

SAP-HISTORY MONOGRAPH- 6

**CONFLICT AND ASSIMILATION IN
MEDIEVAL NORTH INDIAN BHAKTI :
AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH**

RAMESHWAR PRASAD BAHUGUNA

**SAP (UGC) Programme
Department of History and Culture
JAMIA MILLIA ISLAMIA
(A Central University by an Act of Parliament)
Maulana Mohammad Ali Jauhar Marg
New Delhi**

Most of the modern studies of the medieval north Indian Bhakti movement are characterized by two long-lasting and widely held orthodoxies. One of them is the assumption that the phenomenon of medieval north Indian Bhakti was marked by a clear divide between *nirguni* Bhakti (devotion to a non-incarnate, formless God) and *saguni* Bhakti (devotion to a personal god with attributes). The proponents of *nirguni* Bhakti included Kabir, Raidas, Dhanna, Dadu, Rajjab, Malik Das, Jagjivan Das, Paltu and many others. The *saguni* Bhakti, on the other hand found its practitioners in Mirabai, Surdas, Tulsidas and other Vaishnavas of the 16th and 17th centuries. The second orthodoxy which still reigns supreme in modern writings on medieval Bhakti underlines the gradual waning of the *nirguni* Bhakti and its absorption into the ever-assimilating, 'Hinduising' *saguni* Vaishnavism. Most of the scholars are of the opinion that the radical *nirguni panths* ('sects'), founded in the names of the leading *nirguni* preachers such as Kabir and Dadu, lost their moorings in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and assumed the form of Hindu sects. This essay seeks to re-examine these two historiographical trends which have dominated modern writings on medieval Indian *Sant* movement. Focusing on the *sant*-based religious culture of the seventeenth century, this study attempts to emphasize the continuing radical anti-Brahmanical character of the *sant* movement. The essay also seeks to demonstrate that non-Brahmanical groups such as Kabir-panth and Dadu-panth had their origins in this vibrant *sant*-based religious culture of the

seventeenth century and they continued to grow in the eighteenth century despite various attempts by various Maratha and Rajput states to discipline and 'reform' them.

I. THE NIRGUNA-SAGUNA MODEL OF MEDIEVAL BHAKTI MOVEMENT

The *nirguna-saguna* model of the medieval north Indian Bhakti movement emphasizes the primacy of doctrines and theological ideas in the teachings of various Bhakti leaders. This model makes a clear distinction between *nirguni sants*(such as Kabir, Raidas, Dadu etc.) and *saguni* Vaishnava Bhaktas (such as Mirabai, Surdas, Tulsidas, etc.). Modern studies of *nirguni santism* focus on its origins, its uncompromising monotheism and unique perception of God, its rejection of the orthodox Brahmanical and Islamic religions and their scriptures and, finally, its opposition to the Brahmanical caste system. On the other hand, the *saguni* Vaishnavas are seen as accepting the basic premises of the *varna* doctrine and the ritual supremacy of the Brahmins. The *nirguna-saguna* model thus underlines the two-fold theological and social division of the Bhakti movement.

The *nirguna-saguna* model was first popularized by Hindi scholars such as Ramchandra Shukla, P.D.Barthwal and Parashuram Chaturvedi. Ramachandra Shukla was the first important Hindi scholar who propounded the notion of *Bhakti Kal* (the Age of Bhakti) and divided the period into two distinct theological categories; Kabir, Raidas, Dadu, etc. were placed in the

nirguna category (due to their faith in the non-incarnate, formless God) and the Vaishnava devotees of the later period such as Surdas and Tulsidas were placed in the *saguna* category (as they championed the cause of a personal, incarnate god in a human form).¹ Shukla's view of the medieval Bhakti movement as consisting of two distinct theological categories has since been accepted by most of the Hindi scholars irrespective of their differences with him.

P.D. Barthwal in his *The Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry*, produced one of the earliest general works in English on the *sants* and their utterances (*vanis*). His work is particularly important for the information on many obscure *sants*, in particular of the later medieval period.² Barthwal's work was later superceded by Parashuram Chaturvedi's encyclopaedic study, *Uttari Bharat Ki Sant Parampara*, which gives an account of most of medieval and modern Indian *Sants*.³ Both Barthwal and Chaturvedi made a clear distinction, like many scholars before and after them, between *sagun* bhaktas and *nirgun* *sants*.⁴

¹ Ramachandra Shukla, *Hindi Sahitya Ka Itihas*, originally published in 1926, Varanasi: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, reprint, 1952, pp. 59-71.

² P.D. Barthwal, *The Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry* first edn., 1936, reprint, Delhi, 1978.

³ Parashuram Chaturvedi, *Uttari Bharat Ki Sant Parampara*, first edn., Allahabad, 1952, 3rd edn., Allahabad, 1972 (hereafter cited as *Sant Parampara*).

⁴ It may also be noted that both Barthwal and Chaturvedi, particularly the former, drew upon the *sant-banis* published by the Belvedere Press, Allahabad in the beginning of this century. This publication is known as *Sant Bani Pustak Mala* and includes over a dozen volumes, each volume containing a brief account of the life of a particular *sant* followed by a collection of his utterances (*vanis*). The most important aspect of the *Sant Bani Pustak Mala* series is that for the verses of many obscure *Sants* of the 17th and 18th centuries, it is the only source of information in print. The credit for collecting these banis from various shrines and monasteries goes to Baleshwar Prasad who was a follower of the modern Radhasoami sect which traces its lineage to the medieval *Sants*. For information on this aspect, see Daniel Gold, *The Lord as Guru: Hindi Sants in the Northern Indian Tradition*, New York, 1987, pp. 137-8.

The last four decades have witnessed a surge of western scholarly interest in medieval *sants*. Most of the Western scholars have depended heavily on the *nirguna-saguna* model popularized by the Hindi scholars.⁵ Tracing the doctrinal sources of Guru Nanak's religious thought, W.H. McLeod emphasized that while the religious thought of Guru Nanak was more consistent than that of Kabir, the '*Sant tradition*' or '*Nirguna Sampradaya*'

⁵ In recent years, Karine Schomer and W.H. McLeod, eds., *The Saints: Studies in Devotional Tradition of India*, Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 1987 has been the most influential and comprehensive study of medieval *sants* by Western experts. Other major works published in recent times include Charlotte Vaudeville, *Kabir*, Oxford, 1974, later published in a revised form under a new title., *A Weaver Named Kabir*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993; *The Bijak of Kabir*, translated by Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh, Essays and Notes by Linda Hess, Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 1986; Winand M. Callewaert, ed. And trans., *The Hindi Biography of Dadu Dayal* (a critical edition and English translation of Jan Gopal's *Dadu Janma Lila Parchi*), Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 1988; Winand M. Callawert and O.P. de Beeck Bart, eds., *Nirgun Bhakti Sagar: Devotional Hindi Literature*, 2 vols. Delhi: Manohar, 1991; Winand M. Callewaert, ed., *The Sarvangi of Gopaldas: A 17th Century Anthology of Bhakti Literature*, Delhi: Manohar, 1993; Winand M. Callewaert and Peter G.Friendlander, *The Life and Works of Raidas*, Delhi: Manohar 1992; Daniel Gold, *The Lord as Guru: Hindi Sants in the North Indian Tradition*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987, and " *The Dadu-Panth: A Religious Order in Rajasthan Context*" in Karine Schomer et al ., eds., *The Idea of Rajasthan: Explorations in Regional Identity*, Vol. II, Delhi: Manohar, 1994, pp.242-64., David N.Lorenzen, ed.And trn., *Kabir Legends and Anantadas's Prachai*, Abhay: State University of New York Press, 1991; David. N.Lorenzen, ed., *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*, Delhi.. Manohar, 1996; R.S.McGregor, ed., *Devotional Literature in South Asia: Current Research*, 1985-1988, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; Alan W.Entwistle and Françoise Mallison, eds., *Studies in South Asian Devotional Literature: Research Papers*, 1988-91, Delhi: Manohar, 1994; Winand M. Callewaert in collaboration with Dr. Swapna Sharma, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas : The Bhakti Poets of North India*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press 2000; Monika Horstmann, ed., *Images of Kabir*, Delhi: Mannohar, 2002., Winand M. Callewaert and Dieter Talleiu, eds., *Devotional Literature in South Asia, Current Research 1997-2000*, Delhi: Manohar, 2002., Mariola Offredi, ed., *The Banyan Tree: Essays on Early Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages*, 2 vols, Delhi:Manohar, 2000; David N.Lorenzen, ed; *Religious Movements in South Asia 600-1800*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, and his *Who Invented Hinduism? Essays on Religion in History*, New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006, and John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, and John Stratton Hawley and Mark Jueryensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.

provided the basis for the former's religious teachings.⁶ McLeod's expousal of such a position and his reaffirmation of it in his subsequent writings on the Sikh movement⁷ has made him the target of criticism by 'the critics of critical scholarship'⁸ but it must be made clear that McLeod does not equate the *sant*

⁶ W.H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, Oxford, 1968, pp. 149-58 passim.

