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Christ-Centered Bhakti: A Literary and Ethnographic Study of Worship

Nadya Pohran

Abstract: Bhakti (loving devotion) centered on and directed to Jesus Christ—or what I here call "Christ-centred bhakti"—is an increasingly popular religious practice in India and elsewhere. The first half of this paper seeks to explore some of the roots of the contemporary spiritual practice of bhakti poetry which has been written and/or is being sung in India. An overview of bhakti in a broader sense provides the necessary foundation so as to then explore and contextualise the emerging practice of Christ-centered bhakti poetry—often called 'Yesu' (Jesus) or 'Khrist' (Christ) bhajans (devotional hymns)—within the broader theological and experiential frameworks of Hindu bhakti. To structure this contextualization, I draw upon a helpful observation by Jessica Frazier: scholars generally approach bhakti as either a concept, a historical movement, or an experience. The first half of this paper interacts with each of these understandings of bhakti in order to provide the reader with some necessary context of bhakti in its broader and more

commonly known expressions—most of which are in Hindu contexts.

The second half of this paper focuses on Christ-centered bhakti, drawing from both ethnographic fieldwork and literary analysis, and explores how Christ-centered bhakti can be situated within bhakti's broader historical and literary expressions. I highlight some of the expressions of Christ-centered bhakti through focusing specifically on one bhajan, 'Man Mera,' and reading it alongside bhajans by the 16th-century Rajasthani poet-saint Mirabai. The focus on Christ-centred bhakti documents and demonstrates some of the ways in which bhakti is being practiced with Christian idioms and in Christian contexts. And, significantly, it reveals the various ways that some Christians grapple with their faith in Jesus and embrace an existential uncertainty with regard to their sense of God.

VRINDI¹ tossed the end of her *dupatta* over her shoulder and pulled back her long, dark hair, securing it with a hair clip. Her sister handed

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her an assortment of colourful material that she had just measured and cut, and after a few adjustments Vrindi began slowly feeding the material through the sewing machine. There were four women, and myself, in the small room, surrounded by metres of fabric, sewing patterns, an assortment of scissors, thread, and sewing pins, and the one coveted sewing machine. Two of the women came from a nearby slum, to which they had returned after ceasing their involvement with a local sex-trafficking trade. Vrindi and her sister were from a nearby Christian church which ran a ministry targeted at helping slum dwellers—particularly former sex-workers—to learn skills such as sewing or handicrafts so that they could work toward supporting themselves and their families financially. The pastor of the church rented out the space for the women to work in; the room was small and the building was rundown and rickety, but it served its purpose in allowing women to learn various handicrafts, which they could then sell.

Vrindi began humming a quiet tune, and her sister joined in after a few moments. Before long, the other two women in the room were also singing along as the five of us measured, cut, pinned, and stitched:

Bhajo nam, bhajo nam, bhajo nam, Yesu nam.

Yesu nam, Yesu nam, Yesu nam, Yesu nam.

Sab bhakti karo mil gao Yesu nam re.

(Praise the name, praise the name, praise the name, Jesus' name.

Jesus' name, Jesus' name, Jesus' name, Jesus' name.

We all sing Jesus' name with devotion.)²

This paper first seeks to explore some of the roots of the contemporary spiritual practice of bhakti poetry which has been

written and/or is being sung in India. An overview of bhakti in a broader sense provides the necessary foundation so as to then explore and contextualise the emerging practice of Christ-centered bhakti poetry—often called 'Yesu' (Jesus) or 'Khrist' (Christ) bhajans (devotional hymns)—within the broader theological and experiential frameworks of Hindu devotion (bhakti.) Recent theological and anthropological studies of Khrist bhakti, as well as some of my preliminary fieldwork in parts of North India, have suggested that Christ-centered bhakti is on the rise as a form of spiritual practice.³ Christ-centered bhakti is not a monolithic devotional form but has many diverse expressions. It has been suggested that the increasing popularity of Christ-centered bhakti is due to its unique combination of traditionally-Hindu forms of bhakti spirituality and some Christian teachings.⁴ The four women mentioned in the above vignette all grew up in Hindu families. While Vrindi and her sister have come to identify with a Christian church community in many ways, the other two women shy away from Christian institutions because they perceive Christian teachings as an outright rejection of their Hindu traditions.⁵ The practice of Christ-centered bhakti offers an interesting middle-ground to such individuals, as it exists as a sort of dynamic 'hybridization' of some aspects of both Hindu and Christian spiritualities.

A helpful article by Jessica Frazier raises important questions about the ways in which Western scholars have often approached bhakti. Frazier prompts scholars to examine their assumptions regarding bhakti. She asks, 'Is [bhakti] really a distinct 'movement' with discrete boundaries [...]?' Is it a category of identity, an attitude to god, a cultural grammar of practice, or a particularly intense and vital tone of religious life?'⁶ Summarising

some of the key trends in the current literature on bhakti, she offers three different ways through which one can approach the phenomenon: (1) bhakti as a *concept* related to philosophical notions such as transcendence, and what it might mean to 'share in,' or to be part of, a bigger whole; (2) bhakti as a *movement* that occurred in distinct geographical places at distinct times in history; (3) bhakti as an *experience, yoga, and emotion* in which individuals embody and live out the concept of sharing in or being united with a transcendent sacred, generally through the means of adoration and devotion.

These three distinct categories are important conceptual tools for approaching the topic of bhakti, but I think it is more useful to think of them as somewhat-discernible threads that interweave and overlap to comprise a bigger whole. That is, each of the three categories are deeply connected and naturally interwoven with the other two. In this paper, I approach the contemporary *experience* of Christ-centered bhakti as part of a larger *concept* that has been influenced by several historical *movements*. Though I make an effort to distinguish between the concept, the experience, and the historical movements of bhakti, the reader will note that they are interwoven together throughout this paper. Likewise, while I focus specifically on one bhajan ('Man Mera') that is centered on the figure of Jesus in order to highlight some of the expressions within Christ-centered bhakti, it will become clear to the reader that such bhakti poetry cannot be totally extracted and isolated from the broader expression of bhakti. In particular, I refer often to one expression of bhakti within a 16th century Hindu context—that of the Rajasthani poet-saint Mirabai. A consideration of Mira bhajans as well as some other bhajans within Hindu bhakti contexts helps to elucidate the ways in

which contemporary Christ-centered bhajans build from medieval expressions of bhakti.

1) Bhakti as a concept

Bhakti has been defined as 'the offering of one's heart fully to the divine in everything one feels, thinks, and does.'⁷ While there is some ambiguity surrounding terms like 'heart' and 'the divine,' this definition is helpful in gaining a broad understanding of bhakti. However, further nuancing is required in order to gain an understanding of the conceptual ranges of bhakti. This first section explores three key features through which bhakti has been conceptualised. These include: bhakti as an embodied expression that relies on an individual's corporeal experiences; bhakti as an act of single-minded (*ekanta*) love and longing which can be understood analogically as the love of a woman for her beloved; and bhakti as devotion which perseveres in the midst of divine absence.

i. Embodied expression

The term bhakti, often translated as devotion or devotional love, is derived from the Sanskrit word *bhaj*. Crucially, *bhaj* is an embodied concept: the term *bhaj* could be used to refer to the taste of something, or to describe the act of distribution or sharing, or participating in something.⁸ Most interestingly, the nuances of this term can be reflected in the devotional self-offerings of bhakti. Bhakti often involves somatic processes that are visible to an outside viewer. While, as this paper will go on to suggest, high forms of bhakti require *mental* resolve and could thus be said to exist within a mental or emotional, rather than a physical, realm, bhakti is itself an embodied concept in that it makes use of an individual's physical body. Engaging one's body in loving acts of devotion such as bowing low to touch the feet of a guru

or deity, bathing a statue of the deity in water, milk, or *ghee* (rarefied butter), presenting a camphor flame during an *aarti* (worship ceremony) are some of the ways through which embodied bhakti occurs.

