

‘Frames of Return’: *Sādhanā of Vārtā*

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Caurāsī Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā (The Narrative of Eighty Four Vaishnavas, *vārtā* being ‘narrative’, Vaishnavas being the followers of the path of devotion to Lord Vishnu), henceforth CVV, along with *Do Sau bāvan Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā* (The Narrative of Two Hundred and Fifty Two Vaishnavas) and some other text of the *Puṣṭimārga bhakti* (or the Tradition/Path of Grace, *puṣṭi* meaning ‘grace’, *mārga* meaning ‘tradition/path’, and *bhakti*, ‘devotion’), remarks *Ācārya* (teacher/guru/master) Ramchandra Shukla in his magnum opus *Hindi Sahitya Ka Itihasa*, ‘was one of the first compositions in prose in the Braja Bhasha’.¹ CVV is a compilation of narratives (*vārtā*) of the deeds of eighty four devout *sevakas* (devotees)² of the spiritual master Vallabhacharya Ji³(in some popular editions 92), who established his own particular version of the *bhakti mārga* – the aforementioned *Puṣṭimārga* – in North India during the first third of the sixteenth century.⁴ Each *vārtā* recounts selected events of spiritual importance in the life of one of the eighty-four chief *sevakas* of Vallabhacharya Ji. These *vārtās* are not considered to be mere legends but are held by the *Puṣṭimārgīyas* (followers of *Puṣṭimārga*) to be real accounts of actual people and episodes that played definite roles in the propagation of Vallabhacharya Ji’s revelations about the *mārga*.⁵

In the first part of this paper, I approach a *vārtā* from CVV, *Purūṣottamdāskṣatrī Banāras mein rehte tinkī Vārtā* (The Narrative of Purushottam Das Kshatri of Benaras), from two of the three planes of philology suggested by Sheldon Pollock in his essay *Philology and Freedom*. The three dimensions or planes, as Pollock calls them, are different and are separated from each other by their distances in space and time.⁶ The first plane is that of the genesis of the text, and while approaching a text from this plane, the author, the intended audience and the first audience should be studied. The second plane involves approaching works of the readers ‘before me’; and the third plane is that of reading it as me ‘here and now’. However inclusive this practice of philology might seem, the problem with this approach lies in the fact that

it prioritizes a specific type of temporality and spatiality. The time, to be considered in its application, is the linear, secular and universal historical; and the idea of the space, it seems, has to be in terms of geopolitical positions on the ‘subject’ of the activities of the three planes.

In the second part of the essay, while functioning from Pollock’s third plane, I shall use Quentin Skinner’s method of reading *texts* as ‘speech acts’.⁷ I shall show the limits of this method by using Richard Bauman’s method of understanding oral traditions as ‘performances’.

In the third section of my essay I shall show the merits and constraints of these and other approaches presented by Enlightenment disciplinary practices and paradigms by drawing from Sri Aurobindo’s *The Interpretation of Scripture*. In this work, while accepting the value of intellect, and modern disciplines like History, Philosophy and Philology, Sri Aurobindo draws one’s attention to the limits these disciplines impose on an interpreter. He discusses three standards that exist in the exercise of interpretation – the knower, the knowledge and the known – and emphasizes *sādhanā* or ‘spiritual practice’ as the mode of understanding texts like the one in question. I also use the *Bhāva Prakāśa* (The Light on the *Bhāva*, *bhāva* translating as ‘spiritual mood’) commentary on CVV, to understand the traditional interpretation of the text in question. Along with this, I use information provided by my interlocutors from Benaras. Benaras, also called Kashi, the ancient Indian city, also (re)emerged as an early modern cosmopolitan center of learning in the North India and hence I use a *vārtā* set in that city to study interaction of various religious communities in this cosmopolis.

Each *vārtā* in CVV is made up of a series of vignettes, called *prasaṅga*, each one a separate little story independent and distinct from the others.⁸ Some *vārtās* also have *padas* (meter of popular verse with *bhakti* poetry) set to a *rāga* (a set of musical notes meant for expansion to produce music and carry a specific mood with it) suitable for their rendition before the listeners to whom the *vārtā* is told,

and some others have Sanskrit *ślokas* (verses) in between. These elements, along with the use of very colloquial Braja Bhasha in which the *vārtās* have been composed, are reflective of the roots they had in the oral traditions of early modern South Asia. The *praṇetā* (initiator/ inspirer) of the CVV, Gokulanath Ji, was known for his skills in giving sermons; and one knows from other *vārtās* like the *Nija Vārtā*, *Gharū Vārtā* and *Caurāsi Baiṭhakan ke Carita* that he was invited by devotees to lecture on the *Puṣṭimārgīya* principles and *vārtās*.

