CHAPTER IV
PURANDARADĀŚĀ AND THE VIṬHALA CULT

As an aspect of periodization of the medieval historiography of India, the proliferation of religious cults derived from Puranic traditions and its associated bhakti variants may be taken as a feature of medieval history particularly of Peninsular India. Religious cults and its associated puranic forms of temple worship made possible the establishment of a wide network of temples as cult centres which the medieval dynastic states tapped for the purpose of political legitimization. The medieval temple networks and cults played a vital role in integrating diverse elements of medieval society and polity into a state structure and therefore medieval statecraft especially under the Vijayanagara empire revolved around the use of such centres as resources for making the political structure visible in different geographical and social locales. The cult of Viṭṭhōbā was one such religious cult made popular in South India by the Vijayanagara kings, especially during the reign of Krishnadēvarāya (1509-1529).

In this chapter an attempt is made to look at the religious tradition that became predominant in the thirteenth century Mahārāštra which was popularized by Marāthi saints through their poems called abhangs. This devotional cult was known as the cult of Viṭṭhala(also Viṭṭhōba) that was centred around the temple of Pandharpur in the Sholapur district of Mahārāštra. In the thirteenth century Pandharpur emerged as the pilgrimage centre of the Vārkari saints, who composed songs in praise of Viṭṭhala or Viṭṭhōba who was considered as form of Vishnu. The Vārkari tradition is a spiritual movement or more exactly a body of spiritual groups gathered around spiritual teacher-guru. Theoretically everybody without distinction of caste and creed can become a Vārkari. In Maharashtra, the five saint poets of medieval period (panc sant kavi) who
composed the main body of Marāthi devotional poems are glorified and respected even today by all people and are looked upon as creators of ‘people’s literature’ in Maharashtra.¹ They are Jnāndev an outcaste Brahmin, Namdev the tailor, Eknāth the Brahmin householder, Tukārām the Śūdra poet and Rāmdas a political saint and the preceptor of Sivāji. My emphasis is on the spread of this devotional cult towards South India and at what point in history did this cult taken towards South India and who was responsible for the spread of this cult in South India. An examination of the inscriptions of the sixteenth century shows that this cult was popularized in South India by the Vijayanagara rulers who patronized Vaishnavism right from the beginning of Tuluva reign.

In this study I have made use of the inscriptions of medieval period that constitute the most authentic documents for the study of this cult, the most important being the inscriptions of medieval Karnataka. They belong to different dynasties such as Rashtrakutas, Chalukyas, Hoysalas and Vijayanagara Kings. D.R Nagaraj says “the inscriptions have a certain well-formed conception of the world, the community and the role of the individual in history; they seek to represent a body of social knowledge which is put to specific use by a self-conscious agent or political institution”.² Here, a large number of inscriptions pertaining to the medieval period of Indian history throw much light on the socio-economic, political and religious aspects of Deccan, where the cult of Viṭhala became prominent.

Pandharpur located in the fringes of the Deccan, witnessed the incessant struggle between the Rāṣṭarkūtas of Malkhed and the Chāḷūkya of Kalyani in the early medieval period. The rise of

Vijayanagara state South of the Tungabhadra region and the Deccan based Bahmani Sultanates along with the military conflicts between these later medieval polities resulted in Pandharpur changing hands frequently. The linguistic identity of this region has been contested between Maharashtra where Marathi was spoken and Karnata or Karnataka where Kannada was spoken. Pandharpur became a major centre of worship during the reign of the Yadavas whose regime was extinguished by the expansion of the Khaljis in the early fourteenth century.\(^3\) The mention of Vīṭhala as the deity in the Hoysala inscription dated 1237 A.D is the first time that this god is referred in epigraphic texts.\(^4\) Deleury has surmised that the cult of Vīṭhōba had spread among the Marathi speaking population which formed the core territory of the Yadavas of Dēvagiri.\(^5\)

Pandharpur remained the centre of the Vārkari Panth and the association of the Vārkaris with this place can be dated to the arrival of Jnānēsva. The Vārkari tradition started by Jnānēsva crystallized around a group of devotees who sang abhangs about the glory of Vīṭhala. Jnānēsva (c.1220 A.D) was a poem framed as a commentary on the Bhagavad Gītā. Sheldon Pollock has remarked that the work is remarkable as a precarious instance of assertive identity.\(^6\) Vijaya Rāmaswāmy has pointed out that there was a radical element in the Vārkari panth that it admitted members without distinction of caste and gender.\(^7\) Purandaradāsa in his compositions stretched the idea of pilgrimage and made it congruent with the pilgrim routes of the Vijayanagara territories, by identifying the deities of the temples he visited with Vīṭhala of Pandharpur. The dominant message of the Varkari Panth that salvation was open to all

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5. Ibid, p.36.
irrespective of gender, social status or caste given a new meaning and dimension that Purandaradāsā’s compositions related directly to the holy sites he visited. The social base of the Vārkari movement was extremely wide and that accounts for the popularity of the Abhangs composed and their retention in popular memory.

The earliest inscription which mentions Pandharpur is a Kannada inscription of 516 A.D. issued by the Rāshtrakūta king Avidēya From this it can be assumed that the official language of that part of the Deccan was Kannada and was also the language of the people. The Rāshtrakūtas were certainly not Kannada speaking, but came from a country where Marathi was spoken. They employed Kannada script for the inscription to ensure that it was understood by the people concerned.9

The above mentioned inscription refers to the donation to Jayadvitha a Brahmin, of five villages among which was Pandarangapalli which is identified with Pandharpur. Pandharpur remained a part of the Rāshtrakūta domain for over one century. This is attested by a short confirmatory grant engraved in the reign of Amoghvarsha on the copper plate of 516 A.D.10 Amoghavarsha established his capital at Malkhed, about 100 miles South-East of Pandharpur. But, Pandharpur was also a part of the Chalukya Empire till 756 A.D, which may be inferred from the inscription of Kirtivarman II, which mentions Bhandaragavattiga, a village on the banks of Bhima river. Bhandaraga is probably the Pandaraga12, a Kannada term used in many inscriptions and vattiga may stand for Bittiga meaning mountain. Pandharpur at that time was known as Pandara or Pandaranga.

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8 MAD (1929), pp.198. ff.
9 G.A Deleury, Op.cit, p.27
10 MAD (1929) pp.209, 10.
Rashtrakutas were overthrown by the Chalukyas of Badami in 973 A.D and they assumed the imperial power. They encouraged and cultivated the language of Kannada. King Someswara I was a powerful Chalukya king under whose reign the Chalukya power reached its zenith. He shifted the capital from Malkhed to Kalyani which was also a place near Pandharpur. But no inscriptions pertaining to the Chalukya period refer to Viṭhala as a name of a God or in the name of a man or place. The early inscriptive mention of Viṭhala is found in an inscription of 1216 A.D.\(^{13}\)

With the disruption of the Kalyāṇi Chalukya Empire in 1180 A.D the dominion was split into two kingdoms one under the Hoysalas and other under the Yādavas. Two new centres of culture appeared; Dēvagiri in Marāṭhi part and Dwārasamudra in the Kannada part. The Hoysālas of Dwārasamudra continued protecting and encouraging the language of Kannada. At the same time, the Yādavas of Dēvagiri adopted Marāṭhi as the official language of the court.\(^{14}\) It was a reaction against the predominance of Kannada which until then had been the language of power in the reign of preceding dynasties. The Hoysālas were able to meet the Yādava challenge in a battle fought at Lakkundi in Dharwar in 1192 A.D.\(^{15}\) From that time onwards Yādavas expanded towards North and Hoysalas only Southward. Now Pandharpur became a part of the Yādava Kingdom and was already a Marāṭhi speaking country. It was under the Hoysālas that an inscription mentioning the existence of a God in Pandharpur was mentioned in 1237 A.D for the

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\(^{13}\) EC Vol VII, p.54  
\(^{15}\) G.A Deleury, op.cit, p.32.
It was partly in Sanskrit and partly in Kannada. By this time, Pandharpur was no longer a smaller village; it has become a large village or ‘mahagrama’.

