

Antonio Rigopoulos

*The Mahānubhāvs*

KYKEION STUDI E TESTI • SCIENZE DELLE RELIGIONI



Munshiram  
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S T U D I E T E S T I

**Ky ké ion**

Scienze delle Religioni

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ANTONIO RIGOPOULOS

*The Mahānubhāvs*

Firenze University Press ❖ Munshiram Manoharlal

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*dattātreyā hare kṛṣṇa unmattānanda-dāyaka |  
digambara mune bāla piśāca jñāna-sāgara ||*

Oh Dattātreyā [who are] Hari, Kṛṣṇa, the crazy bliss-bestower!  
Oh you [who are] clad in space, the silent one, the child,  
the demon, the ocean of knowledge!

*(Dattātreyā Upaniṣad I,7)*



1  
*Introduction*

The ascetic, devotional sect of the Mahānubhāvs —‘Those of the great experience’— arose, like the much more popular *bhakti* movement of the Vārkarīs centered in Paṇḍharpur, in thirteenth century Mahārāṣṭra. These two movements, which were seminal in the origin and development of Marāṭhī literature, remained separate and independent, never coming into any significant contact with one another.<sup>1</sup> The Mahānubhāvs believe in five manifestations (*avatārs*) of the One God whom they call Parameśvar (‘Supreme Lord’), the sole source of isolation (*kaivalya*) or liberation (*mokṣa*) to whom is directed exclusive devotion.

<sup>1</sup> The Marāṭhī scholar V. B. Kolte suggested that the founder of the Vārkarī movement, the great Jñāndev (d. 1296), might have written his *Jñāneśvarī* as a direct counter-response to Mahānubhāv doctrine (see Kolte 1950). This hypothesis, however, seems far-fetched. Even R.D. Ranade argued that the Mahānubhāvs made current certain Yoga practices which might have influenced some of Jñāndev’s writings. Nonetheless, he observed that Jñāndev owed almost nothing or very little to this tradition (Ranade 1982: 27-29). Though according to the Mahānubhāv *Smṛti-sthaḷ* (chap. 244) it would have been a Mahānubhāv to turn the thoughts of the Vārkarī saint-poet Nāmdev (1270-1350) to Kṛṣṇa, inspiring his song of repentance *My days have passed to no purpose*, this is most probably a hagiographic invention.

These are the so-called ‘five Kṛṣṇas’ (*pañca-kṛṣṇas*), comprising two deities —Kṛṣṇa himself and Dattātreyā— and three sect figures: Cakradhar (d. 1274), the founder of the sect, his predecessor Guṇḍam Rāūḷ (d. 1287-1288), Cakradhar’s *guru*, and Cāngdev Rāūḷ, Guṇḍam Rāūḷ’s *guru*. The early period of the sect is dominated by the figures of Cakradhar, Guṇḍam Rāūḷ, and Cakradhar’s successor Nāgdev, also known as Bhaṭobās (d. 1312-1313). The Mahānubhāvs non-conformity with respect to mainstream Hindūism appears evident at a first glance: the sect rejects the caste system and the entire *varṇāśrama-dharma* ideology as well as the *Vedas* and all brāhmaṇical authority; in order to safeguard their identity and avoid brāhmaṇical persecution Mahānubhāvs had to go underground and develop a secret script to preserve their scriptures; they accept on equal terms both untouchables and women and created an order of female renouncers alongside one of men; they compound asceticism and devotion in a rigorous and at the same time original way, which reinforces their sectarian, elitist character; they are strict monotheists and devalue the entire Hindū pantheon (except Kṛṣṇa and Dattātreyā) repudiating the brāhmaṇical ritual apparatus and the worship of gods (*devatā-pūjā*); philosophically, they appear to be the sole *bhakti* group to embrace dualism (*dvaita*), opposite to the non-dualist devotionism (*advaita-bhakti*) dominant among the Vārkaris and in the whole of the Marāṭhī cultural area; their temples are famous as healing centers, to which people flock in hopes of being exorcized and freed from malevolent spirits and demons (*bhūts*); finally, for some particular aspect of their doctrine and practice, the influence upon them of other religions such as Jainism and even Islām has been postulated. Here, I will offer an overview concerning the origins and main religious and doctrinal characteristics of the Mahānubhāvs, discussing those aspects which appear especially revealing of their difference.

If, in the beginning, the Mahānubhāvs knew a fairly rapid expansion, especially in the northern and eastern regions of Mahārāṣṭra —the old districts of Khāndeś and

Nāgpur, and especially the Varhād or Vidarbha/Berār area, in which they have always been strongest— around the end of the fourteenth century their movement had already split into thirteen ‘sub-sects’ (*āmnāya*, a term often associated with Śākta Tantrism). The Mahānubhāvs went silently underground aiming at a defensive isolation from the larger Hindū context. They never became a popular movement and always centered themselves in remote areas, gathering in monasteries (*maths*) situated in decayed and removed villages. To this day, the sect’s main cult center is Ṛddhipur (modern Rītpur) in Varhād, a small tumble-down village north of Amraoti: this is the town where Cakradhar met his master Guṇḍam Rāūl and attained enlightenment from him. Although the prominent leaders among the early Mahānubhāvs were all brāhmaṇs (often converts from the prevailing *advaita* vaiṣṇavism), their followers were and are mostly non-brāhmaṇs, that is, low caste people and even untouchables.

A clear aversion toward the Mahānubhāvs became evident as early as the latter half of the fourteenth century. Paradigmatic of the disfavor with which they came to be looked upon by Hindūs and of their willingness to separate themselves from brāhmaṇical orthodoxy so as to protect their distinctiveness, was the transcribing of their sacred works, written in Old Marāṭhī, into various ciphers or letter-substitution codes which they themselves invented. The most common among these ciphers and the first to be introduced around the middle of the fourteenth century was the *sakaḷa līpī*, the cipher of ‘all’ (*sakaḷa*) as it was used throughout the sect, traditionally ascribed to Ravaḷobās.<sup>2</sup> In those days, the Mahānubhāvs’ adoption of a secret script was not devised out of fear of Muslim oppression, but rather out of

<sup>2</sup> The script was first deciphered in 1910 by V.K. Rajwade (see the *Bhārata Itihāsa Saṃśodhaka Maṇḍala Reports*, Poona, śaka 1832, p. 78 and śaka 1835, pp. 58-59). For an explanatory presentation of this cipher, invented as all other ciphers by members of the Upādhye sub-sect, see Raeside 1970: 328-334.

fear of orthodox brāhmaṇism, which became all the more rigid in its violent opposition and persecution of the sect. Mahānubhāvs were so successful in their secretive attitude that they remained practically unknown for about five hundred years, that is, until the end of the nineteenth century. Actually, they were even able to expand beyond the borders of the Marāṭhī cultural area. Around the sixteenth century an offshoot of the Mahānubhāvs, known as the Jai Kṛṣṇi *panth*, developed in Punjāb and as far as in what is now Pakistān, with monasteries in Lahore and Peshāwār (and perhaps even Kabul). The Mahānubhāvs' link with this offshoot was strongly maintained until partition.

Outside of their own closed circles, and precisely because of being perceived as separate from mainstream Hinduism, the Mahānubhāvs were met with prejudices and distrust by common people, especially by the brāhmaṇs of the districts in which they flourished. According to D.D. Kosambi, the Mahānubhāv «protest group» would go back to the ideals of a tribal, communal life:

Black garments, absolute rejection of the caste system, organization into clan-like sub-groups, sharing among members, and a greatly simplified marriage ritual (*gaḍa-baḍa-guṇḍā*) prove this, though a few leaders of the sect later accumulated some property, with a concomitant thirst for Hindu respectability (Kosambi 1962: 33).<sup>3</sup>

Although this hypothesis of a sort of tribal, egalitarian background seems untenable, Mahānubhāvs were certainly never entirely accepted by the local people, being perceived as different and strange. Indeed, there are proverbs and idiomatic sayings in Marāṭhī which are derogatory of the 'Mānbhāvs:' they are said to be hypocritical and two-faced,

<sup>3</sup> Kosambi also argues that «Mahānubhāvas take Sāṃdīpani as Kṛṣṇa's *guru*» (Kosambi 1962: 24). Sāṃdīpani is the name of a sage (*muni*) and a master-at-arms who instructed Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma according to the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*. In my reading of Mahānubhāv literature, however, I have never come across such belief.

immoral and lustful beggars who carry their sticks upside down, thieves, and cunning people in general. Brāhmaṇical enmity and hatred towards the sect, both in Mahārāṣṭra as well as in Gujarāt, comes out very clearly in the following decree promulgated in 1782 by MādHAVRĀO PEŚVĀ:

The Manbhaus are entirely to be condemned. They are to be entirely outcasted. They have no connection with the four castes nor with the six Darśanas. No caste should listen to their teachings. If they do, then they are to be put out of caste (in Farquhar 1984: 322).

For centuries Mahānubhāvs suffered in silence such offences.<sup>4</sup> Still in 1885-1887, Sir William Wilson Hunter in *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* (vol. XII, p. 58) presented an account of the Mahānubhāvs which was both inaccurate and filled with popular misconceptions. In it, we read that its supposed founder, one Kishen Bhat<sup>5</sup> said to be the spiritual guide of a king ruling in Paiṭhaṇ around the middle of the fourteenth century, was made an outcaste because of his marriage with a woman of the lowest of Mahārāṣṭra's three untouchable castes i.e. that of the rope-makers Mātāṅgas or Māṅgs: the very name Mānbhāv/Mānbhāu is said to be derived from it.<sup>6</sup> The professed celibacy of the male and female members of the sect—who all have their heads

<sup>4</sup> Still in the nineteenth century, a Muslim from Ellichpur noted that there was bitter enmity between the Mahānubhāvs and the brāhmaṇs of the district and that, even though many people oppressed them, they never complained (Kolte 1962: 148).

<sup>5</sup> In other ethnographic accounts, his name is given as Arjun Bhat or Krishna Bhat.

<sup>6</sup> In the 1881 *Berār Census Report*, E.J. Kitts wrote (p. 62): «The Brāhmans hate the Mānbhaos [...]. The Brāhmans represent them as descended from one Krishna Bhat, a Brāhman who was outcasted for keeping a beautiful Māṅg woman as his mistress. His four sons were called the *Māṅg-bhaos* or Māṅg brothers» (in Russell 1916: 181). This article on the Mānbhao (pp. 176-183), reporting various popular stories documenting brāhmaṇical hatred toward the sect, is said to have been compiled by combining three sources: notes on the caste drawn up by Colonel

shaved (men also their faces) and typically wear black or ash-grey clothes perhaps in Kṛṣṇa's honor<sup>7</sup>— is also called into question, suggesting a situation of promiscuity and sexual misconduct.<sup>8</sup> This is due to the fact that the order allows women as well as men to become ascetic renouncers<sup>9</sup> and that Mahānubhāv monasteries even nowadays house both

Mackenzie and contributed to the *Pioneer* newspaper by Mrs. Horsburgh; Captain Mackintosh's *Account of the Manbhaos* (India Office Tracts); a paper by one Pyāre Lāl Misra, ethnographic clerk. On the Māṅgs, a term derived from Sanskrit *mātāṅga*, see Karve 1968: 33. For another short but useful account on the Mahānubhāvs, see Farquhar 1984: 247-249. See also Gonda 1963: 177.

<sup>7</sup> Another derogatory story put forward by brāhman̄s concerning the origin of the sects' clothing is the following: «Krishna Bhat's followers, refusing to believe the aspersions cast on their leader by the Brāhman̄s, but knowing that some one among them had been guilty of the sin imputed to him, determined to decide the matter by the ordeal of fire. Having made a fire, they cast into it their own clothes and those of their *guru*, each man having previously written his name on his garments. The sacred fire made short work of all the clothes except those of Krishna Bhat, which it rejected and refused to burn, thereby forcing the unwilling disciples to believe that the finger of God pointed to their revered *guru* as the sinner» (Russell 1916: 181-182). The Mahānubhāvs' wearing of dark clothes in Kṛṣṇa's honor is mentioned by various authors: for instance, Ranade observed that «it is probably due to the recognition of this deity [Kṛṣṇa] that they wear dark-blue clothes» (Ranade 1982: 28). Kṛṣṇa literally means black and, in iconography, he as well as Viṣṇu are typically represented bearing a dark-blue complexion, recalling the nocturnal sky or the dark monsoon cloud.

<sup>8</sup> W. Crooke, noticing how Mahānubhāvs like other *vaiṣṇava* sects have been accused of immorality, wrote: «In former times it is said that marriage between a monk and a nun was symbolized by the pair laying their wallets close together — a practice now denied by the members» (Crooke 1909: 504). Nonetheless, Crooke himself observed how Mahānubhāvs «are a quiet, thrifty, orderly people» and that, although «their rejection of the manifold saints and orthodox gods has brought them into conflict with Brāhman̄s», yet «they are held in much respect by lower caste Hindus» (*ibidem*). Also Russell, in his account of 1916, wrote the following: «The Mānbhaos are intelligent and generally literate, and they lead a simple and pure life [...]. Their honesty and humility are proverbial among the Kunbis, and are in pleasing contrast to the character of many of the Hindu mendicant orders» (Russell 1916: 176).

<sup>9</sup> For a comparison with contemporary forms of female asceticism in the Hindū context, based upon a field-research conducted in Vāraṇāsi between 1976 and 1981, see Denton 1991: 211-231.



men and women under the same roof, though living in separate quarters. Suspicions of sexual misconduct, though unfounded, can be traced in the sacred narrative of the founder's deeds, the *Līlā-caritra*, since they remount to the times of Cakradhar himself (Tulpule 1996: 201-211).

In 1907, the account of the *Imperial Gazetteer* was utilized in a court case at the Bombay High Court as evidence to acquit an important figure of the Vārkarī movement who had been charged with having spoken offensively about the Mahānubhāvs. It was precisely this case which brought some Mahānubhāv heads of monasteries (*mahants*) to interrupt their long, self-imposed silence and publicly defend their order. Thus, they decided to reveal their secret scriptures to the scholar R.G. Bhandarkar —as testified in an article which he wrote in the *Times of India*, dated 15 November, 1907— and successfully petitioned for a thorough revision of the *Imperial Gazetteer* article. The revised article which appeared in the 1907-1909 version of the *Imperial Gazetteer* (vol. 21, p. 302) retracted the erroneous connection of the Mahānubhāvs with the Māṅg caste, correctly named Cakradhar as the founder of the sect and highlighted that even though celibacy is viewed as the perfect life, the weaker brethren are allowed to marry.

In another article which appeared in 1909, W. Crooke wrote that, besides their celibate section (*bairāgi*), householder Mahānubhāvs —called *gharvāsī*— are divided into nominal adherents following caste rules (*bholā*) and those who ignore caste distinctions (Crooke 1909: 504).<sup>10</sup> In the 1920s R.E. Enthoven also noted that there are householder Mahānubhāvs, called *angvanshils* or *gharbārīs* (the same as *gharvāsī*), who marry by the *gāndharva* or love marriage form and, at the same time, wear the dress of the order and live in monasteries (Enthoven 1922: 430).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> On these divisions within the order, bearing slightly different names, see Russell 1916: 178-179.

<sup>11</sup> Enthoven obtained all information for his article on 'Manbhavs' (pp. 427-433) from R.G. Bhandarkar.

The 1907-1909 events marked the renewed contact of the Mahānubhāvs with the outside world and the end of their long isolation. The heretical, even orgiastic nature attributed to the Mahānubhāvs and their writings was proved to be totally unfounded. Meanwhile, their thirteen *āmnāyas* or sub-sects were reduced to just two: the Upādhye and the Kaviśvar, with minimal doctrinal differences between them. Besides the emergence of a new attitude, almost a kind of missionary spirit among Mahānubhāv leaders, the coming into the open of their sacred texts stimulated a great interest among scholars. As I.M.P. Raeside puts it:

Marāṭhī scholars were astonished to find themselves presented with a whole corpus of literature much of which dated from the fourteenth century and was contemporary with the oldest works of Marāṭhī literature known up to that time (Raeside 1976: 586).

Among the first Marāṭhī scholars who rediscovered the Mahānubhāvs in the early years of the twentieth century was V.L. Bhave. To be sure, despite the sect's marginality these documents are most precious, being the earliest extant sources of the very beginning of Marāṭhī language. Many of their early works are in prose, not in verse, and thus provide almost the only important corpus of prose writing in Marāṭhī before the seventeenth century.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the Old Marāṭhī language of these early texts was to a large extent preserved, being 'frozen' at the stage it had reached at the time when they came to be enciphered. Thus they were not subject to modifications and modernization along the centuries. Already in 1899, B.G. Tilak, in an article published in the journal *Kesarī* about his research on Marāṭhī traditions, had underlined the historical and literary importance of the Mahānubhāv sect. But the Marāṭhī scholar who

<sup>12</sup> For an overview concerning the historical emergence and development of the Marāṭhī language, see Armelin 1980 and Pacquement 2000: 741-763.

in the twentieth century made the most significant contribution to the study of Mahānubhāv literature was V.B. Kolte. Besides Kolte and the above-mentioned Bhave, mention should be made of S.G. Tulpule, who also wrote extensively in English (see Tulpule 1979), as well as of N.B. Bhavalkar, V.N. Deshpande, Y.K. Deshpande, S.K. Joshi, N.G. Kalelkar,<sup>13</sup> H.N. Nene, and V.K. Rajwade. Among contemporary Western scholars, the greatest authorities on the Mahānubhāvs are I.M.P. Raeside and A. Feldhaus, to whom we owe fundamental studies and critical editions and translations of texts.

Such scholarly interest also contributed to push Mahānubhāvs out of their secretive, closed *milieux*. The principal Mahānubhāv leaders who opened themselves and their libraries to the outside world were Punjābīs. Starting in the 1920s, scholars have emerged even among their adepts and a few personalities among them have recreated some of the lost *āmnāyas*, such as the Yakṣadev *āmnāya*. Between the two World Wars, the *mahants* of the Devadeveśvar monastery at Māhūr (the old Mātāpur) and of the Gopirāj temple at Rītpur have played a prime role in collecting and studying Mahānubhāv works and also in helping outside scholars to understand them. Their successors, however, have not been so active and collaborative. In the mid-1970s, Raeside observed:

The position today is that many *mahantas* within the *pantha* are happy to take their doctrinal difficulties to Professor Kolte to be settled, for he has devoted more study to the Mahānubhāva philosophy and ritual (*vicāra* and *ācāra*) than anyone within the sect. The other half of the sect are strictly orthodox still, and refuse to disclose or even discuss Mahānubhāva beliefs with outsiders (Raeside 1976: 589).

<sup>13</sup> His French unpublished doctoral thesis, titled *La secte Manbhav* (Paris, 1950), appears as the earliest scholarly work in a Western language. Unfortunately, I was not able to see it.

Nowadays, it is quite difficult to estimate the total number of Mahānubhāvs, most of whom belong to the Marāṭhā caste of agriculturists. The *Census of India* has always counted them as Hindūs and never as a separate ‘religion’. In 1901, Enthoven estimated their number as around 22,000 (Enthoven 1922: 427-433). Crooke, quoting the 1881 *Berār Census Report* of E.J. Kitts, said that in Berār they numbered 2,566. Crooke added that their numbers are decreasing «perhaps due to the fact that in the present day fewer join the celibate section» (Crooke 1909:504). In R.V. Russell’s report it is stated that in 1911 the Mānbhao’s religious sect, now become a caste, counted 10,000 members, of whom the Central Provinces and Berār contained 4,000 (Russell 1916:176). Feldhaus has more recently suggested that «a figure of 100,000 to 200,000 today seems likely, although the numbers at pilgrimage places and one’s subjective impressions indicate more» (Feldhaus 1988: 279, n.18).

The discovery of Mahānubhāv literature coupled with the Mahānubhāvs’ own proselytistic *élan* has contributed to the movements’ recent fortune. As Raeside noted, the Mahānubhāvs appear to have achieved an increasing degree of social and religious respectability (Raeside 1976: 599-600).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, as E. Zelliott has observed:

Although it is still in existence, the Mahānubhāv sect is no longer radical. It does accept all castes into its holy orders, but treats them differently according to their high or low status. It does have both male and female orders, but aside from this the Rāūl’s radicality seems to have been lost (Zelliott 1987: 134).

<sup>14</sup> Already in the 1930s Ranade reported: «But modern apologists [of the Mahānubhāvs] are announcing that they have ever believed in the caste system; that though they have not recognized the principle of slaughter in Yajña, still they have believed, on the whole, in the Vedas; that they have sanctioned the system of the Āśramas; and that even though they worship Chakradhara as Kṛishṇa, by Chakradhara is not to be understood certainly the man who founded that sect at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century [sic!]» (Ranade 1982: 28).

