

Social Implications of Two Hindu Pilgrimages in Maharashtra

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Introduction

There are two well-known pilgrimages in the state of Maharashtra, western India. One is the Pandharpur, held at fixed times, and the other is the *Aṣṭavināyaka* (eight Gaṇeśa). The former is comparatively arduous and regimented, while the latter is more personal and pleasure oriented. Maharashtra has eight temples sacred to Gaṇeśa (collectively known as the *astavinayaka*), all located within a hundred-kilometre radius of the city of Pune. The *aṣṭavināyaka* is a popular pilgrimage comprising a visit to all eight of these Gaṇeśa temples. Attracting many pilgrims, both pilgrimages contribute to the regional identity of Maharashtra. This paper shows that these two Hindu pilgrimages in Maharashtra are useful examples to help better understand the role of pilgrimage in modern India.



Figure 1. Taken from *The Experience of Hinduism*, ed. by E. Zelliott and M. Berntsen.

Pilgrimage fits within important Hindu practices that encompass fasting vigils, bathing in sacred rivers, attending religious fairs, and feeding and bestowing gifts on Brahmins. The Hindu term for pilgrimage is *tīrtha-yātrā*, which literally means “undertaking a journey to a holy place or river.” Monier-Williams define the term *tīrtha* (root *tr*) as “a passage, way, road, ford, stairs for landing or for descent into a river, bathing-place, [or] place of pilgrimage on the banks of a sacred stream [or] piece of water.” S.R. Bhardwaj clearly stated the meaning of pilgrimage: “pilgrimage,

though not one of the major recognized paths of achieving *mokṣa* (liberation), is nevertheless accepted as desirable practice to earn religious merit within a life lived according to dharma. It is one of the numerous ways toward self-realization and bliss”.¹ According to orthodox Hindu tradition, journeys to various sacred places and temples are an important means of begetting *punya* (merit). Most sacred places are situated at the confluence of sacred rivers, whose waters are believed to absolve sins, and bestow merit.

Gaṇeśa Worship in Maharashtra

The *Mahābhārata* (one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India) mentions that Vināyaka (Gaṇeśa) has been specially deputed to present benefits to those poor who deserve recognition of their good deeds.² According to Courtright, “Gaṇeśa is fundamentally a mediating figure between the divine realm and the domain of human concerns and aspirations. Through devotion to Gaṇeśa, who is at once the Lord of Obstacles and the Remover of Obstacles, the devotee hopes to pass beyond such encumbrances to an experience of temporary religious fulfilment, or minimally to achieve success in a specific undertaking.”³ Traditionally, Gaṇeśa occupies the first place in any *pūjā* (ritual of worship), being the first God to be worshiped before any religious or social ceremony. Gaṇeśa is a particularly well-known deity in the Hindu pantheon as a son of Lord Śiva and Pārvati. Devotions involving Gaṇeśa are usually performed at the home and community levels, with worshippers invoking Gaṇeśa to protect them from obstacles.

For the people of Maharashtra, Gaṇeśa is very special deity. Historically Gaṇeśa was a *kula-daivat* (clan deity) for the Peśvā rulers of Maharashtra. The Gaṇeśa festival begins on *caturthī* (the fourth day) of the bright half of the lunar-solar month of *Bhādrapad* (around August-September), and is the most colourful and enthusiastically observed among the various festivals celebrated in Maharashtra. The festival derives from a religious celebration connected to family traditions in the pre-independence era, which well-known nationalist and independence fighter, Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920) converted into a social event designed to strengthen national integration and unite people against British rule. This strategy worked well because the British Government could not restrict religious celebrations for fear of antagonizing the population.

The Gaṇeśa Festival lasts ten days, and sees large Gaṇeśa effigies installed throughout the city as well as a series of cultural programs. The festivities reach their climax on the last day when an immersion procession takes over the main streets of the city. The procession lasts for about thirty six hours, in the course of which people dance tirelessly in front of the idol. Over the years the duration of the immersion procession has grown longer, which indicates increasing participation of people in the festival.

¹ S.R. Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India* (Delhi: Thomson Press, 1973), p. 3.

² C. Singh, *Ganesa* (New Delhi: Crest Publishing House, 1996), p. 80.

