From the 'Public' and the 'Oral': Orature and Performance in the Medieval Indian 'Public Sphere'

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Abstract: The idea of orality has played an important function in defining cultural identity. A significant facet of this cultural identity remains rooted in particular religious systems of thought. This includes the attitudinal approach towards the spoken 'word' and the letters that validate/document its existence. With the rise of early modernism in Europe, authenticity and absolutism became dominant modes of human inquiry that supplanted everything that is 'non-scientific'; that is every aspect of human imagination that is resistant to the methodology of empiricism and logical positivism. With the rise in print culture in Europe, the popular understanding of literature became rigidly literary that expedited the already established culture of defining literature (erstwhile religio-centric) in terms of scriptures and texts (that regulated rituals). Interestingly, the secular, humanistic culture that symbolised the ideology of the European enlightenment, created a public sphere (as Habermas pointed out) that too engaged in written debates in philosophy and politics that catered to a wider readership over the culture of orality (that had limited community function).

However, in India, the public sphere can be traced back to medieval times. With Islamic rule in Delhi and its expansion throughout the country, a regular outcome can be observed in rapidly constricting spaces for the Sanskritized Hindu practices (in temples that often invited attacks from the Muslim rulers) governed by written scriptures. This peculiarly led to a radical assertion of the Hindu belief system that on one hand overhauled the discriminatory and oppressive Brahminical dominance (the *varna* and caste system) and on the other hand, resisted the attritions from the Sultanate. This also led to the repudiation of the Sanskrit language and its written efforts while founding itself on story-telling, devotional songs and oral performances that radically altered public spaces and gave birth to an idea of a religion that was borne out and for these spaces (as opposed to the specificity/purity of the temple system).

In this paper, I present and study the effects of orality and orature in redefining, if not substituting, the very idea of religious literature and hence mass identity in the medieval Indian condition. For greater comprehension, I limit myself to the Maharashtrian scene while majorly focussing on Namdev, an anti-caste and devoted religious performer who is believed to deny 'writing' its exclusive space. I argue that oral performances were the bulk of contemporary religious literature that redefined hierarchy, religious temperament and the idea of resistance in a public sphere that adhered to faith and faith alone. This would be contrasted in a sharp antithetical understanding of the European public sphere and the very 'belief' in rationality under the modern condition.

Keywords: public sphere, reason, rationality, orality, literature, faith, performances, memory

The idea of the oral is probably one of the most important investigating loci for what we attempt to define as literature today. The domineering proposition that literature is of the 'literary' is a symptomatic presumption upon the idea that 'literature' can be 'constructed', defined and delimited according to what may emerge as evidences of human cultural expression. In other words, the

language of community construction and artistic exploration, that includes pictorial, runic and even inscriptional sources, besides of course the wider and more common spread of the ink and print manuscripts, has conventionally claimed a hegemonic space in the very thought of the discipline itself. This expands as much as to envelope the beliefs of both individuals and groups in academia as much as what comes across as the popular myths of the 'masses' about the constitution of literature as a recourse to artistic pleasure. However, the art of writing that has always been intrinsically related to the functions of memory and the tunes of music have an extra-tangible, textual boundary that moves beyond the realms of 'works' and 'texts' and with post-modern thought reconceptualises both of them in favour of a certain autonomy and non-originality of ideas. These ideas, as Roland Barthes puts it, modify the very notion of texts and introduce the scriptable element which might, with further interrogation, look at both the oral function and the mnemonic function that have been so integral to the development of the literary tradition.[1]

It is indeed ironic if we glance back at the 'origins' of the global literary endeavour and its inexorable associations with both 'religious' and community functions. Interestingly, both these functions bestowed the 'word' over the letter and the 'idea' above the image.[2] However, with the urges of democratic impulse in readership and on a later stage (in terms of both temporal chronology and through the logic of progression) with the advances of technology, 'writing' itself became the sole defining factor of what can be 'literary' amid its aesthetic and sociological/scientific functions.[3] Culturally, this conflict of literature and orality, tangibility and the ideational, authenticity and the lack of it, definability and indeterminability; all of which bothered the deconstruction tradition at large is, at the most, a problem of language and encompasses the (in)ability of reading.

