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Examining Devotional Themes in Reverend Narayan Vaman Tilak's 19th century Marathi Poetry: A Comparative Study

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An abstract of a
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Abstract:

Examining Devotional Themes in Reverend Narayan Vaman Tilak's 19th century Marathi Poetry: A Comparative Study

By Mayuri Pralhad Patankar

Drawing upon Marathi texts concerning Reverend Narayan Vaman Tilak's writings, this thesis elucidates the devotional themes embedded in his 19th century poetic repertoire. In current missiological scholarship, an assumption of theological resonance between Protestant Christianity and the *varkari bhakti* traditions prevails. As such, the central questions that this thesis seeks to address are: 1. Through the nuanced lens of *varkari bhakti* traditions, how did Tilak articulate his distinctive vision of Protestant Christianity?; 2. Against the backdrop of British Protestant missionaries, where does Tilak's *varkari*-inflected Christian perspective position itself?; 3. What role do non-Brahmin interpretations of *varkari bhakti* traditions, if at all, play in the dialogue between Protestant missionaries and Brahmin converts to Christianity?

A comprehensive examination of Tilak's writing, set within both his English and Marathi contexts, reveals a dominant trend: the narratives of Protestant and Hindu scholars tend to be framed by a Brahmin-centric Indological framework. While this viewpoint has scholarly merit, it risks undermining the rich and textured folk practices that form the foundation of the *varkari bhakti* traditions. As Ramchandra Dhere, a foremost authority in Maharashtra's folk studies, articulates, the deity Vitthal, despite gravitating towards Vaishnavite themes since the 11th century, remains intrinsically linked to its folk origins. It's imperative to recognize that Protestant portrayals of *varkari bhakti*, encompassing those in Tilak's post-conversion works, often diverge from non-Brahmin experiential insights.

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Section I
Theoretical Frameworks: Bhakti, Hindu traditions, and religious studies

The early centuries AD witnessed a fundamental shift in the linguistic landscape of South Asia. The ancient language of Sanskrit, known for its sacred function for nearly a millennium, began to resonate with a new socio-cultural milieu. The corpus of Sanskrit literature started to evolve, serving functions beyond the religious sphere. Sanskrit started being used for diverse political expressions, predominantly employing local literary forms called *rajya* and *kavya*. Sheldon Pollock termed this novel Sanskritic milieu that emerged during these early centuries as the "Sanskrit cosmopolis"[1].

The birth of the Sanskrit cosmopolis also marks the time when Sanskrit was first codified and used for administrative and literary pursuits beyond its sacred scope. These processes have been called as "literization" and "literarization" respectively by Pollock. This gradual incorporation of Sanskrit into political and aesthetic discourse in the wider South Asian context occurred in multiple forms and at various times across different locations. Pollock refers to this epoch as the first vernacular revolution.

Following a few centuries after this revolution, a "second revolution" or a "counter-revolution took root[2]. Modelled on the Sanskrit cosmopolis, these counterrevolutions were marked by the rise of various regional languages of South Asia, distinctive for their anti-Sanskritic *desi* idiom and a close association with religious communities that developed uniquely regionalized characters. This second transition, which involved the use of vernacular

[1] Sheldon I. Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 432.
[2] Pollock, 432.

languages for political and aesthetic literature, provided a backdrop for various *bhakti* traditions to flourish[3].

TRS Sharma, in his contribution to *Keywords for India: A Conceptual Lexicon for the Twenty-First Century* (published in 2020), suggests that *bhakti* traditions represented a distinct form of devotion to a personal god, often employing *shringaar rasa*. He explains the etymological roots of the Sanskrit term *bhaj*, which means "to share, adore, and worship," and proposes that over time *bhakti* traditions acquired a cultural connotation of "partaking of god"[4]. These traditions can be seen as a response to the Vedic strand of Hindu traditions and serve as significant sites for studying the convergence of various traditions now classified as "Hinduism" in the academic study of religion.

Bhakti traditions challenge several assumptions in the field of religious studies. Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer, a German historian of religion who conducted research among practitioners of pastoral traditions in Maharashtra, argues that *bhakti* traditions are one of the five integral components of Hindu traditions. According to Sontheimer, traditional Hinduism encompasses multiple levels, including the orthodox scriptural traditions authored by the Brahmins, sects or sectarian movements based on asceticism and renunciation, tribal religion, folk religion, and *bhakti*[5]. Another German historian of religion, Anncharlott Eschmann, contends that the idea of "sect" was introduced to India at the zenith of early-nineteenth

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[3] Pollock, 432.
[4] TRS Sharma, "Bhakti" in Rukmini Bhaya Nair and Peter Ronald DeSouza, eds., *Keywords for India: A Conceptual Lexicon for the 21st Century* (London New York Oxford New Delhi Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 27–28.
[5]Heidrun Bruckner, in "Sontheimer's understanding of folk religion and his model of the five components of Hinduism" in Aditya Malik and Anne Feldhaus edited *In the Company of Gods: Essays in Memory of Günther-Dietz Sontheimer* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts [in association with] Manohar, 2005), 508.

century Orientalism[6]. Rather intriguingly, she suggests that this term was eventually applied to numerous orthodox expressions of Hinduism, as opposed to unorthodox communities deviating from established norms. Furthermore, N. K. Wagle's research illustrates how *varkari* traditions played a pivotal role in fostering a distinctive sense of Hindu identity, remarkably referred to as "*Maharashtra dharma*" in contemporary texts of sixteenth-century Maharashtra[7]. The sheer diversity of *bhakti* traditions across vernacular languages and historical epochs, coupled with their myriad manifestations in the modern age, necessitates a radical reconceptualization of "Hinduism" as a religious category. The dispersed and polyvalent nature of *bhakti* traditions underscores its indispensable significance as a focal area of study for unravelling the intricacies of Hindu traditions.

In the academic study of religion within a North Atlantic context, *bhakti* traditions have emerged as a powerful rebuke to the philological studies of Hindu scriptures. In *A Storm of Songs*, John Hawley vehemently challenges the contemporary notion of a singular "*bhakti* movement" and instead presents an alternative perspective of *bhakti* as a dynamic "network"[8]. In a similar scholarly trajectory, Patton Burchett (2019) teases out a long genealogy of *bhakti*, in which traditions of *yoga*, *tantra*, *nath yogi* asceticism, and Sufism come to play a significant role in its unfolding. He argues for considering "*bhakti*'s varying contextually rooted meanings" and specifically "to approach the term *relationally*" [9]. Consequently, *bhakti* traditions evolved because of socio-political changes within its network

[6] Anncharllot Eschmann "Religion, reaction, and change: The role of sects in Hinduism", in Günther-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke edited *Hinduism Reconsidered*, South Asian Studies, no. 24, New Delhi: Manohar, 2001, 108–20.
[7] Sontheimer and Kulke, 134–52.
[8] John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement*, Cambridge, Massacusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015, 251.
[9] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion: Bhakti, Tantra, Yoga, and Sufism in North India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, 8.

and in response to contemporary, sometimes competing, traditions. Notably, in the modern landscape of South Asia, *bhakti* traditions often sprouted anti-caste critiques[10].

