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Individualisation, deindividualisation, and institutionalisation among the early Mahānubhāvs

The Old Marathi literature of the Mahānubhāvs provides a classic example of individualisation and its mitigation. Beginning in the second half of the 13th century, the Mahānubhāvs are a bhakti group (*sampradāy*) that places a high value on asceticism and recognises five principal incarnations of one supreme God, called Parameśvar. This chapter will examine the characterisation of two of the divine incarnations, Cakradhar and Guṇḍam Rāṭṭ, in their Mahānubhāv hagiographies, and the account of the early years the incarnations' disciples spent without the benefit of the incarnations' presence. The three principal texts I will discuss are:

- 1) the *Līlācaritra*, the biography of Cakradhar (composed after 1274 and before 1287 CE);¹
- 2) *The Deeds of God in Rddhipur (Rddhipurcaritra)*, the biography of Cakradhar's guru, Guṇḍam Rāṭṭ (composed 1287 CE);² and
- 3) *In the Absence of God (Smṛtistha)*, the account of the early Mahānubhāv disciples in the period after Cakradhar's departure and Guṇḍam Rāṭṭ's death (composed 14th-15th century CE?).³

The *Līlācaritra* is the text I began translating under the auspices of the 'Religious Individualisation in Historical Perspective' project at the Max-Weber-Kolleg in Erfurt. I have already published translations of the other two texts (Feldhaus 1984 and Feldhaus, Tulpule 1992, respectively), under the English titles given above.

1 The most thorough edition of this text is Kolte 1982. I primarily follow the text of Nene 1936–1950, but the numbering I use follows that in my own edition and translation of this text forthcoming in the Murty Classical Library of India series. In Nene's edition and my own, the text has three sections: 'Ekāṅka', 'Pūrvārdha', and 'Uttarārdha'. In references in this chapter, these are abbreviated as E, P, and U (or LC, E; LC, P; and LC, U), respectively.

2 Kolte 1972. Translated in Feldhaus 1984. Abbreviated here as DGR.

3 Deśpāṇḍe 1968. Translated in Feldhaus, Tulpule 1992. Abbreviated here as SS.

1 Violations of social norms

Extraordinary in their behaviour and powers, the divine incarnations can be seen as individual humans who are relatively free from the constraints of societal norms.

Guṇḍam Rāūḷ in particular is portrayed as having been weird and erratic in his behaviour; townspeople in Ṛddhipur are often quoted (favorably) saying things like, ‘The Rāūḷ is mad; the Rāūḷ is possessed!’ He is demanding and petulant, particularly about food, and his disciples work hard to indulge his every whim. His biographer delights in recounting the kinds of crazy, eccentric things that Guṇḍam Rāūḷ used to do. Here are two typical chapters of *The Deeds of God in Ṛddhipur* (Feldhaus 1984, 150, 81):

DGR 288. He plays with his reflection.

The Gosāvi used to go up to a small well. He would stand at the edge and look at his holy face in the well. He would talk to himself. He would say things to himself. He would comb his beard with his fingernails. He would laugh. He would put his holy hand into the well. Sometimes he would sit at the edge of the well, dangling his holy feet.

He would play this way, and then he would leave.

DGR 101. He abuses his buttocks when he farts.

The Gosāvi went out by the eastern gate. When he was near the Paraśurāma temple, to the northeast of it, he farted.

And the Gosāvi said, “Die, buttocks! Die! Why are you shouting?” and he slapped his buttocks and laughed.

Then he left.

The *Līlācaritra* also has several descriptions of Guṇḍam Rāūḷ’s appearance and behaviour (E7, E21, P46–52, P72, P274, P440, and P444). In the following passage, for instance, a disciple who has just returned from Ṛddhipur describes Guṇḍam Rāūḷ’s ‘play’ to Cakradhar (LC, P444):

Lord, Lord, the Gosāvi would get up early in the morning. He would walk back and forth. Then he would go to [the village of] Āpviḥir. Along the way he would play with a boundary stone. He would play at the Five Pipal Trees. Then he would go into the town. He would go into house after house. He would take down the stack of storage pots with his holy hand. He would taste the vegetables. He would stack up the pile again. He would look this way, and then he would say, “Hey, now this is the way I like it.”

The Gosāvi would be going along the road. And he would burst out laughing.

Compared to Guṇḍam Rāūḷ’s portrayal in *The Deeds of God in Ṛddhipur*, Cakradhar’s biography depicts *him* as relatively sane. It does nonetheless show

him to have been to a great extent free from the bonds of normal social expectations. The first part of the *Līlācaritra*, 'Ekāṅka' ('The Solitary Period'), describes Cakradhar in his earlier years as leaving behind home and family to become a wandering, homeless, emotionally detached ascetic – the archetype of the 'individual' in classical India, according to Louis Dumont (1960). One of the principal clusters of characteristics that 'Ekāṅka' emphasises in its portrayal of Cakradhar (whom it calls 'the Gosāvi') is his dispassion and asceticism. Asceticism is a high ideal for Mahānubhāvs, and a life of constant, solitary wandering, renunciation, and detachment (the way of the *sannyāsī*, a wandering ascetic or renouncer) is the central ethical teaching of the *Sūtrapāṭh*, the Mahānubhāvs' anthology of Cakradhar's teachings (Feldhaus 1983). In his early period as a wandering ascetic, Cakradhar certainly illustrates this ideal:

LC, E8. He accepts a state of extreme detachment.

