

***Bhakti* and Its Public**

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In this essay I want to chart a space for understanding *bhakti* that moves between the two dominant, and in some ways mutually contradictory, modes of describing *bhakti* in modern scholarship.¹ These two positions are the idea, on the one hand, that *bhakti* forms a social movement and, on the other, that *bhakti* is an act of personal devotion. In between these poles of the broadly social and the strictly personal, I want to suggest that *bhakti* seeks to form publics of reception rather than communities that imply a single cohesive issue or idiom. I advance the thesis that all manifestations of *bhakti* are performances and, more to the point, public ones, that is, performances that are part of, or help form, publics of reception. While I would not argue that *bhakti* never describes a private affair of devotion, the sense in which *bhakti* enters the history of India is not through the private realm, but through the social world of caste, labor, media (both written and non-written), and markets outside the home and the heart of an individual.

To Śaṅkara, around the ninth century CE, is attributed the argument for an individualized, monist vision of *bhakti*, which he is said to have expressed in the *Śivānandalahiri* by his metaphor of the river, or self, joining the ocean, or Brahman. His broad influence had much to do with philosophical-religious understandings of *bhakti* in the direction of a personal pursuit. Yet the metaphor is telling—the river may be an individual stream on its way to the ocean, but it is also one of the central venues of collective, social Hindu religious practice (think of the Kumbha Melā or the Gaṅgā in Banaras) and also, universally, a key site for commerce, economics, travel, and urban development. The river is many things: a boundary, a threat, a source of sustenance, a channel of trade. The river is an apt metaphor for the public, as much as it is for *bhakti* and religious expression itself (for more on *bhakti* and rivers, see Feldhaus 1995). Indeed, despite Śaṅkara's usage, we also find in Sanskrit an impressive series of texts that associate *bhakti* with public performance. In treatises on aesthetics, and especially in texts attributed to Abhinavagupta in the early eleventh century, the nature of *bhakti* as affect is debated. *Bhakti* in this context is beyond *rasa*, beyond the “flavor” of a performance, but is one of those key “experiences,” or *bhāvas*, that a *rasa* might explore; all roads, as it were, may lead to *bhakti*, and it cannot be limited to any particular kind of affect.² It is thus understood not only to be a shared experience,

like love or anger, but an expressive one—an expression of the self, perhaps, but an outward expression of the self, a performance of emotion. The relationship between *rasa* and *bhāva*, and in particular its affective display, its public performance, suggests both publics that theorize and publics that consume *bhakti* as a key “experience” of life.

Therefore, whether we are talking about songs sung to God, recorded in performance and text, or *bhakti* practices, such as *pūjā*, *darśan*, pilgrimage, or keeping vows, these things all take place in the context of some audience; if no one else, one can be sure that at least God is always watching. I have always thought of the story of Vālmiki as illustrative of this point. The brigand is redeemed by accident. As penance for his crimes, he sits alone, meditating on death by repeating the word for it in Sanskritic languages, “*māra*.” Within this rote anamnesis on death the two syllables are slowly transposed so that Vālmiki is meditating upon “*Rāma*” unintentionally. His accidental repetition is “heard” by God, and he is saved; according to legend, he goes on to compose one of the great texts of *bhakti* in Indian literary history, the *Rāmāyaṇa*. What leads to Vālmiki’s redemption is not intention, or even any trace of “devotion to a personal deity,” much less participation in a social movement, but rather the reception of his sound by a small but powerful audience, in this case God. This is the foundational frame narrative for an epic text that has itself produced innumerable publics through millennia of retelling in India and worldwide.

Bhakti seems to need an audience. Norman Cutler (1984) draws for his reader a graphic representation of what I would call the public nature of *bhakti*. He offers a triangle of lines that link gods, poets, and audience. By invoking the idea of a “public” I do not wish to isolate any one of these three nodes—though that of “audience” might seem the most appropriate. Instead, I want to point to the tripartite structure itself, to the ways *bhakti* relies on the flow of its sentiment and information about the communal identity of fellow listeners, all communicated visibly, mediated by an audience. We can see this evoked in the modern medium of film and its attendant idioms. In all the great *bhakti* films of Indian cinema—such as the Damle and Fattelal films about Tukārām (1936) or Jñāneśvar (1940)—we are the observers of a *bhakti* public. Here *bhakti* always represents an activity performed before audiences, which is in turn projected on a screen and performed for a viewing public. As viewers of these films, we are watching Cutler’s triangle in its entire form: we see the *sant*, we hear his songs to God, and we observe the audience in turn observing and subsequently remembering him as a *bhakta*. In a sense, *bhakti* is this very *mise en scène*—the composition in its entirety, including layers of reception.

