Alternative Modernities and Medieval Indian Literature: The Oriya *Lakshmi Purana* as Radical Pedagogy

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In the early 1500s in Orissa, the saint-mystic Achyutananda Das composes a short poem called "Bipra Chalaka," which ends with a defiant philosophical question. A self-declared low-caste (*sudra*) prophet of social change, Achyutananda directs the question to the Brahminical priestly and intellectual class (the "bipra") gathered around the famed temple complex in Puri.[1] Answer me, he demands, in the final couplet of a poem written in the vernacular, in Oriya instead of the classical Sanskrit, "Does *dharma* derive from *karma* or *karma* from *dharma*?" *Dharma* and *karma* are familiar notions in Hinduism, but in medieval India *dharma* referred primarily to the duty socially prescribed for individuals because of their station in life (their *varna*). In regional traditions, however, such as the one to which Achyutanada belongs, the word *dharma* had also come to signify something like *punya*: that is, virtue or moral merit. Achyutananda's question, framed as a dispute ("chalaka") with the privileged intellectual and priestly mindset, draws attention to the tension generated by the two meanings of the word. Is karma (action, work) determined by dharma, one's ascribed station in life? Or does an individual's karma, or actions, determine his or her dharma (virtue)?[2]

Achyutananda Das's question resonates both philosophically and politically. Identifying himself with the *panchasakha,* the group of poet-saints who were laying the groundwork for vernacular Oriya literature by writing for the masses, not just for the Sanskrit-educated elite, the author of "Bipra Chalaka" sees his question as contributing to a movement for social and cultural equality. Following in the footsteps of Sarala Das, the fifteenth-century Oriya farmer-poet who produced vernacular renderings of the Sanskrit epics the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana,* and who proudly claimed the identity of "sudra muni" ("low-caste sage"), Achyutananda consolidates the public identity of the Oriya writer as both sudra and revolutionary. He voices his challenge to Brahminical authority at roughly the same time that, a continent away, a scholar-monk in Wittenburg is getting ready to nail his "95 Theses" on the door of his church as well as to translate the Bible into the vernacular German. This is also the time when the radical devotional (*bhakti*) movement is sweeping across India (having originated in the south and now spreading to the north) and when Achyutananda's cohort of mystic poets are all drawing on Orissan society's diverse intellectual traditions (Buddhism, Saivism, Vaishnavism, as well as Saktism and Tantrism, both mainly derived from the tribal cultures) to formulate an egalitarian pedagogical project for a society in transition.[3]

This essay focuses on a popular narrative poem, a *purana,* written by Achyutananda's fellow panchasakha writer Balaram Das. Balaram was the oldest in the group, and probably the most radical. He identified himself as a sudra writer, and rendered the Sanskrit *Ramayana* into Oriya, adopting the *dandi* meter—popularized by Sarala Das—in both that text and in the *Lakshmi Purana.* The dandi form used rhyming couplets with variable line-lengths and hence was flexible enough for use in oral performances, especially folk plays [see C. Das, *Balaram* 28–29]; Balaram Das uses a tight form of rhyming couplets with fourteen-syllable lines. The puranas targeted a large, nonelite audience, and were written earlier in Sanskrit and more recently in the vernacular languages. Most puranas contained traditional religious and social messages conveyed through elaborate narratives about gods and goddesses, demons, and ordinary humans,

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tracing cosmic origins and predicting possible catastrophes. From late antiquity into the late medieval period, when Hindu society expanded its reach through new agrarian settlements and incorporation of the indigenous tribal populations, the puranas were a genre intended to domesticate and assimilate the new groups into the Brahminical ideological universe. They were, in other words, texts of the hegemonic culture.[4]

Balaram Das's *Lakshmi Purana,* however, is a counter hegemonic text. As I show in the summary below and through the textual analysis, Das attempts to articulate a subaltern consciousness of the oppressed and their common identity.[5] His explicitly feminist narrative centers on the actions of a strong goddess who challenges male Brahminical authority and advocates both feminism and caste equality. Although ideologically somewhat constrained by its generic narrative framework with its emphasis on ritual worship, the *Lakshmi Purana,* written mainly in a colloquial, non-Sanskritized form of Oriya, is textually layered and often startlingly radical. It shows the process of vernacularization—both linguistic and cultural—at work, as the themes of the dominant Hindu tradition are appropriated into the regional and local context and made to yield to the demands of the lowly segments of society. Its narrative gives dramatic power to the philosophical question broached by Achyutananda Das; the goddess Lakshmi has an egalitarian vision and a new conception of the value of the individual based on action, duty, and work—especially traditionally devalued work. Analyzing some of the literary features of Balaram Das's pedagogical poem, I wish to show how neglected genres like the puranas and vrata kathas[6] can yield insights about radical social and cultural values, values that scholars have not always expected to find in medieval India.[7] Together with studies of the bhakti movement that have reinvigorated the study of the role of religion in producing progressive social change, this essay will, I hope, contribute to the emerging discussion of "indigenous" and "alternative" modernities, one that will decenter the European version of modernity without retreating into cultural or historical relativism. Analyses of precolonial cultural production can help "provincialize" the European experience and provide the grounds for a genuine comparison across cultures, building on Charles Taylor's important intellectual archeology of the West.[8] Such analyses can show how quintessentially modern values like human equality, based on the ideal of a critical and self-reflexive individual, are not necessarily Eurocentric notions, and that they have been articulated in some precolonial, non-European contexts. If literary explorations like mine are convincing, they will also suggest ways of doing comparative historical and cultural studies of what we call "modernity" by expanding the range of texts we traditionally examine. They will indicate how literary analysis, especially of traditional South Asian texts, can contribute to a multidisciplinary collaborative project of historical retrieval, leading to a reinterpretation of what we often condescendingly call the "premodern."

Traditional Form, Subversive Content

While Balaram Das's *Lakshmi Purana* uses traditional literary forms and seems orthodox on the surface, it conveys a message that is anything but conventional. Das intended his narrative to become part of agrarian Oriya society's rhythm of harvest festivals and ritual worship, and so he adopts the form of the vrata katha genre. The *Lakshmi Purana* begins with a hymn praising Lakshmi and provides details about the days devoted to her worship. People of all classes and castes, from chandala to Brahmin, worship the goddess on her holy days in the month of "Margashira, [which] is the essence of all the twelve months" [35], the season of harvest, as the narrator Parashara explains to the sage Narada.[9] The text contains an account of the ritual worship, of how the home and the heart are prepared to invite the goddess in. It contains, again in accord with the traditional form, general details about what is to be gained if the rituals are observed with devotion and what is lost if they are not. The "katha" portion of the text, as is conventional, provides a narrative explaining why the goddess is to be worshipped, what boons she bestows, and what powers she has.

