

Abhanga -Sankeertanam: The Seminal Contributions of “Varkari” Saints to Bhakti Sangeetam

The goal of this article is to describe the background, and spiritual and literary contributions of saints and poets belonging to the vArkari movement which originated in western India. Before delving into the contributions of the vArkari tradition, a closer examination of the spiritual backdrop of the bhakti traditions of India is appropriate. Historians assign a number of 5,000 years to SanAtana-dharma, deeming it to be the oldest ‘religion’ in the world. The British coined the term “Hinduism” or “Hindu Religion”; however, the followers of SanAtana dharma believe it to be a “way of life” and “code of conduct” that has been applicable to human civilization from time-immemorial. Scholars widely believe that SanAtana dharma is the fountainhead for several modern religions.

Faith and ‘Way of Life’ of the followers of SanAtana dharma are bolstered by a huge body of scriptures

consisting of four Vedas¹, 108 Upanishads², six VedAngas³, Bhagavad Gita⁴, more than 108 PurANas⁵ and the worship of thousands of Godheads representing ‘One-God-principle’.

The scriptures iterate the existence of a supreme consciousness (Brahman) as being the One and the Ultimate Truth: ‘ekam sadviprah bahudha vadanti’⁶ (meaning: “Truth is One – the Wise speak of it as Many.” Or “There is but One Truth—the Wise know it as Many”)

For ease of reference and accuracy, we will refer to SanAtana dharma as “the dharma” and will use the more universally popular term “Hindu” to denote ‘followers of the dharma’.

Sanskrit and most of the above-mentioned sacred scriptures, including the two epics⁷, were unavailable to most of the civilization because of

1. the most ancient ‘Dharma’ scriptures, written in early Sanskrit and containing hymns, philosophy, and guidance on rituals for the priests of the Vedic ‘religion’; believed to have been directly revealed to seers among the early civilization in Bharat/India, and preserved by oral tradition, the four chief collections being the ‘Rig’ Veda, ‘Sama’ Veda, ‘Yajur’ Veda, and ‘atharva’ Veda.

2. each of the Upanishads is a series of Hindu sacred treatises written in Sanskrit, expounding the Vedas in predominantly mystical and monistic terms.

3. Literally mean ‘limbs of Vedas’; the six Vedangas (auxiliary disciplines required to study Vedas) are Siksha, Chhanda, Vyakarana, Nirukta, Jyotisha and Kalpa. ... The Vedangas played an important role in maintaining the purity and integrity of the Vedic tradition.

4. The Bhagavad Gita often referred to as the Gita, is a 700-verse Sanskrit scripture that is part of the Hindu epic Mahabharata (chapters 23–40 of Bhishma Parva). The entire knowledge of the Cosmos is packed into the Gita considered applicable to all faith and all humanity not bound by any religion. Supremely profound yet couched in revelatory language of solacing beauty and simplicity, the Gita has been understood and applied on all levels of human endeavor and spiritual striving—sheltering a vast spectrum of human beings with their disparate natures and needs. Wherever one is on the way back to God, the Gita will shed its light on that segment of the journey.

5. PurANas are a class of Sanskrit sacred writings containing mythical legends and folklore of varying dates and origin, the most ancient of which is believed to have existed from the time of the first humans.

6. Rig Veda 1-164-146 & Yajur Veda 32-1 [एकं सद्धिप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति]

7. Ramayana and Mahabharata

taboos implemented / enforced by certain privileged sections of Hindu society, misquoting the Hindu-caste-system. It is in this context that the simple summaries, interpretations and translations of the sacred texts into the regional languages by Saints and Seers all over India became important: they became an invaluable link to the scriptures and an authentic source of spiritual information for the common man with little education/societal status.

Mythical Background of 'Sankeertanam' in Bhakti Movement

The followers of the dharma believe in the 'Catur-yuga⁸' system of measuring time; the prevailing belief is that our present time is a Kali Yuga, which started about 5,120 years ago (after the Mahabharata war).

Brahma-vaivarta PurANa narrates that when, sage nArada, the grandson of the Lord Vishnu, expresses concerns on the well-being of humans distracted by selfishness and materialism, the Lord comforts him with the following:

- The assertion that 'out of the nine forms of Bhakti, a dedicated offering of 'Keertanam' (aka Sankeertanam) is the finest/easiest method' in the fast & distracting Kali-Yuga; and
- The promise that He (Lord Vishnu) shall be present in front of the devotees at all such times to inculcate, protect and guide them in to that highest form of Bhakti, i.e., Sankeertanam. According to the purANa, Lord Vishnu assures Narada that He himself will take incarnations in Kali Yuga to teach and guide all, in the path of Sankeertanam. Several well-known saints over the last 1000 years are considered incarnations of the Divine by followers of SanAtana

drama; these saints enjoy special worship in the Hindu Bhakti movement.

A few of the great Saints (aka Sants) from all over Bharat who contributed to this great tradition Sankeertanam over the last 800 years, include: Bhakta Jayadeva, Kshetrayya, Yatiraja nArAyaNa tIrtha, C'aitanya MahAprabhu, Purandara-DAsa, VyAsatIrtha, VijayaViTThala-dAsa, KanakadAsa, NivrittinAth, SopAndev, MuktabAi, TukArAm, Sri-Samarth-Ramdas, EknAth, NAMdev, BadrAchala-RamadAs, Goswami TulsidAs, SurdAs, Bhakta-MeerA, Kabir-dAs, Sant BrahmAnand, KAlasa-Saheb, Narsi-Mehta, Bhodendra Satguru, Sridhara-VenkaTesa, MarudAnallUr Satguru SwamigaL, the Karnataka Sangita Trinity (comprised of ShyAmA Shastri, TyAgarAja and MudduswAmi Dikshitar) and Sri SadAshiva BrahmendrAr from Tamilnadu.

NivrittinAth, JnAneshvar, SopAn and MuktabAi are hailed as the forerunners of the VArkarii tradition. Sri NAMdev, EknAth, JanAbAi, SakkubAi, KanhopAtrA, Chokkamela, Ghorakumbha and TukArAm also belong to the Varkari movement and made invaluable contributions to the bhakti movement.



Dharma historians believe that between 5th and 9th centuries, all the twelve principal devotees of Lord Vishnu - known as, 'Azhwars' (usually called 'Vaishnava' preceptors) were born in southern India,

8. Yuga in Dharma is an epoch or era within a four-age cycle. A complete Yuga starts with the Satya Yuga, followed by Treta Yuga and Dvapara Yuga into a Kali Yuga

offering divine verses between them as exquisite poetry with great musical and metrical excellence. These verses are known as nAlAyira divya prabhandam and acknowledged to be the quintessence of the eternal Vedas in Tamil, thus accessible to common man irrespective of birth or creed or caste. All these verses can be and are set to highly structured, metrical and musical tunes by the later year saints, Acharyas and musicians to date. Only three of them were brahmins; Andal, the only female Azhwar is believed to be Goddess Bhooma Devi reincarnate with a purpose to educate the mortals of Kaliyuga. The 'Nayanars' (aka Nayanmars) were a group of saint poets born in Tamil Nadu (southern India) between the 6th and 8th centuries, devoted to the worship of Lord Shiva, another facet of the Lord Supreme, also influenced the Bhakti Movement. These divine saints offered to the mortal world, several thousand stanzas of poetry included in 'Tirumurai' - a twelve volume compendium of songs or hymns in praise of Lord Shiva in Tamil language (collected from the 6th to the 11th century) by various poets in southern India. Nambi-Andar-Nambi compiled the first seven volumes of poetry from Appar, Sampandar and Sundarar as Tevaram during the 12th century. As these remarkable poetry from Azhwars and Nayanars were in vernacular (Tamil) – they were accessible to the commoner irrespective of birth, creed, caste, gender or educational level. Furthermore, such access was accepted by the more tolerant society in the southern region.

