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Prahlād the Pious Demon

The story of Prahlād, the pious demon, is a narrative about the transgression of religious and social categories.¹ Although Prahlād is the son and heir apparent of the demon king Hiraṇyakaśipu, he becomes, by an accident of fate, a devotee of Vishnu, the Lord of the gods. His father and gurus repeatedly try to correct Prahlād's inversion of traditional religious and social norms, but to no avail. In the end, Hiraṇyakaśipu decides to kill his errant son, but the Man-lion avatar of Vishnu emerges from a pillar of the palace and kills the demon king instead, tearing open his chest with his nails.

This story is one of the great favorites of puranic literature. Most of the major Puranas tell often quite different versions of it. By far the most popular and influential version, however, has been that of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. Largely through the medium of this text and texts derived from it, the story has become a basic part of bhakti religion. In North India the story has long been popular not only among the followers of *saguṇ* bhakti, those who worship anthropomorphic and theiomorphic deities, but also among the followers of *nirguṇ* bhakti, those who worship an ineffable divine Absolute.

The story of Prahlād is, on the face of it, an unlikely theme for a *nirguṇī* storyteller, since this demon devotee is ultimately saved by one of the quintessential manifestations of the *saguṇī* conception of the Divine, the Man-lion avatar of Vishnu. Nonetheless, many well-known *nirguṇī* authors such Kabīr, Raidās, Bhīkhā Sāhab, Gurū Amar Dās, Rajjab, and Jan Gopāl not only often mention Prahlād in passing, they also dedicate entire songs and narratives (*charitras*) to telling his story. Why did the Prahlād story appeal to these *nirguṇī* authors? And what changes did these authors introduce in their versions of the story to adapt it to a *nirguṇī* context?

Nāmadev, the well-known Maharashtra poet-saint, is a transitional figure whose songs are revered by the followers of both *saguṇī* and *nirguṇī* traditions. Most scholars believe he flourished in the first half of

the fourteenth century, but a somewhat later date is also possible. Many of his songs contain passing references to Prahlād. Three of them are mostly or wholly dedicated to telling Prahlād's story. The oldest surviving version of the best known of these songs is found in the Sikh *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. Both the narrative incidents mentioned and the specific vocabulary used in this song attributed to Nāmadev suggest that it served as the model for other songs about Prahlād by later *nirgunī* poets:²

Śaṇḍa and Marka went to complain:

"Prahlād won't study. We're worn out trying.
He calls on Ram and claps his hands,
all our students are getting corrupted;

*Over and over he recites Ram's Name;
Hari alone he keeps in his heart."*

The queen went to plead with her son:

"The king controls all the earth,
You are his son, Prahlād, yet you
reject his word and resolve on another."

The evil ministers met together:

"To the years he's got left let's fix a limit."³
The terrors of mountains,⁴ water and fire,
King Ram repelled their magic power.

(The demon) drew his sword and sneered:

"Tell me, who will protect you now?"
"Hari, the yellow-clad Lord of the universe,
Dwells within the pillar of stone."

His claws tore Hiranyakaśipu apart.

The Lord protected both men and gods.
Says Nāmadev: the Man-lion fills my thoughts
It's Ram who grants me freedom from fear.

Probably the oldest song about Prahlād by a fully *nirgunī* poet is a *pad* attributed to Kabīr. It appears, with some textual differences, in both the Rajasthani *Kabīr granthāvalī* and the Sikh *Gurū Granth Sāhib* collections. It is also found in Gopāladās' *Sarvāṅgī* collection and in several unpublished manuscripts containing miscellaneous songs by Kabīr and other *nirgunī* poets. A modern collection of Kabīr bhajans contains yet another version.⁵ The *Kabīr granthāvalī* version reads as follows:

"Sir, I'll not give up Ram's Name.
Why should I study other things?"

Prahād set off to class to study,
taking with him many classmates.
"Why do you teach me silly nonsense?
Write on my slate just Lord Gopāl.

Śaṇḍa and Marka told the king,
who had them fetch Prahād in chains.
"Stop this habit of saying 'Ram.'
Respect what I say and I'll let you go."

"Why do you threaten me time after time?
Ram made the water, land and mountains.
Go ahead and tie me, beat me, burn me,
to abandon Ram would insult my guru."

His angry father drew his sword:
"Tell me, who will protect you now?"
Vishnu burst out from within the pillar,
and clawed Hiraṇyakaśipu open.

The Supreme Being, the highest God,
became the Man-lion for the sake of bhakti.
Kabīr says: No one can reach His shore.
Time and again He rescued Prahād.

Another of Kabīr's songs, this one found only in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, contains the following verse about Prahād:⁶

Hari is the sole Lord of all bliss.
The Guru has given me His Name.
He saved Prahād's saintly vow,
And clawed Hiraṇyakaśipu open.

The fact that neither of these two songs occurs in the more strictly *nirguṇī Kabīr-bījak* collection of the Kabīr Panth is probably significant. As Linda Hess (1987: 111–41) has shown, the *Kabīr granthāvalī* and *Gurū Granth Sāhib* are somewhat more open to the influence of *saguṇ* bhakti than is the *Bījak*. It also seems to be the case that many followers of *nirguṇ* bhakti in Rajasthan knew the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* well and often

adapted its stories, including that of Prahlād, to their own purposes, as will be argued in more detail below.

