

# THE ROLE OF PILGRIMAGE IN THE VARKARI TRADITION: A CULTURAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

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## Abstract:

This paper explores the cultural and philosophical significance of pilgrimage within the Varkari tradition of Maharashtra. The Varkari Sampraday, a devotional movement centered around the worship of Vitthal (Vithoba), has had a profound impact on the spiritual and cultural landscape of the region. The tradition emphasizes the importance of pilgrimage to Pandharpur, especially during Ashadhi and Kartiki Ekadashi. This study examines how pilgrimage serves as a unifying force, transcending caste and social barriers, and fosters a sense of collective identity among the Varkaris. The works of notable writers such as Dilip Chitre, particularly his translations of Tukaram's Abhangas and his reflections in *Says Tuka*, and *Anubhavamrut* and other works provide critical insights into the spiritual fervor and social dynamics of the Varkari movement. Through this analysis, the paper aims to highlight the enduring relevance of the Varkari pilgrimage tradition in contemporary times, especially in its capacity to develop shared spiritual beliefs.

## Keywords:

Abhangas, Bhakti Movement, Cultural Identity, Philosophical analysis, Pilgrimage, Tradition, Tukaram, Varkari, Vitthal.

## Introduction:

The Varkari tradition is one of the most significant spiritual movements in Maharashtra, deeply rooted in the Bhakti movement that swept across India during the medieval period. At the heart of this tradition is the pilgrimage to the holy town of Pandharpur, where devotees congregate to worship Lord Vitthal. The pilgrimage, known as Wari, is more than just a religious journey; it is a profound cultural and philosophical practice

that encapsulates the values of devotion, equality, and community. As Dilip Chitre observes,

*The Varkari pilgrimage is not merely a ritual; it is an assertion of a collective identity that transcends caste and class divisions, bringing together people from all walks of life in a shared spiritual experience.*<sup>1</sup>

Chitre's work, particularly his translations of Tukaram's Abhangas, highlights the egalitarian spirit of the Varkari movement, where devotion to Vitthal becomes a form of social resistance. Other contemporary writers have similarly emphasized the cultural and philosophical significance of the Varkari tradition. For instance, R.C. Dhere, in his book *Rise of a Folk God: Vitthal of Pandharpur*, notes that

*the Wari pilgrimage represents a unique synthesis of devotion and social reform, where the act of pilgrimage itself challenges the entrenched social hierarchies and promotes a vision of spiritual equality.*<sup>2</sup>

Eleanor Zelliott, in her essays on the Bhakti movement, echoes this sentiment by stating, The Varkari tradition, through its emphasis on collective devotion and community, has played a crucial role in shaping the social and cultural landscape of Maharashtra, fostering a sense of unity and shared identity among its followers.<sup>3</sup>

These writers, among others, have chronicled the Varkari tradition as a dynamic and living practice that continues to influence the spiritual and social fabric of Maharashtra, making it a significant subject of study for understanding the broader Bhakti movement and its enduring legacy.

## **Historical Context and Evolution of the Varkari Tradition**

The Varkari Sampraday, established in the 13th century, represents a synthesis of devotion, philosophy, and social reform. The movement was influenced by saints like Dnyaneshwar, Namdev, and Tukaram, who emphasized the worship of Vitthal as a path to spiritual liberation. These saints were instrumental in shaping the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra, using their poetic compositions to spread the message of devotion (bhakti) and social equality. Dnyaneshwar's *Dnyaneshwari*, a Marathi commentary on the Bhagavad Gita, and Tukaram's *Abhangas*, devotional songs in praise of Vitthal, are foundational texts that have shaped the Varkari tradition. The pilgrimage to Pandharpur, which occurs twice a year, became a central practice for the Varkaris, symbolizing their unwavering devotion and commitment to the values of Bhakti. The Bhakti movement, within which the Varkari tradition is situated, was a reaction against the rigid caste hierarchies and ritualistic practices that dominated Hinduism at the time. The Varkari sect, with its emphasis on personal devotion (bhakti) to Vitthal, rejected the notion that one's spiritual worth was determined by birth or caste. Instead, it promoted the idea that true devotion and a pure heart were the only prerequisites for attaining God's grace. This egalitarian belief is reflected in the teachings of Tukaram, who emphasized that God resides in all beings, regardless of their social status. Dilip Chitre, in his work *Says Tuka: Selected Poems of Tukaram*, highlights how Tukaram's poetry was a form of spiritual rebellion against the social injustices of his time. Chitre's translations bring out the depth of Tukaram's devotion and his critique of the caste system, making Tukaram's work accessible to a broader audience and underlining the social reformative aspect of the Varkari tradition.