The Gosāvi accepted a state of dispassion. He was not inclined to walk along the road. His matted hair got caught in thorns. The wind would blow it loose, or someone would come along and unravel it, and then the Gosāvi would move on. Thorns would pierce his body and scratch it. Drops of blood would appear. They would naturally look beautiful, like rubies on pure gold.

Repeatedly in the text, the Gosāvi remains silent when addressed by other people. He just stands or sits where he is, on these occasions as impassive toward other people as this *līlā* portrays him being with respect to thorn bushes. Another point the text wants to make is that the Gosāvi does not care about money. Although he plays at gambling and even boasts about his winnings, he gives away all but the amount he really needs:

LC, E13. He gambles,

He told this episode in connection with Āplo:⁴ "My woman, I used to play dice. I would win, but I would never lose."

In a certain village, he went to a gambling den. He said to the gamblers, "Is there room for a winner?"

"Come on in, Sir," they said, and moved aside. They made room for him. Then the Gosāvi began to play. He won many cowrie shells. He spent the small, brown cowries. He gave them away to people.

He separated out some cowries, took them in his holy hand, and held them against his stomach. He went to the food market. There he said, "Can I get a meal for a cowrie shell?" One man invited him in [to his stall], saying, "Come on in, Sir."

⁴ Āplo is a man who appears later in the *Līlācaritra*, first in P325 and then in a few early chapters of 'Uttarārdha'.

He gave the man the cowries. The man gave him a massage. He gave him a hot-water bath. He offered him his clothes. He gave him a meal that was appropriate for his greatness. Then, as the Gosāvi ate the meal, he praised the food. That made the man happy. Then the man set up a cot with a mattress, and [the Gosāvi] accepted sleep.

Early the next morning he was [still] there. Then he left the man's clothes behind and went to the gambling den. When the people in the market saw the Gosāvi, they dropped what they were doing and looked at him. [At the gambling den,] bards and singers were waiting for him: "The generous man from yesterday hasn't come yet," [they said.] Then he arrived.

That day too he won. He kept enough for his meal and gave away the rest. That day he went to a different house. The restaurateurs from the day before got double the normal profit. They were waiting for the Gosāvi.

In this way, he was there for some days. Then he left.

Just as he is about money and his body's welfare, the Gosāvi as portrayed in the 'Ekāṅka' section of the *Līlācaritra* is also dispassionate about food. He will accept a lavish meal when it is offered, but most often he begs 'with his bare hands' (that is, not even using a begging bowl or bag) and eats off a flat surface, such as a smooth rock in a riverbed. Nor is the Gosāvi interested in sex, though he receives a number of propositions and get himself involved in some tricky situations – including a marriage or two. In the following episode, for example, Cakradhar marries a merchant's daughter:

LC, E16. He accepts marriage.

He was sitting under a tree in a certain village. Horse traders had stopped there. They approached the Gosāvi. They saw the Gosāvi as a prince. Then they asked about the types of horses. The Gosāvi explained the types of horses. [...]

Then the horse traders spoke. They invited him. They brought him to their tent. Then he had a massage. He had a hot-water bath. They offered the Gosāvi clothes. They gave him a horse. They began to act as if the Gosāvi was the principal one, the leader, and all the others were his servants.

Then he went to Oraṅgaḷ. Hearing that the horse traders had come, all the people came up to them. As they sold horses, he described them: "This horse is of such-and-such a type. It has such-and-such good qualities, such-and-such characteristics. This horse should get such-and-such an amount." The horse traders said, "Because of the Gosāvi, this horse fetched a high price." The people [buying the horses] said, "Because of the Gosāvi we got this horse for cheap."

A merchant came there. He saw [this]. He said, "Sir, I have a jewel of a daughter. Nowhere is there a husband who is suitable for her beauty. If the Gosāvi makes her his maidservant, I will be gratified. What I have done will have borne fruit."

The Omniscient one said, "I have no caste or lineage, no wife or family."⁵

5 Literally, no stake and tether. In other words, there is nothing to tie me down.

The man said, “The Gosāvi himself is caste and lineage. The Gosāvi himself is wife and family.”

The Omniscient one said, “I don’t have the means to do it.”

The man said, “Sir, I already have everything that is needed.”

The horse traders said, “This all does not belong to the Gosāvi alone.”

