Durga Kale
University of Calgary

RESEARCH NOTE

The Floating Existence of *Taraṅga*s

Appraising Local Deities and Social Meaning-Making on the Western Coast of India

Conversations around rites of possession and object animation within the Hindu performative sphere have a long history of being relegated to a marginalized space unworthy of academic investigation. Using the concept of dramaturgy popularized by Erving Goffman, this article shifts the gaze from object animation and spirit possession to its social performance, in which a temporary egalitarian social scheme is exhibited. In exploring the case of a specific possession rite locally called *taraṅga devatā*, which is practiced along the west coast of India, this article introduces the transformation of the deities housed in local shrines as entities capable of movement and communication known as *taraṅga*. In so doing, I reassess some local Hindu religious practices that were eschewed in the past.

Keywords: Hinduism—possession rites—object animation—vernacular religion—western India—dramaturgy

Asian Ethnology Volume 81, Numbers 1 & 2 · 2022, 279–303
© Nanzan University Anthropological Institute

Rites of possession, characterized by their "extreme multivocality, fundamental issues of emotion, aesthetics, language and personal identity" (Smith 2006, 15), have begun to gain momentum as objects of investigation in the early 21st century, particularly the veiled nature of these practices. Indeed, the relegation of the ritual category of body invasion and the use of material objects in South Asian religious traditions as "black magic" in earlier colonial sources as well as contemporary popular discourse in India has consequently led to a lack of dedicated academic study.[1] Arthur Coke Burnell (1894), one early colonial observer, refers to similar traditions in South Kanara involving *bhūta* (ghost) rituals as "devil worship."[2] In order to further uncover the veiled nature of such practices to do them justice, the intimate connection between praxis and local culture needs to be reassessed. One of the performative aspects of "vernacular" Hinduism (Novetzke 2017) on the coast of Maharashtra anchors itself in the performance of *taraṅga devatā*, which will be closely examined in this article.[3] In this tradition, a mobile deity (*taraṅga*) functions as an embodied form, communicating with practitioners through the agency of a medium. The transition from the stationary, formless nature of a deity residing in its shrine into a subsequent manifestation with form and mobility (*taraṅga*, lit. "wave") underpins a religious process mediated through what I am calling "social meaning-making." This article aims to understand the nature of *taraṅga* performances that were reduced to such questionable categories as "ecstatic" or "shamanic" by earlier observers and hence dismissed from any serious inquiry.[4]

My exploration of *taraṅga* deities worshipped in a specific district on the western coast of India preliminarily attempts to chart everyday practice set within the vernacular culture of Sindhudurg, the district in Maharashtra where I conducted my fieldwork.[5] The article first explores local village deities within their linguistic context and then considers the physical expression of these deities as *taraṅga*, explained via an abbreviated history of certain religious developments in western India. The article then highlights aspects of social entanglement that become apparent through the performance of the *taraṅga* tradition's processions, when stationary deities become noticeably mobile in nature.[6] The processional practice at the heart of such ritual performances takes on a form of unwritten social commentary, as this exploration seeks to convey. The article thus sets up the practice of *taraṅga* and attempts to flesh

out a vocabulary to understand its social performance through the lens of Erving Goffman's notion of dramaturgy.

Goffman's theory of dramaturgy became popular after the publication of his book *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). His classic lends a vocabulary that is still useful today, I believe, for studying social customs across various regions and religions.[7] Along with the idea of material embodiment, the rite of *taraṅga devatā* as performed in the coastal villages of western India could be described through his dramaturgical lens. I attempt to peel away the layers of public performance in which *taraṅga* deities are displayed and paraded to highlight the modified presentation of social roles during the rituals that are mediated through material embodiment in *taraṅga*.

Introducing *taraṅga devatā*: Their linguistic background, form, and function

The deities popularly known as *taraṅga devatā* (*daivata* = deity [singular]; *devatā* = deities [plural]) in the district of Sindhudurg are depicted as transitory and momentary divine entities that make their presence known like "ripples on the surface of water." The tradition of *taraṅga devatā* as a syncretic or mixed form of community performance rooted in the acknowledgment of an invisible spirit world draws narrative strands from localized Hindu beliefs and practices in the region where fieldwork was conducted for this article.[8] The local deities in Sindhudurg take on the form of *taraṅga* during annual festivals conducted in villages throughout the district. *Taraṅga* means "waves" or "ripples" in Marathi, the dominant regional language. Another Marathi interpretation of *taraṅga* is the infinitive "to float," which is often how it is understood in colloquial usage. Local people speak of the deities expressing their presence in humans through the shaking of the body, as if waves or *taraṅga* well up in the body (Dhuri 2013, 22). Simplistic in their form, *taraṅga* deities are depicted by wooden poles capped by metallic or wooden masks that complete their deictic form to signify the containment of godly spirits temporarily residing within them (see figure 1). The three components of such a deity—wooden pole, drapery or cloth, and capping mask—fuse together to form a visual representation of the attendants for an otherwise immobile deity that normally resides within the confines of a sanctum sanctorum.

Local narratives told to me by villagers suggest an acute awareness of the distinction between the village deities and their movable forms as *taraṅga devatā*. Traditionally, the *taraṅga* form embodies a Hindu deity in its local shrine where it is normally worshipped, but when moving it acts as a liaison between the people and the divine. Oral narratives in Sindhudurg reflect the intermediary role of *taraṅga*s as *kāṭiche deva*s (pole deities), *khāmba-kāṭī*s (pillar-poles), and *devaskī*s (of the gods). The first two terms refer to the form—a pole (*kāṭī*)—while the latter refers to the agency of the given deity being activated through rituals allowing it to move about with the aid of a human bearer. *Devaskī* is thus interpreted as an agency emanating from the specific *deva* being worshipped at any given time. In most cases involving *taraṅga devatā*, *devaskī* refers to divine law animated through an object, which is to say the pole and the dressed garment. In the ethnographic context in which my research

Figure 1. The *taraṅga devatā* at Achra, Sindhudurg district, Maharashtra. The female deity on the right is dressed in a red sari, and the other two (Shiva on the left, and alocal spirit deity in the middle) will be dressed for the performance. Photograph by Durga Kale.

is situated, *devaskī* pertains to rites of possession and object animation that are practiced along the coastal regions of Sindhudurg, the main site of my fieldwork. The nomenclature used for the form and function of these rites points to the spirit world as a driving force for both good and evil agents that inhabit village settings in which the performances occur, a point made by John Stanley (1988), where he argues that although they are polar opposites, they both express first and foremost a religious experience.

Participants in the local festivals occurring annually in Sindhudurg described in the following paragraphs are very aware of the distinct differences between the deity in the central shrine and its embodied form as a wooden object that serves as a vessel for the deity spirit. They identify and describe consecrated wooden poles and their ornamentation as a temporary "refuge" for the deities processed during such ritualistic events. Identifiers such as *device taraṅga* (wave or whim of the goddess) and *ravalanāṭāci khāmba-kāṭī* (pole belonging to Ravalnatha) highlight the controlling agency that a deity has over its wooden pole when becoming the *taraṅga* manifestation. The embodiment of the deity as the *taraṅga* pole is completed with a capping element consisting of a mask affixed atop the wooden pole. The capping element of the mask is sometimes replaced by a horse rider or an astylar spire-shaped capping element to mark the presence of an aniconic spirit other than a female deity of a shrine. The mask (*rūpḍe*) hoisted up onto the *taraṅga* pole provides an anthropomorphic form to the material paraphernalia used in the processional rituals by graphically providing a face to a formless, invisible entity.[9] The *taraṅga* form thereby allows for the transition of an immobile deity into a wooden pole capable of being carried around to be shown to the audience participating in the deity's festival.

Figure 2. The capping elements, known as *rūpḍe*, for the *taraṅga devatā* located at Kamte Kot in Sindhudurg district, Maharashtra. Photograph by of Durga Kale.