The basic tale—the "katha" that accompanies the details about the ritual "vrata"—is simple but unusual. In the month of Margashira, on a dasami—the day before ekadasi, the holy eleventh day of the lunar calendar when the Lords fast together with all mortals—the Goddess Lakshmi gets ready for her regular visit to the world outside the temple complex of Puri. This is the season when houses are cleaned and decorated with rice paste so that Lakshmi can be ritually invited in, and it gives the goddess a chance to see that women—in particular—are at work taking care of their homes, tending to their social duties. What Lakshmi observes is that many women are unmindful of their duties, and even unmindful of the implications of the holy day devoted to her worship. Disguised as an ordinary human, an old Brahmin woman, Lakshmi advises a rich trader's wife how to perform the ritual work (the vrata) meant for that day. Later, crossing beyond the bounds of the city proper, she arrives at the house of Sriya, a poor outcaste woman. Sriya's hut has been cleaned and prepared for the goddess: sanctified, wiped clean with holy cow dung, the

flowers arranged, and the rice-paste drawings done on the walls and the floor. Pleased and impressed with the woman's sincere devotion to work and worship, Lakshmi manifests herself in her house on the lotus flower Sriya has painted on her front porch (the lotus is the goddess's traditional symbol). She blesses Sriya and grants her boons. When she returns to the temple, the two Lords prevent her from re-entering because she has been in an outcaste's house; at the angry Balaram's insistence, the younger brother Jagannath tells Lakshmi that she must leave—at least, as he puts it, until Balaram can be pacified. Lakshmi reminds Jagannath of the promise he had made to allow her to go on regular sojourns out into the world, to grace every home and feed everyone "from the lowliest insects to the Supreme Brahman" [51], and leaves with the curse that the two brothers will suffer the fate that befalls anyone whom Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune and well-being, has abandoned.

The middle section of the narrative may be called "The Lesson the Goddess Teaches the Mightiest Gods," as she makes sure—conspiring with her fellow goddesses Saraswati and Nidravati, together with a few minor gods of the natural world, and the spirits of the underworld—that the two brothers learn what it means to be poor, hungry, and socially despised. Much of the action takes place in the city of Puri, outside the main temple complex, as the brothers take the shape of Brahmin mendicants and go in search of food. One person after another turns them down, wary of the two strange Brahmin beggars, while others who wish to feed them discover that they cannot, for inexplicable reasons. So they conclude that the two mendicants are to be avoided at all cost, since they must have been abandoned by the Goddess of Fortune. At long last the brothers arrive, unknowingly, at the new house that Viswakarma, the architect-god of carpenters and all craftspeople, has built for Lakshmi, and decide to beg for food there. The goddess instructs her maids to tell them that hers is the house of an outcaste woman. Hungry and desperate, they shed their caste pretensions and inhibitions, accept their final humiliation, and agree to eat food cooked by a chandaluni.

Lakshmi cooks an elaborate and splendid feast for them, and quietly reveals her identity to her husband when she sends them his favorite rice cake ("podapitha"). He seeks reconciliation with her, acknowledges her glory ("mahima"), and agrees to formally recognize the holy Thursday ("Lakshmivar" in Oriya) that is dedicated to her worship. The goddess relents, but demands more: that the egalitarian values she has defended in the world outside be recognized inside the holiest of holy spaces, the Puri temple. She asks that, within its precincts, Brahmin and chandala, people of all castes and classes, be allowed to eat together, feed each other, every single day—and that the Lord endorse this practice. Jagannath agrees, "Yes, it shall be thus, dear Lakshmi; may your glory shine through the ages" [76, translation modified]. Lakshmi agrees to return to the temple complex, and as they enter together, harmony is restored to the cosmos.

It is overwhelmingly likely that the practice of allowing members of various castes to eat together within the Jagannath temple complex predates the composition of Balaram Das's *Lakshmi Purana.* Scholars have discussed the tribal origins of the deity and how tribal priests are incorporated into the highly ritualized worship in the temple.[10] It is safe to conjecture that Balaram Das wrote his text to defend an antinomian practice that was already in place as a result of struggles by tribal and lower-caste devotees. Balaram Das's purana is most probably an attempt to create an origin myth, providing divine sanction for a practice that must have been deeply offensive to Brahminical sensibilities.

The narrative is inherently subversive, for Balaram Das's Lakshmi is no ordinary goddess, and what she demands is socially unsettling as well as universal in its reach. She is not just another strong female deity who wants to protect her devotees against danger (the theme of many vrata kathas and mangalkavyas of the time [see below, and esp. Note 12]), but rather a goddess who will redefine our basic ethical notions: the meaning of duty, of action, and indeed even of our identities. Balaram Das's *Lakshmi Purana* is a feminist text primarily because it shows a female goddess using her personal power to challenge the way society defines identities and rewards virtue, and the way tradition—even when sanctioned by the Lord himself— understands our ascribed *jati*-identity and its implications for how we are to be treated.[11] The *Lakshmi Purana* echoes Achyutananda's poem, for it too makes *varnashrama dharma,* the duty that is supposed to derive from our socially ascribed identities, subordinate to our karma, our actions as individuals. Women and outcastes come together in this text to question unjustified authority, and when the Lord Jagannath and his brother Balaram are humiliated and taught a lesson, the critique is directed primarily at their arbitrary and hypocritical use of patriarchal power. It is in short a moral critique of how their deeds are inconsistent with their declared principles, how their actions contravene their promises. The rift between speech and action reveals the arbitrariness of social (and here even divine) power. In pointing to this rift, the goddess questions the claims to authority made by those who are born to it, for the implication is that authority ought in fact to derive from virtue. Without such congruence between power and principled behavior, the identities we possess because of

our social privileges—of caste, wealth, and status—have no ethical justification.

