



## FORM AND WORK OF THE SECTARIAN MONASTERIES IN PANDHARPUR

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**Abstract-** It can be said without exaggeration that Pandharpur is a town of monasteries and temples. A majority of these religious centres belong to the Bhaagawat sect. The temple dedicated to Lord Vitthal is at the heart of the town and it is surrounded by a number of monasteries, boarding places, sectarian houses and asylums. These are the places mainly utilized for conducting various activities aimed at the propagation of the Bhaagawat sect.

According to one of the inscriptions found around the temple of Lord Vitthal in Pandharpur, there is a word used 'laanmadu', meaning a monastery or temple. This structure was renovated in the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD. Maharashtra was then under the reign of Ramdevrai Yadav. The word monastery is also found in the literature of the Mahaanubhav sect. It means the concept of the monastery existed well before the times of Saint Dnyanudev and Namdev. However, it is a fact that these monasteries underwent development after the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

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### Definition of Monastery

According to the definition given in Amarkosh, a monastery is a residence of a sage or a disciple. In general a monastery is supposed to be a place where the brahamcharis, sages, mendicants and sannyasis resided.<sup>2</sup> The word 'madh' is believed to have been derived from the Sanskrit base meaning 'to reside'. According to Encyclopedia Britannica 'a monastery is the home of a religious community. The word is commonly used only of houses of men, but in what follows houses of women religious, widely though not properly known as convents, will also be considered'.<sup>3</sup> The word monastery is derived from the Greek word 'monazo', which means 'alone' or 'to live in isolation'. The concept of monastery is quite old to the western world. In the final stage of human life, a person gets separated from his family and its responsibilities. This stage makes a person give up material pleasures and discover the meaning of

life through meditation. Thus, the western interpretation of a monastic life depends entirely upon spirituality. But, the Indian interpretation of monastic life not only expects the spiritual function but a commitment towards the material duties also. It is thus aimed at establishing and maintaining both religious and secular institutions. Besides this, it also plays a role in handing over the cultural heritage of the society. It is fact that the human desires for religious meditation, mysticism and self-denial give rise to the need of monasteries.

### The Origin and Development of Monasteries in India

The people in India have since long been dominated by the concept of the four duties viz. the religious, the economic, the physical and the spiritual. As a result, the concept of monastery came into existence during the Ancient times itself. There existed the monas-

tery system in the Hindu religion even before the creation of the Sangh in Buddhism, but it can't be claimed that monasteries existed then. The third (Waanprasth) and the fourth (Sannyas) stages in the Hindu religious order simply expected the persons to be continuous movers with a total sense of self-denial. But, the life of the people in these stages to a great extent was monastic. It is a fact that with the rise of Buddhism, there came into being monasteries in the Hindu religion too.

Buddhism gives more importance to monastery than what the Hindu religion does, since Buddhism attributes monastic qualities to the Sangh. The Buddhists call the Sangh 'vihaar'. It was Gautama Buddha who originated the concept of vihaar and through these monasteries the philosophy of Buddhism was propagated.<sup>5</sup> The Chaityawaadi of Jainism and the Bhattarak of the Digambar sect became monastic. The Buddhist and Hindu monasteries have been older than the Christian monasteries. The distinction of the Christian monasteries is that they were established on the three principles- holy ordain, honesty and service. We can say that the monasteries have been the excellent centres for the conservation of education and culture. It is because of the monasteries that the ancient books, manuscripts and cultures have been preserved. The maintenance of cultural values realized the development of the monasteries in turn. At present, we see monasteries of various religions and sects dedicated to the propagation and development of religious, sectarian and cultural life of people.

#### **Tradition of Hindu Monastery**

The Hindu culture relates the monasteries, the dargahs and the ashrams to the final stage in human life. It is believed when a person enters into the fourth and the final stage of life by sacrificing the material duties and pleasures; he takes shelter at a monastery. The fame of the monasteries is seen all over the nation. There can't be shown a single state in India which is without a monastery. The concept of taking shelter at a monastery can be located in the sense of security also. A monastery of a particular religion is closely associated with the philosophy of the concerned religion, cult or sect. As a consequence, the mould of every monastery is different from the other. There are some monasteries connected to temples, as there are other monasteries which succeed the temples. There are found several monasteries which appear attractive and splendid.