³ P.B. Courtright, *Ganesa, Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 85.

The Aṣṭavināyaka Pilgrimage

Pune was the capital of the Marāṭha state ruled by the *Peśvās* (Brāhman rulers of the Marāṭha) and its only significant urban concentration prior to the British conquest. Since the early eighteenth century the city has been the cultural capital of Maharashtra. The city's inhabitants worshiped Gaṇeśa as a family deity (kuladevata), supporting the *Aṣṭavināyaka* temples as centres of this cult. It is generally accepted that the *Aṣṭavināyaka* temples rose to prominence during the *Peśvās* era (the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries). While the current temple structures date to this period, the sites themselves were considered sacred since earlier times.⁴

Although Pune ceased to be a political capital after the British conquest, it retained a distinctive place in the life of Maharashtra. The city's cultural identity engendered nationalist politics, regularly frustrating the British. As I mentioned above, B.G. Tilak and other nationalists established a new community festival to foster Hindu solidarity with Gaṇeśa at its core. Thus a festival that had previously been a private and domestic affair developed into the largest community festival in Maharashtra.

Gaṇeśa is considered to be, among other things, *gaṇapati* (leader of the group), *gajānan* (the one who has the head of an elephant), *vighneśvar* (the king of obstacles), *mangalamūrti* (the one who has a holy appearance), *moreśvar* (God of peacocks), *ekadanta* (the one who has one tusk), *vighnahartā* (the remover of obstacles), *sukhakartā* (the one who creates happiness and peace), and *dukkhahartā* (the one who removes pain and sadness). These names symbolize the many facets of this deity. One commentator described Gaṇeśa as follows: "As the scribe of the *Mahābhārata*, he embodies wisdom, yet also mischief. He is considered fierce and warrior-like, yet benign and beneficent. Effectively, he is an ambivalent god, ideally thought of as lying on the threshold of the divine and mundane realms by Hindu devotees."⁵

Associated particularly with trade and prosperity, Gaṇeśa enjoys popularity throughout India. The popular image of Gaṇeśa endows him with human qualities and casts him as the most accessible of the Gods, and hence the favourite God among humans. The physical features of Gaṇeśa are also peculiar, with his elephant head and big belly, as well as his typical pose seated on a small mouse, full of mischief, wit and wisdom. Many myths associated with local shrines to Gaṇeśa focus on how he realizes the desires of worshippers.⁶ The secret to the popularity of Gaṇeśa lies in his manifold character and the hope of worldly rewards. Many devotees explicitly state that Gaṇeśa is a God that rewards devotees properly.

Although many Gaṇeśa shrines spread throughout Maharashtra, the tradition of Gaṇeśa worship is centred on the *Aṣṭavināyaka* — a particular group of eight Vināyakas (Gaṇeśa) temples around the city of Pune. In the sacred geography of the Gaṇeśa tradition, they form a *maṇḍala*

⁴ A.R. Thapan, *Understanding Ganapati* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1997), p. 203.

⁵ P.B. Courtright, "The Ganesh Festival in Maharashtra: Some Observations," in E. Zelliott and M. Berntsen, eds., *The Experience of Hinduism: Essays on Religion in Maharashtra* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 84-85.

⁶ Courtright, *Ganesa, Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings*, p. 210.

around Pune. All eight temples contain so-called *svayambhū* (self-manifested images) that are said to have spontaneously appeared to devotees in the form of elephant-faced stones. Devotional literature and temple guidebooks suggest that pilgrims visit all eight temples on a single pilgrimage (*yātra*), claiming that the merit obtainable from the auspicious sight (*darśana*) of the eight images far exceeds that from a visit to a single temple. The pilgrimage to these eight temples is considered a circumambulation (*pradakṣiṇā*) of the boundaries of the sacred cosmos in the presence of Gaṇeśa.⁷ Reflecting this belief, at most of the *Aṣṭavināyaka* shrines the day of *caturthi* is marked by a procession where the *utsav mūrti* (festival idol) is taken on a *pālki* (palanquin) either around the village or in four different directions radiating from the village centre.⁸