This *mise en scène* is essential to centuries of hagiography as well. The miracles associated with the *sants* are usually public affairs, set before audiences that at times adore the *sant* and at times persecute him or her. One can think of several examples in the history of the miraculous in *sant* literature. For instance, both Kabīr and Nāmdev share the story of being persecuted by a *sultān* who threatens the *sant* with the wrath of a stampeding elephant.³ Their persecution is thwarted by divine intervention, and this is witnessed by the *sultān*’s subjects, as well as by orthodox relig-

ious leaders who have come to see the famous *sant*'s tortures. When figures like Kabīr, Mīrābāī, Nānak, or Nāmdev are faced with persecution at the hands of some mighty temporal authority, they are delivered through their reliance on faith, and the miracle that intercedes on their behalf takes place in public. Such public persecution of figures by powerful political authorities is regularly depicted in hagiography and art, and the *mise en scène* in these visual-literary moments always supplies an audience witnessing the triumph of the *bhakti* of the *sant* over the power of the king or *sultān*. The highly personal "memoir," I would suggest, is never to be found in hagiography, though much hagiographical material is transmitted via a first-person narration attributed to the *sants* themselves. The story of a *sant*'s life is also a story of a context for that life and is coded with the reception of that life in ever-changing contexts. The audience is never absent, but imagined and assumed in any iteration of *bhakti*, whether literary, iconographic, performative, or ritualized. Of course, even the highly theorized conjectures on *bhakti* found in speculative Sanskrit texts have their audiences, but in narratives depicting *bhakti* in action the audience is more pronounced, more clearly situated within a public, both in the narrative itself and in the narrative's social context of reception.

Let me try to make this argument by expanding on the ideas of *bhakti* and public. There are certain words in all languages that defy even heuristic definition, much less an exact and lasting one, and the word *bhakti* is one of these enigmatic terms.⁴ It has appeared in texts and practices for over two millennia and has attracted two centuries of Western scholarly scrutiny, yet it remains an essentially ambiguous term (see Prentiss 1999: 17–41; Sharma 1987). Still we can approximate the term's contours with recourse to etymology, the historicizing logic of philology. In this context the word appears in a number of South Asian religions, but particularly in Hinduism, where it signals a host of meanings that circulate around its Sanskrit verbal root, *bhaj*, "to share, to apportion," and hence comes most commonly to indicate love, sharing, worship, and devotion. This verbal root has other associations too, however. The most common include: to divide, distribute, and bestow; to obtain as one's share, to enjoy or possess; to resort to, engage in, assume (as a form), put on (garments); to experience; to practice or cultivate; to choose; to serve and adore (Monier-Williams 1993: 743; Sharma 1987: 40–41). The noun *bhakta* refers to a person (or in some cases a thing) in whom some qualities of *bhakti* inhere. Thus, a *bhakta* is someone who is devoted, who serves, who is associated with a community, and who is faithful and loyal.

A common scholarly convention interprets *bhakti* to mean "personal devotion" or a sentiment of intimacy with a deity, but the term is also used in highly abstract contexts where the "personal" is not present. In these cases, both in scholarship and within the Indian public sphere, *bhakti* denotes a "movement" of social protest against caste, class, religious, or gender inequities. Historically, no single social movement has cohered around the term *bhakti* or its sentiments. Instead one finds innumerable religious communities, practices, bodies of texts, and so on, that invoke *bhakti* as their generative principle. Many scholars refer to a "*bhakti* movement" composed of a

unified, if heterogenous, field of texts and practices produced and maintained in South Asia over the last two millennia. These Indian spheres of discourse—both textual and practical—use the word *bhakti* self-descriptively and reference one another, producing intertextual consistencies among texts, making “publics” out of their own mutual references. Sometimes this is purposeful, as, for example, when particular hagiographers create genealogical relationships among figures, as Anantadās (*ca.* the end of sixteenth century) does for a collection of *sants* in northern India (see Callewaert and Sharma 2000; Lorenzen 1991), or Rajab does for Dādū Dayāl (both *ca.* sixteenth century) in Rajasthan (see Callewaert 1978), or Mahīpati (eighteenth century) does for the Vārkarī *sants* in Maharashtra.⁵ And sometimes this is implied, as we see in the similarities of stories that link Kabīr and Nāmdev via a trope of persecution in the collections I have just mentioned. This inter-referential practice helps produce the effect of “movement” where it may not have a social basis.

Friedhelm Hardy in his book *Viraha Bhakti* (1983: 489–91) observes similar inter-referential traits between South Indian Tamil devotional texts and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, what he calls an “opus universale,” a text composed in South India in the tenth century CE and found throughout India by the fifteenth century. Here a single text can serve as a kind of nodal archive for *bhakti* in its public reception over many centuries. It produces a broad cohesion for concepts that circle around the idea of *bhakti* both on its own in an elite sphere and more broadly, as it is performed and interpreted. Likewise, we might consider the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, two texts firmly within the discourse of *bhakti* in India that are articulated both in Sanskrit and regional languages, criss-crossing the subcontinent in terms of historical period and regional inflection. Such examples lead scholars to argue that a trans-regional movement with *bhakti* at its core is evident in the ways these core narratives can travel.

Yet even in the case of texts such as these, which are so clearly cosmopolitan in their reach, there are significant restrictions along sectarian and class lines. If one thinks about Cutler’s triangle, the audiences targeted by these iterations of *bhakti* are restricted, at least in their “original,” that is, Sanskritic forms. They represent an elite, literate, Vaiṣṇava sort of *bhakti*; they do not exhibit the entirety of what *bhakti* can mean as a keyword in texts and practices known throughout India. Here is one of the central quandaries occupying the current volume. Although scholarly work typically associates *bhakti* with literary practices that signal the rise of devotional sentiment (often also marking the first or second literary layers of regional literatures⁶), many non-literary practices are also described as *bhakti*, including pilgrimage, daily worship, the repetition of a deity’s name or names, and so on. In practical terms, then, *bhakti* resists confinement to any particular action or utterance.