A note on the term *mahānubhāv* and the movement's self-identity is in order, as still in 1909 Enthoven listed twelve different names of the sect (Enthoven 1909). For the earliest disciples, often called *mahātmās* or 'great souls', the name of the sect was simply *panth*, 'the way'. In the fourteenth century, the *panth* was most commonly known to insiders as the *mārg*, 'the path', or the *para-mārg* 'the path of *para*' or Parameśvar, the One Supreme God, that is, 'the supreme [religious] path'. Mainly outsiders called it the *bhaṭ-mārg*, 'the path of [Nāgdev]bhaṭ', since Nāgdev was the first to do much proselytising (*bhaṭ* being a generic nickname for a brāhmaṇ). The term *mahānubhāv*, common in Marāṭhī where it designates any 'great experiencer', is never found in the *Līlā-caritra*. We find it twice, however, in another important work of the sect: this is the hagiography of Nāgdev, the *Smṛti-sthaḷ* (*The Storehouse of Recollections*), most probably a composite work no earlier than the fifteenth century. Herein (*Smṛti-sthaḷ*, chaps. 53, 233), the term appears as the collective name of the group. In a derogatory way, Hindū outsiders from at least the sixteenth century started calling them Mānbhāvs, not deriving the term from *mahānubhāv* but rather from *māṅghāū*, 'brothers of the Māṅg caste'.<sup>15</sup> The appellation Mahānubhāv has been revived starting with the rehabilitation which followed the disclosure of their scriptures in the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Although in Russell's account dated 1916 it is said that the name Mānbhao «would appear to have some such meaning as 'The reverend brothers'» (Russell 1916: 176).

<sup>16</sup> On the Mahānubhāv name, see Kolte 1962: 12-37; Raeside 1976: 599-600; Feldhaus, Tulpule 1992: 24-25.



*The Early Historical Background  
and the Mahānubhāvs' Foundational Texts*

In Cakradhar's times, the kingdom in power was that of the Yādavs. Their capital was Devgirī (= Daulatābād, near Auruṅgābād) in the Marāṭhvāḍā region. The kingdom's heartland was the agricultural area of the Godāvāri basin in northern Mahārāṣṭra, which came to be extended: from here, the Yādavs tried to expand their rule to much of the rest of the actual State of Mahārāṣṭra as well as to other parts of the Deccan. Although the Yādav kingdom was small, it considered itself as a great force from the Arabian sea to the central regions of the subcontinent. The Yādav army fought against Gujarāt and Māļvā to the north and against the Hoysaļa empire to the south. Under the leadership of King Siṅghaṇa early in the thirteenth century, the Yādavs invaded Gujarāt and other regions, establishing a dominion which, however, lasted only a few years.<sup>1</sup>

Presenting themselves as orthodox brāhmaṇs intent upon the restoration of the sacred *Vedas*, the Yādav rulers claimed to govern society strictly following the precepts of

<sup>1</sup> For a historical overview of the Yādav kingdom of Devgirī, see Bhandarkar 1957: 116-131; Ganguly 1966<sup>2</sup>: 185-197; Verma 1970.

the caste system and of the brāhmaṇical stages of life (*varṇāśrama-dharma*, *catur-varṇya*).<sup>2</sup> Most importantly, the Yādav kings spoke Marāṭhī and patronized the Marāṭhī language in a variety of ways. The kingdom played a crucial role in the rise of the self-awareness of an entire region as a cultural whole. Significantly, Jñāndev mentions King Rāmcandra as «the delight of the Yādav race» (*Jñāneśvarī* 18.1783) and refers to the kingdom's capital Devgirī as «the city of the Marāṭhī language» upon which he prays that «the blessed day of the knowledge of the Absolute» may dawn (*Jñāneśvarī* 12.16).<sup>3</sup>

Hemādrī was the prime minister or chancellor (*mahā-karaṇādhipa*) of King Mahādev (reigned 1261-1270), and was also associated with Mahādev's successor Rāmcandra or Rāmdev (reigned 1271-1311). He was the author of various works on *dharma-sāstra* and of the famous *Catur-varga-cintāmaṇi*, a kind of encyclopaedia of religious rites and observances reflecting the orthodox view concerning the four legitimate aims of human life (the *puruṣārthas*: *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa*). The *Catur-varga-cintāmaṇi* was meant as a guideline for a society to be administered according to the rules of *dharma* and caste, that is, *jāti* and *varṇa* prescriptions and regulations. Hemādrī is also credited for the building of many temples in what is known as the *hemādṛantī* style, which he would have invented or favored, and for creating a rapid, cursive script for Marāṭhī, the *moḍī* script.

In contrast to the institutional, ritualistic orthodoxy of the Yādavs, stood the two great promoters of devotional movements of thirteenth century Mahārāṣṭra: Jñāndev and Cakradhar. Their religiosity of love, aimed at cultivating a direct, intimate relationship with one's chosen deity, met the aspirations of a vast majority of the population and

<sup>2</sup> On the general religious conditions during Yādav rule, see Verma 1970: 294-333.

<sup>3</sup> For the English translation of the *Jñāneśvarī*, see Swami Kripananda 1989.



especially of women and low caste people, *śūdras* as well as untouchables. However, whereas Jñāndev, through the development of his lay Vārkarī movement, didn't constitute any serious threat to the brāhmaṇical socio-religious order, Cakradhar, through the development of his ascetic movement, was less careful in his dealings with social rules, especially for what concerned ritual purity and his liberal attitudes toward women. Though he did not actively rebel against brāhmaṇism —being rather indifferent to it— Cakradhar inevitably tended to be anti-conventional and heterodox. He devalued the *Vedas* and his sect developed as an anti-brāhmaṇical, anti-Vedic group.

His religiosity was thus opposite to that of Hemādri, as when in the *Līlā-caritra* (*uttarārdha* 585) he advises his followers not to distinguish between commandments and prohibitions (*vidhi-niṣedha*), a *mahātmā* being beyond both. In the same teaching concerning the *dharma* to be observed by his disciples in his absence (*asannidhān*), he recommends a life of detachment and asceticism (*sannyās*): one should have no likes and dislikes and nothing to do with buying or selling; one should avoid staying in towns and cities and even avoid visiting popular pilgrimage places and going to fairs and festivals (*kṣetras* and *jātras*); above all, one should avoid violence in any form. The rejection of the need to visit any pilgrimage place or sacred ford (*tīrth*), as well as his condemnation of the practice of making vows and gifts (*vrata*, *dān*), is another sign of his ascetic nature and of the transcendence of established ritual and religion, be it brāhmaṇical or even folk (*Līlā-caritra*, *uttarārdha* 316). Cakradhar emphatically underlined that one should abandon faith in *tīrth*, *kṣetra*, *vrata*, and *dān*, and that going to such 'sacred' places such as Dvārkā, Vāraṇāsī, etc. would not lead one to liberation. Rather, he taught that his very presence and any service (*dāsyā*) rendered to him or to God with full faith (*bhāva*) would grant *mokṣa*. Again, such a teaching was diametrically opposed to the ritualist religion upheld by Hemādri, as is evidenced in the latter's *Catur-varga-cintāmaṇi*. Moreover, Cakradhar did not observe the traditional rules of pollution in his deal-

ings with women —for instance, at the time of their menstrual period— and with untouchables such as Māṅgs or Camārs (the traditional cobbler caste). He was always accessible to them, never erecting any ‘walls’ or barriers and often miraculously proving his spiritual ‘oneness’ with them, saving them from the wrath of people and even from legal expiation (*prāyaścitta*) and capital punishment when they themselves came to break pollution rules (see, for instance, *Līlā-caritra*, *pūrvārdha* 27 and *Līlā-caritra*, *uttarārdha* 72; 102; 384).

The Muslim invasion of the Deccan began in 1294 and had widely spread by 1318, upsetting the whole of Mahārāṣṭrian culture. Passing with his army of apparently only 8,000 men near Elichpur (= Aḷajpur), the capital of Varhād less than twenty miles away from Rddhipur, ‘Alā-ud-dīn Khaljī (d. 1316), nephew of the Delhi Sultan, was able to make a surprise attack on Devgirī in 1294. He utterly overpowered the Yādav’s army, pillaging and carrying off a great treasure, and forcing King Rāmdev —the last independent sovereign of the Deccan— to negotiate peace: Rāmdev was allowed to remain in power though having to pay heavy annual tributes. It was from Devgirī that ‘Alā-ud-dīn Khaljī launched his successful campaign for the throne in Delhi in 1296, after arranging for the killing of his uncle the Sultan. Several raids of the Deccan by the Muslim armies followed. Sometime around 1310, King Rāmdev was captured and sent to Delhi as prisoner by Malik Kāphūr, an officer of ‘Alā-ud-dīn Khaljī. The Yādav king was nonetheless allowed to return to the Deccan, again as a tribute-paying vassal. He died soon afterwards and some years later Rāmdev’s son-in-law, Harapāl, having revolted against the Muslim foreigner, paid his offence by being flayed alive in 1318. With his tragic death, the Yādav’s dynasty came definitely to an end. From now on, Persian became the court language of the Muslim rulers in the Deccan, though the administrative system remained that which Hemādri had established. In 1327, sovereign Muhammad ibn-Tughlaq (reigned 1325-1351) —the Tughlaqs having supplanted the Khaljī rulers in Delhi— made Daulatābād the second capi-

tal of his empire: it even appears that some Mahānubhāv elders had meetings with him. Muhammad ibn Tughlaq's conquests, however, were short-lived and paved the way for local Muslim dynasties. By 1350, the Bahāmanī kingdom with its capital outside the Marāṭhī-speaking area was in full power. Though the Muslim kings were no cruel rulers, Marāṭhī ethos and literature was impeded or altogether halted for about two centuries.

The founder of the Mahānubhāvs, Cakradhar, left behind no writings. In the earliest period, Cakradhar's word and charisma was thought to supplant all scriptural authority. The only source of valid, authoritative knowledge was believed to come directly from Parameśvar or one of his manifestations. There is clearly an anti-intellectual tendency, especially critical of brāhmaṇical, orthodox learning and opposed to the use of Sanskrit. The sole exception is represented by the *Bhagavad-gītā* which the Mahānubhāvs, like the Vārkarīs (Jñāndev's *magnum opus* is the *Jñāneśvarī*, a commentary on the *Bhagavad-gītā*), hold in special reverence. Mahānubhāvs believe that the *Bhagavad-gītā* was spoken by the *avatār* Śrī Kṛṣṇa in person, whereas all else is attributed to Vyās (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 11.108).<sup>4</sup> Thus, all texts of the Hindū tradition were and are radically devalued.<sup>5</sup> However, as all new religious movements

<sup>4</sup> For *Sūtra-pāṭh*'s verses on the *Bhagavad-gītā*, see *Sūtra-pāṭh* 10.85-90. *Sūtra-pāṭh* 13.153 is a commentary of *Bhagavad-gītā* 7.16 («Of these the possessor of knowledge, constantly disciplined, of single devotion, is the best; for extremely dear to the possessor of knowledge am I, and he is dear to Me» [trans. from Edgerton 1964: 39]). The *Sūtra-pāṭh*'s commentary, in Feldhaus's translation (1983b), reads: «One who longs [for Parameśvar] has his mind troubled by sorrow; one who desires knowledge is the best with respect to me; one who aims at the goal is expectant of an eternal abode; the believer goes to the highest by means of faith».

<sup>5</sup> *Sūtra-pāṭh* 11.109 declares that *Purāṇas* and *Āgamas* are merely related to the *devatā-cakra*, the 'wheel of deities' comprising the whole of the Hindū pantheon: herein, nine groups of gods are arranged in hierarchical order. The *Purāṇas* are linked to the fourth level of the hierarchy and the *Āgamas* —the authoritative texts of Tantric, *śaiva* schools such as the

necessitating recognition in order to stress their difference and superiority, after Cakradhar's times Mahānubhāvs developed their own body of authoritative scriptures which came to be bound by secret (as the *Sūtra-pāṭh*, treasuring the holy words and teachings of Cakradhar, itself intimates: 12.155-157, 199; 13.27, 198).<sup>6</sup> These scriptures were jealously guarded within the sect. As Feldhaus writes:

Having rejected the elitism of the learned by composing their scriptures in Marāṭhī rather than Sanskrit, the early Mahānubhāvas then hid the scriptures from public view. They thereby created a new elite: the Mahānubhāvas themselves (Feldhaus 1978:308).

Cakradhar's biography is the *Līlā-caritra*, a prose collection of short chapters or anecdotes (*līlās*: 920 in S.G. Tulpule's edition; 1.237 in V.B. Kolte's edition).<sup>7</sup> These were painstakingly collected from a variety of people who had direct knowledge of the events of Cakradhar's life by one of his disciples, Mhāṁbhaṭ, who subjected these stories to Nāgdev's scrutiny for final approval. The *līlās* of the *Līlā-caritra* are divided into two halves: these are the *pūrvārdha* section which is the earlier section dealing mainly with Cakradhar's early life and his period as a solitary ascetic

Nāth sect—to the third level of the eight Bhairavas (*aṣṭa-bhairavas*). Even the authority of the *Vedas* is indirectly minimized and ultimately rejected since it does not afford access to Parameśvar. *Sūtra-pāṭh* 10.14 says that some portions of the *Vedas*, possibly the *Upaniṣads*, know of the existence of Caitanya. But Caitanya for Mahānubhāvs is simply the highest level in the hierarchy of relative, non-ultimate *devatās* which are *not* Parameśvar and which are qualitatively separate and, therefore, not conducive to him.

<sup>6</sup> Besides the impure ones loaded with *rajas* and *tamas*, whose *karman* is bad and who are devoted to *devatās*, among the ones who are specifically mentioned as not fit to receive the teachings contained in the scriptures are the very old (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 11.257), the mad and possessed ones (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 10.258; 13.150), as well as the blind, the deaf, and the mute (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 13.150).

<sup>7</sup> Herein, I follow Kolte's edition (1982) which subdivides the text in 592 (*pūrvārdha*) and 645 (*uttarārdha*) *līlās*.

(relying upon disciples' accounts of Cakradhar's own reports), and the *uttarārdha* section which deals with the later part of Cakradhar's life. The dividing point between the two halves is Nāgdev's becoming a follower of Cakradhar. Every word uttered by Cakradhar was written down by Mhāim̐bhaṭ as he could remember them, after consulting with the other disciples. Dated 1278 and thus composed soon after Cakradhar's death, it has an authentic ring given the simplicity and antiquity of its language, reflecting the sect's early events as well as the social and religious conditions of the Yādav kingdom. According to tradition, the original work of Mhāim̐bhaṭ was lost or stolen in the political upheaval (the *dhāḍa*) which took place during the Deccan raids of the Muslim army in either 1307-1308 or 1310, when the Yādav king Rāmdev was captured and sent to Delhi as prisoner by Malik Kāphūr. As a consequence, the *Līlā-caritra* had to be reconstructed from the memory of the disciples (Hīrāisā, Kavīśvar, Paraśarām). This reconstruction process of the *Līlā-caritra*, which brought to the elaboration of different versions of the text, continued all during the fourteenth century.

Soon afterwards and still during the lifetime of Nāgdev, Kesobās (= Keśava *vyāsa*), who probably joined the sect after Guṇḍam Rāül's death, produced an epitome of Cakradhar's teachings: this is the *Sūtra-pāṭh*, a collection of 'aphorisms' (*sūtras*) culled from the *Līlā-caritra* under Nāgdev's direction and guidance.<sup>8</sup> Apparently, the *Sūtra-pāṭh* was also lost or stolen during the Muslim invasion of Malik Kāphūr and subsequently rewritten/reconstructed by the disciples Kavīśvar, Paraśarām, and Rāmeśvar. Consisting as we now have it in nine short chapters or *nav-prakaraṇ* (*anyavyāvṛtti*, *yug-dharma*, *vidyā-mārg*, *saṃhār*, *saṃsaraṇ*, *mahā-vākya*, *nirvacan*, *uddharan*, *asatīparī*) and four longer ones (*ācār*, *ācār mālikā*, *vicār*,

<sup>8</sup> For the *Sūtra-pāṭh*, see A. Feldhaus's authoritative edition (Feldhaus 1983b). All quotes are taken from her translation.

*vicār mālīkā*), the *Sūtra-pāṭh* is the veritable ‘Bible’ for all Mahānubhāvs, their most important doctrinal text, originally datable between 1287-1288 (Guṇḍam Rāūl’s death) and 1302 (Nāgdev’s traditional year of death). Some manuscripts also add three other short chapters to the *nav-prakaraṇ*: the *pūrvī*, the *pañca-kṛṣṇa*, and the *pañca-nām*. These three, however, as well as the *ācār mālīkā* and *vicār mālīkā*, are taken to be later additions. The sayings attributed to Cakradhar follow no coherent order, being connected together in an unsystematic fashion. Kesobās, basing himself upon Nāgdev’s memories, also wrote a sort of appendix to the *Sūtra-pāṭh*, that is, the *Dṛṣṭānta-pāṭh*, which is a collection of all the stories that Cakradhar utilized in order to illustrate his teachings. Certainly both the *Līlā-caritra* and the *Sūtra-pāṭh* were for some time floating, oral ‘texts’ before becoming literary documents. These two seminal sources grew up together, depending upon the various oral traditions which influenced each other and which had their origin in the memories of the first disciples. Thus, both the *Līlā-caritra* and the *Sūtra-pāṭh* were built up and finally composed by different authors over a considerable length of time within the different, even rival, sub-sects of the Mahānubhāv order.<sup>9</sup> A significant number of later Mahānubhāv works are in the form of commentaries or philosophical elaborations of these foundational texts.

The events which took place between Cakradhar’s death and Nāgdev’s death can be unveiled thanks to the hagiography of Cakradhar’s predecessor Guṇḍam Rāūl, and the hagiography of Cakradhar’s successor Nāgdev. After Guṇḍam Rāūl’s death in 1287-1288, Nāgdev became the leader of the Mahānubhāv fold until his own death, which most probably took place about twenty-five years later (in 1312-1313). The hagiography of Guṇḍam Rāūl, the

<sup>9</sup> On the relationship between the *Sūtra-pāṭh* and the *Līlā-caritra* see Feldhaus 1983b: 16-20.

*Ṛddhipur-līlā* or *Ṛddhipur-caritra*<sup>10</sup> (also known as *Śrī-govindaprabhu-caritra*, Govindaprabhu<sup>11</sup> being the Sanskritized version of his Marāṭhī name), is traditionally ascribed, as all prose biographies of the *pañca-kṛṣṇas* are, to Mhāimbhaṭ, who wrote it within six months of Guṇḍam Rāūḷ's death, utilizing the testimony of Nāgdev and other adepts who had personally known Guṇḍam Rāūḷ. It comprises 323 episodes of his life and is traditionally dated 1287. This work, however, is not the prototype of the manuscripts we have. This is due to the fact that even this text is said to have been lost or stolen by highway robbers when Mahānubhāvs were crossing the mountains on their way to the Koṅkaṇ area with their precious holy books. Again, this might have happened during the Deccan raids of the Muslim army in either 1307-1308 or 1310. As a consequence, the hagiography had to be reconstructed from the disciples' memory. Kolte has arrived at the conclusion that the *Ṛddhipur-līlā* we now have dates to 1392 and was prepared by one Dattobās of Taḷegāv, being the composite reconstruction of several people's memories of Mhāimbhaṭ's original text.

The hagiography of Nāgdev is the *Smṛti-sthaḷ*, most probably a composite work no earlier than the fifteenth century. According to Marāṭhī scholars, though the basic materials of the *Smṛti-sthaḷ* probably date from soon after Nāgdev's death, the text as we now have it—comprising 261 short chapters in Feldhaus and Tulpule's edition—must have reached its final form more than a hundred years later.<sup>12</sup> In the *Smṛti-sthaḷ* one does not yet see the

<sup>10</sup> For a fine English translation, see Feldhaus 1984.

<sup>11</sup> Prabhu is a name of the Supreme Lord, often identifying Parameśvar, meaning 'the mighty or powerful one'. Besides Govindaprabhu, in Mahānubhāv literature it is usually added as a suffix to the name of Dattātreyā.

<sup>12</sup> For the *Smṛti-sthaḷ*, see Feldhaus, Tulpule 1992. All quotes are taken from this translation.

extreme exclusivism and secretiveness which led later generations of Mahānubhāvs to write the manuscripts of their scriptures in secret codes.

