

THE MANY VOICES OF THE MAINSTREAM:
PANDURANG AND VITTHAL IN SHRIPUR MAHATMYA

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This article discusses how the fissures in a tradition participate in its upholding. A 20th century text largely unfamiliar to Maharashtrian audiences, the Shripur Mahatmya (Shripur being a name for Shrigonda), claims that Panduranga and Vitthal are two different deities. It locates the former to Shripura and the latter to Pandharpur – the centre of Varkaris, the mainstream Maharashtrian devotional tradition. The article argues that such an unusual claim, as locating the most popular deity of Maharashtrians to a different town, not only complicates the claims of Varkari tradition but also creates opportunities for the locals to be Varkaris, as well as Shrigondekars, on their own specific terms.

Key words: tradition, Shrigonda, Shripur, Vitthal, Pandurang, mahatmya

Introduction: Varkaris and the Tradition

Passing something on requires choice. That choice seldom happens in a vacuum. Whether it is economic, social or cultural capital; material or natural advantages and constraints; or various demands and expectations from those on the receiving end, passing something on is rarely an act devoid of goals conditioned by decision-making. Therefore, discussing tradition as a social fact, regardless of its nature, antiquity, or internal diversity, involves greater attention to the processes of transmission. Or perhaps, to the very point where new learning starts. This is not a novel statement. Ever since Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) pointed to how the past is rendered in a new fashion – borrowing from acts long gone, claiming continuity, yet inventing the old in an unprecedented manner – historians,

anthropologists, or sociologists have been careful to wrap traditions in antiquarian clothing. In the South Asian context, Saberwal and Varma (2005), while referring to the “recreation of social arrangements” clothed “traditions in motion” and triangulated them through interactions of “idea, institution and experience” (pp. 1-9). Indeed, even if people of the past were creative enough to work with the residues of the past – whether material culture, texts, or orality formed into memories – people of the present seldom respond to such a heritage without the processes of refashioning and interaction. With the past, or with the present.

This article aims to illustrate how the refashioning of what is so often termed as tradition can be articulated in a way that respects the past and yet attempts to make it work for the future, in other words, makes choices. However, instead of looking at the interstices that hold together ideas and continuities within the history of institutionalisation and set conditions for experiencing any one facet of tradition, I aim to highlight its fissures, cracks, and complexities. Attending to these, despite their seemingly disruptive character, I would argue, helps us to understand how and why such fissures remain part of the whole, and why the old clothes may still hold together.

The Varkaris (*Vārkari*) of Western India, their followers as well as their opponents, have, since at least the 13th century, stood behind the formation of what one might today easily call one of the mainstream Maharashtrian¹ traditions. The meanings usually attached to the English word tradition² correspond to their Marathi cognates, *paramparā* and *sampradāy*. While the former refers more to the sequential process of handing down something such as instruction, skill, or lineage, the latter implies also a group, or network of groups that hand down and organise chosen ideas and practices. The Varkaris (and the Varkari sampradaya) are mainly known as followers of the god Vitthal and as seasonal pilgrims³ to the town of Pandharpur, where this god is said to have resided for eons (Deleury, 1960; Bahirat & Bhalerav, 1988). Vitthal is a peculiar form of Gopal-Krishna who, according to the myths, came to Pandharpur in search of his wife Rukmini. There, Krishna became mesmerised by the devotion of a certain Pundalik towards his parents (*mātāpitr̥bhakti*). Pundalik, occupied in the service of his parents, did not have time to attend to his divine guest, and tossed him a brick to stand on in the muddy ground (it was during the rainy season) and asked him to wait. This is why to this day Krishna is said to stand on a brick in Pandharpur (Novetzke, 2005;

¹ An Indian state created in 1960 on linguistic grounds and demographically dominated by Marathi-speakers.

² From the Latin *trāditiō* from *trādō* - to hand over, surrender, but also hand down.

³ Varkari in a narrow sense means one who carries out the seasonal pilgrimage to Pandharpur called *varī*.

Sand, 1992).⁴ As they walk in the months of Ashadh and Karttik,⁵ the Varkaris carry symbolic silver footprints of their saints – or more precisely, Sants.⁶ These Sants, apart from composing long religious treatises,⁷ are credited with the composition of thousands of short Marathi songs, dedicated mainly to Pandharpur, Vitthal-Krishna and Pundalik, which are sung during the pilgrimage or devotional gatherings. These songs in poetic language articulate the Varkari philosophy of devotion (*bhakti*) and a monist (*advaita*) approach to God, criticism of societal ills, and often refer to the lives and deeds of other Sants.

Understanding the Varkaris solely in religious terms, however, overlooks how what they pass on interacts with what is around and oscillates at the crossroads of the devotional, literary, cultural and political. Indeed, the Varkaris and their traditions can hardly be divorced from their role as a symbol of Maharashtra—its ethnicity, history, learning, philosophy, struggles for equality in society, and the quotidian experience of the country (cf. Karve, 1988; Glushkova, 2021; Keune 2021). The Varkaris and their tradition, therefore, can also be understood in a broader manner, encompassing all those who enjoy and share the Sants' literature and stories, draw inspiration from the Sants' ideas, honour their moral and courage in fighting against caste hierarchies, adopt their simplicity of lifestyle; and ultimately also all those who come to see, greet and support (often economically) not only the pilgrims on their way to the holy town of Pandharpur, but also the educational and social activities of Varkaris.

When describing the Varkari sampraday Jon Keune and Christian Novetzke (2011) highlight the sampraday's decentralised character (pp. 617-619) formed through various subtraditions, often centred around different leaders (*mahārāj*). In another article, Keune (2015) observes that "It is impossible to identify a single geographic centre or spiritual lineage that represents the tradition as a whole [...] the Varkaris continued through the centuries without an institutional structure or authoritative body" (pp. 230, 236). This perhaps explains why their overwhelming presence in Marathi-speaking regions is easy to recognise but difficult to define. The formation of the sampraday, as we know it today – represented by pilgrims, their palanquins, old and new songs, books, and pilgrim-groups (*dindī*) that vir-

⁴ The folk etymology connects the name Vitthal with the Marathi word *vīṭ* - brick

⁵ These months of Indian Shaka calendar correspond to the end of the sowing (i.e. rainy) and harvesting seasons and link Varkari devotional activities to the larger agricultural cycle.