There have come into being several sects from the Hindu religion. These sects have their monasteries in various parts of India. The monasteries set up by Shankaracharya in Badrinath, Dwaraka, Jagannathpuri, Shringeri and Kanchi Kamakoti has been very famous. The monasteries established by the Gosavi and Bairagi sects are termed Aakhaadas. Vallabhacharya, Ramanujacharya and Nimbakacharya are said to have erected monasteries at various places for the propagation of their respective philosophy. One gets information on one hundred and ten monasteries set up by Samarth Ramdas. Although the Hindu religion believes that the monastic persons must follow the principle of self-denial and abstinence, there are several monasteries which possess wealth and estate. The reason is the donations given to the monasteries by people from the royal level to the mass level of the society. In India donations are given in order to get blessings of the donated. This has certainly contributed to the development of the monasteries.

The monasteries in the Hindu tradition have been busy in academics, cultural activities, mass meals, maintenance of scripts, religious rites & rituals and running country gyms.

#### **Origin of Monasteries in Maharashtra**

The influence of the Waarkari sect began to increase in the times of Saint Dnyaneshwar. There were two other sects viz. Naath and Mahaanubhav which had their own dominance before the origin of the Waarkari sect. Although there have been several holy centres belonging to Naath and Mahaanubhav sects in Maharashtra, it can't be said that these sects had any separate monastic system. The Samarth sect is said to have motivated the system of monasteries.

Gorakhpur was the chief centre of Naath sect. The representative branches of this sect were developed all over India due to the work done by Gorakshnath. The Siddhas like- Shaiv, Kapalik and Shakt entered into the fold of this sect. The members of the Naath sect held the temples of Shiva, Bhairav and Shakti to be reverent, so in Maharashtra the temples at Vriddheshwar, Tryambakeshwar, Devgiri, Chandragiri, Paithan, Alandi, Dudulgaon, Mangeshnath, Ambhore, Kanifnath of Diveghat, Parali Vajinath became the centres for the Naath sect. However, these holy centres couldn't develop monasteries.<sup>6</sup>

The birth and residence of the incarnations of the Mahaanubhav sect made several places holy centres. In Maharashtra Phaltan is famous for the birth of Changdev Raul and Mahur for the place of his sacred residence. Chakradhar attributed importance to Paithan for spreading the philosophy of his sect. Besides these, Beed, Apegaon, Tryambak, Madh, Pimpri, Arangaon, Bhingar, Jogeshwari, Verul are called the holy centres.

Ganagapur is called the chief centre of the Datt sect. In Maharashtra there are places- Mahur, Karanje, Audumbar, Narsobawadi and Akkalkot, where the Datt sect is conserved.

It is a fact that Maharashtra witnessed the growth and development of the Naath, the Mahaanubhav and the Datt sects, but there are not seen any monasteries belonging to these sects. Samarth Ramdas is believed to have erected and utilized the monasteries and monks for promulgating the philosophy of his sect. He brought together the family and the spiritual responsibilities. His sect witnessed a huge role played by the monasteries and monks.

There is no unanimous opinion regarding the exact number of monasteries set up by Saint Ramdas. One of the claims says that there were erected 1100 monasteries in and outside Maharashtra by Ramdas.<sup>7</sup> Today, information on only a few monasteries is available. The main centre of Samarth sect is found in Chafal, district Satara. In addition to this, there are seen in the places like- Jamb, Dahifal, Miraj, Sajjangad, Domgaon, Takali, Mahabaleshwar, Karanje, Beed, Nilanga, Kanheri, Parali etc the big and spacious monasteries of the Samarth sect. Thus, in the state of Maharashtra it was the Samarth sect which set up monasteries in huge number. Samarth Ramdas used to appoint on merit basis suitable monks as the managers of these monasteries. But the early merit-based management of the monasteries gave way to the domination of the family-line.

It is said that the Warkari sect couldn't develop the system of monasteries, so long as there was a domination of the saints. After Saint Nilobarai the system of monasteries is believed to have start-

ed to develop due to the cause of Waarkari philosophy and for the accommodation of the pilgrims. A majority of these monasteries are found in the capital of the Waarkari sect i.e. Pandharpur and the places where the saints were born and those where they spent their lifetime. These monasteries can certainly be called the mainstay of the Waarkari sect.