The history of the literary genealogy of *bhakti* is equally broad. Traces of *bhakti* exist as early as the *Ṛg Veda*, possibly composed toward the end of the second millennium BCE, where we find the variations of the verbal root *bhaj* appearing in the context of entreaties to particular deities such as Sarasvatī or, as in the Gāyatrī *mantra*, a call to the deity Savitṛ to protect a supplicant. But it is in a very early Buddhist text

that we find the first uses of the precise form *bhakti* as meaning “devotion” of some kind. In the *Theragāthā*, probably composed in the fourth century BCE, *bhakti* appears to indicate devotion to the way or “*dharma*”—another term that resists definition—of the Buddha. Here, as so frequently in later usage, *bhakti* connects the personal and the social, linking an individual to a shared social moral order (*dharma*). Around this period, the word also appears in the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* of Pāṇini indicating “devotion” to something, but not necessarily a deity. A general scholarly consensus sees the first full articulations of *bhakti* as the term is used today in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which was probably extrapolated from the *Mahābhārata* and composed around the beginning of the Common Era; in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*; and in the *Bhaktisūtras*, probably composed around the tenth century CE, not long after the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. These are all well-known and well-studied Sanskrit texts, yet regional languages also expressing sentiments associated with *bhakti* began to appear in South India in the middle of the first millennium CE. Tamil *bhakti* texts appear as early as the fifth century, and the next twelve hundred years see a long efflorescence of regional literatures throughout the subcontinent, within which the expression of *bhakti* appears a consistent and prominent feature.

Alongside this literary production, we can see a turn towards the physical representation of the public and devotional motivations of *bhakti* in the middle of the first millennium CE. At the end of the Gupta Empire (320–647) and in the reign of the Pallavas and the Pāṇḍyas in South India (fourth to tenth centuries), we see a surge in royally sponsored temple construction, the creation of “homes” for deities and loci for public worship. These provide at least one early context for the practices associated with *bhakti*, such as the process of making visual contact with a deity, or *darśan*, and the offering of goods to a deity’s image, or *pūjā*. These acts were replicated in homes, and the transformations of the public economy of worship bear some significant relationship to the development of regional literatures that take up the ethos of *bhakti*. In the midst of the cross-currents of regional literary developments and the opening of public economies of devotion, we seem to find the rudiments of public performative expressions of *bhakti*: the plays, dances, theatrics, and songs that have come to stand for *bhakti* in modern scholarly discourse.

Unifying the myriad forms that *bhakti* has historically taken and continues to take is the idea of a public, which I think of as a social unit created through shared cultural phenomena and reinforced by demonstrations in public of these shared cultural phenomena. Publics are not exclusive—indeed they can hardly be regulated at all. The idea of a (or “the”) public has a long history in Western theoretical writing and political life, ranging from Immanuel Kant’s (1995 [1784]) ideas about reason among a reading public, John Dewey’s (1927) ideas of public political deliberation, and Jürgen Habermas’s (1991 [1962]) influential theory of “the public sphere,” to the attribution of all kinds of opinions to the “public” by politicians and the metrics of public opinion employed by pollsters around the world.

The identification of publics in scholarship on South Asia is now a decades-long project. The fields of political studies and historical anthropology have provided the

most salient treatments of the functioning of publics. For example, the many publications by Paul Brass in political science (1974, 2003) have long engaged the formation of publics, as has more recent work, such as studies by Ashutosh Varshney (2003) on civil society. In historical anthropology, the work of Bernard Cohn (1996) pioneered a new genre of the study of publics and the colonial state. It has expanded in the work of scholars such as Nicholas Dirks⁷ and Arjun Appadurai,⁸ as well as more recent work by Sandria Freitag (1989), Anne Hardgrove (2004), and Douglas Haynes (1991) (see also Yandell and Paul 2000). We have the excellent work of Francesca Orsini (2002) on the Hindi public sphere in India, and Milind Wakankar (2003) has shown how *bhakti* figures such as Kabir appear there prominently. In this public sphere, *bhakti* can be integrated into ideas of what it is to be “Indian,” that is, into a discourse of nationalism, of *deś-bhakti*, both a devotion to the nation and a commitment to the public that comprises the nation.

When “publics” are introduced in the context of South Asia, it is usually as a description of some formulation of the public sphere and/or of public culture. In both cases the publics scrutinized tend to be set firmly within a designated modern period (usually the nineteenth century to the present). Given the intimate association between the rise of mass media, printing, and the nation that tends to characterize scholarship on the public sphere, the association with modernity makes sense.

