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## UNIT 15 RELIGION IN SOCIETY

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### Structure

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- 15.1 Geographies of Religion
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- 15.3 Temple and its Role
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### 15.0 INTRODUCTION

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In this unit we would be looking at the over all perspective on the religion in the context of early medieval society. In the first part of the unit we will be discussing religious geography of the landscape. Subsequently the issue of the emergence and the integration with the political milieu will be taken up. We will also discuss the role of the temple and later will draw some conclusions based on the discussions.

The medieval cultural milieu included divinity and humanity; drew no sharp line between them; and contained various kinds of beings that moved back and forth between them and lived ambiguously at their conjuncture. Royal genealogies typically had celestial ancestries including the sun and moon. The spirit world was everywhere in everyday life. Celestial beings brought victory in war and commanded human fates. Spirits of nature caused disease, drought, flood, and fertility for animals, crops, and humans. Visible and invisible powers mingled capriciously. Priests, rulers, mystics, and saints evoked divinity and gods lived in society. Medieval domains were institutional environments for organizing, deploying, and controlling powers that circulated among people and gods.

A diverse Hindu cultural complex spread across medieval domains, endowing many local traditions with common features but also being defined distinctly in each place as local people continued to embrace local traditions. Learned Brahmins received gifts of support from rulers and local elites to organize temples and to conduct ceremonies that incorporated local deities, sentiments, and practices. At the same time, Brahmins rationalized and ritualised the local status hierarchy; they defined local identities in the ritual vocabulary of *varna* and *jati*. Brahmins used high-culture elements from ancient Sanskrit texts to compose locally grounded Hindu ritual domains that multiplied disparately in bits and pieces, in a motley pattern of *ad hoc* adjustments.

Brahmanical cultural forms spread in much the same way — and at the same time — as others were spreading Jainism, Buddhist, Islam, and Christianity. Competing royal patrons backed competing religious specialists, often at the same time. In this lively world of cultural politics, Brahmins defined Hindu orthodoxy in local terms. Their success depended on innovative adaptations to evolving social environments. They were active in two distinct arenas: one was inside the state itself; the other, outside the state, in local society, particularly in rural society. Brahman rituals and Sanskrit texts became widely influential in medieval dynasties. The prominence of Sanskrit prose, Puranic deities, and divine genealogy in the inscriptions' *prasastis* indicates a sweeping royal agreement across South Asia (and in parts of Southeast Asia) that Brahmins brought to medieval governance a powerful symbolic technology. Most inscriptions are bi-lingual documents that symbolize the two-tier cultural space in which medieval dynasties worked. Brahman Sanskrit cosmopolitanism met vernacular languages in the inscriptions. Many early medieval Sanskrit *prasastis* report the royal

conduct of Vedic rituals, while vernacular texts in many inscriptions record a rulers' financial support for Agrahara settlements, temple building, and temple rituals. There were many ways to sponsor brahmanical influence and they all centred on temple precincts where most inscriptions appear and most identities were initially formed. The spiritual powers of Brahmans mingled with those of the gods that became central figures in medieval life.

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## 15.1 GEOGRAPHIES OF RELIGION

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Buddhism and Islam became most prominent along routes of trade and migration that ran from one end of Asia to the other. In the sixth century, Buddhists received most of the patronage available in Afghanistan, the upper Indus basin, and Himalayan regions from Kashmir to Nepal. They then moved eastward across Central Asia and established themselves firmly in Tibet, China, and Japan. After the eighth century, the eastward and southern migrations by Arabs and Turks from West and Central Asia forced a shift in the pattern of religious patronage towards Islam. Nevertheless Buddhist monks had a permanent base in Sri Lanka, and from the eighth century onward, they receive state patronage in Burma. This pattern changed as the Islam advanced through trade and the earlier religious patronage now shifted in favour of Islam as Buddhism receded in background. In fact this kind of a scenario can be visualised else where as well. For instance in Bengal in the east Vijayasena (1095-1158) defeated the Palas, pushed Sena armies west across Bengal and northern Bihar, patronized Vishnu worship, and paved way for a patronage of Vaishnavism in the Sena domains. The last Sena raja, Laksmanasena, patronized the most famous Bengali Vaishnava poet, Jayadeva, who wrote the widely influential devotional poem, *Gitagovinda*. The Sena ruler's patronage to vaishnavism came to an end in the 13<sup>th</sup> century as the political patronage shifted again. This shift towards Islam in the eastern regions of Bengal, where the Senas had earlier uprooted Buddhists; while Vaishnavism received support from merchants, landowners, and local rulers in the western regions.

