

**Sects in Maharashtra
Samartha Ramdas Swami 's Maharashtra Dharma – A Case of Nation
Building**

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ABSTRACT :

Ramdas Swami created a *Ramdas* sect of his devotees who followed his philosophy of regular reading of the holy text, politics, alertness and perseverance. By developing virtuous disciples and establishing *Math*, he developed impartial leadership qualities in the people and reached a considerable milestone towards his goal in establishing a sound nation. By creating an unparalleled balance between religious power and political power, he filled the minds of promising youth with patriotism.

He established the powerful deities, Lord Ram and TuljaBhavani and Maruti, the deities of strength, before the people. Simply considering the number of Maruti temples established by him leaves us awe struck at his perseverance and industry; he literally established hundreds of Maruti temples. He lived a life of an ascetic in the wide open and devoted his entire life towards the benefit of the country. He showed the path of spirituality and a better life to people of all classes, orphans, downtrodden and women.

He advised them to develop good judgement to establish soundly their worldly and spiritual lives. He dreamt of an ideal land. He awakened the spiritual as well as the scientific minds of the people to make the nation strong.

Along with his valuable contribution towards establishing the nation, he also stressed on educating the masses, establishing sound worldly lifestyles, spirituality and good judgement, because these are the essential components of a self ruled sound nation. He strove hard to establish and widen the scope of Maharashtrian religion.

Ramdas was one of the great saints of the Maharashtra ..

He was born of Suryaji Panth and Renuka Bai in Jamb, Maharashtra, in 1608 A.D. His original name was Narain. Ramdas was a contemporary of Sant Tukaram. He was a great devotee of Hanuman and Lord Rama. *Swami* Samarth Ramdas was a great litterateur, visionary and progressive *RashtraSant*, adept at diverse topics ranging from spirituality, love of all religions, patriotism, organising people, awakening people, social work, politics, worldly engagements, poetry, literature, metaphysical and physical development. He visited most of the pilgrimage and holy places in the entire country. While visiting the country, he observed the ethos of the nation. In extremely difficult times like calamities and autocratic rule of foreign forces, he literally waved a magic wand to turn the State back from the path of destruction. He strove hard to

establish and widen the scope of Maharashtra religion.

Maratha tituka melvava| Maharashtra Dharma vadhvava|

(The Marathi people should be united | And the Marathi religion be spread)

He created a *Ramdas* sect of his devotees who followed his philosophy of regular reading of the holy text, politics, alertness and perseverance . At a time, when Saint Tukaram by his Gathas became the pinnacle of the temple of Varkari sect, Ramdas Swami laid the foundation of a new revivalist sect possessing zeal for victory. The life span of Ramdas was from A. D. 1608 to 1682. Tukaram and Ramdas were contemporaries and both had come into contact with Chhatrapati Shivaji. The work of Ramdas took shape in the background characterized by continuous invasions of Maharashtra by Muslim powers and consequent rise of the outlook of pessimism and renunciation in the society and the rise of Chhatrapati Shivaji who openly challenged the Muslim invasions and laid the foundation of Swaraj. Ramdas not only promoted a distinctive system of worship by establishing Ramdasi sect, but propagated a social outlook towards life called by him as, “Maharashtra Dharma” and thereby creating a very favourable atmosphere for establishing Swaraj by Shivaji Maharaj. The Maharashtra society during the medieval period was tormented by foreign rule. A feeling of pessimism had gripped the people. In this situation, Samarth Ramdas tried to disseminate his teaching of ‘Maharashtra Dharma’. The expression Maharashtra Dharma was in vogue prior to its use by Ramdas, but its meaning was different. In the ‘Bakhar (a chronicle) of Mahikavati’ (A. D. 1370) first reference to Maharashtra Dharma was made. However, there it means observing various religious rites; such as Kulachar (Family rituals), Vanshachar (lineage rituals), Deshachar (regional rituals), Vedshastrachar (rituals prescribed by Vedshastras), Snana (bathing ritual), Sandhya, Japa (reiteration of the sacred prayer), Upasana (worship), Vrata (rites), Sana (Festivals), Utsav (celebrations) and the sixteen Sanskaras. In Guru Charitra, a sacred text of Datta sect, reference is made to Maharashtra Dharma implying the authority of the Vedas, Varnashram Dharma, good conduct and rites and rituals. The meaning of the term Maharashtra Dharma which Ramdas had in his mind ***implied a psychological attribute or a mental out-look based on Vedic tradition and aspiration for political independence helpful for creating this worldly society.*** A brief reference is made below to the kinds of traits implied in the idea of Maharashtra Dharma as propounded by Ramdas.