The popularity of the Viṭhala cult spread in the Hoysāla kingdom and this is supported by insessional evidences. The Hoysāla patronized the worship of Viṭhala. In Shimoga and Hassan districts there were temples dedicated to Viṭhala, as suggested by the inscriptions of 1216 A.D\(^1\), 1217 A.D\(^1\), 1227 A.D\(^1\) and 1230 A.D. At places like Basharulu\(^2\), Govindanahalli\(^3\) and Bhadrāwati\(^4\) there were images of Viṭhala among the other ‘avatars’ of Vishnu. Biṭṭideva was a Hoysāla king, who was a great devotee of Viṭhala. In Kannada, the term ‘biṭṭi’ means mountain. Biṭṭideva is the lord of the mountain. It can be also assumed that people worshipped lord Viṭhala as the one residing on the top of a hill. G.A Deleury is of the opinion that Viṭhala is a changed version of Biṭṭara. Also there are frequent occurrences of ‘biṭṭiga’ in the inscriptions of the 10\(^{th}\) century. Some of them are the inscriptions of 950 A.D\(^5\), 955 A.D\(^6\) and 964A.D.

The Biṭṭigas mentioned above were petty officers in some villages and they died while fighting against cattle thieves. Here comes the significance of the pastoral origins of the Viṭhala Cult. Cattle were the important source of wealth to the people of Deccan. Great care was given for the maintenance of pasture for the grazing of cattle. Due attention was paid to the protection of live stock. Cattle raids were frequent and the villagers never hesitated to lay down their life in attempt to rescue their cattle from the hands of robbers. Such acts of heroism were always

\(^{16}\) IHQ (1935), pp.775 ff.
\(^{17}\) EC Vol VII, p. 54
\(^{18}\) EC, Vol VIII, p.135
\(^{19}\) MAD (1940), p.117
\(^{20}\) MAD (1934), p.42
\(^{21}\) MAD (1933), p.18
\(^{22}\) MAD (1931), p.4
\(^{23}\) EI, Vol VIII, p.234
\(^{24}\) EC, Vol VIII, p.202
appreciated and gratefully acknowledged by the people by erecting hero stones (vīragals) in their memory landing grants to the bereaved families. There is a story that Viṭṭhala died while defending cattle and a hero stone was erected to commemorate the dead hero. People worshipped this hero stone and the cult was born. There is also iconographic similarity between the image depicted on the hero stone and the deity of Pandharpur and it strengthens the pastoral origins of the Viṭṭhala of Pandharpur. The shepherd community of the Deccan called danghars worshipped Viṭṭhala - a deified conflation of various locally remembered heroes who lost their lives in saving the cattle from cattle thieves. There is a Viṭṭhōba shrine at Patanakōdali in South Maharāshtra, worshipped by the shepherd communities. Later Viṭṭhala became popular with people other than cowherds and shepherds; he came to be associated with the dominant religious traditions. The Yadavas a royal dynasty of pastoral origins popularized their tutelary deity. Viṭṭhala was identified with Krishna (known as a shepherd god) and therefore an avatār of Vishnu.

In an inscription dated 1249 A.D, Pandharpur is mentioned as Pundarika kṣhetra – the place where Pundalika was honoured. The story of Pundalika goes like this:-

“Once Lord Krishna and his consort Rukmini while walking through the Dandirvan forest came to sage Pundalik’s hermitage. At that moment Pundalik was busy attending to his parents, stopping only for a second when he flung out a brick for his visitor to stand upon it, it being the rainy season. When he has finished he went out and asked the lord to excuse him for the delay. But Krishna far from being angry was pleased at his devotion and he bade Pundalika to worship

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25 Gururajachar, S., Some Aspects of the Economic and Social Life in Karnataka, Dharwar: Karnataka University, 1974, pp 48-49.
26 Dandekar, Ajay, Understanding Traditions- State, Cults, and Legitimacy in Early Medieval Maharashtra, p 231
27 Dhere, R.C, Sri Vithalaswamy Ek Mahasamanvay, p.51
28 IA, Vol XIV, p. 68.
him as Viṭṭhōbā – one who stood upon a brick. Ever since then in the same spot has stood the idol of Krishna standing on a brick around which the temple of Pandharpur has been constructed. Close to Viṭṭhōbā stands an image of Rukmini whose flight was the reason for Viṭṭhōbā’s visit to Pandharpur”29.

The Chaturvarga Chintamani of Hemadri a minister of Yadava king Ramadeva mentions Pundarika as the place where Panduranga is worshipped.30 By this time, the gulf between the Hoysalas and Yadavas widened and the Viṭṭhala Cult spread among the Marathi people. Pandharpur had now become a town of pilgrimage. Hoysālas too continued to worship Viṭṭhala. This is supported by the frequent occurrence of the name Viṭṭhala in Karnataka inscriptions found at Anuja in Chittaldurg (1265)31 at Belur (1277)32 at Hassan (1284)33 at Kuruva in Shimoga (1286)34 at Ajjampura in Kadur (1297)35 and at Sagar (1298). A statue of Viṭṭhaleswara was established at Sulukere in Hassan in 1299 A.D36. Most of the temples dedicated to Viṭṭhala in Karnataka are found in Shimōga, which is a hilly region.

There are several inscriptions of the thirteenth century which mentions the name of Viṭṭhala. Some of them are:-

1216 A.D – Vithalesa, name of a God, in Shimoga district37

1217 A.D – Viṭṭhala, a God, in Shimoga38

29Kincaid, C.A, A History of the Maratha People, p.104
30G.A Deleury, op.cit. p.36
31EC Vol XI, P.162
32EC Vol Vp.3
33Ec Vol IVp.41
34EC Vol VII,p.17
35EC Vol VII,p.88
36EC Vol VIII,p.99
37EC Vol VII, p.54
38EC Vol VII, p.135
1227 A.D – Vīṭhalabeyakere, name of a village in Hassan district\(^{39}\)

1237 A.D – Vīṭhala of Pandharpur\(^{40}\)

1299 A.D – Vīṭhalaprabhu, name of a man, in Hassan district. \(^{41}\)

**The Spirit of the Varkari Tradition**

The Varkaris called god as parabrahma – one who is unknowable, who can not be perceived by the senses nor understood by the mind in his totality. This idea of absolute transcendence is found not only in the philosophical works of varkari saints but also in their poems called *abhangs*. Spirituality according to Vārkari tradition is something centered around the idea of mōksha or liberation. The Vārkaris believed that the world is real even if it is of the poorest reality. They believe that god is eternally still and beyond our reach, but the world is its moving manifestation although this motion hides the true nature of god. Man lost among this motion is in god but he can not see him.\(^{42}\)

