CHAPTER TWO
The Vithoba Cult of Maharashtra

From here we go to Pandharpur in Maharashtra, which from the thirteenth century onwards became the birthplace of a great religious movement initiated by one saint called Pundalik. The legend of Pundalik goes like this. He was a man who began to ill-treat his parents soon after his marriage, until one encounter with divinity reformed him so completely, that from the most cruel he became the most devoted of sons.

One day, as history narrates, God Krishna the king of Dwarka, sat thinking of his early days on the banks of the Yamuna. His nostalgia made him long to see Radha again, and so (although she was dead), through his divine powers he brought her back to sit upon his lap. Just then his queen, the stately Rukmini entered the room. Radha should have at once risen to do her honour, but she remained seated. Rukmini left the palace in a fury, and fleeing to the Deccan, hid herself in the Dandirvan forest. Krishna’s search for his angered wife at last led him to the Dandirvan forest, where he finally found Rukmini. “The queen’s celestial anger yielded to the endearments of the King.” Reconciled, they walked together until they came to the sage Pundalik’s hermitage. At that moment Pundalik was busy attending to his parents, so he did not bother to rush to pay homage to Lord Krishna and his wife. He continued to attend to his parents, stopping only for a second, when he flung out a brick for his visitor to stand upon, it being the rainy season. When he had 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 Pundalik to worship him as Vithoba, i.e. one who stood upon a brick. ‘A stately form arose at the scene of the meeting of Krishna and Pundalik (1228 AD).’ 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 Vithoba stands an image of Rukmini whose flight was the reason for Vithoba’s visit to Pandharpur. (A History of the Maratha People 104)
Etymologically, the name of the city Pandharpur goes back to “Pandurang”, a name of Shiva — the deity originally worshipped in that place. The overlapping of Pandharpur - Pandurang-Vrthoba provides an interesting case in the history of the fusion of Vaishnava and Shaiva Bhakti cults whose motive in fact was to point at the same one God or divine truth, which exists beyond all superficial compartments. Another interesting detail is the fact that in the present-day Pandharpur, the temple of God Vrthoba, the incarnation of the original Vishnu, is surrounded by temples of Shaivite Gods. From the thirteenth century onwards, Pandharpur emerged as the pilgrimage of the Warkari Bhakti movement, which boasted an impressive galaxy of saints and bhaktas. The main five saints of Maharashtra being, Jnandev (1275 to 1296), the outcaste Brahmin; Namdev the tailor (1270 – 1350), Eknath (1533 to 1599), the householder Brahmin and editor of Jnaneshwari; Tukaram (1608 to 1659) the Shudra poet saint and Ramdas (1608 to 1681) regarded as a political saint and preceptor of Shivaji, of whom both he and Tukaram were contemporaries.

Sant Jnaneshwar, the torch-bearer of the Warkari Panth was a born saint and genius. He is accredited with instances of miraculous abilities since the age of eight years. In a short life of twenty one years, he managed to compose a major philosophical treatise (the Amritanubhava), a large number of abhangas (religious poems), and an extensive poetic commentary on the Bhagvadgita titled, Jnaneshwari, not to mention a number of shorter works. Jnandev, in light of his life story and his spectacular end, was celebrated chiefly as a saint: Jnandev was also a thinking saint, and an imaginatively poetic thinker, as is manifest both in his Jnaneshwari and his Amritanubhava. The Amritanubhava is a philosophical poem written at the behest of his older brother and guru Nivrittinath; and the Jnaneshwari is a brilliant commentary as well as a recontextualised exposition of the Bhagvad Gita. Jnandev wrote it in 1290 A.D. when he was just sixteen years old. (*1, see notes).

As Prof. Fred Dallmayr (in his yet to be published essay, Jnandev And The Warkari Movement), comments:

Appreciation and admiration are bound to deepen by a closer reading of these texts... despite a diversity of genres, Jnandev’s writings are held together or animated by a common concern or theme. This theme ... is the centrality of love or bhakti, where bhakti does not mean an emotive
sentimentalism but rather a genuine turning-about of the whole being (including mind, heart and senses). . .Faithful to the teachings of the *Bhagavadgita*, he gives pride of place to bhakti marga — without dismissing the other paths or margas.

