

# Religion and the public sphere in premodern India

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# Religion and the Public Sphere in Premodern India

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**Abstract:** When in 1962 Habermas formulated his theory of the public sphere as “a society engaged in critical debate” he sought to describe something he felt was unique to the modern liberal democratic Western world. Yet the creation of discursive spheres where people across lines of social difference debate questions of the common good, mutual interest, and forms of equality long predates the modern era and flourished well outside the “Western” world. This essay adapts Habermas’ influential concept to highlight the emergence of a nascent public sphere at the earliest layers of Marathi literary creation in 13th century India. At this inaugural stage of a regional language’s full shift to writing, we see traces of a debate in the language of everyday life that struggled over the ethics of social difference, a public deliberation that might presage key aspects of Indian modernity and democracy today.

**Keywords:** Religion, public sphere, India, vernacularization, Marathi

## 1 Introduction

The relationship between religion and the public sphere is a subject that has received a good deal of attention over the last decade. There have been numerous symposia and publications on religion and the public sphere<sup>1</sup> and several academic research organizations have undertaken extended studies.<sup>2</sup> Many of these studies and projects claim a new “post-secular” period or position.<sup>3</sup> Several projects have specifically focused on the progenitor of the idea of the public sphere, Habermas, and his own inclinations away from

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<sup>1</sup> Meyer/Moors 2006; Butler et al. 2011; Deane-Drummond/Bedford-Strohm 2011; Kirby 2013; Gillespie 2016; Esposito/Burgat 2003; Mahmood 2016; Rovisco/Sebastian 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Two prominent examples in North America are: Social Science Research Council Project on Religion and the Public Sphere, and the Immanent Frame, 2007 onward; Religion in the Public Sphere at the University of Toronto, 2007, onward.

<sup>3</sup> Calhoun et al. 2013; Gorski et al. 2012; Molendijk et al. 2010.

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religion as a viable feature of the modern public sphere, a position he has only slightly emended in recent years.<sup>4</sup> But perhaps Habermas has come a long way with respect to religion for where once he saw religion as antithetical to rational communication in the public sphere, he now sees that religion has a place in a properly functioning public sphere, if the voices of religion commit to speak in “rational” ways.<sup>5</sup>

Many of these publications and projects entertain perspectives from outside the modern West, though even in such cases, modernity remains a fixed and given timeframe, and Europe the paradigmatic example of the secular public sphere. This is not by accident. Habermas significantly delimited his original notion of the public sphere by describing it as a “child of the eighteenth century” that “cannot be abstracted from the unique developmental history of that ‘civil society’ ... originating in the European High Middle Ages ... nor can it be transferred, ideal-typically generalized, to any number of historical situations that represent formally similar constellations.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, the public sphere is restricted to eighteenth-century Western Europe and later, and to its former colonial spaces, which have public spheres as a kind of after-effect of Western colonialism and the full force of global liberalism. For Habermas and most scholars who build from his work, the public sphere is a modern European invention and export, and everything else fundamentally different, a “formally similar constellation”.

Yet for all such qualifications, Habermas’ own definition of the public sphere is very general and appears quite transposable, hardly the homogeneous product of eighteenth century Europe, it appears as a heterogeneous phenomenon at home in many places and times. Habermas defines the public sphere as “a society engaged in critical debate.”<sup>7</sup> Of course, there’s much more to it for Habermas, including, importantly, the rationalization of markets within modern liberal capitalism that precedes the rationalization of the critical debate of a given society. This idea of a rationalized and critical public debate is a thing that makes the Western public sphere unique to Habermas, and it is also the thing that is supposedly unavailable to the colonized world of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a world without such a liberal economy. Habermas’ magisterial study, in the end, cannot be read as a pronouncement on all possible permutations of the public sphere, but rather as a history of the transformation of *specific*

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<sup>4</sup> Butler et al. 2011; Calhoun et al. 2013; Adams 2006; Junker-Kenny 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Habermas in Butler et al. 2011: 25ff.

<sup>6</sup> Habermas 1989: xviii and xvi, 50.

<sup>7</sup> Habermas 1989: 52.

variations of the public sphere, matched to particular free capitalist markets, which are perhaps paradigmatic for Habermas, but nonetheless represent a type among many possible versions, among many possible “markets”. Habermas’ public sphere is not an only child. And so the idea of the public sphere that we have from Habermas, though it begins in a highly provincialized time and place (Europe, eighteenth century), has enough generality to it to extend beyond this time and place, to other societies engaged in critical debate about the common good.

In this essay I want to stretch this increasingly elastic idea of the public sphere by tracing the genealogy of a discursive sphere of a society engaged in critical debate that emerged in India and in the thirteenth century, a full five centuries before Habermas’ European cafés and public houses. This may be best described as a nascent public sphere. Full democratic participation was not a feature of this sphere in this time. And though we may hear the voice of a “public” in the thirteenth century, no political power was beholden to that voice in anything like the normative ideal in modern liberal democracies. But we can yet trace a sphere of public debate that was putatively open to anyone who would pay mere attention. Several other scholars have studied modern public spheres in India,<sup>8</sup> but only a handful have gestured toward the idea of a public sphere in a period before the advent of European colonialism and modernity.<sup>9</sup> An interesting example is the work of Purushottam Agarwal on the devotional (*bhakti*) figure of Kabir (c. fifteenth century). Agarwal argues that Kabir circulated in a “bhakti public sphere” from the sixteenth century to the present, referring to a sphere organized around the principle of capacious devotion or *bhakti*.<sup>10</sup> I take inspiration from this argument, but press my subject earlier by at least three centuries into a different geo-political context, and unrestricted to the field of devotionalism (*bhakti*), but instead fleshed out by the sphere of the religious in general. These ideas draw from a larger study of the origin of Marathi literary vernacularization, the role of religion in that process, and the ethical discursive core of an emergent Marathi public sphere in the thirteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

I argue in this essay that the ethics of critical debate engendered in this thirteenth-century discursive sphere is the result of two key forces. The first is

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Orsini 2009; Rajagopal 2009; Wakankar 2010; Bhargava/Reifeld 2005; Naregal 2001; Rudolph/Rudolph 2006; Fisher 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Suggestions of the applicability of this term can be found in Shulman/Rao 1998: 7–8, Pandian/Ali 2010: 29, and Sathaye 2017: 443, primarily concerned with the field of Sanskrit.

<sup>10</sup> Agarwal 2009, especially Chapter Two.

<sup>11</sup> Novetzke 2016.

literary vernacularization, the creation of a new literature in a regional language, in this case, Marathi. The second is the ethics inherent in a particular religious perspective around salvation, the idea that all souls deserve the opportunity to *hear* the salvational words of a deity, that salvation is a fundamental human right. This is an ethics I refer to as sonic equality, the right to *hear* salvational texts in one's "mother tongue," but not a right that extends to literacy, participation in public debate, and a far cry from anything like liberal representative governance. I suggest that at the confluence of literary vernacularization and the application of a religious ethics of salvation, a discursive sphere opens up in which questions of social equality, particularly around caste and gender, rise to the surface of public debate. My aim is to use this example to say that not only ought we move past the idea that religion has a restricted place within a given public sphere, but that it might be the very center of one, the primary medium or aesthetic for critical public debate about the common good. And I hope to provide a way to employ the powerful idea of the public sphere outside of a provincial modern European boundary. This is not a post-secular argument I am making since I believe secularism is still very much with us and our current critiques of secularism are of a kind with all earlier ones; indeed, they may even be less radical. I follow Charles Taylor in seeing secularism as "the (correct) response of the democratic state to diversity" in liberal societies, with religion as a primary subject perhaps, but still one among many subjects, such as gender, race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, language, and so on.<sup>12</sup> So this essay is a step toward fully "secularizing" Habermas' idea, making it useful in understanding the diversity of human social debate, rather than simply being the marker of difference.