This fluidity enables the *acala* (stationary) deity to transform into *cala* (ambulatory) form by changing the material in which it is embodied (figures 2 and 3).

In their exploration of masked rituals, David Shulman and Deborah Thiagarajan propose that theories concerning ritual masking are either symbolic, expressive, or performative (Shulman and Thiagarajan 2006, 6). In the parading of a *taraṅga* pole adorned with a mask, the symbolic and performative dimensions of the action take front stage. The *taraṅga* form enables the disengagement of the deity from its stationary form in the shrine, which allows it then to get carried around to visit groups of devotees in the form of the *taraṅga* pole. The mask completes the physical form of the deity, the embodied spirit, through the use of material objects mounted on the pole as well as the drapery ornamenting it. Taken together, the ornamented pole organically symbolizes the physical presence of the invisible entity, while the *taraṅga* masked pole functions or performs "as the deity itself." It thus transcends mere representation in that the object in its clothes and masked form undergoes an ontological transformation to literally become the spirit or deity in question.

Metallic masks and other totems are commonplace objects used for adornment in the lived religions of South Asia more generally, but they are quite ubiquitous in the region of coastal Maharashtra, where masking is a strategy for taking on a material form. This strategy is central to the annual village festivals played out all along the Maharashtrian coast in honor of highly localized deities. A majority of the village deities are simply represented as crude stone blocks or in the form of anthills in the coastal villages of the region.[10] In cases where a stone sculpture of the deity has anthropomorphic attributes, the icon is considered to be unapproachable by the devotees. The crude stone slab thus symbolizes the accessible presence of the deity, but without the active agency for its periodic movement and communication. The stationary forms of such local deities thus occasionally take on a celebratory

Figure 3. A typical *taraṅga devatā* performance. Notice the multiple *taraṅga* deities carried by respective *mānakarī*s from various villages. This moment captures the commencement of the performance. Photograph by Durga Kale.

anthropomorphic form during village festivals when the performance of *taraṅga* occurs. As hinted at in the previous paragraphs, the aniconic sculptures are adorned with metallic masks and nine-yard sarees (in the case of female deities) or *dhotara* (*dhotī*s, for male deities), transforming the seemingly inert objects into dazzling expressions of personhood. The elaborate ritual of adding a visage to an unadorned stone is aptly termed as *rūpḍe lāvaṇe*, to put on a face or beautify. *Rūpḍe*, or the mask for the deity, simultaneously envisages the abstract form of the spirit and the likeness of a human deity, which is reiterated through the narrative lore associated with the transformation of a shapeless object into a recognizable anthropomorphic form. Sight and sound therefore operate in tandem to allow the audience members to experience the transformation they are witnessing both visually and acoustically. The deity first takes form in its shrine, after which its mobility gets expressed through the *taraṅga devatā* rituals, during which it moves about and communicates to be seen and heard by devotees and other members of the crowds that gather for such spectacles. The specific deity going through the transformation assumes personhood as a result of two acts performed: the mask being hoisted onto the wooden pole and the ability to move that is brought about through the agency of the pole bearer. In the case of the *taraṅga* deities, the mask anthropomorphizes the formless deity or covers the otherwise invisible spirit that is being given form. In the process of personifying the deity, the mask as simply a "covering" could seem misleading, for the mask, in turn, uncovers the true form of the deity as an anthropomorphic entity capable of movement through human assistance. The adorned deity is now capable of communicating with devotees through the mediation provided by its respective pole bearer.

On the one hand, the female deities depicted with metallic or wooden masks as capping elements on their *taraṅga* poles complete the process of anthropomorphizing them as well. Standing almost seven feet tall, the wooden pole adorned with a human face and colorful drapery conveys the imposing image of a larger-than-life deity that stands in close proximity to its devotees. On the other hand, the male deity,

who is an aspect of the pan-Hindu god Shiva in most cases, is depicted in the form of a right hand in *abhayamudrā* (non-fear hand gesture), which is locally understood as a blessing.[11] The capping element in the form of a blessing palm thus symbolizes the male spirits of the village, such as Ravalanata and Bhutanata. The signifier *nāṭa* conveys the sense of being a "master of" somebody. In this case, the spirits are described as the masters of *rāvala*s, Maratha administrative personnel during the medieval period in what is now the Maharashtrian state, and *bhūta*s (ghosts), thus suggesting agentic control both over deceased political rulers or administrators and the spirit world in general. A metallic or wooden representation of an open palm in *taraṅga* iconography seems reminiscent of the *pañjā* or *haṃsa* iconography popular in Islamic performative traditions (see Zaidi 2016). A close resemblance of raised-hand iconography with its Islamic counterparts (especially used during *muḥarram* rituals[12]) opens up a discussion on the significance of this motif, to which we shall return later. The third recurring totem for the deities with ambiguous forms is that of an astylar conical capping element. In some cases, the representation resembles a temple's spire. Several deity attendants I interviewed in Sindhudurg stressed that the conical capping elements on the *taraṅga* poles are an acknowledgment of the presence of known and unknown forces that inhabit the landscape. And assigning a *khāmba-kāṭī* or *taraṅga* form to these powers (*śakti*) keeps them propitiated.[13]

Taraṅga masks draw heavily from the local narratives and art of the region. The ceremonial mask for the female deities is distinct from the mask used as the capping element on the *taraṅga* pole. The respondents spoke of a past tradition, now extinct, concerning the village coppersmith or carpenter crafting the face of the *taraṅga devatā.* With modernization, these local craftsmen lost the patronage needed to produce specific masks, resulting in the *taraṅga devatā* gradually becoming adorned with mass-produced masks that were not made specifically for the *taraṅga* deities. The memory of a decline in locally made adornments in favor of mass-produced ones highlights an ambiguous attitude among participant devotees. According to them, the element of generic masking to denote a nondescript anthropomorphic form and the existence of a divine entity is of more importance today than the specific iconographic attributes of the female deities. It may further indicate the perceived oneness of the female deities (*devī*s) and their feminine power (*śakti*) across the performative spectrum in South Asia, which enables the repurposing of masks used for the representation of other Hindu *devī*s, such as Durga during Navaratri and Gauri during Ganapati festivals.[14] Although the provenance or place of manufacture for the mask of the *taraṅga* deity is not a point of deliberation, the place of artistic creation (of the mask, in this case) could influence some of the cultural performances that are integral aspects of the *taraṅga* tradition. For instance, the local guardian spirits envisioned variously as tigers, horsemen, or formless spirits translate into the material depictions of the capping elements adorning the wooden poles. As a general convention, then, the masks currently used depict female representations of the feminine divinities, while an astylar (or plain conical) top referred to as a *pañjā* (blessing palm) above is used for the poles representing a guardian spirit or male deity of the village.

The role of fluid transformation: *Nirguṇa/nirākāra* to *saguṇa/sākāra*

The nomenclature used by devotees conveys the inherently fluid form of the deities when they take recognizable shape as *taraṅga devatā* for a temporary period of time, which could last for one or two nights.[15] Dance performances with the *taraṅga devatā* highlight the movement and process of animating otherwise-inanimate objects such as the mask, drapery, and wooden pole. In this interaction that is fluid in its form, the *mānakarī* ("one who is anointed"), the one with the honor of holding and carrying the *taraṅga* pole, becomes a medium. Although the deity does not inhabit the pole bearer's body, the *mānakarī* affords movement and communication with the *taraṅga* pole. The *mānakarī*'s body experiences *kampa* (shaking), *laharī* (waves), or *taraṅga* (ripples) once the deity-spirit inhabits the pole and the paraphernalia that results in the *mānakarī-taraṅga* union as the *cala* (moving) deity.

