

CONSIDERATIONS OF ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGY IN THE MEDIAEVAL MARATHI POETIC WORK “DNYANESHWARI”

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ABSTRACT: *The mediaeval Marathi saint-poet Sant Dnyaneshwar's work, Dnyaneshwari, is a Marathi rendition of the renowned Sanskrit scripture the 'Bhagwad Gita'. But, while enlightening the religious and philosophical meanings of the Sanskrit Shlokas in Gita, he often uses the images of nature and animals. In so doing, he points out that a true devotee of God could learn the generosity and selflessness from a tree. In the course of his explanation he goes on to comment on the violence being inflicted on nature and animals, visualises the future scarcity of natural resources like water and plants, exhorts us to see the image of God in every being – plant or animal, and prays for the welfare of all – the human and the non-human.*

Key Words: *Marathi saint-poetry, Sant Dnyaneshwar, Dnyaneshwari, environment, ecology, ecocriticism.*

Poetic tradition in Maharashtra is rich and diverse. Initially, this Marathi poetic tradition was nourished by a line of 'santkavis' (saint-poets) in the mediaeval times who, through their work, tried to spread public awareness as well as spiritual enlightenment. One of them, Sant Dnyaneshwar (1275-1296 A.D.), also called as Dnyanadev (spelled also as Jnaneshwar/ Jnanadev), pioneered the Naath and/or Warkari tradition in Maharashtra, and also made a seminal contribution to Marathi poetry. His most famous work, *Bhavartha Deepika* or *Dnyaneshwari*, is considered to be a milestone in Marathi Literature. Referring to his contribution to Marathi literature, Acharya Vinoba Bhave had said, 'Marathi literature minus *Dnyaneshwari* is equal to zero' (Arvikar, 6). *Dnyaneshwari* was written when Dnyaneshwar was only fifteen or sixteen. In Maharashtra, Sant Dnyaneshwar is affectionately called as 'mauli' (mother) because of the extreme tenderness of his thoughts and verse. Besides *Dnyaneshwari*, Sant dnyaneshwar has also written *Amritanubhav*, *Changdevpasashti*, *Haripath* and *Abhangas* but his best and most famous work is '*Dnyaneshwari*'. It has such an esteemed place in the Indian literature that one Hindi commentator says, "If *Dnyaneshwari*, *Gita* and *Amritanubhav* are not available in the literature of any Indian language then the Indianness of the people speaking that language may not be deemed as complete" [qtd. in Tawre, 15; (translation mine)].

Written in 1290 A. D. (Saka 1212), *Dnyaneshwari* is a commentary on *BhagwadGita*. In those days *BhagwadGita* was available only in Sanskrit which was beyond the comprehension of the common people. Even today Vedas are not accessible to a layman because of the difficult Vedic philosophy and its Sanskrit language. *Dnyaneshwari* was a reincarnation of *Gita* in Prakrit-Marathi. In *Dnyaneshwari*, Dnyaneshwar didn't merely translate *BhagwadGita* but provided a kind of explanatory commentary in Marathi for the benefit of the common people. Each Sanskrit 'Shloka' is considered thoroughly and then follows a flood of Marathi 'Ovis' (couplets) that doesn't only enlighten the reader with the meaning of the original *shloka* but also recreate the meaning in an elaborate and lucid way. That is why, perhaps, *Dnyaneshwari*'s second name is '*Bhavarthadeepika*' (flame that enlightens the meaning). Hence, *Dnyaneshwari* is an independent creation of a poet. Though, subjectwise, it is based on *Bhagwad Gita* it touches upon the other secular themes which are relevant not only to his times but also of our own.