### Form of the Monasteries in Pandharpur

Pandharpur is the chief centre for the Warkari sect. Thousands of pilgrims get together in Pandharpur periodically for worshipping Lord Vitthal. The monasteries here are meant for accommodating pilgrims and carrying out the sectarian activities. These monasteries have developed their own boarding places and sectarian houses. The number of such big and small monasteries, boarding places and houses in Pandharpur is around one thousand.<sup>8</sup> There are organized at these monasteries with a great sense of devotion the religious singing programmes, (bhajans), the melodramatic preaching (keertans), the nightly religious programmes (jaagars), and the meditations (naamjaps) on every tenth, eleventh and twelfth day of the Hindu month along with several holy occasions belonging to the Waarkari sect.

It is a fact that the greatest number of monasteries in Pandharpur belong to the Waarkari sect. For the convenience of the present study, the monasteries in Pandharpur are divided into four groups as follows

- Traditional monasteries named after the Waarkari saints
- Monasteries of the temple trustees
- Progressive monasteries/ Monasteries of Saint Gadge Maharaj
- Miscellaneous monasteries

### Traditional monasteries named after the Waarkari saints

Saints belonging to the Medieval Period played a key role in spreading the philosophy of the Waarkari sect. They propagated the grandeur of Lord Vitthal and that of Pandharpur through their songs. The modern disciples of the Waarkari saints have been contributing to the further development of the sect by following the Waarkari philosophy and the saintly behavior. As a means of commemorating these saints, there have been created against their names some temples and monasteries in Pandharpur. The loyal pilgrims going periodically to Pandharpur participate in the work of the monasteries, which consists in spreading the Vitthal cult.

Pundalik is supposed to have been a staunch devotee of Lord Vitthal. However, there is not a single monastery after him in Pandharpur. Nevertheless, there is a temple holding his Samadhi in the riverbed of Bheema. As people are not aware of the dates of his birth and death, there are not celebrated his anniversaries. Nevertheless, the members from the Koli community get together for singing on the eleventh days of every Hindu month and the twelfth day of the Maagh month. On the Kaartiki eleventh day (ekaadashi) there is undertaken a religious rally (Dindi) in the name of Saint Pundalik to Alandi. The pilgrims visiting the temple of Lord Vitthal don't leave temple complex without having paid their tributes to Saint Pundalik. Like Saint Pundalik there is no monastery in the name of Saint Nivruttinath in Pandharpur. On the Aashadhi eleventh day the palanquin of his name is brought to Pandharpur from Traymbakeshwar. This palanquin is accommodated at the Belapurkar monastery in the Naath square. The holy sandals' temple of

Saint Dnyaneshwar is in the same square. The temple holds the idols of Lord Vitthal and his better half- Rukmini along with the holy sandals of Saint Dnyaneshwar. The local trustees of the temple have renovated the structure. There is no special boarding facility for the visiting devotees at this monastery. But, there are boarded some students doing spiritual studies at this monastery. The palanquin named after Saint Dnyaneshwar is alighted at this place. On other occasions the singing clubs (bhajan mandals) of various places stage programmes. The tomb of Saint Namdev is located under the eastern staircase of the temple of Lord Vitthal. On the circumambulation way (pradakshina maarg) there is found the Namdev temple (monastery). It possesses the idols of Keshavraj and Namdev along with rooms for lodging the devotees. Thousands of devotees take part in the programmes organized on the anniversaries of Saint Namdev and there are other occasions too for celebrations. The descendants of Namdev perform the rites and rituals at the monastery and the management is done by the trustees.

There are two monasteries named after Saint Muktabai in Pandharpur. One of them is located on the circumambulation way near the Red Hanuman temple and the other is at the Kumbhar ghat. There are other structures like- Gora Kumbhar monastery in Govindpur, Savta Mali and Saint Chokhamela monasteries in Santpeth, Saint Sena monastery and Saint Damajipant monastery in front of the Shiva temple, Saint Santabai and Rohidas Maharaj monasteries on the circumambulation way, Saint Narhari Maharaj temple-cum-monastery at the main entrance. There are a few other monasteries named after some other saints.