The following is a stanza from the *Jnaneshwari*:

Let the lord of the Universe be pleased with this sacred literary activity of mine, and being pleased, let Him bestow on me this grace: May the wicked leave their crookedness and cultivate increasing love for the good. Let universal friendship reign among all beings. Let the darkness of evil disappear. Let the sun of true religion rise in the world. Let all beings obtain their desire. ..May all beings be endowed with all happiness and offer ceaseless devotion to the Primeval Being... (Raghavan 358)

Jnandev's life was marked by much agony and suffering, induced largely by certain actions of his father Vithalpant — a Brahmin from the Deccan village of Alandi. The life of Vithalpant is also an active example of the ensuing shift in the concept of the divine. Vithalpant was a married man and father to three sons and a daughter (of which Jnandev was the second), when he left his family and joined a community of ascetics in Benaras (Varanasi). Shortly afterwards, by a strange coincidence, the guru of Vithalpant's ashram — a wise man called Ramananda (or Ramashrama) — undertook a pilgrimage through the south of India. His journey also brought him to Alandi where by chance he met Rukmini, Vithalpant's wife, and upon hearing her desolate tale of woe, he quickly discerned the identity of her husband. Instantly he returned to Benaras where he ordered Vithalpant to move back to Alandi and rejoin his family.

Vithalpant's return from *sanyasa* to the life of a householder — was perceived by the Brahmin community as a mixing up of life-stages and a contamination of sanyasa. He and his family were excommunicated by the ruling Brahmin elite, and the children bore this ostracism like a stigma for most part of their lives. Vithalpant did not commit any sin by returning to his family. He in fact, had been courageous and selfless enough to abandon his desire for renunciation, and return to his householder's duties. A smaller penalty by the Brahmin community should have sufficed. But what we have here is not a simple and a fair confrontation. It was the clash of two different religious ideologies. On one hand is the power structure of brahminical fiefdom which perceives the divine as
some "external overseer forever uncontaminated by human concerns and agonies" (I am following Dallmayr here), and on the other hand is the individual, stumbling upon his spiritual quest which perceives the divine, "as intimately involved and actively present in worldly affairs — a presence which can be discerned with the help of a loving heart.

... whereas a remote or shrouded God is to be accessible only to a small elite circle of pundits or gurus, or else to a privileged priestly caste, Bhakti religiosity is available to everyone in all walks of life." While the Alandi priests, in their arrogance, claimed to "possess" God by virtue of their vedic knowledge (jnana), and rituals, Vithalpant learned that the divine can never be possessed and can only be pursued or intimated through a life of giving service. (Dallmayr 4)

Coming back to Jnandev and his siblings. The ostracism of their parents was passed on to the children as well. Despairing of the irreconcilable situation, their parents Vithalpant and Rukmmi, committed suicide by jumping into the river Ganges. Jnandev was only eight years old then. After his parents demise, Jnandev and his older brother Nivrittinath, continued their efforts to obtain pardon from high ranking priests of the Brahmin community, but the Brahmins heaped insult and ridicule on the orphaned boys. Such was the struggle in which Jnandev spent most part of his short life, until the Brahmins recognised in the gentle and forbearing Jnandev, a great saint and spiritual genius.

His friendship with the poet-saint Namdev who was five years older to him, is worth mentioning. The two saints first met in Pandharpur and immediately struck up a close inner companionship. While in Pandharpur, Jnandev became a devotee of the God Vithoba, and also commended Namdev to the God's care. Soon after, the two saints went together on a prolonged pilgrimage, visiting most of the holy places in northern India, including Benaras and Delhi. Following this journey, they returned to Pandharpur in 1296 A.D. where a great festival was held in their honour, a festival — B.P.Bahirat reports — in which many contemporary saints "like Goroba the potter, Sannata the gardener, Chokhoba the untouchable, Pansa Bhagawat the Brahmin, and others took part." It was at the end of this festival that Jnandev expressed the wish to return to Alandi and to enter Sanjivan Samadhi. On hearing this, Namdev was desolate and in tears — but followed his friend's wish. Back in Alandi, the sons of Namdev first swept clean the place of burial. Then, Bahirat reports:
Namdev besmeared the body of Jnandev with the sandal-paste, marked his forehead with the pigment of musk, waved sacred lights and paid homage to the dearest of his heart. At the completion of the samadhi all bystanders were gripped with deep sorrow remembering the sweet company of the saint (14).

