

Hindus, the Sabbath, and Devotion

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India is a land of many faith expressions. People around the world commonly refer to these expressions as Hinduism, implying the one term adequately encompasses the wide variety of groups and sects found across India and other parts of Asia. But living in India for several years, starting in my early twenties, exposed me to new things on many different fronts.

My experiences in India quickly disabused me of the textbook definitions of religion that I had been informed of in my undergraduate studies. The variety of demonstrations of faith in India was astounding—far beyond anything I could have imagined. As the years progressed, and I learned more about some of the various faith traditions from the adherents themselves, I was particularly struck by a strand of people who called themselves *bhaktas* or devotees. Some of them were disciples of the goddess Durga, others of Ayyappa; both are common deities worshiped in the southern Indian region where I lived for some years. The way they dressed, the places they went, and the way they interacted with people was all influenced by their devotion to the deity they had chosen.

Growing up as a Seventh-day Adventist, the seventh-day Sabbath has always been part of my existence. From a young age, I understood and could demonstrate how the Bible taught that the seventh day of the week was the Sabbath. Any evidence to the contrary seemed weak or non-existent. I had also learned the value of setting aside work for one whole day of the week—something I continue to believe is beneficial and leads to real rest. Therefore, the seventh-day Sabbath held truth and meaning for me long before I lived in India.

The Sabbath and devotion would seem to naturally go together. But I had not put much thought into how those two connect, at least not in the way a Hindu might. Through my

interactions with a specific group of devotees in the west-central part of India in Pune, near Spicer Adventist University, I discovered devotion and the Sabbath in a new and profound way. The focus of this paper is that powerful encounter which demonstrates the value of intercultural theological engagement.¹

Bhakti (Devotion) an Ongoing Indian Movement and Yesu Bhaktas

Bhakti Movements in India

India has a long history of spiritual movements stemming out of and in reaction to mainstream organized faith. *Bhakti* movements have taken place throughout India, often it is argued that the earliest movements were in South India but not long after they show up in the North as well.² These movements have been diverse and have not always shared common denominators. But one strand that runs through many of them is the desire to pursue a single deity out of love, and to receive love in return.³ Often these movements exist for a time before they subside, usually in tandem with charismatic leaders who come and go. But the impetus for singular devotion remains constant with new movements cropping up frequently.

¹ The concept “intercultural theology” means different things to different people. When I use the term I am referring to the exchange of beliefs and practices concerning the God of the Bible between people from different cultural backgrounds.

² For a thorough treatment of *bhakti* historically and in its current manifestations see David N. Lorenzen, “Bhakti,” in *The Hindu World* edited by Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004). It is important to recognize that *bhakti* is typically translated as “devotion” in English though it encompasses more than that English term can convey. *Bhakti* is a singular form of devotion that results in a changed approach to everyday life and an insertion of a number of important rituals and practices geared toward the deity of choice. The *bhakta* or devotee is recognized by the wider community as a devotee by the way they look and act.

³ Julius Lipner puts it this way, “The truth is that for most Hindu devotees, the Supreme Being has all the qualities one would generally ascribe to a concerned, engaged, loving deity.” Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, Second Edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 348. Of interest to Seventh-day Adventists would be the concept of *dves-bhakti* found among some devotees. This type of *bhakti* includes a view of god as graceful and abhors any type of permanent hell as it does not fit with the understanding of a merciful god being espoused. Lipner, *Hindus*, 358. Often this singular devotion is also understood to wipe away all ill-effects of bad karma for the devotee, Lipner, *Hindus*, 267.

A legacy of these movements is an abundance of poetry and songs written by women and men who were searching for a deeper and more meaningful relationship with the divine.⁴ These poems and songs are often connected to stories of various deities such as Krishna or Rama⁵ as they are found in the *Mahabharata*,⁶ *Ramayana*,⁷ and *Bhagavata Purana*.⁸ There is evidence of *bhakti* as early as the production of the *Svestavatara Upanishad*, around 500 BCE, where the term is first known to have been written down.⁹ The *Bhagavad Gita* also contains some of the earliest references to devotion as a path to *moksha*;¹⁰ in many ways the *Gita* serves as the foundation for *bakhti* as it is presently understood, though it contains limited examples of actual devotion.¹¹ It was the later movements which gave tangible life to the ideal portrayed in the *Gita*. Much of the extant secondary literature on *bhakti* movements focuses on the movements of the fifth to eleventh centuries, and some in the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. This is a result of the rich textual output of these movements. But there have been countless other *bhakti* movements right up into the present that have not received as much research focus, partly due to the lack of textual works.¹²

⁴ For a sampling of *bhakti* devotional literature see Andrew Schelling, ed. *The Oxford Anthology of Bhakti Literature* (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2011). For more on the background of these poems, songs, and the author's see Karen Pechilis Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 18.

