

CHAPTER 7—RELIGION AND GODS OF MAHARASHTRA

IN MAHARASHTRA A MAJORITY OF PEOPLE OF ALL CASTES worship as family deity either one or two of the following Gods :

- (1) The Mother—goddess.
- (2) Shiva
- (3) Khandoba.

The fourth God is Vithoba. He is worshipped and revered by most Marathi people but he is not the family deity of many families. Another very popular God is Maruti. The God is known as “ Hanumanta” in Maharashtra, Karnatak and Andhra Pradesh, as “ Anjaneya “ in Tamilnad and “ Mahabir “ in the north. He is, however, never a family deity. Other Gods, besides these, are Vishnu, with his incarnations of Ram, Krishna, Narsimha, in rare cases Vamana, A count taken while doing field work in Satara showed that only a minority of people belonging to Brahmin, Maratha, and Mali castes claimed Rama, Krishna, Narsimha as their family deities. Of these again a small number only are worshippers of Narsimha. Narsimha used to be not an uncommon given name in Andhra, Karnatak and Maharashtra¹. Dr. S. V. Ketkar wrote that there was an ancient King of Maharashtra called Narsimha perhaps then as later, parts of Maharashtra, Andhra and Karnatak were under one rule. The name would change to Narsu or Narsia in common parlance. It is possible that Narsimha was a legendary hero in this area. He is also connected in a legend of the Chenchu, a tribe from Andhra.

People worship many gods Worshippers of Shiva also worship Vishnu. The kind of rivalry bordering on enmity between Shaivites and Vaishnavites which one finds in Karnatak is absent in Maharashtra. There seems to be an effort on the part of the poet saints deliberately to play down the rivalry between Shaivism and Vaishnavism and adopt an attitude of worship to all great Gods. Because of this perhaps in Maharashtra the two most sacred days of fast are *Maha Ekadashi*, a day sacred to Vishnu in the month of Ashadha (June-July) and *Maha Shivratri*, a day sacred

¹ Dr. S. V. Ketkar: *Prachin Maharashtra*, Vol. 1, Chap. 7, pp. 44-53, Maharashtra Jnanakosha Mandal Ltd.pooona, 1935.

to Shiva in the month agh (February-March). In this respect Maharashtra is nearer to northern India than to the Dravidian South.

Though people worship many gods, the occasions and the manner of worship differ from god to god. A god and a goddess (a pair), or sometimes only one god is worshipped as the *Kula Daivata* or the *Kula-Swami*. This deity is supposed to have always been the chief deity of a particular Patri-family. The name of this deity or merely the formula, *Kula Swami prasanna* (by the favour of the Kula-Swami or the Kula Swamini) is printed always at the head of a marriage announcement, or invitation (*Lagna-Patrika*). Sometimes after a marriage or a thread ceremony people go to the shrine of their particular god to worship. This is especially the case with regard to Khandoba Newly married couples are taken there to perform a Puja called '*Wawar Puja*' (Wawar, Sanskrit—*vadhuvara*-meaning the bride and the groom). Besides the *Kuladaivata* people pay homage to the *Gramadaivat*, i.e., the deity of the village or town. Maruti or Hanumant is such a *grama-daivat*. He is supposed to guard a town. It was also the custom for a groom's party when they came to the bride's village, to halt at the Maruti temple where the bride's party gave them refreshments and led them to the house allotted to them for their stay in the bride's village. There is a ceremony called '*jyeshtha-jawai puja*' (honouring of the eldest son-in-law) at the time of the marriage of a younger daughter. In this ceremony the elder son-in-law is made to sit near the younger son-in-law-to-be in the Maruti temple and both of them are given gifts¹. The Maruti temple is also many times either part of or just near the village *chavdi* (place of business of the Patil). Other village deities may be Bhairoba, Mhasoba, Viroba, Dhuloba, Jakhai, Jokhai, Mariai. These deities generally are not worshipped at home but they are given their dues on the day sacred to them.

The third type of deity worshipped daily is the *Ishta Devata* (desired or chosen God). This may be either one or many Gods of the Hindu Pantheon like Vishnu or one of his incarnations or Shiva or Datta etc. A man at any time in his life may feel a call to worship a particular deity of a particular place, for fulfilling certain needs, bodily or spiritual. He may choose for himself or be swayed by the advice of friends to approach a certain deity, or he may get sometimes a revelation in a dream or a sudden impulse to go and worship a certain deity. That deity then becomes his *Ishta Devata*.