A somewhat longer composition (13–15 verses of four lines each) about Prahlād is attributed to Kabīr’s brother-disciple Raidās. It is sometimes called the *Prahlād charita*. W. M. Callewaert and P. G. Friedlander have recently edited and translated this text.⁷ It identifies Hiraṇyakaśipu as the king of the city of Multan, and Prahlād as his son. The father asks his son what he has learned in school. Prahlād says the only thing worth learning is the name of Ram, all else is simply entanglement in earthly existence. This response angers Hiraṇyakaśipu, and he tells Prahlād to abandon all worship of Ram. Prahlād refuses. Hiraṇyakaśipu calls his courtiers, and they recommend that Prahlād be killed. Prahlād is put in fire and in a well but is not harmed. Hiraṇyakaśipu boasts of his possession of a boon of being indestructible by day or by night, on the ground or in the sky. Prahlād tells him that Ram is in everything, in me and in you. Hiraṇyakaśipu replies: “If Ram is in this pillar, then why doesn’t he free you?” In the twilight, the Man-lion lifts Hiraṇyakaśipu onto his thigh and tears him open with his nails.

Prahlād’s story was particularly popular among the early Sikhs of the Panjab. In addition to the already cited songs of Nāmadev and Kabīr, the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* contains three songs by the third guru, Amar Dās (1552–74), that narrate the story of Prahlād.⁸ Many other songs by Amar Dās and other Sikh gurus contain passing references to Prahlād’s story. It is also retold at some length in the Sikh *Dasam Granth Sāhib* (1983–86, 1:388–95). Amar Dās’ first song makes an interesting comparison with those of Nāmadev and Kabīr:

“On my slate write ‘Hari Govinda Gopāl.’
 Anything else and Death will snare you.
 The Satguru gives me his protection.
 Hari, the giver of bliss, is with me.”

*As taught, Prahlād repeats the Name.
 The child doesn’t fear any threat.*

His mother tells him: “Dear Prahlād,
 give up Ram’s Name and save your life.”
 Prahlād says: “Listen, mother, I’ll never
 abandon the Name my guru taught.”

Śaṇḍa and Marka went to complain:
 “Prahlād corrupts himself and his mates.”

In the evil court a plot was hatched,
but the Rāghus' king was Prahād's protector.

The arrogant demon raised his sword:
"How will your Hari save you now?"
The fearsome form burst from the pillar,
clawed the demon and saved Prahād.

Hari cares for the needs of his saints.
He saved generations of Prahād's descendants.
Says Nānak: The guru teaches the cure.
Ram's Name saves his saints.

A fourth song by Gurū Amar Dās, though dedicated only in part to the Prahād story, contains two verses that help explain the fascination of *nirguṇī* poets with the story of Prahād. These verses compare Prahād's identity as a demon (*daitya*) with the low-caste identity of two other famous devotees, Kabīr and Nāmādev:⁹

Nāmādev the tailor and Kabīr the weaver,
obtained the goal through the perfect guru.
They recognized the word of Brahman
and lost their egoism and their caste.
Gods and men sing their songs.
Brother, no one is able to destroy them.

The demon's son knew only the One
and wouldn't study karma and dharma.
He met the guru who made him pure.
Every day he recited the Name.
He studied the One; he learned the Name.
No other thing entered his mind.

As I will argue in more detail below, this comparison between demon and low-caste status, is present, at least implicitly, in all *nirguṇī* retellings of Prahād's story and is implied even in the more socially conservative retelling of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*.

Although collections of *nirguṇī* poetry from Eastern India contain many passing references to Prahād, more detailed allusions to his story are rare. The following lines from a song of Bhīkhā Sāhab (on *gaddī* 1760–91 C.E.), a poet of the Bhurākūrā (Ghazipur district) monastic lineage, constitute the only detailed reference I have found in an eastern collection:¹⁰

O Ram, do me this kindness now.
Do it for me as you always do.

Hiraṇyakaśipu tormented his son,
But Prahlād firmly held on to the Name.

With anger he raised his sword to kill him.
The Man-lion appeared and burst his belly.

It is among the followers of the Dādū Panth of Rajasthān that Prahlād's story attained its greatest popularity in a *nirguṇī* context. We have already noted the inclusion of a song about Prahlād in the *Kabīr granthāvalī*, a Dādū Panthī collection of Kabīr's songs and verses. Similarly, the early Dādū Panthī poet Rajjab often refers to Prahlād, as in this verse in *chhappay* meter that describes the cruel ordeals that Hiraṇyakaśipu inflicted on Prahlād:¹¹

For the saint water held no danger.
Buried under ground Prahlād felt no pain.
He was thrown from the mountain and didn't die.
The many perils had no effect.

With the Name on his lips as an antidote,
the poison's evil had no effect.
Prahād shone like gold as he sat
with auntie Ghūnghachī in the fire.

When the sword [hit] the pillar the Man-lion emerged
and killed [the demon], a father and foe.
Rajjab says: "He gave his darshan
and easily saved his young devotee.

One of the most ambitious and most popular *nirguṇī* retellings of the Prahlād story is the *Prahlād charitra* of Jan Gopāl, a Dādū Panthī sadhu who lived in Rajasthan in the early part of the seventeenth century. Jan Gopāl also wrote a *Dhruv charitra* and a *Jaḍ Bharat charitra*, as well as a hagiographical life of Dādū Dayāl and many shorter compositions. Manuscripts of most of these texts, particularly the three *charitras*, are quite numerous in the manuscript collections of Rajasthan. A critical edition and translation of the *Prahlād charitra* is included in this book.

Why would a writer of the Dādū Panth — one of the principal bastions of *nirguṇī* tradition — choose to compose major retellings of

the stories not only of Prahlaḍ, but also of Dhruv and Jaḍ Bharat, all three puranic legends closely associated with the *saguṇī* tradition? In his *Dhruv charitra*, Jan Gopāl explicitly states that he based his account on the archetypal *saguṇī* text, the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. From the close correspondence of the plots and several specific passages, it is clear that the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* was also the principal source for Jan Gopāl's *Prahilāḍ charitra* and for his *Jaḍ Bharat charitra*.

