

## **ETHNOGRAPHY OF SONG AND DANCE OF VASUDEV, AN ITINERANT COMMUNITY OF MAHARASHTRA**

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### **Introduction**

Communal dances and songs are central to tribal life, the performance of which associated with the community (Babiracki 200/2001: 35, 37). As embedded in social and cultural life of communities, songs and dances assume importance in Social and Anthropological studies. From the ethnographic perspective, dance is a kind of cultural knowledge, embodied in movement, especially the highly stylized and codified movements. More than just somatic, it is mental and emotional as well, encompassing cultural history, beliefs, values, and feelings (Sklar 1991: 6). It is important therefore, to know and to understand how people produce a performance, 'how it creates and constructs an experience – a musical experience and aesthetic experience– that we can only make sense of by taking on both a subjective and collective identity (Firth 1997: 109). Early anthropologists including Bronislaw Malinowski, Edward Taylor and Franz Boas, showed some interest in dance, if only to stress its cohesive and integrative functions in non-Western societies (Chakravorty 2011: 138). In India, the colonial government undertook social cultural studies of Indian society with the purpose of revenue collection and effective rule; thus, the arts and art forms were not their primary focus. Even after the independence, the studies of art forms remained confined to the arena of its own field. The social and anthropological studies of artforms in India are few; fewer are dance ethnographies (Mathur 2007: 481).

This article focuses on Vasudev song and dance forms. Vasudev is traditionally an itinerant community in Maharashtra, members of which once moved to the villages early morning to do *uddhar* (propitiate souls of dead ancestors of the patrons); the primary aim of which was to seek alms (known as *daan* in Marathi offering, charity or a donation) to earn their living. They reared cattle as an allied means of livelihood. Usually, the eldest male in a family underwent *deeksha* (Joshi 1974:631), an initiation ceremony during which the boy was vested in particular attire and an elder whispered a secret *mantra* into his ears (Enthovan1922/1975: 454). Thus he began to 'perform Vasudev' (in Marathi, *Vasudev karne*). He would get up early morning, dress in particular attire then would set out to the villages. He sang and danced while he played a pair of brass cymbal and *chiplya* a pair of

clippers as he entered and went around in the villages at early hours of the day waking people up. In the course of the time, some of them have taken up performing *gondhal*, a night long performance of singing narratives from Ramayana and Mahabharata on the occasion of life cycle ritual such as marriage, birth, fifth day celebration after birth or tonsure ceremony, etc. Four or five Vasudev come together to perform the *akhyan*, a preaching performance (Paranjape 1982:2–3). With the change occurring in every aspect of society, Vasudev community also has undergone change. The traditional way of seeking daan has been now seen as begging which is not considered as a dignifying way of earning livelihood by the new generation. Therefore, many have taken up odd jobs; some of those who are educated have been employed in offices or as skilled workers with private or public undertakings. While few of the community still continue the traditional work of seeking daan in return of propitiating the souls of the ancestors of their patrons.

In this article, the author tries to locate the Vasudev songs and dance in the socio-cultural context of Maharashtra, the endeavour he begins with a brief ethnographic view of the community. Besides being associated with the community for several years, the author has collected the data for this article through observations and by conducting informal interviews, group discussions with men and women of different age groups from the community spread over various parts of Ahmednagar and Pune districts in Maharashtra.

### **Vasudev Community: A Brief Ethnographic Profile**

There are several myths about the origin of Vasudev community. According to one story, Vasudev is the descendant of Sahadev, a son of a Brahman *Jotishi* (astrologer) and Kunbi woman (Einthoven 1922/1975: 454. Kalelkar 1928/199: 219, Joshi 1974: 631-32). In another myth, the community received the boon from Sri Ram to sing devotional songs and dance to wake people up in the morning (Shinde 1991: 40–41).

