

# Coercion and Conversion: The Organic Farming Movement in Maharashtra, India

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## Says Tuka

In the classic Marathi text *Tukaram*, the poet protagonist Tukaram devotes himself to practicing the word of God in every aspect of his life. Having endured the death of multiple close family members, as well as the pain and suffering involved in famine and subsequent debt, Tukaram develops an unbridled sense of compassion for his fellow beings – an understanding that is only heightened by his growing connection to Krishna, an incarnation of the preservation god Vishnu.

In his translation of this epic poem, Maharashtran poet Dilip Chitre writes:

*I have nothing  
Left.  
I am too deep  
In debt.*

*My harvest  
Has been  
Looted.  
My wife  
And my children  
Have to beg.*

*I borrow  
Left and right.  
Nothing  
Seems enough....(37)*

*Where shall I go now?  
What shall I eat? (39).*

Upon reading this verse for the first time during my first week in India, I could not help but connect these lines from 17th century Maharashtran literature to the agricultural crisis in modern-day India. Fixating on phrases like, “Where shall I go now? / What shall I eat?” and “I am too deep / In debt,” I remembered the farmer suicide epidemic that had ravaged rural Maharashtra as well as other states throughout India.



With the advent of trade liberalization in the early 1990s as a part of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment program, large transnational corporations, such as Monsanto-Maycho, were permitted to sell genetically modified seeds to small farming communities in India, even though the environmental and societal impacts of these seeds were not sufficiently considered before they were sold. Corporations would often purchase the land of the farmers and consequently make it mandatory for them to buy the expensive seeds they were selling. Other times, companies or even government officials would discourage or prohibit farmers from keeping seed banks in which they could reuse natural seeds from season to season, lowering the input costs on their farms. The historic tradition of exchange and interdependence between Indian farmers was being trivialized by advertising campaigns that employed convincing depictions of Hindu and Sikh gods to sell small farmers hybrid seed varieties (Shiva *Stolen* 10).

As a result, corporate monopolies stripped the farmers of their agency, leaving them no other options to access renewable seeds. Instead, many had to buy expensive genetically modified seeds that could not be saved for future crop cycles, causing large debts that these small farmers could not repay. This trend was a consequence of the Green Revolution (which spread from Mexico to India in the mid-1960s), which noted economics professor Harry M. Cleaver, Jr. defines as “...the rapid output in Third World grain output associated with the introduction of...a combination of improved grain varieties, mainly rice and wheat, heavy fertilizer usage and carefully controlled irrigation” (177). While this seemed like a sound plan to increase food production, especially for overpopulated nations struggling to feed their masses of underfed citizens, Cleaver went on to explain that the Green Revolution has created a cash crop system rooted in farmers' dependency on

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commercial inputs. Farmers were forced to buy inputs for their farms and sell a portion of their yields in order to acquire the money required to purchase inputs for the next season. Proponents of this system encouraged small farmers to want more for themselves and buy commercial goods from stores to raise their standard of living, which contradicted the farmers' original philosophy of collectively working to meet community needs (179). The capitalist inclination of agribusinesses to reduce research costs created incomprehensive reports that failed to account for the extensive devastation of entire ecosystems after the use of many hybrid seeds (184).

Initial high agricultural yields from hybrid seeds and chemical fertilizer use proved unsustainable (Shiva 169), turning into lower yields and higher debts in only a few years. Facing high interest rates (up to 25 percent) and irreversible debts, many farmers looked to suicide as their only option, often ending their lives by drinking the pesticides that had killed their livelihoods in the first place. Others hurled their bodies down wells or set themselves on fire, as if to scream that the violence in taking their own lives felt better than enduring the wretchedness of irresponsible agricultural policy. At a rate of three farmer suicides per day in Maharashtra, the epidemic is creating a generation of children who must grow up without their fathers, and widows who must suddenly support their entire families by themselves. The direness of this situation is aggravated by government financial compensation packages that fail to address the structural shortcomings of Indian agricultural policy and rarely reach the people who need them most (Ahmed 1).

Eager to begin work with the Maharashtra Organic Farming Federation (MOFF), a non-governmental organization meant to promote organic farming as a means of resisting corporate exploitation, I had inadvertently begun processing new ideas by connecting them to what I knew about agriculture in India. Upon rereading the phrase, "Tuka(ram) says the *company* is not so good and true," I thought to myself, sarcastically: even a 17th-century poet could foresee the injustice of future neoliberal policy in favor of corporate capital gains. I didn't share my sentiment with Dilipmama<sup>1</sup>, which is how I referred to the aforementioned poet Dilip Chitre, who I knew as an uncle on my mother's side of the family. Nonetheless, through several conversations, I learned that Dilipmama had spent over 20 years studying and translating *Tukaram*. He believed that Tukaram reclaimed religion as

a method of liberation for all people, and not just for high-caste elites. He further noted that existing social conditions informed how Tukaram interpreted the message of God, making me wonder how the agricultural crisis would inform an understanding of modern Hinduism, and vice versa. Dilipmama planted a new seed in my mind: Do religion and colonization have an inverse relationship in rural India?

Having spent less than a week in India, still awaiting the beginning of my internship, I realized I was getting ahead of myself. Keeping this question in the back of my mind, I began to explore Maharashtra.

### **On Movement and Motorcycles**

Early morning Pune blasted from the windows. Hindi music played outside – the shrill, whiny voice of the female singer accompanied the low groans of the song's featured hero. Motorcycles grunted across the potholed roads, and the tsht-tsht of street-sweepers sounded like a whisper.

It was 5 a.m. Still jetlagged, I woke up brusquely with a nosebleed, probably due to the thick, dry heat and red dust that hung like a fog in Pune. Unable to go back to sleep, I relaxed on the thin, firm mattress in the apartment of Dilipmama and Vijumami<sup>2</sup>, where I would stay for a few days before moving into a women's hostel on the other side of town. I savored the solitary dawn, my only company the discordant melody of incessant honking five floors below me.

Later that day, I greeted this noise from the back of my cousin Abhijit's motorcycle. He gave me a tour around Pune, eagerly trying to help me orient myself in this city that I would so very soon have to navigate on my own. Clutching his shoulders tightly, I grew petrified and overjoyed at the same time as we weaved through tangled traffic jams.

