

# *Premras pāne tu morna picchadhar*<sup>1</sup>

## Gems of Bhakti Mysticism of Narsinh Mehta

### in the Letters of Francis Xavier

by ROLPHY PINTO\*

#### Introduction

To be religious in the postmodern times is to be interreligious.<sup>2</sup> The saints in a given religion are the epitomes of their respective faith tradition. They live out one or more core tenets of their religious tradition in exemplary way. The saints give to the world a glimpse of the authenticity of their religion. The study of saints becomes a channel to grasp the pearls of wisdom of the religion they profess.

While the nature of this article is interreligious, the scope is to restore the distorted image of Francis Xavier. He is perceived by some to be too aggressive in his missionary methods. For some, he is an ally of the Portuguese conquerors. A Hindu writer even brands him “a pirate in priest’s clothing”.<sup>3</sup> To arrive at the desired end the method employed will be comparative. Francis Xavier will be compared with Narsinh Mehta, a man widely acclaimed as a *bhakta*<sup>4</sup> and a saint. The purpose of the comparison is to glean from the *Letters of Francis Xavier* elements of *bhakti* mysticism and to redefine the spirituality of Xavier as a *bhakti* spirituality. This article seeks to answer the question, can Xavier be called a *bhakta* in the way Mehta is *bhakta*?

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<sup>1</sup> *A line from padas of Mehta*. Translation: Serve me the draught of love’s ambrosia, one bedecked with peacock feathers (Kṛṣṇa).

<sup>2</sup> GC 34, Decree 5, no. 3. Text in *Documents of the Thirty-Fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus*, The Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Sita Ram Goel, *History of Hindu-Christian encounters, AD 304 to 1996*, Voice of India, New Delhi, 1996, 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Bhakti* is passionate devotion to a god who returns that love. *Bhakta* the devotee. Cf. Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: an alternative history*, Penguin Press, New York, 2009, 593. The topic will be dealt with greater detail in what follows.

A word about the rationale behind the choice of the protagonists: I belong to the Gujarat province of the Society of Jesus. Most Jesuit institutions in Gujarat bear the name of Xavier. The vast majority of the population of Gujarat is non-Christian. The people know the *name* Xavier but do not know the *person* well. Mehta on the other hand, is well known and much loved. It is hoped that, through the modest contribution of this article, Xavier may be better known and may even become a model of authenticity to be emulated, especially in Gujarat. The Western reader will have an opportunity to appreciate the value and beauty of *bhakti* mysticism, especially as lived out by Mehta.

The article will be developed in two parts. Part I will be an introduction to the lives and contexts of Mehta and Xavier. This part will conclude with setting the criterion for comparison between their spiritualities. Part II will actually compare the spiritual texts of Mehta and Xavier, aimed at discerning points of convergence and complementary differences.

## PART I

### 1. Narsinh Mehta

I would like to narrate a brief personal experience in order to introduce the person of Mehta. I studied Gujarati literature and culture in my Juniorate stage of formation between 1994-96 in Ahmedabad, in a house located in the centre of the city. Very early in the morning I used to hear melodious *bhajans*. A woman sang them as she passed by our house on her way to work every morning. I was curious to know what she sang. I learnt from my teacher of Gujarati poetry that she was chanting the *padas*<sup>5</sup> of Mehta.

This example is one instance of how popular Mehta is in the Western state of India, Gujarat. He is in the hearts and on the lips of people in and around Gujarat. They sing his *padas* to express their love and devotion to lord Kṛṣṇa. Mehta has won the title *ādikavi*<sup>6</sup> or proto-poet, of the Gujarati language, yet little is known with certainty about his life.<sup>7</sup> Even so, one cannot brush him aside, given his enormous influence in the lives of the people of Gujarat and beyond.

Even though information is scarce with regard to Mehta's life, a brief sketch can be drawn from those works of Mehta in which he makes reference to himself and from the works about his life by other writers. It is to be borne in mind that the legacy of Mehta survived through an oral tradition for over a century and a half after his death.<sup>8</sup> This implies a possible interpolation of later material in his creations. He composed *padas* and "sang" them. What has come down to us is a tradition that has its origin in Mehta. "The *padas* of Mehta" refer more accurately to *padas* of the "Mehta tradition". The critical edition of the collection of 807 *padas* of Mehta by Shivalal Jesalpura is widely accepted by scholars as the standard edition.<sup>9</sup>

Jesalpura classifies the *padas* of Mehta under five headings. 1. Autobiographical works - *Ātmacaritrātmak kṛtiyo*, 2. Other Mythological narratives (further divided into three: (i) *Cāturiyo*, (ii) *Sudāma Carita*, (iii) *Dāñlīla*), 3. *Kṛṣṇaprītina pad* (further divided into two: (i) *Vātsalyana pad*, (ii) *Bāñlīla*), 4. Love Poems - *Śṛṅgārna pad*, 5. Poems of *Bhakti*-mystical

<sup>5</sup> A *pada* or a *pad* is a metered poem. A *pada* could be written on any topic. Being metered it could be sung easily or recited rhythmically. *Bhajan* (with the root word *bhaj* as in *bhakti*) is a devotional song, for the worship of God. The act of singing the *padas* and *bhajans* for several hours together, often repeatedly, is called *kīrtan*.

<sup>6</sup> Anantray Raval, "Ujval Vaanino' Bhaktikavi", in A. Raval (ed.), *Narsinh Mehtana Pado*, Adarsh Prakashan, Ahmedabad, 1984, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Darshna Dholakia, *Narsinh Mehta*, Sardar Patel Universtiy, Vallabh Vidhyanagar, 1994, 8.

<sup>8</sup> A 1618 manuscript under the title *hār samena pad*. Cf. Darshna Dholakia, *Narasinhacharitravimarsha*, Aksharbhārati, Bhuj, 1992, 171.

<sup>9</sup> Shivalal T. Jesalpura (ed.), *Narasimha Mahetani Kavyakrtio, Complete Works of Kavi Narasimha Mehta*, Sahitya-Samshodhan Prakashan, Ahmedabad, 1981. From now on abbreviated as NMK.

knowledge and asceticism – *Bhakti-jñān-vairāgyana pad*. The first category of *padas* is named autobiographical precisely because the *padas* therein make reference to events of Mehta’s personal life.

A clearer assessment of the personality of a historic figure emerges only over the passage of time. In the century that followed the death of Mehta, his influence in the society at large in the Saurāṣṭra region of Gujarat was clearly felt.<sup>10</sup> Based on the inherited memory of Mehta, Viṣṇudās was the first medieval Gujarati author to write about the life of Mehta, with his work “*māmeru*”. Dayārām was the last medieval poet to contribute, in works such as “*māmeru*” and “*hunḍī*”, information on the life of Mehta. Other authors between Viṣṇudās and Dayārām who wrote about Mehta are Kṛṣṇadās, Viśvanāth Jānī, Haridās, Govind, Premānand, Vallabh, and Tulsīdās. Keshavram Shastree observes that not only the poets of Gujarat but also poets from outside Gujarat composed poems about Mehta. Rather than reworking the life events which Mehta himself mentions, they gave new information based on stories prevalent in the oral traditions.<sup>11</sup>

Darshana Dholakiya builds a biography of Mehta based on the biographical data from the autobiographical *padas* and complementing that data with information about Mehta available from the Old Tradition (up to the writings by Premānand 1649-1714).<sup>12</sup> Given the proximity in time to Mehta and the consistency among the works, Dholakia considers the Old Tradition more trustworthy than later writings.

Mehta was a citizen of Junagaḍh, a city situated in the south-west of the Saurashtra region of Gujarat. He was a Brahmin belonging to the sub-caste (*jñāti*) of Vadnagar Nāgar brahmins. He was probably born in a village called Talāja near Bhavnagar city.<sup>13</sup> Umashankar Joshi surmises that Mehta was born in 1408 or 1414 and died in 1480.<sup>14</sup> He lost his parents in his early childhood and grew up under the care of his cousin brother and his wife. He did not receive the education proper to the Nāgar clan. Due to this reason, his sister-in-law taunted him as a duffer, and he left home. This provided the occasion for his conversion, and the gift of Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* was bestowed on him by lord Śiva. Back from the wilderness after his conversion, he began his family life (*gṛhasthāśrama*) with his wife Maṅekbai, who was a *suśīl* (of good conduct) woman. For his brother and sister-in-law, Mehta’s devotional activities became a nuisance, and, at their explicit wish that he go elsewhere to live, he moved to Junagaḍh, where he lived for most of his life.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> D. Dholakia, *Narsinh Mehta...*, 9 (Repeated references will be abbreviated in this manner).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Keshavram K. Shastree, *Narashi Mehto: Ek Adhyayan*, B.J. Institute, Ahmedabad, 2005, 100.

<sup>12</sup> As summarized in D. Dholakia, *Narsinh Mehta ...*, 8-12 and D. Dholakia, *Narasinhacharitravimarsa...*, 265-287. All references in this section are from these two works unless mentioned otherwise.

<sup>13</sup> Dhiru Parikh, “Narsinh Mehta: Jivan ane Kavan”, in S. T. Jesalpura (ed.), *Narsimb Mehtani Kavyakrtio, Complete Works of Kavi Narasimha Mehta*, Sahitya-Samshodhan, Ahmedabad, 1981, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Umashankar Joshi, “Narsinh Mehta”, in R. Soni (ed.), *Gujarati Sahityano Itibas*, Gujarati Sahitya Parishad, Ahmedabad, 1976, 120-121. Much debate has taken place with regard to the exact life time of Mehta. The dates cited above are the most commonly accepted.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Jethalal N. Trivedi, *Narasai Maheta, Vyaktitva ane Kartritva*, Jethalal N. Trivedi, Randheja, 1973, 15.



Mehta had two children, a son, Śāmaḷ, and a daughter, Kuṁvarbai. Mehta fulfilled all their life cycle rituals with great equanimity and serenity. He arranged for his son to marry the daughter of the *diwan* (a member of the advisory council) of Vadnagar, Madan Mehta. Śāmaḷ passed away within a short time of his marriage, and the widowed daughter-in-law supported the father-in-law in his *bhakti*. A short period after the death of the son, the wife too passed away.

There is record of three major events in the life of Mehta, *māmeru*, *hunḍī* and *hārno prasang*. In each of these events Mehta deeply felt the assistance of lord Kṛṣṇa. *Mameru* is a ritual celebrated at the first pregnancy of a woman. At this occasion the girl's father has an obligation to give the articles that the in-laws of the girl demand. Kuṁvarbai's in-laws, with the intention of making a mockery of the penny-less devotee of Kṛṣṇa, Mehta, demanded gifts that were far beyond his capacity to present. Kṛṣṇa intervened in the form a rich merchant and safeguarded Mehta's honor.

In the clan of Nāgar Brahmins, Mehta had many enemies. With sinister designs, they once directed a group of pilgrims to Dwārka, in need of a traveller's cheque (*hunḍī*), to Mehta, telling them that he was a wealthy merchant. In order not to disappoint the devotees of lord Kṛṣṇa and trusting in his providence, Mehta wrote the *hunḍī* in the name of Śāmaḷśah Śeṭh of Dwārka. The pilgrims did not find any such person in Dwārka, but the lord Kṛṣṇa appeared to the pilgrims, who were in the state of utter desperation and cashed the *hunḍī*.

The animosity of the Nāgar Brahmins only increased day by day as Mehta's popularity grew among the simple and common folk. They incited the king Ra Mandalik of Junagaḍh to test the authenticity of Mehta's *bhakti*. Mehta was asked to sing *kīrtans* to the lord Kṛṣṇa the entire night enclosed in the king's temple. If at dawn, the garland (*hārmāla*) from Kṛṣṇa's idol were not found around Mehta's neck, he would be beheaded. Mehta, with the aid of Kṛṣṇa, emerged victorious in this test too silencing his adversaries for the moment.

After the event of *Hārmāla*, Junagaḍh, for Mehta, was no longer a conducive place to live. His patroness, the mother of the ruler of Junagaḍh, was dead by this time.<sup>16</sup> The Nāgar Brahmins continued to harass him. So he went to live in Māngroḷ with his uncle Parbatdas. Mehta seems to have died in Māngroḷ. The cremation ground of Māngroḷ is called even to this day, Narsinhnu smaśān (cremation ground of Narsinh).<sup>17</sup>

## 2. Francis Xavier

The primary source concerning the life and activities of Xavier are his Letters. His letters dating from March 1535 have been preserved. Compiling the letters of Xavier in

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Sivapriyanand, "Introduction to the Devotional Songs of Narsi Metha", in S. Mahadevananda (ed.), *Devotional Songs of Nasri Mehta*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 1985, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Keshavram K. Shastree, *Narsinh Mehta*, National Book Trust, India, New Delhi, 1972, 10.

their original form has been a tedious process. Over ninety percent of the letters were written by Xavier after his departure from Lisbon for the Indies. The letters were received with great enthusiasm in Europe. Their popularity was so great that numerous copies of the letters were made and circulated. Many editions of a single letter and collections of his letters became best sellers in Europe. There came a point where finding two identical editions of a single letter became a hard task. The problem became even more complex when the early official editions<sup>18</sup> of the collection of the letters were brought out in elegant Latin. These Latin translations said more or less what Xavier wrote spontaneously from his heart and even things he never wrote.<sup>19</sup>

The critical edition of the Xaverian texts would see the light of day only at the end of nineteenth century in the volumes XVI and XLII of the *Monumenta Historica Societas Iesu*. This edition attributed to Xavier a total of 167 letters and documents. A more careful examination led the editors of the second edition, George Schurhammer and Joseph Wicki, to reduce the number to 137. This second edition appears in volumes LXVII and LXVIII of the same series as: *Monumenta Xaveriana: Tomus Primus, Sancti Francisci Xaverii Epistolae Aliaque Scripta Complectens*, Madrid, I 1535-1548, and II 1548-1552, Rome, 1944. The subsequent translations of the Xaverian texts are based on this second edition. The first critical edition tried to make a distinction between letters and documents. A distinction of the sort is difficult to make, as many of the Xaverian texts are a letter and an instruction at the same. The second critical edition simply presented the Xaverian texts in a numbered chronological order and designated them as *Epistolæ*. This article uses the designation *Documents*, following the modern translated versions.<sup>20</sup>

The Letters alone give only partial information for re-constructing a life of Xavier. There are numerous lives of Xavier written with the aid of secondary sources, mainly the records of eyewitnesses. Numerous biographies of Xavier have been published in every century after his death. These biographies are of different types. They could be classified as early biographies, scientific biographies, popular biographies, historical novels and critical biographies. A work worthy of mention is the monumental scientific biography in four volumes by Georg Schurhammer.<sup>21</sup> Another work that stands apart is one by Xavier Léon-Dufour. It could be called a spiritual biography as it probes the soul of the saint.<sup>22</sup>

Schurhammer divides the life of Xavier into four parts. What follows is a brief sketch of Xavier's life based on Schurhammer's work.

<sup>18</sup> A collection of 52 letters translated from original Spanish and Portuguese by Fr. Horacio Truselini in 1596 and a collection of 90 Xaverian texts by Fr. Pierre Poussines in 1667.

<sup>19</sup> Cr. Léon-Joseph-Marie Cros, *Saint François de Xavier, sa vie et ses lettres*, Privat, Toulouse, 1900, xlv-xlvi.

<sup>20</sup> The Letters cited in this article are from the English translation by M. Joseph Costelloe (ed.), *The Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier*, The Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis, 1992. *Document* is abbreviated as *Doc/Docs*. The citations indicate the document and the paragraph numbers.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Georg Schurhammer, *Franz Xaver, sein Leben und seine Zeit*, 4 vols. Herder, Freiburg, 1955.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Saint François Xavier: itinéraire mystique de l'apôtre*, La Colombe Editions du Vieux Colombier, Paris, 1953.

## 2.1. Europe (1506-1541)

Francis Xavier (Francisco de Jasso/Jassu y Xavier) was born on April 7, 1506, in the castle of Xavier, situated in the Basque country of Navarra, Spain. He was the fifth and last child of an ancient family of Basque aristocracy. His father was Juan de Jasso, a scholarly doctor from the University of Bologna who served as the president of the Royal Council of Navarre. Xavier's mother, María de Azpilicueta, was a deeply religious woman.

While Xavier's brothers were busy with warfare, for the Xavier family was directly involved in the bloody conflicts between Spain and France, the boy Xavier grew up in the quiet of the castle amidst politically troubled times. He did his schooling, including the study of Latin, under the chaplains of the castle church. At the knees of his mother he learnt his prayers and developed a devotion to Our Lady. The "power house" of the castle however, was the thirteenth century CE crucifix, the "smiling Christ" which was to be found in the castle chapel. Xavier would have prayed in front of it on bended knees.

In 1515, Navarra was forcibly annexed to the Spanish crown. Both Xavier's brothers had to flee to save their lives after a 1521 war. They returned to the castle three year later, when a general amnesty was granted by the King of Spain. In 1525, around September, Xavier, now nineteen, left the castle, never to return. He set out to pursue his dreams and ambitions, and those of his family, to the then best centre of learning in Europe, Paris.

His eleven years' sojourn in Paris would change the entire orientation of Xavier's life. He lived in the College of Saint Barbara. By the age of twenty-four (1530), he obtained his masters degree in philosophy and, as a regent (instructor in philosophy), began a three-year period of teaching in the College of Beauvais. It was at this time that Ignatius of Loyola, who had arrived in Paris in 1528, moved first into Xavier's apartment and eventually into his life. Ignatius, a shrewd judge of human character, cast his eyes on Xavier and did not rest until he won Xavier over for Christ. Xavier's conversion was a process that probably began in 1530 and saw the walls of worldly lures collapse by the middle of 1533. The process culminated with Xavier's making of the *Spiritual Exercises* under the direction of Ignatius in the fall of 1534. Prior to this event, on the fifteenth of August of the same year, Xavier made three vows: to follow the life of poverty and chastity and to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land (Jerusalem).

Xavier continued his studies of theology after making the *Exercises*. As per the vows made, he left for Venice in November 1536 with his companions in order to embark for the Holy Land. On June 24, Xavier was ordained a priest, and after three months, on September 13, he celebrated his first Mass in Vicenza. Xavier and his companions were forced to remain in Italy after the ordination because the war between Venice and the Turks made the voyage to Jerusalem impossible. They could not embark for the Holy Land the following year either, for the same reason, and therefore they decided to place themselves at the disposal of the Roman pontiff.