The pictures or figurines or other things representing the deities which are worshipped at home, may sometimes be as many as fifty. All these Icons are brought out every day from the place where they are kept, bathed, covered with *kumkum*, *halad*, and flowers and the whole process might take as much as an hour. One goes on collecting

¹ The informant, a Maratha, told the author that the gift to the elder son-in-law has always to be slightly more valuable than the gift to the son-in-law-to-be. The reporter said that because in her case the elder son-in-law was not satisfied, there was an year-long feud between the two families.

new Icons and keeping on old ones which were worshipped by one's father or grand-father, etc. The daily worship in the family was more common some fifty years ago than it is now, although even now there are very religious families and people who still spend about an hour in worshipping. A number of older people have disposed of their Icons when they found that the younger generation was not going to worship them.

Below is a table which gives roughly the number of people who have given different deities as their *Kuhdaivat*¹. In this context it may be noted that the mother-goddess is represented either as an independent goddess or coupled with Shiva. The name Laxmi or Mahalaxmi is also used for this mother-goddess who is not in this context the wife of Vishnu.

TABLE No. 1.

1. Khandoba	284
2. Jitoba, Jintoba	159
3. Sidhanath, Bhairoba, Dhavloba etc.	215
4. Shiva	61
5. Devi—Independent or connected with Shiva	207
6. Mariai	14
7. Ganapati	7
8. Datta	10
9. Vishnu and his incarnations	54
10. Maruti	3
11. Jain Tirthankars	49
12. Buddha	81
13. Mohammad	66
14. Others	19
15. None	2
16. Christ	1
17. More than one	104
18. Nagoba	1
19. Blank	79
Total	1,416

¹ This list is compiled from the data gathered at the market town of Phaltan and surrounding villages at the time of a Social Survey referred to in this book under the name of Karve and Ranadive.

It will be noticed that the highest number of people give Khandoba as their *Kuh-daivat*. The next highest are those who give the Mother-goddess. It may be noted that the special deity worshipped by Mahars formerly used to be Mariai or Mari-amma also called Laxmi. The next are those who give some form of Shiva as their deity. It may have the name of Shiva or Linga. All the rest have named *Jyotiba* or Jitoba or Mhaskoba or Bhairav which are all minor deities who are followers of Shiva or created by Shiva. Very few have Vishnu or his incarnations as *Kula-daivat*. All Jains worship the Jain Tirthankars, all Muslims, "Paigambar" and the Neo Buddhists, Buddha. The position of Maruti has already been described above. Ganapati is the *Kula-daivat* of only seven families. But Ganapati receive; worship from all at the beginning of certain important life cycle rites. At the time of marriage Ganapati receives the first worship In Poona, for example, it was the custom to give the first invitation of such a ceremony to the Ganapati in the Kasba-peth who is supposed to be one of the older deities in Poona.

It will be seen from this table that it is the minor deities and the mother-goddess who are the *Kula-daivats* for the overwhelming majority of the families in Maharashtra. The minor deities as well as the original independent mother-goddess have been gradually drawn into the particular pantheon belonging to Shiva. This seems to be due to the effect of the Lingayat cult. Most of these deities require animal sacrifice like fowls or sheep. Hundreds of goats are killed every year at the more famous shrines of these gods. Many of these gods e.g., Mhaskoba and Bahiroba need a pipe (*chilam*) with *Ganja* (*hemp—Cannabis sativa*) in it as part of the offering.¹ Khandoba, who is the *Kula-daivat* of so many people, has most of his temples² situated in the basins of the rivers Bhima, Neera, Krishna and a few in the Godavari, valley. There are two or three of them on the coast and almost none in north Maharashtra. This again shows that southern Maharashtra has much in common with the Dravidian south. The Devi (Mother-goddess) cult, however, is found all over Maharashtra and might represent one of the oldest deities worshipped from the Mediterranean right upto India.

In the table above, 104 people have mentioned that their family worships more than one God. A list of the Gods worshipped by these people does not go beyond Khandoba, Devi, Jyotiba, Nath, Siddha, Dhuloba etc. There is not a single person among them who gives Vishnu or Shiva among the Gods he worships as *Kula-daivat*, Therefore, in the table above, these 104 can be added to those who worship Khandoba, Devi, Jyotiba etc.

Below is a list of *Gram daivatas*. Here again we find that the mother goddess predominates. The name Paduba or Padmavati again shows the influence of the South.