Traffic in Pune felt like vehicular anarchy. On many roads there were no lanes, with the right-of-way governed solely by common sense: If you can go, go; if you cannot, don't – and honk. An average Punery (person from Pune) seemingly honked as much as a person from the States did not. Everyone honked, because not honking meant not communicating with the other drivers. It meant speaking up and claiming space. Trucks encouraged honking, with signs painted on their backs bolding stating, "Awaz do," which literally translates to "Give noise" in Hindi. Rumored

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to have traffic problems greater than those in Mumbai (Maharashtra's capital city, as well as the most populated city in India), Pune's rapidly growing population and lack of infrastructure to accommodate the population made niceties inefficient. Communication had to be blatant, without the patience that tough traffic cops and suppressed road rage afforded drivers at smaller cities in the States.

People tended to drive slowly, (out of necessity, because there was always someone or something else in the way to maneuver about). Apparently, traffic anarchy worked at low speeds. Nothing seemed to dominate over anything else - bikes, two-wheelers (what everyone referred to the motorcycles and scooters as), cars, trucks, people, cows, dogs. I encountered very little road kill. Two cows sat in the middle of the road, and all the vehicles went around them, as if to declare that the cows had as much of a right to claim the road as the drivers themselves did. Everything seemed equal on the road. However, this initial absence of domination in road relations became a violent presence during accidents. Bikers bore the brunt of regular fender benders with rickshaws, with legs splayed under tiny rickshaw wheels and helmetless heads exposed to littered pavement. Cars moved through masses without waiting their turns, and the responsibility for avoiding traffic accidents remained chiefly with pedestrians and bikers – those who would feel the consequences of an accident more than the people inside the cars. If equality was indeed an aspect of Pune's traffic situation, then equality was relative.

People busied themselves everywhere. Street vendors, flocks of uniformed children on bikes returning from school, doormen at expensive Westernized stores. A gruff looking man on a moped wore a bright yellow T-shirt that said "Bride to Bee," with a picture of the bee accompanying the text. The man was not being ironic. He was probably being resourceful. The discontinuity between each block, from person to person, coupled with the noise and the commotion echoing in the streets all boiled down to everyone seeking their space in the web of contradiction that Pune had become.

With a population of almost five million, Pune is often referred to as the cultural capital of Maharashtra, a state located in Western India. Nearly two hours southeast of the coastal Maharashtran capital, Mumbai, Pune touts Marathi culture as much as Mumbai renounces it to make room for a more globalized metropolitan culture. Home to several prestigious universities, such as the University of Pune, and a booming information technology sector, Pune boasts economic growth and development, consequently attracting many people from all over India to study and work in the city. This pride stems back to the 1600s, when Chhatrapati Shivaji founded the Maratha empire after defeating Shahistekhan, uncle of the later famed Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. Remnants of the Maratha Empire, a branch of the Kshatriya (or warrior) caste, are visible at several historical sites around the town, including Lal Mahal, Shivaji's former home, and Sinhagad, the site of a famed battle in which Maratha forces conquered the Mughals ("History" 1). Marathas still make their

presence known primarily through political parties in Pune, such as the Maharashtra Naunirman Sena.

Political billboards lined major roads, with pictures of political leaders posing stoically above slogans that promised justice and prosperity for all. Below these billboards were homeless people, losing their individuality and humanity as they blended into the landscape of the city. The sheer multitudes of men, women, and children whose homes were confined to garbage-filled street corners made it difficult to process how each of these people had a story that reflected the realities of "economic development" in Pune, whose benefits were funneled only to a privileged few. Since the Green Revolution hit India in the 1960s, food production has increased hugely, but food security has been on the rocks ever since. Unable to afford the new technologies necessary to modernize their small farms, many small farmers lost their land to wealthy agribusinesses that grew rich off of the labor and resources of the small farmers. As agriculture became less sustainable, farmers had to seek out their livelihoods elsewhere, causing rapid urbanization, evident in traffic density, pollution, and sprawling slums throughout major Indian cities (Clever 182). Pune was no exception.

As my eyes widened at the sight of urban sprawl pouring from the streets into makeshift neighborhoods, I could not help but notice the vibrancy of the reds, yellows, and browns in Pune. Red like the sticker bindis that the women wore on their foreheads, or dust known as "*kumkum*" that frequented the foreheads of religious Hindu men and women. Brown like the dirt that billowed up into the sky as masses of rickshaws, two-wheelers, and some cars created dense traffic jams in order to get from point A to point B. Bright yellow like the flowers that adorned various temples and shrines around the city, inviting everyone to take off their shoes and enter to be blessed by one of many gods. Red like *mendhi* that decorated the hands and feet of new brides, as well as young women who wore this fashion with jeans and blouses, creating an aesthetic fusion of East and West. Brown like the mixture of betel nut and tobacco rolled in a leaf known as *paan*, which men chewed frequently around their favorite *paanwallas*<sup>8</sup>. This *paan* stained their yellow teeth with a sticky reddish brown.

And yellow like the Alphonso mangos I threw up all over the littered street earlier that day, with golden remnants of my afternoon snack ironically splattered right in front of a United Colors of Benetton store. I had been ill for the past few days. My mouth said yes to everything and my stomach said no to everything, much like my senses welcomed the sights, sounds, and smells while my brain could not quite figure out how to process them. For instance, whizzing by barefoot children weaving in and out of traffic, I could not fathom how miserable rural life in India could be to cause a family to choose urban homelessness as their better alternative. Still focusing on the colors of Pune, I fixated upon the terracotta splotches of dirt and sand that streaked the unkempt hair and faces of numerous street dwellers, as if to mark the social prejudices against them.

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These prejudices stemmed from the Hindu caste system. Divided into five main castes – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, Sudras, and Dalits – the caste structure stems from the Vedas, Hindu religious scriptures dating back hundreds of years before Christ. The Brahmins were known as the priestly or philosophic caste, followed by the warrior Kshatriyas. Below these high castes were the traders and farmers of the Vaisya caste, and the manual laborers of the Sudra caste. Dalits, or Untouchables (also known as “scheduled caste”), were considered unholy, and were often forced to work at the least desirable jobs, including the cleaning of excrement from the streets. This system of social stratification created such an intense stigma around Dalits that some people even today fear sully themselves through physical contact with these people (Pillai 1).