But, that was not the case with the vast provinces of northern, eastern and western India. Scriptures in Sanskrit and epics were kept away from common man and all women because of age-old taboos and prejudices of 'qualification'. Based on the affirmations in the purANas, Hindus believe that the

Divine pantheon was reborn, to rectify the prevailing ignorance that mere 'birth' status would dictate access to scriptural knowledge. The Bhakti movement of Eastern India is credited to Jayadeva (widely believed to be an incarnation of Sage Veda Vyasa), while the bhakti movement of western India sprouted with the advent of siblings Nivriddhi, Jnaneshwar, Mukta, and S'opan, considered to be Divine incarnations on earth. While there is, as always, no unanimity as to the exact time when the movement in western India began, most of the scholars of the vArkari tradition (including the westerners who did extensive research) agree that it would not have begun later than the 13th century.

The VArkari Movement of Maharashtra:

The VArkari or WArkari tradition (sampradAya) within the Bhakti movement based on Bhagavata Dharma with the main deity worshipped being Vitthal or viThOba (Krishna, an incarnation of Lord 'Mahavishnu') in Pandharpur (in southern Maharashtra) began in the 13th Century. In the MarAathi language, 'vAri' means 'Pilgrimage' and a pilgrim who undertakes the journey is thus known to be a 'vArkari'. These staunch devotees walk for hundreds of miles to the holy town of Pandharpur, gathering on 'EkAdasi' (the 11th day of the Hindu Lunar Calendar month of AshAdha (falling in July) or on the 11th day of the month of Kartik (falling in November). Due to the affiliation with Krishna/Vishnu, VArkari tradition is considered a branch of Vaishnavism. The Sants who firmly established this tradition include JnAneshvar (sometimes referred to as DhyAneshvar or GyAneshvar), EknAth, NAMdev, ChokhamELa TukArAm, SriSamarthaRamadasa and many others. VArkaris are ordained by basic discipline such as observing strict vegetarianism and the rules of a pious life, moving in 'satsang' or groups irrespective

of caste and creed, constantly performing Sankeertan, fasting on the 11th day of the lunar cycle which occurs twice a calendar month, and



chanting the NAMA of Vitthal. VArkari practices brahmacharya (self-restraint) during his student life. Though a surrendered-devotee of Vitthal, he can have a family and a vocation/profession to sustain him and his family. VArkari recognize about fifty poet-saints (Sants) whose works for over a period of 600 years were documented in an eighteenth-century hagiography by Mahipati.

Background of the Movement and Saints of the VArkari Order:

In the region of Maharashtra, during the thirteenth century, a widespread revival of religious devotion developed, lasting for about 380 years. Its influence continues, in certain religious sects, to the present day. This revival was not restricted to Maharashtra but was active also in other regions of India, including northern India, Bengal and the south. The distinguishing feature of this movement, in contrast to previous trends of mysticism, which were philosophical and remote is its practical and

devotional approach, intimately interwoven with the daily activities, addressing the spiritual needs of all classes of men and women. Devotees in this belt identify the primordial Lord Vishnu unequivocally with his incarnation as Krishna. It is believed that during the dwApara Yuga, Lord Krishna's devotees



worshipped him with an all-consuming 'loving devotion' which was the mainspring of simple religious fervor, and that Krishna satisfied the emotional needs of those for whom philosophical systems and elaborate orthodox rituals would have little meaning. Many Hindus believe that the Bhakti movement has its origins during the time of Krishna. Unlike the traditional 'Hindu' rites, the religious training and the theory and practice of yoga, which were restricted to the brahmin, or priestly caste, the devotional worship of the Bhakti¹⁰ movement was open to all. Among the followers of this movement, or 'path' (which leads from the simplest expression of deep devotion to the highest level of religious experience in the realization of Oneness with the supreme Spirit, the Absolute), were to be found, the learned and the ignorant, the rich and the poor, the great and the humble. Moreover, this form of mysticism was embedded in the community life of

9. Yuga in Dharma is an epoch or era within a four-age cycle. Dvapara Yuga precedes Kali Yuga.

10. The term Bhakti, in this connection, connotes worship, faithfulness, devotion, and is one of the recognized 'paths' to spiritual fulfilment.

the village and religious practices. Such practices, combined with the contributions of the enlightened Sants, eventually brought about social unification; many scholars argue that these developments brought about changes that were of important political value in the building of the Maratha kingdom.

Religious expression among those, who followed the path of this movement, took the form of individual and group singing of devotional hymns, in the temple courtyards, in roadside gatherings after the day's work was done, and in regular pilgrimages to holy places to the sites of great saints and shrines connected with the worship of Krishna. The medium for the religious instruction and exhortation of the devotees was the rhythmic recitation, often accompanied by simple musical percussion instruments, of ancient myths of the Hindu gods and legendary stories of those who worshipped and served them, along with practical expositions and exhortations to simple loving devotion to Krishna. The form in which this was conveyed to groups of worshippers was known as the 'Keertana' or 'song-sermon,' and these recitations made a powerful appeal to the people of less 'sophisticated' social upbringing.

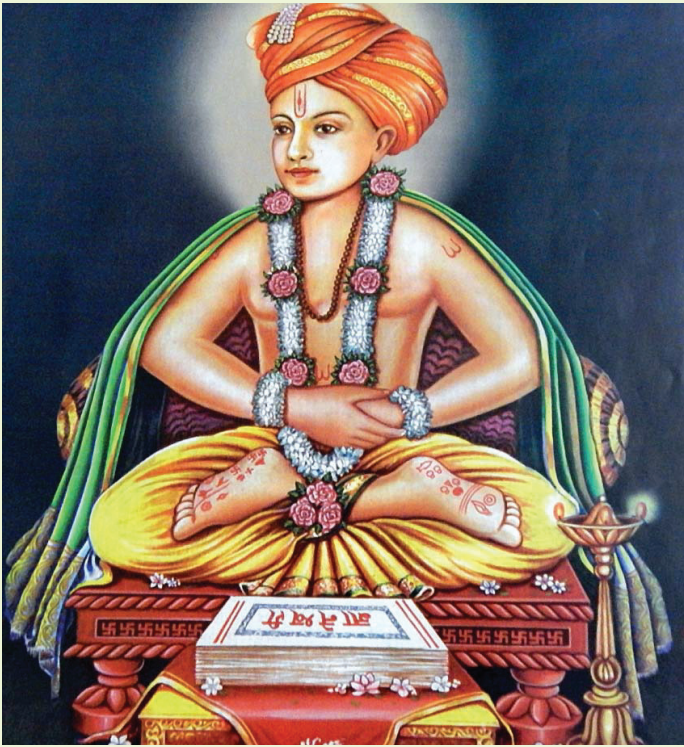


The central focus of pilgrimage connected with the Bhakti movement was, and still is, the shrine of the god Vitthal, or Vithoba in the town of Pandharpur;

