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Garlanding Hinduism: Nabhadās's *Bhaktamāl* in the Colonial Context

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Introduction

Since the time of its composition in the early seventeenth century, Nābhādās's *Bhaktamāl* has posited the existence of a broad-based religious community and provided a site for debates over the nature of this community. During the first decade of the last century, two texts were published that have had a deep impact on subsequent understandings of the Bhaktamal. The first is 'Sītārāmsaraṇ' Bhagvān Prasād 'Rūpkalā's' (1840-1932) monumental edition of the Bhaktamal. This edition, published in Banaras between 1903 and 1909, combines Nabhadās's original text with its most important commentary and Rupkala's own exegesis. A single volume edition of this text, first published in Lucknow in 1913, has become the standard edition of the Bhaktamal and remains in print. The second is George Abraham Grierson's (1851-1941) 'Gleanings from the Bhakta-mala.' In 1909 and 1910, Grierson, a friend of Rupkala, published his 'Gleanings' as a series of articles in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. These articles translate and provide explanatory comments on the opening stanzas of the Bhaktamal and its major commentary. Grierson's 'Gleanings' may be regarded as the beginnings of an English-language commentary on the Bhaktamal, and later editions of Rupkala's book list it as such.

Each of these texts continues a key concern of the Bhaktamal tradition by debating the boundaries of a broadly defined Vaishnava and Hindu community. In this paper, I hope

to demonstrate that Rupkala used a modern idiom to reframe Nabhadās's bhakti-oriented community. By acknowledging a variety of interpretive traditions, he incorporated these traditions into a wider tapestry, that of a modern Hinduism shaped, above all, by bhakti religiosity. Grierson provided an important boost to Rupkala's ideas through his endorsement and nearly wholesale adoption—or is it appropriation—of Rupkala's commentary. He also made an original contribution to the Bhaktamal tradition by positing the existence of an astonishingly broad devotional community that encompassed Christians as well as Hindus.

The Bhaktamal has not yet received the scholarly attention it deserves. A recent exception is the work of Vijay Pinch, who has written on the figure of Nabhadās (1999) and on the role that the Bhaktamal and its commentaries played in early twentieth-century debates within the Ramanandi sampradāy (1996). Pinch has also explored the lives of Grierson and Rupkala in an article entitled "Bhakti and the British Empire" (2003). This article argues that acknowledging devotional religion is crucial for properly understanding the British Empire in India. While I do not fully agree with Pinch's critique of much recent South Asian historiography, his suggestion that bhakti played a more important role than has been previously acknowledged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is certainly welcome. Pinch focuses on the personalities of Grierson and Rupkala. His article, however, does not offer a detailed treatment of Rupkala's and Grierson's work on the Bhaktamal. Today, I wish to take a closer look at their Bhaktamal commentaries and to position these commentaries more firmly within the Bhaktamal's literary and religious traditions.

Background

From its outset, the Bhaktamal tradition has posited the existence of a broad-based religious community and provided a site for contestation over the nature of this community. In the Bhaktamal, or 'Garland of Devotees,' Nabhadas weaves together terse words of praise for hundreds of bhakts, or devotees. In so doing, he imagines into being a new type of community. The individuals and groups, whom he selects for inclusion, reflect a community that spans boundaries of *sampradāy* (order or sect), region, caste, and gender.

Nabhadas's vision was, and is, powerful and provocative. With its focus on the nature and boundaries of the community and its construction in the present, the Bhaktamal has had a continuing relevance in a larger religious world. Approximately a century after the Bhaktamal's composition, Priyādās would simultaneously elaborate upon and critique Nabhadas's vision. Priyadas commented on Nabhadas's root text in an expansive and enormously influential work entitled the *Bhaktirasabodhinī*, 'The Illumination of the Essence of Bhakti.' In this commentary, Priyadas selectively explains and extrapolates from the verses of the Bhaktamal. This commentary has been very influential. Subsequent manuscripts and print editions of the Bhaktamal usually include this commentary, and the combined text is often referred to simply as the Bhaktamal. Priyadas both advances and modifies Nabhadas's message. He shifts the focus from the devotees to God and provides social institutions such as kingship and caste with theological legitimation. Nabhadas presents a vision of a devotional community that exceeds such mundane concerns while Priyadas grants these social institutions a central role in his community of bhakti.¹