Namdev (1270 to 1350 A.D.), who later outlived his dear friend by fifty years, was inconsolable. He devoted to his memory a series of abhangas that became popular. He also celebrated the life of his dear friend Jnandev, in a work of three chapters in the ovee meter, called the “Adi”, “Teerthavali” and, “Samadhi”. By the “Adi”, “Teerthavali”, and “Samadhi” is meant, the genesis, pilgrimage, and the end. Composed of abhangas, this biographical work is a mixture of myth and history and yet it remains the only authentic account of Jnandev. Soon after, feeling lonely in the absence of his spiritual comrade, Namdev left for the North again and visiting holy places on the way, finally reached Punjab and settled there in a village called Ghuman in the Gurdaspur district, where he spent about twenty years of his life, spreading the cult of devotion and thus preparing the people of north India to face the wave of Islam which was fast engulfing Hinduism. “It is this flight of Namdev from Pandharpur to Punjab, (towards the end of the thirteenth century), and the socio-religious work that he did there that initiated the Bhakti movement in the North and eventually inspired poet-saints like Kabir and Nanak through their mainspring, Ramananda.” (Shanker Gopal Tulpule 335)

Coming back to the Pandharpur movement, under Namdev’s initiative and guidance, Jnandev’s very life became an exemplary model for the Warkari Panth. It set certain standards like castelessness, non-hierarchy, and caring human fellowship. The movement also absorbed from the saint’s life, other features like implicit criticism of brahminical narrowness, egalitarianism in spiritual matters, and family-centred life. Under Namdev’s guidance, the movement gathered in its fold an extraordinary company of saints and poets hailing from the entire cross-section of Maharashtra. The group included: Parisa Bhagvata, a Vaishnav Brahmin, Changdeva, the yogi turned saint, Vithoba Khechara, a Shaivite, and guru of Namdev, Gora, the potter who used to evaluate saints as baked or half baked; Savata, the gardener, Sena the barber, Jagamitra Naga, the banker turned begger, Janabai, the serving maid of Namdev, and
above all Chokhamela, the untouchable mahar whose wife, son and sister – all wrote abhangas in honour of Vithoba. History regards them all as “men of holy and austere lives”.

Their worship of Krishna was eminently pure and sane. Their preaching and their poems stimulated men’s minds and led them to seek a refuge from their sorrows at Krishna’s shrine. The spots where Jnandev and his brothers and sisters died* (3), became centres of pilgrimage from which the Pandharpur tenets were promulgated from the Bhima to the Tapti and from Alandi to Saswad. Men who made pilgrimages to these shrines were drawn to each other by their common knowledge of the Marathi speech and of the doctrines of the Pandharpur saints. In this way there came into existence the beginnings of a national feeling. (Kincaid and Rao Bahadur 108)

Later, a number of Muslim saints also became a part of the Warkari Panth.* (2)

While the miraculous life of Jnandev embodied the ideal of sainthood, the life of Namdev was closer to that of the simple, common man, and his abhangas express the intense yearning of a common man for the God of his heart. The full force of the Bhakti upsurge was to decline after the death of Namdev in 1350 A.D., after which the establishment of the Muslim rule began to dominate public life. However, a century later the scenario would change. The Deccan governments by now had begun giving precedence to the Maratha people and to Marathi language over the Afghani residents and the ruthless Muslim officials. As a result, despite the subjugation and harassment perpetrated by the Muslim officials, the Maratha people, owing to the teachings of the saints of Pandharpur, led vigorous and enlightened lives. “So it came about that the religious movement made ready the path for the national hero who was to free Maharashtra from the foreign yoke.” That was, Shivaji (1630 to 1680 A.D.). When he appeared on the scene, “religion gave to his genius, a fervour which he was able to impart to the comrades of his youth and the peasants of his father’s village”, (Kincaid and Rao Bahadur 108). Shivaji remained in touch with both Tukaram (1608-1659 A.D.) and Ramdas (1608-1681 A.D.) during his lifetime; especially with Ramdas, who came to be the guiding light behind his challenging political career. Two years after Shivaji’s death, Sant Ramdas also passed away. The saints left behind them the legacy of a spiritually enlightened and strong-hearted race of the Maratha people, who have kept alive the treasure of their teachings
even today The *Jnaneshwari* and *Amritanubhava* of Jnandev, the inspiring iconoclastic *abhangs* of the poet saints like Namdev, Chokhamela, Sena, and later Tukaram and Eknath, all these contributed towards a body of Marathi literature that had the strength to light the spirits of its people and create a blazing fire of spiritual faith and resilient character, among the Maratha people. The following stanzas of Namdev’s verse have been taken from the *Granth Sahib*.

As the deer followeth the huntsman’s bell,
And giveth up its own life rather than cease its attention,
In the same way I gaze on God . .
As the kingfisher gazeth on the fish,
As the goldsmith meditateth stealing gold while fashioning it,
As the lustful man gazeth on the wife of another
As the gambler meditateth cheating while playing kowries,
So Nama ever meditateth on God’s feet —
Wherever I gaze there is God

(Tr Manmohan Singh Vol 5 2846)

I bring a pitcher
and fill it with water
to bathe my Lord
But alas, in the water live
forty two lacs of beings.
How can I bathe Him with it
O brother? (Tr Manmohan Singh Vol 3 1602)

Namdev is classed with the most iconoclastic of poets like Appar, Basavanna, Kabir, Ravidas and Nanak; poets who besides being saints were also reformers and religious radicals, in so far as they tried to rise above sect-based barriers, broke away from binding ritual and ceremony, ridiculed idolatry, and redefined divinity as based on brotherhood and equality. Scholarship attributes their stance as influenced by Sufism.

