

**Rethinking Bhakti in North India**  
**(Panel 1: ECMSAS Bonn 2010)**  
**Organizers: Vasudha Dalmia and Heidi Pauwels**

**Poets as Seals of Legitimation: The ‘when’ and ‘where’ of their life histories**  
*Vasudha Dalmia, UC Berkeley*

As extensive research in the last decades has shown, the Vallabha Sampradaya expended some effort to establish its claim to Surdas as a major poet of their own order. The mellow power of his verse was to lead, in fact, to his being placed at the head of the group of the eight ‘ashta chap’ poets, who would come to occupy pride of place in the canon of the Sampradaya. My paper will explore the placement of the life histories of these eight poets in the two hagiographical compendia of the Sampradaya, compiled early in the eighteenth century. The lives of four poets were located at the end of the first hagiographical compendium, the *Chaurasi vaishnavan ki varta*, crowning Vallabha’s achievements. The other four lives were placed at the beginning of the second compendium, the *Do sau bavan vaishnavan ki varta*. The eight poets thus connected the life histories not only of the followers of Vallabha, the first and founding preceptor, with that of the second preceptor, Vitthala, Vallabha’s second son, they also legitimated Vitthala’s claim to succession. My focus will be on the discursive use of ‘Braj’ Bhasha poetry in this legitimating process, which would finally link and seal the connection of ‘Bhasha’ with ‘Braj’, particularly as it carried the message of Vallabha into the West of the subcontinent.

**Bhakti as Cultural Capital: A Bundela-Rajput case study**  
*Heidi Pauwels, University of Washington, Seattle*

This paper focuses on the issue of patronage: who subscribed to bhakti and to what ends? Bhakti has been appropriated in many ways over its long history. A lot of attention has been given to its egalitarianizing potential. But not only lower castes sought to get cultural capital out of bhakti. In the context of the Mughal empire, upwardly mobile Rajputs too used it in their struggle to come to terms with their role as local powerbrokers for the centralizing imperial regime. I will focus on the case of the Bundelas of Orcha in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century. With this paper I hope to get others thinking about what made bhakti so popular in the Delhi-Agra area in the midst of the political upheaval by focusing on the socio-political expediencies of its patronage. At the same time, I do not want to lose sight of how bhakti saints nevertheless asserted their independence from such use by groups that were climbing the social ladder.

**The Four Sampradayas:**  
**Decoding a Major Component in the “Bhakti Movement” Narrative**  
*Jack Hawley, Barnard College, Columbia University*

Monika Horstmann has written eloquently about appeals to the rubric of the “four sampradayas” as a way to discipline religion at the court of the Kachvaha king Jaisingh II in the early decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In this presentation I hope to investigate how

that rubric was deployed—and in some ways resisted—by two of its earlier champions in the latter half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Nabhadās the Ramanandi, writing from within the Kachvaha orbit (or at least, so he hoped), is the better known of these two. His *Bhaktamal* quite literally made history. But his text deserves juxtaposing with another. I have recently been able to locate and photograph a manuscript of the *Sampradaya-pradipa*, which presents itself as having been written by Gadadhar Bhatt Dvivedi in Brindavan in V.S. 1610 (1553 C.E.). This text provides insight into how someone closely associated with Vallabhacarya might massage the four-*sampradaya* idea with quite different aims in mind. The collaboration of Abhijit Ghosh of Jadavpur University has been essential in making it possible for me to approach this text.

The notion of the *catuh sampradaya* fits awkwardly with southerners' ideas about the institutional and intellectual history of their own religious past. Is it, then, a simple case of the north inventing the south—in multiple ways—or do actual patterns of Brahmin mobility play a role? Finally, is it possible to determine how the idea of the *catuh sampradaya* became a major feature of the “bhakti movement” narrative that became standard in the early twentieth century and has remained so until today?

### **From the Temple to the Math:**

#### **Politics and Patronage of Bhakti in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.**

*H. S. Shiva Prakash, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi*

The temple-centered Bhakti was born in Tamilnadu in around 7<sup>th</sup> century. Both Shaiva and Vaishnava saints went from temple to temple singing of the glory of their chosen deities. The singing and staging of the composition of Shaiva and Vishnava saints is an important part of temple service in Tamilnadu to this day. Further, the fact that statues of saints are installed in temples bears testimony to the affinity of Tamil Bhakti with the institution of the temple. These temples which were small structures during the life-times of saints gradually grew into bigger structures with the expansion of patron kings. The culmination of this process was coeval with the institutionalization of Bhakti cultures and this in turn was followed by the anthologization and theologization of Bhakti at the hands of Nambi Andar Nambi and Nathamuni after the twelfth century.