However, the task of producing in scriptural form the texts he composed was performed by his disciples, either during his lifetime or after. It was from his time that the tradition of appointing *likhiyās* or scribes began in the Vallabhite temples and *havelīs* (also a category of Vallabhite temples). Krishna Bhatta and Kalyana Bhatta, two of his disciples, produced his sermons in a scripted form under the title *Vacanāmṛta*, and Hariraya Ji edited some of the texts authored by him. Though it would be difficult to give the texts an exact date, on the basis of the style of the language and reference to the famous Mughal emperor Akbar, it can be said with some certainty that it was produced in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. The oldest available manuscript of the *vārtās* dates back to 1640 CE, while its oldest printed edition was published by Surdas Thakurdas from Bombay in 1890 CE.⁹ Each *vārtā* gives an insight into the everyday lives of the Vaishnava community it has been composed about. Gokulanath Ji (1551-1647 CE), to whom the credit of telling the eighty-four *vārtās* is given, was the grandson of the founder and was himself an important *ācārya* of *Śuddhādvaita* (pure non-dualism). The compilation of the present-day popularly accepted form of the *vārtās* is attributed to Hariraya Ji (1591-1716 CE), who was one of the foremost interpreters of the Vallabhacharya Ji's doctrines. Hariraya Ji's *Bhāva Prakāśa* on the *vārtās* presents a *laukika* (worldly) as well as an *ālaukika* (other-worldly) interpretation of each *vārtā*. Before analyzing *Puruṣottamāśkaṣātri's Vārtā*, I throw some light on the doctrines of Vallabhacharya Ji and the literature of the tradition in that context.

Vallabhacharya Ji was an *āstika ācārya* (theistic preceptor) and his *Śuddhādvaita* is classed within the *Védānta* schools of the *Ṣaḍdarśana* (Six Philosophies) scheme. In the *Védānta* schools there are many different traditions, one of which is the Vaishnava tradition according to which the *Parabrahmāṇ* (often understood as the godheads Rama, Krishna or Vishnu in these traditions, *Brahmāṇ* being the ultimate reality that underlies all phenomena) is personal and has divine qualities and attributes.¹⁰ The Vaishnava traditions assert a reliance on the *bhaktimārga* as the surest way to the spiritual freedom of the human soul.¹¹ Vallabhacharya Ji, like several other *ācāryas*, accepts

the doctrine of *karma* (action). *Karma* refers to the force by which every action, no matter how insignificant, breeds results, and these results, in turn, cause further actions; it is believed of *kārmic* requirement that living beings must undergo an unending series of births. Vallabhacharya Ji also accepts the existence of the *jīva* or soul.¹² It is the *jīva* that passes through the aforementioned infinite series of births. In most Indian spiritual traditions, including Vallabhacharya Ji's, the *jīva* is pure but seems to have become impure through *avidyā* or ignorance. Finally, he and most other Indian spiritual *ācāryas* see an escape from this *karma*-produced cycle of birth. This escape is *mokṣa* (liberation): in a/the state of *mokṣa*, the *jīva* is free from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

Brahmāṇ (Krishna = *Brahmāṇ*) for Vallabha (short for Vallabhacharya Ji) is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent and *saccidānanda* (itself, or the experience of *Brahmāṇ*). However, *Brahmāṇ*, which by definition cannot be limited (*akṣara*), conceals part of itself, which Vallabha calls *tirobhāva*. The *māyāśakti* (or power of illusion) of *Brahmāṇ*, like a magician's mirror, makes a part of *Brahmāṇ* apparent (*abhūbhūta*) while the rest is concealed (*tirobhūta*): this *māyāśakti* is under the control of the will (*icchā*) of *Brahmāṇ*. It is through this *śakti* (power) called *māyā* (illusion) that *Brahmāṇ* manifests itself as *jagat* (manifest world). This proposition makes *jagat* real (*satya*) as against the *māyāvādin* (or of *māyā*) understanding of the same, which regards the world to be unreal (*mithyā*). *Jīvas* for Vallabha are parts or fragments of *Brahmāṇ*, like sparks of fire. Due to *avidyā*, the *jīvas* forget their real nature and get trapped in the *saṁsāra* (world as the cycle of reincarnation), governed by the cycle of birth and rebirth. The remedy to get out of this cycle according to Vallabha is *sevābhakti* (devotional service) through *ātma-nivedana* (self-surrender). The *jīvas* are varied; *puṣṭi jīvas* – the *jīvas* complete and nourished with *anugrah* (grace) of Krishna; *maryādā jīvas* – those within the limits of actions forbidden and allowed by the Vedas; and *pravāha jīvas* – those in stream of continuous action. Corresponding to the three different kinds of *jīvas*, according to Vallabha, there are three ways of life – *Puṣṭimārga* (the path of grace revealed by Vallabha), *Maryādāmārga* and *Pravāhamārga*. While the followers of the first two paths are *daiva* or divine and are capable of *uddhāra* (the process of lifting up of a *jīva* from *saṁsāra*), the *pravāha jīvas* are *āsura* and have no scope for *mokṣa*.¹³

