Singing the Way: Music as Pilgrimage in Maharashtra

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Abstract
In Maharashtra, the devotional songs composed by the singer-saints of the Hindu Vārkarī sect are performed publicly and spectacularly during the vārī, one of the largest annual mass pilgrimages in the world. Neither the musical repertory nor the ritual journey itself, despite deep associations with tradition and the past, have fixed meanings, and the complex affective experience of pilgrimage does much more than simply reinforce religious ideology. Drawing upon anthropological frameworks developed since Victor Turner's foundational work in the 1970s, I understand pilgrimage as a dynamic temporal overlapping between people, places, and texts. While songs are often understood as simply one point in this dynamic (text), in this article I argue that music is the medium through which these entities are merged. Pilgrimage comes to be when people sing through, about and in place. Developing an ethnomusicology of pilgrimage, therefore, is not just tangential, but fundamental.

Keywords: music, pilgrimage, India, Hinduism, Vārkarī

Every year during the monsoon season, crowds approaching one million people leave their homes and their work to go on the vārī — the yearly pilgrimage which devotees of the Hindu Vārkarī sect undertake to Pandharpur, in Southern Maharashtra. For nearly a month, they process en masse from a variety of starting points throughout the state, singing the songs of the great saints of the tradition as they move. The towns and cities of the Marathi-speaking heartland bear witness to these pilgrims, lining the streets to see (and more importantly to hear) a spectacle of faith. For the pilgrims themselves, the vārī is a more complex experience, one that ultimately is contingent upon the real-time experience of moving with and towards the divine. Music is essential to the journey that the Vārkarīs undertake, and comprises both the private experience and the public display of pilgrimage. As an individual devotee, the songs and words of the saints map onto the physical progression towards Pandharpur, and constant singing works to focus the pilgrim’s mind inwards. For the audience of the vārī in the many cities and towns which the Vārkarīs pass through, music is an equal counterpart to the visual spectacle of the masses of people processing.

The concept of pilgrimage is common to most of the world’s major religious practices. Whether pilgrimage manifests as metaphor or ritual, and whether movement is real or symbolic, music almost always figures prominently in the constellation of activities that comprise pilgrimage experience. In many traditions, specialised song repertories document places and people; these songs are also used as a catalyst for new experiences on singular or repeated journeys. Particular instruments, melodies and rhythms further mark pilgrimage experience as extraordinary, and are used to trigger emotional and spiritual movement, corresponding to the physical movement of pilgrim’s bodies. In this article, I argue that music is more than a support or even an artefact of pilgrimage; it often constitutes and directs the spiritual journey in multiple and complex ways that correspond with the complex
ways that pilgrimage itself exists. This article is part of a larger project that examines pilgrimage on three levels: as an activity, as an event, and as a mass-mediated product.

Here, I focus on activity, or the pilgrim’s experience, in order to highlight (and really only scratch the surface of) the constitutive role that music plays in the great Maharashtrian pilgrimage. This focus is a direct result of my research methodology. I lived in India between 2003 and 2006, conducting fieldwork with a group of Vārkaṇī devotees located in the city of Pune. I was principally engaged with a community of pakhawāj (double-headed barrel drum) players who were central participants in the rituals and daily practice of devotionalism. It was through sustained work and contact with these musicians that I began to become particularly interested in the idea of musical affordances in the context of ritual and pilgrimage (two similar, but not identical, areas of heightened sacred activity). In the summer of 2005, I traveled with some of these musicians on the vārfī and took part in the pilgrimage myself. During this time, it became clear that music constituted music much more than an accompaniment to spiritual and physical movement. The concept of affordance stimulated particular questions that centered around music’s primacy. What does music bring to pilgrimage that nothing else could? What kind of experience is it when walking is also singing? The Vārkaṇī’s pilgrimage as an activity is inherently musical in a number of ways, which I will explore below. To what extent, then, does music afford pilgrimage, just as surely as pilgrimage affords music?

I also assert a primary place for music in response to analyses of pilgrimage where it is occasionally mentioned but never examined closely. For a time, studies of pilgrimage favoured the silence of exegesis over the din of experience. With anthropological and cognitive approaches more recently return to the realm of the body, it is strange indeed that music continues to be sidelined. I examine anthropological approaches in the first section of this article in order to suggest how music might fit in. I then turn my focus to specific examples from my fieldwork, examining the presence of music within the ritual framework of the Maharashtrian pilgrimage. The vārfī is perhaps an atypical example of pilgrimage in certain ways. It is extraordinary not only in terms of basic qualities such as size (it is the largest annual mass pilgrimage in the world), geographical spread, duration, and regularity of the journey, but also in terms of the public nature of the event, and the fact that the repertory that is sung by the pilgrims is both vernacular and deeply familiar to its audience. Drawing upon my own pilgrimage experience, public notions and representations of the same, and the words and songs of devotees, I conclude by considering the multifaceted ways in which music constitutes pilgrimage.