⁶ Another problematic term that renders the meaning of a good being, good man, or somebody beneficial to others, therefore respected and worshipped, which makes the word close to the English 'saint'.

⁷ The most popular are Sant Jnanadev's late 13th century commentary on Bhagavad Gita, known colloquially as Jnaneshvari and Sant Eknath's commentary on the 11th skanda of the Bhagavata Purana, known as the Eknathi Bhagvat.

tually lock down Maharashtra for the period of their travel to Pandharpur from various Maharashtrian destinations – coalesced by sometime in the 17th century (Keune & Novetzke, 2011, *Ibid.*). Later, in the era when people's collectivity was redefined in ethnic and national terms, the public understanding of the sampraday also gained a political impetus, as illustrated by M. G. Ranade's (1900) instrumentalisation of Varkari Sants in explaining the rise of the Marathas (pp. 143–172). The Sants, being often poets, also became important vehicles in defining Marathi literariness (*sārasvat*), as recently discussed by Prachi Deshpande (2023).

Complicating the Tradition

Historicisation,⁸ when combined with the notion of subtradition or subgroup, allows us to see complexities – cracks in narratives, dynamics between the oral and the textual, forgotten processes of formation of collective identity, altered practices, and so forth – within what is generally and somewhat straightforwardly understood as mainstream. These complexities create specific, locally conditioned environments and work within networks of relationships, discourses, and practices through which negotiation of different voices is articulated and the so-called mainstream parampara/tradition is re-created and localised. Afsar Mohammad (2013) terms this whole process of making the wider tradition local “localisation”. Similarly, the Varkaris' mainstream narrative about Krishna/Vitthal and Pundalik, accompanied by seasonal pilgrimage and practices of devotional gatherings, when complicated and revised locally, stands as another example of localisation. This article, therefore, is an attempt to highlight such complexities, or fissures, within a tradition, to give space to alternative voices, and to show that what is imagined as a tradition is hardly conceivable without the parts that seemingly do not fit within its mainstream narrative and practice. In a way, identifying and understanding these parts before joining them, and seeing how they map on to the traditional and mainstream narrative and practice, may also serve as a pathway to reassembling the tradition (cf. Latour, 2005). I will mainly concern myself with the textual claims that represent these complexities and partly with their practical reception in the present and attempt to contextualise them through ethnographic observations.⁹

Perhaps the best-known example that complicates a simplified, popular understanding of the Varkari tradition is Vitthal's appearance in Pandharpur, further

⁸ For more on how to historicise Varkaris, see Keune (2015). By far the most comprehensive account that analyses the rise of the popularity of the Varkari Vitthal is Dhere (1984/2011).

⁹ All the observations and claims related to current affairs in Shrigonda therefore come from my repeated fieldwork in the town and discussions with the people from Shrigonda.

complicated by sectarian considerations. Although the story of Krishna's coming to Pandharpur is mentioned in Puranas,¹⁰ Ramachandra Dhere (2011) and Eric Sand (1992) have showed considerable textual variations in the Puranic accounts. Moreover, Deleury (1960) noted that the name Vitthal, which does not appear in any of the Puranic materials, first enters "Varkari" discourse in an inscription of Bhillama Yadava from the late 12th century, discovered in Pandharpur (pp. 193-195). The inscription also for the first time testifies to the existence of Vitthal's devotees, who today would be seen as Varkaris. There are numerous other complexities, too many to examine here in greater detail: Vitthal as a deity of Deccan pastoralists; Vitthal as a deity from Karnataka (*Kāṇada Viṭṭhal*); other inscriptions related to Pandharpur and its deity; the figure of Pundalik/Pundarik pre-dating his Varkari appropriation; the Shaivite facet of both Vitthal and Pundalik and their Vaishnavisation; the role of the mother goddess(es) in Vitthal's cult and so forth. As vividly analysed by Ramachandra Dhere (2011), the several historical threads that converge in the understanding of today's Vitthal and connect Varkaris with their Vaishnava devotion, stories and monist philosophy, are just one part of this history, albeit the one which has publicly prevailed.

As is usual with Hindu gods, devotees give them several names that reflect their attitude towards the deity or the deity's specific character. Vitthal is no exception. He has been affectionately called Vithoba, Vithu, or referred to as Mauli (mother) or Vithai (mother Vitthal), emphasising his care for his devotees like that of a mother for her children. One of the most popular names by which Vitthal is known is Pandurang. Read as the one of white (*pāṇḍu*) colour (*raṅga*) as opposed to Krishna's proverbial darkness,¹¹ this name is behind yet another facet of the complexities under review. Drawing on inscriptional and copper-plate records, several authors have noted that the name Pandurang and its cognates¹² served as a name for the current town of Pandharpur, and the latter is most probably a derivation of the former (Bhandarkar, 1913, pp. 88-90; Kane, 1953, p. 717; Dhere, 1984/2011). It seems that the name represented the town's chief deity and from the 14th century onwards, started to appear increasingly in the poetry of Sants as an alternative name for Vitthal.

The sectarian shifts between Shaivas and Vaishnavas also seem to have played a role, since Pandurang may earlier have been a name for Shiva (Bhandarkar, 1913, p. 88; Dhere, 1984/2011). Jason Schwartz (2023) describes the process of the complex religious change of the early medieval tantric shaiva and shakta landscape

¹⁰ Padma, Skanda and Vishnu Puranas (Dhere, 1984/2011, p. 8).

¹¹ Dhere (1984/2011), also suggests that "In the view of the saints, Vitthal is Gopal Krishna, Krishna the cowherd, and he has the name 'Pandurang' because he became dusty all over from the dust raised by the hooves of the cows"(p. 27).

