

Daniel Richard Gold

Hindi sants for middle-caste devotees: two eighteenth-century ideals

The paper will explore some eighteenth century changes among the Hindi sants, when traditions originated by great, predominantly lower-caste figures are renewed by a number of sants from middle castes and classes who often served devotees from similar backgrounds. It will look primarily at Hindi sectarian hagiographical writings about two figures from mercantile communities: Ramcharan, founder of the Shahpura Ramsnehi lineage; and Charandas of Delhi. Ramcharan is a decidedly regional figure, not much known outside of south-central Rajasthan—but there his continuing lineage remains most vital, with his great many verses treasured by sectarian devotees. The stories about him present some intriguing variants of familiar legends concerning the challenges faced by a spiritual leader. Charandas of Delhi was a much better known poet working in a more populous cosmopolitan environment. He was also a more remarkable personality, with a spiritual biography that presents an unusual religious turn. The paper will look at the stories told about these figures in light of those told about earlier sants, especially Kabir, examining some contrasts and continuities in the critiques of conventional outward religion that the stories embody. It will further suggest how the images of Charades and Ramcharan presented in their respective hagiographies offer alternative senses of what sant piety might mean for middle-caste devotees in the eighteenth century and later.

Daniel Gold
Professor of South Asian Religions
Asian Studies
Director of Graduate Studies, Asian Studies
Rockefeller Hall, Ithaca NY 14853 USA

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