By the close of the nineteenth century, *bhakti* traditions came to be framed within the context of Protestant understanding of religion. A sustained interest of Protestant missions in *bhakti* traditions yielded a substantial textual archive, encompassing English translations of Hindu scriptures and performance traditions, commentaries, journal entries, and epistolary interactions[11]. This collection of material takes diverse approaches when examining *bhakti* traditions. In his work, "Missionary Christianity and Local Religion: American Evangelism in North India, 1836-1879," published in 2017, Arun W. Jones contends that due to the shared social marginality faced by American Protestant missions and bhakti sects in Hindi North India, the "evangelism introduced and propagated by American missionaries in Hindi North India found itself operating on the same ground as these bhakti sects"[12]. Thus, Jones daringly postulates the potential for Protestant Christianity to draw inspiration from the *bhakti* traditions. In this thesis, I explore one such interaction that transpired in late-nineteenth century Maharashtra. My thesis is based on interactions between *varkari bhakti* and Protestant Christianity in late-nineteenth-century Maharashtra and invites readers to explore the interplay of various cultural forces.

Since the early nineteenth century, several Protestant missionaries have been deeply interested in the Marathi region along the Western coast. The work of Protestant missions started in 1813 when the American Board of Missions began to work in Bombay and nearby cities like Ahmednagar, Satara, and Sholapur. By 1896, a few years after Tilak converted to

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[10]Novetzke, *The Quotidian Revolution: Vernacularization, Religion, and the Premodern Public Sphere in India,* 13–14.
[11] Arun W. Jones, "Bhakti and Christian Mission," in *Oxford Bibliographies in Hinduism,* 2020.
[12]Arun W. Jones, *Missionary Christianity and Local Religion: American Evangelicalism in North India, 1836-1870,* Studies in World Christianity, Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017, 16.

Christianity and started his work in Ahmednagar, the Church of England and the Free Church of Scotland had already initiated missions in the region. Within Ahmednagar itself, the Society for the Propagation of Gospel in Foreign Parts and the Normal School of Christian Missionary Society were actively operating, furthering their respective missions[13].

[13]"Jan 1889, *The Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record* - Church Missionary Society Periodicals - Adam Matthew Digital," 47, accessed June 26, 2023.
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Section II:

Poet Narayan Vaman Tilak and Reverend Jack Copley Winslow

Narayan Vaman Tilak (1861 - 1919) was a Brahman convert to Christianity in Western India's Marathi speaking region in the late nineteenth-century. In his writings, Tilak explored a variety of literary genres including short stories, novels, plays, poems, and editorials for print journals. At the age of twenty-six in 1887, Tilak converted to Christianity, prompting a shift in the themes and form of his writings. After his conversion, Tilak worked for a Marathi mission at Ahmednagar, while he crafted devotional poetry and prose centered around Protestant Christianity[14].

Through his compositions of songs, hymns, and psalms in the Marathi language, Tilak emerged as a prominent figure within his contemporary evangelical community. He skilfully incorporated *varkari bhakti* traditions into English using the "*abhang*" genre, which thrived in Maharashtra since the late thirteenth century. His works "*Bhakti-Niranjana*" (1920) and "*Kristayana*" (1938) are highly regarded in Marathi and *bhakti* scholarship. "*Kristayana,*" inspired by the Ramayana, remained incomplete at Tilak's death in 1919. Tilak's wife Lakshmībāī and son Ashoka Devdutt Tilak completed the epic poem, published it in "*Sampoorna Smrutichitre*" in 1935[15]. Tilak's epic poem was hailed as the "Christ Purana" by high-Anglican missionary Jack Copley Winslow[16].

During his tenure as the principal of Mission High School in Ahmednagar, Jack Copley Winslow's encounters with Tilak profoundly influenced his perceptions of Tilak as a figure dedicated to nation-building. In 1914, Jack Copley Winslow arrived in India as a missionary

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[14] See Anupama Uzgare, "*Kavivarya Narayan Vaman Tilak: Ek Adhyayan*" (Mumbai, SNDT Women's University, 2003), http://hdl.handle.net/10603/161314.
[15]Lakshmibai Tilak, *Smrutichitre*, Fifth edition (Pune: Varada Prakashan, 2008),
[16] William W. Emilsen, "The Legacy of John Copley Winslow," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 21, 1, January 1997, 26.

with Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Winslow was the principal of Mission High School in Ahmednagar (between 1915 and 1919) where he met Marathi Christian poet Reverend Narayan Vaman Tilak.

In his contribution to the book series "Builders of Modern India" in 1923, Winslow wrote about Narayan Vaman Tilak as a "Marathi Christian poet". In his book, Winslow frames Tilak as a nation-builder because he believed that poets and preachers, given their abilities to inspire others with their spiritual vision, were fitting for the task of nation-building[17]. Winslow describes in detail various aspects of Tilak's personality, but it is Tilak's commitment to poetry that is most appealing to Winslow. According to Winslow, Tilak's poetry reflected the vernacular ethos, and it was this vernacular ethos that he thought would enable the task of Indianizing Christianity. Winslow cites Narayan Vaman Tilak as saying, "it is their [Indian Christian's] poetry and music which gives us insight into people's hearts"[18]. Thus, Winslow suggests that Tilak's poetic acumen, because of its rootedness in local culture made him an ideal leader to serve national interests.

Winslow's portrayal of Narayan Waman Tilak captures the complex interplay between religious identities and influences. Tilak, a Christian poet deeply rooted in local *varkari bhakti* traditions, is juxtaposed with the enigmatic figure of "*sadhus*". Winslow does not translate the term "*sadhu*" into English but ascribes it various meanings through vivid illustrations. He portrays Tilak's maternal grandfather as a "*sadhu*," who spent evenings singing devotional songs and "called upon God by the name "Narayan"[19]. Another of Tilak's brothers is described as "*sadhu*" due to his austere way of life and steadfast dedication to

[17] Emilsen, 26.
[18] J. C. 1882-1974 Winslow, *The Indian Mystic : Some Thoughts on India's Contribution to Christianity /* (London : Student Christian Movement, 1926), 59.
[19] Winslow, 2.

learning[20]. However, Winslow stops short of directly calling Tilak a *sadhu*. Instead, he employs tropes from the *bhakti* and *yoga* traditions to personify Tilak's attributes.