I. The Anthropology of Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage, once avoided by anthropologists due to its temporary and translocational nature, came to the fore of anthropological theory through the work of Victor Turner, who examined the subject in a series of texts in the 1970s (1974, 1978, 1979). In these texts, Turner locates pilgrimage as a “liminal phenomenon which betokens the partial, if not complete, abrogation of [secular social] structure” (Eade and Sallnow 1991: 4). This abrogation of structure is achieved, from Turner's standpoint, largely through communitas, the “spontaneity of interrelatedness” (1978: 32) that pilgrims move towards on their journey. What pilgrimage produces, through the enactment of ritual over an extended period of time across space(s), is an embodied perception of acute togetherness, a sense of a self dissolving into a collective. This conceptualisation of communitas has a certain intuitive weight, which is part of what made it so significant at the time, however it was difficult to pin down.
In the years following Turner’s initial formulation, anthropologists who went out looking for communitas as the pilgrimage experience seem to have had some trouble finding it. In 1991, in their introduction to *Contesting the Sacred: the Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, anthropologists John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow overtly rejected Turner’s paradigm, defining pilgrimage instead as “a realm of competing discourses” (5). Pilgrimage was still understood as a liminal period, but the contributors to the edited volume argued that ritualized pilgrimage allowed for multiple interpretations of sacred ideologies to exist in the same space (the shrine), brought together by the individual pilgrims who traveled to that space:

*Pilgrimage is above all an arena for competing religious and secular discourses, for both the official co-optation and non-official recovery of religious meanings, for conflict between orthodoxies, sects, and confessional groups, for drives towards consensus and communitas, and for counter-movements towards separateness and division. The essential heterogeneity of the pilgrimage process, which was marginalised or suppressed in the earlier, deterministic models of both the correspondence theorists and those who adopted a Turnerian paradigm, is here pushed centre-stage, rendered problematic.* (Eade and Sallnow 1991:2-3)

The concept of communitas was dismissed largely because it was interpreted as privileging the collective over the individual, creating, for Eade and Sallnow, an analytical gap that failed to recognize multiple ideologies competing within the “area” (a spatial metaphor) of pilgrimage.

Yet for many scholars (Morinis 1992, Coleman 2002, Nordin 2011), there is still a great deal to be recovered from Turner’s analytical viewpoint, overtly or covertly; this is the emphasis he, and especially his wife Edith, placed on pilgrimage as experience. Whether or not ‘spontaneous communitas’ is out there to be discovered, analysed, and defined, the Turnerian perspective is one that fundamentally relies upon temporality, and locates pilgrimage not at a particular site, but rather as something that is constructed as multiple bodies move together in time. As Turner (1974: 132) states, “…the limen of pilgrimage is, characteristically, motion, the movement of travel, while that of initiation is stasis… The former liminalises time, the latter space…”. The emphasis on time rather than space suggests a correlated emphasis on experience over ideology. It is precisely this emphasis that is lost in Eade and Sallnow’s 1991 text. While contestation is an important element of pilgrimage, there is a danger in placing too much analytical value on it, particularly because it only seems relevant in terms of very self-conscious forms of ideological positioning. Moreover, pilgrimage frameworks that incorporate liminality and communitas, either explicitly or implicitly, do not necessarily exclude the possibility for multiple interpretations of religious meaning to co-exist. As Alan Morinis (1992: 17) suggests:

*Pilgrims need not, and seldom do, understand a great deal of the symbolism and meaning packed into the churches, shrines, and temples they seek out. Social structure, cultural configurations, and symbolism are only the building blocks out of which the creators of culture fashion the pathways that participants follow. For pilgrims, their experiences while following the stipulated path loom significant. I call attention to the interaction of individuals (with their given structure of physical and psychological responses) and cultural frameworks that incorporate a meaningful code but, at the same time, serve to induce specific, direct experiences in those who follow the steps of the conventional procedure.* (Morinis 1992: 17)

Rather than focus on the meaning(s) produced by the rites and symbols of a sacred journey, Morinis suggests that there is something else altogether going on in what we might call the pilgrimage process. This is echoed by Simon Coleman (2002: 359) when he argues that “[g]roups sometimes contend for ideological hegemony, but sometimes simply look (and walk) past each other in embodied
confirmation of discrepant imaginaries which have been pre-formed at home”. In a more recent article that examines the role of hardship in the experience of pilgrimage using a cognitive approach, Andreas Nordin puts it even more starkly when he argues “[t]here are other things than meanings that matter, and meanings are indeed quite unimportant for some explanatory purposes” (2011: 636).

There are, indeed, “other things than meanings that matter” for a pilgrim traveling over real or imagined terrain; while the symbolic systems that are reinforced (or contested) are important, I found that pilgrims themselves most often described the sights, sounds, and feelings of pilgrimage, not the ideological framework underpinning it. In this sense, Nordin’s use of the concept of ‘sensory pageantry’ (McCauley and Lawson 2002) traverses the realm of experience in a way that is perhaps more satisfying, or at the very least less opaque, than Turnerian communitas. He refers to the ‘split intuitions’ (646) that pilgrims seem to have, largely stemming from the fact that they are simultaneously performing and performed upon. In other words, they themselves are the creators of the daily ritual activities of pilgrimage, but these activities are intensified through a number of factors. Nordin explores, in particular, the role that hardship plays in the intensification process. Here, I suggest that, during pilgrimage, music is as important an intensifying agent as hardship, producing a key meeting point where person, place, and text coalesce.

