

Authorship and Generative Embodiment in Bahiṇāī's Songs¹

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Introduction

Bahiṇāī Caudharī (1880-1951) was an ardent devotee of Viṭṭhal, the god worshipped by Vārkarīs.² Her son Sopāndev was puzzled when he learnt that she repudiated village kīrtans, performances primarily in praise of Viṭṭhal, at the age of sixty. When he asked her for an explanation she said, 'No, no, I don't want to attend kīrtans anymore. They keep saying the same things! Tukā mhaṇe, Nāmā mhaṇe. Has god given them nothing of their own to say?'³ There is a sense of frustration in Bahiṇāī's response. Despite the larger tradition of literary stalwarts like Tukārām and Nāmdev in the Vārkarī fold, kīrtankārs of her time seem uninspired, having had nothing of their own to say.

This essay explores how Bahiṇāī reinvented bhakti outside the prevailing framework of kīrtan, through a genre now eponymously remembered as Bahiṇāīcī gāṇī (songs) or Bahiṇāīcā ovyā. In the first section, I elaborate on the centrality of repetition in performing bhakti. In the sections that follow, I argue that a critique of both kīrtan and writing as modes of devotional expression is implicit in Bahiṇāī's oeuvre. Firstly, writing is considered incompatible with the mobile life circumstances of pastoral Maharashtra, and secondly, ovī⁴ is preferred to kīrtan for it enables encountering Viṭṭhal through coevally performing and labouring bodies. This critique thus foregrounds different models of embodiment as conditions of devotional expression. Authorship in ovī performance is predicated on what I term the *generative model of embodiment*. To Bahiṇāī's credit, this model relates authorship to the bhakta's body differently from how kīrtan and writing do.

The Paradoxical Banality of Repetition

What did Bahiṇāī mean when she said 'They keep saying the same things'? In this section, I

¹ I thank participants at the 17th International Maharashtra Studies Conference held at the University of Chicago Centre in Delhi, and Christian Novetzke, Courtney Bender, Ganesh Bharate, Gayathri Prabhu, Jack Hawley, Nikhil Ramachandran, Rachel McDermott for their feedback.

² Vārkarīs are considered Hindu because Viṭṭhal is an avatar of Krishna. Vārkarīs regard Nāmdev, Dnyāneśwar, Tukārām, Eknāth and Nilobā as the principal saint-poets, all of whom have been explicitly associated with Vaiṣṇava faith. See, Ramchandra Dhere, *The Rise of a Folk God: Viṭṭhal of Pandharpur*. trans. Anne Feldhaus (New York: Permanent Black, 2011); Michael Youngblood, 'The Varkaris: Following the March of Tradition in Western India,' *Critical Asian Studies* 35 (2003) 287-300; Jon Keune and Christian Novetzke, 'Vārkarī Sampradāy,' *The Brill Encyclopedia of Hinduism* 1 (2011) 617-6.

³ *Bahiṇāī*, dir. Atul Pethe, perf. N. D. Mahanor and B. Nemade, Atul Pethe Productions, 2014. All biographical details are from Pethe 2014, and Bahiṇāī Caudharī, *Bahiṇāīcī Gāṇī* (Mumbai: Suchitra Prakashan, 2012). The latter (hereafter BG) is an exhaustive anthology of Bahiṇāī's songs.

⁴ Singular of ovyā.

Rohini Shukla. Authorship and Generative Embodiment in Bahiṇāī's Songs.

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

contextualise the anecdote I began this paper with. I suggest that Bahiṇāī's remark is symptomatic of the paradoxical banality of repetition in bhakti performance – while repetition is central to bhakti performance for several reasons, some of which I recount below, it also thwarts an aspiring bhakta from adapting the existing repertoire to new life circumstances.

Rāṣṭrīya kīrtan gained popularity in the urban counterparts of late nineteenth-century Asoḍā, Bahiṇāī's agricultural village in the Khāndeś district of Maharashtra. Rāṣṭrīya kīrtans were performed with the explicit goal of 'awakening people' during the nationalist movement.⁵ In this subgenre of kīrtan, recurring refrains like 'Jay Jay Rām Viṭṭhal Hari' swiftly move into jap (chanted repetition of a deity's name), creating an affective milieu of bhakti as the backdrop for introducing nationalist figures. Anna Schultz argues that this pattern of repetition effected the transformation of nationalist events into religious public memory (SHN 157).