An individual's physical body also plays a crucial role in bhakti poetry more generally. As an aesthetic form, bhakti poetry is performed: it is presented almost exclusively orally, rather than as a written product, and *bhajniks* (bhajan singers) who travel throughout rural and semi-urban India continue to perform many of the bhajans composed centuries ago.⁹ Referring to the ways in which bhajans were either composed on the spot or created in a fashion that did not require written forms, Indian poet Dilip Chitre uses the term 'orature' to encapsulate this oral-based art form. In this sense, bhajans not only assume an oral quality when being performed to an audience, but indeed rely on the oral delivery as a fundamental component of the creation of the bhajans.¹⁰ Furthermore, the content of bhajans was often reflected in the poets' lives; the poets 'embodied bhakti in their own experiences, their visions [...], their pilgrimages [...], and the community of bhaktas.'¹¹ In this sense, bhajans—especially in their embodied performances—can be seen as a practice of bhakti that is itself acted out in the poets' lives; embodiment is thus crucial to bhakti.

ii. The femininity of bhakti

Graham Schweig explores the way in which bhakti is associated with femininity through focusing on the Bhagavata Purana (BhP), a central devotional Hindu text (c. 1000 CE). Schweig centres in on one particular divine drama (*lila*) within the BhP which has been championed by some Vaishnava traditions as exhibiting one of the most intimate forms of bhakti: the love which the cowherd maidens

(*gopis*) have for Krishna. This five-chapter *lila*—referred to as the Rasa Lila—symbolises the 'boundless love between divinity and devotee' and is often pointed to as an eternal archetype of the bhakti that present-day bhaktas ought to aspire to.¹² The Rasa Lila revolves around a particular style of dance that was often performed in South Asia during harvest time. In this narrative of the *rasa*, several *gopis* in the picturesque landscape of pastoral Vraja hear the sound of Krishna's flute. At the moment of hearing the music, their minds become captured by Krishna, and they are enraptured by him (10.29.1-4.) The women leave behind their household duties and rush to find Krishna and his music in the forest. In a mysterious way, Krishna multiplies himself so that each woman experiences a dance with him simultaneously.

The *gopis* experience an intense love for Krishna, whom they view as their one true lord and divine lover, and they seek to devote themselves solely to him. Their love for him is described as so deep that they are willing to do anything within their means to please Krishna, even if it would result in great personal hardship for themselves. There is a popular legend which encapsulates this sentiment: Krishna has a headache and requires dust from a devotee's feet in order to cure it. While a number of Krishna devotees shirked from this thought, the *gopis* were eager to give the dust from their feet, even though they assumed that doing so would negatively affect their karmic status by transferring karmic demerit.¹³ This sort of self-sacrificing devotional love could be understood as the essence of bhakti.¹⁴ To practice this form of bhakti is to be so madly in love that one does not consider any negative consequences that one might accrue from the act of loving.¹⁵

The exaltation of feminine devotion to a high spiritual status within bhakti contexts is particularly evident in the above-mentioned portrayal of the *gopis*' love for Krishna, but it can be further noted in bhakti contexts more broadly. For example, many of the female bhakti poets proclaim the divine Lover as their husband both in and outside of their bhajans. The poet Mahadeviyakka (c.1130-1160) writes that 'my lord, white as jasmine, is my husband.'¹⁶ Likewise, Mirabai (c. 1600), a widely recognised female bhakti poet, also proclaims Krishna as her only true husband in her poetry. Mira further challenged the gendered duty (*dharma*) of a Rajput female through devoting herself to Krishna alone: although she did marry, she refused to consummate her marriage with her earthly husband nor did she perform the self-immolation of a Hindu widow (*sati*) at her husband's death.¹⁷

This association of one's lord with one's husband is reflected in some of the languages used in modern Indian contexts more broadly—for instance, that the Hindi word *pati* is used for both husband and lord/master, thus blurring the lines between the human and divine identities. However, within discussions of bhakti, it is more common to emphasise the extent to which any individual—no matter his or her biological sex—adopts a female posture in reference to God. There is a popular tale which illustrates this notion: when Mirabai visited the holy city of Vrindaban (a famous pilgrimage site for devotees of Krishna), she was not permitted to meet with a male ascetic (*sadhu*) who had taken a vow that he would not speak with women. Commenting on this vow, Mira retorted, 'Are there any men in Vrindaban except Lord Krishna?' Mira's striking question prompted the *sadhu* to recall how he, too, ought to conceptualise himself as a female—as

a *gopi*—if he wished to truly embody Krishna-bhakti.¹⁸

Schweig argues that this call to 'feminise' oneself in order to fully submit to God does not necessarily entail that women are depicted as being socially subordinate to men. Far from this, he claims, '[the feminine] role of the Gopis is itself evidence of a culture attempting to break out of the constrictive social norms in which it has been ensconced.'¹⁹ In other words, according to Schweig, the femininisation of bhakti can be viewed as encouraging women to step outside of the traditionally-female role, emphasised by normative texts such as the *Manusmṛti* (c. 200 CE), of being a wife and mother. In this sense, bhakti enables individuals (males and females alike) to focus strictly on their own spiritual state rather than being concerned with social or family matters; bhakti can therefore be understood as 'the best and easiest path to liberation,' and it is revered above other paths to liberation such as those of knowledge (*jnana*) and action (*karma*).²⁰

Nevertheless, the femininisation of Hindu bhakti causes one to consider whether this analogy of God (as a husband to whom human beings submit themselves in feminised devotional love) might further contribute to a hierarchy of gender in which women are viewed as subordinate to men, thereby perpetuating a social hierarchy between males and females.

iii. The highest form of bhakti

Without entering into a detailed discussion of the gendered-question of female subordination, the femininisation of bhakti further leads us to consider not simply the act of expressing devotion to a husband or lord, but the very concept of devotion itself. That is to say, one must ask the questions 'What does true devotion look like?' and 'Ought one's

devotion continue when the one to whom devotion is directed has gone?' As the above-mentioned *lila* within the BhP suggests, the *gopis* have deep bhakti while Krishna is present. However, the narrative continues to unfold with a crucial moment that is most pertinent to gaining an understanding of the concept of bhakti: Krishna disappears.