## **Pilgrimage as a Cultural and Social Equalizer**

The pilgrimage to Pandharpur is central to the Varkari tradition. Pandharpur, located on the banks of the Bhima River in Maharashtra, is considered the spiritual capital of the Varkaris. Vitthal, the presiding deity of Pandharpur, is worshipped as an incarnation of Lord Krishna and is revered as the protector of the poor and the marginalized. The Wari pilgrimage is a remarkable phenomenon in that it transcends social hierarchies, bringing together people from different castes, communities, and economic backgrounds. While these gatherings are primarily intended for spiritual and religious pursuits, they extend beyond the spiritual-religious realm to also address contemporary social and political issues. It is noteworthy that, in addition to focusing on topics related to transcendence or other-worldly concepts like moksha and mukti, Bhakti practices also engage with "material" or "secular" matters. These include environmental issues, women's rights, the rights of marginalized communities, and patriotism.

This aspect of the Varkari tradition has been extensively explored in literary works, particularly by Dilip Chitre. In his translations of Tukaram's *Abhangas* and in his own writings, Chitre captures the egalitarian spirit of the Varkari movement, where the act of pilgrimage itself becomes a form of social resistance against caste-based discrimination. The Wari pilgrimage, undertaken twice a year in the Hindu months of Ashadh and Kartik, attracts millions of devotees who walk for days, covering hundreds of kilometers to reach Pandharpur. This journey is more than a physical trek; it is a profound spiritual exercise that symbolizes the soul's journey towards divine union. The Varkaris, or pilgrims, carry the symbolic 'Palkhi' (palanquin) of their revered saints, such as Dnyaneshwar and Tukaram, chanting *Abhangas* and participating

in communal singing (kirtan) throughout the journey. Chitre's *Says Tuka* reflects on the spiritual egalitarianism of the Varkari tradition, where the pilgrimage to Pandharpur is portrayed not just as a physical journey but as a metaphysical quest for unity and equality.

The egalitarian nature of the Wari is evident in the fact that all Varkaris, regardless of their social status, walk together, eat together, and share the same space during the pilgrimage. This practice reinforces the idea of equality, which is a core principle of the Varkari tradition. As the Marathi poet-saint Tukaram emphasized in his *Abhangas*, The Lord is equally present in all; no one is high or low in His eyes.

The Vari pilgrimage is an inclusive event that welcomes people from all spheres of life, regardless of their caste, gender, class, education, or occupation. This openness is one of the unique features of the pilgrimage, allowing diverse social processes that might seem contradictory to coexist within the same space. However, even with this inclusivity, the Vari pilgrimage does not completely eliminate social hierarchies.

On one side, the pilgrimage fosters a sense of unity among the participants. Pilgrims share common symbols of devotion and participate in collective activities such as singing, playing instruments, eating, and spending time together. These shared experiences create a strong sense of bonding and camaraderie among the participants, making them feel connected to each other and to the larger Varkari community. The Vari serves as a platform where people from various backgrounds come together in a spirit of devotion, sharing the same space and experiences, which helps to reinforce a sense of belonging and shared purpose.

