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Self-affirmation, self-transcendence and the relationality of selves: the social embedment of individualisation in *bhakti*

Bhakti stands out by providing possibilities of religious individualisation not only for a select few, but, in principle, for everyone. The phenomenon of *bhakti* provides avenues and openings, of which women and marginalised people could also avail themselves. At the same time, *bhakti* individualisation is an inherently relational affair.

Bhakti can be characterised as an experience of self-affirmation, '(self-)transcendence' and connectedness, connectedness at one and the same time with the Ultimate Divine and with other humans. In a nutshell, and running the danger of over-generalisation, *bhakti* can be understood as representing a devotional as well as participatory approach to the Divine (Pechilis 2012[1]). Its individualising potential lies in both the recognition of one's individual particularity and dignity and the possibility of finding one's own way of self-expression. Particularly characteristic for *bhakti* is the emphasis laid on the relational aspects of human experience, manifested in (imageries of) continual interactions with the Divine, or the Divine's representative, and with other *bhakta*s (i.e. 'devotees'). To the extent that these inner social dynamics open up alternative experiential spaces, the articulations of *bhakta*s from among the socially excluded or disadvantaged provide a special window on these dynamics and will help better understand the dialectics of social (non-)recognition.

Bhakti marks an extremely broad field, with regard to its social, historical and geographical as well as experiential and spiritual scope. Talking of *bhakti* relates to a multifarious ensemble of attitudes, practices, experiences and articulations, the emphases differing from case to case. 'Bhakti' does not represent 'a' religion, or 'a' denomination, but stands for traditions and structures of modalities of practice and articulation as found within various, not always clearly demarcated (and demarcable) religious contexts known under the labels of 'Hinduism' and 'Sikhism', but also 'Buddhism' and 'Jainism', and arguably similarly

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1 See also below.

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within various Sufi contexts.[2] One can characterise *bhakti* as one strand, or path – *mārga* – beside, and interacting with, other spiritual and ritual strands and paths, to which *bhakti* relates and with which *bhakti* practitioners interact (Fuchs 2018). *Bhakti* has a reported existence of around two thousand years.[3] The other strands include those that put ritual into the centre (*karma*), as also the path of knowledge (*jñāna*), the path of world-renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*-hood, *vairāgya*), and the tantric path of normative reversal, especially in the *nāth* form – aside from the large field of folk and tribal religiosities in India. Various schools of *bhakti* fostered (sometimes close) linkages with specific philosophical schools.[4] At the same time, strings of *bhakti* also stand, or stood, in close exchange with phenomenologically comparable experiential modes of different heritage, especially Nath and, as indicated, Sufi (*Ṣūfī*) practices.

The article, taking overall a comparative perspective, will try to do justice to the major forms of *bhakti*. It addresses the (sociological) question of institutionalisation of *bhakti* modes of individualisation in reference to *bhakti's* inner social dynamics. It reads these as expressions of alternative *Weltbeziehungen*, i.e. relationships with, in and to the world. We can understand these relationships and the inner dynamics of *bhakti* only when we look closely into individual cases.[5] On the other hand, it is of equal relevance to get a clear understanding of *bhakti* as a phenomenon, or better, a family of phenomena, at large and as one key to the historical dynamics of the evolving Indian civilisation.

What I discuss is what I consider the phenomenological core of *bhakti*. Obviously, as indicated, *bhakti* phenomena cannot in every case be strictly demarcated from other religious forms and strands. But they can be pinned down or earmarked. This then also allows identifying individual or private *bhakti* practices even while these presuppose inter-subjective communal practices.

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2 Regarding Jainism, see John Cort 2002. A particularly interesting case of, at the same time affirmative and critical, Jain engagement with *bhakti* is that of Banarsidas (1586–1643) discussed in this publication, Part 3, by Rahul Parson. Hans Harder (2011) points to the *bhakti* elements in texts recited by Maijbhandari Sufis in the Chittagong region of Bangla Desh. Anne Murphy (this publication, Section 1.2) describes religious spaces in the case of Punjab shared by Sufi and Nath Yogi as well as *bhakti* ideas, practices and traditions.
3 Some scholars push the first appearances of *bhakti* ideas and practices even further back in time, pointing out traces in the *Upaniṣads (Kaṭha and Śvetāśvatara)* or, still earlier, in the Yajurveda (Prentiss 1999, 18; Pechilis 2011).
4 These involve *Viśiṣṭādvaita*, *Bhedābheda* and *Dvaitādvaita* in the case of *Vaiṣṇavite* forms of *bhakti*, and arguments with, and adaptations of, *Advaita Vedānta* in the case of *Śaivite* forms (including Shaiva Siddhanta).
5 Cf. especially Fuchs (ed.) forthcoming (a).

And a last preliminary remark: *Bhakti* is not just a phenomenon of the past. The sources of *bhakti* have not dried up. New *bhakti* sects kept emerging well into the 19th and 20th centuries.[6] In our days, *bhakti* also provides a core ingredient to many of the contemporary global or cosmopolitan 'Guru' movements, providing a source of egalitarian and even ecumenical impulses (Lucia 2014; cf. Fuchs forthcoming (b)).

1 Prefix: recognising *bhakti*: a history of scholarly interpretations

The difficulties in categorising *bhakti* are reflected in the history of its study and reception. Outside India, but also in certain circles within India, *bhakti* was long regarded as non-classical. Most of *bhakti* literature – predominantly poems and songs – was composed in the so-called 'vernaculars', i.e. the (historically) actually spoken languages, and only partially in the language of prestige, higher knowledge and ritual – in short the language of refinement or 'high culture', i.e. Sanskrit. Moreover, a comparatively large number of *bhakti* poets hailed from non-elite backgrounds, and thus were not deemed 'knowledgeable', and they addressed the wider 'non-educated' public. The poem-songs were and are frequently performed in the company of people from various walks of life, including lower castes as well as women.

During the 19th into the 20th century prominent western scholars showed a disregard, if not strong disdain, of *bhakti* and expressed this with strong words. Max Weber's (1978 [1921]) statements about *bhakti* had a highly pejorative overtone. He specifically excluded from this judgement only the *Bhagavadgītā*, which for him represented the position of intellectuals. This disdain was so strong in his case that it superseded Weber's own contrary insights into the emancipatory moments and universalistic potential of *bhakti*. Louis Dumont (1980 [1960]) too saw *bhakti* as an incongruous element in the context of his so well-structured concept of the Indian value system and normative order – an ideal type of hierarchy –, and this exactly because *bhakti* allows for salvation for everybody and *from within*

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6 Including, as a more orthodox sect, ISKCON, popularly known as 'Hare Krishna movement', founded in 1966 in New York. Other more recent and prominent collective forms of *bhakti* comprise Mahimā (Alekh) Dharma, founded in the 1860s, and the teachings of its best-known preceptor Bhima Bhoi (c. 1850–1895), and the Rādhāsoāmī Satsaṅg, also founded in the 1860s, with its two major branches.

social life.[7] On the other hand, in the later part of the 19th century many Christian, especially Protestant missionaries started making a volte-face (Oddie 2006), and began to see *bhakti* in a new light, as a step towards monotheism. They highlighted the notion of divine grace, which they considered to be comparable to grace in Christian reformation contexts. The missionaries of course did so in an attempt of tapping Hinduism for a Christian conversion project. This was accompanied by the speculations of some Indologists who too saw parallels between certain, particularly *Vaiṣṇava* and *Sikh*, forms of *bhakti* and Christianity. Starting with George Grierson (1851–1941), who spoke of the 'Bhagavata reformation of the Middle Ages', and the establishment of the 'Sikhism as reformation' trope in the 19th century, this extended to the point of identifying Krishna with Christ in the case of Albrecht Weber and others, including claims of a Christian origin of Krishna and even of the notion of divine grace (Max Weber 1978, 22f; Dalmia 1997, 391f.).[8]

In India at the same time, *bhakti* poetry received a new kind of attention in the context of projects of self-ascertainment – in German: *Selbstvergewisserung* – and self-assertion vis-à-vis colonialism. Still vivid traditions, many regional variants of *bhakti* received fresh validation in the context of 19th/20th century proto-national regional (linguistic) and trans-regional movements of cultural affirmation. Mahadeo Govind Ranade (1842–1901) drew parallels between *bhakti* 'reforms' and the Protestant Reformation in Europe (Hawley 2015, 29). Bharatendu Harishchandra of Benares (1850–1885) aimed beyond the regional context and posited *Vaiṣṇava bhakti* as 'the original and all pervasive religious mode of the country', India's true and eternal, or *sanātana dharma* (Dalmia 1997, 374, 390). The modern Indian revaluation of *bhakti* in the 1930s went so far as to make *bhakti* a cornerstone of a full-fledged nationalist agenda, in the shape of the veneration of the home country – *deś bhakti*. Devotion to the nation was regarded as the endpoint of *bhakti's* evolution and fulfilment of its mission. According to this narrative, *bhakti* was seen as the completion of a movement that, starting with the Āḷvārs (or Āzhvārs; Vaiṣṇavites) and Nāyanārs (Śaivites) in the Southeast of India, in Tamil Nadu, in the 5th century CE, progressed northwards via Karnataka and Maharashtra in the West of the subcontinent, and, while branching off into Andhra and Gujarat, finally (in the 15th to 17th centuries) reached the

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7 For a critique of Weber's and Dumont's treatments of *bhakti* see Fuchs 1988, 2016, 2017b and 2018. The English translation of Weber's study on Indian society and religions (Weber 1958) is unfortunately highly unreliable.