### Monasteries of the temple trustees

Several saints of Waarkari sect, having been initiated by the sacred communion of their God, propagated the Vitthal cult. They enlarged the community of devotees by means of singing devotional songs, playing the melodramatic spiritual enactments and conducting sessions of preaching. They organized their disciples of the Waarkari sect for social awakening from town to town. There were established temple trusts for carrying out the pilgrimages to Pandharpur and performing rites & rituals, with a view to directing the disciples into sectarian work. Thus, there got erected monasteries in Pandharpur under the supervision of these trusts for accommodating the pilgrims going there from their native places and for organizing the sectarian programmes. The temple trusts from various regions in Maharashtra like- Marathwada, Vidarbha, and Khandesh have established monasteries and spread the cause of Waarkari sect and at the same time conserved its customs and traditions. Following is a list of such monasteries and their temple trusts.

- Dada Maharaj Chaturmase monastery- Rukmini Pandurang Temple Trust, Anave, District Jalna
- Sakharan Maharaj Amalnerkar monastery- Shri Sadguru Sakharan Maharaj Temple Trust, Amalner, District Jalgaon
- Jayaramswami Wadgaonkar monastery- Jayaramswami Wadgaonkar Temple Trust, Wadgaon, Taluka Khatav
- Dhunda Maharaj Deglurkar monastery- Shri Dhunda Maharaj Temple Trust, Deglur, District Nanded
- Dnyaneshwar Maharaj Ausekar monastery- Sadguru Shri Veer-nath Mallinath Maharaj Temple Trust, Ausa, District Latur
- Sadguru Khandoji Maharaj Kukurmunda monastery- Sadguru

Khandoji Maharaj Kukurmunda Temple Trust, Kukurmunda, District Surat, Gujarat

- Jalgaonkar monastery- Shiram Temple Trust, Jalgaon
- Shankar Maharaj Kandharkar monastery- Shri Sadhu Maharaj Temple Trust, Kandhar, District Nanded
- Shrikshetra Narayangad monastery- Shrikshetra Narayangad, District Beed
- Shri Sant Sakharam Maharaj (Ilora) monastery- Shri Sant Sakharam Maharaj Temple Trust, Ilora, District Buldhana
- Sadguru Kisangiri Baba monastery- Shri Datt Temple Trust, Devgad, District Ahamadnagar
- Shri Gajanan Maharaj monastery- Shri Gajanan Maharaj Temple Trust, Shegaon, District Buldhana.

### **Progressive monasteries/ Monasteries of Saint Gadge Maharaj**

Gadge Maharaj is known all over the nation as a 20th century saint with a progressive mindset. He played a key role in getting the Waarkari sect rid of superstitions and bringing true faith in it. The Waarkari saints belonging to the Medieval Period had attributed a scientific attitude to devotion and attached a sense of duty to it. However, in the later period some of the fraudulent members of the sect brought in superstitions, magic, empty rites and rituals instead of social accountability, morality and devotion. Against this background, Gadge Maharaj taught the society lessons that they must behave like human beings for social reformation, they must maintain health, cleanliness and follow duties. He spread the message 'work is God'. He used to sing his favorite song 'Gopala Gopala Devkinandan Gopala'. Due to Gadge Maharaj's contribution the society has certainly been given a direction towards devotion and faith.

He asserted that God can't be pleased by sacrificing animals or spending hours together in rites and rituals. The best way of seeking God's grace is only through 'active devotion' i.e. good deeds. Gadge Maharaj gives ten principles realizing his humanitarian religion as follows: 1) Food for the hungry 2) Water for the thirsty 3) Clothes for the needy 4) Education to the poor 5) Wages for the unemployed 6) Medical attention to the patients 7) Shelter for the needy 8) Assurance of life for animals 9) Marriages of the poor youngsters & 10) Encouragement for the hopeless.9 With a view to promote his philosophy, Gadge Maharaj constructed boarding houses instead of monasteries. These boarding houses were really schools which inculcated the humanitarian philosophy. Gadge Maharaj never insisted upon erecting temples of gods or saints. He built boarding houses, especially in the vicinity of holy centres, for the needy and poor people. He opened in Pandharpur Chokhamela Boarding House in 1917, Maratha Boarding House in 1927, an Asylum for the blind and the handicapped in 1921 and the Parit Boarding House in 1925.10 Shri Sant Gadge Baba Mission, Mumbai-4, a registered society, has been set up in order to realize the management of these institutes and propagate the philosophy of this saint with a progressive mindset. The Mission looks after the development of various educational institutes, the hostels and publication of Saint literature.