It is clear from the bare outlines of the narrative that Lakshmi's power is being celebrated and announced to the world. There is a tradition of powerful women characters in Indian literature, especially in the puranas devoted to tribal or local village goddesses. Tribal cultures were more egalitarian than Hindu society, and tales of a powerful tribal or village goddess revealing her strength in a moment of crisis to save her devotees are common in eastern India, particularly in the popular traditions of Assam, Bengal, and Orissa.[12] But Lakshmi is no local deity; her origins can be traced back to the Vedas, and she has the sanction of the epics and the numerous puranas where she is mentioned as Lord Vishnu's consort, the bestower of wealth, fortune, and happiness, both worldly and spiritual.[13] In the Oriya literary tradition, Balaram draws on his immediate literary ancestor, the fifteenth-century poet Sarala Das, who invokes Lakshmi in his *Mahabharata* as a goddess who aids the poor and removes sorrow ("daridra bhanjani"; "dukha binasini" in the *Madhyaparba* [see S. Dash 6]). Sarala Das's Oriya rendering of the *Mahabharata* is itself full of strong women, like Draupadi, and his Sita (in his *Vilanka Ramayana*) playfully challenges Rama with the assertion that he would not have been able to kill the demon Ravana without her help! Balaram, then, draws on a hoary tradition that places Lakshmi at the center of the pantheon of the gods, as well as a regional one that worships several strong female heroines and goddesses.

Balaram Das's Lakshmi is a composite of all of these traditional images and themes, but she is above all a vernacularized goddess, an audacious local appropriation of a Vedic deity for local socio-political purposes. The colloquial Oriya that Balaram Das uses (here and elsewhere, even in his translation of the Ramayana, the *Jagmohan Ramayana*) identifies Lakshmi in the very first line as Vishnu's "gharani"—instead of the more traditional *tatsama* word "gruhini" (both can be translated as "homemaker").[14] She is addressed in an informal and endearing way (just as she is in Sarala Das's text) as "Ma go"—which roughly translates as "Mother, my dear"—as opposed to the more traditional "O, Ma!" Lakshmi teases her husband when he forgets his promises to her, loves to put on her clothes and jewelry, and loses her temper when Lord Balaram, Jagannath's elder brother, judges her harshly and reveals his upper-caste prejudices against women and non-Brahmins. What we end up with in this Oriya purana is a goddess who is simultaneously vernacularized—that is, reconceived in the regional and local cultural idiom—and made radical and universal. The values she comes to represent are not just socially subversive. They articulate principles—action is more important than social identity, karma more significant than varnashrama dharma—that can be exported, to the nation and beyond.[15] The *Lakshmi Purana* invites its readers to use it as a pedagogical tool, as a text that counters the dominant pedagogy of the Brahminical elite. While Balaram Das's purana teaches us to do our duty, and thus participates in the general project of "civilizing" and "domesticating" (in the literal sense) the diverse members of his agrarian society, it grounds social equality and justice in principles that are not limited to the goddess's own devotees, or even to Puri. These principles are radical because they are based on more than personal sentiment and in fact have universal reach. They call for recognition of the worth of individual human beings, of the value of work done well and of the worker as potentially an agent of social transformation.[16] Balaram Das's Goddess Lakshmi criticizes local, regional customs and practices, but the ideas her narrative expresses transcend the boundaries of locality and region.

Puranic and Radical Pedagogy

Generically, puranas were pedagogical texts and thus contained invitations, indeed exhortations, to the readers or listeners to study them regularly. Balaram Das puts his exhortation in the mouth of the Lord himself. Lord Jagannath promises that women who recite the *Lakshmi Purana* will "be righteous in this life/and will find a place in heaven" [75]. He adds: "If a woman explains this glorious scripture to others, the virtue she will earn will be indeed immeasurable" [75, translation modified]. While Oriya women are urged to read or listen to this tale, they are also recruited as commentators on the work and as pedagogues. Recitation and explication of scriptural texts have been institutionalized in Orissan culture since Jagannath Das established the first Bhagavat ghara in Puri in the sixteenth century, and today small meeting-places exist in almost every Oriya Hindu village where villagers can gather at the end of the day to listen to and discuss the Bhagavat and other traditional texts [Mallik, *Paradigms* 195–96]. Balaram Das has this kind of decentralized pedagogical context in mind as he makes the Lord invite ordinary Oriya women to both listen to the *Lakshmi Purana* and to continue to talk about it, to explain— and discuss—its significance. Women are in effect encouraged—even mobilized—to take this purana into every home, to repeat its message about the duty of the homemaker and to begin to explicate, or mull over, its lessons about gender and caste relations, about the centrality of karma and the egalitarian vision of social justice.

But once a reader gets down to the business of explicating and discussing the *Lakshmi Purana,* what will she find? What, in the text, cries out for explanation? Perhaps the most pertinent assertion of the text concerns the value of women's work, in particular the work most women do in Das's society: sustain the domestic world by cooking and cleaning, feeding and caring for others. The narrative turns on precisely this point, for what the Lords don't recognize at first is the value of what women do. Balaram says derisively to Jagannath: "Listen to me, Govinda. . . . If your Lakshmi stays in the Temple, I will not. A wife serves a husband; she is like a shoe that adorns the foot of her husband. If I have a brother, I can always find a billion wives for him" [48, translation modified]. It is this attitude that the goddess challenges. Lakshmi does not want to punish the brothers merely because she is angry; they must be taught, she insists, a social lesson. She is clear about the implications of what her husband has done, as she explains to her assistants. "If the Lord Jagannath can abandon me, his wife," the goddess explains, "imagine what—especially in this Kali Yuga [our Age of Vice]—ordinary men will do! Men must recognize how much they need us" [57, translation modified]. The Lord's actions reflect a common patriarchal practice in medieval India, and instead of merely condemning it Lakshmi proceeds to show how much (among other things) the *material* welfare of a household—as of society—derives from the work women do. At various moments in the narrative, the two brothers are shown that they are not self-sufficient, that they *need* the "gharani" Lakshmi. If the *Lakshmi Purana* teaches its female readers the domestic virtues traditionally associated with women—that of taking care of the home, of service, and gracious hospitality toward guests—it does not do so in a purely traditional way. It teaches service, not servility. The devotion the Goddess associates with work, duty, and ritual worship is simultaneously religious and ethical. It advocates the kind of mindfulness without which even worship becomes meaningless. But mindful and loving attention to one's home and to one's work coexists in this text with recognition of the inherent value and dignity of the work a woman does—and hence by implication of individual women, of workers. As we follow the narrative we come to realize that the exercise of power—even the power of the Lord—must not contravene the contractual understanding that the existence of the household implies, that we respect the cooperative division of labor and the value of all kinds of labor. What Lord Balaram is chided (and punished) for is the arbitrary use of his patriarchal authority to deny Lakshmi reentry into the Temple. The Lord Balaram we encounter in this text is arrogant as well as stubborn, unresponsive to reason.

