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In Praise of the Ordinary Man: Popular Media, Social Hierarchy and Identity in a North Indian Text¹

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Abstract: *This article recounts a story found in a popular genre of religious literature known as vrat katha [ritual storytelling]. The narrative is of an “ordinary” low-caste man and his everyday struggles. It tells of the social and economic suffering experienced by the poor man upon encountering god (called Trilokinath/Vishnu) and receiving his blessing, mediated through a series of miraculous events. However, the transformative power of the events and fortunes that follow is undermined by a Brahmin who refuses to acknowledge the poor devotee, rebuffing his ritual gift [prasad] as polluted and considering him untouchable. The ambiguous nature of the gift and the ideology and practice of devotion [Bhakti] present an intriguing and complex picture of Hinduism, revealed in the multiple social roles and social contexts in which subalterns operate in the course of their day-to-day lives.*

I offer a critical reading of this fascinating story. What seems like a straightforward, standardised ritual text is analysed in terms of its competing and sometimes subversive views of “dominant” Hinduism. By examining the tensions and ambivalence in the text I argue for a more nuanced rendition of subaltern power and agency which cannot be reduced to that of resistance and opposition alone.

Keywords: *caste, Hinduism, gift, exchange, popular media, ritual, subaltern*

The recent flurry of debate about identity politics in contemporary India has stimulated scholars to investigate the myriad ways in which caste identities and boundaries are constructed, maintained, and then mobilised by stakeholders for political gain. These studies are particularly relevant given the rise of the Dalit

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(ex-untouchable) movement in North India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). One central arena in which this identity politics is being formulated and contested is the popular media. In fact, the media is possibly the most vibrant arena for such a contest, where underprivileged sectors of society have been actively staking their claims for cultural and political recognition as citizens of the modern Indian nation.

Badri Narayan's (2001) investigation of the cheap booklets and pamphlets found in small towns and rural bazaars reveals the central role that the popular print media plays in UP identity politics. As Narayan discovered, these inexpensive booklets are mostly written by Dalit middle-class intellectuals and distributed across North India through a vast network of local print houses. The popular appeal of this literature derives from its subject, revolving around issues relating to caste prejudice and the economic and social exclusion of lower castes. Disadvantaged groups occupying the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder have felt increasingly marginalised, having witnessed how the middle-class peasantry (also known as Other Backward Classes) have been able to monopolise positions of power. Their leaders often highlight the dismal failure of the state to fulfil its declared aims of providing equal rights and opportunities to disadvantaged groups (Doron, 2008; 2009b). Of course, it is misleading to suggest that such groups constitute a homogenous entity, and there are certainly marked divisions amongst the Dalits of UP (Pai, 2002). However, despite these divisions, the Dalit assertion movement spearheaded by charismatic figures such as the Dalit leader Kanshiram and his disciple Mayawati, currently the Chief Minister, has made a permanent impression on the political landscape of UP, where the Dalit-based party (the Bahujan Samaj Party) currently rules the state (see also Loynd, this issue). The popular media played a significant role in increasing political awareness among Dalits, by commemorating and honouring the achievements of the poor in folk plays [*nautankis*] and cheap booklets and on posters and cassettes (Narayan, 2006, p. 165).

The image of Mayawati has been carefully cultivated in the popular media over the past decade. As Narayan (2006, p. 30) observes, Mayawati has been elevated to heroine status, celebrated alongside other famous Dalit heroes as a woman marked with courage and distinction. This is part of a wider discourse instigated by Dalit intellectuals to put their own heroes into the grand story of the nation-state, which they feel systematically excludes Dalits. Rather than simply opposing conventional narratives, Dalit intellectuals began to investigate their own oral histories to recover a legion of Dalit heroes and heroines whom they etched into popular accounts. They detail their role in Indian mythology (Narayan, 2006), their resistance to the dominant forces of the anti-colonial struggle and the invaluable contribution of Dalits to the project of nation-building.

Narayan's work elucidates some of the strategies and mechanisms that stimulated the growth of political consciousness and mobilisation among some of the most disenfranchised groups in North India. However, this is only part of the story. The value and attraction of many of these popular booklets lies not only in their capacity to "invent tradition" or "rewrite" history from the subaltern perspective (cf. Chakrabarty, 2008), but also in their capacity to offer meaningful commentary on the vicissitudes of everyday life, while articulating the fears, hopes, wants and modest aspirations and accomplishments of ordinary people.

