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*A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement*. By John Stratton Hawley. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015. Pp.xiv+438.

Review by Richard David Williams (SOAS, University of London).

**[Submitted version, prior to proof reading/editorial]**

John Stratton Hawley lifts up the fabric of north Indian religious history, examines it, and observes: 'This is a crazy quilt. To describe it all as a movement serves in only the most general way to capture its full logic.' Hawley guides his readers through the history and nuances of the term *bhakti*: that is, 'devotion', 'participatory religion', or 'heart religion'. Like the word 'Hinduism' itself, *bhakti* is a problematic term: for some it is a useful phrase to cover a variety of different practices, theological concepts, and literary traditions; for others, it refers to one specific, internally coherent historical movement, which swept from south to north India over a thousand years, reaching upwards through society from low to high status communities. Hawley tackles this notion of *bhakti* as a 'movement' – especially in its Hindi avatar, *āṇḍolan* – and explores its longer history, its reworking under colonialism, and how it continues to serve nationalist ideologies.

In Chapter 1 Hawley reconstructs the historiography of the *bhakti* movement, and traces how generations of authors developed and disseminated the fundamental assumptions of the *āṇḍolan*. Hawley brings a sensitive eye to close readings of mid-twentieth-century lectures, monographs, and school textbooks in Hindi and English. The inclusion of pedagogical materials in his discussion helpfully demonstrates how the paradigm of the movement expanded beyond the academy and became a commonplace 'fact' of Indian history. Establishing the assumptions of the *bhakti*

*āndolan*, Hawley then looks back to the influence of European and colonial-era Indian intellectuals, underlining the influence of Hazariprasad Dvivedi in particular. Chapter 2 goes back further in time, to the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century, and evaluates the message of the *Bhāgavata Māhātmya*. In this text, we find the foundational narrative of a feminine personification of *bhakti* journeying through India, from south to north. Taking this text as his starting point, Hawley examines how early-modern readers would have interpreted that imagined journey. Attentively listening to the text's silences and exclusions, Hawley considers how the *Māhātmya* was a literary response to the consolidation of the Mughal state and the rise of Brindavan.

In the three central chapters, Hawley untangles historical developments in early-modern northern India, especially from the sixteenth to early eighteenth centuries. In Chapter 3, Hawley considers the motif of the four *sampradāys* as a precursor to later narratives of *bhakti*'s ascent through India. Hawley reconstructs the infrastructure of religious movements by providing the social contexts for literary and theological works, and examining how sectarian communities negotiated their affiliations in a changing political landscape. Chapters 4 and 5 consider Brindavan and Kachvaha Jaipur together as powerful centres in the Mughal world. These chapters are densely populated with saints, poets, pilgrims, and texts that circulated and consolidated notions of identity and belonging. Movements between the south and north are read critically as quite distinctive episodes: Hawley extracts the nuances of each encounter, journey, and resulting literary composition, rather than conflating them into a single paradigm. Chapter 5 capitalizes upon a complex of recent studies on Jai Singh II to make sense of the relationship between politics, theology, and sectarian identities. Chapter 6 jumps forward in time, again, to twentieth-century Bengal, and plots the reception history of Rammohan Roy, and the influence of Rabindranath Tagore and Hazariprasad Dvivedi.

The final chapter asks, 'What should the *bhakti* movement be?' Hawley explores the varied responses to that question in India today, and posits some of his own alternatives. Taking the full spread of his historical findings into account, *bhakti* cannot be satisfactorily thought of as a 'movement' – especially in the sense of

*āndolan* – since there was never a consistent history of progressive struggle (in the sense of *āndolan* as agitation), nor a theological direction. Given the inadequacy of ‘movement’, Hawley suggests it would be better to think in terms of a ‘network’ of people (merchants, armies, singers), connected through an assemblage of agents and modes of transmission, from musical publics to shared poetic motifs and forms of speech. Expanding on this latter dimension, Hawley posits the value in the notion of a *bhakti* ‘environment’, and provides a fascinating interrogation of the early modern self. This sense of the cultivation and circulation of selfhood and speech also recommends the idea of a shared *bhakti* ‘conversation,’ that was then formalised and codified by hagiographers and anthologists. Hawley’s work recommends tracing the rise and fall of social and intellectual ‘clusters’ and movements, rather than always relying on the grand narratives of great movements that propelled everyone under their purview into the same direction.