8 Grierson termed *Vaiṣṇava bhakti* 'the greatest religious revolution that India has ever seen' (Grierson 1910, quoted in Hawley 2015, 34; also Dalmia 1997, 401ff.; specifically critical Krishna Sharma 1987). Regarding the establishment of the 'Sikhism as reformation' trope see Ballantyne 2006, ch. 2 and p. 165.

North, the Hindi- (and earlier Hindavi/Braj-)speaking area regarded as the hub of modern India (Hazariprasad Dvivedi), together with the Punjab, Kashmir, the Northeast, Bengal and Assam (Hawley 2015, ch. 1 and 2).[9] In its wake scholars started re-discovering the emancipatory, egalitarian and even rebellious dimensions of certain strands of *bhakti*, especially, but not only, from the side of women and low-caste poets. Talk was of *bhakti* as movement(s) of protest, representing subaltern voices and expressing sometimes radical social critique (Ramanujan 1973; Omvedt 2003; 2008; 2012; Zelliot, Mokashi-Punekar (eds.) 2005; Bhagavan, Feldhaus (eds.) 2008; and others). In opposition to this, some leading Marxist historians, like D. D. Kosambi (1962, 31f.), R. S. Sharma (1974) and Ranajit Guha (1983, 18; 1989, 257ff.), considered *bhakti* a social ideology of feudalism, signifying passivity and subordination.[10]

What thus seemed dominant for a long time was the attempt to avail oneself of *bhakti* for various external, including ideological and political, purposes, driven by agendas that themselves did not necessarily do full justice to the specific milieus and the ambience of *bhakti*. Or, alternatively, as was the case with Weber and Dumont, to discredit *bhakti* since it did not fit into agendas of comparison of civilisations and world-religions, and thus keep Indian religions, and India more generally, in a pre-configured niche of stalled development and failed rationalisation. Interestingly however, there is one earlier narrative, a kind of second-order self-objectification of *bhakti*, which seems to support some of these constructions. A 17th century Sanskrit text, the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*, provides an allegorical narrative of *bhakti* and its voyage across the Indian subcontinent. Depicted as a goddess, born in the South, traveling through the length and breadth of India, Bhakti finally reached the Yamuna and Vrindavan as an old woman and in a state of exhaustion, but there, at the centre of Krishna *bhakti*, she felt revived and turned into a young woman again.[11] This parable of *bhakti* furthermore includes a reference to Jñāna and Vairāgya, the two other religious paths of knowledge and renunciation, which are depicted as Bhakti's sons, who travelled with her and became even weaker than Bhakti herself, and it was *she* who had to nurse them back to life. Knowledge and renunciation are being made into dependents of *bhakti*! We thus find a clear sense of the significance of *bhakti*

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9 The first vigorous critique of the idea of a monolithic *bhakti* movement came from Krishna Sharma (1987).

10 For a critique of the Marxist historians see K. Sharma 1987, 29ff. However, Kosambi (1962, 33f.), immediately after calling *bhakti* 'the basic need in feudal ideology', underlines the critique of casteism, starting in the 12th and 13th centuries respectively, by both the *Mahānubhāva* and the *Vārkarī bhakti* movements.

11 See the summary of this narrative in Hawley 2015, 62ff.

and a clear awareness of the sub-continental linkages and movements back in the 17th century, however without attending to any nationalist or socialist or other externally driven agenda. At the time of its composition the Māhātmya was rather meant to sing the greatness of the *Bhagavata Purāṇa*, the most revered Vaiṣṇava text, and thus of Krishna and his *bhakti*. John Hawley speculates that this might have been connected with an attempt at reasserting Brahmin control over *Bhagavata Purāṇa* performances that had proliferated in northern India since the 16th century.[12]

What then 'is' *bhakti*? One aspect that the socio-analytical attempts at framing *bhakti* from the outside share is that they tend to point to *the normative and attitudinal dimensions* of *bhakti*, and in this sense they contain kernels of truth. For me though this confirms that *bhakti* requires a different approach, an approach that explores the *bhakti* phenomena from within their own frames of reference, that focuses on the articulations of *bhakti*, on the life-worlds of *bhakta*s, and on the forces driving its practitioners.

In recent years, starting slowly in the 1980s and 1990s, scholars in the fields of Religious Study, History and Anthropology have begun exploring *bhakti* afresh, trying out new approaches. Many of these new approaches have been informed by a focus on social praxis and cultural practices, have pursued interpretive strategies that shed the limitations of old-style philology, and focus on the positionalities of social actors and on modes of performance. Moreover, many place themselves in the context of a kind of critical theory, taken in a wide sense of the term. Taken together, I think one could see this as a kind of anthropological and phenomenological turn of *bhakti* studies.

Perhaps it was no coincidence that this process of re-focusing occurred at a point in time at which the approach to the study of religion was put under scrutiny more generally. In my view this includes as major aspects: challenging the dichotomy of religion and secularisation; turning away from a textualist understanding of religion and from the search for a dogmatic core; and replacing this with a focus on lived religion and actual religious practices. It further involves extreme care regarding the applicability of the very concept of religion, as a comparative and thus overarching term, especially with respect to its applicability to non-Abrahamic forms; a preference for terms more open, but also more vague, like religiosity, even spirituality; critique also of the notion of religions as collective containers; and the exploration of widely neglected historical processes of religious individualisation.

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12 Cf. John Hawley (2015, 68–74). In addition, he deliberates about the cross-subcontinental linkages among Brahmin *Vaiṣṇava bhakta*s.

Bhakti, I would add from my side, actually strongly resonates with certain modes of sociological thinking that are afloat today: namely the primacy of relationality, intersubjectivity and social interaction; mirroring oneself in the other; the ability to anticipate the actions of the other, which happens reciprocally and thus constitutes sociality; situationally grounded reflexivity; the inclusion of patiency and emotion in the concept of social action; and one could even include a normative dimension, as in the case of John Dewey and Bhimrao Ambedkar, specifically the centrality of free and open communication connected with mobility and based on respect (G. H. Mead 1934; Dewey 1987; 2002; Ambedkar 1989; cf. Joas 1996, esp. ch. 3.3; Pettenkofer 2010, ch. 7; 2017; Fuchs 2019). Talking of *bhakti* resonating with sociological thought is not meant to put *bhakti* into a box and classify it again from an outside position. On the contrary, what I have in mind is a concept of the social that explores the dynamics of situations and constellations from within these settings, with the perspectives and practices of the actors involved in view. What makes *bhakti* so interesting is that it is self-generating, self-propelling and self-organised. At the same time, it is *bhakti* that helps develop new sociological concepts.

2 Introduction: a reconstructive phenomenology of individualisation in *bhakti* and its institutionalisation (an overview)

Bhakti, as found across Indian regions and languages, denotes before all else an attitude of participatory devotion. This is included in the very root of the word 'bhakti' – the Sanskrit *bhaj*, 'to share, partake, participate, belong to' – and it is being continuously repeated in all writings on *bhakti* (where some, largely the older ones, emphasise devotion, and others, often more recent ones, participation (in God)).[13] Immediately foregrounded by this meaning is the relational attitude and the aspect of praxis. The emphasis is on the direct, and actively sought relationship to, and desired potential or actual experience of, the Divine or the Ultimate Reality, on the practices involved, and on the interactions with fellow *bhakta*s and what one could call participatory congregations.