One factor that helps explain why Jan Gopāl chose these three *saguṇī* heroes is suggested by his biography, sparse though it may be.¹² From it we learn that Jan Gopāl was already some sort of begging sadhu when he first met Dādū, and that he apparently came from a Vaishya family. Taken together these "facts" suggest that Jan Gopāl was originally a follower of *saguṇī* Vaishnava tradition and was probably well-acquainted with the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* before becoming a follower of Dādū. Apparently this *saguṇī* background continued to influence Jan Gopāl's religious beliefs and preferences even after his becoming Dādū's disciple.

A second factor in Jan Gopāl's fondness for Prahlaḍ is, as we have seen, the general popularity of this story in *nirguṇī* as well as *saguṇī* tradition, particularly in western India. To a somewhat lesser extent, the story of Dhruv also appealed to both *saguṇī* and *nirguṇī* poets. Although complete songs about Dhruv similar to those about Prahlaḍ are not found in *nirguṇī* collections, both these mythical devotees are frequently mentioned in them. The complete word index to the large collection of the songs of Dādū, Kabīr, Nāmadev, Raidās and Haradās, Sundaradās, and Gorakh recently published by Winand Callewaert and Bart Op de Beeck (1991) lists twenty-seven references to Prahlaḍ (Nāmadev 9, Kabīr 7, Raidās 4, Haradās 2, Dādū 1, Sundaradās 4) and twenty-two references to Dhruv (Nāmadev 9, Kabīr 2, Raidās 2, Haradās 3, Dādū 2, Sundaradās 4). Often the two are named together.

A third possible factor has to do with the social ideology espoused by the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, the main source for Jan Gopāl's *nirguṇī* retellings of the stories of Prahlaḍ, Dhruv and Jaḍ Bharat. In the context of *saguṇī* bhakti, the social ideology of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* is exceptionally liberal and much closer to *nirguṇī* ideology than most other *saguṇī* texts. An excellent article by Thomas J. Hopkins (1968) collects together many passages from the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* that demonstrate this liberality. Hopkins does, however, somewhat overstate his case.¹³ Although *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* does offer salvation even to Shudras, women, and Untouchables, it also strongly supports the hierarchical social ideology of *varṇāśramadharmā*.

In the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (1971), the story of Prahlāda occupies most of book seven. This book is divided into fifteen “Discourses” and has a total of 750 verses.¹⁴ The portion of book seven actually dedicated directly to the Prahlāda story ends at verse 47 of discourse 10, making a total of 492 verses. My critical edition of Jan Gopāl’s *Prahlād charitra* is divided into eighteen sections (the division into sections varies somewhat in the different manuscripts). The base text has a total of 207 verses and the text with all interpolations added has 304¾ verses.¹⁵ In other words, the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* version of the story contains considerably more verses than even the interpolated text of the *Prahlād charitra*.

The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* telling of the story of Prahlāda was, as has been noted, almost certainly the main source for Jan Gopāl’s *Prahlād charitra*. The close correspondence between the content and order of the individual episodes in the narrative portions of the two texts as well as the presence of several parallel passages in the didactic sections are clear indications of Jan Gopāl’s dependence on the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*.¹⁶

In the case of the songs of Nāmadev, Kabīr, Raidās, Gurū Amar Dās, Rajjab, and Bhūkhā Sāhab, it is likely that their ultimate source is the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. The poets also borrowed from each other, however, with Nāmadev’s song being the first of the series. They may also have borrowed from other, now lost, vernacular and oral sources. The narrative incidents mentioned in the songs are too few to be certain about the exact relation of the songs to the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, but almost all the incidents that appear in the songs also occur in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. One interesting exception — found in Kabīr, Raidās, Gurū Amar Dās, and Jan Gopāl, and apparently not in *any* Sanskrit Purana — is the reference to Prahlād writing one or more names of Vishnu on his school-boy’s slate.

The many retellings of Prahlād’s story in Sanskrit texts have been compared and analyzed in historical, structural and religious terms by Paul Hacker (1959), Madeleine Biardeau (1975), and Deborah A. Soifer (1991). One common denominator of all these retellings is what Sheldon Pollock (1991a, 38) has aptly called “an established constellation of mythological components: an ensuing threat of cosmic evil; the intervention of the divine and its transmutation into a preternatural form that circumvents the boon’s apparent all-inclusiveness. . . .”

Where the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, *Prahlād charitra*, and *nirguṇī* song versions of the story most dramatically depart from this constellation of mythological components — and from most earlier versions of the story — is in the central role played by the paradoxical figure of Prahlād, the pious demon.¹⁷ Earlier versions of the story mostly narrate the struggle

between Hiraṇyakaśipu and the Man-lion. Several of them omit or barely mention Prahlaḍ's role. In the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and the various *nirguṇī* retellings, however, it is Prahlaḍ and not the Man-lion who becomes both the victim and the hero of the story. The Man-lion is little more than a *deus ex machina* who comes in at the end to put an end to Prahlaḍ's suffering.¹⁸

According to the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (1971, 7.1–10), the story of Prahlaḍa begins with a curse made against Jaya and Vijaya, two heavenly attendants of Vishnu, by the childlike sons of Brahmā led by Sanaka. Jaya and Vijaya are cursed to become incarnate first as the demons (*asuras* or *daityas*) Hiraṇyakaśipu and Hiraṇyākṣa, then as the demons (*rākṣasas*) Rāvaṇa and Kumbhakarna, and finally as the Kshatriya villains Śiśupāla and Dantavakra. Each of these figures will be killed by an avatar of Vishnu: Hiraṇyākṣa by the Boar avatar,¹⁹ Hiraṇyakaśipu by the Man-lion avatar, Rāvaṇa and Kumbhakarna by Rama, and Śiśupāla and Dantavakra by Krishna.

