

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

A Medieval Temple Dispute

Shobhana Sinha

Assistant Professor, Bharati College, University of Delhi, India

Abstract:

This paper is a study of the conflict over the temple of Srinathji, then located in Vrindavan between two prominent Hindu (Vaisnavite) sects of medieval India. It describes in detail the actual unfolding of the conflict in order to bring out the very real competition for resources that was occurring between different religious sects in the medieval centuries.

Keywords: Gaudiya, Vallabhite. Srinathji, competition, conflict

1. Introduction

A social history of medieval India brings one face to face with the differing trends within medieval Hindu devotionalism, generally referred to as the Bhakti movement. This umbrella term encompasses a whole spectrum of devotion including that of Kabir and Nanak on the one hand and of Caitanya and Vallabh on the other. In this paper, I propose to look at the inter-relationship between two such sects which represented two of the most popular devotional movements of medieval India, namely the Gaudiyas and the Vallabhites. The Gaudiyas and the Vallabhites were both Vaisnav (that is devotees of Visnu) sects whose chief deity was the God Krishna. Both these sects worshipped Krishna in slightly different ways and shared a very competitive relationship with each other. More specifically, I look at the dispute over the Srinathji shrine between the two sects which will demonstrate an important aspect of sect practices in medieval India. Recent scholarship on the Bhakti movement has tended to divide the forms of devotion into two — the *nirgun* and the *sagun* — on the basis of the nature of divinity. The *nirgun* school refers to devotion to a formless entity while the *sagun bhaktas* (who are in majority) are devotees of a physical god. Thus saints such as Kabir and Ravi Das are *nirgun bhaktas*, while Vallabh, Caitanya, Tulsidas, Mira all belong to the *sagun* school. Alongside this distinction has also developed an argument which characterizes the *nirgun* philosophy as the more egalitarian. It is argued that the *sagun* Saints maintained a more orthodox attitude. Thus, while the radical nature and the egalitarianism of the initial phase of the Bhakti movement, represented by *sants* such as Kabir is emphasized, the later phase of the movement is often characterized as Sanskritized or Vaisnavite in nature. However in this essay, I hope to demonstrate the divergences, both doctrinal and otherwise between the different sects who were influential in the later part of the *sagun* Bhakti movement. As mentioned above, I will be looking at the Gaudiya Vallabhite conflict which occurred at various levels. The Gaudiya Sampraday is so named as some of its main theologians belong to Gauda region of Bengal. The founder of the sect was Caitanya. Caitanya's philosophy is known as *Achintyabhedabheda* ('incomprehensible dualistic monism'). The Vallabhite sect derives its name from its founder Vallabhacharya. Vallabhacharya's philosophy is called *Shuddhadvaita* (Pure Non dualism) and the path postulated by him is called the Pushti marga. The main deity of the sect is Srinathji and it was the right to his worship which became the source of conflict between the two sects. While there were important doctrinal differences, the two sects also clashed over the ownership of temples. It is this aspect which is the focus of this essay. Religious sects at this point in history were engaged in a competition for three basic resources. One of these was control over temples. Temples were not only the seats of deities. Indeed, we are aware that the role of temples in Indian social and economic history since ancient times has generated much discussion among scholars. In the late medieval period, institutions such as temples gained even greater importance, especially in the context of newly emerging sects seeking to expand their spheres of influence. The temple provided one such space in which the members could congregate and express their devotion while the sect leaders could expound their vision. Besides, the rituals and the theology of the particular sect could be further institutionalized. The attempt was to create a community of the faithful. At the same time, temples also developed into economically valuable organizations. As we will see, the revenue realized in the name of these temples was substantial and of great consequence for the sects. However, the need to sacralize the temple was also never dispensed with. Thus both in the case of the Govardhanath temple of the Vallabhites and the Govinddeva temple of the Gaudiyas, the chief deity was supposed to have manifested itself in a divine manner (called *svarupa*). Interestingly, in both cases, the stories of their manifestations are in fact very similar, indicating perhaps some already popular myth which was made use of by the two sects. Again, this reflects another strategy through which spheres of influence were sought to be expanded. Through the amalgamation of already current myths in the doctrinal philosophies of the sects more followers could be brought within the orbit of the sect. Conflict over temples is most vividly demonstrated in the *varta* of Krsnadas Adhikari in the Caurasi Vaisnavan ki *Varta* which will be described in some detail below. The incidents of this *varta* are also referred to in the *varta* of Ramdas Chauhan.