Not being able to embark for the Holy Land, Xavier, accompanied by Salmerón, plunged into ministry in Bologna until Ignatius called the whole group to Rome at the end of Lent, 1538. Xavier's stay in Rome was to last for about two years. In 1539 the

Society of Jesus was approved orally by Pope Paul III and was given a formal written approval in September, 1540. In March of the same year, Xavier's destiny was decided forever. Bobadilla, the one chosen to go to India, fell ill. Dom Pedro Mascarenhas, the ambassador to the Holy See of the Portuguese King John III, could not wait any longer to leave for Lisbon from Rome. Ignatius had to find a replacement for Bobadilla. The replacement was to be none other than Xavier, Ignatius's own personal secretary. The ambassador was leaving on March 15, 1540, and Xavier was asked on the previous day. "Esta es vuestra empresa!" was Ignatius's wish, which Xavier took as his command with joy: "Pues, sus! Héme aquí".<sup>23</sup>

Xavier would not embark for India until April 7, 1541, his thirty-fifth birthday.

## 2.2. India (1541-1545)

From Lisbon via Mozambique, Melinde and the island of Socotra, Xavier touched the shores of India in Goa – the "Rome of the East" and the Portuguese capital – on May 6, 1542, after thirteen gruelling months at sea. On the ship he moved around like an angel of mercy in the service of the sick and the poor, never holding onto his special status of papal nuncio. He was already called the "Padre santo" (holy priest) during the voyage to India.

Goa was the headquarters of the maze of Xavier's missionary ventures. In Goa, he first submitted himself to the Bishop, Frey Juan de Albuquerque. He opted to live in the hospice, involving himself in an intense, active apostolate especially among the Portuguese. In September of the same year (1542), respecting the wish of Dom Martim Afonso de Sousa, the governor, Xavier moved to the south of India, to the pearl-fishery coast (Paravas) and the Malabar coast (Macuas). There were Christians there who had been baptised six years before Xavier's arrival in India (by Miguel Vaz, between 1536 and 1537), and they had remained like sheep without a shepherd. The first spell of Xavier's apostolate in India lasted about a three and half years, the major part of which was with the Paravas and Macuas, the poorest of the poor.

Xavier had various options before him, after three years of missionary activity: staying in the Fishery Coast, going to Abyssinia, going to Ceylon or going to the Macassar islands.<sup>24</sup> Between April and August 1545, he spent time in St. Thomé (traditionally, the place of martyrdom of St. Thomas the Apostle). His host was Gaspar Coelho, the vicar-general of the City. Coelho became his confidant, perhaps the only one he had in the East. Xavier shared with him all his past life and made a thorough confession. With a pure and open spirit he spent time in prayer, penance and discernment. Finally, the light he sought came to him, through the interior motions of consolation.<sup>25</sup> After having felt the will of God, Xavier turned his gaze towards Malacca.

<sup>23</sup> Ignatius: This is a task for you! Xavier: Good enough! I am ready.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. L.M. Bermejo, *Unto the Indies...*, 115.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *SpEx* [176]. Text in George E. Ganss (ed.), *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, The Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis, 1992.



### ***2.3. Indonesia and India (1545-1549)***

The network of Xavier's journeys became more complex as he moved more towards the East. Malacca, in the seas of the East, was a strategic post for trade held by the Portuguese, comparable to Venice in the West. It was the centre where the trade routes between India, China, Japan, the Moluccas, etc., met. Xavier himself was in Malacca on five different occasions.

Xavier left St. Thomé in September, 1545, and reached Malacca in the same month. In January, 1546, he left for Amboina in the Moluccas ("Spice Islands") and reached there in mid-February. In June he went to Ternate, and from there, in early September, he went to Moro Island. He stayed on Moro for three months. In early 1547, he was back again in Ternate, by late April in Amboina, and by early July in Malacca, and he remained in Malacca till the end of the year. By mid-January, 1548, Xavier was back in India for fifteen months, visiting various localities of south India. This was his second spell of apostolic activity in India.

While Xavier was last in Malacca, he had met there a Japanese called Anjiro (or Paul of Holy Faith), who had learnt Portuguese. Anjiro spoke to Xavier about Japan. After returning from Malacca, Xavier spent more than one year in India, attending to administrative matters and meeting Jesuits. During this period he also spent time asking God to reveal to him the divine will, in such a way that it would be felt deeply in his soul. The finger of God was indicating to Xavier a place where there was neither Portuguese political support nor even their presence.

### ***2.4. Japan and China (1549-1552)***

On April 15, 1549, Xavier embarked from Goa for Japan, disembarking by August 15 at Kagoshima. Though Xavier had permission to preach Christianity from the local feudal lord there, the year spent in Kogoshima did not bear much apostolic fruit. In September, 1550, he moved to Hirado, a port used by the Portuguese for trade. His eyes set on the Japanese imperial court, he moved North-East to Yamaguchi, the second largest city in mainland Japan, in November-December. In this city he was met only with contempt and scorn in the court of the local lord. In January, 1551, he finally arrived in Miyako (Kyoto), the Japanese capital. Here again, the same story repeated itself, both in the royal court and in the university. Xavier also learnt that the feudal lord of Yamaguchi at that time wielded more power than the emperor. He stayed in Miyako only for eleven days. Back again in Yamaguchi in February, he was favourably received by the Duke of Yamaguchi, thanks to the suitable attire of rich silk and satin worn by Xavier and his companions and the to copious presents they offered to the Duke. Later Xavier paid a visit to the duke of Bungo, in similar fashion, on the invitation of the duke himself. It is around this time that Xavier came to know of a culture greater than that of Japan, and he was keen on penetrating that mysterious land, realising that, if he were to win over the Chinese to Christ, the Japanese would follow suit.

A Portuguese ship (of Duarte de Gama) had arrived in Bungo, and Xavier expected letters from India and Europe. There were none. No news was not taken as good news by Xavier. He made a sudden decision to board Duarte's ship going to Canton and from Canton he took a ship going to Malacca and India, in order to inspect the situation in India.

Xavier stopped in Malacca on December 27, 1551 (here Ignatius's letter dated October 10, 1549, awaited him, naming him Provincial of the East Indies), and then proceeded to India, arriving in Cochin on January 24, 1552. After two weeks there he reached Goa in mid-February. On April 17, he departed from Goa to Malacca to fulfill the dream of entering China. On July 17, he departed from Malacca, and he arrived in September at Sancian, a small island off the coast of China opposite Canton (Hong-Kong). After three months of futile efforts to enter mainland China and combating illness, on December 3, 1552, in the early hours of the day and with his eyes set on the mainland China, he breathed his last.

This short biographical sketch reveals many different facets of Xavier, a missionary-evangelizer, apostle, spiritual guide, explorer, adventurer, administrator, superior and provincial of a religious order. The time Xavier spent outside Europe amounts to eleven years and eight months, from the date of his departure from Lisbon to the date of his death in Sancian. The "*Divino Impaciente*"<sup>26</sup> spent three years and seven months in navigation, sailing a mammoth 80,000 kilometres, an average of sixty kilometres a day. One of every three days, he was on water!<sup>27</sup> There remains a hidden but fundamental facet of his life which needs to be emphasised: the mystic Xavier. This aspect will be the focus of the second part of this article.

### 3. Context of Mehta

Narsinh Mehta is popularly acclaimed by the title *Narasaiyyo bhakt harino*. Mehta is first and foremost thought of as a *bhakta*. *Bhakta* is one who does *bhakti*. *Bhakti*, as a phenomenon, became prominent in medieval India, i.e., in the lifetime of Mehta, yet its origins go as far back as Vedic times.<sup>28</sup> Narsinh Mehta's *bhakti* was Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* as understood in medieval India. *Bhakti* is at the core of Vaiṣṇavism, a branch of Hinduism which worships Viṣṇu as the supreme deity.<sup>29</sup> Evolution of the idea of *bhakti* and Vaiṣṇavism took place in parallel.

<sup>26</sup> The heavenly or inspired hurrier. Cf. James Brodrick, *Saint Francis Xavier (1506-1552)*, Burns Oates, London, 1952, 121, 340; The sobriquet *Divino Impaciente* was in use in Spain some years after the death of Xavier. It is part of the title of theatrical work José María Pemán, *A Saint in a Hurry: el Divino Impaciente. The story of Saint Francis Xavier*, Sands and Co., London, 1935.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. X. Léon-Dufour, *Saint François Xavier...*, 124.

<sup>28</sup> Susmita Pande, *Birth of bhakti in Indian religions and art*, Published by Books & Books on behalf of Indian History & Culture Society, New Delhi, 1982, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Jagadhish Shah, *Madhyakalin Gujarati Bhaktikavita*, Gujarat Grantharatna Karyalay, Ahmedabad, 1981, 1.

### 3.1. Evolution of Bhakti

There was an evolution of the idea of *bhakti* from the Vedic to the Purāṇic times.<sup>30</sup> This evolution is parallel to the way the concept of the Absolute evolved. Though the reality of *bhakti* existed in the Vedas and Upaniṣads, without their naming it, its full flowering is seen in the Bhāgavata Purāna.<sup>31</sup> The author of Bhagavad Gīta<sup>32</sup> introduced the idea of love into the divine economy, and that transformed Hinduism.<sup>33</sup> It is in the Gīta, through Bhāgavata, that a fully-fledged idea of a personal God (*puṇnāvātara*) appears, which makes possible a personal relationship of love between God and a human being. Narsinh Mehta's *bhakti* is the *bhakti* of the Purāṇas, which facilitates a relationship of love between God and the devotee or *bhakta*.<sup>34</sup>

The theological foundation for the *bhakti* of Mehta rests on the doctrines of two of the major thinkers of India, Rāmānujācārya (1017-1137 CE) and Nimbārkarācārya (†1164 CE). Rāmānuja, coming after the Āḷvārs,<sup>35</sup> was the founder of *viśiṣṭādvaita* (qualified non-dualism). Śankarācārya did not satisfy the thirst for God of the common people. Rāmānuja awoke the sleeping *bhakti* in South India, but his teaching would go on to influence the Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* in Gujarat, western India. While for Śankara the external world is illusion (*māya*), for Rāmānuja the world is real. He proposes three fundamental categories of reality, *Īśvara* (God), *cit* (soul) and *acit* (matter). The three are different from each other, but *cit* and *acit* depend completely on *Īśvara* for their very existence. He is the creator and is immanent both in *cit* and in *acit*. The unity here is not undifferentiated, absolute identity but differentiated, organic unity. For this reason Rāmānuja's theory is also called differentiated monism.<sup>36</sup>

For Rāmānuja, the way to *Īśvara* is through *bhakti*, although he limits this way to only the first three castes and excludes the *śudras*. The preparation for *bhakti* is *ātmaśuddhi* or purification of the soul. After Rāmānuja, the *bhakti* he preached took a more popular form and was opened up to all people.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See Chart on next page.

<sup>31</sup> Henceforth Bhāgavata.

<sup>32</sup> Henceforth Gīta. I am using the English translation by Robert Charles Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gīta*, Oxford University Press, London-Oxford-New York, 1973.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Robert Charles Zaehner, *Concordant Discord: The Interdependence of Faiths Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at St. Andrews in 1967-1969*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970, 157.

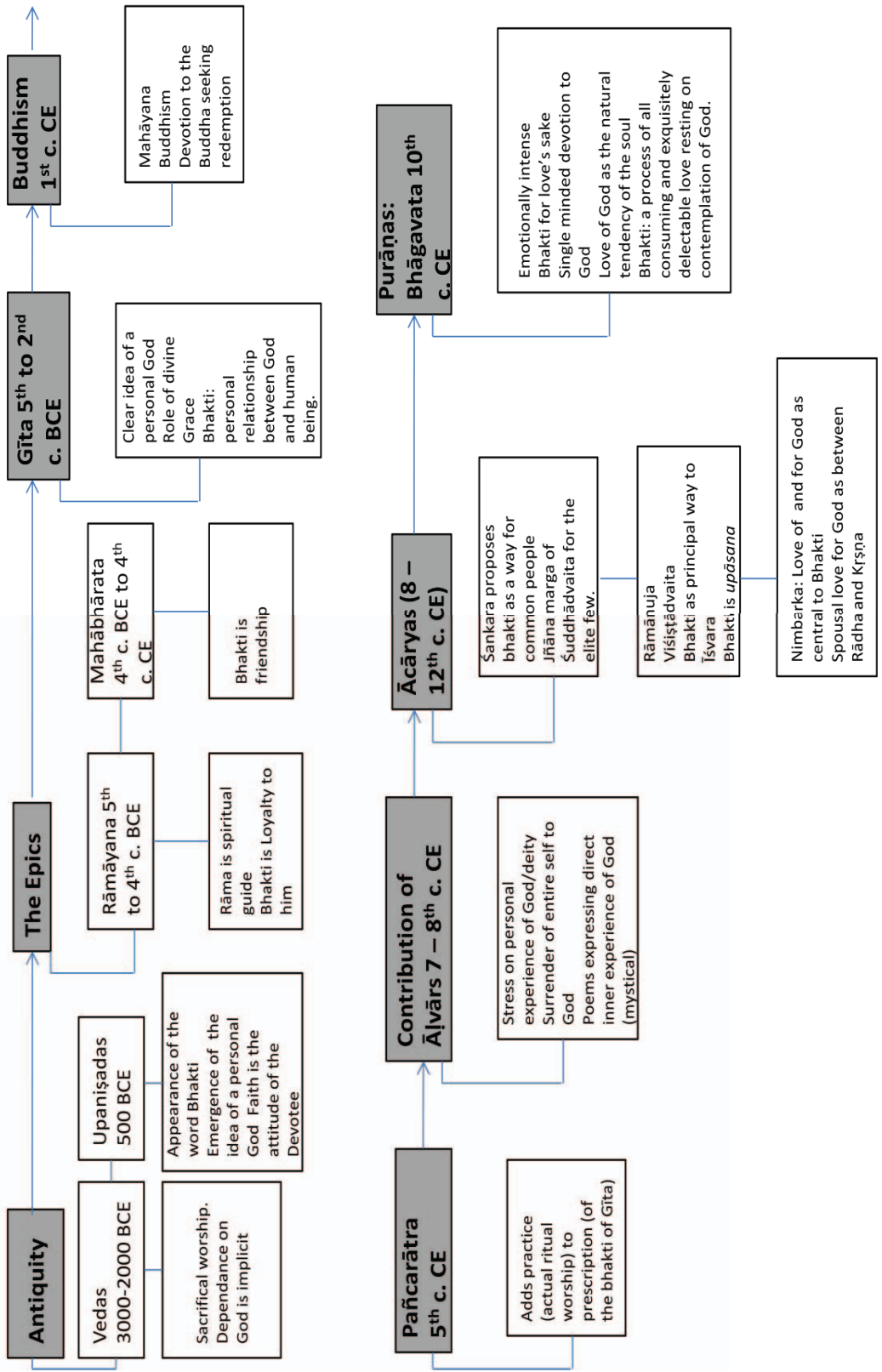
<sup>34</sup> Kṛṣṇa is *antaryāmin*, who indwells and takes a body out of sheer grace and for his devotee (Cf. BhP 10.33.36); Cf. R. C. Zaehner, *Concordant Discord ...*, 159.

<sup>35</sup> The *bhakti* movement spearheads from South India with the advent of the Āḷvārs. They belonged to the Pallava dynasty period (third to ninth century CE; the seventh and eighth centuries form the golden age of their rule). The Āḷvārs appeared as a reaction against the attribute-less absolute (impersonal and atheistic) of *advaita*, Buddhism and Jainism. Cf. Robert Charles Zaehner, *Hinduism*, Oxford University Press, London-New York-Toronto, 1966, 134.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. J. Shah, *Madhyakalin Gujarati Bhaktikavita...*, 12-13; John B. Carman, "Conceiving Hindu 'Bhakti' as Theistic Mysticism", in S. T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983, 208.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. J. Shah, *Madhyakalin Gujarati Bhaktikavita...*, 13.

Overview of the Development of Bhakti





Nimbārkarācārya opened up the way for *premlakṣaṇa bhakti*, which holds love as central. Kṛṣṇa is worshipped along with his consort Rādhā. Rādhā is a *gopī* (milk maid/cowherd girl). The *bhakta* takes up *gopībhāva* or *gopī* consciousness in the *bhakti* of Kṛṣṇa, which makes a love relation, as between spouses, possible. Vallabhācārya, who came after Narsinh Mehta to Gujarat, further develops this doctrine (*śuddha-dvaita*: pure *dvaita*) and incorporates the dimension of grace into *bhakti*. His way is called the *puṣṭimārga* (*puṣṭi* or *pośan* is nutrition given as *anugraha* or a free gift from Hari [Kṛṣṇa]). Here, *bhakti* itself is a grace. The greatness of the Lord is revealed to the *bhakta* by God as a gift. For Vallabha, *bhakti* is to love the Lord above all else.<sup>38</sup>

### 3.2. The development of Vaiṣṇavism

The development of Vaiṣṇavism within Hinduism was a complex process, the result not only of religious factors but also of social and political considerations. Suvira Jaiswal carefully investigates the development of Vaiṣṇavism, and his conclusions shed light on the *bhakti* of Mehta which flourished within the ambience of Vaiṣṇavism.

