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TEXTUAL SOURCES FOR THE STUDY OF

Hinduism

edited and translated
by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty

with Daniel Gold, David Haberman
and David Shulman



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who abandons all this and dwells firm in the ultimate reality, he is Released; this is certain. If the shapes imagined by men in their minds could achieve Release for them, then surely men could become kings by means of the kingdom that they get in their dreams. Those who believe that the Lord lives in images made of clay, stone, metal, wood, or so forth, and wear themselves out with asceticism without true knowledge – they never find Release. Whether they waste themselves away by fasting, or get pot bellies by eating whatever they like, unless they have the knowledge of the ultimate reality – how could they be cured? If people could get Release by performing vows to eat nothing but air, leaves, crumbs, or water, then the serpents and cattle and birds and fish would be Released. (*Mahanirvana Tantra* 14.117–21)

7 THE HINDI TRADITION

Composed by unlettered poets and recited over highly diverse strata of Indian society, Hindi religious poetry developed as an oral tradition. From the fifteenth century into the eighteenth, devotional verse flowered in the North Indian vernaculars, penetrating peoples' lives in various ways: through witty, sometimes biting couplets punctuating ordinary conversation, as short lyrics sung communally at religious events, and in a highly polished literary epic often performed by professional specialists. Verses remained memorable through images at once familiar and striking, and with fairly simple metres and well-defined rhymes, many were kept alive as popular song.

Both devotees in the village and scholars of Hindi literature have traditionally seen devotional poems falling into two main categories: saguna – those evoking the Lord with attributes – usually through a detail in the earthly sport of Krishna or Rama; and nirguna – those invoking the deity without attributes, the Formless Lord realised through humility, detachment, and yoga. Though the religious attitudes that the two types of poetry present need not be mutually exclusive, the saguna and nirguna styles typically draw out their imagery in opposite directions. Since most Hindus already understand abstractly that divinities like Rama or Krishna are incarnations of God, the poet in saguna tradition tries to elicit fervent devotion through vivid presentation of the deity's human image. Saguna verse thus concretises the particulars of the Lord's play, using detailed, sometimes mundane specifics to convey his immediate personal presence. Nirguna verse, on the other hand, begins with immediate mundane images – of catching fish, say, or of dealing with a merchant – and then uses these images figuratively to express more abstract messages of spiritual warning, yoga, and devotion to the formless divine.

The two broad styles of Hindi devotional verse show their clearest differentiation in their origins. In the fifteenth century the nirguna tradition found its greatest and most distinctive proponent in Kabir, the first major devotional poet in

Hindi. Mocking Hindu and Islamic orthodoxies and invoking a Lord who transcended them both, Kabir set the tone for later nirguna poets, who are generally referred to as saints. In the sixteenth century, as Krishna devotion took hold in North India, saguna verse found one of its greatest representatives in Sur Das. Many of the verses attributed to Sur Das were preserved in Krishnaitic sectarian traditions, thus revealing a devotion to Krishna that is exclusive as well as intense. Not only are the sweet joys of Krishna's play described by Sur Das in every conceivable aspect, they are also contrasted to the arid meditations of yogis. The other major line of saguna worship – devotion to Ram – never produced as vital sectarian movements as did Krishna-devotion, but instead blossomed in Mughal India with the revival of the native Hindu tradition as a whole. The Ramcharitmanas of Tulsi Das, the literary masterpiece of Hindi devotion, thus presents a more catholic picture of the Hindu world than the one found in Sur: though Tulsi Das shows the great yogi Shiva adoring Lord Ram, Ram for his part is made to speak respectfully of Shiva. Saints, too, began to emerge from and contribute to the Hindu mainstream, often taking an attitude toward conventional deities more moderate than that of the iconoclastic Kabir; thus, by the eighteenth century Charandas of Delhi was able to integrate vivid aspects of Krishna worship into his saint's vision of inner life.

In referring to mythological characters and religious concepts familiar in both Hindi and Sanskrit forms, Hindi poets did not worry much about consistency. Sanskrit and different Hindi renderings of the same word are frequently given together in one collection – the major consideration often apparently rhyme or meter. The following translations, which sometimes attempt to evoke the tone of an original as popular song, will take similar licence: in particular, final short a's – preserved in Sanskrit but not usually pronounced in Hindi – appear and disappear as metres demand.