Rāṣṭrīya kīrtans highlight two fundamental characteristics of bhakti performance. At the level of individuals, refrains and other kinds of repetitions sung to a beat create temporal landscapes that are amenable to memorisation. Repetition therefore familiarises one with unfamiliar performative content – eventually, everyone manages to sing along. On a larger scale, repetition reinforces, preserves and reinvents bhakti publics. A bhakti public is 'a social unit created through shared cultural phenomena and reinforced by demonstrations in public of these shared cultural phenomena'⁶ or as Christian Novetzke has recently articulated, a public in general is 'an open, social audience, one that attends to, but does not necessarily participate in, a capacious and circulating discourse within a given region, language, or other social context.'⁷ The political function of a performance genre (not always explicit as in Rāṣṭrīya kīrtan⁸) is predicated on the fact that performances exist for and within bhakti publics. Importantly, bhakti publics require reinforcement through repetition because they are ephemeral; they are not physically demonstrable things, always present and verifiable. Repetition evokes nostalgia and identification through aesthetic excess.⁹ Hence, spaces where kīrtankārs frequently perform are believed to continually echo performances from the past – like containers that emanate the essence of asafetida even after it is fully expended.

Moreover, specific bhakti publics are nodes within what John Hawley calls a 'bhakti network.'¹⁰ Its 'osmotic membrane' distinguishes regions, languages and poets across centuries,

⁵ Anna Schultz, *Singing a Hindu Nation: Marathi Devotional Performance and Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) 166. Hereafter SHN.

⁶ Christian Novetzke, *Religion and Public Memory: A Cultural History of Saint Namdev in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) 259.

⁷ Christian Novetzke, *The Quotidian Revolution: Vernacularization, Religion, and the Premodern Public Sphere in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016) 28.

⁸ Rāṣṭrīya literally means 'national' or 'of/for the nation.'

⁹ See Jaime Jones, 'Pilgrimage and Audience on the Maharashtrian Vārī,' *Yale Journal of Music and Religion* 2 (2016) 115-32; Iravati Karve, 'On the Road: A Maharashtrian Pilgrimage,' *The Journal of Asian Studies* 22 (1962) 13-29.

¹⁰ John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2015) 295.

Rohini Shukla. Authorship and Generative Embodiment in Bahiṇāī's Songs.

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

and also enables the transmission of poems across these distinctions.¹¹ In his discussion of Basavā, Nāmdev and Ravidās, who belong to different times and therefore different publics, Hawley poignantly shows how a common repertoire of bhakti idioms and motifs serves as background for the same poem to ‘adapt itself to the life circumstances of individual bhaktas.’¹² Life circumstances – the mountains of Tamil Nadu, the deserts of Rajasthan, the drought ridden farmlands of Maharashtra, temples, royal courts, and so on – make poems ‘new’ despite their shared literary heritage.¹³ This shift of agency from the poet to the poem is crucial. It implies the ability of poems to transmit from one milieu to another in multiple renditions, and the parallel inability of poets to do away with the basic stuff that poets have been dressing in new garbs for centuries together. When Bahiṇāi asks, ‘Did god give them nothing of their own to say?’ she is questioning the average kīrtankār’s ability to give the existing repertoire his or her own voice through his or her specific life circumstances.

In Asoḍā, and perhaps many other places, mere reproduction – ‘they keep saying the same things!’ – is the performative norm. Most poets ‘copy’ their progenitors with regard to more or less unanimously accepted frameworks of genre, image, language and emotional timbre.¹⁴ This form of repetition thrives a paradox for a bhakta such as Bahiṇāi, who aspires to re-render bhakti through her specific life circumstances – she was an illiterate women who spent time farming, cooking and rearing children in the rural fringes of Maharashtra. Repetition, at once central to forming and sustaining bhakti publics, seems also to thwart the process of expressing bhakti anew. As the Sūrdās tradition would have it, the paradox is one for poets who are ‘little more than fireflies flickering here and there’ aspiring to be the sun – having a distinct, self-exuding voice, that stands out against the background of flickering lights.¹⁵ This paradoxical banality of repetition is consequential; Bahiṇāi stopped attending village kīrtans altogether.

