

'God's account book':  
Bhakti and merchant religiosity in northwestern India

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This paper will describe the religious and literary culture of the Bihani Maheshwaris of Rajasthan, a merchant community that possessed considerable wealth and influence in the late sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but which has yet to receive any sustained attention from scholars. Beginning in the late sixteenth century, the Bihanis were instrumental in the formation of two influential *bhakti* communities in Rajasthan, the Dadu Panth and the Niranjani Sampraday. Members of the Bihani community not only provided financial and material support for these fledgling religious orders, but some also became prominent saint-poets within these traditions. In order to reconstruct the role of these merchants in the development of bhakti religiosity and sectarian institutions, this study will analyze three hagiographical texts, the *Dādū Janmalīlā* (1620) of the Dadu Panthi poet Gopaldas, the *Bhaktamāl* (1660) of the Dadu Panthi poet Raghavdas, and the *Dayālī Kī Pañc Paracai* (c. 1700) of the Niranjani poet Hariramdas. Findings from these three texts will be supplemented with evidence from inscriptions and architectural remains in Dadu Dwar, Naraina (the primary seat of the Dadu Panth), and Gadha Dham, Didwana (the center of the Niranjani Sampraday).

A study of the religious culture and history of merchant groups like the Bihanis helps us to better understand the relationship between occupational and religious identity in early modern India. This study is also part of a larger project that seeks to uncover the role that merchant communities played in spreading bhakti religiosity in Rajasthan: although research has been done on connections between merchant groups and Vaishnava sects, scholars have yet to recognize, let alone study, the relationship between merchants and so-called '*nirguṇ sant*' groups like the Dadu Panth and Niranjani Sampraday. This paper will therefore point to the need to reassess current understandings of patronage and proselytization by showing that merchants played as large a role as sadhus and kings in spreading and shaping bhakti throughout northwestern India.