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13 Recently it was Karen Pechilis especially (Prentiss 1999; Pechilis 2011; 2012) who put strong emphasis on the participatory dimension.

Bhakti, obviously, concerns liberation or salvation: liberation or salvation from the world as given or from the circumstances in which one finds oneself. More particularly, and this is specifically important in the Indian context, *bhakti* stands for the universal 'right' to, and potentiality for, salvation. Alongside this in certain cases, however, *bhakti* also stands for the wish to radically reconfigure the world. *Bhakti* is practiced while being based within the social world, in clear difference to those who seek to renounce society.[14] Those pursuing a *bhakti* line of action, the *bhakta*s, attempt to build a relationship to God or to the Divine, or try to experience (the presence of) the Divine. How they do this can oscillate between two forms, by aiming for union with God or by trying to experience the Divine within oneself. This involves activity from both sides, activity of the *bhakta*s as well as the imagined activity of the Divine, or else the preparedness of *bhakta*s for the experience of the Divine, and it is embedded in a social context shared with others who all share the desire for a participatory relationship with the Divine.

The difficulty and challenge is to provide an overview of *bhakti* without becoming schematic and generalising. It is important that we retain a clear sense of the diversity and malleability and the constantly evolving character of the phenomena assembled under the label 'bhakti', while at the same time keeping the ability to draw conclusions of general meaning and with broad relevance.

2.1 Personages of exemplary *bhaktas*

Of central significance are the many figures of exemplary *bhakta*s – be they poet-saints, group leaders, or *gurus*. These give inspiration, create imaginary worlds, suggest a way, represent the Divine to the followers, offer specific interpretations or teachings, and have often been inventors of new practices and new conceptualisations. Devotees want others to learn from them and follow their examples, and in this sense *bhakti* stands for a 'proselytising' trend in Hinduism's history. Still, the emphasis throughout is on each individual's own efforts. The spiritual leaders, like the other *bhakta*s, can only assist or give (soteriological and moral) advice. This may include testing the sincerity of worshippers, as God him- or herself might also do. A few more outspoken poet-saints include addressing and demurring the oppressive living conditions of the poorer sections of people. In some more rigidly organised *sampradāya*s (roughly, but somewhat misleadingly translatable as 'sects') lead figures may act as gatekeepers (to that particular

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14 Cf. Monika Thiel-Horstmann (1989) for a slightly different emphasis.

brand of *bhakti*). The leaders of such *sampradāya*s simultaneously introduce stricter rules and try to control the (moral) conduct of their followers, from whom they may at the same time expect certain contributions and duties. It is the connection with these lead figures, poet-saints and *gurus*, incidentally, that Weber reviled in particular: He denigrated their veneration as 'anthropolatry', as worship of humans (Weber 1978, 351, 359, 369, comp. 159, 187; 1958, 319, 325, 335, comp. 156, 179).

We must however distinguish between different forms and aspects of *guru*-ship: To start with, there is the *guru* as individual spiritual guide or person of knowledge, with whom one interacts directly, face-to-face. Then there is the *guru* as part of a *paramparā*, i.e. as one in a row or series of *gurus* succeeding each other as teachers and disciples, following on and representing the original *guru* or the *satguru*. A *satguru* represents the highest authority in this world. In some cases this may verge on considering the *satguru* as the manifestation of the Supreme Being in human form.[15] But, phenomenologically speaking, there is another, and most intriguing, dimension of *guru*-ship, the *guru* as a name.

It is this last manifestation of *guru*-ship that warrants special attention.[16] This concerns especially those lead figures whom we call poet-saints, and refers to the time after their death. On the one hand, it is a process of memorialisation that keeps them alive. In a way, it is the community in this case that participates in conceiving the individual personality of the lead figure. The community, which actually exists only when people congregate, takes the name and the writings of a poet-saint, i.e. the poems and songs connected to his or her name, as reference and shared identity. What this usually means is that the singers of such a 'community' keep on composing poems not just in the style and genre used by the *guru*, but also under the name of the originating figure – a special form of pseudonymous writing. The *guru* lives on in and as memory, communally redacted (Sangari forthcoming). This form of institutionalised continuity is found in particular in the *sant*[17] traditions in the North and, partly, Maharashtra, but also in the cases

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15 Cases would include Vallabhacharya (1479–1531), Swaminarayan (1781–1830), but in the eyes of many also for example Kabir (c. 1440–1518), and many others.

16 See especially Sangari forthcoming.

17 As a classic on the *sant*s see Schomer and McLeod (eds., 1987), including Charlotte Vaudeville's articles. 'Derived from Sanskrit *sat* ("truth", "reality")' the root meaning of the term *sant* is '"one who knows the truth" or "one who has experienced Ultimate Reality"' (Schomer 1987, 2). By extension the term can refer to those who seriously seek enlightenment. The designation *sant* has been given to the poet-saints of two distinct *bhakti* traditions, the non-sectarian *Vaiṣṇava* poet-saints of Maharashtra of the 13th to 18th century, devotees of the god Vitthala or Vithoba, and the North Indian poet-saints from the 15th century onwards representing a largely *nirguṇa* conception of the Supreme Being, i.e. the Divine without qualities. Regarding *nirguṇa* see also below.

of Mirabai, the most famous Northern Indian female poet-saint (c. 1498–1546), and Surdas (c. 1478/1483–1561/1584), both *bhaktas* of Krishna, as well as others.[18]

2.2 Articulations of *bhakti*

At its core, *bhakti* is communication: symbolic, but before all else practical, communication. The prime mode of articulation of *bhakti* is oral – addressing other *bhakta*s, or all contemporaries around, and addressing God, and even 'one's own heart' (Cutler 1987, 25). Vocal expression, however, cannot be separated from bodily and performative expressions, especially music and dance, communally shared (Novetzke 2008, ch. 2; Pechilis 2012, ch. 5). The significance of performative modes, however, differs widely. Recitation, narration, explanation, singing, dance, dramatisation, procession, worship, ritual and the role of visual elements, at people's residential places or at important religious centres (like temples and *gurudwārā*s), are combined in different ways in different *bhakti* traditions. To this should be added the role of figurative and other physical representations, as well as objectifications of memories of the past, in form of *mūrtis* (images or statues in *saguṇa bhakti*; see below) and sacred sites (sometimes extended sacred landscapes), or material symbols of *gurus*, as well as other material objects and practices (Murphy 2012, 30 et passim, especially with respect to the Sikh tradition). In their regular transactions, especially the northern *sant* traditions tend to focus on textual expression and chanting.

The common modes of verbal expression, across all forms of *bhakti*, are poems and songs, especially poems sung and performed. While states of suffering (from God's absence) and longing (for the experience of the Divine/Ultimate) can be very individualised, it is the *sharing* of feelings, expectations and experiences with others – 'publicly', as Christian Novetzke calls it (Novetzke 2008) – in the form of *satsaṅg*s ('gathering together for the truth'), and *kīrtan*s (a kind of call-and-response style performance, but with wide regional variations), that stands out. Many of these modes of expression are still practised today.

One finds a wide range of regional poetic genres, some invented just for *bhakti* purposes.[19] The languages employed are the local or regional languages

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18 For Mirabai and Kabir, see especially Sangari 1990 and Hawley 2005. Hawley also includes Surdas.

19 These include *abhaṅg* and *ovī* (both in Marathi), *vacana* (in Kannada), *pada/śabda*, *sākhī/dohā* (in Hindi), *kīrtan* (from Sanskrit; a call-and-response style song, ubiquitously used, but regionally varying), *bhārūd* (in Marathi; allegorical drama-poems) etc.

spoken at the time of composition by 'ordinary' people. And these are still more or less understood today. Sanskrit is used in specific cases and in second-order reflections and elaborations. *Bhakti* poems and songs call on God, as they address people, both other *bhakta*s as well as those not (yet) committed; but the poems are not didactic. They employ a wide diversity of modalities – they often express emotions, especially emotions of longing and love for God, or they can display arguments (even bitter complaint) with God, or with other *bhakta*s.[20] The poems and songs play with numerous images and metaphors, and *saguṇa* texts (see below) especially allude to Puranic Hindu mythologies. They express the availability of these feelings and experiences for everyone. Especially the texts of the *sant* poets often assert humanitarian values and ideas regarding human dignity, sometimes attacking core social as well as religious norms. They pronounce critique of the established 'external' religion, particularly of empty ritualism, reliance on scripture, the conceit of religious functionaries, and, directly or indirectly, of exclusionary and hierarchical attitudes and socio-ritualistic ostracism (exemplary: Kabir, c. 1440–1518, whose criticism is directed both at Brahmanical religion and institutionalised Islam).

