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Bhakti

Ankur Barua

Bhakti is a central concept in Hinduism that embodies a multifaceted approach to divine engagement that transcends simple definitions. At the heart of many forms of Hinduism is a multiple-layered vision of becoming centred in the divine reality. Across three millennia of Hindu socioreligious history, various texts, teachers, and traditions have envisioned a world suffused with divine presence within which individuals are engaged in projects of self-negating reformation. Central to many of these images of divine-human alignment is the notion of *bhakti*, which defies straightforward translation: *bhakti* encompasses various ontological, experiential, cultural, and sociological dimensions of Hindu worldviews. Thus, *bhakti* is interwoven with the scriptural cosmologies, ritual practices, affective sensibilities, spiritual disciplines, and material cultures associated with Hindu lineages founded by several paradigmatic gurus. Some of these templates are sketched with Sanskrit philosophical and theological vocabularies; they have also been articulated, especially over the last millennium, with the vernacular idioms of Bengali, Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Tamil, and others.

Bhakti is encountered in diverse socioreligious contexts of Hindu life – as an attitude of self-effacing dedication to an icon (*mūrti*) of the divine reality (*brahman*) placed in a massive stone temple or a small household shrine; as an expression of effervescent joyfulness in congregational singing (*bhajana*) or seasonal festivals of a deity; as the animating force on arduous pilgrimages to sacred sites (*tīrtha*); as a colloquial way of expressing one's heartfelt reverence for a teacher; as a transformative vehicle for energizing egalitarian communities, and so on. So, to speak of *bhakti* is to engage with inquiries into the nature of the human self, the relation between humanity and divinity, the structure of the spatiotemporal world, the goal of human existence, and so on. A comprehensive exploration of *bhakti* would take an individual through the crisscrossing labyrinths of polycentric patterns of Hinduisms (Lipner 2010) – a lifelong (academic) quest. Given the limited scope of an encyclopaedia entry, this article will focus on some north Indian expressions of *bhakti*. With the help of this overview as well as its bibliography, the reader will hopefully be able to venture out into terrains of *bhakti* in other regions.

Keywords: Hindu theology, Worship, Self, Sacrifice, Aesthetics, Dharma, Meditation, Liberation, Devotion, Visualization, Egalitarianism, Caste

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1 Sanskritic roots

This introductory overview of the colours, tastes, and flavours of *bhakti* will proceed along three distinct routes: scriptural, experiential, and social (Waghorne and Cutler 1985; Sharma 1987; Prentiss 1999; Hawley and Narayanan 2006; Coleman 2011; Hawley, Novetzke and Sharma 2019). In many real-world contexts, these three routes are deeply related – for instance, a symbolic description of the divine reality found in a Sanskrit scriptural text may be invoked to promote egalitarian cultures at the grassroots, and this description may also inform one’s engagements with the existential densities of suffering (*duḥkha*); again, the portrayal of the human self (*jīva*, *ātman*) as feminine has different styles of aesthetic expression in poetry, music, Bollywood movies, architecture, and so on (Singh 2006). Thus, a pan-Indian study of *bhakti* will indicate various features such as interconnections between distinctive regional varieties, shifting relations with Sanskritic materials, expressions in the performative arts, articulations of the many languages of devotion in electoral politics, and so on (Beck 2005; Beck 2013a; Packert 2010; Gawde and Sardella 2024; Okita and Lutjeharms 2024).

What is distinctive about many visions of *bhakti* is the characterization of the divine reality as the supremely personal Lord (*īśvara*, *saguṇa brahman*), who is the guiding agent in a spiritual alchemy of communion between humanity and divinity. Here we encounter deities such as multiple goddesses (*devī*), Vishnu (*Viṣṇu*), Shiva (*Śiva*), Krishna (*Kṛṣṇa*), Rāma, and others, who are associated with rich tapestries of iconographic forms, ritual practices, and mythic narratives. In some other visions of *bhakti*, the meditative cultivation of human-divine relationality is rooted in the transpersonal divine reality beyond all forms (*rūpa*) and attributes (*nirguṇa brahman*). And there are various traditions of *bhakti* that interweave these two visions in speaking of the divine alternately – or even simultaneously – as *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa*. A somewhat straightforward pathway into these terrains is provided by etymology – the Sanskrit word *bhakti* is derived from the root *bhaj*, whose semantic spectrum encompasses ‘distribute’, ‘bestow’, ‘share’, ‘practise’, ‘cultivate’, ‘serve’, ‘revere’, and so on. One or more of these meanings are embodied or enacted in the diverse Hindu lifeforms that we will now explore through scriptural, experiential, and social prisms.

The Vedas (c.1500 BCE) constitute the foundational root of some of these lifeforms. They are a diverse body of hymns, invocations, spells, and narratives, and it remains a highly challenging task for scholars to reconstruct the intellectual, social, and material cultures of the people speaking Vedic Sanskrit who composed them. A fundamental Vedic idiom that is rearticulated throughout Hindu worldviews is *dharma*, a polyvalent term encompassing meanings such as ‘order’, ‘harmony’, ‘duty’, ‘morality’, and so on. This all-encompassing *dharma* is said to be generated through a primordial sacrifice (*yajña*) which is to be repeatedly performed on earth by ritual specialists. The *Upaniṣads* (c.800–200 BCE) are, especially in some of their didactic passages, relatively more straightforward

in their teachings relating to the human self, the divine reality, and so on. The Vedic notion of karma as ‘sacrificial action’ becomes increasingly associated with symbolisms of reincarnation across world-orders (*saṃsāra*), and *yajña* is allegorically envisioned as the ‘sacrifice’ of the self in the pursuit of self-inquiry. Around the turn of the first millennium emerges the text that has almost become synonymous with *bhakti*, namely, the *Bhagavad-gītā*, which seeks to interweave key notions from Vedic literature and the *Upaniṣads* in presenting Krishna (Kṛṣṇa) as the supreme Lord (Malinar 2007). The *Bhagavad-gītā* is a central scriptural foundation of many styles of Hinduism associated with *bhakti*; numerous commentaries have been written on it over the last two millennia, and these commentaries continue to shape the lives of many practising Hindus on the ground.

Another Sanskrit scriptural text that has played a pivotal role in the development of *bhakti*-shaped milieus is the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (c.900 CE), which presents a paradigmatic equivalence between divinity and beauty (Beck 2013b). The *bhakti-sūtras* (c.1200 CE), a collection of around eighty-four aphorisms, reflect the intensely passionate experiences that are highlighted in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. Some of these forms of devotion are directed in the *Devī-māhātmya* (c.600 CE) to the cosmic feminine power (*śakti*).

1.1 Veda and Upaniṣad

One paradigmatic narrative that has been reworked multiple times across Hindu worldviews involves a primordial sacrifice (*yajña*) that generates all the types of order (*rta*, *dharma*) – cosmological, linguistic, moral, political – that we see in the world around us. Suppose we ask questions such as: why is there some structure and coherence in the world? Why is it the case that after every day there is night, which is followed by day again? A Vedic answer would be that through this sacrifice, the gods produced the world and the forms of interrelation that shape our everyday existence. Rig Veda 10.90 declares that the body of the cosmic person (*puruṣa*) is ritually dismembered and the different interrelated parts of the cosmos emanate from this order-generating sacrifice. Crucially, we human beings, who are products of and enmeshed within this sacrificial order (*dharma*), have to repeat the sacrifice; otherwise, the fabrics of reality would gradually unravel (Mahony 2002). So, the sacrifice is both the generative matrix of *dharma* and the sustaining power of *dharma* in which we are implicated in the here and now. This fractal-like homology or equivalence (*bandhu*) is highlighted in some Vedic texts which delineate intricate correlations between the sacrificial ritual and the macrocosm.

The idiom of *bandhu* is reflected in many of the Rig Vedic hymns where the central deities are variously imaged as ‘protector’, ‘guest’, ‘friend’, and ‘messenger’. Many of these hymns are directed to Indra, who is the deity of valour and is invoked to defend the officiants at the ritual sacrifices. Indra is invited to come to the ritual space to drink the juice of the *soma* plant offered to him, so that by becoming exhilarated through the drink

Indra will vanquish enemies in battle and munificently offer protection, wealth, and cattle to the supplicants. Agni is extremely significant in the ritual imagination of the Rig Veda: Agni is the deity of the ritual fire and the domestic hearth, and is the mediator between the officiants and the high heavens. Another important deity is Varuṇa, who is the governor of the cosmic moral order (*dharma*). Varuṇa is the punisher of wrongdoing and, through the hymns, is implored to forgive people of transgressing the order (Miller 1993).

Now hear my call, Varuṇa, and today have mercy.