How then did Bahiṇāi reinvent bhakti outside the prevailing framework of kīrtan? In the next section, I explore why engaging the written word as a mode of devotional expression was not a viable alternative for Bahiṇāi, despite kīrtans having severely thwarted her experience of bhakti.

On Writing: Pustaka anī Mastaka

In the Vārkarī tradition, Bahiṇāi is not the only poet known to have been illiterate. Nāmdev, one of the five principal Vārkarī poets who popularised the genre of kīrtan is also remembered to have never written. The primarily oral/performative traditions of kīrtan and ovī co-existed with practices of writing, and are therefore within the purview of what Walter Ong terms secondary

¹¹ Hawley 303.

¹² Hawley discusses idioms relating water, milk and flowers used while worshipping Krishna. See, Hawley 298-301.

¹³ Hawley 306.

¹⁴ McDermott adds in a different context of devotional poetry, ‘This is certainly not a problem within a devotional framework; after all, does the Goddess care about poetic brilliance?’ See Rachel McDermott, *Singing to the Goddess: Poems to Kali and Uma from Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 10.

¹⁵ *Sur’s Ocean: Poems from the early Tradition*, eds. John Stratton Hawley and Kenneth Bryant (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015) vii.

orality.¹⁶ Despite the coexistence of writing and orality however, Nāmdev’s tradition is premised on an unambiguous relationship between the two mediums. Novetzke argues that Nāmdev ‘does not require the medium of writing to ensure that his songs will endure. In the place of writing, he has initiated the medium of kīrtan’ (DA 236). Kīrtan ‘conditions and trumps writing’ (DA 237) in so far as it is more effective in preserving Nāmdev’s public memory.

Kīrtans are led by individual kīrtankārs who are almost always accompanied by a group of kīrtankārs and musicians. ‘Narration, allegory, humor, virtuosity, erudition and entertainment’ in celebrating the glory of Viṭṭhal are the main features of a kīrtan.¹⁷ Novetzke terms the authorial processes that undergird this genre corporeal or corporate¹⁸ – an essentially collective process that has the following components. Firstly, corporate authorship is genealogical. A kīrtan typically ends with an ideograph such as Tukā mhaṇe or Nāmā mhaṇe. The ideograph attests a kīrtan as belonging to the literary oeuvre of the respective poet, and not as owned or composed by individuals named Tukārām or Nāmdev.¹⁹ A kīrtan is genealogically authored in the sense that it is an exploration of the believed authors’ thoughts and intentions through a literary oeuvre that is contributed to by multiple individuals in a single genealogy. Secondly, corporate authorship is transient. The performing kīrtankār’s authorship lasts only through the duration of the particular performance. In Vārkarī kīrtans, transient authorship is symbolised by conferring the vīṇā (a stringed instrument) to the lead kīrtankār at the beginning of the performance; the vīṇā is returned at the end of the performance, thereby concluding the kīrtankār’s transient authorship. ‘Creatively altering and melding narratives, engaging the material with his or her unique artistic abilities’ the transient author marks a performance as ‘an original composition in total’ in a spontaneous and extempore fashion (DA 38-39). This original composition rendered through the kīrtankār’s unique artistic abilities remains within the threshold of the kīrtan genre. Thirdly, corporate authorship is divine or eponymous. It attributes the invention of the genre to a god or a saint. In the case of kīrtan it is Nārad Munī or Nāmdev. And finally, the fourth component covers the larger processes of printing, editing, producing visual culture, etc. that continually reinvent and distribute Nāmdev’s public memory through new technologies. In this detailed framework of authorship, the Barthesian concept of the dead author - the solitary repository and defender of meaning conveyed through written texts - does not pose a problem. This is because the existence, and meaningful transmission of a kīrtan does not depend on a single author, and is not measured against one verifiable manuscript (although verifiable

¹⁶ Primary orality, as opposed to secondary orality, exists in ‘cultures untouched by literacy’. See, Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 6.

