

Milestones and Signposts in Inter-faith relations: a Hindu Perspective¹

Anita C. Ray

Abstract: *This is the last of three papers initially delivered at the Parliament of World Religions, Melbourne 9th December 2009, on approaches in Interfaith Relations. The first two are presented in the prior issue of AEJT [16] representing Muslim and Christian perspectives on interreligious dialogue. Here, Anita C. Ray takes up the same theme from the Hindu point of view, beginning with some typical 'western' misconceptions of Hinduism and then introducing us to the contribution of the northern Indian Sants in the 15th to 17th centuries. Their contemporary relevance as a signpost for interfaith harmony is defended. [Editor]*

Key Words: interreligious conflict; *Bhagavad-Gita*; *the Sants*; bhakti; Kabir; Brahmin; Muslim

Newsweek recently declared that Americans have a predilection for a “divine-deli-cafeteria religion, much in the spirit of Hinduism.”² The author of the article asserts, “A Hindu believes there are many paths to God ... none is better than any other; all are equal.” She supports this statement with a quotation from the most ancient of all Hindu texts, the Rig Veda (c. 1500 BCE), “Truth is one but the sages speak of it by many names.”³ Unfortunately, this is a misrepresentation of Hinduism. The poets of the Rig Veda are merely referring to the sages of their own tradition, and they are in fact at pains to clarify that the reason their sages use so many names for God is because human language is incapable of capturing divine Infinity. At no point do Hindu canonical texts declare that all paths are equal or that no path is superior to another. On the contrary, sacred Sanskrit texts, and even later Sanskrit and vernacular authors recurrently identify soteriological differences between the various schools of Hindu philosophy and propose a hierarchy of spiritual paths. One needs to look no further than the *Bhagavad-Gita* (ca. 300 BCE – 300 CE), or the famous 13th century CE doxology of Madhva, or even the 16th century Bengali biography of Caitanya that posits the pre-eminence of Caitanya’s theological stance. As for those outside the Hindu religious tradition, Hindu sacred texts refer to them pejoratively as ‘barbarians,’ ‘heretics,’ ‘outsiders’ and ‘foreigners.’

¹ Revised version of paper delivered at the Parliament of the World’s Religions, Melbourne, Dec. 2009

² Lisa Miller, *Newsweek* (“We are all Hindus Now”). Issue dated Aug 31, 2009. See (accessed 9/12/10) <http://www.newsweek.com/id/212155>

³ The verse appears in *Rig Veda* 1.164.46.

INTER-RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

A second widespread misconception about Hinduism is that its adherents are by nature spiritual, passive and tolerant. Flattering as this description may be, it is not an accurate reading of history. Intense inter-religious conflict has periodically erupted on the subcontinent. Of course, this should not surprise us, for Indian society was multi-civilizational and multi-religious long before the Common Era. Numismatic, epigraphic, archaeological, historical and literary materials reflect that Persians, Greeks, Greco-Bactrians, Scythians, Kushans, Sassanids, Hepthalites, Kidarites, Arabs, Mongols, Turko-Afghans, Mughals and British have in turn ruled the country. Although some intruders scarcely encroached on the religious domain, and some even drew inspiration from the Hindu tradition, others destroyed temples and images and persecuted those who resisted them. The fact that cultural and religious harmony did prevail for long periods, in spite of invasions, proselytization, migrations and colonization, is not attributable to some peculiar gene of tolerance or passivity, but to a long tradition of rigorous debate. From earliest times, Hindu scholars engaged in public argumentation. Sometimes they adapted to new ideas; but at other times they reacted violently towards those whom they perceived as a threat to their ancient social organization, rituals and myths. In this way, Hinduism has managed to remain a discrete entity in the subcontinent for nearly four thousand years, and stands today as the world's third largest religious tradition, after Christianity and Islam.