It is you whom I desire, seeking help.

You, wise one, rule over all, both heaven and earth.

Listen in response to my entreaty.

Release above the uppermost fetter from us, unbind away the midmost,

(loosen) below those lowest, in order for us to live. (Jamison and Brereton 2017: 124)

These vocabularies of the gracious accessibility of the divine reality become especially significant in subsequent formulations of *bhakti*-animated Hinduism. Two deities central to these formulations are Rudra (Shiva) and Vishnu (with, in one list, ten manifestations or *avatāras*); but in the Rig Veda they are mentioned only in a few verses. There is no clear indication of how these and the other deities that appear in the hymns may be placed on an order of significance, and indeed one verse suggests that they are all rooted in one fundamental divinity: 'To what is one the sages give many a name' (1.164.46). This direction towards unification emerges even more clearly in some *Upaniṣads* which allegorize the Vedic *bandhu* – the true *yajña* involves not the pouring out of material oblations but the sacrifice of the self (*ātman*), that is, the meditative process of surrendering one's emotions, cognitions, and vital breaths into the 'fire' of self-inquiry. This internalized sacrifice constitutes the sacred knowledge (*vidyā*) which is charged with the power of liberating individuals from the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*) that is marked by impermanence, suffering (*duḥkha*), and ignorance (*avidyā*). However, the different *Upaniṣads* do not give us straightforwardly doctrinal teachings on the nature of this *vidyā*, and the relation between *ātman* and *brahman* is variously characterized in terms of identity, dependence, and communion (Cohen 2018).

In the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (c.500 BCE), we distinctly hear the theme that would later become vital to forms of *bhakti* associated with various Vedāntic worldviews (c.1000–1600 CE) and their numerous vernacular expressions (Olivelle 1998: 413–433). It repeatedly highlights the devotional proximity of the human to the divine reality who is said to be one (*eka*) and the source of liberation from the fetters of finitude. Here the divine is Rudra (Shiva) who is the world-producer, rules over perishable objects and the self (*ātman*), envelops everything, and is present imperceptibly everywhere. Those who seek liberation would take refuge (*śaraṇa*) in the adorable or praiseworthy (*īdya*) Lord who is beyond

worldly time, the source of virtue (*dharma*), the destroyer of sins, and the inner self of all beings (*sarvabhūtāntarātmā*). This interplay between the language of transcendence – the Lord is distinct from the world and higher than the highest – and the language of immanence – the Lord is deeply hidden in everything – would shape the visions of several Vedāntic theologians. The word *bhakti* itself appears in the concluding verse (6.23): ‘The topics that have been explained here become clear to a great soul who has the highest *bhakti* for the deity and the same degree of devotion to the guru’.

1.2 *Bhagavad-gītā*

What the Vedas and the *Upaniṣads* seem to indicate is that there is some sort of cosmic ‘kinship’ or ‘affinity’ between humanity and divinity, and this theme becomes even more clearly articulated across the *bhakti*-shaped textures of the *Bhagavad-gītā* (Lipner 1997). The eighteen chapters of this text commence on the eve of a fratricidal battle – on one side are five Pāṇḍavas, and on the other are their cousins, the Kauravas. Arjuna, one of the Pāṇḍavas, is an archer and he declares to Krishna, who is his charioteer, that he cannot fight because he cannot be involved in the slaughter of his kinsmen. The *Bhagavad-gītā* can be read as an extended sermon that Krishna preaches to invigorate Arjuna to stand up and fight. It is often presented as a ‘synthetic’ text which interweaves different styles of theological, cosmological, and ritual vocabulary. There is variously an emphasis on self-inquiry (*jñāna*), performing sacrificial action (*karma*) by surrendering it to Krishna who is the supervisor of *dharma*, and meditatively cultivating a devotional centredness (*bhakti*) in Krishna. The exercises of Vedāntic systematization were partly dedicated to the hermeneutic task of ascertaining which one of these three disciplines (*jñāna*, *karma*, *bhakti*) is soteriologically superior to the other two, and in what order they may have to be cultivated (Lott 1980).

Recalibrating Vedic cosmology, the *Bhagavad-gītā* presents worldly action which is surrendered unto Krishna as a sacrificial ritual (*yajña*). If a student is writing an essay with a meditative form of self-awareness – ‘Through this action I am discharging my *dharmic* obligations as a student, and the ultimate source and foundation of this *dharmic* structure is Krishna’ – then this seemingly mundane exercise is charged with spiritual significance. Thus, we read (5.10) that those individuals who work by dedicating all their actions to Krishna are not touched by evil (*pāpa*), just as a lotus leaf is untouched by water. Krishna is the gravitational centre of a spiritual field, and devotees would inhabit its dynamic milieus by becoming rooted in, or attached to, Krishna. In one of the most frequently cited verses, we hear Krishna’s declaration to Arjuna: ‘Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer, whatever you give away, whatever austerities you practise – do all this as an offering to me’ (9.27). The interiorized style of self-surrender invoked by some *Upaniṣads* is recalibrated in terms of the attachment of the devotee who would become

unwaveringly directed to the deity: ‘if a pure-hearted individual offers me with *bhakti* a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water, I accept their offering of *bhakti*’ (9.26).

Towards the cultivation of such a wholehearted orientation to Krishna, one would negate one’s ‘I’-centred dispositions, such that one would not hanker after the fruits of action and instead surrender them to Krishna, considering Krishna as the supreme agent. The important claim is that actions performed by individuals with an internal sense of detachment will not accumulate karmic residue, so that even though they are *in* the world they are not *of* the world. So, renunciation is not so much the physical migration to a remote island, but the progressive dissolution of an egocentric sense of agency and attachment to the fruits of action. If we are able to move in the direction of this ego-effacing renunciation, we are in the process of cultivating ‘yoga’, which is said to be an equanimity (2.48) in the heat and dust of the everyday world. Krishna himself is perfectly established in yoga, so that Krishna is not attached to the world even though Krishna is working in and through the world (3.22) – Krishna is the transcendental teacher of yoga from whom Arjuna is being invited to learn. For theological systems shaped by the motifs of *bhakti*, the idiom of yoga (Whicher and Carpenter 2003) refers to the cultivation of devotional attachment to the deity as the spiritual discipline that leads to liberation.

In some verses, we encounter clear depictions of Krishna as the supreme Lord – the origin, the basis, and the telos of all finite reality (7.7, 9.4, 10.20). In another frequently cited verse (4.7), Krishna declares: ‘Whenever there is a decline of *dharma* and a rise of *adharma*, I send forth myself’. Although the precise word *avatāra* – which means ‘descent’ and is sometimes translated as ‘incarnation’ – does not appear here, such verses become the basis of the doctrine that the divine becomes manifested in spatiotemporal conditions. The divine descends, as it were, to the world on the edge of *adharma*, and this cosmic intervention draws it back from the brink and restores the structures of *dharma*. Krishna gives Arjuna a cosmic vision with which he is able to behold Krishna’s divine form, and declares that it is through divine grace that Arjuna has been able to see the supreme form (*rūpaṁ param*) – resplendent, universal, infinite, and primal (11.48). The *Bhagavad-gītā*, which incorporates multiple cosmological strands, has been read in somewhat different ways on the theme of whether or not the ultimate reality has a specific form (*rūpa*). Commentators sometimes present verse 18.66 as its quintessential message: ‘abandoning all duties [*dharma*] come to me [Krishna] for refuge, do not grieve, I shall release you [Arjuna] from all evil’. The word translated as ‘release’ has the same root which gives us the word *mokṣa*, or liberation from conditions of ignorance, impermanence, and suffering: Arjuna would seek refuge (*śaraṇa*) at Krishna’s feet, and Krishna will liberate Arjuna from all worldly finitude (*saṁsāra*).

