Patton E. BURCHETT, A Genealogy of Devotion. *Bhakti*, Tantra, Yoga, and Sufism in North India

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REFERENCES


1 A Genealogy of Devotion is the book that was missing from the shelves of our library. The book seeks to understand the rise of bhakti religiosity in North India focusing the attention on the period that ranges from circa the 1450 to the 1750. The questions at the base of the book are declared in the very first page: “What about this bhakti was new and why was it so successful at this particular time? How did early modern devotional communities define bhakti and themselves in relation to other religious approaches and communities?”.

2 Burchett, using the scholarship already existent and adding his own research to it, creates a coherent and well written fusion in which Bhakti is crucially analyzed in its historically and fluid relationships with Tantra, Yoga, Sufism and asceticism, and in which tantrikās, bhaktas and yogīs are historicized and reconceived.

3 Quite often scholars have limited the historiography of Bhakti by conceiving it in terms of emotion and affect, obscuring nevertheless the discourses, embodied practices and institutions through which Bhakti spread. Burchett, instead, points at the fact that “each of the various regions of India had its own distinctive, multivocal bhakti movement shaped by regionally and historically specific social, political, and cultural factors” (p. 2).
Burchett takes under consideration two main ascetics groups, Rāmānandīs and Nāths the bhaktas and the yogis, comparing and contrasting their practices and religious attitudes, even with that of sufis. It demonstrates that the origin of certain attitudes towards tantra today do not simply results from a colonialist rhetoric, rather lie in the period analyzed in this book, in which a new devotional approach is developed. The book also demonstrates that for a proper history of Bhakti it is necessary to look at the history of asceticism in India because various ascetic lineages and monastic institutions had and still have a fundamental role in the spreading of Bhakti.

The book is divided in three parts. The first part, *From Medieval Tantra to Early Modern Bhakti*, consists of three chapters through which the reader realizes the importance of Tantra in creating a theoretical and practical background over which the new religious movements of Bhakti and Sufism could develop according to a new North Indian political and social landscape.

In chapter 1, Burchett describes the correlation between Tantra’s rise of prominence and the growth of popular Bhakti traditions. This is a very dense chapter which is nevertheless unravelled and analysed in a very clear manner. Here Burchett describes the Tantric age showing how tantra was “a broad persuasive mainstream tradition – only marginally concerned with transgression – whose institutions, cosmological assumptions, and ritual forms were key elements in the social life and political structure of early medieval Indian” (p. 41). This era deteriorated with the advent of the Delhi Sultanate, but Burchett strongly points out the fact that tantric groups did not disappear, and their ritual forms and techniques persisted in and beyond the 13th and 15th centuries in the new religious currents of Sufism and Bhakti.

In chapter 2, Burchett demonstrates the specificity of North Indian bhakti movement in its being inflected by the spread of Persian and Indo-Persian culture, by the expansion of popular Sufism and by the growth of charismatic asceticism and vernacular literature. While sufis and tantrikās had very similar structure and organisation which lead one to substitute the other, sufis’ search for God’s love and good ethical life was shared with Bhakti movements. The emphasis on the role of Islam in the emergence and development of Bhakti movements, is indeed another important contribution of this book. Bhaktas and sufis shared similar ethical code: they valorised selfless love and emphasised passionate longing for an absent beloved, displaying similar aesthetic style to express and evoke emotions. However, it was from Akbar on that Bhakti institutions, communities and literature really flourished in North India.

Chapter 3 then deals with the role played by Mughals and Rajputs in the rise of Vaiṣṇava Bhakti. This chapter is a collection of a vast array of scholarly literature, newly interpreted and organised. The Mughal-Rajput socio-political context that allowed Bhakti institutions and literature to prosper is explored focusing the attention on the reign of Akbar and on the role of the Kacchvāhās of Amer.

The second part of the book *Yogīs, Poets and a New Bhakti Sensibility in Mughal India* relies on original, primary source research and deals with the development and the dynamics at play in the 16th -17th centuries North India where a distinctive bhakti sensibility was confronting with tantric religiosity and yoga.

Chapter 4 uses the Rāmānandi of Galtā to create a confrontation between tantric yogic asceticism and the selfless, emotional devotion of bhaktas. It is shown that this confrontation often leads to criticism because in the late 15th and 16th centuries a
number of bhaktas “began to conceive their religious behaviour as quite apart from that of yogīs, ascetics, and most especially, tantrikās” (p. 130).

11 In chapter 5 Burchett tries to answer to the question “How did the tapasvī lineage of Rāmānandis differ from the Nāth yogīs?” His answer is that while Nāth had interest in acquiring siddhis and in the tantric laya-yoga practices, ascetic Rāmānandis practiced a haṭha yoga that maintained close ties with the munis’ ancient physical techniques of tapas (p. 184). To reach such answer, the author describes three streams of yogic practice – tapasvī, meditational and tantric – providing a clear overview on the history of yoga, to point then at its supposed democratization with haṭha yoga and at the downplay of demanding physical austerities and rejection of extreme ascetic practices.

