

**PILGRIMAGE AND THE BHAKTI PUBLIC:
A STUDY OF VARKARI PRACTICES IN MAHARASHTRA**

*Thesis submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
In partial fulfilment of the requirement
for the award of the degree of*

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis titled "Pilgrimage and the Bhakti Public: A Study of Varkari Practices in Maharashtra", submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi is an original and my own work.

I further declare that it has not been previously submitted in part or full to this or any other university for any degree.

Varada A. Sambhus

CERTIFICATE

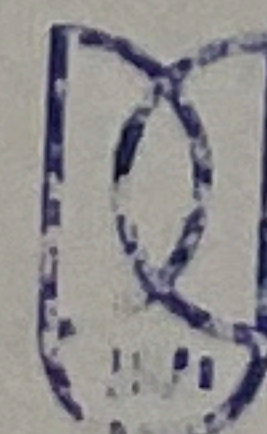
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ABSTRACT

Pilgrimage and the Bhakti Public: A Study of Varkari Practices in Maharashtra

Varada A. Sambhus

This thesis examines the pilgrimage practices that occur during the Vārī pilgrimage in Maharashtra in contemporary times. It investigates if the Vārī pilgrimage generates a homogeneous Vārkarī community and whether pilgrimage processes influence existing power structures, thereby shaping the socio-political dynamics in Maharashtra. In this effort, this thesis explores the Vaiṣṇava bhakti Sampradāya known as the Vārkarī Sampradāya. I argue that the Vārkarī bhakti ethos is circulated through various bhakti practices, with the Vārī pilgrimage being the most significant site for this circulation. The annual frequency of the Vārī pilgrimage, as well as the systems of pālkhīs, diṇḍīs and phaḍas enable for multi-layered interactions between Vārkarīs as well as Vārkarīs and non-Vārkarīs. I contend that, while the Vārī pilgrimage is largely viewed as a spiritual and religious experience, it is also a social and political phenomenon, enabling the negotiation of social and political power dynamics. I enquire into the question of whether caste and gender hierarchies continue to mark the Vārī pilgrimage or whether the setting of the Vārī allows for the transcendence of caste and gender identities. Pilgrimages in general, and the Vārī pilgrimage in particular, appear to be sites where both these possibilities – the creation of a homogeneous community and continuance of societal differences marked by caste and gender – can coexist. To capture these apparently contradictory trends, present in the pilgrimage processes, I analyse two theoretical constructs viz. the notion of “communitas” given by Victor Turner and the idea of “a bhakti public” given by Christian Lee Novetzke. I contend that because of the openness and fluidity offered by the idea of “a bhakti public” it is better suited to understand the multifaceted pilgrimage processes. In this thesis, I observe that the interactions, and

deliberations during the Vārī are complex and, as a result, do not necessarily produce homogeneous communities of pilgrims nor inherently divisive ones. The arguments in this thesis are arrived at based on the scholarly works as well as the data collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews conducted during the 2019 Vārī pilgrimage. Instead, social structures may operate through the Vārī pilgrimage on the one hand, and the bhakti ethos, particularly the Vārkarī ethos, may have an impact on social relations on the other. This thesis argues that, while the Vārī pilgrimage is basically a community affair, it does not result in the formation of a homogeneous Vārkarī community. Instead, it is a more open and inclusive platform through which people and groups can acquire a Vārkarī identity without necessarily transcending their other social identities and the power structures attached thereto.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the loving memory of Aai-Baba, who taught me not to give up and encouraged to walk new paths.

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A Note On Transliteration

There are several ways in which Marathi and Sanskrit words can be transliterated while writing in English. As the immediate context of this work is Maharashtra and Marathi literature, I have employed spellings of all Sanskrit words as pronounced in Marathi unless otherwise standardised in the English language.

e. g. Dnyāneśvara instead of Jnāneśvara or Gnyāneśvara

e.g. Dnyāna instead of Jnāna or Gynāna

For ‘व’ (write in Marathi), always v is used instead of w.

e.g. Vārkarī and not Wārkarī

e.g. Bhagvat instead of Bhagwat.

Vowel ‘a’ is generally avoided in the middle of the word and retained at the end of the word.

e. g. Eknātha instead of Ekanātha

e.g. Nāmdeva instead of Nāmadeva

Diacritics are not used for non-English words routinised in the English language

e.g. Guru, Bhakti

The plural of Marathi nouns is indicated with the suffix ‘s’

e.g. dindīs, phaḍas

Marathi Vowels						
अ a	आ ā	इ i	ई ī	उ u	ऊ ū	ऋ ru/ri
ए e	ऐ ai	ओ o	औ au	अं am/an	अः ah	ऋ ñ
Marathi Consonants						
क ka	ख kha	ग ga	घ gha	ङ ṅa	च cha	छ ccha

ज ja	झ za	ट ṭa	ठ ṭha	ड ḍa	ढ ḍha	ण ṇa
त ta	थ tha	द da	ध dha	न na	प pa	फ pha
ब ba	भ bha	म ma	य ya	र ra	ल la	व va
श śa	ष ṣa	स sa	ह ha	ळ ḷa	क्ष kśa	ज्ञ dnya/jna
श्र śra						
Example						
क ka	का kā	कि ki	की kī	कु ku	कू kū	कृ kru/kri
के ke	कै kai	को ko	कौ kau	कं kam/kan	कः kah	क्र kra

Abbreviations

BG – Bhagvat Gītā

BP – Bhāgvata Purāṇa

BORI – Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute

DMSC – Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja Sansthana Committee

Dny – Dnyāneśvarī

EB – Eknāthī Bhāgvat

IT – Information Technology

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

NSS – National Social Service

TG – Tukārāma Gāthā

VS – Vārkarī Sampradāya

VSS – Vārkarī Śikṣan Santha

Chapter One

Introduction

Ātā viśvāt make deve, yeṇe vāgyadnye toṣāve/

Toṣonī maja dyāve, pasāyadāna he//1//

Je khaḷānchī vyantī sāndo, tayā satkarmī ratī vādho/

Bhūtā paraspāre paḍo, maitra jīvānche//2//¹

This translates,

Oh omnipresent – God, who resides in every particle in the world, now that I am concluding the yajna² of words, be pleased and grace me with the blessing (1)
Let the wickedness of evil-minded wither away, and may their intellect be directed towards good deeds. Let living beings befriend each other and let there be love among them all(2)³

These are the words of Pasāyadāna. I, and many others like me, grew up listening to and singing these words every day. This was a daily prayer at the school where I did my primary education in Pune. Of course, I was too young then to understand its deeply entrenched spiritual and philosophical message. Still, this prayer served as my entry point into the Vārkarī world and, thereby, into the socio-cultural domain of Maharashtra.⁴ Later, these words kept coming back to me as many public gatherings, spiritual discourses, public lectures, and so on were concluded with the singing of Pasāyadāna. Similarly, I also got

¹ Santa Dnyāneśvara, a thirteenth-century bhakti santa in Maharashtra and one of the earliest commentators on the Bhagvad-Gīta in vernacular, concludes his cometary known as “Dnyāneśvarī” with these words. This is a prayer known as “Pasāyadāna” for seeking blessings from the omnipresent God – viśvātmaka deva. This, in a way, serves as the epilogue of Dnyāneśvarī. The “ovīs” mentioned here are just the beginning of this prayer. Please see, Dnyaneshvar. *Saarth Dnyaneshwari*, eds. S. V. Dandekar (Aalandi-Pune: Vārkarī Shikshan Sanstha, 1996), 18 :1793-1801, 824.

² Yajna can be roughly translated as a sacred offering to the fire.

³ I have based my translation on the explanation of Pasāyadāna given by Prof. Ram Shevkar. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vd8nfbKno7o>, Accessed on 28 December 2018.

⁴ What we know today as the state of Maharashtra came into being on May 1, 1960. But in this work, I use the term Maharashtra to broadly indicate the region where people spoke Marathi for centuries, much before the formation of the political map of Maharashtra.

introduced to the compositions of many other santas of Maharashtra through the school curriculum, the famous Sawai Gandharva Sangeet Mahotsav⁵, renditions of abhangas on the popular Pune Akashvani, and screenings of movies like “Santa Dnyāneśvara”⁶ and “Santa Tukārāma”⁷ on the state-owned channel “DD Sahyadri” on Sundays.

Being born and brought up in Pune, every year, I witnessed Vārkarīs and the Vārī pilgrimage passing by the city. For two days, the pālkhīs of Santa Dnyāneśvara and Santa Tukārāma would stay in the city, and it was a common site of a long queue of devotees in front of the temples for taking darśana of pādukās⁸. Sometimes, I too accompanied my parents and some neighbours for the darśana. Many college students and the citizen’s voluntary groups would accompany the Vārī pilgrimage to provide sevā of various kinds, from food distribution to foot massage to the pilgrims - to Vārkarīs. During the period of Vārī pilgrimage, the pravachanas⁹, pārayāṇa¹⁰ of Dnyāneśvarī or Eknāthī Bhāgvata, kīrtanas, bhajanas etc. would organise at the local temples. What is remarkable to note is that many of the participants in these practices are not necessarily Vārkarīs or the followers of the Vārkarī

⁵ It is almost a week-long mega carnival of Indian Classical Music, wherein music maestros from all across the country like Pt. Bhimsen Joshi and Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia take part and perform. The carnival is now known as Sawai Gandharva Bhimsen Mahotsav, and the 67th edition took place between December 11th and 15th, 2019. The 68th edition was held between February 2 and February 6, 2022. For details, please see: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/pune/5-day-sawai-gandharva-fest-begins-from-feb-2/articleshow/88264594.cms>. Accessed on December 14, 2021.

⁶ There are several movies made about Santa Dnyāneśvara as well as other Santas of the VS. The Prabhat Film Company movie, produced in the year 1940, is a black and white movie directed by Vishnupant Damle and Sheikh Fattal. Available on YouTube, <https://Santa.youtube.com/watch?v=INIM-yqblO8>. Accessed on March 27th 2020.

⁷ There are several movies made about Santa Tukārāma. A black-and-white Prabhat Film Company movie was made in 1936 and directed by Vishnupant Damle and Sheikh Fattal. It is available on YouTube at <https://Santa.youtube.com/watch?v=lits5RKpKF4>. Accessed on March 27th 2020.

⁸ Sandal images of the Santas. They can be wooden, silver, five metals (pandchadhatu) etc. The pādukās of Dnyāneśvara as well as Tukārāma are of silver.

⁹ Discourse on spirituality.

¹⁰ Reading the text in a planned manner.

Sampradāya (henceforth VS). Still, it seems they have immense respect for the Vārkarī tradition and are more or less influenced by it.¹¹ The Vārkarī practices like the Vārī, kīrtana, bhajana, the Vārkarī literary canon, including Dnyāneśvarī, Tukārāma Gāthā, the teachings enshrined in the Vārkarī compositions and commitment of the Vārkarīs to follow a particular code of conduct are collectively referred to as “Vārkarī ethos” in this thesis.

Almost every collective bhakti practice of Vārkarīs like kīrtana, bhajana, and pravachana, serves as the platform for interaction between the Vārkarīs (in the strictest sense of the term) and the non-Vārkarīs as well as society at large. However, the Vārī pilgrimage is significant in this regard. The rigid definition of a Vārkarī would include only those individuals who have taken a vow to go to the Vārī pilgrimage every year, who wear the Tulsimālā¹² around the neck and have adopted other rules like vegetarianism, non-alcoholism, non-indulgence, in adultery, etc. Whereas, in the broadest possible sense, anyone taking part in the Vārī pilgrimage can be regarded as a Vārkarī. Literally, one who does Vārī is a Vārkarī. The very fact that a large number of people from across the Marathi-speaking region get themselves involved in some or other kind of sevā, or at least involve themselves in any of the bhakti practices of the Vārkarīs, including walking the Vārī pilgrimage, taking the darśana of pādukās, participating in the kīrtana-bhajana or at least watching the Vārī procession on the television¹³ demonstrates the scale at which people associate with the Vārkarī tradition. It was frequently evident that there is a profound impact of the bhakti

¹¹ The respect for the Vārkarī tradition is evident from the effort that most individuals would put in to participate in these activities in whichever capacity they can. The highest regard for the tradition is symbolised by walking the Vārī pilgrimage up to Pandharpur. If that is not possible, walk with the pālkhī at least for a day, or at least take darśana of padukas at the local temple, or visit the local Viṭṭhala temple. The saying is “*jeevanat ekda tari pandharichya varit char pavala chalata yayla hava*”. This translates as “one should walk at least four steps in the Pandharpur Vārī”.

¹² Tulsimālā can be roughly translated as “a garland of Tulsi beads”. Tulsi is generally understood as holy basil.

¹³ Almost all Marathi news channels carry a “Vārī special bulletin” during the Vārī pilgrimage.

tradition, teachings of santas of VS and its practices on the everyday lives of the people of Maharashtra, which I refer to as Vārkarī ethos. The Vārī pilgrimage brings almost the entire Vārkarī community together, and it is the most evident public manifestation of the Vārkarī ethos.

In the background, as I was becoming more curious about the Vārkarī tradition and the Vārkarī ways, my formal training in political studies helped me understand the contours of the “political”. From the classical, state-centric idea of the political to the contemporary understanding that dwells on the concept of power, the scope of the “political” has expanded substantially. While studying various concepts like liberty, equality, and justice, which matter not only to each individual but also to society that the location of “religion” and, more so, “spirituality” was uneasy within the domain of “political”. Strictly within the classical sense, with the standard of “secular study” and the idea of “separation between the state and the Church”, religion was almost absent from the “political”. As, on the one hand, religion came to be seen “as a private affair” and, on the other hand, the domain of political was considered “public”, the tension between the “private religion” and “public political” became evident while studying political theory based on the modern western ideas of secularism. The discussion on religion within the domain of political studies is twofold: firstly, religion as a private affair and freedom to practice religion or faith in the “private sphere”; and secondly, within the context of the public, religion is often seen as a force of communalism¹⁴ or communal conflict. Despite the fact that the secular and religious were thought to be binary opposites, most religious reflection and public engagement with religion have come from various interpretations of secularism.¹⁵ It seems that the “political” engages far less with

¹⁴ The term “communal” here is used to indicate tension between communities on the basis of different faith systems.

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge (Mass): Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). Rajeev Bhargava, *Secularism and Its Critics* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998). Ashis Nandy, “The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance,” *Alternatives* 13, no. 2, (Apr. 1988): 177–194. T. N.

spirituality than religion.¹⁶ Hopefully, as different academic disciplines adopt a more integrative and holistic approach to the study of social phenomena, the domain of spirituality¹⁷ may be looked at as a “public” phenomenon, not simply relegated to the private domain.

Over time, the path of bhakti, more commonly known as bhaktimārga, and other bhakti practices have been seen as ways to reach spiritual goals in the Indian subcontinent. Mokṣa or muktī, which can roughly be translated as salvation or liberation from the cycles of birth, death, and re-birth, are considered the highest spiritual goal. Bhakti, or devotional love, is believed to be one of the paths to mokṣa.¹⁸ Though bhakti and its practices are as bhajana, kīrtana, nāma-japa, pravachana, pūjā, and pārayāṇa have been part of many people’s daily

Madan, “Secularism in Its Place,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 46, No. 4 (Nov. 1987): 747-759. This list is merely indicative.

¹⁶ The terms religion and spirituality are often used synonymously or in conjunction. I employ the term religion to indicate organised systems of worship or *Upasana Paddhati* (ways of worship). Broadly, in the Indian context, they can be referred to as “Sampradāya” or “Pantha”. Gode and Karve edited Sanskrit- English Dictionary defines Sampradāya as “a peculiar system of religious teaching, a religious doctrine inculcating the worship of one peculiar deity”. See, P. K. Gode and G. G. Karve, ed. *Sanskrit – English Dictionary*, Vol. 3 (Pune: Prasad Prakashan, 1957 [2011])

¹⁷ Spirituality is generally associated with finding answers to some fundamental questions about life and existence, like “who am I?”, “what is the purpose of life?”, “What happens after death?” etc. The answers to these questions, or at least the method by which individuals seek answers to these questions, would have a profound impact on how individuals perceive themselves or their sense of identity and their interactions with other beings in a given socio-cultural setting. Individual’s standpoint, spirituality is a personal experience (often described as an experience of advaita or non-dualism in the Vārkarī tradition), whereas religion is more public and community-oriented, having set rules and practices like practices of worship, pilgrimages, and the recitation of a particular mantra.

¹⁸ The other two paths or mārgas to Mokṣa are believed to be the path of knowledge, i.e., Dnyānamārga, and a path of action, Karmamārga. The earliest and most explicit references to the Bhaktimārga, Karmamārga, and Dnyānamārga can be found in the Bhagvad Gītā. Dnyāneśvarī, the revered text of the Vārkarīs, also elaborates upon these three mārgas, and they are referred to as Dnyānayoga, Karmayoga, Bhaktiyoga. Depending on the school of thought of a Sampradāya, or an individual seeker, the interplay between these three mārgas unfolds differently. In some cases, they are arranged hierarchically, and in some others, these three mārgas are seen as complementary, one leading to the other. The classic example of the debate between Dnyānamārga and Bhaktimārga is found in the Vārkarī tale of the discussion between Dnyāneśvara and Nāmdeva, the former being associated with Dnyānamārga and later with Bhaktimārga. For details see, S. V. Dandekar, “Introduction,” *Sārtha Dnyāneśvarī* (Aalandi-Pune: Vārkarī Shikshan Sanstha, 1996).

lives for centuries, bhakti studies have remained marginal in the mainstream of academic inquiry, particularly in the stream of political studies.

There are a good number of works available on pilgrimage studies, especially from the area of sacred geography. Some scholars like Iravati Karve¹⁹, Bhalachandra Nemade²⁰, R. D. Ranade²¹, and Krishna Sharma²² have put some light on the public nature of bhakti. But in recent years, there has been a growing interest in understanding the social dimensions of spirituality in general and bhakti in particular. Most of the recent works and works from the past dwell on the theoretical underpinnings of bhakti and the bhakti literature or studying various bhakti sampradāyas and their workings in different parts of India, or studying the biographical accounts of the bhakti santas.²³ From the perspective of social dimensions of

¹⁹ Karve's most famous essay in the context of Maharashtra's Bhakti tradition, particularly the Pandharpur Vārī, is titled "On the Road: A Maharashtrian Pilgrimage". Iravati Karve, "On the Road: A Maharashtrian Pilgrimage", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 22, no.1, (Nov., 1962). Another translated essay titled "Boyfriend" outlines Karve's engagement with Viṭṭhala or Pāṇḍurāṅga, the deity of the Vārkarī Sampradāya. Iravati Karve, "Boyfriend" trans. Jai Nimbalkar in *The Experience of Hinduism: Essays on Religion in Maharashtra*, eds. Eleanor, Zelliott and Maxine Berntsen, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 3-6. Apart from these two essays, in several of Karve's writings on the cultural field of Maharashtra, the reference to the literature produced by the santas of the VS and overall bhakti traditions in Maharashtra surface intermittently, though not in a very systematic manner. Please see Iravati Karve, *Marathi Lokanichi Sanskruti* (Pune: Deshmukh Aani Company, 1951); Iravati Karve, *Aamachi Sanskruti* (Pune: Deshmukh Aani Company, (1960) [2016]) Iravati Karve, *Sanskriti* (Pune: Deshmukh Aani Company, 1972 [2014]).

²⁰ Bhalachandra Nemade, "The Revolt of the Underprivileged: Style in Expression of the Vārkarī Movement in Maharashtra," in *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*, ed. Jayant Lele (Netherlands: Brill, 1981), 113 – 123.

²¹ R. D. Ranade, *Mysticism in Maharashtra*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1933 [1982]).

²² Krishna Sharma, *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement: A New Perspective: A Study in the History of Ideas*. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1987 [2015]).

²³ Charlotte Vaudeville, "Paṇḍharpūr, The City of Saints," *Structural Approaches to South Indian Studies*, ed. Glenn E. Yocum and Harry Merwyn Buck, (Chambersburg, Pa: Wilson Books, 1974), 127–161. Jayant Lele, "The Bhakti Movement in India: A Critical Introduction," in *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*, ed. Jayant Lele (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 1-15; Jayant Lele, "Community, Discourse and Critique in Jñanesvar," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 15, no. 1-2 (1980): 104-112; Vanita Ruth "Three women Saints of Maharashtra: Muktabai, Janabai, Bahinabai", *Manushi*, 50–51–52 (January–June 1989), 45–61. Karen Pechilis, *The Embodiment of Bhakti* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Eleanor Zelliott and Rohini Mokashi-Punekar, eds. *Untouchable Saints: An Indian Phenomenon* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005); J. S. Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours* (New Delhi: Oxford university Press 2014); J. S. Hawley, *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); J. S. Hawley, Christian Lee Novetzke and Swapna Sharma, ed. *Bhakti and Power: Debating India's Religion of the Heart* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2019); Christian Lee Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory: Nāmdeva in Religious and Secular Traditions* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2009); Jon

bhakti, what has remarkably remained underworked is the study of various bhakti practices like pilgrimages, bhajanas, kīrtanas, pravachanas, etc., except in the works of scholars like Christian Novetzke.²⁴ Scholars like Alan Morinis²⁵, S. M. Bharadwaj²⁶, Rana P. B. Singh²⁷, Makan Jha²⁸, and Knut Jacobsen²⁹ have focused on pilgrimage in their academic enquiry. Victor Turner's account³⁰ points out the social dimensions of pilgrimage and develops the concept of "communitas", but most of the works available on pilgrimages do not dwell on the bhakti dimensions, especially the social aspects of bhakti while studying the institution of pilgrimage.

My inherent interest in understanding the Vārkarī tradition and my formal training in political studies have shaped the domain of enquiry of this thesis. As the understanding of "political" expanded and moved from the state-centric approach to the power-centric approach, the previously unexplored areas of study became available for serious academic

M. Keune, "Eknātha Remembered and Reformed: Bhakti, Brahmins, and Untouchables in Marathi Historiography". *PhD Thesis* (Columbia University, 2011). <https://doi.org/10.7916/D8CN79VK>; Jacqueline Daukes, "Female voices in the Vārkarī sampradāya : Gender Constructions in a Bhakti Tradition". *PhD Thesis* (SOAS: University of London, 2014). <https://doi.org/10.25501/SOAS.00020367>.

²⁴ Christian Lee Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Memory*; Also see, Christian Lee Novetzke, "Bhakti and Its Public", *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 11, No. 3 (December 2007): 255-272. Christian Lee Novetzke. *The Quotidian Revolution: Vernacularization, Religion, and the Premodern Public Sphere in India*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

²⁵ Alan Morinis, ed. *Sacred Journey: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992).

²⁶ S. M. Bharadwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India: A Study in Cultural Geography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

²⁷ Rana P.B Singh, *Hindu Tradition of Pilgrimage: Sacred Space & System* (New Delhi: Dev Publishers and Distributors, 2013).

²⁸ Makan Jha, ed. *Pilgrimage: Concepts, Themes, Issues and Methodology* (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications: 1995).

²⁹ Knut A. Jacobsen, *Pilgrimage in Hindu Tradition: Salvific Space* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

³⁰ Victor Turner, "The Center Out There: Pilgrim's goal", in *History of Religions*, 12, 3, (Feb. 1973): 191-230 (Reprinted as 'Pilgrimages as Social Processes' in *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, 166-230); Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. 1974), Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1969).

engagement, which, in turn, also called for an interdisciplinary approach. The previously unexplored or less explored topics within the discipline of political studies, like the environment, family, sexuality, gender, sport, art, literature etc., are now well established within the domain of “political”. In this thesis, I attempt to look at bhakti and the bhakti practices, especially pilgrimage, from a political perspective. I focus on the public aspects of bhakti. I argue that bhakti should not be seen merely as a private affair from a reductionist point of view but instead adopt a more holistic approach to understand how bhakti operates in the social arena and what constitutes “bhakti public”.³¹ Scholars like Christian Lee Novetzke and John Stratton Hawley³² have sufficiently established that bhakti is necessarily “public” in nature, generating a particular kind of public - “bhakti public”³³.

Building upon the works of Novetzke and Hawley, I continue to highlight the social dimensions of bhakti in the Maharashtrian context, with reference to the VS. While doing so, apart from studying the most prominent bhakti sampradāya in Maharashtra, i.e. VS, the santas of this sampradāya and the revered literature, I have focused on the most critical bhakti practice of this sampradāya viz. Vārī – the annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur. Even though the thesis touches upon other Vārkarī bhakti practices, collectively referred to as “nāma-sankīrtana”, the core of enquiry remains the Vārī pilgrimage. It should be noted that the subject matter of this thesis demands an inter-disciplinary approach. As a result, I have adopted methodological tools as well as secondary sources from the disciplines of sociology, philosophy, literature (especially Marathi), history, and sacred geography. However, I have

³¹ Christian Lee Novetzke first used the term in the essay titled, “Bhakti and its public”, in *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (December 2007), 255-272. Novetzke uses the term again in his subsequent work, “*Religion and Public Memory: A Cultural History of Saint Nāmdēva in India*”, 2008. Also see “*History, Bhakti, and Public Memory: Nāmdēva in Religious and Secular Traditions*”, 2009.

³² Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*; Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*; Hawley and Novetzke, ed. *Bhakti and Power*.

adopted a “political” perspective to substantiate my arguments. The term “political” refers to social interactions in public spaces where negotiations take place through dialogue and deliberation, which appear to create and disseminate common systems of values and profoundly influence how individuals think and act, guiding their day-to-day behaviour in public. Through these interactions, public culture is shaped, which may further perpetuate and/or alter existing power structures.

1.1. Research Question

In this thesis, the questions I want to address are:

Does the setting of the Vārī pilgrimage wherein pilgrims walk, dance, sing, eat, and stay together create a homogenous, unified community of the Vārkarīs transcending the social hierarchies of caste and gender, or does the Vārī pilgrimage serve as a platform for manifestation and further, perpetuating the hierarchies caused by social structures? Does the circulation of ideas generated by the movement of people from across the Marathi-speaking region during the Vārī aid in shaping a particular cultural ethos in Maharashtra? Can the pilgrimages be seen as protests or alternative spaces that take individuals away from the structures of dominance and into the realm of realisation of universalism, or are pilgrimages institutionalised to support the dominant structures? Are the pilgrimages, in general, and the Vārī pilgrimage, in particular, instruments of change or are they status quoist? What is the nature of interactions between pilgrims, i.e. those who participate in the Vārī pilgrimage, as well as pilgrims and the society at large?

The possible answers to these questions are not simple, and there are multiple layers to uncover. The Vārī pilgrimage tradition seems to be undoubtedly essential in comprehending Maharashtrian culture. The memory of Shivaji Mahārāja, under whose leadership swaraj or self-rule was established in the seventeenth century, and the deity

Viththala or Pāṇḍuranga, as well as the living tradition of the Vārī pilgrimage to Pandharpur, which has attracted pilgrims from across Maharashtra for centuries, are the most important symbols that may capture the popular imagination of Maharashtrian culture and Marathi identity, or “Marathi Asmitā”. Generally, the Vārī pilgrimage and the sampradāya associated with it, i.e., VS, are known for their egalitarian outlook and values such as equality, mutual respect, and non-discrimination based on caste and gender inclusivity, self-discipline, and minimalism. The works of Vārkarī santas are frequently cited in contemporary public discourse. A link is often drawn between the present-day understanding of egalitarian values and the ethos propagated by the VS and the santas of the Vārkarī tradition.

The bhakti practices, especially the public ones, propagated by the VS seem to be instrumental in circulating the ethos of the Vārkarīs and directing common individuals to follow a particular code of conduct. Non-consumption of alcohol and meat, non-indulgence in adultery, speaking the truth and going to the Pandharpur Vārī every year are some of the basic vows of Vārkarīs. Through the bhakti practices like nāma-japa, pārayāṇa, singing of harīpāṭha, bhajanas, kīrtanas etc., a system of specific values is imbibed and disseminated. The reverence for the works of the santas and the santa tradition³⁴ is indicative of a commitment to the Vārkarī ethos. However, despite the works of santas for centuries, respect

³⁴ “Santa tradition” is a literal translation of the term “santa paramparā”. It generally refers to the literature and the teachings of the santas in Maharashtra. In the context of VS, the term “santa paramparā” is used to refer to the legacy of the santas between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, from Dnyāneśvara to Nilobārāya (believed to be a disciple of Tukārāma). It is important to note here that the notion of santa paramparā is used in a narrow sense. In the Vārkarī view of santa paramparā, santas like Rāmdāsa, who is thought to be a contemporary of Tukārāma and also part of the larger Vaiṣṇava bhakti tradition, are not considered to be a part of Vārkarī Santa paramparā. Also, none of the individuals was accorded the status of a santa after the seventeenth century, despite the long legacy of the revered individuals. It can be observed that the individuals who were considered respected in the Vārkarī tradition were called “Hari Bhakta Pārayāṇa” (greatest devotee of Vishnu), but not santas. In my interaction with one of the Mahārāja belonging to the well-known Vārkarī family, I was told that the work done by the santas of the Vārkarī tradition is not only rich in its content but also in abundance, so there is no need to look at other bhakti traditions or visit the literature of other santas. He said, “When one’s own house is filled with delicacies, hence there is no need to look at what is cooked at someone else’s place”. Whereas another Mahārāja, also from the well-known Vārkarī family, stated that there is no strict restriction on only referring to the Vārkarī santas”. He said, “In our tradition (guru tradition), we revere Tukārāma Mahārāja and Rāmdāsa Swāmī equally”.

and remembrance of the santa tradition, circulation of egalitarian ideas through various bhakti practices, and appropriation of the Vārkarī symbols in modern-day social and political discourse in Maharashtra, caste and gender hierarchies and divisiveness continue to mark social, cultural, and political life in Maharashtra.³⁵ In fact, it seems that the very avenues of bhakti practices, including the Vārī pilgrimage, are no exception to this. Further, though the overall nature of the VS and the Vārkarī practices is all-inclusive and based on progressive, egalitarian values, strands of rigidity and orthodoxy are not eliminated entirely.

As far as homogeneity and collectiveness of the Vārkarī community are concerned, the Vārkarī ethos, through its symbols and practices, creates a well-defined Vārkarī community. Interestingly, almost immediately and intuitively, regular or “sampradāyika” Vārkarīs understand who is a “true Vārkarī”. The system of organisation that creates a sense of common binding can be witnessed through the systems of phaḍas in the context of the VS and through diṇḍīs during the Vārī pilgrimage. Within the larger umbrella identity of VS, there are several sub-groups commonly known as phaḍas³⁶ and the chief and the smallest organising unit during the Vārī procession is known as diṇḍī. Even though the ethos of bhakti (as propagated by the Vārkarī santas) is common to all these groups like Viṭṭhala bhakti, philosophy of advaita and Bhāgvata Dharma, simple ways of bhakti to attain mokṣa and so

³⁵ In 1947, the “untouchables” were allowed to enter the Viṭṭhala temple after the famous protest led by Sane Guruji. For a detailed discussion on the Temple Entry Satyagraha by Sane Guruji. See, Aatmaram Walinjar, *Sane Guruji Aani Pandharpur Mandir Pravesache Adhyatm* (Pune: Dimple Prakashan, 2011). To date, in some of the most orthodox Vārkarī groups, women are not accepted as Kīrtanakāras.

³⁶ Phaḍa can be considered as a sub-group or a camp within the Varkari tradition. These are groups of Vārkarīs who are led by a senior Maharaj. The ‘beeja mantra’ or core mantra may change from phaḍa to phaḍa. The style and sequence of the singing of Bhajanas and Harīpātha, performance of Kīrtanas etc., may vary from phaḍa to phaḍa. The continuity of the Vārkarī tradition in its current form can be attributed to the phaḍas. There are several phaḍas within the VS. Santa Nāmdeva Mahārāja (Nāmdasa) Phaḍa, Vaskar Phaḍa, Dehukar Phaḍa, Ajarekar Phaḍa are some of the prominent Phaḍas of the VS. Especially, during the Vārī pilgrimage, the terms diṇḍī and phaḍa are used synonymously. Phaḍa can broadly be said to be a long standing and relatively permanent groups of Vārkarīs gathered around a guru or Mahārāja, whereas the term dindi is used to connote a group of Vārkarīs walking together in the Vārī pilgrimage, mostly for the logistical purposes. Sometimes, diṇḍīs may get dissolved after the Vārī procession, but phaḍas continue to indulge in bhakti practices round the year, thereby developing their own norms like the selection and sequence of abhangas to be sung, style of kīrtanas etc.

on, the details of the practices like the tune and sequence of abhangas as well as their approach to the prevailing socio-political issues may differ from one another. In fact, these variations of details of practices differentiate one phaḍa and diṇḍī from the other phaḍas and diṇḍīs. It seems that even though the Vārkarī identity is common to all these groups and they are integral to VS, the dimensions of being a Vārkarī may change from group to group.

In particular, collective bhakti practices like pilgrimage, kīrtana, pravachana, etc., are the sites where people come together in large numbers. Apparently, the purpose of these gatherings is a spiritual and religious quest. However, the deliberations as well as practices at such sites are not limited only to the spiritual-religious domain but also include deliberations on the social and political issues of the day. What is important to note here is that apart from discussing the subject matters related to transcendence or other-worldliness like mokṣa and muktī, the bhakti practices also encompass the so-called “material” or “secular” aspects, including environmental concerns, rights of women, and marginalised, deśbhakti³⁷, dedication to one’s country, land, language, and so on. More importantly, what may seem like spiritual discourse or interaction may also have a profound influence on the secular, material, or worldly understanding of individuals as well as society at large. For example, during the pravachanas and kīrtanas, a reference to the celebration of the Marathi language, supported by the evidence of the ovīs from Dnyāneśvarī, seems to have an impact on the way the “Marathi identity” gets constructed.³⁸ The distinction between the spiritual and the material, or the secular and the religious, seems to be of academic convenience and does not necessarily play out in everyday life as well as during bhakti practices. It appears that social interactions during Vārī are multifaceted and may result in multiple trends that seem

³⁷ Deśbhakti can roughly be translated as devotion or loyalty to one’s country. The term embodies the spirit of nationalism.

³⁸ Iravati Karve, in the essay “On the Road”, observes that the Vārī pilgrimage was instrumental in the standardisation of the Marathi language.

contradictory. Therefore, it will be interesting to understand the nature of social interactions and the ethos generated at bhakti practices like the Vārī pilgrimage sites.

Vārī is a channel for the exchange of ideas. Apart from spreading the Vārkarī ethos through kīrtanas and pravachanas, it is a hub for social interactions. The Vārī enables both vertical and horizontal thought flow. The family pilgrimage system of Vārī causes vertical circulation. It allows ideas to pass from generation to generation. The vast reach of the Vārkarī ethos over the Marathi-speaking region causes horizontal circulation. Vārkarīs or pilgrims possibly bring back the ideas exchanged during the Vārī journey, widening the sphere circulation. The Vārī pilgrimage appears to have a profound impact on the Maharashtrian culture, as pilgrims return home with the “Vārkarī ethos”. One of the reasons for the widespread circulation of Vārkarī ethos is its inclusive and reconciliatory nature. The Vārī pilgrimage attracts individuals from all walks of life. Individuals of any caste, gender, class, education, or occupation can participate in the pilgrimage. It allows the apparently contradictory social processes to co-exist. Despite its openness, Vārī has hierarchies. On the one hand, the Vārī helps pilgrims feel united through common symbols of reverence, sharing common experiences during the pilgrimage, and creating a bond by singing, playing, eating, and staying together. But on the other hand, the Vārī continues to display social, political, and ideological differences. Though virtually anybody can participate in the Vārī, caste and gender hierarchies still exist. The reconciliatory aspect of it allows for the simultaneous presence of seemingly opposing interests and processes. The social processes during the Vārī pilgrimage are both unifying and dividing. It neither creates nor denies the possibility of creating a homogenous community. It instead allows the creation of a bhakti public that centres around the Vārkarī ethos. This public can be considered as “a Vārkarī public” and the Vārī is the most potent site to generate “a Vārkarī public”. A Vārkarī public, like a bhakti public, seems inclusive, fluid, and open. In the next section I review the literature on the

important themes of this thesis, viz. Bhakti and VS, Pilgrimage and the Vārī, and the Public, the Public Sphere and a public.

1.2. Literature Review

1.2.1. Bhakti and Vārkarī Sampradāya in Maharashtra

In the field of bhakti studies, one of the classic debates is whether there was a unified pan-Indian bhakti movement in India or discrete and sporadic attempts were made by some individuals, or more precisely santas, to disseminate the message of bhakti in their own ways.³⁹ Though the debate is yet to be settled, scholars can agree that the bhakti sampradāyas that emerged in different regions of India and at different times have profoundly impacted the regional cultures. Broadly speaking, the common thread that runs across various regional bhakti traditions has three elements: firstly, most bhakti sampradāyas have been “public-oriented”⁴⁰, and they made the knowledge of the highest spiritual goal, muktī/mokṣa, available to the common people. Secondly, they were instrumental in the process of vernacularisation and preferred Prakrit over Sanskrit. And thirdly, the regional bhakti traditions have played a crucial role in shaping the regional cultures. In fact, the socio-cultural ethos of these regions (which were referred to as states in the post-independence era and are based on linguistic criteria) is difficult to understand without tracing the regional bhaktī tradition in the respective states. For example, it is almost impossible to imagine the cultural ethos of Karnatak or Bengal without paying attention to the bhaktī sampradāyas of

³⁹ J. S. Hawley and Krishna Sharma.

⁴⁰ Shankar Abhyankar, *Vārkarī Santāncā Bhaktiyoga*, Vol. 5 (Pune: Āditya Pratiṣṭhān, 1992); S.N. Bhavasar, “The Spiritual Contribution of Maharashtrian Saints,” *Hindu Spirituality: Postclassical and Modern*, eds. by K.R. Sundararajan and Bithika Mukerji (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003), 23–46; G. B. Sardar, *The Saint-Poets of Maharashtra*, tran. Kumud Mehta (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1969); M. G. Ranade, *Rise of the Maratha Power* (Bombay: Punalekar Publication, 1900); P. R. Mokashi, *Maharashtrateel Paach Sampradāya*, (Pune: Prasad Prakashan, 1975).

Basava and Chaitanya, respectively. Similarly, the Marathi-speaking region of the Deccan plateau witnessed a long legacy of bhakti sampradāyas and a genre of Santas associated with those sampradāyas. There are five prominent bhakti sampradāyas in Maharashtra, viz. Nātha, Mahānubhava, Vārkarī, Datta and Samarthā.⁴¹ The legacy of these sampradāyas can be traced back to at least the eleventh century AD. Though more or less all of them have contributed to shaping Maharashtrian culture, the most prominent of them is the VS.

The VS is a long-standing religious tradition and an influential bhakti sampradāya in Maharashtra. The VS is also known as Bhāgvata Pantha or Bhāgvata Sampradāya. It is a Vaiṣṇava Sampradāya, worshipping a child form of Kṛṣṇa (one of the avatāras of Viṣṇu) – known as Viṭṭhala or Pāṇḍuraṅga. It is difficult to comment upon the definite origins of the Vārkarī tradition, but it can be said that it had significant roots among the ordinary people of the thirteenth century.⁴² Though the originator of the VS is unknown, the works of Dnyāneśvara and Nāmdeva, both thought to have lived in the thirteenth century, are inextricably linked to the VS. As Karve observes, when Dnyāneśvara wrote and sang in Marathi the commentary on Sanskrit Bhagvat-Gītā in the thirteenth century, Pandharpur was a famous pilgrimage site.⁴³ However, it is difficult to discern when the annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur became a yearly ritual of the Vārkarīs. Further, it is unclear when the Vārī came to be unequivocally associated with the VS. Despite the debates regarding the origins of the Vārī, VS and their mutual association, today, the Vārī pilgrimage is considered a defining

⁴¹ R. R. Gosavi, *Paach Bhakti Sampradāya*, (Pune: Moghe Prakashan, 1974).

⁴² See, Dhare, *Shree Viṭṭhala*; S. V. Abhyankar, *Vārkarī Sampradāya*; S. G. Tulpule, *Paach Santkavi* (Pune: Suvichar Prakashanm 1984).; Vidyadhar Tathe, “Vārī aani Vārkarī Sampradāya,” in *Vārī* ed. Devidas Pote (Thane: Param Mitra Publications, 2020), 1 -19 G. A. Deleury, *The Cult of Vithoba* (Poona: Deccan College, 1960); Karve, “On the Road.”

⁴³ Karve, “On the Road”.

characteristic of the VS, without a doubt. In short, the sampradāya that attaches prime importance to Vārī or that is identified with Vārī itself is called VS or Vārkarī Pantha.

The ethos of the VS is widespread among the common people of Maharashtra. The Vārkarī ethos is so deeply rooted that one would hardly come across a household in Maharashtra that is not touched by it. Even today, Dnyāneśvarī, Eknāthī Bhāgvata⁴⁴ and Tukārāma Gāthā⁴⁵ – the texts which are considered the philosophical trinity of the VS – are the revered texts in Marathi households; the Santas associated with the VS are greatly respected across the sections of society; the kīrtanas, bhajanas, bhārūdas, and pravachanas fetch people in large numbers and continue to be influential media; fasting on Ekādaśī is a common practice; many still recite the mantra “Rāma Kṛṣṇa Harī” and harīpātha⁴⁶ every evening; millions walk in the annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur - Vārī.

Some scholars have attempted to capture this deeply entrenched Vārkarī ethos and its impact on shaping Maharashtrian culture. G. A. Deleury’s work, *The Cult of Vithoba*⁴⁷, written more than seven decades ago, still serves as an important work on the VS, providing the details of Viṭṭhala bhakti, VS as well as the Vārī pilgrimage. K. N. Behere’s *The*

⁴⁴ It is a Marathi commentary on the eleventh chapter of the Sanskrit Bhāgvata Purāna, composed by the sixteenth-century Santa Eknātha. Eknātha. *Sārtha Shree Eknāthī Bhagvata*. ed. Nana Mahārāja Sakhare, (Pune: Saraswati Publications, 1999).

⁴⁵ The compilation of *abhangas* of the seventeenth century Santa Tukārāma is known as Tukārāma Gāthā. Tukārāma. *Shree Tukārāma Gatha*. eds. Ashok Kamat, (Pune: Gurukul Pratishthan, 2004).

⁴⁶ *Harīpātha* literally means “everyday prayer to God”. See, Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja, *Haripātha*. <https://Santa.Santasahitya.in/dnyaneshwar/Santa-dnyaneshwar-haripatha/>, accessed on 28th April 2022. Tukārāma Mahārāja, *Haripātha*. <https://Santa.Santasahitya.in/Tukarāma/Santa-Tukarāma-haripatha/>, accessed on 28th April 2022. Eknātha Mahārāja, *Haripātha*, <https://Santa.Santasahitya.in/eknath/Santa-eknath-haripatha/>, accessed on 28th April 2022.

⁴⁷ Deleury, *Cult of Vithoba*.

*Background of Maratha Renaissance*⁴⁸, G.B. Sardar's *The Saint-Poets of Maharashtra*⁴⁹, and Jayant Lele's *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*⁵⁰ and a critical introduction to the English version of D. B. Mokashi's "*Pāḷkhī*" written by Eleanor Zelliot⁵¹, provide the foundation for understanding the philosophical underpinnings of the Vārkarī ethos. These works contextualise the Vārkarī tradition over several hundred years. Among the Marathi sources, scholars like R. D. Ranade, S. V. Dandekar⁵², Shankar Abhyankar⁵³, Sadanand More⁵⁴, and Vidyadhar Tathe⁵⁵ have written extensively on the philosophy of the VS, and others like R. C. Dhere⁵⁶, S. G. Tulpule⁵⁷ have given historiographical accounts of the VS, especially in the context of Viṭṭhala bhakti. Through the writings of Iravati Karve,

⁴⁸ K. N. Behere, *The Background of Maratha Renaissance in the Seventeenth Century: A Historical Survey of the Social Relations and Political Movements of the Marathas* (Banglor: Banglor Press, 1946).

⁴⁹ Sardar, *Saint-Poets of Maharashtra*.

⁵⁰ Lele, *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*

⁵¹ Eleanor Zelliot, "A Historical Introduction to the Vārkarī Movement" in D. B. Mokashi, *Pāḷkhī: An Indian Pilgrimage* trans. Philip C. Engblom (Albany: University of New York Press, 1987).

⁵² S.V. Dandekar, *Vārkarī Panthacha Itihas* (Pune: Pra. Dandekar Dharmik Vnmay Mandal, 1957 [1966]). Also see, S. V. Dandekar, "Introduction"; S. V. Dandekar, *Abhang Sankīrtana*, Vol. I and II. 7th edition. (Pune: Prasad Prakashan, [2015]). S. V. Dandekar, eds. *Vārkarī Bhajan Sangraha*, (Pune: Pracharya Dandekar Dharmik Shaikshanik Va Sanskrutik Vandmay Prakashan Mandal, ---).

⁵³ Abhyankar, *Vārkarī Sampradāya*.

⁵⁴ Sadanand More, "Sohala Krushijan Sanskruticha", in *Vārī* ed. Devidas Pote (Thane: Param Mitra Prakashan, 2020), 72-74. Sadanand More, *Tuka Mhane*, 2nd ed. (Pune: Utkarsh Prakashan, 2016). Also see, Sadanand More, *Tukārāma Darshan* (Pune: Sakal Prakashan, 2014).

⁵⁵ Vidyadhar Tathe, "Vārī aani Vārkarī Sampradāya," in *Vārī* ed. Devidas Pote (Thane: Param Mitra Publications), 1 -19.

⁵⁶ R. C. Dhere. *The Rise of a Folk God : Vitthal of Pandharpur*, trans. Anne Feldhaus (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011); R. C. . Dhere, *Shree Viṭṭhala: Ek Mahasamnway*, 4th ed. (Pune: Padmagandha Prakashan, 1984, [2012]).

⁵⁷ S. G. Tulpule, "The Origin of Viṭṭhala – New Interpretation," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, LVIII – LXI: Diamond Jubilee Volume, (1978): 1009 – 15. S. G. Tulpule, *Paach Santkavi* (Pune: Suvichar Prakashanm 1984).

Bhalachandra Nemade⁵⁸, G. A. Deleury, Eleanor Zelliot, Rajaramshastri Bhagwat⁵⁹, and M. G. Ranade⁶⁰, among others, it becomes evident that the VS has established a particular code of conduct for the Vārkarīs. Considering that the VS is one of the largest, oldest, and most influential bhakti sampradāya in Maharashtra, the set code of conduct of this sampradāya has a significant impact on the social, cultural, religious, and spiritual life in Maharashtra. In my understanding, the scholars mentioned above seem to believe that the VS nurtured some specific values like tolerance, non-discrimination based on caste, class, age, etc., non-violence, and truthfulness among the people of Maharashtra. With the help of various means of bhakti like kīrtana, bhajana, bhārūda, and Vārī, these values were spread among the masses, creating among them a sense of belongingness.

Some scholars have written extensively on the VS and its Santas in recent years. Two of the most prominent are Christian Lee Novetzke and Jon Keune. Keune's work focuses on Santa Eknātha⁶¹, whereas Novetzke's work deals with Santa Nāmdeva, among other important works. For this thesis, I will closely engage with Novetzke's work, especially the notion of "a bhakti public" given in the earlier works on Nāmdeva.⁶² Even though his engagement with the "pre-modern public sphere" in the thirteenth century Maharashtra⁶³ in

⁵⁸ Nemade, "Revolt of the Underprivileged", 113-23.

⁵⁹ Rajaramshastri Bhagwat, *Maharashtra dharma* (Pune: Brahman Chhaphkhana, 1895).

⁶⁰ M. G. Ranade, *Rise of the Maratha Power* (Bombay: Punalekar Publication, 1900).

⁶¹ Jon M. Keune, *Eknātha Remembered and Reformed: Bhakti, Brahmins, and Untouchables in Marathi Historiography. PhD Thesis*, (Columbia University, 2011). Apart from Keune's focus on Eknath, in other works he has written extensively on Bhakti traditions in the Western India. See, Jon, Keune. *Shared Devotion, Shared Food: Equality and the Bhakti-Caste Question in Western India*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021). Gil Ben-Herut, Jon Keune, and Anne E. Monius. Eds. *Regional Communities of Devotion in South Asia: Insiders, Outsiders, and Interlopers*, (New York: Routledge, 2020).

⁶² Christian Lee Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory: Namdeva in Religious and Secular Traditions*, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2009). Christian Lee Novetzke, "Bhakti and Its Public", *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 11, 3. (December 2007): 255 - 272.

⁶³ Novetzke, Christian Lee. *The Quotidian Revolution: Vernacularization, Religion, and the Premodern Public Sphere in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. Also see, Christian Lee Novetzke, "Religion and

his later works is interesting and important, in this thesis, the focus remains on the idea of “a bhakti public”. These scholarly works explore the corpus of VS from different standpoints of academic enquiry, including history, religious studies, philosophy, literary studies, and anthropology. Though some touch upon issues that may be considered “political” in nature, dedicated work on the bhakti sampradāyas in Maharashtra, particularly on the VS, has been absent from a political perspective. In this thesis, I attempt to fill this knowledge gap by focusing on the Vārkarī practice of Vārī pilgrimage.

1.2.2. Pilgrimage and the Vārī

A pilgrimage can be said to be a journey to a place that is considered sacred. A pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred place for bodily and mental, and moral purification, which in turn is associated with the redemption of sins. For centuries, pilgrimages have become deeply embedded in all of the world’s major religions. However, the degree and nature of institutionalisation may differ from religion to religion, from place to place, and with time. As more people started visiting such sites and embracing the belief systems associated with them, the economy around sacred places developed. Unlike the dominantly perceived notion of religion and religious practices of devotion, which are commonly associated with the private sphere of individuals’ faith, pilgrimages are collective and public. Pilgrimages bring people together who have a shared belief system, usually on a large scale. The movement of people and the pilgrimage economy facilitate the circulation of ideas. At the pilgrimage sites, the existing belief system of the pilgrims is not only manifested but, simultaneously, newer interpretations of those beliefs and values may also occur as a result of interaction between

the Public Sphere in Premodern India” in *Asiatische Studien – Études Asiatiques*, 72, 1 (2018): 147-176. <https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2017-0055>.

the pilgrims and other agents involved in the pilgrimage economy. The ever-changing socio-political context would frequently influence these interpretations. The pilgrims come to the sacred place for a while and then disperse to their usual sites or “back home”. This movement from home to the sacred place and back home seems to be a liminal space where ideas related to religious ethos are circulated through social interactions. It can be argued that the interactions at the sacred sites and during the pilgrimage journeys contribute to shaping the cultural fabric of a given society. Pilgrimages serve as sites for the exchange of ideas between people, where power relations between individuals and groups may be negotiated. A pilgrimage may offer seemingly contradictory opportunities - to perpetuate the existing power structures in a particular domain. At the same time, it may aid in the restructuring of power relations in others.

In Hinduism, the term “pilgrimage” is used to connote the meaning of the term “tīrtha-yātrā”. The Sanskrit word “tīrtha” is derived from the root *tr*, which means to cross over (a river). Alan Morinis⁶⁴, Agehananda Bharati⁶⁵, S. M. Bhardwaj⁶⁶, Makhan Jha⁶⁷, Knut Jacobsen⁶⁸, Anne Feldhaus⁶⁹, and Rana P. B. Singh⁷⁰ are some of the leading scholars on pilgrimage in Hinduism. Scholars debate about the earliest textual references to pilgrimage journeys. Some scholars argue that the origins of the Hindu pilgrimage can be traced to Vedic

⁶⁴ Morinis, *Sacred Journeys*.

⁶⁵ Agehananda Bharati, “Pilgrimage in Indian Tradition”, *History of Religions* 3, 1 (Summer, 1963). Also see, Agehananda Bharati, “Pilgrimage Sites and Indian Civilization”, in J. SANTA. Elder, ed., *Chapters in Indian Civilization*, Vol.1 (Dubuque (Iowa): Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company 1970).

⁶⁶ Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage*.

⁶⁷ Jha, *Pilgrimage: Concepts, Themes, Issues and Methodology*.

⁶⁸ Jacobsen, *Pilgrimage in Hindu Tradition*.

⁶⁹ Anne Feldhaus, *Connected Places: Region, Pilgrimage, and Geographical Imagination in India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

⁷⁰ Singh, *Hindu Tradition of Pilgrimage*.

literature (the earliest texts of Hinduism).⁷¹ There is unanimity of opinion that the early mention of pilgrimage can be found in the Mahabhārata text. The Purāṇas are considered the most important group of texts for understanding the expansion of pilgrimage systems. Scholars attribute different reasons behind the development of pilgrimage institution in Hinduism. In the modern context, while pilgrimages are considered integral to Hindu religious practices, there are philosophical and religious criticisms of pilgrimage institutions within the Hindu fold. The nirguṇa bhakti traditions and followers of Arya samaj and the Lingayats of Karnatak are critical to pilgrimage institution.

From the survey of literature on pilgrimages mentioned above, two important aspects need to be highlighted. First, pilgrimages necessarily involve movement or journey, and second, most pilgrimages are collective or public practices. Despite the importance of moving or journeying, most works on pilgrimages centre on the tīrtha, the deity, and the rites performed at the sacred sites rather than the journey. Journeying is a feature that has not been given much attention, and works that look into pilgrimage journeys are often descriptive rather than analytical. While analysing pilgrimages, the pilgrims' journeys or movements should be accorded as much attention as the sacred site itself. Pilgrimages, because they are large movements of individuals from one location to another, include contact between diverse segments of society for various reasons. It can be said that every pilgrimage generates its own eco-system and patterns of circulation of ideas. However, the search for these patterns of social interaction is a largely untapped area of academic study. A lack of emphasis on the

⁷¹ Agehananda Bharati argues that even though the Vedas mention the merit of travel, they do not specifically mention pilgrimage. S. M. Bhardwaj believes that perhaps the earliest reference to the practice of pilgrimage in Indian literature is to be found in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* of the *Rig Veda* (between 1500 and 1000 B.C.), Bharati, "Pilgrimage in Indian Tradition," 146; Bharti, "Pilgrimage Sites and Indian Civilization," 85. Jacobsen believes that the importance attached to travel in Hinduism continues from the Vedic period. Jacobsen, *Pilgrimage in Hindu Tradition*, 147; Morinis, 4; D. K. Behera, "Pilgrimage: Some Theoretical Perspectives" in Makan Jha, ed., *Pilgrimage: Concepts, Themes, Issues and Methodology* (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1995), 43; Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage*, 1.

journey has probably resulted in a lack of systematic knowledge of the social interactions during the pilgrimage journeys. Typically, these social interactions during pilgrimages revolve around religion and spirituality, or so it is widely assumed. However, it can be assumed that these interactions are not limited to the spiritual and religious domains but also involve interactions relating to so-called “secular” or concerns of “public good” such as the economy, good rains, agricultural decisions, government policies, and elections. Pilgrimages appear to be the most potent venues where cultural norms are shaped, negotiated, and transferred from one generation to the next and from one place to another. However, research on pilgrimages as a social phenomenon is limited. Victor Turner’s concept of “communitas” is a remarkable effort to comprehend the social dynamics during the pilgrimage journey.⁷² In different works, Turner has systematically analysed social processes involved in pilgrimages. His concept of “communitas” serves as the framework for investigating the Vārī pilgrimage. Another significant effort is by Karen Pechillis, who provides a critical account of Turner’s idea of “communitas” in her article titled “*To Pilgrimage It*”.⁷³ She has drawn a connection between the local power structures and pilgrimages. She argues, “A pilgrimage is a network of power comprised of a plurality of places invested with meaning through stories that negotiate local and supra-local conceptions of power”.⁷⁴ Carrying forward this view that pilgrimage serves as the site of negotiation for local and supra-local power relations, in this thesis, I attempt to explore the socio-political dimensions of pilgrimage, which are interwoven with the spiritual and religious spheres. In doing so, I focus on the Vārī pilgrimage in Maharashtra.

⁷² Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 1969; Turner, “The Center Out There” 1973. Turner, “Pilgrimage as Social Processes”, 1974.

⁷³ Karen Pechilis, “To pilgrimage It”, in *Journal of Ritual Studies*, Summer 1992, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Summer 1992), pp. 59-91.

⁷⁴ Pechilis, *To Pilgrimage It*, 73.

The Vārī pilgrimage is a peculiar aspect of the VS. There would hardly be any other sapmrādāya defined by its practice of pilgrimage. As the determining characteristic of the VS can be narrowed down to the Vārī pilgrimage, it remains the focal point of this thesis. Most literary sources available on the Vārī pilgrimage are in the form of travelogues, memoirs or testimonies and, in recent years, through blogs and social media.⁷⁵ Serious academic engagement with the Vārī pilgrimage is relatively little. An analytical account of the Vārī pilgrimage was provided by the anthropologist Iravati Karve in the legendary essay titled “*On the Road: A Maharashtrian Pilgrimage*”⁷⁶. Similarly, Deleury has given an account of the Vārī pilgrimage in his work “*The Cult of Vithoba*”.⁷⁷ D. B. Mokashi’s work titled “*Pāḷkhī*”⁷⁸ and the recently published volume titled “*Vārī*”, edited by Devidas Pote provide a detailed account of Vārī pilgrimage. Far less is the academic engagement with other Vārkarī practices like kīrtana, pravachana, bhārūda, pārayāṇa, harīpātha etc. Though some scholars have

⁷⁵ Ramchandra Dekhane, *Vari: Swaroop aani Paramparā*. (Pune: Padmagandha Prakashan, 2013); Sudhir Mahabal, *Parat-Vari*. (Pune: Manovikas Prakashan, 2017); Arvind Nerkar, *Abhangachi Vārī* (Pune: Granthali Prakashan, 1998); Bhaskar Hande, *Vārī Pilgrimage: Dehu - Alandi to Pandharpur*, (Pune: Vishwakarma Publications, 2019). For blogs and social media pages see, Deepak Phadnis, *Pandharpur Wari – A Walking Pilgrimage to Pandharpur Experience, Guidance & Tips from an IIT Engineer* <http://mypandharpurwari.blogspot.com/2017/07/pandharpur-wari-experience-of-iit.html>, Prits, *Photo Blog of Pune - Saswad Wari 2015*, <http://pritskulkarni.blogspot.com/2015/07/photo-blog-of-pune-saswad-wari-2015.html>, Kalyani Nandurkar, *Pandharichi Vārī – The Great Cultural Heritage of Maharashtra*, <https://Santa.boddunan.com/articles/people-places/59-customs-and-culture/22765-pandharichi-vari-%E2%80%93-the-great-cultural-heritage-of-maharashtra-part-i.html>, Pandharpur Vārī, Facebook Page - https://Santa.facebook.com/PandharpurVari/?hc_ref=ARS0XvnAkpZyATI4yApSyI1sblCZs1J2WYLBjYrPCfVna_5ez4ugXeIVWtSQmUMO1E&fref=nf&_tn_ =kC-R, Pandharicha Vārkarī, <https://Santa.facebook.com/groups/618700112050780>

⁷⁶ Karve, “On the Road”.

⁷⁷ Deleury, *Cult of Vithobā*, 73 -109.

⁷⁸ The original work is in Marathi. D. B. Mokashi, *Pāḷkhī* (Pune: Mauj Prakashan, 1964). For translated version, see, D. B. Mokashi, *Pāḷkhī: An Indian Pilgrimage*, trans. Philip C. Engblom (Albany: University of New York Press, 1987).

written on the most popular practices like kīrtana⁷⁹ and bhārūda⁸⁰, the larger corpus of the Vārkarī practices and, more importantly, their impact on the socio-cultural fabric of Maharashtra, is yet to be fully explored.

The decision to work on this particular pilgrimage, i.e., Vārī, is based on several factors. Intuitively, I regard the Vārī pilgrimage as the site of a large-scale manifestation of the Vārkarī ethos, and it provides a common platform to observe and participate in almost all other Vārkarī practices such as bhajana, kīrtana, pravachana, bhārūda, *kālā*, *kheḷa*, and harīpātha. The Vārī is a subject of investigation in itself, as well as one of the most prominent Vārkarī practices. From a socio-political standpoint, it appears that the Vārī pilgrimage not only demonstrates the Vārkarī ethos but also serves as a place for negotiating power relations between groups and individuals. It serves as an avenue where the response of the Vārkarīs to the changing socio-political conditions can be witnessed. Millions of people join the Vārī pilgrimage on an annual basis, making Vārī the site of interaction where not only the issues of transcendence or muktī are discussed, but the exchanges appear to have an impact on the social and political thinking of Vārkarīs. It is important to note that the interactions during the Vārī pilgrimage are not restricted to the members of the close group, i.e., the followers of the VS (in the strictest sense of the term Vārkarī). The Vārī is a platform where not only the whole of the Vārkarī community comes together, but it also seems to be the crucial site for interactions between the Vārkarīs and non-Vārkarīs, or society at large. The attention

⁷⁹ Anna Schultz, “Rashtriya Kirtan of Maharashtra: Musical Fragments of Nationalist Politics”, *Ph.D Thesis*. (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2004); G. N. Koparkar, *Kīrtanachi Prayog-Prakriya: Kīrtanache Prayogik Shatra* (Pune: Kīrtan Mahavidyalay Prakashan, 1982); Yashwant Pathak, *Nachu Keertanache Rangi* (Pune: Continental Publishers, 1980).

⁸⁰ Raymond Wiles Crow Jr., *The Bhāruds of the Marāṭhī Santa Eknāth* (University of Pennsylvania, 1988); Hugh van Skyhawk, “Ekanāthī-bhārude as a Performance Genre,” in *South Asian Digest of Regional Writing*, ed. Lothar Lutze, vol. 10. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1981), 48-56; Eleanor Zelliott, “Eknath’s Bharude: The Santa as a Link between Cultures,” in *The Sants*, ed. Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 91 - 109. Ramchandra Dekhane, *Bharud Vanmayateel Tattvdnyan*. (Pune: Padmagandha Prakashan, 2002).

provided to social processes during the Vārī pilgrimage in the existing literature is insufficient and requires further study. The two most critical scholarly accounts on the subject, given by Karve and Deleury, were presented more than five decades ago. In this thesis, I attempt to comprehend social interactions between Vārkarīs as well as between Vārkarīs and other agents involved in the Vārī pilgrimage in the contemporary context.

1.2.3. “A Public”, “The Public” and “The Public Sphere”

The notions of “the public” or “the public sphere” in the academic discourse usually reflect an engagement of the society with the state and influence the functioning of the state. Further, these terms are almost always associated with the advent of modernity and require “reason” as a precondition for their formation. Jürgen Habermas’ concept of a public sphere is well established in scholarly investigations across disciplines. For Habermas, when the solutions to the issues of common concern are arrived at by a reasonable, critical debate and exchange of opinions and through interaction, it constitutes the public sphere.⁸¹ Habermas defines it as “a society engaged in critical debate”⁸² in the earliest works on the public sphere. There are multiple actors, citizens and institutions, like the media, the intelligentsia, the voluntary civil society groups, etc. Though the public sphere is largely accommodative in providing space for various interests, scholars have intensely debated the relationship between religion and the public sphere. The debate is centred around the question of whether religion and its religious structures aid the public sphere or are antithetical to it. As pointed out by Novetzke, Habermas himself has evolved his position on this matter, from considering religion as the antithesis of the public sphere and rational communication to allowing religion

⁸¹Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

⁸² Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*, 52.

the space within the public sphere if the ways of religious communication are “rational”⁸³.⁸⁴ For Habermas, as long as the religious language in political discourse is “reasonable”, it can be considered to have legitimate space within the public sphere. He wrote, “In a democratic discourse, secular and religious citizens stand in a complementary relation.”⁸⁵ Both are involved in an interaction that is constructive for a democratic process springing from the soil of civil society and developing through the informal communication networks of the public sphere.”⁸⁶

Habermas’s idea of the public sphere helps locate the actors that can exert some control over the state apparatus. It also provides an idea of the impact of “rational” deliberations beyond the formal state institutions like the parliament, and the courts. However, Habermas’ conception of the public sphere is strictly located within the western, modern and rational deliberative public in a liberal democracy. Nancy Fraser criticises Habermas’s concept of the public sphere as “bourgeoisie” and “singular”, which fails to account for multiple and often conflicting publics.⁸⁷ Based on Fraser’s notion of multiple publics, Badri Narayan puts forward the idea of “the Dalit Public”.⁸⁸ He explains: “The notion of the public, as I mean here, may include some of the processes researched by Habermas in the formation of the public sphere, but it owes conceptualisation largely to

⁸³ Quotations also used by Novetzke, “Religion and Public Sphere”.

⁸⁴ Novetzke, “Religion and Public Sphere”, 148.

⁸⁵ Habermas, “The Political”.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 27.

⁸⁷ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, No. 25/26 (1990): 56-80.

⁸⁸ Badri Narayan, *The Making of the Dalit Public in North India: Uttar Pradesh, 1950 – Present* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Nancy Frazer's idea of a multiple public rather than a single subaltern counterpublic."⁸⁹

Narayan's notion of "the Dalit Public" as a counterpublic or public emerging at the margins, is not homogenous or singular in nature. But instead recognises a variety of interests as well as tensions among Dalits as a group. Again, based on Fraser's categorisation, Narayan accounts for "inter-public" and "intra-public" tensions within the Dalit Public that are "continuously being produced, dissolved, negotiated and adjusted, and can be documented".⁹⁰ In all these cases, the ideas of "the public" or "publics" are necessarily used in relation to state power, mainly to exercise control over state power.

In juxtaposition to the terms "the public" and "the public sphere", the idea of "a public" is not centred around the state, though the state might not be absent from it. Further, "a public" requires neither the context of modernity nor rationality as its precondition. The idea of a public is first given by Michael Warner⁹¹ and further qualified by Novetzke in the context of bhakti. "A public," as defined by Warner, is flexible in the sense that it is neither universalistic nor a fixed historical entity. Instead, it adapts and responds to new surroundings, remaking itself continually. This leads to open and blurred boundaries of membership of a public. Novetzke has modified Warner's usage of the term. Unlike Warner, Novetzke situates a public in the non-western, non-modern context of bhakti and, particularly, public memory revolving around the fourteenth century Maharashtrian Santa Nāmdeva in his work *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*.⁹²

⁸⁹ Badri Narayan, *Making of the Dalit Public*, xxiii.

⁹⁰ Ibid, xxiv.

⁹¹ Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture*, Vo. 14, 1, Winter 2002, 49-90.

⁹² Christian Lee Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory: Nāmdeva in Religious and Secular Traditions*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009.

Novetzke distinguishes between “the public” and “a public.” According to him, “the public” suggests uniformity and homogeneity, frequently enforced or predominantly influenced by the state or created through surveys and statistics. He observes that the notion of “the public” is usually linked to modernity. “A public”, on the other hand, indicates a considerably larger degree of openness and fluidity in an organisation.⁹³ Novetzke explains his understanding of “a public” in the following words. He writes:

I understand the explanatory value of the idea of public to be both geographically and temporally modular. The central operation of a public is its inward circularity, its internal system of self-reliance, and thereby its ability to compose its ephemeral body in time by means of the chimaera of discourse. A public is substanceless but, like any social formation, still powerful. It is not, therefore, confined to any of its highly scrutinised forms, most of which have been explicated in the context of modernity. In other words, there is no prerequisite for a public that makes it germane to modernity – not literacy or print; not rationality or transglobal cultural flows; not even a shared verbal language. Publics form by a reference and reinforcement, whether visual, oral, aural, or literary; rather, they are the product of their actors, of their circle of attention. For this reason, modernity is no more suitable than any other epochal epistemology to host a discernible public.⁹⁴

Novetzke’s re-contextualising of “a public” in the non-western, non-modern set up, especially in the plain of pre-modern Maharashtra in relation to the Vārkarī Santa Nāmdeva, is particularly useful while understanding the Vārkarī practice of Vārī pilgrimage. It seems that the idea of “a public” allows us to account for various trends, and at times, even contradictory ones, in the pilgrimage processes. The openness and fluidity made available by the term “a public” allows us to look at various social interactions and their varied implications in the pilgrimage process. Based on insights provided by Novetzke, I probe the question of whether the Vārī pilgrimage creates a Vārkarī public.

1.3. A Note on Methodology

⁹³ Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*, 17.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 18.

The understanding of methodology in the social sciences, in general, and in political studies, in particular, has undergone a considerable change. The journey of methodological tools of study of various domains of society and interaction between them has been through various stages – textual, oral, and, much more recently, performative. This methodological change has also brought about a shift in the understanding of “the political”, making it more inclusive and allowing us to probe the fields in which power operates beyond the formal structures of state apparatus. Locating “political” beyond the formal institutions and in the domain of civil society is well-established in political studies. However, focusing on “rational debate,” religious phenomena like pilgrimage are not conventionally seen as a subject of political studies. Because this is a new field of study, I’m taking cues from methods employed in various disciplines like anthropology, sociology, history and sacred geography.

For this thesis, I have adopted a combination of methods to collect and analyse the data. There are several interpretative paradigms used in social science research. One prominent view is that social reality does not just happen on its own, but is instead shaped by human experiences and social contexts.⁹⁵ Keeping in mind this view that the social real human experiences and social context, I aim to understand and analyse the social interactions during the Vārī through participation and interactions with Vārkarīs. Since 2010, I have participated in the Vārī pilgrimage occasionally and partially, i.e., depending on work commitments and time available at hand, I have joined the Vārī for a day or a few days and at different stages of the pilgrimage procession. It was only in the year 2019 that I carried out fieldwork for the purpose of this thesis and conducted semi-structured interviews with Vārkarīs during the Vārī. Here, I acknowledge here that even though the formal fieldwork

⁹⁵ Anol Bhattacharjee, “Social Science Research: Principles, Methods, and Practices.” *Textbooks Collection*. 3, 103. (2012) http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/oa_textbooks/3, accessed on 25th August 2021.

was conducted in 2019, my casual interactions with Vārkarīs and experience of participating in the Vārī during earlier visits have a bearing on the analysis.

Participant observation and semi-structured interviews are two important aspects of my research. In June and July of 2019, I participated in the pālkhī procession of Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja, starting from Alandi and culminating in Pandharpur. During this field visit, I conducted thirty-seven semi-structured, face-to-face interviews of those who participated in the Vārī pilgrimage, and further eight other interviews, mainly of gurus, leaders of phaḍas, and Mahārajas, were conducted on different occasions. To begin with, I registered myself with Delshmukh Diṇḍī, which is based out of Pune. The registrations with Deshmukh diṇḍī start at least three months before the actual commencement of the pilgrimage. For a week, I walked with the diṇḍī and followed the entire schedule of the diṇḍī. It gave me insights into the diṇḍī life during the Vārī. For weeks two and three, I walked either before the diṇḍī or after it to mingle with varied groups of the Vārkarīs and meet more diṇḍīs. For the afternoon meals, usually, diṇḍī leaders, with whom I was walking, would urge and at times insist on me to join them for *prasad*. Rarely I had to buy lunch. For evening pravachanas, kīrtanas and bhajans, I went to different diṇḍīs. However, I returned to Deshmukh diṇḍī for dinner and a night's stay. The request for this flexibility of "going out" and "coming back" to the Deshmukh diṇḍī was made to one of the leaders of the diṇḍī at the time of registration, to which he readily agreed. As I gained more insights into the Vārkarī world at various stages of the research, the respondents were selected from smaller and smaller groups. The selection of respondents was not aimed at proportionate representation of different groups of Vārkarīs based on the categories of gender, caste, rural-urban, occupation, education, etc., but to get an overview of the range of participants in the Vārī.

The respondents can be categorised into two broad categories: a. regular Vārkarīs - i.e., those who have adopted a Vārkarī way of life by adopting a tulsimala and have taken a

vow to go on Vārī pilgrimage every year. b. non-regular Vārkarīs - those who participate only occasionally and/or not for the entire duration of the Vārī. Non-regular Vārkarīs may join the Vārī out of curiosity or to have a first-hand experience of the Vārī, but they are not usually committed to the Vārkarī way of life entirely. The regular Vārkarīs generally involved leaders of *diṇḍīs*, *vīṇekarīs*, *mahārājas*, *chopdāra*, and such Vārkarīs for whom going to the Vārī pilgrimage is a family lineage. In contrast, non-regular Vārkarīs are usually researchers, scholars, professionals, *sevekarīs*, and personnel from state agencies. It must be noted that the sections of people mentioned under regular and non-regular Vārkarīs are a broad generalisation, and there might be an overlap. Most interviews conducted were face-to-face and rarely telephonic. The interviews lasted for about 25–30 minutes on average. The Vārī pilgrimage has been limited due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in the years 2020 and 2021.⁹⁶

As for the primary literary sources, to understand the canonical basis of the VS, I have referred to the revered texts of the samapradāya like Dnyāneśvarī (Dny), Eknāthī Bhāgvata (EB), Tuakaram Gāthā (TG), Bhāgvata Gīta (BG) and Bhāgavat Purāṇa (BP). The other primary texts include the hagiographical account of the Santas of VS, mainly given by Mahipati. Secondary materials are also employed in conducting this research, along with the primary sources. In addition to books, journal articles, newspaper articles, and magazine articles, e-content from YouTube, blogs, and social media posts are used.

Translations

⁹⁶ For details, please see for year 2020 - <https://punemirror.com/others/pandharpur-wari-no-ashadhi-palkhi-procession-this-year-due/cid5020274.htm>. Also see, <https://Santa.financialexpress.com/lifestyle/travel-tourism/ashadi-ekadashi-july-2020-devshayani-ekadashi-wakhri-pandharpur-tholi-ekadasi-vitthal-rukmini-vithoba/2009447/>, and for year 2021 - <https://Santa.news18.com/news/india/ashadhi-ekadashi-2021-warkaris-carrying-padukas-leave-for-pandharpur-by-bus-3980027.html>. Also see, <https://Santa.bbc.com/marathi/india-57675984>

Most interviews were originally conducted in Marathi, barring one. Translations of interviews, abhanga quotations, as well as materials from primary and secondary texts from Marathi to English are done by me unless specified otherwise. While doing the translations, I have tried to use English synonyms where it fits appropriately but have chosen to retain Marathi or Sanskrit words to preserve the etymological understanding. For example, due to etymological differences, the word “Santa” is not translated as “saint” in this instance. Similarly, instead of translating Vārī as a pilgrimage, after explaining the meaning of Vārī, I have preferred to use the term “Vārī pilgrimage” or simply “Vārī” throughout. The meaning of all such words is explained in the footnotes. A glossary of important Marathi and Sanskrit words is provided at the end for easy reference. An attempt is made to maintain proximity to the linguistic and cultural context of the word, which in this case is Marathi.

The Blend of Objectivity and Experience: Chikitsā and Bhāva

“*Chikitsa*” roughly means the rational, logical, objective analysis (of a given thing or phenomenon), whereas “*bhāva*”⁹⁷ means experience through perception, which by nature is subjective. For over a century, the social and political sciences have been obsessed with “objectivity” to study social interaction and claim the status of “science”. However, it was discovered over time that the objective understanding of social interaction falls short of capturing the social realities in their entirety and requires people’s voices to speak for themselves from their own experiential realities. The context and the “location” of who is speaking have become increasingly important, especially in contemporary political theory.

While carrying out this research, I was posed with the binary – Chikitsa, logical objective reasoning and critical questioning on the one hand, and bhāva – the subjective

⁹⁷ The literal translation of bhāva also means intention.

experience of the Vārī and the Vārkarī practices. This dichotomy played out at the level of observation, especially as a participant or being a “non-regular Vārkarī” myself, and at the level of interpretation and analysis of the data and responses collected through interviews. Reliance only on the former, i.e., *chikitsa*, posed a threat of losing the essence while interpreting the responses and making sense of the Vārkarī *bhakti* corpus, whereas leaning exclusively towards the latter, i.e., *bhāva* had a danger of rendering the argument inconsistent and plausible glorification of the practices and myths. Maintaining a balance between these two domains, i.e., *chikitsa* and *bhāva*, was a challenge as critical enquiry based on objectivity, reason and scientific temperament is considered at the core of any research. However, singular ideas of objectivity and “rationality” may create distance between researchers and respondents. To “make sense” of the responses of the participants, one not only needs to be aware of the linguistic expression but also of the “*bhāva*” of the respondent. It requires sharing the “location” of the respondent, at least partially and temporarily. I have adopted the hybrid approach here, i.e., using the experiential faculty while walking on the Vārī pilgrimage and conducting interviews, whereas using the analytical faculty post-facto.

Furthermore, I would like to emphasise that I have used a “both-and” approach throughout this research rather than an “either-or” approach. Instead of undertaking an analysis based on the formation of binary oppositions, I regard seemingly opposite notions to be matters of differing degrees, with neither necessarily negating the other in the process. For example, the VS and Vārī are neither protests against the existing social order nor instruments for perpetuating the existing hierarchies. Both the *sampradāya* and the Vārī are considered options, and they are likely to co-exist. In this thesis, an attempt is made to decipher political aspects of the Vārī pilgrimage based on the experience, observation and narratives shared by the Vārkarīs apart from the texts and scriptures of the *sampradāya* and

on the sampradāya. Therefore, the claims made are the interpretations rather than the truth claims.