The *Vartas* (literally conversations) - written in Braj bhasha recount episodes from the lives of 84 of Vallabh's disciples. Each *varta* illustrates some desirable quality of a Vaisnav. The authorship of the *Caurasi Vaisnavan ki Varta* has been ascribed to Gokulnath- the grandson of Vallabhacharya. A careful reading of the *Vartas* yields important historical and social information for the period. The Gaudiya Vallabhite conflict occurred in a background of intense competition among various religious sects. Indeed, in the *varta* that we have referred to, we find that it is not only the Gaudiyas who are considered as adversaries. Krsnadas's interaction with Mirabai again offers interesting possibilities of interpreting relations between different Vaisnav. During one of his tours, on the road from Braj to Gujarat, Krsnadas had the occasion to visit the home of Mirabai- the renowned woman saint. As Krsnadas and his companions entered the house, they found that some of the leading *bhaktas* were assembled there. However Krsnadas felt no awe in their presence and in fact he refused a generous donation in favour of Srinathji being offered by Mirabai. When the man traveling with Krsnadas asked in astonishment why he had behaved in this way, Krsnadas explained that it would have been unethical to accept donation from someone who was a follower of another teacher. Furthermore, he says a "great number of religious leaders and *svamis* representing several different sects had gathered in Mirabai's house; I cut all those proud people down to size. All those have been waiting there at Mirabai's house for many days in the hope of getting donations, but I a *sudra* follower of Vallabhacharya would not accept a gift of many gold coins. Every one of those saints and *svamis* will think to himself, "if the disciple is so scrupulous, then how much more so his *guru* must be." ⁱ The first interesting thing to note here is that although the others had been waiting at Mira's place for longer, Mira prefers to attend to Krsnadas immediately and offers him a gift. Thus within the gathering of *bhaktas*, Krsnadas' eminence and that of the Vallabhites is established. Further as historian Jack Hawley has pointed out, a major intention of the story is to show that the donations were clean money- reflecting the theological submission that had been made on the part of the donors. In contrast, Mira is shown as being surrounded by *bhaktas* who were waiting for something to be offered to them. What was being condemned was not only the avarice of the *bhaktas*, but also the unattached and open nature of Mira's devotion. ⁱⁱ The other way in which the new confidence was sought to be expressed was by simply asserting the superiority of the Vallabh sect over the other sects. This is exactly what the *varta* of Krsnadas Adhikari demonstrates in the context of dispute over the Govardhan temple. The events that took place atop the Govardhan hill had important ramifications in the context of the development of the Gaudiya sect also. An interesting aspect of the *varta* relates to the role played by Mughal courtiers.

