

BHAKTI.

The Sanskrit noun *bhakti* is derived from the verb *bhaj*, meaning broadly “to share, to possess,” and occupies a semantic field that embraces the notions of “belonging,” “being loyal,” even “liking.” References to *bhakti* by the grammarian Panini reveal this range of meanings in the fourth century B.C.E. and suggest that even in the early period the word’s most important usage was in the domain of religion. Panini speaks of “*bhakti* to Vasudeva” (i.e., Krishna). *Bhakti*, which comes to mean “devotion” or “love” in later literature, is one of the central concepts of Hinduism. It describes that side of Indian religion in which the personal engagement of a devotee with a personally conceived divinity is understood to be the core of the religious life.

Unlike other concepts through which Hindus understand their religion, *bhakti* is recognized as having an important historical dimension. It is widely acknowledged that Tamil culture played an early and critical role in establishing the sense of *bhakti* as an all-encompassing emotional reality. In a passage that appears in the *Bhagavata Mahatmya* and *Padma Purana* this sort of *bhakti* is personified as a woman who was born in South India and wandered northward through the western provinces, maturing and aging all the while, until she arrived in the Braj region, where she experienced a sudden rejuvenation. The process being described – the so-called *bhakti* movement in Indian religion – spanned the millennium from the sixth to the sixteenth century, and genuine continuities can be found throughout the period that are in force even today. These include the singing of devotional songs composed in vernacular languages by poets who have attained the status of saints; a sense of the mutual companionship of many of these poet-saints; a tendency to consider both sexes and all strata of society as potential devotees;

and above all a cultivation of personal experience as against external or ritual punctiliousness. Collectively, these traits present a formidable contrast to the ritually oriented Vedic traditions preserved by the Brahman caste.

Early Bhakti. The ancient roots of Vedic practice are easy to establish, since the relevant texts have been preserved. Equally ancient *bhakti* texts are harder to locate, but it would be a mistake to conclude on this account that the emphases of *bhakti* religion are more recent in their origins. When non-Vedic religion does begin to leave its traces – in early Buddhist and Jain texts – much of it sounds like *bhakti*. In these texts one hears of such characteristic *bhakti* practices as the enthusiastic offering of flowers and perfumes; the love of music, singing, and dancing; and the veneration of particularly sanctified places. The divinities who are the objects of such worship change over time, from the spirits and snakes (*yakshas* and *yakshis*, *nagas*, and *nagis*) whose images dominate the earliest Hindu sculptures to the most recent additions to the Hindu pantheon (Santoshi Ma, for example, the goddess whose worship became widespread only after she was the subject of a popular film), but the practices by means of which they are worshiped remain recognizably the same. These endure as hallmarks of the *bhakti* tradition.

Such practices make their appearance in the *Bhagavad Gita* (between the second century BCE and the second century CE[?]) as a kind of lowest common denominator upon which a higher theology of *bhakti* is elaborated. Krishna, whose divine utterances to his mortal charioteer Arjuna make up the great bulk of the *Gita*, says that he accepts what by implication are the simplest offerings – “a leaf, a flower, a fruit or water” – if they are presented to him in a spirit of *bhakti* (*bhaktyā*, *Bhagavad Gita* 9.26). Just what

Krishna means by *bhakti* has been a matter of debate. Some scholars have found evidences in the *Gita* of an emotionalism associated with later *bhakti*; but others, such as Friedhelm Hardy, have argued that the author of the *Gita* was referring to a form of fixed mental concentration when he spoke of *bhakti*. It is this “intellectual” dimension, to use Hardy’s term, that makes it so appropriate for the *Gita* to speak of *bhakti* as a kind of yoga, and several commentators have concluded that of the three yogas recommended in the *Gita* – *jnana* (“insight”), *karma* (“action”), and *bhakti* – the last is the most fundamental. Yoga is conducive to detachment from the world, and in the *Gita* Arjuna is encouraged to withdraw from his immediate attachments to family and teachers so that he may attain the inner concentration requisite for equanimity in waging life’s battles. Arjuna’s *bhakti* – his devotion to Krishna – provides the intermediary step: it is a form of attachment to the divine that makes detachment from the world possible.