Nārāyaṇa is a non-Vedic god of the ancient past of primitive tribal life. The cult of this god is called Bhāgavatism, from which Vaiṣṇavism developed.<sup>39</sup> The true meaning of the words *bhagavat*, *bhakti* and Bhāgavata in their origin helps to understand better their current meanings. Nārāyaṇa is the original *bhagavat*. The root of the words *bhagavat*, *bhakti*, *bhakta* and Bhāgavata is *bhaj*. It means to “divide”, “distribute”, “allot”, “share with”, or “partake of”. *Bhakti* did not originally have the current meaning of “to adore” or “to serve”. *Bhāga* means “wealth” or “share”. With the suffix *vat* which means “possession”, *bhagavat* would mean “possessed of material wealth”. *Bhakti* is closely associated with *bhagavat*, meaning “a portion” or “share”, and *bhakta*, that which was “assigned” or “allotted”. In its extended meaning, not only the wealth but the person to whom the wealth was allotted came to be known as *bhakta*. In the primitive stages, the main wealth meant food, and so, in its early uses, *bhakta* also meant food, and to partake of it or to eat meant *bhakti*. In the course of time, the term *bhagavat* was applied to more deities than only Nārāyaṇa. In the Ṛgveda, prayers are offered to *bhagavān* (the possessor of wealth) so that one who offers the prayer could become *bhagavāntah* (the owner of material wealth). The worshippers of Nārāyaṇa were eventually called Bhāgavatas. *Bhagavat* Nārāyaṇa later became a transcendental supramundane god and *bhakta* the title for his devotee.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Cf. J. Shah, *Madhyakalin Gujarati Bhaktikavita...*, 14-15; J.B. Carman, “Conceiving Hindu ‘Bhakti’ as Theistic Mysticism”..., 207.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Suvira Jaiswal, *The Origin and Development of Vaisnavism: Vaisnavism from 200 BC to AD 500*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1981, 229.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. S. Jaiswal, *The Origin and development of Vaisnavism...*, 37-39; S. Pande limits the root to *bhaj*: to serve and in its extended meaning it would mean, to worship; S. Pande, *Birth of Bhakti...*, 1; Carman too takes *bhaj* to be the root of the word *bhakti* but includes the meanings, “to share in”, “to belong to” as well as “to worship”. John B. Carman, “Bhakti”, in M. Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion* II, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1987, 130.

A further development in Vaiṣṇavism is the identification of Vāsudeva<sup>41</sup>-Kṛṣṇa with Viṣṇu. Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa is the most popular and intriguing of the Indian pantheon and has interested the orientalisists all along.<sup>42</sup> Kṛṣṇa is a non-Vedic god, the rival of Indra. His saga is a conglomeration of several heterogeneous elements mingled together into one harmonious whole.<sup>43</sup> In the epic Mahābhārata, Kṛṣṇa is a warrior God,<sup>44</sup> spiritual guide, hero of the Vṛṣṇi tribe, child god with the wheel as his weapon (indicating his antiquity), all put together into one. A preacher and sage, Kṛṣṇa is also to be found in the Cāndogya Upaniṣad. The emergence, propagation and popularity of Buddhism played an important role in leading to the identification of Nārāyaṇa-Viṣṇu with Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa. By the sixth century CE Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa was recognized as a *Purṇāvātara* (complete *avatāra*) of Viṣṇu in the Purāṇic literature.

Kṛṣṇa is also *gopāla* (keeper of cows), a herdsman God. There are several legends of Kṛṣṇa's childhood in pastoral settings.<sup>45</sup> This, according to Jaiswal, is largely due to the result of his identification and amalgamation with the worship of a youthful boy god of the Ābhīra tribe. His foster parents, who appear in the legends, are Ābhīra tribe people of *madhuvana*/Brindāvan in Mathura. Ābhīras constituted a foreign, nomadic cowherd tribe that immigrated to India sometime in the third century BC and were active in the early centuries of the Christian era. They wandered about with their cattle and wagons and did not own land. Cattle and mountains were their deities. The historical evidence shows that they were active in Punjab, Madhuvana (the Mathura region), Saurāṣṭra (the region of Narsinh Mehta's birth and activity) and Konkaṇa. They first came into Punjab and then moved towards Saurāṣṭra. The identification of the youthful god of the Ābhīras with Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa (due to his popularity) not only made Kṛṣṇa a *gopāla*, but also introduced into the Kṛṣṇa saga erotic elements<sup>46</sup> which would have an influence in the way in which the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and his devotees would be understood.

The repeated process of amalgamating the popular non-Vedic deities with the Vedic-Brahmaṇical Viṣṇu (thus transforming popular cults into Vaiṣṇavism), along with the Buddhist doctrine of the Bodhisattvas, gave birth to the theory of *avatāras* (god's descent<sup>47</sup>).<sup>48</sup> With this theory, Vaiṣṇavism accommodated polytheism into a monotheistic

<sup>41</sup> Vāsu+deva = the one dwelling in all things.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. S. Jaiswal, *The Origin and development of Vaisnavism...*, 62-88.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Noel Sheth, "Hindu Avatara and Christian Incarnation: A Comparison", *Philosophy East and West: A Quarterly of Comparative Philosophy* LII/1 (2002), 101.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Karen Pechilis, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Surendranath Dasgupta, *Hindu Mysticism Six Lectures*, Open Court Pub. Co., Chicago-London, 1927, 134-135.

<sup>46</sup> Because of the dalliance of the cowherd hero of the Abhīras with the *gopīs*. S. Jaiswal, *The Origin and development of Vaisnavism...*, 88.

<sup>47</sup> An *avatāra* is usually translated as incarnation. But the two words do not mean the same thing. This will be explained in the following section. Noel Sheth uses the term "god's descent" from the root meaning of *avatāra*. N. Sheth, "Avatara and Incarnation" ..., 86, note no. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Jayant Lele, "The Bhakti Movement in India: A Critical Introduction", in J. Lele (ed.), *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1981, 8.

framework.<sup>49</sup> The culmination of this process took place in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. The social context of the Bhāgavata was the popular *bhakti* movement, spearheaded by the non-Vedic, anti-brāhmaṇical Āḷvārs and Nāyanāras of south India. It was also an effort to sanskritise the popular *bhakti* movement by using the archaic language of the Vedas in composing Purāṇas and making them sound orthodox and authoritative.<sup>50</sup>

Kṛṣṇa, as the youthful god of Ābhīra tribe, was popular in Saurāṣṭra, Gujarat. That popularity was consolidated by the spread of Vaiṣṇavism during the Gupta period. In the second half of the fifth century, Saurāṣṭra passed into the control of the rulers of the Maitraka clan who, with the exception of Dhruvasena I, were devotees of God Śiva (Śaivaites). Dhruvasena I, however, was described as *parama-bhāgavata* (great Bhāgavata). Viṣṇu Purāṇa<sup>51</sup> refers to a temple of Vāsudeva at Dwārka (Gujarat). In Gujarat, Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism existed side by side.<sup>52</sup>

It could be said that the first wave of *bhakti* originated with the advent of the Āḷvārs of Tamilnadu.<sup>53</sup> It was around the time of the Āḷvārs (7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> CE) that the Arab invasion of Northwest India was taking place. In the beginning of the tenth century, with Mohammad Ghazni (997-1030), the Muslim invasion of India began in all its seriousness. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Mogul emperors had firmly established their sultanate in Delhi, ruling practically the entire Subcontinent. In the seventeenth century, the Marāṭha hero Śivāji offered resistance to the Muslim rule. He himself was a religious-minded man, and under his regime the Marāṭha *bhakti* saints flourished, reviving Hinduism against the aggression of the Muslim rulers. This marked the second wave of the *bhakti* movement that spread to the neighbouring Gujarat.<sup>54</sup> It is in this context, between these two waves of the *bhakti* movements, that Narsinh Mehta made his appearance. For Chimanlal Trivedi, he was “the ideal representative of the *Bhakti* movement”.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>49</sup> It should also be kept in mind that the *Vaiṣṇavite* could claim that there has been an evolution in the human understanding of the divinity of Viṣṇu. A parallel could be seen in the recognition by the disciples that Jesus is the Lord, which takes place post-resurrection, even though he was the Lord from the very beginning. Cf. N. Sheth, “Avatara and Incarnation”..., 103.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. S. Jaiswal, *The Origin and development of Vaisnavism...*, 232-235.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Viṣṇu Purāṇa 5.37.36, text in [http://www.gita-society.com/scriptures/ALL18MAJORPURA\\_NAS.IGS.pdf](http://www.gita-society.com/scriptures/ALL18MAJORPURA_NAS.IGS.pdf) [access 14.04.2014].

<sup>52</sup> Cf. S. Jaiswal, *The Origin and development of Vaisnavism...*, 220-221.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism...*, 127, 134. “The growth of the Hindu devotional tradition (*bhakti*) has been commonly conceived as a movement of South Indian origin that gradually spread into northern India where, between the fifteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries, it gave birth to a number of religious communities whose membership cut across caste divisions and used vernacular languages as their primary mode of theological, literary, and ritual expression”. Shandip Saha, “The Movement of Bhakti along a North-West Axis: Tracing the History of the Pustimarg between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries”, *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 11/3 (2007), 299.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism...*, 136-137.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Chimanlal Trivedi, “Medieval Gujarati Literature”, in K. A. Panikar (ed.), *Medieval Indian Literature, An Anthology, Surveys and Selections*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1997, 101.



Mehta, as said above, was a Śaivite by birth but he became *bhakta* of Viṣṇu. This was one of the grievances of the Nāgar Brahmins of his clan against Mehta. Mehta was far from being a brilliant pupil, so much so that he could not even grasp the traditional religious instruction imparted to the children in the Brahmin families. He was considered a duffer. In Mehta's conversion experience in his early youth, Śiva himself infused in his heart the *bhakti* for Viṣṇu. Scholars describe this springing of *bhakti* in Mehta as *sahaj* or *swayambhu*, i.e., spontaneous or inborn.<sup>56</sup> The *padas* of Mehta contain matter from the Hindu Scriptures, especially the Bhāgavat Purāṇa, and there is reference to Vedāntik philosophy. From where did Mehta gain this knowledge? The Vaiṣṇavite pilgrims and the wandering *sadhus* (holy men who renounce the world) from all over India going to the temple of Kṛṣṇa in Dwārka had to pass by Junagaḍh. Mehta interacted with them. His *bhakti* was nourished in their company.<sup>57</sup> Interaction with these *sadhus* was Mehta's link with the external world and his insertion into the *bhakti* movement.

Islam also influenced the *bhakti* movement positively.<sup>58</sup> Akbar sought to reconcile the two religions, although with little success. Islam's strict monotheism and simplicity helped simplify the complexity of Hinduism, making the religion of *bhakti* easily accessible to common people. Islam disregarded the caste system. This influenced the teaching of the *bhakti* poets, who also ignored the caste barriers and condemned caste distinctions.<sup>59</sup>

From time immemorial, human beings have sought the meaning of their life. In the Vedic religion they sought it in sacrificial worship. The inner void led people, in the subsequent centuries, to seek meaning in philosophical abstraction, ritual practices, etc. All along people have also made efforts to conceive of a God with whom humans could relate. This God, who takes a human face most clearly in the Gita, comes down to the level of human beings in the Purāṇas. The common people could relate to this God with loving devotion or *bhakti*, satisfying the soul's thirst partially, if not absolutely. The conception of the attribute-less, abstract, absolute Brahman now appearing as *Īśvara* or

<sup>56</sup> Cf. D. Parikh, "Narsinh Mehta"..., 2, 8.

<sup>57</sup> Bapubhai Jadavray Vaishnav, *Nrisinh Mehtana Jivanna Smarano*, Narasinh Mehta Chora Samiti, Junagaḍh, 1969, 6.

<sup>58</sup> It should also be noted that, with the defeat of the Hindu kings, the Hindu temple complexes lost their royal patronage. Many temples were destroyed by the Muslim rulers. The centres of learning were linked to the temple complexes. The religious teachers had control over the practice of religion. With the collapse of this system, religion became decentralized. The popular *bhakti* poets became the new heralds and custodians of Hinduism. They were wanderers, going from town to town and village to village catechising and nurturing the faith of the common people through their *kīrtans* and *padas*. "Islamic invasions from the 11th century onwards only served to strengthen Hindu sentiment, though the sword brought about some change in the religious composition of the people. The *bhakti* movement from the south, noted earlier, swept across the land, giving rise to singers and prophets over a 700 year period, voices that spoke of God's love for the outcast in the face of human (brahminical) oppression" Suguna Ramanathan, "Jesuits in Gujarat: Looking Back, Looking Forward", in D. d. Mendonça (ed.), *Jesuits in India: History and Culture*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash - Xavier Centre of Historical Research, Anand-Goa, 2007, 171.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism...*, 137.



*Bhagavān*, the supreme being relating to creatures, makes the loving devotion or *bhakti* possible.<sup>60</sup> The transition into such a conception was a centuries-long process of the evolution of the doctrine of *avatāras*. Though there existed *avatāras* of Śiva and the goddess Śakti, *avatāra* doctrine is fundamental to the Vaiṣṇavites.<sup>61</sup>

Within Vaiṣṇavism, the evolution of *avatāra* led to the identification of *bhagavat* Nārāyaṇa with the hero-god Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa.<sup>62</sup> In retrospect, the germs of this theory can be identified in the Ṛgveda, where Viṣṇu takes a different form in a battle.<sup>63</sup> However, the full flowering of the theory takes place in the Bhāgavata, which builds on the important landmark set by the Gīta. The latter, although not using the word *avatāra*, clearly states its meaning and purpose in Chapter 4: 5-8.

*Avatāra* is derived from the root verb *avatṛ* which means “to descend” or “to come down”.<sup>64</sup> “Derived from *ava* (down) and *ti* (to cross), an avatara is generally a ‘descent’ of a deity, or of part of a deity, or of some other superhuman being in a manifest form. An extraordinary human being may also be called (a secondary) avatara”.<sup>65</sup> The other expressions used to denote the descent of the deity are “taking birth” (*janman*, Gīta 4: 5), “springing up”, “coming into being” or “generating” (*sambhava*, Gīta 4: 6; 8) and “creation” (*srjana*, Gīta 4: 7). The purpose of an *avatāra* is to restore *dharma* (right order in the world), when evil abounds, and to destroy the wicked. Once the *avatāra* performs the specific cosmic duty, it disappears or merges back into Viṣṇu.

The number of *avatāras* is not fixed. Mahābhārata gives two lists, the first of four and the second of six *avatāras*. With time, the list kept growing. The sequence in which the *avatāras* are named, too, varies. The Bhāgavata lists as many as twenty-four of them.<sup>66</sup> Traditionally the standard list is of ten (called the *daśāvatara*). Of these ten, Kṛṣṇa and sometimes Rāma and Narasiṃha are considered *puṇḍrāvatāras*, in whom all the powers of Viṣṇu are present, and the rest are *aṃśāvatāras* (partial).<sup>67</sup>

The transition from the conception of an abstract transcendent to a personal immanent God took many centuries. Surendranath Dasgupta traces the development of mysticism in Hinduism in six stages, delineating the gradual transition:<sup>68</sup> Sacrificial or Vedic mysticism, mysticism of the Upaniṣads, Yogic mysticism, Buddhistic mysticism, Classical forms of devotional or *bhakti* mysticism, and popular devotional mysticism. The last two forms of mysticism are fundamentally different from earlier forms. In the earlier forms of mysticism, the subject sought to realize his identity with the absolute Brahman,

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Richard Lopes, *Indian Christology of the Way*, Verlagsanstalt Tyrolia, Innsbruck, 2011, 35.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. S. Jaiswal, *The Origin and development of Vaisnavism...*, 129.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. David Kinsley, “Avatara”, in M. Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion II*, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1987, 14.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Ṛgveda 7.100.6.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Jaiswal, *The Origin and development of Vaisnavism...*, 130.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. N. Sheth, “Avatara and Incarnation” ..., 98.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. S. Jaiswal, *The Origin and development of Vaisnavism...*, 131.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. N. Sheth, “Avatara and Incarnation” ..., 99.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. S. Dasgupta, *Hindu Mysticism...*

which is an attributeless principle and not a person. In *bhakti* mysticism, however, the concept of the personal character of God is prominent and clear. The distinction between the self and the absolute other, too, is clear, and there is no identity between the two. The human being is different from God on the psychological, logical and ontological levels. This precisely is the basis for devotion and worship.<sup>69</sup> In the Gīta and the Bhāgavata Purāṇa this personal god is Kṛṣṇa, the *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. The devotee may regard him/herself as a servant, a son, a spouse or a friend of God.

Mehta stands in line with the large number *bhakti* saints who belong to the school of popular devotional mysticism mentioned by Dasgupta. In the new school of *bhakti* mystics an important emphasis was laid on the non-marital type of human love as a bridge to divine love and even as a key to understanding how God acts with human beings. In all advanced forms of *bhakti* the chief emphasis is on the supreme attachment to God. The *bhakta* here need kill neither his desires nor his inclinations, but s/he must re-direct them all to God. God's absolute transcendence is not denied here. Rather, it is affirmed that, because he is transcendent, he can become immanent, near to and intimate with the human being. He comes down to the human level and makes his home in human beings. What makes this possible is his affection and love for humans. This love is a leveller that makes it possible for humans to relate to him as their partner and friend.<sup>70</sup> True devotion to God is not a means to an end, such as salvation or liberation (desired in the classical schools of Vedānta philosophy), but is an end in itself.<sup>71</sup>

A distinction can be made between modes of *bhakti*, namely, *bhakti* as a means to an end (*sādhana bhakti*) and *bhakti* as an end (*parābhakti* or *prembhakti*).<sup>72</sup> A classical example of *bhakti* as means is *navadha bhakti*, mentioned in Bhagavata 7.5.23. *Nava* is nine. *Navadha* are nine forms of worshiping the deity, in this case Viṣṇu, in order to find favour with him. The perfect practice of these nine forms leads one to attain the supreme gift of *bhakti*. The nine forms mentioned in the Bhāgavata and found in the Gīta are hearing, singing, remembering Vishnu, attending to the feet, offering worship and offering prayers, becoming a servant, being a friend and surrendering one's soul to the Lord.<sup>73</sup>

Attachment and loving commitment to a personal God is the core of Hindu theistic mysticism.<sup>74</sup> This God loves the *bhakta*. Overwhelmed by God's gift of love, the *bhakta's* being becomes a "being-in-love". The liberated soul is conscious "of God" and that it is "like God", and it further yearns for an intimate union "with God". The detached *bhakta* adheres him/herself to God, who is more precious than anything s/he ever knew. For Rāmānuja the spiritual journey does not end at realizing the immortal nature of the soul but in knowing God, and to know God is to love him.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. S. Dasgupta, *Hindu Mysticism...*, 138.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. S. Dasgupta, *Hindu Mysticism...*, 143.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. S. Dasgupta, *Hindu Mysticism...*, 147.