This disappearance of the divine is crucial because it leads to a higher degree of bhakti for the *gopis*. Later on, after re-appearing to the *gopis* who had been lamenting in his absence, Krishna explains:

'...in order/ to strengthen their love, / I may not return even the love / of those who love me; / Like a poor man who obtains / a treasure and then loses it, / Such a person knows nothing else, / filled with no other thought / than regaining that treasure. [...] It was out of love for you / that I became invisible / though you were never removed from my sight.'²¹

This alternating spiral of presence and absence suggests that the highest expression of bhakti is not simply to have attained union with the divine and to show loving devotion in the midst of that experience of divine presence, but to persevere in seeking 'the absent beloved' (BhP 6.11.26) even in the midst of being tormented by the divine absence.²² This phenomenon is what Nancy Martin calls the 'paradox of union and separateness in intimacy,' which, she argues, is the most intimate manner in which bhaktas express their full devotion to God.²³ And so, while many bhakti poems describe a deep sense of intimacy with God, these are themselves contextualised within broader stories of autobiographical voices which speak of doubt, loss, and longing for the intimacy that they once felt. For example, alongside attestations of intimacy with Shiva, the bhakti poet Mahadeviyakka writes of the feeling of longing

for her Lord: 'I look at the road / for his coming. / If he isn't coming, / I pine and waste away. [...] When he's away / I cannot wait / to get a glimpse of him. / [...].'²⁴

In the accounts of Mira's bhakti to Krishna, Mira is also portrayed as being deeply aware of the sense of God's absence. In a Mira bhajan collected by Parita Mukta, Mira tells of her acute loneliness. She sings, 'I have given of my mind and body/ I want to reach the door of the beloved./Giridhar, I have left the *marjad* [honour] of the *kul* [clan] for you.'²⁵ In her analysis of the bhajan, Mukta points out that Mira is in pain not because of the loss of her social status and family ties, or even because of her lack of material wealth, but from her discovery 'that the instances of seeing her Beloved on her veil are momentary.'²⁶ Countless Mira bhajans profess that her love is for Krishna alone (i.e. preferring 'saffron robes' to 'rubies' and desiring the company of '*sadhus*' over 'princes'²⁷ or stating that 'there is no feeling for [the Rana] in [Mira's] heart today.'²⁸ These bhajans repeatedly speak to the human experience in which, despite all one's best efforts and spiritual pursuits, God seems absent. The highest bhakti is achieved in continuing in devotional love despite experiencing the absence of God.

In lived traditions of bhakti, there can be immense difficulty in enacting this persistent devotion. This might be because human nature has a certain fallibility to it that, despite the best of intentions and the highest of aspirations, makes persevering in the face of doubt rather difficult. While Mira is, for the most part, championed as a bhakta who stood strong in her devotion despite any lapses of experiencing divine presence, some contemporary expressions of bhakti suggest that this depth of devotion is difficult to maintain in the midst of divine absence. This painful paradox between the doctrinal ideal

and the lived-out practice of religion is an ongoing focus of study that anthropologists note when exploring lived religious traditions.²⁹

Within the ethnographic literature on Krishna bhakti, there is a case study that effectively demonstrates this dialectic between divine presence and divine absence. Shrivatsa Goswami and Margaret Case draw from their ethnographic work in Vindraban to describe a group of Krishna bhaktas who believe they have witnessed the reappearance of Krishna in the form of a *bhramara* (a small bumblebee like insect.)³⁰ The community attributes this reappearance to their long history of Krishna-bhakti. One can note here the belief that bhakti can lead to miraculous signs and even tangible glimpses of God. Thus, there is a certain reciprocity at play between such experiences of divine presence and continuation of bhakti. That is, it is not a one-way influence in which bhakti leads to sightings of God, but rather a feedback loop in which sightings of God also prompt one to develop more and more bhakti. Certainly, in the case of the above-mentioned Krishna devotees, their experience of Krishna's reappearance ultimately strengthened and increased their bhakti but, importantly, the fleeting moment of divine presence and the subsequent experience of divine absence also left them in a state of longing (in which they desired to experience an even-more tangible sighting of God) and bewilderment (wondering if what they had experienced was really God.)³¹

I now turn to a case study from my fieldwork on Christ-centered bhakti to illustrate the way in which this 'highest form' of bhakti in which an individual retains his or her devotion to God even in the midst of God's seeming-absence can be an extraordinarily difficult task.³² Mahima, who grew up in a

Hindu family, was introduced to some teachings about Jesus Christ when she was in her early twenties and was living in Mumbai. Upon hearing stories from other individuals who had devoted themselves to Jesus and begun to experience positive changes in their lives that they attributed to the blessings of Jesus, Mahima began to wonder whether she too ought to devote herself to this god. After all, she reasoned, some of the stories seemed quite remarkable. One of Mahima's friends, Rupesh (who I later spoke with separately) had also grown up in a devout Hindu family and knew little about Christian teachings. When Rupesh's paternal aunt was diagnosed with HIV and was given only a few months left to live, his family tried to do whatever they could to extend her life. When none of their efforts seemed to be working, a distant relative told them that he had heard of a Christian church on the outskirts of Mumbai that was apparently renowned for miraculous healings—they could take the aunt there, he suggested. After some deliberation, Rupesh's father consented, and he and Rupesh brought Rupesh's aunt to the church. Within days after their visit, the aunt's physical condition seemed to be improving. Within weeks, she began to gain weight to fill in her at-that-point skeletal/fragile frame. Rupesh explains that his entire family now devotes themselves to Jesus Christ. Rupesh attends a Protestant Christian church on a weekly basis and is an established part of a Christian community, while other members of his family continue going to Hindu temples or various churches; thus, they identify as Yesu (Jesus) bhaktas.

It was stories such as those of Rupesh and his family that attracted Mahima to the idea of devoting herself to Jesus. Suspecting her family would not condone her regular attendance at a Christian church, Mahima continued going to a small Hindu shrine close

to her family's home, but she also began to sporadically visit a prominent Christian church in the area. At this church, Mahima bowed down before a figure of Jesus, lit a camphor flame and held it toward the figure as an offering. On her way to the church, she purchased garlands of marigolds and other flowers to leave at the shrine, in a way that is common to many Hindu expressions of worship. Mahima then began to express her devotion to Jesus in this way, and began to identify herself as a Yeshu-bhakta. As time went on, she devoted herself to Jesus with fervour. But, after a period of about six months, when she still did not experience miracles of the sort that had first attracted her to Christ, she slowly abandoned her devotion to Jesus and instead directed her religious devotion to gods other than Jesus. Mahima explained, '[Rupesh] and his family, they had that miracle [of the aunt's healing of HIV], and [Rupesh] talks with Jesus every day in his bedroom even, but not me—I do not feel [Jesus.]'

I think that both the case of the Krishna bhaktas in Vrindaban as well as the case of Mahima are good examples of the ways in which the performance of bhakti in the midst of divine absence or seeming-separation is indeed a persevering task. Both cases suggest that, while this highest form of bhakti may continue to be strived for, individuals also want to experience occasional glimpses of an incarnate Lord so as to motivate a continuation of bhakti.

2) Bhakti as historical movements

Having now explored bhakti as a concept, we can turn to exploring bhakti as a set of historical movements. The historical bhakti movements have a notable breadth and depth to them and are interwoven throughout a wide variety of cultural histories of Hinduism.