¹⁷ Christian Novetzke, ‘Divining an Author: The Idea of Authorship in an Indian Religious Tradition,’ *History of Religions* 42 (2003) 222. Hereafter DA.

¹⁸ Another way to say this is ‘the author is incorporated’ (DA 238). The word corporeality conveys both senses. Personal communication with Novetzke in November 2015.

¹⁹ Novetzke builds on the idea that in bhakti traditions ideographs do not signify ownership of the literary product. This idea was first proposed in John Stratton Hawley, ‘Author and Authority in the Bhakti Poetry of North India,’ *The Journal of Asian Studies* 70 (2011) 269-90.

documents like the *bādās* Novetzke discusses, and other forms of print and visual media remain important in the process of sustaining Nāmdev’s public memory).

One could think of Bahiṇāī’s ovyā as forming a bhakti public through incorporated authorship. Ovyā, composed in the Khāndeśī dialect of Marathi, are short couplets that follow a simple rhyme scheme (lost in translation), rife with aphorisms and allegories from household and farming spaces in Asoḍā. Ovyā are humorous (also lost in translation), known for their peculiar light-hearted caricatures of rather painstaking everyday chores. Bahiṇāī sings in the following ovī -

No oil in the lamp,
Darkness gathers round the night.
At last the oil was found,
The mouse ran away with the wick!
Rolled a shred into a wick
Pour oil in the lamp,
Now where is that matchbox?
The mule – at a standstill again!

Sighted the matchbox,
Darling daughter of the fire jinn,
And in it the single, precious
One and only remaining match stick!

The match it was struck,
The flame burst forth bright,
But, unnerved by the pitch darkness,
She extinguished herself, out of fright!²⁰

This genre is eponymously remembered, thereby attributing Bahiṇāī with its invention. Ovyā are typically sung by groups of women in lieu of everyday conversation, thereby forming a cohesive public through collective singing.²¹ But there are two important differences in the specifics of this genre as corporeally authored, in relation to kīrtan. Firstly, Bahiṇāī’s songs do not end with ideographs. This is a curious characteristic, as Rairkar and Poitevin note, because in a tradition that has a shared repertoire of idioms and motifs, ideographs clearly place ‘new’ poems within a saint-poet’s genealogy.²² Secondly, unlike the lead kīrtankār, Bahiṇāī’s unique artistic abilities are not bound by an already established framework of genre and performance convention – her contribution to the bhakti repertoire lies precisely in stepping out of the framework of kīrtan to

²⁰ Anjali Purohit, *Ragi-Ragini: Chronicles from Aji’s Kitchen* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2012) 51.

²¹ To get a sense of how ovyā sound today, see the digital archive made by People’s Archive of Rural India (PARI), in the Grindmill Songs Project (GSP).

²² Guy Poitevin and Hema Rairkar, *Stonemill and Bhakti: From the Devotion of Peasant Women to the Philosophy of Swamis* (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 1996) 258.

create the distinct performative genre of ovī. Do these differences imply a different authorial process?

As we noted earlier, Bahiṇāī could not read or write, but she certainly saw people reading and writing in her immediate milieu. In a succinct and rhythmic aphorism alluding to a sense of circularity between the reader and the written word, Bahiṇāī says,

Mastakātla pustakāt gela,
Pustakātla mastakāt āla (BG 201)

What is in my head goes into the book,
What is in the book comes into my head.²³

Notably, Bahiṇāī uses the word mastaka to refer to the reading individual. Mastaka has a visceral connotation, generally translated as ‘skull’ or ‘head’ – an unreflexive and static body part. Besides the rhyme scheme (pustaka – mastaka), there seems to be a silent critique of writing as a medium of devotional expression undergirding Bahiṇāī’s peculiar choice of words. Unlike mastaka, Bahiṇāī uses the word mana, translated as mind in the context of movement, mobility and exploration in surrounding landscapes.²⁴ Bahiṇāī sings in an ovī titled *Mana* (Mind).

The mind, a roving cow
Loose among the crop.
Drive it off again, again,
It still keeps coming back.