Since Lord Balaram stands for the figure of arbitrary and arrogant male authority in this feminist text, it makes sense that he would be the target of the text's barbs and jokes. Especially given its oral performances—we know that the *Lakshmi Purana* has been performed for centuries as a folk play, especially in the popular *kathiapala* and *suanga* forms—we can appreciate the raucous humor with which Balaram is ridiculed by some of the women characters [on Oriya folk performances, see Mallik, *Paradigms* 193–94]. We see him called names—"fatso," for instance (the servant woman does not recognize him but refers to him as looking like "the fatso" who had "once hounded our Goddess Lakshmi out from the Great Temple" [64]); we see how, driven wild by hunger, he gobbles down huge amounts of rice and is gently ridiculed by the maid who is serving him. Consciousness comes late to the male gods, only after the ritual humiliation is over. Turned away from home after home, mistaken for thieves and called abusive names, the starving brothers are finally willing to accept their abjection and to ignore the caste prohibitions that prevent them from eating food served by an outcaste. "Let us opt to lose our caste and eat" here, says the famished Balaram to his younger brother [67]. Unbeknownst to them, of course, it is the Goddess Lakshmi's house.

The Construction of Identities

If the education of the divine brothers is one major aspect of Balaram Das's text and it is based on the unraveling of their patriarchal and upper-caste roles, the other aspect of the text is the creation of an alternative common identity of the oppressed. Gods and humans, Brahmins and chandalas, are all brought down to earth, as it were, and their social identities exposed as, in the end, constructed and hence contingent. While it would be too much to impute to the *Lakshmi Purana* the notion of the modern self-interested and acquisitive individual, disembedded from religious or spiritual community, it would not be hard to see how for Das the individual's karma is a major source of value for the world as a whole. Karma is not rigidly determined by a pregiven identity; social identities are secondary.[17]

Nowhere does this emphasis become more clear than in the way even the goddess's own identity is shown to be layered and complex, and in part a product of her own will and changing values. When she decides to leave the temple complex, she announces to her husband that she will give up her ascribed privileges and identify as a chandaluni. When she makes the brothers go through one humiliation after another, she does this as a self-avowed chandaluni. The real chandaluni of the tale, Sriya, cannot

live within the bounds of the city of Puri, and Lakshmi—who lives at the very center of the city, in the sacred temple complex—willingly transforms herself into an outsider. She refuses the rituals of purification that her husband offers, and moves to the outskirts of the city; we see the transformation of her identity most forcefully in two passages that echo each other and stand out for their poetic power. The first of these describes Lakshmi putting on her ornaments and jewels, happy that she is going out to do what she loves most, to serve and feed the world's creatures. The narrative, which is usually fast-paced, begins almost in slow motion as this passage names each resplendent jewel proudly announcing its "indescribable" beauty to the universe. She is, after all, the goddess of wealth and fortune, and her appearance is radiant as she explores and announces her own glory. Everything we have heard about her physical features has been muted and generic,[18] but now, putting on her ornaments one by one, she seems to be revealing the inner glory of "Sri," the divine beauty with which she is associated. But the intricate details in Das's description are local and regional, not traditional:

On the side of her nose she placed nine-jeweled rings
Around her neck the four-stringed gemstone
Elegant armlets and bracelets on her arms and wrists
And cat's-eye pendants dangled from threads of gold.
Ornaments with jingling bells adorned her ankles;
The Mother looked beauteous with these jewels. . . .
Since the Mother owns the three worlds of earth, heaven, and hell,
How can we describe her jewels and ornaments? [36, translation modified]

She took off the tassel of pearls from her hair
And from her bosom the fine silk
Embroidered with gold and gems
The Mother unfastened her netted waistband
of gemstones and jewels;
Unhooked from her ears
the large diamond danglers;
She removed her jade and gold necklace. . . .
How can I describe the other ornaments?
Piled together in the darkness, where she discarded them,
They burn like a raging fire, producing a joyless light.
"Keep them," she said to the Lord,
"They are now yours, O Friend of the Destitute."
[N 53–54 / D 738, translation modified]

What these two passages emblematize, especially when juxtaposed, is a series of questions about the metaphysics of identity. They raise worries about which of our possessions and properties are really ours, which ones are essential and which ones external and adventitious. For those who believe in the sanctity of traditional identities, such passages raise troubling questions about belonging and ownership, about inner vs. outer: jewels that look as natural as flowers in a garden can look like ornaments that merely decorate (or worse, even hide an inner flaw). The passages suggest that our identities are contextual, and that we have the power to make and remake them in the light of our changing ethical and political commitments. Our identities, the Goddess Lakshmi suggests, can serve the dominant patriarchal order, and they can challenge it as well. The denuding, the willed discarding of jewels and ornaments, is in itself the creation of a new self. The fiery harshness ("dau dau") of the discarded ornaments points simultaneously to the death of one identity and the new one that the death makes possible. Lakshmi's action draws attention to the power involved in remaking our inner selves—the willed askesis enables the full flowering of the goddess as a fighter, the goddess who not only serves the lowliest social creatures, the chandalas, but also identifies herself as one and fights alongside them.[19]