Tukaram the much-loved Marathi poet who lived in the seventeenth century, was not as iconoclastic. But he has acknowledged in his abhangas, that the idol is merely a via
media that facilitates worship for the lesser mortals. According to a legend, Tukaram was initiated into poetry-writing by Namdev himself. When Sant Namdev along with Tuka's deity Vithoba, appeared in his dream and told him that his mission in life was to make poems, the dream referred to a pledge made by Namdev to 'Vitthal' that he would compose one billion abhangs in his praise. Namdev therefore asked Tuka to complete the unfinished task. As a result of this missionary zeal, Tukaram in his lifetime, saw himself primarily as a poet. And he was a great poet.

If one stands up  
To argue or fight  
One gets into a mess

Reeds don’t  
Need to exert any force of their own  
They accept the force of water

If one tries to be tough  
One meets one’s match  
The humble stay out of trouble

Says Tuka  
Blend with all  
You’ll join  
A global family.

In the pool of bliss,  
Bliss is all ripples.  
Bliss is the body  
Of bliss.

How can I describe it?  
It's too embarrassing.  
There's no will left.  
It compels more and more.
When the mother craves,  
It's the unborn's fancy  
What grows inside  
Is reflected out.  

(Tr Dilip Chitre 142 & 172)

The last and the finest of the great Warkari poets, Tukaram has been described by his younger contemporary Bahinabai Sioorkar, as "the spire or crown of the temple of the Warkari tradition of Bhakti". Spread over a space of four centuries, the four great Maratha poets (4), along with many other lesser known bhaktas, poured into the surging river of Bhakti poetry, which bathed the Marathas in one dye as never before. As Dilip Chitre comments in his introduction to *Says Tuka*:

This poetry was sung and performed by audiences that joined poet-singers in a chorus. Musical-literary discourses or keertans that are a blend of oratory, theatre, solo and choral singing and music, were the new art form spawned by this movement. Bhajan was the new form of singing poetry together and emphasising its key elements by turning chosen lines into a refrain. These comprise a new kind of democratic literary transaction in which even illiterates were drawn to the core of a literary text in a collective realisation of some poet's work. This open-ended and down-to-earth nativism found its fullest expression in Tukaram, three centuries after Jnandev and Namdev had broken new ground by founding demotic Marathi poetry itself. (xix-xx)

The above holds true for the entire Bhakti movement which flowed all over the country like a river that purges, bathing one and all in its course (except those perched upon ivory towers), as it surged upwards from the southern peninsula and spread to the west, east and the north of the country. V. Raghavan in his essay on the saints of Medieval Hinduism, neatly sums it up as a "popular religious movement" in the Tamil speaking area where saints emerged from the time of the Pallava rulers of Kanchi (i.e. the fourth to ninth centuries). He says:

In reclaiming the kings and the people for Hinduism, they went about singing their psalms to deities enshrined at different temples. From the
Tamil country this movement of saint-singers of philosophical and religious songs in regional languages spread to the Kannada-speaking areas, whence the spark was ignited in Maharashtra; then the Hindi speaking areas took it up and the whole of North India was aflame with this resurgent and fervent faith. This popular presentation of the teaching of the Upanishads, the philosophical schools and the Puranic love, coincided with the linguistic phenomenon of the growth of the neo-Indo-Aryan languages of the North and the flowering forth of the literatures in the Dravidian family of languages in the South (351 - 352).

The Bhakti movement gave a breath of fresh air not only to the tradition of Indian poetry, but also to Indian music. Raghavan makes a note of it. These popular songs as he rightly says, had become the dual heritage of both, the religiously devout and of the musically minded. The songs were also to become:

the forerunners of a musical renaissance. In them a new form of musical composition took shape and a repertoire was provided not only for concerts but also for congregational worship or service in temples. It is these songs that one might have heard in Gandhi's prayer meetings; it is these too that one hears again and again on the All India Radio. (352)