¹² Including Pundarika and Paundarika kshetra, which stand for the Sanskrit name for Pundalik and the area of his activities.

of the Deccan,¹³ populated by the cult of Shiva-Bhairava and his goddesses, that ends in the increasing popularity of Vaishnava religious figures and philosophy. One of the triggers of this process was a change in patronage during the last days of the Yadava dynasty, which held sway over the territory roughly corresponding to today's Maharashtra. A Yadava minister, and powerful Brahman, Hemadpant (second half of the 13th century),¹⁴ almost a cultural hero of today's upper-caste Maharashtrians, openly supported Vaishnavas and their learned Brahmins (Schwartz, 2023, p. 1860 and Chapters 8 to 11). Such historicisation also explains the well-known puzzles of why Pundalik's temple is Shaiva in appearance, or why Vitthal is said to carry Shiva on his crown and perhaps suggests why the Varkari tradition sanitised the roles of mother goddesses by stripping away their transgressive and terrifying aspects. Therefore, it is no accident that Vaishnava Varkari Sants, in some of their poem-songs, saw Vitthal and Pandurang as the union between Vishnu and Shiva as Harihara (Dhere, 1984/2011, on Harihara p. 27, on goddesses Chapter 12).

Apparently, the origin of Vitthal is a problem in itself. However, the originality of his followers is perhaps an even greater problem. The fissures in the tradition resurface whether in the present or the past. In fact, they seem to be the very threads of memory and forgetting with which the current mainstream narrative of Varkari tradition has been woven. After all, despite traditions holding to the claims of passing on what their followers consider as the core of their ideas and practices, traditions also thrive on changes. I would like to demonstrate a recent reinterpretation of who is Vitthal and what Pandurang means, based on a text from the 20th century. Besides Pandharpur, it also localises Vitthal to a different town and, at the same time, it explains this novel territorial and etymological shift that suits even the town's Varkaris who attend the biannual pilgrimage. How is this possible?

Making the Town Famous

Shripur Mahatmya¹⁵ is a text written by Eknath Joshi sometime in the late 1950s or early 1960s. Its published version (Joshi, 2004), based on a currently dilapidated manuscript, does not contain the colophon; hence, in determining the age of the text I rely solely on the memory of Joshi's granddaughter and publisher, Shila

¹³ A wider region of which Marathi-speaking areas form a considerable part.

¹⁴ For an example of Marathi folklore that posits Hemadpant as an ascetic who opposes a tantrika-magician, see Green (2005). On the cultural role of Hemadpant in Maharashtra, see Guha (2010).

¹⁵ Henceforth the SPM.

Joshi/Saraf.¹⁶ The author also mentions that in the ashram of the Kene family, some of whose members are currently considered as Sants and yogis, there existed yet another manuscript of the text, but it was lost. Therefore, in his writing, Eknath Joshi (2004) relies on memory and enquiries from local people (11:95, 20:19-24, 61). The SPM is a modern Marathi *māhātmya* – an account that generally glorifies a place, deity, an important person, conduct, mantra, or any other praiseworthy matter.¹⁷ In fact, the above-mentioned Puranic stories on Krishna's arrival in Pandharpur are all called Pandurang mahatmyas. More particularly, this text has been described as *sthalamāhātmya*, *sthalapurāṇa*, *kṣetramāhātmya*, or *sthānapoṭhī* (Bale, 2004; Gavli, 2015; Sahasrabuddhe, 2019) – an account glorifying a specific place, in this case, the Maharashtrian town of Shrigonda (in Ahilyanagar, formerly Ahmadnagar, district). Even though it has already been published two-times,¹⁸ the Shripur Mahatmya still remains largely unknown to the wider Maharashtrian public. However, the need for republishing the text, as well as the first edition being sold out, suggests that at least in Shrigonda, the text has found its readership. Its twenty chapters offer a vivid narration about the appearance of Pandurang in Shripur – the name Joshi employs for Shrigonda – while simultaneously endorsing the antiquity and greatness of the town and its Sants. In a general sense, the text does not significantly differ from other works of this genre. What makes it special is its novel aetiological claims regarding Pandurang/Vitthal, Maharashtrians' most beloved deity.

In the Marathi records, Shrigonda¹⁹ is first mentioned in 17th and 18th century works called *bakhars*. These texts narrate the political rise of the Marathas, their king Shivaji, and particularly connect the town with Maloji Bhosle, Shivaji's grandfather (Bendre, 2013, pp. 65-103; Duff, 1863, p. 67).²⁰ Local 18th and

¹⁶ I wish at this point to express my gratitude to Mrs. Saraf as well as to her brother Mr. Krishna Joshi and Profs. Balasaheb Bale and Anil Sahasrabuddhe, without whose help this article could not have been written. My gratitude also goes to Ashok Alekar and his son Svarup, who helped me to contact the Joshis and during my research in Shrigonda.

¹⁷ For a brief overview of this genre in Sanskrit literature, from which it has been adopted in Marathi writings, see Gonda (1977, pp. 271-286), or Wiig (1981).

¹⁸ In addition to the original publication, Shripur Mahatmya has been republished as a part of Anil Sahasrabuddhe's Shodha Pandurangaca (2019).

¹⁹ Altered with Cambhargonda (Chumargoondē in Duff), another name of the town to the history of which I won't attend in this article. Yet another name connected with Shrigonda's history is Pande Pedgav.

²⁰ Since Bendre's publication (1957) of the alleged donation of land by Maloji Bhosle to Sheikh Muhammadbaba Shrigondekar (*caknāmā*) in 1595/6, many authors accept the donation as authentic, which would make it the oldest written document from Shrigonda. However, it is by no means certain that the *caknāmā* can be dated so early (e.g. it lacks the government seal, displays inconsistency in dating, uses pen not known for this period, or there is absolute silence about the donation from bakhars and other important authori-

19th century records, as well as British government gazetteers, document that the town's affairs were, until the creation of the modern Indian Republic, largely controlled by Shindes (Scindia), a powerful Maratha family ruling from Gwalior, whose ancestors held fiefs in the region prior to their establishment in North India.²¹ However, there is definitely a deeper past to Shrigonda, for which, at least to my knowledge, written records are still lacking. It is evident from the old temples, *maths*, and general architectural and artefactual heritage still visible at the place (for more details, see Gavli, 2015). This absence of readily available knowledge about this evidently old town is the motivation behind Joshi's mahatmya. In fact, calling Shrigonda Shripur has a precedent: an inscription from Shrigonda's Sakshi Vinayak temple, dated to 1867, which contains a reference to Shripur as a place of Panduranga. Strangely, Joshi did not refer to it in his work.