Hiraṇyakaśipu decides to declare war on Vishnu and his human devotees after the Boar avatar kills his brother Hiraṇyākṣa. Hiraṇyakaśipu first goes to Mount Mandhara to practice asceticism. Meanwhile Indra invades the world of the demons and carries off Hiraṇyakaśipu's pregnant wife. The sage Nārada prevents Indra from killing her and takes her to his ashram where he teaches her divine wisdom. She eventually forgets these lessons, but her unborn child also hears them and is born as a great devotee of Vishnu. This child is Prahlaḍa.

The power of Hiraṇyakaśipu's asceticism eventually begins to upset the universe. The gods go to Brahmā to warn him against what is happening. Brahmā goes to Hiraṇyakaśipu and offers him a boon. Hiraṇyakaśipu chooses a boon that he hopes will make him immortal and unconquerable. After Hiraṇyakaśipu returns home, Nārada returns his wife to him and Prahlaḍa is born.

Meanwhile, Hiraṇyakaśipu attacks the gods, occupies heaven, and takes over the palace of Indra. The gods go to Vishnu to complain, and he tells them not to worry (*ibid.*, 7.4.28): "When the demon seeks to harm his own high-souled son, Prahlaḍa, . . . I shall slay him. . . ."

Hiraṇyakaśipu appoints Śaṇḍa and Marka, the two sons of his own guru Śukra, to be the teachers of Prahlaḍa and the other demon boys. One day Hiraṇyakaśipu places Prahlaḍa in his lap and asks him (*ibid.*, 7.5.4–5): "Tell me, my child, what you regard as good." Prahlaḍa replies that "one should go to the woods and take refuge in Śrī Hari."

Prahlaḍa is returned to his two teachers with the warning that they had better see to it that he is properly instructed (*ibid.*, 7.5.7) "so that

his intellect may not be perverted by Brahmins devoted to Vishnu." Prahlāda cannot be swayed. When he is again brought before his father, Prahlāda once more praises Vishnu. This time Hiraṇyakaśipu becomes enraged and orders him killed. The demons find that their attempts to kill him are unsuccessful, however, and Prahlāda's teachers convince Hiraṇyakaśipu to give them another chance to teach Prahlāda the doctrines appropriate for a demon prince.

One day when the teachers are out, Prahlāda teaches devotion to Vishnu to his fellow students, the demon boys. They accept his teaching and ask him how he learned it. Prahlāda tells them the story of his pregnant mother's capture by Indra and her stay with the sage Nārada, a secret he had refused to tell both his two teachers and his own father.

The two teachers report Prahlāda's continuing bad behavior to Hiraṇyakaśipu, who again calls Prahlāda and asks him: "By what power have you defied my command? . . . If (Vishnu) is present everywhere, why isn't he seen in this pillar?" (ibid., 7.8.7,13). The Man-lion appears in the pillar, fights with Hiraṇyakaśipu, puts him in *his* lap (as Hiraṇyakaśipu had put Prahlāda in his lap), and splits open Hiraṇyakaśipu's heart with his claws.

After Hiraṇyakaśipu's death, the destructive energy of the Man-lion strikes fear in the hearts of the gods. Brahmā asks Prahlāda to pacify the Man-lion which he does by means of a long eulogy to the avatar. The Man-lion offers Prahlāda boons, but Prahlāda refuses all but the wish that his father Hiraṇyakaśipu be absolved of sin. The Man-lion tells Prahlāda to perform his father's funeral rites and then: "Mount your father's throne, set your mind on me, and, devoted to me, perform your acts as the followers of Brahman approve" (ibid., 7.10.23). Prahlāda does so and the Man-lion vanishes.

In terms of the actual events of the story, its retelling in the *Prahlād charitra* is mostly similar. This version does differ, however, in the omission of several minor details of the plot, the greater elaboration of the description of the tortures that Prahlād is forced to endure, the omission of much of the didactic material (long speeches by Prahlād and other major characters), and several key changes in the theological and ideological messages of the didactic passages that remain.

Common to both the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and *Prahlād charitra* versions of the story is a psychological parable of a conflict between father and son. If there is indeed an Indian Oedipus, Prahlād clearly has a strong claim to be he.²⁰ It should be noted, however, that Prahlād's mother plays only a small role in the story, although she does try to convince her son to save himself by obeying his father in the above

quoted songs of Nāmadev and Gurū Amar Dās. Prahlaḍ's only true love seems to be for Vishnu, the *good* father figure. There is also an interesting duplication of the bad father/good father roles of Hiraṇyakaśipu and Vishnu in the figures of Indra (who wants to kill Prahlaḍ) and Nārad (who saves him).

But Prahlaḍ is more than simply an unjustly punished son. It is also important that Prahlaḍ is a demon, a category of beings set apart from both gods and men. As Sheldon Pollock (1991b, 68) notes, the demons of Indian mythology "offer a specific vision of the Other in traditional India." Prahlaḍ's demon identity automatically makes him one of the Others, an outsider vis-à-vis the divine society of the gods and also from its counterpart here on earth, the human society of *varṇāśramadharmā*.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that Prahlaḍ is not a *foreign* Other in the same way that Rāvaṇa and the *rākṣasas* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* seem to be. Prahlaḍ is the Other within the social order, not beyond it. Particularly in *nirguṇī* texts such as the *Prahlaḍ charitra*, Prahlaḍ clearly serves as a character with whom the members of the lower orders of Hindu society are intended to identify. This pious demon serves as a metaphor for all the downtrodden and marginalized victims of human society, for the pious and moral persons who have become the oppressed victims of the rich and powerful. It is this that makes him an ideal victim-hero for the mostly low-caste followers of *nirguṇī* tradition.