⁷ *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*, 2nd edn., Delhi, 1996, p. 5, McLeod argues that Guru Nanak stands firmly within the northern Indian *sant* tradition. "What Guru Nanak offers us is the clearest and most highly articulated expression of the *nirguna sampradaya*, the so-called *Sant* tradition of Northern India" (p. 5). Elsewhere ("The Development of the Sikh Panth", in Karine Schomer and W.H. McLeod, eds., *The Sants : Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, Delhi, 1987, pp. 229-49), he places early Nanak-panth along with Kabir-panth and Dadu-panth in the *sant* tradition, though he clearly shows that gradually the development of Nanakpanth followed a very different trajectory

⁸ For an excellent and fuller discussion of the issues involved in the debate between 'critical scholarship' (represented by scholars such as W.H. McLeod and Harjot Oberoi) and "Critics of Critical Scholarship" (meaning orthodox Sikh historians) on various aspects of Sikh religion, see J.S. Grewal, *Contesting Interpretations of the Sikh Tradition*, Delhi, 1998. For orthodox Sikh historians', criticism of McLeod's alleged equation of Sikhism with 'the *Sant* tradition', see Chs. five and six (pp. 124-25. 132-35). Grewal finds some of the points of the criticism unjustified and observes that "the system of Guru Nanak was not exactly bracketed with the system of Kabir by McLeod" (p. 300). He, however, points out that McLeod's insistence on viewing Guru Nanak as a *sant* or as part of the *sant* tradition "confuses the issue" (p. 301). Such a position "emphasizes the importance of similarities in ideas at the cost of the differences in the systems of Guru Nanak and Kabir. It becomes a case of a part being confused with the whole" (p. 301). In an earlier work, *Sikh Ideology Polity and Social Order*, Delhi, 1996, p. 22, Grewal had made his position on the relationship between Guru Nanak and the *sants* clear. Like McLeod, he saw very little in common between Guru Nanak's religious thought and Vaishnavite bhakti. On the other hand, unlike McLeod, he takes a more balanced view of the ideological affinity between Guru Nanak and the *sants* by pointing out that though the Guru did not mention any of the *sants* who preceded him or who might have been his contemporaries, he does express appreciation for, and approval of, *sadhs* and *sants* "in general terms". We may point out here that McLeod only sees a strong ideological link between Guru Nanak and Kabir. He acknowledges that there is no evidence to show that a meeting ever took place between them. It is only in the hagiographic Janam-sakhi literature that such meetings are narrated with a view to establish Guru Nanak's superiority over the *sants*. See *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, pp. 85-6, p. 56. See also, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*, p. 7.

tradition with Vaishnava bhakti and makes a clear distinction between the two theological traditions.⁹

The value of the *nirguna-saguna* oppositional essences for defining the basic contours of the *sant* movement and of the religious culture shaped by it is pressed further by various contributors to the influential volume entitled *The Sants*.¹⁰ The contributors express their debt to the pioneering works of P.D. Barthwal and Parashuram Chaturvedi in no uncertain terms and regard the *nirguna-saguna* categories as foundational undifferentiated and monolithic.¹¹ Striking the only note of discord, however, John Stratton Hawley points out that though there were differences in the theological learnings of the ‘without attributes’ group of *sants* and the ‘with attributes’ group, yet “they all inherited a single, massive bhakti”.¹² Elsewhere, much in the manner of medieval antholizers - who included the utterances of both *nirguna sants* and *saguna* Vaishnavites in the works compiled by them - Hawley subverts the *nirguna-saguna* dichotomy by presenting six ‘saints’, three of *nirguna*

⁹ McLeod, *Guru Nanak and Sikh Religion*, pp. 151-52. McLeod depended for his information about the *sants* on some of the early writings of Charlotte Vaudeville on Kabir. Vaudeville, in turn, was considerably influenced, as we shall see, by the *nirguna-saguna* theory of Barthwal and Chaturvedi.

¹⁰ Karine Schomer and W.H. McLeod, eds., *The Sants : Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, Delhi, 1987.

¹¹ See, for instance, the editorial introduction by Karine Schomer in *The Sants*, p. 3. She clearly states that the volume reflects the point of view expounded by Barthwal and Chaturvedi.

¹² John Stratton Hawley, “The *Sant* in Sur Das”, in Schomer and McLeod, eds., *The Sants*, pp. 191-211. The quotation is from Hawley’s book, *Songs of the Saints of India*, New York, 1988, p. 6.

persuasion did the other three belonging to *saguna* leanings, in the scope of a single volume.¹³ He cites various instances of mixing up of *nirguna-saguna* categories and of the resultant breach in the theological wall.¹⁴

David Lorenzen, a specialist on Kabir-panth and Kabir legends, strongly supports the view that awareness of *nirguna-saguna* distinction is necessary for studying the values of medieval *sants*.¹⁵ Disagreeing with Hawley, Lorenzen considers the differences between the *nirguna* and *saguna* devotees more fundamental than their similarities. He does not exclude the existence of “considerable overlap” between the two categories but still justifies the distinction as made by scholars such as Barthwal, Chaturvedi, Vaudeville and McLeod. Lorenzen, however, imparts a new dimension to the *nirguna-saguna* dichotomy by identifying the two categories with two mutually opposite social ideologies of dominance and resistance. His argument is as follows:

“Although the contrast between the *saguni* and *nirguni* traditions is usually defined in theological terms - both by outside observers and by the followers of these two traditions - it is the social ideologies of the two

¹³ Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India*. Hawley’s “family of saints” includes Ravidas, Kabir, Nanak, Surdas, Mirabai and Tulsidas.

¹⁴ John Stratton Hawley, “The Nirgun/Sagun Distinction in Early Manuscript Anthologies of Hindi Devotion”, in David N. Lorenzen, ed., *Bhakti Religion in North India : Community Identity and Political Action*, Delhi, 1996, pp. 160-180.

¹⁵ David N. Lorenzen, “Introduction : The Historical Vicissitudes of Bhakti Religion”, in *Bhakti Religion in North India* (cited above), pp. 13-21.

traditions that lie behind and give strength to these differing ideologies. And behind the ideological lie the communities themselves.”¹⁶

Applying the concepts of hegemony and resistance - as formulated by the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci - to the religious ideas of medieval *sants*, Lorenzen concludes that the *saguna* Bhakti was elite, hegemonic and Brahmanical while *nirguna* religion was subaltern, contestory and lower-caste.¹⁷

However, Lorenzen’s attempts to fit the *nirguna-saguna* model into his analysis of caste-based dominance and subordination in medieval India have not been entirely successful. Apart from the important qualifications that he himself introduces in his formulation (such as both *nirguna sants* and Vaishnavite devotees sharing common historical roots, popularity of certain Puranic episodes among both of them, presence of lower caste followers is in *saguna* congregations and *nirguna* appropriations of many *saguna* beliefs and practices),¹⁸ his approach does not take into account the multiple religious forms- and not just the *nirguna* form – which the *sant*-based religious culture could assume in medieval India. As we shall show in the course of this essay, when we move from the *sants* to their ordinary followers, listeners and later day venerators, the whole picture changes because the ordinary people as

¹⁶ Ibid., p.13

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 1, 14, 17, 21

creative agents of history give their own meaning to the *sant* teachings. One may additionally question Lorenzen's assumption that all forms of *saguna Bhakti*- particularly its Vaishnavite version- had acquired hegemonic status during the 16th, 17th centuries and had come to serve the ideological needs of the ruling elites. Perhaps a clear distinction needs to be made here between the hegemonic, orthodox Brahmanical system and an ambivalent but increasingly popular Vaishnavite (*saguna*) movement which was pregnant with many possibilities during the 16th-17th centuries. In popular and subversive Vaishnavism, the difference between a *nirguni* sant and a *saguni* Vaishnava became blurred with the result that figures like Kabir and Namdev could be represented as Vaishnavas and *nirguni sants*.

In fact, in this subversive variant of Vaishnavism- which was reflected in the emergence of such religious fraternities as *Bairagis*, *Mundiya*s and *Satnamis*, not just the difference between *nirguni* and *saguni* but also between Hindu and Muslim became irrelevant.

II. NATURE OF NIRGUNA-SAGUNA CONFLICT

If we focus primarily on the ideas of the great *nirguni* sants of the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries (eg. Kabir, Raidas, Dadu, etc.) and those of the leading Vaishnava bhaktas (such as Mirabai, Surdas and, in particular, Tulsidas), the doctrinal, ideological and social conflict between the *nirguni*

santism and *saguni* Vaishnavism was real and intense. Kabir's diatribe against Brahmanical scriptures, caste, idol worship, incarnations and symbols of Vaishnava worship is too well-known to be recounted here.¹⁹ Their lower-caste origins, their strong monotheism, their rejection of Vedic and Puranic modes of worship, their awareness of each other's teachings and existence of strong ideological affinity among them made the *nirguni* sants distinct from the *saguni* Vaishnavas.²⁰

Moreover, the *nirguni* and *saguni* notions of the term 'sant' contained diametrically opposite social meanings. Different perceptions of *santhood* indicated conflicting socio-religious interests. A person who is regarded as *sant* or *sadh* by the lower and the lowest castes, may have looked an imposter to the Brahmans. It is quite possible that certain religious figures who acquired the status of *sants* may have crossed social frontiers and attained popularity and respect among both high and low castes. But, on the whole, *santhood* was a matter of differing social perceptions. The Brahmanical and Vaishnavite positions are to some extent articulated in Tulasidas's poetical texts. He feels pained that in *Kaliyuga* (Dark Age) the persons who eat all things are called

¹⁹ For Kabir's socio-religious ideas and world-view, see Linda Hess, trans., *The Bijak of Kabir*, Delhi : Motilal Banarsidas, 1986.