In his lifetime, Vallabhacharya Ji composed many texts to establish his version of *Védānta* and the *bhaktimārga*. The most important of these are his *tikās* or commentaries on the *Brahmasūtras*, some *skandas* (books) of the *Śrīmadbhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* (*Śrīsubodhinī*) and the *Gīta*, and a compilation of sixteen short texts called the *Ṣoḍaśaṅgrantha*.¹⁴ Since these texts were in Sanskrit, given

the exclusive nature of the language, they must have had a very small readership. In this scenario, the role of the *vārtās* and other texts composed in Braja Bhasha becomes important.¹⁵ In the *Puṣṭimārga* tradition, one sees a shift from Sanskrit to Braja Bhasha as the language of discourse within the tradition. This shift was part of a larger process, as argued by Pollock¹⁶ and Bucsh¹⁷ in the context of the rise of new regional centers of power in the early medieval and early modern South Asia respectively, in which vernaculars became a medium of asserting one's own identity different from that of the other, and hence an instrument for the peripheries to establish themselves as new centers. Following the same line of argument, for the *Puṣṭimārgīya ācāryas*, the use of Braja Bhasha as the language of both rituals and discourse must have helped them earn a distinct identity for themselves. This, as Shandip Shaha suggests, helped them gain a popular support base and following.¹⁸

Given its limited appeal to the *Puṣṭimārgīya* community or the community of the 'Path of Grace'¹⁹ only, the form and the text of the *vārtās* is not as popular as the other texts produced by this and other *bhakti* traditions. The form in which the text has been composed remained unique to the tradition, and Richard Barz has pointed out the reminiscence in the style of the *vārtās* and *Prémsāgara* (the Ocean of Love) by Lallulāla (1763-1835), the pioneer of the Khadiboli literature. Barz has also pointed out the influence of the *Puṣṭimārgīya Sampradāya* (society/sect) on Bharatendu Harishchandra's (1830-1885) notions of *bhakti*.

I

To begin with the first plane of Pollock's method, that of the text's genesis, not much can be said from the text's self-portrayal and the author. As mentioned earlier as well, the text is attributed to Gokulnath Ji, but he is at the same time called the inspirer or initiator of the text, but not the 'author'. The term 'author', here, is being used in an Enlightenment sense and therefore it connotes an individual who writes or composes a text in the form in which it is found. However, as per traditional accounts, the text was compiled by the *sevakas* of Gokulnath Ji, on the basis of his *Vacanāmṛta* (The Nectar of Speech). Gokulnath Ji being the successor of Vallabhacharya, would have himself heard these narratives in his family and thus would have told the Vaishnavas in turn. The text was part of an oral tradition and therefore has many authors. This complicates the question of the text's 'genesis', and thus, given the lack of sources, not much can be argued from this plane.

This forces me to then shift to study the second plane, that of the 'readers before me'. Owing to its unique

prose form, the text and its genre in general attracted the attention of scholars writing about Hindi Literature in Hindi and other languages. Scholars working on *bhakti* in particular and Hinduism in general have read the text by applying various methods and theories of textual analysis. The earliest references to the *vārtās*, in English language documents, can be found in F. S. Growse's *Mathura: The Memoir of the City*, H. H. Wilson's *A Sketch of Hindu Sects*, and in Karshandas Mulji's *The History of the Maharajas of Vallabhacharyas of Western India*. These three 'readers' of the text have discussed the *vārtās* in general as accounts of the Vaishnavas, and '*Kṛṣṇdāsa Sambhalvāre Kannauj mein rehte tinki Vārtā*' in particular, and have commented on the 'morality' of the Vaishnavas. Richard Barz, in a monograph published in 1964 – *The Sect of Vallabhacharya* – discussed the principles, practices and philosophy of Vallabhacharya, the genre of *vārtās*, and presents translations of four *vārtās* of the four *Aṣṭacāpa*²⁰ poets with the *Bhāva Prakāśa*. In this monograph, Barz treats the *vārtās* as 'biographies', and in an essay published in 1994, as 'hagiographies'.

Scholars like Vasudha Dalmia and Shandip Shaha have also treated the text like a compilation of 'hagiographies'. While this treatment of the text as a compilation of hagiographies or biographies is very useful, when viewed in the light of postmodern scholarship and the idea of 'individuality' and 'individual', it might seem a little problematic. If one treats the *vārtās* as accounts of Vaishnava life, or 'biography' and 'hagiography', a close reading of the text suggests that the *prasaṅgas* in each *vārtā* deal with only those parts of a Vaishnava's life which are concerned with *Mahāprabhu* (great lord)²¹. Therefore, if one is to consider *vārtā* as hagiography or biography of an individual then whose biography is it? A Vaishnava's or that of the *Mahāprabhu*?

