



**Patton Burchett.** *A Genealogy of Devotion: Bhakti, Tantra, Yoga, and Sufism in North India.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. 456 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-19032-9.

**Reviewed by** Aloka Parasher-Sen (University of Hyderabad)

**Published on** H-Asia (April, 2020)

**Commissioned by** Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

If one was to simplify, the book under review could be said to fall under what is popularly called comparative religion, except that it emphatically does not fall under this genre as the scholarship that it contains forcefully argues against the essentialist definition of religion. The crux of this book is about delineating what was new in the *bhakti* that emerged in North India during the medieval and early modern periods and how devotional communities that evolved around it aligned or disagreed with each other. Bhakti, tantra, yoga, and Sufism as important elements in the subtitle of *A Genealogy of Devotion* allude to these religious communities and give an impression that each of these religiosities will emerge as a distinct subject of discussion in the book. On the contrary, what Patton Burchett has ably done is to weave the interlinkages between them, suggesting that the boundaries around each were not rigid. In narrating the historical relationships between them, this book nonetheless shows that each of these strands also had distinct features that kept its individual identity intact. Thus, fluidity on the one hand as the harbinger of possible exchanges co-existed with concerted efforts of the practitioners of these religiosities to define oneself as distinct from the “other.” These multiple sensibilities are complex to explain, and it is this heterogeneity and complexity that Burchett has carefully brought to the fore,

thus establishing that neither binaries of opposition, nor distinct personalities of uniqueness remain historical subjects of enquiry for long. The most central issue in the book that is consciously highlighted is that each of these religiosities evolved against the complex politico-historical circumstances from the early medieval to the early modern period. This period concomitantly saw the emergence of Persianate traditions that then fruitfully fertilized with the Indic ones. It is this particularity of the historical context against which religious ideas evolved that is the essence of the book. The various chapters then unravel how this happened, what were the challenges and institutional impetus and most importantly, the ideological influences that transformed the religious landscape of North India during this period. Burchett does a microlevel regional case study of the Rāmānandīs to illustrate his arguments.

Following a substantive introduction that sets out to explain the aim, definitions, and historiography of the subject on hand, *A Genealogy of Devotion* is divided into three parts. Part 1, “From Medieval Tantra to Early Modern *Bhakti*,” has three chapters that enable the reader to grasp the fundamentals of how tantra was envisaged and how bhakti and Sufism, on the one hand, drew on but also challenged it. An important aspect of this section is to lay bare the sociopolitical background of

Sultanate and Mughal India, which were witness to these changes. Part 2, “Yogis, Poets and a New *Bhakti* Sensibility in Mughal India,” also has three chapters, each of which has a special focus on the Rāmānandī *bhaktas* that is the case study taken up by Burchett. Thus, based on primary sources and with a fine reading of the particular regional context in which the Rāmānandīs challenged the tantric yogis to give rise to their own *bhakti* sensibility, we have before us an in-depth reading of their lineages and their contribution to defining *bhakti* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In part 3, “The Devotee Versus the Tantrika,” with two chapters, the central theme of the book is woven together to highlight the tantra yoga elements in *bhakti* poetry as well as unquestionably argue that the *bhakti* that triumphed was one that had what Burchett calls a “Sufi inflection” and it was this *bhakti* religion that continued well into modern times.

It is worthwhile to bring forth for discussion three issues that keep Burchett’s narrative of the history of religion in medieval and early modern North India apart from other individual studies on themes around *bhakti*, tantra, yoga, and Sufism. The first is the issue of how tantra and particularly *bhakti* should be defined. He moves away from the generally accepted readings of their definition, which tend to give them a self-contained and static meaning. To elaborate on this he first dismisses the earlier meanings generated initially by the Orientalists of *bhakti* as “rational” and “religion” and tantra as “magic” and “superstition” as understood through the prism of Protestant Christian leanings. While this is necessary to see the crucial links between the two strands of Indian beliefs, it also emphatically enables Burchett to argue that *bhakti* should not be seen merely as personal devotion or a “movement” but critically as “embodied practices” (p. 6) that were validated through ideas, memories, poetry, performances, and so on and which constantly circulated among their practitioners in the public domain: “In more specific terms *bhakti* in this narrative account is under-

stood first and foremost as an intimate and loving devotion with the divine alongside other devotees (*bhaktas*) meeting in spiritual togetherness (*sat-sang*). The devotee goes through all the emotions of love as at times being passionate (*mādhurya*) or in painful separation (*viraha*)” (pp. 2-3). These ideas are put forth with an intense reading of earlier scholarly works and their critical acceptance or rejection buttressed with his research findings.

