The *'Palkhi'* of Alandi to Pandharpur

Chapter five

As seen in the second chapter, pilgrimage is a significant ritual in almost all civilisations. It has a common underlying foundation of attaining a higher spiritual level through the act of journeying to holy sites. This discussion forms the background for my study of the Hindu pilgrimage of Alandi to Pandharpur which is the focus of this chapter. My associations with this Pilgrimage described in chapter one, form a crucial link to my explorations here.

The Alandi to Pandharpur pilgrimage, colloquially known as the '*Palkhi*' is one of the most important cultural events in the state of Maharashtra and is unique to the Marathi (local language) speaking people. This chapter examines the different philosophical and physical aspects of the Pilgrimage, mainly through my study of literature on the subject, and partly through my own experience as a pilgrim. This chapter appropriately uses colloquial Marathi words or terminology to describe the inherent qualities of the *'Palkhi'* which would otherwise get lost in translation. Nevertheless, I have attempted to explain all language used either here or later, in the glossary. The visual component in this chapter complements the text, forming another layer of language to better convey the emotive and more intangible aspects of the Pilgrimage.

The chapter begins with my story. It is followed by the literature overview which examines the existing research on the topic. I have used this as background data for my study and analysis. It serves to locate the *Palkhi* in space, time and culture. The next section examines its customs and rituals and its present form. The text oscillates between narrative accounts and factual explanations to provide a comprehensive picture of the event. On the whole, this chapter explores the nature of the Alandi-Pandharpur *palkhi* to understand its distinctive features and their implications to my enquiry.

MY STORY

I began my most awaited journey, a walk of 19 km to the town of Saswad, where the *palkhi* or the palanquin took its night halt. I was walking along with thousands of pilgrims in the famous pilgrimage of Alandi to Pandharpur, a 250 km walk which is covered in 20 days. The skies were clouded, a relief from the harsh tropical Sun; but in a little while I realised that the comfort was short lived. Soon, the uphill climb began, through the winding Dive ghats and I began sweating and panting with the saturation of humidity in the air. Miles and miles ahead, I could see the twisting road flooded with *varkaris* (the pilgrims of this pilgrimage), with their flapping orange flags. The men were clad mostly in white with bright turbans and women in all range of coloured *saris* (women's traditional wear), with the sacred potted plants of *Tulasi* (basil) on their heads, a picture which appeared to be moving as a procession (see Figure 5.1). I could spot the main palanquin which carried the silver footwear of the Saint Jnaneshwar personifying his presence, which has been the driving force behind this 800 year old tradition of pilgrimage. I felt the enthusiasm in the air, with people singing *abhang* (the devotional songs) or just chanting the saint's name "Jnanoba Mauli Tukaram", with smiling faces and purposeful strides.

What makes these '*varkaris*' (the pilgrims of this pilgrimage) overcome their worries, forget their personal comfort, their set lives and even their existence to walk en-masse towards the religious centre of Pandharpur every year? I decided to be one of them and soon caught their rhythm and their infectious devotional fervour and started looking beyond. The rain started pelting down in sheets and I was momentarily shaken from my stance but soon regained my poise and continued the walk. The whole pilgrimage now seemed like a river of umbrellas and colourful plastics which supplemented the raincoats (See Figure 5.2). But there was no change whatsoever, in their pace and spirits and the organised demeanour. Soon after this short spell of rain, the landscape transformed into lush green rolling hills, clean roads, swaying trees and the cool breeze which refreshed my mind with a renewed enthusiasm. The journey continued amidst the changing nature towards the common goal at Pandharpur, the abode of Lord Vithoba.

Figure 5.1: *Palkhi* procession in the Dive ghats

(Source: Sane, 2005)

Figure 5.2: Rain during the *Palkhi's* journey to Saswad

(Source: Sane, 2005)

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This is the unique Pilgrimage of Alandi to Pandharpur. It is popularly known as *'Palkhi' or 'vari'* in the state of Maharashtra. The destination of this pilgrimage is the *'tirtha'* of Pandharpur. It is believed to be the abode of Lord Vithoba.

The popularity of this pilgrimage is attributed to the various saint-poets of Maharashtra who, through their poems and songs, have recorded the importance of devotion towards Lord Vithoba and the significance of doing this pilgrimage. 'The Pandharpur tradition of *Varkari Sampradaya*[1]*,* it is first of all found in the *abhangs* or the hymns of the so-called "poet-saints of Maharashtra", i.e. Jnaneshwar, Namdev, Eknath and Tukaram, and a number of lesser known and less important saints'(Sand, 1990, p.33). In addition, there are pilgrimages (*varis/palkhis*) associated with these saints which begin from several locations in Maharashtra and head to Pandharpur (see p.105).

Though there are historical references and personal accounts of this pilgrimage through the poems of the successive saint-poets of Maharashtra, the detailed history was first studied and recorded in Marathi by a Maharashtrian scholar, S.V. Dandekar (1927). It was based on his experiences of participating in the pilgrimage. This study also dwells upon the spiritual and philosophical aspects of this pilgrimage which is extensively referred to by many scholars later. Rev. Dr. Murray Mitchell (1882, cited in Zelliot, 1987, p.33) is the earliest writer in English who described this pilgrimage event and atmosphere through his observations.

But a very exhaustive study done by a French scholar, Father G.A. Deleury is one of its kind, as it has taken into account all the aspects of this pilgrimage. It examines various aspects like its historical origin, the temple of Vithoba at Pandharpur, the present form of the pilgrimage to its other aspects like etymology, iconography and epigraphy which are compiled in his book called '*The cult of Vithoba*' (1960). I have used his work extensively to

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[1] Sampradaya or Panth mean a 'religious sect', a 'road' or 'a way', 'a way to salvation', a group of followers of a school of spirituality. (Deleury, 1960, p.3)

understand the process and terminologies attached with this pilgrimage but it is more of a documentary nature. Hence, I have also referred to the works of eminent Marathi authors like Karve (1962), Bhagwat (1974) and Mokashi (1990), and intellectuals like Stanley (1992); who have expressed their personal experiences of the *Palkhi* through lucid descriptions. They give an insight on the personal lives of the *Varkari*, their faith and motivation, and illustrate the contemporary form of *Palkhi*.

Mokashi (1964) has written his book based on his diary, interviews and his own experiences on a day to day basis, and it gives a very realistic account of the *Palkhi*. His main intention while participating in the *Palkhi* was to write a novel rather than participate as a devotee. His urban, educated background is reflected in his honest, 'matter of fact' writing as he describes his personal discomforts and questions the relevance of some customs. Rather than glorifying the pilgrims or the pilgrimage, he gives a different insight which I could relate to during my participation. Its translation into English by Engblom (1990) along with an introduction, and a historical introduction by Zelliot (1990), is brief but informative.

More recently, this pilgrimage has been a topic of interest for many Marathi researchers like Sahasrabuddhe (1988), Nerkar (1998) and Nalavde (2000). A few other publications by the Saint Jnaneshwar Trust and *Varkari* organisation at Alandi (Jadhav, 2003) have also documented the various songs, poems and literature along the pilgrimage serving as guides to new participants. Up to date accounts of the *palkhi* can also be obtained from all the prominent local news papers (eg. Sakal*,* Loksatta, The Times of India and Indian Express, 2004 -2006), which give detailed description of the *'Palkhi'* every year. They cover its practical aspects like traffic diversions, temporary facilities, and new developments like special roads, pavilions etc. by the local government[2] for its smooth functioning.

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[2] Mr. Vilasrao Deshmukh (2005, Sakal), the chief minister of the State announced the government plans to complete the following public works at Pandharpur within next 5 years: a bridge for pilgrims, water supply and sewage disposal unit, underground drainage system. The development of entire road stretch with tree plantation was announced by the forest minister, Pachpute (2006, Sakal)

Figure 5.3: Vithoba at Pandharpur
(Source: Joshi, 2006)

One of the recent sketches (see Figure 5.3) in *Sakal* newspaper illustrates the adoration and love of all the *varkaris* for Lord Vithoba. He is depicted as a larger-than-life figure to which all the *varkaris* have physically clung, worshipping him in all the possible ways.

Thus, from the existing body of literature, it is evident that the research on the *Palkhi* is predominantly of an anthropological nature. Some works have focussed upon Alandi or Pandharpur towns, giving descriptions of their historical origin, their associations with the pilgrimage or saints and their current structure (Sand, 1990; Vaudeville, 1996; Nalavde, 2000). None of the literature however, examines the nature of physical settings or public spaces of the intermediate towns.

REGIONAL SETTINGS

To understand this pilgrimage and its distinctive nature, it is necessary to establish its historical, socio-cultural and religious foundations. I now place it into its geographical context through its regional[3] settings.

The *Palkhi* is the most prominent religious expression of the State of Maharashtra (See Figure 5.4). There are several groups of pilgrimages which occur simultaneously to Pandharpur, but I focus on Saint Jnaneshwar's *palkhi* which begins from the town of Alandi. The pilgrims begin their walk of 18 days to reach the holy town of Pandharpur, about 250 km towards South-east. Figures 5.4 to 5.6 zoom from the national to a local level to illustrate pilgrimage location, route and the town of Lonand selected for observations.

Figure 5.4: Location of Maharashtra in India

(Source: Compare Info Base)

(Note: The boundaries depicted may not be authentic)

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[3] The word 'region' here refers to the broader meaning as explored and demonstrated by Feldhaus (2003) which denotes a 'sense of place' or belonging, 'an area with a distinct identity for the people who live in it' inclining towards its cognitive aspects. She has illustrated the 'regional consciousness' arising out of religious connotations that may overlap or co-exist or contradict due to its subjective nature. However, she states that the sacred network or the 'connected places' emerge out of people's activities and their 'imaginations'. Her whole study is based in Maharashtra and is thus of more relevance to my understanding about this uniquely local pilgrimage

Figure 5.5: Three districts through which the *palkhi* passes during its course.