Scheduled caste men and women often crouched against walls, next to small businesses, on street corners, as if their social status manifested through their poor posture. They often had no shoes, even when the sun beat down on the dusty roads and the ground sizzled like a barbecue grill. Though Pune enjoys considerably cooler, more pleasant weather than the rest of Maharashtra because of its fortunate location between the Western Ghats and Deccan Plateau, it still experiences a broad range of climatic conditions, such as fierce monsoons, sweltering summer heat, and chilly winter nights (Brahme 107), which the homeless must bear with only their skin serving as an umbrella or a blanket. Though the Indian Constitution outlawed caste discrimination in 1976 as a part of its 42<sup>nd</sup> Amendment, generations of socially conditioned reactions to caste as an acceptable form of social organization have branded caste prejudices into the minds of modern Puneries (Pillai 1).

We had been riding for about 45 minutes now, and I could not differentiate the neighborhoods of Pune from one another. Divided into peths and nagars, or localities, the neighborhoods in Pune each had their own flavor of bustle and clamor. The peths were older parts of the city, often named after days of the week. Ganesh Peth, home to a large temple featuring the elephant-headed god, attracted many of Pune’s pious poor that tied red strings around their wrists to display their blessing from God. Kalyani Nagar welcomed people down the road that led to Koregaon Park, a tourist area also home to the Osho Ashram, where wealthy international Indophiles visited to free their minds, bodies, and wallets to get closer to God. In major shopping centers like Camp and Deccan, Punery youth spoke Hindi and English, ditching their Marathi (or other home language, depending on which region in India their family was from) for the hip vernacular of Bollywood feature films.

At Sinhagar Road, big bazaars of fruits and vegetables stood across the street from Big Bazaar, a newly opened one-stop megastore that bragged to customers about the clothing, food, and home goods that could be bought there. Pune sprawled into a messy star shape, and at the rate it’s growing now, will soon become an amorphous blob.

Abhijit mentioned the names of various streets to me, but I struggled in remembering which was which as I could not identify easily viewable street signs that I had grown accustomed to using as guides to orient myself in the States. I started remembering landmarks instead. Senapati Bapat Road was home to Simbiosis, or “Sim-boy-sis” as Puneries called it, where students from all over India went to study management and information technology. After Simbiosis on the right was Om Gallery, an art gallery with its name bursting from the building in bold green letters. We stopped at a traffic light and busy intersection, at what I later learned was Gokhale Nagar Chowk (“chowk” meaning square in both Marathi and Hindi), but yet was never able to find a single sign indicating that that indeed was the name of the chowk. Taking a right at the light, I noticed a vendor selling large white and orange flower garlands meant to be hung over religious idols or pictures of deceased ancestors as a sign of respect. I hoped desperately that the flower vendor always stood at that same corner to sell his goods, so I would be able to see him and immediately have some sense of where I was. We passed a series of shops, all cramped together as if a child with building blocks had haphazardly constructed this structure that only his mother could appreciate as an architectural masterpiece. I noticed a rusty yellow gate to my right, and a large sign that read “Siddhi Glass House” to my left. Later, I learned to use that glass house sign as a marker to know that my turn was coming up. We turned left, then made another right before Cosmos Bank. My cousin took me to the end of the street – a dead end. “*Aapun khotay aah?*” I asked, wondering where we were.

He replied, “MOFF.”

### **On Conversion and Cooperation**

With enormous resolve and a concentrated sternness running through the lines on his crinkled forehead, Baradkar-saheb declared, “We need to convert them.” While he paused for emphasis, I mulled over his statement. The word “convert” evoked images of religious or ideological coercion, chalk-full of violence and cultural imperialism similar to that which occurred during the Crusades. He finished his thought, “We need to change their entire mindset. We need to change their way of life to organic farming.”

I had been working with MOFF for about two weeks when my boss, Baradkar-saheb<sup>4</sup>, enthusiastically agreed to let me interview him. He sat behind his desk where he had displayed an abundance of organic samples, including sorghum and green gram, used in *bhakri* (a hand-kneaded flat bread) and *usal* (a spiced legume dish), two staples of Maharashtran cuisine. Having just explained which crops should be cultivated together and how to produce maximum yields to visiting small farmers, Baradkar-saheb could hardly contain his convictions about the benefits of organic farming. Wearing a dusty gray long-brimmed cap, gray slacks, and a button-down gray shirt, he looked outstandingly plain.

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His square-framed glasses plopped firmly on his large, curved nose. A mustache sat comfortably on his upper lip, trimmed neatly by the corners of his mouth. His skin, a rich chocolate brown, looked leathery, as if years of exposure to the sun had only toughened, rather than damaged, his epidermis. The only feature that ruptured the monotony of the rest of his appearance was his eyes. Serious, yet gentle, they commanded attention before his words could, boldly proclaiming that he was only interested in speaking and hearing the truth.

Born in Nanded (about eight hours from Pune, in western Maharashtra), Diliprao Deshmukh Baradkar grew up in a farming family. His first surname, *Deshmukh*, means “landowner,” and like many other farmers who owned their own land, his male ancestors included “Deshmukh” in their family’s name as a sign of status. As the first male-child born in a family of six children (including three sisters elder to him, as well as one sister and one brother younger to him), he enjoyed the perks of a culture that valued males over females, attending school and eventually making it to college. After receiving a post-graduate degree in etymology from a small agricultural university, Baradkar worked for Syngenta, a multinational agribusiness corporation that sold genetically modified seeds and pesticides around the world. From 1970 to 1980, he swore by chemical farming – Syngenta was his livelihood, and he believed in its practices without once doubting its environmental and human consequences.

However, in 1980, after years of exposure to a variety of chemical agents, Baradkar developed lymphatic dermatitis, a skin condition marked by inflammation and irritation. He wanted to continue working, but he physically could not. His condition worsened, spreading to his entire body. Doctors were unable to isolate the irritating agent, for even after Baradkar stopped working, his rashes persisted in droves across his arms, legs, and torso. When allopathy failed him, he turned to homeopathy as a last resort.

By chance, Baradkar met Manohar Parchure, a farmer from Nagpur (the second capital of Maharashtra situated on the eastern border of the state in central India). After discussing Baradkar’s health problems (not uncommon for Indians to do, even in conversation with a relative stranger), Parchure offered Baradkar a glimmer of hope by suggesting that he try organic farming and then organic eating to cure his ailments. As Baradkar retold this segment of his personal history, his eyes lit up and he exclaimed, “This was the turning point in my life!”

