

**'Speaking Truth to Power'**  
Religion, Caste, and the Subaltern Question in India

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of the democratic nation and thus is subjected to the same criticisms.<sup>1</sup> Yet sustained engagements with humanism in the context of modern Indian public culture are rare. This essay is a brief dip into this relatively still water.

Many key European and early American political philosophers of the nation, such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), David Hume (1711–66), Thomas Paine (1737–1809), Ernest Renan (1823–92), and John Stuart Mill (1806–73), were also humanists. Likewise, many of the significant figures of Indian nationalism were associated with humanism by declaration or proclivity: Rammohan Roy (1772–1803), who founded the Brahma Samaj; Vivekananda (1863–1902), founder of the Ramakrishna Mission and the Vedanta Society; Syed Ahmed Khan (1817–98), founder of the Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental College; Annie Besant (1847–1933); Debendranath (1817–1905) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941); Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938); Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1948); Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964); and Mohammed Ali Jinnah (1876–1948), to name only a few. The language of the nation was shared by elites, whether in Europe, India, or America, and this was also often the language of humanism.

Although the idea of humanism has received little attention from postcolonial scholars of South Asia, there are a few important exceptions, such as Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak. Both authors explore humanism in the context of colonialism as one of the defining ideas of western modernity and historiography. Spivak finds in humanism a self-serving explanation for the creation of colonial markets and the spread of imperial 'democracy' in the colonial period as she deconstructs many of the primary statements of western humanism from the late eighteenth to the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Guha (1993) turns to a familiar source in India, one of the final articulations of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, the *Dharmatattva*, published in 1888, and finds in it a 'challenge to the universal pretensions of Western humanism' and hence to universal history; Guha thus presents Chattopadhyay's collection of essays as a brief example of the 'prose of counterinsurgency' enunciated by a figure positioned as 'subaltern' in the context of colonial hegemony, but of a class and social position in India that allowed him the power to 'speak', an impossibility for the quotidian subaltern, as Spivak's famous essay asserts (in Nelson and Grossberg 1988). What Guha chooses not to emphasize in his treatment of *Dharmatattva* is

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### HUMANISM, RELIGION, AND THE NATION Sant Namdev as a *Mānavatāvādīn*

*Christian Lee Novetzke*

Postcolonial scholarship has powerfully critiqued the modern discourse of nationalism and its forms of democratic humanism as they were perverted in the colonial context, often refigured by colonialist thinkers to justify colonialism's rapaciousness. Given the deep investment with the idea of the nation among scholars of postcolonialism, we find the notion of humanism sometimes drawn up and quartered. On the one hand, humanism in this context has been subjected to the critiques of postmodernity (most explicitly attributed to Foucault 1966), which has so deeply influenced postcolonial scholarship from Said (1978) on down. In this context, what is often described as postmodernity's 'anti-humanism' attacks the idea of the human good residing at the heart of western moral philosophy and statecraft. On the other hand, postcolonial scholars have linked their criticism of western humanism to the way the postcolonial nation has been 'imagined' (see Anderson 1983) or 'derived' (see Chatterjee 1986, 1993) vis-à-vis western hegemonic modernity and political philosophy. The inadequacies of the western nation-form in these contexts are matched to a suspicion of western humanism. In both the political genealogy of the nation-state in Europe and the scholarly genealogy that surrounds the nation as a key term, the idea of humanism, and in particular, secular humanism, arises as inherently linked to the ethic

Chattopadhyay's resonant use of bhakti or devotionalism in his formulation of a uniquely Hindu and Indian humanism. Indeed, one could read *Dharmattva* as more explicitly about a recovery of the term 'bhakti' in a new global context than a challenge to western ideas of 'humanism'.<sup>3</sup> Despite these strong denunciations of western humanism by two key figures of the postcolonial study of South Asia, Indian nationalists, literary critics, and others in the Indian public sphere generally have used the term in a more nuanced way.

