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THE THEOGRAPHIC AND THE

HISTORIOGRAPHIC IN AN INDIAN

SACRED LIFE STORY

Sacred biographical narratives from India evince a concern with history, with inserting their sacred figures into the timelines of states and empires. The state and politics, alongside financial records, has long been the primary content of the historical archive, of recording significant events so they would stand through time. Religion is, of course, another primary subject of preserved narrative, but its mode of recollection, at least in the modern West, has often been set in opposition to historical narrative. My aim in this essay is to show that we can find historical 'texture' in various genres of narrative in South Asia before the modern period not only in what we might call 'secular' materials — chronicles, court documents and so on — but in materials whose genre is within what we have come to identify as religious, in this case, hagiography.

If you were to tour around India asking people to tell you stories from the lives of sacred figures, you'd hear an assortment of stories, from the historical to the mythic, and among them would be enumerable tales of the miraculous and far-fetched — of flying walls, death-defying resurrections, and the constant intercession of a broad array of deities on behalf of their beleaguered devotees. Among these stories, you would detect recurring motifs, and one of those would tell about an encounter between a saint and a figure of temporal authority, a king or a sultan, for instance. In many cases these encounters are benevolent. One of the most common anecdotes you might hear is of some encounter between any number of saints and the great Mughal ruler of the sixteenth century, Akbar. Akbar, or his clever advisor Birbal, have been recorded in hagiography as having met at least thirty different sacred figures spanning a period of time anywhere within three hundred years of Akbar's actual lifespan, including such luminaries as Tulsidas (c. late sixteenth century), Haridas (c. early sixteenth century), Surdas (c. early sixteenth century), Dadu (c. late sixteenth century), Mirabai (c. early sixteenth century), and Namdev (c. early fifteenth century). In addition, we have an endless series of assertions in hagiography that other prominent rulers went to saints for advice, as when the seventeenth-century Maratha king, Shivaji, sought out the advice of both Tukaram, a low-caste agriculturalist, and Ramdas, a Brahmin and martially adept saint. In the

sixteenth century, Madhukar Shah, a ruler in the area of Madhya Pradesh, is said to have appealed to the religious figure Hariram Vyas; and the famous Bengali saint, Chaitanya was regularly wooed by Prataparudra, an early-sixteenth-century ruler.[1]

The other type of tale you might hear is more confrontational, thought it eventually expresses a similar kind of betterment of the king or sultan by the saint. In these stories, a ruler seeks to punish or kill a saint, usually as a means of testing the saint's claims to religious merit. Dadu was faced with the threat of trampling by wild elephant when he visited the king of Bikaner. Sikandar Lodi tried to kill the Kabir in the fifteenth century with a wild elephant too. A similar story — which will be explored in this article — is told about the fourteenth-century saint, Namdev, and his purported encounter with a sultan.[2]

What is striking about both of these types of tales of conflict and conciliation between temporal and spiritual leaders is the way they serve to locate hagiographical narratives in relation to state-centred historical narratives. The narratives evince a concern with history, with inserting their sacred figures into the timelines of states and empires. The state and politics, alongside financial records, have long been the primary content of the historical archive, of recording significant events so they would stand through time. Religion is, of course, another primary subject of preserved narrative, but its mode of recollection, at least in the modern West, has often been set in opposition to historical narrative.[3] Here, however, there is a desire to see religion and history as symbiotic.

The apparent dichotomy between religion and history has a correlation with the idea that former colonial or developing societies possessed little or no historical literature or even historical consciousness: the further a civilization was plotted by Western scholars from the centre pole of the modern West, the more these civilizations become characterized as ahistorical and overly religious.[4] This is particular true of India, as we will see. In this article, I will delve into two exemplary cases of encounters between sacred figures and temporal authorities as a means of engaging one of the central theoretical issues undertaken by South Asianists in recent years, one which has lingered as long as Western scholars have studied the subcontinent and its culture. The debate I am referring to asks the central question: Did Indians, before the modern period, possess historical consciousness? Which is to say, did Indian intellectual traditions develop a system or a narrative form for remembering the past that is akin to the systems and forms of modern Europe?

To my knowledge the first prominent thinker to answer these questions in the negative was Hegel in the early nineteenth century. He wrote in *The Philosophy of History* that 'Hindoos ... are incapable of writing History ... all that happens is dissipated in their minds into confused dreams ... what we call historical truth and veracity — intelligent, thoughtful comprehension of events, and fidelity in representing them — nothing of this sort can be looked for among the Hindoos.'[5] In the Hegelian mode, this conceit is retained in the work of Marx and Weber, and passed on to several generations of South Asian historians and religionists; anyone who has written on the matter in the last twenty years has had to articulate a position in relation to it.[6] This argument is based on the notion that history is universal, an epistemological quality like rationality, that either develops or does not develop in any given culture. It is not invented, but discovered, so to speak,

when a culture's episteme is ready. To return to Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, it is not just India and Hindus who are denied historical consciousness; Hegel excludes almost everyone other than modern Germans. For all the rest he sees that while they possess a past and a recollection of that past, their historical consciousness is only 'half-awakened', preserved in '[l]egends, Ballad-stories, [and] Traditions [which] must be excluded from ... history.'[7]