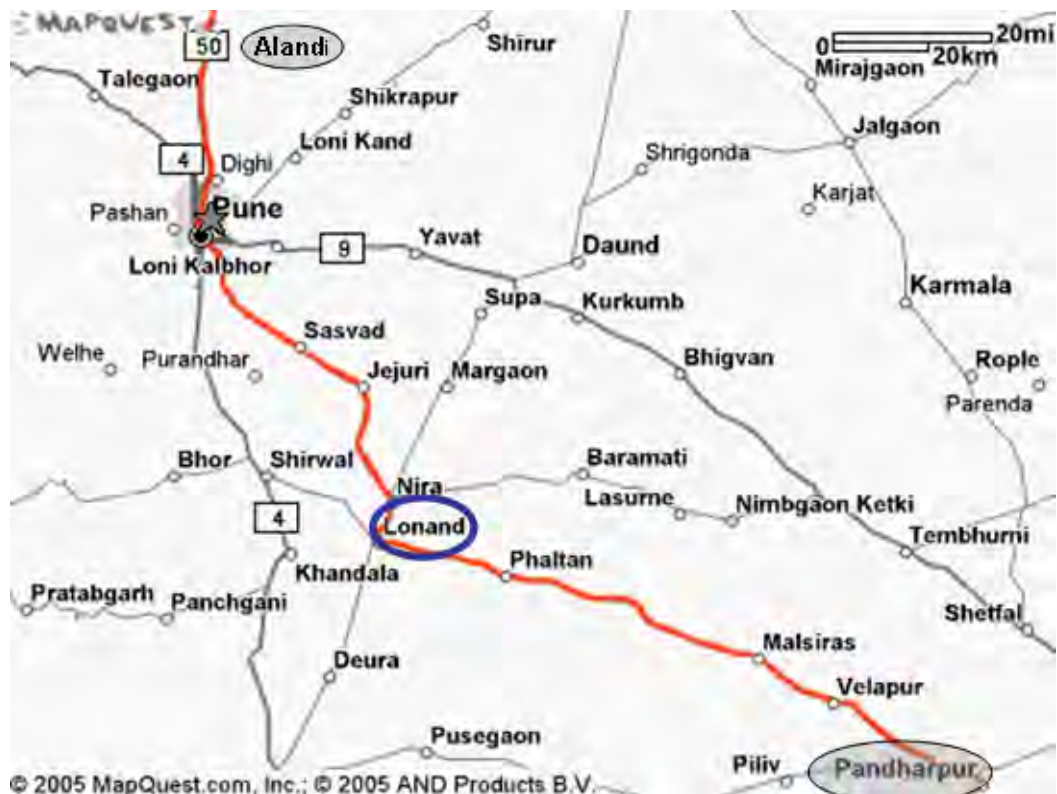(Source: Compare InfoBase)

Figure 5.6: The Alandi- Pandharpur Pilgrimage route

(Adapted from: Map Quest)

As in case of any pilgrimage, the starting point and the destination are inextricably linked to its overall formation and development. Consequently, I need to explain the significance of both, the destination of Pandharpur and the starting point of Alandi, and their connection with the Lord Vithoba and Saint Jnaneshwar respectively. Many scholars have questioned their existence, but are not conclusive; hence, the thesis builds up on the popular belief.

PANDHARPUR AND LORD VITHOBA

Pandharpur *tirtha*, today known as the spiritual capital of Maharashtra is a popular *tirtha* and is located on the western banks of Bhima, a prominent tributary of the river Krishna (see figure 5.7). The Vithoba of Pandharpur and its origin as a God and an *avtara* (divine form) of Lord Vishnu, is found in inscriptions as studied by Khare (1938, cited Deleury,1960) and is believed to have stayed there due to the saint Pundarika's devotion, though there have been subsequent debates about this legend.

Figure 5.7: Pandharpur during Pilgrimage
(Adapted from: Pandharpur, 2005)

The river Bhima takes a gradual turn towards the South-east from Pandharpur forming a crescent moon like shape due to which it is popularly known as Chandrabhaga. The *varkaris* reach Pandharpur on the eve of Ashadhi Ekadshi (the 11th day of waxing moon in the lunar month of Ashadh

as per the Hindu calendar), which is normally in June-July. There are a number of temples in Pandharpur which an ardent *Varkari* visits during his stay. They are mainly divided according to their setting: those lying on the banks of Bhima, those lying on the way of the *pradakshina* (circumambulatory path around the temple precinct), and those of the *nagarpradakshina* (around the city).

ALANDI AND JNANESHWAR

Though the exact year when this pilgrimage began is unknown, Saint Jnaneshwar (see figure 5.8) is credited to formation of the *Varkari* Sect towards the end of 13th century (Deleury, 1960, p.37). He integrated the pilgrims, laying down the norms about the duties of a '*varkari*' in his sacred text of 'Jnaneshwari' (Dandekar, 1927, p.6). Dandekar also asserts that the *varkaris* (the devotees of Lord Vithoba) did exist prior to Jnaneshwar and were also doing the pilgrimage to Pandharpur but they lacked any formal organisation.

Figure 5.8: Saint Jnaneshwar
(Source: Alandi Ashram, 2006)

Deleury (1960, p.1-21) has delved deep into the various facets associated with the history of the *Varkari* Sect. He asserts the relation of 'Marathi' language and the *varkari* poets which began at around 1200 A.D. and that the language itself owes a lot to these poets for its literary development and subsequent establishment in Maharashtra. Till then, Sanskrit was the sole language of cultural expression. Saint Jnaneshwar, as one of the more well-known of these poets, attached himself to the *bhakti* movement (see chapter three, pp.44.45) and changed the picture by translating the old

Sanskrit heritage into Marathi, in his 'Jnaneshwari,' thus reaching out to the common people.

Saint Jnaneshwar's life story (though debatable) contains various accounts of hardships that he and his siblings faced as a result of caste discrimination, and how they overcame these due to the miraculous powers displayed by him from time to time. So, at a very young age, their fame spread rapidly and they were considered to be blessed by God. His entire family (outcast Brahmins), were the first *varkari* missionaries and due to their spiritual statures along with sound knowledge of traditional Sanskrit texts; they started spreading the *Varkari* Sect all over Maharashtra as they travelled. They settled for some time in Nevasa, where Jnaneshwar, at the age of 15 (Dandekar, 1927, p.18), wrote his immortal book, the Jnaneshwari. It was written with the intention of setting up a philosophical base for the *Varkari* Sect and has become 'the book' of the *varkaris* or their Bible, and remains a source of inspiration even today.

Later on, he also travelled to many other parts in India and got acquainted with various religious schools of thought. The *bhakti* movement was in a state of revival, as a reaction to the esoterism of Sanskrit culture[4]. So Jnaneshwar, with his sound spiritual as well as intellectual background 'attached himself to the *bhakti* movement' (Deleury, 1960, p.10). He continued his mission of writing in Marathi language and also started spreading it amongst all the people in Maharashtra soon becoming their spiritual leader at a very young age.

Jnaneshwar and his siblings from their family house in Alandi often took pilgrimages to various places but predominantly to Pandharpur, thereby reinforcing the *Varkari* tradition. As mentioned in *'Shri Jnaneshwar Charitra'* (Gosavi and Gosavi, 2005, p.91), this era of pilgrimages undertaken by Jnaneshwar marks a very important phase in his life. It was also an influential

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[4] Jnaneshwar realised that majority of the masses who were not educated and were predominantly from lower castes were drifting away from Vedic religion precisely due to the reason of its inaccessibility and its mere emphasis on superficial practices. This was resulting into people getting converted to other religions, such as Jainism which was surfacing at that time.

activity as it went on to become a tradition that is still followed today. The main purpose of these pilgrimages was to spread the concepts of *Bhakti* (devotion) and to unite the society by eradicating the differences due to the caste system. Saint Jnaneshwar brought together all the saints from various castes and under his spiritual leadership they all began their great pilgrimage to Pandharpur[5].