In this paper I offer a critical reading of a pamphlet belonging to the popular genre of religious literature known as *vrat katha* [ritual fasting and storytelling]. This is not a celebration of specific low-caste heroes and their battles against social and economic oppression, but rather, in very general terms, is about the aspirations of low-caste groups to be recognised as dignified members of the Hindu religious and social order. This particular genre is important because those who observe the principles laid out in the text are believed to realise their projects and desires. Nevertheless, a richer and more complex appreciation of the ambivalence marginalised groups feel about their relation to dominant Hindu norms, values and attitudes will be achieved by a close examination of the formulaic and conservative format of this *vrat* story. Unfortunately, the subtleties of such ambivalence are often overlooked by those scholars and activists who view overt subaltern opposition and resistance to Hindu hegemonic discourse as the only valuable signs of political vitality. My analysis of the *vrat* story must therefore be read within a wider framework that is sensitive to the fears, struggles, wants and hopes of disadvantaged groups as these are experienced in their daily lives, away from the spotlight of modern-day politics and resistance ideology.

The specific text I examine, known as the Trilokinath *vrat katha* [the ritual story of the God of the Three Worlds – Vishnu] was first given to me by members of the boatman community in Banaras during fieldwork between 2001 and 2003. Boatmen belong to the ritually low Mallah caste, whose traditional occupations were often river-based, including boating, fishing and cultivating fields along the riverbanks. Nowadays, with increased migration to urban centres and various restrictions imposed by the state on certain river-based practices, the majority of the Mallahs in Banaras work as low-paid manual labourers on a casual basis. The *vrat katha* recounts a story about the Mallah caste, but it could equally have been written about any other marginalised community in contemporary India where economic deprivation, social exclusion, marginalising government policies and caste oppression constitute part of their everyday lives. While most *vrat* rituals are observed by women devotees on specific dates, others, like the one examined here, can be undertaken at any time and are performed by both men and women. Moreover, it is safe to assume that most devotees would be familiar with the *vrat* story, which serves to emphasise the efficacious qualities of this *vrat* ideology and practice for enacting change and transformation in people's lives. At the same time, I argue that such transformation is itself embedded in and derived from projects and aspirations that are ultimately designed to generate social stability and cohesion rather than disruption and agitation.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first provides a brief account of the *vrat katha* literature and the way it has been described and analysed in recent studies. The second section focuses on one story. The narration of the text is interwoven with a discussion of its central concepts, structure, function and sociocultural context, which highlights some of the complex and often uneasy social relationships articulated in the text and their political implications. While the paper would certainly profit from an in-depth ethnographic examination of the manner in which it is received, recited and circulated amongst members of the Mallah caste across UP, because of the limited scope of the paper I only allude to this in the latter part of the essay. The concluding section of the paper offers further reflections on the

ambiguous nature of everyday life as it is expressed in the field of exchange, religious practice and social roles, and the relationships that Mallahs have with their social and physical environment in contemporary India.

The *Vrat Katha* Tradition

The *vrat katha* is essentially a ritual fasting associated with the recitation of myths or stories in honour of a particular deity. The ritual vows [*vrat* or *varata* in Sanskrit] are primarily designed to achieve specific goals – for instance, ensuring the well-being of the husband and family, economic success, and more generally, purification from past sins and the accumulation of merit [*punya*]. The importance of this type of popular worship should not be underestimated, because it taps into a wide range of Hindu beliefs, practices and sentiments, traversing the boundaries of the so-called “great” and “little” traditions, as Pearson (1996) observes:

... *vratas* are part of both the orally transmitted, local folk (*laukik*, lit. “worldly”) traditions and the written, *sastrik* (brahminical) pan-Indian traditions. *Vratas* share features of both the *bhakti* (devotionalistic, theistic) strand of Hinduism, where the deity’s grace and boons are sought by the devotee, and the *smarta* ritualistic strand wherein correctly performed ritual is of itself efficacious (Pearson, 1996, p. 5).

The model of “great” and “little” tradition has been widely recognised as untenable, both empirically and theoretically, with its implicit structural-functional assumptions (Fuller, 1992). It will suffice to note that the exchange between the oral and the textual is much more dynamic. While in modern-day India the published form of *vrat katha* is increasingly the norm, the genre is still firmly embedded in a performative tradition. Unlike other forms of storytelling [*kahaani*], the *katha* genre derives its authority from the ritual and devotional appreciation of the texts as “true” or divine knowledge (Korom, 2003).

Susan Wadley’s (2005) pioneering work on the *vrat* tradition of North India offers important clues to the wider processes involved in the reproduction or change taking place in Indian society, and the shift from the oral to the textual rendition of the genre:

The increasing importance of these texts as purveyors of modern Hindu dogma cannot be overstated. Most were composed in the last ten years [referring to the 1970s] ... the output of religious literature from small publishing firms increased dramatically in the last half of the twentieth century. While an explanation for this growing popularity cannot be explicitly stated, several factors clearly are important. Increasing literacy allows thousands to use texts where once they had relied solely on oral traditions. A more mobile population separates generations and deprives both men and women of their traditional religious mentors. Finally, texts are valued in Hinduism in part because of their traditional inaccessibility: to many newly literate persons, reading a pamphlet is more authentic and prestigious than reciting the stories of their elders (Wadley, 2005, p. 39).