This question gets even more complicated when one looks at the initiation rites and the status of *Guru* in the tradition. The initiation rite is called the *Brahmasambandha* (establishing relation with the *Brahmāṇ*), and the *Guru* who officiates this rite is treated as the manifestation of the *Brahmāṇ* in human body. After the initiation, the *Guru* is said to have embodied (*aṅgikāra kare*) the initiate. Thus, the Vaishnavas in the *vārtās* are embodied in the *Mahāprabhu* and therefore it can be said that through the *vārtās*, one gets to know about him. In the light of a Sanskrit text like *Śrī Vallabhadigvijaya*²², which deals with Vallabhacharya Ji's pilgrimage and the establishment of his own version of the *Védānta*, it can be said that texts like the *vārtās* fill the gaps created by it. There is mention of most of the Vaishnavas of the *vārtās* in question and other text of the same genre including the *Nija Vārtā* and *Gharu Vārtā*, and therefore it can be argued that the *vārtās* would have acted as auxiliaries to this text, or

would have been told to those who lacked knowledge of Sanskrit. It should also be noted that each *vārtā* ends with a sentence: 'so, s/he was a devotee of Mahāprabhu Sri Vallabhacarya, and therefore was of God and hence is unparalleled; hence there is no end to what can be written'. This statement gives a sense of incompleteness. This incompleteness, I argue, is intentional, for it necessitates help from somebody who already knows what is missing. Incompleteness also renders a sense of secrecy. The secrecy of such a knowledge hidden by the *vārtā* here, should not be taken to mean something that is forbidden but as something that can only be accessed by the deserving seeker. Therefore, I propose that instead of putting the *vārtās* in categories known to the modern world, one must try to approach them in their own right as a genre unique to this period and such traditions.

II

Having discussed the arguments from the second plane, I move on to Pollock's third plane, that of 'me reading the text here and now'. To begin with, I proceed to read the text with an approach that Quentin Skinner suggests, of interpreting texts as 'speech acts' with their corresponding illocutionary and perlocutionary power to make meaning.²³ To do this I refer to the first *prasaṅga*, to make meaning of what has been written in the text. The translation of the same is being presented here:

And the Séth (wealthy businessman, in this case Purushottamdas) would never go for the ritual seeing (darśan) of the Lord of Benaras, God of World Shiva (Kāśī Mukhya Viśveśvara Mahādēva), who is the raja of Kashi (Benaras). So one day, Shiva, in a dream, said to the Séth – 'You don't keep up the relation of the village/of your people, at least keep up the relation of Vaishnava (that of deity-devotee, here Shiva presents himself as a devotee of Vishnu, and therefore as Purushottamdas' co-devotee), sometimes give me the consecrated offering (mahāprasāda)'.²⁴ The next morning, having performed his daily services, the Séth Purushottamdas took a basket of offerings, and left for the temple of Shiva. Then everybody in the village was amused: The Séth never came before? Why has he come today? So, many people walked with the Séth. The Séth, having placed his offerings (to Vishnu) and taking the name of remembering/praying to Krishna (Śrī Kṛṣṇa smaraṇa), left the place. There were many brahmins devoted to Shiva (Śaiva brāhmaṇa) there, who said to Séth Purushottamdas – 'You didn't prostrate yourself in prayer (daṇḍvat namaskāra) to Shiva? Merely saying 'Glory be to Krishna' (Jai Śrī Kṛṣṇa), you are leaving, this is not appropriate. Then, Séth Purushottamdas said – 'Mine and his (deity) are relations of deity remembrance (Bhagvāna's smaraṇa) only. You ask. You shall be told by Shiva.

So, amongst those brahmins was one who was a devotee and had received grace of the Shiva (kṛpāpātra of Mahādēva jī). So, to him said Shiva: I had asked for offerings from the Séth. Mine and his are only relations of remembrance (as Vishnavas). Therefore, don't say anything to him. After this, many took offerings for Shiva. Once

Shiva started taking the offerings, many people started going to the temple. They said, if the likes of Séth can go, then who are we? Shiva is a great bhagvadiya (devotee of Vishnu)). But do understand this – ājñā (order) happened to the Séth and therefore he went, but Rukmini Gopaldas never went, so how can we go? But not everyone is to be given the best reward/result/gratification (phala). Therefore, only Séth Purushottamdas went.

In Skinner's approach, understanding the author's intention is very necessary, and as has been discussed earlier as well, since the question of authorship is complicated, confusing and unanswered for this text, one might have to overlook it. To understand the text in the light of other texts of the tradition might be useful in using this approach. For this I use *Vallabhadigvijaya*, and from this text derive information on Purushottamdas' first meeting with Vallabhacharya Ji,²⁵ and the resistance the latter faced from various *sampradāyas* (religious sects) in establishing his own version of *Védānta*. Other texts like the *farmāns* (declarations of order) from the Mughal Emperors and Rajput Princes to the *Tilakāyatas* or the chiefs of the tradition, draw one's attention to one of the pragmatic issues of land and monetary grants that all the *sampradāyas* were concerned with. In the light of these tensions, and given the fact that Benaras was an important center of knowledge production and pilgrimage, when one reads *Viśveśvara Mahādēva Jī*/the raja of Kashi's self-portrayal as a Vaishnava, and looks at his request of offerings from Purushottamdas, this can be read as an 'act' of making space for the *Puṣṭimārgīya* in Benaras. This speculation results out of my field work in Benaras. Vallabhadas Ji, an initiate in the *Puṣṭimārga* tradition, said that *Mahāprabhu* (the deity), by setting his lotus feet in Benaras, transformed it into *Késavapurī* (City of Krishna). It is interesting to note that Chowkhamba, where the *Puṣṭimārgīya* shrines, including Purushottamdas' house, are located, is close to the Vishwanath temple and is inhabited mostly by *Puṣṭimārgīya* Vaishnavas. This transformation might have been the power of the 'speech act' Skinner hints at, but in the absence of sufficient material, nothing can be stated with absolute certainty.

