

A community of grace: the social and theological world of the *Puṣṭi Mārga vārtā* literature

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The tradition of writing hagiography in South Asia goes back to the first century CE, but it was between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries that one sees the proliferation of devotional texts written by a wide variety of religious communities in various South Asian vernacular languages.¹ In North India, one of the most important of these regional languages was *Braj Bhāṣā*, which was a dialect of Hindi that would remain the main form of literary expression well into the nineteenth century before being supplanted by modern Hindi. In the annals of Hindi literature, the oldest extant, and one of the most important texts of *Braj Bhāṣā* prose is the collection of hagiography known as the *vārtā* literature, a series of texts central to the devotional life of the religious community known as the *Puṣṭi Mārga*, founded by the philosopher Vallabha (1479–1531).²

Vallabha had founded the *Puṣṭi Mārga* in the early sixteenth century, but under the leadership of his son Viṭṭhalnāth and his descendants, the *Puṣṭi Mārga* would eventually become a very wealthy and socially influential community in Western India which relied primarily on an ever-growing patronage network of devotees drawn largely from the ranks of the mercantile and ruling classes of Rājasthān and Gujarāt. The *vārtā* literature—which details the lives of Vallabha, Viṭṭhalnāth, and their disciples—comprises a number of texts that were written and revised between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the *Puṣṭi Mārga* was slowly extending its sphere of religious influence in western and central India. The ultimate result was a body of religious literature which served the purpose of shaping the *Puṣṭi Mārga*'s self-identity by emphasizing the community as a well-knit, self-sufficient group of devotees who owed their final allegiance to Kṛṣṇa and the community's religious authorities, known as *mahārājas*.

II

The *Puṣṭi Mārga* was founded during a period of north Indian history that was marked by the disintegration of the Delhi Sultanate into a number of regional Muslim dynasties scattered throughout northern, central, and western India. Vallabha interpreted the social dislocation of his time as an indication of the limited efficacy of asceticism, Vedic rituals, and temple-going practices which were collectively lumped under the title of *maryādā mārga* or the 'Path of Rules'. Vallabha instead sought to articulate a new form of religiosity in which the devotee would live a householder life grounded in devotion to the Supreme Lord Kṛṣṇa and purified by his divine grace (*puṣṭi*). Vallabha's community hence came to be known as the *Puṣṭi Mārga* or the 'Path of Grace' into

¹ For introductions and studies of hagiography in the South Asian context, see Winand M. Callewaert and Rupert Snell (eds), *According to Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in India* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1994).

² For a succinct introduction to *Braj Bhāṣā* literature, see Rupert Snell, *The Hindi Classical Tradition: A Braj Bhāṣā Reader* (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1992), 29–60.

which one was initiated by the taking of the *brahmasambandha mantra*, a sacred formula which cleansed the individual of his impurities and made him fit to enter into a loving relationship with Kṛṣṇa. Individuals were then expected to carry on their worldly duties with the understanding that they would rely on no other deity but Kṛṣṇa and that they would dedicate all their future actions and material acquisitions to Kṛṣṇa before making use of them themselves.³

Vallabha thus proposed that the bond between the Divine and the devotee was to be maintained through the process of *sevā*, which meant the dedication of one's physical labour and material wealth to the Divine by worshipping images of Kṛṣṇa.⁴ In other words, one was to work to acquire the most wonderful and highest possible materials with the intention of using them to encourage loving but totally selfless devotion to Kṛṣṇa. Thus the individual was not to perform service to Kṛṣṇa with the intention of securing a specific aim, be it spiritual or material. The practice of *sevā* was to be understood as the spontaneous expression of the devotee's love for Kṛṣṇa, consequently making devotion both the means and the end of *Puṣṭi Mārga sevā*. *Sevā*, in other words, was to be an expression of the innate desire to serve Kṛṣṇa and to experience the joy and happiness associated with his boundless grace.

Vallabha, however, was very clear on one point. The sole purpose of the initiatory *mantra* was to purify the individual and spark his interest in performing *sevā*, but the spiritual advancement that was to occur with the constant performance of *sevā* was wholly dependent on whether or not Kṛṣṇa's grace was upon the practitioner.⁵ According to Vallabha, those who did truly progress in their *sevā* would find their love for Kṛṣṇa maturing into a form of obsessive devotion (*vyasana*) in which the devotee's attachment to Kṛṣṇa would become so intense that he would come to believe that there was nothing else in the world that mattered outside cultivating his selfless love for the Divine.⁶ This would be followed, Vallabha stated, by the constraint or bondage (*nirodha*) of the devotee.⁷ The passionate love cultivated by the spiritual aspirant would become so strong that he, in turn, would become irrevocably bound by the power of divine grace into an intensely personal relationship with Kṛṣṇa. Thus the true spiritual renunciate was one who did not forego his societal duties, but instead channelled his passions and desires towards Kṛṣṇa so he may be permanently bound into a relationship where he subsisted on nothing more than divine grace.⁸

The emphasis Vallabha placed on a householder life meant, in turn, that he affirmed rather than rejected the *varṇāśramadharmā* system. Vallabha

³ Vallabha states this in *Siddhantārahasyam*, the fifth of sixteen Sanskrit treatises found in Vallabha's *Ṣoḍaśagranthāḥ*. See James D. Redington (trans.), *The Grace of Lord Krishna* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 2000), 26–130. For Vallabha's comments on the importance of maintaining the rules associated with the *varṇāśramadharmā* system see verses 18–19 of Vallabha's *Bālabodhaḥ* in Redington, *The Grace of Lord Krishna*, p. 15. Finally, see Vallabha's comments in verses 2 and 3 of *Bhaktivardhini* also in *Ṣoḍaśagranthāḥ*. For these verses, see Redington, *The Grace of Lord Krishna*, 125.

⁴ See Peter Bennett, *The Path of Grace: Social Organisation and Temple Worship in a Vaishnava Sect* (Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1993), 69–72. See also Vallabha's brief but none the less important comment on this in *Siddhāntamuktavālī* to be found in Redington's *The Grace of Lord Krishna*, 26.

⁵ See *Puṣṭipravāhamaryādābhedaḥ*, verses 4–5 in Redington, *The Grace of Lord Krishna*, 44.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 125–6. See verses 3 to 5 of the treatise *Bhaktivardhini* from *Ṣoḍaśagranthāḥ*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 177–81. This can be found in the treatise *Nirodhalaksānam* from *Ṣoḍaśagranthāḥ*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 160–63. The definition of renunciation and the importance of love in separation (*viraha*) are contained in verses 7 to 21 of Vallabha's treatise *Samnyāsānirṇayaḥ*, which is found in *Ṣoḍaśagranthāḥ*.

permitted the fulfilment of worldly obligations and the preservation of the *varṇāśramadharmā* system as long as worldly obligations did not become an insurmountable obstacle to one's journey on the Path of Grace. Vallabha, however, did deviate from the traditional caste system in one respect by stressing that devotees were no longer dependent on the intermediary position of a *brāhmaṇ* priest. All individuals—regardless of caste and gender—were now empowered as members of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* to further their spiritual growth in the privacy of their own homes by placing their reliance solely on Kṛṣṇa.

Vallabha's teachings, however, were nothing new or radical for their time. They clearly echo the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s teachings on the social universality of *bhakti*, so long as it is performed within the confines of the *varṇāśramadharmā* system. Thus it would seem that, for Vallabha, the social distinctions of the worldly realm were to remain, but devotees were none the less spiritually equal for they all traversed the same spiritual path empowered by Kṛṣṇa's grace. This is precisely why Vallabha emphasized the dangers of turning away from the doctrines of the *Puṣṭi Mārga*. Practising any ritual that slightly deviated from *Puṣṭi Mārga* doctrine—especially the *maryādā mārga*—would compromise the one thing that made the *Puṣṭi Mārga* unique amongst all other religious communities around them: the fact that they were a closely-knit community of spiritual elect who, being infused with divine grace, desired nothing else other than to love the form of Lord Kṛṣṇa. Thus, according to Vallabha, '...the souls on the Path of Grace are distinct, no doubt. For they were created in order to worship the Blessed Lord's very person, and for nothing else'.⁹