1.3 *Devī-māhātmya*

This quest for liberation from the trials of *saṃsāra* shapes various forms of devotion to the Goddess (*devī*) (Hawley and Wulff 1996; Pintchman 1984). The *Devī-māhātmya* paradigmatically narrates how the Goddess intervenes, in the terrifying form of Kali (*Kālī*), to slay demonic powers. As the cosmic feminine power, the great *devī* demands that this text glorifying her should be recited with *bhakti* on the eighth, fourteenth, and ninth days of each lunar fortnight, and especially at the great festival (*mahāpūjā*) in the autumn (12.3; 12.12) (Coburn 1991: 79–80). Straddling the borderline between *dharma* and *adharmā*, Kali regenerates order out of the heart of darkness, and it is this mode of maternal care that has been eulogized by poets such as Rāmprasād Sen (c.1718–1775). The flickering mind has to become steadfastly devoted to the feet of the Goddess, under whose protective mantle the devotee would live without fear of any evil. Thus, throwing himself at the feet of the divine mother (*mā*), Sen declares:

Because I forget You
 I burn in pain.
 Mā, I wish I were the dust
 under Your fear-dispelling feet. (McDermott 2001: 196)

1.4 *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*

In the *bhakti*-shaped cosmologies of Hindu worship, we find the divine reality imaged as the cosmic mother – and also as a child, friend, and lover. The paradox is that the supremely perfect Lord, who transcends all spatiotemporal limitations and is not a finite being, is present with us as a human-like protector or companion. In the *Bhagavad-gītā*, when Krishna reveals to Arjuna his infinite form, in which Arjuna sees the whole world with all its beings, Arjuna is struck with fear. Arjuna asks for forgiveness for having presumptuously addressed him as ‘Krishna’ and ‘friend’ – unaware of Krishna’s majesty, whether out of negligence or affection (*praṇayena*), Arjuna may have engaged with Krishna disrespectfully while playing, resting, sitting, and eating (11:41–42).

In certain respects, this paradoxical polarity of divine majesty and divine accessibility is highlighted even more clearly in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, which is a central text in the lineages of many Vaiṣṇava Hindus (Sheridan 1986). The crucial book is the tenth which sketches the birth, childhood, and youth of Krishna, who is variously viewed by the lineages as an *avatar* (*avatāra*) of Vishnu or the fullness of divinity. In either case, Krishna is presented as the supremely adorable Lord who is affectionate to devotees. The vocabularies of Lord-directed affectivity shape the numerous verses that declare that in the present time, called *kali yuga* – which is the most morally degenerate aeon – the cultivation of *bhakti* to the Lord is the only soteriologically effective pathway. This cultivation is structured by practices such as hearing and telling stories about Vishnu and

avatāras of Vishnu; worship of images of *avatāras* in temples dedicated to them; and association with pious devotees (*satsaṅga*).

In five crucial chapters of the tenth book, we find that *bhakti* has the spiritual magnetism to decentre individuals from worldliness and recentre them unwaveringly in Krishna (Kinsley 1979; Schweig 2005). These perfect devotees are the cowherd women (*gopīs*) who are to be emulated by all human beings. On an autumn evening, when the charming full moon has risen, Krishna begins to play on his flute. So entrancing are the notes of the flute that the *gopīs* abandon their domestic chores and run to the forest to be with him. They praise him with song, and he responds with his own singing, and takes them to the riverbank suffused with breezes. Some of them become filled with pride and Krishna disappears, plunging them into grief. Overwhelmed with pain, they search for Krishna everywhere. This agonized quest, during which they discern clear signs of Krishna's absence everywhere, is followed by their reunion with Krishna in a circle dance. At the heart of these alternations lies the acute pain of separation (*viraha*) from the divine, which is presented in Vaiṣṇava theological traditions as a soteriological means of attaining the divine. If Krishna is present to us, we might mistakenly think that we possess Krishna, and even become oblivious to the divine presence; however, when Krishna disappears, so excruciatingly painful is this absence to devotees that they single-mindedly focus their existential core on the (seemingly) absent Krishna alone. The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (10.29.10–11) states, regarding some of the *gopīs* who could not join Krishna, that '[the *karma*] from their impious deeds was destroyed by the intense and intolerable pain of separation from their lover [...] Their bondage was destroyed, and they immediately left their bodies made of the [worldly] *guṇas*' (Bryant 2003: 126).

Thus, central to the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* is the presentation of the reciprocity between the human and the divine in terms of the 'binding' power of love (Hawley 1983). The devotee is the very heart (*hṛdaya*) of the Lord and they do not know anything other than the Lord; and the Lord too is their very heart (9.4.68). The Lord would not abandon the supreme devotees, and the Lord's feet are tied to them with ropes of affection (*praṇaya*) (11.2.55). Thus, Krishna is simultaneously the attractor and the attracted – it is not simply that Krishna is playing on his flute and drawing out human beings from their egocentric absorption; rather, Krishna himself becomes drawn to the devotees who are able to bind Krishna through the soteriological power of their devotional love. This 'accommodation' of the deity to the devotee is highlighted in another famous narrative (10.8.32–45) where Yaśodā tells her infant Krishna that his playmates have complained that he has eaten some earth, and is then struck with bewilderment when on peering into his mouth, she sees entire worlds. She sees the sky, islands and oceans, the moon and the stars, and so on – along with herself (*sahātmānam*). She is about to surrender herself at his feet,

considering him to be her refuge, when Krishna, through his cosmic power, makes her forget this vision, so that she takes her infant on her lap with maternal affection (*sneha*).

1.5 *Bhakti-sūtras*

The aphorisms in the *bhakti-sūtras* embody this theme of generating a single-minded orientation to the divine reality (Swami 1957). We read that *bhakti* is of the form of supreme love (*parama-premarūpā*) towards the Lord and of the nature of nectar, attaining which people become perfected (*siddha*), immortal, and contented. Such *bhakti* involves a restraint (*nirodha*) which is to be understood as single-mindedness (*ananyatā*) towards the Lord and indifference to whatever is opposed to the Lord. Further, *bhakti* is superior to other pathways such as *karma* and *jñāna*; the Lord is averse to egoism (*abhimāna*) and likes the consciousness of one's wretchedness (*dainya*). The supreme devotees who converse with one another with a choking voice, with their hairs standing on end, and with tears flowing, purify (*pāvayanti*) their families as well as the earth. The *Bhakti-sūtras* end by noting that though love of the Lord is one kind (*ekadhā*), it appears in eleven forms: the attachment to the greatness of the divine qualities, the attachment to the divine forms, the attachment to worship, the attachment to constant remembrance, the attachment to divine service (*dāsyāsakti*), the attachment to divine friendship (*sākhyāsakti*), the attachment of parental affection (*vātsalyāsakti*), the attachment of the beloved (*kāntāsakti*), the attachment of self-offering, the attachment of being suffused (*tanmayāsakti*), and the attachment of the deepest separation (*parama-virahāsakti*).

2 Regional routes

The influence of the Sanskrit templates outlined in the previous section can be occasionally discerned in diverse regional media such as art, architecture, poetry, music, and so on. Some of their specifically theological pathways are structured by forms of Hindu hermeneutics called Vedānta, which are dedicated to systematizing Sanskrit scriptural texts and presenting their distilled meaning (Chaudhuri 1973). These two questions are especially crucial: 'is *bhakti* the primary or singular meaning of the scriptures?' and, of course, 'what is *bhakti*?'. Different teachers (*ācārya*) address them in different, or even divergent, ways through their exegetical elaborations. Across a spectrum of *ācāryas* such as Śaṅkara (c.800 CE), Rāmānuja (1017–1137), Madhva (c.1300), Vallabha (1479–1531), and others, *bhakti* is variously positioned as a purificatory pathway towards an ineffable silence beyond all descriptions, as a mode of existential dependence on the supremely personal divine, and so on. The everyday life of many Hindus is situated in the lineages (*sampradāya*) established by such preceptors – their ways of thinking about, and their styles of living in, the world are shaped partly by how *bhakti* is propounded by their guru. In their discourses, such gurus often seek to transpose Vedāntic wisdom into the vernacularized idioms of Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, and other languages

(Hawley 2015). In the historiography of *bhakti*, these milieus have sometimes been categorically divided into two groups of *saguṇa* (divine reality with qualities) and *nirguṇa* (qualityless divine reality); however, the vocabularies of *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* appear within both these groups. Thus, worshippers of the Lord such as Krishna and Rāma characterize the deity as *nirguṇa* to mean that the deity transcends all worldly imperfections, and devotion directed to the formless absolute sometimes use personal names such as 'Krishna' and 'Rāma'.

2.1 *Bhakti* and theological visions

Taking the scriptural tapestries of the *Bhagavad-gītā* as our point of entry into theological landscapes, we see different gurus weaving the threads of *karma*, *jñāna*, and *bhakti* in some distinctive tapestries. The world is said to be without a temporal origination (*anādi*), and it goes through a series of productions and dissolutions as individuals may progress – in accordance with the spiritual discipline laid down by a guru – towards liberation (*mokṣa*). At the heart of these theological visions is an exegetical debate about the relation between *ātman* and *brahman*.