⁵ These two manifestations, or *avatara*, of Vishnu are probably the most common deities chosen by devotees to follow although followers of the goddess, in many different forms, is also common, Lorenzen, "Bhakti," 200.

⁶ The *Mahabharata* contains the more prominent text of the *Bhagavad Gita* but has other stories that feature in devotional movements as well, Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, 17.

⁷ Lipner, *Hindus*, 154.

⁸ For more on the relationship between *bhakti* movements and the *Bhagavata Purana* see Lorenzen, "Bhakti," 193-195.

⁹ Lorenzen, "Bhakti," 187.

¹⁰ *Moksha* is the concept of reaching a point when a person becomes one with the force of the universe and ceases to be reborn on earth or in any other realm. There are a variety of technical definitions that differ depending on which school of thought is doing the defining.

¹¹ Lorenzen, "Bhakti," 188. Lipner gives a helpful comparison of *bhakti* as portrayed in the *Bhagavad Gita* with other later examples such as the *bhakti* of the *Rasa Lila* (a type of reenactment of the stories of certain deities), see Lipner, *Hindus*, 282-284.

¹² Lorenzen argues that "Today *bhakti* is the single most important element of both Hindu and Sikh religious traditions." Lorenzen, "Bhakti," 185. Lipner claims that "We can now go on to consider the most popular path to

In more recent times there has been a rise in Hindu devotees who encounter Christ, either through Christians, other Hindu devotees, or even via dreams. These devotees often begin to steer their devotion in the direction of Christ, which has taken on myriad forms with much diversity and little organization making it somewhat hard to describe the movements in general terms. This next section of this paper provides background and an overview of some *Yesu bhakti* movements in India.

Yesu Bhaktas

It is beyond the scope of this paper to present all the historical manifestations and movements toward Christ among Hindus. Some of these movements originated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; though often the movements at that time tended to understand Jesus as a human guru worth reading about and following but not understood as divine. But by the 1920s up through the 1970s there was an intense outpouring of Indian theological material exploring the possibilities of learning from Hindu devotional movements in combination with a biblically faithful devotion to Christ as divine.¹³ In more recent times movements have sprung up that take Christ to be divine and limit their devotion to Him alone as opposed to other possible deities.¹⁴ They tend to have a high view of the Bible, especially the New Testament, while still showing interest in some Hindu texts and practices especially of a

salvation or spiritual fulfillment followed in Hinduism today, that of devotion or *bhakti* to a deity.” Lipner, *Hindus*, 342.

¹³ See for example A. J. Appasamy, ed., *Temple Bells: Readings from Hindu Religious Literature* (Bangalore, India: I.J.A Publications, 2001). A. J. Appasamy, *Christianity as Bhakti Marga: A Study of the Johannine Doctrine of Love* (Madras, India: The Christian Literature Society, 1926). This is a more recently published version of a compilation of poems and songs that Appasamy, a Christian, published in 1930. The classic text on Indian theology during this time period is Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Revised Edition (Delhi, India: ISPCK, 1975).

¹⁴ For more on this see Dayanand Bharati, *Living Water and Indian Bowl* (Delhi, India: ISPCK, 2004). See especially his chapter “Christ’s Bhaktas in Modern India.”

more devotional nature.¹⁵ Many *Yesu Bhaktas* are devoted to Jesus in an individual manner and not part of a larger group of faithful believers, since there are often no other devotees of Jesus around them.¹⁶ In some cases, however, there are groups of people who have chosen to be devoted to Jesus as a gathered community—usually made up of extended family and friends.¹⁷ The main example I use for this paper is such a group.

Many of the *Yesu bhaktas* come from higher caste homes which have typically been reluctant or outright antagonistic toward organized Christianity, which is dominated by low-caste and outcaste members. *Yesu bhaktas* often do not feel comfortable coming to churches where little devotional activity is displayed or do not see this as a necessity in faithfully following Jesus. Typically, these movements are also reluctant to involve foreigners and rarely take any form of financial help from non-Indians.¹⁸

The *bhaktas* I became friends with in Pune had originally been disciples of Krishna.¹⁹ This had involved regular practices directed toward Krishna, such as visiting temples in their local area, doing regular *puja* toward Krishna at home, and making pilgrimages to sacred sites

¹⁵ An example of this is described in John B. Carman and Chilkuri Vasantha Rao, *Christians in South Indian Villages, 1959-2009: Decline and Revival in Telangana* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), chap. 8. The title of the chapter is “Christian Adaptations of Hindu Practices.”