1.4. Domain of Research

My arguments in this thesis are squarely based on the bhakti tradition in Maharashtra, referring to the VS. Though I firmly believe that similar parallels can be drawn in the cases of other regional bhakti traditions by looking at the bhakti practices in the respective regions, and such a study can be taken up in the future, the arguments made here are limited to the Maharashtrian context. Further, even within the Maharashtrian bhakti tradition, the focus of this thesis has been exclusively on the VS. I have argued that a particular kind of Vārkarī public evolves around the bhakti practice of the Vārī pilgrimage. My hunch is that similar types of Vārkarī publics emerge at other sites of Vārkarī bhaktī practices like kīrtana and pravachana. Further, a study may be conducted in the future to see if similar bhakti publics are created through the practices of other bhakti sampradāyas in Maharashtra and other parts of India and the world. I hope that this work contributes to closing the long-standing gap between the “a-political” understanding of spiritual and religious practices and the “secular understanding of politics”, at least in part. The primary intuition that has guided this research is that the bhakti tradition and practices are as political as spiritual, and I hope to demonstrate this in the chapters to follow.

1.5. Chapter Outline

The chapters in this thesis are developed thematically.

Chapter One is the Introduction to the main subject matter of this thesis.

Chapter Two focuses on the bhakti tradition in Maharashtra and particularly on the VS in Maharashtra. The first section of the second chapter discusses bhakti in general and the

specific variant of Vaiṣṇavism known as Bhāgvata Dharma in Maharashtra. Bhāgvata Dharma is inextricably linked with VS. This section situates the VS in Maharashtrian culture in relation to other significant sampradāyas. Because VS is the primary subject of this thesis, this chapter provides a thorough account of VS. This includes the historical context in which the VS began to take shape, an explanation of the terms “Vārkarī” and “Sampradāya”, the Vārkarī code of ethics, the deity of this sampradāya - Viṭṭhala, the literary canon and the philosophy of sampradāya, organisational structure based on the system of phaḍas, and various means of bhakti adopted and popularised by the VS.⁹⁸ The chapter then goes on to position the VS in the modern setting by underlining what constitutes the VS in the contemporary context. The chapter further refers to the debate on the contributions of the VS by concentrating on two major patterns in scholarly literature. The first trend welcomes, and at times even glorifies, the VS’s work as a social protest or revolt. In contrast, the second characterises the VS as otherworldly, encouraging passivity and non-action among common people. The chapter concludes that, while the primary goal of the VS and its Santas and leaders was not probably to bring about social and political change, the bhakti practices and philosophy embedded in those practices caused a churn in the Marathi-speaking region, which had implications for the social and political domains.

Chapter Three is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on the institution of pilgrimage in Hinduism in general. It outlines the interpretations and definitions of pilgrimage given by different scholars and examines the literary references to pilgrimage in various Hindu texts and scriptures. Having dealt with multiple motivations for going on pilgrimage, the chapter provides a brief overview of the general rituals conducted at the

⁹⁸ It should be noted here that while a full chapter is dedicated to the theme of pilgrimage and the Vārī pilgrimage (chapter three), this chapter does not discuss the practice of Vārī at length.

sacred sites. This section concludes with an insight into the criticisms of the practice of pilgrimage from within the Hindu fold. The second section serves as an anchor for this thesis and provides a comprehensive account of the central theme of the Vārī pilgrimage. In the sub-sections, various features of the Vārī are highlighted. They include the meaning, historical account, details of the pālkhī processions, management, and symbolism involved with this pilgrimage. It also discusses concepts like pālkhī, pādukā, diṇḍī, and so on, as well as how they are understood in the Vārkarī context. A brief section is provided to underline the parallels and contrasts between pilgrimages in general and the Vārī. This section closes by emphasising the importance of the Vārī pilgrimage in understanding Maharashtra's social and cultural dynamics, and the chapter concludes with several important questions concerning pilgrimage processes in general and the Vārī pilgrimage, in particular, emphasises the importance of looking for concepts that can capture the various patterns of social interaction that occur during pilgrimages.

In Chapter Four, I mainly focus on two theoretical constructs. The first is the idea of “communitas” given by Victor Turner, and the second deals with the notion of “a bhakti public” outlined by Christian Lee Novetzke. These two constructs are examined at length in this chapter to see if they can be adopted to account for the mixed and sometimes even contradictory social interactions during pilgrimages, especially on the Vārī pilgrimage. This chapter examines the literature to gather some strands of theoretical understanding of social and political interactions throughout the pilgrimage. Victor Turner has significantly contributed to this area. Turner's conceptualisation of “communitas” and discussion of “structure and anti-structure” are helpful for this chapter's investigation. After highlighting the merits and limitations of the notion of communitas, the chapter explores the idea of “a bhakti public” given by Christian Lee Novetzke. Having highlighted Novetzke's deployment of the notion of “a public” in the context of bhakti, the meaning and nature of “a bhakti

public” are highlighted. The idea of a bhakti public seems more open and flexible to capture the multifaceted interactions throughout the Vārī pilgrimage. It is necessary to clarify that using “a bhakti public” as a conceptual framework to understand the social processes during the Vārī does not inevitably and entirely reject the concept of “communitas”. The chapter goes on to establish a link between a bhakti public, a Vārkarī public, and the VS. It proposes that a Vārkarī public can be viewed as a subset of bhakti publics, forming around Vārkarī bhakti practices, most notably the Vārī pilgrimage. In contrast to a Vārkarī public that is more fluid and flexible, the VS is organised and structured, with a clear code of conduct.

In Chapter Five, the accounts of the Vārī pilgrimage offered by G. A. Deleury and Iravati Karve are examined, and further connections are explored with my own fieldwork and conversations with Vārkarīs. The emphasis of this chapter is on analysing the social processes that occur throughout the Vārī pilgrimage. The goal is to see if the accounts offered by Deleury and Karve, as well as my fieldwork observations, reflect the formation of “a bhakti public” in general and “a Vārkarī public” in particular through Vārī pilgrimage. The chapter also discusses the continuities and variations in the Vārī pilgrimage observed in 2019 and compares them to Deleury’s and Karve’s accounts. This chapter is organised thematically, and the themes revolve around the nature of social interactions as well as responses to power hierarchies generated by social structures in the process of the Vārī pilgrimage. The topics covered in this chapter include the community or collective nature of the Vārī pilgrimage; the Vārī pilgrimage as a site of idea circulation; the inclusive character of the Vārī, the unifying as well as dividing trends present in the Vārī pilgrimage; and the reconciliatory character of the Vārī pilgrimage, as well as the VS and the Vārī pilgrimage beyond socio-political dimensions. The chapter concludes that the social processes present during the Vārī pilgrimage are neither completely unifying nor solely dividing, but both

simultaneously. A Vārkarī public, i.e., a bhakti public emerging out of Vārkarī bhakti practices, is fluid and open.

The thesis concludes with a summary of the chapters and overarching analysis of the concepts and themes discussed earlier. It provides some propositions to look at the social processes involved in the pilgrimages and their bearing on social and political life in modern-day Maharashtra. By the end of this thesis, we will be convinced that bhakti practices, including pilgrimages, are important sites of social deliberation. Such deliberations are multifaceted and, therefore, do not necessarily create homogenous communities of pilgrims or are essentially divisive. Instead, the social structures may operate through pilgrimages on the one hand, and the bhakti ethos of pilgrimage may, on the other hand, influence the social interactions.

Chapter Two

Bhakti and Vārkarī Sampradāya in Maharashtra

Introduction

In almost all parts of India, there have been some or other variants of bhakti Sampradāyas. Notably, these regions' cultural and literary history is closely associated with the respective bhakti traditions. Likewise, there have been five prominent Sampradāyas in Maharashtra. They are: Nātha, Mahānubhava, Datta, Vārkarī, and Rāmdāsī. Amongst these five, Vārkarī Sampradāya (VS) is one of the most popular and widely followed bhakti Sampradāya. In fact, any discussion on the bhakti tradition in Maharashtra will remain incomplete without discussing the VS. The most well-known santas of Maharashtra, like Dnyāneśvara, Nāmdeva, Eknātha, and Tukārāma, are believed to belong to the Vārkarī tradition. This chapter makes an effort to outline the bhakti tradition in Maharashtra, specifically with respect to the VS.

The first section of this chapter, i.e., 2.1, deals with the broader idea of bhakti and the specific variant of Vaiṣṇavism in Maharashtra, known as Bhāgvata Dharma. Bhāgvata Dharma, particularly in Maharashtra, is unequivocally associated with VS. The philosophy of VS is crystallised with the term “Bhagvata Dharma”. This section helps locate the VS in Maharashtrian culture in relation to other prominent Sampradāyas. VS being the primary focus of this thesis, an effort is made to give a detailed account of it in section 2.2. This section is further divided into nine subsections, each subsection focusing on a particular aspect of VS. The subsections deal with historical background, the meaning of the terms “Vārkarī” and “Sampradāya”, the Vārkarī code of ethics, the importance of the deity of this Sampradāya viz. Viṭṭhala and the Viṭṭhala temple at Pandharpur, the literary canon of the

VS, philosophy of Advaita and Chid-Vilās-Vāda, the loosely organised structure of the samprdāya around the system of phaḍas and various means of bhakti adopted by the VS. It shall be noted here that the most critical Vārkarī means of bhakti, the Varī pilgrimage, is discussed in the next chapter, i.e., chapter three. As this thesis deals primarily with the essential Vārkarī practice of the Vārī pilgrimage, a separate chapter is dedicated to discussing the same. Whereas other Vārkarī means of bhakti like kīrtana, pravachana, bhajana, and harīpātha are outlined in this chapter 2. Further, the discussion of the VS is located in the present-day context. This section makes an effort to understand what stands as a VS in contemporary times.

The following section, i.e., 2.3., evaluates the importance of the VS through the writings of various scholars. Scholars are divided on the issue of the contribution of the VS, especially in social and political fields. The writings that critically examine the VS's contributions reveal two significant trends. The first trend celebrates and, at times, even glorifies the work of the VS as a social protest or revolt for social equality by rejecting institutional religion in the social field and having laid the foundation of political consciousness in Maharashtra (which eventually led to the establishment of swaraj under Shivaji). The second trend vehemently criticises the VS as otherworldly, promoting passivity and non-action among ordinary people, leading to the status quo in the social and political fields. These two trends are discussed in detail in subsections 2.3.1, "Revolt for Social Equality or Maintaining the Status Quo?" and 2.3.2, "Laying the Foundation for Political Consciousness?"

Section 2.4 concludes that the primary objective of the VS and the Vārkarī Santas might not have been to bring about social and political change in Maharashtra but to make the dimensions of spirituality and bhakti available to the masses who were denied access to the institutional religion. Almost all bhakti means adopted by the VS do not require elaborate

temple rituals under the guidance of priests. Vārkarī practices like kīrtana, pravachana, bhajana and Vārī are performed “out in the open” and are mainly group or community practices. Special attention is paid to keeping them simple and participative so that ordinary people can practice them easily and without much training or effort. Even though the primary goal of the Santas and leaders of the Vārkarī tradition was not probably to bring in social and political change, the bhakti practices and philosophy embedded in those practices led to a churn in the Marathi-speaking region, having a bearing in social and political fields. As a result, the Vārkarī practices spread widely and among various strata of society and contributed substantially to the making of the Maharashtrian culture.

2.1. Bhakti and Bhāgvata Dharma in Maharashtra

The popular and long-lasting bhakti tradition in Maharashtra is based on the doctrine of Vaiśṇavism, particularly of Bhāgvata Dharma. Bhāgvatas are those who worship Vāsudeva, Kṛṣṇa, or Viṣṇu. The religious faith and practices of the marginalised majority - the poor, lower castes, and women – are commonly associated with Bhāgvata Dharma. Bhāgvata Dharma promotes simple methods of God worship that are accessible to everybody, regardless of caste, colour, gender, or age. According to the BhāgvataDharma, the ultimate responsibility of a human being is to give up one’s desire and passion for possessions and surrender them all to God. The Bhgvas do not require Sanskrit texts (though they do not necessarily reject them), nor do they require rigorous rituals or heretic activities. One need not become a sanyāsī to attain mokṣa or realisation. Even amid daily affairs and performing household duties, with intense and pure devotion to the deity, Bhāgvatas are capable of achieving mokṣa. The pre-requisite for reaching the ultimate goal for a Bhāgvata is ‘bhāva’

or intention.¹ Bhakti practises propagated by the Bhgvas are generally accessible to all, regardless of status or role. Dharma can be said to be a Maharashtrian variant of Vaiṣṇavism, focusing on bhakti as its primary means of attaining mokṣa.

According to Tulpule, the origins of bhakti in Maharashtra cannot be decisively traced to the bhakti traditions of Karnataka and Tamilnadu. Instead, the foundations of the bhakti tradition in Maharashtra can be traced to Bhagavad-Gītā, Bhāgvata Purāṇa, Śāṇḍilya Bhakti Sūtras and Nārada Bhakti Sūtras.² While explaining the influences on the philosophy of the Vārkarī Sampradāya, Tulpule writes, “the Bhagavad- Gītā provided the philosophical basis, whereas the Bhāgvata Purāṇa introduced the different types of devotees who attained to the Godhead through their single-minded devotion. The Bhakti Sūtras of Śāṇḍilya and Nārada provided the link between the philosophy of Bhagavad- Gītā and devotional literature of later times.”³

In Maharashtra, within the pantheon of Hinduism, there are five significant Sampradāyas: Nātha, Mahānubhava, Datta, Vārkarī, and Rāmdāsī.⁴ Among them, the Mahānubhava, Vārkarī, and Rāmdāsī Sampradāyas are primarily bhaktī oriented. However, the Nātha and Datta Sampradāyas first embraced Yogic heritage before being integrated into the larger framework of bhakti. The Nātha and Datta Sampradāyas mainly attracted yogīs and ascetics, whereas bhaktī oriented Sampradāyas spread mainly among householders. These various Sampradāyas became more or less popular at different historical junctures and are associated with various Santas or gurus of that particular Sampradāya. While all of these

¹ Dhunda Mahārāja Deglurkar, *Narad Bhaktisutra Vivaran* (Pandharpur: Bhanudas Dhunda Mahārāja Deglurkar, 2014), 32 -43. Also see, S. V. Dandekar, *Vārkarī Panthacha Itihas*, 6.

² S. G. Tulpule, “The Development of Mystical Thought in Maharashtra,” in *Region, Nationality and Religion* eds. A. R. Kulkarni and N. K. Wagle (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1999), 203-04.

³ Tulpule, *Development of Mystical Thought*, 205.

⁴ For detailed discussion, see, Mokashi, *Maharashtrateel Paach Sampradāya*.

Sampradāyas have contributed to Maharashtra's bhakti lineage and overall culture, the VS, by far, remains the most popular and widest spread among ordinary people.

The VS is one of the largest and most widely spread bhakti Sampradāyas in Maharashtra and is also known as Bhāgvata Pantha or Bhāgvata Sampradāya. It is primarily a Vaiṣṇava Sampradāya, having a child form of Kṛiṣṇa (one of the avatāras of Viṣṇu) – Viṭṭhala or Pāṇḍuraṅga as its deity. The VS focuses on the bhakti way or mārṅa of mokṣa or liberation. Though bhakti assumes the duality of the devotee and the deity, many Bhāgvata Sampradāyas, especially in North India, follow the dvaita⁵ school of philosophy, the defining philosophy of VS is Advaita.⁶ The Vārkarīs, although teaching the devotional way of liberation, follow the philosophy of Śankara⁷ and the Vedantic philosophy of non-dualism.⁸ The highly heralded scripture, which can be said to be the cornerstone of the Vārkarī canon – Dnyāneśvarī - preaches Advaita philosophy.⁹ Even though the VS is founded on the sophisticated philosophy of Advaita, the practices adopted by it are easy. Bhāgvata Dharma, as propounded by the VS, does not advocate rigid ways of bhakti but teaches simple bhakti, which can be accessed and practised by all, including women, Śūdras and the poor. Adoption of bhakti and its practises as the primary means of mokṣa; a child form of Kṛiṣṇa as its deity;

⁵ Dvaita literally means “duality”. In the bhakti tradition, the term is employed to indicate the duality of deity and devotee, or of Jiva or Jivatma and Brahman or Paramatma. Ramanujacharya (11th century) is believed to be the earliest proponent of the dvaita school of philosophy.

⁶ Advaita, broadly, can be said to be non-dual or where duality ceases.

⁷ Shankara or Adi Shankaracharya (circa 8th century) is considered a great sage in the Hindu tradition, and the Advaita school of philosophy, or non-dualism, is believed to have been propagated by him.

⁸ Deleury, *Cult of Vithoba*, 3.

⁹ One of the scholars of the VS, who is also a leader of the *Shree Santa Dnyaneshvara Mahārāja Sansthan Committee*, pointed out the difference between Advaita and Advaya. He said that the philosophy of the VS is of Advaya. Advaya, according to him, is the knowledge that transcends dualism, whereas Advaita is the knowledge of the non-dual. However, the common nomenclature used in the VS is “Advaita”.

the VS is also known as the Bhāgvata Sampradāya, and the VS's philosophy is known as the Bhāgvata Dharma.

It should be noted that the VS is essentially bhakti sampradāya, which primarily focuses on directing one's energies towards worshipping the god by the singing of bhajans, recitation of god-name, and listening to the praise of god and great devotees in the form of kīrtana and so on. While VS is mainly a bhakti sampradāya, it uniquely blends the karma and dnyāna with the path of bhakti. This blending of bhakti, dnyāna and karma is evident in the writings of the Santas of the Vārkarī tradition and the most basic revered text of the Vārkarīs, Dnyāneśvarī.

VS has adopted the philosophy of monism and the practice of bhakti. It generally adopts a reconciliatory approach in the domain of spirituality and religion and when addressing issues of social concern. It neither encourages asceticism nor indulgence in material affairs. It worships a form of Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu but does not antagonise other forms of worship and deities. It calls for egalitarian change for a just and equal society but does not advocate uprooting the existing structures by revolutionary means. It prescribes a code of conduct for its members but does not have a notion of blasphemy or imposition of the rules. The overall approach of the Bhāgvata Sampradāya seems incremental, introducing a set of values to ordinary people through the easily comprehensible means of bhakti.

2.2. Vārkarī Sampradāya

The VS is a longstanding religious tradition, mainly located in the western state of Maharashtra, India. It is one of the region's most prominent and influential bhakti Sampradāyas. Keune and Novetzke write, "The Vārkarīs are a Sampradāya (longstanding religious tradition) based in western India, where Marathi is the dominant language,

particularly in the state of Maharashtra.”¹⁰ The origins of the Vārkarī tradition are not accurately traceable to any single source. It can only be said that it had strong roots among the ordinary people of the thirteenth century. Though the founder of the VS is not known, it can definitely be said that the works of Dnyāneśvara and Nāmdeva, both believed to have lived in the thirteenth century, are undeniably associated with what came to be known as the VS. There is no clear evidence of when the tradition of Vārī (the annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur) began. Still, it is known that when Dnyāneśvara composed and sang in Marathi, the commentary on Sanskrit Bhagvat-Gītā in the thirteenth century, the Sampradāya of Vithobā was already well established.¹¹ At the time of the composition of Dnyāneśvarī in the thirteenth century, the shrine of Pandharpur was a famous place of pilgrimage.¹² However, it is difficult to ascertain when the tradition of visiting Pandharpur and Viṭṭhala temple turned into the practice of annual pilgrimage and adopted a recurrent nature. Similarly, it is difficult to say when the gathering of the Vārkarīs took a more institutionalised form and came to be known as the VS. The annual and frequent pilgrimage to Pandharpur is a distinctive feature of the VS. The importance given to the Vārī or annual pilgrimage, is so evident that the name of the Sampradāya itself is borrowed from the word Vārī. The Sampradāya which attaches prime importance to Vārī or which is identified with Vārī itself is called Vārkarī Sampradāya or Vārkarī Pantha.

¹⁰ Jon Keune and Christian Lee Novetzke, “Vārkarī Sampradāy,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen et al., Consulted online on 15 April 2022, 1. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2212-5019_beh_COM_9000000070 First published online: 2012.

¹¹ Though Vārī can be defined as a pilgrimage, it has some specific features. Vārī is said to be a frequent pilgrimage. Unlike other pilgrimages, it is not a one-time affair, but devotees are expected to take pilgrimage to the temple of Viṭṭhala at Pandharpur at prescribed intervals. From this word Vārī, the Sampradāya of such kind pilgrims is known as Vārkarī Sampradāya.

¹² Karve, “On the Road”, 14.

2.2.1. Historical Background

It is largely accepted by scholars like R. C. Dhere, S. G. Tulpule, S. V. Dandekar, G. A. Deleury, S. V. Abhyankar, and H. V. Inamdar that the roots of the VS can be traced back at least to the close of the thirteenth century and probably even before. Though a more institutionalised and organised form of the Sampradāya appears to have been consolidated in the later centuries, most likely from the seventeenth century onwards,¹³ the works of thirteenth-century Santas such as Dnāyaneśvara and Nāmdeva are undeniably associated with the VS today.¹⁴ The Vārkarī traditions, such as the composition of various texts (revered by modern Vārkarī), worship of Viṭṭhala, the prominence of Pandharpur as a sacred site, and pilgrimage to Pandharpur, all predate the consolidation of the Sampradāya.¹⁵

Maharashtra was under the sway of the Yādavas and was ruled by Rāmdevrao in the thirteenth century. The great days of Yādava power had almost come to an end, and signs of decline began to be evident.¹⁶ This era was also marked by the endless rigid and elaborate Vrata-Vaikalyas (rituals-norms). The Prime Minister of the Yādava king, Hemdri, composed a treatise named “Chaturvarga-Chintāmaṇī”, which was highly respected in this period.¹⁷ Mirajkar writes: “This treatise prescribes five to ten Vratas for each Tithi. The description of the Vratas focuses on listing of number of Brahmins to be invited for the holy feast, the

¹³ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy”, 3.

¹⁴ Certain factors that seem to have consolidated the VS mainly from seventeenth century onwards are: first, the emergence of the system of phaḍas and mathas. Second, more organized way of pālkhī procession as laid down by Haibatbaba. And third, the production of hagiographical accounts of Vārkarī Santas. Also see, Keune, *Vārkarī Sampradāy*, 3.

¹⁵ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy”, 2- 3.

¹⁶ Sardar, 8.

¹⁷ Nishikant D. Mirajkar, “Bhakti Movement in Maharashtra,” in *Dimensions of Bhakti Movement In India*, ed. Santa. M. Marulasiddaiah (Mysore: Akhila Bharatiya Sharana Sahitya Parishat, 1998), 96.

specifications of the recipes to be prepared and the deities to be propitiated accordingly....

For 365 days of the year, the treatise prescribes 2000 different Vratas.”¹⁸

During the Yādava rule in Maharashtra, the Brahmin rule had devolved into a Brahmin tyranny by the latter half of the thirteenth century. During this time, there were two religious trends: revivalism and reform. Social life was defined by religious norms, dominated by caste and Varṇa hierarchy.¹⁹ The orthodox Brahmins attempted to maintain the strict rules of caste and Varna to retain ritual power. The Brahmins had monopolised the religious and spiritual knowledge of the Sanskrit texts as the lower castes did not have access to these scriptures. The efforts of orthodox Brahmins aimed to keep the lower strata of society out of the domain of religious practices. As a result, religious life, built on debt and fear, agony and helplessness, the satisfaction of the senses, and a love of festivals, was reduced to an uninformed, shallow, and confined existence.²⁰ The emphasis was on outward rites and rituals rather than inner spirituality. Religion became more focused on strict ritual procedures than religion's spiritual and philosophical aspects. Ritual practices were restricted to a few high-caste men, excluding the majority of the population from participating in religious affairs. As a result of the rejection of the “high religion” of the Sanskrit scriptures and the confinement of gods and goddesses in the sanctum sanctorum of temples by the orthodox brahmins, the forbidden masses began to worship folk gods such as Yamāī, Jākhāī, Mhasobā, and others.²¹ People worshipped these folk gods out of fear and to keep their

¹⁸ Mirajkar, 96.

¹⁹ Mirajkar, 97. Novetzke also brings out these dual trends present in the pre-modern history of Maharashtra. See, Christian Lee Novetzke, “The Brahmin Double: The Brahminical Construction of Anti-Brahminism and Anti-caste sentiment in the Religious Cultures of Precolonial Maharashtra,” *South Asian History and Culture*, 2, 2 (April 2011), 232 -52.

²⁰ Sardar, 131.

²¹ G. M. Pawar, “Medieval Marathi Literature,” *Medieval Indian Literature: An Anthology*, Vol. 2, ed. Ayyappa Paniker K. (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1997), 343.

destructive powers at bay (Kop).²² With this, religious conviction devolved into perverted faith.²³ Religion became linked with these rituals and rites, and its spiritual content was lost.

Notably, a large section of the society, i.e. Śūdras, Atiśūdras and women, had no place in these rituals. They were denied access to the message of scriptures and knowledge of mokṣa. The efforts of reform were initiated as an inevitable response to this hierarchy-laden, exclusivist social structure. Even before the spread of the VS, efforts were made by Nātha and Mahānubhava Sampradāyas to challenge the brahmin orthodoxy.²⁴ However, the means adopted by these Sampradāyas were either too radical or secretive, which meant they could not be adopted and practised by the common people. With time, both these Sampradāyas substantially lost their mass appeal and remained confined to a few, especially in Maharashtra. On this backdrop, the Santas of the Vārkarī tradition adopted a more people-oriented means of spreading awareness and opening spiritual and religious knowledge to the majority section of society – women, Śūdras and Atiśūdras. The choice of Prākṛut over Sanskrit, the use of metre Ovī, and Dnyāneśvara's declaration in the Dnyāneśvarī that his primary audience is strī-śūdrādī are the testimony of this intentional choice.

Similarly, Nāmdeva's effort to spread the religious-spiritual message through a means of kīrtana indicates that the Santas of the Vārkarī tradition were conscious of the means they adopted. All Santas associated with the VS followed in the footsteps of Dnyāneśvara and Nāmdeva in adopting Marathi for their compositions and correctly blending music, dance, drama, play and singing to take their message to the majority sections of society by popularising kīrtana, bhajana, harīpāṭha, and the annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur, Vārī. The

²² *Kopa* can be roughly translated as curse.

²³ Pawar, 343.

²⁴ For a detailed discussion, see, Mokashi, *Maharashtrateel Paach Sampradāy*. Also see, Anne Feldhaus, *The Religious System of the Mahānubhāva sect: the Mahānubhāva Sūtrapāṭha* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1983).

relative decline of other sampradāyas in Maharashtra and the widespread popularity of the VS seem to result from differences in the practices and means adopted. It appears that in the context of the societal interface, the difference between Nātha, Mahānubhava and VS lies more in the nature of practices and means adopted than in the content of what stands for egalitarianism.

From the thirteenth century, there was a deep churning in the religious life of Maharashtra. Bhakti tradition in Maharashtra was vibrant, and a peculiar set of values and practices developed as a result of teachings of the whole genre of Poet Santas of VS. From the thirteenth century to the seventeenth century, Maharashtra witnessed a series of poet-Santas, starting from Dnyāneśvara and culminating with Tukārāma and his disciple Nilobārāya.²⁵ In the VS, the mantra Dnyānobā Māulī Tukārāma or Dnyānobā - Tukārāma are chanted as a mark of tribute to all the Santas of the VS between the thirteenth and seventeenth century. The Vārkarī belief, as well as scholars like Dhere, Tulpule, Sardar and Deleury, believe that by the thirteenth century, Viṭṭhala worship was well established, and Pandharpur was a famous place for pilgrimage.²⁶ Mirajkar observes that even before Dnyāneśvara, there was already a tradition, though not a very prominent one, of regularly visiting the holy shrine of Shri Viṭṭhala at Pandharpur, which later became the centre of the bhakti movement of Maharashtra for centuries to come.²⁷ As far as epigraphical sources are concerned, the oldest historical reference to Pandharpur is found in Rāṣṭrakūṭa Avidheya's

²⁵ Even though Santa Rāmdāsa also belonged to the seventeenth century and holds a great place in the Santa tradition of Maharashtra, he does not belong to the Vārkarī tradition.

²⁶ Deleury, 31 -36; Sardar, 23 -27; Dhere, *Shree Viththal: Ek Mahasamnvyay*, 35 – 42.

²⁷ Mirajkar, 97.

copper plate of 516 A.D.²⁸ However, some scholars like Novetzke trace the beginning of the VS as well as the Vārī pilgrimage to a later date.²⁹

Tulpule writes, “Mysticism (in Maharashtra) in the full sense of the term begins with Jñānadeva. His commentary on the Bhagvad-Gītā is an unparalleled synthesis of philosophy, mysticism and poetry, and it laid the foundation of the Sampradāya of bhakti in Maharashtra.”³⁰ Prachi Deshpande also makes a similar argument. She argues, broadly speaking, bhakti as a regional culture began with Dnyāeśvara’s Marathi commentary on the Bhagvad- Gītā in the thirteenth century and flourished for the next five hundred years, culminating in the poetry of Tukārama and Rāmdāsa.³¹ Starting with Dnyāeśvara, Maharashtra, for the next five hundred years, witnessed the genre of Santas who built on the path shown by Dnyāeśvara. They all had strong links with Pandharpur, which became the centre of the sampradāya of bhakti.³² In Maharashtra, it is believed that the foundation of the Bhagvat-Dharma was laid by Dnyāeśvara Nāmdeva, Eknātha, and other Santas erected the divine structure, which not only gave the systematic organisation to the sampradāya over the years but also made it famous by reaching out to the masses. And finally, Tukārāma became the pinnacle of this mystical edifice.

The famous abhanga attributed to Bahiṇābāī, the disciple of Tukārāma, captures this imagination. The abhanga reads:

Dnyānadeve racilā pāyā/ Ubhāṛile devālaya//

²⁸ Mirajkar, 97.

²⁹ However, Scholars like Novetzke and Keune trace the beginning of the VS to a later date. See, Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy”, 2-3.

³⁰ Tulpule, *Development of Mystical Thought*, 206.

³¹ Prachi Deshpande, *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700-1960* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007), 129.

³² Tulpule, *Development of Mystical Thought*, 206.

Nāmā Tayācā kiñkara/ tyāne kelā hā vistāra//

Janārdana Ekanātha/ khāmba dilā bhāgvata//

Tukā zālāse kalasa/ Bhajana karā sāvakāśa//

This means,

Dnyāndeva (Dnyāeśvara) laid the foundation of the temple (of Bhāgvata Dharma).
Nāmā (Nāmdeva), who is the servant of Bhāgvata Dharma, expanded the structure.
Janārdana's disciple, Eknātha, built the pillars of the temple by way of composing commentary
on the Bhāgvata (Purana).
Tukārām has become the pinnacle of this temple of Bhāgvata Dharma. Let's sing (their)
bhajanas rhythmically.

There is a good reason to believe that there was a dialogue between various sampradāyas of Maharashtra between the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, and the VS served as its anchor. The violent clashes between the Śaivas and Viśnavas in the South and North India are almost absent in Maharashtra.³³ Similarly, the fierce rivalry between various sampradāyas does not seem to mark the bhakti tradition of Maharashtra.³⁴ Dnyaneśvara, known as the earliest propagator of the VS, belonged to the Nātha tradition.³⁵ Eknātha is supposed to have the spiritual lineage of Datta Sampradāya, whereas Tukārāma mentions he belonged to Chaitanya Sampradāya.³⁶ Further, even though Ramdāsa – who is the progenitor of the Samarth or Rāmdāsī Sampradāya, instituted Rāma worship instead of the Viṭṭhala worship, Abhyankar argues that Rāmdāsa was also a Vārkarī Santa.³⁷ He outlines compositions of Rāmdāsa revering Pandharpur and Pāṇḍuraṅga, which are rarely known.³⁸

³³ Dhere, "Introduction," Shree Viṭṭhala: Ek Mahasambhava.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ In Dyaneshvari, Santa Dnyāneśvara outlines his spiritual lineage. *Dnyāneśvarī*. 18 /1751 – 65, 822.

³⁶ Mokashi, *Maharashtrateel Pach Sampradāy*; S. G. Tulpule, *Paach Santkavi*; S. V. Abhyankar, *Vārkarī Sampradāy*; S. M. Mate, *Samarth Sampradāy* give full reference; Anne Feldhaus, *Mahanubhav Sampradāy*, *Dnyāneśvarī*, Justin Abbott, *Sakal Santa Gatha* give full reference; Nana Mahārāja Sakhare, *Sakal Santa Gatha*.

³⁷ Abhyankar, *Vārkarī Sampradāy*, 122 – 25.

³⁸ Ibid.

Since at least the first half of the twentieth century, a Pālakhī of Samarthā Rāmdāsa starting from Sajjangada participates in the Vārī procession, like that of any Vārkarī Santa.³⁹ This observation is significant in the context of the perceived rivalry between the Vārkarīs – followers of the VS and the Dhārkarīs – followers of Rāmdāsī Sampradāya.⁴⁰ Studying the interaction between these prominent sampradāyas in Maharashtra would be exciting and revealing. However, as this topic lies beyond the scope of this thesis, it may be dealt with in the future.

2.2.2. What is the Vārkarī Sampradāya?

The term Vārkarī is a combination of two words – “Vārī” and “karī”. “Vārī” means “recurrently coming and going back”, whereas the term “karī” means “one who does”⁴¹. The two essential features implied in the term “Vārī” are: first, movement from one place to another and second, the recurrence of that movement. Thus, the term “Vārkarī” literally means one who journeys recurrently. In the context of the VS, the term “Vārkarī” indicates one who journeys to Pandharpur every year, usually once a year.⁴² The term “sampradāya” can be roughly understood as a community or a group of people with a similar belief system.

³⁹ Dandekar, *Vārkarī Panthacha Itihas*, 58, 85

⁴⁰ Based on the writings of scholars like V. K. Rajwade, it was believed that the teachings and practices of VS and *Rāmdāsī Sampradāya* were antagonistic to each other. However, scholars like M. G. Ranade, Rajaram Shastri Bhagwat held that the teachings of the VS i.e. Bhagvata Dharma was the foundation for the teachings of *Rāmdāsī Sampradāya* which came to be known as Maharashtra Dharma. The idea of Maharashtra Dharma is closely associated with political developments in the seventeenth century Maharashtra, under the leadership of Shivaji and establishment of swaraj or self-rule. I have discussed these views at length in My M/Phil dissertation. Varada Sambhus, “The Debate over Maharashtra Dharma: Views of M. G. Ranade, R. Bhagwat and V. K. Rajwade,” *M/Phil Dissertation*, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2012. elaborates on these two views.

⁴¹ In the Marathi language suffix “karī” is often used in conjunction with a noun. E.g. Vīṇekarī, Zenḍekarī, Vārkarī. In all these examples, the term “karī” indicates a person who does some action with respect to the given noun, which is read in a context. Vīṇekarī is one who plays veena, or Zenḍekarī is one who carries the flag. Similarly, Vārkarī means one who does or walks the Vārī pilgrimage.

⁴² The detailed discussion of the term Vārī can be found in the next chapter.

The term “sampradāya” is often used in the religious context to demarcate one group from another. Some other meanings of the term are a system of religious persuasion, a religious school, and a way of religious practices. At times, the Vārkarī tradition is called a Vārkarī Pantha. Pantha literally translates as “a way” or “a path”. Since the primary focus of this thesis is to understand the social interactions associated with the Vārī pilgrimage and as shaped by Vārkarī tradition, I use the term “sampradāya” instead of “pantha”. Generally, “sampradāya” is translated as “cult or sect”. However, to capture the specific context of the term and to avoid the Christian – Abrahamic context associated with the terms “sect” or “cult”, I will continue to employ the term “sampradāya”. The term “sampradāya” here implies a loosely organised community of people having a similar belief system and bound by a shared ethos. Thus, the Vārkarī Sampradāya is a loosely organised community of those people who join the Vārī pilgrimage every year, worship Viṭṭhala or Pāṇḍuraṅga as their deity, and follow a standard code of conduct.

Today, the Vārī pilgrimage and the VS are unequivocally associated. A defining characteristic of a Vārkarī and the VS is the pilgrimage to Pandharpur – Vārī. In the broadest possible sense, anyone who joins the Vārī pilgrimage is regarded as a Vārkarī. However, to formally become a Vārkarī, one undergoes a simple ceremony. Usually, the candidate presents him/herself with a Vārkarī friend before a mahārāja or guru of Sampradāya and expresses the desire to become a Vārkarī. The aspirant must bring a tuḷasīmāḷa with him/her. The guru or mahārāja tells the candidate to place the tuḷasīmāḷa on any of the revered books of the Vārkarīs, usually the Dnyāneśvarī, Eknāthī Bhāgvata, Tukārāma Gāthā, Bhagvat-Gītā or Bhāgvata Purāṇa, and makes the aspirant wear it around the neck, or the guru garlands the aspirant with tuḷasīmāḷa.⁴³ Before wearing the tuḷasīmāḷa, an aspirant must commit to joining

⁴³ This simple ceremony and going to a Mahārāja or guru is not mandatory to become a Vārkarī. During the field work I came across individuals who became Vārkarīs and started wearing tulsī-mālā by visiting any of the revered places of Vārkarīs like Pandharpur, Alandi, Dehu, Paithan. Generally on an auspicious day according to Vārkarī faith, like Ekādaśī or Janmāshtamī, Vārkarīs adopt the mālā. Further, one can become a Vārkarī even at

the Vārī every year and abide by the rules and code of conduct of the Vārkarīs.⁴⁴ This simple ceremony and going to a mahārāja or guru is not mandatory to become a Vārkarī. During the fieldwork, I came across individuals who became Vārkarī- s and started wearing tuḷasīmāḷa by visiting the revered places of Vārkarīs like Pandharpur, Alandi, Dehu, and Paithan. Generally, on an auspicious day (according to the Vārkarīs) like Ekādaśī or Janmāṣṭamī, the Vārkarīs adopt the māḷa.⁴⁵ Further, one can become a Vārkarī even at home by keeping the tuḷasīmāḷa on a sacred text and, after that wearing it around the neck. In all these ceremonies, what is expected is the physical action of wearing or adopting a māḷa. The wearing of māḷa represents the commitment to the Vārkarī code – specifically, visiting Pandharpur every year and giving up alcohol and non-vegetarian food. This code is adopted in the presence of a witness or “sākṣī”. This witness could be a Vārkarī friend, a mahārāja or a guru, a sacred place or a sacred text.

Becoming a Vārkarī is a promise that an individual makes to oneself to abide by a particular way of life and behavioural norms, which I broadly term as “Vārkarī ethos”. Thus, Vārkarīs are also known as māḷakarīs, those who wear māḷa, or tuḷasīmāḷa’. S. V. Dandekar writes: “For a Vārkarī wearing of tuḷasīmāḷa is of the utmost importance. Vārkarīs never remove their tuḷasīmāḷa... tuḷasīmāḷa is the most obvious external symbol for identifying a Vārkarī.”⁴⁶ It needs to be noted that even though this is a formal ceremony to become a

home, by keeping the tulsi-mālā on a sacred text and thereafter wearing it around the neck. In all these ceremonies what is common is the commitment to follow the Vārkarī code to oneself in the presence of a witness or in Marathi “sakshi”. This witness could be a Vārkarī friend, a Mahārāja or a Guru, a sacred place or a sacred text.

⁴⁴ Code of Conduct of Vārkarīs is discussed later in this chapter.

⁴⁵ The Marathi phrase to start wearing a *tuḷasīmāḷa* is “*māḷa ghene*”. “*Māḷa ghene*” practically means a to become a Vārkarī and to commit to the Vārkarī way of living.

⁴⁶ Dandekar, *Vārkarī Panthacha Itihas*, 5. It shall be noted that wearing of a tulsi-mālā is not unique to the Vārkarīs. The followers of other Vaishnav traditions like of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu or ISKCON also wear *tuḷasīmāḷa*.

Vārkarī, it does not mean “initiation” in terms of adopting new ways of worship and beliefs and abandoning the previous ones. The critical feature of being a Vārkarī is to commit to performing the Vārī pilgrimage at least once a year in the company of the Santas and other Vārkarīs. Apart from serving the annual Vārī, giving up non-vegetarian food and consumption of alcohol, Tabaco are integral to the Vārkarī ethos.

Vārkarī bhakti practices are open to all. As Keune and Novetzke point out, the bhakti practices adopted by the Vārkarīs like the Vārī pilgrimage, bhajanas, kīrtanas, pravachanas, and celebrations of festivals are “nonrestricted public events.”⁴⁷ As a result, it is difficult to precisely identify who is a Vārkarī and what their belief system is compared to some other more institutionalised Sampradāyas.⁴⁸ Keune and Novetzke observe:

This has led to confusion about how the term “Vārkarī” is used. In its most restricted, sectarian sense, a Vārkarī is a person who has taken a minimal set of vows before a religious leader to regularly make the vārī and to live by a particular code of conduct. In its general, descriptive sense, the term applies to anyone who joins the pilgrimage to Pandharpur regardless of sectarian allegiance. In its most diffuse sense, the word is sometimes used imprecisely to refer to Marathi bhakti literature and cultural heritage generally, since the Vārkarīs have long comprised the largest religious sampradāy of the region... The terminology is further complicated by the thorough incorporation of Vārkarī poetry and hagiography into 20th-century Maharashtrian political and social discourses that were independent of the Vārkarī Sampradāy.⁴⁹

The term “Vārkarī” is used in many ways. There seem to be two poles in the spectrum of the meanings of the term “Vārkarī” – one pole signifying the strictest meaning and the other indicating a more diffused meaning. In the strictest sense of the term, a Vārkarī is one who commits himself/herself to the Vārkarī way of life, i.e., abiding by the five basic vows of the Vārkarīs.⁵⁰ In this term, being a Vārkarī is a life-long commitment. Once a person adopts a tuḷasīmāḷa, one formally becomes a Vārkarī, and the wearing of a tuḷasīmāḷa is a symbol of

⁴⁷ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy”, 1.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 1-2.

⁵⁰ Please see discussion on Vārkarī Code of Ethics under section 2.2.3.

one's commitment to the Vārkarī way of life. In the most literal sense of the term, anyone who joins the Vārī pilgrimage – Vārī + karī - even temporarily also becomes a Vārkarī. Practically, anyone en route or on the path of Vārī is referred to as a Vārkarī. Further, in the most diffused sense of the term, anyone who participates actively or passively in the bhakti practices of the Vārkarīs like bhajanas, kīrtanas, pravachanas, recitation of Harīpātha, fasting on Ekādaśī and so on, is regarded as a Vārkarī. In this diffused sense of the term, being a Vārkarī is more of a fluid and in-flux identity. As long as a person is associated with the pilgrimage or any of the Vārkarī bhakti practices in any capacity, he or she is regarded as a Vārkarī.

Practically, anyone can become a Vārkarī in the sense of committing to a Vārkarī way of life – in the strictest sense of the term, as well as in the diffused sense - of joining the Vārī pilgrimage even temporarily without dedicating oneself to the Vārkarī ways fully. There is no taboo of caste, gender, class, occupation, education, or even religion to become a Vārkarī. However, the majority of Vārkarīs are agriculturalists and belong to non-brahmin castes.⁵¹ To become a Vārkarī, one need not give up previous forms of worship and beliefs. It is one's own commitment to adhere to specific rules and code of conduct without any external agency enforcing the same. As a result, even a Christian or a Muslim can become a Vārkarī. The examples of Jaitunbi, Latif, and Sheikh Mahammad are well known in the Vārkarī tradition.⁵² Men, women, brahmins and Dalits, literate and illiterate, rich or poor – can become Vārkarīs. More importantly, with sheer devotion, anyone can rise to the height of being a Santa and a

⁵¹ See, Kuene, "Vārkarī Sampradāy", 1. Deleury and Karve also note this observation.

⁵² G. T. Kulkarni, "Deccan (Maharashtra) Under the Muslim Rulers From Khaljis to Shivaji : A Study in Interaction," in *Bulletin of the Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute*, 51/52, PROFESSOR S.M KATRE Felicitation Volume (1991-92): 509. Also see, R. C. Dhere, *Musalmān Marāṭhī Santkavī* (Pune: Dnyanaraj Prakashan, 1967).

guru.⁵³ The number of female participants in the Vārkarī bhakti practices, including the Vārī pilgrimage, is substantial. There is no restriction as to who can become a Vārkarī. However, upon becoming a Vārkarī, committing oneself to a particular code of conduct is necessary. For example, even if a person's usual food habits include eating non-vegetarian food, they are expected to give up meat-eating upon becoming a Vārkarī. This is particularly important because food habits are often closely intertwined with caste. Further, even though one may continue to worship other gods and goddesses and need not give up previous ways of worship, on certain religious occasions and at some places of worship like Tuljapur, meat is offered as naivedya, and devotees consume meat as prasāda. Therefore, even though there is no restriction in terms of who can become a Vārkarī and continuation of previous forms of worship, there are certain restrictions that an individual is expected to adhere to to be a Vārkarī. As compared to who can become a Vārkarī, which is more open and inclusive, being "a true Vārkarī" seems more defined. Though there are no punitive measures for not adhering to the Vārkarī code of ethics, one is not considered "a true Vārkarī".

2.2.3 Vārkarī Code of Ethics

There is no specific rule book or commandments in the VS. However; there is a broad code of conduct that Vārkarīs generally commit themselves to. The wearing of a tuḷasīmāḷa is the most apparent external symbol of a Vārkarī. Along with tuḷasīmāḷa, a mark of Gopichnadan on the forehead is an outward symbol of a Vārkarī. This mark is known as 'Gopichandanacā ṭilā'. It is a "U" shaped mark made from sandalwood paste, and inside the 'U', a black dot is marked with bukkā (black powder) and above that is a saffron dot of a fragrant powder. There is no taboo for women to wear the mark of Gopichandana. Generally,

⁵³ Eleanor Zelliot and Rohini Mokashi-Punekar, eds. *Untouchable Saints: An Indian Phenomenon*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005).

women put a mark of bukkā along with kumkuma or bindī (a mark considered mandatory for married women) and, rarely, a ‘U’ shaped ṭilā of gopichandana along with the mark of ‘kumkuma’. Even though there is no specific dress code for the Vārkarīs, most men prefer white kurtā and dhoti or loose white trousers known as payjamā and women are seen in traditional nauvārī – 9-yard sari (Mar. sāḍī) or round sari. A headgear, either a vertical white cap or a turban known as Vārkarī pheṭā or muṇḍāse. Women either cover their heads with a sari (Mar. padara) or allow the sari tail to cover both shoulders without covering their heads.

Usually, Vārkarīs wear tuḷasīmāḷa and are therefore referred to as mārakarīs. There are certain essential vows that māḷakarī / Vārkarīs take before wearing the tuḷasīmāḷa. The commitment of a Vārkarī to a specific code of conduct can be classified into two categories: firstly, the acts of commission and, secondly, the acts of omission. The acts of commission include such commitments where a particular action is expected to be performed, whereas the acts of omission require the non-performance of a specific act. The primary vow is to commit to going to Pandharpur at least once a year on the Śuddha Ekādaśī, generally, Āṣāḍhī Ekādaśī. Apart from going to the Vārī every year, there are certain behavioural restrictions or acts of omission that a Vārkarī is expected to commit to. They are no meat consumption or adoption of vegetarianism, no adultery, no alcoholism and no gambling. Along with going for a Vārī every year, singing haripāṭha every day, doing nāma-japa every day, reading a small portion of sampradāyika literature every day, observing fast on Ekādaśī, attending bhajanas, kīrtanas, pravachanas in the local temples whenever possible is expected of a Vārkarī.

The Vārkarīs have developed a particular code of conduct. The ease of practice in everyday life is an essential characteristic of the Vārkarī code. Vidyadhar Thathe lists eight important practices of the Vārkarī code. They are: “1. Going to the Pandharpur Vārī every

year at least once a year or on every Śuddha Ekādaśī⁵⁴ of 2. They are wearing a tuḷasīmāla around their neck. 3. Non-consumption of meat (non-vegetarian food) and alcohol. 4. Reciting the mantra ‘*Rāma Kriṣṇa Hari*’.⁵⁵ 5. Strict prohibition of adultery, i.e. any woman other than a wife to be considered a mother. Not to crave other people’s earnings or to compete with them. 6. Regular recitation of haripāṭha and reading of Dnyāneśvarī, Bhagvat, Gāthā. 7. To fulfil the given responsibilities with honesty. 8. Not to look down upon anyone and respect all beings as a creation of God.”⁵⁶

In the Vārkarī tradition, emphasis is laid on regular practice. Repeating certain acts of bhakti at a given interval is at the core of the Vārkarī code of conduct. For example, yearly commitment to the Vārī pilgrimage, fortnightly commitment to observing the Ekādaśī fast, and everyday commitment to singing haripāṭha and doing nāma-japa. The acts of bhakti performed at specific intervals serve as reminders of one’s commitment to a particular code of conduct and the principles one has adopted for oneself. As a result, Vārkarīs are most commonly known for their discipline. Even during the field interaction, the IT professionals from Mumbai noted that they were greatly impressed by the discipline of the Vārkarīs.

2.2.4. Viṭṭhala and Viṭṭhala Temple at Pandharpur

⁵⁴ Ekādaśī refers to the eleventh day in each lunar phase. Śuddha or Śukla Ekādaśī refers to the eleventh day in the waxing phase whereas Vadya or Kriṣṇa Ekādaśī refers to the eleventh day in the waning phase. The Pandharpur Vārī is expected to be done on the Śuddha Ekādaśī.

⁵⁵ Depending on the spiritual tradition of a person, or as per directions of the Guru a mantra may differ. However, Rāma Kriṣṇa Hari is a common mantra for the Vārkarīs

⁵⁶ Tathe, “Vārī aani Vārkarī Sampradāya”, 9.

The town of Pandharpur is located on the banks of the river Bheema⁵⁷, in the southern district of Solapur in the state of Maharashtra, bordering the state of Karnataka. The road distance between Mumbai, the state capital and Pandharpur is around 350 km. The small town of Pandharpur is relatively less developed in terms of industry and commercial activities compared to the big cities like Mumbai, Pune, Aurangabad, and Nagpur. However, the town is revered as a tīrtha and kṣetra and is prominently associated with the Viṭṭhala temple.⁵⁸ What has given the town its particular religious significance is the temple of Viṭṭhala. Thousands of devotees, mainly, Vārkarī s, visit Pandharpur every year during the Vārī pilgrimage. An otherwise quiet town comes to prominence during the Āṣāḍha and Kārtika Vārī pilgrimage to celebrate ekādaśī, and the Viṭṭhala temple remains the focal point of the pilgrimage gathering.⁵⁹

Viṭṭhala or Pāṇḍuraṅga is the main deity of the VS. Viṭṭhala, Vithū, Vithobā, Vithāī, and Pāṇḍuraṅga are some of the names given to the deity.⁶⁰ Though there is a debate regarding the origin of the word Viṭṭhala, some scholars like S. G. Tulpule believe that Vithobā or Vithū or Viṭṭhala is a corrupt Kanarese pronunciation of Viṣṇu.⁶¹ R. C. Dhere argues that the name Viṭṭhala was adopted from the folk tradition and stories associated with worrier-twin heroes, Biththala and Birobā.⁶² Eventually, Biththala became Viṭṭhala and was

⁵⁷ River Bheema is known as Chandrabhaga in Padharpur and in Vārkarī literature because of its moon crescent like shape while flowing through the town.

⁵⁸ Dhere, *Shree Viththal*.

⁵⁹ Deleury, 60 – 64.

⁶⁰ For detail discussion on the etymology of the names attached to the deity of VS and debates regarding the origin of Viṭṭhala worship, please see Dhere, *Shree Viththal: Ek Mahasamnay*. Also see, G. A. Deleury, *The Cult of Vithobā*.

⁶¹ S. G. Tulpule, “The Origin of Viṭṭhala”; For alternative understanding of the word Viṭṭhala, see Dhere, *Shree Viththal: Ek Mahasamnay*.

⁶² Dhere, *Shree Viṭṭhala: Ek Mahasamnay*, 96 -108.

appropriated within the Vaiṣṇava pantheon.⁶³ The popular belief among the Vārkarīs related to the name of their deity is associated with the stories of Pundarika or Puṇḍalikaa on the one hand and with the story of Rakhumāī on the other.⁶⁴

The Vārkarīs believe that Puṇḍalika was one of the earliest bhaktas of Viṭṭhala, known as “ādya bhakta”. The myth is that Puṇḍalika took his aged parents on a pilgrimage and arrived at the banks of the Chandrabhāgā in Pandharpur. He is believed to be a duty-bound and dedicated son. As he was massaging the feet of his parents, Kṛiṣṇa, in the form of Viṭṭhala, came looking for his angry wife – Rakhumāī or Rukmiṇī. When he saw Puṇḍalika fully engrossed in the service of his parents, he was pleased with his bhakta and went to Puṇḍalikaa’s doorstep to bless him. However, Puṇḍalika continued with his service and asked Viṭṭhala to wait on the brick lying around. In Marathi, brick is called “Vīṭa”. The term “Viṭṭhala” is a combination of “vīṭa” and “thala” or “sthala”. Thala or “sthala”, meaning established or settled. Therefore, the one who is established on the brick is known as Viṭṭhala. Another popular name for the deity is “Pāṇḍuraṅga”. The word Pāṇḍuraṅga is derived from two words – “pāṇḍu” and “ranga”. “Pāṇḍu” means whitish, and “rang” means colour. Therefore, it is believed that the name Pāṇḍuraṅga of the deity is derived from its attribute of whitish or dusty skin, whereas scholars like Dhere and Deleury argue that the name Pāṇḍuraṅga indicates its Śaiva origin. Keune and Novetzke observe, “Scholars suggest that this name may indicate a historical link between Viṭṭhal and Śiva, which is quite plausible in light of the numerous other instances of Vaiṣṇava-Śaiva overlap in the tradition.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Dhere, *Shree Viṭṭhala: Ek Mahasamnvyay*, 107.

⁶⁴ See, Dhere, *Shree Viṭṭhala: Ek Mahasamnvyay*, 50 – 65; Keune and Novetzke also highlight this belief. See, Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy”, 4. Also see, “Pāṇḍuraṅga Mahatmya” in *Skandapurāṇa* (Pune: Bharat Itihas Sanshodhan Mandal, Pothishala), 41/161.

⁶⁵ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy”, 3.

The debate on the origin of the VS revolves around determining the period of the beginning of Viṭṭhala worship. And like many other debates associated with Vārkarī history, scholars have varied opinions on this issue. Deleury and Tulpule trace the origin of Viṭṭhala worship to folk traditions of “hero stones”, also known as “vīragala” of the shepherd community.⁶⁶ However, R. C. Dhere disagrees with the view that the origins of Viṭṭhala lie in the worship of hero stones.⁶⁷ According to the Vārkarī belief, Viṭṭhala or Pāṇḍuraṅga is a child form of Kṛṣṇa. The Jains claim that the image of Vithobā has initially been the image of “Jina”, and it must be admitted that the image is fashioned after Buddhist and Jain idols.⁶⁸ The image of Vithobā is made of black stone and is standing on a small brick with his hands resting against the hips. The image is small and represents peace and inaction. Even though Viṭṭhala and Viṭṭhala worship are inextricably linked to Vaiṣṇava tradition, unlike many other Vaiṣṇava Sampradāyas in India, the deity of the VS is none of the Avatars of Viṣṇu. Viṭṭhala is referred to as “Chovisāvegaḷā”.⁶⁹

As far as the epigraphical evidence is concerned, the Viṭṭhala temple of Pandharpur is first mentioned in the stone inscription dating to 1189 CE and in other sets of inscriptions between 1273 and 1277.⁷⁰ The Viṭṭhala temple had the patronage of Yadav king Ramachandra and his minister Hemadri.⁷¹ Keune and Novetzke observe that, irrespective of the origin, “by 12th Century Viṭṭhal had become incorporated into a broader Vaiṣṇava

⁶⁶ Deleury, 181 – 192. Also see, S. G. Tulpule, “The Origin of Viṭṭhala”.

⁶⁷ Dhere, *Shree Viṭṭhala: Ek Mahasamvay*, 179-180.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 219 – 253.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 53 – 55.

⁷⁰ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy”, 2. Also see, R.C. Dhere, *Shree Viṭṭhala: Ek Mahasamvay*.

⁷¹ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy”, 2.

mythology...’’⁷² Scholars like Dhere, Deleury, Dandekar, and Tulpule also argue that the Viṭṭhala worship precedes the Sampradāya of the Vārkarīs. It is important to note here that every Viṭṭhala devotee may not be a Vārkarī. However, every Vārkarī is supposed to be a devotee of Viṭṭhala.

Keune and Novetzke write, “Viṭṭhal is a regional deity unique among Hindu sectarian practices and mythological frameworks as his stance – hands on hips, elbows pointing outward – is distinctive in Hindu iconography.”⁷³ The Vārkarīs generally see Viṭṭhala as either their father or mother. The most commonly used terms are Vithobā – wherein the suffix “bā” stands for father, and Vithu-māulī or Vithāī – wherein “māulī” or “āī” means mother. Sometimes, Viṭṭhala is regarded as a friend or brother, and rarely, as a lover. Many Vaiṣṇava traditions, especially in North India, follow the tradition of “madhurā” bhakti. But, The nature of bhakti in the Vārkarī tradition is generally “sakhya” bhakti or “bhāva” bhakti. In madhurā-bhakti, Kṛṣṇa is often seen as a lover by men and women alike⁷⁴, whereas in sakhya or bhāva bhakti Kṛṣṇa is seen as a companion and friend. In the Vārkarī tradition, Viṭṭhala is most commonly referred to as either a father - “Vithobā” or as a mother - “Vithū māulī”. It is noteworthy that even though Viṭṭhala itself is identified as a child form of Kṛṣṇa, he is most commonly regarded as a father or mother and rarely as a son. In the Vārkarī hagiography, associating Viṭṭhala with the family and household image is very

⁷² Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy”, 3.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ S.N. Tipnis, “The Concept of Madhura Bhakti in Indian Philosophy”, *Studies in Indian Archaeology* (Hasmukhlal Dhirajlal Sankalia), ed. S.B. Deo and M.K. Dhavalikar, (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1985), 235-238.

common.⁷⁵ Due to the fact that the Vārkarī Santas tend to approach Viṭṭhala /Vithobā as their mother or father, Pandharpur is seen as their “māher” or “maternal home”.⁷⁶

In the past, devotees were allowed to hug the image of the deity. However, to save the image from decaying, now devotees are allowed only to touch the feet of Viṭṭhala (charaṇasparśa). Another peculiarity of this temple, especially in the recent past, is that any devotee can enter the innermost sacred recess with impunity and actually touch the image and lay his/her head physically at the feet of Viṭṭhala. Though the VS and the Santas of the Vārkarī tradition are known to criticise caste and gender-based discrimination, it was only after the satyāgraha of Sane Guruji⁷⁷ in the year 1947 that the untouchables were allowed to enter the Viṭṭhala temple.⁷⁸ In 2014, non-brahmins and women were appointed as priests at the Viṭṭhala temple for the first time.⁷⁹ This may have been the first time in Maharashtra that Dalits and women were thought about and chosen to be temple priests.

Apart from Pandharpur, the birthplaces and the samādhī places of the Santas of VS like Alandi, Dehu, Paithan, Mangalvedha, and Edlabad are revered by the Vārkarīs. Across Maharashtra and even beyond Maharashtra, several Viṭṭhala temples often become sites of Vārkarī bhakti practices like bhajanas, kīrtanas, and pravachanas. However, the Viṭṭhala temple in Pandharpur remains a great integrator of the VS. All the pālkhīs of various Santas move in the direction of Pandharpur to “meet” and take darśana of Pāṇḍuraṅga during the

⁷⁵ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy”, 3.

⁷⁶ See, Tulpule, *Paach Santkavi*, 161; Dhere, *Shree Viththtal: Ek Mahasamnvy*, 213–14.

⁷⁷ Pāṇḍuraṅga Sadashiv Sane, aka Sane Guruji (1899 – 1950) was a well-known social reformer in Maharashtra.

⁷⁸ For a detailed discussion on the Temple Entry Satyagraha by Sane Guruji see, Aatmaram Walinjkar, *Sane Guruji Aani Pandharpur Mandir Praveschache Adhyatm* (Pune: Dimple Prakashan, 2011).

⁷⁹ The Hindu, 1st August 2014. <https://Santa.thehindu.com/news/national/otherstates/pandharpur-temple-allows-female-and-nonbrahmin-male-priests/article6272617.ece> Accessed on 24th July 2021.

Vārī pilgrimage. The culmination of pālkhī processions is marked when the pādukās of the Santas take darśana of Pāṇḍuraṅga. As R. C. Dhere points out, Viṭhṭhala is a “Mahāsamnvayaka” or “great reconciliatory”,⁸⁰ symbolising the coming together of the Śaiva and the Vaiṣṇava traditions⁸¹, ascetic and worldly aspects of life, and dvaita and Advaita philosophy. Around the image of Viṭhṭhala and the temple at Pandharpur, the Santas and devotees belonging to the various strata gather together, constituting the Vārkarī Sampradāya. Viṭhṭhala and the Viṭhṭhala temple continue to be a powerful reconciliatory force in Maharashtra. People in Maharashtra come to Pandharpur to take darśana of Viṭhṭhala irrespective of their social, political, economic, or ideological differences.

2.2.5. Santas of Vārkarī Sampradāya

During the Vārī pilgrimage, the Vārkarīs commonly chant: Dnyānobā māūlī Tukārāma; Dnyānobā - Tukārāma; Nivṛtti – Dnyānadeva – Sopān – Mukṭābāī – Eknātha - Nāmdeva - Tukārāma. These chants are generic and are believed to pay tribute to all the Santas of the Vārkarī tradition. As mentioned above, though the founder of the VS is not known, the Vārkarīs believe that Dnyāneśvara and Nāmdeva were the earliest proponents of the Sampradāya. Apart from Dnyāneśvara and Nāmdeva, Eknātha (16th C.) and Tukārāma (17th C.) are the most revered Santas of the Vārkarī tradition. As Novetzke points out in his book, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*, Dnyāneśvara, Eknātha and Tukārāma have contributed immensely to the Vārkarī literary canon in the form of Abhangas and

⁸⁰ Dhere, *Shree Viththal: Ek Mahasamnvay*.

⁸¹ Charlotte Vaudeville, “The Shaiva-Vaishnava Synthesis in Maharashtrian Santism,” *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, edited by Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 215–228.

commentaries. Whereas, Nāmdeva is primarily associated with propagating and popularising the Vārkarī bhakti tradition through the practice of kīrtana in Maharashtra and beyond.⁸²

The VS believes that a person born in any caste, belonging to any class, a man or a woman, can achieve moral and spiritual strength by following the path of bhakti. It should be noted here that in the VS, individuals belonging to almost all castes, including the untouchables and Śūdras, as well as women, achieved the heights of being Santas. Today, the “Santa-paramparā” of the VS includes men and women from various castes, including previously untouchable castes, and the Vārkarīs highly revere them. The compositions of the Vārkarī Santas are sung across the sections of the population in Maharashtra. These men and women belonging to various castes could not only rise to become Santas but also become gurus. Dnyāneśvara, an outcaste Brahmin, Chokhāmēlā, who belonged to the Mahar - untouchable caste, Janābāī, who was an orphaned child and grew up in the family of Nāmdeva, Nāmdeva himself, who was a tailor, Kānhopātrā, a courtesan, Tukārāma, a kuanḇi, are a few examples of the individuals who achieved great spiritual and moral heights by following the path of bhakti. They are respected by the people in Maharashtra even today, irrespective of their caste, class, and gender.

As S. V. Dandekar notes, apart from the santas of Maharashtra who lived from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, the ancient rīśis and āchāryas like Vyāsa, Śuka, Nārada, and Ādi Śankarāchārya are also revered by the Vārkarīs.⁸³ Similarly, Vārkarīs also venerate the bhakti santas from other regions of India, like Kabīra, Sūrdās, Tulsidāsa, and Mīrābāī. Keune and Novetzke also present similar observations. They write,

Vārkarī Sampradāy incorporates the diverse voices of many saint-poets of Viṭṭhal. Primary among these, four key devotees tend to be highlighted: Jñāndev or Jñāneśvar (also spelt

⁸² Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*.

⁸³ Dandekar, *Vārkarī Panthacha Itihas*, 67.

Dnyāneśvar; 13th cent.), Nāmdev (13th–14th cents.), Eknāth (16th cent.), and Tukārām (17th cent.). The Vārkarīs also revere other saint-poets who come from a variety of sociocultural backgrounds as well. For example, there are female saint-poets: Muktābāī (13th cent.), the younger sister of Jñāndev; Janābāī, an orphaned devotee of Nāmdev (13th–14th cents.); and Bahīnābāī, a Brahman devotee of Tukārām (17th cent.). The Vārkarīs revere an “untouchable” saint-poet, Cokhāmēlā (13th–14th cents.), along with his poetically gifted family members, and a notable Muslim devotee, Šayḥ Muḥammad (16th–17th cents.). A number of minor low-caste Vārkarī saint-poets are remembered for using metaphors based on their trades to express their devotion to Viṭṭhal: Senā the barber, Narharī the goldsmith, Sāvātā the gardener, and Gorā the potter. The Vārkarīs also revere a number of saint-poets whose songs are not recorded in Marathi, especially Sūrdās, Mīrābāī, Rohidās (i.e. Ravidās), and Kabīr, who are all of northern Indian origin.⁸⁴

In the Vārkarī tradition, there is no fixed criterion for who is to be regarded as a Santa. Different sources provide different lists of santas of the VS. In his book *Vārkarī Panthacha Itihas*, S. V. Dandekar provides a list of twenty-seven Vārkarī Santas, whereas S. V. Abhyankar lists more than a hundred santas, santa-poets, and gurus and Mahārājas of VS. Interestingly, Abhyankar also includes Santa Rāmdāsa as a Vārkarī Santa.⁸⁵ Identifying who the Vārkarī Santas were becoming especially difficult when selecting “padās” for the Vārkarī kīrtana. Vārkarī kīrtana is supposed to be based on the literature of the Vārkarī Santas. At this juncture, it should be noted that in this thesis, my focus remains on the present-day practices of the Vārkarī tradition, in general, and as manifested in the practice of the Vārī pilgrimage, in particular.

2.2.6. Literary Canon of Vārkarī Sampradāya

There are several texts which are considered the chief sources of Vārkarī philosophy. These texts are usually referred to as “pramāṇbhūta grantha” in the VS. Dnyaneśvārī (Dny.), Eknāthī Bhāgvata (EB) and Tukārāma Gāthā (TG) are the most revered of them. These three texts constitute the “prasthāntayī” of the VS.⁸⁶ The Dny. and EB are the critical

⁸⁴ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy”, 4.

⁸⁵ Abhyankar, *Vārkarī Sampradāy*, 472-73.

⁸⁶ Mirajkar, 99.

commentaries on Bhagvat- Gītā and the 11th Chapter of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, composed by Dnyāneśvara and Eknātha, respectively, whereas the TG is a compilation of abhangas of Tukārāma. Apart from these three, the abhanga compositions of various Vārkarī Santas serve as the philosophical basis of the VS. Like the vernacular texts, i.e., Dny., EB, and TG, the Sanskrit texts like Bhagvata Gītā (BG) and Bhāgavata Purāṇa are greatly revered by the Vārkarīs.

The most sacred text of the VS is Dnyāneśvārī, or Bhāvārtha-dīpikā, composed by Dnyāneśvara. Dny. is believed to have been composed towards the end of the thirteenth century. Dny. is primarily a commentary on the Bhagvata Gītā, but the text itself has achieved the heights of a great scripture independently. S. V. Abhyankar observes that the Bhagvata Gītā, Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Vedas, Upaniṣadas, Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata are sacred texts of the Vārkarīs.⁸⁷ Similarly, all the writings of Dnyāneśvara, Dny., Amṛtānubhāva, Chāṅgdeva Pāsaṭhī, Haripāṭha, and abhangas; EB, Bhāvārtha Rāmāyaṇa and Rukmiṇī Swayamvara composed by Eknātha, and the compilation of abhangas of Tukārāma, are the revered texts of the Vārkarīs.⁸⁸ In addition, the Vārkarīs revere the abhanga compositions of all santas of the tradition like Nāmdeva, Chokhāmeḷā, Janābāi, Gorā Kumbhār, Senā Nhāvī, and Kānhopātrā.

The literature produced by the santas of the VS constitutes a longstanding heritage of Marathi literature. In Maharashtra, the entire genre of santas produced a vast body of vernacular literature that has now become the scriptures in Marathi households. In fact, it will not be an exaggeration to say that any study of the history of the development of the Marathi language is incomplete without duly recognising the literature produced by the santas, known

⁸⁷ Abhyankar, *Vārkarī Sampradāy*, 473.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

as “*santa-sāhitya*”, and specifically of VS. Most of the compositions attributed to the Vārkarī Santas are mainly in Marathi. Though the origins of Marathi can be traced back even before Dnyāneśvara, it was he and other santas of the VS who contributed to the development of Marathi and earned a prestigious position for it vis-à-vis Sanskrit. Instead, they inculcated pride among the masses in using the vernacular and made their teachings accessible to all. It seems that the Vārkarī Santas made a deliberate choice to use Prakrit (Marathi) over Sanskrit. This choice is in tune with the audience they were addressing, namely, *strī-śūdrādī*, especially as unequivocally made clear in the Dny. by Dnyāneśvara.

Dnyāneśvara writes:

Mājha Marāthāci bolū kavatiken/ Parī amrutātenhī pajāsi jinke//

Aisī akṣare rasike/ meḷvīn//⁸⁹

A similar spirit of dignifying the use of language can be witnessed in the writings of Eknātha. He wrote,

Sanskrit vaṇī deve kelī/ Prākṛut kāy chorāpāsūnī jhālī?

Regarding the choice of Marathi language by Dnyāneśvara, S. V. Dandekar writes:

Dnyāneśvara had witnessed that the essence of dharm – i.e. setting the ordinary people on the path of self-realization – had declined and was replaced by external aspects of religion like the performance of elaborate rituals and karmakāṇḍ. The essence of dharm was lost due to ignorance of the masses, as most of the scriptures were in Sanskrit and could not be accessed by the majority section of the society. When the ignorance of true dharm grows, the lowest strata in society are encouraged to convert to other religious paths. To avoid this conversion by making the masses aware of the true essence of dharm, Dnyāṇdev composed the text (*Dnyāneśvārī*) in Marathi.⁹⁰

G. B. Sardar credits Eknātha for turning the stream of Marathi literature from spiritual texts to narrative compositions. In his literature, one finds the amalgamation of various rasas.

⁸⁹ Dandekar, *Dnyāneśvārī*, 14.

⁹⁰ Dandekar, *Vārkarī Panthacha Itihas*, 36.

The one-sidedness in Marathi poetry disappeared, and Marathi readers could now savour the rasas of love, heroism, and compassion.⁹¹ From critical commentaries to the composition of bhārūdas and gavalanīs, Eknātha's compositions are varied in nature, catering to the needs of a diverse audience. Sardar observes a union of action and renunciation and a harmonious blending of individual development and social cohesiveness in Eknātha's writings. Eknātha believed that the Siddha ought not to remain immersed in the joy of the soul but should assume responsibility for the people.⁹²

The compositions of the santas of VS were generally based on their everyday context, i.e., caste-based occupations and Marathi, which was their everyday language. The use of similes from ordinary people's everyday lives in a rhythmic manner is the basic feature of the abhanga compositions of Vārkarī Santas. The expression of "everyday life practices" as well as the use of Marathi facilitated communication within the community and the dissemination of the message of bhakti. The choice of Marathi for the dissemination of spiritual knowledge can be seen in the compositions of all santas of the Vārkarī tradition. Alongside the written texts, the oral transmission of knowledge through the means of kīrtanas and bhajanas is common in the VS. Keune, and Novetzke observe, "On the literary side, it is clear from the poetry of the saint-poets, hagiographies, and the notebooks of kīrtana performers that the performance of the saint-poet's compositions has long been an essential practice in the Vārkarī Sampradāy."⁹³

Apart from the compositions of the Vārkarī Santas, the mahārājas and kīrtanakāras of the VS also rely on anthologies of poet-Santas compiled by various individuals. Keune and Novetzke note that the anthologies of the Vārkarī poet-saints were collected and published by

⁹¹ Sardar, 86.

⁹² Ibid, 91.

⁹³ Keune, "Vārkarī Sampradāy", 3.

the editors and scholars trained in the Vārkarī tradition, like Nana Mahārāja Sakhare.⁹⁴

Similarly, the hagiographies of Vārkarī Santas produced from time to time are referred to by the kīrtanakāras and pravachanakārs. Kuene and Novetzke observe,

The first hagiographies of Vārkarī figures appear in the work of Nāmdev, attributed to the 13th century, and extant in manuscripts from as early as the 16th century. These hagiographies were of Nāmdev's purported contemporaries – Jñāndev and his siblings and Cokhāmeḷā, for example. In addition, Janābāi composed hagiographical accounts of many of the same figures, and of Nāmdev as well. In the 17th and early 18th centuries, hagiographies about the saint-poet Eknātha were composed by descendants in his familial and spiritual lineages. In the late 18th century, scattered individual hagiographies like these were gathered into compendia that could be called “collective hagiographies,” which constitute the hagiographical corpus of the Vārkarī Sampradāy as it is largely remembered today. In the process of drawing stories together, the collective hagiographers also smoothed out and shaped the stories to cohere well in a generally Vaiṣṇava framework. The most influential of these was a Brahman Vārkarī named Mahīpati (1715–1790), who wrote four massive volumes containing stories about hundreds of Marathi and North Indian saint-poets. His Bhaktavijay (Victory of the Bhaktas) and the Bhaktalīlāmṛt (Essence of the Divine Play of the Bhaktas) became the standard sourcebooks for Vārkarī hagiography, both in Marathi and in English translation.⁹⁵

As previously stated, it is mandatory for a Vārkarī kīrtanakāra to use only Vārkarī Santa compositions – sāmpradāyik sāhitya – and not compositions from outside the tradition for a Vārkarī kīrtana. Some other bhakti Sampradāyas, particularly Rāmdāsīs, see this mandate as restrictive or exclusionary, failing to acknowledge the contributions of non-Vārkarī Santas in Maharashtra. The Vārkarī response to this objection is that the non-inclusion of literature by other Santas does not mean that the Vārkarīs dishonour those works or consider those works purposeless.

2.2.7. Philosophy of Vārkarī Sampradāya

The philosophy of the VS is known as Bhāgvata Dharma. Bhāgvata Dharma combines various spiritual-religious principles and also provides a guide to easy practice. The essential element of the Bhāgvata Dharma is bhakti. Even though the VS has embraced the

⁹⁴ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy”, 3.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 5.

philosophy of Advaita, it does not go into the dialectics of Dvaita and Advaita.⁹⁶ It believes that the absolute is above all the dichotomies, including Puruṣa-Prakṛiti, Brahman-Māyā and Dvaita-Advaita, and Saṁguṇa-Nirguṇa. All duality converges into one supreme ultimate. Vārkarī Santas aspire for this universal spirit. Though there is a quest to attain high spirituality, it does not ask its followers to give up their worldly duties. The Vārkarī Santas do not extricate themselves from earthly life.⁹⁷ The VS never preached any renunciation or giving up material responsibilities. Dnyāneśvara and the other santas did not preach the giving up of actions that were beneficial to society. Inactivity and non-action are not interchangeable concepts. Non-action does not in any way contradict karma. In fact, according to Dnyāneśvara, karma is essential for the achievement of non-action.⁹⁸ S. V. Dandekar writes: “Vārkarīs follow the code of conduct prescribed for an ideal bhakta in the eleventh chapter of Bhāgavata (Purāṇa) like worshipping the saṁguṇa form of deity, doing nāma-japa, the performance of kīrtana, importance of guru, belief in the unity of all beings, surrender (to the supreme being) and therefore the Vārkarī Sampradāya is also known as Bhāgavata Dharma (or Bhāgavata Sampradāya).⁹⁹

The primary debate related to Vārkarī philosophy centred around the question of whether the Bhāgavata - Dharma propagated by the Vārkarī Santas was a separate school of thought like that of Jainism and Buddhism rejecting the primacy of the Vedas. Scholars like S. V. Dandekar, S. V. Abhyankar, and H. V. Ianamdar argue that the Bhāgavata Dharma propagated by the Vārkarī Santas was a continuation of the Vedic philosophy and accepted the authority of the Vedas. If any, the departure from the Vedas is in terms of worship

⁹⁶ Pawar, 351.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Sardar, 62. Also see, Dandekar, *Dnyaneśvārī*, 18 – 154.