this town is situated about 148 miles south-east of Bombay on the river Bhima, with its wide and picturesque banks on which many fine temples are visible. At the time of the regular great pilgrimages, which take place twice yearly, hundreds of pilgrim bands converge on this town singing songs of devotion to Krishna/Vitthal and expressing their religious fervor in many ways, including wayside dancing which often induces states of ecstasy. In addition to Pandharpur, a pilgrimage site since the 13th century and the time of JnAneshvar, other well-known centers are the villages of Dehu, about fifty miles from Bombay, and Alandi, site of the shrine and tomb of JnAneshvar, about twelve miles south of Pune. These three centers were and are often visited in a continuous cycle of pilgrimage by the devotees of the god Vitthal and the disciples of the great Bhakti saints.

The general influence of this (VARKARI) movement on the life of the people of Maharashtra was twofold. First, it brought into prominence a number of men, and a few women as well, of outstanding literary skills and saintly devotion, who contributed to Marathi literature some of the greatest treasures of its earlier period. Secondly, the Bhakti movement gave a powerful impetus to the development of the Marathi language as a medium for the expression of religious thought and devotional worship, while, under the cultural influence of Devagiri, Marathi was becoming established as a literary language capable of expressing scholarly works. Hitherto, Sanskrit had been the only medium of expression for the religious and cultural heritage of the Hindus, which was, therefore accessible only to the learned. But now, the everyday language of the common people began to be used both to convey the teachings of religion and to express popular devotion in various forms of worship. Though attempts at expression of

the philosophical and religious thoughts in MarAathi language ante-date JnAneshvari (aka BhAvArthta Deepika or DhyAneshvari), JnAneshvari, stands out among works of the medieval period as marking the dawn of MarAathi literature. JnAneshvar was not only the most renowned figure of medieval MarAathi literature but is also the one who has never been surpassed in achievement throughout the whole of MarAathi literature.



JnAneshvar (aka JnAneshvar or dhyAneshvar):

In relation to the Bhakti movement, JnAneshvar is the most notable and the most deeply revered of its leaders. JnAneshvar or JnAnadeva is considered the Father of the VArkari tradition.

JnAneshvar was a great genius of Maharashtra in whom we find a rare combination of a poet, philosopher and a man of deep religious faith and

expansive spirituality. As a saint, he is held in high esteem among all religious sects; as a poet, he is appreciated among the highest of literary circles. But, his contributions towards the solution of persistent problems of the society and philosophy have not yet been fully recognized! He consciously wrote in MarAathi about which we would address elsewhere in this article. Thus, it was natural on the part of the eastern or western scholars not acquainted with MarAathi language to have ignored or neglected his 'AmritAnubhav', or 'DnyAneshvari' or 'Abhangas' which are as relevant today as when they were composed, some 750 years ago; perhaps even more so today!

The first biographer of JnAneshvar is said to have been one of his contemporaries, NAMdev, author of many devotional works. According to tradition, NAMdev accompanied JnAneshvar on many pilgrimages and it is thought that these two had a considerable mutual influence. NAMdev outlived JnAneshvar by many years and would have been in a good position to preserve information about his life. The most important and reliable source of biographical material is found in the works of EknAth (~1533-1599), author of prolific religious works¹¹ (including EknAthii BhAgavat & BhAvArth RAmAyaN) which are part of the wealth of Bhakti literature. He produced a version of the DnyAneshvari (aka JnAneshvari) which he claimed was an authentic version in which neither change nor addition should be permitted. Finally, much information, though varying in reliability, can be found in the biographical works of Mahipati, the

11. EknAth wrote a variation of the Bhagavata PurANa which is known as the Eknathi Bhagavata, and a variation of the Ramayana which is known as the Bhavarth Ramayan. Eknath wrote Rukmini Swayamwar Hastamalak, which was comprised 764 owees and based on a 14-shlok Sanskrit hymn with the same name by Shankaracharya. His other works were the Shukashtak (447 owees), the Swatma-Sukha (510 owees), the Ananda-Lahari (154 owees), the Chiranjewea-Pad (42 owees), the Geeta-Sar, and the Prahlad-Wijaya. He introduced a new form of MarAathi religious song called Bharood, writing 300 of them.

18th century poet, which include the lives of various saints of the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra. Manuscripts of the JnAneshvari have continued to be found in more recent years, again, of various degrees of authenticity. References to JnAneshvar's work throughout the history of MarAathi literature and the fact that the JnAneshvari is the most widely read religious book among the faithful worshippers of the VArkari sect, as well as a large number of his devotional lyrics, bear witness to the deep and lasting influence of its creator.

The generally accepted date of JnAneshvar's birth is AD 1275 (Saka 1197), but more than one village claims to be the place of his birth. It is believed that he lived for about 21 years of age. According to the most popular version, he was born at Alandi (the site of his shrine), where his parents lived.; another tradition claims that he was born at the village of Apegao(n) in the Godavari valley. He came from a long line of spiritual teachers of the Natha sect and was initiated into the sect by his elder brother, Nivriddhi-natha, who was a disciple of Gahini Natha. JnAneshvar's father, Vitthalpant by name, was a deeply religious man whose wife, Rakhumabai, belonged to the village of Alandi. No children were born from their marriage for some years and meanwhile Vitthalpant, deeply drawn towards the religious life of renunciation, left his wife and made a pilgrimage to Benares where he became initiated as a member of a religious community. Thus, he abandoned his obligations as a householder, one of the essential stages of the life of an orthodox brahman, without having reared a family. However, his guru (that is, his spiritual director), on

discovering that he was a married man who had left his wife without her consent and without giving her children, made him return and fulfil his family obligations. The necessary withdrawal from his initiation in Benares was regarded as a serious deviation from the requirements of his caste and therefore, on his return to Alandi, he and his family were cast-away by his fellow brahmans, forcing Vitthalpant and his family to live on the outskirts of the village. In course of time, his wife bore four children¹², three sons, Nivriddhi, JnAneshvar, and SopAn, and the only daughter, MuktaAbai. As the sons grew to the age at which they should go through the ceremony of full admission to the brahman caste, permission was withheld owing to the severe disapproval of the brahman elders of the community. Upon embarking on a pilgrimage to Tryambakeswar, the family was separated in a storm. The hand of fate placed Nivriddhi in a cave that was occupied by Sri GahiniAth – a prominent and powerful Kashmiri tantric and advaitin. Nivriddhi was initiated by him and attained complete self-realization through the transference of the vidya known as shAmkari vidya or shrl vidya. When the family re-united, Vitthalpant accepted the 'order' to expiate his sin by throwing himself into the river Ganges! Mother Rakhumabai followed him. These incidents prompted Nivriddhi to initiate his siblings into the sacred Natha-SampradAya.

