

Study on Varkari Tradition as a Living Knowledge System in Bhartiya Gyan Parampara

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Abstract

This research paper examines the Varkari tradition, a significant devotional bhakti movement centred in Maharashtra, widely revered as the worship of Lord Vitthal or Pandurang of Pandharpur. It represents a profound and ongoing expression of the Bhartiya Gyan Parampara, known as the Indian Knowledge System. Originating in the 13th century and nurtured by prominent saints such as Dnyaneshwar, Eknath, Namdev, Chokhamela, Muktabai, Kanhopatra, Janabai, and many others associated with the Varkari sampradaya tradition, whose teachings continue to inspire and guide millions. The paper argues that the Varkari sampradaya is a “Living Tradition” supporting indigenous ways of knowing, being, and practising through both informal and formal community-based learning. Central to it is bhakti to Lord Vitthal, seen as an experimental and democratic path to self-realisation and social harmony. The Varkari movement emphasises direct oral transmission, personal experience, and communal learning, with practices such as devotional songs (Abhangas), kirtans, and the annual Pandharpur Vari/Wari pilgrimage creating a socially accessible spiritual framework. These practices preserve and reinterpret Vedantic ideas in simple, emotionally resonant forms, making them accessible to the masses.

This paper argues that the Varkari sampradaya functions as a community Indian Knowledge System, where knowledge is not stored in texts but embodied in collective memory, performances, and practices. Its inclusive nature, cutting across class, gender, and caste, reflects a deep commitment to values like humility, equality, and seva. In the context of Bhartiya Gyan Parampara, the Varkari tradition is an experimental, holistic, and deeply rooted in everyday life. The paper also discusses contemporary challenges such as commercialisation, urbanisation, and digital media, highlighting efforts to preserve and adapt the tradition for the new generations. Through the lens of Bhartiya Gyan Parampara, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of how living traditions can serve as powerful repositories of indigenous wisdom and ethical action. Showing that bhakti movements are not only spiritual paths but an enduring system of education and social transformation.

Keywords: Varkari Sampradaya, Vitthal, Abhanga, Vari, Bhakti Movement, Bhakti Tradition, Bhartiya Gyan Parampara.

Introduction

Bhartiya Gyan Parampara surrounds the shared intellectual heritage of India, which spans across multiple disciplines and centuries. This knowledge tradition is rooted in ancient literature, including the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, and various texts on subjects such as astronomy, Mathematics, Medicine (Ayurveda), and Architecture (Vastushastra). It is an interdisciplinary tradition that combines philosophical thought with practical knowledge, focusing on holistic development, sustainability, and a deep connection

to nature. In today's world, Bhartiya Gyan Parampara faces challenges and opportunities. The rise of the Western scientific method, globalisation, and technological progress has led to conflicts between traditional knowledge and the modern knowledge system. This paper aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how living traditions can serve as powerful repositories of indigenous wisdom and ethical action.

The Varkari Sampradaya is one of the prominent devotional traditions of Maharashtra, India, and it is centred around the worship of Lord Vitthala. Its origins go back to the 13th century, with prominent saints such as Sant Dnyaneshwar, Sant Namdev, and Sant Tukaram shaping its core philosophy. This tradition is deeply associated with the Deccan regions, especially the town of Pandharpur, Solapur, Maharashtra, which acts as an annual pilgrimage known as a Vari. The varkari sampradaya is characterised by its emphasis on simple, heartfelt devotion (bhakti), social equality, and a commitment to ethical living, making it a significant example of a living knowledge system.

Research Methodology

The study will employ a qualitative research methodology to examine how the Varkari Sampradaya represents and perpetuates the essence of the spiritual and social aspects of the Bhartiya Gyan Parampara. The research methodology is designed to investigate the philosophical, spiritual, and socio-cultural dimensions of the sampradaya through a historical, textual, and interpretive framework.

Literature and Textual Analysis: The study will analyse primary sources, such as the analysis of Abhangas composed by Varkari saints. These bhakti poems are not only expressions of spirituality but also carry ethical value, metaphysical reflection, and socio-religious reformist thought aligned with the Bhartiya Gyan Parampara. In addition to primary textual sources, a wide range of secondary sources, including books, research papers, journal articles, and doctoral theses in Marathi, Hindi, and English to trace the historical context, philosophical influences, and interpretations of the Varkari Sampradaya's traditions. However, all this data will serve as background information, providing context and a critical perspective on the Varkari tradition.