It is, of course, one thing to make such a claim and another to prove it. Prahlaḍ's demon status is a *metaphor* for the marginalized social status of those who have listened to his story and identified with him. It is not a direct didactic statement of such an equivalence. As we have seen, however, at least one text does come close to making this equivalence explicit. This is Gurū Amar Dās' song that juxtaposes Prahlaḍ's demon status with the low-caste status of Kabīr and Nāmadev.

Another way to unpack this metaphorical equation of demons and low-caste persons is to note the close equivalence between the relation of gods and demons, on the one hand, and high-caste and low-caste persons on the other. As gods and high-caste persons are commonly said to be noble, honest, chaste, brave, vegetarian, and clean, so demons and low-caste persons are said to be base, dishonest, libidinous, cowardly, carnivorous, and dirty.

It is also true, however, that the caste system is "replicated" within demon society. Great demons such as Rāvaṇ and Hiraṇyakaśipu are described as the kings, and presumably Kshatriyas, of demon society.²¹ Prahlaḍ's demon teachers Śukra, Śaṇḍa and Marka, on the other hand, are specifically called Brahmins. This sort of replication of the caste system

within demon society does not, however, negate the more general equation that demons are to gods as low-caste persons are to high-caste persons. Indeed, the situation is closely similar to the replication of high-caste customs by low-caste persons that Louis Dumont and Michael Moffatt have described in relation to village society in South India.²²

Also interesting in this context is the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* story of Jaya and Vijaya that provides the “historical” background to Prahlād’s story. Owing to a fault committed against the mind-born sons of the god Brahmā, the heavenly attendants Jaya and Vijaya are cursed to be reborn as first the demons Hiraṇyākṣa and Hiraṇyakaśipu, then the demons Rāvaṇa and Kumbhakarna, and finally as the “demonic” human Kshatriyas Śiśupāla and Dantavakra. In other words, just as an evil deed produces bad karma that will cause a high-caste person to be born as a low-caste person, so an evil deed will cause a god to be reborn as a demon.

Finally, we can draw an analogy from an example from William Sax’s anthropological study of the buffalo sacrifice in the Garhwal region of North India. In Garhwal and elsewhere in India, the buffalo sacrifice re-enacts the struggle between the buffalo demon Mahiṣāsura and the Goddess, a myth narrated in the *Devī-māhātmya* and many other texts. In locally told versions of this myth, Sax found that the tellers often referred to the “demon caste” of the buffalo. Sax concludes (1991, 128): “The myth of the buffalo demon is concerned mainly with caste relations. Not only is the buffalo explicitly said to be of low caste, but the inferior status of the lowest castes is reproduced by the buffalo sacrifice.” Here as elsewhere demon status clearly serves as a metaphor for low-caste status.

This is also what makes me somewhat skeptical of Pollock’s (1991b, 70) claim, made in the context of a discussion of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, that so specific a historical identification “obstructs any view of what the *rākṣasas* might signify in the imaginative world of the epic poem itself.” To me it seems clear that although the metaphorical identification of Prahlād with the lower classes of Hindu society rarely becomes explicit, even in the *Prahlād charitra*, it is in fact consciously intended by the authors of both the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and *Prahlād charitra* and is central to the meaning of these versions of the story. In the final analysis, this is a story that refers to a real and quite specific human society, as the didactic passages that accompany the narration make abundantly explicit. Pollock’s (1991b, 71) insistence that the demons “yield their richest signification” when they are regarded as “generalized imaginative representations, large symbolic responses to important human problems”

seems too abstract and literary an approach, at least in the context of the story of Prahlaḍ.

Although Pollock emphasizes the Otherness of demon society, he also points out that it is not simply “the antiworld usually associated with monsters” (74–75). The demons are the rivals of the gods, not their radical opposites. Pollock (75–82) identifies the three principal “deviations” in the character of the demons as their propensity for violence, their ambiguous and frequently metamorphosing physical nature, and their “intemperate and aggressive sexuality.” On the other hand, demons such as Hiraṇyakaśipu are also capable of practising asceticism (although mainly to get boons to use against the gods), of learning the Vedas, and even of having a certain nobility of character.

As we have seen, even the division of society into *varṇas* exists in demon society. Prahlaḍ’s demon teachers Śukra and his two sons are specifically called Brahmins in both the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and the *Prahilāḍ charitra*. Hiraṇyakaśipu is king of the demons, and presumably he and his son Prahlaḍ are Kshatriyas, though neither the *Prahilāḍ charitra* nor the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* specifically calls them such. It is important to note, however, that the *Prahilāḍ charitra* — and in much more ambiguous fashion the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* — are largely written for the benefit of the lower orders of Hindu society. There is no doubt whatsoever that the audience of the Prahlaḍ story was meant to identify with Prahlaḍ as a victim. It is also significant, however, that Prahlaḍ’s immediate enemies and oppressors, the villains of the story, are identified as his Brahmin teachers and his own royal father. The demon Brahmins and kings represent human Brahmins and kings in their more disagreeable personae, those who unjustly appropriate an unjustified share of the status, wealth and power of society.