Priyadas's word, however, is not final. He began a commentarial tradition that still lives. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commentaries usually take the combined text of the Bhaktamal and Bhaktirasabodhini as a single object of analysis. A new phase in the life of this text began in 1827 when British administrators at the College of Fort William

1 For a discussion of the tensions between Nabhadas and Priyadas, see "A Contested Community," my forthcoming article in *Sikh Formations*.

published selections from the Bhaktamal as an exemplary Braj Bhāṣā work (Price). Publishers later issued editions of the Bhaktamal in a variety of languages including Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil, Bengali, Persian, and Urdu. Bhāratendu Hariścandra composed a Bhaktamal on Nabhadās's model and F.S. Growse quotes Nabhadās and Priyadas at length in his account of Brindavan's Vaishnavas (1993).

The arrival of print did not initially bring standardization to the text of the Bhaktamal. As Adrian Johns (1998) has noted in reference to early modern Europe, the uniformity of early printed books and the standardization that print supposedly brought about has been greatly exaggerated. Instability, piracy, and conflict have been neglected, and uniformity, therefore, has been over-emphasized. In the case of the Bhaktamal, print brought nascent conflicts to the surface. Communities of interpretation that had not previously been in sustained contact now came into conflict through the medium of print. Pinch (1996) has provided a detailed treatment of how, later in the twentieth century, print brought conflicts within the Ramanandi Sampradāy to the surface. Rupkala attempts to rise above these conflicts, but, as we shall see, these conflicts have left their mark on his text.

Rupkala and Grierson

Bhagvan Prasad 'Rupkala' and George Grierson had much in common. They each came from prominent families, served in the colonial administration, and shared a commitment to devotional religiosity.

Bhagvan Prasad was born in 1840 to a prominent and scholarly family of Kayasths, which had already produced noted Bhaktamalis, including his father and uncle. He was a committed and celebrated member of the Ramanandi sampradāy. Both 'Sitaramsaran' and 'Rupkala' are names that were granted to Bhagvan Prasad upon initiations to this order.

Bhagvan Prasad spent a successful career in government service. He became a subinspector of schools in 1863 and remained in the educational administration for the next thirty years. He served as a headmaster and eventually became a Deputy Inspector. He never had any children, and following the death of his father and wife, he gave up government employment and retired to an ascetic life in Ayodhya. During his retirement in Ayodhya, Rupkala compiled his edition of the Bhaktamal (Pinch 1996).

George Abraham Grierson was born to a prominent Dublin family in 1851. His father and grandfather, both also named George Grierson, were well-known printers and publishers. Educated at Trinity College, he joined the Indian Civil Service in 1871 and reached the Bengal Presidency in 1873. He would eventually become Magistrate and Collector at Patna and, later, Opium Agent for Bihar. In 1898 he was appointed Superintendent of the newly formed Linguistic Survey of India and moved to England "for convenience of consulting European libraries and scholars" (Thomas and Turner n.d., 3).

Grierson published scholarly works throughout his career: on the dialects and peasant life of Bihar, on Hindi literature, on bhakti, and on linguistics. His contemporaries noted his lack of sympathy for Advaita Vedanta, which he regarded as "pandit religion" but noted his "warm appreciation of the monotheistic devotion of the country folk" (Thomas and Turner n.d., 11) Grierson had thought that bhakti stemmed from contact with Christian communities but later admitted that Indian bhakti was older than Christianity, without ruling out later Christian influence. Most of Grierson's later work deals with linguistics. In a celebratory account of his life, F.W. Thomas and R.L. Turner refer to the extensive publications of the Linguistic Survey of India as "a great Imperial museum, representing and systematically classifying the linguistic botany of India" (n.d., 18)