Engrossed in the study of old Brahmanic lore of Puranas and Shastras (Joshi/Saraf, 2019, pp. 217, 219), Eknath Joshi tried to prove the antiquity of the town by utilising an old image (*mūrti*) of Shrigonda's Pandurang, found today in the temple bearing the identical name. Shrigonda shelters five old temples (Gavli, 2015, p. 204).²² All of them have been popularly called *hemāḍpantī*,²³ which is an adjective attached to the temples from the late Yadava era and refers to the famous minister mentioned above. However, none of these temples contains a legible inscription²⁴ that would help in their dating or precise identification. The temples best preserved and connected to the SPM, are currently known as Lakshmi and Pandurang temples. In the 19th century, they were known as temples of Rakhumai²⁵ and Vithoba (cf. Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, Ibid.). This change in names

ties). What is definitely an original, is an Inam Commission document (19th century) and therefore I prefer dating of the written documents on Shrigonda to start with bakhars until any new evidence is found. I am grateful to Sumit Guha for the suggestion of rereading the historicity of the *caṅnāmā*.

²¹ Sanads issued by Daulatray, Jankoji and Jayaji Shinde (the family archive of Riyaz Sheikh, a descendant of Sheikh Muhammadbaba. I am grateful to Mr. Sheikh for sharing these documents with me) (Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, 1884, pp. 739-740; Gavli, 2015, pp. 192-194).

²² Lakshmi and Pandurang temples, Hatkeshwar, Lakshmi-Narayan temple and Ganesh temple on the Pedgav road.

²³ However, the art historian Pushkar Sohoni, and an expert on medieval Deccani architecture, suggests that both temples cannot be older than 14th–15th centuries, so definitely not from Hemadpant's times. Rather, according to Sohoni, they seem to represent smaller temples built by Hindu feudatories under early Bahmani Sultans (P. Sohoni, personal communication, 19 July 2025).

²⁴ Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency mentions an inscription at the doorstep of Vithoba/Pandurang's temple. This inscription, however, is currently not visible and I was not able to find any other reference to it.

²⁵ Another name for Vitthal's consort Rukmini.

of the deities is directly related to Joshi's claims in the SPM: "Now (let me disclose) the reason for writing this book. People forgot that Shripur is the original dwelling place of Pandurang"²⁶ (1:15). Moreover, he wrote this with the authority of the temples' custodian, because according to his granddaughter, maintenance of the Lakshmi and Pandurang temples and performance of rituals there traditionally belong to the Joshi family (Joshi/Saraf, 2019, pp. 217-218).

Pandurang of Shripur

The SPM reclaims the mythic past for its own purpose of establishing and defending Pandurang's presence in the town. Famous Pandharpur might have its own past, but Shripur has quite another! Right within the classic mahatmya rhetoric, the text starts in an unspecified time in Vaikuntha, the residence of Vishnu and Lakshmi. Vishnu knows that a great devotee of his (*bhakta*) will be born into the world and sends Lakshmi to prepare a place for the devotee. She sets out and finds a suitable place slightly inland, near the confluence of the rivers Bhima and Sarasvati. She makes that place her residence, and soon the fame of Lakshmi attracts devotees and gives the place a name: Shripur.²⁷ Meanwhile, a certain Pandu is born into a Brahman family, who is said to have been a yogi in his previous life and is naturally drawn to Krishna (Vishnu), rather than to the common life of full of doubts and miseries (3:5-16). After studying the scriptures and an early wedding, he leaves his family and children in search of a guru, whom he finds in sage Galav (3:25, 4:17-18).²⁸ Pandu, eager to meet Krishna and attain divine knowledge (*brahmajñāna*, 3:35), is instructed by his guru to go and perform austerities at a place called Shripur, which would be particularly suitable for this purpose.

Reclaiming the mythic past, however, does not prevent one from organising it. In Joshi's text, Pandu is said to be born at the beginning of Kaliyuga, slightly before Krishna appeared in Pandharpur (3:3-5, 9:36-46). He follows his guru's advice and builds his ashram in Shripura, convinced that his desire to meet Krishna will be fulfilled (5:37-38). In contrast to the narrative related to Pandharpur, where it is Pundalik's devotion to his parents (*mātāpitṛbhakti*) that attracts Krishna, Joshi decisively makes Pandu both a yogi and a devotee (*bhakta*). It is his devotion, strengthened by austerity, that not only attracts Krishna (or Bhagvan) to Pandu, but rather compels Krishna to come to meet his devotee and even remain with him.

²⁶ आता ग्रंथासी कारण | पांडुरंग देव त्याचे निवासस्थान | श्रीपूर क्षेत्र गेले लोकमनातून | मूळपीठ ते ॥
All translations from the SPM are mine.

²⁷ Shri, literally noble, is another name of Lakshmi in Hindu lore.

²⁸ This is most probably Vishvamitra's disciple Galav, mentioned in the Mahabharata.

He will be called Pandu, will honor me and will practice austerities as ordered by his guru. Doing austerities, he will become perfect. He will do it all because he wants to meet me. Therefore, I will have to appear there. And not just that! Because of his wish I will have to stay there! (Joshi, 2004, 1:24-26)²⁹

Although there exist representations of Pandu's rival figure, Pundalik, as an ascetic (Sand, 1992, pp. 142-143; Dhere, 1984/2011, pp. 144, 153, 155, 161 and passim), he has been remembered by the Varkaris more as one who, after his initial failures, becomes devoted to his own parents and makes Krishna wait for him. The Pandu of the SPM has been clearly projected as one in whom ascetic practices, achieved through yoga, unify with bhakti, both in a way prescribed by the Shastras (*śāstrarīti*).

