

Article

Continuing Transformation: Śrī Nāth, His Gurus and His Devotees in a Timeless World

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Abstract: Śrī Nāth is one of the most important images of Krishna being worshipped at the temple of Nathdwara in Rajasthan. His devotees consider him to be a living god, he appears in their dreams, and according to their sayings they are in direct contact with him. Śrī Nāth, originally a local deity, is equated with the major Hindu god Krishna. However, while Krishna may be one of the most important gods in India, he is also ambiguous through his acts and words, if not bluntly unreliable. This double nature of Krishna is reflected in the cult of Śrī Nāth. There is an interesting interaction between Śrī Nāth (implying Krishna himself), the main gurus of his cult, i.e., Vallabha (Vallabhācārya) and the latter's son and main successor Viṭṭhalnāth and his devoted disciples. At times, Śrī Nāth feels the need to stick to the official Brahmanical cult of the temple rituals, on other occasions, there is no problem in transgressing any given official rule. The same is true for the primary teachers, who are often put on par with Krishna himself or one of the celestials closely connected to him. Additionally, the disciples can apparently do anything in their frenzies. All of this reinforces the idea that this entire cult belongs to another world (*alaukik*). It is part of the everyday world (*laukik*) of Hindu India, but meanwhile, each and every rule can be ignored if the supernatural breaks through. Even the distinction between Hinduism and Islam at times simply does not seem to be of importance anymore. Muslims can become addicted to the passionate love for Krishna through the form of Śrī Nāth, so it is sometimes stated. Each and every partaker in the cult may share the visions of the initiated devotee, at times even without proper initiation. This all adds to the experience of the supermundane and supernatural in this particular cult.

Keywords: Krishna; Śrī Nāth; vārtā literature; Brajbhāṣā; hagiographies in Hinduism; Vaiṣṇava; Vallabha; Viṭṭhalnāth; puṣṭimārga



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1. Introduction

My friend Sanjay Gupta sends a picture daily of the Hindu god Śrī Nāth, the god worshiped in the temple of Nathdwara, to all of his friends. For him, Śrī Nāth is the prime manifestation of the great Hindu god Krishna. His friends will respond to his message, as good as daily as well. For them too, the divine implies above all the image of Śrī Nāth. Sanjay lives in Udaipur in Rajasthan, in fact very close to Nathdwara, where Śrī Nāth is worshipped in an impressive temple site. For him and all of his friends, Śrī Nāth is not just an image in a temple. They live their lives with him. He is a living god. Śrī Nāth appears in Sanjay's dreams, and he talks to him.

I once visited Nathdwara with Sanjay. We entered the temple grounds. Hundreds of devout pilgrims were there with us. It was in the afternoon, so the temple was still closed. Śrī Nāth lives there as if he were a king in his palace, and during the midday heat he takes a nap. Voices were raised, eyes were staring at the porch. Sanjay was excited, as was everybody, with sweat on his brow. Suddenly the doors opened. Everybody rushed inside, and in no time, we were surrounded by a pushing and tearing crowd that chaotically moved as one. I was crushed between the heated bodies of all those excited Hindus, sweat running over my body, my sweat or anybody else's, it did not matter anymore. We were one flowing movement. We came in front of the image. We had a quick look. Then we went on, and went outside where we could relax. Sweat dropping.

This is not unique; it happens just about every day. It can even happen several times a day. It is part of the daily routine of Nathdwara, of 'living Krishna', who resides there. It is in fact common practice in many Hindu temples all over India. I knew this already, but I saw it once more reinforced that day. For his devotees, Śrī Nāth is not a stone image. He is alive. He is the playful god Krishna himself, taking this shape for the benefit of his devotees, for their enjoyments. Once in front of the image, everything changes to another level, or so it seems.

In this contribution, I want to pay attention to the complicated relations between Śrī Nāth (Figure 1), as a form of Krishna, his devotees, and the acts of gurus in the cult of Vaiṣṇavism. Śrī Nāth is considered by most of his devotees to be equal to Krishna, one of the most playful gods of the Hindu pantheon. However, Krishna is a paradoxical god. On the one hand, he teaches humanity the Hindu *dharma*, for instance in the form of the highly authoritative *Bhagavadgītā*. On the other hand, he creates the world for his own amusement. The god becomes bored and desires to play. He wants to enjoy his own beauty reflected in the universe and its beings. While he is so keen on the importance of *dharma* for humans, if there is one god who transgresses the selfsame rules with ease, it is Krishna himself. This turns him into a paradoxical figure; a figure that is loved and hated, at times by the same historical or mythological figures. Meanwhile, his behavior remains incomprehensible, at least from a 'human' viewpoint. Krishna always seems to 'be beyond'.

However, it is not only Krishna who acts thus. His mystical devotees can get to a similar level of awkwardness as the god himself in their frenzies. At times, the leading gurus of these devotees even feel the need to explain their follower's strange behavior to other Hindus. However, transgression of the fixed rules almost seems to be a basic ingredient for fervent participation in Krishna's games, his *līlā*. This does not detract from Śrī Nāth's position, nor do they see him as an 'uncivilized, irresponsible'¹ god. On the contrary, for his devotees, this only reinforces his uniqueness, his 'otherworldliness'.

In this article, we will mainly concentrate on the interactions between the playful god, his teachers, and the devotees, as we find reflected in hagiographical accounts. The main source in this contribution consists of saints' stories from two important medieval collections of mystics' stories, the *Caurāsī vaiṣṇavāna kī vārtā* and, above all, the *Do sau bāvaana vaiṣṇavāna kī vārtā*.

This article consists of two parts. First there will be an inventory of what *vārtā* literature encompasses; then an exploration of the positions of the two collections mentioned within the works of the *puṣṭīmārga*, the main Hindu denomination (*saṃpradāya*) connected to the cult of Śrī Nāth. The present image of Śrī Nāth was, according to the *puṣṭīmārga*, discovered by farmers, but the cult was brought to its greatest peak by teachers such as Vallabhācārya (1479–1531) and his son and main successor Viṭṭhalnāth (1516–1576). Time and again, devotees search for parallels between the lives of these saints and Krishna himself. Interaction with other competing groups also plays a part here.

The setting in which this all takes place is the Braj area, a sacred area roughly surrounding the sacred city of Mathura in Northern India. The devotees of Śrī Nāth always try to connect their daily life to that of Śrī Nāth. Śrī Nāth lives through a set of daily, fixed rituals (Figure 2). His devotees visit the temple in Nathdwara and persistently try to be aware of what the playful god is doing each moment of the day. The devotees live in likeness to the eternal timeless *līlā*. They will even do so if they are far removed from the Braj area or Nathdwara in Rajasthan, where the image is presently under worship. The devotees try to identify with his games and there is a deep awareness of a mutual interpenetration; a mutual interaction between the devotee's daily life and the timeless life of Śrī Nāth.

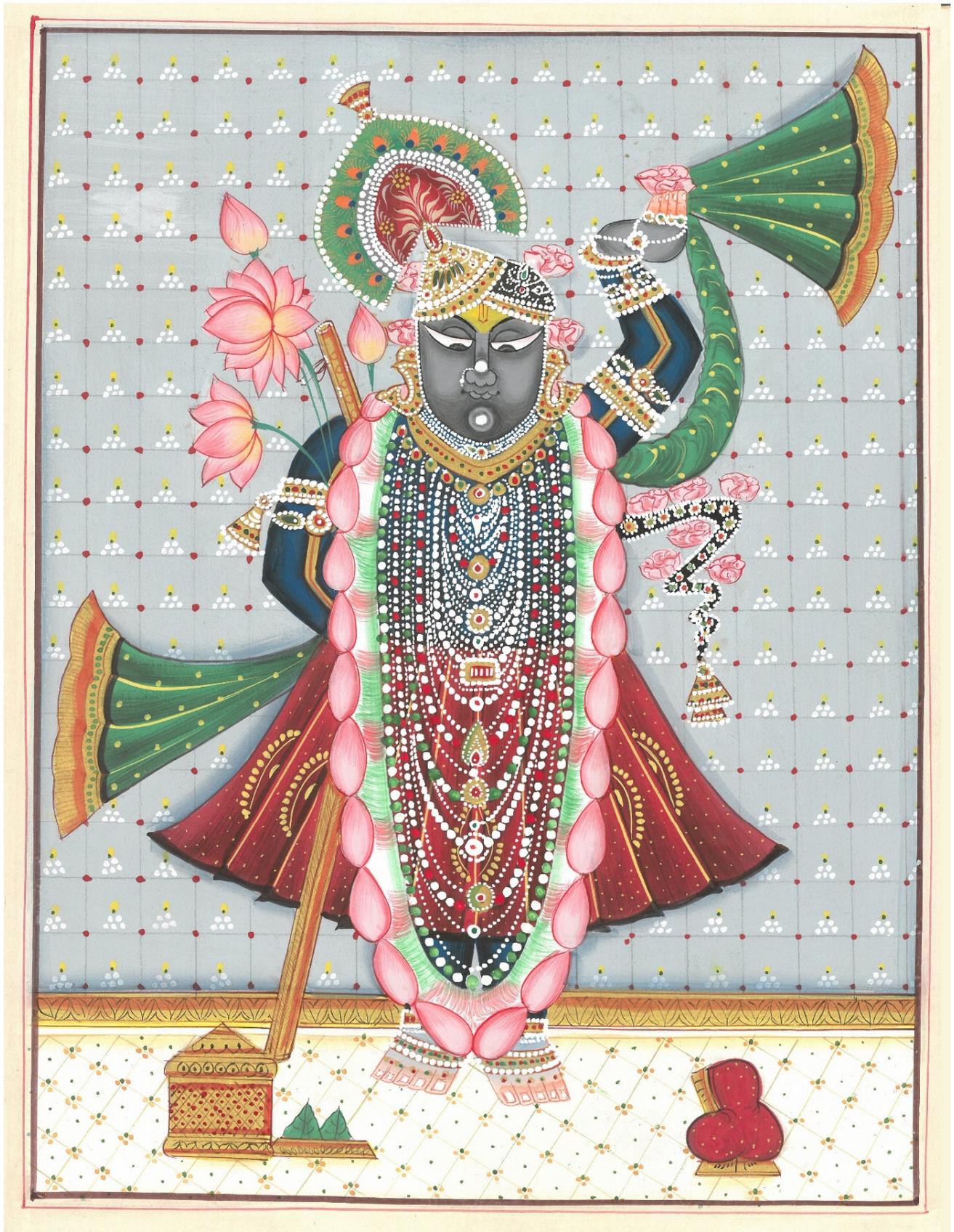


Figure 1. Śrī Nāth, modern painting from Nathdwara (private collection).



Figure 2. The image of Śrī Nāth under worship. In front of the image, there is a small cradle or swing with an image of young Krishna. Worshippers pull the string to rock young Krishna. The priest on the left offers an *ārati* light. Rajasthan late 18th century (private collection).

The main question here concerns the unpredictability of this young god. He always seems to elude each and every rule at will. It is his own choice if he obeys whatever instruction or ordinance, or so it seems. However, it is paradoxical that on the one hand he may escape from the ritual institutions, while on the other hand he may suddenly decide to

obey them. The first part of this article will, thus, concentrate on this strange character and the strange acts which comprise Vaiṣṇavism. They reinforce that Krishna, his gurus, and devotees do not belong to only this world—they are certainly not restricted to this world. They have access to another world as well, the world of the unpredictable living stories of the young, playful god who is beyond time and space. Within Vaiṣṇavism, we often find a distinction made between the common everyday world and the world beyond: Krishna's world. The everyday world is named *laukik*, 'worldly'. Krishna's world is beyond time and space, and therefore, it is not of this world. It is named *alaukik*. This *alaukik* world, at times, shines through the *laukik* everyday. However, what is quite remarkable is that when this happens, it seems as though it happens for the first time. All those present, even the head gurus who should be aware of these events, are overwhelmed by an experience which one would think happens quite often; at least, it happens often in stories. That is remarkable, although friends of mine in Rajasthan, such as Sanjay, with whose quotation I began this article, will tell similar stories. According to devotees, it seems to happen all of the time.

The second part of this article consists of examples from saints' hagiographies; saints' stories in which these unpredictable aspects of the interplay between Krishna, his gurus, and devotees are illustrated. At times, the devotee needs an explanation from their guru for Krishna's behavior. On other occasions, the devotee needs to explain to the guru what Krishna wants. As Vallabha and Viṭṭhalnāth even accepted Muslims as their disciples, Hindus from other denominations at times ask for explanations for this. That the devotees act so strangely is accepted to a certain extent. Very often, they belong to lower castes than the head gurus. However, Vallabha and Viṭṭhalnāth are high caste Brahmins. They embody the Vedic lore. Vallabha is even equated to the god Agni, the purifier of the world who directly communicates with the gods (Barz 1976, p. 28). They then question how they can accept the strange and often impure acts of their disciples. Explanations are naturally needed at times. However, the persistent capriciousness of Krishna oozes through in the frenzies of the devotees, in the passion of the teachers, and the sometimes childish actions of Śrī Nāth.