In the course of his travels, Vallabha built a devotee base in Gujarāt and Purī, but he established the *Puṣṭi Mārga*'s main shrine of worship in the Braj area, where he built a temple on Govardhan Hill to honour an image of Kṛṣṇa known as Śrīnāthjī. When Vallabha died in 1531 the community consisted of both men and women initiated from diverse social and economic backgrounds ranging from *brāhmaṇs* to wealthy merchants to poor *sūdras*, all of whom were now part of one spiritual fellowship dedicated to Kṛṣṇa. The leadership of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* would then fall to Vallabha's elder son, Gopināth (1512–43), whose authority was slowly eclipsed by his more charismatic younger brother, Viṭṭhalnāth (1515–85).¹⁰ When Gopināth died in 1543, a long succession dispute ensued between Viṭṭhalnāth and Gopināth's only son Puruṣottam, resulting in Viṭṭhalnāth's succession to the leadership of the community upon Puruṣottam's death at the age of eighteen. When Viṭṭhalnāth died in 1585, the spiritual leadership of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* was then divided equally among his seven sons who inherited the exclusive right to initiate disciples into the community. Viṭṭhalnāth's sons were also given custody over various images of Kṛṣṇa, with the principal image of Śrīnāthjī being entrusted to the hands of Viṭṭhalnāth's eldest son and his descendants. This distribution of spiritual authority led to the formation of seven divisions within the *Puṣṭi Mārga* known as the 'Seven Houses', with spiritual leadership of each division being based upon the principle of primogeniture. Initiatory rights into the

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44, 47. Vallabha makes this point most emphatically in verses 10–12 and 17–21 of *Puṣṭipravāhamaryādābhedaḥ*, the fourth treatise of *Ṣoḍaśgranthāḥ*.

¹⁰ For general accounts of the institutional history of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* after the death of Vallabha, see the chapters on the *Puṣṭi Mārga* in Alan Entwistle, *Braj: Centre for Krishna Pilgrimage* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1987), 151–4, 160–66, 177–8, Prabhudayāl Mital, *Brajastha Vallabha Sampradāya kā Itihās* (Mathurā: Sāhitya Sammelan, 1968) and the detailed chronicle of the *Puṣṭi Mārga*'s third house by Kaṅṭhamaṇi Sastri entitled *Kāṅkarolī kā Itihās* (Kāṅkarolī: Kāṅkarolī Vidyā Vibhāḡ, 1939).

community and leadership of each of the seven divisions could only be in the hands of the male descendants of Vallabha traced through Viṭṭhalnāth. They were now called *mahārājas* with the special designation of *tilkāyat* being given to the head of the first house who had custody of the Śrīnāthjī image. This division of authority by Viṭṭhalnāth established what would come to be known as the ‘family of Vallabha’ (*vallabhkul*) or the ‘Vallabha dynasty’ (*vallabhvaṃśa*). It would be under the direction of the *mahārājas* who came after Viṭṭhalnāth that the *Puṣṭi Mārga* would come to establish themselves in temples throughout central and western India.

The growth of the *Puṣṭi Mārga*’s economic, social, and religious influence was a slow, steady process that occurred between 1523 and 1633 when Viṭṭhalnāth and his family members were in Gokul, the childhood home of Kṛṣṇa in Braj, where Vallabha had founded the *Puṣṭi Mārga* community. Viṭṭhalnāth’s desire to expand his community’s influence and form of temple worship took him on a series of six extremely successful fundraising trips to Gujarāt and central India. It was during these trips, made between 1523 and 1581, that he and his disciples won numerous converts from among the ranks of the farming communities of the region and, more importantly, from the ranks of the Gujarātī mercantile community whose wealth and affluence made them the elite of Gujarātī society.¹¹ The money from its mercantile patrons was used to finance Viṭṭhalnāth’s temple construction projects in Gokul, which were followed by efforts to protect the community’s resources in the Gokul area by securing the political and economic protection of the Mughal emperors in the form of charitable endowments.

The influence wielded by the *Puṣṭi Mārga* in the Braj area was sufficiently strong that, between 1577 and 1633, a series of edicts (*farmāns*) were issued to the *Puṣṭi Mārga* by Mughal emperors assuring that the villages around Govardhan and Gokul would belong exclusively to the *Puṣṭi Mārga* in perpetuity, and that these properties would always be exempt from all forms of taxation and political interference.¹² The years between 1633 and 1670 would come to represent a period of stability for the *Puṣṭi Mārga*. The community was now firmly established in the Braj area where the families of Viṭṭhalnāth’s seven sons were supported by a very wealthy community of Gujarātī merchants. This period of prosperity was, however, shaken by political unrest in the Braj area, and the community took its principal image of Śrīnāthjī along with its other images of Kṛṣṇa and left for Rājasthān in 1670.

The period between 1670 and 1672 saw the establishment of various *Puṣṭi Mārga* shrines in different kingdoms in Rājasthān. The kingdoms of Jaypur, Būmdī and Bikāner began to offer refuge to various *Puṣṭi Mārga* images that were once housed in Braj and in 1672, the royal kingdom of Mevār offered the first house of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* its own fiefdom which would be

¹¹ For the dates traditionally assigned by sectarian sources for Viṭṭhalnāth’s trips to Gujarāt, see Śāstri, *Kāmkarolī kā Itihās*, 99. Śāstri puts the dates at 1523, 1539, 1542, 1549, 1562 and 1581. For a history of the mercantile communities of western India, see David Hardiman, *Feeding the Baniya: Peasants and Usurers in Western India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹² For translations of the *farmāns* received by the *Puṣṭi Mārga* from its Mughal patrons see, Edwin Allen Richardson, ‘Mughal and Rajput patronage of the Bhakti sect of the Maharajas, the Vallabha Sampradaya, 1640–1760’ (PhD Thesis, University of Arizona, 1979), 31–57. The Mughal *farmāns* to the *Puṣṭi Mārga* were very generous. The community had control over income that from land and villages that extended through Gokul, Govardhan and into Mathurā. There was also the promise of a small imperial army to protect them from harassment. All the *Puṣṭi Mārga mahārājas* had to do in return for imperial support was to pray for the continual well-being of the Mughal empire.

concentrated in the hands of the *tilkāyat*. That very year the image of Śrīnāthjī was installed in its new temple in a town renamed Nāthdvārā, which then became a small autonomous kingdom within Mevār.¹³ This arrangement was advantageous for both the *Puṣṭi Mārga* and the Mevārī nobility. For the Mevārī nobility, the generous endowments to the *Puṣṭi Mārga* was meant to aid Mevār's economy which had been battered due to famine and decades of warfare with the Mughals. In encouraging the community's wealthy devotees from the nearby state of Gujarāt to visit sectarian shrines, Mevār sought to rebuild its ailing economy and to restore its former cultural glory by housing a prominent religious community.¹⁴ In return for aiding in the cultural reconstruction of Mevār, the *tilkāyats* of Nāthdvārā were assured a steady source of patronage in the form of lands and income. Thus by the early nineteenth century, the Nāthdvārā *tilkāyats* had amassed sufficient land and wealth to be formally made members of the Rājput nobility with unfettered spiritual and temporal control over their estates.¹⁵

III

The growth of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* in northern and western India thus underwent three distinct phases. Vallabha had initiated the first phase of the community's growth by laying the doctrinal foundations for the *Puṣṭi Mārga* and by establishing its core devotee base through the course of his preaching tours. Viṭṭhalnāth initiated the second phase of the community's growth by expanding its devotee base and by fostering a greater sense of unity among devotees by attempting to institutionalize the *Puṣṭi Mārga* and create a focal point for religious activity centred around the Śrīnāthjī temple at Govardhan. The third and fourth generations of the *Puṣṭi Mārga*, who lived in Braj and western India, would initiate the third phase of the community's growth by focusing their efforts on the task of community building not only by honouring the *Puṣṭi Mārga*'s longstanding practice of seeking religious patronage from wealthy elites, but also by substituting Sanskrit with the more accessible *Braj Bhāṣā* as their principal mode of religious instruction. Vallabha, Viṭṭhalnāth and Gopināth all produced theological treatises written in Sanskrit; and outside the *Braj Bhāṣā* devotional poetry written in praise of Śrīnāthjī that has been attributed to the *aṣṭachāp* poets, the only notable vernacular religious text produced in the period between the time of Vallabha and Viṭṭhalnāth

¹³ For details on Nāthdvārā in the nineteenth century and the reproduction of some the *farmāns* given to the *Puṣṭi Mārga*, see James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Sons Ltd., 1914). Tod's comments are contained in vol. 1, 415–24, 436–9, and 442–3. The grants of land to the *Puṣṭi Mārga* were very similar to those the community received in Braj. Land grants were given to the *Puṣṭi Mārga* in Nāthdvārā well into the beginning of the nineteenth century, giving the community economic and political control over numerous villages in the area around Nāthdvārā. The economic clout of the *mahārājas* was strong enough by the nineteenth century that they could depute individuals in Cambay and Surat to import spices from the Middle East for the purpose of *sevā* in Nāthdvārā.

