

Book Reviews

A Genealogy of Devotion: Bhakti, Tantra, Yoga and Sufism in North India. Patton Burchett. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. Pp. xviii + 433.

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With *A Genealogy of Devotion: Bhakti, Tantra, Yoga and Sufism in North India*, Patton Burchett has injected further nuance into the persisting popular and scholarly narrative that devotional religiosity spread throughout India by way of a unified “*bhakti* movement.” Utilizing historical and text-critical approaches, in addition to a wealth of secondary sources, Burchett argues that the ostensibly discrete categories of tantric, yogic, and Islamic religiosity are all imbricated in the historical formations of North Indian *bhakti*. In the process, he advocates for *bhakti* movements in the plural, suggesting that “we would be better served to imagine that at different times, each of the various regions of India had its own distinctive, multivocal *bhakti* movement shaped by regionally and historically specific social, political, and cultural factors” (2). Burchett characterizes the early modern North Indian devotional movement as the growth of a “transregional, transsectarian *bhakti* sensibility” united by similar aesthetic tastes, a common moral sense, and shared valuation of emotional expression (17). This sensibility was heavily influenced by the Sufism of the Sultanate and Mughal periods, so Islam plays a significant role in Burchett’s historiography of North Indian *bhakti*, marking a major challenge to the Hindu nationalist implications of a singular “movement” (82).

Burchett begins his historiographical reconfiguring of North Indian *bhakti* in what he calls the “Tantric Age” (600–1200 CE). In this period, tantra was mainstream, its monastic orders and

institutions were tied to dharmic religion, royal patronage, and un-Brahminized local subcultures. On one level, tantra was esoteric and specialized, yet on another level it was a “popular tradition” by virtue of the sway tantric specialists, institutions, and cosmologies held in everyday life (60). The Tantric Age was not without *bhakti*. Indeed, Burchett notes how an embodied, emotional conception of devotion appears in Śaiva texts from as early as the sixth century, well before the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which many scholars have taken as the first Sanskrit expression of *bhakti* (47).

The establishment of the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526 CE) led to the disruption of institutionalized tantra. Meanwhile, aspects of Persian culture and popular Sufism increasingly influenced the emergent North Indian *bhakti*. But even as mainstream tantra waned, fewer institutionalized communities of tantric ascetics still subsisted, most notably the Nāth yogis. The Nāths strived for bodily immortality and becoming ontologically divine, aims that were heretical for Sufis, whose pure and simple goal was divine love (80–81). Burchett hinges one of his central arguments upon this difference: by the later Sultanate period, a “transregional, transectarian” *bhakti* social formation had begun to arise, and with it came a new and Sufi-influenced devotional sensibility that frequently defined itself against the “other” of the tantric yogi embodied by the Nāth (81). Together, *bhakti* and Sufism shared imagery, symbolism, and narratives and offered participation in a distinctive ethical, aesthetic, and emotional sensibility. On account of these commonalities, Burchett suggests that Sufis and *bhaktas* of the Sultanate period had become part of the same “emotional community” (96). Burchett finishes laying the historical foundations by establishing how *bhakti* came to flourish as an institutional and literary phenomenon in North India during the Mughal period. It was the sociopolitical, aesthetic, religious, and courtly culture of Emperor Akbar (1556–1605 CE), in particular,

that enabled the steady progression of *bhakti* communities and literature, especially those dedicated to Viṣṇu. Burchett takes up the Kacchvāhās of Rajasthan as his primary example of a Mughal-aligned, Vaiṣṇava Rajput group that provided a *bhakti*-infused blueprint for political success to other Hindu rulers.

With all this in place, Burchett proceeds into the major component of his argument, the role that the Rāmānandīs at Galta played in furthering a distinctive *bhakti* sensibility in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He focuses on community founder Kṛṣṇnadas Payahārī and his two main disciples, Kilhadev and Agradās. Although these Rāmānandīs, especially Agradās, were fashioning a new, self-conscious *bhakti* and were considered exemplary *bhaktas*, Burchett draws attention to how Payahārī and Kilhadev were simultaneously recognized as “yoga masters.” This calls into question some fundamental assumptions about *bhakti*, and prompts Burchett to speculate that scholars “have not adequately studied [*bhakti*’s] important historical relationships with yoga, tantra, and asceticism, sometimes fostering an inaccurate impression of *bhakti* as a discrete and autonomous genre of religiosity” (152). *Bhakti*, Burchett contends, is better understood as a “nonexclusive entity,” and it “must be conceived in a way that allows us to imagine a certain breed of detached, yoga-practicing ascetic as just as much a *bhakta* as the poet-saint singing songs to God” (156).

But even with their yogic aspects, Rāmānandīs were unmistakably developing a *bhakti* sensibility that was coming into tension with tantric sub-traditions, namely the Nāths. While the goals of Nāth ascetics were supernormal powers and divinizing the body, the Rāmānandīs (not unlike the Sufis) preferred the *bhakti* sensibility of separation from, and devotion to, God. In view of these differences, Rāmānandīs caricatured the tantric “other,” using

figures such as the Nāth yogi as a “foil” to better articulate their *bhakti* ideals (169–171). Consequently, Nāths, yogis and *tāntrikas* started to conjure up sinister connotations.