The literary creations of Sant Dnyaneshwar were of a yogi or a saint, even then he never loses contact with the ground. Though, basically, his poetic output has a religio-philosophical context, it also has socio-scientific context. In his explanation of the *yogas* and various spiritual concepts associated with them, he uses the examples from everyday life and makes frequent use of the images of trees, forests, water, air, sun, birds, beasts etc. and stresses the purity and propriety of the natural order of things. Commenting on the qualities of a true devotee following Bhaktiyoga, as exhorted by god Krishna in *Geeta*, sant Dnyaneshwar says that a true devotee doesn't discriminate between the living and the non-living, the human and the non-human because he sees god in every being. He can-

Unidiache pahudane | nirodhache velhavane|

Zadansi sajane | chavalave ga ||64|| (Dnyaneshwari, Chapter. 12)

{- Have the feeling of sleep while awake, experience the satisfaction of senses having control over them or have the enjoyment of friendship by making friends with trees (translation mine)}.

This idea of ‘making friends with trees’ may not have figured in Dnyaneshwari due to any imminent environmental conservation need in those times but, nonetheless, it gives us a peep into the Indian religious-cultural attitude towards the non-human nature which advocates human’s oneness with it. Here, it is pertinent to quote the western environmental thinker, Lynn White Jr., who places the onus of the Western environmental crisis on Christianity’s attitude towards the non-human nature, and underscores the role of pagan animism in conserving nature:

“Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends... In Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit... Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 10).

In contrast, earlier in Dnyaneshwari, *sant* Dnyaneshwar says that, to follow God’s Bhaktiyoga truly is to consider every being as the image of god:

Je je bhete bhut | te te manije bhagvant |

Ha bhaktiyog nischit | jana majha ||118 || (*Dnyaneshwari, Chapter. 10*)

(Whichever being one meets, he considers each of them as god, this is true devotion towards Me).

While describing the qualities of a true devotee, he says that a true devotee has the sense of equality and indiscrimination like earth that never weans away the bad ones and nourishes only the good ones (*Chapter - 12, Ovi-45*), or like water that quenches the thirst of a cow or a tiger alike. It doesn’t become poison for a tiger because it is violent (*Chapter -12, Ovi-147*). A true devotee is like a tree that-

Jo khandavaya ghav ghali | ka lavni jayane keli |

Dogha ekachi sauli | vruksha de jaisa ||199 || (*Dnyaneshwari, Chapter- 12*)

(A tree gives same shade to both, who has come to dig it out and who has planted it). Such a devotee who doesn’t discriminate shows highest kind of generosity like a tree:

Phuli phali chhaya | muli patrihi Dhananjaya |

Vatecha na chuke aliya | vruksha jaisa ||86 || ch. 16.

Tari dane sarvaswa dene | vechane te vyartha karne |

Jaise phaloni swaye sukane | aushadhinche ||106|| (*Dnyaneshwari, Chapter- 16*)

(As a tree/ medicinal plant never turns down anybody who comes its way, and gives away everything it has- its barks, leaves, flowers, fruits and roots- and withers away living only for others. In the same way, a true devotee gives away everything keeping nothing for his physical comfort).

Having compared a true devotee with a tree for its selflessness, generosity and a sense of equality, *Sant* Dnyaneshwar says that, instead of a great offering, merely a leaf of a tree or even water satiates god and is dear to Him as nectar if it is offered with love. But, at this moment, he also indicates towards a future phenomenon by questioning that, shall there ever come a time when even water and tree leaves will be hard to have?

Athava aisehi ek ghade | je palahi pari na jode |

Tari udkanche tav sankade | navhel kin ||387 || (*Chapter- 9*)

(It may happen that a devotee may not find tree leaves, but will there ever be drought and lack of water? It may never).

