INTRODUCTION TO ORIENTAL CIVILIZATIONS
Wm. Theodore de Bary, General Editor

Sources of Japanese Tradition (1958)
Sources of Chinese Tradition (1960)
Sources of Indian Tradition (1958, revised 1988)

SOURCES OF INDIAN TRADITION

Second Edition

Volume One: From the Beginning to 1800

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First edition edited by Wm. Theodore de Bary *with*
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Columbia University Press
New York

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sources of Indian tradition.
(Introduction to Oriental civilizations)
Translations from various sources by various individuals.
First ed. (1958) compiled by William Theodore de Bary and others.
Includes bibliographies and index.
Contents: v. 1. From the beginning to 1800 — v. 2. Modern India and Pakistan.
1. India—Civilization. 2. Pakistan—Civilization. 3. India—Religion. I. Embree, Ainslie Thomas. II. Hay, Stephen N. III. De Bary, William Theodore, 1918– IV. Series.
DS423.S64 1988 954 87-15607
ISBN 0-231-06650-3 (v. 1) 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
ISBN 0-231-06651-1 (pbk. : v. 1) 10 9 8 7 6 5 4
ISBN 0-231-06414-4 (v. 2) 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
ISBN 0-231-06415-2 (pbk. : v. 2) 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Columbia University Press
New York Guildford, Surrey
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Printed in the United States of America

Hardback editions of Columbia University Press books are Smyth-sewn and printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper

Book design by Ken Venezio

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THE SONGS OF MEDIEVAL HINDU DEVOTION

Beside the great intellectual and artistic achievements of Indian culture that expressed themselves in Sanskrit and are identified with centers of learning, established religious institutions, and the patronage of kings is another aspect of the Indian tradition that many argue reflects more truly its aspirations and its vitality. This is bhakti, the devotional religion that spread throughout India and expressed itself in the regional languages of the whole of the subcontinent. It began perhaps as early as the fourth century B.C. in Tamilnadu, in South India, but flourished from the twelfth to the eighteenth century in all regions and languages.

In this period, designated for the lack of a more generally accepted term as "medieval," Hindu culture in many aspects, secular as well as religious, was colored by the attitudes to life expressed in bhakti poetry. The characteristic feature of bhakti is the expression of an intense and passionate relation with the divine, a devotion that, as has been noted in earlier chapters, had its origins in very remote times and is never absent from the Hindu or Buddhist tradition. Another feature common to the practitioners of devotional religion is the disregard for social conventions, including family life, religious rituals, and normal economic and political values. In other words, the bhakti tradition, as it developed in the medieval period, was of consequence for more than personal religious practice; it was an integral part of the fabric of Indian society. The implications of bhakti for social relations have been little studied, but, as a reading of the examples given here indicates, bhakti literature leaves untouched few human concerns. One fairly certain social function of the bhakti tradition as it developed in the different geographical regions of India was the providing of an outlet for economic and social discontent as well as for religious aspirations. Possibly it served social purposes that, in similar circumstances in the European tradition, led to protest movements or other forms of social change. Certainly, so widespread and so deeply rooted a cultural expression must have had profound meaning for Indian society. Unlike protest movements in other civilizations, however, such as the millenarian and chiliastic movements in European history, bhakti did not deny the underlying assumptions of society. It was a protest that in the end could be accommodated within the existing social ideology because it emphasized the unreality of existing social bonds, not their injustice.

The congruence between bhakti as a religious phenomenon and other aspects of the tradition has been especially noted in chapter 10 on kāma as one of the essential ends of human life and in chapter 11 in the discussion of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Purāṇic theism, and Tantrism. The vocabulary and attitudes of the bhakti tradition as it expressed itself in the regional languages, especially in Tamil, Marathi, and Hindi, have striking resemblances to similar devotional modes in Christianity. Indeed, some Western writers in the nineteenth century supposed, without any historical evidence, that there had been Christian influence involved in the development of bhakti. More plausible is the argument that there was mutual interaction between bhakti and Islamic devotional religion (Sufism) after the fourteenth century, although it must be stressed that the origins and nature of bhakti are clearly derived from the Hindu world view. Its metaphysical underpinnings relate to the great assumptions of the Hindu tradition—dharma, karma, and rebirth. But bhakti should not be wholly equated with mysticism, for mystical practices in Hinduism, as in other religious traditions, often emphasize rigorous meditative and contemplative disciplines that are quite different from the freedom and almost anarchic passion of many exponents of the way of bhakti.