²⁰ For the elements of unity and solidarity among the lower-caste monotheistic (*nirguni*) sants, see Rameshwar Prasad Bahuguna, "Symbol of Resistance : non-Brahmanical Sants as Religious Heroes in Late Medieval India", in Biswamoy Pati et al., eds., *Negotiating India's Past : Essays in Memory of Partha Sarathi Gupta*, Delhi : Tulika Books, pp. 222-253.

sages and that path to success lies in heresy.²¹ He laments that the *sants* of Kaliyuga reject proven Vedas and Puranas and yet seek to discourse on devotion,²² the wicked are happy and the simple and gentle *sants* suffer pain and are punished by kings.²³ Latter part of the last observation suggests a Vaishnavite position rather than a Brahmanical one-like other Vaishnavites of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Tulasidas was a great admirer of the great Puranic heroes who had been prosecuted by the authorities. Glorifying the deeds of Prahlad, Vibhishan, Dhruv and Ambrish in his *Vinaya Patrika*, he declares that those who contrive the death of a saint (*sadhu*) find their own end. The strife against *sants* (*sant-droh*) ultimately yields bitter fruits.²⁴

While Tulasidas's perception of *santhood* combines the elements of both Brahmanical and Vaishnavite thinking, the lower-caste and non-Brahmanical perception of *santhood* represented the *sants* as spiritual warriors (*sant shoorma*). *Sant* religious poetry of the later medieval period is replete with reference to the notion of *sant* as *shoorma*. Adopting the imagery of Rajput notions of chivalry and heroism but rejecting the Rajput political culture of fighting for territory and rank, the *santic* perception of *sant* was that

²¹ Tulasidas, Dohavali, in S.P. Bahadur, trans., *Complete Works of Goswami Tulasidas*, Vol. IV, Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1997, verse 548, p. 72.

²² Ibid., verse 558, p.73.

²³ Ibid., verse 139, p. 81.

²⁴ Tulasidas, *Vinaya patrika*, Eng.trans. S.P. Bahadur, Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1995, 137 : 1-6, p. 80-81.

of a hero who suffered at the hands of religious authorities, officials and rulers and yet ultimately emerged triumphant due to his superior spiritual and moral values.²⁵

The reality of nirguni-saguni conflict is also clear from the differing perceptions of past in the *santic* and *saguni* Vaishnava literature. While the *saguni* devotees narrated the glorious deeds of Vishnu in his various incarnations, the *nirguni* sants of medieval north India traced their spiritual genealogy to the great oppressed heroes of the past. The sants viewed these oppressed mythological and historical figures (such as Prahlad, Dhruv, Mansur al-Hallaj, Baba Farid, and even Sarmad) as the victims of the oppression let loose by the rulers and powerful religious establishments.²⁶ Medieval Bhakti literature also gives us clear indication of the intense conflict between the *nirguni* sants and *saguni* Vaishnavas over the identity of Ram. To Kabir, gods such as Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva were ordinary mortals who were long dead.²⁷ He emphatically says that Ram “never took birth in King Dasharatha’s lineage” and regards the episodes of Ramanaya as “vain tales”.²⁸ The *nirguni* perception of Ram or Hari was that of a non-incarnate, formless, absolute Supreme Being. On the other hand, Tulsidas, the most articulate

²⁵ For these aspects of *santic* religious culture, see Rameshwar Prasad Bahuguna, “Symbol of Resistance”, *op.cit.*, pp. 240-42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 231-36.

²⁷ Linda Hess, *The Bijak of Kabir*, Sabda, no. 45, p.57.

²⁸ Charlotte Vaudeville, *A Weaver Named Kabir*, selected verses, the *Ramainis*, no.2, p. 148-49.

spokesman of saguni Vaishnavism, observed that those people who made a distinction between Ram- the absolute, formless, unborn God, and Ramachandra- the son of king Dasharatha of Ayaodhya, were “vile men possessed by the devil of infatuation and ignorant of the difference between truth and falsehood”.²⁹ Such people were “foolish and blind wretches” and their statements were repugnant to the Vedas”.³⁰ Thus, while the nirguni sants were firmly opposed to the doctrine of incarnation, the saguni devotees asserted that there was no distinction between Unqualified God and a qualified god.

III. BLURRING OF *NIRGUNA-SAGUNA* DIVIDE IN SANT *VANIS* AND HAGIOGRAPHY

From the issues discussed above, it becomes clear that distinction between the *nirguni* and *saguni* categories of medieval north Indian Bhakti was a historical reality. John Stratton Hawley, who has otherwise focused on the erasure of this distinction in different genres of the Bhakti literature, has also acknowledged that the *nirguna-saguna* distinction “largely works”.³¹ Sectarian theological boundaries in terms of *nirguni* and *saguni* doctrines did exist in the medieval Bhakti movement. However, Hawley himself has

²⁹ Tulsidas, *Ramacharitamansa*, tr. by R.C. Prasad Delhi : Motilal Banarsidas, 1990, Balkand, verses 114-15, pp.70-71.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, p.85.

underlined the fact that this distinction was not always honoured in *sant vanis*, hagiographies and anthologies. He cites many poems of “*nirgun* persuasion” in Surdas’s *bhramargit*.³² He also draws our attention to “alignment” between Namdev (a *nirgun sant*) and Surdas (a prominent *saguni* Vaishnava).³³

It may, however, be argued that the instances cited by Hawley to demonstrate a breach in the *nirguna-saguna* divide do not exhaust the subversive potential of the *sant*-based religious culture and hagiography in giving a short shrift to such theological divisions. Here it is important to shift the focus from the ideas of great *sants* to the aspirations and subversive ways of their ordinary followers who used the symbols of both the categories to oppose and ridicule the contemporary religious and political elites. As the *sant* movement grew in the course of the 16th and 17th centuries, the ordinary people remembered the great *sants* of the 15th and early 16th centuries not so much for their *nirguni* ideas as for their frontal attack on Brahmanical supermacy. The stories about the *sants* emphasize the successful assertion by them of their claims to use those sacred objects, myths and symbols that were regarded as Brahmanical or upper-caste monopoly. The subversive, transgressive and contestory character of these lower caste appropriations is also established by the ceaseless Brahmanical disapproval of them as is

³² Ibid., p.76.

³³ Ibid., pp. 76-77.

evident not only from the representations of Brahmans in the *sant* legends but also from texts such as Tulsidas's *Ramacharitamanasa* which in its portrayal of *Kali Yuga* (Age of Degeneration) denounces the lower castes (*shudras*) for instructing "the twice-born" in spiritual wisdom, putting on the sacred thread, accepting "abominable" alms, indulging in all sorts of prayers, penances and vows, and expounding the Puranas" from an exalted seat".³⁴ Even as late as the later part of the nineteenth century, the orthodox Brahmans expressed the view that the *panthis* (low-caste, *sant*-based sects) exhibited "a lamentable ignorance of the precise force of philosophical terms - words, the property of opposed systems, being used indiscriminately ... their style is assumed to attract the vulgar, and the teaching is inconsistent and deliberately false".³⁵ Brahmanical opposition to lower-caste use of various sacred objects, rituals, pilgrimage centres and customs has continued right into the twentieth century.³⁶

³⁴ Tulsidas, *Shri Ramacharitamanasa*, edited and translated by R.C. Prasad, Delhi, first edn., 1990, reprint, 1992, Uttarakanda, stanzas 99-100, pp. 634-5.

³⁵ P.W. Powlett, *Gazetteer of Ulwur*, London, 1878, p. 61.

³⁶ Referring to the upper-caste attitude towards the religious practices of the lowly placed Mahars in late twentieth century rural Maharashtra, Neera Burra informs us that the former did not resent the conversion of the Mahars to Buddhism as much as their attempts to enter the temples and celebrate various forbidden "Hindu" festivals, see her "Buddhism, Conversion and Identity", in M.N. Srinivas, ed., *Caste : Its Twentieth Century Avatar*, Delhi : Viking, 1996, p. 168. We may similarly observe here that while the instances of Brahmanical hostility to Islamization and conversion to Islam are almost non-existent, there are recurring references, both in *sant* and Vaishnavite hagiography and in other religion texts, to Brahmanical disapproval of the attempts of the lower castes to appropriate such religious symbols, myth and objects as were identified with the religious beliefs and practices of the higher castes.