The collected data will be examined through a thematic analysis method. This process includes recognising themes, patterns, and textual sources. The theme will be categorised according to the elements of Bhartiya Gyan Parampara, including spiritual knowledge, ethnic value, and social reform. The analysis will seek to establish how the Varkari tradition effectively embodies and promotes the traditional Bhartiya Gyan Parampara.

Varkari Sampradaya

The Varkari Sampradaya is one of India's major, longstanding religious traditions rooted in Maharashtra. It is one of the most significant and influential bhakti traditions in the region. The origins of the Varkari sampradaya cannot be traced to any specific source. It is only noted that it had strong links with common people during the thirteenth century. While the founder of the Varkari Sampradaya remains unknown, it is clear that the contributions of Dnyaneshwar and Namdev, both believed to have lived in the thirteenth century, are closely associated with what became known as the Varkari Sampradaya. It is characterised by an inclusive ethos, community-oriented spirituality, and a strong devotion to bhakti to Lord Vitthal, which emerged in the 13th century. Varkari traditions developed as part of the broader bhakti movement and represent a transformative spiritual movement that challenged ritualistic orthodoxy, caste hierarchies, and social exclusion through the egalitarian path of bhakti.

"Varkari" is derived from the Marathi phrase "Vari kari," meaning someone who regularly makes the pilgrimage (Vari) to Pandharpur. This pilgrimage is not just a physical journey but also symbolises a deeper path of devotion, humility, and spiritual practice.

The temple of Lord Vitthal is situated on the bank of the Bhima (Chandrabhaga) river in Pandharpur. However, the foundation of the Varkari sampradaya is rooted not in royal patronage but in the lived experiences and teachings of saints who democratised spiritual wisdom by rewriting meaningless rituals and promoting direct, simple devotion accessible to all social groups, especially women and those considered lower caste. The Varkari tradition revolves around fifty poet-sants over more than 800 years, whose teachings form its spiritual lineage. Their teachings continue to guide the movement and reflect the core values of Bhartiya Gyan Parampara: inner purity, self-realisation, and social equality.

Some of the key sants include:

- **Sant Dnyaneshwar:** Regarded as the spiritual and philosophical founder of Varkari Sampradaya, wrote Dnyaneshwari, a Marathi commentary on the Bhagavad Gita.
- **Sant Namdev:** A bhakti poet whose abhangas emphasise bhakti beyond the caste. His teaching reverberated in Maharashtra and Punjab.
- **Sant Chokhamela:** Born into a marginalised community, his life and Abhangas challenged caste barriers, and true bhakti transcends birth-based hierarchy.
- **Sant Ekanath:** known for integrating knowledge with social change, he focused on compassion, forgiveness, and inclusive spirituality.
- **Sant Tukaram:** one of the most significant varkari sant, his Abhangas highlighting themes of selfless love for Vitthal, humility, and detachment. His Abhangas continue to form the spiritual backbone of the sampradaya.

Women sants such as Janabai, Muktabai, Soyarabai, Kanhopatra, Bahinabai, made a profound contribution to spreading Varkari Sampradaya across Maharashtra, north Karnataka, and surrounding regions.

Its spiritual and geographical centre is Pandharpur, a town famed for its shrine and annual Vari pilgrimage, which attracts millions of devotees each year from across western India and southern India during the Ashadhi and Kartiki Vari Pilgrimage. The movement practices have deeply influenced the regional landscape of the region, shaping Marathi cultural identity and permeating local customs and arts. The future of Varkari Sampradaya includes daily recitation of Haripath (devotional verses), Kirtan and Bhajan (storytelling and Collective Singing), vegetarianism and ethical conduct, wearing the Tulsi Mala (sacred basil garland), and annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur. The varakari sampradaya rejects gender, caste, and social discrimination, focusing instead on collective spiritual progress and humility. The Varkari movement continues to be a living tradition that reflects the principles of Bhartiya Gyan Parampara by making that spiritual knowledge accessible, ethical, and transformative for everyone.

