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Temples, Texts, and Taxes:
**the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the Politico-
Religious Identity of the Caitanya
Sect**

*an archival and textual investigation into the text and times of the
Sārārtha-varṣiṇī commentary on the Bhagavad-gītā by Viśvanātha
Cakravartī*

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This dissertation is my own work, and all sources have been acknowledged.

signed: Burton



Overview

The *Sārārtha-varṣiṇī* is an orthodox Gauṛīya *vaiṣṇava* commentary on the *Bhagavad-gītā*. This research project aimed to use the text of the *Sārārtha-varṣiṇī* as the starting point for an investigation into the Gauṛīya sect around the time of its composition. The project began by establishing a scholarly edition of the text with the aid of extant manuscripts and available printed editions. A critical edition and translation of the first three chapters are presented in the appendix.

As the project progressed, interesting archival material surfaced, and the relationship of the sect with the state of Amber/Jaipur became the focus. The role of Gauṛīya religious dignitaries in religious debate in Jaipur was investigated, and the issue of sectarian affiliation emerged as an issue for which the text of the *Sārārtha-varṣiṇī* was particularly illuminating.

Joseph O'Connell and Klaus Klostermaier had done fine academic research on works by the same author and had even touched on this work. Nevertheless, a large amount of groundwork remained to be done to ascertain basic issues such as names, dates, claims of authorship, and other biographical details. Sections One and Two of this dissertation review previous scholarship and tradition on these issues and provide new insights from textual analysis and archival investigation.

With regard to the politico-religious milieu in Rajasthan, V.S. Bhatnagar, Monika Horstman and Irfan Habib had already performed significant archival research and published extremely useful findings. My study was therefore greatly assisted in this area, and this dissertation was able to build on the very solid foundation established by these fine scholars. This study contains reference to many archival documents already published by them, and it introduces a good deal of previously unpublished archival records. Of particular interest are the new records regarding the influence of Viśvanātha Cakravartī, Kṛṣṇadeva Sārvabhauma Bhaṭṭācārya, and Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa. Section Three combines old and new material to create for the first time a “historical” snapshot of these Gauṛīya dignitaries and the politico-religious issues of their times.

The analysis of the sectarian influences on the text of the *Sārārtha-varṣiṇī* (Section 4) brings together the historical issues of the era and the edited text. This section provides clear empirical analysis on the sectarian affiliation of the sect in matters of doctrine. The textual evidence clearly indicates that the Gauṛīya-Mādhva affiliation was merely an “official” stance. Evidence from the text points to a much stronger doctrinal allegiance to Śrīdhara Swami and the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. The

Bhagavad-gītā commentary has provided an invaluable common platform from which to compare the Gauṛīya sect with other established sects and important commentators.

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Abbreviations

BM	British Museum
BP	<i>Bhāgavata-purāṇa</i>
BS	Bengali Era (Bāṅgā Saṁvat, Bāṅgā-abda)
BṛU	<i>Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad</i>
IOL	India Office Library
JAOS	The Journal of the American Oriental Society
JRAS	The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society
JSA	Jaipur State Archives, Bikaner
KaU	<i>Kaṭha Upaniṣad</i>
KD	Kapaddvara Collection (Kapaṛa-dvārā)
ms(s)	manuscript(s)
MuU	<i>Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad</i>
NCC	<i>New Catalogus Catalogorum</i>
NLI	National Library of India
NP	Nusukhā Puṇya (Jaipur State Archives Bound Volumes)
NV	<i>Narottama-vilāsa</i>
P	Pāṇini (Āṣṭādhyāyī)
SKS	Suker Kshetra Shodh Sansthan, Kasganj (Collection of Dr N.C. Bansal)
SS	the Śāka era (Śāka saṁvat, Śākābda)
VRI	The Vrindavan Research Institute
VS	the Vikrama era (Vikrama saṁvat)

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Particular thanks goes to Dr. V.S. Bhatnagar, whose marvellous book derailed my original project by introducing me to the treasure of the Rajasthan 'State Archives.

Indic Language Transliteration Conventions

For all Indic language words in this dissertation, I follow the I.P.A. transliteration conventions for Sanskrit. Anyone familiar with Sanskrit will recognise easily all the diacritics used. Bengali and Hindi present one minor problem: the retroflex flaps.¹ These have been transliterated (following Barz and Yadav 1992) with ɽ and ɽh (e.g. Gauṛīya). This is the same symbol as for the retroflex vowel (as in *kṛṣṇa*), but there can be no confusion since the two never occur in the same environment: the flap ɽ only occurs after a vowel, whereas the vowel ɽ never occurs after another vowel.