In this paper, I draw together three interesting elements to look at this problem of language. My study involves the currents of religious tradition during medieval India and the problems of literary authorship as against collective participation in what Habermas would call a 'public sphere'. The 'public sphere' in medieval India, to present through the words of Christian Lee Novetzke, was largely a product of inter-community participation and was situated within quotidian chores which were, directly or indirectly, across Indian geography, related to the workings of religion. But to understand the problem, we would need a brief brush with history. A religion like Hinduism that has based itself on memory for centuries and scripted its democratizing endeavour (in language and through the medium of representation) only in the first millennium of the common era had to shrink against the slew of foreign invasions for more than six centuries before the advent of the British colonials. Interestingly, the Hindu religion had to revert to its oratory impulse and mnemonic faculties to resist the onslaughts of Abrahamic proselytization and its own draconian structure that promoted social exclusion during the entirety of the medieval period; that is before the European Orientalists took great interest in Brahminic scriptures and codified Hindu laws in a major way while neglecting the inherent variations of the Indic society.[4] The medieval period that was marked by Islamic rule was a curious time in different ways. With a power centre that endorsed a disparate and often hostile ideology to the dominant faith among the masses, I present how the medieval times in India led to the rise of a public sphere that not only interacted with state power (that was largely Islamic) through a process of 'cultural reiteration' but with letters that owed much more to orature and oral transmission that which on the one hand, retained the religion that had, through its written injunctions, done great disservice to the very dignity and existence of a large section of its 'own' and on the other hand, wiped away the axioms of discrimination. In other words, orature itself became instrumental in 'revolutionizing' religio-social forces refining and defining the spirit of devotion and constituting the orbit around which literary interpretation is reduced merely to a chance of memory beyond any alignment of history. It concerns itself about offering a space where writing, orality and memory are immanently intertwined in a difficult play for searching facts.

The concept of the 'public' sphere is a recent theory proposed by the German scholar Jürgen Habermas to reflect back on the European society and its operations during the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries. He proposed that what governs the rise of liberal politics and bourgeoisie state is not just electoral democracy alone but also the sphere of public opinion and mutual exchanges, where ideas were traded as much as commodities but with greater implications in the political life of the people. In this, he used the public/private dichotomy to understand distinctive and almost mutually exclusive roles of citizens in two, different spheres of existence that was so intrinsic to the very conception of liberal polity that had embraced capitalist modes of production. Habermas had defined the public sphere as, "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating needs of society with the state."[5] To add on to the condition during the eighteenth century, he explained, "...the private sphere comprised the civil society in the narrower sense, that is to say, the realm of commodity exchange and social labour...This area (the public sphere) is conceptually different from the state: it is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical to the state."[6] Of course, Habermas was aware of the fact that technology, capitalism and the great meta-discourses were ever-ascending factors at the time too but his research proposes the twin effects of the techno-capitalist takeover only by establishing itself in the nineteenth century. This historicity of the public sphere that Habermas finds to be rather marginally affected by the techno-capitalist onslaught has much to do with both oral debates and written discourses; a product of "communicative rationality" that was completely absent in India during its own medieval times (that culturally outlasted the European chronology on modernity).

However, what interests us in this paper is not just the chronological disjunction in comparative studies of culture across civilizations but an understanding of the literary and the social that, in turn, gave birth to cultural expressions. In India, the birth of the public sphere, seemed to have a debatable historical past; right from its Vedic/post-Vedic Gupta period chronicles, the public sphere was an intermediary between the kings (*rajan*) and the working classes *(praja)*. The *prajas* were neither homogenous (like any other hierarchical society) nor neatly devised like the three/four estate divisions in most parts of feudal or early modern Europe. The *prajas* could be located at a curious intersection of *jatis* (mainly categorized in lines of occupational inclinations), *varnas* (the hierarchical and discriminatory division of Hindu society), and *janapads* (geographical locations that influenced the economy and culture of the localized place), all of which went beyond the sole injunctions of the religious scriptures and the rulebooks of kings. Hence while the warrior caste monopolized power, they were considerably helped by the Brahmins (the priestly class) by drafting out laws of provinces according to what could be considered as *dharma*. The same caste also wielded considerable power through its largely insulated hold over academics and culture; and even practices of art like the theatre (based on the Vedic concepts from the *Natyasastra*) that had mass reception was stringently ritualistic as well. In short, the Brahmins were at the centre of the public 'exchange' or at least facilitated the social role of the conduit for social tension/imagination between the masses and kingly rule. This sort of public sphere was definitely nascent if at all existent during early medieval India (eleventh and twelfth centuries) and was largely run either by scripted 'laws' or conventionally established codes of conduct; transgression of which invited penalty.[7]

