Hindu community formation and Ramanandi hagiographies

between the 17th and the 21st century

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A note on transliteration and translation:

In this dissertation, I have used diacritics for transliterated words in Hindi and Sanskrit, which are italicized. However, diacritics are not used for proper nouns and names, e.g. Ayodhya instead of Ayodhyā and Krishna instead of Kṛṣṇa. The standard transliteration system for Hindi is used rather than Sanskrit as the majority of my sources are in Hindi, e.g. *nirguṇ* instead of *nirguṇa.* Translations are mind unless otherwise noted.

Abstract

      This dissertation studies poems, narratives, and hagiographies written about Hindu *bhakti* ("devotional") saints associated with the Ramanandi *sampradāy* ("tradition"). The namesake of this tradition, Ramanand, lived in fourteenth- or fifteenth-century North India and is associated with many popular *bhakti* saints, and the Ramanandis helped lay the groundwork for a widespread Vaishnava tradition devoted to Ram and Sita. The Ramanandis are one of the largest and most influential ascetic communities in India today. This research project uses Ramanandi hagiographies as a lens to explore the development of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* and the shifts in the narratives surrounding it between the seventeenth century and the present.

      This research offers a historiographical assessment of scholarship on the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, focusing on unresolved and contested topics. It critically evaluates the claim that the Ramanandi *sampradāy* is socially egalitarian, particularly in regard to gender. It analyzes the stories of the women associated with the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, including those considered to be saints and those mentioned in the stories of male saints. The dissertation focuses significantly on the Ram Rasik branch of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* and examines the figure of the *sakhī* ("female friend") as a model of devotion. It argues that the Ram Rasik branch played an important role in the establishment of Vaishnavism in North India through their engagements with Krishna-focused *bhakti* traditions and their role in establishing *Rāmāyaṇa*-related pilgrimage sites. It examines the Ram Rasiks' engagement with the *bhaktamāl* ("garland of devotees") genre of hagiology and tracks Hindu nationalist influences on the re-tellings of Ramanand's life story.

Résumé

Cette thèse étudie les poèmes, les récits et les hagiographies écrits sur les saints hindous de la *bhakti* (« dévotion ») associés à la *sampradāy* (« tradition ») Ramanandi. La personne qui porte le nom de cette tradition, Ramanand, a vécu dans le nord de l'Inde au XIVe ou XVe siècle et est associée à de nombreux saints *bhakti* populaires. Les Ramanandis ont contribué à l'établissement d'une tradition Vaishnava répandue, consacrée à Ram et à Sita. Les Ramanandis constituent l'une des communautés ascétiques les plus importantes et les plus influentes de l'Inde d'aujourd'hui. Ce projet de recherche utilise les hagiographies de Ramanandi pour explorer le développement de la *sampradāy* de Ramanandi et les changements dans les récits qui l'entourent entre le XVIIe siècle et aujourd'hui.

Cette recherche propose une évaluation historiographique de la recherche sur la *sampradāy* Ramanandi, en se concentrant sur les sujets non résolus et contestés. Elle évalue de manière critique l'affirmation selon laquelle la *sampradāy* Ramanandi est socialement égalitaire, en particulier en ce qui concerne le genre. Elle analyse les histoires des femmes associées à la Ramanandi *sampradāy*, y compris celles qui sont considérées comme des saintes et celles qui sont mentionnées dans les histoires des saints masculins. La thèse se concentre principalement sur la branche Ram Rasik de la Ramanandi *sampradāy* et examine la figure de la *sakhī* (« amie féminine ») en tant que modèle de la dévotion. Elle soutient que la branche Ram Rasik a joué un rôle important dans l'établissement du Vaishnavisme en Inde du Nord par son engagement dans les traditions de *bhakti* centrées sur Krishna et par son rôle dans l'établissement de sites de pèlerinage liés à *Rāmāyaṇa*. Elle examine l'engagement des Ram Rasiks dans le genre *bhaktamāl* (« guirlande de dévots ») de l'hagiologie et suit les influences nationalistes hindoues sur les nouvelles versions de l'histoire de la vie de Ramanand.

Hindi/Hindavi workshops I attended and to Purnima Dhavan and Heidi Pauwels for the Hindavi workshop they hosted at the University of Washington-Seattle.

Looking back, I realize how influential my time at Mount Holyoke College was in forming my interest in pursuing a Ph.D. I am particularly thankful for my professors Maria Heim, Susanne Mrozik, and Elif Babül for their roles in shaping my early academic interests. I appreciate all of the support I have received from my Mount Holyoke friends in the ensuing years, especially for Husna Anwar, who joined me in Canada for her own doctoral studies. My time at the University of Chicago Divinity School facilitated my transition from anthropology to religious studies, and I learned so much from my professors and classmates there. In addition, my time spent studying in Kathmandu, Varanasi, Lucknow, Jaipur, and Pune throughout my undergraduate and master's degrees all inspired my interest in pursuing this research.

My friends and family were a huge support throughout the process of writing this dissertation. I am thankful for my niece and nephew, Lexi and Freddy, who were born mid-way through my Ph.D. and who make me laugh every time I talk to them. My parents, Amy and Leo, and my siblings, Daniel, Elizabeth, Emma, and Tess, were always there for me to talk through the ups and downs of my graduate studies. I am thankful that my parents never questioned my interest in traveling to South Asia or pursuing graduate studies in religion and for the lifelong commitment to education that they demonstrate. I was fortunate to have overlapped with Elizabeth for a year at the University of Chicago when she began her Ph.D. in biophysics, and I am grateful for her willingness to read through almost every conference abstract or funding proposal I submitted.

I am thankful for the community I found at McGill and in Montreal. I am grateful for the advice and mentorship of Vanessa Sasson, who I worked with at Marianopolis College. I also

<u>Chapter One – Introduction</u>

This dissertation focuses on the poems, narratives, and hagiographies written by and about Hindu *bhakti* ("devotional") saints associated with the Ramanandi tradition (*sampradāy*). The namesake of this tradition, Ramanand, lived in fourteenth or fifteenth-century North India,[1] and the Ramanandis helped lay the groundwork for a widespread Vaishnava tradition devoted to the gods Ram and Sita. The Ramanandis are one of the largest and most influential ascetic communities in India today. Historically, they play an important role in the idea of the "*bhakti* movement," as Ramanand is said to have brought *bhakti* from South India to the North and he is known as the guru of many popular *bhakti* saints including Kabir and Ravidas. Despite his influence, Ramanand remains a mysterious figure. He is sometimes presented by scholars and his followers as a social reformer who was the first *bhakti* guru to accept women and people from so-called "low castes" as his direct disciples, a story that serves an important role in narratives that portray *bhakti* as egalitarian and accessible to all. Other times, he is presented as a Brahmin guru who composed in Sanskrit and "restored" Hinduism after the spread of Islam in India. This chapter begins by introducing the focus of my research and my main research questions. It then explores the methodology I have used, reviews relevant literature, provides an overview of my primary sources, and outlines the main arguments presented in subsequent chapters.

This dissertation studies the hagiographies of Ramanand and his early followers and analyzes representations of gender in Ramanandi literature from the seventeenth century to the present. Based on this analysis, it investigates the following question: how has the Ramanandi community cultivated and negotiated its reputation as a socially egalitarian tradition over time? One of the central focuses of my research is a branch of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* known as the

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[1] The dating of Ramanand's life is uncertain. See Chapter Two or Richard Burghart, "The Founding of the Ramanandi Sect," *Ethnohistory* 25, no. 2 (Spring 1978): 123 for more information.

Ram Rasiks. This is an esoteric tradition centered around devotion to Ram and Sita from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and it has rarely been discussed by scholars of Hinduism, often being downplayed as derivative of Krishna-focused *rasik* traditions like the Gaudiya Vaishnavas. However, as Philip Lutgendorf explains, "although the *rasik* traditions of Rama and Krishna *bhakti* (devotionalism) have all but vanished from the visible mainstream of contemporary Hinduism—and their history and literature has consequently been largely ignored by academic scholars—their opulent visionary aesthetic and characteristic emphasis on religious role-playing continue to exert an influence on popular Vaishnavism in north India."[2] This dissertation addresses gaps in the scholarly understanding of how the Ram Rasik tradition developed by the Ramanandis helped to shape North Indian Vaishnavism, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Another central theme that runs throughout this dissertation is the creation and enforcement of religious community boundaries through narratives and the composition of hagiographies. The Ramanandi tradition purports to be welcoming and accepting of all, and scholars have traced the many influences on different aspects of their religious beliefs and practices, including both *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ bhakti*, *tantra*, asceticism, yoga, Gaudiya Vaishnava devotion to Krishna, Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas*, and more. Over time, the Ramanandis have attempted to differentiate themselves from other contemporaneous traditions. I study Ramanandi hagiographies as a medium through which religious communities negotiate and define their boundaries and work through competition with other communities. I am interested in how the boundaries of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* shifted over time and how and why various saints and historical figures are claimed to be part of their community. In particular, the Ram Rasik branch

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[2] Philip Lutgendorf, "Words Made Flesh: The Banaras Rāmlīlā as Epic Commentary," in *Boundaries of the Text: Epic Performances in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger and Laurie J. Sears (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 99.

played an important role in composing hagiographies and continuing the *bhaktamāl* ("garland of devotees") genre in North India.

1.1. Methodology

The central approach in this dissertation is textual, including philological and archival work as well as literary analysis. The primary sources are mostly hagiographies in Braj Bhasha (an early dialect of Hindi), modern Hindi, and English, written between the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries. My analyses of these hagiographies are found throughout the dissertation and are particularly developed in Chapters Four and Five. I began studying Hindi as an undergraduate student and started my study of Braj Bhasha during my M.A., providing me with my first opportunity to read *bhakti* poetry in its original language. Although Sanskrit did not end up being a major focus of this dissertation, my study of Sanskrit aided me in my analysis of the debates surrounding the Sanskrit texts attributed to Ramanand in Chapter Two.[3]

In addition, my project is historiographical. My historiographical approach includes studying both the self-presentation of the Ramanandi tradition and the way the Ramanandis have been studied and characterized by scholars over time. Inspired by John Stratton Hawley's approach to studying the narratives of the "*bhakti* movement," which I explain further in this chapter's second section, I am interested in the broader narrative surrounding the Ramanandi *sampradāy* and the ways in which they are invoked as representative of the "*bhakti* movement" as a whole. I am also interested in the figure of the *sakhī*, which is central to the Ram Rasik branch of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. The historiography of the *sakhī* is developed in Chapter Three. Throughout the dissertation, I focus on how and why the claim of social egalitarianism of the Ramanandis, particularly gender egalitarianism, has been invoked throughout history.

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[3] I plan to further develop my research on Sanskrit *stotra*s used in Ramanandi worship.

My analysis of gender and the Ramanandi *sampradāy* is particularly informed by my studies with the McGill Institute for Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies. I completed a concentration in gender and women's studies through the Institute. The interdisciplinary seminars I took there informed my knowledge of contemporary academic theory on gender, and part of my methodology involves bringing comparative gender theory into dialogue with South Asian sources.

My dissertation is greatly informed by the time I spent living and studying in India both before and during my doctoral studies. My research was significantly interrupted by the Covid pandemic, which began during the middle of my Ph.D., causing me to cancel and postpone several planned research trips to India. This prompted me to switch my planned research from a study of Ramanandi manuscripts located in libraries and archives across North India to working primarily on published materials. One advantage to focusing on these published materials is that my work foregrounds the Ramanandis' self-presentation and their public perceptions.

In addition, this textual work has been informed by the approximately two and a half years I have spent in South Asia since 2011, much of which was spent studying in Varanasi and Rajasthan. I first learned about the Ramanandi *sampradāy* through my studies of Kabir, Ravidas, Tulsidas, and other famous *bhakti* poets and the living Ram *bhakti* tradition in Varanasi. This time also introduced me to less commonly known modern hagiographies. For example, in Chapter Five I describe the time I was given an English hagiography of Ramanand by a Ramanandi ascetic in Varanasi. Thus, the time I spent in India was highly influential in terms of sparking my interest and motivating my research questions.

1.2. Key Themes and Review of Relevant Literature

There are seven main themes that frame this dissertation and weave throughout the following chapters: *bhakti*, authorship and performance, hagiography, *bhakti* and gender, community formation, the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative, and the *rasik* tradition. Here, I introduce these themes and review the key scholarship on each of them.

1.2.1. Bhakti

The multivalent word *bhakti* is well-known in the study of South Asian religions. It comes from the Sanskrit root *bhaj*, and has been translated as devotion, participation, eating, and sharing. Vasudha Narayanan writes that *bhakti* "has probably been the most visible, palpable part of Hindu traditions in the last two millennia."[4] She explains that "Hindus recognize many kinds of *bhakti* including mental salutations, disciplined worship, recitation of prayers, passionate and delirious love, emotional weeping, singing, total surrender, and abject servitude to the deity or to a spiritual teacher."[5] In *Bhakti and Power: Debating India's Religion of the Heart*, Hawley, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Swapna Sharma write that "*bhakti* derives a good bit of its power from the fact that it can signify so many things in such diverse settings across a vast expanse of space and time."[6] Hawley's *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement* challenges the idea of a singular "*bhakti* movement," which was commonly understood as a form of socially egalitarian, liberating religiosity that united all of India. Hawley shows that this

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[4] Vasudha Narayanan, "Bhakti," In *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, ed. Knut Jacobsen, Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar, and Vasudha Narayanan (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

[5] Vasudha Narayanan, "Bhakti."

[6] John Stratton Hawley, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Swapna Sharma, "Introduction: The Power of Bhakti," in *Bhakti and Power: Debating India's Religion of the Heart*, ed. John Stratton Hawley, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Swapna Sharma (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 6.

narrative was not crystallized until the twentieth century and that it served a role in the nationalist anticolonial movement of the time.[7]

One of the key characteristics attributed to *bhakti* in the narrative of the "*bhakti* movement" is that it is composed in vernacular languages. More than a mere language preference, this is tied to what Novetzke calls "sonic equality," or "the conviction—a social conviction—that all people are equally entitled to hear words of salvation in their own everyday language."[8] There are many stories in *bhakti* poetry about consciously choosing to write in the language of everyday people despite challenges from Brahmanical authorities. However, *bhakti* literature does not necessitate a wholesale rejection of Sanskrit. John Cort says that many of the earliest *bhakti* hymns are Sanskrit *stotra*s.[9] Hamsa Stainton explains that *stotra*s "can be personal and poetic appeals to a deity, and their poetic features can describe, express, evoke, and explore intense and complex emotions. Such Sanskrit hymns share many characteristics with devotional poetry in a variety of languages."[10] Stainton argues that Sanskrit has served as a "foil to vernacular expression" in the narrative of the "*bhakti* movement,"[11] leading to a lack of recognition of the close relationships between Sanskrit *stotra*s and vernacular *bhakti* poetry. Yigal Bronner and David Shulman argue that Sanskrit and vernacular literature should not be viewed as entirely distinct or oppositional, as "Sanskrit participated along with the vernaculars in

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[7] John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[8] Christian Lee Novetzke, "The Political Theology of Bhakti, or When Devotionalism Meets Vernacularization," in *Bhakti and Power: Debating India's Religion of the Heart*, ed. John Stratton Hawley, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Swapna Sharma (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 91.

[9] John Cort, "Bhakti as Elite Cultural Practice: Digambar Jain Bhakti in Early Modern North India," in *Bhakti and Power: Debating India's Religion of the Heart*, ed. John Stratton Hawley, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Swapna Sharma (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 95.

[10] Hamsa Stainton, "Wretched and Blessed: Emotional Praise in a Sanskrit Hymn from Kashmir," in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Emotions in Classical Indian Philosophy*, ed. Maria Heim, Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, and Roy Tzohar (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 239.

[11] Hamsa Stainton, "Wretched and Blessed: Emotional Praise in a Sanskrit Hymn from Kashmir," 240.

the project of inventing and elaborating distinctive regional cultures and identities."[12] Many

bhakti poets were multilingual and some composed in both Sanskrit and vernacular languages.

The relationship between *bhakti* and Sanskrit is explored further in Chapter One, and the

relationship between *bhakti* and social egalitarianism is further explored in Chapter Two.[13]

In the modern historiography of the "*bhakti* movement," *bhakti* traditions are commonly

divided into two streams, *nirguṇ* ("without attributes") and *saguṇ* ("with attributes"). *Nirguṇ*

devotees generally worship God as an omnipresent, pervasive divinity without a form. The

nirguṇi poet-saints are often known as *sant*s, and popular North Indian *nirguṇ sant*s include

Kabir and Ravidas, who are both claimed to be part of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. *Saguṇ*

devotees typically envision God with a bodily form, often as Shiva or in the Vaishnava *avatāra*s

of Krishna or Ram. Surdas, Tulsidas, and Mirabai, for example, are all popular saints seen as

saguṇ devotees, who are commonly called *bhakta*s.

Although the categories of *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ* can be helpful for understanding the

diversity of *bhakti* traditions, it should not be understood as a strict binary. As Dalpat Rajpurohit

explains, the *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ* distinction "was consolidated in modern times and cannot be

considered a given fact when we talk about the poet-saints of early modern India," and the use of

these terms by the *bhakti* saints themselves "was neither an expression of an organized religious

and philosophical theory nor the definition of a separate *sampradāya* (devotional community) or

ideology."[14] Some *bhakti* theorists argue that *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ* manifestations of God are

ultimately the same, and oftentimes different poems attributed to the same saints can display

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[12] Yigal Bronner and David Shulman, "'A Cloud Turned Goose': Sanskrit in the Vernacular Millennium," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 43, no. 1 (March 2006): 6.

[13] My research on the use of Sanskrit *stotra*s dedicated to Hanuman by the Ramanandi *sampradāy* will be published in a forthcoming volume co-edited by myself and Hamsa Stainton titled *Studying* Stotra*s: Sanskrit Hymns across Traditions*.

[14] Dalpat Rajpurohit, "Vaiṣṇava Models for Nirguṇa Devotion," *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 28, no. 1 (2019): 158.

different orientations. The most famous saints associated with the Ramanandi *sampradāy* have a

nirguṇ orientation and most of the Hindi compositions attributed directly to Ramanand do as

well. However, over time and due in part to the Ram Rasik branch, the Ramanandi tradition

became particularly associated with *saguṇ bhakti* to Ram and Sita. The Ramanandis'

encompassing of both *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ bhakti* is indicative of their catholicity and of the

permeable boundary between the two streams of *bhakti* religiosity.

A key source for the framing of this thesis has been the work of Patton Burchett,

particularly his monograph *A Genealogy of Devotion: Bhakti, Tantra, Yoga, and Sufism in North

India*, so I outline some of his central arguments here*. Bhakti* traditions and Sufism have

mutually influenced each other, particularly in the realm of literature. Burchett argues that either

directly or indirectly, all *bhakti* communities were influenced by Islam, countering the narrative

that Muslims were an outside force that disrupted *bhakti* traditions.[15] He highlights the impact of

Sufi *premākhyān*s on *bhakti* literature.[16] He calls Sufi and *bhakti* communities remarkably

similar in their worship practices and their opposition to tantric yogis. This includes the

importance of devotion above all else, and "an analogous emotional, aesthetic, and ethical

sensibility."[17] One of the main themes of Burchett's book is the importance of emotion in *bhakti*

literature. He writes, "the social work of *bhakti* was accomplished in the cultivation of feeling—

the transmission of affect—far more than in the conveying of theology and ideology."[18] He

explains that the popularization of Vaishnava *bhakti* "ethos, sensibility, and practice" is not

always institutionalized; it can be tied to any form of singing and remembering the name of

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[15] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion: Bhakti, Tantra, Yoga, and Sufism in North India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 73.
[16] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*, 87.
[17] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*, 81.
[18] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*, 18.

God.[19] Hawley also emphasizes the importance of singing for *bhakti* traditions, and says that this is key to the concept of community and participation.[20]

In addition to showing the influence of Sufism on *bhakti* in North India, *A Genealogy of Devotion* also focuses on the connections and differences between *bhakti* and tantric yogi traditions. Rather than viewing *bhakti* as a distinct mode of religiosity that traveled from the South to the North, Burchett refers to the "interwoven threads of devotion, yoga, *tantra*, and asceticism."[21] He focuses specifically on the Ramanandis because of the diversity of their early community and he describes the emergence of the "vulgate Vaishnava" sensibility throughout North India. Burchett discusses the interaction between *bhakti* and *tantra* and he argues that *tantra* was ultimately marginalized and largely replaced by *bhakti*, partially because of Sufism and Persianate political culture.[22] Later hagiographies of the Ramanandis present the Naths as their competitors, but Burchett argues that these strict sectarian boundaries did not emerge until the sixteenth century. He uses Krishnadas Payahari as an example of a Ramanandi yogi and demonstrates the connections between the ritual worship of the Ram Rasik branch with tantric traditions. He points out that both the early Ramanandis and the Naths tended to be *nirguṇ*-oriented, valued asceticism, and accepted all castes; the primary distinction between them lies in the Ramanandis' more social forms of *bhakti* worship, while the Naths were primarily focused the cultivation of *siddhi*s.[23] Burchett's most innovative addition to this field of study is his discussion of "mainstream *tantra*." He gives a brief introduction to *tantra* in general, focusing particularly on medieval North India. He defines this as *tantra* that "was simultaneously both

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[19] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*, 110.
[20] John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 297.
[21] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*, 4.
[22] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*, 63.
[23] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*, 172.

esoteric *and* popular, brahmanical *and* folk,"[24] and he describes it as a tradition that was integral to religious life in North India, particularly before the spread of *bhakti*.[25]

In the realm of Hindi literature, *bhakti* is often presented as a distinct literary genre. Allison Busch explains that the Hindi literary scholar Ramchandra Shukla was the first to bifurcate the genres of *bhakti* and *rīti*, and later scholars developed the narrative that *bhakti* literature degenerated into *rīti*. *Bhakti* literature has long been lauded by Orientalist and contemporary Western scholars as a form of Hinduism that they believed easily parallels with Christianity. *Rīti*, on the other hand, was criticized for being "a decadent literature. It was completely unnatural. It was mannered. It was derivative. It was shockingly sensual and thus morally suspect."[26] The Ram Rasik tradition, which I will further explore below and in later chapters, challenges the bifurcation of *bhakti* and *rīti*. Burchett posits that Agradas, the claimed founder of the Ram Rasik tradition, was concerned with "patronage and prestige within the developing Mughal-Rajput literary and court culture," which may be the reason why he engaged with "the burgeoning *sṛngār* (erotic love) devotional themes and Brajbhasa aesthetic refinements."[27] *Nirguṇ bhakti sant*s like Sundardas also utilized styles and topics typically considered to be *rīti* in their poetry.[28] All of the critiques mentioned by Busch about *rīti* literature were also applied to Rasik literature. The paradigmatic *rīti* author, Keshavdas, composed an influential devotional poem about Ram and Sita called the *Rāmcandracandrikā* in 1601 that shares many similarities with Ram Rasik literature, such as a focus on the setting of the story, the divine couple's relationship, the erotic sentiment, and the underlying sense of *līlā* or "divine

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[24] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*, 29.
[25] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*, 62.
[26] Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings: The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.
[27] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*, 204.
[28] Dalpat Rajpurohit, "*Bhakti* versus *Rīti*? The *Sant*s' Perspective," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 84, no. 1 (2021): 97.

play." The complexity of the relationship between *bhakti* and *rīti* is indicative of the vast diversity of literature that is characterized as "*bhakti*."

1.2.2. Authorship and Performance of Bhakti *Literature*

This dissertation centers particularly on the history of Ramanandi literature, framed in the greater context of Hindi *bhakti* literature, but it is important to note that most *bhakti* poetry is performed and transmitted orally before being written down into manuscripts. This sometimes makes authorship difficult to ascertain. In particular, the early hagiographies associated with the Ramanandis such as those attributed to Nabhadas and Anantadas that I discuss in this dissertation may have been composite compositions. Some scholars of *bhakti* avoid the language of "author," "poem," and "reader" in favor of "composer," "song," and "audience" in order to highlight the oral nature of most *bhakti* compositions. In addition, there is a close relationship between hagiographical literature *about bhakti* saints and literature *by bhakti* saints, and it is often difficult to delineate between the two categories.

Many *bhakti* poems include a *chāp*, or signature line, which scholars use to determine authorship. However, Linda Hess explains that the *chāp* and the *tek* (the refrain) are the most portable parts of a *bhakti* poem, and they are often substituted and interchanged.[29] Sometimes the exact same lines and passages are attributed to different authors. Hawley says that the *chāp* is more expressive of a poem's authority than its authorship. The *chāp* signifies that a poem is valid and complete. For instance, in his study of Surdas's *Sūrsāgar*, Hawley describes the compilation as a tradition that evolved over time, rather than a single text composed by a single author. Hawley sees an element of homage in the use of pseudonyms, as composers try to write in the

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[29] Linda Hess, *Bodies of Song: Kabir Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in North India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 83.

vein of the saints they most admire. He says that it is possible that pseudonyms were chosen

based on the devotional mood evoked in the poem or the subject matter.[30] Hawley views the

relationship between the poem and the stories about the lives of the poets as deeply

interconnected. Since it is common to write *bhakti* poetry in the third person, many poems

attributed to certain authors are also about the lives of those authors. Novetzke agrees with

Hawley and says that the signatures on poems should be understood as "ideographs," or signs of

authenticity, because such a signature "describes or even symbolizes a genre of authorship, as

much as it might suggest a sole author."[31] For example, the poems attributed to the popular North

Indian saint Mirabai have increased over time. Nancy Martin writes, "there is a generative

quality to her character and the traditions which surround her that seemingly invite participation

in the *līlā* [divine play] of her life."[32] The ambiguity surrounding authorship means that it is

impossible to separate the voice of the poet from the context in which they composed.

  Several scholars have foregrounded performance in their study of *bhakti* literature.

Norman Cutler describes Tamil *bhakti* poetry as poetry of participation and says that this

participation creates a sense of community between the devotee and god as well as amongst

devotees. He views identification as an extension of participation. He says that *bhakti* collapses

different identities into each other—the poet becomes identified with god, the audience with the

poet (through recitation), and the audience with god. Cutler also argues that this process of

identification creates accessibility, bringing the god into the experience of the poem. He also

says that *bhakti* poems disrupt the *akam*/*puṟam* binary of Tamil poetics. According to Cutler, the

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[30] John Stratton Hawley, "Authorship and Authority in the Bhakti Poetry of North India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 47, no. 2 (1988): 275.

[31] Christian Lee Novetzke, *Religion and Public Memory: A Cultural History of Saint Namdev in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 135.

[32] Nancy Martin, "Mirabai Comes to America: The Translation and Transformation of a Saint," *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 3, no. 1 (April 2010): 13.

recitation of the *bhakti* poem allows for the reenactment of ritual events, and he says that Tamil *bhakti* poetry involves a theology of embodiment: "contact, participation, communion, and ultimately identification: these are the leitmotifs that pervade *bhakti* poetry at every level."[33]

Hess's *Bodies of Song: Kabir Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in North India* is an ethnography of Marwari folk singers who perform songs attributed to Kabir. Hess says that too often scholars claim to be talking about orality, but they just analyze written texts that mention oral performance. Her work goes beyond this and engages directly with contemporary oral performance in addition to studying manuscripts. She says that oral performance today can help illuminate how textual fluidity operated at the time of writing the manuscripts. Hess refers to the three recensions of Kabir's texts as three "ecosystems" that each grew and developed in their own ways over time. There was never a clear transition from oral to written stages, they interacted and continue to interact over time.[34] Hess says that the singers both consciously and unconsciously change the text to fit each performance. She describes wanting to find a real Kabir, and clinging to the hope that Kabir's poetry could be separated from the rest, but this never really proved to be the case.[35] Although my research is based on the study of published texts by and about the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, it is important to foreground the close relationship between *bhakti* and performance in order to understand how the stories about the lives of Ramanandi saints and Ramanand himself developed over time.

1.2.3. Hagiography

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[33] Norman Cutler, *Songs of Experience: The Poetics of Tamil Devotion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 39.
[34] Linda Hess, *Bodies of Song*, 74.
[35] Linda Hess, *Bodies of Song*, 91.

The term hagiography comes from scholarship on Christianity, so many scholars who study South Asian hagiographies begin their work with a discussion about the merits of the term hagiography and whether or not it applies to their subject matter. Karen Pechilis, for example, describes her decision not to use the term in favor of "biography." She says that she chooses to use "biography" because of her theoretical standpoint as a historian of religion, not a theologian.[36] David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn's edited volume *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History* uses the term "life histories" rather than hagiographies, as their study is not limited to the realm of "religion." They include hagiographies, biographies, autobiographies, and the study of oral life histories in their study. In their introduction, they state that they believe that life histories are important ways of recovering the stories of marginalized groups of people, and that they can be resources for rescuing lost voices.[37]

Other scholars, like Winand Callewaert and Rupert Snell, see a use in the category of hagiography as a distinct genre that can be mapped across South Asian religious traditions.[38] The hagiographies of North Indian *bhakti* saints are usually contained in hagiologies or collective hagiographies. Keune stresses the importance of viewing a hagiology "as a unified text and not merely a collection of isolated stories,"[39] which allows scholars to trace patterns between stories. This framing influenced my approach to the study of both premodern hagiologies of early Ramanandi saints and modern hagiographies of Ramanand. I believe the terms "hagiography"

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[36] Karen Pechilis, *Interpreting Devotion: The Poetry and Legacy of a Female Bhakti Saint of India* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 207.
[37] David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn, "Introduction: Life Histories and India," in *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*, ed. David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 15.
[38] Rupert Snell, "Introduction: Themes in Indian Hagiography," in *According to Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in India*, ed. Winand Callewaert and Rupert Snell (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994), 13.
[39] Jon Keune, "Gathering the *Bhaktas* in Marathi: The *Bhaktavijay* of Mahīpati," *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* (Spring 2007): 177.

and "hagiology" are useful in the context of stories about *bhakti* saints, as they acknowledge the

commonalities between the stories about saints from different regions and time periods across

South Asia and help to facilitate comparison with other religious traditions and regions.

 The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion, edited by

Frank Reynolds and Donald Capps, provides an overview of the main ways that scholars have

studied religious biographies across many different traditions. Historians, scholars of myth and

comparative literature, and scholars of the psychology and philosophy of religion have all had

different aims and approaches to their study, and essays in the book offer examples of these

approaches and debate the merits of each of them.[40] Renato Rosaldo offers an example of how

some anthropologists approach religious biographies, by choosing a single exemplary individual

and recording their entire life memory and using this to reconstruct the biography of a "typical"

member of society.[41] Several authors drew on Erik Erikson's psychoanalytic approach and

analyze aspects of hagiographies like the subject's relationship with their parents or early sexual

experiences in order to understand their behavior. Some scholars who are interested in myth, like

Capps, compare the general patterns that sacred biographies follow and describe how these

stories often fit into preexisting models.[42]

 Callewaert and Snell's edited volume *According to Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in*

India focuses specifically on hagiographies in India, including studies of many *bhakti*

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[40] Frank E. Reynolds and Donald Capps, eds. *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton & Co., 1976).

[41] Renato Rosaldo, "The Story of Tukbaw: 'They Listen as He Orates,'" in *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds and Donald Capps (The Hague and Paris: Mouton & Co., 1976), 121-152.

[42] Donald Capps, "Lincoln's Martyrdom: A Study of Exemplary Mythic Patterns," in *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds and Donald Capps (The Hague and Paris: Mouton & Co., 1976), 393-412.

traditions.[43] Several scholars in the volume discuss the purposes hagiographies serve in religious communities. One major purpose is to present the story of an exemplary devotee that can serve as a role model or inspiration for ordinary people. They can also be read ritually or reenacted in festivals. Hagiographies can also function as a space for innovation or "invention of tradition," as locating a new belief or practice in the past is a way of authenticating it. Additionally, hagiographies often serve as a way of legitimizing sacred space and as a catalyst for pilgrimages, which will be explored more in Chapter Three.

A major theme throughout *According to Tradition* and many other studies of South Asian hagiographies is the difficulty of separating facts and myths in the stories, given the presence of miracles and the frequent occurrences of impossible encounters between individuals. For this reason, hagiographies are sometimes ignored by historians. Snell mentions that the oral origin of many hagiographies can make it difficult for scholars to determine the "ur text."[44] In his description of hagiographies of *bhakti* poet-saints, Hawley states that "the debatable accuracy of these stories matters less than the spirit that gave them rise."[45] Similarly, Hopkins points out that it is still possible to learn from hagiographies. He writes, "to trace the lines of these sacred biographies is to trace the growing self-understanding of living communities vis-à-vis the major historical events and movements of their time. They map very real shifts in religious power and authority."[46] W. H. McLeod's essay on Sikh hagiographies says that scholars and practitioners too often presume that the underlying stories are factual, but this is not true. He said that some

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[43] Winand Callewaert and Rupert Snell, eds. *According to Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in India* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowtiz Verlag, 1994).

[44] Rupert Snell, "Introduction: Themes in Indian Hagiography," 8.

[45] John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 13.

[46] Steven Paul Hopkins, *Singing the Body of God: The Hymns of Vedantadesika in Their South Indian Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press), 58.

scholars think you can just strip away the mythical elements and find a historical core, but a lot

of the stories are in fact borrowed from Hindu, Sufi, Nath, or other traditions.[47]

Although *bhakti* hagiologies have an important element of didacticism, it is important to

note that they are written in narrative form and are not meant to be straightforward guidebooks

for ordinary devotees. Callewaert argues that hagiographies present the archetypes of saints,

"telling us how they *should* have acted" instead of how people acted in history.[48] Hawley writes

that "by emphasizing the extreme circumstances" *bhakti* hagiographies "teach character in

addition to precept; they praise personal resourcefulness and tenacity in a way that codes

scarcely can."[49] He argues that *bhakti* hagiographies present a distinct ethical code, which he

calls *bhakti* dharma. This ethical code does not always align with and sometimes even subverts

other commonly accepted ethical precepts, such as non-violence or the importance of the family

structure. Similarly, in Anne Monius's analysis of a twelfth-century Tamil Shaiva hagiology

called the *Periyapurāṇam*, she explains that the violent acts committed by the saints are not

meant to be emulated or representative of regular devotees, rather, the stories are dramatic

representations of the ideal of intense selfless devotion.[50] Hawley argues that although *bhakti*

dharma's break from tradition might seem threatening at first, in fact, "*bhakti* has an ethical logic

that demands more, rather than less, from those who come under its spell."[51] It does this by

situating the praise of God as the "external referent," liberating devotees from commonly agreed

upon social codes. Hawley writes, "in *bhakti*, dharma is not ultimately abandoned but

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[47] W.H. Mcleod, "The Hagiography of the Sikhs," in *According to Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in India*, ed. Winand Callewaert and Rupert Snell (Wiesbaden: Harrassowtiz Verlag, 1994), 28.

[48] Winand Callewaert, "*Bhaktamāls* and *Parcaīs* in Rajasthan," in *According to Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in India*, ed. Winand Callewaert and Rupert Snell (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 1994), 92.

[49] John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas and Kabir in Their Time and Ours* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 49.

[50] Anne Monius, "Love, Violence, and the Aesthetics of Disgust: Śaivas and Jains in Medieval South India," *The Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32 (2004): 122.

[51] John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 63.

transformed. It is sublated, *aufgehoben*, taken to a different level."[52] This other level of dharma

is most effectively taught in narrative form, since rulebooks would be unable to portray the

sentiment underlying the actions. This underlying sentiment of devotion is more important than

the actions of individual saints. My research foregrounds the narrative aspect of hagiographies

and uses them to understand the shifts in the self-perception of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* rather

than viewing them as straightforward historical records.

1.2.4. Bhakti and Gender

The theme of *bhakti* and gender runs throughout this dissertation. I am particularly

interested in the Ramanandi *sampradāy*'s understandings and negotiations of gender, including

the stories of the early women affiliated with the *sampradāy*, the way that these stories were

invoked over time as evidence for social egalitarianism in the *sampradāy*, and the valorization of

women as model devotees in the Ram Rasik branch of the *sampradāy*. This dissertation's

examination of the female characters in Ramanandi hagiographies such as the wives of the male

saints is inspired in part by the work of Eleanor Zelliot, who studied the wives of Namdev and

Chokamela, two Maharashtrian *bhakti* saints. This is explored in Chapter Three.[53]

As mentioned in the review of literature on *bhakti*, performance, and authorship, the

study of the compositions attributed to female *bhakti* saints is complicated by the fact that it is

often not possible to distinguish between what is written by a saint from what is written by their

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[52] John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 64.

[53] Zelliot's scholarship also engages significantly with the topic of *bhakti* and caste. For more recent scholarship on this topic, see: Divya Cherian, "Fall from Grace? Caste, Bhakti, and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Marwar," in *Bhakti and Power: Debating India's Religion of the Heart*, ed. John Stratton Hawley, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Swapna Sharma (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019) and Divya Cherian, *Merchants of Virtue: Hindus, Muslims, and Untouchables in Eighteenth-Century South Asia* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023). For scholarship on the relationship between gender and caste, see: Charu Gupta, *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016) and Laura Brueck, *Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Hindi Dalit Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), particularly Chapter 7, "Re-scripting Rape," 154-177.

followers. This means that poems attributed to male or female saints are not necessarily composed by people of the same gender. Mirabai is a particularly illustrative example of this. Hagiographies of Mirabai say that she was a princess who abandoned her kingdom in sixteenth-century Rajasthan and devoted her life to Krishna. However, there is very little historical evidence to support this. There are few early manuscripts of poetry attributed to Mirabai in comparison to contemporaneous popular saints like Surdas, and most of the known manuscripts containing poetry attributed to Mirabai are from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hawley says he is "agnostic" as to whether or not she ever existed, but what really matters is her memory and reception.[54] My dissertation also focuses primarily on the memory and reception of the women affiliated with the early Ramanandi *sampradāy*. Despite the lack of historical sources surrounding them, they still played important roles in Ramanandi hagiographies and the historiography of the *sampradāy*.

Martin says that Mirabai has become a symbol for the idea of women going against the grain of society. She explains that there are many English translations of her poetry, there are fictional characters inspired by Mirabai in plays and stories and movies, and that some spiritual teachers and life coaches call themselves Mirabai. Antoinette DeNapoli's ethnographic research also shows that female ascetics in Rajasthan also view Mirabai as both a role model and a source of historical legitimation of their path.[55] Martin says that Mirabai's enduring popularity in India and in the U.S. "was fueled by the search for global religious models and for specifically feminine spiritual voices, as well as for spiritual and psychological healing and wholeness, and for authenticity."[56] This occurred despite the lack of historical information about her life and

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[54] John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 98.
[55] Antoinette DeNapoli, *Real Sadhus Sing to God: Gender, Asceticism, and Vernacular Religion in Rajasthan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 18.
[56] Nancy Martin, "Mirabai Comes to America," 20.

despite the clarity surrounding the authorship of the poetry attributed to her. Martin writes, "the poetry we have in their names is decidedly intersubjective—co-created by men and women, high caste and low, rich and poor, sung in the improvisation milieu of performance and manifest in multiple languages and cultures across India and beyond." [57]

The close connection between *bhakti* saints and their hagiographies in relation to gender is also explored by Karen Pechilis in her research on the sixth-century Tamil saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar. Pechilis points out that Ammaiyar never identifies herself as a woman in her own poetry; the memory of her as a woman is connected to her hagiographies. In Ammaiyar's own poetry, she emphasizes the path of devotion as accessible to anyone, but in the most popular hagiography of her, there is an emphasis on the extraordinary events of her life, particularly miracles.[58] In regards to another female Tamil *bhakti* poet, Narayanan says that when writing about female saints, male hagiographers "tended to isolate their cases and divinize them, thus emptying their lives of social value."[59] By focusing on the miracles that female saints perform, hagiographies of them make it difficult for readers to imagine themselves in similar situations to her, making them seem extraordinary and divine rather than as tangible role models.

1.2.5. Community Formation

In addition to the functions mentioned in the section on hagiography, hagiographies can also serve as a medium through which to negotiate and define the boundaries of religious communities and to work through competition with other communities. The theme of

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[57] Nancy M. Martin, "The Gendering of Voice in Medieval Hindu Literature," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Indian Philosophy and Gender*, ed. Veena R. Howard (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 114.
[58] Karen Pechilis, *Interpreting Devotion: The Poetry and Legacy of a Female Bhakti Saint of India*, 104.
[59] Vasudha Narayanan, "Brimming with *Bhakti,* Embodiments of *Shakti:* Devotees, Deities, Reformers, and Other Women of Power in the Hindu Tradition," in *Feminism and World Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 41.

competition and differentiation from competing religious communities runs throughout many South Asian hagiographical traditions. Starting in the colonial period, the primary "other" that is juxtaposed with *bhakti* communities shifted from different sub-communities within what came to be called Hinduism to Islam. I explore this shift within the context of hagiographies of Ramanand in Chapter Five. My work on community formation in the Ramanandi *sampradāy* has been shaped in particular by the work of J.Z. Smith and by scholars of *bhakti* traditions such as Vasudha Dalmia.

Dalmia's research on the Vallabha *sampradāy*, a Krishna-focused *bhakti* community, shows that for much of their history, they were concerned with self-differentiation from other Hindu communities. In her analysis of the Vallabha *sampradāy*'s *Caurāsī Vaiṣṇava kī Vārta*, she shows how the hagiography ridiculed Brahmanical Hinduism and differentiated themselves from other *bhakti* communities devoted to Krishna. She says that "more immediate rival[s]"[60] receive more attention than distant foes like those promoting devotion to village or folk deities. She says that they are not usually seen as worthy enough foes to merit much attention, and they often attempt to just absorb these traditions rather than refute them. During the nineteenth century, the Vallabha *sampradāy* began to focus on differentiating themselves from Islam. At this time, the category of "other-ness" that had been occupied by groups seen as Hindu came to be occupied by Muslims.[61]

Jon Keune finds an analogous phenomenon in a different context through his study of the Maharashtrian *bhakti* saint Eknath. Keune explains that most hagiographies of Eknath focus on caste tensions. Several texts present Eknath as a role model for Brahmins because of his disregard for rules surrounding untouchability. He notes that stories about Muslims as foreign

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[60] Vasudha Dalmia, "Hagiography and the 'Other' in the Vallabha Sampradaya," in *Religious Interactions in Mughal India*, ed. Vasudha Dalmia and Munis D. Faruqui (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 278.
[61] Vasudha Dalmia, "Hagiography and the 'Other' in the Vallabha Sampradaya," 287.

enemies do not emerge in hagiographies of Eknath until the twentieth century.[62] Similarly, Heidi

Pauwels demonstrates that hagiographies of Kabir focused on differentiation from the *Śākta*

community who worshipped the goddess. She calls these stories "propaganda in a highly

competitive religious market."[63] She also explains that "we need to rethink the monolithic

category of 'Hinduism,'"[64] because in premodern and early-modern times, there were many

divides within it. This is a debate within the field of religious studies, and some scholars, such as

Richard King, believe it is best to abandon the term when discussing premodern India entirely.[65]

Like Dalmia and Keune, Pauwels concludes with a comparison to Islam, emphasizing that the

primary opponent of early modern *bhakti* communities was not Islam.

　　Gil Ben-Herut's study of a thirteenth-century Virashaiva hagiology written in Kannada

focuses in part on the portrayal of Jains as the "intimate, wholly other." He says that Vaishnava

Brahmins are the "opponent other"—they are portrayed as the enemies, but the potential for

redemption is still present. In comparison, Jains are considered to be "wholly other." There are

many examples of violent stories that involve killing Jains and there is evidence of competition

over courtly patronage, festivals, temple ownership, and market trading.[66] Ben-Herut borrows

this language of "other-ness" from Jacqueline Hirst.[67] In Keune's analysis of Sanskrit and

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[62] Jon Keune, "Eknāth Remembered and Reformed: *Bhakti,* Brahmans, and Untouchables in Marathi Historiography" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2011), 231. See also: Jon Keune, "Emphatically Ignoring the Neighbors: The Selective Geographic Orientation of Marathi Bhakti," *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 8 (2015): 296-314.

[63] Heidi Pauwels, "Diatribes Against Śāktas in Banarasi Bazaars and Rural Rajasthan: Kabīr and His Rāmānandī Hagiographers," in *Religious Interactions in Mughal India*, ed. Vasudha Dalmia and Munis Faruqui (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 315.

[64] Heidi Pauwels, "Diatribes Against Śāktas in Banarasi Bazaars and Rural Rajasthan," 317.

[65] Richard King, "Orientalism and the Modern Myth of 'Hinduism,'" *Numen* 46, no. 2 (1999).

[66] Gil Ben-Herut, *Śiva's Saints: The Origins of Devotion in Kannada according to Harihara's* Ragalegalu (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 157-198.

[67] Jacqueline Suthren Hirst, "Who are the Others? Three Moments in Sanskrit-Based Practice," in *Religion, Language, and Power*, ed. Nile Green and Mary Searle-Chatterjee (London: Routledge, 2008), 101-122.

Marathi *bhakti* literature, he found that the identities of Muslims and "Untouchables" are sometimes swapped when they are told.[68]

In the case of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, the turn towards Islam as the primary "other" began in the early twentieth century. This viewpoint was re-inscribed into the history of the *sampradāy*, even though it had never existed before.[69] Most early modern hagiographies of Ramanand and his followers do not mention Islam at all, or only reference it in the context of the Mughal courts. This is drastically different from contemporary Hindutva portrayals of Ramanand. Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya's contemporary hagiography of Ramanand repeatedly references the "rising tide of irreligious atrocities like conversions, destructions of idols, kidnappings"[70] that supposedly occurred before Ramanand put an end to it. He claims that Muslims destroyed temple idols and burned religious scriptures. Vijayvargiya focuses particularly on forced conversions and oppression of Hindus in Ayodhya.

Looking beyond South Asia, I draw on Jonathan Z. Smith's theories of "otherness" in identity construction, especially for understanding the phenomenon of re-writing history in a way that frames Islam as the "other" instead of communities like Brahmanical Hindus or *Śākta*s. Smith argues that "distinctions are usually drawn most sharply between 'near neighbors,'" rather than groups that are obviously distinguishable. He refers to this as "the proximate 'other.'"[71] The first example Smith uses illustrates the parallel processes that occur between nationalist and religious sectarian projects. He explains that upon the union of Scotland and England in 1603, a

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[68] Jon Keune, "The Swappable Other: A Framework for Interpreting Otherness in *Bhakti* Texts," in *Regional Communities of Devotion in South Asia: Insiders, Outsiders, and Interlopers*, ed. Gil Ben-Herut, Jon Keune, and Anne Monius (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 101.

[69] William Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 72.

[70] Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya, *Swami Ramanand: The Pioneer of Ram Bhakti (English Rendering of the Hindi Novel* Payaspayee), trans. Devarshi Kalanath Shastri (Varanasi: Jagadguru Ramanandacharya Smarak Seva Nyas, 2009), 107.

[71] Jonathan Z. Smith, "What a Difference a Difference Makes," in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 253.

society was established in order to ensure that comparable dialects of English were used in both nations, demonstrating anxiety about the distinctions between the "near neighbors." There are many other examples of this phenomena, including Canada's anxiety about establishing a national identity that does not get overshadowed by the U.S. or Nepal's concern about remaining distinct from India. In the case of religious communities, concern over "near neighbors" can be seen in the way various sects of Christianity maintain slightly different rituals, and they might be less concerned with their members practicing Buddhist meditation on the side than they would be if they started alternating between attending Catholic and Protestant masses.

Smith emphasizes the inherently political and shifting nature of "otherness." He argues that "'otherness' is not so much a matter of separation as it is a description of interaction."[72] He explains that conflicts are not based on alterity, rather, it is sameness or proximity that becomes an issue. He argues that conflicts over the "other" reveal the ways in which groups construct their own identity. Following this logic, this thesis explores how *bhakti* communities are primarily concerned with distinguishing themselves from their proximate others, which changes over time. During the period of Ramanand's lifetime and immediately following, the proximate others were primarily other communities who are now called "Hindu." However, as formerly competitive Hindu communities were consolidated, the proximate other shifted to Islam, the second largest religion in India. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there was a rise of communal discourse that juxtaposed Hinduism and Islam.

1.2.6. The Rāmāyaṇa

As the Ramanandi tradition grew, their connection to the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* deepened and they became associated with devotion to Ram and Sita. The theme of Ramanandi

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[72] Jonathan Z. Smith, "What a Difference a Difference Makes," 256.

engagement with the *Rāmāyaṇa* runs throughout this dissertation. Additionally, the Ram Rasik

engagement with the *Rāmāyaṇa* exemplifies its multiplicity and adaptability. A. K. Ramanujan

famously referred to the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, the other great epic narrative from

India, as not just texts but traditions. There is not just one singular *Rāmāyaṇa*. Many

contemporary scholars prefer to use the terminology of "tellings" of the *Rāmāyaṇa* rather than

versions or variants "to avoid the assumption that there is an invariant, an original or *Ur*-text—

usually Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, the earliest and most prestigious of them all."[73] The dating of

Valmiki's telling is unclear, but it was likely composed around the third century BCE to the third

century CE. The term "tellings" also highlights the oral nature of many popular *Rāmāyaṇa*

stories. The base narrative of Valmiki's telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is the story of Ram, the prince

of Ayodhya, who is exiled to the forest for fourteen years with his wife Sita and his brother

Lakshmana. Sita gets kidnapped by the demon Ravana, the king of the island Lanka. She is

rescued by Ram with the help of Lakshmana and Hanuman and they return to Ayodhya. The

Rāmāyaṇa usually presents Ram as the paradigmatic, ideal ruler and husband who is incapable

of making a mistake. Valmiki's telling opens with the question, "is there a man in the world

today who is truly virtuous?"[74] The answer, of course, is Ram.

Ramanujan claims that "in India and in Southeast Asia, no one ever reads the *Rāmāyaṇa*

or the *Mahābhārata* for the first time. The stories are there, 'always already.'"[75] Ramanujan

builds upon Wittgenstein's concept of "family resemblances" to account for the commonalities

between different tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, while acknowledging that sometimes the story is

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[73] A. K. Ramanujan, "Three Hundred Ramayanas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 24.