Acceptable English words like “Swami” (also “Goswami”) or “Hindi” are written as if they were English words, that is to say without transliteration and in their simplest form (i.e. Swami not *svāmin*).

I have not used diacritics where an Indic word has a commonly accepted English rendering (e.g. “Jaipur” or “Jai Singh”). Diacritics have equally not been used where modern Indian authors or institutions present themselves in publications with an Anglicised rendition of an Indic name (e.g. “Ghosh”, “Chakrabarti” or “Man Singh II Museum”). For bibliographical references, all titles, authors, and institutions have been transcribed exactly how they are on the title page of published works.

Other proper names are given with transliteration but without italics (e.g., Gaṇeśa). Compounded Indic proper names received only initial capitilisation (*Bhagavad-gītā* and not *Bhagavad-Gītā*).

Diacritics have not been used when a word has become “anglicised by marriage”, i.e., when it has accepted English derivational suffixes (e.g., “Vaishnavism” as opposed to “*vaiṣṇava*”). When a word accepts English derivational suffixes, then it is treated as a “naturalised” English word.

Sanskrit nouns appear in the basic form in which they would appear in a

¹ The retroflex flaps are an unfamiliar sound for English speakers. They are made by flapping the tip of the tongue along the roof of the mouth down across the gums behind the front teeth. It is generally heard as a “funny kind of d.” Therefore in some transliteration systems the flaps are transliterated by the symbol “d” (eg. Gauḍīya). However in that case there is no way of differentiating them from ordinary retroflex stops. Other systems use a different diacritic (e.g., “ɽ”) but my font did not allow that luxury, and in any case it is not necessary.

Sanskrit compound. That is to say, they have no case ending (“*Skanda-purāṇa*” and not “*Skanda-purāṇam*”) and they exhibit their simplest stem form (“*sannyāsi*” and not “*sannyāsin*”).

As this dissertation involves Sanskrit, Braj Bhasha, Rajasthani, Bengali, and Persian material, there was the potential for multiple transliterations of the same word, e.g., *vaiṣṇava*, *vaiṣṇav*, *baisnab*, *boiṣṇob*, *baisno*, and so on. I have tried as much as possible to transliterate in a regular way, generally using the standard Classical Sanskrit forms. In my own writing I have therefore included the final “a” in words like “Govinda-deva”.² In the transliteration of a quoted vernacular passage, I have exercised my discretion to use an appropriate standard for that particular dialect or language, taking into account prosodic considerations.

I have taken the liberty of sporadically using the ordinary honorifics and suffixes like “*Śrī*” or “*Bhaṭṭācārya*”. This is basically to give the text a little variety, especially with frequently mentioned persons such as “Caitanya” or “Kṛṣṇadeva Sārvabhauma Bhaṭṭācārya”. The honorifics serve to convey the honour given to them by their followers and they help to avoid monotony. Thus throughout the text “Caitanya”, “*Śrī Caitanya*”, and “Caitanyadeva” all refer to the same person. Similarly the section on Kṛṣṇadeva Sārvabhauma Bhaṭṭācārya contains references to “Kṛṣṇadeva”, “Kṛṣṇadeva Sārvabhauma”, and “Kṛṣṇadeva Sārvabhauma Bhaṭṭācārya” in order to break the monotony.

The names of modern Indian authors have been transliterated as they appear on the cover of their books (e.g. Prasad). If the books are in Hindi or Bengali, I have rendered the names with diacritics (e.g. Hari-dāsa Dāsa).

² Some well-known place names (like “Braj”) have escaped the final “a” treatment.

A Note on the Historical Sources and Methodology.

The first part of this dissertation contains some historical information as a background to the text, which is edited and translated as the second half of this dissertation.

Archival records for this project are relatively rich, thanks to the involvement in the affairs of Braj by the rulers of Amber/ Jaipur in the 17th and 18th centuries. The correspondence between the maharajas and the temple priests constitutes the bulk of the archival documents available for the period. Some of these have been retained in the Jaipur State Archives (Bikaner), and others have been retained in the various temples of Braj and Jaipur. The documents are written in Persian, Sanskrit, Rajasthani and Braj-bhāṣā, and some are bilingual.