Greeting the sun, worshipping Lakshmi in sixteen ways, next turning his face to the East, sitting on a seat made from deer skin and meditating with concentration. Assuming padmāsana or baddhāsana, remembering the guru's feet, focusing his eyes on the tip of the nose, he meditated on Kṛṣṇa. Making his mind single-pointed by restraining the breath with Kṛṣṇa's name on his lips. In this manner he passed time in meditation [...] Pandu remained in a state of samādhi for many further days. (Joshi, 2004, 6:10-12, 29)³⁰

The sthalamahatmya genre sufficiently constrained the author from making further diversions into themes of bhakti and yoga, or reflections on the relationship between austerity and devotion, control over the body-mind continuum, achieved powers, and divine power. Rather, his Brahmanic learning inclined him to subscribe to the conventions of the genre and follow the goal of making Pandurang and Shripur well-known. Therefore, the few references to Pandu describing details of his austerities (3:45-46, 4: 32, 6:6-29) cannot themselves account for a developed narrative about the yogi and yoga. However, a review of textual images such as these must consider the multifarious history of understanding yogis and yoga that transpire in Joshi's rhetoric strategy. Several authors have recently shown the need for a nuanced understanding of what texts featuring yogic and bhakti themes actually convey: what genre they follow, what kind of yoga is being

²⁹ तो पांडु नाम धरून | करील माझे अर्चन | गुरुवचनावरून | करील तप ॥ त्या तपे करून | तो होईल सिद्धपुर्ण | त्या तपात मदभेटीची इच्छा म्हणून | मला प्रगटावे लागेल तेथे ॥ इतकेच नव्हे त्याच्या इच्छेवरून | मला राहणे पडेल म्हणून | [...]

³⁰ सूर्य नमस्कार | लक्ष्मीपूजा षोडशोपचार | पुढे पुर्वभिमुख मृगासनावर | बसून ध्यानधारणा ॥ पद्मासन की बद्धासन | घालून सदगुरूचे पदस्मरण | पुढे नासिकाग्र दृष्टी ठेवून | ध्यान कृष्णाचे ॥ श्वास निरोधून एकाग्रचित्त | कृष्ण नाम कंठात | ऐशारीती नियमित | काळ ध्यानधारणा ॥ [...] पुढे दिवसा-दिवसाची ही | ध्यान समाधी स्थिर राहिली...

addressed, and how all this maps on to the remembered and followed practices espoused by different communities and important individuals (cf. Kiehnle, 1997; Burchett, 2019; Horstmann, 2021). The opposition to yoga by bhakti authors was much more directed towards *haṭhayoga*, which seeks powers (*siddhi*), utilises tantric body imagery, employs control-invoking mantra practices and relies on rigorous physical exercises aimed at mastering processes in and around the body to make it immortal (Burchett, 2012; Pauwels, 2010; Horstmann 2021).

This debate, however, is too complex to pursue here. It will suffice to say that in the Maharashtrian context, the debate between devotional (or adoration-oriented) and power-seeking aspects of religion and their mutual intermingling to varying degrees has existed for centuries. Varkaris and their Sants have thoroughly engaged with it, notably Jnanadev, Eknath, or Shrigonda's own Sheikh Muhammad. All three are today considered as Sants of Varkaris. Therefore, the author of the SPM, in his approach of seeing the practice and philosophy of devotion firmly connected with yoga, draws on a centuries-old discourse. In fact, it is more the philosophy of so called *advaita-bhakti* (monist devotion) – a term coined by Ramacandra D. Ranade (1933) – that informs Joshi's approach, rather than engagement with actual practices. It also provides him with arguments for accommodating Pandurang to Shripur and yet keeping Pandurang within the orbit of the Varkari sampraday. In other words, applying the philosophy of the Varkaris and their Sants allows Joshi to localise the broader Varkari tradition through a fissure in its main narrative.

After an intense meditation, from which he was awakened by none other than Lakshmi, Krishna appeared in front of Pandu in the form he had been meditating on, that of an eight-year-old cowherd boy, the very form that has been revered by Varkaris over centuries (Joshi, 2004, 6:52, cf. Dhere, 1984/2011: 5-6, 27 and passim). Pandu, in Joshi's words, speaks the language of non-dualism and addresses his Lord.

Moving or still, all the universe is not different from you. Making this conviction firm in mind creates reality. What I wanted to ask for, all that disappeared. You are the whole universe, see there is no other. Me and you are gone, mine and yours, duality, pairs, have been consumed. No desire has been left there. (Joshi, 2004, 6:58-60)³¹

Such a preamble serves to bring out the main point and introduce the concept of Pandurang. For Pandurang, Joshi would claim, is indeed no different from both Pandu and Krishna. Pandurang symbolises the intrinsic nature of divinity and

³¹ चराचर विश्व सर्वही । तुझ्याहून भिन्न नाही । ऐसा दृढ निश्चय बुद्धी घेई । तेणे ऐसे झाले ॥ मागावे जे वाटले होते । ते आटले सर्व ते । विश्वभर ऐसा तू ते । अद्वैत पाहे ॥ मी आणि तू गेले । तुझे माझे गेले । द्वैत द्वंद्व आटले । तेथे नुरले मागणे ॥

therefore – using the typical logic of Varkari Sants, who attempted to transcend the idiosyncratic scholastic division of divine forms into *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* (with or without qualities), and accordingly played with the meanings of singularity and duality – can take on form. A kind of form and name³² that would survive for eons, even if forgotten. Pandu and his Lord merged³³ to form an image (*mūrti*), which still stands in Pandurang’s temple in Shrigonda, and which the Varkaris would recognise. Moreover, the words *antaraṅ* (inner nature) and *raṅ* (deeply felt emotion), offered Joshi a chance to elucidate his intended meaning through a creative play on words while constructing a novel etymology of Pandurang, yet one recognisable to Varkaris.

