



Performing the Sacred: Song

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In this dissertation, I argue that the liturgical canons of bhakti (devotional) practice in South Asia undergo constant manipulation and transformation through performance. The musicians who activate the canon through song, dance, theater, and drumming play a fundamental role in the creation of felt connections between sacred ideologies and daily experience, and they do so knowingly. The music-making that constitutes devotional ritual simultaneously reiterates a fixed repertoire and re-creates the same fixed repertoire through musical invention, virtuosity, and stylistic citation. In other words, devotees build new spiritual encounters from the established texts of their tradition through music. I focus specifically on the Varkari tradition of Maharashtra, which continues to be practiced actively by nearly one million devotees in Western India. My research centers on a group of Varkari pakhawaj (barrel drum) players in the city of Pune, and the variety of musical activities that make up the work and play of their religion. This community in particular demonstrates self-conscious negotiations between contemporary urban perceptions of sacred musical production and reception, musical virtuosity as it is developed and implemented by the players, and the status quo of the repertoire itself. Throughout the dissertation, I analyze both entrenched and newer ritual genres of the Varkaris and focus on the ways in which the aesthetic systems and performance techniques of these genres inscribe devotional efficacy, identity, and cultural resonance within the larger context of a globalizing Indian modernity. This focus extends previous literary studies of bhakti songs by sustaining questions about the role of performance in the sacred, the implications that this has regarding the agency of devotees, and the discursive strategies that allow musical practice and worship to coincide.

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