

## PANDHARPUR : A STUDY IN GEOGRAPHY OF RELIGION

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**ABSTRACT :** An attempt has been made in this paper to examine the influence of religion on structure, function and landuse of Pandharpur and the spatial influence of this most celebrated religious centre in Maharashtra.

### INTRODUCTION :

The complex of Hinduism, established throughout India and embraced by most of its population, lacks the formal organisation of religion in the West. Common forms and a sense of community have been maintained by means of largely informal autonomous circulatory flows. One such circulation is the movement of religious practitioners and propogandists; another, far greater in volume, is the pilgrim traffic to Hindu holy places (Sopher, 1968).

Pandharpur, one of the most revered places in Maharashtra, attracts devotees from all strata of society, as well as, all parts of the state. This topic has been chosen deliberately as it is significant variously : (a) The Varkari sampradaya, connected with Pandharpur and Vitthal is a very original school of spirituality. It follows the philosophy of Shankaracharya and not that of Ramanuja's disciples (bhakti movement). (b) The second important characteristic of this cult is that its members have a definitely democratic outlook. Anybody can become a varkari and it is remarkable that the caste is no consideration for it. The Varkaris have been particularly fertile in powerful personalities and saints. (c) The religious orientation of this cult is such that it is well representative of Hindu spirituality and it is also valuable for its universal significance. (d) The poems and devotional songs composed by the saints of Pandharpur exert a living influence on the Maratha (all Marathi speaking) people

to the very day. Sacred music plays some part in their ceremonies. A Varkari carries Tulsi mala round his neck, he is strictly a vegetarian, he has to refrain from liquor, he must visit Pandharpur on Ashadhi, Kartiki, Chaitri and Maghi Ekadashi and observe fast on Monday, Ekadashi, and Prodosa. Popularly he is known as "Malkari". (e) They practice their religion at home, in the midst of their families, quietly, with the cheerfulness and stolid commonsense of the Maratha peasant. (f) The Varkari sampradaya is not a Church. There is no centralized organisation, no hierarchy, no general councils, no credo, no sacraments. It is a spiritual movement, or more exactly a body of spiritual groups gathered around spiritual Gurus (Deleury, 1960). The Varkari sampradaya, therefore, is a unique religious movement that spans over Maharashtra, parts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

Considering the antiquity of this place and the rich tradition of Vaishnava saints belonging to various Hindu castes, who have glorified Pandharpur through the historical past, the religious hegemony this place weilds is both logical and unique. An attempt has been made here to examine the influence of religion on structure, function and landuse of Pandharpur and spatial religious influence of this most celebrated religious centre. The presiding deity of this place (Vitthal—an incarnation of Vishnu) is the most important and widely worshipped god in this region. Therefore, it would be appropriate to study the relevant

facets of geography of religion concerning this place, indicating clearly how the natural environment and human calamities have influenced the philosophy and the religious behaviour of the people in this region. This aspect would be better understood on the background of its historical backdrop.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Consideration of nomenclature would be useful as it reveals impact of geography and culture on it. Epigraphic and literary sources have indicated Pandharpur variously viz., Pandhari (पंढरी), Pandurangpur (पांडूरंगपूर) Pandharipur (पंढरीपूर), Phagnipur (फागणीपूर), Pandarage (पंडरगे), Pandarangapalli (पांडरंगपल्ली) etc. (Khare 1963) These details speak of the rich historical past of this celebrated religious centre, as well as, the influence of Sanskrit and Kannada languages on these names. The name Phandarpur probably originated from Kannada name "Pandarage" or Marathi name "Pandhari" both of which might have been derived from "Pundarika", the devotee of Lord Krishna (Viththal) for whom, according to legend, the latter came to Pandharpur.

According to Prof. Rajwade the name Viththal (विठ्ठल) originated from the word "Vishthal" (विष्टल) which means distant or remote place, a spot in a forest. Prof. Rajwade has further mentioned that a forest of acacia trees existed in the past where the Viththal temple exists now and that Pundalika established the Viththala temple in it (Khare, 1963). This explanation is geographical, as well as, logical as many Hindu temples are built on the banks of rivers and surrounded by forests. The other explanation regarding the origin of the name Viththal is furnished by Dr. R. G. Bhandarkar. According to him it originated from the name Vishnu (विष्णु) its Kannada variant being Bitti (बिट्टी) (Khare, 1963). It is generally agreed amongst experts that the name Viththala has originated from the name Vishnu.

### VARKARI (Var + Kari) :

According to Compendium of Molesworth's Marathi-English Dictionary the meaning of the word "Vari" is "the practice of proceeding regularly at recurring monthly or annual periods on pilgrimage to any sacred place" (Bhirat, 1972). According to Rajwade the word "Vari" is derived from Varee-ri (Group of travellers) = vari (वारि-री=वारी). Vari of Pandharpur means, therefore, the group of travellers going to Pandharpur. Dnyaneshwara has used the word "Vari" to signify up and down journey to Pandharpur (फेरा or खेप) Varkari means a traveller who is going on a vari (Bhirat, 1972) word varkari is composed of two words "Vari" and "Kari" : Vari has a very definite and almost technical meaning. The root "Var" means time, as in the expressions three times, four times and so on : so "vari" stands for the regular occurrence of the pilgrimage to Pandharpur the annual going to and coming from that sacred place. "Kari" means the one who does; Varkari, therefore, means one who journeys to Pandharpur at the fixed time (Deleury, 1960). The people visiting regularly other sacred places like Jejuri, Tuljapur etc. in Maharashtra however are not called Varkaris. Thus, the word "Varkari" has specific meaning i.e. only the people who go on pilgrimage to Pandharpur (Bhirat, 1972). According to Dandekar, S. W. "Varkari of Pandharpur is one wearing rosary of Tulsi beads and proceeding regularly to Pandharpur on one of the eleventh of the bright fortnight of Ashadha, Kartika, Magha or Chaitra (Bhirat 1972). Varkari must go to Pandharpur twice every year, at least and, if possible on foot, on the Ashadhi Ekadashi day and on the Kartiki Ekadashi day (Deleury, 1960).

The varkari tradition is unanimous in linking together the names of Viththal and Pandharpur. According to tradition, it is on account of Pundalika's devotion for his aged parents that Lord Krishna came to

Pandharpur and stayed there at his request and became known under the name of Vitthala. It is to Pundalika that all Varkari saints feel indebted for the presence of Vitthala at Pandharpur and all the blessings that came after. Who was this Pundalika and when did he live? It is unfortunately impossible to answer these questions for lack of authentic evidence.

The oldest mention of Pandharpur is in an inscription dating as far back as 516 A.D., carved under the rule of Rashtrakuta king Avideya. The images at Jogeshwari caves (Bombay) and Prince of Wales Museum, brought from Gharapuri, Bombay are, similar to the image of Vitthala at Pandharpur (Khare, 1963). Therefore, one may surmise that Vitthala worship was popular at the beginning of medieval period in Maharashtra. The 'terminus aequum' is given by the dates of Dnyaneshwar as the first Varkari recorded by history, and he wrote his masterpiece, the Dnyaneshwari (Bhavartha Deepika) in 1290 A.D. Dnyaneshwar and Namdev mention the two names of Pundalik and Vitthala hundreds of times in their abhangas. This may be taken as a confirmation of the fact that Dnyaneshwar did not found the varkari sampradaya. But if he was not the founder of the panth, he was undoubtedly the first and greatest of its exponents. On the basis of these facts one can safely infer that the varkari sampradaya was already existing before Dnyaneshwar (Deleury, 1960).