12 Chapter 6 examines the life and works of the 16th century Rāmānandi bhakta Agrādās in order to understand the reasons behind the rise and spread of bhakti communities in early modern North India. He explores the strategies and motivations at works in Agrādās’ literary compositions and in that of his disciple Nabhadās, which negotiated political agendas, pious sentiments and aesthetic tastes to address multiple audiences. Burchett refers to the transectarian bhakti sensibility of the time, to the tantric shadows in Agrādās rasik meditation practice based on the remembrance of the name, and to the link between Nabhadās’ work and the Sufi genre of the tazkira.

13 In the third part of the book, The Devotee Versus the Tāntrika, the author investigates some of the trends that demonstrate how bhakti began to present aspects of a more distinct religious identity.

14 Chapter 7 explores the poetry of the Bhakti Saints to manifest process of interaction and opposition to the tantric-yogic asceticism of Nāth yogīs, and in general to tantric Śaiva and Śakta religious forms, which led to the development of a specific Vaiṣṇava bhakti sensibility and community at the elite and popular levels. The core thought is that bhakti is powerful, while yoga is powerless and liberation can come only through faith and love in God and in the repetition of His name, which although may resemble tantric mantra recitation, owns an intrinsic quality that cannot be misused. The last paragraph provides interesting hints from various other religious groups (like the Dādūpanthī) which were exceptional compared to the described situation.

15 The last chapter in divided in two part: in the first one the author discusses the ways in which Sufi literature and bhakti poetry come to subsume yoga, transforming it in a metaphor for one-pointed ego dissolving in love for God. In the second part Burchett refers to the hagiographic genre to see how sufis and bhaktas articulate a “particular devotional conception of God and appropriate religious behavior in contradistinction to tantric-yogic understanding and approaches” (p. 276). He illustrates how both the Sufi premākhyaṅ, Mirābāi and Sūrdās’ poems, and Marathi, Punjabi and Hindi sources, use a yogic symbolism conveying a message that actually validates the power of devotion. In these works, it is clearly presented “that neither tantric asceticism nor yogic dispassion can meet the needs of the bhakta” because they lack of the true intimate relationship with the Divine (p. 286).

16 A Genealogy of Devotion is a well-documented and written work which courageously confronts many different topics and tries to provide a wider perspective, proving that “a historical study of the different, specific ways that India’s religious communities have constructed the relationship between bhakti, tantra, and yoga (and the boundaries around them) can be a very productive approach to understand those communities and South Asian social and religious history more broadly” (p. 308).
Burchett links together the rise of vernacular composition, which paved the way for bhakti poets, with their institutionalized forms, becoming valuable symbols of power for aspiring Hindu rulers, stressing therefore the role of patronage. To notice, the highlight given by Burchett to the influx of Persianate culture in North India as a crucial element that brought about mayor change in the social and religious landscape. Articulating these various elements, the author presents a complex reconstruction of how in the 16th century Vaishnava devotion increasingly took the place of previously dominant tantric Shaiva and Shakta traditions, becoming the most effective means to satisfy the religious quest of lay and devotee population, with a legacy which still lasts.

Because of the huge task and the huge amount of information presented, sometimes the author seems to lose his initial courage to present more “official” conclusions. To give just one example, the author stresses the fact that it is difficult to make rigid boundaries, but then he seems too firm in categorizing Nāths of the considered period as practitioners of laya-yoga, while he himself provides reach material (especially vernacular sources) which would demonstrate that the yoga practiced by Nāths was not just laya, but based on “yogic posture and breath control” (as Kabir says, p. 247), and bindu retention (as presented in the Gorakhbāṇī). The fact that vernacular and visual sources (such as the miniatures present in the Bahr al-Hayat) depict often Nāths as the practitioners of physical forms of ḥāṭha yoga should not be underestimated.

Another point that I would have liked the author to try to unravel – but I am not sure if there is clear evidence for the purpose – was about the interaction between the rasik Rāmānandī and the tyāgī (and nāgā) Rāmānandī communities which were very much powerful in North India and practiced a bhakti supported by form of asceticism, austerities and physical practices criticized by the rasiks. Therefore, I would have liked some consideration about the role that wandering sādhus could have had in the spreading of the Vaishnava Bhakti.

However, Burchett clarifies that his attention is toward a specific trend and the “trend under discussion was just that, a trend, a general but incomplete shift in North India, not an ironclad rule or an all-encompassing social movement” (p. 274).

To conclude, this is a book that makes the reader questioning labels and practices, showing that while it might seem that a yogi, a tantrikā, a bhakta or a sufi was quite simply one who practiced yoga, tantra or a form of devotion, what was considered to constitute Yoga, Tantra, Bhakti, or Sufism, varied greatly according to what degree these were central in the religiosity of a given religious person.