The mind unbridled, loose,
It goes so many ways,
Like ripples on the water
Running with the wind.

The mind so fickle, fickle,
Who can catch it in his hand?
Breaking out and running
Like the blowing of the wind.²⁵

The divine inspirations and objects of worship in Vārkarī bhakti, Pāṇḍuraṅga/Viṭṭhal and Sarasvatī, are similarly articulated in pastoral and earthy idioms. Snehalata Caudharī argues that in Bahiṇāī’s literary oeuvre, Viṭṭhal’s darśan happens ‘āpasuk’²⁶ – on its own, or automatically, when Bahiṇāī engages in mobile activities. Bhakti comes to Bahiṇāī through the wind that

²³ All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

²⁴ Bahinabai Chaudhari, ‘The Mind,’ trans. Philip Engblom, Maxine Berntsen, Jayant Karve, *Journal of South Asian Literature* 17 (1980) 103.

²⁵ Chaudhari (1980) 103.

²⁶ Snehalatā Caudharī, *Bahiṇāī Caudharī: Ek Cintan* (Pune: Continental Prakashan, 2002) 31.

whispers Pāṇḍuraṅga's whereabouts; through leaves and sunlight that tell her about every step Pāṇḍuraṅga takes (BG 20).

My mother Sarasvatī,
teaches me how to sing.
In Bahiṇāī's mind,
she has planted many secrets.

For me, Pāṇḍuraṅga,
Your Gītā Bhāgvata,
is immersed in the rains,
and is growing in the soil.²⁷

A bhakta's mobility, like Bahiṇāī's constant in and out of home and farmland seems to be necessary groundwork to see Viṭṭhal āpasuk. The acts of reading or writing a book not only suspend the agent's perceptual surroundings, as suggested through the dizzying circularity between the pustaka and the mastaka, but also render the agent immobile in a manner antithetical to the mana that is best understood as roving like a cow, breaking out and running in the fields. Mastaka, unlike mana, could therefore be understood as implying an unproductive engagement with the written text; or as theorist and poet John Hall argues in another context, the writer's fixed gaze unto the written object and the writer's immobility eventually lead to an ironic 'loss of modality through itself.'²⁸ That is, writing begins to 'lose meaningful contexts and even physical locations to contain it ... at some point the activity of writing turns into the contemplation of "not writing."²⁹

In Bahiṇāī's immediate milieu, there seems to be a constant loss of meaningful contexts and physical locations to contain acts of reading and writing. This is primarily because the sense of confinement and fixity inherent to engaging the written word is incompatible with life on a farmland. And additionally, home for Bahiṇāī is spatially continuous with farms – storing, cleaning, and threshing the crop is done in the same places where meals are cooked and children reared; where groups of women labour away and sing together. Home is not a private, isolated and quiet interior enclosed by doors and windows. Homes and the outer landscape are porous, as Bahiṇāī alludes to in the following ovī. Any attempt at seeking solace in reading or writing is most likely bound to fail.

O brother, reading fat books,
let it fall upon my ears.

²⁷ (BG 113).

²⁸ John Hall, *Writings towards Writing and Reading: On Poetics, with Implicated Readings* (London: Shearsman Books, 2013) 57.

²⁹ Hall 59.

O dog, don't you bark,
have you gone mad?³⁰

Unlike the fickle, loose, unbridled mind, that goes so many ways, the writerly–readerly mastaka is at loss of modalities not only to engage with written words, but to also experience Viṭṭhal āpasuk, and it is precisely these aspects of writing that Bahiṇāi evades by singing ovyā. There is a positive argument to be made here, with respect to how Bahiṇāi relates ovī performance and writing – performance does not thrive the ironic loss of modality through itself, and in this sense also, trumps writing. Performance is preferred for it is congenial to making meaning in and through new places, capable of enriching bhakti through Bahiṇāi's pastoral and mobile life circumstances.