Others, especially women *bhakta*s, express their love of God by rejecting and infringing the social norms that bind them, reversing common rules of modesty (e.g. Mahadeviyakka, 12th century; Lalla Ded, 14th century). Throughout there are references to other religious practices and other religious strands, practices and traditions expressing other religious attitudes which *bhakta*s oppose. But poems might also seize on concepts and metaphors extracted from other strands, including ritual practices, *tantra* (Naths), or traditions of renunciation. And they pick up aesthetic principles and philosophical concepts generally available. Many poems are highly inventive, and some deliberately turn the ordinary world upside-down, employing particularly enigmatic language and taking imaginary licence, as in the case of Kabir's *ulaṭbāṃsī* language (Hess, Singh 1983), or in the case of Karaikkal Ammaiyar, a devotee of Shiva (c. 550 CE), who at her own behest transformed from a beautiful woman into a demoness, identified with the ghouls inhabiting the cremation grounds, and whose poems consciously make use of tantric imageries (Chakravarty 1989; for both cf. Fuchs 2017a).

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20 Concerning the love for God, *bhakti* traditions envisioned love variously and in analogy to sentiments in relationships between humans, in the form of servant-master, parental, friendship or erotic relationships, shifting between more peaceful or more ecstatic understandings of the relationship. Cf. e.g. Malinar 2015, 404f.

Examples of *bhakti*, and stories of exemplary *bhakta*s, have been collated in various (regional) collections of biographies or hagiographies[21] (like the *Periya Purāṇam*, the 12th century account of the lives of the 63 Nāyanārs; Anantadas' late 16th century hagiographies of (*sant*) *bhakta*s; and Nabhadas' early 17th century *Bhaktamāla* with Priyadas' 1712 commentary, the *Bhaktirasabodhinī*), or in the form of narrations of major episodes in a (*sat-*)*guru's* life as well as those of his followers (like the 13th century *Līḷācaritra* of the Mahanubhavas, or the 17th century *Chaurāsi Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā* of the Vallabhacharyas). In addition there are literary-metaphysical and mythological-legendary texts extolling *bhakti*, some of which have generated a chain of commentary literature, as well as philosophical-metaphysical treatises. The most famous text of the first category is the *Bhagavata Purāṇa* (8th–10th century), especially its tenth book on Krishna and his *līlā*, his (erotic) play with his followers; the most famous of the second category is the *Bhagavadgītā* (c. 2nd century BCE). Both were composed in Sanskrit, but especially the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* has many versions in other languages. The *Gītā* was first made accessible for non-elite and non-Sanskrit speakers through Jnandev's late 13th century pioneering and highly praised Marathi commentary known as *Jñāneśvarī* (Novetzke forthcoming). The *Gītā* provides the first systematic exposition of *bhakti*; however the *Gītā* is not exhausted by its *bhakti* elements. It seems noteworthy though that the *Gītā* itself is constructed as conversation: conversation between God and *bhakta*, Krishna and Arjuna.

2.3 Conceptualisations of the divine and of human-divine relationships

How *bhakta*s conceive of, and address, the Divine (or the Ultimate Reality) differs, but the different modalities fall within a certain spectrum of direct accessibility and experience. Important throughout is to take into account the difference between experience, and more generally 'religious sensibility' (Vaudeville 1987a, 38), and the doctrinal or metaphysical level. It is standard practice to distinguish between *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* conceptions of the Divine: the conception of the Supreme Being with or without qualities. Seemingly excluding each other, they can be taken as standing for two levels of enlightenment when seen from a doctrinal angle. Looked at from the angle of experiential sensibilities, and taking the ways dimensions of *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* find expression in poems and songs, they can appear as co-present in the renderings given by even authorial figures,

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21 See Pechilis' critique of this term in Pechilis forthcoming.

each modal change exhibiting a shift in expressing the experience of the Divine. Or they can be seen as a way to express the tension as well as shift between presence (actuality) and absence (beyond-ness) of the Divine (Murphy 2012, 29).[22] In a *saguṇa* perspective one conceives of God analogously to how one conceives of another person, and this means, however close one gets to him or her, there always remains a final difference (*viraha*), which affirms God's beyond-ness. The Divine as presented in songs and poems with a penchant for *saguṇa* is predominantly referenced as a form of Shiva or as a Vaiṣṇavite deity, i.e. as a form of Krishna or Ram. In addition, there is *bhakti* of Devi or Kali or other manifestations of the female principle (McDaniel 2004).

In *nirguṇa bhakti* the Divine is conceived as formless, non-personal, ineffable, all-pervading reality, as something 'which can only be spoken of in negative terms' (Vaudeville 1987a, 26). Still, and this aligns *nirguṇa* with *saguṇa bhakti*, the goal is union with, rather than merging into the formless God (ibid., 27). *Viraha* taken from this angle refers to the unfulfilled desire to experience the Divine, or to the utter momentariness of such experience. Whereas *saguṇa* practices represent God by both 'individual' name and form (*nāma-rūpa*), from the angle of *nirguṇa* the Divine is addressed in abstract terms, by the non-specific word *nāma* ('name'), by the generic *Rāma*, or some other appellations. Uttering the generic name, or concentrating on the name, however, is seen as of utmost importance in *nirguṇa* contexts. Both strands 'hold the conviction that God is infinitely merciful and that he will, whenever he chooses, remove the veil of darkness [...] and grant the bliss of eternal union with himself' (ibid., 38).[23]

It is thus that many poems and songs relate to experiences – *anubhava* and *anubhāva* ('the' experience[24]) –, trying to put into words what cannot be caught in words.

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22 Sikh *gurus* ultimately undermine the distinction between the two positions or strands (Anne Murphy, personal communication). Other cases in which the distinction is not consistently working concern the North-Indian poet-saints Kabir (fragments of *saguṇa* devotion in Kabir's *nirguṇa* conceptualisation of God), Mirabai (fragments of a *nirguṇa* idea of God in Mirabai's basically *saguṇa* devotion; for both see Sangari 1990, 1472, 1543f.) and even Surdas (Hawley 2005, 14f., 73, 305–17), as well as the historically earlier Western Indian poet-saint Namdev (ibid., 75). Few scholars would today hold to the quite rigid distinction between the two modalities for which a scholar like K. Sharma (1987) stands.
23 In Vaudeville's view the opposition between *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* is one largely on the 'doctrinal or metaphysical plane, but on that plane only'. She claims that '[i]n their religious sensibility as well as in their ethical views Sants [who stand for a *nirguṇa* approach] and Vaiṣṇavas [who stand for *saguṇa*] remain very close to each other' (Vaudeville 1987a, 39).
24 Ramanujan 1973, 13. – Regarding *anubhava* among Jains, compare Rahul Parson in this publication, in particular regarding the views of Banarasidas (1586–1643) and his 'occasionally competitive' relationship with *bhakti*.

But practising participatory devotion is also intended to trigger new experiences. Its performance is itself experiential. Moreover, the participatory dimension extends to the other *bhakta*s with whom one shares 'spiritual' interests or a community built around these shared interests. At the same time, and against this very background, with this communality as resource, *bhakti* can also be practised individually.

2.4 Institutionalisations of *bhakti*

*Bhakta*s create their own congregational forms, forms of 'voluntary affiliation' (Sangari forthcoming). This needs special mention with respect to doubts, voiced by scholars of comparative religion, that Indic religions ever managed to develop something like community life and forms of brotherliness among lay followers.[25] While congregational assemblies can become formally institutionalised, it seems especially pertinent that many congregational gatherings remain informal and self-organised. These congregations may supersede and destabilise, but importantly, do not cancel out the 'primal' communities people socially belong or are assigned to; these in particular include caste. Again, one should not generalise. Congregational forms range from simply addressing others and addressing God through communal singing of *bhajan*s in non-formal assemblages, to various forms of *satsaṅg*s, to participation at performances, and to pilgrimages – the most famous being the annual group pilgrimages of the *Vārkarī*s in Maharashatra, which involve joint travel, ideally by walking, over an extended stretch of time, inclusive of regular collective singing, and often joint evening meals. Some *sant bhakta*s, like Kabir, on the other hand actively opposed pilgrimage. There also are temple festivals, especially prominent in the South, combining *bhakti* with Brahmanical ritualism (Pechilis 2012). More standardly, group fellowships formed around a (*sat-*)*guru* often led to the emergence of *sampradāya*s, denominations or sects, in various *bhakti* branches, the *Vārkarī*s being only one. Others include the Shrivaishnavas, *Gauḍīya sampradāya*s, Vallabhacharyas or Pushtimargis, Swaminarayanis, Lingayats, Shaiva Siddhanta *sampradāya*s, Kabirpanthis, Raidasis, Ad Dharmis, Satnamis, and Sikhism, as well as many smaller ones. Regarding all these forms, one has to keep in mind the extremely diverse social backgrounds of *bhakta*s, as well as the variations in habitus – all this in the context of very different regional histories.