Interesting to note is that strange acts of a Hindu god that require explanation are not unique to Krishna. I will just mention a few examples here. Similar acts are done by Jagannāth, the main deity of the temple city of Puri in East India. South India is full of stories of the strange actions of gods, such as Śiva and Viṣṇu. Their devotees are frequently astonished, and so are their gurus. There is a local collection of the deeds of Śiva, for instance, in Madurai in Tamil Nadu, the *Tiruviḷaiyātal Purāṇam*.² Hagiographical accounts of devotees of Śiva can be found in Tamil texts, such as the *Periyapurāṇam*.

The three main actions from the hagiographies on which we will concentrate in the second part are: (1) the miracles surrounding Śrī Nāth, his teachers, and disciples, (2) the transgression of the temple rules and subsequent unexpected obedience to the rules by Śrī Nāth, his devotees, and the teachers; and (3) the complicated acceptance of followers of other creeds. In many cases, this implies the acceptance of Muslims. On the one hand, they may be deeply devoted to Krishna, while on the other hand, they embody impurity.

2. Vārtā Literature, the Caurāsī Vaiṣṇavana kī Vārtā, and the Do sau Bāvana Vaiṣṇavana kī Vārtā

In this contribution, we will mainly focus on the so-called *vārtā* literature.³ *Vārtās* are a particular class of texts within the *Vallabhasaṃpradāya* or *puṣṭimārga*, the Vaiṣṇava denomination founded by the main gurus of the *Vallabhasaṃpradāya*, Vallabhācārya and his son and main successor Viṭṭhalnāth. The word '*vārtā*' means 'account'. Within the *Vallabhasaṃpradāya*, several of these texts are held in high esteem, e.g., the *Nija vārtā*, the *Gharū vārtā*, the *Bhāvasindhu*, the *Śrī Nāth Jī prākāṣya kī vārtā*, and the *Śrī Mahāprabhu prākāṣya kī vārtā* (Vaudeville 1980, p. 16). These texts are attributed to a very prolific and, as tradition has it, long lived writer: Śrī Harirāy Jī (1590–1715 CE).

Two other *vārtās* are the *Caurāsī vaiṣṇavana kī vārtā* and the *Do sau bāvana vaiṣṇavana kī vārtā*. The first one, the 'Account of the 84 Vaiṣṇavas' deals with the 84 main disciples of

Vallabhācārya himself. The second collection, the ‘Account of the 252 Vaiṣṇavas’ deals with the 252 main disciples of Viṭṭhalnāth, the second son and main successor of Vallabhācārya. Both these collections are attributed to either Gokulnāth (1551–1640 or 1647), one of the sons of Viṭṭhalnāth or to his nephew, the same Śrī Harirāy just mentioned. In that case, maybe Harirāy based his account on stories Gokulnāth told him. Harirāy is said to have lived from 1590 to 1715, and thus, reached an unprecedented age, certainly for that period. This supposed long life adds to his legendary status. McGregor (1984, p. 209) assumes that this Harirāy was active in the 17th century. Harirāy has also written two commentaries on the two collections of saints’ lives; these commentaries are named *Bhāvaprakāśa*. In these commentaries, he links the incidents of the saints’ lives with the specific theological doctrines of Vallabha.

The *Caurāsī vaiṣṇavana kī vārtā* and the *Do sau bāvana vaiṣṇavana kī vārtā*⁴ are very popular even today in the Braj area. It is important to notice that there are various printed editions of the works. These often show many variations in readings and episodes. The texts are composed in prose and its language is Brajbhāṣā. The Brajbhāṣā of both collections is quite simple; no complicated grammatical constructions nor strict poetical conventions. The accounts reflect popular story telling as if one were listening to a traveling artist who tells these accounts every evening in another dusty village in northern India. In some of the *vārtās*, one may come across Sanskrit verses. These are also quite simple, and from the perspective of classical Sanskrit, one might notice grammatical mistakes or variations.

It is important to note that very often if a devotee of the *Vallabhasampradāya* tells you a saint’s history, they will often claim that it is part of one of the *vārtās*. In many cases, however, such an episode cannot be found in an edited volume. The word ‘*vārtā*’ in such a case simply seems to imply a traditional account of a mystical saint or poet-saint. In this contribution, we will mainly focus on the accounts of the *Do sau bāvana vaiṣṇavana kī vārtā*, the stories on the disciples Viṭṭhalnāth.

A *vārtā* usually consists of various *prasaṅgas*, or episodes. Very often, they start with the words: ‘Śrī Gusāim Jī kā sevak [name of the disciple] tinakī vartā’: ‘The servant of Śrī Gusāim Jī, [name] his/her account’. Śrī Gusāim (Brajbhāṣā for Sanskrit: Śrī Gosvāmī) is the usual title of Viṭṭhalnāth in the stories. After this, in the first *prasaṅga*, the background of the impending saint is given. He or she lived a common life, sometimes even as a criminal (the great saint Chītsvāmī even lived as a thug who killed people for the goddess Kālī). Their caste may be mentioned, or the village where the saint lived or originated from, and so on. These accounts share an initial exposure to Krishna, one of his exemplary devotees, or a confrontation with Viṭṭhalnāth himself.

The first view of Viṭṭhalnāth is often described in deeply sensual, erotic terms. As a teacher, he must have had quite some impact on his disciples. It seems as if his bodily presence was overwhelming and charismatic. This last theme is found in nearly all of the *vārtā* accounts. Viṭṭhalnāth is as attractive as is Śrī Nāth himself. He looks like Kāmadeva or Kandarpa, the god of love. However, more often, it is stated that he embodies the charm of ‘ten million Kandarpas’.

The following, for instance, from the account of Nanddās (though these words can be found in many *vārtās*): ‘Then Nanddās Jī came and had the *darśana* of Śrī Gusāim Jī (i.e., Viṭṭhalnāth); it was the *darśana* of the complete highest person with the charm of ten million Kandarpas (koṭi-kandarpa-lāvaṇya-pūrṇa-puruṣottama) in his selfsame shape’.

Śrī Nāth and Viṭṭhalnāth, thus, share the same sensuality. The images of Krishna himself and his main guru coincide. Sensuality in whatever form deeply pervades Krishnaism more generally. Within these life histories, however, they concentrate on the relation of the devotee to Krishna himself, and the relation to the initiating or confronting teacher. Each and every relationship is characterized by this kind of mutual longing.

The ritual of *darśana* plays an enormous role. The very act of ‘seeing’, and thus, taking part in Krishna’s games is extremely important. Sensory, even passionate experiences exhibit the utmost communion, not the repression of the senses.

After this confrontation, an initiation into the *puṣṭimārga* will follow, in which the overall forces of devotion and *bhakti* are shown. The so devoted and beloved saints, Śrī Nāth and Viṭṭhalnāth, each play their part here. They do so by performing miracles, by extreme acts of devotion, by transgression of ritual restrictions and rules, or, in other cases, by strictly adhering to these rules. Each *prasaṅga* ends in a number. Sometimes, songs or poems are inserted into the text. These poems are then very often connected to that particular incident in that *vārtā* and appreciated with reference to it. At the end of a *vārtā*, we often find sentences such as: ‘He/she was such a vessel of grace of Śrī Gusāṁ Jī, how much further can his fortune possibly grow? The *vārtā* is completed’.

There are many variations in these final sentences, however. Sometimes, the saint simply enters the eternal games of Krishna (*līlā*). This implies that they disappear from this world. This would be the *alaukik* interpretation of the event; they die, one would say from a mundane (*laukik*) viewpoint.

Viṭṭhalnāth was not the eldest son of Vallabha, but he was his most important successor. Viṭṭhalnāth succeeded Gopīnāth, Vallabha’s eldest son. Within the *Vallabhasampradāya*, Gopīnāth was considered to be an incarnation of Balarāma or Baladeva, Krishna’s elder brother. Gopīnāth was, thus, his wordly (*laukik*) form, and Balarāma his ‘other-worldly’ form (*alaukik*). However, Gopīnāth became an ascetic after the ‘disappearance’ of his son Puruṣottamadās, who, according to tradition, was incorporated into the eternal *līlā* by Krishna himself. Puruṣottamadās disappeared in one of the caves of the sacred hill of Govardhanāth. Gopīnāth then withdrew from the Braj area and went to Jagannāth Puri in Odisha. The story has it that there, he mysteriously merged into the image of Balarāma. Thus, he returned to his place of origin and Viṭṭhalnāth took over his position. The fact that Gopīnāth disappeared in the image of Balarāma has important implications for the position of Viṭṭhalnāth. It shows that Gopīnāth is in fact another form of Balarāma, Krishna’s elder brother. Viṭṭhalnāth can, thus, be considered a full incarnation of Krishna, because now, Balarāma was in fact Viṭṭhalnāth’s eldest brother in the form of Gopīnāth. This parallels the relationship of Krishna himself, with Balarāma as his elder brother (Entwistle 1987, p. 151).

Viṭṭhalnāth is named after Viṭṭhala, a form of Viṣṇu under worship in the temple of Pandharpur in Maharashtra. Tradition has it that this form of Viṣṇu advised Vallabha to get married as he wanted to be incarnated as a son of Vallabha. Thus, Viṭṭhalnāth was born (Barz 1976, pp. 29, 38). In the eyes of the disciples of Viṭṭhalnāth, he was as good as equal to Krishna, if not one and the same. There are many songs of praise in which Viṭṭhalnāth’s powers, virtues, charisma, and beauty are put on a par with those of Krishna. The poet-saint Nanddās⁵ sings about him in his songs in *Padāvalī* no. 6 and 7 in following words:

Let me praise the feet of Śrī Vallabha’s son

He is so tender, singing of him gives good fortune, I praise him because he purifies the downfallen ones. I praise him because he expounds the firm rules of the *Veda* and removes the evil of the *kali* time. His glory is incomparable. I praise him as the beauty of the earth, he has removed evil, suffering and crimes. O praise him, he has expounded the *puṣṭimāryādā* (*puṣṭimrajāda*), he is the utmost of the fortune of singing, he completes the upkeep of his own family. The Lord of Nanddās is manifest in two forms, Śrī Viṭṭhala and Giridhara, I praise both. (*pada* 6)

Hail! Lord of Rukmanī and Padmāvati⁶, dear as life-breath, umbrella for the groups of Brahmins, you who cause bliss (*ānanda*)! Torch for the family of Vallabha, savior of the world! You shine like ten million moons! Lord, who gives devotion (*bhakti*) to those who seek liberation, capable of anything, full of countless virtues! May the Lord of the devotees conquer! Who purifies the fallen! Who fulfills the wishes of those who crave, all pilgrimages come to their fulfillment by just remembering your name! A life eternal with him who gratifies Gokul (i.e., Krishna). For Nanda and the servants the Lord is the father of Giridhara and the

others [i.e., Viṭṭhalnāth]. He is the visible incarnation (*avatāra*) of the bearer of Girirāja (Krishna). (*pada* 7)

In *pada* 7, Viṭṭhalnāth's sons are mentioned as 'Giridhara and the others'. They were seen as partial (*aṁśa*) incarnations of Krishna (Barz 1976, pp. 54, 55). In *pada* 6, the word 'Giridhara' refers to Krishna himself or to Giridhara as Viṭṭhalnāth's son. The sons were all named after Krishna or Rāma. The main gurus of the Vallabhasampradāya in the line of Vallabha, Gopīnāth and Viṭṭhalnāth, are even presently considered to be *aṁśa* incarnations of Krishna.

2.1. Discovery of Śrī Nāth and Braj as a Sacred Area

Śrī Nāth is considered by his believers to be a living being with a personality of his own. Nowadays Śrī Nāth is in Nathdwara, which is a typical Hindu pilgrimage site located in a small village with some 50,000 inhabitants. Pilgrims come and go in great masses, especially on festive days. Very often, they combine their pilgrimage with a visit to the Śiva temple of Ekaliṅg Jī and the Jain temples of Ranakpur.

