

Iconography of Śrī Viṭṭhala : A Reappraisal

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When the Yādavas ruled Devagiri, the two prominent religious sects were the Vāraakarī and the Mahānubhāva. The Vāraakarīs advocated devotion to Śrī Viṭṭhala, centred on the shrine at Pandharpur, while the Mahānubhāvas revered Pañcakṛṣṇas, the foremost among whom was Kṛṣṇa, conceptually different from the one revered by the Vāraakarīs in the form of Śrī Viṭṭhala. For the Mahānubhāvas Kṛṣṇa is the omnipotent god and not an incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu as the Vāraakarīs take him to be. When the founder of the Mahānubhāva sect, Cakradhara, was asked by his female disciple, Mahādaisa, as to whether Śrī Viṭṭhala was the incarnation of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, he promptly replied in the negative and went on to explain the origin of Śrī Viṭṭhala. The explanation he gave has been incorporated in the *Līlācaritra*, the memoirs of Cakradhara. Astonishingly enough, we get three, different versions regarding the origin of Śrī Viṭṭhala in three different editions of this work. They are as follows :

1. Viṭṭhala was a mere robber, a highwayman, who along with two others looted and murdered travellers and country folk and got away with their cattle;¹
2. Viṭṭhala is denounced vehemently as a man of easy virtue,² and
3. Viṭṭhala is exonerated from the above two charges and shown as a brave villager who lost his life fighting with cattle thieves.³

G. A. Deleury in his thesis entitled, *The Cult of Viṭhoba* (1960)⁴ has this to say, while discussing the story of the origin of Viṭṭhala as given in the *Līlācaritra* : "Viṭṭhala and his two partners were finally slain at a place called Paṇḍharī. Afterwards Viṭṭhala's sons came to the place where their father had been killed and set there a commemorative pillar or *Bhadakhāmb* and *Liṅga*. This pillar was then worshipped and the fame of Viṭṭhala was spread by the devotional songs or *abhaṅgas* that his sons composed in his honour". Astonishingly enough, Deleury while admitting this to be an apocryphal story relies on the inferences to be deduced from it, namely the creation of a *Vīragaḷa* at the place where Viṭṭhala was slain and the conversion of the *Vīragaḷa* into a deity.

Even in a later post-script based on further information he adheres to the same story

and says, "However, twisted may be the story told by the famous Mahānubhāva leader about the origin of the deity of the rival sect, certain features are striking. The statue of Viṭṭhala was said to be a stone erected by his sons to a certain man called Viṭṭhala, killed in a fight...." He further says, "Finally, to those inscriptional and literary data an iconographical datum has to be added. If we compare the oldest images available of Viṭhobā, the one feature common to all is the position of the arms akimbo, so much so that it is the distinguishing characteristic of an image of Viṭhobā. Such a position is unknown of an image of Viṣṇu in the *Śilpaśāstras* or in any other canonical work. In the same way as there is an etymological problem concerning the name of Viṭṭhala and its traditional assimilation of Viṣṇu, there is an iconographical problem regarding the image of the God with arms akimbo. The only images with arms akimbo are, on the one hand, the figures carved on hero-stones in Maharashtra and Karnataka, and on the other hand those of Bīr Kaur, the Ahir god.... Here again, we reach the same conclusion, the statue of Viṭhobā seems to be a later development of a primitive hero-stone. It is the only conclusion which tallies with the position of the arms".⁵

From this ready spring-board Tulpule (1971) built his theory. He had by this time noticed a hero-stone very near the temple of Viṭhobā of Pandharpur and immediately came to the conclusion that since it was the only hero-stone found at Pandharpur and that too very near the temple itself, it conclusively proved the theory that origin of Viṭhobā lies in a hero-stone. (Amazingly the absence of a hero-stone at Pandharpur has been considered by Deleury as a direct proof of the hero-stone-origin. He says, "... and if our hypothesis is correct, its original Viṭhobā-stone recovery is unlikely, because if the hero-stone in question was replaced later on by a full statue, representing in sculpture the figure roughly carved on it, something must have happened to the original stone long ago").⁶

The entire theory of the hero-stone origin of both Deleury and Tulpule⁷ can be dismantled at its very foundation. We would argue thus :

1. The story told in the *Līlācaritra* is not wholly reliable for it has a rival sectarian bias and in all probability was not recounted by Cakradhara. An additional supportive evidence is available in the Sanskrit rendering of the *Līlācaritra* known as *Ratnamālāstotra* composed by Kesobāsa, a follower of the Mahānubhāva sect. He entirely drops the controversial *Līlā* from his work, as early as C.E. 1316 considering it to be a later unauthorised mischievous addition.⁸
2. There are at least two more hero-stones at Pandharpur besides the one seen by Prof. Tulpule. Moreover, it is ridiculous to say that the original Viṭhobā hero-stone was removed and instead an image of Viṭṭhala which had evolved from it put in its place, for we have in Maharashtra at least a dozen temples which were originally

dedicated to Viṣṇu but are presently Śaiva shrines with a *Śivaliṅga* in the sanctum. No one can, interpret this phenomenon as the transformation of Viṣṇu into Śiva. This is simply replacement of the deity whatever the circumstances and reasons of it.⁹