There are **six characteristics of Maharashtra Dharma** as propounded by Ramdas. These are, Aishwaryakanksha, Prapanch, Lokjagriti, Shakti, Yatnadev and Swaraj and Swadharma.

The first characteristic Aishwaryakanksha or aspiration for prosperity implied this-worldly outlook which according to Ramdas is conducive to

nationalism. This attribute was present in ancient Indian society in great abundance, a fact which contributed to the rise of Hindu emperors. In this period India was leading in the field of arts, science, architecture, commerce, navigation etc. But afterwards as a result of the impact of the philosophy of renunciation of Shankaracharya and the influence of the religious ideology propounded by Kumaril Bhatta, which emphasised the authority of the Vedas and ritualism, this worldly outlook disappeared from the society and as a consequence the whole of India came under the Islamic rule. With a view to bring about change in this situation, Ramdas propagated aspiration for prosperity among people. By acquiring diverse kinds of knowledge, that is by acquiring benevolent knowledge, people should become prosperous. Ramdas says, “ those who are accomplished will enjoy prosperity, while those who are lacking in this, will become poor. There is no doubt about this ”. He impressed on the minds of the people that, without motivation for prosperity creation of an independent nation is not possible. Prapanch or a desire to lead a worldly life is **The second characteristic** of the Maharashtra Dharma. An ideology of renunciation is inimical to nation building. As a result of the inclusion of the path of Sanyas in Hindu religion, there was a firm belief among people, that the pursuits of Prapanch and Moksha were contradictory to each other. This resulted in the ideology of renunciation becoming influential in the society. According to Ramdas the ideology of renunciation was detrimental to the nation building. Hence his exhortation: One should lead worldly life well before thinking spiritual ends: Those who neglected their family or worldly responsibilities and sought to achieve salvation became impoverished. Hence, in the concept of Maharashtra Dharma first importance is attached to achieving well-being of one’s family. Grahasthashrams is most superior Ashram of all the four Ashramas. Gods, Rishis, Munis and ascetics are the creation of this Ashram and live on its support.

Lokjagriti or enlightening the people, is the third characteristic of Maharashtra Dharma. Education of the people, organising the people and encouraging a unity, are the objects considered to be very important for nation building. The most important piece of advice which Ramdas gives us is ‘ educate the people, make them wise and keep them organized by fostering close ties among them’. Shakti or physical strength is the **fourth characteristic**. In the nation building Shakti has been given an important place. Nobody gives any importance to a weakling. While explaining the importance of Shakti, Ramdas says, ‘Kingdoms are won by physical strength. Ingenuity encourages efforts. A person who combines in him physical strength and ingenuity becomes an abode of prosperity.’ As a result of this outlook, worshiping of Shri Ram and Hanuman acquired considerable importance. Hanuman is considered to be a God of physical strength. Yatnadev or activism is the **fifth characteristic** of Maharashtra Dharma. While explaining the importance of making efforts Ramdas says,