Gadge Baba used to claim that 'he has no disciples, as he has no

mentors'. As a result, he didn't declare his successor. Nevertheless, there have been so many self-styled Baba's disciples, who have contributed to carrying on his message of humanitarianism. There are established several monasteries of these modern saints in Pandharpur. Some of the chief monasteries, which carry on the work of progressive awakening, are as follows: - 1. Shri Sant Gayabai Manamadkar Monastery 2. Sant Kaikadi Maharaj Monastery 3. Shri Sant Tanpure Maharaj Charodham Monastery 4. Sant Namanand Maharaj Monastery 5. Bhimdas Maharaj Karande Monastery 6. Lakshman Chandu Padadune Maharaj Monastery 7. Sant Meerabai Suryawamshi Belgaonkar Monastery 8. Sant Mirabai Shirkar Monastery 9. Sant Ruplal Maharaj Monastery.

### **Miscellaneous Monasteries**

There are certain monasteries in Pandharpur which have been set up by heads of the monasteries out of Pandharpur with the help of their disciples with a view to spreading the cause of Waarkari sect. Some of these minor monasteries are enlisted as follows: - 1. Sant Jaitunbi alias Jaydas Guru Hanumandas Maharaj Monastery 2. Sadguru Zenduji Maharaj Belikar Monastery 3. Sadguru Ramchandra Yadav Maharaj Monastery 4. Shri Harihar Maharaj Omkareshwar Monastery 5. Shri Sant Tukavipra Maharaj Monastery 6. Banwaskar Maharaj Monastery 7. Bhajandas Maharaj Monastery 8. Thorla Panchmukhi Maruti Monastery 9. Govind Maharaj Chopadekar Monastery 10. Lohia Maharaj Monastery 11. Sant Kavi Dasganu Maharaj Memorial Monastery 12. Yogi Harhar Maharaj Monastery 13. Shri Swami Samarth Monastery 14. Shri Kanhekar Buwa Monastery.

Besides the Waarkari sect, there are some other sects and their practices in Pandharpur. The Kanadi Vaishnav Monastery located to the other side of the river Bheema has its own salient features. Every member of the Vaishnav sect has to take the Mudra and renew it every five years. The members of this sect come to Pandharpur from various parts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Recently a new monastery named Bangalore Niwaas has been built off the Sangola road. The features of this monastery are reciting the Kannada translation of the Dnyaneshwari and singing the hymns composed by Purandardas and Kanakdas. The Vaishnav pilgrims to Pandharpur are easily identified by the Mudra on their forehead, a tail on their heads and the Kannada intonation. These people are very conservative practicing touchability and doing meditation. The air in their monasteries is totally different. Thousands of people from Madhya Pradesh visit Pandharpur periodically, since the philosophy of Waarkari sect has rooted well there. As a consequence, there has been built off the Gopalpur road a Teerthdhaam, where various religious programmes are organized during the times of pilgrimages. In the modern times the sect launched by Bhakti Vedanta Prabhupaad has carved a place for itself in India and outside India. The Society for Krishna Consciousness is meant for promulgation of the philosophy of Lord Krishna all over the world. The Society has established big monasteries in various cities of America. The members of the Society for Krishna Consciousness sing and preach the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Geeta and the Bhagawat in English. The Society has set up its monastery in the Shegaon fields near the river Bheema in Pandharpur. It conducts a religious rally on every eleventh day of the Hindu month. The members of the Society with Christian

background and in the Waarkari attire, a spot on the forehead and a tail on the head appear very interesting. They celebrate the eleventh day of the Hindu month along with the Mahaashvaraatri festival. Their style of playing the percussion instruments and chanting the name of God are quite different. They have certainly played an important role in spreading the Bhaagawat sect in the western world. The disciples of the Society are accompanied by a vehicle carrying the copies of the Geeta and the idol of Lord Krishna. There is a neighboring monastery belonging to Vallabha sect, the place is known as the seat of the Mahaaprabhu. Near the rest house in Pandharpur there is located a monastery of the Naath sect. Off the Sangola road are located the monasteries of Ganguiri Maharaj and the Govind Kendre Maharaj monasteries.