Like multiple sovereignties in medieval domains, multi-religious cultures developed where patronage sustained diverse religious institutions. Popular rituals and local sentiments often merged and overlapped, crossing the lines of religious tradition, particularly in the spiritual domain of devotional cults that revolved around charismatic individuals.

The Kathmandu Valley was a Buddhist stronghold ruled by Hindu kings. Powerful medieval kings in Tibet accessed the Himalayan passes to the north as major arteries of culture, commerce, and politics reached China. This brought more and more Buddhists and their patrons in the valley. Kingdoms around Kathmandu became a melting pot for Hindus from the south and Buddhists from the north, and like dynasties in Bengal, they made multi-cultural patronage a long-standing religious tradition.

In the western plains — in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Malwa, and Bundelkhand — medieval dynasties of Kalacuris, Caulukyias, Paramaras, and Candelas also patronized Jains, who were prominent among merchants. One Caulukyias king is said to have become Jain. Local and Jain cultural features blended into one another. Jain temple worship and Hindu-Jain marriage became common.

In the peninsula, medieval worshippers of Shiva and Vishnu displaced Buddhism and Jainism from the cultural prominence they enjoyed in early medieval times, especially in Madurai and Kanchipuram. Pockets of Jainism remained, however, and all along the peninsular coast, most prominently in Kerala, kings patronized diverse merchant communities that were essential features of life along the Indian Ocean coast, including Jains, Zoroastrians, Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Arab Muslim settlements received patronage from non-Muslim rulers all along the peninsular coast, as they did across the Palk Straights in Sri Lanka.

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## 15.2 INTEGRATION AS A PROCESS

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Inside medieval cultural environments, trends in popular religion indicate the increasing influence of religious feelings of a distinctly non-Brahman kind that first achieved prominence in temple worship farthest from the original home of classical Brahman orthodoxy. In the far south, from the eighth century onward, Shiva and Vishnu worship in old *Dakshinapatha* spread as a reaction to the orthodox brahmanical religion. This was manifested in the new tradition of devotional (*bhakti*) worship that valued emotion above knowledge, discipline, and ritual; by composing vernacular verse in Tamil, not Sanskrit; by promoting women saints and mass participation in deity worship; by giving devotees a direct relation to god independent of Brahmanical mediation; by making low caste status respectable in the eyes of god; and by creating pilgrimage places rooted in local traditions. *Bhakti* poets produced a new style of emotive, popular cultural politics. Devotionalism made divine frenzy and passion for god a high virtue, and by the tenth century, these energies had been turned against religious competitors. Several texts indicate massacres of Buddhists and Jains. Under Chola kings, worshippers of Siva (Shaivites) prospered at the expense of Vishnu worshippers (Vaishnava), triggering conflicts among sectarian forces.

*Bhakti* devotionalism and sectarian competition challenged the brahmanical elite proponents of traditional orthodox religion as it attracted more patronage from ruling dynasties. To cultivate a popular following, many rulers in the south supported Vaishnava (Alvar) and Saivites (Nayanar) *bhakti* poets. The most celebrated Hindu intellectual of the early medieval age, Shankaracharya (788-820), made his name during his short life by developing a Sanskrit high-culture rendition of Tamil devotional poetry, by reconciling Saivism and Vaishnavism through a non-dualist *advaita* philosophy that drew on the Upanishads and incorporated elements from Buddhism, and by travelling from Kerala to Kashmir and back again to establish monastic centres. Shankara helped to absorb and normalize popular devotionalism in elite Brahman high culture. A powerful regional sect of Virashaivism attracted royal patronage and many adherents from merchant communities and became regionally dominant in northern Karnataka, where Lingayats remain predominant today. Similarly in the Deccan the worship of Vitthala at Pandharpur can be ascribed to a rise of a new polity and its support to a new cult that later legitimised the rule of the new elite.