Then the merchant took the Gosāvi to show him to his extended family. A wedding took place, with a Gondhaḷ.⁶ The marriage ceremony went on for four days. Then the horse traders asked leave to go. The horse traders set out.

Then he lived there for some days. One day they were playing parcheesi upstairs [...] when a wandering ascetic entered the town to beg for alms. The man had turned his back on worldly life. [The Gosāvi] saw this. Seeing the man, he said, “I will do the same thing.” At that, the woman fell down in a dead faint. The Gosāvi lifted her up by her arms. He wiped her eyes with his holy hand. He put water on her eyes. He brought her to consciousness. Then he said, “I was teasing you, I was playing with you.”

At that, Mahadāiseṃ asked, “Lord, the Gosāvi left. What happened to her?”

“She was looking at me. She went into a trance. Then I left.”

Extremely passive in his acceptance of this marriage, Cakradhar leaves it with apparent ease. It is only a later woman disciple, Mahadāiseṃ, who thinks to ask what became of Cakradhar’s abandoned bride.

Besides his ascetic detachment, another way in which ‘Ekāṅka’ portrays Cakradhar as violating social norms is his apparent indifference to purity rules, including the kinds of avoidance normally required between people of different castes.⁷ Not only does Cakradhar move around freely among Untouchables, Adivasis, and other people of low or uncertain position in the caste hierarchy, he sometimes puts low-caste people into a trance state in which they cause what others see as pollution. A good example of this is found early in the text, in the story of Cakradhar’s encounter with an Untouchable Leatherworker:

LC, E12. He meets a Leatherworker.

As he was going to a certain village, there was a drinking-water stand along the road. The Gosāvi sat down at the water stand. A Leatherworker and his wife had gone to the market. They came there. The Leatherworker prostrated himself. He touched the holy feet. Seeing the Gosāvi’s beauty, he began to stare at him. And he opened his partitioned pouch. He offered him pieces of betel nut. He made betel rolls and gave them to him. With that, the Leatherworker’s wife came up from behind. “Get up, you! Let’s go home to our village.”

“Wait a minute. Wait a minute.”

⁶ A Gondhaḷ is a performance in honor of goddesses that involves story-telling and singing. Gondhaḷs are frequently performed in connection with weddings.

⁷ The *Līlācaritra* also provides evidence of Cakradhar’s violations of the rules about separation between the genders. For the most part, I will avoid that topic here, saving it for a separate study.

Again she said that. Three times he gave the same reply.

"All right. You are not coming. If you aren't coming, give up your rights over me."

"I give them up."

"Who is the witness?"

He gestured toward the Gosāvī. "This God." The Gosāvī agreed to it. Then she set out. Then he received a trance state from the Gosāvī. Because of it, he lost all consciousness of his body, all sense of who he was. He became a Gosāvī and moved around in the world as one.

In the course of his wanderings, he came to Kholnāyak's Āmbā. There, thinking him a god-man, they took him from house to house to feed him meals. One man took him to his home. He did *pūjā*.⁸ He served him a meal.

A Leatherworker from that man's village had come there to the market. He said, "Hey! Isn't he a Leatherworker from our village? Here he has become a god. He has polluted the village." One after another, people asked this. Everyone heard it. Then Jagaḍdev and Viñjhdev, the officials, summoned Brāhmaṇs knowledgeable in traditional law. They had them take out law books. Those men said, "He should be seated in lime. Then water should be poured over him from leather water bags."

That is exactly what they did to the man. Seeing the crowd, a man arriving at the scene asked someone what was going on. He replied, "We have done such-and-such to that man."

Then the first man said, "What can you do to him? He is over there in the market, playing, with a garland around his neck and pan in his mouth. The garland around his neck hasn't wilted a bit."

In the later, longer sections of the *Līlācaritra*, 'Pūrvārdha' ('The First Half') and 'Uttarārdha' ('The Second Half'), Cakradhar gathers a shifting but more-or-less permanent group of disciples around him. In these parts of the text, he becomes something like a typical guru, extraordinarily perceptive about his disciples' actions and intentions and strict in his demands for loyalty and obedience. On many occasions, what he teaches his disciples involves ignoring or minimising of caste distinctions and purity norms. For example, on several occasions Cakradhar opposes men's wearing the 'sacred thread', the topknot,⁹ and the forehead mark that indicate their Brāhmaṇ status. In P89 he tells his disciple Nāthobā, 'Go and bury your forehead mark and your sacred thread', and in U53 he commands another disciple, Indrabhaṭ, 'Indra, you must give up the topknot and thread'. In U161 Cakradhar tells Dādos, a rival guru several of whose followers transfer their loyalty to Cakradhar, 'O Māhātma, get rid of your topknot and sacred thread. Follow me'. And in U202, he praises yet another disciple, one who 'gave up everything Brāhmaṇical and got rid of his topknot and sacred thread'.

