“All is vanity - All is vanity - All is vanity.” The words of Solomon echoed in the heart of a poor householder, Vitthala Pant, who dwelt in a small village in Maharashtra. The young Maharashtrian forsook his young childless wife and repaired to Kashi (Benaras) where under the celebrated saint Sri Ramananda Swami, he took up Sannyasa. However, the chaste young Rakhumabai could not stand this separation and by heartfelt supplications moved the great Guru and brought back her husband, Vitthala Pant, once again to lead the life of a householder. Of her were born the great Jnaneswar, his elder brother (who was his Guru), Nivrittinath, his younger brother, Sopana, and sister Muktabai. All the four children became saints of the highest order. The great work Jnaneswari which has immortalized the name of Jnaneswar (who is also responsible for another work, Amritanubhava) was written by him at the age of sixteen and completed with a prayer:

“Now that the chant of this glorious work is completed before ye saints, I seek the shower of grace by you on me your servant who has dealt you with such a pleasant divine dish. I pray also that those leading the wayward life may be brought to the right path and the Divine Light may shine in the Path of all devotees.”

The greatest trait of Jnaneswar was his humility and his indomitable faith in the grace of God. He believed the grace of God comes by meditation on the Guru. Jnaneswar is very insistent on a perfect celibate and ethical life and gives a great place to austerities. But by far the path of realization which he emphasizes over and over is Bhakti and service to the Enlightened Guru. While emphasizing and preaching sadhana as a necessary prelude in the pursuit of the Path, “Resignation to His will” is equally emphasized by him.

A.A.
As the mist lay slumbering on the silent river, two little shadows moved lightly on the path skirting the contours of the water. The mist muffled sound and darkness in a soft eerie substance which seemed to part easily before the steps of the young boys. They wore only loin cloths and no upper garments. They held hands and moved as if they were completely free of worldly concern. Their heads lifted up, with a slight tilt of independence seen only in Self-realized yogis. Their eyes, full of tenderness, were intent on some inner purpose. Well, the eldest was Nivrtti who could have been a little over ten years old, and the younger was Jnaneswar, his middle brother, two years his junior. On what could they be intent, skimming thus through the nebulous haze of pre-dawn hours?

Soon, Nivrtti pointed out the sacred Udumbara tree by the Godavari river where Rsi Gautama taught, back in hoary antiquity.

‘Jnana, this is the place. Come, let us both sit under the sacred tree and do pay attention to what I’m about to say.’

‘O Nivrtti, my beloved elder brother,’ pleaded Jnaneswar, ‘as you are my guru, let me sit at your blessed feet so that I may worship you and imbibe fully your teaching.’

So it came to pass, as one says in stories that happened long, long ago, that the elder child initiated his little brother in the mystery of unfathomable Brahman and the whole universe.

What passed between them can best be assessed by their own lives and teachings.

Let us linger a while yet near the Udumbara tree as the river mists slowly rise and the light of Jnaneswar’s eyes seems to brighten while day is already on the threshold. The inner Light of Knowledge blazed forth in tune with the newly risen sun illuminating the world. Placing his forehead tenderly on his brother’s
feet, Jnaneswar with tears of love streaming down his adoring face, worshipped Nivrtti with all his heart.

A few days later it was Jnaneswar’s turn to initiate his younger brother Sopana and sister Mukta. Sopana must have been over six and little Mukta four or five, yet such was their inner strength and grasp of spiritual Truths combined with the holy background of their upbringing, that these successive initiations passed the sacred knowledge as from one lamp to another with ease and conviction that left no place or corner vacant for the stealing in of darkness or doubt.
Their parents were Vitthala Pant and Rakhumai, brahmins from Apegaon and Alandi. Due to a misunderstanding between Vitthala Pant and his guru, the great Ramananda of Kashi, he was forced to relinquish sannyasa and return to the life of a householder which he had long since renounced. Such unprecedented behaviour in times of brahminical influence was instrumental in the whole family becoming ostracised. Nivratti was born in 1273 and Jnaneswar in 1275. The irate pandits of Alandi adamantly refused Vitthala Pant permission to initiate his sons in the ways of brahminhood; in other words, to enable them to wear the sacred thread. Finally, moved by his humble supplications, they relented and referred him to the more learned pandits of Pratisthana (Paithan). So the little family in their peregrinations came to settle down for a while at Tryambakeswar on the banks of the Godavari.

