

Viṭṭhala in the Eyes of Maharashtra

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Along with Karnataka Maharashtra is the homeland of Viṭṭhala cult at least from 12th cent. C.E. Tracing its antiquity back to 6th or 8th cent. is a point of controversy. Texts on Iconography (*Pratimā lakṣaṇa graṇtha*) are mostly silent regarding the icons of Viṭṭhala or Pāṇḍuraṅga. The reading of copper plate dated 516 C.E. issued by the Rāṣṭrakūṭa ruler Avidheya and authorship of *Pāṇḍuraṅgāṣṭaka* attributed to Ādi Śaṅkarācārya have been questioned by scholars like Prof. Mirashi, G.H.Khare and others. The most reliable sources are the five inscriptions of Yādava period hailing from Pandharpur itself. These are dated in Śaka Saṁ. 1111 (1189 C.E.), Ś.Saṁ 1159 (1237 C.E.), Ś.Saṁ 1192 (1270 C.E.), Ś.Saṁ 1195-99 (1273-1277 C.E.) and Ś.Saṁ 1233 (1311 C.E.). Amongst them the fourth one is known as 'Cauryāśī cā lekha', which is in Marathi. It is in the temple of Viṭṭhala of Pandharapur.¹

The Marathi literature is full of references regarding Pandharpur, its presiding deity Viṭṭhala or Pāṇḍuraṅga, also called Viṭhū-or Viṭhobā and the cult of his devotees called Vāraakarī Saṁpradāya. These references are of two types. First type is of devotional nature recorded by saints like Jñāneśvara, Nāmadeva, Janābāī, Tukārāma, Ekanātha, etc. and others as well including devotees of the present age like Sonopant Dandekar, L.R. Pangarkar, Dhunḍāmahārāja Degalurkar and so many others. Second type of references are from the scholars presenting analytical discussions as per present methodology of research, such as G.H.Khare, V.K.Rajawade, S.G.Tulapule, G.B.Degalurkar and others in large number. The most important work of this nature comprising detailed information about Viṭṭhala and several allied aspects is by R.C.Dhere.² Our present discussions are mostly based on this work. We had no chance to visit Pandharpur or to see the idol of Pāṇḍuraṅga ourselves.

In the present issue of the *Jñāna-Pravāha Research Journal* there are two articles on Viṭṭhala, one by Haripriya Rangarajan of New Delhi and other by P.N.Naidu of Tirupati. Both these scholars have not made much use of evidences from Marathi sources, hence in this paper we propose to record some interesting informations coming from that field.

The idol at Pandharpur

Let us start with the present image of Viṭṭhala in his famous temple at Pandharpur. As per devotional sources (*abhaṅgas*, *padas*, *stotras* etc.) the idol standing on a brick (*vīṭa*) with hands akimbo is extremely fascinating and beautiful like Madana, the God of Love (*madanasundara*) (सुन्दर से ध्यान उभे वीटेवरी - तुकाराम), but actually for a modern art critic the image is not a piece of exquisite art. On such and other allied issues we cannot and should not challenge the saints because the devotional approach visualized by the saints or experienced by the devotees on transcendental level, and analytical approach on material level are two different ends and need not always be mixed together.

It has always been a matter of unending controversy whether-

- (i) the present idol in Pandharpur is the same image which was seen and admired by Jñāneśvara (1275-1296 C.E.), Nāmadeva (contemporary) and others in 13th century;
- (ii) or the present image is a changed one, as right from the Islamic times the Pāṇḍuraṅga image has faced several shiftings.

Decisive answers to these queries have not yet come forward, hence we shall discuss the available evidences only.

