Author and Authority in the *Bhakti* Poetry of North India

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In America we love to put our names on things. Everything from tree trunks to subway cars bears the evidence of our desire to announce what we are and own, and in the world of arts and letters the landscape is little changed. There the copyright expresses our instinct that even creativity has its property aspect: we claim what we have composed. There is a great tendency among us to be suspicious of anything unsigned, and pseudonymity is rare.

Not every culture is this way. To us it may seem a law of nature that books in libraries be catalogued by author's name first and only secondarily by title, but in India it is often done the other way around. Indians usually do acknowledge authors, yet the reality of many well-known Indian texts seems to overshadow their authors' identities, and even smaller, more personal works often betray the sense that an author's job is to transmit something that has been given—to give it again—rather than to create and in that act possess it (Shulman n.d.; Lath 1981:x–xx). Sometimes the author's name is omitted from a title page or dust jacket, and when it appears it often receives smaller billing than it would in the West.

Given the relatively understated role that is assigned to many Indian authors, it is intriguing to find a genre of Indian literature in which the author's signature plays a prominent role indeed. I refer to the *pad*, probably the most influential medium for the expression of devotion (*bhakti*) in North India. *Pad*s are rhymed lyric compositions of about six or eight lines in length (although occasionally they can be much longer) that center on religious themes; each *pad* bears a refrain and is intended to be sung. *Pad*s have been composed in most of the major literary dialects that contribute to what can broadly be called the Hindi language family, including Braj Bhāṣā, Rājasthānī, and *sādhukkarī bhāṣā* (a mixed argot of "holy men's speech"), and some of the poet-saints who expressed themselves in *pad*s in the fifteenth and following centuries did so in such compelling ways that their voices can still be heard today. What they said forms much of the foundation of Hindi literature.

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One is not left to infer the names of authors of these *pad*s on the basis of what they said. It is a virtual requirement of the genre—and in this the *pad* is not alone[1]—that the poet's name appear in the last one or two lines as a sort of oral signature. But the question then confronts us: what do these signatures mean? For the closer we look, the plainer it becomes that such signatures register more—and at the same time rather less—than the name of a poem's author. Although many of these signatures express authorship in the familiar sense, others touch more on a meaning of "author" that has lost its currency in modern English.[2] They say less about the authorship side of "author" than about the author's authority, and they invite us to reconsider our preconceptions about the relation between art and life.

Poets Old and New

Let me report a recent experience of my own in attempting to locate a series of poems attributed to the *bhakti* poet Ravidās, who is traditionally said to have been a younger contemporary of the great iconoclast Kabīr. Forty of Ravidās's compositions are included in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* of the Sikhs (Siṃh 1977:191–204), which makes him the poet most frequently cited in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* after Kabīr and Nāmdev, if one leaves aside poems composed by the Sikh *guru*s themselves. Nor is his fame confined to the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*: other poems of Ravidās are anthologized in the *Sarvāṅgī* and *Pañcvāṇī*, which serve as the most important scriptures of the Dādū Panth.[3] Indeed, his is one of the "five voices" that give the last named work its title. Yet he remains one of the less-sung heroes of North Indian *bhakti*.

For this reason I was most interested to learn that in present-day Punjab and in certain other localities across North India, Ravidās cuts quite a figure indeed. Temples are dedicated to him, cultural organizations and educational institutions bear his name, and a mission has been established in Delhi and the Punjab to discover more about his life and work in Benares, his native city. The cause for all this stir in recent years is that Ravidās came from a caste that ranks below that of any of his compeers in the world of medieval North Indian *bhakti*. He was a *camār*, a leatherworker, and his castefellows, anxious to cancel the opprobrium that traditionally attends their social status, are the ones chiefly responsible for giving his name the luster it has attained of late (Juergensmeyer 1982:260–62; Womack 1983:56–57; Khare 1984:40–50, 97; Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988:chap. 1).

[1] In the second verse of a Hindi *dohā* (rhymed couplet), the author's name often occurs (an early example is translated in McGregor 1984:26), and one typically finds it near the conclusion of the early Bengali *caryā* poems and Marathi *abhaṅga*s, both of which are roughly analogous to the Hindi *pad* (Zvabitel 1976:131; Sen 1971:19, 24–30; Tulpule 1979:336–37, 347, passim). Certain analogies are also to be found in the Urdu *ghazal* (Ali 1973), the Kashmiri songs of Lal Ded (Grierson and Barnett 1920), and in Dravidian lyrics: the *vacana*s of Kannada (Ramanujan 1973) and the *patikam*s of the Tamil *Tevāram* (Shulman n.d.:2; Zvelebil 1974).

[2] The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1970:572) gives as its third definition of the term author "One who sets forth written statements. . . . " The fourth and fifth options, however, are the ones I have in mind here. They are, respectively, "The person on whose authority a statement is made . . . " and "One who has authority over others . . . "

[3] Rajab's *Sarvāṅgī* contains 22 *pad*s and one *sākhī* of Ravidās, and its parent work, the *Pañcvāṇī*, contains a total ranging from 65 to 71 poems in various manuscript versions dating from A.D. 1636 to 1676 (Callewaert 1978:436; Callewaert 1987).

One of the most interesting activities of the Ravidās organizations falls into an area well known to many readers of this article. By means of a word borrowed into Hindi from English, this activity is called "research," and it involves a series of investigations into the exact circumstances surrounding Ravidās's life in Benares. Most particularly, there has been a major effort to discover the place where he was born and grew up. B. R. Ghera, a vigorous man who has now retired from a career as clerk in the Ministry of Labor and Works, has managed to deduce that Ravidās must have been born in a little community called Sri Govardhanpur, where *camār*s still live. This village is located just beyond the southern wall of Banaras Hindu University. Other traditions about the poet's home are current in Benares (Upadhyaya 1982:12), but Ghera reasoned that Sri Govardhanpur must have been the true site since it is the only *camār* settlement that lies between what is traditionally called the *camār ghāṭ* (in Asi) and the trade road to the south of the city that would have been used by the traveling merchants (*banjārā*s) with whom Ravidās is said on occasion to have come in contact.

Furthermore, there is a tree in Sri Govardhanpur that is believed to possess remarkable properties and is associated in local legend with an unnamed Untouchable wonderworker (*caṇḍāl jādūgar*). Ghera deduced that this association must represent a vague memory of the incident, reported elsewhere, in which the famous ascetic Gorakhnāth came to hold discussions with Ravidās. Great yogi though he was, Gorakhnāth suffered from the heat, so Ravidās took a twig from a pile of sticks that had been gathered for firewood and plunged it into the ground near where Gorakhnāth sat. Miraculously, a shade tree sprang up to shelter the yogi; that tree, Ghera reasoned, is the tree still venerated today (Ghera 1983).[4]

When Ghera's research led to such positive conclusions, he proceeded to solicit funds from *camār*s who had attained a measure of wealth either in the Punjab or in England (cf. Juergensmeyer 1982:258–68), and before long the foundation was laid for a temple to Ravidās on the site of his birth. In the years since 1967 that temple has slowly been constructed, and in it the poems of Ravidās are recited on a regular basis (Dhannū Rām 1983). It was to see this place and hear these poems that I traveled to Sri Govardhanpur. I expected that I would at last have the chance to hear how the poems of Ravidās sound when they are actually recited by members of the community that holds them in special esteem. I was ready with my tape recorder and eager to check them against printed versions of the same poems, particularly those included in the earliest known corpus, that of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*.