Throughout the biography, recurring motifs emerge, such as Tilak's estrangement from orthodox Hindu traditions, his independent thinking, and his relentless pursuit of knowledge, community, leadership, and spiritual growth. Winslow vividly portrays Tilak's "spiritual unrest," the impetuous nature and eagerness that drove him to embark on multiple journeys, engage in scholarly endeavours, and interact with various religious communities[21]. For instance, soon after his marriage at seventeen, Tilak is said to have "wandered... for a year or two in Khandesh, often begging for food from place to place as a *sadhu*" [22]. He later retreats to the hills, practising *yoga* in solitude[23]. However, Tilak is disappointed because his fellow villagers begin to treat him as a "religious leader" [24]. Disappointed, he resumes his domestic life while continuing his studies of religious texts from different traditions. It is only after his baptism that Tilak's spiritual and intellectual desires find peace, as Winslow aptly describes "...the old disquiet of unsatisfied longing was gone [25]." In this way, Winslow establishes a compelling connection between local religious traditions and Protestant Christianity through the figure of Tilak, highlighting the enduring significance of indigenous religious practices in shaping their spiritual journey.

Tilak's multifaceted personality and diverse literary works in Marathi present a stark contrast to Winslow's portrayal, revealing a deeper complexity to his character. In her diaries, Lakshmībāī provides valuable insights into the formative years of Tilak. She describes him as short-tempered and prone to leaving his family behind, reluctantly engaging in various

[20] Winslow, 7.
[21]Winslow, 10.
[22] Winslow, 10.
[23] Winslow, 18.
[24] Winslow, 18.
[25] Winslow, 29.

occupations at the urging of his paternal uncle[26]. The anecdotes shed light on Tilak's restless nature and his search for purpose.

During his tenure as a tutor and Sanskrit translator in Nagpur, Tilak's intellectual curiosity led him to delve into religious texts from diverse traditions such as Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. Winslow acknowledges Tilak's disdain for caste hierarchies and rituals within Hinduism, further highlighting his inclination towards social reform.

Prior to his conversion to Christianity, Tilak's poetic endeavors revolved around local religious leaders, the Hindu deity Ganesh, and the village goddesses of Shani-Shingnapur[27]. His written contributions extended beyond the realm of poetry as he also penned essays and editorials advocating for the cow-protection movement, demonstrating his active involvement in social and political causes[28]. These writings showcase Tilak's connection to various religious traditions outside *bhakti*.

Following his conversion to Christianity, Tilak shifted his focus from short story, novels, and plays to different forms of expressions. He delved into devotional songs, embraced the local genre of storytelling called "*sphut-kavya*," and contributed prose writings to various mission-led magazines in Marathi and English. While Winslow's portrayal of Tilak primarily emphasizes his poetry, it overlooks the significance of Tilak's prose contributions, which also shed light on his beliefs and perspectives.

In one such prose contribution, Tilak clarifies his stance on the appropriate form of Christian poetry and Christian God. Tilak objected to another Marathi poet Krushnaratna

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[26] Tilaka, Lakshmībāī, Devdatta Tilaka, and Ashok Devdatta Tilaka. *Sampūrṇa smr̥ticitrẽ*. Abhinava āvr̥tti. Mumbai: Pôpyulara Prakāśana, 1989, 16.
[27] Narayan Vaman Tilak and Ujgare, Bhaskar Krishna, *Reverend Tilkanchi Kavita: Volume I*, Poona city: Bhaskar Krishna Ujgare, 1914, 28.
[28] Anupama Uzgare, "Kavivarya Narayan Vaman Tilak: Ek Adhyayan" (Mumbai, SNDT Women's University, 2003), 25, http://hdl.handle.net/10603/161314.

Sangale's Christian devotional songs, criticizing the lack of explicit reference to either "Yesu" or "Christ" in the lyrics. Moreover, Tilak disapproved of Sangale's use of common nouns instead of specific names for the triune, which, in Tilak's view, created ambiguity regarding their identities. These concerns arose from Tilak's adherence to Protestant thought and his desire for clarity and precision in religious expression.

In Tilak's eyes, the use of the local form of *ovi* by Sangale to reveal the composer's identity in the songs was another point of contention. Tilak perceived this as self-centered behaviour, which he believed should be reserved for nationalist reformers associated with cultural organizations like *Prarthana samaj* and *Ekeshavari panth*[29]. Tilak's writings beyond poetry demonstrate his political engagements that go beyond the realm of *bhakti* traditions. To fully comprehend Tilak's understanding of an Indian expression of Christianity, it is crucial to examine his Marathi writings apart from devotional poetry.

Tilak's inclination towards Christianity becomes apparent through his diary entry, where he contemplates the perceived limitations of Hinduism. According to Tilak, Christianity offered a sense of tranquillity, devoutness, moral principles, ethical conduct and the promise of salvation. These qualities, which Tilak finds lacking in the vast expanse of Hinduism, made Christianity more appealing to him. In his own words, Tilak writes, "Instead of living within a Hindu tradition weighed down by thorns, trees, deep valleys, awe-inspiring

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[29] Anarya S. N. Suryavanshi, "Kaviraj," *Jeevan Vachan Prakashan*, 1983, 58. This controversy is mentioned in Anupama Uzgare's Marathi thesis on the poetry of Narayan Vaman Tilak on pages 12-14. According to Suryavanshi's article, Krushnaratna Sangale's devotional song sparked controversy. Tilak took umbrage at the fact that none of the sentences in Sangale's collection of 101 songs, "Krushnaratna," mention the proper word Yesu or Christ. Sangale instead used common names such as *guru*, *sadhguru*, and *prabhu*. The poet also modelled himself on the poets of the *varkari* tradition by employing the refrain "krushna mhane," which was inspired by Tukaram's genre of *abhang*. Tilak objected to Sangale's omission of Christ's proper name and the incorporation of the composer's identity as a sant *kavi* into his compositions. Tilak felt that Sangale's formal strategies made the poet appear self-centered, and such poetry belonged to among the milieu of national reformers like *Prarthana samaj* and *Ekeshavari panth.*

mountains, fearful deserts and deceitful groves, it feels pleasant to live in the small garden of perennial and prosperous *dharam*-of-Christ"[30].

[30]Uzgare, "Kavivarya Narayan Vaman Tilak: Ek Adhyayan," 10. The marathi phrase used in the sentence is: "*sada prafullit ani suphulit Christrupidharma*"

Section III:

Forms of Tilak's Poetry

In this section, I list my first impressions of one of Tilak's Marathi *kirtans* titled "Prem Samadhi". I then compare Winslow's English translation of the *kirtan* with my English translation that retains indigenous categories. By highlighting the significance of the indigenous categories in Reverend Tilak's Marathi compositions, I challenge the dominant missionary narrative that assumes consonance between Protestant Christianity and *bhakti* traditions. The following are my first impressions based on reading of Marathi *kirtan*, which was first published in an anthology titled *Tilkanchi Kavita* in 1914.