[74] Robert Goldman, trans., *Rāmāyaṇa Book One: Boyhood* (New York: The Clay Sanskrit Library and New York University Press, 2005), 29.

[75] A. K. Ramanujan, "Three Hundred *Ramayana*s: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," 46.

changed so much that different tellings could have seemingly nothing in common besides

perhaps the names of the characters. He uses the metaphor of a "pool of signifiers," like a gene

pool, that includes characters, names, and plot lines that are drawn upon and reinterpreted in

different tellings. In this metaphor, the pool is shared between everyone in South and Southeast

Asia. According to Ramanujan, the different tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* "not only relate to prior

texts directly, to borrow or refute, but they relate to each other through this common code or

common pool. Every author, if one may hazard a metaphor, dips into it and brings out a unique

crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context."[76]

The story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* has had an immeasurable impact on South Asian literature

and art, and it is frequently cited in debates about dharma, ethics, and morality in Hinduism. The

Rāmāyaṇa is also a political narrative, as it tells the story of a great Hindu king, and it has

become particularly important in contemporary Hindu nationalist politics in India. There is a

popular Hindu nationalist slogan that says "*Rām kī bhakti raṣṭra kī śakti hai*," meaning "devotion

to Ram is the strength of the nation."[77] Sheldon Pollock says that "it may be doubted whether

any other text in South Asia has ever supplied an idiom of vocabulary for political imagination

remotely comparable in longevity, frequency of deployment, and efficacy."[78] Pollock traces this

connection back to the twelfth century and says that the clear division between good and evil in

the text allows for easy political transpositions. The nationalist interpretations of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

became important in contemporary Ramanandi engagements with it. Paula Richman explains

that the "*Rāmāyaṇa* tellings provide a set of resources on which people have drawn—in their

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[76] A. K. Ramanujan, "Three Hundred *Ramayana*s: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," 46.
[77] John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 285.
[78] Sheldon Pollock, "Ramayana and Political Imagination in India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (May 1993): 262.

own way and for their own purposes—in order to accuse, justify, mediate, debate, and more."[79] Some tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* involve a drastic reinterpretation of the story, such as focusing on different characters instead of Ram or presenting Ravana as the hero instead of the villain. The theme of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the Ramanandis, and politics runs throughout my dissertation, including through royal patronage of literature, the consolidation of Vaishnavism in North India in the context of British colonization, and contemporary Hindu nationalist engagements.

1.2.7. Rasik

The Ram Rasik branch of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* is a major focus of this dissertation. The Ram Rasiks will be introduced in more depth in Chapter Three. Here, I introduce the concept of the *rasik*, which is an important part of Vaishnava *bhakti*. *Rasik* can be translated as "one who savors *rasa*" or more loosely, "aesthetic connoisseur." *Rasa* is a Sanskrit word that means "taste," "juice," or "flavor," but in technical literary terms, it refers to the aesthetic sentiment that is evoked in performances or works of literature. Marth Ann Selby writes, "*rasa* is what is produced by *bhāva* ('emotion') in combination with *abhinaya* ('dramatic gesture'). *Rasa* is the distillate of emotion and gesture produced by the actors on a stage (or characters in a poem), and it is this distillate that is savored – experienced – by the *rasika* (the 'taster' or connoisseur). There is no *rasa* without a *rasika*."[80] The work *rasa* first appears in a Vedic context, referring to "juice," and the earliest theory of *rasa* in aesthetics can be traced to Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (c. 4th-5th centuries CE).[81]

[79] Paula Richman, "Introduction: The Diversity of the *Ramayana* Tradition," in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 12.
[80] Martha Ann Selby, *Grow Long, Blessed Night: Love Poems from Classical India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 22.
[81] David Buchta and Graham Schweig, "Rasa Theory," in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, ed. Knut Jacobsen, Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar, and Vasudha Narayanan (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

In Vaishnava contexts, the word *rasik* also has the connotation of "devotee."[82] The term *rasikarāy*, meaning "sovereign esthete," is typically reserved for Krishna,[83] and sometimes the word *rasik* itself is a synonym for Krishna, making the term *rasik* more associated with Krishna devotees than Ram devotees.[84] The Gaudiya Vaishnavas, a *bhakti* tradition devoted to Krishna, led important innovations such as the introduction of *bhakti rasa* into Sanskrit aesthetic theory, the "rediscovery" of pilgrimage sites in the Braj region, and the emphasis of the *līlā* or "divine play" of Krishna.

Rupa Gosvamin (c. 1470-1557) and his nephew Jiva Gosvamin (born c. 1513) are two key Gaudiya Vaishnava teachers. Rupa Gosvamin was a disciple of Caitanya in Bengal before settling in Vrindavan. Rupa and Jiva Gosvamin's teachings include significant theological and literary innovations, including the popularization of the *bhakti rasa*. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is an important text in the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition that was written most likely in South India during the tenth century and gained rapid popularity throughout India.[85] The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* features many legends about Krishna, and it became the source of inspiration for lots of Krishna *bhakti* poetry. The stories in this and other Gaudiya Vaishnava texts present a drastically different vision of Krishna than the one who convinces Arjuna to go to battle in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Stories from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* focus on Krishna as a playful child and a flirtatious young adult.

The Gaudiya Vaishnavas led a significant innovation in Sanskrit literary theory that influenced the Ram Rasik branch of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. *Bhakti* is central to Rupa and Jiva Gosvamin's understanding of *rasa*. *Rasa* had previously been relegated to the realm of

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[82] Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings*, 35.
[83] John Stratton Hawley, *At Play with Krishna: Pilgrimage Dramas from Brindavan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 296.
[84] Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings*, 35.
[85] Sheldon Pollock, *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 22.

aesthetics, primarily dramaturgy and literature, and Rupa and Jiva Gosvamin played an important role in bringing it into the field of theology. Rupa and Jiva Gosvamin argue that *bhakti* is itself a *rasa*, as part of what Pollock refers to as the "final chapter" in the history of *rasa*.[86] Prior to this, the category of *kāvya* or "literature" referred primarily to texts like Kalidasa's poetry, which were distinct from "religious" texts like the *Purāṇa*s.

Rupa and Jiva focus on the importance of desire for Krishna. Rupa says that desire is the most important cause of *rasa*. He explains, "when desire freshly sprouts in a devotee of Hari, poetry or drama about him becomes a source of the aesthetic elements." This is because "desire transforms Krishna and the rest of the characters into a locus of the erotic rasa, and they in turn, as they come to be experienced, heighten the desire all the more."[87] Some interlocutors with Rupa and Jiva question how desire for Krishna can produce bliss if the suffering of separation is painful. In his commentary titled *The Passage Through the Impassable*, Jiva responds by explaining that this bliss is superseded by the hope of reunion. He calls the *bhakti rasa* "supermundane," and says that it surpasses all other *rasas*. Jiva further explains that the desire for closeness with Krishna "commonizes" the emotions of contemporary devotees with those in the past, evoking an identical *rasa* in both audiences.[88] In Jiva's *Treatise on Divine Love*, he explains that the *bhakti rasa* has the ability to "transform anyone, from the material hedonist to the spiritually liberated—indeed, even those without eyes to see or ears to hear, even the insensate man—so how could it be disbelieved?"[89] Like Rupa, Jiva uses the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as the best example for the transformative power of *bhakti rasa*. He says that literature is only needed for those who are beginning to experience desire for God. In committed devotees,

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[86] Sheldon Pollock, *A Rasa Reader*, 21.
[87] Sheldon Pollock, *A Rasa Reader*, 304.
[88] Sheldon Pollock, *A Rasa Reader*, 305.
[89] Sheldon Pollock, *A Rasa Reader*, 307.

"*anything* can cause rasa, even turning one's mind randomly toward the Blessed One- indeed, even hearing the notes of a flute."[90] Even though devotion is meant to be fully accessible to anyone at any time, it can be aided through meditative poetry.

The Gaudiya Vaishnavas taught *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana*, a "religio-dramatic technique" that allows devotees to inhabit the world their devotion focuses on.[91] It consists of imagining oneself in the role of a character in the divine drama. David Haberman explains that "one enters the religious reality by assuming, *via role-taking*, an identity located within that reality. The new identity is the vehicle to the new reality."[92] The "role-taking" taught by the Gaudiya Vaishnavas is sometimes done through meditation, which is taught through meditation manuals that instruct the devotee to imagine the erotic play of Krishna and Radha throughout the eight periods of the day. Other manuals instruct the devotee to imagine themselves as a *sakhī* watching a meeting between Radha and Krishna.[93] Rupa Gosvamin wrote the first such poem, the *Aṣṭakālīyalīlāsmaraṇamaṇgalastotraṃ*.[94] It is highly visual, meant to produce an image of the scene in the mind of the reader to facilitate meditation on Krishna. Haberman describes this poetry as both a production of and a facilitator of meditation.[95] There were many poems written in this model in both Sanskrit and vernacular languages.

Haberman refers to the characters deemed suitable for role-taking meditations as "paradigmatic individuals."[96] These paradigmatic individuals are often servants and younger relatives, particularly women. Sometimes male devotees dress as these women as part of their

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[90] Sheldon Pollock, *A Rasa Reader*, 310.
[91] David Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation: A Study of* Rāgānugā Bhakti Sādhana (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3.
[92] David Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation*, 7.
[93] Norvin Hein, "*Līlā*," in *The Gods at Play: Līlā in South Asia*, ed. William Sax (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 17.
[94] David Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation*, 128.
[95] David Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation*, 130.
[96] David Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation*, 8.

practice of *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana*. Barbara Holdrege says that the devotee "engages in a regiment of external bodily practices […] in order to re-figure the karmically bound biological body as a body of devotion."[97] Frederick Smith points out that it is uncertain whether this practice "is mentioned in any Sanskrit text, strongly suggesting that it was originally a local non-orthodox practice," and he describes this as a complex "cultural dynamic between folk and classical," a "'vernacularization' of Sanskrit traditions."[98] Haberman describes the highly detailed typology of individuals that are suitable for meditation, which involves different degrees of proximity to Radha and Krishna and different types of devotion including servitude and friendship. Tony Stewart explains that "following his (and on occasion, her) personal emotion makeup, that is, following the path that comes most naturally, the devotee would focus on the service of Kṛṣṇa, on Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, or even on Rādhā alone."[99] The highest valued group is the women who feel erotic love for Krishna. In particular, women who are married to other men but who are still willing to risk their marriages are valorized.[100] Rupa Gosvamin's followers sometimes call him an incarnation of Rupamanjari, Radha's *sakhī*, as this is believed to be a character with whom he is closely associated.[101]

The concept of *līlā* is important for *rasik*s. *Līlā* can be interpreted as divine play, and William Sax explains that "it refers not only to the supreme being's playful actions but also to the dramatic 'plays' staged by human beings in memory of those actions."[102] *Līlā* is an integral component to many aspects of Hindu theology, particularly Vaishnava theology, and is

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[97] Barbara Holdrege, *Bhakti and Embodiment: Fashioning Divine Bodies and Devotional Bodies in Kṛṣṇa Bhakti* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 95.

[98] Frederick Smith, *The Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 352-3.

[99] Tony K. Stewart, *The Final Word: The Caitanya Caritamrita and the Grammar of Religious Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 223.

[100] David Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation*, 55.

[101] Sheldon Pollock, *A Rasa Reader*, 301.

[102] William Sax, "Introduction," in *The Gods at Play: Līlā in South Asia*, ed. William Sax (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.

sometimes viewed as the motivation behind God's creation of the universe. In the performative

*līlā*s enacted by devotees, some Hindus believe that the divine is present on stage and it is

possible to achieve *darśan* by viewing the play. Norvin Hein locates the origins of *līlā* in a

theological sense to the third or fourth century CE, in Badarayana's *Vedānta Sūtra*,[103] a text that

has been commented upon extensively by Vaishnava scholars. Hein argues that Krishna *bhakti*

communities have played the most influential role in developing the doctrines of *līlā*. The

concept of *līlā* is closely tied to *bhakti* traditions. Ramanujan writes that the ideal devotee wants

to both possess and be possessed by God, explaining, "in *bhakti*, all the arts become also

'techniques of ecstasy,' incitements to possession."[104] Both Ramanujan and Hopkins highlight a

motif in Tamil *bhakti* poetry wherein the devotee devours God, holding him in his belly.

Hopkins writes, "God both possesses *and is possessed by* the devotee."[105] This connects to the

"eating" connotation of the word "*bhakti*." The performances of *līlā*s can be seen as another way

of possessing and becoming close to God.

The Ras Lila is a tradition of drama enacted by Brahmin boys in Braj. Krishna

worshippers believe that they recreate the original Ras Lila performed by Krishna and the *gopī*s,

and that this original *līlā* is re-created through each performance.[106] Hawley argues that in this

genre of performance, everything needs to be understood as a play within a play. Contemporary

performances are not merely imitating the original *līlā*, they are participating in the divine play

themselves. The characters are considered *svarūp*s, meaning they are believed to take on the

form of the actual deities they portray, and they are worshipped as such.[107] Hawley also claims

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[103] Norvin Hein, "*Līlā*," 14.
[104] A. K. Ramanujan, *Hymns for the Drowning* (Delhi: Penguin Press, 2005), 116.
[105] Steven Paul Hopkins, *Singing the Body of God*, 150.
[106] John Stratton Hawley, "Every Play a Play Within a Play," in *The Gods at Play: Līlā in South Asia*, ed. William Sax (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 115.
[107] John Stratton Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*, 18.

that Ras Lila is liturgy in addition to being drama. He sees it as analogous to a Christian

sacrament in the way it is repeated and the force that its repetition enacts upon the devotee.[108]

Similarly, the Ram Lila is a critical part of the Ram *bhakti* tradition. This recreation of the

Rāmāyaṇa is performed every year, often based upon the popular telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* called

the *Rāmcaritmānas*. The Ram Lila performance tradition likely began in the sixteenth century.[109]

Lutgendorf ties the developments of the Ram Lila directly to the *rasik* tradition. He says that

"what began as a play was transformed, under the guidance of the Banaras rulers and their *rasik*

advisors [...] into an enduring ideological statement" that resembles the Ras Lila.[110]

Ram Rasiks reinterpret the story of the Ramayana, placing an emphasis on Ram's

childhood, Ram's relationship to Sita, the events of the Ramayana that take place in Janakpur

and Ayodhya, the *sakhī*s of Sita, and the *līlā* of Ram and Sita. The Ram Rasiks believe that there

are two *līlā*s: the *jñey līlā* ("*līlā* to be understood") is the conventional story of Ram and Sita and

the *dhyey līlā* ("*līlā* to be contemplated") is omitted from the story. They teach that *mādhurya*

(erotic sweetness) predominates in the *dhyey līlā*.[111] The Ram Rasik tradition is clearly heavily

influenced by Gaudiya Vaishnava teachings on *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana*. Initiates in the Ram

Rasik tradition are also taught to meditate on the *Rāmāyaṇa* through detailed guidelines found in

meditation manuals that are taught by gurus. Agradas's *Dhyān Mañjarī* (c. late 16th century) is

believed to be the first such meditation manual.[112] The meditation manuals instruct initiates to

visualize or sometimes even dress up and enact roles in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. This is an example of

what Lutgendorf refers to as the "characteristic Vaishnava concern with entering into the fabric

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[108] John Stratton Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*, 16.
[109] Phillip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the* Rāmcaritmānas *of Tulsidas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 254.
[110] Phillip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, 321.
[111] Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, 317.
[112] Patton Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community: The Politics of Remembrance and the Authority of the Hindu Saint," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 22 (2018): 434.

of mythic narrative."[113] Initiates become specific figures, particularly attendants of Ram and Sita. They are provided with significant contextual information to enable this, including age, place of birth, names of relatives, and more.[114] After taking on this identity, they imagine themselves aiding Ram and Sita throughout the eight periods of the day. Lutgendorf explains the goal of this meditation. He writes, "what begins as 'imaginative conception' (*bhāvnā*) gradually becomes real. By long practice in visualization, the devotee begins to catch 'glimpses' (*jhalak*) of the actual *līlā*; these gradually intensify and lengthen until the adept acquires the ability to enter the realm of Saket at any moment—a condition regarded by this tradition as 'liberation in the body' (*sadeh mukti*)."[115] This form of meditation still plays an important role in the religious lives of Ram Rasiks today.

    The Rasik branch of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* is sometimes called the *rahasya sampradāy* because of the secrecy and esotericism surrounding some of their texts and teachings.[116] This commitment to secrecy as well as the tendency to claim that texts and practices are much older than they really are in order to cultivate a sense of authority both contribute to the lack of scholarly information on the tradition. However, a study of the Ram and Krishna *rasik* traditions help disrupt what Lutgendorf refers to as the overly-broad generalization that "*bhakti* sects emphasized spontaneous, ecstatic practices and a similarly spontaneous experience of grace, and give little importance to psycho-spiritual and ritual techniques."[117] Additionally, the study of Vaishnava *rasik* traditions helps further Burchett's claim that *bhakti* practices need to be

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[113] Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, 251.
[114] Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, 317.
[115] Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, 318.
[116] Vasudha Paramasivan, "Between Text and Sect: Early Nineteenth Century Shifts in the Theology of Ram" (PhD diss., University of California-Berkeley, 2010), 72.
[117] Philip Lutgendorf, *Life of a Text*, 310.

understood in dialogue with rather than in opposition to tantric practices.[118] Despite the importance of these traditions, there are far fewer studies on the Ram Rasiks than the Krishna *rasik*s. Lutgendorf suggests that the more pronounced lack of scholarly attention towards the Ram Rasiks is due to the assumption that erotic and aesthetic themes are more associated with Krishna. My dissertation aims to contribute to this research.

1.2.8. Key Themes and Review of Relevant Literature Conclusion

The seven themes (*bhakti*, authorship and performance, hagiography, *bhakti* and gender, community formation, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and *rasik*) I have reviewed here are woven throughout this dissertation. These themes are also closely connected to one another. The word "*bhakti*" refers to a broad range of devotional traditions, and the Ramanandi *sampradāy* plays an important role in the modern narrative of the "*bhakti* movement." Various aspects of the Ramanandi tradition break down the binaries associated with *bhakti*, such as *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ* religiosity, *bhakti* and tantra, and *bhakti* and *rīti*. The diversity of *bhakti* traditions and the expansiveness of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* are emphasized throughout my research. Performance is closely related to the study of *bhakti* traditions more broadly, as *bhakti* poetry is commonly transmitted orally and performed as song before being written down into manuscripts. The complicated nature of the authorship of *bhakti* poetry is connected to the topic of *bhakti* hagiographies, as it is often difficult to distinguish between poetry that is written *by bhakti* saints from poetry written *about* the saints. The hagiographies that I examine in this dissertation, written between the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries, are all written well after the lifetimes of Ramanand and his earliest followers, and I am interested in how these stories are received and how they change over time.

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[118] Patton Burchett, "*Bhakti* Religion and Tantric Magic in Mughal India: Kacchvāhās, Rāmānandīs, and Nāths, circa 1500-1750" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2012), 8.

As explained in my review of literature on *bhakti* and gender, historical *bhakti* saints continue to impact contemporary Hindu views of religion and gender. Female saints like Mirabai become important symbols, even though there is a lack of historical information about her and it is possible that some of the poems attributed to her and hagiographies written about her were written by men. The review of literature on community formation is also closely connected to the topic of hagiographies, as hagiographies are often a medium through which religious community boundaries are negotiated. The literature on the *Rāmāyaṇa* highlights the diversity of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, and I contribute to scholarship on this diversity through my study of the Ram Rasik branch of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. I also highlight the close relationship between the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Hindu nationalism, which I revisit in Chapter Five. The review of literature on Vaishnava *rasik* traditions connects the Ram Rasiks to the Gaudiya Vaishnavas, setting the foundation for further discussion of the development of a pan-Vaishnava identity in North India. The scholarship reviewed here provides the foundation for the analysis of the primary sources that I describe below.

1.3. Introduction to Primary Hagiographies

The main sources for this dissertation are premodern hagiologies composed in early modern North India, hagiologies of Ram Rasik saints composed in colonial-era India, and contemporary hagiographies of Ramanand. One of the most influential and widespread North Indian *bhakti* hagiologies is Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl* ("Garland of Devotees"), which was written circa 1600 CE in Galta, Rajasthan. This is the origin of the *bhaktamāl* genre. It mentions around eight hundred different *bhakta*s.[119] William Pinch calls Nabhadas's approach a "supra-sectarian

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[119] J. Hare, *Garland of Devotees: Nābhādās'* Bhaktamāl *and Modern Hinduism* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2011), 44.

religious framework,"[120] emphasizing the idea that Nabhadas was concerned with assembling a diverse group of *bhakta*s and *sant*s into one community. Pinch argues that Nabhadas's inclusivity was motivated by concern with attracting both political and popular patronage. J. Hare discusses the difficulty of sorting out the myths from the historical facts in the *Bhaktamāl*. Hare explains that Nabhadas "presents a community, united in *bhakti*, which remains rooted in the monastic order even as it transcends particular sectarian affiliations as well as time itself."[121] Despite the "transcendence of time itself," due to lack of other resources, the *Bhaktamāl* remains one of the most influential sources of historical information about many *bhakti* saints. Heidi Pauwels suggests that looking towards the *Bhaktamāl* is the first step in writing about any *bhakti* saint from North India, as it is the earliest and most authoritative source of evidence.[122]

Another difficulty of ascertaining historical information from the *Bhaktamāl* is what Pinch calls its "cryptic brevity," which called for "detailed exegetical commentary."[123] Many of the stories were incomplete and would be incomprehensible without prior knowledge of the legends and a teacher to explain them. The brevity of the *Bhaktamāl* led Priyadas, a follower of Caitanya who lived in Vrindavan, to write the *Bhaktirasabodhinī* in 1712. He added significant details to some of the figures from the *Bhaktamāl* and left others out entirely. Priyadas's text adds additional attention to the *sampradāy*s themselves as well as their relationship to royal patrons.[124] Each commentary and expansion of the *Bhaktamāl* reflects developing sectarian concerns as *sant*s and *bhakta*s are added or removed or reinvented in the different versions.

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[120] William Pinch, "History, Devotion, and the Search for Nabhadas of Galta," in *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia,* ed. by Daud Ali (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 382.
[121] J. Hare, "Contested Communities and the Re-Imagination of Nabhadas's Bhaktamal," in *Time, History and the Religious Imaginary in South Asia,* ed. Anne Murphy (New York: Routledge, 2011), 150.
[122] Heidi Pauwels, *In Praise of Holy Men: Hagiographic Poems by and about Harimrām Vyās* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 2002), 15.
[123] William Pinch, "History, Devotion, and the Search for Nabhadas of Galta," 371.
[124] J. Hare, "Contested Communities and the Re-Imagination of Nābhādās's Bhaktamal," 151.

The second early modern hagiology of Ramanandi saints that I examine is Anantadas's *Parcaī*s. Anantadas's *Parcaī*s are a collection of narrative poems about the lives of several *bhakti* saints, including well-known saints like Kabir and Namdev alongside lesser-known saints like Dhana, Angad, Trilochan, and Pipa. Many of these saints are part of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, and some scholars believe that Anantadas himself was part of or highly influenced by this tradition too. His poems were likely orally composed over a long period of time before being written down into manuscripts around 1600 CE in Rajasthan, making it roughly contemporaneous with Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl*. It is unclear which hagiography was composed first, but Nabhadas is described by Ramanandis as a direct disciple of Agradas, whereas Anantadas describes himself as a disciple of Vinodi, who in turn was a disciple of Agradas. This suggests that Nabhadas likely lived and composed his hagiography before Anantadas; but as David Lorenzen notes, they "could easily have been contemporaries."[125] In the *Parcaī*s, *bhakti* is extolled over all other forms of religious expression, such as the practice of rituals or asceticism. Anantadas states his priority clearly: "If one ignores the restrictions of tradition and scripture, then one is in the company of Ram," as translated by Callewaert.[126] In the stories, Hari, Ram, and Gobinda are all names for a Vaishnava God. Like the genre of hagiography in general, Anantadas's *Parcaī*s cannot be used as a source of historically factual information about the saints' lives. For instance, Anantadas claims that several saints were Ramanand's direct disciples, despite the geographical and temporal realities that make this improbable. However, it is still possible to learn about early North Indian conceptions of *bhakti* through them, and they are an important resource for learning about conceptions of gender in *bhakti* traditions.

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[125] David Lorenzen, *Kabīr Legends and Ananta-Dās's Kabīr Parachai* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 10.
[126] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas: The Bhakti Poets of North India* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000), 18.

The next two hagiologies I study are particularly associated with the Ram Rasik branch. They were composed as the Ram Rasik branch grew and became institutionalized in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I argue that the Ram Rasik branch played an important role in furthering the *bhaktamāl* genre. The *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* ("Light on the Garland of Rasik Devotees") (c. 1839) of Jivaram "Yugalpriya Sharana" is modeled after Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl*. Similarly, Maharaja Raghuraj Singh's *Rām Rasikāvalī* ("Lineage of Ram Rasiks") (c. 1888) explicitly refers to itself as a *bhaktamāl*. Maharaja Raghuraj Singh was the king of Rewa, a former Rajput kingdom in the Baghelkhand region, which is now located in northeastern Madhya Pradesh. Raghuraj Singh ruled at a pivotal time of colonial history, and he had a complicated relationship with the British administrators. I cite the *Rām Rasikāvalī*'s depiction of Ramanand's female disciples in Chapter Two, and it is explored at length in Chapter Four.

Three additional hagiographies I examine were written in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and are centered on Ramanand rather than his broader community of disciples. Bhagvan Prasad, known as both "Sitaramsharana" and "Rupkala," wrote a full-length hagiography of Ramanand called the *Bhaktisudhāsvād* circa 1903-1909. This text added important details to Ramanand's life story, which became considered to be widely authoritative and influenced British colonial understandings of the history of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. Bhagvan Prasad also played an important role in establishing "a sense of fixity" in the *bhaktamāl* tradition.[127] The most influential figure in reshaping the image of Ramanand and reformulating the Ramanandi *sampradāy* in the twentieth century is likely Bhagavadacarya, formerly known as Bhagavad Das, who lived from 1879-1981 and became the first Jagadguru Ramanandacarya in 1977. Bhagavadacarya is the author of an influential twentieth-century hagiography called the *Śrīmad Rāmānand Digvijaya* (1927). Bhagavadacarya is associated with the Ram Rasik

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[127] J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees," 211.

tradition. William Pinch writes, "as Bhagavadacharya's stature grew, so did the new Ramanandi emphasis on a history of Muslim tyranny as both a catalyst and a backdrop for Hindu decline prior to the arrival of Ramanand."[128] This emphasis on Muslim/Hindu conflict is clearly seen in Bhagavadacarya's *Śrīmad Rāmānand Digvijaya*, which he wrote in Sanskrit with his own Hindi commentary. It depicts Ramanand traveling around India, spreading devotion to Ram, and "re-converting" Muslims back to Hinduism.

The last hagiography that I examine is Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya's hagiography of Ramanand, which was originally published in Hindi as *Pāyāspayī* and was translated into English by Devarshi Kalanath Shastri as *Payaspayee: Swami Ramanand the Pioneer of Ram Bhakti* (2009). Dayakrishna Vijayvargina is the former chairman of the Rajasthan Sahitya Academy, an influential literary organization and archive. Devarshi Kalanath Shashtri is a prolific scholar who has written in Sanskrit, Hindi, and English. In my analysis of this English hagiography, I focus particularly on the use of Hindu nationalist tropes and rhetoric in its depiction of Ramanand. These hagiographies written between the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries demonstrate the important role that the Ramanandi tradition, particularly the Ram Rasik branch, played in furthering the *bhaktamāl* genre. I use them as primary sources throughout my dissertation in order to explore how the Ramanandi *sampradāy* developed over time.

1.4. Organization of the Dissertation and Key Contributions

Chapter Two of the dissertation, "The Historiography of the Ramanandi *Sampradāy*: A Critical Review of Literature, Unresolved Questions, and the State of the Field" focuses on unresolved questions related to the history of the Ramanandis. I examine debates surrounding

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[128] William Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, 79.

details of Ramanand's life story, such as his date and place of birth, the contested compositions attributed to him written in both Hindi and Sanskrit, and the controversies surrounding the identities of his earliest disciples. These debates are important particularly for the role they play in narratives of the "*bhakti* movement" more broadly. I provide an overview of the theory that there were "two Ramanands," and how this shifted from a controversy over whether he was *nirguṇ*- or *saguṇ*-oriented to a controversy over whether he composed in Sanskrit in addition to Hindi. It is likely that the Sanskrit compositions attributed to Ramanand were composed by his followers well after his lifetime, and I provide an overview of each of these compositions (the *Ānanda Bhaṣya*, the *Rāmārcana Paddhati*, the *Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara*, and the *Bhaviṣya Khaṇḍa* of the *Agastya Saṃhitā*) and a discussion of what they reveal about the development of the *sampradāy*. In addition, I describe the origins of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, which did not coalesce until well after Ramanand's lifetime. I then provide an introduction to the historiography of the Ram Rasik tradition and Ramanandi engagement with different tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, namely Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas*, the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, and the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa*.

Chapter Three, "Gendered Devotion: *Sakhī*s as Model Devotees and Early Women in the Ramanandi *Sampradāy*," is divided into two sections which are connected by the shared concern with how gender has been understood within the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. This contributes to scholarship on the question of why women have often been portrayed as model devotees in *bhakti* traditions even though they are vastly outnumbered by male *bhakti* saints and gurus. In the first section, I provide a review of the trope of the *sakhī* in South Asian literature in order to understand the complexity of this stock character in romantic narratives and why the *sakhī* became a model devotee for the Ram Rasiks. In addition, I explore how confusion around this

esoteric tradition has led to conflation between Ram Rasiks and Gaudiya Vaishnava *rasik*s as well as hijras and other non-heteronormative groups. In the second section, I explore how gender factors into claims about *bhakti* and social egalitarianism. I critically analyze the claim that Ramanand was the first *bhakti* guru to accept women as devotees, and I look at the representations of the wives and other women featured in early modern hagiographies of male saints.

Chapter Four, "The Spread of Ram *Bhakti* and the 'Rediscovery' of Sacred Sites" focuses on the development of Ramanandi pilgrimage sites and temples from the late eighteenth century to today. I analyze Ramanand's connection to Varanasi in his hagiographies and I explore how this contributes to the narrative of Vaishnavism in Varanasi as associated particularly with devotion to Ram. The claim that Ramanand lived and taught in Varanasi is consistent across accounts of his life, and Varanasi is also the home of his two most famous disciples, Kabir and Ravidas. However, many of Ramanand's other devotees were from Rajasthan, and hagiographies depict lots of movement between Rajasthan and Varanasi. The association between Ramanand and Varanasi helps bolster Ramanand's authority as a traditional Hindu guru. It also helps the Ramanandis to capitalize on the popularity of Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas*, which was composed in Varanasi and is reenacted through the Ram Lila to this day. In addition, this chapter focuses on the Ram Rasiks' impact on identifying specific places like Ayodhya and Janakpur in southern Nepal as sites from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the Ram Rasiks led an eastward shift of Ramanandi centers from Rajasthan to Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and southern Nepal. Janakpur received renewed attention recently, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's launch of the Incredible India 2.0 campaign and the Swadesh Darshan scheme, which created theme-based tourism circuits. In 2022, the first Indian tourist train extended into Nepal to

connect Janakpur to the Ramayana Circuit. The Ram Rasik tradition played an unacknowledged role in laying the foundation for this development.

Chapter Five, "The *Bhaktamāl* Genre, Ram Rasik Hagiographers, and the Construction of Ramanand as a National Integrator" examines modern hagiographies of Ramanand from the nineteenth century onward and the role of the Ram Rasiks in shaping the contemporary view of Ramanand as a "national integrator" of India. I argue that the Ram Rasiks were essential for the continuity of the *bhaktamāl* genre through their production of commentaries on Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl*. I examine two nineteenth-century Ram Rasik hagiologies in the *bhaktamāl* genre – the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* (1839) of Jivaram "Yugalpriya Sharana," which I use to examine intra-sectarian divides, and the *Rām Rasikāvalī* (1864) of Maharaja Raghuraj Singh, where I highlight the entry on Raghuraj Singh's father, Viswanath Singh, as an example of the Ram Rasiks' efforts to bridge the divide between Ram- and Krishna-focused *bhakti*. I then discuss three hagiographies centered entirely on Ramanand which add a significant amount of details to his life story. I focus particularly on Hindu nationalist interpretations of Ramanand, such as in stories of Ramanand "re-converting" Muslims to Hinduism and teaching them about the importance of devotion to Ram, contributing to recent scholarship on *bhakti* and contemporary politics.

Overall, my dissertation aims to explain the complicated history of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* through an examination of hagiographies written between the seventeenth century and today. I focus on gender in two main ways—through a study of the Ram Rasik tradition, in which male devotees venerate female *sakhī*s of Sita as models of devotion and through an interrogation of the claim that the Ramanandis are a particularly socially egalitarian *bhakti*

tradition. I argue that the Ram Rasiks contributed to the spread of Vaishnavism in North India by merging Ram and Krishna *bhakti* and by propagating the *bhaktamāl* genre.

Chapter Two – The Historiography of the Ramanandi *Sampradāy*: A Critical Review of
Literature, Unresolved Questions, and the State of the Field

Introduction

The history of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* has played an important role in scholarship on

bhakti traditions more broadly. There are many unresolved questions about Ramanand, including

basic facts such as whether he lived in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, whether or not

Ramanuja was his guru, whether he was born in North or South India, and whether or not famous

bhakti poet-saints like Kabir and Ravidas were truly his disciples. Unlike many famous *bhakti*

figures, there are only a few texts attributed directly to Ramanand, none of which are particularly

well-known. Ramanand's status as a social reformer is also contested, as he has been

alternatingly understood as either an advocate for egalitarianism or an upholder of the

Brahmanical hierarchy. Burchett calls Ramanand "an absolutely pivotal, yet mysterious and

controversial figure in the historiography of *bhakti*."[129]

This chapter provides an overview of the major debates surrounding Ramanand's life and

the early formation of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* as well as the stakes involved, including

internal debates among members of the *sampradāy* and secondary scholarship on the tradition

written in Hindi and English. Many of these debates are interconnected—for instance, the dating

of Ramanand's life connects to claims about his guru-disciple lineages, and the attribution of

Sanskrit compositions to Ramanand informs his characterization as a guru who was inclusive of

different social classes and castes. These debates are also important for broader questions beyond

the scope of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, such as the place of Sanskrit literature in *bhakti*

traditions more broadly and the complexity of the narrative that *bhakti* started in South India and

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[129] Patton Burchett, "Rhetoric in the Hagiography of 'Untouchable' Saints: Discerning *Bhakti's* Ambivalence on
Caste and Brahminhood," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 12, no. 2 (Aug 2009): 135.

spread to the North. Hawley points to the way Ramanand has been reinterpreted over time, suggesting that "Rāmānand solves too many problems on too little evidence."[130] It is precisely the lack of historical evidence about Ramanand and the early Ramanandi community that makes the story of his lifetime and the *sampradāy*'s inception so amenable to reinvention. Based on my analysis of the historiography of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, I conclude the chapter by arguing that the debates surrounding aspects of Ramanand's life emerge during moments of controversy over the legacy of the *sampradāy*. Throughout the chapter, I emphasize the way the Ramanandi *sampradāy* has been invoked as characteristic of *bhakti* traditions more broadly.

2.1. Ramanuja, Pan-Indian Bhakti, and Guru-Disciples Relationships in Bhakti Traditions

A common trope in the narrative of the "*bhakti* movement" is that *bhakti* started in South India and spread to the North, uniting all of India in love and devotion to the Divine. Ramanand plays a key role in some iterations of this story. There is a common Hindi verse of unknown origin, *bhakti draviḍ upajī laye Rāmānand* ("*bhakti* was brought from the South by Ramanand") that summarizes the idea that Ramanand was key to the spread of *bhakti*.[131] This is premised on the idea that Ramanand was a disciple of or in the lineage of Ramanuja, and the idea that he was born in the South rather than Prayag (Allahabad) before settling in Varanasi.

Ramanuja is one of the most famous philosophers in the history of Hinduism. He is a proponent of the qualified non-dualism school of Vedanta and he lived and taught in a Tamil community in South India. He likely lived around 1017-1137, and he identified *brahman* directly

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[130] John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 272.
[131] As noted by Purushottam Agrawal, "In Search of Rāmānand: The Guru of Kabīr and Others," in *Ancient to Modern: Religion, Power, and Community in India*, ed. Ishita Banerjee-Dube and Saurabh Dube (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 164 and by John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 102.

with Vishnu in his interpretations of the *Upaniṣad*s.[132] Ramanand is connected to Ramanuja in

Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl*. Hare offers this translation of the relevant section of the *Bhaktamāl* that

discusses the relationship between Rāmānand and Rāmānuja:

> "The glory of Rāmānuja's path spread through the world like nectar.
>
> Devācārya and Hariyānand, second in greatness.
>
> His [disciple], Rāghavānand gave honor to the *bhaktas*.
>
> He took the earth into the shelter of his wings and settled in Kāśī.
>
> He strengthened the bhakti of the four classes (*varan*) and stages of life (*āśram*).
>
> His [disciple] Rāmanānd appeared. The world's auspiciousness took form in him.
>
> The glory of Rāmānuja's path spread through the world like nectar."[133]

This is the first instance of the trope of the four Vaishnava *sampradāy*s and the idea that the

"*bhakti* movement" began in the South and progressed to the North. Over time, the importance

of Raghavanand's role in linking Ramanand and Ramanuja was diminished, and Ramanand was

presented as a direct disciple of Ramanuja. Hawley complicates this narrative and explains that

the *sampradāy*s are supposed to protect an uninterrupted transmission of teachings between

Southern and Northern Vaishnavas. Hawley uses the metaphor of a three-tiered house to describe

the important figures within each *sampradāy*s. The first layer is the god to whom they are

devoted, the second layer is the South Indian teacher (in the case of the Ramanandis, Ramanuja),

and the third is the Northern guru (Ramanand). However, Hawley notes that "the girders

anchoring these northern teachers and their communities to a presumed southern past were

sometimes shaky."[134] He explains that Nabhadas presented this model as a way to present

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[132] Julius Lipner, "Rāmānuja," in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, ed. Knut Jacobsen, Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar, and Vasudha Narayanan (Leiden: Brill, 2018).
[133] J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees," 55.
[134] John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 103.

Vaishnava *bhakti* traditions as cohesive and organized rather than presenting this as an actual historical description.

The idea that *bhakti* originated and the South and traveled to the North became a standard trope in the narrative of "the *bhakti* movement," influencing scholarly explanations of the historiography of *bhakti*. Hawley explains that an over-reliance on the idea that *bhakti* originated in the South and traveled to the North led Hazaripradad Dvivedi in his *Hindī Sāhitya kī Bhūmikā* to ignore evidence of Sufi literature's influence on Northern *bhakti* poetry.[135] Throughout the twentieth century, the idea of the four *sampradāy*s was also featured in the writing of Kshitimohan Sen, Frederic Salmon Growse, R.G. Bhandarkar, and J.N. Farquhar. Ramanand and Ramanuja become paradigmatic examples of the four *sampradāy*s and the movement of *bhakti* from the South to the North, and Hawley suggests that this was influenced by the cosmopolitanism of the Kachvahas of Rajasthan, who became the patrons of Nabhadas and the Ramanandis around the time the *Bhaktamāl* was written.[136] Additionally, Hawley explains, "because their ranks were so inclusive and expanding so rapidly, they more than others needed a history that would validate them, anchoring them in a past they themselves were in a process of creating."[137] This demonstrates the critical role that institutional memory and history play in the legitimization of religious innovations.

David Lorenzen describes two main methods of establishing authority in *bhakti* traditions—the *itihāsa-purāṇa* method, which traces a lineage's history to its associated deity, and the *guru-paramparā* or "guru-disciple lineage" method. Lorenzen contrasts these methods with the establishment of authority in Vedic and Shastric Hindu traditions, which reject "historical precedent and individual illumination as sources" of religious teachings, instead

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[135] John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 107.
[136] John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 113.
[137] John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 116.

believing that "all religious truth is embodied in the Vedas, texts that are external and independent of all human agency."[138] *Bhakti* traditions, on the other hand, are concerned with "both historical precedent and the religious authority of specific persons."[139] This concern with historical precedent and religious authority placed in gurus can be seen throughout the history of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. *Guru-paramparā*s are commonly described in emic accounts of *bhakti sampradāy*s. Daniel Gold says that as *paramparā*s are institutionalized into *panth*s and *sampradāy*s for the purpose of carrying on the guru's teachings, the memory of the entire lineage becomes more important.[140]

Some *bhakti* hagiologies are primarily concerned with listing saints and tracing their connections to each other rather than focusing on the stories of the lives of individual saints. The establishment of an agreed-upon *guru-paramparā* is important for understanding how religious figures assume authority. Heinrich von Stietencron uses Max Weber's theories on charisma to explain the significance of gurus in Hindu traditions. Von Stietencron says that religious communities come into being through charismatic leaders and canons form around them which are meant to be timeless. Through the routinization of charismatic authority, charisma is either inherited, appointed, or divinely revealed by a successor, allowing for the continuation and adaptation of the tradition over time.[141] Pinch says that charismatic authority is central to the cohesiveness of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, and that "the ability to postulate the details of guru parampara constituted the ability to control the past and was the logical route to prominence and

[138] David Lorenzen, "The Lives of the Nirguni Saints," in *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*, ed. David Lorenzen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994)*,* 181.
[139] David Lorenzen, "The Lives of the Nirguni Saints," 181.
[140] Daniel Gold, *The Lord as Guru: Hindi* Sants *in North Indian Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 86.
[141] Heinrich von Stietencron, "Charisma and Canon: The Dynamics of Legitimization and Innovation in Indian Religions," in *Charisma and Canon: Essays on the Religious History of the Indian Subcontinent*, ed. Vasudha Dalmia, Angelika Mailar, and Martin Christof (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 31.

power in the sampraday."[142] Similarly, Richard Burghart, an anthropologist who also studied the

history of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, argues that "every genealogy is a record of a strategy in

which the sect has reinterpreted its past in order to compete more effectively for the limited

resources which are necessary for its survival in the present."[143] This is why the stakes of the

debate around Ramanand's connection to Ramanuja are high. The importance of the *guru-*

paramparā as a source of authority in *bhakti* traditions also helps to explain the importance of

debates surrounding Ramanand's relationships with Kabir and Ravidas. As the following section

explains, the *guru-paramparā* became particularly important in the context of debates within the

Ramanandi *sampradāy* surrounding caste in the twentieth century.

2.2. Compositions Attributed to Ramanand and the "Two Ramanands" Theory

Ramanand is famous for his role as a guru and a religious leader. Unlike many other

bhakti saints, he is not known for his own poetry. Pitambar Datt Barthwal edited and compiled

the Hindi texts attributed to Ramanand in *Rāmānand kī Hindī Racnāē* (1955). He also included a

substantial introduction, starting with a depiction of Ramanand as a sort of divine savior of the

dark medieval ages.[144] Barthwal gives a brief introduction to each of Ramanand's Hindi texts,

and mentions that there must be at least one more text remaining that has not been found,

because none of the available manuscripts features the most famous verse popularly attributed to

Ramanand, "*jāt pāt pūche na koi, Hari so bhaje so Hari kā hoi*"[145] ("do not ask about caste or

class, whoever sings of God belongs to God"). He does not account for the possibility that this

may have been a later attribution rather than something Ramanand actually composed himself.

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[142] William Pinch, "Reinventing Rāmānand: Caste and History in Gangetic India," *Modern Asian Studies* 30, no. 3 (1996): 556.
[143] Richard Burghart, "The Founding of the Ramanandi Sect," 127.
[144] Pitambar Datt Barthwal, *Rāmānand kī hindī racnāē* (Kashi: Nagaripracarini Sabha, 1955), 1.
[145] Pitambar Datt Barthwal, *Rāmānand kī hindī racnāē*, 3.

In the introduction to the compilation of Ramanand's compositions, Barthwal gives a brief overview of Ramanand's biography and his earliest disciples. Barthwal's views fall in line with the group of modern Ramanandis who believe Ramanand was born in Allahabad, was never a disciple of Ramanuja, and that he composed in Sanskrit in addition to Hindi. Rather than questioning the historical plausibility of this, Barthwal says Ramanand must have lived over one hundred years in order for the timeline to fit.[146] Barthwal gives a brief introduction to how he found copies of each text and says that many of the manuscripts are rare or singular. For example, he mentions that one *pad* where Ramanand praises Hanuman was originally collected by George Grierson, the linguist with the British colonial government; two *pad*s were found in Rajjab's *Sarbaṅgī Graṅth*; the *Jñān Līlā* was in the Jodhpur court library; and "a Vaishnava gentleman" sent him the *Yog Ciṅtāmaṇi* and the *Rām Rakṣā Stotra*.[147] While Barthwal's compilation of Ramanand's Hindi texts is a useful resource, it is clear that it could use a substantial revision.

The texts attributed to Ramanand have been used by other scholars to make claims about when and where Ramanand might have lived. For example, Enzo Turbiani has tried to learn about Ramanand's life through a linguistic and philological analysis of his Hindi compositions. Turbiani studied the *Gyān Līlā* and the *Yog-ciṅtāmaṇi* and came to the conclusion that Ramanand was likely born in North India. He does not delve into debates surrounding the authorship of the texts, and he also mentions that two Sanskrit works have been attributed to Ramanand (the *Rāmārcana Paddhati* and the *Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara*) without citing direct sources or qualifying the claim. In a footnote to his article, Turbiani calls for further scholarship into Ramanand's Hindi treatises. Turbiani writes that Ramanand's Hindi texts show "evident

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[146] Pitambar Datt Barthwal, *Rāmānand kī hindī racnāē*, 35.
[147] "*Ek Vaiṣṇav sajjan ne mujhe [...] nāmak choṭī choṭī racnāē milī.*" Pitambar Datt Barthwal, *Rāmānand kī hindī racnāē*, 1-2.

traces of what might be called Kharī bolī influence, since most nominal and verbal terminations are characterized by the morpheme *-ā* and not by the *-o/-au* distinctive of Brajbhāsā and Kanaujī."[148] Turbiani presents this as evidence that "the guru's birthplace is to be looked for somewhere in the Hindi-speaking territory."[149] He also notes the use of Arabic and Persian terms such as *phikira* and *rosanāī* as evidence that "clearly he lived in an epoch when the two classical languages of Islam had already permeated the vocabulary of Indo-Aryan languages."[150] However, without proper evidence to prove that Ramanand was truly the composer of these two texts, Turbiani's analysis just shows that the texts themselves were written by a native Hindi speaker from northern India during the Mughal period.

Today, the Ramanandi *sampradāy* is predominantly associated with *saguṇ bhakti* in devotion to Ram and Sita. However, Purushottam Agrawal points out that Ramanand's own Hindi writings could best be characterized as *nirguṇ*, and that the only clearly *saguṇ* composition is the *pad* about Hanuman that was originally collected by Grierson. Agrawal suggests it is likely that a Ramanandi friend gave Grierson this text, and he describes it as being of "dubious provenance."[151] As mentioned in the Introduction, the dividing line between *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ bhakti* poetry is often unclear, and it may be better thought of as a continuum rather than two opposing forms of religiosity. In addition, as will be explored in more depth in Chapter Three, devotion to Hanuman often blurs boundaries such as between asceticism and *bhakti* or Vaishnavism and Shaivism. That being said, it is notable that the other texts attributed to Ramanand use *nirguṇ* imagery more similar to the poetry of Kabir. Daniela Bevilacqua argues

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[148] Enzo Turbiani, "Some Aspects of the Development of Bhakti Traditions, with Especial Reference to the Hindi Poems Attributed to Rāmānand," in *Devotional Research in South Asia: Current Research 1985-1988*, ed. R.S. McGregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 51.
[149] Enzo Turbiani, "Some Aspects of the Development of Bhakti Traditions," 51.
[150] Enzo Turbiani, "Some Aspects of the Development of Bhakti Traditions," 52.
[151] Purushottam Agrawal, "The Impact of Sectarian Lobbyism on Hindi Literary Historiography: The Fascinating Story of Bhagavadacharya Ramanandi," in *Literature and Nationalist Ideology: Writing Histories of Modern Indian Languages*, ed. Hans Harder (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 243-4.

that the reason for the confusion over Ramanand's orientation is because he taught both "in a *saguna* and *nirguna* shape according to the devotee's needs."[152] However, this conjecture is not supported by clear historical evidence.

The disjuncture between the *saguṇ pad* about Hanuman and the other *nirguṇ* compositions attributed to Ramanand inspired the famous historian of Indian literature, Ramchandra Shukla, to propose the idea that there were two Ramanands in 1930.[153] There have been several other instances of claims of or actual examples of a "second" version of an important teacher in pre-modern and early-modern India, such as two Nagarjunas, two Siddhasenas, and two Haribhadras.[154] The "two Ramanand" theory has been controversial among contemporary scholars, and rather than a controversy between a *nirguṇ*- or *saguṇ*-oriented Ramanand, it has become a debate between a Hindi- or Sanskrit-composing Ramanand. During the twentieth century, during the midst of internal debates in the *sampradāy* surrounding caste inclusion, three Sanskrit texts attributed to Ramanand were either discovered or invented—the *Rāmārcana Paddhati*, the *Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara*, and the *Ānanda Bhaṣya*. A fourth Sanskrit text, the *Śrī Rāmānand Janmotśva Katha* (Narrative Celebrating the Birth of Shri Rāmānand), found in the *Bhaviṣya Khaṇḍa* (Canto of the Future) of the *Agastya Saṃhitā*, also emerged at this time.

It is likely that the Sanskrit compositions attributed to Ramanand were written by his followers in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Agrawal argues that the "Sanskrit Ramanand" was invented at this time to lend authority to the heterodox views of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* regarding caste. Agrawal explains that in the twentieth century, the Ramanandis were

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[152] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India: The Śrī Math and the Jagadguru Rāmānandācārya in the Evolution of the Rāmānandī Sampradāya* (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), 6.
[153] Purushottam Agrawal, "The Search of Rāmānand: The Guru of Kabīr and Others," in *Ancient to Modern*, 137.
[154] Andrew Ollett, *Language of the Snakes: Prakrit, Sanskrit, and the Language Order of Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 234.