MILESTONES IN INTER-FAITH RELATIONS

Numerous milestones exist along the path of inter-faith relations in India, with countless charismatic gurus and saints emerging from within the ranks of Hinduism to knit together communities and maintain vibrant connections across religious and ethnic boundaries. In this respect, Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda are household names. This article focuses on a less well-known but nonetheless remarkable cluster of individuals who lived and worked in north India between the 15th and 17th centuries. Known as the 'Sants' – a Sanskrit word (*sant*) that simply means 'a good person' – they did not initially belong to any specific group or institution, but were merely men and women devoted to a particular set of moral ideals:

Absence of hatred and desire
a tender love for the Lord,
Detachment from the pleasures of the senses
such are the marks of the sant.⁴

The Sants generally emerged from low socio- economic backgrounds, although Nanak and Mirabai are noteworthy exceptions to the rule: Nanak's family belonged to the *khatri* class of traders and scribes, while Princess Mirabai hailed from a royal family in Rajasthan. The remainder of the Sants, however, worked as tailors, goldsmiths, leatherworkers, weavers, cotton-carders and menial labourers. All were gifted poets and led exemplary lives. Prominent among the 15th century poet-saints were Kabir the weaver and Ravidas the shoemaker, while Guru Nanak, Princess Mirabai and the cotton-carder Dadu Dayal composed their verses in the 16th century. Each spoke in his or her vernacular language, rather than the elitist Sanskrit tongue. Stylistic differences distinguish their

⁴ From the Kabīr-granthāvalī, compiled by P.N. Tiwari (1961). Quoted in Vaudeville, 1996: 241.

respective poems. Kabir, for example, the most popular and influential of the Sants, possessed an acerbic style, which Hess (1983) aptly calls “rough rhetoric.” Another obvious characteristic of Kabir’s work is his use of the vocative case. He addresses his listeners directly, seeking to attract their attention: *suno bhai* (‘listen brother!’), or *suno ho santo* (‘listen here, Sants!’).

CONTEXTUALISING THE SANTS

Specific political, socio-economic and religious factors circumscribe the teaching of the Sants. By the early 13th century, Kutb-ud-Din Aibak had overthrown the independent Hindu sovereigns in north India and established the Delhi Sultanate.⁵ For the next six hundred years, Muslim political control persisted in north India. During this time, some rulers restricted the construction of Hindu temples, while others strongly encouraged clergy (*ulamās*) and Sufi Shaikhs to visit India and patronise Islamic centres of learning, much as the former Hindu monarchs had patronised Brahmanical institutions. Persian now became the language of administration, while Sanskrit remained the language of the Hindu ecclesiastical elite.

Understandably, a number of low caste Hindus interpreted the change in north Indian political leadership as a chance to escape from the onerous Hindu class system and they converted *en bloc* to Islam. After all, the Hindu Law Books encoded a person’s occupation, social interactions and even dietary habits according to his or her class, and ruled that no person from a low social class, and no woman from any class, could read or even hear the *Vedas* or participate in initiation. Islam offered a way out to such people. Needless to say, the Hindus, who constituted the vast majority of the population, responded immediately to the impasse. On the one hand, the Brahmins engaged in the elaboration of Hindu Dogmatics and Systematics, as well as the historicizing - and therefore legitimating - of particular texts.⁶ On the other hand, to counteract deep feelings of insecurity among the low castes, numerous Hindu sects proliferated. Centrally important among the sects were the *bhakti* or ‘devotional’ groups, whose essential characteristic was an emphasis on an interior experience of a personal ‘God with qualities’ (*saguna brahman*).⁷ The primary object of devotion was either Shiva or Vishnu or the Great Goddess (Devi).

The religion of the *bhaktas* (devotees) was energetic and emotional. They expressed their love for God in metaphors of sight, touch, sound, taste and smell. Basing their leadership on spiritual experience rather than hereditary factors, they generally lived as itinerant mendicants. They gathered at the doors of famous temples and popular pilgrimage sites and attracted vast crowds as they danced, wept and sang of their painful sense of separation (*viraha*) from God and their longing for union with Him.⁸ Passionately,

⁵ By the 14th century, the Sultanate ruled all of central, west and north India. When their power crumbled in the 16th century, Babur established the Mughal dynasty, which Akbar consolidated. See Habib, 2005: 37 – 46.

⁶ Michaels, 2004: 44, 62. The texts they historicized include the Yoga Upanishads, the Samnyasa Upanishads, the Nibhandas and the Mahatmyas.