A brief treatment of one example of the meeting of western humanism with 'Hindu' devotionalism, bounded not by colonialism but rather by a postcolonial context, is the aim of this essay in honour of Eleanor Zelliot. In order to focus the essay, I will engage with two subjects well-observed by Zelliot. The first is the legacy of the Marathi Vārkarī tradition, a subject Zelliot has studied in detail. In particular, I will look at the remembrance of one key figure, Namdev, who is attributed to the fourteenth century and is said to have been both a friend to, and the key hagiographer of Cokhamela, the first 'Untouchable' or Mahār sant-poet in Marathi, about whom Eleanor Zelliot has eloquently written.<sup>4</sup> Namdev is remembered as having been born a tailor or Sīmpī, and hence as being a 'Śūdra' according to the Brahmanical varṇa echelon. In Indian public memory, he is portrayed as having travelled all over India, composing in Punjabi, Hindi, and other languages as well as in Marathi, and thus he is vital not just to Maharashtra's religious life, but also to Dādū Panthīs, Kabīr Panthīs, Sikhs, and others in northern India. The second subject, then, will be the subaltern or Dalit (a term Zelliot would prefer) perspective that is recovered from this historical voice, and how this voice is articulated in the language of humanism in English and its equivalent in Marathi, *mānavatāvāda*. We will see how, both by critics and in Marathi public culture, Namdev's humanism has been imagined to be part of the proto-history of the Indian nation and part of the long history of expressing Dalit concerns in Marathi cultural contexts.

In the later years of the independence movement and in the postcolonial period in India, particularly from the middle of the 1960s onwards, Namdev increasingly entered the Indian public sphere (in English, Hindi, and Marathi) as a national 'integrator', or a 'saint of the nation' (*rāṣṭriya sant*). This was due to biographical and ethical features of his remembrance, especially his legendary travels throughout India in the fourteenth century and the social egalitarianism of his community

of fellows, which is remembered to have consisted of Brahmans, Śūdras, and Untouchables, men and women, Marathi-speakers and others. His position within a larger pantheon of proto-nationalist heroes was framed by the ideals of Gandhian pluralism, Nehruvian social democracy, and a kind of Hindu secularism or Hindu modernity, of which Gandhi is also emblematic. In contrast to this politically centrist lineage of secular and religious humanism, Namdev has not maintained much social capital in the world of majoritarian Hindu politics espoused by the Hindu Right under the rubric of Hindutva. This is important because Namdev's position within one articulation of the Indian nation is 'humanistic', not religiously chauvinistic, and this contrast highlights the way humanism in the Indian public sphere can map onto one popular representation of modern Hinduism worldwide, that of a 'tolerant' and accommodating religion. Discussions of religion, politics, and nationalism in India, as well as elsewhere in the world, are often dominated by a discourse of extremism, fundamentalism, and the forces of the radical Right within the political spectrum. But religion also has a strong effect on the politics and nationalist imagination of more centrist political actors, an interaction regularly overlooked by scholars and critics of contemporary politics in India. Instead, when one sees 'religion' and 'nation' or 'politics' together, one often assumes a Rightist ideology, but the discourse on humanism contradicts this assumption. The fields of religion and nation conjoined come to characterize Namdev's legacy in the public sphere of central, western, and northern India from the twentieth century to the present, and this characterization is championed by the same social and political forces that espouse secularism, humanism, and democratic socialism.

One can see this invocation of the religious genealogy of the Indian nation in a 'Hindu secularist' mode in multiple ways. For example, in 1964 the Government of India commissioned a series of lectures on issues of national cultural cohesion, which were later aired on All India Radio and published by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. These lectures commemorated the legacy of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (1875–1950), a freedom fighter, nationalist leader, and chief architect of India's post-independence integration of princely states into the new state-union of India. One of the lectures, delivered by V. Raghavan, a Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Madras, concerned a pan-Indian hagiography that reflected the activities of 'great integrators' among the 'saint-singers of India' (1966: 15). Namdev appears in

Raghavan's roster of integrators (1966: 123–8), which includes Tukaram (seventeenth century), Ramdas (seventeenth century), and Jnandev (thirteenth century) from Maharashtra, with the other saints and holy figures drawn from all regions of the modern nation. Namdev here is positioned as a cosmopolitan, polyglot Maharashtrian in the national imagination of India, and his presence in national public memory is due to several facets of his legacy, the core of which must consist of the legend of the sant's travels. This is the root of his position as an 'integrator' of literary devotionalism in central, western, and northern India over the past seven centuries, of the so-called 'bhakti movement', and by extension, of India as a Hindu secularist nation.

The public memory of Namdev's travels is found more as the 'background' story to the wide circulation of his songs and biography in central, western, and northern India, and less in any specific text that recounts this voyage. Indeed, the most common source for Namdev's travels, the *Tīrthāvalī*, can be found in almost all editions of Namdev's verses in Marathi, yet the story itself only hints at travel outside the immediate area of Pandharpur. Whatever travel is narrated in this version finds its completion within the first third of the story, and takes the protagonists (Namdev and Jnandev) no further than Dwarka before they return to Pandharpur. This most common version of the *Tīrthāvalī* is a cautionary tale *against* pilgrimage to any place other than Pandharpur, and is difficult to read as a story that presents a 'united' India.