Given the prevalence of this tradition across North India, it is surprising that there has been relatively little written about the various performances, or the moral, social and even political renditions and visions espoused in this rich tradition. Those valuable studies that do investigate the *vrat katha* literature are either limited to an examination of this genre as an ancient form of Hindu literature (see, for example, Kane, 1974) or, in cases of scholarship that looks at contemporary texts and practice, the focus is largely on women votaries who constitute the main practitioners of this tradition (Caughran, 1998; Pintchman, 2004; Lutgendorf, 2002). Among these, earlier studies have tended to emphasise the ways in which the *vrat katha* tradition, particularly the texts, contributes to the maintenance and reproduction of the hegemonic Hindu discourse (Kakar, 1978; Mazumdar, 1981). More recently, the *vrat katha* tradition has been analysed in terms of its liberating or empowering capacity, as providing occasions for women to comment on, subvert and at times resist structures of authority and hegemonic values and practices (Wadley, 1980; Pearson, 1998). This shift in analysis perhaps indicates a wider paradigm shift in the social sciences, and particularly in South Asian studies, whereby cultural traditions and social roles are increasingly analysed within a framework attentive to questions of power relations and practice, foregrounding social change, structures of domination, women's empowerment and subaltern agency (Ortner, 2006). My own analysis of the Trilokinath *vrat katha* draws on these critical insights. Nevertheless, my current concern is to highlight the ambivalence as well as the multiple and intersecting poles of power circulating in the text, to enrich an appreciation of the sense of power and meaning derived through these religious texts and practices and their ramifications for the everyday lives and politics of subordinate groups.

The *Vrat Katha* Story

I was introduced to the Trilokinath *katha* by members of the Mallah caste in Banaras. On further inquiry I realised that the booklet was commonly available at railway stations, the bazaar and the make-shift stalls along the riverfront, in both Banaras and Allahabad. Interestingly, there is some difference in the recension of the two versions that I found, which is not simply a result of the different locations or publishers (Allahabad/Banaras), but reflects the fact that there is no standard text for this oral and performative tradition. In a similar way to the telling of the story where each individual embellishes it with their own experience and unique rendition, the written version (albeit to a lesser extent) retains a degree of instability, with no single authoritative text or recitation.

The following translation of the Banaras version of the Trilokinath *vrat katha* is an abridged account of this 24-page story, though I shall go into further detail of those parts that are particularly relevant to my discussion. The *katha* is divided into three main chapters. The cover displays the only colour image, depicting Trilokinath with his hand held up in a gesture of blessing to the worshippers seated beneath him and a ray of light emanating from his halo. The shape of the pamphlet is oblong, bound along the long edge and printed and read in landscape format, a layout clearly designed to imitate, and draw its authority from, similarly presented Sanskrit religious texts (see Figures 1 and 2). This intention is substantiated by the

Figure 1. The cover of the booklet with the title *Trilokinath Vrat Katha*, with the image of Trilokinath (Vishnu) surrounded by deities (sage Narada on his left with the lute) and the seated devotees performing worship

Figure 2. The inside pages of the booklet with the rectangle shape and horizontal style layout that are reminiscent of Sanskrit texts

introductory pages featuring couplets and a quatrain praising the God commonly found in the devotional texts. The title page displays the name of the *katha* in bold capitalised type – SRI TRILOKINATH VRAT KATHA – with a subtitle noting that the pamphlet includes instructions for the proper procedures of worship. Underneath, the name and phone number of the publisher (located in a local alley in Banaras famous for its small printing houses) and the price of the pamphlet – 8 rupees (equivalent to 20 cents) – are printed.

The first page details the procedures of the worship, followed by a list of the articles of worship required, and the order in which they should be placed. As Fuller observes (1992, p. 68), worship [*pūja*], is primarily an “act of respectful honoring” of

the Gods, which can only be accomplished by meticulously following “a structured series of offerings and services”. Only when this is achieved, the text stipulates, can one properly listen to the story “with a worry-free state of mind and attentively”.²

The story begins with a prologue by a sage called Pippalad, who tells the other devoted seers and worshippers that the only way for them to gain the knowledge and blessing of the “Transcendental Supreme One” is by listening with reverence to the story.

The hymns of praise begin with a couplet [*doha*]:

First sing the praise of the guru who created the world.
He who created solid mass out of water, He who is the invisible
Nirvana-granting Supreme Man of creation.