Thus, after 25 years of chemical farming experience (including his years with Syngenta, as well as the years he spent on his personal farm using chemical agents), Diliprao Deshmukh Baradkar rejected his entire agricultural mantra and adopted a new way of farming, and consequently, a new way of living. However, he approached organic farming with a profound degree of skepticism. While willing to try anything to end the pain and discomfort spawned by his lymphatic

dermatitis, he could not fathom how high-quality crops and substantial yields could be produced using only organic products. Nonetheless, as a self-confessed skeptic and meticulous record keeper, Baradkar would soon involve himself in a life-changing movement that would define his *dharma*, or duty, in life.

As he converted plots of land on his own farm from chemical to organic, he recorded the amount and quality of yields during each season. Baradkar had also kept extensive records on the quality and quantity of seeds and crops produced by Syngenta; comparing these records to his organic records, he was floored by the success of his organic crops. After each season of organic farming, Baradkar noted more nutrient-rich soil, as well as tastier crops. His records showed that after years of chemical farming, initial high yields dropped off abruptly and the quality of crops diminished. The promise of chemical farming was not completely false, but its benefits were just temporary. Organic farming, on the other hand, produced steadily increasing yields (before leveling off eventually) and environmental renewal. The success of organic farming was rooted in its sustainability. As his diet consisted solely of organic products, and his exposure to chemicals was curbed greatly now that he had transformed his farming method, his lymphatic dermatitis disappeared – its painful trace lingered only in his memory.

After the success of his personal organic farming endeavors, Baradkar made it his mission to spread the word of organic farming as if it were the word of God. Relocating to Vidharbha, a region in northeastern Maharashtra, he began giving presentations on organic farming to Krishi Vigyan Kendras (Agricultural Research Centers), where many policymakers and agricultural scientists were reluctant to listen to his theories. However, after inviting various government officials, scientists, farmers, and others to his farm to see firsthand the progress of his organic crops, Baradkar began to develop some clout in the world of Maharashtran agriculture. He received awards for his educational presentations, and with this prestige came the promise, in his mind, of the implementation of organic farming on a larger level.

“But, I feel we are lacking in the field of systematic organic practices.” Baradkar interrupted the positive tone of his account with disappointment, before continuing to expound upon his own involvement in the systematization of organic farming in Maharashtra. His initial efforts to build systematic practices began in 2000, when Baradkar met Vikram Bokey.

Bokey was an ex-IPS (Indian Police Service) officer who had resigned abruptly due to a conflict of interests between his established career as a police officer and budding career as a politician. In 2006, Bokey was elected president of the Maharashtra Naunirman Sena (Maharashtra Revitalization Army). This party was founded by Raj Thackeray (nephew of Bal Thackeray, the founder of the conservative Shiv Sena political party) to break away from his uncle’s party due to alleged corruption.

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The Naunirman Sena sought to promote Maharashtrian nativism, as well as the rights of the Marathi people over other regional groups in the state. Its motto is, "I am of Maharashtra, Maharashtra is mine."

Interestingly enough, as regional intermingling in urban centers diluted strict Maharashtrian pride, Bokey turned to rural Maharashtra to spread the word of the Naunirman Sena, as if it were the word of God. However, as famous Indian author and social critic Arundhati Roy aptly described, "India does not live in its villages. India dies in its villages," (Roy 1) and Bokey witnessed rural strife on every village visit.

Bokey's interest in rural Maharashtra seemed hardly pure, and the benefits<sup>5</sup> he would reap (in terms of political power) from mobilizing masses of poor farmers for his political party seemed much greater than the benefits the farmers would receive from supporting him. Through his broad network of contacts, Bokey was told about Diliprao Deshmukh Baradkar, a leading organic farmer in Maharashtra state. "Bokey visited my farmhouse and saw my mosambi<sup>6</sup>, chiku<sup>7</sup>, turmeric, mango, bajra<sup>8</sup>..." Baradkar-saheb expressed proudly. "I had kept this farmhouse for over 25 years." Impressed by the low costs of production, strong crop yields, and overall health of the farm, Bokey decided that organic farming needed to spread to Maharashtra's villages. He asked Baradkar for help, as Bokey himself had had little experience with organic farming, let alone farming of any sort (though he claimed in all of his speeches to be a farmer just like his audience – the "farmer" that Bokey described himself as, however, seemed more accurately described as a "landowner," with other farmers actually tending to the 1,200 acres of farmland in Amravaty and 400 acres of farmland in Pune that he owned). Eager to convert the minds of Maharashtra, Baradkar obliged.

On November 30, 2004, Bokey founded the Maharashtra Organic Farming Federation (MOFF), declaring himself "Chairman," and Diliprao Deshmukh Baradkar "Vice-Chairman." While the position seemed to fulfill Baradkar's self-proclaimed life mission, I wondered how aware he was of the politics of his situation. Was Baradkar a type of organic farming evangelist, willing to work in conjunction with Bokey to make small strides in the organic farming movement in Maharashtra, even while realizing that the political career of Bokey would probably benefit more than the movement? One of Bokey's advisors mentioned to me that the two men did not get along particularly well, yet Baradkar's attention to status and respect made it difficult to notice any subtle hints of resentment towards Bokey. My questions remained unanswered, mostly because I could not imagine a tactful way to ask them.

Nonetheless, as we continued our interview, Baradkar-saheb was visibly excited by his work at MOFF. Declaring that organic farming had given his life meaning, he asserted that if others could only see its benefits, India's agricultural crisis could be solved. As if to pay homage to his mentors and colleagues, Baradkar-saheb placed several books and pamphlets on his desk, including *One Straw Revolution* (1978) by

Masanobu Fukuoka and *The Violence of the Green Revolution* (1992) by Vandana Shiva, for my perusal. Taking note of the word "revolution" in the two aforementioned titles, I wondered if organic farming was indeed as revolutionary as Baradkar claimed it was. As if reading my mind, he stated, "Organic farming very much transformed everything about me. I owe my life to Manohar Parchure."

### On Multilingualism and Efficiency

"Neena-madame<sup>9</sup>, what is the English word for *chintza*?" Pandey-saheb asked me in Marathi as he translated a document from Marathi into English after just having his Marathi draft okay-ed by Baradkar-saheb. I hesitated. I had heard the word a million times before in my mother's kitchen. I knew it had a strong flavor, and I remembered eating it in *pani-puri*, a roadside specialty of puffed crackers with masala-spiced legumes, potatoes, and water mixed inside. But it was always just *chintza* to me. The English name that I vaguely knew sat on the tip of my tongue and refused to budge.