How great was my naïveté. When the *Guru Ravidās Granth* was opened in the temple at Sri Govardhanpur and the old liturgist began to chant, I found a text totally at variance with anything I had been led to expect. As far as I am able to determine, it contains not one of the lyrics of Ravidās that appear in the *Granth Sāhib*. Instead, I was listening to a group of poems that are in a sense more about Ravidās than by him, even though he is their recorded author. These are poems about the greatness of the *guru* and the importance of one's fealty to him, of which the following may serve as a typically turgid example:

gura kī mūratī mana vikhe	Project the *guru*'s image in your mind,
dharo so hara dama dhyāna	hold it ever steady in your thought,
nāma dāna asanāna kara	Purity, charity, making yourself a name—

[4] A very different sort of reevaluation of traditional accounts of Ravidās's life—this one having a theological or ideological format rather than a biographical one—has been assayed by Jijñāsu [1968] 1984. For a brief summary, see Khare 1984.

duāre pāve māna
mantra japa gura hṛdaya me
mile so niścala jñāna
bhūkha pyāsa na uttare
nāma vinā bhagavāna
satagura so nahī pāvahi
jo dila māhẽ suāna
mana sacā kita vidha
bhayo kara hai kiyā vijāna
jhūṭhā pālana pālate
kaho kaise kaliyāna
ājñā guru kī citta dhara
kahe ravidāsa vikhāne

these only bolster your pride,
But to mutter the name of the *guru* in your heart
will make you unshakably wise.
Hunger and thirst will never depart
except by the name of God;
No one will ever find the true *guru*
who is self-concerned at heart.
How shall the mind be set aright?
By telling what the *guru* has done.
Tell me then, what's the benefit
in nurturing hosts of lies?
Keep the *guru*'s commands in mind—
so says Ravidās.[5]

Now in a certain way this is just the sort of poem I should have expected. The recitation of many sacred texts in North India begins with obeisance to the relevant *guru*, and in a theological tradition in which the *satguru*, the "true *guru*," is sometimes all but indistinguishable from God, this initial act of veneration becomes all the more important. But what is curious here is that the putative author and the subject of his praise are in an odd way one and the same.

At the first, most obvious level, Ravidās is presumably singing the praises of his own *guru*, and there has been some pointed discussion in the community about who that was, since these Untouchables are loathe to accept the traditional suggestion that it was the famous Brahmin Rāmānand (Ghera n.d.: 1; Khare 1984:47) At a second level, he is simultaneously singing the praises of another *guru*—the *satguru*, God himself— and the term *satguru* often appears in the first hymns listed in the *Guru Ravidās Granth*. Finally, a third *guru* is implied. He is implied in the very name of the book, which quite definitely echoes the title that has come to be applied to the Sikh scriptures and was certainly chosen in part because it was hoped that this *Granth* would be seen as parallel and equal in validity to the Sikh *Granth* (Ghera 1983). The third *guru* implied in the opening poems of the *Gurū Ravidās Granth* is, of course, Ravidās himself. It is his *guru*-ship at least as much as his authorship that gives the book the force it has for those who hear and recite it, and when they sing these lines, the *guru* they have most clearly in mind is none other than the author to whom the words are imputed: Ravidās. The tone, style, and form of the poetry have nothing whatever to do with the sort of poem that is attributed to Ravidās in the old anthologies, including the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, but that bothers no one. His authorship is only secondarily relevant to his presence here; it is his authority that counts.

For the people who hear this and other poems of Ravidās at Sri Govardhanpur, the authority of the author is immense indeed. Enshrined at the heart of the temple is an image of the poet; and oleographs, paintings, and maps depicting incidents in his life are spread about the walls of the sanctuary. These listeners are hearing the words of the figure who symbolizes their collective identity before God and the world. In a number of censuses undertaken by the British in the years prior to India's independence, many of the *camārs* of North India preferred to identify themselves as Raedāsīs (that is, Ravidāsīs) rather than use the more customary designation of their caste, with its derogatory connotations. When the name Ravidās appears in a poem,

[5] Poem no. 2 in the *Guru Ravi Dās Granth* (handwritten in Devanagari script on the basis of a published original in Gurmukhi) as transcribed for Virendra Singh. I am grateful to Virendra Singh for permission to make use of this copy.

then, it is far more than a footnote indicating authorship: the life and status of poet and audience are intimately involved.

For Ravidās to urge veneration of the *guru* may seem more than a little tautological if one takes into account who the *guru* is for those who hear the poem, but that does not make the utterance meaningless—merely complex. In reciting the line, the community reaffirms its loyalty to its own ideals and consolidates its sense of identity by repeating words it understands as given to it rather than invented from within. The name Ravidās indicates that givenness. Although the *camārs* who hear such poems would hardly question their authenticity, what really matters is their authority. If Ravidās is their author, they speak with the collective weight of the community's history before God.

Admittedly this case is a somewhat special one, involving as it does the authorial identity of a poet who is effectively the patron saint of a community, its *guru*. But it is by no means unique: a similar phenomenon is to be seen in the Sikh community. As is well known, the aniconic impetus of Sikh religion has prevented any of the Sikh *gurus*, even Nānak himself, from becoming the object of veneration in the form of an image; no statue of Nānak will be found in any Sikh *gurudvārā*. But if anything, this aniconic guard against the dangers of worshiping a human being has further increased the weight of Guru Nānak's words, which are so generously represented in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*. Moreover, when his signature is recorded there it is perfectly clear that more is at issue than his authorship of a given verse. As used by the Sikh community in reference to its scripture, the name Nānak refers not only to the first *guru* but to all those who had served as leaders of the community up to the time when the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* was assembled by the fifth *guru*, Guru Arjan. One knows which *guru* was remembered to be the author of a given *pad* by means of the heading (*mahalā*) under which it is listed—these number from one to five—but in the poems themselves the only name one hears is that of Nānak (McLeod 1980:287–88). Within the confines of a poem, then, Nānak's name clearly serves as a symbol of authority rather than of personal identity: when leaders subsequent to him in the history of the Panth composed poetry for the community, they did so in his name.

With Ravidās and Nānak, we are traveling in a sectarian world: these poets became *gurus* in a more or less well defined institutional sense. And one need not stop there. It is also possible to hear the poems of Kabīr and Dādū recited with sectarian conviction, since *panths* ("paths") have been established to venerate their names, too (Thiel-Horstmann 1983, 1985). In certain expressions of the Kabīr Panth, indeed, Kabīr is understood as a transtemporal figure, so his words have a resonance larger than life and his signature a force that goes beyond any single historical context. Particularly in the Dharmadāsī branch of the Kabīr Panth, the term "Kabīr" signifies more than the name of a man (Kabīr [attributed] 1975:44ff.; Kabīr [attributed] 1982:85ff.). But with other poets of the medieval period, this sectarian perspective, with its tendency to canonization and even apotheosis, is not so vividly present. Although Sūrdās, Mīrābāī, and Tulsīdās have their special audiences, they are not primarily identified with a single sectarian community, nor is any of them revered as *guru* in an institutionalized way. Outside sectarian circles, however—and sometimes within as well—the names of these other *bhakti* poets are held in every bit as much esteem as is enjoyed by Ravidās, Nānak, and Kabīr; hence it is worthwhile asking whether in poetry their names too point in the direction of authority rather than strictly of authorship.