¹ *Shree Nath Mhaskoba Devache Charitra*, pp. 28-29. 1962 3rd edition, Vir, District Poona.

² R. C. Dhere, "*Khandoba*", Deshmukh and Co.. Poona-2, 1961.

The names of the village deities were as follows :—

Devi or mother Goddess :—

Janai or Jannidevi,—Manai, Gaondevi or Gawdi or Gawdubai, Padmavati or Padubai, Sukai, Baglai, Sadai, Jogeshwari, Devalai, Kalkai, Waghjai, Zolai, Mahakali, Chandika, or Chankai, Kalashri, Navlai, Vaghubai, Vajubai, Vithlai, Mavaladevi, Navasari or Nava Shri, Dhavlai, Bhavani Bahiri, Mari-ai or Laxmi, Kalubai, Ambubai.

Gods-

Narayan, Maruti, Jyotiba, Ram, Vithoba, Shankar, Laveswar, Utveswar, Mankal-Makal, Kedar, Vetral, Khelti or Kheti (?).

Some of the Mother-Goddesses have their names from the village of which they are the goddess, e.g., Vazubai is the mother-goddess of the village Vaze, On the other hand a goddess called Manai was carried from one place to another and the new village has since been called Manai Nagar. This peculiarity of a mother goddess belonging to a particular village has been recorded for Karnatak by Mrs. Banerjee¹.

This is also the case with Shiva as the suffix Ishwar tends to be associated with one village or one town.

The city of Aurangabad used to be called Khadki. The only memory of the old name is found today in the temple of Khadke-shwar. Devi and Ishwar are “ Brahmanisations “ of the old village gods.

A few words about the priesthood of these various temples must be added. In the villages the temple priest may be a Brahmin or a man belonging to another caste depending on the type of temple and the deity. Temples of Vishnu, Rama, Krishna, Ganapati, Maruti, sometimes Devi have generally a Brahmin priest. The temples of Shankar (Mahadev), have generally a Jangam (Lingayat) or Gurav as a priest. Khandoba generally has a Maratha or Dhangar priest. Mari-ai or Laxmi has a Mahar priest. Devi and Maruti also many times have priests belonging to non-Brahmin castes.

At the village level the priest of the main village temple is a *Batutdar* i.e., a recognised hereditary servant of the village. A number of temples in villages, towns and cities are private temples of a family in which case the family has the right to appoint priests. In the larger shrines of importance like the Bhavani temple of Tuljapur, the Vithoba temple of Pandharpur, the Khandoba temple of Jejuri and many others there are different classes of priests serving a shrine. These are all hereditary priests. Neither has the priesthood of one temple any connection with the priesthood of any other temple. The priesthood and the temple it serves are completely

¹ Dr. Bhavani Banerjee--*Marrige and Kinship of Gangadikara Vokkaliga*, Deccan College, Poona, 1966.

autonomous. The priests do not take up the profession because they have a 'call' to it. They are in the profession because they are born to it in most cases as the hereditary servants of the particular god of a particular town or village. As such they do not guide the devotees in spiritual matters which task is fulfilled by the holy men and the learned Gurus of a sect.

Though Vishnu or his incarnations are not prominent among *kula-daivats*, the worship of Vishnu in the forms of Vitthal of Pandharpur has played a very important role in the cultural history of Maharashtra. Vithu or Vitthal is a word derived from Sanskrit Vishnu in Kannada language and taken into Marathi. The word occurs in Pushpadanta's *Harivamsha Purana* and means Vishnu in some places and Krishna in others¹. The god Vitthal has been referred to as "Kannada God Vithu", which shows that the Marathi people remembered the God as belonging originally to Karnatak. Vitthal is associated with the Varkari sect of Vaishnavism in Maharashtra. He may be termed an *Ishta Devata*² in this context (Daivata and Devata are two words used interchangeably in Marathi in this context. The first is neuter, the second is feminine in gender).

There are small Vithoba temples all over Maharashtra, but they all were built after the famous temple of Vitthal or Vithoba at Pandharpur. The inscriptional records of Pandurangapalli i.e. Pandharpur go back nearly to³ 6th and 12th century respectively and the Varkari cult goes back to 13th century in Marathi literature⁴. Inscriptions mentioning pilgrimage to Pandharpur on every *Ekadashi* day, date back to the 11th century⁵. There is a ritual by which a person enters the sect. He has to take the vows of the sect and receive the principles of the sect from a well recognised holy man of the sect generally known as Maharaj or *Buwa*. This man is called the *Guru* (Teacher). The Guru gives a mantra (a short prayer like " *Om Namō Bhagavate Vasudevaya*") to the disciple who has to take a vow to give up certain things like liquor, meat, fish, money (another's) and sexual intercourse with another's wife i.e. things beginning with *M*—*Madya*, *Mamsa*, *Matsya*, *Mudra* and *Maithun*⁶. He has to wear a necklace made from the wood of the

¹ Ludwig Alsdorf, *Harivamsapurana*, pp. 134-136, Friederichsen, De Gruyter & Co. Hamburg, 1936.