We might note here that Hegel denies historical consciousness to India because of its surplus of religious sentiment, circumscribed by the term 'Hinduism'. For China, Hegel identifies the fatal flaw of Confucianism, which he considers a patriarchal religion and therefore stagnant; for the Islamic or Oriental world, it is Islam and its features of 'Asiatic despotism'. We can see this trend of finding non-Western religion constraining the full development of historical consciousness specifically in relation to India in the infamous statement of the nineteenth-century Indologist James Mill who followed in Hegel's footsteps when he put it bluntly that 'no historical composition existed in the literature of the Hindus.'[8] This debate of over two centuries persists today. Let me give the most recent set of examples, which I have enumerated elsewhere as well.[9] The first example is a recent book by Vinay Lal, *A History of History*, published in 2003. Lal undertakes an investigation of the political uses of history as well as attacks by political organizations from within the domains of the Hindu Right on academic historiography in India. Lal writes that 'ahistoricism is one of the defining features of Indian civilization', by which he means that historiography in anything like the forms it takes in the modern West, as well as a general desire to accurately and scientifically recall the past, is absent from India before the modern period. He continues to assert: '[c]ertainly it is not too much to say that Indians were supremely indifferent to historical productions'.[10] Around the same time, an entirely different perspective was published by a triumvirate of authors: Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, in their book, *Textures of Time*. These authors find 'no dearth of historians in South India during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries'.[11] And the authors claim that they have demonstrated 'that the assertion [that] "History is a post-Renaissance Western genre" ... can only be sustained by willfully ignoring a vast body of materials available from South Asia'.[12] What these three authors find are the discursive textures or generic markers of a particular narrative form that resemble those of modern historiography, only in South India this discourse exists within other forms of literary expression, whether chronicle, poetry, myth, or record-keeping.

Given the diametric opposition of these two recent studies, it seems the issue remains unsettled. But what I want to flag here is that in both studies, religion, and especially Hinduism, forms a distinct 'other' with regard to historical consciousness. Lal sees that the rise of fundamentalist Hindu politics in contemporary India has waged a war against history; and Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam find what they call the 'textures' of history primarily in non-religious texts, in book-keeping records, genealogies, and royal chronicles — the archives of the state. For Lal, religion suffocates history; for Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, despite their deep interest in finding history in pre-modern sources, religion is simply bypassed, considered a fruitless historical archive. Religious consciousness, then, seems forever the antagonist of historical consciousness. Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam's work is part of a much larger trend of excluding religious materials from the search

for Indian historiography. For example, the Subaltern Studies Collective has offered rich theoretical discussions of this issue with regard to the way religion appears to animate the consciousness of 'insurgents'. As Ranajit Guha writes of the Santal rebellion in India from 1855–1856, for example, 'Religiosity was, by all accounts, central to the [Santal] *hool* (rebellion). The notion of power which inspired it . . . [was] explicitly religious in character . . . It is not possible to speak of insurgency in this case except as religious consciousness.'[13] In as much as political insurgency is a subject for historiography, and the insurgent is him- or herself acting consciously in a historical way (disturbing the historical and contemporary trajectory of an established political formation), we can understand that linking political power to religious power is a historiographic act. The difficulty, however, is this: if historians understand subaltern insurgents to speak in the language of religion, and to do so for posterity (for 'history' in a sense), then how does a historian take seriously the historical enunciations of religious consciousness?

As I argue in a recent essay, in the example of the Subaltern Collective's work, they inevitably find that history, when it is expressed through religious sentiment, acquires the state of the numinous, the ineffable and inexplicable – a terrain abhorrent to historians and social scientists in general.[14] The hybrid field of historical anthropology or ethno-history, seeks to understand what Nicholas Dirks has called 'an indigenous discourse about the past',[15] but this search almost never looks for this discourse in religious materials even while it is often concerned with the social activities of religious institutions. Even among scholars who are highly engaged with, and sympathetic to, nuanced readings of Indian hagiography, they often explicitly foreclose the possibility of historical consciousness being expressed in hagiographical – that is 'religious' – materials. W. H. McLeod, one of the foremost scholars of Sikhism, described the hagiographies of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, as a historically unreliable 'mass of legendary matter'.[16] A recent, excellent book by William Smith, *Patterns in North Indian Hagiography*, politely states, 'a faithful record of the facts of a saint's life was not . . . a primary goal of hagiography'.[17] And S. G. Tulpule, a doyen of Marathi literary history, described Marathi hagiography as 'complete in every biographical detail . . . only, they are all concocted'.[18] These scholars might not deny historical consciousness to India as Hegel did, and in most cases they would probably oppose this characterization in general, but in the specific instance of hagiography, the historical does not seem to be an attribute these scholars assign to the narratives they encounter.