The case of Sūrdās is especially instructive in this regard. Although Sūr has been claimed by one community in particular—the Vallabha Sampradāy—his appeal is a catholic one (Hawley 1983a:158–69). People outside the sect do not usually dispute

the claim that Sūr received his teaching from Vallabha, but they tend to be much more interested in the poet than in his supposed teacher: Sūr's hymns are sung far beyond the confines of the Vallabha Sampradāy. This seems to have been the case for a long time: only some of the manuscripts of the great anthology of poems attributed to him, the *Sūrsāgar* (Sūr's ocean), bespeak a Vallabhite provenance. And even within the Vallabhite community people hold him in special esteem. He is not the *guru*, of course—that role is reserved for Vallabha—but as a poet he has no peer. Just what is the weight and meaning of Sūr's signature, then, when it is encountered in one of the poems attributed to him?

In brief, Sūr's name (or any of its several variations) appears as much to guarantee authority as to indicate authorship. In a sense this is obvious if one contemplates the thousands of poems that have been added to the *Sūrsāgar* since Sūr's own time. The currently standard Nāgarīpracāriṇī Sabhā edition of the *Sūrsāgar* contains upward of five thousand *pad*s, and one mammoth nineteenth-century manuscript adds thousands more to that sum. Yet if one examines the oldest manuscripts of the *Sūrsāgar*, one finds collections comprising only a few hundred poems. The number grew in the course of time as other poems—some of them originally "signed" by other poets—were added to the corpus; and over the course of time there was a general shift in the tenor of the poetry, too. All this makes clear that what we have in the *Sūrsāgar* is not the monumental work of a single poet that was early dispersed and had to be reassembled over the generations, but a sprawling, gradually evolving tradition that undoubtedly includes poems composed by several authors (Hawley 1979; Hawley 1984:35–63; Bryant 1982:vii–xx). Yet each of these poems bears a single poet's name.

One factor to consider in attempting to understand how this is possible is the role played by middlemen in the process of transmitting an authorial tradition such as Sūr's. These are the performers and editors of the *Sūrsāgar*, and in a certain number of cases they were doubtless responsible for altering the signatures of poems that came to them so that they conformed to the signature of the great figure in whose name a tradition of devotional poetry to Krishna was being amassed.[6] But is is also likely that the composers themselves (if for a moment we may consider them as distinct from performers) felt little obligation to make use of their natural names in "signing" what they sang. Even in the relatively Westernized reaches of modern Hindi literature, it is very common for a person to make use of a pseudonym when assuming an authorial role, and Sūrdās's name must have presented itself as a natural choice to be the signature of many authors. In the first place, Sūr is traditionally held to have been a blind poet, and the name Sūrdās is often used in a generic sense to address blind people; hence it would have been natural for blind singers, of whom there are many in India, to identify themselves in poetry as "Sūrdās" (Hawley 1984:3–33).

Second, I suspect that many of the singers who fashioned these poems wanted to be perceived as singing compositions of some importance and pedigree, and Sūr, the greatest poet of the Braj Bhāṣā dialect, could compose no other. Or to see the matter from still a third perspective, there was doubtless often an element of homage to Sūrdās in the singing of these other "Sūrs," an homage expressed by affixing to a poem the name of the poet who inspired it. Perhaps we should even consider that some of these poets composed poetry in roughly the way that music students like to

[6] We know that this happened in the case of several poems normally listed as part of the *Sūrsāgar*. They seem to have appeared earlier, with different signatures, in collections of verse attributed to Hit Harivaṃś, Paramānanddās, and Tulsīdās (McGregor 1976:526; Hawley 1979:69–70). In regard to Mīrābāī there is some question as to whether the Sūr version or the Mīrā version came first (Mīrābāī [attributed] 1974:33; McGregor 1984:82).

sit down at the piano and compose a movement for a Mozart sonata.[7] Since the genre in which these poets wrote required a signature, it was natural for them to supply the name of the master of the form; in some circles the name Sūr may have gone with the *pad* genre in the same way that Mozartian phrases go with the sonata.

Of course, Sūr had no monopoly on the *pad*: other poets used it as well. It is quite possible that folk poets discriminated among possible pseudonyms (the word is not altogether apt) on the basis of the devotional mood being evoked in the poem at hand. The name of Mīrābāī, for instance, would go naturally with poems that emphasized the importance of ranking service to God above the callings of home and family. Ravidās was one of several names to which one could appeal if the poem had a strong vein of social protest. And if one were composing a poem that had to do with the childhood of Krishna or with the conflict between Krishna's lovesick milkmaids and the ascetic philosopher Ūdho, then at least after a certain point in the evolution of the *Sūrsāgar* Sūr's name would easily have come to mind (Lutgendorf 1987). When any of these names was adopted, much more was being added to a poem than a mere signature. The whole composition might well be tuned to such an authorial persona many verses before the name itself was uttered.

It is well to keep in mind that such apparently protean poetic identities are by no means anomalous when considered against the background of North Indian culture generally. It is perfectly common for a person to bear more than one name in the course of a lifetime. The assuming of a new identity, whether by reason of age, initiation, or sheer personal preference, will often mean the taking of a new name.

When one brings all these factors to bear, it comes as no surprise that in the course of the half millennium since Sūrdās sang, many people evidently became "Sūrs" as they gave voice to poetic utterance. And this being the case, it is little wonder that modern editions of the *Sūrsāgar* such as the large one published by the Nāgarīpracāriṇī Sabhā contain as many mediocre poems as they do. Yet one should understand that from the point of view of the Sabhā's editors—and certainly from the perspective of most readers, even most critics—these are *not* mediocre poems, since they bear Sūr's signature. For how could a poem bearing his name lack an element of exaltation? How could Sūr have composed a bad poem?

For all the effort that has gone into the creation of editions such as the Sabhā's, there has been little willingness to cut away at the *Sūrsāgar* as if it were the product of multiple authors. The basic meaning of edition in this context is that individual poems are edited, not that the entire corpus has been refined and repaired. For there is a magic in the name Sūrdās that makes even modern editors who possess more than a passing acquaintance with the principles of Western textual criticism reluctant to set aside as inauthentic many poems that bear Sūr's signature. Even for such scholars the poet's name seems to figure less as a piece of a historical puzzle than as a sort of imprimatur, and the tradition that Sūr was vastly prolific is still quoted to justify this habit of mind (cf. Gokulnāth [attributed] 1970:434–45).