⁷ The word *bhakti* derives from a Sanskrit verbal root (*bhaj*) meaning ‘to share, enjoy, experience or adore.’

⁸ A strong current of emotional devotionism flowed through South India as early as the 6th century CE, with the advent of the Tamil-speaking Alvars (6th - 9th centuries). A second wave of Kannada-speaking poets spread across Karnataka from the 10th to the 12th centuries, while Marathi-speaking poet-saints flourished in Maharashtra between the 13th and 18th centuries. No evidence suggests a link between northern and

they espoused the value of temple rituals, icons and pilgrimages. They also announced that God periodically incarnates (*avatāra*) in order to restore cosmic and societal stability.

At times, *bhakti* language and imagery is reminiscent of that used by the 13th century Christian mystics in Belgium and the Rhineland, but there is an essential difference between *bhakti* and Christian mysticism: the Hindu tradition widely accepts as positive the emotional responses of the senses, whereas emotional mysticism has remained marginal to the Christian tradition. It is also important to recognise that *bhakti* was a *shared* experience in Indian culture, not a solitary pursuit; and thus communal music, poetry, song, dance and worship served to heighten the emotions of the entire group.⁹ In fact, it would be accurate to claim that *bhakti* religiosity has largely shaped modern Hinduism.

During the 13th century, two other powerful religious currents swept across north India: the influential Nath Yoga movement and Islamic Sufism. The Nath Yogis, also known as the Kanphata ('split-eared') Yogis because of their habit of wearing large earrings in the hollows of their ears, belonged to a non-Brahmanical Hindu movement that claimed direct succession from Gorakhnath (10th or 11th century). They were a Tantric Shaivite sect, probably from Kashmir or the Punjab, who regarded Shiva as the quintessential Yogi and advocated *hatha yoga* as the path to liberation. They demonstrated supernatural powers, lived ascetic lives, incorporated elements of mysticism into their teachings, produced literature in Sanskrit and vernacular languages and rejected class hierarchy.¹⁰ However, unlike the *bhaktas*, the Naths believed in a formless, impersonal Divine (*nirguna brahman*).

The other popular tradition, existing from about the 10th century and sharing the same social space as the Naths and *bhaktas* in the 15th century, was Islamic Sufism. The Sufi Pirs participated creatively and wholeheartedly in the experiential and mystical approach of the Naths and *bhaktas* and fostered the same ideals of goodwill towards all peoples. Intriguingly, although Sufi Pirs welcomed *bhaktas* and Naths as followers, they did not insist that either group should surrender its Hindu identity. Similarly, *bhakti* groups admitted Nath and Muslim disciples, but did not require them to forsake their respective traditions.

CENTRAL MESSAGE OF SANTs

Technically, the Sants were a sub-group of *bhakti*, and a fine line often separates Sant and *bhakti* poems, with the idioms of the *bhaktas* flowing into Sant verses and vice versa. This is of course understandable, particularly when one realises that the Sants and *bhaktas* belonged to the same colourful (though somewhat confusing) raft of 15th century north Indian religiosities.¹¹ Like the *bhaktas*, the Sants welcomed people from all social classes,

southern groups of *bhaktas*. Rather, *bhakti* religion appears to have comprised numerous independent regional groups.

⁹ See Hardy, 1983: 569 – 583.

¹⁰ The Naths remain active in Rajasthan to the present day.

¹¹ For a comprehensive list of major Indian sects, sect founders and poet-saints, see Table 4, Michaels, 2004: 63 – 65. Table 23 (p. 253) divides the theistic *bhakti* movements into three chief traditions: Vaishnava, Krishnaita and Ramaite. Table 24 (p. 254) includes Kabir, Mirabai, Dadu Dayal, Guru Nanak, Guru Amar Dass

promoted a religion of interiority, preached divine grace and claimed that one attains liberation through meditative devotion. They also acknowledged that the Lord creates and maintains the universe. In addition, they encouraged repetition of the divine Name and promoted the idea of keeping company with like-minded people. However, the Sants differed from the *bhaktas* in several important respects. Theologically, they rejected the notion of *saguna brahman* ('God with qualities') and asserted that God has neither name nor form and cannot therefore become flesh. They also discounted the outward trappings of religion, such as temple rituals, icons and pilgrimages. Instead, they maintained that the divine is an abstract, universally accessible 'Formless Lord' (*nirguna brahman*) beyond human categorization. They spoke too, of a divine interior teacher, the 'inner guru,' whom they called *satguru* ('true guru') or Ram.