In Marathi, the *kirtan* is titled "*Premsamadhi ,*" which Winslow translates as "*Love's Samadhi*[31]." The term *samadhi* has various cultural meanings. Christian Novetzke's study of the Marathi *varkari* poet *sant* Namdev explores these cultural meanings within the Sanskrit and Marathi speaking communities of thirteen-century Maharashtra. Literally meaning "put together, union" in Sanskrit, Novetzke suggests that the term *samadhi* was adapted in Marathi *bhakti* in three different ways. First, *sant* Jnandev's biography whose authorship is ascribed to Namdev is called *samadhi*. Second, a "deep meditative state" that another sant-poet Jnandev is said to have undertaken, as described by Namdev, is also called *samadhi*[32]. Finally, the physical location and memorial where Jnandev is set to be present after his break from the material world is called *samadhi*.[33]

Two common themes recur across these three meanings. First, *samadhi* is a state of being in union with a deity, which might be symbolized by an experience of death. Second,

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[31]Winslow, *The Indian Mystic*, 108.
[32] Christian Lee Novetzke, *The Quotidian Revolution: Vernacularization, Religion, and the Premodern Public Sphere in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 365.
[33] Novetzke, 365.

samadhi could be a physical manifestation or memorial signifying that experience. Winslow translates *samadhi* as a "trance-like ecstasy" and suggests that austere way of life is a means to the experience[34]. He further explains his understanding of the state of *samadhi* as a "sense of union with God in which all consciousness of the material world was lost" [35]. By preserving the Marathi title of the song in his English translation, Winslow integrates metaphorical associations of "*samadhi*" as a state of spiritual union, particularly one involving bodily commitment to Protestant Christianity.

According to Winslow's biography, Tilak embodied the role of a "many-sided Christian worker" for whom Christianity was both everyday "life" and a call to renunciations (in Marathi, "*sannyas*")[36]. Winslow further mentions that Tilak could "commune with God" only toward the end of his life[37]. While the biography depicts Tilak's journey from being a householder to a renunciate in a linear order, the poem delves into the tensions arising from the dual expectations of his roles as a Christian worker. The poem explores the interplay between bodily suffering, spiritual sensitivity, and renunciation of the material world, following a profound encounter with the deity. The ultimate outcome of the struggle remains implicit in the poem, although the poet-devotee hints at a preference for uninterrupted spiritual commune with the deity.

In its Marathi form, the *kirtan* consists of six couplets and is based on the rhythm of another Marathi *kirtan* called "*ankit padanbubaji dasi* "[38].This *kirtan* is neither explicitly addressed to any specific deity nor does it reveal the identity of its singers or performers. It describes a series of events that occur while sleeping and is narrated using a somber tone. All

[34] Winslow, *The Indian Mystic*, 108.
[35] Winslow 1923, page no 109
[36] Winslow, *The Indian Mystic*, 111.
[37] Winslow, 111.
[38] Tilak and Uzgare, Bhaskar Krishna, *Reverend Tilkanchi Kavita: Volume I*, 108.

incidents in the song are reported in passive voice. Consequently, the song presents an impressionistic description of activities, using indigenous categories such as *murti*, *hruday*, *mati*, and *vrutti* [39]. In the following table, I juxtapose Winslow's translation on the left side with my English translation of the song (on the right side), which retains indigenous categories.

Ah, *Love*, I sink in the timeless sleep, Sink in the timeless sleep; One *Image* stands before my eyes, And thrills my *bosom's* deep; One *Vision* bathes in *radiant light* My spirit's palace-halls; All stir of hand, all *throb of brain*, Quivers, and sinks, and falls My soul fares forth; no fetters now Chain me to this world's shore Sleep! I would sleep! In pity spare; Let no man wake me more!	Dear, I slept in the most wishful way. A sleep lush and deep *Murti* swelled in eyes. Engulfed my whole *hruday* Colors infused my *mati.* In dream All thoughts all work Stood still. How do I now relate to the world? *Vrutti* lost its delight. Let me dwell here. Do not wake me up. You cruel ones!

Winslow's translation of Tilak's poem instigates two consequential shifts. Primarily, the representation of the deity undergoes a significant change as the tangible form of the deity, commonly known as *murti*, gives way to a more metaphorical depiction, employing the imagery of light. Second, the vast repertoire of indigenous categories signifying interiority converges, dissolving into a singular category of the soul.

[39] Tilak and Uzgare, Bhaskar Krishna, 101.

In Winslow's translation of Tilak's poem, time and sleep deepen as the poet "sinks" into a slumber. The divine reveals itself through visual imagery, captivating the devotee with metaphors of profuse luminosity. The poem is set in motion by the appearance of the divine, overwhelming the devotee with radiant light and brightness. Winslow does not define or name the central subject of his poem. In contrast, he alludes to the subject using non-specific terms like "Image" and "Vision"[40]. On the other hand, Winslow expresses poet-devotees' responses to their deity using metaphors of physical sensations. For example, the poet-devotee's heart "thrills" as he is confronted by the deity; the motion of their hands and brain come to a halt as they are overcome by luminosity[41]. Winslow's translation emphasizes the active agency of light, image, and vision. These slow and gradual interventions by the deity stand in contrast to the swift and immediate responses of the poet-devotee.

Swift physical motions personify the poet's profound attraction to the deity. Notably, absent in Tilak's Marathi original, the concept of the human soul becomes the driving force behind the devotees response to the divine vision. Winslow writes, "my soul fares forth"[42]. Winslow uses the concept of the soul to express devotees' affective responses. The soul, serving as a guide, pulls the poet-devotee towards the divine foregrounding an active agency of the poet-devotee. Winslow uses the concept of soul to replace various indigenous categories such as *hruday*, *mati*, and *vrutti*, which are variously used in the *varkari* context to connote interior feelings and temperament. On the other hand, Winslow describes the body and brain in a literal manner emphasizing their biological nature. Overwhelmed by visual stimulation, these faculties are suspended, while the intellectual and physical aspects of the poet come to a halt. The sombre tone of the poem resonates with the invoked imagery of

[40] Winslow, *The Indian Mystic*, 108.
[41] Winslow, 108.
[42] Winslow, pp. 108

stillness. As the rhythm of time slows, the poetic persona embraces the unfolding experience, seeking delight within the realm of dreams.