The fluid transformation of immobile deities into *cala* forms with the mediation of the *mānakarī* proceeds through a milieu of negotiated meaning-making in the vernacular performative traditions. The processes operative in such a transformation further bring to light the background veiled by the performances in the foreground, in the Goffmanian sense of the term. To fully understand the ontological sense of this fluid transformation, the idea of "teeming place-world"[16] pointed out in William Sax's work (2009, 52) lends itself to approach the case of the *mānakarī-taraṅga* relationship. The presence and embodiment of the deity is rendered complete through the body of the pole bearer and his body alone—along with the family, ancestral history, and social position in the community that comes with it. The pole bearers and their public performance highlight the ontological grounding conditions for candidature as a *mānakarī*. In most cases studied in the Sindhudurg district of Konkan area, the *mānakarī* belongs to a non-Brahmin group in the community, and in four cases of eighteen, the position was rotated among Bhandari community members in the villages. Lower socioeconomic strata represented through the agency of the pole bearer favors the paradigm of social control by relegating possession to the non-Brahmin social castes (see Smith 2006, 51–58). A *mānakarī* lends his body to complete the animation of the deity, often lending his voice for the deity. In the partially oracle-like situatedness of this role, the *mānakarī* brings to the fore a microcosm (as used by Berger 1990) that momentarily inverts the societal normativity, while being acutely aware of the otherwise hierarchical social setup. This, to me, amplifies the deity's fluidity in form as well as the pole bearer's fluid role-playing in the temporary place-world.

The local deities' fluidity of form—from their stationary stone forms to mobile effigies that are the *taraṅga devatā*—anchors the moment(s) of transformation through a narrative discourse. The *taraṅga* "with form" (*saguṇa*) often represents ordinarily "formless" (*nirguṇa*) divinity. The binary employed here may seem to be a superimposition of a "classical" concept onto a vernacular one, but the language of the oral narratives I collected in villages where the festive pole rituals are performed actually speaks of this transformation with the very vocabulary of *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa*. Some of the female village deities in the region continue to be represented as rough laterite stones or anthills, as stated earlier. At the same time, the male deities likened with Shaivite attributes are generally represented as *śivaliṅgam*s (elongated

stones resembling the phallic symbol of the Hindu deity, Shiva). The spirits, when represented, are displayed as rough cobble or unformed stones in and around their shrines. The shrine representations thus adumbrate some sort of incipient form—but so unrecognizable as to often straddle the porous boundaries between *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* modes of representation. The deities' form, as understood in the local context of Sindhudurg, is an anthropomorphic one, where we find a tautological presentation of deities both seated stationarily in their respective shrines as well as in motion as *taraṅga devatā*, which results in a play of form based on the continuing oscillation between *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* aspects of representation.

The *saguṇa* deity as the embodied form capable of direct communication (through the *mānakarī*) attempts to bridge the gap between the deity and the devotee. The deity crosses the threshold from its sanctum to the outer world and can be seen and touched by all sections of society. When seated in the shrine, the deity is in view of all the devotees from a distance, but it is only the designated priest who enters the sanctum and can approach the deity with a devotee's plea. The barriers of access that are broken during festive occasions, although temporarily, attempt a re-enactment of the egalitarian fervor fostered by the so-called *bhakti* movement in the medieval past. By no means complete, the mostly symbolic social shift from hierarchy to the breaking down of barriers concerning purity and pollution can be seen in its incipient stages through the tradition of *taraṅga*. Devotees in attendance at the festivities assert the instrumental role of *taraṅga* in "levelling the playing field"[17] for social and religious roles when in the company of the deity as one of the major purposes of the annual ritual events performed at Kamte-Kot. *Mānakarī*s who hold the position as a part of a hereditary post speak of the performance as representing their family and the community in the worship of the village deity through divination. Direct communication with the divine is, in this sense, the rationale behind pole performance traditions, since they allow everyone to communicate with the deities in their accessible forms during festivals; this suggests several dramaturgical axes, to which I will now turn.

Dramaturgical axes

Erving Goffman uses the concept of "foreground" to refer to the presentation of the unfolding self in his theory of dramaturgy. The foreground presentation, Goffman explains, is intimately tied to the background planes of activities that lend themselves to the description of social (and religious) performances, where the roles of actors are predetermined and are conveyed through the process of dramatic realization (Goffman 1959, 30–34). In the social setting of *taraṅga* performances, which are the foreground, the latent social hierarchies in the community that are the background become temporarily disengaged through ritual performance. The rite of *taraṅga* possession by the *mānakarī* enables a platform for all to interact with the deity in close proximity. The background associations of caste and creed temporarily get alleviated, but the awareness of belonging continues to remain intact throughout the performance. In terms of dramaturgy, the background is thus present and

influences the foreground activities tangentially, thereby creating a façade for a novel presentation of a shared social performance.

Social interaction during pole festivals is a poiesis of socioreligious space characterized by momentary fluidity during which the *mānakarī*s and the audience members function as actors. Social performances pertaining to caste stratification have attracted Goffman's attention in terms of latent hierarchies influencing the status quo and the quotidian sphere of activity (Goffman 1959, 36–37). Goffman directs readers' attention to Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas (1952, 30) to elaborate on the logic of how caste hierarchies operate in social practice. Although Goffman takes the practice of social hierarchies as a representation of a dramaturgical axis, I argue that the status quo is normative, making special performances such as the ones under investigation here qualifiers for analysis through a dramaturgical lens. Impermanent performances, such as *taraṅga devatā*, that disengage from normative social performance and enter the domain of drama or non-routine performance of social roles exhibit distinct elements of dramaturgy when considered from a sociological perspective.

Taraṅga performances temporarily disrupt the privileged access to divinity monopolized by the so-called higher social classes to allow for the engagement in the practice of what he calls "secret consumption" by the subalterns who perform ritualistic functions during the festivals in which the poles are displayed in procession. Goffman outlines secret consumption as secret pleasures derived from a performance, but which are hidden from the public (1959, 42–43). High-caste Brahmins visiting low-caste Shudra establishments to consume intoxicating drinks, for example, is one such secret pleasure in the Indian context. Goffman's example suggests the disruption of ordinary social hierarchy for a moment of pleasure hidden from the public. In a similar vein, economic benefits in the form of donations and endowments given by patrons to *taraṅga mānakarī*s also suggest secret consumption after the performances. In most cases, if not all, the local Brahmin families claim their stake in the donations the *mānakarī*s receive, in exchange for supporting their position for the celebrations in the following year. Thus the rhetoric of training blends into the aspect of secret consumption (of wealth, in this context), whereby a *mānakarī* who is deemed worthy for the position he desires plays into the drama of accruing economic and temporary social benefits from the performance. The Brahmins bolster the rhetoric of enabling, and the *mānakarī*s adhere to that of training, so as to allow for mutual partaking in the socially negotiated performative space that is the *taraṅga* arena. The hypothetical reciprocity of the caste system is thus simultaneously reified and challenged.

The dramaturgical concept of "expressive control" (Goffman 1959, 51) provides for an explanation of how redefining performative moments during *taraṅga* influences the community in which the activities occur. For example, modulations in performance, along with doing away with some of the irregularities in audience-performer rapport, falls within the boundaries of the theoretical discussion on expressive control. A *mānakarī* often expresses the displeasure of the deity embodied in *khāmba-kāṭi* to address the tendency of secret skepticism among audience members. He also reiterates that the success of a *taraṅga* performance is based on faith. The process of mystification through gestures—both planned and unplanned—adds to the

expressive control that anchors the *mānakarī*'s presentation of self through *taraṅga*. Goffman's thesis on dramaturgy then segues into the presentation of "team effort" and impression management (1959, 77–80, 208–20) that can be used to theorize some aspects of interaction that occur between participants coming from a variety of social strata.

