

The Cult of Viṭṭhala : A Study (From 12th to 16th Century C.E.)

P.N. Naidu

Among the several religious cults in India, the cult of Viṭṭhala is an important one. This cult was popular in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and parts of Tamilnadu in the medieval period with Pandharpur in Maharashtra as the radiating centre of this cult. The origin and antiquity, growth and popularity of the cult of Viṭṭhala from 12th to 16th century C.E. under the patronage of Hoyasālas and the Rāyas of Vijayanagara as gleaned through the epigraphs, cult-icons, temples and literary sources is dealt with in this paper.

Pāṇḍuraṅga Viṭṭhala is commonly known as Viṭṭhala or Viṭṭhobā. This is the form of Kṛṣṇa as a grown up man with Rukmiṇī by his side as is represented in the famous temple at Pandharpur in Maharashtra. Lord Viṣṇu, the great boon conferring god and protector of his devotees is worshipped as Viṭṭhala or Viṭṭhobā. This is the Viṭṭhala form of Lord Viṣṇu revealed to a *brāhmaṇa* Puṇḍalīka by name, because of his intense devotion to his aged parents. The name Viṭṭhala or Viṭṭhobā is the corrupt form of Viṣṇu. In Martahi, the word is derived from 'Viṭṭa' (vīṭā) which means 'brick'. This reminds the legend that god stands on a brick in Pandharpur on the bank of river Bhīmā (or the Candrabhāgā as called in Maharashtra).¹

Antiquity of the Cult of Viṭṭhala

The antiquity of the god Viṭṭhala goes back to the sixth century C.E. A copper-plate inscription from Pandharpur, of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa king, Avidheya dated 516 C.E., mentions the word 'Jayadvīṭṭa'.² This suggests the root of the name 'Viṭṭhala' of Pandharpur where the inscription is found and also the cult of Viṭṭhala had the roots from this place in Maharashtra. This is refuted by S.G. Tulpule, who suggests the Karnataka origin of the cult of Viṭṭhala.³ A poem in praise of the Viṭṭhala form of Viṣṇu entitled 'Pāṇḍuraṅgāṣṭaka' is attributed to great *Advaita* preacher Śaṅkarācharya (788-820 C.E.) of about 8th century C.E.⁴ The saints of Maharashtra namely Nāmadeva, Jñāneśvara, Tukārāma, Nivṛttinātha,

Rāmadāsa were great devotees of Viṭṭhala of Pandharpur. They derived their divine inspiration from this god and they call him the god of Karnataka. Nāmadeva says about Viṭṭhala, "Viṭṭhala who stands on the bank of Bhīmā is a native of Kannada country. His name Kānaḍā is charming, appearance is lovely, and sight is delightful". Jñānadeva in his '*Abhaṅgamālā*', says "Viṭṭhala is from Karnataka and speaks Kannada."⁵ On the basis of the references of the above saints, S.N. Sivarudraswamy surmises that "The cult of Viṭṭhala is of Kannada origin, although its foundation head is at Pandharpur in Maharastra. He further says that there was no strict territorial divisions on the basis of linguistic ideas in those days".⁶

Kannada and Marathi poets composed their works in praise of the god Viṭṭhala. Candarasa, a poet of 13th century C.E. who has described himself as 'the bee to the lotus feet' of Viṭṭhala, eulogises his favourite god Viṭṭhala at the outset of his '*Abhinavadaśakumāracarita*'.⁷ Jñānadeva, the Marathi saint has written songs in Kannada language glorifying Viṭṭhala in his '*Abhaṅgamālā*' probably as he is the god of Karnataka.⁸

The Cult of Viṭṭhala under the Hoyasaḷas (C.E. 1100-1342)