The idea that hagiography can be used to write about history, but in itself does not contain a historical sense, seems not to be limited to the study of India. A host of scholars who study European Christian hagiography in the West have made profitable historical use of sacred biography for several decades. These scholars include Caroline Walker Bynum, who used hagiography to reconstruct a history of gender in late medieval Christian Europe; Gabrielle Spiegel, who engages postmodern ideas of historical narrativity to argue that hagiography was a significantly different narrative form from history in the medieval period in Europe; Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell, who perform a statistical analysis of hagiography to make sociological judgments about social life in medieval Europe; and Thomas Heffernan, who argued against the idea of hagiography or 'sacred biography' as fictitious, but still held that historicity isn't a chief concern of the lives of saints.[19] Lynda Coon draws historical cultural contexts of gender from the process of constructing hagiography in late Antiquity in Europe. However, Coon refers to the hagiographies she studies as 'sacred fictions', as literary inventions that serve religious purposes.[20] In other words, the historical content of hagiography seems to require the interpretive power of the historian to counteract the negative, perhaps non-rational, influences of religion – the stories of the lives of saints alone contain no history. In writing the history of gender in medieval Europe, Coon and Bynum have strategically used sacred biography to uncover a history of women's lives that would otherwise have never found representation in conventional historical records. But what do these sacred biographies explicitly communicate about the past? What is their overt historical content set alongside their theological agenda?

This disassociation of religion and history is what I want to engage with reference to Indian hagiography. Specifically I want to highlight what I perceive to be a tendency among contemporary scholars within this debate about historical consciousness to exclude religious materials, and particularly Hindu materials, from their source archive. In other words, even among scholars who would lampoon Hegel's denial of history to India, and who wish to argue that India has always possessed historical consciousness, they almost systematically exclude religious materials from the scope of their research. For this reason, I want to look at a genre of writing that most people, if not everyone I'd think, would consider 'religious' – that is, I will look at hagiography, or sacred biography. I'll do this by focusing on a single story about Namdev – that is, his confrontation with a sultan – and notice how it is retold in two different contexts separated by language, time and region. The nature of these retellings, their devices and shifts of genre, in short the way they are concocted, to use Tulpule's term, is what I will investigate here. I would certainly agree that hagiography is a treasure chest of historical materials, and also that it proposes a significantly different *form* of narrative than the one we associated with history, even if its *content* is the same, that is, even if it treats the same historical event. But I will challenge the idea that religion somehow forecloses the possibility of either historical consciousness or historical expression. I will do this by analyzing the way religious texts, in this case hagiographies, select between (at least) two narrative modes. In analyzing these stories about Namdev, I will want to use a theoretical typology that distinguishes between the theographic and the historiographic as modes of narrative.

Let me explain what I mean by this distinction between the historiographic and the theographic within Indian hagiography. The historiographic generally seeks to represent the past faithfully and with a sense of causal linkages with other events by attending to the specifics of an event. In this way it makes use of historical detail and does so by reflecting, or even interpreting, its contemporary social context. In other words, the historiographic is in direct conversation between two points in time: an exact and specific point in the past (i.e. the time this particular sultan was in this exact place) and the present moment of composition (a detail supplied often in colophonic format). The past is used to express something about the present. Furthermore, the address of the historiographic is outside the field of belief in which the figure of the hagiography operates – it is external. As a result, the details and specifics of time, place, person, and so on that characterize the historiographic often make use of reference to the state, to political orders, to figures of

temporal authority, or to other external, datable, locatable events or individuals. Its narrative therefore evinces a sense of the 'objective' – that is, of 'facts' that are not dependent on the narrative. So texts that we consider 'historical' in South Asia are those that emphasize elements of the historiographic, such as chronicles, genealogies, and secular biographies. When the texture of historiography appears in a predominantly theographic genre like sacred biography, it usually takes several different forms, most notably through dating systems that appeal to astronomy or lunar calendars as objective markers of time; through references to well-known events as 'facts', usually battles or kingship successions; or through references to specific historical people, usually the subjects of conventional historical texts – that is, kings and sultans.

In contrast, the theographic, rather than faithfully representing that past, follows some logic of faith, some theological principle, and uses the past to make a theological point in a way that is *transhistorical*, by which I mean situated in the past, but a past that is modular, not static. The theographic is transhistorical in its ability to be modulated to different specific historical periods, invoked to explain, from the point of view of theology, a historical event for example. In this context, specifics and details are reserved for aspects of the theological point that is to be made, not for the historical person, place, or thing that marks the historiographic. The theographic mode is not primarily about what happened or when (even while it assumes the historical truth of what happened and when), or its relationship to other events, but what a story from the trove of sacred public memory can tell us about an issue of theological importance. The address of the theographic is usually intrinsic, aiming at the faithful, as it were. And the theographic tends toward describing miraculous events in what I call theological time rather than to appeal to datable or locatable events or individuals, the purview of historical time. Theological time shares with historiographic time conceits about teleology and progress, but rather than chart the emergence of some mode of consciousness or the evolution of some political formation, theological time plots the unfolding of a theological principle or truth. Theographic time is still historical in the sense that it shares an understanding of time with the other historical narratives, but its subject matter and mode of presentation emphasizes, or rather epitomizes, some aspect of theology, some relationship to the thought or action of the divine in the world. As a result, the theographic, as a narrative form, dominates hagiographical genres. By this I mean that what we often consider as the character of hagiography – an emphasis on sacred biography as theological example or didactic narrative, often accompanied by miracles and divine intervention – are hallmarks of the theographic. A preponderance of theographic characteristics invested in a biographical tale (even a historical biographical one) pushes a narrative toward the characterization of hagiography. Theography usually takes the shape of the miracle story and most sacred biographies in India are a string of miraculous events, sometimes without any narrative connection uniting them. The miracle is a purposeful break from the mundane, and an expression of divine will or the strength of devotion, and hence is not temporally bounded – it interrupts a historical moment to assert a theological truth. Indeed, then, miracles are theographical in their essence; they *make* the theographic. Both endeavours, the theographic and the historiographic, exist not as oppositional categories but as perceptible shifts in genre or, to borrow Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam's terminology, 'texture'.[21] They function together, not in contrast to one another. In hagiography, a genre that is dominated by the theographic, one can find the historiographic at work, one can see its textures and impetus towards establishing a historical, as well as a theological, fact.