As the eight temples stand some distance from one another, nowadays travel agencies arrange plenty of pilgrimage buses. Every Friday a bus starts from Mumbai and visits Mohad, Pali and Ranjangaon before staying overnight at Pune. On Saturday, pilgrims visit Theur, Siddhatek and Moregaon, along with other holy temples before another overnight stay. Finally, they spend Sunday on visits to Ozar and Lenyadri before they return to Mumbai. The entire three-day, two-night package tour costs approximately Rs.2550 (about US\$50). Similar tours also depart from Pune and other centres in Maharashtra. These tours are usually weekend excursions, and recently this pilgrim tourism has become enormously popular. The trip has become increasingly accessible, as the number of days required for the *Aṣṭavināyaka* pilgrimage has decreased and the cost has become more affordable, which has been facilitated by infrastructural developments, such as improved roads and transportation, and various facilities at the places of pilgrimage. Simultaneously, the pilgrimage has become more pleasurable and now provides a good weekend family escape. The increasing number of pilgrims furthers the growth of local small businesses selling souvenirs in the form of Gaṇeśa idols, photos and other merchandise. *Prasāda*, or holy food offered to the deity, is an important part of Hindu tradition. Near the temples many local people have begun to sell *prasāda*, which usually take the form of sweets made of condensed milk and sugar.

The Pandharpur Pilgrimage

Another important well-known pilgrimage in Maharashtra is the Pandharpur. This pilgrimage takes place during the Hindu month of *Āṣāḍha* on the day of *ekādāśī* (the eleventh day of the third month of the lunar calendar). Every year, thousands of devotees walk a route in western Maharashtra that runs from Alandi (32 kilometres north of Pune) to Pandharpur (250 kilometres to the southeast). The sole focus of the pilgrims is to reach Pandharpur and offer their respects to Lord Viṭṭhal (the reincarnation of Viṣṇu in the form of Kṛṣṇa). The journey generally takes eighteen to twenty days to complete. During the pilgrimage season, braving both scorching heat and heavy rains, the pilgrims sway and dance to hymns accompanied by the sounds of countless

⁷ Courtright, *Ganesa, Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings*, p. 211.

⁸ Thapan, *Understanding Ganapati*, p. 227

tāls (small cymbals), *ektārs* (a stringed instrument with a dried gourd as its sound-box) and *mṛdangs* (drums), all of which creates an enchanting atmosphere. Non-stop chants of “Jñānōbā-Tukārām” (the names of two prominent saint-poets in Maharashtra) are on the lips of devotees.

The Pandharpur pilgrimage is simultaneously known as *yātrā* (pilgrimage), *vārī* (a regular pilgrimage to Viṭṭhal’s temple in Pandharpur) and *pālkhī*. The word ‘*pālkhī*’ clearly connotes the function of this pilgrimage. The literal meaning of *pālkhī* is a palanquin carrying the *pādukā* (footprints) of a saint-poet as a means of symbolizing their spiritual presence. According to one author, “. . . the pole is covered with silver plating, the seat is inlaid with precious metals and the framework is finely carved. Its weight is considerable and eight or ten men are required to carry it on their shoulders. During the journey, it is placed on a four wheeled bullock cart dragged by two strong bullocks.”⁹ The bullock cart is also adorned like a chariot. Whenever the *pālkhī* arrives at a town, it is taken down from the chariot and carried on the shoulders of male pilgrims. The bullock cart carrying the palanquin is the main attraction of the entire pilgrimage, and draws many visitors, tourists and locals seeking a *darśana* (audience), touching their foreheads, and receiving blessings.