However, with Hinduism losing considerable space with the advent of the Islamic Sultanate, the pivot of its social influence tilted towards the followers of the Hindu practices from its regulators. Of course, these practices often involved both the ruling class and the priests, but repeated attritions on centres of power (forts, temples, pilgrimage spots) made it difficult for the erstwhile centres of power to sustain themselves. The Islamic attacks definitely had a political purpose along with a logical effect of cultural expansion but the resistance to this cultural confusion (Hindu-Islamic cultural confrontation/synthesis) was propelled by those masses who were so long cast under lower rungs of the *varna/jati* hierarchy.[8] This resistance to chaos cannot be understood as a reductive event in the history of religion, politics or literature; for the resistance to a new political rule created another order of life that drastically resisted the cultural perpetuation within the Hindu rigidity of life itself. Thus, the resistance served the twin purposes of sustenance and reformation.

This 'movement', born out of these twin purposes of resistance and reformation, came later to be identified as the Bhakti cult of reformation. It actually meant faithfulness to devotion if we adhere to its etymological connotations. As opposed to 'reason' propounded by the European thinkers, this movement defined itself through faith. But then, reverting back to Habermas for once might prove to be important. Habermas was studying the eighteenth century European 'culturescape' which had a direct bearing on the Enlightenment tradition. Reason, rationality and the obsession with absolutism emerged as the mainstream foundation that hosted the 'rational' society of liberalism. This fidelity to reason (in absolutist terms) served as the means and the end to public debate and dissent. To apply a word like 'communicative rationality' (an integral term for the Western public sphere) would be grossly incorrect to an Indian situation on which the Bhakti movement was placed. If the European public sphere was committed to liberal rationality and exercise of reason, the public sphere in medieval India was rooted to an unmistakable relation to belief. If European rationalism was a result of the modernizing, anthropocentric project, the Indian medieval public sphere was a confluence of conservatism and radicalism both; it liberated itself from a plethora of exclusionary social and religious systems and at the same point of time, associated itself unflinchingly to a greater religious concern. When the continental age of reason attempted to dilute social arbitrariness in favour of 'scientific' study, the Indian public sphere immersed itself in 'unreason', miracles and poetry. While the former practiced a homogenising detachment to social identity in order to encourage institutional moderation, the latter dealt with an assertion of identity within a sphere quite opposed to political institutions. It is also true that for Europe, the medieval conception of medieval public sphere was very nascent and did not really enter into a socio–politics of disruption (as much as its economy and colonization projects did), but the scenario was very divergent for the Indian lives. The growth of public sphere can be attributed to the intriguing political condition of the Delhi-based empire where Islamic rule was antithetical to the majority of the cultural practices endorsed by the Hindus. This disjunction between the ruling class (the political pyramid that included Muslim rulers along with Hindu *dewans, subedars* and *zamindars*) and the cultural ethos of the ordinary Hindus was further complicated through the disruptive forces of anti–caste reformation. More importantly, this led to the rise to a newer form of literary scholarship that was constituted, to a great extent, by orality and performance. In other words, the dual courses of identity reclamation in the face of a hostile rule and the subversion of the inherent corrosion within the Hindu fold of life created a case of what I call 'double disruption' that led to a spectacularly unique understanding of public engagement. This 'decentring' of the structures of power, structurally on one hand from the Sultanate to the masses, functionally towards the ordinary life in engendering public discourses and on the other hand, from the erstwhile Hindu rulers and priests to ordinary lower caste Hindus became both the cause and the outcome in an overhaul of the medieval Indian social temperament. Within this cultural flux, literature and its relationship to 'orality' played a very significant role in defining the public sphere.