The limitations of the *nirguna-saguna* oppositional model became even more glaring if we consider the ways in which the images of *nirguni sants* such as Namdev, Kabir and Raidas were constantly fashioned and re-fashioned by their lower-caste followers. This is evident from the hagiographic narratives about these figures. Anantadas, one of the earliest hagiographers of the great *sants* of the formative period, does not use the *nirguni-saguni* distinction to sing the glory of the great miraculous deeds performed by the *sant*-heroes. It seems that before the followers of the great *sants* of the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries themselves began to record the legendary accounts of their lives, liberal Vaishnavite hagiographers such as Anantadas and Nabhadas took the lead in narrating these tales. First non-Vaishnavite reference to legends about great *sants* are to be found in the utterances of *sants* who were the first generation disciples of Dadu (1544-1603). But by the end of the sixteenth century, two Vaishnavite hagiographers Anantadas and Nabhadas had already produced the biographical narratives of Kabir, Raidas and some other low-caste *sants* of the early period. Of these two, Anantadas was exclusively concerned with the biographies of Kabir, Namdev, Pipa, Dhanna and Raidas. The authorship of the *Parachais* of all these *sants* has been attributed to him. We have drawn frequently from the *Kabir Parachai*³⁷ and *Raidas Parachai*³⁸ of Anantadas. David Lorenzen

³⁷ Anantadas, *Kabir Parachai*, translated by David N. Lorenzen in collaboration with Jagdish Kumar and Uma Thukral. The translated version along with an analysis of Kabir legends and critical edition of the *Niranjanpanthi* recension of this *Parachai* is entitled *Kabir Legends and Anantadas's Kabir Parachai*, Albany, 1991.

³⁸ Anantadas, *Raidas Parachai*, translated and edited with an introduction by Shukdev Singh, Varanasi, 1993 (the edited text also includes the text of *Kabir-Raidas Goshthi* attributed to Sen, and passages relating to Raidas's life in Nagaridas's *Pad Prasang*).

believes that Anantadas composed these *Parachai* towards the closing years of the sixteenth century³⁹ while Shukdev Singh is convinced that Raidas Parachai was composed in the year 1588 A.D. (V.S. 1645).⁴⁰ According to Lorenzen, Anantadas was a Vaishnavite of the Ramanandi stock,⁴¹ though John Stratton Hawley is of the opinion that the ‘historical position’ of both Anantadas and Ramanand is not clear.⁴² It is, however, clear that he was deeply sympathetic to the low-caste *sants* and his *Parachai* perhaps constitute the oldest collection of *sant*-legends.

The Niranjani Panthi recession of Kabir Parachai contains thirteen sections and includes some of the most important episodes in the life of legendary Kabir. These episodes are: Ramanand’s acceptance of Kabir as his disciple, God bringing a bullock’s load of food to his house, various encounters between him and the Brahmans, his attempts to rid himself of increasing popularity by taking up the company of a prostitute and the resultant encounter with the Brahmans and the local ruler, the continuing Brahmanical hostility and Sultan Sikandar Lodi coming to the rescue of the Brahmans and qazis, persecution of Kabir by Sikandar Lodi in various ways, Kabir’s miraculous escapes and acceptance of his greatness by the Sultan, the failure of the *apsara* to seduce Kabir in the face of his unwavering devotion to

³⁹ Lorenzen, *Kabir Legends*, p. 13.

⁴⁰ Shukdev Singh, Introduction to *Raidas Parachai*, p. 13.

⁴¹ Lorenzen, *Ibid*, pp. 10 and 75.

⁴² Stratton Hawley, “The Nirguna/Saguna Distinction in Early Manuscript Anthologies of Hindi Devotion”, in David N. Lorenzen, ed., *Bhakti Religion in North India*, p. 164, 177 n. 17.

God, and finally God giving his *darshan* to Kabir. Similarly, the Raidas Parachai narrates various episodes in the life of Raidas: his previous life as a Brahman, his birth in the low-caste *chamar* family, Ramanand making him his disciple, his refusal to accept the philosopher's stone from God (Hari), his encounter with the Brahmans at the royal court becoming a 'political event', his confrontation with the Brahmans over the right to worship the *salagram*,⁴³ his initiation of Jhali Rani as his disciple leading to another confrontation with the Brahmans, his debate with Kabir, his visit to Chittor and manifesting himself in many identical forms in the feast and finally his taking out the golden sacred thread from within and showing it to the king, Brahmans and others.

It is not difficult to decipher the Vaishnavite flavour in these legendary episodes. During the course of the seventeenth century, this Vaishnavite flavour of the hagiographic accounts of the lives of the *sants* became even more perceptible. However, most of these stories, especially those dealing with confrontation between the defiant *sants* on the one hand and religious authorities (mainly Brahmans) and rulers on the other, had low-caste origins. As the popularity of great *sants* such as Kabir and Raidas increased during the

⁴³ Salagram is a sacred stone and is regarded as representation of Vishnu. Abul Fazl has given a brief account of the religious significance of *salagram* for the "Hindus" (*Ain-i Akbari*, vol. II, p. 163). He writes that according to the Brahmanical belief this stone does not lose its claim to veneration even when broken into pieces and, therefore, is more sacred than ordinary idols.

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many legends about them developed from below. Liberal-minded and sympathetic Vaishnavite hagiographers like Anantadas (late sixteenth century) and Priyadas (early eighteenth century) only appropriated these stories and reinterpreted them in Vaishnavite terms.

Bhaktamal literally means ‘The Garland of (Vaishnava) Devotees.’ Nabhadās’s Bhaktamal⁴⁴ is the first major narrative of Puranic and historical bhaktas put together. It set the trend for subsequent works of this kind. According to David Lorenzen, Nabhadās, like Anantadas, was a Ramanandi and they were separated from each other by “one spiritual generation”.⁴⁵ Most of the scholars have placed the composition of Nabhadās’s Bhaktamal around 1600 A.D., though Lorenzen is inclined to believe that it could have been composed between 1600 A.D. and 1625 A.D.⁴⁶ Nabhadās in all likelihood belonged to a low-caste⁴⁷ and was clearly sympathetic to devotees, both mythological and historical, who had risen to fame despite their low caste background.

Strictly speaking, Nabhadās’s Bhaktamal is not a biographical work. Nor does it tell us many stories about the lives of the devotees. To use Linda

⁴⁴ All the references to Nabhadās’s *Bhaktamal* and Priyadas’s *Bhaktirasabodhini* in this thesis are from Sitaramsharan Bhagwan Prasad Roopkala, ed., *Goswami Shri Nabhaji Krit Shri Bhaktamal*, with the commentary called the *Bhaktirasabodhini Tika* by Priyadas, seventh print, Lucknow, 1993.

⁴⁵ Lorenzen, *Kabir Legends*, p. 10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ For various view on Nabhadās’s caste, see Kailash Chandra Sharma, *Bhaktamal aur Hindi Kavya me Uski Parampara* (Hindi), Rohtak, 1983, pp. 41-43.

Hess's phrase, it rather gives us "thumb nail" sketches of the Puranic and historical bhaktas.⁴⁸ He does refer to occasional episodes in the lives of certain individual devotees but such references are brief and assume certain degree of knowledge of events on the part of the listners or readers. Nabhadass glorifies the devotees more in terms of their ideas, values and teachings than in terms of events in their lives. In contrast to the Parachais of Anantadas, there are no references to the happenings, actual or imagined, in the lives of Kabir and Raidas.⁴⁹ References to the Puranic devotees are even shorter and more often than not only names are mentioned. The range of *bhaktas* mentioned by him is very wide but his narration is characterized by lack of thick description. His portrayal of Kabir has been termed "very accurate near-contemporary" perception of Kabir.⁵⁰ However, for other images of Kabir, especially those that revolve around his supernatural anti-Brahmanical deeds and that reveal how the ordinary people fashioned a Kabir rooted in their daily experiences, we have to depend not on Nabhadass's Bhaktamal but on its subsequent expansion by other hagiographers, on Anantadas's Parachai and on *santic* hagiography.

⁴⁸ In Linda Hess's words, Nabhadass's verse on Kabir constitutes a "thumbnail sketch", see her, "Three Kabir Collections : A Comparative Study", in Schomer and McLeod, eds., *The Sants*, p. 139.

⁴⁹ For Nabhadass's verses on Raidas and Kabir, see Bhaktamal, Chhappaya 59, p. 470 and chhappaya 60, p. 479.

⁵⁰ Irfan Habib, "Medieval Popular Monotheism and Its Humanism", *Social Scientist*, 238-39, 1993, p. 84.

Nabhadas's Bhaktamal, however, soon became popular among the Vaishnavites and inspired later generations of hagiographers to compose poetical narratives on the lives of the devotees. When another Vaishnavite hagiographer, Priyadas wrote a 'commentary' on Nabhadasi's Bhaktamal in the beginning of the eighteenth century, he claimed that in the course of his remembering the name of Chaitanya, Nabhadasi himself appeared to him and commanded him to narrate the lives of the *Bhaktas* in greater details.⁵¹ Here one must note that while Nabhadasi was a Ramanandi (and hence a Ramaite), Priyadas, as is clear from his above-mentioned claim, was a Krishnaite belonging to the Gaudiya Vaishnava sect of Vrindavan. Nabhadasi's bhaktamal overcame various sub-sectarian differences among the Vaishnavites and became a pan-Vaishnavite text *par excellence*. Perhaps only the more sectarian Vaishnavas of the Vallabhite *Pushti Marga* sect seemed to have remained relatively uninfluenced by the popularity of Nabhadasi's Bhaktamal. Even the *santic* hagiographic narratives, such as Raghodasi's Bhaktamal, came to be modelled on Nabhadasi's work. Priyadas insists that however great a *bhakta* may be in terms of his all-round devotion, it is necessary for him to keep Nabhadasi's Bhaktamal in his heart in order to comprehend the real nature of devotion.⁵² Popularity of Nabhadasi's Bhaktamal, particularly among Vaishnavites, during the later and late medieval periods is also indicated by

