Among the Varkaris: A journey to Pandharpur

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India abounds in examples where the collective tradition has evolved out of the fierce longing for one’s personal, very own relationship with God. When Sri Jagannath of Puri is adorned and then carried on the shoulders of the millions who adore him, each one of the crowd is feeling a tangible love – akin to what one may feel for more human ties, but far more intense and exalted. When millions of people walk for almost four weeks to reach their beloved Vithoba at Pandharpur every year, they are placing this annual pilgrimage above all their other mundane, domestic tasks. The Pandharpur yatra takes place in the month of July-August, the Hindu month of Ashaadh, in Maharashtra. It is an annual ritual in the lives of millions of people—a month long journey on foot that begins at Alindi on the banks of the Indrayani river, and culminates on the Devshayani or Ashaadhi Ekadashi day at Pandharpur. Here the river Bhima has taken a turn which makes it appear like the crescent of the moon. It is therefore called the Chandrabhaga river. The famed Vitthal temple is in Pandharpur. There is another smaller yatra later in the year during Kartik, or November-December. But the Ashaadh one is the defining journey, the most significant characteristic of the Varkaris—a Vaishnav sect which draws followers from the small rural farmers across Maharashtra.

To be a Varkari is to be free of too many cumbersome rules and rituals. It is to merely love one’s Vithoba with all one’s heart, wear tulsi beads around one’s neck because tulsi is dear to Him, and a spot of black powder on the forehead because Vithoba, like all forms of Vishnu or Krishna, is the Dark One. For a Varkari, liberation is meant to be through love, and love for Vithoba is to be realized as love for one’s fellow humans, and creatures. The simplicity of this particular path to salvation is what has made the Pandharpur yatra such a powerful and memorable journey for around 700 years.

Varkaris refer to the poet saint Sant Jnaneshwar (1275–1296) as ‘Mauli’, an endearment which can refer to one’s mother, and in this case, conceives of the saint as a spiritual parent, both mother and father. Infact, the sect grew out of the teachings of Jnaneshwar, who brought the Bhagawad Geeta out of the clutches of the priestly class and into the hearts of millions of peasants by rendering it into Marathi as the ‘Jnaneshwari’. Jnanadev, his siblings Nivruttinath, Sopan and Muktabai, Namdev, Eknath and Tukaram are among the saints who are venerated each year at the Yatra. Their songs, or abhangs are sung to the accompaniment of dhol, small brass manjiras, and veena. Their wooden padukas, or footwear encased in silver, are carried in palanquins the entire length of the journey from Alindi to Pandharpur.

In Maharashtra, the towns and villages where important temples are situated are called ‘Sri Kshetras’. The route of the yatra is marked with concrete painted boards which greet the pilgrims, and inform all others that it is the ‘Mahamarg’ on which the devout travel to their destination. The sheer scope of the yatra is awe-inspiring. It begins on the Ganesh Sankashta Chaturthi Day at Alindi. Jnanadev’s padukas are carried from this spot, his birthplace. The other large group carrying Tukaram’s palkhi sets off from Dehu, and some 40 odd palkhis from other destinations also begin the journey, where they join the ‘Mahamarg’ at different stages, to finally converge at Wakhri, 6 km. before Pandharpur. Here they set up their last camp, sing, dance, perform theatre, rejoice in having come this far, and reach Pandharpur the next day, to keep their tryst with their Lord.

Sri Krishna as Vitthal came to live in Pandharpur, due to
the request of Pundalik, many centuries ago. Pundalik was a delinquent youth, who had shown great disrespect towards his parents, even turning down their plea to help them in a journey to Kashi. However, he himself felt impelled to go to Kashi shortly thereafter, and losing his way close to the holy city, had to sleep the night in Sage Kukku’t’s ashram. It is said that here he saw how the three maidenly forms of the great rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati came each night to refresh themselves by labouring in Kukku’t’s ashram. When he questioned them, they revealed that Kukkut was so pure a devotee, that merely working for him was enough to cleanse and refresh them, after their exhaustion at washing away the sins of the multitude at Prayag. And what was the secret of Kukkut’s pure devotion? He had selflessly and lovingly served his parents.