"treated as 'country cousins' by the Sanskrit-speaking, caste-rules-observing Rāmānujīs."[155]

During gatherings of the Kumbh Mela, the Ramanandis were supposed to let the Ramanujis bathe first and they were supposed to carry the palanquins of Ramanuji gurus. Agrawal says that the "Sanskrit Ramanand" was constructed "in order to bestow 'orthodox' approval on the lack of strict observance of Brahmanical rules of conduct by modern Rāmānandīs."[156] The idea is that if the Ramanandis could prove that they too had a traditional Brahmanical guru at the start of their lineage, they would be treated equally to the followers of Ramanuja. In the following sub-sections, I introduce each of the Sanskrit compositions attributed to Ramanand and review the extant scholarship on them. In doing so, I show that while it is unlikely that Ramanand composed the Sanskrit compositions attributed to him, they are still important pieces of evidence for understanding the legacy of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*.

2.2.1. The Ānanda Bhaṣya

The *Ānanda Bhaṣya* is a commentary on the Vedanta *sūtra*s, and its creation was likely intended to legitimate Ramanand as a Brahmin *ācārya*, providing him with legitimacy comparable to Ramanuja. Agrawal asserts that the influential Ramanandi religious leader and scholar Bhagavadacarya[157] was central to the creation of the "Sanskrit Ramanand." In fact, Bhagavadacarya admitted to participating in the forgery of the *Ānanda Bhaṣya* in 1958.[158] The first complete copy of this text was found in 1932. Part of establishing legitimacy involved emphasizing Ramanand's Sanskrit capabilities. In response to those who questioned him, Bhagavadacarya wrote, "do you intend to project him as illiterate [in Sanskrit], capable of only

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[155] Purushottam Agrawal, "In Search of Rāmānand," in *Ancient to Modern*, 138.
[156] Purushottam Agrawal, "In Search of Rāmānand," in *Ancient to Modern*, 137.
[157] In 1927, Bhagavadacarya wrote his own Sanskrit hagiography of Ramanand, the *Śrī Rāmānand Digvijay*, which I explore in more depth in Chapter Four.
[158] Purushottam Agrawal, "In Search of Rāmānand," 166.

composing some poems in broken Hindi? [...] As long as I am alive, nobody will succeed in proving Rāmānand illiterate [in Sanskrit]."[159] Rather than challenging the Brahmanical hierarchy and the privileged status of Sanskrit literature, and in contrast to other modern interpretations of Ramanand as a social reformer, Bhagavadacarya and the others in his tradition modelled Ramanand's image off of Ramanuja and presented him as a traditional Sanskrit-composing Brahmin guru.

2.2.2. The Rāmārcana Paddhati

A footnote on Agrawal's essay calls the *Rāmārcana Paddhati* a "rare work" that he was able to obtain with help from an activist within the Ramanandi *sampradāy*.[160] Pinch comments that the *Rāmārcana Paddhati* is "of untested authority,"[161] and Horstmann calls it "a doubtful testimony."[162] Lorenzen explains that different versions of the *Rāmārcana Paddhati* list twelve, thirteen, or nineteen names of gurus linking Ramanand to Ramanuja.[163] There is little information about the rest of the contents of the text and there is some debate within the Ramanandi *sampradāy* over its validity. Agrawal says it is a late-nineteenth or early-twentieth century invention.

2.2.3. The Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara

There are several versions of the *Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara* attributed to Ramanand, and only some of them contain references to Ramanuja. Here, I analyze the edition of the text

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[159] Insertions added by Purushottam Agrawal, "In Search of Rāmānand," *Pratilipi: Āzādī Viśesāmka/Freedom Special,* issue 13 (Oct 2008). < http://pratilipi.in/in-search-of-ramanand-purshottam-agrawal/>.
[160] Purushottam Agrawal, "In Search of Rāmānand," *Pratilipi.*
[161] William Pinch, "History, Devotion, and the Search for Nabhadas of Galta," 381.
[162] Monika Horstmann, "The Rāmānandīs of Galtā (Jaipur, Rajasthan)," in *Multiple Histories: Culture and Society in the Study of Rajasthan,* ed. Lawrence Babb (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2002), 144.
[163] David N. Lorenzen, *Kabīr Legends and Ananta-Dās's Kabīr Parachai*, 13.

published in Ahmedabad in 1980. This edition contains a commentary by the Jagadguru Sri Ramanandacarya Ramaprapannacarya Yogindra who lived and taught in Varanasi, and it has an introduction and Hindi commentary by Swami Sri Rameshvaranandacarya. Swami Sri Rameshvaranandacarya is from the Kosalendra Math in Ahmedabad and Pinch refers to him as "universally regarded as an important contributor to the compilation of Rāmānandī tradition and scholarship," even though there is a divide over his claim to be the presiding *jagadguru Rāmānandācarya*.[164] Haryacharya of Varanasi is generally regarded as the actual claimant to the position. Rameshvaranandacarya's guru was Raghuvacarya, a friend of Bhagavadacarya.

The introduction states that the *Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara* was Ramanand's last composition.[165] It says that the text was written in response to ten questions from Surasuranand, one of Ramanand's original twelve disciples, and it was intended to be for the benefit of the whole world. It also refers to the Shri *sampradāy*, the *sampradāy* associated with Ramanuja, describes Ramanand's guru as Raghavanand, and frames Ramanand as the twenty-second *ācārya* in the lineage of Ram. The 1980 edition features a heading above a picture of Ramanand, which calls him the *hindudharmoddhāraka*, or "the rescuer of the Hindu dharma."[166] Pinch explains that the Ramanandis who distanced him from Ramanuja viewed Ramanand as the savior of Hindu India and saw Ayodhya as the center of their worship. He connects this to a growing narrative of Muslim oppression, setting up the political situation that led to the violence in Ayodhya.[167] Agrawal contends that whoever wrote the *Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara* attempted to translate one of the most famous Hindi verses attributed to Ramanand back into Sanskrit (*jāt pāt*

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[164] William Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, 182.

[165] Svami Ramesvaranandacarya, *Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara* (Ahmedabad: Shriramanandapitha Shrisheshamatha Dharma Pracara Vibhagha, 1980), 3.

[166] Svami Ramesvaranandacarya, *Vaiṣṇava Matābja Bhāskara*.

[167] William Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, 79.

pūchai na koi…).[168] However, I have not been able to trace this verse to any of the Hindi

compositions attributed to Ramanand, and thus it too may be a modern composition.

2.2.4. The Agastya Saṃhitā

The *Agastya Saṃhitā* is a Sanskrit text likely written in Banaras in the twelfth century.

The name is meant to suggest that it is a part of the much older *Pāñcarātra Āgamas*.[169] Burchett

says the text "is novel in making Rama the exclusive object and aim of worship; he is not just

another incarnation of Vishnu, but is equated with supreme reality itself."[170] It advocates the

repetition of *Rām ke nām* and delineates two possible streams of worship, both *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ*.

The text says that the *saguṇ* worship of Ram is the easier path in the Kali *yug*. Burchett explains

the many Ramanandi connections to the *Agastya Saṃhita*. He writes, "it is uncertain whether

these early Ramanandis had any direct historical link to the community that composed the

Agastya Saṃhita, but they certainly seem to have followed the twelfth-century community in

spirit, and, in several ways, in thought and practice as well."[171] The *Agastya Saṃhitā* influenced

several other texts associated with the Ramanandis. Burchett argues that the *Agastya Saṃhitā*

impacted Agradas's *Dhyān Mañjarī*. This can be seen in particular in the detailed description of

Ram and Sita seated on a throne in both texts.[172] Burchett also claims that the *Agastya Saṃhitā*

influenced Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas*. This is demonstrated by the shared importance placed on

Ram's name and the synthesis of *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ* streams of *bhakti*.[173] Paramasivan connects

the *Agastya Saṃhitā* directly to the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*. She claims that the *Adhyātma*

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[168] Purushottam Agrawal, "In Search of Rāmānand," *Pratilipi*.
[169] Purushottam Agrawal, "In Search of Rāmānand," *Pratilipi*.
[170] Patton Burchett, "*Bhakti* Religion and Tantric Magic in Mughal India," 111.
[171] Patton Burchett, "*Bhakti* Religion and Tantric Magic in Mughal India," 116.
[172] Patton Burchett, "*Bhakti* Religion and Tantric Magic in Mughal India," 112.
[173] Patton Burchett, "*Bhakti* Religion and Tantric Magic in Mughal India," 115.

Rāmāyaṇa "re-interpreted" the story of Ram in view of the innovations made in the *Agastya Saṃhitā*.[174] Additionally, Paramasivan says the *Agastya Saṃhitā* influenced Ramcarandas's *Ānand Laharī*, a commentary on the *Rāmcaritmānas*. She writes that the *Sadāśiva Saṃhita*, a text which has not been found by contemporary scholars but is cited in Ram Rasik literature, is also likely based on the *Agastya Saṃhitā*.[175]

Another way in which the *Agastya Saṃhita* plays a role in contemporary Ram *bhakti* is through the Ramanavami festival, which celebrates the birth of Ram each spring. Hans Bakker says those who celebrate the Ramanavami festival believe it is based on the celebration described in the *Agastya Saṃhita*, but he clarifies that the festival likely did not start until several centuries after the *Agastya Saṃhita* was written.[176] Bakker builds on the scholarship of Weber, who claims that the Ramanavami festival is likely highly influenced by another festival that celebrates the birth of Krishna. Bakker also points out that the *Agastya Saṃhita* does not mention Ayodhya at all, and that contemporary pilgrims in Ayodhya do not follow the rituals prescribed by the *Agastya Saṃhitā*.[177] In this way, the *Agastya Saṃhitā* functions as a text that can be invoked in order to authorize practices such as the celebration of the Ramanavami festival, regardless of its actual contents.

The section of the *Agastya Saṃhitā* about Ramanand, the *Śrī Rāmānand Janmotsva Kathā* of the *Bhaviṣya Khaṇḍa*, situates Ramanand's lifespan primarily in the fourteenth century, c. 1299-1410. It also says that Ramanand was born in Prayag (Allahabad). The earliest reference to the *Bhaviṣya Khaṇḍa* is not found until 1903. In 1928, Balbhadra Das wrote that the *Agastya*

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[174] Vasudha Paramasivan, "Between Text and Sect," 33.
[175] Vasudha Paramasivan, "Between Text and Sect," 104.
[176] Hans Bakker, *Ayodhyā: The History of Ayodhyā from the 7th Century BC to the Middle of the 18th Century, its Development Into a Sacred Center with Special Reference to the* Ayodhyāmāhātmya *and to the Worship of Rama According to the* Agastyasamhitā, *Part I* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1986), 154.
[177] Hans Bakker, *Ayodhyā*, 155.

Saṃhitā does not have a *Bhaviṣya Khaṇḍa*, "in fact, it has no Khand division at all, it is simply divided into the '*Adhyayas*' ('chapters')."[178] In addition to the discrepancy in the division of the text, Balbhadra Das points to the start of the relevant chapters. He writes, "it has in the beginning the *Upakrama* ('invocation'), which makes it an independent work. Had this been a *Khand* of the *Agastya Samhita* it would not contain the *Upakrama* [...] Obviously then, this is nothing but a forgery in the name of the *Agastya Samhita*."[179] Agrawal agrees with his critique, and argues that the *Bhaviṣya Khaṇḍa* was added by Rama Narayana Das, a Ramanandi Sanskrit scholar who claimed to be in the lineage of Agradas and who edited the *Agastya Saṃhitā* and produced a Hindi translation of the *Bhaviṣya Khaṇḍa* in 1903. Agrawal says this is one example of how twentieth-century Ramanandis invented the "Sanskrit Ramanand."

Agrawal says that the *Bhaviṣya Khaṇḍ* did not carry much weight even within the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. He explains, "unlike other texts 'produced' by Bhagwadacarya with the claim that these were rare manuscripts that survived in his possession alone [i.e. the Sanskrit texts attributed to Ramanand], the *Agastya Saṃhita* was rather well known in Ramanandi and other Vaiṣṇava circles."[180] This led the Ramanandis familiar with the *Agastya Saṃhitā* to question the validity of the *Bhaviṣya Khaṇḍa*. However, some scholars of Indian history and literature did not question it. R.G. Bhandarkar's analysis of the *Agastya Saṃhitā* included the *Bhaviṣya Khaṇḍa* section and he uses this as a basis for his understanding of Ramanand.[181] J.N. Farquhar also used the *Agastya Saṃhitā* as evidence for the identity of Ramanand.[182] The *Agastya Saṃhitā* is an example of a Sanskrit text that has likely been relevant for the Ramanandi *sampradāy* for a long period of time, but the *Bhaviṣya Khaṇḍa* is likely a late-nineteenth or

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[178] Purushottam Agrawal, "In Search of Rāmānand," *Pratilipi.*
[179] Purushottam Agrawal, "In Search of Rāmānand," *Pratilipi.*
[180] Purushottam Agrawal, "In Search of Rāmānand," *Pratilipi.*
[181] Purushottam Agrawal, "In Search of Rāmānand," *Pratilipi.*
[182] Vasudha Paramasivan, "Between Text and Sect," 80.

early-twentieth century addition. My analysis of the scholarship on the Hindi and Sanskrit texts

attributed to Ramanand demonstrates how these texts are used to make claims about Ramanand

himself, even though the historical provenance of all of them are unclear. In the following

section, I further interrogate the scholarly debates about whether there could have been multiple

Ramanands.

2.3. The Founding of the Ramanandi Sampradāy

The Ramanandi *sampradāy* likely did not coalesce until long after Ramanand's lifetime.

Burghart has evaluated scholarship by Wilson (1846), Barthwal (1936), Ghurye (1964), and

Farquar (1967), who all take different approaches regarding Ramanand's birthplace and date, but

still agree that Ramanand founded the *sampradāy* himself.[183] Burghart, on the other hand, argues

that Ramanand was not really the founder. Burghart asserts that the Ramanandi *sampradāy* was

organized as a distinct community over time under the influence of various outside pressures and

concerns. Burghart states that Ramanand "became retrospectively and retroactively the founder

of the Ramanandi sect."[184] He says this began with Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl* and took its full shape

during the eighteenth century. The eighteenth century was an important time for the

solidification of the *sampradāy*. Monika Horstmann points out that the term "Ramanandi" only

began to be used in the eighteenth century.[185] Burchett uses the term "proto-Ramanandi" to

highlight the idea that the earliest members of the *sampradāy* were retroactively claimed. He

says that the categories of *bhakta*s and *yogi*s were blurry among the early Ramanandis at

Galta,[186] and points out that many early Ramanandis had a *nirguṇ* orientation,[187] contradicting

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[183] Richard Burghart, "The Founding of the Ramanandi Sect," 123-124.
[184] Richard Burghart, "The Founding of the Ramanandi Sect," 136.
[185] Monika Horstmann, "The Rāmānandīs of Galta (Jaipur, Rajasthan)," 145.
[186] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*, 139.

the current predominating association between Ramanandis and *saguṇ* devotion to Ram and Sita. Peter Van der Veer, who conducted ethnographic research on pilgrimage and Ramanandi ascetics in Ayodhya in the 1980s, emphasizes that "Ramanandis are characterized by a great organizational and doctrinal freedom,"[188] which is why he calls the Ramanandis an "open category."[189]

A major debate surrounding the history of the early Ramanandi *sampradāy* is over the identity of Ramanand's early followers, particularly the original twelve disciples mentioned in Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl*. The twelve disciples listed in the *Bhaktamāl* are Anantananda, the first disciple who is said to have encouraged Ramanand to teach others in Varanasi; Sukhananda, the guru of the famous *bhakti* poet Dadudayal; Sursuranand and his wife, Sursari; Nahariyananda, who is said to have worshipped Devi and is connected to the establishment of the Naga branch of the *sampradāy*; Pipa, a king from Rajasthan; Bhavananda; Kabir, a famous *nirguṇ* poet-saint of Varanasi; Ravidas, a low-caste leather tanner also from Varanasi; Dhana, a farmer from Rajasthan who was a married householder; Sen, a barber in Madhya Pradesh; and Padmavati, a woman who has not been written about in any early hagiographies and has no known compositions.[190] As part of his strategy of equating *bhakti* religiosity with Christianity, the British colonial administrator and linguist George Abraham Grierson referred to these disciples as the "twelve apostles" of Ramanand.[191]

Ramanand's affiliations with the two most famous "apostles," Kabir and Ravidas, are most highly contested. Both of these saints lived in Varanasi, are associated primarily with

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[187] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*, 171.
[188] Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth: The Management of Religious Experience and Identity in a North Indian Pilgrimage Center* (London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: The Athlone Press, 1988), 75.
[189] Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, 172.
[190] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism*, 48-53.
[191] John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 36.

nirguṇ bhakti, composed in dialects of Hindi rather than Sanskrit, and are considered "low

caste." In particular, Kabir is one of the most famous *bhakti* saints in history, and his poetry has

been translated into many languages and is popular around the world. Burghart theorizes that

Ramanand likely never directly taught Kabir and Ravidas. Instead, he argues that it is possible

they had attracted their own followers independently and were retroactively folded into the

Ramanandi *sampradāy* in order to gain legitimacy.[192] Burghart explains that Nabhadas's

incorporation of popular saints like Kabir in the *Bhaktamāl* "reveals the broadening of criteria for

recruitment into a Vaiṣṇavite sect thereby enabling the sect to compete more effectively."[193]

Similarly, Pinch says that by incorporating various saints into the *Bhaktamāl*, "Nābhādās

afforded this ragtag band of bhaktas and sants a modicum of Vaiṣṇava respectability by

endowing them with an unimpeachable sectarian pedigree."[194] In this explanation, the

Ramanandi *sampradāy* served to legitimate the already-popular Kabir and Ravidas by

incorporating them into a Vaishnava sect with a Brahmin guru.

Like Ramanand, the dating of Kabir's lifetime is contested, making it difficult to know if

it is even possible that they lived in Varanasi at the same time. Agrawal and Lorenzen believe

that Ramanand was really the guru of Kabir; while scholars including Bhagwati Prasad Singh,

B.N. Shrivastav, and Hawley all believe this is unlikely. Agrawal says that there was a "universal

medieval consensus"[195] that links Kabir to Ramanand, and he points to the *nirguṇ* orientation of

most of the Hindi compositions attributed to Ramanand to demonstrate the likelihood of this

connection. Lorenzen agrees, and he uses this to support the dating of Ramanand's life to the

second half of the fifteenth century. Lorenzen primarily uses hagiographical evidence to support

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[192] Richard Burghart, "The Founding of the Rāmānandī Sect," 125.
[193] Richard Burghart, "The Founding of the Rāmānandī Sect," 133.
[194] William Pinch, "History, Devotion, and the Search for Nabhadas of Galta," 380.
[195] Cited by John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 314.

his conclusion, such as Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl* and Anantadas's *Parcaī*s, both of which describe

Kabir as direct disciple of Ramanand. Lorenzen also agrees with Agrawal that the evidence

supporting the "Sanskrit Ramanand" who lived in the fourteenth century is flimsy. However, as

mentioned in Chapter One, these hagiographies are often not historically accurate, and as

mentioned in this chapter, it is uncertain whether Ramanand authored the Hindi compositions

attributed to him.

Lorenzen acknowledges but ultimately refutes the opposing argument that the connection

between Ramanand and Kabir "was invented in order to legitimize, and also to tame, Kabīr and

the other *sant*s by giving them a learned Brahman as their guru."[196] Hawley thinks that this may

have occurred the other way around; the Ramanandis may have seen the popularity of *sant*s like

Kabir and incorporated them into their fold. Hawley justifies, "it was clearly Kabīr, not

Rāmānand, who unleashed an absolute whirlwind into the religious consciousness of sixteenth-

century India."[197] Ramanand is more famous for his status as a guru than for his poetry. Hawley

questions whether the "medieval consensus" on the Hindi Ramanand was truly a consensus.[198]

He points to several sources that provide doubt as to the relationship between Ramanand and

Kabir. Hawley thinks it is likely Kabir lived in the sixteenth century, making a direct connection

to Ramanand improbable.[199] He also points to the fact that the oldest collections of Kabir's

compositions never refer to a guru. If Kabir had been Ramanand's disciple, he may have written

about this connection or about the other eleven disciples associated with Ramanand.

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[196] David Lorenzen, *Kabīr Legends and Ananta-Dās's Kabī Parcachai*, 11.
[197] John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 314.
[198] Similarly, J. Hare writes, "I agree with Agrawal that the Sanskrit Rāmānand is a modern invention, but I hesitate to endorse the medieval consensus on Rāmānand [as guru of Kabir] as historically accurate. In the absence of solid evidence, though, there is no reason to reject this account out of hand, either." In "Garland of Devotees: Nābhādās' *Bhaktamāl* and Modern Hinduism," 38.
[199] John Stratton Hawley, "Can There Be a Vaishnava Kabir?" *Studies in History* 32, no. 2 (2016): 155.

I argue that it seems plausible that there were "many Ramanands" throughout history. This does not mean that there were multiple gurus with the same name who have been conflated, as Shukla suggests. Rather, it means that Ramanand's story has been contested throughout history, and the authorship of the Hindi and Sanskrit compositions attributed to him and the earliest hagiographical sources like the *Bhaktamāl* and the *Parcaī*s may not be reliable. The Ramanandi *sampradāy* likely did not coalesce until well after Ramanand's lifetime, and early articulations of the twelve "original" disciples of Ramanand emerged in the context of the earliest articulations of an interconnected formation of *bhakti sampradāy*s in hagiologies like Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl*. The debates over Ramanand's connection to Ramanuja emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, during a moment of change within the *sampradāy*, as the Ramanandis were negotiating their positions regarding caste and their relationships with other ascetic communities. Regardless of whether Ramanand was ever truly the guru of Kabir and whether or not Ramanand was the disciple of Ramanuja, the shifting narratives over time demonstrate the evolving concerns of the Ramanandis and attempts to renegotiate his symbolic authority.

2.4. The Ram Rasik Tradition

So far, I have reviewed key debates in scholarship on the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. I have explained how Ramanand has been assigned an important role in the narrative of the "*bhakti* movement" as the conveyor of *bhakti* from the South to the North, and that it is unlikely that he authored any of the Sanskrit compositions attributed to him. Another key aspect of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, especially in relation to gender and devotion, is the Ram Rasik tradition, which has received less scholarly attention than other dimensions of the tradition. Today, the

Ramanandi *sampradāy* is divided into three main branches—the Rasiks, the Tyagis (also called Vairagis), and the Nagas. The Ram Rasik tradition challenges some of the typical binaries that are used to distinguish *bhakti* from other forms of religiosity. For instance, as explained in Chapter One, the Ram Rasik tradition can be seen as straddling two genres of Hindi literature, *bhakti* and *rīti*. The Ram Rasiks are also influenced by Krishna *bhakti* traditions. Additionally, the Ram Rasiks have several commonalities with tantric traditions, including their emphasis on initiation and secrecy and the use of ritual manuals, challenging the distinction between *bhakti* and *tantra*. Each chapter of my dissertation discusses the Ram Rasiks, so I will introduce secondary scholarship on the Ram Rasiks here. I provide an introduction to Agradas, the "founder" of the Ram Rasiks, and focus on the theme of the relationship of the Ram Rasiks to various tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

2.4.1. Agradas

Agradas (c. late 16th century) is commonly known as the founder of the Ram Rasik tradition. He is generally known as the guru of Nabhadas. Agradas is said to have rescued Nabhadas when he was abandoned as a blind orphan, and then raised and initiated Nabhadas at the Galta monastery outside of Jaipur. Agradas told Nabhadas to praise the *bhakta*s, which led to the composition of the *Bhaktamāl*.[200] Priyadas elaborates on the story and says that Nabhadas first demurred, saying that he could praise Ram and Krishna, but praising the *bhakta*s was too great a task.[201] Some scholars, including Kisori Lal Gupta, believe that Agradas also contributed to the composition of the *Bhaktamāl*, while most believe that Nabhadas only includes mentions

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[200] J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees," 1.
[201] J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees," 102.

of Agradas as a way to acknowledge his guru.[202] Regardless of Agradas's role in the creation of

the *Bhaktamāl*, he is closely associated with promoting the praise and worship of *bhakti* saints in

addition to the gods.[203]

Despite his important role as the progenitor of the *Bhaktamāl*, Nabhadas does not go into

much detail about Agradas's life. He only says that Agradas was dedicated to the worship of Sita

and Ram, that he cultivated a beautiful garden, and that he repeated Ram's name while

working.[204] Nabhadas writes, "he lovingly and constantly worked in his famous garden, which he

made with his own hands. On his tongue was the faultless name, like a rain cloud. Krishnadas

graced him with the gift of bhakti, unshakable in thought, word, and deed. Agradas did not spend

time in vain, without devotion to Hari."[205] Despite the characteristically brief description in the

Bhaktamāl, later Ram Rasiks drastically expanded on Nabhadas's stories about Agradas and

framed Agradas as the founder of their tradition.

Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl* and Anantadas's *Parcaī*s describe Agradas as a disciple of

Krishnadas Payahari, who was a disciple of Anantanand, who was a disciple of Ramanand.[206]

The Ram Rasiks say that the *rasik* practices "had existed for centuries as a carefully guarded

esoteric tradition" that was kept secret until Agradas was told by his guru Krishnadas Payahari

that he should popularize *rasik* teachings.[207] Krishnadas Payahari received his name because he

lived on a diet of only milk. Monika Horstmann argues that this name associates him with

devotion to Krishna. She highlights the syncretic Ram and Krishna worship practiced at Galta.[208]

Burchett frames Agradas and Kiladas, Krishnadas Payahari's other most famous disciple, as

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[202] J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees," 27.
[203] Patton Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 438.
[204] J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees," 41.
[205] Translated by J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees," 82.
[206] J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees," 38; Patton Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 436.
[207] Patton Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 439.
[208] Monika Horstmann, "The Rāmānandīs of Galta (Jaipur, Rajasthan)," 151.

representative two distinct forms of worship among the "proto-Ramanandis." Burchett explains

that Kiladas is more associated with yoga and ascetic practices, while Agradas is tied to devotion

and service.[209]

Burchett posits that Agradas was concerned with "patronage and prestige within the

developing Mughal-Rajput literary and court culture," which may be the reason why he engaged

with "the burgeoning *sṛngār* (erotic love) devotional themes and Brajbhasa aesthetic

refinements."[210] Agradas's meditation manual, the *Dhyān Mañjarī*, is regarded as a foundational

Ram Rasik text. The *Dhyān Mañjarī* is a meditation manual written in Braj Bhasha about how to

visualize and meditate upon the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.[211] Ronald Stuart McGregor says that the

Dhyān Mañjarī is influenced by several texts, including the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa*, a *Pāñcatātra*

text called the *Sadāśivasaṃhitā*, and Nanddas's *Rās Pañcādhyāyī*, a Krishna *bhakti* text.[212]

McGregor refers to Agradas as a "Krishnaizing Ramanandi poet," and says that his work

involves the "Krishnaizing of distinctive Ramanandi tropes."[213]

Later Ram Rasik meditation manuals were modeled after the *Dhyān Mañjarī*, part of a

genre called *aṣṭayām* manuals, referring to the "eight periods of the day." This daily cycle is

modeled after the worship performed in Vaishnava temples and royal courts. The *aṣṭayām*

manuals such as the *Dhyān Mañjarī* include detailed descriptions of everything the initiate

should do in service of Ram and Sita throughout the entire day.[214] The *Dhyān Mañjarī* is only

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[209] Patton Burchett, "*Bhakti* Religion and Tantric Magic in Mughal India," 96.

[210] Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 204.

[211] Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 434.

[212] Ronald Stuart McGregor, "The *Dhyān-Mañjarī* of Agradās," in *Bhakti in Current Research, 1979-1982 Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Early Devotional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages, St. Augustin, 19-21 March 1982*, ed. Monika Thiel-Horstmann (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1983), 237.

[213] Ronald Stuart McGregor, "The Progress of Hindi, Part I: The Development of a Transregional Idiom," in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock and Arvind Raghunathan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 936.

[214] Philip Lutgendorf, "The Secret Life of Rāmcandra of Ayodhya," in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 223.

intended for Ram Rasik initiates. It contains detailed descriptions of Ram and Sita's physical appearances as well as their palaces and groves. It emphasizes the importance of role-playing, as the Rasik is supposed to imagine themselves as a character in the story, normally as a servant or friend of Ram or Sita.

Jivaram's *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* (1839) compares Agradas to Valmiki. Jivaram's entry on Agradas in the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* says "his use of letters, verses, and alliteration and his passionate love (*mādhurya*) were like that of Valmiki. He obtained the hidden meaning and secret method of the meeting of the *rasik*s."[215] Jivaram also expands the description of Agradas's garden and connects it to Ram and Sita by saying that Agradas arranged meetings for the couple in a flower garden. Jivaram calls the *Dhyān Mañjarī* "that ocean of *śṛngar ras*."[216] Some of Agradas's poetry is signed "Agra-ali," which is a diminutive suffix used to indicate female friendship. However, Burchett says that this association is completely absent from any texts attributed to Agradas before the late eighteenth century, so he doubts whether Agradas ever used that name for himself.

Burchett argues that stories about Agradas moving from Galta to Raivasa were also later interpolations that do not have a historical basis.[217] The first mention of Raivasa is found in Jivaram's *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* and Horstmann's research on royal patronage of the Ramanandis did not show any evidence of an early Ramanandi community in Raivasa.[218] Daniela Bevilacqua, on the other hand, disagrees. Bevilacqua's *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India* utilizes "a historical diachronic-synchronic perspective with ethnographic

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[215] Translated by Patton Burchett in "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 438.
[216] Patton Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 438.
[217] Patton Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 443.
[218] Patton Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 443-444.

work" (primarily based in Varanasi) in order to trace the development of the Ramanandi

sampradāy up to its current iteration.[219]

Bevilacqua's research was primarily based upon oral tradition and materials "produced

by the various Ramanandi centers" rather than texts found in state or (non-Ramanandi)

institutional archives.[220] This approach offers a helpful viewpoint into the *sampradāy*'s own

view of their history, but does not take a critical approach to this view. Bevilacqua is

unconvinced by Burchett's argument and counters, "the oral tradition about Agradas and his

dwelling in Revasa is still so carefully maintained that there may be no compelling reason to

deny it."[221] She acknowledges the absence of Raivasa from Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl*, but she

suggests that perhaps Agradas did not leave Galta for Raivasa until after Nabhadas finished

writing his text. This argument does not make sense chronologically, so she suggests this "would

in turn require a rethinking about the date of production of the *Bhaktamāl*."[222] Doing so, she

suggests that the existence of an oral tradition is enough to merit re-thinking textual evidence in

order to accommodate its existence. However, she does not explain why she thinks this oral

tradition is accurate. She only cites a conversation with one *sevak* in Raivasa who showed her

Agradas's supposed former accommodation.[223]

Burchett argues that Agradas was not always referred to as a Rasik, much less the

founder of the Rasik tradition. He explains, "it was actually not until the nineteenth century, the

heyday of Ram rasik bhakti, that Agradas came to be described as the founder of the Ram rasik

tradition […] and that his work, the *Dhyān Mañjarī*, became celebrated as a quintessential Ram

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[219] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 1.
[220] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 9.
[221] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 85.
[222] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 85.
[223] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 105.

rasik scripture."[224] Bhagwati Prasad Singh agrees that the nineteenth century was the era of the most influential growth of the Ram Rasik, and he says that a lot of the practices surrounding contemporary Rasik *bhakti* is indebted to authors from this time period, despite being initiated centuries beforehand.[225]

     Burchett calls Agradas "a real trailblazer in the *rasik* practice of Ram *bhakti*,"[226] but he points out that the *Dhyān Mañjarī* was not widely read, especially outside of Rajasthan, until the late eighteenth century. In fact, other works attributed to Agradas were much more popular prior to the growth of the Rasik tradition.[227] Agradas likely authored at least fifteen different texts.[228] Burchett uses the example of Agradas to illustrate the diversity and complexity of the *sampradāy*. He stresses that Agradas was part of "the growth of a transsectarian *bhakti* sensibility."[229] The other texts attributed to Agradas besides the *Dhyān Mañjarī* display theological outlooks that associate Agradas more closely with *nirguṇ* saints like Kabir and Ravidas. Burchett emphasizes that many of Agradas's writings besides the *Dhyān Mañjarī* focus on renunciation, asceticism, and the Divine in a *nirguṇ* sense. Burchett explains that during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, "the community felt the need to look back and establish a clear lineage with the distinguished past," which led to the marginalization of Agradas's other texts and his association with *nirguṇ* sensibilities.[230] The Ramanandis likely established this lineage in order to authorize beliefs and practices that would otherwise be controversial.

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[224] Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 439.
[225] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, *Rāmabhaktī me Rasika Sampradāya* (Balarampur: Avaddh Sahitya Mandir, 1975), 139.
[226] Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 444.
[227] Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 442.
[228] Burchett, "*Bhakti* Religion and Tantric Magic in Mughal India," 89.
[229] Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 196.
[230] Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 443.

This re-writing of Agradas's history has a lot in common with the history of the figure of Ramanand and the continuous re-making of his image. Agradas is directly implicated in this history. In addition to the Sanskrit texts attributed to Ramanand, one of the texts that was "rediscovered" during the debates over Ramanand's connection to Ramanuja was Agradas's description of Ramanand's lineage. This document completely dissociates Ramanand from Ramanuja. Attributing this text to Agradas means that if someone were to claim that Ramanand was actually a disciple of Ramanuja, they would be going against Agradas. This can be seen as a means of attributing a controversial claim to someone else in order to avoid critique. The previous establishment of Agradas as the founder of the *rasik* tradition further removes the possibility of backlash. Raghubardas claimed that the document had been used as wrapping paper and that he found it by chance. Purushottam Agrawal calls this discovery "only the first in a whole series of research miracles performed by the radical Ramanandis."[231] Burchett highlights the role that the stories told about saints plays in intra-sectarian debates throughout history. He explains, "here we have the memory of a saint (Agradas) invoked to authorize the reinvented memory of another saint (Ramanand); a constructed history drawn upon to discredit another constructed history and to replace it with yet another more freshly constructed history, the figure of the saint serving as both the site and the instrument of a struggle to re-shape the present."[232] The actual facts about Agradas's life are sparse, and like Ramanand, this lack of historical specificity has allowed his history to be re-written and his authority to be re-interpreted and invoked over time.

2.4.2. Tulsidas's Rāmcaritmānas

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[231] Purushottam Agrawal, "In Search of Rāmānand: The Guru of Kabīr and Others," *Pratilipi.*
[232] Patton Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 446.

The Ram Rasik tradition's emergence and spread in early modern North India coincided with the growing popularity of Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas*. The *Rāmcaritmānas* was composed in the late sixteenth century and it quickly became one of the most popular religious texts in North India.[233] It is still recited daily by devotees and re-enacted in large yearly public performances of the Ram Lila. The *Rāmcaritmānas* is often called syncretic because of the way it negotiates between *nirguṇ*/*saguṇ* and Vaishnava/Shaiva beliefs. Today, the story of the *Rāmcaritmānas* plays an important role in the devotional practices of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, including the Ram Rasik branch. Ramdas Lamb reports that the *Rāmcaritmānas* is "the most sacred of scriptures" for the Ramanandis.[234] This contemporary relationship with the text has led many to believe that the Ramanandis have always been closely affiliated with the *Rāmcaritmānas*. For example, van der Veer says that the Ram Rasiks based many of their ideas and practices on the *Rāmcaritmānas* and he attributes the growth in influence of the Ramanandis in North India to the popularity of the *Rāmcaritmānas*.[235] However, Vasudha Paramasivan argues that the *Rāmcaritmānas* did not become important for the Ramanandis until the late-eighteenth or early-nineteenth century. Paramasivan's doctoral dissertation focuses primarily on two *rasik* commentaries on the *Rāmcaritmānas* that seek to reconcile what she views as two competing theologies—Ramcharandas's *Ānand Laharī* (1808) and Pandit Shivalal Pathak's *Mānas Mayaṅk* (1818).

Paramasivan refers to assumptions about the historical relationship between the Ramanandis and the *Rāmcaritmānas* as "at best ahistorical, if not revisionist,"[236] and she says that the Ram Rasiks practiced a form of devotion to Ram that was "radically different" from the

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[233] Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, 8-9.
[234] Ramdas Lamb, *Rapt in the Name*, 19.
[235] Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, 164.
[236] Vasudha Paramasivan, "Between Text and Sect," 3.

form promoted in the *Rāmcaritmānas*.[237] In particular, she points to the Ram Rasiks' emphasis

on *līlā*, the extolment of *bhakti* as the most important *rasa*, and the importance placed on the

erotic love between Ram and Sita. Van der Veer does note this tension, saying that the "kind of

bride-mysticism" of the Ram Rasiks "was evidently somewhat contrary to the moralistic tone of

the Ramanandis' basic text, the *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsidas."[238] Paramasivan suggests that

contrary to van der Veer's assertion that the Ramanandi *sampradāy* grew because of the

popularity of their sacred text, the *sampradāy* made the *Rāmcaritmānas* their sacred text because

of its own independent renown. Bevilacqua disagrees with Paramasivan, stating, "we can

actually suppose that Tulsidas had a Ramanandi background that greatly influenced his work."[239]

She says that the absence of written evidence proving this connection could be attributed to the

"lifestyle" of wandering Ramanandi ascetics, and says that she still sees direct connections

between the outlooks of Tulsidas Ramanand, such as the compatibility between *nirguṇ* and

saguṇ orientations, the importance of the name of Ram, a reconciliation of Shaivism and

Vaishnavism, and the de-emphasis of rituals.[240] Similar to Bevilacqua's contradiction with

Burchett's assessment of Agradas's connection with Raivasa, here, Bevilacqua privileges the

views of leaders of the contemporary *sampradāy* and uses this to inform her interpretation of

Ramanandi historiography.

Paramasivan points out that Tulsidas was not considered to be a Ramanandi by any of the

earliest sources that detail Ramanandi lineages, such as Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl* or Priyadas's

Bhaktirasabodhinī. Later Ramanandi hagiographies, however, such as the *Rasik Prakāś*

Bhaktamāl (1839) utilized "ingenious twists in the Ramanandi lineages to incorporate Tulsidas

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[237] Vasudha Paramasivan, "Between Text and Sect," 3.
[238] Peter Van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, 173.
[239] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 73.
[240] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 73-74.

into the community."[241] One of the ways this was done was to interpret Tulsidas's purported

guru, Narharidas, as an actual Ramanandi ascetic with the same name, rather than the common

assumption that he was referring to Hari in human form.[242] This can be seen as characteristic of

the Ramanandi *sampradāy,* as it is just one of many examples where the *sampradāy* finds ways

to incorporate potential competitors into their fold.

2.4.3. The Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa

The *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, which can be translated as the "spiritual" or "esoteric"

Rāmāyaṇa, is one of the most popular Sanskrit tellings of the story of Ram and Sita. Its author

and dating are unknown. It is a *bhakti*-oriented text that emphasizes devotion to Ram as well as

Advaita Vedantic philosophy.[243] It has also been called syncretic for the way in which it

incorporates Puranic and Tantric elements as well.[244] One of its major differences from

Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* is its centering of Ram's divinity. Lutgendorf explains that it "added a

significant dimension to the theology of Ram by presenting him as not only an incarnation of the

preserver-god Vishnu but as the personification of the ultimate reality or ground of being—the

brahman of the Upanishads and of the Advaita or non-dualist school of philosophy."[245] This

focus on Ram as the personification of *brahman* reality entails efforts to explain any potentially

actions of Ram that the audience could criticize. For example, it includes the first mention of the

shadow Sita to avoid critique of the fire test. The *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* is commonly understood

as a source of inspiration for Tulsidas. This can be seen in the Shiva-Parvati narrative frame and

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[241] Vasudha Paramasivan, "Between Text and Sect," 12.
[242] Vasudha Paramasivan, "Between Text and Sect," 22.
[243] V. Raghavan, "The Ramayana in Sanskrit Literature," in *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia,* ed. V. Raghavan (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1980), 17.
[244] Frank Whaling, *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rāma* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980), 106.
[245] Philip Lutgendorf, *Life of a Text*, 7.

the reconciliation between Shaivism and Vaishnavism. Rai Bahadur Lala Baij Nath, a translator

of the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, calls it the *Rāmcaritmānas*'s "parent."[246] The *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*

displays some commonalities with common Ram Rasik beliefs. Kathleen Erndl describes the

text's "aura of playfulness (*līlā*), events being enacted according to a predetermined divine plan

with everything coming out all right in the end."[247] She also says that in the first part of the text,

"Rama is depicted as a playful and mysterious child, much like the child Krishna."[248] The

depiction of Ram as a child is not emphasized to the same extent in Valmiki's telling of the

Rāmāyaṇa.

The *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* plays an important role in contemporary Ramanandi worship.

Lamb reports that the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* is far more important for contemporary Ramanandis

than Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*[249] and Frank Whaling calls it a "scripture" for contemporary

Ramanandis.[250] While explaining the historical context of the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, several

scholars including Whaling and V. Raghavan argue that it was likely written either during

Ramanand's lifetime or shortly afterwards. Raghavan says the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* is "of the

time of Ramananda,"[251] and Whaling laments the lack of scholarship done about the history of

the Ramanandi *sampradāy* at the time of his writing.[252] Whaling claims it is possible that the

organized community of Ram *bhakta*s that the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* describes could refer to the

Ramanandis, because he says they were the first organized Ram *bhakti* community.[253] He

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[246] Rai Bahadur Lala Baij Nath, trans. "Introduction," in *The Adhyatma Ramayana* (Allahabad: Subhindra Nath Vasu, 1913), ii.
[247] Kathleen Erndl, "The Mutilation of Surpanakha," in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 76.
[248] Kathleen Erndl, "The Mutilation of Surpanakha," 76.
[249] Ramdas Lamb, *Rapt in the Name: The Ramnamis, Ramnam, and Untouchable Religion in Central India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 28.
[250] Frank Whaling, *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rāma*, 112.
[251] V. Raghavan, "The Ramayana in Sanskrit Literature," 17.
[252] Frank Whaling, *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rāma*, 112.
[253] Frank Whaling, *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rāma*, 113.

stresses that the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* does not only presuppose devotion to Ram, it presupposes a community organized around this devotion.[254] Whaling also suggests that "it represents an attempt to 'provide a scripture' for the community, to introduce Advaita philosophy into the community, and to brahmanize the community."[255] He also mentions the unsubstantiated story that Ramanand brought the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* from South India to the North himself.

Whaling does not provide any evidence that the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* was read by or considered sacred by any early members of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. For instance, if it was really considered a scripture in the sixteenth century, it seems likely that Agradas or other Ram *bhakta*s in the *sampradāy* would write commentaries on it or mention it in their own writings. The story about Ramanand bringing the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* from the South to the North was likely influenced by the eighteenth and nineteenth century debates about Ramanand's identity and connection to Ramanuja, as it is not found in any early sources of information about Ramanand's life such as the hagiographies written by Nabhadas or Priyadas. Whaling also seems certain that the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* is connected to the Ramanandis, but says it is unlikely that Kabir was a disciple of Ramanand because of the perceived incompatibility of Kabir's *nirguṇ* beliefs with Ramanand's association with the *saguṇ* Ram.[256] Whaling's acceptance of the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* association but rejection of the Kabir association with the *sampradāy* shows that his interpretation is aligned with contemporary Ramanandi emphasis on the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a central part of their beliefs. It is possible that the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa,* like the *Rāmcaritmānas*, did not become important for the Ramanandis until much after its composition. This is another example of the Ramanandis pushing their timeline back.

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[254] Frank Whaling, *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rāma*, 170.
[255] Frank Whaling, *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rāma*, 113.
[256] Frank Whaling, *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rāma*, 114.

2.4.4. The Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa

The *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* is closely associated with the Ram Rasiks. Raghavan calls it the first *bhakti* telling of the story of Ram and Sita,[257] and McGregor says that the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* was likely one of the sources for Agradās's *Dhyān Mañjarī*.[258] Bhagwati Prasad Singh "rediscovered" the text in 1955. Singh found his first copy of the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* with the help of Shri Sita Ram Sharan, a *mahant* in Ayodhya. This first manuscript he came across was incomplete, but with the help of Mahatma Saryu Sharan he found two more manuscripts in Ayodhya. He found the fourth copy at the Oriental Institute in Baroda. Singh says that some of the manuscripts call the text the *Ādi Rāmāyaṇa* (meaning "First *Rāmāyaṇa*") or the *Brahma Rāmāyaṇa*, but the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* title is now more common. Singh published a Sanskrit edition of it in 1975.

Singh argues that the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* is the main source of inspiration for the Ram Rasiks. He says that it was kept secret even though it "continued to be recited and listened to in the limited circle of the Rāma Bhaktas of the *Rasika* cult."[259] The text itself states the importance of secrecy. Keislar translates a passage where Brahma is speaking to Kak Bhushundi. It states, "the supreme sporting of the Gopīs and Rām, which you have asked about, is totally secret; how can it be told? Someone who explained it would surely go to hell… 'Don't disclose this to the unqualified,' the Lord himself told me."[260] This sentiment that *rasik* contemplation is only intended for initiates is present in Krishna-focused *rasik* traditions as well. The stories in the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* are also clearly influenced by Krishna *bhakti* literature. Singh says that in

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[257] V. Raghavan, "The Ramayana in Sanskrit Literature," 17.

[258] Ronald Stuart McGregor, "The *Dhyān-Mañjarī* of Agradās," 237.

[259] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, "*Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* and its Influence on the Mediaevel *Rāmāyaṇa* Literature," in *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia*, ed. V. Raghavan (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1980), 476.

[260] Allan Keislar, "The *Rasik* Concept of Transcendental Sexuality," in *Studies in Early Modern Indo-Aryan Languages, Literature and Culture: Research Papers, 1992-1994, Presented at the Sixth Conference on Devotional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages, held at Seattle, University of Washington, 7-9 July 1994,* ed. Alan Entwistle, Carol Salomon, Heidi Pauwels, and Michael Shapiro (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1999), 184.

some places, the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* seems to be basing its narration off of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.[261] Similarly, Raghavan explains that "the whole ideology and episodes of Krishna appear to be duplicated,"[262] and it "assimilates the personality of Rama to that of Krishna, introduces *Madhura Bhakti* and makes a '*Bhagavata*' of the *Ramayana* with Vraja, Gopis, etc."[263] The *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* even depicts Ram and Lakshmana as cow-herders and says that Ram played the flute.[264] The Krishna *bhakti* influence can be seen in another passage that Keislar translates. The *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* states, "divine women, possessing divine forms (*divyarūpa*), having performed austerities and having obtained a boon, achieved their divine desire (*divya manoratha*). Therefore, the great Rām, to fulfill the boon he had given, enjoyed all those Gopīs with transcendental desire (*kāmatattva*)."[265] Stories about *gopī*s are much more commonly associated with Krishna than Rama, but this is one example of how the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* reinterprets the *Rāmāyaṇa* using stories associated with Krishna. Singh believes that the synthesis of Krishna *rasik* literature and beliefs into the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* is likely a way of authorizing and popularizing the Ram Rasik tradition.[266]

Several scholars including Singh, McGregor, Charlotte Vaudeville, and Grierson posit that *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* was a source of inspiration for the *Rāmcaritmānas*.[267] Vaudeville and Grierson based this estimation on secondary sources since they did not have access to any copies of the text. They point particularly to the Kak Bhushundi frame narrative, which tells the story through a dialogue between the crow Kak Bhushundi and the eagle Garuda, who is Vishnu's

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[261] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, "*Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* and its Influence on the Mediaevel *Rāmāyaṇa* Literature," 479.
[262] V. Raghavan, "Introduction," in *Bhusundi Ramayana*, ed. B. P. Singh (Varanasi: Vishwavidalaya Prakashan, 1975), 3.
[263] V. Raghavan, "The Ramayana in Sanskrit Literature," 17.
[264] V. Raghavan, "Introduction," in *Bhusundi Ramayana*, ed. Bhagwati Prasad Singh (Varanasi: Vishwavidalaya Prakashan, 1975), 6.
[265] Allan Keislar, "The *Rasik* Concept of Transcendental Sexuality," 181.
[266] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, "*Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* and its Influence on the Mediaevel *Rāmāyaṇa* Literature," 491.
[267] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, "*Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* and its Influence on the Mediaevel *Rāmāyaṇa* Literature," 498.

vehicle. Kak Bhushundi is an interesting character in the *Rāmcaritmānas*. Tulsidas says that the

story of the *Rāmcaritmānas* was created by Shiva, who told it to Uma and "to Bhushundi the

crow, recognizing a deserving devotee of Ram." Tulsidas stresses that "these listeners and tellers

are equally worthy, all-seeing knowers of Hari's cosmic play."[268] In the *Rāmcaritmānas*, Kak

Bhushundi advocates the worship of Ram as a child. He states, "my chosen Lord is the child

Ram, who possesses the beauty of a billion Love gods."[269] John Brockington disagrees with the

idea that the *Rāmcāritmānas* is influenced by the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa*, saying that even though

the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* is commonly thought to be a source for Tulsidas, "some acquaintance

with its contents renders this impossible."[270] Danuta Stasik also concurs, saying that she finds the

internal evidence connecting the Kak Bhushundi frame to be unconvincing.[271]

Singh says that at first glance, the differences between the *rasik* nature of the *Bhuśuṇḍi*

Rāmāyaṇa and the focus on Ram as king in the *Rāmcaritmānas* are so drastic that it seems

impossible that there is any connection between the texts. However, he says that upon deeper

study, it is clear that Tulsidas adopted several features of the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa*, including its

devotional outlook. He points out several commonalities between the two texts that are not

shared with the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* or Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. This includes minor shared

features, such as the Lakshmana's presence in the scene where Ram accepts Parashurama's

challenge and strings the bow.[272] The most important connection that Singh highlights is the

ending of the two texts. The *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* says that Ram departs Ayodhya for

[268] Philip Lutgendorf, trans., *The Epic of Ram, Volume I* (Cambridge: Murty Classical Library of India at Harvard University Press, 2016), 71.

[269] Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, 318.

[270] John Brockington, "Re-creation, Refashioning, Rejection, Response… How the Narrative Developed," in *The Other Ramayana Women: Regional Rejection and Response*, ed. John Brockington and Mary Brockington (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 12.