In the tradition of Advaita Vedānta stemming from Śaṅkara, liberation from conditions of finitude lies in the realization of an undifferentiated not-distinctness or nonduality (*advaita*) between *ātman* and *brahman* (Rambachan 2006). The numerous spatiotemporal entities of the world are essentially *advaita* with *brahman* and are not ontologically real over and above *brahman*. Insofar as *bhakti* presupposes or implies a real duality between devotee and deity, and involves various types of *karma*, *bhakti* cannot immediately lead an individual towards *advaita*; however, to the extent that it involves an unwavering focus on an icon of a deity, it can penultimately stabilize an individual on the pathway towards *advaita* through self-knowledge (*jñāna*). Some figures associated with the long history of Advaita articulate an antithesis of the form 'the lower *bhakti* for the masses, the higher *advaita* for the enlightened', but Śaṅkara himself arguably did not view devotional subjectivities and the realization of nonduality in such subordinationist terms – rather, the correct practice of *bhakti* can point an individual towards the *brahman* beyond all forms and qualities (*nirguṇa*) that is intimated by Advaita Vedānta (Hirst 1993; Malkovsky 2001).

Some centuries later, Madhusūdana Sarasvatī (c.1600 CE) would write his *Bhaktirasāyana* (Alchemy of Devotion) and his commentary on the *Bhagavad-gītā* for two distinct audiences. According to Lance Nelson (1988: 85), Madhusūdana composed the first to recommend Advaita visions to devotees outside Śaṅkara lineages, and the second to recommend devotion to fellow ascetics within them. Thus, in the former text, devotion is set out as an independent path that leads to liberation and as the highest goal of life (*paramapuruṣārtha*), while in the latter text, devotion is ultimately subordinated to *jñāna* which is to be attained through scriptural meditation. In some commentarial texts of

nondualist Kashmir Śaivism, too, we find a similar oscillation between an emphasis on the cultivation of *bhakti* towards a seemingly distinct deity and the definitive assertion that the devotee is ontologically not-distinct from the highest reality, Shiva. So, *bhakti* is the deepening of the insight that Shiva is both the subject and the object of devotion (Flood 1993). In these traditions, as developed by Somānanda (c.900 CE), Utpaladeva (c.950 CE), and others, the world is a manifestation of universal and dynamic consciousness (*saṃvit*). This divine principle is the union of Shiva and Shiva's cosmic energy (Śakti), and it projects the world of finite selves and material objects which do not exist independently of their divine root (Isayeva 1995).

In contrast, the Śrī Vaiṣṇava worldview of Rāmānuja, who rearticulates several themes of the poems of the Ālvārs (see [section 2.2](#)), is more unambiguously suffused with the idioms and the subjectivities of *bhakti* (Carman 1974; Lipner 1986; Bartley 2002). The Vedāntic vision of Rāmānuja (known as *viśiṣṭādvaita*) is structured by the claim that the finite world, which is ontologically real, is nondual with brahman, who is the supremely personal (*saguṇa*) Lord Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa. The whole world, comprising conscious selves (*cit*) and insentient materiality (*acit*), is said to be the body (*śarīra*) of the Lord. Rāmānuja defines the word *śarīra* precisely as any substance which a conscious being can completely control and support for its own purposes, and whose essential form is to be the accessory of that being. This definition structures an analogy of being between the embodied self (*cit*), and the Lord who is embodied in the world – just as the physical body is animated, supported, and controlled by the imperishable self in a human person, so too are all finite selves and physical entities animated, supported, and controlled by the Lord. So, regarding the scriptural dictum *tat tvam asi* ('you are that'), *tvam* refers to the embodied self (*cit*) which, as part of the body of the Lord, is a real qualifier of *tat*, who is the Lord. The connector *asi* is to be understood in terms of the notion of inseparability (*apṛthak-siddhi*) which relates two entities which are distinct and yet inseparable.

However, although the world is the *śarīra* of the Lord, this truth is not immediately accessible to all selves because of their ignorance (*avidyā*) about their existential dependence on the Lord. Such individuals should begin to cultivate a deep devotional love (*bhakti*) of the Lord, and envision the finite world as rooted in and pervaded by the Lord. In his commentary on the *Bhagavad-gītā*, Rāmānuja writes that they will seek refuge in the Lord with the understanding that it is the Lord who is the supreme agent energizing their worldly agency. To assist them on their pathway, the Lord assumes different *avatāras* – the transcendental form of the Lord is not accessible to human conceptualization, and the Lord shapes this form, without any transformation in the divine nature, into the likeness of different beings and grants them their desires. The Lord compassionately becomes a refuge for devotees, and by surrendering themselves to the Lord, devotees can become liberated from the sorrows of the world.

In short, both Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja affirm a fundamental nonduality between *brahman* and the world but they disagree over whether or not this nonduality implies that the world is ontologically real (Ram-Prasad 2013). Madhva rejects this motif of nonduality, and concludes, on the basis of his readings of the scriptural texts, that the world is completely dependent on as well as distinct (*dvaita*) from *brahman* who is the Lord Vishnu (Sharma 1986; Sarma 2003). This relationality is expressed through the metaphor of reflection: the Lord is the prototype, and the world is the reflection which remains dependent on its source at all times. Crucially, according to Madhva, *tat tvam asi* should be read as ‘you (devotee) are *not* that (Vishnu)’. The Lord Vishnu, who is the complete reality, should be worshipped with single-minded devotion.

The centrality of the cultivation of *bhakti* appears also in the Caitanya or Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition associated with the Bengali saint Caitanya (1486–1534) (Gupta 2007; Kapoor 2008). The ultimate reality is the eternal hyphenation of Krishna and Rādhā, who is the personification of the ‘delighting power’ (*hlādinī-śakti*) of Krishna. Individual selves and physical objects are reflections of the supreme bliss (*ānanda*) of Rādhā-Krishna. The relation between the world, which is dependently real, and Rādhā-Krishna is that of nondifference and difference (*bhedābheda*). The commentator Jīva Gosvāmin (c.1500) explains that the *Upaniṣads* teach that *brahman* has parts only in the sense that *brahman* is qualified by finite selves (*jīvas*) and others; the *Upaniṣads* which indicate *brahman* to be partless are concerned with the absolute aspect of *brahman*. The *jīvas*, which are manifested by Krishna’s *jīva-śakti*, are inclined towards the world which is produced by Krishna’s *māyā-śakti*, and thus they tend to forget that their true nature is spiritual. However, through the development of unwavering *bhakti*, they can return to the bewitchingly beautiful Krishna. Following the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, the tradition emphasizes the superiority of devotees who seek to realize the sweetness (*mādhurya*) of the Lord over those who meditate on the Lord’s majesty (*aiśvarya*).

These themes are reflected in the *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* of the commentator Rūpa Gosvāmin (c.1500) (Haberman 2003), who divides *bhakti* into four broad classes: *sāmānyā-bhakti*, *sādhana-bhakti*, *bhāva-bhakti*, and *prema-bhakti*. The first is devotion in general; the second is devotion that can be attained through specific types of effort; the third is devotion that rises spontaneously; and the fourth is devotion that has matured into unalloyed ego-effacing love. At the summit, a perfect devotee such as a *gopī* would spontaneously and selflessly love Krishna for the sheer delight of this love (*prema*) and not for the sake of any transactional gain that may result from this affective surrender to Krishna.

In the Vedāntic vision of Vallabha (1479–1531), too, *brahman* is the Lord Krishna, and individual selves return to their Lord by generating devotional love. This worldview is known as *śuddhādvaita* or ‘pure non-dualism’, where the Lord is non-different from the

world which is ontologically real. The world is produced by the Lord's non-necessitated and exuberant sport (*līlā*), and through divine grace (*anugraha*), the Lord becomes revealed as the lover of the *gopīs* who are passionately devoted to their divine beloved. However, because of ignorance (*avidyā*), the *jīva* generally forgets that its fulfilment lies in rendering self-effacing devotional service (*sevā*) to the Lord. Vallabha viewed egoism as a delusion which takes human beings away from the Lord, and put forward *sevā* of the Lord, singing the praises of the Lord, and listening to accounts of the Lord's *līlā* as the means through which they can move towards their Lord. A vital theme in the devotional life of the Vallabha tradition is the *puṣṭi* ('nourishment') type of liberation which is independent of any human means – individuals have to depend entirely on the *anugraha* of their Lord (Marfatia 1967; Barz 1976; Redington 1983).

