

**Jon Keune,
Shared Devotion,
Shared Food: Equality and
the Bhakti-Caste Question
in Western India,**

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“Did bhakti traditions promote social equality? When bhakti poets taught that God welcomes all people’s devotion, did this inspire followers to combat social inequalities based on caste?” With these questions in mind, Jon Keune opens his book centred on the relationship between bhakti traditions, the topic of caste, and the perception of social equality in modern and premodern Western India. Through a multi-disciplinary approach to the analysis of bhakti-caste relations, he focuses on historical texts concerning food and commensality (drawn primarily from hagiographical stories about bhakti saints) as symbolic representations of attitudes toward caste and a wide range of everyday interactions in Indian society. The book aims to go beyond a simple analysis of historical sources and challenge current discourse about how the past of bhakti and caste is narrated.

Keune limits the scope of the research topic (although it remains within a very wide time span) to the period from 1700 until the present in Western India (centred on the area of Maharashtra state) and tries to unravel the intricate context of how the bhakti-caste discourse has changed over the centuries. In the book, he draws on his extensive knowledge regarding the Vārkarī bhakti tradition and the Marathi saint-poet Eknāth.¹ Keune’s narrowing of the research focus to mainly one of the bhakti traditions

is partly because the predominantly brahmanical traditions of Datta or Rāmdāsī have not engaged much with caste criticism. In contrast, the tradition around the figure of Saint Eknāth serves Keune as a valuable illustration of bhakti-caste tension. This focus of the book must then, however, be kept consciously in mind, lest the reader is tempted to generalise and essentialise the bhakti tradition on the basis of the Vārkarī tradition.

The book itself is divided into two major parts. The first part consists of three individual chapters representing the theoretical background and the broader context of bhakti-caste relations linked by the themes of religion, the reinterpretation of social equality in the premodern context, the history of bhakti studies, and prominent authors dealing with bhakti-caste questions.

Keune doesn’t use one overreaching theory to explain the main issues but instead reaches into a multitude of social-anthropological and historical fields to present a comprehensive reconstruction of bhakti and caste. Whether it is the concept of social equality, caste, social movement, or bhakti itself, Keune approaches them in terms of socio-cultural construction in a given historical context, which allows him to avoid the essentialist perspective taken by some other bhakti scholars.

One of the main themes of the first part of the book is processes that have led to redefining historical bhakti traditions as social movements or ideologies based on equality and democratic values. Keune recommends caution in using modern language to describe the distant past and, in this sense, presents a critique of the perception of bhakti by the prism of Western liberalism and notions of social equality promoted in Western modernity (pp. 31-39).

Keune also discusses at length the history of the term bhakti and the problematic perception of the bhakti movement as one unified tradition. Using examples from across the Indian subcontinent, he demonstrates the transformation of the use of the concept of bhakti as a broader category adopted by both Orientalists and Indian scholars – albeit pursuing different objectives – to refer to diverse traditions and

¹ Jon Keune, “Eknāth in Context: The Literary, Social, and Political Milieus of an Early Modern Saint-Poet”, *South Asian History and Culture* 6/1, 2015, 70-86.

practices (pp. 48-56). The understanding of bhakti as a common ground for “nation-building” processes in the unification of Hindu traditions had, according to Keune, a major influence on how the bhakti and caste became conceptualised in modern terms.

The main issue with applying a modern understanding to historical texts, Keune observes, is that although many regional bhakti traditions have a long history in practising social inclusion, to address them as a democratic, inclusive, and equality-promoting doctrine is a misrepresentation of the political and cultural context in which the practices historically operated. This also makes it very difficult to address whether bhakti really enables social change (or whether this is just an idea created retrospectively). Here, the reader may also ask to what extent bhakti can be spoken of as an actor that enables something itself and how this question of agency is related to the concept of bhakti understood in the past.

Keune pursues this topic more deeply in the third chapter when analysing the equality discourse about bhakti in Marathi literature from 1854 to 1950. The author sets out to capture the transformation of the bhakti discourse in the 19th century, when the question of equality begins to stand at its very centre. In this respect, Keune divides the main actors behind the transformation process into four groups. First are liberal intellectuals condemning caste in their public commentaries, although not in the context of bhakti nor much in the practical sense. Second are nationalists and literary scholars who consist of mostly conservative brahmans elevating Vārkarī works, but who do not promote social change. The third category consists of Gāthā (collections of poems and songs) editors and Vārkarī leaders who stood at the beginning of the “canonisation” of Vārkarī literature, capturing the non-elite popular discourse coming from folk production. The last and broadest category constructed by Keune is composed of subaltern critics, rationalists, and Marxist historians. This includes social reformers and activists such as (among others) Jotirāv Govindrāv Phule, who overlooked bhakti in favour of Christian mis-