It then proceeds to narrate in quatrain form [*chaupai*] the great feats of God’s creation, including the seasons, mountains, seas, colours and shapes, as well as the supreme corpus of knowledge – the Vedas.³

Chapter One begins with a description of a meeting of the virtuous spiritual beings [*satsang*], pleading with the great Sage Narada to narrate the story of Trilokinath (the form of Vishnu as the Lord of Three Worlds) for the benefit of all sentient beings so that they may “find deliverance from sinful actions” and achieve the knowledge of the Supreme Being. After this, several paragraphs, laced with Sanskrit words, proceed to describe the trafficking of divine knowledge across genealogical lines of sages until it reaches the great seer, identified as Pippalad, who introduces the story (see Figure 2).

Throughout these first pages we get a sense of the cosmological order, divided across different domains of time, space and knowledge, the highest of these occupied by the Supreme Being and inaccessible to humans who operate in the worldly realm. The sentence “God Himself always remains unblemished” is further indication of the differentiated realms, where God is above suspicion, free from the shackles of time and desire, unsullied by the categories of thought created by humans, such as the caste system, and unaffected by the social suffering experienced by men. Nevertheless, as the manual describes, if one follows the ritual sequence and demonstrates devotion and love for God, one can receive His grace and blessing, thus circumventing the general law of karma, as the following shows:

Pippalad speaks:

It is the story of one *kalpa* [age], where in a town there used to live all the four *varnas* (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra). In the same town there also lived a Mallah, but he was suffering extremely due to his karma. It has been said that:

Quatrain:

One suffers now for what one did before
One will receive in the future the consequences of what one does
The Lord takes away the power of reason
From the one on whom he wants to inflict terrible suffering.

Following the unfolding of the cosmogonic narrative, the concept of karma is elucidated as the law underpinning the cycles of rebirth and human suffering. Having explained the karmic reasoning behind the Mallah's destitution, the narrative goes on to describe the precise nature of his suffering:

God Himself always remains unblemished. He gives each person the fruit of their actions in accordance with the nature of the action. That Mallah had a fruitful cow [*kamadhenu*], but that cow never used to yield more than 250 ml [*paav*] of milk a day, and the Mallah's wife, from the day she came into his household, never offered respect to her mother-in-law, not even in a dream and his son never honoured his dad by calling him "father" [*babuji*]. That poor Mallah was suffering so much that if he got to eat one day then he used to remain worried about where his next day's meal would come from. That's why he used to pray daily to the Lord Almighty, "O Lord, what shall I get to eat tomorrow?"

Thus, we find the Mallah's household in a state of disharmony, deprivation and material uncertainty, reflected in the cow's low yield and the disrespectful conduct of the wife and child towards the Mallah and his family.

The story goes on to describe how, after a few days of such deprivation, the Mallah's wife had managed to scrape together two *paisa* [coins] and send the Mallah to the market to purchase rice and lentils. The Mallah sets off for the market and encounters a Dandi Sanyasi [an ascetic belonging to the Dandi order] perched on the branch of a peepal tree. But readers soon learn that this is no chance encounter, because the Dandi *swami* was sent by the Trilokinath to relieve the Mallah's suffering. Upon seeing the Dandi, the Mallah offers his devout services, prostrating himself joyfully before him. The Dandi then inquires where the Mallah is headed:

"My Lord, I am going to the bazaar." Hearing the word "bazaar" the Dandi said – "If you are going to the market then bring for me camphor worth one *paisa*, mustard oil worth one *paisa* and *panchmeva* [five kinds of nuts] worth one *paisa* to be offered as *prasad* [consecrated food offered to a deity in Hindu worship]. The three *paisa* are lying underneath the peepal tree; pick them up from there and take them with you".

But the Mallah is perplexed as to how he will carry the oil required for the worship of Lord Trilokinath. The Dandi reassures him, saying: "tie the oil in a piece of cloth [*gamcha*] while uttering the name of Trilokinath; the oil will stay in the cloth by virtue of his greatness". Arriving at the bazaar, the Mallah encounters the quintessential groups of merchants in the market. The first is the Baniya [man of the merchant caste] who sells him the camphor. The Mallah then proceeds to the shop of the Teli [man of oil-seller caste] to purchase mustard oil. The Teli mocks the Mallah as a fool for wanting to carry the oil in his *gamcha*, but is dumbfounded to see the miracle of the oil contained in the cloth as if it was "cupped in a lotus leaf". Following this incident, the Mallah goes to the dried fruit shop to purchase nuts for his worship.