This theme of the Lord's gracious outreach is central to the forms of worship of Shiva in the Śaiva Siddhānta tradition, rooted in twenty-eight texts called the Śaiva Āgamas and the twelve Tirumuṟai which are collections of devotional poems of figures such as Appar (c.600 CE), Campantar (c.680 CE), Cuntarar (c.700 CE), and Māṇikkavācakar (c.900 CE) (Dhavamony 1971; Sivaraman 1973; Davis 1992). According to this worldview, the Lord Shiva (*pati*), the individual self (*paśu*), and the world with its fetters (*pāśa*) are distinct. In the form of Sadāśiva, the Lord performs five functions: emanation of the world and its maintenance and absorption, self-concealment of Shiva, and self-revelation of Shiva through grace. Shiva is the efficient cause (*nimitta-kāraṇa*) who generates the cosmos as the moral stage where individuals will overcome their worldly impediments (*mala*); but Shiva is not the substantial cause (*upādāna-kāraṇa*), for the production of the world out of Shiva is believed to implicate Shiva in the limitations of finitude. Because the individual self is encased in worldly bondage, it is not aware of its deep communion with Shiva. Poets such as Appar express both their devotional intimacy with Shiva and their self-abasement before Shiva whose praises they are unworthy to sing.

I don't know pure Tamil for song,
 I can't make poems.
 I knew nothing of science, and the modes of music,
 of all the arts that are his own self,
 and of his greatness.
 He revealed his power and his way
 to me, an ignorant man. (Peterson 2014: 236–237)

Invoking the symbolism of conjugal union, these poets speak of Shiva as the bridegroom and the individual self as Shiva's bride, and proclaim that the love with which they

seek communion with Shiva is itself generated and sustained by Shiva's grace. Thus, Māṅikkavācakar declares:

Like an actor in a play
I imitate your servants
and clamor to enter the inner chamber of your house,
Master,
lord brilliant as a mountain of gems set in gold,
give your grace
so I can love you with love so unceasing
my heart overflows. (Cutler 1987: 161)

The soteriological path starts with a ritual initiation (*dīkṣā*) through the imposition of mantras by a teacher (*ācārya*) – some of the constraints on the individual self's inherent powers of knowledge and agency are removed, and this process has to be carried on throughout one's life through various daily and occasional observances. The liberated self becomes omnipotent and omniscient like Shiva but remains ontologically distinct from Shiva.

2.2 Vernacular reconfigurations

From around the sixth century CE, Tamil emerged as a major scriptural language for the idioms and subjectivities of *bhakti*, through the compositions of twelve poets from Vaiṣṇava milieus (Āḷvār) and sixty-three poets and devotees from Śaiva milieus (Nāyaṅār), where Shiva and Vishnu, respectively, are worshipped as the supreme divinity. To the former category belong Appar, Campantar, and Cuntarar – and their compositions, collectively known as the *Tēvāram* (The Garland of God), constitute the central part of the Śaiva devotional canon. In these religious milieus, Tamil is increasingly positioned, in both domestic and temple spaces, as a sociolinguistic medium for divine revelation. Around the eleventh century, the poems of the Āḷvārs are gathered into a compilation of four thousand poems called the *Nālayira Divya Prabandham* (Divine Collection of Four Thousand). The Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition develops a theological style called 'dual' (*ubhaya*) Vedānta, where the Divine Collection, as the Tamil Veda, is revered as scripturally equivalent to the Sanskrit Veda.

The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* was probably composed somewhere in the southern regions of the country, and reflects the intensely passionate styles of *bhakti* articulated in the vernacular Tamil Vaiṣṇava milieus of the Āḷvārs (800–1000 CE). The poems especially of Nammāḷvār, called the *Tiruvāymolī*, and of Āṅṅāl (Venkatesan 2009) were pivotal in the development of *bhakti*-animated forms of spirituality that would later be synthesized by Rāmānuja. According to Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition, the first *ācārya* Nātamūṇi initiated the recitation of

these Tamil poems in temples, and in contemporary worship, they are used alongside Sanskrit verses. Highlighting this scriptural status, Nammālvār declares:

What can I say of the Lord
who lifted me up for all time,
and made me himself, everyday?
My radiant one, the first one,
My Lord, sings of himself,
through me, in sweet Tamil. (Carman and Narayanan 1989: 234)

Vishnu is declared to be the all-pervasive supreme reality, and all deities to be instruments or attendants of Vishnu with various *avatāras* such as Krishna (often called Kaṇṇaṇ, the 'dear one'), Rāma, and others. As the divinity with a supremely beautiful form, Vishnu is both present to the devotee as the deity enshrined in the local temple with a local name and surpasses all human limitations. Vishnu is the destroyer of demonic forces and the reliever of the distress of humanity, and the Ālvārs repeatedly emphasize recollecting the great deeds of Vishnu, singing the glories of Vishnu, and bowing to Vishnu (Carman and Narayanan 1989: 206). These poems extensively reference the distinctive flora and fauna of the Tamil countryside, as they speak of their agony of separation from, and their quest for union with, Vishnu (Hardy 1983).

O nectar that never satiates!
You cause your servant's body,
so filled with love for you,
to sway restlessly,
like the waves of a sea
dissolving the shores. (Carman and Narayanan 1989: 216)

Such devotion directed to the supremely personal deity appears also in the *Rāmcaritmānas*, which is the retelling by Tulsīdās (c.1600) of the epic narrative Rāmāyaṇa (Lutgendorf 1991); the songs of Sūrdās (c.1500; Bryant 1978), who was associated with the Vallabha tradition; and Mīrābāī (c.1500). A common theme is the emphasis on the impermanence of this precarious world and the salvific power of the compassionate Lord who delivers us from our everyday distress.

Invoking Rāma, Tulsīdās sings:

Say Ram, say Ram, say Ram.
you fool!

That name is your raft
on the awful sea of life. (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 2004: 165)

Echoing the *līlā* (exuberant sport) of Krishna and the *gopīs*, Sūrdās sings:

Thoughts of him stalk me, even in my dreams,
Now that he has gone; and oh, my friend, it hurts
as hard as on the day that [Krishna] left.
Last night, in fact, that cowherd came to my house:
he laughed his laugh and grasped me by the arm.
What am I to do? The night is now my foe.
Will I ever know another wink of sleep? (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 2004: 109)

Many of the songs of Mīrābāī are suffused with the sentiment of acute pain in separation (*viraha*) from the Lord to whom she viewed herself as spiritually wedded (Alston 1980; Mukta 1994; Martin 2002). Thus, she declares:

Go to where my loved one lives,
go where he lives and tell him
if he says so, I'll color my sari red;
if he says so, I'll wear the godly yellow garb;
if he says so, I'll drape the part in my hair with pearls;
if he says so, I'll let my hair grow wild.
Mira's Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter:
listen to the praises of that king. (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 2004: 138)

The bridal mysticism of Mīrābāī is embodied also in the Sanskrit *Gītagovinda* of Jayadeva (c.1200), who sketches with exquisite symbolic beauty the *līlā* of Krishna and the *gopīs* (Miller 1977; Siegel 1978). The intoxicating power of love of God is articulated with similar vivid imageries by the Bengali poet Caṇḍīdās (c.1300; Bhattacharya 1967). Alongside these sensuous expressions of devotion to the personal Lord (Vishnu, Shiva, Krishna) are forms of *nirguṇabhakti* where holy individuals (*sants*) sing praises to the ultimate reality beyond all forms. Whereas Vedic texts are regarded as impersonal (*apauruṣeya*) and not the compositions of human authors, *sants* such as Ravidās (c.1300), Kabīr (c.1450–1520), Nānak (1469–1539), and others are viewed as having discovered the truth through their own efforts, so that their message (*bānī*) is the embodiment of truth (Lorenzen 1996: 156).

The *sants* often use Vaiṣṇava names for the *nirguṇa* deity such as Rāma, Hari, and Govinda, and their belief systems are shaped by the doctrine of the salvific power of the

contemplative remembrance of the divine name (*nām*), the emphasis on the purifying telos of the company of saintly people (*satsaṅg*) and of the pain of separation (*viraha*) of the human self from the divine lover, and the claim that liberation is accessible to all individuals. However, they do not worship the *avatāras* of Vishnu, and vigorously reject Vedic scriptural authority and Brahmanical ritual privileges (Schomer and McLeod 1987; Gold 1987). The somewhat shadowy figure of Rāmānanda (c.1500) belonged to the Vaiṣṇava lineage of Rāmānuja, and the *Rāmcaritmānas* is integral to the everyday life of the Rāmānanda order of renunciants (*vairāgīs*) established by him. By repeating the name of Rāma, *vairāgīs* would seek to cultivate supreme *bhakti* and redirect all their worldly desires towards the Lord. In these milieus, *sants* provoke their audiences to turn their attention towards the ineffable one which is beyond the impermanent world of transmigratory existence and can yet be apprehended in the interiority of the heart by the true seeker.