Nāgdev and the early followers of Cakradhar perceived themselves as a distinct religious group, an ascetic circle separate from all others. Despite the fact that practically all leading members of the sect were brāhmaṇs by birth, Mahānubhāvs felt themselves radically opposed to the world of brāhmaṇical Hinduism. Nāgdev is reported to have once become furious when one brāhmaṇ convert suggested that what he was teaching was not really contrary to brāhmaṇism (*Smṛti-sthaḷ*, chap. 118). In fact, as a form of teaching, Nāgdev deliberately provoked and permitted the violations of the rules of purity and pollution. Moreover, though Nāgdev and his brāhmaṇ disciples were familiar with Sanskrit and used it on occasions, their preference was always for Marāṭhī, the language spoken by the common folk. When two disciples of Nāgdev tried to question him in Sanskrit, he replied that he did not understand their *asmāt* and *kasmāt*, that is, their Sanskrit pronouns, and remembered how Cakradhar always taught him in Marāṭhī (*Smṛti-sthaḷ*, chap. 66). Using Sanskrit would make religious texts not accessible to women and low caste people and would inevitably reinforce brāhmaṇical exclusivism.

Nāgdev, not being an *avatār* of Parameśvar, could not nominate a successor with an authority as great as his own, which derived from Cakradhar's divine appointment. Therefore, after Nāgdev, the real 'successor' came to be the Mahānubhāv holy texts, *in primis* the *Sūtra-pāṭh*, preserving the holy words of Cakradhar. In this way the Mahānubhāvs became a scriptural tradition, whose authority is grounded in a holy book treasuring the holy utterances of a divine manifestation. Though it is highlighted that one must study the scripture not on one's own but under the guidance of a living *guru*—since only when the scripture is heard from the mouth of one's *guru* it comes alive—still the authority of human *gurus* is clearly dependent upon a holy text and not viceversa.



After Nāgdev, the human leadership within the sect was taken by Bāidev who was then followed by Kavīśvar, the great poet of the early period. After Kavīśvar's death in the 1390s, his successor Paraśarām was unable to maintain the group's unity: the *panth* split into thirteen sub-sects. These schisms must have determined many rivalries and disputes.<sup>13</sup>

The criterion within the hierarchy of scriptures (*sāstras*) is to what extent they are believed to be close to the words of an *avatār* of Parameśvar. First of all, Kṛṣṇa's words in the *Bhagavad-gītā* and Cakradhar's own words as treasured in the *Sūtra-pāṭh* are classed as sacred *śruti* (that is, the 'heard' or revealed texts of divine origin), above all other scriptures. *Sūtra-pāṭh* 10.151 celebrates itself by affirming: «This scripture includes all scriptures; but it is not included by any of them». In the second place come the so-called *smṛti* or 'memory' texts, which are of human origin and typically identify Nāgdev's words and deeds. In this class are also comprised the words and deeds of Cakradhar as remembered by Nāgdev as well as the biographies of other *avatārs* of Parameśvar. Thirdly, the writings of Nāgdev's disciples such as Kesobās and others are classed *vṛddhācār*, the 'practice of the elders', and identify the words of the first generation of teachers after Nāgdev. In the fourth place come the *mārgrūdhī* texts of the next few generations, comprising the teachings of Kavīśvar's disciples and, in turn, of their disciples. Also a fifth class of texts called *vartamān* ('of the present day') is sometimes mentioned, which identifies the successors of the preceding category.

The writings of the Mahānubhāvs can be divided up into five categories: a) the *Sūtra-pāṭh* and its commentaries; b) commentaries on the *Bhagavad-gītā*; c) Kṛṣṇa poems, usually based on the tenth and eleventh *skandhas* of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*; d) hagiographies, comprising the lives of Cakradhar and of the other manifestations of

<sup>13</sup> On these schisms, see Kolte 1962: 123-136.

Parameśvar and the places sanctified by their presence, with very detailed stories and *guru-paramparās*; e) other works of commentary and grammatical and lexical interpretation, written in later centuries for a better understanding of the earlier materials. Although the vast majority of Mahānubhāv works is in Marāṭhī, it should be noted that there is also a considerable body of Mahānubhāv writing in both Sanskrit and Hindi.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> For a bibliography of Mahānubhāv works, see Raeside 1960.

*The Five Manifestations of the  
Supreme God Parameśvar*

The monotheists Mahānubhāvs believe in five manifestations of the One God Parameśvar, also known as Īśvar, ‘Lord’, or Para ‘Supreme’. He is the sole source of liberation to whom is directed exclusive devotion. Even though the *Sūtra-pāṭh* (10.212; 11.18-19) states that there are and have been an infinite (*ananta*) number of manifestations of Parameśvar —divine, human, as well as animal<sup>1</sup>— the Mahānubhāvs stick to only five *avatārs*. These are the five Kṛṣṇas (*pañca-kṛṣṇas*) comprising two deities —Kṛṣṇa himself and Dattātreyā— and three human figures: Cakradhar, the movement’s founder, Guṇḍam Rāūḷ, Cakradhar’s *guru*, and Cāngdev Rāūḷ, Guṇḍam Rāūḷ’s *guru*.<sup>2</sup> The *avatārs* of Parameśvar are «*Brahman* with hands and feet» (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 8.18). Mahānubhāvs are therefore exclusivists: Parameśvar alone via the *pañca-kṛṣṇas* can save the souls (*jīvas*) entangled in transmigration. Precisely for this reason, the ‘pres-

<sup>1</sup> For instance Nāgdev, in the *Smṛti-sthal* (chap. 210), says that a parrot in a prostitute’s house in Devgirī is in fact an *avatār* of Parameśvar.

<sup>2</sup> On Mahānubhāv theology regarding Parameśvar’s manifestations, see Kolte 1975<sup>4</sup>: chap. 7. See also Feldhaus 1983b: 28-36.

ence' (*sannidhān*) of a divine manifestation and the coming in contact with an *avatār* of Parameśvar is understood to be absolutely essential for attaining deliverance.

The first explicit mention of the *pañca-kṛṣṇas* is found in the *pañca-nāma* and *pañca-kṛṣṇa* sections of the *Sūtra-pāṭh*. These sections, however, were not comprised in the earliest versions of the sacred text since they were added when Kavīśvar, in the early fourteenth century, reconstructed the *Sūtra-pāṭh*. Feldhaus thinks that the *pañca-kṛṣṇa* theology was not originally Cakradhar's but developed some time after the middle of the last quarter of the thirteenth century, that is, around 1290, after the initial compilation of Cakradhar's statements in the *Sūtra-pāṭh* and the initial composition of the *Līlā-caritra*.

Both the name Parameśvar as well as the fact that Mahānubhāvs believe in five and only five (*pañca*) manifestations of the One God are probably due to the influence of the old, monotheistic (*parama-ekāntika*) *vaiṣṇava* school of the Pāñcarātra (= 'of the five nights'). Like the Mahānubhāvs, Pāñcarātrins revere one personal Lord, whom they call Īśvar or even Parameśvar, identified with Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme God of the gods. As the very name indicates, pentads are a fundamental, recurring theme in their theology and orthopraxis.<sup>3</sup> Apart from the five nights —of Indra, of the seers, of Śiva, of Brahmā, and of Bṛhaspati— during which the sacred knowledge is thought to have been revealed by these figures (linked to the pentads of the five senses together with their objects, as well as to the five parts of the day in which the faithful must perform their rituals), one is here reminded of the Pāñcarātra's five-fold forms of the divine (*para* or transcendent, *vyūha* or emanatory, *vibhava* or as an *avatār*, *antaryāmin* or immanent, and *arcā* or residing in idols),<sup>4</sup> and

<sup>3</sup> On this issue, see Van Buitenen 1962: 291-299; Jaiswal 1981: 41-43; Matsubara 1994: 125-130. On Pāñcarātra theology, see the seminal work of F.O. Schrader (1973).

<sup>4</sup> On the manifestation of the divine in the *Sātvata* and *Ahīrbudhnyā Saṃhitās*, see Bock-Raming 2002. On the conception of the divine in Pāñcarātrism, see also Rastelli 1999.

of the five heroes or *pañca-vīras* (Kṛṣṇa, Balarāma, Pradyumna, Sāmba, and Aniruddha).

A *bhakti* sect which shows several affinities with the Mahānubhāvs and probably also influenced them was that of the ‘heroic *śaivas*’ (Vīraśaivas) or ‘bearers of the *liṅga*’ (Liṅgāyats, the aniconic, phallic symbol of Śiva), which flourished in Karṇāṭaka around the middle of the twelfth century. In 1920, Farquhar —though placing the Mahānubhāvs within the orbit of Pāñcarātra literature and philosophy— noticed the similarities between the Mahānubhāvs and this heterodox sect founded by the saint-poet Basava (1106-1167): both reject the *Vedas* and brāhmaṇical authority as well as the caste system; both are tendentially egalitarian, stressing male and female equality; both are monotheists and reject image worship; both claim to have five founders; both emphasize asceticism and vegetarianism and bury their dead.<sup>5</sup>

The Mahānubhāvs preeminent *pañca-kṛṣṇa* is Śrī Kṛṣṇa<sup>6</sup> of Dvārakā/Dvārāvātī, as can be derived from the fact that the five manifestations are collectively called Kṛṣṇas and also from the fact that Guṇḍam Rāūḷ and Cakradhar —but, interestingly, not Dattātreyā nor Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ— are said to have identified with him on occasions (for Cakradhar, who on Kṛṣṇa’s birthday appears as infant Kṛṣṇa miraculously ‘shrinking’ himself, see *Līlā-caritra, pūrvārdha* 95). Of course, it is not Kṛṣṇa as a manifestation of Viṣṇu who is worshipped by Mahānubhāvs —Viṣṇu being a mere *devatā*— but rather Kṛṣṇa as a manifestation of Parameśvar and particularly as the expounder of the sacred *Bhagavad-gītā*. Kṛṣṇa as protagonist of the main plot of the *Mahābhārata* never figures

<sup>5</sup> See Farquhar 1984: 247-249; 322. In time, this *śaiva* cult —much detested and even persecuted by brāhmaṇical orthodoxy— developed its own class of priests (*janīgams*) and caste-like identity. For an introduction to Vīraśaivism, see Ramanujan 1973. Following Ramanujan, Feldhaus has compared the Vīraśaivism ‘counter-structure’ with the Mahānubhāvs own self-understanding (Feldhaus 1978).

<sup>6</sup> On the Mahānubhāv Kṛṣṇa, see Feldhaus 1983a: 133-142.

in Mahānubhāv literature, and similarly in their writings there is never any reference to the final slaughter of the Yādavs nor to Kṛṣṇa's death. Perhaps influenced by Pāñcarātra theology, Mahānubhāvs, like other medieval *bhakti* movements such as the Āḷvārs and the followers of Caitanya, dissociate Kṛṣṇa from Viṣṇu: Kṛṣṇa in and of himself is the receptacle of their passionate devotion, not Kṛṣṇa as a Viṣṇu *avatār*.<sup>7</sup>

Of the *pañca-kṛṣṇas*, Kṛṣṇa is the most distant in time since he manifested in the *dvāpara-yug* and his deeds are known exclusively through Purāṇic accounts. All other *avatārs* have appeared in the present *kali* age, and Dattātreya is actually said to have manifested himself in all of the four ages. Moreover, whereas the other four are linked to one another in a chain of *śakti* transmission (although, to be sure, Dattātreya is not said to appear in a human form but in the rather extravagant guise of a tigress), Kṛṣṇa is not included in such line. Nonetheless, according to Mahānubhāv theology it is not necessary for an *avatār* of Parameśvar to belong to any chain of transmission or special *paramparā*: a divine manifestation may receive *śakti* on his own.

Feldhaus thinks that the «firm position of Kṛṣṇa in the Mahānubhāva pantheon serves [...] to keep the otherwise unorthodox and exclusive Mahānubhāvas solidly in touch with the outside Hindū world» (Rosen 1992: 139). That is, via Kṛṣṇa, typically present in most Mahānubhāv temples (although his statues are not thought of as regular *mūrtis* to be worshipped), the sect would have linked itself to the more sedate, mainstream devotional Hindūism. Although there might be some truth in this kind of appropriation theory, it is a fact that the Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* component was a constitutive feature of the Mahānubhāvs from their very origins, stemming from the great medieval pan-Indian *bhakti* movement.

<sup>7</sup> On Caitanya and the *gauḍīya* tradition, see Rosen 1992.

The earliest Mahānubhāv Kṛṣṇa poems are Mahādāisā's *Dhavaḷe*, the *Śiśupāḷa-vadha* and the *Uddhava-gītā* of Bhāskara or Kavīśvar, Narendra's *Rukmiṇī-svayaṃvar*, and Dāmodarpaṇḍit's *Vachāharaṇ*. An important text is the *Gadyarāja*, traditionally said to have been composed around 1320 and ascribed to the learned brāhmaṇ Hayagrīva: it is the earliest specimen of a Marāṭhī work composed entirely in *śloka* metre.<sup>8</sup> Here, as in all Mahānubhāv works, what is especially emphasized is Kṛṣṇa's *vīra-rasa*, that is, Kṛṣṇa's role as saviour-hero and slayer of demons. In Mahānubhāv literature as well as in the whole of the Marāṭhī Kṛṣṇa tradition, the erotic element (*śṛṅgāra-rasa*) as in the famous *Gīta-govinda* of Jayadev (twelfth century) is either downplayed or absent. Kṛṣṇa appears to be a sober figure and indeed he is said to be *nāgara*, that is, 'civilized', when confronted with Guṇḍam Rāṭṭ and Cakradhar (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 10.80). Significantly, in Mahānubhāv works Rādhā, the most celebrated among the beautiful, sensuous *gopīs*, is never even mentioned. On the other hand, prominence is given to Kṛṣṇa's legal wives and especially to Rukmiṇī. The theme of the *Rukmiṇī-svayaṃvar* was and still is very important among Mahānubhāvs as it is in the dominant Vārkarī tradition: one is here reminded of Eknāth's *Rukmiṇī-svayaṃvar* and of the fact that Rukmiṇī is also Viṭhobā/Kṛṣṇa's consort at Paṇḍharpur.

Dattātreyā, also known as Dattātreyaprabhu or simply as Datta, is the second of the *pañca-kṛṣṇas* and a most intriguing and elusive figure, of special importance in the religious landscape of Mahārāṣṭra particularly from around the sixteenth century, when via the *Datta-sampradāya* founded by Śrīpād Śrīvallabh and Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī he comes to embody the triad (*trimūrti*) of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva all in one (in modern iconography, Dattātreyā is represented as three-headed and six-

<sup>8</sup> On the *Gadyarāja*, see Raeside 1989.

armed).<sup>9</sup> The Mahānubhāv Dattātreyā, usually single headed yet four-armed, is the first, important testimony of his appearance in the Marāṭhī cultural area. Dattātreyā is a Purāṇic deity, though he appears already in the *Mahābhārata* as a powerful ṛṣi granting boons, notably one thousand arms to Arjuna Kārtavīrya who had propitiated him by means of austerities.<sup>10</sup> Dattātreyā soon became divinized as an immortal *guru*, *yogin*, and *avatāra*. The seminal *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* account<sup>11</sup> presents him as a brāhmaṇ and a master of Yoga, teaching his art to his disciple Alarka. It also depicts him as a manifestation of Viṣṇu, born to the pious couple of ṛṣi Atri and Anasūyā, although his portrait clearly evidences Tantric and *śākta* antinomian traits, more attuned to a *śaiva* than to a *vaiṣṇava* background. In particular, Dattātreyā, as an alter-ego of Śiva, appears as a ‘lord of Yoga’ (*yogīśvara*) and as the veritable paradigm of the supreme ascetic renouncer (*paramahansa*, *avadhūta*).<sup>12</sup> The medieval sectarian *Nārada-parivrājaka Upaniṣad* (154) portrays Dattātreyā along with other mythical figures as one who has no visible emblem and keeps his conduct concealed, who acts as if he were a child, an intoxicated lunatic, or a demon (*bāla-unmatta-piśācavad*) and who, although sane,

<sup>9</sup> In Marāṭhī, the most comprehensive work on Dattātreyā to date is still that of Dhare 1964. For a general introduction to Dattātreyā, see Rigopoulos 1998 (on the Mahānubhāv appropriation of Dattātreyā, see chap. 4: *Dattātreyā in the Literature of the Mahānubhāvas*, pp. 89-108). See also Bahadur 1957; Joshi 1965; Pain, Zelliott 1988.

<sup>10</sup> See *Mahābhārata* 3.115.8 ff., 12.49.30 ff., 13.137.5-6, 13.138.12, and 13.142.21. References are to the BORI edition, which assigns the first two cases to an appendix or footnote as interpolations.

<sup>11</sup> For an English translation, see Pargiter 1981: chaps. 16-19; 37-43.

<sup>12</sup> A possible reference to Dattātreyā as supreme *yogī* or *avadhūt* is found in *Smṛti-sthaḷ*, chap. 261: «That Avadhūt plays on earth»; «He [= Nāgdev] was appointed by the primordial Lord, the supreme *yogī* whom Rddhis obey, whose Siddhis are hidden, who cools [suffering] people». Significantly, the most important work of Nāth inspiration attributed to Dattātreyā is the *Avadhūta-gītā* or «Song of the Free». On this text, see chap. 8 of Rigopoulos 1998 (pp. 195-221).



behaves like a madman.<sup>13</sup> From its inception Dattātreyā theology appears as an inextricable mixture (*miśra*) of *śaiva* and *vaiṣṇava* traits.

Mahānubhāvs ‘received’ Dattātreyā through the medium of the pan-Indian sect of the Nāths, a *śaiva* yogic tradition influenced by Hindū Tantrism as well as Vedāntic non-dualism, which became extremely popular especially from the twelfth century onwards.<sup>14</sup> Dattātreyā had and still has a most important place in the Western *nav-nāth* pantheon, being revered as one of the veritable originators of the sect along with Gorakhnāth (who possibly lived between the ninth and twelfth centuries) and Matsyendranāth. R.C. Dhēre long ago pointed out the connections between the Nāths and the Mahānubhāvs and has plausibly suggested that both Cāngdev Rāūḷ and Guṇḍam Rāūḷ were Nāth *yogīs* or, in any case, adepts of the Dattātreyā cult (Dhēre 1964: 58-66). This is almost certainly the reason why Mahānubhāvs excluded Dattātreyā from their rejection of all other gods of the Hindū pantheon.

Raeside, in his 1976 article, hypothesized that the Mahānubhāvs would have exempted Dattātreyā from their rejection of *devatās* because of his strong popularity in centers such as Mātāpur/Māhūr,<sup>15</sup> an important *śakti-pīṭha* in

<sup>13</sup> For an English translation, see Olivelle 1992: 184. On the ascetic as *bāla*, *unmatta*, and *piśāca* see Olivelle’s introduction, pp. 109-112.

<sup>14</sup> On Nāthism and Nāth literature in its connection with the so-called *Yoga Upaniṣads*, see Bouy 1994.

<sup>15</sup> Cakradhar, in *Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.25, is said to have forbidden going to Mātāpur as well as Kolhāpur both being centers of *devī* worship. In Mātāpur the goddess Ekavīrā/Reṇukā is worshipped and the legends of Reṇukā and Dattātreyā are intermixed; Kolhāpur is the residence of the *devī* Mahālakṣmī-Ambābāī. Guṇḍam Rāūḷ, however, is supposed to have given the opposite command on his deathbed: «Go to Mātāpur, I tell you!» (*Riddhīpur-līlā*, chap. 322, which Raeside sharply renders: «Damn it all, why don’t you go to Mātāpur!»). Cakradhar himself certainly never went to these two places, but Nāgdev, following Guṇḍam Rāūḷ’s words, started visiting Mātāpur. In Mahārāṣṭra, the oldest site associated with Dattātreyā which soon became a Mahānubhāv pilgrimage place and where even nowadays Dattātreyā renouncers known as ‘wearers of the

the Sahyādrī mountains and the locale of one of the oldest and most sacred temples of Dattātreyā: a clear proof of the deity's link with Śāktism (Raeside 1976: 593-595). Mātāpur is very close to the Varhād area, the Mahānubhāvs' heartland. Being the main object of veneration of convenient potential converts, Dattātreyā would soon have been incorporated as an *avatār* of Parameśvar. In his subsequent, most important article on Dattātreyā of 1982, however, Raeside has come to modify his position allying himself with Ḍhere:

There are enough random [...] references to Dattātreyā in *Līlācaritra* and *Sūtrapāṭha* to convince one that he was important for the sect at a very early stage — possibly from the time of its founder. We may suppose that Cakradhara admitted Dattātreyā to his list of genuine *avatārs* of Parameśvara because he was an object of worship for his guru's guru, Cāngadeva Rāuḷa, or more simply because Cakradhara himself, before he became convinced of his own divinity, was attached to or at least drawn towards the Nātha sect (Raeside 1982: 497-498).