The market scene is important for a number of reasons (which I discuss below). For now I want to note the anonymity so far of all of the actors and communities involved. This is not an anonymity designed to alienate the audience; rather, it is a device designed to promote inclusion and identification, itself a mark of the everyday social interaction within Indian society. It is only the sages and seers who bear names, while all the other actors are identified by their caste names, occupational designations or social roles. In fact, even the protagonist's occupation is not given – he is a nameless ordinary Mallah; so too are his wife and son, identified only by their social roles. The same applies to the bazaar, where the merchant is identified only as a Baniya, a caste historically renowned for being an exploitative group, running shops across India and often advancing money to the poor, whose “hand to mouth” existence they regularly exploit (see Hardiman, 2000). What transpires next in the narrative, however, is no ordinary market exchange:

When the Mallah gave one *paisa* to the *panchmeva* seller from his waistline pocket after receiving the nuts and tying them in his *dhoti* he was astonished to discover that all three one-*paisa* coins were still there with him. “All this is the *maya* [illusion] of His Holiness, the Dandi. Now it seems that the three *paisa* will never diminish in number.” Thinking thus, the Mallah joyfully purchased other things according to his own desires, including fruits and flowers, cheese, incense, and fragrant things offered in worship, paying one *paisa* for each item, tying all of it in a cloth bundle. Thereafter he purchased rice, lentils and other groceries, and set out from the marketplace. Still the Mallah had the three *paisa* with him upon arriving back at the same peepal tree where the Dandi was sitting.

If one is to follow an anthropological perspective that conceives of the market as a social system, where various types of relationships between “buyers” and “sellers” are culturally constituted, the types of exchanges portrayed in the story seem to raise several other issues regarding the ramifications of such transactions and social relations for the future (Alexander and Alexander, 1991). That is, the divine properties of the coins and the ensuing transactions reflect well upon the Mallah. Commodities are attracted and attached to the Mallah, as it were, by some sort of divine power and, more importantly, this power is translated into the economic and social realm. His conduct in the bazaar is no longer characterised by a subordination of the buyer to the seller. The story thus captures the imagination and aspirations of the poor on a number of levels. It appeals to an experience of economic deprivation and social marginalisation experienced by groups such as the Mallahs, whose work as seasonal labourers often means they enter into debt to survive. Equally important is the possibility of transformation, restored dignity and harmony brought about by such ritual transactions (cf. Rao's article in this issue).⁴

Interestingly, the Mallah maintains his integrity in the bazaar setting, and in spite of carrying the powerful coins he is not gripped by desire and greed. Rather, the Mallah purchases the articles of faith and household necessities, refraining from overindulgence and displays of arrogance and greed – traits that are increasingly attributed to the burgeoning middle classes of India. It is also important to note that, apart from the material and social benefits that the Mallah stands to gain as a

result of his venture into the bazaar environment, there is also the emotional investment and gain that is of significance to members of the community. This affective dimension builds on people's identification with the predicament and subsequent empowerment of the Mallah, expressed in the text in feelings of extreme sadness or joy affecting him and those around him. The field of exchange is thus replete with symbolic, emotional, political and material significance. This is further reinforced by the Dandi *swami* as he begins to explicate the importance of the elaborate procedures and various kinds of exchange involved in the worship ceremony of Trilokinath.

The Dandi then tutors the Mallah on the procedures involved in preparing and purifying the grounds for the *puja*, instructing him to invite his kinsmen and other townspeople to participate in the worship and listen to the story of Trilokinath on the following day. The Dandi concludes by expounding on the two most important kinds of exchange involved in the ritual worship: *dakshina*, the fees given to the Brahmin for ritual services, and *prasad*, the sanctified food given to devotees at the end of the *puja*:

... the Dandi then said – “O Mallah, look. Bid the Acharya [religious teacher] from whose mouth you hear the *vrat katha* of Trilokinath farewell respectfully after feeding him reverently and giving him whatever *dakshina* you can afford to give. By not donating anything to the Acharya the *yajna* [ritual sacrifice], regardless of its type, becomes futile. Just as if one calls a labourer to do a job and does not pay him his wages it is considered *adharma* [immoral, unlawful]. After listening to the story of Trilokinath one should eat His *prasad* lovingly along with one's kinsmen. Take it for granted that whichever human being hesitates in taking the *prasad* of Trilokinath, he shall bear the brunt of Trilokinath's anger. He suffers terribly and Trilokinath is definitely pleased with the person who eats the *prasad* of Trilokinath with reverence and He fulfils his wish”. Having preached to the Mallah thus the Dandi sent him home.

Thus concludes the first chapter of the Trilokinath *katha*.

The concepts of *dakshina* and *prasad* are introduced for a number of reasons. At the most practical level this is part of the didactic nature of the text, where these transactions constitute a central feature of any *puja*. The idea that one should give as much *dakshina* as one can afford is common in texts, and alludes to a moral injunction, supervised by God himself so that one must be careful when withholding the rightful fee from the priest. But it is the concept of *prasad* that is more central to the *katha*, anticipating the turn of events later in the narrative. In his illuminating discussion of this concept, Fuller (1992, p. 74) emphasises that *prasad* is primarily “the material symbol of the deities' power and grace”. As such, the exchange and consumption of *prasad*, commonly but not always given as sanctified food, becomes an extraordinarily potent symbol of identification and merging between the deity and the worshipper. At the same time, the exchange and distribution of *prasad* is a mark of social difference and hierarchy, tapping into a wider discourse and practice regarding the regulations governing food exchange between castes in Hinduism. Such considerations are even more stringently observed in ritual settings in which

the distribution and consumption of *prasad* becomes a way of “displaying and establishing distinctions of rank” (Fuller, 1992, p. 79). I return to this below, but for now note the way in which various regimens of exchange are articulated in the text in ways that cannot be simply reduced to any uniform expressions of power relations; rather, these are embedded in moral, social, ritual, material and even political meanings.