[271] Danuta Stasik, "Crow Bhuśuṇḍi and His Story of the Deeds of Ram," in *India in Warsaw: A Volume to Commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Post-War History of Indological Studies at Warsaw University*, ed. Danuta Stasik and Anna Trynkowska (Warsaw: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, 2006), 298.

[272] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, "*Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* and its Influence on the Mediaevel *Rāmāyaṇa* Literature," 499.

Pramodavana, "the seat of his eternal blissful sports." Similarly, Tulsidas has Ram depart into a grove and never returns.[273] Singh's access to this telling allows him to make a more detailed claim about its relationship to the *Rāmcaritmānas*, whereas other scholars had to guess based on what they had read about the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* in other sources.

The dating of the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* is contested. Singh believes the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* was composed around the twelfth century. He cites three reasons for this. The first is that the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* includes mention of the "commencement of the Yavana (Muslim) invasion on India," and he claims that the book offers "a glimpse of the tyrannies of the merciless invaders perpetrated for the love of wealth, religious propaganda and imperial aggrandizement."[274] Secondly, Singh explains that the text uses the word *niṣka*, which is a gold coin also used for ornamentation, that stopped circulating after the twelfth century. Finally, Singh says that the erotic emphasis of the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* can be seen reflected in temple carvings, including Khajuraho, which were done between the ninth and twelfth centuries.[275] Singh uses this as evidence for the dating of the text due to the lack of manuscript evidence available. Singh's analysis is clearly influenced by his own contemporaneous political concerns, as evidenced by his emphasis on the "Muslim invasion" in India. In addition, Singh's dating allows for him to make the case that the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* influenced the *Rāmcaritmānas*, suggesting a Ram Rasik influenced on Tulsidas, while Paramasivan demonstrates that the Ram Rasik connection with Tulsidas did not emerge until long after his death.

Other scholars question the twelfth century dating of the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa*. In the introduction to Singh's publication of the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa*, Raghavan places it in the

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[273] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, "*Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* and its Influence on the Mediaevel *Rāmāyaṇa* Literature," 503.
[274] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, "*Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* and its Influence on the Mediaevel *Rāmāyaṇa* Literature," 486.
[275] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, "*Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* and its Influence on the Mediaevel *Rāmāyaṇa* Literature," 487.

fourteenth century.[276] In 1991, Philip Lutgendorf supported Singh's dating, and wrote that the

Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa influenced the Kak Bhushundi framing of the *Rāmcaritmānas*.[277]

Lutgendorf called the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* "an esoteric rewrite of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the light of

rasik practices."[278] However, in 2016, Lutgendorf revised his previous claim and wrote that

"attempts to identify this elusive source with a purported esoteric work of the Ramanandi

tradition remain controversial."[279] He does not explain how he came to this changed conclusion.

Besides Singh, the only in-depth research done on the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* is by Allan Keislar in

his dissertation for the University of California-Berkeley in 1998.[280] In an article about the Ram

Rasik tradition's views on sexuality, Keislar calls the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* "one of the earliest

Ram *rasik* texts available," but dates it in the mid-sixteenth or early-seventeenth century.[281]

Patton Burchett and Vasudha Paramasivan find Keislar's claim convincing.[282] This provides

further evidence that the Ram Rasik tradition is a relatively later development in the Ramanandi

sampradāy.

  Although there is little other information on the text available, Singh's scholarship on the

Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa needs to be critically examined. This is the case when any previously lost or

unobtainable text is claimed to be "rediscovered." Singh does not hide his own veneration of the

Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa. In his discussion of its authorship, Singh writes, "it appears that the great

man merged the transcendental light of his practical genius in the all-pervasive individuality of

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[276] V. Raghavan, "Introduction," 29.
[277] Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, 28.
[278] Philip Lutgendorf, "The Secret Life of Rāmcandra of Ayodhya," 228.
[279] Philip Lutgendorf, trans. *The Epic of Ram, Volume I*, xxvii.
[280] Allan Keislar, "Search for the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa:* One Text or Many? The *Ādi-Rāmāyaṇa,* the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Rāmāyaṇa-Mahā-Mālā*" (PhD diss., University of California Berkley, 1998). Note: I was unable to access a copy of this dissertation, as it has not been digitalized and is not available for inter-library loan.
[281] Allan Keislar, "The *Rasik* Concept of Transcendental Sexuality," 176.
[282] Patton Burchett, "*Bhakti* Religion and Tantric Magic in Mughal India," 220; Vasudha Paramasivan, "Between Text and Sect," 28.

Brahmā, the divine narrator."[283] Singh was the head of the Hindi department at Gorakhpur

University. His book written in Hindi titled *Rām Bhakti Me Rasik Sampradāy* (The Rasik

Sampradāy in Ram Bhakti) (1957) remains one of the only in-depth studies of the Ram Rasik

tradition. McGregor and Lutgendorf both mention that they are indebted to Singh's research on

the Rasiks in their own scholarship. In Akshaya Mukul's book on the history of the Gita Press,

he says Singh's biography of the Gita Press's founding editor Mahavir Prasad Poddar is

"hagiographic" and calls Singh an "insider."[284] Singh is grandiose in his claims about the

importance of the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa*. He believes that "the spiritual practices, supported and

sustained by the long tradition of Saiva, Sakta, Buddhist and Vaisnava philosophical systems

emerging for the first time in the B.R. influenced the entire Rama Bhakti literature of North

India."[285] His attention towards the syncretic nature of the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* is helpful, but it

seems more likely that the text actually reflects developments that can also be seen in texts like

the *Rāmcaritmānas* and the *Dhyān Mañjarī*, rather than being the progenitor of those

developments itself.

The *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* is not the only Ram Rasik-associated text that Singh claims to

have found. In his *Rāmkāvyadhārā*, Singh says that he saw a copy of a text called *Rāj Yoga* that

is attributed to Krishnadas Payahari. This text supposedly "deals with the role of yoga in Ram

bhakti," which Burchett says, "seems entirely in character, for while Nābhā praises his

[Payahārī's] devotion to the lotus feet of Ram, it is his yogic and ascetic qualities that stand out

the most."[286] Burchett says that despite Singh's claim to have seen the text, he has been unable to

locate any manuscripts of it in archives in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Singh also characterizes

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[283] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, "*Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* and its Influence on the Mediaevel *Rāmāyaṇa* Literature," 479.
[284] Akshaya Mukul, *Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India* (Noida: Harper Collins, 2015), 24.
[285] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, "*Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* and its Influence on the Mediaevel *Rāmāyaṇa* Literature," 490.
[286] Patton Burchett, "*Bhakti* Religion and Tantric Magic in Mughal India," 86.

a large number of texts as Rasik. He identified over eight hundred Hindi texts and fifty Sanskrit texts that he classifies as Rasik in nature.[287] Singh's history of finding texts associated with the Rasiks, his own views towards those texts, and his likely overestimation of the quantity of texts that can be categorized as Rasik suggest that his scholarship needs to be critically examined. I believe that it is likely that rather than being a text kept secret by the Ram Rasiks for centuries, while still influencing Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas* before being "rediscovered" by Singh, it is a later composition. A deeper analysis of the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* awaits further scholarship.

Conclusion

The Ramanandi *sampradāy* has a complicated history that has been retold, renegotiated, and reinterpreted by its own members and by scholars over time. Bruce Lincoln has written about the ways in which the present-day concerns of communities influence the stories told about their past, arguing that stories about a collective past are often told in moments of uncertainty as a way to promote a group identity. He writes, "it is precisely through the *evocation* of such sentiments via the *invocation* of select moments from the past that social identities are continually (re-)established and social formations (re-)constituted."[288] Lincoln continually draws attention towards the social and political concerns of the present in order to understand how and why stories about the past are invoked at different times. This understanding of the times of instability in which myths are invoked helps explain why the details of Ramanand's life story have shifted so much over time. Rather than striving to pin down the "real" story of Ramanand and the origins of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, I am interested in examining why debates have emerged over time and why different interpretations of the available data have developed.

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[287] Allan Keislar, "The *Rasik* Concept of Transcendental Sexuality," 189.
[288] Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 23.

The debates over the history of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* have wider implications because they are often invoked as an example of the "*bhakti* movement" more broadly. In addition, many of the debates surrounding Ramanand's life are interconnected. For example, Ramanand is often cited as an example of social egalitarianism in *bhakti* traditions. Debates over whether he was a disciple of Ramanuja and whether or not he was the guru of Kabir and Ravidas both connect to concerns over the *sampradāy*'s acceptance of people from different castes and classes. The attribution of Sanskrit compositions to Ramanand also relate to caste, as they help to situate him as a traditional Brahmanical guru. Some of the historiographical debates surrounding the Ramanandi *sampradāy* are paralleled by the debates surrounding the Ram Rasik branch. For instance, just as Ramanand was likely not the original founder of the *sampradāy*, Agradas may not have founded the Ram Rasik branch. Instead, both the Ramanandi *sampradāy* and the Ram Rasik branch took shape after the lives of their purported founders.

Based on this review of the historiography of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, I identify two main concerns running throughout much of the debates about this tradition. The first is the impulse to incorporate independently popular figures and texts into the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, such as Ramanuja, Tulsidas, and the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*. This is enabled by the catholicity and diversity of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. The next is the desire to push the timeline of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*'s members and important texts back. Rooting the Ramanandi views in history is a way of lending authority to the tradition. This can be seen many times, such as in the attribution of Sanskrit compositions to Ramanand. In the following chapter, I dive deeper into an analysis of the Ram Rasik branch with a focus on the figure of the *sakhī* and interrogate the association between the Ramanandis and social egalitarianism by analyzing representations of women in early modern hagiographies.

<u>Chapter Three – Gendered Devotion: *Sakhī*s as Model Devotees and Early Women in the Ramanandi *Sampradāy*</u>

Introduction

In *bhakti* traditions, the love that a devotee should have for the deity is often explained through models of human relationships, and the ideal devotee/lover is commonly portrayed as a woman. Some of the most famous male *bhakti* poets imagine themselves as women, sometimes as a lover yearning for her distant beloved (who is ultimately God), or a mother showing selfless love for her child (who is also ultimately God). Like the Gaudiya Vaishnavas, the Ram Rasik branch of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* places emphasis on *sakhī*s ("female friends" or "maidservants") as ideal devotees to emulate. Ram Rasiks believe that Ram and Sita should be worshipped together as the *yugal sarkār* ("royal couple"), emphasizing the part of the *Rāmāyaṇa* where Ram and Sita live together in Ayodhya. This places more of an emphasis on Sita than most earlier forms of Ram *bhakti*, and the Ram Rasiks believe that Sita's *sakhī*s have a uniquely important role in the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, given their access to directly witnessing and assisting the *yugal sarkār* together. Some Ram Rasiks ritually enact devotion to the *yugal sarkār* by dressing as a *sakhī* and taking on a female name and persona.[289]

The Ram Rasik branch of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* is an example of the multiplicity and adaptability of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, which has contributed to its lasting influence in Indian religion and culture. This non-heteronormative form of religious expression has been misunderstood by many scholars and outsiders to the tradition, who either misapply terms like "transsexual" or "transgender" to the men who become *sakhī*s or conflate the Ram Rasik tradition with the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition. The first section of this chapter reviews the trope

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[289] Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, 162.

of the *sakhī* in South Asian literature and analyzes the use of Sita's *sakhī*s as a model of devotion for the Ram Rasiks. It also presents a historiographical critique of studies of *sakhī*s and provides an alternative framework for understanding the Ram Rasiks that emphasizes their ritual and devotional contexts.

The second section of this chapter addresses the issue of gender in the Ramanandi *sampradāy* by looking at the women included within the community's hagiographical tradition. One of the central claims about *bhakti* traditions is that they are socially egalitarian. Recent work by scholars such as Burchett, Ben-Herut, Pauwels, and Keune have emphasized the diversity of *bhakti* traditions and has called into question the extent of their inclusivity, particularly in regard to caste equality. The issue of gender in relation to *bhakti* and social egalitarianism warrants further study. The vast majority of *bhakti* saints are male, and while female *bhakti* saints exist, as Pauwels puts it, "the community of *bhakta*s was, after all, very much a 'men's world.'"[290] However, women often play important roles in the hagiographies of male saints, particularly as their wives, mothers, and daughters, which become important resources for lay women in *bhakti* traditions. These women have not received nearly the same scholarly attention as their husbands, sons, and fathers.

Thus, in the second half of this chapter, I critically analyze the claim that Ramanand was the first *bhakti* guru to accept female devotees by examining the stories of his two female disciples, Padmavati and Sursari. I argue that claims of their existence in modern narratives about the egalitarian nature of "the *bhakti* movement" far outweigh the historical significance given to them. In other words, the existence of Padmavati and Sursari is frequently cited as an example of Ramanand's inclusivity as a guru, but this is belied in some ways by their roles within *bhakti* hagiographies. I also examine the hagiographical portrayals of the wives and

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[290] Heidi Pauwels, *In Praise of Holy Men*, 181.

daughters of the male saints in Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl* and Anantadas's *Parcaī*s and make

comparisons with representations of women in hagiographical literature from other *bhakti*

traditions like the Vallabha *sampradāy*. I argue that even though women are rarely the main

focus in North Indian Vaishnava *bhakti* hagiographies, women often still serve critical roles by

spiritually or morally guiding the male saints and it is possible to learn about constructions of

gender and ideas about what it means to be an ideal *bhakta* through these texts. Together, the two

sections of the chapter nuance conceptions about gender and the Ramanandi *sampradāy* through

select comparisons with Krishna *bhakti* traditions.

3.1. Sakhī*s as Models of Devotion*

3.1.1. Introduction to the Sakhī *as a Literary Trope*

Friendship is an important and under-theorized type of relationship in the Ramanandi

sampradāy and in *bhakti* traditions more broadly, and the figure of the *sakhī* calls for attention to

how gender fits into the importance of friendship for spiritual growth. Daud Ali and Emma J.

Flatt explain that while research on friendship is a growing field in philosophy and European

medieval studies, it has yet to receive much attention in historical South Asia.[291] *Bhakti* literature

hagiographies often devote a lot of attention to relationships between devotees. The concept of

satsaṅg, or good company, is often emphasized in *bhakti* literature, and it constitutes part of the

communal nature of *bhakti* teachings. *Bhakti* saints are often both exemplary devotees and the

objects of devotion themselves. The sixteenth-century hagiographic poet Hariram Vyas even

wrote, "better than God, I like his devotees."[292] Similarly, Anantadas writes about his aims in

composing the *Parcaī*. In his hagiography of Angad, he says, "both Angad and his wife sang

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[291] Daud Ali and Emma J. Flatt, "Friendship in Indian History: An Introduction," in "Friendship in Premodern South Asia," ed. Daud Ali and Emma J. Flatt, special issue, *Studies in History* 33, no. 1 (2017): 1.
[292] Heidi Pauwels, *In Praise of Holy Men*, 119.

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only of Hari and meditated on liberation. Anantadas sings the praises of Angad, how much can he apply his mind to that? Singing thus Anantadas will reach liberation."[293] Hariram Vyas often wrote about pairs of *bhakta*s, depicted as friends. Heidi Pauwels says that he depicted them as having "an acute sense of kinship beyond sectarian lineages as we know them now."[294] In addition to the intricacies of hierarchical guru-disciple relationships among *bhakti* poets, the friendships between the saints play an important role in their life stories.

The idea that friendship between women can serve as a catalyst for spiritual growth can be found throughout religious traditions in South Asia. For example, the *Therīgāthā* is a hagiology of the first Buddhist women and is part of the Pali canon of Theravada Buddhism. It was written over a period of several centuries spanning from the time of the Buddha's life to the third century BCE. Charles Hallisey's introduction to his translation of the text highlights the shared suffering of women depicted in the text and the bonds that are developed as a result. Friendship is depicted as something not only helpful on a personal level but on a spiritual one. Hallisey writes that the poems of the *Therīgāthā* "suggest the moral importance of social relationships between women, such as friendships that endure the transition between lay life and ordained life and the enduring relationships between female teachers and their female students."[295] The poems encourage friendship between women and suggest that *kalyana mitta*, or "beautiful friends," can be an aid to achieving liberation. Friendship is thus seen as something that extends beyond the social realm and holds religious significance.

The *sakhī* is a particular kind of female friend, an archetypical figure found throughout Indian literature. In his Sanskrit dictionary, Monier Monier-Williams translates *sakhī* as "female

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[293] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 376.
[294] Heidi Pauwels, *In Praise of Holy Men*, 153.
[295] Charles Hallisey, trans. *Therīgāthā: Poems of the First Buddhist Women* (Cambridge: Murty Classical Library of India, Harvard University Press, 2015), xxviii.

friend or companion, a woman's confidante," or, at the end of a compound, "a woman who shares in or sympathizes with."[296] Early Sanskrit dramaturgical texts like the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (c. 4th century CE) include classifications of women who aid the *nāyikā* ("heroine") and act as messengers between lovers.[297] In Sanskrit literature, the *sakhī*'s role is often that of a *dūtī* or "messenger" who facilitates love between the *nāyaka* ("hero") and the *nāyikā*. Sometimes the terms *dūtī* and *sakhī* are used interchangeably. There is a similar character trope in ancient Tamil literature known as the *tōḻi*, which Martha Ann Selby translates as "girlfriend." Selby pushes back against the translation of *tōḻi* as "maidservant," as she says this translation is overly influenced by court poetry. She writes that the *tōḻi* "facilitates elopement. She entreats, consoles, discloses and reveals."[298] Selby finds that in the *Aiṅkuṟunūṟu*, an Old Tamil anthology of love poems from the third century CE, the *tōḻi* is the most frequent speaker, even above the hero and heroine.[299]

Like the Tamil *tōḻi*, in translations of Sanskrit texts, *sakhī* is often rendered as "maidservant." In some literature, this class connotation is important. Ruchika Sharma analyzes the class dimension of the *sakhī* as depicted in *rīti* texts like Keshavdas's *Rasikapriyā* (c. 1591) "as a way to talk about the category of domestic service in all its layered perception."[300] She points out that the *sakhī* is often of a lower class than the *nāyikā* and sometimes performs other jobs in the court. Sharma explains that the *sakhī* has an intimate relationship with the *nāyaka* and *nāyikā*. She listens to both of them, relays messages between them, and comforts them when one

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[296] Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and philologically arranged with special reference to cognate Indo-European languages* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1899).
[297] Ruchika Sharma, "Engendering *Śṛṅgāra,* Procuring Love: *Sakhī, Duti,* and Go-Between in *Rīti* Poetry," *The JMC Review* 2 (2018): 173.
[298] Martha Ann Selby, "The Ecology of Friendship: Early Tamil Landscapes of Irony and Voice," in "Friendship in Premodern South Asia," ed. Daud Ali and Emma J. Flatt, special issue, *Studies in History* 33, no. 1 (2017): 28.
[299] Martha Ann Selby, "The Ecology of Friendship," 27.
[300] Ruchika Sharma, "Engendering *Śṛṅgāra*, Procuring Love," 170.

of them is absent. She sometimes helps prepare the *nāyikā* for meeting with her beloved and sometimes accompanies her and acts as a chaperone. The *sakhī* is critical for facilitating love.

The figure of the *sakhī* is sometimes eroticized. Faisal Devji, a scholar of intellectual history, Islam, and political thought in South Asia, calls friendship "one of the great themes in precolonial thought," which is common in courtly literature and often involved "the connection between the political and the erotic."[301] *Sakhī*s in particular are often depicted as being directly present to witness sex between the hero and heroine. Sharma highlights the *sakhī*'s "presence as pervasive in the most intimate moments of the urbane *nāyaka* and *nāyikā* […] she is not merely a chaperone but a witness to the amorous moments of the young couple. She not only directs the gaze, but also breaks the boundaries of privacy by being there."[302] The *sakhī* hears both sides' feelings about each other, conveys messages between the two, and sometimes instructs or guides the *nāyikā*. Ruth Vanita says that "Indian lovers, unlike European lovers, are often depicted not in solitude but in a crowd."[303] Sometimes the *sakhī* is depicted not just as a voyeur but as a participant, sometimes in a homoerotic way. This can be observed in paintings that show the physical closeness of the *nāyikā* and the *sakhī* or between *sakhī*s.[304] Vanita says that this is common in late medieval miniature paintings, and sometimes the depictions are explicitly sexual.

Sometimes the *sakhī* is presented as a threat because there is a fear that the *sakhī* could fall in love with the *nāyaka*. This can be seen many times in Bihari's seventeenth-century poetry collection, the *Satsāī*. Sharma says that there is sometimes a blurring of "the identities of the *nāyikā* and the *sakhī*, where the *sakhī* could transform into the *nāyikā* however temporarily."[305]

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[301] Faisal Devji, "Foreword," in *Perilous Intimacies: Debating Hindu-Muslim Friendship After Empire* by SherAli Tareen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), xii.
[302] Ruchika Sharma, "Engendering *Śṛṇgāra,* Procuring Love," 178.
[303] Ruth Vanita, *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 122.
[304] Ruchika Sharma, "Engendering *Śṛṇgāra,* Procuring Love," 185.
[305] Ruchika Sharma, "Engendering *Śṛṇgāra,* Procuring Love," 183.

Ruth Vanita writes that the "common motif of the *sakhī* holding up a mirror to the heroine symbolizes their symbiotic relationship. She can be read as an aspect of the self, close and accessible, in contrast to the distant divine male lover."[306] Compared with the *Rāmāyaṇa*, this theme is more commonly associated with stories of Krishna and the *gopī*s, epitomized by Radha, who famously receives more attention as Krishna's consort than his wife Rukmini. Rama and Sita are more commonly portrayed as having an ideal, monogamous marriage, with Sita as the model wife. The Ram *rasik*s' emphasis on the *sakhī* adapts the dominant image of Ram and Sita, focusing instead on the eroticized aspect of their relationship and inserting additional characters and voyeurs into their marriage.

3.1.2. The Sakhī *Beyond the Literary Realm*

Ethnographic research has found that the depiction of *sakhī*s in literature influences contemporary views towards female friendship and devotion.[307] For example, Tracy Pintchman studied rituals around female friendship in Banaras in the late 1990s. She focuses on a daily form of ritual worship where women embody Krishna's *gopī*s. Women also sometimes perform a ritual where they exchange vows of lifelong friendship. Pintchman explains that these ritual friendships "seem to appropriate the mythic *sakhī* of Krishnaite sacred history as a model for extra-domestic human female-female social and emotional bonds that women choose for themselves."[308] The women Pintchman interviews believe that Radha shares a love with her

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[306] Ruth Vanita. *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West*, 122.

[307] Scholars Mathieu Boisvert, Diana Dimitrova, and Florence Pasche Guignard are currently beginning a relevant multi-disciplinary research project in collaboration with researchers from Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh on *sakhī*s that aims to think of them beyond the category of a "third gender." See: Centre d'etudes et de recherches sur l'Inde, l'Asie du Sud et sa diaspora (CERIAS), Université du Québec à Montréal. "Présentation du project, projet de recherche Sakhī." https://cerias.uqam.ca/presentation-du-projet/.

[308] Tracy Pintchman, "Lovesick Gopi or Woman's Best Friend?" The Mythic *Sakhī* and Ritual Friendship among Women in Benares," in *Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 58.

*sakhī*s and the *sakhī*s love for each other. Pintchman calls this "the seeming collapse of an erotic,

male-female relationship—that between Radha and Krishna—with the relationships of deep

friendship attributed to Radha and her female friends."[309] This demonstrates that the models of

female friendship depicted in early modern *bhakti* poetry still resonate with women in India

today.

Kirin Narayan's research on the theme of friendship as depicted in wedding songs sung

by women in the Himalayan Kangra valley also affirms the spiritually beneficial nature of female

friendship. She explains the importance of the term *sakhī*, also referred to as *sahelī* in Hindi, and

says that "the word encompasses exclusive, close, and casual friendships between girls of the

same age […] it may entail a deep and intimate bond."[310] These *sakhī* relationships are found

primarily between unmarried women. They believe that they can share intimate secrets and

private thoughts with *sakhī*s that cannot be shared with family members. Narayan details the

songs of sadness that women sing when their friends get married and leave their natal homes and

often villages to join their husbands' families. Some of these songs directly invoke Sita and her

*sakhī*s, as the women put themselves in the role of the *sakhī*s singing to their friend (in the role of

Sita) who is the one getting married.[311] Narayan argues that unmarried, adolescent friendship

between women has a special status in Kangra and is believed to have particular emotional

intensity, even though this is a time of "liminality […] between roles rooted in kinship systems,

and also between stages of life."[312] She says that friendship is a source of emotional support

during difficult periods of transition. This ethnographic research demonstrates the importance of

the role of the *sakhī* for contemporary women in North India.

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[309] Tracy Pintchman, "Lovesick Gopi or Woman's Best Friend?" 58.
[310] Kirin Narayan, "Birds on a Branch: Girlfriends and Wedding Songs in Kangra," *Ethos* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 53.
[311] Kirin Narayan, "Birds on a Branch," 57.
[312] Kirin Narayan, "Birds on a Branch," 69.

The homoerotic connotations of the term *sakhī* are sometimes explicitly highlighted by contemporary lesbian and queer activists and scholars in India. Scholar of gender and sexuality in South Asia Ana García-Arroyo says that translating *sakhī* or *jami* as "friend" is inaccurate because the terms are then "purged of their sexual reference and original eroticism," which leads to "lesbian invisibility and misrepresentation."[313] She says that "the lesbian movements of the 80s and 90s have resurrected homoerotic expressions of the rich Indian legacy and have brought them to popular memory."[314] While scholars may debate the complexity and accuracy of using such terminology to describe historical *sakhī*s, these movements frame the association between *sakhī* and lesbian identity as a return to its original connotations and highlight examples of homoerotic depictions of *sakhī*s in premodern Sanskrit literature as a way to indigenize and historicize lesbian identity, to counter claims that it is something foreign, Western, and modern.

In 1991, Giti Thandani founded a lesbian collective based in Delhi called Sakhi. Naisargi Dave calls Thandani "the 'mother' of Indian lesbian politics"[315] and explains that the organization Sakhi played a critical role in creating a pan-Indian and transnational lesbian community. Thandani centers the erotic connotations of the figure of the *sakhī*, which she describes as "one of the nominations of woman-to-woman bonding which included the erotic dimension," and she defines *sakhībhāv* as "inter-feminine lesbian fusion."[316] She views the worship of the *sakhī* in Krishna devotional communities as a non-heteronormative form of religiosity, and she describes the paintings of the *sakhī*s together as erotic, "very explicit lesbian

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[313] Ana García-Arroyo, "From *The Sandal Trees* to *Facing the Mirror*: A Herstorical Over-view of Same-Sex Love in India," in *Contemporary Fiction: An Anthology of Female Writers*, ed. Vandana Pathak, Urmila Dabir, and Shubha Mishra (Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2008), 21.
[314] Ana García-Arroyo, "From *The Sandal Trees* to *Facing the Mirror*," 21.
[315] Naisargi Dave, *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 33
[316] Giti Thandani, *Sakhīyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India* (London: Cassell, 1996; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 71.

depictions."[317] She says that the lesbian connotation of *sakhī*s was important in "earlier, in certain kinds of Sanskrit," but that eventually it has "become desexualized and signified non-sexual friendship between women."[318] Thandani is explicit in her explanation of the choice to use a Sanskrit term for her organization, as she wants to show that women who love and have sex with women have been a part of Indian culture throughout history. Thandani's use of the term *sakhī* demonstrates the legacy of the trope of the *sakhī* that emerged in the earliest examples of Sanskrit romance literature, took on religious significance in *bhakti* literature, and continues to play an important role in some contemporary Indian women's ideas about friendship and love.

3.1.3. The Sakhī in *Ram and Krishna* Bhakti *Traditions*

Focusing on the role of the *sakhī* shows both the many similarities and moments of disjuncture between Ram- and Krishna-focused Vaishnava *bhakti* traditions.[319] Ram and Krishna are often seen on opposite ends of a spectrum, despite both being incarnations of Vishnu. Ram is portrayed as the ideal person, or the *maryādā puruṣotthama*, emphasizing his role as a king and as the upholder of dharma. His relationship with Sita is seen as the model marriage. Krishna, on the other hand, is sometimes called the exemplar of playfulness, or *līlā puruṣotthama*, and is often portrayed as a mischievous child or a playful lover of Radha and all the *gopī*s.[320] The Ram Rasik tradition offers a contrast to the dichotomous view of Krishna and Ram.

Sita's *sakhī*s and Radha and the *gopī*s have a lot in common, and the *sakhībhāva* was first expounded upon by Gaudiya Vaishnava theologians and later adapted for the context of the

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[317] Giti Thandani, *Sakhīyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India*, 72.
[318] Giti Thandani, *Sakhīyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India*, 115.
[319] Chapter Four expands on these comparisons, focusing particularly on pilgrimage sites.
[320] Philip Lutgendorf, "The Secret Life of Rāmcandra of Ayodhya," 217.

Rāmāyaṇa. Peter van der Veer has even called this the "Krishnaization" of Ram *bhakti*.[321]

However, Philip Lutgendorf calls for attention towards the significant innovations made by Ram Rasik writers in adapting the story of Ram and Sita to the social milieu influenced by Gaudiya Vaishnavas, and warns against dismissing the Ram Rasiks as simply derivative of Gaudiya Vaishnavas.[322] This is not a straightforward case of merely replacing Krishna with Ram—the Ram Rasiks led significant innovations while the popularity of the *Rāmcaritmānas* grew and devotion to Ram spread throughout North India. This theme is further explored in Chapters Four and Five.

Both Gaudiya Vaishnava and Ram Rasik texts like the *Hanumatsaṃhitā*[323] describe five types of *bhāva*s of *bhakti*, consisting of *śānta* ("tranquility"), *dāsya* ("servitude"), *sākhya* ("friendship"), *vātsalya* ("affection"), and *mādhurya* ("love"). Each of these *bhāva*s is a different way of expressing devotion to God. In David Haberman's analysis of the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, he focuses particularly on the "religio-dramatic technique" where "one enters the new religious reality by assuming, *via role-taking,* an identity located within that reality. The new identity is the vehicle to the new reality."[324] He refers to these identities as "paradigmatic individuals." The highest-ranking paradigmatic individuals are the *gopī*s, who are considered to be the greatest devotees. The *gopī*s are the female cow herders in stories about the god Krishna. Their mythology dates back centuries, and they are famous for their endless devotion to Krishna. Sometimes male ascetics have a feminine persona they use for this writing, complete with a name and backstory. Some *rasik*s dress as *gopī*s or *sakhī*s while doing their "religio-dramatic

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[321] Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, 165.
[322] Philip Lutgendorf, "The Secret Life of Rāmcandra of Ayodhya," 229.
[323] I have not been able to locate a complete copy of this text, but an excerpt of it is printed in: Tapeshvara Natha, *Bhaktirasaśāstra* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, n.d.), 23. Bhagwati Prasad Singh calls it the "capital source-book of the erotic worship of Rama" in "Bhusundi Ramayana and its Influence on the Mediaevel *Rāmāyaṇa* Literature," 486.
[324] David Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation*, 7.

techniques," while for others, it is a mental or meditative practice. The practice is generally

considered to be esoteric and only available for initiates in the ascetic community.

3.1.4. Hanuman as a Sakhī

One of the innovations in the Ram Rasik interpretation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is the idea that

after Hanuman helped rescue Sita from Lanka, he wanted to serve the *yugal sarkār* together. In

order to do this, he became one of Sita's *sakhī*s and received the new feminine name

Charushila.[325] Patton Burchett uses Hanuman as a figure through which to understand the

divergence between the *bhakti*- and *rasik*-oriented Ramanandi paths from the yogic and ascetic-

oriented paths.[326] Hanuman is sometimes known as Ram's messenger, or *dūt*,[327] and as explained

earlier, *sakhī*s are often portrayed as messengers in Indic literature. Hanuman's parents, Kesari

and Anjana, also became *sakhī*s with the names Shatrujita and Chandrakanti.[328] According to the

Ram Rasiks, other men like Lakshmana and Sugriva became *sakhī*s too, but as the first to do so,

Hanuman maintains an important role in the tradition.

Hanuman's gender transformation has a precedent in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Wendy Doniger

highlights this story in an essay on gender transformations in the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*.

In Valmiki's telling, Rksaraja, the father of Valin and Sugriva, two other monkeys in the story,

changed from a father to a mother back to a father. One day he saw his own reflection in a lake

and thought an enemy is mocking him. He plunged into the water and emerged as a beautiful

human woman. Indra and Surya were overcome with lust, and Indra's semen fell on the woman's

head and Surya's semen fell on her neck. She bore two children, the first named Valin because

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[325] Hanuman as a *sakhī* is also sometimes known as Candrakala, see Chapter Five for more information.
[326] Patton Burchett, "*Bhakti* Religion and Tantric Magic in Mughal India," 125-6.
[327] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, *Rāmabhaktī me Rasika Sampradāya*, 392.
[328] Peter Van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, 162.

the semen fell in her hair, and the second named Sugriva because it fell on her neck. The next day, Rksaraja resumed his monkey shape and saw his two sons, making him both their father and their mother. Doniger points out that in this story, Rksaraja changes both gender and species, but the resulting children are monkeys, meaning "something of his true self remains in place despite the double transformation."[329] She highlights the idea that most gender transformations in the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* are temporary; the characters eventually return to the original, meaning "gender often proves remarkably tenacious."[330] With a psychoanalytical approach, Doniger argues that some myths of gender transformation are a way to express homosexual desire covertly. Doniger's mode of analysis has impacted the way other scholars have written about gender transformation in the context of the *rasik*s.

Hanuman's transformation into a *sakhī* offers an interesting addition alongside studies of Hanuman's more well-known associations with masculinity, virility, and contemporary Hindu nationalism. Lutgendorf explains, "as Rama's obedient lieutenant, a god who speaks eloquently but carries a big stick, a ferocious assailant of dharma-threatening Others, and a staunch celibate aglow with virility, Hanuman embodies many of the recurring tropes of Hindutva ideology."[331] Lutgendorf ties the popularity of Hanuman to Indian nationalist efforts to promote masculinity through physical training programs in contrast to the British portrayal of effeminacy. When the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) began organizing around the Babri Masjid issue, they formed the "youth wing" and named it the Bajrang Dal, invoking Hanuman's epithet *Bajraṅgbalī*, so it can be loosely translated as the "army of Hanuman."[332] In India today, posters and bumper stickers

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[329] Wendy Doniger, "Transformations of Subjectivity and Memory in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*," in *Self and Self-Transformation in the History of Religions*, ed. David Shulman and Guy G. Stroumsa (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 63.
[330] Wendy Doniger, "Transformations of Subjectivity and Memory in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*," 68.
[331] Philip Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey*, *Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 361.
[332] Philip Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale*, 367.

depicting a muscular, fierce-looking Hanuman are ubiquitous. Hanuman's association with masculinity and virility make his identity as a paradigmatic *sakhī* particularly striking. His transformation into a *sakhī* allows him to access more intimate settings with Ram and Sita, as *sakhī*s are able to serve the royal couple more directly than male servants. In this way, women are granted a more privileged position as devotees, leading Hanuman to temporarily transform into a woman. However, it is women's capacity for service that is valorized here.

3.1.5. Gender and Longing

The valorization of the *sakhī* in Vaishnava *bhakti* traditions is inextricably linked to gender. Stories about the *gopī*s and *sakhī*s often draw on the concept of *viraha*, or separation of lovers, because they embody unrequited love. Varuni Bhatia explains that "an enactment of *viraha* involves a constant participation in *smarana,* or remembering. The ideal *virahini* (embodying a tortured emotional subjectivity in various forms of Vaishnavism) is constantly bemoaning the loss of her Lord and lover, Krishna, and thereby *remembering* Him."[333] Some Sanskrit literary theorists argued that the best possible aesthetic sentiment to evoke in works of art is that of love, and the best kind of love is love in separation. Sanskrit dramas and *mahākāvya*s written in the erotic mood almost always depict *viraha*. Sanskrit literary theorists delineated between different types of love in separation, such as that caused by parents or exile, and the different emotions that arise, such as jealousy and pride. The emotion of jealousy is generally only expressed by women in Sanskrit poetry, not by men.[334]

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[333] Varuni Bhatia, *Unforgetting Chaitanya: Vaishnavism and Cultures of Devotion in Colonial Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3.
[334] Daniel H. H. Ingalls, ed. and trans., *Sanskrit Poetry from Vidyakara's 'Treasury'* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 15.

This valorization of *viraha* was present in both Muslim and Hindu poetry in early modern North India, particularly in *bhakti* and Sufi literature. Burchett describes how both Sufi and *bhakti* traditions valorize "passionate love – the kind that overflows all bounds and draws the self outside itself (*ishq*/*prema*)," placing emphasis on "intense longing for the absent belonging (*viraha*/*firāq*) as a metaphor for (and a vehicle to the experience of) pure love for the Divine."[335] In order to express this form of love, male *bhakti* poets often wrote in the voice of women. Hawley explains that in this context, "longing has a definite gender: it is feminine."[336] There do not appear to be any known examples of women writing in the voice of men. One expression of this tradition is the belief that God is the only male, and all humans are women.[337] Busch summarizes this phenomenon by saying that "Indian poetry may often have a female voice, but it has a male gaze."[338]

Scholars have disagreed about how to characterize the phenomenon of men composing as women, and whether or not it shows a positive view towards women's capacity for devotion.[339] Ramanujan offers several potential explanations for this phenomenon in his essay on *bhakti* called "Men, Women, and Saints." First, Ramanujan explains that he lists "saints" as a third category because he thinks they fall outside the traditional gender binary. He explains that male saints take on feminine roles and personae and female saints often break gender norms, so he

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[335] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*, 277.
[336] John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 166.
[337] David Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation*, 87.
[338] Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings*, 83.
[339] My discussion here is focused on the realm of literature, but the theme of men dressing as and performing as women in religious contexts in India has also been studied by anthropologists and performance studies scholarship. For recent scholarship on the topic, see: Harshita Mruthinti Kamath and Pamela Lothspeich, eds., *Mimetic Desires: Impersonation and Guising across South Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2022); Smita Tewari Jassal, *Unearthing Gender: Folksongs of North India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); and Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, *Material Acts in Everyday Hindu Worlds* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2020).

calls saints a "third gender."[340] He writes that male saints want to achieve a woman's status in society and accept the feminine side of themselves, drawing on Carl Jung.[341] However, Ramanujan does not explain why he views women's rejection of gender norms and men's appropriation of female voices as equivalent phenomena.

Ramanujan's second explanation is post-Freudian. He draws on Bruno Bettelheim and Erich Fromm's theory that each sex envies each other, and he suggests that this poetry may be a way of expressing this envy. Ramanujan summarizes his theory by suggesting that writing in the voice of a woman has "multiple meanings: to become bisexual, whole and androgynous […] in a male-dominated society, it also serves to abase and reverse oneself, rid oneself of machismo, to enter a liminal confusion, to become open and receptive as a woman to god; and it is possibly also a poetic expression of the male envy and admiration of woman."[342] Ramanujan's psychoanalytic approach offers explanations for why men write as women, but he does not explain the implications of this for women in *bhakti* communities, beyond the conjecture that it could be evidence of a positive view of women. He also does not fully explain his reason for connecting male envy of women to bisexuality and androgyny.

Some scholars are pessimistic about the possibility that men writing *bhakti* poetry in the voices of women could be helpful for women. Oftentimes the interpretation of this phenomenon rests upon assumptions about the male poets' motivations for doing so. Galina Rousseva-Sokolova explains that in the case of Kabir's use of the feminine voice in some of his poetry, "the assuming of a female voice seems a necessity in order to speak without constraint about

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[340] A. K. Ramanujan, "Men, Women, and Saints," in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 291.
[341] A. K. Ramanujan, "Men, Women, and Saints," 290.
[342] A. K. Ramanujan, "Men, Women, and Saints," 293.

emotions."[343] In contrast with Ramanujan, Rousseva-Sokolova clarifies that this mode of literary expression did not lead to gender equality. She talks about how the assumption of the female voice was pervasive across *bhakti* traditions, while the same traditions also institutionalized sexist policies like barring women from temples. She writes, "if sublimated femininity is a necessary element of the path to salvation, access to it seems to be granted only to males. Actual belonging to the female gender is never viewed as a facilitator on the spiritual path, quite the opposite."[344] She points out the relative lack of female *bhakti* saints as evidence for this.

The phenomenon of male *bhakti* poets writing as women also has potential as something positive for women. Paula Richman studies the *piḷḷaitamiḻ* genre of poetry, a Tamil *bhakti* genre where men assume the voice of a mother devoted to her baby, as a way of expressing a devotee's love of God. This genre began in the twelfth century and remains popular today, and it is almost always written by men. It is used primarily by Hindu poets, but Muslim and Christian Tamil poets have also adapted it and have written about Jesus as a baby. This is an example of the *vātsalya* form of *bhakti*, which emphasizes nearness and accessibility of God and draws on themes of domesticity.[345] Richman says that the domestic images in the poems elevates them, and she pushes back against other scholars who believe that the genre gives an essentialist portrayal of women as always being mothers. Drawing on Michael Parker and Alan Willhardt's *Cross-Gendered Verse* (1966), Richman calls the use of the feminine voice in poetry "cross-speaking," inspired by the term "cross-dressing."[346] The primary focus of her book is not on the gender implications of the genre, but she does say that the genre "may have the potential to

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[343] Galina Rousseva-Sokolova, "Female Voices and Gender Construction in North Indian Sant Poetry," in *Early Modern India: Literatures and Images, Texts and Languages*, ed. Maya Burger and Nadia Cattoni (Heidelberg: CrossAsia, 2019), 195.

[344] Galina Rousseva-Sokolova, "Female Voices and Gender Construction in North Indian Sant Poetry," 198.

[345] Paula Richman, *Extraordinary Child: Poems from a South Indian Devotional Genre* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 4.

[346] Paula Richman, *Extraordinary Child*, 218.

subvert cultural constructions of femaleness, if used in a self-consciously uncanny way," especially if women were to adopt the genre.[347]

Mirabai, the most famous female North Indian *bhakti* poet, provides a counterpoint to the idea that only men can write as women in the context of *bhakti* poetry. There is very little historical evidence about Mirabai's life. Even the commonly agreed-upon aspects of Mira's life story, such as the idea that she came from Merta in Rajasthan and married into the royal family of Mewar are not verifiable based on historical evidence.[348] Like many other *bhakti* poets, the number of poems attributed to Mirabai also grew over time. Kumkum Sangari points out how it is commonly believed that while men can choose to write as women, women *have* to write as women. Sangari analyzes the gendered language used by Mirabai and argues that her status as a woman gives her poetry additional weight. She writes, "in a sense it is the female voice—with its material basis in patriarchal subjugation—which provides the emotional force of self-abasement and *willed* servitude."[349] She says that in this way, through devotion to Krishna, the burden of being born as a woman is lifted.[350]

Even as Mirabai promotes servitude to Krishna, she demonstrates agency and challenges the expected role of women in society. Sangari acknowledges that Mirabai is an exceptional woman, and therefore perhaps does not serve as a role model for regular women, but she maintains that Mirabai's poetry opens up ordinary social relationships to reflection and potentially critique. Sangari argues that in *bhakti* poetry, "there is an implicit understanding here that gender is both a social *function* and an expressive mode, that gender is culturally constructed

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[347] Paula Richman, *Extraordinary Child*, 220.
[348] John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 92.
[349] Kumkum Sangari, "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of *Bhakti*," in *Occasional Papers on History and Society, Second Series Number XXVIII, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Teen Murti House, New Delhi* (June 1990): 51.
[350] Kumkum Sangari, "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of *Bhakti*," 129.

and so gender functions may be interchangeable."[351] Martin makes a similar argument. She

points out that gender plays a pivotal role in *bhakti* religiosity and she says that *bhakti* poetry is

"marked by a collective recognition of diverse gendered subjectivities and of the fluidity of such

social constructions."[352] This idea of gender as both a social function and an expressive mode is

also demonstrated in the Ram Rasik tradition. Having provided this review of the history and

historiography of *sakhī*s in South Asia, I now turn to a detailed discussion of *sakhī*s in the Ram

Rasik tradition.

3.1.6. Confusion, Censorship, and Suppression of Sakhīs

The names and terminology associated with the Ram Rasiks can be confusing. The Ram

Rasik branch of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* is sometimes also referred to as the Sakhi branch, the

Janaki *sampradāy,* the Janaki Vallabha *sampradāy,* the Rahasya *sampradāy,* or the Siya

sampradāy.[353] The most comprehensive study of the Ram Rasiks was published by Bhagwati

Prasad Singh in 1957 in Hindi, and only a handful of scholars have written about the tradition in

English. The Ram Rasiks are esoteric and many of their teachings are only available for initiates.

The terms *sakhī* and *rasik* are associated with both Ram- and Krishna-focused *bhakti* traditions,

leading to conflation of the two traditions, starting in the colonial period and continuing today.

In search of historical precedents to root contemporary identities, activists and scholars

sometimes point to Ram- or Krishna-devoted *sakhī*s as examples of a religious form of non-

heteronormativity, often while making overly-broad generalizations and assumptions about their

practices. One of the most common forms of confusion surrounding the Ram Rasiks is conflation

with hijras and eunuchs. More recently, Ram Rasiks have been described as "transvestite,"

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[351] Kumkum Sangari, "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of *Bhakti*," 70.
[352] Nancy M. Martin, "The Gendering of Voice in Medieval Hindu Literature," 98.
[353] Vasudha Paramasivan, "Between Text and Sect," 72.

"transsexual," or "transgender."[354] Here, I critique the historical application of these terms. It is possible that some modern communities of *sakhī*s may associate themselves with multiple labels or identities. For example, in *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, Serena Nanda describes *sakhībhāva* as "male transvestism as a form of devotion," and claims that "they also may engage in sexual acts with men as acts of devotion, and some devotees even castrate themselves in order to more nearly approximate a female identification with Radha."[355] Many studies of hijras in India focus on the sexualized and sensationalized aspects, and even though historically hijras and *sakhī*s have been distinct categories with different cultural and religious significances, they are sometimes grouped together.

The sensationalized interpretation of *sakhī*s has been repeated by many scholars. Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, scholars of history and nursing who have written extensively on sex and gender, view Hinduism as a religion with uniquely favorable views towards androgyny and cross-dressing, and their analysis has been repeated by other psychologists studying sex and gender.[356] However, Bullough and Bullough's analysis fails to accurately portray what they refer to as a "complicated phenomenon" in India due to their confusion over the *sakhībhāva* tradition. They take a psychoanalytic approach in describing cross dressing in Hindu mythology, influenced by Wendy Doniger, pointing out that it is more common to see stories of men dressing as women than vice versa. They say that men, while "envious of some aspects of the female role, are still conscious of men's higher status in society," and that "female impersonation often had erotic connotations because the cross dressing either led to sexual arousal or gave

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[354] For example, see: C.J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 168 and Robert P. Goldman, "Transsexualism, Gender, and Anxiety in Traditional India," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113, no. 3 (1993), 390.

[355] Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999), 21.

[356] For example, see William J. Mitchell and Richard McAnulty, *The Psychology of Sexual Orientation, Behavior, and Identity: A Handbook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 451.

access to the company of women […] It also often included an aspect of adventure, as if the male were saying, Look what I can do, though I am a man, I can make myself into an enchanting woman."[357] Devdutt Pattanaik, a popular writer who publishes books on Indian mythology and retellings of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, gives a similar suggestion. He compares hijras, Jogappas,[358] and *sakhī*s, saying that these groups "are known to indulge in same-sex activity," and that this is a way for men to "indulge homoerotic fantasies."[359] The broad generalizations and the focus on their sexual activities serves to conflate these distinct communities across India, leading to further stigmatization.

Bullough and Bullough describe *sakhī*s devoted to Krishna as being part of a Shaiva tantric tradition, and without evidence, claim that "female followers of the sect grant sexual favors freely to anyone since they conceive of their sexual partner as Krishna himself," and that many men "in the past emasculated themselves, and were all supposed to play the part of women during sexual intercourse (allowing themselves to be penetrated) as an act of devotion."[360] They claim that the technical term for these men is hijra or eunuch, and that they play an institutionalized third-gender role in society. Bullough and Bullough go on to describe hijra communities in Bombay. Hijras have been the focus of lots of sensationalized studies of India, and they also became popular examples used in comparative studies of trans and queer communities around the world, often in ways that involve generalizations about their communities.[361] For instance, recent scholars like Gayatri Reddy have argued that hijras need to

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[357] Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 7. Among other citations, Bullough and Bullough reference Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) here.
[358] Jogappas are another non-heteronormative community in India.
[359] Devdutt Pattaniak, *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 15.
[360] Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, 8. Bullough and Bullough draw on Serena Nanda's scholarship here.
[361] Joseph A. Marchal, "Trans* and Intersex Studies," in *Religion: Embodied Religion*, ed. Kent L. Brintnall (New York: Macmillan, 2016), 316.

be understood on axes of identity beyond their sexuality, including class, kinship, religion, and more. She also pushes back on the characterization of hijras as an Indian "third" gender, because she does not view hijras as a single homogenous category.[362]

Confusion about gender and sexuality in the Indian context is not a new phenomenon. Jessica Hinchy's insightful book *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India* focuses on British colonial regulation of hijras. Her extensive archival research provides many examples of confusion, uncomfortableness, and oppression of gender non-conforming individuals in India. She says that British colonial officials sometimes registered men who cross-dressed in ritual contexts as "eunuchs,"[363] and that in letters from 1876 and 1882, British officials disagreed with each other about whether or not these men "were 'addicted' to sodomy."[364] Hinchy explains a case in 1882 in which "the police in Ballia district conducted an enquiry into people 'who are believed occasionally to dress as women and are suspected of leading themselves to unnatural lust.' It is possible that these people were *Sakhī*s, since the colonial records suggest that their cross-dressing had 'religious significance.'"[365] The British administrators sometimes referred to *sakhī*s as "impotent."[366] Hinchy also says that sometimes males who played female roles were classified by the British as eunuchs and were prevented from performing in public spaces.[367] There are many examples of different types of behaviors and identities that challenge Victorian British ideals of a heterosexual gender binary in India, each with their own distinct histories and

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[362] Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 74.
[363] Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The* Hijra, *c. 1850-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 23.
[364] Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India*, 59.
[365] Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India*, 191.
[366] Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India*, 182.
[367] Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India*, 171.

religious significances, but the British prejudices against these communities led to an erasure of these differences.[368]

The colonial administrators' confusion about the diversity of Indic practices surrounding gender and sexual identity has contributed to the conflation of different categories today. Hinchy's focus in *Governing Gender* is on hijras, but she mentions *sakhī*s throughout the book to show that the British were confused about the different kinds of genders and sexual orientations that existed in India. However, Hinchy herself does not differentiate between *sakhī*s devoted to Ram and those devoted to Krishna. The book's glossary has the following entry under "*sakhī*": "also termed *Rasik,* a 'female companion' of the Ramanandi monastic order; a male devotee who performs femininity in a ritual context."[369] She does not go into any detail regarding the ritual context, as it is outside the scope of her research, but she also does not mention the existence of Krishna-devoted *sakhī*s or *rasik*s. It is possible that some of the British colonial letters and documents she studies that detail regulation of *sakhī*s could have been referring to Gaudiya Vaishnavas rather than Ram Rasiks.