Two later-day poets from the South who deserve to be mentioned for their significant contributions to both the field of poetry and of music, are: Purandaradasa of sixteenth century Karnataka, and Tyagaraja the Telugu speaking poet of the early nineteenth century Tamilnadu. Purandaradasa (1480 to 1564 A.D.), was a Vaishnava bhakta who belonged to the Haridasa sect of the saint-poets of Karnataka. He is deemed to have laid the foundations of the modern phase of the South Indian classical music system, known as “Karnataka Sangeet”. Tyagaraja (1767 to 1847 A.D.), who was probably the last of the great Bhakti poets, was unique in his stress upon the role of music as an easier route to the divine than the path of yogic practice. A majority of the songs heard in South Indian concerts are the compositions of Tyagaraja. Tyagaraja adores God in the form of Ram and writes with an intensely devotional, moral and spiritual fervour. A few stanzas from Tyagaraja's song ‘Svara-raga-sudharasa’ are presented below:

O Mind! devotion associated with the ambrosia of notes and melodies is paradise...
To know and realize the nature of ‘sound’
originating from the basic plexus (muladhara)
is itself bliss and salvation. Likewise,
the knowledge of the various resonant centres of the body
from which emanate the seven glorious notes of music.
Through philosophical knowledge one attains
salvation only gradually after several births;
but he who has knowledge of melodies along
with natural devotion to God becomes
a liberated soul, here and now  (Tr Raghavan 366)

There were many great bhaktas who deserve a place in any commentary on Bhakti poetry. But since the purpose of these chapters is to preview the general context of the movement, I shall only touch upon a few in some detail. While some of them like, Basavanna, Namdev, Nanak, Kabir and Ravidas were Nirguna bhaktas; there were others like Nammalvar, Jnandev, Sri Chaitanya, Mirabai, Surdas, Narasimha Mehta, Akho Bhagat, Tulsidas, and Chokhamela who were Saguna bhaktas. Other parallel schools of Saguna Bhakti were, the Bhagvata sect initiated by Ramanuja, the Vallabha sect of Vallabhacharya, and the sect of Sant Prannath, among others. The spirit of catholicity and universality was not absent in the above-mentioned sects; and neither were the predominant features of the Bhakti movement initially lacking in them. However in the long run, due to reasons like the overwhelming domination of the brahminical tenets, or filial inheritance of the sect’s spiritual leadership, they tended to degenerate, and lost popularity.

Thirdly, running parallel to the Bhakti tradition of Sants was the Islamic tradition of Sufis, which (especially in north India), made a considerable impact on the Bhakti tradition; absorbing simultaneously, certain devotional practices from the Nath yogis and the Bhakti movement in general. Nirguna Bhakti, of which Kabir and Nanak were leaders, is perceived as the closest that Hindu Bhakti got to Sufism, with its stress upon the repeating of nam (i.e. name – nam japna), and its perception of God as formless. In exchange, the Sufis absorbed the bhakta’s tradition of singing – bhajan-kirtan – as a means of devotion, by initiating Sufi poetry in the qawwali form. This aspect of the Sufis (who themselves were Islamic rebels), was disliked and resisted by the Islamic
orthodoxy of the Mullahs. In the next chapter we shall take a broad view of the Bhakti movement in the north, north-west and east of India. We shall examine the socio-political scene that was also to become a subtext in the poetry of the most secular/cosmopolitan poets of the Bhakti movement; Kabir and Nanak – poet saints who outrightly disowned their inherited filial faiths and refused to get entrapped into any ism of any sort.

Meanwhile, in this chapter we have briefly examined the main poets and the ethos of the Warkari Panth of (mainly) the thirteenth and fourteenth century Maharashtra. We have also acknowledged the presence of Sufism which by then had considerably made its presence felt.

Notes

(1) Following Jnandev's Samadhi, both his life and his writings developed into prime exemplars of genuine religiosity for the Warkari movement, and also into crucial sources and focal points of Bhakti devotion, throughout the ensuing centuries and until the present times. Jnandev's abhangas (poetic couplets) have continued to be remembered and chanted by pilgrims in the form of popular bhajans, just as his teachings are transmitted in kirtans through a combination of song and dance, with exegetic commentary and instruction.


(3) After Jnandev's death his younger brother Sopana imitated at Saswad (east of Pune), the same act of self-immolation. Then his sister Muktabai vanished in a lighting flash on the banks of the Tapti. Nivritti the last left, took samadhi at Trimbakeshwar in Nasik district.
(4) The four were Jnandev, Namdev, Eknath and Tukaram. Eknath belonged to the sect which worshipped Dattatraya as its deity and was founded by two sanyasis during the Bahmani period. Refer page 17 of *A History Of Marathi Literature*. Editors K. Deshpande and M. V. Rajadhyaksha. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1988.

**Works Cited**