In the essay that follows, I first present the context for my idea that a nascent public sphere emerges in the thirteenth century in the Marathi-speaking region of India known then, and now, as Maharashtra, a region ruled over by a dynasty called the Seunas or Yadavas. I then discuss the two texts that form the first iterations of Marathi literature—the *Līlācaritra* (c. 1278 CE) and the *Jñāneśvarī* (c. 1290 CE), and the two figures associated with those texts, Chakradhar and Jnandev. These texts are our record of a society engaged in critical debate about the common good, and the figures associated with these texts are the human metonyms for the ethics that each text conveys. Through the works, I draw out the traces of a debate about social equality and the particular religious ethics that gave shape to this discussion. I conclude by linking this particular religious ethics with the contours of a public sphere as we understand it today.

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<sup>12</sup> Taylor in Butler et al. 2011: 36.

## 2 State, the Brahminical Ecumene, and Everyday Life in thirteenth century Maharashtra

The Seunas were a dynastic family who, from 1187–1317 CE, ruled a region roughly coterminous with the modern Indian state of Maharashtra, with their capital in Devgiri, now called Daulatabad. Better known as the Yadavas, this dynastic family's reign saw the usual measure of war with its neighbors, particularly the Southern kingdom of the Hoysalas, as well as a familiar set of internal successor battles. Despite these upheavals, the Yadava reign was remarkably stable and consistent for over a century, until 1294 CE when Ala-ud-din Khilji captured Devgiri and shortly thereafter gave it a new name. Though a Yadava nominally ruled in Devgiri for the next two decades, Khilji's victory marks the end of Yadava political sovereignty. By the 1317, the Yadavas were completely deposed. This royal, courtly history frames our narrative, but the real story is somewhere between the court and everyday culture. For it is in this period of Yadava rule that the first two extant texts of Marathi literature—the *Līlācaritra* and the *Jñāneśvarī*—are said to have been composed, and so it is in this time that forces colluded in society to create the space for a public and then literary debate about social equality and the common good. Several forces merged in the Yadava period that led to this moment of literary vernacularization tied to a social ethics.

The Yadavas were originally Kannada-speaking émigrés to the Marathi-speaking region they controlled for over a century. The courtly inscriptions of the Yadavas show a strong predilection for Kannada in the earlier years of their reign, and Sanskrit remained a routinized language of inscription during their period of sovereignty. These two languages—Sanskrit and Kannada—form the medium of most inscriptions marking gifts and decrees by the Yadava court. Inscriptions in Marathi, the local language of the region, do appear occasionally at the beginning of the Yadava reign, but they are few in number. However, the number of Marathi inscriptions increases significantly toward the regnal years of the last three key rulers of the Yadava dynasty—Krishna/Kannara r. 1247–1261 CE, Mahadeva r. 1261–1271 CE, and Ramchandra r. 1271–1311 CE. Though this increase in Marathi inscriptions issued by the Yadava court did not surpass those inscribed in Kannada or Sanskrit, the increased use of Marathi in royal decree is important because it corresponds with the purported period of composition of the two extant texts of Marathi literature. I suggest that the increasing use of Marathi mirrored the rise of the language as a medium of public discourse, but a rise not engineered or buoyed by the force of the royal court—as may be the case with some histories of literary vernacularization.<sup>13</sup> In

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<sup>13</sup> Pollock 2006.

contrast, the Yadavas had a benign ambivalence toward Marathi and we see no signs—no gifts, institutions, or other records—that suggest they patronized Marathi as a literary language. Instead, the groundswell of Marathi literary expression emerges from the rise of Marathi discourse circulating in public contexts, and in these contexts Marathi literary expression often took on subjects of social difference and ethics.

The Yadavas may have been indifferent to Marathi, but they were not indifferent to patronizing literary production. Quite the opposite. Though we have little or no record of the Yadavas patronizing Marathi literature, we have many records of them patronizing Sanskrit literary production. Indeed, one of the key features of the rise of Marathi as a literary language is the presence of a thriving economy of literacy under Yadava rule, though this field was restricted to Sanskrit. This economy of literacy was supported, at its highest levels, by Yadava donative practices. The Yadavas regularly distributed certain property rights and revenue allotments to people who produced highly valued literary work in Sanskrit. Though the world of Sanskrit is replete with almost all genres of literature, the one the Yadavas most consistently supported, and the genre we find most commonly in the Yadava period, is the genre of Dharma Shastra, or normative social science. The most common literary product supported by the Yadavas were various Sanskrit treatises on the science of cosmic-social law or *dharmaśāstra*. The most emblematic of such texts is Hemadri's *Caturvargacintāmaṇi* (c. 1270 CE).

These property rights took the form of *agrahāras* (land grants), *brāhmaṇapuris* (village grants), *vedaśālas* (schools for Vedic and ritual instruction), and *maṭhas* (institutions for Sanskrit and ritual learning), among other kinds of entitlements. In almost every case, these entitlements went to Brahmin males; occasionally non-Brahmin men of other castes, such as Kayasthas (scribes) and Guravs (temple priests) also received such entitlements. These property rights were regulated by the sovereign Yadavas, given for achievements deemed of value by the Yadava court in the literary field of Sanskrit. The Yadavas also gave many other gifts, mostly to temples or pilgrimage rest areas.<sup>14</sup> These kinds of gifts, which were not for literary merit, still often went to, or were in the control of, high caste, usually Brahmin, men. These kinds of state gifts—to temples or for texts—also share a political economy, for they both generally relied on revenue from crops, villages, or share of trade of a named agricultural product. The overall effect of this network of entitlements was to create a stabilized geopolitical frame within Yadava territory that was not

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<sup>14</sup> For those interested in reading these land grants in Marathi, the best source is Tulpule 1963. For an English source that discusses Marathi, Sanskrit, and Kannada land grants, see Verma 1970.

subject to the shifts of market or the pressures of war. This was not a reflection of Yadava “worship” of Brahmins or their activities, but rather demonstrated the Yadava political use of entitlements tied to property that was not acquired through war or capital. This network of entitlements provided some stabilization in a sphere something like “civil society” but rather than formally independent, this network was clientalist, beholden to Yadava state largess.

I would not go so far as to call this a form of civil society (which Habermas identifies as a requirement for a public sphere to emerge). Instead I borrow and adapt a term from Rosalind O’Hanlon and refer to this network of entitlements as a Brahminic ecumene.<sup>15</sup> By this term I mean a sphere composed of literary and social capital matched by economic capital and marked by an orienting habitus identified with high caste and Brahmin activities, such as literary production in Sanskrit and temple ritual. The Brahminic ecumene was not derivative of the royal sphere, nor was it restricted to the agricultural sphere (though many entitlements depended on sufficient crop yield) or to the martial sphere (though many Brahmin recipients, like the famous general Kholeshwar, distinguished themselves in military not literary circles). Instead, it stood as an semi-independent space, neither court nor public culture, a unique field of politics, capital, and culture that was maintained by the beneficence of the royal court.

The Brahminic ecumene, by virtue of this quasi-independence, served at least three important functions in this period in relation to the emergence of a literature in Marathi. The first was to stabilize the socio-economic sphere with a kind of aristocracy that served minor governmental and civil law functions. A Brahmin man or family entitled to a percentage of a village’s produce—often the arrangement for an *agrahāra*—was called a Mahajan, and was usually the arbitrator of minor legal issues within the village connected to the *agrahāra*. The Mahajans would also oversee and report village agricultural and artisanal production, assisting minor state functionaries, or even replacing them. The figures in the Brahminic ecumene who received land and revenue rights helped form a key aspect of the nexus of royal court and everyday life. This relative political and social stability enabled the key figures of Marathi vernacularization to flourish. And this point was not lost on these figures of Marathi literary vernacularization. Chakradhar, for example, tells his followers to remain in Maharashtra, in part, because he also advises them to only live in places that are politically stable.<sup>16</sup> And Jnandev concludes his *Jñāneśvarī* with an ode to the

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<sup>15</sup> O’Hanlon in O’Hanlon/Washbrook 2011. My use of this term differs from that of O’Hanlon in that I don’t engage the term’s theoretical foundations in cartography and cultural geography, or the “mental world map” or translocal network ideas to which O’Hanlon applies this term.



reigning Yadava ruler of the age, Ramchandra, with a similar declaration of the virtues of a stable socio-political order.<sup>17</sup> The Brahminic ecumene, though elitist and feudalistic, was also a key feature of the social stability that allowed Marathi literature, and the public critical discussions it registers, to emerge.