As indicated by a narrative from Devgad, which is located in the Sindhudurg area, traditional ideas concerning purity and defilement extend to the practice of parading the *taraṅga* deities. *Taraṅga devatā*, although fluid in the form and gender that they espouse, are carried exclusively by heterosexual males. The male pole bearer holds the deity and dances with everyone, regardless of whether they are bearing male, female, or genderless spirits represented as *taraṅga devatā*. The notion of impurity attached to the female body extends to the taboo that forbids females to become pole bearers, among other social implications (Menon 2002, 140–57). *Mānakarī*s for *taraṅga* deities generally hold a hereditary position within the Dalit social groups residing in the region, as echoed in other academic studies (for instance, Harper 1963, 62). The male body of a Dalit person as vehicle for *taraṅga* deities thus opens up the conversation about social stratification embedded within the orthodox Hindu belief system that underlies Indian society at large.[18]

As a pole bearer, each *mānakarī* carries one *taraṅga* deity pole. The decoration on the *taraṅga* poles envisages the form of deities as expressed through narratives and traditional iconography. In addition to the masks espousing the gender of the deities, the drapery and manner of moving or performing dances with the *taraṅga* poles complete the gendered representation of the deity. A female village deity gets draped with a brightly colored sari, while a cotton loincloth or a pale-colored covering is associated with the male guardian deities. Additionally, the spirits embodied by the *taraṅga* pole often have colored drapery that does not outshine the female deities of the village. By dressing all of the deities in brightly colored garments, the *taraṅga* deities avoid the taboo of dressing in black or grey, which are considered to be associated with death and inauspiciousness.

A *taraṅga devatā* carried by its bearer creates a temporary setting for an egalitarian form of worship, a passing phase within communities where ritual performances based on social hierarchy are not a secret. Participants know all too well that their traditional Hindu communities are stratified based on hierarchical levels of occupational groups. Inherent hierarchies are therefore woven into the fabric of *taraṅga* performances. The Brahminical (or the priestly) community is considered to be the highest social group, which more or less dictates the rule-oriented modes of interaction among all residents in socioreligious settings on a daily basis. The Mahars (*mahār*), a Dalit caste relegated to an extremely low position in orthodox Hindu society, nevertheless are able to secure representation in the *taraṅga* performative sphere. The pole bearers drawn from the Dalit community perform the role of carrying the deities in the midst of people from all caste backgrounds. In the process of interlocution, being an extension of the deities themselves, the *mānakarī*s symbolically assume a visibly higher social role in this particular religious scheme because they function as interlocuters, which provides them with a privileged, higher status than they would normally have at other occasions. Their role as vehicles for

the deities during *taraṅga* performances is absolutely necessary in order to grant mobility to the divine objects for the enactment of ritualized narratives. In addition, Dalit ritualists catalyze a temporary state of mobility within the variegated social groups in attendance that allows for a ritualized form of community participation less restricted to normal social rules pertaining to caste interaction.

The form and effective function of *taraṅga* deities rest on the relationship between the ritual pole bearer and the deity animated within the specific pole he is carrying. The *mānakarī* enters a state of trance, and the deity assumes its mobile form to animate the pole, thereby fully bringing alive the *taraṅga*. My field consultants address the *taraṅga devatā* as "humans living among us" (*āpalyatlī mānase*), who have "individual personalities" (*tyance tyance swabhāva*). The *devatā* behave as if "wind has entered their bodies" (*aṅgāt vāre śiralyāsārakhe*), which can be translated as being possessed.[19] The pole bearer and the paraphernalia that makes up *taraṅga devatā* fuse as one entity, resulting in the boundaries separating their individual existences becoming blurred, so that they bleed into each other temporarily for the duration of the performance. The aniconic deity thus becomes anthropomorphic in the truest sense through the process of trance and embodiment.

The word *laharī* (also meaning "wave" in Sanskrit, Hindi, and other Indo-Aryan languages) is used repetitively in connection to the "will" or "inclination" of the principal deity to act and perform as their self, which suggests an amplification the deity's agency. The village's main deity, for instance, could act on a whim and inhabit some object or a person's body, as some interviewees indicate. This whim is often described as *devīcī lahara*, which could be interpreted as whim or a wave of the goddess. *Taraṅga*, although a form of the deity in the shrine, is but a ripple in the massive ocean of devotion.[20] Frederick Smith (2006, 13–15), in his elaborate study on possession and divination that was cited in the preceding paragraphs, lays out the linguistic descriptors for the experience of divination. *Vāreśirale* ("the wind entered"), *bādhā zālī* ("contracting a malady"), and other linguistic markers are phrases used in Marathi that are linked with divination. The common thread in all these linguistic usages is that they collectively imply that an outside agency enters into someone's body. *Taraṅga devatā*, on very similar lines, exemplifies such a form of agency.

The entire performance known as *avasara* acknowledges punctuated time in the sense that the deity animating the consecrated paraphernalia of the wooden pole, garment, and mask is unfolding at the right moment. The Hindi word *avasara* stands for an opportunity, which the local dialect in Sindhudurg adopts to refer to the "right moment." The *avasara* for the *taraṅga devatā* performances is the period starting with the annual festive season in local villages that is marked by the pan-Hindu festival of Dussehra (*daśaharā*) observed in September-October.[21] If and when the transformation takes place at the right moment, the *avasara* of the *taraṅga* begins. The concept brings in a temporal axis for the beginning of the *taraṅga* performances. By retracing the axes of space, material, and time, the social performance as *avasara* denotes a break from normal life activities to a sacrosanct "liminal" (Turner 1969) time initiated by the object animation that is *taraṅga.* In Victor Turner's scheme of things, it is precisely this liminal period that allows for the breakdown of social norms and also for ontological transformations of ritual participants.

Annual village festivals honoring the local deities allow for the transformation from their *acala* forms housed in shrines to their *taraṅga* forms capable of movement, which must occur at the correct moment for the transformation to be auspicious and thus successful. Ceremonial consecration of the wooden pole, dressing it with fine drapery and a mask that reflects the anthropomorphic form of the deity, together render the animating process complete.[22] Assigned to a specific pole bearer or "anointed one" (*mānakarī*), a *taraṅga* deity embodies a certain kind of rhythmic movement while it is being carried in processions. The collective movement of each pole bearer within the local processions marks the presence of the spirits in human form. They become an integral part of the village congregation in their anthropomorphic form, allowing the main deities resting stationary in their respective shrines to be represented in village affairs. At this juncture, we may circle back to thinking along the lines of dramaturgy. The moment of transformation from background roles to performances in the foreground anchors the *avasara* of the *taraṅga* deity, which gives way to a fusion of the material and the spiritual—the topic of my next section.

Between the material and the spiritual

The dance and procession with the *taraṅga devatā*, the dressed wooden poles, marks a process of transferring the divine element from the shrines into the *taraṅga* manifestation. The pole bearers exhibit their physical strength by balancing the pole in specific positions during the rhythmic and vigorous dances performed during the processions. It is within this arena that the spectator gravitates toward the pole bearers' physical strength and competence to balance the *taraṅga* deities while transforming themselves into the objects they carry (Wagle 1995, 194–95). As the village festival progresses, the deity completely animates the wooden pole dressed in garments and masks, and the bearer becomes established as the medium. The *mānakarī*'s body makes the specific deity he is carrying accessible to the audience. In so doing, he establishes communication between the villagers and the deities.[23]

The performance unfolds through object animation combined with the transfer of agency. The pole bearer lends a human voice to enable the deity resident in the wooden pole to communicate with the audience. In the course of this transformative process, the *taraṅga devatā* mediums achieve a transition from the *nirguṇa* concept of a deity being formless to an anthropomorphized being capable of human communication in the *saguṇa* form. People in the audience with whom I spoke, for instance, mentioned a belief of "temporary form-taking" (*rūpagheṇe*) by the deity. The ritual of *rupaṇe*, which refers to putting the mask on the wooden pole, attests to this local belief. The embodiment of the deity as *taraṅga* could thus be thought of as a conception of "flesh" in the phenomenological sense proposed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1942, 1945). The focus of my discussion is, however, on the presentation of the embodied self in a ritualized social setting that engenders new meaning.