On the other side, however, the pilgrimage does not completely erase social, political, or ideological differences. Despite the open

invitation to all, the Vari still reflects the underlying caste and gender hierarchies that exist in the broader society. These hierarchies are not completely dissolved during the pilgrimage, meaning that while the Vari encourages unity, it also maintains certain divisions. The pilgrimage, therefore, becomes a space where both unity and division coexist. It allows for the expression of different interests and processes, even if they seem contradictory. The dual nature of the Vari pilgrimage is significant. While it does not create a completely homogeneous community, it does not completely reject the possibility either. Instead, it nurtures a community that is united in devotion but still diverse in its social structure. This community, centered around the Varkari ethos, can be understood as a "Varkari public." The pilgrimage serves as the most powerful and effective site for generating and sustaining this "Varkari public," where a shared sense of spirituality and devotion brings people together, even as their social distinctions remain intact. Through this process, the Vari pilgrimage exemplifies how a religious practice can both unite and differentiate, creating a complex social landscape where diversity and commonality coexist. In his work *Rise of a Folk God: Vitthal of Pandharpur*, R.C. Dhere explores the cultural significance of the Varkari pilgrimage, tracing its historical development and its impact on the collective consciousness of Maharashtra. Dhere's research reveals how the pilgrimage has been a vehicle for the transmission of cultural values and traditions, ensuring the continuity of the Varkari tradition across generations.

Moreover, the Wari pilgrimage serves as a medium for the transmission of cultural values and traditions. The oral tradition of singing *Abhangas*, reciting the *Haripath* (a collection of devotional verses), and participating in *kirtans* helps in preserving and perpetuating the teachings of the Varkari saints. This has

allowed the Varkari tradition to remain a living and dynamic cultural force in Maharashtra, even in the face of modern challenges.

### **Philosophical Analysis of the Varkari Pilgrimage**

Philosophically, the Wari pilgrimage is rooted in the Bhakti tradition, which emphasizes a personal, direct relationship with the divine. This relationship is not mediated by priests or rituals but is based on sincere devotion and love for God. The Varkari tradition, through its pilgrimage, embodies the concept of 'Namasmaraṇa,' or the constant remembrance of God's name, which is considered the highest form of worship. Rohini Mokashi-Punekar, a professor of English at IIT Guwahati, in her work *Untouchable Saints*, examines the lives and spiritual contributions of saint-poets from marginalized communities, particularly within the Bhakti movement. She highlights how these figures, despite their socially disadvantaged status, played a crucial role in shaping religious and social thought by challenging established norms and advocating for equality and devotion. Through their poetry and teachings, they offered a voice to the oppressed and reshaped the spiritual landscape of their time, making the Bhakti movement inclusive and transformative. Rohini said,

*The Varkari cult is clearly the most quietly influential mass movement of rural Maharashtra." She records the most striking feature of this cult as the absence of a priest to mediate between the devotee and his bhakta.<sup>4</sup>*

The Wari pilgrimage also reflects the Varkari belief in the concept of 'Satsang'—the company of the holy. The act of walking together, singing together, and sharing the hardships of the journey creates a collective spiritual energy that uplifts the participants. This communal aspect of the pilgrimage is a form of spiritual practice that helps the devotees in their journey towards self-realization and union with the divine. Furthermore, the Varkari tradition holds that

the pilgrimage to Pandharpur is a metaphor for the inner journey of the soul towards God. The physical act of walking towards Pandharpur represents the spiritual progress of the devotee, who must overcome the 'inner distances' of ignorance, ego, and attachment to reach the ultimate goal—union with Vitthal.

William Dalrymple, in his book *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*, examines the spiritual dimensions of the Varkari pilgrimage, portraying it as a journey of self-discovery and transformation. Dalrymple's narrative captures the deep philosophical foundations of the pilgrimage, highlighting its role in the spiritual lives of the Varkaris. The writings of contemporary scholars and poets, such as Dilip Chitre and R.C. Dhere, have explored these philosophical dimensions of the Varkari pilgrimage. Chitre, in his translations of Tukaram's *Abhangas*, emphasizes the transformative power of devotion in breaking down social barriers and bringing about spiritual liberation. Similarly, Dhere's works highlight the synthesis of devotion and social reform that the Varkari tradition represents.