The story of Prahlaḍ is a myth. Like most such texts, it serves as a vehicle for conceptualizing and expressing the key ideologies of the society in question. This is what Pollock (1991a, 41) seems to be driving at when he describes myth as follows:

When I use the term “myth” here, I have in mind a patterned representation of the world, with continuing and vital relevance to the culture, which furnishes a sort of invariable conceptual grid upon which variable and multifarious experience can be plotted and comprehended. It is this essential power to interpret and explain reality — and I mean social reality in the first instance — that has gone largely unappreciated in previous mythic interpretations of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

What Pollock perhaps forgets to add — but does make more explicit in his discussion of kingship in the *Rāmāyaṇa* — is that in a complex society stratified into social classes like that of India, many myths have an inherent, and often intentional, bias in favor of certain classes and against certain others. Furthermore, even allowing for such biases, different versions of the same myth can utilize the same “invariable conceptual grid” to express quite different religious doctrines and social ideologies. Such is the case with the myth of Prahlād and its retellings in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and the *Prahlād charitra*.

The authors of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and *Prahlād charitra* make their own religious doctrines and social ideologies most explicit in the several religious, theological, moral, and social discussions and comments found in both texts. This is particularly true of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* where such didactic passages both frame the story as a whole and also occur at key moments within the narration. I like to think of such passages as a sort of commercial message or advertisement that pays for the entertainment of the story itself. Similarly, the different religious and ideological messages expounded in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and *Prahlād charitra* versions of the Prahlād story can be compared to a change in the sponsors of the entertainment.

One of the more curious features of the studies of Hacker, Biardeau, and Soifer is that they all almost completely ignore these didactic passages. In terms of the historical, structural, and religious analyses that these scholars attempt, such a procedure may have some justification. In terms of any attempt to analyze the full intentions of the authors of the texts, however, these passages obviously represent essential material.

A comparison of the more didactic passages in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and *Prahlād charitra* versions of the Prahlād myth reveals many of the significant differences between the religious and social projects fostered by the religious movements associated with *saguṇ* and *nirguṇ* bhakti respectively. I have discussed the principal differences at length elsewhere (Lorenzen 1987a; 1987b; 1995a). Here I want to discuss mainly the issues of the choice of *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ* conceptions of the Absolute and the attitudes toward salvation for women and low-caste persons expressed in these two versions of the Prahlād myth.

To some extent the choice of *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ* conceptions of the Absolute is arbitrary, but not entirely so. As is well known, the *saguṇ* bhakti movement first became important in Tamilnadu with the devotional hymns of the Āḷvārs and Nāyanārs. Gradually it spread to Karnataka, Andhra, and Maharashtra before reaching the Ganges valley and adjoining regions of North India. The *nirguṇī* movement, on the

other hand, first became important, at a considerably later date, with the *nirguṇī* followers of Rāmānanda led by Kabīr. Since the *nirguṇī* movement was created largely in opposition to the *saguṇī* movement with its *saguṇ* avatars and *paurāṇik* mythology, a logical step was to resort to a *nirguṇ* conception of the Absolute. Such a conception had in fact already been developed by Advaita philosophers led by Śaṅkarāchārya. Kabīr and his early followers were certainly not systematic philosophers, but the great prestige of Advaita metaphysics undoubtedly influenced their choice.

Another factor was the presence of Islam. Even though Allah retained a definable personality, Islam was strongly opposed to any anthropomorphic or iconic representations of Him. Kabīr, Dādū, Rajjab, and several other important early *nirguṇī* saints were raised in Muslim families. The question of the extent of mutual interaction between the *sant* and Sufi movements remains quite controversial, but few scholars deny that some such interaction took place.

A third factor in the choice of a *nirguṇ* conception of the Absolute was the possibility to use it to deny the ultimate reality of caste and class differences. If everything is grounded Brahman, and the physical world is in some basic sense illusory, then the differences between human bodies, between Brahmin and Shudra, are also finally illusory. This argument, logical enough, is in fact frequently wielded by *nirguṇī* poets and writers. Although this egalitarian corollary of the concept of Brahman appears to be congruent with the doctrines of Advaita Vedānta, Śaṅkarāchārya and his followers generally insist that this ultimate identity of all persons is valid only from the perspective of full enlightenment and should have no effect on one's behavior in the context of everyday reality (Lorenzen 1987b).

In both the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and *Prahlād charitra*, Prahlaḍ largely displaces the Man-lion from the central role he plays in earlier versions of the myth, but there is little getting round the fact that God here appears in the thoroughly *saguṇ* form of an avatar. For the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* this presents no problem. For Jan Gopāl the question is somewhat more difficult.

Like most *nirguṇī* authors, Jan Gopāl accepts the existence of the pantheon of gods including Brahmā, Vishnu, and Shiva as minor emanations of the *nirguṇ* Absolute. He generally refers to the one Divine Reality above these gods by the name "Ram" (but sometimes "Hari," "Gopāl," "Vishnu," and other terms). Although all these names are closely associated with Vaishnava tradition, the Ram or Hari of the followers of *nirguṇī* tradition is not a form or avatar of Vishnu, but the

undefinable Supreme Godhead. Nirguṇī poets including Jan Gopāl also often speak of God's Name as somehow being identical with the Godhead Itself. The most impressive evocation of the impersonal *nirguṇ* Absolute in the *Prahalād charitra*, however, is a hymn of praise that describes this Absolute exclusively in terms of what it is not:²³

No bottom no constraint, say all the saints.
No limit no defeat, say all traditions.

No end no number, say all the saints.
Unplumbed and unfathomed, they call you unreachable.

Unseen and invisible, say the gods and Śeṣ.
Undivided and uncut, say all the Vedas.

No boundary no support, they call you formless.
no movement no weight, they call you priceless.

No duality no fear, say the songs of praise.
No chant no image, they call you measureless.

No body no opening, they call you homeless.
No limbs no companion, unbroken, unbroken.