Jnaneshwar entered '*Samadhi*' (voluntary death) at the age of 22 at Alandi (see figure 5.9), earlier known as Alankapur (Jadhav, 2003). Thus it gained spiritual importance as one of the prime locations from where his *Palkhi* begins. Alandi lies about 28 km North-West of Pune city and is situated on the banks of the river Indrayani. Its present form as a temple town was developed by the subsequent Maratha rulers and has kept growing due to its increasing popularity and its closeness to Pune city.
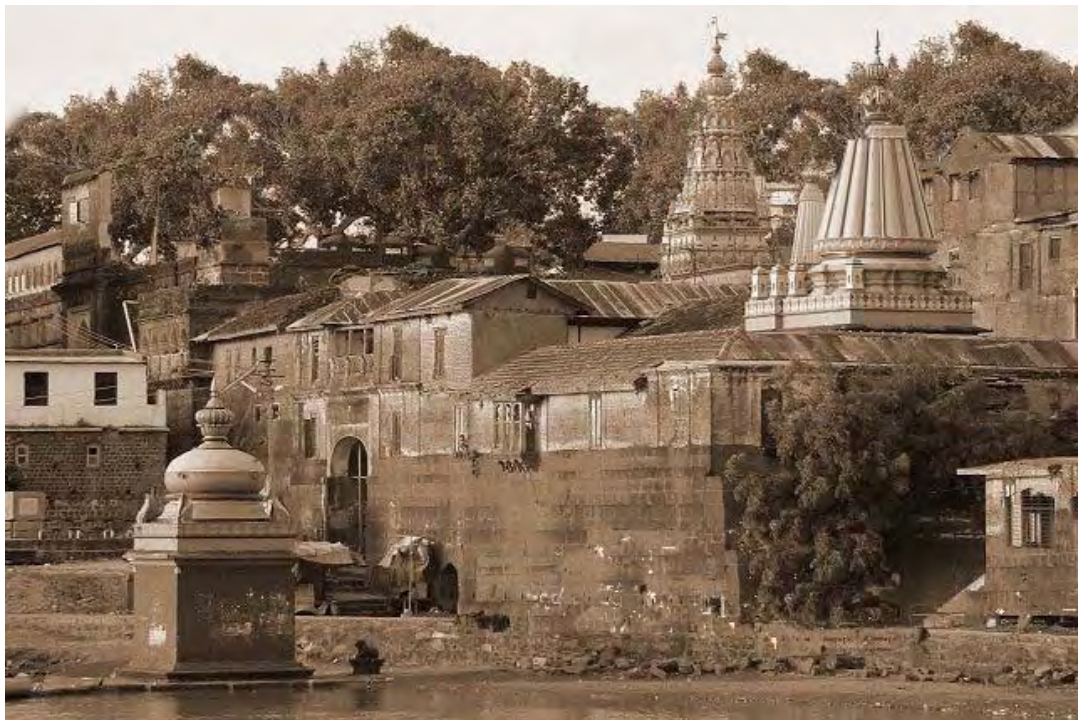

Figure 5.9: Alandi on the banks of Indrayani River

(Source: Despande, 2005)

[5] One of the important saints and Jnaneshwar's disciple (a follower of Vithoba), Namdev was an active participant in this pilgrimage and he was one of the important saints in continuing the Varkari traditions after Jnaneshwar. He lived almost half a century more after Jnaneshwar, and he strongly advocated the pilgrimage to Pandharpur in the company of saints and thus set up Pandharpur as a centre of faith. 'Namdev is credited with the creation of *kirtan*, a performance of song, story, text, even dance, which carries the *bhakti* message'. (Zelliot, cited Mokashi, 1990)

The starting point of Saint Jnaneshwar's pilgrimage is Alandi. The *Palkhi* along with his silver footwear, leaves for Pandharpur amidst a huge celebration on the predefined date and all the *dindis* (groups) of *varkaris* organise themselves in their set positions from here on. The shaping of the pilgrimage in terms of its organisation and the present paraphernalia of horses and a chariot is a recent development of about 200 years back, conceived and realised by a follower of Jnaneshwar called Haibatbaba Arphalkar (Dandekar, 1927, p.41).

Thus, the Pilgrimage is characterised not only by the journey and the destination, but also with the starting point of Alandi. It serves to 're-enact' or 're-actualise' the saint's actions (Eliade, 1957, p.68-99) of leaving for pilgrimage and thus underscores 'polyvalence of meanings' (Dube, 2001, p.14).

ELEMENTS AND FEATURES OF THE *PALKHI*

Given this background of the *Palkhi*, I now discuss its structure and the features that make it unique. This discussion is important for my later analysis of the pilgrims' behaviour patterns and their usage of the space. I focus on their experiences that occur as a result of traditions and rituals.

VARKARI

As seen in chapter three (p.46), pilgrimage in Hinduism is highly recommended but optional[6]. On the contrary, the Pilgrimage to Pandharpur, though voluntarily undertaken by the *varkaris* (pilgrims), it is essential to do it regularly every year. It forms a part of the "*sadhana*" (spiritual discipline or means) of the particular devotional path they have chosen (Engblom, 1990, pp.24-25). The pilgrims of this particular Pilgrimage are known as '*varkari*'.

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[6] The Marathi word for a pilgrim as derived from Sanskrit *tirthayatra* is *yatrekaru* (one who performs a *yatra* or a journey to the holy *Tirthas*). But this term is commonly used to describe the pilgrimage in a 'great tradition sense', to the well known Hindu *tirthas* of Benares, Rameswaram, Nasik, Haridwar (Engblom, 1990, p.24), as highly recommended in Hinduism. This *tirtha*yatra can be done once in a lifetime to achieve a spiritual merit and is of a voluntary nature (one can go alone or with his family and it has no set rules).

The term developed during the time of Saint Jnaneshwar which went on to become the main characteristic of the Pilgrimage (Dandekar, 1927, p.1).

   Varkari as '*Vari+Kari*' was defined by Dandekar (1927, p.1-2; Deleury 1960, p.2), *vari* derives from *'var'* the 'regular occurrence' or 'coming and going' (Engblom P.C, 1990, p.23) of pilgrimage to Pandharpur; *kari* is one who does this pilgrimage. Since *varkari*[7] is the term applied specifically to the pilgrims of Pandharpur tirtha, the study by Deleury G.A (1960, p.3) states the meaning and the duties associated with the term *Varkari* as:

- A person who although living in the midst of his family and carrying on his profession or trade has pledged himself to reach *moksha* (salvation).

- He does it through a way of *bhakti* (see chapter three, pp. 44 & 45), by devotion and love to Lord Krishna in the form of Vithoba of Pandharpur.

- He does the *Vari* or Pilgrimage to Pandharpur every year at the fixed time, guided on the road by the society of saints

- He is also a strict vegetarian.

Figure 5.10: The Varkaris

(Source: Sane, 2005)

7 One of the other terms which is used for a *varkari* is '*malkari*' which means' the one with the 'garland' as they wear a rosary of *Tulasi (local plant)* beads which is almost like their insignia or identification. It signifies their love for Lord Krishna, who is considered to be one of the forms of Lord Vishnu or Lord Vithoba (Dandekar, 1927, p.2). Eck (1998c, pp.59-75) defined '*varkari* as a name of sectarian devotional movement in Maharashtra which honours the deity Vithoba (a form of Vishnu or Krishna) in Pandharpur.'

As discussed by Deleury (1960, pp.2-6), the two main salient features of this particular pilgrimage as compared to the other *tirthayatra* in India are:

- *Varkari* Sect: This school of spiritual thought emerged and was later organised by Saint Jnaneshwar in a very strong movement in the 12th and the 13th centuries C.E., with the base of *'bhakti* movement' which reinstated the pilgrimage to Pandharpur. It is also known as *Varkari Panth/Sampradaya* which signifies a broader meaning than sect. It means 'a way' or 'a road or path to salvation'.

- Democratic outlook: Anybody could become a '*varkari*', regardless of any caste, creed or social hierarchy, especially evident in the Indian society at large. In spite of being great devotees of Lord Krishna, the *varkaris* were different as they did not show any contempt or hostility towards the devotees of other Gods; there seems to be an eclectic attitude which does not allow esoterism, fanaticism or any indulgence in exaggerations in asceticism but only a personal devotion to Vithoba.

Figure 5.11: Varkaris during the journey
(Source: Sane, 2005)

Now I turn to the actual act of pilgrimage and the elements which shape the event. I divide this structure into four parts namely: organisation, varkaris' experience and movement the time frame. In addition, I begin the discussion with the description and significance of the word *Palkhi*.

PALKHI

The Marathi word '*palkhi*' literally translated means 'a palanquin'. Palanquin has not only been associated with pilgrimages, but to carry people as well. It has always represented a royal mode of transport. In this case, it is the palanquin in which the *paduka* (silver footwear) of Saint Jnaneshwar are carried with honour from Alandi to Pandharpur. It signifies his spiritual presence in the journey[8].

The present day palanquin of Saint Jnaneshwar is 'quite elaborate: the pole is covered with silver plating, the seat is inlaid with precious metals and the framework is finely carved (see figure 5.12). Its weight is considerable and eight to ten men are required to carry it on their shoulders. During the journey, it is placed on a four wheeled bullock cart dragged by two strong bullocks' (Deleury, 1960, p.82) and is also adorned like a chariot (see figure 5.13). Whenever the *Palkhi* reaches the town, or near its rest location, it is taken down from the chariot and carried on shoulders. This bullock cart with the palanquin is the centre of attraction of the entire pilgrimage and has a magnetic presence pulling visitors, tourists, local village people to 'see' and 'touch' any part of the assembly as a way of taking *darshan* and getting blessed.

Apart from its physical description, the word '*Palkhi*' has 'certain connotations that are both specific and more general than the literal meaning of a palanquin'. It is now identified with Saint Jnaneshwar's entire pilgrimage procession, especially in Maharashtra, and more generally with the entire *Varkari* movement thus embodying a socially and religiously 'integrated emblem' for the state (Engblom, 1990, p.17)

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[8] Historically, the *paduka* were taken along by tying them around the neck of one of the saints or devotees. In the nineteenth century (Neurgaokar, 1936, cited in Stanley, 1992, p.84) Haibatbaba Arphalkar decided to give the journey a character of a procession. He organised a palanquin to carry life size silver *paduka or footwear* and also asked for royal backing from the local rulers called Shitole Sardar who added the paraphernalia of horses, tents, palkhi servants and other decorations. (Neurgaokar, 1972, p.19) Till today, the same tradition is continued and followed and has attained a festive nature.