A case study of the process unfolding at the cult centre at Pandharpur in the early medieval times will illustrate this point better. The epicenter of the cult of Vitthala is located in the township of Pandharpur, in the heart of the Yadava kingdom. The city of Pandharpur is located on the right bank of river Bhima, on 17° North and 75° 23'-east longitude.

The earliest reference to Pandharpur is from a Rastrakuta grant dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. The operative part of the grant states that the Pandarangapalli along with Anewari, Cala, Kandaka and Duddapalli were granted to a learned brahmana, Jayadviththa. This grant also refers to the scribe, one Pandaradrisena, the lord of the hill Pandara. This grant is ratified by a confirmatory grant by Rastrakuta king Amoghavarsa in the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. The next reference to Pandharpur is slightly indirect, viz. in that the grant refers to a small temple 'Lahan madu' being erected by the Mahajanas, Dandanayaka and others, during the reign of Bhillama this inscription is dated to 1189 AD. We will come back to this inscription in another context. In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Hoysala king made some donations to the Lord Vitthala at Pandharpur. The next inscription is interesting from the perspective of the evolution of the settlement that had remained a Palli. It states that Mallisetti gave at Paundarikaksetra, on the Bhimarthi a village. The palli is now being referred to as the Ksetra. In the later half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century some inscriptions refer to the palli as pura. The following can be culled out from the evidence cited above.

Pandharpur is first referred to as a palli in the sixth century AD. This term denotes a small settlement. This status of the settlement remains unchanged from the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD to the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. This status drastically changes in the next one hundred years, between 1189AD- to 1237. The settlement now is a mahagrama. The nature of the settlement undergoes further change in the next 50-75 years. In the 'Cauryasi' grant this mahagrama has been referred to as a 'pura'. Finally, a 14<sup>th</sup> century grant also refers to Pandharpur as a pura, an urban centre. It is also interesting to note that the reference to Vitthal as a deity is only in the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. The phenomenal growth of the settlement is compressed in mere one hundred years. This is due to the extraordinary interest shown by the state in the existing traditions at the settlement. Here we must now turn to the deity to understand the interplay of traditions on the deity there that creates a cult at Pandharpur by the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD.

It is important to record the epigraphic evidence about the Vitthal as a deity before we get into the interplay of tradition. This is important as the epigraphy can then suggest a temporal and spatial context within which we can then understand the play of traditions and the role of the state in this drama. We can divide the entire epigraphic context pertaining to the cult of Vitthal into four distinct phases. In the first phase (516 AD to 1188AD) we get references to Pandharpur but we do not get any conclusive evidence regarding the existence of Vitthal as a deity at Pandharpur. There is one controversial reference to the 'Lord of the Hill', but the reference to the context eludes us. In this phase, Pandharpur is referred to as a palli, or a settlement. All that can be concluded from this oblique reference to the lord is that some kind of a worship centre might have existed on the hill at Pandarangapalli. This phase comes to an end in the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD, towards the very end of the reign of Bhillama V, an inscription invokes Vitthal as a deity and refers to the small temple/shrine that has been erected. This is the first concrete reference to the deity at Pandharpur. One Vitthaldevanayaka is also referred to in the inscription, suggesting that by then name of the deity had become wide spread in the society at large.

In the next phase the signs of first change in the nature of settlement occur. The Hoysala inscription of 1237AD refers to the grant for the anga-ranga-bhoga and a grant to the Siva temple too. It also refers to the palli as a mahagrama. The change in the nature of the settlement is linked to the fortunes of the deity, which are also changing. In the last phase of its journey from the palli, the centre now refers to the Pura and the small temple undergoes a remarkable change. The grand Yadava temple sponsored by the Yadava dominated domains now stands in full glory before the world. This evolution takes place between 1273-1277AD.