The idea of pilgrimage as convergence of person, place and text is a framework that has developed over the past twenty years (Coleman and Elsner 1995, Coleman 2002, Eade 2013). As with communitas, there is a certain amount of intuitive strength in this particular analytical lens. The observers of and participants in pilgrimage (including, of course, fieldworkers) know from experience that pilgrimage consists of a self-conscious and inherently active coalescence, a process of bringing together people, places, and texts (understood in the broadest sense). In this formulation, the verbs used to describe pilgrimage turn away from interpretive and towards operational terms, marking a return to Turner’s privileging of time as the medium of pilgrimage (rather than space). Here, I would simply add that music has something important to say about these matters, which I will return to in the final section of this article.

II. Music and Devotion in Vārkarī Practice

The Vārkarī Sampradaya, or tradition, of Maharashtra is a regionally-specific set of practices, stories, and beliefs that comprises a way of life for hundreds of thousands of devotees throughout the Marathi-speaking region of India. It is also a manifestation of bhaktī, a wider formulation or way of being Hindu that exists in different forms throughout the subcontinent. The basic tenet of bhaktī traditions is the idea that by committing oneself entirely to (usually) one particular god, a devotee may achieve Bhagavan, or an idealised reciprocal relationship of love with the divine being. This basic idea had important implications for the lower castes, who typically were not powerful or wealthy enough to afford the ritual sacrifices required by more orthodox forms Hinduism, and who were not literate and therefore had no access to the Sanskrit texts that made up the esoteric body of knowledge guarded by Brahmans. This had two major effects on the ways in which devotion was and is practiced. First of all, due to the large number of illiterate or non-Sanskrit speaking devotees, and the general principle that anyone should have access to god, the literatures that now comprise the core texts of individual bhakti traditions are vernacular literatures. These consist almost entirely of devotional songs, written in local, everyday language. In many regions, these songs mark the beginning of any kind of non-Sanskrit literary tradition, and as such continue to hold positions of high
cultural importance. The other important effect that the population of devotees had on practice was the development of sets of rituals meant to do the work of both achieving a sense of union with god and serving a pedagogical function in terms of spreading liturgy. Towards both of these ends, music became an important component of ritual performances, as evidenced in the specific history of the Vārkarī sect, which was founded in the 13th century. The various saints who wrote devotional poetry (called abhangas) were also always singers and sermon-givers; the poetry was intended always to be sung rather than read, heard rather than studied, and repeated rather than guarded. The early saints incorporated different kinds of musical performance in order to transmit the messages of their songs, and many of the same rituals hold a central place in Vārkarī practice today. The kīrtan allows charismatic leaders to expound or sermonize upon a particular theme, and to use verses of the abhangas to punctuate crucial moments in their exposition. More informal bhajans allow a kind of egalitarian participation, in which the choice of song and song-leaders varies without a reliance on hierarchy. Bharud is combines elements of sermon with drama and song, using stock folk characters to enact morality plays. As I will explore below, during the vārī, music plays an especially crucial role in structuring the experience of pilgrimage.

It is no exaggeration to say that music constitutes the Vārkarī tradition, yet, despite its centrality, scholars in and outside of India have often treated Vārkarī abhangas not as songs, but rather as a set of texts, as ‘works’ that comprise a body of literature that can be asserted as both historical and as canon. This perspective is evidenced in the ways that these poems have been treated and disseminated. In Maharashtra, there is a long history of scholarship that tends to focus on either the philosophical writings of Jnaneshwar, the founder of the tradition, or on the interpretation of the abhang poetry of the saints. Abhangas from the Vārkarī tradition are taught in schools as a central part of regional culture; they are also anthologized in collections of pan-Indian bhakti poetry and distributed to a national audience as text. In part this relates to the fact that the tradition has transformed from a religion based on charismatic leaders (who used song and sermon to proselytize) to a hereditary practice that seldom initiates outsiders. Over the past two hundred years, the tradition has become substantially more codified, and it is now the case that charismatic performers no longer compose their own songs but rather rely upon the fixed texts collected and affirmed as canon. In this sense, the Vārkarīs are seen, and often see themselves, as culture-bearers, representatives of a long-standing tradition and preservers of a great literary and devotional heritage. As culture-bearers, Vārkarīs necessarily engage with the abhanga repertoire as a set of texts, with relatively fixed and stable meanings that have accumulated over time through discourse. Yet the abhanga is also music, and as music it does things other than mean! In the person/place/text triad discussed above, ‘text’ is often understood as a fixed entity that produces multiple interpretations or responses. Music-as-text, I would suggest, contains multiple responses within it already. When Vārkarīs move musically as pilgrims, they rely upon the inherent qualities of devotional songs not only to perform devotion through the citation of authoritative texts, but also to be performed upon through the dynamism inherent to music-as-text.