Thinking of writing as inimical, and orality as conducive to devotional expression seems odd given how orality has been theorised. A dominant view proposed by Jack Goody, Walter Ong and Ian Watt is that orality is the necessary teleological precedent of writing. Walter Ong writes, 'orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing.'³¹ Literacy or writing on the other hand is 'absolutely necessary for the development not only of science but also of history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself.'³² Secondary orality is considered to persist in societies that are yet to undergo the complete cognitive shift effected by writing and print technologies. The question of what inventive processes undergird orality is considered unimportant because creative expression that involves meticulous thought is considered solely the disembodied writer's concern.³³ Orality, unlike writing, is spontaneous. Primary orality promotes spontaneity because the analytic reflectiveness implemented by writing is unavailable; secondary orality promotes spontaneity because through 'analytic reflection we have decided that spontaneity is a good thing.'³⁴ In the latter, analytic reflection implies spontaneity in a blatantly contradictory manner – performers 'plan their happenings carefully to be sure that they are thoroughly spontaneous.'³⁵

Ruth Finnegan nuances this teleological model by arguing that orality and writing are only different in degree; that writing is structured by non-verbal elements, and it is therefore wrong to think of writing as having done away with its oral inheritance. Despite the postulated common elements, processes that produce the two mediums remain polarised. On the one extreme, in

³⁰ (BG 194).

³¹ Ong 14.

³² Ong 14. See also, Jack Goody, 'Evolution and Communication: The Domestication of the Savage Mind,' *The British Journal of Sociology* 24 (1973) 1-12.

³³ See Liedeke Plate, "'I come from a woman": Writing, Gender, and Authorship in Helene Cixous's *The Book of Promethea*,' *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 26 (1996) 158-71. Susan Star has argued that women choose to remain illiterate to transmit their religion orally, inside their homes, to avoid the patriarchal power relations within religious institutions. See Susan Starr, 'The Sacred in the Profane' in *Priestess Mother Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 145-59.

³⁴ Ong 134.

³⁵ Ong 134.

Finnegan's framework, orality supposedly consists of spur of the moment, frantically embodied, energetic performances led by individual artists. Oral performances therefore have 'no existence or continuity' apart from the specific meaning generated during the sporadic performance.³⁶ At the other extreme, Albert Bates Lord endows orality with continuity through tradition. He argues that orality 'is always being preserved with every truly traditional performance by a truly traditional singer.'³⁷ 'True tradition' provides performers with set formulae (as the discipline of Oral-formulaic Studies clearly suggests³⁸), and individual performers are believed to innovate within the framework always already provided by 'true tradition.'

The inventive processes that go into making performances form a theoretical blind spot; this blind spot is filled in by the supposedly self-explanatory notions of embodied spontaneity or 'true tradition'. In the next section I explore the specific model of embodiment undergirding *Bahiṇācī gāṇī*.³⁹ Since oral traditions are characteristically variable, that is, there isn't a single performance that sets the measure of 'authenticity', the idea of embodiment implies the lack of processes that authorise performance. Specifically in the context of bhakti, Norman Cutler uses the phrase 'theology of embodiment'⁴⁰ in arguing for the ultimate communion between god, performers and audiences effected through and during bhakti performance, but it remains unclear how embodied authorship legitimises or even leads to a collapse of identities during the performance. Cutler writes, a bhakti poet is entitled to saintly status only if he or she composes without premeditation ... spontaneously in a burst of inspiration.'⁴¹ In *Bahiṇācī gāṇī* however, as we saw, movement into surrounding landscapes is the condition for seeing Viṭṭhal āpasuk: the mastaka-pustaka duo does not meet these conditions.

Models of Embodiment: Embedded, Alleviative and Generative

In this section, I describe three different models of embodiment in bhakti performance – embedded embodiment in Rāṣṭrīya kīrtan, alleviative embodiment in Nāmdev's tradition, and generative embodiment in *Bahiṇācī gāṇī*. I elaborate on each model in terms of how the body of a bhakta is relevant to the respective genre's authorial processes. Based on these models I argue against the idea of spontaneous embodiment, to emphasise how different genres of bhakti performance are undergirded by different models of embodiment.

³⁶ Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 28.

³⁷ Albert Bates Lord, *The Singer Resumes the Tale* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995) 3.