And, finally, there is the aspect of *sevā* ('service', *Dienst*): individual *sevā* to the Lord and, secondarily, *sevā* to other humans, other *bhakta*s or, in some *sampradāya*s, most prominently in Sikhism, to people in general. *Sevā* means

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25 According to Max Weber (1978, 63), 'the Hinduistic religion as such' does not know 'congregations'.

'voluntary manual labor in service of the community [...] [and] a deed of love and selfless service for fellow human beings'.[26] *Sevā*, then, by this understanding, is fundamental for the obliteration of ego-centredness (in the Sikh context referred to by the term *haumai*) (Murphy forthcoming).

Continuity in *bhakti*, i.e. carrying and passing on practices and conceptualis-ations, may then happen in different ways.[27] It can mean institutional continuity of a sect or *sampradāya* involving admission rituals (*dīkṣā*). It can mean continu-ity of a trans-regionally important religious centre (Braj-Mathura-Vrindavan) or a site of pilgrimage (Pandharpur). Institutional continuity can also relate to the can-onisation of a series or 'family' of poets, as in the case of the Āḷvārs and Nāyanārs in Tamil Nadu, or regarding the list of notable Lingayats in Karnataka, the *vārkarī sant*s in Maharashtra, or the genealogy of the ten original Sikh *gurus*. In a different way other poet-saints establish regional interlinkages by cross-referencing each other's poetry and perspectives (most famously among the North Indian *sant*s, including the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* of the Sikhs). And finally, as we saw, institutional continuity can mean carrying on with a name, and this not just by venerating the name of a particular *guru*, but also and prominently by continuing composing using his or her name as 'signature name',[28] by, more or less, reproducing his or her style of writing, and by continuing a tradition of performing and singing in his or her name.[29] What holds such tradition, a mere body of stories and poems and mnemonic (performative) practices, together is then the respective name (Sangari forthcoming). In these cases, it is the local singers who continue, but also add to, the corpus which in this way is simultaneously changing.

The continuity in composing shows the *availability* of poems and songs for everyone. People may for example cite or sing songs attributed to Kabir on various occasions, like when they are working, in the fields or elsewhere. And this means,

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26 Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *Sikhism: An Introduction* (London/NY: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 86, as quoted by Anne Murphy (forthcoming).

27 What I refer to here is being expressed in German by the word *tradieren* – i.e. *weiterführen*, *weitergeben*. This of course relates to 'tradition', but the emphasis here is on the act and process of carrying and passing on certain practices and thus establishing 'a' line of tradition.

28 Signature name (in Hindi *chāp* – seal, or *bhaṇitā* – speaker) as affirmation of the claim of authorship.

29 One might here make a linkage to Shahzad Bashir's argument in Section 2.2 in this publi-cation, who depicts the poetic selves displayed in Taqi al-Din Awhadi Balyani's *ʿArafāt al-ʿāshiqīn* as both individualistic ('individualistic through emphatic self-assertion') and dividualistic ('dividualistic through the presumption of an identity shared across humanity': the first-person voice indexing universality and projecting intimacy 'while being emphatically impersonal in that it is bound to a genre that does not allow for a free relationship between voice and person').

aside from keeping a communal practice alive and going, that this religious mode also allows for everyone's individual practice of *bhakti* anywhere, anytime.

All of this implies that the oral traditions are usually much broader and at the same time more diverse than what has been put down and passed on in writing. Canonisation of texts happened in some *bhakti* traditions of more closed character, and this in some cases already at a very early stage. Several collections of hagiographies were already mentioned. Some cut across *sampradāya* distinctions or specific spiritual allegiances, like the *Bhaktamāla*. To this one can add anthologies, like the 9th/10th century *Divya Prabandham* collection of songs of the Āḷvārs; the *Tirumuṟai* collection of poems of the Nāyanārs, finalised in the 12th century; the Sikh *Gurū Granth Sāhib* (17th/18th century), and similar ones of other, smaller *sant bhakti* sects, like the *Gurū Anyās* of the Shivnarayanis (18th century), as well as the competing anthologies of Kabir's poems (the *Bījak* of the Kabirpanth, the *Pañcvāṇī* or *Granthāvalī* of the Dadupanth, and the Kabir songs in the *Gurū Granth*), which also include poems written by later adherents of Kabir.

From a comparative angle, what seems impressive is the great variability and versatility of this religious strand that allows for ever new articulations under changing circumstances and for the emergence of new possibilities. Institutionalisation happened in various ways and on various levels – practical, interactional, literary as well as organisational – differing in form and intensity in each case. This includes of course occasional closures and moments or processes of de-individualisation – and *a fortiori* the re-emergence of social exclusion – but no overall closure. Not only did *bhakti* retain the capacity of new inventions of new ways – and this did not even stop with (late) modernity –,[30] *bhakti* also kept on relying on the active involvement of individual *bhaktas*.

3 Intermediate: universal recognition and the limitations of critical alterity (in *bhakti*)

Bhakti represents an opening, spiritually and socially, concerning experiential articulation, and concerning possibilities of participation. Enunciations by the disadvantaged provide a particular window on the dynamics of *bhakti*. What stands out in the textual traditions is the attention accorded to 'lay' people, their strong presence in congregational publics, and actually the space created for

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30 Early modernity had actually seen a new flourishing of *bhakti* in Northern India (Dalmia, Faruqui (eds.) 2014). For examples of more recent, 19th and 20th century *bhakti* 'sects' see above fn. 6.

their articulations. At least some of the *bhakta*s who became renowned are shown turning against religious functionaries who claim control or exclusivity of access to the Divine. This means, *bhakti* does provide for those excluded or marginalised the possibility to express their religiosities in a mainstream (which does not have to mean dominant) idiom, different from local, village, or group-specific cults. This has two implications. It allows for Dalit and low caste enunciations in an idiom shared with others, a *third idiom* that transcends the limitations of conflicting positions or discourses and that, on principle, is not owned by any one side (Fuchs 2001, 266; 2009, 31). *Bhakti* provides spaces, platforms, languages which give individual *bhakta*s from excluded and marginalised backgrounds, as well as women *bhakta*s, wider recognition and lets them appear as included – in performative contexts and gatherings as well as in anthologies, canonical hagiographies or other lists of prominent *bhakta*s. Put differently, the specific experiences and visions of the marginalised as well as of women, suffering from discrimination of different degrees, can thus be translated into a language that allows appealing to others and conveying one's existential issues to the world – the issues and visions thus being universalised (issues and visions lose, to some extent at least, their 'particularistic' character).

On the other hand, this development does not necessarily signify interaction across social divides beyond the realm of spiritual practices, or the translation of a shared perspective on life into a joint social agenda transcending social distinctions. While one consequence, a kind of secondary wave of *bhakti*, thus is the advance of distinct articulations of *bhakti* from among the marginalised and stigmatised (but not of women) in the form of separate socio-religious movements, these represent only disadvantaged sections of society, but continue to employ the universalistic language, the third idiom, provided by *bhakti* (e.g. the Kabir-panth, Satnampanth, Ad Dharm, and other *sampradāya*s; Lorenzen 1987; Dube 1998; Juergensmeyer 1982; cf. Fuchs 1999).

Even though the degree of social recognition in and through *bhakti* remains limited, *bhakti* is a confirmation of the fact that some generalised recognition of human dignity was felt required – and this even more so after the weakening and (forced) demise of Buddhism in mainland India.[31] *Bhakti* thus depicts a propensity towards the universalisation of religious ideas and practices, of possibilities of liberation and salvation. This appears of particular relevance in a context in which caste distinctions, hierarchy and the stigmatisation of sections of people have sedimented and seem deeply ingrained in the dominant social imaginary out of which they are continuously being reaffirmed.

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31 On the demise of Buddhism see the remarks below in this text.