The next impotent Bhakti Movement of South India was born in Karnataka in 12<sup>th</sup> century. Called Lingayat Movement, it was predominantly an artisan-led movement. Because the temple had by then become centres of trade, commerce and caste power, the artisan-led movement evolved a Bhakti culture outside the temple. The myths and legends surrounding the movement as well as the compositions of the saints demonstrate that there was a stiff opposition between them and the temple. When Lingayat saints came into conflict with all the values associated with temple like caste hierarchy, supremacy of scriptures, violence erupted in Kalyana, the centre of movement resulting in the dispersion of Lingayat converts. After the consolidation of temple power, the Lingayat followers went underground or turned militant. However, the increasing popularity of the new faith compelled the emperor of Vijayanagar to give it imperial patronage after 13<sup>th</sup> century, paving the way for anthologization and theologization of Lingayatism. At the same time, the radical values of Lingayatism were revived in Kodekal Basveshwara's sect which kept away from the new institution of the matha, the monastery, the centre of institutionalized Lingayatism.

My paper intends to be a dialectical analysis of the relationship between protest and patronage in the two leading Bhakti Movements of

### **Rāmānandī Nāgās: Politics and Bhakti**

*Monika Horstmann, University of Heidelberg*

In the kingdom of Jaipur, Rāmānandī Nāgās were once powerfully represented by a lineage which was heavily involved in eighteenth-century politics and warfare. This lineage is best known for their leader Bālānand, who occupies a larger than life-size place in Vaiṣṇava sectarian history. With the establishment of the Pax Britannica, the power of the lineage virtually collapsed. Nonetheless it retained its centralistic organisation, henceforth an almost hollow machinery. With its centre weakened and the organisation breaking away from the periphery, where the leaders of its sub-lineages were busy guarding the land and tax assignments and warding off rivals for their own minuscule seats of power, the lineage never recuperated. It did retain for a long time some of its ritual privileges, but for all practical purposes was impotent.

This case, if any, obviously raises questions about the relationship between bhakti and politics. It will not do to suspect that bhakti was merely a transparent strategy rather than a genuine marker of identity of that lineage, also because it would be unwise to essentialize bhakti as a religious category rather than assessing the various bhakti modes in their social history. Bhakti did figure in the self-understanding of that lineage, and is also evidenced by the ritual role it played in the state of Jaipur. However, that bhakti was fused with a political identity copying the structure of Rajput state governance. This also implied that the lineage did not have any noticeable basis in the ordinary populace, but was attached to the bigger or smaller Rajput *ḥikāṅs*. This again may also be suspected to be one of the reasons why these Rāmānandīs could not really define themselves as a *religious* group which might have stayed their complete erosion. In contemporary history we see them acting for survival in the wake of trends emerging from other centres of their order.

The thrust of the paper is on positioning the self-perception of a politically active and even prominent bhakti group in the socio-historical frame of their time.

### **Between Text and Sect: Early Nineteenth Century Commentaries on the Ramcharitmanas**

*Vasudha Parmasivan, UC Berkeley*

The emergence of Ram bhakti as a major North Indian devotional tradition was propelled by two key developments in the sixteenth century. The first was the composition of the devotional text the Ramcharitmanas by Tulsidas. A vernacular rendition of the legend of Ram as first depicted in the Ramayana, the Ramcharitmanas is considered the quintessential text of Ram bhakti. The second development was the expansion of the monastic community, the Ramanandi sect.

Although both text and sect emerged almost simultaneously in the sixteenth century, they represented distinct theologies and it was only in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when they were united under the patronage of a rising Hindu polity.

In this paper, I will consider two early nineteenth century examples (the Anand lahari and

Manas mayank) from the commentarial tradition that formed the first literary link between the Ramcharitmanas and the Ramanandi sect. These early commentaries sought to incorporate the Ramcharitmanas into the sectarian canon by treating it as incomplete and by inscribing it with their distinct theological concerns. This paper will thus highlight the tensions that emerged between the imperatives of the text and those of the religious community as they shaped the contours of the Ram bhakti tradition.

### **The Adversarial Bhakta in the Krttibāsi Rāmāyana**

*Mandakranta Bose, University of British Columbia*

Even though the Rāmāyana composed by Krttibāsa is an overt and sustained exposition of Visnu bhakti, the path of engagement with the Lord does not always run straight. Both the narrative inventions tagged on to Valmīki's original storyline and direct authorial comments identify Krttibāsa's text as a planned celebration of Visnu, its plot shown from the beginning as part of Visnu's grand design for affirming righteousness and eradicating evil. Like all epic tales, it is a battle story in which battle lines are drawn between clear opposites, leaving no difficulty in defining the good and the evil. Or so it seems. But in an astonishing twist of narrative disclosure, which has profound theological implications, Krttibasa springs upon the audience reversals of character and motive that entirely undermine the simple good-evil dichotomy of the basic plot. At several climactic moments of violent encounters with Rama, his demon adversaries, such as Taranīsenā, turns out to be his devotee who has chosen this approach as a quick and sure route to redemption. When at the end of the battle Ravana himself is revealed as a devotee, the bhakti agenda of the text comes full circle as a triumphant declaration of the divine design. Along with the narrative impact of this strategy and its cultural context, this paper will examine its moral and theological implications, which, it will argue, broadened the understanding of bhakti as a mode of worship.