In Busch's discussion of the *rīti* genre of Hindi poetry, she explains that part of the reason for its eventual fade from the literary sphere is its erotic content. She points out that "Victorianism also had a role in shaping new standards of literary taste. A natural target for reform was Brajbhasha poets' customary emphasis on *śṛṅgāra*. The British did not distinguish between the obscene and the erotic, tarring anything that sniffed of sensuality with the same crude brush."[370] In addition to regulation from the British, the *sakhī* model of religiosity also faced confusion and condemnation from other Hindus. Haberman discusses Rupa Kaviraja, a

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[368] For more information on the British Orientalist focus on sexuality in India and its legacy, particularly regarding stereotypes of effeminacy, see: Joseph Alter, *Moral Materialism: Sex and Masculinity in Modern India* (Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011).

[369] Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India*, xi.

[370] Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings*, 232.

Gaudiya Vaishnava practitioner who advocated for the literal physical imitation of *gopī*s through dressing and acting as a woman. Some Gaudiya Vaishnavas believe he took this too far, and in 1727 a council was convened to condemn Rupa Kaviraja's works.[371] He was expelled by his community in Vrindavan and moved to Assam, but two of his Sanskrit works survive where he outlines how to become a *gopī*.

As a result of the negative British views towards *sakhī*s, the colonial-era Hindu reform movement also began to criticize *rasik* practices. In 1886, composer of the Indian national anthem Bankim Chandra Chatterjee expressed his "disgust with the 'sensual' and 'effeminate' nature of Krishna."[372] David Haberman examines the British regulation of *sakhī* ritual practices in an article on the Maharaj Libel Case, an 1862 trial at the Supreme Court in Bombay. In 1860, Karsandas Mulji published a newspaper editorial arguing that the Vallabha *sampradāy* "was a 'new' and therefore 'false religion,'" compared to the Vedas, and accused the Vallabha *sampradāy* of "being disgustingly immoral and 'lost in a sea of licentiousness."[373] In particular, Mulji accused Jadunathji Maharaj, a religious leader and direct descendent of Vallabhacarya, of having affairs with the wives and daughters of male devotees. Jadunathji Maharaj filed a libel suit with the British-governed Supreme Court, in which the court examined a text written by Jadunathji Maharaj that valorized the "adulterine love" of Krishna and the *gopī*s.[374] Chief Justice Sausse said that the songs about Krishna "were of an amorous character and corrupting licentious tendency."[375] The conjoining forces of British colonial officials with Victorian heteronormative

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[371] David Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation*, 98.
[372] David L. Haberman, "On Trial: The Love of the Sixteen Thousand Gopees," *History of Religions* 33, no. 1 (Aug 1993): 69.
[373] David L. Haberman, "On Trial: The Love of the Sixteen Thousand Gopees," 45.
[374] David L. Haberman, "On Trial: The Love of the Sixteen Thousand Gopees," 55.
[375] David L. Haberman, "On Trial: The Love of the Sixteen Thousand Gopees," 62.

ideals, differences of opinion even within traditions with *sakhī*s, and Hindu reformers who were part of the Indian independence movement all led to the suppression of *sakhī* practices.

As a whole, this scholarship on the gender of longing presents a complex picture. The practice of men writing in the voice of women is not a straightforward elevation of women's status, as it draws on gendered tropes of women's servitude and passivity while pining for their beloved. The valorization of *sakhī*s began with the Gaudiya Vaishnavas in a Krishna *bhakti* context, but the Ram Rasiks adapted this form of religiosity to fit with devotion to Ram and Sita. *Sakhī*s have clearly played an important role throughout the history of South Asian literature, and the Vaishnava *rasik* traditions elevated their religious significance, shaping North Indian Vaishnava views of friendship, love, and devotion. In the next section, I focus on a different way of understanding Ramanandi views of gender through an analysis of the narratives surrounding the female disciples of Ramanand and representations of women in early modern Ramanandi hagiographies.

3.2. Ramanandis, Gender, and Social Egalitarianism

3.2.1. Introduction to Bhakti and Social Egalitarianism

Many scholars and activists have looked to *bhakti* saints and literature in hopes of finding an emic critique of inequality within Hindu traditions. As discussed in the Introduction, one of the central ideas behind the narrative of the "*bhakti* movement" is that it was a pan-Indian push towards social egalitarianism. Ramanujan explains that people often want to present *bhakti* as "a mass-movement of the lower classes against the upper, a Marxist movement before Marx was thought of."[376] More recently, scholars have questioned the claims of *bhakti* and social egalitarianism, particularly with regards to caste. One of the main concerns addressed by these

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[376] A. K. Ramanujan, "Men, Women, and Saints," 285.

scholars is that they do not want to anachronistically project contemporary social ideals onto the past.

This is one of the central focuses in Jon Keune's *Shared Devotion, Shared Food*, which examines the connection between theological egalitarianism and social equality through a study of the hagiographies of Maharashtrian Varkari saints. He frames the book by starting and ending with the critiques of B. R. Ambedkar. In 1936, Ambedkar made some of the same points that more recent scholars of *bhakti* highlight. Ambedkar said of the *bhakti* saints, "they did not preach that all men were equal. They preached that all men were equal in the eyes of God—a very different and a very innocuous proposition, which nobody can find difficult to preach or dangerous to believe in."[377] Keune highlights how modern, Western, democratic notions of equality influence the way contemporary people read *bhakti* literature. He examines the Marathi words that approximate the English notion of "equality" and questions whether social equality was ever a historical aspiration of *bhakti* traditions.[378] Keune also calls attention to the narrative structure of hagiographies, viewing them as stories rather than straightforward doctrinal expositions, which often display a "practical logic of strategic ambiguity."[379] This strategic ambiguity allows for the possibility of multiple interpretations.

The diversity of *bhakti* traditions and the narrative nature of hagiographies are both key to understanding the relationship between *bhakti* and social egalitarianism. Burchett characterizes the predominant attitude in *bhakti* hagiographies about caste as "ambivalent." He argues that the disconnect between *bhakti* ideology and lived practices

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[377] Jon Keune, *Shared Devotion, Shared Food* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 5.
[378] Jon Keune, *Shared Devotion, Shared Food*, 96-99.
[379] Jon Keune, *Shared Devotion, Shared Food*, 142. Other relevant passages include his engagement with Quentin Skinner, J.L. Austen, and Wittgenstein, 43; and his engagement with Sascha Ebeling's point about negotiation of power in hagiographies, 125.

"goes beyond a simple and widely accepted lack of connection between theory and practice, or spirit and real world," instead, "it is not simply that there has been a failure to put the egalitarian *bhakti* theory of these 'untouchable' hagiographies into actual practice, but rather that the messages in these hagiographies are themselves far less democratizing and socially progressive than they might at first appear."[380] The possibility for multiple readings of the same hagiographies demonstrates the diversity and multiplicity of *bhakti* traditions.

Burchett engages in a close reading of the hagiographies of four different *bhakti* saints from different centuries and different regions of India and he highlights the subtle ways that the stories reinforce caste hierarchies. In his analysis of Tiruppan Alvar, an eighth- or ninth-century Tamil saint, Burchett talks about a story where Tiruppan was carried into a temple from which he would normally be barred as a so-called "Untouchable" on the shoulders of a Brahmin. This story might seem to be positive at first, but Burchett points out that Tiruppan is still not allowed to touch the temple ground because he would pollute it. Burchett says that the hagiographers "sought to demonstrate that he was a truly exceptional and miraculous figure, not an ordinary human being whose life could be emulated."[381] This idea is central to the genre of hagiography in general, as the subjects of hagiographies are saints who often perform miracles or demonstrate devotion outside the realm of what is possible for an ordinary person. Following Hawley, Burchett emphasizes the range of ideologies present in *bhakti* texts and their interpreters, rather than viewing *bhakti* as a unified form of religiosity. He says that "contemporary Dalits have by and large rejected, abandoned, or ignored the 'untouchable' *bhakti* saints in their struggle for

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[380] Patton Burchett, "*Bhakti* Rhetoric in the Hagiography of 'Untouchable' Saints," 116.
[381] Patton Burchett, "*Bhakti* Rhetoric in the Hagiography of 'Untouchable' Saints," 119.

social justice."[382] Burchett says that this is because *bhakti* egalitarianism is confined to the spiritual sphere.

Another *bhakti* tradition known particularly for their perceived egalitarianism is the South Indian Virashaiva tradition. Gil Ben-Herut studies the Kannada hagiographies of Virashaiva saints, whom he says many people today view as "revolutionary iconoclasts and social reformers who, as precursors to modern stances, eschewed the caste system and were egalitarian."[383] He critiques this modern view, and argues that the hagiographies show that the community was far more disparate than it is imagined to be, and that the hagiographies display complex attitudes towards caste and social norms. Ben-Herut says that Harihara's "revolution was literary rather than social,"[384] and that "nondiscrimination is manifested in its fullest in this text only in the context of ritual encounters."[385] For example, the hagiographies reject caste discrimination when it comes to the performance of rituals, but not in terms of labor divisions. Ben-Herut focuses primarily on caste as the most prominent form of social stratification. He mentions gender briefly and confirms that although the text does include female saints, they are also relegated to a subservient status to men, and the female saints are often outcast from their societies. He also points out the overriding sectarian belief exclusively promotes worship of Shiva. Ben-Herut argues that viewing the hagiographies of Virashaiva as egalitarian is "anachronistic because the broad significations implied by these and similar terms are steeped in Western and modern value systems that are far removed from this tradition's cultural

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[382] Patton Burchett, "*Bhakti* Rhetoric in the Hagiography of 'Untouchable' Saints," 125.
[383] Gil Ben-Herut, *Śiva's Saints*, 3.
[384] Gil Ben-Herut, *Śiva's Saints*, 63.
[385] Gil Ben-Herut, *Śiva's Saints*, 123.

bedrock."[386] This call to avoid anachronism is found across recent scholarship on *bhakti* and social egalitarianism.

In Pauwels' study of the hagiographies written by Hariram Vyas, a sixteenth-century Krishna devotee in Vrindavan, she makes a similar argument. She says that "it is anachronistic to hijack *bhakti* voices for the purpose of a particular agenda, be it colonial, nationalist, postcolonial, Marxist, conservative, feminist, fundamentalist, deconstructionist, or subaltern."[387] Pauwels emphasizes intertextuality in her essay and the importance of understanding poems in relation to one another. She shows that even within the poetry of a single author there is still a diversity of views regarding caste and gender. This approach is important because it shows that not only are *bhakti* traditions incredibly diverse, even specific hagiologies are not always theologically cohesive, and it is important to consider the range of messages presented within these traditions.

Recent scholarship by authors like Keune, Burchett, Ben-Herut, and Pauwels has provided a more nuanced take on claims of *bhakti* and social egalitarianism in terms of caste. This mode of analysis can also extend to the realm of gender. The Ramanandi *sampradāy* provides a particularly illustrative case for discussing this relationship. Despite the claims that the Ramanandis are especially inclusive, evidenced by Ramanand's acceptance of two female disciples, an analysis of early modern hagiographies associated with the Ramanandis shows that the views of women are ambiguous. The narrative structure of hagiographies allows for nuanced portrayals of women's capacity for devotion, which I will analyze here.

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[386] Gil Ben-Herut, "Religious Equality, Social Conservatism: The Shiva-*Bhakti* Community as Imagined in Early Kannada Hagiographies," in *Bhakti and Power: Debating India's Religion of the Heart*, ed. John Stratton Hawley, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Swapna Sharma (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 39.

[387] Heidi Pauwels, "Caste and Women in Early Modern India: Krishna *Bhakti* in Sixteenth-Century Vrindavan," in *Bhakti and Power: Debating India's Religion of the Heart,* ed. John Stratton Hawley, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Swapna Sharma (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 49.

3.2.2. Gender Inclusivity in Bhakti *Traditions*

Caste and gender are sometimes grouped together under the term *strīśūdrādika* ("women, 'low castes,' and others").[388] Almost every scholarly introduction to the Ramanandi *sampradāy* emphasizes Ramanand's inclusivity as a guru and notes that he includes two women, Padmavati and Sursuri, among his original twelve followers, and they assign great importance to this inclusion. This dates back to the early-twentieth century, when narratives of the "*bhakti* movement" were being formed. For example, in 1925, Ganga Prasad Mehta wrote, "we cannot, of course, fail to notice the important position assigned to women. Although women saints are frequently met in all the sects of the Vaishnava reformation, Ramananda is the teacher who placed the sexes on an equality by calling the two women to be his disciples."[389] Similarly, in 1928, Shrikrishna Venkatesh Puntambekar wrote that Ramanand's followers included a Muslim, a low-caste leather-worker, a Brahmin, and a woman, and that he viewed everyone equally.[390] These claims are repeated in more recent introductions to the Ramanandis too. In 1982, Diana Eck wrote that among Ramanand's disciples were "an untouchable, a barber, and, it is said, even a woman. Although little more is known of him, Rāmānanda stood at the dawning of a new age of religiousness all over North India."[391] Questions surrounding the historicity of the formulation of his original twelve followers has been explored in Chapter Two, but in this section, I analyze the significance of the inclusion of Padmavati and Sursuri in the historiography of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. There is very little information about the two women, and there are no

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[388] Jon Keune, *Shared Devotion, Shared Food*, 62.
[389] Ganga Prasad Mehta, "Ramanand," *The Indian Review (a monthly periodical devoted to the discussion of all topics of interest),* ed. G.A. Natesan, XXVI, no. 9 (Sept 1925): 627.
[390] Shrikrishna Venkatesh Puntambekar, *An Introduction to Indian Citizenship and Civilisation (Historical Background and Modern Problems), Vol. I.* (Benares: Nand Kishore & Bros., 1928), 114.
[391] Diana Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 86.

extant compositions attributed to them. Despite this lack of information, they remain important

in claims about the unique inclusivity of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. Similar to the issue of caste

inclusivity, a closer analysis of the representations of gender in Ramanandi hagiographies shows

that the views of women are ambivalent. In these stories, women's status as wives and their

devotion to their husbands is often valorized above their devotion to God.

Padmavati and Sursuri became important in modern narratives about the historiography

of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, but they did not receive much attention in earlier hagiographies.

For example, Nabhadas does not give any details about Padmavati in his *Bhaktamāl*. He does,

however, explain that the other female disciple, Sursuri, is married to another disciple,

Sursuranand,[392] and both were Brahmins. Nabhadas calls Sursuri a *mahāsatī* and emphasizes her

chastity and her devotion. He tells the story of Sursuranand and Sursuri being attacked in the

forest and being saved by Hari.[393] In Priyadas's commentary, he adds that Sursuri was an orphan

who was introduced to Sursuranand by Ramanand himself.[394] He also emphasizes Sursuri's

chastity, calling her "the perfect example of chastity by the mercy of the Lord."[395] In Raja

Raghuraj Singh's *Rām Rasikāvalī*, the entry on Sursuranand focuses on his dedication to

preparing *prasād* and serving the saints.[396] His entry on Sursuri also tells the story of the couple

being attacked in the forest, and says that when the "lustful barbarian" went to Sursuri, she called

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[392] There is little information available at Sursuranand's legacy, but Alan W. Entwistle reports that one of the few Ramanandi establishments in Vrindaban is a *samādhi* of Sursuranand in Ram Kunj in *Braj, Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage* (Groningen: Groningen Oriental Studies, vol. 3, 1987), 173.

[393] Renu Bahuguna, "Devotion in Gender in Early Ramanandi Community," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 80 (December 2019): 562.

[394] Bhumipati Dasa, translator, ed. Purnaprajna Dasa, *Śrī Bhaktamāla compiled by Śrī Nābhā Gosvāmī with commentary by Śrī Priyādāsa* (Vrindaban: Rasbihari Lal & Sons, 2017), 228.

[395] Bhumipati Dasa, trans., ed. Purnaprajna Dasa, *Śrī Bhaktamāla*, 229.

[396] Raghuraj Singh, *Bhaktamāl: Rāmrasikāvalī* (Bombay: Lakshmi Venkateshvar Kalyam, 1956), 893.

Hari to mind and he saved her by taking the form of a lion.[397] Thus, in this late-nineteenth century hagiography, Sursuri's chastity is still emphasized above her devotion.

In contemporary hagiographies such as Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya's *Payaspayee: Swami Ramanand the Pioneer of Ram Bhakti*, which will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Five, the roles of Sursuri and Padmavati are expanded. This narrative emphasizes Ramanand's egalitarianism. Vijayvargiya says that after Ramanand began giving teachings in Varanasi, "there was no bar of gender or the untouchables. He had removed the rift between the human beings; all were one."[398] The hagiography mentions Sursari, and like Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl* and Raghuraj Singh's *Rām Rasikāvalī*, it focuses primarily on her devotion to her husband. However, Dayakrishna adds some new details. He says that after Sursuri and her husband became disciples of Ramanand, "that time in the South the Muslim Ruler Malik Kafur had spread the regime of terror amongst the people," so Ramanand instructed the couple to go to the South to help the Hindus. They successfully accomplish this by teaching Malik Kafur the "real 'Truth'" and continue spreading their message throughout the South, until Sursuri dies and her husband returned to Varanasi and then went on to Ayodhya.[399]

Later, Vijayvargiya expands on Padmavati's story, who he refers to as both "Padma" and "Padmavati." He says that she came from Tripura, a small state in eastern India that borders Assam, Mizoram, and Bangladesh, and that she demanded her father take her to Varanasi to learn from Ramanand. Given that the premodern hagiographical sources do not mention Tripura and focus on connections between Rajasthan and Varanasi (as explored in Chapter Four), situating Padmavati as hailing from Tripura is likely part of Viyavargiya's attempts to emphasize Ramanand's reach all throughout India. Vijayvargiya says that Padmavati was blessed by

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[397] "*Mlecch yak kāmī mahā*," Raghuraj Singh, *Bhaktamāl: Rāmrasikāvalī*, 894.
[398] Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya, *Swami Ramanand*, 16.
[399] Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya, *Swami Ramanand*, 41.

Lakshmi and that she was part of a group of "liberated souls" who were sent "to India to rescue and bring back the respected positions of those women in India who were attacked, kidnapped and were the victims of cruelty."[400] This new version of Padmavati's story clearly reflects contemporary political concerns. It exemplifies how the stories of Padmavati and Sursuri receive more and more attention over time.

In addition to the study of female saints in *bhakti* traditions, it is also possible to learn about different views of gender through an analysis of the far more prevalent male saints' interactions with women, such as their wives, daughters, and mothers. These women are often featured in *bhakti* hagiographies. Even though they are not portrayed as the focus of the story, sometimes they play pivotal roles in guiding the religiosity of the male saints. Examining the stories of these women can help with understanding different *bhakti* traditions' views of the roles of women. Ramanujan mentions the important role of wives of male saints in an essay focusing primarily on female *bhakti* saints in the Virashaiva tradition. He says that the most common tropes in the hagiographies of female saints include an early dedication to God, a refusal of marriage, the defiance of social norms, initiation into a tradition, and marriage to God. Often female saints' biggest challenges are with their families.[401] The stories of the wives of male saints follow a similar pattern to the female saints. Ramanujan suggests there is a trope wherein saints' wives are portrayed as superior to their husbands, even if they are not saints themselves. He says that these wives "out-saint" their husbands.[402] Unlike the female saints, the wives of male saints do not reject their families or societies. Instead, they model devotion in a way that is compatible for householders to follow.

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[400] Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya, *Swami Ramanand*, 37.
[401] A. K. Ramanujan, "On Women Saints," in *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and D. M. Wulff (Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1982), 324.
[402] A. K. Ramanujan, "On Women Saints," 323.

The women featured in the hagiographies of male saints often humanize them by highlighting some of their flaws. Eleanor Zelliot has written about the mothers and wives of Namdev and Chokamela, two male Maharashtrian *bhakti* saints. Their mothers and wives composed their own poetry that Zelliot says "seem remarkably human even today,"[403] often expressing their unhappiness with domestic life. Namdev's mother and wife both complain that he abandoned his family out of devotion to God, leaving them without support. Chokamela's wife complains that she was abandoned by him while pregnant.[404] The women are presented as sincere devotees in their own right, despite not being classified as saints themselves, and finding faults with the male saints they are associated with. Zelliot says that "the inclusion of women not only lets their voices be heard but also shows them, as well as their husbands, how to be true Varkaris."[405] Given the relatively small number of female saints, Zelliot's scholarship demonstrates the potential of learning more about the roles of women in *bhakti* traditions through the stories of the lives of female family members of male saints.

In recent years, several scholars have studied conceptions of gender in the Vallabha *sampradāy*, also known as the Pustimarg. The Vallabha *sampradāy* is said to have been founded by Vallabha, a Telugu Brahmin from Andhra Pradesh, who traveled to Braj and established a sectarian community there around 1494 CE in devotion to Krishna. The central hagiology in this tradition is the *Caurāsī Vaiṣṇava kī Vārtā* ("The Narratives of Eighty-Four Vaishnavas") (c. 1702), which narrates the lives of Vallabha and his earliest followers. It is written in Braj Bhasha and is one of the oldest works of prose literature in any dialect of Hindi. It is generally attributed to Gokulnath, Vallabha's grandson, but its authorship is highly contested. In addition to

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[403] Eleanor Zelliot, "Women in the Homes of Saints," in *Home, Family, and Kinship in Maharashtra*, ed. Irina Glushkova and Rajendra Vora (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 89.
[404] Eleanor Zelliot, "Women in the Homes of Saints," 94.
[405] Eleanor Zelliot, "Women in the Homes of Saints," 99.

providing information about Indian history and the early saints in the Pustimarg, the *Caurāsī*

Vaiṣṇava kī Vārta is also an important resource for the maintenance of Pustimarg religiosity for

contemporary devotees.

The Vallabha *sampradāy*'s hagiographical literature includes many depictions of women,

particularly in their roles as the wives of male saints. Dalmia argues that this literature is

"evidence of the remarkable latitude granted to women in order to enable them to follow the

devotional path."[406] She even refers to the "radicalism" of the texts in regards to their views of

women.[407] Dalmia explains that the hagiographies are meant to inculcate new forms of religiosity

that demarcate members of the Pustimarg community from other Hindu sects, and points out that

the *vārtās* often define themselves against Vedic norms and *maryādāmārga*, or the way of

custom.[408] Dalmia draws on and quotes from traditional Sanskrit *śāstrik* literature like the

Manusmṛti in order to highlight this contrast. She uses two vignettes as her primary evidence, the

first of which is the story of the wife of Krishnadasa. The moral of this story promotes putting

devotion to fellow Vaishnava *bhakta*s ahead of marital fidelity. The second story, which takes

place in the *vārtā* of Rana Vyasa, features an unnamed woman who shows that devotion to God

is more important than devotion to her husband. Dalmia has a positive view of these stories,

explaining, "within the dynamic framework of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* or devotion it was possible and

desirable for a woman to seek to establish a relationship to her own god."[409]

A central aspect of the Pustimarg's religiosity is the practice of domestic *sevā*, or

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[406] Vasudha Dalmia, "Women, Duty and Sanctified Space in a Vaiṣṇava Hagiography of the Seventeenth Century," in *Constructions hagiographiques dans le monde indien: Entre mythe et histoire*, ed. Françoise Mallison (Paris: Editions Champion, 2001), 207.
[407] Vasudha Dalmia, "Women, Duty and Sanctified Space," 209.
[408] Vasudha Dalmia, "Women, Duty and Sanctified Space," 208.
[409] Vasudha Dalmia, "Women, Duty and Sanctified Space," 217.

"religious worship." Shital Sharma uses *sevā* as a way to understand women's roles in the *sampradāy*. Noting that most scholarship of gender and *bhakti* focuses on female saints, Sharma instead proposes "a shift in focus to the everyday female practitioner, such as the lay Puṣṭimārg Vaiṣṇav woman," in addition to the wives and daughters of the saints.[410] She examines hagiographical and other religious texts in addition to conducting ethnographic research with middle- and upper-class mercantile communities in Gujurat. Like many other *bhakti* communities, most of the saints and officials in the Pustimarg are men. Sharma argues that "despite the 'officially' male public face of contemporary Puṣṭimārg, women are very much at the center of the life of the sect,"[411] and that the performance of domestic *sevā* by women is essential to maintaining their sectarian identity. Sharma explains, "domestic and familiar imagery permeate every aspect of Puṣṭimārg ritual culture."[412] For instance, the Pustimarg often conceives of God as a child, and the performance of rituals in the home is emphasized above rituals in the temple. Sometimes women in the Pustimarg assume the authoritative role of their husbands or fathers after they die, but Sharma qualifies this by explaining, "we should be careful not to romanticize these as evidence of women's 'equal status' in religious traditions. In this context, women's leadership roles are contingent upon their husbands' inability to rule; they are *appropriating* authority, which ultimately rests in the figure of male Gosvāmīs."[413]

　　Contemporary Hindu women often draw on *bhakti* hagiographies as a way to inform their religiosity. Emilia Bachrach has conducted ethnographic research on gatherings of contemporary female followers of the Pustimarg in Gujurat, where women meet to read and discuss sectarian hagiographies. One of the central themes in these hagiographies is the challenge of balancing

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[410] Shital Sharma, "A Prestigious Path to Grace: Class, Modernity, and Female Religiosity in Puṣṭimārg Vaiṣṇavism" (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 2013), 13.
[411] Shital Sharma, "A Prestigious Path to Grace," 4.
[412] Shital Sharma, "A Prestigious Path to Grace," 6.
[413] Shital Sharma, "A Prestigious Path to Grace," 175.

family life with religious commitments. Bachrach describes how the women discuss the story of

Purushottamdas and his wife, drawing parallels with their own lives. One mother talks about her

distress that her husband and children do not follow the food restrictions and rituals of the

Vallabha *sampradāy*, and another discusses her concern that her son is married to a German

woman who does not known about Indian culture or traditions. Bachrach explains how "the

hagiographies' protagonists are perceived to be vividly real figures whose experiences directly

resonate with the lived realities of contemporary devotees."[414] Bachrach's ethnographic research

shows that even though the women are discussing hagiographies of male saints, the women focus

on the female characters in the stories and draw connections to their own lives. The views of

women across *bhakti* traditions are complex. Narratives of the "*bhakti* movement" stress the

soteriologically inclusive aspect of *bhakti* in comparison to earlier forms of Hindu religiosity, but

hagiographical representations of women are much more ambiguous. In the following section, I

analyze stories of women in Anantadas's *Parcaī*s, a hagiology affiliated with the Ramanandi

sampradāy.

3.2.3. Gender and Ambiguity in the Parcaīs

Anantadas's *Parcaī*s show ambiguous attitudes towards women's capacities for devotion,

particularly in their portrayals of the women surrounding the male *bhakti* saints. In this section, I

highlight the women portrayed in the hagiographies of Pipa, Namdev, and Dhana. I focus

particularly on this early-seventeenth century hagiology by Anantadas in order to highlight

Ramanandi portrayals of women prior to the modern depiction found in narratives of the "*bhakti*

movement" that depict Ramanandis as emblematic of social egalitarianism.

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[414] Emilia Bachrach, "Religious Reading and Everyday Lives," in *Text and Tradition in Early Modern North India*, ed. Tyler Williams, Anshu Malhotra, and John Stratton Hawley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 420.

The trope Ramanujan highlights of wives "out-sainting" their husbands can be seen in Anantadas's hagiography of Pipa. Pipa is one of the saints claimed as one of the twelve original followers of Ramanand. He is an interesting member of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, which will be explored more in Chapter Four, as he was formerly a devotee of Durga and later became a devotee of Krishna rather than Ram. Anantadas focuses particularly on Pipa in his hagiology, and Callewaert refers to Pipa's *parcaī* as "by far the longest and in fact also the most interesting."[415] Pipa's youngest wife is named Sita, and although she does not get her own dedicated hagiography and is not considered to be a saint herself, she is a critical character throughout all of Pipa's stories. Hawley writes, "surely it is no accident that Pīpā's faithful wife is called Sītā, for the story of their life together amounts to a new version of the Hindu marriage that is usually understood as the classic statement of virtue and self-sacrifice: the epic marriage of Rām and Sītā."[416] Anantadas directly compares Pipa's wife Sita to Ram's wife Sita in his *parcaī*.

In Anantadas's *Parcaī*, sometimes Sita is portrayed as the one who really understands the proper way to practice devotion, not Pipa. For example, when Pipa announces that he will become a renunciant, he says he will leave his wives behind, and they ask him to stay. In Callewaert's translation of the story, Anantadas narrates,

"Pīpā pleaded sweetly:

'You are all sensible women, please go back home. Allow me to go to Dvaraka, from

where I will soon return. When again will I have the company of my guru?'

The queens said: 'It is not proper

that we should leave you and go back alone.

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[415] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 2.
[416] John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 62.

The thread always follows the needle.

Without you, O husband, where can we go?'

Then Pīpā and his guru signaled to each other,

and Rāmānanda thought of a fitting answer.

He urged the twelve queens to go back home and said:

'You are not that dear to Pīpā.

How will you proceed on my path with the commitment that your husband has?'"[417]

Later, Ramanand tells Pipa's wives, "Pīpā might even sell you and use the money for food. Or he might leave you with an ascetic and never remember you afterwards. Shaven-headed ascetics will ridicule you and shower you with abusive language. You will be extremely sorry."[418] This language attributed to Ramanand clearly demonstrates a lack of respect for the wives, as they are treated as distractions.

Unlike the other wives, Sita refuses to stay home, and says she wants to join Pipa. Ramanand encourages Pipa to let Sita join him, but Pipa repeats misogynistic tropes in his response. Anantadas writes,

"Pīpā replied: 'What will I do with her?

She is of no use to me, give her to someone else.

We will be criticized by people and tradition.

Svāmī, it is not appropriate to keep a woman with us.

Now you say it is alright,

but later you will be ashamed.

When I tell people that I am your disciple,

they will criticize us.

By force of deceit women beguile men,

and loving them can only be an obstacle to knowledge…

Not only men, even gods are infatuated with women,

forgetting *bhakti*, they plunge into the dark well of a household."[419]

Pipa says women are deceitful and an obstacle to knowledge, distracting to even the gods. However, Sita proves herself to be an exception. In order to prove her devotion, at the request of Ramanand she sheds all of her clothes and dances naked before the court. Anantadas describes how Sita "discarded her clothes till she was naked—she dropped all shame and thus left the world behind. The whole town witnessed the spectacle, but Sītā just ignored them as if they were grass."[420] This is a common trope in stories about female *bhakti* saints, paralleled by famous saints like Mirabai. This test of devotion could also be compared to the *agniparīkṣa* of the Sita from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, or the disrobing of Draupadi in the *Mahābhārata*. Sita insists that she follow Pipa, and eventually Ramanand encourages him to let her. Anantadas praises her devotion to her husband, rather than focusing on her devotion to God. Pipa's wife Sita negotiates several conflicting ethical norms. She defies the expectation to stay in the court like the other wives; but her devotion is still tested and mediated by Ramanand, a male guru. She is devoted to god above all else. She still constantly has to prove her devotion to her husband, even though he shows multiple times that he is willing to abandon her. After Sita is able to prove her devotion, she follows her husband and becomes a wandering ascetic.

While traveling, Pipa and Sita run into several problems. One such story involves them running into a Pathan (a person from a North Indian Muslim ethnic group). Pipa is completely

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[419] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 158.
[420] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 157.

useless here. When the Pathan asks who Sita is, Pipa immediately volunteers, "I am an ascetic and this is my woman. I want to spend my days worshipping the Creator. If you want to use violence, do what you desire." The Pathan requests that he hand over Sita, and Pipa does so immediately, taking this as proof that she never should have tagged along. He says, "but what could I do, the Svāmī ordered me to bring her. See, she has now fallen into the hands of a ruffian." The Pathan takes Sita and tries to seduce her. She responds, "I will end my life by biting off my tongue, you sinner." She then begins to think of Hari, and Anantadas explains, "suddenly there appeared a terrible man who picked up the Pathan and threw him on the ground, unconscious." The Pathan laments, "this giant came and threw me down. This man was invisible, I could not see him with my eyes… I will never behave in this shameful manner again."[421] In this story, Hari intervenes directly in order to violently attack a man. This same story later teaches a message of nonviolence, when Pipa and Sita successfully teach a hungry tiger to give up killing other animals and humans.[422]

In the rest of Pipa's *parcaī*, there are several incidents of nearly-missed sexual violations of Sita. For instance, at one point Sita offers to become a prostitute to help provide money for a gathering of devotees organized by Pipa until the man realizes his mistake and the depth of her devotion,[423] and at another point, Pipa offers Sita to "four men with wicked desires"[424] before Hari sends a tiger as protection. These stories of Pipa and Sita parallels the brief story of Sursuranand and Sursari from the *Bhaktamāl*, as they depict God intervening to prevent the saints' wives from sexual violation.

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[421] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 167-169.
[422] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 171. This story is also similar to a tale from the *Vessantara Jataka,* which narrates the stories of the Buddha's previous births. In one story, the Buddha feeds himself to a hungry tiger so she does not have to eat her own cubs.
[423] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 183-185.
[424] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 187.

Anantadas praises Sita's devotion even above Pipa's devotion. Anantadas venerates Sita, saying "Pīpā's mind was concentrated on Hari, but Sītā's mind was even more pure."[425] However, despite this moral superiority, she is repeatedly praised for her devotion to her husband, and Pipa is allowed to treat her as he pleases. Anantadas says, "on the shoulders of this exceptional woman Pīpā loaded all his burdens."[426] In Anantadas's narration, Sita says

"If she is never angry with her husband […]

If she has no clothes or food and yet does not complain,

If she never expresses her own desires,

but behaves with people as her husband commands […]

If she does not mind the mistakes of her husband –

this faithful woman will find liberation.

As she worships Rām,

so she should honor her husband."[427]

Even though Sita's devotion is proven time and again throughout Anantadas's hagiography of Pipa, she is not considered a saint. Her devotion to her husband is seen as even more important than her devotion to God.

In Anantadas's hagiography of Namdev, Namdev's own family is not mentioned, but the wife of another character becomes important in one story. Anantadas relays the tale of a wealthy merchant named Vimal who wishes to give some money to Namdev as an offering. Namdev refuses and says that he would only accept the amount of gold equal to the weight of a single tulsi leaf. In order to teach Vimal a lesson about valuing devotion rather than money, Namdev writes the half of the name of Ram on the leaf, "who weighs as much as the whole world." When

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[425] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 171.
[426] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 189.
[427] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 194.

Vimal begins to put gold on the scale, he realizes that as much as he adds, the leaf still weighs more, because "the scale ridiculed traditional religion" in favor of *bhakti*. Vimal makes his wife remove her jewelry and add it to the scale, but she realizes what is happening quicker than Vimal. She tells him, "we have given all because our master asked us, but it is useless against half the Name." Vimal and his wife try all of their other displays of religiosity, like performing various Vedic rituals, serving food to Brahmins, and making vows, but it still does not work. Eventually, Vimal realizes what his wife already knew – "there is nothing one can give in exchange for even half Ram's name. All rituals, all power and wealth are worthless before it."[428] Although Vimal's wife is a nameless character who appears only in this brief story, she is an example of the wives of the seemingly more central characters knowing more about *bhakti* than their husbands.

The women featured in Anantadas's hagiography of Dhana, one of the low-caste saints said to be one of the twelve original disciples of Ramanand, demonstrate a more negative view of women's religious potentials. Dhana's wife is briefly mentioned in his hagiography. She is never named. Her primary attribute seems to be her devotion to her husband, and her own devotion to God is seen as irrelevant. Anantadas writes, "Dhana had a wife who excelled in obedience to her husband. Therefore, she had no need of any god, and was all the time detached from worldly things." Anantadas even compares Dhana's wife to his possessions. He explains, Dhana "stayed at home, detached, like a traveler staying closer to a waterhole. His house, his wife, his possessions, he made them an offering to Hari." While Anantadas praises wives for devotion to their husbands, husbands are not expected to do the same in return. Later, when Dhana is talking to Hari disguised as an ascetic, he tells him, "go to my home and take whatever

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[428] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 37.

food you desire. In my home there is a good woman, she will serve you in every manner."[429] In another vignette, a group of *bhakta*s goes to Dhana's house, and Dhana's wife gives them water and washes their feet. She is praised only for her obedience, not for her devotion to Hari.[430]

The only other woman mentioned in Dhana's hagiography is the story of a ploughman's wife. In this story, Dhana gives away the ploughman's grain to Hari, and then tells the ploughman that he needs to have faith in God and he will provide for him. However, his wife is angry; "she was furious and shouted and swore. 'Madcap, what will you eat?'"[431] Dhana's wife then tells the ploughman's wife that she will be punished for not having faith, and later, the ploughman's wife apologizes for her doubt. The women in Dhana's hagiography show a more negative view towards women, demonstrating the complexity and diversity of views regarding gender within a single hagiology. In some instances, the women in Anantadas's narration "out-saint" their husband by proving their capacity for devotion and encouraging their husbands to act in the proper way. In other stories, women are presented as distractions and as ignorant of proper *bhakti*. An examination of early modern hagiographies of women associated with the Ramanandis demonstrates ambiguous and ambivalent messages, in contrast to later claims that the Ramanandis are exemplars of social egalitarianism.

Conclusion: Sakhī*s, Female Devotees, and Ramanand*

This chapter has taken two approaches to the study of gender in the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. First, it analyzed how the figure of the *sakhī* has been present throughout the history of Sanskrit literature, especially in its important roles in romantic and devotional poetry, and it argued for ways to nuance modern scholarship on this figure. Although the *sakhī* may seem

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[429] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 102-3
[430] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 107.
[431] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 104.

tangential to the main plot of a story, focused on the hero and heroine or devotee and God, the *sakhī* often serves a critical purpose in terms of facilitating the story, guiding the other characters, and serving as an intimate witness to the events that take place. There is also sometimes a homoerotic connotation to *sakhī*s which has both contributed to the marginalization they have received and the reclamation by contemporary lesbian and queer activists and scholars. *Sakhī*s are also an example of the valorization of friendship and love in *bhakti* traditions. Their role demonstrates that even stories about love and devotion are about more than just two figures, they are part of a community. *Sakhī*s and *gopī*s are particularly present in *bhakti* traditions devoted to Krishna, while the Ram Rasik tradition also views the *sakhī*s of Sita as important models of devotion. Many scholars have written about the tradition of men impersonating women in India in contexts including devotional poetry, theatre, and religious festivals. The context of *Rāmāyaṇa*-related devotional traditions is particularly interesting given that the story of Ram and Sita is often held up as a model of a patriarchal heterosexual marriage. The Ram Rasik tradition is esoteric and some of its teachings are only available to initiates. Starting in the colonial period and continuing today, there have been many examples of outsiders misunderstanding their practices and conflating them with Gaudiya Vaishnavas, hijras, eunuchs, or transgender communities. Hence, I have argued that the Ram Rasiks have played an important role in bridging Ram and Krishna devotional communities, leading the figure of the *sakhī* to be an important part of Vaishnava *bhakti* more broadly.

In the second half of the chapter, I focused on the role of gender in claims about social egalitarianism in the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. As explored in Chapter One, social egalitarianism became one of the hallmark characteristics in the modern narrative of "the *bhakti* movement." However, recently scholars have emphasized the importance of looking at the diversity of *bhakti*

traditions instead of viewing it as a singular cohesive movement and have suggested that *bhakti* traditions often display complex and ambivalent views towards caste equality. Sometimes singular hagiographies will demonstrate contrasting messages about caste, or narrate stories whose messages are unclear and open to interpretation. Based on my analysis of hagiographies of Ramanandi saints, I argued here that a similar kind of ambiguity and ambivalence characterizes the Ramanandi *sampradāy*'s views towards gender equality.

One of the most common claims about Ramanand is that he viewed everyone equally and led a social revolution by welcoming people from all different backgrounds as his disciples, including two women. Mentions of these women, Padmavati and Sursuri, are ubiquitous in introductions to the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, but actual information about either of them is far less common. In a short entry on Sursuri and her husband Sursuranand, Nabhadas emphasizes her chastity and her devotion. There are not any available writings attributed to either of them. The lack of information shows a sort of ambivalence, as they are remembered as token examples of inclusivity rather than for their own individual lives. Contemporary hagiographies such as Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya's *Payaspayee* add details to the stories of Padmavati and Sursuri, reflecting the important role that they play in the narrative of social egalitarianism in the Ramanandi *sampradāy*.

Despite the lack of information about Ramanandi female saints, it is possible to learn more about views towards gender in the community through the stories of the women associated with male saints in hagiographical representations, as scholars of the Pustimarg have done. In my analysis of the stories of women in Anantadas's *Parcaī*s, I show that while sometimes the wives can be seen as "out-sainting" their husbands, other times they remain token figures that are judged primarily on the basis of devotion to their husbands. By bringing my analysis of

important Ramanandi figures into comparison with the work of scholarship on other *bhakti* traditions, I have shown that the modern narrative of gender inclusivity in *bhakti* traditions does not always align with early modern hagiographical representations.

This chapter has analyzed key dynamics around gender and the Ramanandi *sampradāy* by exploring the role of the *sakhī* in the Ram Rasik tradition and analyzing narratives of women in Ramanandi hagiographies. The next chapter builds on this analysis by exploring the physical locations associated with the Ramanandi *sampradāy* and highlighting the role the Ram Rasiks played in identifying sacred sites from the *Rāmāyaṇa* with physical locations in India and Nepal.

Chapter Four – The Spread of Ram *Bhakti* and the "Rediscovery" of Sacred Sites

Introduction

This chapter examines the history and significance of the physical locations associated with the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. I focus particularly on the connections between Rajasthan and Varanasi, as seen in stories that move back and forth between the two regions in early hagiographies such as Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl* and Anantadas's *Parcaī*s, and the role the Ram Rasiks played in identifying places described in the *Rāmāyaṇa* with corresponding places in India. The Ram Rasiks used their commonalities with Krishna *bhakti* traditions, including the valorization of the *sakhī* and the emphasis on sacred places, to contribute to the development of a pan-Vaishnava identity in North India. In this chapter, my first main argument is that hagiographies of Ramanand emphasize his connection to Varanasi and depict him traveling between Rajasthan and Varanasi in order to capitalize on Varanasi's status as an important seat of Hindu authority and to create a vision of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* as stretching North India.

This chapter builds on recent scholarship on the relationship between early modern schisms within Hinduism and the consolidation of a Vaishnava Hindu identity in the colonial period. One of Hawley's central arguments in *A Storm of Songs* is that the idea of "the *bhakti* movement" was not fully formed until the twentieth century, and that it "was an immense resource in the cause of national integration."[432] As explored in Chapter Two, a common claim in narratives of a cohesive *bhakti* movement suggest that *bhakti* originated in the South and brought to the North, uniting all of India. However, Hawley writes that "this history of south-to-north progression turns out to be the history of a wish—a northern wish that required the invention (or perhaps reinvention) of an earlier south."[433] While Ramanand's connections to

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[432] John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 13.
[433] John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 100.

Ramanuja and the South are highly debated by Ramanandis, the memory of him as a great North Indian *bhakti* leader remains. Ramanand's connection with Varanasi later became important in claims about Varanasi's status as a holy place for both Shaivas and Vaishnavas.

The Ram Rasik branch of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* began in Rajasthan and began to spread beyond the region in the eighteenth century. By the nineteenth century, it became more popular and began to be established as a separate sectarian community.[434] The Ram Rasiks were highly influential in the identification of sacred sites from the *Rāmāyaṇa* with actual physical locations. In particular, Ayodhya was identified as the birthplace of Ram; Janakpur in the eastern Terai region of southern Nepal was claimed to be the birthplace of Sita; and Citrakut in Madhya Pradesh was seen as the place where Ram, Sita, and Lakshmana spent twelve years in the woods. In this chapter, I explore the parallels between the Ram Rasik establishment of pilgrimage sites with the way the Vallabha *sampradāy* "rediscovered" places related to stories from Krishna's life in Braj in the sixteenth century, focusing on Ayodhya and Janakpur. I also investigate the implications of these places for contemporary Indian politics. In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced the Indian Ministry of Tourism's Swadesh Darshan scheme, consisting of fifteen thematic circuits including a Ramayana Circuit. In 2022, the Ramayana Circuit implemented the first Indian tourist train to extend to Nepal. My second main argument in this chapter is that while the Hindu nationalist narrative promotes the idea that the *Rāmāyaṇa* recounts historical events that took place in India centuries ago, the history of the Ramayana Circuit is best understood in the context of the history of the Ram Rasiks in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

4.1. Ramanandis, Varanasi, and "Vulgate" Vaishnavism

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[434] Patton Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 440.

Ramanand's affinity with Varanasi is a central component of the collective memory of him. The idea that he lived and taught in Varanasi is consistent across accounts of his life. Varanasi is also claimed to be the home of Ramanand's two most famous disciples, Kabir and Ravidas, and stories of his other followers often depict them traveling back and forth between Rajasthan and Varanasi to meet with Ramanand or to receive initiation from him. I argue that the connections between Ramanand and Varanasi have been emphasized for a few reasons, which I will present in this section of the chapter. The first reason is that this connection helps to bolster the authority of Ramanand as a traditional Hindu guru, as Varanasi has long been venerated as a particularly holy place for Hindus and as a site of scholastic activity. Another reason is that attributing the rise of Vaishnavism and devotion to Ram in Varanasi to Ramanand helps to situate Varanasi as an important place for all of Hinduism, not just Shaivism, with which Varanasi is particularly closely affiliated. This also serves to shift attention away from Tulsidas, who wrote the *Rāmcaritmānas* in Varanasi, and re-center Ramanand's role in promoting devotion to Ram in North India. In this way, Ramanand's association with Varanasi is tied to the rise of Vaishnavism in early modern North India.

4.1.1. Ramanand in Varanasi

There are countless stories of Ramanand living and interacting with his disciples in Varanasi in hagiographies of him written from the early seventeenth-century onwards. There are also many active Ramanandi temples and monasteries in Varanasi still today, such as a pilgrim rest house located near Kabir Chowra and a garden located across the river where Ramanandis grow vegetables and keep cows.[435] Bevilacqua visited many contemporary Ramanandi centers in Varanasi based off a study done by Sinha and Saraswati in the 1960s. They listed around forty

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[435] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 136.

*maṭh*s and claimed that Ramanandis made up about a fifth of the total ascetics in the city.[436]

Bevilacqua describes her visit to a few of these *maṭh*s, such as the active Ram Janki Mandir in Chowk; the Sital Das Bara Akhara near Assi Ghat, which contains a school; the Sri Anant Sri Sita Ram Janki Mandir in Kashmiri Ganj, which has a guru who seeks an international audience; and the Lota Tila Math, which has been mostly abandoned.[437] Bevilacqua focuses particularly on the Shri Math, founded in the late 1980s and located on Panchaganga Ghat, where Ramanand is said to have lived.

Panchaganga Ghat is said to be the exact location of Kabir's initiation, as told in a famous story from Anantadas's hagiography. In this story, Ramanand initially refused to initiate Kabir because of his Muslim background. Early one morning, Kabir laid down in the path Ramanand took on the way to bathe in the Ganges. He accidentally stepped on Kabir and called out "Ram! Ram!" Kabir took this as his initiation, and he was eventually accepted as a disciple by Ramanand.[438] Panchaganga Ghat is a particularly important Vaishnava pilgrimage spot that is considered one of the main *tīrtha*s in the city.[439] Bevilacqua notes that Nabhadas never mentioned Ramanand living at Panchaganga Ghat, and she considers it "plausible" but "difficult to determine" whether or not he really did live there.[440]

By the nineteenth century, Ramanandis began to claim that the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb destroyed the original Ramanandi ashram and only a *caraṇa pādukā* or "footprint" of Ramanand remained, according to Bevilacqua. She searched for evidence of Ramanand's ashram, and in the earliest painting she could find from 1770, you can see "a structure similar to

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[436] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 205.
[437] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 207-209.
[438] David Lorenzen, *Who Invented Hinduism: Essays on Religion in History* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006), 108.
[439] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 130.
[440] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 131.

a pavilion"[441] where today's Shri Math was eventually built. Later paintings and photographic evidence show that the pavilion is not connected to any building. She puts forward three hypotheses: that Ramanand had an ashram somewhere nearby but not exactly on the ghat; that his ashram was built on the ghat but it did not last long because his disciples moved to Rajasthan; or that Ramanand bathed and taught at the ghat but never had an actual ashram there. She does not state which of these is most likely but seems to believe they are all plausible.[442] However, I would add that it is possible that none of these hypotheses is true. It may be the case that Ramanand never lived or taught at Panchaganga Ghat. Given the lack of early evidence linking Ramanand to the ghat, it is possible that this was a later addition to his life story that served to legitimate the founding of the Shri Math.

4.1.2. Rajasthan-Varanasi Connections

There are many stories of Ramanand's disciples traveling back and forth between Rajasthan and Varanasi to meet with him. For instance, Dhana, one of the original twelve disciples of Ramanand listed in Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl*, is said to have been born in 1415 CE in Dhuat near Tonk in Rajasthan.[443] P. Caturvedi says that Dhana was first associated with Ramanand in a song attributed to Mirabai, and questions whether Dhana, like many of the saints associated with Ramanand, was actually his disciple.[444] In Anantadas's *Parcaī* of Dhana, as translated by Callewaert, he describes how a Brahmin instructed Dhana on how to worship Ram while he was a child living in Khairapur. Eventually, the Brahmin tells him to "go on a journey to Kashi and try to find Guru Rāmānanda. When you see him you will experience great joy."