Figure 5.12: The Palanquin of Saint Jnaneshwar with his silver *paduka* (footwear)

(Source: Sane, 2005)

Figure 5.13: The decorated chariot carrying the palanquin

(Source: Sane, 2005)

Dindi

Though the processions appears to be a sea of people following each other and the *Palkhi*, it is not an 'indiscriminate mass' but has a set pattern or organisation called as a '*dindi*' (Deleury, 1960, p.83). This arrangement is in the form of groups of pilgrims known as *dindis*[9], which may be formed according to professions like tailors, merchants or belonging to a particular village or caste[10] or family ties but may also be a group of disciples following the same *guru* or spiritual teacher (Deleury, 1960, p.83). Some *dindis* may be further subdivided into smaller units, at least in their pattern of march (Stanley, 1992, p.72).

The number of *varkaris* in a *dindi* may vary from 100 to 1000 per *dindi*, (Neurgaokar, 2001) and the overall organisation is such that the oldest *dindi* is closest to the *Palkhi*. The *Palkhi* is normally between the various *dindis* and the two horses lead the whole procession. As told by Dhavlikar (2005), there were 26 *dindis* in front of the *palkhi* and 250 behind it 2005. The management, coordination and space allocation is currently under the *Palkhi* committee which is responsible for the entire pilgrimage. The respective positions are maintained right from the start and the *varkaris* coordinate the arrangements after every halt in an orderly manner. A *dindi* normally comprises of lines with 7-8 *varkaris* (men usually walk ahead of the women 'folk) and some space is left on both sides of the road so as not to block the other traffic.

Many *dindis* (observed in many *dindis* but not all) have a head who is responsible for all the pilgrims in his group, their food and stay arrangements. He manages the transportation of their luggage and the belongings including food materials for the 18 day stay. Trucks are commonly used for this purpose, which is the modern day adaptation of buffalo carts. Each member of the *dindi*

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[9] The organisation of the procession which is a characteristic especially of the Jnaneshwar *Palkhi* is credited to Haibatbaba who formulated a definite arrangement of pilgrims so as to give a form to the procession

[10] Though the *Varkari Panth* sought to eradicate the caste system, Karve's vivid descriptions (1962) point out that the discrimination still exists, in the form of *dindi* in which people guard their food habits and carry out certain activities as per their castes exhibiting their superiority or importance in subtle ways. However, I experienced that the procession had discipline and organised behaviour which can be attributed to the *dindi* organisation.

pays for these support services[11]. But along with these *dindis* several people who are very poor and cannot afford the contributions, travel separately, alongside or behind the procession. The intermediate towns and other voluntary organisations arrange for their food and accommodation.

The head of the *dindi* carries the *vina* or a lute and selects the *abhang* (devotional song) and their particular order, thereby maintaining the zeal and enthusiasm of the pilgrims. Structurally, pilgrims with orange flags (see figure 5.14) are at the front to represent the beginning of a *dindi*, followed by the *talkari* who are pilgrims with cymbals tied to strings and some with a *mridang* (drum) (Karve, 1962, p.15). They provide the musical accompaniments to the *abhang* (devotional songs) which are sung by all the members of the *dindi* along the journey.

Figure 5.14: The flag bearers of a *dindi*

(Source: Sane, 2005)

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[11] The trucks leave ahead of the *palkhis* and some of the lady pilgrims take turns to prepare food for the varkaris after the walk. The richer *dindis* of *varkaris,* depending on their affordability even keep cooks, which is sometimes considered as comfort oriented by others.

SISTER *PALKHIS*

Though I have focussed on the Saint Jnaneshwar's *Palkhi*, which is the oldest and most attended *Palkhi*, there are several other *palkhis* which originate from different places in Maharashtra following the *Varkari* cult. They carry the *padukas* of influential saints from the respective areas towards Pandharpur, following the models of the earliest Jnaneshwar *Palkhi* and the equally popular Tukaram *Palkhi* which began in the nineteenth century (Engblom, 1990, p.19). The study done by Deleury (1960) is extensive in this regard. He recorded 28 *palkhi*s in 1951 and mapped them so as to study the geographical influence of the *Varkari* movement which nearly included the whole of the Marathi speaking population. All of these *palkhi* processions meet at Wakhari, a small town about 7km from Pandharpur. From there, they merge to form a single pilgrimage procession and march to Pandharpur on the eve of Ashadhi Ekadashi.

Thus, the Pilgrimage has often been described metaphorically as various rivers and its tributaries joining to form a large river before meeting the sea. This intensifying nature of the Pilgrimage is one of the characteristics that sets it apart from the other pilgrimages. In addition, people from surrounding villages come and join the *Palkhi* constantly at almost all the halts along the way. This intensification not only occurs in terms of the overflowing numbers of the pilgrims, but also in their enthusiasm, joy and devotion which attains a forceful nature as the pilgrims advance towards Pandharpur. This growing force was experienced by Mokashi (1990, p.263) he describes the scene at Wakhari saying, 'the thronging tide of people surged in'.

Interestingly, Feldhaus (2003, p.220-21) comments on the religious geography defined by the *Varkari* sect as all the sister *palkhis* originate from different points to converge at Pandharpur. According to her, the present day Maharashtra State that was defined in 1960, corresponds closely to the extent of *Varkari* pilgrimage and the Marathi linguistic region.

MOVEMENT TO PANDHARPUR

Daily routine

The walk to Pandharpur is characterised by the activities carried out by the pilgrims. Within the structured *dindis* around the *Palkhi*, the daily routine of the pilgrimage is traditionally preset and followed meticulously. The daily routine of the *Palkhi* is more or less fixed like a timetable. It can be briefly described as follows.

- Early morning there is an elaborate *puja* (worship event) of the silver *paduka* (footwear) of Jnaneshwar and a collective prayer. This is followed by the departure from the place of halt, normally as early as 6.00am. It begins with a loud signal when the pilgrims assemble in their *dindi*s. The twin horses[12] begin the journey and lead the procession. The trucks carrying the food and belongings of the *varkari* normally leave ahead of the *Palkhi* in order to prepare for the midday meals.

- After the palanquin is placed in the bullock cart, the *varkaris* start singing the *abhang* (devotional songs).

- After every three to four miles of walk, the procession halts for rest. The main halt during the day occurs at noon. It is normally near a river or a water source as cooking, cleaning etc. activities take place. After a collective lunch and a brief rest, the pilgrims are refreshed and begin their onward journey.

- The afternoon journey is normally arduous due to scorching heat but may sometimes be relieved with the onset of rains. The collective singing is continued throughout the journey. After one or two intermediate halts, depending on the distance to be covered, the *Palkhi* reaches the town in the evening where it halts for the night.

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[12] Traditionally, two horses lead the Jnaneshwar's *Palkhi*. A horseman dressed in red, carrying a long pennon rides first horse. It is followed by a white horse which has never been saddled and is believed to be mounted by Saint Jnaneshwar. Both these horses are considered sacred and people continually come to have a *darshan* of them along with actual *Palkhi* (Deleury, 1960, p.83). Both, the Palkhi chariot and the horses thus mark the principal points of reference in the procession (Stanley, 1992, p.77).

- The place of halt is normally on a large open ground on the outskirts known as *Palkhi tal.* The main tent is already set up for the *Palkhi* and the town welcomes it with decorations and banners.

- The *dindi*s stand in a circular form and the central pathway leading to the tent is carpeted. As the *Palkhi* enters the *Palkhi tal*, the rhythmic singing picks up amidst the sound of cymbals and drums.

- 'The mace-bearer then asks for silence, and a short *arati* (worship song) is performed in front of the silver *padukas* (footwear) which are taken inside the tent. He then announces the time of departure for the following morning, and a list of lost properties for that day and then the pilgrims go to their night quarters (Neurgaokar, 2001, p.28-35; Deleury, 1960, p.86)

Singing of abhangs

This is very prominent trait of *Varkari* Sect though it has evolved from *bhakti* movement. The *varkaris* walk the whole of the journey singing religious hymns and poems composed by the various *varkari* saints thus personifying their presence and a link to them. In fact, it is one of the things expected of a *varkari* and is central to the whole pilgrimage. Karve (1962, p.22) has noted:

> 'I witnessed how the language and culture of Maharashtra has spread among all its social layers. The fine poetry of five centuries was recited daily. The poetry embodied a religion and a philosophy. People speaking many dialects sang the same verses and thus learned a standard language'.

Though each *dindi* sings separately, the sequence of *abhangs* is more or less common set by Haibatbaba and according to the time of the day[13] and location and mood, the head of the *dindi* selects it (Neurgaokar, 2001, p.30). The oral tradition of *abhangs* is set up through the repetitive singing of these hymns which get automatically memorised.

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[13] Towards the beginning of the day or between two abhangs, or during the halts there is a continuous chanting of God's name which is said to be meritorious as it helps in diverting the mind's wanderings to God. It is normally 'Jnandev Tukaram' or 'Jnanoba Mauli Tukaram' which reaches an intense pitch at intervals to mark the increasing closeness of the approaching Pandharpur and Lord Vithoba along with the collective enthusiasm to achieve the same.

Purpose of abhangs

The collective singing of *abhangs* is not a mere traditional feature of the *palkhi.* Deleury 1960, p.88) has analysed the several reasons behind this tradition discussed as follows.

- It keeps up the spirit of journey as hardships of the travel such as the discomforts due to rain or heat are temporarily forgotten due to the collective singing, as it 'helps in keeping with the walking pace, in maintaining the enthusiasm when one feels the fatigue of walking'.

- It serves as a unifying factor for the *dindi*, as everyone has a part to play giving rise to group spirit or a sense of 'communitas' (Turner, 1969).

- Karve (1962, p.23) similarly points out that the songs served the purpose of education with its three characteristics namely 'preservation of traditional knowledge, its cultivation and its transmission to next generation.'