This conclusion seems most reasonable and fitting. Nāthism strongly influenced both the early Mahānubhāvs and the early Vārkarīs.<sup>16</sup> Chief protagonists of Nāthism in

twisted locks of hair' (*jaṭā-dharas*) meet, is the *ātma-tīrth* at Pāncāleśvar, on the south bank of the Godāvarī river east of Paiṭhaṇ. Here, Cakradhar is said to have pointed out the site of Dattātreyā's hut (*gumphā*; *Līlā-caritra*, *pūrvārdha* 312 in Tulpule's edition). There is even one *abhaṅg* attributed to Jñāndev magnifying Dattātreyā as «the one formless *yogī*» which mentions the value of a bath (*snān*) at Pāncāleśvar. Dattātreyā is believed to take his morning bath here; the *abhaṅg* is quoted in Ḍhere 1964: 66-67. The Dattātreyā temple of Pāncāleśvar was rebuilt by Mahānubhāvs in 1963.

<sup>16</sup> Even Charlotte Vaudeville is of the same advice and suggests that both Cakradhar and Jñāndev were affiliated to the Nāth tradition (Vaudeville 1987a: 218, 221). Following *in toto* Tulpule (1979: 316), who in turn relies upon the works of Y.K. Deshpande and R.C. Ḍhere (*Śrīguru Gorakṣanāth: Caritra āṇi Paramparā*, Bombay 1959), Vaudeville argues that Cakradhar would be none other than Harināth, the grand-*guru* of Mukundarāj author of the philosophical treatise *Viveka-sindhu*, tradition-

Mahārāṣṭra were Gahinīnāth and Nivṛttināth, the elder brother of Jñāndev. Through his brother and *guru* Nivṛttināth, the young brāhmaṇ Jñāndev became an adept of the Nāth sect. Indeed, he wrote the *Jñāneśvarī* on the instruction and to the glory of his master Nivṛttināth. N.H. Kulkarnee has even advanced the hypothesis that in order to popularise Nāthism in Mahārāṣṭra Gahinīnāth mixed devotion to Kṛṣṇa with yogic practices (*sādhana*) (Kulkarnee 1989: 200). What came to be developed was an inextricable combination of both asceticism and devotion, *yoga* and *bhakti*. This is evidenced by the Mahānubhāvs adoption of Kṛṣṇa and Dattātreya, the first being paradigmatic of devotion via the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the second being exemplary of asceticism and renunciation.<sup>17</sup> Quite differently from the lay Vārkarī movement—which was always a non-ascetic, non-exclusivistic tradition—the adoption of an ascetic life-style, that is, of *sannyās*, was the distinctive element of all Mahānubhāvs who especially insisted upon it: this was also the main reason for their narrower and more elitist appeal.

ally dated to 1188 and considered to be the earliest literary work in Old Marāṭhī. Harināth alias Cakradhar would have initiated two different traditions, one of Vedānta and another one of Siddhānta. Mukundarāj would have been the recipient of the former (through Raghunāth, his direct *guru*) and Nāgdev, the first preceptor of the Mahānubhāvs, of the latter. The French indologist reiterates the same thesis in *The Shaivite Background of Santism* (Vaudeville 1987b: 34, 36).

<sup>17</sup> In Mahānubhāv stories concerning Dattātreya we also find the essence of Mahānubhāv teaching and practice: severest asceticism coupled with pure love and service. For instance, in the *Sahyādra-līlā* (and there is no Purāṇic source or antecedent which has been identified for it) we are told the incense-burner story of Arjuna Kārtavīrya, who took live coals in his hands for worshipping his master Dattātreya. Holding burning items in one's hands—such as live coals or camphor—is often an extraordinary feat performed as a result of divine possession (*angāt yene*). This narrative puts together the two traditions about Kārtavīrya: self-mortification or extreme asceticism through which he propitiated Dattātreya (as in the *Mahābhārata*, thanks to which he got his boons, notably one thousand arms) and loving service (*sevā*, as in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, where Kārtavīrya serves Dattātreya as a humble and faithful disciple).

Charlotte Vaudeville has argued that, in Mahārāṣṭra, the shifting from *śaivism* to nominal *vaiṣṇavism*, which she sees as a broad, general pattern, is especially evident in the case of the Mahānubhāvs' *pañca-kṛṣṇas*. Noticing how in the Marāṭhī area *rāūḷ* is the name of a very low caste of Bhairava<sup>18</sup> worshippers, she has come to the conclusion that both Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ and Guṇḍam Rāūḷ belonged to that group and were originally *śaivas* (Vaudeville 1987a: 221). In Cakradhar's case the prominence of the *vaiṣṇava* element is revealed by his very name, Cakradhar (lit. 'wheel-bearer') being a celebrated name of Viṣṇu.<sup>19</sup> A somewhat similar shifting from *śaivism* to *vaiṣṇavism* might be posited in Dattātreyā's case. The fusion of *śaiva* and *vaiṣṇava* motifs is a characteristic of Dattātreyā from his first Purāṇic emergence, making him the paradigm of Mahārāṣṭra's integrative spirituality. Dattātreyā, via the *śaiva* Nāths, was a perfect candidate for appropriation by the ascetic Mahānubhāvs given the deity's Purāṇic identification as an *avatār* of Viṣṇu.

At the very beginning of the *Līlā-caritra*, Dattātreyā is reported to have manifested himself to Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ at Mātāpur in the guise of a tigress. Laying her paw on Cāṅgdev's head she transmitted Dattātreyā's *śakti* to him. Again, Dattātreyā's appearance as a tigress may be interpreted as a *śaiva* or *śākta* element. The episode also bears a tribal flavor, calling to mind the shamanic figure of the 'man-tiger'. The account indicates clearly that this Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ was a disciple of Dattātreyā. The Mahānubhāv Dattātreyā is strongly linked with animals, especially impure dogs, as well as with the despised, peripheral *milieux* of untouchables and tribals (even Muslims). This is consistent with his unpredictable *avadhūt* nature, relating him to the wilderness and to the 'uncivilized' domain of nature.

<sup>18</sup> The most dreadful form of Śiva. Bhairava literally means 'frightful', 'terrible', 'horrible'.

<sup>19</sup> On the *cakra* attribute of Viṣṇu, the wheel or discus which the god carries in uplifted hand, see Gonda 1993: 96-99.

Dattātreyā's love and identification with impure dogs calls to mind Cakradhar's ascetic recommendation to «be like a singed dog» (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.219). Dattātreyā's perfect detachment and freedom from all social rules and conventions makes him a potent symbol of the transcendence of the Absolute. In Mahānubhāv literature, for instance in the *Gadyarāja* (verse 234), he appears disguised as an outcaste carrying a load of meat upon a carrying pole (*kāvadhī*). Similarly, in the *Sahyādra-līlā* Dattātreyā appears as an outcaste Māṅg bent under the heavy weight of a load of meat. Herein, he also appears in the guise of a hunter (*pāradhī*), wearing a *dhotī* in the wrestler's style and holding a pair of dogs in one of his hands. Dattātreyā is said to be particularly fond of hunting and of dogs. In the *Līlā-caritra* (*uttarārdha* 146) it is even said that Parśurām, the son of Jamadagni and Ekavirā, had a vision (*darśan*) of Dattātreyā with a pair of dogs in his hands.<sup>20</sup> The presence of dogs is a leit-motif in the modern iconography of Dattātreyā: in the brāhmaṇical, sanitized re-interpretation, the three (or four) dogs that always accompany him are said to symbolize the three (or four) *Vedas*!

In the *Sūtra-pāṭh* (10.282-285), Dattātreyā is said to manifest himself in each of the four ages and is also said to be the first cause of the Mahānubhāv tradition, his sight being unfailingly effective. Raeside finds it suspicious that these four *sūtras* are placed at the very end of the *vicāra* chapter and that neither of them can be referred back to the *Līlā-caritra*. This is not exactly true, however, since *Sūtra-pāṭh* 10.284: «The sight of him is unfailingly effective» (*teṃ amogha darśan kiṃ gā*) finds a parallel in *Līlā-caritra*,

<sup>20</sup> A dog, Dāṅgarā, which originally belonged to a tribal woman called Āūsā, is mentioned as a *bhakta* of Cakradhar. The *Līlā-caritra* narrates two incidents about the dog and his devotion for Cakradhar (*uttarārdha* 305, 341). At the time of the dog's death, Cakradhar is reported to have said: «Even this dog is better than you all. For it could not live in separation from me». On this episode and dogs' devotion, see Tulpule 1991. More generally on the role of dogs in Indian mythology, see White 1991: chap. 5.

*pūrvārdha* 62. Dattātreyā's *darśan* is believed to be extraordinarily powerful: in both the *Sahyādra-līlā* and the *Gadyarāja* (chap. 232), he is magnified as *parāvareśa*, the lord of both the «higher» (*parā*) and «lower» (*avara*) *śaktis*: he may thus see a *jīva*'s lower or higher fitness, and reward it with *parā* or *avara jñān*.<sup>21</sup> Dattātreyā, as the prototype of the omnipresent, itinerant ascetic is believed to move in the world clothing himself in many different bodies and garbs, also appearing as the «prince of tricksters» (*Gadyarāja*, chap. 236). The god's unexpected guises and sudden appearances have indeed become proverbial in Marāṭhī: «To appear all of a sudden like Datta» (*datta mhaṇūna ubhā rahānem*). Celebrated cases are the ones reported by the hagiographer Mahīpati (1715-1790) of Dattātreyā granting *darśan* to the saint-poet Eknāth (1533-1599) as a Muslim soldier on horseback (red-eyed, bristling with weapons, speaking the language of Muhammadans) and also as a Muslim *faqīr* accompanied by a woman and a dog (Rigopoulos 1998: 144-145). Most probably because of Eknāth's link to Dattātreyā and to Islām via his *guru* Janārdan, this integrative saint-poet didn't fear to identify himself with Mahānubhāvs at a time when Mahānubhāvs were an isolated, persecuted group. Thus, in one of his short poems (*bhāruds*) Eknāth's refrain, which he applies both to himself and to his master Janārdan, is: «We have become Manbhavs» (Zelliot 1987b: 102-103).

The fact that the authoritative *Sūtra-pāṭh* declares Dattātreyā to have manifested in all four *yugs* and to be the originator or 'first cause' (*ādi-kāran*) of the tradition, reflects in my opinion the early belief that he is in fact omnipresent, being worshipped as an immortal *yogin*. Via the Nāth movement, Dattātreyā was revered as one among the tutelary deities of the esoteric science of alchemy (*rasāyan*): herein, he was viewed as the quintessential *yogin* having achieved a perfected, incorruptible body (*siddha-*

<sup>21</sup> Another name of Dattātreyā is Jīvadattā, that is, 'given to *jīvas*'.

*deha*).<sup>22</sup> Within the *Datta-sampradāya*, this belief in Dattātreyā's immortality will be further elaborated upon. In the theological understanding of devotees, Dattātreyā is even today believed to be at the same time the eternal, omnipresent *avatār* and the Messianic, ultimate descent (thus identifiable with Kalkin) who will suddenly manifest himself at the end of this *kali yug*. I think that Dattātreyā is said to be the first cause of the Mahānubhāvs not simply because he passed on his *śakti* to Cāṅgdev Rāūl, the first of the human *pañca-kṛṣṇas*, but because he is understood to be the primordial *guru* and *yogī* (*ādi-guru*, *ādi-yogī*): if among Nāth adepts he is even said to replace Śiva as lord of Yoga, in Mahānubhāv theology Dattātreyā appears as the embodiment of the transcendent, ineffable reality of the One, Absolute Parameśvar.

Among the important Mahānubhāv sources concerning Dattātreyā (and Mātāpur) are the hagiographical works *Śrī-dattātreyā-caritra* attributed to Mhāim̐bhat, of the late thirteenth century, which is a prose text of Dattātreyā's life, the *Sahyādrī-varṇan* or *Sahyādrī-māhātmya* (Kolte 1964) attributed to Ravaḷobās, circa 1333, in 517 *ovī* verses, and the *Sahyādra-līlā* (published as an appendix to Kolte's edition of the *Sahyādrī-varṇan*). Other sources are the *Ṛddhipur-māhātmya* of Maheśvar Paṇḍit, probably dating to the early fourteenth century, the *Dattātreyā-prabandha*, attributed to one Bhīṣmācārya, also possibly dating to the fourteenth century, and a *Dattātreyā-varṇan-stotra*, attributed to Śārangdhar Pusadekar, dating sometime in the seventeenth century.

According to Mahānubhāv *pothī* tradition, Cakradhar was born in 1194 at Bharvās/Broach, in Gujarāt. He was the son of one Vīsaldev, a royal minister —perhaps a chief minister (*pradhān*) of King Malladev— and his original name was Haripāl or Harapāl. He was married to a woman called

<sup>22</sup> On these alchemical issues, see White 1996. On the belief in bodily immortality, see Schaeffer 2002.

Kamaḷāisā, and he was much addicted to gambling. Apparently, he died young around 1221 but just before his body was to be cremated it was reanimated by the spirit of Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ, also known as Cakrapāṇi (another name of Viṣṇu, significantly being indistinguishable in meaning from Cakradhar).<sup>23</sup> According to Raeside, this story of Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ being reborn as Cakradhar may have developed between Cakradhar's death and the time of Kaviśvar.

Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ, almost certainly a Nāth *yogī* believed to possess great powers (the entire fifty-two *siddhis*),<sup>24</sup> lived most of his life and also voluntarily died in Dvārāvātī or Dvārkā, the holy Kṛṣṇaite city of Kāṭhiyāvār, in Gujārāt, believed to have been founded by Kṛṣṇa himself. The *Līlā-caritra* (*pūrvārdha* 16) reports why Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ had decided to drop dead. There was a *haṭha-yoginī* called Kāmākṣī who tried to lure him away from his asceticism, as she had done with many other *yogīs*. She wanted to have sex with him and, although he would refuse, she stubbornly sat for seven days and nights at his cell's doorway. In the end Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ, evidently tired of such a situation and resolute to keep to his vow of continence, decided to discard his body thanks to his extraordinary yogic powers.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> It should be noted that in the *Sūtra-pāṭh* Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ is referred to in only four *sūtras* from the *vicār mālīkā* section (11.51-54), most probably a later accretion and not the earliest record of Cakradhar's own words.

<sup>24</sup> There are many Cāṅgdevs in the early period of Marāṭhī literature, the most famous being the *yogī* to whom Jñāndev addressed his *Cāṅgdev-pāsaṣṭī*, a poem in sixty-five quatrains magnifying the experience of non-duality. On the various Cāṅgdevs and their possible links with Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ, who has also been identified as a *śaiva* Pāśupata, see Dhare 1977. The *Sūtra-pāṭh* (11.51; 54) states that Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ gave an infinite number of powers and also bestowed knowledge to fifty-two men or *siddhas*. He was probably credited with the teaching of the fifty-two *siddhis*. These are supposed to comprise all possible powers, derived from the fifty-two syllables (*mātrkāś*) of the Sanskrit alphabet and their associated *mantras*.

<sup>25</sup> Despite obvious differences, this story of Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ calls to mind Śāṅkara's temporary death and 'entrance' in the corpse of King Amarūka, which he reanimated in order to master all the secrets of erotic pleasure (*kāma*); on this episode, see Piantelli 1974: 68-70.



Although he was no more Haripāl, the young prince went back to live with his wife Kamaḷāīsā and had a son from her. He also continued to gamble and on one occasion he lost heavily and so asked his wife to give him her golden ornaments so that he might pay off his debts. She, however, angrily refused to give him her gold. His affectionate father then intervened and generously paid off all his debts: he ordered his treasurer to go and pay the creditors the total sum of five hundred gold coins (*āsus*). This incident was the turning point in Haripāl's life. He became disgusted with worldly life and decided to leave on a pilgrimage to Rāmṭek, northeast of Nāgpūr, the most important Rāmaite pilgrimage center in Mahārāṣṭra, in which Rām is venerated primarily as a sovereign king (Bakker 1990). Haripāl was never to return home. Apparently, his father didn't want him to leave on pilgrimage, Mahārāṣṭra being viewed as a foreign land. Also, the father seems to have objected to his departure by saying that there was a state of war between the Gurjars of Gujarāt and the Yādav kingdom and, Haripāl belonging to the *kṣatriya* caste (*rāje*), a brāhmaṇ priest should better be sent on pilgrimage in his place.

However, separating himself from his retinue, he never got to Rāmṭek but eventually stopped in Ṛddhipur, a small town in Varhād which saw the presence of a rich variety of *śaiva*, *vaiṣṇava*, and even Nāth temples and monasteries and the passing by of many ascetics and pilgrims on their way to Rāmṭek and other holy places. Here, he finally met with the anti-conventional Guṇḍam (lit.: 'rounded stone') or Guṇḍam Rāūḷ, a paradigm of the crazy (*unmatta*) ascetic who was a brāhmaṇ by birth and who initiated him into spiritual life and renunciation (*sannyās*), renaming him Cakradhar. The latter's biography (*Līlā-caritra*, *pūrvārdha* 15) says that Guṇḍam Rāūḷ in his early years had been formally initiated as a *daśanāmī* renouncer in the order of Śāṅkara (788-820) by one Kamaḷāraṇya. His name as a renunciant would have been Vibudhāraṇya (Dhere 1977: 227-230). Nonetheless, as Dhere has concluded, Guṇḍam Rāūḷ, like Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ, was most probably a Nāth *yogī*, and his name appears in several lists of the eighty-four *siddhas*.

*Līlā-caritra*, *pūrvārdha* 15, narrates that Guṇḍam Rāūḷ received the «high-and-low powers» (*parāvara-śakti*) —the most complete of the three *śaktis*, making him a full manifestation of Parameśvar—<sup>26</sup> from Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ when, on the bank of the Gomatī river, the latter placed his winnowing fan on his head and hit him with his broom. *Sūtra-pāṭh* 11.52 states that the eccentric Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ showed the way with a winnowing fan, and knowledge with a broom. The broom or brush, which the *yogī* Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ habitually used to sweep the streets of Dvārāvātī with, and especially his winnowing-fan, in which he collected all dust and rubbish, might be interpreted symbolically as magic, shamanic tools.

Guṇḍam Rāūḷ is the most strange and unorthodox of the manifestations of Parameśvar. Mahānubhāv's nonconformity reflects the unconventional character of their *avatārs*: indeed, how could it be otherwise? Guṇḍam Rāūḷ is gluttonous, childish (*bāla*), breaks pollution rules, disrupts rituals, even treats deities with disrespect (*Līlā-caritra*, *pūrvārdha* 168, reports that he often played with the images of deities, for instance putting his fingers into their mouth, nose, ears, eyes, etc.). He is altogether mad (*vedā*). The townspeople of Ṛddhipur,<sup>27</sup> the out-of-the-way and yet

<sup>26</sup> The *Līlā-caritra*, however, adds that while Guṇḍam Rāūḷ's higher power was manifested, his lower power was hidden. The other two types of *śaktis* which may characterize manifestations of Parameśvar are, according to Mahānubhāv theology, the *para-dṛśya* type, which can «see the high», and the *avara-dṛśya* type, «which can see the low» (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 11.20).

<sup>27</sup> On Ṛddhipur, nowadays in the Morśī *taluk* of the Amrāvātī district, see Feldhaus 1987. In the *Ṛddhipur-māhātmyas*, it is reported that the original name of the place was Rucikāśrama or Rucikapur, the forest hermitage of a *ṛṣi* named Rucika. Through his ascetic powers, Rucika won the wish-granting cow Kāmadhenu, the wish-granting tree Kalpataru, and the wish-granting gem Cintāmaṇi. These three being called *ṛddhis*, the town came to be known as Ṛddhipur. It is narrated that Rucika, in order to win his bride, had to present her parents with five hundred black-eared horses. After searching everywhere in vain —even in heaven— he finally obtained the horses from Dattātreyā and his mother at Māhūr, that is,

prosperous village in which Guṇḍam Rāūḷ spent most of his life and which is equated with Dvārkā/Dvārāvātī by Mahānubhāvs,<sup>28</sup> would occasionally say: «The Rāūḷ is mad, the Rāūḷ is possessed» (*rāūḷ veda, rāūḷ pīsā*). It is precisely his madness,<sup>29</sup> manifested through his rude, bizarre, aberrant behaviour, which is understood to be an essential sign of his divinity, transcending all *varṇas* and *āśramas*, all social and ritual norms. Guṇḍam Rāūḷ's madness is paradigmatic of the transcendent otherness of Parameśvar. The early Mahānubhāvs never denied his madness, but rather understood it as a sign of his divinity. In other words, his madness and his divinity are not thought of as contradictory but rather as complementary, madness being the special illustration of his divinity. He moves freely in society as a capricious egalitarian, utterly disregarding caste and sex barriers. For instance, he has a very special affection for Māṅgs, the lowest of Mahārāṣṭra's untouchable castes, and he scrubs women's back and even toys with a woman's breast (!), though the conventions he breaks are not primarily of a sexual kind. Guṇḍam Rāūḷ exhibits the perfect freedom of the Supreme, who does not know or care about any of the categories in which humans divide themselves. In his unlimited freedom, why shouldn't or couldn't he be mad? Guṇḍam Rāūḷ's madness does not arise from any loving or devotional attitude, as is common among many saints, especially *vaiṣṇavas*. Guṇḍam Rāūḷ is never portrayed as a devotee: in fact, he is not devoted to anyone since he *is* God. Others, eventually, are devoted to him.

only about a hundred miles to the south. Rucika's son was Jamadagni who later married Reṇukā, the chief *devī* of Māhūr. The celebrated son of Reṇukā and Jamadagni was Parśurām.

