

## The Unique Iconographic Features of Pāṇḍuraṅga Viṭhobā in Pandharpur

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### Place

Pandharpur (Paṇḍharapura) is a famous pilgrimage town situated about forty miles to the west of Sholapur district of Maharashtra. It lies along the right bank of the Bhīmā river which is also known as Candrabhāgā river due to its particular shape of the river bed that gives an appearance of the moon as it is seen on the bright half of Hindu calendar.

In Pandharpur there are several temples dedicated to the different divinities. But the chief temple is of Viṭhobā, also known as Paṇḍharī alias Pāṇḍuraṅga and thus the area is called Paṇḍharī Kṣetra or Pāṇḍuraṅga Kṣetra.

### Legend of the place

According to the local legend there was a merchant named Puṇḍalika (Puṇḍalik or Puṇḍarik) in Pandharpur who was very cruel to drive his parents out of the house so that he would enjoy the property belonging to them. Fortunately, when his parents decided to go to Kāśī on foot, he also undertook the pilgrimage to Varanasi by the chariot. On the way he spent a night in the *āśrama* of a sage. In the night he was surprised by witnessing a group of three beautiful young women dressed in dirty clothes, entering the *āśrama* and after finishing the needful work and prayer reappeared in spotless dress and vanished. Next night also he witnessed the same. Then he came to know from them that they were the goddesses Gaṅgā, Yamunā and Sarasvatī. They explained that they were dirty because of the sins of the bathing pilgrims. They also told that because of his ill treatment of his parents, Puṇḍalika was the greatest sinner among them. This incident completely transformed the behaviour of Puṇḍalika. He made all efforts to make his parents comfortable. Seeing his utmost devotion and commitment towards his parents the ever loving God knocked the door of Puṇḍalika. Realising the God Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa himself had come to see him, but at the same time as

he had to finish his duties towards his parents, he threw a brick at the doorstep for God to stand on. Lord Viṣṇu in the Kṛṣṇa form pleased with his commitment granted a boon to him. Puṇḍalika prayed to Him to stay permanently in Pandharpur and bless his devotees. The God agreed to stay back and till today he is in Pandharpur.

According to another legend, in the Dvāparayuga while Kṛṣṇa was the residing in Dwārkā, suddenly started remembering his early days in Vṛndāvana. He particularly remembered his sports with milkmaids, cowherd boys and his love for Rādhā. By his divine power he brought Rādhā to Dwārkā and made her seated by his side. It so happened that when his queen Rukmiṇī entered the room, Rādhā did not rise to pay her respect. So Rukmiṇī left Dwārkā in anger and hid herself in Diṇḍīrvana forest. After some days Lord Kṛṣṇa in searching of his queen first went to Mathura and then to Gokul. He met the milkmaids and cowherd boys. They went to Govardhan in her search. At the end they reached the bank of the river Bhīmā in Deccan. Then he left all of his companions in Gopalapura and he himself went to Diṇḍīravana forest where he met her and managed to calm her. There they both came to Puṇḍalika's *āśrama*. The rest of the legend is same. It is to be noted that both the legends are told by the devotees in Pandharpur.

## Etymology

Viṭhobā is known by many names such as Viṭhṭhala, Pāṇḍuraṅga, Paṇḍharinātha, Hari and Nārāyaṇa. While the spelling of the name Viṭhobā is pronounced in English as 'Vithoba', in Marathi it is written as Viṭhobā. It means that the deity is shown standing upon a brick with arms akimbo for his devotee Puṇḍalika. In the Marathi language the word 'Viṭa' means brick 'Ubā' means standing. Similarly Viṭhṭhala is also composed of two Sanskrit-Marathi words. Accordingly 'viṭa' means brick and *ṭhala* (which may be originated from Sanskrit word *sthala*) meaning standing. According to the Vārakarī poet saint Tukārāma the etymology of the name Viṭhṭhala is thus: *Viṭhṭha* means ignorance and *la* means one who accepts. It means 'one who accepts innocent people who are devoid of knowledge'.<sup>1</sup> According to R.G. Bhandarkar Vitthu in English is pronounced in Kannada as Viṭṭu. The suffixes *la* and *bā* means father in Marathi. It is possible that the name Viṣṇu might be a corrupted one and thus with '*la*' and '*bā*' - it is pronounced in reverential manner as Viṭhṭhala and Viṭhṭhobā. In fact the people of Gujarat add the suffix '*nātha*' to Viṭhṭhala and call the deity as Viṭhṭhalanātha. The name Pāṇḍuraṅga which is another popular epithet of Viṭhobā, means 'the white god' in Sanskrit. This name is also used as an epithet for the god Rudra-Śiva says the Jaina author saint Hemacandra. The deity is depicted with dark complexion, but he is called 'white god', which clearly indicates that Viṭhobā is the dual form of Hari and Śiva. This concept will be dealt with in detail in the following pages while explaining the