<sup>72</sup> More classifications of *bhakti* are possible but I shall limit this one for this study.

<sup>73</sup> *Śravanam kīrtanam viṣṇoh smaranam pādasevanam  
Arcanam vandanam dāsyam sakhyamātmanivedanam*

<sup>74</sup> Cf. R.C Zaehner, *Concordant Discord ...*, 152.

*Bhakti* as an end, then, is a pure gift of union with God experienced as bliss.<sup>75</sup> It is higher *bhakti*, beyond *navadha bhakti*, and it is pure grace.<sup>76</sup> It is also called *parābhakti*, *prembhakti* or *mādhurya bhakti*.<sup>77</sup> *Bhakti* that is attained as a pure grace is also called *puṣṭibhakti*.<sup>78</sup> *Puṣṭi* is a special favour that God gives to the *bhakta* in order to rise in affection for God. Ultimately, one's loving God is itself a grace.<sup>79</sup> In this higher form, love of God is central. The relationship with God reaches an intense and deep level, and the *bhakta* is short of words to express it. Recourse is now taken to the language of love, including conjugal love. In the Bhāgavata, Rādhā is Kṛṣṇa's beloved. Rādhā represents the *ātma*, the soul, and Kṛṣṇa the *paramātmā*, the absolute soul.<sup>80</sup> The erotic language of the Bhāgavata is to be interpreted metaphorically and mystically and not in its literal sense.<sup>81</sup> It presupposes the radical distinction between God and the self. What lies beneath the erotic imagery is the search for the adequate expression of the soul's longing for God.<sup>82</sup>

The *bhakta* who experiences the higher *parābhakti* no longer seeks *mukti* or liberation. S/he only seeks *bhakti*, the love of God. The Āḷvārs prefer the gift of bliss and service of the Lord to liberation.<sup>83</sup> The Purāṇas care little for heaven or *mukti*. The true *bhakta* seeks only *bhakti* in the heart.<sup>84</sup>

In the above section the development of the idea of *bhakti* and Vaiṣṇavism were briefly discussed. The *bhakti* movement was the context in which Mehta's *bhakti* blossomed. The movement, being popular, simplified the concept God, making it possible for common people to relate to an intimate, friendly God, Kṛṣṇa, the *avatāra* of the Supreme Viṣṇu. The object of Mehta's worship and union is Kṛṣṇa of the Bhāgavata. At the same time, in the later *padās* of Mehta, allusions to the same Kṛṣṇa in his abstract transcendent form are not lacking. Having seen the wider socio-religious context of Mehta, it is now time to provide the background to Xavier.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. S. Pande, *Birth of Bhakti...*, 154.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Pierre Fallon, "Doctrinal Background of the Bhakti Spirituality", in D. Smet and J. Neuner (ed.), *Religious Hinduism: a presentation and appraisal*, St. Paul Publications, Bombay, 1964, 246.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. J. Shah, *Madhyakalin Gujarati Bhaktikavita...*, 16; R.C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gita*, 446.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. J. Shah, *Madhyakalin Gujarati Bhaktikavita...*, 16.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. S. Dasgupta, *Hindu Mysticism...*, 147.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. U. Joshi, "Narsinh Mehta" ..., 112; Niranjan Bhagat, *Svadyalok-V*, Gurjar Granthratna, Ahmedabad, 1997, 28.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. R.C. Zaehner, *Concordant Discord ...*, 158; The poetic language of Bhāgavata has a symbolic meaning. The ecstatic play symbolises the indescribable ecstasy of the soul in the nearness of God. Cf. Daniel P. Sheridan, "Devotion in the Bhagavata Purana and Christian Love: Bhakti, Agape, Eros", *Horizons* VIII/2 (1981), 271-272.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. R.C. Zaehner, *Concordant Discord ...*, 158-159.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Pande, *Birth of Bhakti...*, 116.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. BhP 7.9.43-44, 4.20. 24-31. Anad Aadhar Prabhu (ed.), *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, original Sanskrit and English translation in <http://www.srimadbhagavatam.org/contents.html> [access 06.05.2014]; S. Pande, *Birth of Bhakti...*, 151, 159-160.

## 4. Context of Xavier

Brodrick deduces that Xavier was brought up in an atmosphere of austere Catholic piety. The chaplains of the castle also had minute instructions stating clearly what was expected of them. It is probably these chaplains who took care of Xavier's schooling. When Xavier arrived in Paris, he had sufficient Latin to commence his university studies.<sup>85</sup>

The presence of a peculiar, life-size wooden cross, some three centuries old, in one of the castle chapels is of particular significance. The peculiarity of the cross lies in the facial expression of the crucified. This crucifix is known as the "Santo Cristo" or "Cristo sonriente" (smiling Christ), because Christ wears a mild smile which, in the midst of his suffering, prefigures the resurrection. On the walls of the chapel was depicted the "dance of death", skeletons trampling down the human attributes of beauty, riches and power.<sup>86</sup> The smiling Christ was the hub of religious life of the castle. Periodically, pilgrims came to visit the Santo Cristo, especially in times of need such as drought and famine. The castle was also a pilgrimage centre for people who lived in the villages and towns of Navarre and Aragón. In the ambience of religiosity within the castle and of the popular piety without, the soul of young Xavier was being formed.

Xavier arrived in Paris in the autumn of 1525. He lived in the college of Saint Barbara, one of the most progressive and flourishing institutions of the university.<sup>87</sup> From here he would witness some events that would begin to change the face of the Catholic Church.<sup>88</sup> The winds of the Protestant Reformation were already blowing in the city of the best Catholic university of the time.<sup>89</sup> It was here, in the Collège of Montaigu, that Martin Luther, Calvin and Erasmus had studied. The Faculty of Theology was the main rampart against heresies. It was in this context that Ignatius of Loyola came into the life of Xavier. Xavier acknowledges in his letter to his brother Juan that Ignatius kept him from getting involved in the heresies.<sup>90</sup>

The conversion process of Xavier was slow, three long years in spiritual conversations with Ignatius. The *Spiritual Exercises* influenced the foundation of "the first companions", of whom Francis Xavier was one.<sup>91</sup> Xavier's conversion reached its climax in his making of the *Spiritual Exercises*. *Exercises* are a method and manual for spiritual freedom springing from Ignatius's own experience. Their purpose is to rid oneself of inordinate affections in order to be free for God. From his personal experience, Igna-

<sup>85</sup> Brodrick, *Francis Xavier...*, 18-20.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. José María Recondo, *San Francisco Javier: vida y obra*, La Editorial Católica, Madrid, 1988, 54.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Georg Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier, his Life, his Times, Vol. I Europe 1506-1541*, M. J. Costelloe (tr.), The Jesuit Historical Institute, Rome, 1973, 78-82.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. G. Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier I...*, xv.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Ignacio Cacho, "Iñigo de Loyola y Francisco Xabier. No pensaban igual, pero quisieron lo mismo", *Manresa* 78/306 (2006), 19-21.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. March 25, 1535, *Doc.* 1.6.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Pedro De Leturia, "Génesis de los ejercicios de San Ignacio y su influjo en la fundación de la Compañía de Jesús (1521-1540)", in I. Iparracuirre (ed.), *Estudios Ignacianos*, IHSI, Roma, 1957, 22-23.



tius came to know that the human heart is never free of affections, whether good or bad. Convinced of this, he devised a method to rid the heart of inordinate attachments and to nurture only the ordered ones. Cultivating godly desires and their corresponding affections plays a fundamental role in the dynamics of the *Exercises*.<sup>92</sup>

In the book of the *Exercises* there are several elements that are specific to Ignatius having their source in his personal experience. But what about the rest? What are Ignatius's sources? Most commentators are in agreement that there is a direct link between the *Spiritual Exercises* and *Devotio Moderna*.<sup>93</sup>

#### 4.1. Devotio Moderna

*Devotio Moderna* was not a "new" devotion but a "renewed" devotion, restoring the ancient spiritual traditions of the Apostles, the Desert Fathers and the greatest teachers of the Church. Such devotion was practised with an ardent intensity by the most common people in the most common places.<sup>94</sup>

The origins of *Devotio* are associated with Greet Groote (1340-1384) of Deventer in Netherlands. Fourteenth century Europe was stricken with war, famine and plague (e.g., the Black Death of 1348), and fear of death. Ecclesiastically, the Great Schism (1378-1417) was followed by the Avignon papacy.<sup>95</sup> It was a time of confusion for common Christians. They found hardly any consolation or hope in the practice of religion, as the parish clergy was in decadence.<sup>96</sup> The methods of prayer used in the monasteries were of a speculative and metaphysical nature and did not nourish the spiritual needs of the average Christian, who had barely any learning.

Greet Groote distanced himself from speculative spirituality, as it did not address the needs of common people.<sup>97</sup> As a movement largely lay,<sup>98</sup> *Devotio Moderna* began as a reaction to speculative mysticism involving the discursive thinking prevalent at the time.<sup>99</sup> Greet Groote founded for women a group called "Sisters of Common Life", making his own house available for them. After his death, Florent Radewijns (1350-1400) founded the "Brothers of Common Life" and took over the direction of both the groups.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>92</sup> John O'Malley, "Early Jesuit Spirituality: Spain and Italy", in L. K. Dupré and D. E. Saliers (ed.), *Christian spirituality: Post-Reformation and Modern*, Crossroad Pub., New York, 1989, 4-7.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. J. O'Malley, "Early Jesuit Spirituality" ..., 5.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. John van Engen, *Devotio moderna: basic writings*, Paulist Press, New York - Mahwah (NJ), 1988, 34-35, 47.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Louis Bouyer and Jean Leclercq, *History of Christian spirituality, Volume II: The Spirituality of Middle Ages*, Burns & Oates, London, 1968, 481-482.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. J. Engen, *Devotio Moderna...*, 12-13.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Rogelio García Mateo, *Storia della spiritualità: secoli XV-XVI*, Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Roma, 2004, 6.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. L. Bouyer and Leclercq, *The Spirituality of Middle Ages...*, 408.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Angela Tagliafico, *Ignazio di Loyola e Teresa d'Avila: due itinerari spirituali a confronto : cristocentrismo, preghiera e servizio ecclesiale*, Edizioni OCD, Roma, 2009, 24.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. L. Bouyer and Leclercq, *The Spirituality of Middle Ages...*, 431-432.

The influence of the *Devotio* on Xavier was both direct and indirect. Directly, it was through the devotion to the smiling Christ, placed in the little chapel of the castle, and through the chapel walls, painted with the “dance of death”. Life lived as a persistent preparation for death was proposed by Thomas à Kempis (CE 1380-1471), an author of the *Devotio*.<sup>101</sup> Indirectly, it was through Ignatius, who had a strong affinity to the *Devotio*. In Paris Ignatius had close ties with Montaigu college, where *Devotio* was the order of the day.<sup>102</sup> Greater had been the influence of *Devotio* on Ignatius while he was in the Benedictine monastery of Montserrat. This link would deeply influence the coming to be of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The *Devotio* was to have a greater influence on Xavier through his making of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Pedro de Leturia traces the journey of *Devotio* from its origins to the Benedictine monastery of Montserrat.<sup>103</sup> “The Sisters and Brothers of Common Life” were instrumental in the expansion of the *Devotio Moderna*. The Carthusian and Cistercian monks also embraced the *Devotio*, and this gave greater impulse to its diffusion outside the Netherlands and Germany. Nicholas of Cusa, one formed under the Brothers of Common Life, spread the teachings of the new school. As a Papal legate for reformation he journeyed throughout Germany between 1450-1452. The wave of reformation also swept through the Benedictines, due to Luis Barbo, in Italy and Spain. When the famous García de Cisneros, the cousin of Cardinal Cisneros, arrived in the monastery of Montserrat in 1493, he found the *Devotio* implanted there. He carried forward the work of reform.

García de Cisneros composed in Spanish, for the use of monks, a small manual called *Ejercitatorio de la vida spiritual* (1500) largely culled from the *Rosetum* of Mombaer. This manual laid the foundation of the spiritual life of the monks. Ignatius arrived into this context in Montserrat in March of 1522.<sup>104</sup> He fell on his knees before Juan Chanones, a confessor in the monastery. Ribadeneira refers to Ignatius’s encounter with Chanones and with the book *Ejercitatorio*,<sup>105</sup> or with the résumé of the same known as *Compendio Breve de Ejercicios Espirituales*,<sup>106</sup> as a true blessing for the Society of Jesus.<sup>107</sup> Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*, a work of such great calibre, could hardly be merely a fruit of human

<sup>101</sup> Cf. Gerald O’Collins and Farrugia Mario, *Catholicism: the story of Catholic Christianity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003, 224.

<sup>102</sup> “The Brothers of Common Life” were in charge of the formation of the youth in this college. They did not have rules in the strict sense but what they called “Consuetudines”. Cf. García Mateo, *Storia della spiritualità...*, 7.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. Pedro De Leturia, “La “Devotio moderna” en el Montserrat de San Ignacio”, in I. Iparraquirre (ed.), *Estudios Ignacianos II*, IHSI, Roma, 1957, 73-88.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. *Autob* [18]. Text In Parmananda Roque Divarkar (ed.), *A Pilgrim’s Testament: The Memoirs of Ignatius of Loyola*, The Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis, 1995.

<sup>105</sup> When historians researched the genesis of the *Spiritual Exercises*, they came across the *Ejercitatorio*, which gave them important clues. Cf. R. Ricardo G. Villoslada, “Rasgos característicos de la “Devotio Moderna””, *Manresa* 28/108 (1956), 316.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Javier Melloni, *The Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola in the Western Tradition*, Gracewing, Herefordshire, 2000, 9.

<sup>107</sup> Letter to Fr. Girón 18 April 1607, in Ribadeneira II, vol. 60, MHSI, Madrid, 1923, 505.

endeavour. Nevertheless, Ignatius used what he encountered at the monastery of Montserrat, especially the *Imitation of Christ* and the *Ejercitatorio*, in composing the *Spiritual Exercises*.<sup>108</sup> Some elements found in the *Spiritual Exercises* that have a link with the *Devotio* are the focus on the humanity of Christ and an affective friendship with him, the structure and methods of prayer, the rootedness in Scriptures, and the involvement of affects and sentiments.<sup>109</sup>

A major breakthrough in the *bhakti* movement was the contribution of the Āḷvārs, who distanced themselves from the speculative schools of Hinduism (*jñāna mārga*) and, through their poetry which spoke of their affective inner experience, made God experience accessible to common people. Like the Āḷvārs and the later *bhakti* saints, the New Devout were mystics of a different kind. The New Devout would not speak about infused contemplation, although many of them had the gift.<sup>110</sup> More similarities between the two movements can be listed. The devotion of the New Devout centred around the incarnate Christ and the Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* around Kṛṣṇa, the human *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. A strict moral social conduct was demanded both of the New Devout and of Kṛṣṇa *bhaktas*. Affectivity, i.e., the cultivation of pious, even passionate, sentiments for the object of worship was common feature of both phenomena. While the New Devout laid stress on the inner person and interior conversion, the *bhaktas* stressed the relationship with Kṛṣṇa, the *antaryāmin* (one who dwells and moves within the person).<sup>111</sup>

*Devotio Moderna* could be said to be the remote context of Xavier. Trained in the school of the *Spiritual Exercises* Xavier developed an affective (free of inordinate attachments) spirituality and a deep and intimate friendship with the incarnate Christ. Noel Sheth explains the preliminary meaning of the term and doctrine of incarnation:

the word “incarnation” means “enfleshment,” based on the statement in the Gospel according to John, namely: the Word (Greek: *logos*) became flesh (Latin: *caro* = flesh, corresponding to the Greek *sarx*) (Jn 1.14). Christians believe that the Logos or Word, the Second Person of the Trinity, assumed human reality. Incarnation refers both to the act of God becoming a human being as well as to the result of this action, namely the permanent union of the divine and human natures in the one Person of the Word.<sup>112</sup>

Incarnation is a Christian mystery in which the second person of the Holy Trinity becomes man in order to save the human race. Incarnation is redemptive. Jesus Christ is the God-man, in whom God and man are united in one person.<sup>113</sup> Jesus’ virginal con-

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Jesús Alvarez Gómez, *Historia de la vida religiosa, Desde la “Devotio moderna” hasta el Concilio Vaticano II*, Publicaciones Claretianas, Madrid, 1990, 149.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. M. A. Lewis, “Reforma católica”, in C. O’Neill and J. M. Domínguez (ed.), *Diccionario histórico de la Compañía de Jesús : biográfico-temático IV*, IHSI - Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Roma-Madrid, 2001, 3504.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. R. Villoslada, «Rasgos de la «Devotio»...», 344.

<sup>111</sup> For the characteristic features of the *Devotio* see Villoslada, “Rasgos de la “Devotio” ...”, 317-350.

<sup>112</sup> N. Sheth, “Avatara and Incarnation” ..., 104.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. Josef Neuner and Jacques Dupuis (ed.), *The Christian faith in the doctrinal documents of the Catholic Church*, Theological publications in India, Bangalore, 2001, 143, 215.

ception expresses his divine origin. "The fact that he was born of a woman pointed to his humanity. The fact that he was born of a virgin pointed to his divinity".<sup>114</sup>

## 5. Criterion for Comparison

Mehta's lifetime was the second half of the fifteenth century and Xavier's the first half of the sixteenth. They belonged to different religious traditions. Mehta was a Hindu Brahmin. Born into a Śaivaite family, he later adopted Vaiṣṇavism. Xavier was Christian and a Catholic. He was a founding member of a new religious order in the Catholic Church, the Society of Jesus. While the *bhakti* stream of Vaiṣṇavism shaped the spirituality of Mehta, the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius moulded Xavier.

Mehta was married and had a family of his own. He lived his *bhakti*, his loving and wholehearted surrender to Kṛṣṇa, within the context of his family responsibilities. Xavier, being a member of a religious order, lived his total commitment to Christ through embracing the evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity and obedience). He was sent to India with the responsibility of a religious superior in order to lead and guide a group of men placed under his care. He was also named the Provincial Superior of India around three years prior to his death. The writings of Mehta are sublime poetry in Gujarati, while the letters and instructions of Xavier are prose in Spanish and Portuguese, often written in a hurry, mostly to report, instruct and govern.