[Pandu asking Krishna] “Take such a name, so that people would say you descended because of me, and that name would become famous.”³⁴ Having been asked for such a boon, Bhagvān said, “Let it happen,” dispersed all his lustre, and turned himself into stone [...] “We³⁵ never comprehended that such is your inner self! Now it has all come to light, what a supreme bhakta you are!” The permanent hue of Pāṇḍu, in which he is always lost – this is the meaning of the god’s name Pāṇḍuraṅga. Although the image is of Govinda, Pāṇḍuraṅga’s name will be (known) everywhere. Its special sign is that on his head there is Śiva. In this manner, Pāṇḍu, accumulating greatness, left the ṛṣis, the people, and the world. (Joshi, 2004, 6:70-71, 79-82)³⁶

Joshi’s creativity does not end with localising the Varkaris’ main deity to Shri-pur. His effort is more a reaction to the existing presence of both Pandu’s and Lakshmi’s temples and murtis in the town, rather than a creation of a novel explanation without any real material basis for his claims. Paraphrasing Latour,³⁷ it

³² Again, this is a very Indic play with the concepts of name and form (*nāma* and *rūpa*).

³³ पांडु मात्र देवरूपात | विलीन होऊन राहिला विदेहात | However, Pāṇḍu merged with God’s form and remained bodiless (Joshi, 2004, 9:29).

³⁴ The SPM contains several intertextual connections with the Puranic stories (cf. Dhere, 1984/2011, p. 142).

³⁵ Seeing Pandu immersed in a lengthy meditation a crowd of his devotees and rishis assembled in Shripur. It is they who speak.

³⁶ माझे नाव सर्वामुखी राहील | ऐसेच करी सर्वकाळ | माज्यासाठी अवतरलास लोक म्हणतील | ऐसे नाव धरी || ऐसे मागता वरदान | एवमस्तू म्हणाले भगवान | सर्व तेज आवरून | शिलारूप झाला || [...] तुझे अंतरंग ऐसे हे | आम्हा कदाच कळले न हे | आता उमगले सर्व हे | भक्तिवान तू कैसा || पांडूचा नित्य रंग | पांडु ज्या रूपात नित्य दंग | ऐशा अर्थी पांडुरंग | नाम देवा || जरी गोविंद मूर्ती ही | तरी नाम पांडुरंग सर्वत्र होई | याची विशेष खूण ही | मुगुटावरी शिव हे || ऐशारिती ऋषीकडून | सर्व जनाकडून | धन्यत्व जोडून | पांडु लोकातीत झाला ||

³⁷ I am aware that in strictly ontological terms this paraphrase will not fit Latour’s design, yet will risk its employment here.

is as if divinity, through its very material presence, struck back at the tradition's singularity and called for a more open reconsideration of how tradition is made up (cf. Latour, 2000, 2005). This provides Joshi with a strong argumentative position, and he did not hesitate to seize the opportunity. The temples and murtis in the town invite the idea of tangible history, and the sthalamahatmya genre feeds on the material realities that are to be experienced in the locations chosen for eulogy. As already highlighted by Jan Gonda (1977), most mahatmyas seek to trace their origin to Puranic lore, even if this might prove difficult to historicise (p. 277; cf. Buchholz, 2022).

Classically, Joshi refers to the Skanda Purana to justify the claims that the Purana supplies evidence for the uncommon Pandurang in Shripur; it is unclear whether and from which version of the Skanda Purana. In our context, however, it is more important to heed the reliance on the Purana rather than the actual evidence.³⁸ Briefly, answering a rishi's inquiry about which among all places in India is the best (*sarvottama kṣetra koṇṭe bhārtāt?*, 8:9),³⁹ where one can encounter the greatest deities and visit all places of pilgrimage (*jethe sarva tīrthācā vās, utkruṣṭ devatāncā nivās*, 8:11),⁴⁰ Skanda replies (and Joshi explains with his commentary) that a certain Pandu Sharma, a great bhakta doing austerities in Shripur on the banks of the Sarasvati River, will attract the coming of God there, which in turn will attract other deities (8:70-71 and passim). Thus, a few shlokas from a Pan-Indic authoritative text provide Eknath Joshi with certainty and support (*ādhār*) that his understanding of who Pandurang from the temple under his custodianship is, is correct.

But that is not all. Making Shripur the *sarvottama kṣetra* allows bridging the book with its other half, where the greatness of the town is narrated through specific examples. Before that, however, it was important to establish that Pandurang and Vitthal are different and yet the same. In Chapter 9, almost in the style of a historian, Joshi explains the reasons why Pandurang became a name of Vitthal. He claims that the time period of Panduranga and Pundalik was roughly the same, with only a slight difference. Pandurang was the first avatar in the Kaliyuga but was forgotten due to the vile influence of the era. Since people knew that he was Krishna, Govinda, Keshava, Vishnu – the new avatar of Vishnu – Vitthal, also

³⁸ There is no space to attend here in detail to all the problems that a text like the Skanda Purana and its appropriation by the author involves (e.g. that the purana mentions Shrigonda and Cambhargonda (shloka no. 13 quoted in the 7th adhyay of the SPM). For a brief overview in the context of sthalamahatmyas, see Buchholz, 2022, p. 12.

³⁹ I am quoting from Joshi's Marathi commentary whereas the shlokas are in Sanskrit.

⁴⁰ The 12th chapter of the SPM details all the deities found in Shrigonda/Shripur today, from eight Ganeshas, and eight Bhairavas, twelve jyotirlingas, and nine goddesses, through numerous other deities, memorials (*samadhis*) of Sants up to the tombs of Muslim pirs and Parshvanath of Jains. Gods literally filled up the town (*devane nagar bharlele*, Joshi, 2004, 12:43).

came to be called by these names, including Pandurang. Moreover, historically, the more famous avatar, Vitthal of Pandharpur, received political patronage: *rājāśray*, literally “shelter of the king” (9:15-35, 20:18). This state of affairs, combined with the deterioration processes of Kaliyuga that made the rishis of Shripur leave the place for the Himalayas, is declared to be the main reason why the identity of both Panduranga and Shripura were forgotten. This reasoning is triumphantly followed in the next chapter by a lengthy explanation of the similarity and the difference between the two deities.