I here seek to contextualise contemporary expressions of bhakti within central Hindu texts and within the historical bhakti movements.

i. Bhakti within foundational Hindu texts

The practice of bhakti has been traced back to classical Hindu texts such as the Rig Veda (c. 1500 BCE) which, as Lorenzen points out, contains 'many quite personal hymns' and 'manifest[s] *bhakti* to gods such as Indra, Varuna, Agni, Rudra, and Vishnu.'³³ One form of bhakti has also been noted within the Upanisads (c. 600 BCE), even though the actual word 'bhakti' occurs only once in the entirety of the early Upanisads—toward the end of the Svetasvatara Upanisad (6.23).³⁴ Here, one finds a number of themes which heavily influenced the subsequent development of what we now refer to as 'bhakti movements,' such as its rejection of Vedic sacrifices and its focus on internal sacrifices which are directed toward a supreme deity, whether Vishnu or Shiva.³⁵

A more prominent expression of bhakti in classical Hindu texts can be found in the Bhagavad Gita (c.400 CE); the Gita is the first text which introduces bhakti as 'a method of religious experience that leads to liberation.'³⁶ One section in the fourth chapter of the *Gita* depicts a key component of bhakti—that of the *avatars* of Vishnu—and the latter chapters of the *Gita* explain how Krishna-bhakti will lead to spiritual liberation.³⁷ In its discussion of bhakti as a means of spiritual liberation, the *Gita* does not discriminate against individuals from lower castes or between genders.³⁸ The writings of the medieval Maharashtra poet-saint Tukaram demonstrate the belief that bhakti is a central spiritual path to the divine. Specifically, his poems 'The Ascetic,' 'I've Not a Single Fraud,' 'He's Not a Brahmin Who Abhors,' and 'If You Don't Keep the *Ashramas*' all express the sentiment that the practice of

bhakti is the truest form of spirituality, while the lives of Brahmins and even ascetics are inadequate when compared to the fervent devotion that characterises bhakti.³⁹

The most central bhakti text is the Bhagavata Purana, which, as mentioned above, has been championed by some Vaishnava traditions as exhibiting one of the most inspirational forms of bhakti. In addition to outlining the *gopis* bhakti for Krishna, the BhP attributes 'the ease and wide availability of *bhakti* as a means of liberation' to the current time period of the *Kali Yuga* (dark period), thereby ascribing a redeeming quality to the cycle of time traditionally thought of as the worst part of Hinduism's linear cycle of time.⁴⁰ Lorenzen provides an excellent summary of the works of several academic scholars (e.g. Friedhelm Hardy 1983 and J.A.B. van Buitenen 1968) who distinguish between 'emotional bhakti' and 'intellectual bhakti'.⁴¹

ii. The development of bhakti movements

Though bhakti as a devotional practice did not truly flourish until the 4th-6th centuries CE in Northern India, scholars have noted the numerous places in which bhakti slowly arose across the Indian continent. Some scholars have portrayed these bhakti movements as being transmitted from one region to another (e.g. Ramanujan 1973). An old Sanskrit saying, quoted in the introduction to an anthology of bhakti poetry, also encapsulates this sentiment: 'Bhakti took birth in Dravidian lands/ ripened in Karnataka, came to/ womanhood in Maharashtra, and grew/ crone-like in Gujarat. / Reaching Vrindavana she re-emerged/a nubile young woman.'⁴² However, Lorenzen in particular emphasises the differences of each of these regional movements, stating that 'the appearance of powerful sociocultural movements based on *bhakti* in different regions in different

centuries must be explained treating each case in its own historical context.'⁴³ For such reason, even though they share some essential features, we must be cautious when referring to 'the historical bhakti movements' in sweeping terms; rather, we must be certain to emphasise its internal pluralities.

Many of the historical bhakti movements are understood as developing as complex sets of responses to Vedic traditions.⁴⁴ Bhakti movements rejected the divisions traditionally placed in Brahmanical Hindu cultures between higher and lower caste individuals based on caste norms. Such bhakti movements have been referred to as '*avarnadharmi* movements' in that they reject the notion that individuals should follow certain socio-religious duties (*dharma*) on the basis of the caste (*varna*) they are born into.⁴⁵ These *avarnadharmi* movements emphasised that spiritual liberation by means of bhakti was available for all individuals, regardless of gender, caste, or social status.⁴⁶ Many bhakti poet-saints are originally from a low-caste or reject their high-caste status and purposefully disregard inter-caste boundaries.⁴⁷ For example, although Mira was born into a high-caste family of good social standing, Mira endured social alienation from her clan (*kuḷ*) due to her rejection of the ruling Rajput lifestyle through refusing to consummate her marriage with the Rana. She additionally declared Rohidas, a leather-worker from an 'untouchable' caste, as her guru, thus furthering the ways in which peasants and other low-caste member society could relate to her devotionally-reconfigured identities. In this way, Mira became 'a symbol through which [low-caste individuals] have voiced their rejection of the authority of the Rana.'⁴⁸ It is therefore not surprising that the vast majority of Mira bhajans that are sung today continue to portray her as a woman from a

high-caste background who challenged the caste norms and disregarded the social boundaries it tried to enforce.⁴⁹

*iii. The rise of bhakti poetry*⁵⁰

The historical contexts of the bhakti movements gave rise to the creation of bhakti poetry and bhajans. Stephen Taylor describes how music has been used in Hindu religious rituals for centuries, especially in morning rituals at temples, as a sonic medium to reach the sacred.⁵¹ Bhakti poetry and bhajans continue in the tradition of utilising music as a sacred medium, but focus on the diction and themes contained within the words rather than on the style of music itself.⁵² Bhakti poetry, written in the vernacular, often centres around vivid imagery and sometimes blunt statements by the poet-speaker. Schelling identifies six features that characterise bhakti poetry. These include: the authority and character of the poet's voice (in that many early bhajans were composed spontaneously by the poet-speaker, and even composed works were rarely written down until centuries later), the 'highly-developed process of thinking in images,' an intensity of passion and honesty, a listening-audience who figuratively enters the poem and becomes a part of its narrative, an 'animal-body rootedness' (the poem incorporates both body and spirit), and a willingness to view the poet as a 'shaman.'⁵³

The style of bhakti bhajans sometimes includes multiple points of view within one song. Even when an entire bhajan is sung by one sole individual—which it often is—experienced listeners can easily discern the bhajan's shifts between vantage points. In many Mira bhajans, one line is attributed to Mira while the next is understood to be the voice of the Rana or perhaps of a member of Mira's family. For example, Mukta notes that

one of the most frequently-sung Mira bhajans she encountered during her ethnographic research was a bhajan which opens with the perspective of Mira's family members. In these lines, they admonish her: 'Mira, leave the company of the *sadha* [renouncers]. Your Merto is covered with shame. Mewar is covered with shame.'⁵⁴ The bhajan continues to shift back and forth between the voice of Mira, who asserts her reasons for remaining among the renouncers and ascetics rather than living the life of a Rajasthani princess, and the voices of her indignant family members. All of this, Mukta observes, is traditionally performed by a single individual.

Bhajans tend to focus on the experiences and feelings of the poet-speaker, rather than simply being a praise song to a deity.⁵⁵ In particular, bhajan compositions of North India frequently include a "signing" of the poet's name within the text of the bhajan itself as a means of implicating the poet directly into the bhajan.⁵⁶ Many of the poets accomplish this by concluding the bhajan with a couplet that begins with the words "[Poet's name] says [...]"⁵⁷ Although much of the bhajan focuses on the poet-speaker, they also repeatedly invoke a name of the deity throughout the bhajan.⁵⁸ This can be traced to a prominent Hindu belief in which an individual can receive total spiritual liberation simply by repeating and focusing on the Name (*Nam*) of a particular deity. For example, the Bhagavata Purana (BhP) stipulates that any individual can partake in, and benefit from, bhakti: 'even a dog-eater [...] even a Pulkasa, [...] Antevasayins are purified by hearing about you, singing about you, and meditating on you ... *Bhakti* dedicated to [Krishna] purifies even dog-eaters of [the stigma of their] birth.'⁵⁹ The BhP tells of the saving power of simply hearing the purifying name of Vishnu, claiming that, upon merely hearing his name, 'one's heart is

moved, tears comes to one's eyes and the hairs on one's body stand erect.⁶⁰

3) The experience of bhakti

Having first contextualised bhakti as a concept through which one positions oneself as a devotee to God, and then summarised some of the key historical bhakti movements that led to the rise of bhakti poetry and bhajans, I now turn to the experience of bhakti. It is at this point that the paper shifts from exploring bhakti in a more general sense, to looking specifically at how it can be expressed through Christ-centered bhakti.