Dnyaneshwar and his family were the first known varkari missionaries and, therefore, varkari panth began to spread all over Maharashtra. The family of Dnyaneshwar, his two brothers and a sister, were born and brought up at Apegaon (near Paithan, Dist. Aurangabad). They travelled widely in Maharashtra propagating Vaishnavism, and finally settled and took samadhi at distant places in the state. Nivruttinath went to Tryambakeshwar (Dist. Nasik)

where he was initiated by Nath Yogi (Gahininath). He entered samadhi near a pond on the way to the Godavari stream. Dnyaneshwar took samadhi at Alandi, Sopandev at Saswad (dist. Pune) and Muktabai at Edlbad (dist. Jalgaon). Thus, as early as the thirteenth century A.D. the Varkari panth was deeply rooted as a legacy of the impact made by these brothers and sister in Maharashtra.

Saint Dnyaneshwar and Saint Namadev visited many religious places in Rajasthan and Punjab during years 1293-95 A.D. Saint Namadev travelled alone in North India for long after 1326 A.D. (Kamat, 1964). He travelled through Western and North-Western parts of India. The closing of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth century A.D. witnessed the influx of Muslim invaders in Maharashtra and Malwa. Therefore, Saint Namadev reached Punjab through Gujarat and western Rajasthan, the areas that were safer for journey, then. The religious tours of Namadev and Dnyaneshwar in the north were instrumental in diffusing the Bhakti cult of Maharashtra in those regions.

There is tremendous discussion, in history, about Krishna Deo Raya who brought the Vitthala image to Vijayanagar. According to Khare, G. H., god Vitthala was established at Vijayanagar in 1434 A.D. For supporting this event he noted that the gift given by Krishna Deo Raya was first and biggest in the same year and, therefore, one can surmise that Vaishnavism was deeply rooted in Karnataka by 1434 A.D. (Khare, 1963).

#### LOCATION, SITUATION AND SITE :

Pandharpur is one of the most frequented places of pilgrimage in the state of Maharashtra and ranks first by size amongst the fairs in the state with an aggregate congregation of three to four lakhs or even more. The Vitthala of Pandharpur has thousands of devotees belonging to different castes and

cults in Marathi speaking areas of the country and even outside.

Pandharpur city is located on  $17^{\circ}40'$  North latitude and  $75^{\circ}23'$  East longitude,

74 kilometers to the west of Solapur ( Refer Fig. 1 ). This holy city is situated on the right bank of the Bhima river, the main tributary of the Upper Krishna.

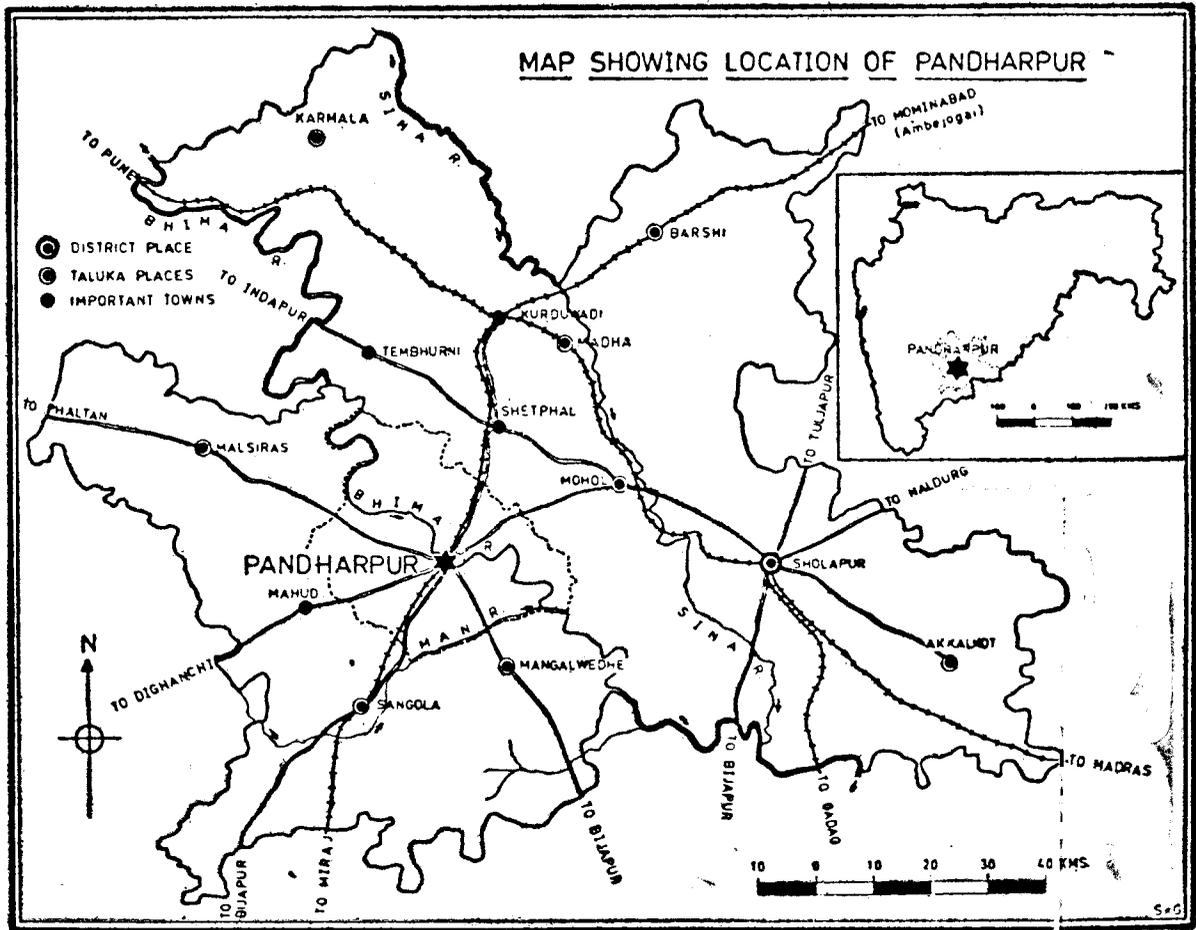


Fig. 1

The river Bhima is also locally known as Chandrabhaga due to crescent-like shape of the river bend (Refer Fig. 2). The city occurs more or less in the centre of the Bhima and Upper Krishna river basins. It is located at the junction of old trade routes and therefore, had active links with Solapur, Ahmednagar, Bijapur, Alandi and many other places during the historical past. During modern times it is the headquarter of tahsil of the same name and is linked with cities of the country by roads and railways. Pandharpur was linked with Miraj and Kurduwadi junction by railway in 1915 A.D.

#### CLIMATE AND FAMINES :

Pandharpur enjoys, generally, a warm and drier type of climate due mainly to its location to the south of the Tropic of Cancer, in the lee of the Western Ghats and also

in the longitudinal drought-prone area. The cold season lasts from December to the middle of February. March onwards temperature rises sharply and absolute temperature values of  $44^{\circ}$  to  $45^{\circ}$  C are not unexpected during May/June. In the monsoon season, that commences in June, the rainfall may be too precarious to support agriculture. Late arrival of monsoon and/or scanty rainfall disturb the agricultural economy leading to famine or semifamine (scarcity) conditions, continuously for several years at times.