A second, little-studied version of the *Tīrthāvalī*, which dates to 1581 CE and has almost never appeared in print,<sup>5</sup> seems to contain the only textual account of this remembered pan-Indian voyage. In the popular story of Namdev's journey, which is detailed in this version of the *Tīrthāvalī*, the sant does literally chart out the contours of what would become the modern Indian nation, going no further to the northwest than Rajasthan and no further east than Puri, thus avoiding what would become the postcolonial nations of Pakistan and Bangladesh while voyaging as far north as the Tibetan plateau, near Nepal, and to the southernmost town of Kanyakumari. Furthermore, Namdev's travels do enact a *pradakṣiṇā* of the 'heart' of India, which is to say he charts a clockwise course consistent with ritual practice at temples and other holy sites, and this pattern has been read by some scholars and popular writers as a prognostic benediction of the Indian nation—one encapsulated by a 'saint of the nation' and of 'national integration',

not of Hindu chauvinism. Writing the preface for the Maharashtra state-sponsored *Nāmdēv Gāthā* in 1970, the Minister of Education M.D. Chaudhari asserted that Namdev had circumscribed the territory of 'the heart of India' (*āntara bhārātī*) through his travels.<sup>6</sup> One Marathi yogi and *kīrtan*kār, K.G. Wankhade, even embarked on a journey to retrace Namdev's footsteps throughout India as a living symbol of Namdev's nationalist proclivities.

The 'truth' of this story in Indian public memory is not invested in any recorded version of the *Tīrthāvalī*. Instead, what gives credence to the idea of Namdev's ability to integrate the Indian nation is the distribution of his legend in hagiography and his songs in various regional literatures, and the physical presence of sites of remembrance, *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1989), throughout India. The sites of memory that make up the historiographic cairns of Namdev's legacy also mark the domain of influence of the sant's 'humanism'.

Amid numerous celebrations and symposia held across India in 1970, a number of publications heralded Namdev's importance in the history of the nation, phrased in vaguely religious terms. The Maharashtra Information Center and the Government Central Press of Maharashtra produced a short essay in English on Namdev by the Marathi scholar M.A. Karandikar. The preface to the essay sums up the contents of its thirty pages:

National integration is the need of the hour and Saint Namdev by virtue of his crossing the linguistic and geographical barriers to enlighten the people in areas far away from Maharashtra can truly be called Apostle of National Integration (Karandikar 1970: i–ii).

Intertwined in this simple description is a unified idea of religion, secularism, and nationalism that came to characterize the post-Nehruvian period of Congress rule at the Centre and in many states. I would describe this idea as Hindu secularism. It is similar to the secularism of the United States, which remains deeply characterized by Christianity, heard in common mottoes such as 'One Nation Under God' and 'In God We Trust', yet is ideally set at a safe distance from actual Christian practice, which would be characterized as the 'Religious Right' or Christian fundamentalism. Karandikar uses terms that reference Western Christianity, such as 'saint' and 'apostle', yet these religious appellations are applied to 'national integration' across boundaries of

language and geography, the secular map of a nation. This statement was made almost two decades before the full rise of the Hindu Right in Indian national politics, when political discourse indulging in religious metaphors was replaced by the explicit public use of religion, and particularly chauvinistic Hinduism, in ways far removed from the impulse of 'national integration'.

Namdev's influence within the trajectory of the Indian nation certainly might appear to be a form of 'religious nationalism'. However, the kind of religious nationalism associated with Namdev is not that of the so-called Hindu Right. Instead, Namdev's legacy constitutes one of many 'secret histories', as Partha Chatterjee uses the term, of the Indian nation embedded in a field often identified by Western scholars and others as 'spiritual' or 'religious', but by reference to sentiment rather than doctrinal content. In this case, Namdev's religious contribution to the nation suggests one of the key features of Hindu secularism in general, a reference to the ethics of humanism, a notion that in Western history has its own long and complicated relationship to Christian thought.