⁹⁹ Dandekar, *Vārkarī Panthacha Itihas*, 6.

methods rather than philosophy. The knowledge of Vedas and Upaniṣads was brought to the common masses in the language that they understood by the Vārkarī Santas. They also contextualised this knowledge to suit their time and requirements. H. V. Inamdar writes: “Acceptance of authority of Vedas, centrality of bhakti, transcending the binary of saguṇa-nirguṇa and Dvaita-Advaita and unity of Hari (Viṣṇu) and Hara (Śiva) are the cardinal principles of Vārkarī philosophy.”¹⁰⁰

The philosophy of Dnyāneśvara as exhibited mainly in Dnyaneśvārī, Amṛtānubhava, and Chāṅgdeva Pāsaṣṭhī are known as Chid-Vilāsa-Vāda.¹⁰¹ The theory of Chidvilāsavāda claims that the whole world is an illumination of the substance or Ātman. Chidvilāsavāda (pūrṇādvaita) deviates from the doctrine of Kevalādvaita of Śaṅkarācārya. “Dnyāneśvara’s theory of chidvilāsa ends up in the fusion of love and devotion (Prema-bhakti), whereas Kevalādvaita’s theory assumes the world to be a creation of false knowledge (Ajnāna), ends up in renunciation (Sanyāsa).”¹⁰² Even in the Dny. Dnyāneśvara seems to advocate bhakti even for the one who has gained knowledge or Dnyāna. The utmost stage of bhakti, as reflected in Dny. is “Dnyānottar bhakti” or “post-realization bhakti”, wherein an individual has gained complete knowledge of one’s being and eventually settles into bhakti. The beginning of bhakti, according to Dnyāneśvara, maybe in the worship of an idol, but its end has to be in bhakti blended with true knowledge. The devotee ultimately recognises and experiences the existence of God everywhere around him (her) and eventually within himself

¹⁰⁰ S. V. Inamdar, “Vārkarī Sampradāy: Kahi Vishesh,” in *Vārī* ed. Devidas Pote (Thane: Param Mitra Prakashan, 2020), 42. For similar analysis, see, Dandekar, *Vārkarī Panthacha Itihas*, 75 -77; Abhyankar, *Vārkarī Sampradāy*, 272-73.

¹⁰¹ S. G. Tulpule, “The Modus Operandi of the Divine Name as Explained by Jñānadev.” *Studies in South Asian Devotional Literature: Research Papers, 1988–1991*, edited by Entwistle and Mallison (1994), pp. 146–153. Dandekar, “Introduction,” *Dnyāneśvārī*. Also see, Suruchi Pandey, “Vithoba of Pandharpur,” http://www.hindupedia.com/en/Vithoba_of_Pandharpur, accessed on 14th May 2022.

¹⁰² Mirajkar, 99-100.

(herself). S/he becomes one with God.¹⁰³ Dnyāneśvara's philosophy of bhakti transcends the dual concepts of dvaita-Advaita (dual - non-dual), saṁguṇa-nirguṇa (with form – formless), vyakta-avyakta (manifest – unmanifest).¹⁰⁴ Some of the abhangas, as well as harīpāṭha composed by Dnyāneśvara, also reflect the spirit of Dnyānottar bhakti or nirguṇ bhakti. One such abhanga is - “*Pāṇḍuraṅga Kānti, Divya Tej Jhaḷakatī*” – popularised by Asha Bhosale.

The spirit of Dnyāneśvara seems to be adopted by other poet Santas of the Vārkarī tradition as well. There is not much emphasis on karmakāṇḍa or ritualistic worship. Importantly, any rules or code of conduct adopted by the Vārkarīs stem from a love for God and the eagerness to experience the joy of bhakti over and over again rather than avoid God's wrath and be blessed with material well-being. The deity Viṭṭhala is not a god of “Navas”, i.e., there are no promises made to the god of return gifts to fulfil devotees' material desires. While highlighting this aspect of the VS, G. B. Sardar writes:

The Vārkarī Sampradāy did not adopt any narrow dogma; nor did it cling with stubborn pride to any particular symbols. It wedged no battles over deities. The belief of the Santas of the VS was that the Supreme Being is imminent and assumes different forms. The worshippers of Rāma, Kṛishṇ, Datta, Shiv, and of other deities were all accepted into the Vārkarī fold. The Vārkarīs stressed time and again that Shiv and Vishnu were but one.¹⁰⁵

Keune and Novetzke also note the reconciliatory nature of the VS, especially in the context of saṁguṇa and nirguṇa bhakti and its ability to reconcile the principles of Advaita Vedānta and Kashmir Śaivism. They write,

One of the distinctive features of Vārkarī thought is the tendency to hold together saṁguṇa and nirguṇa understandings of God. The transcreative works endorse nondualist positions (drawing on both Advaita Vedānta and Kashmir Śaivism), while the short poetry consistently emphasizes devotion to Viṭṭhal. In effect, Vārkarī literature allows saṁguṇa and nirguṇa notions to continue without conflicting with each other or offering a grand explanation of how they fit together.

¹⁰³ Mirajkar, 100.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Sardar, 67.

Vārkarī thought tends to be much more focused on bhakti in people's daily lives than on engaging in abstract philosophical argumentation.¹⁰⁶

There was no fundamental difference between Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, and Viṭṭhala for a Bhāgvat devotee. They were different forms of the very same all-pervading God. It is only natural that Rāma, born to destroy demons, should wield the bow and arrow. But Pāṇḍuraṅga or Viṭṭhala is always looked at as the mother of all, especially of the oppressed, Śūdras, Dalits, and women. Sardar argues, “the task of Viṭṭhala as a deity is wholly constructive, and therefore he did not bear any destructive weapons like Rama. The image of Viṭṭhala is that of kindness, forgiveness, generosity, and tender love.”¹⁰⁷ On the one hand, VS establishes Viṭṭhala worship and urges the devotees to focus their attention on the single form, i.e., Viṭṭhala. Simultaneously, it follows the philosophy of Advaita-Vedānta, wherein there is no duality of “self” and “other” or, in the context of bhakti, between the devatā and a bhakta. Furthermore, it does not preclude bhaktas from performing pūjā for other gods and goddesses in addition to Viṭṭhala worship, i.e., saṅga bhakti and the principles of Advaita – nirguṇa, non-dual existence. The Vārkarī Santas did not adopt the radical approach of abandoning all prevailing social and religious practices. However, they indicated the highest principles of the philosophy of Advaita and Viṭṭhala worship as an intermediate step towards attaining the realisation of this principle.

As the saṅga and nirguṇa notions continue to co-exist within the Vārkarī philosophy, so does the idea of detachment, saṅyasa and engagement with worldly affairs, sansāra. Often, various spiritual schools within the Hindu fold have not only glorified saṅyasa or renunciation but have frequently made it a prerequisite for spiritual success. The santas of VS neither advocate renunciation nor turning away from the daily engagement of professional or

¹⁰⁶ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy,” 10.

¹⁰⁷ Sardar, 94.

family life. Most of the santas belonging to the VS were mostly householders, men as well as women. They continue to pursue their family occupation, possibly with the sole exception of Kāṇhopātrā, the daughter of a courtesan. In several compositions of the Vārkarī Santas, Viṭṭhala is seen helping the bhakta in fulfilling the daily tasks. The stories of Viṭṭhala helping Janābāī in making the cow-dung cakes or the potter Gorā shaping the pots are popular among the Vārkarīs. Several compositions of the Vārkarī Santas are set in their vocational context. Kāṇḍā, mulā, bhājī/ Avaghī Vithāī Māzī// - a composition by Savatā Mālī is a classic example of this spirit. The simple ways of bhakti adopted by the VS allowed the followers to adopt the path of spirituality across the social spectrum without giving up their worldly duties towards the family and society. In fact, in Dny. Dnyāneśvara explicitly states that one of the qualities of a bhakta is not the non-performance of responsibilities but rather the detachment from the outcome of the action, and whatever the outcome may be, offering the same to God.

Mirajkar summarises the basic teachings of the Vārkarī Santas as, “Envy to none, purity of body and mind, simplicity in conduct, and awareness of high moral values is the way of life propounded and practised by the followers of the bhakti movement in Maharashtra.”¹⁰⁸ The VS does not preach renunciation from worldly household duties. As Murty points out, “There was no world negation; on the other hand there was a stress on world acceptance.”¹⁰⁹ Similarly, the Vārkarī philosophy does not advocate physical suffering or torture to achieve mokṣa or self-realization.

2.2.8. Organization of Vārkarī Sampradāya

¹⁰⁸ Mirajkar, 108.

¹⁰⁹ Murthy, *Bhakti – A Protest Movement*, 32.

There is no centralised authority in the VS. The Sampradāya is constituted around the shared value system, or common ethos, and common objects of worship and respect. As Deleury points out in his book, no Church-like organisation exists in the VS.¹¹⁰ Keune, and Novetzke present similar observations. They write, “The “essence” of the Vārkarī ethos – its ethics and morality, its customs, and conventions – is not standardised or regulated by any text, authority, or charismatic central leader. In general, the tradition’s beliefs and practices are conveyed by interpreting the songs and actions attributed to the various Vārkarī saint-poets.”¹¹¹ The organisation of the Vārkarīs is mainly through the local groups or a group of devotees around a mahārāja or buvā known as phaḍas.¹¹² Phaḍa can be considered a subgroup or a camp within the Vārkarī tradition. These are groups of Vārkarīs who are led by a senior mahārāja, who commands respect as a spiritual authority. Keune and Novetzke note, “In modern times, the Vārkarī Sampradāya has comprised a vast number of devotional subtraditions (phaḍs or sampradāys) of widely varying sizes that centred on male Vārkarī leaders (mahārājs). Some mahārājs belong to familial lineages established in earlier generations, others claim spiritual (guru-disciple) lineages, and others arise by simply attracting a group of followers.”¹¹³

The continuity of the Vārkarī tradition in its current form can be attributed to the phaḍas. It will not be an exaggeration to say that the phaḍas are the backbone of the VS, those who have kept the tradition alive. However, the organisation of phaḍas is a relatively

¹¹⁰ Deleury, 4.

¹¹¹ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy,” 7.

¹¹² Vidyadhar Tathe argues that there are mainly four kinds of Phaḍas that are the cornerstones of Marathi culture. They are: 1. Vārkarī Phaḍa; 2. Kusticha phaḍa (groups of wrestlers); 3. Tamashacha phaḍa (groups of performing artists – involving drama, dance and music moving from place to place); and 4. Usacha Phaḍa (groups associated with Sugarcane farming). Interestingly he associates these phaḍas with bhakti (devotion), shakti (strength), kala (art) and udyog (industry), respectively. Tathe, “Vārī aani Vārkarī Samprday,” 15. For the purpose of this thesis, I will focus only on the Vārkarī phaḍa or phaḍas related to bhakti.

¹¹³ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy,” 8

recent phenomenon. Tathe observes that from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, i.e., from the period of Dnyāneśvara to Tukārāma, the development of the VS seems to be centred around a santa or a group of santas.¹¹⁴ Bahirat argues that the development of the system of phaḍas developed around the latter half of the nineteenth century¹¹⁵, whereas Tathe seems to believe that even though there were prominent santas like Nīlobā and Bahīnābāī, after Tukārāma, the VS was more or less institutionalised by the phaḍas.¹¹⁶ The phaḍas are also sometimes referred to as mathas. It is without a doubt that for at least the last two hundred years, the development and spread of the VS have been mainly through the system of phaḍas led by various mahārājas, buvās, or gurus. Keune and Novetzke note,

Most mahārājs have undertaken years of training either with elder Vārkarī mahārājs or at training schools such as the Vārkarī Shikshan Sanstha in Alandi. Such training includes studying the saint-poets' writings and learning how to perform kīrtans. These mahārājs are vitally involved in organizing groups of Vārkarīs to make pilgrimages to Pandharpur or to important saint-poets' temples on festival days.¹¹⁷

There are several phaḍas within the VS. Santa Nāmdeva Mahārāja (Namdās) Phaḍa, Vāskar Phaḍa, and Dehukar Phaḍa are some of the most prominent phaḍas of the VS. Similarly, Ājarekar Phaḍa, Shirvalkar Phaḍa, Thakubuvā Phaḍa, Bālāpurkar Phaḍa, Rāshinkar Phaḍa, Karhādkar Phaḍa, Dada Mahārāja Satarkar Phaḍa, Bankatswāmī Phaḍa, Sākhare Mahārāja Phaḍa, Ausekar Phaḍa, are well known in the Vārkarī tradition.¹¹⁸ These phaḍas further develop sub-branches, led by spiritual or family successors. Tathe argues that it is worth studying the transformation of the VS from the individual leadership of great

¹¹⁴ Tathe, “Vārī aani Vārkarī Samprday,” 16.

¹¹⁵ B. P. Bahirat, *Vārkarī Sampradāy: Uday va Vikas*.

¹¹⁶ Tathe, *Vārī aani Vārkarī Samprday*, 16.

¹¹⁷ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy,” 8

¹¹⁸ Vikas Kadam, “Varkari Phads in Pandharpur and Their Tradition Contribution,” *Journal of Arts and Culture*, 2, 3 (2011): 93 – 96. https://bioinfopublication.org/files/articles/2_3_5_JAC.pdf, accessed on 20th October 2022.

santas to the institutionalisation of the phaḍas resulting in the Sampradāya led by ordinary people.¹¹⁹ It is important to note that the phaḍas are the primary sites where individuals can become a Vārkarī by adopting a tuḷasīmāḷa and committing to the vows of the Vārkarīs.

According to Keune and Novetzke, “These groups (phaḍas), which gathered around local Vārkarī leaders whose traditions are passed on through blood or spiritual lineages, were instrumental in shaping the modern organisational form of the Vārkarī pilgrimage.”¹²⁰ In particular, during the Vārī pilgrimage, the terms diṇḍī and phaḍa are used interchangeably. Even though there are overlaps between the diṇḍī and phaḍas, some fundamental differences between the two can be pointed out. As S. V. Dandekar notes, “phaḍa is a large group of disciples gathered around a mahant (guru or mahārāja), whereas diṇḍī is a small group of people singing bhajans.”¹²¹ Phaḍas, broadly, can be said to be a longstanding and relatively permanent group of Vārkarīs gathered around a guru or mahārāja, whereas the term diṇḍī is used to connote a group of Vārkarīs walking and singing together on the Vārī pilgrimage, primarily for logistical purposes. Sometimes, diṇḍīs may get dissolved after the Vārī procession, but phaḍas continue to indulge in bhakti practices round the year, thereby developing their norms like the selection and sequence of abhangas to be sung, the style of kīrtana etc. Most diṇḍīs follow the bhajana singing pattern of a specific phaḍa. There can be one or several diṇḍīs walking the Vārī pilgrimage associated with a particular phaḍa. From the organisational perspective of the VS, phaḍas are a more stable organisation than diṇḍīs. Diṇḍīs adopt the rules and regulations set forth by the phaḍas.

¹¹⁹ Tathe, *Vārī aani Vārkarī Samprday*, 16.

¹²⁰ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy”, 3.

¹²¹ Dandekar, *Vārkarī Panthacha Itihas*, 73.

Often, there is no particular distinction made between the terms *diṇḍī* and *phaḍa*. Among the *Vārkarīs* I interviewed during my fieldwork, very few respondents, mainly the regular *Vārkarīs* associated with a particular *phaḍa*, explained the distinction. Even their understanding of the difference and relation between *diṇḍī* and *phaḍa* varied greatly. One of the respondents said, “Numbered and well-organised *diṇḍīs* are *phaḍas*. Those *diṇḍīs* adhere to strict rules of walking and daily routine during the *Vārī*. They sing *abhangas* in a particular sequence.”¹²² Another respondent who was also a *diṇḍī* leader and a regular *Vārkarī* pointed out, “though there are several *phaḍas* in the *Vārkarī* tradition now, the oldest and most revered are *Vaskar Phaḍa* and *Dehukar Phaḍa*. Other *phaḍas* take inspiration from them. *Phaḍas* give direction to the *Vārkarī samāja* (community).”¹²³ Another regular *Vārkarī*, who was associated with a well-known *diṇḍī* from Pune, highlighted the role of *phaḍas* as the leaders of *Vārkarī samāja* and also flagged certain concerns. He opined that the *phaḍa* should be more responsible in their responses to various social and political trends and their manifestation in the VS. He observed, “the divisive trend of mainstream politics has entered the VS. Certain *phaḍas* mandate singing (*nāmaghoṣa*) only “*Tukārāma Tukārāma*” at the conclusion of a *kīrtana*, and prohibit singing “*Dnyānobā Tukārāmā*” which has been the usual practice. This needless separation between *santas* is created by the *phaḍakarīs*, where there is a unanimity of the message of all *santas*. The *phaḍas* need to be more responsible while mandating such a code.”¹²⁴ The ISKCON *diṇḍī* leader made it clear that they do not follow the rules of any of the *phaḍa* but rather follow their own tradition of singing and mantra recitation, even while walking in the *Vārī*.¹²⁵

¹²² Interview conducted on 7th July 2019.

¹²³ Interview conducted on 11th July 2019.

¹²⁴ Interview conducted on 9th July 2019.

¹²⁵ Interview conducted on 12th July 2019.

The broader Vārkarī ethos is common to all phaḍas, like devotion to Viṭṭhala or Pāṇḍurnaga as the main deity, reverence to the Santas of the Vārkarī tradition, the mandate to go on the Vārī pilgrimage every year, fasting on the day of ekādaśī, attending kīrtanas, bhajanas whenever possible, nāma-japa, and non-consumption of meat and alcohol. However, there are differences in the details of the practices based on this common ethos. For example, irrespective of the phaḍa, all Vārkarīs are supposed to do nāma-japa daily. Phaḍas are at the forefront of deciding, altering, negotiating, and changing the code of conduct and also in shaping the responses to the socio-political happenings that concern the VS. But, the “bīja mantra”, or core mantra, may change from phaḍa to phaḍa. The style and sequence of the singing of bhajanas and harīpāṭha, the performance of kīrtana, etc., may vary from phaḍa to phaḍa. From the above responses, it can be deduced that the phaḍas are the principal organisational units of the VS, whereas the diṇḍīs are the organisational units of the Vārī pilgrimage. Usually, well-organised and well-managed diṇḍīs that give shape to the entire Vārī procession are associated with some or other phaḍa. Notably, the ideological basis of the contemporary Vārkarī practices is provided by the phaḍas.

2.2.9. Means of Bhakti Adopted by Vārkarī Sampradāya

As mentioned earlier, the relative spread and popularity of the VS lie in the means of propagating and disseminating the teachings of the santas of the Sampradāya. VS adopted a people-oriented, simple means of bhakti that all could practise, irrespective of caste, gender, class or age. The means adopted by the VS did not need a scriptural scholarship, nor did they need elaborate and expensive preparations, like for yadnya. It did not advocate extreme physical suffering, tapas, rigid rules of worship, or sādhanā. It adopted the means of bhakti which could be adopted by ordinary men and women belonging to various strata of society without giving up their day-to-day worldly commitments. The means adopted by the VS

could be adopted by sanyāsīs and householders alike. Even though the VS is based on the high philosophy of Advaita, the methods used to get to the spiritual goal are very simple and easy to follow in one's day-to-day life.

The bhakti practices advocated by the VS are collectively known as nāmasankīrtana. Nāmasankīrtana includes the recitation of god-name or nāma-japa, pārayāṇa, satsanga (santsanga), kīrtana, bhajana, pravachana and vyākhyāna. Apart from the nāmasankīrtana practices, the essential practice propagated by the VS, which gives the very identity to the Sampradāya, is the annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur known as the Vārī.¹²⁶ The Vārī means could, therefore, be classified into two: firstly, the Vārī pilgrimage, and secondly, nāmasankīrtana. The fundamental difference between these two means is that the first kind demands a movement from “home” to the sacred place, i.e., Pandharpur, preferably walking, whereas the second kind requires no or hardly any physical movement on the part of a devotee. The Vārī pilgrimage is essentially a community affair, whereas some practices of nāmasankīrtana can be performed solitarily, and others are always performed in a group. For example, the practice of nāma-japa can be done solitarily, whereas the group practice of nāma-japa would take the form of jāgara, jayaghoṣa, nāmghoṣa or bhajana, pārayāṇa - the reading of scriptures like Dny, EB, BG, BP – can be done solitarily or in a group, whereas, kīrtana and pravachana are necessarily group or community activities. During the Vārī pilgrimage, almost all practices of nāmasankīrtana can be witnessed. However, they are also practised independently at local levels, mainly in the temples, from time to time and on various occasions throughout the year.

VS condemned meaningless rituals and advocated a non-ritualistic mode of worship in the form of singing, dancing, and playing together. Out of the terms nāmasankīrtana, the

¹²⁶ Chapter three discusses the practice of the Vārī pilgrimage in detail.

term *nāma* stands for the recitation of God's name. Generally, it takes the form of *nāma-japa*. Japa can broadly be said to be a repetition of the mantra or name of God as adopted by a person or as directed by a guru. There can be a fixed number of times a mantra or name might be repeated. Most commonly, the given mantra or name is chanted a hundred and eight times. However, depending on the spiritual tradition, the number of repetitions may change. *Nāma-japa* is usually a solitary practice. When God's name is chanted in a group, it is called *jāgara* or *nāma-ghoṣa*. Rhythmic name chanting is often a part of *bhajana*. *Vārkarī* Santas attach supreme importance to the name-chanting or *nāma*. Out of any other means of realising spiritual goals, like meditation or yoga, *Vārkarī* Santas prefer *nāma* over any other means. Chanting of the divine name is a novel instrument implemented by the VS, which any sincere devotee can utilise, irrespective of his/her social status. “Dnyāneśvārī repeatedly stresses the point that (reciting) the name (of the God) does not require any rituals; it wipes out all woes and fills the universe with great happiness.”¹²⁷ As Mirajkar argues, the *Vārkarī* Santas broke the bondages of rituals and caste-oriented spiritualism and made mysticism accessible to all.¹²⁸ Similarly, most of the compositions of the *Vārkarī* Santas are in *ovī* meter, which is easily recitable and does not require any special training in music or various ragas. The *abhang*a compositions of most of the *Vārkarī* Santas are in *ovī* meter. Keune and Novetzke note, “The *Vārkarī* Sampradāy makes extensive use of several performative media to express its devotional and ethical positions. The primary medium of all the saint-poets is the short poem (more accurately, a song-poem) that is composed in one of the flexible Marathi forms called *ovī* or *abhang*a. The *Vārkarī* saint-poets are remembered to have been vocal performers of their compositions, and each “song-poem” is a performance.”¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Mirajkar, 106.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 107.

¹²⁹ Keune, “*Vārkarī* Sampradāy”, 10.

Sankīrtana is one of the forms of public manifestations of bhakti propagated by the Vārkarī Santas. Sankīrtana (kīrtana) involved chanting and singing together with the fellow Vārkarīs, accompanied by musical instruments and dance. Kīrtana is practised not only during the Vārī, the pilgrimage of the Sampradāya, but also on the auspicious days like Ekādaśī of each month, Kriṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī, Rāma Navamī, Mahāśivarātrī etc. It needs to be noted here that the term sankīrtana is generic and includes various means of bhakti like bhajana, pravachana, pārayaṇa, satsanga, whereas the term kīrtana indicates a specific performative bhakti practice involving dance, drama, and singing, and is central to nāmasankīrtana.¹³⁰

Kīrtana

Kīrtana, in general, and Vārkarī kīrtana, in particular, are aimed more at group singing than solo singing and are necessarily a public act. Kīrtana is a performative practice, essentially praising God and great devotees of the past, and it involves singing, dance, drama, play, and music. Kīrtana is an art of spiritual teaching through story-telling. It is typically performed by one or two leading performers, called kīrtanakāra, accompanied by instruments like the Harmonium, Tabalā, Ektārā, Tamburā, Tālas and Tiparī (wooden pieces). It involves singing, acting, humour, dancing, and story-telling. What possibly makes kīrtana different from other performing arts is the essence of bhakti. No kīrtana can be imagined without bhakti or love for God. Kīrtanas are typically performed in temples or sacred sites. People gather in temples or sacred places where the kīrtanakāra narrates a story from the scriptures, accompanied by singing and music. The narration of the story is usually known as nirūpaṇ. There are various styles of kīrtana in Maharashtra. Nārādīya kīrtana, also known as

¹³⁰ This distinction is noted in the Maharashtrian context. In other parts of the country as well as in some other Sampradāyas the term “sankīrtana” carries different connotations.

Hardāsī/Harīdāsī kīrtana, Vārkarī kīrtana, Rāmadāsī kīrtana, Dāsgaṇū kīrtana, and Rāśtrīya kīrtana, are some well-known styles.

Almost all Vārkarī Santas advocated kīrtana bhakti, and most of them were kīrtanakāras or kīrtana performers. Kīrtana is the primary means adopted by the VS to disseminate the message of the Vārkarī Santas, and the tradition of the Vārkarī kīrtana continues even today. Keune and Novetzke note, “The Vārkarī tradition has many expressive performance traditions, but the most ubiquitous is Kīrtana.”¹³¹ It is well accepted in VS that Santa Nāmdeva pioneered the form known as Vārkarī kīrtana or Sampradāyaika kīrtana in the thirteenth century. Vārkarī kīrtana differs from other forms of kīrtana performed in Maharashtra. What makes Vārkarī kīrtana different from other traditions of kīrtana is the choice of padās and the style of nirūpaṇa.

As far as padās are concerned, a Vārkarī kīrtana is usually based on compositions by the Vārkarī Santas. No compositions of santas other than the Vārkarī Santas are taken as the basis for a Vārkarī kīrtana, including contemporary gurus and mahārājas of the VS. As for the style, unlike the Nārādīya kīrtana, there are no two separate sections known as Purvaraṅga and Uttara-raṅga in the Vārkarī kīrtana. A Vārkarī kīrtana is a narration and explanation of an abhanga or ovī from the Vārkarī literature while intermittently singing bhajans along with the audience. A Vārkarī kīrtana is a continuous performance of about two to three hours without a break. Another important characteristic of a Vārkarī kīrtana is the accompaniment of ṭālkarīs. Ṭālkarīs are the chorus, supporting the main kīrtanakāra by playing the cymbals (ṭāḷa) and singing.

No compositions composed after Nilobārāya (Tukārāma’s disciple in the seventeenth century) are accepted for a Vārkarī kīrtana. Kīrtanakāras belonging to the other traditions

¹³¹ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy,” 11.

criticise this restriction as an exclusionary practice. However, S. V. Dandekar responds to this objection by saying, “The non-inclusion of literature by Santas of other bhakti traditions does not mean that Vārkarīs consider such literature futile. It simply means that they (Vārkarīs) want to serve their tradition as honestly as possible.”¹³² He further adds, “If a particular group does not take the responsibility of enhancing and protecting the literary tradition, with time, the tradition declines and eventually dies. It is because of the literary restriction that Vārkarīs have put on themselves, the Vārkarī literature still thrives.”¹³³

Vārkarī kīrtana is relatively more popular in the remotest parts of Maharashtra and among the lowest strata of society than Nāradīya kīrtana, which remains somewhat confined to the urban centres. With the efforts of Vārkarī kīrtanakāras like Vishnubva Jog, Bhausaheb Katkar, and Nana Mahārāja Sakhare, Vārkarī kīrtana has gained popularity even among the educated and urban class. Novetzke points out, “a Vārkarī Kīrtana relies on more communal, interactive participation with an audience than does Nāradīya Kīrtana”.¹³⁴ A Vārkarī kīrtana is more participative, wherein at frequent intervals, the audience sings along with the kīrtanakāra. Traditionally, the audience of the Vārkarī kīrtana has been rural, agrarian men and women who have had no direct access to the scriptures and the Sanskrit language. To cater to this majority of the audience, the style, similes, and narration employed in the Vārkarī kīrtana are borrowed from the everyday experiences of ordinary householders rather than deep philosophical debates and theories.

The Vārkarī kīrtana is open to all. Various diṇḍīs perform kīrtana on the banks of the river Chandrabhāga, popularly known as the “Chandrabhāgeche vāḷvanta” (dessert of Chandrabhāgā) in the Vārkarī terminology. From Ekādaśī to Pournimā, i.e., from the eleventh

¹³² Dandekar, *Vārkarī Panthacha Itihas*, 68.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*, 87.

day of the waxing moon till the full moon day, about four days, the banks of Chandrabhāgā are filled with the sounds and rhythm of kīrtana. The Vārkarīs believe that Viṭhṭhala himself starts dancing to the rhythm of ṭāḷa and mrudung when the kīrtanakāra exhibits an extraordinary talent for giving an ecstatic experience to the audience. As Novetzke points out, “A Vārkarī kīrtanakāra can be from any caste and is often of a middle or Maratha (Marāthā) caste or a low caste, reflecting the social teachings of most Vārkarī Santas, whatever their caste.”¹³⁵ Even though a Vārkarī kīrtanakāra can be from any class and any strata of society, the majority of Vārkarī kīrtanakāras are male. In fact, some of the phaḍas consider it taboo for a woman to perform kīrtana. Even though some phaḍas and diṇḍīs welcome women kīrtanakāras, their number is far less in the Vārkarī tradition of kīrtana than in the practice of Nāradīya kīrtana.

Over the centuries, there might likely be some variations in the performance of a Vārkarī kīrtana. As Keune and Noveztke note, “This songsermon-dance event (Vārkarī kīrtana) is one of the main ways in which Vārkarī literature is transmitted orally and reinterpreted in each new context. Although the precise form certainly has changed through history, contemporary Vārkarī Kīrtana follows a relatively set pattern.”¹³⁶ Along with bhakti, addressing the issues of social concern like freedom from tobacco and alcohol addiction, gender equality, cleanliness, and environmental awareness are addressed through the Vārkarī kīrtana. It is worth noting that in recent years, some Vārkarī kīrtanakāras have been more open to basing their kīrtanas on the padas of other Santas for kīrtana and pravachana, including that of Rāmdāsa, though the number is still very small. Furthermore, newer media platforms like radio, television, YouTube, and social media are increasingly used by the

¹³⁵ Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*, 88.

¹³⁶ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy,” 11.

Vārkarī kīrtanakāras. However, adopting more unique ways and more contemporary subject topics is not uniform among various phaḍas and kīrtanakāras. Some phaḍas are more rigid in accepting new practices and stick to the classical methods of kīrtana to keep the tradition “pure” and “free from corruption”. In contrast, some others are more adaptive to changes in accepting the literature of other Santas or employing newer technological means.

2.3. Impact of Vārkarī Sampradāya in Maharashtra

2.3.1. Revolt for Social Equality or Maintaining Status Quo?

There are two extreme opinions about the implications of the teachings of Vārkarī Santas and VS. One school of thought regards the works and message of Vārkarī Santas as vidrohī, or revolutionary, pioneering radical social change against Vaidic Dharma and denouncing the Vedas. In contrast, another school of thought regards it as completely status quoist, diverting people’s attention away from immediate socio-political concerns. In the first case, an argument is made that the VS, like the Jain and Buddhist traditions, emerged as a critique of the Vaidic tradition and especially of the varna system. On the other extreme, Vārkarī philosophy and the works of Santas of the Vārkarī tradition are termed “other-worldly”, indulging in the passivity of action through the promotion of bhakti. According to this view, the implication of advocating bhakti was to maintain the status quo as it overlooked the political and social issues of the time. Scholars like Rajwade were at the forefront of this argument. In support of the “status quoist” argument, a stanza from Santa Tukārāma's abhanga “*Thevile anante taisechī rahāve/Chittī asū dyāve samādhāna/*” – meaning “one should be content with whatever one has and as given by God” – is frequently quoted.

However, several other scholars do not hold either of these views. Dandekar, Abhyankar, Sardar, Deleury, Karve, and Novetzke point out that the character of the VS was

neither revolutionary nor did it advocate radical changes in society. Even though they advocated a more egalitarian, just and equal society, they did not call for the destruction or dismantling of the existing social structures. The criticism of caste, gender-based hierarchies, and the inclusion of strī-śūdrādī in performing bhakti practices, the claim that every being is capable of attaining mokṣa, or ultimate spiritual goal, irrespective of caste, gender, or class, was undoubtedly a departure from orthodox religious understanding. This departure laid the basis for social change and reform. However, the opening up of the spiritual-religious domain did not necessarily advocate equality of social status. As Sardar observes, Dnyāneśvara, who, along with his three siblings, suffered the wrath of Varṇāśramadharmā, did not advocate uprooting from its foundations the system of four Varnas and the structure of caste determined by birth. He can, therefore, be described as a religious reformer and not a revolutionary.¹³⁷ He further adds,

The Buddhists, Jains and the Lingayats vehemently opposed the Varna system and tried to uproot the caste system, advocating absolute equality, not just in spiritual and religious domains, but also at the social level. In spite of the efforts of these Sampradāyas, the caste system based on Varṇāśramadharmā did not collapse, it did not loosen its grip over the minds of the people. In fact reverse occurred. Therefore the theory of these Sampradāyas and the social practices were in conflict with each other. Based on this experience, Dnyāneśvara did not interfere with the social practices of the time. He entertained no false hopes about a social revolution. What he could achieve was the sense of equality and the feeling of brotherhood into the religious life of the people. As the implication of this, the bitterness in social relations must have certainly decreased to an extent at least.¹³⁸

The VS, based on the philosophy of Advaita, believes in the fundamental unity of all beings. This spirit of fundamental equality is epitomised in Pasāydāna, composed by Dnyāneśvara and the most basic prayer of the Vārkarīs. However, even though the Vārkarī Santas and VS established equality of all castes, classes, and genders in the spiritual domain, it did not necessarily translate into social equality. Even among Vārkarīs, caste and gender

¹³⁷ Sardar, 75.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 77.

hierarchies continue to manifest in their daily interactions and, for a long time, even at bhakti gatherings. As Karve and Deleury noted in their works, until recently, the *diṇḍīs* were formed on caste lines, and even among mixed-caste *diṇḍīs*, the rules of caste-based purity and pollution were observed.¹³⁹ Keune and Novetzke capture this paradox by arguing, “Vārkarīs generally espouse a theologically informed equality among castes, genders, and subcultures, although in practice many Vārkarī social structures are constituted along caste, gender, and regional lines.”¹⁴⁰

On similar lines, Mirajkar argues, “The bhakti movement in Maharashtra did not raise a flag of rebellion against the prevailing social pattern that was marred by inequality, nor did it condemn the social atrocities in a confronting manner. But the propounders of the movement did advocate equality and fraternity in clear terms.”¹⁴¹ He further adds, “It is the miracle performed by the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra that outcaste, downtrodden, untouchables and women found a voice of their own and could be elevated to a respectable position, at least in a limited frame-work.”¹⁴² Mirajkar believes that the (Vārkarī) movement was successful in crossing the barriers of social, economic, and gender disparities by bringing people on a common platform. The Vārkarī Santas gave confidence to the ordinary men and women of the lowest strata of society that the highest spiritual achievement was within their reach.¹⁴³

The degree of protest against the hierarchy-laden social structures in the writings of the Vārkarī Santas differs depending on their own context and experiences. G. B. Sardar

¹³⁹ Karve, 20-21. Also see Deleury, 83, 104-05.

¹⁴⁰ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy”, 8.

¹⁴¹ Mirajkar, 108.

¹⁴² Ibid, 109.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 110.

makes an intriguing observation about the compositions of Brahmin and non-Brahmin

Santas. He writes,

The writings of Dnyaneshwara and Eknātha and the writings of Nāmdeva and Tuakarama are cast in two different moulds. In the writings of Dnyaneshwara and Eknātha, we find a gentle sympathy, a yearning to improve a lot of the downtrodden and an expression of humanity. But the flow of their writings is constant and calm. On the other hand we find the abhangas of the non-Brahmin saints a struggle for self-expression. The injuries that society inflicted on them wounded their hearts. Naturally this suffering finds reflection in their writings. When they are carried away by their feelings, they raise their voice against social inequality; on rare occasion they speak the language of revolt. But when this passing wave subsides, they once again submit quietly to traditional thought. In their writings there is an awareness of class difference, but there is nowhere the sharpness of class struggle.¹⁴⁴

It is true that the VS prioritised the majority sections of society, namely the strī-śūdrādī, and took it upon itself to uplift these sections in the spiritual domain. The bhakti practices adopted and advocated by the VS were people-oriented. The message of spirituality was disseminated through the language that people spoke, i.e., in Prākṛit, in such a literary form that people could relate to. The santas of the VS engaged themselves in creating different means of teaching, which were very simple but rhythmic, easy to understand, and rich in philosophical content. They composed abhangas, performed kīrtanas, bhārūdas, gavṇaṇī, bhajanas etc. The Santas of the Vārkarī tradition blended bhakti's individual and collective practices. Nāma-japa, pūjā, and harīpātha are primarily seen as individual acts of bhakti, though they can also be performed collectively. However, kīrtana, bhajana, pravachana, and Vārī are essentially collective acts to be performed in the community. The uniqueness of kīrtana, pravachana, or bhajana lies in their collective aspects. The singing of the bhajanas and kīrtanas together served as a great instrument of religious education for the people. They offered people such a simple spiritual instrument as the recitation of the name (nāma), which could be practised by anyone and anywhere, even while carrying out their day-to-day activities.

¹⁴⁴ Sardar, 17.

As G. B. Sardar notes, “the VS evolved a new kind of platform for its religious instruction. The style of their *kīrtanas* and *nirupanas* is quite novel... The VS trained religious preachers from among the people... The Santa *kīrtanakāras* did not belong to a special Varna or group.”¹⁴⁵ Similarly, Murthy observes, “to enkindle faith and devotion, mass gatherings become a necessity. Collective singing, dancing, feeding (dining) eating, pilgrimage and even collective living play an important role in Bhakti movements.”¹⁴⁶ The distinctiveness of the Vārkarī tradition lies in the rejection of “high Brahmanism” and the focus on equalitarian principles. The Vārkarī tradition tried to move away from the rigid rituals and traditions and preached a simple path of bhakti (devotional spirituality) that was accessible to all, including women and Śūdras. It tried to cut across the boundaries of caste, class, gender and religion. The VS taught the majority community noble religious principles and raised their spiritual and ethical standards.¹⁴⁷

According to Bhalchandra Nemade, the code of the VS reflects the logic of what can be afforded. Furthermore, he says that the Vārkarī organisation could be reduced to the twin principles of perfect autonomy and total decentralization.¹⁴⁸ In his opinion, these two principles would keep the movement alive as long as there was faith. The Vārkarī Sampradāya has evolved styles best suited to the underprivileged classes’ resources. Therefore, it never attempted to go beyond the moderate range of social change and preferred to work within the broad Hindu tradition. V. M. Sirsikar argues that no one can deny the direct and indirect influence of the Santas and their preaching on Maharashtrian minds. He further adds, “The teachings of the Santas gave cohesion to the illiterate rural masses who

¹⁴⁵ Sardar, 72.

¹⁴⁶ Murthy, 34.

¹⁴⁷ Pawar, 351.

¹⁴⁸ Nemade, “Revolt of the Underprivileged”, 116.

were suffering from fragmentation and oppression.”¹⁴⁹ G. B. Sardar made a similar observation. He writes: “The secret of spread of the Vārkarī teachings and of their great popularity lay precisely in the union of thought and feeling that prevailed among the leaders of the Sampradāy. Loyalty, sacrifice, courage, patience and generosity were the qualities with which they won the hearts of the people. Without at all getting enraged with the world, the Santas bore patiently the blows of social scorn.”¹⁵⁰

Keune and Novetzke also observe, “Female figures have central and consistent positions in the panoply of Vārkarī saint-poets, and an ethics of equality are regularly promoted in the song-poems and hagiography of the saint-poets.”¹⁵¹ When women were discriminated against in social and religious affairs and were attached to Śūdras status uniformly, the VS opened the doors of spirituality and honour to women. In the Vārkarī tradition, women not only participated in the pilgrimage and other religious and spiritual affairs, but several women assumed the status of Santa. Hence, gender was no bar in the Vārkarī tradition to achieving the heights of santhood. Muktabāī, who was a sister of Dnyāneśvara, rose to such spiritual authority that the Hatha-yogī and follower of Nātha pantha, Chāṅgdeva Vateśvara, became her disciple. Janabāī, a maidservant of Nāmdeva, Kānhopātrā, a fallen woman, Soyarābāī, wife of an untouchable, Santa Chokhāmeļā, and Bahinābāī, a disciple of Tukārāma, were known for their abhanga compositions and have contributed immensely to the bhakti tradition of the VS in Maharashtra. The VS was remarkable for creating an atmosphere that helped women develop their intellectual, literary, and spiritual agencies.

¹⁴⁹ V. M. Sirsikar, “Political Culture of Maharashtra”, in *Region, Nationality and Religion* eds. A. R. Kulkarni and N. K. Wagle (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1999), 8.

¹⁵⁰ Sardar, 77.

¹⁵¹ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy”, 8.

The continuing tradition of the Vārī reflects the sampradāyika ethos of Maharashtra, which has been shaped for over a thousand years in the process of coming together for the purpose of Vārī on an annual basis and carrying the values and norms of the VS back to home and village. Even after returning home, most of the Vārkarīs get together regularly in the local temples of Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Viṭṭhala or any of the Santas of the VS and sing abhangas, perform Kīrtanas and Bhārūdas, listen to the discourses (pravachana) delivered by the spiritual gurus and sādhus, etc. The singing of harīpātha, composed by Dnyāneśvara, is commonly seen in most Vārkarī households on an everyday basis. Similarly, on some special occasions like Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī and Rāma Navamī, reading of various scriptures of the Sampradāya is performed in a group as well as by individual Vārkarīs.

On the one hand, Murty regards the writings of the bhakti Santas as revolt-oriented literature. He writes, “even though with limitations and within a certain framework, all Bhakti literature was protest literature. They were socio-religious protests against religious imperialism, and they were also sincere attempts to democratise religion. They tried to reform the ritual-based religion into a value-based one.”¹⁵² And on the other hand, Sardar constantly reminds us of the moderate nature of the VS. He argues, “The movement of the saints did embody a feeling for religious reform and popular awakening but it was no call for a social revolution but at the same time, it did not uproot the foundations of the old social structure and to build a new one in a revolutionary sense.”¹⁵³ He further adds, “The movement of the Santas was therefore, not a reactionary force seeking to divert people from the social struggle; it was a movement for reform which, within the sphere of religious life, fought in an orderly manner for their rights.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Murthy, 40.

¹⁵³ Sardar, 34.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 21.

2.3.2. Laying the Foundation for Political Consciousness?

In “*A Historical Introduction to the Vārkarī Movement*”, Eleanor Zelliot reviews the history of Vārkarīs both as a strong religious tradition in its own right and also as an integrating Maharashtra “national” symbol.¹⁵⁵ As Zelliot has pointed out, the common households in present-day Maharashtra are thoroughly influenced by the teachings of the Vārkarī Santas, not only in the times of these Santas but even today. The Santas of the Vārkarī tradition are highly heralded figures even in present-day Maharashtra. Kīrtanas, bhajanas, bhārūdas, harīpātha etc., are part of the daily lives of people, not only of the Vārkarīs but also of those who do not subscribe to the Sampradāya or who are not the Vārkarīs in the strictest sense of the term.

Like the debate related to the contribution of the VS towards creating social equality, another debate revolves around the role of Bhāgvata Dharma and VS in shaping the political aspirations of people in Maharashtra. Especially in the context of the “swaraj” established by Shivaji in the seventeenth century, scholars discuss the VS's contribution, prominent among them being M. G. Ranade and V. K. Rajwade.¹⁵⁶ The chief argument of the reconciliatory view of M. G. Ranade was that the work of the Santas of VS from the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries prepared the ground for political Swaraj under the leadership of Shivaji envisaged by Santa Rāmdāsa. According to Ranade, the teachings of the VS laid the foundation of the swaraj by preaching specific life values like honesty, tolerance, sympathy, truthfulness, compassion, service, benevolence, equality, fraternity, and so on. On the other hand, the reconciliatory view of the Bhakti tradition, especially of the Vārkarīs, was severely criticised by V. K. Rajwade. Rajwade denounced the works of the Vārkarī Santas as

¹⁵⁵ Mokashi, *Pāḷkhī*, 8.

¹⁵⁶ For my M.Phil dissertation, I have discussed this debate in detail.

“Santism” for preaching the path of inactivity and weakness. Rajwade criticised the Santas of the VS or Bhāgvata Dharma for being exclusively other-worldly and having no consideration of their times’ social, political, and economic conditions. He alleged that the teachings of the Vārkarī Santas were responsible for imbibing passivity in the masses of Maharashtra, which eventually led to the political dominance of the foreign rulers. According to Rajwade, it was only through the efforts of Rāmdāsa and Shivaji that political Swaraj was achieved in Maharashtra in the seventeenth century.

Though the question of the intention of the santas of the VS in creating political awareness among the masses can be debated, there is no difference of opinion regarding the outcome in this regard. In a way, at least indirectly, the VS led by the santas of the tradition laid the foundation for the political consciousness of Swaraj in Maharashtra and channelised people’s thinking to take pride in their dharma language and land. While arguing for this case, N. K. Behere writes: “The feeling of national brotherhood based on this devotional aspect of religion pervaded the land in spite of the prevalent obnoxious caste system. Maharashtra was their common mother-land, Vithobā was their common God, Marathi was their common mother-language, and several Maharashtra santas were their common religious leaders and spokesmen. This religious bond in course of time developed the idea of national unity.”¹⁵⁷ The pride in the power of the Marathi language was accompanied by a feeling of identification with the region of Maharashtra. This new spirit in Marathi society, which took the form of pride in one’s own language and region, was responsible for moulding the history of Maharashtra. From a cultural standpoint, it seems that, the work of the bhakti sampradāya in Maharashtra is far more comprehensive in scope and more fundamental in its implications compared to its counterparts in other parts of India. Many scholars are of the opinion that the

¹⁵⁷ Behere, 23.

work of these santas created an awareness of spiritual equality, social tolerance, and vernacular literature. This further played a significant role in creating an impulse against foreign rule, protecting culture and awakening a sense of identity.

The most critical distinction which sets VS apart from many of its contemporary traditions is its democratic credentials.¹⁵⁸ To quote Deleury, “another point which seemed to differentiate it from other sampradāyas was that its members had a definitely democratic outlook.”¹⁵⁹ Anybody could become a Vārkarī, which was a stepping stone in the midst of a society organised according to the rules of castes. They have a very strong feeling of solidarity that ties them closely together and unites them in a spiritual body composed of the departed santas and the living members of the tradition. More importantly, it is a living tradition. While evaluating the social and political impact of Vārkarī Sampradāya V. M. Sirsikar argues, “An important contribution to the general culture of the region has been made by the Santas of Maharashtra. The Santas were interested in liberating the religious rigidity and fighting social oppression. But their role in the political sphere was, at best, very minor.”¹⁶⁰

Keune and Novetzke observe that the interpretation of the VS became a central component in political and social movements in 20th-century western India.¹⁶¹ In the wake of the modern nationalism and the independence movement in India, the major public debate revolved around the question of the contribution of the bhakti Sampradāyas in general and of Bhāgvata Dharma or VS, in particular, in raising social and political consciousness among

¹⁵⁸ It should be noted here that the term “democratic” here is used to refer to a set of certain egalitarian values like equality, mutual respect, diversity and not in a restrictive sense to indicate political structure of modern times.

¹⁵⁹ Deleury, “preface,” *The Cult of Vithoba*, ix.

¹⁶⁰ Sirsikar, 7-8.

¹⁶¹ Keune, “Vārkarī Sampradāy”, 12.

the people of Maharashtra. During this time, it was difficult to find a well-known social and political reformer who did not consider the works of the santas of the Vārkarī tradition. The work of the santas profoundly influenced leaders like M.G. Ranade and Tilak. In particular, Ranade saw Bhāgvata Dharma as the basis of social and political consciousness in Maharashtra, which eventually paved the way for political independence under Shivaji. Similarly, Tilak was influenced by the people-centric means of bhakti propagated by the VS. His adoption of religious gatherings to invoke nationalist sentiment among the people is a testimony to the influence of Vārkarī means.¹⁶² However, not all the social and political leaders of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had a positive view of the Vārkarīs. As mentioned above, V. K. Rajwade vehemently criticised Bhāgvata Dharma and the Santas of the VS. He argued that the VS led society to passivity, overlooking the immediate social and political concerns of their time. Keune and Novetzke note that social reformers like Jotiba Phule and B R Ambedkar discouraged their followers from joining the VS.¹⁶³ Although social and political reformers in the nineteenth and twentieth-century Maharashtra were deeply divided on the issue of the VS's contribution to social and political reform, none of them could avoid acknowledging the work of the Vārkarī Santas.

Even in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the VS has grown in numbers and popularity.¹⁶⁴ In particular, the Vārī pilgrimage, which is a defining characteristic of the VS,

¹⁶² The new genre of kīrtana known as Rāśtrīya Kīrtana where is a kīrtana performer narrates a story of nationalist revolutionary or ignites a sense of 'deśbhakti' is inspired by Tilak. Personal Communication with one of the Rāśtrīya Kīrtanakāras on 12th May 2021.

¹⁶³ Keune, "Vārkarī Sampradāy", 12.

¹⁶⁴ Though it is difficult to know the exact number of pilgrims in the Vārī, one of the ways to know growing popularity of the VS is by way of knowing the increasing number of pāḷkhīs over the years. It seems that not only the number of pāḷkhīs has grown over the years, but it also reflects the geographical expansion of the VS. The 1927 work of S. V. Dandekar notes a list of 30 pāḷkhīs (20 + 10). Dandekar, *Vārkarī Panthacha Itihas*, rear page. Deleury notes that in the year 1951 "In all about forty pāḷkhīs (were) present at the pilgrimage". See, Deleury, *The Cult of Vithoba*, 77. In the work of 2020, Vidyadhar Tathe notes that from the entire region of Maharashtra around 60 -70 pāḷkhīs start to reach Pandharpur for the great pilgrimage in the month of Āṣadha. Tathe, "Vārī āni Vārkarī Sampradāya," 18.

witnesses increasing numbers every year, and the public associated with the Vārī and other Vārkarī means of bhakti is expanding. With the help of new technology and easy access to the internet, social media platforms have made it possible to reach a large section of society who have not been Vārkarīs in the strictest sense of the term. Even today, a few criticise the Vārkarī means as other-worldly and futile. However, the overall perception of the VS and Vārkarī Santas in Maharashtra has been positive, and the general sentiment is to experience the Vārī pilgrimage at least once.¹⁶⁵

2.4. Conclusion

The primary message and the domain of work of the Vārkarī Santas and the VS have been the spiritual-religious domain. The quest for equality among all human beings has resulted from their spiritual philosophy. The direct implication of their teachings in the political domain is far less clear. All-encompassing social and political change has not been the primary motive of the Vārkarī Santas. The primary objective has been to encourage individuals to lead more moral and committed lives and channel their energies to achieve their spiritual goals. To achieve this objective, they made bhakti the basis of their teachings and advocated simple means of bhakti that were both personal and public.

As discussed in the introduction chapter, understanding “political” is not limited to the state. If we consider the power-centric view of “political”, the works of Vārkarī Santas and the VS can be regarded as political. The adoption of non-ritualistic means of bhakti, which all could practise, non-discrimination based on caste, class, and gender in the spiritual and religious domain, and preference for the majority section of society, namely, strī-śūdrādī, were not only conscious choices on the part of Vārkarī Santas but they can be considered

¹⁶⁵ In my interactions with the non-Vārkarīs, often this sentiment is expressed.

“political” choices as well. There are differences of opinion regarding the extent to which these deliberate choices resulted in a substantial social and political change to establish an egalitarian society. However, there is no doubt that they opened up religious and spiritual spaces that had previously been closed to the majority sections of society. The works of the Vārkarī Santas and the VS can be credited with igniting confidence among the masses that they can attain the highest spiritual goal, irrespective of the dogma of caste and gender. It would not be an exaggeration to argue that the Vārkarī Santas and the VS were instrumental in igniting pride in one’s own deś and bhāśa, i.e., in one’s own country and language, and thereby shaped the psyche of Marathi people.

The Vārī pilgrimage, being the living and most defining characteristic of the VS, is unique among all other Vārkarī practices. Like other Vārkarī practices, the Vārī pilgrimage is also a community affair and takes place “out in the open”. What makes the Vārī unique is its annual frequency, ability to get the Vārkarīs out of their “homes” or ordinary settings, and ability to bring together the Varkarī community. Notably, the Vārī not only brings the whole of the Vārkarī community together but also serves as a crucial platform for interaction between the Vārkarīs and non-Vārkarīs, creating multiple layers of interactions. To understand the socio-political interactions of the Vārkarīs within and outside of the Vārkarī community, the most appropriate avenue is the Vārī pilgrimage. The study of the Vārī pilgrimage is worthwhile not only to understand the operative part of the Vārkarī philosophy but also to see if the pilgrimage serves as a site to alter the social interactions of the Vārkarīs. The critical question to ask is: does the Vārī pilgrimage create a homogenous Varkarī community where all other identities, like those of caste and gender, take a back seat, or do the social hierarchies continue to exhibit themselves during the Varī pilgrimage? An effort to address this question is made in the remaining chapters of this thesis. The next chapter, i.e.,

chapter three, discusses the practice of the Vārī pilgrimage in detail and lays the basis for understanding the nature of social interactions during the Vārī.

Chapter Three

Pilgrimage: An Account of Vārī in Maharashtra

Introduction

Historically, communities have associated super-natural powers with a particular object or totem, natural or human-made, including mountains, rivers, trees, idols, and buildings, and have worshipped them. These objects have served as the glue to bind communities together and constitute an essential element in shaping the identity of the members belonging to that particular community. As more people started visiting such sites and embracing the belief systems, the economy around sacred places developed with time. As the holy powers of these objects and sites became popular, they could have developed into an institution of pilgrimage. The degree and nature of such institutionalisation may differ from religion to religion, from place to place, and with time. Today, pilgrimages seem to be pan-religious as well as a global phenomenon. A pilgrimage can be said to be a journey to a place that is considered sacred. Pilgrimage stories have been written down for centuries, but a systematic study of pilgrimages is a relatively recent phenomenon. Several books are written to highlight the sacrality of a particular site or place to attract more and more pilgrims. However, the accounts of pilgrimage journeys, especially of social interactions during the journey, are rare.

In the contemporary context, most of the world's major religions are associated with one or more pilgrimages sites, and these sites are integral to their religious canon.

Pilgrimages are seen as the primary subject matter of theology or the study of religions.

However, the study of pilgrimages has become interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary over the years. A multidisciplinary study of pilgrimages or sacred journeys attempts to address several questions from an academic perspective, bringing into light various dimensions of

pilgrimage. The disciplines of philosophy, sociology, geography (sacred landscape), anthropology, religious studies, cultural studies, as well as psychology are seriously engaging in the study of pilgrimage. However, one hardly comes across a dedicated work on a pilgrimage within the domain of political studies.

The focus of this thesis remains on looking at the pilgrimage from a socio-political perspective. In an effort to do so, this chapter aims to explore the phenomenon of pilgrimage in the Hindu belief system, in general, and the Vārī pilgrimage in Maharashtra, in particular. In the words of N. Collins-Kreiner, “pilgrimage is a religious circulation of the population and creates mobilities such as trade, cultural exchanges, political integration...”¹ What is of interest to this thesis is the aspect of political integration provided by pilgrimages. The term “political” is understood mainly in two different but interrelated ways. The classical understanding of “political” confined itself to the domain of the state and the state apparatus, including the processes, institutions, laws, policies, and the exercise of power by the state to govern “the subjects”. In contrast, the contemporary understanding of “political” revolves around the concept of power and power relations beyond the state apparatus.

The power-centric understanding has expanded the scope of “the political” tremendously. It has enabled students of political studies to delve into subject matters that were previously considered “non-political” or “a-political”, such as family, caste, gender, religion, education, science, health, data, etc. In this work, I use the term “political” in the latter sense, i.e., a power-centric understanding. This chapter demonstrates that pilgrimages are not simply a religious, spiritual phenomenon but equally socio-political. For a long time, in the academic discourse, pilgrimages were considered merely a religious-spiritual phenomenon, dealing with transcendental objects, hence, away from or at least neglected by

¹ N. Collins-Kreiner, “Researching pilgrimage: continuity and transformations,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 37, 2, (2010): 441. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2009.10.016>, accessed on 20th April 2021

the “secular” disciplines and “modern scientific enquiries”. From a socio-political perspective, pilgrimages are important for two reasons. Firstly, pilgrimages are generally large gatherings of people or necessarily “public” phenomena. Unlike the dominantly perceived notion of religion and religious practices of devotion, which are usually seen as personal and private affairs, pilgrimages are essentially collective² and public in nature. Pilgrimages bring people together who have a shared belief system and, most often, on a large scale. Secondly, and more importantly, pilgrimages facilitate the circulation of ideas. The movement of people and the pilgrimage economy facilitate the circulation of ideas. At the pilgrimage sites, the existing belief system of the pilgrims is not only manifested but, simultaneously, new interpretations of those beliefs and values may also occur as a result of interaction between the pilgrims as well as other agents involved in the journey called pilgrimage. The ever-changing socio-political context would frequently influence these interpretations. The pilgrims come to the sacred place for a while and disperse to their usual sites or “back home”, possibly impacted by newer ways to fit the belief system in their everyday lives. Pilgrimages are generally large gatherings of people involving the movement of people and ideas on a substantial scale. This movement of people and the circulation of ideas through their interactions are not only based on the existing power structures, but simultaneously, they also have the potential to change, alter, or/and perpetuate those structures. In short, pilgrimages are not only religious but also socio-political phenomena as they are public. They are also the sites where power relations of various kinds are shaped, reshaped, and negotiated.

Depending on the nature of a particular pilgrimage and the belief system associated with it, pilgrimages can be instrumental in substantiating and perpetuating the existing social

² The term collective here is used to indicate a community phenomenon.

and cultural power structures, or they can also be seen as “protests” altering the power status quo in a given society. What needs to be noted here is that a pilgrimage may offer the opportunity to continue the power structure in a certain domain, while at the same time, it may aid in the restructuring of the systems in some others. Therefore, in this work, I look at the pilgrimage as a site of exchange of ideas between people where power relations between individuals and groups are negotiated, which, in turn, may influence power structures in a given society by challenging them or/and perpetuating them.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section, i.e., 3.1, focuses broadly on the institution of pilgrimage in Hinduism. The first subsection of this section discusses the meaning and definition of pilgrimage given by various scholars. The following subsection focuses on the textual references to pilgrimage in various Hindu texts and scriptures. The third subsection deals with the multiple motives behind going on pilgrimage, and then A brief discussion on the general rituals performed at the sacred place is outlined in the fourth subsection. The last subsection gives an overview of criticisms of the practice of pilgrimage within the Hindu fold. In the second section, i.e., 3.2, a detailed account of the Vārī pilgrimage, the primary subject matter of this thesis, is given. This section serves as an anchor for this thesis and deals with the core theme of the Vārī or Vārī pilgrimage.³ Several aspects of the Vārī are highlighted in eight subsections. They include meaning, historical account, the details of the pāḷkhī processions, schedule, management, and symbolism associated with this pilgrimage. It also explains terms like pāḷkhī, pāḍukā, diṇḍī etc. and particularly the way they are understood in the Vārkarī context. The Vārī has certain elements common to all pilgrimages, but some characteristics of this particular pilgrimage make it unique. In the concluding section of this chapter, some pertinent questions are flagged about

³ For ease of understanding, I have used the terms Vārī or Vārī pilgrimage. However, part four of this chapter discusses the similarities and differences between Vārī and pilgrimage.

pilgrimage processes, in general, and the Vārī pilgrimage. A small section is added to highlight the similarities and differences between pilgrimages in general and the Vārī. This section concludes by underlining the importance of the Vārī pilgrimage to understanding social and cultural dynamics in Maharashtra.

3.1. Pilgrimage

3.1.1. Definitions and Meanings of Pilgrimage

A well-adopted understanding of pilgrimage is a physical journey to a sacred place for the purpose of bodily and mental, and moral purification, which in turn is associated with the redemption of sins. The Oxford Dictionary defines pilgrimage as “a pilgrim’s journey”, and a pilgrim is defined as “a person who journeys to a sacred place.”⁴ Alan Morinis defines pilgrimage as “A journey undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to employ a valued ideal.”⁵ D. K. Behera uses the term “pilgrimage” to label “the journey any individual undertakes to a sacred place with the idea that he or she is a pilgrim.”⁶ Knut A. Jacobsen writes: “Pilgrimage is religious journeying, travel for a religious purpose towards a place believed to have a divine presence or possess salvific power – the power to bless, heal or fulfil wishes.”⁷

There are one or more sacred or holy sites in most religions worldwide. Individuals are expected to visit these sites at least once in their lifetime or more frequently to achieve worldly and, more importantly, otherworldly goals. Some of these visits or journeys are

⁴ Julia Elliott, ed. *Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 561.

⁵ Morinis, 4.

⁶ Behera, 43.

⁷ Jacobsen, 147.

carried out by lone pilgrims, while others take the form of large pilgrimage gatherings. The concept of pilgrimage is one of the most important and popular features of all the major religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.⁸ Even though the concept of pilgrimage exists in all major religions, their meanings and rituals vary greatly. As the meanings of pilgrimage differ from religion to religion, they also differ from person to person who is part of the same religion. It would not be an exaggeration to argue that pilgrimage is a panhuman phenomenon.

In the context of Hinduism, the term “pilgrimage” is used to connote the meaning of the term *tīrtha-yātrā*. *Tīrtha-yātrā* literally means “undertaking journey to river fords.”⁹ The Sanskrit word “*tīrtha*” is derived from the root *tr*, which means to cross over (a river), step over, or sail across.¹⁰ According to Jacobsen, “the meaning of *tīrtha* can be a place where salvific and divine power is available”.¹¹ Therefore, *tīrtha-yātrā* can be understood as a physical journey carried by an individual or pilgrim. But this is a limited understanding of pilgrimage, as it concerns only the physical journey. As Agehananda Bharati points out, the terms *tīrtha* and *tīrtha-yātrā* are also understood metaphorically.¹² Bharati argues, “Pilgrimage...in a metaphorical sense is the pilgrimage of the soul between two births.”¹³ The other way to make sense of pilgrimage metaphorically is to understand the *tīrtha* as a virtue or a set of virtues (like truth, control of the senses, kindness to all, simplicity,

⁸ Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage*, 1.

⁹ Bhardwaj, 2.

¹⁰ Jacobsen, 9.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Bharati, “Pilgrimage in Indian Tradition,” 146. Also see, Bharati, “Pilgrimage Sites and Indian Civilization,” 85.

¹³ Bharati, *Pilgrimage in Indian Tradition*, 146.

forgiveness) and to understand yātrā as the process or journey of acquiring these virtues.

Tīrtha-yātrā, thus, means the journey of an individual to acquire certain values. Bhardwaj writes: “Tīrtha-yātrā not only means the physical act of visiting the holy places but implies mental and moral discipline.”¹⁴ To emphasize this, he further argues, “In fact, without the latter, pilgrimage in the physical sense has little significance in the Hindu tradition.”¹⁵

Pilgrimage helps pilgrims detach themselves from daily life's routine and worries. It also provides an opportunity to engage in praying, meditation, reciting the name of their god/s (Nama-japa), singing bhajana, contemplation, reading scriptures, and listening to the discourses of spiritual gurus and sādhus. In Hinduism, there are four āśramas, or broadly speaking, four stages of life, viz. Brahmacharyāśrama (life of celibacy/student life), Grīhasthāśrama (life of a householder), Vānaprasthāśrama (life of simplicity with bare minimum needs), and Sanyāsāśrama (life of an ascetic). Out of these four, in the last two phases of life, or āśramas, vānaprastha and sanyāsa, individuals are expected to go on pilgrimages. One of the main motives for going on a pilgrimage is to attain mokṣa or muktī, i.e., to overcome never-ending life-death cycles. Or, it is generally believed that the physical suffering that one undergoes on a pilgrimage aids in the purification of the mind and contributes to the quest of muktī or mokṣa.

3.1.2. Textual References

The Vedas are considered the earliest texts of Hinduism. However, there is no unanimity of opinion among the scholars on whether the tradition of pilgrimage can be traced to the Vedas. Agehananda Bharati argues that even though the Vedas mention the merit of

¹⁴ Bhardwaj, 2.

¹⁵ Ibid.

travel, they do not specifically mention pilgrimage. He writes that the pilgrimage was not considered particularly meritorious in the Vedic times.¹⁶ He continues that the Ganges or Kurukshetra were not particularly considered meritorious in the pilgrimage sense in the *Manu- Smṛti*. He writes, "...there are no pilgrimages enjoined, nor even recommended, in any literature earlier than Mahabharata and Purāṇas."¹⁷ However, Bharati does not provide any logical explanation for the non-existence of the institution of pilgrimage in the Vedic period, apart from the lack of textual evidence. He argues that the early references to pilgrimage can be found in the literature of the lawmaker Gautama, dating back to ca. 200 B.C.¹⁸

Unlike Bharati, S. M. Bhardwaj believes that perhaps the earliest reference to the practice of pilgrimage in Indian literature is found in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* of the *Ṛg Veda* (between 1500 and 1000 B.C.).¹⁹ He suggests that the rivers have been revered since the Vedic times and constitute important pilgrimage sites even today. Similarly, the importance of travel in Hinduism continues from the Vedic period. To put this in his words, "At least two strands of the concept of pilgrimage, namely, the merit of travel and reverence for rivers, can be considered to have been continuous from the Vedic times, to which later developments in Hinduism added additional content and meaning. He also believes that the practice of tīrtha-yātrā is found in the classic Aryan law book *Manusmṛti*.²⁰ Although tīrtha-yātrā is not

¹⁶ Bharati, *Pilgrimage in Indian Tradition*, 136-37.

¹⁷ Ibid, 145.

¹⁸ Ibid, 137.

¹⁹ Bhardwaj, 3.

²⁰ Bhardwaj, 4.

explicitly mentioned in Vedic literature, Bhardwaj believes that the logic of sin purification and redemption persists from the Vedic period to modern pilgrimage.²¹

Knut Jacobsen heralds the view of Bharati that the institution of pilgrimage was absent in the Vedic era. He believes that the earliest pilgrimage texts in Hinduism are found in the Mahābhārata (400 BCE-400 CE).²² According to Jacobsen, “The pilgrimage texts in Mahābhārata, especially the lengthy *Tīrthayātrāparvan*, are the earliest descriptions of pilgrimage places in Hindu texts.”²³ Jacobsen also provides logic for the non-existence of pilgrimage in the Vedic tradition and the relative importance of pilgrimage in the Mahābhārata era. He observes that the presence of *tīrtha*, or the salvific space, is essential for pilgrimage. He argues, “...tradition of assigning a permanent divine presence to particular places which could be the basis of pilgrimage.”²⁴ Further, *tīrtha* is a particular site believed to have a divine presence or possess salvific power.²⁵ But in the Vedas, there is no conception of sacredness attached permanently to particular places, as “The gods of the Vedic tradition did not inhabit specific places... The Vedic religion and the Vedic gods were placeless.”²⁶ The Vedic gods were constantly on the move. In the sacrificial religion of the Vedas, the gods were thought to move where the humans performed their rituals.”²⁷

While explaining the emergence of the practice of pilgrimage, Jacobsen argues that one significant transformation that had come about in India before the composition of the

²¹ Ibid.

²² Jacobsen, 50.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, 41.

²⁵ Ibid, 147.

²⁶ Ibid, 44.

²⁷ Ibid, 72.

tīrthyātrāparvan (of *Mahābhārata*) was the belief in the permanent presence of the power of Buddha in the *stupas* and at the places associated with events of his life, and perhaps a similar development took place in the Jaina traditions with respect to Mahāvīra and other *Tīrthankaras*.²⁸ He further argues, “Hindu pilgrimage possibly arose partly as a response to Buddhist pilgrimage and the *Śramaṇa* critique of the ritual of sacrifice (*yajña*), and was a part of the competition for support and the economic recourses and donations (*dāna*) of the pilgrims”.²⁹ According to Jacobsen, “The *Buddhist* pilgrimage seems to have been well established before the Hindu pilgrimage. The sudden expansion of Hindu pilgrimage places in the *Tīrthyātrāparvan*, which encompasses large parts of India, could perhaps be a textual manifestation of a response to the expansion of Buddhist pilgrimage.”³⁰

It is clear from the above discussion that Jacobsen believes that Buddhism was instrumental in establishing the tradition of pilgrimage in India. Even though Jacobsen did not mention the period of Buddha and Mahāvīra and the expansion of Buddhism and Jainism clearly, the corollary of the argument mentioned above is that Jacobsen believes that Buddhism and Jainism were deeply rooted religious systems well before the period of *Mahābhārata*. He believes that the period of the *Mahābhārata* is 400 B.C.E. to 400 C.E.³¹ Therefore, the period of Jainism and Buddhism would date back to before 400 B.C.E. Jacobsen argues that the Hindu tradition of pilgrimage emerged mainly to counter the growing popularity of Buddhism and Jainism as well as the economic competition between the *Bauddha Bhikkus* and Brahmin priests for ritual gifts.³² According to Jacobsen, in

²⁸ Jacobsen, 71.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, 61.

³¹ Ibid, 50.

³² Jacobsen, 63.

Hinduism, the pilgrimage tradition developed for two reasons: first, to counter the threat of the rapidly growing influence of Buddhism; and second, the Brahmin quest to appropriate the economic benefits in the form of *dāna*, or ritual gifts.

Regarding the latter references to pilgrimage in Hinduism, there is more or less agreement among the scholars. After the *Tīrthayātrāparvan* (of *Mahābhārata*), the *Purāṇas* form an important source of knowledge about the sacred places in India.³³ The *purāṇas* are the most important group of texts to understand the expansion of the Hindu traditions of salvific space.³⁴ The Hindu tradition recognises eighteen mahā-purāṇas and several upa-purāṇas. Though there is no unanimity of opinion among scholars regarding the dates of the composition of the purāṇas, generally, it is considered that they are from the third to eleventh century A.D.³⁵ The purāṇas contain extensive sections on pilgrimage and sacred geography. Jacobsen argues that it is not impossible that the purāṇas as a genre were partly developed for the sake of promoting the traditions of tīrtha and tīrtha-yātrā. There are several sthana-mahātmyas (praise of particular places) incorporated into purāṇas.

Even though the pilgrimage tradition in India is based on purāṇic literature, the *purāṇas* do not discuss the philosophy of either *tīrtha* or *tīrtha-yātrā*. In the twelfth century (about 1110), the nine-volume digest entitled *Kṛtyakalpataru* was composed by Bhatta Lakshmidhara.³⁶ Based on the purāṇic authority, the eighth volume, *Tīrthavivechana Khaṇḍam*, lists a number of tīrthas all across the country.³⁷ According to Jacobsen, *Tīrthavivechana Khaṇḍam* was the first text to give a systematic treatment of pilgrimage and

³³ Bhardwaj, 16.

³⁴ Jacobsen, 81.

³⁵ Bhardwaj, 61.

³⁶ Ibid, 73

³⁷ Bhardwaj, 73,

sacred geography.³⁸ In the latter period, the most critical texts for a logical treatment of the details of pilgrimage are found in *Tīrthachintāmaṇi* by Vachaspatimishra of Mithila (fifteenth century), *Tristhalīsetu* by Narayana Bhatta (sixteenth century) and *Tīrthaprakāśa* by Mitra Mishra (seventeenth century).³⁹

Among the non-Hindu sources of the pilgrimage tradition are the travel accounts of Hsuan-Tsang, who is believed to have travelled to India between 629-645 A. D.⁴⁰ The other references can be traced in Alberuni's *Kitab-ul-Hind* and Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari*, written in the early eleventh century and late sixteenth century, respectively.⁴¹ In the colonial era, several British scholars and Christian missionaries wrote at length about the tradition of pilgrimage in India.⁴² State records from the colonial and post-independence periods are also good sources of information on important pilgrim sites and pilgrimages. Bhardwaj mentions that the gazetteers are an important source of sacred places in India. The *Imperial Gazetteer of India* gives the exact location and much, though unsystematic, information about many more well-known sacred places in India.⁴³ Apart from the Imperial Gazetteer, information on particular *tīrthas* and *tīrtha-yātras* can be found in state and district gazetteers. Another state

³⁸ Jacobsen, *Pilgrimage in Hindu Tradition*, 15.

³⁹ Ibid, 16.

⁴⁰ Bhardwaj, 75.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Thomas Becon, *The Orientalist* (Manchester: Ainsworth, 1842). Abbe J. A. Dubois, *A Description of the Character, Manners and Customs of the People of India* (Madras: Higgenbotham, 1862); Willian Ward, *A View of the History, Literature and Religion of the Hindus*, 2 vols. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1820 [2009]); Caleb Wright, *Lectures on India* (Boston, 1851); John F. Hurst, *Indika: The Country and the People of India and Cylon*, (New York, 1891).

⁴³ Bhardwaj, 27.

record available on the pilgrimage tradition is the 1961 Census of India. It has published a series of volumes on the fairs and festivals of each state.⁴⁴

Apart from the textual references, one of the important sources for tracing the tradition of pilgrimage is the inscriptions. Inscriptions are significant for assessing the dates of the origin of the pilgrimage tradition to particular places and their institutionalization. Inscriptions are also helpful in understanding the popularity of the sacred place for a specific period. The records kept by the priests at a particular temple are one of the most overlooked by scholars but important sources of pilgrimage. Bharadwaj writes: “The *Purohīts* (priests) at many sacred places maintain *bahīs* (records) regarding the date and purpose of visits of their clients. These *bahīs* are of great value because they evidence the traditional relationship between the priests and their clients and have been maintained by generations of priests.”⁴⁵

Those mentioned above are the critical sources for tracing the tradition of pilgrimage in Hinduism. The primary sources, as well as the secondary sources, focus on either the description of the sacred sites or explaining their mahātmyas or importance. Relatively recent works try to unearth the philosophical underpinnings of the practice of pilgrimage. Scholars like Alan Morinis⁴⁶, S. M. Bhardwaj⁴⁷, Makhan Jha⁴⁸, Knut Jacobsen⁴⁹, and Rana P. B. Singh⁵⁰ have looked at pilgrimages as sacred networks across the subcontinent, and there

⁴⁴ See, for example, Census of India, 1961, *Fairs and Festivals, Kurnool District*, Vol. II: Andhra Pradesh, Part VII-B 11, (New Delhi: Manager of Publications, Government of India, 1963).

⁴⁵ Bhardwaj, 28.

⁴⁶ Morinis, 3-5.

⁴⁷ Bhardwaj, 175 -184, 216 – 223, 226 -28.

⁴⁸ Jha, 11-16.

⁴⁹ Jacobsen, 146 -160.

⁵⁰ Singh, 50-54.

seems to be a suggestion regarding the socio-political implications of pilgrimages. There are, however, few studies that examine the socio-political processes involved in pilgrimages. Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process*⁵¹ and *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*⁵² and especially his idea of "communitas"⁵³ are the most direct accounts of the social dimensions of pilgrimage. Pilgrimages as a domain of serious academic work remains understudied. However, their impact on shaping the cultural ethos of a particular community is great and needs to be inquired into by those interested in studying social dynamics. Further, as pilgrimages attract more and more people, probably due to better means of communication and transport, the importance of pilgrimages as the nodes of circulation of ideas has grown manifold. With the increase in the number of pilgrims and overall growing interest in the pilgrimage tradition, the pilgrimage sites are also serving as the avenues of social as well as political activism.⁵⁴ Therefore, it is essential to look at pilgrimages as well as pilgrimage centres not only as "spiritual-religious" sites but also as "social and political" ones. To enquire into the socio-political aspects of pilgrimage (which are intertwined with the spiritual and religious domains), this thesis focuses on the case of the Vārī pilgrimage in Maharashtra.

3.1.3. Motives for Pilgrimage

In terms of structure, the deity or the sacred object, routes, and rituals performed at the sacred site, pilgrimages vary. Similarly, there is also a wide range of motivations for

⁵¹ Turner, *Ritual Process*.

⁵² Turner, "Pilgrimage as Social Processes", 166 – 230.

⁵³ Chapter 4 discusses the idea of "communitas" at length.

⁵⁴ The recent socio-political revolving around the sacred sites are many. It would not be an exaggeration to say that these debates over the "religious" places are greatly influencing contemporary "socio-political" debates in different regions of India as well as at the national level. The recent developments at Ayodhya to re-construct great temple of Rāma, the Hindu claims over the sacred sites of Kashi and Mathura, the debate sparked on the issue of entry of women in the Śabarīmalā temple, appointment of Dalits and women as priests at the Pandharpur are just a few examples of socio-political dimensions of pilgrimage sites and hence pilgrimages.

going on a pilgrimage. Each individual may have a different motive or a cluster of motives ranging from transcendental aspirations to material well-being. Alan Morinis argues, “Pilgrimage is born of desire and belief.”⁵⁵ He further explains, “The desire is for solution to problems of all kinds that arise within the human situation, and, belief is that somewhere beyond the known world there exists a power that can make right the difficulties that appear so insoluble and intractable here and now. All one must do is journey.”⁵⁶

The motives for pilgrimage depend on two types of settings: firstly, the setting of a pilgrim; and secondly, the setting of the site of pilgrimage, or the *tīrtha*. The motive for going on a pilgrimage may differ from pilgrim to pilgrim. The purpose of pilgrimage depends on an individual’s “situatedness”. The situatedness of individuals is shaped by a number of factors like his or her social, economic, political, cultural, geographical, and temporal setting, which in turn is shaped by caste, religion, gender, age, education, class, and so on. These factors encourage individuals to go from the known, familiar place (home), the structure, to the unfamiliar sacred place.