The case of “public culture” is somewhat different. The genealogy of this term borrows something from the understanding of publics within political theory and the notion of the public as a sphere of social activity opposed to the private. But the major use of “public culture” appears to have begun with the second wave of cultural studies initiatives of the 1980s. Its distinction from the notion of a “public” in the political theoretical sense is its emphasis on a cultural studies or “culture as text” approach. Used by cultural studies predominantly (and by anthropologists, in principle), public culture seems to me to have become a study of modern, urban cultural forms in interstitial spaces: between the state and the individual, between political and popular culture, between the global and the local, between the modern and the traditional. Public culture is distinguished from the idea of the public sphere in at least two ways. The idea of the public sphere is what I would call highly genealogical in that the parameters of its debate, and the dialectic of the debate’s continuity, are located within the seminal work of Habermas. Following Habermas, the construction of the public sphere often relies upon at least the technologies of modernity (the printing press, and so on) if not a good number of its key forms (the nation, civil society, political life, and so on). Whatever the differences in these key terms in social theory, both tend to emphasize the modern: for the public sphere, the core features of modern social organization are a prerequisite, whereas for public culture, the interstices of modern life appear to be the generative site of study.

Like Subaltern studies, the study of public culture entered mainstream academia at the hands of South Asianist scholars. Though the term “public culture” predates its usage in the influential work of Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge (see Breckenridge 1995), through their stewardship of a series of influential publications

and journals,⁹ South Asia has remained a key site for the study of public culture in general.¹⁰ However, as I have said, these studies tend to remain within modernity, expressing the relationship between modern forms of the state (colonial or democratic) and publics, or within modern cultural formations like the public sphere. For this reason, though these excellent studies make lucid use of ideas about the public in modern contexts, they cannot provide a model for understanding *bhakti* in its broadest, historically richest manifestations. They stop short at the threshold between the pre-modern or non-modern and the modern.

In formulating a broader, usable outline of the idea of a public, we can turn to Michael Warner, who provides a description of a public similar to the use I make of the term here in the context of *bhakti*: “a public enables a reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity” (2005: 11–12). The circularity of this heuristic definition is purposeful and recalls the same kind of circularity as that used by Clifford Geertz (1973) to describe religion as a self-reinforced system of symbols, or a socially repetitive system, as in Peter Berger’s (1967) work, or as a principle of the “reflexive sociology” of the cultural field, as Pierre Bourdieu (1993) has described it. Importantly, however, Warner (2005: 15) makes plain what at least Geertz implies: the object of the belief, in this case of a public, is a fiction. It is not a physically demonstrable thing, like a state, village, township, or other polity; nor does it exist in a carefully constructed discourse, like a judiciary, a set of laws, or a dogma. A public relies as much on the imagination of each individual as on a collective agreement as to its existence. People must believe they are part of a public, and this gives it both its strength and its ephemeral quality.

Likewise, the public created when *bhakti* is invoked is ruled neither by dogma nor coercion, but made cohesive by a kind of social agreement. *Bhakti* indicates a practice of sharing, equal distribution, and mutual enjoyment, what Karen Prentiss calls “participation” (1999: 24), an interaction that suggests the “embodiment” of *bhakti* as a prerequisite for its practice. This is a crucial point when we are discussing systems of memory that are often extra-textual and appeal to people who are not literate or who do not engage with *bhakti* through literacy. Just as the public sphere requires literacy, the publics of *bhakti* in South Asia require “embodiment,” the human as medium. This very useful notion of “embodiment” does not simply exist as a trope of literature, but is deeply engaged in the performance of the discourse of *bhakti*. By “discourse” I mean the manifestations of *bhakti* not only in performance through song or literacy, but also through all those actions and bodily displays that make up *bhakti* in the broadest sense, such as those outlined above: pilgrimage, *pūjā*, *darśan*, the wearing of signs on the body, and so on. Embodiment, then, is not so much a technique of *bhakti* as its very epicenter: *bhakti* needs bodies. In other words, *bhakti* needs the medium of the living human or the remembered *bhakta* in hagiography, and the ways in which bodies are objects of public display hardly need rehearsing here (for example, Berlant and Warner 1998; Foucault 1995; Zito and Barlow 1994). There is then almost a symbiotic equation between *bhakti* and performance. At this confluence, a public is necessarily

created.

A *bhakti* public might have its precedent in what we might call the anthropological etymology of *bhakti*—“anthropological” because it involves some of the old-fashioned markers of community beloved of the anthropologist, like commensality. The sharing of food constitutes a significant form of *bhakti*, both in its earliest articulations in Sanskrit and throughout its literary and practical genealogy in India. We see it in the at least partial breaking of the taboos of caste commensality during pilgrimage and in the hagiographical and religious invocations of this act as a marker of the particular ethics of *bhakti*.¹¹ We also see this in the act of exchanging an item, often food, with a deity, since the recipients of such food typically belong to a number of otherwise well-defined commensal groups. *Prasād*, as it is called, is then often redistributed to friends and family. In this way *bhakti* shows a parallel with older Sanskritic uses of the word in the context of the preparation and distribution of food, which is one of the key anthropological markers of community, alongside marriage (Monier-Williams 1993: 743). As early as the *R̥g Veda*, the verbal root *bhaj* and its associated nouns, such as *bhakti* and *bhakta*, indicated the sharing, serving, and distributing of something, whereas in the *Manusmṛiti* and *Mahābhārata*, the noun *bhakta* indicated prepared or cooked food (Monier-Williams 1993: 743). Pāṇini uses the compound word *bhakta-kam̐sa* to indicate “a dish of food,” and many other compound words formed around *bhakta* relate to food preparation and distribution (Monier-Williams 1993: 743). One possible translation for *bhakti*, then, is “commensality,” the sharing of comestibles by a community as a way of marking their kinship. In this way, *bhakti* as the exchange of food becomes a metonym when applied to religious contexts. It takes on the meaning of sharing food, as a symbol of other kinds of social circulation, with both deity and fellow devotees. Here the comestible is “devotion” itself.