Turning back to our protagonist, the next chapter begins with a narration of the transformative events following the Mallah’s pious conduct. We find that harmony is restored to the Mallah household. Upon arriving home he is happy to hear his son respectfully calling him “father” [*babuji*] and his wife addressing him lovingly, as is evident below:

When his wife saw her husband coming with a big bundle she went running to her mother-in-law and said, “respected Mother-in-law [Ma ji], today I don’t know where my lord and master is coming from with a big bundle”. Hearing this, her mother-in-law said to herself with great surprise, “until today even upon being taught to do so my daughter-in-law never called me ‘Ma’; what is the matter today that she is calling me ‘Ma’?” . . .

Things seem to fall back into place, as the Mallah’s life path, material circumstances and social relationships are transformed as a result of his pleasing Trilokinath. The following day the Mallah invites all his kinsmen and townspeople to participate in the performance of the *vrat katha*. Gratified that all of his instructions for performing the *vrat katha* correctly have been followed, the Dandi says:

“O Mallah! A person who invites his kinsmen and reverently listens with them to the excellent sermon of Shri Trilokinath is freed from sin [and] attains liberation along with his clan and family.” Saying this, the Dandi began to narrate the sermon of Trilokinath.

The Mallah appears to gain on a number of fronts. Spiritually he is cleansed of all sins, and the benefits are extended to his whole clan and family. Thus, the symbolic, moral and ritual meaning of the *vrat katha* also has material and social ramifications.

The next section of the story hails Trilokinath as the God of all worlds, the formless one whose virtues and powers are unimaginable. It proceeds to elaborate on the pivotal role of receiving the *prasad* in the *vrat katha* as a mark of devotion and love for Trilokinath. If until now the chain of events is rather formulaic, the last part of the story presents an unexpected twist:

Having said this the Dandi instructed the Mallah – “Now perform the *havan* [fire ritual accompanied by chanting] in the ritually prescribed manner and distribute the *arati* [sacred camphor flame] and *prasad* among all the people present”. As per the wishes of Hari [Vishnu], just then a Brahmin arrived there. Seeing that, people said to him with great respect – “Your Holiness [*panditji*], take the gift [*prasad*] of Trilokinath before you go back home”. The Brahmin asked – “Which social group/class [*varg*] is performing the worship?” and the

people said – “Mallah”. Hearing this, the Brahmin said – “I will not accept a *prasad* offered by a Mallah”. Upon saying this, the Brahmin left. Then the Dandi said – “This Brahmin seems to be very arrogant ... Look, it has been said:

‘He who considers a person to be untouchable upon learning that the latter is Harijan becomes a shrew in his next birth and eats faeces. A living being who believes a devotee of Trilokinath to be untouchable becomes a faeces-eating shrew’⁵.

The Dandi continued, saying to the Mallah – “Now take the *prasad* and distribute it among the people and take whatever of it is left home with you” ... As the Dandi instructed, the Mallah distributed *prasad* among all the people present. Having received the *prasad* all went home joyfully glorifying Trilokinath, and the Mallah took the leftover *prasad* and went home, praising Trilokinath with his mother, wife and son. From that day onwards such was the grace of Trilokinath that poverty left that Mallah’s home and [the Goddess of Wealth] Lakshmi came to reside in it. The *kamadhenu* cow that never used to yield more than 250 ml of milk in a day began to yield 5 litres of milk. From that day onwards that Mallah’s wealth began to increase day by day. Thus ends the second chapter ...

The third chapter begins with the sage Narad telling his companions about the terrible punishment meted out to those who scorn the devotees of Trilokinath:

Naradaji said – “O Sages! When that Brahmin refused to take the *prasad* of Trilokinath, considering it to be untouchable, and went home, he began to suffer terribly from ailments. One day that Brahmin’s son suddenly died, and he began to beat his breast and wail loudly and went to sleep crying in his ignorant state. Then Trilokinath announced in that Brahmin’s heart: ‘O Brahmin! You are very arrogant. The other day you went away considering my *prasad* to be untouchable and insulting my devotee. That is what you are being punished for. From today onwards resolve to worship Trilokinath and listen to His story, and to never consider God’s *prasad* as being untouchable, and your welfare will be restored and your son will come back to life; otherwise you will certainly be completely ruined’ ... Understanding this, and frightened, the Brahmin resolved to worship Trilokinath and listen to His story and prayed to Him, and as a result his son came back to life. He was very happy to find his son alive, and the very next morning proceeded to make preparations for performing Trilokinath *pūja* and *katha*, but soon realised ‘I don’t know the worship method; how will I do it?’ ... At the Dandi’s behest the Brahmin went to the Mallah’s town and, asking people the way, he reached the Mallah’s house and said to him: ‘Hey, brother! I wish to worship Trilokinath so tell me how to do it’. Hearing this, the Mallah explained the procedure of worship ... Then the Brahmin narrated the whole story of Trilokinath’s fury to his kinsmen and invited all of them to the ceremony ... At the end of his account, he performed *arati* using camphor, and distributed *prasad* among all