Several key elements of Namdev's hagiography appear to have become seamlessly enmeshed in the eighteenth century and carried into the twentieth century. What is worthy of preservation from this earlier hagiographical tradition is the general character of Namdev as a figure who represents the downtrodden, helpless, landless, and powerless, and whose position is reinforced by caste and class—a position designated in contemporary scholarship as 'subaltern'. Yet this designation in the Marathi public sphere, when associated with bhakti figures, is also conditioned by a sense that humanism or mānavatāva is defined in relation to the subjectivity of the subaltern, not the elite; to be a humanist, in this sense, is to suffer the pains of human life without the mediation or comforts afforded by wealth and power. It is the humanism at the root of Nehruvian socialism or within Ambedkar's repeated efforts to legislate amelioration for Dalits under the rubric of 'Scheduled Castes and Tribes'. In both cases, Indian humanism visualizes a particular kind of ethical analeptic state that is influenced by a nation largely composed of those who have suffered the domination of colonialism, caste discrimination, or other kinds of oppression. The Indian nation-state, though imagined by its most elite members, projected a vision of itself as subaltern from its very inception in the early twentieth century and its actual political creation in 1947, thus wedding

a particular kind of Indian humanism with the unique Indian state newly engendered.

Namdev's mānavatāva is expressed in two ways: through the ascription to him of opposition to caste, class, or gender discrimination; and through a motif, which I feel is in part borrowed from Kabir because of its relatively late appearance in Namdev's pan-Indian hagiography, that Namdev assuaged the rivalries of Hindus and Muslims. In a volume of Marathi essays published in 1970 by the Government of Maharashtra and intended as a companion to its edition of Namdev's songs, Dhananjay Keer writes of the 'Humanist Namdev' that his travels throughout India served to 'spread the light of wisdom'. This refers to an oft-quoted verse attributed to Namdev in which he proclaims, 'let's dance with passion in the *kīrtan*, and spread the light of wisdom in the world' (Kavitkar *et al.* 1970: 111). Keer cites Marathi and Hindi songs that reiterate Namdev's lowly status, his opposition to Brahmanical orthodoxy and orthopraxy, his rejection of caste and class, and his inclusive social politics. Keer quotes a Hindi song attributed to Namdev, 'My caste is low and debased, Lord of Pandhari. Why did you make Nama the Tailor this way?' (*ibid.*: 112). In a Marathi verse, contained in manuscripts from the eighteenth century, Keer quotes, 'These [Hindu] Gods, they are broken by the Turks, drowned in water [by Hindus], yet they never utter a single complaint.'<sup>7</sup> While this song, also present in the Marathi corpus, is clearly of the *nirgunī* variety, it is often used to express Namdev's 'balanced' assessment of orthodox religious culture: he is neither dogmatically Hindu nor sympathetic to dogmatic Islam.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Ashok Kamat and R.C. Dhare quote a Hindi song attributed to Namdev, 'Hindus worship in the temple and Muslims in the mosque. Namdev happily serves the lord, neither in the temple nor in the mosque,' (Kamat and Dhare 1970: 105) a couplet that one would not be surprised to find within Kabir's corpus of songs.<sup>9</sup> The demonstration of Namdev's 'non-denominational' position, entwined with the biographical persona of Kabir, is implied in another quotation: 'Hindus are blind and Turks can't see straight. A smart man is better than both' (*ibid.*). Namdev here is carefully construed as someone who worships humanity itself.

In a copious collection of essays entitled *Śrī Nāmdēv Darśan*, D.K. Sant wrote an essay on 'Namdev's Humanism' (Relekar *et al.* 1970: 712–26). Sant attributes to Namdev a sentiment of temporality or worldliness (*aīhikata*) that helped develop a sense of the historical

(*aitihāsik*) in India. The author insists that Namdev assisted Maharashtra in becoming part of the nation of India by balancing cosmopolitanism and regionalism in his own biography and corpus of verses, a balance made with the help of a historical impulse. Sant also draws a striking analogy, asserting that Namdev was the Erasmus of Maharashtra, thus making the connection with humanism unmistakable (ibid.: 715–16). Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus (1466–1536) was a Dutch philosopher whom many consider to have been the founding voice of modern humanistic thought. The comparison between him and Namdev is made on the basis of several perceived similarities. Both figures were considered devout in their faiths, but were also reformers; both travelled widely—Erasmus lived in the areas of the modern-day nations of the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, and England; both composed in several languages.