The cult of Viṭṭhala was prevalent in Karnataka even before the establishment of the Vijayanagara empire. The worship of Viṭṭhala form of Viṣṇu rose to prominence under the Hoyasaḷas and Viṭṭhala was considerably a popular deity in the Hoyasaḷa region. There are explicit references in epigraphs to the devotees of Viṭṭhala and the persons bearing that name. God Viṭṭhala was installed in a temple in Songane Agrahāra (Shimoga) in 1216 C.E. and grants were made.⁹ Dasavanta Daṇḍanāyaka is described in an epigraph of 1217 C.E. from Udri (Shimoga) as the worshipper of the holy lotus feet of Śrīviṭṭhala: *Śrī Viṭṭhaladeva - divya - śrī - pada - padmārādhaka*.¹⁰ An epigraph of Hubli (Dharwar) dated C.E. 1228, mentions a grant made by Kaluvara Singa Gavunda for the charities to be maintained on periodical pilgrimages to god Viṭṭhala of Paṇḍuraṅge.¹¹ Also a merchant Koṇḍanambī is stated to have built a *satra* in Paṇḍuraṅge (Pandharpur).¹² This apart, sculptural representations of Viṭṭhala are found on the walls of ornate Hoyasaḷa temples namely Lakṣmī Narasimha temple at Harnahalli, Hasan District, of C.E. 1234 and Pañcaliṅgeśvara temple of Govindahanalli, Mysore, of C.E. 1240.¹³ Here the wall sculptures of Viṭṭhala are two armed standing figures with the hands akimbo. *Śaṅkha* and Pitcher (bag of money) are the attributes in the hands.

The Cult of Viṭṭhala under the Rāyas of Vijayanagara

The cult of Viṭṭhala became popular during the Vijayanagara period. In the second half of 15th century, Vaiṣṇavism became a dominating factor in the religious arena of

Vijayanagara empire. The rulers of Saluva and Tuluva dynasties who succeeded the Saṅgama rulers, were staunch Vaiṣṇavites. In this situation, Mādhva saints played a pivotal role in socio-religious life of the Vijayanagara empire. The Mādhva saints namely Vyāsarāya, Śrīpadarāya and Vādirāja popularised the Viṭṭhala cult. This cult reached the culmination during the time of Purandaradāsa due to his many sided devotional activities. He was the colossal personality in Dāsa - Sāhitya (a unique form in Kannada literature) and it was he who immortalized the Viṭṭhala cult. He composed countless songs in the name of god Viṭṭhala. The Viṭṭhala cult became a synonym for the legacy of Purandaradāsa. It was he who enlivened and spread the Viṭṭhala cult through his devotional songs in the capital Vijayanagar (Hampi) and also in the empire.¹⁴ As a result of this widespread activities of the saints of the period Viṭṭhala temples were constructed and cult icons of Viṭṭhala were made and sculptured in the temples.

The most magnificent Viṭṭhala temple built during the Vijayanagara period could be seen in the Viṭṭhalapura at Hampi. Though its existence could be traced at least from the time of Devarāya-II (C.E. 1422-46).¹⁵ It was elegantly expanded from the beginning of 16th century C.E. There is yet another *Prāta* or old Viṭṭhala temple within the Vijayanagara city. Anila Verghese is of the opinion that this "Prāta Viṭṭhala temple was the earliest centre of Viṭṭhala worship at the site; and with the construction of great Viṭṭhala temple, the Prāta Viṭṭhala temple gradually declined in importance". There is no foundation inscription help to date this temple. Verghese says that "it could have been constructed late in the 14th or at the beginning of 15th century C.E."¹⁶ The existence of the old Viṭṭhala temple at Hampi from the late 14th or early 15th century C.E. onwards proves that the cult of Viṭṭhala was not a late importation into the city as had been held by some Historians.¹⁷ It was one of the earliest Vaiṣṇava cults to be incorporated into the capital fairly soon after the establishment of the Vijayanagara kingdom. The site of Vijayanagara city was traditionally a Śaivite *tīrtha*, for there are few traces of Vaiṣṇava traditions here from the pre-Vijayanagara times. The early Saṅgama period itself saw the promotion of the worship of Vaiṣṇava deities Narasimha and Viṭṭhala at the site and possibly also Kṛṣṇa. It was the conscious policy of the Vijayanagara state to patronage religion in general and to foster and promote diverse cults and traditions both at the capital as well as through out the kingdom. In *Śrī Vyāsarāyogīcaritam*, the life of great Vyāsarāya, mention is made of the temple of Virupākṣa and Viṭṭhala when the saint first visited Vijayanagara in C.E. 1498.¹⁸ There are also two epitaphs of Saluva period mentioning grants made in the presence of god Viṭṭhala in C.E. 1493 and C.E. 1503 respectively.¹⁹