In contrast to the temporary suspension of physiological functions, affective faculties become active, driven by the concept of the soul. Winslow's translation illustrates the soul guiding the poet-devotee's heart, as seen in the lines, "My soul fares forth, no longer fettered to this world's shore"[43]. In Winslow's translation, the poet-devotee asserts the imperative to sequester the material world to immerse oneself in the realm of interiority and profound spiritual encounters evoked by the interplay between the soul and the divine. Consequently, everyday existence becomes distinctly demarcated from the spiritual realm. Moreover, it is this transcendent encounter with the divine that initiates the soul's transformative journey, propelling it from the corporeal to the ethereal plane.

Tilak states in the Marathi version of the *kirtan* that the events recounted in the poem occur while he is asleep. In this stage, an embodiment of Hindu deity, locally called *murti* appears in the front of the poet-devotee. The poet's awareness is flooded with the deity's love, rendering thoughts and earthly pursuits (*karya*) superfluous. The poet-devotee feels alienated from the physical universe while explaining how his attraction with worldly allures has waned. The poet-devotee's encounter with *murti* is a pivotal act in the poem, leading the poet to a deep sleep as the heart surrenders and the mind absorbs the essence of the deity. The poet savours the experience of being absorbed in the deity's presence, urging against any disruption.

The presence of the category of *murti* in the Marathi *kirtan* indicates a strong influence of Hindu devotional practices. In my translation of Tilak's *kirtan*, I retain the

[43] Winslow, *The Indian Mystic*, 108.

concept of *murti* - an embodied deity. The category of *murti*, however, does not reveal the specific identity of the deity. In Hindu traditions, deities are represented through discernible forms such as iconic and aniconic images. The concept of *murti* signifies more than a mere resemblance; it stands for the actual reality of the deity itself. Diana L. Eck, in her book *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* suggests that the Sanskrit meaning of the word murti implies a "congealing of form[44]." Eck explains that a murti is "the deity itself taken form"[45]. By including the concept of *murti*, the Marathi *kirtan* preserves the modality of Hindu worldview.

The presence of *murti* in Tilak's Marathi *kirtan* suggests an integration of the modalities of Hindu devotional practices into Christian worship[46]. In contrast to Winslow's arguement that Tilak was opposed to "idolatry" (in Marathi, "*murtipujan*"), the inclusion of *murti* in Tilak's Marathi *kirtan* suggests a deployment of Hindu devotional practices for Christian worship. According to Diana L. Eck, Hindu devotion encompasses not only honour but also affection expressed through ritual acts and gestures towards the *murti*[47]. Through the presence of *murti* and its accompanying implications, Tilak's Marathi *kirtan* reflects the integration of Hindu devotional practices into Christian worship, contradicting Winslow's notion of Tilak's opposition to "idolatry".

The interpretation of Tilak's poem in my English translation diverges from Winslow's by avoiding the suggestion of a dream-like realm. In my English translation of the poem, I maintain the semi-conscious state of sleep as depicted in Winslow's rendition. However, I

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[44] Diana L. Eck, *Darśan, Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 2nd rev. and enl. ed (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 38.
[45] Diana L. Eck, 38
[46] J. C. 1882-1974 Winslow, *The Indian Mystic : Some Thoughts on India's Contribution to Christianity* (London : Student Christian Movement, 1926), 16.
[47] Eck, *Darśan, Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 47.

diverge from Winslow's interpretation by refraining from implying that the events occur within the realm of a dream. Tilak's Marathi poem alludes to the unfolding events taking place during slumber without specifying a particular social context. To understand the significance of social context in varkari bhakti, it is important to consider the polemical potential it holds.

In the context of *bhakti*, the imagined location of a *bhakta* (devotee) in *varkari bhakti* carries polemical potential. Christian Novetzke, in his analysis of the interplay of various modes of religiosity in the *bhakti* tradition of sant Namdev, highlights this aspect. Novetzke explains that although Namdev's vision of *bhakti* situates a *bhakta* outside the realm of economics and culture, they are still firmly rooted "within a socially shared space of devotion"[48].

The English translations by both Winslow and me share a common topography of dreams, yet they convey distinct meanings within their respective contexts. When viewed through the lens of *varkari bhakti*, the setting of Tilak's poem assumes a polemical nature as the deity presents itself to the devotee independently, free from any textual authority or prescribed rituals. In my translation, by preserving the semi-conscious state of slumber, I aim to capture the import of the indigenous category of *murti* while avoiding the implication of a dream-like scenario. This distinction accentuates the varying worldviews conveyed by the two translations.

At first glance it might seem that the social context of the poem is lost when the setting is a dream. However, it is important to remember that the *bhajans* are embedded in a larger genre of performance called *kirtans*. I used a textual collection in my analysis.

[48] Novetzke, *The Quotidian Revolution*, 13.

Nonetheless, given the style and genre of these poems, they are intended to be performed collectively and in conjunction with other genres. When performed in the genre of *kirtan*, possibilities for dramatically different interpretations open. It is further worth noting that the *kirtan* borrows its tune from another *kirtan* referencing a local religious leader, enabling the devotees to carry forward previous associations into their own interpretations.

Section IV:
Theological Re-fashioning of Christ

In Section III, I delved into different perspectives through which a *varkari* poet-devotee might have envisioned their relationship with the Christian God, as depicted in both Tilak's Marathi *kirtan* and Winslow's English translation. In the subsequent paragraphs, I will further analyze the multiple ways in which the Christian God is conceptualized in Tilak's Marathi *kirtan* titled "Christ, Guru, *Mauli*," as well as in Winslow's English translation. First, I will list my initial impressions upon reading Tilak's *kirtan* in Marathi. Then, I will compare Winslow's translation with my own English translation that maintains indigenous categories. By examining how Tilak and Winslow employ gendered pronouns to shape the form of the Christian God, I propose that Winslow incorporates *varkari* conceptions of deity into Protestant Christianity. On the left side, I present Winslow's translation of the *kirtan*, while on the right side, I present my translation of Tilak's Marathi *kirtan*, retaining the indigenous categories.

The Mother-Guru[49]	Krist's Motherly Love
Refrain (at the beginning and after each verse)	Krist, guru, māulī, she, my mother, dear Krist guru mauli
Tenderest Mother-Guru mine, Saviour, where is love like Thine?	For those scorched by sin's blazing fire She, a redeeming shadow
A cool and never-fading shade To souls sin's fierce heat dismayed:	My loving mother, Krist, guru, māulī Krist guru māulī
He made Him friends to those that mourn With hearts by meek contrition torn"	To aid my sinful self, in need of passage, Descended swiftly from the heavens.
For me, a sinner, yea, for me He hastened to the bitter Tree:	Krist, guru, māulī, my dear mother Krist guru mauli

[49] Winslow, *The Indian Mystic*, 91.