Fortunately we have iconographic description of the Viṭṭhala image preserved in two *Pāṇḍuraṅga Māhātmyas* which are said to have been parts of *Skandapurāṇa* and *Padmapurāṇa* respectively. Dhare³ holds that the one of *Skandapurāṇa* is pre-Hemādri period, (that is prior to round about 1260-70 C.E.). and the other of *Padmapurāṇa* should be dated somewhere in 16th century.⁴ Both these sources specifically mention that the image bears a six-lettered Viṭṭhala *mantra* on its chest in coded way just like the necklace of six pearls.⁵ The decoded reading of the *mantra* is *Śrī Kṛṣṇāya namaḥ*.⁶ Another reference to this sacred *mantra*, on the chest of Pāṇḍuraṅga is to be found in one *abhaṅga* of Sāvātāmālī, who was contemporary of Jñāneśvara (1275-1296 C.E.). According to this *abhaṅga*⁷ Viṭṭhala with *mantra siddha* on lotus chest (*hṛdaya kamaḷa*) is nude (*digambara*), has hands akimbo carrying lotus bud (*padma puṣpakaḷī*) with its stem held in fingers in right hand and a conch (*śaṅkha*) in the left. The anklets (*toḍe*) and wristlets (*vālī*) have also been mentioned as ornaments.

Existence of this *mantra* on the chest of Viṭṭhala even in early 19th century is proved by another evidence. In one of the *stotras* entitled '*Viṭṭhala - dhyāna - mānasapūjā*' composed by Bābā Pādhye, one of the authors of *Dharmasindhu*, - (who expired in 1805 C.E.) the six-lettered *Kṛṣṇamantra* on chest has been referred to.⁸

Bābā Pādhye a resident of Pandharpur, was a staunch devotee of Viṭṭhala. Not only that he had direct access to the sanctum of the temple, but actually he participated in the daily worship (*nityopacāra*) of the god.⁹ Naturally therefore, his authenticity cannot be questioned.

The present image in Pandharpur does not have any such *mantra* on its chest, but luckily enough it does appear in a Viṭṭhala figure enshrined in a temple at Mādhe¹⁰ (Pl. 8.1) in Solapur district of Maharashtra. The Mādhe figure of course is comparatively much later in date as is clear from its delineation and lettering of the inscription on chest¹¹ (Plate 8.2). Now the question arises how these two facts can be reconciled?

We know that the original idol (*ādyamūrti*) at Pandharpur had undergone shifting several times. Its shifting to Karnataka in the times of Vijayanagar ruler Kṛṣṇadevarāya (Ś. Saṁ. 1432-1451 = 1510-1529 C.E.) and its return with efforts of saint Bhānudāsa, (Ś. Saṁ. 1370-1435 = 1448-1513 C.E.) is well recorded.¹² Similarly this also seems to be a fact that during the period of Afzal Khan's invasion on the Maratha ruler Śivājī in 1659 C.E. the image was again shifted to some secure place. Citing Rajawade, Dhare¹³ observes that in 1659 the image is said to have been shifted to Mādhe, some 20 miles from Pandharpur, and when conditions became normal it was brought back to its original place. In memory of the event the residents of Mādhe got a fresh image made, just a prototype of the original one and got it installed in a separate temple built by Mahadaji Nimbalkar.¹⁴

Thus existence of *ādyamūrti* with sacred hymn on chest till at least 1805 C.E. is well proved, but after that date it seems that there occurred some sort of fresh change of idol, as the present one does not bear any sacred *mantra* on chest. The image now existing does not appear to be of pre-sixteenth century in date according to G.H.Khare.¹⁵ The reasons or circumstances responsible for this change are not very clear, but some clue seems to be forthcoming from an event of the year 1873 C.E.¹⁶

It so happened that this year someone hurled a big stone on the image of Pāṇḍuraṅga, due to which one of its legs suffered heavy injury, and thus the image became mutilated. Worship of injured or mutilated image is strictly prohibited, it has got to be removed and changed. This rule is not applicable to self-born (*svayambhū*) images. The priest worshippers (Baḍave as they are called) of Pandharapur assert that 'the Viṭṭhala image being of *svayambhū* type has not been changed, rather only a support has been provided to the injured leg from back side and the worship continues as before'. Dhare¹⁷ in this connection observes that the so called *svayambhū* figures are unhewn stones (Marathi '*tāndaḷe*') as we see in case of *svayambhū liṅga*, Gaṇeśa or Devī figures. Image of any deity with decent body and emblems cannot be self-born, it is always, man-made purposely well carved. In