Philosophical Background

The varkari sampradaya unites bhakti with the non-dual understanding of Advaita Vedanta in a distinctive framework termed Advaita-Bhakti. While uploading ultimate unity of all beings (Advaita), this tradition encourages the heartfelt devotion to Lord Vitthal, seen as both immanent and transcendent. It rejects the ritual exclusivity, caste barriers, and dogma, placing a higher value on sincerity and ethical behaviour.

- **Karma-yoga:** the yoga of selfless action serves as a path to liberation.
- **Bhakti Yoga:** a loving bhakti to the divine.

- **Jnana Yoga:** wisdom through personal experience.

The varkari sampradaya rejects exclusivity and caste barriers, and prioritises humility, sincerity, and ethical behaviour over external formalities. Sants often criticise meaningless rituals and advocate for bhakti that is heartfelt and that is rooted in moral living. The Devotional practices, such as haripath recitation, singing of Abhangas, collective kirtan, and the Pandharpur Vari promote both community unity and personal transformation. The use of the Marathi language and music allowed the philosophical concepts to be accessible to everyone, leading to a significant social transformation in Indian spiritual life. Components of Bhaetiya Gyan Parampara in the Varkari Sampradaya: The Varkari Sampradaya of Maharashtra is a living embodiment of the Bhaetiya Gyan Parampara, and this system is rooted in ethical conduct, spiritual, oral tradition, ecological harmony, and community life. It blends devotional tradition with social reform and deep philosophy.

Spiritual Knowledge

Concept of Bhakti: The Varkari Sampradaya emphasises that spiritual achievement is rooted in bhakti-loving devotion to Lord Vitthala (a form of Krishna), which is the most direct and accessible way to connect with the divine, and this sampradaya does not follow the rigid paths of bhakti, but it teaches simple bhakti. Bhakti is not presented as a ritualistic practice or an obscure one, but as a daily life commitment that rises above the divisions of caste, gender, or economic status. Every devotee, irrespective of their social background, can achieve spiritual fulfilment. This approach makes spirituality more inclusive, highlighting sincerity, humility, and moral behaviour as the true marks of spiritual awakening.

Abhangas: Sants like Sant Dnyaaneshwar, Sant Namdev, Sant Ekanath, Sant Tukaram, and many others composed the Abhangas (devotional poems) in the vernacular language. Abhangas are spiritually profound yet easily accessible to all people. The Abhangas make metaphysical discourses understandable in simple to the layperson. These Abhangas address issues like non-duality (advaita), the fleeting nature of existence, and the soul's desire for oneness with the divine- turning theoretical understanding into lived shared experiences. The communal singing of Abhangas serves as both a spiritual practice and a public philosophical conversation for the community, representing the oral knowledge tradition of Bhartiya Gyan Parampara.

Pilgrimage (Vari): The annual Pandharpur Vari pilgrimage represents not just a journey but also discipline in self-purification, bhakti, and communal harmony. By walking together, chanting, serving, and living a simple lifestyle throughout the Vari, participants cultivate self-discipline, humility, and togetherness, demonstrating the principles of karma-yoga and bhakti practice along with Jnana Yoga.

Moral and Ethical Values of Varkari Sampradaya

The Varkari Sampradaya is fundamentally a moral framework that emphasises social harmony and compassion. It strongly promotes equality, humility, service (seva), non-violence, and compassion. These values are not just a theoretical concept but are actively practised in everyday life during the Vari. The tradition's unwavering stance against caste discrimination and its commitment to social inclusion stand as a powerful testament to its moral foundation. Throughout history, Varkari sants such as Sant Chokhamea from marginalised communities have played a key role in challenging rigid social hierarchies, advocating that an individual's value is determined by their bhakti and character, not their birth.

Oral and Performative Traditions

In the Varkari Sampradaya, knowledge extends beyond written text; it is a living, performative tradition. Abhangas, Kirtan, and Bharudas are central to these. These public performances, which combine storytelling, music, and singing, serve as an act of collective memory, ensuring that the teachings of the sants are passed forward through generations. The significance of music, storytelling is essential in transmitting values, spiritual stories, and philosophical ideas in an engaging and accessible way, reinforcing community bonds and a sense of identity.