Severe famines have been recorded in the territory around Pandharpur during the past seven centuries. The Durgadevi Famines of the years 1396-1407 (12 years), 1460, 1520, 1791, 1802-3, 1818, 1824, 1832-33 etc. and about thirteen different years in the

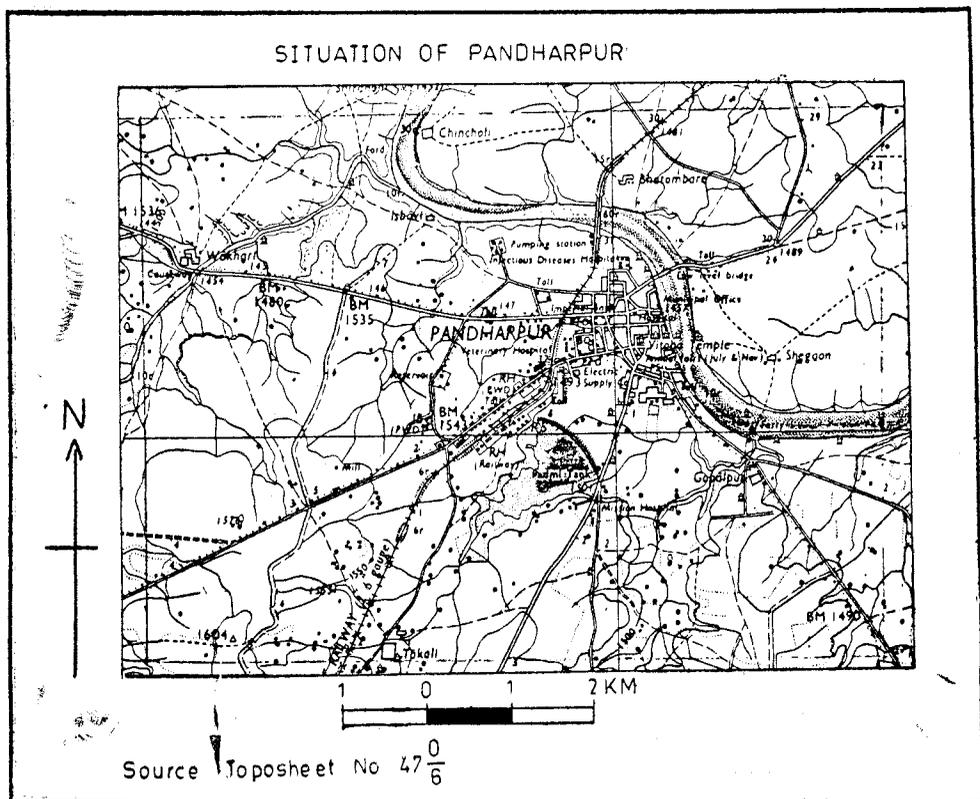


FIG NO. 2

present century are significant ( Gazetteer Solapur 1977 ). Some of these famines were caused due to precarious rainfall. Some were, however, due to destruction and plundering of crops by enemy forces, as in years 1520, 1802, and 1818. Both the natural, as well as, human factors ( आस्मानी व सुलतानी ), have played their role in causing famines of food making the people destitute and miserable. " Severe famines are not unknown over wide areas of the country during the medieval period. Between 1614-15 to 1659-60 there occurred nearly thirteen famines of varying intensity. Out of the thirteen famines six were more or less acute and they occurred in such varied areas as the Coromandal coast, Gujarat, Central India, South India and Rajputana. It may be concluded that during the pre-British period population was regulated by the positive checks of famine and war ( Ranadive, 1930 ). Namadev in a certain abhanga of his complaints about the distressing conditions caused by the Muslim invasions ( Kulkarni, 1971 ).

#### ENVIRONMENT AND PHILOSOPHY :

Such unfavourable conditions led to : ( a ) Outmigration of population to areas where food was available and ( b ) Diffusion of settlements in remote mountainous and forested areas for purpose of safety from depredations of passing armies. Since Pandharpur occurred along highways during the mediaeval period, the people in and around this place had to face such calamities. Outmigration of population is still the important feature of population geography of the drought prone areas of Solapur, Ahmednagar, Pune and other districts.

However, those who preferred to endure these hazards of famine and persecution naturally developed a philosophy of their own-negative philosophy-that denounces this material world which is filled with miseries of all sorts, with monotheism as its basis.

Saint Tukaram has said that : " सुख पाहता जवा पाडे । दुःख पर्वता एवढे " ( Where as pleasures are microscopic, miseries are mountainous ). The spiritualism underlying the " philosophy of the Bhakti cult " of Maharashtra, in fact, advocates devotion to one god ( Vitthal as Brahma ) and thoughts advocating other-worldliness. Shankaracharya also contributed to a sort of philosophy which propagated more the tendency towards other-worldliness. There were again surreptitious inroads into the Hindu religion and society, made by the Muslim Sufi Saints ( Kulkarni, 1971 ). These forces accumulated and succeeded in turning the mind of the people away from the affairs of the mundane world. Thus, there was no positive view towards life, except to survive in miseries, that were the result of sin, committed during earlier life, and earn salvation ( मोक्ष ) through devotion to Vitthal. The following verse speaks for itself :

डेविले अनंते तैसेची रहावे । चित्ती असो द्यावे समाधान ॥  
वाहिल्या उद्वेग दुःखाची केवळ । भोगणे ते फळ संचीताचे ॥

—संत तुकाराम

( Live the life as destined by God and remain contented in mind. If one cherishes disgust about it, the same breeds nothing but misery. One has to reap the fruits of his past deeds.

—Saint Tukaram

This sort of philosophy developed largely due to the political and social conditions of the time, to a considerable extent ( Kulkarni, 1971 ). Religious personality is caused by the environment—the environment that suits the temper of religion and vice versa. That is why, in Kashmir, since times immemorial, people were guided and are guided to believe in the theory of Monism—the existence of one God. ( Faizli, 1985 ). This is due to the awe-inspiring grandeur of lofty snowcapped peaks of the Himalayas, that have been believed to be the abodes of Gods in tribal,

as well as, more educated societies from time immemorial. In the same way the severe droughts or drought-like conditions leading to failure of crops have been dreaded through history in the area in which Pandharpur is located. Naturally monotheism flourished in this area to satisfy the altruistic needs of the people.

The philosophy of Bhakti (devotion) of Viththal has been propagated in Maharashtra since at least thirteenth century, that has been identified as the "Renaissance Period" in Marathi literature. There were saints and writers in every stratum of the society (Kulkarni, 1971) viz. Dnyaneshwar, Muktabai, Eknath (Brahmins); Namdeo (Tailor); Sena (Barber); Savata (Gardner); Narhari (Goldsmith); Gora (Potter); Chokha (Mahar); and Tukaram (Vaishya), etc. Even to this day, there are saints and seers belonging to this rich tradition, drawn from various Hindu castes and also Muslim religion, Mulla Ali Abbas, for example (Geeta Darshan, 1978). A graphic description of the vari (vari = journey, from Alandi near Pune to Pandharpur and back), that consists of people from various strata of society, is provided through an article by a social scientist, late Iravati Karve (1962). These features are reflected through the characteristics of structure of Pandharpur, as given below :

#### **EVOLUTION AND MORPHOLOGY :**

Pandharpur is a great place of antiquity and it has been mentioned variously in epigraphic and literary sources. The earliest reference to Pandharpur occurs in a copper-

plate of A.D. 516 of the Rashtrakuta king Avideya and it mentions Pandurangpalli as one of the place east of the Mahadeo range. However, a more definitive reference to this place is found in the inscription of A.D. 1237 of the Hoysala king Someshwara and in it Pandharpur has been indicated as Pandarge. It would be fair to conjecture that Viththala must have existed at this place for at least a hundred years before the year 516 A.D. and therefore, Viththala and the settlement around it has continuously existed for over fifteen hundred years.