As suggested by this paper's opening vignette in which the women sang bhajans while working on a sewing project, Christ-centered bhakti extends beyond the walls of a church building or even any sort of specifically-religious gathering. While the bhajans which express and embody bhakti can sometimes be heard being sung in a defined Christian context (i.e. at a church service, a *Yeshu satsang* or at another spiritual gathering), the singing of bhajans often moves out into secular spaces, thereby suggesting a sort of disintegration or blurring of the line between 'sacred' and 'profane' space. As mentioned above, this type of all-pervading spirituality has an established history within many bhakti movements—notably in the ways in which the vast majority of the bhakti poets reject Vedic rituals that were the preserve of upper-caste Hindus. Instead, the spiritual practice of bhakti was to be pursued by individuals regardless of gender, caste, or social class—and, indeed, it did not absolutely require a religious institution for its enactment.⁶¹

i. Christian or Hindu?

A pertinent question in the study of Christ-centered bhakti is whether it can be

appropriately labelled as either a Hindu or as a Christian practice—or perhaps both at once. Indeed, as has been discussed above, bhakti is a spiritual practice that emerges from traditionally-Hindu contexts and remains dominantly associated with Hinduism, but its Christ-centered expressions suggest affiliations with Christian theological and ecclesiological ideas about the nature of God and the people of God. Accordingly, this results in Christ-centered bhakti having a somewhat ambiguous 'hybrid' religious status.

The question of whether a particular 'Indian Christian' spiritual practice ought to be viewed either as being of Indian origin (and, as such, claim at least some affiliation with Hindu practices) or as the result of foreign importation remains an intensely debated topic in scholarly discourse and social media.⁶² There is tension about whether Indian Christian communities can be regarded as truly 'Indian,' or whether they ought to be regarded as the result of foreign cultures.⁶³ Further, the crossovers between the life-worlds of Hinduism and Christianity through the conduit of bhakti have been seen as sites of active opposition from the standpoints of certain Hindu nationalist organizations. As a result, the religious identity of Christ-centered bhakti enters long-standing debates in the fields of Indian Christianity, Indian religions, and Hindu-Christian studies more generally regarding the alleged 'foreignness' of Christianity in Indian contexts.

Bhakti expressions of spirituality, and bhajans in particular, have been gradually woven into some Indian Christian contexts and are thus an interesting phenomenon through which to pose the above-mentioned question of religious affiliation. It is difficult to ascertain the precise time period when Christian communities began to incorporate traditional bhajans into their worship

practices. H.A. Popley has argued that Indian styles of music were used in Syrian Christian⁶⁴ worship services until at least 1835, but that the quality and frequency of traditional Indian bhajans has significantly decreased in most Christian churches, especially those in urban areas. Popley suggests that urban churches have been influenced by the European missionaries' efforts to limit the use of bhajans and other spiritual traditions thought of as too 'Indian' for proper Christian practice, and have also preferred Western music in their own efforts to assimilate into Western cultures.⁶⁵ On the other hand, some historians document the ways in which Indian Christian worship contexts slowly transformed from strict Anglicised styles of worship music to musical genres that were more traditional to Indian cultures. For example, Hephzibah Israel explores the ways in which Protestant devotional hymns became an integral part of South Indian Christian worship cultures. Due to the presence of European missionaries, South Indian Christian worship in the 18th and 19th centuries consisted largely of English or German hymns translated into the Tamil language while maintaining their original Western-European melodies, and these were played with Western musical instruments.⁶⁶ Alongside this style of music, Protestant Tamils began to compose their own devotional hymns, and set them to music that was more fitting to traditional Tamil musical conventions such as the use of rhythmic metre. Though these hymns steadily grew in number during the 18th and 19th centuries, it was not until the middle of the 19th century that such hymns began to be included in the printed hymnals of various churches—up until this point, the missionaries had resisted the circulation of Tamil hymns.⁶⁷

While I am at present uncertain about the relative proportion between traditional-

Indian bhajans versus Western-style music in Indian Christian churches today, bhajans certainly continue to be used in some Christian contexts. It was at a Protestant church in Mumbai in 2013 where I first came across the use of traditional-sounding bhajans in a Christian worship context. Since the church was predominantly English-speaking and had a significant expatriate community, the majority of the songs were contemporary western worship songs. But one of the worship leaders in particular sought to incorporate more-traditional bhajans into the church's liturgical time. He explained this choice as, 'using Indian sounds, Indian words, and Indian feelings in our worship.'⁶⁸

Perhaps somewhat ironically, some of the bhajans that appear to be most popular among Indian Christians, at least among younger individuals who are often described as more 'Westernised' than their parents' generation, are actually composed by westerners. Chris Hale, the lead musician of the band Aradhna, has composed over three albums of Christian bhajans which are widely sung inside and outside of India.⁶⁹ Hale is a Canadian of non-Indian origin who grew up in Nepal and then moved to India in his early twenties, and is quite familiar with traditional music styles. He has trained as a classical Indian musician and now has his own music school in Canada where he teaches students.⁷⁰ His music embodies a notable combination of Hindu and Christian themes and includes lyrics in both English and Hindi (and, sometimes, Sanskrit.) The bhajans have been praised by many pastors and lay-people who I have spoken with in Mumbai as an exemplary merging of Indian tradition with worship of Jesus Christ; one individual even praised Aradhna's music for 'teaching Indians how to worship Christ in [an] Indian way.'

ii. A literary analysis of one Christ-centered bhajan

I now turn to one bhajan ('Man Mera') of Hale's which I have heard performed at a number of local churches in and around Mumbai and which I consider to be in keeping with other bhajans I have heard in Christian contexts. It would be difficult to classify any one bhajan as totally 'representative' of Christ-centered bhakti, since the phenomenon covers a vast number of theological and experiential themes, but this bhajan is by no means an outlier. As such, it can be understood as reflective of Christ-centered bhakti.

Considered on its own, 'Man Mera' may not initially appear to be 'Christian,' as it speaks of God with many idioms and imageries that are traditionally-Hindu. But one must consider it within the context of other songs written by the same artist and in the light of the author's own specifically-Christian religious identity, and one must note it has been taken up for worship use in specifically-Christian religious contexts. As such, one begins to grapple with the ways in which this bhajan can appear simultaneously Hindu and Christian—readers and listeners are prompted to consider what it might mean to direct devotion to Jesus Christ through idioms and imageries that have been traditionally recognised as 'Hindu.' Through this melding of Hindu and Christian aspects, we are invited to look at it, to call upon the words of Francis Clooney, 'without the safeguards of familiar interpretation and settled theological expectations, and [...] without the comfort of any sure sense where things will end up.'⁷¹ Through applying a form of reader response theory and adopting a 'theopoetics' of the sort applied by Clooney in his analysis of Hindu and Christian poetry, we can engage with this bhajan in terms of the dynamic interplay between Hindu and Christian traditions.

Indeed, it is through considering the allusions to both of these rich traditions that we can use 'Man Mera' as a window through which we can glimpse at a recent expression of Christ-centered bhakti.

