

Ekanaatha: The Saint, Philosopher and Mystic

V. K. Saraf

Paithan or Prathishthan, as it was called in olden days, is situated on the banks of river Godavari in Maharashtra, and was already an important commercial and religious place before the Satavahana kings who ruled half of India in their heyday, made it their capital in 2nd century BCE. It later passed on to the Chalukyas and other dynasties, ending with the Yadavas who ruled the region till the 14th Century. It had more than a millennium long political importance as the capital brought in its wake affluence and an advanced civilisation with trade in textiles and other merchandise to



all important markets in India, as well as Europe.

Pratishthan was also regarded as a *Moksha Tirtha*, pilgrimage centre like Kashi where, people believed, the soul could attain liberation or *moksha*. Inevitably therefore, a strong, organised and influential priest class arose that ruled the roost in religious matters. Diehard orthodoxy, religious dogmatism, senseless ritualism and consequent tyranny in the name of *Shastras*, coupled with threats of ostracism became the order of the day. The way child Jnaneshwar and his siblings, orphaned by the suicide first by the father as decreed by the priests as *Prayaschitta* (penance for having reverted to a householder's life after being a *Sanyasi*), and then by their mother who followed suit, were persecuted by the priests of Paithan, is well recounted till this day, though a happening of the 13th century.

Ekanatha in the mid-16th century became the other well-known victim of the priestly despotism, which in a way brings out its continuity over the centuries. Though born in a Brahmin family of saints and Sanskrit scholars, Ekanatha was egalitarian and inclusive in his attitude and approach to other

sections of the social community. This was perhaps because of his family's generations old association with the Warkari movement brought to prominence by Sant Jnaneshwar in alliance with other contemporary saints of Maharashtra, where caste had no place.

Therefore, when invited by a Shudra for a meal, Ekanatha not only accepted it but went ahead and ate at his house, despite stiff opposition from the priests. To them he justified his action by citing a verse from the *Bhagavata Purana* that said that a lowly outcaste who has dedicated his life and possessions to the service of God was superior to a Brahmin, who though satisfying all the twelve characteristics that exemplify a Brahmin, has turned away from the feet of God. However, the furious orthodox Brahmins ordered penance for Ekanatha who promptly obliged but accepted yet another invitation to dine by the same Shudra without hesitation, to make a point. On yet another occasion, he saved the life of a Shudra child who had got lost in the scorching hot sands of river Godavari. The Brahmins were upset at his touching a Shudra child. Just to mollify them

but also to prove its superficiality, he took bath in the river. Doggedly, despite vociferous opposition by the orthodox Brahmins, he insistently invited Shudras for the *Shraddha* of his father. His compassion for all the living beings was manifest when he fed a donkey dying of thirst, with the Ganga water that he had brought with him, all the way from Kashi.

Ekanatha may thus be regarded as one of the earliest to take up cudgels against untouchability in Maharashtra when orthodox Brahmins disdainfully avoided even their shadows. His verses exhort people to treat other fellow beings with compassion and to further extend this attitude to all other living beings. He was truly a saint who was '*Suhrudam sarvabhutanam*' actively engaged in '*Sarva bhuta hite ratah*', as the *Gita* propounds.

As often happens, there is some academic controversy about Ekanatha's date of birth but it is undisputable that he was born at Paithan in the 4th or 5th decade of the 16th century in an illustrious family of saints and scholars. Since his parents died when he was a child, his grandparents took him under their care. When he was 12

years of age, he left for Devgiri, later renamed as Daulatabad by the Muslim rulers, to seek tutelage of Janardana Swami who was head of the Daulatabad fort, a householder and at the same time an enlightened saint. Janardana Swami readily accepted him as a disciple, discerning his spiritual potential and taught him *Vedanta* and other scriptures including *Jnaneshwari*. Above all, Ekanatha learnt from his guru how to progress spiritually, while being a householder. Young Ekanatha spent six years under Janardana Swami, at the end of which he is said to have attained God realisation.

Ekanatha was so much one with his guru that in all his verses,

“ Ekanatha may thus be regarded as one of the earliest to take up cudgels against untouchability in Maharashtra when orthodox Brahmins disdainfully avoided even their shadows. ”

thousands of which he composed in subsequent years, he calls himself Eka-Janardan. In the introduction to his commentary on the *Bhagavata*, he writes, 'A flute produces a variety of melodies but the real credit for this must go to the flautist who blows the air. Similarly, all my writings are in reality his (guru's) creations'.