In addition to simply being paraded in the streets for the audience to see, the *taraṅga devatā* in their fully dressed form as mobile deities also dispense the role of judges within a temple environment. As has been shown to be the case elsewhere in India and other places in the world where law and ritual overlap (see Sax and Basu

2015; Berti, Good, and Tarabout 2016), *taraṅga*s also provide counsel on personal problems, land disputes, or local concerns about the weather and agricultural productivity. This aspect of their "human" selves highlights their legalistic function as part of a religious tribunal in which object animation reigns supreme. In recent times, interestingly enough, the Covid-19 pandemic and public health issues are becoming part of such discussions.[24] *Taraṅga devatā* in the role of judges thus suggests that they become entities capable of being called upon when needed to fulfil a specific role.[25] Although *taraṅga devatā* are manifestations of deities worshipped in shrines by their attendants, their moving form allows for fluid interaction with the devotees, as I have been arguing. The transition from an *acala* deity in a shrine to an animated *taraṅga* one also addresses the local need for a form that can relate to the people who worship them or depend upon them to adjudicate court cases.

It is also worthwhile to underscore the widespread belief elsewhere in India of temporary animation's role in the process of deities "taking shape." The terracotta effigies made for Durga *pūjā* in West Bengal and the Ganesh *caturṭī* festival in Maharashtra, for example, highlight the traditional backdrop for the practice of temporary material manifestation of deities brought out in procession (Feldhaus 1995, 76–84). Although the aforementioned deities are normally presented with form even when not being paraded, the idea is a similar one; namely, animating the gods for public processional purposes leads to distinct kinds of action and behavior. Following a similar belief, therefore, *taraṅga devatā* assume their full form only after being adorned with masks, drapery, and other paraphernalia during village festivals such as the one described. On conclusion of the festival, the *taraṅga* poles are either returned to their respective small shrines scattered across the village or are placed outside of public view, as if resting. *Taraṅga devatā* are, however, called upon when the village is in distress, or some sort of divine counsel needs to be sought. On such occasions, the *khāmba-kāṭi* is dressed and adorned with a mask. In such cases, a brief consecration ceremony activates what I have been calling "object animation," after which the *taraṅga* deities are presented as divine judges to rule over the matter at hand. The designated pole bearers or *mānakarī*s once again take their positions with their respective *taraṅga* deities to become divine media for the purpose of meting out decrees.

A striking difference between Hindu festivities in other parts of India such as the Durga *pūjā* and Ganesh *caturṭī* celebrations and the *taraṅga* performance is issues surrounding the moment or time of object animation. The *taraṅga devatā* could be summoned when the village needs divine intervention over a period of six months starting from Dusshera. The effigies of Durga and Ganesh, however, follow directives for installation and worship over a fixed period in the year. The terracotta effigies of Durga and Ganesh later return to their respective worlds after being immersed in water, while the *taraṅga* paraphernalia are disassembled and placed within their respective shrines for future access when summoned upon necessity by the village residents.

Unlike the ritual effigies for the Durga and Ganesh festivals, *taraṅga* representations indicate an acute sense of self-awareness by way of the act of possessing the *mānakarī*s, which is to say that the mobile deities borrow their carriers' speech to communicate with humans and utilize their physical strength to be danced about in public. The

foreground performance featuring the *taraṅga* deities emerges as a specific type of social negotiation involving individual roles, during which participants self-monitor and play their respective roles.[26] These roles include that of attendants to the *mānakarī*s; that is, people who regulate the devotees by taking on clients sequentially for personal dialogues with the deities present for the occasion. The moment of *avasara* (when the object animation is activated) and the duration of *devaskī* allow for aspects of change to occur when people associated with the corresponding shrines assume their own roles in the context of the *taraṅga* performance. The presentation of self in this setting results in self-disclosure, for the devotees who voice their concerns and seek divine justice from the *taraṅga*s disclose their intimate details and concerns in a public setting, where all attendants are a part of the presentation. The invisible pact of ritual secrecy and sacrosanct confines of the temple where the action takes place binds the actors present to an unfolding, emergent performance.

Goffman's three dramaturgical principles of self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-disclosure (1969, 20–29) lay a fertile groundwork to situate rites of possession through the various *taraṅga* motifs that I have described. Although the *mānakarī*s report losing their self-awareness once the *lahara* (wave) of the deity washes over them, after which they are possessed, their awareness of being a *mānakarī* does not cease. They, and others around them, perform to keep the possession intact so that they may proceed competently throughout the remainder of the performance, thereby guaranteeing the efficacy of the ritual process. Through the temporary hypnotic enabling of embodying the material paraphernalia, the *mānakarī*s revivify the social status quo outside of the religious performance through their dramatic actions.

An entire body of enquiry in Hindu studies explores the deeper meanings concerning the form deities take in vernacular religious practices in India (for example, Korom 1999, 2002), and other scholars in general have long postulated the potential for a transformative liminal space between the mask and the wearer, in which the wearer eventually and temporarily becomes one with the mask worn (see Gill 1976). In the case of *taraṅga devatā*, the mask or the visage is that of the decorated deity in the form of a pole. The *mānakarī* transforms into the de facto voice of the divine, thus removing the barrier between the human and the possessing spirit. However, it must be noted that the bearer of the *taraṅga* pole almost becomes the deity, as my consultants would say, since there is a disconnect in form between the garbed pole deity and the bearer that acts as a barrier for a complete and absolute transformation. That said, during the courtroom performance of the deity, the bearer speaks on behalf of the deity, thus completing the partial possession as a form of mediation during procession into a full possession when entering the temple court, in which he embodies the deity by lending his voice.

The outside, the periphery of the performative space, influences the role of the *taraṅga devatā* in reasserting the need for liminal spaces. If *taraṅga* performance results in the embodiment of the shrine deities, it fits within the phenomenology of possible material forms a divine entity may take, but it also diverges from orthodox practice by being an antinomian kind of form-taking. The distinction between *taraṅga* and the ritual procession of the effigy in a palanquin, which is the norm, thus relegates the *taraṅga* ritual to a self-conscious re-enactment of exclusion in the

Foucauldian sense of the term (McNay 1991). Goffman's dramaturgical parameters aid us in analyzing how certain social groups are tied to the *taraṅga* ritual. The marginal specificity of occupational groups and lowly social status of the communities who are the custodians of the *taraṅga* phenomenon underscore their peripheral nature brought about by orthodox notions concerning low-caste impurity and the social taboos associated with it in the local communities that attend the village festivals. Some of the liminal social groups already discussed, such as the *mānakarī*s, take on the role of the front-stage actors who have some foreknowledge of the probable history of the embodied objects and their associated rituals. It is their views of origins to which I turn my attention in the next section.

A probable history of *taraṅga*

The *taraṅga* tradition of insignia in procession espouses a multi-layered local history of public performance through religious procession. The developmental stages of the unique form of wooden sticks embellished as a *taraṅga devatā* are shrouded in mystery full of speculations. In her influential work on sacrificial posts in Indic culture, Madeleine Biardeau (1989, 2004) charts the significance of wooden poles and posts in Hindu performative spaces within South Asia. The use of wooden poles in sacred and political performances as well as insignia in medieval (*c.* 800–1700 CE) India may hold some clues for the present form the *taraṅga devatā* take.