Pl. 8.1: Viṭhthala, Māḍhe



Pl. 8.2: Sacred hymn in coded form, Māḍhe

conclusion he says, 'The *ādyamūrti*' of Viṭṭhala was there in the temple at Pandharpur till 1805 C.E. Possibly after being injured in 1873 it has been changed. For knowing the original one, the only known source before our eyes is the Viṭṭhala image at Mādhe.¹⁸

The four-armed Viṭṭhala

Usually the Viṭṭhala that is, Paṇḍuraṅga images are two-armed, both hands placed on hips very often holding the lotus bud in the right and conch in left. Sometimes the right hand, though on hip is in *varada* pose (e.g. Raṅgnātha *Mandir* figure, Shrirangam)¹⁹ or even in *abhaya*.²⁰ In some cases the two hands akimbo carry no emblems.²¹

The saints like Jñāneśvara, Nāmadeva, Cokhāmeḷā, Bhānudāsa, Ekanātha etc. refer the four-armed form of Pāṇḍuraṅga carrying *śaṅkha*, *cakra*, *gadā* and *padma*.²² In sculptures this form is extremely rare. A figure under worship in a temple at Tākaḷibhāna²³ (Pl. 8.3) in Ahmadnagar district of Maharashtra can be cited as an unique example. In this case the normal hands, perhaps devoid of any emblem, have been folded inwards and almost placed on stomach, while the upraised hands carry *cakra* in right and *śaṅkha* in left. Besides the god bears moustaches on face and a Śiva-*liṅga* on head (Pl. 8.4).²⁴ The image is not of classical style, but mostly evinces folk elements. On the basis of an inscription dated Ś.Saṁ 1192 (1270 C.E.) of the period of the Yādavas of Devagiri recording the name of king Bhānu, a subordinate of the Yādava rulers, possibility has been expressed that the image and original Tākaḷibhāna Temple (renovated in 1997) might be datable to 13th century.²⁵

Paṇḍuraṅga with Śiva-*liṅga* on head

This feature has been highly spoken of by saints right from Jñāneśvara (13th century) to Samartha Rāmadāsa (17th century) and onwards as well, and stress has been given on establishing unity of Śiva and Viṣṇu. A glaring example is the episode of the goldsmith Narahari²⁶ (Narahari sonāra C.E. 1193-1285), who, though a resident of Pandharpur, was a staunch Śaiva, and had taken a vow never to see or worship any other deity except Śiva. As the story goes Narahari was approached by a land-lord (Marathi 'sāvakāra) of Devagiri to get a jewelled waistband (*mekhalā*) prepared for the image of Paṇḍuraṅga. The goldsmith accepted the offer on condition that exact measurements of the periphery of idol's waist should be given to him. The waistband was prepared as per given measurements, but when actually put on the middle part of the idol it turned out to be shorter in size. The goldsmith cut it accordingly, but when again worn, it appeared much longer than the actual size of the waist. Perplexed Narahari now decided to take the periphery himself. So he put on a thick bandage on his eyes to avoid any glimpse of the god and touched the waist of the icon. But what a wonder!! His touch revealed it to be a Śiva-*liṅga*. Immediately he opened



Pl. 8.3: Viṭṭhala, Tākalibhān



Pl. 8.4: Viṭṭhala with 'liṅga' on head, Tākalibhān

his eyes to see his lord, but before him again there was the idol of Pāṇḍuraṅga and not any *liṅga*. Thus identity of Śiva and Viṭṭhala was realized by him. Narahari himself has described this event in one of his *abhaṅgas* as well as in his *Stavana-mañjarī*.²⁷ Another evidence comes from Mahipati²⁸ who observes 'From thenceforth Pāṇḍuraṅga carries *liṅga* on his head as the god never goes against the wishes of the devotee'.

