Vitthalas (Varkari Panth)

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History

- The origins of the cult are deeply rooted in the lower castes of Maharashtra.
- Identifiable factors in the growth of the cult are the assimilation of a local Kannada deity with Krishna, the political events at the end of the twelfth century which changed the region from Kannada-speaking to Marathi-speaking, and an ascetic named Pundalika who attracted the deity because of his devotion.
- By the thirteenth century the cult of Vitthala was becoming prominent.
- Jnanesvara is the first of a long line of writers and poets whose works are central to the doctrine and practice of the Vitthalas, and he is often described as the founder of the cult.
- Namdev (c. 1270-1350) helped to spread the bhakti movement in Punjab, where he lived for twenty years. Some of his poems are found in Sikh texts and he is sometimes considered a sant, holy man, by Sikhs and Sufis.
- Eknath (1533-99) spent his life in Paithan. Besides writing hymns he translated the Ramayana into Marathi for the first time and edited a reliable version of Jnanesvara's commentary on the Bhagavad Gita.
- Tukaram (1608-50) came from a poor sudra, lowest caste, family at Dehu. He lived there much of his life and was married with a family, though inclined to the ascetic life. He spread the Vithala bhakti faith through the villages and became the most revered and popular of the Marathi bhakti poets, and he still is today. In the nineteenth century the hymns of Tukaram and other poets were adopted into the worship of the Prarthana Samaj, a

Hindu reform group based in Bombay (see separate entry).

- One result of the Marathi poets was the starting of a nationalist movement against the Mughals. The pilgrimages helped to generate nationalist feeling. Some of the poets were more than indirectly involved. Ramdas (1608-81) was militantly nationalistic and he was the guru of Sivaji, leader of Maratha resistance to the Mughals.

Headquarter

- Pandharpur, Maharashtra, India.

Followers

- These are mainly low caste householders, as were the poet-saints. Caste distinctions are minimised, especially during pilgrimages.

Symbols

- The cult of the original deity, the Kannada hero assimilated with Krishna, was focused on a memorial stone in Pandharpur. The Vitthalas are united in the annual pilgrimage to Pandhapur.

Doctrines

- The cult of Vitthala is part of the bhakti devotional movement. Its deity, Vitthala or Vithoba, was originally a Kannada hero in the south of Maharashtra around whom a cult developed.
- The cult was pastoral and so was assimilated with Krishna. Therefore the Vitthalas are a Vaishnavite bhakti cult.
- The bhakti devotional doctrine of the Vitthalas is based on a succession of writers and poets.
  - First is Jnanesvara with many devotional hymns and a commentary on the Bhagavad Gita. He is followed by poets that wrote in Marathi.

- Namdev's poetry tells of a deity who is everywhere and accessible to everyone.
- All that is needed is to love him and sing his name. You do not have to practise austerities and renunciation, meditate on the absolute, or go on pilgrimages.
- Vitthala is a transcendent god of such breadth he is identified with Brahman.
    - The ascetic life of Eknath while still living with his family emphasised the belief of the sect that sanctity could be attained by anyone in daily life.
    - The most important poet was Tukaram, who claimed that devotion to Vitthala alone sanctifies.
- Love of God is above everything and without this love there can be no real spiritual growth. Such love of God would not be possible without duality (dvaita).
- There was a political content to the doctrine of the Vitthalas, for the Marathi poets started a nationalist movement of resistance to the Mughals.
- Though Namdev wrote that pilgrimage is not necessary, an annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur is a central part of the practice of the cult, with devotional singing of hymns and prayers on behalf of Tukaram to Vitthala.
- The importance of pilgrimage is reflected in the cult also being called Vakari Panth, 'pilgrim's path.