² *Ishta* is also mentioned as *Aradhya Devata* or *Uposya Devata*.

³ Pandurang palli Inscription : 516 A.D. Pandarage Inscription : 1236 -A.D. (G. H. Knave Sri *Vithal and Pandharpur*).

⁴ S. V. Dandekar : In " *Jnanakosha*" Vol. 20, pp. 172, 173. Published by Dr. S. V. Ketkar, Poona, 1926.

⁵ Hebbalil inscription : 1248 A.D., G. H. Khare : " *Sri Vithal and Pandharpur*. III editi n. P. 40-41.

⁶ M. D. Sathe : " *Tantrashastra Va Shakta Sampradaya Yavishayi Kahi Vihar*" Nav Bharat : September 1966. The five things beginning with *ma* are first mentioned in the 'Shakta' branch of Devi-worship which again is part of an extreme Shaiva-sect. The five things are a must for a true Shakta-devotee (R. G. Bhandarkar, *Vaisnavism, Shaivism and minor religious systems*, p. 147, Strassburg. Karl J. Trubner 1913). He must honour and

Tulsi plant round his neck, put big marks of a white paste called *Gopi Chandan* (white clay) on certain parts of his face and body, fast on every *Ekadashi*, worship Vithoba, visit the shrine at Pandharpur either once a month or once a year. This monthly or yearly pilgrimage is called *Vari*, hence the word *Varkari* means 'one who goes to Pandharpur again and again.' Marathi literary tradition begins with a commentary on the *Geeta*. This commentary was written by Dnyaneshwar in the 13th century. This book is sacred to the *Varkaris* and Dnyaneshwar is acknowledged as the first great *Varkari* saint. Dnyaneshwar was followed by a whole line of saints who have written magnificent poetry in the praise of the god Vithoba. They belong to all castes . as will be seen from the list below :

Dnyaneshwar (Brahmin), Namdev (Shimpi—tailor), Janabai (the maid servant of Namdev), Eknath (Brahmin), Sena (barber), Savata (Mali-gardener), Chokhamela (Mahar—untouchable). The last great saint of the series was Tukaram who was a Kunbi. Dnyaneshwar at the end of his book has made mention of king Ramdev Yadav of Devgiri (modern Daulatabad). This king was defeated by Alauddin and since that time up to the time of Tukaram, Maharashtra was governed by Muslim kings belonging to the Bahamani dynasty and Adilshahi dynasty. Paithan which was right upto Dnyaneshwar's time the capital city of the Yadavas was in the hands of Muslims. Paithan gradually lost its importance. Shivaji. and the *Peshwas* who made Kolhapur, Satara and Poona on the edge of the Western Ghats the capital cities of Maharashtra were yet to rise. It was during this period when Maharashtra had no Hindu kings and no patronage of native kings that these poet saints and the Vitthal shrine at Pandharpur preserved the unity of Maharashtra. There are a number of songs and legends connected with the other god like Khandoba and Devi but there is not a continuity of tradition and literature in the case of these which one finds among the *Varkaris*. The greatest among them were well respected in their own days and even today that respect has not diminished, According to Vaishnava precepts they ended their own lives. Dnyaneshwar chose to be buried alive at Alandi near Poona. Eknath drowned himself in the Godavari at Paithan and Tukaram did the same in the river Indrayani at Dehu not far from Alandi near Poona. All these are places sacred to the members of the *Varkari* sect and others. At present the shrine at Pandharpur is visited by nearly two hundred thousand pilgrims during the *Ekadashi* festival in June-July. People from all over Maharashtra and from other parts of India go to Pandharpur on pilgrimages all round the year. On the *Maha-ekadashi* day it is customary to carry images or symbols of saints from different places of

partake of intoxicating drink (*madya*), flesh (*mamsa*), fish (*matsya*), sexual intercourse (*maithuna*) and practise the different poses (*mudras*) prescribed in Hatha-yoga. Vaishnavism is in many ways a reformistic religion and looks down on these things and forbids them to a Vaishnava. So they become the forbidden things in the *Varkari* sect. According to devotees in Pandharpur the words *Mudra* in this context means money (other people's) and *Maithuna*— intercourse with another's wife.