As we have implied, Sūr was not the only poet to become the posthumous beneficiary of a large corpus of poetry of which he had no knowledge. The same is true of many poets and is particularly evident in regard to Mīrābāī, the famed Rajput poet-princess of Rajasthan. Indeed, Mīrā's case is even more extreme than Sūr's. With Sūr, we can certify on the basis of manuscript evidence that at least a certain proportion of the poems found in the present-day *Sūrsāgar* had come into usage in or near the poet's own lifetime, but with Mīrā this is hardly the case. It is true that one poem

[7] I am grateful to my musical wife for this comparison.

attributed to her appears to have been recorded in the original recension of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, dating to A.D. 1604. Certain difficulties surround this poem, however, and we cannot be absolutely sure it was incorporated into the *Granth Sāhib* before V.S. 1699 (A.D. 1642) (McLeod 1975:72–75; 1980; Singh 1983:325–27, 331–32). Another possibly datable poem of Mīrā occurs in a manuscript that was written some decades later, in V.S. 1713–14 (A.D. 1656–57), but the dating of that manuscript is not fully secure either.[8] In addition, of course, it is worth noting that only a single poem is recorded in either place. Only in manuscripts belonging to the latter half of the eighteenth century—fully two centuries after the time Mīrā is universally supposed to have lived—do we have any substantial reference to the poet-princess of Rajasthan, and even there the sampling is remarkably sparse, considering her towering reputation in the present day.[9]

As with Sūr, this means we must revise our impression of what Mīrā's signature means when it appears in the many poems that bear her name. It seems unlikely that all the poems attributed to her could have been composed by a single sixteenth-century princess. As in Sūr's case, there is much about Mīrā that would have attracted later poets to the use of her name. Because she was a woman, her signature may well have served as an umbrella for a number of other female poets, and the force of her life story doubtless drew poets of both genders to her banner. It is possible, of course, that any poems composed by a historical Mīrābāī were retained purely in oral tradition

[8] The poem occurs in folio 51 of the first section of manuscript 30346 (*sphuṭapadaḥ*) in the Rajasthani and Hindi collection of the Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, Jodhpur. This manuscript is assigned the dates V.S. 1713–14 by the Institute, but I have as yet been unable to find the colophon that would confirm them.

[9] In his *Mīrā̃-Bṛhatpadāvalī* (Mīrābāī [attributed] 1975:4, 6), a study of manuscripts in Rajasthani collections that contain poems of Mīrā, Kalyāṇsiṃh Śekhāvat has found poems bearing Mīrā's signature in manuscripts dating to V.S. 1826, 1834, and 1836 (= A.D. 1769, 1777, and 1779). To my knowledge, no study of similar manuscripts existing outside Rajasthan has yet been attempted. The sources underlying the first volume of the *Mīrā̃-Bṛhatpadāvalī* (Mīrābāī [attributed] 1968) and the methods used by its editor, Harinārāyaṇ Śarmā, to compile it are unknown, as are the sources and methods lying behind the edition that is most widely used today: Paraśurām Caturvedī's *Mīrābāī kī Padāvalī* (Mīrābāī [attributed] 1973).

Similar uncertainties attend many other editions. Of these, the one that most directly challenges the conclusions presented above is Lalitāprasād Sukul's *Mīrā̃ Smṛti Granth*, which purports to give the contents of two manuscripts of Mīrā's poetry that Sukul obtained in Dakor, Gujarat, in 1924. One, said to have been written in Dakor itself, is dated to V.S. 1642 (A.D. 1585), and the other, from Benares, is dated to V.S. 1727 (A.D. 1670). The former contains sixty-nine poems, which the latter repeats in the same order before giving an additional thirty-four. These poems have been reproduced with a comparative apparatus in Bhagavāndās Tivārī's *Mīrā̃ kī Prāmāṇik Padāvalī*. I regret that I have not as yet been able to see the manuscripts upon which these editions are based, since the information published about them has caused me to doubt their authenticity. The earlier dating of the Dakor manuscript, in particular, would make it remarkable, considering that the great manuscript libraries of North India (e.g., the Nāgarī Pracāriṇī Sabhā in Benares, the royal Pothīkhānā in Jaipur, and the Vrindaban Research Institute) contain no early manuscripts exclusively devoted to Mīrā. With the rarest exceptions, as stated above, her poems are not even anthologized in early manuscripts. Further doubt is cast by the fact that these two manuscripts were obtained from a single source and that, despite the disparate provenances claimed for them, they contain a common store of poems with identical readings. Sekhavat (1974:15) was bothered by the occurrence of *ḍ* in some of the poems; I am more struck by the frequent substitution of *ś* for *s*, a fact that would seem to suggest the place of publication (Calcutta) rather than the cities with which the manuscripts themselves are said to be associated, unless hypercorrection is involved. At the very least, such circumstances force us to question the authenticity of these two manuscripts until the originals can be examined.

until they began to be written down centuries later, but this seems improbable when one considers that we have substantial written collections for other poets with whom she is supposed to be roughly contemporary. Despite the uniform signature, what we have in present-day collections of Mīrā's poems is evidently not the work of a single author.

Signature and Syntax

In trying to arrive at a sense of what signatures such as those of Sūr, Nānak, Mīrā, and Ravidās mean, we can learn a great deal by paying attention to the diction surrounding these names in the poems in which they appear. It is normal practice in the commentarial literature, both oral and written, to understand the poet's name as connected to the syntax of the rest of the line in which it figures by means of the verb "to say" or some variant of it. This seems to imply in a straightforward way that the poet named is the author of the verse in question and of the poem that it concludes. When one looks at what is actually involved, however, one sees that the situation is more complicated. The discourse of these poems is telegraphic. One almost always has to supply a certain number of connections between words in order to render their meaning intelligible in prose, and the connecting element that has to be supplied more frequently than any other is the one tying the signature to the language of the rest of the poem. Only on rare occasions is such a signature accompanied by a second word that serves this function in an obvious one-dimensional way.

To get some sense of what is involved in supplying such connections, let us consider two samples from the thousands of poems one could choose. The first is the concluding line of a poem bearing Nānak's name. The words of the poem itself provide only the following information:

nānaka / bhagatā / sadā / vigāsu //
Nānak / the devotees / always / happiness [or, happy] //

suṇiai / dukha pāpa kā nāsu //
on hearing / destruction of pain [and] sorrow //

(*Japjī* 10:3, Nānak 1978:40)

The commentator is therefore obliged to expand in providing a gloss in prose, and most commentators do so unflinchingly by supplying the verb "to say" in tying the poet's name to the rest of his composition. Here is an example:

> Therefore the *guru* [i.e., Nānak] says that those who are devoted to the Name [of God] continually grow and prosper; on hearing the name all varieties of difficulty and sin are cut away.
>
> (M. Sahgal, in Nānak 1978:40)

Or take, for comparison, a line from Sūr. It too is a concluding line and it too is sparse in its diction:

sūradāsa / prabhu / yahai parekhau //
Sūrdās / Lord / this challenge //
gokula / kāhāi / bisāre //
Gokul / why / forgot //

(Sūrdās [attributed] 1976, *pad* 3854:6)

In this case we can refer to the exposition of a very scrupulous commentator, one

who places in parentheses any words that he feels are not directly given in the text. His comment reads as follows:

> Sūrdās says that this (is) the test of the Lord
> (Krishna): why has (he) forgotten Gokul?
>
> (Varmā 1972:244)

Even in so careful a rendering the commentator has not thought it necessary to place parentheses around the verb "says." Either he understands it as part of the plain structure of the line or he regards it as so constantly and apparently in need of being added that it would be tedious to draw attention to it each time.

For our purposes, however, what is noteworthy in all this is precisely the grammatical hiatus that exists between the signature and the remainder of the verse in which it occurs. Only rarely does a verb of "authoring" appear in connection with the poet's name. Among the poets we have been considering, it is only Kabīr who gives such a verb with any frequency, and that may have to do in part with euphony, for the commonest way to say "to say" is with the verb *kah-*. Occasionally one finds the verb "to say" in Ravidās too, but very rarely in the others (e.g., Sūrdās [attributed] 1976, *pad* 3847:14; Sūrdās [attributed] forthcoming, *pad* 2376:5; Mīrābāī [attributed] 1968, *pad*s 36:4, 173:4). And there are many times when clearly it is not even implied.