To sum up, in the first phase we do not find any trace of Vitthala in its deified form at Pandharpur. The construction of the temple turns out to be the most crucial event in the history of the settlement as well as the deity. Within a span of 84 years of the construction of the small temple, there ensues a virtual renovation and expansion of the same. The palli of the sixth century is now a pura. This growth is compressed in less than one hundred years. Intimately connected with all these development are the Yadavas, the Devagiri and the Hoysalas. It is clear that they find a common strand in one of the traditions at the cult centre and thus are able to extend a patronage to it. In a manner, the Yadavas are responsible for the existence of the deity and the cult centre at Pandharpur.

Popular devotionalism attracted thousands of passionate believers to temples and pilgrimage sites. This made public patronage increasingly complex and fraught, because sects could provide decisive military and financial support for dynastic contenders. Multiple and layered sovereignties continued among the gods, nonetheless, in the established medieval manner. Thus the rise of the sects and the consolidation of the

new polities went hand in hand. The Jagannath cult at Puri is an illustrative example of this phenomenon and this was repeated elsewhere as polities emerged integrating the local traditions and ascending to the regional levels.

Popular movements made such support contentious. Rulers had to balance support for their core religious constituency with support for others, which brought condemnation from allies. Devotees of Vishnu and Siva could be equally unforgiving.

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### 15.3 TEMPLE AND ITS ROLE

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Activity that dramatized emerging social identities appear in temple inscriptions. Rituals performed by Brahmans using Sanskrit liturgies brought cosmic spiritual powers down to earth to sanctify a caste social order. Temples were sites for enacting social rank among worshippers who protected *dharma* and financed rituals; and the rituals brought a variety of local, regional, and imperial gods together. Medieval societies witnessed many kinds of rituals, by all kinds of spiritualists and officiates, from all kinds of social backgrounds, in all manner of locations, which brought rain, secured crops, drove away disease and delivered healthy babies and bolstered dynasties. Temples to these great sovereign gods rose on the land as towering sacred landmarks and monuments to political power.

The temple as a ritual and architectural complex emerged in its glory in the later Gupta period. Its elaboration and spread from the sixth to the fourteenth century provide a legacy for us to study from Mahaballipuram to Khajuraho. The absorption of local deities, rituals, symbols, and spiritualism into Puranic literature and related myth, folklore, and artistic representation constituted the dominant worship by enhancing the cultural potency of local deities, their devotees, and their patrons. Local cults were woven into Puranic traditions and temple rituals as local communities came under royal authority. The greatness of the gods enhanced the glamour of royal patrons. We do come across a number of inscriptions referring to temples and the grants given there along with the rituals performed. In many cases we find the local deity be accorded a higher status in the religious pantheon and the advent of *Bhakti* paved a different type of integration that was more open.

Social identities emerged around temples as people and gods lived together. Gifts by kings, landed elites, merchants and others to Brahmans and temples increased the spiritual stature of the donor. Inscriptions are contracts and advertisements. The more popular a temple became — the more praised in song and more attractive for pilgrims — the greater became the value of its patronage and the number of people whose identity attached to it. Rising *bhakti* devotionism enhanced the virtue, volume, and commercial value of pilgrimage, as it increased temple donations and investments. Donations became increasingly popular as a means and marker of social mobility as temples became commercial centres, landowners, employers, and manufacturing centres. Increasing participation in temple rituals made them more effective sites for social ranking, as temple honours were distributed according to rank and all worshippers were positioned in ranked proximity to the deity. Rulers came first. Rich donors came in the order of the value of their temple endowments. Popular *bhakti* movements made sovereign gods ever more central in everyday social life, even for the poorest people who did all the hardest manual labour who were prohibited from ever setting foot in the temple, whose exclusion marked them as the people of the lowest social rank. Some powerful *bhakti* saints came from the lowest of the low, whose devotion was so strong that gods came out of temples to return their love.

