



Namdev

Namdev (Pronunciation: [\[na:mdev\]](#)), also transliterated as Nam Dayv, Namdeo, Namadeva, (traditionally, c. 26 October 1270 – c. 3 July 1350^[1]) was a [Marathi Vaishnava saint](#) from [Narsi](#), [Hingoli](#), [Maharashtra](#), [Medieval India](#) within the [Varkari](#) tradition of Hinduism. He was as a devotee of the deity [Vithoba](#) of [Pandharpur](#).^[2]

Namdev was influenced by [Vaishnavism](#) and became widely known in India for his devotional songs set to music (*bhajan-kirtans*). His philosophy contains both [nirguna brahman](#) and [saguna brahman](#) elements, with [Vedanta](#) themes.^[3] Namdev's legacy is remembered in modern times in the *Varkari* tradition, along with those of other *gurus*, with masses of people walking together in biannual pilgrimages to [Pandharpur](#) in Maharashtra.^{[4][5]} He is also recognised in the North Indian traditions of the Dadu Panthis, Kabir Panthis and Sikhs.^[2]

Some hymns of Namdev are included in the [Guru Granth Sahib](#).

Namdev was married to Rajai and had a son, Vitha, both of whom wrote about him, as did his mother, Gonai. Contemporary references to him by a disciple, a potter, a guru and other close associates also exist. There are no references to him in the records and inscriptions of the then-ruling family and the first non-Varkari noting of him appears possibly to be in the [Leela Charitra](#), a [Mahanubhava](#)-sect biography dating from 1278. *Smrtisthala*, a later Mahanubhava text from around 1310, may also possibly refer to him; after that, there are no references until a [bakhar](#) of around 1538.^{[12][a]}

According to [Mahipati](#), a [hagiographer](#) of the 18th century, Namdev's parents were Damashet and Gonai, a childless elderly couple whose prayers for parenthood were answered and involved him being found floating down a river. As with various other details of his life, elements such as this may have been invented to sidestep issues that might have caused controversy. In this instance, the potential controversy was that of [caste](#) or, more specifically, his position in the Hindu [varna system](#) of ritual ranking. He was born into what is generally recognised as a [Kshatriya](#) ([क्षत्रिय](#)) caste,

variously recorded as [shimpi](#) (tailor) in the [Marathi language](#) and as *Chhipa*, *Chhimpa*, *Chhimba*, *shimpi*, *chimpi* ([calico](#)-printer) in northern India. His followers in Maharashtra and northern India who are from those communities prefer to consider their place, and thus his, as [Kshatriya](#).^{[13][14]}

There are contrary traditions concerning his birthplace, with some people believing that he was born at [Narsi Bahmani](#), on the [Krishna River](#) in [Marathwada](#) and others preferring somewhere near to [Pandharpur](#) on the [Bhima](#) river.^[15] that he was himself a calico-printer or tailor and that he spent much of his life in Punjab.^{[7][16]} The *Lilacaritra* suggests, however, that Namdev was a [cattle-thief](#) who was devoted to and assisted [Vithoba](#).^{[16][17][b]}

A friendship between Namdev and [Jñāneśvar](#), a [yogi](#)-saint,^[19] has been posited at least as far back as circa 1600 CE when Nabhadās, a hagiographer, noted it in his *Bhaktamal*.^[7] Jñāneśvar, also known as Jñāndev, never referred to Namdev in his writings but perhaps had no cause to do so; Novetzke notes that "Namdev's songs generally did not concern biography or autobiography; the historical truth of their friendship is beyond my ken to determine and has remained an unsettled subject in Marathi scholarship for over a century."^[20]

Namdev is generally considered by [Sikhs](#) to be a holy man ([bhagat](#)), many of whom came from lower castes and so also attracted attention as social reformers. Such men, who comprised both Hindus and Muslims, traditionally wrote devotional poetry in a style that was acceptable to the Sikh belief system.^[16]

A tradition in Maharashtra is that Namdev died at the age of eighty in 1350 CE.^[7] Sikh tradition maintains that his death place was the Punjabi village of [Ghuman](#), although this is not universally accepted. Aside from a shrine there that marks his death, there are monuments at the other claimant places, being Pandharpur and the nearby [Narsi Bahmani](#).^{[21][22]}

Reliability of hagiographies

[\[edit\]](#)