7.1 KABIR

Kabir, although remembered as a Muslim, seems to have been born in a caste of weavers only recently converted and still conversant with popular Indic yogic traditions. While his dates of birth and death remain obscured by legend, recent critical estimates put his creative period in the first half of the fifteenth century.¹ Growing up on the lower margins of society, Kabir no doubt experienced both a hard life and abuses of traditional religion – factors inevitably contributing to his highly sceptical view of all orthodox ways, both Hindu and Islamic. Two major themes run through his verse: disgust with the hypocrisy and transitoriness of the world, and a corresponding devotion for the Lord beyond worldly forms, who may be known through the guru. Bridging these themes and adding to their religious persuasiveness are allusions to practical yogic experience, able to reveal at once the hollowness of outward ritual and a path toward the Formless Lord.

Though many longer lyrics bearing Kabir's name are extant, Kabir is

recognised throughout North India as the pre-eminent master of the trenchant couplet. He deliberately confounds us with striking, sometimes paradoxical language (1, 15:14) and bemuses us with insistent irony (15). Oral style remains visible in the repetition of phrases (3, 9:5, 9:35, 9:17, 9:36) as well as of images (3, 9:35, 9:36)². As is customary in collections of sant poetry, the selections below are ordered topically.

Warnings

1 Couplets

Strive for one—you'll get the one; / Strive for all—lose all. / Turn within to water the root / And you'll get more than enough fruit. [15:14³

Kabir says: don't puff up with pride, / Death's got you by the hair / And he can strike you anywhere— / abroad, at home inside. [15:44

One night Kabir was dreaming, / His being seemed to break: / Two people when he's sleeping / But just one when awake. [15:47

An unbaked jar, this body: / You took it on a trip; / It broke when it was hit; / Nothing remains of it. [15:59

This body is the forest; / Your karmas are the axe. / Kabir has thought it out: it's you / who cut yourself down through your acts. [15:60

So many different words there are— / Attend the word that's true. / The word through which you'll meet the Lord: / Grasp it close to you. [15:88

The instrument remains unplayed, / with broken strings. / When the player's left—bereft, it can't / do anything. [16:1

I'm living in a poisoned forest, / encircled by snakes. / Fear thus grasps my soul, / all night awake. [16:4

You won't be overlooked, fish: / the fisherman is death. / Though you go round to all the ponds, / in each he's set his net. [16:7

To a doll of five elements / a man's name they give; / It stays for four days / but needs such space to live! [16:14

Shining now inside the shrine of the body, / like a lamp's light: the soul— / The wayfaring swan. When it leaves, though, they shout: / Drag that trash from the house! [16:22

All the weepers are dead; / the corpse-burners have died. / The lamenters are dead: / so to whom can I cry? [16:23

When they see the gardener come, / the buds make a loud fuss: / The flowers in bloom have all been picked— / tomorrow's time for us! [16:34

Big deal, a son is born! / Why bang a plate to celebrate? / The souls that come and go all seem / like ants who're marching to and fro, in streams. [16:40

Carrying on with another man's wife / is just like eating garlic: / You can hide in a corner to eat it / but finally can't keep it a secret. [30:1

2

For you I live, O Allah-Ram / Show mercy to your slave, my lord. (refrain)

If you draw blood and then call yourself mild, / hiding your guilt all the while

/ What will you get from then bathing in water / or hitting your head on the earth? / Why wash your hands and face, invoke the gods aloud, / or bow your head in mosques: / If your heart says crooked prayers, then what's it worth / to see the *kaaba*⁴ in the pilgrims' crowd? / On the eleventh day of every month the Brahmin doesn't eat; / in Ramadan the *qazi*⁵ fasts for twenty-four. / Pray tell me why eleven months are empty / and one month has so much more? / And if God only lives in mosques, / whose land lies in between? / Can Ram reside in images and pilgrims' stops? / In neither one has he been seen. / The east is the abode of Hari;⁶ / Allah's station's in the West. / But Rama and Rahim⁷ both lie within the heart, / and there alone is where to seek them.