In fact, Śrī Nāth originates from the Braj area.⁷ The entire Braj area is nowadays connected predominantly to Vaiṣṇavism and Krishna. This was different in the past. Research proves that up to around the 16th/17th century C.E., Braj was more oriented towards Śiva and Pārvaṭī (Vaudeville 1976, 1980; Entwistle 1987). In the 16th/17th century, new Vaiṣṇava movements arose and prominent teachers came to the Braj area. Braj was 'rediscovered', so to say, as a Vaiṣṇava area (Vaudeville 1976). Ever since, it has become a prominent pilgrimage site, but mainly for devotees from other areas of India. The original Brajvāsīs still prefer Śiva and his consort. There is even one place where Śiva is stated to have dressed up as a cowherd girl, a *gopī*, in order to witness Krishna's nightly dance (Entwistle 1987, pp. 58, 59; Padmalocandas n.d., pp. 53, 54).⁸ This can be interpreted as an initiative of the newly arrived Vaiṣṇavas to integrate the original Śaiva worship within Vaiṣṇavism. It can be seen as an attempt of appropriation. Many local Śaiva names of areas were also adjusted to better suit Vaiṣṇavism.

It is stated in the Braj region that Vajranābha, one of the great-grandsons of Krishna himself, indicated all the places where Krishna had walked, lived, and resided in the region. In accordance with his instructions, palaces and temples were constructed. Due to the sinful religions of Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam, these sacred sites had disappeared. They were absorbed by the goddess earth herself. When it comes to the embodiment of Krishna himself, there are descriptions, so tradition states. The last human who could remember exactly what he looked like was princess Uttarā. She was married to Abhimanyu, one of the sons of Arjuna and Krishna's sister Subhadrā. As Uttarā was the last to have seen him alive, her descriptions were crucial in forming images of Krishna. She gave much advice concerning the bodily features of these images. Tradition will even say it was according to her instructions that the image of Śrī Nāth was made. However, these images had also disappeared due to the harmful religions mentioned above, vanquished into the earth. It was only when righteous devotees returned to the Braj region that the sacred sites once more revealed themselves.

The Braj text *Śrī nāth jī prākāṭya kī vārtā* describes how Śrī Nāth made himself manifest in stages, and how his image was discovered inside a hill. Charlotte Vaudeville has analyzed the text and the imagery of it at length in her studies (Vaudeville 1976, 1980). The image was discovered when a cow leaked out all of her milk every day on a particular spot. Later, a hand and a mouth were discovered, and in stages, the entire image of Śrī Nāth became manifest. Similar stories at times play elsewhere in India on the discovery of *liṅgas* of the god Śiva, for instance. Very important here is that it is the image of Śrī Nāth itself that makes the choice to become manifest, as by now, these virtuous Vaiṣṇavas were born and were about to visit Braj.

Vaudeville (1980, p. 20) mentions how the moment Śrī Nāth's mouth became manifest, Vallabha was born. This simultaneity is not coincidental. Vallabha, as a pure high caste Brahmin, embodied the mouth of Viṣṇu or Krishna, he embodied the *Veda*, and even the god

Agni, as stated above. As a high caste Brahmin, he embodied the power of the manifested divine sounds of the *śruti*. Therefore, his words are supposed to be true. Vallabha later came to the Braj region and the sacred sites simply popped up from their hiding. In some accounts, it is the river Yamunā itself who manifested as a goddess and took Vallabha around.

Meanwhile, other Vaiṣṇava communities also claimed the discovery of Braj and the images of Krishna. The great ecstatic mystic Caitanya (1486–1533) departed from Bengal, came to Braj, and discovered the sacred site Rādhākuṇḍ. Within the tradition, it is better to say Rādhākuṇḍ manifested itself when the pure devotee Caitanya appeared there. At a certain moment Vallabha went on a *parikramā*, a tour around the universe. The daily worship of Śrī Nāth was then handed over to Caitanyaite Brahmins from Bengal (Vaudeville 1980, p. 39). However, they applied sandal paste on Śrī Nāth's body, which he did not like. Moreover, the Caitanyaites would at times put an image of Bṛndādevī, a manifestation of the local goddess, next to the image of Śrī Nāth. Within the Vallabhasampradāya, Krishna is very young; he is of an age at which 'girls are [frequently] stupid'. Therefore, Śrī Nāth was not too fond of playing with girls. That would only change later on. Within the *Gauḍīyasampradāya* of Caitanya, Krishna is a little older and his love games with his beloved *gopīs* are central. However, young Krishna was not fond of the rituals of the Caitanyaites.

Vallabha passed away in Varanasi. As mentioned, his son Gopīnāth succeeded him, but he disappeared in Puri. Viṭṭhalnāth succeeded Gopīnāth and had the Caitanyaite Brahmins removed from the temple service. The main priest of the Caitanyaites, Mādhavendra Purī, was sent to South India to get a very special type of sandal paste from there. However, it was Śrī Nāth's intention that he would never come back. It was indeed for this very reason that Śrī Nāth had demanded that particular type of rare sandal paste. Thus, the devotional duties came back to the hands of the Vallabhites, and the Caitanyaites were out of the picture.

Within the *Vallabhasampradāya*, several images of Krishna are worshipped. The main ones are Śrī Nāth, Śrī Navanītapriya, Śrī Mathureśa, Śrī Viṭṭhalanāth, Śrī Dvārakānāth, Śrī Gokulnāth, Śrī Gokulcandra, Śrī Bālakṛṣṇa, and Śrī Mukundarāya (Barz 1976, p. 55). They are called *mūrtis* or *svarūpas*; 'images' or 'embodiments'. For the nine mentioned here, the term *svarūpa* is preferred within the *Vallabhasampradāya*. A distinction is made between *mūrtis* and *svarūpas*, the *svarūpas* being considered as superior embodiments of the god, and thus, within the *Vallabhasampradāya*, the term *mūrti* is avoided (Barz 1976, p. 9). Each of the embodiments have their own particularities and characteristics. The most important one is Śrī Nāth; however, the image of Nathdwara (Figure 3). It is in black stone and measures 1.40 m. The image shows the god standing with his left hand directed upwards. This perhaps refers to the episode where he lifts Govardhan hill to protect the area against the rains of the god Indra. His right hand touches his hip. He has peacock feathers on his head, which are often considered to be a connection to his life as a cowherd boy in the forests of the Braj area, which are full of peacocks. Furthermore, he has three lotuses on his right side. On his left side, he has a type of shawl that curves as if it were a snake.⁹

Śrī Nāth is shown in a mountain cave. The mountain itself has depictions of two cows, two peacocks, one snake, one parrot, and sometimes a lion. In the temple itself, the image is elaborately decorated. The cult of Śrī Nāth is so popular that his outfit is changed several times a day. He is never given the same garment or jewel to wear, at least so it is stated locally. Behind his image, there are large depictions of Krishna's games in the pasture fields of Braj. Festivals are sometimes depicted as well. These colorful paintings, usually on cotton cloth, are named *picchvai* which are sold after the ritual *darśanas*. Therefore, there are thousands of these, and they are often found in the houses of richer Vaiṣṇavas and in museum collections. Sometimes, they are elaborately painted with gold-infused paint.



Figure 3. The image of Śrī Nāth is installed. Rajasthan 18th century (private collection).

Another connection between Krishna and Śrī Nāth consists of the following. Krishna was born, according to the myth, in the prison of his uncle, the evil king Kaṁsa of the demonic city of Mathura. Kaṁsa wanted to kill the newborn baby Krishna, since it had

been predicted that the child would eventually kill him. Miraculously, Krishna was saved by his father Vasudeva, who transported him to the cowherd settlement of Gokul. Later on, Krishna and his family had to flee because Kaṁsa had heard that Krishna was still alive. He, therefore, wanted to kill all boys in Gokul up to approximately three years of age. Krishna was then brought to Brindavan where he grew up. Once the image of Śrī Nāth was discovered, it was worshipped in the Braj area, but later on, just like in the case of Krishna, the image had to be transported elsewhere because the Moghul emperor Aurangzeb (1556–1605) wanted to destroy it. The image was carried away in a bullock cart, and after various events, it ended up in Nathdwara, where it is under worship now. It was the will of the image itself to remain in Nathdwara, so tradition has it. Once more, a parallel between Krishna and Śrī Nāth.

The god himself is truly worshipped as if he were a living person, which Śrī Nāth definitely is for his devotees. He lives in his temple as a king in his royal court. The temple is named a *haveli*, or mansion. It has various chambers and rooms as if it were a palace where a royal or noble ruler lives.

In the temple, there is a strict order for the day. There are particular moments during which the devotees throng together to have the visionary experience of their god, to see the living deity. These moments are the so-called *darśanas*, and for each of these, his outfit is changed. Having a *darśana* is one of the most profound rituals of Hinduism more generally (Eck 1985). Devout Hindus enter their temple to be in the living presence of the god. They see the living god, and the living god sees them. Vaiṣṇava tradition purports that when Krishna was still very young and crawled in the courtyard of the house of Nanda and Yaśodā, the girls and women of the village would come to play with him, not giving him a moment's rest. Yaśodā noticed how her little son got extremely tired and did not even have the opportunity to eat properly, constantly caressed as he was by these women. She decided that her son should be given moments to sleep, moments to eat, and to be by himself for some time. Therefore, the ritual *darśanas* were instituted, so tradition has it. These are the moments that the playful god belongs to the world. The other moments are his.

2.2. Śrī Nāth and the Daily Life of the Devotees

The devotees are well aware that their god passes through a perfectly arranged and ordered cycle of daily rituals. These are usually performed by skilled professionals, in most cases Brahmins. These ritualists (*bhīṭariyā*) are trained in these ritual services, they originate from proper family lines and from specific Brahmin castes. When they serve in the shrines, they are in a condition of utmost ritual purity. The devotees can see their god at various times each day in the shrine, while he is in fact performing his manifold games. He is pure because his Brahmins, their rituals, and their ritual implements are pure. Seeing the god thus, 'having his *darśana*' on various moments of the day, is one of the main rituals of Vaiṣṇavism. The confrontation with the specific acts of the deity at these moments once more reinforces the devotee as a participant of the games of Śrī Nāth. Throughout the year, the daily rituals may naturally differ in detail. They can be different on festive occasions, for instance¹⁰, but in Nathdwara, Śrī Nāth passes through the following ritual cycle essentially every day:

At around five o'clock in the morning, the *maṅgaladarśana* takes place. Krishna is awakened by blowing a conch shell. He is given breakfast; in summer, he wears light clothing, in winter, his clothing is somewhat warmer. Songs are sung of Paramānanddās¹¹ and the *vīṇā* is played.

The next *darśana*, the *śṛṅgāradarśana*, is at six in the morning during summer and at seven-thirty in winter. Krishna wears rich clothes and ornaments in accordance with the seasons. Songs of Nanddās are sung, the tanpura, the sarangi, and the mridanga drum are played.

The *gvāladarśana* takes place at around one hour after the previous *darśana*. This is the moment Krishna goes out to herd the cows in the forest and the pasture

fields. A light-offering, *āratī*, is performed and incense is offered. Govindsvāmī's compositions are sung, accompanied by shennai and nakkara drums.

The *rājbhogadarśana* is held at midday. It is the most elaborate of all. Krishna is clothed in his most beautiful outfit and he gets several top-quality dishes to eat. Songs of Kumbhandās are sung and music is played on various instruments. After this ceremony, Krishna rests.

At two o'clock in the afternoon, Krishna is awakened with conch shells during the *utthāpan* ceremony. Songs of Sūrdās are sung.

At around three in the afternoon, the *bhogadarśana* takes place. Krishna gets his afternoon meal. Songs of Caturbhujdās are sung and Krishna gets cooling water in the summer, or a warm stove for his feet in winter.

The *sandhyā āratī* is held at five o'clock in the afternoon. In the eyes of the devotees, Krishna now returns home from the pasture fields. Lamps are waved in front of the image and Krishna receives a light meal. Compositions of Chitsvāmi are sung.

The *śayanadarśana* is the moment Krishna goes to sleep. A tray with small snacks and a vessel of water from the Yamunā are left at the side of his bed, and songs of Krishnadās are sung. The temple remains empty until the next morning.¹²

For the devotees performing the ritual service, (*sevā*) Śrī Nāth is a living being to such an extent that he is considered to attend the *śṛṅgāradarśana*; just before the devotees get the chance to share in his *darśana*, they may even offer a mirror for him to inspect his own beauty now that he is dressed in his most exquisite outfit. The mirror is considered to be a manifestation of Rādhā, as he can, thus, experience his own beauty reflected in Rādhā. That he is given a stove for his feet in wintertime makes him even more 'human'. Some devotees state that in the warm months of the year, Śrī Nāth rushes back to Braj after the *śayanadarśana* to play with his friends and the cowherd girls in the forest of Brindavan. In the colder months, he remains in Nathdwara, because the trip to Braj is too hard in that season.