With the advent of Mohammedan rule in this region they desecrated Hindu shrines and destroyed many temples. Mohammedan armies did not spare the Viththala temple either, forcing the devotees to remove the deity of Viththala to places of safety at several times. The site of the Viththala temple occurs on a mound, safe from river floods. Initially, this place must have been a small rural settlement, that grew in religious importance, as well as size from the fifth century onwards. According to the Hoysala inscription of 1237 A.D., it was no longer a small village ("Palli") but it had become a large village or a small town i.e. "Mahagrama". The temple of Viththala must have been at the centre of the settlement with the houses of the Brahmins and other communities surrounding it. (Fig. 3).

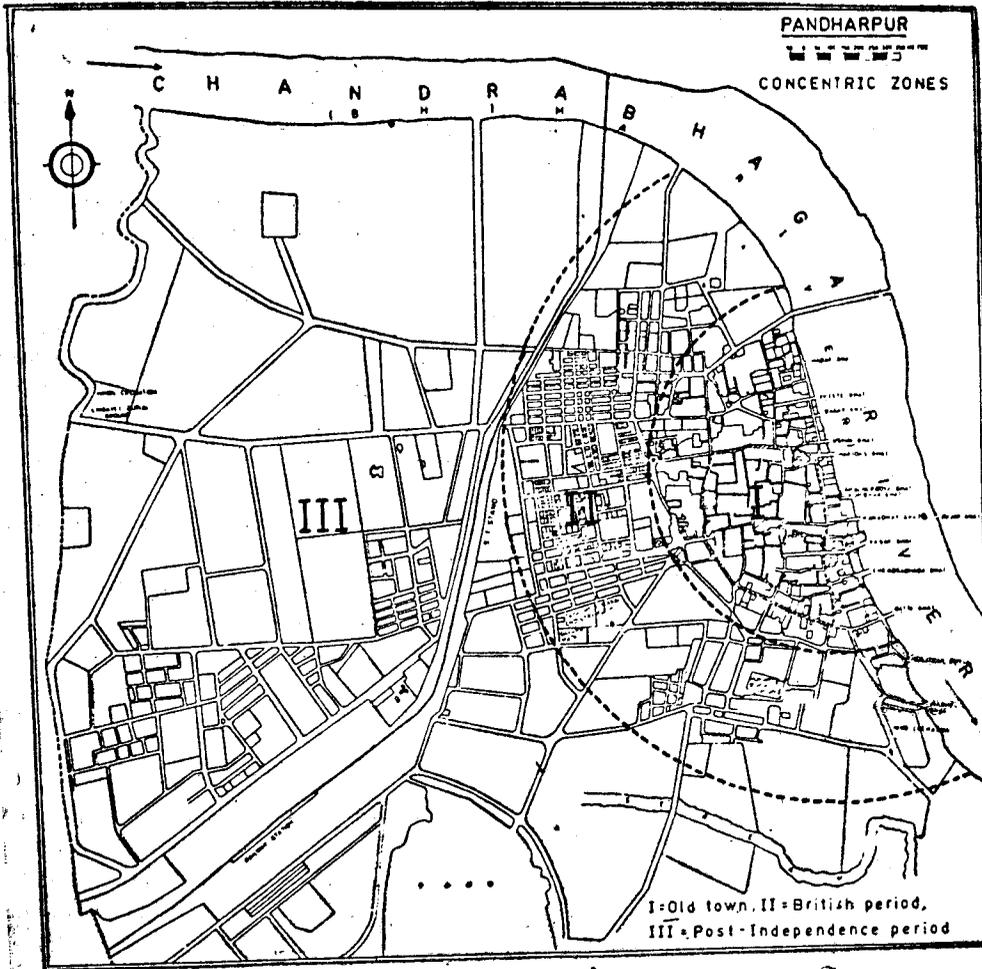


FIG.NO. 3

**LANDUSE OF A RELIGIOUS CENTRE :**

The predominantly religious landuse in the old town is revealed in Fig. 4. A series of sacred ghats from Wadaar ghat in the north to Madhe ghat in the south occur along the right bank of the river. One finds a number of temples and samadhis along the river bank as also in the bed of the river. Old historical structures housing temples, maths, choultries etc. are found all along the bank of the river, signifying the religious importance of the place. The Mahadwara road, extending from Mahadwar ghat ( river bank ) to the main viththala temple is lined with temples and shops selling mainly articles or

worship and religious use. Its extension towards the west, skirting the temple from the north to Chouphala, also reveals the same character.

**PILGRIM CIRCULATION :**

The Pradakshina marg or holy round commences from the Mahadwar ghat as the devotees have to take the sacred dip in the river Bhima at this most sacred ghat. They move along the southern course to the Kalika temple, and turning westward follow an almost semi-circular route to the Uddhav ghat. The devotees once again join the Mahadwar road towards the south for the Namdeo Payari towards the west. A large

number of devotees coming from outside commence the pradakshina after taking a sacred dip in the river at the Chandrabhaga ghat. They then turn southwards to the Datta ghat near Datta temple and join the route indicated above at the Kalika temple. This Pradakshina marg is bordered by a large number of temples dedicated to various gods, goddesses and saints all along its length.

The nature of shops along the western and northern segments of Pradakshina marg is typical. Whereas, a part of it in the west houses shops selling produce of religious use, a large part of this western and northern segment also contains shops selling goods of domestic and other consumer uses also, due to their proximity to residential areas. The distribution of shops is along three important roads. A high concentration of shops selling religious goods (flowers, incense sticks, bukka etc.) is found along the roads in the vicinity of the Vithhala temple. This feature is also observed at other important religious centres such as Kolhapur, Varanasi etc.

The only sacred tank (Padmini tank) is found along the railway line to the south of the S.T. Stand with the temple of goddess Padmavati at its centre. A number of complexes of temples, maths, and choultries are found in the second zone. Significant among them are those of Kaikadi Maharaj, Tanpure Maharaj and Gadage Maharaj. The concentration of choultries close to Haridas ghat in the east and along the station road towards west is significant. The choultries located along the station road are convenient to devotees arriving by railway and S.T. buses. The Mosque and burial ground occur close to the main Muslim settlement towards the south of the town beyond the Pradakshina marg, i.e. away from main Hindu settlement as usual.

It is obvious from the preceding discussion that the religious function is most important economic base of Pandharpur that generates energy for the town. Commercial activities and services related to the needs of the devotees of Vithhala, particularly during the two great fairs in the year, are most significant for the local traders and owners of other commercial establishments. Residential function is also growing with increasing population. In order to assess the spatial extent of the religious functions, the area under temples, maths, choultries, ghats and the holy round has been computed and it is found that over five percent of the settled area is under this landuse. Fig. 4 (landuse map) excludes areas under agricultural fields, within the municipal boundary, but if the segment of the river within the municipal boundary is considered, then the total area under religious landuse is over 23 percent.

#### FAIRS AT PANDHARPUR :

Pandharpur like most religious places of importance, attracts a large number of devotees who meet on definite days of the year (Ashadhi, Kartiki, Chaitri and Maghi Ekadashis) for religious purposes. This involves a large scale movement of Vithhala's devotees, particularly on these occasions, as every varkari as the devotee of vithala is called, is required to visit Pandharpur at least twice a year.