It is this combination of opening and limiting that seems of particular significance, and again and again has had the effect of hampering the unfolding of the possibilities of religious individualisation. It is the social context that infringes on *bhakti's* potentiality, while it remains at the same time a constant stimulus for *bhakti*. This shows in many ways. The movements triggered and led by low caste and 'Untouchable' *sant*s in Northern India, like Ravidas (c. 1450–1520?), Kabir and others, including the Kabirpanth (since 16th or 17th century[32]), the Satnampanth founded by Ghasidas (between 1820 and 1830), or the Ad Dharm movement (since the 1920s), mostly did not find support from among the better-off. Among the *vārkarīs*, the Untouchable saint-poet Chokhamela (between second half of the 13th century and 1338) still has largely Dalit followers only, while the non-Untouchable, but low caste Tukaram (1608–1649), after allegedly having faced rejections during his lifetime, became the most venerated of the Maharashtrian *sant*s. Exceptions are few and have had no larger impact. In the case of the Bavaripanth, whose first poet-saints are considered to have been Muslims, and the eponymous founder a female Sufi (late 16th century), later generation high caste *sants* seem to have continued railing against the Brahmanical ritual order and socio-religious discrimination and thus kept this counter-culture up (Luge forthcoming). In the case of the lists of the much earlier Tamilian Āḷvārs and Nāyanārs, the inclusion of a small number of low caste *bhakta*s, like Nandanar (between 660–842 CE) or Tiruppan-Alvar (perhaps 8th to 9th century), looks like a sign of liberality, carefully orchestrated, and at the same time like an appropriation of the low caste *bhakti* voices. Friedhelm Hardy gives the example of Tiruppan-Alvar a particularly emblematic interpretation: the Untouchable, the prototypical humiliated person, represents in his eyes the exemplary human in need of redemption: '[...] metaphorically the untouchable symbolises the unliberated man's distance from Vishnu in *saṃsāra*[33]: he is "outside" the realm of grace and salvation' (Hardy 1991, 149). This practice of qualified inclusion extended to the cases of women *bhakta*s, like Karaikkal Ammaiyar (c. 550 CE), Antal (10th century), or Mahadeviyakka (12th century); however taming the deviance of these women *bhakta*s was of a different kind. In comparison to the situation of *bhaktas* from 'untouchable' castes, women in comparison, overstepping rules of decency, are permitted a relatively wider scope of infringement of norms.

All this illustrates: *Bhakti* is not a stand-alone phenomenon; it is, in certain ways, 'parasitic'. *Bhakti* interacts with and depends on the existence of other religious strands and other *mārga*s. And this would be the other driving-force behind

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32 Dates given differ; see Linda Hess 2009, 174.
33 Transmigration.

bhakti. The constant renewal, renovation as well as continuation of *bhakti* presupposes other (and usually dominant) modes of religiosity and other religious stances from which *bhakta*s over and again distance themselves and with which they have to find secondary accommodation, again and again.

Bhakti is not self-sufficient. *Bhakti* depends on a religious and social context within and against which it positions itself. It represents modes of individualisation that require an 'other'. It is this more or less critical, nonetheless connected, otherness that is *bhakti's* signature. At the same time, *bhakti* extends the Indian religious imaginary in a direction that is vital, that of a pervasive universality. Extrinsically, *bhakti* means challenging as well as compromising with other strands of religiosity. Intrinsically, *bhakti* stands for the universalisation of liberation and of human dignity, for relationally based selfhood.

4 Evaluation: the *bhakti* sociology of individualisation

Bhakti is inherently and fundamentally, and intentionally, relational. *Bhakti* stands for highly dynamic participatory interactions among *bhakta*s and between *bhakta*s and the Divine. The interactions that define *bhakti* provide a model and framework *of* and *for* what can be considered exemplary social relationships (in the double Geertzian sense of model). Incorporated into the modalities of its functioning and inscribed into the visions and dispositions of *bhakta*s, this relationality allows the realm of *bhakti* to open out to the world that extends beyond the religious in the strict sense of the term. What is more, this micro-social model points towards a macro-social interconnection of Indian religions, a specific civilisational modus characterised by synchronic ruptures as well as specific modalities in which these are being tackled. In very particular ways, *bhakti* brings to life the triangularity of relationships that as such may not appear unique – the relationships between the individual *bhakta*, other *bhakta*s and the Divine – and in doing so encapsulates a particular kind of *Weltbeziehung*, of relationships with the world.[34]

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[34] Regarding the notion of synchronic intra-civilisational ruptures see below subchapter 6 (Final note) and Fuchs (2018, 141): 'The image of synchronic ruptures contends that the respective civilizational complexes and principles coexist in tension and that they interlace at the same time by way of the interactions of the agents and agencies involved.'

4.1 The triangle

The dynamic, interactional triangular participatory relationship between the Divine or God, saint-poet or *guru*, and the congregation of (other) *bhakta*s, is a model that allows for a wide range of instantiations. Norman Cutler (1987) may have been the first to suggest such a model, however based on the semiotics of Roman Jakobson. Emphasising the inter- and transactional dimension of this constellation, several aspects stand out: First of all, all three poles or positions, not just that of the *guru* or poet, not just that of the Divine, but also that of the more ordinary human followers, represent agentive powers[35]; they interact with each other, act on each other, put demands on each other. Therefore, secondly, the constellation, being highly dynamic, allows for ever new arrangements – all three sides continuously interpreting each other, reacting to the others' actions, and interpenetrating each other. Thirdly, built into this interactive triangle is a structural tension between authority and reciprocity: while the humans need the Divine and the *guru*, both God and *guru* also need the human followers (God pining for the presence of the devotees; in some cases the follower is even imagined to exert power over God).[36] But whereas the spiritual context, through the experience of transcendence, provides for ways that this tension is lifted up to a higher unity (*Aufhebung* or sublation in the sense of Hegel), the tension lingers on in the more profane interactive contexts.

4.2 Alternative relations with the world (*Weltbeziehung*)

To spell out more concretely what the abstract model enshrines: *Bhakti* redraws the social landscape, or what has been called the relationship to and with the world – *Weltbeziehung* in German. This was not the first attempt at such redrawing, as Buddhism in particular had shown earlier. *Bhakti* and Buddhism at the core share ideas of universality of the worth and dignity of each human, as well as of intersubjectivity, empathy and care for others. But *bhakti* has shown a longer perseverance, not just because important streams of *bhakti* had been involved in combatting Buddhism (and Jainism), in particular in certain South Indian regions,[37] but also (and not withstanding *bhakti* elements in certain forms

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35 Conceiving of them as just 'audience', as Cutler does, seems too narrow.

36 This applies in particular to *saguṇa* forms of *bhakti*, or forms bordering on *saguṇa*. See e.g. the case of the *bhakti* of Vitthala (Vaudeville 1987b, 224); or the case of the *Gītagovinda* (esp. song X, 8).

37 *Bhakti* representatives seem to have stood at the forefront of these combats; see Champaka-lakshmi 2011, 23f., 64–6, 72f., 438–60.

of Buddhism and Jainism) because *bhakti* remained closely associated with what became regarded as the Brahmanically dominated Hinduistic fold. Buddhism could be, and was, exteriorised; *bhakti* was not. Rather, the oppositional or deviating stances that *bhakti* enabled, being bound to its counterparty, got at one and the same time confirmed and demarcated with the elimination of Buddhism.

We find *Weltbeziehung*, understood as relation *to* the world (an externalist stance), used by Weber in alternation with two other terms, *Welteinstellung* and *Haltung zur Welt*, attitude towards the world. Weber applied the term preferably to the attitudes of collectives, including attitudes he claimed whole civilisations to hold. He was led by the idea of *confrontation* with the world, as if social actors would be occupying an external or outsider position vis-à-vis the world, and as if the world itself would be constant, invariant and passive, independent of one's interactions with(in) the world.[38] The term was recently reintroduced (by Jóhann Arnason 2003, Hartmut Rosa 2016, and others, following Merleau-Ponty 1962; 1968) to relate to the way humans feel situated *in* the world and interact *with* the world, which the human subjects help co-constituting (Fuchs 2016, 225; 2017d). Taking this understanding, one can state that *bhakti* represents a distinct and unorthodox *Weltbeziehung*, or better, stands for a group of alternative *Weltbeziehungen* which share a high degree of family-resemblance (*Familienähnlichkeiten*): world relations of connectedness. In our case, this is not just about relationships towards or with or in the world, but here relationality – or connectedness – actually designates the very focus of this kind of *Weltbeziehung* – connectedness as both experienced *and* desired. The world appears less as a world of hard objects, but as personalised and inter-personal. Looking more closely, this kind of *Weltbeziehung* implies:

(1) The phenomenal world and the transcendent intersect, the transcendent actually becoming part of the phenomenal world. Picking up a term proposed by other authors in other contexts, but giving it a specific meaning, one may speak of 'immanent transcendence', without confining transcendence to immanence. Even when in tension, both dimensions are not necessarily seen as separate spheres, but as co-present, related and continuous.[39] Other than *saṃnyāsin*s, *bhakta*s do not attempt to leave the world.