The songs are commonly an expression of *bhakti* or devotion towards Lord Vithoba which intensifies the devotional mood in the journey and strengthens the purpose behind the pilgrimage. However, one of the pilgrims put it simply as, 'We make our pilgrimage as we sing our songs-for the love of Vithoba. There is no other reason…We sing all the way to Pandharpur because of our love of Vithoba' (cited in Stanley, 1992, p.78). Thus, the journey is characterised by the collective singing.

As Saint Jnaneshwar has expressed through the devotional lyrics of one of his *abhang*:

> We are pilgrims. As a result of our pilgrimage, sins that beset us are taking to their heels in all directions…..
>
> There is no need to mortify our bodies for attaining spiritual knowledge. Nor there is any necessity to shave our heads. The utterance of God's name will enable us to escape the contamination of our worldly actions.
>
> (Jnaneshwar, cited in Bobde, 1987, p.50)

Kirtans

The chief disciple of Saint Jnaneshwar, 'Saint Namdev, is credited with the creation of *kirtan*, a performance of song, story, text and even dance, which carries the *bhakti* message' (Zelliot, 1987, p.39). *Kirtans* are the religious discourses that happen mostly at the Pilgrimage sojourns in the villages along the way. They are conducted by the learned amongst the pilgrims or by the specially invited speakers (*kirtankars*). The style of *kirtans* developed by the *Varkari* Sect was novel as it evolved a new kind of platform for its religious instruction, training the preachers from among the people. This was encouraged to create a feeling of confidence among them and to make them feel completely at home (Sardar, 1969, pp.70-71).

The residents of the village also get to participate along with the pilgrims, and thus everyone is drawn towards devotional values and guidance on the virtues of living. The *kirtans* are performed every night in front of the *Palkhi* tent and every night a different *dindi* is in charge of that function (Deleury, 1960, p.86). Saint Tukaram, one of most famous saints of *Varkari Panth* strengthened this tradition of *kirtan* performance by writing over four thousand poems and hymns which are very popular[14]. The activity of *kirtans*, *bhajans*, and the *abhangs* have been the most important feature of this pilgrimage as, combined with the spiritual teachings they provide the necessary recreational mood and encourage participation from pilgrims as well as the locals, who await the activity eagerly.

Thus it not only serves in spreading the religious values but also acts as a reinforcing socio-cultural event. I will be dealing with this aspect in detail in Chapter Seven (*Palkhi in Lonand: an Analysis*). The other activities which engage the pilgrims are small dramas, folk performances, group games and one of the more famous and sought after is that of *ringan*[15]

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[14] Tukaram spread the teachings of the sect making it largely popular beyond the confinements of caste and creed. His palanquin is also a part of *Varkari* tradition and is taken from Dehu (near Pune) to Pandharpur, similar to the *Palkhi*, but from a different route. Today many of his *abhangs* and *bhajans* have become an inseparable part of the Varkari Sect.

[15] A *ringan* (or *rangan*) is a mass ritual performance during which the twin horses that lead the *Palkhi* are made to gallop [in a particular way] before the assembled devotees (Mokashi, 1987, p.207)

EXPERIENCE DURING THE JOURNEY

When I walked with the *varkaris*, from Natepute to Malshiras, it was early morning. The skies had cleared up and the air was cool, refreshing the *varkaris* from their fatigue of previous 12 days. We reach the stream of Mandavi river after a walk of about four miles, which is the resting point for the *Palkhi*. There are expansive fields all around, stretching till the horizon, with no hint of hills. Many *varkaris* are bathing or washing their clothes and utensils in the smaller part of the stream. The fields are a riot of colours as the *saris and dhotis* (the traditional clothes worn by the women and men *varkaris)* are held flapping in the winds and turbans flow around bushes and branches. They are helping each other to hold the clothes in the wind to dry, or wringing them out. They are also helping each other with bathing, carrying the water around or scrubbing each other's backs. (see figures 5.15 and 5.16). Some *varkaris* are busy discussing about the programmes and activities which are going to happen in the remaining days. Others are having some food, chatting about their lives, telling stories about their home and village, or simply sprawling around and taking rest.

I realise that a sense of community or a large group builds up during the journey. It may be a temporary feeling, experienced while walking and singing the same songs which enhance the spirit of journey. Sometimes it may be experienced through participation in the *kirtans*, games and other common activities. It may also be a result of sharing personal experiences and spending time together while heading for the same goal.

Figure 5.15: *Varkaris* washing clothes and utensils along the route

(Source: Sane, 2005)

Figure 5.16: Morning halt on the way to Malshiras town

(Source: Sane, 2005)

TIME FRAME

The *Varkaris* undertake this 'spectacular activity' (Deleury, 1960, p.73) every year and though they are expected to go to Pandharpur on four major *ekadashis* (eleventh day of waxing moon) as per the Lunar calendar, the most organised and attended is the pilgrimage in June-July which reaches Pandharpur on Ashadhi Ekadashi.

Apart from the religious significance of Ashadhi Ekadashi day, the more practical side of it is argued by Karve (1962, p.22). She states that the participation of *varkaris* (who are mainly the farmers) from all over Maharashtra plateau just at the onset of rainy season (Ashadh month) was obvious, as they had just ploughed their fields and had spare time till they could start the sowing. Further, she says that the absence of coastal people from 'Konkan' area was equally justified as they had to work in their fields due to which they attended the pilgrimage in Kartik (November) month. 'All areas were devoted to Pandharpur but neither the coastal people nor the plateau people neglected their fields to show devotion to Vithoba' (Karve, 1962, p.22). This reasoning also throws more light on the flexibility of the *Varkari* sect and its teachings. It doesn't encourage devotees to avoid their daily duties for God which may also be one of the reasons for its popularity and wide acceptance.

One of the crucial aspects related to the Pilgrimage is of time management as the *Palkhi* is supposed to reach on time, a day prior to Ashadhi Ekadashi in Pandharpur. It is crucial as there are many hurdles all along the way, ranging from harsh rain, heat, calamities like floods and the capacity of individual pilgrims to keep up with the pace of the *Palkhi*, which also at times slows down the procession. But from experience of previous years, all the *palkhis* start accordingly, considering possible delays and make it to Pandharpur well within time.

The culmination of the Pilgrimage occurs when it reaches Pandharpur *tirtha*. All the *palkhis* enter the town in a sequence with the Jnaneshwar *palkhi* arriving last in the position of greatest honour. The *varkaris* rejoice and celebrate as they reach the temple of Vithoba. The main focus is then shifted to Lord Vithoba as everybody yearns for His '*darshan*' (sight) after which the

pilgrimage is felt to be complete. After all the pomp and ceremonial rituals, the *palkhis* are taken back to their origins, without much splendour and the zeal of the onward journey.

CONCLUSION

This is a glimpse of the *Palkhi* of Alandi to Pandharpur. The above description highlights it as a multifaceted and complex process. It is defined by the two *tirthas* of Alandi and Pandharpur. The 'spiritual magnetism' (Turner, 1987, p.329; Preston, 1992, p.33) of Pandharpur is complemented with the metaphorical presence of Saint Jnaneshwar along the movement. As conclusively stated by Engblom (1987, p.28), this pilgrimage does not fall under the 'typical' category of Indian pilgrimages or '*tirtha yatra',* but more under the specific act of following *'bhaktimarga'* or the 'path of devotion'. Karve (1962) also interestingly arrived at a new definition of Maharashtra: 'the land whose people go to Pandharpur for pilgrimage'. Though it fulfils the broader criteria of journeying towards a holy place transforming the individuals to a higher spiritual plane, there are certain nuances which are very specific to the process of achieving the goal. The characteristics of 'collective devotion' and 'walking with fellow brothers and saints' in a 'repetitive' manner renders it a distinct quality which prompts enquiries at multiple levels.

Through this chapter, I have addressed elements of the *Palkhi* and its activities which emphasise its unique character. It has set a background for the analysis. My experiences and the other features of the *Palkhi* will be articulated and perceived holistically in terms of its spatial manifestation which is complemented by other activities surrounding the pilgrimage. The next chapter focuses on my fieldwork which intersects the zone of public realm with the Pilgrimage activity in the selected town of Lonand.

Contextual settings of Lonand

Chapter six

The last chapter examined the manifold layers of Alandi to Pandharpur *Palkhi* and established the context and background for my work. It illustrated the 'spirit of the *Palkhi*' which continues to perpetuate through centuries of change. In the current chapter, I provide the framework for addressing the issues of spatial manifestations pertaining to the Pilgrimage. The study of the existing town settings, as a prelude to analysis of the people-space relationship, is the basis of this discussion. I have derived this approach from Pieper's (1980) architectural anthropology as discussed in chapter four (pp.84-85), which forms the theoretical underpinnings of the study.

In this chapter, I focus on Lonand, one of the selected towns along the Pilgrimage. The work compiled and presented is an outcome of my fieldwork. It is based on my experience of the *Palkhi* and a close examination of its physical settings. Lonand, due to its pivotal location on the route has been an active element in the *Palkhi's* effective periodical functioning. My objective is to analyse the town's response to the pilgrimage, especially the role of its public spaces. The chapter constitutes, but is not limited to, the documentation of the town's physical and spatial configuration, weaving in the human element of hospitality and participation of the locals in the activity as a starting point of analysis.

