

VIEWS OF VARKARI SAMPRADAI**Dr. Radhika Mohan Pathak**

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ABSTRACT

Vitthal devotees have been performing "Vari" even before Saint Dnyaneshwar (13th century). However, the current tradition of carrying the "Paduka" (sandals) of the saints in a palkhi from their "hometown" (place of Samadhi) to Pandharpur was started by the youngest son of Sant Tukaram called Narayan Maharaj in 1685. The Varkari (वारकरी) tradition: started by Sant Jnaneshwar [Mauvli] over 700 yrs ago sowed the seeds of "Bakhti" in every individual irrespective of caste, creed or status. Varkari in Marathi means : travellers or more precisely periodic travellers.

The Varkari sampraday (religious movement) is so called because the followers travel hundreds of miles to the holy town of Pandharpur on foot, every year on the Ekadashi (11th day by lunar calendar) in the Hindu calendar month of Aashaadha (which falls sometime in July) and Kartik Ekadashi (which falls sometime in November). This pilgrimage is called vari (वारी) in the Marathi language and thus one who performs it in the path of devotion (Bhakti Marga) is a varkari. Shri. Baba Maharaj Satarkar was astonished to find the proficiency with which Shri. Tukaram Ganapathy Maharaj, chanted the Marathi Abhangs, when they both met each other first. In an assembly of 50,000 devotees, in front of Shri. Dehukar, the 10th descendant of Jagadguru Tukaram Maharaj, at Dudivare, Shri. Baba Maharaj gave him Deeksha (Initiation) to start Vishwa Varkari Samsthan and authorized him, the 'Adhikari' of Vishwa Varkari Samsthan.

Aadhar (base) for Namaskanerthanam : of Varkari sampradaya is the 'Prasthaana Trayam' . Tukaram gatha (abhangs of Tukaram Maharaj). Eknath Bhagavath (Marathi translation of the 11 th Canto of Srimad Bhagavatham) Dnyaneshwari (marathi translation of Bhagavat Gita by Sant Dnyaneshwar also known as Mauvli)

Key words – Varkari, Vitthala, Sant Tukaram.

INTRODUCTION

Varkari can refer to an individual or group who undertakes a pilgrimage to the temple of Lord Vitthoba or Vitthala in the town of Pandharpur in the western Indian state of Maharashtra. Lord Vitthoba himself, and the pilgrimage to Pandharpur can, in many respects, be considered the most important, popular deity and pilgrimage in Maharashtra. Indeed, in some manner, the pilgrimage itself defines the idea of Maharashtra as a distinct region as pilgrim processions from the different cities and towns converge on this sacred center. Deleury 1960 (cited under General Overviews) considers the etymology of the word to consist of "vari" and "kari." "Vari" is derived from "var," which means occurrence or periodic schedule. Thus "Vari" signifies the regular occurrence of the pilgrimage to Pandharpur. "Kari," on the other hand, implies "doer." Thus a Varkari is someone who regularly, that is, at least one or more times annually, "does" the journey to the holy town of Pandharpur. The journey to Pandharpur commences from various cities and towns in Maharashtra, each retracing the path embarked upon by important poet saints of the medieval period who were staunch devotees of Lord Vitthala. The towns and cities include Jalgaon, Paithan, Daulatabad, Alandi, Dehu, and many more. Each city or town is associated with one or more saints of the bhakti movement in Maharashtra such as Muktabai, Eknath, Janardanswami, Jnanesvar, and Tukaram. The bhakti movement in Maharashtra can be considered a regional expression of a social and religious protest movement that gathered momentum in different parts of India mostly during the medieval period. The

leaders of this movement, which included both women and men, emphasized social equality and a denial of caste and gender hierarchies; an immediate experience of divinity unmediated by ritual or priests; and the composition and dissemination of short, sung, pithy religious poetry in vernacular or regional languages and dialects that were easily accessible to non-elite communities who were not familiar with the language Sanskrit and its religious scripture. The bhakti saints and poets many of whom belonged to lower, “untouchable,” or Dalit communities regarded an intimate, personal relationship to a chosen deity to be paramount. The saints, whose journeys the Varkaris retrace, chose to form such a relationship to Lord Vitthala whom they considered to be a manifestation of Lord Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa. Since retracing the journeys of these saints is so important, the ground upon which the saints walked is considered sacred, and the religious significance of the saints’ feet as a repository of their spiritual strength becomes vital. Large groups of devotees departing from the hometowns of the saints thus also conduct the journeys on foot, while carrying silver footprints of the saints in palanquins or palkhis.