Yet this article dares to compare the spiritualities of Xavier and Mehta. What is the common ground to do so?

According to Evelyn Underhill, one of the essentials of mysticism is the way in which the mystic feels about the deity and his/her own relationship with it.<sup>115</sup> It is in the way in which mystics relate with their deity that mystics, at their best, are more like each other than unlike each other. Of particular importance is the following point: the mental image of the object which the mystic forms is not an abstract principle; this object is a deity. This is theistic mysticism.<sup>116</sup>

Theistic mysticism, in its turn, can take various forms. The image of God of the mystic can be of an impersonal god, inclining more towards being an abstract principle, or of a personal God who, being personal, is at the same time the absolute Thou. For this study, not only is the relationship between the mystic and his/her deity important, but also the concept of the deity held by the two persons being studied. Mehta's deity is *avatāra* Kṛṣṇa and Xavier's is incarnate Christ. The concepts of the deity held by both are similar in some ways and dissimilar in others.

<sup>114</sup> Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: a biblical, historical, and systematic study of Jesus Christ*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York, 1995, 276.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. Evelyn Underhill, "The Essentials of Mysticism", in R. Woods (ed.), *Understanding mysticism*, Image Books, Garden City, N.Y., 1980, 28.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. S. Pande, *Birth of Bhakti...*, 115.



### 5.1. Avatāra and Incarnation

The doctrine of Hindu *avatāra* and Christian incarnation are akin to each other.<sup>117</sup> *Avatāra* is the word used to translate incarnation into the Indian vernacular languages.<sup>118</sup> It is used as early as the seventeenth century CE, by De Nobili, to refer to incarnation.<sup>119</sup> Though the doctrines are similar, they are not the same. The use of the term *avatāra* to translate incarnation and vice-versa could be misleading. Here, some fundamental similarities and differences will be dealt with.

#### 5.1.1. Similarities

In both *avatāra* and incarnation, the initiative is from God who wishes to reveal his personal love, either to the *bhakta* or to the disciple. The doctrines of both *avatāra* and incarnation emphasise *bhakti* (loving devotion) rather and *jñāna* (knowledge).<sup>120</sup> *Avatāra* and incarnation refer to one immanent yet transcendent and free. Both *avatāra* and incarnation are world affirming and appreciate the goodness of matter.<sup>121</sup> Both are based on their respective scriptures and tradition. Both have given rise to internal differences and doctrinal disputes. Both Kṛṣṇa and Christ enter the world in a miraculous way. They also promise a second coming: Viṣṇu in *kaliyuga*<sup>122</sup> and Christ in his second coming.

#### 5.1.2. Differences

The major differences between *avatāra* and incarnation can be summarised as in the following table:<sup>123</sup>

<sup>117</sup> Cf. R. Lopes, *Indian Christology...*, 223, 234.

<sup>118</sup> “the term Avatar is used in the books of Gujarati [Catholic] liturgy. It is used in noun or verb form (*avatar*, *avataran*, *avataryo*, *avatarya*) for Jesus Christ 21 times in the Gujarati *Sampurna Bible*, 40 times in the *Gujarati Missal*, 27 times in the hymn book *Kirtansagar* and 28 times in the prayer book *Nityavandana*. The same is true with Marathi hymn book *Mala Gau De*, where the term Avatar is used 11 times and in the Marathi *Roman Missagranth* the word appears 5 times”. R. Lopes, *Indian Christology...*, 259, note no. 567. “Every Christian book in the vernacular uses the word ‘Avatar’ to describe the Incarnation of Jesus”. Aiyadurai Jesudasan Appasamy, *The Gospel and India’s heritage*, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, 1942, 256.

<sup>119</sup> Cf. Michael Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus*, ISPCK, Delhi, 2005, 125.

<sup>120</sup> Cf. N. Sheth, “Avatara and Incarnation”..., 104, R. Lopes, *Indian Christology...*, 243.

<sup>121</sup> Cf. N. Sheth, “Avatara and Incarnation”..., 104-105.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. R. Lopes, *Indian Christology...*, 243.

<sup>123</sup> This is a summary of the conclusions of N. Sheth, “Avatara and Incarnation”..., 106-112 and R. Lopes, *Indian Christology...*, 250-257.

Avatāra	Incarnation
<i>Purpose</i>	
Many different purposes in every age	One purpose: ultimate salvation
Is to destroy evil and evil doers. Use of violence for establishment of order ( <i>dharmā</i> ) and peace. <sup>124</sup>	Does not destroy sinners. Incarnation is a “Love meeting” between God and man in the mystery of the Cross of Christ.
<i>Doctrine</i>	
Gīta: Doctrine of identity of Kṛṣṇa with Brahman	John’s Gospel: Doctrine of unity of the Son with the Father and the Spirit
Doctrine is pure metaphysics	Doctrine is moral, spiritual and historical
Many, repetitive, partial and full, in diverse forms <sup>125</sup>	One and complete in the human reality
No hypostatic union, no human soul. Body assumed (material nature or <i>prakṛti</i> ) <sup>126</sup> is perfect body.	There is hypostatic union of natures. Has a human soul. Assumes imperfect <i>prakṛti</i> .
God cannot suffer. States of hunger, thirst and suffering are only apparent. Their purpose is to generate <i>bhakti</i> in the devotees.	Jesus takes sin and suffering of the humanity upon himself. Feels hunger and thirst. Suffers. Jesus is a suffering saviour
Temporary and static, from time to time. They disappear or are reabsorbed into the Absolute. They abandon the body and return to Viṣṇu.	Abiding and dynamic. Abides in the dynamism of the Holy Spirit, the gift of the risen Lord.
Come to an end in an ordinary way. Death is apparent. Reality of resurrection is absent.	Jesus dies a horrendous death on the Cross and rises from the dead.
Apparent and mythical	Real and historical

The criterion for the comparison between the two mystical spiritualities is the way in which Mehta and Xavier related to their respective deities and what they felt in relation to the same. The concepts of the deity both held are not the same, though they are similar, as shown above. These preliminary observations having been made, the task ahead is to proceed with the actual comparison.

<sup>124</sup> Sheth nuances this distinction. Both *avatāras* and incarnation include the purpose of forgiveness of sins and establishment of the right order in the world (Jesus comes to establish the kingdom of God). The aspect of the destruction of evil and evildoers is not completely absent in the Christian doctrine. “It should be noted that Christians believe that Christ, at his Second Coming, will destroy his enemies”. N. Sheth, “Avatara and Incarnation” ..., 111.

<sup>125</sup> N. Sheth nuances this difference showing how the cyclic world view warrants many *avatāras*. Within a given *yuga* (age) there is only one *avatāra*. Every given *yuga* in itself is linear.

<sup>126</sup> For a Hindu it is impossible for God to be imperfect. “So the Vaisnavites developed the idea of a perfect ‘pure matter’ (*suddha-sattva*) constituting the body or form of the *avatara*”. N. Sheth, “Avatara and Incarnation” ..., 100.

## PART II

The comparison of the mystical spiritualities will gradually reveal that *bhakti*-love of God is at the core of both spiritualities. The first three points in this part will deal with the similarities and the fourth with the complementary differences.

## 6. Points of Convergence

### 6.1. Two Mystical Itineraries

The quest for a neutral tool to determine the authenticity of the experience of God of a person independently of his/her religious allegiance led me to take recourse in Lonergan's notion of religious conversion. For Lonergan, arriving at the awareness of the experience of God is a process that, complex as it may seem, involves five levels of consciousness, which are spelled out in five transcendental precepts and three conversions. The first three levels of consciousness, namely experience, understanding and judgment, form the cognitive order. The second two levels, namely, deciding/acting and loving, form the moral and religious orders respectively.<sup>127</sup> These processes can be identified in the lives of both Mehta and Xavier.

#### 6.1.a Before the Religious Conversion

Mehta was orphaned at a tender age and was brought up by his cousin brother. The brother was sympathetic to Mehta but not the sister-in-law who treated him badly and kept taunting him for being a burden on the family. Mehta was considered a good-for-nothing sort of boy. Besides, he had a speech impairment. He probably tended the village cows and whiled away his time singing and dancing in the company of the wandering *sadhus* who passed through Junagaḍh. The continuous taunting of his sister-in-law drove Mehta into the wilderness to seek refuge at the feet of Siva in a dilapidated temple.

Xavier was brought up in the family castle in an atmosphere of piety, but his early years in Paris were far from pious. In spite of the rigorous timetable of the academic life, he occasionally enjoyed late night escapades along with his friends, and sometimes even his tutor, into the streets and taverns of the Latin Quarter. Only the fear of contracting the dreaded syphilis and the ugly sores it caused protected him from sexual involvement.<sup>128</sup> It was in this context that Ignatius of Loyola entered into the life of Xavier, at a very opportune time indeed.

<sup>127</sup> I follow here the explanation of method of Lonergan by Tad Dunne, *Lonergan and Spirituality: Towards a Spiritual Integration*, Loyola University Press, Chicago (IL), 1985.

<sup>128</sup> Cf. G. Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier I...*, 106.

### 6.1.b Conversion Events

The conversions of Mehta and Xavier are not to be understood as stereotypical conversions from being a “bad” person to being a “good” person. They are to be understood in the Lonerganian sense of religious conversion – as profound encounters with the divinity or as an other-worldly falling in love,<sup>129</sup> where their beings became being-in-love with God.

Forced to leave home, Mehta spent days fasting and meditating on Śiva with single minded devotion. Nāgar Brahmins are Śaivites, i.e., worshippers of Śiva. On the seventh day, Mehta had an experience of God that would transform rest of his life. It is hard to say what exactly took place. He had a vision of Śiva. Mehta gives the following expression to the experience, employing the language that his religious superstructure provided him. He heard Śiva telling him,

Ask whatever you want. I am well pleased with your *bhakti*<sup>130</sup>

The devotion that Mehta offered to Siva was the *sadhana bhakti* (the means), and in return he was graced with the gift of *sadhya bhakti* (the end).

With a lump in my throat, I could barely speak. He [Śiva], recognizing my innocence, laid his hands on my head. Life gushed into my lifeless self, sins of my entire life were erased, my sleeping voice/word woke up. [...] I was an ant and I became an elephant.<sup>131</sup>

The God experience came after an intense period of purification. The change wrought in Mehta was radical and mammoth (ant to elephant). The gift of “speech” (*vāṇi*) is a metaphor that stands for the gift of *bhakti*. His speech impairment disappeared when Śiva laid his hands on Mehta. He also had the experience of the heavenly glory and the dance of mystical ecstasy (*rās līla*) of Kṛṣṇa with his maids (*gopīs*). Śiva was the guru who led Mehta to the vision of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa, too, granted him the supreme gift of *bhakti*.<sup>132</sup> Śaivite Mehta from this moment on became *Vaiṣṇavite*.

Mehta was unable to determine how long the mystical experience lasted. In an intense mystical experience, there is loss of time consciousness. The mystic is never certain how long s/he is lost in ecstasy. A long period of time seems but a flash. Mehta writes, “I saw with my own eyes, real (true) or dream I know not”.<sup>133</sup> There is a near impossibility of distinguishing between dreamlike state and reality.<sup>134</sup> Such is the nature of mystical experience: obscure yet, at the same time, certain.

Having experienced the sublime *bhakti*, love of God, Mehta wants to take it to the earthly sphere and to share it with the others.

<sup>129</sup> Cf. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1973, 240.

<sup>130</sup> NMK, 27. Translations are mine unless mentioned otherwise.

<sup>131</sup> NMK, 4-5.

<sup>132</sup> Cf. NMK, 5.

<sup>133</sup> NMK, 8.

<sup>134</sup> Cf. N. Bhagat, *Svadhyalok...*, 27; U. Joshi, “Narsinh Mehta” ..., 122.



Mehta's conversion was instantaneous and sudden. Xavier's conversion took place gradually over three years. Ignatius was the mediator, the guru.<sup>135</sup> Xavier was the toughest dough that Ignatius had to knead. Xavier kept avoiding Ignatius but Ignatius gradually won over Xavier's confidence through human (financial help) and divine (spiritual conversation) means.<sup>136</sup> Xavier's conversion reached its climax with the *Spiritual Exercises* he made under the guidance of Ignatius in September 1534.<sup>137</sup> Xavier subjected himself to severe penances as a remedy against worldly ambitions and vainglory. "... he tied his arms, hips, and feet so tightly that his limbs swelled up and the thin cords could hardly be seen [...] his companions were afraid that at least one of his arms might have to be amputated, when God heard their earnest prayers and assisted him as if by a miracle".<sup>138</sup> There was a clear intervention of God in the life of Xavier.

These *Spiritual Exercises* of Xavier can be called his "foundational experience". He allowed the divine love to flood his soul during the privileged period of the *Exercises*. His companions noticed that he was no more the same Xavier after the *Exercises*.<sup>139</sup> "A holy fire illuminated his countenance".<sup>140</sup> According to Lonergan, the religious conversion or the other-worldly falling in love is the final step of a process of conversions which entails two prior conversions, namely, intellectual and moral (a process from below). But, Lonergan also points out an exception to this rule with regard to religious matters. When people fall in love, love takes priority over the knowledge of the person they fall in love with. "So it is that in religious matters love precedes knowledge and, as that love is God's gift, the very beginning of faith is due to God's grace".<sup>141</sup>

This kind of religious conversion in which God's love takes priority was clear in the case of Mehta.<sup>142</sup> In the case of Xavier, there was a prior preparatory period during which Ignatius worked patiently and delicately with Xavier. Yet it was in the experience of the *Exercises* that Xavier's other-worldly falling in love took place. God took the initiative and his love took priority over Xavier's knowledge of God.

<sup>135</sup> The role that the persons played as mediators in the conversions of Mehta and Xavier can be further nuanced. Mehta's sister-in-law and Ignatius played the role a catalyst. The sister-in-law, though, was unskilled in spiritual matters and became an instrument accidentally, unintentionally and unknowingly. Ignatius was spiritually skilled and intended a conversion in Xavier. The role of the guru could be more appropriately attributed to Śiva in the case of Mehta and to the Holy Spirit in the case of Xavier.

<sup>136</sup> Cf. G. Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier I...*, 185.

<sup>137</sup> Xavier could not make them earlier because he was busy with the teaching the three-and-half years' course of philosophy in the Collège de Beauvais. Cf. G. Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier I...*, 216.

<sup>138</sup> Joseph F. Conwell (ed.), *A brief and exact account : the recollections of Simão Rodrigues on the origin and progress of the Society of Jesus*, Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis, 2004, 6, no. 5.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. X. Léon-Dufour, *Saint François Xavier...*, 22-23; Joaquín Castiella, "Francisco Javier. ¿Quién fue realmente este hombre?", *Manresa* 78/306 (2006), 9.

<sup>140</sup> G. Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier I...*, 223.

<sup>141</sup> B.J.F. Lonergan, *Method...*, 122-123.

<sup>142</sup> Though the role played by the sister-in-law, unintentionally, was preparing the ground in Mehta to receive the gift of God's love.

### 6.1.c Post Conversion

The other-worldly falling in love or the religious conversion, according to Lonergan, influences and transforms all other levels of consciousness. This holds true in the lives of both Mehta and Xavier. Some select examples to illustrate this fact from the life of Mehta and Xavier would be fitting.

After the divine encounter, Mehta dedicated his life to the service of the devotees of Kṛṣṇa, making love of Kṛṣṇa accessible to them by singing *kīrtans* for them.<sup>143</sup> People seeking an experience of God now flocked to the once good-for-nothing Mehta.<sup>144</sup> A clear sign of the authenticity of Mehta's conversion was his revolutionary act of reaching out to the untouchables of his society. The society in which Mehta lived was governed by strict caste codes. A Nāgar Brahmin of the highest caste mingling with the *dhēḍs*,<sup>145</sup> the outcasts, was unimaginable. It was considered the most abominable thing a Brahmin could do. The penalty was excommunication (*nat bahar*) from the caste, the consequence of which was both spiritual and physical death. The excommunicated person was completely ostracised by everyone.

Mehta risked everything when he responded to an invitation by the *dhēḍs* to perform *kīrtans* in their *vās* (quarters). He made no discrimination among human beings.<sup>146</sup> He began to look at the *dhēḍs* with the eyes of God, as children of God. The Nāgar Brahmins of Mehta's clan rebuked him, ridiculed him and excommunicated him. Yet Mehta stood his ground and continued his option for the least and the last of the society. He fearlessly confronted the Nāgar Brahmins.<sup>147</sup> His fearlessness derived from the experience of the love of God.

Transformed by the love of God, Xavier, too, touched the untouchable by cleaning the sores of the sick in the hospices of Italy.<sup>148</sup> Xavier, who had cared much for worldly ambitions, refused the privilege of a special cabin meant for the apostolic nuncio on board the ship to India. He replied to the insistence of Count of Castanheira, "The right way to acquire them [honour and credibility] is by washing one's own clout and boiling one's own pot, without being beholden to anybody, while at the same time busying oneself in the service of souls".<sup>149</sup>

It would be a misconception to suppose that Xavier was concerned only with the salvation of "souls". He was interested in the salvation of the whole person. Once while Xavier was active in the south India coast, in Coimbatore, the Parava fishermen neo-

<sup>143</sup> Cf. NMK, 8.

<sup>144</sup> Cf. NMK, 28.

<sup>145</sup> This is a derogative term and could amount to crime according to Indian law if used in an offensive way.

<sup>146</sup> *Pakṣāpakṣī tyān nahi paramēśvar* (Where there is discrimination, the Lord is there). Cf. NMK, 64.

<sup>147</sup> Cf. NMK, 65.

<sup>148</sup> Cf. EB [42] [43]. Text in *Epistolae PP. Paschasii Broëti, Claudii Jaji, Joannis Cadurii et Simonis Roderici*, MHSI, Madrid, 1903; English translation J.F. Conwell (ed.), "A brief and exact" ..., 45-47.