Thus, we find the monasteries belonging to the Waarkari and the other sects of the Hindu religion in Pandharpur. The number of holy palanquins and religious rallies coming to this town is going up and the monasteries are getting widened. In Pandharpur the Waarkari pilgrims and their monasteries are synonymous.

### The Work of the Sectarian Monasteries

Although the monasteries in Pandharpur have been mainly established for the accommodation of the visiting pilgrims of the Waarkari sect but they have become cultural centers. These monasteries house religious books, which exhibit the growth and development of the Waarkari literature. Thus, monasteries are not simply lodgings but they are the spiritual centers strengthened by the conventional reciting, singing and preaching activities aimed at reforming the society. There have been given to society several renowned preachers and singers educated at these manifold monasteries. Pilgrims belonging to various castes and creeds reside at the monasteries and take part in the religious and spiritual churning giving impetus to the social and political movements. It is known by the participation of the heads of the monasteries in the national movement how the monasteries have contributed to the social reformation.

The saint reformers of the Waarkari sect, while promoting the philosophy of the sect, never practiced the religious, caste, class or cult discriminations. However, at present, the monasteries erected in the names of the saints in Pandharpur are witnessed to have been dominated by the people belonging to the caste of the eponymous saints. This may give rise to communal tension and divide. Attempts at doing away with these harmful consequences will be in the interest of maintaining cultural and social integrity. There are several spacious monasteries in Pandharpur. Some of these are used during the pilgrimages only. It will be good if these monasteries are utilized in other times when there are no pilgrims to Pandharpur. At some monasteries the programmes meant for awakening the people to the dangers of superstitions, addiction and other social evils are carried out. People are convinced in the importance of health, education, human duties. It is a sad fact that government spends crores of rupees in implementing programmes meant for the welfare of the people and on the other hand the managers of these monasteries carry out the work of awakening without any financial resources and support. On the contrary, the managements of the monasteries have to pay the government huge amounts for taxes. A majority of the administrators of these monasteries narrated that the expenditure of the monasteries is managed on the basis of the pilgrims visiting Pan-

dharpur on festive occasions. The monasteries don't have any independent sources of income. In spite of this, the Pandharpur Municipality and the State Government of Maharashtra extract the property taxes from these monasteries. As a result of this financial crisis, the management of monasteries, which are essentially set up for maintaining the Waarkari tradition, has become quite a challenge. It can be suggested that the monasteries, which work for social unity and integrity, must be granted subsidies by the government.

A number of managers and administrators of these monasteries are well-qualified and they do the work with a scientific temperament. As the pilgrims visiting and staying at the monasteries belong to various language families like- Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Hindi, there is strengthened the linguistic brotherhood. Today Pandharpur has a domination of the Waarkari sect, since it has been a melting pot wherein various trends of Hindu religious philosophy are homogenized. There have been thousands of women participants in the activities of the monasteries. These women have given up their conservative and regressive practices and adopted the progressive mode of seeking spiritual satisfaction and contributing to the social harmony. This is quite helpful in maintaining a healthy dialogue and collaboration between men and women.

The monasteries are a platform not only for carrying out the religious festivals and occasions but conducting health camps, awakening programmes for maintaining the environment and cows, exhibitions of agricultural products and several other activities also. These are the events which boost the national income and development. The pilgrims, having been inspired by the Waarkari philosophy into visiting Pandharpur, have been instrumental in setting up monasteries. These people coming in huge numbers in the pilgrimages to Pandharpur have been responsible for the increased competition of acquiring land in the town. The prices of land in Pandharpur have gone four to five times more during the last three decades, only due to the growing demand for establishing monasteries. In spite of literally no industrial development, the town has grown in size because of the increase in the number of monasteries.

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