iconography of the deity Viṭhobā. The name Viṭhobā, according to Pandit Bhagavanlal Indrajī "is a short form of Viṭhṭhala bāva, that is "Father Viṭhṭhala or Dear Viṭhṭhala". The name Viṭhṭhala is probably a Kanarese name.<sup>2</sup> The name Pāṇḍuraṅga is the Sanskritised form of Paṇḍaraga, that is belonging to or of Pandaranga, the old name of Pandharpur<sup>3</sup> Pāṇḍarinātha is also meant to the place Paṇḍaraga.

## Temple of Pāṇḍuraṅga

In the temple there are six gates, two on the north, one on the west, one on the south and two on the east. The main gate or entrance to the shrine faces east. It is called "*Nāmadeva Gate*" named after Nāmadeva, an ardent devotee of Viṭhobā lived in the thirteenth century C.E. The first step of the entrance of the shrine is called "*Nāmdevā cī pāyārī*". It is said that when Nāmadeva was a young man, he prayed to the deity that himself (soul of Namadeva) should be present in the first step of the entrance gate so that whenever devotees would come to the shrine of Pāṇḍuraṅga (Viṭhobā), would touch him in the first step by keeping their feet on him. God blessed him with his wish and that is why even today that step is fondly called as "*Nāmdevā cī pāyārī*". (Pl. 6.1)

## Iconography of the Idol

In the *garbhagṛha* the image of Pāṇḍuraṅga alone is depicted as a young dark boy and shown standing in *samabhaṅga* position (Pls. 6.2, 6.3). The poet saints of Maharashtra have called him "*Parabrahma* with a dark complexion". The image is made of black basalt measuring 3'9" high along with its base. The base is 1½" thick which resembles the brick to suit the story of Puṇḍalika. The god is so kind to his *bhakta* that till today he is standing on the brick and blessing his devotees in Pandharpur. The image is two-armed, keeping arms akimbo by resting on the waist. In the left hand *śaikha* is held and the right hand holds *cakra* or lotus flower. The image is represented with a thin loin cloth, the *kamarabanda* traced by thin carvings. The deity is decorated with a necklace and in the long earlobes *kuṇḍala* in fish shape is seen touching the shoulders. On the left breast of the deity one finds a special mark known as "*Śrīvatsalāñchana*" and on the right side of the breast a circular mark or ring shaped mark symbolizes goddess "Śrī". The symbolic figures of *Śrīvatsa* and Śrī indicate that Viṭhobā is lord Viṣṇu of Vaikuṇṭha, who appeared before a young man called Puṇḍalika and waited on the brick thrown for him to stand on it. It is to be noted that the shrine of Rukmāmāī (Rukmiṇī) is placed to the backwall of the temple.

Coming to the vital point of the iconography of Viṭhobā is his "headgear". The unique feature of the headgear is very significant fact for the readers. On the top of the head



Pl. 6.1: Main entrance of the temple. The first step 'Nāmadevā cī Pāyarī'



Pl. 6.2: Standing image of Pāṇḍuraṅga



Pl. 6.3: Pāṇḍuraṅga (Pl. 6.2) with beautiful decorations



Pl. 6.4: Figure of 'Linga' shown on the headgear

of the deity at the centre is found a tiny figure of *liṅga* on *praṇāla* (*yonipīṭha*). While the semicircular shaped figure of *praṇāla* is shown very prominently, the figure of *liṅga* in the centre is seen very small (Pl. 6.4).

The exuberant carving of such a highly metaphysical aspect of *liṅga* is covered by the long and circular headgear. Such unique feature of the image of Viṭhobā is found exclusively in the temple at Pandharpur. In fact there are several temples of Viṭhobā in India. Surprisingly none of the images of Viṭhobā in any of the temples do have such spectacular features of the depiction of *liṅga* at the centre of the top of the head of Viṭhobā.

It is said that Puṇḍalika was the first great high priest of the deity Viṭhobā at Pandharpur. But one does not know where he lived and when this saint brought the deity to stay in Pandharpur. The earliest reference to the image of Viṭhobā holding the figure of *liṅga* of Śiva on the head is attested to Nivṛttinātha, the elder brother of Jñāneśvara and later by Rāmdāsa. In the *Jñāneśvarī*, the reference is found with regard to the unique image of Viṭhobā holding the *liṅga* of Śiva on the head.<sup>4</sup> There are two questions to be answered: (1) what does such uniqueness of this particular Vaiṣṇava image suggest? (2) What could be the name of the *liṅga* and of which *kṣetra*?