The chapter begins with the contextual mapping of Lonand and its significance in the *Palkhi*. I then articulate the characteristics of the town by using schematic maps, graphics and photographs, thereby providing an overview of the overall town settings. The chapter ends at a specific 'time' when the *Palkhi* enters Lonand, in a narrative exposition of events. Through the sense of an 'incomplete' story, it leads to the following chapter seven *(Palkhi in Lonand: An Analysis)* to carry out the detailed analysis of the research.
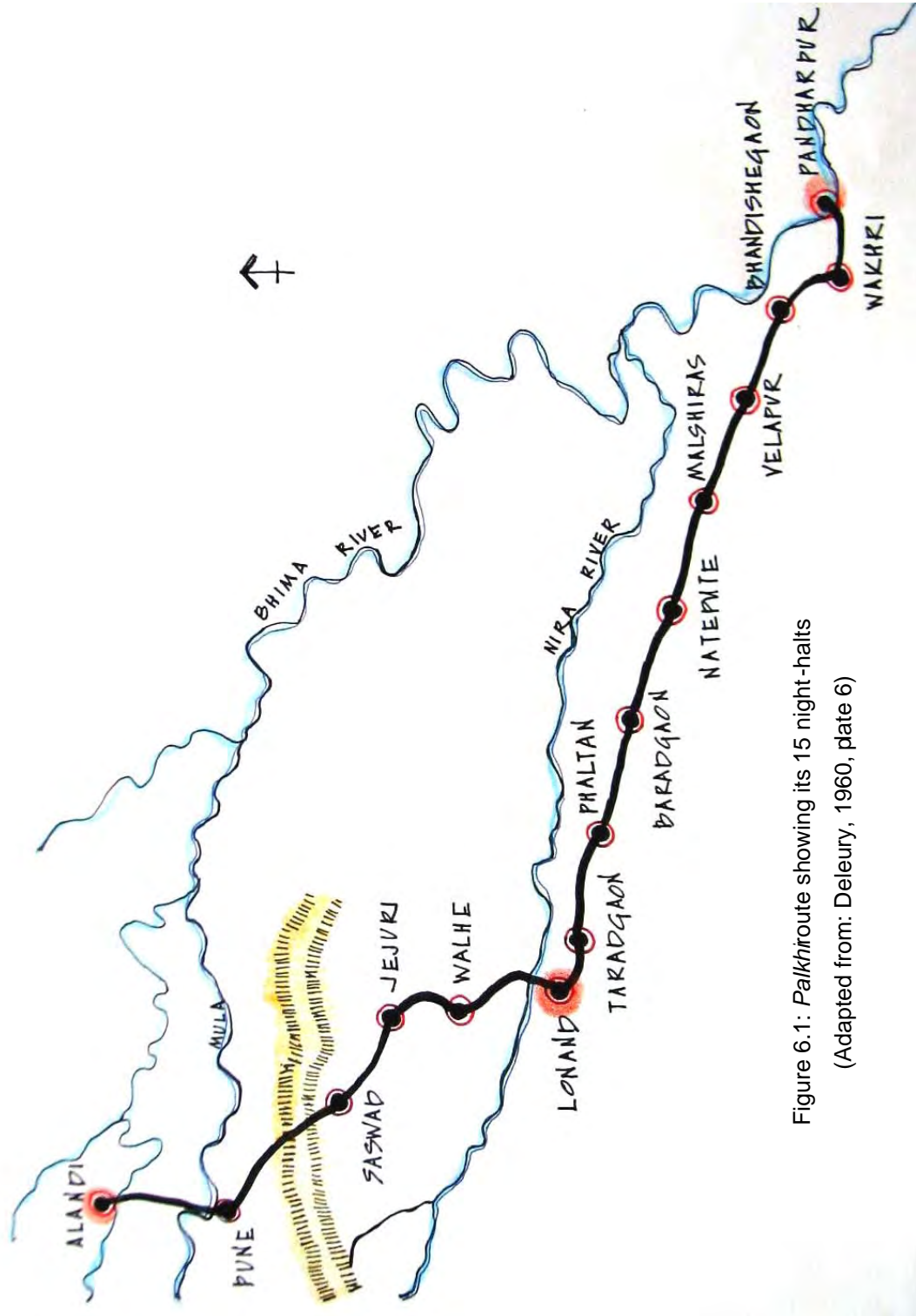
Figure 6.1: *Palkhi*route showing its 15 night-halts

(Adapted from: Deleury, 1960, plate 6)

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BACKGROUND

As noted previously, the Alandi-Pandharpur *palkhi* travels a distance of about 250 km in 18 days and it takes night halts at 15 towns which are traditionally decided (see figure 6.1). This sacred network woven out of the *Palkhi* gives a character to the entire activity and to the towns, as they immerse themselves fully in the event. They act like the milestones which mark the progress of the journey, as a *varkari* experiences increasing elation with every stop that takes him closer to Pandharpur. Amongst these halts, that dot the route, I have selected Lonand town for my observations.
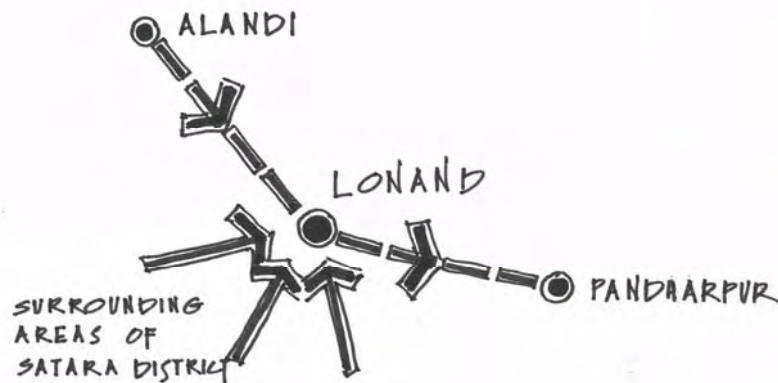

Figure 6.2: Key location of Lonand on the *Palkhi* route

(Source: Sane, 2005)

Lonand lies to the south-east of Alandi and is close to half the distance covered from Alandi to Pandharpur. One of the reasons for selecting this town is due to its key location on the pilgrimage route. It is placed at the point where the route turns direction from southwards to south-east. Thus, people from the surrounding areas of Satara district come to Lonand to join the pilgrimage or to take *'darshan'* of the *Palkhi* forming an important node at this point (see figure 6.2). It is also the next major town after Pune city along the route for the commercial activities to take place.

The second important reason for selecting Lonand is the extended stay of *Palkhi* for two days. This is its longest stay at one place with the exception of Pune city, and hence makes Lonand a good place for observing the various activities associated with the event. Lonand does not have much historical significance and is not a place of tourist attraction. It is small town that has gained importance by the virtue of its location on the *Palkhi* route.

SETTINGS OF LONAND

Lonand is an agricultural and a market town located on the northern border of Satara district in Maharashtra state. Its development plan and report was done by the Zilla Parishad (district council), Satara district under Maharashtra state government in 1978, which was subsequently modified in1980. It is the only document which has recorded all its aspects from physical characteristics to demographic ones. I have used the same as base data, along with the other current information, for my understanding about the town. Since 1978, Lonand has grown from a small village to a town of about 20,000 people (DP Report, 1980) but is still under the jurisdiction of a village *panchayat* (council).

CONNECTIVITY

The town is located on the junction of two major district roads (MDR) namely the north-south Pune-Satara Road and west-east Khandala-Lonand Road which continues in the same direction to nearby major town of Phaltan and further south-east towards Pandharpur (see figure 6.3). The Miraj-Mumbai broad gauge railway line also passes through the town, thus providing a good connectivity with other important towns in the state.
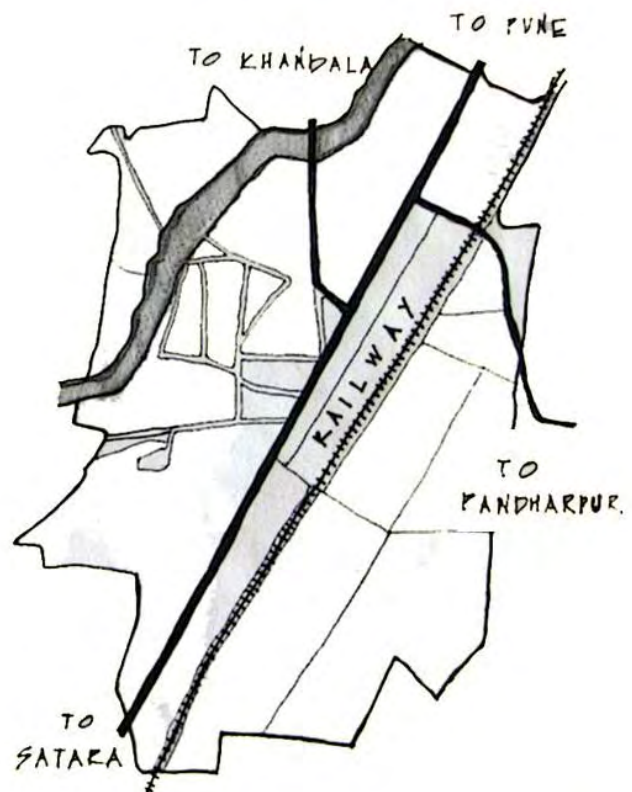

Figure 6.3: Major road and rail connections
(Adapted from: DP Report 1980)

ACCESSIBILITY, ROAD NETWORK

Other than the main link of the Satara-Pune road the overall traffic pattern observed in the town is of a slow-moving nature and hence there were no provisions made for road widening in the development plan.

The two major roads within the *gaothan* (town core) area are *Bazaar* Peth road and Laxmi road which branch off from the main Satara-Pune road (see figure 6.4). They are internally linked by small roads and lanes giving the town a very human scale. An overlap of pedestrian and vehicular pattern is observed throughout the day and the same space is also used for playing, group interactions, shopping and other religious activities thereby rendering the place a very lively quality. The commercial activities are concentrated along these two roads and Satara-Pune.