The word “public” often also marks places where the common good is situated. Unlike the term “popular,” which makes a utilitarian appeal to a majority, or the word “communal,” where the individual is subordinated to the whole, the idea of a public implies a measure of resistance to homogeneous social entities that cause the erasure of the individual. Note that I distinguish here between “a public” and “the public.” The latter designation, “the public,” implies homogeneity, often enforced or primarily influenced by the state. This is the public measured by pollsters and appealed to by politicians. It is also the public invoked by scholars of phenomena such as “the public sphere” and “public opinion.” This notion of the public is also usually associated almost exclusively with modernity.¹² In contrast, “a public” implies a much greater flexibility of social organization. Warner (2005: Chapter 2) outlines a handful of characteristics that help us identify “a public” when not qualified by its state-centered, hegemonic sense as “the public.” Warner conditions a public with these principles: publics (a) are self-organized; (b) exhibit a “relation among strangers”; (c) are both personal and impersonal in their address to an audience; (d) require “mere attention”; (e) construct a “social space...by the reflexive circulation of discourse”; (f) “act historically,” which is to say they address the issues of their time—they historicize themselves; and (g) enact a project of “poetic world-making,” which is to say that

publics give character to themselves and their participants, a character that is often then embodied in signs of dress and bodily display that recall the poetics of a public.

There is much in Warner's general rubrics that one can recognize when one thinks of *bhakti* as a public. We certainly have a long tradition of the poiesis of *bhakti*, much of which attempts to create "families" out of strangers, especially those made strangers by differences in caste, class, language, and religion. The circulation of a shared discourse that connects otherwise disparate *bhakti* traditions—such as the inter-relationship of the hagiographies of Kabīr and Nāmdev or the multiple emplotments of *bhakti* on the imagined map of pre-modern India—is also readily apparent. And the shared social space implied by these sorts of circulations is substantiated in pilgrimage and other religious gatherings where strangers make common cause and identify their commonality by means of the language of *bhakti*. On another front—the sixth of Warner's principles—many studies have shown how *bhakti* texts and practices invest themselves in their historical moments. The challenges faced by figures like Nāmdev, Nānak, and Kabīr at the hands of those who hold temporal authority immediately historicize issues of persecution and faith that would have remained current concerns after the purported lives of the *sants*. Indeed, the tendency to "act historically" is one of the key "pathologies" of texts such as these. Scholars who address them must grapple with long traditions of emendation and intercession upon the body of a *bhakti* text as it passes through time, as it continues to locate itself in reference to a changing stream of historical contexts (for more on this, see Callewaert and Lath 1989; Hawley 1984; Novetzke 2008). Warner provides a useful, but not comprehensive, set of standards that help us see the way *bhakti* can function as a public.

Bhakti traditions emphasize the social ethics that accompany the act of generating a public. We have seen this through the notion of sharing food, places, and time in religiously defined collectivities—performative moments, pilgrimage, the exchange of *prasād*, or the act of *pūjā*. Sometimes the creation of public spaces, especially temples, exemplifies this concern. Yet we also see the opposite tendency: to close temples to other religions or caste communities, or to refuse to eat with a member of another community or caste, even when engaged in a moment of *bhakti*—such as on a pilgrimage. The creation of shared publics is also always a creation of differences between different publics.¹³ As Warner has suggested, publics represent a communication among strangers, but this communication assumes a shared identity that can be differentiated from whatever is perceived about those who lack whatever is required to join the quality of the public in question.¹⁴ One sees the bifurcation of large social groups into communities designated Hindu and Muslim or Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva. The latter pair describes one of the key axes of difference that militates against the portrayal of *bhakti* as a unified "movement."¹⁵ A comprehensive history of the differences assumed or overlooked within the so-called "*bhakti* movement" is a narrative awaiting an author. Consider, for example, the history of divisiveness in the literature and politics of South India during the formative period of Tamil *bhakti* among *nāyanārs*, for example, where Jain, Buddhist, Vaiṣṇava, and Śaiva all stand at odds with one another. Or consider the long antagonism in Marathi religious history between the Vārkarīs and

the Mahānubhāvas. Both revere Kṛṣṇa in localized forms, and both devote ample literary energy to mutual ridicule. Also consider the history of the Kumbha Melā for examples of centuries of regularized bloodshed among Śaiva mendicants (see Pinch 1996, 2006).