Such times are particularly frequent in the Mīrā corpus, for her name is often anchored to the rest of the signature line by means of a genitive postposition. The phrase that rings in memory, since it occurs so many times, is

> *mīrā̃ ke* [or *re*] *prabhu giridhara nāgara*
> Mīrā's Lord is the clever Mountain-lifter

and the *Sūrsāgar* presents several instances of the same construction (*sūra ke prabhu* or *sūradāsa ke prabhu*). Much more numerous, however, especially in poems that can be dated to the earlier stages of the *Sūrsāgar*'s development, are equivalent phrases in which the explicit genitive marker is omitted. These implicit compounds, of which *sūra prabhu* and *sūradāsa prabhu* are the most common, all mean "Sūr's Lord" too, but the responsibility for forming the grammatical connection is left to the hearer. And there is often sufficient room for ambiguity even in such frequently occurring patterns. The line of Sūr that we have most recently cited provides an instance. It will be recalled that the commentator chose to interpret the words *sūradāsa prabhu* by inserting the verb "says" between them. He interprets the line as meaning "Sūrdās says that this (is) the test of the Lord. . . . " But one could equally well understand these two words as a compound meaning "Sūrdās's Lord," in which case the line means "This is the test of Sūrdās's Lord."

Even apart from questions of text criticism and the growth of literary traditions, then, more than a simple claim to authorship is involved when a medieval Hindi poet's name appears in a poem. The relation between the signature and the line of which it is a part can be an intricate matter indeed—not at all so simple as the linear "Sūrdās says" or "Ravidās says" would suggest.

Poetry and Biography

At issue here is the relation between poetry and biography or, in the setting of North Indian *bhakti*, between hymnody and hagiography. In North India these two

are very closely related (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988; cf. Hardy 1978; Ramanujan 1981:165; Cutler 1983; Shulman n.d.). It is probable that the first and greatest of the "Lives of the Saints" to be composed in Hindi, the *Bhaktamāl* of Nābhājī, was drawn together at just about the same time that the first anthologies of devotional poetry were being fashioned, around the turn of the seventeenth century (Jhā 1978:40–46; Pollet 1974:157–59; cf. Lorenzen 1986:2–5), and many of the poets whose lives it highlights are also featured in these contemporary anthologies: the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* (cf. McLeod 1975:60–62, 73–79) and the Fatehpur collection containing poems by Sūr and some thirty-five other poets (Bahura 1983; Bryant 1983:37–47). As the poetic anthologies expanded and proliferated, so too did their hagiographical counterparts, and not merely as parallel genres. These hagiographies tend to be organized around poetic compositions attributed to the figures they describe, and substantial numbers of entries in the poetic anthologies take their inspiration from motifs associated with the lives of the poets who are said to have composed them.

Quite a number of poems attributed to Mīrābāī, for example, display this biographical emphasis prominently. The episode that most frequently makes its way into Mīrā's poetry is the one cited by Nābhājī when he introduces the devotee Mīrā to readers of his *Bhaktamāl*. It is the incident in which the king (*rāṇā*) of the family into which Mīrā married tries to poison her. (Unlike later versions of the story, the *Bhaktamāl* does not specify whether the villain was her husband or her father-in-law.) Tradition reports, as does Priyādās, who composed an influential commentary on the *Bhaktamāl* in A.D. 1712, that the *rāṇā*'s anger was aroused by Mīrā's exclusive attention to Krishna and total neglect of the duties and affections that would have made her a good wife. As Priyādās tells us, however, the poison's effect was nil. Mīrā willingly drank, then continued to sing of her immortal Lord, and the poison merely improved the quality of her voice (Nābhājī 1969:718–19).

If one compares Nābhājī's explicitly hagiographical poem about Mīrā with one of a number of poems said to have been composed by her, one sees that the distance between the two genres is not so great as one might expect. There is no denying that the poems are very different in mood, pace, and choice of words. But as one comes to the end of the contrasting compositions, one finds a common element. The story of the poison serves as the culminating episode for both, occurring in the penultimate verse, and it is followed in each poem by a concluding verse that makes reference to Mīrā's special attachment to Krishna in his role as the heroic lifter of Mount Govardhan. First let us hear Nābhājī's poem about Mīrā:

Mīrā unraveled the fetters of family;
she sundered the chains of shame to sing
of her mountain-lifting Lover and Lord.
Like a latter-day *gopī*, she showed the meaning
of devotion in this devastated age.
She had no fear. Her impervious tongue
intoned the triumphs of her artful Lord.
Villains thought it vile. They set out to kill her,
but not even a hair on her head was harmed,
For the poison she took turned elixir in her throat.
She cringed before none: she beat love's drum.
Mīrā unraveled the fetters of family;
she sundered the chains of shame to sing
of her mountain-lifting Lover and Lord.

(Nābhājī 1969:712–13)

And here, for comparison, is a poem that the signature identifies as having been composed by Mīrā herself:

I'm colored with the color of dusk, oh *rāṇā*,
colored with the color of my Lord.
Drumming out the rhythm on the drums, I danced,
dancing in the presence of the saints,
colored with the color of my Lord.
They thought me mad for the Maddening One,
raw for my dear dark love,
colored with the color of my Lord.
The *rāṇā* sent me a poison cup:
I didn't look, I drank it up,
colored with the color of my Lord.
The clever Mountain Lifter is the lord of Mīrā.
Life after life he's true—
colored with the color of my Lord.[10]

Obviously the latter poem has more than a bit of hagiography in it, and in other poems attributed to Mīrā the "autobiographical" emphasis is even more pronounced (e.g., Mīrābāī [attributed] 1975:68, 72, 76—*pad*s 140, 148, 167). Hence it is not surprising to find that the two genres are not always kept separate in the minds of those for whom Mīrā has meaning. On a recent trip to Rajasthan, for example, I happened to encounter a wandering *rāvaṇ-hattho* player in Jodhpur and took advantage of the occasion to ask him to sing me a song or two by Mīrā. I did receive two songs in response, and both of them included Mīrā's name quite prominently, but only the first contained her signature. The second, instead of being *by* her, was *about* her. Whether the performer himself would have been comfortable in making such a distinction, I do not know.

If it is possible for poems presumably "by" an author to shape themselves around events in or aspects of the life of the poet, the opposite phenomenon can also occur, illustrating the proximity of poetry and biography from the other side (cf. Hardy 1978:38–39). For accounts of the lives of the medieval poet-saints seem frequently to take their impetus from poems these poets are thought to have composed. To show how this could happen, we may take an example from the literature of Sūr—in this case from literature about him rather than by him. I refer to the *Caurāsī Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā*, a work probably composed in about the middle of the seventeenth century, which provides the most extensive traditional biography of Sūr that has come down to us. The entire structure of the *Vārtā*'s account of Sūr's life appears to have been patterned after the arrangement used to organize certain collections of his poetry. Logically enough, it proceeds mainly in a sequence determined by the life story of the god to whom most of Sūr's poetry is dedicated: Krishna. One moves from Krishna's birth through the episodes of his childhood and adolescence in the Braj country to the culminating event, his *rās* dance with the *gopī*s, and his departure from Braj. Poems with other emphases—compositions depicting Krishna's life as king of Dvaraka or his role in events recounted in the *Mahābhārata*, poems praising Rām or bemoaning the poet's own sorry biography—are fitted in around the edges (cf. Hawley 1984:48).