Within the *saṃpradāya*, special songs have been composed to remind the devotees concurrent to each moment of the day what the young god is doing. As an example of this, I want to present the *aṣṭayāma*¹³ song of the renowned poet Raskhān (also: Rasakhāna 16th/17th century CE.):

Aṣṭayāma

1. In the morning Gopāla Jū gets up, he bathes in the river and arranges his hair. I constantly look at that treasure of rasa (*rasakhāna*).
2. There, Śrī Nandalāla performs his *pūjā* and worship while he sits. On the flute, a sweet tune resounds¹⁴, hearing it everyone is joyful.
3. As soon as you see the crown with the mirror and the beautiful crest jewel, the beautiful garland, there is beauty. Hail! Hail! Gopāla!¹⁵
4. Then, a group of *bhaktas* arrives there, each of them bringing his own plate. The Lord eats from them, it hardly takes any time.
5. Thus, two *pahars* (i.e., two periods of three hours) pass. Then there is the border of the forest. He takes the cows and goes to the forest, while he plays music on his flute.
6. Then, all the *bhaktas* go as well, they all run from behind. They play and go there where the fluteplayer makes them joyful.
7. When they arrive in the forest, where there is always the abode of Madana,¹⁶ the skilled dancer performs there all types of *rāsa* dances.
8. One *pahar* he roams in the forest, Śrī Madana Gopāla. He makes a trip in his own *dhāma*¹⁷. Altogether they are a great group.
9. Then, when the excellent dancer returns and takes his food, they take their *prasāda* with devotion (*bhakti*) and all sit down after washing their hands.

10. Then, the flute of Gopāla resounds there, a treasure of *rasa* (*rasakhāna*¹⁸); hearing this, all forget their memories; mind and life-breaths are joyful.
11. The Lord next gives a good sermon and he makes all glad, all minds are delighted when they hear it, they are made tender and full of enjoyment.
12. The Lord always gives a sermon of three *gharīs* (*gharī* i.e., 3 × 24 min) to the *bhaktas*. Lust, anger, pride, and greed do not arise then anymore.
13. Then, when he sees that it is time to milk the cows, the clever boy, dark as a raincloud, calls all his friends by their beautiful names.
14. Then, he looks with his curved eyes there as he always does. All the milk, excellent because of its taste, the glorious and divine Śyāma (i.e., the 'Dark one') milks.
15. Then, all the *sakhīs* (girlfriends), always with love, take the milk, by signs they delight the excellent dancer because of the love in their minds.
16. Then, as soon as the lamps burn, all the *bhaktas* run gladdening, each taking their own light, expressing their love.
17. Rādhā¹⁹ and Krishna are seated there with the other eight queens. The clever one (*sujāna*) sings a song while an offering of light (*āratī*) with incense goes up.
18. Thus, there are two there: enjoyment and passion (*rasa* and *raṅga*). Thus, a *pahar* passes by. When they have got permission then, the *bhaktas* go to their own houses.
19. Then, all the *bhaktas* go to their own houses, holding in their heart the beauty of the couple at night. They have a pleasant sleep.
20. Śyāma always sleeps a few *pahars*, then he wakes up. When a melody of the flute resounds then, the *bhaktas* get up, taking his name [in their mouth].²⁰
21. Since Rasakhāna has seen the beauty of Mohana, the eyes are not his own anymore. If he pulls (his eyelids) they come like from a bow, released they go like arrows.²¹
22. This son of Nanda! This thief of my mind! He stole the jewel of my mind. Now he settled in my mind. What can I do now without my mind? I fell into the noose of love.
23. The beloved took my mind, when he looked, but gave nothing in return!²² Where did you learn this manner! That you keep your riches with you?
24. Oh Friend! I have seen the beautiful boy near the house of Nanda. He stared sweetly smiling. Each and every memory of my body is stolen.
25. I have seen the incomparable beauty of the enticing beautiful Śyāma. He is the son of the headman of Braj. He settled in my mind, soul . . . eyes . . .
26. Friend! The skilled beloved has become a stranger, while I know him. He has given up knowing me, although he knows me as his beloved.

Several accounts of the *Do sau bāvana vaiṣṇavana kī vārtā* show how devotees keep this daily order of rituals in their mind even when they are far removed from the image of Śrī Nāth. This is found for instance in the *Do sau bāvana vaiṣṇavana kī vārtā* account of Mādhovdās Kṣatrī (no. 19), also named Mādhavadās Kṣatrī. He was a disciple of Viṭṭhālānāth, but he lived in Kabul in Afghanistan. Another Vaiṣṇava named Rūpamurārī goes on a tour with a king and comes to Kabul, where they recognize each other. Śrī Nāth himself even responds to Mādhavadās' devotion by appearing in Kabul, which is far removed from Braj. Śrī Nāth even protects them later on against robbers. Śrī Nāth makes them miraculously reach the company of the king who traveled many days ahead of Rūpamurārī. This is just another miracle of Krishna, of which there are so many in the *vārtās*.

The servant of Śrī Gusāiṃ Jī Mādhovdās Kṣatrī, his account. That Mādhavadās lived in Kabul. One day Bhaiyārūpamurārī [another Vaiṣṇava, also named: Rūpamurārī] came to Kabul together with the king. When he saw a *tilaka* on the forehead of Mādhavadās on the market there, he asked: 'Who are you and why do you have that *tilaka*?'. Then, Mādhavadās said: 'We are servants of Śrī Gusāiṃ Jī.' When Rūpamurārī then said: 'We are also servants of Śrī Gusāiṃ jī', Mādhavadās was very joyful. In the meantime, Mādhavadās got up and started to spread his shawl. Then, Rūpamurārī asked him: 'What is this?' Then he said:

‘Śrī Nath Jī now enters Braj in order to let the cows graze, therefore I spread out my shawl’. Hearing this, Rūpamurārī was very astonished. There was such an amazement that Śrī Nāth Jī here gave him a *darśana* [this means so far from the Braj area]. In his mind, he praised him a lot. And whatever Mādhavadās said about the outfit of Śrī Nāth, his brother Rūpamurārī wrote that down. Then, after they had gone to the house of Mādhavadās, they had the *darśana* of Śrī extsubdotThākura Jī (i.e., Krishna or Śrī Nāth). It was truly the *darśana* of Śrī Govardhanāth Jī [another form of Krishna]. Then, he said in his mind: ‘It is my good fortune that Śrī Gusaīm Jī even in this land of foreigners (*mlecchadeśa*) still gives me the company of Vaiṣṇavas’. When after thus staying a few days, they prepared for leaving, then Mādhavadās said: ‘You should stay a few more days. When the king will go twenty more stages, I will make you reach there in one day’. Then, Rūpamurārī stayed. Twenty days later, Mādhavadās sat on a horse together with Rūpamurārīdās, and following some other road of eighty *kośas* through the mountains, they reached there in one night. On the road, there were many thieves, but nobody saw Mādhavadās and Rūpamurārī. And the entire night on the road, they were talking on the deeds of the Lord. When Mādhavadās said: ‘I have become the servant of Śrī Gusaīm Jī in Haridvar’, then Rūpamurārī was greatly astonished that Śrī Nāth Jī gave him there [i.e., in Haridvar, so far from Braj] the *darśana* together with the *līlā* of Braj. Śrī Gusaīm Jī has a great deal of compassion over them. Then, Mādhavadās said goodbye to Rūpamurārī and he went to his own house. Such a vessel of grace is Mādhavadās that Śrī Nāth Jī gives him ever again the *darśana* in Kabul. The essence is that the Lord is only subject to the emotion (*bhāva*), and not subject to the method. Nanddās has said this:

dohā:

Although he, whom they call the *Veda* (*nigama*), is not accessible through the *āgamas*,

He is subject to passionate love, Hari is extremely close then,

They call him the *Veda* (*nigama*).

The *vārtā* is completed. Vaiṣṇava 19.

3. The Wondrous Interactions between Śrī Nāth, Viṭṭhalnāth, and the Disciples

In the second part of this article, we will concentrate on particular episodes from a number of *vārtās* from the *Do sau bāvana vaiṣṇavāna kī vartā*. The main focus will be the mysterious interaction between Śrī Nāth, the primary guru of that period, Viṭṭhalnāth, and the devoted disciples. The interaction will concentrate on these aspects: (1) the miracles that surround Śrī Nāth, his gurus, and devotees, (2) the transgression of rules or the attempts to stick to these rules, and finally, (3) the attitude towards those considered ‘others’, especially towards Muslims who desire to take part in the service of Śrī Nāth. In many of these hagiographies, it becomes clear that worldly existence (*laukik*) and Krishna’s eternal timeless world (*alaukik*) interact. In this context, ordinary phenomena are not what they seem to be at first view. In the *alaukik* world, devotees are different from the humans they might look like. Some mystics are even identified with figures from the *alaukik* world, including associations with a name and family. Above, we have already seen how Vallabha was put on par, if not equated to, Viṣṇu’s mouth and the god Agni. However, he is also sometimes identified with Svāminī, a title of Rādhā. Rādhā is Krishna’s most important consort; though in the *Vallabhasaṃpradāya*, emphasis is laid on Krishna as a small child, Rādhā is still present. Viṭṭhalnāth is identified with Kāmadeva and also with Krishna himself, but additionally with another cowherd girl named Candrāvalī (Ambalal 2004, p. 87). Multiple identifications are often found within these Vaiṣṇava circles.

The priests in the *Vallabhasaṃpradāya* sometimes even dress up as Krishna’s and Rādhā’s girlfriends (*sakhīveś*).²³

There are many occasions in the hagiographies of the saints, which make it clear that things are really different from ordinary daily life if regarded on the *alaukik* level. All of the time, Krishna's timeless world manifests itself. Within the *Gaudīyaśaṅkṛadāya* founded by the followers of Caitanya, there are texts in which the various saints are clearly identified with the characters of Krishna's *alaukik* world. Two of these are the *Kṛṣṇaṅodeśadīpikā* and the *Gaurāṅodeśadīpikā*. Both are attributed to Kavikarṇapura of the 16th or 17th century C.E.

3.1. The Miracles of Śrī Nāth, His Gurus, and His Devotees

Śrī Nāth performs miracles. This is typical of Hindu gods. Krishna can do whatever he wants. In many cases, we can see that, on the one hand, there is a practical reason why he performs miracles. This is required because a suffering being needs to be delivered from suffering or saved from an enemy, for instance. Krishna lifts Mount Govardhan to protect his villagers against the rains of Indra. Even as a small child, he miraculously kills demons or delivers others from curses inflicted on them. As an incarnation of Viṣṇu, he kills the evil king Kaṁsa. That was the primary reason why Viṣṇu incarnated on earth as Krishna. On the other hand, many miracles are performed as part of a game, a play (*līlā*). This play is performed by Krishna to enjoy his own character, his own powers, to experience his own beauty, the beauty of others and of the world. When it comes to his play, he eschews all restrictions unless they suit him.

However, performing miracles is not restricted to the gods. Devotees sometimes do exactly the same. We can find this, for instance, in the account of Nanddās, number 4 in the *Do sau bāvāna vaiṣṇāvāna kī vārtā*. According to this account, Nanddās was the younger brother of the famous poet Tulsīdās, the composer of the *Rāmcaritmānas*. In Nanddās' account, we find several episodes depicting interactions between the two brothers. Tulsīdās apparently does not accept Nanddās' choice to remain in the Braj region, and for choosing Krishna instead of Rāma. One day, Tulsīdās comes to Braj to take his younger brother back to Ayodhya and to live there as a proper devotee of Rāma. Nanddās convinces Tulsīdās with his songs that he truly belongs to Braj and to Krishna. Both brothers then go to visit several temples. Nanddās, however, understands that Tulsīdās will only bow his head for Rāma, not for Krishna. Nanddās then requests Krishna, in this case in his form of the local *svarūpa* of Govardhanāth under worship in Gokul, to show himself as Rāma. Only then would Tulsīdās bow his head. The result is there. Nanddās requests that Govardhanāth shows himself in the shape of Rāma. Govardhanāth obeys. He does so out of respect for a disciple of Viṭṭhalnāth.

Next to that, Raghunāth, one of the sons of Viṭṭhalnāth, is depicted when he is about to get married. Tulsīdās longs for a similar *darśana* he just experienced of Govardhanāth in the shape of Rāma. At the request of Nanddās and Viṭṭhalnāth, once more a miracle takes place. Raghunāth shows himself as Rāma, and his newly-wed wife takes on the form of Sītā. Only then does Tulsīdās bow down:

Hearing this *pada*, Tulsīdās remained silent. Nanddās Jī then went to have the *darśana* of Śrī Nāth Jī. Tulsīdās also went after him. When they had the *darśana* of [the image of] Śrī Govardhanāth Jī, Tulsīdās Jī did not bow his head. Then, Nanddās understood: 'He does not bow for anyone else than Śrī Rāmacandra Jī'. Nanddās thought this in his mind here: 'Let me make him have the *darśana* of Śrī Rāmacandra Jī in Śrī Gokul'. Then, as he (=Tulsīdās) should know the power of Śrī Krishna, Nanddās Jī made this request to Śrī Govardhanāth Jī. That *dohā* is:

How can I describe the beauty of today, the Lord shines radiant.