In other words, the phenomenon of fairs conforms to the various attributes of the 'General Movement Theory'. Any religious fair involves movement of devotees from their places of residence to the shrine of their god and back. Thus, the religious circulation of people has the followings attributes: The religious movement has an origin in geographic space. The devotee have to cover a specific distance from their respective places to Pandharpur and back. The devotees and the religious palanquines

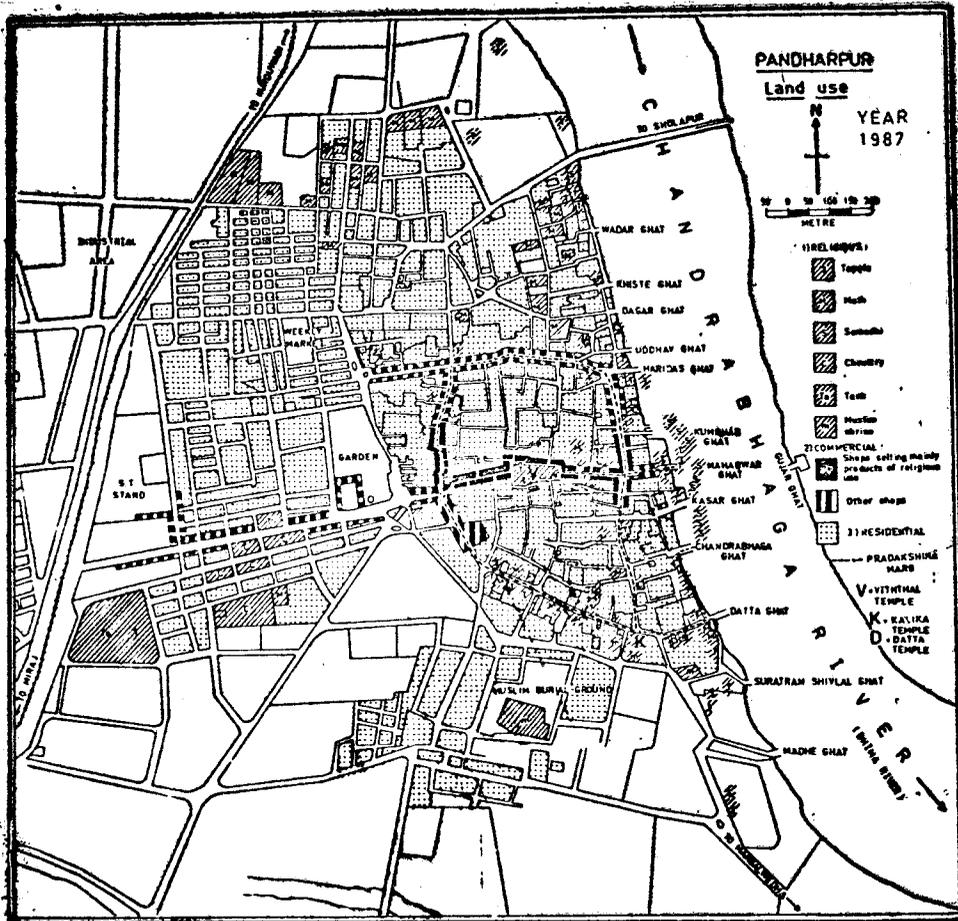


FIG. NO. 4

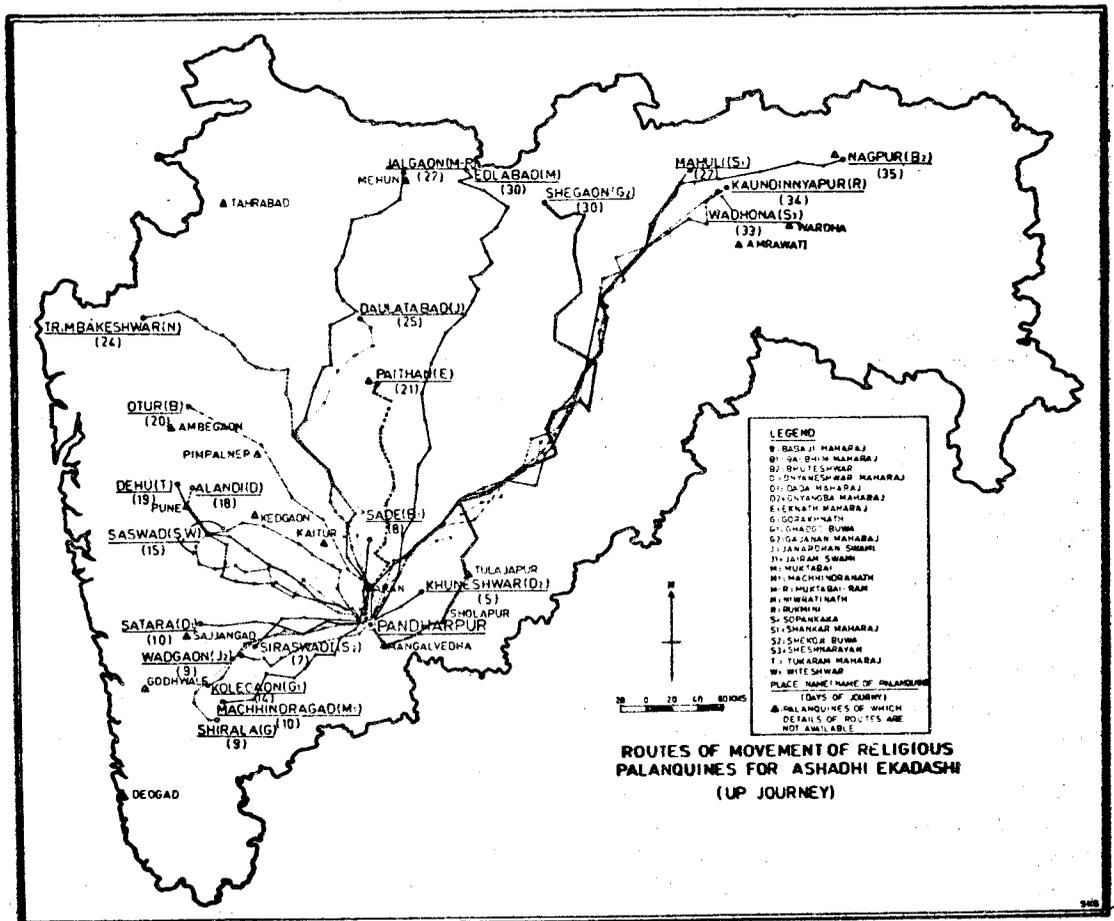
travel along definite traditional paths, that may not be straight. The movement requires expenditure of time and human efforts. The movement is purposeful i.e. it is strictly on religious grounds. Since Pandharpur is a place of religious importance par excellence, it attracts a huge gathering of devotees on the specified auspicious days according to the beliefs of the cult. Such movement is of a purely temporary nature.