Shaving one's head entirely, giving up the topknot, and removing one's sacred thread are part of the ritual requirements for leaving the householder state

⁸ *Pūjā* is ritual worship, involving offerings and gestures of hospitality.

⁹ A tuft of hair left on the crown of the head when the rest of the head is shaved.

and becoming an ascetic renouncer. Hence, in these passages Cakradhar is urging his high-caste male disciples to renounce the householder life and become ascetics, rather than wholeheartedly condemning Brāhmaṇism or caste hierarchy. In the case of Indrabhaṭ (U53), his father-in-law pleads with Cakradhar, 'Shave my head, Lord, instead of his. But don't shave his, Lord'. When Cakradhar asks why, the father-in-law replies that Indrabhaṭ's wife (the father-in-law's daughter) 'is young' and should not be deprived of her husband's presence so early in her life.

While Cakradhar's disparagement of the marks of Brāhmaṇical status may thus be better seen as a preference for ascetic withdrawal from the world, there are many other episodes that indicate his disregard for the rules of purity and pollution. Cakradhar is especially lax about the rules about ingesting food or drink that Brāhmaṇs would normally considered polluting, whether because of being served by someone in a permanent or temporary state of pollution or because of having been touched by someone's saliva. In P332, Cakradhar makes fun of Lukhdevobā for undergoing an elaborate purification ritual after having drunk water that was served to him by an Untouchable. When Dādos' father has died, Cakradhar accepts food from Dādos, even though Dādos points out that he is affected by death pollution. 'I don't observe anything like that', Cakradhar says (LC, E61), and he eats the curds and rice that Dādos brings him. In P222, Cakradhar eats jujubes that one of his disciples has tasted, and in P223 he eats chickpeas that the same disciple has tasted.¹⁰ On many occasions reported in the *Līlācaritra*, Cakradhar gives people food that he has tasted or pan that he has chewed (P11, P245, P256, P260, P433, etc.). In U61, his spittle cures a Gardener-caste woman's tongue disease, and in E36 pan that he has chewed heals an eye that has been put out. In P94 and P99 disciples intentionally drink water that he has spat out, and in many more episodes, devotees drink water that has washed his feet.

Guṇḍam Rāūl too is frequently portrayed in his Mahānubhāv biography as violating not just the norms of sanity and politeness but also those of purity. For example, he drinks water from a large water storage jar reserved for Untouchables' use, then washes his feet directly in the jar (DGR 23). He plays with meat in the butchers' shops, then washes his hands in the water storage jar at a Brāhmaṇ's house (DGR 49). He takes a cloth that the Brāhmaṇ's daughter sits on while menstruating (DGR 16), and puts it into her family's water storage jar. The following episode from *The Deeds of God in Rddhipur* illustrates the problems he

¹⁰ Even more shockingly, in P221, when the same disciple (who appears to have been physically if not also mentally disabled) needs someone to accompany him when he goes to urinate, Cakradhar is the one to take on this task. The urine splashes onto the Gosāvi's feet. Afterwards a female disciple washes them.

causes for the authorities in Ṛddhipur, by passing freely between the homes of Untouchables and Brāhmaṇs:

DGR 47. The village headmen make an ordinance.

The village headmen said, “The Rāṭṭ goes around among the houses of Māṅgs and Mahārs, and right afterwards he goes into the houses of consecrated Brāhmaṇs. In this way, the Rāṭṭ has caused general pollution. Put their houses outside the village. Then the Rāṭṭ won’t go to them.”

Thus they had houses built outside the town. The original Mahār quarter was razed. But the Gosāvi would go to the new one too, [saying], “Oh, I shouldn’t go, I say [...] I should go, I say [...] No, I must not go, I tell you.” In this way, he would amuse himself, going from house to house.

Thus, both Guṇḍam Rāṭṭ and Cakradhar violate purity rules, and both transgress on occasion the boundaries of caste. Moreover, each of them is quoted in his biography as having spoken a verse that expresses his transcendence of the principal categories of classical Hindu social theory, the *varṇas* (‘castes’ or ‘classes’) and *āśramas* (‘stages of life’ for an upper-caste man), as well as the even broader distinction between human and divine beings (*Sūtrapāṭh*, ‘Vicār Mālikā’ a61 [Feldhaus 1983, 199, with changes]; DGR 281; LC, P328):

I am not a man, nor a god or Yakṣa,
Nor a Brāhmaṇ, a Kṣatriya, a Vaiśya, or a Śūdra.
I am not a celibate student; I am not a householder or a forest hermit.
Neither am I a mendicant, I who am innate knowledge.

Cakradhar says something similar to this twice during his ‘Ekāṅka’ period. We have already seen him, in E16, say to his future father-in-law, ‘I have no caste or lineage, no wife or family’. And in E48, when Cakradhar attends a wedding without being invited by either the bride’s side or the groom’s, he says: ‘I am not yours. I am not theirs. I do not belong to anyone.’