The *Vārtā* adapts the basic pattern of Krishna's life to Sūr's. When Sūr arrives near Braj, he meets Vallabha, the *guru* tradition ascribes to him, and there at Gaughat

[10] Mīrābāī [attributed] 1973:111, *pad* 37. In translation, as in performance, the refrain is repeated at intervals throughout the poem.

on the banks of the Jumna, Vallabha initiates him into the mysteries of Krishna. Initiation complete, Vallabha takes him off to Gokul, the site where Krishna is supposed by Vallabhites to have spent his early childhood. At both places Sūr composes songs to Krishna. At Gaughat he celebrates the god's birth on this earth, as if Sūr were finding a language for Krishna's birth in his heart. At Gokul he sings of the charms of Krishna in his infancy. After that Sūr's journey takes him to Govardhan, where he is introduced, in effect, to the heroic side of Krishna's adolescence, for when Krishna lifted Mount Govardhan to protect the residents of Braj from India's angry rainstorms, it signaled the conclusion of what was in many ways the culminating battle of his youth. Parasauli is the last stop on Sūr's journey, and it too has a special significance in Krishna's life story. In the Vallabha Sampradāy it is thought to be the place where Krishna first danced his *rās* dance. Sūr sings of these themes in Krishna's life as his own passes by.

One might think on the basis of the foregoing account that the *Vārtā*'s purpose is to cast Sūr's life in the mold of Krishna's, but this is only secondarily so. The primary interest of the author of the *Vārtā* is to provide a framework within which the rough sequence that had come to be ascribed to Sūr's poems about Krishna would make biographical sense. Because that sequence was determined by the order of events in Krishna's life, it appears that the poet's life follows the god's, but the *Vārtā*'s true preoccupation is not the tie between life and life but between art and life. Sūr's life is retroactively fashioned to follow the order that was given to the poet's collected opus. In very short compass, the *sūrdās kī vārtā* mimics the *Sūrsāgar*. Once that bond is established, it cancels any suggestion that Sūr's poems could have been composed on a purely random, occasional basis, each one appropriate to an event in which the poet participated or to a mood that welled up within him at a given time. Instead, we get a picture of Sūr as the author of a whole, sequentially ordered corpus. He becomes the author of the *Sūrsāgar* in the form that it was known at the time the *Vārtā* was composed (Hawley 1984:7, 19, 45). Indeed, on one curious occasion the *Vārtā* reports that the poet was actually called by the name of his work: Vallabha addresses Sūr as none other than "Sūrsāgar" (Gokulnāth [attributed] 1970:414).

One of the most vivid of the vignettes in the *Vārtā* that seem calculated to demonstrate the intimate connection between Sūr's art and his life is an episode in which Sūr's poetry is put to the test. Sūr was blind—this is his hagiographical hallmark, much as Mīrā's is the drinking of poison—so the great question was always how he could have produced poems that depend so formidably on visual detail. Was he cheating in some fashion? Did he just make it up on others' hearsay? Or was he endowed with a visual acumen of even greater sensitivity than that possessed by ordinary mortals?

To answer these questions the author of the *Vārtā* relates an incident involving the mischievous children of Vallabha's second son, Viṭṭhalnāth. Viṭṭhalnāth was in charge of the temple at Gokul and was punctilious in his efforts to provide fresh, decorous clothing for the image installed there, a tiny icon called Śrī Navanītapriyajī and depicting Krishna with a handful of newly churned butter. Seeing Sūr in attendance among the spectators who had gathered to have a visual experience (*darśan*) of Śrī Navanītapriyajī in the hot season, Viṭṭhalnāth's children decided that they would exceed every norm and clothe the image in what amounted to no clothes at all. Pearls and flowers were to suffice as garments for the Lord on that devastatingly hot day. The urchins were sure that the blind poet would be unable to detect this daring departure, but as soon as the curtain was drawn back and the image revealed, Sūr gave voice to a song that revealed his amazement at what he "saw" and was clear

evidence that he had passed the children's test. He spoke, as he customarily did, through the persona of one of the *gopīs* in Krishna's world. She addresses a friend:

> Look my friend, Hari's naked, all naked!
> A garland of lotuses glistens on his limbs
> which, lacking their garments, send out waves of charm.
> Seeing the measureless sweetness of each limb,
> thousands of Passions and Limbless Ones feel shame.
> He burbles with joy, smearing butter on his mouth,
> and Sūr says the girls of Braj join him in his laugh.[11]

One of the effects of the *Vārtā*'s providing etiologies such as this for poems in the Sūr corpus is to emphasize the poet's close involvement in what he sang. On the *Vārtā*'s telling, Sūr is not merely producing exclamations of wonder that could have come from the lips of Krishna's milkmaid friends upon seeing their lover so scantily clad; he is reporting his own experience before an image of the Lord. In making this point, the *Vārtā* greatly reduces the potential distance between poetry and biography. After a certain number of such stories, the reader of the *Vārtā* should be able to hypothesize occasions on which Sūr sang—and "saw"—every poem in the *Sūrsāgar*, not just those discussed in the *Vārtā* itself. The poems of the *Sūrsāgar*, then, become testimonies of the experience of a saintly person, not disembodied compositions of literary or even devotional worth. And the blindness traditionally attributed to Sūr becomes the guarantor not only of the accuracy of what he saw but of the force of what he said.

As in the case of Mīrā, moreover, things come full circle when Sūr's poetry mimics his biography. It would have been possible for many poets to say "how blind, how base, how blank" they have been in humbly lamenting their personal inadequacies before the Lord, but when Sūr says it, as he does in these or similar words on more than a few occasions, it has a particular bite (Sūrdās [attributed] 1972, *pad* 198:3, cf. 135:6, 296:2). Not surprisingly, the references to Sūr's blindness in poems attributed to him tend to become proportionately more numerous in relatively recent strata of the *Sūrsāgar* than they are in poems old enough to have come from the lips of the original Sūr. As legends of the poet grew, they—and particularly their emphasis on his blindness—became more and more a part of what the poet himself was supposed to have said.

The Poet as Part of the Poem

It is not hard to see how such autobiographical allusions contribute to the force of the poems in which they occur. The sanctity of the speaker makes the poem worth listening to regardless of its literary quality, and if a poem conveys beauty as well as truth, so much the better. Yet this is not just a case of having a poem's reception potentially altered by the audience's knowledge of a poet's reputation and biography: the poem itself often changes at the moment that the identity of the author is revealed.

[11] Gokulnāth [attributed] 1970:421. In verse 3, Passion is Rati, wife of the god Kāma, who is "limbless" (*ananga*) in consequence of his famous encounter with Śiva, in which the ascetic god reduced him to ash with a blast of yogic heat stored in his third eye. The second half of the fourth line is capable of a second interpretation, which will become relevant to our discussion presently. It could be rendered "and Sūr joins the girls of Braj in laughing at him."

So once again we see that more is involved in giving a signature to a poem than merely citing an author's name.