Unlike the *saguni bhaktas* who generally supported Brahmanic values, the Sants crossed traditional boundaries and raised their voices against caste and gender biases. They argued that caste and gender are mere accidents of birth and irrelevant to spiritual attainment, and that anyone can experience liberation from reincarnation. Liberation does not depend on intellect, class or gender, the Sants asserted, but on an inner path that is available to all. Hence, the Sants ate and worshipped with people from all backgrounds, even 'untouchables' and women. Their behaviour often incurred the wrath of the Brahmin establishment, posing a serious challenge to traditional notions about 'purity' and pollution.

Kabir, a towering figure in the history of north Indian religions, dared to deliver his pronouncements in Varanasi, the holiest city of the Hindus. He reminded the Brahmins that the Ganges water they imbibed, and in which they bathed, was scarcely 'pure.' It is full of rotting corpses and sewage, he announced:

Pandit, think before you drink
that water...
Hell flows along that river...¹²

Kabir's poems reverberate with opposition to the caste system:

Pandit, look in your heart for knowledge.
Tell me where untouchability
came from, since you believe in it.¹³

He is also quick to mock the pomposity of the clerics of his day:

The great went off in their greatness
ego in every hair.¹⁴

Kabir is particularly scathing about hypocrisy, although his criticism is equitable, for he spares neither Muslim nor Hindu. He is as caustic about the Hindu priest who performs

and Sundaradas among the major nirguni poet-saints (Sants), and lists Jñāneshvara (13th century), Namdev (14th century) and Eknath (16th century) - all from the Maharashtra - as the major saguni poet-saints.

¹² The Bijak of Kabir. Number 47. Transl., Linda Hess & Shukdev Singh, 1983: 57.

¹³ The Bijak of Kabir. Number 41. Trans., Hess & Singh, 1983: 55. Mahatma Gandhi referred to the lowest class - the 'Scheduled' or 'Untouchable' Class - as Harijans, 'children of God.' Today, the Harijans refer to themselves as Dalits ('the downtrodden')

¹⁴ The Bijak of Kabir. Number 139. Trans., Hess & Singh, 1983: 105.

animal sacrifices as he about the Muslim worshipper who concentrates on outward appearances and disregards the inner pathway to God:

Qazi, what book are you lecturing on?
Yak yak yak, day and night.
You never had an original thought.¹⁵

Or again,

Why bump that shaven head on the earth,
why dunk those bones in the water?
Parading as a holy man,
you hide yourself, and slaughter.

Why wash your hands and mouth, why chant
with a heart full of fraud?
Why bow and bow in the mosque, and trudge
to Mecca to see God?

Does Khuda (God) live in the mosque?
Then who lives everywhere?
Is Ram in idols and holy ground?
Have you looked and found him there?
...
Search in the heart, in the heart alone:
There live Ram and Karim!¹⁶

And again,

The Hindu says Ram is the beloved,
the Turk says Rahim ('merciful').
Then they kill each other!¹⁷

However, not all of Kabir's poems contain "rough rhetoric." He also expresses himself in gentler tones, especially when he tells of his love for God or his sense of separation from the Beloved:

Kabir,
Separation from the Beloved
coils around my heart
like a snake.
No mantras work
I cannot live without Ram
If I go on living
I'll go mad!¹⁸

And again,

Kabir,
If I made ink
out of all the oceans

¹⁵ *The Bijak of Kabir*. Number 84. Trans., Hess & Singh, 1983: 69.

¹⁶ *The Bijak of Kabir*. Number 97. Trans., Hess and Singh, 1983: 73 – 74.

¹⁷ *The Bijak of Kabir*. Number 41. Trans., Hess & Singh, 1983: 42.