Maharashtra to the main shrine. These images are carried in a palanquin borne in bullock-carts or on men's shoulders. Each procession walks from its town to Pandharpur for eight to twenty days. The number of such palanquins is nearly 50. No two palanquins go from one town and they come from all corners of Maharashtra. All of them stop overnight just outside the town of Pandharpur in the village Vakhari. The next day they are received in pomp at the city gate by the citizens of Pandharpur. Each is accompanied by devotees and pilgrims from the town where it starts and goes on gathering more and more people on its way to Pandharpur. People join it in groups which are called *dindi*. In each *dindi* there is a man with a string instrument (veena). One man with a drum (mrudung) for keeping rhythm, and about 10 disciples sing. The man with the veena starts to sing the poetry of the Vaishnava saints. The disciples sing after him line by line. There are people who accompany the *dindi* group who may also join in the singing. The programme of the day is such that except for a mid-day pause and the night's rest this type of singing goes on almost continuously while people are walking with palanquins. In this way devotional and highly philosophical thoughts were communicated for centuries to mainly illiterate masses. This walking together, singing together, gathering of all the palanquins outside Pandharpur and then going into Pandharpur created strong group feeling among the Marathi speaking people, for centuries. The spirit of tolerance of the *Varkari* is shown in the fact that many of the pilgrims who accompany the palanquins to Pandharpur visit famous Shiva temples on the way and pay their respects there. And the songs sung on the day when the palanquin is passing the Shiva temple at Shingnapur contain praises of Shiva. This tolerance avoided sectarianism so that we have in Maharashtra a people who largely worship as *Kula-Daivat* gods belonging to the Shiva Pantheon and who have Vitthal as the *Ishta-devata* and the worship of this *Ishta-devata* has played a great role in recent times in fostering the idea of oneness among the Maharashtrian people¹.

A religious sect based on Krishna worship and reverence to a Guru deserves mention here. This sect is called Mahanubhava or Mahatma Panth. It was founded and flourished during the 13th to the 16th century. Some scholars think that it has a philosophy based on Vedic philosophy but others think it is nearer to Jain philosophy. The followers of this sect created magnificent prose and verse in Marathi. This has however remained almost unknown because owing to persecution at the hands of the last Yadava kings and later antagonism with the other Hindus the sect went underground and preserved its literature in a secret code in the monasteries of that sect. This code has been recently deciphered by scholars and this amazingly rich literature is made available to Marathi readers. The sect is still alive in certain parts of eastern Maharashtra

¹ I. Karve *On the Road, A Maharashtrian Pilgrimage*, Journal of Asian Studies, XXII, No. 1—November 1962.

It is important in Maharashtra history inasmuch as for people of this sect Maharashtra was the sacred land and Marathi the language of their sacred books. In a manner different from the *Varkaris* they helped to keep and to enhance the solidarity of Maharashtra through this emphasis on the land and its language. It may be noted that this language is the same as in Dnyaneshwari and shows that a common literary form of Marathi had already evolved in the 13th century¹.

Besides these gods which are worshipped by Marathi people, holy men too have always found a worshipful following in all sects. This devotion is sometimes far greater than that shown to the Icons at home or in the temples. In some ways the worship of holy men has its roots in Indian philosophy which teaches that each man is the *Brahman* (*Aham Brahma Asmi*) and also in the doctrine of *Mukti* (deliverance) where the fourth or the highest kind of *Mukti* is complete union with God. The worship of holy men has, however, a nearer and more immediate source in the *Guru-sampradaya*. In its narrow sense *Guru-sampradaya* is a sect which worships Dattatraya or Datta, one of the latest deities of the Hindu Pantheon. There is also the doctrine that a disciple in any Vaishnav sect or Shaiva sect needs the advice and guidance of a spiritual master (Guru) to lead him to the proper modes of worship, contemplation, and the ultimate release. In Maharashtra in the earliest literature extreme devotion to one's gurus is depicted. This is seen specially in Dnyaneshwari and the literature of the Mahanubhav sect. Apparently from the 13th century onwards there were hosts of holy men or saintly men. They still dominate the spiritual life of Maharashtra. This holiness depends on many things. A man may be a peasant or a man belonging to an humble caste and yet be capable of holding discourses on spiritual life, capable of composing devotional poems or songs, and such a man, if he led a very simple life, almost in disregard of material comforts, could become a holy man if he wanted to. Sant Gadge Maharaj was one such man who, besides worship of Vitthal, also preached reforms of various types and politically indoctrinated

¹ (A) The following are some scholars among others who have studied and edited Mahanubhava literature.