Yet what was particular about the *mānavatāvāda* Namdev espoused? It sometimes rejected orthodox Islamic and Hindu practice, perhaps, but was surely invested with Hindu religious language and actions. What kind of nation is imagined through the eyes of Namdev's humanism? In order to answer these questions, I would like to turn to two films about Namdev produced within the context of his invocation as a representative of humanism and nationalism, that is, within the latter half of the twentieth century. Rather than using songs attributed to him or biographies of him written before the twentieth century, I refer to film in order to maintain a historically consistent context and to comment on the way Namdev's legacy is invoked in public memory. The 'modern' portrayal of Namdev, in the modern medium of film, is one of the best ways to see the interaction of humanism and nationalism in the legacy of the sant.

Keshav Talpade made *Sant Namdev* in 1949, two years after Independence. *Sant Namdev* represented a departure for this Marathi director, who was more famous for his large-scale commercial Hindi film, the Fearless-Nadia hit *Tigress* (1948). Produced in a period of uncertainty about the shape of the future constitution of India and the division of its states, the film, though invoking a figure of the fourteenth century, appears to engage concerns of the twentieth century. By noticing these concerns, we can see how Namdev's humanism was imagined.

Talpade's film begins in an undisclosed narrative time in the context of a kīrtan; this immediately marks the moralizing ethos of the film.

In Marathi a kīrtan is a performance of song, dance, exposition, and music that focuses on the hermeneutics of a particular verse or moment from the life of a sant, presented to elucidate some moral position. Namdev is considered the first Marathi kīrtan performer, and this narrative entrée suggests a link to him as well as a link to the ethical injunctions the audience is about to receive. In other words, the film is contextualized by delivering Namdev's humanistic message itself.

Namdev is first portrayed as a child, various stories are recounted, and we meet the adult sant at the door of the Viṭthal temple, where he and others are denied entry by a group of Brahmans who are counting bags of money. They lock the door to the temple to be sure the Śūdra stays out. Namdev stands forlornly at the door and sings to Viṭthal a song about how the deity saves the fallen and most wretched of the world: 'Hearing the name of the One Who Saves the Fallen (*patitapāvan*), I have come to the door [of the temple]. But because He is not there I have turned back again' (NG: 659, song 1691, verse 1). Abandonment by one's deity is a perennial theme in bhakti throughout India, and Namdev voices this anxiety here. At the song's conclusion, the doors open, to the amazement of all, including the Brahman priests. This episode does not appear in Namdev's received biography. Instead it seems to invoke debates about temple entry for low-caste and Untouchable Hindus. In early 1950 the Indian Constitution was ratified, carrying with it in Article 25 the mandate to allow Hindus of all castes free access to temples. As we will see, this film reinvents many aspects of Namdev's remembrance in order to address issues that pertain to the film's present.

Intervening scenes depict Namdev's family life, made difficult by economic hardship, until the narrative introduces a key figure in Namdev's public memory, his orthodox Brahmanical interlocutor, Parisa Bhagavat. The two carry out a debate about caste difference. In this debate, well-documented in Namdev's literary corpus, Namdev betters the Brahman, who hurriedly leaves the scene humiliated. In Talpade's film, Parisa is not fully redeemed; he is merely humiliated into renouncing his casteism. In other words, the tide of public opinion, represented by the many observers of the debate (and, by extension, the viewers of the film), turns against the Brahman and his orthodox position. The encounters between Namdev and Parisa Bhagavat were important enough to the film's appeal that the producers used a still from one of these scenes for publicity purposes (Fig. 2.1).

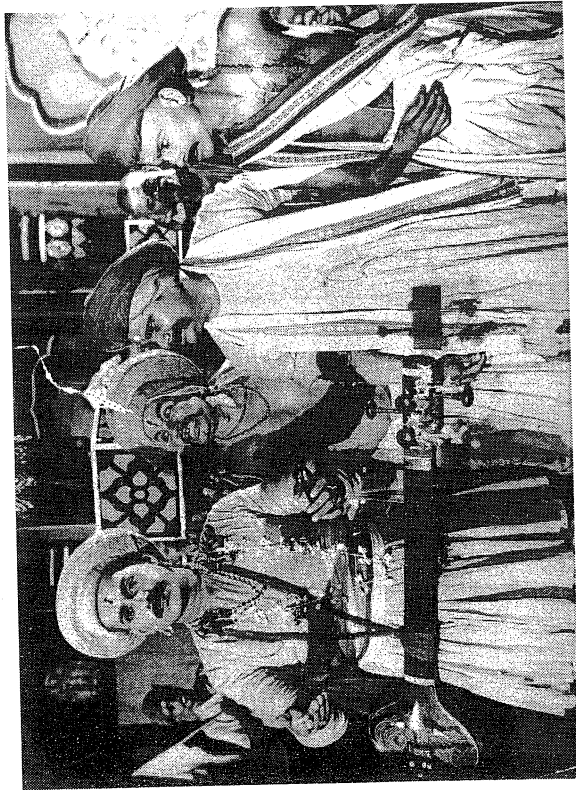


Fig. 2.1 Encounter between Sant Namdev and Parisa Bhagavat. Still from Talpade, *Sant Namdev*, 1949. Courtesy: National Film Archives of India