As indicated earlier, the devotees have to cover the distance on foot from their villages, towns or cities to Pandharpur and back. Some of them also travel by S.T. buses and/or railways. However, the most significant movement is that of the religious

palanquines from fifty different places towards Pandharpur, along the traditional routes. In addition, five palanquines originate and move within the town. The people of the rural and urban settlements enroute have been rendering hospitality to the devotees of Viththala, accompanying such palanquines on foot, over several centuries. Some of these palanquines follow slightly different routes on the return journey, either to visit important places on the way or to avoid taxing people of the same villages again. It is remarkable to note that Dnyaneshwara himself was a varkari who performed 'Vari' (as the pilgrimage to Pandharpur is popularly known) to Pandharpur

during the thirteenth century. Historical evidences of the years 1639 and 1684 A. D. reveal the fact that the tradition of religious palanquines predates the year 1639 A.D. and that the Kartiki fair was far more significant than the Ashadhi fair even at that time. The two most important religious palanquines are those of Dnyaneshwara, originating from Alandi (near Pune) and that of Tukarama from Dehu (near Pune). The devotees moving with palanquines go on foot and therefore, every palanquine has to allow for a certain number of days to reach Pandharpur on the day before the fair, for example, Alandi required eighteen days, Tryambakeshwar twenty four

days, Shirala nine days, and Nagpur thirty-five days etc. (Fig. 5). Obviously, these movements of people converge on Pandharpur and they again disperse to their respective places of origin, after spending 2-3 days at Pandharpur. Since, the 'Ashadhi' and 'Kartiki' fairs are considered most auspicious, a very large religious fair is held on each of these two occasions. Some devotees also gather on the Maghi and Chaitri Ekadashis, but the size of these fairs is relatively small as they are considered less significant from the religious point of view. Thus, this movement is clearly temporary and associated with specific seasons of the year.



SOURCES: BHARAT, B. R. VARNANI, SAMPRADAYA(MARATHI), VENUS PRAKASAN, PUNE, 1972.  
 DELEURY, S. A. THE CULT OF VINCHA, PH.D. THESIS, SUBMITTED TO UNIVERSITY OF POONA, 1952.  
 FIELD INFORMATION FROM POLICE STATION, PANDHARPUR, JULY, 1955.

FIG. NO. 5

India being a monsoon country, agriculture depends upon the behaviour of the monsoons. Ashadhi and Kartiki Ekadashis, precede and follow the monsoons, respectively, and also the Kharif (summer) season. The Chaitri Ekadasi fair follows the Rabi, winter season. It may be remarked that in the Christian countries, the great festivals which most often accompany the great fairs are those of the worm season. In the non-Christian countries, there is a similar association between religious, commercial, and the climatic rhythm (Andre, 1922). As regards the attendance at the four important fairs referred to earlier, there is strong correlation between the behaviour of the monsoon and the subsequent success or failure of the crops which are important factors to reckon with. If the monsoons fail to arrive on time or is weak, affecting the kharif crop adversely, then the size of the Ashadhi fair is relatively small, e.g. in the Ashadha (July) of the year 1983, the monsoons were delayed by about two-three weeks and therefore, the farmers were busy with agricultural operations at the time of the Ashadhi fair, leading to a poor attendance of devotees at Pandharpur (Kesari, 1983). On the other hand, if the monsoons arrive on time, and the sowing operations are over, with bright prospect for a good crop, the size of the Ashadhi fair is fairly large, e.g. in the Ashadha (July) of the year 1986, when approximately six lakh devotees assembled at the fair (Sakal, 1986). Significantly, trading activity is brisk when the size of the fair is large and the itinerant traders make good business. Since the local trading community depends entirely upon the Ashadhi and Kartiki fairs for their year's income.

### THE RELIGIOUS FIELD OF PANDHARPUR :

The Vitthala of Pandharpur, Khandoba of Jejuri, Ambabai of Kolhapur and Bhavani

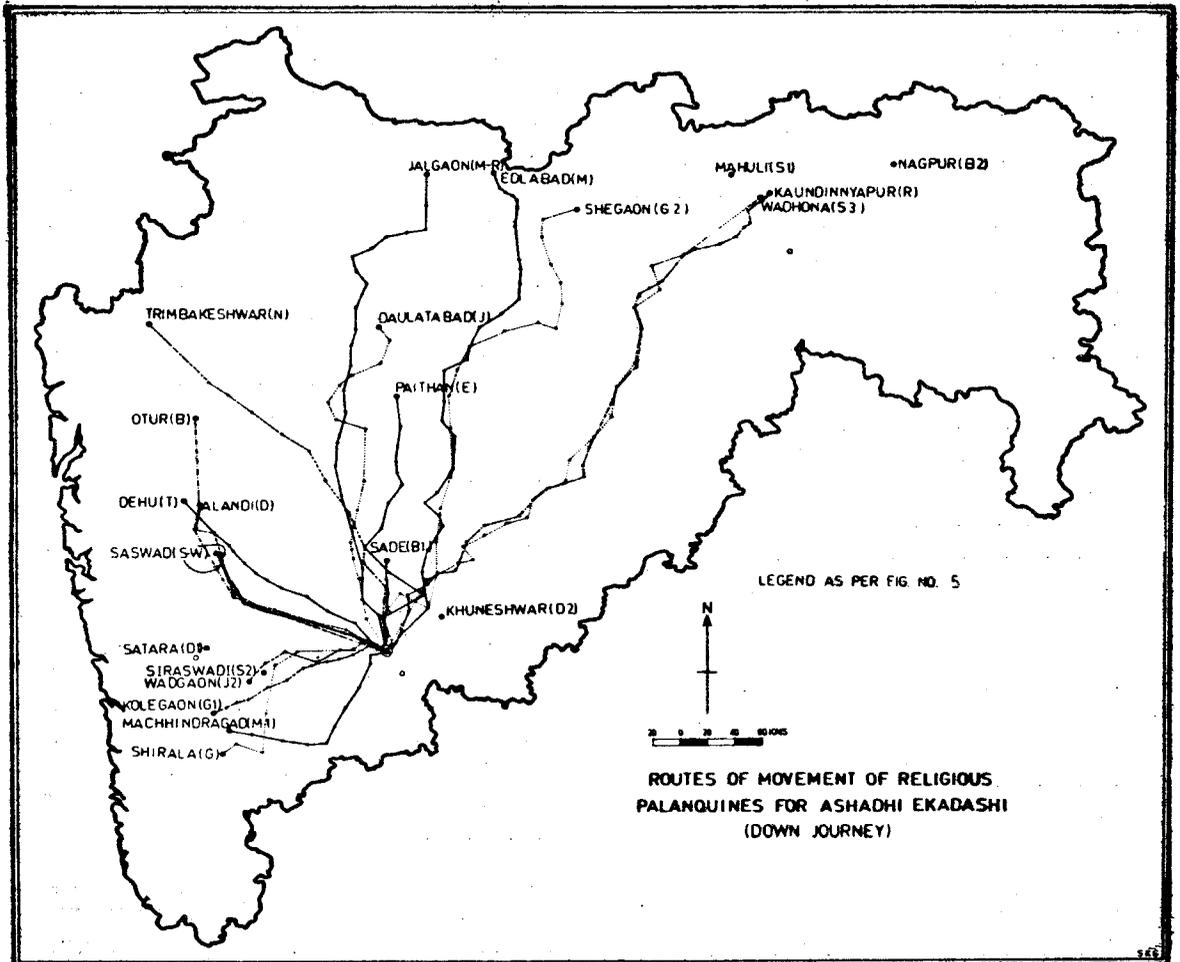
of Tuljapur are the four principal family deities of the Hindus in Maharashtra and even outside. Among all these four gods and goddesses, it is the Vitthala of Pandharpur that exerts maximum religious influence, covering almost the whole of Maharashtra. For places like Pandharpur, Jejuri, Tuljapur, Mahur, Kolhapur, Nasik, Amravati, Bandra (Bombay) etc. the religious function is the most important. Looking at the pilgrim field of Pandharpur, it is clearly seen that the very 'raison de être' of the town is to fulfill this great need which is felt by devotees to visit their respective places of worship on the stipulated day of the year.