Reference to Vasudev goes back to ninth century Mahanubhav Sect's literature in which Vasudev is referred to as '*Bhridi*' (Dhere 2007:14). Shri Krishna being the principle deity of the sect, its affinity towards Vasudev is but obvious. Later, we find the poet saints of Maharashtra beginning from Dnyaneshavar (CE 12 century) upto Tukaram and Eknath (CE 16 Century) used Vasudev either as a simile in their poetical rhetoric or composed verses using Vasudev style metrical form, or some used gestures peculiar to Vasudev as media to communicate their socio-religious message effectively (Khandge 1982: 32, Deshmukh 1982: 23). For instance, Tukaram, a great poet saint of Maharashtra, also composed his devotional *Abhangas* (a type of devotional verses) in the Vasudev metrical form (See *Sant Tukaram Gatha*, verse 429-434). Vasudevs claim that their ancestors acted as spies for the Maratha King Shivaji and supplied to him vital information from the enemy. The gazetteers mention presence of Vasudev community in Aurangabad,

Beed, Kolhapur, Nashik, Parbhani, Pune, Solapur, and Thane districts of Maharashtra. The community is also found in Varhad, Madhya Pradesh and Hyderabad kingdoms. According to S.V. Ketkar (1926), Vasudev put a peacock feathers in their headgear in Marathi districts, that is in Maharashtra, and 'in the area around Sagar [Madhya Pradesh] they cover their head with a vessel called "matak"' (183).

Vasudev community is divided into two main *kulas*, subgroups. One is known as *Sahadev Joshi*, the astrologers who predict fortune by reading palm. The other is Vasudev, who seek *daan* and propitiate the ancestors of the donor. When asked to distinguish the other group, Vasudevs maintain saying, *amhi ekach; fakt, te hatavar magtat ani amhi taalavar magto* (we are the one and the same; except the difference in our earning of livelihood. They, the Joshis, seek alms by reading palm whereas; we seek alms by playing the *taals*). Both, Vasudevs and Joshis inter-dine and intermarry. Vasudev community is further divided into exogamous clans; each of which has common ancestors and common surname. Each clan has its own *kuldaivat*, the ancestral deity. In addition, they also adore god Panduranga, known as Shri Vitthal of Pandharpur (Solapur District in Maharashtra). People from different parts of Maharashtra undertake walking pilgrimage to Pandharpur on the occasion of the main festival on the eleventh day of waxing moon of the lunar month Ashad (June–July). The pilgrimage is known as *dindi*. Vasudevs invariably accompany the *dindis*. Thus, Vasudevs from Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra meet together at Pandharpur on the following day of the feast. It confirms the popular saying prevalent among them that says, '*Chandrabhagechya Kathi, Vsudevachya gathi-bheti*,' (On the banks of the river Chandrabhaga, where Vasudevs from different places confluence). Khandoba of Jejuri (in Pune district) is another common deity adored by Vasudevs. They perform a *gondhal* (devotional ritual with song and dance that lasts throughout the night) in honour of Khandoba on auspicious occasions, such as first tonsure of a child or a marriage ceremony. They adore goddess Satvai whose main shrine is located at Mankeshwari near Bhoom in Osmanabad District, Tuljabhavani of Tuljapur, in Solapur district and Ranumata at Rottha, near Wardha. Often, they make a vow to these goddesses and in fulfilment of the vow, join in the annual *jatra*, the festive celebrations, during which they offer goats or chicken.

Vasudevs is patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal community in which child marriages are common. Cross-cousin marriages are allowed. Generally, monogamy is practiced. If the wife is sick, issueless or the family does not have a male child, the man can marry another woman. However, in no case a woman marries second time. The informants further explained to me the strictness of the rule saying, even if the groom dies after they have applied turmeric paste to the bride, she cannot get married again. If anyone contracts marriage involving a person from other community, either he or she, is expelled from the community. It is the most severe

punishment known as *chillam an tambhaku jalne*, (it literally means burning off the smoking pipe with tobacco), to signify severing of all the ties with the community.

A Vasudev family consists of parents with their unmarried children. Women keep a day long fast as part of their vows/promises to goddesses. The nature of fasting is so very austere that some of them do not even drink water throughout the day. Just before serving men the special food items prepared, they perform a ritual to honour ancestral deities. Whether it is a day of fasting or not women always eat after men have eaten their meal. Women avoid certain vegetables out of its season as part of their ritualistic life. They prepare a food item using the particular vegetable and perform a ritual before eating serving it for the first time in the season. It is known as *navakhane*. Children, girls as well as boys, are sent to schools. Except for few girls who pursue college education these days, often girls drop out of schools as they are married after their first menstruation. The dead are buried and the community traditionally being an itinerant, the 'tenth day' ritual is conducted on the third day of death.