the people present . . . Thereafter he also gave *prasad* to the Mallah with great reverence and bid him farewell. It was from that day onwards that the greatness of Trilokinath became widely known in the world . . . ”

In this way Naradaji narrated the amazing greatness of Trilokinath in detail to the sages. The sages were very pleased to hear this story and went to their respective abodes. Then Naradaji went to Brahma-loka [the heavenly abode of Brahma].

Thus ends the third chapter.

This final section further examines the ambivalence and tensions inherent in the *vrat* story. This ambivalence serves as fertile ground for competing and sometimes subversive views and interpretations of the hegemonic discourse and ideology espoused by dominant Hinduism. I conclude by relating these interpretations to the way in which subaltern classes seek to enact their projects and desires in the world, without necessarily defaulting into a position of resistance and opposition – those markers of subaltern consciousness that are being praised increasingly as the most valuable signs of agency and political vitality in the lower classes in contemporary India.⁶

As we have seen, the *katha* is framed within a standard formula that adheres to a dominant version of Hinduism, with its concepts of karmic action and socio-cosmological order. This view is revealed early with the articulation of the cosmogonic narrative, describing the supreme God, from whom divine knowledge filters through to the human realm, and his capacity to create and destroy. This epistemological understanding of how sacred knowledge is distributed and transferred in the cosmos lends authority, power and meaning to the text and is reflective of the Hindu universe where the “social, ritual and cosmic domains [are] integrally bound to one another” (Dubey, 1998, p. 5). Thus, the power of the text is inseparable from the performative, everyday dimension, for only through the proper ritual and exegesis associated with fasting can one ameliorate social suffering in the world.

This is well illustrated by the *vrat* ideology and practice, which constitutes another dimension of power. When it is properly conducted, it entails the realignment of the cosmos through words, performance, transactions and devotion. In the *vrat katha* all of these constitute a modality of action that offers a transformative potential. It could be argued that only by compliance with and affirmation of this dominant ideology can one achieve the desired goals. Such a reading is problematic because, as the text demonstrates, the dominant ideology itself is contradictory and ambiguous. The *bhakti* stance in which rigid social and religious ideology has less purchase, for example, infuses the *vrat* story with competing messages: that the causal direction of karma can be reversed through practice (see Wadley, 2005); and that ritual hierarchy with its attendant values of purity and pollution can be simultaneously affirmed and reworked to accommodate the projects and desires of disenfranchised populations.

The point is clarified when we consider the “philosophical” pole of power exemplified by the figure of the Dandi *swami*. Throughout the *katha* the Dandi *swami* remains in one place. The imagery of the Dandi *swami* perched in the peepal tree evokes the notion of spiritual power, knowledge and morality, commonly associated with these wandering ascetics. Ultimately, the Dandi’s spiritual power is

pitched against the Brahmin and his community, who represent the institutional mode of power, which is potentially profane; Brahmins operate and are enmeshed in “the material and social order” (Parry, 1989, p. 74; Dumont, 1972). The Dandi ascetic, on the other hand, derives his power from operating on the fringes of society, through acts of disengagement and austerity. Such other-worldly renouncers mark the limits of knowledge and action in the world, while at the same time it is through them that meaningful social order is defined. To put this in a slightly different way, the modes of power in the *vrat* story are not externally imposed; they constitute and validate the very fabric of the Hindu world and its ideals, values and practices. But the very ritual structures and forms of exchange that reinforce Hindu values also connote fluidity and disruption. The ambivalent nature of the gift – in our case, the *prasad* – is inseparable from the relationship of power and is itself heavily laden with moral significance (Shulman, 1985, p. 104). If he accepts the *prasad* from the ritually low Mallah, the Brahmin is in danger of severely compromising Brahminical values of purity and status, which are required of him to continue operating in social life. On the other hand, it is incumbent upon a Brahmin to accept such gifts, especially from his patron, the king (Shulman, 1985, p. 98). In the *vrat* story, this transactional process should be straightforward, for the *prasad* is sanctified by the all-powerful Trilokinath. This tension emerges precisely because the exchange is designed to reaffirm social identities and definitions of roles (Shulman, 1985, p. 104). This may well explain why the Brahmin is not condemned by the Mallah himself upon denying the *prasad*, but rather by the Dandi. The *vrat* story concludes with the restoration of social order and the enhanced value of the Mallah community, which is graced by Trilokinath and achieves some degree of social respect in the process.