As many women, men, that have been born: / they're all your forms. / Allah-Rama's little child, Kabir / knows that one as his guru and his *pir*.⁸ [177

Experience

3 Couplets

When I existed, Hari didn't; / now Hari is—I'm not. / All darkness was destroyed just when / I saw the lamp that burns within. [9:1

A flickering light, but no approach— / can't go there, cannot see it: / Where merit doesn't count, or sins, / Kabir is bound in adoration. [9:5

The ice took shape from water / and then dissolved away. / Whatever was has become Him: / What more now can I say? [9:9

Kabir has seen the impenetrable—one— / whose greatness can't be told: / Bright being, spouse, philosopher's stone, / how he absorbed my gaze! [9:12

No foundation for the temple there, / no body for the god— / Where Kabir lingers in service to / the one who can't be seen. [9:13

Inside—a bright shining lotus / where Brahma makes his home. / The bee-mind is attracted there: / hardly anybody knows. [9:17

There heavens are thundering, nectar drips down, / banana trees bloom, and the lotus shines bright: / Where just his few real slaves are found, / Kabir is bound in adoration. [9:35

Kabir sees a bright shining lotus, / a spotless, risen sun. / Night's darkness disappears: he hears / the horn of unstruck sound. [9:36

4

Who has died? Who has come into birth? / And who has found heaven and hell? [refrain

The unchangeable gives rise to the five elements, / then lives in them itself. / When the elements slip off, it returns to what it was, / with no hope of a trace. / For the jug is in the water and the water's in the jug: / water within and without. / And the wise teach that when the jug breaks all the water / is one—one like the air. / Know: there's air at the start, and there's air at the end, / and, brother, all the air that's in between. / Kabir says: how can karma stick? / All plans and doubts are false. [194

5

Kabir's gone bad;⁹ / O help me, Ram— / Brother, you / don't go bad, too!
[refrain]

A tree that grows near sandalwood / goes bad: it turns to sandal. / Iron that's touched the philosopher's stone / goes bad: it turns to gold. / Water mixed into the Ganges / goes bad: it's Ganges' water. / Kabir says: he who's uttered 'Ram' / goes bad: he's turned to Ram. [166]

Devotion

6 Couplets

The true guru's the true hero: / just one arrow he shot. / But how it struck! A wide wound in my heart, / I hit the ground. [1:9]

The *satguru*,¹⁰ with steady grip, / put an arrow in his bow, then let it go. / And I, exposed, was hit. My body / like a forest burst in flames. [1:23]

The guru is the same as Govind: / the rest is all his forms. / To see him truly, worship Hari / and destroy your self. [1:28]

He picks up dice of love, / and makes a game-board of his body. / The guru's taught him how to throw: / Kabir, the servant, plays. [1:33]

The guru had been pleased with me, / and told me something true. / The cloud of love then burst, / and soaked me through and through. [1:34]

I'll burn my body to ashes: with smoke / rising from the pyre; / perhaps Ram will show mercy, showering / rain to drown the fire. [2:20]

Though his guru's in Banaras / and he lives by the sea, / if he's made of worthy stuff / they never will forget each other. [2:27]

7

My guru's a great bumble-bee; / When bugs come near, that bee will / give them colours like himself.¹¹ [refrain]

Their legs become different, their wings become different, / he colours them a different colour. / He doesn't look at rank or origins, / for the devotee is an outcaste. / When it flows into a crossing channel, / the Ganges water itself becomes a little stream. / But someone who has thus become the river / no longer has to jump across it. / He stopped the crooked / movements of my mind / To show that beyond the essence in essentials / and the companion in companionship. / He unbound my bonds / and tore through what was pressing me. / He gave Kabir an access to the Lord beyond all reach / and dyed him in Ram's colours. [1]

7.2 SUR DAS

The historical Sur Das probably flourished sometime in the mid-sixteenth century but — like Kabir — he now presents a figure of legendary stature whose name adorns

a great corpus of verse. The pre-eminent poet of Krishna devotion in Hindi, Sur Das seems to have been particularly fascinated with the image of Krishna as a child. Sometimes knowingly (8), sometimes less so (9), Sur's helpless, mischievous infant was also the Lord, giving indescribable delight to his family: his father, Nanda, his mother, Yashoda, and brother Balram. But Sur revelled just as much in Krishna's later play in the pastures of Vraj country, showing us the Lord as beautiful cowherd teasing enraptured milkmaids (12–15), who in turn taunt his befuddled friend Uddhava (17–19). Uddhava for Sur Das presents both a philosophical foil and comic relief: when Krishna was away at Mathura, he had sent his friend to console the milkmaids in his absence, and in a long series of poems that explicitly contrast saguna and nirguna paths, Sur Das depicts the scornful reactions of the milkmaids to Uddhava's misguided exhortations to yoga.¹²