Bhakti in South India. Considerable distance separates the *bhakti* of the *Bhagavad Gita* from that found in the writings of the earliest Tamil singer-saints, who anticipated so much of the subsequent history of *bhakti*, right down to the present day. In the compositions of the Alvars and Nayanars, groups of South Indian poets who sang of Vishnu and Shiva, respectively, we find a tone that is almost opposite to what we meet in the *Gita*. For the Tamil poets, *bhakti* is “hot” rather than “cool”: the poet Manikkavacakar says that Shiva melts him with his irresistible fire. Here *bhakti* is basic, even alimentary, rather than cerebral: Nammalvar announces that Vishnu has eaten him whole, and marvels on occasion that he has done the same in return. And here the root meaning of *bhakti* attains new overtones as devotion verges on possession in the extreme sense of the word. Vaishnavites and Shaivites alike report that *bhakti* can be a form of

madness, in which one is no longer in control of oneself. Furthermore, because this experience of possessions is shared, it creates new communities of those possessed – entities based on ties that are quite distinct from traditional caste, occupational, and geographic affiliations.

Our first detailed knowledge of such institutions comes from the South. Although such early northern sects as the Bhagavatas and Pashupatas – Vaishnavite and Shaivite groups, respectively – may have had similar institutional identities, our information concerning them is too meager to know this with certainty. In the South, by contrast, we can see a clear process of institutional development, according to which the Alvars came to be revered as the foreparents of the Sri Vaishnava community, and the Nayanars as the source of inspiration for adherents to the Shaiva Siddhanta theological system. The leadership of the Sri Vaishnava fold came to be firmly the province of brahmans, while Shaiva Siddhanta leadership was exercised primarily by Vellalas. Both groups controlled networks of temples, and both enjoyed the patronage of several South Indian dynasties.

On both the Vaishnavite and Shaivite sides, such institutionalization was accompanied by some determined hagiographical work. Not only were the poems of the twelve Alvars and the sixty-three Nayanars collected, but the lives of the saints themselves were given canonical form. The poetic *Prabandham* of Nathamuni (tenth century [?]) and the hagiographical *Arayirappati Guruparamparaprapavam* of Pinpalakiya Perumal Jiyar (thirteenth century) and *Divyasuricaritam* of Garudavahana (sixteenth century [?]) fulfilled this function for the Sri Vaishnavas, of whom Nathamuni himself was the founding teacher (*acharya*). For Shaivas, Nampi Antar Nampi (eleventh century) performed a similar task by arranging the hymns of the Nayanars in what was to

become the Shaivite canon (*Tirumurai*). It was completed when an additional collection, the hagiographical *Periya Puranam* of Cekkilar, was added to it in the twelfth century.

Although the Vaishnavite and Shaivite *bhakti* institutions of the Tamil country were firmly managed by the powerful Brahman and Vellala castes, who administered initiation and perpetuated the traditions (*sampradayas*) of doctrine and teachings to which they were heir, the poet-saints to whom they looked for inspiration were neither exclusively upper-caste nor exclusively male. Among the Alvars, for instance, Tirumankai was a member of the lowly ranked thief caste; Tiruppan was a Dalit or “Untouchable”; and Antal, perhaps the most popular of the Alvars, was a woman. Furthermore, accounts of the lives of these saints specifically underline the point that their *bhakti* had the power to vault them ahead of members of the “purer” castes in the eyes of Vishnu.

Bhakti in Western India. This counterstructural thrust in the *bhakti* heritage took on new force as the *bhakti* movement spread toward the northwest. Like the Alvars and Nayanars, the Virashaiva saints of Karnataka (twelfth century) included outcastes and women, and at least initially their fundamental institutions were defined in counterstructural terms as well. The Virashaivas questioned the close association between sacred locale and intense devotion that had been one of the fundamental emphases of Tamil *bhakti*. Rather than pondering the mystery of a God who could encompass all yet become manifest in particular temples, the Virashaivas insisted that the only true temples are those inside human beings. In consequence, a set of institutions centering on temples and their priests was abjured.