¹⁶ There have been a number of major studies of *Yesu bhaktas* done in India over the past 45 years. Kaj Baago published a few works on this in the mid-Twentieth century. Kaj Baago, *The Movement Around Subba Rao: A Study of the Hindu-Christian Movement around K. Subba Rao in Andhra Pradesh* (Bangalore, India: The Christian Literature Society, 1968). Kaj Baago, *Pioneers of Indigenous Christianity* (Madras, India: The Christian Literature Society, 1969). Two monographs that have been published in more recent times are Herbert E. Hoefler, *Churchless Christianity* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001). Dasan Jeyaraj, *Followers of Christ Outside the Church in Chennai, India: A Socio-Historical Study of a Non-Church Movement* (Secunderabad, India: KEEANS, 2010).

¹⁷ This fits with the historical *bhakti* movements that sought the company of “like-minded practitioners, called *satsaṅga*” which created a space for encouragement and advice as one practiced devotion. Lipner, *Hindus*, 365. For an example of *Yesu bhaktas* who fit this description see Darren Duerksen, *Ecclesial Identities in a Multi-Faith Context: Jesus Truth-Gatherings (Yeshu Satsangs) among Hindus and Sikhs in Northwest India* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015).

¹⁸ For more on why this is the case see Bharati, *Living Water*, chap. 2. See also J. Paul Pennington, *Christian Barriers to Jesus: Conversations and Questions from the Indian Context* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2017).

¹⁹ Krishna is a deity that has garnered large devotional followings throughout history. For more on this see Edwin F. Bryant, ed., *Krishna* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007).

associated with Krishna such as Mathura and Vrindavan.²⁰ Like other *bhaktas*, they were singular in their devotion—choosing not to worship any other deity than the one they had chosen. Their devotion was serious, to the point of making sure the rest of their lives revolved around their dedication to the deity rather than the other way around. When they encountered Jesus, this devotional attitude remained for the most part but shifted toward Jesus. However, they have found it hard to replace some of the aspects of devotion that were so crucial in their previous devotion toward Krishna.²¹ Devotion at home was easier. They often read their Bibles, pray to God, and sing Bible-based songs. But replacing other details of devotion such as visiting sites has been difficult. They do not attend churches because of their understanding that churches are made up of low-caste Indians who have Westernized their faith and abandoned their Indian heritage. When I met this group, they were still early in their transition from being devoted to Krishna to following Jesus and searching for meaningful ways to demonstrate their devotion. It was within this context that the Sabbath became significant for them and was filled with additional powerful meaning for me.

Seventh-day Adventists and the Sabbath

Not long after my initial encounter with this *bhakta* group in Pune, which I will return to below, I worked on a research project trying to locate Adventist approaches to the Sabbath that emphasized devotion. I learned a lot about Adventist thought and understanding of the Sabbath. I categorized my findings into areas in which Adventists had heavily emphasized the Sabbath in the literature which I read. I scoured the Internet, the James White Library, as well as the

²⁰ Mathura is believed to have been the birth place of Krishna and contains many important temples in connection to this belief. Vrindavan is a town where it is believed Krishna grew up and where many of the stories recorded about Krishna in the *Bhagavata Purana* take place. Both cities are frequented by Hindu pilgrims on a regular basis.

²¹ Prentiss lists out “praise, prayer, meditation, and self-discipline” as all important aspects of a *bhaktas* spiritual regimen. Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, 22.

archives of the Center for Adventist Research during a brief research trip to Andrews University. What I found was both reassuring and disturbing. Adventist writers had produced much of great value in relation to the Sabbath, but there was little on the topic I was pursuing. Adventists had very little material that discussed the Sabbath as a day of devotion. There were a lot of daily devotion books with chapters on the Sabbath, but few discussions of how the Sabbath related to devotion for a devotee of God.²²

This is not to argue the literature was totally devoid of the topic. There were a few examples that leaned toward devotional thinking.²³ Joanne and Richard Davidson, professors and scholars for many years at Andrews University, have long emphasized looking into and putting into practice some Jewish rituals for the Sabbath that certainly aid in keeping the Sabbath time devotional.²⁴ These examples were helpful as I continued to pursue a more devotional approach to the Sabbath and as I shared these with my friends in India.