Frequent in the work of Sur Das are references to eyes and vision. Devotees are attracted to the sight of the Lord: He takes control of their eyes (14) which flow into him as into a sea (15), and which they do not want to close (18); indeed, even Uddhava's eyes, which had just come from gazing at Krishna, at first bring delight to the milkmaids (16). This play of inward and external vision in Sur's poetry makes the traditional representation of Sur as a blind poet particularly enigmatic.

The child-god

8

Krishna is coming outside from within. [refrain]

To walk in the courtyard was easy, indeed; / at the doorway he's caught, though: / He trips and falls down — he just can't pass the threshold; / what labour to get him beyond it! / In only three steps he traversed the whole world;¹³ / but to move across his house takes him such time . . . / Deep within his soul Balram has understood: / Krishna's just pretending to be helpless. / The countless glories of Sur's Lord / delight devotees' hearts. [743]¹⁴

9

Watching Krishna walk gives joy to Mother Yashoda. [refrain]

On all fours now, close to the floor, Krishna flounders; / his mother sees the scene and points it out to all. / He makes it to the doorway then / comes back the other way again. / He trips and he falls, doesn't manage to cross — / which makes the sages wonder: / Ten millions of worlds he creates in a flash / and can destroy them just as fast; / But he's picked up by Nanda's wife, who sets him down, plays games with him, / then with her hand supports him while he steps outside the door. / When they see Sur's Lord, gods, men, and sages / lose track of their minds. [744]

10

Yashoda, his mother, is teaching him to walk.

[refrain]

He stumbles and then grabs her hand, / Unsteady, his feet have found the floor. / At times she looks at his beautiful face / And prays for his well-being. / At times she beseeches her family gods: / 'Let my boy Krishna have long life.' / At times she gives a shout to Balram: / 'Come play here with your brother in the yard.' / Sur Das knows that this great glory of the Lord's play / Gives delight to Raja Nanda. [733]

11

Kanha's¹⁵ coming: crawling, crying joyfully. [(refrain)]

In the courtyard of Nanda, golden and jewel-studded, / Hari hurries to catch his reflection. / Now and then Hari,¹⁶ seeing his shadow, / gives it a grasp with his hands, / Then gleefully gurgles: two little teeth shine. / Hari repeatedly seizes his image. / Hand-shadows, foot-shadows, on the golden ground / Together all shine forth. / As if each hand and foot in every jewel on the earth / Had come together in a lotus-throne adorning Krishna. / Yashoda seeing the sweetness of childhood, / calls out to Nanda again and again. / Then hiding her son in the folds of her sari, / suckles Sur's Lord at her breast. [728]

The milkmaids' fascination

12

In every house in Vraj they've started talking: [(refrain)]

'Hari's stealing curds and butter, / Then eats it with his cowherd friends.' / The women of Vraj are delighted to hear this: / 'Maybe he'll come to my house; / I could creep up on him, as he eats butter, / And press him to my breast.' / This is their desire deep / within: the thought all their hearts keep. / Even if he were to take it away, says Sur Das, / They'd give the Lord butter to eat. [890]

13

Young Kanha took away my heart. (refrain)

Since then I've been possessed, O Mother, / tell me what to do! / I've grown entangled in his twisted curls / and cannot come unloosed. / His pleasing glances, eyes seen from aside, / have settled in my body. / Grown shameless, I've destroyed our family pride: / What is his spell? / Time and time again I tell / him: 'I'm not entering your heart!' / But just as I said 'Hey, / you think I think like you,' / Oh, what a state he brought me to— / my body seemed to fade away. [2517]

14

These eyes are sold to Hari— [(refrain)]

A honeyed smile their price. / How could this happen? / Before, I controlled them so nicely, / but things have changed. / Now they're in Hari's camp, embarrassed when they see me. / They only come to leave again— / we meet as

in a dream. / Says Sur: now that they flow toward Nanda's joy, / they trust in no one else. [3020]

15

My eyes are mine no longer. [(refrain)]