G.H.Khare could not notice any *liṅga* on the head of the present idol of Viṭṭhala in Pandharapur. So he says, 'What people call Śīva-*liṅga* on head is just the simple high crown of the god'.²⁹ Now in the light of Haripriya's discussion and photographic illustrations existence of a small *liṅga* with *yonipīṭha* is well proved. It is true that this feature is rarely seen in other Viṭṭhala images, but we are in know of at least one more such figure namely the four-armed Tākālībhāna image³⁰ illustrated by Dhere.

Footnotes

1. Madhukar Ramdas Joshi, Cauryāśī cā Śilālekha (Marathi), *Prasāda*, Pune, Aug-Sept. 1974, nos. 1-2 (Special Issue on Viṭṭhala); - R.C.Dhere, 'Śrī Viṭṭhala: eka Mahāsamanvaya (SV) (Marathi), Pune, 2nd edition, 2005, pp. 393-405.
2. R.C.Dhere, as cited above (SV)
3. SV., p. 40
4. SV., p. 45
5. SV., p. 128 - श्रीवत्सं धारयन् वक्षे मुक्तमालां षडक्षराम्।
6. SV., p. 132
7. SV., p. 142 - विठ्ठलाचे रूप अतर्क्य विशाल, हृदय कमळ मंत्रसिद्ध॥
दिगंबर मूर्ति गोजरी सावळी, तोडे पायी वाळी मनगटी॥
कटी वरी हात, हाती पद्म शंख, पुष्पकळी मोख अंगुलीत॥
सावतामाळी म्हणे शब्दब्रह्म साचे, नाम विठ्ठलाचे कलियुगी॥
8. SV., p. 148 - विठ्ठल-ध्यान-मानसपूजा, श्लोक 12 - षडक्षरं कृष्णमंत्रं वक्षस्थलगतं स्मरेत्।
9. *Ibid.*
10. For full description of Mādhe figure. SV., p. 138
11. SV., p. 152
12. G.H.Khare, *Śrī Viṭṭhala āṇi Paṇḍharapura* (Marathi), Pune, 1953, p. 61-62
13. SV., p. 134
14. SV., p. 130
15. G.H.Khare, as above. p. 77, Khare observes, The present image is definitely not of early medieval age, but it is also doubtful, whether it can be assigned to the closing of medieval period. - also SV. 144
16. SV., p. 150

17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *SV.*, Pl. 30
20. *SV.*, p. 146
21. Thanjavur figure, *SV.*, Pl. 29
22. Nana Kothekar, 'Santavāṇītila Paṇḍuraṅga', *Prasāda*, Aug-Sept. 1974, as cited in 1 above, pp. 140-144
23. *SV.*, Pl. 18
24. For description of Takalibhan Image, *SV.*, p. 146
25. *SV.*, p. 144-45
26. D.K.Dhavare, '*Śrī Sant Naraharī Sonāra*', Santa Caritramālā, no. 41. Pune, 1998
27. *Stavana-mañjarī* - अहोरात्र मी ध्यातसे सांब भोळा, न पाहे दुजा देव केव्हाहि डोळा।
कटीसूत्र ही जाहले सुस्त अंगा, नमस्कार त्या रुक्मिणी पाण्डुरंगा॥
भला भक्त सोनार हा धन्य केला, कसा देउळी नेत्र बांधूनी गेला।
कृपेने धरी मस्तकी दिव्य लिंगा, नमस्कार त्या रुक्मिणी पाण्डुरंगा॥
Abhaṅga - नरहरी सोनार न देखे द्वैत, अवघा मूर्तिमंत एकरूप।
28. *Mahipati* - तै पासूनी पाण्डुरंग, मस्तकी धरिले असे लिंग, आपुल्या दासाचा श्रीरंग,
न करी मनोभंग सर्वथा॥
29. G.H.Khare, as above in 12, p. 72
30. *SV.*, p. 146, Pl. 19
Pls. 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4 - Photo courtesy R.C.Dhere, *SV.*,