A probable candidate for the present form of the *taraṅga devatā* could be the *niśāṇa*s, flags offered to village deities or village spirits, a custom practiced by South Asian Muslims as well, for example when they perform rituals for venerated Sufis at their *dargāh*s (shrines) during annual *'urs* (death anniversary) processions (Saheb 1998). Late-medieval documents written during the Peshwa period (*c.* 1713–1818 CE) bring out the intimate association of local spirits or ghosts, village deities, and the Peshwa government. Some cases from nearby Konkan to the south, which is noted for the activity of spirits and village deities, mention the offering of a silken flag (*niśāṇa*) as a plea to the inanimate spirit.[27] Those accounts (*rumāl*) indicate the intent of propitiating a spirit so as to eliminate its malevolent activities from the sphere of the afflicted petitioner making the offering. In the Peshwa notes, one comes across the issue of ancestor spirits and unidentified ghosts (*bhūta*s), propitiated through material objects and animal sacrifice, serving as a lynchpin for the modern belief in spirit lore. *Taraṅga* could have possibly emerged as an innovative attempt at replacing the offering of a silken flag and staff with a wooden pole garbed in silk.

Taraṅga's other probable origin could possibly be traced to the practices of ancestor worship in western India. The popularity of memorials in the form of wooden and lithic slabs or poles for deceased ancestors in western India underscores their active agency in the local religious sphere (Settar and Sontheimer 1982). At least one of the *taraṅga* representations in temples across Sindhudurg district embodies a local ancestor spirit. These ancestor spirits function as interlocutors (through the agency of the pole bearer) as part of the tribunal setting during the village festivals described earlier in this article. The function of the ancestor spirit could have influenced the

creation of *taraṅga* as a method to create an anthropomorphic form for the formless ancestors called upon to help the living.

Rich oral narratives current in the area attempt to trace the origin of *taraṅga* deities. A popular account from Devgad *tāluka* in Sindhudurg district, for example, includes an episode that connects the origin of the wooden pole with a person belonging to the socially oppressed group associated with the *taraṅga* today. The account, summarized from informants in several villages in Sindhudurg district, proceeds as follows:

> The legend goes that a village deity, preoccupied with some task at hand, decided to dispatch her attendant to the neighboring village as a response to a call for help. The attendant deity was a shapeshifting spirit, but the deity feared that the villagers would mistake the attendant for a malevolent spirit. To avert such an occurrence, the deity asked the attendant spirit to animate the objects lying within the shrine and to wear the deity's ceremonial mask so as to take on her form for the people. The deity also revealed herself in a dream to a Dalit cleaner in the village and commanded him to carry the wooden pole, drape, and mask as the deity's "emblems" (*niśāṇa*). The cleaner feared for his life as a result of defiling the divine paraphernalia through his touch, as Dalit individuals were prohibited from entering the sanctum of a Hindu temple or to even touch any ritual objects that would lead to defilement. The deity responded that his grandfather and great grandfather had previously carried the *taraṅga* on the deity's behalf and prosperity filled their household. Thus relieved, the Dalit individual began to carry the *taraṅga* animated by the attendant spirit. On reaching the neighboring village, the *mānakarī* carried the *taraṅga* pole and presided over a temple courtroom. A traditional courtroom of the deity thus proceeded with *taraṅga* as the judge, and the squabbles were resolved.[28]

This story may indicate that *taraṅga* performances were not initially annual affairs but took place only when the spirits—both benevolent and malevolent—were to be consulted for legalistic reasons.[29] If that is indeed the case, then the elements of ritual drama elaborated in the preceding paragraphs must have served to further induce the fostering of specific performances as Goffmanesque foregrounds within religious and ritualistic environments.

Discussions concerning the expressive forms of spirit-deities raise the question of the historicity of this practice. The local gazetteers published during the British colonial period attest to the prevalence of *taraṅga*s in the shrines of Sindhudurg and the surrounding area. The spirits manifesting themselves as *taraṅga*s are akin to the objects used in puppetry and the performance of *daśāvatārī* [30] (ten incarnations). The perceived importance of wooden poles utilized in bodily practices to represent the totems of the spirit world (Bhattacharya 2000, 41–50) could plausibly compound the material choices practitioners had to make in constructing the effigies used in processions. For instance, masks and other capping elements used for the *taraṅga* deities are influenced by the local iconography of female deities in their masked *rūpḍe* forms, and the symbol of *pañjā* or *haṃsa* for spirits and male deities could very well be a borrowed influence from local Islamic practices (Zaidi 2016, 19), as was also suggested for the shared use of flags. The overlap between the *pañjā* hoisted on the

wooden pole used for Shi'i Muslim practices and that of *taraṅga*s cannot therefore be overlooked. Rigorous fieldwork in the future and directed ethnographic data-collection in this regard will certainly prove useful to establish the existence of an overlapping artistic sphere shared by local Muslims and Hindus. However, it remains to be seen how the mediation of orthopractic social hierarchy entered the *taraṅga devatā* ritual complex.

Concluding remarks

The tradition of *taraṅga* deities in the annual festivals of coastal western India is an ongoing process emerging historically from a cumulative understanding of disparate religious movements and developments that apparently cut across caste, class, and creed lines. Although the influence of Islamic iconography on *taraṅga* representations remains to be studied, the extant practices as described here suggest a body of cross-cultural and diachronic influences. As I have argued, the basic form of wooden poles to represent the deities of *khāmba-kāṭī* is very likely a development that grew out of the traditional *niśāṇa*s, indexical pendants used in the medieval period. If Biardeau (1989, 2004) is correct about the religious significance attached to wooden posts and poles since the Vedic period, then this powerful symbol gets translated through the form and function of *taraṅga* iconography in modern-day Maharashtra, at least along the coastal regions where I conducted my fieldwork. The *taraṅga* form draws from the symbology attached to a pole or a sacrificial post in Hinduism, or effigies hoisted on poles to allow for movement.

A play on the ritual masking and unmasking of the pole maintains the distinction between the pole bearer and the dressed object that becomes the vessel for the deity spirit being carried in procession. The play further continues with the delicate dance between the *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* forms of divine expression, highlighting the fluidity of *taraṅga* deities as fixed forms. The ritual practice of performing the fluid transition of the *taraṅga* deities from the *acala* or fixed deity represents a change in the socioreligious history of the region. The medieval period (*c*. 1000–1600 CE) in western India that probably shaped the modern practices associated with the *taraṅga devatā* provides the historical background for situating the contemporary need for the construction of approachable deities on a vernacular level, as pointed out for other deities in Maharashtra by Christian Novetzke (2017). Moreover, by filling the roles of judges to counsel devotees within a temple tribunal setting, *taraṅga devatā* add yet another dimension to their social role as aniconic mediating forces who need anthropomorphic form in order to be approachable, which then allows them to adjudicate cases for the masses attending the annual festivals arranged to bring out the mostly stationary, formless deities that spend the majority of their time in shrines dedicated to them.

The phenomenology of presenting the local deities to the public during annual village festivals could be extrapolated as a kind of dramatic performance embedded with devotional and philosophical notions rooted in Hinduism, such as *bhakti* ontological concepts concerning *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* that I have defined and explored in this article. In closing, I propose that Goffman's (1959) theory of dramaturgy that

I employed in my analysis of *taraṅga devatā* offers us a useful lens to view a set of modern practices performed along the coast of Maharashtra that have to do with the symbolic untangling of complex hierarchical relationships that regulate everyday social interaction throughout the region where such practices occur. Similar to the *avasara* of *taraṅga* deities when they animate the material paraphernalia, *taraṅga* festivities offer a momentary egalitarian refuge from an otherwise stratified society. This is especially noticeable when Dalit members of the local communities who participate in the festivals described in this article act as *mānakarī*s, who express the mitigation of social boundaries in the foreground performances that I identified in my analysis.[31]

The social background of the performers involved in such village-wide, multi-caste religious performances highlights the significance of the temporary status change achieved by low-caste members that participate ritually in their *mānakarī* roles. By reducing their own sense of agency to be a co-producer of spirit animation during *taraṅga* performance, they play a key role that elevates their status for the duration of the ritual. Just as the stationary *acala* deities ontologically manifest themselves anthropomorphically then move about through the *taraṅga* medium, so too do participating Dalits go through a transformation when they symbolically change their ontological status by "moving" up to a higher position in the social hierarchy vis-à-vis the ritually pure castes that are also engaged in the same event that includes all members of the surrounding communities in one way or another, regardless of caste, class, or other forms of social status. It must be said, however, that the change in status among select males from the Dalit groups who share divine agency as *mānakarī*s is only temporary, since the end of the *taraṅga* festival reinstates the status quo, due to the ideology of purity and pollution propagated by the dominant groups.