The community council consists of leaders belonging to different clans, known as *mahajan*, which settles the dispute in the community. In earlier days no one was allowed to take any dispute to civil court or police station. But now, situation has changed. If anyone from the disputing parties, is not satisfied with the verdict of the Mahajan, can seek justice in the civil court. *Soir Sudamat* is a kinship hierarchy that comes into action especially at the time of marriage. They resolve issues that arise at the time of wedding.

### **Socio-cultural Context of Vasudev**

The Vasudev cult is intrinsically connected to the people's religious beliefs, including the belief in the propitiating of souls, traditional moral values, and agrarian economy. As part of religious belief, the cult of Vasudev is closely associated with the cult of Sri Vitthal, the principle deity of Maharashtra. People adore Sri Vitthal so much that every year they undertake walking pilgrimage to the shrine at Pandharpur in the month of *Ashad*. The entire month of *Shravan*, is dedicated for the devotion to the god; everywhere villagers gather in the temple in the late evening to sing *bhajans*, devotional songs in his name. It is popularly known as *Bhagwat Dharma* and its followers as *warkaris*.

Basically, Sri Vitthal is no one but Sri Krishna who as Gopalkrishna, the cowherd, came in search of Rukmini, his wife, to Dindirvana (near Pandharpur), and to visit his ardent devotee Pundalika. In addition, Pundalika took great care of his aged parents which pleased Sri Vitthal. So to appreciate his devotee, when Sri Vitthal arrived at his door, Pundalika seem to have lost in his work and had no time to welcome the visitor. Therefore, he threw a brick (Marathi, '*vit*') for the visitor to stand in waiting. Apparently, Pundalika forgot all about the guest who

continued standing on the brick. It is believed that Sri Vitthal is standing on the brick for last twenty-eight yugas. Thus it is Sri Krishna, the *gopveshdhari*, the one who is clad in cowherd's attire, as Sri Vitthal, who is standing on the brick. (Dhere 1984: 58–59). Vasudev personifies Sri Vittal wearing the attire of Sri Krishna.

### **The Vasudev Attire**

Vasudev attire includes a long gown reaching till below the knees. It is usually either complete white or orange in colour, with a colourful hem attached at the end. Traditionally, a white dhoti was worn. As dhoti has become obsolete with new generation, a white or orange pyjama is worn these days. The gown also resembles the gown worn by Vasudev, the father of Sri Krishna. A long rope worn over the gown (see Picture 1.1) is looped around the neck making a cross on the chest; the ends of the rope are tucked in front in the sash on either side. The rope symbolises the chains with which Vasudev was tied when he was imprisoned by Kauns, the maternal uncle of Sri Krishna. A long strip of cloth known as *dhaj*, usually red in colour is worn around the neck that hangs down to till the knees. It adds elegance to the attire. A sash (*kamar patta*) made up of cloth is tied over the gown around his waist. Usually a short flute (*pava*) resembling the flute Sri Krishna played, is tucked in the sash in front. A sling used in storing daan received, hangs on his left shoulder. Vasudevs wear a conical cap (*topi*) of peacock feathers



**Picture 1.1:** Vasudev Attire

*Source:* Fieldwork collection

resembling the cap worn by Sri Krishna. It is usually adorned with images of various deities embossed on brass metal pieces. The top most part of the conical shape cap is known as *kalas*, a pinnacle of a temple, is made up of brass.

It reminds the people in rural Maharashtra, the Sri Vitthal temple at Pandharpur. For them, looking at the *kalas* is as good as taking a *darshan*, a devout glimpse of Sri Vitthal without going to Pandharpur. Some caps are adorned with a brass icon, either of Sri Vitthal-Rukhmai or of any other deity instead. The legacy of the cap is enshrined in a myth according to which Sri Ram blessed the peacock after it directed the king of Ayodhya to a water source in the forest to provide drink to thirsty Sita during the exile.

Just as warkaries do, Vasudev marks his face by applying spots of sandalwood paste (Marathi, *chandanacha tila*), on the forehead, ear lobes, on both the cheekbones and a spot on the neck below the thyroid gland. A pair of *chiplyas*, the pincers, are held in left hand while *taal*, a pair of brass cymbals are held in the right hand. These are the instruments invariably used by the *Warkaris*, during their devotional singing. Following the rhythm of these instruments Vasudevs sing and dance.