(2) Including the divine relationship not only implies widening, expanding and surpassing the social into the transcendental, but also means transcend-

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38 See the critical discussion in Fuchs (2017d).

39 For Kabir for example, there exists no opposition between worldly and transcendent, inner and outer, social and spiritual (Agrawal 2009, 36; comp. Hess 2015, 361). The unbroken continuity of worldly and transcendent shows in Kabir's *ghaṭ sādhanā* (spiritual practice in the body) – without *ghaṭ sādhanā* 'social consciousness and criticism are impossible' (ibid., 37 / 362).

ing the social world *as it is*, towards a world with better social conditions. This finds expression in depictions of a utopian society like that of 'Begampura', the city where suffering and sorrow find no place, and where there is no exploitation (Callewaert, Friedlander 1992, 126; Omvedt 2008, 106f. et passim; Hess 2015, 373). At the minimum, this implies better relationships among each other within the respective community of *bhakta*s. The option is not one of escapism, but a change of the quality of relationships in the social world in general – even though this quest is getting blocked more often than not.

(3) Social and religious selves are hard to separate; they belong to the same world. This finds a parallel in the modes of literary presentation and the types of narrative. The poetic articulation refers again and again to the everyday – everyday practices and social placement – and combines this with metaphysical ideas and the search for liberation. 'The ordinary' becomes central, and becomes the space in which (the humanised) God appears and does wonders. The ordinary becomes the site of excess; 'the ordinary becomes excessive and (thus) extraordinary'. There is both 'transgression' of the ordinary, as also its 'reconfirmation' (Vasudha Dalmia forthcoming).

(4) The phenomenal, social world taken in this wide sense is at the same time getting reconceptualised. Kumkum Sangari (1990) has suggested the term 'feminisation' for this. This term might not exhaust what is new, but can serve as a good entry point. What Sangari has in mind is an ideal that in many ways is different from the attitudes that dominate society, attitudes of dominance by force. Femaleness as ideal is meant as a 'mode of *immersion* in the world', and an attitude of 'willed servitude' to God as 'ground for agency', or what she calls '[…] a humble yet powerful subalternity' (Sangari 1990, 1472, 1537f.). She regards this as a form of heightened reciprocity that takes 'desire and subjection, femaleness and moral duty in its stride'. *Bhakti* offers direct salvation, 'the intermediary position' now belonging not to a human agent, like the husband or the Brahmin priest, 'but to the female devotional voice' (ibid., 1473). Femaleness thus understood and generalised becomes 'the characteristic relation of all humans to god. God is the only male, all humans are female' (ibid., 1538), and many male *bhakta*s have consciously adopted this attitude 'in order to gain spiritual advantage'. Implied is the humanisation of social relationships (equal human dignity) as well as a humanisation of God.

(5) This *Weltbeziehung* is thus to be seen as the opposite of a 'flight from the world', *Weltflucht* or even *Weltablehnung* in German. Flight from the world is what Indian religiosity has been made to stand for, with Max Weber as

the strongest proponent of this position within the social sciences.[40] This is being reversed from two angles: (i) Certain forms of *bhakti* at least stand for an expressly positive attitude towards the world *and* to the body.[41] In this, anguish about one's separation from God, the feeling of the ultimate unattainability of the divine – *viraha* – is being combined with an intense love of God and a confirmation of one's worldly existence as a human by God. (ii) At the same time, and this concerns the second angle, *bhakta*s make an effort to connect to other humans. Hierarchy and exclusion are seen as denials of relationality. What has been termed feminisation means the *subversion of the hierarchical* and an articulation of a *desire for relationality*. The lack (or restricted existence) of connectedness to others becomes the trigger for the search of relationality. What *bhakti* thus expresses is the *reality of the potentiality of relationality*: a search for the validation of the basics of humanness.

(6) Finally, the relations and the identities of the actors involved appear *not* to be fixed, not stable: not only is the world of *bhakti* a world of constant interaction and changing contexts, also the identities and names of the (prominent) *bhakta*s are not stabilised, but are ever freshly enacted (Sangari forthcoming[42]). One might also describe *bhakti* as a sequence of changing states of closeness and remoteness vis-à-vis God, as shifting between being with the Divine (and with other *bhakta*s), and occupying a place and role in society. People, and this would include the poet-saints, move in and out of *bhakti* engagements; they shift between the everyday and the specific occasions of *bhakti* congregations and events.

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40 For the *Bhagavadgītā* (between 200 BCE and 100 CE) though, in difference to *bhakti* as practised in later periods, Weber reserves a slightly different form of *Weltbeziehung*, that of 'indifference towards the world'; see Weber 1978, 194; 1958, 189.

41 Friedhelm Hardy, in his work on (Tamil) Krishna *bhakti* and Shrivaishnavism, uses phrases like 'positive attitude to the world', 'this-worldly attitude', 'world-positive (Hardy 1983, 234, 314, 447). Karen Pechilis Prentiss, in her work on Tamil Shaiva Siddhanta, talks of '[b]hakti's positive valuation of action in the world' as 'a constitutive premise of *bhakti's* thesis on embodiment' and, additionally, of 'two competing world views in *bhakti*: the perspective of renunciation and that of affirming life in the world' (Prentiss 1999, 18f.).

42 Kumkum Sangari (forthcoming): 'In the dissident devotional field, subject formation occurs in variant repertoires; it is individuated and depersonalised, affirmative and nonpossessive, relational (not contained within its own skin) and translational, contextual and mobile, oral/musical and textual, linguistic and performative, social and renunciatory, sectarian and multireligious, and everywhere implies a lack of fixture, an absence of full ownership of names and selves as is evident in the circulation, multiple attribution, substitution and reattribution of names, songs and stories.'

5 Conclusion: at the centre – relationality of selves

Bhakti seems an exemplary, fertile platform for religious individualisation. *Bhakti* allows for developing very different articulations of participatory devotion, and for different individual experiences, and is instituted in such a way that new forms are always a possibility. This does not mean that all what sails under *bhakti* would be full-fledged individualisation, nor does this exclude conventionalising these formats or limiting the scope that individualisation can take. Regarding *bhakti* we can distinguish between different grades of individualisation. There is, first, the basic concept of individual devotion or participation in God and the specific types of *Weltbeziehung* connected with this.[43] From this we can distinguish, secondly, the emphatic, sometimes idiosyncratic practices and constellations of *bhakti,* as also the many creative moments of invention of new articulations and paths of *bhakti* over a period of at least 1500 years. We can further distinguish between two prime modes of individualisation: the first, *from within* (*Purāṇic* or other) established *bhakti* traditions, changing the avenue and the access to the Divine for people; the other, individualisation vis-à-vis or *against* established traditions, especially ritual, renunciatory, tantric or other non-devotional religious traditions from which *bhaktas* try to dissociate themselves. In the last case, this is often closely interconnected with opposition towards practices of social exclusion and hierarchisation.

Regarding the specifics of individual *sampradāya*s or cases of *guru* relationships, the individualising moment can, and does, of course shade more or less quickly into one or the other form of routinisation of practices, without necessarily repudiating the individualising sting. At this point one can also encounter secondary forms of individualisation, agency and deviance that attempt to overcome tendencies of routinisation. Characteristic of *bhakti* is the constantly renewed chance of a fresh start and of breaking free of conformity.