People who joined temple society gave gifts to gods and Brahmans that increased the status of donors, executors of the grant, and by extension, and all their kin. Over time, kinship circles formed around lineages and clans that fed gods and Brahmans, and

these kin groups formed high-status, non-Brahman elite *jatis*, elevated above others in ritual and society. Brahmins reaped major benefits. In some instances, thousands of Brahmins were granted rights to hitherto uncultivated land. In the open spaces of Rashtrakuta power, one inscription records a gift of 8,000 measures of land to 1,000 Brahmins, and 4,000 measures to a single Brahman. In each specific context, an inscription of this kind appears to mark an effort by a non-Brahman power block to enhance its status and that of its local allies.

In other cases, Brahmins were appointed as the local representatives of the state authorities in what are described as *agrahara* villages where Brahmins presided over small peasants, who in Bihar were mostly landless sharecroppers or bonded labourers. These *agrahara* villages were typically small villages and satellites of bigger villages that included members of several castes and bigger land-holders. In Bihar, such *agrahara* villages proliferated and it is quite likely that in such *agrahara* oppressive social relations and some of the most egregious patterns of caste-centered discrimination and exploitation may have developed.

But these developments took time to spread elsewhere in India, first spreading to Bengal and eastern UP, and very gradually elsewhere in India. However, this pattern was not necessarily replicated in identical form throughout India and some parts of India virtually escaped this trend. In *agrahara* villages in other parts of India, Brahmins did take on the role of local administrators and tax collectors, but the status of the small peasantry was not always as miserable as in Bihar. The degree of exploitation and oppression appears to be related to the extent of alienation from land-ownership.

In religions that paid tremendous stress on “revealed truth” (such as Christianity or Islam) there have always been strong tendencies towards dogmatic rigidity. But even at the peak of their influence, India’s Brahmins were never quite able to impose any comparable sort of rigid uniformity in the practice of Hinduism on a national (let alone, international) scale. In some localities, the lower castes did without the Brahmins entirely while elsewhere, especially in the South, or in Central India and Orissa - Brahmins often felt obliged to give due deference to dissenting and heterodox cults, and incorporated their belief systems into mainstream Hinduism.

The existence of these numerous cults was partly an expression of the struggle for social equality and freedom from exploitation, but for some, it was also a means for accessing greater social privileges. The Brahmins of Tamil Nadu (along with the rulers) attempted to manage these social tensions through co-option, philosophical accommodation and synthesis.

In Andhra, folk religions played a powerful role in mediating Brahmanical influences, and a vibrant example of the deep penetration of folk influences in popular religion is to be seen in the sculpted array of folkloric panels in the temple of Srisailam (sponsored by the Vijayanagar rulers in the 14th-15th C.). In neighbouring Karnataka, the Bhakti ideal and Jain influences put their stamp on prevailing religious practices.

Religion in India thus developed in a much more organic fashion than is commonly realized, and it was never completely divorced from popular inputs. Both male and female deities drew followers, and while goddesses were sometimes displayed in demonic warrior roles, gods were sometimes displayed with feminine qualities. In the Yogini temples, all the deities were women and although today, there are only a handful of surviving Yogini temples, (mostly in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh) it is not unlikely that many more may have been in existence.

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## 15.4 SUMMARY

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In this unit we told you the story of how religion developed in the early medieval society. The role of popular cults was highlighted to show how the inputs from

popular religious beliefs and practises was shaping the mainstream religious social developments. The link between cults and the rise of states was also highlighted.

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## 15.5 GLOSSARY

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**Popular Devotionalism :** Here we mean the faith and love of ordinary people towards god which developed as forms of Bhakti cults in various parts of the country.

**Celestial Ancestries :** This is the practice of tracing geneologies of kings and queens to mythical forms of planets, sun and the moon.

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## 15.6 EXERCISES

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- 1) Discuss the salient features of religion in early medieval society.
- 2) Did polity play any role in shaping of religion in early medieval India?
- 3) How was the cult of Viththala was patronized by the Yadavas?