This has a particularly strong effect on the idea of place. During the vārī, nearly a million individuals make the pilgrimage from sacred sites all over the state to Pandharpur, which is roughly 200 miles southeast of Mumbai. The devotees travel in large groups (some reaching numbers approaching 500,000), called pālkhīs, after the ‘palanquin,’ or carriage upon which they carry relics of the tradition’s saints from (at least) 43 different sites.
The length of the journey and its movement across the state render the Maharashtrian vārī exceptionally effective in situating the region as sacred. The songs, the abhangas, which are identifiably Maharashtrian through language, mode, and meter, incorporate the names of real individuals and places from the history of the Vārkarī tradition, frequently invoking Pandharpur itself as both a metaphor and a real place. When these songs are performed on the road, music inscribes these places with people, as the pilgrims retrace not only their own steps, but also those of the saints of the tradition and their ancestors. The importance of these kinds of associations is evident in the ways that the villages, towns, and cities of the pilgrimage choose to identify themselves. Certain sacred sites such as Pandharpur and the birth/death places of the saints are more overtly connected to the Vārkarī tradition. But even the sites merely passed through by the procession retain some kind of physical link to this act. Memory, in both the personal/experiential and the collective/historical sense, is employed actively during the journey, as the Vārkarīs literally ‘remember’ the names of god and the saints, as they sound the words of the abhangas, and as they meet one another on the road. There is a constant interaction between the active process of memorialisation (a process which involves not only memory but also an act of marking and remarking) sounded through the sung repertoire of the pilgrims and the artifacts of this process (the song texts themselves) which constitute a record of the journey. The song-as-music is they key operator of pilgrimage, while the song-as-artifact preserves the tradition as a history that is
substantiated during the pilgrimage by the sights and sounds of the countryside through which the pilgrims pass. Another way of putting this distinction would be to differentiate between the multiple journeys acted out over time by individuals – the act of forming, and the journey to Pandharpur – a static, recognisable structure. In what follows, I focus on thinking about journeys – individual experiences of pilgrimage that rely upon the fixed structures that render the vārī both meaningful and feelingful. The notion of the meta- and historical journey, however, is never fully divorced from individual journeys.

For pilgrims going to Pandharpur, time is largely structured through the dindīs, the smaller sub-groups of pilgrims (roughly 80-100 people) that make up the larger pālkī procession outlined above. Each dindī has a certain number of musical specialists (singers and drummers) who lead and accompany the slow daily procession from town to town, which typically ranges approximately 15-20 kilometers and begins as early in the day. Upon arriving at each day’s destination, an aarati, the arrival ceremony that includes all of the dindīs of each palkhi, takes place. It serves ceremonially to lay the saint’s pālkī to rest and practically as a kind of daily meeting of the group, where pilgrims can air grievances and make announcements. As the procession continues and the pālkhī near Pandharpur, special ceremonies called ringan (derived from the Marathi word ‘rangan,’ which literally means an circus, or more loosely an ‘arena,’ but possibly affected here by the closeness of the English term ‘ring’) begin to take place. These ringans, which are ritually centered around the horses that accompany the pālkī, are also created musically, as each dindī performs gymnastic feats of dance and drumming, and as all the participants break up and play dance ‘games’ such as phugadī, for several hours. After settling into a night’s resting spot, one could participate in any of the major forms of Vārkarī music-rituals: bhajan, kirtan, and bharud, which would go on late into the night. Upon waking, one hears the abhangas of the pilgrims as they start to walk as early as 4:00 a.m. Song, dance, and drumming permeate nearly every waking moment of the journey; music thus constitutes the individual’s experience of pilgrimage, allowing them to move through both space and time.

III. Song as Person, Place, and Text

The multiplicity of genres and modes of musical performance enacted during the vārī consistently bring about the convergence of person, place, and text. I want to examine some of these connections more deeply here by looking at the most fundamental of the many performance types listed above: the group singing that takes place within the dindī during the daily procession. In addition to the abhangas themselves, which of course consist of words written by the saints, invocations in the form of chanting the names of the saints and the gods are also utilized during the journey. The most common invocation is “Jnanoba Tukaram,” which not only calls upon the two most important saints for the Vārkarīs, but also encapsulates the entire lineage of the saints – with Jnanoba, or Jnaneshwar, being the first and Tukaram being the last of the great Vārkarīs. Of note is the fact that the saints are invoked with much greater frequency than the god (Vitthala, Vithoba, or sometimes the more generic Hari), which falls in line with the emphasis on human divinity common to bhaktī throughout South Asia. In the procession, abhangas and invocations are sung continuously within each dindī during the daily fifteen-twenty kilometer walk. Many dindīs organise the order of the abhangas ahead of time, and distribute this order to participants through pamphlets. If not, the order is determined on the spot by one of the musical experts in the group, who may also consult a text. The repeated performance of the abhangas on the road resembles a liturgy in this sense. For the most part, the same songs are repeated each day, and certain groups of songs are used to mark particular points of the journey. Invocations, on the other hand, are
more spontaneous. They can be used to ‘fill time’ while stopped, or are interjected before an important sequence of abhangas as a kind of marker. There is a practical element to both modes of performance here; it is common wisdom that singing and walking in rhythm to the pakhawāj (drum) make the journey go by faster. This becomes increasingly important as the weeks wear on and people grow tired.