Man Mera

Man mera, kyon dole re
Naina nir se bhare re
Moh bandhan ne ghera re
Man mera, kyon dole re?
Maharaj biraaje aasan me
Surya Chandra uski goda dhare
Bhanvar se tujhe vahi tare re
Man mera kyon dole re?
Kshatra nakshatra uski parikramaa kare
Tej ko uske surya naman kare
Gaharaai uski koi na naap sake
Ishvar mere ati aananda, ati aananda, ati
aananda

Oh my soul, why do you waver?
Oh my eyes that are weighted with water
I am captivated by Him; I am enclosed by
fetters.

Oh my soul, why do you waver?
The great king presides on his throne.
The sun and moon are seated at his lap.
From the whirlpool of your suffering he
will save you.

Oh my soul, why do you waver?
All the celestial bodies revolve
continuously around him.
The sun bows at his radiance.
No one can measure his profoundness.
God is my supreme bliss, my supreme bliss,
my supreme bliss.⁷²

This bhajan opens with the poet-speaker addressing his '*man*' (soul) and asking why it wavers.⁷³ In doing so, the poet-speaker recognises the wandering nature of human individuals: we are easily-distracted creatures who can find it difficult to keep our eyes, much less our devotional love, fixed on any one

thing. And, while simultaneously recognising the wavering nature of the soul, the poet-speaker also invokes his eyes, weighed down by tears. The semantic alignment of the soul and the eyes as highlighted in the bhajan imply a conceptual link between the two: the wavering soul and the tearful eyes seem to either share a common cause or are perhaps reciprocally-related; one feeds into the other. As the soul wavers, sadness ensues, and as sadness intensifies, the soul wavers all the more.

In the third line we have the first mention of a Being other than the poet-speaker—there is Someone who has captivated the poet-speaker. While the words ‘captivated’ and ‘enclosed’ can be ambiguous in their meanings, they have certainly been used by other Christian poets in a specifically positive light.⁷⁴ For example, a classic Christian hymn ‘Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing’ written by Robert Robinson in the 18th century speaks of the benefits of being bound and fettered to God. Robinson writes, ‘Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,/ Bind my wandering heart to Thee.’ The imagery of being ‘captivated’ also has resonances with the works of the 17th century metaphysical poet John Donne who, in one of his ‘Holy Sonnets,’ pleads with God to ‘imprison’ and ‘enthrall’ him, claiming that this is the only way for him to truly be free. ‘Man Mera’ similarly portrays the act of being bound to or imprisoned by God as desirable and positive: specifically, the poet-speaker’s use of ‘*moha*’ (to be captivated by) and ‘*ghera*’ (to be enclosed by) suggests this entrapment by divine love to be a positive state. In particular, the Hindi word ‘*moha*’ holds undertones of endearment and affection.⁷⁵

And yet, while works such as Robinson’s and Donne’s are clearly addressed to God, the poet-speaker in ‘Man Mera’ addresses himself—or, rather, his soul (*man*). At three

times in the bhajan, the poet-speaker asks ‘Oh my soul, why do you waver?’ This leitmotif resonates with some biblical texts and also traditional bhajans. Firstly, this act of addressing one’s soul is reminiscent of Psalm 42 in which David poses the question, ‘Why art thou downcast oh my soul, and why art thou disquieted within me?’⁷⁶ But, secondly, this self-interrogative feature also shares its style with traditional bhajans which are not just hymns sung directly to God, but rather are *about* God, the Great King (*Maharaj*), with particular attention being paid to the emotions and experiences of the poet-speaker. This pattern of self-inquiry within devotional contexts is in keeping with traditional bhakti poems in Hindu traditions, since ‘in bhakti the poem’s emotion and its drama stay focused on the poet. They are rarely simple praise poems to a deity.’⁷⁷ Interpreting the bhajan in this sense, the reader can learn about the poet-speaker’s understanding of God’s majesty through focusing on the complementing imagery which fills the poem, and on the emotions expressed by the poet-speaker.

In line six of ‘Man Mera,’ the poet-speaker states that the sun and the moon are seated (*dhare*) at the lap of God. In Hindi, the word ‘*dhare*,’ from the verb ‘*dharna*,’ is one of the words used for the English ‘to sit.’⁷⁸ But given the availability of more common verbs for ‘to sit’ such as ‘*baithana*,’ it is interesting to note the artist’s selection of ‘*dharna*.’ ‘*Dharna*’ holds particular connotations that seem important in the context of this hymn—namely, ‘*dharna*’ in modern Hindi is a form of non-violent protesting. ‘*Dharna*’ was one of the styles of civil disobedience used by Gandhi during India’s anti-colonial movement, and it remains an ongoing political practice throughout India as a means of showing submission and respect while seeking justice.⁷⁹ Overall, ‘*dharna*’ is a purposeful act which

involves concentration and determination of the mind, rather than simply a bodily position. With this understanding of '*dharna*' as a contemplative and yet active form of waiting, one might deduce that the poet-speaker portrays even the sun and the moon as being oriented toward the throne of God, perhaps emphasising that worship of God occurs on a cosmic level.

While I have translated line nine as 'all the celestial bodies revolve continuously around him,' the original Hindi contains slightly more nuance that cannot be adequately captured in an English translation. In Indian folklore, '*kshatra*' encapsulates divine power and '*nakshatra*' is the place where the moon and other planets orbit.⁸⁰ As such, while there are connotations of 'sun' and 'moon' contained within this phrase, the poet-speaker describes more than just the sun and the moon; the very arenas in which the sun and moon exist revolve around God and his divine power. The reader is reminded of line six, which specifically describes the sun and the moon as sitting at God's lap. It is a rather striking image to envision God as the great king at whose lap even the sun and moon sit down at, but also around whom the entire universe revolves. For the reader familiar with Hindu folklore and mythic narratives, the imagery of celestial bodies might bring to mind stories from the *Bhagavata Purana* of the infant Krishna whose mother looked in his mouth and gasped in awe on seeing the entire universe contained therein.⁸¹

The poet-speaker concludes that the profoundness ('*gaharaai*') of God is immeasurable (or, perhaps even more accurately to the original Hindi, 'without size').⁸² God is portrayed as a great king who is both separate from the universe and intimately present to it. He is someone worthy of being captured ('*moha*') by and is worthy of

high praise. And yet the poet-speaker continues to waver and wander away from this God, and cannot hold steadfast in devotional love. Where the Psalmist David commands his soul to 'put your hope in God,' the poet-speaker here instead reminds himself of the profound depths of God, the divine bliss. There seems to be a certain level of acceptance with the wavering of the soul, as if the poet-speaker has resigned himself to this aspect of human fallibility. While there is no direct mention of feeling the absence of God (which accounts for much of the 'wavering' found within the bhakti tradition), the very act of wavering indeed resonates with expressions of bhakti. A bhakta, after all, is one who recognises the supremacy and the profound depths of God, and who desperately desires to devote oneself to God on account of this recognition, but who still struggles to be fully suffused with divine love.⁸³

And yet, even while recognising the temptation to wander away from God, bhakti poetry revolves around the individual who recognises their 'wandering' and 'wavering' but continues to re-orient themselves to God in the midst of their uncertainty. Indeed, this mental resolve to persevere is the highest level of bhakti. Certainly, in this bhajan, the poet-speaker can be understood to re-orient himself to God through the three-fold reminder that God is 'my supreme bliss (*ati aananda*), my supreme bliss, my supreme bliss.'