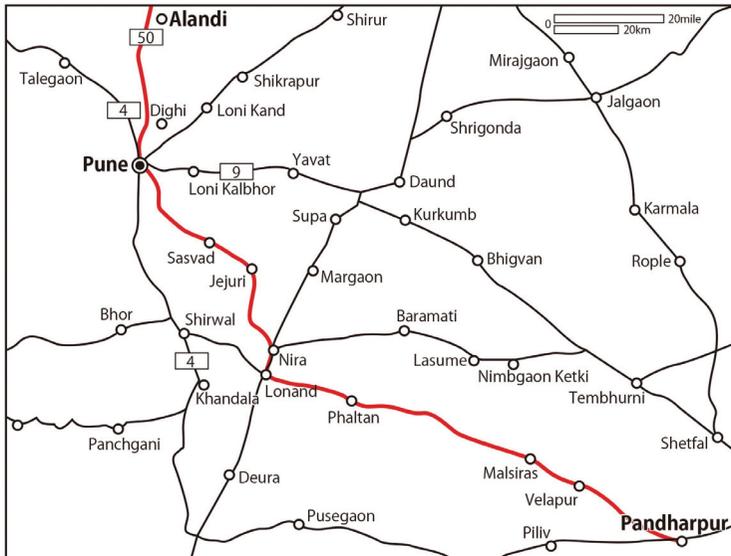


Figure 2. Route map of Pilgrimage. The Alandi-Pandharpur Pilgrimage route Taken from the Master thesis of Prajakta Sane, “Experiential Shaping of Public Space during Pilgrimage: The Alandi-Pandharpur *Palkhi*,” University of New South Wales, 2007.

Gathering under the *pālkhī* of a specific saint-poet, pilgrims feel as if this saint were with them, an experience that sustains the vigour of the eight hundred year old tradition of the *vārī* pilgrimage. The oldest and biggest *pālkhī* is that of Jñāneśvar (1275-96), a prominent saint-poet who significantly contributed to Maharashtrian culture. Jñāneśvar commented on the *Bhāgavadgītā* in Marathi and wrote philosophical works. He also left numerous beautiful poems called *abhaṅgas* (poems praising Lord Viṭṭhal) to express his philosophical thoughts. These

⁹ G.A. Deleury, *The Cult of Viṭhobā* (Poona: Deccan College, 1960), p. 82.

abhaṅgas have been sung for generations and remain very popular among the people of Maharashtra. It has been said that Jñāneśvar completed his work in this life and attained renouncement in Alandi, a small town located on the bank of the river Indrayani. There is a temple of Jñāneśvar in Alandi where he is believed to be meditating even today. Notably, Jñāneśvar inspired a tradition among his adherents and worshippers of singing *abhaṅgas* while traveling the pilgrimage route. This tradition conveys the legend of Jñāneśvar who used to walk barefoot with a flag in his hands, maintaining a fast throughout the journey.

Each *pālkhī* is divided into *dinḍī*, small groups that move together under specific saints' *pālkhīs*. *Dinḍī* are groups of pilgrims typically structured around professions, castes, or a particular village associated with a prominent saint. The number of *Vārkarīs* (pilgrims) in a *dinḍī* may vary from 100 to 1000. The procession is arranged so that the oldest *dinḍī* are closest to the *pālkhī*. The *pālkhī* is normally positioned between the various *dinḍī* and the whole procession is led by a pair of bullocks or horses. In 2005, 26 *dinḍīs* stood before the *pālkhī* with 250 behind it. Currently the *pālkhī* committee, which is responsible for the entire pilgrimage, oversees management, coordination and space allocation issues.¹⁰

In 1991, I participated in a *dinḍī* named “Deshmukh Mahārāj *dinḍī*” — named after a prominent *Vārkarī*. The *dinḍī* had a head managing all logistical matters including food, accommodation (sometimes simply an open space, or sometimes a school or public hall), and handling the entire luggage to allow the pilgrims to concentrate on walking. Driving a chartered truck, the *dinḍī* head arrived at each daily resting place ahead of the main group so as to prepare and serve meals. This *dinḍī*, known as a Brahman *dinḍī*, generously accepted us foreigners into their group. Their only requirement was that we wear *solā* (a waistcloth for men) and *sarī* (traditional women's dress) during meals. Before joining a *dinḍī* one must be vaccinated against typhoid and cholera and submit the vaccination certificate. For the entire eighteen-day pilgrimage I paid Rs.400 (about US\$15).