The cult of Viṭṭhala was on the increase during the reign of Tuluva dynasty. Kṛṣṇarāya proved his sense of devotion to God Viṭṭhala. The Viṭṭhala temple of Hampi received

substantial patronage from Kṛṣṇarāya and his two queens. Not only were villages and valuable objects of precious metals gifted to it but in C.E. 1513, the *gopuras* were added to the temple complex.²⁰ In 1516-17 C.E. a hundred pillar *maṇḍapa* was built.²¹ From this period onwards, till the destruction of the Vijayanagara city in C.E. 1565, the Viṭṭhala temple witnessed tremendous constructional activity. Acyutarāya (1530-1542 C.E.), the successor of Kṛṣṇarāya, appears to be an ardent devotee of god Viṭṭhala. During his reign, certain significant additions were made within the Viṭṭhala temple complex.²² The reign of Sadāśiva (C.E.1542-1567) the last of the Tuluvas, is a landmark and an epoch making one in the history of the cult of Viṭṭhala in the Vijayanagara city. During his reign, the maximum development was in Viṭṭhalapura. The Viṭṭhala temple became the greatest centre of religious activity in the city, a fact reflected in the constructional work undertaken both within and around the Viṭṭhala complex. In the temple itself, the most remarkable structure is the magnificent Uyyala *maṇḍapa* (swing pavilion) constructed in C.E. 154 by the Aravidu chief Udayagiri Timmarāya,²³ a structure with its 56 composite pillars, marks the high water mark of Vijayanagara architecture and sculpture. The Viṭṭhala temple was surrounded by four streets besides the long chariot street in front of it and separate shrines to the Ālavāras and other deities lined these streets.

An interesting practice of the Rāyas of Vijayanagar was that of often recording grants made by kings and even others in the presence of a deity, evidently the god was invoked as a witness. A careful perusal of all such grants registered at Hampi during the entire period it served as the capital, highlights the importance of Viṭṭhala since a sizeable number of grants were made in his presence.

A study of the Vijayanagara inscription reveals a significant fact: Virūpākṣa was without any doubt the prominent deity in the Vijayanagara city during the Saṅgama period. While under the Saluvas and Tuluvas, Vaiṣṇava deities especially Viṭṭhala gradually gained importance in the sixteenth century. Virūpākṣa lost importance due to the immense popularity of Viṭṭhala. During the period before Kṛṣṇarāyas reign, there were only three grants registered before Viṭṭhala. In the first few years of Kṛṣṇarāyas rule (C.E. 1509 to 1515) all grants were made in the presence of Virūpākṣa. However from C.E. 1516 onwards some grants were also recorded in the presence of Viṭṭhaleśvara. More than half of the grants of Acyutarāya's period were issued in the presence of Viṭṭhala, while under Sadāśiva, almost all grants were made in front of the Vaiṣṇava deity Viṭṭhala.²⁴