In course of time, however, the four children came to be recognized as having saintly qualities, and, in the case of JnAneshvar, as being endowed with miraculous powers. Whether they were re-admitted to the brahman-caste is not known, but they were

12. There is strong belief amongst hundreds of millions of believers of Dharma (Hinduism) that these four children were none else than "Lord Shiva (Nivriddhi), Lord Vishnu (JnAneshvar), Lord Brahma (SopAn) and Goddess Sakti (Mukta)". In 'Gnaneswar vijaya, Sri Satchidananda baba wrote, ग्रानाशो भगवान् विष्णु - निवृत्ति भगवान् हरः शोबानो भगवान् ब्रह्मा - मुक्ताक्या ब्रह्म चित्कला

revered as true saints, throughout Maharashtra and soon all over India while concurrently humbling the dogmatic caste-leaders. The four-some made significant contributions to VARKari literature which became the foundation for modern Abhanga



sampradAya(or tradition/lineage) and Sankeertan-paddati (tradition) aside from the spiritual well from which hundreds of millions of ordinary citizens could drink the wealth of Dharma scriptures.

JnAneshvar: The family settled for some time at Nevasa, not far from Paithan, on the Godavari river, and it was here that JnAneshvar composed the BhAvArthha Deepika and, later, his more philosophical work, the amritAnubhav¹³ (an elixir of experience), a work still held in the highest esteem and considered a milestone in MarAthi literature. He also composed many religious songs and devotional hymns. JnAneshvar is said to have been profoundly inspired by Adi Shankara BhagavatpAda; together, scholars agree that

Shankara and JnAneshvar are among the most influential philosophers, literary figures and spiritualists in the sanAtana dharma anthology of saints and philosophers. After the completion of his two major works the family returned to ALandi and it was here, in his early twenties, that he took the final step to the highest level of spiritual experience, known as sanjIvan samadhi, in committing himself to live entombment whilst in a state of ecstasy.

The main narrative theme of JnAneshvarii or DhyAneshvarii is based on one of the most widely known of the poetical works of Sanskrit literature, the Bhagavadgita , sometimes given the name of 'Song of the Lord', in English translations, and frequently referred to by the shortened form of the title, the Gita. This work is the most highly treasured of the religious scriptures of the Hindus, and its eighteen chapters form the core of the values of human life and the path to follow. Throughout the text of the poem, its author places great emphasis on this religious philosophy, known as advaita, non-duality, or identity, in contrast to the teaching of the opposite principle of dvaita, duality, or the essential separateness of the individual soul from the Supreme Spirit ('Brahman'), upheld by certain of his predecessors if not his contemporaries.

The poem is written in a form of rhythmic prose known as "Ovi" in MarAthi, especially suitable for recitation, or chanting; This scheme has a wide range of variety in length of line allowing for many irregularities; but this freedom makes it possible to convey different types of subject matter without the

13. Amrutanubhav is derived from Amrita which translates as immortal Elixir in Sanskrit) and Anubhav meaning experience. As a result, it literally translates to "The elixir of experience" or even "the experience of elixir" in Sanskrit/ MarAthi. On advice from his guru Nivrattinath, JñAneśvar created an original work to state his experiences in yoga and philosophy. Although the work did not achieve as much fame as the JñAneśvari, it is still considered as one of the most important works in MarAthi literature. This work was to be JnAneshvar's last as he soon announced his intention to take on the state of a Sanjeevan Samadhi.

restriction which would be imposed by a more fixed type of versification. It is impressive to note that millions of illiterate and semi-literate Maharashtrians can and do recite this magnum opus JnAneshvarii (neo-version of Bhagavad Gita)¹⁴ – most of the 9,000 verses in about 108 sittings! Devout Hindus believe to this day that, true to the assertions in the Brahma-Vaivarta-PurANa, the Lord Almighty brought his “Divine Song”, the Bhagavad-Gita, to the masses through His own incarnation of ‘JnAneshvar’!

At this juncture, it is not out of place to mention, Tirumoolar, one of the greatest of saints that lived in Madurai and sometime between 8th to 11th centuries! Also known as SundaranAthar, he was a Tamil Shaivite mystic and poet, considered one of the sixty-three Nayanmars and one of the eighteen renowned Siddha-purushas. His main work, the Tirumantiram (also referred as Tirumanthiram, Tirumandhiram, et al.) consists of over 3000 verses and forms a part of the key text of the Tamil Shaiva Siddhanta, and the Tirumurai.

If one were to closely study the teachings of both Tirumoolar and JnAneshvar, we would conclude that the biggest spiritual dimension preached by both, is an ‘expansive view on Brahman and Love,

and how such expansive philosophy centers around the concept of Brahman being the Highest ideal of Love. Most quoted verse of Tirumoolar is,

அன்பும் சிவமும் இரண்டு என்பர் அறிவிலார் - அன்பே சிவம் ஆவது யாரும் அறிகிலார்
அன்பே சிவம் ஆவது யாரும் அறிந்தமின் - அன்பே சிவமாய் அமர்ந்து இருந்தாரே [#270]

Anbum Sivamum iranDu enbar arivilaar- Anbe Sivam
aavadu yaarum arikilaar
Anbe Sivam aavadu yaarum arindapin - Anbe SivamAi
amarndu irundaare

“The ignorant prate that ‘Love’ and ‘Siva’ are Two; but none do know that Love (alone) is Siva;
When men but know that Love and Siva are the same, Love as Siva, they ever remained”

JnAneshvar’s amritAnubhava is a highly esoteric treatise of the concept of prakAsha and vimarsha in shAmkari vidya or shrl vidya: the “higher love” underscored throughout the amritAnubhava is highly resonant with the ethos of Tirumoolar as well as the spirit and ethos of the Soundarya Lahari (‘Wave of Beauty’) by Shankara. JnAneshvar’s experience of the “higher love” translated to his deep caring of the universe and all the souls in it. He repeatedly prays to ViTthobA (his favorite Godhead) for the wellness and contentment of all souls: His pasAyadan or “Peace-prayer” is deeply poignant and emotional, and illustrates Jnana’s love for all. Jnana’s abhangs and Ovis showcase an exquisite braid of

14. [VG Pradhan and H.M. Lambert 1948 thesis on Jnaneswari or Bhavarth-deepika] - The narrative of the JnAneshvari closely follows the Bhagavad Gita, yet the commentary – called tika in the local tradition – is written in the form of a “song-sermon” that expands the explanation to include a discussion of the major Hindu philosophies and beliefs in the 13th-century. While the Gita has 700 verses, the JnAneshvari has about 9,000 verses. It includes references to the Vedas, the Upanishads and other major Hindu texts. The JnAneshvari is a rhythmic prose, that can be recited alone or chanted as a group. Each of its 9,000 verses consists of four lines (quarters) called an ovi (a form of MarAthi meter). Unlike the Gita which has fixed number of syllables in its verses and which do not rhyme, the JnAneshvari commentary on the Gita has a variable number of syllables per line, of which first three of four do rhyme. Each line in the JnAneshvari typically has between three and thirteen syllables. The text reverentially includes the names of numerous Hindu gods and goddesses from Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism traditions, as well as Vedic ones such as Saraswati (Sharada). The last line of many of its verses include the characteristic “JnAneshvardeva says” or “Says Jnanesvara”. This format was adopted by other later era Bhakti movement poets, as well as in the Guru Granth of Sikhism.