Most of the *sants* belonged to the lower socioeconomic strata and were usually illiterate and had no access to Sanskritic education. They used vernaculars such as Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Marathi, and others which were only emerging and were instrumental in shaping them into their present literary forms. Kabīr’s vernacularized style of iconoclasm, which seeks to cut through structural hierarchies and point to the divine hidden within them, is reflected in these lines:

So I’m born a weaver,
so what?
I’ve got the Lord in my heart.
Kabir:
Secure in the arms of Ram,
free from every snare. (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 2004: 58)

Such radical statements cannot be easily accommodated at a doctrinal level in some Vaiṣṇava life-worlds, and we will later highlight a powerful tension relating to the significance of sociocultural eligibility (*adhikāra*) across the social imaginations of *bhakti*. Vaiṣṇava worldviews are marked by varying degrees of acceptance of socio-ritual distinctions of caste (*jāti*, *varṇa*) while articulating spiritual sensibilities regarding the search for the divine in a transient world, and their ethical views emphasize nonviolence, humility, detachment, compassion, and reverence for all. Such expressions of devotional relationality can be found in three contemporaneous figures from the west and the east of the country: the Gujarati poet Narasiṃha Mehtā (c.1414–1480; Shukla-Bhatt 2015), and the Assamese poet Śaṅkaradeva (1449–1569; Neog 1965; Murthy 1973; Chaliha 1978) and his disciple Mādhavadeva (1489–1596). Mehtā composed several lyrics about the life

of Krishna among the cowherds, and one of his devotional songs would later become a favourite of Mahatma Gandhi: 'A Vaiṣṇava is said to be one who knows another's pain'.

The Vīraśaivas or Liṅgāyats, who emerged in the region of Karnataka through the leadership of Basava (1106–1167), were animated by ardent devotion to Shiva. Their literature consists of devotional songs (*vacana*) in Kannada which critique rigid forms of social hierarchy (Ramanujan 1973; Ishwaran 1992; Michael 1992). Reflecting the tension indicated earlier, it has been argued that Śaiva devotion in Kannada-speaking regions was accommodating towards local Brahmanical institutions (Ben-Herut 2018). The religious cosmology of Vīraśaivism states that the world of finite entities is real, and real as the cosmic power of Shiva (*Śakti-viśiṣṭādvaita*). The twelfth-century Vīraśaiva poet Akka ('elder sister') Mahādēvi regarded herself as wedded to the Lord Shiva, and her *vacanas* articulate a bridal mysticism reflective of the songs of Āṅṅāl and Mīrābāī.

I love the Handsome One:
he has no death
decay nor form
no place or side
no end or birthmarks.
I love him O mother. Listen [...]
So my lord, white as jasmine, is my husband.
Take these husbands who die,
decay, and feed them
to your kitchen fire! (Schelling 2011: 48)

A few centuries later, the Vārkarīs appeared in the region of Maharashtra. Their founder was the thirteenth-century saint Jñāneśvara, who produced an influential rendering in Marathi (often called the *Jñāneśvarī*) of the *Bhagavad-gītā*. The movement consists of numerous poets in Marathi from across the caste continuum such as Cokhāmēlā (c.1300), Nāmdev (c.1300), Eknāth (1533–1599), Tukārām (c.1608–1650), and others (Nemade 1980; Lele 1981; Israel and Wagle 1987; Callewaert and Lath 1989; Mokashi-Punekar 2002; Novetzke 2008). The supreme deity is Vishnu who is worshipped in the form of Viṭhobā in a temple in Pandharpur, to which Vārkarī devotees travel on annual pilgrimages on foot with palanquins (*pālkhī*). The devotional songs and performances (*kīrtan*, *abhaṅg*) of Nāmdev, Eknāth, and others are alternately directed towards Rāma as an *avatāra* of Vishnu and the transcendental divine beyond forms addressed as 'Rāma'. From around the thirteenth century onwards, the Mahānubhavs developed a religious cosmology in which liberation is effected through *bhakti* to the one supreme God (*paramēśvara*), whose incarnations include Krishna (Feldhaus 1983).

3 Sociocultural networks

Many of the vibrant fabrics of Hindu socioreligious life are densely woven with polychromatic threads of *bhakti*. Human subjectivities are said to be transformed by the grace of the Lord (*īśvara*) who becomes progressively expressed in the lives of the devotees. When human emotions are reoriented towards the Lord as their ultimate object and the senses are purified through service, deep levels of intimacy would develop between devotees and their deity. Thus, when their thoughts, emotions, and volitions are directed to the Lord, they would undergo a perceptual shift through which they are able to perceive the supramundane within the everyday world. To what extent such a reorientation involves the direct rejection of notions and subjectivities of caste remains an intensely contested topic. Many worlds of *bhakti* do not seek to immediately dismantle ideas or institutions of caste but regard them as largely irrelevant on the spiritual pathway (Pande 1989: 122).

3.1 *Bhakti* and gendered aesthetics

By working with the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, the Caitanya and the Vallabha traditions characterize the pathway to the Lord with aesthetic idioms and subjectivities. Theological commentators in the Caitanya tradition read the narrative of the *gopīs* as a window into the supramundane dance between Krishna and the cosmological powers (*śakti*) who became manifested on earth as the *gopīs* who loved Krishna selflessly. Human beings should emulate their supreme *bhakti*, and on their journey towards the summit of unwavering love (*prema*), their lives would be structured by the regulations of *vaidhi-bhakti* and the spontaneous expression of *rāgānuga-bhakti*. The former is developed by following scriptural injunctions such as resorting to a spiritual guide, following the ways of saintly people, living in places of pilgrimage, circumambulating an image of Krishna, and so on. It will develop into the latter, which is a spontaneous attraction and unalloyed attachment to Krishna. For cultivating this *rāgānuga-bhakti*, a devotee would vicariously participate in the sentiment of a particular celestial attendant or companion of Krishna by meditatively imagining the *līlā* between Krishna and the attendant or companion (Wulff 1984). They envision the world as a dynamic stage on which the central hero (*nāyaka*) is Krishna, and they play out their roles by relating themselves to Krishna. By actively participating in these theodramatic narratives, they would move from their corporeal identity to their true spiritual body (*siddha-rūpa*), which is similar to the bodies of the attendants or companions of Krishna.

In one such form of visualization (*līlā smaraṇa*), devotees meditatively imagine themselves as a handmaiden (*mañjari*) to Rādhā, Krishna's eternal consort, and construct a *siddha-rūpa* that is inwardly female. They memorize the details of the heavenly realm, including the locations of Rādhā's house, Krishna's house, and the various bowers around the pond

where they meet. They learn about the eternal *līlā* of Krishna and Rādhā during each of eight divisions of the day, and visualize these activities in their spiritual body (McDaniel 1989: 49). A certain devotee from the early eighteenth century, Kṛṣṇadāsa Bābā, who had the *siddha-rūpa* of a *gopī* serving Rādhā, once became so absorbed in the service of placing bangles on Rādhā's arm that it seemed to bystanders that he had become unconscious for around three hours. However, when he 'awoke' he claimed that from the perspective of his '*līlā*-time' only a few moments had passed (Haberman 1988: 92). A contentious debate emerged over whether such imitation of the characters of the divine script, through the cultivation of a fine-tuned feminine subjectivity, was to be strictly mental or whether practitioners should put on the clothes and ornaments of these supramundane characters. The option that was condemned by a council in Jaipur in 1727 was that practitioners should transform their physical bodies to conform to those of the *gopīs*, the female exemplary models (Haberman 1988: 98).

This discipline of enacting the selfless love of the *gopīs* is modulated by the language of aesthetic enjoyment (*rasa*). The tradition of Sanskrit aesthetics views an 'abiding emotion' (*sthāyī-bhāva*) as a latent state in the mind of the aesthete which is evoked and then developed, through the words or events in a poem or play, to the aesthetic awareness of *rasa*. The *Nāṭya-śāstra* mentions eight abiding emotions: *rati* (love), *hāsya* (gaiety), *śoka* (pathos), *krodha* (anger), *utsāha* (enthusiasm), *bhaya* (fear), *jugupsā* (disgust), and *vismaya* (astonishment). To these correspond eight *rasas*: *śṛṅgāra* (erotic), *hāsya* (comic), *karuṇa* (pathetic), *raudra* (furious), *vīra* (heroic), *bhayānaka* (terrible), *bībhatsa* (disgust), and *adbhuta* (marvellous). According to the template of aesthetic motifs developed by Rūpa Gosvāmin and Jīva Gosvāmin, the abiding emotion of love of Krishna is developed – through practices such as hearing about the productive joyfulness (*līlā*) of the Lord – to the awareness of *bhakti-rasa*. This love (*prema*) of Krishna is manifested in five types of *bhakti-rasa* which are arranged in an order of increasing intimacy: *śānta* (peacefulness), *dāsya* (devotional service), *sakhya* (friendship), *vātsalya* (parental love), and *mādhurya* (erotic love). The first is the mental equipoise that results from an identification with the transpersonal *brahman* which, according to the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, is not the ultimate reality but a partial manifestation of Krishna. The second is the service offered by devotees who view Krishna as their master; the third is the loving devotion of individuals who regard Krishna as their friend; and the fourth is the parental concern that a devotee exercises towards the infant Krishna. The highest state is *mādhurya-bhakti*, which is the self-effacing love of the *gopīs* for Krishna (Chakravarti 1969: 218).