This particular encounter solidifies the non-Brahman character of this film. Following the assassination of M.K. Gandhi on 30 January 1948 by a Maharashtrian Brahman, Nathuram Godse, India saw riots and violence directed at Brahmans, in rural areas as well as in cities like Bombay and Pune. Marathi anti-Brahman sentiment has a long history, including among such social luminaries as Jotirao Phule (1827–90) and B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), and draws much of its anger from resentment over the Brahman-dominated Peshwa rule of the Maratha Confederacy. The events of 1948 refocused attention on non-Brahman sentiment in Maharashtrian public culture. Made one year after Gandhi's assassination, Talpade's film was no doubt viewed in light of these events and of aggressive anti-Brahmanism in the Marathi-speaking regions of India. Yet the film does not depict violence, and Parisa is not ostracized, but merely coerced into recognizing his own folly. Anti-caste humanism makes a space for redemption within the narrative of the film, and thus also within the ethics of Namdev's character. Thus, the film presents Namdev's humanism with regard to caste from both a subaltern position and an elite one, concerned with maintaining civil society.

While these concerns are not necessarily those of the nation, but rather of Maharashtrian public culture in the late 1940s, both the energy of newly-won independence and Namdev's own cosmopolitan legacy required the film to address in some way Namdev's peregrinations over the length of India, the key narrative at the heart of his position as a 'national integrator'. This is done only briefly, with a montage depicting Namdev walking along a road in an undefined terrain, followed quickly by an image of Namdev, singing and walking, superimposed over a clay replica of the new political area of post-independence India. Interestingly, Namdev's image is also divided into five identical images, and their translucency allows us to see India through Namdev's multiple forms. The song he sings invokes unity and oneness (Fig. 2.2). The hint of the impulse toward 'national integration' is thus present but muted, subjugated to the more pressing local concerns of Bombay State (later to be divided into Maharashtra and Gujarat) rather than to the needs of the 'nation', itself still in the process of becoming 'imagined'. It is not until the 1990s that a film is made on Namdev with an explicit nationalist agenda.

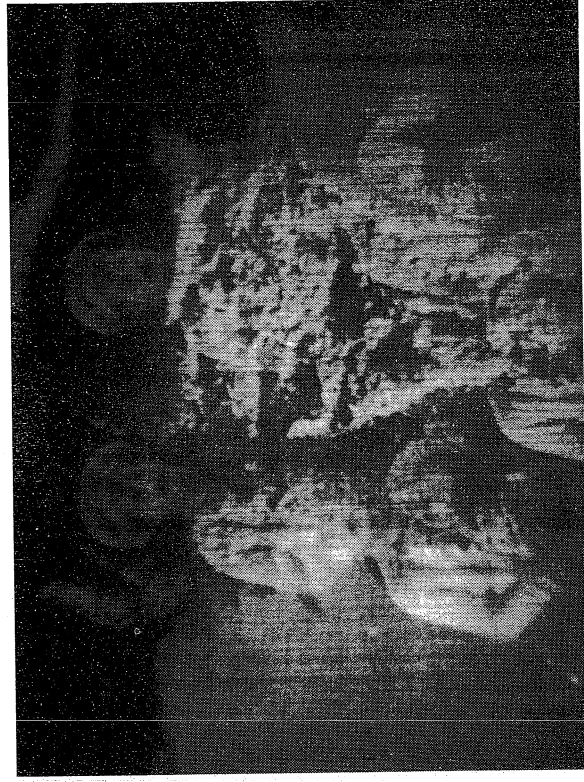


Fig. 2.2 Multiple images of Sant Namdev superimposed on a map of India. Still from Talpade, *Sant Namdev*, 1949. Courtesy: National Film Archives of India