<sup>149</sup> MX II, 836-837. Text in *Monumenta Xaveriana et autographis vel ex antiquioribus exemplis collecta* (2 vols.), MHSI, Madrid, 1899-1912; English translation in J. Brodrick, *Francis Xavier...*, 96.

phytes became victims of the political conflicts among the rulers of South India. The way Xavier reached out to them was truly remarkable. The poor Parava pearl fishers were being attacked by the Badaga hoards from the north for accepting baptism and these Paravas were left die of hunger and thirst in the rocky sea of Cape Comorin.<sup>150</sup> Xavier tried to reach them via sea but could not make it due to the strong contrary monsoon winds. Finally, he went by land, confronted the Badagas alone, risking his own life, and rested only after leading the Paravas to the safety of Manapar.<sup>151</sup>

These Parava pearl fishers were mercilessly exploited by those who claimed to be protectors of the neophytes, the Portuguese officials. The former were not paid their due for the pearls they gathered and were even made to pay taxes irrespective of whether or not they harvested pearls. One gets a glimpse of the fearlessness of Xavier in the letters he wrote to the King of Portugal, reprimanding him for not punishing his officials and captains.<sup>152</sup> This prophetic act of Xavier would be, in current terminology, “faith that does justice”.<sup>153</sup> The love God of so transformed Xavier that he was fearless even before the sovereigns of this world.

#### 6.1.d Ongoing Conversion

The experience of other-worldly falling in love in Mehta and Xavier both began their conversion and marked, to a large extent, the process of their fulfillment. Their respective foundational experiences penetrated and transformed all levels of their consciousness, i.e., their way of experiencing, understanding and judging reality. Yet conversion is not complete with one fundamental experience. Rather, it is the beginning of an ongoing, lifelong process. Though both Mehta and Xavier were radically transformed persons after their first moment of falling in love with the Transcendent, there remained some levels of consciousness in them that needed further healing.

The Śṛṅgārṇa Pad (*padas* of love for Kṛṣṇa) form the largest section of Mehta’s writings. They were, in all likelihood, composed by Mehta in his younger days. In these *padas* Mehta identifies himself with a *gopī*, a cowherd girl, the beloved of Kṛṣṇa. Human language is often inadequate to put into expression a mystical experience, so mystics often take recourse in the language of conjugal love, using it as a symbolic expression of mystical experiences. Here lies the danger. The line between symbolic expression and erotic excess is very subtle, and crossing this line is very easy. Such tendency in Gujarati is defined as *ughāḍo* or *sthul śṛṅgār*<sup>154</sup> (open *śṛṅgār*). Mehta too crosses the

<sup>150</sup> Cf. *Doc.* 30.1.

<sup>151</sup> Cf. *Doc.* 32.2.

<sup>152</sup> Cf. *Docs.* 46.8; 49.7; 61.8.

<sup>153</sup> GC 34, Decree 2, n. 21.

<sup>154</sup> Cf. U. Joshi, “Narsinh Mehta”..., 150. *Śṛṅgār* begins to take an extreme form in *Gitgovind* (of Jayadeva), and that exaggeration influences poets such as Dayārām and Narsinh Mehta. This tendency has not gone uncriticised. Cf. J. Shah, *Madhyakalin Gujarati Bhaktikavita...*, 5. The erotic elements enter the Kṛṣṇa saga due to the identification of the Abhira tribal deity with Kṛṣṇa. Furthermore, the tendency

limits of modesty in his use of the language of conjugal love. Some Śṛṅgārna Pad are explicitly erotic:

She took him (Kṛṣṇa) in her embrace, kept him on the heart/breast. He drank the lip-nectar, caressing the neck of the *kāmini* (literally, lustful woman).<sup>155</sup>

Don't untie the threads of my *choli* [bodice], my love;  
 The fruits of my breasts are not good enough for you!  
 Ananga, the god of love, stirs not in the unbloomed youth;  
 There can be no ecstasy without lovemaking.<sup>156</sup>

The presence of *ughāḍo śṛṅgār* in his *padas* gave occasion for Mehta's enemies to accuse him in the court of king Ra Mandalik as *kāmi* (lustful) and *lampaṭ* (lustful/licentious).<sup>157</sup> The religious conversion of Mehta did not heal yet some of his lustful tendencies. He was in need of further purification. As he advanced in age, all traces of sensuality disappeared in Mehta, and he arrived at spiritual maturity and integration.<sup>158</sup> His *bhakti* did not lose its ardent intensity, though its sensuous expression disappeared and took a new form. With spiritual maturity dawning on him, Mehta condemned the lustful tendencies in one of the Bhakti-jñāna pad.

The beloved of Rama lusts not after women. The perfect [plenitude] one is full of the perfect bliss; others worship elsewhere, but Narsaiyyo sings the attributes of the absolute and not of carnal craving, as the lustful think.<sup>159</sup>

In the older Mehta one can perceive a greater degree of purification, with a heightened moral consciousness. He no longer required the language of conjugal love to express his God-experience. Instead he would say, "*premaras pāne, tuñ moranā picchadhar! Tattvanuñ ṭapanuñ tucch lāge*".<sup>160</sup> Like Ignatius at the end of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Mehta, towards the dusk of his life, sought, "love of yourself [God] along with your grace, for that is enough for me".<sup>161</sup>

What gives room for Xavier's adversaries to criticise him? One instance is Xavier's narration of some of the events in Tuticorin. Xavier allowed and approved that a group of boys would break and trample the idols in a Hindu temple. He rejoiced greatly when the boys did "other things which, though it is better not to mention them by name".<sup>162</sup>

towards erotic mysticism is again due to the identification of Narāyana with the cowherd hero and god of the Abhiras. Cf. S. Jaiswal, *The Origin and development of Vaisnavism...*, 88, 123.

<sup>155</sup> NMK, 102

<sup>156</sup> Sachin Ketkar, *Translation of Narsinh Mehta's Poems into English: With a Critical Introduction (Doctoral Dissertation)*, South Gujarat University, Surat, 2001, no. 5.1.7 square brackets mine. NMK, 305.

<sup>157</sup> Cf. NMK, 45; U. Joshi, "Narsinh Mehta"..., 116.

<sup>158</sup> Cf. Suresh Dalal (ed.), *Kavyavishesh: Narsinh Mehta*, S.N.D.T. Women's University, Bombay, 1992, 9.

<sup>159</sup> S. Ketkar, *Narsinh Mehta...*, no. 5.2.41 square brackets mine. NMK, 360.

<sup>160</sup> NMK, 390. Serve me the draught of love's ambrosia, One bedecked with peacock feathers! This futile threshing of arid philosophies tastes so insipid! S. Ketkar, *Narsinh Mehta...*, no. 5.2.29.

<sup>161</sup> *SpEx* [234].

<sup>162</sup> *Doc.* 20.5.



One wonders, how could someone so deeply in love with the Transcendent behave in this manner? An answer to this question would seem to be that a comprehensive healing of Xavier's insufficiency of discreet charity from below took time.

Xavier's austere, ascetic apostolic poverty impressed people in India and Indonesia. They recognised a man of God in him, and Xavier's apostolate bore great fruits. However, when he proceeded to Japan, things were different. There, he followed the same lifestyle for the first half of his ministry, but this practice did not yield the results he expected. He and his companions were despised and ridiculed in the court at Yamaguchi. He reflected on this experience, returned to the court of Duke of Yamaguchi dressed in rich satin and silk, and was well received by the Duke. What motivated this change of strategy? Xavier recognized that he now had a new set of data before him. He had to move upwards towards a new understanding and judgement to a new plan of action. He had to shed his prejudices, namely, holding on to the notion of poverty as an end in itself, and to embrace a new type of poverty, a spiritual poverty where in material poverty is only a means.<sup>163</sup> This flexibility demonstrated improved authenticity in the service of the absolute good, which was, for Xavier, ushering in the gospel of Christ.

Eight years after the events surrounding the desecration of the Hindu temple in India, Xavier seemed like a different man. In his letters of 1552, the aggression of 1544 had disappeared. Now he was talking about learning local languages and studying local cultures before plunging into action.<sup>164</sup> He writes to Ignatius: "Our Lord . . . gave me a great knowledge of my infinite iniquities; for, being apart from myself, I did not recognize the many evils that were within me until I saw myself amidst the toils and dangers of Japan".<sup>165</sup> After reading these lines, a question that springs forth: would Xavier still have rejoiced at the behavior of the boys who desecrated the Hindu temple?

In the strikingly similar spiritual itineraries of Mehta and Xavier, a twofold movement can be discerned: a movement from above, where the initiative of the love of God touched their religious consciousness and transformed their moral and cognitive consciousness; a second movement from below through the process "from experience to growing understanding, from growing understanding to balanced judgment, from balanced judgment to fruitful course of action"<sup>166</sup>

## 6.2. Confidence in God Alone

The entire life of Narsinh Mehta could be described as a song of confidence in God alone. A similar affirmation could be made about the life of Francis Xavier. "Confidence in God alone" could be called the leitmotif of his letters. This total confidence in God alone shared by the two is born of their other-worldly falling in love.

<sup>163</sup> Cf. B. J. F. Lonergan, "Healing and Creating"..., 105.

<sup>164</sup> *Doc.* 96.45.

<sup>165</sup> *Doc.* 97.2.

<sup>166</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "Healing and Creating in History", in F. E. Crowe (ed.), *A Third Collection, Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan*, Paulist Press, New York-Mahwah, 1985, 106.

Confidence is a derivative of the more general theological virtue of hope. The word confidence comes from the Latin “*fiducia*”. It means to place one’s hope and trust in someone or something. In so doing, the person who trusts feels secure. To confide in someone or to take someone into confidence also means sharing a secret with or opening up one’s heart to someone. When both of these meanings are combined, i.e., when the person in whom one confides is also the person who assists, the word confidence attains its full potential.<sup>167</sup> In what follows, the word confidence, when used in reference to God, is employed in its combined sense.

Authentic confidence in God leads one first to obedience and then, ultimately, to abandonment. When one submits oneself to what is clearly revealed to him/her in advance (e.g., Church commandments, will of the superior etc.), it is obedience. This obedience becomes abandonment when one submits in freedom and ardent love, and not in mere resignation, to the will of God as manifested through unforeseen events over which one has no control (e.g., prosperity or adversity, consolation or desolation etc.).<sup>168</sup>

An important hermeneutic key to understanding “confidence in God” in the entire Ignatian corpus is Ignatius’s understanding that all one is and has is a free gift from God. Confidence in God is the appropriate response of “all persons who have judgment and reason”<sup>169</sup> to a God who is source of all graces, who gives, and gives even Himself, freely.<sup>170</sup>

The four major episodes<sup>171</sup> in the life of Mehta, namely, *putrano vivāh*, *purtrinuñ māmeruñ*, *hundī* and *hārno prasaṅg*, were marked by four major testing events. Remaining steadfast in faith through all these events was what proved the mettle of Mehta as a *bbakta* of the finest category.<sup>172</sup> The level of difficulty of the tests he was subjected to followed an ascending order. To the popular consciousness, the miraculous elements of these events appeals the most. Yet these incidents are not without an historical core.<sup>173</sup> These events reveal both how Mehta experienced God and the nature of his intimate relationship with God. Only the last of the four events mentioned will be dealt here.

### 6.2.1. Hārno Prasaṅg

The *hār* event is the last testing recorded by Mehta. This was the hardest of the tests. Even here, Mehta remained steadfast in his trust in Kṛṣṇa. The situation, instigat-

<sup>167</sup> Cf. A. Pigna, “Confidenza”, in L. Borriello, E. Caruana... (ed.), *Dizionario de Mistica*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano, 1998, 328.

<sup>168</sup> Cf. Gasper Bertoni, “St. Ignatius’ Letter on Obedience”, [http://www.st-bertoni.com/constitutions\\_files/obedience\\_1.pdf](http://www.st-bertoni.com/constitutions_files/obedience_1.pdf) [access 23.04.2014], 41.

<sup>169</sup> *SpEx* [96].

<sup>170</sup> Cf. Vicent A. Catalá, “Confianza”, in Pascual Cebollada, José Carlos Coupeau... (ed.), *Diccionario de espiritualidad ignaciana*, Mensajero-Sal Terrae, Bilbao-Santander, 2007, 385.

<sup>171</sup> Cf. Mira K. Mehta, *Narsinh, Mira, Akho ane Dayaramni Kavitanan Tattvadarshan*, Mira Kirtikumar Mehta - Gujarat Sahitya Akadami, Rajkot, 1986, 72.

<sup>172</sup> Cf. D. Parikh, “Narsinh Mehta” ..., 27.

<sup>173</sup> Cf. D. Dholakia, *Narasinhabharitramarsha...*, 14.

ed as always by Mehta's enemies, was completely out of Mehta's control. The king had him arrested. The grievances brought against Mehta were many: he, a Nāgar Brahmin and a *śaivaite*, had become a *vaiṣṇavaite*, a Kṛṣṇa bhakta; in order to identify with the *gopīs*, he dressed like a woman, putting the Nāgar *nāt* into shame; worst of all, he had broken the caste code of conduct by embracing the *dheḍḍ*s. Officially, he was accused of being a *lanpati*<sup>174</sup> (a sexual pervert). He was locked inside the King's palace temple. To prove his innocence and true *bhakti* he would have to pass this test: If the necklace or the garland from Kṛṣṇa's statue were not be found around Mehta's neck by moving, he would be decapitated.

Mehta resigned himself, without force or coercion but willingly, to the will of God. He abandoned himself, surrendering himself completely to the will of God. He prayed the whole night. Here are some fine examples of Mehta's intimacy and trust in the Lord from Hārsamena pad:

If the King Māṅḍalik kills me, will there be any loss except for the moistening of the dust? People will say, Narasainyo lost his life doing *bhakti* and you will lose your title of 'the gracious one'.<sup>175</sup>

The day is about to break, Śāmala! Please wake up and come to my aid, harden not your heart. What do you lose by just giving me the necklace?<sup>176</sup>

The expression "tāra bāpanuṅ śuṅ jāy?" literary means "will your father lose a thing?" This is a colloquial expression in Gujarati, used either when one is angry or when two share friendly intimacy. Here, the latter is the case.

If the King Māṅḍalik kills me, you will lose face and will be ruined. I am not afraid of death. It is you who will lose the title of "the gracious one".<sup>177</sup>

After Mehta's night-long supplication, addressing Kṛṣṇa as would a friend entreating a friend, Kṛṣṇa came to the aid of Mehta. The flame of the temple lamp had grown feeble. The curious crowd was watching. Kṛṣṇa placed his necklace on Mehta's neck<sup>178</sup> and saved his *bhakta's* life. Mehta finally exhorted the crowd to, "hṛday āno drḍ viśvās" (inculcate firm trust in your hearts). *Viśvās* is the word that explicitly expresses Mehta's trust and confidence in God.

Through the four testing events, Mehta's confidence in God kept growing gradually. In the last and the hardest event, Mehta's complete abandonment to God took place. He was not afraid even of losing his life. The main attitude expressed in the above quoted *padas*, which are also prayers of supplication, is that of surrender. Along with the expression of ardent longing for the Lord, there is a prayer of praise of Kṛṣṇa for his

<sup>174</sup> Cf. NMK, 45.

<sup>175</sup> NMK, 48.

<sup>176</sup> NMK, 51.

<sup>177</sup> NMK, 55.

<sup>178</sup> Cf. NMK, 60.

mighty deeds.<sup>179</sup> These *padas* also bring out the characteristics of a true *bhakta* of God,<sup>180</sup> namely, trust and confidence in God alone, childlike faith,<sup>181</sup> fearlessness, attitude of self-surrender to the omnipotent, and abandonment.<sup>182</sup>

Xavier expressed his trust in God alone in different contexts. He, like Mehta, endured several crisis moments. Yet, some of the most touching descriptions of his trust and confidence in God are found in his letters written after he ventured further East from India. An example will illustrate this better.

There were several occasions in which things were out Xavier's control. The last of them was when the embassy he had so meticulously planned from Malacca to China completely fell apart. The arrogant De Ataide forcibly prevented the embassy from sailing.<sup>183</sup> Xavier placed confidence in human means, but only as long as those were at the service of God.<sup>184</sup> Not even the threat of excommunication could change the stubborn mind of Ataide. Xavier was completely helpless.

Xavier finally sailed to China on Pereira's *Santa Cruz*, but without the embassy and with Ataide's men. Xavier, with Jesuit scholastic Alvaro Ferreira, the faithful lay man Antonio Chinaman, and his Malabar domestic Cristovão, arrived in the island of Sanctian at the beginning of September. No merchant wanted to risk smuggling Xavier, a foreigner, to the mainland. Finally, one Chinese agreed to take Xavier in hiding to Canton at night, in return for a handsome amount of money. One Pero Lopes agreed to accompany Xavier as interpreter, as Antonio had forgotten his mother tongue.<sup>185</sup> By mid-November, the Portuguese ships, one after the other weighed, anchor for Malacca. The chief captain of the Portuguese forbade Xavier to sail the three leagues to the mainland until the last Portuguese ship had left the shore, lest the Chinese take revenge.

After hearing the stories of Chinese dungeons from the fugitive Manuel de Chaves, Ferreira backed out, and the would be interpreter Lopes followed suit. All human means gave way. Barely twenty days before his death, Xavier wrote to Father Francisco Pérez: "The interpreter who, as I wrote to you, was willing to accompany me remained behind through fear. We, Antonio, Cristovão and I, are going with the help of God".<sup>186</sup>

The Chinese merchant did not turn up on the appointed day, November 19, to take Xavier. On the twenty-first he fell ill. He never recovered. At the moment of his death, only Antonio was present with Xavier. The Indian servant Cristovão had abandoned him a day before his death. Xavier had not protested. He had resigned himself to the will of God freely. His obedience to the will of God had reached its climax in complete abandonment. His waking moments in the last days of his sickness were spent in prayer,

<sup>179</sup> Cf. D. Parikh, "Narsinh Mehta" ..., 45.

<sup>180</sup> Cf. N. Bhagat, *Svadhyaalok...*, 23.

<sup>181</sup> Cf. U. Joshi, "Narsinh Mehta" ..., 130.

<sup>182</sup> Cf. D. Parikh, "Narsinh Mehta" ..., 83.

<sup>183</sup> Cf. J. Brodrick, *Francis Xavier...*, 504.

<sup>184</sup> Cf. *SpEx* [23].