On the journey towards this spiritual summit, the landscapes of Krishna's eternal Vrindavan are reimagined affectively in the interior spaces of the 'heart' – body, mind, and senses. For Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas, the birthplace of Caitanya (in the Nadia region of the state of West Bengal) is sacred geography – it is said to be a veiled (*gupta*) Vrindavan, the playground of Krishna and Rādhā. Through the cultivation of specific spiritual techniques,

the celestial presence of Rādhā-Krishna is said to become manifest (*prakaṭ*) in worldly domains, whether these are the interiorized spaces of the mind-heart (*manas*), the sensory surfaces of the body, or specific physical landscapes in the world. In an ethnographic study, Sukanya Sarbadhikary (2015) notes that the three distinct groups of Vaiṣṇava *bābājīs* (celibate renouncers), *sahajiyās*, and members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISCKON) have developed spiritual techniques which are overlapping in certain respects and disjointed in others. The *sahajiyās* state that they do not only imaginatively witness, as the *bābājīs* claim, the pastimes (*līlā*) of Krishna and Rādhā, but experience them affectively in their bodies configured as a sacred place. While ISCKON, established by Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977), does not reject the significance of *rāgānuga* devotion, it reserves the cultivation of such subjectivities for the spiritually adept. Rather, one should serve Rādhā-Krishna by living in, developing, and beautifying the land of Nadia, which is the worldly manifestation of the transcendental Vrindavan (Sarbadhikary 2015: 23).

These theodramatic styles of *bhakti* are enacted also in the region around Varanasi, in north India, which is transformed into the sacred geography of the epic narrative *Rāmāyaṇa* during the festivities associated with Rām Līlā. The pilgrims walk barefoot and act out specific parts of the Tulsīdās narrative, whether as citizens of Ayodhya who follow Lord Rāma to the forest or as wedding guests of the four brothers. There are no clear distinctions between ‘audience’ and ‘actors’, for people not only witness the drama but themselves participate in the narratives that are unfolding around them (Hess 1983: 179–180). The neighbouring region of Mathura and Vrindavan is the epicentre of rich traditions of devotional songs (*kīrtan*) which reenvision the land of Krishna’s childhood and youth as suffused with sacred power (Hein 1972; Entwistle 1987). In the Samāj Gāyan form of singing in the temples in the Rādhā Vallabha tradition, trained musicians sing, during the *rāsa-līlā* season in mid-October, from two Braj Bhāṣā versions of the motif of the dance of the *gopīs*, one by Harirām Vyās (c.1560) and the other by Nandadās (c.1580). The participants assume the roles of Krishna and the *gopīs*, and the musical performance progresses through their interactive play, which is not simply a meditation on the eternal dance but a vicarious participation in its transcendental movements (Beck 2013b: 197; Pauwels 1996).

In the southern lands, Āṅṭāl presents herself as a cowherd girl who sets out to wake up Krishna, viewed as a manifestation of Vishnu. According to hagiographies, Āṅṭāl did not get married to a human husband, seeking union with her divine Lord alone. Such feminine – or feminized – pathways of *bhakti* characterize many dimensions of the Vallabha tradition too. The performance of devotional service to Krishna can culminate in the development of a state of mind which is characterized by an intense longing for Krishna (*mādhurya-bhāva*). Here devotees alternate, in their passionate devotion (*vyasana*) for Krishna, between moments of union and separation, and they gradually attain a mental state called

sarvātmabhāva where they are so completely immersed in Krishna that they see the entire world as an expression of Krishna (Saha 2013: 140–141).

A central focus of ritual life in these Vallabha contexts is the cultivation of maternal love (*vātsalya bhava*) for the infant Krishna through the offering of different kinds of food to the icon in the temple; and the icon, in turn, showers the food with nourishing grace (*puṣṭi*) which sustains the devotees (Toomey 1990: 167–168). The word used for these temples is not the usual *mandir* but *haveli*, which are large mansions with rooms, balconies, and courtyards that evoke in the minds of devotees the land of Vraj, where Krishna was raised by his foster parents. There are eight viewings (*darśan*) of Krishna at different times of the day, starting from the awakening of the child Krishna through Krishna taking out the cows to graze to Krishna being put to sleep in the evening. The deity is awakened with gentle music around three in the afternoon, and an hour later some food is offered to Krishna before he goes out to the pastures. During the early evening viewing, a lamp is waved in front of Krishna, who has returned from the fields, so as to ward off evil influences. The devotees take great care to ensure the comfort of the icon of Krishna during these viewings. For instance, before sunrise, the doors are kept closed so that the child Krishna is not rudely awakened by the devotees. During the hot weather, small fountains are set up in front of the icon; sandalwood, known for its cooling properties, is applied to the icon which is now dressed in light clothing; and the icon is offered foods such as milk, yoghurt, and mangoes. At the Annakūṭa festival, which is celebrated to mark the episode when Krishna took the form of the mountain Govardhan and received food from the residents of Vraj, a likeness of the mountain is prepared with boiled rice and placed before the icon. These food offerings are later distributed among the devotees in the form of *prasād*, which has been infused with the grace (*puṣṭi*) of Krishna (Saha 2013: 145).

According to the Vallabha tradition, the poet Paramānand (c.1500) was initiated into this ‘pathway of grace’ (*puṣṭi-mārga*) by Vallabha who taught him the tenth chapter of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. By repetitively hearing Paramānand’s songs at different times during the day in the constant (*nitya*) cycle, and at different points during the festival (*utsava*) cycle, devotees would meditatively begin to see the *līlā* in the spiritual worlds of which Paramānand himself is said to have had revelations (Sanford 2008: 12). While the earthly Vrindavan is manifest to everyone, for those whose sensorium has been purified through devotion to Krishna everything becomes an occasion of active remembrance of Krishna. By adopting the persona of a *gopī*, a devotee would undergo the pain of separation, while reenvisioning every aspect of the physical world – the birds, the skies, the trees – as vivid signifiers of Krishna’s veiled presence.

Oh friend, what should I do now?

After my eyes fell upon the son of Nanda, I can’t remain apart from

him for even the blink of an eye [...]

Neither night nor day passes easily for me; the house and the courtyard are no longer pleasant.

The lord of Paramānand laughs, he has stolen my mind. (Sanford 2008: 96)

Some of these theoaesthetic motifs are expressed in forms of temple worship (*pūjā*) directed to the icon of the deity who is said to be affectionate toward devotees. Such devotional affectivity is modulated by the full gamut of the human sensorium – *pūjā* is ritually performed by pouring water, ringing bells, chanting hymns, singing songs, and burning incense. The food placed before the image is ‘consumed’ by the image, and these transfigured offerings (*prasād*) are partaken of by the devotees who have gone to ‘see’ the image; the heart of *pūjā* is constituted by this reciprocation of glances. In this way, the divine reality (*brahman*) is ritually invoked to make a finite object a suitable habitation so that devotees can have a vision (*darśan*) of the divine (Eck 1998).

Especially in the Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition of Rāmānuja, one of the five forms of Vishnu is *arcāvatāra*, which is a manifestation of Vishnu worthy of worship in a temple. In the Veṅkaṭeśvara (Vishnu) temple in Tirumala in Andhra Pradesh, the deity is ‘awakened’ early in the morning with the recitation of Sanskrit verses, so that the deity can ‘receive’ pilgrims who have gathered for a vision. Various texts delineate the ritual processes through which an image-maker (*śilpin*) consecrates a block of wood or a piece of metal. The crucial moment is the establishment of life-breath (*prāṇa*) in the image through the recitation of a mantra. The eyes are the last to be painted, and the initial glance of this ‘awakened’ image should fall on sweets or a mirror before it touches the devotees who will view the image.