⁵¹ Priyadas, *Bhaktirasabodhini*, kavitta 1, p. 1

⁵² *Ibid.*, Kavitta 8, p. 36.

the esteem in which the work was held by Mahipati, the author of Marathi hagiographic text, *Bhaktavijaya*. Mahipati, expressing his gratitude to Nabhadhas for his information, writes that Nabhaji (i.e. Nabhadhas) lived in the “country to the North” and was an incarnation of Brahmadev. He “wrote a great book containing the stories of saints.”⁵³ He again writes that Nabhadhas was “a chief jewel among Vaishnavas” and that he wrote “very extraordinary history of the bhaktas” and after reading this book he wrote his own work in Marathi.⁵⁴ Referring to the greatness of various Puranic and historical devotees, Charandas, a prominent eighteenth century *sant*, informs us that it is these *Bhaktas* whose devotion was narrated by Nabhadhas.⁵⁵

Priyadas composed his *Bhaktirasabodhini* in A.D. 1712. This work has been treated as a commentary on Nabhadhas’s *Bhaktamal* but it is more appropriate to look upon it as an expanded version of the original work. It is a full-fledged hagiographic work written by a broad-minded Vaishnava from Vrindavan. While excluding individual devotees who do not find mention in Nabhadhas’s *Bhaktamal* or who may have attained fame during the course of the seventeenth century, Priyadas gives detailed narratives of various episodes in the lives of Puranic and historical devotees who have been treated fleetingly

⁵³ Mahipati, *Bhaktavijaya*, English translation by Justin E. Abbott and pandit Narhar R. Godbole as *Stories of Indian Saints*, reprint ed., 2 vols. in 1, Delhi, 1982 (original ed., 1933-34), vol. 1, ch. I, verses 37-38, p. 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. II, verses 248-49, p. 29.

⁵⁵ Charandas, *Shri Bhaktisagar Granth*, 8th reprint, Lucknow, 1975, p. ; Vrajcharitra varnan, verse 35, p. 38.

by the original author. Some of the great religious figures of the sixteenth century - such as Guru Nanak, his spiritual successors and Dadu - have been excluded from Priyadas's expanded version perhaps because the original author, Nabhadasi deliberately overlooked them. It cannot be argued that Nabhadasi was unaware of Guru Nanak who had acquired greater fame by the end of the sixteenth century than many other sixteenth century devotees who have been mentioned in the Bhaktamal. One is tempted to explain this notable exclusion in terms of the growing distinct religious identity of the Sikh movement which may have made it difficult even for such a catholic Vaishnava as Nabhadasi to look upon Guru Nanak and other Sikh gurus of the sixteenth century as Vaishnavas. It may also be stressed here that most of the sixteenth century devotees mentioned in Nabhadasi's Bhaktamal and Priyadas's Bhaktirasabodhini belonged to, or were associated with, regions which came under increasing Vaishnavite influence during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There is not much evidence to suggest the presence of a strong Vaishnavite movement in the Punjab and north-western part of the country during this period. It may not be far from truth to suggest that for most part of the later and late medieval periods, the region beyond Thaneshwar remained some kind of prohibited zone and terra incognita for the leading Vaishnavite preachers like Vallabhacharya, though some of his followers did

establish a branch of *Pushti Marga* in some towns on the bank of river Indus.⁵⁶ A leading authority on the Krishnaite sects of the Braj regions tells us that the Punjab and north-western India remained largely isolated from the Vaishnavite centres of northern India during the later medieval period.⁵⁷ So far as the omission of Dadu in Nabhadās's *Bhaktamal* is concerned, it was impossible to appropriate the memory of a living, or recently dead, non-Vaishnavite figure while it was relatively easier to do so in the case of temporally distant figures such as Kabir and Raidas. Priyadas could not include Dadu in his *Bhaktirasabodhini* as he was bound by the names provided to him by Nabhadās's *Bhaktamal* but another Vaishnavite hagiographer of the eighteenth century, Mahipati does mention the name of 'Dadu Pinjari' as a devotee of "perfect delight".⁵⁸ It is clear from the above mentioned cases of exclusion that Vaishnavite ideological considerations did play a role in Nabhadās's scheme of things. Most of Priyadas's information on the low-caste *sants* seems to have come from Anantadas's *Parachai* or from stories that were already in circulation.

The *Bhaktavijaya* of Mahipati (1715-1790) contains large number of verses on the lives of the low caste *sants* of medieval India. There are also the detailed descriptions of the lives of Namdev and other *sants* of medieval

⁵⁶ Prabhudayal Meetal, *Brajasth Vallabh Sampradaya Ka Itihas*, Mathura, 1968, p. 84.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85, 105.

⁵⁸ Mahipati, *Bhaktavijaya*, vol. II, ch. LVII, verse 181, p. 384.

Maharashtra. Mahipati was born in family of *Varkari* pilgrims and subjects the lives of Kabir and other *sants* to extreme Vaishnavization. Raidas is mentioned as Rohidas. Mahipati's work clearly indicates that the stories about the lives of major medieval *sants* such as Kabir and Raidas had spread beyond northern India into the Deccan during the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Jan Gopal's *Dadu Janma Lila*⁵⁹ was written about two decades after the death of Dadu in 1603. The work, which is the first important, full-fledged santic hagiographic account, underwent many interpolations later. The legendary episodes of Dadu's life, particularly his meeting with Akbar, are important for throwing light on the political perceptions of the ordinary followers of the *sants*.

The first important Bhaktamal in the *sant* tradition is that of Raghodas.⁶⁰ According to its editor, it was written around 1660 A.D.⁶¹ Most of the scholars are, however, convinced that it could not have been written before the second decade of the 18th century. Raghodas's Bhaktamal is modelled on the Bhaktamal of Nabhadasi. It deals with about twelve hundred *sants*. Many of them were the followers of Dadu and other great *sants*. The

⁵⁹ Winand M. Callewaert, *The Hindu Biography of Dadu Dayal*, Delhi, 1988 (critical edition of *Dadu Janma Lila* along with its English translation).

⁶⁰ Agarchand Nahata, *Raghavadaskrit Bhaktamal* with a commentary (Tika) by Chaturdas (Chaturdas Krit Tika), Granthank 78, Jodhpur, 1965.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, Introduction, p. XVIII.

commentary by Chaturdas was written around 1800 A.D. Another important Bhaktamal in the Dadupanthi tradition is that of Brahmadas.⁶²

Most of the Kabirpanthi sectarian literature consists of various 'sagars' and 'bodhs'. Most of them were composed in the early 19th century, though *Anuragsagar* is believed to have been written in the late eighteenth century. *Anuragsagar* is the earliest work written by the Kabirpanthis of Chhatisgarh. The work soon came to acquire different forms and many interpolations have crept into it. The most important aspect of this work is that it offers considerable information on early Kabirpanthi notions of cosmos and time. It also mentions various incarnations of Kabir in previous *Yugas*.⁶³

It is important to point out that although the Vaishnavite hagiographic accounts of the *sants* do contain ideological bias and add Vaishnavite flavour to various episodes in the lives of the *sants*, they are still important from the viewpoint of identifying non-Brahmanical elements in the legends. What is required is to remove the superficial Vaishnavite coating and penetrate beneath it. Moreover, we should remember that there were spheres where Vaishnavite and santic interests converged - both were against orthodox Brahmans and their dominance. The Shaivite and Smarta Brahmans are

⁶² Brahmadas, *Bhagatmal*, edited by Udairaj Ujjwal, Jodhpur, 1959.

⁶³ *Anuragsagar*, Lucknow, 1989. For the details of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century mythological literature belonging to the Chhatisgarh Kabirpanth, see Kedar Nath Dvivedi, *Kabir Aur Kabir-Panth* (Hindi), Prayag, 1965, pp. 37-41.

scuffed at as much in the Vaishnavite hagiography as in the *santic* versions. Most of the hagiographic accounts, whether composed by Vaishnavas such as Priyadas or by *Santic* ideologues such as Raghodas, clearly overlook the *nirguni-saguni* distinction while narrating the episodes in the lives of the great *sants*. What they highlight is the confrontation between the *sants* and political-religious elites in busy market-places, temples and pilgrimage centres. Vaishnava symbols and artifacts are shown as being more helpful to the *sants* than to the Brahmans.

IV. EMERGENCE AND GROWTH OF SANTIC PANTHS

Recent Western writings on the medieval north Indian Bhakti movement underline the process of gradual ‘sanskritization’ and ‘Hinduization’ of the communities formed by the followers of Kabir and Dadu. Charlotte Vaudeville, Daniel gold, Winand M., Callewaert and David Lorenzen have, in different ways, have attempted to show the process by which *sant*-based formations such as Kabir panths and Dadupanth have been absorbed into conventional Hinduism. From the following discussion, it becomes clear that these panthic communities retained most of their radical anti-Brahmanism until the late medieval period, although they may have changed their symbolic and cultural strategies in the changing milieu of the 18th century.