To present my study, I particularly look at the Maharashtrian region (the current Indian state of Maharashtra) and the idea of this pre-modern public sphere. Maharashtra, during the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, witnessed a slew of religious movements that on the one hand, relegated the veneration of Sanskrit strictly to the temples and its uses, and promoted the rise of what can be termed as "vernacularization" or promotion of Marathi in the quotidian sphere of life, on the other hand, they took recourse to extra-literary, mainly oral sources of performances to sustain and redefine both identity and nuances of religion. The latter, with its essential relationship with literary texts, is the main subject of my discussion. To categorically mention, the two significant extra-literary traditions that affected literature of the medieval period engaged with an overwhelming dependence on stories along with public memory/conversations (about miracles, heroism, devotion and egalitarianism), and performances that were re-lived through the presentation of these stories, often subjected to improvisations aligning with particular contexts and orders of imagination. It

would be important to note that both of these functions are intrinsically related to the functions of orality. In addition to these performances, devotional songs like *kirtan* and *bhajan* had become the most significant element in providing the bulk of medieval 'literature' through story-telling, intense subjectivity and most importantly oral performances. For instance, a lot of material has been presented by the likes of Christian Lee Novetzkee, on a Bhakti saint figure identified as Namdev. Of course, the author's choice of Namdev for his research is exceptional given that Namdev was the major figure in the Marathi Bhakti tradition to have repudiated the need to 'write' whatsoever (historically, Namdev was not well versed with letters). Novetzkee delineates how miracles and cult following within the greater tradition was expressed through oral devotional songs like the *kirtans*. These *bhajans* (interestingly the word *bhajan* shares its semantic connotation with both 'worshipping' and 'sharing'; the term (*dhatu*) *bhaj* refers to sharing and chanting in Marathi scholarship) and *kirtans* are understood to have contributed the major bulk to medieval 'orature' and challenged the authority of scripted texts and their discriminatory ethics. I attempt to cite some instances to understand this issue with better precision.

For instance, in one of these *kirtans*, Namdev is shown to "invert" a temple using his own devotional music and on another instance, he is depicted to grant back life to an associate called Gora Khumbar along with his daughter.[9] Now, there are two very significant points that can be deduced from this instance. First, there remains a metaphorical idea of 'inversion' that of the system of Hindu faith (that located itself in and around the temple; often governed by and according to the rules of the upper strata of society) and the fact that the devotional song is the medium of this inversion. The songs, like I mentioned, were neither scripted nor were dug out from the scriptures; they were immensely personal and often self-composed by the devotee that gained popularity among the masses, embraced modification on several occasions, as it travelled from a geographical space to the other. These *kirtans*, etymologically derived from their conception of devotional service or *dev karya*, can be culturally posed on a contrary plane to Sanskrit *slokas*, the *srutis* and the *smritis*, most of which had been written down with commentaries (*nibandhas*) and thus, founded the plinth on which caste-based discrimination and hierarchical social practices were performed. In this, Namdev's own identity is equally compelling. Traditional remembrance states that Namdev belonged to the tailor caste; that is one of the sub-castes under the *shudra varna* who were traditionally treated as socio-cultural inferiors and as *pariah* figures. Namdev was himself a part of the Varkari sect (a near Vaishnavite sect that worshipped the deity Vitthal as an incarnate of Godhead Vishnu) that included saints from deprived castes like Tukaram and even Chokhamela while the same sect also comprised upper caste figures like Dnyandeva (or Jnanadeva) and Eknath, both of whom belonged to Brahmin families by birth. The public memory that resounds with Dyandev and Namdev's spiritual proximity provided a huge fillip in the anti-caste consciousness that developed outside the halls of cultural and political power.[10] The commonality of this expression was through *kirtans* that not only extended a dialogue and a claim to the porous boundaries of literature but also attempted to substitute the very religious codification that constituted the literature of identity and a ritualistic community. The interesting facet of this also includes the fact that these *kirtans*, though self-composed and symptomatic of intense personal communication with the divine, where mostly performed in public spaces. These included spaces outside the boundaries of the temple structure, crossroads, temporary scaffolds on which various plays were performed and corners of *bazaars*. In this, the language of the personal *kirtan* transmitted and emerged as the language of the public sphere. We will come to this peculiar phenomenon with greater focus in the later portion of this paper.