Although the supreme God of *saguṇī* tradition is also often given a transcendent character, a *via negativa* eulogy such as this would be highly out of place in a text such as the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. The corresponding eulogy in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* is much longer and covers a number of different topics. One of its central purposes, however, is to praise the embodied avatars of Vishnu, something that would be equally out of place in a *nirguṇī* text such as Jan Gopāl's.

In practical terms, the most basic difference between the *nirguṇī* and *saguṇī* devotional movements is not their metaphysics but their attitudes toward caste divisions and social hierarchy. It should also be kept in mind, however, that *both* the *nirguṇī* and *saguṇī* bhakti movements generally fostered more liberal social attitudes than those held by more orthodox Hindus, particularly the Brahmins who followed Advaita Vedānta, Mīmāṃsā, and other traditional *darśanas*, as well as scholars of the Vedas, *vedāṅgas* and *dharmaśāstras*. The most important exceptions among these more orthodox Hindus were the Brahmin proponents of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta and Dvaita Vedānta, many of whom played important roles in the philosophical systematization of the *saguṇī* bhakti tradition.

The attitudes of *saguṇī* bhakti poets and theologians toward caste and hierarchy are naturally quite complex and varied, given the enormous historical depth and geographical spread of the movements they led. On one question, however, most seem to have been in agreement: heartfelt devotion to the Lord will allow anyone, *even* Shudras and women, to achieve salvation. The base text of this view is the *Bhagavad-gītā*, where Krishna says (9.32): “Those who take refuge in me, Arjuna, even those who have had a sinful birth as women, Vaishyas and Shudras, will reach the supreme goal.”²⁴ Several passages in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* version of the story of Prahilāda express similar sentiments. Most striking is the conclusion to Prahilāda’s long speech to the demonless boys (7.7.51–55):

O sons of the demons, neither the status of being twice-born, nor of being a god, nor of being a sage is sufficient to please Mukunda, not good behavior, nor learning, nor charity, nor asceticism, nor making offerings, nor ritual purity, nor religious vows. Hari is pleased by pure bhakti. All else is imposture. For this reason, O demons, you should practise bhakti to Lord Hari, the Lord who is the Self of all beings, by everywhere [regarding] the identity of the Self and others. For [this reason, even] Daityas, Yakṣas, Rākṣasas, women, Shudras, herdsmen, birds, wild animals, and evil persons have attained salvation. This is to be remembered as the highest goal of man: exclusive devotion to Govinda, which [means] to see him in everything.

Such passages clearly represent a much more inclusive and liberal view of the possibilities for salvation than that of more conservative thinkers such as Śaṅkarāchārya who generally limit the right (if not necessarily the capacity) for salvation to male Brahmins alone, or at most to twice-born males. Nonetheless, these passages also reveal a decidedly patronizing attitude toward women and low-caste persons: salvation can be obtained *even* by women and Shudras.

Other passages in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* retelling of the Prahilāda myth make it clear that the author or authors strongly support the Brahmanic ideology of *varṇāśramadharmā*. Above all, the text stresses the necessity of offering respect and charity to the Brahmins. The final five discourses (11–15) of book seven of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* that follow the narration of Prahilāda’s story mainly consist of a lengthy dialogue between Nārada and Yudhiṣṭhira on the virtues of *varṇāśramadharmā*.

Jan Gopāl’s *Prahilād charitra*, on the other hand, promotes the more egalitarian and generally anti-Brahmin ideology commonly found in

nirguṇī texts. Verse three of the first section does contain a perfunctory obeisance to the four *varṇas* and the four *āśramas*, and other verses briefly pay respect to the Vedas, cows, and Brahmins. More typical, however, are statements such as Jan Gopāl's final comment when Indra asks Nārada how it came to pass that the great devotee Prahlād is to be born in a family of demons: "The Brahmin [or "Brahmā"] and the low-born are of one essence. Gold cannot become something different. Jan Gopāl says: For the Lord of the World, family (status) has no meaning."²⁵ The final verses of Prahlād's speech to the demon boys make the same claim from the point of view of the devotee:²⁶

For service to Hari, nothing is needed. When one has offered [this service], one obtains food, wealth, and clothes. Material things are not needed for service. Love of devotion alone gives sustenance. No other god has authority. Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra and women: for devotion to Rām all have authority. Everyone from Brahmin to Untouchable should think about this. If one sings the virtues of Hari with love, one will get that most difficult to obtain goal.

Here the words bear a definite resemblance to the parallel passage in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, and also to the famous *Bhagavad-gītā* passage, but the patronizing word "even" is missing. All the *varṇas* are, in fact, treated equally.

In many respects this comparison of the retellings of the Prahlād myth in the *Prahlād charitra* and the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* represents an extreme test of the hypothesis that *saguṇī* and *nirguṇī* traditions differ significantly both in terms of theology and social ideology. On the one side we have a *nirguṇī* author whose choice of this story and whose religious and caste background suggest that his commitment to *nirguṇī* tradition was somewhat equivocal. On the other side we have a classic *saguṇī* text that is noted for its liberal social attitudes and was evidently the principal source for Jan Gopāl's telling of the story. Nonetheless, as I have tried to show here, the authors of these two texts differ markedly with respect to the way in which they conceptualize the Godhead, in their attitude toward the possibility of salvation for low-caste people and women (although both accept this possibility), and in their attitude toward the hierarchical social ideology of *varṇāśramadharmā*. These differences are, I think, illustrative of a whole range of theological and ideological oppositions between the *nirguṇī* and *saguṇī* traditions that ultimately reflect the different religious, social and psychological needs of the persons who belong to these movements, on the one hand, and

those who direct and control them on the other.