This sensation of vague familiarity resurfaced as a trend throughout my entire summer in India. As a second-generation immigrant, I had been born and brought up in the United States; however, my upbringing was governed in part by the Indian culture my parents had spent their formative years in, prior to their immigration to the United States in the early 1980s. Having only met India through my parents, and a couple of family visits to Maharashtra and Gujarat, I wanted to explore Maharashtra personally and politically. Popular analysis of the growing economic relationship and social change taking place as a result of the connection between the United States and India frustrated me immensely, as it generally seemed to be rooted in how India had encountered economic growth due to neoliberal policies that supported the upper and middle classes in further consumption, and consequently created large returns for transnational corporations. I wanted to examine India outside of a framework that equated capitalistic consumption with development, and instead delve into a nuanced look at the effects of globalization on the people whose voice may not be as loud as the voice of lucrative multinational firms. Nonetheless, the goal of my exploration of Maharashtra not only included my desire to understand one of India's most relevant agricultural justice movements, but also my strong willingness to learn about how Maharashtrian culture had informed my experience as an American child of Maharashtrian immigrants. And in the most immediate sense, that meant struggling with elusive Marathi words on the tip of my tongue, while Pandey-saheb sat patiently in front of me, unaware of the mental workout that went along with being a member of the second generation.

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Pandey-saheb was Baradkar-saheb's right-hand man. Every morning, he'd ride to MOFF on his motorcycle, often clad in an entire rain-suit, meant specifically for drivers of two-wheelers during the monsoon season. He sat at the desk across the room from Baradkar-saheb, under newly packaged organic goods stocked neatly on shelves. In charge of reviewing the needs assessment surveys completed by agricultural villages all over Maharashtra, Pandey-saheb had a monumental task in front of him.

Across the room, Baradkar-saheb had been working on the Self-Sustainable Biovillage Project Proposal for the village of Jambharun. I had been working on editing a similar proposal for another village called Dhotra. As he didn't know how to use a computer, Baradkar-saheb would handwrite everything, and usually then gave it to his secretary, Sangita-madame, to type. Impressed by my typing skills, however, Baradkar-saheb made me the new typist, allowing Sangita-madame to work on MOFF's accounting and funding management. Baradkar-saheb would handwrite his documents in Marathi first, then translate them to English (I would help translate a few words and phrases here and there). Then I would correct it, and type it (or I would type it as I corrected it). Sangita-madame typed carefully in the adjoining room, with two index fingers slowly pressing each key. She seemed grateful at having a break from transcribing Baradkar-saheb's intelligent yet sometimes unintelligible chicken scratch.

Pandey-saheb, Baradkar-saheb, and I sat in this bland room, tossing around the Marathi and English names of spices and grains and fruits with vibrant and distinct tastes. While Baradkar-saheb and Pandey-saheb sat at opposite ends of the room at their desks hunched over scattered documents and folders, I sat in between them on a folding chair, without a desk, next to some boxes filled with MOFF's promotional pamphlets. Once I started bringing my laptop to work, I reassured my bosses that my lap would suffice as my workspace. Plugging<sup>10</sup> it into an outlet next to a pamphlet box and pulling up an extra chair to place paperwork on, I noticed that my colleagues were amused at my peculiar space-saving set-up. On a more conscious level, I knew I always worked with my laptop on my lap, and that I was indeed very comfortable with this cramped set-up, as evidenced by my similar working tendencies at Brandeis. However, on a subconscious level, perhaps I was trying to take up as little space as I could, as if my small work space would speak to how I didn't want to be a burden on the organization, but instead be of use in whatever way possible. My posture paid the price for this fence I walked on – between confidence and arrogance, humility and meekness – as I tried to navigate my place in this NGO.

I generally began my days with a meeting with Baradkar-saheb, in which he would inform me of the tasks he wanted assistance with or invite me to observe or participate in meetings he was to have that day with a variety of visitors, including farmers, scientists, researchers, government officials, and students. While farmers were in and out of

MOFF throughout the week, some would specifically show up on Fridays to attend farm school sessions, where Baradkar-saheb or Pandey-saheb would talk about various growing techniques and often hand out seed samples. These initially practical talks would quickly evolve into motivational speeches, which would encourage farmers to take charge of their communities and take care of their families through sustainable agriculture. Rarely did I verbally participate in these sessions. Instead I just actively listened, soaking up a little bit of Baradkar or Pandey's zeal for organic farming, words that helped me stay motivated while working on my tasks throughout the week.

These tasks were not always as stimulating as I had hoped for them to be. I found myself writing some letters (in English) for fundraising purposes, and figuring out ways to connect MOFF and Maharashtra's small farmers with the global organic farming movement, as solidarity with other communities fighting for similar causes could only strengthen each community and each movement. However, these endless Google searches felt futile, because the small farming communities we were trying to help were not hooked up to the Internet and did not share a common language with people of other communities. Furthermore, no one served as a long-term liaison in keeping these various communities connected. My two-month stint at MOFF wasn't going to solve this problem. Furthermore, I was convinced that these farmers didn't care about the struggles of other farmers abroad, when the injustices that plagued their lives were more than enough to deal with without having to relive the pain of other people's agricultural strife. International solidarity, in this sense, seemed like a privilege that these farmers couldn't afford. Meanwhile, I struggled and wondered how my efforts of connecting Maharashtra (or Maharashtra's NGOs, rather) to an international movement would be beneficial.

While observing and participating in various meetings, including those with prominent Maharashtran thinkers such as economist Sulabha Bramhe and writer Usha Kelkar, I began to slowly understand, from a variety of perspectives, both the strengths of organic farming, as well as its shortcomings. Each time I raised a concern over one of these shortcomings, including the belief that organic farming cannot feed the most populous nation in the world, or the thought that organic farming is far too labor intensive, Baradkar-saheb would immediately write down the names of books, articles, or weblinks that I should seek out to help to educate myself. He insisted that if I was actually going to thrive at MOFF, I'd have to have faith in the cause and its merits; however, he encouraged my skepticism, not wanting me to blindly accept his claims. At the end of the day, as Pandey-saheb was tidying up his desk and getting ready to leave the office, I exclaimed, "Tamarind!" He looked at me, puzzled. "*Kai zaala?*" He wondered what happened that had made me blurt out this word. "*Chintza* is tamarind!" I remembered, proudly. Pandey-saheb laughed as he noted the translated word on a piece of paper. He zipped up his rain-suit and zipped away through puddled potholes and endless rain.