Field enquiries by the authors at Pandharpur have revealed that people from almost every district of Maharashtra visit Pandharpur on Ashadhi fair and/or Kartiki fair. They travel by railway, S.T. buses, cars, bullock carts and even on foot to worship Vitthala at Pandharpur. A great tradition, signifying religious unity and integrity of the philosophy of several vaishnava saints is witnessed through the large number of palanquines emerging from distant religious spots reaching Pandharpur on the stipulated day, almost simultaneously. Such religious palanquines are carried by the devotees on their shoulders or by bullock carts, accompanied by a considerable number of devotees who sing sacred songs, all travelling on foot, following stipulated paths, as per schedule, fixed through long tradition for reaching Pandharpur. In order to identify the field of religious influence of Pandharpur, the criteria used are : (a) the up and down journey routes of movement of religious palanquines for Ashadhi-Ekadashi fair, and (b) the frequency of special S.T. buses for the Ashadhi Ekadashi fair.

A number of religious palanquines originate at ancient places of religious importance as Kaundinyapur, Mahuli, Edlabad, Paithan, Tryambakeshwar, Dehu, Alandi, Sajjangad

and Machhindragad etc. (Fig. 5 and 6). These figures show routes of movement of religious palanquines for Ashadhi Ekadashi fair both up journey (towards Pandharpur) and down journey (return journey) routes, respectively. The Fig. 5 shows the exact paths followed traditionally by twenty-three important religious palanquines and the locations of eighteen other places of origin of religious palanquines, of which the route details are not available. The routes followed by various palanquines are pretty zigzag as they pass through several places of religious importance on route. The longest route is that from Nagpur, requiring thirty-

five days to reach Pandharpur. Significantly, the routes of these palanquines span the entire state of Maharashtra with the exception of three areas: (a) The farthest Chandrapur and Bhandara area towards east is characterised by hilly terrain, heavy rainfall, thick forests and relatively low population density. (b) The area consisting of Dhule district and the adjoining part of Nasik district is once again characterised by hilly terrain, thick forests in western ghats and a large tribal population. (c) Ganesh worship is more popular in the Konkan



SOURCES: BHARATI, B.P., VARKAR, SAMPRADAYA, (MARATHI), VENUS, PRAKASHAN, PUNE, 1972  
FIELD INFORMATION FROM POLICE STATION, PANDHARPUR, JULY 1985.

FIG NO 6

tract and Ganesh Chaturthi is the greatest festival of that region. Therefore, Vitthala worship seems to be less important in these three areas. It is important to note that no palanquine comes to Pandharpur from the adjoining Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh areas. This can be explained on the ground that the deity of Vitthala was removed temporarily for purpose of safety to Vijayanagara in the year 1513 A.D. during the rule of Krishna Dev Raya. This new abode (Vijayanagara) of Vitthala assumed religious importance in those days and the devotees of Vitthala from these two states started visiting this new shrine. However, it is surmised that though the

original yiththala deity was brought back to Pandharpur by Bhanudasa later, the Kannada and Andhra people have continued to visit the Vitthala temples erected in these areas to this day. Fig. 6, shows the return journey routes of religious palanquines that deviate from their up journey routes, though the deviations are not considerable for obvious reasons.

The S.T. services are important in Maharashtra as they serve considerable areas where railway facilities are not available. Several S.T. routes penetrate the hilly, forested and other remote areas of the state. Fig. 7 shows frequency of special S.T. buses for Ashadhi Pandharpur fair

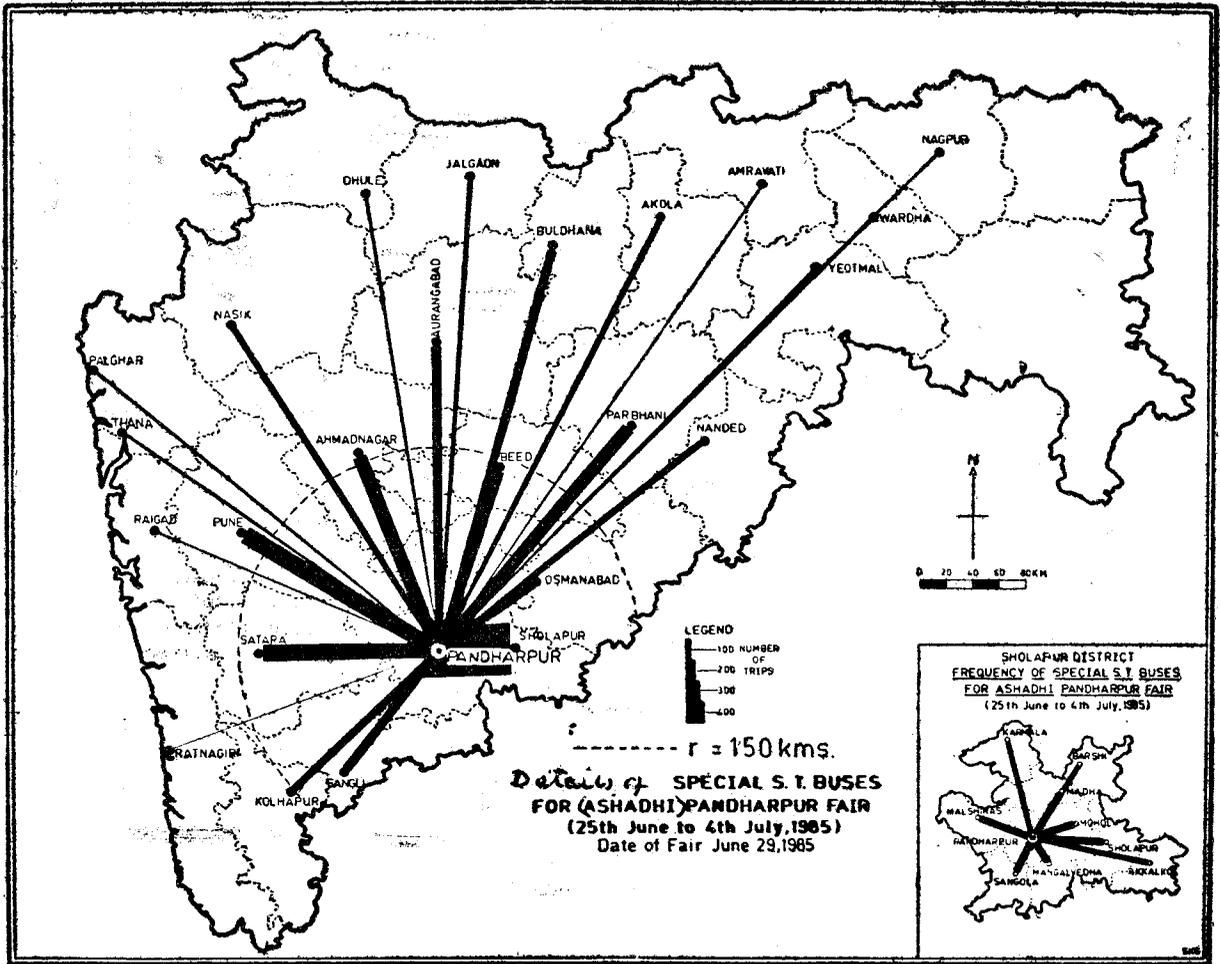


FIG. NO. 7

(25th June to 4th July, 1985) (Table No. 3). The data was available for the individual district as a whole, so mapping for individual places could not be attempted. This map

shows that Nagpur in the east, Jalgaon and Dhule in the north and all districts from Nasik to Kolhapur in the west are served by S.T. facility. The frequency of sepcial

