

# ॥ दिगंबर दिगंबर श्रीपादवल्लभ दिगंबर ॥



## **Shri Vasudevanand Saraswati** **Tembe Swami Maharaj**

(A Compact Biography)

### **1. THE BEGINNINGS**

#### **Background**

India in the middle of nineteenth century was in a state of confusion and turmoil. The British, through the medium of East India Company had struck political roots and were about to begin the severe assault on the Indian Culture and religion. The roots of the ancient Vedic

religion, which had withstood the centuries of Muslim rule, appeared to be shaking under the Western influence. The Varnashram system, which had stood the test of time over millennia, was destabilized. The Brahmins who were supposed to guide the society were, for most part occupied by worldly pursuits. Even the awareness of true religion was fading from social psyche leave alone its knowledge. The confusion in the ranks of Vedic (Hindu) intellectuals was to manifest in the forms various 'Samajas' that took birth in that century. The people were losing their faith in the traditions, having forgotten the essence of the principles and practices of religion. The doctrines of our religion appeared ambiguous and contradictory, the practices so diverse as to be conflicting and mythology bereft of any meaning. There was a dire need for a person who could not only make the people clearly understand these doctrines but also presented, in the form of his own dedicated life, the ideal practice of religion and guiding them on the path to Divinity. Such a person indeed was Shri Vasudevanand Saraswati, the great saint and ascetic who revived the ancient Dattatreya tradition and embodied in his short life the ideals of Brahmacharyashram, Grihasthashram and Sanyasashram.

### **Family and Birth**



**Home Shrine of Shri Swami Maharaj**

He was born in the village of Mangaon near Savantwadi, then a princely state, in southern Maharashtra in a traditional Brahmin family.

His parents were devotees of Lord Dattatreya, his father Shri Ganesh Bhataji Tembe spending years together in the remote Ganagapur temple of the Lord in Karnataka. His mother Ramabai also used to spend her time in religious pursuits like jap (recitation of mantras), pradakshina, path, atithisatkar (hospitality) etc. After a particularly long stay in Ganagapur, Lord Dattatreya appeared in a dream and instructed Shri Ganesh Bhataji to return to Mangaon and lead the life of a householder (grihastha), promising to incarnate as their son. It was after his return from Ganagapur that his eldest son Vasudeo was born on the 5th day of the dark fortnight of the month of Shravan of A.D. 1854. Tembe family was endowed with spiritual riches (daivi sampat) but had little temporal wealth. Their priestly duties were not adequate for the livelihood and Vasudeo's grandfather took to agriculture as a side business.

### **Elementary Education**

At the age of three years Vasudeo started going to the private school in the Yakshini temple in the village. He had to learn writing with his fingers on a layer of dust, a very tiring and painful mode. Apart from the secular education in the school, Vasudeo also received traditional oral education from his grandpa Hari Bhataji. With his sharp intellect and quick memory Vasudeo soon mastered the basics of Sanskrit grammar and poetry.

### **Brahmacharyashram**

As per the tradition Haribhataji performed the Maunjibandhan of his beloved grandson Vasudeo, which consists of initiation to the Vedic studies and Brahminhood and the first of the four Ashramas, Grihasthashram. Immediately after this, the young Vasudeo started the daily rituals ordained by the scriptures viz. Sandhya twice a day, 1000 recitations of Gayatri mantra, daily reading of shri Gurucharitra – the bible of Shri Datta tradition etc. He also completed a 2.4 million recitation of Gayatri. He strictly followed the religious disciplines prescribed by scriptures, particularly the Gurucharitra. He then started the study of Vedas, the holiest of the scriptures, under the guidance of Shri Tatya Bhataji Ukidave. He woke up daily before sunrise and took his bath and insulated himself from all impurities and contamination during the religious practices. He only took fresh, pure (sattvik) and vegetarian food prepared by himself or by his mother and never ate outside his home. The food prepared in this fashion, he used to first offer to sacrificial fire (Vaishvadev), the cow (Gograas), to the crow

(Kaakbali) and finally to the Lord Datta, before partaking it in the manner ordained by scriptures. During the meal any impurity in the environment led him to leave his food and fast for the day. He used to observe the fasts on the 11th moons (Ekadashi) of both the fortnights, when he did not even drink water and did not sleep during the day or in the night.

Vasudeo, with his sincerity, sharp intellect and phenomenal memory, soon completed his study of the Vedas and became proficient in the priestly duties. Soon, he became a respected and beloved figure in the neighborhood and started contributing to the family livelihood.