Most of the scholars have suggested the existence of well-organised and well-demarcated sects in the names of the major *sants* such as Kabir and Dadu right from the beginning. However, there is very little evidence to show that non-Brahmanical sects such as Kabirpanth and Dadupanth existed in institutionalized form till the end of the seventeenth century. To be sure, the term ‘Dadupanth’ was used by some followers of Dadu and we find the evidence of its use in the *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* also. But for most part of the seventeenth century Dadupanth existed more in the form of a loose association of non-Brahmanical *sants* who used it as a platform for religious propaganda. From various references in the seventeenth century texts such as Jan Gopal’s *Dadu Janma Lila* and the *Bhaktamals* of Jagga and Chain, it is clear that many Vairagis, Raidasvamshis, Dhannavamshis, Pipavamshis and Namavamshis were among the active followers of Dadu.⁶⁴ It would not be correct to assume that they left their original sects to join the Dadupanth.⁶⁵ There were no organized *sant*-based *panthas* during most part of the seventeenth century. It is quite possible that the names of great *sants* such as Kabir, Raidas, Dhanna,

⁶⁴ For references to *Vairagi* followers of Dadu, see Jan Gopal, *Dadu Janma Lila*, 9: 24, 9: 25 and 13:10, and Jagga, *Bhaktamal*, Agarchand Nahata, ed., Verse 51, p. 278. For reference to Mohan ‘Dhannavamshi’, see Jagga, *Bhaktamal*, verse 59, p. 279. For ‘Raidasvamshi’ devotees, see Jagga, *Bhaktamal*, verse 62, p. 279 and Chain, *Bhaktamal*, verse 76, p. 285. For references to ‘Pipavamshi’ *sants*, see Chain, *Bhaktamal*, verse 63 and 67, p. 284. For ‘Namavamshi’ Teeku, see Chain, *Bhaktamal*, verse 76, p. 285. The *Bhaktamals* of Jagga and Chain have been included in the form of appendices in Agarchand Nahata, ed., *Ragavadaskrit Bhaktamal*.

⁶⁵ See, for instance, the comment of Shahabuddin Iraqi that Jagannathdas was previously a Kabirpanthi and later became a disciple of Dadu, “Historical and Religious Dimensions of Dadupanthi Sources”, *Islamic Culture*, vol. LXXI, no. 3, 1997, p. 44.

Pipa, etc. were used by their latter-day followers to emphasize their affiliation with one of them. The prevalence of such a practice did not, however, imply the creation of organized and well-structured *panths*. Dadupanth served as a nucleus of non-Brahmanical *santic* gatherings during the seventeenth century. These gatherings were open to the followers of various *sants* and there is little evidence to show that the followers of Dadu subordinated the spiritual authority of other great *sants* to that of Dadu. From the testimony of Jan Gopal himself, it is evident that Kabir occupied a high place among Dadu's followers and Dadu himself is represented as an incarnation of Kabir and depicted as constantly singing Kabir's verses.⁶⁶

Seventeenth century saw many generations of Dadu's followers but they all were scattered in various parts of Rajasthan. They sang the verses of Dadu along with those of other leading *sants* such as Kabir. Disciples were not organised under a single hierarchical organisation. Naraina near Jaipur had come to be seen as a sacred centre by the followers of Dadu but there is no evidence for the existence of ritualized worship of Dadu during most of the seventeenth century.

Daniel Gold has suggested that the mid seventeenth century image of Dadu was that of a Darvesh (sufi saint) and not of a mythical figure who ultimately became an object of ceremonial worship. According to Gold,

⁶⁶ Jan Gopal, *Dadu Janma Lila*, 1: 17, 2: 4.

Dadu's tomb at Naraina was treated in the manner of a sufi shrine. The emergence of Dadupanth as a "distinct sectarian institution" was only a late seventeenth century phenomenon. At the end of the seventeenth century a charismatic figure Jaitram emerged on the scene and began to exercise authority over Dadu's followers. He remained in control of Dadu's *gaddi* at Naraina for about for decades and it was during this period of early eighteenth century that he organised Dadu's followers into a well kint sect.⁶⁷

The early history of Kabirpanth is shrouded in mystery. Some modern scholars and Kabirpanthis of various hues believe that the *panth* was founded by Kabir himself. There is, however, no evidence to trace the history of Kabirpanth to a date before the end of the seventeenth century. The term 'Kabirpanth' or 'Kabirpanthi' in the pre-eighteenth century sources is hardly used. The author of the *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* in the mid seventeenth century gives a detailed account of Kabir and attributes large following to him, yet he also does not refer to the existence of Kabirpanth. In the *Bhaktamal* of Raghodas, there is a reference to 'Kabir Sahib Kau Panth' but as we have mentioned in Chapter II, the work was written in the second decade of the eighteenth century and not around A.D. 1660, as is believed by some

⁶⁷ Daniel Gold, "The Dadu-*panth* : A Religious Order in its Rajasthan Context," in Karine Schomer et al. eds., *The Idea of Rajasthan*, Vol. II, pp. 249-50.

scholars.⁶⁸ Linda Hess, who has carried out detailed research on the *Bijak* of Kabir is of the opinion that the assertion that Kabirpanth emerged in Eastern Ulltar Pradesh and Bihar between 1600-1650 is based on “rough guess work”.⁶⁹ She makes the important point that most of the manuscripts of the *Bijak* belong to the post 1800 period.⁷⁰ Dharmadas, who is considered to be the founder of the Chhatisgarhi branch of Kabirpanth, is a mysterious figure about whom very little is known. His followers believe that he was initiated into Kabirpanth directly by Kabir himself and chosen as his successor by the *sant*. Most of the scholars however are of the opinion that there is a long chronological gap between their periods. Raghodas in his *Bhaktamal* has mentioned large number of Kabir’s disciples including ‘Guru Dharamdas’.⁷¹ But since this *Bhaktamal* was written in the second decade of the eighteenth century it is quite possible that by that time Dharmadas had come to be regarded as the founder of the Chhatisgarh branch of the Kabirpanth. The

⁶⁸ Winand M. Callewaert, an eminent authority on the Dadupanthi sources, has given 1720 A.D. as the date of the composition of Raghodas’s *Bhaktamal*, see his “Dadu and the Dadu-panth: The Sources”, in Schomer and McLeod, eds., *The Sants*, p. 186.

The description of Kabirpanth in Raghodas’s *Bhaktamal* appears under the heading of “Chaturpanth Vigat Barnan” (Account of Four Sects). These four sects are - Nanakpanth, Kabirpanth, Dadupanth and Niranjani-panth. After narrating various episodes in Kabir’s life in *Mool Chhappayas* 349-52 (pp. 177-78), Raghodas turns to a description of various disciples of Kabir in *Mool Chhappayas* 353-358 (pp. 178-179). From Raghodas’s description, it is clear that Dharmadasi branch of Kabirpanth was already in existence in the beginning of the eighteenth century.

⁶⁹ Linda Hess, Preface to English trans. of the *Bijak of Kabir*.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, appendix C, p. 165.

⁷¹ Raghodas, *Bhaktamal*, pp. 178-179.

names of some of Dharmadas's successors in this branch are also mentioned by Raghodas.

From the above discussion, it becomes evident that the claim of the official histories⁷² of the Dadupanth and Kabirpanth that the sects were founded by the original *sants* themselves cannot be taken seriously. Each of these *panths* has viewed its history as a linear development from the lifetime of the original *sant*. The long hiatus between the lifetime of the great *sant* and the period when well-organised, well-demarcated *panth* began to emerge in his name is generally overlooked. As we have shown in the last two chapters, before the final stage of 'routinization' or 'crystallization' set in into the *sant* movement, there was a long period of transitional broad-based, fluid religious culture.

The followers of the *sants* travelled from one place to another in various parts of northern India during the 17th century and sang the verses of their religious heroes. They did not hierarchically privilege the verses of one particular *sant* over those of others. As is clear from the *Panchvani* anthological tradition, Kabir was immensely popular among Dadu's followers during the seventeenth century and was given equal respect, if not more. If the verses of Dadu are found in larger number than those of Kabir in the

⁷² See, for instance, the official Kabirpanthi biography of Kabir written by Gangasharan Shastri, *Kabir Jivan Charitra* (Hindi), first edn., 1976 Varanasi, 1991.

Panchvani anthologies compiled by various followers of Dadu during the seventeenth century, the explanation should be found not in the existence of sectarian tendencies among them but in the ultimate limitations of oral transmission in the later medieval period. Dadu was, after all, historically and spatially closer to them than Kabir was. But still the popularity of *sant*-based religious culture spread in various parts of northern India and Kabir's sayings were included in large number in most of the anthological traditions. However, neither the *sant*-anthologies nor the *vanis* of the great *sants* of the early period acquired the status of sectarian texts during the 17th century. Moreover the verses in the anthologies were still subject to changes and interpolations and were not yet fixed. There did not yet emerge a "textual community" of believers of one particular *sant* during most of the seventeenth century. The utterances of Kabir and other *sants* were immensely popular during the seventeenth century. They, however, lacked the scriptural status that came to be associated with Nanak's *Vanis* and the *Adi Granth* during the same period.