Love and Longing for the Lord as well as informed detachment (vairAghya)--both hallmarks of a very advanced practitioner of non-dualism and jnana-vairAghya-sAdana. JnAneshvar was irrefutably the fountainhead of inspiration for all the vArkari saints that followed him. Many scholars believe that any devotee of JnAneshvar would be moved to idealism, and consequently, to total social reform. Hence, arguably, the vArkari saints were the ground zero of social activism in western India as we know it. Many scholars believe that the ideology of JnAneshvar influenced modern day philosopher-activists such as MahAtmA Gandhi or Bapu.

VArkari and Guru-parampara:

The 'epic' of VArkari SampradAya is believed to be divided into five time periods, as per historian Banoor SriRangaji maharaj¹⁵

- (1) Bhakta Pundaliika to Sant JnAneshvardev,
- (2) end of JnAneshvardev through Sri NAMdev,
- (3) Sant Sri Bhanudasa¹⁶ to Sant Sri Eknath,
- (4) Sant Sri TukArAm saga, and
- (5) post-TukA sants

Sant JnAneshvar was known and has been affectionately called over 700 years, as 'Maavuli' (meaning: "mother"); the highest level of scholarship of an AchArya; and, the 'visible' divinity of the Lord of Pandharpur. Hence the name 'GnyAneshwara'. His works and compositions are as follows:

- 'JnyAneshwari or DhyAneshvari' also known as BhAvArthta-deepika (9,032 Ovis or poems);

- AmritAnubhav or anubhavAmrita (806 ovis and 5 slokas);
- 'NAMAn' (108 abhangas);
- Haripath (27 abhangas);
- ChAngdev pAshAshTi
- Bhakti pAth (972 abhangas)



JnAneshvar offered every one of his works to his brother and Guru NivrittinAth. He explains in this poem the reason for his ability and how he created all his works!

म्हणोति माझे नित्य नवे सोच्चसही प्रबध हो आवे /

श्री गुरुकृपा काय नाह ज्ञानदेवा म्हणे

"What is not possible as long as I have the grace of my Guru NivrittinAth!

He transformed each of my breath into poetry (i.e. making poetry)!"

Sant NAMdev (aka NAMdev or NAMdeo)

Just as Srivaishnavites of southern India believe that the 12th Azhwar Madurakavi should be eternally thanked for bringing out the magnum opus 'nAlAyira divya prabhandam' through his devotion to his Guru NammAlwar and dedicated scribing for humanity, the vArkari sampradAya and the world should thank Eknath for bringing out the greatness of JnAneshvar and his divine gems to the outside world.

The great saint-bard of Maharashtra that followed JnAneshvar was NAMdev (also affectionately called NAMA); he was born near Pandharpur, as the son of

15. Sri Lakshman Ramachandra Bankarkar (2005) writes on 'gyAneshwar vijaya' and Banoor SriRangaji maharaj quoting the above belief of five time periods of vArkari. This assertion is unauthenticated by other historians.

16. does not however comport with any scholarly accounts! Bhanudasa is not considered part of the mainstream vArkari sampradaya.

a tailor/ cloth printer called Dama Seth in 1270 AD. Most modern biographers and scholars agree with the first critical biography¹⁷ published in 1927. Historians concur that his birth occurred about 200 years before the birth of the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak and 130 years before Sant Kabir's birth. Although NAMdev was a sincere seeker of God-realization from adolescence on, he did not meet a Guru until the necessity of a living Guru was brought home to him at a meeting with JnAneshvar, NivrittinAth and a few other devotees such as 'GorA' (aka GorAkumbhara). GorA reportedly called NAMdev, 'a partially filled earthen pot' which was not poorNa – or full (with the true knowledge of the Self). Shocked and affronted by GorA's words, NAMdev appealed to Jnaneshvar and MuktabAi for guidance. MuktabAi said to have referred NAMdev to VisobA Kechara, an enlightened disciple of Jnaneshvar.

NAMdev's meeting with VisobA is said to have brought about a profound transformation in NAMdev; he was thus initiated into the nAtha sampradAya by VisobA Kechar, and returns to Pandharpur, as an enlightened seer. From this point on, NAMdev's abhangs combine the worship of the formful and formless effortlessly, reflecting the exquisite poignancy of JnAneshvar's abhangs and ovis, while retaining a simplicity and beauty all on their own.

Historians propound that NAMdev wandered all

Historians propound that NAMdev wandered all over India, and was even imprisoned by Mohammad Bin Tughlaq but was subsequently set free after his spiritual greatness was realized by the Sultan and his ministers. After JnAneshvar had written AmrutAnubhav, the siblings visited Pandharpur where they met NAMdev, who, became a close and dear friend of JnAneshvar¹⁸. Many scholars accept the traditional view that NAMdev and JnAneshvar were contemporaries.

Soon after the demise of JnAneshvar's family, when NAMdev was hardly 27-years of age, he embarked on a second and final journey to Gujarat, Kathiawar, Central India, Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Punjab; even today there exist memorials, traditions and temples associated with his visits in all those states! This is why the disciples of NAMdev and their vArkari lineages are reported to number in millions. After more than 35 years of wandering, he lived in Ghuman in Gurdaspur district with his numerous disciples for about 18 years and reached samAdhi in 1350. Here again, there is no agreement as to the place of his final destination. A group of followers continue to believe that he returned to Pandharpur and left the mortal world in front of the temple!

NAMdev's songs were composed to be melodious and carry a spiritual message. They were built on one among the many ancient Indian traditions for making music and singing. NAMdev's bhajans, note Callewaert¹⁹ & LAtha, deployed particular species of

17. *Biography of Namdev by R. J. Ajgaonkar (1927)*

18. *JnAneshvar and Namadev embarked on a pilgrimage to various holy centres across India where they initiated many people into the VArkari tradition; JnAneshvar's Abhangas are believed to have been formulated during this period. On their return to Pandharpur, JnAneshvar and Namadev were honored with a feast in which, (according to the famous commentator of 'JnAneswari', B.P.Bahirat) many contemporary saints such as "Goroba, the potter, Sanvata, the gardener, Chokhamela, the mahar (untouchable) and Parisa Bhagwat, the pandit" were honored and Sant Mela of abhangs were exchanged.*

19. *The Hindi Padavali of NAMadeva (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta) - by, Winand M. Callewaert, Mukunda LAtha - 1989*

Raag, used Bhanita (or Chhap, a stamp of the composer's name inside the poem, in his case Nama), applied a Tek (or dhruva, repeated refrain) and a meter that helps harmonize the wording with the musical instrument, all according to Sangita manuals refined from the 8th to 13th centuries.