Apart from the shortcomings of this approach, there is another major limitation in Skinner's reliance on *texts*. In the case of the *vārtās*, as these have remained in oral form for a long time, this reliance might again yield only limited results.

Since mass-level spread and popularization of the *vārtās* as *texts* happened only after the introduction of the printing press in South Asia, they largely remained and remain in transmission through oral performances and practices. The alternative to Skinner's approach comes from Richard Bauman's idea of 'performance'. Bauman defines performance 'as a mode of language

use, a way of speaking', and 'a species of situated human communication'. Bauman first points to the increasingly all-encompassing use of the term performance to convey a dual sense of artistic *action* – the doing of folklore *and* artistic event – in a performance situation, involving performer, art form, audience and setting. He emphasizes the need to identify the features that distinguish performance from other 'interpretive frames' of communication; and then offers a 'very preliminary attempt' to specify the interpretive guidelines set up by the 'performance frame'. For Bauman, Skinner's approach is also one of the many 'frames' of textual analysis.²⁶ To read the *vārtās* in this manner, I use some ethnographical approaches of studying a living text like this and in doing so, draw heavily from Philip Lutgendorf's work on *Śrīrāmacaritamānas*.²⁷

Vārtā, despite being in print, is *done* or performed by the *Tilakāyatās* or *ācāryas* or Vaishnavas of *Puṣṭimārga*, in *satasaṅga* (community gathering for devotional purpose) settings in the courtyard of temples, Vaishnava houses or in temporary pavilion in huge grounds; and are attended by Vaishnavas visiting temples, pilgrims or anybody who wishes to become part of it. Such performances involve narrations of *vārtās* and then some contemplation on them by the performer. Depending on the performer, the *vārtās* may be read from the text or just spoken on the basis of one's memory.

Bauman's analysis suggests two criteria for identifying an 'act' of expression as performance. The first relates to the performer's 'assumption of responsibility' and so might be termed a 'formal' criterion: it accords well with one of the dictionary definitions of 'performance' as 'execution in a set or formal manner or with technical or artistic skill'. The skills of performance, for Bauman, are acquired by mastering the art of public speaking, singing, etc. The second criterion relates to the potential effect of a performance on the participants – its ability to enhance or intensify experience – and so might be termed 'affective'. Performance events then, are demarcated by both the formal and the affective registers from ordinary events and communications. They, suggests Bauman, 'break through' into 'the mundane context, signaling their presence by formal clues but justifying their existence by their ability to transform and enhance life, often by reference to impersonal values and experience'. But if rendering the *vārtās* is to be seen as performance, the 'skills' required by the performer do not come by the exercises that Bauman suggests but through the *practice* of certain spiritualities. Similarly, to understand the 'effect' of the performance of the *vārtās*, the *practices* associated with them are to be understood. To understand this approach. I use Sri Aurobindo's idea of 'interpreting scriptures' and discuss it in the part that follows.

III

Sri Aurobindo, writing on the scriptures²⁸, in discussing the three standards of interpretation, states three categories, as mentioned in the introduction as well: the known, the knower and the knowledge. The 'known' is that which one intends to interpret: the text itself; the 'knower' is its *drashtā*, with whom one ought to be in spiritual contact, and 'knowledge' is the eternal truth, part of which the *drashtā* expresses to the one engaging with the text. If *drashtā* is to be regarded as the author of the text, then Sri Aurobindo's approach provides for a possibility of blurring the difference between Pollock's first and third planes. By stating that the *drashtā*'s contribution in the interpretation of the 'truth' is only in part, Sri Aurobindo seems to be emphasizing the mere indicative nature of the language,²⁹ which fails to render the 'truth' somebody like him is looking for.³⁰

In the context of the text in question, this idea can be understood with help of the Hariraya Ji's *Bhāva Prakāśa* and an enquiry into the 'skills' of the performer and the effect of the performance, if one approaches the *vārtās* from the 'frame' of 'performance'. Ideally, approaching the text through Pollock's three-dimensional reading, one should have discussed these in the second plane, but using Sri Aurobindo's approach, I shall show how the 'distance' in space and time is collapsed and transcended by Hariraya Ji and subsequently the practitioners³¹ of the *vārtās*.