Tulsī will only bend his head, if you take bow and arrow in the hand.²⁴

Hearing this, a thought came to Śrī Nāth Jī out of respect for Śrī Gusāim Jī: 'What a servant of Śrī Gusāim Jī is saying, that I have to do'. Then, Śrī Govardhanāth Jī gave Tulsīdās Jī a *darśana* in the form of Śrī Rāmacandra Jī. Then, Tulsīdās Jī fell down for Śrī Govardhanāth Jī like a stick with the eight parts of the body²⁵.

After Tulsīdās Jī had had the *darśana* and he came outside, Nanddās Jī went to Śrī Gokul. Tulsīdās Jī also came with him. Once he had come there, Nanddās Jī had the *darśana* of Śrī Gusāīm Jī and he bowed with the eight body parts stick-wise and Tulsīdās Jī also bowed down stick-wise with the eight body parts. And Tulsīdās said to Nanddās: ‘Let me have such a *darśana* here like the one you let me have over there’. Then, Nanddās Jī made a request to Śrī Gusāīm Jī: ‘This is my brother Tulsīdās. He does not bow for anyone else than Śrī Rāmacandra Jī’. Then, Śrī Gusāīm Jī said: ‘Tulsīdās Jī, please have a seat!’. Now, Śrī Raghunāth Jī, the fifth son of Śrī Gusāīm Jī, was standing there, and that day the marriage of Śrī Raghunāth Jī was celebrated. Then, Śrī Gusāīm Jī said: ‘Raghunāth Jī! Your servant has arrived. Give him a *darśana*!’ Then, Śrī Raghunāth Lāl Jī and the bride Śrī Jānakī let him have a *darśana* in the form of *svarūpas* of Śrī Rāmacandra Jī and Śrī Jānakī Jī in their own person. Then, Tulsīdās Jī bowed down with the eight body parts like a stick. Therefore, Śrī Dvārakeśa Jī has sung in the *Mūlapuruṣa*:

The reason for your high name became manifest

When you obeyed the order of your father.

And Tulsīdās became very happy after he had this *darśana* and he sang this *pada*:

I will describe the village Āvadhigokul.

After he had sung this *pada*, Tulsīdās took his farewell and he went back to his own country. Nanddās Jī was such a vessel of grace of Śrī Gusāīm Jī, such a *bhagavadīya* (=devotee), that by his words, Śrī Govardhannāth Jī and Śrī Raghunāth Jī were ready to give *darśanas* wearing the shape (*svarūpa*) of Śrī Rāmacandra Jī. (*prasaṅga* 5)

In the case of this episode from the *vārtā* of Nanddās, it was Krishna who performed miracles at the request of Nanddās in the shape of the *svarūpas* of Govardhannāth and Śrī Nāth. Meanwhile, Krishna had a human shape in the form of Viṭṭhalnāth. As a result, Tulsīdās even understands in the *pada* he sings at the end that Avadh (another name for Ayodhya, the city of Rāma, and Gokul, which is connected to Krishna, are in fact the same, as Rāma and Krishna are the same.

However, as stated above, not only Krishna performs miracles. Miracles are also performed when Krishna is not directly present in the form of a *mūrti* or *svarūpa*. In the *vārtā* of the saint Cācā Harivaṃś (no.7), we come across the theme of walking on water owing to the immeasurable powers of faith. Cācā Harivaṃś can walk on water, and a Vaiṣṇava can follow him until he loses faith, a story resembling that of Christ and Saint Peter.

And one day Cācā Harivaṃś Jī went out to bring *sāmagrī*²⁶ from Śrī Gokul for Śrī Nāth Jī. He loaded the *sāmagrī* on the head of a Vaiṣṇava and he went from Śrī Gokul. When he came to the stairs (*ghāṭ*) of the Yamunā then there was no boat. As it had become evening Cācā Jī thought: ‘It will be night till the sixth *gharī* tomorrow morning and they will need this *sāmagrī* but the night needs to be passed first, and Gopālapur is ten *kośas* away. How can we reach it now?’ Thinking thus he said to that Vaiṣṇava: ‘I will walk on the Yamunā. Where I will put my feet and stand, on that very spot you should also put your feet and come’. Then, Cācā Harivaṃś began to walk on the Yamunā Jī and he started to say the name of the Lord. Then, that Vaiṣṇava came after him also saying the name. Then, that Vaiṣṇava thought in his mind: ‘Cācā Jī is taking the name of the Lord and I am taking the name of the Lord. Why should I put my feet on his footprints?’ When he started to put his feet on another spot then he started to sink into the Yamunā. Then, Cācā Jī came and took his hand and brought him to the other shore. Then, Cācā Jī said: ‘Why did not you put your feet on the spot where I put down my feet?’. Then, he said: ‘I was taking the name of the Lord and you were taking the name of the Lord’. Then, Cācā Jī said: ‘He listens to my

words, he will now also listen to your words'. Such a vessel of grace was Cācā Jī that the Lord even listens to him. (*prasaṅga* 5)

The wondrous magical powers are indeed not restricted to the Hindu devotees of Śrī Nāth and Viṭṭhalnāth; even Muslim followers develop these abilities. In *vārtā* 17 on Alīkhān Paṭhān, we find proof of this. Alīkhān Paṭhān has become the governor of an area named Tavīsā. He comes to Mahāban in the Braj region and remains there. He was very strict in his ruling; anyone who harmed even a simple tree in Braj would be punished. One day, an oil-seller accidentally broke the trunk of a tree with his wagon. He was punished: all of his oil leaked out over the broken tree trunk. This theme is frequently found in India. It may be an attempt to heal the broken tree. Sometimes it is done with cowmilk or ghee. From that day onwards everybody understood the rigidity of Alīkhān Paṭhān's rules and laws. Nobody dared to harm even a leaf of a tree in the Braj area (*prasaṅga* 1). However, Alīkhān's rule continues. A thief is tested with oil:

One day a thief was brought before Alīkhān and that thief swore an oath saying: 'I will put my hand in cooking oil and when the oil will become cold then you will believe that my word is true'. Then, Alīkhān had oil ordered and said: 'The highest Lord (*parameśvar*) can make oil cold. He can make cold oil warm. Therefore, you should put your hand into cold oil. When that thief put his hand into the cold oil then his hand was burnt. Such a strong faith Alīkhān had in the highest Lord (*parameśvar*). (*prasaṅga* 2)

On another occasion Alīkhān wanted to donate a beautiful horse to Viṭṭhalnāth, as the latter had praised the horse's beauty and speed. However, Viṭṭhalnāth refused to accept the horse. Alīkhān decided to become a disciple of Viṭṭhalnāth hoping that Viṭṭhalnāth would perhaps then accept the horse. However, there was a miraculous outcome to this: Śrī Nāth started to dance with Alīkhān's daughter:

Then, Alīkhān understood in his mind: 'If I will be his servant, then he will accept it [i.e., the horse]'. Then, Alīkhān became a servant and when Alīkhān started to do service, then Alīkhān's daughter started to do service as well. Then, Śrī extsubdotThākur Jī let Alīkhān's daughter have an experience and he would dance with her. When Alīkhān heard this news and the priest (*bhītar*) said that there was the sound of dancing, and Alīkhān looked at it secretly, then Śrī extsubdotThākur Jī entered and he would dance. Seeing this he very much started to praise his daughter. (*prasaṅga* 3)

Devotion to Viṭṭhalnāth and Śrī Nāth embodies particular powers as we have seen before: Madhavdās and his companion can safely pass through an area full of evil robbers. The power of devotion spreads. It radiates, and even non-Vaiṣṇavas and non-Hindus can become aware of this. It is portrayed in the account of Gaṇeśvyās (no. 31). He converts an aggressive, blood-demanding goddess to Vaiṣṇavism and vegetarianism.

The servant of Śrī Gusāiṃ Jī, Gaṇeśvyās, his account

Now this Gaṇeśvyās knew the experience of Śrī Nāth Jī. One day, this Gaṇeśvyās brought the implements for Śrī Nāth Jī when on the road the rain burst out. He took shelter in a temple of Devī outside the village. However, the people said that if a man would stay there in the night, the goddess would eat him. Then, Gaṇeśvyās cleaned the temple of the goddess and whispered the eight syllable *mantra*²⁷ in her ear and slept there. Then, that goddess said in a dream to the Rājā of that village: 'Now I am a Vaiṣṇava. You always send two goats to me, do not send these anymore. You should all become Vaiṣṇavas, otherwise I will cause harm to all of you!'. This matter the goddess told the Rājā in a dream. Then, that Rājā came to Gaṇeśvyās in the morning and asked him the entire matter. Then, Gaṇeśvyās came together with the Rājā. He had him made into a servant of Śrī Gusāiṃ Jī. Such a vessel of grace that Gaṇeśvyās was that by contact with him the goddess and the Rājā became Vaiṣṇavas. (*prasaṅga* 1)

Another devotee, Gopāldās Segalākṣatrī (no.14), entered into the service of a foreigner (*mleccha*). However, Gopāldās would steal from his master and spend the possessions of that foreigner on Vaiṣṇava services, preaching (*kathā*), and the singing of songs and hymns (*kīrtana*). Yet his master is sure about Gopāldās Segalākṣatrī, and contrary to advice of others, he does not dismiss him. He is convinced that Gopāldās brings him good luck. The mind of this *mleccha* is eventually purified because of the presence of Gopāldās. Gopāldās embodies fortune and good luck according to that *mleccha*:

The servant of Śrī Gusāiṃ Jī Gopāldās Segalākṣatrī, his account

That Gopāldās lived in Śrī Nandgāma. Now Śrī Gusāiṃ Jī came one day to Śrī Nandgāma. Then, Gopāldās let Śrī Gusāiṃ Jī come to his own house and everything that was inside the house that all he surrendered to him. Then, he started to do service to a *mleccha* and the riches of that *mleccha* Gopāldās would constantly spend on Vaiṣṇavas. Then, the servants of that *mleccha* said: 'Throw him out of service, he is always spending money on *kathās* and *kīrtanas*!' Then, that *mleccha* said: 'Because of his good luck my riches constantly grow from day to day and he does not spend anything in worldly affairs. Therefore, how can he be removed from service?'. That Gopāldās was such a vessel of grace. Because of contact with him the mind of a *mleccha* became spotless. The *vārtā* is completed. (Vaiṣṇava 14)

3.2. Krishna and His Devotees Transgress the Ritual Rules

Śrī Nāth seems to be a completely autonomous god. He can do anything; whatever pleases him, so it would seem. Meanwhile, Vallabha and Viṭṭhalnāth typically have to stick to traditional instructions. They are high-caste and pure Brahmins. They have to defend Krishna and his miraculous acts. This is especially the case if he transgresses the regulations. These regulations and ritual instructions were often institutionalized by these gurus themselves. At times, they have to defend highly complicated situations. This makes their position paradoxical and their choices intriguing and complex. Some of Śrī Nāth's devotees get so deeply involved in his games (*līlā*) that they misbehave in the eyes of the common Hindus. This may be so even in the eyes of Vaiṣṇavas, though they should be acquainted with Krishna's games and the strange acts of his closest devotees. In the account of Govindsvāmī (no. 1, also named Govinddās), we see how Śrī Nāth plays horseback riding with Govindsvāmī, as any child could do with a parent or an uncle or so. Govindsvāmī goes very far in his role as a horse or elephant. He even urinates like an animal. When asked about this open misbehavior, Viṭṭhalnāth gives an explanation as he truly must defend his devotee:

Now Śrī Nāth Jī would always play together with Govindsvāmī in the forest and one day he would make Govinddās into as a horse, the other day into an elephant. Such games he would always play. One day Śrī Nāth Jī had changed Govinddās into a horse and he was sitting on him as a horseman. Now Govinddās urinated as a horse does. A Vaiṣṇava saw this, went to Śrī Gusāiṃ Jī and told him this. Then, Śrī Gusāiṃ Jī gave the order: 'Govindsvāmī is a horse or an elephant. How can it be that he would not imitate a horse or an elephant the entire way? Do not intervene in these matters'. Hearing this, that Vaiṣṇava remained silent. Such a vessel of grace was Govinddās. (*prasaṅga* 16)

Apparently, Govindsvāmī plays with Śrī Nāth in the *alaukik* mode, but this is not recognized by the others. They can only see a urinating devotee. The above quotation explains what it may have looked like from the *laukik* side.