<sup>185</sup> Cf. J. Brodrick, *Francis Xavier...*, 516.

<sup>186</sup> *Doc.* 135.9.



with his eyes raised to heaven. He invoked the three Persons of the Holy Trinity and the Virgin Mother of God, repeating constantly, “Jesus Son of David, have mercy on me”. On the dawn of Saturday, December 3, with the sweet name of Jesus on his lips, he entrusted his soul back to his creator.<sup>187</sup> In the hour of death, he had truly placed all his hope and confidence in God.

When Mehta had nowhere else to turn, as in the last episode of his test, he abandoned himself, without fear, into the hands of Kṛṣṇa. Xavier’s confidence in God was strikingly similar to that of Mehta. Both showed steadfast and heroic trust in God through all the vicissitudes of their lives. The reflections, based on their lived experiences, on why one should place his/her confidence in God are similar. To suppose that “I do everything”<sup>188</sup> is ignorance for Mehta and pride for Xavier. Both agree that it is God, or his grace, that does everything in us. Such a conviction made them fearless, because they were convinced that God would never abandon them.<sup>189</sup> As a result, both abandoned themselves fully into the hands of God.

### 6.3. Knowledge Derived from the Experience of God

As a consequence of the other-worldly falling in love, the lives of Mehta and Xavier became songs of confidence in God alone. In complete self-surrender to God, they experienced God and experienced life in God. It is this experience that they make accessible to others through their writings. Nothing that was not first in their experience entered their writing and instruction.<sup>190</sup>

One can not only sift out similarities in their transmitted experiential knowledge, but can also see that they even used similar forms of communicating the love of God to others. Simplicity characterised the matter and form of the preaching and teaching of both Mehta and Xavier. Mehta sang in spoken Gujarati, the language of common people, and not in Sanskrit, the language of the *paṇḍits* or the scholars. His *padas* are rich with metaphors, stories and expressions from daily life. His *Kīrtan* was accompanied by the tinkling of a *kartal*, a musical instrument with little cymbals.<sup>191</sup> The *padas* could easily be committed to memory. The content of his *padas* was culled out from the Hindu scriptures accessible to him, especially the Bhāgavata Purāṇa.

Xavier’s addressees were largely illiterate, simple and poor. The basic Christian doctrine he taught them was culled out from the Christian scriptures. He not only translated the content of his teaching into the vernacular of the people but he also put that teaching into a song form. He convoked the village folk for prayer by ringing a bell, and

<sup>187</sup> Cf. MX II, 896.

<sup>188</sup> Cf. NMK, 390.

<sup>189</sup> Cf. *Doc.* 90.24.

<sup>190</sup> For Mehta, mere lip service is like rocking a cradle bereft of baby. A *bhakta* who is not authentic is like a crow pretending to be a swan. Cf. NMK, 368. Xavier writes, “I shall write to you what I shall have seen and learned through experience about those regions”. *Doc.* 55.16.

<sup>191</sup> Cf. NMK, 77.

he taught them to sing the prayers, so that they could learn them easily.<sup>192</sup> Xavier adapted himself to the mental capacities of his listeners and urged his companions to do the same. He advised them even to speak in broken Portuguese to the simple slaves, so that they could understand the preaching.<sup>193</sup>

God is an unspeakable reality. One who has had an experience of God cannot help but speak of God, no matter how inadequately. Xavier and Mehta both were so full of the love of God that they wanted to share it with others. They shared it with simple people by putting their knowledge of God into song form and into a language comprehensible to their listeners. They also tried to reach out to as many people as possible. These characteristics were common to both the *bhakti* movement and *Devotio Moderna*.

Mehta and Xavier, being mystics left gems of mystical knowledge in their writings. The core experience in both is that of *bhakti*-love of God. Mehta received the gift of *bhakti* in his foundational experience from Kṛṣṇa himself through the mediation of Siva. In the *Bhakti-jñān-vairāgyana Pad*, compositions towards the end of his life, he still considered *bhakti* supreme among all gifts and the most precious substance on earth. He says, “*bhakti* is the greatest of gifts, unknown in the world of great Brahma”.<sup>194</sup>



The front cover of the book by K.K. Shastree, *Narsinh Mehta*, New Delhi, 1972.



Francis Xavier with a crucifix and a bell, Shrine of Xavier, Navarra, by Elías Salaberría. Photo in *San Francisco Javier en las artes*, Pamplona, 2006, 37.

<sup>192</sup> Cf. *Docs.* 20.2; 55.2; 59.9.

<sup>193</sup> Cf. *Doc.* 92.3.

<sup>194</sup> *Bhutaḷ bhakti padārath moṭuñ, brahmalokamañ nāhīñ re.* NMK, 359.

While Xavier was in Rome, he had once woken up Simon Rodrigues with the cry “more, more, more!” He was asking for more sufferings and hardships for the love and service of the Lord.<sup>195</sup> Xavier was asking for more spiritual consolation, in which there is increase of love of God in the soul.<sup>196</sup> In this sense, spiritual consolation is akin to the gift of *bhakti*. His ardent prayer did not go unanswered, for, speaking about the islands of Moro, he writes:

... for all the toils and dangers that are willingly encountered here for the love and service of God our Lord alone are treasures abounding in great spiritual consolations, so much so in fact, that here on these islands a man might well lose the sight of his bodily eyes within a few years from the abundance of his consoling tears.<sup>197</sup>

Two questions arise here: was the love of Mehta and Xavier for God interested love, and were they seeking the consolations of God or the God of consolations?

(i) It can be affirmed that they loved God merely for the sake of love. Mehta says,

True devotees of Hari do not crave for final salvation [*mukti*], but they ask for endless avatāras To serve and celebrate, to sing praises [*kīrtan*] of the son of Nanda [Kṛṣṇa] and to contemplate him without end.<sup>198</sup>

*Bhakti* is attachment to a personal God. *Bhakti* as an end is a gift of grace from that same personal God. Mehta experienced so much love or *bhakti* or consolation that he preferred *bhakti* to *mukti*. In other words, he sought not salvation but the love of God. He loved God for the sake of the love of God and for no other ulterior motive.

Xavier sought spiritual consolation (love-*bhakti*) only for the love and service of God.<sup>199</sup> He writes,

I can tell you nothing more about these regions than that the consolations which God our Lord gives to those who go among these pagans and convert them to the faith of Christ are so great that, if there is ever any joy in this life, this can be said to be it.<sup>200</sup>

“Francis Xavier was able to pray to God, saying, ‘I love you, not because you have the power to give heaven or hell, but simply because you are you – my king and my God’”.<sup>201</sup>

<sup>195</sup> Cf. G. Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier I...*, 728.

<sup>196</sup> Cf. *SpEx* [316]

<sup>197</sup> *Doc.* 59.4.

<sup>198</sup> Swami Mahadevananda (ed.), *Devotional Songs of Narsi Mehta*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi-Varnasi, 1985, 124.

<sup>199</sup> His motivation to go to India, (*Doc.* 48.5) Japan (*Docs.* 76.2, 90.3; 52) and China (*Docs.* 96.52, 131.4) was purely for the love and service of God.

<sup>200</sup> *Doc.* 20.13.

<sup>201</sup> P. P. Benedictus, *Jesus of Nazareth*, A. J. Walker (tr.), Bloomsbury, London, 2007, 162-163. The Pope here is referring to the sonnet-hymn “No me mueve, Señor, para quererte” which expresses the loving sentiment of the soul of Xavier. Cf. Appendix II, George Schurhammer (ed.), *Epistolae S. Francis- ci Xaverii aliaque eius scripta, Tomus II (1549-1552)*, Apud MHSI, Romae, 1945, 531, 535.

Like Mehta, Xavier did not love the Lord for the love of heaven (*mukti*) but for *bhakti*-love alone.

(ii) It is often a temptation for those who advance in the spiritual life to desire the consolations of God more than God himself. Ignatius was subject to such a temptation and continuously purified his intention of desire of gift, e.g., tears of consolation and toward desire of the giver of gifts.<sup>202</sup> Mehta asked for the *premrās*, the draught of love's ambrosia, but he also says,

At the feet of the dark one [Kṛṣṇa] I wish to die, for here no one matches Krishna, my love.<sup>203</sup>

Xavier, who asked for "more", at one point pleaded, "Disse, aleuantando os ol-hos ao çeo, e pondo as mãos nos peitos: Senhor, no mais, no mais".<sup>204</sup> Elsewhere he says,

O Lord, do not give me many consolations in this life! Or, now that you in your infinite goodness and mercy give them, take me into your holy glory, for it is most painful to live without seeing you after you have communicated yourself so intimately to your creatures!<sup>205</sup>

What Mehta and Xavier sought in asking for death is to be in the presence of God eternally, i.e., they sought God himself. Consequently, they sought the God of consolations more than the consolations of God. While on this earth, both lived their lives as prisoners of the love of God.<sup>206</sup>

## 7. Complementary Difference

A person in love strives to please the beloved in every way possible. S/he aspires to discover the will of the beloved and to fulfill it to the best of his/her ability. The fundamental difference between the mystical spiritualities of Mehta and Xavier lies in the way in which they sought and found the will of God and the manner in which they fulfilled their beloved's will. It will be shown, though, that this fundamental difference is not contradictory but complementary. After dealing with this aspect of difference, this section will once again focus on some more salient similarities. Though Mehta and Xavier differed in seeking and finding the will of God, the obstacles they faced to their fulfillment of the will of God were strikingly similar.

<sup>202</sup> *DEsp* [377] Text in Santiago Thió de Pol (ed.), *La intimidad del peregrino: diario espiritual de san Ignacio de Loyola*, Mensajero-Sal terrae, Bilbao-Santander, 1990. See also page 213.

<sup>203</sup> NMK, 385.

<sup>204</sup> With his eyes elevated toward heaven, and hands on his chest, Xavier was saying: "No more, Lord, no more". Cf. MX II, 950.

<sup>205</sup> *Doc.* 20.13.

<sup>206</sup> Mehta: "dearer than my [Kṛṣṇa's] life is my devotee [Mehta] to me" (*prāṇ thakī mane vaiṣṇav vahāla* – NMK, 382) Xavier: "It is much better to be a prisoner for the love of God alone than to be free to escape from the sufferings of the cross" (*Doc.* 135.9).



### 7.1. Mehta's Nuptial Mysticism

Speaking of his “foundational experience” Mehta says, “*puruṣ-puruṣātan līn thayuṅ māharuṅ*”<sup>207</sup> (my maleness got dissolved). After his last test, the *hārno prasang*, Mehta makes Hari-Kṛṣṇa affirm about self, “you, Mehta, gave up your maleness and became a maid, you gave up the world and danced with love”.<sup>208</sup> Mehta’s consciousness was transformed into feminine consciousness (*nāribhāv*). He considered it a privilege and a gift because a weak maid (*abala*) wins over the favour of the Lord Kṛṣṇa more easily. Even the *munis* (sages) and gods covet the female *avatāra* (birth) of *gopī*, because what they achieve with great difficulty is granted to her easily by Kṛṣṇa.<sup>209</sup> The love experienced and expressed by the *gopīs* is called *premlkṣaṇa bhakti*.<sup>210</sup>

The love relationship between Rādhā<sup>211</sup> and Kṛṣṇa is at the centre of *premlkṣaṇa bhakti*.<sup>212</sup> *Madhura* or *mādhurya* (sweet) *bhakti* is another name for same *bhakti*. Lord Kṛṣṇa (male) is the object of *bhakti*, and Rādhā (female) is the *bhakta*. Radha is the human soul, which is the feminine and passive principle, and Kṛṣṇa is *puruṣa*, the male and active principle.<sup>213</sup> The relationship between God and the devotee is that of the beloved and lover.

According to R.C. Zaehner, in all the mystical traditions the love of bride and bridegroom provides the most satisfying symbol of the love of the soul for God. In Hinduism the characteristic of mysticism of love is passion.<sup>214</sup> In the Śṛṅgārṇa Pad of Mehta, he assumes the *nāribhav* or *gopībhav* in order to attain *bhakti*.<sup>215</sup> He identifies himself with or projects himself into Rādhā. *Premlkṣaṇa bhakti* provides the necessary duality<sup>216</sup> between the *ātman* (human soul) and *Paramātman* (divine soul). Besides, the assumption of *gopībhav* by Mehta makes the conjugal love<sup>217</sup> between the soul (feminine) and the abso-

<sup>207</sup> NMK, 6.

<sup>208</sup> NMK, 61.

<sup>209</sup> Cf. NMK, 361.

<sup>210</sup> Cf. U. Joshi, “Narsinh Mehta”..., 110.

<sup>211</sup> Rādhā is the female protagonist in the *Gitgovind* of Jayadeva (CE 12<sup>th</sup> C). She is the *ārādita*, the favorite of Kṛṣṇa among the *gopīs*. *Gitgovind* exerted a great influence on Mehta.

<sup>212</sup> Cf. D. Parikh, “Narsinh Mehta”..., 6.

<sup>213</sup> Cf. R.C. Zaehner, *Concordant Discord* ..., 160-161.

<sup>214</sup> Cf. R.C. Zaehner, *Concordant Discord* ..., 160-161.

<sup>215</sup> Cf. Dalal (ed.), “Kavyavishesh”..., 4.

<sup>216</sup> The commentary of Harvey D. Egan on the sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) illuminates this point better and could be applied to Mehta, with some nuances. “Sermons 83 and 85 describe spiritual marriage and spiritual fecundity. The Word actually takes the soul as his bride, and [the] two become one in spirit, yet remain two. Nuptial mysticism emphasizes a differentiated unity. In other words, love actually makes two one, but also enhances personal identity. Love makes the soul equal to God, God by participation, but not simply God. Also, Bernard emphasizes that bridal love loves God for his own sake”. Cf. Harvey D. Egan, *An Anthology of Christian mysticism*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minn., 1991, 170.

<sup>217</sup> Braj Sinha notes that *Śṛṅgārṇas* is absent in Mirabai for the obvious reason that she is a woman. What she naturally experienced as a woman is experienced by Narsinh Mehta and Caitanya by assuming femi-

lute soul (male) possible. The this-worldly, visible and vivid play of love between Rādha and Kṛṣṇa in the *padas* of Mehta is an expression of his experience of an invisible and inexpressible other-worldly falling in love.<sup>218</sup>

*Nāribhav* presupposes a body consciousness. It helped Mehta to experience the love of Kṛṣṇa and to submit himself completely to his will. While the bodily consciousness was a help, he went beyond the binary categories of denominating the body in terms of male or female, for he says, “*dehadaśa ṭaḷī*”<sup>219</sup> (I lost my bodily consciousness). His consciousness of non-possession of a body makes it clear that, when he sang the *śṛṅgārras* (ardent sentiments of love), he was not referring to the this-worldly but to the transcendent sphere. Here is an example,

I am willing to lose everything for my Lord. I will put on my best and await his coming every day. I will not set him aside all day long but in love hold him close.<sup>220</sup>

It is Mehta’s abiding feminine consciousness that helped him to abandon himself entirely to the will of the divine Lover. The Rādha-Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* provided for him a suitable matrix for expressing what he felt for, and how he experienced the gratuitous love of, Kṛṣṇa, his supreme Lord. Mehta was not merely passive, but was actively receptive to the will of Kṛṣṇa. Mary said yes to the will of God, made known to her through the message of an angel, with the words, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Lk 1: 38). Mehta’s attitude before God resembles that of Mary. As she made herself an active instrument so that the plan of God could be taken to completion in her, Mehta allowed Kṛṣṇa to use him to make Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* known on earth.

## 7.2. Xavier’s Service Mysticism

The love of God experienced and expressed as conjugal love is absent from the letters and instructions of Xavier. How did Xavier fulfil the will of God in his life? In order to realise the will, one has to know it first. A good number of Xavier’s letters end in this mood of prayer:

I thus bring this to an end, asking our Lord that he may give us to feel interiorly within our souls his most holy will and the strength to fulfill it and to bring it to fruition.<sup>221</sup>

Xavier possessed some tools, contained in the *Spiritual Exercises*, called the “Discernment of Spirits” and the “Election” as aids for making the right choices.<sup>222</sup> The

nine consciousness. Cf. Braj Sinha, “Mirabai: The Rebel Saint”, in K. R. Sundararajan and B. Mukerji (ed.), *Hindu Spirituality, Postclassical and Modern*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Lt., Delhi, 1997, 150.

<sup>218</sup> Cf. Sivapriyanand, “Introduction to the Devotional Songs”..., 17.

<sup>219</sup> NMK, 6.

<sup>220</sup> NKM, 289.

<sup>221</sup> *Doc.* 52.4. Other similar endings, *Docs.* 61.5, 70.15, 71.13, 76.5, 83.5. In other contexts, *Docs.* 50.2, 51.2, 55.1, 59.21, 70.10, 83.1, 129.4.

<sup>222</sup> *SpEx* [313-336], [169-189].

divine will is not only communicated in the understanding, but can be felt within the soul.<sup>223</sup> Xavier depended upon spiritual consolations, a sign of confirmation from God, in crucial moments of his decision making. One such moment was his decision to go to Malacca. He spent four months, between April and August, 1545, at St. Thomé, in prayer, purification and discernment in order to find out what the Lord wanted of him. A pilgrim<sup>224</sup> does not follow his own inclinations, but the inclinations of the One who moves his heart. Xavier, constant seeker of the divine will, writes, “I am undecided as to whether I should go to Malacca or remain here. During the whole month of May I shall consequently deliberate on whether I should go there or not”.<sup>225</sup> With regard to the fruit of his discernment he writes,

In keeping with his usual mercy, God has been pleased to be mindful of me; and with great interior consolation I have felt, and have come to know, that it is his will that I go to those regions of Malacca. [...] I am so determined to carry out what God gives me to experience within my soul that it seems to me that I would be going against God’s will if I did not do so, and that he would not grant me his grace either in this life or in the next.<sup>226</sup>

Xavier went through a similar process before deciding to go to Japan. In both the discernment processes, Xavier took time for prayer and patient listening, to know the will of God. Only after he felt the will of God in the depth of his soul, with clarity and conviction, did he take the step forward. Once convinced of the will of God, nothing could stop Xavier from fulfilling it. If consolation followed the felt desire, he was confident, such a desire is placed in the heart by God. Failing to fulfil the desire would be going against God.<sup>227</sup>

To compare Xavier with St. Paul and to acclaim Xavier as the greatest apostle after apostolic times is a commonplace. Both of them felt sent by the Lord, and both sought actively the will of God. They expressed their complete confidence in God in similar language. Though it appears that St. Paul boasts of the great things he had done for Christ, he was deeply aware of his fragility and of the action of the Spirit in him.<sup>228</sup> Xavier, like St. Paul, had a deep realisation of his fragility, “*I know my own weakness and how useless I am in everything*”.<sup>229</sup> One could put the words of St. Paul, “though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1Cor 15: 10), into the mouth of Xavier, and they would authentically express Xavier’s experience. Xavier did heroic and adventurous things not with his own strength but with grace of God.