If Namdev's songs could invert a temple, it was a female figure by the name of Janabai who documented Namdev's public performances and oral preaching almost like a biographer. She refers to Namdev as a master performer and a *kirtankar*; she records that although other saints from the Varkari tradition could modestly write, it was Namdev who knew 'nothing about letters'.[11] In fact Novetzkee points out that if there was any passing mention to the skill of writing when it concerned

the depiction of Namdev, it was only about "the writing of fate".[12] Janabai also insinuates that the most alluring trait of the saint figure is his sole belief in "speaking and listening to the speech of others".[13] A song by Namdev that Janabai records reads like, "*I don't know scripture or lore/I have ignored papers and books/Without verses like pearl-white clouds//I have only spotless gem of the mind.*"[14]

Janabai adds to her record contemplating, "*How many sants of the past/Could speak like Namdev does? Nama went to the temple/And God spoke to him excitedly/Just to tell you about this miracle/Jani the disciple writes this verse.*"[15]

In her loose hagiography about Namdev, Janabai attributes a recitation to him that reads "*Artists have sketched bouquets of flowers/But their lovely perfume cannot be expressed/The moon, the sun and even the reflections/One can learn all this/But the light they give cannot be drawn.*"[16] Similarly on another occasion, Janabai remembers Namdev and an associate called Nivritti, "Nivritti wrote the words that Vitthal placed on Namdev's tongue and Namdev expounded the practice of *namsam*."[17] Both these references are important to understand how the art of writing (that also becomes our sources for research, even in this paper) was establishing a fluid relationship to orality and performance. The question that might cross one's mind in this regard could be if orality is not really the source of every piece of writing in a way given its expressive character? The answer would be in the affirmative. But in this particular case, it was orality and not written texts that was shaping the medieval public sphere. As already mentioned, the other famous characters from the Varkari tradition in Maharashtra could write but none of them shaped public memory through the written records. In fact, though Janabai mentions a register that included the popular saints of the time, she mentions that "people flock to them to watch their performances and listen to their devotion. They write only for a few to read".[18] This is not particularly striking given the condition of literacy in medieval India; India had a very narrow section of upper caste Hindu men and a limited section of Muslim men from the royalty who could read or write in the court/religious/colloquial languages. Indeed then, the instance that Janabai particularly points out regarding oral speeches as the "sun" that could tangibly present a fragment of its reflection in letters can be indicated to affirm that orality was the defining discourse of what we can claim to be 'literature' of the medieval Indian situation; in other words, the written texts were never intended for an audience, they served as adjuncts to anticipated public memory for a future time. In this, the recourse to oral tradition and an expectation of a written future might be an interesting point to note.

Novetzkee questions on similar lines in his book, *Religion and Public Memory: A Cultural History of Namdev in India*, "How can a tradition be preserved over hundreds of years without an explicit reliance on some static form of presentation? How can a process of authenticity and authority be established without the aid of the single author, accountable for the assertions? What is the role of human intervention in an oral/performative chain of transmission?"[19] He insinuates that the reality of such a condition based itself somewhere between the spaces of performance and written records by some devotee or associate that themselves were subjected to multiple revisions and additions.

An important perspective in this debate can be to look at the idea of *kirtan* itself. As already mentioned, *kirtans* derive from the idea of devotional service. But in many Indian cultures, these can be read as 'collective performances', that might include dance, drama and song (as in the southern states of India like Kerala and Tamil Nadu), and might mean only a devotional song sung solo in another southern state like Karnataka. It might mean simply sitting near auspicious spaces of worship in groups and singing religious songs collectively or simple community participation in recital performances as in the northern parts of the nation. In Maharashtra, however, *kirtan* has a combination of all these elements. A panegyric song in praise of the deity is sung by the *kirtankar* that is followed by his invocation of a few popular/moral stories about community/individual conduct and is succeeded by a philosophical interpretation of the tales. What is however intriguing is that though the *kirtankar* plays the most significant role throughout this oral, narrative and musical performance, there are several instances where audiences have taken the liberty to join him and revise/modify

parts of his narrative and the song.[20] This participatory, almost collective impulse can be read in many ways. One can ascribe to it the idea of spiritual and material alienation or a supra-real ecstasy or even a Bakhtinian sort of carnivalesque owing to the resistance it posed to the Islamic rule and societal discrimination within the Hindu fold.