<sup>28</sup> On the identification of Rddhipur with Kṛṣṇa's capital, found in chap. 213 of the *Rddhipur-līlā*, see Feldhaus 1987: 76.

<sup>29</sup> On Guṇḍam Rāūḷ's madness, see Feldhaus 1982 and 1984: 3-29. Useful for a summary as well as for a comparison with other radical saints is Zelliott 1987a. On the behaviour of saints as if mad, see Kinsley 1974; McDaniel 1989; Feuerstein 1992.

Similar to other *gurus* of *bhakti* movements which tended to iconoclasm, Guṇḍam Rāüḷ taught the paramount importance of an intimate, direct relationship with God. All exterior rituals and images,<sup>30</sup> *mūrtis* and temples were unimportant to him and finally to be rejected diverting attention from the sole necessary practice of inner, spiritual search. For Guṇḍam Rāüḷ definitions and categories simply did not apply, he being utterly beyond them. As he gloriously sang (*Ṛddhipur-līlā*, 281):

I am not a man, nor a god or Yakṣa [= a semi-divine being],  
nor a *brāhmaṇ*, a *kṣatriya*, a *vaiśya* or a *sūdra*.  
I am not a celibate; I am not a householder or a forest  
hermit;  
neither am I a mendicant, I who am innate knowledge  
(Feldhaus 1984).<sup>31</sup>

Exhibiting a crazy or foolish behaviour, a sort of ‘divine intoxication’, is thought to be appropriate for a manifestation of Parameśvar. As *Sūtra-pāṭh* 10.106 declares:

God becomes a tortoise, he becomes a fish; he descends  
among the gods, he descends among men, he descends  
among animals. When he has descended among men,  
God becomes a madman, he becomes a possessed man, he  
becomes a mute; but a walking, talking God is rare  
(Feldhaus 1983b: 184).

Of course, such divine madness and possession, even such divine muteness, are thought of as altogether different from ordinary human madness and possession, which *Sūtra-pāṭh* 10.258 and 13.150 views as an evil, negative condi-

<sup>30</sup> On image worship in Hindū religions, see Padoux 1990a. See also Waghorne, Cutler 1996.

<sup>31</sup> This is the only verse which is also found in the *Sūtra-pāṭh* (11.a61). Guṇḍam Rāüḷ, like all manifestations of Parameśvar, is revered as an omniscient. As it is said in the *Sūtra-pāṭh* (10.215): «My children, there is nothing he does not know. Even though he knows everything, he [acts as if he] is ignorant».

tion: people affected by such mental illnesses —as well as by blindness, deafness, and muteness— are said to be unfit to receive the Mahānubhāv teaching. Guṇḍam Rāūḷ's divine madness, on the other hand, is not unique and certainly not to be interpreted as a Mahānubhāvs' specialty: such a typology is often found among a variety of extreme renunciators, especially Nāth and Tantric *yogīs*. As demonstrating the madness of God Himself, Guṇḍam Rāūḷ's crazy character resembles the madness of Śiva, the mad god par excellence in the Hindū context. But here the exemplary model of Guṇḍam Rāūḷ's behavior as a lunatic and as one possessed by demons is no doubt the *ādi-kāran* Dattātreyā in his well known *bāla-unmatta-piśāca* characterization.

In order to stress Guṇḍam Rāūḷ's divinity —he was a «womb incarnation» (*garbhācā*) of Parameśvar according to Mahānubhāv theology<sup>32</sup>— his biography highlights his precocious genius and extraordinary talent, his innate, superhuman qualities. The *Ṛddhipur-līlā* magnifies his omniscience and power over nature and all sorts of disease: among the many miracles attributed to him, we find astounding feats such as raising humans from the dead (and animals as well: for instance, a donkey!).

Coming back to Cakradhar, the *Līlā-caritra* (*pūrvārdha* 20) reports the crucial encounter between him and Guṇḍam Rāūḷ, in which Cakradhar received a food offering (*prasād*) and both «the power of knowledge» (*jñān-*

<sup>32</sup> The *Sūtra-pāṭh* (10.104-105) names three ways in which the One Parameśvar takes on a *māyā*-body, that is, manifests himself in the realm of illusion: he takes it on in a womb (as in Kṛṣṇa's case); he raises a corpse (as in Cakradhar's case); he pushes out a soul (*jīva*) from a living body (*davaḍaṇe-avatār*; neither the *Līlā-caritra* nor the *Sūtra-pāṭh* give examples of this third type). Concerning Guṇḍam Rāūḷ, some authorities such as Kolte (1975: 199) have argued that he was an incarnation of the third type. In other words, he would have replaced a soul already in his mother's womb. By favoring such interpretation, many present-day Mahānubhāvs argue that Guṇḍam Rāūḷ's madness was not originally his own. Rather, he would have inherited it from the *jīva* he replaced. This interpretation, however, is unfounded if one looks at early Mahānubhāv literature.

*śakti*) as well as *parāvāra-śakti* from the divine lunatic who placed his hand on Cakradhar's mouth. This meeting is said to have taken place in the bazaar at Ṛddhipur and lasted just a few minutes. Cakradhar then left him and started wandering around in solitude, totally indifferent to the world.

In Mahānubhāv sources, Cakradhar always magnifies Guṇḍam Rāūḷ's life as a pure divine «play» (*līlā*): the latter is revered as one who «delights in the Self» (*ātmārāmu*), identical with the «Absolute beyond attributes» (*nīrguṇa brahma*), the «eternally liberated Reality» (*nītyamukta vastu*). Apparently, though Cakradhar later sent his disciples to Ṛddhipur to serve Guṇḍam Rāūḷ even for long periods, he himself returned to visit Guṇḍam Rāūḷ only twice, the second time receiving a quite rough reception (*Līlā-caritra, pūrvārdha* 33-37): Guṇḍam Rāūḷ, being choleric and unpredictable, most often received people with curses and blows.

Cakradhar wandered twelve years in the wilderness before he 're-emerged' and started attracting disciples. He led an itinerant and solitary life, always begging his food, never staying in one place for more than a few days. His temporary abodes were out-of-the-way places at the foot of trees or dilapidated temples. His insights were grounded in self-discipline and the pursuit of virtues, among which non-violence (*ahimsā*) was paramount. The twelve-year-period of itinerant life in the forest (*vana-vāsa*) is often recommended in Hindū asceticism, number twelve being symbolic of perfection and completion of a cycle (Schimmel 1993).

Cakradhar is then reported to have spent some time at Warangal in Āndhra Pradeś, where he strangely married a second time with the daughter of a rich merchant. By this paradoxical, antinomian behaviour he possibly wished to prove the freedom of his divine, *avadhūt* nature, beyond attachment and non-attachment, and thus beyond all caste and family rules and restrictions. He was unpredictable and, on occasions, acted in bizarre and apparently non-*dharmic* ways. The name of this second wife was Haṃsāmbā. However, he was really married only to renun-

ciation and soon left her and started living again as an *avadhūt* in the wilderness. Cakradhar's mastery of alchemy is also mentioned: in this early period, he is said to have received the power of arresting the aging process from a Nāth adept, a *rāj-guru* called Udhalināth. Later on (*Līlā-caritra*, *pūrvārdha* 315), in a meeting with another Nāth *yogī* by name Viśvanāth, Cakradhar will declare his ability to turn copper into gold, that is, of being a master at alchemical transubstantiation.

His itinerant life of aimless wandering ended when he came to the ancient city of Paiṭhaṇ on the Godāvārī, which at that time was the center of learning and brāhmaṇ orthodoxy and which Cakradhar made his headquarters (Feldhaus 1991). He settled here at the instance of one Bāisā: this woman was his first follower, whom he probably met in 1266. This marks the end of the *ekāṅka* period in Cakradhar's life, that is, the period in which he was alone. It should be noticed that, although he came from Gujarāt, the *Līlā-caritra* (*uttarārdha* 133) says that he spoke Marāṭhī fluently. This has led to hypothesize that he and his family, though residents in Gujarāt, actually came from Mahārāṣṭra. This opinion, however, is contradicted by the tradition that his father didn't want him to go on pilgrimage to Rāmṭek in Mahārāṣṭra, said to be a foreign land.

The last eight years of Cakradhar's life, from 1266 to 1274, are meticulously reported in the *Līlā-caritra*. This is the period of his association with a group of followers in which women, especially elderly and poor women to whom he gave shelter, outnumbered men. In the *Līlā-caritra*, the memories of the disciples who were witness to his teachings, his many miracles, and all the various events which took place in those early days are presented in a realistic way. Countering the obscurity of his origins and early life, detailed accounts are offered of even the most minute incidents in Cakradhar's everyday life and of his wanderings in the various locales along the Godāvārī. All stories are written with freshness, in a naïve, terse, and popular style reflecting the language and culture of village Mahārāṣṭra of the time. About half-way through these eight years, around

1270, Cakradhar was joined by Nāgdev who soon became his closest male disciple and inseparable companion.

Cakradhar is always revered as an incarnation of Parameśvar. He himself was perfectly self-conscious of his divine identity (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 11.19). Apparently, in these last years his fame spread so much that even court ministers and the Yādav rulers Kṛṣṇadev and Mahādev wished to meet him. King Kṛṣṇadev (1245-1261), in the *Līlā-caritra* better known as Kānherdev or Kānhadev, is reported to have once met with Cakradhar. Then the Gosāvī,<sup>33</sup> as Cakradhar was commonly called, gave proof of his supreme indifference, when the king offered him a quantity of gold coins (*Līlā-caritra, pūrvārdha* 61). We are also told that Kṛṣṇadev's son and successor, i.e. King Mahādev (1261-1270), made more than one attempt to have *darśan* of Cakradhar, the latter's fame having spread to such an extent that the king once found his court empty. Cakradhar, however, is reported to have slipped away knowing that the king might hand over his kingdom to him (*Līlā-caritra, pūrvārdha* 225-227). The Gosāvī's refusal highlights his ascetic aloofness from the worldly domain, as well as his willingness to give himself completely to his followers and especially to the poor and downtrodden.

In the *Līlā-caritra, uttarārdha* 564, Cakradhar says of himself: «a walking and speaking god is hard to get in the world». On various occasions, physical contact with Cakradhar, or his mere touch or glance, is said to have had healing power (*Līlā-caritra, pūrvārdha* 54, 92, 116, 232) and even the might of 'deifying' a person and rendering him/her invulnerable (*Līlā-caritra, pūrvārdha* 27). Though Cakradhar led his followers with firmness and required adherence to strict discipline, still he was known as a *ved-hācārya*, a «master of attraction», like Kṛṣṇa. Apparently, the Gosāvī was quite handsome and extremely charismatic. Women were especially attracted by him, and this, in turn,

<sup>33</sup> This term identifies a person who has renounced all worldly ties and pleasures, an ascetic.



attracted criticism.<sup>34</sup> In fact, Cakradhar was not a womaniser at all. He was a staunch renouncer who, adhering to traditional male ascetic views, regarded woman as the chief ‘intoxicating substance’ and always taught his male followers to be on guard.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, Cakradhar recognized equal religious rights for women, granting them initiation into renunciation (*sannyās-dīkṣā*, also known as the «mendicant life», *bhikṣā*), their soul being recognized as the same as that of men (*Līlā-caritra, uttarārdha* 102). He especially taught his disciples to transcend the conventional ideas of bodily purity and pollution (*Līlā-caritra, uttarārdha* 384, 537).

In the main, Cakradhar followed general ethical principles (*sādhāraṇa-dharmas*) and there are many examples in the holy texts purporting his love, kindness, patience, forgiveness, courage, forbearance, modesty, obedience to his *guru* Guṇḍam Rāuḷ etc. Moreover, when confronted with his lay followers he did not underestimate the importance of family life and of the *gṛhastha-dharma*, and often took interest in their problems: he would offer solutions to property claims (*Līlā-caritra, pūrvārdha* 387), and once granted a son through his miraculous powers to a childless —though polygamous— wealthy landlord (*Līlā-caritra, pūrvārdha* 63). To be sure, the granting of a male offspring has always been one of the most sought after graces, precisely because of the wish (and dharmic obligation) to continue one’s life in the world through progeny. Cakradhar is even reported to have sent Nāgdev, who had already become a renunciant, back to his village so as to organize the maintenance of his destitute (ex-)wife and beget a son for helping her in life! Before taking *sannyās*, one should first settle all primary, worldly duties (*Līlā-caritra, uttarārdha* 32). Cakradhar, through his pow-

<sup>34</sup> On women’s attraction for Cakradhar, see *Līlā-caritra, pūrvārdha* 56 and 97, *uttarārdha* 80 and 266. A criticism of this female presence around him can be found in *Līlā-caritra, uttarārdha* 474.

<sup>35</sup> On the intoxicating properties of women, who intoxicate just by being seen, see *Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.9-12; 13.252.

ers, is also said to have cared for the fate of sonless widows (*Līlā-caritra, pūrvārdha* 217).

Nonetheless, precisely because he was a renouncer of a radical type beyond the worldly domain (*saṃsār*) and all social norms, he would often act as moved primarily by compassion rather than justice. Cakradhar noticed how theft and adultery were most common and indeed the *dharma* of this *kali* age. Once he protected an adulterer (*Līlā-caritra, uttarārdha* 271). As for the universal duty of *asteya* or abstinence from theft, Cakradhar is said to have more than once protected thieves. Here we find a clear conflict between Cakradhar's free, transcendent status —a 'law' into himself— and the common rules of law administered by the State, according to which it is the prime duty of the king to administer justice through punishment (*daṇḍa*) (Sontheimer 1982). For instance, Cakradhar condoned and took moral blame upon himself of a theft of chick-pea bundles done by his followers, which he then had roasted and ate with gusto (*Līlā-caritra, uttarārdha* 15). On another occasion, he had a village officer (*adhikārī*) free a thief who had stolen his horses: he defended him calling him «my companion», forcing the officer to worship and feed him even before himself. He then helped this same thief to escape by making a folded rope out of clothes (*Līlā-caritra, pūrvārdha* 57).

Although Cakradhar seems to have been conscious that people might object to the numerous presence of women among his followers (*Līlā-caritra, uttarārdha* 266), he got especially into trouble when Dematī, the wife of Hemādrī, the famous chancellor of the Yādav king, became attracted to him and wished to become his disciple. As a wife, Dematī was unhappy being much neglected by Hemādrī. Her *darśan* of Cakradhar in Paiṭhaṇ strongly affected her, and, surprisingly, Hemādrī came to be newly attracted to her (*Līlā-caritra, uttarārdha* 509). When he wondered about the reason for his renewed affection towards Dematī, she told him of her *darśan* of Cakradhar and attributed the 'miracle' to him. This naturally caused the jealousy of the chancellor, and apparently even Cakradhar resented the disclosure by Dematī, knowing that the orthodox brāhmaṇ Hemādrī,

upholder of a strict adherence to *varṇāśrama-dharma*, was against him and his followers. Moreover, one Sāraṅgaṇḍit, a celebrated brāhmaṇ scholar of Paiṭhaṇ, was also jealous of his young wife's devotion for Cakradhar.

Despite Cakradhar's holy character, brāhmaṇical opposition to him and his movement grew. Some though not all versions of the *Līlā-caritra* narrate that, due to the hatred of some brāhmaṇ ministers of the Yādav king Rāmdev, who was possibly a Vārkarī devoted to god Viṭṭhaḷ in Paṇḍharpur,<sup>36</sup> Cakradhar was arrested and taken to Paiṭhaṇ. Events reached a climax when a general court (*sabhā*) was instituted, in which Cakradhar —confronted by all the leading brāhmaṇs of the town, the important people (*mahā-janas*) of all castes, as well as by Jains and members of the Nāth sect— was accused of having a special attraction to women (*Līlā-caritra*, *uttarārḍha* 536). The formal accusation was that of living immorally with his female disciples, and the *Līlā-caritra*, signalling the whispering which took place in the assembly, suggests that the whole case was manipulated.

At large majority (with only two persons dissociating themselves from the judgement, Māyītā Harī and Prajñāsā-

<sup>36</sup> A Paṇḍharpur stone inscription (col. 1, l. 31), dated between 1273 and 1277, mentions King Rāmdev as «chief of the *phaḍs* (= groups) in Pāṇḍarī (= Paṇḍharpur)» (Tulpule 1963: 179). Historical events of the Yādav period are mentioned here and there in Mahānubhāv literature. Useful references are especially found in the *Smṛti-sthaḷ*, chaps. 77; 83-87; 92-93; 145-146; 148-150 (Feldhaus, Tulpule 1992). Interesting is the case of queen Kāmāīsā, the wife of the Yādav king Rāmdev. She was very devoted to Nāgdev. Nāgdev, however, refused to initiate her as an ascetic since the land in which Cakradhar commanded his followers to stay, Mahārāṣṭra (as per *Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.24), belonged to her husband. Since she could not leave/renounce her husband's land, she was considered not fit for initiation. Nāgdev also instructed her not to enter the fire, that is, commit *satī* of her own accord: if she did, he told her, she would certainly end up in hell since this is the destiny of all those who commit suicide. Eventually, at the time of Rāmdev's death in 1311, she was forced to commit *satī* by her stepson, who cruelly had her thrown into the fire despite her cries and her implorations to spare her. For an overview of these various incidents, see Joshi 1976.

gar), the decision (*samaya*) of the gathered assembly was to punish Cakradhar with ‘the *pūjā* of the nose’, that is, the cutting off of his nose. Apparently, this was done right on the spot. Another source reports that even his ears were cut off. According to Mahānubhāvs, however, Cakradhar had his nose (and ears) restored miraculously and was able to continue his preaching activity. In about 1274, on the command of the Yādav king or of Hemādri himself, Cakradhar was arrested a second time and finally assassinated by being beheaded (*Līlā-caritra, uttarārdha* 641). Besides Cakradhar’s anti-brāhmaṇism and the formal accusation of living immorally with his female adepts, some scholars speculate that he might have been put to death also for political reasons. As the son of a Gujarātī prince, Cakradhar alias Haripāl might have been involved in the conflict against the Marāṭhā army of Sīnghaṇ Yādav (1200-1247):

Les motifs de cette ‘exécution’ sont mystérieux: sa doctrine aurait dérangé l’ordre établi et la morale, mais la raison était peut-être d’ordre politique, dans la mesure où Harpaldev, en tant que prince de la famille de Broach, avait combattu les armées marathes de Singhana Yadav (Kshirsagar, Pacquement 1999: 201, n. 12).

Before being beheaded, Cakradhar forecasted two dreadful events: the invasions of the Muslim «barbarians» (*mlecchas*) from the north, and the coming of a most terrible famine (*Līlā-caritra, uttarārdha* 603). Both events took place: the first Muslim invasions led by ‘Alā-ud-dīn Khaljī started twenty years after Cakradhar’s death, in 1294, whereas the devastating famine is identified with the so-called *durgā-devī* famine, which took place almost a century later, in the years 1396-1407.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> In the *Līlā-caritra, uttarārdha* 436, Cakradhar also predicted that in the *kali* age Viṣṇu and Śiva temples would come to decay and that *kṣetra-pālas* such as Mairāḷa would replace them. With the fall of the Yādav empire and the decay of its *hemādpantī* style temples even this prediction came to fulfillment.

The Mahānubhāvs, however, have not accepted Cakradhar's violent death and believe that he miraculously got his head back and left «by the northern way» (*uttarā panth*), being last seen in the holy city of Ujjain in Madhya Pradeś (*Līlā-caritra, uttarārdha* 645). The North is the direction of immortality and Cakradhar, on analogy with Dattātreya and the mythical Nāths (all believed to be masters of the alchemical science, *rasāyan*), is still thought to be living incognito as a splendid immortal somewhere in a Himālayan cave.<sup>38</sup> Though twice in the *Smṛti-sthaḷ* (chaps. 132, 232) Cakradhar is said to have been seen in Ujjain, Nāgdev discouraged his disciples to rush there remembering his master's final words: «Now we will meet anew» (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 11.139; 12.262; *Līlā-caritra, uttarārdha* 646, 655). These words are interpreted as a prohibition against searching for him, meaning that the encounter with him will take place in the next rebirth.