The second setting, which shapes the motives of a pilgrim, is the site of pilgrimage, or the *tīrtha*. Scholars have said that there is a hierarchy of pilgrimage sites in Hinduism, with some more critical than others.⁵⁷ Preston suggests, “The places of pilgrimage are endowed with spiritual magnetism by association with (1) miraculous cures, (2) apparitions of supernatural beings, (3) sacred geography, and (4) difficulty of access.”⁵⁸ Bharati points out

⁵⁵ Morinis, *Sacred Journeys*, 1.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ See, Bharati, *Pilgrimage in Indian Tradition*; Bharati, *Pilgrimage Sites*, 1970; Bhardwaj, 94-115; Jacobsen, 122-146; Robert Stoddard, “Defining and Classifying Pilgrimages,” in *Sacred Places, Sacred Spaces: The Geography of Pilgrimage, Geoscience and Man*, Vol. 34, eds. Robert S. Stoddard and E. Alan Morinis (USA: Louisiana State University, 1997), 41-60.

⁵⁸ Preston, James J., “Spiritual Magnetism: An Organizing Principle for the Study of Pilgrimage”, in *Sacred Journey: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, ed. Alan Morinis (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), 33.

that some pilgrimage sites specialise in certain rituals like *prāyaścitta* or *snāna* or *śraddhā*.⁵⁹

Three factors mainly characterise the setting of the *tīrtha*: firstly, the topography⁶⁰, i.e. the water source, mountains, caves, seashore, etc.; secondly, the accessibility,⁶¹ i.e., easy or difficult access to the *tīrtha* depending on the distance that one needs to travel to reach the *tīrtha*, and development of modern means of transport and communication; and thirdly, the qualities or virtues possessed by the deity/deities⁶² at the pilgrim place or *tīrtha*. Other minor considerations in the setting of *tīrthas* include the behaviour pattern of the priests at the site of pilgrimage, state taxes, lodging and dining arrangements, and so on.

The motives for going on a pilgrimage can further be classified based on their nature. The nature of motives can be divided into two broad categories: first, the motives related to worldly life, and second, those pertaining to transcendental life. The first category of motives involves a wish for healing from a disease, prosperity or progeny etc. As Bhardwaj points out, some motives (to go on a pilgrimage) are concerned with mundane existence. They usually involve a commitment or vow to the deity whose blessing is sought to solve a problem the pilgrim is afflicted with.⁶³ The second category involves the motives related to the transcendental life. This generally includes earning religious merit or *punya*. Jacobsen argues that Hindus might have different motives for visiting sacred sites and participating in

⁵⁹ Bharati, *Pilgrimage in Indian Tradition*, 139.

⁶⁰ Anne Feldhaus gives an excellent account of topographical dimensions of the sacred places in Maharashtra. See, Feldhaus, *Connected Places*.

⁶¹ Interestingly, in Hinduism it is believed that more the *tīrtha* is inaccessible, higher are the returns (*phala*) to the pilgrim from the travel. For further discussion, see Bhardwaj, 116-124. Also see Jacobsen, 127-128.

⁶² It is believed that the main deities of Hinduism like Viṣṇu, Śiva, Śakti, Brahma, Gaṇeśa etc. possess certain specific values. E.g. Gaṇeśa is believed to be the god of knowledge, whereas Śakti is the symbol of power. For related discussion, see Bhardwaj, , 160, and Bharati, *Pilgrimage in Indian Tradition*, 152.

⁶³ Bhardwaj, 6.

pilgrimages. Still, most of them do so to wash away moral impurity (pāpa) and achieve religious merit (puṇya).⁶⁴

An aspiration for mokṣa or muktī (liberation) is the most common transcendental goal of a Hindu. It also involves knowledge of the self, or sākṣātkāra, the experience of the divine, i.e., anubhava, or the state of perfect balance (of body, mind, and soul), and samādhi. Pilgrimage is not considered the chief means of attaining mokṣa or liberation; it is a stepping stone to leading a detached life. Understanding the exact meaning of these transcendental motives is relatively complex compared to the motives related to worldly life. The pilgrimage with worldly motives focuses more on the deity, whereas the pilgrimage with transcendental motives focuses more on the journey.⁶⁵ In short, the assumption of going on a pilgrimage seems to be that going away from the usual set-up, and routine would help individuals get some respite from their daily worries and problems and further look for an insight into a transcendental or material quest. Pilgrims seem to think that pilgrimages can help people get away from their daily routines and point them in the right direction for their spiritual journey.

3.1.4. Rituals Performed at Pilgrimage Sites

Rituals in the context of pilgrimage are performed at three stages of the journey: when a pilgrim prepares to leave his/her house; on arrival at the sacred place, or tirtha; and when one returns home after completing the pilgrimage.⁶⁶ The various purāṇas in detail describe the rituals to be performed by the pilgrims at all these stages of the journey.⁶⁷ I intend to deal with the most commonly performed rituals at the tīrthas, i.e., rituals or rites performed on

⁶⁴ Jacobsen, 7.

⁶⁵ Bhardwaj, 6.

⁶⁶ For details see, Jacobsen, 148-49.

⁶⁷ A. D. Pusalkar, *Studies in the Epics and Purāṇas* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963), 197.

arrival at the sacred centres. The rituals performed at the sacred places depend on the motives of individuals. The following is a brief account of the most common rituals performed at the sacred sites.

Darśana (seeing the sacred object)

Darśana is a Sanskrit word which means “to see” or “to have a sight of”, generally used in the context of the deity, sādhus, saints, and holy men or objects. Taking darśana (of the deity) is the most common act performed by pilgrims. Generally, the act of darśana is considered the culmination of the pilgrimage. Diana Eck has written at length on the practice of darśana in Hinduism.⁶⁸ The role of a visual image is essential to Hindu tradition and culture. The act of darśana is based on the belief that the deity's statue or object possesses divine power. Among all the rituals performed at the tīrtha, darśana is the most common.

Pradakṣiṇā/ Parikramā (Circumambulation)

Pradakṣiṇā means to walk about or to walk around.⁶⁹ Circumambulation is an invariably observable observance during the pilgrimage, and it often figures as the central event of the journey.⁷⁰ In the Hindu tradition, the route of pradakṣiṇā is generally clockwise, keeping the sacred object at the centre, unless specified otherwise. The logic behind this could be that the sacred object or the deity should be on the right of the devotees, as the left side is believed to be inferior. Therefore, the deity is always considered superior and should never be kept on the left. Diana Eck observes that often there is a circumambulatory passage

⁶⁸ Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarashidass, 2007).

⁶⁹ Vaman Shivram Apte, ed. “The Principal Sanskrit – English Dictionary”, in *Digital Dictionaries of South Asia*, <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/apte/>

⁷⁰ Bharati, *Pilgrimage in Indian Tradition*, 138.

around the garbhagrha (the innermost and most sacred part of the temple) and that circumambulation by the pilgrim symbolises attending to the entire visible world of name and form.⁷¹ In some cases, circumambulation, or pradakṣiṇā itself, is a pilgrimage, or tīthayātrā.⁷²

Snāna

The Sanskrit word snāna means “to take a bath”. The term generally refers to religious or “ceremonial bathing” or purification by bathing.⁷³ The ritual of snāna is common at the tīrthas located at the river ford or the river confluence. The dates and times at which bathing has to be performed (the auspicious moment for the dip) are laid down in pertinent manuals, but in reality, they are fixed by the local priests and depend on various local considerations.⁷⁴ It is believed in Hinduism that the river waters possess purifying capacities. Interestingly, it is believed that the waters not only purify bodily impurities but, more importantly, moral impurities as well. Further, the river water not only washes away the moral impurity (pāpa) but also awards the pilgrim religious merit (puṇya). Bathing at pilgrim places is generally considered meritorious, except when deemed inauspicious, like an eclipse.

Śrāddha

Śrāddha is a funeral rite or ceremony performed in honour of and for the benefit of the departed spirits of deceased relatives.⁷⁵ The śrāddha ceremony is performed with great strictness at various fixed periods and on occasion. Many ritual places are associated with

⁷¹ Eck, *Darśan*, 63.

⁷² Narmada *Parikrama* or parikrama at Brahmagiri in Nashik are the most appropriate examples.

⁷³ Apte, <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/apte/>.

⁷⁴ Bharati, *Pilgrimage in Indian Tradition*, 137.

⁷⁵ Apte, <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/apte/>.

śrāddha' ceremony, i.e., obligatory obsequies for the dead.⁷⁶ The ashes of the deceased person are preserved until one is able to go on a pilgrimage, and they are finally immersed in the holy waters, generally at the river fords or the river confluence.

Muṇḍana

At many pilgrim places, muṇḍana or shaving rites are performed. Muṇḍana is generally done on two occasions: firstly, as part of the śrāddha rites; and secondly, as part of the upanayana or thread ceremony, among the dvija (twice-born) castes. Sometimes, as a part of the atonement (prāyaśchhitta) ceremony, muṇḍana is performed.

Prāyaśchhitta (atonement)

The word prāyaśchhitta means atonement, expiation, indemnification, a religious act to atone for sin.⁷⁷ Prāyaśchhitta is a kind of an act of penance performed by individuals to get rid of sins committed (knowingly or unknowingly). Prāyaśchhitta is a special kind of ceremony of atonement where ritualistic impurities due to all kinds of pollution (such as travel across the sea, conscious or unconscious eating of contaminated food, etc.) are to be expiated. There are various ways of taking or performing prāyaśchhitta. For example, feed Brahmins, give donations, dip into the holy waters, etc.

Dāna (gifting)

Dāna is a sacrificial rite of giving. This is a form of present or donation given to the Brahmins, needy fellow pilgrims, or the deity. On some occasions, donations are offered as

⁷⁶ Bharati, *Pilgrimage in Indian Tradition*, 138.

⁷⁷ Apte, <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/apte/>.

part of *pryachhitta* or *śrādhha* ceremonies. However, the most common form of *dāna* is observed as the “return gift” to the deity for fulfilling devotees’ wishes or aspirations.

Prasāda (food offerings)

Sharing food with others or commensality is an integral part of many pilgrimages. Offering food to the god at a sacred place, known as *naivedyam*, is yet another crucial ritual performed at the pilgrimage site. After the offering of *naivedyam*, the remaining food is distributed among the fellow pilgrims or needy, known as *prasāda*. Along with offering food to God and offering food to brahmins, *brāhmaṇa bhojana* is also considered meritorious.

3.1.5. Criticisms of Pilgrimage within Hindu Tradition

Though pilgrimage has become a common norm for practising Hindus over the centuries, certain schools of thought within Hinduism denounce pilgrimage as a spiritually meritorious act. There is a sceptical attitude towards the often-exaggerated rewards associated with pilgrimages. Some of the religious strands of Hinduism focus more on inner spirituality through meditation and yoga. This form of worship is best captured by the notion of “*nirguṇa*” *bhakti*, or the realisation of a formless supreme entity, rather than “*saguṇa*” *bhakti*, or worship of the form of a deity. Pilgrimages, as they essentially involve an object of worship, are considered a part of *saguṇa bhakti*. Jacobsen points out that the *Bhagvata-purāṇa* exclaims, “Just by the sight (*darśana*) of *sādhūs* one is purified, whereas pilgrimage places (*tīrthas*) and gods made of earth or stone purify only after a very long time.”⁷⁸

Agehananda Bharati observes that the *Ārya Samāja*, the most fundamental school of contemporary Hinduism, forbids practices like bathing at sacred sites, pilgrimage, the use of

⁷⁸ As quoted in Jacobsen, 18.

beads and ascetic marks, and gifts to mendicants.⁷⁹ Further, Bharati points out, “Similarly, the monotheistic Lingāyata Sect of Mysore teaches, as one of its main tenets, that there is no need for a mediator between man and god and that there is no need for sacrifices, penances, pilgrimages, and fasts.”⁸⁰ Especially within the nirguṇa bhakti tradition, where no attributes are attached to the supreme being, the institution of pilgrimage is criticised severely. Apart from the philosophical reasons, the monopoly of the brahmins and priests over the sacred sites, the meaningless ritualism or karmakāṇḍa at the sacred sites could have been possible reasons for the criticisms of the pilgrimages. The sense of fearfulness of the deity or god getting angry (kopa) if certain rituals are not performed appropriately took away the fundamental basis of bhakti, i.e., love. These ritualistic interpolations in the practice of pilgrimage, developed over centuries, seem to be a reason for criticism of the pilgrimage tradition.

Despite all the criticism, the tradition of pilgrimage has flourished over the years, not only in Hinduism but almost in all the major religions of the world. Indeed, due to the advancement of modern communication and the publicity provided by the mass media and, more recently, social media, pilgrimages are seeing unprecedented numbers of visitors. With the increasing number of pilgrims, the sacred places are important for religious and spiritual purposes. Still, the tīrthas have also become the markets, and the annual fair places serve as the hubs of commercial activities. The increasing number of pilgrims to various pilgrimage centres and the increased economic activity at and around sacred sites mandate political regimes to consider pilgrimages.

⁷⁹ Bharati, *Pilgrimage in Indian Tradition*, 143.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

3.2. The Vārī

The Vārī is an annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur, and the VS gets its identity from this pilgrimage. VS is a group of people who go on the Vārī pilgrimage every year. It will not be an overstatement to say that to understand the bhakti tradition of Maharashtra; one needs to understand the VS, and furthermore, to understand the bhakti ethos of the VS, one needs to witness the Vārī pilgrimage. The Vārī pilgrimage serves as a window to understanding the Vārkarī world. The Vārī pilgrimage is a peculiar aspect of the VS, and its practice of pilgrimage would hardly define any other sampradāya. The ordinary image that immediately flashes in one's mind on hearing about Vārī or the VS is a bhakta walking towards the deity, a Vārkarī going to Pandharpur. The Vārī is an obligation freely undertaken by a Vārkarī. This fits well with Karen Pechilis' understanding of pilgrimage as "the preeminent example of the public demonstration of one's individual decision and commitment to participate in worship as being a Vārkarī means going on pilgrimage."⁸¹

While studying the phenomenon of the Vārī pilgrimage in Maharashtra and especially its social and political dimensions, in addition to the secondary sources, I have also relied upon my observations during the 2019 fieldwork as well as interaction with the Vārkarīs on several occasions. There are several scholarly accounts on Pandharpur, Vārkarī Sampradāya, its deity Viṭṭhala, and santas, but works directly focusing on the Vārī pilgrimage are uncommon. Most accounts available in English are usually given by foreign scholars. Generally, the accounts given by Maharashtrian scholars are in Marathi. The exceptions to this pattern are the essay "*On the Road*", written by Iravati Karve⁸² and a brief mention by P.

⁸¹ Karen Pechilis, "Pilgrimage and Praise," *The Embodiment of Bhakti* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 50.

⁸² Karve, "On the Road".

V. Kane in “*History of Dharmashastras*”⁸³ in the section on pilgrimages. Some well-known works in the English language on the Vārī include G. A. Deleury’s “*The Cult of Vithoba*”⁸⁴, John Stanley’s “*The Great Maharashtra Pilgrimage: Pandharpur and Alandi*”⁸⁵, Victor Turner’s reflections on the Vārī in the famous essay “*The Centre Out There*”⁸⁶, Philip Engblom’s translation of D. B. Mokashi’s “*Pāḷkhī*”⁸⁷ and its introduction by Eleanor Zelliot⁸⁸. A photolog titled “*Vārī: Ek Anandayātrā*”⁸⁹ with a critical introduction by Sandesh Bhandare, another photologue by Uddhav Thakarey⁹⁰ titled “*Pahāvā Viṭhṭhala*”,⁹¹ “*Paratvārī*” by Sundhir Mahabal⁹², “*Vārī*”, a compilation of articles edited by Devidas Pote⁹³, and several travelogues by the pilgrims are available in Marathi. Apart from these textual sources a few films⁹⁴ are made on the Vārī pilgrimage or the stories that run on the backdrop of the Vārī pilgrimage, especially in Marathi.

⁸³ P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmashastras: Ancient and Medieval Religious and Civil Law*, Vol. IV, 3rd ed. (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1991), 712 – 722.

⁸⁴ Deleury, *Cult of Vithoba*.

⁸⁵ John M. Stanley, “The Great Maharashtra Pilgrimage: Pandharpur and Alandi”, in *Sacred Journey: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, ed. Alan Morinis (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), 65 -87.

⁸⁶ Turner, “Center Out There”, 191-230.

⁸⁷ D. B. Mokashi, *Pāḷkhī*.

⁸⁸ Zelliot, “Historical Introduction”, 31 -58.

⁸⁹ Sandesh Bhandare, *Vārī: Ek Ānandayātrā*. 2nd ed. (Pune: Manovikas Prakashan, 2018).

⁹⁰ Uddhav Thakarey is a known Shivsena leader and a currently a sitting Chief Minister of Maharashtra.

⁹¹ Uddhav Thakarey, *Pahāvā Viṭhṭhala* (Mumbai: Prabodhan Prakashan, 2010).

⁹² Mahabal, *Paratvārī*.

⁹³ Devidas Pote, ed. *Vārī* (Thane: Param Mitra Prakashan, 2020).

⁹⁴ G. D. Sontheimer and Henning Stegmüller (1990) *Vari: An Indian Pilgrimage*, Munich: Adonos Films. For clips see <http://www.onlinefilm.org/en/film/51112> and www.tukaram.com/wari/, Accessed 20th May 2020; *Pandharichi Vari*, directed by Ramakant Kavthekar (Golden Plaza, 1988), 2:22:27. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgPAq1TF8PI>; *In Search of Vitthal*, Abhishek Kulkarni (Pocket Films, 2017), 5:20. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBeA58gWDX0>; *Ringan*, Dipesh Vaity (Morya Motion

In this subsection, i.e., 3.2., the aim is to lay the foundation for analysing the social processes involved in the Vārī pilgrimage and to ask if the phenomena associated with a Vārī pilgrimage can be comprehended well through the notion of “communitas” used by Victor Turner⁹⁵ and the idea of “a bhakti public” used by Christian Novetzke.⁹⁶ The section begins with the meaning of the term Vārī (literal and contextual). It goes on to trace the trajectory of the practice of Vārī through the historical accounts given by scholars like S. G. Tulpule, R.C. Dhere, and G. A. Deleury. The following subsection discusses the contemporary structure of the Vārī and pālkhī procession. Because several pālkhī processions comprise the Vārī pilgrimage, the pālkhī procession of Santa Dnyāneśvara remains the focal point for this work and gaining an overall sense of the Vārī pilgrimage. However, the discussion of the Vārī pilgrimage is not limited to this particular pālkhī procession. Next, the symbolism of the Vārī pilgrimage is discussed. While doing so, terms such as pālkhī, dīṇḍī, phaḍa, and pādukā – the Vārkarīs’ specific vocabulary – are explained. The chapter concludes by highlighting the uniqueness of the Vārī pilgrimage and its impact on the socio-cultural fabric of Maharashtra.

3.2.1. What is Vārī?

Pictures, 2020), 5:16, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUCSBZ23z90>; *Dithi*, Sumitra Bhav (Sony Liv Originals: 2021), 1:27. For trailer see, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11155460/?ref_=vp_vi_tt.

⁹⁵ Turner, *Ritual Process*; Turner, “Center Out There”. Also see, Turner, “Pilgrimage as Social Processes”.

⁹⁶ Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*; Novetzke, “Bhakti and Its Public”, Also See Novetzke, *The Quotidian Revolution*.

The Marathi synonym for Vārī is yerzāra⁹⁷ which literally means “going to and coming back from”⁹⁸ repetitively, at frequent intervals. During our interaction, a regular⁹⁹ Vārkarī said, “The meaning of the word Vārī is yerzāra. Yerzāra means, coming here but not to stay here (at Pandharpur) forever, but (individuals) come and go and come again for Āṣādhī.”¹⁰⁰ Ordinarily, the term Vārī, in the Maharashtrian context, is used to refer to a yearly pilgrimage to Pandharpur. Though there are several pilgrimages in India as well as in Maharashtra, and some of them are annual pilgrimages, like that of Khandobā of Jejuri,¹⁰¹ the term “Vārī” is exclusively used to connote the pilgrimage to Pandharpur, which revolves around the deity Viṭṭhala or Pāṇḍuraṅga. In some ways, the pilgrimage—Vārī; the sacred place—Pandharpur; and the deity—Pāṇḍuraṅga/Viṭṭhala—are inextricably linked in the minds of Maharashtrians. In common parlance, Vārī is also called “pālkhī sohaḷā”, “pālkhī”, “Āṣādhī”, and “diṇḍī sohaḷā”.

One of the respondents, an old Vārkarī, explained that there are several meanings to the term Vārī. “This (yerzāra or going and coming back) is a śabdārtha, the literal meaning of the word. There are seven meanings to each word. The śabdārtha, the literal meaning, lakśārtha, the emblematical meaning, can only be understood by someone who has studied texts or scriptures. Śabdārtha, lakśārtha, Vākyārtha (as used in a sentence), Dhwanyārtha (as heard), in such a way, there are seven meanings for each word. The emblematic meaning of

⁹⁷ S. V. Dandekar, one of the most respected personalities in the Vārkarī Sampradāya, also adopts this meaning of the term Vārī. See, Dandekar, *Vārkarī Panthacha Itihas*, 1.

⁹⁸ All translations in this thesis are done by me, unless specified otherwise.

⁹⁹ The term regular Vārkarī is used to indicate those Vārkarīs who go on the Vārī pilgrimage every year, without fail and usually for several years.

¹⁰⁰ Interview conducted on 12th July 2019.

¹⁰¹ Khandoba is a folk god of a Shaiv tradition. The main temple is in Jejuri in Pune District in Maharashtra. For details, see, R. C. Dhere, *Dakshinecha Lokdev Shri Khandoba* (Pune: Padmagandha Prakashan, 2016). Also see, G.D. Sontheimer, Anne Feldhaus, et. al. *King of Hunters Warriors and Shepherds: Essays on Khandoba* (New Delhi: IGNCA & Manohar, 1997).

Vārī is that we are born and then die to be born again. This is a yerzāra or Vārī of birth - death and rebirth. It is believed that the Vārī pilgrimage is a way to come out of this cycle of birth and rebirth.”¹⁰² In his opinion, “So, if we desire to be free of yerzāra (of birth and death), the Vārī (pilgrimage) has been schemed for that (by the Santas of the Vārkarī Sampradāya).”¹⁰³ He added that as one keeps coming to the Vārī pilgrimage, the subtler meanings of Vārī start unfolding. Though all Vārkarīs might not know all seven meanings of the term Vārī, apart from doing the Vārī in the physical sense, the spiritual reasons for going to the Vārī seem to be associated with the emblematical understanding of the term. For Vārkarīs, it seems, Vārī always means something more than a physical journey from home to Pandharpur. This “something more” may differ from individual to individual, based on their beliefs, aspirations, spiritual lineage, etc.

Several scholars have put forth the meaning of the term Vārī. G.A. Deleury defines it, “The pilgrimage (Vārī) is the gathering of all the members of the (Vārkarī) Panth, living as well as the dead, at the feet of Vithoba.”¹⁰⁴ R. C. Dhere defines Vārī as “a pilgrimage performed repeatedly, on a regular basis”.¹⁰⁵ Vaudeville writes: “The (Vārī) pilgrimage has a markedly social character. It may be said that it is a form of mass communion in the exaltation of Vithoba's presence and his presence beloved saints”.¹⁰⁶ Vidyadhar Tathe in “*Vārī aani Vārkarī sampradāya*” explains the meaning of the term Vārī as “a collective way of worship offered by the Vārkarī sampradāya to free the ordinary people from the clutches

¹⁰² Interview conducted on 13th July 2019.

¹⁰³ Interview conducted on 13th July 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Deleury, 73.

¹⁰⁵ Dhere, *The Rise of a Folk God*, ix.

¹⁰⁶ Charlotte Vaudeville. *Myths, Saints and Legends in Medieval India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 216.

of meaningless rituals (karmakāṇḍa) and to direct them towards (morally) high and noble values.”¹⁰⁷ Yashwant Pathak, a scholar of Santa literature, writes: “There are several etymological traces of the term ‘Vārī’. The Vārī of Pandharpur means a group of people going to Pandharpur, and a Vārkarī is a person who goes on Vārī.”¹⁰⁸ Amarkoś defines ‘vār’ as “a group or community.”

From the above discussion, it is clear that the term “Vārī” is used to indicate the frequent going to and coming back from Pandharpur, with a sense of bhakti towards the deity Viṭṭhala or Pāṇḍuraṅga. Vārī is essentially a collective affair and accords the highest importance to walking with the fellow Vārkarīs and in the company of righteous beings (Santasang). The collective elements of Vārī are not only exhibited in walking together but also in singing, dancing, playing, eating and staying together. The Vārī includes singing abhangas, dancing during kīrtanas and bhārūḍas, playing local games like phugaḍī, and listening to the discourse or pravachana. In this sense, Vārī is a public manifestation of bhakti, expressed by going to Pandharpur at frequent intervals, usually once every year.

One of the defining criteria of becoming a Vārkarī is taking a vow to go to Pandharpur at least once a year. A Vārkarī can choose to go on any one of the four pilgrimages taking place in the months of Chaitra, Āṣadha, Kārtika, Māgha. Even though any of these four pilgrimages are referred to as Vārī, the term is commonly adopted to refer to the Āṣadha pilgrimage. The pilgrimage to Āṣadha, on the other hand, is the largest and most famous of all. Most Vārkarīs prefer to travel during the month of Āṣadha because it corresponds to their agricultural calendar. Deleury, as well as Karve, put forth this observation in their works. Sadanand More writes: “A system of Vārī is institutionalised by keeping in mind the

¹⁰⁷ Tathe, 5.

¹⁰⁸ Yashwant, Pathak. “Vārī: Antarangateel aani Bahereel”, in *Vārī* ed. Devidas Pote (Thane: Param Mitra Prakashan, 2020), 20.

yearly calendar of agriculture and farmers.”¹⁰⁹ More regards the Vārī pilgrimage as a celebration of agrarian culture.¹¹⁰ The pilgrimage gatherings of Chaitra and Magha are relatively smaller as compared to Āṣadha and Kārtika pilgrimages, respectively.

3.2.2. Historical Account of Vārī

Like most folk traditions, it is difficult to trace the origins of the Vārī pilgrimage. There is no unanimity of opinion among the scholars regarding the beginning of the tradition of Vārī. Another critical factor that needs to be accounted for is that most of the historical evidence available references the Viṭṭhala temple in the form of copper or stone inscriptions by way of donations received from the devotees and the rulers. Even though the efforts to date the origin of Viṭṭhala devotion might not necessarily correspond with the beginning of the Vārī pilgrimage, they at least provide a clue to understanding the mainstreaming of Viṭṭhala bhakti and hence the Vārī pilgrimage. References to the Vārī can be found in several folk songs, oṽīs and gavaṇṇīs, but it is difficult to determine the period in which these folk songs were composed.

Based on the evidence provided by the copperplate from the Rashtrakuta dynasty, Vaudeville claims that the recorded history of Pandharpur as a sacred site can be traced back to AD 516.¹¹¹ Very often, to establish the importance of Pandharpur as a sacred site, Śakarācārya’s composition of *Pāṇḍuraṅgaṣṭaka*¹¹² is presented as evidence. It is generally believed that Śakarācārya lived in the eighth century, and therefore it is argued that at the

¹⁰⁹ More, “Sohala Krushijan Sanskruticha,” 73.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 72 – 74.

¹¹¹ Charlotte Vaudeville. “Pandharpur: The City of Saints”, in *Structural Approaches to South India Studies*, ed. Harry M. Buck and Glenn E. Yocum (Chambersburg: Anima, 1974), 146-47.

¹¹² For Further details, see, Dandekar. *Vārkarī Panthacha Itihas*, 18-19. Also see, Dhere, *Shree Viṭṭhala*.

time of Śakarācārya, Pandharpur was already a well-established sacred site; the mahātmya, or importance, of which attracted people even from far-off regions in the country.

The first mention of the Vārī appears in the stone inscription of 1237 from the times of the Hoysala dynasty. Shreedharbuvā Dehukar writes: “The stone inscription available in the sixteen-pillar hall (*sola khāmbī maṇḍapa*), which dates back to śaka 1159 (1237 CE), is carved on three sides of the beam. This inscription is in Sanskrit and Kannada, and the Devnāgarī script. It has a mentions Puṇḍalika and Viṭṭhala. Furthermore, on the eastern side of the beam, in the seventy-first line of the inscription, is the mention of Vārī. This is the oldest reference to Vārī.”¹¹³ This means that the tradition of Vārī has been prevalent at least since the thirteenth century, if not earlier. As A. S. Alatekar points out in “*Rashtrakutas and Their Times*”, “it is not unlikely that Gnanadeva may have had several predecessors, now lost into oblivion, who may have popularised the gospel of Bhakti among the masses by vernacular poetry earlier than his time”,¹¹⁴ also seems true in case of the Vārī pilgrimage. The 1237 inscription carries the weight of evidence. However, there is sufficient room to assume that the tradition of Vārī must have been in practice much before it got a place in the inscription. However, it is difficult to argue that what is today known as VS, associated with the genre of Santas, already had taken its institutional form in the thirteenth century. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the idea of a well-bound community around the practice of Vārī and the Santas, who mainly advocated Viṭṭhala bhakti, seems to have unfolded in the later years.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Shreedharbuvā Dehukar, “Pāḷkhī Sohla”, in *Lokrajya*, Vārī special Volume (August 2018):14. *Lokrajya* is published by the Information and Public Relations Department of Government of Maharashtra.

¹¹⁴ A. S. Alatekar, *Rashtrakutas and Their Times*, Poona Oriental Series, 36. (Poona: Oriental Book Agency, 1967), 299. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.57217/page/n313/mode/2up?q=>

¹¹⁵ Please see section 2.2.1. from the previous chapter. Also see, Keune and Novetzke, *Vārkarī Sampradāy*, 3.

There are several abhangas of the Santas of the VS that refer to the tradition of Vārī. Arvind Nerkar has compiled the references to the Vārī pilgrimage found in the Santa literature in the book titled “*Abhangāchī Vārī*”.¹¹⁶ The most quoted abhanga of Santa Dnyāneśvara with respect to the Vārī pilgrimage is as follows:

Māze jīvīchī āvadī/ Pandharpurā neīna gudhī//
Pāṇḍuraṅgī mana rangale/ Govindache guṇī vedhalen//
Jāgrutī swapna suṣupti nāthave/ pāhato rūpa ānandānanda sāthaven//
*Bāprakhumādevīvara saguṇa nirguṇa/ rūpa vitevarī daviṭī khūṇa//*¹¹⁷

This translates as:

The most likeable thing for me is to take a flag (gudhī) to Pandharpur. My mind is engaged with Pāṇḍuraṅga and his qualities (guṇas). I’m not conscious of three stages of consciousness: the awake stage, the dream stage, and the deep sleep state. The ecstasy caused by seeing the form (rūpa) Pāṇḍuraṅga, I want to preserve.

There are several abhangas like this which refer to the Vārī pilgrimage. The frequent references to the Vārī and Viṭṭhala in Santa literature appear to establish a link between the Vārī tradition, the Viṭṭhala temple of Pandharpur, and a community of devotees who identify with these two, known today as VS. From the above discussion, it can be argued that the tradition of the Vārī pilgrimage was well established at the time of Dnyāneśvara and Nāmdeva, i.e., the thirteenth century, i.e., the thirteenth century. However, the nature and the form of today’s Vārī are a much later development of the nineteenth century under the guidance of Haibatbaba.¹¹⁸ Almost all Vārkarī Santas composed abhangas on the Vārī and Viṭṭhala worship. It would not be wrong to say that those Santas who celebrated the Vārī

¹¹⁶ Nerkar, *Abhangachi Vārī*.

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Nerkar, *Abhangachi Vārī*, 3.

¹¹⁸ The contribution of Haibatbaba in streamlining the pālkhī procession is discussed later in this section.

and considered Viṭṭhala or Pāṇḍuraṅga as their ārādhyā (personal deity) eventually came to be associated with the VS.¹¹⁹ These Santas belonged to the period between the thirteenth century and the seventeenth century. From the range of abhangas and the accounts of Vārī available in the Santa literature, it is clear that the practice of the Vārī pilgrimage has continued to date at least since the thirteenth century, if not earlier.

It seems that it was during Tukārāma mahārāja's time that the Vārī took a more organised form.¹²⁰ The Vārkarīs believe that after Tukārāma, his brother Kānhobā and his son Nārāyaṇ continued the tradition of going to Pandharpur in small groups or diṇḍīs. Tathe observes, "It was Narayana mahārāja (Tukārāma's son) who started carrying the Paudukas of Tukārāma up to Alandi and from there carried pādukās of Dnyāneśvara and Tukārāma in a pālkhī to Pandharpur together."¹²¹ The Dnyāneśvara and Tukārāma pālkhī travelled together to Pandharpur for almost a hundred years until a dispute among Tukārāma's descendants led to two separate pālkhī processions.¹²² Since then, Tukārāma's pālkhī started from Dehu, whereas that of Dnyāneśvara's pālkhī starts from Alandi, both located in the Pune district. In 1827¹²³, Haibatraobābā Arphalkar started a separate pālkhī procession for Santa Dnyāneśvara from Alandi. Because of this, Haibatbābā is also considered a progenitor of the modern-day pālkhī procession.¹²⁴ It is Haibatrao Bābā or Haibatbābā who is believed to have given the

¹¹⁹ This point can be highlighted in the context of Santa Rāmdāsa. Though Rāmdās has written on his devotion to Pāṇḍuraṅga, he chose Rāma as his ārādhyā and promoted Rāma bhakti among his followers. Probably as the result, Rāmdāsa is not considered as a Vārkarī Santa and his compositions, though almost similar in spirit to that of Vārkarī Santas, are not taken as the base for Vārkarī kīrtana.

¹²⁰ Dandekar, *Vārkarī Panthacha Itihas*, 48 – 56.

¹²¹ Tathe, 18.

¹²² Jacqueline Daukes, "Female voices in the Vārkarī sampradāya: Gender Constructions in a Bhakti Tradition" (PhD diss., SOAS: University of London, 2014), 54. <https://doi.org/10.25501/SOAS.00020367>.

¹²³ Daukes gives this year as 1832. See, Daukes, "Female voices", 55.

¹²⁴ Tathe, 18.

present structure of the pāḷkhī procession, especially to the Dnyāneśvara mahārāja's pāḷkhī procession. The present-day sequence of horses, nagara, bullock carts, diṇḍīs, pāḷkhī, as well as the route of the pāḷkhī, is believed to be set by Haibatbābā. Haibatbābā was a Sardar or military commandant of Shide Sarkar. "In recognition of his devotion and contribution to the VS, Haibatrao Bābā is now buried under the first step at the Dnyāneśvara mahārāja Mandir at Alandi. The revival of the Vārī led by Haibatbābā was instrumental in the Vārkarī Sampradāya becoming a mass movement in the nineteenth century."¹²⁵ At least since Haibatbābā institutionalised the pāḷkhī procession of Dnyāneśvara, the pāḷkhī sohaḷā has continued unceasingly. Although the city was shut down due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, a symbolic pāḷkhī procession with pādukās in the bus took place for the years 2020 and 2021.¹²⁶ As large gatherings were not possible during this period, many Vārkarīs and their leaders invented new ways of performing Vārī, like manas Vārī, virtual Vārī, and pārāyaṇa Vārī.¹²⁷

The most prominent accounts of Vārī in the twentieth century are found in the works of G. A. Deleury, Iravati Karve and D. B. Mokashi. It is important to note here that even though the pāḷkhī procession is equated with the Vārī itself, it is a misnomer. The Vārī is a much larger affair, whereas the pāḷkhī is of a particular Santa. Starting from different parts of Maharashtra and even beyond all, together make up the Vārī pilgrimage. The term "Vārī"

¹²⁵ Daukes, "Female voices", 55.

¹²⁶ <https://Santa.financialexpress.com/lifestyle/travel-tourism/ashadi-Ekādaśī-july-2020-devshayani-Ekādaśī-wakhrī-pandharpur-tholi-ekadasi-vitthal-rukmini-vithoba/2009447/>, 1st July 2020

¹²⁷ Manas Vārī is an imagined Vārī, where a Vārkarī draws a mental map of the Vārī and follows a similar routine as if s/he is in the Vārī. Virtual Vārī included virtual kīrtanas, pravachanaags, bhajana where Vārkarīs could participate in these activities virtually. Pārāyaṇa Vārī is where Vārkarīs do Pārāyaṇa or read any of the revered texts of the Vārkarīs. When I called two of the respondents during the pandemic, whom I had interviewed during the 2019 field work, one of them told me that she was doing a Pārāyaṇa of Eknāthī Bhāgavata whereas the other person said that he is doing the Pārāyaṇa of Bhāgavata Gīta and Dnyāneśvarī simultaneously. For details see, Varada Sambhus. "Bhashya: Nem Chuko Nedi Kadhi," *Sakal*. July 14th 2021. <https://www.esakal.com/sampadakiya/varada-sambhus-writes-about-aashadhi-wari-pjp78>. Accessed on 14th July 2021.

also includes those who might not be accompanying any *pāḷkhī* but are a group or a *diṇḍī* going to Pandharpur. Therefore, even though associating oneself with a particular *pāḷkhī* is a common practice, it is not a precondition to take part in the *Vārī*. The symbolic meaning of walking with the *pāḷkhī* is that one walks in the company of the Santas, which allows individuals to get a fuller experience of the *Vārī* and is considered spiritually meritorious. The number of *pāḷkhīs* has been growing, and it is clear from the comparisons of accounts given by Deleury and, most recently, by Vidyadhar Tathe. Deleury writes: “There were twenty-five *pāḷkhīs* who participated in the pilgrimage of 1951.”¹²⁸ Tathe writes in his most recent work of 2020 that “from entire Maharashtra, around 60-70 *pāḷkhīs* of various Santas start from their respective places to reach Pandharpur.”¹²⁹ This increasing number of *pāḷkhī* processions starting from various parts of Maharashtra seems to indicate the growing reach and popularity of the VS, in general, and of the *Vārī* pilgrimage, in particular. Most likely, the development of means of communication and especially the coverage of the *Vārī* by various news channels have led to this growing interest in the *Vārī* pilgrimage, resulting in more *pāḷkhīs* as well as *diṇḍīs*.

3.2.3. *Pāḷkhī* and the *Pāḷkhī* Procession

As previously stated, the *pāḷkhī* procession is sometimes confused with *Vārī* itself. However, the *pāḷkhī* and *pāḷkhī* procession are only a part of the more significant phenomenon of the *Vārī* pilgrimage. Small and large *pāḷkhīs* start from different parts of the Marathi-speaking region with the plan of reaching Pandharpur on the day of Āṣadha Śhuddha Ekādaśī. Generally, the *pāḷkhīs* are of Santas of the *Vārkarī* tradition. However, the *pāḷkhīs* of

¹²⁸ Deleury, 77.

¹²⁹ Tathe, 18.

Santas who are not considered Vārkarī Santas also join the Vārī pilgrimage. One of the most prominent examples of a pālkhī by a non-Vārkarī Santa is that of Santa Rāmdāsa¹³⁰, a seventeenth-century Santa in Maharashtra who is also believed to be Śivājī's guru. Rāmdāsa's pālkhī starts from Sajjangad in Satara and goes to Pandharpur every year.

Each procession going to Pandharpur for a great pilgrimage, i.e., the Āṣadha pilgrimage, is called a pālkhī.¹³¹ The term “pālkhī” literally means “a palanquin”. In the context of the Vārī pilgrimage, pālkhī is a carrier in which the pādukās or sandal images of a Santa are usually carried. It is a very simple affair, which consists of a long pole curved upwards in its middle, from which a small wooden platform with a framework hangs.¹³² A Pālkhī is generally a shallow wooden or metal box with poles on two sides. Very often, it is carried on the shoulders of the carriers. In the past, pālkhīs were used for the movement of kings, queens, and influential people. In the context of the Vārī pilgrimage, the pālkhī is used to carry the pādukā or the sandal image of the Santas of the Vārkarī tradition. pādukās are a kind of wooden sandals. They can also be made of silver or panchadhātū (five metals). Pādukās of a particular Santa is carried along the way to Pandharpur in a pālkhī. It is believed that even after death, santas continue to live in their spirit and take part in Vārī in the form of pādukās. These pādukās differentiate various processions converging on Pandharpur. They

¹³⁰ Rāmadās is considered as a non-Vārkarī Santa primarily because he chose Rāma as the deity rather than Viṭṭhala, the deity of the Vārkarī sampradāya. Similarly, instead of adopting the Vārkarī mantra “*Rāma Krishna Hari*”, he adopted “*Shreeram Jai Rāma Jai Jai Rāma*” as a *beejmantra*. The ways of Rāmadās and later, his followers came to be known as Rāmadāsī sampradāya, also known as Samarth sampradāya. For details see, S. S. Dev. Shree Samarth sampradāya (Mumabi: Keshva Bhikaji Dhawale, 2007).

¹³¹ Deleury, 77.

¹³² Ibid, 82.

are symbols of the living presence of the great santas of the past.¹³³ In the Vārkarī canon, the feet or images of feet are significant. This is clear from the symbol of pādukās.

In some pāłkhī processions, instead of pādukās, a mukhvata (metal face mask), an idol, or a photo frame of a santa is carried. Sometimes a combination of some of these or all of them is taken together in a pāłkhī. All of them, pādukās, mukhvata, idols or photo frames, are considered the symbols of the living spirit of the santas and are placed in the pāłkhī. Therefore, the pāłkhīs become the focal points of the entire pilgrimage procession. The centre point of each pāłkhī procession is a pāłkhī. The devotees, pilgrims as well as the villagers on the route of pilgrimage assemble near the pāłkhī to take darśana of pādukās as the pāłkhī proceeds or wherever it halts at night. As the pāłkhī remains the centre point of the pilgrimage procession, the entire pilgrimage procession is also known as the pāłkhī sohaḷā or pāłkhī ceremony.

The pāłkhīs of various santas start from different places. Dnyāneśvara's pāłkhī starts from Alandi (Pune), Nivruttīnātha's from Tryambakeshvar (Nasik), Mukṭā's from Edalabad (Jalgaon), Sopānkākā's from Saswad (Pune), Nāmdeva's, Narhari Sonār's and Rohidāsa's from Pandharpur, Chokhāmeḷā's and Banka's from Mangalvedhe (Solapur), Janardanaswāmī's from Aurangabad, Eknātha's from Paithan (Aurangabad), Savatā Maḷi's from Aranbhendi (Solapur), Gorā Kumbhār's from Teredhoki (Osmanabad), Tukārāma's pāłkhī starts from Dehu (Pune), Niḷobārāya's from Pimpalner (Ahmednagar), Rāmdāsa's from Sajjangad (Satara), Dāmājī's from Mangalvedhe (Solapur), Jayarāmswāmī's from Vadgaon (Satara), Gādagebābā's from Kole (Satara), Nrusinghaswāmī's from Mehekar (Buldhana), Swarūpānanda's from Pavas (Ratnagiri), Puṇṇānada's from Bhognul (Belgaon), Gajānana mahārāja's from Shegaon (Buldhana), Gulāba mahārāja's from Mohod

¹³³ Deleury, 82.

(Amaravati), Śakaraswāmī's from Shirur (Pune), Mukundarāya's from Ambejogai, (Beed), Bankataswāmī's from Ningur (Beed), Chāngadeva's from Puntambe (Ahamadnar), Śankara mahārāja's from Mahuli (Amaravati), Rakhamābāi's from Kaundinyapur (Amaravati), Bodhalebuā's from Dhamangaon (Amaravati), Visobā Khechar's from Aundhya Nagnath (Hingoli) and Chaitanya's from Otur (Pune). These are some notable pāḷkhīs that originate in various parts of Maharashtra; however, this list is not exhaustive.¹³⁴ The pāḷkhī processions of various santas, starting from different parts of Maharashtra and even beyond, all together constitute the Vārī pilgrimage. There might also be some Vārkarīs who are not associated or affiliated with any of the pāḷkhīs and walk in small groups, also known as diṇḍīs to Pandharpur, which is also considered a part of the Vārī pilgrimage. However, the ecstasy of the Vārī pilgrimage is found in the pāḷkhī processions.

Out of all the pāḷkhīs mentioned above, the pāḷkhī processions of Santa Dnyāneśvara and Santa Tukārāma are the largest, fetching around two to three lac Vārkarīs in each pāḷkhī. The pāḷkhī procession of Dnyāneśvara is not only the largest but also the oldest. The pāḷkhī of Santa Dnyāneśvara is the most revered. Vārkarīs believe that after Dnyāneśvara took sanjīvana samādhī at Alandi, his contemporary santas like Nāmdeva, Gorobā, and Naraharī Sonāra, along with others, started going to Pandharpur from Alandi on foot while singing bhajanas and kīrtanas. Later santas, such as Eknātha, Tukārāma, Nilobā, Śankaraswāmī, and Mallappa Vaskar, not only continued but popularised this tradition. The pāḷkhī procession of Santa Dnyāneśvara is the largest one, having about 400 plus diṇḍīs walking with the pāḷkhī. More importantly, the Vārkarī bhakti sentiment is deeply associated with Dnyāneśvara. Bahiṇābāi's abhanga- "*Dnyānadeve rachilā pāyā*" is often quoted as evidence of this. Dnyāneśvara's composition of *Dnyāneśvarī* is the philosophical foundation of the VS.

¹³⁴ There are approximately more than seventy pāḷkhīs that start from Various parts of Marathi speaking region. Some of them find mention in, Tathe, 18.

Dnyāneśvara is considered the *māūlī*, or mother, of all Santas as well as of all the Vārkarīs. The often chanted mantra during the Vārī pilgrimage is “*Dnyānobā – Māūlī – Tukārāma*”. This not only indicates the highest regard that the Vārkarīs have for Santa Dnyāneśvara and Tukārāma, but it is supposedly a reference to all those santas who lived between the times of Dnyāneśvara and Tukārāma. The words “*Dnyāneśvara – Tukārāma*” are believed to include the entire genre of the Santas of the Vārkarī tradition.

Different *pāḷkhīs* take different routes from their starting points to reach Pandharpur. Some of them intersect on the way. For example, Dnyāneśvara mahārāja’s *pāḷkhī* and Sopānkākā’s *pāḷkhī* meet at Saswad. The *pāḷkhīs*, depending on the distance to Pandharpur, start on different days, i.e., the date of *prasthāna* (departure) of all the *pāḷkhīs* is not the same. On the way to Pandharpur, the *pāḷkhīs* halt at various villages. The villagers gather to take *darśana* of *pāḍukās* or any such symbol signifying the presence of a Santa. Some *pāḷkhīs* take more than a month to reach Pandharpur. However, all these *pāḷkhīs* come together on the day of Āṣadha Śuddha Daśamī at Vakhari. Vakhri is a small town just before Pandharpur, about 8 miles away from Pandharpur. All the *pāḷkhīs* enter Pandharpur on the day of Ekādaśī in a sequence. The last *pāḷkhī* to enter Pandharpur is that of Dnyāneśvara, which enters the sacred town around 11 PM. The Vārkarīs say that Dnyāneśvara being the *māūlī* of all santas as well as Vārkarīs, like a mother who does not leave any child behind, Dnyāneśvara’s *pāḷkhī* enters Pandharpur at last.¹³⁵

The Vārkarīs accompany *pāḷkhīs*, the devotees from different parts of Maharashtra, as well as some from Kannada and Telugu-speaking regions, come to Pandharpur on the auspicious day of Ekādaśī. People from Pandharpur and nearby villages also take part in the processions. The procession stretches over almost 10 kilometres and accommodates around

¹³⁵ Interview conducted on 10th July 2019

fifteen to twenty lakh people, making it a spectacular sight. The thumping sound of “*Dnyānobā – Māūlī – Tukārāma*”, sang and danced to by the Vārkarīs as they enter Pandharpur, is unmistakable. The singing of Vārkarīs moves the environment, and one can witness a unique climate of bhakti. Hence, the god or deity, i.e., Viṭṭhala or Pāṇḍuraṅga, the santas of the sampradāya in the form of pādukās or any other symbol, and the devotees, the Vārkarīs, come together on the day of Āṣadha Śuddha Ekādaśī. This is the only time of the year when Vārkarīs gather together in such a large number. This is the most prominent and evident public manifestation of bhakti propounded by the VS.

a. Pālkhī Procession

On the Jyeṣṭha Vadya Aṣṭamī, the pālkhī of Dnyāneśvara departs from Alandi, Pune, to reach Pandharpur before Āṣadha Śuddha Ekādaśī.¹³⁶ Alandi is a place where Dnyāneśvara took Sanjīvana samādhī.¹³⁷ This day is called “prasthānāchā divasa”, i.e., the day of departure, which means the commencement of the journey. At around 4 PM, the departure ceremony begins in the samādhī temple of Dnyāneśvara in Alandi. The horses are brought to the temple where the āratī is performed. All the dignitaries, owners, and heads of the diṇḍīs are honoured by the Sarpancha (elected leader) of the village. Once the felicitation is done, at around 5 PM, the pādukās of Dnyāneśvara māūlī, carved on the silver block, are put into the silver pālkhī. For this ceremony, thousands of Vārkarīs and devotees are present. Without any invitation, advertisement, or propaganda, the Vārkarīs reach Alandi on the day of Jyeṣṭha Vadya Aṣṭamī. The diṇḍīs are arranged at this juncture, and every Vārkarī takes his or her

¹³⁶ The description of the pālkhī procession given in this thesis is of Dnyāneśvara mahārāja’s pālkhī procession, unless specified otherwise.

¹³⁷ It is difficult to translate the term samādhī into English to capture the meaning of the term in its entirety, commonly it is translated as voluntary entombment, or spiritual suicide. In the spiritual context, the term samadhi is used to indicate the union of a *jiva* with brahman or supreme being. It is also used to indicate a deep meditative state.

position in the formation. It is important to note that no manager or organiser directs Vārkarīs to form diṇḍīs. Vārkarīs start reciting the name “*Dnyānobā – Māūlī – Tukārāma*”, accompanied by the rhythm of tāḷs, mṛdaṅga, and vīṇā. While the Vārkarīs keep singing, some Vārkarīs take the pālkhī for circumambulation inside the temple itself. With every round of circumambulation, the rhythm and the tone of the recitation of mantras or jayaghoṣh get so high and quickened that (Vārkarīs believe) the pinnacle of the temple shakes. As the rhythm reaches its peak, the pālkhī is carried out of the main gate of the temple and arrives at the Gandhi wādā, next to the temple, at around 7 PM on the same day. Gandhi wādā is known as the maternal house of Dnyāneśvara.

Dnyāneśvara’s pādukās are made of silver and are carried in the silver-decorated pālkhī. The pālkhī, with pādukās in it, is placed in a ratha, or chariot, and the entire pilgrimage procession is organized, keeping the chariot at the centre. Ratha is pulled by the bullocks. Therefore, the management of the movement of the ratha is supervised and directed by a Chopadāra. (can be seen in photo iii, on the ratha). A Chopadāra uses a long pole (daṇḍa) to guide the procession. Once the pole is held high by the Chopadāra, the entire procession, including the pilgrims and the ratha, needs to stop. The circular motion of the daṇḍa is an indication that it is time to start the procession.

Carrying the pādukās and the pālkhī in a ratha is a relatively recent phenomenon. Traditionally, the pālkhī was carried by the carriers, Bhoīs, which was considered a great honour. It is to be noted that out of twenty-seven honourable (mānāchyā) diṇḍīs or groups before the chariot of Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja, the 27th diṇḍī is of carriers, i.e., diṇḍī of Bhoī samāja. There is a high possibility that the diṇḍī was started only when the ratha replaced the carriers. Behind the ratha, there are more than three hundred diṇḍīs with numbers and an equal number of those diṇḍīs who have temporary numbers or no numbers at all. The newest diṇḍīs are farthest away from the pālkhī, and the oldest, nearest to the pālkhī.

b. Structure of the Pāḷkhī Procession

Following is the conventional structure of Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja's pāḷkhī procession:

Trucks and Vehicles

(Carrying luggage of the Vārkarīs, groceries and cooking materials)

Mokaḷe Vārkarī

(Unaffiliated Vārkarīs)

Nagārā – Chaughadā

Two Horses

(Chopdārāchā and Māūlīchā)

Twenty Seven diṇḍīs

The Chariot carrying pāḷkhī and pādukās

Numbered diṇḍīs (Permanent Numbers)

Numbered diṇḍīs (Temporary Numbers)

New diṇḍīs (Without number)

Mokaḷe Vārkarī

(Unaffiliated Vārkarīs)

The following is the usual schedule of Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja's pāḷkhī procession. The pāḷkhī sohaḷā of Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja from Alandi to Pandharpur is eighteen days long, and that of Tukārāma Mahārāja from Dehu to Pandharpur is of nineteen days, generally.¹³⁸ The return journey, or Paratvārī, is not accounted for in this schedule. Paratvārī is taking back the pāḷkhīs of Santas to the starting point. Most Vārkarīs do not accompany the Paratvārī. The pace at which Paratvārī reaches its destination is almost twice that of Vārī, i.e. pāḷkhīs are taken back to their starting point in half the time that they bring to reach Pandharpur. For example, Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja's pāḷkhī takes about nineteen days to reach Pandharpur from Alandi, whereas Paratvārī of Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja's pāḷkhī reaches Alandi in about ten days from Pandharpur. Paratvārī is not a celebration or sohaḷā, and therefore it does not take the form of a large procession.

From Alandi to Pandharpur

<i>Place of Departure</i>	<i>Date According to Indian Calendar</i>	<i>Lunch Breaks</i>	<i>Place of Stay at Night</i>
Beginning of the procession from Alandi	Jyeṣṭha Vadya Aṣṭamī	Departure of pāḷkhī at 4 pm	Maternal House of Dnyāneśvara, Alandi
Alandi	Jyeṣṭha Vadya Navamī	Kalasacha Odha, Vakadewadi	Temple of Pāḷkhī Vithoba, Bhavani Peth, Pune
-----	Jyeṣṭha Vadya Daśamī	-----	Pune

¹³⁸ Depending on the *tithi* according to the Indian calendar, the duration may vary.

Pune	Jyeṣṭha Vadya Ekādaśī	Hadapsar	Saswad
-----	Jyeṣṭha Vadya Dvādaśī	-----	Saswad
Saswad	Jyeṣṭha Vadya Trayodaśī	Temple of Yamaishivai	Jejuri
Jejuri	Jyeṣṭha Vadya Chaturdaśī	-----	Valhe
Valhe	Jyeṣṭha Amāvasyā	Bathing of pādukās in the river Neera	Lonand
-----	Āṣadha Śuddha Pratipadā	-----	Lonand
Lonand	Āṣadha Śuddha Dwitīyā	Chandobacha Limb (Vertical Ringaṇa-I)	Taradgaon
Taradgaon	Āṣadha Śuddha Tritīyā	Nimbhore Odha, Wadjal	Phaltan
-----	Āṣadha Śuddha Chaturthī	-----	Phaltan
Phaltan	Āṣadha Śuddha Panchamī	Vedhani Odha	Barad
Barad	Āṣadha Śuddha Ṣaṣṭhī	Sadubowa samādhī,	Natepute
Natepute	Āṣadha Śuddha Saptamī	Mandvicha Odha Sadashinagar (Round Ringaṇa- I)	Malshiras

Malshiras	Āṣadha Śuddha Aṣṭamī	Khaduscha Odha (Round Ringaṇa- II), Winzori, Dhava	Velapur
Velapur	Āṣadha Śuddha Navamī	Thakur Bovachi samādhī (Round Ringaṇa- III), Tondale-Bondale, Tappa	Bhandi Shegaon
Bhandi Shegaon	Āṣadha Śuddha Navamī and Daśamī	Bajirawachi Vihir, Vakhari (Vertical Ringaṇa-II, Round Ringaṇa – IV)	Vakhari
Vakhari	Āṣadha Śuddha Ekādaśī	Veesbavi (Vertical Ringaṇa – III)	Pandharpur
The Main Day of the Pilgrimage	Āṣadha Śuddha Dvādaśī Āṣadha Śuddha Ekādaśī to Āṣadha Pournimā	-----	Pandharpur

From Pandharpur to Alandi

Place of Departure	Date According to Indian Calendar**	Morning Stay pāḷkhī heads at 1 PM	Night Stay pāḷkhī heads at 2 AM

Pandharpur	Āṣadha Pourṇimā (15, Full Moon Day)	pāḷkhī leaves at 4 PM	Vakhari
Vakhari	Āṣadha Vadya Prathamā (1)	Tondale-Bondale	Velapur
Velapur	Āṣadha Vadya Dwitīyā (2)	Malshiras	Natepute
Natepute	Āṣadha Vadya Tritīyā (3)	Barad	Phaltan
Phaltan	Āṣadha Vadya Chaturthī (4)	Taradgaon	Padegaon
Padegaon	Āṣadha Vadya Panchamī (5)	Neera	Valhe
Valhe	Āṣadha Vadya Ṣaṣthī (6)	Jejuri	Saswad
Saswad	Āṣadha Vadya Saptamī (7)	Leaves at 12 noon	Hadapsar
Hadapsar	Āṣadha Vadya Aṣtamī (8)	Reaches Pune at 6 AM	Pune
Pune	Āṣadha Vadya Navamī (9)	Pune	Pune
Pune	Āṣadha Vadya Daśamī (10)	Leaves at 11 AM from Pune	Arrives at Alandi at 7 PM
Pune	Āṣadha Vadya Daśamī (10)	Leaves at 11 AM from Pune	Reaches Alandi at 7 PM

Generally, the dates of the entire pāḷkhī procession are fixed according to the Indian calendar. Only when the two tithīs fall on the same day (kṣaya) or one tithī extends for two days (Ādhika) or under unavoidable circumstances there can be a change in the schedule of the pāḷkhī procession. The program is adjusted in such a way that the pāḷkhī reaches Pandharpur one day before the main day of Āṣadha Śuddha Ekādaśī. It reaches back to Alandi one day before Āṣadha Vadya Ekādaśī, i.e., Under compelling circumstances, the Alandi Sansthān Committee, in consultation with the trustees and the representatives of Haibatbābā, is authorised to make the necessary changes in the schedule of the pāḷkhī procession. on Āṣadha Vadya Daśamī.

The Chopadāra of the Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja Pāḷkhī procession provided information that the structure and the schedule of the present pāḷkhī procession took shape at the hands of Haibatbaba Aarphalkar more than one hundred and fifty years ago. Haibatbaba introduced the system of pāḷkhī for carrying the pādukās of Dnyāneśvara. Along with the pāḷkhī, two horses walk at the beginning of the entire procession. One horse is ridden by a person in a red dress holding a long pennon, which is called “chopdārāchā ghodā”. The other horse is white and empty. The Vārkarīs believe that Dnyāneśvara himself is riding the empty horse, and therefore, throughout the procession, the Vārkarīs and the devotees take darśana of the empty horse. This empty horse is called “māulīchā ghodā”. No one rides this horse throughout the year. Before the horses, there was a cart carrying drummers, which is known as a choughadā. The purpose of chaughadā is to announce the arrival of pāḷkhī in every village by means of playing the drums. Before the choughadā walk, individual pilgrims or small groups who are not members of any of the diṇḍīs. Similarly, such individuals and groups also walk after all the numbered diṇḍīs. The horses and the essentials like tents, vehicles, cooks, and other helping staff for the overnight stay of the pāḷkhī in different villages on the route were sponsored by the Shitole Sardār, a nobleman at the court of Scindhia of Gwalior. As an

acknowledgement of this sponsorship, the ancestors of Shitole are given the honour of carrying the pādukās from Vakhari to Pandharpur.

One of the major attractions of the pāłkhī procession, for Vārkarīs as well as non-Vārkarīs, is the ringaṇa. Ringaṇa literally means “circle” or “round”. There are two types of ringaṇas performed during the Vārī – the vertical ringaṇa or ūbhe ringaṇa and the circular ringaṇa or gola ringaṇa. For example, in ūbhe ringaṇa, Vārkarīs stand on either side of the road, leaving a space in between. The two horses, one of Chopadāra and the other an empty horse of Dnyāneśvara māūlī, run in the open space. On the other side of the ringaṇa is the pāłkhī. When both the horses bow down to the pāłkhī, that marks the conclusion of the vertical ringaṇa. Similarly, for gola ringaṇa, Vārkarīs make formations in circles. At the centre of this circle is the pāłkhī. In the inner circle are vīṇekarīs, ṭālakarīs, pakhvājīs, zenḍekarīs, women carrying Tułśi and water-pots from all the diṇḍīs. In the outermost layer are other Vārkarīs, villagers and onlookers. The two horses, one of Chopadāra and the other an empty horse of Dnyāneśvara, are brought into the inner circle. The horses run in the inner circle, followed by the Vārkarīs. After about three to four rounds, the horses stop and bow down to the pāłkhī, marking the end of the ringaṇa. As the two horses run through Vārkarīs, their foreheads touch the ringaṇa ground, causing dust to fall on them. The very act of ringaṇa carries a lot of symbolic value and, more importantly, gives the pilgrims an immense sense of joy. The Vārkarīs believe that as the rhythm of nāma-ghoṣa rises, santas themselves join the procession. Vārkarīs play several traditional games after the culmination of ringaṇa. They include Phugadī, Hututū, Manorā, Hamāmā, Ghasarphugadī, Gāthoda and so on. It should be noted that the joy experienced by the pilgrims is not simply happiness derived from physical or bodily movement, but rather, it is joy intertwined with bhakti.

Every morning, around 4.30, before the pāłkhī departs on a day-long journey, the pūjā of the pādukās is performed. This pūjā is performed in the tent (tambū), wherein the pāłkhī is

kept overnight. The pādukās are the symbols of the spirit of the santas. While some of the Vārkarīs sing select abhangas, the priests recite the appropriate mantras. After pūjā, naivedya (auspicious food) is offered, typically consisting of milk, fruits, and peanuts. After the pūjā, Bhoīs (palanquin carriers) carry the pālkhī on their shoulders to the ratha, or chariot, and place it in the middle of the ratha. The horses are then brought close to the pālkhī. They bow before the pālkhī. This morning's pūjā culminates in the singing of pasāyadāna by Dnyāneśvara.

After the morning pūjā is performed, the horn (karṇā) is blown three times every ten minutes. On the first horn, Vārkarīs get ready for the daily departure and leave the place where they are staying. On the second horn, they form diṇḍīs and take their position in the diṇḍī, which does not change throughout the day. And all the Vārkarīs start walking when the horn is blown for the third time. Generally, the pālkhī departs at 6.30 AM, but depending on the distance, the time of departure is announced one day before.

Once the pālkhī is kept in the ratha, the Vārkarīs start singing bhajana and abhangas in the prescribed sequence. This sequence is known as “bhajanī mālikā”. The singing begins with reciting the names of Dnyāneśvara and Tukārāma. These words are not merely tributes to Dnyāneśvara and Tukārāma, but they symbolise the entire genre of the Santas of the Vārkarī tradition from the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries. Vārkarīs believe that the foundation of the philosophy of Vārkarī philosophy was laid by Dnyāneśvara and that the culmination of the same is found in the literature and teachings of Tukārāma. Vārkarīs acclaim the mantra “*Dnyānobā māūlī Tukārāma*”. The vīṇekarī initiates the singing of abhangas. The various kinds of abhangas are sung in a particular sequence. In the morning, the abhangas of “Rupa”, “Bhūpālī”, “Vāsudeva”, “Āndhaḷe”, “Pangale”, and “Gavaḷaṇī” are sung. When walking resumes after the lunch break, “Harīpātha,” “Guru parampareche abhanga,” and “Naṭāche abhanga” is sung. Apart from these, there are abhangas for every day

of the week, called “Vārāche abhanga”. If time permits, the abhangas composed by the Vārkarī Santas are sung. Once the place of destination comes within easy reach, the prayers or “vinavaṇīche” abhangas are sung. It is important to note that the abhangas composed only by the Santas belonging to the Vārkarī tradition are sung. The compositions of santas after Nilobārāya and those who are not considered Vārkarī Santas are not sung during the procession. The sequence of singing these abhangas may change from group to group.

Generally, after every 8-10 kilometres, the pālkhī and hence the entire procession halts for a short break of 15-30 minutes. The places of the recesses are fixed, and most of them are near water resources like rivers, springs, or canals. Even the locations for the lunch break are specified. The lunch break is almost 1.5 to 2 hours. After lunch and rest, the procession begins again, and the pālkhī reaches its destination of the day at around 6 or 6.30 PM. The time may differ depending on the distance covered in a day.

At the destination, the tent for the pālkhī is well prepared before the pālkhī arrives. The place of the tent for pālkhī or the base is generally open ground (except Pune). On reaching the base, all the diṇḍīs stand or sit in a circular formation. Women in each diṇḍī sit in the inner circle, whereas men form the outer circle. A narrow gap is left for pālkhī to enter the core of the circle, the tent. The tent is generally built a little higher than the ground level. The Bhoīs (palanquin carriers) bring down the pālkhī from the ratha to the base and further to the tent on their shoulders. While the pālkhī is brought to its core, all Vārkarīs keep singing “*Dnyānobā māūlī Tukārāma*” while playing tāḷas and mṛdaṅga.

Along with the pālkhī, the Chopadāra and the Pancha also reach the core. Chopadāra carries a silver staff. The moment the staff is raised by the Chopadāra, all the Vārkarīs stop playing tāḷas and mṛdaṅgas and singing. There is literally a pin-drop silence, and every one carefully listens to the instructions given by the Chopadāra. One by one, the Chopadāra reads out the list of lost and found belongings of the Vārkarīs. Any belongings that are lost or

found, including valuables, money, important documents, and sometimes even children, are reported to the committee office next to the tent of the pāḷkhī. After this, the information about the departure and the schedule for the next day is given by the Chopadāra. In the end, all the Vārkarīs sing together the āratī of Dnyāneśvara – “Āratī Dnyānarājā” and the āratī of Tukārāma composed by Nilobārāya. This evening āratī is known as “*Samāja-Āratī*” as the villagers from the nearby villages come for āratī and to take darśana of pādukās. After performing the Samāja-Āratī, the pāḷkhī is taken to the tent and the Vārkarīs head towards their respective arrangements for the stay.

Once the pāḷkhī enters the main tent, the villagers and even the Vārkarīs can take darśana of the pāḷkhī. In the open space around the main tent, kīrtana is performed every day. The dates for performing kīrtana are allotted to the kīrtankārās (those who perform kīrtana) by the committee. The themes of kīrtana are generally spiritual and sometimes social as well. As kīrtana is performed at the main base, similarly, kīrtanas, bhajanas, bhārūḍas, and pravachanas are organised in each diṇḍī. After the kīrtana, āratī of the pādukās is performed, and naivedya is offered. At night, jāgara is performed by the select groups of Vārkarīs in the rotation, which continues till the morning pūjā of the pādukās. The performance of kīrtana-jāgara never fails or is cancelled under any weather conditions. Every day, almost the same schedule is followed. Depending on the distance to be covered, the time for daily departure is finalized.

Before the establishment of the rule of the East India Company, all the expenses for the pāḷkhī procession were borne by the King of Aundh and later by the Peshvas. The East India Company followed the same system. But, in the year 1852, while deciding the dispute between the legitimate depositors and the heirs of those who had initially had the honour, a Pancha Committee was established, and a scheme regarding the honours and organisation of the Śree Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja Sansthāna, Alandi. The scheme is called “*Śree Dnyāneśvara*

Mahārāja Sansthāna, Alandi, Scheme, 1852". The scheme was modified in 1934 by the District Court and in 1938 by the Bombay High Court.¹³⁹ The role of the Pancha committee is to take care of the financial as well as overall management of the pāḷkhī procession. To date, the pāḷkhī procession has taken place under the observation of the Pancha Committee.

3.2.4. Diṇḍīs

Generally, the pāḷkhī, carrying the foot images or pādukās, is at the centre of the procession. Before and after the pāḷkhī, there are several *diṇḍīs* or well-organised groups of Vārkarīs. The core organising unit of the Vārī pilgrimage is a diṇḍī. Diṇḍīs were generally formed on the basis of caste groups. However, there can be various criteria for the formation of the diṇḍīs. For instance, a substantial number of diṇḍīs are mixed-caste groups, but they confine themselves to a particular locality or district. Some diṇḍīs consist of more urban and educated Vārkarīs, also welcoming the researchers. I had registered myself with Deshmukh diṇḍī, which consisted of individuals mainly from Pune. This diṇḍī is known as the diṇḍī of urban and educated Vārkarīs. Some diṇḍīs are occupational groups like individuals from the corporate sector, or some diṇḍīs consist only of students. Some diṇḍīs are formed for a specific purpose, like providing sevā to the Vārkarīs along the route of the Vārī, while others are to spread awareness about social issues. In short, broadly speaking, diṇḍī is a group of people taking part in the Vārī pilgrimage, defined by occupation, locality, common guru, shared purpose, or a mix of these criteria. In the classical understanding, diṇḍī is always a group of Vārkarīs walking to Pandharpur for the celebration of Āṣadhai Ekādaśī. However, loosely, the term "diṇḍī" is used to refer to any such group associated with the Vārī, whether they aim to reach Pandharpur or not. For example, some sevā diṇḍīs provide sevā at specific

¹³⁹ For a detailed discussion, see Appasaheb Bhanudas Vaskar v. Tatyasaheb Balasaheb Kore & Others, 1981. LPA No. 80 Of 1979 (No. 3025 Of 1981), 29-09-1981, Bom. SANTA. .C. Available at: <https://Santa.legitquest.com/case/appasaheb-bhanudas-vaskar-v-tatyasaheb-balasaheb-kore-others/2FC41>

locations and often do not go to Pandharpur, nor do they walk. Instead, they are stationary at a given location for a day or two and then move to the next location in a vehicle.

Each *diṇḍī* has its fixed place in the *pāḷkhī* procession as allotted by the Pancha committee. The number of *diṇḍīs* before the *pāḷkhī* is fixed; only twenty-seven *diṇḍīs* can be seen before the chariot. But there is no such limit on the number of *diṇḍīs* after the *pāḷkhī*. The oldest *diṇḍīs* are nearest to the *pāḷkhī*, and the newest ones are farthest away. If a new *diṇḍī* is formed, it needs recognition from the Pancha committee. The newer *diṇḍīs* are given temporary numbers on registration. Suppose these *diṇḍīs* follow all the rules and regulations and show their dedication to the overall ethos of the *pāḷkhī* procession for three consecutive years. In that case, the temporary number is converted into a permanent one.¹⁴⁰ Daily attendance in the morning and evening by the *vīṇekarī* is necessary, failing which is seen as default in adhering to the rules of the *pāḷkhī* procession.

The number of individuals may differ from *diṇḍī* to *diṇḍī*, varying from 1500 to 50. Even within *diṇḍīs*, there is some sort of organization. Every *diṇḍī* consists of a *vīṇekarī* (who plays *vīṇā*) and a *pakhvājī* (who plays *pakhvāja* or *mṛdaṅga*). Other *Vārkarīs* play *tāḷas* (cymbals). Some of them carry flags and banners, whereas women in the *diṇḍī* usually have *tuḷsi-vridāvan* (Tulsi pot) or jars of water. There can be several drummers, but there is only one *vīṇekarī* in every *diṇḍī*. *Vīṇekarī* is the leader or the head of the *diṇḍī* who initiates the singing of *abhangas* and *bhajana* while walking. Generally, the *diṇḍīs* walk in lines of four. In the first row, a *Vārkarī* walks with the number plate attached to the long stick, which can be noticed easily by the members of the *diṇḍī*. In the following rows walk the *zenḍekarīs* or flag bearers. Flags are the same colour as brick or *kaṣāya*. The *zenḍekarīs* are followed by *tālkarīs*

¹⁴⁰ I was informed about this by one of the *vīṇekarīs* of a *diṇḍī* which had started in the year 2018 with the initiative of a local *Vārkarī* leader. The *diṇḍī* had a temporary number (*Kaccha kramank*) and it was second year in a row that the *diṇḍī* was walking in the *pāḷkhī* procession of *Dnyāneśvara mahārāja* and followed the rules of attendance prescribed for all *diṇḍīs*. There was no caste or occupational taboo to join the *diṇḍī*. Interview conducted on 11th July 2019.

(cymbal players). At the centre of the diṇḍī, on one side is a vīṇekarī (vīṇā-bearer) and on the other a pakhvājī (pakhvāja/ mṛdaṅga player). In every diṇḍī, there is only one vīṇā bearer, but there can be one or more pakhvājīs. Behind the vīṇekarī and pakhvājī are women with a tulsi pot and a water jar (haṇḍa), respectively. Behind them are male Vārkarīs, followed by female Vārkarīs. Each diṇḍī follows this sequence. Each diṇḍī follows a particular sequence of singing abhangas, and the singing is led by a vīṇekarī or any other member of the diṇḍī. Once an individual's position in the diṇḍī is fixed, they are not supposed to change it. There should not be any space left between the two diṇḍīs. This especially becomes important when the pālkhī procession passes through the city centres to avoid traffic disruption. Walking in a given sequence at a defined place without leaving a long distance between members of a particular diṇḍī or between two diṇḍīs is an important rule while walking in a diṇḍī. On the side-lines of each diṇḍī, or at the end of the procession, walk the unaffiliated (mokaḷe) Vārkarīs, i.e. those who are not members of any of the diṇḍīs. These diṇḍīs, which walk in a sequence one after another, make the pālkhī a grand procession. Even though around 6-8 lakh Vārkarīs walk in the pālkhī procession, the procession takes place smoothly without any chaos or stampede because of this sequence.

When the respondents were asked, “who can become a member of the diṇḍī?” almost all the respondents responded that “anyone” can participate in a diṇḍī. There is no bar of caste, religion, language, class, gender, age, education, profession, etc. Practically, any person can be a member of a diṇḍī, but upon becoming a member of a diṇḍī, individuals need to follow the rules and the code of behaviour of that diṇḍī. While responding to this question, one of the respondents, who was also the Diṇḍī Chālaka, said, “Anyone can join the diṇḍī. We never ask which village a person belongs to or what their caste is when a person wants to participate in a diṇḍī. She/he is never asked about her/his hometown or any address proof, nor

do we ask about caste. When a person comes with faith, she/he happily dances and walks behind the pāḷkhī.”¹⁴¹

Some diṇḍī allow membership only to those who have taken tuḷsimaḷa and follow the rules and norms of the sampradāya, whereas some other diṇḍī are open to all, whether Vārkarī or not. Once an individual becomes a member of the diṇḍī, s/he is expected to sing the bhajana and abhangas composed by the santas of VS while walking. The broad rule is that singing of any other form of poetry or songs which do not fit into the Vārkarī sāmpradāyika tradition is not welcomed. This is the reason that, generally, a regular Vārkarī who has a good knowledge of the sāmpradāyika ways is a vīṇekarī, who leads singing in a diṇḍī. Only when the diṇḍī gets arranged every morning, before taking up walking, can new members be added to the diṇḍī. Once the walking resumes, no new member or non-member is allowed to enter the diṇḍī as places for individual Vārkarīs are finalised at the beginning itself.

Every diṇḍī has a code of discipline. Some rules are common to all diṇḍīs like one needs to walk in a line, not fight with each other, not move out of the group abruptly while walking, be punctual, and so on. Similarly, each diṇḍī also has its own set of rules. For example, the sequence of singing abhangas, the dress code, and specific rules regarding eating and preparation of food may differ from diṇḍī to diṇḍī. While explaining the rules of conduct, Diṇḍī Chālaka said,

The pāḷkhī leaves early morning before that a person has to get up take a bath; he/she should perform the rituals such as gandha, akshatā, sandhyā before āratī starts. He/she should be ready with it, and when the pāḷkhī begins, he/she should participate in it. For this, he/she should be prepared in advance. That means a person should not be late and lag and should match pace with everyone else and keep walking. One should not go in and out of the group again and again. This is a part of discipline, and it need not be told. Whoever takes part in the diṇḍī understands these rules, and there is no need even to monitor.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Interview conducted on 8th July 2019

¹⁴² Interview conducted on 30th June 2019

Another Vārkarī informed, “There is a dress code; we have to wear white clothes in this diṇḍī. We have to walk with the sohaḷā, but as our pace doesn't match, we walk ahead of the pālkhī. There is a particular rhythm of playing tāḷa, and one needs to walk in a line of four.”¹⁴³ A woman who is a regular Vārkarī and has been taking part in the Vārī for twenty-eight years explained, “You should not stray away from the diṇḍī. People should walk in the diṇḍī in four lines. You should not chitchat while walking. You should immerse yourself in singing bhajana so that you don't realise the pain and troubles while walking.”¹⁴⁴ To become a member of a diṇḍī, one needs to pay the required contribution to the owner of the diṇḍī. The contribution may differ from diṇḍī to diṇḍī ranging from Rs. 500 to Rs. 3000. Some of the women I met during my fieldwork told me that every month they save Rs. 100 to Rs. 500 so that no one at home stops them from going to the Vārī for financial reasons.