There are other examples of transgression of the rules by both Krishna and his devotees. The following two examples are also from the *vārtā* of Govinddās, who had developed a profound friendship with Krishna. The particularities of this episode may generally characterize close friendships between young boys. One day Viṭṭhalnāth was preparing the *śrīṅgāra darśana*, the elaborate ritual of midday in the temple. Śrī Nāth himself, however,

would always play with Govinddās. Govinddās was singing in the temple now, but Śrī Nāth and Govinddās were so close that they enjoyed teasing each other. Śrī Nāth threw stones at Govinddās. Then, Govinddās threw a stone back at the image of Śrī Nāth. Even Viṭṭhalnāth was shocked now but Govinddās was able to explain what he did. It was Śrī Nāth who started the throwing even though the others present perhaps did not see this.

One day, Śrī Gusāim Jī was doing the *śṛṅgāra* of Śrī Nāth Jī. In the meantime, Govindsvāmī was singing *kīrtana* songs in the jagmohan temple hall. Then, Śrī Nāth threw eight stones at Govinddās. When Govinddās threw one stone back then Śrī Nāth Jī was startled. Śrī Gusāim Jī then said: ‘Govinddās! What have you done?’. Then, Govinddās said: ‘He Mahārāj! You did not say anything when that complete idiot threw eight times stones at me!’ Hearing this, Śrī Gusāim Jī remained silent. Such a *sakhābhāva* [emotion of friendship] had Govinddās developed. (*prasaṅga* 8)

On another occasion, Śrī Nāth is afraid that Govinddās will beat him up, like small boys will do. Govinddās is thrown out of the temple by a priest but apparently Śrī Nāth still wants to see him. Śrī Nāth communicates this to Viṭṭhalnāth.

One day, Śrī Nāth Jī was playing with Govinddās. Then, Śrī Nāth Jī understood it was his turn, but then it became time for the *utthāpan* ceremony and Śrī Nāth Jī ran away and snuck into the temple. Then he (=Govinddās) also entered the temple and threw stones at Śrī Nāth Jī. Then, the servant extsubdotTahelbāna pushed Govinddās and threw him out and held the *utthāpanbhoga* ceremony. Govindsvāmī went away and sat down on the road and said: ‘Now Śrī Nāth Jī will come on this road together with the singers and I will give him a blow!’ Later, Śrī Gusāim Jī came into the temple after he had taken a bath and he saw that Śrī Nāth Jī was dejected and that the *sāmagrī* of the *utthāpan* was not healthy. Then, Śrī Gusāim Jī asked Śrī Nāth Jī how he was. Then, Śrī Nāth Jī said: ‘As long as you will not settle the memory to Govinddās for me, nothing will please me! Therefore, let me go on that road and without playing with him nothing can go on. However, if I go on that road now, he will give me innumerable blows. Out of this concern nothing pleases me. If Govinddās comes then it will please me’. Hearing these words and seeing the affection of Śrī Nāth Jī towards his devotees (*bhaktavatsalatā*), Śrī Gusāim Jī’s heart ran over. He had Govinddās called over and conciliated and he made the request to Śrī Nāth Jī saying: ‘He is present now, he has come’. Then, Śrī Nāth Jī became healthy again. Such a vessel of grace was Govinddās. (*prasaṅga* 19)

In the *vārtā* of Cācā Harivaṃś Jī (no. 7), we find yet another proof of the transgression of the ritual rules by both Śrī Nāth and his devotee. On the other hand, we also see here the visionary powers of an important poet-saint. In this case, it is the renowned Sūrdās. Sūrdās is considered within the *puṣṭimārga* to have been one of the most important disciples of Vallabha.²⁸ In the story, it is time to blow the conch shell in order to wake up Krishna. All the temple priests, the *bhītariyās*, are waiting for Cācā Harivaṃś to blow the conch shell. Cācā Harivaṃś, however, realizes that Krishna is still in deep sleep. After two hours, Viṭṭhalnāth comes there and wonders why Krishna is not awake yet. Then, the conch is blown. Still Krishna does not wake up. It is only after the great saint Sūrdās’s sings a *pada* that Krishna gets up. It is no exaggeration to state that the poet-saint Sūrdās is the most famous of the Brajbhāṣā Krishna poet-saints. According to the legendary accounts, he was blind since childbirth. Therefore, it is often stated that what he sees is the direct result of his seemingly unlimited powers of poetic sight. It is the result of his ability to take part in the *līlā*. What Sūrdās sees is a direct revelation that can be compared to the *Veda*. According to the *Bhāvaprakāśa* commentary on the *Caurāsī vaiṣṇavana kī vārtā* of Harirāy, Sūrdās was a manifestation of a celestial being that during the daytime took part in the *līlā* as a *sakhā*, a cowherd boy who went to the forest with Krishna. At night, he was a *sakhī*, a female companion of Krishna (Barz 1976, p. 106). As a *sakhā*, he was named Krishnasakhā, as a

sakhī, his name was Campakalatā. For this reason, he was able to have such a complete and overall view of the *līlā*. Once more, his *laukik* form was that of a blind poet-singer. His *alaukik* form was that of a *gopī* at night, and a *gopa* during the day. Both Sūrdās and Cācā Harivaṃś understood why Śrī Nāth was still sleeping. Both the god and his close devotees transgress the rules here:

One day, Cācā Jī went up on Girirāja (i.e., the mountain Govardhana) and prepared for blowing the sound of the conch. However, Cācā Harivaṃś found that Śrī Nāth Jī was in deep sleep. Then, he did not blow the conch. All the *bhītariyās* stood there. After two hours, Śrī Gusāim Jī came, but when he had the sound of the conch produced, still Śrī Nāth Jī did not wake up. Then, Sūrdās sang a *pada*. That *pada* is:

Son of Nanda, what habit is this?

It is dawn, at the moment of awakening,

Pītāmbara²⁹ stretches out and sleeps’.

Hearing this *pada*, Śrī Nāth Jī woke up. Such a vessel of grace was Cācā Jī that Śrī Gusāim Jī would listen to him and that he had all memory of the fame of Śrī extsubdotThākur Jī (i.e., Krishna). (*prasaṅga* 7)

3.3. Krishna Is Subordinate to the Ritual Rules of Viṭṭhalnāth and the Saṃpradāya

Meanwhile, in other cases, Śrī Nāth tries to behave as properly as possible. He even tries to return to his temple so the ritual order is not disrupted. We already saw this in *prasaṅga* 19 of the account of Govinddās. Apparently, he snuck out to play with his devotees, but is still subordinate to the daily ritual structure of the *darśanas*. This is of course quite paradoxical. Is it Krishna who sets the rules or is it to the Brahmin ritualists? Or is it rather Vallabha and Viṭṭhalnāth who do this? Of course, the powers of the ritualists are basically unlimited. They speak the divine Sanskrit to which every god obeys. Yet, it is paradoxical. Who rules whom? This theme of obeying the Brahmin institutions can be found for instance on another occasion in the account of Govinddās:

One day, Śrī Nāth Jī had climbed a *sāma* tree (*sāmaḍāk*) and shone there and he played his flute. Govinddās was sitting on another hill and watched him. At that time, Śrī Gusāim Jī had bathed and he came on Śrī Girirāj to perform the *utthāpan* ceremony. Śrī Nāth Jī was looking from the *sāma* tree and quickly jumped from there. The cloth of his garment got torn and a piece of cloth remained in the bushes. When Śrī Gusāim Jī opened the door and looked in order to perform the *utthāpan*, he saw that the cloth of the garment was torn. He asked the people whether anyone had entered there, but all said that was not the case. When he started to think on this matter then Govinddās said: ‘Why do you think about this matter, don’t you know what boys are like? They are naughty. He jumped from the *sāma* tree and got the cloth of his garment torn. If you come I will show you that a piece of cloth is still hanging’.

Śrī Gusāim Jī came there and took that piece. Then, Śrī Gusāim Jī asked Śrī Nāth Jī: ‘Why were you in such a hurry?’ Then, Śrī Nāth Jī said: ‘It had become time for the *utthāpan* and you had taken a bath and you came in. Therefore, there was such a rush’. From that day onwards such an arrangement was made that the *utthāpan* would only be performed after the bell resounded three times, the conch would be blown three times, and then, only after waiting twenty seconds, they would open the doors of the temple. Such a vessel of grace was Govinddās. (*prasaṅga* 14)

It is remarkable from these accounts that on the one hand Śrī Nāth transgresses the rules, and on the other hand rigidly sticks to them. This same tension can be seen in Krishna himself, who on the one hand preaches the *dharma* to Arjuna in his renowned *Bhagavadgītā* and on the other hand, he seduces young girls into leaving their families and enjoy his

company in the forest. Thus, on the one hand, there is protection of the *dharma*, while on the other, there is severe transgression of it. Krishna can do whatever pleases him so it seems. He sticks to rules if he desires to do so, but just as easily leaves them behind. All for the fun, the *līlā* aspects of it. Yet, at times, he takes obedience to the rules so seriously, one could consider it to be extreme. Meanwhile, he has to save the universe. Regardless of these paradoxes, his transgression has as the result that the rituals are adjusted to accommodate his playful acts.

This type of transgression is not exceptional within Vaiṣṇavism. It can at times be observed among Vaiṣṇavas even today. The Brahmin ritualists sometimes have difficulties explaining the odd acts of their disciples. Meanwhile, they have to interpret the strange acts in light of official Vaiṣṇava doctrines. I have noticed this several times during my fieldwork in the Braj area.

In the account of Ajabakuṃvara Bāī (no. 47, we see how Śrī Nāth on the one hand surely understands the importance of the ritual order of the day. He must be present in the Braj area for the worship by Viṭṭhāl-nāth and his sons. This ritual order may not be disrupted. However, meanwhile, he knows how to escape from it in order to be with a devoted woman, Ajabakuṃvara Bāī.

The servant of Śrī Gusāīṃ Jī, her account

That Ajabakuṃvara Bāī lived in Mevār. One day when Śrī Gusāīṃ Jī came there, it was for Ajabakuṃvara Bāī the *darśana* of the complete highest person in his own shape. Then, Ajabakuṃvara Bāī became Śrī Gusāīṃ Jī's servant, and all eight watches of the day, her mind was stuck in the lotus feet of Śrī Gusāīṃ Jī. When Śrī Gusāīṃ Jī was about to leave then Ajabakuṃvara Bāī fainted. When Śrī Gusāīṃ Jī saw her in such state, he shone there for four days longer and he had for Ajabakuṃvara Bāī his wooden sandals (*pādukā*) installed [in her private shrine for instance]. Then, Ajabakuṃvara Bāī started to do service according to the ways and standards of the pure *puṣṭīmārga*.

Now Śrī Nāth Jī always played *caupar* (chess) with Ajabakuṃvara Bāī. And in the mind of Ajabakuṃvara Bāī came such a thought: 'If Śrī Nāth Jī would always shine here it would be good'. One day, Śrī Nāth Jī was pleased with Ajabakuṃvara Bāī and said to her: 'Whatever you ask!'. Then, Ajabakuṃvara Bāī asked 'Shine here forever!'. Then, Śrī Nāth Jī said: 'Śrī Gusāīṃ Jī and seven sons of Śrī Gusāīṃ Jī will perform my service here directly on the earth; therefore, I cannot directly leave the mountain Govardhan, but afterwards I will come here and I will always straightly continue to come!'. Hearing such words, Ajabakuṃvara Bāī was very happy in her mind. Therefore, for making the words to Ajabakuṃvara Bāī true, Śrī Nāth Jī is now naturally shining in Mevār. How can her *vārtā* be told? The *vārtā* is completed. (Vaiṣṇava 47)

Śrī Nāth respects the temple rituals, but after these, when he is supposed to sleep inside his temple, he escapes, goes to Mewar (Mevār) and is present there to play chess with Ajabakuṃvara Bāī. He obeys the rules and yet transgresses them.

Similar stories play in other Vaiṣṇava temples, where Krishna or Viṣṇu in fact desire to see each and every devotee, but the Brahmin rules can be so strict that they must be adhered to instead. In Jagannāth Puri, the god Jagannāth, equated to Krishna, longs to see anyone who visits the site. Yet, entrance to the temple is restricted. This mainly has to do with ritual purity. There are many stories how Jagannāth escaped from his temple and his Brahmin ritualists. He does so, for instance, to see a low-caste person who wants to pay homage to him. Jagannāth and his brother and sister even come out of their temple for the car festival (*rathyātrā*) out of this desire to see those who cannot enter. Close to the Jagannāth temple, there is a small temple that is accessible to anyone, irrespective of caste or origin. In another adjacent village, Jagannāth remains inside the temple, but his hands one day reached out to an impure low-caste devotee through the walls.