The bhakti tradition found expression through devotees, often referred to in the West as "poet-saints," who went about singing songs in the vernacular languages of their regions. Some went on pilgrimages to famous temples and sacred places; others carried on intense worship in a particular place to a particular deity. Some supported orthodoxy; others decried all ceremonies, pilgrimages, and temples and denounced attachment to deities in any particular form. This last group included those who worshiped the deity as formless and without attributes (*nirguṇa*, in contrast to *saguṇa*, worshiping through attributes and form), but most of the bhakti poets addressed their devotion to one of the two great gods, Shiva or Vishnu. A third deity, the

Great Goddess Shakti, was very widely worshiped, as noted in the section on theism (chapter 11), but fewer songs of her devotees appear to have been preserved.

Although it is possible to interpret the bhakti tradition as the religion of the poor masses, and as a protest against the dominance of priests and rulers, bhakti should not be seen just as a religion of the downtrodden and oppressed. Devotional religion in India, as elsewhere, has been practiced by all sorts and conditions of men and women. Indeed, it has helped to bind together the many diverse elements of the Indian subcontinent into a functioning society.

The historical evidence, although scanty and at times contradictory, indicates that bhakti, in the sense of devotion expressed in the languages of the people, began in South India in the Tamil-speaking area with the saints living under the Pallava rulers of Kānchī (c. fourth to ninth centuries).

During these great days of the Pallavas, when art and literature blossomed and Hindu culture spread from the South across the seas into the East Indies, the Tamil saints sang of Shiva and Vishnu in the temples then coming into prominence. The hymns about Shiva (called *Devāram*) and those about Vishnu (called *Divya Prabandham*) are revered still today by the Tamils as the *Tamil Veda*. They are sung to different melodic modes, and inscriptions in the temples provide for endowments to maintain their recitals as part of the temple service. The contributions of these two groups of saints, those who adored Shiva (Nāyanārs) and those who sang of Vishnu (Ālvārs), form the bedrock of Tamil culture and a most appealing part of Tamil literature. The most important among these saints lived in the period from the seventh to the ninth century; others followed and kept the tradition in full vogue throughout the subsequent centuries.

From the Tamil country bhakti singing spread to the Kannada-speaking area, whence the spark was ignited in Maharashtra; then the Hindi-speaking areas took it up, and North India was aflame with this fervent faith. This popular presentation of the teaching of the Upanishads, the philosophical schools, and the Purānic lore coincided with the linguistic phenomenon of the growth of the neo-Indo-Aryan languages of the North and the flowering of the literatures of the Dravidian languages of the South. The literary growth of the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages came about through the impregnation of the ideas and themes of classical Sanskrit literature, original production in which was weakened as a result of the upsurge of creative effort in the vernacular. At the same time, popular songs served as forerunners of a musical renaissance. In them a new form of musical composition took shape, and a repertoire was provided not only for concerts but also for congregational worship or service in temples. In various localities where people met, sang, and went into devotional ecstasies, halls were erected called *bhajan math* or *nām ghar*. The saint-musicians and their *bhajan* halls still continue in force all over the country even in modern cities like New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras. One also hears the songs of the medieval poet-saints again and again over radio and television in modern India, demonstrating how the flow of the heritage adapts itself to changing times. Bhakti may still, as in the past, provide a way for channeling discontent and frustration in directions acceptable to established social patterns.

The readings that follow are selections from the psalms and songs of these saint-musicians of India, representing not only the geographical and linguistic regions of India, but also the chronological movement from the seventh century to the beginnings of the nineteenth.[1]

The selections have been classified under four headings: three determined by the names of the deities or their manifestations to which the songs were addressed—that is, Shiva, Vishnu, and Devī—and the fourth including the expressions of those poets who declared that the object of their devotion was without a particular name, form, or quality (*nirguṇa*). It is an inexact division because some of the poets, although using a god's name, do not give him definite personal attributes. Basavanna, the devotee of Shiva, is an example. This classification, however, parallels the one used in chapter 11 for the material on Purānic theism and, to some extent, in chapter 10 for the material on kāma and thus helps to indicate the linkages of different aspects of the tradition. Most of the great cultural and linguistic regions, particularly Tamilnadu, produced poets belonging to more than one group.

Shiva Bhakti

As the selections in chapters 10 and 11 indicate, Shiva is one of the most ancient of Indian deities because of his many forms and attributes, also the most enigmatic and contradictory. The great ascetic, he is also the great lover; he is destroyer and creator; kind and beneficent, yet dark and terrible. This many-sided nature of Shiva is celebrated in the hymns of his devotees, who see in the seeming contradictions reflections of power. The geographical range of the poet-singers represented here is from Tamilnadu in the south to Kashmir in the extreme north.