The god of Śrīpūra is not Viṭṭhal. He is Pāṇḍuraṅga in reality!
He appeared because of Pāṇḍu, in a form different from Viṭṭhal. (Joshi, 2004, 9:49)⁴¹

The forms are different, yet appear the same. Seeking the sameness, the difference is seen. By this, it becomes evident to all that difference turns into unity. (Joshi, 2004, 10:36)⁴²

In Lieu of a Conclusion: Varkaris, Shrigondekars, and How the Tradition Thrives

Similarly to the oldest references to the town, the earliest evidence connecting Shrigonda with the Varkaris relates to Sant Sheikh Muhammad (died circa 1660). His Marathi work Yogasangram (The Battle of Yoga),⁴³ the title of which reflects the theme of a warrior soul battling vices represented by ego (*ahamkāra*) and the deluded mind ruling over the senses and body, continues the thread of devotional thoughts found in the works of other famous Varkari Sants, namely Jnanadev and Eknath. Let alone that Yogasangram argues for devotion using Vaishnava rhetoric. This, coupled with the popularity of poem-songs attributed to the Sheikh – some of them dedicated to Vitthal – among the Varkaris, led to his recognition as a Varkari from as early as the 18th century.⁴⁴ Therefore, after establishing the presence

⁴¹ श्रीपूरीचा देव विठ्ठल नव्हे | तो सत्य पांडुरंग आहे | पांडुसाठी प्रगटला आहे | विठ्ठल रूपाहून वेगळ्या रूपे ||

⁴² भिन्नरूपे तरी साम्यत्व भासते | साम्यता शोधिता भिन्नत्व दिसते | यावरून भिन्नत्व ऐक्यत्व येते | प्रचित सर्वा ||

⁴³ Yogasangram (1645) was first published by Sitaram Wagle in 1889 and later several times republished, most recently by the Sheikh’s Vaishnava devotees (Mete, 2021).

⁴⁴ By far the best detailed information on the Sheikh is still Bendre (1957). For the inclusion of the Sheikh among other Varkari Sants, see Bhaktavijaya (Devle, 2002, 51:85-87, 52:87-119), written by Mahipati, who is acknowledged as the best authority on the lives of Varkari Sants among the Maharasthrian hagiographers.

of Pandurang, the Sheikh is the first Sant to whom a whole chapter is devoted in the SPM. After all, many would today claim that Sheikh Muhammad is the patron deity (*grāmadevatā*) of the town, and according to Joshi, the Sheikh's residence in Shripur is directly related to Pandurang's presence there (14:3-4). Over the centuries, the connection between the Sheikh's devotees and the Varkaris has only strengthened. In fact, for many Shrigondekars, there is no difference between the Sheikh's devotees and the Varkaris. On the contrary, they are primarily the ones who carry on the Varkari devotion in Shrigonda and its vicinity. A local procession carries the Sheikh's footprints to Jnanadev's Alandi, and an annual festival for the Sheikh, which has been documented from the late 18th century onwards and in which many Varkari performers and lay devotees participate, takes place. For the last three years, a new procession of the Sheikh's Varkaris walks from Shrigonda to Pandharpur⁴⁵ with ever-increasing participation. Finally, at least three other Varkari processions stop in Shrigonda to greet Sheikh Muhammad.⁴⁶

Thus, through the Saints who sang about Pandurang/Vitthal, the rest of the Shripur Mahatmya justifies that the Pandurang of Shripur should be counted among the deities of the Varkari sampradaya and Shripur itself among all-India sacred places. Indeed, Shripur is declared to be the land of Saints and great religious leaders (*sant-mahantās āśray bhūmī hī*),⁴⁷ who, according to the narrative, mostly came to Shripur from outside. As Pandurang sanctifies the place, so do the Saints. Whole chapters are dedicated to the most important of them among the Varkaris,⁴⁸ and their devotion to Pandurang has been illustrated through miraculous stories from their lives, presented as evidence of both their special powers⁴⁹ and their devotion. Moreover, the saints of Shripur provide a direct link to current times and participate in what may be safely called the Varkari parampara, passing on the heritage of revering Pandurang in a guru-disciple lineage. Beyond Sheikh Muhammad's followers, this can also be observed in the family of Prahlad Maharaj, whose descendants and disciples have actively participated in Varkari devotion (cf. Chapter 16 of the SPM). Two recent figures from Prahlad's family lineage,

⁴⁵ It is rather difficult to estimate the historical roots of the Sheikh's procession (*dinḍī*) in Shrigonda. But his descendants residing in Vahira village some 30 kms from Shrigonda claim to have been performing the pilgrimage to Pandharpur for as long as their family memory goes back.

⁴⁶ Two processions of the famous Varkari poet Tukaram's guru Babaji Caitanya come from Otur but take a different route and the procession of Tukaram's disciple Nilobaray Maharaj comes from Pimpalner (Lokhande, 2019, p. 301).

⁴⁷ This is quite a common rhetorical strategy, found also in the context of many other Maharashtrian localities.

⁴⁸ This does not mean that Shaiva Saints, Raul and Godhad, were omitted from the SPM.

⁴⁹ E.g. the Sheikh's contemporary Prahlad Maharaj is said to bring the dead child back to life (Joshi, 2004, 15: 43-45).

Tatya Maharaj and Bhushan Maharaj, are known as active Varkari leaders and kirtankars, with the latter still performing and leading a seasonal procession of Varkaris to Pandharpur (Lokhande, 2019, p. 300). Similarly, members of the Kene family, to whose possession the earliest manuscript of the SPM may be traced, were introduced in the SPM as participants in the sampraday. They are said to visit Pandharpur and associate with renowned people such as Sakhre Maharaj, whose collection of Varkari saint-poetry is perhaps the most well-known and widely used across Maharashtra (Chapters 17 and 18 of the SPM).