Let us turn to several poems of Ravidās for examples of the sort of shift that is apt to take place in a poem when the poet's signature is revealed. Frequently the realignment one feels in these *bhakti* poems is a subtle one, involving a slight shift of perspective such as one finds in the poem that follows. In this composition Ravidās speaks through a persona, as is customary for poets such as Sūr and Mīrā, who often speak through the words of Krishna's *gopīs*. Here Ravidās assumes the identity of a young girl:

Mother, she asks, with what can I worship?
  All the pure is impure. Can I offer milk?
The calf has dirtied it in sucking its mother's teat.
  Water, the fish have muddied; flowers, the bees—
No other flowers could be offered than these.
  The sandalwood, where the snake has coiled, is spoiled.
The same act formed both nectar and poison.
  Everything's tainted—candles, incense, rice—
But still I can worship with my body and my mind
  and I have the *guru*'s grace to find the formless Lord.
Rituals and offerings—I can't do any of these.
  What, says Ravidās, will you do with me?[12]

This is one of the Ravidās poems in which a verb of speaking appears: the signature line begins *kahi ravidāsa*, "says Ravidās." That would seem to imply that one could simply subtract this phrase from the rest of the poem and end up with uninterrupted, unencumbered direct discourse comprising what the young girl said to her mother. Indeed, this is quite possible, as it is in so many poems—particularly the early ones—of the *Sūrsāgar* (Hawley 1983b:171–76; 1984:54–86). But more is involved, as is suggested by the fact that when a *pad* is given musical rendition, its intensity often builds to precisely the point at which the signature is announced. Far from engaging in an act of mental subtraction, many listeners experience a sense of heightened satisfaction when the performer reveals who it was that gave utterance to the sentiments expressed in the poem.

In the poem we have just heard, such a sense of expanded meaning is almost inevitable because of the theme on which the innocent girl chooses to question her elder. The issue is ritual purity, a matter close to the heart of Untouchables since it has been so commonly used to exclude them from Hindu worship, and the point of the poem is to ask whether even the purest substances used in Hindu rituals are not themselves "untouchable," having been polluted by prior use (cf. Ramanujan 1973:90). With this question to the fore, when the poet's signature is disclosed one can scarcely help recalling more about him than his name. Ravidās is a man with an unusually high investment in whatever answer might be given to the girl's question. Hence after his name has been mentioned, one hears in the first-person utterance of the last line not only the girl's question but that of the poet himself. "What will you do with me?" refers not just to her but to him. Like bifocals, the last line takes on a different focus depending on how far back one stands from the colloquy of mother and child, and the presence of the signature indicates that both distances are possible (cf. Hawley 1983b:118–20 [Sūr]; Hawley 1986:238–41 [Mīrā]).

[12] Siṃh 1977:195, *pad* 13. The reference to the act that "formed both nectar and poison" is to the churning of the primordial milk ocean on the part of the gods and demons. They desired the liquid of immortality, but as they churned the ocean, they drew up not only the elixir but a deadly poison as well.

In other poems the signature verse makes such a reorientation in the direction of the author not only possible but necessary. Consider the following instance:

The walls are made of water, pillared by air,
sealed together with the mortar of blood,
A cell of veins and meat and bones,
a cage to hold this poor bird.
Who cares what's yours or mine?—
for we nest in this tree only briefly.
As high as you can build, as low as you can dig,
your size will never swell the dimensions of a grave;
Those lovely curls, that turban tied so rakishly—
they'll soon be turned to ash.
If you've counted on the beauty of your wife and home
without the name of Rām, you've already lost the game.
And me: even though my birth is mean,
my ancestry by everyone despised,
I have always trusted in you, King Rām,
says Ravidās, a tanner of hides.

(Siṃh 1977:197, *pad* 19)

Here Ravidās begins with a diatribe of a general nature, the sort of speech that implies no particular persona. In the penultimate line, however, he introduces first-person adjectives, something appropriate to a particular speaker, and the subject that he addresses in that verse—lowness of birth—makes it plain well before one hears his signature in the following line that Ravidās is indeed referring to himself when he makes this seemingly personal statement. Here biography has an obvious impact on poetry—the poet announces his own caste—but the realignment this causes is not just one of subject matter. The tone changes, too. There is a confidence in the last two verses that implies that they provide an answer to the question that is implicitly raised in the rest of this poem: how to escape one's blind and futile reliance on the transient appurtenances of this world? Humility and trust are the antidote to misplaced pride, and Ravidās is a natural heir to these gifts of the spirit by virtue of what others regard as his unfortunate position in society. As in the previous poem, he knows whereof he speaks not really in spite of, but because of, his social rejection. Whether or not he is the author of both these poems, then, he is the authority that makes them possible.

A similar case can be found in another sort of poem, which provides a contrast with the foregoing two in that it is entirely taken up with what seems to be autobiographical utterance. In this poem Ravidās speaks as a *camār* from the very beginning: one of his caste occupations provides the subject for the entire poem.

I've never known how to tan or sew,
though people come to me for shoes.
I haven't the needle to make the holes
or even the tool to cut the thread.
Others stitch and knot, and tie themselves in knots
while I, who do not knot, break free.
I keep saying the name of Rām, says Ravidās,
and Death keeps his business to himself.[13]

[13] Siṃh 1977:198, *pad* 20. Similar sorts of poems, in which the central motif is the poet's caste occupation, can be found among compositions attributed to Kabīr, Nāmdev, and many

The signature verse introduces a change of mood even in this poem, which is dependent on the author's identity from the start. The first two verses tell us about an inept *camār*, while the last two describe an adept of a different sort. Here too, then, the poet's identity is a tool of transformation. Implicitly it encourages the hearer to change along with the poem, to consider what it would be like to be not a shoemaker but a Lord's-name-sayer.

In each of these poems the poet is doubly present—first as the general narrator (in various guises) and then with redoubled force as the giver of his own signature. And when the poet's name is announced, the poem takes notice. It would not be right to claim that this happens with quite such intensity in every poem attributed to the great medieval singer-saints of North India, but it happens with sufficient frequency to give a new dimension to our consideration of how an author's presence in these poems is apt to convey not only authorship but a sense of authority.

What's in a Name?

If one thinks back over the many ways in which *bhakti* poems from North India register the author's authority—the perception that some poets ought to be venerated as *gurus*, the attraction of poems by multiple authors to a single poet's name, the close interrelation of poetry and biography, and the often-strong impingement of a poet's signature on the verse of which it is a part—one will not be surprised to learn that the Hindi language itself has a way of recognizing the authority of these *bhakti* authors. It concerns the manner in which a poet's signature can be designated. One means of doing so is quite straightforward and seems to correspond easily enough to our modern Western understanding of what is meant by "author": a poet's signature can be called a *bhaṇitā*. This word means simply "speaker" and evidently refers to the role that most commentators point to when they explain what a poet's name is doing in a poem by saying that this is what Sūrdās or Ravidās or Mīrā or Nānak "says." Here is authorship pure and simple.

But there is another way of referring to these signatures in Hindi, a way that is perhaps somewhat more frequently used in the language and suggests that more is involved than authorship in the banal sense. One can also refer to a poet's signature as a *mudrikā* or, more commonly, a *chāp*: a "stamp" or "seal." The Vallabha Sampradāy, for instance, speaks of the eight poets it regards as the finest in its tradition as the "eight seals" (*aṣṭachāp*); Sūr, of course, is included among them. The implication of the word *chāp* is that the poet who attaches his or her name to a poem not only acknowledges being its author but testifies that the poem is valid and complete, much as a passport officer might stamp a seal on a travel document or a merchant might place a seal on a letter or parcel. To affix one's "seal" is to perform an act of witness or good faith, not just to sign a signature, and for that reason the seal bears the authority that such seals implied before the advent of automatic franking machines. The poem is lent credibility by the name affixed to it, as is made clear in the *Vārtā*'s exposition of the situation that led to the composition of "Look my friend, Hari's naked, all naked!" [14] In the many *bhakti* poems that are devoted to describing a vision

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others. For Nāmdev, the tailor, see Nāmdev [attributed] 1980 and Nāmdev [attributed] 1969:179, 209—*pad*s 2145 and 2166. These are translated in Machwe 1968: 96, 101, 105. For Kabīr, the weaver, see Kabīr [attributed] 1961, *pad* 12, translated in Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988.

