

Pandharpur Pilgrimage: A Spiritual Journey

Pandharpur, often referred to as the city of the saints, is located 200 miles east of Bombay on the Deccan Plateau in Western India and is home to about 55, 000 people (Engblom 1). The city plays an important role within the Hinduism, especially in the last seven centuries (Engblom 1). Pandharpur is the location where the god Vithoba is worshipped. This worship takes place in the lunar month of Ashadh, which is the time period between the end of June and the beginning of July. Throughout the year small pilgrimages to Pandharpur take place, with the largest pilgrimage taking place in Ashadh. During this lunar month Pandharpur becomes home to five or six hundred thousand pilgrims who come from all over India as well as from other places throughout the world (Engblom 2). The site's importance to the Hindu tradition is directly influenced by how many pilgrims go to it each year. Due to the popularity of the large Pandharpur Pilgrimage in Ashadh, as well as the smaller pilgrimages throughout the year Pandharpur has become the largest site for pilgrimage in Maharashtra (Engblom 1).

The city of Pandharpur is centered on the Vithoba temple, which has a central role in the pilgrimage. The temple is large, covers a vast area and its structure is very detailed. The style of the temple dates back to the 5th century BCE and some of the designs on the temple date back to the 13th century BCE. Containing many columns the temple has six different gates where each is an entrance into the temple. The *navdev* gate is located on the eastern side and is the main gate used by pilgrims to enter the temple (Deshpande 3). When pilgrims go through the entrance of the temple and become closer to Vithoba, they “dissolve their separateness from one and other, moving nearer towards the movement

and place when and where they would be seeing god's face with their own" (Ludwig 289).

Pilgrims embark on this fifteen day spiritual journey starting in Alandi, which is in the district of Pune, and make their way to Pandharpur (Karve 15). Pilgrims come from a variety of areas, including Pune, Junnar and Moglia (Zelliot 158). Travelling in small groups, individuals sleep in white canvas tents and eat their meals communally. Typically, females prepare the meals for the men as well as for themselves. During the pilgrimage some pilgrims choose to follow special dietary rituals at meal times in order to form a stronger connection with god, therefore they do not participate in the communal meal times.

Alandi, which is located outside of Pune, is the starting point for the pilgrimage. Alandi was chosen because it is the location where Dnyaneshwar, a philosopher and poet, died voluntarily at the age of twenty in front of hundreds of people. Dnyaneshwar composed songs about the meaning of the *Bhagavad-Gita* in Marathi and set out in search of God by entering into a Yogic path at a young age (Karve 15). He is an important symbol to the pilgrimage and for pilgrims, because during his quest for God Dnyaneshwar traveled to Pandharpur. To commemorate his journey, every year on the pilgrimage silver images of his feet are taken to Pandharpur by a palanquin.

On the pilgrimage the pilgrims travel through the hilly regions of Alandi, Poon, Saswad and enter the plateaus of eastern Maharashtra where the temple is located. Each group of pilgrims is accompanied by a *dindi* that sings different songs, and keeps different rhythms with their feet (Karve 15). A *dindi* is worshipping in groups where individuals creative talents, such as singing and dancing are expressed (Lele 121). The

individuals who make up the groups travelling to Pandharpur are from different castes, but are mostly all Marathi speaking people who are able to sing the same verses (Zelliot 158). Even though everyone speaks a different dialect, the pilgrims sing the same verses and are thus able to express themselves in a standard language when forming a connection to Vithoba (Zelliot 159).

Waking up early in the mornings when on the pilgrimage is common; some groups wake up as early as 4:30 am in order to bath and continue the journey. According to the anthropologist Iravati Karve, when walking towards Pandharpur there are many professional beggars and poor people who are willing to eat whatever pilgrims are willing to donate (Karve 18). Giving food to beggars is a form of sacrifice that the pilgrims choose to partake in, and they believe that by performing such acts of charity, a stronger connection is formed with God. As pilgrims near the city of Pandharpur the pilgrimage swells in number as more pilgrims congregate and the different groups who have walked the fifteen day journey merge. Pilgrims of all the various castes come together, singing the same songs and verses. This is one of the most notable characteristics of the Pandharpur Pilgrimage for through the collective singing, the ideology that distinguishes and separates each caste is removed and commonalities between individuals are formed.

There are two distinct traditions of worship that take place at Pandharpur. The first is the pilgrimage that takes place accompanied with travel by road, singing and prayer in order to worship Vithoba. The second form of worship is an emotive approach that lovingly worships Vithoba (Engblom 8).

Once at the pilgrimage site there are various ritual services that are available. These include *snana* which is ritual bathing. The action of ritual bathing is believed to be

the washing away of one's sins. *Tonsure* and *upanayana* (the sacred thread ceremonies) are also available. If someone has died since the last pilgrimage, often their ashes will be brought to Pandharpur, where family members will spread them in the holy waters of the Bhima River (Engblom 10).

Individuals from any caste can enter the temple of Vithoba. Once individuals have entered the *navdev* gate many take part in the *Pad-Sparsha-Darshan* which is a ceremony where individuals can place their head at the feet of Vithoba (Religious Portal 1). It is claimed that placing one's head at the feet of Heads Vithoba provides a direct connection between the god and devotee. This procedure of making physical contact with the feet of the divine is a particularly attractive feature of the Vithoba temple, and therefore draws a large number of Hindus as well as tourists (Pandharpur 1).

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Yoga

Dnyaneshwar

Vithoba

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http://onpilgrimage.com/_wsn/page2.html

“Pilgrimage India” <http://www.pilgrimage-india.com/hindu-temples.html>

“Pandharpur” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pandharpur>

“Pandharpur” <http://www.solapur.gov.in/htmldocs/rpandharpur.pdf>

“Pilgrim: Religion”

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761574362/Pilgrim_\(religion\).html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761574362/Pilgrim_(religion).html)

“Vithoba Temple”

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vithoba_temple,_Pandharpur

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