The philosophy of the Vārkaris says that if man cannot reach God by his own effort, he may ask Him to be known and reached. According to them, the only adequate method to acquire moksha or liberation is Bhakti. Jnānēswari says “it is those who are full of devotion to me, for whom the Guru acts as a pilot and who takes the raft of self realization for such we may say that the flood ceases to exist”.\(^{43}\) According to Tukaram, the great saint of Vārkari Panth, only faith in God can save man. To ask for His Grace is the only way to attain mōksha according to Vārkaris. God indeed is only waiting for the devotion of man so that god can manifest himself to man.\(^{44}\)

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\(^{39}\) MAD (1940), p.117  
\(^{40}\) EC Vol VII, p.44  
\(^{41}\) EC Vol VII, p.54  
\(^{42}\) G.A Deleury, op.cit, p.111  
\(^{43}\) Ibid, p.112  
\(^{44}\) Ibid, p.113
The avataras or various forms of Vishnu like Viṭṭḥōbā must be understood in this light. They believe that Vishnu took the form of Viṭṭḥōbā in response to or in recompense for the devotion of a Bhakta. Devotion only attracts god and that is why God Vishnu took the form of Viṭṭḥōbā and blessed pundalika, a devotee. Tukaram again in one of his abhangs says that God has assumed a shape for his worshippers sake. For the Vārkaris Viṭṭḥōbā is not only the form of Vishnu or Krishna, but primarily the form of Parabrahma or the Unknowable.

According to the Vārkaris, the purpose of God taking a form is to meet the desires of his devotees. For the Vārkaris, God reaching man was not just a possibility but a fact that really happened when god came to Pundalika, stood on the brick with his hands akimbo- hence the name Viṭṭḥōbā. The Vārkaris considered their duty to therefore set apart himself/herself totally to devotion of Viṭṭḥōbā, because it is the only way to obtain the liberation. Viṭṭḥōbā is everything to a devotee, his mother, father and teacher. Viṭṭḥōbā is for a Vārkar his true family and the place where he longs to be. Vārkar believed Viṭṭḥōbā is the absolute- hence omnipresent and omnipotent. Tukaram in an abhang says that god is everywhere, in the desert and in the sea. What ultimately needed is deep faith, God comes quickly and stands where He finds faith. Faith will please God and he will reward it by his presence. God dwells in all images as he dwells in everything, and he knows how to adapt himself to the level of his worshipper. For the Vārkaris, the stone image of Viṭṭḥōbā at Pandarpur is only an image. They believe that they have formed a Vishnu of stone, but the stone is not Vishnu. The image of stone is only a means to show their devotion to the one who is beyond their reach. Such is their attitude towards the images of stone especially towards the image of their beloved Viṭṭḥōbā.
To the Varkaris, God must be understood by everybody and that is why images are used. It is also the reason behind the Vārkari practice of the means of worship that anybody can practice. One among such means is the practice of Pilgrimage which was discussed in the earlier chapter. But the pilgrimage itself is only a training in the simple methods that Varkaris advocate for moving ahead in spiritual life and finally attaining the goal of mōksha or complete liberation. The other methods of worshipping god among the easy means of attaining moksha are the chanting the name of God (Nāmajapa), listening to the Kīrtans (Nāmasravana) and the companionship of the saints (Satsang). In their hymn books in Marāṭhi, these three traits are mentioned by the terms, Nāmapara, Kirtanpara and Santapara respectively.

The absolute devotion of the Vārkaris to the idea of Viṭhoba can be contrasted to the other parts of self realization put forth in medieval philosophy. Rejecting the abstractions of the Vēdas (Jnānēśvar composed Vēdas on stones) and the ritualistic practices of both yōga and kriya, the Vārkaris foregrounded only bhakti as the only reliable means of self awareness. Jnāna and yōga along with kriya are not explicitly rejected, but the Vārkaris were aware of the limitation of these methods and hence the emphasis on devotion or bhakti. The bhakti of Purandaradāśā derived from the Vārkari tradition in that Nāmasamkirtana or the recitation of the holy name was the formal expression of his devotion which culminated in the recognition of all avatāras of Vishnu as a form of Viṭhala. To the Vārkaris, utterance of the name of god is the most important aspect of bhakti. In Jnānēswari is said that sin has been driven out of the world by chanting the name of God. According to Nāmdev, the Vārkari saint, the name of God has a great power on
God Himself. When once uttered his name, god himself cannot escape from us. To the Varkaris, man is able to stay in the presence of God through out all his life, by the utterance of his name. God’s name has the power to purify men from all sins. The Varkaris believed that one does not need to perform any other religious observances if he utters the name of God. To them, name of Viṭhala is the essence of everything. He who recites the name of Viṭhala continually is freed from all obligations. The names which Vārkaris utter are those of Vishnu: Hari, Krishna, Gopāla, Gōvinda, Kēsav. The most frequent repetitions are those of the names of Viṭhōbā, Rukmini.

The term Kīrtan refers to many kinds of performance tradition in India such as Samkīrtan, Namakīrtan (performing the name of God) – a peculiarity of the Bhakti tradition in Maharashtra and Karnataka. Kīrtan is a vital religious practice in Sikhism also. The Varkari kīrtans are accompanied by other elements like dance, music, audience participation and moral narration mixed to varying degrees. Unlike the traditions found in the rest of India, the Kīrtān performance in Mahārāshtra is a different genre. The person who plays a vital role in this is a Kīrtankar who is the lead performer. He invokes one or two kīrtans and gives a philosophical interpretation of the selected texts. In Marāthi tradition, there are many names for Kīrtan performance like Harikatha, Harikīrtan and Nāmakīrtan. The Marathi inscriptions pertaining to 12th and 13th centuries did not have any connotation of performance as far as the term Kīrtan was concerned. It literally meant ‘glorious thing’. A Marāthi kīrtan takes a number of forms such as one accompanied by dancing and music under the direction of a Kīrtankār, a social commentary,

45 Ibid. p.121
a philosophical narration and linguistic description. Christian Lee Novetzke says, “in general Kirtan emphasizes narration, virtuosity, scholarship and entertainment all brought together to assess the beauty of the Kirtan”. To the success of a Kirtan, the way of performance and the mastery over music is of central importance. The Kirtankars were wandering singers who constantly sang about performing Kirtans and listening to the Kirtans of others.