The Commentaries

Both Rupkala and Grierson composed Bhaktamal commentaries that are simultaneously scholarly and devotional. Rupkala's commentary has been dealt with in some detail in Pinch's *Peasants and Monks in British India*. Pinch is mainly concerned with Rupkala's depiction of the life of Ramanand. He summarizes,

What emerged as a result of Bhagvan Prasad's exegetical labors was a critical examination of the fundamentals of Ramanandi tradition, an account of a life of unparalleled importance that tried to reconcile a variety of proto-doctrinal opinions through exhaustive scholarship. (1996)

Rupkala prefaces his edition with the "Shri Vaishnava Namavali," which lists 108 prominent Vaishnavas. It provides "names, dates, and places" along with "a confirmation of each individual's contribution to the sampraday." With this Namavali, Rupkala was continuing the Bhaktamal tradition by praising prominent devotees from the past in order to establish the breadth and importance of a community in the present. Pinch emphasizes that Rupkala's commentary should be understood as a "commemoration, indeed celebration, of the Ramanandi sampraday" (1996).

The bulk of this edition consists of Nabhadās's Bhaktamal and its commentaries. Rupkala brings together three distinct layers of text. The innermost text is Nabhadās's Bhaktamal, which is highly allusive and, it is true, oftentimes provides little more than lists of names. The second layer is Priyadas's commentary. Like the original, this commentary is in difficult Braj Bhasa verse. The outermost layer is Rupkala's own *vārtik tilak*, or exegetical commentary. This modern standard Hindi commentary expands the laconic and sometimes obscure verses of Nabhadās and Priyadas into clear prose. Rupkala provides glosses of difficult terms, restates episodic narratives in clear prose, and establishes a wider context by quoting verses from sources such as the *Bhagavat Purana* and the *Ramcaritmanas*. Rupkala, like other commentators, does not simply clarify and explain the meaning of the texts on which he comments. Rather, he expands the meaning of these texts in interesting

and significant ways.

As is the case with Rupkala's exegesis, Grierson's "Gleanings from the Bhakta-mala" demonstrates Grierson's religious commitments. 'Gleanings' was published as a series of articles in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* from 1909-1910. In these articles, Grierson provides loose translations of the first eight verses of Nabhadas's Bhaktamal as well as Priyadas's commentary on these verses. He also provides his own explanatory interpolations, explaining that a simple translation of the Bhaktamal would not be of much value. He writes,

In fact, the book partakes of the nature of the sūtra-works of Sanskrit literature. It is written in an extremely compressed style, every possible superfluous word being omitted, and every epithet being intended as the clue to some legend not otherwise recorded. Hence a translation of the mere text would be of little use. Under his instructions his pupil Priyā-dāsa... wrote a commentary explaining the various allusions in the text. This commentary really forms an integral portion of the work, and owing to circumstances of its composition is of equal authority with the rest. (Grierson 1909, 608)

It should be noted that Grierson exaggerates the connection between Nabhadas and his commentator. The Bhaktamal and the Bhaktirasabodhini are separated by too much time to be authored by guru and disciple (Jhā 1978). Priyadas does claim that Nabhadas verbally instructed him to write his commentary, but in contrast to Grierson, Rupkala understands Priyadas to mean *ākāś-vāṇī*, a voice from the sky (Rupkala 2001).

A striking feature of Grierson's commentary is the comparison between Hindu bhakti and Christianity that permeates these articles. In his comments on the first verse of the Bhaktamal, Grierson presents the similarity between Nabhadas's faith and Christianity. The opening verse of the Bhaktamal reads:

*bhakt, bhakti, bhagavanta, guru, catura nāma vapu eka,
inake pada baṇdana kiye, nāshahim vighna aneka.* (Rupkala 2001, 37)

Devotee and Devotion, God and Guru,
Four names for a single body.
Praising their feet

eliminates many obstacles.²

Grierson emphasizes the shared identity between the devotee and the object of devotion.