First of all, during the early centuries Pandharpur was the centre of ancient traditional cults of different castes of people worshipping Rudra-Śiva, Khaṇḍobā, Bhairava and number of local gods and goddesses. There is no mention of Viṣṇu worship being prevalent during the early centuries. Puṇḍalika as we mentioned earlier was a great devotee of Viṭhobā. When Puṇḍalika passed away, a temple was built in his memory on the bank of the river Bhīmā. One cannot say whether this temple of Puṇḍalika was his *samādhi*. In his temple even today people are seen worshipping Śiva *liṅga* in the shrine. This clearly supports the above statement that during his time the saints and the people of Pandharpur knew no distinction between Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism. As R.G. Bhandarkar pointed out the epithet that Pāṇḍuraṅga the 'white limb' god, which is really the name of Śiva also, indicates the prevalence of the same practice in the society.

Secondly the image of Viṭhobā is an ideal example of the synchronization of three Hindu deities, Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa and Śiva. It is supported by the corrupted name of the deity Viṭhobā for Viṣṇu. Then the consort of the deity Viṭhobā is called by the saints and devotees of Maharashtra as Rukhumāmāī which is the corrupted name of Rukmiṇī, the wife of Lord Kṛṣṇa of Dwarka in Gujarat in Dvāparayuga. It means Viṣṇu in his Kṛṣṇa *avatāra* along with his consort Lakṣmī came from Vaikuṅṭha to reside in Pandharpur (Maharashtra) to bless his *bhakta* Puṇḍalika in this *yuga* (Kaliyuga). Viṣṇu is called Viṭhobā and Lakṣmī as Rukmiṇī. More than anything else on the head of Viṣṇu the depiction of *niṣkala* form

of Śiva in *liṅga svarūpa* indicates that Viṣṇu and Śiva are two manifestations of infinite *Brahman* like two sides of a coin.

Thirdly in the opinion of R.G. Bhandarkar the people in Pandharpur might have been worshipping the deity Pāṇḍuraṅga as the form of Śiva only. But in the later period with the increasing popularity of Viṭhobā's *bhakti* cult, the image might have been identified with Viṣṇu and thus emerged the Vaiṣṇava deity Pāṇḍuraṅga Viṭhobā. In other words with the arrival of the icon of Viṭhṭhala (Canarese name) in Pandharpur by his *bhakta* Puṇḍalika, the conversion of the local mass into Vaiṣṇavism could have happened. However Śiva remained the supreme deity. One can presume that the sculptor might have been an ardent devotee of Śiva. At the same time he might have been influenced by the Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*. It is possible that when he sculptured the image of Viṭhṭhala he would have wished to exhibit his deity Śiva in *liṅga* form in the image of Viṣṇu. This may be the reason that one finds such unique figures of Śiva and Viṣṇu in a single image.

Fourthly, the infinite *Brahman* is a single independent entity whether it takes the form of Viṣṇu or Śiva. When God reveals Himself to the devotee in his heart, then that vision cannot be confined to the devotee's heart only. He sees God everywhere. In fact God reveals Himself to him as the all pervading *Ātman*, assuming various forms. It is possible that because of such spiritual experience the true *bhakta* sculptor might not have realized the dualism in the divine forms of the image of either Śiva or Viṣṇu. Actually speaking when *Brahman* manifests then it comes to be identified with its forms and names of Viṣṇu or Śiva with accordance to its attributes. Normally devotees worship any one form of the God. But the saints have the divine power to visualize both the divinities in a single icon. Can we presume that the sculptor of the image might be a great saint who with his uncompromising faith in Almighty prayed to respond to his longing wish to show him the dual form of Him and thus with his inner power could visualize the *svarūpa* of both divinities in a single image. Can we say that could be the reason we see the figure of *liṅga* on the head of Viṭhobā. This is supported by the description of the saints of Pandharpur by addressing Viṭhobā as '*Parabrahma svarūpa*'.

The answer to the second question is thus. In the *Skandapurāṇa* there is a fabulous narration of Viṣṇu's *bhakti stuti* to Aruṇācala Maheśvara who resides in Aruṇācala mountain in Drāviḍadeśa which is in the present time included in Tamilnadu. The name of the place where it is located is called Tiruannamalai. In this, in Tamil, 'tiru' means sacred, 'aṇṇā' means fondly called as elder brother and 'malai' means mountain. The full name indicates that the deity in the mountain form is a big brother to all. In other words, He in the form of elderly person is blessing the devotees.