But, Dnyaneshwari does not talk only about the graciousness of trees and water and the possibility of their scarcity in future. It also talks about the violence that is inflicted on animals and trees alike, thus raising the ecological issue. Criticising the act of violence against animals, *Sant* Dnyaneshwar attributes the hunters of birds and beasts with demonic tendency who kill the herds of animals so as to fill their bellies (*Chapter- 16, Ovis 345 & 346*). He even lashes against the then acclaimed Ayurveda that practiced the killing of one to save the other, in the 13th chapter- “Prakritipurushvivekyoga”, like this –

Ani ayurved aaghava | to yacha mohara pandava |

Jo jivakarane karava | jeevaghata ||225|| (*Chapter- 13*)

(And, Arjuna ! Ayurveda, as it recommends the killing of one to save the other, is same as the non-violence that is being traditionally advocated which does nothing but promote the violence). In Ayurveda, a creature suffering from various diseases and pains is diagnosed and medicated. But, before that, to prepare the medicines-

Tavten chikitse pahile | ekache kand khanvile |

Ani eka upadvile | samulin sapatrin ||227|| (*Chapter- 13*)

(Before the diagnosis and medication, roots of trees and, sometimes, the whole tree, with its roots, leaves and flowers, is brought, digging it out of the soil). Or –

Eke aad modavili | ajangamachi khal kadhavili |
Eke garbhini ukadvili | putamaji ||228|| (Chapter- 13)

(Some plant is broken from the middle, the other, that is firmly rooted in the soil, is peeled off, or still other, that is pregnant (in its blossoming period), is boiled and baked inside the covering of clay and leaves). In this way –

Ajatshatru taruvara | sarvangi devavilya shira |
Aise jeev ghevuni dhanurdhara | korade kele ||229|| (Chapter- 13)

(A tree that has no enmity with anyone is wounded and killed, and is dried of its life-blood). Even living, moving animals are not spared –

Ani jangamahi hat | launi kadhile pitta |
Mag rakhite shinat | anika jeeva||230|| (Chapter- 13)

Not only the trees that do not move, (the moving animals are also caught and their organs, like bile, are chopped off so as to save the suffering and the life of the diseased). This practice of Ayurveda is like building temples by destroying well established mansions, removing the loincloth to use it as a turban, or giving charity feast by using looted wealth.

In our times, environmental imbalance, climate change, global warming, depletion of the natural resources like water, and the disturbance in seasonal cycle have become burning issues. They are being discussed on the global platforms and it is argued that the reason for these disasters is man's extreme interference with the natural order of things. Therefore, as the American ecocritic Lawrence Buell says,

"If, as environmental philosophers contend, western metaphysics and ethics need revision before we can address today's environmental problems, then environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity's relation to it. To that end, it behooves us to look searchingly at the most searching works of environmental reflection...; for in these we may expect to find disclosed (not always with full self-consciousness, of course) both the pathologies that bedevil society at large and some of the alternative paths that it might consider" (Buell, 2).

In this context, it is pertinent to point out that *Dnyaneshwari* stresses the propriety of the natural order of beings. According to it, on this earth there are various forms of life with unique habits and inclinations of their own. Some feed on the air only, some subsist on grass and some eat food. For some the water is their life. But all of these beings are under the control of *Prakriti* (nature) and god is present in every being, in a similar degree (Chapter- 7, Ovis: 37-39). The '*Pasaydaan*' – a request for god's grace – at the end of *Dnyaneshwari* is a unique prayer for the universal peace and prosperity for all, the human and the non-human.

Kimbahuna sarva sukhi | purna houni tinhi loki |
Bhajijo aadipurushi | akhandita||1799|| (Chapter- 18)

(May all the beings, in His creation, be filled with happiness and perpetuate their state in the grace of god by their devotion towards him.) The most notable feature of this prayer is that it transcends religion, creed, and time. It is on behalf of all, and the all time humanity.

A Marathi critic V. D. Kulkarni observes, "Today, a beautiful picture of the whole world could be drawn with the extraordinary might that the man has achieved. But instead of using that might for the welfare of humanity man is using it for his own destruction. He has gone blind with pride of his self, his caste, his tribe, his religion (?).In such a disastrous time a tale of peace like *Dnyaneshwari* tells us our religion, assures us to follow it without doubt and ensures for us the spiritual satisfaction of the discharge of our duty than that of success or failure" (Tawre, 13; translation mine).

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