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[441] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 132.
[442] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 132-133.
[443] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 99.
[444] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 100.

Dhana receives initiation from Ramanand, who tells him to "worship Hari and the guru-saints as one, do not think of them as two. Meditate on Rām, serve the saints, and give food to the hungry."[445] This is the extent of Anantadas's description of Dhana in Varanasi, and the rest of the story describes him farming in his village in Rajasthan. At the end, Anantadas connects the story of Dhana to other saints. He writes, "What can the Creator not do? Dhana's field was given a harvest, and oxen were brought to Kabir's house. The roof on Nāmdev's house was thatched, and Pipa was made to see Dvaraka."[446] This links together saints from different regions with different sectarian affiliations.

Pipa is another of the twelve disciples of Ramanand and he also has connections between Rajasthan and Varanasi. Pipa is a surprising disciple of Ramanand in many ways. He is a Rajput prince who is primarily devoted to Krishna, not Ram. However, his wife is named Sita, and as explored in Chapter Three, there are several clear parallels between stories about her and stories about the Sita from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. There is a significant amount of attention dedicated towards Pipa in Bhagavadacarya's *Rāmānand Digvijāya* (1927), showing that Bhagavadacarya thought he was an important saint. Chapter nine is dedicated entirely to Pipa, and chapters ten through fifteen (out of twenty) also expand on Pipa's story in connection to Ramanand.[447] Pipa is claimed by both the Ramanandi and the Niranjani *sampradāy*s,[448] and Pipa's writings are featured in the Nirajani *Vāṇī* tradition, the Dadupanthi *Sarvaṅgī*s,[449] and the Guru Granth Sahib.[450] In a poem attributed to Pipa found in Gopaldas's *Sarvaṅgī*, he praises Kabir extensively. He sings, "But for

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[445] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 102.
[446] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 108.
[447] Bhagavadacarya, *Śrīrāmānandadigvijayaḥ* (Ahmedabad: Kashmira Society, 1927), 3-4.
[448] Tyler Williams, "Sacred Sounds and Sacred Books: A History of Writing in Hindi" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2014), 186.
[449] The Dadupanthi *Sarvangi*s are collections of poetry from the 17th century of over one hundred *bhakta*s classified thematically. See Winand Callewaert, "Is the Poet Behind the Texts?" *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 26, no. 5 (October 1998): 411.
[450] Tyler Williams, "Sacred Sounds and Sacred Books," 299.

Kabir in this Kaliyuga, the ways of the world, the force of Kaliyuga, and the authority of the scriptures would have destroyed *bhakti* forever… God, in his mercy, sent his own man Kabir, made him sing, the true light spread, and this humble Pipa also got a glimpse of the truth."[451] Even though hagiographies of Pipa focus on his devotion to Krishna, his own poetry and his inclusion in anthologies suggest a presence of *nirguṇ* themes in his work.

Anantadas says that Pipa was from the Khici clan and he was king of the city Gagrauni. Anantadas describes the city as beautiful and wealthy, and says, "he ruled with authority; he was brave in war, virtuous and wise. People of all castes lived in his city. Deeds of merit graced every home."[452] He worshipped Devi, until one day he had a vision where she told him that he needed to turn his attention towards Hari and to serve Hari's devotees. She also told him to travel to Varanasi to make Ramanand his guru.[453] Anantadas describes Pipa as distraught about this advice, because it means he will have to leave his kingdom. He was so upset that his household tried various remedies, until Pipa told everyone that they need to stop worshipping the Goddess and turn their attention to Hari. He eventually "travelled to Banaras to be initiated and to have the burden of all his doubts removed," and for thirteen days and nights he rode horses to Ramanand's monastery in Varanasi.[454] The doorman at the monastery initially refused to let him in, telling him, "there are many gurus in Kashi… the Swāmī refuses to give you initiation," while Pipa argued, "we are Rajputs and we have travelled here from the western part of the country, in order to acquire initiation from Rāmānanda."[455] Through the firmness of his convictions, he is eventually allowed in for initiation.

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[451] Translation by Purushottam Agrawal in "But for Kabir in this Kaliyuga…" *India International Centre Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (Autumn 2010): 36; original Hindi version published in *The* Sarvangi *of Gopaldas*, ed. Winand Callewaert (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993), 261.
[452] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 142.
[453] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 145-6.
[454] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 149.
[455] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 150.

According to Anantadas, Pipa eventually returns to his kingdom in Rajasthan, and after a year, he sends a letter inviting Ramanand to Gagrauni. Along with Kabir, Ravidas, and forty other householders and ascetics, Ramanand travels to visit him. Ramanand tells everyone, "let us all go to Dvaraka, where Murārī Himself lives. On the way we will stay with Pipa for a few days."[456] They traveled there slowly, visiting villages along the way, where people were excited to see and worship Kabir in particular. Anantadas describes Kabir as "equal to Rāmānanda," and says that Pipa treated Ravidas "as an equal of Rāmānanda himself."[457] Anantadas describes several events and miracles that took place in Gagrauni, and says that after two and a half months of slow travel, Ramanand and Pipa and the others reached Dvaraka and stayed there for six months. One day, Ramanand asks Ravidas and Kabir,

> "'Tell me what you think.
>
> Of the seven cities which is the largest,
>
> which is the longest, and which are equal to each other in size?'
>
> Raidās answered with the proper argument:
>
> 'The biggest city is Mathurā, for so say the Vedas.'
>
> Kabir said with knowledge and discrimination:
>
> 'All of them are really equal, this is what I think.'
>
> Images of gods, temples, places of pilgrimage, holy waters –
>
> how far did your intelligence examine their meaning?
>
> And so I say to you, Gosvāmī, let us go back to Kashi.
>
> Let us sing the praises of Gobinda in our home."[458]

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[456] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 153.
[457] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 155.
[458] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 161.

Kabir, Ravidas, and Ramanand stopped in Mathura for a few days before returning to Varanasi. Pipa decides to stay in Dvaraka, where he eventually met Krishna himself along with figures like Rukmini, Pradyumna, and Balram after jumping into the sea.[459] Pipa and his wife Sita want to stay there, but Krishna eventually tells him to return so he can serve others and tell them about his experience. Anantadas says that they "went on travelling everywhere," singing praises of God, eventually reaching Dhanora.

Pipa is a particularly interesting Ramanandi saint as he is given a lot of attention and significance both from within the Ramanandi *sampradāy* and from broader *bhakti* traditions, but he has not received much attention from English scholarship. Hagiographies of Pipa help illuminate the connections between Rajasthan and Varanasi. Pipa is intricately connected with Rajasthan, given his royal status, but he is still depicted leaving Rajasthan to learn from Ramanand. The stories of his travels between the regions emphasize his role in spreading *bhakti* along the way.

4.1.3. Vaishnavism in Varanasi

Varanasi, also known as Banaras and Kashi, is famous as being a particularly holy city for Hindus. It is home to thousands of temples and shrines, and it attracts millions of pilgrims from around the world every year. There are many myths about the auspiciousness of dying or being cremated alongside the Ganges in Varanasi, and the city is particularly associated with Shaivism. Varanasi is often characterized as an ancient, unchanging city, and it is one of the longest inhabited cities in the world. A famous Mark Twain quote about Varanasi, reprinted in many English-language guidebooks, states, "Benares is older than history, older than tradition,

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[459] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 163.

older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together!"[460] However, Sandria Freitag explains that "the Banaras with which we are familiar is almost entirely a construction (both literally and figuratively) of the 18th century."[461] This was due to several processes, including the devolution of Mughal political power, increasing urbanism, and the consolidation of communal identities.

Even though Varanasi is commonly known as an important city for Shaivas, Vaishnavism also plays a central role in the city's religiosity, particularly devotion to Ram. This emergence of Ram *bhakti* occurred relatively late. One main example of and reason for this is that Tulsidas wrote the *Rāmcaritmānas* in Varanasi, and the city is home to the most famous annual performance of the Ram Lila. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the royal court patronized performances of the Ram Lila and oral expositions of the story that occur throughout the year.[462] Lutgendorf argues that the royalty of Varanasi became interested in the Ram tradition in the late eighteenth century because of "their need to cultivate an explicitly Hindu symbol of royal legitimacy, and thus to achieve ideological as well as political independence from the Nawabs."[463] This connection between *Rāmāyaṇa* and Hindu royalty is used to explain the strong presence of worship of Ram in Rajasthan.[464]

Lutgendorf also says that a motivation for the patronage of the *Rāmcaritmanās* tradition was motivated by the desire to maintain a close relationship to the Ramanandis.[465] As explained

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[460] Diana Eck, *Banaras: City of Light*, 5.
[461] Sandria Freitag, "Visualising Cities by Modern Citizens: Banaras Compared to Jaipur and Lucknow," in *Visualizing Space in Banaras: Images, Maps, and the Practice of Representation*, ed. Martin Gaenszle and Jörg Gengnagel (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006), 242.
[462] Philip Lutgendorf, "Rām's Story in Shiva's City: Public Arenas and Private Patronage," in *Culture and Power in Banaras: Community, Performance, and Environment, 1800-1980*, ed. Sandria B. Freitag (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 36.
[463] Philip Lutgendorf, "Rām's Story in Shiva's City: Public Arenas and Private Patronage," 41.
[464] Anne Vergati, "The Construction of Tradition: The Cult of the God Rama in Rajasthan, North India," *History and Anthropology* 15, no. 3 (2004): 263.
[465] Philip Lutgendorf, "Rām's Story in Shiva's City: Public Arenas and Private Patronage," 41.

in Chapter Two, the Ramanandi connection to the *Rāmcaritmanās* is a relatively late

development led by the Ram Rasiks. However, due to the similar time period of the composition

of the *Rāmcaritmānas* and the stories about Ramanand and his disciples in Varanasi, this

narrative took hold. The Ram Rasiks' claim over the *Rāmcaritmānas* and the continued

popularity of the Ram Lila in Varanasi likely contributed to the lasting claims about the

Ramanandis' influence on Vaishnavism in Varanasi.

Similarly, as explored in Chapter Two, Ramanand's connection to his two most famous

disciples, Kabir and Ravidas, is highly contested, both by scholars who analyzed philological

evidence and by contemporary devotees. Even though Ramanand's connections to Tulsidas,

Kabir, and Ravidas are all contested, he is still claimed as having played a central role in the rise

of Vaishnavism in Varanasi. In an edited volume on Vaishnavism in Varanasi, Hindi and

Sanskrit literature scholar Vidyanivasa Misra argues that Vaishnavism and Shaivism "both have

the same nature and same character," and says they are inseparable from each other and from

Varanasi.[466] Misra says that the rise of Vaishnavism in Varanasi should be attributed primarily to

Ramanand and Vallabhacarya, and that Ramanand in particular "addressed the people

directly."[467] This statement references the common claim of Ramanand being particularly

socially egalitarian. Misra emphasizes the commonality of all sects of Hinduism and says that

Varanasi is known for its acceptance of people from different sects and regions.

An essay by Vasudeva Singh in the volume says that while Vrindavan is the center for

Krishna *bhakti*, Varanasi is the center for Ram *bhakti*. He claims that Ramanand mediated

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[466] Vidyanivasa Misra, "Introduction," in *Vaishnava Contributions to Varanasi (Kashi)*, ed. R. C. Sharma and Pranati Ghosal (Delhi: DK Printworld, 2006), 1.
[467] Vidyanivasa Misra, "Introduction," 2.

between *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ bhakti*, Shaivism and Vaishnavism, and yoga and *bhakti*.[468] He writes, "the disciples of Rāma chose Kāśī as the centre for Rāma *bhakti* instead of Ayodhyā. Why? In fact, its main reason is the effort which was made by the saints to unite Shaivas and Vaishnavas."[469] Singh uses modern terminology and addresses contemporary concerns in his description of Ramanand. He says that "Svāmī Rāmānanda would be remembered forever as a unique missionary of the adoration of Rāma, as a founder of harmony, friendship and humanism; as a reformer of the national language, Hindi; and an uplifter of nationalism."[470] However, while Ramanand has several Hindi compositions attributed to him, none of them are particularly well-known or renowned as works of Hindi literature. The idea that Hindi is the national language of India is contested to this day. While some scholars view the Ramanandis as playing a central role in the development of the Hindi language,[471] this is primarily due to the compositions of purported disciples of Ramanand, not those of Ramanand himself. The language of Ramanand as an "uplifter of nationalism" is also a modern idea which is explored in greater depth in the following chapter. The essays in this book demonstrate that Ramanand is seen as a bridge between disparate ideologies and that the memory of him as being key to Ram *bhakti* in Varanasi is enduring.

4.1.4. "Vulgate" Vaishnavism

Early modern India was an important time for the consolidation of different Hindu sectarian identities and the solidification of the place of Vaishnavism as central to Hinduism more broadly. In Valerie Stoker's study of religion and the sixteenth-century Vijayanagara court

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[468] Vasudeva Singh, "The Medieval Vaishnava Bhakti Movement and Kāśī," in *Vaishnava Contributions to Varanasi (Kashi)*, ed. R. C. Sharma and Pranati Ghosal (Delhi: DK Printworld, 2006), 29-33.
[469] Vasudeva Singh, "The Medieval Vaishnava Bhakti Movement and Kāśī," 30.
[470] Vasudeva Singh, "The Medieval Vaishnava Bhakti Movement and Kāśī," 33.
[471] Ronald Stuart McGregor, "The Progress of Hindi, Part I," 914.

in South India, she analyzes the impact of imperial patronage on sectarian identities. Stoker uses the term "big tent Vaishnavism" to describe the "distinctive Vijayanagara cosmopolitanism" that the court promoted through the patronization of temples and *maṭha*s.[472] She describes this type of Vaishnavism as multilingual and devotionally pluralistic, with an overarching shared network of ideas, while still remaining "highly sectarian."[473] She says that through a series of interactions including doctrinal debates and polemical texts, different Vaishnava sects clarified their own distinctive beliefs.

Similarly, Elaine Fisher argues that Hindu sectarianism in early modern India is a form of religious engagement "that did not fragment a primordial whole but was the primary vehicle for the earliest expression of Hinduism as a unified religion."[474] She explains that in the sixteenth century, through the development of monastic lineages and engagement of different sects in public debates, group identities and boundaries were solidified at the same time that a form of Hindu pluralism emerged. Fisher examines the rise of Shaivism in the early second millennium, which "subsumed Vedicism under its overarching umbrella of authority,"[475] and was later incorporated back "under the umbrella of a new Vaidika authority" in the late-medieval period.[476] Poets like Nilakantha Dikshita were careful to invoke "the legacy of the past while promulgating radically new modes of religious identity," which, in the case of Dikshita, was *Smārta-Śaivism*.[477]

A similar process of a consolidation of sectarian identities under the category of "Hinduism" occurred in North India, and the Ramanandis played an important role in this

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[472] Valerie Stoker, *Polemics and Patronage in the City of Victory: Vyāsatīrtha, Hindu Sectarianism, and the Sixteenth-Century Vijayanagara Court* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 133.
[473] Valerie Stoker, *Polemics and Patronage in the City of Victory*, 133.
[474] Elaine M. Fisher, *Hindu Pluralism: Religion and the Public Sphere in Early Modern South India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 4.
[475] Elaine M. Fisher, *Hindu Pluralism*, 35.
[476] Elaine M. Fisher, *Hindu Pluralism*, 38.
[477] Elaine M. Fisher, *Hindu Pluralism*, 49.

process. This consolidation became largely characterized by a broad form of Vaishnavism that encapsulated devotion to both Krishna and Ram. Rather than "big tent Vaishnavism," as used by Stoker, Hawley and subsequently Burchett use the term "vulgate Vaishnavism" to describe this form of Vaishnavism that came to dominate in North India. Hawley refers to "vulgate Vaishnavism" as a "progressive religiosity" that can be contrasted with the "more strictly 'devotional' Krishnaism we associated with, say, the Chaitanyites."[478] Hawley's use of the term emerges in his study of Vaishnavism in Kabir's poetry. Hawley argues that this "Vaishnavization" of Kabir's poetry was promoted by the Ramanandis, and he says that the only claims of connections between Kabir and Ramanand come from the Ramanandis themselves. Hawley explains that the manuscripts of Kabir's poetry that were edited and translated by Hess and Shukdev Singh in the *Bījak* primarily have a *nirguṇ* ethos, and that due to the popularity of this presentation, "Kabir was effectively de-Vaishnavized in many people's minds."[479] This poetry primarily comes from the "Banarasi core" of his writings,[480] while poetry attributed to Kabir from Rajasthan and Punjab is often more explicitly Vaishnava. There are many examples of this, including frequent use of the word Hari. He also suggests that some of the Vaishnava-oriented poetry attributed to Kabir references Krishna, not Ram.[481]

As explained in Chapter One, scholarship on *bhakti* hagiographies has found that *bhakti* sectarian communities are often more concerned with distinguishing themselves from their near-neighbors, or "proximate others" than with more clearly distinct communities. Similarly, Hawley writes that the "garment we call Vaishnavism was never a one-size-fits-all affair. It was entirely possible for Kabir to be a different sort of Vaishnava than Tulsidas was, with the shared name

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[478] John Stratton Hawley, "Can There Be a Vaishnava Kabir?" 153.
[479] John Stratton Hawley, "Can There Be a Vaishnava Kabir?" 149.
[480] John Stratton Hawley, "Can There Be a Vaishnava Kabir?" 150.
[481] John Stratton Hawley, "Can There Be a Vaishnava Kabir?" 159.

being a potential source of conflict rather than amity, as in so many family feuds."[482] However,

over time, various Vaishnava communities became consolidated and Vaishnavism came to

characterize Hinduism in North India from around the eighteenth century onward.

The Ramanandis played an important role in this process, particularly in Varanasi.

Burchett describes vulgate Vaishnavism as "a loosely Vaisnava sensibility, a shared set of *bhakti*

values articulated in a Vaisnava idiom utilizing the imagery, themes, myths, and names of Rām

and Kṛṣṇa."[483] Burchett says that on a popular level, the rise of vulgate Vaishnavism was

primarily connected to singing the name of God and valorizing loving devotion. He argues that

vulgate Vaishnavism and the "catholic vision of *bhakti*" promoted by the early Ramanandis

would "come to serve as a foundation for mainstream modern-day Hinduism."[484] He asserts that

the Ram Rasiks and Agradas in particular "assisted in the growth of a transsectarian *bhakti*

sensibility."[485] The Ramanandis close association with Varanasi, their claim over popular saints

like Kabir and Tulsidas, and their affiliation with the *Rāmcaritmānas* all contributed to their

lasting status as being upheld as responsible for the Vaishnava character of Varanasi. In the next

section, I turn towards the Ramanandis' role in establishing *Rāmāyaṇa*-related pilgrimage sites

in North India.

4.2. The "Rediscovery" of Rāmāyaṇa-*Related Pilgrimage Sites*

A central function of hagiographies as a genre is to situate a holy figure within a

particular physical landscape, which can solidify communal and regional identities and promote

pilgrimage. Ramanujan writes that "saints' pilgrimages and celebratory songs about hundreds of

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[482] John Stratton Hawley, "Can There Be a Vaishnava Kabir?" 156.
[483] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*, 3.
[484] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*, 4.
[485] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*, 196.

holy places mapped the country as much as the king's institutions did; they literally sang places

into existence."[486] Hagiographies of Ramanandi saints often mention names of cities and regions

and tell stories of how the saints traveled across North India spreading devotion to Ram.

Hagiographies from other *bhakti* traditions show similar attention to sacred place. For instance,

Indira Peterson explains that Tamil Shaiva hagiographies articulate not just a Shaiva identity but

a distinctly Tamil identity, and that they "celebrate specific visions they had of specific

manifestations of Śiva in particular places in the Tamil land."[487] She writes, "love of Tamil place

pervades these songs as much as love of Śiva,"[488] and says that some hagiographies explicitly

invite devotees to follow the physical journey of the saints and sing their pilgrimage songs as a

way to experience Shiva. Some of the hagiographies are grouped by the pilgrimage site to which

they are devoted, so listeners can sing songs about a particular shrine. The act of singing

hagiographical songs of saints and participating in pilgrimage becomes a way of uniting the

community. Similarly, Phyllis Granoff explains that Jain hagiographies of Nagarjuna from the

thirteenth and fourteenth centuries depict him as a Jain saint by using well-known features from

the Buddhist life story but adapting aspects to localize him and connect him to Jain holy sites.[489]

Keune writes that Mahipati's *Bhaktavijay* (c. 1762) both articulates a distinct Maratha identity

and demonstrates attempts to be associated with North Indian *bhakti* saints.[490] Ramanandi

hagiographies frequently include references to particular cities and villages in order to create

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[486] A. K. Ramanujan, *Hymns for the Drowning*, 107.
[487] Indira Peterson, "Tamil Shaiva Hagiography," in *According to Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in India*, ed. Winand Callewaert and Rupert Snell (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994), 204.
[488] Indira Viswanatha Peterson, "Lives of the Wandering Singers: Pilgrimage and Poetry in Tamil Śaivite Hagiography," *History of Religions* 22, no. 4 (May 1983): 339.
[489] Phyllis Granoff, "Jain Biographies of Nagarjuna: Notes on the Composing of a Biography in Medieval India," in *Monks and Magicians: Religious Biographies in Asia*, ed. Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1988), 47.
[490] Jon Keune, "Gathering the Bhaktas in Marathi," 179-180.

associations with particular sites, both promoting and capitalizing off of the popularity of devotion to Ram.

4.2.1. Renewed Attention towards Ayodhya

The Gaudiya Vaishnavas led the "rediscovery" of Krishna-related pilgrimage sites in Braj. Braj is an increasingly popular pilgrimage destination today. It roughly corresponds with the Mathura district of modern-day Uttar Pradesh and includes cities such as Vrindavan and Mathura. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims visit every year. The city of Mathura has been a major urban center since at least the time of the Kushan Empire (approximately second century BCE to the third century CE).[491] Mathura was promoted as an important Vaishnava pilgrimage site in the *Purāṇa*s. Robert Goldman explains that Mathura is mentioned in both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, but it is not emphasized in either epic. He says that only the "late Vaishnava addenda" to the epics (the *Mahābhārata*'s *Harivaṃśa* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s *Uttarakāṇḍa*) emphasize Mathura.[492] The process of "rediscovery" involves identifying sites mentioned in religious texts with physical locations in India. Many temples in Vrindavan are associated with specific instances from Krishna's life story. Caitanya "established through divine clairvoyance" that Vrindavan is the site of Krishna's upbringing.[493] His followers later said that Caitanya came to this realization because he is an incarnation of Krishna himself. Oftentimes this identification is not supported by archaeological evidence.

Similar to the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, the Ram Rasik tradition has mapped out places from the *Rāmāyaṇa* story onto physical locations in present-day India. In this section, I

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[491] Robert P. Goldman, "A City of the Hearth: Epic Mathurā and the Indian Imagination," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106, no. 3 (July-Sept. 1986): 471. See also: Charlotte Vaudeville, "Braj, Lost and Found," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 18 (1976): 195-213.
[492] Robert P. Goldman, "A City of the Hearth: Epic Mathurā and the Indian Imagination," 472-3.
[493] John Stratton Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*, 5.

highlight the Ram Rasiks' role in identifying sites from the *Rāmāyaṇa* with locations such as

Ayodhya. The Ram Rasiks prefer the older name "Sāket" to "Ayodhya," similar to how some

Krishna devotees preferred the name Goloka to Vrindavan.[494] The Ram Rasiks played an

important role in the development of Ayodhya, one of the most globally well-known pilgrimage

sites in India because of the violent destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the ensuing

political and legal battles. The legacy of Ayodhya is still ongoing, as has been explored by many

scholars over the past few decades. The construction of a new temple dedicated to Ram where

the Babri Masjid once stood is still in process. Ayodhya has thousands of temples dedicated to

Ram, and the Ramanandis control many of them. The Ram Rasiks in particular play an important

role in the religious and political life in Ayodhya, ranging from sponsoring the annual Ram Lila

to running for political office.[495] The complicated history and significance of Ayodhya has been

explored at length by other scholars, so this section of the chapter focuses specifically on the role

of the Ram Rasiks in developing Ayodhya between the eighteenth century and today. The Ram

Rasiks began to move eastward from Galta in Rajasthan to Ayodhya in the eighteenth century

while expanding and solidifying their branch's identity. This period of growth and concern for

establishing the branch's genealogy and leadership led to the creation of several hagiologies,

which is explored in Chapter Five. I argue that the Ram Rasiks' model of identifying sites from

the *Rāmāyaṇa* with physical locations parallels the Gaudiya Vaishnavas' activities in Braj,

contributing to the emergence of a pan-Vaishnava identity in North India.

      Lutgendorf argues that the connection between the Ayodhya of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the

physical location in Uttar Pradesh was a gradual process in which Ramanandis played a key role,

particularly in the eighteenth century. The *Ānand Laharī*, the first Hindi commentary on the

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[494] Philip Lutgendorf, "Imagining Ayodhyā: Utopia and its Shadows in a Hindu Landscape," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 1, no. 1 (April 1997): 40.
[495] Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, 170-1.

Rāmcaritmānas, was written by a Ram Rasik named Ramcaran Das. Vasudha Paramasivan writes that it is "irrevocably linked to Ayodhya,"[496] and it marks "the lateral shift in the locus of the Rasika Sampradāya's power and influence eastward from Rajasthan" over the course of the eighteenth century.[497] Around the same time that the Ramanandis, particularly the Ram Rasiks, moved eastward, the Gaudiya Vaishnavas moved westward. During the period between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Gaudiya Vaishnavas gradually expanded from Braj into Rajasthan and Gujurat. Shandip Saha argues that this was shift was due to the Gaudiya Vaishnavas' "intimate involvement in the secular world of politics, prestige, and patronage"[498] from the Mughals, Rajputs, and the Gujurati mercantile community. He argues that scholars need to pay attention to not only the theological concerns underlying the spread of *bhakti*, but also the material realities such as patronage that made the spread possible.

As Ayodhya became increasingly important in the collective memory of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, Ayodhya eventually overtook Galta as the proclaimed center and origin for the community. This can be seen in other narratives about the expansion of the Ramanandis across North India. Arik Moran studies the establishment of Ramanandi ascetic communities in the West Himalayan kingdom of Kullu in the early modern period. He explains that a sadhu named Bhagwan (d. 1659) from Pindori, located in Punjab, founded a Ramanandi center in the early sixteenth century. Bhagwan is said to have traveled to Galta to become a disciple of Krishnadas Payahari before returning to Pindori, and from there Ram *bhakti* spread throughout the kingdoms

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[496] Vasudha Paramasivan, "'Yah Ayodhyā Vah Ayodhyā': Earthly and Cosmic Journeys in the *Ānand-laharī*," in *Patronage and Popularisation, Pilgrimage and Procession: Channels of Transcultural Translation and Transmission in Early Modern South Asia; Papers in Honour of Monika Horstmann*, ed. Heidi R.M. Pauwels (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009), 101.

[497] Vasudha Paramasivan, "'Yah Ayodhyā Vah Ayodhyā,'" 101.

[498] Shandip Saha, "The Movement of *Bhakti* along a North-West Axis: Tracing the History of the Puṣṭimārg between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 11, no. 3 (Dec 2007): 300.

in the Punjab Hills including Kullu. [499] However, some accounts of the spread, such as a history

of the region written by a Pahari administrator named Hardyal Singh in 1885 and Priyadas's

commentary on the *Bhaktamāl*, center Krishnadas Payahari instead of Bhagwan and say that the

tutelary deity of the kingdom came from Ayodhya. Moran argues, "the claim of Kullu tradition

that Raghunath came from Ayodhya counters what has been shown as the likely path of

Ramanandi expansion from Galta via Pindori."[500] Even though Ayodhya was a relatively recent

center for the Ramanandis, their connection with it quickly became central to the *sampradāy*.

As explained earlier, the Ram Rasik tradition was not a straight-forward reproduction of

Krishna *bhakti* traditions, and even though they were influenced by the Gaudiya Vaishnavas'

efforts to "rediscover" sites in Braj, they had several key innovations. One important difference

between stories about Ram and Krishna is the emphasis on their settings. The setting of

Krishna's stories is tied to his identity as an unmarried cow-herder who meets with the *gopī*s

outside. For example, in Rupa Gosvamin's *Aṣṭakālīyalīlāsmaraṇamaṇgalastotraṃ* he describes

Krishna as the one who "at night's end leaves the bower and returns to the cowherd village, in

the morning and at sunset milks the cows and enjoys his meals, at midday roams about playing

with his friends and tending cattle […] at night makes love in the forest with Radha."[501] He goes

on to detail the sounds of the birds that Krishna and Radha hear in the forest. Most of Krishna's

most important activities take place outside, whereas early modern stories about Ram emphasize

his role as the ruler of Ayodhya and his life in the palace with Sita. Agradas describes Ayodhya

in detail in the *Dhyānmañjarī*. He recounts the beautiful palaces and markets in the city, as well

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[499] Arik Moran, "Toward a History of Devotional Vaishnavism in the West Himalayas: Kullu and the Ramanandis, c. 1500-1800," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50, no. 1 (2013): 11-13. See also: Patton Burchett and Aditi Rao, "Ascetics, Kings, and the 'Triumphs' of Vaiṣṇavism in Mughal India: Myth and Memory in the Many Lives of Krishnadās Payahārī from Rajasthan to the Western Himalayas," *South Asian History and Culture* (2020): 1-22.

[500] Arik Moran, "Toward a History of Devotional Vaishnavism in the West Himalayas," 17.

[501] David Haberman, trans., "The Eightfold Activities of Radha and Krishna," in *Hinduism: The Norton Anthology of World Religions*, ed. Wendy Doniger, general ed. Jack Miles (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 502.

as details of the court such as Ram's beautiful jewel-encrusted throne.[502] The Ram Rasiks place

particular emphasis on Ram and Sita's time together in the palaces of Ayodhya rather than their

time in exile in the forest or Sita's time spent hostage in Lanka. This is reflected in the Ram

Rasiks' role in constructing temples in Ayodhya.

The Kanak Bhavan, which is said to be Sita's Golden Palace, was originally a theoretical

object of meditation that is now believed to be located in Ayodhya. Hans Bakker explains that it

is now "considered to be a terrestrial facsimile of the celestial palace," and this concept "pertains

specifically to *mādhurya-bhakti* [of the *rasik* tradition] and hence would not have been

conceived before this variety of Ram devotion rose into prominence, i.e., late 16th or 17th

century."[503] In his ethnographic study of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, van der Veer describes the

Kanaka Bhavan temple. He calls it opulent, and although he was not allowed into the inner

chambers, they have been described to him as magnificent. He stresses that "it is important to see

that much emphasis is given to the beautification of the temple and rituals in the enactment of

Ram and Sita's royal life."[504] Relating the holy sites of the story of Ram and Sita to physical

locations is an important way in which devotees are brought into the story directly.

One of the other main eighteenth-century Ramanandi developments in Ayodhya, along

with the inauguration of institutions like the Bada Sthan and the Kanak Bhavan, was the creation

of the Hanuman Garhi temple.[505] Hanuman Garhi was the site of the debate over Ramanand's

connection with Ramanuja, where in 1920, Bhagavadacarya presented Sanskrit texts he claims

were written by Ramanand himself.[506] In van der Veer's ethnography from the 1980s, he calls

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[502] Patton Burchett, *A Genealogy of Devotion*, 217.
[503] Hans Bakker, *Ayodhyā*, 140.
[504] Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, 161.
[505] Vasudha Paramasivan, "Between Text and Sect," 91.
[506] Purushottam Agrawal, "The Impact of Sectarian Lobbyism on Hindi Literary Historiography," 252.

Hanuman Garhi "Ayodhya's most important temple."[507] It is home to five to six hundred *nāga*s, many of whom study at a *pāthaśālā* located in the temple. The temple is located on the *Hanumān ṭilā* ("hill of Hanuman"), and the Ramanandis battled the Dasanamis for control over the hill, eventually winning and replacing the Dasanami *maṭh* with their own temple. Today, the temple contains a display of trident weapons allegedly stolen from the Dasanamis during the battle.[508]

Prior to the Dasanamis, the hill was controlled by Nath *yogī*s.[509] In addition to the Naths, Dasanamis, and Ramanandis, the *Hanumān ṭilā* in Ayodhya also is said to have held significance for Muslims. Muslims worshipped an image of Hanuman as Hathile Pir, one of the five *pir*s popular in northeastern India. Van der Veer qualifies that the connection between Hathile Pir and the *Hanumān ṭilā* is not historically verifiable. Lutgendorf points out that the vocative of *haṭhīlā* is also one of the thousands names used in Hanuman's ritual worship.[510] However, the Muslims were eventually driven out by a Ramanandi named Abhayramdas, who "dreamt that Hanuman came to him and told him to chase away the Muslims and Shaivites who were defiling his place of worship and to build a temple in his (Hanuman's) honor, because this was the place where he had stayed in the time of Ram."[511] However, given the lack of historical evidence of Muslim worship at the *Hanumān ṭilā*, it seems possible that rather than being one of the origins of Hindu-Muslim conflict in Ayodhya, this connection was invented in the modern period. This story demonstrates how the process of "rediscovery," which often involves dreams and divinations revealing new information about the *Rāmāyaṇa*, contributed to the solidification of Ayodhya's identity as a critical site for Ram *bhakti*.

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[507] Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, 151.
[508] Philip Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale*, 83.
[509] Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, 147.
[510] Philip Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale*, 83.
[511] Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth,* 150.

The history of the conflict over the *Hanumān ṭilā* and the Hanuman Garhi in Ayodhya is also connected to the origins of the campaign to destroy the Babri Masjid. Bevilacqua says that in the mid-nineteenth century, tensions began to rise between Muslims and Ramanandis from the Hanuman Garhi, and in 1859, the British colonial administration intervened to prevent communal clashes.[512] It was around this time that the Babri Masjid became known as the birthplace of Ram. In 1949, Ramanandi *sadhū*s were involved in entering the Babri Masjid to install a *mūrti* of Ram. Some Ramanandis also actively collaborated with the VHP and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in mobilizing around the destruction of the Babri Masjid.[513] The Ram Rasiks' role in establishing Ayodhya as a central site for Ram *bhakti* has had significant contemporary political implications.

4.2.2. Janakpur and Ramanandi Expansion into Nepal

The Ram Rasiks also played a significant role in establishing Janakpur as a *Rāmāyaṇa*-related pilgrimage site as part of their northeastern expansion. Janakpur is part of the Mithila region that stretches from Bihar and Jharkhand across the Nepal border to the eastern Terai, a lowland region north of the Indo-Gangetic Plain. Today, the boundaries of Mithila are loosely defined by geographical and cultural boundaries that include parts of both India and Nepal.[514] In addition to the establishment of Janakpur, the Ramanandis also have a prominent presence at one of the most significant religious sites in the Kathmandu Valley, the Pashupatinath Mandir.[515]

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[512] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 117.

[513] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 118.

[514] The newly formed Mithila Studies Network aims to aid research on the Mithila region. See; https://mithilastudies.org/. For information on the Maithili language and its contested relationship to Hindi, see: Mithilesh Kumar Jha, *Language Politics and the Public Sphere in North India: Making of the Maithili Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[515] Axel Michaels, "To whom does the Pashupatinath Temple of Nepal Belong?" in *The Politics of Belonging in the Himalayas: Local Attachments and Boundary Dynamics*, ed. Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka and Gerard Toffin (New Delhi: Sage, 2011), 125-143.

Nepali Hindus also have a significant connection with Varanasi, as they have been visiting as

pilgrims and students for centuries and have established temples there.[516] In addition, there are

important Nepali tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the most famous of which was composed by

Bhanubhakta during the mid-nineteenth century, approximately the same time as the

establishment of Ram Rasiks in Nepal.[517]

Historically, the term Mithila generally refers to the ancient Videha Kingdom that is

featured in the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and its capital was said to be Janakpur. This is said to be

Sita's birthplace. Unlike a city like Varanasi that has maintained a continuous status of religious

importance stretching back centuries, Burghart argues that the modern-day city known as

Janakpur was only "rediscovered" and identified with the ancient Janakpur towards the end of

the seventeenth century.[518] Unlike Ayodhya, which has had religious significance for centuries,

Janakpur is a more straightforward case of Ram Rasik innovation. The establishment of Janakpur

as a pilgrimage site demonstrates the Ram Rasiks' emphasis on devotion to Sita in addition to

Ram.

Burghart conducted ethnographic research involving interviews with pandits and ascetics

in Janakpur in the 1970s and examined extant archaeological and literary evidence about

Janakpur. Common oral testimony states that Janakpur disappeared long after the events of the

Rāmāyaṇa took place and turned back into a jungle, until it was "rediscovered" by devotees of

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[516] See: Martin Gaenszle (in collaboration with Nutandhar Sharma), "Nepali Places: Appropriations of Space in Banaras" in *Visualizing Space in Banaras: Images, Maps, and the Practice of Representation*, ed. Martin Gaenszle and Jörg Gengnagel (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2006), 303-324.

[517] This Nepali telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is particularly influenced by the *Adhyātmarāmāyaṇa*. There are also fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Sanskrit tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Nepal, Newari tellings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and early-nineteenth century Nepali tellings such as the *Rāmāśvamedha* (c. 1832), *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa Bālkāṇḍa* (c. 1829), and the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa Laṅkakākāṇḍa* (1829). Jessica Lynn Vantine Birkenholtz, "The *Svasthānī Vrata Kathā* Tradition: Translating Self, Place, and Identity in Hindu Nepal" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2010), 236.

[518] Richard Burghart, "The Disappearance and Reappearance of Janakpur," *Kailash: A Journal of Himalayan Studies* 6, no. 4 (1978): 258.

Ram. One of the first ascetics to arrive in Janakpur was Caturbhuj Giri who was initiated in the

Dasnami sect in Badrinath. While traveling around Mithila, he fell asleep and had a vision from

Ram telling him he had arrived in Janakpur.[519] Sur Kisor also arrived around the same time, and

there are disagreements about who arrived first. Sur Kisor was initiated into the Ramanandi

sampradāy at Galta and then lived in Lohargal in Rajasthan before traveling to Janakpur.

Burghart reports that in the village of Dhanusa, located twelve miles northeast of Janakpur, there

is a rock guarded by Sur Kisor's descendants and worshipped as a piece of Shiva's bow that Ram

used to win his engagement to Sita.[520]

Oral testimony says that the "jungle" of Janakpur was cultivated over time, but Burghart

writes, "archaeological evidence reveals that the so-called jungle into which the early ascetics

wandered had already been settled by Hindus who were organized politically into petty

kingdoms or chieftaincies and who derived their livelihood by tilling the soil."[521] However,

Burghart finds that archaeological evidence confirms that Caturbhuj Giri and Sur Kisor arrived

in Janakpur and founded the Ram Candra and Janaki monasteries around the turn of the

eighteenth century. Prior to the arrival of devotees of Ram and Sita, the religious landscape of

the region had been focused on "tantric sectarian deities, such as Laksmi Naryan, Durga, and

Siva."[522] Burghart also mentions the possibility that there had already been a local tradition that

associated the site with the historical Janakpur and that Caturbhuj Giri and Sur Kisor merely

popularized this idea instead of creating it. Janakpur is still an important site for Ramanandis. In

2014, Jadguru Ramanandacarya Ramnaresacarya organized a pilgrimage from Varanasi to

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[519] Richard Burghart, "The Disappearance and Reappearance of Janakpur," 259.
[520] Richard Burghart, "The Disappearance and Reappearance of Janakpur," 261.
[521] Richard Burghart, "The Disappearance and Reappearance of Janakpur," 265.
[522] Richard Burghart, "The Disappearance and Reappearance of Janakpur," 268.

Janakpur.[523] Janakpur has also received renewed attention with its inclusion on the Ramayana Circuit. In the following section, I connect the Ram Rasiks' "rediscovery" of pilgrimage sites related to the *Rāmāyaṇa* to the contemporary phenomenon of Modi's promotion of these sites for tourism.

4.2.3. The Ramayana Circuit

The establishment of religious pilgrimage sites has clear parallels and connections to nationalist politics. Pauwels uses Benedict Anderson's conception of "imagined communities" in her study of religious communities in sixteenth-century Vrindavan and the "rediscovery" of important sites in Krishna's life. Pauwels notes that by applying Anderson's theory to early-modern Indian religious communities, she does not mean to equate them with nations. Rather, she is interested in highlighting the similarity between constructions of nationalism and religious communities in that both are construed "in an ahistorical perspective, mixing cosmology and history."[524] Pauwels argues that the application of a theory of "imagination" is particularly apt in her study of *bhakti* communities, as the Krishna *bhakti* communities she studies use imagination as a way to participate and connect with the divine through divine play (*līlā).* The imagined historicity of the *Rāmāyaṇa* has become salient in Hindu nationalist politics in many ways, including the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, new iconography of Hanuman, and now through tourism with the Ramayana Circuit.

India's Ministry of Tourism has been active since Modi's inauguration. They launched the Incredible India 2.0 campaign, meant to promote India as a destination for both domestic and international tourists. These programs have been highly visible and effective. Domestic tourism

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[523] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 94.
[524] Heidi Pauwels, "Hagiography and Community Formation: The Case of a Lost Community of Sixteenth-Century Vrindāvan," *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 3 (March 2010): 86.

was also boosted as a result of the Covid pandemic, which limited international travel opportunities and increased the number of people working remotely, allowing people to work while traveling. As of 2022, Uttar Pradesh has become the most popular state for domestic tourists in India, receiving nearly 318 million visitors.[525] They also created the Swadesh Darshan scheme; in collaboration with provincial governments, the government created theme-based circuits that connect different parts of India. Some of these circuits are explicitly religious, such as the Krishna, Ramayana, Buddhist, and Tirthankar circuits; other circuits are centered around landscapes and nature, such as the Coastal, Desert, Wildlife circuits; and there are also Tribal, Heritage, Rural, and Spiritual themed circuits.[526] These circuits have obvious parallels with the popular Buddhist circuit, which connects the Buddha's birthplace in Lumbini, Nepal; the place of his enlightenment in Bodh Gaya, Bihar; the place of his first sermon in Sarnath, just outside Varanasi; and the site of his death in Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh. Sri Lanka launched a similar program prior to the Ramayana Circuit called the Ramayana Trail. The idea was first discussed in the 1990s, and it was finally unveiled in a ceremony in New Delhi in 2008.[527]

Varanasi is included in the Ramayana Circuit part of the Swadesh Darshan scheme, alongside Ayodhya, Buxar and Sitamarhi in Bihar, Citrakut, Nasik, Hampi, and Janakpur. The eighteen-day train journey connects the cities. The Indian government's promotion of domestic tourism has focused primarily on Hindu pilgrimage destinations, and the changes in Varanasi

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[525] "India Tourism Statistics at a Glance – 2023," Ministry of Tourism Government of India, July 2023.
[526] "Theme Based Circuits," Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, Swadesh Darshan, 2023. https://swadeshdarshan.gov.in/index.php?Theme.
[527] Justin Henry explains that this program is meant to attract Indian tourists to Sri Lanka and it connects 50 locations throughout the island, "each with some putative connection to the 'historical Ramayana.'" Henry explores the political dimensions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in depth in his book, which has many parallels to the situation in India. Justin Henry, *Ravana's Kingdom: The Ramayana and Sri Lankan History from Below* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 2.

have been striking. Scholars and journalists have documented many of these changes,[528] and I

also observed them personally over periodic visits to Varanasi between 2012-2022, including for

four months during Modi's election campaign in 2014, and the changes to tourism in the city

have been remarkable. I have always stayed in the area surrounding Assi Ghat, which is close to

the river and to Banaras Hindu University and is known as a hub for foreign visitors. Varanasi

was known as a destination for hippies traveling throughout India in the 1960s, and beat poets

like Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsburg stayed there and wrote about the city. During my first few

visits to the Assi area, I met many tourists from around the world, some of whom were passing

through Varanasi while backpacking throughout India, and others who stayed for long periods of

time or returned yearly to study things like yoga, Ayurveda, classical Indian music, or Hindi.

There were several cafes and restaurants that seemed particularly designed to appeal to

foreigners, and I met a number of people who returned to the city for long stays periodically over

the course of years.

     I was in Varanasi during Modi's first election and witnessed his quickly-growing

popularity and the rallies organized for his visits. He chose Varanasi as his constituency because

of the religious connotations and the support for the BJP in Uttar Pradesh. Freitag writes that in

Varanasi, the "appeal to primordial images simultaneously offers a legitimacy born of 'tradition'

with a reservoir of values to be drawn on when negotiating change under modern

circumstances."[529] Over the next few years after Modi's inauguration, when I returned to visit

Varanasi, I saw changes like new programs to clean up the ghats and add free wifi on the ghats,

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[528] For example, see: Vera Lazzaretti, "New Monuments for the New India: Heritage-Making in a 'Timeless City,'" *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27, no. 11 (2021): 1085-1100; Vera Lazzaretti, "Religious Offence Policed: Paradoxical Outcomes of Containment at the Centre of Banaras, and the 'Know-How' of Local Muslims," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 44, no. 3 (2021): 584-599; "Kashi Corridor: Sections of Locals Unhappy Over 'Lost Homes,' Demolition of Iconic Buildings," *Indian Express*, Dec. 15, 2021, https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/lucknow/kashi-corridor-locals-lost-homes-demolition-iconic-buildings-7674248/.

[529] Sandria Freitag, "Visualising Cities by Modern Citizens: Banaras Compared to Jaipur and Lucknow," 246-7.

and new road signs and historical plaques throughout the city. Recently, the government installed surveillance cameras throughout the city and QR codes on some of the historical monument plaques, so people can scan them and quickly learn about their significance.[530] Modi has pledged to turn Varanasi into a "smart heritage city," which includes creating light displays on the ghats and at the central railway station.[531] New luxury cruises have also been allowed to operate on the Ganges River. After Modi took office, he visited Japan and signed an agreement with the Japanese prime minister to collaborate conservation and modernization projects between Varanasi and Kyoto, and he has modeled some of his plans on Kyoto.[532] The most dramatic change in Varanasi has been the creation of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, which aimed to make it easier for pilgrims to reach the Kashi Vishwanath Mandir. In the process, many old homes and storefronts were destroyed, angering a lot of local people. There is also concern over the fate of the Gyanvapi masjid, located near the mandir.[533]

When I went to Varanasi in December 2022, there were signs everywhere welcoming tourists from Tamil Nadu, as the government had recently launched a campaign to promote tourism from southern India to Varanasi. There were significantly more domestic tourists than foreign tourists, even in the Assi area, and many guest houses and restaurants had opened or expanded to cater to them. I visited the Ramanandi Sital Das Bara Akhara near Assi Ghat, and there was a group of women from Jodhpur doing a puja with a priest there. They were taking many pictures and asked me to be their photographer throughout the puja, and when I finished, the priest explained that there has been a rise in demand for pujas from visiting Hindu tourists.

[530] "Kashi Vishwanath Cooridor: A Look at Varanasi's Transformation Under PM Modi," *Outlook* Dec 13 2021, https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-kashi-vishwanath-corridor-a-look-at-varanasis-transformation-under-pm-modi/404904

[531] Philippa Williams, "Making the 'Smart Heritage City': Banal Hinduism, Beautification and Belonging in 'New India,'" in *Spaces of Religion in Urban South Asia*, ed. István Keul (London: Routledge, 2021), 161.

[532] Philippa Williams, "Making the 'Smart Heritage City,'" 163.

[533] Chander Suta Dogra, "Kashi Vishwanath Cooridor Project Done, Varanasi Holds its Breath for Bigger Changes," *The Wire,* Jan 15 2023, https://thewire.in/religion/kashi-vishwanath-corridor-varanasi-gyanvapi.

The Ministry of Tourism has launched several new tourism campaigns, such as Subh-e-Banaras near Assi Ghat, a morning program including Vedic chanting, music, yoga, and cultural performances. According to the Indian government, tourist visits to Varanasi jumped at least twenty-five percent between 2022 and 2023.[534]

The creation of the Ramayana Circuit has led to the first Indian tourist train to extend into Nepal.[535] Modi used the occasion to discuss his views on the relationship between Nepal and India and his hopes for future collaborations. When he went to Janakpur in 2018 to commemorate the Ramayana Circuit, he said, "our Ram is incomplete without Sita. I know that people of Nepal area are also happy now that a grand Ram Mandir is being built in India,"[536] in reference to the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. He also said that the friendship between India and Nepal will benefit all of humanity. Nepal's status as a small country situated in between India and China and as a former Hindu kingdom that relatively recently transitioned to a secular democracy has made Nepal's relationship to Hindu nationalist politics in India particularly contentious.[537] Modi has used Janakpur as a cause to emphasize the shared majority-Hindu identity of India and Nepal. These recent political developments illustrate the close relationship that the *Rāmāyaṇa* has had with political concerns since its inception. The renewed attention towards pilgrimage sites happening today are due in part to the undertakings of the Ram Rasik tradition in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

[534] "Kashi was Most Popular Destination in UP in 2023 as 32 Crore Tourists Visit the State," *CNBCTV18.com*, Jan 6, 2024, https://www.cnbctv18.com/travel/kashi-was-most-popular-destination-in-up-in-2023-as-32-crore-tourists-visit-the-state-18732371.htm.

[535] "Explained: The Ramayan Railway Circuit That Will Retrace the Epic in 8,000 Kms Journey," *Outlook,* May 28, 2022, https://www.outlookindia.com/national/explained-the-ramayan-railway-circuit-that-will-retrace-the-epic-in-8-000-kms-journey-news-199034.

[536] "Ever-Strengthening India-Nepal Friendship Will Benefit Entire Humanity: PM Modi in Lumbini," Outlook, May 16 2022, https://www.outlookindia.com/national/ever-strengthening-india-nepal-friendship-will-benefit-entire-humanity-pm-modi-in-lumbini-news-197021?utm_source=related_story.