This leads to a second key function the Brahminic ecumene serves in our story of an evolving public sphere crafted in the forge of emergent Marathi literature. It was the high regard for literacy in Sanskrit, so prized by the Brahminic ecumene, that allowed several key figures to transpose the value of literacy to a sphere outside of Sanskrit, to a new sphere where literacy had not enjoyed such influence, in the field of the language of everyday life in the region, Marathi. The Brahminic ecumene thus functioned as a political strategy, a means to create clientalist Brahminic wards of the Yadava state throughout the lands by instituting a system of entitlements and minor judicial functions. But it also served an unintentional social process as well—conveying the value of literacy, a feature of the Sanskritic world and the Brahminic ecumene, into the context of Marathi as a public, quotidian language, producing at least one key incentive for a literary market for Marathi. In other words, one place where the Sanskrit Brahminic ecumene and quotidian world of Marathi found synergy was the value of literacy itself.<sup>18</sup> At the juncture of relative political stability and the rising cultural capital of literacy within Marathi-speaking, everyday worlds, the story of literary Marathi emerges. And when it arises, it carries with it some of those everyday aspirations and social negotiations, drawing out the kinds of questions of social equality that surface in locations of quotidian life, the sphere of the market, the urban cross-roads, the places where elite and non-elite, men and women, high caste and low, come into contact with one another. It is in these everyday spaces and to the people who reside within them, that the first two works of Marathi literature direct themselves and their ethical mandates.

The third function of the Brahminic ecumene in this period in relation to Marathi literary vernacularization and public discourse is the way that a concern for proper social order, endemic to the Brahminic ecumene, infiltrated the thinking of Chakradhar, Jnandev, and the emergent sphere of debate they represent. As mentioned above, the dominant literary idiom patronized by the Yadavas, and rewarded by state entitlements, was the creation of Sanskrit works on Dharma Shastra, on normative social order. Both Jnandev and the Chakradhar appear well

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<sup>17</sup> See the *Jñāneśvarī* [Jn.] 18, 1783.

<sup>18</sup> This is certainly not the only reason or force pressing toward literarization in Marathi. It is merely the one that I've chosen to highlight in this essay and most relevant to the emergent public-quotidian sphere I trace here. See Novetzke 2016 for other rationales. In other contexts, as with Jains within the Sanskritic-Prakritic world, for example, see Andrew Ollett 2017.

acquainted with this literature and the social capital that surrounds it in their age—in Chakradhar’s case his own life will dramatically intersect with actual Dharma Shastra law. Intense debates about social normativity occurred within Brahminical intellectual in the Yadava era. I suggest that these debates also spurred critiques of normativity, opening the way to the sphere of social critique that I describe as a nascent Marathi public sphere. If the literary values of the Brahminic ecumene could be decoupled from Sanskrit and transferred to the heterogeneous world of Marathi, a key conceptual focus on normative social order could also be transposed from the normative sphere of the Brahminic ecumene to a new context in social critique in Marathi, carrying merely the impulse toward debate about social order, and not necessarily the normative injunctions of its Brahminic origins. In other words, I think we see an idea travel—that intellectuals pronounce upon social order. And two Brahmin intellectuals who had rejected many aspects of the Brahminic ecumene are likely figures around whom rejections of normative social order might also attend. As we will see, the texts associated with Jnandev and Chakradhar will witness and comment upon social order, filtered through everyday life scenarios that mirror the use of colloquial Marathi. Just as a certain heterodox literary impulse drove the creation of a new literary field, so too a heterodox social impulse will carry forward a non-normative debate about social order in the nascent layers of Marathi literature.

### 3 Social Ethics in the *Līlācaritra* and the *Jñāneśvarī*

Given the way in which Brahmin males of Sanskrit pedigree were rewarded with financial and social capital in the Yadava period, it is perhaps surprising that the two figures who appear as the agents/authors of the first two texts of Marathi literature were Brahmin males of who were also literate in Sanskrit and Sanskritic literary world. The *Līlācaritra*, Marathi’s oldest extant work of literature, is a biography composed by the mostly Brahmin followers of Chakradhar (b. c. 1194), himself a Gujarati Brahmin and son of a royal minister to the king of Baruch. Chakradhar came to Maharashtra in his youth and over the course of perhaps eight decades, he gathered a group of followers who called themselves Mahanubhavs, “Those of the Great Experience.” The *Līlācaritra* is the key sacred text of the Mahanubhavs, and most of Chakradhar’s early followers, and almost all of the collective authors of the *Līlācaritra*, were Brahmin, both male and female. While Chakradhar is not the author of the *Līlācaritra*, I call him its “agent” because the text purports to record in stark historical realism the actual

words and deeds of Chakradhar, a figure the Mahanubhavs considered to be divine, and so the text is a portal for Chakradhar's divine agency. The *Jñāneśvarī*, on the other hand, is purported to be composed by a figure named Jnandev, a young Brahmin man who was a Sanskrit scholar. The text is a lengthy commentary on the Sanskrit *Bhagavad Gītā* (c. 100 CE) serving as both interpretation and a kind of translation or transmission of the Sanskrit text into Marathi. It is also the first time the famous *Bhagavad Gītā*, India's most translated text, was first recreated in a language other than Sanskrit. Though Jnandev is not said to have written the text down, he is remembered to have had a Brahmin scribe, Satchitananda, who wrote down Jnandev's words. Still, I see no reason not to consider Jnandev the purported author of the *Jñāneśvarī*, which is in line with public memory around Jnandev and his text. Indeed, though the *Jñāneśvarī* is not quite as old as the *Līlācaritra*, for most Marathi-speakers and most scholars of Marathi literary history, the *Jñāneśvarī* signals the inauguration of Marathi literature as it is considered Marathi's first self-consciously literary text.

Both texts—the *Līlācaritra* and the *Jñāneśvarī*—were inspired, composed or created by Brahmins, and primarily by Brahmin men. Yet these texts evince a critical position toward caste and gender, and in particular, toward the ritual and hubristic excesses of Brahmins in particular. In other words, these text perform a kind of social Brahminical auto-critique, and they do so in a context of high cultural privilege for Brahmins, especially Brahmin men.<sup>19</sup> And as texts outside of the usual routes of the Brahminic ecumene, texts not in Sanskrit but in Marathi, they also are excluded from the kinds of channels of financial reward that I outlined in the first section of this paper. So a puzzle exists here: why would Jnandev and Chakradhar, two Brahmin men of high learning, and their many Brahmin followers, enact a critique of Brahminism, reject the Sanskrit literary field that yield such rich rewards, and mount a challenge to reigning normative paradigms of caste and gender discrimination that would appear to weaken their social power?

As religious innovators and social critics, these figures rejected the capital of state endowment tied to high caste and Sanskrit literacy for an engagement with questions of everyday life, of social relations in the world of ordinary interaction, and they did so in the name of a primary ethical conviction. In Chakradhar's case, the social ethics ultimately leads his followers to the logic of composing in Marathi, as we will see. In Jnandev's case, the ethics and the literary innovation appear side by side, I will suggest. Both literary contexts transposed the cultural capital of literacy from the Brahminic ecumene into the

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<sup>19</sup> See Novetzke 2011.

quotidian world, and in the process, these texts appear to have inaugurated Marathi literature. Each embeds within this new literary sphere an ethics of social inclusion directed toward an everyday population, and oriented around a specific religious social impulse that held that everyone, regardless of caste or gender, should have access to the salvational words of God. Let us turn to these two texts to see the contours of this religious ethics that implies a social critique, as well as to the limits set around this critique within both texts.