Hariraya Ji was Gokulnath Ji's nephew and could have been part of the first audience of the *Vacānāmṛta* and other discourses given by his uncle, thus placing him in the first plane by Pollock's way of analysis. *Bhāva Prakāśa* and the *prasaṅgas* of the *vārtās* were so closely knit that in most of the manuscripts they were found together. As mentioned in the beginning, the commentary deals with both material and spiritual aspects of the *prasaṅgas* of the Vaishnava. The *Bhāva Prakāśa* is indicative of the importance of the *bhāva* a practitioner should have while practicing the *vārtās* and performing their *sevās* (service to the deity).

To explain this, I shall first discuss Hariraya Ji's *bhāvātma lēkha* (an exposition on the real sentiment/meaning of the *vārtā*) on the entire *Vārtā* and then engage with the *Bhāva Prakāśa* on some *prasaṅgas* of Purushottamdas' *Vārtā*. My translations of the relevant parts, with explanations, are being presented below:

(Translation)

Obeisance to Sri Krishna! Obeisance to the Lord/darling of Gopis (Śrī Gopījanavallabha). Thus is written the bhāva³² of the Caurāsī Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā done by Sri Gokulnath Ji, said by Sri Hariraya Ji.

This statement establishes the orality of the text and tradition and the importance of the *bhāva* in approaching these texts.

Hariraya Ji's emotional write up (*bhāvātmake lēkha*):

(Translation)

The reason behind eighty-four Vaishnavas is that the divine soul (*daiṃ jīvas*) have fallen in eighty-four forms of life (*yonīs*)... Those souls are of eighty-four kinds. They fall in *rājasī*, *tāmasī*, *sāttvikī* and *nirguṇa* categories, the four types/attributes/qualities (*guṇas*) of being. Within them live those with qualities/attributes (*guṇmaya*) *rājasī*, *tāmasī* and *sāttvikī*. Gosainji (Vittalānath, son of Vallabhacharya Ji) will redeem them.³³ Since Śrī Govardhandhara (God) is in the Master (Śrī Ācārya jī/Vallabhacharya), and the Master is in the Vaishnavas, God appeared in embodied attribute-less (*nirguṇa*) Vaishnavas. So, the eighty-four Vaishnavas shall redeem one lac forms each... Eighty-four Vaishnavas, embodied in the divine, are without attributes in the divine-play (*rāsālilā*). Therefore, as per the treatises on experience/state of being (*rasa*) they are beyond worldly experience (*alaukik*). And since the Master's limbs/parts of the body (*aṅgas*) are twelve, the Vaishnavas are all these parts of him. In each part there are seven qualities (*dharmas*): *aiśvarya*, *vīrya*, *yaśa*, *śrī*, *jñāna*, *vairāgya*, these six, and the last *dharmī*. When these seven are multiplied by the twelve parts, the eighty-four Vaishnavas (are produced), and being embodied in the Master, are omnipotent and beyond worldly experience... Therefore each soul is embodied... With this emotion, the eighty-four Vaishnavas of the Master, drowned in the experience... Time passed and it was midnight. Then, a Vaishnava requested Sri Gokulnath Ji, that 'O King of kings (Mahārājādhirāja), when will you tell the story (*kathā*). It is (already) midnight'. Then from his divine mouth (Śrīmukha) uttered Sri Gokulnath Ji: 'Today I have told you the reward (*phala*) of the story. Know the entire reward in Vaishnavas' *vārtā*. There is nothing beyond Vaishnavas. This is Puṣṭi bhakti mārga and therefore would only yield results or fruits through Vaishnavas. The Master also said: 'Damala (Dāmodardās Harsānī, first disciple of Vallabhacharya Ji), for you I have revealed this path. Therefore, regard the *vārtā* of the Vaishnavas to be supreme. In this manner eighty-four Vaishnavas should be known as the heads of the Master's attribute less aspect.

From the *bhāvātmake lēkha*, one can deduce that the choice of eighty-four Vaishnavas is not random but fits into larger theosophical discussion of the tradition. The *lēkha* also substantiates my argument about the Vaishnavas being embodied by the *ācārya*, and by further deduction, by the *Brahmāṇ* itself. One sees Gokulnath Ji 'practicing' or 'performing' the *vārtā* with other Vaishnavas, and the 'responsibility' and 'effect', if argued from the 'frame of performance', lies in their doing it with *bhāva*. The element of practice becomes apparent when one is told that they get immersed in the *rasa*, and lose 'sudhi' or awareness of doing the *kathā*. The later discourse on the *phala*, importance of the *vārtās* and their treatment equal to or even greater than the *kathā* from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, reflect on their nature as something important for

practice in *bhakti*. The *līlā* or the divine play, discussed in the note, though *nitya* (constant, not bound by time), happens 'in time' as well. Monika Horstmann, in her essay *Theology and Statecraft* discusses the similarities between the *līlās* of the *Dvāpar* (the epoch of Krishna's *pūrṇa* or full avatar) and their re-enactment in the *Kali* (the epoch of his *mukhāvātāra* (existence as a body/voice, Vallabhacharya Ji). However, the *nitya līlā* being constant can be accessed through a text like this if practiced at any moment in 'time'. This notion of the knowledge contained in the text being *nitya* then creates a tension between the traditional and modern, Enlightenment approach towards it. This can be substantiated by looking at the *Bhāva Prakāśa* on *Purushottamdas' vārtā*.