It was during one of their peregrinations on the Brahmagiri before daylight, that a tiger suddenly pounced on the little group, scattering them in all directions. Nivratti, the eldest boy, fled into the recesses of the mountain, losing his way so completely that he chanced to enter a deep cave where an enchanting sight met his eyes. In the dancing light of wood and cowdung fires, he saw humans and animals mingling in undisturbed harmony. Was he not greeted by a tiger similar to the one that had given them such fright? The big cat lay sprawled at the feet of some yogi lost in deep meditation. Back to back were deer and panthers, birds of all kinds and even snakes, coiled peacefully round pillars of branches. Nivratti approached cautiously and discovered from one of the anchorites moving about the place that the yogi in meditation was their guru Gaininath, a disciple of Goraksanath. The yogi opened his eyes and looked reflectively at the shy young boy who seemed transparent with purity and vibrant with the inner forces of introspection and self-discipline. The boy stood as it were at the very gates of the arduous path of Self-realisation.

‘Come here, child; who are you and how did you come here?’ said the yogi.

Most humbly Nivratti fell at his feet and related the events that brought him there. The yogi smiled and assured him that his coming was no accident, for his guru had correctly predicted it and urged him to initiate Nivratti, demanding that in turn Nivratti should initiate his brother Jnaneswar who was destined to bring salvation to many.

When the perfect guru meets the right disciple, time is no factor in imparting knowledge. Within eight days Nivratti learnt all that there was to know. All four heavenly children were indeed ready to receive that pure knowledge of yoga. It was already ingrained in their soul, and the act of initiation was actually the revealing or rekindling of that existing fire of Truth.

When their parents saw that all their children shone with the inner effulgence of Self-realisation, radiating love that is divine, they left them to proceed to Prayag (Allahabad) at the confluence of the three sacred rivers, where they offered their lives to the One unchangeable Infinite.
This left the children free to wander where the will of God took them so they headed for Pratisthana. After rescuing the children from exhaustion, the pandits of the sacred city confronted them with a haughty rebuttal of their claims, and the priests refused to give them the letter of purification from their parent’s sins. There ensued an argument with the children until Jnaneswar quoted the Vedas to the great irritation of the head priest, who snapped: ‘Do not trifle with the Vedas for you are all outcastes!’ But Jnaneswar patiently argued that the Vedas were being misinterpreted and that all creatures were free to recite them. Even the heavy he-buffalo passing by the temple gates was no exception. Amidst loud guffaws, the brahmins ordered the buffalo to be brought into the assembly hall and then with incredulous stares asked the fearless boy standing humbly before them whether the animal possessed that knowledge. Jnaneswar without any hesitation assured them that it was so, for the Self indeed was manifest in the whole universe whether consciously or unconsciously. The brahmins roared with laughter and said: ‘Well, let the buffalo recite the Vedas!’ Still unruffled, Jnaneswar appealed to the Divine within the beast and spoke to him softly, gently stroking his forehead. The boy began to recite a passage in the *Rg-Veda* which describes the sacred letter Aum and from then on, the buffalo took over and chanted the *Rg-Veda* in a deep and sonorous voice.

The heart of the pandits underwent an instant change, and while true introspection caused them at first to remain glued to their seats they suddenly rose as one man and humbly prostrated and surrendered to the slender feet of the child they now regarded as Divine Knowledge incarnate.

Censure and praise did not affect the young ones. They accepted both in their serene way and then proceeded on their journey and settled for some years in a village called Nevase where Jnaneswar, still in his early teens, composed his Marathi translation of the Gita with his own original commentaries, and other immortal works of philosophy such as the *Amrtanubhava*, as well as verses of pure enraptured love of God. Seldom has one so young been seen to achieve and combine the sublime goals of knowledge and devotion at one and the same time. It seems as if Jnaneswar swam freely in both currents and so proved them to be one. In fact all the four children did the same with the greatest ease. True to his humble nature, Jnaneswar attributed his success and achievements entirely to the grace of his guru Nivrtti.

Meanwhile, the Alandi brahmins also underwent a change in their attitude to the holy family and in sincere repentance begged them to return to their homeland. Once in Alandi, they made several more disciples including a formidable yogi said to be 1400 years old who practised Hatha-Yoga, by which he renewed his body cells at regular intervals. Changadeva, as he was called, gave up his arrogance and supernatural powers and meekly accepted young Mukta as his guru.

We must remember also that in Maharashtra of seven centuries ago, two main thought-currents were predominant among the masses: that of the Nathas and
the other, the Varkari Sampradaya of the devotees of the Vitthala of Pandharpur. Jnaneswar was quick to sense the need of the illiterate villagers, their constant yearning for a personal God they could feel as their own and confide in. Whatever they got from religion came through the mouths of pandits who spoke as they pleased, since none else knew Sanskrit. Jnaneswar brought them the Gita in their own language and embellished it with such vivid commentaries as charmed his audience wherever he taught. He named his work the Bhavartha Dipika, later known as the Jnaneswari. This was followed by the Amrtanubhava, a treatise expounding his own philosophy, as subtle and profound as his own heart.

