

The Bhakti Movement – From Where? Since When?

by
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No one connected with the India International Centre—in fact, no educated person in the whole of India—has the slightest trouble recognizing what we mean when we speak about “the bhakti movement.” And if we go on to ask, “the bhakti movement—since when?” we would seem to be still on firm, familiar ground. I doubt that many would disagree too strongly with what was said in the brochure that announced a national conference on bhakti sponsored by the Indian Council of Philosophical Research and the Tirupati-Tirumalai Devasthanams in December, 2007. I quote: “The bhakti movement began in South India around the fifth century CE, and in the next thousand years it spread northward through the subcontinent, taking on individual and distinctive forms as it moved from one area to another.”¹

But suppose we ask this same question in a different way. Suppose we ask it not historically but historiographically. Since when have we imbibed the idea that there ever was such a thing as the bhakti movement? I want to propose that the answer to

¹This article emerges from a talk I gave at the India International Centre on March 23, 2009. It was co-sponsored by the American Institute of Indian Studies, to whom I am indebted not only for that initiative but for the fellowship that made possible my visit to India in spring 2009. I am grateful to many people who gathered on that occasion, especially Allison Busch, Shrivatsa Goswami, and Kapila Vatsyayan. An earlier, somewhat different version of the talk—under almost the same title—was presented at the conference on “Celestial Love: Bhakti in Indian Tradition,” held in Tirupati on December 6-9, 2007. The exact text of the Tirupati talk has recently been published in the *Journal of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 24:4, (2007; actually, May 2009), pp. 69-90. There I also attempt to describe the interesting and sometimes rather heated discussion that ensued after I had presented the paper. I am grateful to Professor Godabarish Mishra, Member Secretary of the ICPR, for encouraging the publication of both that essay and this subsequent one. A still earlier statement of some of these thoughts comprised the first of two Birks Lectures given at McGill University on October 29-30, 2007. To Davesh Soneji and his colleagues I am indebted not only for their invitation and hospitality but for some very helpful follow-up conversations on the talk itself. /