Conclusion

This paper began by exploring and summarising some of the key themes and key expressions of bhakti in a more general sense—that is, bhakti as it is often practiced in Hindu contexts. This set the stage for exploring bhakti as it is practiced in Christ-centered contexts—the knowledge of the first

formed the foundation on which an understanding of Christ-centered bhakti could be formulated. An understanding of bhakti—that is, as it is traditionally expressed in Hindu contexts—is needed so to explore the expressions of Christ-centered bhakti; indeed, we can see various resonances of traditional bhakti in the context of expressing worship and devotion to Christ. And yet, at the same time, Christ-centered bhakti can further act as an interpretive and informative lens that we can now use in our understanding of bhakti more broadly—and this, among other reasons, can act as a motivation to conduct further explorations of other ways that Christ-centered bhakti is being practiced throughout India and elsewhere.⁸⁴ Firstly, Christ-centered

bhakti reminds us that the alleged boundary of religious devotional expression is not as impermeable as some discourses of religions and interreligious relations seem to portray. Indeed, bhakti does not belong uniquely to Hindu contexts, but can be found to exist strongly in other religious expressions. We see, through the written lines of Christ-bhakti poetry, as well as in the lived realities of individuals who strive to practice bhakti directed toward Jesus, the struggle to come to terms with the ineffable mystery of faith; to embrace existential uncertainty; and to continue in devotion and longing, even when the Lord appears to be silent or absent.

Notes

¹ Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

² Author's fieldwork (Mumbai, December 2015).

³ Ciril J. Kuttiyanikkal, *Khrist Bhakta Movement: A Model for an Indian Church? Inculturation in the Area of Community Building* (Germany: Lit Verlag, 2014) & Darren Todd Duerksen, *Ecclesial Identities in a Multi-Faith Context: Jesus Truth-Gatherings (Yeshu Satsangs) among Hindus and Sikhs in Northwest India* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2015).

⁴ Kuttiyanikkal, 2015.

⁵ See, for example, Chad Bauman, *Pentecostals, Proselytization, and Anti-Christian Violence in Contemporary India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) in which he discusses the ways in which some Hindus perceive Christianity to be a rejection of Hindu traditions and practice.

⁶ Jessica Frazier, 'Bhakti in Hindu Cultures,' in *The Journal of Hindu Studies* (2013) Volume 6, Issue 2 (101-113) 101. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhs/hit028>

⁷ Graham Schweig, 'The Rasa Lila of Krishna and the Gopis: On the Bhagavata's Vision of Boundless Love' in *The Bhagavata Purana: Sacred Text and Living Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) 117.

⁸ David Lorenzen, 'Bhakti' in *The Hindu World* (New York: Routledge 2007) 185.

⁹ It should here be noted that many classical bhajans were not written down until centuries after they had been originally composed. For a general discussion of this with regard to bhajans, see Andrew Schelling (2011.) See also Muchkund Dubey (1997) who notes this to be the case for the bhajans of the Bauls in the region of Bengal.

¹⁰ Lorenzen, 2007, 185.

¹¹ Karen Pechilis Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 7.

¹² Schweig, 2013, 118.

¹³ Traditional religious conceptions of purity in India would inhibit something from the feet of an individual of lower status to come into contact with the head of someone of a higher status. In addition to defiling the individual whose head it came into contact

with, such an act might negatively affect the individual of lower status by giving them negative karma (*paap*) which would affect their rebirth status.

This is a popular legend within Hindu contexts and I have heard it several times in varying contexts during former visits to India. The story has been recounted in print by Frederique Apffel Marglin (1985).

¹⁴ While it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into an in-depth analysis of this possible comparison, it might be fruitful for future studies to concentrate on a possible link between the notion of *sati* (in its original sense of ‘good wife’ rather than the present-day use which refers almost exclusively to the act of self-immolation) and the embodiment of bhakti. Both are acted out (albeit, allegorically in the case of bhakti) from female postures in reference to one’s husband and lord, and both uplift absolute devotion to one’s husband/lord even when doing so comes at great self-sacrifice.

¹⁵ While in India, I have heard the Hindi word ‘*pagal*’ (crazy) used to describe bhaktas, and so the phrase ‘madly in love’ seems most apt here. In English conversations, I have heard some individuals refer to themselves as ‘crazy for God’ when they describe their spiritual devotion. See also the work of Muchkund Dubey (1997) who notes that the Baul people, famous in the Bengal region for their bhajans, draw their name from the Bengali word ‘*baula*’ which means crazy/possessed (pp. 142).

¹⁶ Quoted in Schelling, 2011, 48.

¹⁷ Parita Mukta, *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994) 65.

¹⁸ In other bhakti poems, the poet-speaker describes the bhakta as a “dog” who brings himself low before God and even eats from the hand of God in an act of humility. This is

especially notable since dogs traditionally hold a rather low status in Indian society. For an example of this sort of imagery in bhakti poetry, see the poem ‘God’s Own Dog’ by Tukaram.

¹⁹ Schweig, 2013, 127.

²⁰ Lorenzen, 2007, 192.

This uplifting of bhakti above other paths to spiritual liberation does not exist in a cultural vacuum. Indeed, there is a complicated social meta-narrative at play within ~6th century Indian society. In the midst of the somewhat wide-spread rejection of the violent sacrifices and hierarchical structures innate to Vedic Hinduism as well as the simultaneous uprise of *shramanic* (world-renouncing) religions of Buddhism and Jainism, bhakti spirituality became conceptualised as a sort of spiritual middle-ground in which an individual could devote themselves to God and spiritual practice without *totally* renouncing their social/family responsibilities. It is for this reason that Mirabai, who radically rejected her social/family responsibilities as a Rajput woman, suffered harassment and ostracisation at the hands of others.

²¹ Bhagavata Purana, 10.32. See Schweig, Graham. *Dance of Divine Love. India’s Classic Sacred Love Story: The Rasa Lila of Krishna*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2018. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv301g6v>

²² The Narada bhakti sutras (circa ~800 CE) describes a state of “high bhakti” as selfless love in which the act of bhakti is itself the fruit.

²³ Martin, 1999, 212.

²⁴ Quoted in Schelling, 2011, 49-50.

²⁵ Mukta, 1994, 167

²⁶ Mukta 1994: 168.

²⁷ Ibid., 166.

²⁸ Ibid., 138.

²⁹ Robert Orsi, ‘Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion,’ (Princeton, N.J.:

Princeton University Press, 1997), 3-18; Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008),

³⁰ Shrivatsa Goswami, and Margaret H. Case, "The Miraculous: The Birth of a Shrine" (in *Parabola: The Magazine of Myth and Tradition*. University of California Press, 2006.)

³¹ Ibid.

³² Author's fieldnotes. December 2015.

³³ Lorenzen, 2007, 187

³⁴ Ibid., 188.

³⁵ Lorenzen draws his readers' attention to the way in which not all bhakti movements emphasise a total rejection of animal sacrifice. Rather, Lorenzen argues, the *Devi Mahatmya* (The Greatness of the Goddess) text demonstrates that animal sacrifice was not incongruent with bhakti practices. Instead, it is only the ritual and inherent hierarchy innate to Vedic sacrificial rites that was unanimously rejected by bhakti movements (2007: 190-2).

³⁶ Karen Pechilis Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 5; Nancy Martin, 'Love and Longing in Devotional Hinduism' (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999.)

³⁷ Lorenzen, 2007, 188-9

³⁸ Ibid., 193

³⁹ Wendy Doniger and Jack Miles (eds), 'Tukaram of Maharashtra Says No,' in *The Norton Anthology of World Religions: Hinduism* (India: Viva Books Private Limited, 2015) 459-479.

⁴⁰ Lorenzen, 2007, 194.

⁴¹ Ibid., 195.

⁴² Schelling, 2011, xviii.