When the abhangas are sung on the vārī, they are sung using the most straightforward melodic patterns and a relatively simple system of rhythmic accompaniment. This does contrast with the kind of performance that one might hear at a bhajan or a kirtan, in that there is little room for ornamentation or elaboration. The text is the focus during the pilgrimage, and the mode of performance used while walking is one that emphasises singability (so that all may participate) and intelligibility (so that all may understand the words of the saints). One example of this style is taken from a recording I made on the eighteenth day of the journey, only a few days outside of Pandharapur.

Figure 2 – Video footage of “Sundara Te Dhyan” and the first abhanga of the Haripath, July 2005

Here, the pilgrims sing “Sundara te dhyan...” which is an abhanga by Tukaram, the last great saint of the Vārkarīs. This abhanga is one of the most famous and popular in Maharashtra. Its language is relatively simple, and it is focused on the image of the god Vithoba. The perspective is clearly first-person (see translation, figure 3). Tukaram’s 17th-century Marathi, while still removed from the modern vernacular, is relatively easy to understand here, in part because of the simplicity of the sentiment. Tukaram’s abhanga serves here as a lead-in to the performance of Jnaneshwar’s Haripath, a set of 28 abhangas that are performed towards the end of each day’s journey. The texts that comprise the Haripath, which can be translated as ‘the lesson of Hari,’ or even ‘Hari, by heart,’ are much more philosophically complex than the Tukaram example. Jnaneshwar, born a Brahmin, was an educated thinker. His goal as a bhakta was to render the mysteries of the Vedic and Puranic literature clearly, in the vernacular. Here, he is clearly referencing the Gita. It is also important to note that his 13th-century Marathi is quite far removed from the modern idiom. While the Vārkarīs do indeed learn the Haripath ‘by heart,’ the extent to which all of
the literal meanings of the poetry are understood is unclear. Instead, certain lines, in this case, “Hari mukhe mhana,” or “chant the name of god,” receive more attention.

**Figure 3 – Texts of “Sundara Te Dhyan” and the first abhanga of the Haripath**

One obvious element of the formal structure used during the procession is its participatory nature; the abhanga is ‘called’ by lead singers, and the rest of the dīgḍī responds by repeating the strophe. The first half of each line is repeated one time, while the second half is repeated twice. The general downward-moving melodic contour of both abhangas are similar, however the mode usually changes from song to song (or from song group to song group). The melodic material, furthermore, is not bound to the text specifically. Rather, a group of stock tunes that fit the metric pattern are employed, making performance relatively flexible. This combination of a flexible melodic structure and a stable pattern of call and response contribute to a form that is simultaneously improvised, repetitive, and interactive. By far the most fixed element of the performance of abhanga in this context is the system of rhythmic accents instituted by the metric pattern of the drum and imitated by the voice, which groups the ten to twelve syllables of each line into smaller groups of three. This basic rhythm framework allows the singers to move fluidly from one abhanga to the next, whether or not there is a shift in melody. The tempo also remains constant, and so the temporal structure remains a secure and stabilising element throughout the day’s procession. The only kind of intensification that we see in this structure is the textual one through the repetition of the second line. In the case of the second abhanga above the line which becomes the refrain for the entire performance translates as “Chant the name of Hari”. This line is both the most intelligible (as most pilgrims would not fully understand the medieval Marathi) and also, of course, the most performative. The line does as it says, and vice versa.

The singing of the abhangas on the road is the central activity of the pilgrimage; one’s temporal experience of the vārī is largely structured through this ‘sung movement.’ While the vārī does represent the most important public manifestation of bhaktī in Maharashtra, it also literally comprises the identities of the practitioners themselves (as the word Vārkarī itself suggests). Although the Vārkarīs are aware of themselves as performing to a public throughout certain parts of the journey, the emphasis while walking, and in particular while cycling through the important

<table>
<thead>
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<th>2. Abhanga of Jnaneshwar, from ‘Haripath’</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- सुंदर ते च्याण जो विद्यारी भव करणी तेलिन्हस</td>
<td>- देवाच्येह्रे हि उँ तलयती, तेली मुळी दिव्यी साध्यैयायः</td>
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<td>- तुलकामीर गाय काये देवंतियस अख्ते दितित लिंग य</td>
<td>- हरी मुखे भानं हरी मुखे भानं पूर्वात नानं कायं कारी</td>
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<td>- भाॅन्नककृतु कीसतायी भत्तबी</td>
<td>- असो यमक्षे जज्वे वेगु काश वेदान्तनात्र उभरी बाहुय सदाः</td>
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<td>- तुल्य मले मले हेवि सह सुख</td>
<td>- जयंदेवेन मलाने यवत्स्थिश्च भानुण्डे ध्रुवेच्छे रे काशी भरणी</td>
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- शंदरा ते द्विवेदह उहेष विद्वारी |
- करा करावी दैवापि
- तोहिकरा गाळ कीड़ पोलिंचा विन्दू निनामने पेच्ची रोपा
- मुकानक्कूर्ण तालमण्डल श्रवण्यने |
- तोकी निहाने मूळिहे ब्रह्मा श्रवणा पिबिः श्रृंभुक्का विन्दूण्ये

- Beautiful is the image standing on the brick, with his bands on his hips.
- Tula around his neck, yellow silk around his loins
- Tula says as he walks, my pleasure
- I will contemplate his face with love.