Apparently, there are many overlaps between Shrigonda's Varkaris and generic Varkaris as imagined in contemporary Maharashtra. These overlaps are further strengthened by the mutual dialogue between regional scholars writing on Shrigonda and Varkaris. On the one hand, even if these scholars are not practising Varkaris themselves, their writings exert a profound influence on the discourse regarding the old and localised Varkari tradition, ideas that are then espoused by devotees. On the other hand, the practices of these devotees, rooted in shared family and community memories, allow scholars a basis to speak on behalf of the living tradition. Mainly, by utilising the claims from the SPM, they furnish the discourse with ideas and examples to articulate the antiquity of Shrigonda. Eknath Joshi's suggestion that Shripur is like Kashi⁵⁰ is thus easily reinterpreted as Shripur being a Southern (Dakshina) Kashi.⁵¹ Furthermore, the presence of ancient idols of Pandurang and Lakshmi in the town's two old temples allows scholars to see Shripur as another Pandharpur (*prati*-Pandharpur, Gavli, 2015, p. 187, 189; cf. Sahasrabuddhe, 2019, pp. 118-160). In this context, Anne Feldhaus's (2003) observation that the popular Maharashtrian way of measuring the greatness of a place against the idealised Northern Indian place, involves both "a sense of inferiority and a kind of defiant pride" (p. 183) acquires yet another layer of meaning in the case of Pandharpur. Joshi's creation of a fissure within the Varkari tradition thus turns this rhetorical measuring into a very regional attempt to subscribe to and complicate the mainstream tradition for the purpose of acquiring a "good deal of the sanctity from the relationships with [distant] places widely acknowledged to be holy" (Feldhaus, 2003, p. 158).

One may, however, ask whether Varkaris from Shrigonda adopt the SPM's claims about Pandurang. The answer, again, is ambivalent. As currently the Shrigondian Varkaris and other local devotees gather at Shripur's Pandurang temple for devotional singing and on special occasions, the place unproblematically serves their

⁵⁰ Kashi is another name for Varanasi, one of the most ancient and most important Hindu pilgrimage sites in all India.

⁵¹ Anil Sahasrabuddhe gives the Varkari tradition yet another spin by pointing to the role of mother goddess (Radhabhav) within Shrigondian devotional landscape. Discussing it, however, would require another article. For many other Maharashtrian Dakshina Kashis, see Feldhaus (2003, p. 160).

needs. However, the classical image of Pandharpur's Vitthal appears ubiquitously in the visual materials shared among Shrigondian Varkaris, and their participation in the pilgrimage to Pandharpur betrays the fact that living within the fissure requires a great deal of negotiation and depends on when and why the SPM's claims that rely on the memory of the Shrigondian past are utilised.

As we use different clothing for different occasions, the SPM comes in handy when the othering of Shrigondekars within the tradition crosses an acceptable boundary. For instance, during the 2024 pilgrimage, the town's Varkaris were ridiculed for bringing the footprints of a Muslim to Pandharpur.⁵² However, the antiquity of the town and the Sheikh being a devotee of Pandurang, who belongs to both Pandharpur and Shrigonda, as stipulated by the SPM, serves to mitigate such othering but also to create another fissure in the tradition. After all, scholars who have written on the Sheikh and helped his tradition to find its place in the public discourse have drawn on the SPM in their writings. Another example is employing the SPM to postulate societal cohesion in Shrigonda, instead of highlighting caste differences, i.e. using the Brahman origin of its author as the sole interpretative tool. The SPM clearly problematises such a view with reference to the town's past and a particular quality of the town where all communities found their space. Shripur not only shelters important Hindu, Muslim, and Jain sacred places and Hindu gods, but also houses a diverse range of Sants, thus providing a sense of Shrigondian unity against those who would deem to doubt it. In Joshi's words (2004), "So independent are the Sants here that they did not stick with any sect!" (19:57)⁵³ Living the fissures in the tradition, then, indeed creates the difference through which a regional identity is built. Pandurang helps to achieve it even if not everybody, such as the Sheikh's devotees, accepts him as the patron deity of the town.

In conclusion, while Joshi, by writing the mahatmya, skillfully localised the broader Varkari tradition and created a fissure in its main narrative that translated into devotional practices slightly different from the mainstream, this localisation has taken on a life of its own quite without the direct involvement of the SPM. The mutual dialogue between devotees and scholars has also helped this process. The local embodiment of the supralocal deity, then, not only complicates mainstream Varkari beliefs but also creates opportunities for locals to be Varkaris, as well as Shrigondekars, on their own specific terms. These terms, it seems to me, corre-

⁵² Similarly, Varkari kirtankar Vasant Gadkar was accused by other Varkaris of distorting the traditionally accepted story that Sant Tukaram was taken to Vaikuntha (Vishnu's heaven) on a flower-cart and siding with those who claim he was murdered by his upper-caste opponents.

⁵³ येथे ऐसे संत झाले, तरी स्वतंत्र वृत्तीवाले, कोणत्या पंथाला चिकटले, ऐसे नाही. Open-mindedness and catering to the needs of all people from Shrigonda while disregarding caste is said to be another quality of Eknath Joshi (Joshi/Saraf, 2019, p. 220).

spond more closely to the building blocks of the tradition, which, as I have tried to show, requires reassembling before making any generalised claims about it. One wonders whether the inner nature (*antaraṅg*) of Shripur's Pandurang might not convey more than just illustrate Joshi's peculiar viewpoint by providing his claims an attractive rhetorical flair.

Homogeneity, nevertheless, is just a wish; living through multifarious realities requires skills of negotiation. For many Shrigondekars, it ultimately does not really matter which Vitthal/Pandurang is receiving their love, so long as it is Vitthal/Pandurang who helps, cares about his devotees, and displays such an inner nature that gives religion its depth and meaning. And this, after all, lies firmly within the scope of Eknath Joshi's claims and goals.

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