Following Cakradhar's 'disappearance' sometime in 1274 (= Śaka 1196, possibly in the month of *māgh*),<sup>39</sup> the disciples decided to move to Ṛddhipur and gathered around Guṇḍam Rāūḷ. They stayed with him up until his death, said to have been caused by an attack of diarrhea around 1287, that is, about thirteen years after Cakradhar's 'departure'. In the *Ṛddhipur-līlā* (chap. 322), when Guṇḍam Rāūḷ is dying, Nāgdev asks him: «Lord, King Śrī Cakradhar entrusted us to you. Now you are leaving, Gosāvī. So to whom have you entrusted us?» To this, Guṇḍam Rāūḷ answers: «I have entrusted all these others to you, and I have entrusted you to Śrī Dattātreya-prabhu».

<sup>38</sup> For an assessment of Cakradhar's whole life and «final event» (*śevaṭaceṃ prakaraṇa*), see Kolte 1952. On the immortal Dattātreya meeting Śaṅkara at Badarīnāth and taking him by the hand to a cavern from which they were never seen to come out, see Rigopoulos 1998: 95.

<sup>39</sup> In the past, scholars such as K.M. Munshi, S.G. Tulpule and others have privileged 1272 as the year of Cakradhar's death. Kolte, in his *Śrīcakradhar Caritra*, proposed the date of 1276. Nowadays, however, most authorities agree on 1274 as the most probable date.

From then onwards, in the absence of a recognizable *avatār* of Parameśvar, the leadership of the group was taken up by the «charismatic» (*vedhavantī*) Nāgdev, whom the Mahānubhāvs understand to have been appointed as successor or «deputy» (*adhikaraṇ*) by both Cakradhar and Guṇḍam Rāūl. He administered initiation to all new disciples and expounded the fundamental teachings in the same way to everybody. His authority depended upon his knowledge, based upon memory, of Cakradhar's precepts and was tempered by the frequent religious discussions and debates (*dhārma-vārtā*) which took place especially with the Mahānubhāv elders. Nāgdev distinguished himself from Cakradhar and the other *avatārs* of Parameśvar, saying that he was *not* God but simply a *jīva* and a devotee of God (*Smṛti-sthaḷ*, chaps. 126, 198). People, therefore, should not worship him as God. Nonetheless, Nāgdev's unique position and role inevitably brought the followers to pay him special homage. He guided the Mahānubhāvs for about twenty-five years till his own death, which probably occurred in 1312, the same year in which the Yādav kingdom fell to the Muslims. For Nāgdev, the *Smṛti-sthaḷ* (chap. 260) reports that the disciples officiated the solemn rites appropriate for a *yogī*.

*Elements of Mahānubhāv Doctrine*<sup>1</sup>

The *Sūtra-pāṭh* presents us with a fundamentally dualist (*dvaita*) system of thought. Cakradhar taught a radical distinction between individual souls and Parameśvar and preached a strict monotheism: in order to help *jīvas* attain salvation, Parameśvar manifests himself on earth as an *avatār*. In Mahānubhāv systematic, pluralistic doctrine—though it is not clear if this was also Cakradhar’s point of view—there exist four separate and independent realities or substances (*padārthas*), thought to be beginningless (*anādī*) and eternal (*ananta*): a) Parameśvar, the One Supreme God beyond all deities, also called Dev, Īśvar, Para, or Śrī Prabhu; b) the many *devatās*, comprising the entire Hindū pantheon (with the exception of Kṛṣṇa and Dattātreya); c) the innumerable *jīvas* or individual souls; d) *prapañca* or the material world.

Despite the emphasis on the oneness of God, Parameśvar’s nature is tripartite (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 6.5): «being» or *sat* (= *Brahman*, said to be devoid of all properties); «consciousness» or *cit* (= *Māyā*, which has properties); and «joy»

<sup>1</sup> For a quintessential synthesis of Mahānubhāv doctrine, see Kolte 1997: 456-457.

or *ānanda* (= *Īśvar*, which is both devoid of all properties as well as possessed of them).<sup>2</sup> These immediately call to mind the three characteristics of the Vedāntic *Brahman* as *sat-cit-ānanda*. Words are of course inadequate to express the mystery of the 'three in one', and *Sūtra-pāṭh* 11.12 states that «the tripartite (*tri-aṃśa*) one is nevertheless one in such a way that it cannot be divided». Kolte has suggested that Parameśvar is to be identified as the *Īśvar* who has properties by virtue of his union with *Māyā*, the unqualified *Īśvar* being identical with *Brahman* (Kolte 1975<sup>4</sup>: 122). Still, the fact that *Māyā* is said to be an *aṃśa* of Parameśvar contradicts Parameśvar's transcendence and radical otherness with respect to Hindū *devatās*. In Mahānubhāv theology *Māyā* (also known as Caitanya) is classified as the highest deity of the Hindū pantheon: though ranking at the top, *Māyā* is thought of as totally separate and different from the Supreme Godhead. Such an inconsistency shows the *Sūtra-pāṭh*'s unsystematic character.

The realm of materiality (*prapañca*) is unconscious and thus there is no aspiration nor liberation for it. *Devatās* are believed to be always bound (*baddha*) and strictly limited in their spheres and powers: for them also there is no liberation. *Jīvas* alone are self-conscious and capable of knowledge and error. The *jīvas*' essential nature (*sva-rūpa*) is said to be crystal pure: however, being obnubilated by ignorance (*avidyā*), *jīvas* are thought to be bound by all sorts of attachments and thus to be spoiled by karmic impurities or «stains» (*maḷa*; *Sūtra-pāṭh* 8.46). *Jīvas*, nonetheless, have the potential to free themselves and become *baddha-mukta*, «liberated from bondage» and all *karman*. The *jīva*'s goal is to attain *mokṣa*, that is, participation in Parameśvar's bliss. If a *jīva* worships any inferior kind of *devatā* it will only enjoy the pleasures within the powers of that *devatā*: the reward (*phala*) of such worship is finite, limited in time, and *karman* bound since all *devatās*

<sup>2</sup> On Parameśvar in the *Sūtra-pāṭh*, see Feldhaus 1983b: 28-32. On the meaning and experience of *ānanda*, see Olivelle 1997.



knowledge is based upon karmic stains (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 11.98). Through such worship, the *jīva* is believed to remain ensnared within *saṃsār*, on one or more of its multiple planes. *Devatās* in general are understood to be an obstacle and a temptation for the *jīva*, since they are thought to distract individual souls from their one and only worthy goal: union with Parameśvar. Release may be obtained solely through the worship of Parameśvar or one or all of his five *avatārs*, who infallibly lead each *jīva* on to the right path and to the attainment of isolation (*kaivalya*) by means of salvific knowledge (*brahma-vidyā*) which must be distinguished from the many types of non-liberating *vidyās*. Interestingly, however, the *Sūtra-pāṭh* (10.38-40; 11.70-75) also mentions another sort of *vidyā* said to be given by Parameśvar: it is called *deha-vidyā*. It does not lead to liberation but rather produces effects which remind us of the description of yogic *siddhis* and alchemical mastery. For instance, through *deha-vidyā* the mortal frame is said to be transmuted into a golden, immortalized body (*vajra-deha*). Again, this confirms the thesis of a Nāth influence.

Both the manifestation and dissolution of the cosmos are subject to the will (*pravṛtti*) of Parameśvar, who transcends all processes.<sup>3</sup> Concerning the manifestation of the cosmos (*saṃsarana*; chapter 5 of the *Sūtra-pāṭh*), Mahānubhāvs reject both the Sāṃkhyan *pariṇāma-vāda* (= the evolution of the world by the transformation of a pre-existing substance) —though they adopt the Sāṃkhya doctrine of the three *guṇas* and other Sāṃkhya categories— as well as the Advaita Vedāntin *vivarta-vāda* (= world as an illusion; definitely opposed to the Mahānubhāvs' realism and pluralism). They also reject the Advaita Vedānta notion of *avidyā* as the cause of the world, since, rather, «the world is the cause of the world» (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 10.61). Quite unexpectedly, the world is thought to be the product of a psychological or mental process, that is, some sort of 'mental object'. There is no systematization of this idealis-

<sup>3</sup> On the cosmology of the Mahānubhāvs, see Feldhaus 1983b: 38-45.

tic leaning for the early period. One doesn't find enough information in the *Sūtra-pāṭh* which, it must be remembered, is a composite work and not a philosophical treatise. The stages in the process of world creation seem to be understood as a series of mental acts on the *jīva*'s part. The original «stain» or *maḷa* is connected with world manifestation and the individual soul is thought to get stained immediately after birth.

With the cosmos' dissolution (*saṃhāra*; chapter 4 of the *Sūtra-pāṭh*), the eternal entities which remain are Parameśvar, the *devatās*, and the *jīvas*. The non-eternal entities which, still, remain, are: *anādi-avidyā* and all stained *jīvas* who 'retire' themselves into the *sva-rūpa* of *Māyā* (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 4.11-12). At this time, all effects appear to dissolve into their respective causes, stage by stage. Contrary to the process of manifestation, this dissolution chain is fully consistent with *pariṇāma-vāda*. There is clearly a lack of symmetry when comparing the two processes of manifestation — a psychological, mental series — and dissolution, a purely material series. From these processes, a kind of equivalence is derived between man (= microcosm) and the external world (= macrocosm; *Sūtra-pāṭh* 10.64-65).

The mediating link between microcosm and macrocosm is the «wheel of deities» or *devatā-cakra*, comprising nine groups of gods arranged hierarchically.<sup>4</sup> The first chapter of the *Sūtra-pāṭh* (the *anyavyāvṛtti*) lists these groups in ascending order starting from the lowest level. We find: the deities of the Indian subcontinent or *karma-bhūmi*, comprising the innumerable local and village gods of Hinduism together with *Yakṣas* and *Yakṣiṇīs*, totalling 130,000,000; the eight classes of *Deva-yonis*, also numbering 130,000,000; the *Gandharvas* occupying the «intermediate space» (*antarāla*) between earth and the skies, together with the troops of *Gaṇas*, again numbering 130,000,000; *Indra*, *Candra*, and the other deities of heaven delighting in

<sup>4</sup> On the *devatā-cakra*, see Feldhaus 1980; see also Feldhaus 1983b: 23-28.

all pleasures, i.e. the classical 330,000,000 gods residing in Svarga, of whom Indra is the sovereign; Hari, Hara, and Brahmā together with the multitude of their retinues abiding in Vaikuṅṭha, Kailāsa, and Satya-loka numbering 90,000,000; Viṣṇu as Śeṣaśayya, resting on the serpent Śeṣa in the Ocean of Milk together with a host of other divine beings numbering 125,000; the eight Bhairavas linked to the Nāth tradition,<sup>5</sup> to whom the *Āgamas* and the eight *sākta-vidyās* are ascribed, said to be especially egotistical and proud, harassing the *jīva* on his path towards liberation; Viśva, «the Entire One» or «the Totality»; and finally Caitanya or «Consciousness», also known as Māyā, Videha, Parā, and Śakti: Parameśvar's agent in the manifestation and annihilation of the cosmos.

Although the groups of deities are sometimes overlapping and not strictly mutually exclusive (for instance, Hari, Hara, and Brahmā of one group are hardly distinguishable from three of the eight Bhairavas, namely Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Mahādeva), the *devatā-cakra's* purpose is to offer an orderly structure comprising the entire pantheon of Hindū gods. All gods are separate and distinct from the One, Supreme Parameśvar. *Devatās* are understood as partial *śaktis* of Parameśvar, who rules the universe through them. Their power is limited and relative, since *devatās* cannot bestow *mokṣa* which can be attained from Parameśvar alone (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 11.39).

Following the wheel of deities, the relative *vidyās* in gods' power, including many yogic *siddhis*, are hierarchically arranged as four types of non-liberating (*amocakā*) knowledge (as in chapter three, *vidyā-mārg*, of the *Sūtra-pāṭh*): the two-fold *sāmbhava-vidyā*<sup>6</sup> (Caitanya's *vidyā* and Viśva's *vidyā*); the eight-fold *sākta-vidyā* given by the eight

<sup>5</sup> The *Sūtra-pāṭh* (11.32) states that the Nāths have four traditions: the Vajra, the Amara, the Siddha, and the Divya. In the *kali-yug*, only the Vajra and Amara traditions are said to be extant.

<sup>6</sup> The term *sāmbhava* means 'coming or deriving from Śambhu' i.e. the Benevolent one, a name of Śiva.

Bhairavas; the *āṇava-vidyās*<sup>7</sup> which are 720,000,000 (from Indra's group in the *devatā-cakra* down); and the *mahāṇava-vidyās* which are 90,125,000 (coinciding with the number of deities present in the groups of Hari-Hara-Brahmā and Śeṣāśayya).

Even the description of the dissolution and (re-)manifestation of the cosmos (and of the *jīvas*) parallels the *devatā-cakra* structure. These processes are said to take place in stages, in each of which the *jīva* stains itself with an erroneous identification. Each stain corresponds to one of the *devatā-cakra* levels. Thus the *jīva*, in its stage by stage descent into the manifested realm, thinks to be Caitanya, Viśva, the eightfold *prakṛti* (= the eight Bhairavas, possibly representing the five gross elements plus the three *guṇas* of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*), down to its identification with the multiple senses and sense-objects. In particular, the eight Bhairavas appear to be in charge of the unfolding of the manifest world (*prapañca*). Conversely, in the dissolution process the sense-objects are said to dissolve into the senses, the senses into egoity (the *antaḥkaraṇa*, paralleling the eight Bhairavas), egoity into the body (*deha*, assimilated to Viśva), and the body into the disembodied (*videha*, one of the names of Caitanya).

Similarly, in each *yug* the practice of the proper *dharma* leads to the attainment of merits (*phala*) which are identified with the stages of the *devatā-cakra*. In the second chapter of the *Sūtra-pāṭh*, the *yug-dharma*, *dharma*s are arranged according to the scheme of the four ages. Proper to the golden or perfect age (*kṛta-yug*) was introspection (*ātmopāsti*); proper to the *tretā-yug* was *bhakti* towards *devatās*; proper to the *dvāpara-yug* was sacrifice (*yāg*); and proper to our degenerate *kalī-yug* are the various practices of popular piety: pilgrimages, vows, and almsgiving (*tīrth-kṣetra-vrat-dān*). In each of the three higher *yugs*, *adharma* is the *dhar-*

<sup>7</sup> The term *āṇava* is derived from *aṇu* and literally means 'fine', 'minute'. As a technical word, in Tantric *śaivism* it usually designates the limited individuality of all beings.

ma of the next lowest *yug*, its practice leading to rebirth in that lower *yug*. At the highest level of *dharma* practice the reward of introspection in the *kr̥ta-yug* is the attaining of Caitanya, whereas at the lowest level of *dharma* practice the reward for *tīrth-kṣetra-vrat-dān* in the *kali-yug* is (in the best of cases) the attainment of the Gandharva realm or else the attainment of the realm of the Deva-yonis or of the *devatās* of *karma-bhūmi*. In conclusion, none of these *dharmas* is conducive to the highest goal, that is, the attaining of Parameśvar. All *dharmas* are purely relative and lead to temporary, non-ultimate goals.<sup>8</sup> Parameśvar is totally beyond the realm of *dharmic* rewards. As *Sūtra-pāṭh* 2.23 declares: «Parameśvar is known through Parameśvar; Parameśvar is attained through Parameśvar».

Raeside has noted that much of the vocabulary of the *Sūtra-pāṭh* is Tantric and interprets it to be a post-Cakradhar accretion. As we have seen, however, a Tantric or yogic terminology need not be viewed as a late development given the certain link of early Mahānubhāvs with Nāthism. Even Feldhaus has observed that the vocabulary of the *Sūtra-pāṭh*, especially when it discusses the *jīva*'s acquisition of inferior levels of knowledge (in the *vicāra* and *vicāra-mālikā* sections), is influenced by yogic and Tantric concepts as well as by Vedānta. When, for instance, *Sūtra-pāṭh* 8.21 says that it is by means of *parā* speech that Parameśvar communicates to the *jīva* a particular kind of knowledge, it is clear that here *parā* alludes to the highest of the four levels of speech or *vāc* (*vaikhari*, *madhyamā*, *paśyantī*, and *parā*), characteristic of *śaiva* Tantric schools. To be sure, the *devatā-cakra* exhibits *śaiva* influences. The *aṣṭa-bhairavas* are a *śaiva* heritage, appearing already in Kāpālika theology,<sup>9</sup> and the *vidyās* (*śāmbhava*, *śākta*, *āṇava*,

<sup>8</sup> On these various non-liberating means and goals, see Feldhaus 1983b: 46-50.

<sup>9</sup> See Lorenzen 1972: 84-85. Karālī and Vikarālī, two of the eight Mahānubhāv Bhairavas, recall the names of two of the twelve sages to whom the *śaiva* Kāpālika doctrine was revealed (Lorenzen 1972: 37).

etc.) as well as the notion of *maḷa* are typical of an Āgamic vocabulary. Raeside thinks that although Cakradhar may have taught the inferiority of Hindū gods in a general way, the systematization of the hierarchy of *devatās* into a well arranged, detailed structure was probably a post-Cakradhar development. This may well be the case. He has also pointed out that the elaborate hierarchy of deities finds a parallel in the *vaiṣṇava* dualist system (*tattva-vāda*, *pūrṇa-dvaita*) of Madhva (1197-1276), who was more or less a contemporary of Cakradhar and who developed his hierarchy from Pāñcarātra sources.<sup>10</sup> Madhva's radical distinction<sup>11</sup> (*bheda*) between the Absolute Īśvara and individual souls (*jīvas*) resembles closely Mahānubhāv doctrine. Even B.N.K. Sharma has noted the affinities between the Mahānubhāvs and Madhva's school, though he has also underlined fundamental differences. He writes:

The philosophy of the Mahānubhāva sect was frankly dualistic, in that it admitted the reality of the world and the difference between Jīvas and Brahman as ultimate. But its belief in the *independent reality of the world* and the 'Nitya-baddhatva' [= eternal bounded nature] of Devas was in complete opposition to the teachings of Madhva. This shows that it must have originated independently in the beginning; though later, its opposition to Advaita might have received further stimulation from the teachings of Madhva as they spread in those parts (Sharma 2000: 534).

Nonetheless, I think that Raeside is probably right when positing a Madhvite influence in the elaboration of the Mahānubhāvs' four *padārthas*: he ventures to hypothesize that «perhaps both systems descend from the lost

<sup>10</sup> On the hierarchy of gods, see Siauve 1971: 9-14; 42-51. On Madhva's theology, see Sharma 1994. For a fine overview, see also Squarcini, Bartoli 1997: 111-117.

<sup>11</sup> On the radical difference between the Absolute and the innumerable, distinct individual souls, see Prahaladachar 1997: 107-124.

*Pāñca-rātra* texts to which Madhva refers» (Raeside 1976: 590, n. 12).

Though the role of Viraśaivism must also be carefully considered,<sup>12</sup> it seems reasonable to suggest that much of early Mahānubhāv theology comprising its *śaiva*, Āgamic references was grounded in Pāñcarātrism, as it has already been advanced in the brief discussion of the name Parameśvar and the *pañca-kṛṣṇa* pentad. Mahānubhāvs selectively picked and chose within the reservoir of the vast (and, to a large extent, now lost) corpus of Pāñcarātra literature and doctrine. Obviously, they rejected its rigid ritualism and sophisticated orthopraxis. Concerning such a relevant *śaiva* topic as the four-fold articulation of speech (*vāc*),<sup>13</sup> though Pāñcarātra *Samhitās* do not extensively treat the subject still one finds references to it in texts such as the *Sātvata Samhitā* (one of the oldest works, possibly dating prior to the tenth century), the *Lakṣmī Tantra* (a work influenced by *śaiva* medieval theology, of around the twelfth century), the *Pauṣkara Samhitā*, the *Pārameśvara Samhitā*, the *Jayākhyā Samhitā*, the *Viśvāmitra Samhitā*, and the *Ahīrbudhnya Samhitā* (Sferra 1994: 48 ff).

More significantly, in Pāñcarātra literature we find the presence of Dattātreya. The *Sātvata Samhitā* (12.111) lists Dattātreya as one among the «important deities» (*pradhāna-devatā*): whoever shall resort to him will be relieved from the three sicknesses of birth, old age, and death and will attain release.<sup>14</sup> In the later *Ahīrbudhnya Samhitā*, Dattātreya is listed as the 26th principal *vibhava* or divine manifestation of Viṣṇu in a list of thirty-nine descents (Schrader 1973: 49-50).<sup>15</sup> Mirroring the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*

<sup>12</sup> The Mahānubhāvs' resemblance to Viraśaivism was also highlighted by Louis Renou (Renou, Filliozat 1985: 655-656).

<sup>13</sup> On the understanding of *vāc* within Tantrism, see Padoux 1990b.

<sup>14</sup> For the text of the *Sātvata Samhitā*, see Dvivedi 1982. See also Smith 1975: 524 and 1969.