Varkaris consider believe that uttering the name of God and listening to his names are paths towards liberation. Listening to the ‘Kirtans’ is a form of practicing Bhakti. They also believe it as the holiest of their duties. The performance of a Kirtan will not only sanctify the performer and the listener, but also the place where it is done. Many abhangs of the Varkaris celebrate the sanctity of the sands of the holy banks of river Chandrabhaga, where the Kirtans are sung in the calmness of the night. That performing Kirtan is the most important among the duties of a saint takes us to consider the last important doctrine of the Varkari panth i.e Satsanga or the company of the saints. The Varkaris believed in the presence of a guru to begin the spiritual journey. And the concept of ‘sant’ is essentially derived from this conception of guru. all the great saints like Jnaneswar, Eknath, Tukaram are indebted to their spiritual masters and expressed in many of their poems the indebtedness to their gurus. It is Guru who unfolded the royal teaching of bhakti for their benefit. To the Varkaris, God was something beyond their perception, and to reach God, the presence of a spiritual Guru was considered important. Here is where the ‘santa’ mediates. He thus becomes the representative of God – the one who bridges the gap between man and God. God it is believed comes to the place where the saints are together.
There is a concept among varkaris – ‘Santasajjananci Mandi’ or society of the saints. This does not imply that they considered themselves as saints, but preferred the company of saints. This is a very remarkable feature of Varkari tradition. The importance of being in close contact with the saints was always stressed by the varkaris. This is a feature of all Bhakti schools- in the Tamil bhakti as well as the haridasa tradition, the poems of the bhaktas of these schools creates an idea of a saintly community. Thus the spirit of Varkaris has two important features- the transcendence and absoluteness of God and at the same time the constant preoccupation to make salvation possible for all. Through various methods as chanting the name of Viṭṭala, singing his kirtans and being in company of the santas, the varkaris aimed at guiding their followers towards the highest peak of spiritual life- a communion with God.

The role of memory in shaping the bhakti that we find reflected in Purandaradāśa has not been adequately studied. The historical context of Vijayanagara history, especially the reign of Krishnadevarāya is almost entirely set in terms of military and political engagements. The cultural aspect is largely ignored. While it is not possible to say that a ‘public sphere’ existed in the Vijayanagara empire during the sixteenth century, it is certainly possible to say that Bhakti constituted a ‘less logically structured mode of recollection’ as pointed out by Christian Lee Novetzke. Bhakti saints like Purandaradāśa drew upon the public memory attached to religious shrines that were preserved in the oral medium or represented in complex iconographic artifacts and used the images to weave a fabric or tapestry of music in which the flow of language meets the concrete real image of the deity lodged in the sacred site or temple. Thus in a direct way the act of Bhakti spirituality became an act of cultural memory keeping. This aspect explains the

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47 G.A Deleury, op.cit, p.3
48 Ibid, p.23
reason for the preservation of the compositions of Purandaradāśā in the public constituted by the
circle of bhaktas or devotees.

Vijayanagara Empire and the Viṭhala Cult

The Cult of Viṭhala found great patronage in the Vijayanagara Kingdom established in 1336
A.D. Lord Viṭhala attained great popularity and it was not uncommon to find individuals named
after Viṭhala in the Vijayanagara Empire. Sadasivarāya had under him a minister called Viṭhala.
There are inscriptions at Kādur, Hassan, Mysore, Bellāry and Chingelpet. The temple at
Vijayanagara is called in the inscriptions as Biṭalēswar, Viṭhalēsa and Vithalēswar. The
magnificience of the Viṭhalaswāmi Temple at Hampi is still a visible evidence for the devotion
of Vijayanagara rulers and people to Viṭhala who was also the Lord of Pandharpur.

Krishnadevaraya was to a certain extent justified in bestowing praise on brahmanas who
had proved their worth as Governors and Generals. Since the time of Harihara it had been the
custom to entrust administrative work to qualified Brahmins. Thus Madhava Rāya the Brahmin
general was temporarily entrusted with the government of the town of Jayanthi. Another famous
Brahmin governor was Viṭhanna Odeyar, who was the viceroy of Araga, in A.D 1403.49 He was
the son of Bommanna who was the son of well known minister Sankappa of the Bharadwāja
Gōtra50. His praise is thus sung in an inscription of the same date. “ And at the same time, by that
Maharāja’s order the Brahma-Kshatri the son of Hemādri, an initiating priest for all gifts, a son
to the lotus line of Sankappa and Rayappa, son of a chief Brahmin minister, proficient in
learning, a royal swan in the lotus pond of the learned, a moon to the chakora’s poets, remover of

49 B.A Saletore, Social and Political Life in Vijayanagara Empire, p.129-30
50 Ibid
the poverty of his servants, a flamingo at the lotus feet of kriya sakti guru munisvara, devoted to
the worship of Triyambika, the son of Virūpāmbika”51. An inscription of 1516 A.D mentions the
construction of a thousand pillared Mandapa to Lord Viṭṭhala at Hampi by Krishnadēvarāya.
Another inscription of 1531 A.D mentions the granting of a village to Viṭṭhala temple at Hampi
by Achyutharāya. In an inscription of 1536 A.D, Hiriya Tirumala Nāyaka gave 200 varahas as
daily offerings to Viṭṭhala temple and also ghee, milk and curd rice (dadyadana) were offered.
Name Viṭṭhalarayarāya is mentioned in an inscription dated 1549 A.D. A Brahmin of Bharadvaja
Gotra named Viṭṭhalaraya is mentioned in an inscription dated 1516 A.D as the holder of vritti
(village).

It was in the early 16th century under the Vijayanagara kings that the name Viṭṭhala became more
and more popular.

An inscription of 1537 A.D52 mentions the name Viṭṭhala who was a governor of Tirunelveli. This
shows the extent and popularity of this cult up to down South in Tamilnadu.

Some of the inscriptions pertaining to Vijayanagara period in the early 16th century are:-
1513 A.D53 – Viṭṭhala
1515 A.D54 – Viṭṭhanna
1516 A.D55 – Biṭṭalēswara on the banks of Tungabhadra
1519 A.D56 – Viṭṭhalabhatta
1534 A.D57 – Viṭṭhalapura

51 E.C, Vol VI, Kp.52, P.86-87
52 HISI, p.248
53 Ibid, pp.239
54 EC, Vol vi,p. 88
55 EC, Vol iii, P.115
56 EC 5. Cp. 16
1540 A.D\textsuperscript{58} – Viṭṭalabhatta

1544 A.D\textsuperscript{59} – Vithaleswaradeva

1551 A.D\textsuperscript{60} – Viṭṭalarayya

There is at Mulbagal in the Kolar district, a Viṭṭala Temple built under the Vijayanagara rulers in the beginning of the sixteenth century A.D. It is one of the few images of Viṭṭōbā carved in the Vijayanagara style and one of the finest among all the Viṭṭōbā images. This image resembles that of Viṭṭōbā in Pandharpur by its elegance as well as its ornamentation.\textsuperscript{61}

A temple exclusively dedicated to Viṭṭala, believed to be the only one of its kind in Tamilnadu, constructed by the celebrated ruler Krishnadevaraya, has been traced in a village near Mahabalipuram as a result of the efforts made by Vasundara Filliozat who specialized in the study of Hampi ruins in the French Institute of Indology in Pondicherry. The temple was located about 10 kms South of Mahabalipuram on the coast line. It is about 17kms from Tirukkalikundram on the road to Kalpākkam. The hamlet itself is called Viṭṭalapuram.