¹⁴ See Śāstrī, *Kāmkarolī kā Itihās*, 138–9. See also Richardson, *Mughal and Rajput Patronage of the Bhakti Sect of the Maharajas*, 71–6.

¹⁵ For a consideration of the relationship between the *Puṣṭi Mārga* and the Mevārī nobility, see Shandip Saha, 'Creating a community of the grace: a history of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* in northern and western India: 1493–1905' (PhD Thesis, University of Ottawa, 2004) and Shandip Saha, 'The Darbār, the British, and the runaway Māharāja: religion and politics in nineteenth century western India' (unpublished manuscript). For a consideration of the relationship between the *Puṣṭi Mārga* and the rulers of Koṭa, see Norbert Peabody, 'In whose turban does the Lord lie: the objectification of charisma and the objectification of fetishism in the Hindu kingdom of Kota', *Comparative Study of History and Society*, 33/4, 1991.

seems to have been the *Vallabhākhyān*, a Gujarātī poem written by Viṭṭhalnāth's disciple, Gopāldās which was meant to be a praise of Kṛṣṇa, Vallabha, and Viṭṭhalnāth.¹⁶

The use of *Braj Bhāṣā* in the *Puṣṭi Mārga* as a vehicle for religious instruction has been attributed to Viṭṭhalnāth's fourth son Gokulnāth (1551–1640), who regularly instructed his devotees in *Braj Bhāṣā* on matters relating to theology and the history of the community. The *Śrī Mahāprabhuḥī kī Nijvārtā* and the *Gharūvārtā* which form part of the *vārtā* literature are two works which have been associated with Gokulnāth and which are concerned with establishing the divinity of Vallabha and preserving anecdotes about Vallabha and his extended family in Varāṇasī.¹⁷ Another significant body of *Braj Bhāṣā* literature associated with Gokulnāth is titled *Śrī Gokulnāth ke Caubīs Vacanāmṛta* or the 'Twenty-Four Nectarean Utterances of Gokulnāth', twenty-four short pieces of religious instruction written down by Gokulnāth's devotee Kalyāṇ Bhaṭṭ. The *vacanāmṛta* stressed the importance of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* as an exclusive group of religious elect who, suffused with the grace of Kṛṣṇa, were to lead lives of humble, selfless devotion to no other deity than Kṛṣṇa. Should they ever stray from the path set forth by Vallabha, they risked being reborn as a dog or condemned to the depths of hell.¹⁸

The *vacanāmṛta*, in turn, would shape the theological framework for the *Caurāsī Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā* (CVV).¹⁹ This important collection in the *vārtā* canon is a group of stories about Vallabha and his eighty-four most exemplary devotees, gathered by Gokulnāth to amplify themes outlined in his twenty-four utterances. The CVV would in turn provide the inspiration for two other collections of literature in the *vārtā* canon. One, attributed to Gokulnāth but probably compiled by his disciples, is the *Bhāvsindhu kī Vārtā*, which retells the lives of certain devotees from the CVV along with a few devotees said to be associated with Viṭṭhalnāth.²⁰ The second is the other major collection of *vārtā* literature attributed to Gokulnāth entitled the *Do Sau Bāvan Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā* (DSB) which are didactic stories about Viṭṭhalnāth and his 252 exemplary devotees.²¹

These two principal collections of *Puṣṭi Mārga* hagiography—the CVV and the DSB—seem to have been revised and finally redacted in the cultural milieu of Rājasthān where Harirāy (1590?–1715), Gokulnāth's nephew, had been residing since 1660. Harirāy made his home in the kingdom of Koṭa from where he wrote theological texts and would make trips to Nāthdvārā to advise the *tilkāyat* on the performance of *sevā* until his death in 1715. It was during this period that Harirāy had revised the CVV by adding extensive commentaries to the text while his disciples continued with the task of revising the DSB by

¹⁶ Gopāldās, *Śrī Vallabhākhyān* (Mathurā: Govardhan Granthmālā Kāryalāy, n.d.).

¹⁷ Gokulnāth, *Śrī Mahāprabhuḥī kī Nijvārtā, Gharūvārtā, Baiṭhak Caritra* (Indaur: Vaiṣṇav Miṭṭ Maṇḍal, 1995).

¹⁸ Gokulnāth, *Śrī Gokulnāthī ke Caubīs Vacanāmṛta*, reprinted in *Gosvāmi Gokulnāth Smṛti Granth*, Bhagavati-Prasād Devapurā, ed. (Nāthdvārā: Nāthdvārā Sāhitya Maṇḍal, 1996), 57–73. For instances where Gokulnāth stresses the karmic results of straying away from Vallabha's path, see utterances 4 and 6.

¹⁹ This text will be referred to for the remainder of this essay as the CVV. The edition that will be used is Harirāy, *Caurāsī Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā* (Indaur: Vaiṣṇav Miṭṭ Maṇḍal, 1992).

²⁰ Gokulnāth, *Bhāvsindhu kī Vārtā*, (Mathurā: Śrī Govardhan Granthmālā Kāryalāy, 1972).

²¹ This text will be referred to as the DSB for the remainder of this essay. The edition that will be used is Harirāy, *Do Sau Bāvan Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā*, 3 vols. (Indaur: Vaiṣṇav Miṭṭ Maṇḍal, 1992). All references from the CVV and DSB will be cited by *vārtā* number, the relevant section number, followed by the page numbers.

adding stories related to the establishment of Nāthdvārā as well as commentaries modelled along the lines of those Harirāy had written for the CVV.²² The commentaries in both collections define exactly how individuals should live as the recipients of Kṛṣṇa's grace and are equally concerned with legitimizing the claims of the *Puṣṭi Mārga mahārājas* to be Kṛṣṇa's earthly intermediaries. The two texts would be followed by another text, mistakenly attributed to Harirāy, entitled the *Śrīnāthjī Prākāṣya kī Vārtā*, which was probably written in the early eighteenth century shortly after the establishment of Nāthdvārā.²³ The main purpose of this text was to extol the greatness of Śrīnāthjī and to legitimize the close ties between the Nāthdvārā *tilkāyats* and the Mevār royal house.

Did these new bodies of religious literature say anything new? Yes and no. The *vacanāmṛta* and the *vārtā* literature were very much an amplification of Vallabha's teachings about the importance of relying on divine grace, of performing regular *sevā*, and protecting the distinctive religious identity of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* from outside religious influences. What was distinctive, however, about the production of religious literature from the time of Gokulnāth onwards was that the literary genre used to convey these key teachings was not elaborate philosophical treatises, but hagiography. Sanskrit texts mentioning details of the history of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* seem to have been in existence as far back as the time of Viṭṭhalnāth, and while Gopāldās' *Vallabhākhyān* could be termed the first vernacular hagiography of the *Puṣṭi Mārga*, it would seem that it was only from the time of Gokulnāth that one would witness a truly sustained effort to use vernacular religious material to create a body of didactic historical writing that could be used to address the theological needs of devotees.²⁴

How do we, therefore, want to evaluate the importance of the *vārtā* literature within the context of the history of the *Puṣṭi Mārga*? When the *Puṣṭi Mārga* had settled in Braj and eventually Rājasthān, it enjoyed the generous political and economic protection of their royal patrons and from their rapidly growing membership of wealthy Gujarātī merchants. Hence the *vārtā* literature, against this larger historical context, should be viewed as the product of a period of economic and political stability for the *Puṣṭi Mārga* which gave members of the community the time to turn their attention to developing

²² The CVV exists in a commentarial and pre-commentarial form. The earliest extant manuscript for the CVV exists with a colophon bearing the date of 1601. The earliest extant manuscript of the CVV in its commentarial form exists with a colophon bearing the date of 1695.

The dating of the DSB is, however, more problematic. The authorship of the DSB is attributed to Gokulnāth and Harirāy, but it seems that the texts were compiled and completed most probably by disciples of Harirāy. The stories of Lāḍabāī, Dhārabāī, and Gaṅgābāī in the DSB all contain details concerning the *Puṣṭi Mārga*'s exodus to Nāthdvārā and indicate that that the revision of the text continued after the establishment of Nāthdvārā in Rājasthān in 1672. The use of Gujarātī and Persian words in the texts again also points to the DSB being redacted in the cultural milieu of Western India. The establishment of Nāthdvārā was in 1672 and the DSB exists in its commentarial form in a manuscript bearing the date of 1730. This again would suggest that the DSB was still in the process of being written and redacted towards the end of the seventeenth century.