Appendix

Prahlaḍ charitra attributed to Raidās. It is transcribed from Rājasthān Prāchyavidyā Pratiṣṭhān (Jodhpur) manuscript no. 1882, folios 69–70. This is roughly the same as Callewaert and Friedlander 1992, 224–25.

राग धनसी ॥ अथ प्रहलाद चरित लिष्यते ॥
 पूर म(?)ढ(?)न ²⁷ मुलतांन तहां हिरनांकुस राजा ।
 पुत्र भये प्रहलाद सरै सबहिन के काजा ॥
 जोसी जाय र पूछी यौ भये सुत राज
 कुमार या बालक सम को नहीं ऐ असुर सिंघारन काज ॥ 1 ॥
 कै धौं रै प्रहलाद कहा गुन तू पढ्यौ ॥ टेक ॥
 पढ्यौ राम कौ नांम आंन हिरदै नहि आंनों
 र रौ म मौ दोय आंक और तीजौ नहिं जांनों ॥
 कहा पढावै बावरे और सकल जंजाल ॥
 भौ सागर जम लोक मै मोहि कौन उतारै पार ॥ 2 ॥
 राम गुण में पढ्यौ ॥ टेक ॥
 सुनि राजा परजरयो रोस मन में अति कीनों ॥
 मेरौ बैरी राम सो तैं हिरदै धरि लीनों ॥
 ए पढिबौ तू छाडि दै रे क्यौ हमारौ मांनि ॥
 टूक टूक करि डारि हौं रे जब र सुनों हरि कांनि ॥ 3 ॥
 जौ बरजै सौ बार क्यौ तेरौ नहि मांनों ॥
 छांडि सिंघ की सरन गीध कै गवनिन(?) लागौ ॥
 पूरन ब्रह्म सकल मई जा कौ ऐ । बिसतार ॥
 जा कै राम सहाय हैं ताहि कौन सकगौ(?) मारि ॥ 4 ॥

सभा लई बुलाइ कहौ धौं कहा बिचारौ ॥
 लै देशौ परतीति जाय गिर वर तैं डारौ ॥
 सकल सभा मिलि लै चले लै गये सैल चढाय ।
 पंछी हू की गम नहीं तहां दीयौ छिटकाय ॥ 5 ॥
 जब पिरथी आधीन दीन होय दुरसन आई ॥
 मस्तक चरन छुवाई लीये हिरदा सौं लाई ॥
 कहा भगत कौं त्रास है आदि अंति नहिं और ॥
 अब कै सेवा चुकि हौं तौ नहि तीन लोक में ठौर । 6 ॥
 हसत हसत प्रहलाद पढन जब साल पधारै ॥
 उचरत रं रं कार सकल तजि सव परहारे ॥
 परषि लेत परचौ भयौ मु(?)नि उपज्यौ बिसवास ।
 सकल सभा आनंद मई इक राजा फिरत उदास ॥ 7 ॥
 असुर भयौ मति हीन जाय लै पावक दीनौ ॥
 अंगि ज्वाला परजरी तहां द्रिढ आसन कीनौ ॥
 सकल देव रिछ्या करैं पावक निकट न जाय ॥
 पठ्यौ सीत सहाय कौं(?) मांनौ मीन मकर में न्हाय ॥ 8 ॥
 ना जाणौ कछु जंतर मतर नट नाटिक कीनों
 अज हूं न समझत अंध जाय लै कूपै दीनों ॥
 सुर नर मुनि जन जानहीं ध्रु(?)व नारद सै साषि ।
 जा कै राम सहाय है रे ताहि कौं हौ लै राषि ॥ 9 ॥
 प्रफुलित है प्रहलाद मंदिर मांहीं जब आये ॥
 षोजत षोजत असुर जाय प्रहलाद संताये ॥
 तो कौं राषै जो कहां अब र छाडि हूं नांहि ।
 कोमल बचन कुंवर जब बो(?)ल्यो मो पति षंभा मांढि(?)हि ॥ 10 ॥

रे मो मृत अब हू न आय षडग बाण नहिं भेदै ॥
 जल ज्वाला मैं मरौं जुध कोउ जिंद न छेदै ॥
 छाया माया नां मरौं नां मरौं धरनि अकास ॥
 मति ब्रह्मा की कहा कहै रे सोचत त्रिभवन नाथ ॥ 11 ॥
 रे ऐ तौ कहा है गरब राम है गरब प्रहारे ॥
 सब देव तुम से बलि हिरणाछि आदि बराहा सिंघारे ॥
 सब देवन कौ देव है सब ईसन कौं ईस ॥
 मो मै तो मैं षडग षंभ मैं पूरि रखौ जगदीस ॥ 12 ॥
 कर गहि लीनों षडग कोपि सनमुष भयौ ठाट(?)ौ ॥
 देषौ जै है भगि षंभ सौं कीनों गाढ(?)ौ ॥
 बार बार तो सौं कहौं एह अंदेसौ मोहि ॥
 जे षंभ मैं राम है । तौ क्यों न छुडावै तोहि ॥ 13 ॥
 असत भयौ है भान उदौ रजनी जब कीनों ॥
 अधर बिंब कि छांह उठाय जंघन परि लीनों ।
 नष सुं उदर बिंदारियौ तिलक दीयौ प्रहलाद ॥
 सप्त दीप नव षंड मैं भई तीन लोक मैं गाज ॥ 14 ॥
 जहां जहां संकट परे संत के कारज सारे ।
 हम से अधम उधारि कीये नरकन सौं न्यारे ॥
 सुर नर मुनि गंध्रब रटें सब कौ सुष निवास
 मनसा वाचा करमना ए गावै जन रैदास ॥ 15 ॥