In the course of time the Virashaiva teaching centers (*mathas*) and the ascetics who gathered there came to assume many of the functions of a temple, but elements of the stringent Virashaiva message continued to set the community apart. In the hagiographical accounts that grew up around the Virashaiva saints (e.g., *Shunyasampadane*, fifteenth century), one finds an emphasis on the transcendent value of work, which is foreign to earlier Tamil teaching. This assessment of ordinary labor as an expression of *bhakti* has led to comparisons between the Virashaivas and European Protestants on the part of Max Weber and subsequent scholars persuaded of the cogency of Weber's thesis concerning the Protestant ethic.

The poet-saints of Maharashtra, the most significant of whom were Vaishnavite rather than Shaivite, have come to be associated by means of a literary and festival tradition focused on a particular sacred site, the temple of Vithoba (Vishnu) at Pandharpur. Again the saints represent a variety of social stations—from Jna-neshvar and Eknath (thirteenth and sixteenth centuries), both brahmans, to Namdev, a lowly tailor, and Chokhamela, an outcaste Mahar (both fourteenth century)—and all levels of society have always participated in the semiannual pilgrimage to Pandharpur. As is typical in the *bhakti* movement, however, the full message is not pure egalitarianism but rather an inner freedom to serve God that calls into question the ultimate validity of all caste conceits. Hence the legacy of caste continues to make itself felt in many expressions of *bhakti*. Various castes travel together to Pandharpur, but rules of caste commensality are honored; until recently Untouchable pilgrims were denied entrance to the temple that is the goal of the journey.

Bhakti in North India. The poems attributed to the *bhakti* saints of North India contain a number of references to their predecessors in western India – particularly to Namdev and to Narasi Mehta of Gujarat – and a less obvious but equally significant debt is owed to their southern forebears. A number of motifs that occur in the popular descriptions of Krishna’s childhood by Surdas (sixteenth century) – the child’s insistence on having the moon as his toy, for example – are to be found nowhere in Sanskrit literature but appear eight centuries earlier in the Tamil poems of Periyalvar. Evidently, a vernacular network of transmission connected the *bhakti* saints of various regions.

Customarily it is said that more formal lines of initiation and community affiliation tied together many *bhakti* figures from different regions. The fifteenth-century weaver Kabir, for instance, has been depicted since the seventeenth century as an initiate of Ramananda, who in turn came to be understood as belonging to the Sri Vaishnava Sampradaya. But a close examination of the legend leads one to doubt its veracity, as does the fact that Kabir nowhere mentions Ramananda in his poetry. Similarly dubious are several of the bonds that are claimed to exist between the more recent *sampradayas* of North India and their South Indian predecessors – the connection between the followers of Vallabha (sixteenth century) and those of Vishnusvami (twelfth to thirteenth century [?]), for example.

The thematic and stylistic similarities that draw together *bhakti* poetry from all parts of India cannot be gainsaid, however, nor can one overlook the common patterns that emerge in the lives of the saints, whatever their provenance, or the fact that they are everywhere found together in hagiographical anthologies. In every region, too, *bhakti* literature contains songs that express a visual fascination with God and songs that

bemoan the deity's absence and invisibility. And almost everywhere one finds poems extolling the glories of particular places that have been touched by God.

In the North, however, it became customary to distinguish between poets who adopt a *saguna* ("with qualities") approach, accepting that God is to be worshipped by means of images, and poets who reject this in favor of a *nirguna* approach, the effort to worship God "without qualities." The latter group, which included Kabir and Nanak, are typically called *sants* ("good people") in the North, and owe a debt to the followers of Gorakhnath that is shared by some of the saints of Maharashtra. The various *bhakti* institutions of North India divide along the *saguna/nirguna* line far more neatly than do the poets themselves, with communities such as the Gaudiya (or Chaitanya) Sampradaya and Vallabha Sampradaya serving as examples of the former, and the Dadu Panth and Kabir Panth as examples of the latter. The Sikh community too, which claims the sixteenth-century *bhakti* poet Nanak as its founder, falls in the latter camp.