For the *vārtā* of Lāḍabāī and Dhārabāī see DSB, vol. 3, *vārtā* 229, 262–4. The *vārtā* of Gaṅgābāī is found in DSB, vol. 2, *vārtā* 65, 434–9.

For dating concerns see, Hariharanāth Ṭaṇḍan's extensive survey of the *vārtā* literature, *Vārtā Shītya: Ek Brhat Adhyāyan* (Aligadh: Bhārat Prakāśan Mandir, 1960), 112–42. See also Dindayālu Gupta, *Aṣṭachāp aur Vallabhā Sampradāy*, vol. 1 (Prayag: Hindi Sāhityā Sammelan, 1970), 129–30, Dhirendra Varma, *La Langue Braj* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1935), 31–2, and John Stratton Hawley, *Sūrdās: Poet, Singer, and Saint* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984), 7–8.

²³ The current edition of this text is Harirāy, *Śrīnāthjī Prakāṣya kī Vārtā* (Nāthdvārā: Vidyā Vibhāg, 1988).

²⁴ Ṭaṇḍan mentions some of these Sanskrit texts in *Vārtā Sāhityā*, 148–60.

a unique and distinct religious identity as they adjusted to living in Braj and Rājasthān. This was accomplished through the creation of an accessible body of vernacular literature that used the history of the community and its prominent members to illustrate key theological concepts and to lay out for devotees an ideal vision of a united *Puṣṭi Mārga* community. This ideal vision would emphasize the uniqueness of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* as a close-knit, self-sufficient community who, as the recipients of Kṛṣṇa's grace, owed its final allegiance to Kṛṣṇa and his earthly authorities, the *mahārājas*.

IV

In the hagiography of the *Puṣṭi Mārga*, the task of establishing the authority of the *mahārājas* begins with presenting Vallabha as a manifestation of Kṛṣṇa. The *vārtā* literature makes the point that, just as Kṛṣṇa manifested himself on earth during a time of chaos and evil to re-establish righteousness, Vallabha was the identical manifestation of the Divine who appeared on earth in an age of spiritual malnourishment to teach individuals how to re-establish their connection with God. Thus in the *vārtā* literature, Vallabha is referred to as the 'Manifestation of the Mouth of Kṛṣṇa' (*Kṛṣṇa ke mukhāvātāra*) and 'The Essential Form of the God of Fire' (*Agni svarūpa*) as a means of amplifying and intensifying the claims that Vallabha was indeed a divine manifestation of Kṛṣṇa.

These two epithets for Vallabha are used in connection with his birth. The stories concerning Vallabha's birth state that when he was born, he was believed to have been stillborn and left under a tree by his grief-stricken parents. When the couple returned to the site where they had abandoned the child, they found Vallabha playing in the centre of a hearth surrounded by a circle of fire.²⁵ The fire symbolism refers to the role of Agni as the purifier of the world and as the divine intermediary figure who carries up the oblations necessary to secure gifts from the gods during the performance of Vedic sacrifices. Thus what the *vārtā* literature seeks to establish is that Vallabha is the intermediary who, having initiated the neophyte into the *Puṣṭi Mārga* community, purifies the individual of his impurities and reconciles him to Kṛṣṇa. Since Vallabha is the source of those teachings that reconcile the individual with God, and is considered to be a manifestation of Kṛṣṇa, Vallabha is presented as the personification of fire. According to the *vārtā* literature:

Vallabha is the very embodiment of the supreme Lord and is so radiant that he is a part of fire. So he revealed himself from a sacrificial hearth and thus all call him the embodiment of fire. That fire which resides in the mouth of the supreme Lord, that form belongs to Vallabha.²⁶

The significance of Vallabha as intermediary and as the manifestation of Kṛṣṇa's mouth is further underlined in the account given in the *vārtā* literature concerning the founding of the *Puṣṭi Mārga*. This account states that Vallabha learnt the means of initiating individuals from none other than Kṛṣṇa himself. Vallabha is depicted as being awake one night, terribly worried about the current state of spiritual decline, when Kṛṣṇa suddenly appears to Vallabha and instructs him on how to initiate individuals. It is by this initiation process that those who become members of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* will be forever purged of their

²⁵ For a discussion of the fire imagery in the *vārtā* literature, see Bennett, *Path of Grace*, 45–8.

²⁶ Gokulnāth, *Śrī Mahāprabhuji kī Nijvārtā*, 2. This translation and all other translations from the *vārtā* literature are my own.

faults and thus be prepared to enter into a relationship with the Divine. Vallabha's close associate, Dāmodardās Harsānī, is also present at the scene, but is depicted as being unable to make out any of the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Vallabha. Only after Vallabha himself initiates Dāmodardās does the disciple fully understand the import of Kṛṣṇa's divine revelation. In other words, this account emphasizes that without Vallabha's teachings, there can be no reconciliation with Kṛṣṇa.²⁷ The literature goes on to state that Vallabha far surpasses Kṛṣṇa himself by recounting a dialogue between Dāmodardās and Viṭṭhalnāth which neatly summarizes the importance of Vallabha as the dispenser of divine grace. Viṭṭhalnāth asks Dāmodardās if Kṛṣṇa surpasses Vallabha in importance, to which Dāmodardās responds that Vallabha is greater than Kṛṣṇa for he is the vehicle through which the Lord is obtained.²⁸

Establishing the importance of Vallabha as the divine intermediary between Kṛṣṇa and the individual was apparently not as difficult as establishing the legitimacy of Viṭṭhalnāth's descendants as the legitimate spiritual successors to Vallabha. The commentary of the CVV is painfully aware of the succession problems that arose in the aftermath of Vallabha's death, when Viṭṭhalnāth took over his elder brother's position as their father's successor. In order to avoid the possibility of any challenges to the legitimacy of Viṭṭhalnāth's descendants, the commentary goes to great lengths to assert that Vallabha, Viṭṭhalnāth, and Kṛṣṇa are conceived as being one and the same form, making only Viṭṭhalnāth suitable for shaping the future of the *Puṣṭi Mārga*.

Gopināth's unsuitability to lead the community was explained by claiming that he was an incarnation of Kṛṣṇa's elder brother, Balarāma, who had descended to Earth for the purpose of preserving the *maryādā mārga* which Vallabha had so strongly rejected.²⁹ Thus the CVV ultimately dismisses the disciples of Gopināth as illegitimate followers of the *Puṣṭi Mārga*, while only those who were initiated by Viṭṭhalnāth could be considered true members of the community.

²⁷ See CVV, *vārtā* 1, section 1, 1–2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8. This incident is reported in *vārtā* 1, section 3.

²⁹ DSB, vol. 1, *vārtā* 1, section 1, 4. This is found in the commentary for the story that deals with the life of Nāgajī. Bhaṭṭ Harirāy makes this comment about Gopināth when trying to explain why Nāgajī was sent by Vallabha to Viṭṭhalnāth for instruction in the worship of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* despite Gopināth's status as Vallabha's eldest son. In the *vārtā* 20 of the CVV, which deals with the life of Prabhudās Jaloṭā, we find Gopināth associating with Rāmdās Kṣatri who would worship Kṛṣṇa according to the traditional regulations of Hindu *pūja*. This image of Gopināth is reinforced in *vārtā* 17 of the CVV that deals with the life of Devākapūr Kṣatri. Gopināth is presented again as a manifestation of Balarāma, who descended to earth for the protection of traditional Hindu rituals which Vallabha had rejected as being ineffectual. Thus the *sevā* performed by children of Devākapūr was of no real value because they were initiated by Gopināth. A similar theme is again developed in Harirāy's commentary on the life of Nārāyaṇdās Bhaṭṭ in the CVV where Gopināth's initiation of Nārāyaṇdās into the *Puṣṭi Mārgā* is of limited value because of Gopināth's predilection towards traditional Hindu rituals.

In the CVV, Harirāy is not very kind at all to Gopināth and goes as far to imply that Gopināth's delinquency was the reason for the end of Gopināth's lineage when Puruṣottam died prematurely.

Harirāy's comments are contained in the appendix to *vārtā* 3 (*lauṇḍī ki+ vārtā*) of the CVV that deals with the life of Dāmodardās Sambhalvāre. See CVV, *vārtā* 3, 39.