And still within me living, too, He fills my being through and through My heart is all one melody — “Hail to Thee Christ, all hail to Thee!”	For the ones steeped in remorse, at her feet She turned us into her disciples. Krist, guru, māulī, my dear mother Krist guru mauli For me, the sinner, the one on *stambh* Hastened her demise. Krist, guru, māulī, my dear mother, Krist guru mauli Within the recesses of my heart My māulī resides, ever-present. Krist, guru, māulī, my dear mother, Krist guru mauli. Krist, Krist, jai! Krist, Krist, jai! Krist, Krist, jai! Krist, Krist, jai! Her devotion imbues my *mati* Krist guru mauli, my dear mother Krist guru mauli.

“Christ, Guru, Mauli” is a traditional *kirtan* through which a deity is addressed. Various qualities are ascribed to the deity in a cumulative manner. However, motherhood remains a central defining feature of the deity. The poet recollects various ways in which the deity nurtures him and the ones around him: She redeems the ones who are anguished by the flames of their sins, she rescues the poet-devotee when required, and she nurtures the desolate refugee who arrives at her feet. Her presence permeates the body of the poet-devotee.

The *kirtan* “Christ, Guru, Mauli,” was first published as a Christian song in an anthology of devotional songs in the year 1912. In Tilak’s kirtan, *māulī* is a proper noun mentioned alongside “Krist” and “Guru”. Its specificity excludes everyday maternal aspects. In contrast, “*maay*” (literally, “mother”) is a common noun that invites intimate expressions with possessive, non-honorific, and feminine pronouns, representing the devotee’s

earnestness, desires, and love. To grasp the metaphorical implications of the mother figure in Tilak's *kirtan*, I explore the associated meanings in *varkari bhakti*. Additionally, I elucidate the distinctions between Tilak's usage of "*māulī*" and the term "*maay*" in the following paragraphs.

The term "*māulī*" in *varkari* bhakti refers to its central deity Vitthal. Scholars of old Marathi Shankar Gopal Tulpule and Anne Feldhaus translate the term as a "loving mother"[50]. They further suggest that the term first appears in the Marathi language in the oeuvre of the twelfth century poet-saint Chakradhar[51]. Within the context of *varkari* bhakti, the term acquires a more specific meaning. Novetzke suggests that *māulī* is one of the popular names for the thirteen-century poet-saint Namdev in Marathi, symbolizing him as a "mother" to his devotees and potentially the progenitor of Marathi literature[52]. Additionally, the term "*māulī"* is associated with the deity central deity of the *varkari* tradition —Vitthal, who is often referred to as "Mother Vitthal" or *Vitthai*[53].

Novetzke further explores the use of metaphors of motherhood in *varkari bhakti* traditions, where the Sanskrit Vedic and oral text *Bhagavad Gita* is recast as a mother figure sought by poet Namdev with childlike need and love[54]. Consequently, Namdev adopts childlike language in his conversation with Nivritti, his elder brother who appears as both a

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[50] Shankar Tulpule and Anne Feldhaus, eds., *A Dictionary of Old Marathi* (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1999), 539.
[51] Tulpule and Feldhaus, 539.
[52] Christian Lee Novetzke, *The Quotidian Revolution: Vernacularization, Religion, and the Premodern Public Sphere in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 179. For a radically different conceptualization of the figure of *māulī* as a form of a village goddess Vithalai, see Rāmacandra Cintāmaṇa Ḍhere and Anne Feldhaus, *The Rise of a Folk God: Viṭṭhal of Pandharpur*, South Asia Research (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.
[53] Novetzke, *The Quotidian Revolution: Vernacularization, Religion, and the Premodern Public Sphere in India*, 341.
[54] Novetzke, 228.

"guru" and a "mother" to him in *Jñāneshvari,* which is a Marathi rendition of *Bhagavad Gita*[55].

In the realm of *varkari* bhakti, places, people, and objects associated with knowledge and authority are metaphorically referred to as mothers, while the practitioner of the *bhakti* tradition is attributed childlike qualities. As an example, Novetzke notes that the *varkari* poet-saints regularly referred to Pandharpur—the most important pilgrimage centre for *varkari* bhakti— as their "*maher*", which means the natal home of a bride[56]. Thus, in *varkari bhakti*, the convention is to employ the trope of mother-child relationship, which shapes the nature of the devotee's initiation into a new tradition. The mother serves as both an authoritative figure and a patient teacher.

Tilak introduces the *varkari* connotations of motherhood into Protestant Christianity, blending the roles of authoritative figure and patient teacher through the term *māulī.* Tilak's use of female voice stands in contrast to other *bhakti traditions*, such as *vacana* poetry, where the use of female voices takes on a more expansive and nuanced role. Consider the case of Mahadeviyakkam, a twelfth-century poet, who incorporates pan-Indian imagery of love poetry into her devotional verses, eloquently addressing the deity as "*cennamallikarjuna*," thereby invoking a form of deity Shiva called *Mallikarjuna* as a physically attractive lover[57]. Likewise, Nammalvar, a ninth-century Tamil poet, articulated evocative phrases using female protagonists. As Venkatesan astutely notes that during the moments of profound anguish, "it seems only a woman's voice can capture the corporal and sensory dimensions of desire" [58].

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[55] Novetzke, 228–29.
[56] Novetzke, 350.
[57] A. K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, The Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, 125.

[58]Nammāḻvār and Archana Venkatesan, *Endless Song: Tiruvāymoḻi,* Penguin Classics (Gurugram, Haryana, India: Penguin Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2020), 23.

In contrast, the *varkari* expressions predominantly revolve around the prism of motherhood. Within the domain of *kirtan*, Tilak harnesses the gendered voice to access the tender and affectionate facets of the deity. However, the expressions of mischief, banter, and eroticism so prevalent in other *bhakti* traditions remain conspicuously absent from Tilak's exploration of *varkari bhakti*. Moreover, he makes no endeavour to infuse those voices into the devotional songs of Protestant Christianity. Consequently, even when Tilak attributes a feminine essence to Christ, the associations firmly anchored in motherhood emerge as the sole elements that permeate his verses.

Winslow's English translation of Tilak's *kirtan* eschews the recursive structure, infusing the hymn with lucidity and lyricism distinct from Tilak's rendition. Titled "The Mother-Guru," Winslow's translation prioritizes an action-driven narrative, diverging from Tilak's focus on portraying Christ. Winslow's adaptation involves the removal of the refrain, substitution of a male pronoun for the deity, replacement of the local category of *mati* with that of a heart, and the introduction of consonance of heart and body. Through these thematic changes and structural adjustments, the ecstatic tone characteristic of Tilak's *kirtan* becomes subdued.