Krishnadēvarāya had obviously followed the tradition of colonizing people in selected areas, donating lands, building temples and settling families. An inscription in this temple records the establishment of this village by Krishnadēvarāya and the construction of the temple in the early 16\textsuperscript{th} century. The temple structure bears close resemblance to that at Hampi and includes a ‘garbhagraha’ and ‘sukanasi’ an ‘ardhamandapam’ and a ‘mukhamandapam’. The temple tower and the prakāram have collapsed. The six foot idol of Viṭṭala in standing posture holds the conch

\textsuperscript{57} IMP, Bellary, 459
\textsuperscript{58} EI Vol III, p.150
\textsuperscript{59} EC 9, P.30
\textsuperscript{60} IMP, Bellary, 313
\textsuperscript{61} MAD (1945), p.36
(sankham) on the left arm, displaying the “abhaya” (protection) by the right hand, said to be the characteristics of Viṭṭhalā. The images of Rukmini and Sathyabhāma without heads have also been found. Besides, there is an idol of Ānjanēya. Another inscription at the base of the temple mentions a gift by an individual, lakshmīnāth of Māvēlipuram, perhaps the name by which Mahābalipuram was then known. At present the temple is under the State department of Archaeology. Viṭṭhalā was the family deity of the Vijayanagara dynasty. There is a sub shrine for Viṭṭhalā at Ranganatha temple at Śrīrangam. The Mahavishnu temple in Pondicherry and the Narayana Perumal temple at Tiruvathikai near Panruti in Tamilnadu also have sub deities of Lord Viṭṭhalā.

**Pastoral context of the cult**

A strong pastoral context to the cult is supplemented by the oral traditions which are also supported by archaeological evidences62. Viṭṭhalā was worshipped by the pastoral communities of Deccan called Danghars. They were noted for their martial qualities and were incorporated into the army of the later kingdoms like that of the Yadavas, Hoysalas and Vijayanagara. During the Vijayanagara period the display of military strength was an obvious expression of royal force and might. At the capital there were usurpations, invasions and the rulers kept a formidable centre of infantry, cavalry, elephants, artillery and a palace guard. The structures related to this military force, fortifications, defensive gateways, stores, treasuries were also indicators of royal might. The Vijayanagara rulers strengthened their military powers by incorporating the pastoral communities into it. The help of pastoral communities like Danghars and Kuruwas were sought by the rulers for defending external aggression. Moreover the Yādavas who claimed descent

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from the Yadu clan with which Krishna, the shepherd god is associated, began to give more importance to the Vaishnava traits of God Viṭṭhala.\textsuperscript{63} If we look at this aspect, the arguments in favour of the pastoral orgins of the cult and its patronage by Vijayanagara rulers get strengthened, since history of Vijayanagara says that the peasant communities later claimed the position of powerful Nayakas or feudal chieftains who also served military purposes in times of emergency.

This strong pastoral context is also supported by iconographic evidences like hero-stones. Hero stones are a subset of memorial stones that are spread in large areas of Indian sub continent from the South to the Northern regions. Hero stones depicting cattle raids are indicative of the political domonation of the pastoralists in the Deccan region till the fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{64} The oral traditions suggest that Viṭṭhala died while defending cattle and a hero stone was erected to commemorate the dead hero. People later started worshipping the hero stone and the cult was born. There is some iconographic evidence concerning the earliest shaping of the cult of Viṭṭhala in the Deccan region. The lowest panel of the hero stone depicts the event of battle in which the person died, the middle panel depicts the heavenly march of the dead and the top panel depicts the dead hero worshipping a deity. The image of Viṭṭhala and the image of dead hero depicted on the hero stone have some similar attitudes. G.A Deleury in his work ‘The Cult of Viṭṭōbā’ says that there is no similarity between the image of Viṭṭhala in Pandharpur and God Vishnu, thus iconography would strengthen the pastoral origins of the Viṭṭhala of Pandharpur.

The saints of the Madhva sect known as the Haridāsas, greatly propagated the Viṭṭhala cult in the Vijayanagara Empire. These saints were the first and foremost followers of Viṭṭhala. The

\textsuperscript{63} Ajay Dandekar, Op.cit
\textsuperscript{64} G.D Sontheimer, \textit{Hero and Sati Stones of Maharashtra}, in S.Settar and G.D Sontheimer, \textit{Memorial Stones}, Heidelberg: South Asia Institute, 1982, pp 261-81
earliest of the Dasas was the Narahari Tirtha who spent the last years of his life at Hampi and died here at 1333 A.D. he was followed by Sripadaraya who was also known as Ranga Viṭṭhala. The most illustrious among the dasas was Purandaradāśā (1484 A.D – 1564 A.D) who travelled extensively throughout the Vijayanagar Empire, singing soul-stirring songs on Viṭṭhala still sung and remembered by all sorts of people\textsuperscript{65}. The dasa saints used the \textit{Ankita} (mudra) called Viṭṭhala in the ending line of their songs.

Scholars like R.G Bhandarkar associates the Viṭṭhala Cult with the Saivite tradition. This may be because of the fact that, in the present day Pandharpur, the temple of God Viṭṭhōbā is surrounded by Siva temples. Moreover the epigraphy and iconography in Andhra Pradesh supports this Saivite influence, Siva being the primary deity of Pandharpur. Later when Vaishnavism began to attain prominence in the 11\textsuperscript{th} and 12\textsuperscript{th} centuries, chiefly centred around the principles of Bhagavata Purana that considered Krishna as an important avatar of Vishnu, the Saivite tradition at Pandharpur was forgotten. Vaishnavite tradition made Viṭṭhōbā, the twenty fourth avatar of Vishnu and several inscriptions of Yadava kings link the deity closely to the Vaishnavite God\textsuperscript{66}.

In the 13\textsuperscript{th} century, Pandharpur emerged as the pilgrimage centre of the Varkari Bhakti saints, who composed and sang songs in praise of Viṭṭhōbā. The term ‘Vārkari’ is composed of two words ‘\textit{vari}’ and ‘\textit{kari}’\textsuperscript{67}. ‘\textit{Vari}’ stands for the regular occurrence of the pilgrimage to Pandharpur. Kari means the one who does. Varkari therefore means one who journeys to Pandharpur at a fixed time. This is the most important characteristic of a devotee of Vithōbā. Theoretically everybody without distinction of caste and race can become a varkari. All are

\textsuperscript{65} Jackson, William, Songs of Three Great South Indian Saints, p.11
\textsuperscript{66} BG, 20, p.422
\textsuperscript{67} Deleury, G.A, op.cit, p.2
admitted in the midst of this spiritual family, as history shows that many of the medieval saints respected by all people today, came from low caste origin.

Even today, Varkaris come mostly from the countryside, being farmers, craftsmen, artisans and traders. People come both from town and villages; some wealthy townsmen are among them mostly shopkeepers and traders from Bombay, Poona and such other parts. The origin of the Cult of Viṭṭhōbā is still an issue of debate among the historians. However, the pastoral origin of the cult is acceptable due to some reasons such as iconographic similarity between the hero stones and the deity of Pandharpur. Moreover Yadavas of Devagiri patronized this cult to bring more popularity for their tutelary tribal deity – Viṭṭhōbā. The annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur every year attracts huge crowds of pilgrims and onlookers. This shows how deep is the religious consciousness and spiritual needs of the people of Deccan and also how those needs are fulfilled by the teachings of the spiritual masters.