When the scattered references to Gopināth from the *vārtā* literature are put together, one is left with the impression that Gopināth was highly involved in the fundraising efforts for the community, but his association with practitioners of the *maryādā mārga* rendered Gopināth, in the eyes of Harirāy, as a lowly person whose initiates were to be ignored. Thus Gopināth's alleged lack of mastery over the philosophy and worship of the *Puṣṭi Mārgā* seems to have contributed to Viṭṭhalnāth's prominence in the *Puṣṭi Mārgā* after the death of Vallabha. For the remarks about Gopināth in the *vārtā* of Prabhudās Jaloṭā, see CVV, *vārtā* 20, 140–41. For the *vārtā* of Devākapūr Kṣatri, see *vārtā* 17, 130–31 and for the for the *vārtā* of Nārāyaṇdās Bhaṭṭ, see CVV, *vārtā* 57, 325–7.

This point is made very bluntly in another account revolving around Vallabha's close disciple, Dāmodardās Harsānī. Dāmodardās is described as refusing to recognize Viṭṭhalnāth's spiritual authority, since Dāmodardās could accept only Vallabha as his spiritual teacher. Vallabha, however, appears to Dāmodardās in a vision and orders him to honour Viṭṭhalnāth by touching his feet since he, Vallabha, always resides in the heart of his son. The implication here is that Vallabha and Viṭṭhalnāth are clearly one and the same and are thus to be regarded as equals in status and authority. It is this status which, the *vārtā* literature goes on to state categorically, does not belong to Gopināth, but only to Viṭṭhalnāth and his successors:

Thus even if Gopināth (Vallabha's elder son) was the elder brother of Gusainjī Viṭṭhalnāth, Vaiṣṇavas never touched his feet. Know that Vallabha's essence lives on in Viṭṭhalnāth, his seven sons, and in their descendants. Thus touch their feet and prostrate before them. Know this to be the (correct) teaching.³⁰

What is stressed in this elaborate picture of legitimization is that spiritual succession within the community could only be hereditary and be passed through Vallabha to Viṭṭhalnāth and to his descendants.³¹ Thus, within this context, all *Puṣṭi Mārga mahārājas* were divine intermediaries since they were all partially embodied with the divinity of Kṛṣṇa that Vallabha himself embodied. Disciplic succession could not be allowed within the community regardless of how skilled a devotee may be. This was even taken to the point that Viṭṭhalnāth's adopted son, Tulsidās, could not hold the same status as the seven sons of his adopted father. In the DSB, Tulsidās is given an image by Viṭṭhalnāth and sent off to the Sindh to propagate the teachings of the *Puṣṭi Mārga*. After this, he disappears from the remainder of the *vārtā* literature.³² Not once are Tulsidās and his descendants ever mentioned as even coming close to holding the status of Viṭṭhalnāth's seven natural sons. Elevating Tulsidās to the level of Viṭṭhalnāth's descendants would have called into question the privilege of the *mahārājas* to initiate individuals based on dynastic rather than on apostolic grounds. Thus the authority of Vallabha and Viṭṭhalnāth to dispense grace, as pictured in the *vārtā* literature, gave authority to later *Puṣṭi Mārga mahārājas*

³⁰ CVV, 11. This is found in *vārtā* 1, section 5.

³¹ It is not clear why Hariṛāy keeps emphasizing that the authority of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* be held within the hands of Viṭṭhalnāth's male descendants. There was no one from Gopināth's family to challenge Viṭṭhalnāth's ascension to power after the death of Puruṣottam, for tradition states that Viṭṭhalnāth's in-laws departed for South India. Hariṛāy gives no indication that there were still other individuals who could claim to have the same initiatory privileges as Viṭṭhalnāth and his male descendants. There may be two reasons for Hariṛāy's concerns. The first, so clearly demonstrated in the *vārtā* of Dāmodardās Harsānī, was to pre-empt any possibility that prominent devotees, who by virtue of their mastery of the teachings of the *Puṣṭi Mārga*, could claim to initiate individuals thus causing sub-lineages and splinter groups. The second may be an attempt to pre-empt any claims to authority by anyone associated with Gaṅgabaī, the woman who, in 1670, led the community's procession from Braj into Nāthdvārā. According to *vārtā* 65 of the DSB, Gaṅgabaī was conceived by a *kṣatriya* woman from Mahāban with none other than Viṭṭhalnāth. The story is very concerned with wanting to preserve Viṭṭhalnāth's ritual purity and moral authority and states that once the woman had recognized Viṭṭhalnāth as Kṛṣṇa, Viṭṭhalnāth fulfilled her wish to spend the night with him by having relations with her in a dream. The *kṣatriya* woman became pregnant the following day with Gaṅgabaī. For the story of Gaṅgabaī, see DSB, vol. 1, *vārtā* 65, 434–9.

³² For the *vārtā* of Tulsidās, see *vārtā* 239 of DSB, vol. 3, 288–9. For a more detailed and extensive study of the so-called eighth seat of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* established by Tulsidās, see Alan Entwistle, *The Rāsa Māna ke Pada of Kevalrāma* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1992), 1–59. Entwistle makes the point that descendants from Tulsidās' lineage still have to be initiated by descendants of one of the seven major houses of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* to be considered legitimate members of the community.

to claim that, just as Kṛṣṇa had manifested his own unique qualities to Vallabha and Viṭṭhalnāth, these qualities were equally manifested in their descendants. This claim made the *Puṣṭi Mārga mahārājas* effectively more important than Kṛṣṇa in the eyes of devotees seeking liberation, for it was the *mahārāja* as the dispenser of grace that stirred within the individual the capacity to love Kṛṣṇa, transforming the devotee into a servant (*sevak*) of Kṛṣṇa.

V

The ideas concerning the performance of service and being a servant of Kṛṣṇa as taught by Vallabha are reflected very clearly in the *vārtā* literature. *Puṣṭi Mārga vārtā* literature constantly stresses that one need not renounce all worldly actions, but rather the fruits of one's actions through the practice of selfless service (*sevā*). Thus the DSB tells of a Vaiṣṇava couple who refuse to eat anything unless it has first been offered to their image of Kṛṣṇa, even if they are visiting the homes of other *Puṣṭi Mārga* devotees. One is told that the reason the couple are so firm and single-minded in their devotion to Kṛṣṇa is because they equate service to Kṛṣṇa with the concept of *pativrata*. Just as a woman is expected to put her material and spiritual welfare after that of her husband, true happiness comes when the devotee sets all personal concerns aside in order to minister single-mindedly to the needs of the Divine.³³

In the *vārtā* literature, devotees like Pūranmal Kṣatrī and Nārāyaṇdās Dīvan Kāyastha thus come to represent excellent examples of devotees who use whatever material goods they have purely for the service of Kṛṣṇa. In the CVV, Pūranmal is held up as an exemplary devotee because, in funding the construction of Śrīnāthjī's temple at Govardhan, he does not use his large earnings as a merchant for worldly concerns, but purely for the sake of Kṛṣṇa, the *guru*, and for the benefit of other Vaiṣṇavas.³⁴ In a similar vein, in the DSB, Nārāyaṇdās is depicted as an ideal devotee not only because of his commitment to scrupulously following the *Puṣṭi Mārga*, but also because of the fine quality of his *sevā*, which is financed by working for a local Muslim ruler.³⁵

Performing true service to Kṛṣṇa not only requires a certain single-mindedness and commitment, but also humility which, the *vārtā* literature stresses in numerous stories, is the cardinal virtue of a true devotee of the *Puṣṭi Mārga*.³⁶ A good community member never looks at the faults of other Vaiṣṇavas, is pure in mind, humble, patient in times of suffering, and never seeks to advertise his sectarian affiliations. Thus one reads of two Gujarātī brothers who wear their sectarian markings (*tilaks*) and rosaries (*mālās*) at home, where they engage in *sevā* and religious discussions, but then remove their sectarian markings before going into the fields to make money which they humbly donate to Viṭṭhalnāth.³⁷ Humility, then, is not only important for the performance of one's service to Kṛṣṇa, but also because it reminds the devotee of how one should approach the *guru*. It is only through the regular and devoted performance of *sevā* to one's *guru*, the *vārtā* literature states, that

³³ DSB, vol. 2, *vārtā* 91, 32–4.

³⁴ CVV, *vārtā* 24, 163.

³⁵ DSB, vol. 1, *vārtā* 5, 103–20.

³⁶ Examples of these types of stories in the *vārtā* literature are numerous. In the DSB, see *vārtās* 1, 4, 10, 12, 38, 43, 48, 52, 62, 103, 110, 159, 160, 164, 179, 190, 209. In the CVV, see *vārtās*. 3, 4, 6, 8, 11, 19, 23, 27, 44, 49, 47, 77.