The play between the historiographic and the theographic may be evident not just in sacred biography in India, but in historical sources in India and perhaps elsewhere for that matter. It seems to me that something like the texture of theography may be detected in the historical narrative of American history that sees a divine providence guiding the course of history, the 'God is on our side' thesis that Robert Bellah described as an American civil religion, which proposes a religious civil orthodoxy in America that fills out the shape of the conservative nation, pegging its holidays to the institutionalization of Christian practice and its targets of charisma to America's founders and idealized political leaders, all the while underscoring the role of providence in the course of history.[22] Likewise, historical texts in India would regularly deify their kingly subjects or describe their victories as explicable only in miraculous, divinely ordained terms. So, even though historical narratives are characterized by a preponderance of the historiographic texture of narrative, they can demonstrate the theographic at work as well.

Let me now return, as promised, to the story of Namdev and his confrontation with a sultan to see the theographic and the historiographic at work. I will offer two versions of this single story of Namdev's confrontation in order to ask a question: how might we trace the narrative textures of hagiography to see the multiple ways these texts speak from the past into the present and the many audiences they identify for their address?

Tradition recalls that Saint Namdev emerged from Maharashtra in the fourteenth century from Pandharpur, the epicentre of the worship of a Hindu deity named Vitthal, a version, so to speak, of Krishna. Namdev's caste is always ascribed the status of either a tailor or *shimpi* in Marathi or a cloth printer or *chimpi* in Hindi. In either case, he is usually remembered as having been of a low caste, situated within the *varna* echelon of caste ascriptions in orthodox Hinduism as a *shudra*, the lowest of the four castes. Though Namdev comes from Maharashtra, he is remembered within a very broad swathe of culture and history throughout central, western, and northern India, his influence felt in religions such as the Dadu Panth, the Kabir Panth and Sikhism, and in several languages, including Marathi, Hindi and Punjabi. In Sikhism, Namdev is one of the oldest and one of the key *bhagats*, an exemplary and inspirational devotee for the Sikh Gurus, and 61 verses attributed to Namdev are in the *Guru Granth Sahib*.[23]

The story of Namdev and the sultan has been very popular in central, western, and northern India through the field of sacred biography that unites many figures in this region, such as Kabir, Surdas, Raidas, Dadu, Nanak, and many others. This particular story has been told in northern India by Hariram Vyas in 1580, by Anantadas in 1588, then Nabhadas in 1600, Priyadas in 1712, and Caturdas in 1720 – as well as in the *Prem Ambodh Pothi* of around 1693.[24] In Marathi, the story appears in an early Marathi chronicle, called a *bakhar*. It appears in the *Mahikavatici Bakhar*, in a portion dated to around 1538, and later in a hagiography by Mahipati in 1762. The story has also been told regularly in Marathi, Hindi and

English literary history throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as in the work of Parashuram Chaturvedi in the 1950s,[25] and has even crept into several of the films made about Namdev in the twentieth century.[26] Finally, it has been told in the two sources I will discuss below.

The first hagiographical source is the *Guru Granth Sahib*, within a particular song attributed to Namdev. This song in Rag Bhairav first appears in the *Adi Granth* of 1604, and in the *Guru Granth*, completed in 1708. Since the song is attributed to Namdev and is also about Namdev, it is a kind of auto-hagiography, a very common narrative form in Hindu hagiographical texts. In other words, Namdev is singing about himself. The second version of the story is in prose rather than verse and is from a Marathi hagiography composed in 1723 in Pandharpur in Maharashtra, the epicentre of the worship of Vitthal and Namdev's hometown. The author of this sacred biography is someone named Dattatreya. While the text that I will examine by Dattatreya is not within the field of texts associated with the Varkaris, it becomes a common source for several later hagiographies of Namdev in Marathi. So we can think of Dattatreya, in sectarian terms, as a free agent, not directly within any lineage of worship associated with Namdev, but still within the broad discursive world of hagiography in Marathi in the eighteenth century.