2 De-individualisation

However, despite such bold pronouncements, and despite the biographies’ portrayal of Cakradhar and Guṇḍam Rāṭṭ as not conforming to the rules, there are some ways in which the two divine incarnations seem not to be understood as individuals.

Most fundamentally, as incarnations of the same divine being, generally referred to as Parameśvar (the ‘supreme Lord’), they are not two separate individuals but essentially identical with each other and with at least three other such

incarnations. A couple of episodes in the *Līlācaritra* point out Cakradhar's identity with Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ, another incarnation of Parameśvar, who abandoned his body and took on the body of the young man who became Cakradhar (E4; cf. P330). There are many more episodes that express or refer to Cakradhar's identity with the god Kṛṣṇa (Śrīkṛṣṇa Cakravartī): for example, P63, P88, P246, P376, P380, P437, P392, U88, U275. In one of the most striking such passages, fish in the Godāvārī river swim to the surface to look at the Gosāvi, just as fish swam to the surface of the Yamunā river to look at Kṛṣṇa in the distant past:

LC, P376. Śrīkṛṣṇa on the [river]bank.

Then the Gosāvi sent all the devotees straight along the path. Placing his holy hand on Upādhye's shoulder, the Gosāvi went along the bank of the river. [...] The shadow of the Gosāvi's holy body fell on the water. That made all the fish from the bottom come up. All the fish were looking at the Gosāvi's holy form. Then the Gosāvi said to Upādhye, "Śrīkṛṣṇa Cakravartī was going along the bank of the Yamunā. The fish who had gone to the underworld had gone to the bottom [of the river]. They came up to look at the holy form. [...] That is what an attractive teacher he was."

"Yes, Lord."

Finally, *Līlācaritra* passages that express the identity of Cakradhar and Guṇḍam Rāūḷ include the following episode in which Guṇḍam Rāūḷ (Śrīprabhu) reveals that Cakradhar too is divine. Cakradhar is staying in the Bhairav temple in Ṛddhipur when Guṇḍam Rāūḷ comes along:

LC, P51. Śrīprabhu plays in the Bhairav temple.

One day Śrīprabhu came playing from the step-well¹¹ to the Bhairav temple. As he played with Keśav's image, he would place his finger on its nose, he would place it on the ear, he would place it on the eyes. At the same time he would say, "This is an ear. This is the nose. This is an eye. This is the forehead." And he would say, "Are you a god? Drop dead! You aren't. This is not a god." As he went along doing this, he reached the Bhairav temple.

Bhairav was in the back. The Omniscient one said, "Go away for a moment, my woman. Śrīprabhu is coming." Bāiseṃ went outside. She covered her eyes and kept silent, in order not to break his play.

Śrīprabhu entered [the temple]. He played with Bhairav in the same way. Then he approached the Gosāvi. The Gosāvi was sitting still. "This is an ear. This is the nose. This is an eye. This is the forehead." Saying this, he put his finger on [the Gosāvi's] forehead. "Yes. You are a god." (Hirāisā version: "Oh, you are a god, I say. You aren't, I say. This is a god, I tell you."¹²)

In this way, God revealed God.

¹¹ A well with stairs leading down to the level of the water.

¹² This is a normal way of speaking for Śrīprabhu.

As two of the five principal incarnations of Parameśvar, then, Cakradhar and Guṇḍam Rāṭi are fundamentally identical with one another and with the other divine incarnations. They are thus, in this sense, not portrayed as individuals.

Besides this fundamentally theological identity, there are several more ways in which the Mahānubhāv biographies portray these two divine incarnations as not being completely individualistic, but in fact conforming to a great extent to the rules that governed the society of their times. As human beings, both Cāṅgdev Rāṭi and Cakradhar are Brāhmaṇs,¹³ and both of them are men. Besides the occasions on which each of them breaks the rules for proper Brāhmaṇ behaviour, or on which they or their disciples violate the norms for gender roles, there are other times when they conform to those rules and norms, often without even questioning them. The most prominent of these occasions have to do with food and eating.

To begin with, Brāhmaṇs are not supposed to eat food prepared by a member of a lower caste. Cakradhar and his mendicant followers, most of whom were originally Brāhmaṇs, often adhere to this most basic caste rule. When they are in a village where there is no Brāhmaṇ home that can provide them with cooked food, the *Līlācaritra* portrays them accepting only uncooked food as alms (U184, U216, U241–2). At one point in the text (P284–5), Cakradhar stays for more than a week in the home of a certain Sāidev, whose shield, sword, and horse mark him as most probably a member of a warrior caste. During this visit, the food that Cakradhar and his disciples eat comes not from Sāidev's kitchen but from a neighboring Brāhmaṇ home. On another occasion, when one of Cakradhar's female disciples, Sādheṃ, finds that it has gotten too late, and she too hungry, to beg for her food, she asks for and eats a plate of food at an unfamiliar house that she takes to be the home of Brāhmaṇs.¹⁴ The way Cakradhar teases her upon her return reflects at least her assumption, if not also Cakradhar's and the text's authors', that it would be horrifying for her to eat food cooked by anyone but a Brāhmaṇ. The passage also illustrates the kind of clues that people in the late thirteenth century, as now, used to guess a person's caste (LC, U124):