Figure 6.4: Road Network in Lonand showing two main roads
1: *Bazaar* Peth road; 2: Laxmi Road
(Adapted from: DP Report, 1980)

CLIMATE AND RAINFALL

As noted from the climatological data of Lonand (DP Report 1980, p.10) the maximum temperature recorded in summer (April) rose up to 38.7degrees celsius and dropped to a minimum of 7.4 degrees celcius in winter (December). Rainfall occurs mainly during the monsoon months of May to October with an annual average of 390.4mm. The maximum rainfall ever recorded was in the month of August which was 108.6mm. The prevalent wind direction is from the south-west. The climatic pattern can be said to be of an alternating type which is common for most western parts of India. As seen from the climatic data and prevalent patterns in the region, the climate alternates between hot dry and warm humid for the majority of the year. Overall, the town has a warm climate throughout the year, with the exception of the monsoon months which tend to be relatively pleasant due to the rains.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

From the population projection chart (DP Report, 1980, pp.11-12), the present day residing population of the town is about 20,000 people. From its occupational structure, the town has been classified as an 'agricultural and a commercial' town with its onion trade ranked second in the state (see figures 6.5 & 6.6). Also from the study, it was found out that Lonand does not boast a high opportunity for jobs due to limited growth and therefore does not attract people from the surrounding villages for work. The younger population was observed to emigrate to major cities like Pune or Mumbai for better opportunities in education and work.

Figure 6.5: Agricultural surrounds

(Source: Sane, 2005)

Figure 6.6: Weekly *bazaar* or market

(Source: Sane, 2005)

LAND USE AND GROWTH TRENDS

The development is mainly observed in the core town area known as '*gaothan*', which spans between a small stream at the north-west and the railway line at the east (see figure 6.7). The total area under village limits measures 2526.6 hectares out of which 150.3 hectares constitutes the developed area of the town. It is predominantly of a residential nature with a supplementary commercial and public use. The remaining area is used for agricultural and marginally for agro-industrial purposes. The railway line passing through the town divides the major developed area into two distinct parts. The market yard, police headquarters and the high school are situated on the eastern side of railway line, and the residential area, shopping, weekly *bazaar* and government offices on the western side (D.P. report, 1980). The land for *bazaar* happening on Thursday is allocated on the western side near the stream. This land is alternatively used as the *Palkhi* base during its stay.
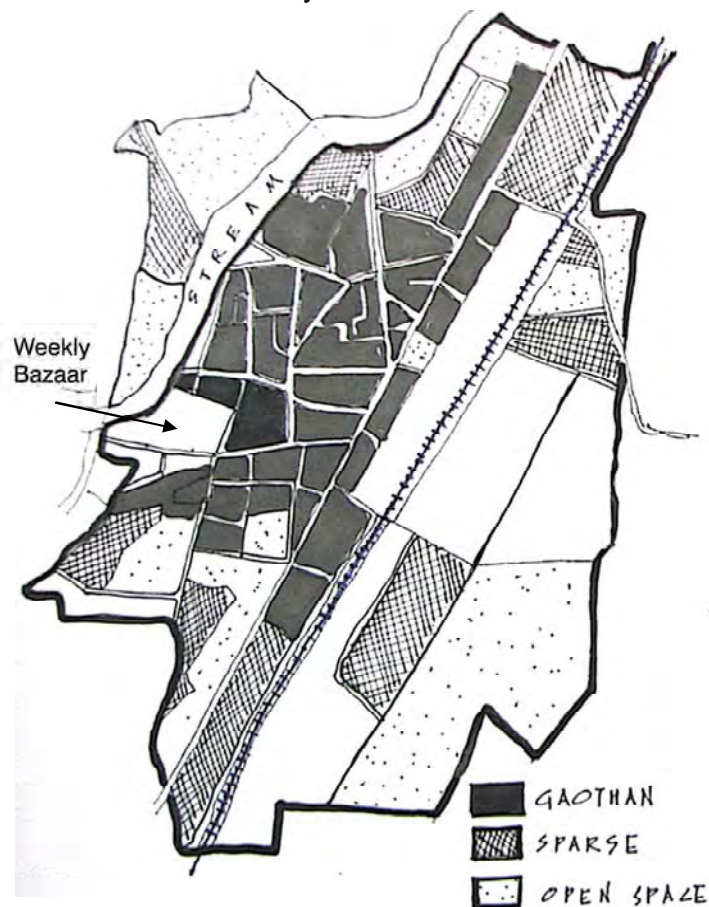

Figure 6.7: Land use pattern
(Adapted from: DP Report, 1980)

HISTORY AND CULTURE

The Bhairavnath temple is the oldest temple in the town (see Figure 6.8). It is also quite famous locally. Many other small temples are located in the *gaothan* area but are of less historical importance. The Shelke and Kshirsagar families are the founding residents of Lonand and their ancestry dates back to the rule of King Shivaji in the sixteenth century. (DP report, 1980)

The town celebrates all the local festivals throughout the year and the *Palkhi* sojourn is one of its major celebrations. 35 years ago, the *Palkhi*'s base was shifted from the outskirts of Lonand (on the banks of river Nira) to its present day location, within the town due to the growing number of pilgrims. (Dhavlikar, 2005). The *Palkhi* route within the town is such that it passes along most of the temples or religious nodes, thereby honouring their presence. Figure 6.9 indicates the *Palkhi* route towards its base (*Palkhi tal*: shown yellow)) traversing various temples along the way (shown red).
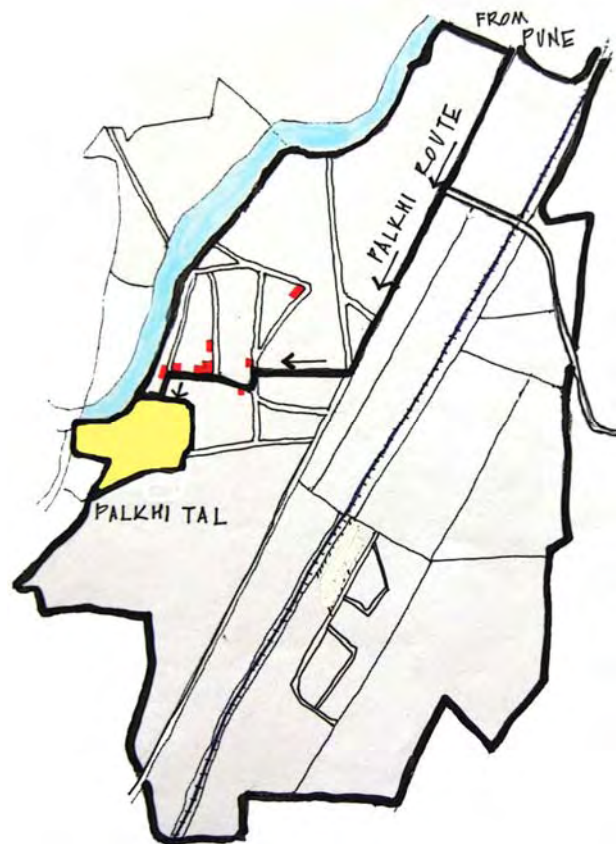

Figure 6.8: Bhairavnath Temple
(Source: Sane, 2005)

Figure 6.9: *Palkhi* route in Lonand
(Adapted from: DP Report, 1980)

ARCHITECTURAL PATTERN AND SETTINGS

The *gaothan* area or the core of the town, is a dense settlement (see figure 6.10), consisting of mainly residential development mixed with commercial use. The majority of the cultural activities occur in this western part which is not a planned area. It has evolved over a period of time in an 'organic' manner like most of the surrounding villages. This organic pattern is evident through a lack of repetitive and regular plots or blocks of buildings. There is no formal street grid and land use pattern. The overall housing development is a result of an incremental process in which the residents construct, expand or improve their houses depending on their economic situations. Commonly observed is the conversion of ground floor or the street facing rooms of the houses to shops, thus combining the two activities.

The architectural character of this town can be said to be in a state of rapid change. The older buildings have tiled sloping roofs and verandas. Load-bearing construction with local materials like stone, brick; or timber construction is commonly observed here as in the surrounding region. The new buildings have framed reinforced cement concrete (RCC) construction with a modern look of rendered concrete and paint. Thus, there is no uniformity in the visual character of the town.

The entire *gaothan* is linked by several narrow lanes which remain in shade throughout the day (see figure 6.11). This is a typical response of vernacular architecture to the warm climate prevailing for the most part of the year. It is also an outcome of the organic development as lanes, by-lanes, offshoots and niches have emerged out of the in-between spaces of the buildings creating a complex spatial network.