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## On Gender and Empowerment

Part of the reason why I was attracted to MOFF was because I was inspired by its focus on women's involvement in sustainable agriculture. It seemed true to the tenets of ecofeminism, which emphasizes the connection between the oppression of women and the deterioration of the environment, thereby suggesting that women's empowerment has a direct correlation with environmental sustainability (Shiva *Stolen* 74). MOFF seemed to be trying to shift the power that companies have sucked out of the hands of the people (and into their own corporate hierarchies) back to the people – especially to the women who have historically been deeply involved in the planting and harvesting of seeds, and in daily crop cultivation (17). One of MOFF's defining features was its establishment of self-help groups for men and women within various communities, which were supposed to create accountability within members of the community in meeting community needs geared toward sustainability. This could involve reviewing growing techniques, managing microcredit loans, and assessing community needs together.

I had imagined self-help group meetings to involve women keeping tabs on each other to help repay microcredit loans, and gathering to talk about a variety of other community problems, ranging from alcoholism to suicides to domestic abuse to the education of their children. My imagination had to suffice for my first few weeks working at MOFF, before I got to see my first self-help group in action. Until then, I had met many farmers who were members of self-help groups when they visited MOFF. They would ask Mr. Baradkar for advice, review surveys and needs assessments that they had collected from town, or attend a farm school session. However, what was striking was one similarity between all the farmers that had been coming to MOFF – they were all male.

There have been plenty of women who have come to MOFF with agendas related to organic farming. Some were students and researchers, others were coordinators of other NGOs with similar causes looking to collaborate with MOFF, and some were marketing representatives who were working on income-generation programs for some of these farms that were starting to go organic. In Pune and other growing cities, women were upwardly mobile and making a profound footprint in business, nonprofit, and IT sectors. But rural agriculture was a different ballgame. And I hadn't met any female farmers in the office.

That was until I visited Maval, a *taluka* (similar to what would be considered a county in the United States) approximately two hours from Pune city, where I met many female farmers. Testing my skepticism of the organic farming movement, I helped to document the progress of villages going organic through taking pictures and collecting data from meetings of women's self-help groups. After introducing myself as an American student trying to learn about organic farming in Maharashtra, I added that I was staying in Pune for the monsoon season, hoping that this would encourage some conversation about a place we were both somewhat familiar with. They said nothing. I asked the women how

often they went into Pune. They laughed, and while some mentioned that they had been there a handful of times in the past, others replied that they had never been. Some explained how they had visited some neighboring villages in their taluka, but never beyond that. However, getting these answers was a bit of a struggle.

Whenever I asked any questions to these women or told them a little about myself, they would usually giggle and look away. At first, I thought it was just my funny accent and poor grammar (and I'm sure that this was part of the reason that they were pretty amused). Then, many of the men started to answer for the women. They would goad the women into answering, saying things along the lines of "Why don't you tell them about who gathers all the money and how you meet on Mondays?" or "Come on, this girl has come all the way from America to learn – not for you all to just sit there and laugh, but for you all to answer her questions!" One man even scolded a woman much older than him, saying, *Maushi, aaike ka tum?* ("Auntie, are you even listening?"). Though I was uncomfortable, the women seemed at ease. After a little more of their male counterparts' "encouragement," they would finally repeat what the men had coached them to say. I made a mental note about how I felt that Maval's males' "Come on, be more empowered!" approach to women's empowerment was not working. I noticed that when men were not present, the women were candid in their responses about their isolation from resources inside and outside their villages.

I noticed that when men were not present, the women were candid in their responses about their isolation from resources inside and outside their villages.

Later in the day, I went into one home, with a thatched roof and tightly packed dirt walls that were different shades of coffee brown depending on how much sunlight they absorbed. As always, I was barefoot<sup>11</sup> and the warm rough ground felt nice on my wet feet, soaked from monsoon rains. I ate lunch with Mr. Baradkar, as well as several other male leaders in Maval. The women served us food (fresh *bharit*, a mushy blend of roasted eggplant and spices, and *tandoori roti*, a flat bread made of rice flour), and hurried back into the kitchen. One man, a leader in the male self-help group, opened up the conversation by elucidating the shyness of the women to me. He mentioned how the women didn't like to talk when the men were around. He finished his sentiment by chuckling, and saying that the women wouldn't know what to say anyway. I forced a smile. I realized that my own femaleness had taken the backseat. I was eating lunch with these men because in their eyes, my Americanness, my college education, and a variety of other factors raised my status much higher than that of the native women of Maval. The men were kind to me and were eager to answer my questions. To

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Every day, as I worked with MOFF both in the office and in villages, I frequently found myself perplexed at the role of religion in the organic farming movement.

accompany that aforementioned smile, I said, "Maybe if the men would stop talking so much, the women would have a chance to respond." The man laughed and understood what I was getting at. He invited his wife out to the room, where she spoke with me briefly, and then invited me back into the kitchen after I finished my lunch.

I noticed that when the women had a little time to get used to me, and after the men were not within an earshot, the women were willing to talk. Struggling with my desire to set up a safe space for open dialogue at the women's self-help group meetings versus my

reluctance to overstep my boundaries as a foreign intern just scratching the surface in learning about their culture created a mounting tension within me. However, the time restraints of my internship established that this safe space would not be possible. Nonetheless, while my impulse to be proactive was limited, my observation of alleged women's empowerment in Maval helped me to realize that empowerment is not something that can be bestowed upon another. Vandana Shiva states:

*For more than two centuries, patriarchal, eurocentric, and anthropocentric scientific discourse has treated women, other cultures, and other species as objects...For more than two decades, feminist movements, Third World and indigenous people's movements, and ecological and animal rights movements have questioned this objectification and denial of subjecthood... Ecological feminisms recognize the intrinsic worth of all species, the intelligence of all life, and the self-organizational capacity of beings. They also recognize that there is no justification in a hierarchy between knowledge and practice, theory and activism, academic thought and everyday life (Stolen 74).*

Instead, empowerment is personal growth that only a woman herself can measure in her own way. When a woman claims choice, space, and agency on her own terms, she is empowered.

### On Images and Imagination

In terms of the aforementioned choice, space, and agency, I asked myself whether I was contributing to or detracting from women's empowerment in Maharashtra each time I removed my camera to photograph them. While they welcomed me to take many pictures of them, and proudly displayed their homes, their families, and their land, I felt uneasy. I wondered how taking pictures of these people would ultimately benefit them. After all, it was me who – in the end – would get to keep the photograph. I informed them beforehand that I would be giving the pictures to MOFF to use in publications, and that I would be showing their pictures to my university to share with others what I

learned from them. Everyone smiled and agreed wholeheartedly, finding me overly formal and silly even for asking so many times if it was okay that I take their pictures.