‘ effort or struggle is god, people who are gifted with this quality are fortunate. Without efforts there is poverty’. He called ‘ activism ’ God, which he believed, would eradicate the blind belief of destiny from the Hindu mind. Ramdas tried to impress on the minds of the people, that the line of fate could be obliterated through one’s efforts. Swarajya (Self-Government) and Swadharma (duties of one’s Varna) together **constitute the sixth characteristic** of the Maharashtra Dharma. Swarajya is the objective while Swadharma is a means for achieving it. Persons belonging to the four Varnas neglected their Swadharma or duties, as a result of which there was anarchic condition in the society. Maratha nobles and Brahmins took pride in serving the Muslim rulers, and forgot the responsibilities of their Varna. As a result, the nation deteriorated. In order to alter this situation and take the nation to its glorious State, it is essential that people, especially those belonging to Brahmin and Kshatriya Varna, observe their Swadharma, that is perform the duties of their Varna. With this view, Ramdas propounded his concepts of Rajdharma, Kshatradharma, Brahman Dharma and Sevak Dharma. Launching an attack on the enemy without caring for one’s life is the Dharma of the Kshatriya. Devoting to the study of Vedas, Smritis and Puranas, and thereby preaching religion to the people is the Dharma of the Brahmins. Ramdas appealed to the Brahmin youths to become religious heads and thereby create awakening among people. In the ideology of Maharashtra Dharma as propounded by Ramdas, not just religion, but both religion and politics have been fused together. In order to inculcate this ideology in the society, Ramdas propagated a code of conduct, and laid the foundation of his sect. To provide an organized form to the sect, Ramdas established a net-work of monasteries inside and outside Maharashtra. Among the several monasteries outside Maharashtra are included those at Surat, Kashi, Kanchi, Haridwar and Ayodhya. Mahants were made the chief of these monasteries. Intelligent and smart boys from the Brahmin caste were selected with great efforts to the position of Mahants. The primary duty of the Mahant was to create religious and political awakening in the society by educating the people. Ram, Maruti and Tulja Bhavani were the principal deities of the sect. Ramdas founded Maruti temples at numerous towns and villages in Maharashtra and introduced the practice of celebrating Ram Navami, the birth-day of Ram. While performing these activities a good deal of secrecy was required to be observed due to foreign rule. Ramdas advised the Mahants not to remain content only with preaching but render social service to the community and try to remove their sufferings, and develop friendship with all. A Mahant should be selfless. He should not perform Kirtan for money, nor be a worker of the royal family, nor should he accept gifts from anyone. He should maintain himself on alms. He should not accept large quantity of alms from one household alone but take only a handful. Under the pretext of collecting alms, he should observe the condition of

society. The Brahmin youths should consider themselves responsible for propagating 'Rashtra Dharma'. That is why he exhorts Brahmin youths to create awakening in the society. While the leaders of Varkari sect denounced worship of inferior gods and goddesses, Ramdas did not do so. In this respect his outlook was more accommodative and all embracing. He advises people to worship Kuladevata, Gramadevata, and various inferior gods and goddesses. This reveals the traditional and revivalistic nature of this sect. Dasbodh is the authoritative text of the sect. This work is divided into twenty Dashaka and each Dashaka is further sub-divided into ten Samas, dealing with various themes. In addition to this, three more works of Ramdas, namely, Karunashtake, Adhyatmik Prakarne, and Ramayan are considered to be important in the sect. Besides these, the books written by well-known disciples are also respected in the sect. In this connection a mention may be made of 'Samartha Pratap' by Giridhar, 'Bhaktileelamrit' by Bhimajibuva, who was the descendant of the lineage of Kalyanswami and 'Dasvishramdham' by Atmaramswami Ekkehalikar. Chaphal and Parali, both located in Satara district are considered to be the most important holy places of this sect. Ramdas made a beginning of his mission after establishing the first monastery of the sect at Chaphal and hence the place is considered to be the chief centre of the sect. Similarly, Ramdas spent the last years of his life and breathed his last on Sajjangad in 1681 and hence the place has acquired sanctity. Besides these two places, Jamb in Jalna district which is the birth place of Ramdas; Shinganwadi, where one of the eleven temples of God Maruti founded by Ramdas, is located; Shivatharghal, where Ramdas wrote his famous Dasabodh, Dahiphall in Parbhani district and Takli in Nasik district, have acquired the importance of the sacred place in the sect. Similarly, Panchawati, Ayodhya, Rameshwar are also considered to be the sacred places, for the sect distinction is made in the sect between the celibate and the house-holder. A crutch in the arm-pit, a cloth-wallet for collecting alms hanging around the neck, ochre-coloured gown, Chipli (a wooden musical instrument) in the hand, and a seal of Ram on the forehead, is the usual appearance of the Mahant. In the daily routine of the followers of this sect, bath and offering water oblations (Sandhya), worship of family deities, reading of minimum two 'Samas' from Dasbodh, eleven Shlokas from Manobodh, and two Karunashtakas, Dnyaneshwari, Eknaths Bhagwat etc; are included.. In some respects the ideology and ritual practices professed by various sects were different from those of the orthodox Vedic religion. Broadly, these sects may be classified into three categories, namely, revolutionary, reformist, and revivalist, Virshaiva and Mahanubhav sects professed revolutionary religious ideology. To a large extent, these sects were alienated from the orthodox Vedic religion. Varkari sect. may be treated as a reformist sect. Instead of rejecting the entire framework of the