All the diṇḍīs in the procession do not sing the same abhangas simultaneously. Even though the broad sequence of the abhangas is prescribed, the selection of the abhangas in each category may differ from diṇḍī to diṇḍī. Therefore, the singing of abhangas is not synchronised throughout the Vārī but is limited only to the particular diṇḍī. Depending on the situation and the context, every diṇḍī may choose from a variety of abhangas, maintaining the larger format. For example, upon reaching the slope (dhāvā) before Velapur, the abhangas of “dhāvā” are sung. A vīṇekarī in every diṇḍī leads the singing throughout the Vārī, and therefore, the vīṇekarī should be the one who has a thorough knowledge of the singing pattern and the philosophy of the sampradāya. While singing the last stanzas “Dnyāndevā pramāṇ, Nivruttīdevī dnyān,

¹⁴³ Interview conducted on 30th June 2019

¹⁴⁴ Interview conducted on 1st July 2019

samādhī sanjīvana harīpātha” of the harīpātha, all the Vārkarīs in the diṇḍī face the pālkhī and stand in their positions. On completion of the harīpātha, all the Vārkarīs bow down and touch the clay on the ground, applying it to the forehead. Again, they turn back to resume walking.

A packed breakfast is provided in some diṇḍīs, whereas in some others, breakfast is not provided. In such cases, the members of the diṇḍī are asked to carry some dry snacks, or they can either buy breakfast items, like fruits, or they may take offerings from those who provide sevā on the way. Some Vārkarīs may also prefer to go to restaurants, but most avoid eating out. The common phenomenon in the Vārī is a morning fast, and most of the Vārkarīs do not eat anything till lunchtime. In some diṇḍīs, food is prepared by the members of the diṇḍī on reaching the place of lunch. In some diṇḍīs, some of the members of the diṇḍī go ahead to prepare food and keep the food ready by the time the other members arrive. In some cases, the villagers offer food to all the members of the diṇḍī as a part of sevā or service. In some other diṇḍīs, the sevekarīs (those who give sevā or service) get cooked food and serve it at a designated spot, whereas in some other cases, a cook is hired for the entire duration of the Vārī. These commensality and food distribution practices are important because, traditionally, food practices are closely tied with the caste system.¹⁴⁵

Every diṇḍī has its own schedule. The Vārkarīs in a diṇḍī are supposed to get up at around 4.00 AM. If the stay of the diṇḍī is in the tents, one needs to get up at 3.30 AM so that the tents can be removed. The morning tea is served around 5.30 AM, and everyone needs to be ready to walk in the procession by 6.00 AM as the pālkhī of Dnyāneśvara moves at that time. All the members of diṇḍīs assemble at a pre-decided point at a given time, generally

¹⁴⁵ Iravati Karve also mentions about varying food habits among Vārkarīs and draws a connection with caste system in her essay “On the Road”. See, Karve, “On the Road,” 14 -18, 25.

around noon, for lunch. Depending on the rules of the Vārī and its internal management, food is prepared. In some of the diṇḍīs, onions and garlic are entirely prohibited, and they eat only “sattvic food”. As part of the larger Vārkarī ethos, non-vegetarian food is a strict taboo in the Vārī. During lunchtime, the entire procession stops. After lunch, there is some time for rest, and at around 2.00 pm, the procession starts again. At around 4.00, there is yet another break, and at around 6.00 pm, the pālkhī reaches its daily halt. On reaching the destination, a samāja āratī, community prayer, is performed, and all the diṇḍīs move to their place of stay.

The place for the overnight stay for each diṇḍī is finalised well in advance. Generally, the arrangements for the members of the diṇḍī are made in the temples, schools, marriage halls, or the tents in the open space or on the verandas of the big houses, and sometimes in the villagers’ homes. On arriving at the place of stay, generally, tea is served. In the evening, dinner is served. Similarly, the arrangements for tea, breakfast, lunch, and dinner are taken care of by the diṇḍī organizers. In fact, the primary purpose behind registering with the diṇḍī is to avail of the minimum arrangements for shelter and food. But these arrangements are very basic and modest and nowhere close to the daily comforts of home. The places of stay and lunch are pre-decided and booked before the Vārī begins. It is the primary responsibility of the diṇḍī pramukha or head of the diṇḍī. Similarly, the arrangements for food are also made by the diṇḍī. Most diṇḍīs also have water tankers. The luggage of the Vārkarīs, as well as the cooking materials, including groceries, utensils, LPG cylinders, and the materials for tents and accommodation, are carried in the trucks. The trucks start moving before the pālkhī starts and reach the pre-decided location. A Vārkarī from Chennai, while responding to the question on the management of the diṇḍī, said,

The management of the diṇḍī is excellent. The only thing is, you have to forgo luxuries like sleep. We get only 3 to 4 hours of sleep. And in the afternoon, maybe we get it for 1 hour. We need to get up early because the tents must be folded and loaded into the truck, getting to the next location before the pālkhī arrives. So, once you get up at 4 o'clock, it is easy for them to carry the tent to the next place and set it up there. If you get up at 6 o'clock, the truck cannot move in the traffic. The same is the case for lunch. They (trucks) move before 2 o'clock so that

they can plan for tiffin, lunch, and dinner. They (the diṇḍī managers) are doing an excellent job.¹⁴⁶

Every day, during the Vārī, there are different programmes and performances.

Generally, before or after dinner, each diṇḍī organises various entertainment programmes which revolve around the bhakti practices and have a spiritual or/and social message. They include bhajana, bhārūḍa, gavaḷaṇa, kīrtana, harīpāṭha, and pravachana. In some cases, a programme for singing popular bhakti songs is also organized. Thus, these bhakti practices as stand-alone activities do have an impact on the Vārkarīs, but most importantly, they also need to be seen as an integral part of the Vārī pilgrimage.

To arrange for the facilities mentioned above for the members, the diṇḍīs charge a minimum amount from the Vārkarīs. The amount of contribution ranges from Rs. 500/- to Rs. 3,000/-. The contribution to the diṇḍī may vary each year depending on the number of donors or sevekarī. During the fieldwork, I met several women who said that they save Rs. 100–200 every month so that they can come for the Vārī. For this purpose, some of the women in the village come together and start a bhīśī, a kitty. The diṇḍīs provide the payment receipt. Some of the diṇḍīs, especially in the city areas, also make online payments or net banking available.

The facilities provided by diṇḍīs may not be perfect, but they undoubtedly facilitate individuals' taking part in the Vārī. It enables individuals to rise above the routine back home and fully involve themselves in the experience of bhakti offered by the Vārī. A female Vārkarī who had joined the procession from Pune explained her reasons for joining the diṇḍī. She said,

There are many benefits to walking in a diṇḍī. Our diṇḍī attracts visitors from all over Maharashtra, including Nagar, Mumbai, Pune, Western Maharashtra, Konkan, Ratnagiri, and others. I was interacting with people from various parts of Maharashtra. We meet so many people over here. We even start to know more about ourselves, how to adjust and live with other people. The diṇḍī teaches everything. It teaches self-discipline and being responsible for one's actions. There is no discrimination, great or ordinary, rich or poor, young or old, women or men. There is no such discrimination. We get all kinds of life experiences in the diṇḍī. Apart from

¹⁴⁶ Interview conducted on 2nd July 2019.

these spiritual reasons, the logistical arrangements made by the *diṇḍī* are helpful, especially for women.¹⁴⁷

Another Vārkarī, who was also a *vīṇekarī*, said, “If one is walking alone, he/she may feel bored and feel tired easily. We don’t feel tired when we are walking in a *diṇḍī*. We chant the name of God, we sing *abhangas*, we play as much and whenever possible.”¹⁴⁸

Though some Vārkarīs register themselves with the *diṇḍīs*, they do not prefer walking with the *diṇḍī*, mainly because they cannot keep up with the pace and discipline of walking with the *diṇḍī*. The *pāḷkhī* has long halts and long stretches of walking. But some Vārkarīs prefer to take small breaks and cover a little distance at a time. Such Vārkarīs walk either ahead or at the end or on the side-lines of the procession. The Vārī pilgrimage allows each individual to walk at their own pace. However, walking in a *diṇḍī* along with the *pāḷkhī* requires more discipline as well as physical stamina. An old female Vārkarī said, “We walk at our own pace. The pace of *diṇḍī* at times is swift, at other times, too slow. The pace of *diṇḍī* needs to be adjusted to the speed of the entire procession and the *pāḷkhī*. So, we walk at our own pace, as we find it comfortable. We take small breaks and walk ahead of the *pāḷkhī*. Everyone can't adhere to the rules of the *diṇḍī*, so we walk at our own pace and as conveniently as possible.”¹⁴⁹

Some of the *pāḷkhīs* do not have a system of *diṇḍīs*, especially the smaller processions. One big group or a large *diṇḍī* becomes the *pāḷkhī* procession and is not divided into smaller units of *diṇḍīs*. The management of such processions is done on the basis of being a member of the *pāḷkhī*, and it is possible in such cases, as the number of Vārkarīs is relatively small, about 1000-1500. For the more prominent *pāḷkhī* processions like that of

¹⁴⁷ Interview conducted on 29th June 2019.

¹⁴⁸ Interview conducted on 12th July 2019.

¹⁴⁹ Interview conducted on 6th July 2019.

Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja and Tukārāma Mahārāja, the basic facilities of shelter, accommodation and food are managed by the *diṇḍī*s.

Mokaḷe Vārkarī: Unaffiliated Pilgrims

Though most Vārkarīs prefer to join a *diṇḍī*, not every Vārkarī can do so for various reasons. Sometimes the contribution is too high for some, or at times the registration in a *diṇḍī* is full, and generally, in the case of new Vārkarīs, they might not know about the *diṇḍī*s. But very few of them choose not to be a part of any *diṇḍī*. All the unaffiliated Vārkarīs are called “*mokaḷe Vārkarī*”. Mokaḷe literally translates as “untied” or “loose”. Some Vārkarīs do not opt to become members of any *diṇḍī*. One of them (unaffiliated Vārkarīs) said, “I don’t like going with the *diṇḍī*. It’s not very comfortable with the *diṇḍī*. One needs to maintain a pace of walking with the *diṇḍī*. We have to stick to a very tight schedule. We do not get the opportunity to get accommodation in tents. It is more like being bound. Walking on your own gives you freedom. Being unaffiliated with the *diṇḍī*, one can move at will. Sit when one feels tired, then walk again. At least five or six times, we have walked independently without affiliating with the *diṇḍī*.”¹⁵⁰

Another lady from the group of unaffiliated Vārkarīs threw some light on the financial aspects of walking unaffiliated. She said, “The expenses that one needs to bear while walking unaffiliated are lower than the contribution for *diṇḍī*s. The contribution for *diṇḍī* is Rs. 1,000 – Rs. 1,500/-. Considering the food served and the facilities provided by the *diṇḍī*, the contribution is not worth it.”¹⁵¹ To this, another gentleman added, “The government has made provisions for the tankers, so one does not need to pay for water. So, one can drink tanker water to quench their thirst. But, if you choose Bisleri (purified water bottle) over water from

¹⁵⁰ Interview conducted on 5th July 2019.

¹⁵¹ Interview conducted on 8th July 2019.

the tanker, as the latter can induce cough and cold, it inflates your cost by Rs. 70, assuming one needs six to seven bottles a day. We can't spend so much... But if one goes on spending like this, the sky is the limit."¹⁵² While explaining the arrangements for food, one of the Vārkarīs walking unaffiliated with any diṇḍī explained, "There are so many who offer food on the way of Pandhari (Pandharpur). People feed us with love. They insist (āgraha) that we eat. Because of the bliss of (Vithobā) māūlī, we are very comfortable walking unaffiliated."¹⁵³ He expressed his faith, saying that no one goes hungry on the way to Pandharpur. And while talking about sleeping arrangements, he said, "We make ourselves comfortable at any place. We are at the mercy of (Vithobā) māūlī. We carry plastic bags (which protect us from the rain). Or we look for a shed and lie down there just to give some relief to our backs."¹⁵⁴

One of the significant concerns that surfaced during the interaction with the unaffiliated Vārkarīs is that, while responding to the question regarding facilities such as toilets and bathing, most of them said that they defecate in the open, mainly in the fields. Though they sometimes use mobile toilets provided by the government or NGOs or ask locals to let them use toilets and bathrooms at their homes, it's not very often that they do this.

During the fieldwork, I came across two opposite ways to look at the diṇḍī –

- i. Those who were affiliated with some diṇḍī had a sense that one should not take anything from anyone outside the diṇḍī and should live with the minimum resources that the diṇḍī generated. There was a sense that the diṇḍī provides comfort while walking by providing different facilities and logistical support like food, accommodation, vehicles to

¹⁵² Interview conducted on 8th July 2019.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

carry the luggage, etc. It allows an individual to be in the company of fellow Vārkarīs, and it provides an experience of community pilgrimage. Importantly, as the logistical needs are taken care of by the diṇḍīs, it gives the members of diṇḍīs freedom to walk and immerse themselves in the experience of the Vārī. Even the arrangement of various programmes in the evening – bhajana, kīrtana, bhārūḍa, pravachana, haripātha etc. – needs some amount of money. Hence, the contribution to the diṇḍī is very well justified.

ii. Unaffiliated (mokaḷe) Vārkarīs were primarily of the opinion that some diṇḍīs charge exorbitant contributions that are not worth paying because the facilities claimed to be provided by the diṇḍīs are inadequate. They also believe that Pāṇḍuraṅga gives as much as needed to everyone in the form of many donors. They primarily complained about the strict discipline of the diṇḍī. Not everyone can maintain discipline and walk at the same speed as the diṇḍī. According to them, diṇḍīs bind individuals.

Though these are two opposite versions of being a member of a diṇḍī, most Vārkarīs prefer to be associated with the diṇḍī. Apart from the arrangement of accommodation and food, one of the crucial motives for joining a diṇḍī is to experience the collective dimensions of the Vārī. Or put it another way, being a member of a diṇḍī appears to allow a Vārkarī to be in the company of like-minded people or good or righteous individuals, observe their ways of conduct, and benefit from their spiritual practice. One can easily take part and experience the joy of collective bhakti practices like singing abhangas, dancing during kīrtanas, bhārūḍas, and playing games together as a member of a diṇḍī. As a result, even if material comfort management is not perfect, Vārkarīs generally don't complain. Even though there are several benefits to being a member of a diṇḍī, at times, diṇḍīs might lead to the experience of hierarchy and divisiveness. As Karve points out in her account, even though the diṇḍī that she walked into was a mixed-caste diṇḍī, the caste identities between Brahmins and Marāthās were strong and exclusivist. Similarly, during my fieldwork, I also came to know that some

diṇḍīs do not allow a woman to be a vīṇekarī or a kīrtanakārā or a pravachanakārā. Though this is not a general norm, a woman vīṇekarī is still a rarity.¹⁵⁵ Thus, even though the diṇḍīs may be instrumental in giving a fuller experience of collective bhakti practices and exhibit the more egalitarian ethos that the VS is known for, they may also serve as sites for reinforcing gender and caste hierarchies. Without a doubt, diṇḍī is a chief management unit of the pālkhī procession. Still, one also needs to look at diṇḍī as a facilitator of a bhakti public, providing a platform for individuals to interact with one another and have a shared experience of bhakti by walking together and participating in various bhakti practices.

Changing Nature of Diṇḍīs

Though traditionally, the diṇḍīs have been groups of Vārkarīs, generally hailing from the same locality, and even before that, from the same caste affiliation¹⁵⁶, the composition of the diṇḍīs is changing very rapidly. One can hardly witness the diṇḍīs based on caste affiliation anymore. Also, regional affiliation is not strictly followed. In fact, in some of the diṇḍīs, one can meet and interact with Vārkarīs from almost all over Maharashtra, of various castes, educational and occupational backgrounds, and social and economic strata. Generally, the old and the large diṇḍīs have become more cosmopolitan, allowing even foreigners, researchers, and members of other religious groups.

IT Diṇḍī

¹⁵⁵ During the 2019 Vārī pilgrimage, I came across some women vīṇekarīs. Especially in Santa Bahinabai Mahilā diṇḍī, only women can become vīṇekarīs.

¹⁵⁶ As mentioned by G.A. Deleury as well as Iravati Karve in their respective works.

The IT diṇḍī was organised as a sub-diṇḍī of the Deshmukh diṇḍī, which started in Pune. It is a diṇḍī of IT professionals working in different parts of India and the world. It provides an opportunity for IT professionals to participate in the Vārī pilgrimage suitable to their schedules. Though any individual can register with the diṇḍī (online), most of the members are IT professionals, as the name of the diṇḍī suggests. Most of them come on the weekends and walk with the pālkhī for two days. Some take leave from their professional commitments for all eighteen days of the pilgrimage and participate in the procession for the entire duration.

Banjārā Samāja Diṇḍī

In Maharashtra, the Banjārā community is classified as the Vimukta Jātī and Nomadic Tribes (VJNT). In this diṇḍī, the maximum number of members belong to the Banjārā community (caste). Though the diṇḍī is said to be open to people of all castes, most of its members are Banjara. In this diṇḍī, the line between the pālkhī procession and the diṇḍī is blurred. There are around 4,000–5,000 members in the group, and they walk with the pālkhī of Santa Sevālala, a Santa hailing from the same community. The entire procession walks together, and there is no separate diṇḍīs. In a way, it can be said to be a smaller pālkhī procession. The pālkhī starts from Mudhvadi, Aurangabad and covers a distance of about 350 kilometres. It takes about 21 days to reach Pandharpur.¹⁵⁷

Mahilā Diṇḍī

Mangalatai Kamble started all women's diṇḍī in the year 1998. The diṇḍī is named after Bahiṇabāī, a revered disciple of Tukārāma. Since 1998, Mangalatai has led the diṇḍī,

¹⁵⁷ The information of Banjārā Samāja diṇḍī is based on personal communication with a member of the diṇḍī. Interview conducted on 12th July 2019 during the Vārī pilgrimage.

and the diṇḍī walks with Tukārāma mahārāja's pālkhī procession. She started the diṇḍī with the understanding that women don't get the chance to get out of their houses and responsibilities of family. To provide an opportunity for women to step out and break the monotony of the routine, to provide space for interaction with other fellow women Vārkarīs, to get the chance to experience the joy of pālkhī sohaḷa and to walk on the path of spirituality, Mangalatai started this diṇḍī. Interestingly, all the tasks in the diṇḍī are performed by women, including being a vīṇekarī, performing kīrtana, delivering pravachana, except for the playing of pakhvāja.

NSS Diṇḍī

Every year, the student volunteers of the National Service Scheme (NSS) of Savitribai Phule Pune University and Punyashlok Ahilyabai Holkar Solapur University form a diṇḍī and take part in the Vārī pilgrimage. The primary goals of participation are social awareness and social service. This year, the volunteers mainly engaged in four activities. Firstly, cleaning. Once the pālkhī moves in the morning, the volunteers clean the entire area of the pālkhī tāḷa. Secondly, street plays on the issues of women's safety, domestic violence, the importance of cleanliness, environmental conservation, non-addiction to Tabaco, alcohol, etc. Third, tree planting along the route of the pālkhī procession. Finally, this year, students distributed patrāvaḷīs, a traditional Indian plate made of tree leaves, to the Vārkarīs and collected them to be composted.

Vārkarī Shikshan Sanstha Diṇḍī

The most spectacular and disciplined diṇḍī in the Dnnāneśvara mahārāja pālkhī sohala is that of *Vārkarī Shikshana Santha, Alandi*. The dress code of the diṇḍī is a white Kurta and a Dhoti (a long cotton cloth worn in a particular way). They are primarily students of the

Vārkarī Shikshan Sanstha, imparting education in Vaishnav philosophy, Bhāgavata Dharma, the teachings of the Santas of Maharashtra, and training students in various Vārkarī practices like bhajana, kīrtana, and also teaching them the techniques of playing instruments for these practices like the tabla, tāḷa, pakhavāja, etc. Since the members are well trained in various Vārkarī practices and understand the ethos of the sampradāya, it is the most disciplined diṇḍī in the entire procession, numbered one before the ratha of Dnyāneśvara mahārāja's pādukā. In a way, it provides guidelines for other diṇḍīs regarding the sequence of abhangas to be sung, the rhythm of the instruments, and ways of playing a variety of games.

In Dnyāneśvara's pālkhī procession, there are about 350 diṇḍīs which have received permanent numbers (puccā kramānka). The permanent number of a diṇḍī indicates that they have a fixed place in the pālkhī procession. Except for 27 diṇḍīs of honour (mānāchyā diṇḍyā) walk in front of the pālkhī. All remaining pālkhīs are arranged number wise behind the pālkhī, first diṇḍīs with a permanent number, starting from 1 and then diṇḍīs with a temporary number (kacchā kramānka). The list of the non-traditional and unique diṇḍīs given above is indicative. The non-traditional diṇḍīs can further be divided into two subcategories. Firstly, "awareness diṇḍīs", i.e., various government and non-governmental agencies, form diṇḍīs to spread awareness regarding social issues like environmental conservation, women's related concerns etc. Some of the examples of awareness diṇḍīs are- A Human Rights group from Mumbai formed "Sanvidhāna Jāgara Diṇḍī". The purpose of this diṇḍī was to make the Vārkarīs aware of the values of the constitution.

Similarly, the Maharashtra State Commission for Women (MSCW) formed a diṇḍī to spread awareness regarding various issues related to women, including domestic violence, female feticide, education of girl children, etc. They also distributed a booklet containing a summary of the laws pertaining to women. The Ministry of Environment of the state of Maharashtra had a "Parayāvaraṇ diṇḍī" to spread awareness regarding environmental issues.

The second category of the non-traditional *diṇḍīs* is “*sevā diṇḍīs*”. Several civil society groups form small *diṇḍīs* to offer *sevā* or service to the *Vārkarīs* on the way to the procession. Various kinds of *sevās* are provided during the *Vārī* pilgrimage, from cleaning the roads to distributing food, water etc. The most noticeable is the medical service. One can see the medical camps set up by various medical colleges or hospitals or by NGOs with the help of medical professionals. Mostly, the medicines are given free of cost, and these groups treat minor ailments.

Some of the non-traditional *diṇḍīs* accompany the *pālkhī sohaḷā* throughout the procession, whereas some prefer to go to particular places, depending on the services provided and the availability of resources. Unlike the traditional *diṇḍīs*, the non-traditional *diṇḍīs* generally do not walk with the procession. Depending on the purpose of the *diṇḍī*, they move in vehicles either ahead of the *pālkhī sohaḷā* or behind it. For example, the awareness *diṇḍīs* need to move before the *pālkhī* procession. They choose a spot for their set up and performances around the places of the halt of the *pālkhī*, whereas the *diṇḍīs* involved in cleaning move behind the procession. The individuals involved in these *diṇḍīs* are either volunteers or employees of the NGOs and government bodies. It needs to be noted that the distinction between the “awareness *diṇḍīs*” and “*sevā diṇḍīs*” is often very blurred.

The VS and the *diṇḍīs* are frequently chastised for being other-worldly or solely concerned with *bhakti*, with no regard for material well-being. However, it would be wrong to say there is a total lack of “social vision” among *Vārkarīs*. Apart from the message of *bhakti*, *diṇḍīs* also promote the fight against corruption, advocate saving the girl child, encourage the devotees to give up addictions like tobacco, and alcohol, adopt a rational approach and not indulge in blind faith, promote vegetarianism, oppose adultery.¹⁵⁸ Several

¹⁵⁸ Jacqueline Daukes has made similar observations. See “*Female voices*”, 62.

diṇḍīs participate in the Vārī pilgrimage to spread social awareness. To mention a few, the diṇḍī of volunteers of the National Service Scheme of the University of Pune, the “Sanvidhāna Jāgara diṇḍī”, Bahinabāi Mahilā diṇḍī, and so on. The diṇḍīs adopt various means to spread awareness on social issues, including street plays, distribution of pamphlets, etc. Very commonly, the diṇḍīs also adopt kīrtana or bhārūḍa; the classical Vārkarī performative practices, to spread their message. What is important to note here is that the diṇḍīs who take part in the Vārī for social awareness, which otherwise are not Vārkarīs, adopt the Vārkarī means to spread the “secular” message. Similarly, through classical Vārkarī practices such as pravachana, kīrtana, and bhārūḍa, gurus or those committed to and trained in Vārkarī practices disseminate the “secular” social message intertwined with the spiritual understanding based on Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, lives of Santa, and so on.

Understanding the functioning of diṇḍīs is important as diṇḍīs are the core organizing units of the Vārī pilgrimage. As phaḍas are essential to the organization of the VS (discussed in the previous chapter under section 2.2.8), diṇḍīs serve as anchoring points around which the Vārī procession is organised. Though the unaffiliated Vārkarīs is not an unusual phenomenon in the Vārī, the majority of Vārkarīs are members of diṇḍīs. Further, some of the main diṇḍīs that not only attract a large number of Vārkarīs but are also idealised by other newer diṇḍīs are generally associated with some phaḍa. This connection between phaḍas and diṇḍīs underlines the connection between the VS and the Vārī pilgrimage. It is through the phaḍas, in the larger context of the VS; and the diṇḍīs, in the particular context of the Vārī pilgrimage, the Vārkarī ethos is disseminated among Vārkarīs as well as non-Vārkarīs (in the strictest sense of the term), from one generation to the next and across the region of Maharashtra. The Vārkarī response to the socio-political issues is mainly shaped through the phaḍas, and the bhakti means like the Vārī pilgrimage, kīrtanas, pravachanas become instrumental in circulating those responses. Therefore, it can be argued that the phaḍas and

the *diṇḍīs* are the primary fields of interaction, wherein the exchange is not limited to the “religious-spiritual” domains but also includes “socio-political” interactions.

3.2.5. On reaching Pandharpur (Āṣadha Śuddha Ekādaśī to Āṣadha Pournimā)

The *diṇḍīs* dissolve on reaching Pandharpur. They are generally not responsible for making arrangements in Pandharpur. All *Vārkarīs* are expected to make their arrangements for food and shelter in Pandharpur. The entire village of Pandharpur takes the shape of lodging and boarding dormitories. Most houses in Pandharpur provide lodging for the *Vārkarīs* at a minimum charge. After reaching Pandharpur, on the day of Āṣadhi Ekādaśī, *Vārkarīs* bathe or take a holy dip in the waters of Chandrabhāgā. Pandharpur is situated on the banks of the river Bhīmā, and it is known as “Chandrabhāgā” in Pandharpur, as the flow of the river forms a curve in this part. After bathing in Chandrabhāgā, the *Vārkarīs* go to take darśana of Puṇḍalika, who is believed to be the first propagator of VS, then of Pāṇḍuraṅga and Rukmini or Rakhumai. It is important to note that the idols of Padurang and Rukmini are not in the same temple. Rukmini’s temple is a short distance away from the Vithhal temple. The *Vārkarīs* provide a mythological account of the reason behind these two separate temples. Then the darśana of other deities and samadhis of various Santas is taken. Then the *Vārkarīs* circumambulate the kshetra of Pandharpur, known as the *Nagar-pradakshina*. On the day of Ekādaśī, even the *pādukās* of Dnyāneśvara are taken for pradakshina, but they are not taken to the Vithhal temple as the temple is flooded with devotees.

During these four days, from Ekādaśī to Pournimā, almost in every corner of the village, bhajana, kīrtanas, bhārūḍas, gavaḷaṇi are performed. In some places, *Vārkarīs* do *pārāyaṇa* of Dnyāneśvārī or *pravachanas* of the various gurus are organized. On the day of *Pournimā* (full moon day), all the *Vārkarīs* gather at Gopaḷapura, which is a little away from the main temple. On this day, the naivedya is made of rice flakes, curd, and milk, known as

“kālā”. Kālā is the highest symbol of the Vārkarī belief in the ethos of equality. Kālā is the last ritual performed, marking the pilgrimage's end. After kālā, all the Vārkarīs start their return journey by whatever means of transport are available. Interestingly, many Vārkarīs do not go to the Vithhal temple but take darśana only from the pinnacle of the temple.

3.2.6. Parat-Vārī: Return Journey

Most Vārkarīs return on Dvādaśī (many of them refer to this day as Bārasa, meaning twelve), and the total duration of the pilgrimage is 18 days, i.e., it begins on the day of Jyeṣṭha Kṛṣṇa Aṣṭamī and ends on the day of Āṣadha Vadya Dvādaśī, which fell on June 25th and July 13th, respectively, in the year 2019. The Vārkarīs take a tempo, truck, bus, train, or other available vehicles. Even the state transport authority, as well as the Indian railways, make provisions for additional buses and trains respectively, starting from Ekādaśī to Pournimā, full moon day.

On the return journey of the pālkhī, only the phaḍakarīs, sevekarīs, vīṇekarīs, zenḍekarīs, pakhavājī, women with Tulsi and water jars, and the monthly Vārkarīs accompany the pālkhī. Monthly Vārkarīs are those who undertake a pilgrimage from Alandi to Pandharpur and back to Alandi every month. The Parat-Vārī is a small procession. The return journey is covered within ten days, i.e., from Āṣadha Pournimā to Āṣadha Vadya Daśamī, almost half the time of that of Vārī. On the day of Āṣadha Vadya Daśamī, the pālkhī reaches Alandi at around 7.30 in the evening. The villagers welcome the pādukās by performing pūjā. After taking pālkhī at the temples of Rāma, Viṣṇu, the pādukās are placed before the samādhī of Dnyāneśvara, and the āratī of Dnyāneśvara is performed. The Vārkarīs accompanying pālkhī on its return journey stay for a day in Alandi. The next day, i.e., Āṣadha Vadya Ekādaśī, after performing ‘nagara pradakṣiṇa’, or circumambulation of the village, the Vārkarīs return home. For the Vārkarīs who participate in the Parat-Vārī, the entire

pilgrimage is 34 days, according to the Indian Calendar, from Jyeṣṭha Kṛṣṇa Aṣṭamī to Āṣadha Kṛṣṇa Ekādaśī, which fell on June 25th and July 28th, respectively, in 2019.

Not all Vārkarīs stay in Pandharpur till the day of Pournimā. Many conclude their pilgrimage on the day of Dvādaśī and start their return journey by bus or whatever convenient means. On the return journey, or what is known as “Parat-Vārī”, only the phaḍakarīs, sevekarīs, and the monthly Vārkarīs (*mahinyāche Vārkarī*) accompany the pālkhī. Monthly Vārkarīs are those who undertake a pilgrimage from Alandi to Pandharpur and back to Alandi every month. The return journey is covered within ten days, i.e., from Āṣadha Pournimā to Āṣadha Vadya Daśamī. The return journey, or Parat-Vārī, from Pandharpur to Alandi or the respective starting places of various pālkhīs, is not accorded as much importance as the journey to Pandharpur or Vārī. There are hardly any literary accounts of ‘Parat-Vārī’. Recently, Sudhir Mahabal has penned his experience of Parat-Vārī in a book titled “Parat-Vārī”.¹⁵⁹ He considers Vārī, or journey to Pandharpur, as a celebration of prosperity or ‘Aīśwarya Vārī’, whereas ‘Parat-Vārī’ or return journey detachment or ‘Vairāgya Vārī’.

3.2.7. Pilgrimage and the Vārī

As mentioned in section 3.1.1. of this chapter, the Sanskrit term for pilgrimage is ‘yātrā’ or ‘tīrtha-yātrā’. What is interesting is that the sacred journey of the VS is always referred to as Pandharpur Vārī or Āṣadha Vārī, and never as Pandharpur Yātrā or Āṣadha Yātrā. The Vārī of the VS can be considered as pilgrimage only in a limited sense of a sacred

¹⁵⁹ Sudhir Mahabal, an employee of a Multi-National Corporation started going for Vārī out of curiosity. He is joining the Vārī pilgrimage for more than 10 years and was interested in the return journeys of the Pālkhīs. His journey to join Parat-Vārī was based on purely pragmatic concern of lack of sufficient leave to join the Vārī pilgrimage to Pandharpur. He joined Parat-Vārī for the first time in the year 2005. His experience of Parat-Vārī is penned in “Parat-Vārī”. Sudhir Mahabal, *Parat-Vārī*. Pune: Manovikas Prakashan, 2017. Also see, Sudhir Mahabal. “Interview”, *Vachal Tar Vachal*, News18 Lokmat. 1st October, 2017. https://Santa.youtube.com/watch?v=3SEdf_P1JLI.

journey involving movement from “home” to the “sacred place”. However, Vārī cannot be equated to yātrā in its classical sense. The Vārkarīs themselves make this distinction very clearly. Some essential features of the Vārī are not associated with other forms of pilgrimages. Vidyadhar Tathe writes, “to know the uniqueness of the Vārkarī sampradāya. We need to understand the subtle difference between Āṣadha Vārī and Āṣadha yātrā. Pandharpur Vārī is a unique practice of the Vārkarī sampradāya and is at the core of the Vārkarī sampradāya.”¹⁶⁰ Abhay Tilak writes:

There is a fundamental difference between the motives of ‘tīrtha-yātrā’ and ‘Pandharpur Vārī’ (Pandharichi payi Vārī). The place which helps transcend is a ‘tīrtha’. Therefore, transcending the ‘worldly life to attain mokṣa and heaven is traditionally understood as the motivation behind going for tīrtha-yātrā. As a result of this, accumulating spiritual merit (puṇya) is an integral part of tīrtha-yātrā, and spiritual merit is associated with the performance of rituals (karmakāṇḍa), bathing ceremony (snāna), donations (dāna-dharma), tonsure (daṇḍana - Muṇḍana), fasting (vrata-vaikalye).¹⁶¹

Tilak further adds that there is a qualitative difference between tīrtha-yātrā and Vārī. The Santas (of the VS) do not attach much importance to getting rid of “pāpa”, attaining mokṣa or heaven.¹⁶² Unlike several other pilgrimages, the Vārī is not to gain a material benefit from Viṭṭhala. There is no notion of Navas¹⁶³ in Pandharpur Vārī. The only consideration that the Vārkarīs have for going to the Vārī is getting “Prema” or love of Vithūmāulī and that of Santas. Tilak quotes Santa Tukārāma and writes, “Muktī koṇī tethe hātī neghe phukā/lutatīla sukhā premāchīyā//”. This means nobody is willing there (in the Vārī) for Mukti or liberation. What they seek is only prem or love.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ Tathe, 6.

¹⁶¹ Abhay Tilak, “Gat Ja Ga, Gat Ja Ga”, in *Vārī* ed. Devidas Pote (Thane: Param Mitra Prakashan, 2020), 75.

¹⁶² Tilak, 75.

¹⁶³ Navas can roughly be understood as a barter between God and devotee. It is a promise made by a devotee to the deity to offer something on fulfilling his or her material needs like prosperity, success, progeny, health etc.

¹⁶⁴ Tilak, 76.

Some yātrās are performed to avoid the anger of God or to avoid going to hell, and on the contrary, to secure one's place in heaven. However, none of these considerations are true in the case of Vārī. If a Vārkarī does not go to Pandharpur, there are no sanctions or even fear of Viṭhṭhala getting angry with the devotee. The critical point that needs attention is that there is no negative motive based on fear of God or the consequences of not doing certain things in a particular manner. But instead, it is the positive sentiment of love for God and, in turn, seeking love from God. Deleury, in his account of the Vārī, highlights these elements of voluntariness and love-seeking as the crucial elements of the Vārī. Deleury writes: "To go every year on pilgrimage is indeed for the Vārkarī an obligation: but this obligation should not be considered an external rule, the breaking of which would be penalised by any sanction. The Vārkarī is obliged to go on pilgrimage because if he did not, he would not be a Vārkarī... It is, therefore, the fulfilment of a vow taken freely by the member of the Panth."¹⁶⁵ Deleury further adds, "The Vārkarī on his way to Pandharpur has not the psychology of one who would abide by a rule but one who fulfils an essential and well-loved promise."¹⁶⁶

The tradition of Vārī is to be transferred from one generation to the next. In Vārī, coming across three or even four generations walking together. Pandharīchī Vārī/ Āhe mājhe gharī//, meaning Pandharpur Vārī runs in the family or it is a family tradition is a matter of pride for the Vārkarīs. The Vārī pilgrimage is essentially a family pilgrimage. Iravati Karve, as well as Jacqueline Daukes, make similar observations. What is interesting is that even though the tradition of Vārī runs into the family, generations after generations, Viṭhṭhala is not a kuldeva¹⁶⁷ and performing the Vārī pilgrimage is not a part of Kulachar.¹⁶⁸ Usually,

¹⁶⁵ Deleury, 103.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ The family god. Khandoba of Jejuri is an example of Kuladev.

¹⁶⁸ Tradition of family rituals, which must be performed.

going to a particular sacred place by family members, generations after generations, on some special occasion in the family like marriage, birth etc., is a phenomenon with respect to the kuladevī or kuladeva. However, one never comes across Viṭhṭhala as a kuladeva. Despite this going to Pandharpur annually becomes a family practice out of voluntary obligation. As a result, the Vārkarī ethos is transferred from one generation to the next. In this sense, Viṭhṭhala is truly a folk god – “lokadeva”¹⁶⁹ and the Vārī pilgrimage - a folk tradition – “lokāchāra”. In short, while the Vārī fulfils the fundamental criterion of pilgrimage, i.e. moving from the routine – “home” – to the sacred place, it differs qualitatively from the general understanding of pilgrimage.

3.2.8. Importance of Vārī Pilgrimage

The importance of the Vārī pilgrimage lies in its all-inclusive character. People and devotees from the length and breadth of Maharashtra and further from the Marathi speaking region gather together for the Vārī pilgrimage on an annual basis. The tradition of Vārī is one of the oldest and the most popular in Maharashtra. Among the cardinal pillars that define Maharashtrian culture, the Vārī pilgrimage ranks relatively high on the list. Through the means of Vārī, a platform is made available to every individual, irrespective of differences of class, caste, gender, education, and occupation, to pursue their spiritual quest and attain great heights by following in the footsteps of Santas. The Vārī pilgrimage is the public manifestation of collective ways of bhakti as institutionalised through the Vārkarī sapmrādāya. It is not just a pilgrimage, a journey to the sacred site, but an opportunity to witness, participate in and experience almost all kinds of collective bhakti practices, including bhajana kīrtana, pravachana, kheḷa, and nāma-japa.

¹⁶⁹ R. C. Dhere refers to Viṭhṭhala as “lokadev” – meaning people’s god.

Iravati Karve sheds light on the importance of Vārī in Maharashtrian culture. She writes: “I was getting to know my Maharashtra anew every day. I found a new definition of Maharashtra: the land whose people go to Pandharpur for pilgrimage... All were Marathi speaking people-coming from different castes, but singing the same songs, the same verses of Vārkarī cult, speaking to each other, helping each other, singing songs to each other.”¹⁷⁰ Karve further believes that the Vārī pilgrimage was also instrumental in standardizing the Marathi language. She explains, “I witnessed how the language and culture of Maharashtra had spread among all its social layers... People speaking many dialects sang the same verses and thus learned a standard language. Their learning was achieved in a massive dose but without pain or compulsion.”¹⁷¹

In the writings of Deleury as well as Karve, this observation is expressed. Deleury writes: “The pilgrimage is popular in more than one way. It is a social event in the country's life, a festive date in the calendar of the villagers. The Vārī pilgrimage creates a network of communication. The various pāḷkhīs, far from only the main roads, often take to side-roads and even footpaths. In that way, they pass through villages which are not situated on the main lines of communications.”¹⁷² Similarly, Karve draws a parallel between an education institute and a Vārī. She considers Vārī as a great source of learning at the individual level and community education. Karve writes, “the three characteristics of education were present here (in the Vārī): the preservation of traditional knowledge, its cultivation, and its transmission to the next generation.”¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Karve, 22.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Deleury, 107.

¹⁷³ Karve, 23.

The pilgrims not only hear and discuss the topics of religion and spirituality, but as they stay, eat, sing, dance, and play together, they also share their worries and sorrows. It is no wonder that specific importance is attached to the system of *diṇḍī*, or collectivity, in the Vārī pilgrimage. Further, unlike the opinions of the critics of the Vārī, it is not merely an other-worldly affair. The Vārī is very much a this-worldly affair, providing a space for shaping, reshaping, and negotiating the social ethos. However, the Vārī or the VS were unable to translate the ethos of spiritual democracy, i.e., allowing every individual representation and opportunity to achieve the highest possible spiritual goal without discrimination based on caste, class, or gender, into a social reality. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the institution of Vārī kept the spaces inclusive and open for dialogue. The Vārī and the other bhakti practices like *kīrtana*, *pravachana*, *bhārūḍa* employed during the Vārī help intertwine the message of spirituality with the immediate concerns of the people, having a direct bearing on how the social ethos is shaped, reshaped and negotiated.

3.3. Conclusion

Based on the discussion in the above two sections dealing with pilgrimage in Hinduism and the Vārī pilgrimage, some pertinent questions can be asked concerning the pilgrimage processes. Though the questions framed here are specific to the Vārī pilgrimage, similar questions can be asked about other pilgrimages. The questions are: whether social interactions taking place during the Vārī pilgrimage are instrumental in creating a unified, homogenous community of Vārkarīs? Do they lead to include temporary participants in the Vārkarī practices within the scope of Vārkarī identity, during the pilgrimage and after that? Does the Vārī pilgrimage help transcend the differences and hierarchies based on caste and gender, or are social differences and individual identities sharpened during the pilgrimage processes? An effort is made to look for answers to these questions in the following two

chapters. The next chapter, i.e. chapter four, discusses two theoretical concepts of “communitas” given by Victor Turner and “a bhakti public” provided by Christian Lee Novetzke. It seems that these concepts can help understand the social processes involved in pilgrimages.

Chapter Four

Examining the Pilgrimage Processes: “Communitas” and “A Bhakti Public”

Introduction

As mentioned in the chapter on pilgrimage, movement or journey from one place to another or from “home” to the “sacred site” is crucial to any pilgrimage. Apart from the aspect of journeying, most pilgrimages are social affairs. Though pilgrimages are well recognised as part of the religious affairs of individuals, in all practical senses, most pilgrimages are part of “the public religion”. They do not confine themselves to the “private religious sphere”. From the logistical arrangements of the journey to the notions of sacrality and rituals performed at the sacred sites, the acts involved in pilgrimages are usually public. Consequently, pilgrimages, both the journey and the sacred sites, serve as social interaction sites between individuals and groups. The motivation to go on a pilgrimage may be personal, ranging from a desire for good health and wealth to spiritual transcendence. It may have a bearing on an individual’s experience of the outcome/merit of the pilgrimage. However, pilgrimages also serve as avenues for social interaction, resulting in social processes and possibly defining and/or re-defining an individual’s sense of belongingness to a particular community of pilgrims and one’s understanding of “self” and “other.”

This thesis’ primary inquiry is to see if the pilgrimages serve as the sites wherein social and political power relations can be negotiated between individuals and groups, both among the pilgrims themselves and between pilgrims and non-pilgrims. In the light of this question, it is vital to see if the pilgrimages create homogenous communities of pilgrims or whether separate individual and group identities get sharpened in the pilgrimage journey. Concerning the specific case of the Vārī pilgrimage, I focus on the question of whether the

caste and gender hierarchies continue to mark the Vārī pilgrimage or do it serves as the site to negotiate power relations among individuals and groups based on caste and gender. Further, this chapter enquires into the question: does the Vārī pilgrimage create a homogenous, well-defined Vārkarī community, or are there multiple layers to understand what constitutes a Vārkarī community. Based on the discussion in the previous chapter, it seems that pilgrimages in general, and the Vārī pilgrimage, in particular, are the sites where both these possibilities – realization of a homogenous community and the continuation of social divisions marked by caste and gender may co-exist. As a result, there is a need to look for ideas and concepts that can account for these two seemingly contradictory trends in pilgrimage processes. This chapter discusses the concepts of “communitas” given by Victor Turner and “a bhakti public” provided by Novetzke. On analysing and comparing these two concepts in the context of the Vārī pilgrimage, the chapter goes on to enquire if these two concepts help understand the social processes and interactions during the Vārī pilgrimage.

The first section of this chapter, i.e. 4.1, titled “pilgrimage journey and social processes”, reviews the literature from where some threads on theoretical understanding of social and political interactions during the pilgrimage can be gathered. This section highlights that very few academic enquiries focus on the actual journeys while studying pilgrimage and further, rarely are the attempts made to understand and theorise interactions among the pilgrims and between pilgrims and non-pilgrims. In this direction, significant contributions are made by Victor Turner. Turner’s conceptualisation of “communitas” and discussion of “structure and antistructure” in different writings are helpful for the enquiry of this chapter. Section 4.2 is dedicated to the discussion on “communitas” at length. Having pointed out the strengths and limitations of the concept of communitas in section 4.2, the following section, i.e. 4.3, explores the possibility of adopting a broader concept that will capture the mixed and, at times, even the contradictory trends during the pilgrimages. To look for an alternative

conceptual category, this section discusses the idea of “a bhakti public” given by Christian Lee Novetzke. This section concludes with the discussion on the possibility of adopting the concept of “a bhakti public” better to understand the multifaceted interactions during the Vārī pilgrimage. It is important to note that assuming “a bhakti public” as a conceptual framework does not necessarily reject the construct of “communitas” entirely. The following section is, 4.4, draws a relation between a bhakti public, a Vārkarī public and the Vārkarī Sampradāya. It argues that a Vārkarī public can be understood as a part of bhakti publics, emerging around the bhakti practices of the Vārkarīs, importantly the Vārī pilgrimage. In juxtaposition to a Vārkarī public, which is more fluid, flexible, the Vārkarī Sampradāya is well organised and structured, having set rules of code of conduct. Section 4.5 concludes the chapter.

4.1. Pilgrimage Journey and Social Processes

According to the definitions of pilgrimage given in the previous chapter, journeying, whether on foot or with the assistance of modern means of communication, is an essential part of the pilgrimage. The aspect of journeying is relatively understudied, and the works that discuss the pilgrimage journey generally give a descriptive account rather than an analytical one. John Stanley argues, “Movement is a key to understanding pilgrimage... Motion carries the pilgrim away from home, and movement leads him across physical and metaphysical boundaries.”^{1 2} Even though journeying or movement from one sacred site to another is crucial, most writings on pilgrimages focus on the *tīrtha*, or the sacred place, rather than the journey. As mentioned earlier, Bhardwaj believes that the pilgrimage with the transcendental motives (of the pilgrims) focuses more on the journey itself than *tīrtha* or deity.

¹ Stanley, “Great Maharashtrian Pilgrimage”, 65.

² Bhardwaj, 6.

Jacobsen has made a similar observation. He observes that not much attention is paid in the *Puraṇas* to the journey before one arrives at the *Kṣetra* or pilgrimage site.³ He further argues that the *Dharmanibandhas*, as well as *Tristhalīsetū*, hardly give any importance to pilgrimage travel. Jacobsen concludes, “If it were the case that the reward is only due to being present at the place, there is no reward from the journey itself. The pilgrimage then does not produce any benefit in addition to the *tīrtha*. It is the *tīrtha* that gives the benefit and not the travel.”⁴ He also notes that the description of pilgrimage travel is often found in the hagiographies and biographies of *sadhus* and saints.⁵ However, when one looks at the pilgrimage from a socio-political perspective, it is imperative to focus on the journey of pilgrims and their interaction with one another and society at large. While studying pilgrimages, the journey or movement of pilgrims should be given as much attention as the sacred site itself.

As pilgrimages are primarily movements of individuals from one place to another, they involve interaction between various sections of society for multiple purposes. Multiple individuals are involved in the interaction with a pilgrim. From families of the pilgrims, those engaged in providing transport, food, accommodation, guides, state clearances at the borders and check posts, medical facilities, priests, and local vendors selling materials to perform rituals at the sacred site, a pilgrim interacts with several individuals during the journey. Every pilgrimage develops its ecosystem and creates the patterns of circulation of ideas through these interactions. However, the search for these patterns of social interactions is a relatively new field of academic study.

³ Jacobsen, 148.

⁴ Ibid, 149.

⁵ Ibid, 150.

The lack of focus on the journey itself in pilgrimage studies has also led to a lack of systematic understanding of the social processes involved during the pilgrimage journey. As mentioned above, the pilgrimage journey is essential in terms of the physical movement of pilgrims from home to the sacred site, the metaphysical and spiritual movement of individuals, and the movement of groups on a large scale. The pilgrimages can be seen as sites where people move together towards a goal – the sacred site. Moving together provides individuals and groups to interact with each other. These interactions would include the themes of religion and spirituality, usually. However, it can be presumed that these interactions do not confine themselves only to the spiritual and religious domain. Still, they also include interactions related to the so-called “secular” concerns or concerns of the common good, including the economy, good rains, agricultural decisions, government policies and elections.

Like the Vārī pilgrimage, Pilgrimages create a space for these interactions across the social strata and the region. For over eighteen days, pilgrims walk together, stay together, sing and dance together, which provides them with an ample opportunity to deliberate upon the “religious-spiritual” and “socio-political-economic” issues. Therefore, it would be safe to argue that pilgrimage sites allow largescale interactions between individuals and groups. Pilgrimages are one of the most potent sites where cultural norms are shaped, negotiated, and transmitted from one generation to the next and from one place to another. However, the literature analysing pilgrimages as social phenomena and having the potential to shape the cultural ethos of a given society is scanty.

Victor Turner makes a remarkable effort to understand the social processes during the pilgrimage through his concept of “communitas”. Another essential term to understand the social-political impact of the bhakti practices is “a bhakti public”, given by Christian Lee Novetzke. Novetzke employs the term “a bhakti public” regarding the production of bhakti

literature. However, in this chapter, an attempt is made to determine whether the term “a bhakti public” can be used to understand the social processes involved in the Vārī pilgrimage.

4.2. Communitas

4.2.1. Meaning and Types of Communitas

Rarely have scholars attempted to analyse the social processes involved in pilgrimages. The seminal works in this regard are written by Victor Turner titled “*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structures*”⁶, an essay titled “*The Center Out There: Pilgrim’s Goal*”,⁷ and a chapter titled “*Pilgrimage as Social Processes*”⁸ in “*Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*”. In these works, Turner develops the idea of “communitas” to understand social processes at work and the transformation of one’s sense of self in comparison to the other during the pilgrimages. Turner understands pilgrimages as anti-structures moving away from the structures of everyday life and hierarchies, which, according to him, allows pilgrims to transcend one’s individualistic understanding of self to the sense of “brotherhood”, which he terms “communitas”.⁹ Though there are some criticisms of Turner’s model of pilgrimage understanding, his analysis remains an important reference point for understanding social processes during the pilgrimage.

Turner has given a broad generalisation about the pilgrimage journey and the social processes. He regards pilgrimage as a social enterprise or social drama.¹⁰ He deals with

⁶ Turner, *Ritual Process*.

⁷ Turner, “Center Out There”.

⁸ Turner, “Pilgrimage as Social Processes”,

⁹ Turner, *Center Out There*, 220-21.

¹⁰ Ibid, 192.

pilgrimage as a social process at five different levels: pilgrims' preparation for departure, their collective experience of the journey, their arrival at the pilgrim centre, their behaviour and impression at the centre, and their return journey.¹¹ Turner deals not only with a particular group of pilgrims but also accounts for the social and cultural relationships between pilgrim groups and the successive socio-cultural environments through which the pilgrimage procession passes. For him, pilgrimage is a journey from the structure to the formation of *communitas*, from the divisiveness of the structure with its rigidly defined roles and status to the collective whole, of community feeling not restricted to blood kinship or familiar locality.¹² He juxtaposes structure and *communitas* as "two major models" for human interrelatedness, juxtaposed and alternating.¹³

Turner explains, "The first (model) is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of "more" or "less". The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders."¹⁴ The difference between *communitas* and structure is further explained as - "the distinction between structure and *communitas* is not simply the familiar one between "secular" and "sacred," or that, for example, between politics and religion."¹⁵ Turner writes, "structure tends to be pragmatic and this-worldly; while *communitas* is often speculative and generates imagery and philosophical

¹¹ Turner, *Center Out There*, 192.

¹² Turner, *Dramas, Fields, Metaphors*, 201.

¹³ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 96.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

ideas.”¹⁶ According to Turner, *communitas* is the “recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be no society.”¹⁷ Turner argues that there is a dialectical relation between structure and *communitas*. He writes, “for individuals and groups, social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality.”¹⁸ Further, he adds, “maximization of *communitas* provokes maximization of structure, which in its turn produces revolutionary strivings for renewed *communitas*.”¹⁹ From this discussion, it can be inferred that the dialogical relation between structure laden with hierarchy and *communitas* creates a collective unity.

Distinguishing between structure and *communitas*, Turner argues, “... *communitas* has an existential quality; it involves the whole man in his relation to other whole men. On the other hand, the structure has cognitive quality; ... it is essentially a set of classifications, a model for thinking about culture and nature and ordering one’s public life.”²⁰ For Turner, the sense of homogeneity and equality with everyone else, within and beyond the structure, is inherent to each society. Through the social processes and interactions, this intrinsic generic bond is realised. He further argues that *communitas* is that kind of model of society which is unstructured, homogenous, and “whose boundaries are ideally coterminous with those of the human species.”²¹

¹⁶ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 133.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 97.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 96.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 129.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 127.

²¹ *Ibid*, 132.

Based on Robert Merton's understanding of the social structure, Turner defines structure as "the patterned arrangements of role sets, status sets, and status sequences" (original quotes) consciously recognized and regularly operative in a given society and closely bound up with legal and political norms and sanctions."²² Further, he adopts the notion of *gemeinschaft* or community as used by Ferdinand Tönnies to formulate the understanding of *communitas*. Turner writes: "*Gemeinschaft* ... refers to the bonds between members of tightly knit, multifunctional groups, usually with a local basis, has "social structure" in this sense. But insofar as it refers to a directly personal egalitarian relationship, *gemeinschaft* connotes *communitas*, for example, where Tönnies considers friendship to express a kind of *gemeinschaft* or "community feeling" that is tied to neither blood nor locality."²³

While drawing the connection between the sacred sites and *communitas*, Turner suggests that the sacredness or holiness of an object or a place is determined by its ability to offer individuals the experience of boundlessness, where the boundaries of role and structure are transgressed. Hinting at what is considered holy or sacred, Turner suggests, "it is almost everywhere held to be sacred or "holy," possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency."²⁴ According to Turner, the realisation of *communitas* is based upon the human faculties of reason, volition, and memory.²⁵ Turner argues, "Communitas is not solely the product of biologically inherited drives released from cultural constraints. Rather, it is the product of peculiarly human faculties, including rationality,

²² Turner, *Dramas, Fields, Metaphors*, 201.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 128.

²⁵ Ibid.

volition, and memory, which develop with experience of life in society.”²⁶ What is interesting to see is Turner’s treatment of sacred and secular faith and reason while constructing *communitas*. On the one hand, for Turner, *communitas* is the experience of the wholeness of humankind, unbound by structures, and he considers pilgrimages as the potential sites for forming *communitas*. And simultaneously, on the other hand, Turner argues that *communitas* is a product of rationality and volition. It is crucial to see Turner’s treatment of what is generally known as a religious phenomenon, i.e., pilgrimage on one hand and reason and preference, which are usually seen as opposed to religion, on the other hand. For this work, Turner’s argument that the social processes involved in the pilgrimages lead to the realisation of this generic bond among individuals and groups, leading to the emergence of *communitas*, is of immense importance. There seems to be no contradiction between an individual’s pilgrimage experience and the rational thinking process for Turner. Even though Turner has written extensively on different religious practices of various communities, the discussion in this chapter is limited to Turner’s understanding of the social processes involved in pilgrimage in general and the Vārī pilgrimage in particular.

Turner answers the question of the fate of *communitas* and whether the *communitas* sustains itself over a long period and across the members of *communitas*. He explains: “*Communitas* itself soon develops a structure, in which free relationships between individuals become converted into norm-governed relationships between social personae.”²⁷ This process - from structure to realisation of *communitas*, and *communitas* again developing structure - is a continuous one. Turner accounts for this dialectic relation between

²⁶ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 128.

²⁷ Ibid, 132.

communitas and structure by categorising communitas into three kinds. First, existential communitas; second, normative communitas; and third, ideological communitas.

The first kind of communitas is known as “existential or spontaneous communitas”,²⁸ wherein there is direct, immediate, and total confrontation of human identities. Those experiencing such a kind of communitas tend to think of mankind as a homogenous, unstructured, and free community.²⁹ The experience of existential communitas is always “inward experience”.³⁰ The second kind of communitas, according to Turner, is “normative communitas”. Such a kind of communitas is formed “under the influence of time, the need to mobilize and organize resources, and the necessity for social control among the members of the group in pursuance of these (collective) goals.”³¹ In this process, the original existential communitas is organized into a social system that Turner calls normative communitas.³² The third and final form of communitas is labelled as “ideological communitas”. The term ideological communitas is applied to that model of societies which exemplifies or supplies the optimal conditions for existential communitas.³³ In Turner’s words, “ideological communitas is at once an attempt to describe the external and visible effects – the outward form, it might be said – of an inward experience of existential communitas, and to spell out the optimal conditions under which such experiences might be expected to flourish and multiply.”³⁴ He further adds that both, normative and ideological communitas operate “within

²⁸ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 132.

²⁹ Turner, *Center Out There*, 193.

³⁰ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 132.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Turner, *Center Out There*, 193.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 132.

the domain of structure”.³⁵ Turner argues that all existential or spontaneous *communitas* inevitably or deterministically witness “decline and fall” by developing into a structure and bound by rules and law.³⁶

In the context of the relationship between *communitas* and pilgrimages, Turner argues that while the entire situation (of pilgrimage) fosters the emergence of existential *communitas*, it is the normative *communitas* that constitutes the characteristic of a social bond among pilgrims and between pilgrims and those who offer them help and hospitality on their holy journey.³⁷ While discussing the social processes involved in pilgrimage, Turner argues, “individual responsibility is now extended from the domain of immediate kin and neighbourhood relations in localised normative systems to that of the generic human “brother” and the “neighbour” who might be anyone in the wide world but whom one should love. The “other” becomes a “brother”; specific siblingship is extended to all who share a system of beliefs.”³⁸ Turner believes that societies based on agriculture but with a relatively advanced degree of division of craft labour provide the optimal conditions for flourishing pilgrimage systems. With limited industrial development, such societies are those with patrimonial and feudal political regimes and those with a well-marked urban-rural division.³⁹ Turner regards the habitual or familiar patrimonial and feudal set-up as the structure and the non-familiar or unknown pilgrimage journey as the antistructure. He believes that pilgrimage is the ordered antistructure of patrimonial-feudal systems.⁴⁰

³⁵ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 132.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Turner, *Center Out There*, 194.

³⁸ Ibid, 207.

³⁹ Ibid, 195.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 204.

4.2.2. Structure and Anti-structure

For Turner, pilgrimages are a “liminal’ phenomena”.⁴¹ He explains liminality as when the subject is spatially separated from the familiar and habitual, constituting a cultural domain that is extremely rich in cosmological meaning, conveyed primarily by nonverbal symbols.⁴² To quote him, “Liminality represents a negation of many of the features of preliminary social structures and an affirmation of another order of things, stressing generic rather than particularistic relationships.”⁴³ He argues, “Liminality, the optimal setting of *communitas* relations, and *communitas*, a spontaneously generated relationship between levelled and equal total and individuated human beings, stripped off structural attributes, together constitute what one might call, ‘antistructure’”.⁴⁴ Further, he clarifies, “*Communitas*, however, is not a structure with its signs reversed minuses instead of pluses, but rather the *fons et origo*⁴⁵ of all structures and, at the same time, their critique. Its very existence puts all social structural rules in question and suggests new possibilities.”⁴⁶ Turner contends that the *communitas*, which emerged from the social processes involved in the pilgrimage, calls all social structural rules into question and suggests new possibilities. It strains towards universalism and openness.⁴⁷ According to Turner, even though the pilgrimages might not eliminate the structural divisions present in a given society, they at least reduce the sharpness

⁴¹ Turner, *Center Out There*, 191.

⁴² Ibid, 213.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 216.

⁴⁵ Merriam-Webster defines *fons et origo* as source and origin. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fons%20et%20origo>, accessed on 22nd October 2020.

⁴⁶ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, Metaphors*, 202.

⁴⁷ Turner, *Center Out There*, 216.

and force of their divisiveness.⁴⁸ To emphasize this argument, Turner writes: “In its genesis and central tendency, *communitas* is universalistic.”⁴⁹ While seeking oneness, *communitas* does not withdraw from diversity; instead, it is to eliminate divisiveness and realise non-duality.⁵⁰ Karen Pechillis points out, “For Turner, an act of temporary suspension occurs in the pilgrimage which is in the interest of emphasizing the unified whole (religion) over the reality of the diverse parts (society). In the context of the pilgrimage, religion is the antithesis of the divisiveness of social distinctions.”⁵¹

It seems that Turner uses the meta-categories to understand the social processes involved in the pilgrimages. The argument that the *communitas* developed through the social processes at the pilgrimage sites and journeys questions all structural rules and hierarchies is a teleological one. Pilgrimages indeed offer possibilities for bringing about social change, but that is not the deterministic characteristic of pilgrimages. As there is a possibility of bringing in egalitarian social change with the realisation of *communitas* through pilgrimages, there is also a possibility of perpetuating power hierarchies prevalent in the structure through pilgrimages. Therefore, pilgrimages need to be seen as social interaction sites rather than a teleological process of creating *communitas*. Pilgrimages need not be seen as anti-structures; instead, pilgrimages may serve the purpose of structures and may aid in substantiating the rules of hierarchy present in the structure. Pilgrimages are sites of the circulation of ideas. The ideas circulating through the pilgrimage circuits may substantively influence pilgrims. However, the ideas circulating at the pilgrimage sites are not necessarily egalitarian and

⁴⁸ Turner, *Center Out There*, 221.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 217.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*.

⁵¹ Karen Pechilis, “To pilgrimage It”, in *Journal of Ritual Studies*, Summer 1992, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Summer 1992), pp. 59-91.

transformative, but they may also be divisive and status-quoist. Therefore, to put it in the Turnerian framework, pilgrimage may serve as antistructure and structure. They might have the potential to develop into a community, but they may also lead to more divisive and isolating tendencies among groups and individuals. Considering these diverse and contradictory possibilities offered by pilgrimages, a more nuanced understanding of social processes during pilgrimages is needed, and Turner himself makes such an attempt in his essay on the Vārī pilgrimage.

4.2.3. Universalistic Construction of Communitas vs Communitas as a Possibility

In the later work “*Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*,” Turner takes a more nuanced view of the pilgrimage processes. He argues that instead of pilgrimages leading to *communitas*, the sense of boundless connectedness with universal humanity, and beyond the sense of divisiveness of the structure, pilgrimages may themselves generate fanaticism. He writes: “when *communitas* becomes force rather than “grace,” it becomes totalism, the subordination of the part to the whole instead of free creation of the whole by the mutual negotiation of its parts.”⁵² He argues that the pre-condition for pilgrimages to become egalitarian *communitas*, or at least to move in that direction, is when the *communitas* operates within relatively broad structural limits. He argues, “Yet when *communitas* operates within relatively wide structural limits, it becomes a means of binding diversities together and overcoming cleavages for the groups and individuals within structured systems.”⁵³

To substantiate this point, rather than understanding *communitas* as the concrete realisation of the universal, *communitas* serves more as a possibility to bind diversities and

⁵² Turner, *Dramas, Fields, Metaphors*, 206.

⁵³ Ibid.

remove the sharpness of differences. Turner gives an example of the Vārī pilgrimage and refers to the account given by Karve and Deleury. Turner quotes Deleury and writes: “The Vārkarī solution is a happy compromise between the reality of the distinctions between castes and the ideal of a social community to unite them... the hardships of the way contribute to bind the various groups together and the goodwill of all prevents hurt and prevents the feelings. Slowly but truly a *pāḷkhī* consciousness (embracing all its sub caste divisions) grows through the willingness and kindness of all.”⁵⁴ According to Turner, even though the structural differences of various kinds might not be eliminated by the pilgrimage process, “nevertheless, it may be said that, while the pilgrimage situation does not eliminate the structural divisions, it attenuates them, removes their sting.”⁵⁵ Turner further explains: “Moreover, pilgrimage liberates the individual from the obligatory everyday constraints of status and role, defines him as an integral human being with a capacity for free choice, and within the limits of his religious orthodoxy presents for him a living model of human brotherhood and sisterhood.”⁵⁶ Turner concludes, “Thus, social and cultural structures are not abolished by the *comminutas* and *amnesia*, but the sting of their divisiveness is removed so that the fine articulation of their parts in a complex heterogeneous unity can be better appreciated... I’m suggesting that the social mode appropriate to all pilgrimages represents a mutually energizing compromise between structures and *communitas*... where differences are accepted or tolerated rather than aggravated into grounds of aggressive opposition.”⁵⁷

Turner has given a systematic analysis of the social processes involved in pilgrimage. More importantly, unlike most of the works on pilgrimage, he has given the study of social

⁵⁴ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, Metaphors*, 207.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Turner, *Center Out There*, 221.

⁵⁷ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, Metaphors*, 208.

processes involved in pilgrimages. At the core of his analysis is a group or society. For Turner, pilgrimages are instrumental in transcending individuals' self-centric, individualistic identity into a collective identity with the sense of brotherhood that forms *communitas* anchored around collective experience. The formation of *communitas* serves as the antistructure and thereby alters the relationship one shares with the community and society, at least temporarily.

In Turnerian understanding, *communitas* seems to be an ideal type that could potentially emerge from the pilgrimage. For him, *communitas* allows individuals to think of humankind as a homogenous, unstructured, free community⁵⁸ wherein distinctive; divisive identities are overcome. Further, he views pilgrimage as an antistructure that challenges the structure's hierarchies and alters the relationship that one shares with the community and society. He believed that, while pilgrimages may not produce an ideal type of *communitas*, they do provide the opportunity to transcend the structure's divisiveness. Turner also sees pilgrimage as liberating individuals from everyday constraints of status and role.⁵⁹

Further, drawing the opposition between structure and *communitas*, Turner writes: "The historical fate of *communitas* seems to have been to pass from openness to closure, from "free" *communitas* to the solidarity given by bounded structure, from option to obligation... But in its genesis and central tendency, *communitas* is universalistic. Networks, like most species, get specialized; *communitas*, like man and his direct forebears, remains open and unspecialized, a spring of pure possibility as well as the immediate release from day to day structural necessities and obligatoriness."⁶⁰ Thus, Turner views pilgrimage as - "pilgrimages seem to be regarded by self-conscious pilgrims both as the occasion on which

⁵⁸ Turner, *Center out There*, 193.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 221.

⁶⁰ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, Metaphors*, 202.

communitas is experienced and journeys towards a sacred source of communitas, which is also seen as a source of healing and renewal.”⁶¹ To sum up, for Turner, pilgrimage is a journey that offers the possibility of experiencing communitas to the pilgrim. He seems to understand the sacred site or *tīrtha* as the sacred source of communitas.

It seems that, for Turner, structure and communitas are binary opposites. The structure is marked by status and roles, which are divisive and hierarchical. In contrast, communitas is the antistructure, which challenges the rules and well-defined roles of the structure and allows the possibility of realising the non-dual, non-homogenous nature of humankind and an open and free community. He considers that pilgrimages, the destination, and the journey are antistructures and open up the possibility of experiencing communitas. He demonstrates this with several examples. Even though he attaches a caveat to this claim that the communitas might not eliminate all differences and divisiveness of the structure, it at least reduces their sharpness. The experience of communitas would make individuals open to tolerating differences rather than aggravating the opposition. However, in my opinion, this seems to be a lopsided understanding of pilgrimage processes.

4.2.4. Communitas and the Vārī Pilgrimage

In his work *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, while looking at pilgrimage as a social process, among other pilgrimages, Turner also analyses the Pandharpur pilgrimage or what is popularly known as Vārī. He primarily relies on the accounts of the Vārī given by G. A. Deleury and Iravati Karve. While analysing the Vārī pilgrimage and social interactions during the Vārī, Turner seems to be moving away from his universalistic construction of communitas in the earlier work “*The Ritual Process*”. In this latter analysis, Turner

⁶¹ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, Metaphors*, 203.

acknowledges the apparently contradictory trends present in the pilgrimage process; wherein pilgrimages do not necessarily lead to a sense of collective unity and homogenous, universal *communitas*. The hierarchies present in the structure may manifest themselves in the pilgrimages. In the context of the Vārī pilgrimage, Turner explains:

... distinctions of caste are maintained during the pilgrimage journey, though in modified form. In pilgrimages, the mere demographic and geographical facts of large numbers of people coming at set times and considerable distances between their homes and the sacred site compel a certain amount of organization and discipline. The absolute *communitas* of unchanneled anarchy does not obtain here. What we see is a social system, founded in a system of religious beliefs, polarized between fixity and travel, secular and sacred, social structure and normative *communitas*, which may aspire to an open morality... may even imagine it possesses one, but stops short at the cultural bounds of a specific religious world view.⁶²

Referring to the account of the Vārī pilgrimage given by Karve, Turner perceives Karve's elaboration of her experience of the Vārī pilgrimage as the experience of *communitas* while simultaneously experiencing the caste-based divisiveness. He writes: "She (Karve) records how deeply she was moved by the *communitas* she experienced among her fellow pilgrims, so moved, in fact, that she could not endure their division into caste-bound *diṇḍīs* within the *pālkhī* or palanquin group, the salient religious unit of the pilgrimage. If she had been content to accept the standpoint either of her own caste or of detached anthropological observation, perhaps she would not have been so evidently stirred up and involved. But then, as is so often the case, we would have been deprived of a lot of the truth of the situation."⁶³

While analysing Karve's account, Turner points out, "though pilgrimages strain in the direction of universal *communitas*, they are still ultimately bounded by the structure of the religious systems within which they are generated and persist."⁶⁴ Further, while explaining

⁶² Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, 171.

⁶³ Ibid, 205.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 202.

the relationship between the *communitas* and the structure, he writes: "... though one pole stresses the model "structure" and the other "normative *communitas*". However, until now, *communitas* lives within structure; and structure within *communitas*."⁶⁵ In his further analysis, Turner realises that with time, *communitas* becomes a structure bound by rules and hierarchies and remains a mere remote possibility. He argues, "Total or global brotherhood or *communitas* has hardly yet overlapped the cultural boundaries of institutionalized religious structures. *Communitas* itself in time becomes structure-bound and comes to be regarded as a symbol or remote possibility rather than concrete realization of universal relatedness."⁶⁶

Based on the Turnerian paradigm, John Stanley argues that Turner saw the Vārkarī's promise (to perform the Vārī) as "so unconditional" that it took the Vārkarī out of the structure of "normative *communitas*" and, wrongly, into that of spontaneous or "existential *communitas*".⁶⁷ According to Stanley, the Vārkarī experience is one of normative *communitas* as the Vārī has organisational structures such as the "order of the march, prescribed stopping times and places, and sometimes elaborate eating arrangements".⁶⁸ However, Turner recognises that while pilgrimages reduce structural divisions, limit the constraints of status and role and remove the pilgrim to another type of time, *communitas* does not abolish social and cultural structures. Turner acknowledges that the distinctions of caste are maintained during the Vārī, as members of a *diṇḍī* tend to belong to a single *jātī*. He recognises that the Vārī remains within an "established religious system"⁶⁹ and does not necessarily transcend to the division-less, unified community. Turner supports his argument

⁶⁵ Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, 206.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Stanley, "Great Maharashtrian pilgrimage," 67 – 87.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 71-72.

⁶⁹ Daukes, *Female voices*, 51.

by referring to Deleury's explanation for the single-caste *diṇḍī*. However, this analysis needs revisiting as there are more and more mixed-caste *diṇḍīs* today.

Though the pilgrimage indeed opens up the possibility for pilgrims to experience *communitas* – the wholeness and non-dual existence - transcending the structure's hierarchical and divisive roles and rules, it is also true that the pilgrimage may reinforce the rules and roles of the structure. In particular, in the context of the *Vārī* pilgrimage, and based on the accounts given by Deleury and Karve (both the accounts relied upon by Turner), it is demonstrated that the *Vārī* pilgrimage, with its egalitarian approach, does allow the possibility of experiencing what Turner refers to as *Communitas*. Still, at the same time, there is also a reinforcement of rules of structure, like caste and gender norms. Therefore, both the experience of *communitas* or/and the experience of support of the rules of the structure are the possibilities present in the process of pilgrimage. Chapter 5 discusses these apparently contradictory trends during the *Vārī* pilgrimage in the next chapter.

Is the experience of *communitas* during a pilgrimage a long-term change in a pilgrim's outlook, or is it a fleeting experience of humanity's wholeness? Turner does not explicitly comment on whether the *communitas* can be sustained over time or if it is a momentary experience of wholeness in a particular pilgrimage setting. Does the realisation of community homogeneity persist when a pilgrim returns "home" from the pilgrimage setting, or does the structure reinforce itself once more in the routine setup – rendering no change as the outcome of the pilgrimage process? Turner suggests that the moments of experience of *communitas* are transitory moments that exemplify the ethos of antistructure. In other words, the experience of *communitas* is a temporary one that allows pilgrims to experience the wholeness of communities and transcend the boundedness of the rules and roles that constitute the structure. However, Turner does not suggest if this exemplification of the antistructure experienced by pilgrims has the potential to alter the structure (when they

return) and bring in social change in the direction of realising the ethos of *communitas*. Notably, the question arises whether the experience of the *communitas* is available to those who are not pilgrims. Turner does not hint at whether the sense of *communitas* experienced by the pilgrims (if at all) transposes to include the entire society or a larger public. The precondition for experiencing the *communitas* is direct involvement in the pilgrimage, primarily as a pilgrim.

Considering the criticisms mentioned above, the Turnerian construct of structure, antistructure, and *communitas* seems insufficient to analyse the social processes involved during pilgrimages. On the one hand, pilgrimages seem to have the possibility of offering the experience of *communitas* to the pilgrims. On the other, they may also experience reinforcement of the rules of the structure. Therefore, the openness and freedom of *communitas* and the structure's boundedness and hierarchies may be present in pilgrimage processes. Saying that pilgrimages serve as antistructure, therefore, is a partial understanding. Rather than constructing the teleological *communitas* as the pre-destination of the pilgrimage journey, it would be appropriate to look at pilgrimage as a site where the elements of the ethos of *communitas* and the status and role of the structure are included both present. It seems, instead, that pilgrimages provide an opportunity for interaction and negotiation between the wholeness of *communitas* and the divisiveness of structure. Karen Pechillis make a similar argument. She believes that to develop a theory of pilgrimage as a meaningful ritual, pilgrimages need to be seen as “a form of ritual negotiation”⁷⁰ against Turner’s construction of pilgrimage as “an idealized locus of opposition to social structure”.⁷¹ Pechillis also points out the potential of pilgrimages to offer a wide range of meanings. She argues that

⁷⁰ Pechillis, *To Pilgrimage It*, 62.

⁷¹ Ibid.

what distinguishes pilgrimage from local worship sites is “the sheer density of meanings”⁷².

A clue regarding the multiple and, at times, contradictory trends found in the pilgrimage can be seen in Pechillis’ argument: “These (multiple) meanings represent a negotiation between a random collection of individual meanings and the possibility of collective meaning.

Pilgrimage has more elasticity in such negotiation than many other religious rituals, simply because resolving the issue of conflicting meanings in a permanent way is not one of the characteristics of pilgrimage.”⁷³ Therefore, instead of understanding the social processes involved in the pilgrimage as a uni-directional journey from structure to antistructure and further realisation of *communitas*, it would be appropriate to view pilgrimages as a dialogical; or rather multifaceted interaction between *communitas* and structure (if we continue to use the conceptual categories used by Turner) and negotiating the elements of both. To adopt an alternative understanding, the concept of “a bhakti public”, given by Christian Novetzke, may be helpful in this regard. Though Novetzke does not directly focus on pilgrimage and the social processes involved therein, his analysis of public memory of Nāṃdeva sustained through bhakti practices, primarily kīrtana, and the composition of literary texts of the VS may provide some cues for a more nuanced understanding of the practice of pilgrimage. The following section gives a detailed account of Novetzke’s conceptualisation of “a bhakti public” and analyses the possibility of adopting this concept to address better the mixed and often even the contradictory trends present in the Vārī pilgrimage.

⁷² Pechillis, *To Pilgrimage It*, 65.

⁷³ Ibid.

4.3. A Bhakti Public

4.3.1. A Public

The idea of “a public” as conceptualised by Warner is fluid because “a public” is neither universalistic nor a fixed historical entity. Instead, it adapts and adjusts to changing circumstances, constantly reshaping itself. As a result, the boundaries of “a public” or who can become a legitimate member of a public are open and blurred. Warner juxtaposes the concept of “a public” with “the public” and “the public sphere”. He lists seven characteristics of “a public”. They are 1. “A public is self-organized.”⁷⁴ 2. “A public is a relation among strangers.”⁷⁵ 3. “The address of public speech is both personal and impersonal.”⁷⁶ 4. “A public is constituted through mere attention.”⁷⁷ 5. “A public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse.”⁷⁸ 6. “Publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation.”⁷⁹ 7. “A public is poetic world-making.”⁸⁰

Michael Warner, in the essay titled *Publics and Counterpublics*,⁸¹ writes: “A public seems to be self-organized by discourse, but in fact requires preexisting forms and channels of circulation. It appears to be open to indefinite strangers, but in fact selects participants by criteria of shared social space (though not necessarily territorial space), habitus, topical

⁷⁴ Warner, *Publics and Counter Publics*, 50.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 55.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 57.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 60.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 62.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 68.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 82.