Tirunāvukkarashu

Tirunāvukkarashu (Vāgīsha, seventh century), known as "Master of Speech" or Appar, was one of the earliest Tamil poet-saints. He was reconverted to Shaivism from Jainism by his sister Tilakavatī and in turn reconverted the Pallava king Mahendra Varman.

We are not subject to any; we are not afraid of death; we will not suffer in hell; we live in no illusion; we feel elated; we know no ills; we bend to none; it is all one happiness for us; there is no sorrow, for we have become servants, once for all, of the independent Lord, and have become one at the beautiful flower-strewn feet of that Lord.

Jnānasambandha

Jnānasambandha (seventh century) vanquished the Jains in debate at Mathurai[2] and reconverted the Pāndyan king to Shaivism.

THE LORD'S NAMES

The Lord's names are medicines; they are sacred mantras; they are the way to salvation in the other world, they are all the other good things, too; through them all acute miseries are destroyed; meditate only upon those names of the Lord.

THE LORD IS EVERYTHING

Thou art flaw, Thou art merit, O Lord of Kūdal Ālavāi![3] Thou art kith and kin, Thou art Master. Thou art the light that shines without a break. Thou art the inner meaning of all the sacred texts learned. Material gain, emotional gratification *[kāma]*, all these that man seeks art Thyself. What can I utter in praise before Thee?

Mānikkavāchakar

Mānikkavāchakar ("the Ruby-worded Saint," eighth century), a minister of the Pāndyan court at Mathurai, fought Buddhism and revived Shaivism. His songs are surcharged with much feeling. The collection of his devotional poems is called the *Sacred Utterances*.

[From *Tiruccatakam*, 90]

I am false, my heart is false, my love is false; but I, this sinner, can win Thee if I weep before Thee, O Lord, Thou who are sweet like honey, nectar, and the juice of sugarcane! Please bless me so that I might reach Thee.

From his poem on union with the Lord, called the *Puṇarcci-p-pattu*, which is typical of devotional ecstasy and the symbolism of "divine nuptials."

Melting in the mind, now standing, now sitting, now lying and now getting up, now laughing and now weeping, now bowing and now praising, now dancing in all sorts of ways, gaining the vision of the Form [of the Lord] shining like the rosy sky, with my hairs standing on end—when will I stand united with, and entered into, that exquisite Gem of mine [the Lord]!

Sundaramūrti

Sundaramūrti (ninth century) was the most humanistic of the Shaiva Nāyanārs of the Tamilnadu.

[O Lord!] Without any other attachment, I cherished within my mind only Thine holy feet; I have been born with Thy grace and I have attained the state whereby I shall have no rebirth. O Benevolent Lord at Kodumudi,[4] worshiped and lauded by the learned! Even if I forget you, let my tongue go on muttering your mantra, *Namaḥ Sivāya.*[5]

Basavanna

Basavanna (c.1106–1168), the great poet-saint of the South Indian region of Karnataka, composed his work in Kannada, the Dravidian language of the area. He was a passionate devotee of Shiva and founded the important Vīrashaiva movement, which attacked both orthodox Brahmanism and Jainism, which was still strong in the area. He disregarded the restrictions of caste and preached an egalitarianism based on utter devotion to Shiva, who was the giver of grace, without the need of brāhman priests. Because his followers wear the lingam, the symbol of Shiva, they are often known now as Lingāyats. In modern India, they constitute an important social and political group who have made many adjustments to orthodox Hinduism, including the use of brāhman priests. The following Kannada poems, known as *vacana*, or religious lyrics, illustrate many of Basavanna's attitudes toward society and his devotion to Shiva, who is referred to as "Lord of the Meeting Rivers," in reference to the place where Basavanna first came to know Shiva as his god.

[From Basavanna, selections from *vacanas*]

The lamb brought to the slaughterhouse eats the leaf garland with which it is decorated. . . . The frog caught in the mouth of the snake desires to swallow the fly flying near its mouth. So is our life. The man condemned to die drinks milk and ghee. . . .

He who knows only the *Gītā* is not wise; nor is he who knows only the sacred books. He only is wise who trusts in God.

When they see a serpent carved in stone, they pour milk on it; if a real serpent comes, they say, "Kill, kill." To the servant of God, who could eat if served, they say, "Go away, go away"; but to the image of God which cannot eat, they offer dishes of food.

To speak truth is to be in heaven, to speak untruth is to continue in the world of mortals. Cleanliness is heaven, uncleanliness is hell.