Here in the structural temple the deity is worshipped in the *liṅga* form in the name of Candraśekhara. Among the several forms of Śiva-*liṅgas* being worshipped in different places and temples, the mountain of Aruṇācaleśvara is regarded to be exclusively as the "Entrance to Bhūloka from Śivaloka". This *Kṣetra* is considered to be the Agnikṣetra in the *Pañcabhūtas* on the earth and the 'god Śiva in *liṅga svarūpa* is considered to be residing in the mountain form. That is why devotees do "*giri pradakṣiṇā*" on every *pūrṇimā* day. In the *Skanda-purāṇa* while explaining the greatness of Aruṇāchala Kṣetra, Nandikeśvara says that Viṣṇu is a great Śiva *bhakta* and his *bhakti* towards Śiva is par excellent. It is because Viṣṇu worships Mahādeva with great reverence and praising him with many epithets.<sup>5</sup> It is beyond the perception of human beings unless the human being could be an evolved soul. It is possible that the sculptor of the image of Viṭhobā might be an evolved soul and a great *bhakta* of Śiva and Viṣṇu. He might have wished to depict both Śiva and Viṣṇu in a single icon to convey the message that both Śiva and Viṣṇu are one and the same of *Brahma svarūpa*. It is possible that he could have attained the spiritual insight to visualize Viṣṇu worshipping Aruṇācaleśvara in Aruṇācala mountain. He might have wished to bring out such statement of Nandi in visual form. If we presume this to be, then we can say that the figure of *liṅga* depicted on the head of Viṭhobā may be Aruṇācaleśvara *liṅga* which represents Agni in the *Pañcabhūtas* in the Nature.<sup>6</sup> This *liṅga* in mountain form is in Draviḍadeśa which in the present time includes in Tamilnadu. Tamil people fondly and respectfully call the deity as Aṅṅāmaliār and his consort as Uṅṅāmalaiammaiār which means Śrī Aṅṅāmalai and mother goddess Uṅṅāmalai.

## Date of the idol

Regarding the date of the installation of the idol one cannot comprehend that how the God came, from where he came and when he came to take his abode permanently in Pandharpur. In the Maharashtra Gazatteer, there is a mention about the original date of the idol. It says "the general workmanship of the image is earlier than the medieval Rajput style of the Anhilvad Caulukyās (C.E. 943-1240), the Devagiri Yādavas (C.E. 1175-1318), or the Azmer Chohans (C.E. 685-1193). The dress and ornaments of the image belong to a little later than the Guptas, probably not later than the fifth or sixth century after Christ. As far as it is known no other existing Vaiṣṇava temple in India has an image of Viṣṇu like the Pandharpur image..... This type of image represented is Viṣṇu only in his form of Hari."<sup>7</sup> The statement given in the Gazetteer is very much supported by the great prayer rendered by Ādi Śaṅkara extolling the virtues of the deity Pāṇḍūraṅga of Pandharpur. There are nine *ślokas* and in the last line of every *śloka* Ādi Śaṅkara (7<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) addresses the deity

Pāṇḍuraṅga as "*Parabrahma liṅgam*".<sup>8</sup> Since he has written the prayer, this image must not be later than 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E.

Henry Cousens opines that the present temple of Viṭṭhobā might have succeeded an older one to the same deity. He writes "there is an inscription upon a pilaster of a former temple, now used as an overhead beam in the present tells us in Kanarese and Sanskrit that the Hoysala King Vīra Someśvara in Saṁvat 1159 (C.E. 1237) gave a gift of gold to the god Viṭṭhala which is an older form of the name Viṭṭhobā. Portions of this inscription in its present position are covered by the overlapping of the capitals of the pillars below it, thus showing that it could not have been engraved in the present position."<sup>9</sup> He further writes "between the present temple and the river there is a portion of an old temple converted into a *cāvaḍī* or police station. The pillars are all standing in their original positions and upon one of them there is an inscription in Sanskrit verse which informs us that a subordinate chief Keśavamaṇḍalika performed the "*Āptoryāma*" sacrifice in the temple of Pāṇḍuraṅga Viṭṭhala on the banks of the Bhīmarathī in Saṁvat 1192 (C.E. 1270). This would make it appear that this was the original temple of Viṭṭhobā."<sup>10</sup>

Thus Viṭṭhobā being the form of Lord Kṛṣṇa of Dvāparyuga had come to take his abode in this sacred town of Pandharpur to bless a devotee called Puṇḍalika who requested the Lord to stay permanently to bless his innumerable devotees, who would come to Pandharpur. To fulfill his ardent devotee's wish Lord Kṛṣṇa with his consort Rukmiṇī is till today residing in Pandharpur with one difference. Here He is not called by the name Kṛṣṇa instead 'Pāṇḍuraṅga Viṭṭhobā' who still stands upon a brick like a loving father waiting for his son.