Gazing intently on beautiful Shyama,¹⁷ / they've spilled out and flow like water. / My eyes behave like water / rushing downstream madly. / The water finally merges with the sea; / my eyes become attached to every part of Krishna. / The sea has no bottom, one cannot pass through it— / nor can one find the end of Krishna's beauty. / Says Sur, the milkmaids' eyes became converging sacred rivers / and mixed into the endless sea of Shyam. [2848]

Songs to the bee¹⁸

16

Today we've been fortunate, Uddhav. [(refrain)]

Those eyes of yours that come from Shyam / now fall on us. / Just as bees feel love when wind bears / flowers' scent / So bliss swells up in us today, / our limbs know joy. / Just as one's entranced when / looking in the mirror, / So when Hari's found, the pain / of longing leaves. [4151]

17

Uddhav, consider our state here in Vraj. [(refrain)]

Spread the word on yogic powers after that. / Think deeply of the reason Krishna sent you: / Can't you see how great a gap / lies between our longing and transcendent fact? / Since you live among the saints, they say you're smart, / and skilled in spiritual troubles. / Why, then, do you always tell the drowning to keep / grasping foamy bubbles? / How can we erase that smile from our hearts, / that glance that gives us pleasure? / Yogic means, release—the highest holy treasure— / we offer to his flute. / In what way can the *nirgun* come to live / in hearts that know those lotus eyes of his? / We'll let all adoration float away / that feels for something else. [4240]

18

Uddhava, we are not worthy of yoga. [(refrain)]

How can we weak women meditate? / How can we know the one truth? / How can you tell us to shut up these eyes / Where Hari's image glistens? / You're trying to trick us, bee, / and we won't listen! / Who can bear the yogi's pain: / split ears¹⁹ and matted hair? / As we burn up with longing and despair / you'd trade our cooling sandal-paste for ashes. / The one for whom the yogi loses himself, wandering, / is there in us already. / Says Sur: not for a moment are they separate from him— / as if his body's shadows. [4543]

What land does *nirgun* live in, bee?

We're serious, we swear it's not / a joke, so please explain! / Who's his dad and who's his mum? / His wife and maid are who? / If you try to tell us tales, / they'll come back to haunt you! / What's his colour? What does he wear? / What pleasures does he take? / Unbalanced, silent, Uddhav listens: / Sur thinks his brain might break. [4250]

7.3 TULSI DAS

If any one book can be singled out as the most influential devotional work in the Hindi-speaking areas, it is surely the Ramcharitmanas of Tulsi Das (d. 1623). The basis of public commentary and dramatic performance, Tulsi Das' highly mellifluous verses are also chanted quietly by individuals in private acts of devotion. Historically, the Ramcharitmanas appears as a Hindu reaction to the increasingly attractive Indo-Muslim Mughal culture that had begun to take shape by Tulsi Das' time. Not only does it evoke a mythic past that presents the glories of Ram – the embodiment of traditional Hindu virtues – but it also attempts to reconcile deities that rivalled each other in contemporary sectarian versions of Hinduism. Thus, as the hero of the epic, Ram remains the focal point of devotion, but the other great deities are not demeaned by him.

In the passage given here, Tulsi Das makes Ram instrumental in the Shiva mythology; but at the same time he presents Shiva as a powerful, omniscient yogi. The great ascetic Lord Shiva, having just heard of Ram's glory and longing to meet him, suddenly sees him in the forest. Ram, aided by his brother Lakshman, is in the midst of his long search for his abducted wife, Sita. Shiva is accompanied by his own first wife, Sati, who – by throwing herself into the sacrificial fire lit by her father Daksha – would achieve the dubious distinction of giving her name to the Hindu practice of widow-burning. According to Tulsi Das, Sati was led to her act of self-immolation through her doubts about her husband's devotion to Ram – the subject of the following extract.

20 Ramcharitmanas, Balakanda, 50–52

When Shiva then saw Ram, intense, uncommon joy grew in his heart. / Gazing at this beauty-sea, his eyes were filled. / Yet he did not reveal himself: / he knew it wasn't time / 'O truth, consciousness, and bliss, O world-redeemer – triumph' / —this was all that Shiva said, who once destroyed the god of love. / As he walked away with Sati, Shiva, the abode of grace, / kept shuddering with bliss. / When Sati saw her husband's state, uncommon doubt grew in her heart: / 'The world should worship Shiva, he's the ruler of the world. / To him all gods, all men and sages / bow their heads. / But he salutes that king's son – "O

truth, consciousness, and bliss," he says, / "O other world!" How he was struck with rapture when he saw that form. / And love that can't be checked / keeps growing in his heart.