¹⁸ Kabir *dohā* from the *Ādi Granth*. Trans., Dass, 1991: 274)

and pens out of all the forests,
and make the earth my paper
I still could never finish
writing the praises of Hari¹⁹

Kabir's intentions are transparent: his goal is to persuade people of all religious affiliations to turn inwards, rather than conform to mechanical external rituals. At no point does he (or any other Sant, for that matter) call upon people to abandon their faith or convert to his sect. Rather, he invites people to engage imaginatively and critically with the entire human family, in all its diversity. Paradoxically, when Kabir died, both Muslims and Hindus claimed his body, fighting over whether his corpse should be buried or cremated. According to legend, in place of the corpse, they found only flowers; and the Muslims buried their portion, while the Hindus cremated theirs.

SUCCESS OF SANTs

The prophetic voices of the Sants have reached far beyond their own communities. The *Adi Granth* (1604), the sacred scriptures of the Sikhs, has incorporated several hundred Sant songs, including those of Kabir, Nanak, Mira and Ravidas. In fact, Sikhism developed in the Punjab from the Sant tradition. Songs and couplets attributed to Kabir also appear in the *Bijak* of the Kabir Panth, and in a Rajasthani collection belonging to the Dadu Panth.²⁰ The *Bhaktamal* ('A Garland of Devotees'), an influential Hindi hagiography of north Indian poet-saints (c. 1600), also eulogises the Sants. Translations of this book have appeared in Persian, Urdu Gujarati, Tamil and Bengali. In addition, marginalized groups like Tribals, Shudras and Dalits still use the poems of the Sants to communicate their plight and resist class tyranny.²¹

Oddly, the utterances of the Sants contain no radically new doctrine. The Upanishads had spoken about a religion of interiority in the 8th century BCE; the Buddhists and Jains had challenged Brahmanical class hierarchy as early as the 5th century BCE; while the Advaita Vedanta School of Hindu philosophy had extolled the 'ineffable God without attributes' from the 9th century CE. Moreover, north Indian *bhakti* groups had disseminated similar ideas to those expressed by the Sants ever since the 13th century. Orality and performance were essential elements of *bhakti* religiosity: music, rhythm, body language, repetition and audience participation through clapping and dancing had made *bhakti* teachings accessible to those unfamiliar with writing and print and had rapidly spread the message of devotion to God from one linguistic region to another.²² Although the Sants were somewhat less reliant on the emotions than the *bhaktas*, their teachings none the less spread like wildfire in north India. To what, then, should we attribute their remarkable success?

Crucially, the Sants received the support of two major classes in north Indian Hindu society: the financially strong merchant class and the numerically vast servant class. The

¹⁹ Trans., Dass, 1991: 275

²⁰ The Sants originally acknowledged no formal organisation, but three influential Panths or 'paths' eventually developed: the Kabir Panth, Dadu Panth and Nanak Panth.

²¹ Interestingly, Lorenzen (2004: 272 – 282) proposes that the Kabir Panth served as a Hinduizing agent for marginal groups of Tribals, Shudras and Untouchables.

²² Neelima Shukla-Bhatt, 2007: 273 – 298.

affluent but disaffected merchants were in a mood for change; they objected strongly to the dismissive and patronising treatment they received at the hands of the Brahmins, in spite of supporting the Brahmins financially, and were ready to shift their allegiance to the Sants. The poor and vulnerable, on the other hand, found it easy to identify with Sant sentiments. The anguish that Ravidas experienced as an 'untouchable' is palpable in his poems, while Mirabai's expressions of her tragic clashes with her marital family have enabled many Gujarati and Rajasthani women to identify with her distress as a woman.

Another reason for the success of the Sants was their down-to-earth approach to daily life. Although they lived lives of immense piety, they understood the immense hardship and penury experienced by the masses. Further, they communicated their points in idioms, vocabulary and concepts that were intelligible to working-class people. For example, Sant poems contain widely recognizable names for the transcendent Lord - Ram, Madhav, Krishna, Hari, Natha, Umapati and Allah – and such names were familiar to Shaivites, Vaishnavites, Naths and Sufis alike.²³ In addition, the Sants judiciously employed the paradoxical imagery of the Nath Yogis, and utilized the Nath poetic device of shocking the listener to attract attention. Although they replaced the physical aspects of Nath *hatha yoga* with meditation on the divine name, they retained the Nath idea of spiritual ascent to a state of bliss. Further, Sant beliefs and rituals resonated strongly with Sufi practices. For example, the Sant practice of calling upon the Name of Ram was similar to the Sufi repetition of the divine Name (*dhikr*; 'remembering'). Similarly, Sant respect for the guru correlated with Sufi reverence for the *pir*, while Sant ideals of egalitarianism, an inner experience of the Divine, submission to God and selfless service (*seva*) found strong echoes in Sufi teachings. Thus, the Sants had the backing of the merchants, the poor and downtrodden, the Naths, the Sufis and many of the sectarian *bhaktas*.