13 Guṇḍam Rāṭi's Mahānubhāv biography states directly and at the beginning that he was born into a Kāṇva Brāhmaṇ family (DGR 1), that is, a family belonging to the Kāṇva branch of the Yajur Veda. The *Līlācaritra* is much more cagey about Cakradhar's caste identity. In U122, however, one of Cakradhar's female disciples refers to his caste as 'Lāḍ', a Brāhmaṇ group from Gujarat (Novetzke 2016, 109). In Kolte's version of LC, E16 (numbered P32 in Kolte's edition), Cakradhar calls himself a 'Lāḍ Sāmak' – that is, a person belonging to the Lāḍ *jāti* ('sub-caste') and the Sāma Veda.

14 On another occasion (U235), Sādheṃ goes to a Brāhmaṇ house to drink water when she becomes thirsty.

“[...] By then I got hungry, Lord. It was early afternoon. So I asked a Brāhmaṇ for a plate of food. [His wife] had made a leaf vegetable cooked in buttermilk. So I ate my meal there, Lord. I brought back the rest of the food. [...] I placed it over there.”

The Omniscient one said, “O Sādhem, that house was a Grocer’s.”

“No, Lord. There is a Tuḷsi Vṛndāvan at their house.”¹⁵

The Omniscient one said, “There are Tuḷsi Vṛndāvans at Grocers’ houses. [...] Isn’t that so, Vānareya?”

“That’s right, Lord,” [replied Vānareya]. “Those are the Grocers at the Capital. Let’s go to the Capital, and then we can get some groceries there.”¹⁶

“No, Lord, his bull’s ears are this big.”

The Omniscient one said, “Grocers’ bulls’ ears are big like that too.”

“No, Lord. His womenfolk are light-skinned. His children are light-skinned.”

The Omniscient one said, “Grocers’ womenfolk are light-skinned too. Grocers’ children are light-skinned. Isn’t that so, Vānareyā?”

“That’s right, Lord.”

And Sādhem remained silent.

Then the Omniscient one said, “O Sādhem, if it turns out that even so that house was a Grocer’s, what will you do?”

“Then I will drink water that has washed the Gosāvi’s feet. Then I will purify my stomach.”

The Omniscient one said, “Oh, Sādhem, that house is not a Grocer’s. That house was a Brāhmaṇ’s. I was teasing you.”

“Is that so, Lord?”

Was the Gosāvi teasing Sādhem because he thought that she was silly to worry about whose food she ate, or because he agreed with the premise of her horror and was simply being playful? The text leaves the answer deliciously ambiguous.

Except for some episodes recounted in ‘Ekāṅka’, Cakradhar and Guṇḍam Rāuḷ rarely eat food obtained by begging. Rather, disciples cook for them, and the disciples who do the cooking are almost invariably women, not men. This is but the most striking way in which the divine incarnations and their disciples adhere, apparently unquestioningly, to the gender roles of their times. Having women cook, however, raises questions about purity and pollution. In this respect too, Cakradhar, though gentle, nonetheless conformed to the conventions. Here is the most explicit treatment I’ve found in the *Līlācaritra* of his policy with respect to menstrual pollution:

¹⁵ A Tuḷsi Vṛndāvan is a flower pot, often decorated, that is generally set in a central location in front of the doorway to a house, in which a holy basil (*tuḷsi*) bush is planted, to be worshiped every morning by a woman of the household.

¹⁶ It appears that Vānareya (another name for Bhaṭṭabās or Nāgdev) is playing along with Cakradhar’s joke.

326. He accepts Umāī's snack.

Umāīseṃ was preparing to fast for a month. The Omniscient one said, "When one commences a month-long fast, one should serve a meal to Brāhmaṇs."

So Umāīseṃ invited the Gosāvi for some food. On the evening of the tenth day of the fortnight, she became polluted. Early the next morning she came for darśan of the Gosāvi. She prostrated herself to the Gosāvi without touching him. She began to express her sadness to Ābāīseṃ.

The Gosāvi called for Ābāīseṃ. "My woman, what is the woman who is fasting for a month saying?"

Then Umāīseṃ began to say to the Gosāvi, "Lord, Lord, I do not have the good fortune of preparing food for you myself, Lord, and then doing pūjā to the Gosāvi." Having said this, she began to cry.

The Omniscient one said, "O woman who is fasting for a month! Is it good to be far away [in the kitchen], not to know where I am, to fill your eyes with smoke? [...] Vṛdhābāīseṃ will prepare the refreshments. Nāgdev will do the pūjā on your behalf at the door of the house. Do not cry."