The all-pervading *brahman*, with no birth, no parts, no passion; / no wants and no distinctions – which the Vedas do not know / can it really take a body and become a man? [50]

Sure, Vishnu took a human form to benefit the gods, / but like my Shiva, he knows everything. / That home of knowledge, Lord of wealth, that one who kills the demons— / can he be searching for his wife just like a stupid man? / Yet Shambhu's²¹ word cannot be false; / for everybody knows that he knows everything. / This boundless doubt stayed in her mind; / her heart knew no enlightenment. / She said nothing of her state, but Shiva knew. / He knows all, who controls within: 'Listen, Sati, you've a woman's nature; / don't ever keep this doubt within your heart. / That's my Ram, my chosen deity, / the one of whom the jar-born *rishi* sang;²² / in whom I have professed my faith, whom sages serve unceasingly, / the hero of the Raghavas.

Whom sages ever contemplate with spotless mind / —stern yogis, too, accomplished masters; / the *nigamas*, the *agamas*,²³ *puranas* all have sung his praises, / saying, "he's not this, not that": the indescribable; / Maya's Lord, the all-pervading *brahman* that rules all the worlds / —that's Ram. For the sake of his devotees he has manifest, / forever self-sufficient, the jewel of Raghuvance.

This teaching did not sit within her heart, despite Lord Shiva's repetitions. / But deep within the great Lord knew the power of Hari's *maya* / and so he smiled and said: / [51]

'If so much doubt is in your mind, / then why not go and make a test? / I'll sit beneath this banyan's shade / till you come back to me. / Consider carefully, then do something to take away / this stupid, strong delusion.' Sati took Shiv's leave and went away; / 'Oh, brother,' she was thinking, / 'Just what am I to do?' / Shiva sitting there reflected: / 'Nothing good will come to Daksha's daughter. / If, with all I said to her, her doubt did not depart, / then the fates are against her, her fortune is bad. / Still, everything will come through Ram's arrangements; / no need to sit and think how matters could be worse.' / He muttered this, then took up Hari's name. / Sati went to where Ram was in person, the Lord, abode of joy.

She thought and thought within her heart / and took the form of Ram's wife Sita, / then walked along the road on which that king of men was coming. [52]

Lakshman saw her in the guise of Sita. / Startled, he became confused within. / So grim he looked – he couldn't say a word. / Still, wise, he knew the power of the Lord. / That master of the gods saw through her pose / —all-seeing Ram, controlling all within. / Remember him and ignorance will cease; / Lord Ram knows all! / Yet Sati wanted to deceive him. . . / Behold – the power of woman's nature! / Admiring to himself the force of his illusions, / Ram smiled to speak sweet words. / His palms together, the Lord bowed; / and only

after giving out his own name and his father's, / inquired where Shiva was – whose standard bears a bull. / And why was Sati wandering in the forest by herself?

These words of Ram, so soft and deep, made her embarrassed. / Sati, awestruck, walked toward Great Lord Shiva, / heavy-hearted, thinking: / 53 'I disobeyed what Shiva said, / taking my ignorance to Ram. / What can I say to Shiva now?' / An awful fire grew in her heart. / Ram knew the pain that Sati felt, / so let her know some of his glory. / Walking down the road, she saw a spectacle: / in front of her was Ram, with his brother and his wife; / She looked around: behind she saw the Lord, / his brother, too, and Sita – beautifully clothed. / Whichever way she looked, she saw the Lord enthroned; / wise sages, adepts served him. / She saw many Shivas, Brahmas, Vishnus— / their splendour boundless, one beyond the next. / All the gods she saw, in different dress, / giving service to the Lord and bowing to his feet.