During this period, he also studied some astrology and Sanskrit poetry with one Shri Sadhale shastri. However his astrological calculations soon started embarrassing Sadhale Shastri by being more accurate than the latter's. This led Sadhale to stop Vasudeo's tuition.

### **Mantrasiddhi**

Vasudeo's austerities, dedicated practices and devotion soon led to his acquiring mantrasiddhi i.e., supernatural powers operating through vedic mantras. There are numerous examples of these. Once he was traveling by foot with a fellow priest, to a nearby village through a forest. Suddenly they saw snake slithering ahead of their path and his companion asked him whether Vasudeo could try a mantra on it. Quickly Vasudeo held some dust nearby in his hand and reciting an appropriate mantra, sprinkled it in a circle around the passing snake. Suddenly, the snake was stopped in his tracks. It could not cross the circle and started moving round and round within it. The two priests went about their way and having finished their business in the neighboring village, returned to their homes, forgetting all about the snake. Only the next afternoon, Vasudeo suddenly remembered the snake and went to the spot along with his friend. To his horror, the snake was lying listless in that circle apparently totally exhausted after unsuccessfully trying to break through the circle. Quickly, Vasudeo took some more dust and reciting an antidote mantra, sprinkled it over the poor creature. The snake, as if suddenly released from the bondage, sprang away into the bushes. This so deeply affected Vasudeo – we better call him Vasudeo Shastri or simply Shastriji, that he never again used that mantra

Once at his sister's place, Vasudeo displayed his mantric prowess by turning her intractable cow docile. He also helped local police by providing an accurate description and modus operandi of a particularly

evasive gang of robbers. Another time, he correctly predicted the capture of the accused by the police of another state. He also helped people in distress by relieving them of their chronic ailments. This augmented his reputation in Mangaon and the surrounding area. He was now respectfully addressed as Shri Vasudeo Shastri.

However, it must be emphasized here that Shri Vasudeo Shastri never employed his powers for either monetary gain or to impress others in any way. He only used his powers to help the needy and to relieve suffering. We shall see that this compassion for his fellow beings continued to be a major motivation in his entire life.

## **2. HOUSEHOLDER (Grihashthram)**

### **Grihashthram**

Shri Vasudeo Shastri was married at an early age of 21 years (1875 A.D.) much against his wishes. One Babaji Pant Hawaldar of Ranganagad, a nearby village, approached his teachers Ukidave and Alavani to get his rather plain looking daughter with defective foot, married to Vasudeo. Together, they practically settled the marriage without a word to Vasudeo. When his mother learnt of this, she was dismayed that her son has taken such a major decision without even consulting her. When Vasudeo later told her that he knew nothing of the matter and had not even set eyes upon the girl, she was somewhat pacified. Eventually, Vasudeo had to bow to the wishes of his teachers and thus married to Babaji's daughter Bayo whom, as per the custom Vasudeo's mother christened as Sou. Annapurna. Soon after the wedding Vasudeo commenced the worship of ritual fire (*smartagni*) and completed a *Gayatri purashcharan*.

Subsequent to marriage, the need to earn some extra money took Vasudeo to Goa for a few months. He studied astrology with Shri Neelkanth Padye, a renowned astrologer in those days. Vasudeo's sharp intellect and adherence to religious discipline, earned him the affection and respect Shri Padye. However, Vasudeo had soon to return to Mangaon because of his father Shri Ganesh Bhataji's illness. Despite Shri Padye's having held his belongings to ensure Vasudeo's return, he never did.

Vasudeo lost his pious and simple father at the age of 23(1877 A.D.). Shri Ganesh Bhataji was a spiritually evolved soul and knew the time of

his death beforehand. He was only 56-57 at the time.