3. Deleury considers the arms akimbo position of the Viṭṭhala images as a distinguishing characteristic common to figures on hero-stones including that of Bīr-Kaur. He further opines that such a position is unknown of an image of Viṣṇu. Deleury's thesis is unacceptable for two reasons : first there are a lot of dissimilarities in other features between the figures carved on hero-stones including that of Bīr-Kaur and the image of Śrī Viṭṭhala; and secondly, more importantly, we do have images of Viṣṇu with arms akimbo, one from Udayagiri caves and the other now displayed in the Allahabad Museum. Both belong to the 4th century C.E.

It is hoped that nothing further is required to disprove the theory of the hero-stone origin of Śrī Viṭṭhala. Without trying to understand the iconographical features in all their suggestive powers the scholars have unfortunately relied on stories originating in sectarian prejudice and animosities.

While the story from the *Līlācaritra* was in currency with the followers of the Mahānubhāva sect hundreds of thousands of devotees of Viṭṭhala belonging to the Vāraṅkarī *Sampradāya* described Viṭṭhala as a form of Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa. It is abundantly clear in literature, in the *abhaṅgas* of Jñānadeva, Nāmadeva, Cokhāmeḷā, Gorā Kumbhāra, Sāvata mālī, Janābāī, Ekanātha, Tukārāma, Rāmadāsa and many other saints. Once identified as either Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa they accepted him as such and spoke of him as *caturbhujā*, as Bālakṛṣṇa, as Gopāla. All these descriptions are basically poetic fancy drawn from the mind's eye and not seen with the corporeal eye, the deity is experienced emotionally by the devotee. No one can object to this mind's view of the saints.

It is however a different matter when saints like Nivr̥ttinātha, Jñānadeva, Narahari Sonāra and Rāmdāsa visualise Viṭhobā as Harihara, the basis of their assumption being the head-gear of Viṭhobā identified with a *Śivaliṅga*. The saints were more probably consciously or unconsciously striving towards achieving a spiritual identification of Viṣṇu and Śiva. Yet iconographically the vision is untenable. The Harihara image must give equal status to both the deities. As is well known to iconographers, the purpose of the composite image was to bring together the followers of these deities. If so, then it was inadvisable to have a *Śivaliṅga* on the head of Viṣṇu, indicating the superiority of the one over the other. Nowhere has an icon of Harihara been conceptualized in this manner.

Desartes has said, "We should never take anything for granted", we must follow

a 'doubte systematique' and only surrender to evidence.¹⁰ And the evidence is provided by the very iconography of Śrī Viṭhṭhala. Let us discuss it in detail.

Śrī Viṭhṭhala of Pandharpur being a very important and revered deity, around which revolves the religious mainstream of Maharashtra, it is necessary that all the controversies regarding his origin should be settled as convincingly as possible. The following study based eitiely and purely on iconographic evidence can help put to rest a number of knotty problems.

The image of Viṭhṭhala at Pandharpur is an installed image and therefore an *acala* or immovable icon (*dhruva bera*). He stands erect, with rigid and straight legs, the feet together in the *samācaraṇa* pose, the hands akimbo, holding a conch in the left and a lotus in the right. Any other posture such as *dvibhaṅga*, *tribhaṅga*, *ālīḍha* or *pratyālīḍha* or any other position of the hands in the various *mudrās* would suggest movement. Instead Viṭhobā stands erect with no movement of hands. Kālidāsa describes this position as 'निर्वात निष्कंपमिव प्रदीपः' steady as an unflickering lamp'.¹¹ He holds the conch, a symbol of knowledge and lotus, a symbol of purity. These two, knowledge and purity, are the essential qualities of a *yogī*. And hence, the image of Viṭhṭhala can be identified as a *yogasthānaka* image. Images have been classified as *Bhoga*, *Vīra*, *Abhicāraka* and *Yoga*, to be prepared as per the requirement and the wishes of the devotees. A tantric would like to have an *Abhicāraka* image, while a warrior would prefer a *Vīra* mage from which he can seek a boon for strength and power. Devotees would generally like to have images which can reflect their mundane wish-fulfilments. Such images are to be classified as of the *Bhoga* variety, the best example of which is Śrī Bālājī of Tirupati. Viṭhobā of Pandharpur is not known for wish-fulmilment. None of the saints have ever sought worldly pleasures of him. The prayers to him, in fact, have been of a different sort seeking liberation from the worldly bonds : "Whether this corporeal body exists or not, my devotion to Viṭhṭhala will remain steadfast. I vow never to leave his feet" देह जावो अथवा राहो। पांडुरंगी दृढ भावो। चरण न सोडी सर्वथा। तुझे आण पंढरीनाथा। or "I have befriended wealth, which has left me alone, let me be at your feet to be exempted from the penalties". संपत्तीची सखी ती म्या आप्त केली। ती ही मजला टाकूनी गेली। पायी दिधला पिंड। आता दंड नाही।। (Narahari Sonāra). "Thy name is melodious. Thy form is charming. Oh Lord, bestow upon me thy everlasting affection" गोड तुझे नाम गोड तुझे रूप। देई मज प्रेम सर्वकाळ. Being neither an *Abhicāraka*, *Vīra*, nor *Bhogamūrti* he has to be taken to be a *Yogamūrti*.