The lowly creature most directly associated with the goddess is of course her outcaste devotee, Sriya, her name a derivation from one of the goddess's most ancient names: Sri. The connotations of the name—beauty, divine grace—are visible in the way Sriya performs her social duty, since she transforms even menial work into a form of mindful worship: she "swept clean the streets . . . with rapturous devotion for the Lord" [45]. Before the goddess appears in Sriya's chandala neighborhood on the outskirts of the city, she is struck by images of indolence and somnolence. Young and old women of the upper castes, half asleep, clothes in disarray, contrast sharply with Sriya, who is a model of hard work and mindful devotion. Her glory ("mahima"), we are told, is not yet visible ("agochara") to the gods, but she works quietly and attentively. Her worship is no empty ritual, for we see in the description the stirrings of subjectivity. In the middle of her ritual worship of Lakshmi, she grows restive but then continues, arranging and decorating her altar: "[Sriya] drew murals on the floor of her house with raw rice paste. She drew an in-tricate lotus motif with sixteen petals. She lighted an earthen lamp that had ten mouths to hold ten wicks, and placed it at the center of the mural. On this mural she placed fruits and tubers of ten colors. . . . *Her mind drifted, grew restless*; she went to get more raw rice and some holy duba grass . . ." [46; translation modified, my emphasis]. Sriya is depicted as a conscious and attentive devotee, with believable psychological traits. Her ritual worship is not routine or

mechanical; she brings mindfulness to both work and worship, and occasionally struggles to keep her mind on her tasks. This sign of human failing makes her devotion more endearing, and her work more meaningful. It accentuates the attitude of willed surrender she brings to what she does, the attitude of *sraddha,* which can transform work into worship, a routine menial job into selfless service.

These are the very attitudes—humility and joy in service and work—that the goddess herself embodies in the *Lakshmi Purana.* This is evident in some of the most telling descriptions we have in the text: that of Lakshmi preparing her new home to serve and feed the two hungry brothers who have finally arrived at her house.

Lakshmi cleaned the whole palace
with her own hands.
She sprinkled the house
with camphor and oil of sandalwood.
She assembled for her guests utensils made of gold:
platters, plates, quarter-plates, bowls, and quarter-bowls.
She also arranged basins for the rinsing of their hands
and tubs for washing their feet,
as is the practice of the two Lords
when they are offered the bhog.
She made and spread out
two mats of pure gold,
where the brothers will sit and have their food.
Then the Mother pleaded with her maids:
"Go and usher in my Lords . . . go, hurry!" [69–70]

This attitude of service represents more than forgiveness. It shows us how to value the work we do in our everyday lives—even the work delegated to women and the lowly classes of the world. When we see the thematic links between the goddess and the chandaluni, Sri and Sriya, the picture of women's work points to a generalizable value. It is the valorization of the ordinary, the everyday, the socially marginal—that which is taken for granted. The goddess shows us how such work can be both humble and grand; in fact, we see this most clearly when Sri and Sriya fuse together in our line of vision. The lowly Sriya, whose "mahima" or glory was hitherto undetected, is elevated by Lakshmi's divine blessings. The material blessings she asks for hesitantly ("I don't know what to ask for, My Goddess, since I have never learned how to ask for boons") appear in a form that celebrates both the doer and the ideal of a deed well done. Sriya herself becomes a generative metaphor of wealth and plenty, of abundance: her hut, "which resembled a wasp's burrow" turns into a "palace" made of fragrant sandalwood; the granary that had no rice is now stacked with gold; her childless home is now filled with "five sons." In the course of one day in divine time, Sriya's human world is profoundly transformed. The invisible toiler is now recognized as "bhagyavati," or "the woman of good fortune," her house now the blessed center of a universe of abundance.[20] The work done by the lowly is lifted up to divine gaze, given the universal recognition it so richly deserves.

The connections established between Sri and Sriya, goddess and devotee, are even more intimate. In another text, the "Kamalalochona Chautisa," Balaram Das calls the Goddess Lakshmi "Sriya." "Sriyadevi," the Goddess Lakshmi, is identified as the consort of Lord Vishnu (or Jagannath). The Lord is "Sriyadevinka manohara," dear to the goddess's heart.[21] The interchangeability of Sri and Sriya, the goddess and the outcaste woman, supports the *Lakshmi Purana*'s ideological emphasis on what modern feminist theory calls "women's work." Our sixteenth-century text performs the audacious and counter hegemonic task of valuing that which is socially invisible ("agochara"); it also refines our understanding of all work, all socially meaningful work, by emphasizing its subjective dimension. While on one level Das's Goddess Lakshmi speaks to the women of every Oriya household about their domestic duties, on another level she directs her challenging questions at all members of Orissan society, men and women, the upper and the lower castes. The primary literary device that enables the second level to do its work is the poetic emphasis on identities, on how they are constructed and how they are remade. In the striking passages about the goddess's ornaments and jewelry, Lakshmi seems to celebrate her own identity as wife and goddess, and then to openly disown part of it. Her new identifications, her solidarities, are also clearly suggested: the text links her to her foremost devotee, Sriya, as well as to a whole class of lowly workers, the substratum of society. The poetic—in particular, metaphorical—connections among the various actors consolidate the philosophical redefinition of identity in terms of action rather than social ascription, or karma rather than dharma. The individual self is extricated from entanglements of caste and social station as the self of the doer and the devotee. The *Lakshmi Purana* may well represent a major stage in the articulation of a subjectivity that is disembedded from caste and class, and available in principle to all human agents, not limited to gods and goddesses.

Part of the poetic achievement of Balaram Das's text is that it performs a series of powerful displacements, spatial as well as political, of which lord to outcaste is perhaps the most startling one. The typical trajectory of these displacements can be traced by following one

humble word, the colloquial Oriya adjective "bai." It appears most prominently when Jagannath chides Lakshmi after she returns to the temple. He reminds her that she is, after all, popularly known among the ordinary people of Orissa as the "bai thakurani," the "crazy" or "fickle" goddess ("thakurani": goddess). Fickleness is of course the stereotype that would commonly be applied to the goddess of fortune, but what Jagannath is referring to in the context of the narrative is also her impatience, her restiveness, her desire to wander—to go beyond the boundaries of the temple complex, and to cross traditional lines of separation that another goddess (any woman, for that matter) would be reluctant to violate. The colloquial Oriya word "bai" is derived from the tatsama word "Bayu" or wind (from the Sanskrit Vayu), and its semantic migration to suggest restlessness, fickleness, and even errancy are perfectly natural. After all, Lakshmi herself claims the right to wander: to leave the sacred space of the temples to visit the world outside where she will serve, teach, and mingle—with everyone from the lowliest insect to the lords of the world.