Interestingly, these *kirtans*, as Novetzkee opines, originally meant a 'temple' till the twelfth century of the common era. However, with the Bhakti movement spreading wide across various regions of India, the generic meaning of the art was disrupted to create a dimension outside the confines of Brahminic privileges and the sacrosanct authority of the Sanskrit texts. The idea of space and location that founded itself largely on an extremely limited conception of dwelling (the temples: of the priests, by the kings and the priests, for the priests, kings and the noblemen) evolved into a radically egalitarian and public sphere of life that was surprisingly exposed to all, including the lower sections of the Hindu community at least as an audience if not as the artist. Thus the idea of the 'local' (in spatial terms) evolved into the 'vocal' (within temporal terms) with a sort of radical re-construction of the 'public' and the conception of a community in transit. In simpler terms, the temporal continuity of the vocal that was accessible to the larger portions of quotidian life transcended the spatial liminalities that are intrinsic to caste and body politics; this mode of politics is uniquely integral to the discourse of the Indic life system. However, a secondary layer is equally important in this discussion. If orality has an inherent notion of temporality built with it, the orality of the medieval public sphere in India is radically different from the orality that the Vedic system possessed. The Vedic cultural (and even pedagogical) system had within it both the co-ordinates of spatiality and temporality, the body and the voice that were fundamentally limiting agents. If the conception of purity/profanity was present in the Vedic system similar to the medieval times, the vocality of the tongue was not egalitarian but stringently limited to the usages of the Sanskritic linguistic and epistemological system that included within itself both the notions of a limiting time in addition to a limited space (Sanskrit was only used as a language in scared spaces of worship, sparsely in royal inscriptions but only in promoting the hierarchies of the caste system).[21] However, in the Bhakti tradition, the recourse to regional and quotidian public languages swept through the spatial dimension of the voice and instilled into it a notion of collective cohesion and horizontal behaviour (to a certain extent).

To look back to these *kirtans* with its own variability, they were often not only spontaneous, intrapersonal expressions but often skilfully crafted. For instance, even today near Pandharpur, the centre of devotion and pilgrimage for the Varkari sect, the *kirtankar* took up the role as an "author" (an author of orature of course) to reframe religious anecdotes with personal mystical appearances and incorporate into it even non-religious stories from the experiences of everyday life. In that, the *kirtankar* could serve both as a producer of narratives and hence meaning; and function as a social critic and commentator. The tradition of *kirtan* pervaded from commemorating a sacred event, a miraculous change in weather, a re-telling of history and reflecting on social conditions to the deaths of the renowned saints (the *Samadhi* cycle of *kirtans* that marked the demise of Dnyaneshwar*)*.

What would be important is to look at a more nuanced cultural phenomenon that can help us look at the relationship between orality and 'literature' here. Novetzkee refers to two categories of texts that he had come across while doing his research on the Varkari tradition. The first he defines as *pothis* or texts that are strictly literally, rarely exposed to revisions and considered sacrosanct in ritualistic practices. These, he asserts, are texts that are well bound, maintained over time and even written neatly with care. The other category of text he mentions are the *badas* that are particularly a loose grouping of materials from everyday processes of life; ranging from raunchy, bawdy songs to popular folklore and the performances of the *kirtankar*. Of course, this instinct to incorporate devotional songs like the *kirtans* to *badas* and not to *pothis* could pose before us an interesting case of study.

