

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rāmacandra Cintāmaṇa Ḍhere. *Rise of a Folk God: Vitthal of Pandharpur*. Translated by Anne Feldhaus. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 370 pp. \$74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-977759-4.

Reviewed by Ann Gold (Syracuse University)

Published on H-Asia (October, 2012)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha

There are many reasons to value the work of Rāmacandra Cintāmaṇa Ḍhere and to be grateful to Anne Feldhaus for producing such an accessible, even charming, translation of his important book, *Rise of a Folk God*. Feldhaus is an indefatigable chronicler of regional culture and religion in Maharashtra. While her works, spanning several decades, have been highly influential in broader fields including the study of gender (*Water and Womanhood*, 1995); pilgrimage (*Connected Places*, 2003), and many other aspects of both classical and vernacular religious traditions, Feldhaus sustains her regional focus without apology. Dedicated to exploring Maharashtrian culture at all levels and through a striking range of methodological lenses, Feldhaus has not only published her own major original ethnographic and literary studies, but taken the time to translate into English, from German and from Marathi, other scholarly works she deems critical to the larger project of illuminating Maharashtra's regional religious culture. She has demonstrated productive collaborative and collegial relationships with scholars based in India, including R. C. Ḍhere, who authored the book under review here.

I began reading *Rise of a Folk God* predisposed to value it just because Anne Feldhaus does, and I was not disappointed. *Rise of a Folk God* is published in an excellent series—South Asia Research, a collaboration between the University of Texas South Asia Institute and Oxford University Press—that makes works of meticulous, specialized scholarship available in hardback editions. This book contributes importantly and extensively to the already considerable body of scholarship focused on ViTThal of Pandharpur.[1] It also exhibits several broader significances which the translator highlights in her succinct, lucid, and helpful introduction. These include not only a vernacular theology and the meticulous tracking over time and through space of its complex historical developments, but also an excellent example of rigorous scholarly practice on the part of an author who affirms himself to be staunch devotee of the deity he studies. As

Feldhaus puts it, “believing that his god has stood on a brick for twenty-eight yugas does not prevent Ḍhere from wanting to know what individuals and groups have worshiped the god in historical times, and what changes those various worshipers had wrought in the traditions about the god” (p. xvii). Ḍhere pursues these latter matters systematically, in detail and in depth. The result is a volume that in its entirety may be of compelling interest to a rather select group. Some of Ḍhere's conclusions have apparently aroused lively opposition, engendering debates that his translator understands may not be of general interest. What is of the broadest interest, especially to religionists, is the manner in which Ḍhere the author negotiates his duplex identity as scholar-devotee.

I confess that my own academic interests do not lie in the kind of multistranded genealogical theology at this book's core. Nonetheless, I found inherent fascinations in Ḍhere's investigation of ViTThal's identity. Feldhaus's very evidently loving translation helps to sustain these. The cadence of Ḍhere's language is sometimes reminiscent of a bard's. For example, chapter 1 concludes, “Who was this god originally?... How did he become Gopal Krsna and take on the form in which the saints experienced the soul of the universe? This is the amazing story that we are about to experience” (p. 27). Such anticipatory rhetoric is a prominent feature of bardic language, and here it adds to the book's genre-transcending qualities.

*Rise of a Folk God* contains fifteen chapters and all of them hold rich materials concerning the nature of ViTThal, and equally the ways that religious traditions interact with society, language, politics, and locality. The central chapters are concerned to present a detailed account of ViTThal's often shape-shifting, border-crossing career. Ḍhere does a magisterial job of documenting diverse, concrete elements of an essentially ineffable divine identity. He persuasively musters evidence from diverse tex-

tual sources, including Sanskrit *PurāNas* and Marathi devotional poetry, to construct historically grounded arguments about ViTThal's travels and transformations. The fluidity and plasticity of divine identity—that is, the ways a localized deity absorbs distinctive traits while simultaneously dissolving them—are phenomena well known to scholars of popular Hinduism. Few, however, venture an attempt to sort out these entanglements as Dhere has done. Indeed, I have never seen such processes so carefully tracked and illuminated.

At the broadest level Dhere argues, as Feldhaus puts it, that ViTThal is “a convergence, synthesis, or confluence” of many different streams of Indian religious traditions (p. xiv). These streams include VaiSNava and Śaiva, as well as high caste and folk. ViTThal's pastoral origins, Śaivite antecedents, and ultimate Vaishnavization as a form of Gopāl KrishNa, are major threads throughout the book. Given his pastoral origins, ViTThal organically crossed geographical and linguistic borders. In chapter 2, Dhere uncovers and explicates ViTThal's historical links to Karnataka: “ViTThal knows how to speak Kannada; PuNDalik [his great devotee] doesn't understand his language” (p. 36), writes Marathi poet Nāmdev. Chapters 3 and 4 explore the resonances between ViTThal of Pandharpur and VenkaTeśvar of Tirumalai in Andhra Pradesh. Dhere's meaningful observation is that while the lord of Tirumalai has become wealthy, ViTThal still “belongs to the poor” (p. 57).

Dhere does not confine himself to verbal sources, but uses iconographic materials very effectively; photographs of specific images he discusses enhance his

sometimes elaborate arguments. Two intriguing chapters deal with the ways ViTThal's figure has incorporated or been incorporated into both Buddhism and Jainism. On the one hand, ViTThal becomes identified with Buddha in accord with Buddha's absorption as an incarnation into ViSNu (chapter 10). We also see a well-documented effort by Jains to merge ViTThal with the twenty-fourth *tīrthankara*, Nemināth (chapter 11).

While I would expect historians to value most Dhere's detailed chronological accounts of ViTThal's transformations over time, for religionists and anthropologists the chapters of greatest interest may be those on gender and place. Chapter 12, focused on the ways ViTThal's devotees think of him as “mother,” and chapter 15, on the bodily internalization and significant metaphorization of pilgrimage to Pandharpur, are both gems.

Throughout his work, Dhere makes clear that his sympathies lie with devotees, not priests; with pastoralists, not temple donors and builders. Beyond the light his book sheds on the specific divine career of ViTThal, Dhere's larger arguments have to do with expressions of a Hindu devotional tradition that has persistently run counter to the invidious workings of caste over many centuries, and continues to do so to this day.

#### Note

[1]. H-ASIA review editor's note: as we are unable to insert the appropriate diacritic I have inserted upper-case letters to indicate the Indic retroflex consonants that Professor Gold had used in her review.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

**Citation:** Ann Gold. Review of Dhere, Rāmacandra Cintāmaṇa, *Rise of a Folk God: Vitthal of Pandharpur*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. October, 2012.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34765>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.