Purushottamdas would do a *rāja sevā* (special/royal service) of Sri Madanmohan ji (Krishna). He would offer fifty-two *bīdās* (rolled beetle leaves) every day. Therefore, Purushottamdas kept fifty-two *bīdās*, twenty with the *bhāva* for *Thākur Jī* (Krishna), and thirty-two for Krishna's consort. This is because *Thākur Jī* likes faith: hence twenty *bīdās* to express firm faith in him. The consort likes *srṅgār* (ornamentation or love), therefore the *srṅgār* of the two would be (sixteen multiplied by two equals) thirty-two. In this manner, Purushottamdas would please the consort as well. The reason behind mentioning this is to emphasize that whatever *sevā* Purushottamdas would do, he would do it with *bhāva*. Even for things, clothes and ornaments.

Thus, as is clear from the title of the commentary and the *lēkha* on it, the central idea or approach to *vārtā* remains that of understanding the *bhāva* and then realizing it for oneself through practice. In Purushottamdas' case, the notion of time is played out by placing him in two tenses simultaneously, in past and present, in his *laukik* and *ādibhautika* (other worldly) forms respectively. The description of *līlā* is always done in the present tense, again a sign of making it always accessible to the practitioners who do it with '*bhāva*'. My interlocutors from the community in Benaras explained *bhāva* as an eternal state, to be entered (*praveśa*) by following instructions of one's *Guru* and performing *sevā* of his *sevya* (the form of the deity given by the Master for service) with devotion. *Bhāva*, by this understanding, also denotes a spatiality which is transcendental and is accessible anywhere. *Bhāva* and *rasa* are important notions in Indian aesthetics and Vaishnava and Shaiva devotional practices. Being in *bhāva*, both in aesthetic practices of theatre, dance, and music, and that of devotion, requires discipline or *sādhana*.

Another *prasaṅga*, from the *Vārtā prasaṅga* 4, that clearly challenges the quotidian notion of time, is being discussed here, in translation:

One day Sēth Purushottamdas was sitting in the temple stitching dresses (for the deity). Then, seeing from a distance, Gopaldas (his son) thought to himself that since Sēth Ji has grown old, he should take on the service (of the deity). Then he bathed and came (to the temple). Then, knowing his thoughts, Sēth called him, 'Son, come closer'. Then Gopaldas went closer and saw that Sēth (was) of 20-25 years. Then he told Gopaldas, 'People of God are always young. But in accordance with their (bodily) stage, they should be treated with respect. Therefore, never bring such thoughts to your mind'.

By presenting himself as a youth, old Purushottamdas, presents himself to his son in two states: first as a *bhagvādīya* and hence beyond aging or ever in one age, and second, as affected by aging. While the first form is that in *līlā* the latter is in *samsāra* and interestingly, they seem to happen simultaneously in one moment.

To conclude, as per Sri Aurobindo's proposition, if the inculcation of the *bhāva* is understood as a practice or *sādhanā*, the 'knowledge' in the text can only be 'known' by inculcating the *bhāva* that 'knowers' like Gokulnath Ji or Hariraya Ji had while accessing or conceiving and then rendering the text in *language*. What Gokulnath Ji or Hariraya Ji rendered, according to this approach, should be considered to be only part of the 'knowledge' that the text contains. This approach thus, while recognizing the importance of and need for the social, political, cultural or linguistic analyses of a text, presents their limitations as well. Therefore, I propose that to have a broader understanding of texts like this, which are living or are in transmission in traditions, the paradigms and epistemological systems emic to them, in which they are 'read' and 'practiced', be taken seriously.

NOTES

1. Shukla, Acharya Ramachandra, *Hindi Sahitya ka Itihas*, (Varanasi: Kashi Nagari Pracharni Sabha, 1951), pp. 332-335.
2. Literally servants, the term means devotee when used to express one's relation with the deity or the *ācārya* in spiritual traditions. *Sevak bhāva* is one of the most important modes of *navavadhā* (nine-fold) *bhakti* in Vaishnava traditions.
3. Ji, a suffix of respect.
4. Hariraya Ji, who wrote the *Bhāva Prakāśa* on CVV added eight *vārtās* of the family members of Purushottamdas, thus making it 92 instead of 84.
5. Barz, Richard; *The Bhakti Sect of Vallabhacharya* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1992), p. 3.
6. Pollock, Sheldon, 'Philology and Freedom', *Philological Encounters* 1, Brill NV (Leiden, 2016), pp. 4-20.
7. Skinner uses the term 'texts' in italicized form to connote the meaning of texts as written or printed documents as against 'texts' when used in regular form to mean everything including verbal, written, visual, and