Satis, too, she saw, and Brahmas' wives and Vishnus' / —all limitless, unequalled: their bodies fit to wear / the raiments of the gods. / 54

All the gods there, with their wives, / wherever she saw Ram; / all living and all lifeless things in the created world / —she saw them there, all kinds. / In many diverse guises, the gods worshipped the Lord. / But she saw Ram in just one form. / However many Rams and Sitas she beheld, / they all looked just the same. / Ram, Sita, Lakshman—all the same! / Sati was struck by mighty awe. / With quivering heart and no awareness of her body, / she closed her eyes and sat down by the road. / Then opening her eyes she looked again, / but Daksha's daughter could see nothing there. / She bowed her head repeatedly down toward the feet of Ram, / and went off to where Shiva had remained. / When she approached him, Shiva smiled / and asked her how she was: 'I want to hear the truth now, dear. / How did you test the Lord?' / 55

7.4 EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SANTs

Though Kabir and most of the sant's who immediately succeeded him came from some of the lowest strata of Indian society, by the eighteenth century important poets in the nirguna tradition were coming from middle Hindu castes. Paltu Sahib of Ayodhya – an important centre of Ram worship – was a baniya, a member of a trading caste, and uses the imagery of the merchant to express both spiritual problems (21) and spiritual potential (22–23).²⁴ Like Kabir at Banaras, Paltu Sahib lived at a pilgrimage centre and denounced the practice of pilgrimage: more efficacious than empty rituals was devotion to the guru (24). Charandas Das of Delhi (1703–82), also from a merchant caste, was more open to Hindu traditions of ritual and myth. He travelled to Vraj country, which he described with a sant's insistence on its inner reality (25), and tells of the one divine that transcends both saguna and nirguna truths (26).

7.4.1 Paltu

21

A merchant is someone who measures his mind.

[(refrain)]

Inside the mind's a bazaar; / and the mind has itself become buyer. / In the mind is the giving and taking – for the mind is the store: / the mind lives out its life in the mind. / Loading, unloading take place in the mind – where else can they go? / For the mind must eat what the mind will grow. / In the mind is the measure, in the mind is the weight; / Paltu says it's all a circle in the mind. / 3:45²⁵

22

Look, there's a merchant gone mad— / he's running a knowledge shop.

[(refrain)]

He's selling deathless nectar, but still it seems like poison: / no customers will buy it. / They ask for salty snacks, he shows them sugar in the raw; / he looks like he's confused. / He gives loans without conditions / and asks everyone to take them. / Those who do will leave him happy / and won't ever be asked to pay him back. / His scales forgive, his weights are full, / his words are sweet for all. / With gems of *nam*²⁶ just lying in piles about, / he weighs them out, and asks no price. / Of *surat* key and *shabda* lock, / he tells through yogic means. / Says Paltu: Truth's a constant bargain / offered always day and night. / 3:73

23²⁷

Who will keep my shop now, hey, who will keep the shop?

[(refrain)]

The goods are all at *trikuti*, *sushumna*'s got a mattress on the floor; / my main store's at the tenth door; where sits the endless Lord. / *Ida*, *pingala* – my two scales, they hang from the soul's strings. / I'll grasp the cross-beam of true sound, and weigh out piles of pearls. / The sun and moon will keep up watch on heaps of primal stuff, / climb to *turiya*, set up shop; that's how I'll take charge. / The master *satguru*'s interceded, I've met sweet-seller Ram. / He's sounded the drum at Paltu's house, / who keeps getting paid back a hundred and twenty-five per cent. / 3:38

24

I'll give up all the rest to contemplate the guru.

[(refrain)]

I won't worship Brahma, Vishnu, or Mahesha,²⁸ / nor fix attention on a god of stone. / The object of my love resides within my body; / to Him alone I'll bow my head. / I won't take my final rest at Kashi, / or take the pilgrim's walk around the town. / Should I reach Prayag, I won't go to the bathing place, / nor will I sacrifice myself to Jagannath at Puri. / Sadhu, I won't mutter wordless phrases / or fix my gaze between my eyes. / Nor will I stretch to sit in yogic posture / and play myself internal sounds. / Sadhu, I'll abandon all God's names / to take the one my guru gave. / The guru's image overspreads my heart

/ and gets all my attention. / When he obliterates our separateness, / what's left
I'll call the formless. / The world within the sky will be our kingdom / and with
fanfare I will call out 'I'm that Truth.' / At my turn in the game of love, says
Paltu, / I'll gamble with the guru. / I get the guru if I win, and if I lose, / then I
can say I'm his. [3:2-3]

7.4.2 Charandas

25

Krishna always lives in Vraj / But doesn't meet me. / I feel his waves of mercy
sometimes / as if he's grasped my arm.