The young ones made several pilgrimages to the sacred city of Pandharpur where they mingled with other saints and encouraged the popular feelings of devotion to a God who was both personal and impersonal, who was their constant friend and yet was everywhere in all things. The other saints, who numbered over a score, were no less worthy of admiration. They all had their trials and tribulations and came out of the fire ordeal unscathed, with their faith intact. Most of them belonged to the lower castes or were even outcasts. This did not prevent them from realising the truth of Vedantic Oneness which they achieved without the least effort or tuition. All they knew was complete surrender to God, and that act itself opened the door to the knowledge of the Self.

Does this not go to prove that the paths of knowledge and devotion converge into one through the sincerity of the devotee?

Their matchless verses (abhahges) proclaim ceaselessly the fact that ‘O Lord, Thou art ever One, not two!’ (duja nahi!). Even the little maidservant of Namadeva, the saint Janabai, declares the same in all her songs overflowing with pure love of Panduranga, (Krsna). So did the mali (gardener) Sawata: ‘Thou art the well, the ropes, the bucket and the bullocks and the water flowing in peace to the blossoming plants which Thou art!’

Kanhopatra, the courtesan turned devotee of later centuries, cries to her Lord: ‘The devotees are but your other forms.’ Namadeva the tailor left his meal to chase a dog who had stolen a piece of bread from his plate, exclaiming: ‘O Lord, please take this ghee too, lest your stomach ache after eating dry bread.’

This innate conviction of the Oneness of the Universal Spirit singles out the Maharashtrian devotees as a class of their own, far above the concept of dualism. Besides, they all shared the same humility, the same love of God and of all his devotees, nay, of all creation. They all renounced every desire for worldly possessions and attained complete unattachment. Neither were they given to ostentatiousness or spectacular fits like epileptics. They led quite normal lives.
They were the most perfect combination of Jnana and Bhakti, which they practised every moment of their lives. True yogis par excellence. Apart from a few like Jnaneswar and his family, they were all householders.

Jnaneswar was chosen unanimously the leader of the Varkaris, the devotees of Vitthala (otherwise known as Panduranga). His deep philosophy never clashed with his teachings on Bhakti, a similarity with the great Sankaracarya. Those devotees had no inkling of difference between castes and creeds. Siva was extolled as much as Visnu, both merged into the One same Divinity. Their pure hearts were utterly free from petty bigotry, pride, lust, envy and other mind-shrinking feelings.

Saint Jnaneswar and Saint Namadeva found joy in each other’s company and became close friends. They were the first proponents of the Hari Sankirtana or the mass singing of the names of God. It is still remembered in South India where every Kirtana begins with due salutation and respect to these two saints.

When he approached his twenties, Jnaneswar left for a pilgrimage to the North, accompanied by his faithful friends Namadeva and other saints. They preached as far off as Punjab.

On their return there were great rejoicings in Pandharpur where Kirtanas rocked the temple with the force of unison. It was the high tide of an ocean of joy with devotees and saints dancing in waves of bliss. By that time not only Pandharpur but the whole of Maharashtra burst forth like a forest of flowers as Kirtanas swayed villages and towns with the compulsive force of their dancing and singing the blessed names of God to their heart’s content. Maharashtra resounded thus with the purifying names of ‘Rama, Krsna, Hari Vitthala Panduranga!’ to which they danced in complete abandon of worldly cares, without awareness of the physical world, totally intoxicated with the bliss of the Lord. No one today can even picture in his mind the bliss of what these Kirtanas must have been when one recalls that they were conducted and attended by scores of fully Self-realised saints! God’s name rose like a lion’s roar invading the whole firmament. It transformed, it revived and bathed the entire universe in peace and flooded it with pure love. Blessed, blessed indeed is Maharashtra to have nurtured these great souls at one and the same time!

It was after such a Kirtana that Jnaneswar confided in his friend Namadeva that the time had come for him to leave this world. The news so stunned Namadeva that he was unable to comprehend. Jnaneswar who had always been his friend, his support, to leave them all, just like that? His mute entreaty could not shake the young yogi’s resolve. ‘No, Namya, I have completed all the work I had come to do and now I must leave this body by wilful Samadhi at Alandi.’

Namadeva’s tears brought together all the devotees who joined their entreaties to Namadeva’s. Namadeva felt that even Panduranga expressed his sorrow at such a young life about to be forsaken, but Jnaneswar soothingly and ever so gently gave them hope in the serenity of the Infinite. ‘Let Panduranga
They had to bow to the inevitable and to the will of God who worked through them in His mysterious ways. Namadeva left us eyewitness accounts of these events, as well as biographies of other saints. His rendering of Jnaneswar’s departure from this world is so moving, his pangs of separation so deep that one cannot remain unmoved by his heart-rending verses.

