Joyous Festival of Bhakti, A Pilgrimage of Songsters
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FESTIVALS

Joyous Festival of Bhakti, A Pilgrimage of Songsters

Pandharpur's annual yatra of penance and bhajan transports devotees to a heaven world

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Lord Vithal (Krishna) and his con-sort Rukmani Devi stand with arms akimbo at the temple, as if waiting for this party day in Pandharpur in southern Maharashtra. Hordes of pilgrims pour in from far and wide on the July ashada ekadasi day to sing and dance with verve. My longtime love of abhang, pulsating bhajans to Lord Vithal, endearingly called "Vithoba, " made me undertake a trip this year. Abhangs are four-line poems written by two Maharashtra saints, the 13th century Dyaneshwar and 17th century Tukaram. My bus from Solapur had to crawl its way into Pandharpur through the surge of pilgrims who have made this round trip from their home to Vithal temple and back. It was a sea of humanity, and the air over the town was engulfed by non-stop chants of "Vithala-Vithala " and "Gyanba-Tukaram, " serenading Vithal and the saints who poured their hearts out for the dwarf Lord of this village.

Shri Tukkaram Ganapathy Maharaj, a well-known master of pravachanam (religious preaching, often with stories and music), invited me to join his camp of 50 people who had traveled along with him from Tamil Nadu. On arrival I went to check out the partying town at close range. The night was fast setting in, but there was no sign of anyone retiring. What a party for the spirit! Bhajan singing emanated from every corner and every single tent, creating an ethereal ambiance. The clash of differing music in close proximity disturbed no one, as the mind, body and spirit were all focused on a higher plane. Singers were belting out songs accompanied by tambura, harmonium, tabla, pakhawaj drum and cymbals. Some vocalists were flanked by about a hundred cymbal players, who danced in fluid harmony with his verses. Regardless of age, the humble musicians touch each other's feet and seek

blessings in the firm belief that a musically gifted person must be a higher, blessed soul. "Having trained as a classical Hindustani musician, people ask me why I sing more of abhangs, and I tell them I must be fortunate and blessed to be singing the name of God all the time " says Sanjay Nadkarni, a noted musician from Mumbai, who was on his second visit to Pandharpur.

The pilgrimage starts a week in advance and culminates on the ekadasi day. Every day the odes to Vithal continue well into the wee hours. Men and women sitting on the ground with folded legs join in the chanting with their countenance full of bliss, bereft of all worldly worries. Musicians move around neighboring camps to offer variety for the pilgrims. Established musicians, such as Satarkar Maharaj, give large public shows. His diehard fans throng to catch a glimpse of him once a year during this festival.

The warakaris (piligrims) carry floral decorated palkhis (palanquins) with the paduka (sandals) of the saints on the 21-day walk-a-thon from their villages. These are worshipped along the way by those who cannot make the journey. Each wari (pilgrim group) will have a lead singer. A truck follows with their belongings. Bystanders offer food and drinks along the way. The warakaris are predominantly simple farmers, men dressed in all white--cotton shirt, pajama and a Nehru cap. They undertake this 21-day journey after sowing their fields so that it is time for weeding by the time they return home. "This is the land of Shivaji, the king who defended Hinduism against the invading Islam, and that spirit still stays alive amongst us Maharashtrians " quipped a frail man in his eighties.

The story of Pandharpur is that once a man named Pundalika lived here. One day Lord Krishna came to his house to bless him for his exemplary service to his parents, Pundalika threw a brick for the Lord to stand on as he was busy serving his parents. The Lord waited and then granted him boons. Pundalika asked the Lord to stay permanently. This place was thus named Pundalikapuram and later, Pandharpur. To this day the Lord is standing on a brick in a waiting posture at the temple here.

There was a long, serpentine queue in the multi-terraced building adjoining the temple. People were waiting 24 hours for darshan of the Lord. People streamed into Chandrabhaga River that runs by the temple, as Saint Tukaram deemed this river as the mother of all rivers, and a source of certain salvation for those who bathe in her waters.

"Some of us don't just sing and dance once a year, have fun and go back to our earthly existence. We visit Pandharpur every month and keep the flame alive in our hearts through this sacred music " says Samant, a dapper man from Pune, a town 250 kms away.

To transcend this material and earthly living and climb onto a higher plane is a constant battle for seekers everywhere, but these self-effacing, uncomplicated farmers who gather at Pandharpur seemed to accomplish that transition with utmost ease through their strong faith, simply plunging themselves into that divine subliminal bliss.