- (1) H. N. Nene.
- (2) Y. K. Deshpande.
- (3) Dr. V. B. Kolte—now Vice-Chancellor, Nagpur University.
- (B) The following are some of the more important poems and prose writings of Mahanubhava Saints.
 - (1) *Shishupal Vadha*—1273 Bhaskarbhatta Borikar.
 - (2) *Uddhava Gita*—1274 Bhaskarbhatta Borikar.
 - (3) *Vachhaharan*—1278 Damodar Pandit.
 - (4) *Rukmini Swayamvar*—1291 Narendra.
 - (5) *Sahyadri Varnan*—1302 Rago Vyas.
 - (6) *Rudhipur Varnan*—1363 "Narayan Pandit.
 - (7) *Leela Charitra*—1378 Mhaimibhat.
 - (8) *Dristanta Path*—1348 Kesshirajbas.
 - (9) *Chakradhara Siddha*—1381 Gopal Pandit and Anerajbas.
 - (10) *Smriti Sthala*—1312 Nagadevacharya.

This list has been prepared from G. B. Nirantar "*Marathi Vangmayacha Paramarsha*," Venus Book Stall, p. 60, Poona, 1949.

For further information see books by the above scholars.

illiterate masses. Another holy man who led only a devotional life was Gulab Rao Maharaj from Nagpur and Vidarbha. He was a blind man who had dedicated his life to Vittal. He himself practised what is known as *Madhura Bhakti*¹. He had a great following among the Vaishnavas. These were saints coming from the masses and have also swayed the masses. They were given devotion equal to God himself. Then there are people who are known for their scholarly or deeply emotional exposition of the Vaishnava sect. These are known as the *Pravechankars* and hold discourses either on the Sanskrit *Bhagawdgita*, *Bhagavata Purana*, or on *Dnyaneshvari* which is the Marathi commentary on the *Bhagavadgita* or on *Bhagavat* written by Eknath, or on any of the poems of Tukaram. These *Pravachankars* are educated people mostly Brahmins, though some of the best known were non-Brahmins like Dada Maharaj who was said to be a barber. A higher type of the saintly man is he who has a reputation beyond his province and some times beyond his country and is a man of learning and philosophy. Among them can be named people like Rama Krishna Paramahansa and Vivekanand, Shri Arobindo, Ramana Maharshi and Krishnaji, the *guru* of the Theosophists. They are also worshipped by their followers as one would worship God. There is no comparable figure in the recent history of Maharashtra.

Besides these people there are holy men who do not belong to any sect, who are not too well educated, who may live the life of an ordinary person or are aberrant types, who do not care what they eat or what they wear. After reading their lives one cannot understand why they have attracted the enormous following which is theirs in Maharashtra. There is again a tradition of holy people who claim that God has revealed himself to them and who, not caring for the world behave like children, mad men, or the possessed (*Bala*, *Unmatta*, and *Pishachavat*). It must also be remembered that among all ancient and mediaeval people there was a belief that a mad man was possessed by an evil spirit; but in the case of a holy man he is possessed either by a god or a benevolent spirit. One such man called Gundam Raul has been mentioned in old Mahanubhav texts. In the present day Maharashtra the holy man called Sai Baba had the largest following. He is now dead and his shrine is in the town of Shirdi in the Ahmednagar District. Thousands of people, educated and uneducated, visit this shrine and buy rings, amulets or photograph of the Baba to bring them luck. Another such figure also belongs to the Ahmednagar District. He was called Upasani Baba and attracted a great crowd of disciples². Among the

¹ Madhura Bhakti is the kind of devotion in which a man or a woman are attached to God as a lover. Gulab Rao used to put *mangalsutra* (black beads) around his neck to show that he was a "wife of the god." The great saint Meera is an example of *Madhura Bhakti*. Bengal is supposed to be the home of *Madhura Bhakti*.

² Dr. S. N. Tipnis, '*Contributions of Upasani Baba to Indian culture* Shri Upasani Kanya Kumari Sthan, Sakuri, 1966. The book is a thesis for Ph.D. degree accepted by the Poona University.

exploits and miracles attributed to these people are stories of how they abused some-body and how the abuse itself turned into a blessing. This type of contradictory behaviour is part of their holiness.