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THE PEOPLE'S  
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Earlier you read about the emergence of Pandharpur as a religious centre. In this appendix we give you an insight into the evolution of the Vitthal tradition. This will help you to grasp the religious process at a local level.

### **Vitthal and Traditions**

It is important to record the epigraphic evidence about the Vitthal as a deity before we get into the interplay of tradition. This is important as the epigraphy can then suggest a temporal and spatial context within which we can then understand the play of traditions and the role of the state in this drama.

We can divide the entire epigraphic context pertaining to the cult of Vitthal into four distinct phases. In the first phase (516 AD to 1188 AD) we get references to Pandharpur but we do not get any conclusive evidence regarding the existence of Vitthal as a deity at Pandharpur. There is one controversial reference to the 'Lord of the Hill', but the reference to the context eludes us. In this phase, Pandharpur is referred to as a palli, or a settlement. All that can be concluded from this oblique reference to the lord is that some kind of a worship centre might have existed on the hill at Pandarangapalli. This phase comes to an end in the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD.

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In the next phase the signs of first change in the nature of settlement occur. The Hoysala inscription of 1237 AD refers to the grant for the anga-ranga-bhoga and a grant to the Siva temple too. It also refers to the palli as a mahagrama. The change in the nature of the settlement is linked to the fortunes of the deity, which are also changing.

In the last phase of its journey from the palli, the centre now refers to the Pura and the small temple undergoes a remarkable change. A full-fledged Yadava temple sponsored by the Yadava chiefs now stands in full glory before the world. This change occurs between 1273-1277 AD. To sum up, in the first phase we do not find any trace of Vitthala in its deified form at Pandharpur. The construction of the temple turns out to be the most crucial event in the history of the settlement as well as the deity. Within a span of 84 years of the construction of the temple, there ensues a virtual renovation and expansion of the same. The palli of yesteryears is now a pura. This growth is compressed in less than one hundred years. Intimately connected with all these developments are the Yadavas, the Devagiri and the Hoysalas. It is clear that they find a common strand in one of the traditions at the cult centre and thus are able to extend a patronage to it. In some sense the Yadavas are responsible for the existence of the deity and the cult centre at Pandharpur.

Against this background now let us analyse the interplay of traditions at Pandharpur. We can identify three primary traditions but not necessarily in the chronological order of succession at the centre. Of the three the saivite tradition can only be glimpsed through and is not easily discernable. It leaves its traces at the cult centre at various places. We can trace the saivite tradition through the imprints in the epigraphic, sanskritic and the oral sources.

The vaisnavite tradition is more pronounced at Pandharpur. In the Vaisnavite tradition, the deity appears as the 24<sup>th</sup> avatar of Visnu. The deity is also closely linked to the Vaisnavite pantheon. This becomes clear from the various titles used for the deity in the inscriptions by the Yadava kings.

The third tradition, the pastoral tradition, is most interesting and least pronounced at the cult centre. This is so because the pastoral tradition is not so easily visible outside the

frame of reference of pastoralism. In the pastoral tradition, the lord Vitththal appears as the younger brother of Biroba/Birappa/Virabhadra. There are innumerable stories regarding the two brothers, narratives of their journeys and the processes of their settling down. We will refer to one illustrative story of this tradition before we move on to the underlying feature of this tradition and its importance to the state.

‘Once upon a time Vitththala and Bramal (Biroba) felt that they required a new place to stay. They started looking for a new place and came down to Pattankodoli. Here they saw a huge empty space and decided to settle down there.

In the meanwhile, Kallya learned that these Dhangar gods have come to the settlement. He immediately summoned Lingusha Patil, Dattoba Kulkarni and Japtap. They were informed about this arrival. He also complained that now that they have come they will surely kill a goat and the blood will flow past my door! The leaders of the village decided that they would not allow them (the gods) to stay in the village. The next day Vitththal and Bramal send out Soma Pradhan to find out whether anyone was willing to give them shelter. As no one was willing to and that they were not quite welcome in the village was conveyed to Soma. He came back and reported this to the gods. The gods then become angry. Bhandara was sprinkled over the village. The entire population of the village sans the brothers went blind. The leaders then rushed to the gods. The gods agreed to restore the sight of the people in lieu of space for them. Thus an agreement was reached and they stayed in the village.