In Vraj are twelve fortunate forests / and twelve enraptured groves / Where
Hari plays his flute / and, wanton, sweetly sings.

The fourth state's²⁹ Lord, / who's deep inside us all, / He lives in Vraj for his
devotees' sake, / concealed within Vrindavan— / Wandering over the glorious
forest, / the place of play within.

Hari hides from worldly vision / but comes to those with fixed attention. /
The sphere of Mathura is nowhere manifest; / if it's manifest it isn't Mathura. /
To see the sphere of Mathura, / one needs the inner eye. [Bhaktisagar, p. 3³⁰

26

In him there are countless forms, / profound and without bounds. / Look how
he has manifest / in shapes and names and sounds.

I'll tell you the names of the seeds and the trees / and show all their
manifestations: / For he who comprehends the seedless / knows the *nirgun*
truth. / But when he understands the truth in all its forms, / he sees the marks
of branches, roots, and fruit. / In this way is *brahm* complete, / not in formless
nirgun. / Not *nirgun* and not *sagun*: / they're thought-up names – not him. / But
what I say is nonsense, / for no one can tell the untellable tale. / When someone
tries to tell it, pay attention, / but don't think what he's said the final truth. /
Says Charandas: great *rishis*, *munis*, / heavy *pandits* – all have searched and
failed.

He's *nirgun* and he's *sagun*, / He's different from them both. / Who he was I
never knew / however much I pondered. / Endless power, endless play, /
virtues of all kinds, / A spectacle of endless shapes / to which Charandas gives
offerings. / Endless names, distinctions, actions, / endless *avatars*: / Of *avatars*,
though, Shukdev thinks that / twenty-four stand out, / Then Ram and
Krishna, both complete, / two in twenty-four: / From *nirgun* he is *sagun* / for
bhaktas to adore. [Bhaktisagar, pp. 176-7]

8 THE BENGALI TRADITION

Bengali religious texts have a continuous history reaching back to esoteric Buddhist poems (charya-padas) of the ninth or tenth century. Bengali verse (prose being a development of the nineteenth century) experienced tremendous growth during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. The literature of this medieval period consists of three major genres: (1) mahakavya (great poetry), (2) mangalakavya (auspicious poetry), and (3) devotional literature. Mahakavya includes, most importantly, Bengali versions of the classical epics Ramayana and Mahabharata (the best-known authors being Krittivasa and Kashirama Dasa respectively). These are not simply translations of the Sanskrit into Bengali, but are original works that sometimes differ significantly from the classical Sanskrit texts. Since selections from the classical epics have been translated in other portions of this sourcebook, no translation of the Bengali epics is included here. Mangalakavya is a much more uniquely Bengali style of 'village poetry' that is concerned with the emergence of new deities, most frequently female, and the establishment of their cults on earth. I have included the birth story of the goddess Manasa as an example of this genre. The most popular among the Bengali devotional movements is Vaishnavism. A Vaishnava revival took place in Bengal during the sixteenth century which produced a wealth of religious texts including biographies, philosophical works, and devotional poetry. I include a selection from the Chaitanya-Charitamrita, the most influential of the biographies written about the fascinating saint Chaitanya; the first chapter of the Bhaktirasamrita-sindhu, a work (written in Sanskrit) which defines the way of devotion in aesthetic terminology; a poem (also in Sanskrit) produced for meditation on the playful activities of Radha and Krishna; and three poems addressed to Krishna by Narottama Dasa Thakura. I conclude this section with two poems by Ramaprasada Sen addressed to the goddess Kali and two poems by the famous Baul singer Lalan.

Those interested in learning more about the history of Bengali literature would do well to consult either D. C. Sen, History of Bengali Language and Literature, second ed., Calcutta, 1954, or S. Sen, A History of Bengali Literature, New Delhi, 1960.

8.1 THE BIRTH OF MANASA¹

Devi, or the Goddess, assumes a vast variety of manifestations throughout the South Asian subcontinent. Here is the story of the birth of Manasa, one of the forms she assumes in Bengal. Manasa is the goddess of snakes. A complex cult is associated with the worship of Manasa, which commonly involved the use of a sacred pot. The goddess Manasa is worshipped in Bengal to secure a host of