In contrast, Winslow omitted the refrain in his English translation, resulting in the loss of the recurring central subject of the poem. He replaced the Marathi epithet "Krist, Guru, *māulī*," with "Mother-Guru," erasing the specific cultural connotations associated with *māulī*. "Mother-Guru" emerges as a category to invoke the presence of Christ but is only present in the title and first couplet of the hymn, serving as an indirect way to address Christ. By transposing the cultural worlds associated with the figures of mother and *guru* in *varkari* bhakti traditions onto the figure of Christ, the cultural resource of *bhakti* is incorporated into the idioms of Anglican Christianity.

It is worth noting that Winslow's English version is intended for readers within the Anglican Church. Although it may appear that Winslow edited out *varkari* connotations in his translation, it is important to recognize that he advocated for the use of *varkari kirtans* in the Ahmednagar mission. Winslow is faced with the limitations of form and language in his translation. With this context in mind, Winslow's adjustments of *varkari bhakti* in the English language can be understood as his attempts to incorporate categories of *varkari* devotion into the Protestant tradition, rather than an effort to eliminate local elements.

Section V:
Vitthal in Christian and *Varkari* narratives

An assumption prevails in the current missiological scholarship, asserting theological consonance between Protestant Christianity and *varkari bhakti* traditions[59]. However, upon closer examination, it becomes evident that the late-nineteenth century Protestant missionaries' notion of *varkari bhakti* was derived from Sanskrit scholarship, which is only one of the many ways in which *varkari* bhakti has been understood in the modern period.

The centrality of Sanskritic assumptions in the missiological scholarship on *bhakti* raises concerns, prompting us to wonder whether missionaries fully understood *varkari* bhakti as practiced by the larger population they sought to serve. Were Protestant missionaries' understanding of *varkari bhakti* limited to that of the Brahman milieu of the late nineteenth century?

One of the most important pieces of missionary writing on *varkari bhakti* is Reverend Nicol MacNicol's works. For example, the Reverend Nicol MacNicol's book titled *Pslams of Maratha Saints* was published in 1919. In "Preface" to the book, MacNicol suggests that even though religious literature of India was available in abundance, he sensed a dearth of such literature for "ordinary man," and it was to this common man that his book was addressed[60]. The book consists of English translations of hundred and eight *varkari bhajans*,

[59] See Vijay Pinch, "Bhakti and the British Empire," *Past & Present*, no. 179, 2003, 159–96., Martin Paul Alphonse, "The Gospel and Hindu 'Bhakti': Indian Christian Responses from 1900 to 1985 - a Study in Contextual Communication," Ph.D. thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Mission; Malcolm J. Nazareth, "Reverend Narayan Vaman Tilak: An Interreligious Exploration", Ph.D. thesis, United States -Pennsylvania, Temple University, accessed July 5, 2023. .

[60] Nicol Macnicol, *Psalms of Marāṭhā Saints : One Hundred and Eight Hymns Translated from the Marathi by Nicol Macnicol* (Calcutta : Association Press ; London ; New York : Oxford University Press, 1920), 4.

which he sourced from "*varkari* singers" and the Sanskrit scholar Sir Ramakrishna Bhandarkar[61].

On examining MacNicol's text, it seems that his understanding of *varkari bhakti* was largely influenced by scholars of Sanskrit texts belonging to Brahmin milieu. MacNicol underlines the central philosophy of his book, "*Advaita* (non-duality) and *bhakti* are not so much as… contradictory theories of the universe as varying modes of Hindu mind"[62]. Both MacNicol and Winslow underline that *varkari bhakti* represented anti-institutional tendencies, theological depth, and centrality of inner self in forming an intimate relationship with the deity. They recognized *bhakti* as a distinct religious mode that transcended the confines of caste and the karmic cycle.

At a theological level, Protestant missionaries found themselves genuinely attracted to *bhakti* traditions, seeing in them the potential for the fulfilment of Christ. The ideas of personal devotion aligned with a parallel movement for devotionalism in Victorian Britain[63]. The growing influence of fulfilment theory led Protestant missionaries to believe that Christ could be fulfilled through *bhakti* traditions.

In this section, I argue that although some theological aspects of *varkari bhakti* did resonate with the ethos of Protestant Christianity, various other ideas of *bhakti* were at play in Hindu-Christian interactions. In the following section, I draw out varying assumptions about *varkari bhakti* in the accounts of Protestant missionaries, Tilak- a Brahmin Christian convert, and non-Brahmin Christian practitioners of *varkari bhakti*. In laying out diverging understandings of *bhakti*, I illustrate how missionary understanding of *varkari bhakti* did not intersect with non-Brahmin practitioners of *bhakti*. Thus, I challenge the prevailing

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[61] Macnicol, 6.
[62] Macnicol, *Psalms of Marāṭhā Saints*, 22.
[63] Pinch, "Bhakti and the British Empire."

assumption in missiological studies that claims the consonance of Protestant Christianity and *varkari bhakti*.

MacNicol's anthology encompasses the writings of "some of the chief Vaishnavite poets of the Mahratha country" signifying the cultural and religious breadth of the *varkari bhakti* traditions[64]. Central to his thesis is the proposition that the poems of these "Maratha pslamists," which seemingly were opposed to the Vedanta creed, underscore the primacy of "conscious experience", a characteristic both *Advaita* and *bhakti* theologies emphasize[65]. To illustrate this argument, MacNicol refer to the fourteenth century saint Namdev, who according to him exalted inner devotion over the Marathi translation of the Sanskrit text *Bhagavad Gita*, which he is believed to have authored.

The anthology, proofed by W. B. Patwardhan of Fergusson College (of Pune) and V. A. Sukthankar of Indore includes *kirtans* supplied by the esteemed Sanskrit scholar, Sir Ramakrishna Bhandarkar[66]. Importantly, MacNicol emphasizes that these *kirtans* were not merely academic pursuits for Bhandarkar, but integral elements of his daily spiritual practice. Ramkrishna Bhandarkar was one of the early indologists in India who received his PhD from Gottingnen University in 1885. Trained in comparative and historical methods of studying philology and archaeology, Bhandarkar was one of the founders of *Prarthana samaj*, a monotheistic reformist movement centered around the Marathi saint Vitthal.