The definite shift in court patronage from Virūpākṣa to Viṭṭhala during the Tuluva period becomes even more obvious if a comparative study is made of the inscriptions engraved within the two largest temple complexes in the city, one of Śaiva (Virūpākṣa) deity and the other of Vaiṣṇava one (Viṭṭhala). Within the Virūpākṣa temple, there are only

five inscriptions of the Vijayanagara period of which three are royal grants (one of Hari Hara II and two of Kṛṣṇarāya). There is no inscription in this temple complex after the reign of Kṛṣṇarāya and the last royal grant is dated in C.E. 1513. Significantly the first record within the Viṭṭhala temple complex is of C.E. 1513; from then onwards, there are numerous inscriptions about thirty in all, the last dated C.E. 1564. Evidently there was a direct correlation between the rising importance in the popularity and patronage enjoyed by the Viṭṭhala temple and the decline in the patronage of the Virūpākṣa temple and the cult²⁵. The comparative study of epigraphs of Virūpākṣa and Viṭṭhala temples makes it clear that the Viṭṭhala cult in the 16th century grew from strength to strength and in the last quarter of this century before the city's destruction in C.E. 1565, it overshadowed the importance of the cult of Virūpākṣa.

The outstanding importance of the cult of Viṭṭhala during the Vijayanagara period is reflected in sculpturing and setting up of the cult-icons of Viṭṭhala in other parts of the city and the kingdom. One of the finest Viṭṭhala sculptures in the Vijayanagara city is found in a niche on the outer wall of the south entrance of the Rāmacandra temple. He is nude, wearing *kirīṭamukūṭa* and elaborate jewellery. The conch is held in one hand, the other is in *varada-mudrā*. In another exquisitely sculptured niche on the north face of the south *gopura* of the Viṭṭhala temple is another fine image of this God. Here, he is in his more usual clothed form. Both the hands are on the hips.²⁶ Besides the smallest Prāta Viṭṭhala temple and largest temple and the sculptures of Viṭṭhala in the Vijayanagara city, there are also independent temples and cult-icons of this god outside the capital. There is a temple of Viṭṭhala built within the later part of 15th century at Mulabagilu, an important provincial capital of the Vijayanagara empire. S.N. Sivarudraswamy opines that 'this temple is earlier than the great and famous Viṭṭhala temple of Hampi.'²⁷ The icon of Viṭṭhala of Mulabagilu is shown nude. Standing in *samabhaṅga*, the deity holds a *śaṅkha* in the left hand placed on the hip, while the right hand touches the hip in *varadamudrā*. The god is flanked by Rādhā and Rukmiṇī, who were the incarnations of Śrī and Bhūdevī. The impact of the cult of Viṭṭhala may also be seen in Rayalaseema during the period of Tuluva dynasty i.e. in the 16th century C.E. An inscription dated in 'S' 1457 (=C.E. 1535) of the reign of Acyutarāya, records the consecration of the image of Viṭṭhaleśvara in the Viṭṭhaleśvara temple at Viṭṭhalam in the Vayalpadu taluk of Chittoor District. It further registers the gift of lands to the temple by Venkaṭādri Nāyaka.²⁸ Another epigraph of Sadāśiva dated in 'S' 1467 (=25-3-1546 C.E.) registers that Devarāya Bhaṭṭār installed an image of Viṭṭhaleśvara Perumal in Śrī Govindarāja temple of Tirupati and made the provision for its propitiation daily and on auspicious occasions.²⁹ Other round Cult-icons of Viṭṭhala are also found in the S.V. Museum (Pls. 7.1, 7.2) at Tirumala and in the *Kalyāṇa maṇḍapa* of the Lakṣmī Nārasimha temple of Lower Ahobilam. Stylistically these images belong to the late



Pl. 7.1: Viththala, S.V. Museum, Tirupati



Pl. 7.2: Viththala, S.V. Museum, Tirupati

Vijayanagara period, about 16th Century C.E. The images of Viṭṭhala is found in the S.V. Museum are two-armed, the left arm holds *śankha* and the right arm in *varada-mudrā* in one image and in *kaṭi* in another image. In the Ahlobilam image, the deity is well dressed and holds, *śankha* and pitcher (bag of money). (This could be a lotus bud, as Viṭṭhala carrying pitcher is not mentioned any where - Editor).