The first example, taken from northern India and in Hindi, is drawn from the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The song in which Namdev retells his experience with the sultan appears just after a poem in which Namdev tells the story of Prahlad. Prahlad was a demon who worshipped Vishnu, which is a very undemonic thing to do, and for which his father, a more conventional demon, tried to kill Prahlad in various ways. Eventually, Vishnu himself came to Earth as the man-lion or Narasimha and killed Prahlad's father by basically tearing him apart, thus saving the good demon's life. Namdev finishes this story in the *Granth* then narrates the story of his own persecution at the hands of a sultan who, importantly, goes unnamed in the text. Here's a portion of the song:

> The Sultan had Nama bound.
> [He said,] 'Show me your Vitthal
> By bringing life back into the body of a slaughtered cow.
> If you fail, I will cut your throat where you stand'.
> And this is just what the Sultan did [to the cow]:
> He slaughtered the cow, and no life remained in its body.
> [Namdev said to the Sultan,] 'Whatever I do is but nothing.
> Whatever is done, God does it'.
> This reply enraged the egotistical Sultan
> And he readied the elephant to trample Namdev.
> Namdev's mother cried out to Namdev, 'Give up your God Ram! Sing instead
> the name of Allah (Khuda)!'
> Namdev replied, 'I am not your son; you are not my mother'.[27]

At this point Namdev begins to sing to Vitthal. The sultan becomes impatient and orders an elephant to trample Namdev. Through divine intervention, the elephant is inexplicably pacified. Clearly a miracle has happened, and the sultan realizes he is in a bind. He must not lose face before his public by giving in to Namdev, but,

well, God is on his side. Namdev has by this point won the support of the sultan's people, who propose to the sultan a compromise. They ask the sultan to let Namdev go free and take in exchange the saint's weight in gold. But the sultan objects on religious grounds, saying to himself, 'If I take the gold I'll go to hell. I will forsake my faith (*din*) for worldly wealth'. I want to stress this moment in the story because here we see two theological positions expressed by use of a moment within a shared historical frame — that is, with reference to the rule of a particular sultan in northern India, who is unnamed, but nonetheless understood to ground the narrative in historical reality (though not pinpoint it in that reality by exact reference). The first theological position is Namdev's refusal to abandon his faith and hence not to capitulate to temporal authority. The second is the Sultan's refusal to abandon the rules of his faith, his role as the protector of the *dar al Islam*, the world of Islam. They are both men of principle, as it were. At this juncture, when both sides have had their say, the action can proceed to its dénouement. Vitthal, off stage as it were, revives the cow miraculously, to everyone's astonishment. Namdev even milks the cow and offers the milk to the sultan. Here's what happens next:

> The Sultan returned to his palace
> And he was in anguish.
> The Sultan sent a message
> through his agents and messengers:
> 'Forgive me, Hindu, for
> I am your cow'.[28]

Namdev's story of a confrontation with a Sultan is a morality story that, in essence, retells the story of Prahlad, which preceded this account of the confrontation with the Sultan. David Lorenzen has convincingly tracked the story of Prahlad through several iterations in the context of devotional narratives in North India and presented the thesis that the Prahlad story serves as a tale of subaltern agency in the context of devotion.[29] Here Prahlad can overcome his inherent demonic nature, an accident of birth, in the same way that low-caste saints can overcome the accident of their births, their own low status. Lorenzen has also demonstrated that the Prahlad narrative is a trope for religious persecution, both within Hinduism and between Hinduism and other religions, especially Islam. But the role of the story, both the Prahlad story and the Namdev story, is theological primarily — the fact of the events' historical truth is hardly an issue. It is historical in so far as it references the historical condition of religious difference, and the larger problem of persecution. The primary impetuses for the Prahlad story and the Namdev story in the *Granth* are similar: to generally characterize a historical situation of explicitly theological conflict (which is, of course, implicitly political, social and cultural conflict) by interjecting a theological solution, a solution premised on a moment of *salvation*, which is to my mind, as I have stated, a kind of insurgency, a theological insurgency into the general historical narrative.

These two stories, one about Prahlad and the other about the sultan, are coupled together and attributed to Namdev in the *Granth* in order to serve a theological position. We can describe this position as the denial of the importance of sectarian

or religious difference and caste difference, and the faith in the efficacious effects of reciting the Name of God — which is how Namdev summons Vitthal for help. In other words, the story of Namdev and the sultan, while it draws from a public memory of a past event, expresses a theological position about religious status, religious practice, and conversion. Its primary aim is not to provide specific historical detail or speak to a very specific event, but rather to use a general historical context to inscribe a religious truth, through the trope of this story, into the text of Sikhism at its earliest scriptural stage. There is no doubt that these stories are responding to historical specifics in a contextual sense, but they are, in their narrative form, addressing not those specifics of political or imperial order (which I would label historiographic) but rather the specifics of theology and of divine intercession. In other words, the particular historical problem of forced conversion and the particular instances of religious difference and its problematics is managed by narrative metaphor, not by historiographic precision. The shape and content of the metaphor is theological — it addresses the machinations of the divine, superimposed over the mundane, human world. I think this point is made plainly by one of the last lines of the song attributed to Namdev that tells us this story in the *Granth*. The line reads:

> If on that day the cow had not come back to life
> Faith in Namdev would have been lost.[30]

The point of the story is clearly faith; the fact of history is assumed. There is no anxiety in this statement about the past (it is understood that the moments described actually happened), but rather there is anxiety about faith and forced conversion. This story of Namdev and the sultan in the *Granth*, then, serves a theographic position because its primary concern is to expound a theology internal to Sikhism and the broader world of North Indian devotionalism in the early seventeenth century; this theology is grounded in the world (hence the reference to the worldly contexts of religious difference) but is located self-consciously in an another realm.