There must have been millions of devotees and saints present at Alandi where the fasting crowds regaled themselves with five days and nights of uninterrupted Kirtanas. The river Indrayani seemed to overflow her banks with delight.

Then, on the thirteenth day of the dark fortnight of Kartika (November-December), Jnaneswar bathed and put on the new ochre cloth (gerua). They marked his body with auspicious signs and slowly and tenderly led him to the final resting place of his youthful body. Yes, he was barely twenty-one! The pit had been dug to the left of the Siddheswar temple, at the foot of an Anjana tree. They spread a deerskin, relates Namadeva, and showered fragrant petals.

The incessant singing and dancing went on, radiating joy around Jnaneswar. Yet Namadeva, Sopana and Mukta could not forget their grief and pangs of agony at the coming separation. Namadeva could not bear to look at the freshly dug pit without feeling the loss of him on whom he had come to depend so much. ‘O Jnanoba, you have been our father and mother. How shall life go on without you?’

Accompanied by the saints, Jnaneswar worshipped at the Siva temple (Siddheswar) and Namadeva poured the sanctified flowers in his hands. Then, as Kirtanas redoubled in power and the name of Govinda rent the air, the heavens seemed to add heavenly Vinas and Mrdangas. Walking in front of the two elder brothers were Sopana and Mukta. Jnaneswar embraced each in turn and Namadeva, who was too upset to utter a word, silently wept on his friend’s breast. The singing of Hari’s name continued unabated. ‘Alas,’ cried Namadeva as tears rolled down his face, ‘my heart is suffering unbearable torments!’

Jnaneswar stood in their midst like a moonbeam of tender light, bowing to them all in humble leave-taking. Namadeva, Mukta and others threw themselves sobbing at his feet in a futile effort at dissuading him. Jnaneswar now could do no more than hand them all over to the care of Sri Vitthala, and with an infinite smile of love gave them assurance that he indeed would always remain their all in all.

With the assent of Nivrtti, Jnaneswar slowly descended to the waiting asana (seat). After bowing in all directions, he sat there, his hands in abhaya mudra resting on his lap. With his mind fixed in one single purpose, he concentrated on the rise of the Kundalini Sakti (power). Stage by stage the serpentine power
rose and crossed the six cakras (psychic centres), abandoning them no sooner had it awakened them; and finally piercing the Brahmārandhra, or top of the head, he merged where he had always belonged, in the formless state of the Self. Cries of ‘Glory to Jnaneswar!’ resounded on all sides while Kirtanas never ceased and flowers fell in showers upon him. With tears in their eyes, the villagers rolled a heavy slab of stone and closed the aperture for ever. Nivratti, Sopana, Mukta and Changadeva also abandoned their mortal coil within a year of Jnaneswar’s becoming one with Brahman.

Note: Italics in this article are by the Editor.


** Smt. Savitribai Khanolkar was born on July 20, 1913 to a Russian mother and a Hungarian father. She acquired Indian citizenship after her marriage to the late Major-General Vikram R. Khanolkar, brother of Dr. V. R. Khanolkar, noted cancer specialist and a former Vice-Chancellor of Bombay University.

Though a non-vegetarian by birth, Smt. Khanolkar, even as a child, preferred vegetarian food. Nature and its beauty thrilled her; she adored the sun and the sea. All along she felt she belonged to India. Impelled by her intense spiritual yearnings, she set out in search of a guru. The momentous meeting with her guru, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, removed “all my doubts and a joy never before experienced flowed into my heart.”

Though a foreigner, in course of time, she so identified herself with the Indian way of life and thought, that she could not think of being anybody else except an Indian.

Eva, as she was known before she married, learned Indian music, Sanskrit and Kathakali. She spoke Marathi like a native and was proficient in Hindi. Besides her mother tongue, she knew English, French and Italian too.

After her husband’s untimely death in 1952, she repaired to the Ramakrishna Vedanta Ashrama in Darjeeling and later settled down in Maharashtra. It was during her stay in Wai that she developed a great reverence for the Saints of Maharashtra and was inspired to write about them.

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The Upanishads Speak

Who sends the mind to wander afar? Who first drives life to start on its journey? Who impels us to utter these words? Who is the Spirit behind the eye and the ear?

It is the ear of the ear, the eye of the eye, and the Word of words, the mind of mind, and the life of life. Those who follow wisdom pass beyond and, on leaving this world, become immortal.

There the eye goes not, nor words, nor mind. We know not, we cannot understand, how He can be explained: He is above the known and He is above the unknown. Thus have we heard from the ancient sages who explained this truth to us.

*Katha Upanishad*