"All right, Lord."

The Gosāvi is sympathetic to Umāīseṃ, but he does not encourage her to violate the prevalent pollution rules. Rather, he attempts to reconcile her to them. Here, as in other cases, the divine incarnations, along with those who composed and preserved the texts describing their lives, appear to have been untroubled by – indeed, unconscious of – the caste-based and gendered structures within which they lived as humans. In these respects, the biographies' subjects were far from becoming, and the texts' authors were far from portraying them as, revolutionary individuals.

3 Institutionalisation

Besides allowing us to question the degree of individualisation that Cakradhar and Guṇḍam Rāṭī may have achieved, early Mahānubhāv literature provides a good deal of evidence about the process of institutionalisation experienced by their followers. As the 'founder' of the Mahānubhāvs, Cakradhar is remembered to have taught a large number of doctrines and rules of behaviour. The constraints that these teachings and instructions place on the thoughts and actions of his followers provide further examples of 'de-individualisation' that can be traced in the early Mahānubhāv literature. To take just one example, many of the rules that Cakradhar taught have to do with asceticism. Asceticism as a way of life involves cutting oneself off not only from luxury and comforts, but also from social bonds. The institutionalisation of the life of a wandering ascetic is one of the principal developments of the Mahānubhāvs' early years. The text that

reports in the most detail on that institutionalisation is *Smṛtisthaḷ*, the account of the developments among Cakradhar's disciples in the years after his departure in early 1283 CE and, approximately fourteen years later, the death of Guṇḍam Rāṭi (in 1286 or 1287 CE), up until the death of Nāgdev or Bhaṭobās, who led the group during this period. For example, *Smṛtisthaḷ* contains some poignant episodes about disciples, both male and female, being tested in their renunciation of home, family, and sex.¹⁷ One particularly dramatic episode tells of the efforts by the family of Kesobās, who would later compile Cakradhar's remembered sayings in the *Sūtrapāṭh*, to get Kesobās to abandon the ascetic live (*Smṛtisthaḷ* 12–3):

It is not known what village Kesobās was from. [...] He was a learned preacher. One day he came to Bhaṭobās and was initiated as an ascetic by him. Bhaṭobās loved him very much. He stayed in Bhaṭobās's presence. [...]

Then one day Kesobās's relatives heard about [his initiation as an ascetic] and came to take him away. His brother, Gopāḍdev, and his father-in-law came to take him away because they were opposed to what he had done.

They took Kesobās away. They tried to make him give up his initiation; but no matter what they did, he would not give it up.

Then they summoned all the learned men and had them argue with him. But he silenced them in argument. And the learned men washed their hands of him. They said, "We cannot win him over. If he is to be won over now, it is his wife who will do it. Now lock up the two of them in the same room."

So they locked them in. If she lay on the cot, he would sleep on the ground. If she lay on the ground, he would sleep on the cot. In this way, the night would pass.

During the daytime, he would go to the river. They would put someone there to watch him. Kesobās would stay alone at the river. [...] Then they would bring him into the village.

Several days passed this way. Then his wife said, "Let him go now. He has become a *yogī* now. It is a sin for me to interfere."

So they all gave Kesobās permission to leave. He left. He met Bhaṭobās. He told him what had happened. Bhaṭobās listened, and then praised him lavishly. [...]

Besides showing us the heroic efforts of the first two generations of Cakradhar's disciples to live the way of life he taught, early Mahānubhāv literature also allows us to trace the development of the Mahānubhāvs from a single individual to a loosely knit group to a highly structured institution. In the *Līlācaritra*, the description of Cakradhar as a solitary wandering ascetic in the first part of the text ('Ekāṅka') is followed, in the second and third parts ('Pūrvārdha' and 'Uttarārdha'), by almost a thousand episodes in which he is accompanied in his wanderings by one or a few disciples. Toward the end of 'Pūrvārdha' (P444), Cakradhar meets Bhaṭobās, and Bhaṭobās comes to realise that Cakradhar is

¹⁷ See *Smṛtisthaḷ* 13, 53, 54, 56, 58, 75, 83, 97, 105-6, 134, and 206, and the discussion in Feldhaus 1994.