This film, also called *Sant Namdev*, was made by Yashwant Pethkar in 1991. Pethkar's career began in 1947 with Hindi films of a non-religious nature. In 1951, he made his first Marathi film, *Vitthal Rakhumai*, about the deities of Pandharpur. His most well-received film was *Keechaka Vadha* (1959), 'The Slaying of Keechaka', a retelling of a popular vignette from the Mahabharata. Pethkar continued to make Marathi and Hindi films, both widely commercial and devotional, until the middle of the 1970s. *Sant Namdev* was his first film in almost two decades. It was shot half in Marathi and half in Hindi, half in Maharashtra and half in northern India. The multiple locations of the film, as well as its bilingualism, immediately signal its nationalist proclivities.<sup>10</sup> Pethkar's narrative, like Talpadé's, follows in the main the standard recollection of Namdev's life. Here too we have the famous encounter between Namdev and Parisa, but the resolution reveals a slight shift in the 'non-Brahman' ethos so readily apparent in Talpadé's film—and, indeed, in the corpus of songs and stories about or attributed to Namdev in the pre-modern period. Here Parisa and Namdev debate, but the compulsion for Parisa's ultimate metanoia is not public humiliation but personal transformation. In this case, Parisa is moved both by Namdev's words and by those of the famous Untouchable Sant Cokhamela. The humanistic impulse against caste-ism is represented here as shared by Namdev and his companions and is undertaken in public discourse, but it relies not on civil society but on personal conviction, on human ethics, the human individual choosing the ethically righteous.

While the first half of the film largely establishes Namdev's ethics and narrates the denouement between Parisa and Namdev, the second half shows Namdev travelling and living in northern India. The locale of the Punjab is made explicit, and the characters, including Namdev, speak Hindi, though Namdev's Hindi remains stilted and odd, emphasizing that it is a second language to him. Yet his status as a stranger in the Punjab also lends him an outsider's point of view—a device found often in Tamil films that comment on issues in northern India.<sup>11</sup> In one scene, Namdev intervenes on behalf of a poor, starving man who stole an ear of corn to feed his family. Namdev produces a bag of grain to pay for the one ear of corn, and it is left ambiguous whether the grain has been produced as a 'miracle' or Namdev has purchased it—after all, it is only one bag of grain he offers, not an endless stream.

This story, like several in Talpadé's film, is invented entirely for this scene, and its novelty comments on the director's intent to establish Namdev's humanism in somewhat realistic rather than magical or mythical terms. Though poor himself, Namdev helps the poor, and the means of that help is modest, yet somehow divinely invested.

In the final scenes of the film, Namdev has reached an advanced age. He tells his now-copious crew of followers that they should no longer serve him but rather 'serve the poor, humble, and suffering,' Namdev's humanistic imperative. One follower delivers a short speech:

Since [your] coming to Ghuman [in Punjab], there has been no violence between Hindus and Muslims. Brahmans, Kshatriyas, and Jats—they all eat together. All the Muslims worship Ram and all the Hindus perform Muslim prayers. Because of your kirtans, everyone has forgotten their caste and has become one community (jāti).

This is a key summation of the film, enunciated by a devotee of Namdev's, a former criminal whom Namdev brought back to lawfulness. We hear of bhakti, but not of a particular deity or even practice. Instead, we hear of social cohesion, of peace among castes and religions. These final iterations of Namdev's humanism wed a secular Hindu nation to the ethics of anti-caste-ism, and convey the thesis of this film's morality tale.<sup>12</sup> The film's clear social message seems aimed at the concerns of 1991, both caste and religious, though here the latter seem paramount. The state of Indian communal politics was highly volatile at the time when the film was made, given that the general elections of late November 1989 had been followed by some of the worst communal violence in northern India since the Partition or the Emergency. Since 1986 the Vishva Hindu Parishad and the Bharatiya Janata Party had been calling increasingly vociferously for the Babri Masjid to be razed; 1990 saw the self-immolation of Hindu Right protestors over the Babri Masjid, and L.K. Advani's first *ratha yātrā* ('chariot pilgrimage') was carried out in September of that year. In 1991 Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu woman who opposed Gandhi's withdrawal of support for Hindu Tamil separatists in Sri Lanka. Between 1989 and 1991 India had four prime ministers, with two governments that each lasted less than a year. Pethkar seems to have been deeply influenced by this social and political turmoil, and Namdev's humanism, as



depicted in the film, may have been an artist's response to the darkness of the times.

