The circulation of ideas and practices is a feature typical of Indian religions. Right from the textually attested beginnings, a system of worship and religion-based social structures was imported into South Asia and gradually spread all over the Subcontinent. Over the centuries, conquering kings, migrant communities, and itinerant monks of various denominations transported ideas throughout the region, thus adding to the plurality of views that characterizes the religious landscape of India. The so-called bhakti [devotional] movements are no exception to this. Appearing on the scene in about the sixth century CE in the South, and later all over India, they often started as regional cults with deities who were worshipped not in Sanskrit but in the vernaculars. Sometimes the deities attracted devotees from wider areas and developed into pan-Indic ones, or the founders and members of local cults were influenced by the pan-Indian traditions with their overwhelming presence in Sanskrit literature and other media, so that exchange, incorporation, and circulation can be observed in many fields.

The most popular religious group in Maharashtra, the Vārkarī movement, is the perfect case study for circulation since it absorbed many influences. It centers on the god Viṭṭhal of Pandharpur and is first attested in an inscription of 1189 CE, in which the construction of a temple for the god is mentioned. A special feature of the cult is the vārī [pilgrimage] to Pandharpur that takes place twice a year, and to which the devotees owe their designation vārkārī [“those doing the pilgrimage”]. Many Maharashtrian poet-saints since the medieval period have been Vārkarīs, and their compositions have helped to increase the fame of the god.

Already in the old layers of Marathi literature that date back to the thirteenth century, it is possible to trace elements of various origins that make up the Vārkarī belief system. In the following I shall exemplify this by
means of songs attributed to the poet Jñāndev, who most probably died in 1296 CE, and is one of the prominent saints of Maharashtra. He is considered by the Vārkarīs as one of the founders of their movement. He wrote the famous Bhagavadgītā commentary that was later called Jñānesvari, and several other texts on philosophical subjects. A collection (Jñāndev Gāthā) of about 1200 songs (abhaṅgas) is attributed to him as well. The authorship question has not yet been solved completely. There may be songs or groups of songs that go back to the famous author, while others may have been composed by his followers. I am inclined to consider the texts as products of the “Jñāndev school”. If treated thus, the Jñāndev Gāthā can supply valuable information about the development of the Vārkarī movement.

The songs deal with various topics such as the highest reality, the teacher (guru) who is supposed to help the devotee experience that reality, the methods to be applied for this purpose, and the philosophical background of those views. The texts discussed in this paper belong to a group of about 100 compositions called gauḷanī-virahiṇī by some of the editors of the Gāthā. The term “gauḷanī” (or gauḷaṇi in Old Marathi) means “cowherdess” or “milkmaid” (gopī in Hindi, gopikā in Sanskrit), and refers to the playmates of Kṛṣṇa during his youth in Vrindavan. In modern Marathi, “gauḷanī” is used for the genre of songs pertaining to them. The milkmaids are important characters already in the tenth book of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa (most probably composed in the tenth century, and since then one of the pillars of the Vaishnava religion) where their love for Kṛṣṇa is depicted. Their pain of separation (viraha) after he left them is the reason why they are also called virahiṇīs, women separated from their lover or husband. The gopīs have become the subject of many texts all over India, and one would expect the Jñāndev songs to be similar to those in other areas. That, however, is only partly the case. The songs were used for purposes beyond expressing love and longing, and contain various elements pertaining to literature, philosophy, and religion. In this paper, I first introduce the songs, highlighting the philosophical complexity of their imagery, before turning to more general reflections.

First of all, one finds in the gauḷanīs the element of folk religion, namely local Viṭṭhal devotion. The oldest literary source for the cult is the

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3 Kiehnle 1997b: 3ff.
4 For an extensive examination of this variety of devotion (especially in the Bhāgavatapurāṇa) cf. Hardy 1983.