Since there is considerable evidence for the evolution of many Kabirpanthi sects during the 18th and 19th centuries but relatively little evidence for the existence of organized Kabirpanth during the pre-eighteenth century period, one may venture to suggest that when Kabirpanth did emerge during the late medieval period, it emerged not as one single *panth* but as

many mutually competing organised entities in different geographical settings of eastern U.P., western Bihar and north-eastern Madhya Pradesh. As the non-Brahmanical *panths* such as Dadupanth and Kabirpanth developed their ritual, hierarchical, monastic and mythological apparatus, *sants* such as Kabir and Dadu lost their *santhood* and came to be seen as divine incarnations.⁷³

While seventeenth century in northern India is largely characterized by a non-Brahmanical *sant*-based broad religious culture which glorified the great *sant*-collective and which regarded Kabir as the greatest religious hero, eighteenth century is marked by the emergence of myriads of low-caste divisive sects evolving their own systems of rituals and placing their own *sant* in a position of dominance over others. Thus, apart from Kabirpanth (or Kabirpanths) and Dadupanth, various other sects such as Dariyapanth, Bawripanth, Shivanarayani *panth* and many others emerged in various regions of northern India. The *panths* faced external and internal constraints from the very beginning.

⁷³ First important Kabirpanthi hagiographic work which regards Kabir as an incarnation of the Supreme Being and subordinates various deities of the Hindu pantheon to Kabir's authority is *Anurag Sagar*. The work is associated with the Chhatisgarhi Kabirpanth and is in the form of dialogue between Kabir and his 'chosen successor' Dharmadas. See the Lucknow edition printed in 1989.

V. EIGHTEENTH CENTURY STATES, BRAHMANICAL REACTION AND VAISHNAVITE CONSERVATISM

In the absence of any direct evidence, it is difficult to surmise the extent to which the all-pervasive prevalence of the vibrant *sant*-inspired religious culture of the seventeenth century eroded the ideological and cultural basis of Brahmanism. We begin to come across large body of archival evidence which shows that the Rajput and Maratha states of the eighteenth century sought to enforce caste rules and religious norms rigourously. It may be pointed out that the increasing attempts of the eighteenth century states to regulate the society in accordance with the principles of Brahmanical ideology could not have been undertaken without the prior violation, transgression and subversion of caste and religious norms.

Historians have highlighted various measures introduced by the eighteenth century Rajput and Maratha states to punish such violations. Brahmanical influence increased under the Peshwa rule. A.R. Kulkarni has cited many cases where the Peshwa state enforced rigid caste regulations with the help of various bodies of Brahmans such as Brahma Sabha, Dharma Sabha etc.⁷⁴ Peshwa Narayan Rao deprived the Prabhus, who had been uplifted from the shudra status to that of Kshatriyas, were deprived of their newly acquired

⁷⁴ A.R. Kaulkarni, "Social Relations in the Maratha Country", pp. 139-149 passim. See also his *The Indian Village*, p. 43.

caste identity and were prohibited the use of Vedic *mantras* and ceremonies.⁷⁵

The Peshwa state tightened the functioning of the caste system, suppressed the lower castes and enforced religious discipline. The worships of God Vitthala at Pandharpur, which was popular among all sections of the society, was brought under the control of Peshwa state and the ‘untouchable’ social groups were prohibited to enter the main temple there and threatened with punishment if they violated the state regulation.⁷⁶

Evidence for similar acts of state suppression of religious assertion by the lower castes has come from eighteenth century Rajasthan as well. Sawai Raja Jai Singh, who was one of the most powerful rulers in northern India during the first half of the eighteenth century, attempted to revive and strengthen the Vedic system of worship in accordance with orthodox Brahmanical system. He imposed restrictions on various non-conformist religious communities such as Vairagis, Sanyasis and Ramanandis.⁷⁷ The Vairagis were told not to carry arms⁷⁸ and both the Vairagis and Nagas were made to pledge that they would not fight against each other.⁷⁹ Various Vaishnavite groups were required to come to terms with the Vedic mode of orthodox Brahmanical worship. Various Vaishnavite sects of the sixteenth and

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ V.S. Bhatnagar, *Life and Times of Sawai Jai Singh*, Delhi, 1974, pp. 337-342.

⁷⁸ Gopal Narayan Bahura and Chandramani Singh, *Catalogue of Historical Documents in Kapad Dwara*, vol. 1 Amber-Jaipur, 1988, document no. 1277, p. 163.

⁷⁹ Ibid., document no. 1300, p. 165.

seventeenth centuries had emerged in opposition to the orthodox Brahmanical mode of worship. The Vaishnavites were clearly hostile towards the Shaktas and Smartas, as is evident from the Nabhadās's *Bhaktamal* and the Vallabhite *Vartas*. The attitude of the 17th century Vaishnavites towards the Vedas and Vedic forms of worship was one of indifference, if not defiance. Vaishnavite preachers such as Tulasidas did acknowledge the authority of the Vedas and even invoked it in their narratives. Such a practice, however, should be viewed in terms of their attempts to impart legitimacy to various innovations in religious beliefs and practices. Another important feature of the seventeenth century Vaishnavite religious culture was its liberal attitude towards the lower castes.

The eighteenth century states increasingly prevented the liberal-minded Vaishnavite sects from carrying out their religious innovations. From the *sammatipatras* (bonds) signed between the leaders of various sects and the Jaipur state authorities, it becomes evident that the Vaishnavites and non-Brahmanical sects came under increasing pressure from the state to give up their religious and social radicalism. The practice of allowing the *shudras* to worship *salagram* was prevalent among many Vaishnavite groups. The eighteenth century Jaipur state clearly considered such a practice contrary to

the Vedic principles and asked the Vaishnavite leaders to bring it to an end.⁸⁰

The Vaishnavite were also required not to associate with the *shudras*.⁸¹

The activities of various non-Brahmanical sects such as Laldasis (or Lalpanthis) and Dadupanthis were also restricted by the Jaipur state of the eighteenth century. Laldasis or Lalpanthis were the low-caste followers of Laldas, a seventeenth century Meo *sant* whose teachings were similar to those of Kabir. The Jaipur state of the eighteenth century required the Lalpanthis to give an undertaking that they would observe the principles of Vaishnava *dharma*.⁸² Most stringent Brahmanical restrictions were imposed on the Dadupanthis. They were made to agree that they “would follow the principles of *shastras* as desired by the Maharaja and would have no contacts with the Muslims.”⁸³ This is very significant because throughout the seventeenth century Dadupanth was a non-Brahmanical community of *sants* and their followers. It is quite clear that the eighteenth century Jaipur state tried to curb the subversive practices of the Dadupanthis and imposed Brahmanical system of values on them. There is an interesting evidence from the late eighteenth century Jodhpur Kingdom which clearly shows state’s concern for caste and religious discipline in the society. The state required the local officials to prevent the persons belonging to the lowest castes from carrying the pitchers

⁸⁰ Ibid., document no. 1516.

⁸¹ Ibid., document no. 1518, p. 184.

⁸² Ibid., document no. 1145.

⁸³ Ibid., document no. 1282, p. 163.

filled with the holy water from the Ganges while persons belonging to 'Hindu' castes such as Rajputs, Jats and Malis were allowed to do so.⁸⁴

Strengthening of the state control over the transgressive religious practices of the lower castes and resurgence of a Brahmanical ideology which gained sustenance from the Rajput and Maratha States of the eighteenth century were not the only factors that constrained the growth of non-Brahmanical sects. Vaishnavism, which had largely ignored the ties of caste and recruited its adherents from all castes including the lowest, was increasingly acquiring a conservative character during the eighteenth century.

Although the Vaishnavite movement never questioned caste as the basic principle of ordering society, many Vaishnavite sects of the seventeenth century developed an egalitarian orientation. David Lorenzen has suggested that religious and social conservatism began to grow in the Ramanandi order in its early phase.⁸⁵ Such a view, however, is not borne out by facts. During most of the 16th century, the Ramanandi order retained its liberal religious character and recruited persons of both sexes and castes including 'untouchables'.⁸⁶ Ramanandi hagiographers such as Anantadas and Nabhadras glorified the values and deeds of many low-caste devotees. The great

⁸⁴ Sanad Parwana Bahi, Baisakh budi 2, 1838 V.S. (1781 A.D.), Rajasthan State Archivas Bikaner.

⁸⁵ David N. Lorenzen, *Kabir Legends*, pp. 25-26.

⁸⁶ Richard Burghart, *The Conditions of Listening*, p. 19, and Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, p. 436.

Vaishnavite preacher, Ramanand came to be represented in popular memory as the Brahman teacher of various low caste *sants*. The Vaishnavite congregations of the seventeenth century had a participatory character and were open to all castes and social groups. As is evident from the testimonies of texts such as the *Vallabhite Vartas* Bhaktamal of Nabhadās, Anantadas's Parachais and Tulasidas's *Ramcharitmanas*, the seventeenth century Vaishnavite sects accommodated rather yjism excluded lower castes. The names of many lower caste followers of the *Pushti Margi* preachers have been mentioned in the *Do Sau Bavan Vaishnavan Ki Varta*.⁸⁷

Vaishnavism was gradually becoming a state ideology during the eighteenth century. In lieu of state patronage, the Vaishnavites had to abserve the caste rules and give up its liberal and sympathetic attitude towards the lower castes. Citing the case of transformation of Vaishnavism into a state ideology in later medieval Maharashtra, D.D. Koshambi points out that while originally Bhakti began as a form of protest against oppression perpetuated through Brahmanical superstitions, the feudal order ultimately imposed its own limitations and "the reforms and its struggle was never consciously directed against ferdalism so that its very success meant feudal patronage -

⁸⁷ These lower caste followers of Vitthalnath, the successor of Vallabhacharya, belonged to various low castes such as Dhobis, Nais, Malis, Dhimars and even outcaste groups such as Chuhars. For the details of these devotees, see *Do Sau Bavan Vaishnavan Ki Varta*, varta no. 113, pp. 274-75; varta no. 135, pp. 304-06; varta no. 147, pp. 316-18, and varta no. 244, pp. 491-92.

and ultimately feudal decay by diversion of democratic movement into the dismal channels of conquest.”⁸⁸ While Nabhadās’s Bhaktamal and the early eighteenth century commentary by Priyadas reflect the great capacity of seventeenth century Vaishnavites to accommodate the lower castes and glorify the lower caste Bhaktas, most of the eighteenth century is marked by growing Vaishnavite conservatism. Even the Vairagi sect which incorporated people from different castes and religions in its fold during the seventeenth century, became socially restrictive in the eighteenth century. The Ramanandis began to seek royal patronage to defend their newly acquired prestige and religious power.⁸⁹ The eighteenth century states, in turn, increasingly patronised conservative Vaishnavite sects and ascetic orders.

