

“Christian Lee Novetzke is a rising star of his generation. In this book he takes English-language scholarship on Marathi *bhakti* traditions to new levels of theoretical sophistication.”

—ANNE FELDHAUS, ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Namdev is a central figure in the cultural history of India, especially within the field of *bhakti*, a devotional practice that has created publics of memory for over eight centuries. Born in the Marathi-speaking region of the Deccan in the late thirteenth century, Namdev is remembered as a simple, low-caste Hindu tailor whose innovative performances of devotional songs spread his fame widely. He is central to many religious traditions within Hinduism, as well as to Sikhism, and he is a key early literary figure in Maharashtra, northern India, and Punjab.

In the modern period, Namdev appears throughout the public spheres of Marathi and Hindi and in India at large, where his identity fluctuates between regional associations and a quiet, pan-Indian, nationalist-secularist profile that champions the poor, oppressed, marginalized, and low caste. Christian Lee Novetzke considers the way social memory coheres around the figure of Namdev from the sixteenth century to the present, examining the practices that situate Namdev's memory

in multiple historical publics. Focusing primarily on Maharashtra and drawing on ethnographies of devotional performance, archival materials, scholarly historiography, and popular media, especially film, Novetzke vividly illustrates how religious communities in India preserve their pasts and, in turn, create their own historical narratives.



CHRISTIAN LEE NOVETZKE is assistant professor at the University of Washington's Jackson School of International Studies in the South Asia Program and Comparative Religion Program.

“Secular humanist, social bandit, wandering truth-teller, hardscrabble patriot, (pre)-postcolonial critic, humble devotee, saint—Namdev has been many things to many publics. For Christian Lee Novetzke, the many pasts of Namdev offer an opportunity to investigate not only the literary and religious legacy of this important fourteenth-century singer—*sant*—of Maharashtra but the manner in which he has been remembered across the centuries and its implications in the cultural, social, and political history of early-modern and modern India. Along the way, we learn much about the place and potential of religion in history and the evolution of the public sphere in India and beyond. Novetzke is a skilled and sensitive writer, and he has produced a challenging, erudite, and engaging book that will interest both historians and scholars of religion.”

—WILLIAM R. PINCH, WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

“Novetzke lets us see the processes that allow the songs and stories of a fourteenth-century saint to live vibrantly today. With a discussion of ‘public memory’ and a thorough explanation of how orality influences literacy and how performance trumps permanence, Novetzke brings the cultural world of Namdev to life.”

—ELEANOR ZELLIOT, CARLETON COLLEGE

“This erudite study is an important contribution to several important issues in contemporary social theory, especially the relations of memory, history, and community through the past thousand years of the vernacular millennium. Deeply grounded in manuscript sources, Novetzke never loses sight of the living context of performance where the texts originated.”

—SUMIT GUHA, RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

“Novetzke does a marvelous job of redefining *bhakti* religion in India—so often described as personal devotion—as a set of practices that constitutes ‘public memory.’ His elegant theorization of the creation of publics at the interstices of memory and history unfolds through original, nuanced studies of the saint-poet Namdev and of *kirtan* as an oral, performative form in Maharashtra.”

—INDIRA VISWANATHAN, MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE

“The mobility and plasticity of saints’ lives invite us to consider how the past comes to be remembered in different ways at different moments in the lives of religious communities. *Religion and Public Memory* offers a theoretically sophisticated and historically textured analysis of one saint’s reception and legacy over several centuries. Highlighting the importance of social memory in understanding the transmission of the past into a series of presents, this book makes a substantive theoretical and cultural-historical contribution to the study of public memory in religious contexts.”