[537] Chiara Letizia, "Ideas of Secularism in Contemporary Nepal," in *Religion, Secularism, and Ethnicity in Contemporary Nepal*, ed. David N. Gellner, Sondra L. Hausner, and Chiara Letizia (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 36.

Conclusion

One of the few consistent claims about Ramanand across accounts of his life is that he lived and taught in Varanasi. The origins of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* are more closely tied to Galta in Rajasthan, but there are many depictions of saints traveling back and forth between Rajasthan and Varanasi to meet with Ramanand. His two most famous disciples, Ravidas and Kabir, are both inextricably connected to Varanasi, and the Ram Rasik tradition also claims Tulsidas as a Ramanandi. Pipa is a particularly interesting example of a Ramanandi saint who has not received much attention in international scholarship, but who seems to have been well-known in the early modern period as both a Ramanandi and a devotee of Krishna who traveled between Rajasthan and Varanasi. Accounts of Vaishnavism in Varanasi often point to Ramanand as a central figure. This is yet another example of how Ramanand functions as a bridge between disparate traditions and orientations, including *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ bhakti*; yoga, tantra, and *bhakti*; and between Shaivism and Vaishnavism. This ability to engage different traditions and enfold various famous figures into the tradition has been key to the popularity of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, and it is also an example of the early modern rise of vulgate Vaishnavism in North India.

A central tactic used in Hindu nationalist rhetoric is claims of historicity, and the political organizing around the *Rāmāyaṇa* has often involved claims of ancient physical locations in India where the story is said to have taken place. However, as I focus on in this chapter, popular pilgrimage places connected to the *Rāmāyaṇa* did not receive the same level of attention until the Ram Rasiks began to emphasize and develop them in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Ram Rasik tradition has been significantly influenced by the Gaudiya Vaishnavas, who

emphasize bringing stories to life through *līlā* and "rediscovered" Krishna-related pilgrimage sites in the sixteenth century. Although the Ram Rasiks were not the first to connect Ayodhya to the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, they are responsible for some of the major centers there like the Kanak Bhavan and the Hanuman Garhi temple. Their developments also shifted the associations of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* eastward—even though they started in Galta, Rajasthan, they became more closely affiliated with Varanasi and Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh later on. In addition, the Ram Rasiks are responsible for the establishment of Janakpur in southern Nepal as a *Rāmāyaṇa*-related pilgrimage destination. The creation of the Ramayana Circuit and the promotion of pilgrimage sites through the Swadesh Darshan scheme demonstrate the lasting influence of these developments on contemporary India.

<u>Chapter Five – The *Bhaktamāl* Genre, Ram Rasik Hagiographers, and the Construction of Ramanand as a National Integrator</u>

Introduction

Ramanand has been remembered in many ways. At varying points in history, he has been remembered as a radical social reformer who rejected the dominant caste and gender views of his day and as a Brahmin Hindu guru who "re-converted" Muslims back to Hinduism and united all of India in devotion to Ram. Most stories of Ramanand focus on his relationship with his disciples and his role of spreading Ram *bhakti* rather than the contributions attributed to him. This chapter analyzes how Ramanand came to be seen as a "national integrator," in the words of the Sanskritist V. Raghavan,[538] and the ways in which his hagiography has been retold over time with Hindu nationalist tropes so that he has come to be viewed as a proto-Hindu nationalist. Juxtaposed with the predominantly *nirguṇ bhakti* writings attributed to Ramanand and claims about him as the guru of Kabir and Ravidas, this shift is particularly striking. This shift took place primarily during the twentieth century while the narrative of a unified "*bhakti* movement" coalesced.

The Ram Rasik branch played an important role in shaping the political legacy of the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. Singh's pioneering 1957 study of the Ram Rasiks comments on their political orientation. Lutgendorf explains that Singh's study "suggests the political implications of the theology and mystical practice of the sectarian teachers: in a period dominated by a foreign power, they offered devotees and patrons and interiorization of the old Vaishnava royal court, based on a 'new kingdom,'" which is "the world of Saket."[539] As explained in Chapter Four, this "interiorized" portrayal of Ram's court in the mythological Saket later became

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[538] John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 20.
[539] Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, 321. Citing Bhagwati Prasad Singh, *Rāmbhakti meṃ rasik sampradāy*, 365.

identified with the physical location of Ayodhya, alongside the "rediscovery" of other pilgrimage sites related to the *Rāmāyaṇa*. However, Lutgendorf highlights how Singh's own political concerns shaped Singh's analysis of the Ram Rasiks. The Ram Rasik tradition emerged "precisely during a period of generally amicable relations between Hindus and Muslims."[540] Singh's explanation suggests that these innovations were a reaction against Muslim domination, reflecting the religious and political dynamics of post-independence twentieth century India, while in fact the Ramanandis often benefited from the patronage of the Mughals.

Despite the concurrency of the growth of the Ram Rasik tradition in North India with the spread of Ram *bhakti* and its political appropriations in the twentieth century, there have yet to be any studies of the role of the Ram Rasiks in the development of the close connection between the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Hindu nationalism that exists today. In addition, although many scholars have studied the development of the *bhaktamāl* genre, the Ram Rasik affiliation of some of the most important hagiographers has not been discussed in-depth. The first section of this chapter examines Ram Rasik hagiographies, beginning with their engagement with the *bhaktamāl* genre dating to the seventeenth century, and their role in creating a canon of North Indian *bhakti* saints. The second section looks at twentieth-century hagiographies that were influential in creating the idea that Ramanand traveled around in India spreading Vaishnavism and devotion to Ram and "reconverting" Muslims back to Hinduism. The third and final section looks at the legacy of this shift in the memory of Ramanand and its contemporary political implications. Through a study of modern hagiographies of Ramanand, I argue that the Ram Rasik orientation of many influential *bhaktamāl* authors is an important factor in understanding their religiosity, and the Ram Rasik branch played an important role in the process of turning Ramanand into a pan-Indian Hindu leader.

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[540] Philip Lutgendorf, "The Secret Life of Rāmchandra of Ayodhya," 229.

5.1. Ram Rasiks and the Bhaktamāl *Genre*

The Ram Rasiks have played an important and under-acknowledged role in the North

Indian *bhaktamāl* genre as a whole. Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl* is the most influential North Indian

bhakti hagiology. Hare argues that Nabhadas instituted a *bhaktamāl* genre, explaining that even

though it was not the first hagiology, Nabhadas was influential for the way he inspired

subsequent hagiographers.[541] There is little historical information available about Nabhadas, but

his close connection to the early Ramanandis persists, in part because of the work done by later

Ram Rasiks. The Ram Rasiks claim that Nabhadas was himself a Ram Rasik and that he was a

disciple of their claimed founder of the tradition, Agradas.[542] Agradas is also claimed to be the

guru of other hagiographers. Raghavdas, a Dadu *panthi* who wrote a hagiology in the *bhaktamāl*

genre in 1660, says that Agradas had thirteen disciples.[543] Anantadas, author of the late-sixteenth

century *Parcaī*s, says that he himself was a grand-disciple of Agradas.[544] The close connection

between Nabhadas and Agradas helps to lay the foundation for the Rasiks' connection to the

Bhaktamāl and concern with praising *bhakta*s. In addition, Nabhadas wrote two *Aṣṭyām*s or

*Aṣṭakāl Carit*s that describe Ram's activities throughout the eight periods of the day in the

mādhurya bhāv,[545] furthering the connection to the Rasiks.

The Ram Rasiks played a large role in promoting the *Bhaktamāl* as an authoritative text

and they wrote many hagiologies modeled after it. Hare calls for further studies of the *bhaktamāl*

genre, arguing that this "will enable a better understanding of the transition between the early

modernity of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the colonial modernity of the

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[541] J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees," 4-6.
[542] See Chapter One for a detailed explanation of the claims of Agradas as the founder of the Ram Rasiks.
[543] Patton Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 435.
[544] Patton Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 436.
[545] J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees," 43.

nineteenth and twentieth centuries."[546] Sometimes subsequent *bhaktamāl*s are viewed as

commentaries rather than "original" texts, but Hopkins points out the significance that

commentaries can have. He writes, "to comment on a text is not so much to dissect it into minute

doctrinal particulars, but rather to *re-experience* it."[547] He views commentaries as a form of

"spiritual enjoyment," and highlights the "imaginative participation" of the authors.[548] Keune

says that hagiologies are created for the purpose of "codifying and expanding the historico-

mythological worldview of the tradition […] [to] build on the intertextuality of the saints' poetry

but go beyond them in emphasizing the saints' membership in something larger—the coalescing

tradition."[549] As the Ram Rasik branch of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* grew, establishing

monasteries and temples at pilgrimage sites related to the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the late eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries, the Ram Rasiks established themselves as a separate sectarian community

through the composition of hagiographies. This occurred at the cusp of the transition between the

early modernity of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the colonial modernity of the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an important period for the coalescence of Vaishnava Hindu

identity.

5.1.1. The Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl *(c. 1839) of Jivaram "Yugalpriya Sharana"*

     One of the important Ram Rasik hagiographies composed in the *bhaktamāl* genre is the

Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl ("Illumination of Rasiks in the Garland of Devotees") (1839) of

Jivaram "Yugalpriya Sharana." This is the first Ram Rasik hagiology modeled after Nabhadas's

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[546] J. Hare, "A Contested Community: Priyādās and the Re-Imagining of Nābhādās's *Bhaktamāl*," 195.
[547] Steven Paul Hopkins, *Singing the Body of God*, 139.
[548] Steven Paul Hopkins, *Singing the Body of God*, 147.
[549] Jon Keune, "Conditions for Historicising Religion: Hindu Saints, Regional Identity, and Social Change in Western India, ca. 1600-1900," in *Historiography and Religion,* ed. Jörg Rüpke and Susanne Rao (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2015), 233.

Bhaktamāl. It exemplifies the tradition's efforts to reinterpret popular saints as Ram Rasiks and to create a canon of Rasik saints. While Nabhadas was "obviously quite favorably disposed toward the more radical *sant* tradition"[550] rather than the *saguṇ bhakti* tradition, Jivaram and other subsequent Rasik hagiographers focus more on the *saguṇ bhakta*s. Pinch writes that prior to the popularization of the printing press in North India in the second half of the nineteenth century, Ramanandi scholars throughout the Gangetic region were "constantly engaged in the exegesis of the Bhaktamal as a matter of experiencing and expressing faith, guiding lay Vaishnavas and young Ramanandis, and articulating a universal moral code."[551] Pinch explains that the Ramanandi centers spread throughout North India were "relatively autonomous," which allowed for diversity in their presentations of the *bhakta*s' lives and did not provoke concern about "the overall ideological integrity of the sampraday."[552] However, this changed after the spread of the printing press, and there was an increase in sectarian concerns over the depictions of the *sampradāy*. The *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* is written on the cusp of this transition.

The author of the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl*, Jivaram, used the names "Yugalpriya Sharana" or sometimes just "Yugalpriya" as his *chāp* or "poetic signature." The word *śaraṇa*, meaning "refuge," "shelter," or "protection," is also a common name in the Ram Rasik tradition, invoking the idea of seeking refuge in Ram and Sita.[553] Jivaram was the disciple of the Ram Rasik *mahant* Ramcarandas (1760-1831). Ramcarandas was the author of the *Ānand Laharī* and an important Ram Rasik leader in Ayodhya. Paramasivan writes about Ramcarandas in her dissertation about the Ram Rasiks' relationship with the *Rāmcāritmānas* and she calls him "a key figure, if not *the* key figure in the consolidation of the *rasik sampraday*'s authority in

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[550] David N. Lorenzen, *Kabīr Legends and Ananta-Dās's Kabīr Parachai*, 26.
[551] William Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, 55.
[552] William Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, 55.
[553] Dolf Hartsuiker, *Sādhus: Holy Men of India* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1993), 170.

Ayodhya."[554] Jivaram's composition of the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* can be viewed as a

continuation of this process of establishing the Ram Rasiks as a distinct sectarian tradition.

Bhagwati Prasad Singh says that Jivaram spread *rasik bhakti* in Avadh and Bihar[555] and

that Jivaram focuses on telling the stories of the lives of saints from the Ayodhya and Chapra

areas.[556] Jivaram has a lasting influence on *bhakti* in Ayodhya, as he was the guru of the founder

of the Lakshman Kila.[557] Jivaram's father was born in the Chapra district of Bihar, and he gave

Jivaram his first initiation. However, Jivaram's father was oriented towards the *dāsyabhāv*, and

since Jivaram was interested in *śṛṅgārī bhakti*, he travelled to Ayodhya to learn from

Ramcarandas.[558] His father is the author of just one extant text, the *Rāmanāma Mālā*. It is written

in dialect that mixes Magadhi and Bhojpuri, which is rare for Ram *bhakti* poetry.[559] Jivaram

himself wrote three other known texts, the *Padāvalī*, the *Śṛṅgāra Rasa Rahasya*, and the

Aṣṭayāma Vārtika, but his *bhaktamāl* is the most famous of them.[560]

Paramasivan gives a brief, helpful introduction to the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl*. She is

particularly interested in the text because it was one of the first *rasik* texts to claim a link

between Tulsidas and the Ramanandi *sampradāy*, as explained in Chapter One. She writes that

"a preliminary reading of this text shows that as the locus of the *rasik sampraday* shifts from

Rajasthan to Ayodhya in the eighteenth century, invariably, the *rasik* devotees featured in the

hagiography becomes associated with the activity of *Mānas* katha."[561] Burchett also examines

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[554] Vasudha Paramasivan, "Between Text and Sect," 93.
[555] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, *Rāmbhakti meṃ rasik sampradāy*, 441.
[556] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, *Rāmbhakti meṃ rasik sampradāy*, 3.
[557] Sitaram Sharan, "Bhūmikā," *Śrīrasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl*, 4. This founder was named Rasikacarya Swami Shriyugalananya Sharana.
[558] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, *Rāmbhakti meṃ rasik sampradāy*, 424-6.
[559] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, *Rāmbhakti meṃ rasik sampradāy*, 426.
[560] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, *Rāmbhakti meṃ rasik sampradāy*, 441.
[561] Vasudha Paramasivan, "Between Text and Sect," 108.

the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl*'s depiction of Agradas,[562] as does Burghart as a reference for his ethnographic work and comparison with oral histories in his work on the "rediscovery" of Janakpur.[563] However, the *Rasik Prakās Bhaktamāl* has not yet been the primary focus of any academic study, and it has not been translated into English.

The *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* was first published by the London Printing Press in Lucknow. Jivaram's own disciple Vasudevdas (more commonly known as Janaki Rasik Sharana)[564] also wrote a commentary on the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* titled the *Ras Prabodhinī Ṭīkā* in 1862/3, which is the edition I examine here.[565] Hindi literature scholar Kailashchandra Sharma writes that Vasudevdas's commentary is modeled after Priyadas's *Bhaktirasabodhinī* (1712), which is itself a commentary and expansion of Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl*.[566] The *Bhaktirasabodhinī* "shifts Nabhadas's focus from the devotees to God,"[567] presenting miracles as performed by God on behalf of the saints, and focuses particularly on Krishna.

Like the *Bhaktamāl*, the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* is written in terse language with few details about most of the saints. The *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* is written in a form of Braj Bhasha or Hindavi, and the *carita*s of each saint are in verse. The *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* seems to be more concerned with presenting a coherent lineage and documenting the relationship between

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[562] Patton Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 438-9.

[563] Richard Burghart, "The Disappearance and Reappearance of Janakpur," 260-1.

[564] Pinuccia Caracchi, *Rāmānanda: Un guru tra storia e leggenda. Con una traduzione dei canti Hindī in collaborazione con Shukdev Singh* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2017), 53-4. Bhagwati Prasad Singh also writes about a Ram Rasik ascetic named Janakirasikasharana, who also uses the name Rasamala and authored the *Avadhī Sāgara* (1703) and some *śṛṇgārī pada*s, but it is unclear whether or not there is any connection between this one and the *bhaktamāl* commentator. Bhagwati Prasasd Singh, *Rāmbhakti meṃ rasik sampradāy*, 396.

[565] The *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* was first published by the London Printing Press in Lucknow in 1839 and by the same publisher in 1863, as cited by Vasudha Paramasivan, "Between Text and Sect," 66. The *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* was also published alongside Janaki Rasik Sharana's commentary by the Khanga Vilas Press in Bankimpur in 1887, as cited by Pinuccia Caracchi, *Rāmānanda: Un guru tra storia e leggenda*, 337. The edition I examined includes Janaki Rasik Sharana's commentary, Jivaram "Yugalpriya Sharana," *Śrīrasik Prakāś Bhatkamāl*, ed. Acarya Svami Srisitaramsharanaji Maharaj "Vyas" (Ayodhya: Lakshmankila, 1962).

[566] Kailashachandra Sharma, *Bhaktamāl aur Hindī Kāvya meṁ Uskī Paramparā* (Delhi: Manthan, 1983), 129-130, 135, 146; as cited by J. Hare's "Garland of Devotees," 137.

[567] J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees," 86.

different gurus and disciples rather than providing embellished depictions of each saint's life.

Also similar to the *Bhaktamāl*, the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* includes depictions of both figures

from the *Rāmāyaṇa* like Dasaratha alongside historical figures like kings from Rajasthan.

Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl* is best known for its catholicity and its expansiveness, including mention

of around eight hundred bhaktas, while Jivaram makes his own affiliation with the Ram Rasiks

much more explicit. He claims that his text includes the *bhakta*s that were left out of Nabhadas's

Bhaktamāl.[568] Vasudevdas calls Jivaram an *avatāra* of Nabhadas. In the preface, Sitaram

Sharana says that it is because Nabhadas is a student of Agradas that he did not write much about

him, despite him being a pillar of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* and the founder of the "*rasik*

sampradāy."[569] The *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl*'s entry on Ramanand consists of just three verses

and it is grouped together with an entry on Raghavanand, who is referred to as Ramanand's guru.

Janaki Rasik Sharana's commentary has eight verses on Raghavanand and three on Ramanand.

The *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* describes Raghavanand as living in Banaras as a Shaiva until Shiva

appeared to him to teach him about *rasik bhakti*, which he then transmitted to Ramanand.[570] This

demonstrates how even by the mid-nineteenth century, Ram Rasik *bhaktamāl*s still placed more

of an emphasis on Ramanand's lineage than on the life story or teachings of the guru himself.

In addition to expanding the community of Ram Rasiks by applying the label to other

popular *bhakti* saints, the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* negotiates intra-sectarian conflicts. As

explained in the Introduction, the Ram Rasiks engage in the *sakhībhāv* form of worship, where

they choose a particular attendant to serve the royal couple of Ram and Sita. These chosen

attendants have intra-sectarian implications, and Jivaram writes extensively about this practice.

Burchett explains that Jivaram was the first to write that Agradas's *sakhī* form is Candrakala, and

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[568] The subtitle on the cover of the text says: "*Śrīnābhāsvāmījī ke bhaktamāl se atirikta bhaktoṃ kā jīvan carita*."
[569] Sitaram Sharan, "Bhūmikā," *Śrīrasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl*, 2.
[570] Pinuccia Caracchi, *Rāmānanda: Un guru tra storia e leggenda*, 53-4.

this later became a standard part of the collective memory of Agradas. In Jivaram's entry about Agradas in the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl*, as translated by Burchett, he says that Agradas was "the first [the favorite] among the female companions of Janak's daughter [Sītā]. She or he expertly arranged Rām and Sītā's meeting in the flower garden. Candrakalā was [Agra's] name, the beloved female companion who helped bring Rām under Sītā's spell [power/control]."[571] Jivaram himself is also associated with Candrakala.

I argue that Jivaram may have created the connection between Agradas/Candrakala in order to give validity to his own association with Candrakala as a parallel but distinct form of worship from his own guru, Ramcarandas, who is associated with the *sakhī* Carushila. Since the Ram Rasiks have not been studied in-depth in scholarship written in English, the intricacies of relationships between Ram Rasiks have been obscured. For instance, van der Veer says that Candrakala and Carushila are just different names for the same figure.[572] He says that in the 1930s, a *sādhu* named Ramkishorsharan collaborated with a Sanskrit pandit named Sitaramsharan to write a text called the *Lomāśasamhitā*. They claimed that they found an ancient text written by the sage Lomasha. In it, Hanuman is named Candrakala instead of Carushila. Ramanandi *mahant*s on both sides of the debate organized to advocate for their own position. Eventually, after years of debate, they agreed that the *Lomāśasamhitā* was a forgery.[573]

Singh explores the origins of the association of Jivaram/Candrakala and Ramcarandas/Carushila and the stakes of the debate. Singh explains that "it is said" that one day Jivaram fell asleep and dreamed he was learning drums from Candrakala, and Carushila appeared. Candrakala was shy about continuing instructing him in front of Carushila, because

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[571] Patton Burchett, "Agradās and Rām *Rasik Bhakti* Community," 439.
[572] Peter van der Veer, "The Power of Detachment: Disciplines of Body and Mind in the Ramanandi Order," *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 3 (Aug 1989): 466.
[573] Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, 163.

Jivaram was connected to Ramcarandas, who was the attendant of Carushila. However, Carushila gave Candrakala permission to take Jivaram into her community and inform Ramcarandas. Upon awakening, he told this story to Ramcarandas, who gave his approval. Singh explains that it is because of that incident that Jivaram's tradition is now associated with Candrakala while Ramcarandas's tradition is associated with Carushila, and these two different lineages view their own *sakhī* as the main *sakhī*.[574] The concern over guru-disciple relationships in the story shows the self-conscious awareness of the intra-sectarian implications of becoming associated with a different *sakhī*. It also suggests that even though Jivaram is seen as equivalent to Ramcarandas in a way, Jivaram still respects the authority of Ramcarandas.

In Ram Rasik religiosity, playing music is very important because the two main *sakhī*s of the royal couple played instruments. Carushila played the *vīṇā* while Candrakala played the *mṛdaṃga*.[575] Singh says that of the sixteen *sakhī*s of the royal couple, both Carushila and Candrakala are considered to be forms of "Sarveśvarī." Both are referred to as *yūtheśvarī*, or the leader of a group of *gopī*s.[576] He says that Carushila is a form of Hanuman and Candrakala is a form of Bharata.[577] Both Carushila and Candrakala are listed in the name of the "sisters" of Sita, a list of 21 daughters of Janaka and his brothers found in Raja Kishorivara Sharana's *Deval Saṃhitā*,[578] and they are also both mentioned by Nabhadas in his *Aṣṭakālacarita*.[579] Jivaram's emphasis on Agradas's association with Candrakala demonstrates the intra-sectarian concerns at play in the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl*.

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[574] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, *Rāmbhakti meṃ rasik sampradāy*, 440-1.
[575] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, *Rāmbhakti meṃ rasik sampradāy*, 360.
[576] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, *Rāmbhakti meṃ rasik sampradāy*, 239.
[577] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, *Rāmbhakti meṃ rasik sampradāy*, 301.
[578] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, *Rāmbhakti meṃ rasik sampradāy*, 238.
[579] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, *Rāmbhakti meṃ rasik sampradāy*, 100-101.

These intricacies of competition within the Ram Rasik tradition have been largely overlooked in scholarship, but the examination of Ram Rasik hagiographies illuminates the complex dynamics at play. The composition of Ram Rasik *bhaktamāl*s served several purposes. They allowed for a forum to assert authority within the Ram Rasik tradition, as guru-disciple lineages are a key way that the tradition developed. They also elevated the status of Ram Rasik saints by situating them in a *bhaktamāl*, showing them as worthy of remembering akin to the popular *bhakti* saints described in Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl*. In addition, the Ram Rasik *bhaktamāl*s played a role in affirming the Ram Rasiks' status as an important Vaishnava sect that is compatible with Krishna-focused *bhakti* traditions, which I will explain further below.

5.1.2. Maharaja Raghuraj Singh's Rām Rasikāvalī (1864)

The second important Ram Rasik *bhaktamāl* that I will discuss is Maharaja Raghuraj Singh's *Rām Rasikāvalī* ("Lineage of Ram Rasiks"). This text is written in an early form of Hindi and it explicitly refers to itself as a *bhaktamāl*. The text was first published by the Venkateswara Press in Mumbai in 1864.[580] The *Rām Rasikāvalī* has been cited by several scholars as a hagiographic source for their studies of various *bhakti* saints, but it has yet to be translated into English or treated as a focus of study. Paramasivan briefly mentions the *Rām Rasikāvalī* as an example of the Rewa court's affiliation with the Ram Rasiks.[581] McGregor uses

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[580] It was republished in 1888/9 (cited by Imre Bangha, "Lover and Saint: The Early Development of Ānandghan's Reputation," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (July 2001) as *Bhaktamāl: Rāmrasikāvalī* (Bombay: Lakshmi Venkateshvar Kalyam, new edition 1956) and by J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees"; in 1915 (cited by Heidi Pauwels, "Hagiography and Community Formation," as *Bhakta Māl arthāt Rām Rasikāvalī*, ed. K. Krishnadas (Bombay: Lakshmi Venkateshvar Steam Press, 1915); in 1952 [which is the edition I examined – Maharaja Raguraj Singh, *Śrī Bhaktamālā Rāmarasikāvalī*, ed. Khemaraja Srikrishnadas (Mumbai: Sri Venkateshvar Press, 1952)]; and in 1956 (cited by R.D. Gupta, "Priyā Dās, Author of the *Bhaktirasabodhinī*," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 32, no. 1 (Feb 1969): 58 as "*Rāmarasikāvalī*, Bombay, 1956" with no details on the publisher or editor.
[581] Vasudha Paramasivan, "Between Text and Sect," 94.

it as a source for understanding Man Singh's connection to the Ram Rasiks,[582] and both Hare and

R.D. Gupta describe it as a key source of information about Priyadas, the author of the

Bhaktirasabodhinī.[583] Pauwels cites the *Rām Rasikāvalī* in her work on Hariram Vyas,

describing it as the only hagiography that differs in its depiction of Vyas's son.[584] Callewaert

also mentions the *Rām Rasikāvalī* to provide extra details of Pipa's life story, featuring a

conversation between Pipa and Devi, where Devi instructs Pipa to make offerings to Ram instead

of to her. Callewaert also claims that Narayandas's 1969 commentary on the *Bhaktamāl* is based

in part on the *Rām Rasikāvalī*.[585] Imre Bangha cites the text as one of the only examples of a

bhaktamāl that includes the saint Anandghan.[586] Even though the *Rām Rasikāvalī* has been cited

by many different scholars, and it has been reprinted several times, there have yet to be any

comprehensive studies on this Ram Rasik-oriented *bhaktamāl* from the nineteenth century. I

argue that the *Rām Rasikāvalī* demonstrates an emerging pan-Vaishnava orientation of the Ram

Rasik tradition in the nineteenth century, as well as the close relationship between royal courts

and Ram Rasiks.

Maharaja Raghuraj Singh (1833-1879) was the king of Rewa, a former Rajput kingdom

in the Baghelkhand region, which is now located in northeastern Madhya Pradesh. Raghuraj

Singh's father, Viswanath Singh, abdicated his control for his son in 1843.[587] Viswanath Singh

was the patron of Ramcarandas, [588] the aforementioned Ram Rasik leader and guru of Jivaram

"Yugalpriya Sharana." Raghuraj Singh ruled at a pivotal time of colonial history, and he had a

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[582] Ronald Stuart McGregor, "The *Dhyān-Mañjarī* of Agradās," 238.
[583] J. Hare says that the only other external source of information about Priyadas comes from Pratap Singh's *Bhakta Kalpadrum* (1866), another Ram Rasik hagiology, in "Garland of Devotees," 96.
[584] Heidi Pauwels, "Hagiography and Community Formation," 90.
[585] Winand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas*, 141.
[586] Imre Bangha, "Lover and Saint," 8.
[587] Shailendra Bhandare, "A Metallic Mirror: Changing Representations of Sovereignty on Indian Coins during the Raj," in *The Raj and the Rajas: Money and Coinage in Colonial India*, ed. Sanjay Garg (London: Routledge, 2022), 114.
[588] Vasudha Paramasivan, "Between Text and Sect," 92.

complicated relationship with the British administrators. Raghuraj Singh printed a coin in the name of "Bushby Saheb," which refers to George Alexander Bushby, the Commissioner and Agent of parts of central India in service of the East India Company. Shailendra Bhandare refers to this printing as "a coup that is unparalleled in the history of colonial numismatics,"[589] and theorizes that Raghuraj Singh likely saw Bushby as "the most accessible instrument of British supremacy that the maharaja could invoke as a means to indicate his subservience."[590] Raghuraj Singh may have created coins honoring Bushby in order to strengthen his relationship with the British.

Raghuraj Singh includes an entry on his father, Viswanath Singh (1789-1854) in his hagiology. Raghuraj begins by describing the joy that he gets from telling the stories of the devotees, including his father. He writes,

"Priyadas's best student is my father Viswanath.

I am telling his story, having felt modesty that's not small.

Having seen the community of *bhakta*s, my mind rejoiced a lot.

I will describe the stories of the *bhakta*s, and I will describe them without any

shortcomings […]

The audience should listen carefully to the stories of the salvation of the saints."[591]

Raghuraj goes on to explain that his father studied the *Bhagavāta Purāṇa* with his guru Priyadas (a different Priyadas from the composer of the *Bhaktirasabodhinī*[592]). Viswanath's guru Priyadas studied with famous Krishna devotees in Vrindavan before becoming the teacher of the king.

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[589] Shailendra Bhandare, "A Metallic Mirror," 114.
[590] Shailendra Bhandare, "A Metallic Mirror," 115.
[591] Raghuraj Singh, *Bhaktamāl: Rāmrasikāvalī*, 181. "*Priyādāsko śiṣya vara, Viśvanāth pitu mora. Tāsu carita varṇana karata, lagati lāja nahĩ thora. Pai lakhi bhaktana saṁpradā, hulasati ati mati mori. Bhakta carita varṇana karaũ, karaũ kachū nahĩ khori* […] *sāvdhāna śrotā sunahu, santa carita sukhasāra.*"
[592] R.D. Gupta, "Priyā Dās, Author of the 'Bhaktirasabodhinī,'" 66.

Raghuraj calls his father "Priyadas's best student."[593] This is notable because Raghuraj does not

note any incompatibility with this famous Ram Rasik leader being a devoted student of the

Bhagavāta Purāṇa, which focuses on the stories of Krishna.

Raghuraj Singh says that his father was a famous Ram Rasik devotee and that he

practiced the form of meditation where he visualized himself as a *sakhī* aiding Ram and Sita in

their daily routines. He says that Ram and Hanuman came to visit him in his dreams, and that

they instructed him to write texts devoted to Ram and Sita. Viswanath built a temple dedicated to

them, and he also visited Citrakut, a pilgrimage site associated with the Ram Rasiks, several

times. After one visit, Raghuraj Singh wrote, "he came again to the city of Rewa, having been

fully satisfied in the color of Rama. He imagines himself in the body of a spectator, where he

lives with the Lord."[594] At several points in the hagiography, Viswanath Singh is questioned

about the relationship between Ram and Krishna. He repeatedly affirms that "*Rāma Kṛṣṇa ke rūp*

abhedā,"[595] meaning "the form of Ram and Krishna is undivided." Even though Raghuraj Singh

imagines himself as a *sakhī* of Ram and Sita and patronized Ram Rasik authors, he does not

elevate the Ram Rasiks at the expense of devotion to Krishna, he believes that the worship of

both gods is ultimately compatible. In addition, Raghuraj Singh describes his father's connection

with Kabir's poetry.[596] Kabir's *Bījak* was first published in 1868 alongside a commentary written

by Viswanath Singh. This commentary later became accepted as a standard commentary

alongside the *Bījak*.[597] Viswanath Singh's interest in Kabir is evidence of the Ram Rasiks'

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[593] Raghuraj Singh, *Bhaktamāl: Rāmrasikāvalī*, 182.
[594] Raghuraj Singh, *Bhaktamāl: Rāmrasikāvalī*, 182. "*Āyo puni Rīvā nagara, Rāma raṅga mahã chāki. Parṣada vapu mānata nijai, rahanalayo prabhu tāki.*"
[595] Raghuraj Singh, *Bhaktamāl: Rāmrasikāvalī*, 188.
[596] Raghuraj Singh, *Bhaktamāl: Rāmrasikāvalī*, 184. "*Vījaka Tilaka nareśa banāye.*"
[597] It was first published by Pandit Gopinath Pathak's Benares Light Press and then re-published by Naval Kishore Press in 1883. Ulrike Stark, *An Empire of Books: The Naval Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Word in Colonial India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007), 401.

concern with establishing a close connection between the popular saint and the Ramanandi *sampradāy*.

In addition to the *Rām Rasikāvalī*, Maharaj Raghuraj Singh is known for also composing numerous works devoted to Krishna,[598] demonstrating his pan-Vaishnava orientation. Both Ram- and Krishna-focused *rasik* traditions are particularly amenable to crossing back and forth between devotion to the two gods as well as the simultaneous worship of them both. For example, the Rajput prince Nagaridas (also known as Savant Singh of Kishangarh, 1699-1764) is best known for his poetry devoted to Radha and Krishna, but he also composed the *Rām Carit Mālā* (1749) about Ram and Sita. Pauwels describes this composition as being influenced by the Ram Rasik tradition, particularly because of its foregrounding of the romance between Ram and Sita, and what she describes as a "feminization" of the story.[599] In addition, Nagaridas's emphasis on Sita's experience of *viraha* "fits well with the Krishna universe where the *viraha* of the Gopīs and Rādhā is ubiquitous."[600] Nagaridas also describes himself visiting Ramanandis at the monastery in Galta, which had a Ram Rasik orientation at this time. In another composition, Nagaridas expounded the doctrine of *bhedābheda* (in Pauwels' translation, "difference in non-difference") between *avatāra*s of Ram and Krishna, "stating that while Rāma and Krishna, and in fact all *avatāra*s are ultimately the same," it is still "appropriate for devotees to feel an exclusive attachment to one only."[601]

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[598] Stuart McGregor, "The Progress of Hindi, Part 1," 937.
[599] Heidi Pauwels, "Rewriting the Sītā-Rāma Romance: Nāgarīdās' *Rām-Carit-Mālā* (1749)," *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 9 (2016): 252.
[600] Heidi Pauwels, "Rewriting the Sītā-Rāma Romance: Nāgarīdās' *Rām-Carit-Mālā* (1749)," 263.
[601] Heidi Pauwels, "Rewriting the Sītā-Rāma Romance: Nāgarīdās' *Rām-Carit-Mālā* (1749)," 254.

Maharaja Raghuraj Singh composed dialogues for Ram Lila performances in Varanasi in collaboration with Bharatendu Harishchandra, the so-called "father of Hindi literature."[602] Lutgendorf views Ram Lila performances as a form of *ṭika* or "commentary" on Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas*. He says that the Ram Rasiks played an important and unacknowledged role in shaping the Ram Lila, and he highlights the compatibility of Ram Rasik theology with the Ram Lila tradition. In particular, Lutgendorf focuses on the "visual and tangible dimension" of the performances that enables devotees "to participate in the recreation of the story."[603] He notes that the modern Ram Lila "evolved into its contemporary form during the heyday of *rasik* devotionalism."[604] Raghuraj Singh's collaboration with Bharatendu Harishchandra on the Ram Lila is an example of the close connection between the Ram Rasiks and the popularization of Ram *bhakti* and pan-Vaishnavism.

Maharaja Raghuraj Singh's collaborations with Harishchandra is particularly notable because of the important role that Harishchandra played in creating the modern conception of Hinduism as the national religion of India. Dalmia's research highlights Harishchandra's role in shaping conceptions of Hinduism in the nineteenth century, which was a critical time for the consolidation of Hindu traditions during the era of British colonialism and the Indian independence movement. Dalmia delineates between the "reformist" approach by groups like the Arya and Brahmo Samaj and the "traditionalist" approach used by Harishchandra and his ilk. The reformists uphold the Vedas as the foremost religious authority, they do not rely heavily on the *Dharmaśāstra*s and instead promote their own leaders' guidelines for social propriety, and

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[602] Bhargav Rani, "The Night Before *Bhor Ārti:* Play and Banarasipan in the Ramnagar Ramlila," in *Performing the Ramayana Tradition: Enactments, Interpretations, and Arguments*, ed. Paula Richman and Rustom Bharucha (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 312.
[603] Philip Lutgendorf, "Words Made Flesh," 98.
[604] Philip Lutgendorf, "Words Made Flesh," 99.

they do not center temples or ritual worship.[605] Dalmia argues that while the reformist groups were the catalysts for more radical changes, "the most vital issues concerning notions of cultural, religious and political identity were thrashed out in the traditionalist quarters as well, and perhaps with more lasting effect, and it was here that the face of modern Hinduism – within which temple and *varṇa* continue to play a prominent role – was finally to be coined."[606] Both groups advocated for the idea of an eternal, unified version of Hinduism, but both the reformists and traditionalists had to come up with innovative interpretations of the past to fit their contemporary concerns. The Ram Rasik orientation promoted by authors like Raghuraj Singh is more aligned with the traditionalist view.

Harishchandra was affiliated with the Vallabha *sampradāy* but he called for a unified version of Hinduism which was to be unimpeded by sectarian differences. In 1873, he contributed to the founding of the Tadiya Samaj, which was meant to consolidate the Vaishnava *sampradāy*s.[607] He promoted a monotheistic vision of Vaishnavism, wherein even the *yugalasvarūpa* is viewed as a single unit rather than a "divine pair." He viewed Krishna as the ultimate God and believed all other gods were ultimately Krishna. Harishchandra never rejected the *sampradāy* model, in contrast to the *smārta*s who sometimes viewed *sampradāy*s as heterodox. Harishchandra composed Vallabha sectarian texts such as a hagiography of Vallabhacarya. He emphasized *saguṇ bhakti* as a central unifying ideology in Hinduism, and viewed the *Bhaktamāl* as an important text that articulated this vision. He also wrote his own *bhaktamāl* called the *Uttarārdhabhaktamāl* in 1876.

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[605] Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harischandra and Nineteenth-Century Banaras* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010), 7-8.
[606] Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*, 4.
[607] Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*, 366-7.

Like the Ram Rasiks, Harishcandra did not shy away from the erotic form of *bhakti*. In 1876, Harishcandra wrote a play called *Candrāvalī* that celebrates the *sakhya bhāva*, focusing on the *sakhī* Candravali's love for Krishna. Dalmia points out that Harishchandra did not promote "an abstract internalized devotion, puritanically cleansed of its erotic associations;"[608] rather, he composed and celebrated devotional love poetry. Unlike contemporaneous work by Bankimchandra, the Bengali composer of the Indian national anthem who promoted a more martial and heroic vision of Krishna like his role in the *Bhagavadgītā*, Harishcandra drew on the *rasik* orientation of the Vallabha *sampradāy* in his vision of Krishna as the ultimate God. Harishcandra also composed the *Sītāvallabhastotra*, which praises Sita and her *sakhī*s, demonstrating the impact of the Ram Rasiks on his religiosity in addition to his comfortability with merging both Ram and Krishna *bhakti*.[609]

Nabhadas's early-seventeenth century *Bhaktamāl* laid the foundation for an imagined community of *bhakti* saints, and the many commentaries and poems composed in the same genre led to continued negotiations of the identity of this community. Over time, Vaishnavism began to predominantly characterize North Indian *bhakti*. The Ram Rasiks' repeated engagement with this genre allowed them to influence this process and assert the importance of devotion to Ram alongside Krishna. At the same time, Krishna devotees like Harishcandra also began to promote a unified form of Vaishnavism as the national religion of India. The *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl* and the *Rām Rasikāvalī* demonstrate how Ram Rasik *bhaktamāl*s became a medium in which Ramanandis could create a canon of saints, negotiate positions related to intra-sectarian debates, and emphasize commonalities with Krishna devotional communities to assert Vaishnavism.

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[608] Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*, 377.
[609] Bhagwati Prasad Singh, *Rāmbhakti meṃ rasik sampradāy*, 362.

5.2. Ramanand as a National Integrator

Many *bhakti* saints have been associated with regional nationalist projects in India. For example, Dean Accardi explains that the saint Lal Ded became central to Kashmiri identity, even though there is almost nothing known for sure about her life or her poetry. This happens in part because she is believed to have lived in a time period valorized by Kashmiris as the last time they were self-ruled, and the connections are made through hagiographies written about her life.[610] Indira Peterson discusses the same phenomenon in her study of hagiographies of Tamil Shaiva *bhakti* saints, which emphasize a distinctly Tamil identity through references to particular sacred locations.[611] Similarly, Jon Keune explains that in the late twentieth century, *bhakti* poets began to be invoked in political debates in Maharashtra. He writes that some believed that these saints were "preparing the social ground to support the development of self-rule in Maharasthra."[612] Christian Lee Novetzke argues that this is because *bhakti* saints like Jnandev were indispensable in the creation of Marathi as a literary vernacular language. He points out that Jnandev's writings specifically reference particular places in Maharasthra, outlining a sacred geography. He calls this a "full embrace of geopositionality, making 'place' a key logic to the text as well."[613] These scholars all offer examples of the ways in which *bhakti* saints are used for regional nationalist projects.

Ramanand stands out as being particularly affiliated with pan-Indian religious nationalism. As John Stratton Hawley points out, V. Raghavan was the first to call *bhakti* saints the "great integrators" of India. Raghavan was a Sanskrit scholar who was invited by Indira

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[610] Dean Accardi, "Embedded Mystics: Writing Lal Ded and Nund Rishi into the Kashmiri Landscape," in *Kashmir: History, Politics, Representation,* ed. Chitralekha Zutshi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 247.
[611] Indira Peterson, "Tamil Śaiva Hagiography," 193.
[612] Jon Keune, "Eknāth Remembered and Reformed," 261.
[613] Christian Lee Novetzke, *The Quotidian Revolution: Vernacularization, Religion, and the Premodern Public Sphere in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 184.

Gandhi to deliver the Sardar Vallabhai Patel Memorial Lectures in New Delhi in 1964. These lectures were highly influential, as they were rebroadcasted on the radio across India, published, and translated into English. Raghavan proposed that it was *bhakti* saints who first achieved "the emotional integration" "upon which the territorial integration of India had relied and would continue to rely."[614] Raghavan drew connections between *bhakti* saints all across India, and he emphasized the social inclusivity they promoted. Ramanand plays a particularly important role in this configuration as the "shortcut" between *bhakti* in Southern and North India, as explored in Chapter Two. Hawley describes Raghavan's formulation as just one example of how "fresh political configurations served as relevant background for what happened in the realm of ideas."[615] Hawley argues that Raghavan's speeches was part of a project to draw different sects into the larger category of "Hinduism," and to draw connections and parallels between different *bhakti* communities that had been previously considered opponents to one another.

The modern hagiographies of Ramanand reflect the way the present-day concerns of the Ramanandis inform their revisionist history. Unlike Lal Ded or Jnandev, Ramanand has never been associated with a regional nationalist project because there is not a North Indian equivalent of a Kashmiri, Tamil, or Maratha nation. In fact, these nationalist movements all define themselves against the hegemony that North India represents. In this section of the chapter, I highlight two hagiographies that helped lay the groundwork for Raghavan's presentation of Ramanand as a "national integrator": the *Bhaktisudhāsvād* (c. 1903-1909) of Bhagvan Prasad "Sitaramsharana" "Rupkala"'and Bhagavadacarya's *Śrīmad Rāmānand Digvijaya* (1927).

5.2.1. The Bhaktisudhāsvād *(c. 1903-1909) of Bhagvan Prasad "Sitaramsharana" or "Rupkala"*

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[614] John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 20.
[615] John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 25.

Bhagvan Prasad, known as both "Sitaramsharana" and "Rupkala," wrote a full-length

hagiography of Ramanand called the *Bhaktisudhāsvād* (c. 1903-1909). It was published in six

parts over the period of several years.[616] Bhagvan Prasad's publication of the *Bhaktisudhāsvād*,

published alongside Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl* and Priyadas's *Bhaktirasabodhinī* became the

standard edition of the *Bhaktamāl* that remains in print today, re-printed by the Gita Press and

other popular Hindi publishers. This text added important details to Ramanand's life story.

Bhagvan Prasad is also an example of the important role the Ram Rasiks played in the promotion

of the *bhaktamāl* genre. Bhagvad Prasad was a resident of Kanak Bhavan in Ayodhya. He spent

most of his childhood in Mubarakpur, in eastern Uttar Pradesh, and he took on the Ram Rasik-

oriented name Sitaramsharana (meaning "one who takes refuge in Sita and Ram") after being

initiated by Swami Ramcharandas from the Parsa village in the Chapra District of Bihar. He was

later granted another *rasik* name, Rupkala ("manifest beauty") by Shri Ramcharandas Hanskala

of Bhagalpur, Bihar.[617] The self-authored introduction to the *Bhaktisudhāsvād* says that Bhagvan

Prasad has been studying the *Bhaktamāl* since childhood.[618]

Bhagvan Prasad's father, Tapasviram (1815-1855), also wrote a *bhaktamāl* in the Persian

script called the *Ramuze Mihovafa*. Tapasviram's brother, Tulsiram, was a Ram Rasik

scholar from Ambala, located in Haryana near the border of Punjab, who later settled in

Vrindavan. He wrote the *Bhaktamāl Pradīpan* (1854), which was "extremely popular and

commanded high sales."[619] It was published first by the Lahore Koh-e Nur Press and then by the

Naval Kishore Press. Tulsiram's *bhaktamāl* was written in Urdu and was transliterated into

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[616] Pinch says that the "bibliographic details of Bhagvan Prasad's commentary are unclear." William Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, 184.
[617] William Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, 73-4.
[618] "*Śrīsītarām-Kṛpā se is dīn ko bacpan hī se Śrībhaktamāljī ke paḍne mẽ*," Bhagwan Prasad "Sitaramsharana" and "Rupkala," *Gosvāmi Śrīnābhājī Kṛt Śrībhaktamāl, Śrīpriyādāsjī Praṇīt Tīkā-Kavitta, Śrīayodhyānivāsī Śrīsītāśaraṇa Bhagavanprasād Rūpkalā Viracit Bhaktisudāsvād Tilak Sahit* (Lucknow: Tej Kumar Press, 1977 [1903-1909]).
[619] Ulrike Stark, *An Empire of Books*, 401.

Devanagari twice in 1866/7, once by Hari Baksh Ray and once by Raja Pratap Singh of Sidhua (North Bihar) with some minor additions. Raja Pratap Singh's edition was called the *Bhakta Kalpadrum*, which was a popular text that was published at least twelve times.[620] There were also several earlier Persian tellings of the *bhaktamāl*, such as those by Lalla Lalji Das (c. 1771) and Lala Gumani Lal (c. 1841).[621] Ulrike Stark says that this reflects "the wide interest in Vaishnava hagiology among Urdu-reading Hindus"[622] at the time. All of these examples demonstrate the involvement of Ram Rasiks in the proliferation of the *bhaktamāl* genre throughout the nineteenth century.

Bhagvad Prasad's commentary on the *Bhaktamāl* was in part influenced by the *Śrī Rāmānanda Yaśāvalī* (1879).[623] Pinch surmises that almost all of Bhagvan Prasad's details of Ramanand's life came from the *Śrī Rāmānanda Yaśāvalī*, which itself is said to have been based on the *Agastyasamhita*, one of the contested Sanskrit texts attributed to Ramanand. As Pinch explains, Bhagvan Prasad's telling of Ramanand's life story became considered to be widely authoritative and that he was also in contact with British colonial scholars, influencing their interpretation of Ramanand. Bhagvan Prasad worked in the Bihar Education Branch of the Bengal Presidency.[624] Alongside Grierson, Bhagvan Prasad played an important role in establishing "a sense of fixity" in the *bhaktamāl* tradition.[625] His version made it possible for "readers of modern standard Hindi to read the *Bhaktamāl* without the aid of a trained exegete," which makes it take the place of public recitation.[626]

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[620] William Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, 55.
[621] Ulrike Stark, *An Empire of Books*, 402.
[622] Ulrike Stark, *An Empire of Books*, 402.
[623] William Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, 56.
[624] William Pinch, "*Bhakti* and the British Empire," *Past & Present* 179, no. 1 (May 2003), 165.
[625] J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees," 211.
[626] J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees," 229.

Like most commentaries in the *Bhaktamāl* tradition, Bhagvad Prasad expands on the life

stories of the *bhakta*s.[627] His Ram Rasik orientation is evidenced in his depictions. For instance,

Bhagvan Prasad elaborates on a line in Priyadas's telling which states that Nabhadas was born as

part of Hanuman's lineage. Hare explains that Bhagvad Prasad expands on this and adds many

more details, citing his father and uncle's *bhaktamāl*s, claiming that Nabhadas was a descendent

of a partial avatar of Hanuman named Ramdas who was a Maharashtrian Brahmin and lived in

the South and was famous for his devotion to Ram and Sita.[628] He also offers other possibilities

for Nabhadas's connection to Hanuman, including the *Rām Rasikāvalī*'s interpretation of it

meaning *Lāṁgūlī* Brahmin. In addition, Bhagvad Prasad suggests that Nabhadas was born from a

drop of Hanuman's sweat. He tells the story of how one day, Shiva was instructing Hanuman in

yoga, and a drop of sweat fell. Shiva caught the drop and threw it to earth in order to increase

bhakti, where it became Nabhadas. The reason Nabhadas was blind was because Hanuman was

in a state of *samādhi* when the drop fell, which also gave him "a divine interior vision."[629] There

is an important historic connection between the Ram Rasiks and Hanuman, as explained in

Chapter Three.

Bhagvad Prasad's description of Ramanand in the *Bhaktisudhāsvād* is detailed, and it

emphasizes the idea that Ramanand is an *avatāra* of Ram himself. Bhagvan Prasad's depiction of

Ramanand appears to be influenced by his Ram Rasik orientation, as evidenced by his emphasis

on Hanuman and devotion to both Ram and Sita. He also promotes the idea that Ramanand

traveled throughout India on pilgrimage, and it was during this time that he broke the rules of

caste commensality, which led to the establishment of his own *sampradāy*.[630] Bhagvan Prasad

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[627] J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees," 222.
[628] J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees," 224.
[629] J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees," 225.
[630] William Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, 58.

was innovative but not entirely unique in his vision of Ramanand. For instance, Nabhadas's

Bhaktamāl states, "taking form in many ages, he has carried the reverent to the opposite shore.