But very soon we notice that the adjective "bai" itself wanders within the confines of the text. When Sriya asks for boons, the goddess lovingly chides her for being "bai": "How can you so *bai,* my dear Sriya," she says, "as to want immortality, something that is impossible for me to give you?" (She can grant boons of wealth and fame, even happiness after her death—but granting a human immortality is beyond even her power.) The slightly pejorative adjective becomes an affectionate term when used by the goddess, suggesting that the qualities it denotes are not so negative after all. It is natural for humans to want more, to ask for things that are not (yet) possible. In our human world, it may be good to stray a bit, to go beyond the bounds of what is given, what is traditionally accepted and understood. Later in the text, the adjective returns playfully, with the pejorative connotations intact, but this time attached to Lord Jagannath. When the two brothers appear at Lakshmi's palace, hungry and desperate, Jagannath explains to the servant women how they are suffering because of what they did to his wife. The women, who know who the brothers are and what issues are at stake, pretend they do not, and mock him: "Don't be *bai,* you old Brahmin, why should a man suffer just because he drove his wife out of his house?" Here "bai" means something like the colloquial "daft" or "silly," and part of the point is to get the Lord to confess how much he values Lakshmi, how much he needs her. But this is achieved by transferring the adjective "bai" from her to him, which would be a startlingly rude thing to do to the Lord if we had not already come to hear the word used affectionately by the goddess to describe her devotee.

Remaking Tradition and the Individual

It is in the context of such semantic and thematic displacements that we approach the radical demand at the end. When Lakshmi demands that everyone, Brahmin or chandala, be treated as equal within the precincts of the temple, and the Lord agrees to it, that newly sanctioned practice of the various castes eating together—customary even to this day in Puri—is itself the visionary product of Balaram Das's wanderings. It is a bold statement defying caste hierarchy, and it makes the Lord invite the outcaste into the symbolically powerful inner world of the Puri temple complex. This is the political value the goddess wishes to exemplify, indeed to embody, for the world outside the temple's boundaries, Hindu society in general. The temple courtyard where food is shared now becomes a counterhegemonic space sanctioned by divine law, by the word of the Lord. But this law is of course new, and its origins can be traced not only to the word of Lord Jagannath but also to the goddess's questioning, restive, reformative spirit. The new law owes its existence to the community of the outcastes and women that the goddess embodies, a community of the subaltern that lies beyond the traditional purview of Brahminically controlled divine law. It is wandering, and even errancy, that takes us beyond the law of tradition to produce a new and more humane law. It is perhaps appropriate, then, that Balaram Das leaves it open whether the male Lord himself quite comprehends what is at stake in the change.[22] It is enough for our purposes that the Lord will (have to) listen to us, for the *Lakshmi Purana*'s ultimate message is that the transformation of the world is primarily our own responsibility, primarily up to us. The Lord is humanized in the narrative, but it is the female reader (of the vrata katha) who is elevated to the status of agent, of doer. Women ask, demand, act—and that is how we get the Lord (and the lords of the world) to change the way things are.[23] In this powerful text written some five hundred years ago, the image of Hindu tradition is transformed, since it is made accountable to the contingent present, just as male gods are to eccentric goddesses, Brahmins to *bai* outcastes.

The transformed image of Hindu tradition can be traced in part through the semantic and ideological unsettling of the notion of karma. The *Lakshmi Purana* marks a certain ambiguity in the meaning of work and duty, even as it brings about a radical transformation of

caste-based evaluations and perceptions by valorizing the work done by women and all lowly workers. For work done with sincerity and devotion is not enough to challenge an unjust social structure, since it may simply be ritual work devoted to one's ascribed station in life. The new attitude to work may ensure that the unjust social system will function more smoothly, making the lowly workers content with their lot. This is why, for all her importance, Sriya cannot by herself be the central agent in Balaram Das's narrative. It is both Sriya and her Goddess Sri who together form the more complete image of the new social agent and outline a new notion of karma. Dutiful work can serve the caste order of society, but the goddess suggests the principle that part of our duty is to wander, to question, and to challenge—just as she challenges patriarchal will and tradition, as well as her own identities. Karma thus includes the intentional act of questioning the world around us. The world is of course not always apart from us, outside the self, but often implicated in the way we view ourselves, our roles, our identities. In unmaking her identity as the bohu and goddess of the temple and remaking it to suit the new context, the new egalitarian ideals, Balaram Das's radical goddess shows how self-(re)making is an important component of social critique. The critique—and redefinition—of social identity is part of the work, the dutiful karma, that the goddess posits as the source of dharma or virtue. Sri and Sriya together complete the new conception of karma that is suggested in Achyutananda Das's "Bipra Chalaka": dharma or virtue derives from intentional action based on a critical awareness. Just as ritual worship is made mindful through conscious effort in the *Lakshmi Purana,* social existence is itself made meaningful through the principle of critique. Karma and inherited social roles (the traditional meaning of dharma) are here wrenched apart; what emerges as an alternative to ascribed identity is the thinking, questioning, critical self—something close to the modern ideal of the individual whose value does not depend on social status but rather on what she or he chooses to do, on intentional action. It should not come as a surprise that these semantic and ideological reversals would be close to the heart of Balaram Das, the self-declared sudra writer. Drawing on a remarkably diverse intellectual tradition, Balaram Das and the panchasakha attempt a critical synthesis and envision a social revolution through their narratives, songs, and dramatic performances.