Perhaps the most pernicious of these divisive uses of the *bhakti* public occurs when “Brāhmaṇ” and “non-Brāhmaṇ” are made to stand for social opposites. As one can see at various moments in the history and literary remnant of the Vārkarī tradition in Marathi, for example, a clear anti-Brāhmaṇ sentiment occurs in the works attributed to figures like Nāmdev (fourteenth century) and Tukārām (seventeenth century), and this sits alongside periods of upper-caste discrimination, such as one sees in the many centuries in which the Viṭṭhal temple in Pandhapur, under the management of a particular Brāhmaṇ community, refused entry to the lowest castes. Yet even among Vārkarī *sants* of Brāhmaṇical origin, the power of their voices in the creation of publics runs counter to exclusivity and caste elitism. Jñāndev (thirteenth century), though a Brāhmaṇ by birth, is remembered by some as having wrested that great articulation of *bhakti*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, from the confines of Sanskrit, rendering it for the first time into a regional language meant for the consumption of the “lowly” who otherwise would not have access to the text without Brāhmaṇical mediation.¹⁶ Eknāth (sixteenth century), also a Brāhmaṇ, is remembered to have been associated with a Šūfī order of the Deccan, and his remembrance in Marathi public culture features his engagement with the life of the non-elite, whose metaphors and performative cadences of labor appear in his speech. We can also see the formation of a new *bhakti* public around Śivājī, exemplified in the violence and censorship that followed the release of James Laine’s book in India in 2003 (for more on this, see Novetzke 2004). A new religion has been proposed by those who claim Śivājī as a champion of the lower castes, a religion in which they refuse the participation of Brāhmaṇs and draw deeply from a comingling of Vaiṣṇava Marathi *bhakti*, Marāṭhā militancy, and anti-Brāhmaṇical rhetoric.

Thus, publics in the context of *bhakti* are both created and opposed, they both unify and divide. Initially this fact seems to disallow the possibility of a single social movement configured around the idea of *bhakti* in India. Overall, the literature of *bhakti* defines its publics as inclusive, contrasting them to associations that form along lines of class and caste, which are their primary “others.” Yet exclusivity is also expressed through the media of *bhakti*—in practice if not in theory. The idea of a public allows us to engage both the inclusive and the exclusive assertions of the texts and practices associated with *bhakti* and allows for social effects of both kinds.

Let me give an example of what I mean here from my work on Nāmdev. The need for observers and participants is perhaps most apparent when Nāmdev enacts any kind of performance, primarily *kīrtan*, which he does with regularity both in songs attributed to him and in his received biography (see Novetzke 2003). Throughout Nāmdev’s songs in Marathi, one finds the invocation of the public, or *loka*, a noun almost always indicating the plural, the receptive public at large. The *loka* are often the addressees of Nāmdev’s verses, and within songs he calls upon them to listen or

witness. This is not a theorized social entity, but rather a surrounding social force with which Nāmdev’s songs and biography interact and take shape. His audience becomes transformed into the *loka*, the public that receives his legacy long after he is said to have died. Here we find the second meaning of *loka* in Marathi, indicating “the world,” but a human world, not a physical one. This second meaning of *loka* depends on the first to impart its sense of a human field of reception and interaction and one unmarked by caste, class, or gender. What makes a *loka* in Nāmdev’s verses is the human world alert to its own inward, referential gaze. We find the word *loka* designating either the first person plural, as in “We people do this,” or the third person plural: “That is the practice of those people.” The public as expressed through this term creates both self and other. The *loka* form the audience of *bhakti*, both in Nāmdev’s songs and in Marathi scholarship about Nāmdev; without this audience, Nāmdev’s *bhakti* would remain silent, unrecalled, and lost to time. *Bhakti* without an audience, without a *loka*, has no meaning.

A famous passage often used to evoke the seamless unity of *bhakti* over time and place personifies *bhakti* as a woman. She grows old and withers as she moves northward, but she also blossoms anew as she follows that same course.¹⁷ The connotation of gender here is particularly interesting: as the old cliché of anthropology suggests, women preserve culture, and they do so within the “private” realm of public culture; we might notice, without taking it too seriously, that *bhakti* is a feminine noun. Female sex and sexuality have long been sites for the inscription of patriarchy, as is well known, and this means both the homogenization of what it is to be female universally and the absolute heterogeneity of each woman, as marked in relation to some specific patriarchal system. Something similar is perhaps implied in this gendered view of the career of *bhakti*: a transmission over time and space that could be claimed universally but marked with the minutiae of place and time in any given context. In this sense, *bhakti* never achieves a hegemonic status in any place or time, as do categories like *dharma*, but rather permeates and inflects regional variations on the theme of constructing publics of worship. Likewise in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when *bhakti* enters the Indian public sphere (in the Habermasian sense), it comes to stand for unity, for both “love of the nation” and, configured as “movement,” as a social force that has unified a religiously striated culture. Yet it is used by the hegemonic discourse of “nation” and in the service of a nascent state, not as a historically sound interpretation of a social movement on its own. As in the past, *bhakti* in the post-colonial period is often marshaled to form publics, an act that narrowly misses crossing the boundary of social secularism, a mandate of the Indian constitutional state.

Similarly, in contemporary scholarship, we can see social forces shaping our conceptions of *bhakti*. Is it a coincidence that in the context of colonialism and early modernity, *bhakti* would be described as a “Protestant” movement? Or that so many scholars who entered their professions as members of highly politicized university environments of the 1960s and 1970s should find in *bhakti* a call to “social protest”? Or that some members of the Subaltern Studies Collective, writing in the context of the great post-modern moment and the rejuvenation of a Neo-Marxism in scholarship,

have seen *bhakti* through the lens of old-school Marxism, where religion will always be exploited by the elite to subjugate the powerless, but religion will therefore also regularly form the content of the language that the subaltern throws back at the elite (see Novetzke 2006)? Is it a coincidence that I should see as fruitful an engagement with key words of contemporary cultural theory, such as “public culture” or “memory” or “subaltern,” and see in these theoretical terms a convincing explanation for the force of an ancient pan-Indian term such as *bhakti*?