RELEVANCE OF SANTS FOR CONTEMPORARY WORLD

I do not concur with Muhammad Hedayetullah's (1977) evaluation that the Sants were primarily "apostles of Hindu-Muslim unity." Their chief aim was not to unite Hindus and Muslims, but to summon people to an **interior quest for the 'Formless Lord.'** **In the process, they made strong statements about** the true nature of holiness, the plight of the oppressed, **caste elitism, over-attachment to rituals and hatred of the 'outsider.'** They **spoke** out in the public square, in a language that everyone could understand, **and their radically egalitarian approach** expressed the worth of every human being. They thus provided those from the lowest social classes with a positive self-image. They also created ethical communities that exemplified the core values of courage, tolerance, honesty, humility, generosity and service (*seva*). These values were not new to Hinduism, but the *Vedas* espoused fearlessness as an attribute of the warrior class, generosity as a quality of the householder, and service as a characteristic of the lowest classes.²⁴ The Sants offered a new perspective on Hindu *dharma* (duty, law); they did not ask people to dispense with *dharma* altogether, but invited them to reappraise their values. In this way, the Sants contributed to the renewal of society.

²³ It is also apparent that Kabir was familiar with the path of the Nath Yogi ascetics, for he utilizes Nath vocabulary. See Mariola Offredi, 2002: 127 – 141. See also Hawley, 2005: 300, 302.

²⁴ See Hawley, 2005: 62 – 69.

Do the Sants continue to serve as signposts in the contemporary world? I believe so. One of the vital issues facing India today is religious nationalism. Sadly, right-wing political organizations have politicized Hinduism, aspiring to transform the secular state into a Hindu nation. It is surely ironical that the very week *Newsweek* reported that Hindus regard all paths as equal, the BBC News announced an alarming escalation of religious violence in India.²⁵ According to the BBC, India is now on a “watch” list with countries like Cuba, Somalia and Afghanistan, for having failed to protect its minority communities. The Hindu right continues to humiliate and demonize minority groups, typecasting them as the ‘enemy’ - and in this way it produces a new inequality based on political power. Moreover, class discrimination is still alive and well in India, even in Mahatma Gandhi’s home state. The Times of India (Dec., 2009) reports that 97% of Dalits surveyed in 1,655 Gujarati villages feel unwelcome at their local temple because they are ‘untouchables.’²⁶ Circumstances such as these lead to bitterness, communal tensions, recriminations and retaliations. The savage massacres of Muslims at Ayodhya in 1992, and in Gujarat in 2002, as well as the Hindu-Christian riots in Orissa in 2008, stand as testimony to this fact. In the 21st century, the Sants call us to a deeper experience of God and a life lived by the law of Love. They challenge us to rescue religion from ideological distortions and affirm that there is a place for all at the table of God.

Author: Anita C. Ray is a specialist in ancient Indian religions, researcher for the Asia-Pacific Centre for Interreligious Dialogue and Honorary Fellow, Australian Catholic University.

Email: Anita.Ray@acu.edu.au

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²⁵ BBC News, 13/08/2009. URL: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8198770.stm.

²⁶ ‘No temple entry for dalits in Gujarat.’ Vijaysinh Parmar, TNN 7 December 2009. See (accessed 9/12/10) <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/No-temple-entry-for-dalits-in-Gujarat/articleshow/5308970.cms>. A carefully conducted study that surveyed 1,655 Gujarati villages revealed in December 2009 that 97% of Dalit respondents were unwelcome at their local temple because they were ‘untouchables.’

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