My analysis of the rise of the notion of a self-aware individuality (grounded in the capacity for social evaluation and criticism) in a sixteenth-century Oriya text complements the work of historians and literary critics who have been tracing the development of similarly "modern" themes in precolonial Indian literature.[24] Focusing on Telugu and Tamil literary works from the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries, these scholars have suggested how a modern historical practice develops in forms that are traditionally considered literary, and they have based their analysis of precolonial modernity—in particular secular values, historical consciousness, and a nonreligious sensuousness tied to a new experience of the body—on the rise of a new socioeconomic class, the karanams, which was educated and socially mobile. What these analyses suggest is that we need to reread medieval Indian vernacular literature through new lenses, looking in particular at the way traditional religious idioms are being deployed for novel explorations. New questions are being asked during this transitional period, from new perspectives, and new social values are being explored. Medieval Indian literatures reveal a picture of a dynamic society in flux, a very different image from the one we have inherited from James Mill. And the view of modernity that emerges in them is at odds with the capitalist modernity that dominates in the European context. Much work needs to be done on literary and non-literary texts from this period before we can generalize usefully, but the central questions suggested by such analyses as mine are tantalizing ones. What would a critical and selfaware individuality look like if it were not tethered to capitalist values? The emergence of individuality in the texts and discourses I have examined reveals what has been called a "disembedding" from primordial commitments [see Taylor]; it begins to conceptualize individual actions as logically prior to, and not dependent on, ascribed social duty. Similarly, in this new perspective, self-making and remaking are fundamental to social critique. A new radical identity politics based on the solidarity of the subaltern groups challenges the hegemonic identity constructs of Brahminical ideologies, specifically of varna and caste. Is it possible to see in these new cultural imaginings a noninstrumental form of rationality, a new set of generalizable critical principles through which the poor and the marginalized challenge unjustified power and authorize their own insurgency? How do we understand the role the social struggles of oppressed groups have played in the development of such universal modern values as egalitarianism and individuality? The pursuit of these far-reaching questions calls for research that is both comparative and multidisciplinary, and I hope to have suggested through my analysis of one medieval Indian narrative that literary criticism can play a crucial role in shaping such a project.

Notes

1. Puri has traditionally been one of the major Indian centers of Hinduism, both as a site of pilgrimage and, especially in the precolonial period, as a space for intellectual exchange among various religious traditions. Its main deity, Lord Jagannath ("Lord of the Universe"), originated in tribal cultures but was gradually Hinduized. The temple complex we see today was built in the twelfth century. Puri, and Orissa in general, have been researched and written about extensively in recent decades; for a sampling of the most impressive body of work, see the collections *Cult of Jagannath*, and *Jagannath Revisited*.
2. This unpublished poem is quoted by Mallik; see *Medieval Orissa* 44. The orthodox Brahminical notion of dharma as tied to varna is articulated most famously by Lord Krishna in chapter 2, verse 31, of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Buddhism provided egalitarian and universalist alternatives to this Brahminical interpretation of dharma, and since medieval Orissan society had a strong Buddhist cultural tradition it is likely that Achyutananda Das was drawing on it. Also see note 16, below. Santina provides a critique of Krishna's Brahminical view of dharma and karma, as expressed in chapter 2 of the *Gita*.
3. For a brief account of Achyutanda Das and the panchasakha as mystics and thinkers, see C.Das, *Studies*. Mallik's *Paradigms* provides a more comprehensive and detailed historical account, with an emphasis on the Oriya sudra muni tradition, which began with Sarala Das. On Balaram Das, see C. Das, *Balaram*. Unlike many Indian writers of the period, Sarala Das and the panchasakha did not have court patronage. They were almost all from the lower castes, and the one Brahmin in the group—Jagannath Das—sided with the lower castes in his writings. The name "Das" or "Dasa" (which means slave or servant) was used by them and other Indian writers to disown their caste identity; they saw themselves as servants of the Lord and hence less accountable to kings and priests. The collection *Tradition and Modernity* is an excellent introduction to the bhakti movement, although it is selective in its coverage of regional trends.
4. A good brief introduction to the classical puranas is Narayana Rao's "Purana"; Rocher provides extensive summaries and a comprehensive analysis of the genre. On the ideological function of the puranas in at least one regional context, see Chakrabarti. As a narrative, Balaram Das's text differs from the Sanskrit models, which were sprawling baggy monstrosities; he deals with gods and goddesses and provides an origin myth, but his narrative structure is tightly organized, almost like a modern short story. He incorporates the traditional content of the puranas into the more focused form of the vrata katha (see note 6, below). Since vrata kathas were meant to be read ritually by women, this choice was politically and strategically quite astute.
5. The *Lakshmi Purana* is not a translation or transcreation of an existing model in Sanskrit, although it may have drawn on oral traditions. Das's Oriya text is very popular and can be found on the web at: http://www.odia.org/books/LaxmiPurana.pdf. No critical editions exist, but there are two translations into English. The first is an excerpt, translated by Rajendra Prasad Das; see Balarama Das, "Lakshmi." The second is the complete text, published in 2007 [Balaram Das, Lakshmi]. I rely mainly on the second translation, done by Lipipuspa Nayak, modifying it in many places. Citations to the Nayak translation are indicated with an N and the Das translation with a D.
6. Vrata kathas were didactic texts that were meant to teach devotees how to observe ritual fasts and worship individual deities. These were generic texts that contained detailed instructions and also provided a katha, or story, whose message explained why the deity should be worshipped and what boons he or she can give (or withhold).
7. The notion that precolonial Indian society was static and unchanging after the ancient period originates with James Mill. Mill influenced not only colonial officials but also thinkers like Marx, among others. For a brief introductory discussion of medieval Indian historiography in this context, see Talbot 1–4.
8. There is a vast (and somewhat confusing) body of recent work on the notion of colonial and alternative modernities. A helpful survey of some basic questions is Dube and Banerjee-Dube's introduction to *Unbecoming Modern;* that collection and *Alternative Modernities* convey a sense of the range of issues involved. Chakarabarty's is an influential account, and his title *Provincializing Europe* provides a nonnativist flag under which students of all cultures can rally. Taylor's *Modern*, building on his nonrelativist philosophical approach, has cleared the ground for nonethnocentric comparative studies. On historical consciousness in precolonial India, see *Textures of Time;* see also Subrahmanyam. A good summary of the issues in the Indian context is provided in Narayana Rao, "Play" [see note 24, below].
9. Chandala was a generally pejorative term used for groups that were beneath even the sudras, the lowest of the four varnas. Chandalas were outcastes, often drawn from aboriginal tribes and relegated to the lowest economic strata of traditional Hindu society. The sage Parashara is the narrator of many puranas. Balaram Das uses this convention, even though his vernacular purana does not follow many other generic conventions of the classical puranas [for a description of these conventions, see Narayana Rao, "Purana" 99].
10. See Eschmann, "Hinduization" and "Prototypes." G. N. Dash provides a methodologically complex and illuminating analysis of how the temple rituals have themselves been shaped over the centuries by struggles among various kinds of priests, especially those of tribal origin and those from the upper castes.
11. *Jati* is the word that corresponds to caste; the earlier word varna is closer to "station in life" (based on occupation), since it is not as rigidly determined by birth. Jaiswal's study is an excellent historical and conceptual guide to the phenomenon of caste.
12. For a discussion of a purana devoted to Assam's famous Tantric goddess Kamakhya Devi, see Biernacki. On the mangalkavya tradition in Bengal, devoted to the local village goddesses Manasa and Chandi, see Clark; Chakrabarti. In Orissa, Sarala Das wrote his *Chandi Purana* in the fifteenth century, but it is very different in tone from Balaram Das's text devoted to Lakshmi. For Oriya texts devoted to the goddess Mangala, see Apffel-Marglin and Mishra. The Oriya *Lakshmi Purana* builds on the feminist genre devoted to strong

tribal and tantric goddesses, but changes it drastically by focusing on a classical goddess and by developing universalist ethical notions.