Anachronisms and interpolations have long bedeviled the philological study of religion, so much a part of the presence of *bhakti* in academic and popular discourse. Some observers might feel that ascribing to *bhakti* the status of a modern social movement or the character of a public-producing social phenomenon is just one more shift away from the *ur*-text, from what *bhakti* “really is.” But my concern here is not with origins but with process, not historical fact but discourse (communication and power conjoined), not any material product (a single text or practice) but the motivation of *bhakti* as a social act. Even when one takes this view, however, *bhakti* emerges as being no more a social movement in India than love is a social movement in America and Europe. Instead, *bhakti* serves as a subject of a complex series of performances and mutual interactions that divides and unites, crosses all sorts of borders and time periods, and remains fully intact only to the extent that its own finite, largescale conception allows it to ride above particular social historical instantiations. *Bhakti* is a locus for the creation of publics, not the formation of a single social or literary movement. But publics can, in turn, portray *bhakti* in any way that serves the constituency of a particular public: as a social movement, as a personal communication with God, or as a Protestant revolution, a nationalist focal point, or a system of social protest. The genealogy that constructs *bhakti* as a “social movement” is the genealogy of one of the many publics produced by *bhakti* over millennia. It has its roots in colonialism, Orientalist scholarship, and the Indian independence movement, on the one hand, and the rise of sociology and structural analysis of cultures in Euro-American scholarship of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, on the other. But the “*bhakti* movement” is not a fabrication of the colonial and post-colonial period. The *bhakti*-as-woman metaphor cited above shows us that possibly as early as the sixteenth century, *bhakti* was understood in a cosmopolitan, transregional way in India, as a means of absorbing differences caused by regional variation.

The project of challenging the common scholarly understanding of *bhakti* as a “movement” is important, not just for the way it can supply historically accurate portrayals of India’s religious and literary past, but also for the way it illuminates the motivations that lie behind our current scholarly conventions. Several scholars have engaged the fallacy of a “*bhakti* movement” in print: Sharma (1987) is perhaps the most forceful, albeit polemical, and Prentiss (2001) is the most nuanced. Both scholars break down the historical construction of *bhakti* as a simple social movement, noticing how it actually serves to unite two broad, discursive projects that are substantially different. The first was to establish the similarity between the challenge that regional *bhakti* traditions posed to cosmopolitan Sanskrit culture, on the one

hand, and the challenge of regional Protestant traditions to the Roman Catholic Church, on the other. Colonial scholars first promoted this parallel, but it served the purposes of Indian social and political activists as well. The second project noticed by Sharma and Prentiss also sought connections between Hindu *bhakti* and the Protestant Reformation, but was far more specifically an effort by Indian nationalists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to use *bhakti* as a paradigm for a social movement whose historical fulfillment was the national, transregional identity of India, unified under the banner of “Saints of the Nation.” In both cases, the Orientalist trace of scholarship so familiar from Edward Said and his contemporary scholarly genealogy tracks the way an “academic” idea (one pairing missionary concerns with the production of early colonial knowledge) becomes a bedrock for an Indian “indigenous” idea shared by many of the “neo-Hindu” leaders. The irony of the transmission of knowledge into shifting spheres of power is perfectly natural in the colonial context, as many post-colonial scholars have endeavored to show. The relationship of knowledge to power is a variable that can be manipulated. Mountstuart Elphinstone seemed aware of this very specific threat to Empire when in October 1819 he wrote a personal letter of concern to Captain Francis Irvine of the Eleventh Regiment of the Bengal Native Infantry in Calcutta, concluding:

I have often considered the state of our Empire in India & it has always appeared to me that...it would probably stand for a long time unless chance should raise up some false prophet who should unite a plan for the reformation of the existing religion with one for the deliverance of the country from foreigners (cited in Ballhatchet 1957: 248–49).

One might hear in this the veiled threat of a figure like Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), who, though a darling of the British Empire, provided the archetype for the devout, yet thoroughly modern and British, Hindu subject. It was, after all, Roy who first used that enigmatic term “Sanatāna Dharma” in a politico-religious context, stripping it of its very particular meanings in texts such as the *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Manusmṛti* (see Halbfass 1988). Elphinstone was likewise forecasting generations of leaders, from Svāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī and Svāmī Vivekānanda to Aurobindo Ghose and from Mohandas K. Gandhi to Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and Keshav Baliram Hedgewar. They would all display the characteristics of education and nativistic pride that Elphinstone attributed to his portentous “false prophet.” In all these figures one sees the imbrication of scholarship and politics, and many drew from the body of modern scholarly literature that had wedded *bhakti* to a social movement, meant to provide emancipation either from perceived Brāhmaṇical hegemony or from economic and political colonialism. The project initiated here by Jack Hawley to interrogate claims made about *bhakti* is vital because it recalls that scholarship is not simply “academic” but has some effect in the world. Today the idea of a *bhakti* movement and of all the *bhakti* figures it encompasses are used by actors across the political spectrum in India, Left to Right.