³⁸ Ruth Finnegan, "'Oral Tradition': Weasel Words or Transdisciplinary Door to Multiplexity?' *Oral Tradition* 18 (2003) 84-6.

³⁹ For a poignant criticism of 'true tradition' see Ruth Finnegan, 'Tradition, but what Tradition and for whom,' *Oral Tradition* 6 (1991) 104-24.

⁴⁰ Norman Cutler, *Songs of Experience: The Poetics of Tamil Devotion* (New York: Indiana University Press, 1987) 112.

⁴¹ Cutler 7.

Schultz argues that Rāṣṭrīya kīrtan instantiates ‘devotional embodiment’ (SHN 168) or ‘embedded embodiment’ (SHN 173). Between complete loss of bodily sensation (trance), and enacted experience (drama), devotional embodiment occurs when the audience, led by the kīrtankār, begins to show physical symptoms of abandon. Rāṣṭrīya kīrtan is indeed, as Schultz describes it, a formal event with a definite beginning and an end, a stage, designated space for audience, and a clear political goal as I noted earlier. In such a setting, the kīrtankār and audience visibly cease to identify with their individual bodies through physical symptoms such as ‘sweating, dizziness, crying, detached expressions’ (SHN 168) and so on. That is when they exit the realm of performance and enter that of embedded embodiment - a prerequisite for renewed merging of identities between the many bhaktas, the kīrtankār, the invoked saints and political figures. Eventually, a ‘feeling of natural belonging to a Hindu nation’ (SHN 168) is experienced through merged embodiment. Through performances with explicitly Hindu nationalist messages, the locus of a Rāṣṭrīya kīrtan’s intended effect is postulated beyond the individual bhakta’s body – the collective experience of the devotionalised nation. Renouncing identity with one’s own body, the collective experience of merging identities, and the eventual collective experience of a devotionalised nation are the criteria for deeming a Rāṣṭrīya kīrtan complete.

In Nāmdev’s tradition, authoring and performing a kīrtan is believed to abate the universal arch-rivals of an author – time and death – by making a vivacious public memory of Nāmdev permanent. This form of reminiscent permanence is at the level of publics. At the level of individual bhaktas, Novetzke tells us that, ‘kīrtan is called a “remedy” for bodily affliction (tapatraya) and the drudgery of life (samsāra)’ (DA 223). Let us call this model of embodiment alleviative. Here, the permanence effected by kīrtan is predicated on slowly decaying human bodies; as the song goes, ‘Let the kīrtan pour into your ears and you will be cooled inside’ (DA 223-4). Kīrtan is experienced by transient authors and the audience as a way to undo the decay set into their body through everyday life. Energy spent during the exclusive duration of kīrtan, singing and dancing ecstatically in informal gatherings, is experienced as an antidote to the physical fatigue acquired otherwise. In light of kīrtan’s recuperative powers, the mass of peasants walking the vāri barefoot for three weeks, or singing and dancing together after a day’s manual labour seems perfectly comprehensible.

In Bahiṇācī gāṇī, we see a different understanding of how samsāra relates to the authorial process. Bahiṇāi sings,

Oh Gharoṭā Gharoṭā,
my hands ache a lot.
The songs of samsāra,
I keep singing along.

Oh Gharoṭā Gharoṭā,
just as the flour emerges from you,

so too, songs born in my stomach
well up to my lips.⁴²

Gharoṭā, also called jāta or grindmill, is a mechanical machine used to make flour. It has a hole where raw grains are added little at a time by one hand, while the other hand simultaneously turns the attached lever to set the machine in motion. Freshly ground flour slowly collects at the bottom, which is then used to make bread. This incredibly tedious task is done by pairs of women sitting on the ground first thing in the morning. Women like Bahiṇāī, begin their days before dawn, by singing ovyā to the rumbling, monotonous sound of the jāta. For Bahiṇāī, these are the songs of samsāra.⁴³ This highlights an important difference in how ovyā and kīrtan are authored. Unlike kīrtan – either in the form of a formal event as in Rāṣṭrīya kīrtan, or an informal gathering as in Vārkarī kīrtan, Bahiṇāī’s songs are sung while women do hard physical work. Which is to say, ovyā are authored in the midst of women’s inevitable life circumstance – everyday labour.