sionaries and British colonialism; Gopāl Valaṅkar, who actively used bhakti as an inspiration for Dalit resistance strategies; and B. R. Ambedkar, who famously criticised the attitudes of bhakti traditions towards caste as being insufficient to produce any social change. These categories in Keune’s book probably act more as Weber’s ideal types², representing certain attitudes toward the bhakti-equality discourse in society rather than closed non-overlapping social groups. Nevertheless, this categorisation allows the author to summarise the main actors in the production (and construction) of knowledge about bhakti and its relationship to caste and equality. More interestingly, Keune delves deeper into the analysis of the bhakti-caste-equality discourse while examining equality-related terms in Vārkarī writings in Marathi (pp. 90-99). He builds his arguments around the context in which multiple emic terms were used to describe complex positions of people in society. In doing so, Keune reveals the rich linguistic equipment with which Marathi authors addressed the complex regional situation of each community. Later attempts to define these attitudes by the unified modern term “social equality”, according to Keune, only reinforced the idea of bhakti traditions as social movements that failed to fulfil modern equality aspirations.

This is where Keune shifts his attention from the general bhakti-caste discourse to the main example on which he illustrates this issue in practice: the role of food and commensality in hagiographical stories in Marathi bhakti sources – the major theme of the second part of the book. As food plays an irreplaceable role in human interactions, its sharing or non-sharing is viewed in the book as a mirror to social inter-community and inter-caste relations filled with symbolic meaning. Keune turns to the theme of food as a means of social communication in the context of religious practice, building on recent studies of the anthropology of food and commensality re-

2 Max Weber, *Methodology of Social Sciences*, New Brunswick (NJ): Transaction Publishers 2011 (first edition 1949).

lated to power relations and ideas of equality. By firstly laying out an overview of the role of food, eating habits, and regulations in Sanskrit texts, the fourth chapter serves as an introduction to the various contexts in which food is at the centre of the Hindu world structure (pp. 109-119). Then, on the hagiographical bhakti stories, Keune traces a lineage in which food and commensality represent and construct the structure of caste relations and vice versa. This relationship is most clearly manifested in stories containing brahmins and Dalits, or in the description of the divine relationship to bhaktas (devotees from all social backgrounds). In the light of these examples in hagiographic stories connected to the Vārkarī saint Eknāth, Keune opens the main question of the book's second part: What is the social function, the "social logic" behind these stories about commensality? What do they represent, and where do they lead? The fifth chapter then represents the core of the author's analysis aimed at finding the answers.

Despite the limitation of the book in its scarcity of sources regarding Vārkarī tradition, which the author himself admits, the fifth chapter is filled with a quantity of historical material from the four main collections containing stories about Eknāth's life and his caste-transgressive attitudes involving commensality. Keune shows how the ambiguous narratives and cognitive dissonances within them shaped the plastic image of the saint and represented strategies for dealing with the difficult theological and social questions of the time, the answers to which the hagiographers suggested in the direction and manner of the narrative. The ambiguity of the bhakti-caste topic in precolonial times made it also possible for various audience to be involved in the tradition. This strategic ambiguity in

hagiographic stories was then, according to Keune, blurred by western notions of equality, and with the arrival of new genres of storytelling through film and theatre, the narration began to incline to the uniformity of the story. Keune traces this part of storytelling in chapter six through an analysis of film and theatre dealing with the portrayal of Eknāth in the 19th and 20th centuries. The journey ultimately ends where the author began his thinking about the bhakti-caste and social change relationship – with the figure of B. R. Ambedkar and his shadow cast over bhakti traditions, especially in Maharashtra.

In general, the book represents a rich exploration of bhakti-caste relationships from history to the present, tracing them through examples of the hagiographic stories of Saint Eknāth and other depictions of him in the context of food and commensality. Jon Keune deftly manoeuvres between an overcritical postmodern constructionist approach and overreaching generalisations that may imply essentialism while not falling on either side of the spectrum. At the same time, one cannot escape appreciating the author's ability to capture sensitively the important details in a vast sea of broad categories in order to deliver a complex picture of the topic to the reader. By using Keune's own food metaphor, the book is like a nutritious multi-course meal at a restaurant accessible to all with an appetite for quality historical-anthropological work.

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