### 3.1 The *Līlācaritra*

In 1273 Chakradhar is remembered to have left Maharashtra and his Mahanubhav followers—Mahanubhavs do not believe Chakradhar has died. In the wake of his departure, his followers—mostly Brahmin men and women—gathered to recall the words and deeds of Chakradhar with as much accuracy as possible. The text links theology and historical realism in this way, seeking, as a theological injunction, to preserve the exact things Chakradhar said and did, without embellishment or emendations. The text is composed of *līlās* or episodes (literally “play”) that usually begin with some indication of place, time of day, or other locational information, followed by a report about some action of Chakradhar. Very often the episodes record a conflict, argument, set of questions, or other debate involving Chakradhar and his followers, as well as people outside his circle of devotees. The text remembers Chakradhar encountering lofty holy figures, Yadava kings and other rulers, key personalities of the Brahminic ecumene, but also ordinary people, such as merchants, tailors, cobblers, farmers, horse traders, robbers, soldiers, and many others. The text records Chakradhar encountering men and women, low caste and high caste, from Brahmin to Dalit<sup>20</sup> and everywhere in between. Indeed, the text is so thorough in its details of everyday life and ordinary encounters in the thirteenth century in Maharashtra that it is the standard historical source for any Marathi historian who wishes to comment on general “life” in the Yadava period. So careful is this text to get the “facts right,” as it were, that the *Līlācaritra* even records disagreements among the members of the small editorial group that had gathered to compose the text around 1273–1278 CE, often citing the disagreement of one devotee over the details of a memory given by another devotee.<sup>21</sup> This is

<sup>20</sup> Dalit, a Marathi/Hindi word that means “downtrodden” is the term I’ve elected to use to stand for other terms, such as “Untouchable.”

<sup>21</sup> For parallel development of a “historical consciousness” in Kashmiri Sanskrit texts, see Obrock 2010 and Whitney Cox 2013.

obviously not a work of modern historiography, but it shares a concern with objectivity in relation to sources and testimony, and a narrative that seeks to convey the past accurately (as remembered, in any case) into the present.<sup>22</sup>

The core subject of the *Līlācaritra* is the teaching of Chakradhar expressed through his words and actions. There is no goal beyond this one. This is not a text with an argument or a thesis, other than that Chakradhar is divine. Instead, the *Līlācaritra* is a simple recounting of the events that make up a fascinating life. However, I find there are particular themes in the text, which, following the logic of the Mahanubhavs' impulse in the *Līlācaritra*, I impute to Chakradhar, to his ethics. And among these themes, for our purpose, the most prominent include ways that Chakradhar engaged with caste and gender prejudices and ignorance, and what it was about Chakradhar's teaching that led his early followers to record his life in Marathi rather than in the expected medium of Sanskrit. Nestled within these two broad themes is an idea about social inclusion that I would like to highlight, for I feel it sets the context for the much more explicit engagement with social equality that will emerge a little over a decade later in the *Jñāneśvarī*.

Though the *Līlācaritra* is not a text about social equality (it is about Chakradhar), very early on in the text social issues rise prominently. During the narration of Chakradhar's early years, we learn that though he was a Brahmin (a Lad Samak Brahmin specifically<sup>23</sup>), he dined at the home of low caste people—Telis, Gonds, and others.<sup>24</sup> This is significant given that one of the cornerstones of caste normativity in South Asia is a set of rules of purity that dictate with whom one can or cannot eat. Narrating these events so early in the *Līlācaritra* clearly establishes Chakradhar's egalitarian position on caste difference in terms of his own practices. As Chakradhar travels through the Andhra region, he acquires a devotee who is a Chambhar, a Dalit.<sup>25</sup> Chakradhar teaches this man for some time, then continues on his journey. However, we learn that after Chakradhar's departure, the Chambhar man begins to preach Chakradhar's teachings. This offends the Brahmins of the village and after consulting a Brahmin who is a Dharma Shastra expert, an authority in normative social science and law, it is determined that he must

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<sup>22</sup> See Narayana Rao et al. 2001.

<sup>23</sup> LC-P 32. Lad Samak may refer to Laati Brahmins of Gujarat, a community present in Baruch, the remembered place of origin of Chakradhar, with Samak a reference to the Sama Vedas, perhaps a traditional text associated with the Laati Brahmins of Gujarat. For more on Chakradhar's caste see Novetzke 2016.

<sup>24</sup> See the *Līlācaritra* [LC], *Pūrvārdha* section [LC-P], *līlā* 34, 41.

<sup>25</sup> LC-P 27.

be buried in a pit of limestone and his body slowly dissolved. Such is his punishment for this audacious act of teaching as if he were a Brahmin holy man. The *līlā* tells us that as the Brahmins watch the man being lowered into the pit, he is also spotted teaching in the town square amid the local market. When this miracle is determined to be true, the Brahmins bow down to the Chambhar man, and in an irony of language, the Brahmin men declare themselves to be “fierce Outcaste” (*caṇḍāl*), sometimes also glossed as an “Untouchable.” This story—and the many others like it in the *Līlācaritra*—not only demonstrates a significant challenge to caste discrimination, but also highlights the plight of the castes and Dalits.

The *Līlācaritra* tells us of several moments when Chakradhar forms bonds of affection and devotion with Dalits. At one point, Chakradhar is living in a cremation ground where Dalits of the Mahar caste make a living carrying in dead bodies for cremation and removing the remains of burned bodies, a practice considered so “impure” that it can only be undertaken by a Dalit, a Mahar.<sup>26</sup> Chakradhar finds a bit of cloth that has survived the flames, and he takes it, only to be accosted by a Mahar man who says that, since Chakradhar is not a Mahar, he is not entitled to the remains of the dead, as are the Mahars. Chakradhar surrenders the cloth, but the two begin to converse, and the Mahar man realizes Chakradhar’s divine and enlightened state. Wishing to give something to this God-Man, he finds he has nothing to give but the disputed bit of cloth, which Chakradhar takes as a great offering. With this story, and others like it, the *Līlācaritra* communicates the idea that Chakradhar lived among “outcaste” communities, thus fully rejecting caste rules of orthodox society, and in the process, learning of the world outside the narrow sphere of the Brahminic ecumene.

Another story makes this point about Chakradhar’s “ethnographic” proclivities. One day Chakradhar and his followers came to a temple, and Chakradhar began to act strangely. The text tells us that:

In the temple’s assembly hall, Chakradhar removed his shirt and hung it up; he wrapped his turban around his waist. He applied ash to his forehead like the Shudras do. Then he went by the drainage line [outside the temple] and stood there. He joined his hands together.

Then he said, “Sorathi Somnath! Aundha Naganath! Paraliya Vaijanath! One hundred Lingas! One thousand Lingas! One hundred thousand Lingas! [I do] prostration [to them]! [I do] one prostration [to them]! Bless Saya! Bless Maya! Bless Kaya! Bless Saubai! Bless Maubai! Bless Kaubai!”

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26 LC-P 86.

And then Chakradhar folded his hands and came towards the devotees [and said], “O Elders, this is pure! O Elders, this is pure.”

Then Baisa said, “What is this, sir?”

Chakradhar said, “Woman, this is how the Shudras encounter God.”<sup>27</sup>

Here Chakradhar appears to instruct his mostly Brahmin followers in the rituals of Shudras, because, we can assume, they knew little or nothing of how Shudras worshipped. We can also guess that Chakradhar knows these things not only from observation, but from participation—as in the story of the cremation ground, he may have lived and worshipped as a Shudra. As we will see below, though the *Līlācaritra* tells us he was born into a Brahmin family in Gujarat, in Maharashtra his caste status is very obscure—people do not know what to make of him. Chakradhar is not only instructing his followers about what life is like for Shudras, he is also showing them how to learn this for themselves.