Figure 6.10: Dense *gaothan* with mixed architectural character

(Source: Sane, 2005)

Figure 6.11: Narrow Lanes

(Source: Sane, 2005)

The most important architectural feature binding the urban fabric is the treatment of the edge condition. As figures 6.12 and 6.13 show, in Lonand this consists of 1200 -1800mm wide verandas, connected to the road by steps and covered by the projection of the building above. This feature has also affected the use of public spaces as it articulates the edges by softening it so as to blur the boundaries between the private and the public.
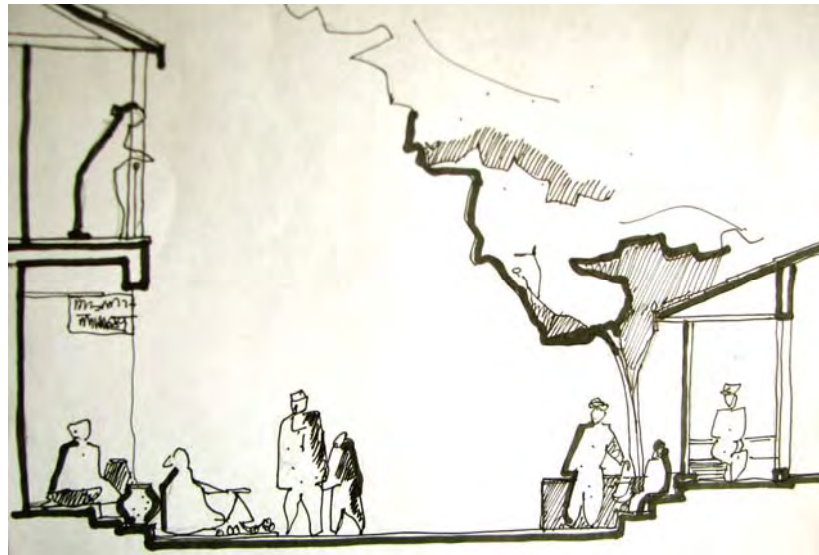

Figure 6.12: Typical street section

(Source: Sane, 2006)

Figure 6.13: Balconies and verandas overlooking Laxmi road in Lonand

Source: (Sane, 2006)

PUBLIC SPACES IN LONAND

The streets and the public spaces mirror the lifestyle of the town. The public spaces in Lonand have emerged as a consequence of usage as well as time. The existing land-use and the development plan do not mention anything about the character of these spaces or their use, generally showing apathy towards them. Consequently, there is no provision for such spaces in the new development plan. The only mention is of allocating land zones for public gardens and playgrounds which fall under the category of 'recreation'.

The traditionally developed village squares based on community patterns have somewhat managed to retain their character, probably as a result of non-development of public spaces. The growing impact of modernisation, on the one hand, is taking its toll in the form of 'socio-culturally unrelated patterns of buildings and city planning' (Doshi, 1997, p.16) whereas the ritual practices and festivals, on the other hand, still hold on to traditional ways of life and usage of spaces.

What we see today in Lonand is an amalgamated whole. When I walked through the town for the first time, I was surprised to observe the widening of roads at certain junctions or near the temples; and increase in the building setbacks in some locations to form a sort of a square. These spaces seemed to surface at intervals without any planned interventions or design elements. The overall character of the streets is of heterogeneous nature. Various shops spill onto the road, furniture and ad-hoc advertisement signs are placed differently everyday, vegetable and fruit vendors occupy the available street space for their businesses in a haphazard way or without much apparent order (see figure 6.14). Public spaces are not confined to the squares but encompass the streets, lanes, nooks, corners, verandas and steps. They almost form a 'labyrinth within a cellular structure with numerous openings, passages' and fragmented architectural fabric (Edensor, 1998, p.206).

I noted that the streets as well as these spaces responded to the activities around (or were a part of them), such as temple visits, daily shopping, interaction and business. The mixed land use allows for the

extension of both, residential and commercial activities into the street space, rendering the spaces a quality of liveliness and informality. As against the 'increasingly regulated qualities of Western street life ', we see a 'rich diversity of social activity' (Edensor, 1998, p.205), which gets intensified when the streets turn into sites for various types of movement and events that inscribe themselves onto the spatial scene. Lonand, like many other Indian towns and cities has multiple types of street movement ranging from two-wheelers, bicycles, pedestrians, hawkers, stray animals, auto-rickshaws, bullock-carts, trucks and cars (though to a lesser extent), adding to the liveliness of the public realm.

Figure 6.14: Vegetable market on the street
(Source: Sane, 2006)

Figure 6.15 & 6.16: Streetscapes in Lonand

(Source: Sane, 2005)

PALKHI IN LONAND

Each year, the town people await the *Palkhi* with enthusiasm as it heralds the festive mood of celebrations. Preparations start about a couple of months in advance, involving infrastructure planning, provision of facilities, security measures which are a done by the local village council. Tradespersons and merchants from the town and surrounding villages step up their goods manufacture for the upcoming event which takes on the form of a fair.

During my fieldwork, I went to Lonand on the afternoon just before the *Palkhi* arrived. I begin the description of the pilgrimage travel during that day, paraphrasing and translating (from Marathi) the excerpts from the local newspaper:

> 'The *Palkhi* left Walhe village after a night halt and started early in the morning for Lonand. After the ten day incessant rainfall it was a relief to see the Sun finally make its way through the clouded sky. The *Palkhi* travelled amidst *abhang* and *'Harinam'* (the chanting of God's name "Hari" a synonym for Lord Vitthal or Vithoba) and intermittent soothing breeze to reach the river Nira at about noon. There was a grand welcome organised by the political officials and the localites. The villagers from all the nearby areas had come together to take *darshan* of the *palkhi* and view the ritual bathing (in river Nira) of the silver *paduka* (footwear) of Saint Jnaneshwar. This bathing is considered a very auspicious occasion and is the only one which precedes the mega event of ritual bathing in Chandrabhaga river at Pandharpur. After lunch and rest, the *Palkhi* and the *varkaris* resumed their journey towards Lonand entering the Satara district at 2.30pm' (Sakal, 2005, 5th July 2005; Aikya, 5th July 2005).

I watched the town as it readied itself for the event. It was getting decorated with welcome gateways (see figure 6.17), banners, flowers, garlands and firework arrangements. Temporary welcome sheds were erected that had loudspeakers blaring out announcements about the current location of the *Palkhi* and its estimated arrival time. It was interspersed with *bhajans* and quotations from saintly literature. The mood of celebrations and a sense of importance and pride displayed by the town residents were obvious. They felt

blessed that Saint Jnaneshwar was arriving at their doorstep, and that they were getting a chance to serve him and the *varkaris*.

Figure 6.17: Welcome gateway for the *varkaris*

(Source: Sane, 2005)

The element of mere hospitality towards the guests transcended into something more powerful; into a feeling of hope, satisfaction and overflowing happiness. I could almost believe that this was the first time that this event was happening. I then started to see a trickle of *varkaris* arrive. They were the ones who had walked ahead of the *Palkhi* carrying their orange flags and banners. I began to feel a childlike curiosity to see the *Palkhi's* entry.

Then I went to the *Palkhi Tal*, the open space where the *Palkhi* was supposed to rest. The space had lost its vacant character. It was rapidly getting filled up with trucks, tents, sheds and pilgrims in their colourful clothes (see figure 6.18). The main tent of Saint Jnaneshwar (see Figure 6.19) was set up towards the farthest end, and was quite large and heavily decorated. It was supposed to serve almost as his temple during the next two days, when the people came to worship him or take his *darshan*.

Figure 6.18: Temporary shed stretched from a truck on *Palkhi tal*.

(Source: Sane, 2005)

Figure 6.19: Saint Jnaneshwar's tent on *Palkhi tal*.

(Source: Sane, 2005)

The infectious enthusiasm engulfed me. I walked back near the entry point, looked around at the environment with its diverse range of embellishments. I tried to locate a vantage point, just like every other onlooker and local resident so that I could get the best possible view of the *Palkhi* chariot. I finally decided upon a second floor terrace and went inside to ask for the resident's permission to enter their premises. He posed no issue and was quite happy to offer access for the *Palkhi's darshan*. Similarly, others seemed happy to offer their verandas, steps, balconies and terraces to their friends and onlookers who wanted to see the *Palkhi* arrival. They were trying to be of assistance in any possible way, as they believed they were finally doing it for Saint Jnaneshwar.

It was a moment of revelation for me. The individual mattered the least. Who was doing what and for whom was of little consequence as the higher goal was to honour God by serving the *Palkhi*. This set me into the perspective for my future observations, and for my research as a whole. I realized that I had to step out of my usual self, the 'me' with my sense of modernity and beliefs, if I had to truly understand the whole process. I completely forgot that I had walked with the *Palkhi*, had witnessed its arrival in Pune city, and that I have been seeing it since my childhood. I found myself sitting on the rooftop, waiting in eager anticipation for the drama to unfold.

At around quarter past five, it started drizzling and I felt disappointment rise within myself. I was worried about my being able to take photographs as my main intention was to observe and document the moments. Fortunately, the rain stopped and I suddenly heard the bang of fireworks followed by the familiar shouts of people "Jnanoba Mauli Tukaram", "the *Palkhi's* here", the uproar of loudspeakers, drums and cymbals as everyone rose to the occasion (see figure 6.20).

Figure 6.20: Glimpse of *Palkhi* arrival in Lonand

(Source: Sane. 2005)

CONCLUSION

This chapter has set out the various dimensions of Lonand town. It is examined through Rapoport's (1977) viewpoint - the physical environment as a setting for psychological, social and cultural activities. The town's organic nature of growth, mixed land-use and social structure is characteristic of a typical Indian town. The nature of architectural settings and development is observed to be heterogeneous with the unifying elements of the transition spaces. These spaces foster day to day interaction as do the streets and public spaces alike. The selection of public spaces on the *Palkhi'* route is addressed in the next chapter. Thus, rather than rigid spaces with distinct boundaries, the overall town exhibits a fluid and open character. Its responsiveness to the temporal activity of Pilgrimage is analysed with this background.

The last part of the chapter is illustrative of the human element of participation. It is a mutual experience for both, the pilgrims as well as the local people. The role of the existing physical and social environment and its degree of affordability is the next level of enquiry. The following chapter continues the detailed description of the *Palkhi* stay in Lonand through time based activity mapping in the selected public spaces. It leads to the analysis of the people–space relationship.