Rāmānand, like Raghunāth (Ram), fashioned a second bridge for crossing the world."[631] This

comparison to Ram shows that Bhagvad Prasad's vision of Ramanand as an *avatāra* is an

interpolation, but one that is built on pre-existing concepts. Similarly, it is not clear what exactly

Nabhadas means by the bridge that crosses the world, but Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl* became

influential for later ideas about the four Vaishnava *sampradāy*s and the idea that the "*bhakti*

movement" began in the South and spread to the North via Ramanand.[632] Rather than focusing

on the broader imagined community of *bhakta*s as in the *bhaktamāl* genre, Bhagvan Prasad

instead focuses particularly on elevating the status of Ramanand as a guru. This trend was

continued by Bhagavadacarya.

5.2.2. Bhagavadacarya's Śrīmad Rāmānand Digvijaya *(1927)*

The most influential figure in reshaping the image of Ramanand and reformulating the

Ramanandi *sampradāy* in the twentieth century was likely Bhagavadacarya, formerly known as

Bhagavad Das, who lived from 1879-1981 and became the first Jagadguru Ramanandacarya in

1977. Bhagavadacarya is the author of an influential twentieth-century hagiography called the

Śrīmad Rāmānand Digvijaya (1927).[633] Bhagavadacarya was the disciple of a Ram Rasik guru in

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[631] J. Hare, "Garland of Devotees," 56.
[632] John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, 105.
[633] Richard Burghart says that along with the *Śrīmad Rāmānand Digvijaya*, one of the earliest detailed biographies of Ramanand was the *Sri Ramanand Natak* by Avadh Kisor Das, published in Varanasi in the late 1930s or early 1940s. Burghart says he saw a manuscript of this text at the Ramanandi ashram in Janakpur. He also notes that in the 1940s, Hari Caranlal and Varma Sastri edited and published the journal *Jagriti* with numerous articles on Ramanand. "The Founding of the Ramanandi Sect," 133.

Ayodhya named Ram Manohar Prasad and he promoted Visishtadvaita Vedanta philosophy.[634]

He was an orphan and studied at a school run by the Arya Samaj as a child.[635] Bhagavadacarya

was a supporter of Gandhi, and he wrote a trilogy of Sanskrit *mahākāvya*s about Gandhi called

the *Bhāratapārijāta*, the *Pārijātapahāra*, and the *Pārijātasaurabham*.[636] Maxim Demchenko

explains that "retracing Gandhi's voyages, he visited South Africa where [he] probably hoped to

start an international Rama-*bhakti* movement but lacked resources, both moral and financial, for

this enterprise."[637] His interest in Gandhi is reflects his nationalist sentiments.

      Bhagavadacarya's view of Ramanand was controversial but gained popularity over time.

Pinch writes, "as Bhagavadacharya's stature grew, so did the new Ramanandi emphasis on a

history of Muslim tyranny as both a catalyst and a backdrop for Hindu decline prior to the arrival

of Ramanand."[638] This emphasis on Muslim/Hindu conflict is clearly seen in Bhagavadacarya's

Śrīmad Rāmānand Digvijaya, first published in 1927 with the title *Svāmī Rāmānand kā Jīvan*

Caritra and later re-published in 1967 by the Adhyapika Shrichandandevi Press in

Ahmedabad.[639] Bhagavadacarya wrote the *Śrīmad Rāmānand Digvijaya* in Sanskrit with his own

Hindi commentary. His choice to compose in Sanskrit demonstrates Bhagavadacarya's belief in

the importance of Sanskrit and the association between Sanskrit and Ramanand. The text depicts

Ramanand traveling around India, spreading devotion to Ram, and "re-converting" Muslims

back to Hinduism. Bhagavadacarya also wrote the *Śrī Janakī Kṛipābhāṣyasya* in 1958 and the

Śrī Rāmānand Bhāṣyam in 1963.[640]

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[634] Maxim B. Demchenko, "Shri Bhagavadacharya's Approach to Commenting on and Propagating of Vishisthadvaita-Vedanta within the XXth century's Ramanandi Tradition," *RUDN Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2022): 384-5.
[635] Maxim B. Demchenko, "Shri Bhagavadacharya's Approach," 387.
[636] V. Raghavan, *Contemporary Indian Literature* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1957), 247.
[637] Maxim B. Demchenko, "Shri Bhagavadacharya's Approach," 388.
[638] William R. Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, 79.
[639] Richard Burghart, "The Founding of the Ramanandi Sect," 563.
[640] William Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, 68.

As detailed in Chapter Two, Agrawal believes Bhagavadacarya played a large role in promoting the image of Ramanand as an orthodox Hindu *ācārya* who wrote in Sanskrit. Bhagavadacarya established the Ramanandi Literature Publication Committee in the early 1930s, which was dedicated to publishing and propagating Ramanandi books. Pinch says that they were generally concerned with two main issues: "caste elitism and the coming of Islam to India."[641] They promoted the idea that Hindus' strength in India had been weakened by rivalries between Vaishnavas and Śaivas, which made them "vulnerable to violent Muslim persecution."[642] In the early twentieth century in Ayodhya, Bhagavadacarya and other Ramanandis began focusing particularly on the perceived threat of Islam. Rather than presenting all Muslims as enemies, though, Bhagavadacarya promoted the idea that they could be "re-converted" to Hinduism.

The Sanskrit compound *digvijaya* means "conquering in all directions." In epic and Puranic literature, the word *digvijaya* was generally used to describe military conquests, and over time, it came to refer to religious conquest by the founders of major Hindu renunciant traditions like Shankara, Madhva, Caitanya, and Vallabha.[643] William Sax argues that the political and religious connotations of *digvijaya* cannot be separated and that the term helps illuminate the way in which "kings and renouncers are, in many respects, alter egos of each other."[644] He highlights the similarities between depictions of kings and renouncers, and compares premodern *digvijaya*s to modern ones, like Gandhi's salt march for Indian independence in 1930 or L.K. Advani's *rath yātrā* to Ayodhya in 1990 in the lead-up of the destruction of the Babri Masjid.[645] Sax says that "the postfacto attribution of such a *digvijaya* to major tradition founders had

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[641] William Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, 71.
[642] William Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, 71.
[643] William S. Sax, "Conquering the Quarters: Religion and Politics in Hinduism," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 4, no. 1 (April 2000): 39.
[644] William S. Sax, "Conquering the Quarters: Religion and Politics in Hinduism," 42.
[645] William S. Sax, "Conquering the Quarters: Religion and Politics in Hinduism," 40.

become an established practice" by the mid-sixteenth century.[646] Bhagavadacarya's depiction of Ramanand's *digvijaya* can be seen as part of this established practice of elevating him to the status of other great religious leaders.

In Bhagavadacarya's account, Ramanand "re-converts" both Muslims and Jains to Vaishnavism. This idea of spreading religious teachings fits within the established norms of *digvijaya* texts. Sax writes, "the successful *digvijayī* did not annihilate his enemies but, whenever possible, reestablished them or heirs upon their thrones as tributary kings subordinate to him… Inclusion, not destruction, was the hallmark of the *digvijaya*, which sought to conquer not only places but also the infinite directions."[647] Over time, as the *digvijaya* paradigm was adapted to fit the hagiographies of religious leaders in the early modern period, this form of subordination was adapted to refer to the spread of religious teachings. Beginning in the thirteenth century, hagiographies of the eighth century Advaita theologian Shankara, for example, depict him traveling throughout India to debate other philosophers and establish schools.[648] Meera Kachroo says that the *digvijaya* genre "became the religious literary expression of a political tour of victory of Brahmin ascetics like Śaṅkara."[649] The historicity of Shankara's travel throughout India is contested by scholars, but Sax argues that it is possible that the stories of his *digvijaya* were modeled after the actual *digvijaya*s undertook by Vaishnava religious leaders like Madhva, Vallabha, and Caitanya.[650] Valerie Stoker explains that these *digvijaya* texts "often give a miraculous tinge to the protagonist's life story."[651] She says that in South India, *digvijaya*

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[646] William S. Sax, "Conquering the Quarters: Religion and Politics in Hinduism," 50.
[647] William S. Sax, "Conquering the Quarters: Religion and Politics in Hinduism," 44.
[648] William S. Sax, "Conquering the Quarters: Religion and Politics in Hinduism," 47-48.
[649] Meera Jo Kachroo, "Śrīvidyā's *Rahasya*: Public Esotericism in a Contemporary Tantric Tradition," (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 2022), 178.
[650] William S. Sax, "Conquering the Quarters: Religion and Politics in Hinduism," 48.
[651] Valerie Stoker, *Polemics and Patronage in the City of Victory*, 22.

narratives "reflect the increasing interdependence" of sectarian monastic and court spaces.[652] Bhagavadacarya's presentation of Ramanand conducting a *digvijaya* presents him as an independent, influential Hindu leader, using an established trope to elevate Ramanand's status as a guru for all of India.

The standard *digvijaya* normally presents the hero completing a *parikrama* or circumambulatory movement around the conquered region, followed by him attaining an authoritative position. The *Śrī Rāmānand Digvijaya* depicts Ramanand traveling across India spreading his teachings. Some of this is clearly mythological, as Bhagavadacarya describes Ramanand traveling to Raivataka via Indra's plane in the fourteenth chapter.[653] In the same chapter, Bhagadacarya says that Ramanand redressed questions from a Jain *sādhu* and then took *darśan* of the plight of Somanatha. This blending of "mythological" and "historical" elements is a common feature of *bhakti* hagiographies in general. Christian Lee Novetzke explains that hagiographies often contain both historiographic and theographic shifts in genre. He writes, theographic writings use

> "the past to make a theological point in a way that is *transhistorical*, by which I mean situated in the past, but a past that is modular, not static. The theographic is transhistorical in its ability to be modulated to different specific historical periods, invoked to explain from the point of view of theology, a historical event for example - or the present."[654]

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[652] Valerie Stoker, *Polemics and Patronage in the City of Victory*, 22.
[653] Bhagavadacarya, *Śrīrāmānandadigvijayaḥ*, 4.
[654] Christian Lee Novetzke, "The Theographic and the Historiographic in an Indian Sacred Life Story," in *Time, History and the Religious Imaginary in South Asia*, ed. Anne Murphy (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 120.

Bhagavadacarya is motivated by his own contemporary political concerns in the way he relates the story of the past. These concerns, for example, are clear in his depiction of Ramanand's visit to the temple of Somanatha on the coast of Gujurat.[655]

The invocation of Somanatha is significant, as it has been projected as central to the relationship between Hindus and Muslims. The Somanatha temple is an important pilgrimage site for many Hindus, particularly devotees of Shiva. In the early eleventh century, Sultan Mahmud from Ghazni, Afghanistan raided prosperous Hindu temples in India including Somanatha. It was partially replaced with a mosque. Over time, this became an important event in popular public memory as a symbol of the oppression of Hindus by Muslims. It has been framed as a source of collective trauma for all Hindus. This story is used to fuel the idea that there are long-standing religious grudges between the two groups, and Somanatha became a popular symbol for Hindu nationalists. For example, the procession that led to the destruction of the Babri Masjid started in Somanatha.

In Romila Thapar's analysis of the memory of Somanatha, she argues that there is no debate that the raid of Somanatha happened, but she complicates the "degree to which it can be seen as the politics of representation, both of earlier times and of the present."[656] Thapar explains that Mahmud exaggerated the size and wealth of the temple in order to exaggerate the extent of his conquest, and says that these embellishments continued to grow over time.[657] She also says that later retellings conflated Arab traders and Turks and grouped them all together as "Muslims," reifying the boundaries between Hindus and Muslims, and points out the recurring pattern of the destruction or decline of temples. Thapar argues that British colonial accounts of the history of Somanatha presumed that Muslim rule involved oppression of Hindus and that

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[655] Bhagavadacarya, *Śrīrāmānandadigvijayaḥ*, 4.
[656] Romila Thapar, *Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History* (London: Verso, 2005), 7.
[657] Romila Thapar, *Somanatha*, 51.

they ignored counter-evidence. By inserting Ramanand into the narrative of Somanatha, Bhagavadacarya's *Śrīmad Rāmānand Digvijaya* adds to this collective memory of perpetual conflict between Hindus and Muslims in India.

The *Śrīmad Rāmānand Digvijaya* also focuses on Ayodhya. Chapter nineteen describes the "tyranny" in Ayodhya, including the destruction of temples and pilgrimage sites, Hindus who became Muslim, and the murder of Hindus.[658]

> In the Hindi gloss of the Sanskrit verse of this section, Bhagavadacarya writes, "Hey lord of ascetics! For the sake of the protection of the noble-minded victims from the great nuisance of the scoundrels with wicked forms, you set out to Saket having taken an *avatāra*. The Hindus who reside in Ayodhya are extremely scared by the violent beasts who have the form of foreigners. From the strength of their swords, etc., the barbarians have caused the lapse of the *svadharma* of Hindus. The temples and pilgrimage places are all being destroyed and degraded. Everything has gone into disorder."[659]

This description presents Muslims as violent invaders and presents Ramanand as the savior of Hindus. The invocation of specific locations in Ramanand's *digvijaya* is paralleled by hagiographical depictions of Shankara's *digvijaya*. Kachroo explains that *digvijaya*s mention specific places. She writes, "this sacred geography (and pilgrimage circuit) creates a mythological identity for the full reaches of the empire's domain, and the mythologizing of place contributes to the authority of Śaṅkara as he is associated with many sacred sites of popular worship, reciprocally lending legitimacy with his orthodox standing."[660] By depicting Ramanand

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[658] Bhagavadacarya, *Śrīrāmānandadigvijayaḥ*, 331-2
[659] Bhagavadacarya, *Śrīmad Rāmānand Digvijaya*, 331. "*He yatirāj! Duṣṭoke duṣṭatārūpamahākaṇṭakase pīḍitasajjanõkī rakṣākeliye kṛpākar āp sāketse avatār lekar padhāre haĩ. Ayodhyāvāsī hindu, yavanarūpahiṁsakapaśuõse atyant ḍare hue haĩ. Mlecchõne talvār ādike balase hinduõko svadharmase patit kar diyā hai. Devālaya aur tīrthasthān sab naṣṭ bhraṣṭ kiye jā rahe haĩ. Sabkī avyavasthā ho gayī hai.*"
[660] Meera Jo Kachroo, "Śrīvidyā's *Rahasya*," 180.

as traveling to specific places all throughout India, Bhagavadacarya presents Ramanand as a

Hindu leader for all of India, not limited to his associations with Rajasthan and Varanasi found in

earlier hagiographical sources.

Bhagavadacarya repeatedly stresses that the reconversion is not just to Hinduism, but

particularly to Vaisnava Hinduism. The concept of reconversion became politically important as

a result of the work of the Arya Samaj in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Arya Samaj

uses the language of *śuddhi*, or "purification," to describe the process of enfolding Muslims and

people from low castes into the dominant stream of Hinduism. C.S. Adcock argues that rather

than thinking of *śuddhi* as "conversion," it should be thought of as "refusal of the low status

ascribed to them by others."[661] Bhagavadacarya's rhetoric reflects similar concerns to those of

the Arya Samaj, such as the myth of the Vedic Golden Age and the glorious past of India.[662]

Bhagavadacarya was briefly involved with the Arya Samaj,[663] but he is generally more in line

with the "traditionalist" approach that Dalmia describes Bharatendu Harishcandra engaging in.

Unlike the "reformist" approach of the Arya Samaj, the twentieth-century "traditionalist"

approach does not view the Vedas as the sole authoritative religious text and instead draws on

other historical works in their promotion of Vaishnavism as the central message of Hinduism.

These examples of twentieth century hagiographies of Ramanand are not the only

situation in which opposition to caste-based oppression and discrimination against Islam are seen

as compatible viewpoints. In his study of representations of the Marathi *bhakti* saint

Chokhamela, Anil Sapkal discusses the play *Sangit Uhshap* (1927) written by Vinayak Damodar

Savarkar, a prominent Hindu nationalist politician. Sapkal says that Savarkar used the image of

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[661] C. S. Adcock, *The Limits of Tolerance: Indian Secularism and the Politics of Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 121.
[662] C. S. Adcock, *The Limits of Tolerance*, 42.
[663] William Pinch, *Peasants and Monks in British India*, 187-8

Chokhamela "to project his own ideas and theories about social and political reform," including the idea that "anti-Islamic sentiments go hand in hand with the message of eradication of untouchability."[664] Savarkar's play tried to promote the idea that all castes should be considered Hindu, and that the true enemy of Hinduism is Islam. The play imagines Chokhamela as a teacher who promoted Hinduism above all other religions. Savarkar even anachronistically says that Chokhamela denounced Christianity and argued against conversion.[665] The comparison of Ramanand with other *bhakti* saints demonstrates that the memories of these saints serve as a valuable resource for religious nationalist and ethnic nationalist projects. Particular saints are invoked by different communities to root them in the past, and the saints' lives are reinterpreted depending on shifting political concerns. Ramanand stands out as a saint who is particularly amenable to being co-opted by pan-Indian Hindu nationalism.

5.3. The Contemporary Hindutva Ramanand

5.3.1. Hindu Nationalist-Inflected Interpretations of Ramanand in Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya's Payaspayee: Swami Ramanand the Pioneer of Ram Bhakti *(2009)*

The contemporary view of Ramanand as a proto-Hindu nationalist is built upon the twentieth-century innovations to his hagiography created by Ram Rasik-affiliated scholars like Bhagvan Prasad and Bhagavadacarya. These include his *digvijaya* and the association between Ramanand's caste acceptance and Islamophobia. This new vision of Ramanand is evident in *Payaspayee: Swami Ramanand the Pioneer of Ram Bhakti*, which is Devarshi Kalanath Shastri's English translation of Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya's Hindi biography called *Pāyāspayī*. Dayakrishna Vijayvargina is the former chairman of the Rajasthan Sahitya Academy, an

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[664] Anil Sapkal, "Representations of Chokhamela in Marathi Film and Drama," in *Untouchable Saints: An Indian Phenomenon*, ed. Rohini Mokashi-Punekar and Eleanor Zelliot (Delhi: Manohar Press, 2005), 175.
[665] Anil Sapkal, "Representations of Chokhamela in Marathi Film and Drama," 177.

influential literary organization and archive. Devarshi Kalanath Shashtri is a prolific scholar who has written in Sanskrit, Hindi, and English. These texts have yet to receive scholarly attention, with the exception of a brief mention by Daniela Bevilacqua, saying that it uses "quite contemporary tone and words such as nation, Hindu-nation and Hindutva," "especially when Rāmānanda is shown to reconvert Muslims to Hinduism."[666] In this section, I analyze the Hindu nationalist overtones of this contemporary hagiography of Ramanand.

I was given a copy of this book in August 2019 when I visited the Shri Math at Panchaganga Ghat in Varanasi, a monastery where Ramanand himself is claimed to have lived, as explained in Chapter Four. An ascetic there heard about my research interests and told me this book would be a good way to learn about Ramanand's life. This anecdote suggests the status that the story has received among at least some contemporary Ramanandis. The English translation of the book also suggests a concern with reaching an international audience.

The foreword to the book, written by the Jagadguru Ramanandacharya at the Shri Matha named Swami Ramanareshacharya, makes this aim explicit and connects the messages of the book to the current situation in India. He says that the English translation was published "so that it reaches the readers on a global level." He writes, "unfortunately inauspicious clouds of the times of Swamiji are wandering there even today, but the only remedy to dispel them away and bring pure sunshine lies in Swamiji's guidance and by following his ideal doctrines founded on spiritual power."[667] The foreword by Udai Pratap Singh explicitly connects this to Islam. He writes, "in that period we see the efforts of Swami Ramanand against atrocities committed by the

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[666] Daniela Bevilacqua, *Modern Hindu Traditionalism in Contemporary India*, 31.
[667] Swami Ramanareshacharya, "Blessings from His Holiness Jagadguru Ramanandacharya Swami Shri Ramnareschacharya," in *Swami Ramanand: The Pioneer of Ram Bhakti (English Rendering of the Hindi Novel* Payaspayee*)*, by Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya, trans. Devarshi Kalanath Shastri (Varanasi: Jagadguru Ramanandacharya Smarak Seva Nyas, 2009), iv.

Muslim rulers on Hindus and the hypocrisy in the name of religion."[668] This demonstrates the direct connection between the aim of relating the life of Ramanand to the contemporary political situation in India.

The emphasis on refuting Islam found in *Payaspayee* is evident from the beginning of the story. Ramanand's mother was taking care of baby Ramanand when she received a vision in a dream from "Lord Veṇīmādhava," which is a name of Krishna. She was told that her baby will be the incarnation of Ram, and she relayed this information to her husband. He told her that Ram will be reincarnated "to purify this land," and reminded her of "that incident at Prayag when certain Muslim fanatics were intense on killing Mansukh for his refusal to accept the Muslim religion," but he managed to escape and "achieved blessings for protecting his country fellowmen as well as the great ancient religion."[669] This rhetoric of an ancient, unified, Hindu India juxtaposed with foreign Muslim invaders is a standard trope used in Hindutva historiography.

There are constant invocations of orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism throughout the books, with emphasis on the ancientness of the religion. Ramanand's father is claimed to be a renowned Sanskrit pandit in Prayag (Allahabad), and Ramanand is depicted as a gifted Sanskritist even as a child. He is eventually sent to Varanasi for further studies where he is initiated by Swami Raghavanand at Panchaganga Ghat. Raghavanand "was confident that he [Ramanand] would thereafter protect the country, religion and society and guide them towards the virtuous moral way; that he would propagate the significance of faith in protecting the country and preserving

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[668] Udai Pratap Singh, "Foreword," in *Swami Ramanand: The Pioneer of Ram Bhakti (English Rendering of the Hindi Novel* Payaspayee*)*, by Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya, trans. Devarshi Kalanath Shastri (Varanasi: Jagadguru Ramanandacharya Smarak Seva Nyas, 2009).
[669] Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya, *Swami Ramanand*, 3.

the ancient religion."[670] Raghavanand tells people that Ramanand "was a divine presence who had reincarnated to protect the country, cows, brahmins, mothers and sisters and he would rescue them from injustice and oppressions caused by dubious religions."[671] The language of morality, justice, and faith are used repeatedly.

This contemporary hagiography also describes Ramanand travelling around India in a *digvijaya* "to rejuvenate the society into a unified whole, and to make the Hindu population stand upright with alertness and unified energy."[672] This part of the story may have been influenced by Bhagavadcarya's *Śrīmad Rāmānand Digvijaya*. The initiation of Ramanand's two most famous disciples, Kabir and Ravidas, are explained in terms of strategic expedience. Shastri says that Ramanand's openness and willingness to accept people from "all castes and creeds" into his hermitage attracted Kabir. After Kabir's initiation, "the anti-religious elements have stopped their evil attacks to a great extent and conversions have come down."[673] Ramanand tells Kabir, "you are the Ekalavya of our present time,"[674] and he says that chanting the name of Ram will bridge the *nirguṇ*/*saguṇ* divide.

Later, Ravidas starts visiting the hermitage, and Anantanand urges Ramanand to initiate him. Anantanand tells Ramanand,

"this time, rampant oppressions are being carried out on a Hindu society by the anti-religious elements, forcible conversions are taking place, women are not safe and they must be protected. Hindu society is divided in different castes and is deeply trapped in the vicious circle of higher and lower classes. This is the time when the Hindu society must

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[670] Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya, *Swami Ramanand*, 14.
[671] Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya, *Swami Ramanand*, 15.
[672] Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya, *Swami Ramanand*, 87.
[673] Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya, *Swami Ramanand*, 22-23.
[674] Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya, *Swami Ramanand*, 19.

unite and create an atmosphere of reciprocal care. The present calamity can be fought

only if the Hindu society is organized."

In this story, the conflation of Islamophobia and a critique of caste as weakening Hindu unity is

evident. Ramanand responds to Anantanand, "you will see, a day will come when all the world

will come running to India for spiritual knowledge and their materialist mind will receive the

solace in this soil only."[675] This language is informed by a nationalist, anti-colonial viewpoint. It

is reminiscent of language used by Swami Vivekananda, who promoted the idea that India is

uniquely spiritual and that the rest of the world can learn from this. Srinivas Aravamudan

describes Vivekananda's views as demonstrative of "the close fit between cosmopolitan

universalism and the racial essentialism of different cultures."[676] *Payaspayee* is a clearly modern

take on the life story of Ramanand, likely informed largely by twentieth-century hagiographies

by Bhagavadcarya and Bhagvan Prasad. In the following section, I continue to explore how

Ramanand becomes appropriated in Hindu nationalist rhetoric.

5.3.2. The Invention of Tradition and the California Textbook Debate

I view the efforts to tie Ramanand to contemporary Hindu nationalism as related to what

Eric Hobsbawm calls an "invention of tradition." Hobsbawm argues that "traditions which

appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented."[677] Hobsbawm

believes that traditions are invented as responses to new problems that emerge, often during

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[675] Dayakrishna Vijayvargiya, *Swami Ramanand*, 23.

[676] Srinivas Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 55. Narendra Modi also frequently uses similar language and invokes Swami Vivekananda in his political speeches. For instance, see the *Hindustan Times* op-ed by Shiv Prakash, national co-secretary of the BJP, titled "The Modi Government is Realising Swami Vivekananda's Dream," *Hindustan Times,* Jan 12, 2024, https://www.hindustantimes.com/ht-insight/knowledge/the-modi-government-is-realising-swami-vivekananda-s-dream-101704980860754.html.

[677] Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition,* ed. Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

periods of rapid transformation. Invented traditions are key to understanding nationalism. He

says that invented traditions are often important in a historiographical sense, as they offer

evidence of problems in society that might otherwise be overlooked.[678] Invented traditions often

take shape in the form of rituals or symbols. Terence Ranger offers many examples of this from

the context of late-nineteenth century colonial Africa, focusing particularly on Zimbabwe. He

explains that both the British and African engaged in the invention of tradition in order to suit

their own causes. For example, African communities created dances that mimicked European

military drills, or asserted royal status by adopting British symbols of authority like using royal

carriages.[679] The term "invention of tradition" can help to explain the recent Hindu nationalist

framing of Ramanand's life story. In particular, the way that the past becomes particularly

important for the formation of a group identity is relevant. However, the central matter at hand in

this case is the way stories about the past are told rather than the invention of particular new

rituals or symbols.

      Hobsbawm's theories on history and nationalism become particularly relevant in drawing

parallels between nationalism and religion. Hobsbawm argues that nations "generally claim to be

the opposite of novel, namely rooted in the remotest antiquity, and the opposite of constructed,

namely human communities so 'natural' as to require no definition other than self-assertion."[680]

Traditions are invented in order to serve this purpose, and religious leaders use the same strategy

in order to gain a sense of authority. Bruce Lincoln characterizes religion as "that whose defining

characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally

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[678] Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," 12.
[679] Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa," in *The Invention of Tradition,* ed. Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 239; 244.
[680] Eric J. Hobsbawm, "The Nation as Invented Tradition," in *Nationalism,* ed. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 76.

transcendent and eternal."[681] By emphasizing the eternal nature of their beliefs, religious leaders are able to prevent questioning or suspicion. The parallel between the importance of history for nationalism and particularly religious nationalism is exemplified by the strategies used by Hindu nationalists.

Other scholars have also noted the importance of drawing on history for nationalist projects. Ernest Renan has written about "historical error," which is similar to the concept of the "invention of tradition," but refers more to a deliberate mis-reading or misinterpretation of the past, rather than a creation of a new ritual or symbol. He explains, "forgetting, I would even say historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation and it is for this reason that the progress of historical studies often poses a threat to nationality." [682] Similarly, Hayden White concurs with Renan, explaining, "history is indeed as much about forgetting as it is about remembering."[683] In addition to the "invention of tradition," the approach of focusing on deliberate historical errors helps to understand the contemporary nationalist portrayals of Ramanand.

One legacy of the Hindutva vision of Ramanand has been his invocation in the California textbook debate that took place between 2005-2009 and was revived in 2016-2017. The Hindu Education Foundation (HEF) USA used Ramanand as an example of their critique of the portrayal of *bhakti* and Hinduism more broadly in American public schools. The HEF is affiliated with the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh of America, a subsidiary of the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The Hindu American Foundation, an advocacy group in Washington D.C., also supported the HEF in this controversy. In the HEF's review of the of

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[681] Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on Method," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1996): 225.
[682] Ernest Renan, "*Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*" trans. Ethan Rundell (Paris: Presses-Pocket, 1992), 3.
[683] Hayden White. "Guilty of History? The *Longue Durée* of Paul Ricoeur," *History and Theory* 46 (May 2007): 237.

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's Social Studies program for middle school students in California, they call the textbooks "Hindu-phobic." They claim that the textbooks present Hinduism and India in a negative light, reflect Orientalist biases, and violate California's educational standards. California's educational guidelines include provisions to protect cultural diversity, eradicate roots of prejudice, and prohibit demeaning or stereotypical descriptions of minority groups.[684] Included in a long list of complaints, the HEF believes that the California textbooks gave undue attention towards the caste system and descriptions of *bhakti* become a battleground for this issue.

The Hindu America Foundation critiques the textbooks' definition of *bhakti*. The Hindu America Foundation points towards a specific passage in one of the Californian middle school textbook. The textbook says that "*bhakti* derives from a Sanskrit word that means 'to share.'" This is a common explanation of the word *bhakti* and its Sanskrit root, *bhaj*, but as explained in Chapter One, *bhakti* is difficult to translate and its etymology alone does not fully encapsulate its meaning. The Hindu America Foundation says that this line in the textbook is inaccurate, and they proposed changing the line to the following: "*Bhakti* comes from a Sanskrit root word that means 'to devote.' Followers of *Bhakti* express their love and devotion to their Ishtadeva, or chosen deity, their favorite expression of the Divine."[685] This emphasis on a chosen deity could describe some *saguṇ* forms of *bhakti* that are focused on one particular deity, but it fails to fully encapsulate the diversity of *bhakti* traditions, such as *nirguṇ* forms of *bhakti* that do not focus on worshipping one God. The textbook changes proposed by the Hindu America Foundation

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[684] Hindu Education Foundation USA, "Review of HMH Social Studies for California (Grades 6-8)," July 2017, < https://www.hindueducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Review-of-HMH-Social-Studies-for-California-Grades-6%E2%80%938-.pdf>, 2.

[685] "Hindu America Foundation to Stephanie Gregson, Executive Director of the CFIRD of the California Dept. of Education," July 10, 2017. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B28Pcsvft8UocXBPemk3OTRzNDQwMVNkX1l uLXNZTHBleG5J/view> 9.

demonstrates how it is possible to emphasize a form of *bhakti* that is more aligned with orthodox, Brahmanical Hinduism.

The HEF specifically invokes Ramanand in one part of their critique of the textbooks. This highlights the political nature of the claim that Ramanand wrote several texts in Sanskrit. The textbook explains that *bhakti* "poems were written not in Sanskrit but in the languages that people spoke, like Hindi or Tamil."[686] In response, the HEF claims that this violates the California legal standard that mandates historical accuracy and variety of perspectives. The only evidence provided as a counter-point to the textbook is that "Rāmānanda himself is known to have composed works in Sanskrit like *Vaishnava Matābja Bhāskara* and *Rāmārcana Paddhati*." As discussed in Chapter One, Agrawal convincingly argues that the Sanskrit texts attributed to Ramanand were in fact composed by his followers in the twentieth century.[687] Ram Rasiks like Bhagavadacarya played a large role in this association.

In HEF's critique of the textbooks, a footnote to their claim that Ramanand composed in Sanskrit cites Turbiani's essay as evidence of Ramanand's Sanskrit compositions, despite the fact that Turbiani does not cite any of these texts directly, and merely states that they have been credited to Ramanand.[688] The citation of Turbiani shows how the Sanskrit texts attributed to Ramanand have been cited and used in many different circumstances without much attention paid to the actual contents of the texts. This shows that the contents are not the important part, it is the symbolic nature of Ramanand writing in Sanskrit that matters in the debate resituating him as an *acārya*. A study of the invocation of Ramanand in the California textbook debate reveals the important but unacknowledged legacy of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ram Rasik

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[686] Hindu Education Foundation USA, "Review of HMH Social Studies for California (Grades 6-8)," 17.
[687] Purushottam Agrawal, "In Search of Rāmānand," in *Ancient to Modern*, 137.
[688] Enzo Turbiani. "Some Aspects of the Development of *Bhakti* Traditions," 51.

interventions. This also demonstrates the way that the memory of Ramanand is used as a proxy for broader debates about Hindu nationalist revisionist history.

Contemporary Hindu nationalist portrayals of Ramanand can be characterized as a sub-set of a broader phenomenon of Hindu nationalists re-writing history. There is a general trend of Hindu nationalists drawing upon historical events in order to suit their political goals. Tanika Sarkar argues that the RSS has engaged in a long-term project to re-write India's past. She connects this project to Savarkar, who first coined the term Hindutva. In Sarvarkar's telling of India's history, narratives like the *Mahābhārata* are "presented as poetical rendering of actual historical truth,"[689] despite the obvious lack of historical verifiability. In Savarkar's creation of Hindutva, he makes Hindu and India synonymous. Savarkar presented Islam as the enemy of Hindus throughout all time, justifying communal violence.

This Hindutva version of history is incredibly influential. The RSS currently runs the largest chain of schools after the Indian government.[690] These schools emphasize "moral education," and Sarkar argues that "all implant an aggressive Hindu supremacism and hatred for the non-Hindu. All exalt Hindu heroes who fought against Muslims."[691] Sarkar analyzes the textbooks used by these schools and says that they emphasize the history of the nation. She says that in this sense, history "becomes a biography—or hagiography—of the nation."[692] She notes that the textbooks blur the lines between historical and mythological figures, and that they do not allow any insight into the contributions of Muslims to India's history. This project expands beyond children's textbooks. Sarkar explains that the RSS influences the Indian Council of

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[689] Tanika Sarkar, "How the Sangh Parivar Writes and Teaches History," in *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India*, ed. Angana P. Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen, and Christophe Jaffrelot (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 154.
[690] Tanika Sarkar, "How the Sangh Parivar Writes and Teaches History," 160.
[691] Tanika Sarkar, "How the Sangh Parivar Writes and Teaches History," 161.
[692] Tanika Sarkar, "How the Sangh Parivar Writes and Teaches History," 162.

Historical Research, and the effects can also be seen in new budget cuts and other restrictions placed on leftist schools like Jawaharlal Nehru University. The influence of Hindutva tellings of history have even reached the U.S., as demonstrated by the lawsuit over middle-school textbooks in California. The re-interpretation of Ramanand is an example of this larger trend of re-interpreting India's past to fit Hindutva concerns.

Conclusion

Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl* played a central role in what was later described as the "*bhakti* movement" as it created an imagined community of *bhakti* saints that stretch across India over the course of centuries. It also sparked a whole genre of subsequent *bhaktamāl*s, which adapted and added to the stories of the saints. The Ram Rasik branch of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* played an important role in the popularization of the *bhaktamāl* genre. Nabhadas himself is said to be a Ramanandi and a student of the purported "founder" of the Ram Rasiks, Agradas. The Ram Rasiks also composed several hagiologies modeled after Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl*. They claimed that many popular saints and writers were part of the Ram Rasik tradition and created a canon of Ram Rasik saints. These *bhaktamāl*s were also a forum to create and consolidate authority within the Ram Rasik tradition, such as in the *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl*. The Ram Rasiks' engagement with the *bhaktamāl* genre shows that they were not only interested in promoting devotion to Ram and the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, they were also invested in promoting Vaishnavism more broadly. This is clear in the case of Maharaja Raghuraj Singh's hagiographical representation of the life story of his father, Viswanath Singh. Raghuraj Singh emphasizes the commonalities between devotion to Ram and Krishna.

The Ram Rasiks' engagement with the *bhaktamāl* genre happened primarily during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a critical time in the emergence of the idea of Hinduism as a pan-Indian religion. The Ram Rasiks promoted a "traditionalist" approach, similar to that of Bharatendu Harishcandra, rather than the "reformist" approach used by groups like the Arya Samaj. Over time, the Ram Rasiks like Bhagvad Prasad began to focus particularly on the life of Ramanand, adding many details to his life story. Bhagavadacarya played an important role in the emergence of the idea that Ramanand helped reinvigorate Hindu devotion in the context of oppression by the Mughals. This version of the story took hold and laid the foundation for the contemporary Hindu nationalist celebration of Ramanand. Even though there is not much writing attributed to Ramanand and early *bhaktamāl* entries on him are short, over time, his reputation grew and his followers began claiming that he served a pivotal role in reclaiming India from the Mughals and "re-converting" Muslims back to Hinduism.

Chapter Six - Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I briefly review the content of the preceding chapters and summarize the key arguments of the dissertation. Historiography is of central interest in this dissertation, because the history of the Ramanandis has been re-written and re-interpreted over time. The details of the stories of Ramanand's life became more elaborate in subsequent tellings. He was briefly mentioned as a key figure in the transmission of *bhakti* in Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl* in the early seventeenth century, where he was depicted as renowned for his role as a guru but with very few details about his life. Later, he became the sole subject of entire hagiographies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as in the *Bhaktisudhāsvād* and the *Śrīmad Rāmānand Digvijaya*. In "Chapter Two – The Historiography of the Ramanandi *Sampradāy*: A Critical Review of Literature, Unresolved Questions, and the State of the Field" I examine the unresolved questions surrounding the life of Ramanand and the early formation of the *sampradāy*. I focus particularly on contested issues, such as how the dating of Ramanand's life impacts claims about his guru-disciple lineages, and how the compositions attributed to him inform characterizations of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* as socially egalitarian. I argue that the lack of historical information about Ramanand and the early Ramanandi community has made the story of his life and the *sampradāy*'s founding amendable to reinvention. In addition, the Ramanandi *sampradāy*'s catholicity and efforts to incorporate popular religious texts like the *Rāmcaritmānas* have allowed for the *sampradāy*'s expansion and continued popularity.

The story of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* is intricately connected to the story of the "*bhakti* movement." Ramanand is popularly said to have served a key role in transporting *bhakti* from South India to the North. The complexity of this narrative is tied to Ramanand's relationship to Ramanuja, a famous South Indian philosopher and guru. As David Lorenzen explains, *bhakti*

traditions are concerned with "both historical precedent and the religious authority of specific persons."[693] The Ramanandi *sampradāy* utilizes both of these methods. Many Ramanandi hagiographies emphasize *guru-paramparā*s or guru-disciple lineages over narrative structures.

The Hindi texts attributed to Ramanand were edited and compiled by Pitambar Datt Barthwal in 1955 in a volume called *Rāmānand kī Hindī Racnāē*. Given the scholarly progress that has been made in the field of philology since the mid-twentieth century, as well as Barthwal's own personal orientation in his introduction where he venerates Ramanand, the manuscripts with Hindi compositions attributed to Ramanand deserve further scholarly attention. It is notable that these Hindi compositions primarily have a *nirguṇ bhakti* orientation. As mentioned in "Chapter One – Introduction," the *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ bhakti* divide is best understood as a modern schematic that does not fully encapsulate the nuances and overlaps between these two orientations. However, it is still interesting that the only overtly *saguṇ* Hindi composition attributed to Ramanand is a poem about Hanuman that was collected by the colonial administrator Grierson. Agrawal describes this poem as being of "dubious provenance."[694] This is remarkable because even though Ramanand's two most famous devotees, Kabir and Ravidas, are considered to be paradigmatic *nirguṇ sant*s, Ramanand's other devotees like Pipa and Dhana are more aligned with *saguṇ bhakti*. As the Ramanandi *sampradāy* grew and coalesced, they became particularly associated with *saguṇ* devotion to Ram, and the Ram Rasik branch played an important role in this development.

The story of Ramanand and the early founding of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* has shifted over time. Similarly, the origins of the Ram Rasik branch of the *sampradāy* has been retold and reinterpreted. The Ram Rasiks view Agradas as their founder and say that he kept his teachings

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[693] David Lorenzen, "The Lives of the Nirguni Saints," 181.
[694] Purushottam Agrawal, "The Impact of Sectarian Lobbyism on Hindi Literary Historiography," 243-4.

on Ram and Sita secret for a long time. Burchett's scholarship shows that Agradas was not described as the founder of the Ram Rasik tradition until the nineteenth century. Similarly, the Ram Rasiks retroactively claimed Tulsidas to be part of their tradition, but Paramasivan's research demonstrates that the *Rāmcaritmānas* did not become an important text for the Ramanandis until the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. It is likely that the Ramanandi *sampradāy* did not coalesce until well after Ramanand's lifetime. None of the Hindi or Sanskrit compositions attributed to Ramanand are historically verifiable, and the existence of these texts with differing orientations demonstrate that his image has been subject to reinvention over time. Similarly, the claims surrounding Ramanand's disciple lineage has been contested, particularly his relationship with Kabir and Ravidas. The second chapter of this dissertation highlights how the narratives surrounding the history of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* have shifted, laying the groundwork for understanding the claims of social egalitarianism in the *sampradāy*.

The following chapter, "Chapter Three – Gendered Devotion: *Sakhī*s as Model Devotees and Early Women in the Ramanandi *Sampradāy*," focuses on the Ramanandi *sampradāy*'s understandings of gender. I provide a review of the trope of the *sakhī* in South Asian literature, and I examine how *sakhī*s inhabit an ambiguous position between servitude, friendship, and sexuality. *Bhakti* traditions often discuss the relationship between devotees and God in terms of human relationships, such as the love between lovers, a parent and child, or friends. While *sakhī*s are not the primary characters in South Asian literature, they serve critical roles in facilitating love between the hero and heroine and can add drama or tension as potential competitors. The homoerotic connotation of *sakhī*s has been emphasized by contemporary lesbian and queer activists and scholars as examples of indigenous, historic lesbians in India.

Both Ram- and Krishna-focused *bhakti* communities place a significant emphasis on *sakhī*s. This valorization of *sakhī*s began with the Gaudiya Vaishnava community, and the Ram Rasiks later adapted it to fit the context of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The Ram Rasiks view *sakhī*s as a type of "paradigmatic individual" who is worthy of attention and emulation. This is tied to the concept of *viraha*, or separation of lovers, as *viraha* is often valorized in both romantic and devotional literature. Authors of this literature were often men writing in the voices of women. The Ram Rasiks believe that Hanuman was the first *sakhī*, and that he became one out of a desire to serve Ram and Sita together after Sita was rescued from Lanka. Viewing Hanuman as a *sakhī* is a sharp contrast to contemporary Hindu nationalist portrayals of Hanuman that emphasize his masculinity, strength, and virility. The Ram Rasiks' view of *sakhī*s is an example of the multiplicity of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. The Ram Rasiks' emphasis on *sakhī*s also goes hand-in-hand with their attention placed on Sita and worshipping Ram and Sita together. The Ram Rasik tradition is known by several different names and has several important commonalities with Krishna-focused *rasik* traditions, leading to a significant amount of confusion by outsiders to the tradition. Some scholars have confused *rasik*s with other non-heteronormative groups like hijras or eunuchs. In addition, the British colonial administration was wary of the *rasik*s and criticized and sometimes criminalized their practices.

The second section of this chapter focuses on the claim that the Ramanandis are particularly socially egalitarian, which is premised in part on the inclusion of two women as Ramanand's initial disciples. Recent scholarship by Keune, Pauwels, Ben-Herut, and Burchett have provided a nuanced understanding of the relationship between *bhakti* and caste. They warn against anachronistically projecting modern ideals onto the past, and they emphasize the diversity of *bhakti* traditions. I extend this mode of analysis to the realm of gender and analyze

representations of gender in early modern Ramanandi hagiographies. I demonstrate that the two female disciples of Ramanand, Padmavati and Sursuri, do not receive much attention within the tradition, but they are later invoked time and again as examples of Ramanand's inclusivity. Their hagiographies are expanded in modern hagiographies like the *Payaspayee*. Additionally, by examining the stories of the wives of male saints and other women mentioned in Anantadas's *Parcaī*s, I highlight the ambiguous status of women in the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. For example, Pipa's wife Sita is sometimes portrayed "out-sainting" her husband by showing him the proper way to practice devotion, while other times she is treated as a burden and is valorized for her devotion to her husband rather than her devotion to God.

Chapter Four of the dissertation, "The Spread of Ram *Bhakti* and the 'Rediscovery' of Sacred Sites," focuses on physical locations associated with the Ramanandi *sampradāy*. In the first section, I examine Ramanand's connections to Varanasi. Ramanand's affiliation with Varanasi is one of the few parts of his life story that are maintained across hagiographies of him from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries. In addition, Ramanand's two most famous disciples, Kabir and Ravidas, both lived in Varanasi. This connection to Varanasi is often emphasized in order to situate Ramanand as a traditional Hindu guru. Ramanand is also often cited as a main reason that Vaishnavism characterized by devotion to Ram is present in Varanasi.

The early Ramanandi *sampradāy* likely took shape in Galta, Rajasthan, but there are many stories of Ramanand's disciples traveling back and forth between Rajasthan and Varanasi. For example, the Rajput prince Pipa who is known as one of Ramanand's original twelve disciples is said to have traveled to Varanasi to receive initiation and teachings from Ramanand. Varanasi is primarily characterized as a Shaiva city, and it is also famous for being a particularly holy city for Hindus of all orientations. The Vaishnava character of Varanasi is likely connected

to the early modern period. Tulsidas is said to have written the *Rāmcaritmānas* in Varanasi, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the royal court patronized large performances of the Ram Lila. The Ramanandis built on the popularity of the *Rāmcaritmānas* and even retroactively claimed Tulsidas as part of their own *sampradāy*. During the process of the consolidation of Hindu identity in the colonial period, Vaishnavism began to characterize North Indian religiosity.

In the second section of the chapter, I compare the Ram Rasiks' identification of particular sites in North India with sites from the *Rāmāyaṇa* to the Gaudiya Vaishnavas' "rediscovery" of pilgrimage sites in Braj. The Ramanandis, particularly the Ram Rasik branch, played a significant role in developing Ayodhya. This has significant contemporary political implications. In addition, the Ram Rasiks led the expansion into Nepal with the identification of Sita's birthplace with Janakpur in the eastern Terai region. Under the guidance of Modi, the Indian Ministry of Tourism has been promoting tourism to these sites through the creation of the Ramayana Circuit.

Finally, Chapter Five, "The *Bhaktamāl* Genre, Ram Rasik Hagiographies, and the Construction of Ramanand as a National Integrator" continues the theme of contemporary political connections to the Ramanandis by looking at how the memory of Ramanand has changed over time through the re-telling of his hagiography. I highlight the Ram Rasiks' role in shaping the political legacy of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* and in the continuation of the *bhaktamāl* genre. The Ram Rasiks composed several important commentaries on Nabhadas's *Bhaktamāl* and emphasized its importance. In addition, the Ram Rasiks composed several hagiologies written in the *bhaktamāl* genre. These became spaces through which the Ram Rasiks could form a canon of saints, highlighting the guru-disciple relationships, such as in Jivaram's *Rasik Prakāś Bhaktamāl*.

The nineteenth-century Ram Rasik hagiologies contributed to the formation of a broadly Vaishnava sensibility in North India. Rather than stressing the supremacy of devotion to Ram, the *Rām Rasikāvalī* emphasizes the compatibility of devotion to both Ram and Krishna. In the twentieth century, the Ram Rasiks turned their attention back towards Ramanand. They expanded Ramanand's life story significantly and reflected contemporary political concerns back onto Ramanand's life such as in depictions of Ramanand traveling throughout India, "re-converting" Muslims back to Hinduism, laying the groundwork for the contemporary Hindu nationalist interpretation of Ramanand. This dissertation explores how the Ramanandi *sampradāy* expanded and changed over time in relation to larger social and political shifts in India. It uses hagiographies as a lens for exploring the self-representation of the community and argues that hagiographies are both a product of and an active contributor to many of these shifts.

There are many possible areas for further research surrounding the history of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* and the related topics raised in this dissertation. This includes a re-evaluation of the Hindi manuscripts with compositions attributed to Ramanand, a comprehensive study of the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa*, and further study of the women depicted in Ram Rasik hagiologies. During the course of this research, I became particularly interested in the spread of *bhakti* in Nepal and the relationships between Nepali and Indian Hindus. As mentioned in Chapter Four, the Ramanandis played an important role in "rediscovering" Janakpur as the site of Sita's birthplace and developing it as a pilgrimage site, and there is also a Ramanandi presence in the Kathmandu Valley and a Nepali presence in Varanasi. These connections could be further explored in order to learn more about the significance of devotion to Ram and Sita in Nepal and the relationship between Indian and Nepali Hinduism. In addition, several scholars have examined the relationship between *bhakti* and Hindu nationalism, such as the use of the

term *bhakta* to refer to Modi's supporters,[695] and the study of Hindu nationalism and masculinity has been the subject of recent research.[696] I am interested in building on this research and studying the connections between Hindu nationalism, masculinity, and the Ramanandi *sampradāy*.

This dissertation has used Ramanandi hagiographies as a lens for investigating the development of the Ramanandi *sampradāy* between the seventeenth and the twenty-first centuries. This dissertation's title reflects the focus on gender that runs throughout the chapters. I interrogate how the Ramanandis cultivated and negotiated their reputation as socially egalitarian, particularly in regard to gender, through an analysis of the stories of women associated with the Ramanandi *sampradāy* and the study of the Ram Rasik branch. I also examine how Ramanand has been invoked in contemporary Hindu nationalist rhetoric, which portrays Ramanand as a defender of Hinduism against Islam, and how the Ramanandis helped lay the groundwork for widespread Vaishnavism in the early modern and colonial eras.

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[695] Nisha Mathew, "Bhakt Nation: The Return of the Hindu Diaspora in Modi's India," in "Strongmen and Informal Diplomats: Toward and Anthropology of International Relations," ed. Ameen Lufti, Nisha Mathew, and Serkan Yolacan, special issue, *History and Anthropology* 33, no. 3 (2022): 337-354; John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, particularly "Chapter 7. What Should the Bhakti Movement Be?" 285-342.

[696] Arpita Chakraborty, "Tracing the Rise of Ascetic Masculinity in India," in *Women, Gender and Religious Nationalism*, ed. Amrita Basu and Tanika Sarkar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 195-223; Prem Kumar Vijayan, *Gender and Hindu Nationalism: Understanding Masculine Hegemony* (London: Routledge, 2019).

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