[14] A slightly different usage in South India is alluded to by Shulman (n.d.:2): *tirukka-*

of Krishna or Rādhā or Rām or Sītā, we meet this act of witnessing in its simplest form, but testimonies of experience such as Ravidās provides are scarcely a step away. In both cases the presence of the "seal" is meant to indicate authoritatively that what has been said is true and bears listening to.

These seals make their poems affadavits in verse, and for that reason it is natural that they are sometimes supplemented, explicitly or implicitly, by other elements that strengthen the force of the author's name. Sūr's name is a case in point, in that the meaning of the word *sūr*—or, even more explicitly, *sūraj*—is "sun." This causes one to stop and think, for according to all the biographical traditions associated with Sūr, this poet's source of light was an extraordinary one, an inner sun for which his blindness provided the seal. And something similar is at work in poems attributed to Ravidās. His name too means "servant of the sun," but it is a different feature of his biography that lends his poems their peculiar credibility. What sets him apart is his caste, and as we have seen, that is often what gives his witness its particular force. So it is fitting to find that in quite a number of the poems collected in the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* he expands his signature with a second word and identifies himself as "Ravidās the leatherworker" (*ravidāsa camāra, ravidāsa camārā*; Siṃh 1977:192–94, 197—*pad*s 3–5, 9, 19; cf. *ravidāsa dāsa* and *ravidāsa udāsa* in *pad*s 6, 7, 16, 34, 38, 39). These phrases function as strengthened, compound seals.

Finally we should mention Mīrābāī, whose seal—her human name—is often expanded so that effectively it incorporates its divine counterpart. Time and again the first half of Mīrā's signature line is taken up with the phrase *mīrā̃ ke [re] prabhu giridhara nāgara*: "Mīrā's Lord is the clever Mountain-lifter." One gets the feeling that the whole clause belongs together as an indissoluble unit of devotion in which the emphasis is distributed between Mīrā and her Lord. Indeed, if one had to state which element of this expanded signature is more important, the human or the divine, one would have to concede that at least as much stress is given to Krishna's side of the relationship as to Mīrā's.

This kind of signature is unusual in medieval North India, but it is not without precedent in the history of *bhakti*. In the Kannada hymns to Śiva that were composed by the Vīraśaiva community of South India in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, one finds a literature in which the individual name chosen by the poet to designate God becomes, in effect, the poet's signature. The poet's own name does not appear, but if the "lord of the meeting rivers" is addressed, one knows that Basavanna is speaking; and if the "lord white as jasmine" is mentioned, one can be sure that Mahādēviyakka is the author of the poem (Ramanujan 1973:67–90, 115–42; cf. Ramanujan 1981:163). Although Mīrā's poems hybridize this tradition by combining it with the standard North Indian practice of giving the poet's own name, the force of having a "divine signature" along with a human one is by no means lost. And these compound signatures once again point away from any notion that a poet's name connotes authorship in a simple, reduced sense. To expand an author's name in this way makes it obvious that its significance is larger than what one might at first think. In the Kannada poems the use of an individual designation of Śiva as a sort of signature has the effect of anchoring the poem to something stable and trustworthy, and Mīrā's "Mountain-lifter" does substantially the same. He is her protection, as the image

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ṭaikkāppu, "closing the gates," in the *Tevāram patikam*s (cf. Ramanujan 1981:163). More directly apposite is the instance of the Hindi *dohā*, which is sometimes called a *sākhī*, as in the case of couplets attributed to Kabīr. This word means "witness"—literally, "one who possesses an eye"—and suggests that the force of the utterance has something to do with the character of the person who makes it.

suggests, and at the same time the ultimate source of her authority: she witnesses to him.

The seal on a *bhakti* poem does far more than indicate that so-and-so says thus-and-so. There is a long tradition in India, and in many other cultures as well, that knowledge and truth are personal things. One doubts that they can be learned from books, at least if there is no teacher at hand to impart them (Smith 1971; Jaeger 1943–45; Brown 1983, 1987). In order genuinely to grow and learn, the hearer must believe in what is heard, and that sense of primal educability—of vulnerability, if you will—can only be evoked in the presence of a trusted person. To be in the presence of this kind of personal authority makes it possible really to hear, in something of the same way that examples often have a greater power to influence behavior than prescriptions and codes do. Not all truth is propositional, and in the realm of *bhakti*, where verbal utterances are apt to be full of surprises and great saints such as Nammāḻvār and Caitanya remained speechless for long periods of time, this is especially so.

To mention the name of a renowned poet-saint at the conclusion of a *pad*, when the injunction to faith is the strongest, is to make the poem an event in this intense circle of devotional learning. It transports both singers and hearers—and they may be the same—into a realm where change is possible, where faith can grow. Therefore it is appropriate that the occurrence of the poet's name often signals a slight reorientation of the *pad* itself. It provides an earnest of such transformation. As the poet brings his or her name into what is being sung, even the plainest narrative format is metamorphosed into something with personal relevance. These are, after all, poems of faith, and they become the more trustworthy for having been uttered by one of the faithful.

To many who composed poems that eventually took their place in the Mīrā, Sūr, and Ravidās traditions it must have seemed improper that they should suggest that their own names possessed such authority. They found it easier to lodge such authority in their poetic preceptors, just as Mīrā (or the many who sang in her name) had bound her own name to that of the God she trusted. So it is not strange that the people who composed the poems in praise of God, *guru*, and Ravidās that begin the *granth* in use at Sri Govardhanpur found it easy to give over their own voices to that of the *guru* about whom they were speaking. And it is no embarrassment that the *Sūrsāgar* and the Mīrā corpus have grown wildly through the accretion of numerous poems "by" Sūr and Mīrā that cannot have been composed by the sixteenth-century poets of that name.

To call such instances of latter-day "sealing" pseudepigraphic is broadly to miss the point. Here nothing is being altered, nothing falsified. Nothing is being put over on the historical Sūrdās or the historical Ravidās any more than Jesus is being willfully misquoted when he is given the *ego eimi* passages in the Gospel of John. It is just that the meaning of authorship in devotional India or the cultic Levant is not what we have come to expect in Europe and America since the Renaissance. In devotional Hindi poetry, to give an author's name is not so much to denote who said what as to indicate the proper force of an utterance and the context in which it is to be appreciated. The author's name is no mere footnote. It anchors a poem to a life, a personality, even a divinity that gives the poem its proper weight and tone; and it connects it to a network of associations that makes the poem not just a fleeting flash of truth—not just new and lovely—but something that has been heard before and respected, something familiar and beloved. By providing this tie, the signatures in *bhakti* poems communicate much more than authorship. They lend these poems

authority and conviction, and they establish an aura in which the act of listening can be as intense as the speech.

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