Chakradhar often plays on his Brahmin followers’ caste prejudices. One poignant example can express this feature of Chakradhar’s teaching. One *līlā* recalls a time when Chakradhar was inside of a Shiva temple near Paithan in Maharashtra.<sup>28</sup> A Matang man, a member of a Dalit caste, requested to meet Chakradhar, conveying a message through Chakradhar’s Brahmin devotee, a woman named AUSA. It is interesting to note that the man describes himself in the text as a soldier and does not name his caste—not everyone accepted their normative social ontologies it seems. AUSA relays the soldier’s message, and in response Chakradhar gives her a sweet from the temple to give to the soldier, a sweet which had been an offering to the God in the temple, and thus a consecrated and sacred substance (*prasād*). The man gratefully receives the sacred sweet and takes a small bite of it, but he remains outside the temple, insisting that he meet Chakradhar himself. Chakradhar then comes outside the temple and greets the soldier, who in turn “worships” Chakradhar by touching his feet. Chakradhar then asks the soldier to return the uneaten portion of the sweet, which he does. Before the astounded soldier, Chakradhar then turns to his Brahmin devotees and offers them the sweet now handled and partly eaten by a Dalit. In doing so, Chakradhar is asking his Brahmin followers to undertake a rather extreme and public disavowal of cast normativities around purity, commensality, and pollution. His followers appear unsure how to react, and Chakradhar scolds them, “Which of you would not reach out for rice and clarified butter? Who wouldn’t reach out for fine garments among you?”

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<sup>27</sup> LC U 508.

<sup>28</sup> LC-U 72.

You'd take filthy water from me and call it 'a great offering (*mahāprasād*). Well this is *prasād*! Why wouldn't you take it from me?" His followers accept the sweet and eat it.

The lesson is clear: a Mahanubhav must reject his or her caste prejudice. Chakradhar himself disavows his own caste status on several occasions when he is asked specifically about this subject; but he also does give his caste name in other contexts. Indeed, Chakradhar, as God, is beyond caste and gender distinctions, but his followers are not—for them, rejecting the privileges of their caste is very difficult. And it also seems as if Chakradhar's followers struggle with their human deity's caste status as a Brahmin as well. In one story, Chakradhar and his followers are invited to dine at the home of a prominent Brahmin, Tikavanayak, a relation of one of Chakradhar's key female followers, the Brahmin woman Mahadaisa.<sup>29</sup> As is customary, Tikavanayak plans to feed all the Brahmins first, and so he asks Mahadaisa about Chakradhar's caste. Mahadaisa becomes enraged by this question, telling Tikavanayak that Chakradhar is God, what more does he need to know? But Tikavanayak persists: "Yes, sure, sure. Chakradhar is God. But what is his caste?" The *līlā* does not tell us how this situation is resolved, but it seems there remained some awkwardness, for in the morning, Tikavanayak feels compelled to explain the situation to Chakradhar, and in Mahadaisa's presence. Chakradhar directs his reply to Mahadaisa, "Oh woman! What Tikavanayak says is the way it is. Is a person a Brahmin, or a Kshatriya, or a Vaishya, or a Shudra, or whatever, how does one know?"<sup>30</sup>

Mahadaisa, a Brahmin woman of some stature not only among the Mahanubhavs but in the Brahminic ecumene itself, is unable to relinquish her own caste hubris, and therefore holds on to such a hubris around her own object of devotion. Chakradhar's chastisement of Mahadaisa reveals another facet of the struggles over social difference in the *Līlācaritra*. Chakradhar here accommodates rather than critiques normative social order. This verse may seem to contradict the radical challenge to caste distinction that we have seen from Chakradhar so far. But here I think we can notice the field of debate in action. Chakradhar appears to suggest that social distinctions should be dismantled only within his Mahanubhav community of followers, and they might then serve as models for others. But he does not seem to think society outside of this small group should change. In other words, Chakradhar is not imposing radical social beliefs on society in general, and he upbraids a follower who attempts

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<sup>29</sup> LC-P 470.

<sup>30</sup> These are references to the traditional four *varṇas* or theoretical socio-religious orders of society, often glossed as "caste" in a very general way.



something of this kind. This suggests a debate within the Mahanubhav community about the extent of social change viable outside of the new social ethics of their small community.

A similar complexity surrounds the ways Chakradhar teaches a rejection of norms of purity and pollution regarding gender, as well as social hierarchy and patriarchy within his circle of followers. The clearest example of powerful role of women in the Mahanubhav order is the presence, and even dominance, of women within his circle of followers. The beginning of the Mahanubhav order is often marked by the period in which Chakradhar accepts the Brahmin woman Baisa as a devotee. Within the order, women appear to make up a majority of followers. Yet men, not women, are ascribed the two apparently most prominent positions in the group, which include the leader of the Mahanubhavs after Chakradhar's departure (this honor goes to his Brahmin follower Bhatobas) and the compiler/editor of the *Līlācaritra* (this position is ascribed to the Brahmin male Mhaibhat). Despite this, the *Līlācaritra* appears to me dominated by the inquiries, actions, and exemplars of female devotees. Many, if not most, of these female devotees were Brahmin women, and several appear to be widows. Interestingly, many of these widows continued to control wealth and property after the death of their husbands. Women are vital to the Mahanubhav order in other ways as well. For example, shortly after the *Līlācaritra* was compiled, it is remembered that a fire or other disaster destroyed the only extant written copies of the work. The entire text was reconstructed primarily from the memory of a single female devotee, Hiraisa. It is because of this female devotee of Chakradhar that we have the *Līlācaritra*.

In several places in the text, Chakradhar specifically challenges gender-based prejudices inherent in normative society at the time. In one story, a female Brahmin follower, Umaisa, is menstruating and so does not perform her usual worship of Chakradhar, which is to touch his feet.<sup>31</sup> Chakradhar, with some easy jocularly, rejects the idea that menstruation makes a woman impure, a very common idea in South Asia especially among Hindus. For example, often Hindu women will not visit temples or engage in other rituals during menses. Chakradhar declares that if the flow of human effluvia were grounds for devotees and others to avoid Chakradhar, then every devotee who defecates each morning would be required to avoid Chakradhar, and he'd have no disciples at all. In another incident, one of Chakradhar's erstwhile followers, a Brahmin man named Sarang Pandit, finds himself annoyed that Chakradhar's community is so dominated by women.<sup>32</sup> He calls them

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<sup>31</sup> LC-U 384.

<sup>32</sup> LC-U 102.

“plumpies” (*guluguliya*) and mutters that they should all be sent away to another land “to pound rice.” Chakradhar overhears these mutterings and confronts Sarang Pandit, saying, “Why should women not come for instruction to fulfill their desire for religion (*dharmā*)? Why do you act like such an oaf (*tomga*)? You have a soul (*jīva*); do they not also have souls? Does one God protect you and another God protect them?”

The fact that many, if not most, of Chakradhar’s followers were women seemed particularly troublesome and threatening for the patriarchal Brahminic ecumene to countenance, far more than Chakradhar’s caste transgressions. We know that teaching women was the most salient and risky aspect of Chakradhar’s teaching for the Brahminic ecumene because of the presence of a *līlā* that tells of a purported public trial Chakradhar underwent precisely because he taught women. This story is disputed by some Mahanubhavs, and I mention it here because it occurs in many versions of the text, but I do not recount it as an endorsement of the events it describes as historical facts. Whether or not the trial occurred, the memory of the trial is suggestive of social conditions that surrounded the Mahanubhavs.

The *Līlācaritra* tells us that toward the end of Chakradhar’s time in Maharashtra, his fame and circle of followers grew, and this became a threat to some members of the Brahminic ecumene, particularly at the intersection of the royal court. This intersection is typified by the figure of Hemadri, a powerful Brahmin minister to three Yadava rulers, and a person who represents the intersection of Brahminical and royal power in the period. Hemadri is not only remembered for this military prowess and skill as a courtly advisor, but also for his Sanskrit literary production, particularly his treatise on everyday religio-social normativity, the *Caturvargacintāmaṇi*. The *Līlācaritra* remembers that Hemadri, feeling threatened by Chakradhar in several ways, both professional and personal,<sup>33</sup> assembled a tribunal to try Chakradhar on the grounds that “attracting” female followers was scandalous and contrary to normative Dharma Shastra injunctions. Here is the *līlā* that describes the trial<sup>34</sup>:

Then Chakradhar, having crossed the Godavari River, went to Paithan, where a tribunal (*sabha*) gathered at the Aditi temple of Mudha. Hemadri, Sarang Pandit, Mayata Hari, Prajnyasagar; the major leaders of the village, the Brahmin elites [*mahajan*], scholars, historians, holy men, celibates, Jain ascetics, members of the Natha sect—they all

<sup>33</sup> One *līlā* recalls that Hemadri’s wife, Demati, was a devotee of Chakradhar, something Hemadri did not like. See LC-U 509.