A comparative understanding of the contents in these texts indicate the differences of perceiving rituals, religion and identity. While in *pothis*, we get references to translations of a few *Dharmashashtras*, royal observations and interpretations of various religious texts by Brahmin scholars, *badas* hardly

deal with nothing that is exclusively divine or elevated. Amongst some texts that contain songs that are sung in different rituals, including songs that celebrate sexual life of the Marathi community, different forms of semi-popular poetry and certain pieces of theatrical performances, *kirtan* occurs as a misfit amongst others if we attempt to locate it predominantly from the religious lens. The *kirtans* mention Namdev on several occasions and also expound on different tales that had captured the Varkari imagination. Most tales have little or negligible echoes of overt religiosity but like with most, religio-centric societies of the medieval periods, these trace community participation to a grand narrative of divinity and supernatural. This is understood *vis-a-vis* communal behaviour. The notable point in this issue is that these devotional songs and oral performances are roughly grouped into mundane records of history despite their greater socio-religious function and relevance in wielding cultural power at the expense of the sacred pages from the *pothis*. This is indeed a complex situation that proposes 'inversion' on many grounds including the role reversal in the cultural politics of power where the *badas* catch, cement and also regulate public behaviour as against the almost ossified contents of the *pothis* that were otherwise devised to regulate society. In a broader ironic vein, one of these *badas* mentions an episode from Namdev's life that was intended to cater to "higher and elevated thoughts of minds and not mundane everydayness."[22] This is despite the fate that the piece would meet in the hands of the medieval Marathi community.

Similarly, these *badas* present different episodes related to *kirtans* that slight its own creative moments. This is significant if we refer to the words of Namdev and the mystic reasons he propounded to validate the superiority of orature as the "primal form of divine literature".[23] Novetzee notes a *vahi* (or an entire corpus of text) that is available with the Government of Maharashtra that mentions Namdeva's curious relationship with the deity Vitthal, also known as Panduranga in the region, where Namdev is portrayed to be "a conduit", "a human medium where Saraswati sits on Namdev's tongue", where writing is just for the "exalted ideas to live on for *sants* of the future".[24] This also means that while orature and memory appealed to the contemporary society *en masse*, it was the written medium that was meant for the literate, elevated figures from future time, and thus had limited intention that allowed it only a secondary role to play in the contemporary times. Similarly, Mahipati, a contemporary biographer and commentator of Namdev's age, pens down *Bhaktivijaya* (a text on Varkari saints with a special emphasis on Namdev) and comments about this in the introductory sections of the text: "*I have written every single letter in the book/Just as Rukmini's husband had commanded/Like the puff of breath blown by a mountain/I am the wind that sounds the flute.*"[25] The indication is clearly to attribute a secondary status to literary medium of presentation while glorifying the divine inspiration about orality and public performance. This also might extend to include the problem of authenticity which stands on a subverted plane against what we understand as the modern understanding of literary works.

Before the 'postmodern' condition of literary understanding, the 'works' were heavily realized to be under the merit and the aura of the author; they served a relationship of a 'producer' to his production. But with the post-modern approach, works became texts and claimed autonomy of their existence that granted access to all audiences and critics to read and write through their language and meaning. However, if post-modern understanding looks at the text as an autonomous, independent entity with its own right, in the Bhakti cultural sphere, the idea of 'authenticity' was twice removed from the very existence of these texts. As opposed to the concept of modern reading (that reads the text in relation to the author) and the post-modern understanding of reading (the audience's reception of the text as a site of production), here the 'originality' of discourse aligns with oral performances; in fact it is through mentioning the speaker that the author claims 'originality' to his text. Hence, 'authenticity' neither lies with the author nor with his written work but with the speaker before whom both the writer and the text is reduced to mere functions for documentation and its status remained as a corrupted replica of the original speech. So here, the speech as text had greater importance in the cultural imagination of the masses and even today, the re-reading of these texts can be assumed to provide only a rough glance about the public discourse and identity issues of the times.

Novetzkee's research has pointed out that this anxiety towards authenticity can be noticed through the repetitions in the records of events and the representation of performances already written down in influential *bada.* This is while the newer authors have been observed to add newer records to these events, to delineate the events succeeding them or the exploration of newer nuances to the events/ performances already marked. In short, the claim to written authenticity was only by a reiteration of the contents present in the public texts and a re-affirmation of oral practices of the past. Interestingly then, the debate over authenticity was through tracing a lineage from the oral performer to the written scribe; almost in a manner of tracing one's bloodline, this too creates a volatile understanding of identity even if through cultural means. Besides, this intriguing idea of identity affirmation, many contemporary or even later writers have used their compositions in the name of the Varkari saints to claim legitimization of their mystic experiences; this is the phenomenon that bothers Novetzkee and he entitles it as an act of "corporate authorship."[26]

Hence, this entire Maharashtrian tradition of Bhakti that is located around Namdev can be a very interesting corpus to read the relationship between orature, public performance and literature at a time when India witnessed one of its most defining moments of cultivating a public sphere that was both non-modern in character but instrumental in de-stabilizing the operations of a rigid, insecure society that was absorbed into the urges of identity explorations.