<sup>15</sup> For the text of the *Ahīrbudhnya Samhitā*, see Ramanujacharya 1966. On Dattātreya as the 26<sup>th</sup> *vibhava*, see Singaramma 1991: 155. S.K.

story, even the *Lakṣmī Tantra* (8.40; 11.22) mentions Dattātreya as a *vibhava* of Viṣṇu, calling him the son of Atri and a great master. At the time of his manifestation, his consort Lakṣmī emerged from a lake in order to be enjoyed by him.<sup>16</sup> F.O. Schrader reports that both the *Pādma* and *Viṣṇu Saṃhitās* mention the existence of a *Dattātreya Saṃhitā* (Schrader 1973: 8).<sup>17</sup> These elements confirm that in the Pāñcarātra tradition Dattātreya had a certain importance. It seems reasonable to conclude that the Mahānubhāvs' appropriation and acceptance of Dattātreya, which came primarily via the medium of the Nāth sect, was facilitated also by the deity's presence in Pāñcarātra theology.

Parameśvar is the eternal pervader and the holder of all powers. Especially stressed is his mercy and kindness towards all individual souls: a mother's love is said to be just a fraction of Parameśvar's love for the *jīva* (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 10.184-185). Parameśvar offers salvation, «uplifting» (*uddharaṇ*), by means of either *bhakti* or *jñān*.<sup>18</sup> It is Parameśvar who bears the initiative and who takes the first step towards the *jīva*. The *jīva* as the recipient of his uplifting grace must cooperate with him and exercise his/her own effort. He or she must take refuge in Parameśvar and follow in his steps. The *jīva* must be totally dependent upon Parameśvar and always obedient to the words and com-

Ramachandra Rao, however, lists him as the 25<sup>th</sup> *vibhava* (Ramachandra Rao 1991: 120).

<sup>16</sup> For the text of the *Lakṣmī Tantra*, see Krishnamacharya 1959. For an English translation, see Gupta 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Ramachandra Rao also mentions a *Dattātreya Saṃhitā*, which he classifies as a «spoken by a sage» (*muni-bhāṣita*) text of a *tāmasa* kind following the fourteenth century *Siddhānta-ratnākara* of Śriśaila Veṅkaṭasudhi (Ramachandra Rao 1991: 179, Appendix V). Ramachandra Rao even lists Dattātreya as a *prādurbhāvāntara* form of Viṣṇu as per the *Pauṣkara* and *Īśvara Saṃhitās* (Ramachandra Rao 1991: 181, Appendix VI).

<sup>18</sup> *Sūtra-pāṭh* 11.30-31 adds a third means and calls it «detachment» (*vairāgya*). However, *Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.221 states that *vairāgya* is not to be understood as an independent means of liberation.



mands of his *avatārs*. However, it should be noted that whereas a *jñānin* sees an *avatār* of Parameśvar as essentially *a means* to achieve isolation/liberation (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 8.27-28), a *bhakta* sees an *avatār* of Parameśvar not just as a means but *as a goal in himself* (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 8.17-18).

*Sūtra-pāṭh* 11.32 states that love (*prema*) for Parameśvar is much better than knowledge.<sup>19</sup> This pure love or devotion requires the transcending both of excessive emotionality (*bhāv*) as well as of the adherence to merely exterior injunctions (*vidhi*; *Sūtra-pāṭh* 10.54; 13.103). Through pure *bhakti*, both passion (*vikāra*) and error (*vikalpa*, a property of the mind, *manas*) are thought to be done away with and the devotee is believed to achieve blissful union (*sambandh*) with Parameśvar (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 8.19-20): he or she is graced with the fullest experience (*anubhūti*) and enjoyment (*ratī*) of God (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 8.59).

Indeed, *bhakti* is thought to be easier, preferable, and even superior to *jñān* since the *bhakta* is dearer to Parameśvar. He places the *bhakta* before his face (*samora*; *Sūtra-pāṭh* 8.60) and it is actually impossible to tell if the *bhakta* experiences Parameśvar as distinct from himself/herself or as one with himself/herself (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 8.65). On the other hand, those who have acquired knowledge, whom through perfect isolation he makes one with the impersonal *Brahman* (*brahmābhūta*), he places at his back. Therefore, whereas the *bhakta* is said to attain Parameśvar in his triadic fullness (possibly retaining an individual identity in his/her 'fusional' love embrace), the *jñānin* is said to attain the impersonal *Brahman* and to lose his/her individuality.

The *uddharaṇ* chapter of the *Sūtra-pāṭh* distinguishes four stages in the process of liberation by means of *jñān*.<sup>20</sup> Stage by stage, what was originally a hindrance to the *jīva* becomes subject to the *jīva*, and finally the *jīva* becomes

<sup>19</sup> On the attainment of blissful union with Parameśvar through *bhakti*, see Feldhaus 1983b: 53-54.

<sup>20</sup> On the attainment of *jñān* by the *jīva*, see Feldhaus 1983b: 50-52.

completely free, detached from all obstacles. First of all Parameśvar, through his *parā* speech, demonstrates his «beingness» (*astitva*) to the *jīva*, that is, reveals himself. In the second stage, Parameśvar gives the «knowledge of being» (*sattā-jñān*) to the *jīva*, also known as the unerring knowledge. Parameśvar is said to choose an auspicious time to draw back the stain of *karman* which covers the individual soul: he then deposits his «being-power» (*sattā-śakti*) in the *jīva* and finally replaces the stain. Through this cleansing process, the *jīva* acquires full knowledge of the various workings of *karman*. In the third stage, the *jīva* acquires the «knowledge of universals» (*sāmānya-jñān*) and in the fourth and final stage, the *jīva* is given the «knowledge of all particulars» (*viśeṣa-jñān*). At the time of liberation, the *jīva* attains freedom from Māyā and becomes one with *Brahman* (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 8.61, 64), the isolated, impersonal *aṃśa* of Parameśvar.

As other *bhakti* sects, the Mahānubhāvs practise an exclusive devotion to one God, though not denying the existence of other gods. Mahānubhāvs, however, are different and separate from Mahārāṣṭrian Hindūs since they avoid all eclecticism restricting their worship to Parameśvar and his five manifestations. The ascetic must cultivate a burning longing (*ārti*) for Parameśvar. After Cakradhar's and Guṇḍam Rāūl's death, the essential mood of Mahānubhāvs' religious life has been 'desolation' (*viraha*) at the 'absence' (*asannidhān*) of God. The feeling of desolation is described as extremely intense: adepts are said to faint from grief, and some devotees become almost mad. Even if one dies or actively kills himself/herself out of suffering at Parameśvar's absence, he or she is said not to be subject to the consequences of suicide, normally leading to a hellish rebirth (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 10.232; 13.85). The theme of *viraha* is especially characteristic of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* movements<sup>1</sup> and the Mahānubhāvs are no exception (though

<sup>1</sup> On separation from the Lord and the pangs of love, see the classic monograph of F. Hardy (1983).

their desolation is for Cakradhar and Guṇḍam Rāūḷ's absence rather than for Kṛṣṇa's absence).

This theme of devotion to an absent God leads to a theological crux: how can one attain liberation if the 'presence' (*sannidhān*) of an *avatār* of Parameśvar is indispensable in order to attain it and yet no other *avatār* of Parameśvar has manifested since the end of the thirteenth century? A possible solution lies in the acceptance of Dattātreya's eternal *avatār*hood, given the popular belief that he unexpectedly manifests himself under disguise as an authoritative *guru* or *yogin* (Rigopoulos 1998: 100-101). The solemn statement of Guṇḍam Rāūḷ through which he entrusted Nāgdev to Dattātreya seems to support such a conviction. Cakradhar's immortality and last words —«we shall meet again»— could also be interpreted along these lines. Via Dattātreya, there is undoubtedly a Messianic potential left open.

In the early period, service (*sevā*, *dāsya*) and love (*prema*) towards Cakradhar were understood as the sovereign means of release. The «infusion with love» (*prema-sancār*) was acquired in the form of a «pervasion» (*vedha*) by which Parameśvar, in the form of Cakradhar, filled the *jīva* (a human being as well as an animal) with an experience of pure love which would temporarily transfix or enrapture the soul.

Separation from God was alleviated by a number of practices, the most important of which —as in all *bhakti* circles— was and is «remembrance» (*smaraṇ*). This must be performed daily and at all times (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 9.4 *passim*), both mentally as well as vocally. As *Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.27-28 states, reporting Cakradhar's words: «Remember me as you have seen me: [my] name, deeds, appearance, and movements». Although authentic *smaraṇ* can be practiced only by someone who has actually seen an *avatār* of Parameśvar (otherwise, one may be said to practice *bhāvanā* or imagining rather than *smaraṇ*), *nāma-smaraṇ* is strongly recommended to all. There is an identification (*abhimān*) of Parameśvar with his names, and this reflects the universal belief of the magic force of the name in evoking the immediate, concrete

presence of the god (as per the celebrated equivalence *nomen = numen*). Indeed, all that is needed for salvation is the remembrance of God at all times: while sitting, eating, walking, and even lying down (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.30). One must constantly engage in «remembering, more remembering, remembering at every moment» (*smaraṇ, anusmaraṇ, sakṛta smaraṇ*). As Cakradhar solemnly promised (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 9.1-6 i.e. the famous *asatīparī*): «To one who, free from passion and error, with his nature restrained, independent (*nirālabhī*), spends his life in recollection of God, Parameśvar again gives union with himself». Here, the Mahānubhāvs' nonconformity lies in the fact that we find no trace of conventional *vaiṣṇava bhakti*: devotional songs (*kīrtan*) have no place and, in accordance with Mahānubhāv iconoclasm, there is no worship to any one god residing in a particular place or temple or having a special image (such as Viṭhobā at Paṇḍharpur). Cakradhar emphasized that adepts should avoid all holy places (*tīrths*) and *devatās*. There is an anti-ritualistic attitude in the early Mahānubhāvs since ritual purity meant nothing to them. Besides *smaraṇ*, the other spiritual exercise which was and is most recommended is the study and memorizing of the *Sūtra-pāṭh* itself, the '*Parameśvar-sāstra*' being the only true and authoritative *śruti*.

Despite Cakradhar's prohibition of going on pilgrimage and his command of aimless wandering, peregrination to various places thought to have been sanctified by the former presence of one of the manifestations of Parameśvar soon developed. Much of the late literature of the sect is made of *māhātmyas* and *varṇanas* meant to glorify these holy sites. One of the most detailed texts, along with the *Tīrth-mālikā* listing the places visited by Parameśvar's *avatārs*, is the *Sthān-pothī*, a fourteenth-century prose text offering a rich description of these various sites (Kolte 1976). The first Mahānubhāv pilgrimage was started by Nāgdev along the Godāvārī river and was motivated by *viraha*, due to the death of Guṇḍam Rāūl. The underlying motivation was that pilgrimage aids recollection: a vast network of pilgrimage sites was thus elaborated and, with this, Mahārāṣṭra was turned into a holy land, as the veritable sacred center and

spiritual heart of the Indian subcontinent.<sup>2</sup> The great majority of Mahānubhāv pilgrimage sites were and are the ones associated with Cakradhar and Guṇḍam Rāūḷ. Other sites, such as those thought to have been sanctified by the ‘holy feet’ of Kṛṣṇa or Dattātreyā, have come to be shared with all Hindūs and non-Mahānubhāvs. Nowadays, monks as well as lay Mahānubhāvs practise pilgrimage.

Also, with the acquisition of lay followers and a large non-brāhmaṇ constituency, the Mahānubhāvs developed ritual practices of their own. In addition to pilgrimage, we soon find the veneration of relics, that is, parts of a divine person’s body (teeth, fingernails, locks of hair, etc.) as well as the worship of any objects such as food, clothing, furniture, metal, jewellery, rocks and pebbles which the *pañca-kṛṣṇas* touched, wore or deliberately gave as «gift» (*prasād*) to disciples.<sup>3</sup> Already in the *Smṛti-sthaḷ* relics are objects of great respect though it is not clear if they were objects of worship. An extreme case reported herein (chap. 6) is when Nāgdev kissed and Bāidevbās licked Cakradhar’s spit-tle or, rather, the place where Cakradhar once spat.

In particular, the *oḷā* is a white, low stone or pedestal, generally a rectangular block about three feet high. It marks a place visited by Cakradhar or where any of the *avatārs* are believed to have done something. These *oḷās*, to which Mahānubhāvs bow in respect, soon became veritable cult objects and multiplied. Mahānubhāvs, however, stress the fact that they simply honor the *oḷā* as a marker of a place sanctified by the presence of one of Parameśvar’s *avatārs* and that they do not worship the *oḷā* as a god or as a pedestal enshrining a particular deity. Afer all, Cakradhar himself is reported to have commanded his followers to always show reverence for all pedestals and stones which had come in contact with him (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.186).

<sup>2</sup> On the Mahānubhāvs’ network of pilgrimage places, see the most recent book by A. Feldhaus (2003, chap. 7).

<sup>3</sup> On Mahānubhāv contemporary religious practices, see Feldhaus 1988: 270-276.

We then find the cult of the so-called *saṃbandhi-pāṣāṇs*, that is, of stones said to have been touched or to be in some way «connected» (*saṃbandhi*) with one of the five manifestations: even of these *saṃbandhi-pāṣāṇs* there has been a proliferation over time. Often, the larger rocks are carved in the shape of Cakradhar or of Kṛṣṇa and Dattātreyā, though Mahānubhāvs emphasize that these are not gods or images containing gods (*mūrtis*), as for the Hindūs, but rather only reminders of Parameśvar's former presence. Later Mahānubhāvs have 'adopted' an increasing number of temples via this *saṃbandhi* doctrine, such as the Devadeveśvar temple at Māhūr, housing a *liṅga*!

Nowadays, one sees a flourishing of Mahānubhāv relics. At least from the outset, there appears to be no difference between Mahānubhāvs' acts of worship and mainstream Hindū *pūjā*. Every major *math* exhibits fragments of an *avatār*'s nails or teeth, fragments of cloth from Cakradhar's garments, etc. All these relics have an elaborate cult ceremony, called *prasādābhiṣek*. Though modern converts are requested to cast out all Hindū gods from their homes, they are also advised to set up in their place a *saṃbandhi* stone or an image made from one.

Coming now to an appreciation of the sect's ascetic practices,<sup>4</sup> it needs to be emphasized how in origin the Mahānubhāvs were a very strict group preaching a life of solitude (*vijan*), comprising both male and female renouncers (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.268-277). For Mahānubhāvs, the theme of ascetic renunciation appears to be earlier than the *bhakti* theme. In other words, the ascetic element is the fundamental prerequisite. Thus, although the *bhakti* motif may be viewed as more important or superior, it must always be understood as grounded in asceticism and renunciation. This is precisely the Mahānubhāvs' peculiarity. Moreover, although Mahānubhāvs will later develop into a monastic sect upholding a *regula vitae* clearly intended for renun-

<sup>4</sup> On the practice of renunciation in the *Sūtra-pāṭh*, see Feldhaus 1983b: 57-64.

ciants (*sannyāsīs*) —who nowadays spend most of their times living in *maths*— it should be underlined that even the monastic life is never referred to in the *Sūtra-pāṭh*.

Ascetic renunciation was the essential element of Cakradhar's teaching. It is revealing that it is precisely in the *ācār* or 'practice' section of the *Sūtra-pāṭh* that we find the highest proportion of correspondences with the *Līlā-caritra*: forty-five per cent. Herein, a life of extreme detachment (*tyāg*, *vairāgya*) is prescribed for all members, in which one must abandon all objects of sense pleasure (*viśaya*, *vikho*) as well as all passions (*vikāra*).<sup>5</sup> Detachment, in turn, must lead to equanimity. Cakradhar disregarded social and sexual differences, ritual purity having meant nothing to him. An adept must renounce all worldly connections (*sambandhs*), severing one's links with home, family, and land (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.1). In this way, by emptying and depriving oneself, he or she becomes fit —also through the help of the other group members— to establish the only necessary *sambandh* which is that with God or one of his *avatārs*: this blissful encounter alone, nourished by devotion, is believed to bring ultimate peace and freedom.<sup>6</sup>

The first and basic renunciation is to home and family, mother and father, husband or wife and all sexual relations («woman intoxicates by being seen», *Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.12). Next comes the renunciation of one's land and one's village. Mahānubhāvs are advised to stay in dilapidated and abandoned temples outside villages or in remote areas such as hillsides. The portrayed ideal is to spend one's life «at the foot of a tree, at the end of the land» (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.26, 72, 202; 13.219). The «end of the land» (*deśācā śevaṭa*) most likely refers to the fringes of the Marāṭhī speaking area. *Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.23-24 commands avoiding the Kannaḍa and Telugu countries, lands where ascetics are honoured and which are full of sense pleasures, and to stay in Mahārāṣṭra

<sup>5</sup> On Mahānubhāv practice, see Kolte 1948.

<sup>6</sup> On these two *sambandhs*, see Feldhaus 1994.



which is considered better for practicing asceticism, possibly because of its lack of comforts.<sup>7</sup> The Mahānubhāvs' and medieval Mahārāṣṭra's two focal regions were the Godāvārī Valley and Varhād. Of these two, the Godāvārī Valley appears to have been especially favored for practising ascetic wanderings, following the example of Cakradhar.

The wandering of the ascetic should be constant (*nityāṭan*; *Sūtra-pāṭh* 13.132) and aimless. One should not get used or attached to any place in particular. All adepts are to practise a life of solitude, avoiding cities and towns as well as pilgrimage places (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 13.19). One should stay one night in a village and five nights in a town: not more (*Smṛti-sthaḷ*, chap. 214). The practice of solitude is paramount. As the *Sūtra-pāṭh* (13.43) teaches: «Get off by yourself at the foot of a tree». This should be the regular ascetic's routine. And Nāgdev admonished: «It is better to sit daydreaming under a tree than to practice *smaraṇ* at home» (*Smṛti-sthaḷ*, chap. 33). Recollection of God is the best way to spend one's solitude. One should nonetheless also alternate solitude with sitting together with other adepts in *sat-saṅg*, discussing religious matters (*dharma-vārtā*).

Renunciation of money and of all possessions is another cardinal rule, which Mahānubhāvs share with Indian asceticism in general (ascetics should never handle money or be involved in anything having to do with wealth or financial affairs). The ideal food is the one obtained by begging randomly and from all castes. One is to become indifferent to food by avoiding any choice about what one is to eat. All adepts are recommended to eat their food alone, for instance on the bank of a river. One should mix the various types of food together, and stuff the food into his or her mouth like an animal, so as to become free from disgust (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 13.62). The renouncer is also called to eradicate

<sup>7</sup> On Mahānubhāvs' regional consciousness, which came to develop itself into a sense of pride for being Mahārāṣṭrians, see Feldhaus 1986: 532-548.

habits (*savaya*), which go together with attachments (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.37; 13.39). Besmeared with ashes or dirt and bearing no special marks on his or her body, the ascetic should not be naked but dressed with only the poorest and roughest garments which he or she may have casually found. The head should be shaved and the renouncer should always wear some kind of head covering.

Casually meeting other brethren and sisters during wandering is a fortunate occasion. The recommended subject of conversation will then be the life and teachings of Cakradhar. *Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.134 states that renunciators might stay together «for seven, five days; then you must go your own ways». Apparently, among the early Mahānubhāvs group relations were characterized by great affection and care: as the scriptures report, all adepts are encouraged to always help and serve one another.

Still, the Mahānubhāvs were and are not an egalitarian sect (Feldhaus, Tulpule 1992: 35-41). The basic distinction is between ascetic renunciators — ‘withdrawn’ (*nivṛt*), or ‘mendicants’ (*bhikṣuk*)— and lay disciples — ‘active [in the world]’ (*pravṛt*), or ‘those who have desire [to eventually become ascetics]’ (*vāsaniks*). Lay disciples, whose primary duty is to give alms, were thought of as inferior and subordinated to renunciators. The *ācār* section of the *Sūtra-pāṭh* is totally focused on the ascetic life, and the possibility of being a lay follower is not even considered. This highlights the fact that the Mahānubhāvs were a community of ascetics, vowed to a life of renunciation. Their identity was rooted in asceticism. Women as well as men could take initiation, and even instruct and initiate others. No prominent distinction based upon gender seems to have ever applied.

In the *Sūtra-pāṭh* there is no mention of a period of rest during the rainy season. However, despite the *Sūtra-pāṭh* saying (13.132) that wandering should be constant, Nāgdev soon instituted the four-month rainy season retreat (*caturmās*; *Smṛti-sthal*, chap. 29). In this time period, wandering was and is suspended (as is customary among Buddhists and Jains). Also, the rule of aimless wandering seems to have been altered by Nāgdev, who encouraged his followers to go

on pilgrimage to the holy places. At a certain point, Nāgdev asked his followers to wear special clothes so as to make themselves recognizable as wandering mendicants (and not be taken as thieves; *Smṛti-sthaḷ*, chap. 30). He attributed this decision to a commandment of Cakradhar himself regarding the time of his absence. In *Smṛti-sthaḷ*, chap. 106, Nāgdev is said to have established the rule that male ascetics should wander in pairs and female ascetics in groups of four. Concerning female renunciation, it should be noted that in the *Smṛti-sthaḷ* most women who become ascetics do so only as widows.