- One who ascends for a moment to the threshold of God will assuredly attain the four stages of liberation.
- Chant the name of Hari, chant the name of Hari, the value is infinite, let your tongue chant the name.
- The authors of the Vedas and various scriptures have all proclaimed this path with arms upraised.
- Jnanadev says, the lord will become your slave
- as Krishna served the Pandavas, Vyasa has told.

While the Vārkarīs are aware of themselves as performing to a public throughout certain parts of the journey, the emphasis while walking, and in particular while cycling through the important
abhanga|s handed down by the saints, is on the simultaneous processes of internalisation of the texts and embodiment of the saints through song. Both of these acts do more than simply invoke the presence of the saints on the journey. There is an important glossed meaning of the Marathi word sant, which is usually translated into the English word saint, as I have been using here. While the two terms are mostly equivalent, I want to highlight the second meaning of sant, which is air, breeze, or current. The Vårkari saints are considered to be 'in and of the air,' and this usage denotes the importance of presence in the ideology, typified not only by the fact that the canonised saints of the tradition continue to make the yearly pilgrimage through the symbolic act of being carried in the pālkhi, but also through the saint-hood bestowed upon each Vårkari on the road to Pandharpur.

The centricity of the literature to Marathi culture, the use of music historically to disseminate and circulate the ideals of the bhakti tradition, and the characteristic mode of performance during pilgrimage all contribute to a configuration of music that is simultaneously text and more-than-text. The spiritual efficacy of song relies not only upon saying the words of the right people in the right place, but also on the combination of a set of musical effects common to trance-inducing practices and the clear articulation of the words of the saints. This first set of qualities line up with those that, according to Judith Becker, induce a state of what she has called 'deep listening,' which is described as an embodied state, in which the mind is focused only on the present (Becker 2004). This state is centered on the body as the site of affective emotion, and on the first-person experience of moment-to-moment circumstance. The entrainment that is a result of this phenomenon renders in the singer/listener a state of openness that allows music to act. The repetitive rhythm and melody and the intense timbre of the tāl (hand cymbals) work to induce this state. Yet at the same time the text is still paramount, reflecting the importance of an aural and musical rendering of the words of the saints. The simple declamation allows the words to work, so to speak. Music, which is rooted in temporal experience, particularly in a genre that is essentially participatory, opens up the space for agency by allowing the Vårkari to re-utter and make new the words of the saints, ultimately allowing the devotee to become the saint. Music acts here to turn ideology into feeling, as in the Vårkari Sampradaya, it is believed that those on the road are temporarily divine. The collective nature of musical synchrony and the call-and-response structure of the abhangas form work to underline bhakti’s egalitarian philosophy, while the embodiment of emotion, experience, and text through ‘deep listening’ exemplifies bhakti’s orientation towards the self.

Invocations also use repetitive rhythmic structures and a call-and-response style to unify, synchronise, and encourage deep listening. Yet the most remarkable feature of invocation is the emphasis placed on intensification, marked through increased tempo, rhythmic density, and dynamics and also through dance, which work actively to ‘call’ upon the presence of the saint. From a strictly musical perspective, invocation utilises a much simpler formula, as this example of a ‘Jnanoba-Tukaram’ invocation recorded in the city of Pune demonstrates (see Figure 4). The repetitive call of the saints’ names is declamatory rather than melodic. It is recited over one pitch, with a marked accent (occasionally with a slightly raised pitch) on the first syllable of Jnanba. The pakhawāj imitates this accent with a resonant strike on the rim of the right drumhead. The recitation begins quite slowly and almost solemnly. The leader, usually one of the older members of the dинтер situ|ated near the pakhawāj player, begins by playing the tāl, and calling the line. The drummer and the rest of the dинтер join in with the response. As they continue, both tempo and dynamics increase, as does the rhythmic density of the percussion. Towards the end of the invocation, the chant is happening so quickly that only the accented syllable of
“Jnanoba” can be heard. This is most intensely evident while standing towards the back of the dinḍī, with the musicians – the singers and pakhawāj players. The rest of the men form rows at the front and dance in synchrony as the chant intensifies.

Figure 4 – Video footage of “Jnanoba-Tukaram” in Pune, June 2005

In this example, music’s phenomenological characteristics, its synchronisation and intensification through the gradual increase in volume and speed, contribute to the efficacy of the ‘call.’ Considered from a South Asian perspective, it is important to bear in mind the fact that speech/sound, or vāk, has been a primary agent for the sacred throughout the Indian subcontinent, not only for Hindus, but also for Buddhists, Jains, and Muslims. In each of these traditions, and arguably in most religious traditions of the world, the recitation of sacred text is a kind of ‘speech act’, to use Austin’s (1962) term, that derives its power simply by being voiced. ‘Saying something’ becomes equivalent to ‘doing something.’ Vedic recitation, for example, is only ritually efficacious when chanted; as mere text, the vedas are only useful to scholars and philosophers. An important characteristic of this efficacy is its dependence upon proper pronunciation and performance – hence Vedic recitation has remained within the domain of the Brahmin priests who preserve the ‘correct’ articulation of the Sanskrit verses through an intense pedagogical process of rote memorisation. For the Vārkaṅīs, the ‘correct’ enactment of invocation relies upon a musical framework that locates the affective power of the call within the body of the participating devotee, dancing collectively in the places of pilgrimage.