The performances described in this article that use objects as vessels for the spirits being displayed in human form and that allow for the temporary status increase of the *mānakarī* pole bearers suggest precisely those aspects of Goffman's dramaturgical thesis that emphasize continual self-awareness of the participants' sociological background and a self-consciousness of the actors' positionality within the local hierarchy involved. Symbolic meaning-making in the *taraṅga* performance is thus a temporary departure from social reality that displays a dramatic form of ritual possession that affects all members of the participating communities, regardless of social or economic status. Despite the fact that some scholars have criticized the opinion that possession rites are attempts to dismantle various forms of social hierarchies, the specific case that I have discussed here presents some preliminary ethnographic and historical data for rethinking how such rites do indeed act in a utilitarian fashion—they bring about a temporary state of fluid boundaries through performance that does not permanently eliminate the rules governing social categories but at least loosens those rules up long enough that the rites may have longer-term social and political consequences in western India. In embodying the spirit of *khāmba-kāṭi*, the *mānakarī*s embody the fluidity of *taraṅga* to move seamlessly between the material and the spiritual, as well as the background and the foreground, for the entire duration of *avasara*, thereby performing an auspicious service for community members in the specific region investigated here.

Acknowledgments

A portion of the fieldwork carried out for this project was funded with a Research Travel Grant awarded by the University of Calgary, and the ethnographic interviews were conducted with Canada Research Ethics Board (CREB) approval of the project (REB19-0381). I thank Dr. Frank Korom and the anonymous reviewers for their inputs on an earlier draft of this article. I extend my gratitude to the named and anonymized respondents in Konkan area, without whom the study would not have materialized.

Author

Durga Kale is a PhD candidate at the University of Calgary, Canada. With a background in archeology and training in anthropology, she focuses on the ethnographic study of religion in Western India. Her research has appeared in peer-reviewed journals on archaeology, curatorial practice, and oral history. She analyzes the tradition of *sati*-memorials in Western India beyond their appearance and presence as memorial stones in her paper "Speaking Stones: Oral Tradition as Provenance for the Memorial Stones in Gujarat." One of many joint publications from her research and curatorial projects is a catalogue for the special exhibition she curated at Nickle Galleries, and she has recently contributed to the Data of Religious History (DRH) at the University of British Columbia.

Notes

1. For a cross-cultural overview written by an Indologist concerning some of the issues involved, see, for example, the review article by Smith (2001).

2. Between 1894 and 1896 he wrote a series of articles on the topic, only one of which is cited here, where he equates the Indic term in question with "devil." Shields (1987), however, much more benevolently refers to the same class of entities as "healing spirits." Two important studies worth noting that treat *bhūta* worship in Maharashtra specifically from a non-evaluative position are Stanley (1988) and Wagle (1995).

3. The term "vernacular" is gaining traction in many areas of study to replace other terms, such as "folk" or "local." See Primiano (1995). Novetzke uses it specifically for Maharashtrian culture.

4. While missionaries often referred to such practices as "devil worship," scholars such as Lewis (1971) used "ecstatic," while Eliade (1964) used "shamanic."

5. It is roughly 5,200 square kilometers in size with a population of approximately 850,000. The district has a very small urban population, with almost 80 percent of the residents living in rural areas made up of villages.

6. The study of religious displays during processions has also more recently come into sharper focus in the study of Hinduism. See, for example, Jakobsen (2008).

7. Other works in the social sciences, such those by as Goffman's contemporary Victor Turner (1969), opened the door for the investigation of ritual drama as performance. Their seminal works and the flood of books that followed all by and large emphasize the kinds of power that

performance space provides for the transformation of reality, even if only temporary, as I shall suggest in the following paragraphs.

8. I use the adjectival form of the noun "syncretism" in quotation marks, since it is a contested concept in the academic study of religion. However, a discussion of the central issues involved in the debate over whether or not to use it is beyond the scope of this brief study. For a suggestive and incisive critique, see Stewart (2001).

9. The term *rūp* (shape) in Marathi can refer adoringly to physical beauty when addressing a woman. The diminutive *ḍe* is added to emphasize the affectionate nature of the term. *Rūpḍe* can therefore be interpreted as "affectionately beautifying" the (little) pole.

10. On the symbolism of anthills and their ritual usage, see Irwin (1982), who traces their significance back to Vedic times.

11. Some of the Indic terms used here are borrowed from Haas (1912).

12. See, for example, Korom (2003) for an extensive comparative study of *muḥarram* rituals in which the open palm motif is used to cap standards that are carried annually in Shi'i processions performed throughout the world as well.

13. This general belief is recounted on the basis of ethnographic interviews I recorded in Sindhudurg district in 2019.

14. The reader should be familiar with the public festivals celebrating Ganesh, particularly the *ganeṣotsav* in Maharashtra and the celebration of *navarātrī* in honor of the goddess Durga. I skip over the history and details of these two well-known performance traditions owing to a general familiarity with such celebrations among the public, so as not to detract the reader from the topic at hand. I simply introduce the Ganesh and Durga festivals solely to highlight the performative differences.

15. The terms *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* for form and formless, respectively, were popularized during the *bhakti* movement in India (*c.* 1200–1800 CE). This well-known socioreligious movement witnessed the involvement of saints, bards, and religious thinkers who resisted oppressive religious norms and sought to break the social hierarchy that dictated access to religious and social participation by oppressed groups, such as the Mahars referred to in this article. Here, I use the terms as they are deployed in local discourse and the popular belief systems in the region where I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork.

16. William Sax, in his work on healing rituals in Chamoli, charts the boundaries of spatial anchors for performative and possession rites that simultaneously address the narratives of possession, healing, as well as embodiment as agencies of this change. Sax effectively uses Edward Casey's (1996; cf. Sax 2009) piece for this positionality to explore the rituals "from the inside" for the community, which I continue for the case of *taraṅga* performances in Konkan area. I bring out the point of positionality in relation to the *mānakarī*'s embodiment to stress the reflexivity of positionality of the pole bearer in the social space more so than the physical/territorial space that dictates the effectiveness of the fluid transition in question.

17. The respondents worded it as "*sagale sārkhe vāṭāt*" or "*bhed kāhī nāhī*." Interestingly, the members of non-Brahmin communities describe this seemingly egalitarian performance as a win, and the Brahmin respondents tried to highlight this as a reflection of the usual state of affairs, where the non-Brahmin townspeople are treated as equals by the Brahmins. The

narrative analysis could reflect further attitudes of perceiving egalitarian participation in Konkani villages, which will be dealt with separately in future research pieces.

18. There is further scope for future research that could extend into the colonizing of the human body for *taraṅga* practices and ritual performances. Unfortunately, it cannot be discussed here.

19. Supported by similar descriptions included in Smith (2006, 120–22).

20. It is a literal translation from Marathi of an interview conducted during fieldwork in 2019: "*Taraṅga mhanje shevṭi kay, eka choṭi lāta, hyā bhaktisāgarātil. Hya devānce paṇa taseca.*" The speaker is a priest at the Bhagwati temple, Kamte-Kot, Devgad *tāluka* in Sindhudurg.

21. It is celebrated on the tenth day of the lunar month named Ashvina, which is the seventh month of the Hindu calendar. Overall, it symbolizes the victory of good over evil.