### **Conclusion**

The pilgrimage in the Varkari tradition is not just a religious act but a deeply cultural and philosophical practice that embodies the core values of the Bhakti movement. It serves as a powerful symbol of devotion, equality, and community, reflecting the rich spiritual heritage of Maharashtra. Through the Wari pilgrimage, the Varkari tradition continues to inspire and guide millions of devotees, offering them a path towards spiritual fulfillment and social harmony. The pilgrimage in the Varkari tradition is far more than a mere religious ritual; it is a deeply ingrained cultural and philosophical practice that encapsulates the essence of the Bhakti movement. At its core, this tradition is a profound expression of devotion, equality, and community, weaving

together the spiritual and social fabric of Maharashtra in a way that has endured for centuries.

The Wari pilgrimage, which sees thousands of devotees embarking on a journey to the sacred town of Pandharpur to worship Lord Vitthal, is a powerful symbol of this tradition. It is not only a physical journey but also a spiritual one, where pilgrims, or Varkaris, walk for miles, chanting and singing hymns, often under the scorching sun or in the pouring rain. This act of devotion transcends the boundaries of individual lives, uniting people across caste, class, gender, and occupation in a shared purpose. The Wari becomes a microcosm of society, reflecting the ideals of the Bhakti movement which sought to dismantle the rigid social hierarchies and promote a more egalitarian vision of spiritual practice. The philosophical depth of the Varkari pilgrimage is rooted in the teachings of saint-poets like Sant Tukaram, Sant Dnyaneshwar, and Sant Namdev, whose works have been pivotal in shaping the Varkari tradition. These saints emphasized the importance of a direct, personal relationship with the divine, one that is accessible to all, regardless of their social status. The pilgrimage embodies this philosophy, offering a path of devotion that is inclusive and accessible, allowing every pilgrim to experience a sense of spiritual fulfillment.

Culturally, the Varkari pilgrimage is a living tradition that continues to thrive in modern times. It is a celebration of Maharashtra's rich spiritual heritage, where devotion is not confined to the temple but spills over into the streets, fields, and homes of the people. The Wari is a time when the entire state comes alive with the sound of abhangas (devotional songs), the rhythm of the veena and mridangam, and the vibrant colors of the saffron flags carried by the pilgrims. It is a time when the barriers between the sacred and the secular dissolve,

and everyday life becomes infused with spiritual meaning. The enduring significance of the Varkari pilgrimage lies in its unique ability to bridge the gap between the divine and the mundane. It creates a sacred space where devotion and daily life converge, offering a shared experience of spiritual joy that is both deeply personal and communal. In this space, the Varkari tradition continues to inspire and guide millions of devotees, providing them with a sense of purpose and a connection to something greater than themselves.

This connection extends beyond the boundaries of Maharashtra, resonating with people across India and even beyond. The lessons of the Varkari pilgrimage—of devotion, equality, and community—are universal, offering insights that are relevant in today's world, where divisions based on caste, religion, and economic status continue to persist. The Varkari tradition stands as a testament to the power of faith and the possibility of social harmony, making it not only a vital part of India's cultural and religious landscape but also a source of hope and inspiration for all. In the works of writers like Dilip Chitre, the Varkari tradition is brought to life with vivid imagery and profound insights, capturing the essence of this enduring spiritual journey. Chitre's explorations of the Varkari pilgrimage, along with the contributions of other contemporary writers, provide a window into the rich tapestry of devotion that defines this tradition. Their writings ensure that the lessons and values of the Varkari tradition continue to be celebrated and understood by future generations, preserving its legacy as a vital and living part of India's spiritual heritage. This ability of the Varkari tradition to adapt and remain relevant in different contexts is what makes it a cornerstone of spiritual life in Maharashtra and beyond. It is a tradition that not only honors the past but also speaks to the present and the

future, offering timeless wisdom that transcends the boundaries of time and place.

The enduring significance of the Varkari pilgrimage lies in its ability to bridge the gap between the divine and the mundane, creating a space where devotion and everyday life converge in a shared experience of spiritual joy. This makes the Varkari tradition a vital and living part of India's cultural and religious landscape, with lessons that resonate far beyond the boundaries of Maharashtra.

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