The Dhangar oral tradition is replete with such stories. All these stories bring out a basic conflict between the pastoralists and the others. We need to locate this conflict in the history of the semi arid belt and the response of the polity to this conflict.

Vitththala is not always a younger brother of the god of the sheep keepers. At times, it is suggested in some versions of the oral tradition of the pastoralists that Vitththala is their son in law, and Padubai/Rahi/ Rukmini is their daughter. Yet, the son in law maintains an identity and his temple is different than that of his wife.

These oral traditions that connect the deity to the strong pastoral context are also supported by two different sets of evidences, the hero-stones and a 13<sup>th</sup> century contemporary story from a different sect that suggests a strong link between the hero stones and the origin of the cult at Pandharpur. Hero-stones form part of a matrix of what has been categorized as ‘memorial’ stones. Memorial stones are spread across the sub-continent from the deep south to the arid reaches of Rajasthan desert. Here we will confine ourselves to those in Maharashtra. These date to about the eighth to the thirteenth centuries. There are sati stones and stones set up in remembrance of dead men. The latter can be subdivided into those set up to commemorate individuals who died a natural death, and those set up to honour ‘heroes’ who died in battle.

Normally the hero-stone (locally known as *viragala*) has three panels. The lowest panel depicts the event in which the person has died. In case the death occurred in a battle or a skirmish, the battle is depicted on the lowest panel of the stone. Sometimes that panel is expanded or new ones added according to the scale of the event in which death occurs. The middle panel depicts the heavenly march of the dead, escorted by the *apsara*. The top most panel depicts the dead hero, worshipping a deity, which in most cases is a *sivalinga*. In this stereotype, there are variations to cater to the need of the situation. In case more than one member of a family dies, then we find two slabs joined together or the slab is vertically divided. We also come across quadrilaterally carved hero-stones, which depict three panels of identical sizes. The hero-stones of Maharashtra carry no inscriptions. In Pandharpur two cattle raid depicting herostones have been discovered recently. There is also a story in a contemporary text about the origin of the deity. This story suggests that Vitththala died while defending cattle and a Bhadkhamba was erected to commemorate the memory of the dead hero. Later the Bhadkhamba started giving boons to the

worshippers and the cult was born. In some sense, then the origin of the cult lies in the tradition of the dead, of the heroes and the practice of erecting the herostones. These two sets of evidences make a strong case for pastoral tradition to be the primary tradition and the later varkari tradition is post Yadava intervention. The reasons for the Yadava intervention in this cult centre are now clear. We need to understand the nature of the Yadava intervention to understand the birth and the evolution of this cult.

The state intervenes decisively at Pandharpur only in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. It has been noted earlier that a small temple was erected at Pandharpur by the Yadava feudatories in the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. This small temple was expanded/renovated/reworked in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. This initiative came from the political structure. A call was given to mobilize resources. At the beginning, the call was not given its due attention and very little resource mobilization took place. Then the Karnadhipa of the Yadava kingdom, made donation to the cult centre. This was followed by a spate of donations at the cult centre. Finally the Yadava King Ramcandradeva Yadava capped the donations arrived at the temple by his own, and he himself took upon the role as the Pandhari Phad Pramukh, or the head of the congregation at Pandharpur. Here the cult is successfully created by the state.

#### **A Parallel Process: Issue of Legitimacy**

A similar pattern occurs at Velapur, although on a smaller, more localised scale. Velapur is located twenty miles to the northwest of Pandharpur. It has a large Hemadpanti temple of Haraharesvara Mahadeva. The temple has three inscriptions of four to seven lines each, two dated to A.D. 1300 and the third dated to A.D. 1301, all in the reign of the Devagiri Yadava king Ramachandra (1271-1310). As Tulpule (1963: 103) has documented, Velapur has four inscriptions in all. These are dated A.D. 1206 (two records), A.D. 1300 and A.D. 1305. Out of these four inscriptions, we are concerned here only with the last three. The first one is a memorial stone. It records the death of one Mali Setthi, whose admirers put up the Stone.