The Pandharpur pilgrimage attracts hundreds of thousands of devotees, mostly from rural communities. According to one media report, “a total of over forty *pālkhīs*, including Jñāneśvar and Tukārām, visit Pandharpur every year. This year [in 2008] 275 registered *dinḍīs* (or more if unregistered *dinḍīs* are counted as well) and two lakh devotees are marching along the route to Pandharpur. The total number of pilgrims is less than the previous year. It is due to scanty rainfall and high inflation that has made it unaffordable for [the] poor who normally undertake this pilgrimage after the sowing season is over.”¹¹

All *pālkhīs* set out from their own starting points (usually the birthplace of a saint poet or similar) and meet at Vakhri, a village near Pandharpur, one day before *Āṣāḍha ekādaśī* (the eleventh day of the fourth lunar month of the Hindu calendar). This represents the last halt for the pilgrims, and after this point they combine to form a single huge pilgrimage known as the *Vārī*. At the last stop in Vakhri, all *dinḍīs* under *pālkhīs* stop at the vast field and spend the night singing

¹⁰ Prajakta Sane, “Experiential Shaping of Public Space during Pilgrimage: The Alandi-Pandharpur *Palkhi*,” Master thesis for University of New South Wales, 2007, p. 103.

¹¹ *Times of India*, 11 July 2008.

holy songs such as *bajana* and *kīrtana*, listening to stories from *Purāṇas*. The *Vārī* symbolizes unshakeable faith in God in the face of hardship and the desire for salvation.

Implications of the Pandharpur Pilgrimage

One of the most important factors shaping the Indian tradition of pilgrimage is *satsaṅga* (company of holy men). *Satsaṅga* is considered to be a chief means of moral education. When you come in contact with men of noble character (*sādhus*), and share the same experiences, they will have a moral impact on you through their behaviour and teachings. This is why in India, *satsaṅga* is considered essential to moral and spiritual development.

Pilgrimage is also important because it provides spiritual input and inspiration. As E. Zelliott described, “the Pandharpur pilgrimage has features in common with other pilgrimages — the sense of oneness with other pilgrims, the joyous quality of both the journey and the arrival at the centre, V. Turner’s idea of catchment into which many streams flow, and of course the importance of the site itself — it is in many ways unique.”¹² Two significant factors reinforcing the spiritual elation of the *bhaktas* (devotees) are the holiness of the places themselves as well as *satsaṅga*. To visit holy places with holy men benefits the moral development of ordinary men. Therefore, mass pilgrimage has a cumulative effect on the human mind, presumably serving as a seed of religious education. Pilgrimage helps people confirm their religious conviction and offer mutual encouragement to each other. Thus, the process of pilgrimage, namely people walking up to a holy place, is comparable to the process through which a *sādhaka* (ascetic) attains God.

The *Bhāgavata sampradāya* (a religious sect comprising the followers of Lord Viṣṇu) of Maharashtra, refers to pilgrims as *Vārkarī*. To be *Vārkarī* means to undertake *vārī*, and pilgrimage itself is the main aim of *Vārkarī*. Considering the meaning of undertaking the pilgrimage inevitably leads us to examine the practice of *Vārkarī sampradāya* (religious sect) as a good example of its actual manifestation of the word *Vārkarī*. The term *Vārkarī* itself apparently derives from the practice of pilgrimage. According to Deleury, “the word *Vārkarī* is composed of the two words ‘*vārī*’ and ‘*karī*’. ‘*vārī*’ has a very definite and almost technical meaning. The root ‘*vārī*’ means ‘time’ as in the expressions ‘three times’, ‘four times’ and so on. So, ‘*vārī*’ stands for the regular occurrence of the pilgrimage to Pandharpur, the annual going to and coming from that sacred place. ‘*karī*’ means the one who does; ‘*Vārkarī*’ therefore means one who journeys to Pandharpur at the fixed time.”¹³

The main practice of *Vārkarī* is pilgrimage. A *Vārkarī* is supposed to go on the pilgrimage to Pandharpur twice a year. Moreover, this should be done in the spirit of fulfilling a happy promise with Lord Viṭṭal rather than as an obligation. No special sanctions from the *Vārkarī* sect exist for those members who do not undertake regular pilgrimage, for *Vārkarī* are enthusiastic about pilgrimage and never willingly miss such opportunities. *Vārkarīs* like to say that if one of them is

¹² Eleanor Zelliott, “A Historical Introduction to the Wārkarī Movement,” in D.B. Mokashi, *Palkhi: An Indian Pilgrimage*, tr. by P.C. Engblom (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 33.