Shastriji's married life was not exactly a bed of roses. Sou. Annapurna never got along well with her mother-in-law. She had to suffer a lot of verbal and at times corporal abuse at the hands of Vasudeo's mother. Shastriji being a devoted son never even uttered a word in his wife's defense in spite of sympathy for her, lest his mother be offended. Annapurna felt neglected and at times rebelled by not cooperating in the various religious rituals, which formed such a major portion of Shastriji's life. These continuing domestic clashes sharpened his inherent detachment. The thoughts of renouncing it all for an itinerant life were growing stronger by the day. One day, he left home quite determined to get initiated as a monk (*Sanyasi*) and went to Savantwadi. There, in a chance encounter, a spiritual being (*brahma-pishach*) told him through the medium of Shri Aanaavkar, quite unexpectedly, that his thoughts of renunciation are premature and he has much work to do at Mangaon. This made him change his mind. This particular brahm-pishach, on his own admission was the spirit of a learned and virtuous predecessor of Aanaavkar (a Brahmin) who accidentally killed a cow while trying to drive her away from his garden. He never told this to anybody nor did he perform the necessary absolutions (*prayaschhitta*). On his death, the Chitragupta (the angel of judgment) gave him a choice between the births of tiger or abrahm-pishach. He opted for the latter since this would preserve his memory and knowledge. According to him this birth would last for from hundreds to thousands of years. This Aanaavkar spirit was indeed very knowledgeable and was several times instrumental in solving Shri Vasude Shastriji's problems in astrology and scriptural interpretations.

### **Narasobawadi**

He now started feeling the urge to travel to Narasobawadi, the place where Shri Narsimh Saraswati Swami Maharaj, the second incarnation of Lord Dattatreya in the age of Kali (15th Century A.D.), spent 12 years in austerities, situated at the confluence Krishna and Panchganga. The Lord Dattatreya is worshipped here in the form of His feet or Padukas installed under the ancient Audumbar tree, alongside the riverbed. Doubtful about his mother's consent for traveling to Narasobawadi (also referred to as Wadi), he kept his thoughts to himself. One night a Brahmin appeared in his dreams and said, "Shastriji, if you are so keen to go to Wadi why don't you? Your mother will surely consent and you will get company as well as the money!" After this dream, Shastriji spoke to his mother who said, "I have no objection! Take a trip if you so wish!" The other predictions in the

dream also came true and Shastriji arrived in Wadi. On the way he was instructed through another dream to contact Shri Govind Swami a self-realized soul then staying in Wadi.

### **Shri Govind Swami**

On reaching Wadi, Shastriji took the customary dip in the Krishna River and wet and fresh from the dip, took a vessel full of the holy river water to be poured over the padukas in the temple. The priests, doubtful of his identity, did not allow him into the sanctorum. Disappointed, Shastriji started climbing up the steps of the riverbank, when Shri Govind Swami, who was ordered by the Lord Himself, came down the same steps addressing Shastriji in a surprisingly familiar manner, "welcome Vasudeo Shastri! It appears the priests haven't allowed you to worship the Lord's feet! Come with me, please." With these words he handed his sacred staff (Dand) to Shastriji and took him back to the temple. Thus accompanied by the revered sage, Shastriji was naturally allowed access to the Padukas. From that day onwards Shri Govind Swami became the mentor and the guide of Shri Vasudeo Shastri.

One night, during his maiden visit to Wadi, Shastriji descended to the river to wash his feet. On his way back, he went to the temple and as he was circling it, he was suddenly confronted by a tall and radiant monk who admonished him, "are you not aware of the rule forbidding visit to the temple at night after the night service?" Shastriji paid his salutation and asked his pardon. When he recounted the event to Shri Govind Swami, the monk was none other than Shri Narsimh Saraswati Himself. During this visit, Shastriji was initiated to the regular worship of Shri Datta Padukas, in addition to the Panchayatan worship he was practicing, by the instructions from Lord Dattatreya, under the guidance of Shri Govind Swami. He was also ordered to perform ritual of reading of Shri Guru Charitra.

### **Lunar Fast (Chandrayan Krichhra)**

By the time he returned from Wadi, the renovation of his old house he had commenced while leaving, was nearing completion. He undertook to carry out the house warming rituals (Vastu Shanti). However, his wife could not join him within the auspicious time. Shastriji, dejected by this, exclaimed, "no one will live in this house. This place will be asylum (dharmashala)." That is what came to pass. His brother Shri Hari Bhataji performed the ritual later.

Such events continued to add to Shastriji's detachment and goaded him to austerities to dissolve his sins and cleanse his mind as prescribed by scriptures. Thus he set out to undertake the rigorous lunar fast. The fast is to be commenced on a day of dark moon (Amavasya) by totally abstaining from food. On the first day of the bright moon fortnight, one serving of food of the size of hen's egg is taken. This is increased by daily increments, to a meal of 15 servings on the full moon day. During the dark fortnight, the food intake is decreased by one serving each day till the next dark moon, when a total fast is observed. During this period, all daily injunctions viz. three baths and Sandhya thrice a day, the daily worships, recitations and other sever austerities continued. Shastriji had instructed his family to refrain from feeding him anything, even water, in the event of his getting unconscious. The fast was successfully concluded. However it left Shastriji sick and tired and he could hardly walk. Even so, he set out for Wadi along with his mother, for the celebration the birth anniversary of the Lord Dattatreya.

