

PAINT ME YELLOW

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On `Somavati Amavasya' this sleepy town, otherwise wearing somber tones of gray and black basalt, revels in the golden yellow, a ritual offering of turmeric called the `Bhandara'. In the swirling of humanity, faces painted in yellow with bright vermilion mark on the forehead, are customary trademarks for the day.

To witness this frenzy pandemonium, we endure this trip to the temple town of Jejuri in the dry heat of March. Falling twice or thrice a year, this day of no moon falling on a Monday has great religious significance. Devoted to Khandoba, Lord Shiva's incarnation, He is linked to both the Sun and the Moon by his origins. A premier God of `Sakama Bhakti', or wish granting prowess, Lord Khandoba is revered for courage, virility and prosperity. And since these powers are heightened at the time of conjunction of the Sun and the Moon (*amavasya*), Jejuri becomes a great ceremonial festival.

Khandoba, out of the 64 aspects of Lord Shiva, is one of the two primary male deities of the Maharastrian community. The other being Vithoba at Pandharpur. He is said to have evolved to rid the earth of the demons Malla and Mani. Like all Hindu Gods having various aspects, Malhari, Martand, Bhairav are synonyms for this deity. Martand is the representation of the Sun, identified with the yellow of turmeric.

The reflection of the frenzy can be vaguely found in this Marathi ballad

*`Ya bai Jejuri nagarat; korya chandani mahalata;
Malsha banai bhandati; ho aikuni malhari haasati.'*

Literally meaning- in this town of Jejuri, this bright and sparkling palace, where Malsha and Banai are quarrelling, while the Lord (represented as Malhari) is enjoying the scene. Malshabai and Banai are Lord Khandoba's two wives. While Malshabai is accepted as an incarnation of Parvati riding next to him on a white horse, the legend of Banai, his second wife is retold in a folk tale. The fable mentions of Lord Khandoba, on one of his many expeditions found his way blocked by a herd of grazing sheep. His many efforts of moving the animals failed, and in a fit of rage he slaughtered the flock. In spite of losing her animals, the shepherdess Banai was impressed by the supernatural powers of Khandoba, and joined the followers. Pleased by her devotion, the Lord brought the flock of sheep back to life by sprinkling the *bhandara*.

Swiftly moving up the almost 450 steps, the climb is a promenade of events. Alongside little shacks selling brassware and religious paraphernalia, are performers like the Waghyaas and Muralis, who sing and dance to the tune of the festival. Clusters of pilgrims render the air thick with turmeric spraying on to the impressive *deepmalas* lining the ascent. Even the stone image of the demon Malla changes his color from red to yellow as he is showered with the *bhandara*. The act signifies the conversion of the demon, after his defeat, to a Khandoba devotee.

The temple's crest, four minarets and the series of arches signifies a strong Islamic influence. It is believed that the four imposing *deepmalas* within the temple complex were built by Aurangzeb. Before the built up of the crescendo, devout are seen lighting

oil lamps, making vows, and greeting each other by anointing turmeric powder. The courtyard swarms with activities in the continuous stream of the sacred turmeric.

At the consecrated moment, the images of Khandoba and Malshabai placed in a palanquin, emerge from the temple, all hell breaks loose. The devotees fight their way, pushing with surging bodies, to shoulder the palanquin, in an effort to being blessed by the Lord. The crowds gathered in the temple courtyard and the perimeter walls, throw large fistfuls of turmeric, exploding in ritual shouting. People rush forward to touch the images, believing that by its contact Khandoba's powers will be bestowed upon them. In an example of such transmission, a few devotees get possessed and dance in a trance. The courtyard becomes an arena, with the sea of humanity swaying in a rhythmic wave as the palanquin makes its way to the doorway towards the Malhar Sagar reservoir. The procession moves down the steps, followed by ecstatic devotees. As we follow at a distance, we are sucked into the frenzied pandemonium of revelry. Dancing, we are dissolved into the yellowness; all around us the faces blur in blissful motion, the music rising into an uncontrolled passion. The procession moves towards the waters with intense cries of excitement. Devotees stripped up to the waist enter the water the moment the images are immersed, in the belief that the powers of the deities will flow unto them.

Their bathing complete, the excitement melts as the images are taken back to the temple. With the new moon rising in the distance, the pilgrims make their way back. The setting sun casts its therapeutic shimmer over the turmeric smeared all over the temple town rendering it in a golden hue, its significance of being referred to as '*Sonyachi Jejuri*', meaning golden Jejuri in the Marathi ballads, stands testified.