He writes,

In Western language we might say that the brotherhood of man is a necessary inference from the universal fatherhood of God. As Growse... well says, this couplet is a compendium of the theory upon which the whole Vaiṣṇava reform was based. It declares that there is a divinity in every true believer, whether learned or unlearned, and irrespective of all caste distinctions. (1909, 617)

Here and throughout the 'Gleanings,' Grierson highlights what he sees as a the profound connection between Christian and Hindu bhakti. He views the Bhaktamal, and Vaishnavism generally, as another language for expressing Christian truths. Grierson shows the same admiration for the faith expressed in the Bhaktamal as he did for the faith of ordinary Bihari peasants. In this passage, he expresses this admiration by restating Nabhadās's words in distinctly Christian language. Whether this was simply a strategy to communicate with Europeans inclined toward a less sympathetic view of Hinduism or whether he actually believed Vaishnavism to be a kind of crypto-Christianity is unclear to me. For Grierson, Hindu and Christian devotionalism were but two different languages to express a single truth.

Both Grierson's and Rupkālā's commentaries reveal a deep rootedness in devotional religiosity as well as an urge to explain and clarify. Both of these scholar-devotees sought to bring the Bhaktamal to a readership outside of its traditional context. The Bhaktamal was, as Grierson noted, not meant to be read on its own. The reach of print and the exegetical prose of Rupkālā and Grierson bring the Bhaktamal to readers who might not encounter this work through a guru or trained reciter. These commentaries are products of late-nineteenth century colonial administrators who sought to maintain the relevance of the Bhaktamal by bringing it into the realm of print culture.

² All translations from the Bhaktamal are my own.

Early Life

The similarities between Grierson's and Rupkala's commentaries are not coincidental. Both of these authors acknowledge an intellectual debt to the other. Grierson calls Rupkala a friend and praises his commentary, calling it his "chief authority in all doubtful points" (608-9). Rupkala thanks Grierson for his assistance and, in later editions, lists "Gleanings" as an English-language commentary on the Bhaktamal. Perhaps the best way to examine the nature of the exchange between Rupkala and Grierson is to consider their respective treatments of a single verse. Their commentaries on the early life of Nabhadās reveal Rupkala's strategy for negotiating conflict between multiple interpretative traditions as well as the extent of Grierson's debt to Rupkala.

Nabhadās does not himself provide an account of his early life. In the Bhaktamal's fourth verse he provides a rare example of self reference:

*agradeva ājnā daī, bhaktana kau yasha gāu,
bhavasāgara ke tarana kau, nāhina aura upāu.* (Rupkala 2001, 40)

Agradās gave the order:
Sing the devotees' praise.
There is no other way
to cross the ocean of existence.

Here, we simply learn that Nabhadās composed the Bhaktamal at the prompting of his guru, but Priyadas elaborates with four *kavitt* verses.³ Priyadas tells how Agradās became aware of his disciple's gift for praising the bhakts and tells us that when Agradās ordered Nabhadās to write the Bhaktamal, the humble disciple objected that praising Ram and Krishna was something he could do but praising the disciples was too great a task for him. Priyadas then backtracks to tell us of Nabhadās's childhood and how he came to be adopted by Agradās before describing Nabhadās's selfless service to the sadhus of Galta.

3 For an introduction to Braj Bhasa prosody see Snell 1991.

Rupkala gives the most attention to Nabhadās's early life. Priyadas writes that Nabhadās was born blind in the lineage of Hanuman (*Hanūmān vamś*). When he was five years old, there was a time of famine, and his mother abandoned him in the forest. Kīlhdās and Agradas found this helpless orphan, and Kīlhdās, sprinkling water from his *kamaṇḍal* in the boy's eyes, gave him vision (Rupkala 2001, 43).

Rupkala provides nearly three full pages of commentary on these four lines of verse. Much of his commentary is concerned with the question of what it means to be part of Hanuman's lineage. He cites several distinct traditions, some attributed to other Bhaktamālis and others without specific attribution. Hanuman vamśis may be the descendants of a Maharashtrian Brahmin famed for his devotion to Sita and Ram who are now renowned for their skill as singers, or Nabhadās may have been a Ḍom. Rupkala is quick to explain, however, that in western Marwar and environs, Doms are not scavengers but rather prominent and well-respected singers (2001, 43). Rupkala presents the possibility that Nabhadās was neither Brahman nor Dom, but a member of a so-called 'untouchable' *gotra*. Rupkala also considers Nabhadās's possible divine origins. According to one tradition, Nabhadās was a partial incarnation of Brahma, cursed by Krishna to be born blind in Kali Yuga for the crime of kidnapping but also blessed by Krishna for his great devotion. After five years of blindness, he would be simultaneously granted divine and ordinary vision and achieve great glory (44).