Paradoxically, while various Vaishnavite sects such as Ramanandis and Vairagis increasingly became status quoist and developed full-fledged Brahmanical tendencies, popular Vaishnavism reached new heights in the course of the eighteenth century. Vaishnavite preachers and story-tellers took the Rama and Krishna cults to regions which had hitherto been beyond the influence of Vaishnavism. The *Ramcharitmanas* of Tulasidas was slowly but steadily acquiring the status of a “social epic” in various regions of northern India. It was read, sung and enacted on various occasions and became popular among the common people and elites alike. Different sections of society

⁸⁸ D.D. Kosambi, *Myth and Reality*, p. 35.

⁸⁹ Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, p. 436.

interpreted its contents in different ways. While the ruling elites used it to maintain status quo, the oppressed people, particularly peasants, interpreted its contents in subversive ways, especially during times of crisis and hardship. The *Ramcharitmanas* made available a language that enabled the oppressed social groups to vent their feelings against the agents of the state. In an important study, Philip Lutgendorf has emphasized the increasing popularity of the *Ramcharitmanas* from eighteenth century onwards.⁹⁰ The *Manas-Katha* tradition and the *Ramleelas* (dramatized enactment of the episodes described in the *Ramcharitmanas*) played important role in making the epic popular among the peasants and other oppressed groups. The facts that the epic contained many passages which denigrate the lower castes and women and which advocate an ideal social order based on the hierarchical concept of *varna-ashrama-dharma* became irrelevant as the epic could be read and understood differently by different sections of society. While the elites could interpret the concept of *Ramraj* in terms of a hierarchical socio-political order in which the lower castes would know their limits, the common people belonging to the lower casts and peasantry could understand the same concept in terms of an ideal society in which all would be free and equal irrespective of their caste and class. By the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, Krishnaite and Ramaite forms of Vaishnavism had become

⁹⁰ Ibid., see especially chs. 3 and 5.

popular among many sections of the subordinate social groups in various parts of northern India. The popularity of Vaishnavism seriously restricted the scope of non-Brahmanical sects. However, in regions where Vaishnavism was not very popular (such as western Rajasthan and the Punjab), non-Brahmanical religions continued to spread among the common people. This, to some extent, explains the growing popularity of the Sikh movement in the Punjab and Bishnoi religion in western Rajasthan.

VI. THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY SECTS : INTERNAL CONSTRAINTS

While the rulers, Brahmans and Vaishnavites imposed external constraints on the growth of the eighteenth century non-Brahmanic sects, internally they were characterized by mutual conflicts, rivalries, sectarian ideologies and growing isolation from the common people. If we look at the eighteenth century hagiographic narratives, such as the *Anuragsagar*, it becomes clear that eighteenth century sectarian miracles were far removed from the day to day life and aspirations of the common people. Kabir's image in the late eighteenth century hagiography is radically different from the image that is reflected in the seventeenth century Vaishnavite and *sant* hagiographics. *Anuragsagar* is a text of esoteric *santism*. Though it is attributed to Kabir himself by the Chhatisgarh Kabirpanthis, most of the scholars are of the opinion that it was composed in the late eighteenth

century. Very soon many similar works came to be written by the Kabirpanthis. Anuragsagar and other sagars formed part of what has been called *Kabirsagar*. The Anuragsagar gives an elaborate description of Kabir's relationship with various supernatural beings including Niranjan who is represented as an evil force. Niranjan is shown as the father of three major Gods of Hindu pantheon, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. On the other hand Kabir is depicted as the incarnation of divine goodness and is shown in perpetual conflict with Niranjan.⁹¹

A late nineteenth century Kabirpanthi work *Kabir Manshur* gives graphic details of Kabir's encounters with various mythological and historical figures such as Prophet Muhammad and Gorakhnath. It presents an elaborate picture of Kabirpanthi cosmology, mythology and incarnation system.⁹² The miracles attributed to Kabir in these sectarian hagiographical works had very little to do with the lower caste perception of Kabir which was fashioned by the seventeenth century followers of Kabir. Miracle mongering became an integral part of the closed eighteenth century sects. The sects did produce their literature and mythology, and had committed following in certain areas and even commanded material resources at their disposal, but, on the whole, they were anti-thesis of the non-Brahmanical religious culture of the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries.

⁹¹ See Anuragnagar, Lucknow, 1989.

⁹² Parmanandadas, *Kabir Manshur*, Bombay, 1992.

Though most of these sects continued to make converts from the lower and the lowest castes, and acquired significant mass base in some regions such as Chhatisgarh in Madhya Pradesh, Eastern U.P. and Western Bihar, yet they were a pale shadow of the *sant*-based religious movement of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Organisationally, many of them resembled monasteries (*mathas*). Some of them even sought patronage from the contemporary states by making compromises with the rulers. From the Kapat Dwar documents cited above it becomes clear that the Dadupanthis in the eighteenth century were prepared to make ideological and social compromises in order to seek patronage from the Jaipur state. Daniel Gold has pointed out that during the eighteenth century many Dadupanthis turned into the warrior *Naga Sadhus*. Many of them were in the service of the Jaipur state.⁹³ There are also instances of Dadupanthis adopting money-landing as a profession.⁹⁴

Each of the eighteenth century *panths* developed into a well-knit religious organization based on the ritual worship of a particular great *sant*. The *sant* now came to be regarded as a divine being and incarnation of God. A clear distinction was made in the hierarchy of the *panth* between monks and lay followers. *Panths* such as Kabirpanth and Dadupanth had little following among the peasants, with the exception of some regions in eastern Uttar Pradesh, western Bihar and north-eastern Madhya Pradesh. It is only in the

⁹³ Daniel Gold, "The Dadu Panth," p. 250.

⁹⁴ Munshi Devi Prasad, *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwad*, Jodhpur, 1890, p. 294.

Chhatisgarh region that Kabirpanth came to acquire a large low-caste following, though Kabirpanthi monasteries did wield limited local following and influence in other regions. Instances of state patronage to Kabirpanth and other low-caste sects do not compare favourably with state support to Vaishnavite sects.

It would, however, be wrong to over-emphasise the limitations of the eighteenth century non-Brahmanical sects. As Lorenzen has pointed out, Kabirpanth continued to articulate the dissenting voice of the non-Brahmanical sections of the society.⁹⁵ Kabirpanth spread in various parts of Northern India during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Kabirpanth and Dadupanth still derive their following from the low and lower castes.

What is, however, important is that with the establishment of British colonialism and introduction of colonial - Orientalist forms of knowledge sects such as Kabirpanth and Dadupanth have undergone further marginalization.

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century there has been a tendency to view these *panths* as part of Hindu society. These sects have also gradually begun to identify themselves as Hindu. But, the non-Brahmanical elements have not altogether disappeared. Throughout the eighteenth century, sects

⁹⁵ See David Lorenzen, "The Kabir Panth and Social Protest", in *The Sants*, pp. 281-303.

such as Kabirpanth and Dadupanth retained their non-Brahmanical character. The Kabirpanthi mythology as evolved in texts such as *Anuragsagar* places Kabir on top of the Brahmanical gods. In the *Anuragsagar*, we also come across Kabirpanthi attempts to develop cosmological concepts which constitute an alternative to the Brahmanical notions of cosmology. Though increasingly marginalized and sectarianized, the *panths* continued to articulate the anti-Brahmanical values of the lower-castes which constituted their social base. Anti-caste and anti-Brahmanical movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have, in one way or the other, have drawn on the values of these sects, though their ideological and political perceptions must be studied in the context of different historical circumstances. In the 1990's as the most virulent and powerful form of Hindu fundamentalism seeks to further omit and marginalize the alternative histories and religious traditions of the lower and lowest castes by merging them into the grand history of Brahmanical Hinduism, the contemporary Dalit movement, Dalit intellectuals and other radical scholars have emphatically begun to question and contest the elitist assumptions of much of the existing historiography which is obsessed with the bipolar view of Indian religious history and coopts the low and lower castes into the Hindu community. The memory of the medieval *sants* has not died; it has become part and parcel of the daily struggles carried out by the lowest and depressed castes. It is a different matter that forms of resistance are today different from those that prevailed in the later and late medieval periods.