When Vasudev arrives at the *aangan*, foreground any house in rural area, people consider him a saint, if not equate him to the deity itself. They revere him as god who comes to visit his devotee, remembering Sri Vitthal's visit to Pundalika. It is this image of Vasudev that has been preserved in the collective mind and heart of the people in rural Maharashtra. His gentle mannerism and soft-spoken approach confirm this image further. Faces are seen lit with joy when people spot Vasudev in their village. Though, the new generation in urban areas is far removed from the socio-religious context, show respect when they see Vasudev moving in the lanes and by lanes of their city or town.

### **Meaning and Significance of Vasudev Dance and Songs**

Those from the community who go 'performing Vasudev' have their days fixed and areas assigned to them. They rise early in the morning, dress in the particular attire after taking bath, and set out to the villages. By noon they return home with good amount of grain in their sling and some cash in their pocket. The performance includes songs and dance which can be roughly divided into three sections: the first section is the songs and dance performed as Vasudev enters a village. During this time Vasudev performs a body movement with peculiar steps and wears pleasant facial expressions as he enters a village or goes about in the village lanes. The second is the dance and song performed after Vasudev is offered daan. In his jubilant and hilarious mood Vasudev performs now a rigorous body movements encircling about himself, he acknowledges the daan. And, the third is, when Vasudev narrates stories through songs. The story telling performance involves mainly hand gestures, facial expressions and intonation of voice. There is not much of body

movement involved in this performance. Therefore, we focus here on the first two sections. In all his performances, Vasudev is the singer, musician, the dancer and actor (Bhavalkar 1982: 27).

Throughout the performance Vasudev plays the *taal* and *chiplya* alternatively, producing mixture of sharp metal sound of the *taals* and flat sound of the *chiplyas* in unison, maintaining eight beats. The number of beats remains the same for all the songs. However, the tempo of the beats varies according to the kind of singing. For devotional singing it is medium whereas for singing narratives it is slow. This music is closely associated with Vasudev identity. Hearing its very tune, people understand that Vasudev has arrived in their village and flock to see him.

### **Vasudev Songs and Dance while on Village Lanes**

Vasudev enters a village dancing, singing accompanied by the rhythm of taal and chiplya. He performs leg, body and the neck movements as he moves on the village lanes. He jumps alternatively on one or the other foot as he puts it forward. While doing so, he adds a little swing to it while slightly bending and straightening it as he firmly rests it on the ground, constantly balances his weight on it at the same time. While these movements take place, the other leg is bent in the knee backward resting the sole on the ground behind, keeping the heel in a raised position. As these leg movements go on, his upper torso is slightly bent forward first, and swung in sideways later. At the time when the torso is swung in one direction, a slight jerk is given to his head in the neck in opposite direction in keeping with the rhythm supplied by playing taals and chiplyas (see Illustration 1:1). Occasionally, he plays



**Illustration 1.1:** Vasudev Body Movements

the short flute adding another tune to the music. He raises his hands occasionally to emphasise the emotions in the song he sings in a husky baritone voice that resounds in the silence of the early hours. His face remains sublime all throughout the performance. So, at any given moment, Vasudev makes a dynamic picture of his body and limbs bent in a zigzag shape. These movements are well synchronised with the rhythm provided by singing and playing the instruments. Such an energizing performance easily catches everyone's attention at the start of the day.

There are several devotional songs Vasudev sings to Sri Krishna and Sri Vitthal, on his arrival in the village. Many of them contain the theme of encouraging people to adore god regularly. The 'Tulasi song' narrating why the Tulasi plant should be adored every day, is one of the most popular songs:

*Tulas vandavi – vandavi / mavali – santachi savali  
Tulasi eisei lavita rop / paluni jati sagle dosh  
Tulasi ghalit eise vata / vighan jatil bara vata  
Tulasi ghalit eise pani / zali patkanchi dhuni  
Tulasi lavit eise gandha / tutail yamyache bandha  
Tulasi ghali pradkshina / pathimage ubha kanha  
Tulasi eise davit naivadhyia / bhoajan baisale govind  
Tuka mhane tulasi chhand / gaato govind*

(The sacred Tulasi plant is a protective shelter provided by saints hence, we must adore it./ By planting Tulasi sapling you chase away all the diseases from the household./ By constructing a parapet around the plant your household will be protected from all the calamities;/ By watering the tulasi plant you set ablaze all your sins./ By applying a spot of sandalwood paste on the plant you break the clutches of Yama, the god of death./ When you ceremoniously circumbulate around the sacred plant you will find Kanha, Sri Krishna, standing behind you./ When we offer naivadya, the ceremonious food items, Govind (a name of Sri Krishna) will dine with you./ 'Tukaram says' is the characteristic ending of the song to finally conclude the theme of the message. Tukaram says that Govind, Sri Krishna himself, sings this verse of Tulasi plant).