⁸¹ Ibid, 49-90.

concerns, intergeneric references, and circulating intelligible forms (including idiolects or speech genres).”⁸² Even though Warner’s conceptualisation of “a public” is in the context of queer publics located in the modern western context, the fluidity and openness offered by this theoretical construct is valuable while looking at the social processes during the Vārī. It seems that the seven characteristics of “a public” (as mentioned above) can be witnessed during the Vārī pilgrimage. However, the notion of “a bhakti public” – as framed by Novetzke – seems more appropriate to comprehend the social processes during the Vārī.

Novetzke adopts the notion of “a public” as Warner conceptualises and employs it with different connotations to suit his understanding of bhakti and memory revolving around Sant Nāmdēva. In his work, *“History, Bhakti and Public Memory”*,⁸³ He writes: “In formulating the broader usable outline of the idea of a public, I have relied on Michael Warner’s work on queer publics in America, in which he provides a description of a public like the one I use here in the context of bhakti.”⁸⁴ Novetzke goes on to quote Warner to convey his adoption of the term a public. He quotes, “a public enables a reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexivity circulating discourse, a social entity.”⁸⁵

Based on Michael Warner’s notion of “a public”, Novetzke writes: “The object of the belief, in this case of a public, is a fiction. It is not a physically demonstrable thing, like a state, village, township, or other polity; nor does it exist in a carefully constructed discourse, like a judiciary, a set of laws, or a dogma. A public relies as much on the imagination of each individual as on a collective agreement as to its existence. People must believe they are part

⁸² Warner, *Publics and Counter Publics*, 75.

⁸³ Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 16.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 1.

of a public, and this gives it both its strength and its ephemeral quality.”⁸⁶ Novetzke not only distinguishes the meaning of the word “public” from “popular” or “communal”, but he also brings out the distinction between “the public” and “a public”. He writes: “Note that I distinguish between “a public” and “the public”. The latter designation of “the public” implies homogeneity, often enforced or primarily influenced by the state or generated from the magic of statistics or surveys.”⁸⁷ He adds, “This notion of the public is also usually associated almost exclusively with modernity. In contrast, “a public” implies a much greater flexibility of social organization.”⁸⁸

Novetzke departs from Warner’s notion of a public in two ways. Firstly, from the modern western context adopted by Warner to frame “a public”, and secondly, he adds a dimension of memory to make a fuller sense of a public.⁸⁹ Deviating from the modern western context of “a public” proposed by Warner, uniquely, Novetzke adopts the non-western, non-modern context to situate his discussion of the notion of a public. His immediate context for formulating the understanding of “a public” is pre-modern, revolving around the memory of fourteenth-century bhakti Santa Nāmdeva in Maharashtra, India. This specific context renders Novetzke’s formulation beyond the conventionally understood locus of “a public” beyond the West and the modern. Novetzke writes:

I understand the explanatory value of the idea of public to be both geographically and temporally modular. The central operation of a public is its inward circularity, its internal system of self-reliance, and thereby its ability to compose its ephemeral body in time by means of the chimera of discourse. A public is substanceless but, like any social formation, still powerful. It is not, therefore, confined to any of its highly scrutinised forms, most of which have been explicated in the context of modernity. In other words, there is no prerequisite for a public that makes it germane to modernity – not literacy or print; not rationality or transglobal cultural flows; not even a shared verbal language. Publics form by a reference and reinforcement, whether visual, oral,

⁸⁶ Novetzke, “Bhakti and Its Public,” 261.

⁸⁷ Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*, 17.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

aural, or literary; rather, they are the product of their actors, of their circle of attention. For this reason, modernity is no more suitable than any other epochal epistemology to host a discernible public.⁹⁰

In addition to the seven characteristics of “a public” identified by Warner, Novetzke proposes to add one more, and that is – shared memory. He argues, “publics by their nature, remember and are constituted by shared memory. Indeed, to append Warner’s list above, publics are systems of memory.”⁹¹

Novetzke uses the term “a public” to capture the meaning of the Marathi word “*loka*”, “a noun that almost always indicates the plural and primarily indicates receptive public at large.”⁹² He observes that Nāmdeva often uses the term *loka* and urges them to listen or witness.⁹³ A public or *loka* that Nāmdeva addresses “is not a theorized social entity but, rather, a surrounding social force with which Nāmdeva’s songs and biography interact and take shape; it is his audience, both immediate and in historical transmission.”⁹⁴ Novetzke writes: “The word *loka* designates either the first person plural, as in “we people do this,” or in the third person plural, “That is the practice of those people.”⁹⁵ As expressed through this term, the public creates both self and other.

While discussing the concept of *loka* in Nāmdeva’s songs, Novetzke writes:

Throughout Nāmdeva’s songs in Marathi, one finds the invocation of the public, or *loka*, a noun almost always indicating the plural, the receptive public at large. The *loka* are often the addressees of Nāmdeva’s verses, and within songs he calls upon them to listen or witness. This is not a theorized social entity, but rather a surrounding social force with which Nāmdeva’s songs and biography interact and take shape. His audience becomes transformed into the *loka*, the public that receives his legacy long after he is said to have died. Here we find the second

⁹⁰ Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*, 18.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid, 14.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 15.

meaning of loka in Marathi, indicating “the world,” but a human world, not a physical one. This second meaning of loka depends on the first to impart its sense of a human field of reception and interaction and one unmarked by caste, class, or gender. What makes a loka in Nāmdeva’s verses is the human world alert to its own inward, referential gaze. We find the word loka designating either the first person plural, as in “We people do this,” or the third person plural: “That is the practice of those people.” A public as expressed through this term creates both self and other. The loka form the audience of bhakti, both in Nāmdeva’s songs and in Marathi scholarship about Nāmdeva; without this audience, Nāmdeva’s bhakti would remain silent, unrecalled, and lost to time. Bhakti without an audience, without a loka, has no meaning.⁹⁶

Novetzke writes that his engagement with Nāmdeva’s public memory through various sources like literary, biographical accounts, performance arts and modes of remembrance is to “see how these activities constitute a practice that creates a dialogue between past and the present and how this dialogue, in turn, constructs publics of reception in time.”⁹⁷ Like Warner, Novetzke too does not use the term “public” to “indicate a state-centred activity in any way; rather... a mode of social cohesion, temporally bounded, and united in its aim toward affective display”.⁹⁸ It is important to note that Novetzke employs the term “a public” not only in the non-modern, non-western context, but also clearly distinguishes it from the notion of “the public” – primarily associated with the state as well as “the public sphere”, as used by Habermas⁹⁹, implying the rational literary debates. As pointed out by Novetzke, “publics” in the context of South Asia is usually “a description of some formulation of the public sphere and/or of public culture”¹⁰⁰ and is often perceived as a modern phenomenon. Novetzke writes: “...the publics scrutinized tend to be set firmly within a designated modern period (usually the nineteenth century to the present).”¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*, 265.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 2.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 14.

⁹⁹ Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

¹⁰⁰ Novetzke, *Bhakti and Its Public*, 260.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

4.3.2. Re-contextualizing “A Public”

Novetzke’s re-contextualizing of “a public” in the non-western, non-modern set-up, especially in the plain of pre-modern Maharashtra concerning the Vārkarī Santa Nāmdeva, is of immense value for this work. In work “*History, Bhakti and Public Memory*”, Novetzke demonstrates how the public memory of Nāmdeva through various means - literary, oral as well as performative like kīrtana, films, biographical accounts - leads to the creation of “a bhakti public”. In this work, Novetzke traces the genealogy of a bhakti public revolving around the fourteenth-century Santa Nāmdeva to post-colonial times through public memory or through how Nāmdeva and his legacy are remembered in Maharashtra through time. In relatively recent work, “*The Quotidian Revolution*”¹⁰², Novetzke defines public as, “an open, social audience, one that attends to, but does not necessarily participate in, a capacious and circulating discourse within a given region, language, or other social context. This is a context of mutual intelligibility and access. Publics are constituted primarily by passive attention, and people often participate in them through consuming discourse and reflecting their engagement through affect. A public is defined by its open-ended address, available for attentive reception. A public is a social formation that is reflexive and organized by the circulation of a particular discourse of mutual concern.”¹⁰³

As compared to the notion of “communitas” given by Turner (discussed in the previous section of this chapter), the idea of “a public” seems more open and fluid to better understand the interplay between various forces during the pilgrimage, in Turnerian language – between structure and antistructure. As the notion of “the public”, the idea of communitas is more homogenous and universalistic. Even though the construct of communitas needs not

¹⁰² Novetzke, *Quotidian Revolution*.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 28.

to be abandoned entirely, the elements of universal and homogenous claims about pilgrimages (prevalent in the understanding of *communitas*) and their uni-directional movement towards the formation of *communitas* can be re-visited with the help of the notion of “a public”. The idea of “a public” allows us to account for various trends, and at times, even contradictory ones, in the pilgrimage processes. The openness and fluidity of the term “a public” allow us to look at various social interactions and their varied implications in the pilgrimage process. For understanding and analysing the apparently contradictory trends in pilgrimage processes, especially in the Vārī pilgrimage, the notion of “a public” is more suitable than *communitas*. Even though Turner has indicated the possibility of *communitas* itself becoming a structure and hierarchy laden, this idea still operates with the assumption of the existence of either *communitas* or the structure. It does not allow us to imagine the possibility of both – the *communitas* and the structure – being present in the pilgrimage processes. The concept of “a public” will enable us to account for trends towards *communitas* while also allowing for the possible reinforcement of rules and hierarchy of the structure through pilgrimages. It is not a “either/or” question, but rather “both-and”.¹⁰⁴ While understanding the Vārī pilgrimage, the Turnerian construct works on the principle of “either-or”, whereas the idea of “a public” allows addressing the possibilities available on the spectrum of *communitas* and structure as two opposite poles; and even beyond. In a particular context of the VS and the Vārī pilgrimage - both closely associated with the bhakti tradition of Maharashtra – it would be interesting and important to see the interplay between dimensions of bhakti and publics associated with it. The following section discusses the concept of “a bhakti public” given by Novetzke and situates the discussion on the Vārī pilgrimage in light of this concept.

¹⁰⁴ N. Collins-Kreiner, “Researching pilgrimage: continuity and transformations”, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 37, no.2, (2010): 440- 456. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2009.10.016>.

4.3.3. Meaning and Nature of “A Bhakti Public”

The term “bhakti public” may seem like an oxymoron to some. One of the interpretations, and possibly a dominant one, of the term bhakti is - devotion to the deity, wherein bhakti is considered a private affair. However, “a bhakti public” essentially has a social or public dimension. Scholars like J. S. Hawley and Christian Novetzke have looked at bhakti as socio-political and hence a public affair. In two different works, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory* and *The Quotidian Revolution*, Novetzke systematically demonstrates the public nature of bhakti. In the earlier work, i.e., *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*, he primarily deals with the public memory of Nāmdēva. He demonstrates how, through the bhakti practice of kīrtana, a bhakti public gets constituted. Novetzke’s “*The Quotidian Revolution*” focuses on the presence of a “nascent public sphere” in thirteenth-century Maharashtra. In the earlier work, i.e., “*History, Bhakti and Public Memory*”, the oral-performative bhakti practice of kīrtana is analysed as a site of the creation of a bhakti public, whereas, in the latter work, i.e., “*The Quotidian Revolution*”, Novetzke traces literary sources and, more importantly, their public composition as the locus of creation of a bhakti public with the examples of Liḷācharitra and Dnyāneśvarī. It is important to note that Novetzke sees bhakti practices like kīrtana and pilgrimage as the nodes of the bhakti network. These nodes serve as the intersection of the circulation of social ethics propagated by the bhakti tradition, thereby creating a bhakti public. His analysis of the pre-modern public sphere in the thirteenth century in Maharashtra is interesting and important; I focus on the notion of a bhakti public in this thesis.

In his work, Novetzke traces the dialogue between the past and the present through the public memory of Nāmdēva. Taking a cue from Novetzke’s construction of “a bhakti public”, in this thesis, I focus on the bhakti practice of the Vārī pilgrimage in Maharashtra. In contrast, I intend to look at the dialogue and interaction between individuals and groups

brought together at the site of the Vārī pilgrimage. It is not intended to give a detailed analysis of the Vārī pilgrimage as historical memory but rather to look at it as a platform that allows the interaction and negotiations between various groups and individuals during the pilgrimage process in contemporary times. The critical questions that I deal with in this subsection are: How is Novetzke's construction of "a bhakti public" different from "a public" or queer publics as used by Warner? What qualifications are added to "a public" by invoking the notion of bhakti with it? Can the idea of a bhakti public be adopted to understand the bhakti practice of the Vārī pilgrimage and the social interactions present therein?

As mentioned above, the very notion of "a public" is employed differently by Novetzke at two levels – adopting it to the non-western, non-modern context and adding a dimension of public memory. By invoking the notion of bhakti and the notion of "a public", Novetzke further qualifies the term. Novetzke's primary focus in *"History, Bhakti, and Public Memory"* is on the formation of bhakti publics through Nāmdeva's public memory. The concept of "a bhakti public" can be applied to almost any social expression of bhakti, including pilgrimage. Novetzke adopts the dimension of bhakti to "a public" as he believes that bhakti or devotionism serves as the social context to the regional cultural memory of Nāmdeva.¹⁰⁵ In other words, various publics created through the public memory of Nāmdeva over a long period are primarily contextualised by bhakti. It can be noted here that the cultural memory of almost all the Santas of the Vārkarī tradition, including Dnyāneśvara, Eknātha, Tukārāma, and others.

Further, bhakti serves as the social context of not only the individual figures associated with the VS, namely, the Santas, but also of most of the literary and performative activities associated with the VS. The Santas of the VS propagated and institutionalised

¹⁰⁵ Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*, 2.

various bhakti practices like kīrtana, bhajana, pravachana, and Vārī. It would be fair to argue that more than the literary sources, it is mainly through these oral-performative means of bhakti that the teachings of the Santas and the Vārkarī ethos reached Marathi households and common masses. The cultural essence of kīrtana, bhajana, harīpātha, pravachana and pilgrimage is necessarily shaped by bhakti. In this thesis, building upon this understanding of bhakti, I engage with Novetzke's conceptualisation of "a bhakti public" to understand the social interactions during the Vārī pilgrimage and compare the implications the same with the idea of *communitas*, discussed in the previous section of this chapter. In the following section, I focus on various characteristics that outline the nature of a bhakti public, as mentioned by Novetzke.

A. Bhakti is Essentially Public

The term "a bhakti public" is first employed by Christian Lee Novetzke in "*Bhakti and its Public*"¹⁰⁶ and subsequently in his work on Nāmdeva – "*History, Bhakti and Public Memory*"¹⁰⁷. As the term suggests, "a bhakti public" is essentially a social category and looks at bhakti's public or social dimensions. In the essay titled "*Bhakti and its Public*", Novetzke points out two polar interpretations of bhakti: first, as a form of social movement, and second, as an act of personal devotion. Novetzke argues, "*Bhakti*, as a subject for cultural history, must be taken in its social forms and not theorized solely within the spheres of an individual's consciousness if we are to understand *bhakti* in terms of cultural and historical."¹⁰⁸ He further adds, "For the purpose of this study (on Nāmdeva) – and, I would

¹⁰⁶ Novetzke, *Bhakti and Its Public*.

¹⁰⁷ Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 21-22.

argue, of any study of *bhakti* that is not essentially theological or didactic – *bhakti* must always be social, or I would say public subject.”¹⁰⁹

However, it is essential to note that for Novetzke, this public dimension of *bhakti* does not necessarily take the form of a social movement, popularly known as the *bhakti* movement, though it is implied in the notion of “*bhakti* public”.¹¹⁰ Heightened a sense of individuality and pilgrimage as a personal experience and created a homogenous, collective community through a common shared experience. For Novetzke, considering *bhakti* as a personal affair or a social movement serves as the two extremes. He is convinced that there are nuances associated with *bhakti* which are neither confined to an individual experience as a private or personal affair nor is it a homogenous, cohesive social movement for the upliftment of the marginalised. Novetzke does not reject these two possibilities of *bhakti* but points out that neither can be adopted to understand the social processes involved in *bhakti* practices fully. He employs the concept of “a public” to investigate “the vast area between these poles where the complex interchange exists...”¹¹¹ Novetzke’s understanding of a *bhakti* public, which sees *bhakti* as neither entirely personal nor as a social movement, while not rejecting the possibility of both, is critical in my investigation of the social and political dimensions of the Vārī pilgrimage. As I investigate whether pilgrimages in general and the Vārī pilgrimage in particular result in the formation of a homogeneous community of pilgrims or whether the pilgrimage process strengthens the group and individual identities, the idea of a *bhakti* public provides an opportunity to consider *bhakti* as a personal as well as a social phenomenon. These possibilities arising out of pilgrimage processes may be accounted for with the help of “a *bhakti* public”. Further, the notion of a *bhakti* public allows

¹⁰⁹ Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*, 22.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

accounting for pilgrimage experience as an individual's personalised experience on the hand and, at the same time, the possibility of the common shared experience on the other.

B. Publics of Reception

In the essay, "*Bhakti and Its Public*", Novetzke suggests that between these two poles of understanding bhakti as personal devotion and bhakti as a social movement, bhakti creates "publics of reception"¹¹². He writes: "I advance the thesis that all manifestations of *bhakti* are performances and, more to the point, public ones, that is, performances that are part of, or help form, publics of reception."¹¹³ He further argues that bhakti seeks to form publics of reception rather than communities that imply a single cohesive issue or idiom.¹¹⁴ To highlight the public nature of bhakti, Novetzke brings out the performative and the epiretinal aspects of bhakti, which essentially manifest outwardly. He writes: "It (*bhakti*) is thus understood not only to be a shared experience, like love or anger, but an expressive one - an expression of the self, perhaps, but an outward expression of the self, a performance of emotion."¹¹⁵ Importantly, this performance of bhakti is always in the presence of some audience. The audience may be direct or indirect. For example, the audience of kīrtana itself is a direct audience, whereas when kīrtana, as well as its audience, are watched on the screen, it constitutes an indirect audience. The formation of a bhakti public takes place in both cases, though they might be characteristically different from each other. Novetzke writes: "The audience is never absent, but imagined and assumed in any iteration of bhakti, whether

¹¹² Novetzke, *Bhakti and Its Public*, 255.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 225.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 255 – 56.

literary, iconographic, performative, or ritualized.”¹¹⁶ Further, even though the theorization of bhakti in the literary texts also has an audience, especially “in narratives depicting bhakti in action, the audience is more pronounced, more clearly situated within a public, both in the narrative itself and in the narrative of the social context of reception.”¹¹⁷ Novetzke draws upon Norman Cutler’s tripartite structure of “gods,” “poets,” and “audience”. In this construction of “a bhakti public”, Novetzke points out that even though the audience may seem most important, she/he does not want to leave out any of the nodes (in the tripartite structure) as the flow of sentiments expressed through bhakti practices through this structure creates the “layers of reception”.¹¹⁸

In other words, Novetzke sees bhakti as a shared experience and an outward expression of emotion. Even though it is a shared experience, it is not a shared experience; that is to say, the experience and the outward expression of that emotion may change from individual to individual. In this sense, the audience of bhakti is neither cohesive nor does it create a community of audience having a shared experience. Novetzke’s understanding of layers of reception may help understand the social interactions during the Vārī pilgrimage. The expression of shared experience through dancing, singing, playing in the presence of fellow Vārkarīs and importantly, in the presence of the spirit of the Santas in the form of pādukās, the audience of kīrtanas, bhajanas, pravachanas during the Vārī as well as the indirect audience present in the Vārī pilgrimage employing mass media and social media demonstrate the multiple layers of receptions during the Vārī. These multiple layers of reception revolve around the fundamental Vārkarī ethos of the VS, manifested through the Vārī pilgrimage. However, varying degrees of engagement and attentiveness in participation

¹¹⁶ Novetzke, *Bhakti and Its Public*, 257.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 255.

create multiple layers of reception. This indicates that rather than creating a collective, unified community of the Vārkarīs, more open and fluid publics are generated in the process of pilgrimage.

C. Self-Referencing and Circularity

In *Bhakti and Its Public*, Novetzke demonstrates how “a public” is constituted through the circulation of a single text over a long period. Novetzke writes: “Here, a single text can serve as a kind of nodal archive for *bhakti* in its public reception over many centuries. It produces an overall cohesion for concepts that circle the idea of *bhakti* both on its own in an elite sphere and more broadly, as it is performed and interpreted.”¹¹⁹ The common thread that makes a public identifiable separately from other publics is the circle of perception created around the text and the ideas of *bhakti* emanating from the text. Therefore, depending on the level of circulation and association with the common notions of *bhakti*, the possibility of developing a social movement around the ideas of *bhakti* need not be ruled out.

As mentioned above, Novetzke does not leave out the possibility of “*bhakti* as a social movement” from the notion of “a *bhakti* public”. For Novetzke, the stream of thought argues for *bhakti* as a movement or nineteenth and early twentieth century invocations of *bhakti* as renaissance or the idea of *deśbhakti*, too are the forms of *bhakti* publics. He explains: “Many scholars refer to a “*bhakti* movement” composed of a unified, if heterogenous, field of texts and practices produced and maintained in South Asia over the last two millennia. These Indian spheres of discourse - both textual and practical - use the word *bhakti* self-descriptively and reference one another, producing intertextual consistencies among texts,

¹¹⁹ Novetzke, *Bhakti and Its Public*, 258.

making “publics” out of their own mutual references.”¹²⁰ The importance of mutual referencing lies in the fact that it allows the circulation and negotiation of the bhakti ethos that reshapes itself with the changing context and adjusts and accommodates the changing social needs, thereby extending the sphere of a bhakti public.

Novetzke points out that the bhakti practices “attempt to create “families” out of strangers, especially those made by differences in caste, class, language, and religion.”¹²¹ According to Novetzke, the texts and practices related to bhakti keep circulating in various forms and invent new forms of circulation. It is important to note that the bhakti ethos is circulated through the circulation of the text/s and different bhakti practices like kīrtana, pravachana, and pilgrimages. While referring to the practice of pilgrimage, Novetzke observes, “the shared social space implied by these sorts of circulations is substantiated in pilgrimage and other religious gatherings where strangers make common cause and identify their commonality by means of the language of bhakti.”¹²² This identification of commonality through the language of bhakti is not confined to a particular group at a specific historical time, in a sense, it does not make “the public”. However, with the continuous circulation of texts and practices over a long period, bhakti has the potential to keep generating publics. Members of such publics are self-conscious that the common thread that binds them together is bhakti, constituting a bhakti public. However, it is a multi-layered, diversified public and not a collective, unified one.

D. Bhakti Requires Embodiment

¹²⁰ Novetzke, *Bhakti and Its Public*, 257 -58.

¹²¹ Ibid, 263.

¹²² Ibid.

While distinguishing between “the public” and “a bhakti public”, Novetzke observes that “the public” requires the literacy of participants, whereas “the public sphere” requires reason and the ability to debate and discuss issues of the common good. In other words, the context of modernity, marked by rationality and literacy, makes the public cohesive. On the other hand, a sense of cohesiveness or belonging to a public comes with a social agreement. According to Novetzke, more than literacy or the ability to debate rationally, a bhakti public is constituted by “participation”.¹²³ He elaborates: “the public created when bhakti is invoked ruled neither by dogma nor coercion, but made cohesive by a kind of social agreement. Bhakti indicates a practice of sharing, equal distribution, and mutual enjoyment, what Karen Prentiss calls “participation”, an interaction that suggests the “embodiment” of bhakti as a prerequisite for its practice.”¹²⁴ In short, a bhakti public is defined neither by its ability to reason nor by literacy but rather by mere participation, by being there – directly or even indirectly, and being a part of what Novetzke regards as “social agreement”.

Novetzke argues, “Just as the public sphere requires literacy, the publics of bhakti in South Asia require “embodiment” the human as medium.”¹²⁵ Notably, the embodiment of bhakti is not a literary act but rather a performative one. Novetzke writes: “This very useful notion of “embodiment” does not simply exist as a trope of literature but is deeply engaged in the performance of the discourse of bhakti.”¹²⁶ He further goes on to clarify his usage of the term discourse. He explains: “By “discourse”, I mean the manifestations of bhakti not only in performance through song or literacy but also through all those actions and bodily displays

¹²³ Novetzke imports the meaning of the term participation from the work of Karen Prentiss See, Pechilis, *Embodiment of Bhakti*.

¹²⁴ Novetzke, *Bhakti and Its Public*, 261.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

that make up bhakti in the broadest sense, such as those outlined above: pilgrimage, *pūjā*, *darśan*, the wearing of signs on the body, and so on. Embodiment, then, is not so much a technique of bhakti as its very epicenter: bhakti needs bodies.”¹²⁷ Apart from the requirement of participation, Novetzke notes, it is at the confluence of bhakti and performance that a public is created. He writes: “There is almost a symbiotic equation between bhakti and performance. At this confluence, a public is necessarily created.”¹²⁸ Viewing this argument in the light of the Vārī pilgrimage, the acts of singing, dancing, playing, and most importantly, the very act of walking the pilgrimage allows the performance of bhakti. It seems that all those who take part in the Vārī pilgrimage, directly as well as indirectly, are bound by a social agreement of the fundamental Vārkarī ethos, which in my opinion is epitomised by everyone being referred to as “māūlī”.

E. Commensality

Another dimension of sharing, apart from the social agreement, that Novetzke highlights is the practice of sharing food or commensality. Commensality simply means eating food together and constitutes an integral part of bhakti practices. It will not be an exaggeration to say that the expression of devotion is exemplified by food offerings to the deity and, after that, to the fellow bhaktas. The notion of prasāda, or sacred food, is common to almost all bhakti practices. What makes the usual food turn into a prasāda, or what gives it sacrality, is a bhava, or a feeling that the food has become pious as god has consumed it. As Novetzke observes,

The sharing of food constitutes a significant form of bhakti, both in its earliest articulations in Sanskrit and throughout its literary and practical genealogy in India. We see it in at least partial breaking of the taboos of caste commensality during pilgrimage and in the hagiographical and

¹²⁷ Novetzke, *Bhakti and Its Public*, 261.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 261-62.

religious invocations of this act as a marker of the particular ethics of bhakti. We also see this in the act of exchanging an item, often food, with a deity, since the recipients of such food typically belong to a number of otherwise well-defined commensal groups. Prasāda, as it is called, is then often redistributed to friends and family. In this way bhakti shows a parallel with older Sanskrit uses of the word in the context of the preparation and distribution of food, which is one of the key anthropological markers of community, alongside marriage.¹²⁹

While drawing the difference between public and popular, Novetzke writes: “The word “public” often also marks places where the common good is situated. Unlike the term “popular”, which makes a utilitarian appeal to a majority, or the word “communal”, where the individual is subordinated to the whole, the idea of a public implies a measure of resistance to homogeneous social entities that cause the erasure of the individual.”¹³⁰ Novetzke highlights the importance of public practices of bhakti, which are usually large gatherings, and points out their role in shaping social ethics.¹³¹ According to him, commensality or sharing of food, sharing of places and time are made possible through various bhakti practices like kīrtana, pilgrimage, distribution and exchange of prasāda, the performance of pūjā, etc. Through all these acts of bhakti, social ethics are emphasised.¹³² He elaborates: “Sometimes the creation of public spaces, especially temples, exemplifies this concern.”¹³³ In a way, the membership of a bhakti public allows a bhakta a window to “experience life”.¹³⁴ In other words, a bhakti public helps determine the way a person responds to life situations, personal or public. To take an example, it seems that during the Vārī pilgrimage, not only do the participants, the Vārkarīs (in the broadest possible sense), get a window to experience life through the practice of pilgrimage, but the very pilgrimage

¹²⁹ Novetzke, *Bhakti and Its Public*, 262.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid, 263.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 256.

serves as a window or a platform where exchange between the VS and the society at large takes place. This is also a window through which interaction between the prevailing social norms and ethics and particular Vārkarī norms and ethos takes place. The Vārkarī practice of “Gopalkālā”, which marks the end of the Vārī pilgrimage, may be seen as a symbol where Vārkarīs feed each other prasāda without any consideration of caste. This act of feeding a fellow Vārkarī in a given context of the Vārī pilgrimage does not necessarily make Vārkarīs transcend the rules of commensality dominated by caste considerations beyond the context of the Vārī. Nevertheless, the participation in Gopalakālā seems to provide a window to negotiate the rules of commensality as a social norm and the Vārkarī ethos of equality.

F. Inclusion and Exclusion

Unlike Turner’s notion of *communitas*, Novetzke clarifies that a bhakti public is not a homogenous, universalistic one. In the idea of a bhakti public, the trends of unification and division can both be present. While a public is self-addressing, they are also conscious of non-audience or those who are not members of a public. As we discussed above, a public creates “families” of strangers, and in doing so, “shared identity” is assumed. While the boundaries of a public are fluid and more inclusive, it needs to be pointed out that, unlike *communitas*, there are still boundaries. However, unlike “the public” or “the public sphere,” the boundaries are not rigidly defined or contextualised by modernity and rationality. A public with its characteristics of self-referencing and internal circulation has the ability to keep generating publics over time and across the social spectrum. Novetzke writes: “The creation of shared publics is also always a creation of differences between different publics.”¹³⁵ The general perception in the bhakti literature is that bhakti transcends the

¹³⁵ Novetzke, *The Quotidian Revolution*, 28.

associations of caste, class, gender, and the hierarchies related to them. However, “in practice,” Novetzke points out, bhakti creates publics that may be more cohesive and at the same time exclusive in the sense of creating “others” or clearly identifying who does not belong to a public.¹³⁶ To quote Novetzke,

Thus, publics in the context of bhakti are both created and opposed, they both unify and divide. Initially this fact seems to disallow the possibility of a single social movement configured around the idea of bhakti in India. Overall, the literature of bhakti defines its publics as inclusive, contrasting them to associations that form along lines of class and caste, which are their primary “others.” Yet exclusivity is also expressed through the media of bhakti - in practice if not in theory. The idea of a public allows us to engage both the inclusive and the exclusive assertions of the texts and practices associated with bhakti and allows for social effects of both kinds.¹³⁷

While discussing the inclusive and exclusive characteristics of a bhakti public, another critical argument is put forth by Novetzke. He argues that the bhakti practices generally allow all individuals to participate in the bhakti practices and guarantee the benefits thereof irrespective of the social locations of individuals marked by caste, class, and gender. However, this non-discrimination based on social hierarchy to participate in the bhakti practices does not necessarily call for change in the social structures or possibly would not even criticise such social boundaries.¹³⁸ To elaborate this argument, he gives an example of Dnyāneśvarī (a revered text of the Vārkarīs). Novetzke writes: “The cosmic salvation possible through a text like the Jnaneshvari will be available by attentive listening alone. Regardless of caste, class, or gender, anyone who hears may benefit. A public then can cross social boundaries of caste, class, and gender, but it might not serve to unravel or even critique those boundaries in the process.”¹³⁹ Novetzke argues that a public might not critique the

¹³⁶ Novetzke, *Bhakti and Its Public*, 264.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Novetzke, *The Quotidian Revolution*, 29.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

boundaries of class, caste, and gender, but at the same time, it shall be noted that neither it actively supports nor sustains those boundaries. Novetzke further points out, “Nevertheless the theoretical sentiment of *bhakti*, based on a principle of apportionment, appears to more positively define publics as inclusive.”¹⁴⁰ This caveat added by Novetzke that *bhakti* publics are inclusive is a “theoretical sentiment” that appears to be problematic. The literature on *bhakti* indeed highlights the transformative capacities of *bhakti* and *bhakti* practices. However, it is not merely a “theoretical sentiment”, as Novetzke argues. Various *bhakti* practices serve as avenues and allow the individuals to realise the ethos of equality “in practice”, even though probably temporarily. The example of “Gopālkālā” discussed above, or the practice of reciprocal namaskāra in the VS serves as the testimonies to realise the theoretical sentiment of apportionment into the practice. The potential of *bhakti* to transform individuals and society is constantly put to use through such *bhakti* practices. At the time, it should be noted that the *bhakti* practices need not lead to creating an ideal type of *communitas* – where all social distinctions disappear. Rather a *bhakti* public may be seen as a locus where the theoretical sentiment and day-to-day practices are negotiated and reshaped.

Another argument where I differ from Novetzke’s understanding of *bhakti* is where he regards *bhakti* as an “empty vessel”. According to Novetzke, “*bhakti* is again the empty vessel into which both nectar and poison can be poured. The power of *bhakti* as a concept for the formulation of publics is precisely this dual ability: both to be exceedingly specific, targeting the community, ethnicity, sect, nation, polity, or even individual; yet also to be exceptionally general, uniting and even co-opting through spreading outward from its nebulous, never-defined core.”¹⁴¹ I differ here from Novetzke’s view that *bhakti* is an “empty

¹⁴⁰ Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*, 20.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 268.

vessel”. Bhakti has its content that outlines the nature of bhakti practices that many vary from sampradāya to sampradāya. At the core, there is a broad understanding of bhakti based on the BG, bp, and Nāradiya Bhakti Sūtras. Then there are regional or sāmpradāyika¹⁴² variations and interpretations. To use the analogy of food, bhakti is like cooked food. Depending on the intention or bhava of an individual, it might be converted into prasāda, maybe simply seen as nutrients, or if kept for a long time (used mis-appropriately), may turn into poison. This is why the experience of bhakti changes from person to person, sampradāya to sampradāya. But, indeed, bhakti is not an “empty vessel”.

G. Spectrum of Bhakti and Its Public

Bhakti and bhakti practices serve as a platform to bring various interests together. As Novetzke aptly points out, “Bhakti is a locus for the creation of publics, not the formation of a single social or literary movement. But publics can, in turn, portray bhakti in any way that serves the constituency of a particular public: as a social movement, as a personal communication with God, or as a Protestant revolution, a nationalist focal point, or a system of social protest.”¹⁴³ As pointed out by Novetzke, the platforms of bhakti practices are employed by various socio-political interests, including differing or at times, even antagonistic ideologies. From various socio-political awareness campaigns to perpetuate a particular religious ideology, the platforms of bhakti practices are often put to use. Novetzke aptly observes, “Today the idea of a bhakti movement and all the bhakti figures it encompasses are used by actors across the political spectrum in India, Left to Right.”¹⁴⁴ It is

¹⁴² The term sāmpradāyika refers to the “way of sampradāya” or “of sampradāya” in this context. In Hindi, the term sāmpradāyika is often used to indicate the tension between two religious groups, in the sense of communalism. However, this meaning is not employed in this thesis.

¹⁴³ Novetzke, *Bhakti and Its Public*, 266.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

important to note that Novetzke views bhakti at the intersection of public culture and political power. This juncture of bhakti marks the beginning of the bhakti network.¹⁴⁵

So far, from the above discussion, it is clear that bhakti practices create “bhakti publics”. The questions that can be asked are – is the creation of a bhakti public a temporary and sporadic phenomenon? Or does it have the capacity to sustain itself over time? Is it limited to specific geographies and contexts, or can it travel distances and in various settings? Further, does it lead to bringing in social change or perpetuating the existing power structures? Novetzke provides a cue to these questions. He writes: “In most cases a public is maintained through media such as literacy, visual culture, art or performance, though any medium of circulation of ideas will do.”¹⁴⁶ It can be argued that as long as the ideas associated with bhakti and its proponents keep circulating through various media, a bhakti public can sustain itself. In “*The Quotidian Revolution*”, Novetzke notes, “A public can be of almost any size; it may be situated in a given historical time or geographic space, or it may be transregional and transhistorical.”¹⁴⁷ Addressing the issue of the potential of a bhakti public to bring in social change, he argues, “bhakti, to give one example, has long existed as a “public”, a social sphere of inclusion but not necessarily of social change, a sphere of critique but not necessarily of correction or coercion.”¹⁴⁸ It is a crucial point to note that a bhakti public is not a homogenous and cohesive community, but rather one that is open and fluid. The primary characteristic of a bhakti public is inclusion, though this inclusion is not necessarily a protest or a revolt against the existing social patterns of exclusion. A bhakti public neither aims to correct the current discourse nor impose an “alternative view”. It

¹⁴⁵ Novetzke, *The Quotidian Revolution*, 101.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 28.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 29.

neither seeks to bring about revolution and deconstruct the existing structures nor support the existing structures or get subsumed within those structures.

In the light of enquiry of this thesis, the primary question emerging from the above discussion on a bhakti public is: can a notion of a bhakti public be adopted better to understand the multifaceted social interactions during the Vārī pilgrimage? What kind of publics are created in the process of the Vārī? Can the possibilities of creating “communitas” through Vārī be incorporated within the idea of a bhakti public? The following section addresses these questions.

4.5. “Communitas”, “A Bhakti Public” and Vārī Pilgrimage

This section attempts to see the present-day practice of the Vārī pilgrimage with reference to the concept of “a bhakti public”. Unlike the notion of communitas, the idea of a bhakti public – as conceptualised by Novetzke - is not a homogeneous or cohesive community. The idea of a bhakti public may help understand multiple patterns and layers of social interactions present in the Vārī pilgrimage, which at times, can be contradictory.

The Vārī pilgrimage is essentially a public affair, and the binding glue that creates a sense of a common bond among the pilgrims is bhakti. The structures like pālkhī, pālkhī procession, phaḍas, diṇḍīs seem necessary for providing the optimum circumstance to “experience” the Vārī. Apart from creating the structures for manifesting as well as experiencing bhakti, they are also primary sites through which the Vārkarī ideas are circulated among the Vārkarīs and the society at large. To adopt the analogy of “layers of reception”¹⁴⁹ to the Vārī pilgrimage, several layers of reception can be uncovered during the process of pilgrimage. These layers of reception would not only be intermediated by time,

¹⁴⁹ Novetzke, *Bhakti and Its Public*, 255.

space, and the medium of performance but also by the degree of attentiveness. For example, irrespective of whether the devotees walk the entire pilgrimage repetitively for several years or a short distance, are the villagers who merely take darśana of pādukās during the procession, or are the shopkeepers on the route of the Vārī but pay little attention to the bhakti dimensions, or distant devotees who follow the news bulletin on Vārī and so on, all can be considered as members of “a bhakti public”, created through the practice of Vārī. As Novetzke and Warner point out, even being passively attentive is sufficient to belong to a public. As long as the individuals as well as groups reference themselves as *bhaktas* or devotees (even if not Vārkarīs) and consider themselves as members of the Vārī, in whichever capacity, they constitute “a bhakti public”. One can easily imagine the Vārī pilgrimage through the several layers of reception and thereby forming a bhakti public.

Though Novetzke’s focus in his works is not on pilgrimage exclusively, his observations on pilgrimage as a platform for creating a bhakti public through the circulation of ideas are particularly pertinent to this thesis. Novetzke observes, “Pilgrimage destinations are, and were, nodal points in networks of communication, trade, political prestige, and record-keeping, all seamlessly interwoven in the “religious” fabric of their existence.”¹⁵⁰ He further adds, “It seems clear that, for hundreds of years, pilgrimages and pilgrimage sites provided a parallel social, cultural structure, alongside other ones, such as agricultural centres, mobile military campaigns, and urban settlements. People moved among these social structures, linking them by their travel as centres of economic, political, and religious capital.”¹⁵¹ I agree with Novetzke’s observation about the pilgrimage centres, especially in the context of the Vārī pilgrimage and Pandharpur as a pilgrimage site. It is true that

¹⁵⁰ Novetzke, *History, Bhakti, and Public Memory*, 176.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

pilgrimages and pilgrimage centres have been nodes of circulation for values associated with bhakti and enshrined in the texts composed by Santas. The sites of various bhakti practices like kīrtana, bhajana, pravachana, harīpātha, bhārūda serve as the sites of circulation of bhakti ethos. They are instrumental in transmitting or circulating the bhakti ethos from one generation to the next and across the Marathi-speaking region. Continuing with the argument given by Novetzke, “a public is maintained through any medium of circulation of ideas,”¹⁵² I argue that in Maharashtra, a bhakti public created by and revolving around the VS has sustained itself through various loosely institutionalised bhakti practices. The chief and primary source of the vertical and horizontal circulation of ideas, i.e., inter-generational circulation and transmission of ideas across the length and breadth of Maharashtra, has been made possible through the Vārī pilgrimage.

The Vārī, as well as other Vārkarī bhakti practices, serve as the platforms where not only the circulation of bhakti ethos takes place, but they are the sites of negotiating, shaping, and reshaping this ethos to adjust according to the changing needs of society and address common concerns. However, what is interesting is that the circulation of ideas at these sites is not strictly confined to the domain of bhakti. Or rather, it would be appropriate to say that the domain of bhakti is expanded to include the so-called “secular” aspects of life. For example, Pilgrimages and pilgrimage sites are simply platforms that can be used for various purposes. Apart from the core agenda of bhakti for which kīrtanas, pravachanas, bhārūdas, bhajanas are organised during the Vārī pilgrimage, it also serves as a platform for other “secular” agendas like spreading awareness against alcoholism, Tabaco consumption, female foeticide, environmental protection, the importance of hygiene and cleanliness and so on. The pilgrimage provides a platform not only to the kīrtankāras, pravachankāras, mahārājas, and

¹⁵² Novetzke, *History, Bhakti, and Public Memory*, 28.

buvā's (the classical agents of bhakti) but also to the modern agents of a social and political cause for "secular" purposes like the NGOs, government agencies, civil society organizations as well as political parties. What is interesting to note here is that irrespective of the participants' intentions, most of these acts are carried out as acts of bhakti or at least contextualised by bhakti. As the result of this multifaced interaction and circulation of ideas, unifying and dividing forces are present in the pilgrimage process. These interactions and circulations need not always result in egalitarian practices or, as Turner suggests, might not serve as "anti-structures" and further lead to the creation of "communitas". There is a possibility of realising wholeness and a sense of universalism through these interactions and circulations. Still, there is also a possibility of reinforcing the existing hierarchies – social, political, and economic. Therefore, even though there is no homogenous and cohesive community and, at times, various groups and individuals may have conflicting views and agendas, as long as they consciously consider themselves part of the Vārī procession, they constitute "a bhakti public".

The social ethics that VS identifies with, or what I refer to as the Vārkarī ethos, are manifested during the Vārī pilgrimage. The two most prominent symbols that reflect the social ethics of Vārkarīs are: firstly, all Vārkarīs call each other "māūlī" or mother and secondly, they bow down to each other irrespective of caste, class, gender, age. Both these practices, as well as the practice of "kāḷā" and distribution of prasāda on the concluding day of the Vārī, are celebrated as marks of the equalitarian and egalitarian outlook of the VS. However, the question is whether this egalitarian outlook is accepted, adopted and practised by all Vārkarīs (in the broadest sense of the term) during and after the pilgrimage? It would not be appropriate to generalise that all Vārkarīs imbibe the ethos of social equality. There is

no doubt that the VS and the santas of the tradition preached “*bhedabheda amangala*”,¹⁵³ i.e., it is inauspicious or unacceptable to discriminate based on caste or gender, and therefore, every Vārkarī would aspire to follow the path shown by the santas. However, it would be an overgeneralisation to argue that the Vārī pilgrimage allows one to transcend all the differences of caste, class, and gender among individuals and leads them to realise the wholeness or non-dual nature of their existence. Using the Turnerian construct would be an oversimplification to argue that the Vārī acts as an antistructure and leads to the formation of *communitas*. Instead, it would be appropriate to recognise that pilgrimages, including the Vārī pilgrimage, may reinforce some of the existing social structures and offer the possibility of realisation of the wholeness of humankind and eliminate differences. Both the possibilities are provided by pilgrimages as well as other bhakti practices.

The pilgrimages are not primarily anti-structures, nor do they necessarily create *communitas*. Though the possibility of the emergence of *communitas* in the pilgrimage process needs not to be abandoned, it needs to be qualified by saying that it is only one of the possibilities. Therefore, in my opinion, pilgrimages, especially the Vārī pilgrimage, need to be seen as a platform where multiple social processes and interactions coincide. The interactions between various groups can be complimentary or may run parallel or, at times, can also be conflicting. Pilgrimages provide a venue for bringing these disparate interests together on a common platform. Though there may or may not be direct interaction between these groups and individuals, the discourse keeps circulating within “a bhakti public” constituted by the pilgrimage. This further allows for negotiating the ethos and constantly adjusting to the changing circumstances. The term negotiation allows for addressing contradictory trends.

¹⁵³ It is an often quoted verse from one of the Abhangs of Tukārāma.

The patterns of organization of *diṇḍīs*, distribution of food and practices related to commensality, not allowing women *vīṇekarīs* and *kīrtankāras* in some *diṇḍīs* and *phaḍas* demonstrate that the structural hierarchies of caste and gender continue to manifest themselves during the *Vārī* pilgrimage as well as in the VS, in general, at least to a certain degree. As Novetzke argues, “Publics in the context of *bhakti* are therefore both created and opposed: within them, certain things circulate freely, but without are the usual features of social chauvinisms that mark all cultures.”¹⁵⁴ It needs to be highlighted that transcending the differences and realisation of universal, cohesive existence is a possibility and not the inevitable outcome of the pilgrimage process. Reinforcement of social hierarchies and the realisation of *communitas* are two polar possibilities available through the pilgrimage process. Between these two poles, several other possibilities might indicate a mix of these two or go even beyond these two. What pilgrimages probably offer pilgrims is the possibility of experiencing the wholeness of humankind and the divisive features of a given society. Most likely, individuals will experience these apparently contradictory trends in the pilgrimage process. Therefore, the *Vārī* pilgrimage is neither the “antistructure”, revolting or reforming the social hierarchies, nor is a “status-quoist” platform which serves to perpetuate the prevailing hierarchies. Neither of these can be generalised as a defining characteristic of the *Vārī* pilgrimage, and simultaneously, these trends are present in the pilgrimage process. These apparently contradictory trends can be understood by employing a “both-and” approach rather than “either-or”. The closest possible term that allows us to take this approach is the concept of “a *bhakti* public”.

4.6. *Vārkarī* Sampradāya, “A *Vārkarī* Public” and “A *Bhakti* Public”

¹⁵⁴ Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*, 20.

Broadly, the idea of a bhakti public can be adopted to make sense of mixed patterns of social interaction during the Vārī pilgrimage. However, a public is more a general term which may be adopted in the context of almost any bhakti practice or any public manifestation of bhakti. To demarcate publics created by the Vārkarī practices from other kinds of bhakti publics, the term “a Vārkarī public” seems appropriate. To put it differently, the term “a Vārkarī public” is used to understand a public created through Vārkarī bhakti practices, including the Vārī pilgrimage. In contrast, the term “a bhakti public” is broader and can be adapted to any identifiable group of individuals associating themselves with bhakti. In this sense, a Vārkarī public can be said to be a manifestation of a bhakti public associated with particular bhakti sampradāya, i.e., VS. It is important to note here that a Vārkarī public includes those who are followers of the VS or who bear the identity of being a Vārkarī (in the rigid sense of the term) as well as those who are not the Vārkarīs, i.e., those who do not bear the identity of being a Vārkarī.

Even though there is no centralised structure of the VS, the decentralised organisation of the Vārkarīs can be seen in the *phaḍas* and *diṇḍīs*. With the system of basic vows, the method of becoming a Vārkarī, the rules pertaining to the singing of *abhangas*, the nature and operation of the VS get more defined. There seems to be a clear understanding among the Vārkarīs as to who can be called a “true Vārkarī”. Very often, the term “*sāmpradāyika*” is used to refer to the well-defined structure and rules of the VS. The term “*sāmpradāyika*”¹⁵⁵ has a particular connotation in the Vārkarī terminology. In the Vārkarī canon, the term “*sāmpradāyika*” is employed to indicate what belongs to the tradition of the sampradāya, and here, sampradāya is understood to be VS. In my interactions with the Vārkarīs, very often the

¹⁵⁵ The term “*sāmpradāyika*” is frequently used to mean “communal” or to indicate tension between two or more religious communities, especially in Hindi and Marathi news reporting. However, it should be noted here that the term “*sāmpradāyika*” is not used to indicate tension between two or more communities in the Vārkarī terminology.

regular Vārkarīs mentioned “sāmpradāyika kīrtana”, “sāmpradāyika chāla”, “sāmpradāyika paramparā” and so on. The term “sāmpradāyika kīrtana” refers to that genre of kīrtana performance which fits the rules and style of the VS, distinguishing it from any other style of kīrtana. Similarly, the term “sāmpradāyika chāla” (tune) refers to the tunes of abhangas and bhajanas, which are used in the Vārkarī tradition specifically.¹⁵⁶

There seems to be a system of self-referring among the Vārkarīs, where not only the understanding of who is a “true Vārkarī” is demarcated, but also what belongs to the Vārkarī tradition is specified. The term “sāmpradāyika” is frequently used to indicate what can be considered within the fold of the VS and simultaneously distinguish it from other sampradāyas and traditions. It is important to note here that even though the term “sāmpradāyika” can be used in a generic sense and can refer to the tradition of any sampradāya, in the Maharashtrian context, it almost always refers to the VS. For example, the terms “sāmpradāyika kīrtana” or “sāmpradāyika chāla” refer to Vārkarī kīrtana or Vārkarī tune respectively, and there seems to be broad consensus among the followers of various bhakti traditions of Maharashtra. In this sense, the term sāmpradāyika (vyaktī or individual) is more defined, referring to those who adhere to the Vārkarī ethos as a lifestyle.¹⁵⁷

A Vārkarī public refers to all those who participate in any of the Vārkarī bhakti practices or sāmpradāyika acts of bhakti like Vārī, kīrtana, pravachana, harīpātha, saptāha, and so on, with active or passive attention. Even though a Vārkarī public is not a very well

¹⁵⁶ The Vārkarī tunes of Abhangs and bhajanas are relatively easier to sing than say for example in Naradiya kīrtana tradition. The tunes adopted by the VS are such that any ordinary person even without any training in music and singing can recite abhnags without much practice. It should also be noted that even though there is no strict restriction to adopt other tunes while performing kīrtanas, especially for community singing easiest tunes or sāmpradāyika tunes adopted. Similarly, the Vārkarī sāmpradāyika tunes can also be employed by those who are not the Vārkarīs in the narrow sense of the term.

¹⁵⁷ Here the term lifestyle refers to a lifetime commitment to the Vārkarī ways of conduct and incorporation of Vārkarī practices like nāma-japa, recitation of harīpātha as daily practices, fasting on Ekādaśī, attending bhajanas, kīrtanas on at regular intervals and going to the Vārī pilgrimage every year. The sankrit term implied in the usage of the word ‘lifestyle’ is “vrata”.

defined, organised and hierarchised public, it assumes a Vārkarī identity by participating in the Vārkarī means of bhakti. Individuals' Vārkarī identity, in this case, is in flux and fluid as a result of their participation in the Vārkarī bhakti practices by providing active or passive attention. It is a temporary identity that an individual assumes as long as they are associated with a particular bhakti practice within the Vārkarī sāmpradāyika fold. On the contrary, a “true Vārkarī” abides by all sāmpradāyika rules and regulations. A “true Vārkarī” is supposed to go for the Vārī pilgrimage every year – at least once a year is not supposed to consume alcohol or meat. They should not commit adultery and always speak the truth. Apart from these five basic vows, a “true Vārkarī” is also supposed to wear a tulasīmālā, recite harīpātha daily, read at least a few ovīs or ślokaś from the revered texts of the Vārkarīs every day, repeat a mantra or nāma-japa as directed by a guru, attend bhajanas, kīrtanas, pravachanas, and hold the santas of the VS in reverence. Notably, one commits to these sāmpradāyika niyamas, or sāmpradāyika rules and regulations, voluntarily or by choice. In this case, being a Vārkarī is not an assumed identity, but it is usually a lifelong commitment to a particular way of life. Those who adopt the Vārkarī ethos as a lifestyle are generally associated with some phaḍa. As long as one remains committed to the Vārkarī ethos and acts upon the same, one is supposed to be a Vārkarī.

The basic difference between being a member of the VS or being a sāmpradāyika vyaktī and being a member of a Vārkarī public lies in the performance of action. One can become a member of a Vārkarī public merely by participating or even by paying passive attention, whereas being a Vārkarī (in the strictest sense) calls for an adherence to the Vārkarī ethos. A member of a Vārkarī public does not need to commit fully to the Vārkarī ethos. For example, one might choose meat as a food choice and still be a member of a Vārkarī public by attending a Vārkarī kīrtana or by walking the Vārī pilgrimage, even for a few steps, or by taking darśana of pādukās on the route of the Vārī. To be a member of a Vārkarī public, one

need not accept the Vārkarī ethos as a lifelong commitment. One may continue to be a member of other sampradāyas and might follow non-Vārkarī ways of bhakti in their day-to-day lives and still be a part of a Vārkarī public as long as one participates in the sāmpradāyika practices of VS, even for a while, actively or passively.

Compared to a Vārkarī public, the VS is better defined and identifiable. It might seem complicated for an observer to point out the clear differences between a sāmpradāyika vyaktī and a member of a Vārkarī public. However, Vārkarīs seem to have developed a system of self-referencing wherein the differences can be understood almost immediately and intuitively. To put it broadly, VS is a group of committed Vārkarīs who are bound together by the shared ethos and practices that the santas of the Vārkarī tradition lay down. Importantly, they identify themselves as Vārkarīs or māḷkarīs. Entry into the VS and membership in a Vārkarī public is free and open to anyone, irrespective of caste, gender, class, age, language, religion etc.¹⁵⁸ However, on becoming a Vārkarī, one is expected to commit to the Vārkarī ethos as a way of life. Being a member of a Vārkarī public does not require such a commitment. Further, even though there are no punitive sanctions if someone exits the Vārkarī fold and abandons the Vārkarī ways, it might create a moral burden on individuals.

On the contrary, an exit from a Vārkarī public is more accessible as the very membership of a Vārkarī public is temporary and contextual. In the broadest possible sense, any individual, irrespective of age, class, gender, caste, language, region, as well as sāmpradāyika affiliation, may become a member of a Vārkarī public, even by remotely engaging with the Vārkarī bhakti practices.¹⁵⁹ This engagement may be in the form of

¹⁵⁸ A small ritual performed for becoming a Vārkarī is explained in the previous chapter.

¹⁵⁹ During the field work I came across the ISKCON diṇḍī. The members of this diṇḍī are not ‘Vārkarīs’ in the rigid sense of the term. Detailed discussion can be seen in chapter five.

walking the Vārī pilgrimage, irrespective of motives to join the Vārī. Furthermore, the engagement does not always have to celebrate the Vārkarī ethos, but it can also be critical. A Vārkarī public is far more open and porous as compared to the VS. They need not adhere to the Vārkarī practices in their totality and often continue to follow mixed practices, Vārkarī as well as non-Vārkarī. Becoming a member of a Vārkarī public or leaving it; deciding on the degree of adherence to the Vārkarī ethos and practices are individual choices.

A Vārkarī public can be a locus of interaction between the VS and society at large. The members of a Vārkarī public, when they join the pilgrimage or any other bhakti practice, bring along the structures of hierarchies and the divisive notions that one experiences and possibly return home with some element of the Vārkarī ethos, which is relatively more egalitarian. Similarly, the VS is also influenced by the changing notions in society. It would be utopian to expect a complete transformation of a pilgrim after attending the Vārī or other bhakti practices. Thus, bhakti practices appear to be sites of negotiation between what Novetzke regards as everyday “social mores” and “cosmic transcendence”¹⁶⁰ or what Turner regards as “structure” and “communitas”.

The Vārī pilgrimage becomes an easy platform to spread the message across the sections of society and the region. As a result of this interaction, not only does the Vārkarī ethos percolate within society, but in turn, the dominant socio-political discourses also enter the VS. As mentioned earlier, political parties, ideological groups, NGOs, and state actors also participate in the Vārī pilgrimage in a variety of capacities and with a variety of motives. It should be noted here that a Vārkarī public is not a very close, bubble-like entity but rather a very porous and loosely bound group wherein entry and exit are flexible and open to all. Therefore, it is inevitable that the members of the VS, too, are part and parcel of the social-

¹⁶⁰ Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*, 100.

political developments. However, by adopting the Vārkarī ethos, it is believed that individuals will be able to rise above the social hierarchies of caste, class, gender etc. This egalitarian approach is relatively more visible during the Vārī and other Vārkarī practices, as the very goal of such bhakti practices is to transcend the limitations of the material world – individual limitations like anger, jealousy, desires, etc. Though it is expected of all Vārkarīs to imbibe the Vārkarī ethos, in reality, one would witness a hybrid of the Vārkarī ethos and the continuation of the socio-political hierarchies present in all Vārkarī bhakti practices. It is uncertain and difficult to generalise that each Vārkarī lives this spirit of mutual respect and equality in their day to day routine, transcending the caste and gender hierarchies “back home” when they are beyond the influence zone of a Vārkarī public. Nonetheless, the Vārkarī practices arranged at regular intervals and santasanga during these gatherings serve as reminders and role models to internalise the Vārkarī ethos.

4.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed the concepts of “communitas” and “a bhakti public” in light of social interactions and processes taking place at the site of the Vārī pilgrimage. Though communitas need not be wholly abandoned, the concept of bhakti is broader and more inclusive that can encompass the complex and, at times, even apparently contradictory trends of interactions at the pilgrimage sites. A substantial part of this chapter has dealt with the idea of “a bhakti public” given by Novetzke. Though Novetzke himself has not elaborated much on the phenomenon of a pilgrimage, I have drawn upon his idea of a bhakti public to see if it suits the understanding of the Vārī pilgrimage. A distinction is made between “a bhakti public” and “a Vārkarī public”. I have argued that the Vārī pilgrimage serves as the primary juncture where the nodes of bhakti networks intersect. Therefore, it is the most important site where the fullest demonstration of a Vārkarī public can be witnessed. To

highlight the degree of openness and fluidity of a Vārkarī public, a distinction is also made between a Vārkarī public and the Vārkarī Sampradāya. I have argued that a Vārkarī public has sustained as well as expanded itself over a long period in and outside Maharashtra, owing to its openness to including various layers of participation and attentiveness in the Vārkarī bhakti practices, including the Vārī pilgrimage. The character and form of a Vārkarī public may keep changing according to the changing circumstances and context. This adaptability and flexibility make a Vārkarī public inclusive. However, what keeps a Vārkarī public bound together and identifiably different from other bhakti publics is its particular bhakti ethos as propounded by the Santas of the Vārkarī tradition and maintained through the system of phaḍas and mathas.

As Novetzke pointed out in the context of Dnyāneśvarī, the “impetus behind the JnaneshVārī is not to change the social world entirely, but to open to all society the possibility of salvation inherent in hearing the Bhagvad Gita...JnaneshVārī presents a careful balance between satisfying social norms and transcending them.”¹⁶¹ He further adds, “this text (Jnaneshvari) walks between the two poles of social orthodoxy and social critique”.¹⁶² These observations can also be said to be true about the Vārī pilgrimage as well as the VS. The Vārī pilgrimage does aim to bring about social transformation, but this is not an explicit aim of the VS. It allows every individual a possibility of salvation or self-realization by following the path of bhakti. Bhakti, in this context, is embodied by walking the pilgrimage, singing abhangas, playing and dancing with the fellow Vārkarīs, listening to the words of Bhāgavata-Gita and the great Santas of the Vārkarī tradition and being in the company of pious beings or Santasanga. The Vārī is a platform where individuals can freely

¹⁶¹ Novetzke, *The Quotidian Revolution*, 215.

¹⁶² Ibid, 220.

take part in all these bhakti practices, and the extent of their involvement is their choice. This possibility of self-realization is available without any discrimination, practically to everyone who is even passively attentive. A Vārkarī public is not an ideal kind or a perfect, homogeneous, and coherent public who all speak in the same tone. It is made up of a variety of interests, some of which may seem contradictory. However, the potential of a Vārkarī public lies in its capacity to account for and include a variety of voices, irrespective of social, economic, or political differences. A Vārkarī public is neither wholly egalitarian nor entirely devoid of hierarchy and differences. It is characterised by both egalitarian values as well as hierarchy, and it has the capacity to accommodate all social interactions between these two poles and possibly beyond.

Having dealt with the theoretical and conceptual categories that may appropriately capture the patterns of social interaction during the Vārī pilgrimage in this chapter, the next chapter, i.e. chapter five, looks at the operational part of the concept of a Vārkarī public or a bhakti public associated with the Vārkarī practices, prominently, the Vārī pilgrimage. The question addressed in the next chapter is whether the Vārī pilgrimage serves as the site of a bhakti public. To find the answer to this question, two scholarly accounts given by G. A. Deleury and Iravati Karve are relied upon, and same are compared and contrasted with my observations by way of participation in the Vārī and interactions with the Vārkarīs.

Chapter Five

Vārī as a Site of “A Bhakti Public”

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I analysed the concepts of “communitas” and “a bhakti public” given by Victor Turner and Christian Lee Novetzke, respectively. I have argued that the idea of “a bhakti public” seems to address the complex patterns of interactions during pilgrimages, in general, and the Vārī pilgrimage, in particular. Along the lines of the idea of a bhakti public, I argue that the Vārī pilgrimage is instrumental in creating what can be called “a Vārkarī public”. A bhakti public is a broader, fluid and more inclusive category, accounting for the trends which may seem contradictory. Similarly, “a Vārkarī public” is open, where the boundaries of membership are fluid. During the Vārī pilgrimage, even those who are not Vārkarīs, in the strictest or narrowest sense, can become members of a public. One can easily become a member of a Vārkarī public by way of participating in the Vārī pilgrimage, remotely or directly, for the entire duration or just for a little while, with active or passive attention.¹ A member of a Vārkarī public need not give up other means of bhakti or belief systems. Further, a Vārkarī public is not a very well defined, structured and exclusive community, and individuals may continue to operate from their social, economic, and political vantage points. In this sense, a relation between a Vārkarī public and other socio-political structures is not defined by “either-or” categories but by “both-and”.

Though there are other scholarly works on the VS and its deity, Viṭṭhala or Pāṇḍuraṅga, very few academic accounts deal directly with the practice of Vārī and,

¹ It seems that several avenues like bhajana, kīrtana, and pravachana are instrumental in creating a Vārkarī public. However, since the focus of this thesis is on the Vārī pilgrimage, the arguments made here are mainly in the context of the Vārī pilgrimage.

importantly, the social dimensions of Vārī. Two of the most important accounts that deal with the social processes involved in the Vārī pilgrimage are given by Deleury and Karve in their works “*The Cult of Vithobā*” and “*On the Road*”, respectively. The most scholarly account of the Vārī pilgrimage is presented by the anthropologist Iravati Karve. In the famous essay titled “*On the Road: A Maharashtrian Pilgrimage*”, published in *The Journal of Asian Studies* in 1962, Karve gives an analytical account of the Vārī pilgrimage based on her own experiences. In this chapter, I analyse the accounts of the Vārī pilgrimage provided by G. A. Deleury and Iravati Karve and further draw linkages between my fieldwork and the interviews of the Vārkarīs. Similarly, G. A. Deleury carried out research on the cult of Vithobā for the award of his PhD and joined the Vārī pilgrimage in 1951.² The Deccan College later published his thesis, Pune, titled “*The Cult of Vithobā*” in 1960. He has dedicated a chapter on the Vārī pilgrimage and also outlines the social aspects of Vārī.

The focus of this chapter remains on understanding the social processes taking place during the Vārī pilgrimage. The aim is to see if the accounts presented by Deleury, Karve and my observations from the fieldwork suggest the creation of “a bhakti public” in general and “a Vārkarī public”, in particular, through a means of Vārī pilgrimage. There is a lapse of more than six decades between my fieldwork-based observations of the Vārī pilgrimage and the accounts of Vārī given by Deleury and Karve. As a result, it would also be essential to note the continuities and changes observed in 2019 and compare the same with the accounts of Deleury and Karve. I have divided this chapter thematically. The themes revolve around social issues and give a glimpse into the nature of social interactions and responses to the power hierarchies created by social structures. The quest is to understand whether the social interactions taking place in the Vārī pilgrimage suggest the emergence of a Vārkarī public. In

² Deleury, Preface, xi.

each section, I have presented the views of Deleury, then Karve and lastly, my observations from the fieldwork. Wherever possible, I have drawn comparisons between these three accounts and have also noted the continuities and changes in the Vārī pilgrimage.

The first section, 5.1, focuses on the community or collective nature of the Vārī pilgrimage. It argues that Vārī is necessarily a collective bhakti practice. It underlines that the Vārī is not supposed to be performed as an individual or solitary pilgrimage. Acts of walking, singing, dancing during the Vārī are group activities and *diṇḍīs* are the locus to organise diverse groups. The importance of the collective nature of Vārī lies in the fact that it brings together a variety of interests on a common platform. It also addresses the question of whether the community nature of the Vārī pilgrimage creates a homogenous community of Vārkarīs. Section 5.2. deals with Vārī as one of the most potent sites of circulation of ideas in general and circulation of bhakti ethos of the VS. It highlights that the Vārī allows circulation of ideas horizontally, i.e. across the length and breadth of Maharashtra and vertically, i.e. from one generation to the next. It seems that the circulation of ideas through the Vārī pilgrimage substantially contributes to the shaping of Maharashtrian culture as the pilgrims take the “Vārkarī ethos” back home when they return. The following section, i.e., 5.3, deals with the inclusive character of the Vārī. It observes that people from various strata of society voluntarily participate in the Vārī pilgrimage. Differences in caste, gender, class, education and occupation do not restrict the entry of individuals into the pilgrimage. However, the inclusiveness of Vārī is not devoid of hierarchies. While focusing on the overall inclusive nature of the Vārī, this section also points out the manifestation of social structures during the pilgrimage. Carrying forward the thread from the previous section, 5.4 mainly focuses on unifying and dividing trends in the Vārī pilgrimage.

On the one hand, the Vārī is instrumental in creating a sense of unity amongst pilgrims by way of common objects of reverence, being part of the same procession, through

the systems of *diṇḍīs*. However, on the other hand, the social, political, and ideological differences continue to be exhibited during the *Vārī*. Though practically everyone can take part in the *Vārī*, the caste and gender hierarchies continue to manifest in the *Vārī* setting. This section highlights the simultaneous trends of unity and difference present in the *Vārī*. Section 5.5 discusses the reconciliatory force of the *Vārī* pilgrimage as well as of the VS. It is probably owing to the overall reconciliatory character of the VS that the apparently contradictory trends can be witnessed in the *Vārī* pilgrimage. This section is further divided into three sub-sections, viz., “*Vārī*: A Pilgrimage of *Grihastha*”; “Convergence of Various Paths”; and “Ideological Spectrum during the *Vārī*”. Section 5.6 is titled “Beyond Socio-political” and argues that even though the *Vārī* is as much a social and political phenomenon as it is spiritual and religious, the primary driving force of the *Vārī* is essentially *bhakti*. It does not teleologically create “*communitas*”, nor does it reject the possibility of “*communitas*”. The last section, 5.7, concludes this chapter and argues that the social processes present during the *Vārī* pilgrimage are neither completely unifying nor solely dividing, but both simultaneously. A *Vārkarī* public, i.e. a *bhakti* public emerging out of *Vārkarī bhakti* practices, is fluid and open.

5.1. *Vārī* is a Community Pilgrimage

Deleury’s work, “*The Cult of Vithobā*”, traces the origin and practices associated with the VS. Because the *sampradāya*’s very identity is defined by its annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur – *Vārī* - he has a dedicated chapter on the *Vārī* pilgrimage.³ Apart from elaborating on the details of the *pālkhī* procession and organisational aspects, he analyses the social aspects of the *Vārī* pilgrimage. For this work, I engage closely with Deleury’s

³ Deleury, 73 – 109.

observations regarding social processes during the Vārī. Deleury argues that the Vārī pilgrimage is essentially a community affair. It is not a solitary exercise of sanyāsīs or sādhus going to some challenging mountains or rugged terrain. Nevertheless, it is a pilgrimage of ordinary village people walking in small groups, known as diṇḍīs, singing, dancing, and walking together to Pandharpur. Deleury writes:

All the pilgrims participate in this singing, and their joy is the joy of a community. This leads us to stress another characteristic of the pilgrimage, its social aspect. It is not the solitary pilgrimage, or the kind performed by innumerable ‘sādhus’ and ‘gosāvīs’ commonly met on any of the Indian roads, nor the frantic rush of devotees pulling the cart of their god as is often seen in other holy places, it is peaceful if enthusiastic pilgrimage of several small groups united by familial or social ties and that are in existence the whole year-round. The Vārkarīs are not professional pilgrims; and they are ordinary men-of-the-world.⁴

Deleury defines the community of the Vārkarīs as the “community of the saints”⁵ and the Vārī pilgrimage as “the practical aspect of the “community of the saints”⁶. It seems that Deleury uses the term “community of the saints” to indicate the larger community than the members of the VS. The community of the saints includes every individual who, in some or the other way, seeks an opportunity to be associated with the pilgrimage and a chance to serve God, the Santas of the sampradāya or the pilgrims on the way to Pandharpur. Deleury explains:

It is a social event in the life of the country, a festive date in the calendar of the villagers. The various Pālkhīs, far from using the main roads, often take to side roads or even footpaths. In that way, they passed through villages not situated on the main lines of communications. For all these villages, the coming of the pālkhī is a great event, look forward to and prepared: in many places, the villages adorn their houses and their streets. Hawkers and peddlers take care to come in advance so that in all the places where the pālkhī stops it is a real fair which is waiting for it. Besides, villagers have the duty which is considered by them as an honour to lodge and feed the pilgrims and that gives them ample opportunities to come into contact with them and become members of the “community of the saints”.⁷

⁴ Deleury, 109.

⁵ Ibid, 104, 107.

⁶ Ibid, 104.

⁷ Ibid, 107.

Similarly, Karve's account of the Vārī establishes the community character of this pilgrimage. She writes: "People from far and near had flocked to pay respects to the great saint. Whole families had come... Thousands walked from Alandi to Pandharpur with the image of the saint."⁸ Though Karve does not employ the term "community of the saints", she writes about a similar spirit. Karve's account establishes the centrality of the Santas, in the form of pādukās, during the Vārī pilgrimage. She elaborates: "The pilgrimage starts from Alandi where Dnyāneśvara died voluntarily at age twenty-two in the presence of hundreds of people. The silver images of his feet are taken every year in a palanquin to Pandharpur to reach the town the day before the first Āṣādhī Ekādaśī, the eleventh day of the waxing moon in June-July."⁹ However, this phenomenon of carrying pādukās of santas to Pandharpur is not limited to Santa Dnyāneśvara. Even today, various pālkhī processions begin from various parts of Maharashtra, carrying in the pālkhī the sandal images or a photo frame or other object symbolising the presence of the santa's spirit.

Karve adds to her description, "Simultaneously, different "saints" born between the fourteenth and the seventeenth century and belonging to this cult also start - that is, their foot-images start - for this pilgrimage from different parts of Maharashtra. Each palanquin is accompanied by pilgrims. The pilgrims belong to the cult and go to Pandharpur each year - the Vārkarīs - and those who are not members of the cult but wish to visit the god in the company of the saints."¹⁰ The community nature of the Vārī pilgrimage is becoming more robust with time. The increasing number of pilgrims going to the Vārī every year is increasing. The communities and the geographical areas which were not seen earlier during the Vārī are increasingly participating in the Vārī. Karve mentions that the pālkhīs from

⁸ Karve, 14.

⁹ Ibid, 15.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Konkan generally join the Vārī in the month of Kārtika to suit the agricultural calendar of the region. However, during the 2019 Vārī, I witnessed that some pālkhīs from Konkan, like that Swāmī Swarūpānanda from Pavas in the Ratnagiri district, also joined the Āṣādha pilgrimage. There could be several reasons for the numerical and geographical spread of the popularity of the Vārī pilgrimage. The foremost reason, in my opinion, is mass media and social media. Apart from several movies made on the Vārī pilgrimage and Santas of the Vārkarī tradition, almost every Marathi news channel carries a Vārī special bulletin during the Vārī pilgrimage.

Even the national news channels and newspapers cover the Pandharpur procession. Furthermore, with the widespread internet and mobile phones, the circulation of information related to Vārī, like photos and videos, is now a common phenomenon. In some of the social media groups of the Vārkarīs, the images of Viṭṭhala and Rakhumāi are circulated every day after the Pūjā, and especially during the Vārī pilgrimage. Further, on special occasions like the Dnyāneśvara Jayantī or Tukārāma Bīja, the abhangas of respective Santas, their photos and stories related to them keep making the rounds on social media. There are social media pages managed by the committees of the temples related to the VS; for example, the Facebook page of the “Śrī Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja Sansthāna Committee, Alandi”¹¹ broadcasts the āratī of Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja Samādhī every morning. Because of this widespread information, more and more people are attracted to and become curious about the VS and participate in the only community gathering every year, i.e., the Vārī pilgrimage.

Further, the development of means of transport has made it easy for people in the remotest villages to come to Pune and join either of the pālkhī processions of Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja or Tukārāma Mahārāja. If there are enough enthusiasts and devotees, some groups

¹¹ <https://Santa.facebook.com/maulialandiweb>. This is a link to the official Facebook page of Shree Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja Sansthan Committee, Alandi. As of 15th May, about 63800 people followed this Facebook page.

also start a *diṇḍī* to join any of the *pālkhī* processions. A woman *Vārkarī* who had come from Aurangabad, explained,

We had seen the *Vārī* procession on television. Many families participate in the *Vārī*, which inspires us to come for the *Vārī* at least once. There is also curiosity regarding the procession, and many people come to *Vārī* every year to gain happiness. They dance, they sing *bhajan*s, and they enjoy and share happiness. We, too, wanted to share this happiness. Last year in Pune, we went to take *darśana* of *Tukobārāya*'s *pālkhī* (*Tukārāma Mahārāja Chowk*), and at that time, we decided that we should join the *Vārī* pilgrimage after the retirement of my husband. He retired from his service last year, so we joined the *Vārī* this year along with my daughter's in-laws.¹²

Generally, the *Vārī* pilgrimage is associated with ordinary, simple village people and farming communities who might not be literate or have very little formal education.

However, in recent years, an increasing number of highly educated people from urban centres and various professions are joining the *Vārī* procession. The leaders made a deliberate effort of the *VS* to reach out to the urban, educated masses over the years. As Deleury points out in his account, "One of these '*diṇḍīs*' is a group of intellectuals gathered around the spiritual personality of principal Dandekar, professor of philosophy at Sir Parashuram Bhau college, Poona."¹³ doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, and researchers are becoming attracted to the *Vārī* pilgrimage. Though to date, a large section of the *Vārkarīs* come from rural areas and are farmers, the number of people from city centres and modern professions is also growing. In fact, for the last few years, there has been a group of IT professionals who join the *Vārī* pilgrimage every year. One of the IT professionals, who had come from Mumbai to Pandharpur on the day of *Ekādaśī* said,

Two-three years ago, I was attracted to the lakhs of people. There is a vast crowd, and I was curious about how everything is managed here. I came here initially to find it out. Then I started to realise that there was something different over here. There are various ways in which people communicate. You hear people from *Nagar* speaking in the *Nāgarī* language. You listen to people from *Khandesh* in the *Ahiraṇī* tone, the *Nashik* tone, and the *Satara*, or *Phaltan* tone. We see the finesse, the innocence, and the commitment of the *Vārkarīs*. There is a mixed crowd. It is a different experience on the bank of the river *Chandrabhaga*. This is an altogether different

¹² Personal Interaction, July 2019.

¹³ Deleury, 83.

experience than the crowd and hectic schedule of Mumbai. There are more people here than on the local trains of Mumbai, but this is managed wonderfully here.¹⁴

A Vārkarī woman highlighted that the Vārī pilgrimage brings people together from across Maharashtra, which in turn helps sustain the Maharashtrian community. She said, “There are many benefits of walking in a dīṇḍī. We meet many people over here. People from all over Maharashtra are there in our Dīṇḍī; Nagar, Mumbai, Pune, Western Maharashtra, Konkan, Ratnagiri, etc. We understand the culture of Maharashtra by interacting with the people who come from various parts of the state. We even start to know more about our roots and culture and like to adjust and live with other people.”¹⁵ Being together with their fellow Vārkarīs is a joyful experience for the pilgrims. A remarkable feature of the Vārī pilgrimage is the company of other like-minded people. These righteous beings have earned spiritual authority by their practice and sādhanā and with the Santas of the sampradāya, whose presence is symbolised by the pādukās. This is known as santasanga or satsanga, in Vārkarī parlance. A regular Vārkarī, who has been coming to the Vārī pilgrimage for twenty-seven years, explained her experience of being with her fellow Vārkarīs for about three weeks every year. She said,

There is immense joy in the Vārī. It is the bliss of togetherness. There is happiness in the sound of the ṭāḷa and mṛdaṅga. This music, singing, dancing, playing, chanting of the name of God (nāma-japa), together with other Vārkarīs, makes us forget the worries that haunt us back home. We listen to the pravachanas of great spiritual leaders. We see their humility and simplicity during the Vārī. Being in the company of such righteous beings is bliss, and not many have it easily. However, once you come for the Vārī, you are in the right company. It makes us walk on the right path. This is the happiness we get by walking in the Vārī.¹⁶

¹⁴ Interview conducted on 8th July 2019.