<sup>34</sup> LC-U 536.

assembled. Chakradhar was brought into the Mudha Aditi temple. Chakradhar took a seat in the middle of the assembly hall.

They said to him, “Who are you?”

Chakradhar said, “I am an ascetic, a Mahatma.”

[They said,] “There is nothing more you’d like to say?”

[Chakradhar] said, “All of you gathered here are eminent people. Scholars, students, renunciates, milk fasters, legal scholars, historians.”

And then his gaze fell upon Sarang Pandit, and Sarang Pandit looked aside.

[Chakradhar continued,] “You who have assembled are the leaders of all eighteen important families [of Paithan], Jain ascetics, Natha yogis. You would not drink unknown water.<sup>35</sup> Then you ask yourself what it is that I am.”

[They said,] “The women are attracted to you, no? Isn’t this the way it is? And you are similarly attracted to the women, isn’t that the case?”

Those gathered said, “Yes!”

Someone among the tribunal clapped, and they all began to quietly conspire (i. e., “whisper”) with one another.

Then two people, Mayata Hari and Prajnasagar, stood up [and addressed the tribunal]: “That you conspire [against Chakradhar] is wrong.”

The conspiring talk ended.

Mayata Hari and Prajnasagar said, “You [tribunal members] are bring ruin upon this country (*rāṣṭra*) and you are acting like Chandals.” Then Mayata Hari and Prajnasagar left.

Chakradhar said [to the tribunal], “You each are religious experts (*agāmika*). Each of you holds a position of political importance (*pradhān*). Please consider what it is you’d like to do.”

“No need, we’ve decided already,” they said.

“Is it so? Then whatever it is you’ve decided, just do it,” [Chakradhar said.]

Then they took [Chakradhar] to the temple courtyard. There he voluntarily offered his nose.

This trial, whether fact or fiction, registers two fields of public debate, both integrated into the religious innovations of the Mahanubhavs, and represented in Yadava public culture and the Brahminic ecumene. The first concerns gender. The premise of this trial is a false one, what contemporary lawyers might call the fallacy of equivocation, using a term of legal importance in a way that is deliberately ambiguous so that one may reach a favorable decision for some

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<sup>35</sup> This figure of speech indicates to “stomach” something, to bear something offensive in silence, or simply to keep silent. Chakradhar is saying that they are not the kind of people to keep quiet because they have already made up their minds.

other crime or end. In this case, Chakradhar is falsely accused of improper relations with his female devotees, all of whom were either married or widowed, we presume. The Brahmin tribunal appears to rely upon particular passages of the *Manusmṛti*, a key Dharma Shastra text of Brahminical law, that provides an injunction against men who “violate the wives of others,” a crime punishable with disfigurement, and specifically identifies “cutting off the nose,” which is what is meant by the last line of the *līlā* in which Chakradhar “offered his nose.”<sup>36</sup> This is the “case” against Chakradhar—that he has inappropriate relations with the wives of others, that is, his Brahmin female devotees. This is of course a false accusation as represented in the *Līlācaritra*, where the idea of such relations with his female followers is absurd—they are after all celibate renunciates. Yet this does point toward one important field of debate—the teaching of women and in particular, providing such opportunities for women to transcend the restrictive social norms of the time.<sup>37</sup> Notice that Sarang Pandit, who had earlier complained of the number of women in Chakradhar’s circle of followers, is present at this trial, but not as advocate—he is one of Chakradhar’s judges.

We can see one other issue that is circulating in public discourse indicated by this trial. Notice two Brahmin figures—Mayata Hari and Prajnyasagar—protest the proceedings and abandon the trial. Their accusation is not against Chakradhar but against Hemadri, Sarang Pandit, and their other Brahmin peers, whom they accuse of arranging a “rigged” trial, conspiring to unfairly influence the proceedings. The *Manusmṛti* sets out several requirements for a fair trial, as well as punishments and admonishments if a fair trial is not provided (to Brahmin men at least). Here is a translation of a relevant section by Suman and Patrick Olivelle: “Justice struck by Injustice, and Truth by Untruth, while the court officials remain idle onlookers, then they are themselves struck down...[they become like] “low born” (*vṛṣala*).”<sup>38</sup> This latter designation of low born is invoked when the tribunal members are referred to as Chandals, a synonym of *vṛṣala*. This suggests a public debate about justice itself, about how classical texts of social science, of Dharma Shastra, meet the vernacular application of trials in the everyday world. The story of this trial links both Chakradhar’s egalitarian approach to spreading his message among social orders across caste and especially gender, but it also draws in

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<sup>36</sup> See *Manusmṛti* 8:6, 352, and Olivelle/Olivelle 2005: 167; 186.

<sup>37</sup> Here too the tribunal seems to reference a section of the *Manusmṛti* that forbids married women from undertaking vows or fasts without the permission of their fathers or husbands (*Manusmṛti* 5: 155), see Olivelle/Olivelle 2005: 146. As Mahanubhavs, these women are always undertaking such vows and fasts as a matter of regular practice.

<sup>38</sup> *Manusmṛti* 8: 14, see Olivelle/Olivelle 2005: 168.

broader issues of social equality and fairness. The trial shows a society engaged in critical debate, creating lines of fracture within the Brahminic ecumene itself—gender, caste, and, as we will see, language.

I read the trial as an indictment of Chakradhar's social ethics by the Brahminic ecumene, and in particular his desire to cross gender lines, which seems more problematic in the Brahminic ecumene and Yadava-era public culture than his interest in teaching across caste lines. Indeed, the very question of the language in which the Mahanubhavs will preserve their most sacred texts, those texts that most closely convey the life, words, and deeds of Chakradhar, is exactly situated in the relation between gender and the language of everyday life. A text second only to the *Līlācaritra* for Mahanubhavs is the *Smṛtisthaḷa*, a work that records the life of Bhatobas, the figure who becomes the leader of the Mahanubhavs after Chakradhar's departure. The text also records the history of the early Mahanubhavs as they assemble the *Līlācaritra* and routinize their religious practices in the wake of their founder. The *Smṛtisthaḷa* records an important debate among the early Mahanubhavs regarding the appropriate language in which to preserve Chakradhar's memory. Given that almost all of these early devotees are Brahmin, and that the key editors of the text (Mhaibhata, as well as Bhatobas) are also Brahmin men, there was an assumption that Sanskrit should serve as the key medium for the legacy of Chakradhar. However, when this idea is proposed, Bhatobas rejects it in clear terms, for he says a text in Sanskrit would "deprive my elderly women/followers" from their right to hear the words and deeds of Chakradhar.<sup>39</sup> The decision to record the earliest and key texts of the Mahanubhav order in Marathi was not solely based on the fact that Chakradhar spoke Marathi (though Gujarati was his native tongue), but rather the decision to use Marathi directly addressed the social inequality in the field of Sanskrit, a language used almost exclusively by Brahmin and other high caste men. The question of what language to use to convey Chakradhar from the past into the present was a question of social equality.

If we return to the trial, we can see more clearly a particular threat to the Brahminic ecumene that links gender and language. Chakradhar taught women, in Marathi, and his followers retained that social impulse in the initial texts they created in his absence. As the inaugural work of Marathi literature, the question of vernacularization is driven by the desire to preserve the opportunity to learn of Chakradhar's salvational words and deeds in the language of everyday life, configured here as an act of social equality around gender. The text does not press this question of social equality further—this is

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<sup>39</sup> *Smṛtisthaḷa* 14 in Deshpande 1969, and Feldhaus/Tulpule 1992: 73.

not a call for gender equity. But the first work of Marathi literature, the *Līlācaritra*, was not an accidental text. It was a conscientious attempt to bridge a gender-power divide around language, public culture, and access to the possibility of salvation through Chakradhar's words and deeds. The trial indicates social normative resistance to this act, and this importantly suggests a field of debate that must have extended well beyond this one example. Our evidence for the fact that this debate was not isolated to the Mahanubhavs is apparent when we see similar questions of language, social equality, and access to salvational possibilities animate the composition of the *Jñāneśvarī*.