Conclusion

To sum up, this study reveals that, the origin and antiquity of this cult can be traced from the 6th century C.E. as evidenced by the copper plate inscription dated C.E. 516 of the Rāṣtrakūṭa king Avidheya found at Pandharpur in Maharashtra, the radiating centre of this cult. From 6th century C.E. onwards, this cult spread by leaps and bounds. The successive dynasties such as the Hoyasaḷas, and the kings of Saluva and Tuluva dynasties of Vijayanagara contributed their mite for the growth of the cult of Viṭṭhala in their empires. We find there has been an increase in the number of inscriptions, cult-icons and temples of Viṭṭhala from 12th to 16th century C.E. The presence of a very large number of inscriptions, images and temples testify that the cult of Viṭṭhala was popular and widely prevalent in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh during medieval period, i.e. 12th to 16th century C.E.

Footnetes

1. God Kṛṣṇa appreciated the endless devotion of Puṇḍalika towards his aged parents and came to Pandharpur to see him. Then Kṛṣṇa could not return.
2. Annual Report, Mysore, Archaeological Dept. 1929, p. 198.
3. S.G. Tulpule, *Epigraphy, Numismatics and Other Aspects in Karnataka*, Mysore, 1995, p. 125.
4. H. Krishna Sastri, *South Indian Images of Gods and Goddess*, New Delhi, 1955.
5. S.K.Ramchandra Rao, *Purandara Sāhitya Darśana*, Bangalore, 1997, Vol. I, pp. 12-14.
6. S.N.Sivarudraswamy, "Viṭṭhala cult in Karnataka and Viṭṭhala temple at Mulabagilu", *Proceeding of 5th Session of Indian Art History Congress*, Bhuvanewar, 1997, p. 108.
7. R.S.Panchamukhi, *Progress of Kannada Research*, Dharwar, 1953, p.6.
8. S.K.Ramchandra Rao, p. 15.
9. E.C., Vol. VII, Sg 54.
10. *Ibid.*, VIII, Sb 135.
11. S.II., Vol. XV., M.187.
12. E.C., Vol. V., AK 108; S.V. Padigar, *Vishnu Cult in Karnataka*, Mysore, 1996, pp. 105-106.
13. S.V.Padigar, pp. 228-229, pl. 95; MAR 1933 p. 18.
14. S.N.Sivarudraswamy, *Proceeding of 5th Session of Indian Art History Congress*, p. 109; *Ibid.*, *Vijayanagara Temple in Karnataka*, Mysore, 1995, p.7.

15. ARSIE 1889, no. 51; D.Devakunjari, *Hampi Ruins*, 4th ed., New Delhi, 1998, p. 63.
16. Anila Verghese, *Archaeology, Art and Religion*, New Delhi, 2001, p. 194.
17. A.H.Longhurst, *Hampi Ruins*, New Delhi, 1982, p. 121; Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture (Buddhist & Hindu)*, Bombay, 1976, p. 92.
18. B. Venkoba Rao, *Śrī Vyāsarāyayogī caritam*, Introduction pp. XII-XIII.
19. Anila Verghese, *Archaeology, Art and Religion*, New Delhi, 2001, Note 1, Appendix, nos. 53 & 54, p. 145.
20. S.I.I., Vol. IV, nos. 273 & 278.
21. ARSIE, 1922, nos. 711, 712 & 713.
22. Anila Verghese, *op.cit.*, p. 51
23. S.I.I., Vol. IX, Part II, no. 653.
24. Anila Verghese *op.cit.*, pp. 103-104.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Anna L. Dalla Piccola & Anila Verghese, *Sculpture At Vijayanagara - Iconography and Style*, New Delhi, 1998, p. 54.
27. S.N.Sivarudraswamy, *op.cit.*, p. 109
28. ARE 372 OF 1936-37; IC.E., Vol. II, Part I, no. 1046.
29. TTDER, Tirupati, 1998 (Re-print), p. 303.