Contrary to the desired effect of kīrtan (alleviation of samsāra), singing ovyā helps Bahiṇāī get through the day’s work, without seeking bodily relief. Just as the flour emerges from you, / so too, songs born in my stomach, / well up to my lips. What raw grains are to the flour, Bahiṇāī’s samsāra is to her songs, the grinding gharoṭā being symbolic of her toiling body. Bahiṇāī’s innovative leap outside the framework of kīrtan is precisely owing to this reversal – while kīrtans remedy samsāra, Bahiṇāī’s ovyā emerge from samsāra. Repetition in Bahiṇāī’s ovyā, literally and metaphorically, seems to embrace the grind through what I call the model of generative embodiment. Unlike bhaktas who experience gradual relief through performance, who have exclusive time to celebrate their bhakti, Bahiṇāī sings addressing herself,

Oh come my life,
a lot of work remains.
As I work, as I work,
I will see god’s image.⁴⁴

Bahiṇāī was married off at the age of 13 to a vatandār (landowning farmer) from Jaḷgāo – Nathuji Caudharī. Nathuji was 30 when he married Bahiṇāī; Bahiṇāī was 30 when she was widowed. As a widow, she had the additional burden of repaying Nathuji’s debt, while also raising two sons and one daughter. For these reasons Bahiṇāī was indeed bound to her farms and household, unable to give exclusive time for bhakti through writing or kīrtan. This is not to say however that Bahiṇāī’s songs instantiate generative embodiment only by way of negation or constraint. Again, there is a positive argument to be made here. Generative embodiment has to

⁴² (BG 125).

⁴³ Philip Engblom, Jayant Karve and Maxine Berntsen have translated samsāra as ‘married life.’ See, Chaudhari (1980) 103. As will be clear in this section, Bahiṇāī seems to use the word in a much broader sense. I therefore use Novetzke’s translation of samsāra as ‘the drudgery of life’ (DA 223).

⁴⁴ (BG 19).

be understood as Bahiṇāī's way to creatively ground bhakti in matters that shape her life.

O Pāṇḍuraṅga, tell me,
how do I do your bhakti?
Before your image,
comes the Sāvkar.⁴⁵

My sweat drips in the farms,
my bones break.
Now take Hari's name,
and clap along.⁴⁶

Concluding Remarks

As Courtney Bender poignantly puts it in a different context of everyday kitchen labour, 'religion happens in the midst of important things going on.'⁴⁷ I have argued that Bahiṇāī authors bhakti in the midst of important things going on – one of them, for her and many women alike, is spinning the gharoṭā in preparation for the next meal. The gharoṭā stands for coevally labouring and performing bodies; it is not conferred and then returned to mark the duration of an ovī, as is done with the vīṇā during a kīrtan. This process of authorship is intransient, incompatible with acts of reading and writing that are predicated on immobile and leisurely bodies. Bahiṇāīcī gāṇī go on for long hours, and women take turns to embrace the grind while singing in lieu of conversation, at times in praise of Viṭṭhal, and at times about the joys and sorrows of their own lives. Indeed, joys and sorrows are never distinct in the doldrums of quotidian routines, and the body knows this all too well. In an ovī titled 'On the way to my Maher,'⁴⁸ as Bahiṇāī sings,

Going to my maher,
Though blistered my soles,
They walk and keep walking,
With that tug at my feet.

Hastening to my maher,
Though I slip and fall,
The stone on which I stumble,
Speaks forth to me and calls!

⁴⁵ Money lender.

⁴⁶ (BG 30).

⁴⁷ Courtney Bender, *Heaven's Kitchen: Living Religion at God's Love \We Deliver* (New York: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 22.

⁴⁸ Maher is a married woman's natal home. Bahiṇāī's maher was Asodā.

‘Tread carefully, dear child,
Don’t hurry and skid so,
After all, I am a rock on the road
That to your maher goes.’

On the way to my maher
Look, that little salunki bird takes wing,
To race me to my mother’s doorstep.
And of my arrival sing.⁴⁹

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⁴⁹ Purohit (2012) 7.

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