⁴³ Lorenzen, 2007, 196.

⁴⁴ Prentiss, 1999.

⁴⁵ Lorenzen, 2007, 186.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 189-193.

⁴⁷ A notable exception to this is the poet Tulsidas, who believed that the effort to establish equality amongst the different castes was one of the biggest wrongdoings of his time. (Tulsidas attributed this effort to the *kali yuga* [age of spiritual darkness.]) See Schelling (2011) pp. 149-153 as well as Lorenzen (2007) pp. 200-201 for discussions of this. See also the work of Mukta (1994) who discusses in detail the ways in which bhakti movements rejected caste hierarchies. However, it should also here be noted that David Lorenzen points out the way in which even *avarnadharmi* movements, such as the bhakti associated with Kabir, continue to implicate caste-specific practices. As such, Lorenzen argues, even the *avarnadharmi* movements do not fully and completely reject the caste system (pp. 186).

⁴⁸ Mukta, 1994, 86.

⁴⁹ There is only one bhajan collected by Mukta which portrays Mira as a low-caste individual, in which it describes her as a weaver. See the bhajan on page 114.

⁵⁰ The scope of this paper does not allow a more detailed overview of bhakti poetry. For an overview of some of the most renowned bhakti poetry and bhajans throughout India over the past few centuries, one can turn to Andrew Schelling's excellent anthropology of bhakti poetry. In addition to Schelling's anthology, Lorenzen (2007) provides a good overview of some key bhakti poets. Like Schelling, Lorenzen seeks to span the Indian continent and include poets from North, South, and central India. Lorenzen helpfully categorises the poets into not only their regional context but also by the social content of their poems and their theological conception of God.

⁵¹ Stephen Taylor, "The Experience: Approaching God" in *The Life of Hinduism* (California: University of California Press,

2006) 38. <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520249134.001.0001>

⁵² This is not to say that the metre and rhythm of bhakti bhajans do not follow a particular style that is itself conceptualised as emotionally evocative and/or spiritually powerful; indeed, bhakti music is thought of in this way. See Mukta (1994), Norman (2008), and Popley (1957) for a more in-depth discussion of the quality of music itself.

⁵³ Schelling, 2011, xxi-xxii.

⁵⁴ Mukta, 1994, 91-92.

⁵⁵ Schelling, 2011.

⁵⁶ Lorenzen, 2007, 199. See also the work of Karen Pechilis Prentiss (1999) for her discussion of this in Tamil bhakti poetry.

⁵⁷ In her study of Mira bhajans, Mukta points out that Mira often “signed” her name by incorporating herself as a character into the poem. Mukta speculates that this might be so that Mira could effectively not be eradicated from the poem without losing some of the poem’s content.

⁵⁸ Although this is more common in *saguna* bhajans (bhajans directed toward a God who is perceived to be ‘with form/attributes’), this can also be found in *nirguna* bhajans (bhajans directed toward a God who is perceived to be ‘without form/attributes.’) For an example of this see the work of Namadeva, a Varkaris poet who uses the name “Ram” to refer to “the same transcendent, formless Ram praised by *nirguni* poets, such as Kabir, Raidasa, and Nanak” (cited in Lorenzen, 2007, 199.)

⁵⁹ Cited in Lorenzen, 2007, 193.

⁶⁰ BhP 2.3.20-24, quoted in Lorenzen, 2007, 194.

⁶¹ The exception of Tulsidas when it comes to the rejection of caste has been noted earlier.

⁶² For a summary of this within scholarship see Kunniyanikal (2015). For an example of this being emphasised within social media see <http://www.thegospeltruthnewspaper.com/2016/05/many-hindus-in-new-zealand-accept-jesus.html>

[016/05/many-hindus-in-new-zealand-accept-jesus.html](http://www.thegospeltruthnewspaper.com/2016/05/many-hindus-in-new-zealand-accept-jesus.html)

⁶³ Julia Kuhlin, ‘Hindu-Christian Relations in the Everyday Life of North Indian Pentecostals,’ *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* (Vol. 28, Article 6. 2015.) <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1605>

⁶⁴ Syrian Christian refers to the ‘St. Thomas Christians’ in Kerala, India.

⁶⁵ H.A. Popley, “The Use of Indian Music in Christian Worship.” *The Indian Journal of Theology* 6(3): pp. 80-88, 1957.

⁶⁶ Israel, 2015, 88.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 89.

Such expressions of bhakti are found not only in some Christian contexts within India, but in the Indian diaspora as well. Joy Norman (2008) explores the historical significance of *bhajans* and the ways in which they have become a part of Christian worship in Indian diasporic communities. She suggests that the Christian use of bhajans can be seen as a bridge in two distinct ways: between Hindu and Christian forms of religiosity, and between India and diasporic nations.

⁶⁸ At a later visit to the same church in 2015, a guest pastor concluded his sermon by singing a bhajan that he had written. When I spoke with him afterward, the pastor emphasised to me the importance of incorporating what he considered to be “the essence of India” (by which he meant traditional bhajans, etc.) into Christian worship. “How can it Indian worship without the bhajan?” he asked rhetorically.

⁶⁹ I have heard Aradhana’s bhajans being sung by several church communities in India. Hale and his wife continue to host monthly *satsangs* in the Canadian city of Toronto where individuals of several nationalities meet up and sing the bhajans with fervor.

⁷⁰ Author’s fieldnotes. December 2015.

⁷¹ Francis Clooney, *His Hiding Place is Darkness* (California: Stanford University Press, 2014) 31.

⁷² This translation bears resemblance to the English translation provided by the artist Chris Hale, but I have made minor changes with the aim to reflect some nuances of the original.

⁷³ The word ‘*man*’ is here translated as ‘soul’, could perhaps be more accurately translated as ‘mind-heart,’ as the Hindi word ‘*man*’ connotes both thinking with one’s intellect and feeling with one’s emotions. In this sense, ‘*man*’ is not simply the immaterial part of an individual, but the part of an individual that engages with the world both rationally and logically as well as emotionally.

⁷⁴ It is also described positively in the *Rasa Lila* of Krishna in which the *gopis*’ minds become ‘captured by Krishna” (BhP Book 10, Chapter 29: Act 1, scene 1). See Schweig, Graham. *Dance of Divine Love. India’s Classic Sacred Love Story: The Rasa Lila of Krishna*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2018.

⁷⁵ The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006 [1993]), 837.

⁷⁶ Psalm 42:11.

⁷⁷ Schelling, 2011, xviii.

⁷⁸ The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary, 525

⁷⁹ For a June 2014 case of where *dharna* was held in an Indian village to protest the murder of teenaged girls, see: <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics/family-members-hold-dharna-under-tree-where-girls-were-hanged/>

⁸⁰ The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary, 540.

⁸¹ Described in the Bhagavata Purana 10.8.37-39

⁸² The use of *Ishvar* as the term for God is especially striking in this regard. Whereas I have observed many Indian Christians use some form of *Prabhu Yeshu Khrist* (Lord Jesus Christ) when referring to God, the use of *Ishvar* connotes Supreme Soul, or Highest Reality, in a similar manner to the use of *Brahman* in some ancient Hindu and medieval Sanskrit contexts.

⁸³ This same sentiment is captured by Robinson’s hymn only a few lines after the above-quoted phrases. He writes, ‘Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.’

⁸⁴ Kerry San Chirico, Israel Selvanayagam, Darren Todd Duerkson, and Ciril Kuttiyanikkal have all produced thought provoking scholarship in this area.