Scholars note that many miracles and specifics about Namdev's life appear only in manuscripts written centuries after Namdev's death.^{[23][24]} The birth theory with Namdev floating down a river, is first found in Mahipati's *Bhaktavijay* composed around 1762, and is absent in all earlier biographies of Namdev.^[24] Mahipati's biography of Namdev adds numerous other miracles, such as buildings rotating and sun rising in the west to show respect to Namdev.^[25]

The earliest surviving Hindi and Rajasthani biographies from about 1600 only mention a few miracles performed by Namdev.^{[26][23]} In Namdev biographies published after 1600 through the end of the 20th century, new life details and more miracles increasingly appear with the passage of time.^[26] The earliest biographies never mention the caste of Namdev, and his caste appears for the first time in manuscripts with statements from Ravidas and Dhana in early 17th century.^[23] Namdev's *Immaculate Conception* miracle mentioned in later era manuscripts, adds Novetzke, is a story found regularly for other sants in India.^[27] The Namdev biographies in medieval manuscripts are inconsistent and contradictory, feeding questions of their reliability.^[23]

Work

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The literary works of Namdev were influenced by [Vaishnava](#) philosophy^[7] and a belief in [Vithoba](#). Along with the [Jñānēśvarī](#), a sacred work of Jñāneśvar, and of [Bhakti movement](#) teacher-writers such

as [Tukaram](#), the writings of Namdev form the basis of the beliefs held by the Varkari sect of Hinduism.^[4] He was thus among those responsible for disseminating the monotheistic Varkari faith that had emerged first in [Karnataka](#) in the mid-to-late 12th century and then spread to Pandharpur in Maharashtra.^[28]

Namdev and Jñānēśvar used the [Marathi language](#) to convey their beliefs. Namdev's style was to compose simply worded praise for Vithoba and to use a [melodic device](#) called [samkirtana](#), both of which were accessible to common people. Shima Iwao says that "He taught that all can be saved equally, without regard to caste, through devotion (*bhakti*) to Vithoba" and that he greatly influenced groups of people who were forbidden by the Brahmin elite from studying the [Vedas](#), such as women and members of the Shudra and [untouchable](#) communities.^{[28][29]}

The earliest anthological record of Namdev's works occurs in the [Guru Granth Sahib](#), the Sikh scriptures compiled in 1604,^[7] although Novetzke notes that while the manuscript records of Namdev mostly date from the 17th and 18th centuries, there exists a manuscript from 1581 that presents a rarely recounted variant version of Namdev's *Tirthavli*, a Marathi-language autobiographical piece.^[30] It is evident that the *Guru Granth Sahib ji* record is an accurate rendition of what Namdev wrote: the oral tradition probably accounts significantly for the changes and additions that appear to have been made by that time. The numerous subsequently produced manuscripts also show variant texts and additions that are attributed to him. Of around 2500 [abhangs](#) that were credited to him and written in the Marathi language, perhaps only 600 - 700 are authentic.^[7] The surviving manuscripts are geographically dispersed and of uncertain provenance.

Namdev's *padas* are not mere poems, according to Callewaert and Lath.^[32] Like other Bhakti movement saints, Namdev composed *bhajans*, that is songs meant to be sung to music.^[33] A *Bhajan* literally means "a thing enjoyed or shared".^[34] Namdev's songs were composed to be melodious and carry a spiritual message. They built on one among the many ancient Indian traditions for making music and singing.^[33] Namdev's bhajans, note Callewaert and Lath, deployed particular species of *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 than helps harmonise the wording with the musical instrument, all according to *Sangita* manuals refined from the 8th to 13th centuries.^[33]

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.^[35] In some species of Indian music, it is the music that dominates while words and their meaning are secondary.^[36] 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.^[36] The songs and music that went with Namdev's works were usually transmitted verbally across generations, in a *guru-sisya-parampara* (teacher-student tradition), within singing *gharanas* (family-like musical units).^[36]

Callewaert and Lath state that, "each single song of Namdev is a musical and textual unit and this unit is the basis for textual considerations".^[37] The unit contained *Antaras*, which are the smallest independent unit within that can be shifted around, dropped or added, without affecting the harmony or meaning, when a bhajan is being sung with music.^[38] In Namdev's songs, the dominant pattern is *Caturasra*, or an avarta with the 4x4 square pattern of musical matras (beat)