<sup>223</sup> Cf. Luis M. Bermejo, *Unto the Indies: Life of St. Francis Xavier*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, 2000, 117.

<sup>224</sup> Xavier considered himself a pilgrim. Cf. *Doc.* 50.2.

<sup>225</sup> *Doc.* 50. 3.

<sup>226</sup> *Doc.* 51.1, 2.

<sup>227</sup> Cf. *Doc.* 51.2.

<sup>228</sup> Cf. 2Cor 11: 16-33; 2Cor 12: 10; 1Cor 15: 10.

<sup>229</sup> *Doc.* 8.1.

Allowing the will of God to be done in oneself (Mary-Mehta) and doing the will of God assisted by the grace of God (Paul-Xavier) are not opposed to each other. They complement each other as, finally, it is the grace of God that brings forth all that is good. Both Mehta and Xavier loved God above all and loved everything in God. Both were purified by the transforming love of God that permeated all the levels of their consciousness. Though Xavier lived his life actively in service, he spent the long silent nights in prayer.<sup>230</sup> Although Mehta sang *kīrtans* in praise of his beloved, he did not lose track of the responsibilities of a householder and *sañtseva*.<sup>231</sup> Both were contemplatives in action in their own ways, though the contemplative aspect was more visible in one, the active in the other.

It could be said that Mehta was “pushed” from within by the love of God, and that Xavier was “pulled” by the light of the same love of God. The driving force behind the contemplative *kīrtan* of Mehta and the active service of Xavier was one, flowing unceasingly from the bosom of the Creator: *bhakti*, the love of God.

### 7.2.1. Major Obstacles

Though Mehta and Xavier apprehended and lived the will of God for them differently, the difficulties they faced in fulfilling the will of God were similar. Two such major difficulties can be clearly identified in their writing, the lack of self-knowledge and the influence of the forces of evil.

(i) Self-knowledge is closely linked to the weak and transitory mortal nature of the human being. A false notion of the self leads to ego-centeredness and either to self-aggrandisement or to self-belittlement. In this sense, lack of self-knowledge is also an obstacle to placing one’s trust and confidence in the Absolute reality that is the origin and destiny of creation. Lack of self-knowledge is further linked to the virtues of humility and obedience. They are two inseparable virtues, both required in order effectively to place one’s trust in God.<sup>232</sup> The former is required to accept one’s weakness and helplessness. Realization of one’s spiritual frailty readily leads the human person to obey the will of someone greater than him/herself. In order to obey wholeheartedly, one needs to recognize one’s own smallness and weakness and to know that one is not self-sufficient. Such realization makes one humble. Humility is the foundation on which one builds the edifice of trust and confidence.<sup>233</sup>

Mehta exhorts others to pause and to think of the meaning of their existence.

<sup>230</sup> Cf. MX II, 950; Georg Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier, his Life, his Times, Vol. II India 1541-1545*, M. J. Costelloe (tr.), The Jesuit Historical Institute, Rome, 1977, 502. Mansilhas writes that no human being could have done what Xavier did. Cf. MX II, 316.

<sup>231</sup> Service of the “saints”, i.e., seekers of God or *bhaktas*. Cf. NMK, 8, 28.

<sup>232</sup> Cf. *Doc.* 70. 3; 4, 71.3, best of all qualities required in a Jesuit are humility and obedience. Cf. *Doc.* 105.3,

<sup>233</sup> Cf. X. Léon-Dufour, *Saint François Xavier...*, 99.



Unless and until you gain self-knowledge, useless is all your *sādhana*; it spoils your entire life like an unseasonal rain that ruins the crops.<sup>234</sup>

Here Mehta means, by *sādhanas*, such external rituals as purificatory baths, smearing of ashes on the body, growing or shaving of hair, pilgrimages, almsgiving, reciting the beads, etc.<sup>235</sup>

Xavier links self-knowledge with human weakness:

*... since, through the mercy of God, after acquiring some little knowledge of myself, or at least some semblance of it, I know my own weakness and how useless I am in everything, I have striven to place all my hope and confidence in God.*<sup>236</sup>

He advised Father Barzaeus with these words, “First of all, be mindful of yourself, rendering an account first of all to God, and then to your own conscience. With these two things you will be able to do much good for your neighbors”.<sup>237</sup>

A true self-knowledge, Mehta asserts, is acquired only in the light of the knowledge of Śrīhari.

Be constantly mindful of Śrīhari, put aside self-love, think of your foundation; O mortal! Who are you? What are you relying on? Without giving it [your foundation] a thought, you claim (that all is) ‘mine’.<sup>238</sup>

Self-knowledge grows in proportion to one’s knowledge or experience of the love and mercy of God. At the same time, it is God alone who can help one to overcome weaknesses.<sup>239</sup> Xavier knew, right from the beginning of his missionary ventures, that “the good that is being done is known to God, since it is he who does it all”.<sup>240</sup>

For Mehta, to suppose that “I do everything” was ignorance. He compared such an attitude to a dog who walks under the bullock cart and presumes he is carrying the load.<sup>241</sup> For Xavier, to rely on one’s own strength was cowardice. One should only fear not placing one’s hope and trust in God.<sup>242</sup> The origin of cowardice lies in placing trust in oneself,<sup>243</sup> because human being, without the grace of God, is feeble.<sup>244</sup> Humble people dream big because they place their confidence in God and not in self.<sup>245</sup>

<sup>234</sup> NMK, 386.

<sup>235</sup> Cf. NMK, 386.

<sup>236</sup> *Doc.* 8.1. in italics because Costelloe italicises the original Latin texts in his translation.

<sup>237</sup> *Doc.* 80.1.

<sup>238</sup> NMK, 363.

<sup>239</sup> Cf. Carlos Coupeau, “Javier, formador y superior de misioneros”, *Manresa* 78/306 (2006), 78-79.

<sup>240</sup> *Doc.* 13.2.

<sup>241</sup> Cf. NMK, 390.

<sup>242</sup> Cf. *Docs.* 78.2; 90.8.

<sup>243</sup> Paul Coutinho, “The Goals of Formation According to Francis Xavier and Peter Faber”, *Ignis* XXXVI/1-2 (1997), 33.

<sup>244</sup> Cf. *Doc.* 90.9.

<sup>245</sup> Cf. *Doc.* 55.4.

To know oneself is to know that human being is mortal and that the days of youth are not permanent. So, the time to change, according to Mehta, is while one is young. He warns that one must avoid procrastination, lest it become too late.

Though the youth of your body is fast effacing and your body is reduced to fragile skeleton, you are not invoking Kṛṣṇa; beware, death is near, seek your salvation before the game is over.<sup>246</sup>

Xavier gave similar advice to the King John III. He asked the King to take particular care of himself, i.e., to know himself and not to postpone the matter until the hour of death.<sup>247</sup> He shared with his own companions his reflections on this topic in his great letter from Japan:

Those who live with desires to serve God should therefore strive to humble themselves greatly, always making little of themselves, placing their great and firm foundations in God, so that, in the great toils and dangers of both life and death, they can hope in the supreme goodness and mercy of their Creator.<sup>248</sup>

Mehta and Xavier realised that lack of self-knowledge was a major obstacle to experiencing the love of God and to fulfilling the will of God. They overcame that obstacle and taught others to do the same.

(ii) The second major difficulty faced by Mehta and Xavier in responding to the love of God was the influence of the forces of the evil spirit or the devil on them. In the *padas* of Mehta there is no direct reference made to the evil spirit. But, Mehta was not free from the influence of the evil spirit, whether experienced within himself (for example, in his struggle with the lustful tendencies) or experienced in the form of persecutions faced from without. The war with the evil spirit that each person has to fight is metaphorically depicted by Mehta in a *prabhāṭiya* (a *pada* sung in the mornings) titled *Jala Kamal*.<sup>249</sup> The *pada* depicts the duel between child Kṛṣṇa and the devil embodied in the *kālinaga*, a gigantic cobra living in the Yamuna river. In the battle that symbolises the inner struggles of Mehta himself, Kṛṣṇa has the final victory.

Xavier speaks of his own struggle with the evil one at several junctures of his life. While he was making his discernment in St. Thomé, the devil provided many impediments to Xavier's prayer. The devil even harmed Xavier physically with blows.<sup>250</sup> While waiting to enter China, he wrote on October 22, 1552,

... if it is to his greater service, he will protect us from the dangers of this life [...] since without the leave and permission of God the demons and their ministers cannot harm us in any way.<sup>251</sup>

<sup>246</sup> NMK, 364.

<sup>247</sup> Cf. *Docs.* 46.6; 109.8.

<sup>248</sup> *Doc.* 90.9.

<sup>249</sup> Cf. NMK, 43.

<sup>250</sup> Cf. MX II 946-947; G. Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier II ...*, 591.

<sup>251</sup> *Doc.* 131.4.

Xavier was convinced that nothing could separate him from the love of God. He continued to write about the obstacles of the devil and the hoped for victory of God in a letter – his last – written twenty days after the one just cited.<sup>252</sup> He breathed his last in the early hours of the third day of December, with his eyes fixed on the blue mountains of mainland China still beckoning him. Did the devil prove stronger than God in the premature death of Xavier? Apparently, yes, but not definitively. Thirty years later, Matteo Ricci and Michele Ruggieri did take the gospel to China, for which mission Xavier had prepared the way. He always wanted “to open the way for others”.<sup>253</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

The pada “*Vaiṣṇavajan*” of Mehta is, perhaps the best of his *padas*. It was one of the favourite *padas* of Mahatma Gandhi, if not his favourite. Since the *pada* was so dear to the heart of Gandhi, it is acclaimed as the “*Rāṣṭrabhakti gīt*” or the devotional song of the whole nation.<sup>254</sup> The *pada Vaiṣṇavajan* is the epitome of the teachings of Mehta. It depicts the characteristics of a *Vaiṣṇavajan*, a *jan* (man, here devotee) of Viṣṇu, i.e., a *bhakta*. One who merely recites his/her prayers, sings the praises of God and fulfils the external religious rituals is not, for Mehta, an authentic *bhakta*. The true test of a *bhakta* is love in action.<sup>255</sup> This conception is in perfect congruence with the spirituality of Ignatius, “Love ought to manifest itself more by deeds than by words”.<sup>256</sup> The *pada* could well be considered as a self-portrait of Mehta, as he himself lived the characteristics of the *bhakta* that he has highlighted in *Vaiṣṇavajan*.<sup>257</sup>

Here is how Gandhi translated the *pada Vaiṣṇavajan* into English:

He is a Vaishnava who identifies himself with others' sorrows  
and in so doing has no pride about him.

Such a one respects every one and speaks ill of none.

He controls his speech, his passions and his thoughts. May his mother be blessed.

He is equidispensed towards all, has no desires, regards another's wife as his mother; always speaks the truth and does not touch other people's property [does not covet others' wealth].

He labours neither under infatuation nor delusion and withdraws his mind from worldly things; he is intent on Ramanama [engrossed in God's name]; his body is his sacred shrine for pilgrimage [he embodies all places of pilgrimage].

<sup>252</sup> October 13, 1552. Cf. *Doc.* 137.7.

<sup>253</sup> *Doc.* 98.9. Aso *Doc.* 107.18.

<sup>254</sup> Umashankar Joshi, *Nishchena Mabelma*, Sastu Sahitya Vardak Karyalay, Ahmedabad, 1986, 42.

<sup>255</sup> Cf. U. Joshi, *Nishchena Mabelma...*, 40.

<sup>256</sup> *SpEx* [230].

<sup>257</sup> Meghnad H. Bhath and Yashvant Shukla, “Vaishnavjan to Tene re Kahiye”, in R. Chaudhari and P. M. Dave (ed.), *Narasinb Maheta: Aswad ane Swadhyay*, Dhairyabala Vora, Mumbai, 1983, 300.

He is no miser and is free from cunning [greedless and deceit-less] and he has conquered passions and anger.

Narasaiyo says: His presence purifies his surroundings.<sup>258</sup>

Mehta composed this *pada* after interiorising the teachings of the Bhāgavata.

The Ten Commandments formed essential part of Xavier's catechism.<sup>259</sup> Most of what is contained in the Decalogue (Ex 20: 1-17) in the form of precepts can be found in the descriptive form in the *pada Vaiṣṇavajan*. The similarity between the Decalogue and the *Vaiṣṇavajan* has been observed by non-Christians.<sup>260</sup> Compare, for example, the following:

The Decalogue	Vaiṣṇavajan
- honour your father and mother	- respecting everyone
- do not commit adultery	- regarding another's wife as one's mother and being passionless
- do not covet your neighbour's wife	
- do not steal	- not touching other people's property
- do not bear false witness	- speaking the truth always
- do not covet neighbour's goods	- being greedless

The religious conversion facilitated for both Mehta and Xavier the internalisation of the essential teaching of their respective scriptures. If Mehta sang his internal convictions in the *Vaiṣṇavajan*, it could well be said that Xavier essentially embodied what the *Vaiṣṇavajan* contains. Merely the sound of the name his beloved Kṛṣṇa got Mehta ticking. To converse about "*cosas de Dios*" (things of God)<sup>261</sup> Xavier sailed seven seas.<sup>262</sup>

The qualities of a *bhakta* and *Vaiṣṇavajan* that Mehta so beautifully depicts in the *pada Vaiṣṇavajan* provide a portrait of Xavier himself. It can be said that Xavier was an embodiment of the characteristics of *bhakti* as described by Mehta. Can Xavier, then, be called a *bhakta*?

The similarities between the mystical spiritualities of the two protagonists have been highlighted in the second part of this article. Their spiritual itineraries, their respective abandonment to the will of Kṛṣṇa and Christ, their mystical knowledge, and the difficulties they faced on their journeys towards union with God have several points of convergence. Having reiterated what is common to both, it can be fairly affirmed that Xavier, too, is a *bhakta*. What certainly distinguishes their mystical spiritualities is the way they perceived the will of God and fulfilled it. Both were actively receptive to the love of God, but passivity dominates Mehta's mysticism (nuptial mysticism) and activity domi-

<sup>258</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. XLIV, The Publication Division, New Delhi, 1971, 437; NMK, 382.

<sup>259</sup> Cf. *Doc.* 14.6-11.

<sup>260</sup> See for example M. Bhat and Shukla, "Vaishnavjan"..., 296.

<sup>261</sup> Cf. *Epp* I, [96]. Text in *Sancti Ignatii de Loyola Societatis Iesu fundatoris epistolae et instructiones* (12 vols.), MHSI, Madrid, 1964-1968.

<sup>262</sup> Cf. *Doc.* 84.15.



nates Xavier's mysticism (service mysticism). The difference, though, is complementary, inviting men and women today to aspire for the wise "middle way" of seeking an optimum balance.

Even as these lines are being written wars are being fought in the name of religion. Vote bank politics is being played, especially in India, polarising populations based on their religious affiliation. *Bhaktas*, men and women deeply in love with God as were Mehta and Xavier, are beacons of hope in contexts where religion divides people, rather than uniting them. These *bhaktas* rise above the socio-religious-cultural-political milieu and inspire humanity to be touched the same love God that moved them, in order to build a diverse but harmonious world family. The *bhakti* saints teach us to receive the offer of the unconditional love of God, to be transformed by its all-encompassing nature and to become channels of *premnas*.

## Transliteration of Sanskrit and Gujarati Words

(The first column: Gujarati alphabet. The second column: the symbol used in the transliteration. Third column: an approximate English phoning)

અ	a	cut	ડ	d	dust
આ	ā	calm	ઢ	ḍh	thus
ઇ	i	bit	ણ	ṇ	no equivalent
ઈ	ī	ease	ત	t	thorough
ઉ	u	bull	થ	th	thistle
ઊ	ū	rule	દ	d	mother
ઋ	r̄	rich	ધ	dh	no equivalent
એ	e	take	ન	n	nurse
ઐ	ai	time	પ	p	pot
ઓ	o	go	ફ	ph	camphor
ઔ	au	cow	બ	b	boy
અં	m̄	thumb	ભ	bh	boom
ક	k	cut	મ	m	mud
ખ	kh	current	ચ	y	yes
ગ	g	go	ર	r	rubber
ઘ	gh	foghorn	લ	l	love
ઙ	ñ	dung	વ	v	worm
ચ	c	church	શ	ś	shock
છ	ch	church	ષ	ṣ	no equivalent
જ	j	jug	સ	s	some
ઝ	jh	bridgehill	હ	h	honey
ઞ	ñ̄	knack	઼	ḷ	no equivalent
ટ	ṭ	tub	:	ḥ	uh
ઠ	ṭh	tooth			

## Abbreviations

- ARSI: Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu  
*Autob*: Autobiography of St. Ignatius of Loyola  
*BhP*: Bhāgavata Purāṇa  
*DEsp*: Spiritual Diary of S. Ignatius of Loyola  
*Doc.*: Document. Refers to documents as in *Epistolae S. Francisci Xaverii I & II* and their English translation by M.J. Costelloe  
*EB*: *Epistolae PP. Paschasii Broëti...*  
*Epp*: The Letters of St. Ignatius of Loyola  
*GC*: General Congregation of the Society of Jesus  
*Gīta*: Bhagavad Gīta  
*IHSI*: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu  
*MHSI*: Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu  
*MX*: *Monumenta Xaveriana*  
*NMK*: *Narasimha Mahetānī Kāvyaḥṛtio* (Complete Works of Kavi Narasimha Mehta)  
*SpEx*: Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola

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