2. The Dispute over the Srinathji Shrine

According to Richard Barz, Krsnadas is one of the most "fascinating figures to appear in the history of Hindu devotionalism..." ⁱⁱⁱ He was the son of a Kunbi headman of a village in Gujarat. Kunbis belong to the *Sudra* varna although Krsnadas' family was reasonably well off. This itself is significant in the kind of suggestion it offers. After a family dispute in which he exposed his father's dishonesty, Krsnadas decided to renounce worldly life. In the *varta* we are told that on the day of the *Aksayatriya* festival the temple which had been financed by one Puranmal Khatri was completed. The first temple of Srinathji was erected by Vallabh himself in 1494. This was replaced by the later temple whose construction began in 1500 A.D and was completed in 1520. Vallabh asked Saddu Pande (the local resident who discovered the deity) to take over charge of the performance of the *seva* (ritual service). However, the latter humbly refused. He suggested that the group of Krsna worshipping Bengalis who stay near Radhakund should be asked to perform the *seva*. Thereafter Vallabh sent for them and assigned the duty to the Bengalis. According to the *Govardhanji ki Prakatya ki varta* Madhavendra Puri was the head of the Bengali priests who had been assigned by Vallabh to worship the deity. Here again, we see the peculiar nature of the relationships between the two sects. The correct worship of the *svarupa* was necessary and there could be no prejudice or compromise there. Thus if enough Vallabhite priests were not available, then the services of the Bengalis would be utilized- but the *seva* had to be performed properly. Krsnadas, on the other hand was appointed as manager of the temple- or *adhikari*. He had the responsibility of collecting donations which he then had to turnover to priests to be used for the temple. However, the decision to appoint Bengali Brahmins as opposed to Saddu Pande - a Brajvasi (resident of Braj) to perform the *seva* at the temple can also be seen as attempts to close ranks by the Vaisnavite establishment of the region against the local populace. According to R.P Rana, the followers of the Vallabhite and the Gaudiya sects belonged to the upper castes while the local population of the Vrindavan region consisted of peasant castes such as the Jats, Gujars and Ahirs. Using the paradigm of the elite -folk binary opposition, Rana has argued that "during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Braj- bhumi (i.e. land) had become a battle ground of two rival cultures." ^{iv} However, it may be added that in the fight for Braj bhumi, it was not only a Jat versus Vaisnav conflict but also *one Vaisnav sect against another*. To return to the *varta*, the trouble began when the Bengalis started to transfer all the offerings meant for Srinathji over to their guru at Vrindavan. Moreover the Bengali priests had started worshipping a goddess along with Srinathji at the time of the food offering. The *varta* further tells us that the Lord instructed one Avadhutadas to direct Krsnadas to evict the Bengalis. Interestingly, the reason that Srinathji himself offers to put an end to the *seva* by the Bengalis, to Avadhutadas was that the Bengalis used to seat the goddess alongside him- not the alleged financial irregularities being committed by the Bengalis. Thereafter Krsnadas set off for Adel as he could not remove the Bengalis without the consent of Sri Gusainji- Vallabh's successor as it was Vallabh himself who had entrusted them with the duty. At Adel, he met Sri Gusainji and recounted the purpose of his visit. Apparently, Gusainji was already aware of the misdeeds of the Bengalis, but had felt restrained by the fact that they had been appointed by Sri Vallabh himself. However, Krsnadas was able to persuade Gusainji to change his mind as this was the will of the Lord himself. Gusainji then wrote letters to Todar Mal and Birbal and asked them to do as Krsnadas directed them. Krsnadas then went to the Mughal court to deliver the letters and solicited the support of Todar Mal and Birbal.

Subsequently Krsnadas turned towards Govardhan. Upon reaching Govardhan, his first action was to set fires to the huts of the Bengalis at Rudrakunda. Then, he asked his supporters to start screaming. On hearing the commotion, the Bengalis who were performing puja at the time, came out. As soon as they saw their homes burning, they ran out to douse the fires. Krsnadas was

waiting precisely for this opportunity. He stationed his people at strategic places in the temple and appointed Brahmin *bhitarayas* (priests) to perform the *seva*. The Bengalis had by now started returning, but Krsnadas refused to let them inside the temple. A physical battle ensued, in which the Bengalis were defeated. The Bengalis then went to Mathura and told Rup and Sanatan – important leaders of the sect, about the happenings. They also pointed out that Krsnadas was a *Sudra*. Rup and Sanatan also confronted Krsnadas about the entire incident as well as about his caste. However Krsnadas pointed out to them that they too were only *Kayasth* and not Agnihotri Brahmins. The Bengalis then approached the governor of Mathura. However, at this point, Birbal and Todar Mal interceded on behalf of the Vallabhites. Later on when Sri Gusainji came to Govardhan, the Bengalis met him. In order to pacify the Gaudiyas, the former entrusted the care of Madanmohanji to the Bengalis. Ultimately in 1670, in view of the policies being pursued by Mughal ruler Aurangzeb, a decision was taken to move Srinathji from Vrindavan. En route to Kota in Rajasthan, the cart carrying the idol got stuck in Sinhad. This was interpreted as a sign that the god wanted to settle down there, and consequently a temple was constructed there. Eventually a township developed around the temple and came to be known as Nathdwara. The *Caitanyacharitamrit*- a hagiographical text of the Gaudiyas- does not contain reference to this incident. However, Alan Entwistle has suggested that the aversion of Caitanya, Rup and Sanatan to set foot on the Govardhan hill could have been an outcome of the above incident. It was given a religious gloss with the argument that the Bengalis considered the hill itself to be a manifestation of Srinathji and so would not step on it. The loss by the Bengalis of their share in the service of Srinathji appears to coincide with the expansion of their settlement at nearby Radhakund during the 1540s.^v