The texts of the abhangas are filled with symbolism, with images and meanings that can be interpreted in various ways. However I would argue that when we think of these texts as music, the glosses and meanings of the words are less important than the musical deployment of song as a strategic mode of experience. In a similar vein, the invocations to the saints are questions that are answered as they are performed – the saints are called to be present, and are present through the music. In both cases, pilgrims rely on a transformative efficacy that rests within their own bodies. Some of the early observers of the Vārkaṅī sect (Deleury 1960, Karve 1962) were perplexed by the daily performance of song and chant on the road to Pandharpur, because, as the journey wore on, it seemed to become repetitive, and, from the outside, mundane. This was especially so when compared with the more spectacular modes of performance that also take place during the journey. However, most of the
Vārkarīs with whom I spoke suggested that the daily journey, as sung, was the moment at which devotion was the most heightened internally. This feeling is augmented by the physical space of the road. Walking straight ahead, one experiences only one’s immediate group, which often includes only the few rows in front of you and not even the whole of the ḍīṅḍī. One hears the pakhawāj loudly only if situated nearby, so nearby voices and the ringing of the tāl are the most audible aspects for many. One could extend this to realise that the musical parameters of abhanga performance during the vārī produce ideal circumstances for communitas—the “spontaneity of interrelatedness”, to return to Turner. Taking all of this into consideration, it would be difficult to see how such a state would be possible without music.

IV. An Ethnomusicology of Pilgrimage

When I was traveling on the vārī, I unintentionally made a division between the social interactions that I experienced and the musical performances carried out by the pilgrims during the journey. This division was usually marked by whether or not I was holding my video camera. Every morning, as we took up the journey and embarked, singing, on the road, I became an ethnographer, diligently looking for opportunities to get a decent recording, keeping eyes and ears peeled for anything remarkable or extraordinary. In the evenings, and for brief periods during the day when we would come to rest outside a restaurant or tea stall, or sitting underneath a truck, I allowed the ethnographer to relax. Instead I chatted with the women whom I was sharing a tent with each night, answering their questions and my own, none of which had to do with my research. Over the course of the nights I spent with these women, I grew close with them. They were, of course, interested in me because I was a novelty, and derived huge amounts of pleasure in teaching me how to get on, giggling whenever I made a mistake. I came to rely on them for guidance and support, and, in the shared space of the tent, a kind of social intimacy developed between us.

It was in the tent one night that I witnessed the performance of an abhanga that drove home for me the absolute centrality of song to Vārkarī practice. After a long day of walking, singing, and dancing, I lay in the tent as the women giggled and talked around me, looking at a collection of the abhangas in English translation. Shindubai, an illiterate vegetable seller with whom I had struck up a particular friendship, started teasing me about my Marathi, asking if I could write in it. After my weary answer in the affirmative, she asked me to write down her favourite abhanga by Tukaram, (“Kahi jano naye Pandurangavina,” see text and translation, below), and she began to recite it to me as prose. Halfway through the first line, she paused, forgetting what came next. She started over, this time singing the words to a common tune. Her memory thus jogged, she continued, line by line, waiting for me to catch up with the written word, each time singing the line all the way through first, repeating the second couplet, and then slowly speaking the line again, as I wrote:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kahi jano naye Pandurangavina</th>
<th>Know nothing without Pandurang;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pavijela sina sandehane</td>
<td>Doubt will only exhaust you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhaliya naye alavila pita</td>
<td>Even if you remember Him by any other name,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tari to janata kalavala</td>
<td>Your Father understands why you pine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alakar jato gauravita vani</td>
<td>Praise Him and you are no more vain;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarvagattra dhani harikatha</td>
<td>Listen to his story and wishes come true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuka mhanे epaje vihale awadi</td>
<td>Says Tuka, you will suddenly fill up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karava to ghadi ghadi laho</td>
<td>With the feeling of love without end.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 5 – Transliteration and translation of “Kahi Jano Naye…” by Tukaram*
‘Tuka mhone,’ which translates as ‘Tuka says,’ is the most common closing device for the abhangas of Tukaram, the beloved 17th century Vārkārī. Tukaram’s image pervades the landscape of Maharashtra, and his abhangas continue to be the most popular. Tukaram was a Shudra, a low-caste Hindu who renounced worldly affairs in favor of composing abhangas and spreading the word of god through song and sermon. The act of singing one of his abhangas today brings the saint present. The poem itself acts a virtual definition of bhaktī itself: know nothing but god, and you will attain Bhagavan. The last line, ‘you will suddenly fill up with the feeling of love without end,’ transforms an abstract or studied idea of Bhagavan into a personal feeling of liberation and love. I could understand why this abhanga was Shindubai’s favourite.

When I was finished with my writing, I read my version to her. She immediately pointed out that I hadn’t repeated the second half of each couplet, as she had sung it. At this point, one of the wealthier, higher-caste women in my tent spoke up, saying that I had written it correctly, and that the repetition only happens ‘when you sing.’ Shindubai, however, was not appeased. She insisted that I write it out again and read it back to her with the repetition. I willingly obliged and read it back to her, and this time she was satisfied. I was struck by the disparity, though minor, between Shindubai’s knowledge of the particular abhang and mine, or the other devotee’s, for that matter. One might say that from my own perspective and from the perspective of ‘educated’ Marathis, performance of the abhangas was a live rendering of a textual tradition, but for Shindubai, writing was merely transcription of words experienced and learned as sound.