³⁷ DSB, vol. 1, *vārtā* 80, 527–30.

one's connection to Kṛṣṇa can ever become firm.³⁸ Thus the ideal servant of Kṛṣṇa is one who is not only humble, self-effacing, and respectful to other Vaiṣṇavas, but one who is also unswerving in his devotion to Kṛṣṇa, Viṭṭhalmāth, and Vallabha. Living a life in this way had the purpose of receiving Kṛṣṇa's grace, which gives the individual the necessary spiritual strength in a time of spiritual degeneracy.

Within this context, the *vārtā* literature places a tremendous emphasis on food as the principal means of transmitting that divine grace to the individual. Offering consecrated food to Kṛṣṇa (*prasād*), either in the temple or in the home, had the purpose of providing not merely physical sustenance to the individual, but also nourishment to the soul of the individual. This helps to explain why a number of stories in the *vārtā* literature are about food and feeding.³⁹ Within the *vārtā* literature, feeding fellow devotees is considered a tremendously important service for community members who, having been infused with divine grace, are in a sense an extension of Kṛṣṇa as well. To leave a fellow community member hungry or to deny a devotee food is considered such an offence that the *vārtā* literature goes to almost absurd lengths to stress the importance of feeding fellow community members. One story depicts a woman as being prepared to prostitute herself in order to raise the necessary expenses to feed a group of community members; another story describes how two brothers steal from a local merchant the food necessary to feed some devotees who had unexpectedly arrived at their home.⁴⁰

Thus the *vārtā* literature, in an albeit exaggerated way, emphasizes the need to serve fellow community members and to promote their well-being. Thus, feeding other community members is considered the highest responsibility of a devotee to the point that one Gujarātī couple are depicted as starving themselves until a group of devotees agree to take food into their home. Their reaction is not so much due to the fact that their hospitality has been rejected, but because the refusal of their *prasād* is considered to be detrimental to the overall spiritual well-being of the devotees.⁴¹ It is through feeding that one's faith in both Kṛṣṇa and the teachings of the community are solidified so the individual can continue with greater interest in the performance of *sevā*. Thus according to *vārtā* 168 of the DSB:

The responsibility of Vaiṣṇavas is the following: After offering consecrated food to Vaiṣṇavas, then one should take it. Then the teachings of the path will take root in the heart, one will take great interest in the Lord, and then one can perform service to the Lord well.⁴²

The feeding stories in the *vārtā* literature, therefore, should be interpreted as a means of creating harmony and solidarity within the *Puṣṭi Mārga* community. To offer food in great abundance to Kṛṣṇa and then offer that consecrated food afterwards to fellow devotees was a demonstration of boundless love towards Kṛṣṇa and fellow members. Feeding community members *prasād* infused with the grace of Kṛṣṇa had the purpose not only of physically nourishing the community, but also of keeping it spiritually strong.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, *vārtā*, 37, 299. For stories in the DSB stressing the importance of *guru sevā*, see *vārtās* 2, 3, 25, 37, 115. In the CVV, see *vārtās* 1, 3, 4, 7, 27, 34, 36, 50, 58, 77.

³⁹ For examples of feeding stories in the DSB see, *vārtās* 139 163, 168, 179.

⁴⁰ The story about the woman is from the CVV, *vārtā* 75, 394–9. The story about the two brothers is found in DSB, vol. 2, *vārtā* 163, 156–62.

⁴¹ DSB, vol. 2, *vārtā* 139, 281–6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, vol. 2, *vārtā* 168, 423–4.

VI

The *vārtā* literature's link between food and the spiritual strength of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* underlines the important theme of how food is capable of transforming the emotional state of the individual who has prepared it. This accounts for a number of stories that deal with the theme of ritual purity and impurity. In the *vārtā* literature, improperly consecrated food displeases Kṛṣṇa and is harmful to the spiritual state of both the one who prepares the food and the one who partakes in it. This point is emphasized by a well-known story in the CVV about an image of Kṛṣṇa refusing a plate of food prepared by a devotee of Vallabha because he prepared his food while entertaining mundane thoughts.⁴³ This theme is also repeated in another well-known story about the preparation of food for Kṛṣṇa. In this story, a dog enters the kitchens of a wealthy and a poor devotee making both individuals' kitchens ritually impure for the preparation of *prasād*. Viṭṭhalnāth, however, ultimately rejects the offerings of the rich devotee and instead takes the food of the poor one, for he had prepared his food with humility and not with the pride of his rich counterpart.⁴⁴ The point of the story is an obvious one that also applies to other stories in the *vārtā* literature dealing with the performance of *sevā*: the true *Puṣṭi Mārga* servant is one who, in body and mind, must always be pure if he is to render proper service to Kṛṣṇa and his fellow community members.

Concerns about purity and impurity, however, appear in these texts not only through the subject of food but also through stories that voice concern about keeping contact with individuals who are not initiates of the *Puṣṭi Mārga*. Keeping company with non-members had the effect of distracting individuals from their commitment to the *Puṣṭi Mārga*, and thus the *vārtā* literature tells of the dangers of disbelief (*anyāśraya*) and the serious consequences that befall those who fall away from the path.⁴⁵ For example, a *brāhman* woman devotee of Viṭṭhalnāth, famed for the quality of her *sevā* to Kṛṣṇa, is shunned by the close disciples of Viṭṭhalnāth because she had taken gifts from a *śākta* devotee. In taking the gifts from the *śākta* devotee, the woman is told that she sold the most precious gift that she could have in the form of her faith and that is so unpardonable that even Viṭṭhalnāth chooses not to defend her.⁴⁶

Shunning seems to be a rather extreme step for what is a seemingly trivial action, but the response of Viṭṭhalnāth and his disciples seems to be a rather common response in the *vārtā* literature to those who have committed an action that went against the key beliefs of the community. In the CVV, Dāmodardās Sambhalvāre refuses to look at or eat with his wife when he learns that his wife doubted Vallabha's promise about the birth of a son by consulting an astrologer. Dāmodradās' state of grace is compromised by the actions of his wife, who is so repentant of her actions that, after she does give birth to a newborn son, she blindfolds herself and never looks at the face of her new child.⁴⁷ When Dāmodardās eventually dies, she donates all her husband's wealth to Vallabha, who rejects it on the grounds that she has rendered them impure by giving birth to an outcaste child. Thus all of Dāmodardās' property, including a maidservant, is thrown into the Yamunā. The *vārtā* literature

⁴³ CVV, *vārtā* 11, 106–09.

⁴⁴ DSB, vol. 3, *vārtā* 197, 115–19.

⁴⁵ For more stories on this topic see, DSB, *vārtās* 1, 38, 44, 60, 145. and CVV, *vārtās* 3, 6, 8, 10, 19, 27, 60, 64.

⁴⁶ DSB, vol.1, *vārtā* 38, 305–12.

⁴⁷ CVV, *vārtā* 3, section 7, 34–6.

recounts how the maidservant was given to Dāmodardās as part of his marriage dowry and hence was considered to be a form of property which would eventually become consecrated to Kṛṣṇa once Dāmodardās' family took initiation into the *Puṣṭi Mārga*. The maidservant was, from that point, rendered a pure devotee, but once Vallabha had decreed Dāmodardās' property to be impure, the maidservant also was rendered impure. Thus she was disposed of by being consigned to the Yamunā.⁴⁸

These stories point to just how broadly the term *anyāśraya* is defined for the audience of the *vārtā* literature. Disbelief does not mean merely to forsake the *Puṣṭi Mārga* for another religious path, but it extends to viewing or keeping an image that is not a consecrated *Puṣṭi Mārga* image, going on pilgrimages to sites not associated with Kṛṣṇa or the *Puṣṭi Mārga*, using goods for *sevā* that have been touched by non-members, and marrying outside the community. The *vārtā* literature does not emphasize the need for community members to isolate themselves completely from individuals outside the *Puṣṭi Mārga* community, but devotees should exert great care in all of their actions so their purity and relationship with Kṛṣṇa is not compromised. Thus, in the commentary on the story concerning Dāmodardās Sambhalvāre, the dangers of *anyāśraya* are described in the following manner:

Thus there is no greater fault than that of disbelief. Just as the moral conduct of a woman is ruined once she leaves a husband for another man, in the same way, if one shows even the smallest amount of disbelief, then the faith of a Vaiṣṇava is ruined.⁴⁹