Some may wonder if a state of yogic concentration, of *samādhi*, can ever be possible in a standing posture. That it is possible is amply evident from the detailed instructions in canons like the *Vaikhānasāgama*¹² about the preparation of a *yogasthānaka* image. Moreover, *yogasthānaka* images of Viṣṇu are also available, one of them being displayed

in the Indian Museum at Calcutta. The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* and the *Pātañjala yogasūtra* enjoin that a *yogī*, in deep meditation, whether he be standing or sitting, must hold his chest, neck and head erect in one alignment. The *Kāthopaniṣad* too expects the same. तौ योगमिति मन्यन्ते स्थिरां इन्द्रियधारणाम्।¹³ A complete and static control of the mind and the limbs is *yoga* योगश्चित्तवृत्ती निरोधः।¹⁴ All these yogic aspects can be observed in the image of Viṭṭhala very clearly. No wonder then that Jñānādeva describes Viṭṭhala as ऐसा हा योगिराजु। तो विट्टल मज उजू।।¹⁵ i.e. "I like very much Śrī Viṭṭhala as Yogirāja." And if Viṭhobā is a *yogirāja* his seat must obviously be a *Mahāyogapīṭha*, as it has indeed been described by no less an authority than Śaṅkarācārya, महायोगपीठे तटे भीमरथ्याम्। वरं पुण्डरिकाय दातुं मुनीन्द्रैः।

The image of *yogasthānaka* Viṭṭhala helps to solve two more riddles : (1) In all the stories in circulation about him Viṭṭhala is always alone, neither Rukmiṇi nor Rāhī or Garuḍa are with him. Some of the folk tales are in fact attempts to explain this 'Lone' appearance. Again, iconographically it is far from surprising. He is a *yogī*, therefore, he ought to be shown *aparivārī*, without any paraphernalia whatsoever. (2) His being two-armed and not *caturbhūja* as is usually the case with Viṣṇu makes the saints describe him as *covisāmūrtihūni vegalā*, तो हा पंचविसावा।¹⁶ different from the twenty-four aspects of Viṣṇu but even so, alike him.

Thus, the identification of Viṭṭhala as the *yogasthānakamūrti* helps us to solve various problems regarding Viṭṭhala's proper identification. It is hoped that this reappraisal of the iconography of Viṭṭhala would enable us to understand the religious life in Maharashtra in its proper perspective and put away all the controversies regarding the identification of Śrī Viṭṭhala.

Footnotes

1. *Lilācaritra*, uttarārdha, pt. II (Ed. S.G. Tulple), 1967, *Lilā* no. 411, P. 101.
2. *Ibid.*, (Ed. Nene), *Lilā* no. 246.
3. *Ibid.*, (Ed. V.B. Kolte), 1982, p. 659.
4. G.A. Deleury, *The Cult of Vithoba*, 1960, pp. 181-184.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 196 ff.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Marāthī Saṁśodhana Patrikā*, Oct-Nov., 1977, Pune
8. R.C. Dhere, *Śrī Viṭṭhala-Eka Mahāsamamvaya*, 1984, Pune, p. 168.
9. G.B. Degulrkar. In *Vidarbha Saṁśodhana Maṇḍala Vārṣika*, 1973, p. 147 ff.
10. G.A. Deleury, *The Cult of Vithoba*, 1960, Pune, p. 194.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 197
12. N.P. Joshi, *Bhāratīya Mūrtiśāstra*, 1979, p. 55.
13. *Kāthopaniṣad*, 2.6.11
14. *Ibid.*, 1.2
15. Jñāneśvara, *Sakala Santa Gāthā*, abanḡa, no. 597.
16. *Ibid.*, no. 450