.From the above *varta* it appears that in the initial stages, during the early years of the sixteenth century, relations between the two sects were not as antagonistic, and in fact there seems to have been some amount of give and take- as indicated by the appointment of the Bengalis for the *seva* by Vallabh himself. However, as temples became seats of power- both esoteric and temporal, and began to vie for political patronage, competition also developed. Dormant tensions came to the fore.

The reason given by Krsnadas for not readmitting the Bengalis was their alleged lack of true devotion. Thus, they had left the *seva*- as soon as they saw their houses burning. Having to choose between God and Home, the Bengalis had chosen the latter, that is the material over the spiritual. No doubt, this was a plausible reason for removing the Bengalis from the Srinathji temple. However, at the same time, it was also an indirect way of questioning the nature of devotion of the Bengalis at the broader level. If the priests of the sect could be so greedy, then it was a reflection on the sect as a whole also? The Caitanyites had to be disparaged first and foremost in terms of their spiritual powers. Thus they are depicted in the seventeenth century text as being more interested in worldly things in God. Clearly, a dual purpose was served. Not only were the Caitanyites evicted from the temple, but the superficial nature of their piety was also exposed. In yet another instance, the tone of the Vallabhites is almost disrespectful when they refer to the worship of goddess Vrindadevi by the Bengalis. Moreover, Srinathji himself did not want to be worshipped along side her. There could not have been a more powerful condemnation of the doctrine of the Gaudiyas in which the female principle occupies a prominent place. The other reason given by Krsnadas was the lack of loyalty on the part of the Gaudiyas. Thus the Srinathji temple was projected as an exclusive institution of the Vallabh sect. Only then could the question of loyalty to Krsnadas arise. Moreover, we see subtle attempts at demeaning the Caitanyites by Krsnadas who refers to them as his employees.

3. Conclusion

The Gaudiya and the Vallabhite movements occurred in the background of a resurgence of Vaisnavism. While at the one end, this period witnessed the development of the Jagannath Cult in Eastern India, at the other the Warkari movement, involving annual pilgrimages to Pandharpur to the shrine of Vithoba also came to occupy an important position in the religious landscape. All these movements used innovative methods to attract followers and in many ways challenged existing norms. Mira's devotion thus did not only reflect love for Krishna, but ultimately, also came to symbolize an important challenge to patriarchy. Moreover, even as it is true that often the leaders of many of these sectarian movements were Brahmins, still the competition for resources and the creativity engendered by the religious enterprise gave birth to a very vibrant form of devotion which was different from the *Brahminism* of the Great Tradition. Thus Krsnadas Adhikari often referred to his *sudra* caste even as he defended Vallabhite interests. The dynamism of many of these sects such as the Vallabh and the Gaudiyas, transcended limitations of caste and class (at times even creed) in the larger attempt to recruit followers, and in the competition for patronage.

4. References

1. Gokulnath, Caurasi Vaisnavan ki Varta, Bombay, Lakshmi Venkateshwar Press, Varta no.83
2. John Hawley, (2005). Three Bhakti Voices, New Delhi, Oxford University Press.
3. Richard K. Barz,(1992). 'Krsnadas Adhikari: An Irascible Devotee's Approach to the Divine'. In G.M Bailey and I.Kesarcodi Watson (ed.)Bhakti Studies, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers Pvt Ltd.
4. R.P Rana, (2006). Rebels to Rulers The Rise of Jat Power in Medieval India c. 1665-1735, New Delhi, Manohar.
5. A.W Entwistle, (1987). Braj Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage, Groningen Egbert Forsten