### 3.2 The *Jñāneśvarī*

Though the *Jñāneśvarī* may not be the oldest work of Marathi literature, it is undoubtedly considered the foundational work of Marathi literature, the language's first explicitly literary text. The *Jñāneśvarī* sees itself as such as well. Here are some of the ways Jnandev describes his endeavor:

I will compose my Marathi with such affectionate words and artistic expressions that [Marathi] would defeat even divine nectar in a contest over which is the sweeter. || Jn. 6.14 ||

By the sophistication (*nāgarapaṇe*) of Marathi, the aesthetic of peace (*śānta*) will outlive the aesthetic of passion (*śṛṅgāra*).

Then these verses (*oviyā*) will have become the jewels of rhetoric (*sāhitya*). || Jn. 10.41 ||

Let a gold mine of literature (*sāhitya*) be excavated from the soil of Marathi (*deśī*).

Let vines of aesthetic discernment grow everywhere. || Jn. 12.12 ||

Let the knowledge of Brahman (*brahmavidya*) abound in the city of Marathi (*marhāṭiyecāṃ nagarīṃ*) ... || Jn. 12.16 ||

Though a commentary in Marathi on the Sanskrit *Bhagavad Gītā*, it does not transpose the Sanskrit commentarial form into Marathi, but creates something new, a hybrid of Marathi oral genres and Sanskrit literary conventions. The text is in a rhymed couplet form called *ovī* that mirrors an oral performative tradition of expounding texts for everyday audiences (*kīrtan*); in other words, the author chose a simple, quotidian lyrical form in Marathi that would have been familiar to any everyday speaker of the language. And so the language of the text is highly colloquial, on the one hand, but also replete with philosophical and theological terms more at home in Sanskrit scholarship than everyday Marathi speech. This peculiar hybrid is named by the author as a *grantha kīrtan*, a mix

between a high textual register (*granth*) and an autochthonous informal oral performance, a *kīrtan*. It is also a “performance” (*kīrtan*) about a “book” (*grantha*), the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The *Jñāneśvarī* and its author seek to draw the elite religious and philosophical discourse of the Brahminic ecumene and the Sanskrit cosmopolis into the field of everyday life, both in terms of language—Marathi—as well as aesthetic—the common *ovī* metre.<sup>40</sup>

The text seeks a wide, everyday audience, and this is clear from its choice of language as well as its poetic form. But the text does not leave this point about its intended audience to chance. Jnandev believes that the Sanskrit *Bhagavad Gītā* was created for all people, regardless of caste or gender. However, the *Gītā* is inaccessible to all but a tiny minority of people—high caste men who are literate in Sanskrit, the small but powerful population of the Brahminic ecumene in the Yadava period. Jnandev feels the he is completing the mission of the *Bhagavad Gītā* itself when he puts the text into Marathi. As he says,

By listening to [the *Jñāneśvarī*], anyone can easily enter the sacred waters of the *Gītā* ... || Jn. 11.8 ||

From these Marathi words I have built steps to cross over the impassable banks of Sanskrit ... || Jn. 11.9 ||

Therefore, now anyone at all (*bhalaṭā*) may bathe in these sacred waters as if they were at Prayag viewing Krishna’s form as the Universal Lord.

And upon achieving all this, a person might just give up the world! || Jn. 11.10 ||

Though Jnandev was a Brahmin male of high Sanskrit pedigree, and thus likely had ample opportunities for a lucrative career in the Brahminic ecumene, he appears to understand himself as a man of the people, an agent on their behalf, drawing into the quotidian world a text of singular salvific potential. He no doubt belongs to the elite, but Jnandev does not follow the path of his elite male Brahmin brethren who would direct their texts toward kings, scholars, and other Brahmins. Instead, Jnandev has in mind a different audience:

The person who hears, recites, or understands the *Gītā* will be given nothing less than liberation (*mokṣa*).

Just like a rich donor would never say to someone in need, “I have nothing to give.” || Jn. 18.1673 ||

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**40** For more on the relationship between *ovī* and everyday life, see the Grindmill Project, directed by P. Sainath, which is dedicated to studying *ovī* or “women’s work songs”: <https://ruralindiaonline.org/articles/the-grindmill-songs-recording-a-national-treasure>. Last accessed 2.11.18.

Thus the inscrutable words [of philosophy] were included and simplified [in the *Bhagavad Gītā*]

For the sake of women, low castes, and others (*strīśūdrādika*). || Jn. 18.1678 ||

“Women, low castes, and others,” the vast majority of the population of the Yadava era (and now), the core constituency of the field of everyday life—this is Jnandev’s explicit audience, the very group for whom he believes the Sanskrit *Bhagavad Gītā* was originally composed, yet so long disenfranchised from its message because of the “impassable banks of Sanskrit.” This clear, strident, and ethically direct thesis lends to this text the sense that it is a kind of vernacular manifesto, a declaration not only for a new avenue for literary work in a new age—a “goldmine of Marathi literature” and a “city of Marathi”—but for the revival of an old ethics, one he sees conceptualized yet not fully executed in the *Bhagavad Gītā*,<sup>41</sup> which is that all people should be entitled to hear Krishna’s words of salvation, that salvation is almost a “public good” that no one ought to be denied. As the *Jñāneśvarī* closes, Jnandev reminds his listeners of the social-salvational ethics of his work:

Thus the holy book, the *Gītā*, contains the ocean of philosophy.

It is the Veda in essence, yet it is different because it is more liberal (*audārye*). || Jn. 18.1446 ||

The Veda contains great treasures, but there is no other quite as miserly.

For [the Veda] enters only the ears of the three castes [Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya]. || Jn. 18.1447 ||

All other living beings also endure the suffering of the world, whether they be women, low castes, or others (*strīśūdrādika*).

They should no longer be denied access. || Jn. 18.1448 ||

Thus the way I see it, in order to correct this previous failing,

And to serve all people, the Vedas took the form of the *Gītā*.

|| Jn. 18.1449 ||

Not only can the *Gītā* saturate the mind through its meaning, but that meaning can also be perceived by the ears through listening, and meaning can dwell in the mouth through recitation || Jn. 18.1450 ||

By reading the *Gītā* in the company of the wise ... || Jn. 18.1451 ||

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**41** There is a long tradition of texts in Sanskrit or other elite languages, like Pali, that also name their audience to be women, low castes, and others, configured in various ways. These would include the *purāṇas*, the epics, Buddhist texts in Pali and Sanskrit, and many others. Jnandev’s point is that whatever the claims of such texts, if they remain in Sanskrit, they cannot actually be accessed by their purported audience.



A “liberal” Veda, the full expression of the ethics of the *Gītā*, a hope for women, low castes, and others to endure “the suffering of the world” through the soothing words of the *Gītā* channeled through the *Jñāneśvarī*, these ideas are the ethical principles that compel this inaugural work of Marathi literature. As a vernacular manifesto, the text links a new literature in Marathi with a social agenda—making salvation available to all across social distinctions. This ethics will have a profound impact on the devotional or *bhakti* tradition that will form in the region in Marathi around the worship of the deity Vitthal in Pandharpur. Within a few decades the first “saint-poets” (*sant-kavi*) of Marathi will emerge in the Varkari religious tradition in the region. And though Jnandev evinces no devotion to Vitthal in Pandharpur in the *Jñāneśvarī*, Jnandev and his text will be absorbed and revered by the Varkaris to come. Many links will be formed in hagiography and in devotional songs between Jnandev and the Varkaris, particularly between Jnandev and the figure of Namdev, a low caste “tailor” with whom Jnandev will develop a close bond in hagiography. Through these stories, one key shared concern will be the full expanse of the possibility of salvation, which the Varkaris will emphasize is accomplished by an intimacy with the deity Vitthal, not necessarily a familiarity with the *Bhagavad Gītā* in one’s language. Despite this difference, the ethics of the Varkaris and the ethics of the *Jñāneśvarī* will interlace as the text is brought fully into the Varkari religious and ethical world.