This was the eye-opener that Pundalik needed to abandon his neglectful ways and turn into such a devoted son, that one day, when Sri Krishna arrived to beckon him from outside his Pandharapur home, Pundalik did not rush out, as he was busy massaging his old parents’ tired feet. Instead he threw a brick outside, known as a veer in Marathi, and asked Krishna to stand on it and wait for him, till he finished his work. Thus Viththal stands with arms akimbo, in the classic waiting position, the Bhaktavatsal, ready to wait forever for the love of his devotees. The Pundalik story has a theme underpinning it, that illustrates a fundamental facet of Indian culture—when we serve one’s parents, we are actually serving God.

When I joined the Yatra at the end of June, 2001, the Varkaris had already been walking for weeks, and had set up the last camp at Wakhi. I stumbled off a bus onto the highway near Wakhi at night, and for a few moments stood in a disoriented haze. Then I began walking towards distant lights, where others were already silhouetted before me. I reached a lantern lit expanse of tents where the throng attuned to the others around him or her. The lady already asleep next to me woke at 2 am and left to bathe for the final trek to Pandharpur. When she returned, she was ready to talk. She asked me to join her for the Yatra every year from Dehu, even pointing out her address from certain landmarks! She was warm and welcoming, and did not even feel the need to know my name. My clothes, accent, obvious social status, nothing held any importance for her—only my desire for Viththal’s blessing. The rest of the night was enlivened by the performance of ‘bharud’, a form of folk theatre that showed Tukaram’s struggles with his shrewish wife on this occasion. After the drama, and in between, there was abundant song—the devotional abhangs of the saints. I walked into the watery rising sun of an Ashaadh morning towards Pandharapur with the others streaming around me, fortifying myself with the stunningly sweet amrut tulia chalta or nectar-like tea, sold at intervals. This heavily sugared brew is especially for the walkers who may be running low on blood sugar. For me, it was sheer indulgence! Pandharapur town was decked up for the great event, and crowds packed the temple where all the pilgrims would not be able to have darshan. But this does not discourage them. For this annual event is its own reward. The Lord lives among his people, and to have been a part of this journey, is to have recognised this. Other incentives are unnecessary. An endless procession of humanity, with the bright colours of saris, turbans and pennants heightening its already colourful character, is the final, delightful sight of this unique event. As I stood on the appointed day at the gates of Pandharapur, seeing before me the river of arriving pilgrims stretching to the edge of the horizon, I felt the stirring deep inside that informs us we are close to our Source. It is at moments like this, when it seems obvious that the intelligence that guards over all of us, and goes by the name of God, is not on some distant galaxy, but here, very close at hand.

The big, beautifully curved and embossed silver handles of the Tukaram palkhi beckoned, and as soon as I had finished paying my few moments of homage to the saint, I was asked if I had eaten. Would I like dinner? The question came from an elderly man with twinkling eyes. Over a dinner of khichdi, potato and peas sabji, and large round rotis, he told me that he had been coming with the palkhi from Dehu for forty seven years, and before that, from Alinidi for another twenty five. ‘Forty seven years!’ I exclaimed. ‘I’m only forty!’ ‘Well, I’m in my eighties’, said the man, indulgently. His smile was that of a man who is absolutely content—to be walking for a three-week period at eighty, without any sign of strain.

I stretched under the stars on the ground, along with hundreds of others, wondering about the spirit that held the whole community together. Was this mortification, walking for weeks, sleeping in the open, enduring every discomfort for a demanding God? It seemed to me like a river of love and contentment, with every person in the throng attuned to the others around him or her. The lady already asleep next to me woke at 2 am and left to bathe for the final trek to Pandharpur. When she returned, she was ready to talk. She asked me to join her for the Yatra every year from Dehu, even pointing out her address from certain landmarks! She was warm and welcoming, and did not even feel the need to know my name. My clothes, accent, obvious social status, nothing held any importance for her—only my desire for Viththal’s blessing.

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