The second issue that then emerges after elucidating the way *bhakti* should be understood is to explain the complex relationship between tantra and *bhakti*. The former was well established as a form of worship during the early medieval period and had had consistent patronage of the ruling elite. It had perfected the ideal of yoga and asceticism that the early *bhaktas* continued to draw on. Over a period of time, the *bhakti* strand of religiosity began to place itself in stark contrast to what the tantric yogis practiced and propagated. It is the fluidity with which some of the *bhakti* practices continued to draw on tantra, while, at the same time, beginning to question its modes of individual salvation that had been perfected by the Nāth yogis. It is the different forms of yoga (*laya* versus *hatha*) and their approaches to the divine, which these two strands of religiosity espoused, that distinguished them from each other. The author brings forth these differences and concludes to establish how a contradictory relationship between the two existed. It is further pointed out that it was only during the later medieval period that the difference between the two strands of North Indian religiosity become clear. In other words, the shift from the political patronage, institutional forms, and symbols of tantric Śaivism and Śāktism to a new, clearly established sociopolitical environment that enabled the formation of Vaiṣṇava communities took place by the seventeenth century. Burchett’s contribution in this area has been to sift out the underlying features that allowed yogic and ascetic practices to define the *bhakti* monastic or-

ders as exemplified in his case study of the Rāmānandīs and the particular figure of Agradās.

The third issue of considerable importance that Burchett raises concerns the Sufi impact on the bhakti tradition, though he notes that in some ways both were indebted, even though indirectly, to the yoga element of tantra in their own respective evolution. His major argument in this regard is that the way that North Indian *bhakti* finally emerged in the early modern period had a lot to do with what he calls a “Sufi inflection” of bhakti and its essential features. In more traditional interpretations, bhakti in India is seen to have gradually evolved responding to various strands of religious thought within the Indic context from ancient times with its spread regionally all over India. Burchett’s attempt has been to see the evolution of a particular bhakti in the regional context of eastern Rajasthan and against the Mughal Rajput sociopolitical setting that enabled Sufi elements to impact the new bhakti sensibilities in various ways. He initiates this discussion against the background of the Sultanate and Mughal rule in chapters 2 and 3, where he introduces to the readers how the new, shared Indo-Persian culture spread and alongside which there was also the spread of popular Sufi sensibilities. How the Sufi “inflection” penetrated the particular bhakti of this period is elaborated by Burchett in chapter 8 with a comparative analysis of both bhakti and Sufi literatures, which enables him to suggest that they not only had a shared conception of God but also had similar performative and communal forms of collective religious behavior that contributed to common devotional sensibilities. To make his point he emphatically writes: “We need to understand the literary-performative environment that arose during this period and, in particular, the role that Sufis played in forging a certain emotional-aesthetic culture that resonated powerfully with, and was influential in, the development of *bhakti* in North India” (p. 83).

Taking a look at the larger picture that emerges from this study, it needs to be stressed that in both the case of the evolution of bhakti and the Sufi tradition in India of this period, the local and regional contexts have to be underlined and this has indeed been done by the author. Burchett has brought before us sources that were located in particular contexts and most importantly, based on individual seekers of the divine in both traditions. It was thus dialogues between individuals and their local settings that defined the parameters of the exchanges that took place. Therefore, it is very difficult to authoritatively pinpoint and attribute the origins of these devotional sensibilities to one group or the other. Rather, one would like to see the book actually discussing multivocal sources of authority that in some cases agreed with each other while in others, disagreed and distanced themselves from each other. In other words, this book has delineated terrains of engagement at the first instance between individuals and then between larger communities of believers that projected networks of relations that cannot find a single authoritative voice. I see in this effort then a study that informs us about how religious communities were in a continual state of negotiating plurality during a period of dramatic sociopolitical change in North India. There was no option other than to redefine the “self” vis-à-vis the “other” in a relationship of understanding and not dependence for all religiosities concerned.

*A Genealogy of Devotion* successfully breaks from an Orientalist definition of religion that understands it within rigid frames of seeking “origins” and “influences” in a way that poses different strands of religiosity in competition with each other. Instead, what it suggests is that origins of religious traditions as formulated by its participants co-existed with ever-changing “factual” beginnings that need to be historically contextualized.

In an interesting essay Carl Ernst suggests that what he calls the “the polythetic approach to religion” enables scholars to avoid essentialist di-

chotomies, as it would not be “necessary to attack or defend arguments of influence or authenticity, since it is now possible to acknowledge freely that numerous examples of hybrid and multiplex symbols, practices, and doctrines can be at work in any particular religious *milieu*.”[1] I find Patton Burchett’s study suggestive of this kind of approach, as is apparent from his own statement at the beginning of the book, namely, “We would be better served to imagine that at different times, each of the various regions of India had its own distinctive, multivocal *bhakti* movement shaped by regionally and historically specific social, political, and cultural factors” (p. 2). This approach enriches the understanding of the entry of the “other” into our midst during this period of immense sociopolitical change in North India, only to make it a more vibrant social milieu that remained creative to the core in times to come.

Note

[1]. Carl W. Ernst, “Situating Sufism and Yoga,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 15, no. 1 (2005): 15-43; 20-21.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-asia>

**Citation:** Aloka Parasher-Sen. Review of Burchett, Patton. *A Genealogy of Devotion: Bhakti, Tantra, Yoga, and Sufism in North India*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. April, 2020.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54347>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.