### **Bhatta Brahmins in Braj**

*Swapna Sharma (Yale University, New Haven)*

This paper investigates the social aspect of the bhakti "movement," by looking at the role of specific Brahmin families in the "revival" of bhakti in the Braj area. What role was played by Bhatta Brahmin families? What ritual and other know-how from their Southern home areas did they bring to Braj, and how did this influence the way the bhakti movement in Braj/Vrindaban developed? The paper will investigate the case of three Gaudiyas, Gadadhar Bhatt, Narayana Bhatt and Gopal Bhatt, and one Nimbarki, Keshav Kashmiri Bhatt.

### **Devotion and 18<sup>th</sup> -early 19<sup>th</sup> century imaginary of the Sikh community**

*Anne Murphy, University of British Columbia, Canada*

This paper will examine how the Sikh *panth* has been described as a community of devotion in the context of a select number of examples from 18<sup>th</sup> century *gurbilas* literature. The *gurbilas* represents a genre of Sikh historiographical literature composed from the beginning of the eighteenth century on, as literally the "sport" or "play" of the

Guru. Generally the genre begin with writings attributed to the tenth and final living Guru of the normative Sikh tradition, Guru Gobind Singh, and particularly his *Bachittar Natak*. According to Surjit Hans, who has written extensively on these materials, the *Bachittar Natak* (like all Gurbilas literature) is singularly concerned with history: “this is a work of nascent history,” he writes, “which under the stress of circumstances, is more faithful to the demands of the future than the quiet details of the present” (*A Reconstruction of Sikh History*, 233-234). Jeevan Deol has discussed texts of the period in question with reference to the creation of what he calls a “metanarrative” derived from the Dasam Granth (a compilation of writings attributed to the tenth Guru, or written in his court) in which the aspirations of the Khalsa community to define itself as distinct and sovereign were placed within a framework based on Puranic myth, defining dharma in a mode that is simultaneously religious and political. This paper will draw on such arguments regarding the relationship of history to the narration of the Sikh community in such texts, to excavate how devotion is configured in the imagination of the community, in both religious and political terms, and how such texts can be placed in a larger re-imagination of the history of the community of *bhakti* in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in northern India.

### **Bhakti in current research 2003–2009**

*Imre Bangha, Oxford University*

The triennial International Bhakti Conference under various names has for several decades been the largest forum for scholars working on the interrelated fields of devotional religiosity and the early modern literatures of North India bringing together experts not only from the western hemisphere but also from Eastern Europe and Asia, especially India and Japan. At the initial stages of the conference the most studied aspect of the early literatures in NIA languages was bhakti. By today the pendulum seems to have gone to the other side and research has been more concentrated on the study of the secular or courtly aspects of these literatures.

The Bhakti conference continued after a six-year gap shows that bhakti is still at the focus of interest of international scholarship as it was before. It examined new themes such as the dynamics of Taxonomies, Jain Devotion or the grammar of Bhakti putting into new light the idea of the four sampradayas, the Nirgun-sagun distinction or presenting the largely unknown field of Jain vernacular bhakti literature. Along with these themes the speakers also unearthed new aspects in the more traditional fields of hagiography, Vaishnava and Nirgun Bhakti, Yoga, and the material aspects — such as the attitude towards wealth or the importance of ritual in religious literature or the female body and ornaments — and the performance of bhakti finding a system underlying the musico-religious performance of the *Samaj-gayan*.

Without focussing on one or another aspect of bhakti this triennial event is a venue for scholars to share their findings in a plethora of themes and approaches. In its eclecticism the tenth Bhakti conference reflected the rich variety of devotional experience in South Asia.

## **Dhrupad Lyrics Inspired by Bhakti in the Repertoires of the Mughal Court Musicians**

*Françoise 'Nalini' Delvoye, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (SHP), Paris*

This paper will analyze Dhrupad lyrics inspired by Bhakti in the repertoires of the Mughal court musicians. As a case-study I will present a choice of Dhrupad songs attributed to Tansen (d. 1589) and other poet-composers mainly from the treatises in Sanskrit of Bhavabhata, the musicologist of the royal court of Anup Singh, king of Bikaner (r. 1669-1698). Some lyrics with the “signature” of Tansen include the name of Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605), and others do not, but all were sung by court musicians till the time of their collection at the imperial courts of Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1658) and Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707).