- performed that can be read in the category. I, drawing from him, shall use this style to make this distinction in my essay as well.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
9. Tripathi, Kamala Shankar (ed.), *Chaurasi Vaishnavan Ki Varta* (Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Hindi Samsthan, 2008), pp. v and vi.
10. Dasgupta, Surendranath, *A History of Indian Philosophy* (5 Vols.; Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1961). Vol. I, p. 68.
11. Bhandarkar, R.G., *Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Minor Religious Systems* (Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1965), p. 50.
12. The term is used to connote the soul. The relationship between the soul and the *Brahmāṇ* is like that of a spark to the fire, explained later in the essay.
13. ŚrīmadVallabhacharyaviracitampuṣṭipravāhamaryādābheda: This text details the difference between the three jīvas and basic qualities and conduct of the *Puṣṭi Jīvas*.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-45.
15. Shaha, Shandip, 'A Community of Grace: The Social and Theological World of the Puṣṭi Mārga vārtā Literature', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (2006), pp. 225-242.
16. Pollock, Sheldon, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, in Introduction (London: University of California Press 2006), pp. 3-8.
17. Bronner, Yigal, Whitney Cox and Lawrence McCrea (eds.), *South Asian Texts in History: Critical Engagements with Sheldon Pollock*, in chapter 9, 'Hindi Literary Beginnings' by Allison Busch (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 2011), pp. 203 – 225.
18. Shaha, Shandip, 'The Movement of Bhakti along a North-West Axis: Tracing the History of the Pushtimarga between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. *International Journal of Hindu Studies*', Vol. 11, No. 3 (December 2007), pp. 299-318.
19. Translated as the "Path of 'Grace' " instead of 'Nourishment', because of Vallabhacharya Ji's doctrine of '*Poṣaṇamīdanugrahaṇi*'
20. Literally, 'Eight Stamps'. *Cāpa* refers to the signature line in a pada of a poet (see J. S Hawley's *Three Bhakti Voices* for details). *Aṣṭacāpa* refers to the group of eight Kirtanīyas (poets and singers who compose and sing in glory of the Divine) organized by Sri Gosain Vitthalanath Ji. The group included Paramanandas, Surdas, Chaturbhujadas, Krishnadas, Kumbhandas, Govind Das, Chitaswami, Nanadadas. They are also called *Aṣṭasakhā* of the Divine, who are always with Krishna during the *Nitya Līlā*.
21. Used to address Vallabhacharya Ji.
22. The text was composed by Shri Yadunath Ji in the Samvat year 1658 (CE 1601). He was Gokulnath Ji's brother.
23. Skinner, Quentin, *Visions of Politics: Volume I, Regarding Method*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 103-127.

24. The Vaishnavas (devotees of Vishnu) and the Shaivas (devotees of Shiva) are often rival sects.
25. *tata ācāryāḥ kāśīyātrām mamāpya maṇikarṇikāyāmekadā sthitā tadāreṣṭhīkṛṣṇadāsasutaḥ puruṣottamadāsa samāgataḥ | sa ca praṇamyāha | suciraṁ mayā tapyataśrīmaddarśanārtham | tata ācāryaiḥ snānam kārayitvā tasmai manudvayaṁ mālā ca dattā tatastadgrhe gatvā madanamohanmurtiḥ sanskr̥tya sevārtha dattā | mār̥gamaryādā śikṣitā*, from *Śrī Yadunātha Jī Praṇīta Śrī Vallabhadvijayam* (Delhi: Shri Vallabha Prakashan, 1985), p. 42.
26. Bauman, Richard, 'Verbal art as Performance', *American Anthropologist*, Vol. VII, 1997, pp. 290-311.
27. See, Lutgendorf, Phillip, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritamānas of Tulsidas* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), p. 20.
28. Sri Aurobindo's usage of the term refers to both the Vedas as texts and Knowledge, thus making it a broader category to include all that is to be known within it.
29. This idea can be understood if one engages with the concept of the four levels of 'Vāc': the *vaikharī*, *madhyamā*, *paśyanti* and *parā*, *vaikharī* being this language in which one interacts at the lowest level of consciousness, each level being indicative of the level above it, and *parā* being the highest form.
30. Sri Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo – Vol. XII: Essays Divine and Human, Writings from Manuscripts 1910-1950* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1997), pp. 36-37.
31. I use this term to replace it with the idea of the performance, because to me and as I shall argue later in the paper, the *vārtās* are not only 'performed' but 'practiced' by the practitioners of the tradition.
32. I interpret *bhāva* from *√bhū* – to be as state of being in *sādhana* or spiritual practice.
33. This is explained as the reason for doing *Do Sau Bāvan Vaiṣṇavan Kī Vārtā*.

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