¹⁵ Interview conducted on 10th July 2019.

¹⁶ Interview conducted on 6th July 2019.

To understand the overall perception of the Vārī pilgrimage and the social imagination in Maharashtra, it is essential to note that most of those who have not or could not participate in the Vārī pilgrimage hope that they will get an opportunity to experience the Vārī and walk at least a few steps with pākhī. Many people try to associate with the Vārī in whatever way they can. Those who cannot join for the entire duration of the Vārī, for whatsoever reason, try to participate in the procession depending on their availability and capacity. The various groups from various parts of Maharashtra, India, and some foreigners, take part in the Vārī for a smaller duration. Some join for a week, some for two days, while others only for a day, starting with the pākhī in the morning and reaching the destination in the evening. This one-day participation in the Vārī is often referred to as “*tāppā*”. The attempt is to get a glimpse of the experience of the Vārī.

A sevekarī (one who provides service) had joined Vārī at a particular halt and had come to serve food to the Vārkarīs who was walking with the pākhī. He explained his sense of being duty-bound to join the Vārī in some form, if not walking the pilgrimage, then at least by serving the pilgrims. He narrated that his parents used to go on the Vārī pilgrimage. Since he could not take an extended leave because of his profession and could not join the procession for the entire duration, he took the opportunity to do sevā by arranging for food at some halts on the way to pākhī. He commits to a particular diṇḍī and makes arrangements for at least three meals for all the members of the diṇḍī. He felt happy that he could continue his parents’ legacy, at least in some form. Furthermore, he added that he feels delighted when he can serve.¹⁷ As our interaction concluded, he insisted that I take prasād and leave. I could not override his request to join the diṇḍī for lunch, or rather prasād, and relished simple dal, rice, chutney, and onion.

¹⁷ Interview conducted on 6th July 2019.

Many people provide various kinds of sevā during the Vārī. As mentioned above, some sevekarīs accompany the Vārī for the entire duration, but everyone cannot. To associate themselves with the Vārī in some way, individuals offer sevā to the Vārkarīs. There are various kinds of sevās provided during the Vārī. They include serving food, offering tea, water, arranging for overnight stays, making toilets and washrooms available to the Vārkarīs, medical sevā, sevā for hair cutting and shaving, and so on. Primarily, the villagers from the villages on the route of the pāḷkhī procession provide these services. What is remarkable is that the Muslim villagers, too, give sevā to the Vārkarīs. People also come from different parts of the state to provide sevā. Generally, they distribute non-perishable food items, like biscuits, water bottles etc. Some others, who cannot join the pilgrimage, go directly to Pandharpur on the day of Āṣāḍha Ekādaśī to take a dip in the Chandrabhaga river and take darśana of Pāṇḍuraṅga. Those who cannot make it to Pandharpur on the day of Ekādaśī, observe fast, listen to bhajana/kīrtana, take a darśana of Pāṇḍuraṅga at a local temple, recite god-name, nāma-japa, and haripāṭha are the standard practices in the households of Maharashtra.

As the pāḷkhī passes through various villages, the villagers from the town as well as nearby villages gather at the pāḷkhī ṭaḷa to take darśana of Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja's pāḍukā. A long queue for darśana till midnight and at times till early morning is a common sight. Some of them also join the kīrtana performed at the pāḷkhī ṭaḷa. Pravachana, saptāh, kīrtanas, pāṛāyaṇa, gatherings for the recitation of haripāṭha, singing of bhajanas, performing bhārūdas, etc. are organised in the villages throughout the years, and precisely so during the period of Vārī pilgrimage. With the development of communication means, the recent platforms associated with the Vārī include TV and social media. Interestingly, it is common for individuals to take darśana of pāḷkhī or pāḍukās on TV screens or through social media. Those who cannot go to Pandharpur can compensate by watching a live telecast of the

mahapūjā of Viṭṭhala in Pandharpur which starts at 3.30 am on the day of Ekādaśī. Finally, if any family member, relative or neighbour walks in the Vārī, even for a while, people take darśana of that individual. The belief is that the expression of bhakti, in taking darśana of a Vārkarī, will reach Pāṇḍuraṅga.

It is important to note that the sense of community during the Vārī pilgrimage - what Deleury refers to as the “community of the saints” - is not restricted to the Vārkarīs alone (in the narrowest sense of the term) but expands to every individual who is even remotely associated with the Vārī. The community includes various sections of people – the Vārkarīs who are initiated into the Sampradāya, as well as all those who take part in the Vārī pilgrimage – even without being initiated into the VS, those who do not walk the entire distance but just a few miles or for a few days according to their convenience and ability. The community constituted during the Vārī pilgrimage also includes the sevekarīs - those who provide various kinds of sevā with or without payment, like the devotees who want to offer food to the pilgrims or even the shopkeepers, police personnel, doctors, and volunteers from the NGOs. It is inclusive of the local people who come to take darśana of the pālkhī or go to attend kīrtanas and pravachanas, or the individuals involved in local administration who are instrumental in providing the administrative support to the pālkhī procession. The community that takes form during the Vārī pilgrimage is not devoid of politicians. The volunteers and leaders of various political parties use the platform of the Vārī to propagate their interests by putting up flex and banners, or by offering food, water, and other kinds of sevā, or organising kīrtana, bhajana, and pravachana. They, too, are accommodated within the idea of the community during the Vārī pilgrimage. This sense of community is well understood by the fact that every person on the way to Pandharpur during the Vārī pilgrimage is called “māūlī”. The deity Pāṇḍuraṅga, the Santas of the tradition, the initiated and the non-initiated pilgrims, the sevekarīs, the representatives of the government and the non-government agencies all are

called “māūlī”. As this entire gathering of people, physically or virtually, is around the pāḷkhīs of the Santas of the Vārkarī tradition, the Santas to are considered the members of the community. It is no wonder that Deleury aptly adopts the term “community of the saints”.

However, as Karve points out in her account, not everything was good about this community living. Karve clarifies: “This does not mean that all the pilgrims were happy. This communal living, this sharing, brought both joy and sorrow. So many unhappy and bereaved persons were walking the road to Pandharpur! They opened their hearts and unburdened their woes to their travelling companions. They tried to get consolation and sympathy and hoped to gather the strength to bear their misfortunes. And what sorrows there were! Each of a different kind, but still sharing much with the others.”¹⁸ Even though there is generally a welcoming approach towards the Vārkarīs and the pāḷkhī procession, there are also voices that distance themselves from this approach. There can be several reasons for this desolate view ranging from theological, didactic reasons¹⁹ to the concerns of cleanliness and hygiene as the vast mass of Vārkarīs move from one village to the next. Some petitions were filed in the Bombay High Court seeking a stay on the bathing in the waters of Chandrabhaga river (which is an integral part of the Vārī pilgrimage), citing the reasons for environmental pollution.

The Vārī offers a platform for the Vārkarīs as well as non-Vārkarīs to come together and form the “community of the saints” and the possibility of creating the *communitas*; however, the Vārī does not necessarily make a homogenous group of Vārkarīs. There is no precise answer to whether the individual and group differences merge within the more significant communal identity to form the *communitas* as conceptualised by Turner.

¹⁸ Karve, 27.

¹⁹ These reasons are like those discussed under the section “Criticisms of Hindu Tradition of Pilgrimage” in chapter 2.

Pilgrimages, in general, and the Vārī pilgrimages in particular, must be viewed as sites that allow for the negotiation of various identities – individual, group, and community. Realising a community identity and a sense that one belongs to a larger whole does not necessarily mean giving up other identities. Individuals seem to move back and forth, associating with various identities simultaneously, leading to an apparent contradiction. In the Vārī pilgrimage, one may call every other individual “māūlī” and continue to maintain the hierarchies of gender and caste. Instead of viewing these differences as contradictions and paradoxes, the social interactions that occur during bhakti practices in general and the Vārī, mainly, should be considered negotiations between various social identities. To better capture this fluidity, openness and inclusive character of the community, the term “a bhakti public” is more appropriate, which includes within its scope the possibility of forming “communitas” or “community of the saints” and goes beyond.

5.2. Circulation of Ideas

The Vārī pilgrimage serves as one of the most important sites for the circulation of ideas, vertically and horizontally. The vertical circulation of ideas means ideas being disseminated from one generation to the next. In contrast, horizontal circulation implies spreading ideas across the length and breadth of Maharashtra and even beyond. The vertical circulation of ideas is facilitated by the family character of the Vārī pilgrimage, i.e. generations after generations in a given family continue to go to the Vārī and going to the Vārī pilgrimage every year is seen as a pious duty to be performed by the family members. The horizontal circulation is made possible because of the nature of the pākhī processions starting from various villages and towns of Maharashtra, binding the local people together in a pākhī procession and going to Pandharpur. The Vārkarī ethos has circulated in the most households in Maharashtra thanks to the movement of people during the Vārī pilgrimage.

Apart from the actual movement of people during the Vārī, other Vārkarī means like kīrtana, bhajana, haripāṭha, pravachana, and saptah also aid in the circulation of ideas and the spread of the Vārkarī ethos.

Deleury points out the importance of the bhajanas and kīrtanas performed during the Vārī pilgrimage, attracting thousands of people to every village where the pilgrimage halts for the night. He observes that the pilgrimage procession is an annual celebration for which villagers wait eagerly every year. He writes: “The Vārkarī movement owes its widespread popularity to its annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur, which attracts vast crowds of pilgrims and onlookers every year. The towns that lie on the way to the processions and even the smaller villages do the festival attire for that occasion. It is the village fair. Although this popular aspect must not be overlooked, the main attraction for the pilgrimage lights is still more in the daily ‘bhajanas’ and ‘kīrtanas’ performed by the leaders of the pilgrimage, to which people flock thousands.”²⁰ The villagers listen to the kīrtanas and pravachanas religiously, with all sincerity. Deleury writes: “the seriousness with which the audience listens to the preachers or the singers reveals how deep is the religious consciousness and the spiritual needs of the people, and how fittingly that need is ministered not only by the teachings of the Vārkarī ‘gurus’, but also by the manner of the teaching. The devotional atmosphere of these gatherings never fails to leave its mark on those who attend them...”²¹ Bhajanas, kīrtanas and pravachanas are organised every evening in each of the diṇḍīs as well as in front of the pālkhī tent known as pālkhī taḷa. The bhajanas and kīrtanas are played throughout the night, till around the morning pūjā time at 4.00 am.

²⁰ Deleury, 6.

²¹ Ibid.

The overnight bhajanas and kīrtanas are primarily organised for the villagers, a town where pāḷkhī stays at night. Deleury writes in his account, “Nevertheless, the night does not stop the activities of the pāḷkhī. Every night a different ‘diṇḍī’ is in charge of the night function, and during the whole night ‘, bhajanas’ and ‘kīrtanas’ are performed in front of the big tent, attended by some pilgrims and the crowd of villagers. It is the best moment for the Vārkarīs to impart their spiritual message to many village folks. They do it in a way that is admirably fitted to their audience, who listens in a religious silence and participates in the singing.”²² This description of the eager audience of the kīrtanas and pravachanas and participation in bhajanas suits well with the definition of “publics of reception” given by Novetzke while describing a bhakti public. Through these kīrtanas and pravachanas, the ideas of the VS are circulated in each village, big or small, on the way to Pandharpur. Similarly, the message is taken home by the pilgrims who join the Vārī from the length and breadth of the Marathi-speaking region.

Highlighting the inter-generational transmission of ideas by way of singing together during the Vārī pilgrimage, Deleury writes:

The singing of the hymns is the most crucial function of the pilgrimage. As most of the pilgrims are illiterate (but this does not mean that they are uncultured), the singing of religious hymns is what reading spiritual books is for other communities. Through the medium of these hymns, the Vārkarī traditions and teachings are transmitted from generation to generation. This makes as long as the pilgrimage lasts a true school of spirituality, and it also explains why the Vārkarī is under obligation to take part in it. So say, it is a long retreat lasting a fortnight or more that the Vārkarīs undergo every year.²³

Another function of the singing of bhajanas and kīrtanas is to give each diṇḍī a sense of unity, argues Deleury. He writes: “... it (singing) is the group's activity in which each member has a part to play.”²⁴ Deleury argues that singing together prepares the minds of

²² Deleury, 6.

²³ Ibid, 88.

²⁴ Ibid.

pilgrims and makes them aware of the presence of the god they are going to meet. Notably, “Little by little (the devotee), he is liberated from his daily worries and into a state of psychological peaceful is necessary for any spiritual achievement.”²⁵ Even though Deleury sees the importance of liberation from daily worries as necessary for spiritual achievement, this might be considered liberation from the structure's hierarchies and roles from a Turnerian perspective.

The bhajanas and kīrtanas are also instrumental in preserving the oral tradition of the VS Deleury explains, “... another result of the singing of the ‘abhangas’: the faithful transmission of a literary tradition. As long as the pilgrims go on singing their poems, the great bhakta poets are in no danger of falling into oblivion because they live in the heart of a whole people. The names of Jnanadeva, Namdev, Eknātha, Tukārāma, Niloba and all the others remain in the memory of thousands of people who, without having ever read one line of the writings, know many of them by heart.”²⁶ Elaborating the Vārkarī methods of imparting moral and spiritual teachings, Deleury explains: “Every night, the procession pauses in a larger village or town, where a large audience awaits its arrival. The people gather enthusiastically around the pālkhī to listen to the “kathās” and do the singing. The Vārkarī Sampradāya has adopted the means of kīrtanas, kathās and pravachanas to impart moral and spiritual education to the people in such a manner that it reaches ordinary masses.”²⁷ Deleury points out the mandate of the Vārkarī kīrtanakāra that all must understand him and must be able to seek the attention of his audience. As Deleury observes, the prominent leaders of the VS, like mahārājas, buvās, gurus, pravachanakaras, and kīrtanakāras, instil the teachings of the great Santas of the past into the minds of their listeners. The audience gives this

²⁵ Deleury, 88.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 107.

performance their full religious attention, occasionally interrupted by the singing of some well-known abhangas. “Kīrtana is a psychologically beneficial form of popular preaching.”²⁸

Deleury points out that the Vārī pilgrimage serves as the site of circulation of ideas. He writes:

Hitherto (Pandharpur) had been a place of pilgrimage only; now, it has also become a centre of spiritual learning. For not only did it attract to itself a stream of devotees who came to learn at the feet of the great saint and his successors, but it became the focus from which devoted disciples returned to disseminate countrywide the teaching which they had imbibed at Pandharpur... the spreading of the influence of Pandharpur was providential, for when the onset of Muslim invasions sealed the doom of Devgiri as a Marathi cultural centre, the tradition was enabled to live on in the countryside, to revive later with great strength.²⁹

The importance of the Vārī is not restricted to the circulation of ideas and of the Vārkarī ethos. Still, it also aids in shaping the common Maharashtrian identity – shaped by the common scriptures, common language, intermingling and similar spiritual aspirations directed towards one God. The Vārī pilgrimage and the VS indeed influence an individual’s sense of right and wrong. Iravati Karve believes that the Vārī pilgrimage was instrumental in standardising the Marathi language. She explains:

I witnessed how the language and culture of Maharashtra had spread among all its social layers. The fine poetry of five centuries was recited daily. That poetry embodied a religion and a philosophy. People speaking many dialects sang the same verses and thus learned a standard language. Their learning was achieved in a massive dose but without pain or compulsion. Everyone was laughing and joking during the march. Nobody pressed people to join the pilgrimage. No public announcement of the programme was made, and the outside world might just as well not exist. The pilgrims were intoxicated with happiness; anyone with a heart and the insight could have the same joy.³⁰

A common saying is that the Vārī is more than the university. One learns what one does not get to learn, even by reading thousands of books and getting degrees from universities in the Vārī. Vārī is severally referred to as “Loka-vidyāpīṭha” – “public

²⁸ Deleury, 107.

²⁹ Ibid, 37.

³⁰ Karve, 22.

university” or “peoples’ university”. Another cliché is ‘if one wants to know the culture and tradition of Maharashtra, one should walk in the Vārī. Karve mentions a similar experience in her essay. She writes that although this was not a formal education institution, the three qualities of education were evident: the preservation of traditional knowledge, the cultivation of that knowledge, and the transmission of that information to future generations. This school long encompassed a wide range of subjects. Beyond religion and philosophy, it also featured the three arts of music, dancing, and theatre. It also included the entire society's living together at a single location, known as the “living together period”. Though not of very high quality, in addition to the conventional simple songs, attempts were made to incorporate them into classical rāgas with the rhythm of the mṛdaṅga drum. She heard the ragas Bhairavī, Kāfī, Bhūpa, Sāranga, Jaijaivantī, Durgā, and Mālakaṇṣa, among others, during her experience of Vārī.³¹ Karve defines Maharashtra as “a land whose people go to Pandharpur”. She writes: “I was getting to know Maharashtra anew every day. I found a new definition of Maharashtra: A land whose people go to Pandharpur for pilgrimage... All were Marathi-speaking people – coming from different castes but singing the same songs, the same verses of the Vārkarī cult, speaking to each other, helping each other, singing songs to each other.”³²

As mentioned earlier, the Vārī pilgrimage and Pandharpur as a sacred site have not only served as the nodal points of the circulation of ideas enshrined in the revered texts of the Vārkarīs and through bhakti practices like kīrtana, bhajana, pravachana, haripātha, and bhārūda but, more importantly, they have shown the flexibility to adjust and adapt to the changing socio-political context. The Vārī pilgrimage and the VS might not be instrumental in bringing about radical social change. Still, the preaching and practices of the Santas have

³¹ Karve, 38.

³² Ibid, 22.

prepared the social mindset to adopt more egalitarian ways of life. As argued by Novetzke, more than literacy or the ability to debate rationally, a bhakti public is constituted by “participation”. Furthermore, this description of a bhakti public fits well with the Vārī pilgrimage.

5.3. Inclusiveness in the Vārī

A remarkable characteristic of the VS, and also of the Vārī pilgrimage, is its inclusive nature. Practically, anyone can become a Vārkarī and can walk with the pālkhīs to Pandharpur during the Vārī pilgrimage. The VS does not prescribe any particular criterion or qualification to become a Vārkarī. Ordinarily, a person becomes a Vārkarī by performing a small ritual, i.e., symbolically wearing a tulasīmālā around the neck and committing oneself to join the Vārī pilgrimage every year in the presence of some guru or mahārāja of the VS. However, it is not mandatory to go to a guru to be initiated in the VS. Some Vārkarīs start wearing tulasīmālā simply by visiting any of the revered places of the sampradāya, like Alandi, Dehu, Paithan, or Pandharpur. A tulasīmālā around a neck and a mark of gopi-chandan on the forehead are the visible and most commonly seen symbols of a Vārkarī.³³ However, this does not imply that one cannot be a Vārkarī without these visible symbols. Notably, one identifies as a Vārkarī by following the code of conduct and principles laid down by the Santas of the sampradāya.

While addressing who can become a Vārkarī, Deleury writes: “Theoretically everybody, without distinction of caste or race. Everybody is admitted into that spiritual family. History shows that many of the holy men and Saints respected by all were of low

³³ A detailed discussion on “who can become a Vārkarī?” can be seen in chapter 2.

caste origin.”³⁴ He also mentions, “the (Vārkarī) movement is open to all. The majority of Vārkarīs are villagers, peasants, craftsmen and tradesmen.”³⁵ One of the leaders of the diṇḍī, while responding to the question, “who can join your diṇḍī?” said, “anyone can join the diṇḍī. We never ask which village a person belongs to when a person wants to participate in a diṇḍī. They are never asked about their hometown or address proof, nor do we ask about caste. When a person comes with faith, they happily dance and walk behind the pālkhī.”³⁶

The respondents told me that anyone belonging to any caste, class, religion, language, or gender could take the “mālā” and be a follower of the VS To become a Vārkarī, no qualification of caste, class, education, religion, or gender is required. What matters most to becoming a Vārkarī is the “bhāva” or involvement in bhakti. Similarly, almost all the respondents interviewed during the fieldwork responded that “anyone” could participate in their respective diṇḍīs. There is no bar on caste, religion, language, class, gender, age, education, profession etc. Practically, any person can be a member of a diṇḍī. However, upon becoming a member of a diṇḍī, individuals are expected to follow the rules and the code of behaviour of the VS, in general, and of that diṇḍī, in particular.

An old Vārkarī, who has been coming for the Vārī for over four decades, on asking the question who can wear the mālā or which practically would mean who can become a Vārkarī responded, “anyone can wear it (mālā), or anyone can become a Vārkarī.”³⁷ To substantiate his point, he quoted a verse from the abhanga of Santa Tukārāma’s “*Sakaḷānsī yethe āhe Adhikāra*”, which literally translates as “everyone has a right here” (to achieve the highest spiritual goal and to recite nāma). He added that anyone could be initiated into the

³⁴ Deleury, 2.

³⁵ Ibid, 2.

³⁶ Interview conducted on 8th July 2019.

³⁷ Interview conducted on 10th July 2019.

tradition. Still, once a person becomes a Vārkarī or starts wearing the mālā, s/he should not eat non-vegetarian food, drink alcohol, and should not smoke or eat tobacco.³⁸ He also quoted another abhanga by Santa Tukārāma indicating how God blesses every individual irrespective of caste, whether low or high or nature of work, only if one is filled with bhakti and bhava.

The abhanga reads,

*Ucch nich kāhī neṇe Bhagavanta, Tiṣṭhe bhāva-bhakti dekhoniṇyā,
Dasīputra kaṇyā Vidurāchyā bhakshī, daityā gharī rakshī Pralhādāsī,
Sadguru hovūn bolāve Ravīdāsāsange, Kabīrāchyā māge shele viṇī
Sajan kasāyā vikū lāge mans, mālyā Sāvatyāsī khurapū lāgī
Narharī sonārā ghaḍu phunkū lāgī, Chokhyāmēlyasange dhora odhī,
Nāmyāchyā Janīsave vechī sheṇī, dharmāgharī pāṇī vāhe zāḍī
Nāmyāsavē jevī navhe sankochita, Dnyaniyāchī bhīnta ānge odhī,
Arjunāche rathī hoyā hā sārathī, bhakshī pohe prītī Sudāmyāche³⁹*

The translation of this abhanga is as follows:

The Bhagvanta, or god (in this case, Pāṇḍuraṅga), does not see high or low (caste and status) but waits only for bhakti and bhāva (devotion and involvement). He ate grains offered by Vidura, a servant's child who protected Pralhada at the monster's house (Hirayankaśyapū). He became the guru of Rohidāsa (who was a leatherworker and considered an untouchable) and helped Kabīra weave the cloth. He sold meat with a butcher named Sajana and sickled with the gardener Sāvātā. He blew the pipe with the goldsmith, Naraharī, and pulled the dead animals with Chokhāmēlā. He helped Nāmdeva's servant, Janī, to collect cow dung and watered the plants at the house of Dharma. He did not hesitate to eat at Nāmdeva's (a tailor) house and helped Dnyāndeva pull the wall. He became the charioteer of Arjuna and ate the rice flakes offered by Sudāmā with love.

He interpreted the abhanga and explained, "So there is no high and low (caste) for God, and God does not discriminate. If God discriminated against people, he would not have sold meat to Sajana, he would not have helped gardener Sāvātā on his farm, he would not have helped the goldsmith Naraharī Sonāra, and he certainly would not have helped Chokhāmēlā.

³⁸ Interview conducted on 6th July 2019.

³⁹ Interviews were conducted on 1st July 2019.

God is hungry only for devotion (bhakti), and he does not discriminate against anyone by caste or religion.”⁴⁰ He further defined a trait of a Vārkarī as “Vārkarī follows and acts according to the concept of equality shown by the Santas. Whoever comes for the Vārī is a Vārkarī and has no consideration for caste.”⁴¹ He added that the value of equality is celebrated in the writings of Santas of the Vārkarī tradition like Dnyāneśvara and Tukārāma. Another mahārāja, who had just delivered a pravachana before I interviewed him, talked about the philosophy of equality and its fundamental principle as perceived by him. He said, “every individual can experience the highest possible spiritual attainment. The spiritual experience itself is intellect (buddhī), and everyone has it. How one’s experience is shaped completely depends on the intention, motivation and the faith one has.”⁴²

The all-inclusive character of the VS is not limited to becoming a Vārkarī, but anyone can reach the heights of being a guru and further become a Santa. This aspect is also found in Deleury’s account. He writes, “the name ‘santa’ in Vārkarī terminology is not restricted to the recognised ‘guru’, but also applies to any pilgrim on the way to Pandharpur, as if the road had somehow the power to sanctify. Santas make the road holy, and in its turn, the road becomes sanctifying.”⁴³ A Vārkarī or a pilgrim gets immense respect from the villagers on the way to Pandharpur. The respect for the pilgrims is not a tribute to an individual but rather a symbol of the Santa tradition, walking the same path that was taken by the Santas a few centuries ago. Here, the path is both the way to Pandharpur and the path or mārḡa of bhakti. Deleury writes: “the pilgrim is the object of universal veneration. The inhabitants of

⁴⁰ Interview conducted on 1st July 2019.

⁴¹ Interview conducted on 3rd July 2019.

⁴² Interview conducted on 6th July 2019.

⁴³ Deleury, 75.

the villages he crosses on his way feel that they must provide for his food and lodging.”⁴⁴ The very fact that everybody on the path to Pandharpur is referred to as ‘māūlī’ is an indication of a broad, inclusive and open community – a Vārkarī public - created during the Vārī pilgrimage. The significant point is that a Vārkarī public constituted during the Vārī pilgrimage is not homogenous or universal, like, the “*communitas*”.

An IT professional from Mumbai who had come to witness the gathering on the banks of Chandrabhaga on the day of Ekādaśī was moved by the social, economic, and linguistic diversity of the Vārkarīs. Still, at the same time, the entire gathering appeared to be bound together by a sense of common shared understanding shaped by self-discipline and cooperation. He expressed, “People from all over Maharashtra come here. They come from all communities, whether rich or poor. Even the poor people live with such satisfaction that reflects on their faces. We can see this only in the Vārī and not back at home. I feel fulfilled after coming here. It feels nice to see the innocence on the faces of all the people. I feel good, and that is the reason I come here.”⁴⁵

A Vārkarī, walking in an “all-women’s *diṇḍī*” - Bhiṇābāi *diṇḍī* - said that in their *diṇḍī*, all tasks, including those which have been traditionally considered as men’s tasks, are performed by women. In a *diṇḍī*, women are *zenḍekarīs*, *vīṇekarīs*, *pravachanakaras* and so on. The founder leader of the *diṇḍī* is a woman, Mangalātāi Kamble, and the interviewee spoke highly of her. As was the usual practice in the Vārkarī tradition, the women in the *diṇḍī* referred to each other as *māūlī*, as was also known by the name *sakhī* (friend), which was unique to this *diṇḍī*. The primary goal of the *diṇḍī* is to make a platform available to women to come together and take part in the Vārī, to encourage them to step out of their traditional

⁴⁴ Deleury, 75.

⁴⁵ Interview conducted on 3rd July 2019.

domestic environment and get a glimpse of the world. Another Vārkarī from the same diṇḍī said, “The objective of this diṇḍī is that the women should get an opportunity to step out of their houses, from their routine duties.”⁴⁶ I was also informed that even menstruating women could participate in the Vārī pilgrimage. However, generally, menstruating women do not go near the pāḷkhī or pādukās or to the temple at Pandharpur. Menstruation is not considered a taboo for walking in the Vārī.⁴⁷

One of the respondents from the Mahilā diṇḍī criticised the regressive practices in some orthodox diṇḍīs such as not accepting a woman leader or not allowing women to play vīṇā, or to be a pravachanakara or kīrtanakāra. She also added that those who hold on to this view are very few in the Vārkarī tradition, and the outlook of the majority of people towards women has changed. The participation of women has increased, and now they also take up leadership positions in the sampradāya like Mangalātāī Kamble. On asking about the essential principles of the VS, yet another Vārkarī from all-women’s diṇḍī opined that the central focus of the sampradāya is all-inclusivity. She said, “Anyone can join the Vārī. No one requires any invitation, any particular economic or social qualification to walk with the pāḷkhī. There is no mandate for particular offerings or gifts.”⁴⁸ Another Vārkarī made a similar observation. He said, “Everyone is entitled to the joy of the Vārī pilgrimage, and one does not need to spend any money. Merely by walking (in the Vārī), one can experience this happiness. One experiences freedom from the daily worries.”⁴⁹ He added, “Without any invitation, advertisement, or propaganda, people from all over Maharashtra come for the Vārī. Some start a month before the Ekādaśī and some others later, but everyone starts from

⁴⁶ Interview conducted on 4th July 2019.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Interview conducted on 6th July 2019.

⁴⁹ Interview conducted on 5th 2019.

their places to reach Vākharī on the Āṣādha Daśamī. Even illiterate people who cannot read a calendar start from their homes at the appropriate time, which has been going on for centuries.”⁵⁰

A mahārāja from Pandharpur elaborated on the ethos of equality prevalent in the VS Vārkarī by pointing out the uniqueness of the Pandharpur temple. He said,

People, not only from Maharashtra but from other states too, come to meet the Pāṇḍuraṅga. God is not known for fulfilling worldly wishes. (*Navasāla pāvaṇārā deva nahī.*) People do not come here to ask God for material benefits, and there is no transaction between devotees and the god. However, devotees get something much more important here than they do not get anywhere else: they get to touch God himself. Go to any places of pilgrimage where the god is 10 feet away from you, and you have to bow to him from a distance. Nevertheless, it is only in Pandharpur that you can touch his feet, and earlier, one could also embrace the idol. The god never keeps his devotees at a distance. It is only here (in Pandharpur) that you have the privilege of touching God. You may go to Kaśī, Prayāga, Gokūḷa, Vrindāvana, Kanyākumārī, Tirupatī - Bālājī, Gokarṇa, or Mahabaḷeshvara; you may go anywhere, you may travel to North India or South India, but God is never near us. He is always at a hand's distance from us (devotees). This system prevails in India but is absent here in Pandharpur. One may be poor or rich, a child or aged, a woman or man, a brahman or śūdra, educated or uneducated. Anyone can come here and be near to God.⁵¹

To substantiate his point that the access to the temple of Pāṇḍuraṅga in Pandharpur and, therefore, the opportunity to achieve the highest spiritual goal is available to everyone without any discrimination, he quoted a Hindi abhangā of Tukāḍojī mahārāja, a twentieth-century Maharashtrian Santa, which reads:

Sabke ke liye khulā hai mandira ye hamārā,

Matabhed ko bhulātā mandira hai hamārā /

Āo koī bhī panthī, āo koī bhī dharmī,

Deśa-videśiyon ka mandir ye hamārā /

Maidānapata bicchāyā, dālā hai ek āsana,

Sab devatā samāna, mandir ye hamārā/

This translates as:

⁵⁰ Interview conducted on 5th 2019.

⁵¹ Interview conducted on 28th June 2019.

Our temple is open to everyone, and it does not discriminate based on differences. Let any person from any pantha or any religion come, let it be a person from this country or a foreigner. The ground itself is the mattress (for prayer), and every god is equal. The temple is open to everyone.

Today, everyone is allowed to enter the *garbhagriha* at Viṭṭhala temple in Pandharpur, but it was not always the case. This respondent, a mahārāja from Pandharpur, seemed to be glorifying the custom of touching the feet of Viṭṭhala but did not consider the historical fact that the Dalits were not allowed to enter the temple. In 1947, after the satyagraha by Sane Guruji, the temple's gates were made open to the previously untouchable castes. Possibly, the celebration of kīrtana in the dessert of Chnadrabhaga and the claim that the Viṭṭhala comes “out in the open” to give darśana to his devotees on the banks of the Chandrabhaga could be the implication of this exclusion of the majority section of society. The santas of the Vārkarī tradition provided an avenue for gaining spiritual knowledge and experience “out in the open” – in the dessert of Chadrabhaga in the form of kīrtana.

Further, the deity, who was confined to the “garbhagriha” and could not be seen or touched by the majority of devotees, was believed to be present in the kīrtana. Even today, many Vārkarīs, even after walking the entire distance to Pandharpur and having faced all the hardships of the journey, do not go to the temple to take the darśana of Pāṇḍuraṅga but simply take the darśana of the pinnacle (kaḷasa) of the temple to conclude their pilgrimage. Even though the present-day practice is primarily a result of logistical concerns like a long wait of at least 2-3 days in a queue due to the large numbers of pilgrims, the custom seems to be ritualised by the memory of the past caste discrimination and lack of access to the temple.

According to Deleury, there are two aspects of Viṭṭhala worship. He writes: “There are therefore two distinct elements in the cult of Vithobā. The ritualistic worship carried on by the badvas, and the spiritual worship patronised by the Vārkarīs.”⁵² The ritualistic worship

⁵² Deleury, 54.

is more rigid and well defined by the caste hierarchies and social distinctions.⁵³ Till very recently, only the badvas (the brahmins) were allowed to perform the pūjā at the Viṭhṭhala temple. On the contrary, the spiritual worship patronised by the Vārkarīs is all-inclusive and more egalitarian. This dichotomy between ritual and spiritual worship is essential to highlight the apparently contradictory trends in the VS and during the Vārī pilgrimage.

On the one hand, there is an overall ethos of inclusion and non-discrimination, inspired by the teachings of the Santas of the VS. However, on the other hand, there were some concerns expressed by some leaders of the phaḍas regarding growing caste consciousness among some groups of the Vārkarīs. One such leader observed,

Some of the Vārkarī groups are closely associated with the political parties, and those political parties influence their functioning and agenda. The political parties see various caste groups as a consolidated vote bank, so the caste identities get sharper. The same is reflected in the conduct of such groups and leaders, affiliated/influenced by political parties. The caste identities are sharpened so much that even the caste categorisation of Santas of the tradition is not spared. Those Santas who gave the message of “bhedaḥbheda amangala” and prayed for the well-being of all - “sarv sukhī”- and who transcended all social distinctions of caste, class, religion, and gender are now put into the caste categories.⁵⁴

Another Vārkarī echoed similar views and added, “A “true Vārkarī” never pays any heed to caste difference or gender difference as everyone here is a child of Pāṇḍuraṅga.”⁵⁵ While reflecting upon the claim of the legacy of Santas by particular caste groups, one of the Vārkarīs, who himself belonged to a marginalised section of society, expressed his views in the following words, “Such categorisation of Santas done by some people is wrong. The VS accommodates everyone, or it would not have grown so big. For example, people working as leather workers or shoemakers also come to our pālkhī by themselves. They are good

⁵³ A similar kind of understanding is put forward by Novetzke which he categorises as “institutional religious practices” and “everyday religious practices”. See, Novetzke, *Quotidian Revolution*, 18.

⁵⁴ Interview conducted on 4th December 2019.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

mālkarīs. It is essential that one has to discard the “vāma pantha” or the bad habits one has.”⁵⁶

Moreover, the most critical aspect of the sampradāya is to encourage each individual to give up bad habits like gambling, alcohol and Tabaco consumption, adultery, etc. It is not just giving up bad habits but also replacing them with good ones, like recitation of God's name with bhakti, good behaviour with neighbours and family members, not quarrelling with others, etc. This is the message given through kīrtanas, bhārūdas, pravachanas etc. People learn the same values in the Vārī in a positive manner.⁵⁷

The division of santas along the caste lines and claiming the legacy of a particular Santa by a particular caste group is merely at the superficial level. A common Vārkarī does not bother about it much. They are interested in singing bhajanas, nāmasmaraṇa and remembering the message of the santas. For a common Vārkarī, the message of all santas is the same, and that is Advaita, non-dualism. According to him, this sense of non-dualism exhibits itself in the practice of referring to each other and every person as māūlī, mother. To put it in his own words, “We refer to all the people as “māūlī”. We do not know dvaita (dualism). It is a path of Advaita (non-dualism). We all are one, and we will always sing Dnyānobā-Tukārāma.”⁵⁸

A female Vārkarī, who reflected upon the question of caste-based categorisation of Santas in the following words:

Vārkarīs have no concern for the castes of the Santas. When asked her take on affiliating Santas to a particular caste, she responded, "We did not experience that Tukārāma, Dnyāneśvara or Nātha (Eknātha) Mahārāja's pālkhī is carried only by some specific caste. The devotees come from various places, from every corner of Maharashtra, from all castes, take part in it and pay their respects to all the Santas equally. We don't think, at all, that Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja was great and Tukārāma Mahārāja or Eknātha Mahārāja were not. All the Santas are equal, they

⁵⁶ Interview conducted on 29th June 2019.

⁵⁷ Interview conducted on 29th June 2019.

⁵⁸ Interview conducted on 28th June 2019.

have shown us a good path, and they should not be dragged into politics. This (dividing Santas by caste lines) is just not possible.⁵⁹

She seems to suggest that confining Santas to particular castes is an agenda of the political parties for vote-bank politics. Still, an ordinary Vārkarī does not distinguish one Santa from another based on caste. A mahārāja of one of the diṇḍīs spoke about the non-imposing nature of the sampradāya. He said that the Vārkarīs are supposed to follow the path shown by the Santas of the Vārkarī tradition, which includes self-discipline, compassion towards others, careful actions that will not hurt or affect any other individual and so on. Nevertheless, nobody imposes these values on any individual. Pravachanakaras and kīrtanakāras talk about these values in their discourses and kīrtanas. Still, they have a positive impact only if one is open to listening to the message. Furthermore, if someone is adamant, the only response a Vārkarī gives is to chant *Rāma Harī* and move on without holding any grudges.⁶⁰

The primary assumption of the Vārkarī ethos is that every individual can transform their life for the better. If individuals are willing to become members of the Vārkarī community, there is no systemic exclusion, and no one is denied the opportunity to be a member. A Vārkarī, who belonged to the Banjārā community, talked about his transformation and the impact of VS and going for the Vārī on the Banjārā community. He said,

No one (came for the Vārī) before me. (from my community)! We are from the Banjārā samāja, which means we keep moving from one place to another in the hills. Until 30-40 years ago, we did not know anything about the Vārī, bhajanas or (Vārkarī) sampradāya. However, when we started interacting with other good people, we became aware of all this. And then we developed an interest, so we were drawn to this. Our community eats non-vegetarian food and drinks alcohol. We had gone astray (from the right path). We now observe the ways of good and righteous beings and are becoming more aware of good ways of conducting oneself. We have started following good practices. I wear the (tulasī) māḷā as well.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Interview conducted on 2nd July 2019.

⁶⁰ Interviews were conducted on 28th June 2019.

⁶¹ Interview conducted on 4th July 2019.

The VS is popularly known for its egalitarian and reformatory outlook in Maharashtra. The works of the Santas of the VS, apart from their spiritual teaching, are also seen as a criticism of orthodox, divisive religious practices based on caste and gender. Even though, on the one hand, the sharpness of caste and gender hierarchies might get diluted in the VS as well as during the Vārī pilgrimage, it is not a universal phenomenon that all can experience.

5.4. Unity, Difference and Individuality

One of the essential features of the VS and the Vārī is that it does not have any centralised structure or hierarchy. Even though the Vārī is a community gathering, there is no centralised authority to govern the pilgrimage, and there is no centralised organising agency. There is no single chief matha or phaḍa. There is neither a central command nor a relation between command and obedience. Deleury also highlights the decentralised organisation of the Vārī pilgrimage as well as the VS. He explains: “the membership of the pantha does not involve abnegation of the ordinary duties of one’s caste, which the Vārkarī can freely continue to perform.”⁶² As mentioned earlier, the primary driving force for following the Vārkarī code of conduct and discipline is self-motivation. Being a Vārkarī is a voluntary choice. Even though many Vārkarīs feel duty-bound to carry forward their family tradition of going to the Vārī and thereby become a Vārkarī, the very decision of carrying forward the tradition is not an imposition but a personal choice. There are no punitive or apostate measures if one discontinues the family tradition or becomes a Vārkarī by wearing a tulasīmālā but does not follow the code of behaviour of the sampradāya. While underlining the element of spontaneity and choice, Deleury writes:

This spontaneity is not hampered by a stiff frame: although there is a definite organization it is meant more to canalise the enthusiastic participation of the pilgrims than to impose a totalitarian rule on them. For instance there is no hierarchy among the members of the procession. The

⁶² Deleury, 4.

pilgrimage has no director: there is not a distinction between priests, officiants, clerks and faithful: all the pilgrims are on the same level, and if there is an authority, it is not due to any office but to the spiritual personality of some of the pilgrims acknowledged as ‘guru’ by his followers.⁶³

This description may remind us of Turner’s *communitas*, where there are no external rules and hierarchies, and the entire community of pilgrims seems to be one homogenous group. However, though there is no formal organisation and a hierarchy for the whole of the Vārī procession, it would be an overstatement to consider all Vārkarīs as a homogenous group. A system of *diṇḍīs* and *phaḍas* maintain the boundaries of the practices and the rules to be followed by their members. Deleury is aware of the dangers of *diṇḍīs* becoming exclusive and restrictive. He observes,

This organisation by ‘*diṇḍīs*’ offers a golden opportunity for the Guru to preach but his example and train his disciples; but it also has some dangers. The *diṇḍīs* may become a small closed “chapel” exclusive in its membership, and it’s automatic in its doctrine, which could split the unity of the procession. It is a real danger because these groups consist of people of the same caste, and one knows the frequent isolationist tendency of the various castes in India. The teaching of the saints on that subject is clear. Vithobā does not make a difference between castes: within the limits of Pandharpur, there is no distinction between castes: anybody, whatever his caste, may reach ‘*mokṣa*’ through the royal path of ‘*bhakti*’.⁶⁴

There is a fundamental Vārkarī ethos which is familiar to all the *diṇḍīs*, but there are some variations in the style, sequence of singing, rules of *diṇḍī*, membership of *diṇḍī*, and so on. It must be noted that the differentiated rules of *diṇḍīs* are generally not a dividing factor in the VS, but at times the differences may also result in a conflict. For this very reason, the entire *pālkhī* procession takes place under the observation of the Pancha Committee. The primary objective of the Pancha Committee is to ensure a peaceful pilgrimage procession and resolve the conflict between *diṇḍīs* amicably. Traditionally, the *diṇḍīs* – the smallest organising unit of the Vārī pilgrimage – were organised along caste lines. Deleury elaborates: “Each ‘*diṇḍī*’ which may consist of thirty to hundred members, is a group of devotees

⁶³ Deleury, 103.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 104.

connected by family or caste ties. Sometimes it is a group of disciples gathered around their ‘guru’. In the Jnaneshvara pāḷkhī, there are *diṇḍīs* of tailors, of merchants, etc.”⁶⁵ However, Karve’s account suggests the prevalence of mixed-caste *diṇḍīs*. Her account says that even though the *diṇḍīs* were run by the leaders of a particular caste and the element of commensality was absent between various caste groups in a given *diṇḍī*, the membership of a *diṇḍī* is not restricted to one caste only. Karve writes: “I could see Brāhmīṇ women, wearing special ritual garments, cooking food in the open courtyard. There was a small brick wall, and beyond it, just a few feet away, Marāthā women were cooking food for their party, without ritual clothes.”⁶⁶ Karve’s account establishes that even though the *diṇḍī* (with which she took part in the Vārī procession) was led and organised by the Marāthā spiritual leaders, there were Brahmins as well as Marāthās walking in the same *diṇḍī*. The Brahmins and the Marāthās were friendly, sang abhangas together, and danced in the ringaṇa. Individuals belonging to different castes also helped each other. However, walking alongside one another, singing and dancing together, and assisting one another does not necessarily imply a blurring of caste identities and a willingness to abandon caste rules. The caste-based rituals, especially concerning cooking and sharing of food, continued to be practised in the Vārī, in the same *diṇḍī*. Karve elaborates on this in the following words,

He (Karve’s companion) and the other Brāhmīṇ man of our party put on their silken garments and took their meal. After them, the women who had cooked filled their plates and sat apart to eat; the rest of the food, with the pots, was handed over to those who, like me, were in ordinary clothes. After the meal, we washed the pots. Beyond the wall, the Marāthās were also having their meal together and without ritual. They also finished washing their pots. As we went to load the truck, I discovered that the Marāthās and we belonged to the same walking group or *diṇḍī*, which was to keep together and share the car, but of course, not the food nor the accommodation every noon and night.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Deleury, 104.

⁶⁶ Karve, 14.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Karve further elaborates on the caste distinctions and concerns for purity and impurity related to drinking water. She explains:

Just then, Buwa (the *diṇḍī* leader) came to enquire if all the arrangements were satisfactory. I said, "Oh, the place is very nice, but the well is far away. Our feet are so sore from the long march that I do not know how we can bring water from such a distance." Buwa pitied our plight, made a servant scrub, cleaned a big copper pot, filled it with water, and placed it in our quarters. I blessed him and drank from it to my heart's content. But for drinking and making tea, the other women in my group used only the water they had brought; they employed the water sent by Buwa only for toilet purposes. The next morning, we got up early as usual and went to the dark stream to wash. A large number of people were there, cleaning their teeth, washing their mouths, and spitting into the stream. I could not bring myself to clean my mouth with the water, and took only a cursory wash. However, the women in our Brahmin group apparently felt no hesitation, took their baths with usual cries of "O Ganga! O Bhagirathil" and even washed their mouths with the water. Apparently the spitting of members of other castes was not considered to pollute their bathing water in the stream, while the clean well water was considered polluted because it had been brought by a man of non-Brahmin caste!⁶⁸

Even today, there are *diṇḍīs* named after a particular caste or after the Santas with the mention of their caste. I was told by one of the *mahārājas* of the VS that merely mentioning the name of the caste of a Santa and naming *diṇḍī* in such a way is not an indication of caste discrimination. Very often, the names of the *Vārkarī* Santas are taken along with their castes, like *Nāmā-śimpī*, *Sāvatā-mālī*, *Gorā-kumbhāra*, *Naraharī-sonāra*, and so on. However, this identification with caste does not stop *Vārkarīs* from paying respect to any particular Santa or all of them simultaneously. Another *mahārāja* told me, "Respect for the *Vārkarī* Santas does not emanate from their caste identity but because they could transcend all material identities of caste, gender, and religion. That is fundamental to becoming a Santa. That is the reason even the male Santas of the *Vārkarī* tradition are regarded as "māulī". The caste differences are because of different ways of living, and the difference does not mean discrimination."⁶⁹

The newer *diṇḍīs* started recently are not generally named after any caste. In particular, in the large *diṇḍīs*, starting from city centres like Pune, Mumbai, Nashik, and Aurangabad, there is a better intermingling of various caste groups. However, particular

⁶⁸ Karve, 14.

⁶⁹ Telephonic Conversation, 14th March 2021.

practices in some *diṇḍīs* can signal the influence of the past – when the *diṇḍīs* were organised along caste lines. For example, even though all *Vārkarīs* are essentially vegetarians, in some *diṇḍīs*, there is no taboo on the consumption of onions and garlic. In contrast, other *diṇḍīs* serve only “sattvic” food, without onions and garlic. Similarly, in some *diṇḍīs*, strict hygiene rules are followed by allowing only specific individuals to cook for the duration of the *Vārī*, and there is a specific protocol that those cooks must follow, such as bathing before cooking and not being touched by anyone before the meals are prepared. This protocol is known as “*sovala*”, whereas, in other *diṇḍīs*, the members of a *diṇḍī* take turns to cook food.

Further, as Karve points out in her account, some eat just one meal a day, some need three meals, some *Vārkarīs* fast on certain days only with fruits and milk, some eat sago on the day of the fast, and still, others do not eat anything on the day of fast. All these variations are present in the same *diṇḍī*. From a managerial perspective, it may seem a tedious task to cater to each individual's different demands and requirements. However, from the other side, it can be seen that within a given rule of vegetarianism, an essential characteristic of a *Vārkarī*, individuals can maintain their food choices and patterns of eating. Interestingly, fasting on *Ekādaśī* is an integral part of the *Vārkarī* code of conduct and almost every *Vārkarī* fasts on this day. However, being a *Vārkarī* does not restrict individuals from keeping fasts on other auspicious days associated with other gods and goddesses. Some *Vārkarīs* fast on Monday as a mark of their devotion to Śiva, on Tuesday or Friday for their dedication to some form of Śaktī, and some fast on the day of *Chaturthī* (4th day of a waxing moon) for their devotion to Gaṇeśa/Gaṇapati apart from their mandatory fasting of *Ekādaśī* – a symbol of being a *Vaiśnava*, or a *Vārkarī*.

Because there is no imposition of external authority, it has to be an individual choice and dedication to become a *Vārkarī* and follow the *Vārkarī* ethos. In this sense, the VS and the *Vārī* do not create a universal system applicable to each individual. The fundamental

principle is that everyone has the right and the ability to become a Vārkarī, go for the Vārī, and experience the happiness therein, as Vārkarīs themselves put it. However, the question is: once a person becomes a Vārkarī or a pilgrim in the Vārī procession, is the sense of individuality of individuals overshadowed by the sense of communal feeling? Does a sense of collectivity subsume individuals' identities? Turner, in his account, believes that the pilgrimages lead to the constitution of *communitas*, where a sense of wholeness of the community takes precedence over an individual's narrow, self-centred identities. Deleury also suggests that individuality disappears in the process of the Vārī pilgrimage. However, he does not argue that it necessarily creates a sense of wholeness with the community or the creation of *communitas*. Unlike Turner, Deleury seems uncomfortable with individuals' individuality disappearing under the loud and continuous community singing and the constant rhythm of cymbals and drums during the process of the Vārī pilgrimage. He writes:

... thus singing becomes mechanical, the words lose their meanings, the expression of personal prayer, of an individual aspiration towards God. The pilgrimage is indeed a public manifestation of devotion. As such, it is necessary that common stock of traditional prayers should exist: every religion has a hymn book under one form or another. It is also true that the needs for a spiritual life has been the same throughout the history of mankind and the teachings of the great spiritual masters of the past ages are still valuable and indeed irreplaceable. But any progress in spiritual life presupposes a personal effort that a common prayer however useful it maybe, can never replace. Besides prayer must be in keeping with the context of daily life of the devotee, and correspond who needs condition by its culture and social environment. The danger of the prayer during the pilgrimage is not that it will be common, but that it is only common.⁷⁰

Constant community singing to the rhythm of *ṭāḷa*, *mṛdaṅga* may get disturbing at times. The charged atmosphere of the Vārī may hinder an individual's inward journey. In some ways, the Vārī forces people to be extroverts because they constantly contact other people, walking, singing, dancing, eating, playing, staying, and sharing their sorrows and joys. Iravati Karve expresses similar feelings. She writes, "When we stayed in a house for the night, the singing within the four walls of a room often seemed discordant and the noise of

⁷⁰ Deleury, 106.

the instruments unbearable. Indoors I felt oppressed, but out in the open, the sound of the bell-like cymbals was never too loud.”⁷¹

Generally, the spiritual journey is believed to make individuals more introverted. However, the Vārī pilgrimage, which is assumed to be a part of an individual’s spiritual journey, seems to make the pilgrims extrovert and outward-looking. There is no doubt that the Vārkarīs draw their happiness from “being together” and from the communal nature of the Vārī. However, does the Vārī leave any space for individual prayer, walking alone, and self-exploration by being quiet? When asked about the extrovert character of the Vārī pilgrimage, one of the regular Vārkarīs said, “one needs to get up early in the morning to be with oneself. Usually, everyone in the diṇḍī gets up at 4 am. However, if one wants to meditate, one should wake up earlier than this. Do the meditation, or silent nāma-japa, or Harīpātha and then start your day.”⁷² One of the mahārājas said,

It is only in the Vārī that the entire Vārkarī samāja comes together. Vārī is essentially the joy of togetherness, knowing others, sharing with others. The Santas of the Vārkarī tradition were wise. They have asked Vārkarīs to look inward throughout the year, when they are at home, and only for about two weeks when they are with the Vārkarī community – being outward and still soaked in bhakti. Being in good company – satsanga – is crucial on the spiritual path, and the Vārī pilgrimage offers satsanga. Vārī is like a crash course in bhakti where you learn the right ways and reaffirm your faith in the path shown by the Santas of the tradition.⁷³

The Vārī seems to be transcending a narrow, restricted understanding of the “self” as the result of making minor adjustments with the fellow Vārkarīs about food, lodging, and other logistical arrangements. The possibility of individuals giving up their rigidities followed at “home” is heightened in the atmosphere of the Vārī pilgrimage. Making small compromises on material comforts and helping out a person with little resources as a part of diṇḍī living seems to be a common phenomenon. It might be an overstatement to say that the

⁷¹ Karve, 18.

⁷² Interview conducted on 8th July 2019.

⁷³ Interview conducted on 13th July 2019.

Vārī pilgrimage leads to transcending one's sense of individuality and creating a homogenous community. However, walking, singing, playing, eating, and staying together in a *diṇḍī* undoubtedly aids in creating "diṇḍī consciousness". Diṇḍī consciousness may help individuals expand their sense of self beyond their dogmatic, narrow, egoistic self. However, there is also a possibility of creating strict boundaries by confining to the *diṇḍī* identity by creating an exclusive, restricted structure around the *diṇḍī*. To put it in other words, a *diṇḍī* consciousness may serve as a bridge to realise overall Vārkarī consciousness and further expand it to realise the universal human consciousness as manifested in the teachings of the Vārkarī Santas. However, there is also a possibility of creating a restricted, exclusivist space in the form of a *diṇḍī*. Diṇḍī consciousness may help individuals to realise a relationship of equality among all the members of a public constituted by the Vārī pilgrimage and even beyond Vārī. However, it may also aid in highlighting and perpetuating social differences and hierarchies. Though everyone refers to each other as "māūlī" during the Vārī pilgrimage, this does not necessarily mean giving up caste and also, to some extent, gender identities. Even though the difference does not necessarily mean hierarchy, at least in the context of the Vārī pilgrimage, the caste-based identities indeed hinder the process of intermingling freely. Iravati Karve and Deleury have mentioned the caste dynamics in the Vārī pilgrimage. Karve expressed her observations regarding caste and gender relations in the following words:

In the Marāthā group, the women did the cooking, but the men took over the serving of the food, bringing water, and loading the heavy baggage into the truck. Altogether, the men and women behaved more freely and openly with each other. Of course, they always sat in separate groups and there was no joking or laughing between them, but one noticed that there were no special inhibitions of behaviour between the two groups. On the other hand, in the Brahmin group, most of the work was done by the women. There were only two men, the guru and another. When the guru was about, everybody was very subdued and respectful. The other gentleman did carry out a few chores, but the women did most of the work. Also the routine of the Marathas was uncomplicated.

There were no people who put on special clothes, and nobody had different kinds of fasts. All sat down to their meal together and all finished together; so, even though there were about fifty or sixty people in the group, everything was done quickly. Every day I regretted the fact that one and the same *diṇḍī* was divided into these two sections. All of the people were clean, and ate their food only after taking a bath. Then why this separateness? Was all this walking together, singing together, and reciting the poetry of the saints together directed only towards

union in the other world while retaining separateness in this world? This question was in my mind all the time.⁷⁴

Both Karve and Deleury point out the paradox in the teachings of the Vārkarī Santas and the caste-based differences among the Vārkarīs during the Vārī. Karve asks, “The tradition of the Vārkarī pilgrims, the rebellion of the saints against giving importance to external matters and against the hypocritical following of prescribed behaviour, the teaching of the oneness of man and deity, and above all the modern city life - how could one reconcile these with regard for ritual purity and impurity?”⁷⁵ Deleury also expresses similar concerns. He wonders, “Is not the *diṇḍī* system contrary to this ideal of the Saints, and how is this ideal practically realized in the pilgrimage?”⁷⁶ To this question, Deleury himself answers as follows:

On the level of the *pāḷkhī*, one can see that this idea (of equality) is realized and it is a characteristic seldom found in other religious sects in India. The *pāḷkhī* is composed of members of all castes, Brahmins, Marāthās, Craftsmen, Kuṇbīs and even Mahārs. But one point must be made clear at the same time. The members of the various castes are not mixed together but the members of each *diṇḍī* belong to one caste only. However, this is not in opposition to the ideal above mentioned: it is on the contrary a solution of the problem of distinction of castes and of their life together. Idea of a group composed of individuals coming from various castes with different cultures, traditions and customs could only be an artificial juxtaposition and not a true community: this idea can exist only in the minds of idealists who have lost contact with human and social reality. The Vārkarī solution is a happy compromise between the reality of the distinction between castes and ideals of a social community to unite them.⁷⁷

However, Deleury believes that the Vārkarī solution to the question of caste is an efficient one. According to him, even though various *diṇḍīs* represent different caste groups, all of them coexist in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding.⁷⁸ Deleury writes: “A Brahmin will not hesitate in helping a Mahār in need. All the pilgrims without distinction

⁷⁴ Karve, 19.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 19-20.

⁷⁶ Deleury, 104.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 105.

of caste will gather together in the evening around the pālkhī or at night to listen to the leader of kīrtana or bhajana. The hardships of the way contribute to bind the various diṇḍīs together and the goodwill of all prevents hurts and space the feelings. Slowly but truly a ‘pālkhī consciousness’ grows through the willingness and kindness of all.”⁷⁹ Deleury further points out the danger of the partitioning of diṇḍīs along caste lines. He believes that caste discrimination becomes manifest with the test of commensality (sharing of food). Based on his own experience during the Vārī pilgrimage, Deleury opines that the overall outlook of the Vārkarīs is tolerant towards other castes, creeds and races.⁸⁰ However, he believes that the VS falls short of bringing progressive social change. He explains: “Nevertheless, this pantha does not seem to be a progressive element towards the lowering down the fences between castes. They have found a compromise, they have not taken a step forward.”⁸¹

I was told by one of the members of a diṇḍī that there is no caste-based discrimination and men and women of all castes can join the diṇḍī by making a required contribution. However, in the same diṇḍī, women were not allowed to carry vīṇā or become *vīṇekarī*, which symbolises the leader of a diṇḍī. Whereas in an exclusively women’s diṇḍī, not only could women become *vīṇekarīs*, but all the critical tasks like managing the diṇḍī, delivering a daily discourse - *pravachana*, and performing kīrtana were all performed by women, except that the diṇḍī owner had invited a few students from VSS⁸² to play *pakhvāja* and *ṭāḷa*. The reason for this arrangement, I was told, was that playing *pakhvaj* needs much physical strength, and even though women could play *ṭāḷa* to create a powerful sound during kīrtana

⁷⁹ Deleury, 105.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² It needs to be noted that the VSS (Vārkarī Shikshan Sanstha, Alandi) is all boys institute imparting Vārkarī Shikshan. The syllabus of VSS includes texts revered by the VS along with the “secular syllabus”.

and bhajana, the students from the VSS were invited. The examples given here are indicative and demonstrate that though the overall ethos of the VS as well that of Vārī, strives for equality, the divisiveness of caste and gender continue to operate in the Vārī.

I would argue that unifying and dividing trends within a Vārkarī public are not the two separate streams of social interactions contextualised by bhakti. These two apparently contradictory trends are present in all cultures, even without the context of bhakti. What bhakti does is provide a junction for meeting these so-called opposing trends and negotiating the ethos prevalent at a particular historical juncture. Through the interactions and circulation of ideas during the pilgrimage and other bhakti practices, including bhajana, kīrtana, and pravachana, the social ethos is constantly negotiated and re-shaped to suit the needs of a given society. What these sites of bhakti allow individuals is the possibility of experiencing the *communitas* as well as the divisive features of a given society. Most likely, individuals will experience both these apparently contradictory trends simultaneously. Even if individuals decide to move in a particular direction and bring about transformation in their behavioural traits, it indeed is a process of moving forward and back. Therefore, unifying and dividing trends present within a bhakti public in general and a Vārkarī public, in particular, is a part of the same social process of negotiating the shared ethos and addressing the power relations associated with that ethos.

5.5. Vārī as a Reconciliatory Force

In the famous work “*Shree Viṭṭhala: Ek Mahasamanvay*”, R. C. Dhere regards Viṭṭhala - the deity of the VS - as a great reconciliator.⁸³ During my interactions with the Vārkarīs, I realised it is not just the deity who is to be considered a great reconciliator.

⁸³ Dhere, *Shree Viṭṭhala: Ek Mahasamanvay*.

However, the very character of the VS seems to be reconciling apparently different and, at times, even paradoxical approaches. Furthermore, it seems that the Vārī pilgrimage is a platform wherein the possibility of reconciling such differences is available. This also means that different views and approaches are present in the Vārī. The Vārī pilgrimage merely provides a platform for everyone to come together, and in the process of the journey, contextualised by bhakti, opens up the possibility of reconciling the differences.

Nevertheless, it does not necessarily create a homogenous, uniform Vārkarī community. This section will focus on three elements present in the VS and manifested during the Vārī pilgrimage. First, the reconciliation between the needs of ordinary, material life and the quest to achieve a spiritual goal; second, the reconciliation between various religious approaches to attaining those goals; and third, a range of social and political ideologies which manifest themselves during the Vārī pilgrimage through NGOs, political parties, voluntary groups, and state agencies. These three sections are titled “Vārī: A Pilgrimage of Grihastha”; “Convergence of Various Paths”; and “Ideological Spectrum during the Vārī Pilgrimage”, respectively.

In the preface to *“The Cult of Vithobā”*, Deleury also highlights this reconciliatory character of the VS. He explains, “... although they (Vārkarīs) were great devotees of Kṛiṣṇa, they did not on that count show any contempt or hostility towards the devotees of other gods: there seemed to be an eclectic attitude which did not allow it’s esoterism or fanaticism.”⁸⁴ The VS has adopted the bhakti-mārga primarily to reach mokṣa. It’s Santas do not advocate asceticism and severe yogic tapas to attain enlightenment. The simple ways of worship which can be practised by the primary audience of the VS, i.e. ordinary village people, are popularised by the Vārkarī Santas. More importantly, the path of bhakti is open to all,

⁸⁴ Deleury, Preface, ix.

without any special qualifications. Deleury underlines this by arguing, “Besides, as the ‘mokṣa’ promised by bhakti is open to all, its purification method is possible for all are not restricted to the fortunate people who can live the world and isolate themselves in forests or deserted places.”⁸⁵ In this perspective, one of the simple ways to purify oneself is by going on the annual Vārī pilgrimage as a voluntary obligation.

According to Deleury, the only public manifestation of the (Vārkarī) pantha is the pilgrimage to that place (Pandharpur).⁸⁶ According to Deleury, the Vārī pilgrimage is “a real tapa”⁸⁷ for a Vārkarī. The hardships on the way to Pandharpur, mending the ways to live a community life with fellow Vārkarīs, and being away from the comforts of home are seen as purifying. Deleury believes that the road to Pandharpur assumes a sanctifying power. Moreover, it is sanctifying, and he writes, “because it is mortifying”.⁸⁸ He further adds, “It is by doing it (pilgrimage) year after year that Vārkarī saints are made. This asceticism is not extravagant but sane and harmonious: it is one of the qualities of the road to make of the walker a calm and well-balanced being.”⁸⁹

A Vārkarī, who was also a vīṇekarī, spoke about this sanctifying power of the Vārī and walking on the path to Pandharpur. According to him, the code followed by the VS is in accordance with the Vaiṣṇava Dharma that does not discriminate based on caste, class, colour, gender, economic status, and so on. Some follow this code, and some do not. The teachings of the VS are open to all. It depends on an individual’s understanding and intellect how much they implement these values. Nevertheless, one needs to come to the Vārī every

⁸⁵ Deleury, 108.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 4.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 108.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 108 – 09.

year. The Vārī allows each individual to be in the company of Santas and remember the deeds and message given by the Santas through bhajanas, kīrtanas, and pravachanas. Daily walking and singing in the Vārī purify one's soul, and individuals return home with the determination to follow the right path. To put it in his words, "in the Vārī, in these twenty-one days, in the presence of the māūlī, our life is charged just like a battery. We get an opportunity to listen to the thoughts of other people. Our intellect changes... This change is possible only because of bhakti. Every person gains it depending upon the faith one has."⁹⁰

The several interactions I had with the Vārkarīs established that the VS is primarily a "sampradāya of grihasthas" or householders. Even Deleury's account emphasises this point. Deleury argues, "He (Vārkarī) has not to renounce his family, or his work, or his home, he has not to cease to live in the Grihasthaśrama state and had to adopt the sanyāsāśrama way of life."⁹¹ Vārkarīs are not required to give up their families or even household duties and the work needed to earn a livelihood. Some Vārkarī groups - phaḍas - consider it highly condemnable to ask for alms. One is supposed to make a living by one's labour. Furthermore, while carrying out the household duties, keep on chanting the name of the god and dedicate all karma to the god. In other words, the Vārkarīs believe that all that they get is the blessing of the Pāṇḍuraṅga, even the hardships of life. One is expected to perform one's duty, whether in the domain of bhakti by reciting daily haripāṭha, chanting nāma-japa, or carrying out the daily chores, but not get entangled with any of the actions or their results.

5.5.1. Vārī: A Pilgrimage of Grihastha

⁹⁰ Interview conducted on 11th July 2019.

⁹¹ Deleury, 2.

VS is essentially a householder's tradition. Several scholars who have written on the VS have mentioned this characteristic of the sampradāya. Apart from Deleury and Karve, R. C. Dhere, D. B. Mokashi, Sadanand More, Vidyadhar Tathe, Eleanor Zelliot, Christian Lee Novetzke, Jon Keune, Jacqueline Daukes have paid attention to the householder character of the VS. The VS does not call for *nivruttī* or complete renunciation or detachment from the worldly life or family. It does not demand asceticism as a pre-qualification for *muktī* like many other ways, e.g. hathayoga. The qualifying agent for any practice of *bhakti*, according to the Vārkarī tradition, is *bhāva*, intention, involvement and intensity. The most prominent symbolism of the VS is drawn from the sense of being a householder. The symbol of considering the deity and the Santas of the tradition as a mother, fellow Vārkarīs as brothers and sisters, and the sacred site of Pandharpur as one's maternal home are the testimony of the householder character of the VS.

Deleury defines a Vārkarī as, "He is a man who, although living in the midst of his family and carrying on his profession or grade has placed himself to reach *mokṣa* through the way of *bhakti*, and by devotion to Lord Kṛiṣṇa in the form of Vithobā of Pandharpur, and to go on pilgrimage to that place every year at the fixed time, guided on the road by the society of the Santas. He is also a strict vegetarian."⁹² What was echoed by the respondents during the interviews was that the teachings of the santas of the Vārkarī tradition do not suggest *nivruttī* or giving up worldly duties, towards family, towards society, nation. Rather, the Santas advocate easy-to practise *bhakti-mārga*, which is solely based on *bhāva*, or intention. This notion that *bhakti mārga* is the path of householders and does not advocate ascetism as a precondition is beautifully captured in the famous *abhanga* of santa Sāvātā, who was a gardener.

Kāndā, muḷā, bhājī, avaghī Vithāī māzī

⁹² Deleury, 3.

Lasūṇ, mirchī, kothambīrī, avaghā zālā māzā harī

This translates as:

Onion, radish and vegetables, all are my Viṭṭhala māūlī, garlic, chilly and coriander, all are my god (Harī).

The deity Viṭṭhala himself is perceived as one with children, ‘lekūrvāḷā’ and a big family. In an often recited abhanga of Santa Janābāī, it is imagined that the Santas of the Vārkarī tradition are the children of the God Vithobā. Janābāī’s abhnag writes:

Vithū māzā lekūrvāḷā/ Sange gopāḷānchā meḷa/

Nivruttī hā khāndyāvarī/ Sopānāchā hāta dharī/

Pudhe chāle Dnyāneśvara/ Mage Mukṭāī sundara/

Gorā Kumbhāra maṇḍīvarī/ Chokhā jīvā barobarī/

Bankā kaḍīyevārī/ Nāmā karanguḷī dharī/

Janī mhaṇe Gopāḷā/ Karī bhaktānchā sohaḷā/

This means that my Viṭṭhala is with children and is surrounded by them. Nivruttī is sitting on the shoulder, and Sopāna’s hand is held. Dnyāneśvara is walking in front, and Mukṭāī is walking behind him. On the lap is Gorā Kumbhāra, and Chokhameḷa is walking along. Bankā is on the sides of the waist, and Nāmdeva is holding a small finger. Janābāī says, “Hey Gopala (Lord), you celebrate your bhaktas.”

There are several abhangas of the Santas, which are commonly located in the context of a “prapancha” or the material affairs of this world, including the role of a householder. In an abhanga, santa Gorā Kumbhāra beautifully portrays the bhakti of a householder. A few lines from the abhanga are:

Tuze rūpa chittī rāho, mukhī tuze nāva,

Deha prapanchaāchā dāsa, sukhe karū kāmā//

Dehadhārī jo jo tyāsī, vihita nitya karma,

Sadāchāra nīṭhunī āgaḷā na dharma,

Tulā āthavāve, gāve, hāch eka nema//

Not only are the Vārkarīs householders; their god, Viṭhṭhala, is depicted as a householder; and the Santas' memory is associated with their role as householders; but, interestingly, even the Vārī pilgrimage is a living example of the VS's householder character. Curiously, some of the testimonies of the Vārkarīs elaborated on their experience, saying that going on the Vārī pilgrimage has made them better householders. One of the Vārkarīs, who had come from Pune, explained the impact of going for Vārī on his family atmosphere. He used to be a very strong-headed and short-tempered person, and he wanted to get things done his way. He said he has become calmer and considerate since he started going for the Vārī. To quote him, "Because I come to the Vārī, my family life is very easy. Otherwise, I would have taken alcohol, eaten gutkha and spoiled my health, spoiled my relations with others."⁹³ He further added, "If one wants to carry on the burden of family issues, being entangled by the petty egos in the family, it is one's decision, but if one wants to seek happiness, he/she should come to Vārī."⁹⁴ He qualified his claims by adding, "in fact, if one wants to lead happy and satisfied family life throughout the year, taking out 15-18 days for the Vārī is a good way of getting the correct perspective."⁹⁵

Another Vārkarī from Banjārā Samāja Dinḍī explained the transformation he has gone through after starting to come for the Vārī. He said that he has given up alcohol consumption and non-vegetarian food since joining the dinḍī. Coming to Pandharpur and being in the company of virtuous beings has helped him improve his family relations, and he no longer beats up his wife. He said that the ways of VS introduced him to civilised ways of living.⁹⁶ A

⁹³ Interview conducted on 8th July 2019.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Interview conducted on 10th July 2019.

⁹⁶ Interview conducted on 10th July 2019.

mahārāja of one of the diṇḍīs in Tukārāma Mahārāja’s pāḷkhī procession elaborated on the reasons that motivate individuals to come to the Vārī pilgrimage in the following words:

People are troubled in their family lives. They do not have even a small respite from it. They do not get proper sleep in the night as petty worries bother them constantly. When such individuals participate in the pāḷkhī procession, they come in the presence of Santas. They learn politeness and gain happiness. They get this invaluable happiness merely by walking and do not need to spend huge amounts for that. The aim is to get freedom from worldly engagements. Once a person comes here for 20-21 days, s/he derives happiness and satisfaction that lasts a year, and again, a person comes next year to experience the same... A person gets this happiness from the presence of Santas. *Santa sangatīche kāya sāngū sukha?* (how to explain the joy of being in the company of Santas?) People participate with this intention.⁹⁷

When the respondents were asked about the transformation that Vārī brought about, a typical response was that the Vārī helps them overcome petty egos and, in turn, that helps in leading a peaceful and happy family life and social life. Another Vārkarī, who is a farmer, explained his commitment to the work as well as his quest to join the Vārī. He said, “As the rain started a little late this year (2019) during the Vārī, he left the Vārī in between, sowed the seeds for the farming season, and joined the Vārī back.”⁹⁸ One of the reasons that most of the Vārkarīs prefer to go to Vārī in the month of Āṣāḍha is because most of the Vārkarīs are farmers, and Āṣāḍha Vārī suits their yearly agricultural calendar. This, too, is a testimony that the VS does not advocate non-action; instead, it calls for “*niṣkama karma-yoga*”, i.e., while carrying out day-to-day tasks, one needs to try to overcome the sense of “I” as a doer of all actions and rise above selfish, egoistic individualism.

A Vārkarī from Chennai expressed this belief in the following words, “Automatically, once a person comes to the Vārī, it helps eliminate the ego. It eliminates ‘I’ and mine. Consider, you are mine, and I am yours. This is the feeling. This feeling is seen only in the Vārī.”⁹⁹ The overall sense of the Vārkarīs is that one is supposed to start going for the Vārī as

⁹⁷ Interview conducted on 9th July 2019.

⁹⁸ Interview conducted on 8th July 2019.

⁹⁹ Interview conducted on 9th July 2019.

a grihastha, i.e. when one is leading a life of a householder and not during the life of retirement. To put it in the context of the classical understanding of the four phases of life, according to the teachings of the Vārkarī Santas, one needs to initiate the path of paramārtha or bhakti during the grihasthāśrama phase and should not wait until retirement or vānaprasthāśrama and after that sanyāsāśrama. The annual Vārī, satsanga, nāma-japa, daily pūjā, haripātha, bhajana, kīrtana, fasting, etc. are simple ways of bhakti which serve as reminders to individuals while walking the path of muktī.

Eventually, when all the pālkhīs enter Pandharpur, even the lines of separate pālkhī processions get blurred, and the intermingling and the sense of family expand to accommodate every bhakta, anchored around the deity, Vithobā māūlī, mother not only of the Vārkarīs taking part in the Vārī but also of the Santas of the tradition. As R.C. Dhere points out, Śrī Viṭṭhala serves as the great unifier. The distinctions of various pālkhī processions, castes, genders and individuality are unified in the identity of a bhakta, facilitated by the idea of the mother of all, Vithāī or Vithū Māūlī.

In one of the abhangas, “*Ranga Yei Vo*”, Dnyāneśvara Mahārāja regards Viṭṭhala as Vithāī which is a combination of Viṭṭhala and āī, literally meaning mother Viṭṭhala. The abhanga reads as:

*Rangā yei vo, āī,
Vithāī kī thāī maze kruśṇāī, kānhāī
Vaikunthavāsini Vithāī jagata jananī
Tuzā vedhū māze manī*

In this abhanga, Dnyāneśvara appeals to the Vithāī, Viṭṭhala māūlī, to come urgently as he is desperate to meet his mother, Viṭṭhala. The abhanga translates as,

Hey (Pāṇḍu)ranga, mother, please come,
Mother Vithāī herself is my mother Kṛṣṇa, Kānhā

One who resides in Vaikuntha¹⁰⁰ is the mother of the entire world

My mind craves for you

It should be noted that this expansion of the feeling of family is not restricted to considering Viṭṭhala and the Santas of the tradition māūlī. However, it extends itself to consider Pandharpur as *māhera*, which literally translates as maternal home. To regard Pandharpur as *māhera* is the most common feeling expressed by several respondents. It also corresponds with the popular imagination in a number of famous abhangas and songs in Maharashtra.

A very famous abhanga of Santa Eknātha, popularised by Bhimsen Joshi and which to date is sung in almost every *Bhakti Sangeet* concert, captures this sense of Pandharpur as *māhera* reads:

Māze māhera pandharī, āhe bhīvarechya tīrī
Bāpa āṇī āī, māzī Viṭṭhala Rakhumāī
Punḍalika rāhe bandhū, tyāchī khyātī kāya sāngū?
Māzī bahīṇ Chandrabhāgā, karitase pāpa-bhanga
Ekā Janārdani śaraṇa, karī māherāchī āthavaṇa

Which translates as:

My maternal home is Pandharī (Pandharpur), which is on the banks of the river Bhīmā

My father and mother are Viṭṭhala and Rakhumāī

Punḍalika is my brother. How much shall I praise him?

My sister is (river) Chandrabhāgā, who cleans the sins

I, Ekā Janārdanī, seek refuge (here), remember my maternal home.

¹⁰⁰ Vaikunth is a place which is generally regarded as the abode of Viṣṇu. The word vaikunth is composed of two words Vai+ Kunth, vai meaning negation and kunth meaning sadness, inaction, poverty, laziness etc. Therefore, Vaikunth means where there is no negativity of any sort.

It is important to note that the Vārī is seen as a family pilgrimage not only in the sense that some members from the same family, or close or distant relatives, friends, and acquaintances take part in it together but also because one gets the sense of an extension of the family. Generally, at the beginning of the pilgrimage, the circle of interaction is limited to the family members or acquaintances if there is more than one family member. As the pilgrimage progresses, the domain of interaction and sense of belongingness expands to all the members of the diṇḍī and later to the entire pālkhī procession. Individuals often identify themselves with the diṇḍī name or number during the procession. Identifying the diṇḍī becomes necessary from the management perspective, especially when one is lost on the way or unable to locate the place of stay or halt. At times, the response to the question “where are you from” was Alandi/Dehu, indicating the pālkhī that the Vārkarīs were walking with. More importantly, what is instrumental in the expansion of the sense of family is that all the members in a given procession are bound together by the presence of the spirit of the Santa, by a common mother, Dnyānobā māulī. The pādukās or the pālkhī become a common point of reference for every individual walking in the pālkhī procession, whether affiliated with the diṇḍī or not.