The musical genre of NAMdev's literary works was a form of Prabandha – itself a very large and rich genre - that includes dhruvad, thumri, tappa, geet, bhajan and other species. In some species of Indian music, it is the music that dominates while words and their meaning are secondary. In contrast, in NAMdev's bhajan the spiritual message in the words has a central role, and the structure resonates with the singing and music. The songs and music that went with NAMdev's works, were usually transmitted verbally, across generations, in a guru-sisya-parampara (meaning: teacher-student-tradition), within singing gharanas (family-like musical units).

Callewaert and LAtha state that, "each single song of NAMdev is a musical and textual unit and this unit is the basis for textual considerations". The unit contained 'antaras', which are the smallest independent units, which can be shifted around, dropped or added, without affecting the harmony or meaning, when a bhajan is being sung with music. In NAMdev's songs, the dominant pattern is Caturasra, or an Avarta with the 4x4 square pattern of musical mAtas (beat)²⁰.

The repertoires grew, because the later devotees and artists added new songs to their repertoire. The

earliest surviving manuscripts of songs attributed to NAMdev, from these singing families, are traceable to the 17th century. A diverse collection of these manuscripts exist, which have been neither compiled nor archived successfully in a single critical edition. The state Government of Maharashtra made an effort and compiled NAMdev's work from various manuscripts into the Sri NAMdev Gatha in 1970. The Adi Granth of Sikhism includes a compilation of 61 songs of NAMdev²¹. However, of these only 25 are found in surviving NAMdev-related manuscripts of Rajasthan. Callewaert suggests that NAMdev's poems in the Adi Granth and the surviving Rajasthani manuscripts are considerably different musically and morphologically, but likely to have evolved from a very early common source. Of thousands of Abhang poems credited to NAMdev, may be, 600 to 700 are authentic. The other poems are attributed to NAMdev, in a phenomenon Novetzke²² calls, "anamnetic authorship".

The later compositions and their authors hid the true authorship purposefully and collectively over the 14th to 18th centuries, a period described in Maharashtra culture as the dark age. This was a period of Muslim conquest and repression of Hindus under the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire. The fact that literary works not composed by NAMdev were attributed to him was partly a product of this history of political suppression and suffering in Deccan region of India.

Towards the end of his life, NAMdev's abhangs were soaked in philosophy of devotion and informed

20. *Though not consistent with a majority of the marAthi abhangs!*

21. *Note that the MarAthi works are part of the granth sahib; the hindi works are not!*

22. *Religion and Public Memory - A Cultural History of Saint Namdev in India, Christian Lee Novetzke - Columbia University Press (2008)*

detachment. He wondered aloud the purpose of delving into the four Vedas without realizing Lord's 'Love' ("Shodhoniya chAree Ved!"), and how he 'realized' his 'Love' (even as JnAna identified the Lord with Love) in his abhang "Na laage tujhee bhukti, na laage tujhee mukti") – 'I do not desire the delights of your world, I do not crave salvation; my haven is different and unique, O Lord! I have realized myself, my lord, since I have realized the bliss of your Love'... "I will sing your Name which alone is celestial and ineffable to me, says Nama, and Lord, you will be compelled to seek me and make me your Own!" In one of his final and most esoteric abhangs, "kaala dEhAsi AIA kau" NAMa stares down Death with Knowledge of the Highest Love.

NAMa braids Love and Longing with Vairaghya time and time again, like his closest friend and guide Jnana. However, NAMdev is best known for his abhangs dripping with the sweet experience of nAma-rupa: In his celebrated "paNdharicA RAJA", NAMa states: "Vitthala stands on the banks of the Bhiima (River), greeting his devotees with hands outstretched." NAMa identifies with Lord ViThobA as he continues: "gyAre NAMasukhE preme alowkika sAdhana Anhika karunikA" – which means, "Chant my Name peacefully, joyously; no other sAdana or achievement is required."

Through these powerful words, NAMdev instructs future generations to sing and chant the Name of the Lord –NAMdev's message is crystalline: "Sankeertanam" alone is enough; it is the greatest upAya or medium to reach Bliss Consciousness.

Sant Eknath (1548-1600) was another great MarAathi Sant seen as a bridge between his predecessors -JnAneshvar and NAMdev - and the later saints, including TukArAm. He wrote a variation of the

Bhagavata PurANa which is known as the Eknathi Bhagavata, and a variation of the Ramayana which is known as the Bhavarth Ramayan. He also wrote Rukmini Swayamwar Hastamalak, which was comprised of 764 ovis and based that on a 14-stanza Sanskrit hymn with the same name by Adi-S`ankara. His other works were the Shukashtak (447 ovis), the Swatma-Sukha (510 ovis), the Ananda-Lahari (154 ovis), the Chiranjeewa-Pad (42 ovis), the Geeta-Sar, and the Prahlad-Vijaya. He introduced a new form of MarAathi religious song-style called Bharood, writing 300 of them. Only less than 50 of his abhangs are available.

During the four centuries that elapsed between JnAneshvar and the departure of Samartha Ramadasa (1681), numerous sants were born and gave dynamic teachings and prolific compositions in the form of abhangs.

Amongst them all, TukArAm (1598-1649) has been acclaimed as the 'greatest in the popular estimation and certainly the widest in the extent of influence'. TukA was born in a family of well-to-do farmers in Dehu and sold grains and farm produce for living. In that era, the grain sellers were considered low-born and the learned priestly class looked down upon one such shop keeper! TukA was doing well until the great famine devastated everything including his family. Young (hardly 21 years) TukA wandered and fervently prayed for proper guidance on the spiritual path which he considered as the only reason for his questionable existence.

He is said to have been initiated by Jnaneshvar and NAMdev in his dream, and several other gurus of the nAtha sampradAya in their subtle forms. While TukA may have been initiated into the Bhakti-mArga by

Babaji Raghavacaitanya, he calls Jnaneshvar his Guru in "jnAniyanca RAjA Guru MaharAve". After being initiated into the bhakti mArga, Tuka renounced his material possessions and ancestral property to his brother. When he started his journey as a pilgrim (yAtrA) and soul-stirring discourses, his magnetic appeal brought him countless number of devotees and also jealous orthodoxy; the latter took every step to condemn his spiritual discourses as heretical conduct ('taking the message of the holy scriptures to all and sundry!'). Jealous detractors and countless insults did not deter Tuka's mission and it was just a question of time when distinguished disciples joined the great journey of Tuka for the rest of his life.

Before understanding Tuka's contributions, one should try to understand the then prevailing social prejudices, taboos, and religious structure of the society which struggled to compromise on these long-standing traditions. Tuka made a significant contribution towards dispelling the feeling of intellectual helplessness among the downtrodden.