Community and Social Organisation

Paalki Procession: At the core of the Vari pilgrimage is the magnificent Palki procession. More than 50 Palkis, or palanquins, each Palki carrying the padukas or foot images of various sants, journey from different sants' mausoleums in different places of Marathi-speaking regions to Pandharpur. It feels as though the sants are accompanying you on this pilgrimage. Among the most notable are the Palki of Sant Tukaram, which comes from Dehu, Pune, and Sant Dhyaneswar from Alandi, Pune, and Sant Sopankaka Palki from Saswad, Pune. These Palkis take breaks along the pilgrimage route, moving along while singing and dancing to the songs of Vithala. The town of Pandharpur is renowned for its lively welcome of these holy processions. However, after the Palki, there are several Dindis that are there by a very well-organised group of varkaris, also dindi pramukh is there for each dindi.

Dindi structure in the Vari: The dindi structure is a smaller spiritual unit within the larger Vari. The group of pilgrims (varkari) travelling together, guided by self-discipline and mutual support, is a model of democratic management, teamwork, and collective self-control in the border context of pilgrimage.

Role of the Varkari Community in Teaching Practices: The Varkari community primarily teaches knowledge through their way of life, embodying values through communal living, hospitality, and daily worship and service, instilling ethics in practices and action instead of through abstract preaching.

Ecological and Lifestyle Knowledge

Sustainable Pilgrimage(Vari): The traditions focus on walking, community sharing, and simplicity during Vari promote a low-carbon, eco-friendly way of life, minimising consumption and connection with the environment.

Simplicity and Frugality: The values of Varkari advocating a simple lifestyle, moderation in diet, fostering a harmonious relationship with the land and natural surroundings – reflecting ancient Bhartiya principles of sustainability and well-being.

Modes of Knowledge Transmission

The Varkari Sampradaya represents a vibrant and old tradition of knowledge sharing that transcends traditional boundaries between formal and informal education. It is rooted in the Bhartiya Gyan Parampara; the modes of knowledge exchange within the Varkari traditions are essentially experiential, participatory, and collective. Knowledge is not simply taught; it is lived and enacted.

Oral Tradition: Songs, Recitation, Communal Memory: The Varkari tradition relies extensively on oral techniques, where community performances of Abhangas, kirtans, and Bhajans in Marathi ensure that philosophical teachings are available to everyone. These oral tradition promotes a collective memory, as the frequent singing and recitation during gatherings or pilgrimages still convey spiritual and ethical values

through generations. Sants and Preachers (Kirtankar) from diverse social backgrounds create and perform songs, making the teaching engaging and flexible to the modern situation.

Intergenerational Learning: Intergenerational learning is central to the Varkari Sampradaya, where spiritual knowledge is conveyed from elders to younger generations through everyday practices, rituals, and devotional music. Families are creating environments for spiritual education, enabling children to learn Abhangas, Haripath, and moral values by participating and observing in household worship and community pilgrimages. The use of the Marathi language and culturally significant expressions ensures that each generation grasps intricate spiritual concepts in familiar terms. Participation in the Wari and Dindi introduces youth to the virtues of discipline, humility, and seva. Oral traditions, particularly the Abhangas of sants like Dnaneshwar, Namdev, Ekanath, Tukaram, and Janabai, provide both ethical direction and philosophical teachings. Women play a key role in transmitting values through storytelling, songs, and rituals. This experimental approach to learning reflects the Bhartiya Gyan Parampara, highlighting lived experience, ethical behaviour, and shared devotion as the pillars of spiritual continuity through generations.

How Varkari Sampradaya Teaching Can Inform

- **Moral Education:** The principles of Varkari sampradayas emphasise humility, Seva, non-violent, and compassion, forming a basis for ethical behaviour in contemporary society. Abhangas, as a song and community practices, offer experimental learning of virtues that are crucial for personal growth and character development. However, there are some Varkari residential schools, such as they are in Amravati, Pune, Pandharpur, Dehu, and Aalandi. These schools teach Abhangas, Haripath, Bhajans, Sant Literature, and musical instruments.
- **Social Harmony:** The Sampradayas' legacy of inclusion-going beyond caste, gender, and class divisions, provides a template for creating respectful, cohesive communities. Such activities as communal meals (maha-prasad), joint pilgrimages(vari), performing Kirtan, and collective singing promote a “we” ethos that is essential for contemporary multicultural societies. The VS rejects the caste hierarchical norms and promotes collective participation, where people from all backgrounds come together and walk, sing together, and serve each other.
- **Environmental Sustainability:** The varkari tradition emphasises walking pilgrimages, simple living, and deep respect for nature, which promotes eco-friendly behaviours. By showcasing a low-carbon lifestyle, sharing resources within the community, and encouraging minimal consumption, this tradition exemplifies ecological responsibility that is pertinent to the current climate crisis.
- **Mental Health and Mindfulness:** Rituals like kirtans, recitation, and group meditation create supportive social environments and promote mindfulness, resilience, and emotional health. The Varkari focus on community support and belonging tackles feelings of isolation, stress, and anxiety that are prevalent in urban environments.