### **Vasudev Dance after daan is Received**

As Vasudev moves about in the village lanes someone invites him to the house. Before he reaches the *aangan*, a married woman from the household waits for him at the door with some grains, a small containers of vermilion (*kumkum*) powder, turmeric (*halad*) powder and a pot (*tambya*) full of water placed in the winnowing pan (*soop*). When Vasudev arrives at the foreground (*aangan*) of the house the woman first pours the pot full of water on his feet, a gesture to welcome Vasudev washing the dust on his feet. Then she applies kumkum and halad to the icons on



his cap, she applies it on his forehead with the tip of the second last finger. By this, he is revered as god personified. Vasudev in return applies kukum and halad on the lady's forehead to acknowledge the same. The grains in winnowing pan then offered to him. Vasudev receives the offering gratefully and empties the pan into his sling. He returns the pan placing few grains back into it, signifying his wishes of prosperity and well being to the family; he politely inquires the names of the deceased ancestors with the lady. Soon after getting the names, he swings into singing and dancing with electrifying body movements.

First, he begins with thanking for the daan received in the name of various gods, reciting their names and the places of their shrines. As he sings, he dances in circle with the same steps as before. The tempo gradually goes on increasing steadily so much that; finally, Vasudev whirls around himself as he dances and sings (see Illustration 1.2). He sings the characteristic song of Vasudev song '*daan pawala*' (the offering received):



Illustration 1.2

He sings to announce that he has received the daan in the name of various gods and goddesses:

*Daan pawla /daan pawla  
 Pandharichya / Itobaryala  
 Kondhanpuratil / tukkobaila  
 Jejurimandi / khandobadevala...*

Then he continues to sing glorifying the ancestors of the patron who offered him daan.

*Dharma kela pachi botan / dharma kela... navan*

When Vasudev dances in circle, he symbolically goes around the universe. Thus, it is believed that the goodwill gesture of the family reaches to various deities across the universe. Vasudev considers himself as the one who receives the *daan* on behalf of gods. Therefore, he sings the song *daan pawla*, reciting a long litany of names of gods on whose behalf he has revived the daan. The patrons with their simple faith are contented to hear the far reaching effects of their *daan*. Here, Vasudev as a mediator of divine grace is taken in place of god and adored by the people. In return, he does not lose the opportunity of distributing the grace generously, as he blesses people with prosperity, propitiates the souls of their ancestors. He almost functions as a goodwill ambassador of gods. Due to this role Vasudev has carved an image of a benevolent minister in the minds and hearts of the people.

The souls of ancestors are respected and revered on many occasions in rural Maharashtra. There are rituals performed on tenth and thirteenth day after death to keep the souls satisfied. Every year two weeks of the month of *Ashvin* are especially assigned to perform rituals to propitiate the souls of the ancestors. Before any auspicious occasion or wedding ceremony, a special ritual is performed to make sure that the souls of the ancestors are given a proper respect so that they do not cause any 'disturbance' in the undertaking. In such context, when Vasudev reaches at the patron's door at the early hour of the day and propitiates souls of the ancestors is considered something of great value. It is not the goodness of the person who actually offered the daan but Vasudev emphasises the greatness of the ancestors who transmitted that goodness to the generations after. It is but fortunate being born in such lineage, he says. People feel proud of hearing such praises sung to their ancestors.

### **Conclusion**

From the socio-cultural perspective Vasudev, embodies a rich symbolism and meaning. They do not mix their main aim of earning livelihood with the dance and songs anywhere throughout the performance. People value the purity of good intention; therefore, they do not consider this as begging but generously offer daan to him as they treat him with respect. Those who perform Vasudev told me that,

they walk in the village lanes; and do not go door to door. Only when someone calls, they go to any household, without keeping any expectations of daan. They bless and express their good wishes to the household where they are invited. Therefore, even if the context has changed considerably, Vasudev with his pleasant mannerism and benevolent spirit still retains his iconic image.

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