The inscriptions of A.D. 1300 and A.D. 1305 form a group. The first inscription in this group states that in the reign of Sri Ramachandra Yadava, Joideva was in charge of Mandesa, and the officers Baideva and Brahmadevrana were under Joideva in Mandesa. Baideva erected a temple of Vatesvara and gave some concessions.

The second inscription from Velapur, also related to this temple of Vatesvara, states that when Jaideva was Sarvadhikari of Mandesa and when his representative, Brahmadev Rana's brother Baidevarana, was an officer of Mandesa he erected a maker (temple/Yajna gruha) for the temple.

The third inscription relating to Velapur is also related to the temple of Vatesvara at the same place. This inscription states that, under the reign of Ramacandra Yadava, the Sarvadhikari of Mandesa, Brahmadevarana erected and considerably enlarged the temple of Vatesvara. He also brought order to the various temples of Velapur. A considerable restructuring seems to have been carried out at Velapur. These three inscriptions have to be taken together. A brief history of the growth of this temple can be recreated when these inscriptions are analysed.

In A.D. 1300, Brahmadeva Rana erected a temple for Vatesvara. His brother Baideva Rana erected another structure near the temple in the same year. In the year A.D. 1305, after a gap of five years, Brahmadeva Rana constructed a palace and other structures. A general renovation of other temples seems to have been carried out at Velapur. The gap of five years can be explained terms of Brahmadeva Rana's own advance in the Yadava administration, where he rose to become the administrative head of Mandesa. Thus, he is heralded as the Sarvadhikari of Mandesa by the year A.D. 1305.

We suggest that the thrust of the polity followed by the Yadavas becomes clearer from this example. The parallel example of the evolution of the Vatesvara temple at Velapur and the general practice of making donations is suggestive of a deliberate polity. The list that gives the names of deities is from the Dharwad and Vijapur areas. These areas were brought under Yadava influence when the Hoysala kingdom suffered a set back at the hands of the Yadava.

We therefore need to contextualise the semi-arid zone against the frame of reference presented above. It is clear that it was 'marginal' territory, insofar as agricultural activity is concerned. We also do not come across major land grants given by the early medieval state in this period. Yet the process of assimilation was carried out through the temple networks, and it does not appear to be a 'marginal' territory any more, as the extent of the resources mobilised becomes clear. It was very much at the centre of activity. Therefore, it was important for the Yadava State to hold this territory. It could be suggested that perhaps one way of integrating the newly conquered areas was to extend patronage to local temple networks. In that sense, cults or temples had assimilative qualities in early medieval contexts. Such assimilation becomes necessary in a situation where there is a need to integrate diverse segments within a single polity.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The existence of these numerous cults was partly an expression of the struggle for social equality and freedom from exploitation, but for some, it was also a means for accessing greater social privileges. The Brahmins of Tamil Nadu (along with the rulers) attempted to manage these social tensions through co-option, philosophical accommodation and synthesis. In Andhra, folk religions played a powerful role in mediating Brahmanical influences, and a vibrant example of the deep penetration of folk influences in popular religion is to be seen in the sculpted array of folkloric panels in the temple of Srisailam (sponsored by the Vijayanagar rulers in the 14th-15th C.). In neighbouring Karnataka, the Bhakti ideal and Jain influences put their stamp on prevailing religious practices.

Religion in India thus developed in a much more complex fashion than is commonly realized, and it was never completely divorced from popular inputs. Both male and female deities drew followers, and while goddesses were sometimes displayed in demonic warrior roles, gods were sometimes displayed with feminine qualities. In the Yogini temples, all the deities were women and although today, there are only a handful of surviving Yogini temples, (mostly in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh) it is not unlikely that many more may have been in existence.

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## SUGGESTED READINGS

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