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Notes

[1] Roland Barthes in his text *S/Z* (1970) introduced two important terms "lisible" and "scriptable" that meant "readerly" and "writerly" respectively. The idea of classifying a readerly/writerly text was based on the method of approaching a text. Readerly texts could be those texts that invite an act of reading it for its fixed and intended meaning without any possibility of the reader to interpret it otherwise. In such an approach, meaning production and reception is a unilateral process, between the writer and the reader. In writerly texts, a reader can 'create' his/her own meaning out of the text and thus meaning can vary from one reader to the other. In this, the reader himself produces a parallel meaning to that of the writer; hence is 'scriptable' or 'writerly'.

[2] Most non-modern /primitive religious belief systems relied on orality, memory and body performances for community construction. The idea of writing down a script is relatively new to anthropological studies and the first attempts at a written system roughly dates back to the third millennium BCE when scripts consisting of pictorial letters and symbolic figures emerged.

[3] During the period of European enlightenment, reason and rationality was mostly circulated in pamphlets, treatises and in the eighteenth century through periodicals to cultivate a culture of debate. Here, it is to be noted that Habermas' conception of the public sphere, in Europe, fits in only with the culture of written arguments. Oral representation in these debates had little intrinsic value to politics and the efforts in shaping public opinion.

[4] The likes of Max Muller and William Jones had categorically attempted to translate and interpret Vedic ideas on rules to shape them into laws in a rather selective and often brief understanding of the pre-Islamic Indic condition. In fact, religiosity and practices varied from one region to another though within a common fulcrum of a dharmic worldview. The European Orientalists clubbed them into a single group of what they defined as 'Hinduism'.
See, *The Dharmashastras in Socio-Legal Perspective,* edited by Tapati Mukherjee, (Kolkata: The Asiatic Society), 2021, p. 7-11.

[5] See, Jurgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article" in *New German Critique,* No. 3, Autumn 1974, p. 49-55.

[6] Ibid.

[7] See, Christian Novetzkee, *Religion and Public Memory: A Cultural History of Sant Namdev in India*, (West Sussex: Columbia University Press), 2008.

[8] While the Brahmins and the ruling elites came under direct attack by the Islamic rulers in India, the public space that was predominantly Hindu took recourse to practising religion by abjuring the Sanskrit language and living outside the scriptural–temple–based ritualistic religion that were mostly sanctioned by the priests. However, community rituals and popular practices continued in non-sacred places of human interaction. Novetzkee notes that a great population of these participants belonged to the deprived castes and sections of the society. Ibid., 77-79.

[9] Ibid., 42-44.

[10] Ibid., 61.

[11] Ibid., 105.

[12] Ibid., 117.

[13] Ibid., 118.

[14] Ibid., 128.

[15] Ibid., 163.

[16] Ibid., 208.

[17] Ibid., 209, 213.

[18] Ibid., 221.

[19] Ibid., 224.

[20] In fact, a well–brought–out dichotomy can be noted between the practices of 'Naradiya Kirtan' that allowed limited participation of audiences and was based on religious scriptures. However, with the likes of Namdev, the 'Varkari kirtan' stemmed with great public participation where one in the audiences could also assist the key artist in the oral performance. These kirtans were non-planned and without the scriptural foundations of religion.

[21] See, Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Pre–Modern India*, London: University of California Press, 2006.

[22] See, Christian Novetzkee, *Religion and Public Memory: A Cultural History of Sant Namdev in India*, (West Sussex: Columbia University Press), 2008, p. 234.

[23] Ibid., 236.

[24] Ibid., 239.

[25] Ibid., 212.

[26] Ibid., 248.

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