I will question their meaning and relevance in the Indo-Persian context and share with the audience some striking comments made by the late Prof. Prem Lata Sharma (1927-1998) with whom I had worked since the early 1980s.

### **Bhakti in Persian**

*Francesca Orsini (SOAS) and Stefano Pellò (University of Venice)*

“Hindu” texts in Persian have so far been studied in terms of sponsored imperial translations (e.g. *Mahabharata*) or recreations by Mughal court poets (Faizi’s *Nal Daman*, Masih Panipati’s *Masnavi Ram wa Sita*). Yet there is a significant number of texts that were authored by Hindu devotees and poets who sought to “write themselves” into the Persian episteme. From even a preliminary sample it seems that the strategies they availed themselves of were several: they could either view religious terms, concepts, characters and stories wholly through a Persian prism (to use Stefano Pellò’s expression), or they could pay relatively little attention to Persian conventions. How the texts themselves envisaged their audiences will become clear from internal clues, such as the amount of explanation and of previous knowledge presumed.

The paper will consider two examples: the *masnavi* by Bhopat Rai “Begham” “Bayragi” (late 17c), in order to examine its use of Persian poetic conventions, and the *Bhagat Mala* (H1893/1682) by Ram Soni from Ghazni, which seems to have become quite a popular text. The *masnavi* by Bayragi is said to be a translation of the famous allegorical play *Prabodhachandrodaya* and contains stories about Narada, Sankara, Baba Lal, Namdev, Vasudeva, etc. Bayragi discusses these figures through a Persian prism, e.g. Namdev is called a *butparast kafir*. The introduction to Soni’s *Bhagat Mala* (which does not purport to be a translation of Nabhadās’s *Bhaktamal*) chooses terms to praise God that have Islamic resonances, though illustrated with examples from the epics and Puranas. Both translation theory, as used e.g. by Tony Stewart, and the analysis of poetic tools and imagery will help us understand what kind of Bhakti these authors wrote into Persian.

**(Nirgun) bhakti and Ritual Practice:  
Thoughts on the History of the Bāvarī panth**  
*Till Luge, University of Pennsylvania*

In the practice of the present Bāvarī *panth*, we can witness the performance of rituals closely resembling that at other *nirgun bhakti* maths in the Bhojpurī-speaking area of today's eastern Uttar Pradesh, western Bihar and northern Chhattisgarh. The introduction of ritual practice in Sant and other *bhakti* traditions has often been interpreted as a form of 'accretion' or even a 'betrayal' of the original ideas of the poet-saints. This valuation is based on an ideal-type approach to (*nirgun*) *bhakti* and reflects the social and intellectual bias of the literary evidence. This paper attempts to take a different approach by interpreting the emergence or sanctioning of ritual practice as part of a transformation of religious authority while contesting the narrative of a successive introduction of rituals correlating with a decline in commitment to the *bhakti* ideal as imagined by historians.

**The Enigma of Eknāth: Breaking Barriers in Bhakti by Advaita Vedānta**  
*Vidyut Aklujkar, University of British Columbia*

Sant Eknāth (1533-1599 CE) is the most complex sant-poet of the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra. He lived an enigmatic life apparently full of contradictions and was misunderstood and maltreated both in his own community and by the others. Is he an Advaitin or a Bhakta? A Īaiva or a VaiΣava bhakta? A traditional or a reformer?

It is not easy to capture his identity because he deliberately defies labels. His works have incorporated influences from Advaita Vedānta, Nāth panth, and Islam (sufi panth) to create his uniquely enigmatic brand of Bhakti. A brahmin by birth, education and profession, he has followed his own dharma/duty in life quite traditionally while at the same time fighting against all kinds of injustices and inequalities including untouchability and ritual impurity of caste, gender and creed by practicing what he preached. His works consist of original poetic creations in Marathi based on Rāmāyaḷa and Bhāgavata purāḷa, and several stray poems in the abhanga form and longer kīrtanas in the line of Bhakti.

Using these works in medieval Marathi, and offering my own translations where needed, I shall argue that the enigma of Eknāth's complex identities is resolved by understanding the underlying strong basis of Advaita Vedānta that supports his Bhakti. I shall try to resolve the apparent contradictions in Eknāth's words and behaviour by referring to his understanding of the major concepts of Advaita Vedānta such as the oneness of the individual soul and the cosmic principle (Brahma), the unattached action (niΣkāma karma) and a living-liberated soul (jīvanmukta).

I shall also demonstrate Eknāth's effective use of several poetic strategies such as staging quarrels and fights to give voice to strife and misunderstanding, using abuses and low language to reach to masses, and assuming multiple voices to propagate the message of ultimate oneness of individual souls.