13. See Dhal for a fairly comprehensive account of the literature devoted to Lakshmi.
14. Tatsama words, favored by the educated elites, were vernacular words derived from Sanskrit and changed only very slightly.
15. In other words, this is a vernacular formulation of ideas that are cosmopolitan in reach. Pollock has done valuable work on the idea of Sanskrit and vernacular "cosmopolitanisms," and he suggests new ways to analyze vernacularization and the role of literature across regional and national contexts.
16. Even though I have not found hard textual evidence for this, I think it is very likely that the Oriya panchasakha writers are echoing the southern Indian anticaste movement called "virasaivism," which originated in Karnataka in the twelfth century and became a popular social force there and in Andhra. One of the founders of virasaivism was the Kannada saint Basava, who was born a Brahmin but attacked the Brahminical ideology of varna and caste. Worshippers of Lord ŝiva, the virasaivas were unorthodox in their approach to worship and social life. They questioned notions of dharma based on social rank and emphasized the importance of work done with devotion. Their main literary form was the *vacana*, a short poem through which a "saying" could be conveyed (vacana literally means "saying"). For a basic historical account of virasaivism, see Desai, and for a discussion of doctrine, Malledevaru. Examples of vacanas can be found in Ramanujan, and for an unusual Telugu text, a purana celebrating virasaiva saints, see Narayana Rao, *ŝiva's Warriors* (both Ramanujan and Narayana Rao provide good introductions to their texts and provide useful general background). On the theme of the dignity of work in virasaiva thought, see Michael. In my view, Balaram Das's *Lakshmi Purana* combines the southern Indian virasaiva tradition with the Sakta or goddess tradition that had a strong presence in Orissa (Sarala Das's fifteenth century *Chandi Purana* is the most prominent textual evidence of the latter).
17. Talbot talks about the "fluidity of social identities" in medieval Andhra and elsewhere [84–86 and ff.] and provides lucid discussions of issues in medieval Indian historiography [esp.1–17; 208–15].
18. Contrast this muted description with, for instance, the Sri Sukta in the Rig Veda, the earliest invocation of the goddess, where she is described more precisely using the following Sanskrit adjectives: she is (among many other things) *jvalanti*, lustrous like fire, and yasti, slim and slender; she is described as *padmavarna:* she has the color of the lotus flower. For a complete translation and some discussion, see Dhal 47–62.
19. In my view, the willed making and unmaking of identities is often an implicitly rational response to changing contexts, and so identities, while constructed, are not thereby arbitrary. New identity choices are justified when they are based on an accurate understanding of changing social relations and political needs, and of the values and principles that are most appropriate for those needs. This view of the transformation of identities is similar to the approach defended in the collection Reclaiming Identity and by Babbitt. This essay on the *Lakshmi Purana* can be read in part as an extension of the "realist" theory of identity I have been elaborating since the early 1990s [see Mohanty, "Epistemic Status"; *Literary Theory*, chapter 7].
20. Given the textual cues, it would be hard to miss the metaphorical nature of the boon of abundance that the goddess grants Sriya. Lakshmi is associated with not only material wealth but also spiritual grace, with the fulfillment of human desires, actual and ideal. So it is significant that Sriya's house is not made of marble, which would be the sign of a rich person's palace, but rather of scented sandalwood, whose paste is said to have calming properties and is always part of Hindu ritual worship. Similarly, while she did not have rice to eat before, her house is now "stacked with pure gold" (*suddha . . . subarna*); she had no sons, and now has five. Sriya is now a creative, generative center, not unlike her goddess, who is traditionally described as hiranyamayi, radiant like gold, as well as udara, noble and bountiful.
21. I thank G. N. Dash for this reference.
22. All that we hear from Lord Jagannath is that he acknowledges Lakshmi's power and glory after having been humiliated by her; he endorses the practice of intercaste mingling in the temple courtyard but says nothing about its significance [see N 74–75].
23. How much the lords of the world listen or yield to us is of course a historically contingent and contextual matter. An analysis of the changes in the practice of caste-intermixing within the Puri temple would be valuable, especially if it follows the multidisciplinary methodological model Dash provides for his analysis of struggles within the priestly community. Another valuable project would examine the way the *Lakshmi Purana* has been deployed in subaltern social mobilizations over the ages. This would also involve tracking the shifting power relations in the general polity (the British, for instance, gave more power to the Brahmin priests than the priests had before—for strategic administrative reasons [see Mubayi, esp. 152–90; for an important related account, see Kulke, Kings, esp. 1–136].
24. Narayana Rao, "Play," provides a brief summary that is worth quoting in some detail: Shulman and I . . . have demonstrated that modernity in [Telugu] literature was already flourishing during the period from the late fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The colonial modernity that had its beginning with the British rule in India is certainly a different kind of modernity, but it is not the only modernity known to Indian literature. Colonial modernity is perhaps most easily defined by what it is not: it is not "traditional." It rejects the immediate past and presents itself as distinctly different from it. . . . In contrast, precolonial modernity does not define itself as a radical break from the past nor does it deny the significance of the past. It continues the tradition but marks a shift in sensibilities. . . . [160–61] Narayana Rao is talking about how literature thematizes and represents social modernity, and his critique is directed at the colonialist bias, often seen in nineteenth-century Indian reformers aswell, that sees the precolonial past (in particular, the four centuries leading up to the nineteenth) as the dark ages. Such a bias derives from ignorance about the details of cultural and social history,Narayana Rao and his colleagues would argue, and it discourages revisionary historical analysis.

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