God; at the beginning of the third and final part of the *Līlācaritra* ('Uttarārdha'), Bhaṭobās becomes a full-fledged follower of Cakradhar (U1), renouncing home and family, as well as his previous guru.¹⁸ Gradually, in the course of the 500-or-so episodes of 'Uttarārdha', Bhaṭobās becomes Cakradhar's most important disciple. At the end of 'Uttarārdha' (U489, U495, and U496),¹⁹ Cakradhar entrusts him with the leadership of the community of disciples. Fourteen years later, Guṇḍam Rāṭi confirms the appointment, when he is on his deathbed. At the end of the *The Deeds of God in Rddhipur* (DGR 322), Bhaṭobās asks him, 'Lord, Śrī Cakradhar Rāyā²⁰ entrusted us to you. Now you're leaving, Gosāvī. So to whom do you entrust us?' Guṇḍam Rāṭi replies, in his typical speech pattern, 'Oh, drop dead! I entrust all these others to you, and I entrust you to Śrī Dattātreyā Prabhu'.²¹

Finally, *Smṛtisthaḷ* portrays Bhaṭobās and the other disciples working out, under his leadership, the rules and structures of a full-blown *sampradāy* ('sect'). We learn of the categories of discipleship that come to be utilised, of the body of literature that begins to be composed, of the traditions of pilgrimage and relic veneration that develop, of the theology that grows ever more elaborate, and of the rules and regulations that become ever more precise.²² For example, Bhaṭobās modifies Cakradhar's command that his followers should practice constant, solitary, aimless wandering (*nityāṭan*) by directing the disciples to wear distinctive clothing when they wander (SS 30), by instituting the suspension of wandering during the rainy season (SS 29), and by introducing the innovation that male mendicants should wander in pairs and the women in groups of four. Bhaṭobās institutes the last of these modifications in response to an incident narrated in *Smṛtisthaḷ* 105–6:

18 In LC, U29–31, Bhaṭobās's wife, Gāṅgāiseṃ, comes and curses him ('Burn up! Burn up! Such a man's [life] was saved. Why is that man still alive? The man whose wife has no food, no clothes – that man has no shame'). Cakradhar convinces Gāṅgāiseṃ that she is better off with Bhaṭobās alive, then he sends Bhaṭobās and Gāṅgāiseṃ to spend the night together in the nearest village. When they fail to reconcile, Cakradhar finally sends Bhaṭobās home to make arrangements for Gāṅgāiseṃ's support.

19 These chapter numbers follow Nene's edition. The corresponding numbers in my forthcoming edition are U494, U500, and U501. For similar chapters in Kolte's edition, see his LC, U606, U620, U623, and U625. See also *Sūtrapāṭh*, 'Vicār' 153, 155, 156, 158–62, and 240, and 'Ācār' 137.

20 Rāyā means 'King'.

21 Dattātreyā Prabhu is another of the five principal divine incarnations recognised by the Mahānubhāvs.

22 For a detailed discussion of these and other aspects of the institutionalisation of the Mahānubhāvs, see the introduction to Feldhaus, Tulpule 1992, especially pages 3–53.

Once when Kesobās had gone out alone to wander, rain fell out of season. He went to a village to beg. At one house a moneylender's daughter saw him. Kesobās was handsome. He was strong. She felt attracted to him. She gave him alms herself, and asked, "Where do you live?"

He just shook his head and moved on indifferently.

She watched for him until evening. That evening it rained. He went to spend the night in a *linga* temple²³ near the village gate. He had a small piece of shawl with him. He placed it in front of him and sat in a corner.

At night the temple priest went home. He had seen [Kesobās], but left without saying anything.

After a while, the woman wrapped herself in a thick blanket and came to the temple. She looked around and saw Kesobās. And she sat down on his lap.

Kesobās said, "Get up. I'll do whatever you say," and he made her sit on the ground.

And he said to the woman, "I'm going out to urinate. You sit right here." And he left behind the shawl and some belongings that he had. She believed him.

In this way, he got out of the temple, and immediately he left, saying, "Śrī Cakradhar!"

The woman waited for a while. When she realised that he was not going to return, she got frightened. She went home.

That night Kesobās slept out in the open, and the very next day he set out to meet Bhaṭobās. [...]

Then Bhaṭobās said to Kesobās, "Now you go back there."

Kesobās agreed. Kesobās said to himself, "My body is the cause of this." So he returned to his wandering. His body became emaciated. He practiced stringent fasting. Then he went to that same village and went to beg at that woman's house. Just then, she was standing there. She saw Kesobās and spat contemptuously, naturally taking him to be a wretched beggar. And she went into the house.

With that, Kesobās patted himself on the arms.²⁴ "Am I not Śrī Cakradhar's Keśavdyā?" he said. [...]

So [Bhaṭobās] arranged that the men should [go wandering] in pairs and the women in groups of four.

Thus, even in *Smṛtisthaḷ*, we are presented with a very organic, non-bureaucratic process. We observe Bhaṭobās and others of the first generation of Cakradhar's disciples as they figure out how to practice, over the long term and as a growing group, the highly ascetic, individualistic way of life taught by a man they understood to have been God. Through *Smṛtisthaḷ*, we are thus able to capture the very beginnings of the institutionalisation of a way of life based on the teachings of a highly individual religious leader and his extremely unconventional guru.

²³ A temple of the god Śiva in his aniconic/phallic form.

²⁴ This is a gesture of self-congratulation in Old Marathi.

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