Let us now turn to the second hagiographic example, which is drawn from Dattatreya's eighteenth-century Marathi prose account. Dattatreya likely had the *Granth* version before him, or was at least aware of it when he wrote his own version in 1723. Dattatreya's version tracks most closely to the story as it appears in the *Granth* than any of the other Marathi versions, such as the one told by Mahipati fifty years later. But there are significant differences between Dattatreya's account and that contained in the *Granth*. Here are a few excerpts from the Marathi:

(Dattatreya 1723)

> Sultan Tughlaq complained that Namdev had not come to pay his respects. He said, 'There is a tailor named Nama, a devotee of Pandharpur. Have that rascal (*punda*) come demonstrate his religious learning (*gosavipane*). Tell me Vitthal, speak to me, what should I do? I'm not a religious expert, and everyone goes to the Sultan unarmed' ... The Sultan (*yavana*) sent his envoy and took Namdev and brought him to the Sultan's court. Namdev arrived, well dressed, wearing a Tulsi bead necklace, and with Vitthal's name on his tongue. The Sultan said, 'Show me your Vitthal.' Nama said, 'Maharaj, my

Vitthal is in your heart. Hindu, Muslim, or other castes — God is never neglectful of anyone'.

(Dattatreya 1723)

The figure named here is a reference to Mohammad bin Tughlaq, called 'toblakh' in the text, the second Sultan of the Tughlaq dynasty who ruled from 1325–1351. Tughlaq is very important to Maharashtrian history as he shifted his capital, for a little while in 1327, to Devgiri, renaming it Daulatabad, in north-central Maharashtra. The assumption of the text is that the confrontation occurs in Daulatabad, not in Delhi. The reference specifically to Tughlaq implies both a time and a place for this event, elements missing from the account in the *Granth*.

Dattatreya's story proceeds from here much as it does in the *Granth* version. Namdev is presented with a dead cow and faces the threat of death by elephant trampling. He is offered the option of converting to Islam, but Namdev refuses, of course. Vitthal then appears, just in time. With divine help, Namdev revives the cow. He also pacifies the pachyderm, and in this case, after the animal bows to Namdev, the elephant dies, apparently of his own accord. This signals a bad turn of events for the sultan. Whereas in the *Granth* version a détente is reached between sultan and saint, here the sultan is terrified by Vitthal's *vishal rup*, his huge form. In this form, Vitthal chases the cowardly Sultan to his *haram*, where he attempts to hide among his queens, disguised as a queen himself, but he is discovered. Let's return to the narrative:

> Crying and fainting, the Sultan collapsed. All the Sultan's women called for mercy. They held Nama's feet and said, 'Please don't make us widows!' Nama entreated Vitthal, 'Please, Preserver of Fear, Destroyer of Fear, Lord of Protection, have mercy on him'.

(Dattatreya 1973)

The sultan is thus saved by the saint, who is both the trigger and the control for the rage of the Hindu God. In other words, the narrative is not satisfied with simply proving the Muslim ruler wrong via a well-placed miracle, but the threat of violence and the inversion of masculine, war-like norms, takes place here. As in the *Granth*, this is a recollection of the sultan story filled with metaphor, but here, in Dattatreya's version, the metaphor is not theological but historical.

In the case of Dattatreya's account of the story in 1723, the text lacks the kinds of effusive laudatory comments with which other Marathi hagiographers would pepper their texts, the kind of *santamruta* or *bhaktamala* language that hangs devotional descriptions ad nauseam upon the name of a saint. Instead, its prose style is reminiscent of the Marathi *bakhar* or chronicle tradition — a more or less straightforward statement of fact, of what happened or what was reported. Dattatreya's text, however, is not a chronicle but quite completely a hagiography. Yet here especially he seems careful to mention Tughlaq, a specific Sultan rather than just any sultan, and one very important to Maharashtrian history in the fourteenth century through his activities around Daulatabad and elsewhere.

This attention to a specific reference to a person that one can plot in time and space is in part what gives Dattatreya's hagiography its historiographic texture, as