In his text 1928, *Vaisnavism, Saivism, and Minor Religious Systems*, Ramakrishna Bhandarkar traces the origin of Vaishnavism to the fifth century before Christ. He

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[64] .Macnicol, *Psalms of Marāṭhā Saints*, 5.
[65] Macnicol, 24.
[66]Bhandarkar Ramkrishna Gopal, *Vaisnavism Saivism And Minar Religious Systems*, 1928, 6.

characterizes the tradition as a form of "religious reform," initially known as "*Ekantika Dharam*," which he explains as "single-minded love and devotion to the One. [67]"

Underlining the key personalities instrumental in shaping the religion, Bhandarkar draws attention to the role of a devotee named Pundalika. Bhandarkar proposes that Pundalika, a devout follower, was instrumental in establishing the cult of Vitthal. This claim is anchored in a story connecting the shrine of Vitthal in Pandharpur to Krishna. The narrative goes that Krishna's wife Rukmini, distanced due to a conflict, sought refuge at Pundalika's home. Known for his devotion to his elderly parents, Pundalika was serving them when Krishna arrived to meet Rukmini. Unable to divert his attention from his parents, Pundalika threw a brick, or "*vit*", for Krishna to stand on, asking him to wait. It is in these pivotal moments of service and devotion, Bhandarkar suggests, that the essence of Vaishnavism is embodied and memorialized at Krishna's shrine in Pandharpur.

As the narrative unfolds, Bhandarkar makes an intriguing proposition about the deity worshipped in Pandharpur, locally revered as Vitthal. Bhandarkar posits that the deity is essentially a regional manifestation of Vishnu. He underscores the importance of *varkari bhakti*, a specific form of Krishna devotion, in local culture.

Beyond the deities and forms of worship, Bhandarkar draws attention to the religious leaders who shaped the *varkari bhakti*. He highlights that most of the religious leaders among the traditions of *varkari bhakti* were "Sudra prophets"[68]. Among the various *bhakti* poets, Bhandarkar distinguishes *varkari* saint-poets Namdev and Tukaram, and Kabir as notable poets. The verses of these three saint-poets Bhandarkar argues stressed "purification of the individual's heart and moral elevation" to the "attainment of eternal bliss"[69].

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[67]Bhandarkar Ramkrishna Gopal, 24.
[68] Bhandarkar Ramkrishna Gopal, 127.
[69] Bhandarkar Ramkrishna Gopal, 144.

A parallel devotional ethic had evolved in late Victorian Britain, which resonated with *bhakti* traditions[70]. William Pinch, citing Owen Chadwick's work on 'Victorian devotion', brings this intriguing correlation to light, revealing how similar devotional currents flowed in seemingly disparate cultural contexts. The theology of *bhakti*, as eloquently expounded by Bhandarkar, found an audience among the devotional movement in Victorian Britain. Within the realm of *varkari bhakti*, Protestant missionaries discovered a path to deepen their devotion, seeking in them the potential for shared spiritual connections. It was the heart of this tradition— the focus on an inner core and the cultivation of intimate relationships with the deity— that strongly resonated with the missionaries. They felt a genuine pull towards *varkari bhakti*, recognizing in it the potential for shared spiritual connections.

It was within this intellectual backdrop, Tilak's spiritual quest unfolded. Tilak's life was marked by continuous learning and transformation. As a young boy, he studied at a vernacular school, immersed himself in learning *shastric* methodologies, and later translating Sanskrit texts into Marathi. He is even said to have mastered English in his late teens by memorizing sections of an English dictionary.

As Tilak's understanding of religious traditions grew, so did his capacity to question and redefine them. Winslow's biography offers insights into Tilak's evolving spiritual tendencies, highlighting a pivotal period when Tilak, having abandoned the tenets of "Hindu orthodoxy," described his own religious philosophy. Significantly, Tilak's idea of religion rejected conventional concepts such as *karma*, reincarnation, caste, and "idol worship" [71].

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[70] Pinch, "Bhakti and the British Empire," 173.
[71] H. L. Richard and H. L. Richard, *Following Jesus in the Hindu Context: The Intriguing Implications of N.V. Tilak's Life and Thought*, Pasadena, California: Willia, Carey Library, 1998), 18.

As Winslow narrates, this phase of spiritual evolution, however, was interrupted by a chance encounter with a Christian man on train. This meeting introduced Tilak to the teachings of the New Testament, profoundly shaping his perspectives and eventually leading him to embrace Christianity. It is crucial to note that this conversion occurred within a broader context of diverse devotional movements, underscoring Tilak's genuine interest in understanding and learning from various religious traditions.

With his conversion, Tilak's understanding of religion underwent another transformative phase. He began to reinterpret and adapt his prior religious beliefs within the framework of his newfound faith. The central question that guided this phase of his theological exploration was, "How can we speak of Jesus as the 'guru of the world?[72]"" Despite this significant shift, Tilak continued to engage with a variety of other religious and philosophical sources, demonstrating his ongoing commitment to religious learning. In conclusion, Tilak's journey represents a personal religious innovation within a richly diverse and dynamic spiritual landscape.

Broadly speaking, the interpretations of *varkari bhakti* tradition tend to vary greatly, with a particularly marked difference observed between the views of Protestant missionaries, Tilak, and Marathi scholars of *varkari bhakti*. Protestant missionaries, including Tilak, predominantly viewed *varkari bhakti* as a singular expression of Vitthal, the central deity of this tradition, whom they viewed as a manifestation of the Vaishnavite Krishna. They wholeheartedly practiced devotion towards religious leaders as a crucial aspect of their spiritual engagement. However, this interpretation seemed to omit a significant facet of the *varkari bhakti* tradition, namely its deeply rooted folk dimensions. As mentioned earlier,

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[72] H. L. Richard and H. L. Richard, *Following Jesus in the Hindu Context: The Intriguing Implications of N.V. Tilak's Life and Thought*, Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1998, x.

Tilak's early writings in Marathi (published before conversion) demonstrate an awareness of various other folk traditions and village goddesses. However, Tilak understands Vitthal as a Vaishnavite deity in relation to Christianity.

Ramchandra Dhere, whose scholarly work is based on the folk ideas of about Vitthal suggests that the folk deity Vitthal is not mentioned either in *Vedas*, *Smritis*, or *Puranas*, which are classical texts of Hindu traditions[73]. He underlines the fact that projection of Vitthal in the form of Visnu-Krsna is only one of the many ways in which the deity was conceived of my *varkari* poets. He underlines that *varkari* saint-poets were aware the Vitthal had a distinguished identity from the "twenty-four [incarnations][74]. It was only at the end of the eleventh century that Vitthal began to be associated with Krishna devotion. Even when Vitthal accrued Vaishnavite meanings, the deity continued to retain its folk characteristics. It is because of this complexity of the figure of the deity Vitthal that Dhere calls him a deity "who brings about a great confluence of many religious streams"[75]. These multiple associations related to Vitthal are missed out on in the writings of Jack Copley Winslow, Nicol MacNicol, R. B. Bhandarkar, and Narayan Vaman Tilak.

[73] Ḍhere and Feldhaus, *The Rise of a Folk God*, 7.
[74] Ḍhere and Feldhaus, 3.
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