**Madhvacharya’s influence in Pandharpur**

The great teacher of all Haridasa saints, Madhvacharya himself had exerted considerable influence upon Ṣanjñēśvar. Ṣanjñēśvar also aimed at the betterment of the spiritual status of the common men, the villagers and the unlettered folk and to bring the knowledge about god Viṭṭhōbā to them in their vernacular language and literature. Ṣanjñēśvar’s source of inspiration for a daring break with the tradition is believed to have received from Karnataka. The *Vachanakaras* in the 12th and 13th centuries in Karnataka included men and women drawn from different strata of the society who enriched their literature in regional Kannada language. The other factor was the bhakti school of Dvaita Vedanta propogated by Madhvacharya which was Vaishnava in character and had an important place for the worship of Viṭṭhala which was the deity of
Pandharpur where the Varkari tradition sprang up. Viṭhala was also the *Samsthana Pratima* of several mutts of Udupi.

As far as the dates are concerned, Madhvacharya (1238-1317) was an early contemporary of Jñaneswar. Madhavavijaya, the biography of Madhvacharya refers to his pilgrimages to many sacred centres in the North including Badrinath, banks of Alakananda river, Godavari region in Maharashtra, most probably Paithan associated with Warkari saints in the religious history of Maharashtra. Another important factor attesting the spread of Madhva’s philosophy in various parts of Deccan is the survival of families who came into the fold of Madhva in those early days in places like Puntamba and Varkhed in Maharashtra.68

Chronologically speaking the date of compilation of Madhva’s *Gitabhashya* is not later than 1260A.D which is earlier than the compilation of Jñaneswari which was written in 1290A.D. This shows that Jñaneswar must have been well aware of Madhva’s philosophy that gained popularity in his times in many parts of Maharashtra. Though Jñaneswar differs from the philosophical outlook of Madhva, he has at many places agreed with the theories of Madhva regarding the attainment of Moksha through the path of Nishkamakarma that forms a vital part of Dvaita Sidhanta. Madhva propogated that the leaders should be better informed than those who are to be led by them. The same ideas are reflected in the thoughts of Jñaneswar put forth in Jñaneswari. Jñaneswar also refers to the Dvaita and Advaita darsana as representing the right and left cheeks of god Ganesa in the very first ovi(verse) in Jñaneswari paying tribute to Ganesa who he considers as the embodiment of all the Vidyasthas.

From the above description it is clear that Madhva’s philosophy exerted great influence upon the Varkari saints of Maharashtra thus establishing a link between the both. In this way

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68 BNK Sarma, *History of the Dvaita School of Vedanta and its Literature*
Purandaradāsā through his pilgrimages crossed several historical, linguistic and cultural zones which he was able to unify by means of his songs in praise of Viśṇubā.

The Cult in Śrīrangam

During the 16th century, regions in lower Kaveri became the stronghold of the Viśṇula cult with Śrīrangam temple as its base. Śrīrangam was an active Vaishnavite centre of worship with god Ranganātha as the chief deity, even during the days of Ālvārs in the 8th century. Later the Vaishnavite āchāryas like Nāthamuni and Rāmanuja were quite active in spreading the importance of Divya Nālāyira Prabandham of Ālvār saints.69 These religious leaders worked with great spiritual zeal and enthusiasm and exercised great influence on the religious ideas of later centuries. The Vijayanagara empire in the early 16th century attached great importance to the doctrines of Śrī Vaishnavism propagated by Rāmanuja. The patronization of the Viśṇula cult by the Vijayanagara rulers was the part and parcel of this affinity towards Vaishnavism. It received great popularity thou it was not a state religion.

In this context I would like to look at a few inscriptions from Śrīrangam temple that shed light on worship of Viśṇula in the temple of Sriranganātha. There are enormous inscription on the temple walls dating back to the 10th century. The state of prosperity enjoyed by the Śrīrangam temple received a great set back with the Islamic invasions of the south in mid 14th century. It was restored with the revival of political power in the south by Vijayanagara rulers. The large number of inscriptions in Śrīrangam temple belonging to the mid Vijayanagara rulers, register gifts and endowments of a public and private nature to temples, Mathas, Brahmins and other officials. There are also inscriptions referring to the Governors of Tiruchirapally region and

69 V.N Hari Rao, History of Srirangam Temple, S.V University, Tirupathi, 1976, pp.14-15
their association with the temple. A study of the inscription of the temple shows that the temple received great patronage under the rule of Krishnadēvarāya since majority of the Vijayanagara inscriptions belonged to his reign. In this context it will be out of place to mention all inscription of Krishnadeva Raya, but a few inscriptions referring to the theme of my thesis have been studied which provide ample information on the spread of Viṭhala cult in the lower Kāvērī.

The earliest inscription referring to Viṭhala in Śrīrangam is dated 1515A.D which is inscribed on the inner wall of the Viṭhala shrine in the Rangavilāsa Mandapa. This inscription records that two velis of land belonging to the temple were allotted to the worship of images of Viṭhalēswara and Madurakavi Ālvār. This inscription issued during the reign of Krishnadevaraya suggests that the image of Viṭhala in Śrīrangam shrine was consecrated somewhere around 1515A.D. The two velis mentioned in the inscription are distributed between Tirumudikkurai and Nindriyur. It also refers to the construction of a Rayagopuram and the two velis of land have been gifted for keeping the temple in a good state of prosperity. 70

Another inscription dated 1544A.D issued during the reign of Sadāsivarāya provides ample information on the kind of worship in the temple of Śrīrangam.71 It registers a gift of a village called Kilaimuri Marudur in Pachil kurram in Malai Nadu a sub division of Vadagarai Rajaraja Valanadu in Tiruchirapally Usavadi by Viṭhala deva Maharaja, the son of Timmayadeva Maharaja who had obtained the village as Nayakattanam from Sadāsivarāya for worship and offerings to God Viṭhala. It refers to the offerings like amudham, Talikai ( an

70 SII, Vol XXIV, No.369
71 Ibid, No.454
important Vaishnavite offering), scented musk, sandal etc during the car festival on every Friday. These were brought from the taxes obtained from the village given as *Nayakattanam*.

Another inscription dated 1546 A.D refers to the gift of a village the name of which is missing in the inscription, for the worship of Vithaleswarar. But it is mentioned that the village is located in the Uraiyyur kuttram, in Räjagambhirä Valanadu and it is given as Kattalai (contract). Both Nanjai and Punjai land (wet and dry respectively) have been gifted and they have to be used for financing the worship of Vithala. The offerings mentioned in the inscription are ghee, sukhiyam, arecanut, betel leaves, sandal etc. The Koil Olugu mentions that the Vithala temple was reconstructed by Kanadadi Rämânujadäsar in 1546A.D

An inscription belonging to the Nayakas of Tanjore in 1669A.D inscribed on the West wall of the Garuda Mandapa refers to the deity of Vithala. During the day of Bhûpati Udaïyar festival the image of Ranganätha is taken to the Vithalaraja Mandapa. If Bhûpati Udaïyar mentioned in this inscription is one among the last major kings of Sangama dynasty, it can be assumed that the Vijayanagara patronage of Vithala goes back to the Sangama age. There are also references to the offerings made to the god like *pori amudhu, palam, pāvädai, pāku, parivottom, tirumulkankanikkai, rice* etc.