The emphasis in the *vārtā* literature on the concept of *satsaṅg* is understandable within this context. Meeting with other initiated members on a regular basis for the sharing of consecrated food and discussion of religious topics had the purpose of fostering and promoting solidarity within the community. It is through the constant association with other devotees that Kṛṣṇa is most pleased and makes his presence felt with those devotees who are constantly engaged in discussing his glories.⁵⁰

For those devotees from the mercantile community who were away from home for long periods of time, the creation of small pockets of well-knit Vaiṣṇava communities was indeed helpful as a means of spiritual support. Thus the *vārtā* literature tells of one *Puṣṭi Mārga* devotee living in Kabul named Madhodās Kṣatrī whose constancy in *sevā* was maintained by the support of Rūpmurāridās, a fellow devotee initiated by Viṭṭhalnāth.⁵¹ For others, however, who lived in distant lands, there was not the same assurance that there would be other devotees who could give a *Puṣṭi Mārga* member a sense of community and belonging. Thus, in the DSB, one Gujarātī devotee expresses his doubts to Viṭṭhalnāth about how it is possible to experience the constant presence of Kṛṣṇa when one lives in foreign lands. Viṭṭhalnāth states that firm faith in Kṛṣṇa is enough to maintain that bond between the Lord and devotee, for Kṛṣṇa is greatly compassionate and is the protector of all.⁵²

Given this emphasis on the exclusive nature of the community, the *vārtā* literature finds itself trying to explain away the community's contact with Muslims. Political circumstances had changed considerably by the time the

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, *vārtā* 3, 39–40. This story is contained in the appendix to the *vārtā* of Dāmodardās Sambhalvāre entitled *lauṁḍī kī vārtā*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁰ See DSB *vārtās* 2, 3, 39, and 109 for stories concerning the topic of *satsaṅg*.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, *vārtā* 8, 139–4.

⁵² *Ibid.*, vol. 2, *vārtā* 126, 210.

entire *vārtā* literature was fixed in the eighteenth century. The Rājapūts were now the community's chief political patrons and, consequently, it became quite a challenge to explain why the famous Muslim emperor Akbar had shown such great favour to Viṭṭhalnāth by granting him the community's first group of land endowments. It even became a greater challenge to explain why traditions within the *Puṣṭi Mārga* had asserted that Viṭṭhalnāth had accepted Muslim converts into the community such as the famous poet, Raskhān or Alikhān Pāthān, the district ruler (*hakīm*) of Mahāban.⁵³

In the stories about Akbar and other Muslims, the *vārtā* literature has no easy answers, and instead relies on very contrived explanations stating that such Muslim figures had close ties with the *Puṣṭi Mārga* because they were righteous pagans. In the story of Viṭṭhalnāth's close disciple, Nārāyaṇdās Dīvān Kāyastha, the support that Nārāyaṇdās' *sevā* received from the local Muslim governor is attributed to the fact that the governor was a realized spiritual soul in his previous life.⁵⁴ The explanation given for Alikhān's favour towards Viṭṭhalnāth was that Alikhān and his daughter, Pīrzādī, were both manifestations of Kṛṣṇa's female attendants (*sakhīs*) Rasatarāṅgīnī and Śubhānana.⁵⁵ A similar explanation is given for Akbar's generous support of the *Puṣṭi Mārga*. According to the CVV, Akbar was once a *brāhmaṇ* who unwittingly swallowed a piece of cow hair while drinking milk. It was this act of ritual impurity which caused him to be reborn as a righteous pagan emperor.⁵⁶

Akbar, however, is not pictured as a convert to the community but as one who finds himself humbled by the presence of Viṭṭhalnāth. The DSB tells of a story in which Akbar supposedly meets with Viṭṭhalnāth in Gokul and asks him what is the easiest way to reach God, to which Viṭṭhalnāth simply answers: 'In the same way you have met me'.⁵⁷ Viṭṭhalnāth's simple assertion that the path to the Divine is not a difficult one but is direct and effortless in nature, leaves Akbar so impressed that he acknowledges Viṭṭhalnāth as Kṛṣṇa and lavishes gifts upon him. A humbled Akbar then leaves, marvelling at Viṭṭhalnāth's majesty and wisdom.

The stories dealing with Akbar in the *vārtā* literature are, however, not just there to help to explain why the *Puṣṭi Mārga* had such favourable associations with Muslims in the past. The stories about Akbar also point to what the exact relationship should be between *Puṣṭi Mārga mahārājas* and those secular rulers who were initiated into the community. When one puts together the stories about rulers who have been initiated into the *Puṣṭi Mārga*, one sees the model for an ideal *Puṣṭi Mārga* kingdom in which the ruler, having been initiated into

⁵³ For the *vārtā* of Raskhān, see DSB, vol. 3, *vārtā* 245, 341–7. Raskhān's mausoleum is found in Gokul where the *Puṣṭi Mārga* was founded, but there are doubts about whether Raskhān was initiated by Viṭṭhalnāth. R. S. McGregor states that, according to Raskhān's work, *Prem Vāṭikā*, Raskhān arrived in Delhi some time in the mid-1550s shortly before Viṭṭhalnāth's death. If that is the case, then he probably did not arrive at Gokul until after Viṭṭhalnāth's death. For this discussion of Raskhān and his poetry see, R. S. McGregor, *Hindi Literature from Its Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1984), 104–06.

⁵⁴ DSB, vol. 1, *vārtā* 5, section 4, 117.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, *vārtā* 37, section 2, 302.

⁵⁶ CVV, *vārtā* 81, section 3, 447. This explanation is found in *vārtā* of the celebrated *bhakti* poet, Sūrdās. For a consideration of Akbar's place in hagiographies, see Kumkum Sangari's 'Tracing hagiographies, popular narrative traditions and conversion' in Neera Chandhoke (ed.), *Mapping Histories: Essays Presented to Ravinder Kumar* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000), 61–103. For Akbar's place in the *vārtā* literature see John Stratton Hawley's essay, 'Last seen with Akbar' in John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 181–93.

⁵⁷ DSB, vol. 1, *vārtā* 75, 503. This is the *vārtā* that deals with Viṭṭhalnāth's supposed connections to Akbar's famed courtier, Birbal.

the community, would enshrine an image in a temple, make it the titular ruler of his kingdom, and perform *sevā* with the help of *brāhmaṇs* who would aid the ruler in observing the correct etiquette concerning the feeding and support of the fellow Vaiṣṇavas.⁵⁸ The *vārtā* literature also goes on to state that devotion to Kṛṣṇa is fine and extremely important for a ruler who is a member of the *Puṣṭi Mārga*, but not to the point that it keeps the ruler from fulfilling his worldly responsibilities. Conducting the affairs of state with faith in Kṛṣṇa and with the blessings the *Puṣṭi Mārga mahārāja* will suffice to ensure a prosperous kingdom.

This image is brought forth in the literature concerning Pṛthvī Siṃh, the *Puṣṭi Mārga* royal patron who ruled over the Rājasthānī kingdom of Bikāner. Pṛthvī Siṃh in many ways represents the image of the ideal ruler in *vārtā* literature, for he carries out his appointed duties in life, while engaging in devotion to Kṛṣṇa in his personal life. Pṛthvī Siṃh is depicted wearing religious garments indicating his affiliation to the *Puṣṭi Mārga*, he meditates completely upon Kṛṣṇa and Viṭṭhalnāth, and expresses his devotion and humility to both of them in song and poetry. Yet, when necessary, Pṛthvī Siṃh fights on the battlefield and emerges as a victorious warrior because of his firm devotion to Kṛṣṇa and Viṭṭhalnāth.⁵⁹ This image also comes through in the narrative concerning Āskaran, an accomplished warrior who wants to give up his kingly duties in order to engage in constant mental meditation upon Kṛṣṇa. Āskaran, however, is told by Kṛṣṇa in a dream to desist from giving up his kingly duties. Shortly after, he vanquishes an arriving army, and then immediately lapses into a state of mental absorption upon the form of Kṛṣṇa.⁶⁰ Both Āskaran and Pṛthvī Siṃh, the *vārtā* literature tells us, represent model devotees because of their total submission to Kṛṣṇa and Viṭṭhalnāth. Whatever accomplishments these kings achieved, they did so not by their own merits, but because they were favoured with the grace of Śrīnāthjīā as mediated through their *guru*.