The gullibility of some people and the cunning of others also help to create holy men of this type. Some time during 1966 a naked man was seen on a street in Poona. He would sometimes sit in the shade of a tree. He sometimes accepted food when offered by some kindly passerby, sometimes he refused. He did not speak. Within a few days he gathered some people around him. Soon he became a holy man. Then later a small hut was built for him on the sidewalk where he used to sit down. In the hut is a bed on which the man sleeps and apparently he is fed. The police or the municipal authorities who remove encroachment in public places have not done so in this case. So apparently some people are made holy men this way. One would have thought that literacy and education would bring about a critical judgement and that the tradition of such holy men would gradually die out, but this has not so far happened. Some of these modern holy men were attacked¹ in a series of articles some years ago. Now and then voices are raised against this type of holy men and their following. There was a very famous holy man in Orissa called Nepali Baba². Besides Sai Baba there are hundreds of such holy men. Some give practical advice, some read holy texts, and some might even be themselves mentally ill. One wonders whether the uncertainties and pressures of a modern society lead to people's seeking set security from such men.

The practices described upto now are found among the Hindus. In Maharashtra there are Christians—1.4 per cent, Muslims 7.6 per cent, Jains 1.23 per cent, Jews and Zoroastrians are put with 'others' as 0.24 per cent. and Buddhists 7.05 per cent. (1961 Census).

Jains: The Jains spread in Maharashtra apparently after the 10th century. They have many sacred places all over Maharashtra. Some of the place names, like Vasai and Thuwwa are witnesses to Jain habitation³. A large part of the community are traders but all along south Maharashtra one find Jain peasantry too. The Jains in many respects resemble the Hindus but their religion is governed by stricter tenets so that though is there are recognized 'holy men' and 'holy women' their position is far different from that of the 'holy men' of Hindus. The Jain holy men and women are supposed to chess in a particular way and live in strict abstinence. They have to get themselves initiated before taking the vows. They are greatly respected, hold religious and spiritual discourses and have their lives

¹ Mahadev Shastri Divekar. *Hindu Samaj Samartha Kasa Hoil*, pp. 63-65 2nd edition. Hanuman Press and Samartha Bharat Chhapkhana, Poona, 1927.

² His fame was as widespread as it was short-lived. Within six months he had received nation-wide publicity and even ministers of states became his devotees. But soon afterwards he dropped out of sight and has not been heard of since.

³ Vasai derived from Vasati near about a Jain Temple or Monastery. Thuwwa is from Stubha again originally a Buddhist or a Jain habitation.

regulated by the order to which they belong. At the Jain temples and *ashrams* there are again 'holy men' who spend their entire lives in contemplation and study and who too hold spiritual discourses. These places are visited in large numbers by the Jains.

Zoroastrians: The Zoroastrians who came to India in the 10th century are called the Parsis. They found refuge with a Hindu king of Gujarat. They spread along coastal Gujarat to Bombay and became a commercial community there. They are fire worshippers who have established their sacred fire in places called the Agyaris. At these places their life cycle ceremonies, like the thread ceremony (called Navjyot) and marriage take place. They have thus become temples as well as places for social occasions. Their dead are exposed in deep wells to be devoured by vultures. This goes back to a very ancient past, when the Persians and Indians had not separated. This mode of exposure of the dead finds a mention together with burial in *Rigveda*. Apparently, some time after coming to India the ancient Aryans took to cremating their dead. The Parsis however have kept to their ancient custom even today.

Among the Parsis there are not such a multiplicity of "holy men" as among the Hindus. A number of Parsis visit the "holy men" of other religions. Though the most highly educated community in Maharashtra, they are known to be indiscriminately charitable and give money freely, to beggars and to religious mendicants like *jogis* and *fakirs* of other religions. Recently a 'holy man' has arisen in this community. He is called Meher-Baba and is said always to keep silent. He has followers among the Parsis, as also among citizens of the United States.

