TWO RATHER OBVIOUS QUESTIONS were behind the idea of examining the contemporary relevance of Warkari sampradaya: a) the continuing influence of the Warkari persuasion on a large segment of the rural population in Maharashtra, in spite of the rise of “urban” institutions and b) despite large-scale bureaucratically sponsored projects, the fact that no real enthusiasm has emerged in rural areas for a cooperative effort, an effort such as was foreseen in the ideology of Community Development (Krishnamachari, 1968). An important technological fact makes this situation even more acute. In India and particularly in Maharashtra, prospects for large-scale, technological transformation through guaranteed irrigation are severely limited. Any significant rise in agricultural productivity must come from the massive, imaginative and yet routine cooperative effort of the peasants, labourers and artisans in villages across the land (Rao and Sayed, 1973). Indigenous and all-pervasive economic development demands precisely those impulses which have been conspicuously absent in rural India in the last three-and-a-half decades.

Self-generating cooperative efforts in village communities may not really gain ground without basic changes in man-land relations. Largely symbolic gestures, such as tenancy regulations, were aborted in practice by the same class of rich farmers which controls the political and administrative apparatus. Frustrated by a lack of consciousness about structural contradictions, convinced of the futility and hypocrisy of the ruling ideology of legal justice, freedom and individual rights through parliamentary democracy, many young men and women have shown their willingness to dedicate their lives to the task of raising consciousness. They usually arrive in rural areas with a predetermined, adverse, orientation to tradition, often imparted to them by their “progressive” teachers. Warkari sampradaya, as an element of that tradition, is usually treated as an obstacle: they have no other way of dealing with it. Consequently, they become incapable of establishing a dialogue of shared meanings with the rural masses because a) they have never before shared the life experience of oppression in the rural context, and b) they bring with them a hostile attitude towards tradition which, paradoxically, can be the only possible common bond between them and the rural folk.
These considerations point to the need for exploring the contemporary relevance of tradition. They have led me to a study of Warkari sampradaya. At least three major themes deserve detailed investigation.

1. **Warkari sampradaya as a discourse on tradition.**
2. Contemporary society and Warkari practice.
3. Lack of appreciation of its critical and liberating impulses by modern intellectuals and activists.

A study of the writings and practices of Warkari poets as part of the first theme alone suggests a variety of directions from which the dialectical growth of tradition can be gleaned. Here, the criterion of successful social transformation as a predetermined outcome of this dialectic is not available. Whether an impulse was potentially revolutionary or not has to be judged in terms of the nature of oppressive social practice, the options open to a given society and the associated development of the consciousness of the oppressed social classes. The context of the social and material conditions of production needs to be examined. Similarly, whether a critical impulse can regain its potential in a changed social practice cannot be determined without adequate reinterpretation of the same impulse. A superficial review of the social history of Warkari sampradaya, its insistence on the use of the language of the masses and its open-door policy with respect to all castes, including the Untouchables, are the obvious indications of its critique of society. On the other hand, the rise of linguistic nationalism under Shivaji and Ramdas and the corresponding disappearance of creative writing by the Warkaris, both point to a hegemonic appropriation by the ruling classes (Lele, 1980).

Let us begin with the notion of "potential community". It can be explored by contrasting it to that of the actual community in which members live and communicate naively on the basis of shared meanings. Community in the latter sense is living tradition. Family, village and caste are various levels of such actual community in which tradition remains alive and meaningful for all members, not only through language and rituals but through shared productive activities as well. Human communal existence has three basic dimensions—the material world, the social world and the world of the self. Human community is also "a speech community", including all native speakers of a given language who share symbols and meanings which stem from the dual character—natural and social at the same time—of the human species. With the human individual mediating, simultaneously, his naturalness and socialness, his entire world comes to be structured and expressed through his own subjectivity, through the objectivity of the material, sensuous world, and through the normativity of his social relations. Together they make up his symbolic-linguistic world of inter-subjectivity (Habermas, 1979). The essentially linguistic nature of this triple world also points to its potentiality. The necessity of having to regard others as subjects, as having intentions behind their beliefs and activities, implies that the latter can be brought into open and