This book responds to two distinct challenges: firstly, to unpick the historiography of the *bhakti* movement as an idea; and secondly, to suggest an alternative, more nuanced history for religious movements associated with *bhakti*. In terms of the first objective, having explored a vast range of sources, from wall paintings to modern textbooks, Hawley concludes that, ‘The bhakti movement is a modern idea. It has roots in the early modern period, it answers to a modern search for nationhood and self, and it has crystallized only in the course of the last one hundred years. In fact, as we have just seen, it is unfinished, ongoing.’ (333) This overall shape is nuanced by paying attention to particular deployments of the concept, including in Mughal-Kachvaha politics; as a Hindutva historiographical alternative to ‘Islamic India’ in the nation’s chronology; populist, anti-Brahman movements; and Tagore’s *dharmasetu* bridge between Hinduism and Islam. Together, these reappraisals challenge the basic assumption of the purposive spread of *bhakti* from south to north: crucially, Hawley suggests that be it the pre-modern, colonial, or modern variant of this narrative, the idea of the *bhakti* movement is a northern construction, projected back – temporally and spatially – onto the south. By restoring the construction to its historical context, this work also highlights the underlying role of the Mughals in the fashioning of north Indian Hindu traditions.

This is an ambitious and textured work. Reading Hawley's assessment of how the texts and characters of pre-modern history fit together raises further questions, which might yet help to tease open more historiographical knots in the cloth of *bhakti*. For example, given the pre-eminence of the Gauḍīya and Vallabha *sampradāys* in political circles, should we now question the dominant narrative that posits their overarching influence in the formative years of Brindavan's community? This would require a re-evaluation of the Nimbārkīs' claims to settling in Braj long before, and then integrating smaller sectarian communities, such as the Rādhāvallabhīs, more deeply into the history of Brindavan and transregional *bhakti*. Larger questions might yet be asked about how southern authors and movements viewed the north, and bring Hawley's critical reading of the Hindi-Bengali *āndolan* paradigm into conversation with south Indian conceptual frameworks. Though multifaceted, Hawley's history nonetheless contains significant mini-dark-ages, which future scholars will need to illuminate. In particular, the relative leap from Kachvaha Jaipur in Chapter 5 to colonial Bengal in Chapter 6 gestures to how much more work needs to be carried out on the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Without deeper reflection on that period, how are we to make sense of the continuity or dissonance between Rajput theologians and *bhadralok* or nationalist intellectuals? Beyond the history of ideas, this work also demands further research into how concepts generated in poems and lecture series could speak to, and then inform, popular systems of belief and practice outside the temple or classroom.

Hawley has mustered an army of references and scholarly insights in his mission to dislodge the *bhakti* movement from the level of assumed fact. For some readers, this is a masterful exercise in analysis and deconstruction: the conclusion — that the idea is far more simplistic than the messy historical reality — will come as no surprise, but the delight is in the details. Yet Hawley also addresses this book to critics from South Asia, who are either politically invested in *bhakti* as *āndolan*, or cynical about the historiographical approach of the 'Western' academy. This book feels entangled in recent debates and contestations between South Asians and South Asianists, in which the right to speak about Indian history and religion has come to the fore. Hawley invites sceptics to walk with him through the alleys of sixteenth-

century Brindavan, and to sit with him through lectures in twentieth-century Shantiniketan, in the hope that his reflections will be taken as more than the misconceptions of a 'Westerner'. The book is a defence of the Western academy's meditations on Hinduism as much as a plea to release *bhakti* from its historically flattened and politically sharpened model. However, can an academic monograph like this book actually convince someone who is deeply entrenched in the *āndolan* paradigm that there is a viable alternative? Can dissecting school textbooks and analysing the shifting historiographies of Hindi litterateurs change long-established beliefs? In the 'Post-Fact' world, when someone believes in a single and unified movement, can you convince them that the reality was closer to a network-environment-conversation-clusters-quilt? By challenging the one-size-fits-all paradigm of the *āndolan*, Hawley has presented a more variegated vision of religious history, but in its current academic format, one wonders if he is preaching to the choir?