The commentary then moves on to a relatively lengthy narrative of the early life of Nabhadās—his birth, eventual abandonment, and rescue—before returning to the “discussion of Nābhājī's birth, *jāti*, and name.” Here Rupkala adds yet another interpretation. He explains that Nabhaji was not born of a woman (*ayonij puruṣ*) and therefore has no *jati*. Rather, he was born from a drop of Hanuman's sweat. Once, while Shiva was instructing him in yoga, great mental effort caused a drop of sweat to fall from

Hanuman's body. Shiva caught this drop of sweat in a container and cast it down to earth in order to increase bhakti. This drop of sweat became "Nabhabhūj," better known as Nābhājī. In contrast to his earlier account, Nabhadās was born blind because Hanuman was in a state of samādhi when the sweat fell. From the moment of birth, however, Nabhadās possessed a divine interior vision (45).

This section of commentary is fairly typical of Rupkala's approach. His reading reflects both a traditional devotional orientation and an awareness of modern textual scholarship. He reports several mutually exclusive accounts of Nabhadās's origins and childhood, but he does not adjudicate between them. The proliferation of print editions during the nineteenth century brought different traditional accounts of Nabhadās's life into sustained contact. Rupkala provides us with a collection of these accounts, but he declines to choose between them. Rupkala's objectives are inclusive. He does not present and defend a single position. Rather, he maps the outlines of a Hinduism that is broad enough to include multiple, contradictory positions.

The clarity of Rupkala's prose is, unfortunately, absent in Grierson. Grierson's interpretive notes on these verses bear a remarkable similarity to Rupkala's exegesis. Grierson's acknowledgment of his debt to Rupkala does not reveal the extent of his reliance on Rupkala. Grierson repeats the tradition that the Hanuman vams was founded by a Maharashtrian Brahman and partial avatar of Hanuman. He also reports that Nabhadās was "according to the ordinary story" "by caste a Ḍōm or scavenger." He also reports that the "commentators maintain that this is a mistake due to ignorance of the fact that in Rajputana the word *ḍōm* signifies a professional singer, or, according to others, a monkey." Grierson also explains the etymology of Nabhaji as a corruption of "Nabhabhū-ja, or born from a cloud" in relation to the tradition that Nabhadās was born from a drop of Hanuman's sweat. Grierson's notes here are simply a paraphrase of Rupkala's commentary. Instead of

presenting several distinct accounts of Nabhadās's early years, as Rupkala does, Grierson runs them together and provides significantly less detail than does Rupkala.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the first decade of the twentieth century was critical for the transmission and reception of Nabhadās's Bhaktamal. From the time of its first commentary in the early eighteenth century, the Bhaktamal has been the site of discussion and debate over the nature of a transregional and suprasectarian religious community. Print did not immediately bring standardization to this text. It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that Rupkala, a former colonial official, would compile an edition and exegesis that would come to be seen as authoritative. This monumental work of Hindi-language scholarship would, indirectly through the borrowings of Grierson, bring the Bhaktamal to serious scholarly attention in the English-speaking world for the first time. Rupkala's text is marked by an awareness, made possible by print, of multiple communities of interpretation. His work is, in part, an attempt to supersede the conflicts between these groups. Rupkala uses a modern idiom to incorporate a variety of communities of interpretation into a single overarching communal identity. Grierson's goals are distinct from Rupkala's, but Grierson's reliance on Rupkala's commentary is apparent in the 'Gleanings.' Grierson pushes the boundaries of the devotional community even farther and sees Hindus and Christians as sharing in a single devotionalism. In the early twentieth century, as in the seventeenth, these commentators present themselves as participants in a broad bhakti community and so continue the Bhaktamal tradition.

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