### **Wadi Again**

This time his stay in Wadi extended to four months. Shri Govind Swami urged him to undertake the path of dedication to Lord Dattatreya, which he ignored. The same night the Lord Himself appeared in his dream and bequeathed the mantra. Even as he woke up from his dream Shri Govind Swami called out from his bed, "Shastriji, got your mantra? I shall teach you the practice (vidhan) tomorrow." This greatly accentuated Shastriji's reverence for Shri Govind Swami whom he now accepted as his Master. Next Shri Govind Swami gave him on the practice of the mantra and also instructed him to read Shri Shankaracharya's bhashya (exposition) on Upanishads.

### **Shri Mouni Swami**

During this period, Shastriji's urge for renunciation surfaced again. However Shri Mouni Swami told him that he has to stay at Mangaon for some more days. Shri Mouni Swami hailed from the Solapur area. Leaving home in childhood in search of Divinity, he travelled to holy places traversing the country from Kashi to Rameshwar on foot, several times, performing austerities and living only on neem leaves for years. At the youthful age of 25 years, he was initiated to ascetic life (Sanyasi) and christened Pradyumna Saraswati by his master. However, having abstained speech (Mouni) for several years, he came to be addressed as Mouni Swami. Absorbed always in the



contemplation of the Brahma (Godhead), he had a child-like disposition. He was greatly respected and his utterances always came to pass. Even Lord Dattatreya seemed to respect his word. He passed away in Wadi only. He had great affection for Shastriji.

### **3. THE MANGAON TEMPLE**

#### **Idol**

Towards the end of his stay at Wadi, Lord Dattatreya communicated to Shri Vasudeo Shastri his plan to "reside in Mangaon for seven years". Soon thereafter Shastriji set out for Mangaon for the necessary preparations for the Lord's stay. After paying his respects to the Mother of the Universe (Mahalaxmi) at Kolhapur, he was passing through the market of a town called Kagal, thinking about the idol of Lord Dattatreya for the proposed temple at Mangaon. Suddenly his eyes fell on a sculptor's shop when the sculptor himself came out of the shop and after salutations started saying, "Shastriji, please give me the specifications of the idol you want and I shall make exactly what you want. Please do not worry about money." The sculptor had received instructions from the Lord to make the idol for Shastriji. Consequently, Shastriji stayed at Kagal for a couple of days. As per his instructions, the sculptor made a brass idol about seven fingers width tall, sitting in siddha posture with two arms signalling bestowal (var) and protection (abhay). The sculptor's charges amounting to about 20-25 rupees were paid collectively by some local gentlemen.

#### **The Temple**

Taking the idol Shastriji returned to Mangaon. As he was nearing his home, an empty space caught his attention, which he thought, would be suitable for the temple. However as the land belonged to someone else, he kept his thought to himself and kept the idol in a corner in his home. Within a couple of days the widow of the owner of the land had a dream instructing her to donate her land to a Brahmin. She approached Shastriji's mother for advice. On her suggestion, the lady donated her land to Shastriji for the proposed temple.

Having thus received the idol and the land without much effort, Shastriji immediately started the construction of the temple. With

inspired assistance from the residents in the form of material, money and labour, the temple facing east, was completed in a mere seven days. A well was dug up nearby in three days. Shastriji constructed the sanctum with bricks laid by his own hands. The idol from Kagal was consecrated in the new temple on the 5th bright day of Vaishakh of A.D. 1883.



**Mangaon Temple**

As per His pledge, the Lord started residing in the Mangaon temple, as evidenced by the subsequent response of the people, their experiences and general prosperity of the place. The place became well known in a short span of time and people started coming in hordes, especially on Saturday evenings when a palanquin with the mobile idol of the Lord used to be taken out, circling the temple three times, singing the Names of the Lord, bhajans and songs in his praise. The offerings of the devotees used to be collected in heaps and distributed as prasad. The festival of the Birth Anniversary of Lord Dattatreya was also celebrated on a large scale. Around 8-10 thousand people used to partake the meal (prasad) on the occasion. People afflicted with evil spirits etc. used to attend the Saturday palanquin. They used to get the advise on the ways to relief through Shastriji. Many people came with some wishes and done following Shastriji's advice, which consisted mainly of some form or other of the worship of the Lord, fulfil those.

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