Dilipmama, also a photographer, mentioned to me how one owns herself, but not her image – the image is a malleable feature that is dictated by the various perspectives of others. Keeping that in mind, with each photo I snapped, I thought about the image that I was producing. Was I exoticizing a community? Would these pictures simply validate my trip to Maharashtra, and serve as evidence of my learning and experience, instead of showing anything that the people of these communities truly wanted to share with others? My conclusions were always changing, especially as I noticed an imbalance of power in so many relationships I had been witnessing.

### On Liberation Theology

In addition to gaining exposure to gendered versions of rural life in Maval, I also noticed that each home I visited had a small shrine set up, with pictures and statues of deities and either incense or a small candle lit in honor of different gods (or different manifestations of the same, all-encompassing energy of one god – however you want to look at it). Women had their arms and hands tattooed, sometimes with images referring to God. Men wore bright red, pink, or orange bracelets on their hands, which they had received from temples and usually would wear until the bracelet tore or fell off. Each morning, to begin the new day, men and women would place loose, fragrant flowers or stringed garlands in front of idols at community temples or personal shrines, making sure not to inhale the scent of the flowers so as to save it for the god being honored.

Though India is officially a secular nation, religion strongly shapes daily life. Because religion is such a strong institution, many farmers in villages, at MOFF, and people away from my internship were surprised by some of my questions concerning the subject – not because the questions themselves were particularly pointed or inappropriate, but instead because the religiosity I was asking about was a normal aspect of life that they had ceased to notice. Discussion of religion in the popular press was rooted in an analysis of the tension between religious groups in India, including Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Christians; yet, the impact of religion in shaping social organization, apart from inter-religious antagonism, was seldom explored. As a result, with half-smiles and hesitation, many people answered my peculiar religious queries about their rituals with, "For God. We're doing this for God."

Every day, as I worked with MOFF both in the office and in villages, I frequently found myself perplexed at the role of religion in the organic farming movement. In thinking about other social movements, outside of a farming context, outside of India, I wondered why they so

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often tapered out or failed. Because people frequently participate in movements as separate causes external to their lives, their investment in these causes grows peripheral to their day-to-day life. For instance, in the current movement against the war in Iraq, it seems like people free up a Saturday to go to an anti-war protest – and then they get back to their regular lives. But, what happens when people do not have the privilege to externalize their participation in a movement?

In his article, “Oral History of the Chilean Movement, ‘Christians for Socialism,’ 1971-1973,” David Fernandez explains how Catholicism grew to extend beyond the spiritual realm into a socially conscious movement. Communities began using their Catholic worldview to address social injustice, especially following the election of Chile’s first socialist president, Salvador Allende, of the Popular Unity (Unidad Popular – UP) party. “[T]he Unidad Popular appeared as the cohesive force for all the social and political movements which sought liberation from oligarchic capitalism and imperialism. The aim was to put an end to poverty and break the ties of dependence which kept Chile in a state of underdevelopment” (Fernandez 284). The ties between religion and social consciousness birthed the Christians for Socialism movement (Cristianos por Socialismo – CpS), setting the groundwork for the Catholic Church’s staunch stand against the Pinochet regime, which had overthrown the democratically elected Allende government in 1973. As many Chileans were stripped of their human rights during and after the coup, many no longer had the choice to externalize their participation in the social justice movement; more than ever, the social and economic oppression (based in the neoliberal exploitation of their country) they had been fighting against grew into political oppression that affected their lives as much as the lives of those less fortunate for whom they were initially fighting.

Using ideas from the Cuban Revolution’s martyr, Che Guevara, many priests in Chile (including those from abroad who had come to express solidarity with their Christian brethren) “wanted to be faithful to Jesus Christ through the revolution, interpreting the signs of the times so that their faith was not something apart, but profoundly involved in the life of the people and their struggles” (289). By understanding the needs of the poor members of their community, many Catholics began to become politicized, seeing the political left as more sympathetic and responsive to the needs of the poor and the oppressed.

Upon learning about the liberation theologians’ interpretation of faith as a means of revolution, I remembered Dilipmama’s assertion that Tukaram sought to conquer existing social strife as a means of fulfilling God’s vision. This 17<sup>th</sup>-century lesson extended to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during which Mahatma Gandhi launched the Quit India Movement. In 1942, at Gandhi’s urging, Indian men and women prepared for “an all-out offensive against imperialism,” demanding the immediate end to British colonial rule in India (Namboodiripad 11). Part of Gandhi’s ability to mobilize masses of Indians revolved around his inclusion of all people in the fight against imperialism, regardless of their caste.

More conservative freedom fighters tended to direct their energies at mobilizing higher-caste members of the upper and middle class; as a result, issues like rural poverty and agricultural justice were not talked about, and poorer, low-caste Indians had no incentive to lend support to a cause that did not accommodate them (Mondal 425). Rudolf Heredia, a professor at Maharashtra’s renowned St. Xavier’s College, states:

*[T]he ethic that Gandhi was trying to introduce and inscribe into Indian political life was that real swaraj [self-governance] would not be the acquisition of authority by a few but the acquisition of the capacity of all to resist authority when it is abused...The basis then of his swaraj could not be just rights, it had to be duties [dharma] as well. For Gandhi real rights are legitimated by duties they flow from, for both are founded on satya [truth] and dharma (1).*

Employing the belief behind liberation theology that religion could be used to inform social change, along with the Gandhian notion that dharma mandated involvement in social justice efforts, Mr. Baradkar imparted words of encouragement rife with religious imagery upon a self-help group of local women in Maval. I paused for a moment and put aside my reference points of religion as something that had to do with brainwashing and coercion. These women proceeded to explain microcredit to me, and how they would pool their money in order to get bank loans, which they would then use to gather some essentials they needed for their community. They explained how these self-help groups were spaces where they could discuss their problems. I asked them what they wanted most for their village, and one woman named Sayindra responded, *Pani ani shaara* (“Water and school.” Irregular rain patterns left Maval with long periods of drought, followed by huge monsoons, and there still was no system of harvesting excess water during monsoons and making it potable during drought (Brahme 108). And formal education in Maval only went up to seventh grade; families wanted their children to get better educations, but they had nowhere to send them, and no one to teach them.