Generally, though, Adventists approached the Sabbath from an apologetical stance. There is a long history of trying to convince those outside of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination

²² I came up with the following taxonomy to organize the literature on the Sabbath. 1) Creation focused, often written to prove the Sabbath was created by God from the beginning, also often discussed in the context of science and religion debates. 2) Commandment or Law focused, much of the literature fell into this category which typically was attempts to defend the fourth commandment as still binding. 3) Historical focus. This genre focused on tracing the Sabbath through post-biblical history, especially the transference of Sabbath from the seventh day to Sunday, though also some work has been done on groups who retained a belief in the seventh day Sabbath through history. 4) Theological focus. This loci tends to be more abstract in its style. Books and articles in this genre focus on the meanings of the Sabbath throughout Scripture, often in a systematized or semi-systematized form. Outside of these four areas I added worship focus and ritual focus as potential areas of weakness that I found far less in Adventist literature. There was nearly nothing of substance on rituals and the Sabbath. I presented my findings in a paper entitled “Seventh-day Adventist Theology in the South Asian Context: Considering the Sabbath as a Test Case,” at the Spicer Adventist University Centennial Theological Conference held on January 28, 2015.

²³ The following examples include aspects of Sabbath description that fits very well with the devotional beliefs and practices found among Hindus. Niels-Erik Andreassen, *Rest and Redemption: A Study of the Biblical Sabbath* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1978), 12, 60. Raoul Dederen, “Reflections on a Theology of the Sabbath,” in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, edited by (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 297, 301. Katsumi Higashide, “Meanings of the Sabbath for Worship in the Seventh-day Adventist Church,” (ThD dissertation, Boston University, 2010).

²⁴ For many years both Joanne and Richard Davidson have both taught students and actually demonstrated the practices together with students to help them grasp an aspect of the Sabbath that many Adventists have not fully recognized or understood.

that the Bible upholds the Sabbath on the seventh day and that this will be a sign of the faithful in the end of time. While this belief is important, the Sabbath is more than an end-time litmus test, as Sigve Tonstad has ably demonstrated in his book *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day*. When it comes to the Sabbath's potential, there is a "portfolio" of meanings and practices that can be explored.²⁵

Learning from *Bhaktas*

While much of the *bhakti* found throughout the history of India would be deemed idol worship, and rightfully so, there is still something important to grasp from this history.²⁶ Human beings throughout the world periodically turn toward a more intense and focused devotion of a deity or ideology because they feel something is missing in their current life journey. The *bhakti* movements of India often display this need. Commonly they lean toward one deity while moving away from the multi-manifested approach to the transcendent that occupies many Indians.²⁷ And the devotional movements have often been focused on the love of the deity—both from the deity to devotee and the devotee to the deity. This has sometimes resulted in new social movements that opposed the oppression of women or low-caste people, even periodically led by women and low-caste people,²⁸ though this is often short-lived as others in positions of power recognize the movement as influential and swoop in to claim the movement as their own.²⁹ But this distinctly focused devotion is powerful and life-transforming, invigorated by profound poetry and song writing along with intentional rituals.

²⁵ Sigve Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 27.

²⁶ The use of iconography in devotional movements is well-attested to throughout India, Lorenzen, "Bhakti," 186.

²⁷ For more on the tendency of a number of *bhakti* movements to trend towards a type of monotheism see Lorenzen, "Bhakti," 191.

²⁸ Lorenzen, "Bhakti," 207.

²⁹ While certain writers have emphasized the counter-cultural *bhakti* movements of history the reality is that many *bhakti* movements have taken place within the social hierarchies already present without much disturbance to existing social dynamics. Lorenzen, "Bhakti," 186. See also Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, 29. There are exceptions to this, however, that are significant in Indian history.

The devotees I met were extraordinary in their devotion to Jesus. They had tapped into their long history of devotional practice and directed it toward the deity described in the Bible. To match these disciples' devotional intensity was a new challenge for me, as someone who had believed and attempted to follow the God of the Bible since childhood. While one could question the realistic longevity of such devotion, there was still something that drew me to the devotees' piety of the God I had familiarized myself with for decades.

The Sabbath and *Bhakti*

One Friday evening I paid a visit to my *bhakti* friends. I did not visit often as both they and I believed it best for the foreign presence within the group to be held to a minimum. A few young Adventist Indian friends who were visiting with this group once or twice a week had introduced me to them. Together we had developed a plan of reading the Bible stories chronologically with this group because they had expressed a desire to learn the stories of the God they were now devoted to. In the process they had been introduced to the Sabbath through the story of creation. At the time it had not conjured up much discussion on the Sabbath. This particular week we were planning on continuing the stories; we were at some point in the narrative of Abraham, and so I arrived prepared to share about him.