Challenges

- **Urbanisation:** Fastly growth of urban areas reduces the chances and location for collective spiritual activities, resulting in weakened traditional community ties.
- **Commercialisation:** Religious ceremonies face the danger of being commercialised, which endangers the genuine and participatory nature of Varkari spirituality.

- **Loss of Interest Among Youth:** The attraction of competing entertainment options, digital distractions, and a lack of cultural context in contemporary education have contributed to a decline in interest among younger generations.

Opportunities

- **Digital Platforms:** Online performance of kirtans, Abhangas singing and Bharuds, Bhajans, social media, and YouTube platforms broaden outreach, making spiritual facilities available to youth and diaspora communities in India and all over the world.
- **Academic Inclusion in Bhartiya Gyan Parampara Curriculum:** The Varkari Sampradayas philosophy, literature, and values inside the formal education through the Bhartiya Gyan Parampara or Indian Knowledge System (IKS) schedule can renew interest, encourage comprehensive education, and bridge the gap between tradition and contemporary academic structures.

Conclusion

The Varkari Sampradaya represents a rich and dynamic embodiment of Bharatiya Gyan Parampara, consistently bridging India's old traditional knowledge with living, practical applications in the modern community, deep-rooted in the devotional worship of Lord Vitthal in Pandharpur and influenced by the teachings of sants like Dnyaneshwar, Namdev, Ekanath, Chokhamela, Tukaram, Muktabai, Janabai, Soyarabai, and Kanhopatara, among others. The varkari sampradayas' ongoing path reaffirms the power of spiritual gyan, moral behaviour, and ethnic strength. Through the collective rituals, pilgrimages, devotional singing, and a daily dedication to humility, inclusiveness, and service, the Varkari tradition showcases how enduring principles can become rooted in and transform everyday life.

The real-world effects of the Varkari tradition can be seen in its persistent commitment to promoting social equality, environmental harmony, and the well-being of communities. Its fundamental activities abhangas, kirtans, Bhajans, Bharuds, communal meals, the inclusive Dindi system, and collective pilgrimages serve not only as spiritual expressions but also as acts of ethical and cultural education. By encouraging learning across generations and engaging in public teaching, the Varkari Sampradaya has maintained centuries of philosophical, ethical, and social insights outside traditional educational frameworks, showcasing the ongoing relevance of Bhartiya Gyan Parampara.

However, the tradition is new and important considerable challenges. The rapid urban development, the commercialisation of rituals, and the declining engagement of young people in traditional worship rituals pose a threat to the essence and integrity of the Varkari heritage, but as per this year's Maharashtra government and newspaper data, young people's engagement has increased. If not addressed purposefully, these changes could jeopardise the crucial connections among knowledge, practice, and community that characterise Bharatiya Gyan Parampara.

As a result, there is an immediate necessity to actively preserve, document, and incorporate the Varkari tradition and similar living streams of knowledge into academic, digital, and cultural discourses. Maintaining oral histories, translating and archiving Abhangas, Bharuds, and situating Varkari philosophy within the modern value systems will help in bridging the gap between tradition and modern aspirations. Incorporating these teachings into the Bhartiya Gyan Parampara curriculum and utilising digital platforms can revitalise youth involvement, ensuring that the insights and ethical frameworks of the Varkari Sampradaya remain accessible for everyone.

This paper highlights the Varkari Sampradaya as a living embodiment of the Bharatiya Gyan Parampara, underscoring its significant contribution to the spiritual, ethical, and cultural foundation of Indian society. It is only through deliberate preservation and renewed integration that these traditions can continue to inspire and ground future generations amidst a rapidly changing and evolving world.

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