I conclude with this extended anecdote for a number of reasons. First, it demonstrates the role that the abhangas play in the everyday experience of Vārkāris, in this case not during ritual performance but in a more relaxed (and indeed sociable) mode. Second, this example demonstrates a kind of sacred knowledge beyond the ideological, and a liturgical knowledge beyond the text. Shindubai’s performance of this abhanga, particularly in the slippage between speech and song that resulted when she forgot how simply to ‘say’ the words, also exemplifies the primacy of music as a mnemonic device. Finally it demonstrates the importance of performed versions of the abhangas in the lives of devotees. Shindubai learned this song through the simultaneous acts of listening and singing abhangas throughout her lifetime, and her faith is constituted by these acts, not through their explanation. The abhangas of the saints are more than vehicles for the representation of a history or of an ideology. They act through the individual, allowing for the expression of affective and personal devotion.

The songs performed during the Vārkāris’ pilgrimage have always been more than text: they were conceived and disseminated in musical, sung form. The vast majority of Vārkāris who participate in the pilgrimage do not understand this body of work as words only. Instead, music allows devotees to remember, access, and express the liturgy, actively contemplating using the voice and the ears. Returning to the anthropological approaches discussed in the first section of this article, it has been suggested that pilgrimage produces a liminal experience of time, that pilgrimage creates the circumstances necessary for spontaneous communitas, that pilgrimage produces multiple meanings that can be contested, and that during pilgrimage, meaning is not always the most important thing happening. Given all of this, I can’t help but be struck by the fact that music remains peripheral to the study of pilgrimage, despite certain obvious connections to the perspectives discussed above. Music is the temporal art bar none. Music produces intense feelings of togetherness. Music constantly produces “other things than meaning”, even while it also fixes
meaning through the merging of words and tune. If pilgrimage is the dynamic convergence of person, place and text, than music is the site of convergence; pilgrimage comes to be when people sing through, about and in place.

**Glossary**

**Abhanga** – the poetic song form of the Vārkarī tradition. This is a strophic form with rhymed couplets of 7-15 syllables, and a flexible number of stanza. One stanza typically acts as a refrain in performance.

**Bhagavan** – an idealised reciprocal relationship of love with the divine being.

**Bhaktī** – Literally ‘devotion,’ a form of Hinduism that began to spread northwards from Tamil Nadu from the 7th century, and which focuses on the path of devotion (bhakti-marga) advocated by Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita. In essence, bhakti can be characterized as a reaction against brahminical Hinduism(s) and the hierarchical structures that these practices imposed. Bhaktī is focused on one god, to whom the disciple constantly strives to meet through prayer, song, and chanted ‘naming’ of the god. Nearly all bhaktī movements in India have a vernacular poetic tradition that also encompasses the musical performance of these texts.

**Dindi** – the smaller groups of pilgrims (around 40-100 people in each) which comprise each palkhi procession. Dindis are usually formed in pratical terms: according to geography, friends or family, etc. Each dindi performs the abhangs of the saints in their own particular order. A dindi is recognized by a row of orange flag-bearers in the front and a row of musicians (who play pakhawāj, or barrel drum, tal, or small bronze cymbals, and veena, or 1-stringed drone instrument – now largely ceremonial).

**Pakhawāj** – double-headed barrel drum used in both Hindustani classical music (particularly in dhrupad) and in a number of sacred traditions. Pakhawāj players within the Vārkarī sect are musical specialists who spend years learning their craft and who engage with music as a primary means of access to God.

**Palkhi** – from ‘palanquin,’ literally refers to the carriage that holds the relics of the different saints. “Palkhis” also refer to the processions that accompany each saint on pilgrimage.

**Vārī** – the annual pilgrimage taken by the Vārkarīs to Pandharpur. Last year, nearly 1,000,000 were estimated to have participated. This journey takes 22 days, and is carried out on foot, with pilgrims traveling between 15 and 20 kilometers per day. The pilgrims travel from 43 different saint-locations spread throughout Maharashtra, carrying the relics of the saints. They all meet and converge on Pandharpur, in the southern part of the state, on the same day during July.

**Vārkarī tradition** – The Vārkarī tradition is the largest and oldest bhaktī tradition of Maharashtra. It began in the 13th century when the first saint, Santa Jnanadev, translated the Bhagavad Gita into Marathi, the vernacular language of the region. Centered around devotion to the god Vitthala, or Vithoba, an incarnation of Vishnu, it flourished until the 17th century. While its ‘golden’ age is commonly understood to have ended with Santa Tukaram, the last great poet of the tradition, there are hundreds of thousands of practicing Vārkarīs in Maharashtra today.
This distinction is also found in Christianity, as in the Holy Ghost, but in that case has more to do with the godliness of the spirit than with the human-ness of the saint. In other words, the idea is that some essence of the sant’s body remains in the air.

iv Tukaram translation adapted from Chitre 1991.