I thought about Sayindra’s answer to my question. The women had just finished telling me about how they spend their days cultivating rice paddy and tending to domestic work, and Sayindra mentioned wanting some basic needs taken care of in her community. I thought about religion again. I wondered, if these women were spending the majority of their time working to satisfy their immediate needs, maybe farming in itself was a kind of religion, or at least a very tangible supplement to traditional Hinduism. These women prayed for good weather for their crops and spent their waking hours making sure that different tasks on the farm were completed. Maybe MOFF and Mr. Baradkar had a point – if these women were actually going to begin organic farming, they needed to look at it as something that reached all aspects of their life.

While liberation theology in Chile involved a concerted attempt to engage the Church as an institution to actively participate against the abuses of the dictatorship, liberation theology in a Hindu context

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meant using tenets of Hinduism to necessitate involvement in the organic farming movement. Like the Chilean Catholics whose belief in Christianity propelled them to work for the benefit of the poor, and later the politically oppressed during the Pinochet dictatorship, Mr. Baradkar was invoking Hinduism and the concept of dharma to help the women of Maval understand agricultural injustice, and how they could change it. He had already expressed to me in conversation that he felt it was his dharma to spread organic farming throughout Maharashtra. He went on to explain how it was the duty of women to care for their children, which meant making sure they had food, education, and the resources they needed. However, he pressed pointedly, how could they fulfill their dharma if major corporations were taking the profits of Maval's land and community, leaving their children with nothing?

So perhaps these words that initially made me uncomfortable — “convert” and changing someone's entire way of thinking — were ways to speak the same language as the women of Maval, whose reference points revolved around farming and God. The theology of liberation, it seemed, was not something that had to be rooted in Christianity. Liberation is a universal concept, and understanding it in a Hindu context was what the women of Maval were just beginning to do.

### Says Viju

According to the Human Rights Law Network, over 10,000 farmers have committed suicide in India in the past five years (Dogra 1). Vikram Bokey, proclaiming himself the spokesperson for the agricultural justice movement, gave an example of the benefits of going organic on behalf of MOFF, stating, “Our studies have shown that the chemical cost per acre for sugarcane is Rs. 17,000 in order to yield 35 tons of produce, while an organic farm costs Rs. 2,200 per acre for an output of 60 tons” (“India” 1). His analysis, fervently backed and probably originally conceived by Baradkar-saheb, raised the question regarding why so much energy would be invested in unsustainable farming techniques. In his article, “The Contradictions of the Green Revolution,” Harry M. Cleaver, Jr. responds to this question, stating:

*The Green Revolution provides a striking illustration of how imperialist intervention, no matter how well-intentioned, can have far-reaching negative effects on the Third World. The problem of hunger in the capitalist world has rarely been one of absolute food deficits, particularly when the productive capacity of the developed countries is taken into account. It is one of uneven distribution caused by a system that feeds those with money and, unless forced to do otherwise, lets the rest fend for themselves (186).*

However, Cleaver's qualifying statement that explains how the haves can oppress the have-nots “unless forced to do otherwise” provides a glimmer of hope for the organic farming movement in India. This

hope challenged the power differential between India's rural masses and the Global North's hegemonic industries that fed the overarching social structure of agricultural injustice in India.

For instance, in terms of colonization, multinationals were the new colonizers, benefiting from their relationship with India's small farmers by pillaging labor and resources. In terms of politics, Bokey benefited from the support of the farmers, gaining political power and wealth that never seemed to trickle down to the masses. In terms of the implications of being an American college student working abroad at a social-justice NGO, my pictures and my experience had a voice, while the subjects of my pictures had only faith in my representation of them, which I did little to merit. Nonetheless, this is how power had developed under the guidance of globalization. But, as Indian activist Arundhati Roy states, “The only thing worth globalizing is dissent.” In this context, the “dissent” she speaks of could indeed mean organic farming.

While working at MOFF, I felt that Hindu dharma informed how many activists and small farmers alike viewed organic farming. If liberation was tied to fulfilling one's dharma, and dharma was tied to feeding one's children and caring for one's community, and multinational corporate influence made it difficult to care for one's children and one's community, the transitive property would suggest that liberation meant working against irresponsible corporate influence. MOFF chose organic farming as the route to address agricultural injustice in Maharashtra, but this only addresses a part of the problem. Patriarchy within rural communities and a lack of education made communities increasingly defenseless against corporate control. However, what religion did was provide hope to communities whose remaining threads of optimism for a better life had been severed by suicide.

Cleaver's aforementioned quote begged the question: What can force the haves to shift some power back into the hands of the have-nots? I found myself sitting once again in the apartment of Dilipmama and Vijumami, overwhelmed by the interconnectedness of the agricultural-justice movement with the gender, caste, and other social-justice movements in India. However, sensing my bewilderment, Vijumami lovingly placed her hand upon my shoulder and gently, but firmly, stated, “Don't get confused.” But, having spent only a little over two months learning about the organic farming movement in India, it was only natural that I had more questions than answers. “If you really want to learn about India, you can't just come here once,” Dilipmama added, to which Vijumami added, “Now you have to come back!”

Off to a solid start in understanding the dynamics of power and religion in India's organic farming movement, as well as the nation, culture, and family that had strongly affected my own upbringing, I have all the more reason to return to Maharashtra.

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## Notes

- 1 The Marathi suffix “*mama*” means “maternal uncle.”
2. The Marathi suffix “*mami*” means “wife of maternal uncle.”
3. The Marathi suffix “*walla*” means “vendor,” thus creating the contraction, “*paanwalla*” that translates to “vendors of paan.”
4. The Marathi suffix “*saheb*” means “boss.”
5. His luxury SUV complete with leather seating, automatic gear shift (a rarity amongst cars in India), two television screens on the backs of the driver and front passenger’s seats, and air conditioning indicated that his political clout had afforded him economic power as well. His designer jeans and sunglasses furthered this thought.
6. “Mosambi” means “sweet lime.”
7. “Chiku” means “sapodilla fruit.”
8. “Bajra” means “pearl millet.”
9. Office culture at MOFF felt very formal. All of the men were addressed by their last name and the suffix “sir” or “saheb,” and the women were addressed by their first name and the suffix “madame.”
10. This habit of plugging in my laptop often served no purpose, as frequent power outs in Pune (including the infamous Thursday power outs that would last up to eight hours) occasionally left me with a low battery.
11. Following a cultural custom, everyone always removed footwear before entering homes, and in villages, we’d tend to remove our sandals even to enter schools, meeting halls, or almost any other structure.

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