An inscription of 1674A.D refers to the gifting of a village for the worship of Ashtabhuja Gopälarakrishna who is seated between Vithalēsvara and Kurattālvār. Another record written in Sanskrit in Grantha characters gives the genealogy of the Vithala of the Aravaidu family and

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72 SII, Vol XXIV, 454
73 Ibid, 459
74 Ibid
75 Ibid, 547
76 Ibid, 550
registers the grant of some villages for providing offerings and worship to God Sriranganatha. This inscription suggests that one of the last major kings of Aravidu family is named after God Viṭṭala.\(^{77}\)

The above mentioned are some of the important inscriptions found in Śrīrangam temple which provide references to Viṭṭala and its worship in Śrīrangam. They show that the Ranganātha temple along with Viṭṭala shrine was patronized by the Vijayanagara rulers more specifically during the 16\(^{th}\) century and though the cult of Viṭṭala lost its predominance that it enjoyed in the days of Vijayanagara with the fall of the empire in 1600’s, it is found that the Viṭṭala shrine was patronized by the Nāyakas of Tanjore in the 17\(^{th}\) century.

There are also other places in Tamilnadu where the deity of Viṭṭala is worshipped. The Nārāyana Perumāl Temple at Thiruvathikai near Panrūti has the idol of Viṭṭala with his consort Raghumāi, but it seems to be of a recent origin. The Perumāl temple in Pondicherry has a separate quarter where Viṭṭala is worshipped.

**The cult at Tirupati**

The Viṭṭala cult in Tirupathi is associated with Devaraya Bhattar of Udayagiri who istalled the image of Viṭṭala in Govindaraja Perumal temple and the provision for its propitiation daily and on auspicious occasions. Towards the expenditure for offerings to Viṭṭala, he granted to the temple in 1546A.D, Viṭṭalēswaran Kālvay(channel) excavated by him in Tiruchukkanur surnamed Varadarājapuram, Chennappudaiyan-eri with the land below it purchased from the Tiruvettunāyaka padigal in the Pudupattu village and the village Viṭṭalēswarapuram founded in the above land, and the four shares in the half agrahāragrāmam, Nedunādu Kulattūr, excluding

\(^{77}\) SII, Vol XXIV, No.455
the half Tiru-vidaiyatta gramam given to him by Bayakkara Ramappayyan, together with the 30 rēkhai pon donated with the accompaniment of a gift deed by the several residents of Tirupati i.e.

10 rēkhai promised annually by the Komatis (merchant class), 10 rēkhai pon by Vyāpāris (Beri settis) of Tirupati and 10 rēkhai pon by the Vyāpāris residing in Kottapālayam, a suburb of Tirupati. Some income seems to have been secured for Śrī Viṭhalēswara temple through Kānkkai rendered by the votaries of this deity and it was stipulated that the entire offerings should be devoted to the repairs of that temple.

Just as he raised the annual contribution of 30 rēkhai pon from the palapattadaiyar of Tirupati, for the worship of the Viṭhala shrine in the Govindaraja temple, so had he raised further donation in the following year from the public on a large scale, obtained gift deeds for the same remitted into the temple treasury apportioning sums towards charges for supplies and services to Viṭhaleswara. The supplies consisted of ghee, oil, flowers, fire wood, silk thread, clothes, curd, milk, pots and brass vessels. The payments were provided for pounding of paddy, the salary of the men carrying necessary articles to Tirumala, measuring grain, the kaikkolar of kottapalayam, temple servants, Talaiyaris (watchmen), Tiruppanipillai, Ramanujakutam, elephant drivers, nottakkarar (tester of coins), watchmen to the entrance to Viṭhaleswara’s shrine, gardeners, accountants, bearers of pallakkus, supplies of articles and water for Tirumanjanam, distributors of prasadam, garland makers and reciters of Veda and Sahasranama. Within the next two months on the 15th day of Vaikasi 1547 A.D, Devaraya Bhattar arranged for the celebration of the Kodai-tirunal of Śrī Govindaraja on the 5th day in the premises of Viṭhaleswars temple, the charges for which amounting to 104 ¾ panam were required to be paid from the temple treasury year after
Devaraya Bhattar once again secured further donations for Vithaleswara temple to the extent of 52 rekhai and added it to the balance of 70 rekhai outstanding from his previous payments. Out of this amount of 122 rekhai in 1547A.D he utilized only 77rekhai and 7 panam for propitiation of Vithaleswara and allowed the balance of 44rekhai, 3 panam to stand to his credit in the temple treasury. The present contribution comprised 30 rekhai paid as makamai by the shopkeepers for their use of the ankanams or the temple premises constructed by Pottapati Timmarajayya in the periya rajavidhi, 10 rekhai granted in addition to their previous gift by the pearl merchants and 12 rekhai paid by stall keepers opening their stalls during the Purattasi Tirunal in the plot of land belonging to Vithaleswara.

It is believed that Devaraya Bhattar’s ancestors migrated to Tirupati from Udayagiri about half a century previously during the reign of Saluva Narasimha when the temple of Kodandarama was constructed and officiated as priests there in. it is still an Udayagiri family of Vaikhanasas that deliver worship in the Srirama temple in Tirupati. An inscription on the North wall of the prakara of the Tirumalai temple alludes to the fact that several mahamandaleswaras of Tirupati were named after the god Viṭṭhala. An inscription refers to the name of a governor of Sadasivaraya, Vithaleswara Maharaja donating three villages namely Palamangalam, Paranur and Venakattur for the benefit of the temple treasury for the purpose of conducting pallavotsavam festival in Tirumalai temple for Sri Venkateswara.

Purandaradāsā and the Viṭṭhōbā Cult

Purandaradsa is a central figure in the cultural history of Vijayanagara Empire especially with in the field of bhakti a devotional practice that has created publics of memory around the

78 TTD, Vol V, No.364, Govindaraja Temple(G.T),
79 Ibid, No.367, G.T
80 No 561 and 660 of T.T(Tirupati Temple)
figure of Purandaradāsā for over five centuries. This religious figure of the 16th century Vijayanagara has been remembered over five centuries through a long tradition of recollection. To understand this long tradition of recollection an attempt is made to uncover both the practices of memory and the publics that preserve and are continued by that memory. The cultural history of Purandaradāsā’s public memory is imagined over the past 500 years by his devotees, admirers and others who applied his memory in the service of some social and spiritual goal. Purandaradāsā’s influence spread well beyond the capital city of Vijayanagara and his songs were circulated in the Marathi, Telugu, Kannada and Tamil speaking regions of the Empire. His songs are remembered in literary sources as well as oral performance traditions in the regions of present day Maharashtra, Karnataka Andhra and Tamilnadu. His songs have preserved the traditions of the Varkaris and the Dasas alive to this day.

The most important aspect of Purandaradāsā’s cultural memory is the idea of Bhakti which is manifested in his songs to god Viṭhala. Bhakti in this context can be viewed as a form of public memory, preservation of a past full of sentiments and historical sense maintained by religious communities.81 Though Purandaradāsā was born at Hampi, popular culture recalls Purandaradāsā’s cosmopolitan appeal through the stories of his travels stretching from Pandharpur in the Deccan to Śrīrangam in the Tamil South. In a sense the figure of Purandaradāsā has served as a means of crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries. Although Purandaradāsā is primarily recalled as a saint poet of Vijayanagara empire, he also served as a mode of articulation between different cultural and linguistic spheres. His songs link many cultures, languages, literatures and histories. Pu’s deity is often referred to as Viṭhala of

Pandharupur which itself attests to his popularity outside the Kannada milieu and this attributes to his trans-regional appeal.