Burchett returns to Agradās (c. 1600), using him as a case study encapsulating the formation of early modern *bhakti* sensibilities. Drawing from his translations of heretofore overlooked manuscripts, Burchett contends that Agradās initiated a vernacular literary project within the Rāmānandī community to praise saintly devotees and spread the salvational message of *bhakti*, all the while attracting Brahmanical respect, elite financial support, and a depressed-class following. Not only did Agradās’ project strengthen the standing of Rāmānandīs and expand the trans-sectarian *bhakti* sensibility, but it also reinvented the *bhakta* as a distinct category of religious person (235). Though Agradās and his hagiographers gave Sufism little acknowledgement, it was nonetheless an inextricable part of the religious landscape within which these *bhakta* litterateurs operated.

From here, Burchett goes on to explore the sustained tensions between the emergent *bhakti* sentiment and tantric-yogic religiosity. For North Indian *bhakti* poet-saints, the persistent foil was the “twofold tantric other”: the yogi and the Śakti worshipper (239). From the fifteenth century onward, *bhakti* saints as diverse as Kabīr and Tulsīdās stood united in their rejection of tantric and yogic approaches. Similarly, in the hagiographies of Mīrābāī, Raidās, and others, Śakta religion serves again as a foil for *bhakti* devotional religion. Burchett hypothesizes that the collective efforts of these *bhaktas* in criticizing yogis and tantra may have served toward transmuting the performance of “tantra-mantra” into an alternative linguistic activity – that is, song. As Burchett would have it, sound and syllables remained essential for *bhaktas*, but the emphasis shifted from goal-oriented tantric mantras toward devotional singing and repetition of the divine Name (268). These

practices were rewards in themselves because of the emotions they evoked. Furthermore, *bhakti* songs and the divine Name were available to everyone, exemplifying what Burchett calls the “‘democratizing’ spirit of *bhakti*” (271).

Sufi literature from this same period shows comparable awareness of the tantric other, and this is Burchett’s point of departure for his penultimate chapter, in which he delves deeper into early modern *bhakti*’s Sufi inflections. In Sufi romances and the poems of Sūrdās and Mīrābāī, yoga is subsumed by devotion, and the yogi is reconfigured as the ideal devotee. The devotee can triumph over the yogi by *becoming* a yogi – that is, by redefining the “true yogi” as a selfless, impassioned lover of God (277–278). In addition to this, Burchett identifies a narrative trope that circulates in both Sufi and *bhakti* hagiographies wherein magic – often that of yogis – is proven futile.

Altogether, Burchett claims it is “foolish” to characterize the religious approach of early modern *bhaktas* as being entirely new (303). This being said – and despite the continuities with preceding forms of *bhakti* throughout India that can be identified among early modern North Indian saints such as Kabīr, Tulsīdās, Mīrābāī, and many others – he does note numerous elements distinct to their specific social, political, and religious environment. The Sufi-inflected understanding of devotion is at the forefront of these elements. With this conclusion, Burchett further complicates the simplistic, potentially (Hindu) nationalistic narrative of a unified, pan-Indian “*bhakti* movement.”

Burchett’s book is equally noteworthy for complicating received scholarly narratives about tantra. If his source material is any indication, prevalent present-day Indian imaginings of tantra as “black magic” and “mumbo-jumbo” are not solely the product of Western colonial discriminations (306). Rather, the Sufi inflected

tantric caricatures produced by North Indian *bhaktas* suggest that these negative attitudes have indigenous roots. Burchett also points out that tantric practices are still pervasive in India, even though Hindus rarely recognize them as tantric. Indeed, scholarly and popular dividing lines have kept tantra segregated from “proper” religious expressions such as *bhakti*, potentially underestimating tantra’s presence in contemporary Hinduism. This segregation figures prominently among Burchett’s culminating thoughts: “in the end *bhakti*, tantra, and yoga are not properly bounded entities. They are forever intertwined, blurring into one another in practice” (308). It is reassuring to see that, as with *bhakti*, scholarly narratives of tantra are maturing as well. Tantra is as just as ubiquitous as *bhakti* – to be sure, the two often intersect. Tantra still thrives, I would submit, because it is so closely tied to contemporary expressions of *bhakti*. The fact that Burchett ends with these reflections intimates that the field is heading toward a thorough reconceptualization of tantra similar to that ongoing with *bhakti* – as well it should

All told, Burchett has taken the product of considerable historical and text-critical labor and synthesized it with a vast range of scholarship from history, ethnography, and religious studies of South Asia. His management of secondary sources is admirable. Moreover, Burchett has incorporated sources that might otherwise have been disregarded, including a considerable number of works by junior scholars. Evidently, Burchett has a keen eye toward the future of South Asian studies. *A Genealogy of Devotion* will doubtlessly shape this field’s future, as it champions a reading of past and present-day Indian religion where boundaries between categories such as “*bhakti*,” “tantra,” “yoga,” and “Sufism,” among many others, are not so rigidly demarcated. Certainly, for tantra and *bhakti* (as well as yoga and Sufism), scholars should be less fixated on whether any given phenomenon “is” or “is not” and more attuned

to “how much is it so?” All of the above categories interpenetrate one another, even if some scholarly and popular sectors remain reluctant to see it.