opposed to the theographic texture of the *Granth* version. What is perhaps more important is what I perceive to be Dattatreya's use of the story to comment on his own historical present. Dattatreya's text is positioned in 1723 during the reign of the powerful Peshwa Bajirao who expanded the Maratha Confederacy to its fullest form between 1719 and 1739, particularly northward against the decaying Mughal Empire. Invoking the Delhi Sultan Tughlaq is, I argue, strategic. Around 1324, while Muhammad Tughlaq battled the remnants of the indigenous Maharashtrian kingdom, the Yaadavas, his armies destroyed much of Pandharpur, including most of the Vitthal temple, the temple of Namdev's God.[31] This story suggests a kind of 'Pandharpur strikes back' fantasy. But it also seems to reference, albeit in a distorted way, a historical fact. I would argue that the idea that Vitthal chases a fearful Tughlaq to his *haram* where he hides from Vitthal's enormous form echoes Tughlaq's own retreat from Daulatabad back to Delhi. While this retreat was for reasons germane to internal sultanate politics in Delhi, not military opposition in Maharashtra, it might have signaled for the reader or patron in the eighteenth century a condition of political and social life by speaking to the contemporary decline and weakness of the Mughals as the Marathas move northward. In other words, this story uses the past in two ways — to establish its facts, when it happened and who was involved; and to interpret that past in light of the social conditions of the present. As I have mentioned above, I see this as markers of the historiographic, not the theographic. The historiographic proceeds from the 'historical' specifics of an event (who, what, where, in detail) to comment on some aspect of the present; the theographic, while certainly assuming the truth of a historical event, instead emphasizes the specifics or details of a theological matter, the form of which is historical, but the content of which is theological.

In all the versions I've read or heard of the retell of Namdev's encounter with the sultan within the broad hagiographical field of India, it is only in Dattatreya's account that the Sultan's elephant dies as the cow is raised from the dead. It is hard not to see some metaphorical power implied in the symbolic index of these two animals. The elephant is a martial symbol employed by Indians regardless of religion, whereas the cow is a religious symbol and only then to Hindus. I cannot help but read here a thinly veiled symbolic dialectic between the Maratha (read as Hindu) advancement and a propagandist portrayal of a Mughal (read as Muslim) power under its siege. Certainly the social and political make-up of these two powers can in no way be mapped to a tidy division between Hindu and Muslim, but as often is the case in hagiography, or in historiography, a composer chooses simple dialectics to make arguments about the past and present. This is what Dattatreya is doing, I think.

My aim in this article has been to show that this notion that we can find historical 'texture' in various genres of narrative in South Asia before the modern period holds not only for what we might call 'secular' materials — chronicles, court documents, and so on — but for materials whose genre is within what we have come to identify as religious — in this case, hagiography. In Dattatreya's story, we find the texture of historiography, the desire to represent the past as a historical fact, situated in time and space. Dattatreya also makes this historical fact communicate something about the political and social present of the early eighteenth century. Dattatreya's mode of address is external in that his account is neither sectarian nor theologically specific to any belief system. The prose style of his hagiography resembles the prose

chronicles and brings his subject, Namdev, into an encounter with the usual subjects of historical narratives — that is, figures of political and temporal power.

In addition to the historiographic, we also find another logic at work in hagiography, and this is evident in the story of Namdev's encounter with the sultan in the *Granth*. Here we have the imperative to provide a theographic account of the past, one that shares the same aim toward inscription and preservation, but that serves a timeless theological truth rather than a historically specific recollection of an event. This emphasis of the theographic over the historiographic in the *Granth* is striking when one considers contemporary events in the history of Sikhism. Two years after the formalization of the *Adi Granth* under the leadership of the fifth guru, Guru Arjun, in 1604 Sikhism would suffer its first martyrdom, the murder of Guru Arjun in 1606 at the order of Jahangir, the Mughal son and successor to Akbar.[32] Thus this theological story of the confrontation of a saint and a sultan attributed to Namdev would play out two years later, in real life, with a much different result; a particular historical event, however, is not the concern of this narrative, here. Specific events may be alluded to, or even collapsed within, this story about Namdev and the sultan, but in the *Granth* it serves a theological point; again, by extension, this point is also a historical, cultural, social and political one, but explicitly, in the narrative as we have it, the point is a theological one.

Let me conclude by asking what this exercise in exploring genre shifts in hagiography might tell us about the issue of historical consciousness with which I opened. First, excavating hagiography for instances of historiographic textures opens up a field of data that is largely untapped by scholars who wish to make positive arguments about Indian historical consciousness, particularly in the medieval period. Studies like this one can help the ongoing effort to parse out prejudices inherited from colonial-period scholarship that see a world of people without history and those with history, as Hegel put it, or the Third World and the First World, to use our contemporary terminology.

Second, it reorients our approach to the question, what constitutes a historical text? It does this by allowing us to read texts as heterogenous cultural products aimed at multiple audiences rather than as homogenous, monological texts with strictly delimited audiences. In other words, it allows us to see that a literary genre like hagiography, while it is distinct from historiography, utilizes the same pool of literary styles and strategies but with different intentions. What distinguishes sacred biography from history may be more a question of the aggregate composition of a text than its generic form as a single unit.

Third, there is an ethnographic or ethno-historical benefit from examining the internal diversity of texts we generally ascribe to single genres, either historical or hagiographical. This is true because in all cases today, the texts I have discussed are performed texts — that is, they have an oral and performative life before they enter the written archive, and they maintain that life after being written down. The project of uncovering shifts within texts suggests something about the publics that would have received these stories in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, or later. We can ask the question, what does it mean that someone hearing Dattatreya's biography of Namdev would *want* to know which of many sultans of Indian history confronted the saint? And how would this eighteenth-century person receive this story? As theology? As history? As something for which we don't have an easy vocabulary

to denote? Likewise, what might have been the desires of an early-seventeenth-century public in North India receiving Namdev's retellings of the trials of Prahlad and Namdev's own encounter with a sultan? With what resonance would this story resound when told at the end of Akbar's reign and the beginning of that of his son, Jahangir? The growing ire of the power-centre of Delhi was certainly being felt in Punjab when Guru Arjun included Namdev's songs within the Sikh scripture.