It is present in the homes and personal lives of Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains, as in the public lives of voters, activists, and *sevaks*. For all the good that the invocation of *bhakti* in the Indian public sphere can do—as it assisted in the nationalist endeavor to end the exploitation of colonialism—it can also marshal the “faithful” to commit atrocities against others, as in Bombay in 1992–93 and in Gujarat in 2002. Here, as we have seen earlier, *bhakti* is again the empty vessel into which both nectar and poison can be poured. The power of *bhakti* as a concept for the formulation of publics is precisely this dual ability: both to be exceedingly specific, targeting the community, ethnicity, sect, nation, polity, or even individual; yet also to be exceptionally general, uniting and even co-opting through spreading outward from its nebulous, never-defined core.

The question, “the *bhakti* movement—says who?” has its answer in these and other discourses where we can see who indeed “says” there is a *bhakti* movement at a particular time and for an identifiable purpose. People write, speak, perform, and represent such a movement at specific points in time and space and thus make it real in a social sense, but not in a transcendent one. At present, for example, a major lacuna in the rich scholarship on *bhakti* is the presence of Islam, specifically of Sufism, a lacuna that may be a product of the narrowing of historical vision that results from seeing “Hinduism” as a religion and *bhakti* as a movement. Instead, one could talk of localized, specific publics of *bhakti* that are as much “Hindu” as they are “Muslim”—or indeed neither. Similarly, much work remains to be done on historical and contemporary (primarily political) uses of *bhakti* to set caste communities against each other along the axes of “high” and “low” or “Brāhmaṇical” and “Dalit” or “OBC.” Indeed, rather than Hindu-Muslim antagonism, the primary locus of public political tension across India for decades to come will be caste, and into this cauldron we can expect expressions of *bhakti* as caste difference to be poured. When we talk of a “*bhakti* movement” we are identifying—perhaps even representing—one of many publics that have received this ancient word in a particular way, a public of which we, as scholars, form an important part in the present. My point in this essay has not been to prove or disprove this question of whether *bhakti* is a “movement,” but to attend to the “who” in Hawley’s question. I have suggested that the multiple manifestations of *bhakti* in South Asian history are predicated on asking the same questions: who says? And, just as importantly, who listens?

Notes

1. My thanks to Jack Hawley, Sunila S. Kale, and Whitney Cox.
2. The orthodox theories of *rasa* debate but exclude *bhakti* as a *rasa*, but certain Vaiṣṇava theologians argue that *bhakti* is a *rasa*, particularly within the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition. In the Marathi songs attributed to Nāmdev, he often refers to the *rasa* of *bhakti*, but this is of course in a very non-technical way.
3. In Kabīr’s case the punishments also include being bound in chains and thrown into a river and being set on fire!

4. In this section I draw on Novetzke (1999).

5. At the time of writing, no good study exists of Mahīpati's work, though Justin Abbott's translations are available in English.

6. Compare Pollock (1998), where he argues that royal and courtly discourse in regional languages preceded religious discourse for the most part.

7. Dirks has explored the relationship between caste, colonialism, and public displays of status in *The Hollow Crown* (1987) and more recently has studied the reinscription of caste in Indian public culture through the hegemonic ordering of social forms in the colonial period in *Castes of Mind* (2001).

8. Appadurai has explored publics or public culture in a number of venues, for example, *Worship and Conflict Under Colonial Rule* (1981) and *Modernity at Large* (1996).

9. In addition to their numerous independent publications, Appadurai and Breckenridge founded the journal *Public Culture* in 1988.

10. What one might call a competing tradition of the study of public culture exists in Australian cultural studies, inaugurated by the work of Horne (1986).

11. Caste commensality is as much maintained as transgressed in pilgrimage settings, but I have yet to encounter a *bhakti* text that lauds caste commensality as a virtue of *bhakti*. See Karve (1962).

12. This is almost universally true, even in influential studies of publics, especially public culture and the public sphere, in South Asia, such as those conducted by Appadurai and Breckenridge, Freitag, Hardgrove, Haynes, Orsini, and others (see Yandell and Paul 2000). Warner, while not discussing South Asia, is equivocal on the historical emergence of publics. Sometimes he attributes them to modernity, and at other times he professes ignorance about the issue in non-Western, non-modern contexts. In my reading, there is nothing about "a public" in Warner's formulation that fixes the phenomenon in modernity, nor aligns it necessarily with notions of public culture shared by the authors cited above. By contrast, the public sphere, if one follows Habermas, is by its definition a modern phenomenon, bounded by the same conditions as the idea of the nation or of history, for example.

13. When this difference takes the form of a public in opposition to "the public," Warner (2005: Chapter 2) and others have described this as a "counterpublic," though I do not find this term nearly as helpful as his ideas about publics in general.

14. In America, for example, the "voting public" is also divided into the publics that represent "conservative" and "liberal" voters. Likewise media are divided. The conservative public reads *The National Review*, while the liberal public reads *The Nation*; the conservative public watches Fox News; the liberal public, The News Hour, and so on.

15. Many more examples can be found within very specific traditions. See, for example, Carman's (2000) essay on schisms among Śrī Vaiṣṇavas.

16. Here I am referring to the *Bhāvārthadīpikā* attributed to Jñāndev, who is also known as "Jñāneśvar" and hence the text is in Marathi popularly called the *Jñāneśvarī*.

17. See the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya* (seventeenth century?), a text also attributed to the *Padma Purāṇa*.

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