¹³ Deleury, *The Cult of Viṭhobā*, p. 2.

not seen on the pilgrimage he must be dead or dying. *Vārkarī sampradāya* is a self-disciplined mass pilgrimage born not out of any religious code but out of the enthusiastic devotion of the *Vārkarīs*, the most devoted devotees of Lord Viṭṭal; they love the road, and walking in unison, because it leads to their heart's desire — Pandharpur.¹⁴

According to Deleury's definition of the *Vārkarī*, "he is a man who although living in the midst of his family and carrying on his profession or trade has pledged himself to reach *mokṣa* (final liberation) through the way of *bhakti* (exclusive love for God) and by devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa in the form of Viṭṭobā of Pandharpur, and to go on pilgrimage to that place every year at fixed times, guided on the road by the society of the saints. He is also a strict vegetarian."¹⁵

Vārkarī sampradāya is unique in many ways. First of all, devotees have nothing comparable to a church. While the Viṭṭobā temple in Pandharpur is the symbol for their worship, it does not function as a church. The annual pilgrimage is the only time when the *Vārkarīs* and other devotees gather, making it the most characteristic aspect of this *sampradāya*. The *sampradāya* followers strictly observe vegetarianism, wearing *tulsimālā* (rosary made of basil wood) to mark their *Vārkarī* status. The participation in this *pantha* (literally a 'way', here meaning a group of people following the same 'way' towards liberation) requires no special initiation ceremony. Those wishing to become *Vārkarīs* simply express their desire to join the *pantha* in front of the leader of one of the *Vārkarī* groups. As Deleury described, "he must bring a rosary of 'tulsī' beads which the *guru* tells him to put on the book of *Jñāneśvarī* (a sacred book of Commentary on *Bhagavadgītā* by Jñāneśvar), set on a low table in front of him. The candidate then pledges himself to go regularly to Pandharpur on the fixed dates, and to live a straightforward life consistent with the Hindu concept of 'dharma' (duty). Thereupon the *guru* places the *tulsimālā* round his neck, and gives him spiritual advice, enjoining him to lead a life of service and respect to the saints, and to observe all Mondays, as well as the two *ekādaśīs* (the eleventh day of the Hindu lunar calendar) as days of fast."¹⁶

There is no esoteric ceremony required to become *Vārkarīs*. Embracing people from many social strata, the *pantha* is open to everybody capable of abiding by its basic regulations. E. Zelliot identified three elements of *Vārkarī* tradition: "implicit criticism of Brahmanical narrowness, egalitarianism in spiritual matters, and family-centred life."¹⁷ Even householders can practice *bhakti* in *Vārkarī sampradāya*. Inclusiveness seems to be the main reason for the popularity of *Vārkarī sampradāya*. Deleury also noted this aspect of the pilgrimage: "the *mokṣa* promised by *bhakti* is open to all, its method of purification is possible for all and not restricted to the fortunate few who are able to leave the world and isolate themselves in forests or deserted places."¹⁸ Seekers of the Ultimate Reality do not have to go into the forest. Pilgrimage is easy and accessible to all kinds of people. Anyone willing to undertake the pilgrimage and maintain strict

¹⁴ S.K. Neurgaokar, *Pāḷkhī Sohalā; Alandi Devāsthān* (Pune: Alandi Devasthan Prakashan, 2001), p. 21.

¹⁵ Deleury, *The Cult of Viṭṭobā*, p. 3.

¹⁶ Deleury, *The Cult of Viṭṭobā*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁷ Zelliot, "A Historical Introduction to the Wārkarī Movement," p. 39.

¹⁸ Deleury, *The Cult of Viṭṭobā*, p. 108.

vegetarianism can pursue this *sādhānā* (spiritual discipline or means). There is no esoteric element, and the practice is open to all.

Deleury also argues that *Vārkarī sampradāya* is a collective experience: “The pilgrimage must be considered a real ‘tapa.’ A special line of mortification will give the *Vārkarī* the opportunity to exercise the virtues required to practice the perfect ‘bhakti’.”¹⁹ This holy travel is a significant occasion for *Vārkarīs* not only to maintain their spiritual discipline, but also to sing *bhajanās* (devotional songs) composed by previous saint-poets and listen to *kīrtana*. By so doing, *Vārkarīs* feel oneness with all and closeness to the great saint-poets. *Vārkarī pantha* can be understood as a spiritual group gathering around saint-poets belonging to Pandharpur. For those following *Vārkarī pantha*, participation in the pilgrimage is the only way to learn the teachings of this pantha and absorb its cultural heritage through *bhajana* and *kīrtana*.