22. Saldanha (1911) notes the practice of *avasara* (object animation) and *taraṅga* performances in Sindhudurg district.

23. For similar performances in Tamil Nadu, see Biardeau (2004).

24. The presence of *taraṅga devatā* in ritual courtrooms deserves a separate exploration but is outside the purview of the current article. It would, however, make for an interesting future study in the post-pandemic future.

25. The idea of being "called upon" to descend into a human assembly to perform a specific function is known from elsewhere in India. In West Bengal, for example, the ritual of *nāmḍāk* (name call) for the village deity known as Dharmaraj is also performed annually in a similar manner. See Korom (2002, 436–37).

26. Korom (1999) explores the relationship between play and ritual during such Hindu festive occasions in much greater depth.

27. Noted in a 1786 court case as a *peśve daftar ghaḍṇi rumāl* in Marathi. See Wagle (1995, 182). The presence of traditions popularized during the Peshwa period in Maharashtra is apparent in the tradition of *taraṅga* deities under investigation here.

28. This is an oral narrative that I collected in the villages of Mitbhav, Devgad, Naringre, Kamte-Kot, and Kudal in 2019. I thank Mr. Bapat, who assisted me with interview recording and arranging meetings with *mānakarī*s in Sindhudurg district.

29. *Taraṅga-mānakarī* presiding over a courtroom scene makes for a substantial analysis into the overlap of local tribunals and rites of possession, along with the inversion of social hierarchies. This piece of the performative tradition is best explored as a dedicated research paper and has not been dealt with in this article, in the interest of time.

30. *Daśāvatārī* as a form of offering to the deity in the form of theatre performance is typical of the area (South Konkan, in particular). Although it literally means "ten incarnations," referring to the popular *avatāra* theme in Hinduism, the theatre performances are based on any chosen religious theme. The colorful drapery and some props used in the theatre performances resemble the paraphernalia associated with the *taraṅga* performances.

31. For parallels concerning the temporary change of low-caste devotees into high-caste ritual officiants, see again, for example, Korom (1999, 2002).

References

Berger, Peter. 1990. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Anchor Books.

Berti, Daniela, Anthony Good, and Gilles Tarabout, eds. 2016. *Of Doubt and Proof: Ritual and Legal Practices of Judgement*. London: Routledge.

Bhattacharya, N. N. 2000. *Indian Demonology: The Inverted Pantheon.* Delhi: Manohar.

Biardeau, Madeleine. 1989. *Histoires de poteaux: Variations védiques autour de la déesse Hindoue*. Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient.

———. 2004. *Stories about Posts: Vedic Variations around the Hindu Goddess*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Burnell, A. C. 1894. "The Devil Worship of the Tuluvas: The Origin of the Bhuta Panjurli." *Indian Antiquary* 26: 47–53, 64.

Casey, Edward. 1996. "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena." In *Sense of Place*, edited by Steven Fend and Keith H. Basso, 13–52. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

Dhuri, Shyam Pandurang. 2013. *Kokaṇātīl Gāvrahāṭī* [Village structure in Konkan]. Pune, India: Varad Prakashan.

Eliade, Mircea. 1964. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Feldhaus, Anne. 1995. *Water and Womanhood: Religious Meanings of Rivers in Maharashtra*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gill, Sam D. 1976. "Disenchantment." *Parabola* 1 (3): 6–13.

Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* New York: Anchor Books.

Haas, George C. O. 1912. *The Daśarūpa: A Treatise on Hindu Dramaturgy*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Harper, Edward. 1963. "Spirit Possession and Social Structure." In *Anthropology on the March*, edited by Bala Ratnam, 165–77. Madras: Book Centre.

Irwin, John C. 1982. "The Sacred Anthill and the Cult of the Primordial Mound." *History of Religions* 21 (4): 339–60. https://doi.org/10.1086/462905

Jakobsen, Knut A., ed. 2008. *South Asian Religions on Display: Religious Processions in South Asia and in the Diaspora.* London: Routledge.

Korom, Frank J. 1999. "'To Be Happy': Ritual, Play, and Leisure in the Bengali Dharmarāj Pūjā." *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 3 (2): 113–64. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11407-999-0001-4

———. 2002. "Caste Politics, Ritual Performance, and Local Religion in a Bengali Village: A Reassessment of Liminality and Communitas." *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 47 (3/4): 397–449. https://doi.org/10.1556/AEthn.47.2002.3-4.14

———. 2003. *Hosay Trinidad: Muḥarram Performances in an Indo-Caribbean Diaspora*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Lewis, I. M. 1971. *Ecstatic Religions: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*. New York: Penguin Books.

McNay, Lois. 1991. "The Foucauldian Body and the Exclusion of Experience." *Hypatia* 6 (3): 125–39. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1991.tb00259.x

Menon, Usha. 2002. “Making Śakti: Controlling (Natural) Impurity for Female (Cultural) Power.” *Ethos* 30 (1/2): 140–57. https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.2002.30.1-2.140

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1942. *The Structure of Behavior*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

———. 1945. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Novetzke, Christian Lee. 2017. *The Quotidian Revolution: Vernacularization, Religion, and the Premodern Public Sphere in India*. New Delhi: Permanent Black. https://doi.org/10.7312/nove17580

Primiano, Leonard. 1995. “Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife.” *Western Folklore* 54 (1): 37–56. https://doi.org/10.2307/1499910

Saheb, S. A. A. 1998. “A ‘Festival of Flags’: Hindu-Muslim Devotion and the Sacralizing of Localism at the Shrines of Nagore-e-Sharif in Tamil Nadu.” In *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and the Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults*, edited by Pnina Werbner and Helene Basu, 55–76. London: Routledge.

Saldanha, Jerome A. 1911. “Savantwadi Castes and Village Communities (Appendix 3), in Kunkeri Village Survey Monograph, Part VI (I), Vol. X.” *Census of India (1961 Reprint)*, vol. 10: *Maharashtra*. Bombay: Government Central Press.

Sax, William. 2009. *God of Justice: Ritual Healing and Social Justice in the Central Himalayas*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sax, William, and Helene Basu, eds. 2015. *The Law of Possession: Ritual, Healing, and the Secular State*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Settar, Shadaskshari, and Günther Sontheimer. 1982. *Memorial Stones: A Study of Their Origin, Significance and Variety.* Dharwad, India: Institute of Indian Art History.

Shields, Nancy K. 1987. “Healing Spirits of South Kanara.” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 11 (4): 417–35. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00048492

Shulman, David, and Deborah Thiagarajan, eds. 2006. *Masked Ritual and Performance in South India: Dance, Healing and Possession*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.165030

Smith, Frederick. 2001. “The Current State of Possession Studies as a Cross-Disciplinary Project.” *Religious Studies Review* 27 (3): 203–12. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-0922.2001.tb00369.x

———. 2006. *The Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization*. New York: Columbia University Press. https://doi.org/10.7312/smit13748

Srinivas, M. N. 1952. *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stanley, John M. 1988. “Gods, Ghosts, and Possession.” In *The Experience of Hinduism: Essays on Religion in Maharashtra*, edited by Eleanor Zelliot and Maxine Berntsen, 26–59. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Stewart, Tony. 2001. “In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter through Translation Theory. *History of Religions* 40 (3): 260–87. https://doi.org/10.1086/463635

Turner, Victor. 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Wagle, N. K. 1995. "On Relations amongst Bhuts, Gods and Men: Aspects of Folk Religion and Law in Pre-British Maharashtra." In *Folk Culture, Folk Religion and Oral Traditions as a Component in Maharashtrian Culture*, edited by Günther-Dietz Sontheimer, 181–220. Delhi: Manohar.

Zaidi, Sarovar. 2016. "Religious Iconography in Islam: Some Motifs from the Shi'a Context in India." *India International Centre Quarterly* 43 (2): 84–97.