Christians: Though the oldest Christians (the Syrian Christians) claim that they arrived on the Indian West Coast (Kerala) in the early centuries after Christ, no definite proof of the claim has been found. In Maharashtra however, their influence was not felt till the establishment of the British Empire. Almost all varieties of Christianity are found here. The Christians are governed by the Churches of their denomination. Unlike the Hindus all the important life rituals for a Christian, take place at the hands of an ordained priest. There are no familial rituals, though there may be family festivities. The Churches have an entirely different significance in the life of the Christians as compared to the place which temples occupy in the life of the Hindus. The religion being institutionalised, there is no room for freelance, individual holiness as there is in Hinduism. There have been no great religious figures among the Maharashtrian Christians. Among all religions being discussed here this religion alone has Missions which besides religious work have been active in the field of education and medical relief so that a large share of education and help to the sick in Maharashtra has been taken up by the Christian Missions and convents.

Muslims : Muslims were known to south India as overseas traders, mostly Arabs, long before they became known in the north as

conquerors and kings. In this respect the conditions in Maharashtra seem to be like those of North India. Arab traders do not seem to have been trading with the Konkan coast as they did on the Kerala coast which is rather surprising.

Muslim religion thus came in the wake of Muslim conquest and almost all the Muslims in Maharashtra are converted Muslims. In rural Maharashtra Sunnis predominate while in Bombay the *non-Sunni Bohras* and *Khojas* (converts from Gujarat) are found.

Mohammedanism is a religion based on a book like Christianity. It also requires that life cycle ceremonies be performed in the mosque by a recognised and 'ordained' priesthood, but there is apparently room for local holy men. Maharashtra has no imposing mosques to compare with those in Delhi or Bijapur but it is strewn with holy places where saintly men lived or died or were buried. Healing and other miracles are reported from such places. These are visited by both Muslims and Hindus. In Maharashtra there does not seem to be at present a tradition of Muslim scholars giving popular lectures on Muslim religion. Muslim scholarship, religious or secular, seems to be confined to the urban elite.

Jews : This has been always a small community confined mostly to the west coast, which has lately penetrated slightly westwards to the cities like Poona. There are Jews on the Malabar coast especially in Cochin. They claim to have come to India before the Christian Era, a claim which has not been historically substantiated. They are a small community where men and women all have Biblical names, who strictly keep to their group and though there have been many Jews prominent in the public life of Bombay, there has been no influence of this community in Maharashtra. This is now especially the case since many of them have migrated to Israel.

Buddhists : The most important religious movement in Maharashtra in recent years has been the revival of Buddhism. Buddhist caves were being curved in the 11th century A. D. Since then Buddhism vanished from all over India except a small remnant in Bengal and on the northern borders in Ladakh and in some of the valleys on this side of the Himalayas. The present rise of Buddhism is not due to northern or Bengali influence. In fact the rise is not due to a revival. It can be characterized as a new identity accepted by one of the deprived and backward groups in Maharashtra. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was born as a member of the then untouchable Mahar caste in the year 1891. He became the greatest leader of the scheduled castes not only in Maharashtra but in the whole of India. He was also a patriot and a great scholar. His resentment against the majority community which treated him in the past as untouchable was very great. He did not like the half-hearted compromises, which Gandhiji offered. He succeeded in getting special representation on legislative bodies and special privileges in services and educational institutions for the untouchable castes in India in general and in Maharashtra in particular. He and his followers resented the term

Harijan applied to them. He was in constant search of an identity for his group, an identity which would do away with the stigma of untouchability and of euphemisms like the word Harijan. He toyed for some time with the idea of converting to Mohammedanism, Sikhism, or Christianity. At last towards the end of his life he, together with thousands of people of his caste, embraced Buddhism. This action shows a maturity of judgement and a certain softening of his former attitude towards the Hindu community. Christianity and Mohammedanism had already Mahar converts which in fact did not add any advantages to the position of Mahars. Some of the old discrimination remained and became lost in the very big and assorted convert population of the two religions. They also became completely severed from the Hindus. Sikhism did not appeal to Dr. Ambedkar's scholarly and aesthetic mind. Ancient Buddhism has one of the richest literature in the world. It is grand both in its philosophical and moral concepts. In its Jataka and story literature it has a simplicity and humanity which has attracted people from all over the world. It is also indigenous in its origins. In converting to Buddhism Dr. Ambedkar symbolically remained hundred per cent. Indian and not completely cut off from Hinduism. He himself was a scholar, but those who became converted to Buddhism after him did so only because of political expediency. Buddhism at one time had influenced orthodox Hinduism in a very considerable measure. This might happen in future, as regards the new Buddhists. but today's Buddhism in Maharashtra remains no more than a group identity and a political effort at improving the status of the deprived castes. Buddhism is so new that it has not yet created its holy men, poets or saints in Maharashtra.