Bhajana and *kīrtana* are traditionally understood as essential means to pursue *bhakti*. Nowadays, *bhajana* means “an ascetic poem, hymn, or piece of a verse to be sung to a specific God,” and thus involves singing for the glory of a God and simultaneously making the best use of one’s singing ability. But the specific meaning of *bhajana* in Maharashtra, especially for *Vārkarī sampradāya*, is singing devotional songs associated with the saint-poets. *Kīrtana* is an exposition of the devotional text of *abhaṅgas* (the same as *bhajanās*) being narrated with the help of stories from *purāṇas* (collections of old stories) and *itihāsa* (history). With its simple language and peculiar storytelling method, it explains various philosophical concepts in terms intelligible to a layman. *Kīrtana* consists of *bhajanās*, *abhaṅgas*, and narrations. The *kīrtanakara* (the person who performs the *kīrtana*) has to study scriptures and quote their passages from memory. As *kīrtana* brings peace of mind, the performer’s first aim may be personal happiness. However, *kīrtana* also induces mass ecstasy, since it shows the audience the path of Bliss. Sharing this ecstasy with other devotees is another important aspect of *kīrtana*. *Kīrtana*, as an intangible cultural asset of Maharashtra, is a composite art featuring singing, storytelling, and performance.

In *Vārkarī sampradāya*, *bhajana* and *kīrtana* are equally accessible to all pilgrims regardless of literacy level. The *Vārkarīs* learn philosophy through *bhajana* and *kīrtana* without consulting written scriptures, which are often complex and require additional commentaries. *Bhajana* seem to work as an intermediary between the God and devotees. The devotees feel the immediate presence of their God when they sing and become engrossed in *bhajana*. Importantly, *bhajana* are equally easy for all devotees to perform. P.C. Engblom said, “What makes *bhajana* so attractive as a (spiritual means) is that it is comparatively accessible to the common man or woman and does not require esoteric disciplines. *Bhajana* is an act of the most complete self-abnegation and total self-surrender to Viṭṭhal (Viṭhobā)”.²⁰ Singing *bhajana* and listening to *kīrtana* are important not only to approach God, but also to gain proper knowledge of the *bhakti* teachings and thereby adapt the moral and spiritual disciplines to raise the cultural level of ordinary people. Previous saint-poets have written numerous *abhaṅga* containing moral and philosophical teachings. Singing

¹⁹ Deleury, *The Cult of Viṭhobā*, p. 108.

²⁰ Philip C. Engblom, “Introduction,” in Mokashi, *Palkhi*, p. 25.

and listening to *bhajana* has thus been the main means of intergenerational transmission of *Vārkarī* traditions and teachings.

In recent years, the state authorities have begun to use *Vārī* for mass communication. When the pilgrims halt for rests and overnight stays on their way to Pandharpur, traditional Marathi folk songs and music performances are organized to raise consciousness of disaster management and health issues. This practice provides a precedent for spreading other messages, such as temperance and family planning, through folk entertainment.

Another important aspect of the *Vārkarī sampradāya* is its roles in both the religious and social spheres. The pilgrimage functions as a powerful medium of communication broadly uniting the people of Maharashtra. The tradition reveals social relationships among the pilgrims' groups and the wider society. Meanwhile, the enthusiasm and the spontaneous spirit greatly impact the rural and urban areas of Maharashtra along the journey route.²¹ The pilgrims on their way to Pandharpur pass through numerous villages where they stay for one or two nights. Even the villagers, who cannot join the pilgrimage, are eligible to share the merit accumulated through this journey by offering the pilgrims assistance and hospitality. The villagers also enjoy the *bhajana* and *kīrtana*. Deleury identified two main functions of *Vārkarī* pilgrimage: "It is a religious activity essential in the formation of *Vārkarī* and, at the same time a powerful way of spreading the *pantha* and promoting the religious education of the people."²² The pilgrimage plays an important role not only in developing individual morals, but also in promoting social awareness. It is enormously important as a spiritual discipline.