orthodox Vedic religion, it attempted to bring about maximum modifications in the system. Datta and **Samartha sects were revivalists in nature.** They attempted to establish Varnashrama Dharma in its pure form. However, in some respects these sects maintained their separate identity from the orthodox Vedic religion. At social level, Datta sect. attempted to bring Hindus and Muslims near each other, as can be seen from various cultural and social symbols of the sect. **Samartha sect. edged a revolt against the attitude of disinterestedness in worldly life, and ideology of pre-destination.** The main concern of the Nath sect. was with those seekers, who had reached a certain spiritual height. At this level the sect rejected distinctions of caste. On the whole, it can be said that, all these sects made attempts to remove inconsistencies and find a solution to secular and spiritual problems arising out of the strained relationship between the orthodox Vedic religion and the Hindu society, as a result of changes in the socio-political environment. Although none of the above sects appears to have attained complete success in achieving the above objective, the Varkari sect. appears to have done a very valuable work towards attainment of the above goal. Saint poets of this sect, namely, Dnyaneshwar, Eknath, Namdeo, Tukaram and others, have done an important work in fostering unity in the religious life of various castes, tribes and other groups belonging to different cultures in Maharashtra. Without resorting to force or intolerance, these saint-poets criticised inferior forms of worship and religious ideologies prevalent among various castes and tribes, and provided to them the progressive form of worship of the Varkari sect and contributed to the process of evolution of the religious life in Maharashtra. Among various social groups in Maharashtra a bond of religious unity was created at the regional level through the devotional cult of Vitthal. By strongly criticising meaningless ritual practices spread in society in the name of religion, the saint-poets tried to impress on the minds of the people the importance of pure religiosity.

The saint-poets wedged a revolt against the promotion of inequality based on the caste and varna in the religious sphere by Shastris and Pandits of the medieval period. Importance of ritual practices was reduced by promoting the practice of muttering the name of god as a simplified religious practice and thereby providing equal rights to the common people in the religious sphere. In spite of their firm conviction that, Vitthal is the only god who should be worshipped by all, they adopted a liberal and all-embracing attitude towards different modes of worship prevalent in different groups in society and brought all the sects together under the banner of Varkari sect. In this way they prepared the foundation of religious life of the society in Maharashtra by creating a thread of devotion of Vitthal which wove together various castes, tribes and territorial groups in spite of the diversity in religious life existing among them. In the mediaeval period the society in Maharashtra had

to face a challenge posed by Islamic religion and political aggression. Out of the efforts to meet this challenge, various sects came into being.

However Ramdas Swami By developing virtuous disciples and establishing *Math*, developed impartial leadership qualities in the people and reached a considerable milestone towards his goal in establishing a sound nation. By creating an unparalleled balance between religious power and political power, he filled the minds of promising youth with patriotism. He established the powerful deities of Lord Ram and TuljaBhavani and Maruti, the deities of strength, before the people. Simply considering the number of Maruti temples established by him leaves us awe struck at his perseverance and industry; he literally established hundreds of Maruti temples. He lived a life of an ascetic in the wide open, and devoted his entire life towards the benefit of the country. He showed the path of spirituality and a better life to people of all classes, orphans, helpless children and women. He advised them to develop good judgement to soundly establish their worldly and spiritual lives. He dreamt of an ideal land. He awakened the spiritual as well as the scientific minds of the people to make the nation strong.

Saamarthya ahe chalvaliche, jo jo karil tayache\ parantu tethe adhishtan pahijel bhagvantache

(A movement has strength, with people joining in\ but the movement needs the presence of divinity)

According to his above adage, he tried to create a movement with the presence of divinity. Realising the importance of *Chhatrapati* Shivaji Maharaj's political movement of establishing *Swarajya*, he gathered the people together and made a valuable contribution towards strengthening the *Swarajya* movement and establishing the nation. He awakened the movement for a divine and just nation by creating a balance between tolerance and yearning for victory. Along with his valuable contribution towards establishing the nation, he also stressed on educating the masses, establishing sound worldly lifestyles, spirituality and good judgement, because these are the essential components of a self ruled sound nation.

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