If one can accept these two operations at work within hagiography — the historiographic and the theographic — it suggests, in essence, that hagiography contains the same complex arrangements of textures that we find throughout other South Asian textual sources. This reveals to us how sacred biography is a multifaceted narrative about the past that has served multiple purposes and innumerable publics over centuries in South Asia.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   Smith (2000, 14–16).
2   Smith (2000, 14–16).
3   See *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 45 (December 2006), especially pages 10–26 and 80–92.
4   There are many studies, generally in the realm of post-colonial historiography and anthropology, that have engaged this position. For two good examples, see Chakrabarty (2000) and Dirks (1990).
5   Hegel (1944[1830], 162).
6   For exemplary treatments of this issue in premodern India, see Pollock (1989, 1990); Aktor (1999); Perrett (1999); Sharma (2003). Compare: Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam (2003); Inden, Walters, and Ali (2000), especially the chapter by Ali.
7   Hegel (1944[1830], 2).
8   Mill (1858, 47).
9   See Novetzke (2006).
10 Lal (2003, 14).
11 Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam (2003, 252).
12 Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam (2003, xi.).
13 Guha (1988, 46), with my gloss of *hool* as 'rebellion', which may more correctly be translated as 'sudden attack'. This essay originally appeared in Guha (1983).
14 See Novetzke (2006); see also Novetzke and Patton (2007).
15 Dirks (1993, 58).
16 McLeod (1975, 22).
17 Smith (2000, 16).
18 Tulpule (1979, 335).
19 For example, for Bynum, see Bynum (1987); for Spiegel, see Spiegel (1997); for Weinstein and Bell, see Weinstein and Bell (1982); for Heffernan, see Heffernan (1988).
20 Coon (1997).
21 Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam (2003, 1–24).
22 Bellah (1967).
23 For a fuller understanding of the relationship between Sikhism and the *bhagats* and their songs, see Singh (2003).
24 Callewaert and Lath (1989).
25 Chaturvedi (1951).
26 *Sant Namdev* (1921, Dir. Phalke); *Namace Mahima* (1937, Dir. Apte); *Patitapavan* (1955, D. K. Films); *Sant Namdev* (1949, Dir. Talpade); *Sant Namdev* (1991, Dir. Pethkar).
27 *Guru Granth Sahib*, Rag Bhairav, song 10 (pages 1165–6), my translation here and elsewhere.
28 Ibid., verse 22.
29 Lorenzen (1996).
30 Verse 27.
31 I should point out that looting Pandharpur was not particularly a 'Muslim' thing to do. Krishnadevaraya in 1521 looted the Vitthal temple as well, taking the image of Vitthal into the Vijayanagar kingdom. See Davis (1993).
32 See Fenech (2001).

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James P. Hare

A CONTESTED COMMUNITY: PRIYĀDĀS AND THE RE-IMAGINING OF NĀBHĀDĀS'S *BHAKTAMĀL* [1]

Nābhādās composed his Bhaktamāl *during the first quarter of the seventeenth century. Through the praise of hundreds of* bhakts, *this slender collection of biographical stanzas constructs a community that spans boundaries of* sampradāy, *region, caste, gender and time. In so doing, the* Bhaktamāl *establishes a location for debates over the constitution of this religious community. Approximately a century after the* Bhaktamāl*'s composition,* Priyādās *composed this text's earliest known commentary, which accepts Nābhādās's frame even as it modifies his logic. Priyādās shifts the focus from the* bhakts *to God, emphasises the importance of the* sampradāy, *and grants spiritual importance to caste. In hindsight, the tension between Nābhādās and his commentator can be seen as a debate over the boundaries and composition of what would later come to be called Hinduism. This brief analysis of the* Bhaktamāl *and its most influential commentary may contribute to a better understanding of the religious subjectivities of the traditionalist advocates of modern Hinduism.*

Introduction

During the first quarter of the seventeenth century, in the Galtā monastery near present-day Jaipur, a new kind of religious community was imagined by a monk in residence there. The name of this monk was Nābhādās, and the text he is said to have composed was the *Bhaktamāl*, or 'Garland of Devotees'.[2] In this slender collection of biographical stanzas, Nābhādās weaves together terse words of praise for hundreds of *bhakts*.[3] The individuals and groups whom he selects for inclusion reflect a community that spans boundaries of *sampradāy*,[4] region, caste, and gender. The community also exceeds temporal boundaries: Nābhādās includes his contemporaries as well as *bhakts* whose lives are recorded in the Purāṇas and other ancient sources. He presents a community, united in bhakti, which remains rooted in the monastic order even as it transcends particular sectarian affiliations, and pasts and present.

In the *Bhaktamāl*, the religious community is constituted by the exemplary individuals whose lives it narrates. Nābhādās imagines the past, through these narrated lives, in order to construct a community in the present. In so doing, he establishes