This emphasis on social equality is both profoundly stated but also carefully circumscribed in the *Jñāneśvarī*. The text does not call for full social equality, though there is nothing in the text that would countermand this impulse. Instead, the text seems to balance a strident insistence on equal access to the salvational message of the *Gītā* with a kind of vernacular social status quo, a recognition that society is a field of difference and hierarchical relationships. Set alongside the kinds of statements given above, we can see several examples of social inequity appear in the form of figures of speech and observations of social norms. At a few points in the text Jnandev uses everyday Marathi colloquialisms that express a general social casteism or sexism. These are not Jnandev’s beliefs—his social ethics are clear enough—but they are part and parcel of the language of everyday life. At several points we see Dalit women presented in euphemistic ways that reveal their vulnerability to both patriarchal sexism and caste prejudice.<sup>42</sup> At

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<sup>42</sup> Jn. 13.478 and Jn. 3.246, for example.

another point, as Jnandev is explaining a Sanskrit verse on the insufficiency of having mere faith, Jnandev says:

Don't hold to faith (*śraddhā*) alone, O Arjuna, for does not a twice-born rubbing elbows (*ghṛṣṭi*) with a lower caste (*antya*)

Himself become a lower caste? || Jn. 17.51 ||

Think about it: Would Ganga water be just as pure if poured from a liquor bottle? || Jn. 17.52 ||

Jnandev here reminds his listeners that his capacious ethics around salvation is sent out in the world by a social discussion of what is culturally appropriate. This is not a statement about caste (we have seen Jnandev's very direct statements on this subject), but the use of social normativity as metaphor in order to make a theological point. Yet the metaphor encodes the social prejudices of Jnandev's age, even if they are not his own. The rules of social etiquette remain intact even when faced with Jnandev's interventions around social access to the words of salvation. For example, we read:

Just as a corpse must be placed outside the home, one should avoid chit-chat with a lower caste (*antya*).

Doesn't one wash one's hands when they are dirty? || Jn. 17.106 ||

Such statements are not uncommon in the *Jñāneśvarī*, though they all exist in the context of metaphors used to explain theological points. I see these as colloquialisms of difference nestled in the grooves of everyday speech in the Marathi of Jnandev's age—they are not positive statements of social normativity but features of the quotidian world reflected in Marathi. When Jnandev speaks directly on a subject, as I have shown above, and as he does in the *Pasāyadān*, a kind of closing prayer to his text, his language is redolent with a desire for social equality and an elevation of the common good.

Yet what such colloquialisms of difference reveal is that the social debate about caste and gender is endemic to the use of the vernacular, to a language rooted in the experience of everyday life in a given region, and so it is endemic to everyday, shared social life. Unlike Sanskrit, which can exist in an elite sphere of artifice, colloquial Marathi was inextricable from its everyday roots—the ordinary world of social interaction at street corners and in markets and homes was the very source of the Marathi Jnandev used. Jnandev's goal to bring the soteriological possibilities of the *Gītā* to all people could not be accomplished without some enduring remnants of the inequalities of the social world.

## 4 Sonic Equality and a Nascent Public Sphere

I refer to the particular impulses toward social equality found in the *Jñāneśvarī* and the *Līlācaritra* as *sonic equality*, a term that conveys the idea that all people have a fundamental right to *hear* the salvational message of the *Gītā*. This is an unequivocal ethics at the core of the *Jñāneśvarī*, and I think it is traceable in the *Līlācaritra* and the teachings of Chakradhar. This is a kind of inchoate liberalism, an ethical and even rational principle of social right, though restricted to this very particular religious sphere of salvation. Sonic equality is not social equality, but it is a kind of equality tied to a fundamental human right that can serve as the seed for expanded ideas of social equality to come. We see something like this happen in the history of Jnandev and the *Jñāneśvarī*. As the Varkaris enfold Jnandev and his text into their religious tradition, they equip him with a hagiography that describes Jnandev very much “rubbing elbows” and engaging in “chit chat” with lower castes—indeed, his closest companions are low caste men and women in the Marathi Varkari hagiography, such as the Shudra Namdev. The sonic equality of the *Jñāneśvarī* will transform in Jnandev’s Varkari hagiography to become something much more like social equality, the story of a Brahmin saint of Sanskrit pedigree who breaks all rules of caste and gender distinction to form an intimate camaraderie with the devotees of Vitthal, the Varkaris. I argue that this hagiography, in the context of the *Jñāneśvarī* itself, reveals the machinations of a society engaged in a critical debate about justice and equality, not only in terms of salvation, but in all aspects of social life.

It may seem unlikely that from the elite spheres of the Brahminic ecumene figures like Chakradhar and Jnandev would emerge to engage with everyday life, jettisoning their security as Brahmin males in the Yadava period, and instead becoming emblems for a reformulation of normative social relations, even in the restrictive ways I have outlined here.<sup>43</sup> Yet just such socio-economic crossings mark the emergence of the public spheres of Europe as well, at least in Habermas’ telling of it. His cafes, salons, public houses, social societies, and printed periodicals of the eighteenth century and later may have formed a public that saw itself as capacious, but it was also highly restricted to well-educated literate men (for the most part), and often defined by aristocratic access, and almost always limited to those with high education and secure property rights—in other words, to an elite few, mostly male, people. Yet here too Habermas emphasizes how these elites still identified a public, promoted an inclusivism,

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<sup>43</sup> As I argue in *The Quotidian Revolution* (2016), Jnandev in the *Jñāneśvarī* shows no signs of having suffered the “outcaste” status that is a hallmark of his (likely later) hagiography attributed to Namdev.

and imagined a field of common interest and concern that reflected an imagined public. If Habermas' European elites could speak for the non-elite as well, why could India's elites not do the same?

My goal is not to argue that an exact Indian cognate to the European public sphere is evident here in the thirteenth century, nor do I suggest that the moments and texts outlined here form the origin of modernity, democracy, or human rights. Instead, I have indicated that the texts examined here, the inaugural works of Marathi literature, register a larger debate occurring in Marathi public culture of the era, significant enough that these debates about social equality come to prominent positions within the first two works of Marathi literature. And so these two texts are emblematic of an emergent public sphere in Marathi that engaged in critical debate about society, but these texts are not the confines of this public sphere. These works are metonymic and indexical, signs of a much larger sphere in which the common good was a key question.

I suggest that in the genealogy of Indian modernity, and in particular, in the history of Indian public spheres, which surely must be a plurality in a region of linguistic diversity far in excess of Europe at any point in time, we can add strands of social influence that precede and transcend the advent of colonialism and the glimmers of European modernity on the subcontinent, which are typically identified as the origins of Indian public spheres. My aim is not to delimit any of these possibilities, but to expand them, to look back further and deeper into India's past to observe when and how we see a society critically engaged in debate about social concerns, even when this debate swims in the sphere of "religion" and does not hold stylized conceptions of rational communication as its aesthetic norm. The moment of Marathi literary vernacularization is one signal example in a sky filled with other stars, both earlier in time and later, and more expansive in space across the region. And though these histories are known, they are very rarely understood in the social historical context of public spheres, perhaps for all the reasons I mention at the beginning of this essay, and perhaps even more to the point: because pre-modern India is so commonly associated with "religious world views" that are unfavorably juxtaposed to rationalist modernity, a key conceit of the pejorative aspects of Orientalist-colonialist thought. Though we are all postcolonial now, still many histories remain mired in a normative discourse that sees the premodern and modern as entirely unintelligible to each other; it is often the wall of "religion" that stands between them. Or else this gap is bridged by the ludicrous—Vedic flying saucers and ancient plastic surgery to name a few recent examples. Yet in the middle there is the possibility for rethinking key features we associated with Western European modernity, such as the public sphere, as hybrid concepts with multiple genealogies in the present. It is hubris to think the modern Western world

invented the idea that humans share a common condition and strive toward a common good. If the debate about this common good is a key to all public spheres, then we should seek it out wherever and whenever we find it the history of humanity.

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