VII

How, then, is one to evaluate the social world of the *vārtā* literature? It has been suggested that the social inclusivity of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* depicted in the *vārtā* literature is indicative of how the *Puṣṭi Mārga*, under the leadership of Vallabha and Viṭṭhalnāth, was akin to a type of religious populist movement that gave the marginalized of Hindu society a sense of community where they were on an equal footing with upper caste *brāhmaṇs* and *kṣatriyas*.⁶¹ However, one has to be very careful in making such a statement. Vallabha, himself was interested in winning broad-based class support including the *sūdra* community, and there is no indication in the *vārtā* literature that Vallabha sought the patronage of any particular social group in Hindu society. The active courting, however, of political officials, merchants, and nobility began under Viṭṭhalnāth who clearly understood the lucrative nature of mercantile and

⁵⁸ The stories about local chieftains and rulers who are said to have become members of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* are all found in the DSB. See *vārtās* 62, 63, 66, 104, 123, 177, 183, 185, and 237. See especially *vārtās* 63, 104, 123, and 237 and the discussion of some of these *vārtā* stories in Woodman Taylor, 'Visual culture in performative practice: the aesthetics, politics, and poetics of visuality in liturgical practices of the Vallabha Sampradaya Hindu community at Kota', (PhD Thesis, University of Chicago, 1997), 59–61.

⁵⁹ For the *vārtā* of Pṛthvī Siṃh, see DSB vol. 3, *vārtā* 237, 283–6.

⁶⁰ For the *vārtā* of Āskaran, see DSB, vol. 2, *vārtā* 123, 181–200.

⁶¹ Vasudha Dalmia, 'Forging community: the guru in a seventeenth-century Vaiṣṇava hagiography', in Vasudha Dalmia, Angelika Malinar and Martin Christof (eds), *Charisma and Canon: Essays on the Religious History of the Indian Subcontinent* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 129–54.

royal patronage. The *Bhāvsindhu kī Vārtā* details Viṭṭhalnāth's relationship with Rāṇī Durgāvati who would arrange his second marriage, the DSB details how prominent Gujarāti disciples were associated with the Mughal regime, and while the stories about Viṭṭhalnāth and Alikhān and Akbar are probably fictional, the DSB at least acknowledges that Viṭṭhalnāth did have ties to the Mughals, whose generous patronage would safeguard the community's interests in Braj.⁶² In other words, the *vārtā* literature indicates that the *Puṣṭi Mārga's* becoming elite began with Viṭṭhalnāth, who approached political notables as well as the merchant community who constituted the elite of Gujarāti society.

There is nothing in the *vārtā* literature to suggest that once mercantile and royal patronage became an important feature of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* that membership was now open only to the rich and wealthy. The small sample of devotees listed in the DSB lists about thirty-five devotees as *śūdras*, which does indicate that social groups that remained outside elite circles were still members of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* and that such groups did gain much social prestige from membership in the *Puṣṭi Mārga*. The most obvious example from the *vārtā* literature is Vallabha's *śūdra* disciple, Kṛṣṇadās, whose appointment as the first temple manager of the Śrīnāthjī temple gave him considerable clout and influence within the *Puṣṭi Mārga* to the point that he almost thwarted Viṭṭhalnāth's attempt to assume the authority of the *Puṣṭi Mārga* by banning him from the temple for six months.⁶³

The reality, however, was that class distinctions still remained within the community. The commentary on the *vārtā* of Pīrzādī and Alikhān makes it quite clear that the mundane and the spiritual are two very distinct realms with their own rules, to which individuals are subject and the stories about Āskaran, Pṛthvī Simh, and the two unnamed Gujarāti brothers tend to reinforce this point.⁶⁴ They are devotees in their private lives, but continue to fulfil their worldly obligations according to their standing in society. The same applies to Viṭṭhalnāth's disciple, Murāridās. Murāridās is a professional priest at pilgrimage sites, but after his conversion to the *Puṣṭi Mārga* he is told by Viṭṭhalnāth that he must continue to carry out his worldly obligations otherwise it will invite criticism from other members of society.⁶⁵ Thus devotees are still *brāhmaṇas*, *kṣatriyas*, or *śūdras*, but are considered spiritual equals for they are devotees who, being empowered by Kṛṣṇa's grace, all enjoy the same opportunity to reach the Divine. Spiritual equality, however, seems to have its limits in the *vārtā* literature. The stories surrounding Dāmodardās' wife, child, and maidservant as well as the story about an unnamed female devotee and the *śāka* devotee are indicative of how committing an act of *anyāśraya* could result in one's excommunication from the community. All of them are ostracized or rejected because they commit actions that would serve to compromise the community's unique religious identity as the recipients of Kṛṣṇa's divine grace.

It is the power of divine grace or *puṣṭi* which is the overwhelming theme that runs throughout the *vārtā* texts.⁶⁶ In the *vārtā* literature, once infused with

⁶² Gokulnāth *Bhāvsindhu kī Vārtā*, 254–67.

⁶³ CVV, *vārtā* 84, section, 7, 596–608. For an analysis of Kṛṣṇadās' *vārtā* see Richard Barz, 'Kṛṣṇadās Adhikārī: an irascible devotee's approach to the divine', in G.M. Bailey and Ian Kesarkodi-Watson (eds), *Bhakti Studies* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1992), 236–50.

⁶⁴ For the commentary of Pīrzādī and Alikhān, DSB, vol.1, *vārtā* 37, section 2, 298–9.

⁶⁵ DSB, vol.1, *vārtā* 4, 94–5.

⁶⁶ For a discussion of the meaning of *puṣṭi* in the theology of the *Puṣṭi Mārga*, see Richard Barz, *The Bhakti Sect of Vallabhācārya* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1992), 86–7 and Bennett, *Path of Grace*, 196–7.

this grace, individuals, regardless of gender and social status, become transformed into human beings whose every thought and action is motivated out of selfless love for Kṛṣṇa. Individuals express the transformative power of receiving Kṛṣṇa's divine grace by working in their daily lives towards acquiring the most lavish and highest quality gifts so they can minister out of great love and devotion to the every need of the image of Kṛṣṇa installed in a sectarian shrine. This reception of grace in the *vārtā* literature is not merely for the greater glory of Kṛṣṇa, but also works towards the creation of an awareness that, since community members were infused with grace of the Divine, they have a responsibility to maintain the overall well-being of their community by generously feeding fellow devotees and supporting their spiritual pursuits.

The divine grace that sustains this community, the *vārtā* literature emphasizes, could not be obtained without the figure of the *mahārāja*. With its justification of Vallabha and Viṭṭhalnāth as divine intermediaries of Kṛṣṇa, the *vārtā* literature reminds individuals that the divine nourishment which sustains the community comes directly from the *mahārāja* in his position as Kṛṣṇa's intermediary. It was this position of the *mahārāja* in the *Puṣṭi Mārga* that not only reminded devotees within the community of their position in relation to the *mahārāja*, but also reminded secular rulers of their proper place in relation to the *mahārāja*. Rulers may have had tremendous secular authority and may have been accomplished in the skills of warfare, but the *vārtā* literature emphasizes that their ultimate success was due to the grace that they received from the *mahārāja* himself.

It is difficult to say that the religious world outlined in the *vārtā* literature was one in which the poor and downtrodden were given a state of privilege that made the *Puṣṭi Mārga* religiously radical for its time. There is no doubt that devotees came from various social groups ranging from *brāhmins* right down to *sūdras*, but the social vision of the *vārtā* literature was essentially a conservative one. Devotees are accorded spiritual equality for they are all traversing the same religious path, but class distinctions remain for they are enjoined to fulfil their worldly obligations in accordance with their societal status. The *vārtā* literature, however, tends to tell its audience to be wary of the world. Devotees are enjoined to keep the world around them at bay because outside religious influences may cause them to lose their unique spiritual identity by prompting them to commit an act of *anyāśraya*. Thus no matter how much one may be active in the worldly sphere, ultimately the devotee's true home is in the close-knit, self-sufficient, but rather exclusive community of believers who together traverse the Path of Grace.

The emphasis given in the *vārtā* literature upon preserving the unique nature of the community is not so surprising. The long period during which these texts were revised and finally redacted was one of consolidation for the community. The production of the *vārtā* literature represented a most important phase in the institutional growth of the community, for it built upon the philosophical and structural frameworks created by Vallabha and Viṭṭhalnāth in order to foster a sense of unity among devotees through the use of vernacular hagiography. The final product of this long period of revision and redaction was a body of literature that envisioned the *Puṣṭi Mārga* as a well-knit, self-sufficient community thriving on the grace of Kṛṣṇa, which, in turn, was administered by the community's *mahārājas*. It was this vision, outlined in the *vārtā* literature, that became the definitive theological statement for the *Puṣṭi Mārga* and would come to guide the ethical and religious life of devotees to come.