When we arrived, the group eagerly welcomed us. They immediately sat us down and pleaded with us to tell them more about the Sabbath. We asked what prompted their sudden interest in the Sabbath. Apparently that week, several strangers visited with them—women who advised them that the Sabbath was the day God desired special devotion. The women did not stay long and had not returned, and our friends could not tell us much about them. Unprepared for this sudden turn, we shared as best we thought how and left there stunned. It was out of this event that I began to recognize the Sabbath was indeed a day of devotion.

It was then I started on the research project concerning Sabbath and devotion, and began sharing with the *bhaktas* through my young Adventist friends my findings. The research prompted several new ideas about the Sabbath and devotion that I picked up from some in the *bhakti* group itself. Members of the group told me it was fine that the Sabbath was one of God's commands but that they did not need a command to see its importance. They were more interested to know if the Bible had stories about the Sabbath and songs or poems about the Sabbath. Suddenly Psalm 92, a song written specifically for the Sabbath day, became so much more meaningful to me and to them as I shared it in this setting.³⁰ It was a song written by a "devotee" of God and it extolled the love of their God, while connecting it all by way of the Sabbath. The author of Psalm 92 demonstrated that these Hindus were not the first to see the Sabbath as a day of devotion, not just a day of rest, or to worship. But that it involved a day of utmost devotion—singing praises, playing instruments, and declaring God's glory through poetical exaltation.

In the New Testament, the stories of Jesus' approach to the Sabbath took on fresh meaning when read in the context of this group—stories of a God of love who deserves our unfailing devotion in return for His caring attitude expressed so meaningfully on the Sabbath through acts such as healing. The group had been searching for something deeper in their devotional journey with Jesus. Used to an abundance of devotional practices and concepts in their devotion to Krishna, they were ready to transfer that devotion to Jesus. And the Sabbath became their primary devotional space in time to do this. It was a powerful "sanctuary in time"

³⁰ In my research on the Sabbath and devotion I was delighted to find a gem of a book written by Richard Davidson entitled, *A Love Song for the Sabbath* which is probably the most devotionally oriented book on the Sabbath written by an Adventist that I came across. Richard M. Davidson, *A Love Song for the Sabbath* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1988).

for them and gave them the latitude for devotion they had been wanting.³¹ They moved toward creating rituals, such as the inclusion of lighting incense at the beginning of the Sabbath which burned continuously until the Sabbath ended.³² I hinted at incorporating some Jewish practices but never was able to find out what they decided in this regard.³³

Not long after this group began their quest to incorporate the Sabbath into their devotion of Jesus, I moved from India. The last I knew they were rigorously demonstrating their devotion to God on the Sabbath by singing *bhajans* in honor of Jesus throughout the Sabbath day and often fasting as well.³⁴ One thing I know for certain is that I continue to strive to have the singular devotion to God that I learned from this group and desire to more appropriately allow the Sabbath to be a deeply meaningful part of this journey. I contend that my description of the devotional life of these *bhaktas* does not do them justice nor fully provide the depth of their experience.³⁵ Spending time with this group allowed for a better grasp of yet another powerful reason God created and gifted us the Sabbath, a day set aside for singular devotion. Increasing our capacity to observe, listen, and interact with people pursuing the God of the Bible from backgrounds different than our own is a valuable process that needs to be engaged more

³¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1951).

³² For many Hindus ritual is absolutely crucial to their faith journey, often more important than any other particular aspect. Part of the reason for this is that it makes tangible the love of the deity towards the devotee as well as bring the deity down into the everyday life of the devotee, Lipner, *Hindus*, 328. This is not unlike the ritual system God provided for Israel in the Old Testament.

³³ The use of rituals and how they can play a positive role in the faith journey of a devotee of Christ deserves far more reflection and research than Adventists have thus far engaged in. Prentiss reminds her readers, commenting on Hindu *bhaktas* that the tangible things of everyday life are often brought into the ritual life of the devotee in order to connect the unseen deity with life in the present. Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, 27-28. Adventists have long debated what activities are appropriate for good Sabbath keeping, but this is often discussed in a setting or frame of mind that is different than the rituals engaged by devotees. Embodied rituals meant to draw people into a tangible experience with God is not something easily found in Adventist literature. The closest thing I have been able to locate is Mary-Ellen Colon, *From Sundown to Sundown: How to Keep the Sabbath...and Enjoy It!* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2008).

³⁴ Demonstrating devotion through the singing of praises toward God is very much a part of the *bhakti* traditions of Hindus, see Lipner, *Hindus*, 284.

³⁵ As Prentiss reminds her readers, the English term devotion is itself inadequate to describe what *bhakti* actually is, Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, 24.

intentionally by Adventists. This example of the Sabbath among *Yesu bhaktas* in India demonstrates, in a small way, the possibilities of such interactions.