The basis of all this, or so I argue, is the core emphasis on and experience of the relationality of one's self. In principle, a relational concept of self is nothing new nor is it confined to *bhakti*. As a general idea it was proposed by pragmatist thinkers like George Herbert Mead (Mead 1934; cf. Joas 1985).[44] *Bhakti* practices and concepts could thus be seen as not just supporting such ideas, but as

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43 Certain forms of *bhakti* can also be read as illustrations of a notion of dividuality, as set out in Part 2 of this publication, that takes individuality/individualisation and dividuality as two sides of the same coin. See in particular the Introduction by Antje Linkenbach and Martin Mulsow.
44 For Psychology see e.g. Andersen and Chen 2002.

forms of social thought existent before the term. *Bhakti* practices and concepts would thus add perspectives to the modern sociological (and psychological) ones. What interests here are the specificities of the *bhakti* forms of relationality. This requires that the question of self-hood be taken as an open one, difficult to conceptualise transculturally, but even intra-culturally, and waiting for further discussion in the future.[45] Important is, concerning Indic traditions, that we take the discussions out of the confines of philological debates about terminologies. The fixation on *ātman* (the embodied, immortal self), or *jīva* (immortal essence), together with *brahman* (absolute being), and the debates about *ahaṃkāra* (ego-consciousness), and the many other connected philosophical terms found in Indian textual traditions[46] had long obliterated any serious engagement with expressions of selfhood as found in actual social and religious practice. For this one would have to get back to individual cases of *bhakti* practice, something that I cannot do here. But I can refer to the forthcoming *Bhakti and Self* volume (Fuchs (ed.) forthcoming (a)). The model just used, that of the triangle, however allows some general observations.

It should be obvious from all that I have said that relationality in the perspective of *bhakti* appears as constitutive for the self, or more exactly, for a successful (*gelingendes*) self. Persons develop individual strengths when reaching out to others, to connect and even unite with some other, and with *the* Other, or when they defy dominant ritual as well as social norms based on their connection with others and with *the* Other.

This widely shared ground allows for various fragmentary conclusions: On the one hand, there is the recognition, and thus constitution of one's self-identity, *by or through* one's divine as well as human others.[47] Here the relation itself defines the core, or lies at the core (type I). On the other hand, there is the discovery of the other, and thus the recognition by the other, *within* oneself (or one's self). Here the relationship defines *the path towards* self-realisation (type II). Significantly, this quest for self-realisation has throughout been seen as embedded in a supporting, caring, empathising relationship with other humans (Agrawal 2009).

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45 Highly pertinent and an excellent starting-point are the discussions in Mark, Thompson, Zahavi (eds.) 2011 and Ganeri 2012; cf. Fuchs 2015.

46 *Puruṣa* or conscious entity and *prakṛti* or single creative power; the *tattva*s or constituents of being; *manas* or mind; *saṃkalpa* or imagination and volition; *buddhi* or the faculty of discrimination (Malinar 2014); *citta* as those specific elements of one's stream of consciousness which attention centralises (Buddhagosha; see Ganeri 2017).

47 Recognition here broadly taken in the sense of Axel Honneth (1996). For an adaptation as well as critique of Honneth's views see Fuchs 1999 and 2017c.

Both conceptions can thus be seen as forms or modes of recognition.[48] Again, both these modalities can and would have to be further specified. An example regarding the first (type I) is the debate between the cat and the monkey models of grace and the concept of self-surrender (*prapatti*; Raman 2007).[49] Regarding the second (type II), the task is more difficult. Here it is for everyone to make their own non-replicable experiences, and each of these remains inexpressible, an 'untellable story' – Kabir's *akatha kathā*.

From an individualisation perspective, this then would also mean that the divine other, which represents the universal, appears 'individualised' as well: becomes, in a way, an individual other, or what one could call, taking another paradoxical expression, the 'individual universal' vis-à-vis each *bhakta*.

What relationality or connectedness, against the background of the countervailing forces, then allows for is to conceive of different aggregate states of the self. What we encounter on the one hand are affected selves, which means subject-states affected by others, socially by the oppressors one does not connect with, as well as by one's peers, spiritually by the Divine; on the other hand different degrees of permeability (*Durchlässigkeit*) of selves. Permeability of selves does not mean relinquishing the Self: on the contrary, its very permeability seemingly helps constitute a resilient self (as Kabir exemplarily shows).[50]

Analytically we might distinguish different – contrasting – possibilities of relationality in the *bhakti* context: negative and positive, denied and affirmed, non-recognitional (contempt, disregard) and recognitional (reciprocal). On the social level the modes of reciprocity of selves stand in sharp contrast to the forces of divisiveness. The experience of shared belonging in *bhakti* conflicts with the everyday experience of the afflictions of difference (distantiation and discrimination). Put differently, and keeping caste divisions in view: divisiveness and shared belonging, distantiation and reciprocal relationality, or connectedness, co-exist. *Bhakti* is not able to remove difference and divisiveness once and for all or for the entirety of social life; *bhakti* can only provide a

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48 The first stands for a search for union with, and at the same time experience of separation from, the Divine; the second for the internal discovery and experience of the Divine (within one-self).

49 The reference here is to the debate between the southern (*teṅkalai*) and the northern (*vaṭakalai*) schools of Tamilian Shrivaishnavism regarding how to conceive of salvation through grace. The Teṅkalais are associated with the position that God acts entirely on his own and saves souls out of his compassion, 'as a mother cat carries her kitten'. In contrast the Vaṭakalais are described as adhering to the position that salvation requires some effort on behalf of the devotees, 'as a baby monkey clings to his mother'. See Raman 2007, ix, 11.

50 For more detailed discussion of the permeability of selves see Part 2 of this publication.

counter-position. Socially, *bhakti* marks the tension between the relational and the non-relational, or non-connected, the positively relational and the negatively relational self.

Regarding this duality, again the inferences drawn can differ: On the one hand we find the argument that *bhakti* allows people, especially people in crisis or in subjugation, to look out for a point of stability, a *Fixpunkt*, in their relation with one's others – other humans, as well as 'the' Other. The idea is that of an 'embedded' self, but a self embedded in an *alternative* social setting (Pauwels forthcoming). On the other hand there is the question which Kumkum Sangari (forthcoming) asks and which, at least for now, has to remain open: 'Can an unstable corpus (of texts, poems, identities etc.; MF) yield a stable self' or only shifting subject positions? Does then the point of stability remain a dream, a point of desire? Does individualisation in this case have to remain fluid? Or does this only apply to the name-giving *bhakta*, the saint-poet, not to the followers?

But is the idea of stability required for notions of self? Can we not also think of dispersed and moving selves? Significantly, Kumkum Sangari has added the notion of 'multiple' (or multi-directional) personae to the statement quoted above.[51] What this would signify is an openness for and to diverse others, and for diverse constellations and situations, kept (clamped) together, even if loosely, by an instance (*Instanz*) constituting a person(a) or a self. In the case of the name giving *bhakta* or (*sat-*)*guru* this instance may be references to the core Divine, while socially it would be the interlocking articulations that keep what is 'subdivided' or scattered among those who speak in his or her name together, the clamp thus being 'enlarged to a point of elasticity that threatens to snap the thread' (Sangari forthcoming). But regarding the *bhakta* followers – participating in continuing and elaborating the name of the guru – would their identification with the name-giving *bhakta* as well as the Divine not translate into consolidation of their own selves, and thus an inner instance that integrates their (multiple) personae? An identificatory stabilisation pairing the smaller with the larger self?

What we find in examining *bhakti* is not generalised mysticism, nor is the world of *bhakti* 'other-worldly' (in the sense given to the term by sociologists of religion). What we find are conceptualisations of forms of relatedness, or connectedness, that go beyond *our* everyday sense of relation and communication and that allow broadening the pragmatist-phenomenological sociological perspective.

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51 For this aspect too cf. Part 2, Section 2.2, of this publication.

6 Final note: limitations of *bhakti* as individualisation and socio-religious alternative

Bhakti provides a socio-religious alternative only up to a point. This is the kernel of truth of the often-repeated characterisation of *bhakti* as a counter-tradition. This signals not just a dimension of power. Much more deeply, *bhakti*, in its imaginaries but even more so as an alternative formation, remains dependent on what it opposes and at the same time takes from. It might be that we can here find the key to explaining the long duration of *bhakti* – as a thorn in the flesh of external religion and oppressive conditions that people again and again picked up – a lasting, unresolved 'inner conflict of tradition', to adapt the famous phrase coined by Jan C. Heesterman (who himself had applied this to the relationship between societal values, centred on Brahmanical ritualism, and world-renunciation). Individualising and emancipatory forces are thorns in the flesh of the dominant religious realm, of ritualism, world renunciation (*vairāgya*), knowledge (*jñāna*), and even of the other alternative that is being labelled as tantrism. It is the dominant religious realm that keeps a cap on expressions of individualisation.[52]

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52 Against this background, one might also have to reconsider the place of Buddhism in Indian religious history, different from Buddhism elsewhere. As the fate of the freshly revived or Navayana Buddhism in India shows, Buddhism too is in danger of remaining (again) stuck in the position of a counter-tradition (Fuchs 2019).

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