Pethkar's film was first screened not in India but in Israel, in 1995, at the behest of a Marathi-speaking Bene Israeli (Jewish) organization. Thus the first audience for the film was neither in India nor predominantly Hindu. In this context, perhaps, a reminder of the sovereign nation, as defined by the peregrinations of a historical figure, was deemed important, both to Indians in India and to those abroad. Pethkar, who embraced the idea that Namdev's travels unified India, made his film at a time when not only was there turmoil in India, but India was moving toward neo-liberal reforms and embracing the transnational economies of 'globalization', opening its markets and, as a result, its public culture to the influences of the global cultural economy. It is only in this context, one that circumscribes the Indian nation as an entity amid many global competitors, that Namdev's perceived humanism so explicitly invokes the Indian nation. Yet it retains all those hallmarks of Namdev's ethics that have compelled Marathi and English commentators to refer to him as an Indian humanist—his position against caste, class, and gender injustice. The two films, by Talpade and Pethkar, can be viewed as two perspectives on the single subject of the nation and humanism, constructed in historical contexts that required shifts within, but not radical departures from, the quotidian representation of Namdev's social ethos. The legacy of Namdev's representation as a humanist is deeply intertwined with the imagination of a Hindu secular nation. But it is the ethics of this humanism, not the demands of the nation, that have remained the enduring interpretive lens through which contemporary artists and cultural critics in India have sought to refine Namdev's public memory.

#### NOTES

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1. See, for example, Hobsbawm 1996: 22, 234, and 243.

2. See Spivak 1999 and Spivak and Guha 1988: 3–32.

3. This mapping of humanism onto bhakti is not uncommon. In the 25

August 1997 edition of *Outlook*, a popular Indian magazine, Ravinder Kumar, then-director of the Teen Murti Nehru Memorial Library and Archive in Delhi, India, commented that 'In our society, humanism is shaped by bhakti and devotional theism.'

4. See Zelliott in Lorenzen (ed.) 1995 and Lele (ed.) 1981.

5. I know of only two times this text has been printed: in Babar 1970 (NG) and in Nikte 2000. The version reproduced in both anthologies is dated to 1581 CE.

6. NG: 'nivedan' [preface], 1.

7. Ibid. See also NG: 640, song 1630, verse 2.

8. See Nemade in Lele (ed.) 1981.

9. I could not find this song attributed to Namdev or Kabir, but Gorakhnath's *sakhi* literature does include an almost identical song (Callewaert and Op de Beeck 1991: 491, song 58).

10. At one point, Namdev even briefly speaks Gujarati with a dacoit who hails from the Gujarati-speaking region. This may refer to the popular story that Namdev met, and influenced, Narsi Mehta, a famous saint-poet of Gujarat from the fifteenth century.

11. For example, Mani Ratnam's films *Roja* (1992) and *Bombay* (1995).

12. It is important to note that though Namdev is a *bhagat* within the Sikh tradition, and this particular film was financed by both Sikh and Maharashtrian devotees of Namdev, the film is careful not to imply a nascent Sikh community, and thus Hinduism is clearly the mode of religious expression even as Namdev is in Ghuman, in Punjab, the central location of his public memory in Sikhism.

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## 3

## PROPAGATING THE GOSPEL OF ANIMAL KINDNESS

Sacred Cows, Christians, and American Animal  
Welfare Activism with Reference to India at  
the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Janet M. Davis

On 23 April 1866, a New York shipping heir named Henry Bergh charged through the crowded streets of New York City in hot pursuit. Wearing a badge and a dark blue cape, the towering, spindly Bergh chased down an immigrant German butcher who was driving a cart loaded with calves 'piled up like wood ... and one of them so disposed of as to bring his eye in contact with a sharp stick, thereby destroying his sight....'<sup>1</sup> Acting in his official capacity as officer and president of the newly incorporated American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (the nation's first organized animal welfare group), Bergh arrested the butcher, thus marking the first of thousands of confrontations and arrests over the next several decades in New York City and beyond. By 1874, virtually every medium-sized and large city north of the Mason-Dixon Line had an animal welfare society. Various, these organizations (also known as humane societies) sought to regulate and 'civilize' the urban animal economy by creating decent conditions for labouring horses, oxen, and cart dogs; abolishing cock fighting, dog fighting, and pigeon shoots; banning vivisection; prohibiting the sale of unadulterated milk; lobbying in state legislatures for the humane railroad transport of animals bound for the stockyards; and enforcing 'noiseless' and painless methods of euthanasia for unwanted strays.