Purandaradāsā was an ardent devotee of Lord Viṭṭhobā of Pandharpur. The music compositions of Purandaradāsā refer to the picturization of the glory of Panduranga Viṭṭhala who is an aspect of Lord Vishnu, the Supreme. Besides this deity, he describes other deities also, but not with much emphasis as on Viṭṭhobā. Viṭṭhobā is also called Pundalika Viṭṭhala after a great bhaktha of Maharashtra. The deity is called by different names according to the love and devotion for him. Purandaradāsā himself mentions all the avatars of Vishnu as Viṭṭhala, in his songs. As compared to the other deities it is believed that Purandaradāsā was biased in favour of Lord Vishnu.

In all his compositions, Purandaradāsā mentions the physical attributes of Viṭṭhobā, as they reveal the human form of the Lord and he has described the lord like that of a great personality. Although the compositions basically belong to the sphere of music, Purandaradāsā has enriched the mythology of Lord Hari by describing him as it pleased him. It may be said that since singular attention is paid to his favorite deity the description is referring to Panduranga Vittala exclusively. He appears to consider him as a supreme being and identified him with Lord Krishna or Rama. He sees Vishnu in him. The deity’s link to music has been established by Purandaradāsā which has become a pathway to later musicians. Further a keerthana became a means to obtain emanicipation in life in the kali yuga. It is a sure measure for removal of sins and helping the maintenance of purity to qualify for spiritual attainment. Purandaradāsā sings

“Dhyanavu kritayugadalli yajna yagavu thretha yugadalli
Archana dwaparadalli keerthana matradi kaliyugadalli
Mukutiya neeva purandara Viṭṭhala

Purandaradāsā likes the kīrtan form of worship. He elected Panduranga Viṭṭhala as the god of his keerthans. The kīrtan therefore serve as a source book for knowing the supreme lord. He used the regional language i.e. Kannada to compose songs in praise of Viṭṭhala. Purandaradāsā lauded and glorified the doctrines of Dvaitha philosophy. Purandaradāsā recognised the lordship of dasas in Viṭṭhala. There are kīrtans of Purandaradāsā which suggest that he had the direct experience of the god himself. The compositions like Na kande Govindana and Kannara kandena achuthana, support the view that Purandaradāsā had a vision of the God in the aspect he worshiped i.e. as Panduranga Viṭṭhala. Therefore the compositions of Purandaradāsā seem to be authentic to note the form and personality of the deity, Viṭṭhala.

There are several reasons provided by the tradition how Purandaradāsā elected Viṭṭhala as his ‘ishtadevata’. Primarily Purandaradāsā’s guru Madhwacharya held a great faith and admiration to this god. Secondly god Vishnu is supreme (Hari sarvothama) in the Dvaita system of philosophy. Purandaradāsā belonged to the Madhva system of philosophy which respects Ānjanēya, Bhima and Madhva as great. Tradition says that Purandaradāsā is born in Purandaragad, a place in Maharashtra which attracted a great number of saints, devotees to Viṭṭhala. During the times of Purandaradāsā the inestimable qualities of Viṭṭhala was popularized by several saints who attracted the singer saint to this deity. Another reason pointed out is that due to his wife Saraswathi, Purandaradāsā got introduced to this deity. In a dream God Viṭṭhala

82 Purandara Sahithya Darsana (PSD), Vol 2, p.43
83 PSD, Vol 3, p.22
84 PSD, Vol 3, 41
advised Purandaradāsā to go to Pandharpur and reside there. Before he set forth for pilgrimage, he lived in the Panduranga Kshetra for twelve years.

Purandaradāsā’s medium of expression of his spirituality was singing songs in praise of god Vīthāla and this was the mode of devotion in the Varkari tradition in Maharashtra. This tradition has been preserved for centuries through the intermixing of oral performance and the written media. The performance tradition is the Kirtan conducted by a Kirtankar (performer of a kirtan). The written medium is the practice of Kirtankars transcribing songs into notebooks, the oldest of which date from the middle 17th century. The Marathi Varkari tradition has a close relationship to writing and literacy. Except Namdev, the most famous of the Varkari sants could write. But in Karnataka the codification and the compilation of the songs of Purandaradāsā started only in the late 19th century. In this context a short history of the compilation of the songs of Purandaradāsā is discussed. The textual fixity imparted to the songs of Purandaradāsā is of much later stage. Purandaradāsā did not write down his songs. His songs were orally transmitted to the posterity through his disciples the most prominent being Vijayadasa during whose life time the songs of Purandaradāsā were collected and compiled. He was active in collecting and writing them down, publicizing and popularizing them; thus began a revival of the songs of Purandaradāsā. In 1850 there was a collection edited by H.Narasimhayya which was later published by a British officer, J.Garrett, functionary in the Mysore Government. It contained 173 kirtans by Purandaradāsā and other Dasas. In 1894, a Telugu script collection was brought out by Bālakrishna Rao of Madakashira entitled Purandaradāsuluvaru Pādina Kīrtanalu. Between

86 William Jackson, Op.cit, p.75
1880 and 1894 a collection of Purandaradāsā’s songs were brought out in Devanāgari script by Abaji Rāmachandra Savant of Belgaum and he also published 108 Suladis in 1908. In Udupi Pavanje Guru Rao brought out in five volumes 1050 songs of Purandaradāsā. In 1925 Suboda Rama Rao published the first volume of the series Haridasa Kirtana Tarangini. In many collections like these in the grass root level, near about 600 songs are alive among Kannada speakers. Purandaradāsa Ācārya Mandala in Hospet near Hampi published an authoritative volume on Haridasa literature with critical annotations and a biography of Purandaradāsā in 1956. In 1959 in Hubli at Tulunādu press S.S.Karan published 656 Padas and 36 Sūlādis. In connection with the 400th year celebration of Purandaradāsā in 1964, under S.K Rāmachandra Rao one hundred songs with notation were published. Thus the legacy of Dāsa tradition has existed in the space created between the performance of the songs and the codification of the songs by the public over the centuries. Like the songs of Varkari saints, Purandaradāsā’s songs are known as kīrtans or Dēvaranāmas in Kannada. Purandaradāsā as a wandering singer, during his peregrinations in the Vijayanagara territories is said to have observed the difference between the kīrtans in Haridāsa tradition as well as other traditions. The songs of Purandaradāsā help in understanding the spread of the cult in the nook and corner of the Vijayanagara Empire, in the light of several inscriptional records. A tradition was recollected and renewed by analyzing his songs. Viṭṭala cult also stands as an example for the incorporative attitude of the Vijayanagara kings.

In this chapter we have discussed the place of the great saint and composer, Purandaradāsā in the overall context of the gradual spread of the cult of Viṭṭala in Peninsular India during the Vijayanagara empire. We have reconstructed the history of the worship of
Viṭhala as an instance of a pastoral deity which was incorporated with in the fold of Hinduism. This important change coincided with the development of dynastic states such as the Rāṣhtrakūtas and reached its climax during the period of the Yādavas. Finally we have examined the conceptual and philosophical aspects of the Vārkari movement. The spread of the cult of Viṭhala is studied in this chapter on the basis of inscriptions found on the walls of temples and an attempt is made to link the spread of the cult to the peregrinations of the wandering saints.

In the next chapter we examine the imperial ideology of the major empire of Peninsular India in order to unpack the tensions between the demands of local traditions and the centralizing impulses of an imperial state.