This characteristic of being a sampradāya of householders does not always showcase the bright side of householders. I met some older Vārkarīs who had joined the Vārī as they were considered a burden by their sons and daughters-in-law, and they took the opportunity of the Vārī to be away from daily taunting and the sense of being unwanted, at least for three weeks. As they could not afford the membership fees of the diṇḍī (about Rs. 1000-1500 per person), they chose to walk unaffiliated. They ate whatever was offered on the way, bathed and cleaned at the facilities provided by the government, drank water from the water tankers and slept wherever they could find a place to sleep at night. Some others had come with their children as they did not have enough to provide for the large family. One lady told me that

she had to convince her family members to let her go for the Vārī, and she had to make alternate arrangements for cooking and cleaning at home in her absence. However, another older Vārkarī, who was not literate, said that she did not need any permission from anybody in the family. She is the master of her decisions, and other family members have to mend their ways. The only permission she needed was that of Pāṇḍuraṅga. “Only when God wills, one can walk the Vārī. It is beyond human choice,” she added.

Another woman who has been joining the Vārī pilgrimage every year for the last twelve years said, “Pandharpur is my maternal home, and Pāṇḍuraṅga is my father, and he is my mother too. She referred to the deity as “*vithū māṭūlī*” and expressed that the joy one gets by coming to Pandharpur is “the joy a married girl gets on going to her maternal home”. She also had a very pragmatic reason for joining the Vārī. She said that she could take a break from the kitchen work and domestic affairs during the entire duration of the Vārī. She need not worry about the “domestic”.¹⁰¹

One often comes across more than one member of the same family walking on the Vārī pilgrimage. Four women belonged to four generations of the same family. They had come only for two days, and the male members of the family had promised to look after the household duties in their absence. An eight-year-old girl had come with her mother, grandmother, and great grandmother to take darśana of Pāṇḍuraṅga on the day of Ekādaśī. The great grandmother said that all family members had taken tulasīmālā, and her son walks the Kārtika Vārī. However, because women in the family are bound to the kitchen and other household chores throughout the year, the Vārī pilgrimage is seen as a respite from the daily routine. She was nearing eighty and had lost her husband, who too was a Vārkarī. She had walked the entire Vārī procession three to four times, but with age, she could not take part in

¹⁰¹ Interview conducted on 7th July 2019.

the procession. She believed that it was the older generation's responsibility to show the right path of Vārī and to instil good *sanskāras* (values) in the younger generations.

Even though asking for alms is generally not a Vārkarī practice, it was not an unusual sight to see people claiming themselves to be Vārkarīs, begging just around the time when the *pāḷkhīs* pass through the city. They used to go from building to building, asking for food and money. Even during the 2019 Vārī, it was a similar experience. Karve, in her account of the Vārī, also mentions this phenomenon. She explains: "These were the better-class farmers. There were hundreds of professional beggars and poor people. They ate whatever people gave them, spread their mat wherever they found a room and walked with the palanquin. They suffered if it rained."¹⁰²

Unlike some critics, such as V. K. Rajwade, the VS philosophy does not see a binary opposition between *prapancha* (carrying out material duties of this world) and *paramārtha* (carrying out other-worldly duties) *pravrutti* (active engagement to do something) and *nivrutti* (renunciation). Instead, these seemingly opposite domains need to coexist in a life of a *bhakta*, according to the philosophy of the VS. One is supposed to carry out all day-to-day tasks. One needs to perform all such actions and duties (*karma*) necessary for living, maintaining, and continuation of oneself, family, and society without getting entangled by the demands of the *prapancha*. One is not supposed to get swayed by the continued attraction of the sensory comfort that may be offered by *prapancha*, as this comfort is momentary. One needs to rise above this sensory happiness, above the restricted idea of the "self" for lasting happiness and joy. However, this does not mean that this philosophy advocates physical suffering or pain or that it is against achieving ease of living and prosperity. The Santas of the tradition caution *bhaktas* regarding endless indulgence in this physical world, *prapancha*, as if

¹⁰² Karve, 17.

this is the ultimate goal of life. The Santas, though they are not against worldly well-being and riches, specify that this is not permanent as the physical world keeps changing. They guide the bhaktas towards achieving the state of eternal blissfulness, i.e., sat-chid-ananda. Moreover, one can achieve this through bhakti, i.e., one is supposed to perform karma, as every karma or doing is an offering to God. Once this is the conviction, a bhakta aspires to make every karma as pure and pious as possible.

5.5.2. Convergence of Various Paths

The Vārī and the VS are the confluence of various schools of religious thought that offer different and sometimes contradictory perspectives on achieving mokṣa, the ultimate goal of an individual according to Hindu belief. In the Vārī, I met a Vārkarī from the Vaiṣṇava tradition as well as the Śaiva tradition, including ISKCON, Nātha Sampradāya, Datta Sampradāya, and so on. The Vārī not only welcomes individuals from different traditions but also respects their thought systems. Karve, in her account, points out a remarkable difference between the monotheistic way of religion and the more open religion of the Vārkarīs. She has written about the activities of the missionaries during the Vārī to convince the Vārkarīs of the path of Christ. She sharply criticises monotheistic ways – political, social and ethical. Karve writes:

While we were resting in our midday camp, I looked up the road and saw a pair of missionaries. They had little pamphlets in their hands and had come to spread the religion of the Lord Christ. After the first two or three days, they must have despaired and gone away, for I did not see them during the later stages of the pilgrimage. I was very angry with them, but the people in my group just laughed at the whole thing. That pair was certainly literate in Marathi, but had not even a trace of understanding of Maharashtrian culture. Different human societies express their sense of beauty and sanctity, and the goodwill in their hearts, in different ways; to learn the value of these different manifestations and at least to try to understand what others believe before insisting that one's own beliefs are the only right ones - is this not the sign of wisdom? The quality of compassion is to love-to love without a thought of return. To love humanity without any desire for gain is not that the means to true wisdom? But the followers of monotheism - political, social, or ethical - can never understand this. Particularly the servants of Christ, who for the last two or three centuries have conquered and ruled different human

societies all over the world and trampled upon their cherished values, are not likely to realise this.¹⁰³

In juxtaposition to the monotheistic religions, the religion of the Vārkarīs is more open and inclusive. It was not the presence of the Christian missionaries but their “mission” to convince the Vārkarīs of the only way of Christ that seemed to have made Karve agitated. The Vārkarī way, in line with the Hindu belief system, does not believe in only one way of attaining spiritual goals. In this context, a remarkable sight was that of ISKCON diṇḍī, walking with the pālkhī of Tukārāma Mahārāja. The leader of the ISKCON diṇḍī and a member of the ISKCON movement who was walking in the Vārī shared his experience. He said that the ISKCON diṇḍī does not follow the phaḍakarī¹⁰⁴ system of the singing of bhajanas and such other practices of the Vārkarīs. The primary purpose for coming to Pandharpur and walking in the Vārī is to get the darśana of Viṭṭhala; for this purpose, all the traditions are the same, and there is no difference.¹⁰⁵ He said, “Our (ISKCON diṇḍī) rules are pretty different from those of phaḍakarīs. We follow the rules as they are told in the first Skandha (chapter) of Bhāgvata Purāṇ that one should not eat meat, consume alcohol, abstain from adultery, and refrain from gambling, so we do not do these four things. We follow these rules, which do not stop us from believing in the Santa paramparā of the Vārkarīs.”¹⁰⁶ Further, he elaborated, “For example, a pedhā (a sweet made of milk), if you eat it from any side, it will always taste sweet. Similarly, there are many names for Viṭṭhala. You can chant any name, and it makes no difference. You can chant any of Viṣṇu’s names, but not those of

¹⁰³ Karve, 23.

¹⁰⁴ Another name used for Vārkarīs. The term phaḍakarī comes from the term “phaḍa”, a traditional group of Vārkarīs gathered around a Guru. The details of the phaḍa system are given in the Chapter on VS.

¹⁰⁵ Interview conducted on 10th July 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Interview conducted on 12th July 2019.

other Gods and Goddesses. This is our tradition. There is no difference in principle between our way and the Vārkarī way.”¹⁰⁷

It was clear from the account of the leader of the ISKCON diṇḍī that members of the ISKCON movement took part in the Vārī pilgrimage precisely because they considered VS and the tradition of the Vārī to fit into the larger Vaiṣṇava pantheon. He considers Vārī and the VS as an integral part of Vaiṣṇava Dharma. To quote him, “There are no caste restrictions. The Vaiṣṇava religion says *“bhedābheda amangala”*. It is bad to follow any kind of discrimination. Castes or financial backgrounds should not discriminate against people. All are one.”¹⁰⁸ It is important to note that to emphasise his point about the non-discriminatory nature of the Vaiṣṇava Dharma. He quoted a verse from one of the abhangas of Tukārāma Mahārāja. He added that the literature followed by them is different from that of Vārkarīs. Also, the mantra of ISKCON is *“Hare Kṛṣṇa,”* unlike that of Vārkarīs, who generally chant *“Rāma Kṛṣṇa Harī.”*

Moreover, despite these differences, there is a shared ethos of Vaiṣṇava Dharma, according to the leader of the ISKCON diṇḍī. Even though it seems natural for the Vārkarīs to accommodate the followers of the ISKCON and consider them “māulī” or members of “a Vārkarī public”, I wonder if the Vārkarī symbols and canons were not Vaiṣṇava, would there be ISKCON diṇḍī taking part in the Vārī pilgrimage? On the contrary, Vārkarīs see the unity of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava ways of worship.¹⁰⁹ The deity Pāṇḍuraṅga is considered a symbol of this unity of Harī, indicating Viṣṇu, and Hara, indicating Śiva.

Another Vārkarī from Aurangabad said that she was a member of the Svādhyāya Parivāra, established by Pandurangshatri Athavale, where she was introduced to bhakti

¹⁰⁷ Interview conducted on 12th July 2019.

¹⁰⁸ Interview conducted on 8th July 2019.

¹⁰⁹ For details, see Dhere, *Shree Viṭṭhala: Ek Mahasamanyay*.

practices. She wanted to explore the bhakti-mārga and the Santas of VS. So, to achieve this goal, she joined the Vārī.¹¹⁰ When asked about the mixing of the different systems of bhakti, i.e. the Svādhyāya Parivāra and VS, she said that eventually, all roads lead to God, and she does not necessarily see the difference or the paradox between these two systems.¹¹¹

During the fieldwork, I also came across a *diṇḍī* belonging to the Ādinātha sampradāya. Ādinātha Sampradāya, as the name suggests, belongs to the Nātha tradition and is primarily a Śaiva Sampradāya. I interviewed the leader of the *diṇḍī*. He said that there is no dispute about teachings between the Vaiṣṇava and the Śaiva traditions of Maharashtra. He believes that there is no hierarchy between Brahma, Viṣṇu and Maheśa. They indicate three different virtues. He said, “Śiva, Viṣṇu and Brahma were born simultaneously. Three different virtues were born. Viṣṇu was satguṇī, Brahma was Rajoguṇī, and Śiva was Tamoguṇī.”¹¹² Additionally, to emphasise the great reconciliatory nature of the VS, reconciling the Vaiṣṇava and the Śaiva tradition, i.e., the unity of Harī and Hara. To emphasise this point, he quoted the guru tradition of Dnyāneśvara. He said, “Ādinātha, i.e., Śiva himself, gave anugraha (initiation into a particular belief system) to Pārvatī by telling her the “bījamantra”. Viṣṇu took the form of Machhindranātha, and he heard the mantra. He then told it to Gorakṣanātha, then Gorakṣanātha passed it on to Gahininātha. Gahininātha initiated Nivruttinātha, and Nivruttinātha then passed on the tradition to Dnyāneśvara or Dnyānanātha. So, the tradition of Dnyāneśvara starts with Śiva, and the VS considers him as a “māūlī” and a great propagator of the Vārkarī tradition.”¹¹³ He further added that there is no dispute between various sampradāya traditions. To put it in his own words, “There is no

¹¹⁰ Interview conducted on 4th July 2019.

¹¹¹ Interview conducted on 3rd July 2019.

¹¹² Interview conducted on 4th July 2019.

¹¹³ Interview conducted on 7th July 2019.

dispute of sampradāya among us. All those who come here are our brothers. Regardless of one's caste, creed or even methods of worship (uapāsanā paddhatī).”¹¹⁴

5.5.3. Ideological Spectrum during Vārī

During the Vārī pilgrimage, one comes across a broad spectrum of social, political, and ideological affiliations. Pilgrims or Vārkarīs belong to diverse social groups in terms of caste, class, education, occupation, age, and region. However, the range of diversity in this spectrum is not limited to socio-economic conditions. The Vārī pilgrimage witnesses a wide range of ideological and political spectrums during the procession. The NGOs, leaning from left to right, participate in the Vārī pilgrimage in various capacities, from awareness campaigns on social and political issues to providing sevā to the Vārkarīs. Though it is difficult to determine the ideological and political leanings of all these organizations, it is clear that the NGOs working on various social issues with different ideological stances are present during the Vārī pilgrimage. Some NGOs and voluntary citizen's groups involve themselves in sevā activities like offering food, water, providing medical services, helping Vārkarīs to find their stay or diṇḍī (if lost), managing traffic and coordinating with the state authorities. In contrast, some others participate in “awareness campaigns”. These groups generally take up issues like dowry, female foeticide, domestic violence, alcohol and tobacco addiction, environmental concerns, cleanliness and hygiene, etc.

Political parties, like NGOs, are also present during the Vārī pilgrimage. Huge banners and posters with an image of Viṭṭhala or Santas of the VS alongside a local leader are a common sight along the route of the Vārī pilgrimage. Some political parties have “Welcome booths” where a huge pandal is erected as a resting place for Vārkarīs. In some

¹¹⁴ Interview conducted on 7th July 2019.

cases, Vārkarīs are provided with food and water. It is also very common for political leaders to walk a short distance alongside the pālkhī procession, attracting media attention. In some cases, diṇḍīs are patronised by political leaders or those who cannot afford the paid membership of a diṇḍī are sponsored by local leaders. In short, the Vārī pilgrimage witnesses the presence of political parties and hence political interests.

Apart from these non-state actors, the state agencies are also actively involved in the Vārī pilgrimage. The police, the fire brigade, local administration, and traffic police are all involved in providing support to the pilgrims and coordinating with the leaders of the pālkhī processions. During the fieldwork, I also came across the “awareness vans” of the ministry of environment and the State Women’s Commission. The presence of the state in the Vārī pilgrimage is epitomised by the *Ekādaśī Mahapūjā* performed by the Chief Minister of the state every year. It is considered an honour of the Chief Minister to perform this *Mahapūjā* on the day of Ekādaśī. This pūjā starts at around 3 AM and is telecasted live every year. There seems to be growing discontent among the Vārkarīs about this arrangement as it takes a long time to complete the rituals. One of the respondents said, “It is a dishonour of those Vārkarīs who walk long distances over several days to meet Viṭṭhala. The first right of darśana of Viṭṭhala must be of Vārkarīs and not the political leaders who come in their cars”. In recent years, the visit of the Chief Minister to the Vitthal temple is also used to achieve political goals by protesters or interest groups. In the year 2018, the then Chief Minister of Maharashtra Devendra Fadnavis was threatened by some Marāthā groups that they would not allow him to perform the Ekādaśī Mahapūjā. Among other demands, the protesters' primary demand was reservations for the Maratha community.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/maharashtra-cm-fadnavis-not-to-perform-pūjā-in-solapurs-vitthal-temple-amid-stampede-threat/articleshow/65091998.cms>, accessed on 24th October 2020.

Unlike many other sampradāyas in India, VS has not adopted extreme forms of worship, such as austere tapas or renunciation from family life, nor has it created rigid membership structures in the sampradāya. People from almost all political ideologies in Maharashtra take part in the Vārī pilgrimage, and even though the phaḍas and diṇḍīs may affiliate with a particular political party or ideology, the pilgrimage remains open to all. There are no apostate practices of punitive measures in the VS for the commission or omission of certain acts. The entire edifice of the sampradāya is based on an individual's consciousness and commitment to following the path of bhakti with pure love and intention, or bhāva. Interestingly, unlike in many other religions, even if a person becomes a Vārkarī and starts wearing a tulasīmālā, he/she need not give up old practices of worship or rituals. For example, even if a Vārkarī goes to Pandharpur every year to meet the God, Pāṇḍuraṅga, one need not give up the worship of other gods or need not stop going to other sacred places dedicated to other gods. VS is usually seen as a people-oriented sampradāya and primarily addresses the majority section of society, namely the poor, disadvantaged, and those who have been historically marginalized. Therefore, the ways adopted by the VS are not radical or extreme. The VS adopted ways that everyone could easily practise without any special qualifications. However, this does not mean that the VS merely added Viṭṭhala worship to the prevailing practices of people without any vision to bring in any qualitative change. The VS focused more on making the religious practices available to the masses by de-bramanising religion caught in the ritual worship of the temples. The celebration of Marathi as a language of bhakti by the Vārkarī Santas is remarkable. From Dnyāneśvara to Tukārāma, all Vārkarī Santas chose to write and compose their works in Marathi to reach out to the common masses. The mainstreaming of bhakti practices, in which ordinary people can be both audience and participants, is consistent with the VS's reconciliatory approach. Again, it should be noted that the Santas of the tradition did not ask their followers to abandon the old

ways or ritual worship or to sing Sanskrit verses entirely but made the alternatives available to those who were excluded from the old ways. It will be appropriate to say that the VS and the works of the Santas of the VS democratised spirituality and religious practices, so much so that these alternative practices seem to have become mainstream in the households of Maharashtra continue to be so to this day.

5.6. Transcending the Socio-Political

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that pilgrimages in general and the Vārī pilgrimage, in particular, are not only spiritual and religious phenomena but also social-political ones. However, what keeps the Vārī going, attracting thousands of ordinary men and women year after year, over centuries, is its ability to touch something fundamental to human existence, beyond the social-political. The social and political aspects of Vārī seem to be one of the implications of the process of Vārī and such other bhakti practices. Individuals suffering from pain and sorrow find solace in the Vārī pilgrimage, and these sorrows are not necessarily the results of social and political structures and power hierarchies. Iravati Karve expresses this in the following words. “These sorrows were not the result of any social inequalities, nor were they caused by any political turmoil or war. These were human sorrows and would disappear only when human beings disappeared. They were there for the rich and the poor, for the young and the old; they encompassed the whole of humanity.”¹¹⁶ The limitation of the universalistic ways of bringing in social change is pointed out powerfully by Karve in her article. She writes:

Is religion a kind of opium? Human civilization has created many kinds of opiates and wines. Opium makes a man forget the world and become sleepy. Wine makes him offensive. Both are methods of forgetting the existing situation. Somebody creates a god, somebody a science, somebody a political *ism*. Have not all those thousands of scientists pursuing their studies, forgetting everything else, partaken of a kind of opium? The ones who let out the cry that

¹¹⁶ Karve, 28.

modern science is the agency for making mankind happy are clearly intoxicated with the wine of knowledge. From Buddha to Marx, there have been many profound philosophers who wanted to eliminate the sorrows of society by social reorganization. Yet we see not only that the old sorrows have not been eliminated, but that new sorrows have been added to the list. And then man takes opium or alcohol, forgets the sorrow, and says, "We have progressed. We are at the dawn of a happy world"¹¹⁷

5.7. Conclusion

Very often, the Vārī pilgrimage is glorified to create *communitas*, where it is believed that the distinction between the self and the other is transcended to create a common Vārkarī identity. The pilgrims, in this case, the Vārkarīs, who begin their journey from home as individuals bound by structures of class, caste, and gender hierarchies, are believed to develop a sense of homogenous community, overcoming the structural differences at the feet of Pāṇḍuraṅga, in Pandharpur. The bhakti practices of kīrtana, bhajana, haripātha, pravachana, ringaṇa, and the very act of walking together in a group – in *diṇḍīs* – during the pilgrimage are believed to help transcend the differences of class, caste, gender, ways of worship, and, at times, differences of region and language. During the pilgrimage, everyone becomes “māūlī”, including the deity, Santas of the Vārkarī tradition, the pilgrims, the *sevekarīs*, and the onlookers. The “structural” identities of class, caste, gender seem to be blurred to assume the identity of “māūlī”. No special qualification is required to become a māūlī, except being a part of a receptive public, even if the attention is passive. Though it is true that every individual during the Vārī pilgrimage, especially at the sacred site of Pandharpur, is called “māūlī”, and there seems to be a blurring of the structural identities, this is not the complete picture of the Vārī pilgrimage. In fact, the negotiation process between the hierarchised, diversified beings and the ideal of a homogenous, undivided community takes place during the pilgrimage. Though individuals assume the identity of being a māūlī, this does not necessarily mean transcending the identities based on caste and gender. On the

¹¹⁷ Karve, 28-29.

one hand, one may come across the ethos of community sharing in the form of commensality and offering food to every individual in the group without any consideration of caste and gender, and at times, even to those who are not members of a group. Simultaneously, on the other hand, in the same group, caste and gender hierarchies may continue to exist. Therefore, the Vārī pilgrimage need not be seen as a unidirectional, deterministic process leading to the formation of “communitas” – a non-dual, homogenous, undivided Vārkarī community. However, the Vārī pilgrimage is a site where the realisation of non-dual identity is merely a possibility due to the pilgrimage process itself.

Reinforcement of social hierarchies and the realisation of communitas are two polar possibilities available through the pilgrimage process. Between these two poles, several other possibilities might indicate the mix of these two. It needs to be highlighted that transcending the differences and realisation of universal, cohesive existence is a possibility and not the inevitable outcome of the pilgrimage process. The pilgrimage process does not necessarily result in the expected outcome of realising the boundaryless self, but it may also reinforce the prevailing social hierarchies of gender and caste. Though the expected outcome of the Vārī pilgrimage remains transcendence of the bounded, hierarchised self-identity, this may not be the uniform, universal outcome. Rather, the Vārī pilgrimage is a site of negotiation between the egalitarian ethos of equality and the societal practices based on gender, caste, class hierarchies.

The complete transformation of the existing power structure in the direction of more egalitarian ways or the perpetuation of the existing power hierarchies by the “haves” can merely be considered two poles of the social processes involved in pilgrimage practice. The reality of social interaction during the pilgrimage lies between these two poles and needs to be understood as a spectrum. Though the pilgrimage indeed opens up the possibility for pilgrims to experience communitas – the wholeness and non-dual existence-transcending the

structure's hierarchical and divisive roles and rules, it is also true that the pilgrimage may serve to reinforce the rules and roles of the structure. The Vārī pilgrimage, with its egalitarian approach, does allow the possibility of experiencing what Turner refers to as *Communitas*. However, at the same time, there also is the reinforcement of the rules of structure – like the caste rules. It seems, instead, that the pilgrimage provides an opportunity for interaction between the wholeness of *communitas* and the divisiveness of structure. Therefore, it would be appropriate to view pilgrimage as a dialogical or rather multifaceted interaction between *communitas* and structure and negotiate the elements of both.

Pilgrimages are neither essentially “anti-structures”, uprooting or at least challenging the hierarchies present in the structure, nor do they necessarily create “*communitas*” – a homogenous, universalistic community of pilgrims. Instead, pilgrimages are the platforms of social interaction, where individuals and groups come together and negotiate the existing power structures through a means of *bhakti*. Pilgrimages are the sites of the circulation of ideas, and they have the potential to adapt to changing socio-political circumstances. However, whether those ideas challenge, alter or perpetuate the existing power structures based on social categories cannot be understood in a deterministic manner. Any argument that claims complete transformation of the existing power hierarchies or perpetuation of power by the “haves” through a means of pilgrimage falls short of capturing the entirety of pilgrimage processes. Pilgrimages are not linear processes of creating a homogenous, egalitarian community, nor are they essentially structures to reimpose the existing power hierarchies to maintain the status quo.

It seems that the idea of “a public” (in comparison to the idea of *communitas*) allows us to account for the various trends, at times contradictory, present in the pilgrimage processes. As pointed out by Novetzke, the *bhakti* practices of *kīrtana* and pilgrimage serve as the nodes of the *bhakti* network. These nodes are at the intersection of the circulation of

social ethics propagated by the bhakti tradition, thereby creating “a bhakti public”. The interactions between the bhaktas and non-bhaktas can be understood in a nuanced manner with the help of the idea of a bhakti public and a Vārkarī public, respectively. These interactions are spiritual and religious, and at the same time, they are socio-political. The interactions associated with bhakti are neither confined and restricted to an individual’s experience as a private or personal affair nor is it a well-co-ordinated social movement for the upliftment of the marginalised.¹¹⁸ As Novetzke argues, bhakti can be a personal faith and a social movement. These are the two possibilities offered by bhakti. However, neither of these two strands can comprehensively define bhakti and its practices. Similarly, considering bhakti merely as a spiritual and religious phenomenon, having no consideration of secular aspects – social, political, economic – is insufficient to make a fuller sense of bhakti. Like Novetzke, one can argue that “a bhakti public” is “the vast area between these poles where the complex interchange exists...”¹¹⁹

While the boundaries of a public are fluid and more inclusive, it needs to be pointed out that, unlike *communitas*, there are still boundaries. However, unlike “the public” or “the public sphere,” they are not rigidly defined or contextualised by modernity. A public with self-referencing and internal circulation characteristics can keep generating publics over time and across the social spectrum. A bhakti public is not an ideal type or a perfect, homogenous and cohesive public, echoing the similar or identical voices. A bhakti public is contrary to this. It includes a wide range of interests, some of which are antagonistic. A bhakti public is not necessarily an egalitarian one, nor is it completely hierarchy-ridden. Nevertheless, the potential of a bhakti public lies in its possibilities for ordinary bhaktas.

¹¹⁸ Novetzke, *History, Bhakti and Public Memory*, 22.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

Similarly, a Vārkarī public is more fluid and open than those who are “sampradāyika” or “true Vārkarīs”. Entry in and out of a Vārkarī public is easy. It can be temporary, whereas being a sampradāyika or belonging to the Vārkarī community is a voluntary life-long commitment. Unlike “the public”, the (Vārkarī) sampradāya does not demand rational debate, literacy or modernity as pre-conditions. Instead, the membership of the (Vārkarī) sampradāya is practically open to all, without any prescription of pre-qualification. However, on becoming a member of the sampradāya, individuals are expected to adhere to the Vārkarī ethos as strictly as possible. Whereas, in the case of a Vārkarī public, individuals need not be fully committed to the Vārkarī ethos. They may follow a mix of bhakti practices and belief systems, a part of which is generally associated with the Vārkarī ethos. Thus, a Vārkarī public is a more broad, open, and fluid group of those individuals who voluntarily participate, actively or passively, in one or more bhakti practices institutionalised by the VS The Vārī pilgrimage serves as the most potent site for creating a Vārkarī public as a result of the circulation of ideas facilitated by the movement of Vārkarīs.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

In this thesis, my goal has been to understand and analyse the nature of social interactions during the Vārī pilgrimage in Maharashtra and their impact on the existing power hierarchies and the shaping of the social and cultural fabric of Maharashtra. As stated in the introduction, the Vārī pilgrimage is one of the defining characteristics of the Maharashtrian culture. With its annual frequency, the importance attached to walking and particularly in *diṇḍīs*, and the aspiration of a large section of Marathi speaking population to take part in the Vārī pilgrimage, the Vārī serves as the focal point of social interaction in the Marathi speaking region. As it involves a physical journey from home to Pandharpur, in the company of the Santas of the Vārkarī tradition (in the form of sandal images) and fellow Vārkarīs, the Vārī serves as the ready ground for the circulation of ideas across the sections of Vārkarīs and further in the society at large.

The Vārkarīs indeed take part in the Vārī pilgrimage primarily for the religious and the spiritual reasons. However, the social interactions during the Vārī are not confined to the religious and spiritual. What may seem like a spiritual or religious discourse may also have a social and political message. I have argued that the pilgrimages in general and the Vārī pilgrimage, in particular, is not only religious and spiritual phenomenon but also deeply social-political. Not only does the very subject matter of interactions during the Vārī pertain to social and political deliberations, but the so-called religious and spiritual interactions may also have a bearing on the “secular” choices of the pilgrims, aiding the perpetuation/alteration of the existing power hierarchies mainly associated with caste and gender. In the process, these social interactions do not necessarily create the homogenous community of the Vārkarīs, but rather such a public where entry and exist are open, and the boundaries are

fluid. The apparently contradictory social processes may coincide during the Vārī. A Vārkarī public resulting from the Vārī pilgrimage serves as a window between the VS and the society at large, wherein the Vārkarī ethos is also disseminated among the non-Vārkarīs. The VS also gets influenced by social and political currents.

Chapter Review

Chapter One of “Introduction” outlined the major themes of this thesis. It elaborated the journey through which the enquiry of this thesis began. This chapter consisted of research questions, literature review, methodology, the outline of the chapters and the domain of this thesis.

Chapter Two outlines the bhakti tradition in Maharashtra, especially the Maharashtrian variant of Vishnavism centred around the VS. A foundation of this chapter is laid with the discussion on Bhagvata Dharma, which is considered to be the philosophy of the VS. This chapter also provided an overview of the VS. It shall be noted here that the primary purpose of this chapter is to introduce the readers to the Vārkarī world, rather than going into the nuances of several debates revolving around the VS and Vārkarī Santas. The overview of the VS began by providing the historical background of the emergence of the VS based on the works of scholars like R. C. Dhere, S. G. Tulpule, S. V. Dandekar, and G. A. Deleury. The Vārkarī tradition can be traced back at least to the thirteenth century. However, it is difficult to decisively argue about the origins of the institutional form of the VS and its undeniable association with Viṭhṭhala bhakti and the Vārī pilgrimage. The basic terminologies associated with the VS and their meanings are explained in this chapter. The terms “Vārkarī” and “Sampradāya” are discussed in detail, and the way they are employed in this thesis is specified. Thereafter, the chapter provided an account of the Vārkarī code of ethics. Though different scholars enumerate different vows to be taken by the Vārkarīs, going

to Pandharpur every year at least on one of the Ekādaśīs, wearing a tuḷasīmāḷa around the neck, non-consumption of meat, alcohol and tobacco, reciting the mantra ‘Rāma Kṛṣṇa Hari’, and prohibition of adultery are the five core vows of the Vārkarīs. It is noted that commitment to these vows is a voluntary self-imposition by individual Vārkarīs, and VS or other Vārkarīs impose no sanctions for non-commitment to these vows.

One of the primary elements of the Vārkarī tradition is Viṭṭhala or Pāṇḍuraṅga bhakti. It is noted that even though every Viṭṭhala bhakta is not a Vārkarī, every Vārkarī is a bhakta of Viṭṭhala. Viṭṭhala is the main deity of the VS, and the origins of Viṭṭhala bhakti are associated with the story of Puṇḍalika – *ādyā bhakta*. Vārkarīs consider Viṭṭhala as a child form of Krishna, and in this sense, the VS is deemed to be a Vaishnava Sampradāya. The Viṭṭhala temple in Pandharpur is the focal point of the Vārī pilgrimage and the various pālkhī processions, starting from different regions, culminating in Pandharpur. It is observed that even though the Vārkarīs are committed primarily to Viṭṭhala bhakti, worshipping other gods and goddesses is not a taboo in the VS. In the present-day Maharashtrian discourse, Viṭṭhala and the Viṭṭhala temple are seen as symbols of integration¹, integrating the teachings of various philosophical schools as well as where social hierarchies and differences meltdown. A section on Viṭṭhala and Viṭṭhala Temple at Pandharpur in this chapter also mentions other essential sites of the Vārkarīs, usually associated with the Vārkarī Santas.

Maharashtra is known as the land of Santas or Santa-bhumī. The majority of the Santas remembered and revered today belong to the Vārkarī tradition. Between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, the practice of Vārkarīs revolved around the Santas. The great Santas of the Vārkarī practice were men and women who hailed from all social strata, including the “untouchable castes”. Most prominent among them are Dnyāneśvara, Nāmdeva,

¹ R. C. Dhere, *Shree Viṭṭhala Ek Mahasamnway*,

Eknātha and Tukārāma. The compositions of these Santas constitute the Vārkarī literary canon, along with other religious scriptures like BG and Bhagvat Puran. Almost all compositions of the Vārkarī Santas are in Marathi. Instead, it seems to be a deliberate choice for the Santas to compose in Marathi to reach out to the common masses and majority sections of the population. This conscious choice made by the Santas opened the doors of spiritual knowledge to all sections of the society who did not have access to the Sanskrit scriptures. It was observed that even though the Santas preferred Marathi over Sanskrit for their compositions, they did not reject the authority of the Sanskrit scriptures.

Along with using the people's language, the uniqueness of the compositions of the Santas lies in their employment of everyday life experiences of ordinary people to impart spiritual knowledge. It was interesting to note that even though the VS is usually considered to be open and welcoming of various other religious traditions, the selection of the padas for kīrtana or pravachanas restricts the materials only to the compositions of the Vārkarī Santas. S. V. Dandekar defended this restriction by arguing that limiting the sources only to the compositions of the Vārkarī Santas has helped maintain the purity of the teachings of the Santas.²

In understanding the organisation and functioning of the VS in contemporary times, it was observed that the phaḍas are the epicentre of the VS. Around the gurus, Mahārājaas, and buvas, the devotees come together. Under their leadership, the individuals adopt tulasimala to become Vārkarīs formally. It is through phaḍas that the tradition of the Vārkarīs is sustained, and the VS continues to expand. A separate study of the functioning of different phaḍas and their contribution to the sustenance of the VS and their take on the current socio-political issues can be taken up in the future. What are phaḍas to the organisation of the VS? Diṇḍīs

² S. V. Dandekar, *Varakari Panthacha Itihas*.

are for the Vārī pilgrimage? Phaḍas are more or less permanent in nature, whereas diṇḍīs are relatively temporary. Some of the prominent diṇḍīs are associated with some well-established phaḍas. The Vārī, in all practical sense, is managed through the diṇḍīs. Diṇḍīs are the core organising units of the Vārī pilgrimage. Though not every Vārkarī or a pilgrim is registered with a diṇḍī, the diṇḍīs provide the structure to the pālkhī procession.

The overall approach of the VS is people-oriented. This is evident from the means adopted by the VS. As mentioned above, the Santas of the VS chose Marathi over Sanskrit for their compositions. Similarly, they adopted such standards of bhakti that did not require special sacrifices, rigorous austerities, extraordinary intellect or even literacy. The VS adopted measures that could fit individuals' daily lives without giving up worldly life responsibilities. Bhajana, kīrtanaa, nama-japa, haripātha, pravachana, pārayāṇa are some of the means adopted as well as popularised by the VS. All sections of the society can participate in the Vārkarī bhakti practices, and most of these practices are performed “out in the open” and are usually group or community practices.

As for the contributions of the VS, scholars are divided on the issue. This chapter notes two primary debates regarding the nature and impact of the VS. The first debate revolves around whether the VS was instrumental in bringing in the social change and creating a more egalitarian society or did it help perpetuate the social hierarchies revolving around caste and gender. Some scholars argue that the VS was revolutionary in nature. On the other extreme, some scholars vehemently criticised VS as maintaining the caste differences or not “doing enough” to uproot the social injustices. The further primary debate is anchored around the issue of whether the VS helped lay the foundation of political consciousness, which is seen culminating in the form of “swaraj” under the leadership of Shivaji Mahārāja in the seventeenth century. Again, there are differences of opinion among scholars on this issue. Some argue that the works of the Santas of the VS provided the basis

for political consciousness by raising the moral standards of the people. Whereas the other view dismisses the VS and teachings of the Santas of the VS as passive and otherworldly, having no concern with the socio-political issues. I have argued that while it is not likely that the primary goal of the VS and its Santas and leaders was to effect social and political change, the bhakti practices and philosophy embedded in those practises caused a stir in Marathi-speaking region, with ramifications for both social and political domains.

Chapter Three discussed the core theme of this thesis, i.e. the Vārī pilgrimage. The first section of this chapter addressed the institution of pilgrimage in Hinduism. It referred to different definitions of pilgrimage given by various scholars. It outlined the trajectory of the institution of pilgrimage in Hinduism through various textual sources and scriptures. Scholars differ significantly regarding the earliest references to pilgrimage in the Hindu scriptures. Scholars like S M Bhardwaj traced the origins of the pilgrimage institution to the Vedic times.

In contrast, Agehananda Bharati, Knut Jacobsen traced it in However, scholars agree that *tīrthyātrāparvan* of Mahābhārata serves as an essential treatise on pilgrimage. In the purāṇic literature, the institution of pilgrimage is well-established—much later literature. Apart from the textual sources, the travelogues, inscriptions, bahis or records kept by temple priests are significant historical evidence to understand the origins and development of pilgrimage institutions. It was observed that most literature available on pilgrimages focuses more on the tirtha itself than the journey.

Further, the majority of accounts of pilgrimage are descriptive rather than analytical. Some scholars like Alan Morinis, S. M. Bhardwaj, Makhan Jha, Knut Jacobsen, and Rana P. B. Singh have studied pilgrimages as sacred geography and networks across the subcontinent. In these works, apart from focusing on the holy and philosophical dimensions of pilgrimages, there seems to be a suggestion regarding the socio-political implications of pilgrimages. The

literature focusing on the social dimensions of pilgrimage is scanty and remarkable work in this regard is produced by Victor Turner. An attempt was made to look at the literature explaining pilgrims' motivations to go on a pilgrimage. After giving a brief description of the most common rituals performed at the pilgrimage sites, the chapter discusses the critical view of the institution of pilgrimage from within the Hindu fold.

The second section of Chapter Three made an effort to give a detailed account of the Vārī pilgrimage based on the secondary sources and fieldwork. It is the Vārī pilgrimage that gives the Vārkarī identity to the Sampradāya. It is one of the most prominent platforms where the entire VS comes together. The Vārī also serves as the window through which the non-Vārkarīs get a glimpse of the Vārkarī ways and an opportunity for the Vārkarīs to interact with the non-Vārkarīs. It is at the site of the Vārī pilgrimage that the Vārkarī ethos circulates among large sections of the society. Through this section on the Vārī pilgrimage, an attempt was to give a descriptive account of the Vārī pilgrimage and acquaint the readers with the actual procession. Apart from the explanatory value, this section also serves as the basis for analysis in the following chapters.

The description of the Vārī included meaning, historical account, the details of the procession known as the pālkhī processions, schedule of the Vārī pilgrimage as well as daily schedule during the procession, management of the pālkhīs through small groups known as diṇḍīs, and the symbolism associated with this pilgrimage. Attention was paid to point out the difference between the terms like Vārī, pālkhī, diṇḍī. Terms like pālkhī, pādukā, diṇḍī, etc. and particularly the way they are understood in the Vārkarī context. The Vārī has certain elements which are common to all pilgrimages, but there are some characteristics of this particular pilgrimage which make Vārī unique. A small section is added to highlight the similarities and differences between pilgrimages in general and the Vārī. This section concludes by underlining the importance of the Vārī pilgrimage to understanding social and

cultural dynamics in Maharashtra. In the concluding section of this chapter, some pertinent questions are flagged off about pilgrimage processes in general and the Vārī pilgrimage in particular.

Vārī is an annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur, centred around the Viṭṭhala temple. It is difficult to say when exactly the practice of Vārī began, who and how it started, and when was it institutionalised. Further, at what historical juncture it became a defining feature of the VS is unknown. Scholars agree that by the thirteenth century Viṭṭhala temple of Pandharpur was already a well-established pilgrimage centre. However, its institutionalisation seems to be the later development. Today, Vārī is the largest pilgrimage gathering in Maharashtra and one of the significant symbols of Maharashtrian culture.

Vārī is a pilgrimage wherein pilgrims start their journey from different parts of the Marathi-speaking regions and beyond. Several pilgrimage processions, known as pāḷkhī processions, taking different routes and culminating at Pandharpur, constitute the entire Vārī pilgrimage. The pāḷkhīs or palanquins are the focal points of each procession. Pāḷkhīs usually carry padukas or sandal images of a Santa of the VS or objects symbolising a Santa's spirit. Pāḷkhī processions are known by the name of the Santa, whose padukās are carried in the palanquins. The size of the pāḷkhī processions may vary considerably, generally older pāḷkhīs being the large processions. Two of the most prominent pāḷkhī processions are Dnyanehsvara Mahārāja and Tukārāma, starting from Alandi and Dehu, respectively. The pilgrims walk before and after the palanquin in small groups known as diṇḍīs. All pāḷkhīs may not have the system of diṇḍīs. However, large pāḷkhī processions are organised in diṇḍīs. Diṇḍīs are the core managing unit of the pāḷkhī procession as well as that of the Vārī pilgrimage. The location where the pilgrims interact, walk, eat, play, sing and stay together is that of diṇḍī. Diṇḍīs provide the logistical support as well as organise devotional treats in the form of kīrtanas, bhajanas, pravachanas etc. Though the basic structure is common to all diṇḍīs, they

differ significantly from one another in terms of size, facilities provided, and overall culture of a *diṇḍī*. With changing times, newer *diṇḍīs* are coming up that accommodate more non-traditional *Vārkarīs*. This chapter has noted some of the *diṇḍīs* like IT *diṇḍī*, Mahila *Diṇḍī*, Banjārā Samāja *Diṇḍī*, NSS *Diṇḍī*, and *Vārkarī Shikshan Sanstha Diṇḍī*. All *Vārkarīs* do not register themselves with the *diṇḍīs*. However, the essence of the *Vārī* pilgrimage lies within *diṇḍīs*, to be in the company of fellow *Vārkarīs*. *Diṇḍī* is a unit where a variety of interactions take place among *Vārkarīs* and between *Vārkarīs* and non-*Vārkarīs*. It would not be an exaggeration to say that if one wants to know and experience the *Vārī*, one should walk in the *diṇḍī*.

A brief section is provided to underline the parallels and contrasts between pilgrimages in general and the *Vārī*. Though *Vārī* can be broadly categorised as a pilgrimage, it has some unique features. Unlike many other pilgrimages, *Vārī* is an annual affair, i.e. *Vārkarīs* are supposed to join the *Vārī* every year at a fixed time of the year. The tradition of the *Vārī* is followed in the families from one generation to the next. Walking in the *diṇḍīs* or along with the fellow *Vārkarīs* is attached much importance, and therefore, *Vārī* is essentially a community affair. The Pandharpur *Vārī* is not usually undertaken for the material benefits like wealth, progeny, marriage etc. There is no idea of “*Navas*” attached to the *Vārī* pilgrimage. Similarly, getting rid of sins or attaining heaven to avoid the wrath of God or to make the god happy by going on the pilgrimage are no motivations to go on the *Vārī*. The primary reason is the love of the god, Viṭṭhala.

The *Vārī* pilgrimage is the public manifestation of collective ways of bhakti, institutionalised by the VS. It is not just a pilgrimage, in the sense of a journey to the sacred site. Still, it is an opportunity to witness, participate in, and experience almost all collective bhakti practices. At this site, the essence of the VS can be captured as the entire *Vārkarī* community comes together during the *Vārī*. Importantly, Sampradāya’s interaction with

society can be understood through the Vārī. During the course of the research, it was realised that even though the Vārkarī ethos is common to all Vārkarīs, the Vārī pilgrimage does not lead to the creation of a homogenous, uniform Vārkarī community. There is a great deal of variety in the functioning of the diṇḍīs as well as pālkhī processions. Individuals from different ideological standpoints and various social backgrounds participate in the Vārī. But, participation in the Vārī pilgrimage does not automatically transcend their socio-political identities to create a singular identity of being a Vārkarī. It was realised that the importance of the Vārī does not lie in creating a uniform community but rather in providing such a space where people with multiple interests and from various backgrounds can come together on the same platform and interact with one another. This finding necessitated an enquiry into such a concept encompassing the multiple layers of social interaction during the Vārī pilgrimage.

Turning to Chapter Four, in an attempt to look for concepts that can capture the multiple layers of social processes during the pilgrimages and particularly during the Vārī pilgrimage, this chapter focused on two theoretical constructs – the first being the idea of “communitas” given by Victor Turner. In contrast, the second one was the notion of “a bhakti public”, as formulated by Christian Lee Novetzke. The literature was examined to identify some threads of theoretical understanding of social and political relations found throughout the pilgrimage journey. The chapter began by highlighting the need to focus on the component of the journey while studying pilgrimages. As pilgrimages are primarily people's movements from one place to another, they create their economy and spaces for social and political interactions. It was noted that the dimension of the journey was rarely paid attention to in the writings on pilgrimages.

One remarkable work that systematically studied the social processes during the pilgrimage is by Victor Turner, especially the notions of “communitas” and “structure and anti-structure”. The idea of communitas is critically analysed in this chapter. It was argued

that even though *communitas* helps understand the social processes involved in the pilgrimages, pilgrimages do not necessarily create the homogenous, universal communities of pilgrims where the differences in the social structures cease to exist. Though the construct of *communitas* need not be abandoned altogether, it needs to be qualified as only one of the possibilities of pilgrimage processes and not the essential outcome. Turner's understanding seemed teleological and deterministic. As established in the previous chapter and elaborated in the next chapter, in the Vārī pilgrimage, there are multiple layers of social interactions. While pilgrimages have the potential to affect egalitarian social change through the realisation of *communitas*, they also can perpetuate the power hierarchies present in a given social structure.

Similarly, they may create homogenous communities where the structural differences may meltdown, but they may also sharpen the identities located in social structures. Importantly, these trends of bringing about egalitarian changes and perpetuating the structural hierarchies may be present simultaneously in the pilgrimage process. The limitation of the notion of *communitas* is that it falls short of capturing the possibility of co-existing the apparent contradictory trends current in the process of pilgrimage. Therefore, there was a need to search for a concept to address this issue.

While looking for theories that may address the fluidity and openness of the Vārī pilgrimage, the notion of “a public” and particularly “a bhakti public” is arrived at. After discussing the idea of “a bhakti public” as given by Christian Lee Novetzke, the chapter went on to see if this idea helps encapsulate the trends of social interactions present during the Vārī pilgrimage. Novetzke's work primarily deals with the public memory of the fourteenth century Vārkarī Santa, Santa Nāmdeva and refers to the Vārī pilgrimage only anecdotally. Nonetheless, his reconceptualisation of “a public” – given by Michael Warner - in the non-Western, pre-modern context was immensely helpful for the enquiry of this thesis. The

concept of a bhakti public appears to be more receptive and adaptable to the diverse interactions that unfold during the Vārī pilgrimage. It is necessary to emphasise that using the conceptual model of “a bhakti public” to analyse the social dynamics of the Vārī does not imply a rejection of the concept of “communitas”. Based on the notion of a bhakti public, the idea of a Vārkarī public is conceived in this chapter. A link is drawn between “a bhakti public” and a Vārkarī public, and it is argued that a Vārkarī public can be considered a subgroup of a bhakti public. In other words, a Vārkarī public is a bhakti public, with its particular Vārkarī essence. Further, a distinction is made between a Vārkarī public and the Vārkarī Sampradāya, and it is argued that a Vārkarī public is open, flexible, fluid and more inclusive. In contrast, the Vārkarī Sampradāya is relatively more defined, well-structured, and has a clear sense of members and non-members and a fixed code of conduct.

Chapter Five mainly focused on the actual accounts of the Vārī pilgrimage and analysis of the views of Iravati Karve and G. A. Deleury. The research and comparison of these two accounts are based on my fieldwork carried out in the year 2019 and my interactions with Vārkarīs. The emphasis in this chapter continues to be on comprehending the social processes during the Vārī pilgrimage. The purpose is to determine whether the narratives offered by Deleury, Karve, and my field observations reflect the formation of “a bhakti public” in general and “a Vārkarī public” in particular as the result of the Vārī pilgrimage. An attempt is made to comprehend the negotiations between the hierarchy laden social structures and an egalitarian Vārkarī ethos at the site of the Vārī pilgrimage. As there is a gap of six decades between my field-based observations and the accounts given by Karve and Deleury, I have given a comparative history wherever appropriate. I have marked continuities and changes in the Vārī pilgrimage juxtaposed to these two accounts.

To see whether the Vārī pilgrimage leads to the creation of a Vārkarī public, some basic tenets of the Vārī are discussed. The first one focused on the community or collective

nature of the Vārī pilgrimage. It is observed that Vārī. It argues that Vārī is necessarily a collective bhakti practice. It underlines that the Vārī is primarily a collective or communal bhakti practice. It is unlikely to go on the Vārī pilgrimage solitarily. Most of the acts during the Vārī like walking, singing bhajans, and dancing to the rhythm of taal, and mridanga are all collective actions, mainly organised in a *diṇḍī*. This allows coming together different groups having a variety of interests. It is highlighted that even though the Vārī pilgrimage is essentially a community affair, it does not lead to the creation of a homogenous Vārkarī community. Instead, it is a more inclusive platform wherein individuals and groups can adopt a Vārkarī identity (temporarily as long as they are in the Vārī) without giving up their other social identities.

Vārī is an avenue where the circulation of ideas takes place. Apart from the dissemination of the Vārkarī ethos through *kīrtanas* and *pravachanas*, it is also a site of circulation of socio-political ideas. It is observed that the Vārī allows vertical and horizontal circulation of ideas. Vertical circulation results from the system of Vārī being the family pilgrimage. It allows transferring of ideas from one generation to the next. Whereas horizontal circulation results from the broad reach of the VS across the Marathi-speaking region. Vārkarīs coming from the length and breadth of Maharashtra, probably take home the ideas circulated during the Vārī pilgrimage, expanding the sphere circulation. It seems that the circulation of ideas through the Vārī pilgrimage has a significant impact on the moulding of Maharashtrian culture since pilgrims bring the “Vārkarī ethos” back with them when they return to their respective localities. The chapter highlighted the inclusive nature of the Vārī pilgrimage. It observed that people from various strata of society voluntarily participate in the Vārī pilgrimage. Differences in caste, gender, class, education and occupation do not restrict the entry of individuals into the pilgrimage. However, the inclusiveness of Vārī is not devoid of hierarchies. While focusing on the overall inclusive nature of the Vārī, this section also

points out the manifestation of social structures during the pilgrimage. Carrying forward the thread, unifying and dividing trends in the Vārī pilgrimage are identified.

On the one hand, the Vārī is instrumental in creating a sense of unity amongst pilgrims by way of common objects of reverence, being part of the same procession, through the systems of *diṇḍīs*; however, on the other hand, the social, political, ideological differences continue exhibit during the Vārī. Though practically everyone can take part in the Vārī, the caste and gender hierarchies continue to manifest in the Vārī setting. The simultaneous presence of apparently contradictory interests and processes is possible, it is argued, because of its reconciliatory nature of it. The reconciliatory character is manifested not only during the pilgrimage but the VS itself is reconciliatory in the heart.

In conclusion, it is argued that the social processes at work during the Vārī pilgrimage are neither totally unifying nor solely separating, but rather both at the same time. It neither creates “*communitas*” teleologically nor rejects the possibility of “*communitas*”. A Vārkarī public or a bhakti public born of the Vārkarī bhakti practice of the Vārī pilgrimage is inclusive, fluid and open.

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Glossary

abhangā	lit. – unbroken; devotional poetry using a verse form, usually ovī. Most of the Vārkarī Santas have composed abhangas. Vārkarī bhajanas and kīrtanas are usually based on abhnagas.
āchārya	teacher
Adhika	lit. additional; thirteenth or additional month in the Indian lunar calendar occurring every three years
adhikāra	right or authority earned;
adhikārī	lit. officer, in spiritual-religious understanding adhikārī is a person who has earned spiritual authority by sādhanā or steadfastness
Ādinātha	lit. the Primeval Lord; A name of Śiva
advaya	non-dual, where duality ceases
advaita	non-dual, one of the prominent philosophical schools of Hinduism arguing for non-separateness of god-consciousness and human consciousness. Advaita vedānta as propounded by Ādi Shankara and upheld by Dnyāneśvara is believed to be the basis of Vārkarī philosophy
ādyā	first, at the beginning
āgraha	insistence
āī	lit. mother, also used as a suffix with female names as a mark of respect especially female Santas and goddesses e.g. Muktaī, Yamāī
aiśvarya	prosperity
ajnāna	ignorance
amangala	inauspicious
Amṛtānubhava	a philosophical text composed by Dnyāneśvara
āndhaḷe	a form of metaphorical abhangā composition
anubhava	experience
ārādhyā	a god that one worships, most commonly used as ārādhyā devatā

āratī	a ritual of worship wherein light is offered to one or more gods, accompanied with singing of verses and music
Āṣadha	fourth month in the Indian lunar calendar
āṣādhī	lit. used as an adjective for the days that fall in the month of āṣadha; in the Vārkarī parlance it is almost, always used to indicate the eleventh day Āṣadha - the most auspicious day on which the Vārī pilgrimage reaches its culmination
āśrama	a hermitage, or place of religious retreat
Aṣṭamī	eight day in the fortnight of lunar calendar
ātman	the soul or the being
ātma- sakṣātkara	realisation of ‘self’ or one’s being
avatāra	incarnation
avyakta	Unmanifest, latent
Badve	priests at the Viṭṭhala temple in Pandharpur
bahī/vahī	Notebook, written record
Banjārā samāja	historically a nomadic community, who were classified as Criminal Tribe under the colonial rule, are presently classified as ‘Denotified Tribe’ (DT) or ‘Vimukta Jātī’ in Maharashtra.
Bhagvad Gītā	lit. a song of lord; one of the most revered texts of Hindus
Bhāgvata Dharma	philosophy of Vārkarī Sampradāya,
Bhāgvata pantha	lit. a path of a devotee, indicating commitment mainly to the devotional path or bhakti directed towards Viṣṇu or any of the incarnations of Viṣṇu
Bhāgvata Purāṇa	one of the most revered texts of Hindus and most prominent of eighteen maha-purāṇas
bhairavī	a raga in Indian classical music, it is considered as a queen on of rāgas.
bhajana	devotional singing
bhajanī mālīkā	sequence of bhajans, order in which Vārkarīs sing bhajans

bhakti	lit. distribution or division; loving devotion to god, dedication to god
bhakti-yoga	dedication or commitment to the path of devotion
bhakti sūtra	lit. – principles of devotion, also used to refer to treatises on devotion by ancient sages like Nārada, Shāndilya known as Nārada Bhakti Sūtre, Shāndilya Bhakti Sūtre
bhārūda	it is a performative folk art involving music, dance, drama, play. It is generally satirical and usually imbedded with dual meaning – material aspects and spiritual message. In the Vārkarī tradition it is believed to be popularised by Santa Eknātha and can be classified as a genre of sankīrtan.
bhāśa	language
bhāva	intention
bhedābheda	discrimination, differences
bhīṣī	a kind of kitty, monthly voluntary contribution of fixed and small amounts by individuals to the group fund or corpus and can be withdrawn for contingencies or pre-decided purpose. Some Vārkarīs contribute to bhīṣī in order to pay for logistical arrangements provided by diṇḍīs.
Bhoī/ Bhoī samāja	lit. carrier, a name of a caste, traditionally, those who carried the palanquins of kings and queens and other royals. Community of palanquin carriers
bhojana	Meal (n.), to eat a meal (v.)
bhūpa	lit. king. (Also bhūpālī) a rāga in Indian classical music. A devotional song sung early morning employing raga bhūpa to wake up the deity is called bhūpālī
bīja-mantra	the core or base mantra. A bhakta is supposed to recite bīja-mantra or meditate upon bīja-mantra

bindī	a mark on the forehead, usually worn by married Hindu women
Brahman	the ultimate reality, the primary principle which is the source of existence
Brahmin	name of a caste
buddhī	intellect
bukkā	black fragrant powder, considered auspicious by the Vārkarīs
buvā	used as a mark of respect for an elderly or wise man, often kīrtanakar is regarded as buvā. Generally, used as a suffix with male names. E.g. Tukārāma buvā
Chaitra	first month in the Indian lunar calendar
chāla	tune, rhythm
chālaka	lit. driver; one who manages
Chandrabhāgā	lit. a section or part of the moon. In and around Pandharpur river Bheema is referred to as Chandrabhaga as it resembles the shape of the moon.
Chāṅgdeva Pāsaṣṭhī	a philosophical text composed by Dnyāneśvara. It is believed that this text was composed to impart spiritual knowledge to an elderly hathayogī Changdeva.
charaṇasparśa	touching feet, usually of a deity, guru or an elderly person
charitra	biography
chaturthī	fourth day of waxing and waning phase of lunar calendar
Chaturvarga-	a treatise dedicated to dharmasāstras. It gives a detailed account of
Chintāmaṇī	performance of rituals to be conducted on various occasions, composed by Hemadri who was a prominent minister during the reign of Yadava king Krishnadeoray
chid-vilāsa-vāda	lit. philosophy of eternal blissfulness. The philosophy espoused by Dnyāneśvara is known as chid-vilāsa-vāda.

Chopadāra	a person who is in charge of directing the pālkhī procession, carries a long staff in a hand
chovisāvegaḷā	lit. different than twenty-four. The adjective is used for the Vi
dāna	donation
danḍa	pole
darśana	seeing, usually used in the context of seeing god
daśamī	tenth day of waxing and waning phase of lunar calendar
Datta	Three headed god in Hindu pantheon
deś	country
deśbhakti	devotion to one's country, patriotism
dhāvā	lit. run, a slope near Velapur, on the way to Pandharpur, from where Vārkarīs run or pace up towards Pandharpur
dhoti/dhotar	a long cloth or a garment, traditionally worn by men to cover lower part of the body, tied around waist and looks like a trouser outwardly
dhwanyārtha	meaning (of a word) indicated by sound
diṇḍī	lit. threshold, a basic organising unit of pālkhī procession, a small group of Vārkarīs, generally hailing from same locality, traditionally, diṇḍīs were formed along the caste lines. Diṇḍīs make logistical arrangements for its members including stay, meals, bathing, and cleaning facilities etc.
divasa	day; daytime
dnyāna	meditation, concentration
Dnyāneśvarī	highly revered text of Vārkarīs, earliest commentary on the Bhagvat-Gītā composed by Dnyāneśvara in the thirteenth century. It is also known as “Bhāvārtha- Dīpikā”
dnyānottar bhakti	post-knowledge bhakti, bhakti practiced by a realised being
Durgā	a form of female goddess

dvādaśī	twelfth day of waxing and waning phase of lunar calendar
dvaita	lit. dual, philosophical principle that regards god-consciousness and human consciousness as two separate entities. (also see advaita)
dvija	twice-born; used for members of first three sections of Varṇa system in Hinduism viz. Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya.
ekādaśī	eleventh day of waxing and waning phase of lunar calendar, considered important especially by Vaiṣṇavas for religious purposes
ektārā	one stringed musical instrument
Gaṇeśa/Gaṇapati	elephant headed God in Hindu pantheon, worshipped mainly for removal of obstacles, as the god of intellect and wisdom
Ganga/Ganges	name of a river, one of the holiest rivers believed to have purifying qualities by Hindus
garbhagriha	inner sanctum of a temple, where the murtī or image of the primary deity is placed
gavaṇṇī	lit. a milkmaid, a cowherdess; a form of a folk-song based on imagined dialogue between Kriṣṇa and milkmaid
ghar	home, a place of residence, household
ghodā	horse
Gopala/ Gopaḷa	lit. protector of cows; name of Kriṣṇa
Gopichandana	white sandalwood paste
Gopichandanachā	a mark on forehead with sandalwood paste. It is an important symbol for
ṭīḷā	Vārkarīs.
Gosāvī	an ascetic; also, a priest
grihastha	a householder
grihasthāśrama	a phase of life wherein one leads a life of a householder, second of four stages of āśrama-dharma

gudhī	a kind of a flag, a cloth tied around bamboo or long stick, decorated with flowers, mango leaves, neem leaves, and the top is covered with brass, silver or copper pot (kalaśa). In Maharashtra, gudhī is erected in front of houses on first day of Chaitra (Chaitra Śuddha Pratipadā) to mark the beginning of new year.
guṇa	quality or fundamental characteristic. Sattva – a quality of purity, rajas – a quality of passion and tamas – a quality of darkness are considered to be three basic guṇas
guru	a teacher or a guide on the path of spirituality
haṇḍa	a round-shaped water jar
hardāsī/haridāsī	lit. a servant of harī or god; a kīrtankāra or kīrtan performer is regarded as hardāsī/haridāsī
Harīpātha	a collection of abhangas which Vārkarīs are supposed to recite every day. Prominent Santas like Dnyāneśvara, Eknātha and Tukārāma have composed Harīpātha.
hatha-yogī	practitioner of a branch yoga known as hatha-yoga which includes advanced āsanās (body postures) and prāṇayāma (breathing techniques)
itihāsa	lit. as it is; history
jāgara	lit. to wake, invoking deity through singing and music
jaijaivantī	a rāga in Indian classical music
Jākhāī	a name of a folk goddess, or a village deity
Janmāṣṭamī	a tithī or eighth day of month of Śrāvaṇ, celebrated as a birth day of Kriṣṇa
japa	repetition of a mantra or a divine name, often employed in meditation practice
jātī	lit. – category; caste
jñāna	knowledge

jñāna-yoga	commitment or dedication to path of knowledge
jayaghoṣa	acclamation, a call for praise
jyeṣṭha	lit. senior, also a name of a month in the Indian calendar
kacchā	lit. unripe or raw, tentative, unformed
kāñī	a rāga in Indian classical music
kālā	lit. a mixture, a mixture of rice flex and curd, a ritual of kīrtana after which a mixture of rice flex and curd is distributed among the devotees which marks the end of Vārī pilgrimage
kaḷasa	pinnacle
karma	action or deed
karmakāṇḍa	Rituals, to be performed adhering to a set of prescribed rules
Kārtika	a name of a month in the Indian calendar, also a name of elder son of Śankara and Pārvatī
kaṣāya	colour, a shade of orange, a colour of Vārkarī flag
kevalādvaita	lit. pure non-duality or exclusive monism; a sub-branch of advaita school of philosophy
khāmb	pillar, pole
kheḷa	play, game
kīrtana	lit. to sing praises; a public performance which is a mix of song, dance, music, satire, and drama in the praise of god or great devotees, found mainly in Hindu and Sikh religious traditions
kīrtankāra	a person who performs kīrtana
kopa	lit. anger, anger of the deity as the result wrong-doing
kramānka	number
kśaya	decline or fall
kṣetra	lit. region, in the context of pilgrimage – a cluster of sacred sites
Kuṇabī	one of the prominent castes in Maharashtra

Kuladeva/kuḷādeva	family god
Kuladevī/ kuḷādevī	family goddess
kumkuma	a red pigment applied on forehead, generally applied in a round shape by married Hindu women
kurta	a long, loose, shirt like attire, usually worn by men
lakṣārtha	a meaning of a word or sentence the requires attention, meaning deeper than the literal meaning
lekūrvāḷā	one with kids
loka	people, also used to refer to material existence
loka-vidyāpītha	folk or peoples' university
lokāchāra	ways of people, appropriate social conduct
lokadeva/devī	folk god/goddess
madhurā-bhakti	lit. sweet devotion, a strand of bhakti wherein the deity is considered as a lover
Māgha	a name of a month in the Indian calendar
mahant	generally, a leader of a religious order or head of a matha or monastery
Mahānubhava	a Sampradāya believed to be propounded by Shree Chakradhara in the thirteenth century in Maharashtra.
mahāpūjā	lit. a great prayer; elaborate rituals to worship god or the deity, generally performed on special occasions
Mahār	a prominent Dalit caste in Maharashtra
mahārāja	a great king
mahāsamnvayaka	a great reconciliator
mahātmya	greatness, the religious scriptures that glorify the greatness of the god or rivers are known as mahātmya. E.g. Pāṇḍuraṅga mahātmya
māhera	house of married woman's parents
mahilā	women

māḷa	a garland, rosary
māḷakaṇṣa	a raga in Indian classical music
māḷakarī	lit. one who wears a māḷa. In the Vārkarī context, a person who is committed to a Vārkarī way of life, symbolised by wearing of a tulasīmāḷa, is known as a māḷakarī
mānāchyā (diṇḍyā)	(diṇḍīs) with special honour
mandapa	lit. pavilion or porch, usually an open space where kīrtanas and pravachanas are organised
mantra	hymn; a word, a set of words or sound repeated for achieving concentration in meditation
Marāthā	a caste name, majority in Maharashtra
mārga	path, way, road
māūlī	lit. mother
māūlīchā ghodā	lit. horse of a mother. In the Vārkarī context, an empty horse that is believed to be ridden by Dnyāneśvara or Tukārāma Mahārāja
māyā	(in the context of advait vedant of Shankaracharya) illusion
māze	lit. mine
Mhasobā	a folk god of pastoral trobes in Maharashtra and Western India , a horned buffalo
mokaḷe	untied, loose
mokṣa	ultimate freedom, salvation
mṛdaṅga	a barrel shaped double headed drum, a percussion instrument
mukhavata	lit. a face-mask; in the Vārkarī context, a face image or statue or a bust of a santa, usually carried in the pāḷkhī during the Vārī pilgrimage
muktī	lit. – liberation; generally used in Hinduism to mean final liberation from the cycles of birth and death. Similar to mokṣa, sakṣātkara, ātma-sakṣātkara

muṇḍana	tonsure, shaving off the hair; performed on specific religious occasions like śrāddha ceremony, thread ceremony etc.
muṇḍāse	a turban or a headgear
nagara	a town
nagārā	a percussion instrument; drums played as bass instrument, usually played in pairs
naivedya	offering food to the god
nāma-ghoṣa	recitation of god name in high pitch, generally accompanied by musical instruments
nāma-japa	repeating god name
nāma-sankīrtana	a common term used to refer to bhakti practices such as kīrtana, bhajana, pravachana, pārayāṇa, haripāṭha, nāma-japa
nauvārī	a nine yard sari worn by women mainly in the western part of India
navas	a blessing is sought from the deity to fulfil a particular wish of a devotee with a commitment of offering (like gold, silver, food, cow, clothes etc.) on getting the desired fulfilled
niśkama karmayoga	philosophy of performance of action without any expectation of return or fruit as the result of that action. The most prominent Hindu scripture underlining this philosophy is Bhagvat-Gītā
nivruttī	detachment from or non-involvement in the worldly affairs
niyamas	rules and regulations
ovī	a meter of poetry composition. Most compositions of Vārkarī Santas are in ovī meter.
pādukā	sandal images, central force of the pālkhī procession, believed to manifest the spirit of past Santas in the Vārkarī tradition
pakhvāj	a barrel shaped hand drum, two headed musical instrument, a variant of mridanga

pakhvājī	one who plays pakhvāj
pakkā kramāṅka	confirmed or fixed number
pālkhī	a palanquin
panchadhātū	five metals
Pāṇḍuraṅga	lit. whitish in colour; name of the deity of the Vārkarī Sampradāya; another name of Viṭṭhala
Pāṇḍuraṅgaśtaka	a composition of Ādī Śankarāchārya in the glory of Pāṇḍuraṅga believed to be composed in the eight century
pangaḷe	lit. disable, in the Vārkarī context, a genre of abhanga compositions
pantha	lit. – path, road. Also, sect or cult or a group of people committed to a particular religious-spiritual path
pāpa	sin, an immoral act
paramārtha	lit. the highest meaning, all that deals with transcendental world; often used in juxtaposition with prapancha – meaning worldly affairs
paratvārī	return journey, a journey from Pandharpur to Alandi or Dehu
pārāyaṇa	reading of a scripture in a systematic manner
paryāvaraṇ	environment
parikramā	circumambulation, going in a circle around a temple or sacred object
pasāydāna	lit. seeking a blessing; Dnyāneśvara concludes Dnyaneśvarī with the prayer to the omnipresent god.
patrāvalī	a dish made of leaves
payjamā	a loose cotton trouser
phaḍa	a group of Vārkarīs gathered around a guru or mahārāja having some sort of organisation, and a particular code of conduct
phaḍakarī	a member of a phaḍa
phetā	headgear or a turban
phugadī	a cross handed circular movement of two or more people, a kind of game

pournimā	a full moon-night
pradakṣiṇa	circumambulation, also see, parikramā
prākṛut	vernacular
pramāṇbhūt (grantha)	authoritative, accepted, that which has evidential value
prapancha	worldly life; also see paramārtha
prasāda	sacred food, food distributed among devotees after offering it to the deity
prasthāna	departure, beginning of the journey
prasthāntrayī	three means of departure; in the Vārkarī context, Dnyāneśvarī, Tukārāma Gāthā and Eknāthī Bhāgvat are considered as canonical prasthāntrayī
pravachana	a spiritual discourse
pravachanakāra	one who delivers a spiritual discourse; usually a guru, buvā or mahārāja
pravṛttī	oriented towards action, opposite to nivṛttī
prāyaśchitta	atonement or penance
prema	love
pūjā	ritual worship
puṇya	spiritual merit earned by performing good deeds
purāṇa	lit. traditional or ancient; a set of scriptures in Hinduism. It is believed that there are eighteen great (mahā) purāṇas
purohīt	priest
puruṣa	the unmoving, eternal entity Also, male
prakṛiti	primal matter
purvaranga	first half of kīrtana, mainly reflecting upon the meaning of a chosen abhanga. (also see uttararanga)
Rakhumāi or	wife of Pāṇḍuraṅga
Rukmiṇī	

Rāmdāsī	a name of a sampradāya named after Samarth Rāmdasa; a follower of Rāmdāsī Sampradāya
ranga	colour
rasa	taste
ratha	chariot
ringaṇa (gola ringaṇa) (ubhe ringaṇa)	lit. circle or round, in the context of Vārī it is an occasional congregation of Vārkarīs and non-Vārkarīs at designated places. At the centre of this congregation is a palkhī. Two horses running in a circular fashion or vertically is the high point of a ringaṇa. When horses run in circles it is called gola ringaṇa when the move vertically it is known as ubhe ringaṇa
riśi	a sage or an enlightened being
rūpa	form
śabdārtha	literal meaning
sādhana	dedicated
sādhū	a holy or pure being
saguṇa	With form and name, with qualities, opposite to nirguṇa
Śaivas	devotees of Śivā
Śakarāchārya	a common title used for the heads of Hindu monasteries or mathas following the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta. The school of Advaita Vedanta is believed to be propounded by the eight-century sage known as Ādi (first) Śakarāchārya
sakhī	a female friend
sakhya bhakti	a kind of devotion wherein the deity is considered to be a friend. A common example of sakhya bhakti is the relation between Arjuna and Kriṣṇa
Śaka/Śake	era
sākṣātkāra	ultimate realisation

sākṣī	a witness
Śaktī	lit. power, a feminine principle, a consort of Śiva, a goddess
samādhī	trance, a state of perfect balance representing the ultimate; the highest state of yoga
samāja	lit. society, also used to indicate a caste-group or community
Samāja-Āratī	a singing prayer offered by the entire community
sampradāya	a group of people following a particular way of worship and a way of life. Usually translated as cult or sect
sāmpradāyika	that which belongs to the sampradāya or of sampradāya.
sangeet	music
sankīrtana	singing the glories of god, one of the means of bhakti involving music, dance, singing and play. Often used interchangeably with kīrtana.
sansāra	world, or worldly life
sanskāra	a deep psychological imprint
santa	a spiritually accomplished person, usually translated as a saint or holy person; highly revered person in the Vārkarī tradition
santa paramparā	the tradition of the Santas, the path of saints
santa sāhitya	literature and compositions of Santas
Santasanga/ satsanga	in the company of Santas, good company, association with good people
sanvidhāna	Constitution (of India)
sanyāsa	renunciation, detachment from the worldly life
sanyāsāśrama	the last stage of life, out of four stages, prescribed in the traditional Hinduism i.e. the stage of renunciation and leading a life of an ascetic
sanyāsī	an ascetic, one. Who has renounced the worldly life
saptāha	lit. a week, in the Vārkarī context saptah refers to seven days of bhakti practices like pārāyaṇa, kīrtana, pravachana etc.
satguṇī	one with good attributes or qualities

sattvic	serene, harmonious, balanced. One of the three guṇas. E.g. Sattvic food
satyāgraha	lit. insistence upon truth, a method of protest popularised by Mahatma Gandhi
sevā	selfless service, voluntary service without any expectation for return
sevekarī	a service provider or one who offers sevā
Śimpī	lit. a tailor, a name of a caste
Shivājī	Seventeenth century king in Maharashtra celebrated for having established 'swarāj' or self-rule
śloka	a couplet or distich consisting of two lines, and sixteen syllables in each one
snāna	bathing
sohaḷā	celebration, festivities
sovaḷa	rules regarding purity and cleanliness
śraddhā	devotion, faith, veneration, belief
śrāddhā	rites performed in the memory of a deceased person
sthana-mahātmya	lit. greatness or glory of a place, texts celebrating glories of sacred sites
strī	woman, a feminine form
stupa	dome shaped structure, usually associated with Buddhist shrine
śuddha	Pure, unadulterated
Śūdra	the fourth of four-fold varṇa order
tabalā	a musical instrument, a pair of twin hand drums
tāḷa	a musical instrument, cymbals
tāḷkarī	one who plays tāḷa
tamborā	a drone instrument used in Indian classical music
tamoguṇī	one with dominance of tamas guṇa, or qualities of inertia, inactivity, dullness, and lethargy
ṭappā	a milestone or a tap

thala or sthala	a place or location
tiprī	a piece of flat stone, used to produce sound
tīrtha	a sacred or holy place, a place to cross over, holy water,
tīthayātrā	pilgrimage, journey to a sacred place
tithī	a day in a lunar calendar
tuḷṣīmāla/ tuḷṣīmāḷa	necklace or garland of tuḷṣi beads
tuḷṣi/ tuḷas	holy basil, venerated mainly by Vaiṣṇavas, including Vārkarīs
tuḷṣi-vridāvan	a pot or a place wherein holy basil is grown and is considered sacred
upāsana paddhatī	ways of worshipping
upanayana	a thread ceremony
uttara-ranga	second half of kīrtana, mainly narrating a story of santa, or a historical figure that matches the spirit of a chosen abhanga
vadya	Musical instruments
vaidic	based on Vedas
vairāgya	detachment, dispassion
Vaiṣṇava	devotees of Viṣṇu
Vaiṣṇavism	philosophy of Vaiṣṇavas
vākyārtha	the literal meaning of the sentence
vāḷvanta	a desert
vānaprasthaśrama	the third stage of one's life, living a life of a hermit in the forest to limit one's worldly desires
vārāche abhanga	abhangas to be sung on particular days of the week
Varī	lit. going and coming back repetitively, an annual pilgrimage of Vārkarīs to Pandharpur
Vārkarī	one who goes on the Vārī pilgrimage
varṇa	lit. colour, social order

	duty or obligation as per the social order based on varṇa and one's stage
Varṇāśramadharma	in life
vedantic	based on the essence of Vedas
vidrohī	non-conformist, rebel
vimukta jātī	De-notified Tribes, a tribal community (in some parts categorised as Other Backward Classes)
vīṇā	a stringed musical instrument
vīṇekarī	one who plays vīṇā
vīragaḷa	a stone hero
vīṭa	a brick
Vīṭṭhala	the deity of Vārkarī; also known as vīṭhobā, Vithū, vithāī (also see entry for Pāṇduranga)
vrata	a resolve or a vow involving religious observances, usually undertaken for self-purification
vyākhyāna	discourse, lecture or speech
vyakta	manifested, expressed
vādā	Debate, argument
yadnya	ritual sacrifice performed in front of sacred fire
Yamāī	name of a folk goddess
yātrā	pilgrimage
yerzāra	going and coming back repetitively
yogī	follower of yoga, an ascetic
zenḍā	flag
zenḍekarī	flag bearers

Sample Questions Asked during the Semi-Structured Interviews

a) Personal Information

1. Name
2. Age
3. Gender
4. Address
5. Place
6. Caste
7. Occupation
8. Education

b) Vārī Related Personal History

1. Since when are you participating in the Vari?
2. Do you take part in the Vārī every year and for the entire duration?
3. Which Pāḷkhī do you walk with?
4. Are you affiliated with any particular dindi or do you walk unaffiliated?
5. If Affiliated, what are the details of the dindi? – Name, Number, leaders of dindi, nature and composition of dindi.
6. Have you taken maḷ of the VS? If yes, when and from whom?
7. What rules of the VS do you follow?
8. Is going for Vārī a family lineage? If yes, for how many generations?
9. For how long do you stay in Pandharpur after Ekadashi?
10. What rituals do you perform on reaching Pandharpur?
11. When and how do you return home?
12. Have you accompanied pāḷkhīs for Parat-Vārī?
13. What motivates you to go to participate in the Vārī?

14. What role does the family play to support your pilgrimage?
15. How do you manage your work/occupation during the Vari?
16. How do you manage the expenses of the Vari?
17. What is the impact of Vari on your day-to-day life?
18. What Varkari practices do you continue regularly?
19. In your opinion, what are the important values of the VS and its Santas?

Date and Place of Interview