Through his tireless teaching, he succeeded in awakening a consciousness of the equality of all human beings and of the fundamental right of every person to worship and realize the Lord. Tuka was able to make the society around him lot more dynamic, more conscious of the obligations and more united, in the Name of God. He sang over 4,600 abhangs and reportedly declined any royal patronage (and invitation from Shivaji maharaj). These abhangs have been consolidated into a volume known as 'Gatha'. The Collection reveals Tuka in all phases of his life and in all aspects of his religious beliefs and spirituality.

After God-Realization, Tuka unequivocally declared the mission of his life in hundreds of abhangs, and was engaged in deep contemplation of the Self. He saw the Divine in everything, and affirms that the universe is a projection of the Self. Tuka's enlightened state and true liberation are evident in this example, wherein he asserts that the dialogue with the Self is superior to materiality!

वृक्ष वल्ली आह्नां सोयरीं वनचरं ।
पक्षी ही सुस्वरं आळविती ॥१॥

येणें सुखें रुचे एकांताचा वास ।
नाहीं गुण दोष अंगा येत ॥२॥

आकाश मंडप पृथुवी आसन ।
रमे तेथें मन क्रीडा करी ॥३॥

कंथाकुमंडलु देहउपचारा ।
जाणवितो वारा अवसरु ॥४॥

हरिकथा भोजन परवडी विस्तार ।
करोनि प्रकार सेवूं रुची ॥५॥

तुका ह्मणे होय मनासी संवाद ।
आपुलाचि वाद आपणांसी ॥६॥

The trees, the creepers and the animals wild
Are our kith and kin in these woods so kind.

The birds in the nature sing sweet notes so clear
In this solitude we get the solace of life so dear.

Hence we are away from the good or evil impacts
The loneliness is better than the worldly facts.

The azure is our canopy here
And the earth an only bed so sheer.

The mind is free from the painful bonds
To linger in the bliss of this peaceful resort.

A blanket and a pitcher are only sufficient here
To protect the body and needs so meager.

The light and the merry air is always there
To lilt the mind, idle and play in this bare.

Thy songs and psalms serve as the food O' Lord
They increase thy love and quench my hungry heart.

Says Tuka, we can have a dialogue
With our own self here
It is always better to have an argument
First with the self O' dear
Why to fall on the thorns of life?

After leading an immensely spiritual life, TukArAm passed away in 1650. Several native ballads reiterate that the Lord of Pandharpur beckoned him and took TukA in His pushpaka-vimana.

Samartha Ramdas Swami (1608 – 1681) is a popularly known saint and poet throughout Maharashtra. Although he is not considered part of the vArkari sampradAya, Samarth Ramdas deserves special mention in the context of the bhakti wave in Western India and activism through the entire Deccan plateau.

Samarth Ramdas was known as Narayan Suryaji Thosar at birth. He was born in Jamb village, on the banks of the river Godavari in a Deshastha Rigvedi Brahmin family. His father Suryaji Pant died when Ramdas was eight, turning him into an introvert. He was engrossed in thoughts of God and tried to find out how to meet God. It is believed that at age 11, Lord Rama appeared and advised him to chant the (Rama) tAraka-mantra repeatedly and accepted him as his disciple, naming him Ramadas. At 12, while he was standing on the podium during his marriage ceremony, he heard the Brahmins chanting wedding mantras that included the word "SaavadhAn." This word has other meanings, including "Beware!" Immediately after hearing it, he knew what it meant; he fled the scene and went to the holy city, Nasik, where he started his worship of Rama, which lasted for 12 years. This account of events however, appears to be an exaggerated story. Marriage and family were not his priorities, the life of a monk, being his preference. Ramdas was a spiritual guru of Shivaji who gave a Sanad to the fort of Parli to Ramdas. The fort was later renamed Sajjangad. Ramdas not only spiritually guided Shivaji, but also advised the king on tactical and warfare strategies. King Shivaji's son, Sambhaji was

a devout Hindu and had great respect for all contemporary saints from all religions. Ramdas had written a letter to Sambhaji guiding him on what to do and what not to do after the death of Shivaji. Sambhaji later built a samadhi temple for Ramdas on Sajjangad upon the latter leaving the mortal body.

Ramdas produced considerable literature in verse form in MarAathi. These include a condensed version of the Dasbodha, KarunAshtakas, SunderkAnDa and the YuddhakanDa of the epic Ramayana, many Abhangas and Ovis, Poorvarambh, Antarbhav, Atmaram, Chaturthman, Panchman, Manpanchak, Janaswabhawgosavi, Panchsamasi, Saptsamasi, Sagundhyan, Nirgundhyan, Junatpurush, Shadripunirupan, Panchikaranyog, Manache Shlok, Shreemat Dasbodha and many unpublished works. Unlike the other vArkari saints, Ramdas was not pacifist and his writing includes strong militant expressions to support nationalism as a means to protect against the rule of the invaders. In his writings, he also advocates unity of Marathas in propagating the Bharata-dharma. His writing was so simple that illiterates understood it, if read aloud to them. He took a straightforward, forceful and unhesitating approach. He used to write or dictate quickly and used Hindi, Urdu, Arabic or Sanskrit words so long as his writing remained simple. He introduced new words to these languages. Many of his sentences have become widely used the MarAathi language of today.

Scores of MarAathi Sants followed these great men and offered myriads of abhangs; at least half of these abhangs are available and a tenth of them have been published. These abhangs are the genesis of Sankeertana-paddati in the north &

south-western, western and central India for about 600 years. The Sankeertana Trinity (as mentioned in the beginning of the article) integrated hundreds of abhangs in to the Dakshina-Bharata-Sampradaya-Sankeertana paddati which we currently call 'prAcheena-Sankeertanam'.

Abhanga – the Immortal Compositions

Abhangas are a sublime form of lyric whose origin can be traced to the spiritual ideologies of the bhakti saints of Maharashtra. Essentially these compositions are bhajans in Marathi sung in praise of Lord VitThoba, characterized by simple appealing tunes and meaningful words. The meaning of the word can be derived from its root 'a-bhang' – that which has no bhanga or hindrance; thus, translating to 'that which does not stop'. Structurally, there is no stoppage between the verses or the main line and the verse; an abhanga does not pause until it actually ends. Philosophically, scholars have asserted that 'Abhanga' means 'Composition(s) that can or will never be wiped off the face of the Earth'. They are eternal, ever new and always full of Life. Rendering of Abhangas should be done with extraordinary dedication to the importance to the words, their diction, chorus singing of the Dhruv Pad (usually the second line of the Abhanga) and the most essential requirement of Bhava. The 'thlrmAnam' or 'conclusive-tala-beats' are a special requirement for a successful rendition. The Abhanga form is unique in that it constantly braids the form (saguNa) with the formless (nirguNa) aspect of all-pervading consciousness. Thus, this expansive and inclusive song-form stands above all philosophies and epistemology.