General Overviews

There are not many detailed overviews of the Varkari tradition and the cult of Vithoba. While a number of articles refer to aspects of the pilgrimage and to the deity, it is only Deleury 1960 and Dhare 1984 that provide a comprehensive introduction and in-depth description and analysis of the complex pilgrimage to Pandharpur. The Jesuit priest G. A. Deluery’s sensitive account focusing on the worship of Lord Vithoba is a pioneering work in this field. He painstakingly traces the history of the Varkari movement through the biographies and compositions of the poet saints like Jnanesvar and Tukaram. Similarly, the recent translation into English by Anne Feldhaus in 2011 of the monumental Marathi work by one of the foremost Maharashtrian historians of religion, R.C. Dhare, provides a finely nuanced history of the Varkari movement and the multilayered religious meanings of Lord Vithoba himself (see Dhare 1984). This translation of R.C. Dhare’s comprehensive Marathi work based on years of research gives English-speaking readers a well-scripted, easy access to a complex body of thought with regard to the origins and multiple religious meanings of the cult of Vithoba and of the central importance of Pandharpur within the religious history of Maharashtra. The extensive bibliography includes many other references to Marathi language research. For those looking for an entry point into the history of Varkari tradition, its practices, and customs, the encyclopedia entry Keune and Novetzke 2011 provides a succinct introduction to the Varkari Sampraday including a detailed historical account of bhakti tradition of Western India, and its location within contemporary politics.

Warkari (**Marathi**: वारकरी; Pronunciation: [va:rkəri:]; Meaning: 'The one who performs the [Wari](#)') is a [sampradaya](#) (religious movement) within the [bhakti](#) spiritual tradition of [Hinduism](#), geographically associated with the Indian state of [Maharashtra](#). Warkaris worship Vitthal (also known as [Vithoba](#)), the presiding deity of [Pandharpur](#), regarded as a form of [Krishna](#). Saints and [gurus](#) of the [bhakti movement](#) associated with the Warkaris include [Dnyaneshwar](#), [Namdev](#), [Chokhamela](#), [Eknath](#), and [Tukaram](#), [Gadge Maharaj](#) all of whom are accorded the title of [Sant](#).¹

The Warkari tradition has been part of Hindu culture in Maharashtra since the thirteenth-century CE, when it formed as a panth (community of people with shared spiritual beliefs and practices) during the [Bhakti movement](#). Warkaris recognise around fifty poet-saints ([sants](#)) whose works over a period of 500 years were documented in an eighteenth-century [hagiography](#) by [Mahipati](#). The Warkari tradition regards these sants to have a common spiritual line of descent

The Warkari movement includes the worship of Vithoba and a duty-based approach towards life emphasising moral behavior and strict avoidance of [alcohol](#) and [tobacco](#), the adoption of [sattvic diet](#), a modified [lacto-](#)

[vegetarian](#) diet that excludes onion and garlic and fasting on [Ekadashi](#) day (twice a month), self-restraint ([celibacy](#)) during [student](#) life, equality and humanity for all rejecting discrimination based on the [caste system](#) or wealth, the reading of [Hindu texts](#), the recitation of the [Haripath](#) every day and the regular practice of [bhajan](#) and [kirtan](#). The Warkaris wear tulashi-mala, a [rosary](#) made from the wood of the sacred [Tulsi](#) ([Ocimum sanctum](#) L.) plant. The Warkari men may be known by their three upright brow lines, a black between two white gopichandan or white clay and sandal-paste lines which is also popular with other Vaishnavite devotees.^[5] Warkaris look upon God as the Ultimate Truth and ascertained grades of values in social life but accept ultimate equality among men. Warkaris bow in front of each other because "everybody is Brahma" and stressed individual sacrifice, forgiveness, simplicity, peaceful co-existence, compassion, non-violence, love and humility in social life.^[6] The Warkari poet-saints are known for their devotional lyrics, the [abhang](#), dedicated to Vithoba and composed in [Marathi](#). Other devotional literature includes the Kannada hymns of the Haridasa, and Marathi versions of the generic [aarti](#) songs associated with rituals of offering light to the deity. Notable saints and [gurus](#) of the Warkaris include [Jñāneśvar](#), [Namdev](#), [Chokhamela](#), [Eknath](#), and [Tukaram](#), all of whom are accorded the title of [Sant](#).

CONCLUSION

Warkari people undertake an annual pilgrimage called wari, to Pandharpur, gathering there on Ekadashi (the 11th day) of the Hindu lunar calendar month of Ashadha, corresponding to a date falling sometime between late June to July in the Gregorian calendar. Pilgrims carry Palkhi of the saints from their places of Samadhi (Enlightenment or "spiritual birth"). The tradition of carrying the paduka (sandals) of the saints in a Palkhi was started by the youngest son of Tukaram, Narayan Maharaj, in 1685. Further changes were brought to the pilgrimage by descendants of Tukaram in the 1820s and by Haibatrababa, a courtier of the Scindias and devotee of Dnyaneshwar.

Devotees of Vitthal were holding pilgrimages prior to the 14th century. In the present day, about 40 palkhis and their devotees from all over Maharashtra do so. Another pilgrimage is celebrated on the Ekadashi of the month of Kartika, which falls in November of the Gregorian Calendar. Events such as Ringan and Dhava are held during the pilgrimage. During the Ringan, an unmounted sacred horse called Maulincha Ashva, who is believed to be the soul of the saint whose idol is being carried in the litter, runs through the rows of pilgrims, who try catching the dust particles kicked off and smear their head with the same. Dhava is another kind of race where everyone wins and it is held to commemorate the manner in which Tukaram first saw the temple at Pandharpur and started running in sheer exhilaration.

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