3.4. Śrī Nāth, Viṭṭhalnāth, and Muslims

Among the stories in the *Do sau bāvana vaiṣṇava kī vārtā*, several accounts can be found depicting how Śrī Nāth and Viṭṭhalnāth dealt with Islamic beliefs, or Muslims who came to visit Braj, or who tried to contact, for instance, Vaiṣṇava singers and other artists. On the one hand, the *Vallabhasampradāya* is open to foreigners. This is more often the case with Vaiṣṇava denominations. On the other hand, there are always the concerns of purity and impurity. Sometimes, Śrī Nāth is touched by the devotion of a foreigner (*mleccha*), usually a Muslim. In these cases, indeed, the purity/impurity paradox plays a part. This may even be the case for Śrī Nāth personally. If he accepts devotion from a Muslim, he might not be pure enough anymore for confronting Viṭṭhalnāth himself. Solutions must be found. In other cases, the visions and experiences of a foreigner can be so intense that everybody is impressed, pure or not.

An example of this is the account of Raskhān (no. 218). According to his *vārtā*, Raskhān was a Muslim, a Paṭhān from Delhi. He fell in love with the son of a banker. He would go so far in his love for this boy that he would even eat the leftovers of his meal, abhorrent in orthodox Hindu eyes. One day, he hears a few Vaiṣṇavas preach on Krishna. One should be as concerned about Krishna as Raskhān is for the banker's son. Raskhān's attention is drawn and he asks for the Vaiṣṇavas to show him a picture of Śrī Nāth. He sees a picture and immediately leaves for Gopālapura. There, he changes his clothes, most probably in favor of Vaiṣṇava clothing, and visits various temples. He is disappointed, however. Afterwards, he goes to see Śrī Nāth, but he is recognized as not being a Hindu. He is thrown out of the temple:

Now follows the account of the disciple of Śrī Gusāimī Jī, Raskhān, a Paṭhān who lived in Delhi. In Delhi lived a banker. The son of this banker was very handsome. Raskhān's mind was deeply attached to that boy. He would follow him and eat his leftovers³⁰ and serve him all day long. Earning a salary was not there, day and night he remained attached to him. The other people of high birth slandered Raskhān in many ways, but Raskhān did not listen to anybody and all the time his mind was attached to the son of that banker.

One day, four Vaiṣṇavas had come together and they were telling the story of the Lord. Whilst doing so, a word fell that one should attach the mind to the Lord as Raskhān's mind is attached to the banker's son. Meanwhile, Raskhān emerged on that road. He heard these words. Then, Raskhān said: 'What are you saying about me?' Then one of the Vaiṣṇavas spoke the word that had been said.

Then, Raskhān said: 'If I see an image of the Lord, my mind will be attached'. Then, the Vaiṣṇavas showed him a picture of Śrī Nāth. As soon as Raskhān saw it, he took the picture with him, and in his mind, he made a decision to see that image (*svarūpa*). He took a meal and came from there in one night to Brindavan, seated on a horse. He changed his clothes³¹ and the whole day he lingered in all the temples. And in all the temples he had a *darśana*, but when there was not such a *darśana* (i.e., such a *darśana* as he longed for), he went to Gopālapura and after changing his clothes one more time he went to have the *darśana* of Śrī Nāth Jī. Then, the guardians recognized the mark of a highborn one³² according to the will of the Lord. They gave him a stroke and threw him out. They did not allow him to enter. He left and remained on Govind Kuṇḍ.³³ He lay there for three days. He did not pay any attention to taking food or drinking.

Poor Raskhān lies outside the temple, but Śrī Nāth understands the purity of his intentions. He shows himself to Raskhān. Raskhān runs after Śrī Nāth who feels threatened by this overflow of passionate devotion. He flees and tells Viṭṭhalnāth to initiate Raskhān. Raskhān is pure as a being, but impure because he is not a Vaiṣṇava. He is a foreigner (*mleccha*). Viṭṭhalnāth must initiate him, otherwise Śrī Nāth cannot accept anything from Raskhān due to his impurity as a foreigner.

Then, Śrī Nāth Jī understood this: ‘This being is divine, it is pure and truthful. It is a devotee (*bhakta*) of mine. If I give him a *darśana* it will be good’. Then, Śrī Nāth Jī gave him a *darśana*. He (Raskhān) got up and ran towards him to grasp him. Śrī Nāth Jī fled. Śrī Nāth Jī then spoke to Śrī Gosāīm Jī: ‘This being is divine and it has a birth as a *mleccha* (foreigner). Have pity on him and accept his refuge. Where your relation with a being is not pure, there I do not touch that being in purity. I do not talk to him and I do not eat from his hand. Therefore, accept him!’.

Viṭṭhalnāth comes to Raskhān, who sees him as if he were Śrī Nāth himself. Viṭṭhalnāth shows Raskhān the *utthāpan* ceremony and gives him some of the *prasāda*³⁴ of Śrī Nāth. Raskhān is completely absorbed now that he sees Śrī Nāth. It is remarkable that apparently here Śrī Nāth sticks to the instructions on purity, whereas we have seen otherwise in other accounts. This is probably because Raskhān is more impure than others interested in Śrī Nāth as he was originally a Muslim.

When Śrī Gusāīm had heard the word of Śrī Nāth Jī, he entered Govind Kuṇḍ and he called his (i.e., Raskhān’s) name. And indeed he (Raskhān) had the *darśana* of Śrī Nāth Jī himself in the shape of Śrī Gusāīm. Then Śrī Gusāīm Jī took him inside and showed him the *utthāpan* ceremony. He let him accept the *mahāprasāda*. Raskhān got absorbed in the image (*svarūpa*) of Śrī Nāth Jī.

Raskhān has composed many *kīrtanas*, *kavittas*, and *dohās* of various kinds. Just as he saw the *līlās*, thus he described them. Raskhān was a person who deserved such a grace from Śrī Gusāīm Jī. His mind was attached to Śrī Nāth Jī, pulled away from the world just by seeing a picture. Where else can his prosperity grow? (i.e., there is no more place for his prosperity to grow). The *vārtā* is finished. (Vaiṣṇava 218)

However, there are other accounts. We even come across Akbar, the great Moghul emperor (1542–1605) in the *Caurāsī vaiṣṇavana kī vārtā* and the *Do sau bāvana vaiṣṇavana kī vārtā*. It is often suggested that the *Vallabhasampradāya* and Akbar at times kept contact, more often than not in secret. In Brindavan, one can sometimes hear the story of Akbar being a Vaiṣṇava in his past life. By accident, he drank a glass of milk that contained a cow hair. Therefore, he was in his present life born as an impure Muslim. Thus, he was impure as a Muslim on the *laukik* level. In the *alaukik* world, he was possibly one of Krishna’s companions. It is said that Akbar even tried to visit the great poet-saints Sūrdās and Nanddās. According to Vallabhite sources, these two were among the major disciples of the *Vallabhasampradāya*. Both belonged to the so-called *aṣṭachāp* poets, the ‘eight seals’, a group of eight poets who are each believed to have been incarnations of close companions of Krishna himself. Thus, tradition has it that six of the eight poets of the *aṣṭachāp* were brought before Akbar (McGregor 1973, 32 nt7).

In the *Do sau bāvana vaiṣṇavana kī vārtā*, we find the story of Chītsvāmī (no. 2). Here, we see an example of how Akbar meets Viṭṭhalnāth.³⁵ Both Chītsvāmī and Akbar share a deeply spiritual vision of the image of Krishna and Viṭṭhalnāth. Akbar is brought to this scene by one of his famous courtiers Bīrbal. Bīrbal does not have the intense experience that Akbar and Chītsvāmī have, even though Chītsvāmī is Bīrbal’s private chaplain (*purohita*). Akbar indeed sees something completely different from Bīrbal. He later asks Bīrbal about what he has seen. According to the text, Akbar is an advanced devotee and Krishna gives him very particular visions. He is even secretly given the *prasāda* or *mahāprasāda* by Viṭṭhalnāth. These are the leftovers of Krishna’s food. As mentioned, food touched by another is extremely impure in Hinduism, but if the essence of it is eaten by a deity it is the purest a human can long for in this world. It is polluted by the saliva of the god. The lowest of the godly is the highest humanity can hope for:

One day, Bīrbal came with permission of the emperor of the country to Śrī Gokul for the *darśana* of *janmāṣṭamī* (i.e., Krishna’s birthday). Later on, the emperor of the country also came in disguise looking and looking again. When he had

the *darśana* of the cradle of *janmāṣṭamī*, nobody among the crowd except for Śrī Gusāim̃ Jī recognized the emperor of that country. Then, Chītsvāmī was singing *kīrtanas* and Śrī Gusāim̃ Jī was swinging the cradle of Śrī Navanītapriyā Jī.³⁶ Then, Chītsvāmī Jī sang this *pada*:

The cradle of the beloved Navanīta swings,

Śrī Viṭṭhalnāth is swinging it

One moment he himself swings together with him,

the other moment he (Navanīta) comes down,

and makes it (i.e., the cradle) move.

Sometimes he takes nicely colored toys,

and makes him play in many many ways.

Sometimes he takes the jojo on his lap,

Sometimes he makes the rattle resound.

He prepares food on a tray and there is a pitcher,

both of them eat and feed each other together.

The hidden highest experience (*mahārasa*) he makes clearly known,

new joy he brings forth. Glory to the people, the own servants,

by whom this *darśana* is found. Chītsvāmī sings of Giridhara,³⁷ Śrī Viṭṭhala and the *Veda* (*nigama*),

making them one.

Such a *darśana* Chītsvāmī had and also the emperor of the land had such a *darśana* and the people altogether had a common *darśana*. Then, the emperor of the land went away. Then, Śrī Gusāim̃ Jī had *mahāprasāda* given to the emperor in secret. Then, the emperor of that land went back to Agra. The next day Bīrbal came. Then, the emperor of that country asked Bīrbal what kind of *darśana* he had. Then, Bīrbal said that the cradle of Śrī Navanītapriyā Jī was swinging and Śrī Gusāim̃ Jī was rocking it. Then, the emperor of that country said: 'This matter is not true! Śrī Gusāim̃ Jī is swinging in the cradle and Śrī Navanītapriyā Jī is rocking. I had such a *darśana*. Chītsvāmī who is your *purohita* sings such *kīrtanas* and I was standing next to you'. Then Bīrbal said: 'Why did not I have such a *darśana*?'. Then, the emperor of the country said: 'You do not have any knowledge of the true form of the guru (*guru ke svarūp*), while your *purohita* is Chītsvāmī, who has experienced these things. Therefore, you do not have this joy for whatever *darśana* you have'. Such a vessel of grace was that Chītsvāmī. The *vārtā* is completed. (Vaiṣṇava 2)

Of course, the *Do sau bāvana vaiṣṇavana kī vārtā* is typically a Vallabhite source that defends the particular spiritual path instructed by Vallabha and his sons. This becomes clear from the great power attributed to Viṭṭhalnāth and his temple rituals. These are considered to be so effective that they make Krishna himself take part in the events. Of course, Akbar is attracted to such a group, one would say.

In the account of Govinddās (Govindsvāmī), we find an example of a meeting between the poet-saint and Akbar during which the poet-saint is apparently not too fond of the emperor's presence. The mere fact that the emperor, a non-vaiṣṇava, is present, pollutes the entire hymn:

One day the Bādśā of Agra (Āgrā), Akbar had heard that Govindsvāmī was such a good singer. 'But he is indifferent³⁸ and he is fearless. How can the melodies be heard from his mouth?' While pondering thus, the emperor changed his outfit and he came alone to Śrī Gokul. Govinddās was singing an *alāp* in *Bhairava rāga* on Jasodāghāṭ. Then, the emperor cried out: 'Well done! Well done!' Then, Govinddās said: 'Now this *rāga* has become touched [i.e., impure]'.³⁹ Then, he (Akbar) said: 'But I am the emperor'. Then, he (Govinddās) said: 'If you are

the emperor then just do what is to be done as an emperor, but this *rāga* has been touched because you have listened to it'. Then, the emperor thought: 'I am the king of a country but even the power over the triple world seems to be dull to him. Therefore, he remains in his own authority that he is ready to say so'. Thinking thus, the Bādśā left and Govindsvāmī did not sing the *Bhairava rāga* with the musical instruments. Govindsvāmī was such a reliable devotee (*bhagavadīya*). (*prasaṅga* 15)

The problem here is not with Śrī Nāth or Viṭṭhalnāth; it is the mystics in these cases.