Let us consider what the Mallahs have to say about the story and its meaning as recounted in their telling. It is in this context that I found the Trilokinath *katha* stimulated a strong response from the boatmen. Firstly, they note that no Brahmin would ever agree to conduct this *vrat katha*, as opposed to other common *kathas* such as Satyanaryan *katha* (which Brahmins commonly officiate for boatmen). The boatmen add that the moral of the story reflects everyday life, for as any of them will tell you, Brahmins are greedy, arrogant and morally suspect, and are especially well known for fleecing the pilgrims arriving in the city of Banaras for worship (see Doron, 2008). However, the main reason and occasion for performing the *katha* remains unchanged – to alleviate personal and social suffering and garner the support and blessing of the Gods for the projects, desires and aspirations of everyday life.

This realm of everyday life is clearly articulated in the *vrat* story itself. I have already mentioned the significance of the nameless characters in the text, which can be understood as a device for producing identification and inclusiveness. The description of the anonymous protagonist is significant for another – and related – reason. It describes the multiple social roles and complex social contexts within which subalterns operate during the course of their daily lives. Members of the subaltern group do not constitute a unitary entity that bears a single identity exclusively defined by relations of power. This is revealed in the narrative when we learn of the daily social and material suffering of the Mallah: as a father, husband, son and a poverty-stricken member of the community. It is these social roles, networks and relationships that are embedded in the lives of ordinary people, and

that need redressing. The efficacy of the *vrat* lies in its capacity to instigate change and achieve harmony. The question of caste domination embodied in the exchange with the Brahmin is only broached “after the fact”, as it were, following the success of the ritual and the restored integrity of the community. Resistance to Brahminical order and domination is not the sole objective. It is not the primary benefit, even though the dramatic final episode of the story certainly seeks to redress this imbalance.

Conclusion

I began by considering some of the recent developments seen in the scholarly and political arenas of North India. Charismatic figures such as Mayawati, whose power has been hailed in the popular media alongside other heroes and heroines, speak of the need to resist caste prejudice and dominant national narratives, while celebrating the Dalit contribution to Indian civilisation. This discourse values courage, distinction and resistance as the ultimate markers of political vitality and action. The success of the Dalits in gaining political recognition and occupying positions of power is indeed a significant sign of achievement.

Nevertheless, the resistance paradigm needs to be enriched by a more complete understanding of the subaltern situation, which is not simply structured by top-down relations of subordination. Subalterns who appear to be affirming hegemonic cultural values, which at times include social hierarchies that subordinate them, are thus also affirming stability, insofar as it helps them to maintain their everyday lives in meaningful ways. Kinship and caste relations, material conditions, ritual exchange and social hierarchy all constitute part of this meaningful social order. Despite the upshot of the *vrat* story, which to some extent reproduces social order and Hindu values, there is also a transformation. The Mallah adheres to Hindu values and performs the ritual accordingly, after which he receives the blessing of Trilokinath and his life (and that of those around him) is transformed. As a result, the Mallah reaches an equilibrium, achieves material security and rids himself of karmic baggage, and social cohesion is restored. These are the modest accomplishments of the ordinary man, rather than the brilliant revolutionary aspirations of a small minority of middle-class intellectuals and politicians. If this means structure is reinstated, then it alludes to the desire for security, dignity and harmony, which are often most sought after by those who experience permanent uncertainty in their everyday lives.

Notes

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2. The translation from Hindi of the Trilokinath *katha* booklet was done by Vimal Mehra and Richard Barz and myself.
3. I wish to signal my discomfort with the use of terms such as God, Lord and so forth with their Christian/monotheistic overtones. Still, I feel that the text is not compromised by the use of these terms, which lend coherence and flow to the narrative.

4. I am indebted to Philip Taylor for making these points (personal communication, 20 January 2009).
5. The term "Harijan" [child of God] was originally coined by Gandhi in a bid to counter the degrading terms used for those groups traditionally regarded as untouchable (outcastes). The term was subsequently rejected as patronising by untouchables themselves, who prefer the term Dalit [suppressed]. In the *vrat* context, however, the use of the term is revealing. Although the Mallah caste is not considered untouchable in the ritual hierarchy, the author appears to "downgrade" the status of the caste to emphasise its subaltern position in the social structure.
6. Sherry Ortner (2006) makes a similar argument in relation to different categories of agency, and the need to distinguish the "agency of power" from the "agency of intentions and of projects", in which people seek to achieve their goals in ways that are not solely defined by power relations (see also Doron, 2009a).

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