At the behest of his guru who also accompanied him for a while Ekanatha embarked on a pilgrimage and visited several holy places in the West and North India. While at Panchavati (Nasik), Ekanatha started writing a commentary on *Bhagavata* in Marathi in *Owee* meter (*Owee* is a four-line verse form based on Vedic *Chhandas* and comprises three lines that rhyme followed by the fourth which is different). When completed, the commentary popularly known *Ekanathi Bhagavata*, turned out to be a masterpiece comprising 18,800 *owees*.

Being 25 years of age when he returned to Paithan after the pilgrimage, he got married and settled down to the life of a householder. He spent most of his life at Paithan, except for a sojourn of three years at Kashi. When he

arrived at Kashi in 1570, he had completed first five chapters of his commentary on *Bhagavata* and was writing *Rukmini Svayamvar* based on 144 verses in the *Bhagavata Purana*. Initially the local orthodox pundits took strong exception to Ekanatha writing a commentary in Marathi, that privilege being entirely reserved for Sanskrit, but before long they were so impressed by his saintly nature and complete devotion to God that they took out a palanquin procession of the Marathi *Ekanathi Bhagavata* when it was completed.

Some years later he went to Alandi to visit Sant Jnaneshwar's *samadhi*. His real purpose he himself explains in an *owee*. He writes, 'Jnaneshwar appeared in my dream and complained that the roots of the tree under which he sat in *samadhi* were hurting him, therefore, I should come and rid him of the discomfort. Thus, I came to Alandi and had the good fortune of meeting guru-like Jnaneshwar'. In the intervening period of over three centuries since the original Jnaneshwari was written, several corruptions and inaccuracies had crept in, therefore Ekanatha took upon himself the task of researching, editing and restoring

the original purity of the scripture.

To truly appreciate the life-work of Ekanatha and its emphasis on progressive outlook and adherence to dharma, we must have a look at the socio-political and economic conditions then prevailing in the region which was vibrant, progressive and prosperous under the Yadavas. But all that ended with the invasion by Allauddin Khalji of the Delhi Sultanate at the turn of the 13th century and consequent subjugation of the Yadavas. The Muslim rule continued thereafter for over three centuries. During this period, Maharashtra was reduced to bankruptcy with concomitant social and spiritual degradation. With no scope for individual enterprise in political and economic spheres and little religious freedom, divisiveness and ritualistic fundamentalism ruled the roost in the Hindu community that became an easy prey to superstition and caste extremism.

To seek amelioration for the degenerate, demoralised, squabbling society Ekanatha devoted his attention and energies to social upliftment and through his *Katha* and *Kirtana*, as well as voluminous writings in Marathi he

succeeded to a large extent in arousing enthusiasm for the *Bhagavata Dharma* and stimulating them to *Bhakti marga*. This about sums up the real work and accomplishment of Ekanatha. For this purpose, in spite of opposition from the traditionalists he took to explaining and interpreting spiritual books in the Marathi language so that even ordinary literate persons could read them. Thus, he created *Ekanathi Bhagavata*, *Rukhmini Swayamvar*, *Geeta Saar*, and a host of other compositions in *owee* form. To cap it all, he embarked on writing his magnum opus, the *Bhavarth Ramayana* but could pen only 25000 *owees* before death took its toll in 1599. The voluminous work was later completed by his disciple Gavaba by name, who added another 15000 *owees*. *Bhavarth Ramayana* is not just an elaborate translation of *Valmiki Ramayana* but a comprehensive philosophical and spiritual discourse. It also, taking into account the contemporary decadent social order, advocates in a subtle but persuasive manner, demolition of the evil of caste mania and its perpetration and the establishment of a just, equitable society that



Vasudeva

adheres to the *Bhagavata dharma*.

In propagating this ideology, Ekanatha did not confine himself to discourses and commentaries on holy scriptures interpreting them in the modern idiom, or even on *Kathas* and *Kirtans*. His objective

being not just to awaken the literate echelons but to go down to the lowest stratum, the Shudras, the outcastes and the like, he adopted novel devices of verbal communication. Thus, he introduced the *Bharud* – a folk form of art that combines spiritual songs and impromptu drama, which is popular in the rural areas even today. He himself wrote some 300 *Bharuds*. Not content with this, he initiated a movement called *Vasudevas*, in which a versatile fancily dressed Individual called *Vasudeva* goes from house to house, spreading religious messages by singing appropriate songs standing in front of the house, the import of which is purity of thought, word and deed.

Such was the many splendoured personality of this much-loved godman who by his bold, fervent and relentless drive brought a perceptible change in the decadent society of that time and goaded it to the path of Dharma. ●

Strip Ad

Shreekrishna Sweets, Chennai