4. Concluding: A Transformative Interaction

Krishna, his gurus, and devotees have a very particular, not to mention complex relationship among each other. The presence of the three seems to enhance a process that can be characterized as a multiple transformation. The process transforms the everyday world, which is in Vallabhite terms very often described as *laukik* ('worldly', derived from Sanskrit 'loka'; 'world', into *alaukik*, 'beyond the daily'). *Alaukik* is a characteristic of the timeless eternal world of Krishna. In this *alaukik* world, he plays his endless games. In this world, he can be young and timeless at his own will. Krishna manifests himself in each and every phenomenon in the world, but his manifestations remain hidden as long as this secret, hidden world is not disclosed. And that is where this specific interaction comes in that transforms multiple parties. Krishna alone may be aware of his beauty and potency to his endless enjoyment, but he needs the others to truly enjoy and experience it. Thus, he becomes aware of his own nature. Therefore, he needs this world, even though he may be disinvested in each and every phenomenon that appears in this world. He needs the regulation of the temple rituals and the rules. Otherwise, there is nothing to transgress. It is out of these transgressions that he creates the possibility for his detachment to be witnessed. That is when the miracle happens. That is when the transformations become manifest. This transformation takes place within interactions. This interactive component needs to be emphasized time and again. Otherwise, it might be forgotten. It might just become part of everyday experience. However, the breakthrough of the extraordinary contrasted with the ordinary is one of the prime experiences of Krishnaism in general. The world is what it is at first sight. However, meanwhile, it never is; at least it is not limited to this. All day long, there are the manifestations of the other world that ooze through, but this is only visible to few. It is only to be experienced by the initiated disciple.

Remarkable here is that the various characters in Krishna's *līlā* always seem to forget his miraculous nature. It is as if they are overwhelmed each and every moment the transformation takes place, but it is subsequently forgotten the very next moment. Therefore, it happens each time anew as if it never happened before. It seems as if many of the characters simply lack memory, or never get used to the fact that the *līlā* manifests itself all over again, at each moment. Vallabha and Viṭṭhalnāth must give the same explanation ever again. However, maybe that is not quite so strange. Krishna's games are endless, eternal, beyond time. Memory cannot exist without time, as it implies the experience of the passage of time. The *līlā* is, in a way, beyond memory. If time is to be experienced it is up to Krishna. He plays his games very seriously, however. Even in his breakthroughs of the *līlā*, he is serious. There is nothing to remember, so to say, to be experienced.

The interaction cannot take place without the three main players. In the first place is Krishna himself. In the case of the Vallabhite hagiographies, it is usually in the form of one of the *svarūpas* being worshipped in the major temples of the *Vallabhasampradāya*. There are a number of primal *svarūpas*. There are also images of lesser importance, even though they are still embodiments of the divine playing Krishna. The most important one is Śrī Nāth. Above it has been exposed how parallels can in fact be constructed between the mythological life of Krishna and the biography of the image of Śrī Nāth. As Krishna had to flee from his evil uncle Kāṃsa, likewise Śrī Nāth was threatened by the Moghul emperor Aurangzeb. Through this identification, Śrī Nāth's identification with Krishna is once more reinforced. Likewise, Aurangzeb changes into the evil, demonic king Kāṃsa.

A close parallel is constructed between Vallabha and Śrī Nāth in the *vārtā* literature. According to the *Śrī Nath jī prākāṣya kī vārtā*, Vallabha was born the moment the mouth of Śrī Nāth became manifest. This makes Vallabha, who was a Brahmin and, thus, the voice of the divine, an even stronger embodiment of Krishna. Viṭṭhalnāth is also identified with Krishna as his elder brother Gopīnāth disappeared into the image of Balarāma in Puri. Moreover, the presence and mere sight (*darśana*) of Viṭṭhalnāth already transformed a future disciple into a being of another order. It was the seductive attraction of ‘ten million Kāmadevas’, which is a highly charged description. This ability to seduce transforms Viṭṭhalnāth into just another form of the primal seducer, Krishna himself. The seductive guru transforms the future disciple into some other being, a divine player from another world. At times, this otherworldly (*alaukik*) identity of the advanced initiate is even known by name, as we have seen.

The initiated devotees or disciples are Krishna’s playmates par excellence. They move beyond each and every restriction. The *laukik/alaukik* division simply dissolves. Of course, they have to restrict themselves, especially in the context of the everyday world. However, they do experience another reality, so tradition has it. It is very hard for them to obey the worldly rules, whereas their personal sensory experiences can be so different. That is why Govinddās feels the need to throw stones at the image of Śrī Nāth. In his experience, it was Śrī Nāth who started throwing stones. The devoted disciple even has a certain control over the deity. The deity will escape from the temple, sneak out, if necessary, to respond to their demands. The disciples can imitate the playfulness of Krishna himself and, thus, attract him. However, the rules and rituals are strict, and at times, Śrī Nāth needs to obey his gurus. Otherwise, they would lose their authority, and then, devotees might turn to other denominations (*sampradāya*) or even resort to other gods. Very interesting in this world view is that a Muslim may be impure from the *laukik* viewpoint. If it comes to *alaukik*, however, he can be a pure character from Krishna’s *līlā*.

It is no exaggeration to state that these currents in Krishnaism are characterized by an ever-continuing, mutual fascination of Krishna, the gurus, and the disciples. The presence of these three against the background of the sacred area of the Braj region implies this transformation of the mundane to the supernatural, to the supermundane. Yet, all of the time there are possibilities to return to the common world. From there, the unlimited timeless world is accessible to the advanced devotee. The presence of the image of Śrī Nāth or one of the other *svarūpas* implies this transformation, this dynamic interaction between the world of time and the timelessness. This implies the transformation of an ordinary mortal into a timeless player in the eternal *līlā*. This is the transformation of the dusty villages of the Braj area into a divine, heavenly abode. Even an absolute outsider can be absorbed, well beyond rules, regulations, and even the ever-so-important purity. Of course, these rules are of great importance. However, at the provocations of the playing god, they may all of a sudden simply evaporate when the time bound is transformed into the timeless.

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Notes

- 1 I have at times heard this sort of remark on Śrī Nāth during my fieldwork periods in the Braj area from other Hindus. This is, for instance, sometimes stated by followers of Rāma. Rāma has one wife, his loyal Sītā. Krishna seduces married women.
- 2 See for a study of local stories on Śiva in South India: Shulman ([1980] 2014). *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. For a translation of the *Tiruvālaiyātal Purāṇam*. S. Ponnuswamy (2021). *Divine Games of Lord Shiva*. Thiruvilayadal Puranam. Mumbai and Chennai: Giri.
- 3 On *vārtā* literature, see: Vaudeville (1980, pp. 15–17); Barz (1976, pp. 97–103); McGregor (1984, p. 209).
- 4 Unless mentioned otherwise, we will refer to the editions of both texts of Gaṅgāviṣṇu Śrī Kṛṣṇadās. Translations of the *vārtā* accounts are my own, unless mentioned otherwise.
- 5 *Padāvālī* in *Nanddās granthāvalī* edition of Brajratnadās.
- 6 The names of the two wives of Viṭṭhalnāth. Both are also names of wives of Krishna. This once more equates Viṭṭhalnāth with Krishna.
- 7 See for the Braj region, a.o.: Hawley (1981). Entwistle (1987); Growse ([1883] 1979); Haberman (1994); Case (2000).
- 8 For an image of Śiva as a *gopī* at Bansi Bat in Brindavan, see Entwistle (1987, 437 plate 7b).
- 9 This shawl is sometimes connected to an ancient snake (*nāga*) cult that was part of the Śaiva layer in the Braj area. Moreover, Balarāma is often considered to have been an incarnation of Śeṣa, the snake on which Viṣṇu rests on the milky ocean.
- 10 For a list of yearly festivals, see Goswamy (1982, p. 126). See also Barz (1976, pp. 49, 50).
- 11 Paramananddās and the other seven poets that are mentioned here are together given the title of the *aṣṭachāp*, the *eight seals*. Their teachings and works form the essence of the *Veda* for the devotees following the *puṣṭimārgasampradāya* of Vallabha and Viṭṭhalnāth.
- 12 This is a summary after the description of the daily rituals of the temple of Nathdwara as presented by Goswamy (1982, p. 125). See also Barz (1976, pp. 47–49).
- 13 *Rasakhāna Aṣṭayāma* edition of Devendra Pratāp Upādhyāya (1962, Aṣṭayāma found on pp. 273–75).
- 14 Or: ‘he plays a tune on the flute’.
- 15 Another translation: ‘As soon as he sees the crown and the beautiful crest jewel, the beautiful garland in the mirror, there is beauty. Hail! Hail! Gopāla!’ This translation is in line with the practice in the (Vallabhite) temples when Krishna is offered a mirror at this *darśana* to inspect his own beauty.
- 16 A title of both Krishna and Kāmadeva.
- 17 The sacred place where the god remains.
- 18 The word ‘*rasakhāna*’ has a double service here. It can be translated as ‘a treasure of rasa’, but also serves as to identify the poet Raskhān who composed this *aṣṭayāma*.
- 19 It is noteworthy that Rādhā plays a part here. In the *Vallabhasampradāya*, Krishna’s games as a young child are much more important than his games with his girlfriends. The service as a girlfriend (*sakhī*) is not absent in the *puṣṭimārga*, but less prominent. In the temples of the *Vallabhasampradāya*, Krishna even goes to sleep earlier than in the other Vaiṣṇava denominations. He is really considered to be a very young child. Raskhān is within the *Vallabhasampradāya* seen as a disciple of Viṭṭhalnāth. Thus, he belongs to the *Vallabhasampradāya*, but apparently still mentions Rādhā. It is not sure though that Raskhān indeed belonged to the *Vallabhasampradāya*.
- 20 Or: ‘Then a melody of the flute resounds, taking the names of the *bhaktas* who get up’.
- 21 In fact, the *Aṣṭayāma* proper seems to consist of the verses 1–21. The verses 22–26 are also found in the *Sujāna Rasakhāna*, another work of Raskhān. Verse 22 is *Sujāna Rasakhāna* 63; 23 is *Sujāna Rasakhāna* 62; 24 is *Sujāna Rasakhāna* 82; 25 is *Sujāna Rasakhāna* 98; 26 is *Sujāna Rasakhāna* 175. See for a translation and further data on the *Sujāna Rasakhāna*: Van der Velde (2022).
- 22 ‘pai chaṭāṃka nahīm deta’, ‘but he gave not one sixth of a seer’, i.e., nothing.
- 23 See for a painted image of *sakhīvoś*: Ambalal (2004, p. 88).
- 24 Bow and arrow are the weapons of Rāma.
- 25 A traditional way of bowing down for an image or for a highly esteemed person. The devotee lies down on the chest completely stretched. The eight body parts are: hands, elbows, knees, and feet. Sometimes the series is: hands, elbows, chin, chest, and feet.
- 26 *Sāmagrī* consists of sweet smelling herbs. *Sāmagrī* is often offered to Hindu gods.
- 27 Most probably the mantra ‘*om namo nārāyaṇāya*’, which consists of eight syllables.
- 28 See for the *vārtā* of Sūrdās: Barz (1976, pp. 105–39). Whether Sūrdās truly was a follower of the *puṣṭimārga* is doubtful. Charlotte Vaudeville, for instance, doubted this. However, the ‘vallabhite’ tradition claims him to have been the foremost follower of Vallabha.
- 29 ‘*Pītāmbara*’, ‘he who has a yellow garment’, an epithet of Krishna.

- 30 As lovers can do among each other out of deep affection. Disciples often do so with the leftovers of their guru. Hindu women sometimes do so with the leftovers of their husband's meal. For traditional Hindus, it is quite shocking that Raskhān would eat the impure leftovers of this boy.
- 31 Maybe for the clothes of a Vaiṣṇava, not to be recognized as a Muslim.
- 32 Apparently, Raskhān wore some sign of his foreign background. The word *cihnā* means: 'sign', 'mark', 'banner', 'stain'.
- 33 One of the important places in Brindaban on the river Yamunā.
- 34 The remains of the food eaten by Krishna himself.
- 35 This example of Chītsvāmī is also noted by McGregor (1973, p. 32, note 32). McGregor refers to another edition of the *Do sau bāvana vaiṣṇavana kī vārtā*.
- 36 One of the images under worship in the *Vallabhasampradāya* (Barz 1976, p. 55).
- 37 Giridhara 'Mountain-lifter' is a name of Krishna, but also a name of one of Viṭṭhalnāth's sons.
- 38 *nirapekṣ*, 1. 'not looking for, not desiring, 2. not having regard (to); indifferent, impartial' (McGregor 1993, p. 566). This means indifferent to the emperor, to money? Indifferent to the creed of the Moghul emperor: Islam?
- 39 The song has become impure because a Muslim has heard it now.

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