As one might expect, the institutions of *bhakti* are subject to continuous change. Not only does the *bhakti* movement itself honor individual inspiration, but the Hindu tradition as a whole places considerable store in the sort of learning that can only be transmitted from person to person, from teacher to pupil. Hence doctrine is often a relatively weak guarantor of institutional identity and new waves of the *bhakti* movement are constantly being emitted. These may be excited by the appearance of an inspired teacher or a newly popular divinity, a disagreement in a *sampradaya* about proper lines of succession, or by the gathering in urban settings of groups that possess formerly independent traditions. To this extent *bhakti* embraces not only a single, overarching current – the *bhakti* movement as a whole – but a series of more or less parallel streams,

such as the *panths* and *sampradayas*, all in a sea of ever-shifting, interdependent eddies and vortices that catch up individual believers in various aspects of their devotional lives.

Bhakti Historiography. In speaking of *bhakti* historically and geographically, we have repeatedly made use of the commonplace notion of a pan-Indian “*bhakti* movement.” Only once—with the first mention of the term—did we suggest that this might be something “so called” rather than real. Yet when one looks closer, questions begin to arise. It is true that individual *bhakti* poets sometimes appeal to poetic or sectarian predecessors, and that when such lineages are absent in the poetry itself, hagiographers may supply them. Moreover, nascent *bhakti* communities such as those that formed around Nanak and Dadu in the sixteenth century gave shape to their liturgical practice by anthologizing *bhakti* poetry in songbooks that placed their own gurus’ compositions alongside those of other, often earlier poets. All these are efforts to connect *bhakti* poets to the past, but do they prove that there was such a thing as a *bhakti* movement?

Cumulatively, perhaps they do. But rarely do these anthologies, whether poetic or hagiographical, display the sorts of transregional and multilingual links that our modern notion of an overarching “*bhakti* movement” implies. The first hint of such an idea comes with the hypostasized Bhakti of the *Bhagavata Mahatmya* and the *Padma Purana*, to which we referred at the outset. This story cannot have come into being before the sixteenth century, when a massive building program underwritten by the Mughal state created a Brindavan worthy of Krishna’s—and Bhakti’s—mythical youth. Yet the Brindavan whose ambience it praises and the *Bhagavata Purana* whose performance it endorses are distinctly Vaishnava entities. The *Bhagavata Mahatmya*’s south > west >

north historiography apparently makes no room for Nayanars or Virashaivas, who were only much later worked into the narrative. Nor does it say anything about the links and lineages that were claimed in the sixteenth century itself by *nirguna* communities such as those centered around Kabir, Dadu, and Nanak.

Although the *saguna/nirguna* distinction was used already in the seventeenth century as a means of classifying theological positions, it was only in the early decades of the twentieth century that it was mobilized to do the work of cultural and religious history. The great formulation belongs to Ramchandra Shukla, author of the subsequently authoritative *Hindi Sahitya ka Itihas* (“History of Hindi Literature,” 1929), who spoke of a “*bhakti* period” (*bhakti kal*) with *saguna* and *nirguna* aspects. But when Shukla spoke of a movement (*andolan*) that swept “from one corner of India to the other,” he was thinking only in Vaishnava terms (p. 102). The broader notion of a *bhakti* movement, though not always phrased in just that way, seems to have developed first in English, among such thinkers as George Grierson (1909) and J. N. Farquhar (1915). Grierson and Farquhar were certainly independent minds, but they did not operate in a vacuum. Unavoidably, almost, they shared in an intellectual project that was conditioned by missionary and imperial agendas: the need to taxonomize Indian religion in a way that would work for the subcontinent as a whole. In doing so, they—like Shukla, who was driven by the mandates of cultural nationalism—added impetus to performative and hagiographical projects that flourished under earlier imperial umbrellas. So far it appears that the first of these umbrellas was Mughal. The historiography of a pan-Indian *bhakti* movement started then and not before. If the South served as the foundation stone for a unifying *bhakti* history, it was in the North that such a history first emerged.