*Ahiṃsā* or non-violence was and still is the paramount virtue (*dharma*) of all Mahānubhāvs. One should avoid the killing or harming of any creature whatsoever. One should not even wish harm to anyone. Consequently, all adepts should have nothing to do with the production or use of weapons, and should not stay in places where any acts of violence take place (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.240-241). A Mahānubhāv should strive to calm the fears of all living beings (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.232). Cakradhar is reported to have once protected a rabbit calling him a *mahātmā*, thereby converting some hunters to follow *ahiṃsā* (*Līlā-caritra*, *pūrvārdha* 42). He insisted on the fact that one should always act towards others in such a way to assure freedom from fear (*abhaya*; *Līlā-caritra*, *uttarārdha* 368). Cakradhar is presented as providing safety to all kinds of beings (*jīvas*), since not even an ant should be killed by man: he figures as a protector of animals as well as of humans. The observance of the golden rule of *ahiṃsā* is what leads Mahānubhāvs to always accurately strain their drinking water. The emphasis on non-violence and a vegetarian diet excluding meat is especially underlined in the early nineteenth-century ethnographic accounts of the sect.

Following a practice which is typical among Hindū ascetics, Mahānubhāvs bury their dead instead of cremating them. In 1909, Crooke offered the following account:

When a Mahant, or pontiff, dies, his corpse is washed, placed in a raised seat, worshipped, tied in a litter in a sit-

ting posture, and carried to burial, not in one of the ordinary cemeteries, but in a clean place selected by the brethren, where the grave is spread with salt, the corpse laid on its left side facing the east, and a coconut is broken on the skull as a commutation of a sacrifice. After burial all traces of the grave are obliterated, and no tomb is raised — to avoid the possibility of the growth of a cult of the dead man (Crooke 1909: 504; see Russell 1916: 181).

One last issue which needs to be discussed is the Mahānubhāvs' link with possession. Although Crooke wrote that «they have no belief in the agency of spirits, holding that the diseases usually attributed to them are the result of sins committed in this or in a former life» (Crooke 1909: 504), Mahānubhāv temples have become renown as healing centers to whom people from different walks of life — and belonging to whatever religion— resort to. Indeed, Mahānubhāv holy places are believed to have the special power to cure from *bhūt* possession and these sites are very popular both within the sect as well as outside of it.<sup>8</sup> This is due to their perceived heterodox, anti-brāhmaṇical character, coupled with their 'openness to pollution' via the strong presence of women, untouchables, and low castes. To be sure, all Hīndū gods that do possess are typically non-brāhmaṇical gods, and the 'impure' Mahānubhāvs fit perfectly in such a picture being perceived as different, strange, and with a long tradition of accommodating marginal individuals. As we have seen, especially Guṇḍam Rāṭṭ behaved as though he were mad and possessed. And Cakradhar is reported to have often gone into trance (*sthītī*)<sup>9</sup> as well as to have induced trance in others. It may well be hypothesized

<sup>8</sup> For a Mahānubhāv monastery in Saṅgvī Havelī near Puṇe, famous as a spirit-exorcising center, see Ghurye 1962: 214. For more information on the Mahānubhāvs see Ghurye 1964<sup>2</sup>: 210 ff. The day at Mahānubhāv temples when the healing power is believed to be greater is Friday.

<sup>9</sup> A 'meeting' between Cakradhar, who went into a trance, and female folk deities i.e. the Sātī Āsarās under the waters of the Tāpī River, is reported in *Līlā-caritra, pūrvārdha* 419; see Feldhaus 1995: 58-59. Sātī

that such trance-inducing properties of Cakradhar came to be transferred to Mahānubhāv sites. Both Cakradhar and Guṇḍam Rāūl used to stay in temples of Nṛsimha, called *rājā-maṭhs*, and Cakradhar used to call Nṛsimha an *avatār* of demons (*bhūts*) rather than an *avatār* of Viṣṇu (*Līlā-caritra*, chap. 318) (Sontheimer 1985: 145).

In Mahārāṣṭra there are three kinds of healing centers.<sup>10</sup> These are: Mahānubhāv temples; the tombs (*dargās*) or memorials (*chillas*) of Muslim holy men (*pīrs*) as well as some tombs (*samādhis*) of Hindū saints; temples of deities such as Dattātreyā<sup>11</sup> and Kāl Bhairav, a terrible form of Śiva. In particular, the ubiquitous Dattātreyā is believed to be very powerful in freeing people from *bhūts* and malevolent possession, though he can also ‘divinely possess.’<sup>12</sup> Even nowadays, people who believe to be possessed by evil spirits (*bhūt-bādhā*) or to be victims of black magic (*karṇī*) come in great numbers to the most famous of Dattātreyā’s temples—in Gāṇagāpūr, Narsobāvāḍī or Audumbar—hoping to be set free by the extraordinary power of the wakeful (*jāgrt*) god.<sup>13</sup> The incorporation by Mahānubhāvs of the *avadhūt* Dattātreyā (who is *bāla*, *unmatta*, and *piśāca*) as is reflected in the antinomian behavior of Guṇḍam Rāūl, Cakradhar,

Āsarās often possess their devotees. Even Dattātreyā is sometimes linked to these folk goddesses through the *uḍumbara* tree which is especially sacred to him.

<sup>10</sup> On possession in Mahārāṣṭra, see Stanley 1988: 26-59. See also Assayag 1989: 151-183 and Assayag 1992. On the general phenomenology of possession in India, see Rahmann 1959: 681-760; Jones 1968: 330-347; Kakar 1982; Schoembucher 1993: 239-267; Carrin 1999.

<sup>11</sup> On Dattātreyā temples as healing centers, see among others Enthoven: «There is a temple of the god Shri Dutta at Narsinhwadi [= Narsobāvāḍī] in the Kolhapur State, to which people suffering from evil spirits are brought for a cure» (Enthoven 1976: 35).

<sup>12</sup> Ecstatic possession by the divine is called *angāt yene*. On possession, both divine and demoniac, see Stanley 1988: 40-53 and Rigopoulos 1999: 207-220.

<sup>13</sup> On Dattātreyā’s link with possession and healing, see Rigopoulos 1998: 122-125. On Gāṇagāpūr, the most important pilgrimage place in the *Datta-sampradāya*, see Mate, 1988<sup>3</sup>: 79-101.

and even Cāṅgdev Rāūḷ, certainly played a role in the sect being associated from an early period with impurity and demons, and, at the same time, with possession and healing from possession. Mahānubhāvs and the thirteenth century Dattātreyā icon mutually reinforced each other in an exaltation of their heterodoxy and nonconformity. What I might call the ‘Dattātreyā factor’ —who, we must remember, is revered as the *ādi-kāran* by all Mahānubhāvs— is once again seen at work.

Whereas physical illness is generally understood to depend upon one’s *karman*, mental illness and even spirit possession is a kind of affliction or *pīḍā* (‘trouble’, ‘distress’) to which one becomes victim. It is thought of as especially shameful, in particular for women. Unlike *karman*, ordinary people perceive *pīḍā* as unmerited. In recent years Vieda Skultans, of the Department of Mental Health of the University of Bristol, has done field-research at the Mahānubhāv temple of Paiṭhaṇ, which has a special reputation both for its healing powers and its trance-inducing properties (Skultans 1987a: 661-679; 1987b: 2-4; 1991: 139-171). She has noted that the common belief is that families rather than individuals are the target of *bhūt* possession. Usually, women come as care-givers accompanying a mentally ill family member who is almost always a male: ill females are abandoned to their destiny. When women care-givers arrive at the temple they soon become afflicted by trance. In fact, according to Skultans’ data, the trancers are most often *not* the patients themselves but the female care-givers. This is an important point, since in Stanley’s field-research and also in my own experience —though not at Mahānubhāv temples— trancing is performed by the very ill, and, indeed, it is through such trance that people are thought to be cured or relieved from their *bhūt* possession (Stanley 1988: 37-40; Rigopoulos 1998: 123).

According to Skultans’ research, Mahānubhāv monks and these women have opposite understandings of the essence and function of trance. Monks do not themselves trance and view trancing as a typically female affliction due to women’s alleged weaker nature, prone to pollution. For

these reasons, they think that women are more susceptible to madness or mental illness brought about by malevolent witchcraft. Monks underline the fact that, at Mahānubhāv temples, all *bhūts* —obviously believed to have no divine status!— are punished and driven away. Trancers themselves are not thought to suffer. The violence of the trance, with trancers shaking and moaning, fainting and falling to the ground, is said to be experienced by the evil spirit alone (who suffers the holy, divine presence and fights against it). Moreover, monks deny that any shifting or sharing of affliction is possible, probably because of the implicit belief in the non-transferability of *karman*. The person who trances is by them identified with the one who is afflicted by the *bhūt*.

Women, on the other hand, assert that their trancing is *self-inflicted*: they pray that the malevolent attacks be *shifted away* from the suffering family member (typically husbands or sons) unto themselves (wives, mothers). Trancing (here called *hajerī*, lit. ‘presence’, ‘attendance’) among female care-givers usually takes place at the time of *ārtī*. This is the closing ceremony with the circling of a tray of lights, at which time the divine force is thought to reach its maximum height. Monks provide the ritual setting. Trancing women think that permanent expulsion of the *bhūt* or *bhūts* is unrealistic. Their aim, rather, seems to establish a kind of ‘working relationship’ with demons. As the physical health of the trancing women deteriorates, the condition of the ill person is thought to improve. Skultans’ thesis is that women tend to sacrifice their own well-being if close male relatives suffer from mental disturbance. The men’s and the families’ health and welfare is thought to depend upon female self-sacrifice: a basic, engrained *leit-motif* of Indian culture, witnessing the utter subordination of women.





*Mahānubhāvs and Other Religions*

Scholars have noted similarities between certain aspects of Mahānubhāv theology and practice and other religious systems. For instance, I. Karve observed that, according to some, Mahānubhāvs are nearer to Jain philosophy than to any other form of Hinduism (Karve 1968: 190-191). Brāhmaṇs have often derogatorily linked the sect to other religions, especially Jainism and Islām, encouraging the identification of Mahānubhāvs with these heterodox and hated *mlecchas*, precisely because of their perceived non-conformity.

In the Yādav period, Jainism was the dominant religion of Karṇāṭak, having its stronghold among merchant and trading castes and receiving an ongoing royal patronage from the various dynasties in power. This is precisely the reason which has led to suggest a Jain influence over Vīraśaivism. At the time of the Yādav King Mahādev, it appears that even one of the royal preceptors was a Jain (one Bhaṭṭārkaḍev). In the Marāṭhī-speaking area, one of the most important Jain centers was Kolhāpur.<sup>1</sup> Feldhaus

<sup>1</sup> On Jainism during Yādav rule, see Verma 1970: 309-313.

has noted that there are partially excavated Jain ruins in Rddhipur and that there are mentions of Jain temples (*vasais*) in both the *Līlā-caritra* and the *Sthān-pothī*.<sup>2</sup> Though G. B. Sardar has argued that Jains and Mahānubhāvs were never on friendly terms, he cannot fail to notice similarities, especially in the realm of ethics, venturing to suggest that Mahānubhāvs copied their monastic system from the Jains (Sardar 1969: 36-49; 133). Raeside has even observed that the Mahānubhāv monastic structure «has Buddhist echoes» (Raeside 1989: vii).

Certainly, it is a striking similarity that Mahānubhāvs, like the Jains, emphasize the rule of non-violence as the first and foremost *dharma*. Mahānubhāvs believe that in our *kali* age the anti-*dharmic* conduct par excellence is «violence» (*himsā*), its practice leading straight to hell (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 2.18, 20). Still, the doctrine of an eternal damnation, which is found in Madhva and in Jainism, seems not to have been adopted by Mahānubhāvs. Moreover, both Jain and Mahānubhāv ascetics encourage extreme forms of renunciation and self-mortification, adopt vegetarianism, and preach the religious and social equality of males and females. The Mahānubhāvs' insistence on the emaciation of the true ascetic (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.60-61, 77-78), and on the practice of perpetual fasting (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.94) to the point of becoming «rattlingly thin» (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 12.78) are cases in point. In the *Līlā-caritra* (*uttarārdha* 532-534), Cakradhar is once reported to have ordered his female disciple Āūsā to embrace Digambar Jain monks without her clothes on! On the other hand, we also find rules of moderation in the *Sūtra-pāṭh*: the ascetic is not to starve or go naked (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 13.72, 210, 229), nor is he or she to subject himself/herself to extremes of heat and cold (*Sūtra-pāṭh* 13.68).

<sup>2</sup> In a Mahānubhāv narrative about Haragarva/Hayagrīva (*vṛddhācāra* 16), we find mention of the town of Śirpur, about forty miles south of Akolā in Varhād: this is a Jain pilgrimage site with a temple of Pārśvanāth.

Ph. Granoff has contrasted Jain monks—who exhibit clear limits in their interaction with the lay community and secular life as such—with the Mahānubhāv *avatār* Guṇḍam Rāūḷ, who, on the contrary, enters intimately into the domestic realm of even his female devotees, offering them concrete assistance and guidance (Granoff 2001: 114-116). Whereas Jain monks tend to separate themselves from the worldly sphere, minimizing all interaction, Guṇḍam Rāūḷ would represent a model of freedom in interaction, irrespective of social and religious boundaries. As already noted, however, Guṇḍam Rāūḷ's freedom is part and parcel of his characterization as an antinomian *avadhūt*. In fact, the Mahānubhāv order as a whole has also tended to separate itself sharply from society, even adopting a secret script from early times.

Interestingly, in Jain *Mahā-purāṇas* both Kṛṣṇa and Datta are listed among the nine Vāsudevas: Jain heroes who bravely engage in war killing their enemies. Having gone against the precept of *ahiṃsā*, the Vāsudevas are believed to be reborn in hell. However, as «illustrious beings» (*śalākā-puruṣas*), Jain scriptures say that they will re-manifest in the next time-cycle as Jinas or Tīrthaṅkars, the glorious «ford-makers» (on analogy with Mahāvīr, the twenty-fourth and final «ford-maker» of the current world-era) (Jaini 1993: 207-249). In particular, via Nāthism the ubiquitous Dattātreya appears to be linked with Jain asceticism (Rigopoulos 1998: 98). 'King Dattātri' is said to have been the first convert of the twenty-second Tīrthaṅkar Nemināth, and we have testimonies that Dattātreya has come to be worshipped *as* Nemināth.<sup>3</sup> On the highest peak of Guru Shikhar, at Mount Abu—one of the holiest places of Jainism from the eleventh century onwards—one can find a small cell where the foot-prints (*pādukās*) of Dattātreya

<sup>3</sup> Appropriations work both ways. In the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (5.3-7), Rṣabha, the first of the twenty-four Tīrthaṅkars of the Jains, is cast in the role of partial (*aṃśa*) *avatār* of Viṣṇu in order to re-establish the *śramaṇa-dharma* of the naked ascetics (Jaini 2000a: 325-349).

are venerated. On another north-western peak, there is a shrine dedicated to Anasūyā, Dattātreyā's mother.

The Dattātreyā shrines of Nāth adepts amid Jain sanctuaries around Mount Abu as well as in the Girnār area—coupled with Dattātreyā's characterization as a *digambara* or «clad in space»—must have favored his assimilation or identification as a Jain saint.<sup>4</sup> All in all, Mahānubhāvs' asceticism is certainly to be ascribed to Nāth influence. Nonetheless, the strong presence of Jainism in central and southern India, coupled with the peculiar contiguity of Nāthism and Jainism, as evidenced in Dattātreyā's case, must have led Mahānubhāvs to appropriate certain Jain features, first of all their emphasis on the practice of *ahiṃsā*.

Coming to an assessment of the Mahānubhāvs' resemblance to Islām, one cannot fail to recognize the following similarities: its radical monotheism, its aniconism and rejection of image worship, the supreme authority of the Mahānubhāvs' holy book, the *Sūtra-pāṭh*, over all human preceptors (on analogy with the *Qur'an* or the *Ādi-granth* of the Sikhs), and also their custom of burying the dead. As K.M. Munshi has argued in the *Foreword* to volume 5 of *The History and Culture of the Indian People*.

Hindu and Muslim saints, not unoften, had a common appeal to both the communities, and the sects of both the religions, by way of action and re-action, and sometimes by challenge, influenced each other. The Mahānubhāva sect, a non-idolatrous Krishna cult, founded by Chakradharasvāmī [...] about the time the first Sūfi saints settled in Aurangābād, is an instance in point (Munshi 1966<sup>2</sup>: xviii).

A. Ahmad, in his *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*, paraphrased Munshi in total agreement with him (Ahmad 1964: 130). Even Vaudeville—following

<sup>4</sup> On the Jain assimilation of Hindū deities in the Girnār area, see Jains 2000b: 275-276.

Ḍhere's *Musalmān Marāṭhī Saṃtakavī*— noted that Mahānubhāvs are «suspected of having later on imbibed a fair number of Muslim views and practices» (Vaudeville 1987a: 219). Feldhaus has pointed at the significant Muslim presence in Ṛddhipur, with five mosques and two saints' shrines (*dargās*). One mosque is located on the site of the Nṛsiṃha temple which served as Guṇḍam Rāü's abode: it so happens that the most important Mahānubhāv pilgrimage place in Ṛddhipur is now the site of a mosque!

Over the centuries, some kind of mutual exchange between Mahānubhāvs and Muslims undoubtedly took place, especially with Sūfī mystics and holy men. The case of Shāh Muni, an eighteenth-century Muslim *bhakti* poet who knew Hindū theologies well and had a bent for Mahānubhāv doctrine precisely because of its monotheism, is quite famous (Ḍhere 1967: 127-129). As N. H. Kulkarnee has written:

Shah Muni's tomb is maintained by five Muslim families who are vegetarians [...] worship Kṛṣṇa and regard Mahānubhāvas as their intimates [...] Since *Siddhānta Bodha* (= Shāh Muni's celebrated work) has a place of honour among the Mahānubhāvas [...] Shah Muni also must be looked upon as a Mahānubhāva [...]. [The *Siddhānta Bodha*] contains a mixture of Mahānubhāva teachings, *advaita* philosophy and Purāṇic stories in lyrical language (Kulkarnee 1989: 224).

Similarities in doctrine and practice, coupled with the social proximity of the heterodox Mahānubhāvs to the Muslim *mlecchas*, determined curious links as well as identifications. In the Marāṭhī cultural area, Dattātreyā was appropriated by Sūfī circles at least from the time of Eknāth. It is often the case that Muslim *faqīrs* are popularly identified with Dattātreyā.<sup>5</sup> By the same token, one finds

<sup>5</sup> As it has happened with the famous Sāi Bābā of Śīrḍī (d. 1918), nowadays the most beloved saint all across the Indian subcontinent (Rigopoulos 1993; Warren 1999).

revered saints within the *Datta-sampradāya* who are clearly Muslims (Rigopoulos 1998: 135-168; 237). The paradigm of this synthetic mysticism aiming at Hindū-Muslim unity, even in Mahārāṣṭra, was Kabīr, the fifteenth-century *sant* of Vāraṇasī.

Despite all affinities and ‘integrative encounters,’ a direct, foundational Islāmic influence over Mahānubhāv theology appears untenable. Besides the Mahānubhāvs, we know of other medieval *bhakti* sects which are monotheist, yet there is no reason to suppose any Islāmic borrowing or dependence for any of them. *Mutatis mutandis*, I think that the following remarks of S. Siauue with regard to the alleged influences of Islām on Madhva’s theology, may equally well apply to the Mahānubhāvs’ case:

Mais il est impossible [...] de parler d’influence de l’Islam sur la pensée de Madhva. Il y a là une certaine convergence de doctrine sur un point certes essentiel, celui de la transcendance de Dieu, mai ce point unique est enchassé chez Madhva dans un environnement si spécifiquement hindou qu’aucun musulman ne pourrait y apercevoir un reflet de sa religion. Et d’autres part cette thèse centrale prend toutes ses références à l’intérieur de sa propre tradition, dans le Veda et les Upaniṣad, et plus encore dans des textes du Pañca-rātra qui sont premièrement des textes de rituel, le plus hindou et le plus traditionaliste qui soit (Siauue 1971: 110-111).

Finally, although Mahānubhāvs have recurrently been accused by Hindūs of siding with the Muslim occupants and of being on friendly terms with them, this is surely not true. Mahānubhāvs never received any favors from Muslim rulers.

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