The saint-poets preach universal, spiritual and ethical values within a broad framework of the traditional *varṇāśrama-dharma* (an ordered society based on distinct social categories). All devotees, including the illiterate, listen to the teachings of saints through *bhajana* and *kīrtana* during the pilgrimage, and share this experience with other devotees. The *Vārkarī sampradāya* provides all the discipline necessary to a *Vārkarī*.

Conclusion

The pilgrimages to Pandharpur and Aṣṭavināyaka have recently attracted a growing number of people of Maharashtra. They clearly have a strong desire to participate in the pilgrimages, seeing them as an occasion to confirm their Maharashtrian identity.

The shift from a state-managed economy to a middle-class culture of consumption in India since 1990 has brought many changes, accompanied not merely by the geographic spread of global commodities and information, but also by social anxiety due to the rapid progress of urban areas. This whirlwind change is epitomized by the mushrooming of urban shopping malls that are generating so-called "*mall sanskr̥ti* (mall culture)." Frustration is increasing among the urban masses who are too busy earning money to reflect on their own lives. For this group, one of the

²¹ V. Thakur, "The Wari to Pandharpur" paper read in an International Symposium on Pilgrimage held in 2010, p. 4.

²² Deleury, *The Cult of Viṭhobā*, p. 109.

few ways of alleviating stress is to visit shopping malls and waste money on luxuries, which causes further anxiety, emptiness, mental hunger and other dissatisfactions and ultimately leads to conservatism and extreme Hindu nationalism.

The meteoric urbanization and dynamic economic development have brought substantial social harm, such as environmental deterioration and a sharper distinction between rich and poor. Particularly, the development of mass media, such as radio and television, and satellite broadcasting, immerses people in a constant flood of information. Television provides instant visual information and enormously amplifies curiosity and material desire. The modern way of life places so much emphasis on material satisfaction that people mistakenly see superficial material pursuits as the sole aim of life, disregarding inner spiritual thirst and traditional morals. At the individual level, materialism perpetuates insecurity, unhappiness, and identity crises, which accounts for the excessive desire of individuals for belonging. As a self-defence mechanism, membership in a collective sometimes emboldens people to artificially hate other groups.

In response to all these insecurities, various pilgrimages now serve as important occasions for disciplining individuals and solidifying their Hindu identity. The *Aṣṭavināyaka* pilgrimage with its relative leisure orientation may be seen as a means of pursuing worldly reward. The Pandharpur pilgrimage in contrast attracts those seeking much deeper spiritual satisfaction, but still faces pressures of change. The vast number of people moving during the pilgrimage season also creates serious hygienic and logistical problems. Every year the newspapers comment on these challenges. For example, the Times of India observed: “The primary objective of developing model camp sites is to provide affordable and comfortable accommodation for pilgrims with required amenities such as shelter, food, water and sanitation arrangements as an alternative to entering and congesting the town area. Local commercial establishments have to be included in the planning to involve their business activities within the camp sites.”²³

The government of Maharashtra is keenly interested in developing tourism, including both the *Aṣṭavināyaka* Pandharpur pilgrimages. One newspaper commented: “This annual pilgrimage has always drawn the fascination of creative minds. Concepts of ‘*Vārī* tourism,’ ‘brand promotions’ and ‘sponsored *Vārī*,’ which are making the rounds in business minds, could soon become a reality in the near future.”²⁴ Sharad Joshi, chairperson of Farmers’ Organization also told a seminar on the Dehu Alandi-Pandharpur *Pāḷkhī* procession on 2 July 2010, “*Vārī* has become an event. It is a high profile activity and politicians and marketers are closely watching the changing *Vārī*. Don’t be surprised if the concept of *Vārī* tourism gains momentum, where people would walk with *Vārkarīs* with facilities, including air conditioned tents.”²⁵

Nevertheless, for *Vārkarīs* themselves, the pilgrimage to Pandharpur remains a spiritual experience. While the commercialization of *Vārī* in the form of “*Vārī* tourism” may be inevitable, it is unlikely to overwhelm the pilgrimage’s underlying spirituality. Despite all the problems and changes, the pilgrims themselves completely committed to continuing their participation.

²³ *Times of India*, 3 July 2010.

²⁴ *Times of India*, 11 July 2010.

²⁵ *Times of India*, 3 July 2010.