3.2 Bhakti and the pedagogy of the oppressed

Given that the ‘vision’ of the Lord encompasses all reality, these *bhakti*-suffused cosmological visions would seem to contain an egalitarian edge that cuts through caste-based claims of eligibility (*adhikāra*) based on occupational style, endogamous grouping, and ritual purity. Indeed, many figures associated with the *bhakti*-shaped worlds of Hindu social existence are women and individuals from the lower end of the caste spectrum (Mullatti 1989; Chandramohan 2016). For instance, among the sixty-three Śaiva poets and devotees (Nāyaṇār), nine are from the lower castes (Śūdra) and three, including Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār, are women. In the Nām-ghoṣā, a text of fundamental importance in the everyday life of Assamese Vaiṣṇavas, Mādhavadeva envisions subservience to Krishna as the locus of a spiritual egalitarianism:

I do not belong to the four castes nor to the four [stages of life]. Neither am I pious, giving gifts and visiting sacred places. But surely do I become the servant of the Lotus-Foot of the Lord of the Gopis, the Lord who is the Ocean of fullness of joy. (Das 1957: 322)

At the same time, one should not think in terms of *one* response on the part of all *bhakti*-animated visions regarding how devotional self-surrender to the Lord may interrogate, challenge, or undermine structural hierarchies. The hagiographies of *bhakti* saints from the lower castes are sometimes ambivalent in their rejection of Brahmanical privileges – even as they claim that *bhakti* transcends boundaries of caste, they may affirm some notions of caste purity and social hierarchies (Burchett 2009; Keune 2021). Movements associated with Caitanya, Tulsīdās, and others can be regarded as social revolutions to the extent that the equalitarian language of *bhakti* threatens the cultural prestige and ritual privilege of Brahmin priests; however, this language did not, generally speaking, animate or call for a wholesale dissolution of social hierarchies. While Caitanya was regarded as God who had descended to the world to rescue, in particular, women and the lower castes (Śūdra), the movement was not concerned directly with socioeconomic transformation or structural alteration of the ritual economy, but with the cultivation of hospitality to fellow Vaiṣṇavas and the offering of alms to people in need. The Caitanya devotees usually accepted certain social restrictions relating to *varṇāśrama-dharma*, such as devotees of different *jātis* not intermarrying or interdining, for the sake of maintaining social order and avoiding misunderstanding with wider traditional contexts. Thereby, they maintained a combination of ‘egalitarian affectivity’ with fellow devotees in settings such as festivals and ‘inegalitarian functionality’ in mundane situations (O’Connell 1993: 23).

Such *bhakti* movements were often integrated back into Brahmanical norms and subjectivities, for their emphasis lay not so much on effacing caste-based distinctions as on generating enclaves where socioeconomic inequality or sociocultural hierarchy would be regarded as irrelevant to the spiritual goal. From a low-caste position, Ravidās declares:

A family that has a true follower of the Lord
Is neither high caste nor low caste, lordly or poor.
The world will know it by its fragrance. (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 2004: 25)

From a similar caste-location, Cokhāmeļā deconstructs the notion of ritual pollution:

Five elements compound the body impure; all things mix, thrive in the world.
Then who is pure and who impure?

The body is rooted in impurity.

From the beginning to the end, endless impurities heap themselves.

Who is it can be made pure?

Says Chokha, I am struck with wonder, can there be any such beyond pollution? (Mokashi-Punekar 2002: 57)

Such rejections of caste-rooted hierarchies, Brahmanical ritualism, and Brahmanical authority sometimes proceeded alongside the redescription of one's 'Brahmin' status in terms of one's devotion to the Lord. The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (7.9.10) declares that a 'dog-eater' (a socioritual outcaste) whose psychic affectivities are dedicated to Vishnu is superior to a Brahmin who has turned away from Vishnu; elsewhere, the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (7.11.1–35) defends the idealized classification of four social groups and stages of life (*varṇāśramadharmā*). Vīraśaiva theologians regarded Vīraśaivas as true Brahmins (*aprākṛta*), whereas the other Brahmins through birth were only natural Brahmins (*prākṛta*); Basava himself would refer to Vīraśaivas as of 'high birth' (*kulaja*). The *Siddhāntaśikhāmaṇi* (c.1200 CE), a handbook of Vīraśaiva doctrine, states: 'The person in whom devotion is steadied, whether a foreigner or someone of high caste, is dear to Śiva and a Brahmin; not dear to Śiva is someone devoid of devotion' (Zydenbos 1997: 530).

For a strident rejection of all terminologies and subjectivities of caste, we may turn to the songs of the Bauls, the wandering minstrels of Bengal. The Bauls – whose songs interweave various forms of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* – believe that the divine essence lies hidden in the 'person of the heart', which is beyond all distinctions of caste, social mores, and cultural conventions (Urban 1999). The songs of Rāj Khyāpā (1869–1946) highlight a distinction between the inner perspective (*antaraṅga*) of the 'I', which is free from distinctions of pure and impure, and the external perspective (*bahiraṅga*) which is the world of hierarchy, discrimination, and ranking. The focus lies in the experience of the here-now (*bartamān*) and not knowledge gained through ritual practices or social orthodoxies (Openshaw 2005).

4 Conclusion

The distinctive idioms of *bhakti* – entwined with the human psychosomatic sensorium in architecture, poetry, and the performing arts – resonate through some of the most vibrant and tangible Hindu socioreligious milieus. Thus, *bhakti* awakens in the long queues of devotees at five in the morning at a local shrine; illuminates the subjectivity of a shopkeeper writing out the name 'Krishna' or 'Rāma' on a notebook in the blistering heat of the afternoon; suffuses the festivities at a busy wedding which is believed to mirror, and even enhance, the transcendental bliss of the divine couple Vishnu-Lakshmi or Rādhā-Krishna; and pervades the tranquil air hanging over the sombre lake beside the ancient banyan tree when the temple bells have fallen silent. A dominant motif across

these milieus is relationality: *bhakti* poets articulate a playful alternation between deity and devotee, such that lover and beloved often change their roles or persona in a cosmic drama of liberation. One of the finest expressions of this polarity is a devotional song composed by the Bengali poet-thinker Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941):

Infinite is your wealth, yet you are not satisfied with that,
You wish to take it from my hands, bit by bit.
Giving away your jewels you have made me rich (*dhanī*) –
Now you come calling at my door, the door that is kept shut.
You would make me the giver, and you would become the beggar (*bhikkhu*) –
The whole world is delirious with laughter.
You will not stay on that chariot, you come down on the dusty path –
You will walk with me through all the ages. (Tagore 1931: 37–38)

The cultivation of such theocentric attachment would infuse diverse aspects of one's quotidian existence: thus, the offering of a flower – a seemingly trivial object – can become charged with spiritual radiance if it is intertwined with the affective sinews of a devotional heart. These osmotic tissues across the borderlines of deity and devotee are often vocally concretized in social settings such as congregational singing, pilgrimage, and so on. As we have seen, *bhakti* is not *one* thing, and its presence, in ways both vivid and subtle, structures, energizes, or inflects diverse Hindu socioreligious cultures. Notions and practices relating to *bhakti* are interwoven with the multiple languages of *karma*, *saṃsāra*, *ātman*, *brahman*, *īśvara*, *mokṣa*, *vidyā*, and *yoga*, with distinctive variations across multiple traditions and multiple regions.

In a text called the *Bhāgavata-māhātmya*, *bhakti*, personified as a woman, says she was born in Dravida (the southern land), came of age in Karnataka, travelled here and there in Maharashtra, and became old in Gujarat. However, when she reached Vrindavana, she became young again and radiant with beauty (Hawley 2015: 59, 69). This narrative of pan-Indian outreach was crafted sometime in the early eighteenth century in the north of the country, and is an intimation of a motif that would become crucial to the generation of solidarity during some anticolonial movements – namely, the agglutinative power of *bhakti* to bring together distinct classes, communities, and religions. The category 'the *bhakti* movement' emerges partly from these contexts, but it is an ahistorical romanticization projected onto a vast conglomerate of distinct, and occasionally divergent, premodern formations. Yet, different dimensions of the semantic and experiential range of *bhakti* – attachment, attention, protest, playfulness, love, loyalty, serenity, steadfastness – can indeed be discerned in multiple milieus of Hindu and, more generally, South Asian religious traditions.

The landscapes of *bhakti* have constituted a site of social critique, even if not a real-world restructuration, of caste-shaped fault lines by invoking the name of the one Lord of all humanity. They have also been matrices of localized flavours of Islam and Christianity which have creatively recalibrated the language of loving submission to the beloved Lord of sovereign freedom. Various transnational styles of Hinduism – such as ISKCON (Bryant and Ekstrand 2004) and Swaminarayan Hinduism (Williams 2019) – remain vital expressions of *bhakti*-suffused motifs of divine-human relationality. The ‘deterritorialization’ that these motifs embody – namely, this world is our home and yet it is not our true habitat – is a generative motor of such ongoing migrations of Hindu devotionality across national borderlines.

Attributions

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