## Footnotes

1. *Gazetter of India*. Maharashtra State, Kolhapur district, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., p. 889, Bombay, 1960. Also, see R.G. Bhandarkar, *Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Minor Religious Systems*, pp. 87f, Varanasi, 1965.
2. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. by James Hastings, p. 602, third edn. Edinburg, 1973.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 889.
4. R.D. Ranade, *The Mysticism in Maharashtra*, p. 41.
5. *Saṅkṣipta Skanda-Purāṇa* in *Kalyāna*, Vol. I, Aruṇācalamāhātmya Khaṇḍa, pp. 196ff., Gorakhpur.
6. The universe is made of five elements in nature, namely, earth, fire, water, air and space. In South India there are *Pañcabhūtasthalas* (five abodes of Siva) corresponding to the five elements. Lord Śiva is worshipped as earth at Kanchi, as water at Tiruvanaikkaval, as fire at Tiruvannamalai, as air at Kalahasti and as space at Chidambaram.
7. *Gazetteer of India*, Maharashtra State, Kolhapur district, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., p. 890, Bombay, 1960.
8. Ādi Śankara *Paṇḍuraṅgaṣṭaka*, *Śankara granthāvalī*, Delhi, 1966 :

## पाण्डुरंगाष्टकम्

महायोगपीठे तटे भीमरथ्या  
वरं पुण्डरीकाय दातुं मुनीन्द्रैः।  
समागत्य तिष्ठन्तमानन्दकन्दं  
परब्रह्मलिङ्गं भजे पाण्डुरङ्गम्॥ 1 ॥  
कटिद्वाससं नीलमेघावभासं  
रमामन्दिरं सुन्दरं चित्रकाशम्।  
वरं त्विष्टकायां समन्यस्तपादं  
परब्रह्मलिङ्गं भजे पाण्डुरङ्गम्॥ 2 ॥  
प्रमाणं भवाब्धेरिदं मामकानां  
नितम्बः कराभ्यां धृतो येन तस्मात्।  
विधातुर्वसत्यै धृतो नाभिकोशः  
परब्रह्मलिङ्गं भजे पाण्डुरङ्गम्॥ 3 ॥  
स्फुरत्कौस्तुभालंकृतं कण्ठदेशे  
श्रिया जुष्टकेयूरकं श्रीनिवासम्  
शिवं शान्तमीड्यं वरं लोकपालं  
परब्रह्मलिङ्गं भजे पाण्डुरङ्गम्॥ 4 ॥  
शरच्चन्द्रबिम्बाननं चारुहासं  
लसत्कुण्डलाक्रान्तगण्डस्थलान्तम्।  
जपारागबिम्बाधरं कञ्जनेत्रं  
परब्रह्मलिङ्गं भजे पाण्डुरङ्गम्॥ 5 ॥  
किरीटोज्ज्वलत्सर्वदिक्प्रान्तभागं  
सुरैरर्चितं दिव्यरत्नैरनर्घैः।  
त्रिभङ्गाकृतिं बर्हमाल्यावतंसं  
परब्रह्मलिङ्गं भजे पाण्डुरङ्गम्॥ 6 ॥  
विभुं वेणुनादं चरन्तं दुरन्तं  
स्वयं लीलया गोपवेषं दधानम्।  
गवां वृन्दकानन्ददं चारुहासं  
परब्रह्मलिङ्गं भजे पाण्डुरङ्गम्॥ 7 ॥  
अजं रुक्मिणीप्राणसंजीवनं तं  
परं धाम कैवल्यमेकं तुरीयम्।  
प्रसन्नं प्रपन्नार्तिहं देवदेवं  
परब्रह्मलिङ्गं भजे पाण्डुरङ्गम्॥ 8 ॥  
स्तवं पाण्डुरङ्गस्य वै पुण्यदं ये  
पठेन्त्येकचित्तेन भक्त्या च नित्यम्।  
भवाम्भोनिधिं तेऽपि तीर्त्वाऽन्तकाले  
हरेरालयं शाश्वतं प्राप्नुवन्ति॥ 9 ॥

॥ पाण्डुरङ्गाष्टकं संपूर्णम् ॥

9. Henry Cousens, *Medieval Temples of the Dakhan*, p. 65, Calcutta, 1931.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 65.