Sweet words are equal to all prayers. Sweet words are equal to all penances. Good behavior is what pleases God. . . . Kindness is the root of all righteousness.

Those who have riches build temples for Thee; what shall I build? I am poor. My legs are the pillars; this body of mine is the temple.

[From Basavanna, trans. by A. K. Ramanujan in *Speaking of Śiva*, pp. 79, 84]

Don't you take on
this thing called bhakti:

like a saw
it cuts when it goes

and it cuts again
when it comes.

If you risk your hand
with a cobra in the pitcher,[6]
will it let you
pass?

The pot is a god. The winnowing
fan is a god. The stone in the
street is a god. The comb is a
god. The bowstring is also a
god. The bushel is a god and the
spouted cup is a god.

Gods, gods, there are so many
there's no place left
for a foot.

There is only
one god. He is our Lord
of the Meeting Rivers.

Mahādevī

Many of the poet-saints were women, who, even more than men, risked the censure of society by their unconventional lives. Like Basavanna, Mahādevī lived in Karnataka in the twelfth century, and, according to the legends, although she was married to the king, she gave all her love to Shiva, not to her husband. She refers in her poems to Shiva as "The Lord White as Jasmine," and, as in the secular love poetry of chapter 10, the imagery is of love in separation and love in union.

[From Mahādeviyakka, trans. by Ramanujan in *Speaking of Śiva*, pp. 134, 141]

I love the Handsome One:
he has no death
decay nor form
no place or side
no end nor birthmarks.
I love him, O mother. Listen

I love the Beautiful One
 with no bond nor fear
 no clan no land
 no landmarks
 for his beauty.

So my lord, white as jasmine, is my husband.

Take these husbands who die,
 decay, and feed them
 to your kitchen fires!

Better than meeting
and mating all the time
is the pleasure of mating once
after being far apart.

When he's away
I cannot wait
to get a glimpse of him.

Friend, when will I have it
both ways,
be with Him
yet not with Him,
my lord white as jasmine?

Lallā

Lallā, who lived in the fourteenth century in Kashmir, was another famous woman devotee of Shiva who, like Mahādevī, defied all social conventions in her search for her beloved.

[From Lallā, *Lallāvākyāni*]

I, Lallā, went out far in search of Shiva, the omnipresent Lord; after wandering, I, Lallā, found Him at last within my own self, abiding in His own home.

Temple and image, the two that you have fashioned, are no better than stone; the Lord is immeasurable and consists of intelligence; what is needed to realize Him is unified concentration of breath and mind.

Let them blame me or praise me or adore me with flowers; I become neither joyous nor depressed, resting in myself and drunk in the nectar of the knowledge of the pure Lord.

With the help of the gardeners called Mind and Love, plucking the flower called Steady Contemplation, offering the water of the flood of the Self's own bliss, worship the Lord with sacred formula of silence!

Vishnu Bhakti

The extraordinary place that the great deity Vishnu came to occupy in Indian mythology and devotion is discussed in chapter 11 in the sections on the *Bhagavad Gītā* and Purānic theism and in chapter 10 on kāma. Two of Vishnu's incarnations, Rāma and Krishna, are especially important for the bhakti movement. The stories of the great hero Rāma had been enshrined in the Sanskrit epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa,* which, under the influence of bhakti, had been retold in regional languages, most notably by Kamban in Tamil and Tulsīdās in Hindi. There is an immense literature dealing with Krishna, who in the bhakti tradition is worshiped and celebrated, not as the great austere teacher of the *Bhagavad Gītā,* but as a god who is a playful child, a great lover, and a worker of miracles. These stories have also been the inspiration of important traditions of painting as well as festivals and music. The poet-singers selected for inclusion here are mainly from the Hindi-speaking regions of western and northern India, where the Krishna cult was most widespread. Special attention is given to three of the Hindi poets—Sūrdas, Ravidās, and Mīrābāī—who illustrate the complex interworking of orthodoxy, social protest, and devotional worship of Krishna. Vishnu was also the focus of worship from very early times in South India. Some of the most splendid of the great temples there were built in his name and a few examples of early Vaishnavite bhakti from the South are given.

The Ālvārs

The poets who sang the praise of Vishnu as their Lord in Tamil are known as the Ālvārs. Poihai of Kānchīpuram, Bhūtam of Mahābalipuram, and Pey of Mylapore, Madras, were the first three Ālvārs. On a rainy night, at Tirukkōvilūr, all three were taking shelter together in a small room that was all dark; Vishnu also pressed into that small space, and to find out who the