The emphasis of abhanga sankeertana has always been on devotion and love towards the Lord, in contrast to blind adherence to rituals and arcane religious practices. In addition, individual sacrifice, non-violence, compassion, peaceful co-existence, service to humanity were the values these abhangas stressed and emphasized. They preached people to cast aside the heavy burdens of caste and the subtle complexities of philosophy and simply express their overwhelming love for God. To enable even the unlettered masses to attain the highest state of devotional bliss, they were consciously composed in simple language. Yet, they are ecstatic, lyrical and emotionally moving. The devotional music of Maharashtra is more aimed for group singing than for solo performances. People used to gather in the temples for 'Keertans' since the 13th century CE where the 'Keertankars' used to preach the spiritual, devotional, social and later national messages with the help of 'Music'. Maharashtra has witnessed, over the centuries, a lot of Keertankars well versed in Classical Music using Abhangs as their primary verses for devotional renditions as well as medium for Harikatha with spiritual and social messages. Three major traditions of 'Sankeertan' prospered in Maharashtra over the centuries; Naradeeya Keertan, Waarkari Keertan, and Ramadasi Keertan. In the last three centuries, in the age of national freedom movement, the Raashtrlya keertans became a novel form of Sankeertans spreading the message of patriotism, national unity and freedom of worship for depicting their devotion to the Lord.

The Marathi Sankeertans begins with 'Naman' (invocation of the Lord), continues with 'RoopAcha Abhang' (describing the portrayal of physical form and beauty of the Lord Supreme in human form),

Guru-abhang in praise of the AchArya and on importance of Supremacy of the Guru and an abhang giving out the moral message enveloped in spiritual message. The lighter compositions such as 'Gawlan' (the song of a maiden) or 'virahaNii' (song on viraha or mood of separation) are usually recited and rarely sung. The only exception is the virahaNii repertoire of Jnaneshvar, which expose the deep Longing of the jeeva for 'disindividuation' or total Union with the Supreme Consciousness. Some Bhajans giving the devotional and moral messages are sung in the end with the Pasaay-Daan or pasayadan (JnAneshvar's prayer on Universal well-being) concluding the devotional Sankeertan-sessions.

Abhang has been the main form of devotional poetry and music for about 500 years in most of the western and north deccan regions. encompassing more than a third of the nation. The meter of an 'abhang' was believed to have been formulated by Sant JnAneshvar and was reiterated and perfected by Sant NAMdev. There are two types of abhangs: 'Devadwaar' abhangs and 'Devivar' abhangs. The abhangs have (mostly) four stanzas or 'charans' the first three being the same meter and the last or conclusory one, in a shorter meter. Abhangs by TukArAm have settled the structure/pattern over the last 350 years and considered the most famous for all musicians throughout India. Abhang and the 'nAman' bhajans were originally set to specific Raag and tAl. But, over the centuries, the Raag structure had deviated for the sake of liberty of expression. Common rhythm or tAl used is Dhumali (similar to PakhAwaj's Kherwa tala rendition) and Bhajani with a solid manjirA made of brass or bronze. PakhAwaj is the main instrument for centuries and Tabla has now become another percussion commonly used.

The drone or 'tAnpura' is often the accompaniment although many other instruments including Harmonium and Veena got added to the fray in later centuries. But, the veena used here is 'Ektaari' which is plucked during the abhang singing by the main singer and the group follows him line by line. Abhangs over the centuries are unfolded with a short AlAp or a stanza of another abhang (connoting the sentiment of the main piece) by the main singer, more elaborate if it is a professional musician who does the Sankeertan. In the last 80-90 years, 'Abhang-vANI' (or concert) unfolds with a little bit of improvisation, tAn and Sargam. Many of the Raags chosen are consciously five notes for easy repetition by the masses. MarAthi (Maharashtra) sangeet include Gawlan, Wirani, Bharud, Owi, Panchapadi etc., but Abhang-keertan has set the stage for MarAthi fine arts from folk to classical music exposé. The twentieth century musicians of prowess have redefined the Sankeertans involving a more serious and elaborate improvisation like the Dhrupad or Khayal. The tradition of devotional music of Maharashtra, especially abhang-keertan, was passed on to generations verbally. Its popularity in the 20th and 21st centuries is primarily due to great musicians such as Padmabhushan Krishnarao Phulambrikar (aka Master Krishnarao), Padma Bhushan Bal Gandharwa (Narayan Sripad Rajhans), Bharat-Ratna Bhimsen Joshi, Padma Vibhushan Kishori Amonkar, Padma Vibhushan Kumar Gandharwa, Saraswati Jitendra Abhisheki, Vasantarao Deshpande; the list of famous devotional musicians who popularized Abhang-sankeertan is lot longer starting with Bharat-Ratna Lata Mangeshkar, Hridayanath Mangeshkar, Asha Bhos'le, Sudhir Phadke, Snehal Bhatkar, Srinivas Khale, G L Ranade, Jyotsna Bhole, Manik Varma just to name a few.

Abhanga and the modern-day Karnataka-sangitam concerts:

The writer was introduced to vArkari sampradAya and abhang-keertans in 1959 by his Sankeertana-Guru Nanaji²³ and later by Thennangur Haridoss Giri Swami²⁴ (famously known as 'Guruji'), who is believed to have firmly established the 'Abhang-Keertan' tradition in south India for over fifty years. In the current presentations of 'Dakshina-bharata-sankeertanams' by thousands of Sankeertana-bhagavatas around the world, abhangs constitute at least 20% of the total content thanks to MarudAnallur Satguru Swamigal, several of the twentieth century bhagavatas and by 'Guruji'.

The turning point was when, in the last 30 years, a small number of modern-day Karnataka-sangitam stage artists/performers started singing one or two abhangs towards the end of their concerts to great welcome and appreciation. Slowly, these musicians became more popular than others, thanks to the audience awaiting such conclusory pieces, abhangs. While this is a welcome development, quite often the rendition of such (highly emotive) abhangs seem to just highlight the prowess of the musician in classical music, raga and tala complexities rather than their grasp of the real 'bhAva' or the emotions of the Sants/composers! The writer is hopeful that many newcomers in the KarnaTaka Sangeeta platforms will start learning and absorbing the meaning/bhAva of those abhangs in large numbers such that the classical music concerts become a lot more bhava-laden devotional sangeetam bringing

out the emotions behind each of those compositions. While some of the MarAathi (classical) musicians sing abhangs either as main pieces or towards the end of their concerts, a significant number of them seems to preserve and present the bhAva with minimal showmanship, and more emotive presentation.

With thousands of youngsters around the world, over the decades, showing enormous interest in propagating dakshiNa-bhArata-sankeertana tradition with Harikatha and divya-dampati-vivahams, abhangs are more and more propagated by this new crop of singers and bhagavatas than by the classical musicians (from north and/or south of India). The writer hopes that the classical musicians will follow this new surge and fervor on abhanga-sankeertanam!



Thiruvaiyaru
SR Krishnan

23. 'Nanaji' – Srirangam Brahmasri Nathamuni Narayana Iyengar (1923-2003), a Sankeertanam exponent.

24. 'Guruji-Haridoss Giri' (1936-1994) - world renowned Sankeertanam exponent who is credited with the renaissance of Pracheena-SampradAya-Sankeertana paddati, Harikatha and Bhagavata Mela traditions in the 20th century.