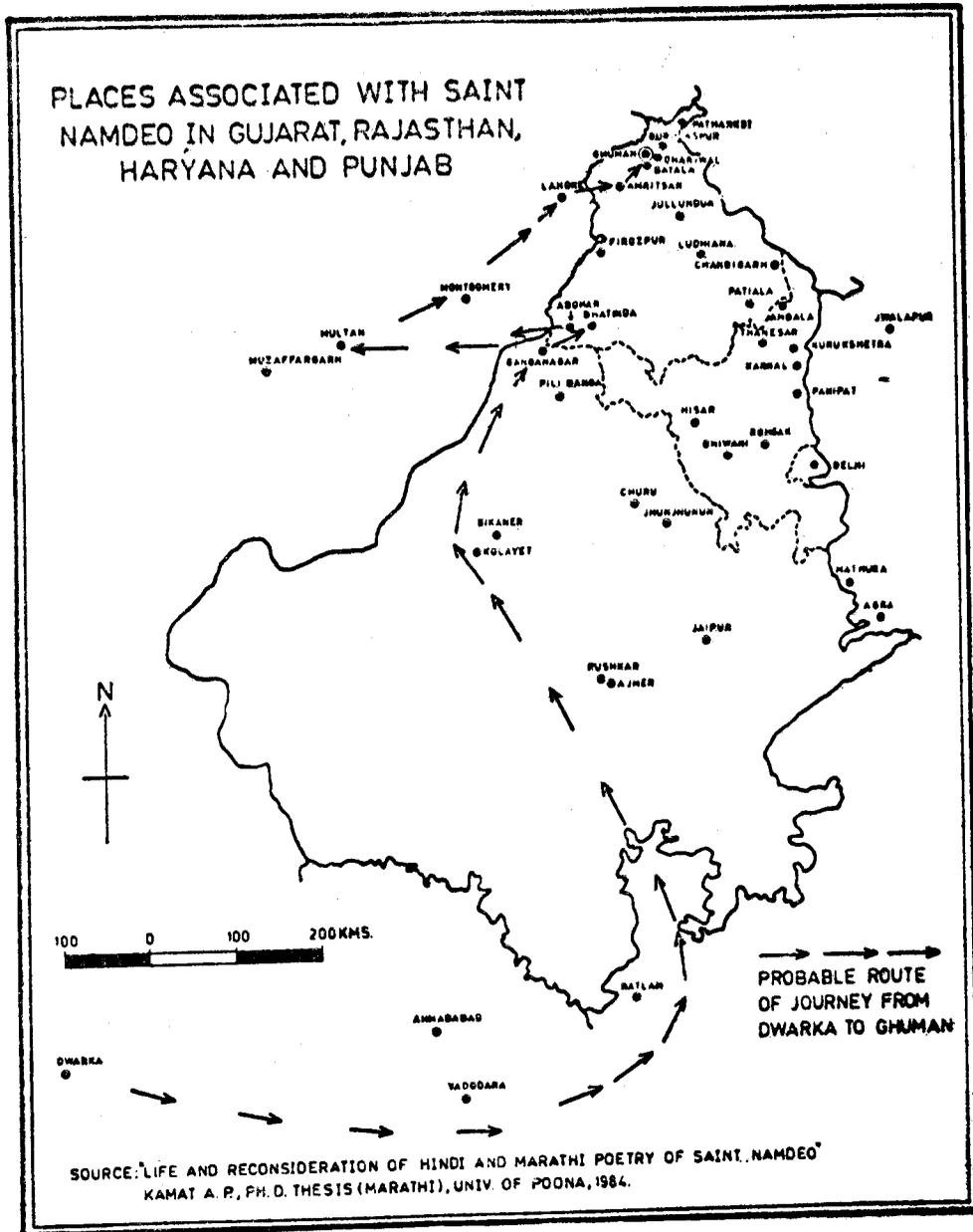


FIG. NO. 8

S.T. buses, however, is more within a radius of 150 kilometers from Pandharpur, as indicated in the map. The inset map shows the special S.T. bus facility according to tahsil headquarters for Solapur district. Though large number of people also come by regular S.T. buses, railways, private cars and also bullock carts, the map showing frequency of special S.T. buses relevant quite accurately the main pattern of religious movement.

As regards the extra territorial influence or the vaishnava cult, it may be noted that :  
 (a) The Vitthala cult was propagated in North India by Saint Namdeva in the fourteenth century A.D. as mentioned earlier

(Fig. 8). Several temples dedicated to Vitthala and Namdeva occur in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Harayana and Punjab (Fig. 9).  
 (b) The Maratha armies penetrated North India, South India & also in the East, during medieval period and established kingdoms. A considerable number of temples dedicated to Vitthala, Khandoba of Jejuri and Bhavani of Tuljapur are, therefore, found in Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and even in the adjoining areas. These remarks are meant to indicate the areas of furthest influence of Pandharpur, though the number of devotees visiting the main shrine at Pandharpur, at the Ashadhi and Kartiki Ekadashi fairs from these areas is rather remote.

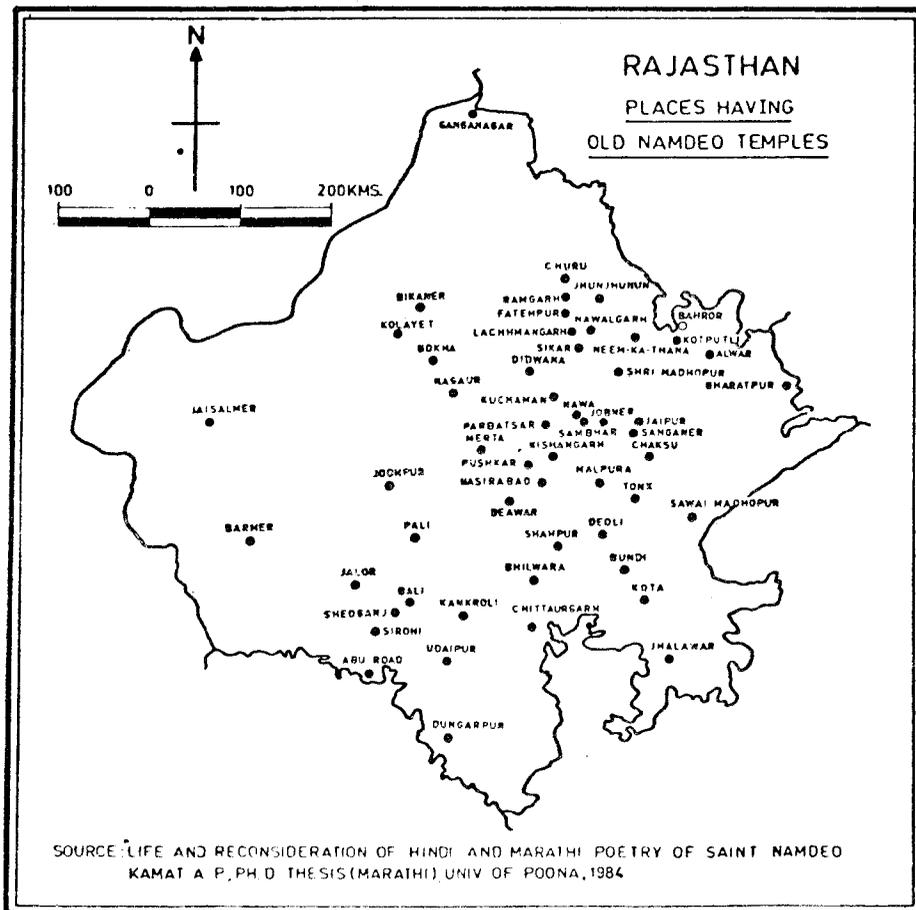


FIG NO 9

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