The records held in the Jaipur State Archives (JSA) are immense and only a fraction of them deal with the religious history which is the focus of this dissertation.³ Thus far only limited use has been made of these documents by scholars of religious history.⁴ The majority of documents from the Jaipur State Archives used in this dissertation are previously unpublished.⁵

The documents of the Jaipur State Archives Collection are arranged by type of document, and the following categories have been used in this study:⁶

- *Kharitā* are “official letters” written between the chief priests of the temples and the ruler. Those kept in the Archives are the letters

³ The political history of the period has been ably chronicled by V.S. Bhatnagar (1974) making extensive use of the vast archival materials.

⁴ Bhatnagar’s chapter on “Cultural Institutions” is really only an appendix to the very fine political history. M. Horstmann makes good use of the Jaipur State Archives in her later works (1994, 1999, and forthcoming). A.K. Roy (1975, 1986) makes some use of the Jaipur State Archives collection, but not always accurately (see section 2.4 below).

⁵ Dr. Prof. Monika Horstmann is working on a related field, and has conducted similar archival research.

⁶ A much more detailed description of these document types is furnished by Bhatnagar (1972: 347-355) and Horstmann (1999: 41-61).

received by the maharaja. Mostly these are standard letters of formality, offering flowery praise to the maharaja, inviting the maharaja to visit the temple and giving him a gift of blessed food or clothing (*prasād*). Some, however, contain interesting requests. Unfortunately they are rarely dated. The *Kharitā* are written on fine coloured paper with distinctive decorative motifs and watermarks.

- *Parvānā* are “royal orders”. They are authoritative documents informing the court officials of the decision of the maharaja in regard to matters such as the offering of land in *jagir* and dedicating villages to a deity. They document the government processes. These note-pad size papers are stored in bundles according to date.
- *Sanad* is a “voucher” or a “statement of accounts”. These cover the fiscal orders relating to land grants. Almost like a receipt, the *sanad* are quite often issued to the recipient of the grant.
- *Dastur Kaumwar* are records of gifts given as part of Jaipur court protocol. These documents are stored according to caste (*kaum*). These record official visits of religious dignitaries to the court. The bundles of notepad size pieces of paper have been transcribed and indexed in bound volumes. They contain occasional cross-references to the *Siah Hazur*.
- *Siah Hazur* are records of the daily activities of the maharaja.
- *Nusukhā Punya* are accounts of the charity given by the maharaja. They give more detail about the offering of villages in *jagir* to those with whom the maharaja was pleased, such as court officials, temple priests, deities, and warriors. This extensive collection is transcribed and bound (but not indexed) and is divided into two sections: one arranged according to village and district, the other according to caste of the recipient.

Another collection of immense importance is the Kapaddvara Collection kept in the maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum in the Jaipur City Palace. This is a smaller collection of documents similar to those in the Jaipur State Archives Collection, but which were kept in the personal wardrobe (*kapaṛa-dvārā*) of the maharaja. Being the private collection of the maharaja they were not taken to Bikaner with the other documents in the State Archives. These contain many of the statements of opinion which Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II solicited from pandits from as far away as Navadvīpa in Bengal. Unfortunately, for bureaucratic reasons, the collection was not open for inspection during this project, but G.N. Bahura and C.Singh (1988) have provided a short synopsis in English of all the documents, and

the work of Horstmann provides some transcripts.

The letters written from the Jaipur State to the chief priests (*mahant* or *adhikārī*) have mostly been preserved in the collections of the various temples themselves. The Vṛndāvana Research Institute (Vṛndāvana U.P.) has microfilmed a good quantity of documents from the temples of Govindadeva, Rādhā-Dāmodara and Madan-mohana, all in Vṛndāvana.

A small but significant collection of Persian, Braj, and Rajasthani documents pertaining to the official dealings of certain Gauṛīya *vaiṣṇavas* has been published by Irfan Habib (1996). This is a synopsis of documents from various sources arranged by the name of the person involved.

Monika Horstmann (1996 & 1999) has also published some very significant documents concerned with the custodianship of the Govindadeva temple. Both this and the collection of Habib are documents collated by the deceased Tarapada Mukherji.

The only problem with the above documents is that they only record the “official” dealings, such as the exchange of land, money and gifts, or with squabbles which had to be resolved by the state authorities. Some of the more reclusive members of the sect are not mentioned at all in these documents.

More specific personal information about our author is found in sections of two traditional works composed by members of the Gauṛīya sect. The older of the two is Narahari Cakravarti’s *Narottama-vilāsa*, which appears to have been written some time between 1700 and 1750.⁷ The second work is Gopāl Kavi’s *Vṛndāvana-dhāmānurāgāvalī*, which was written in 1843.⁸ Both works are verse hagiographies, the former written in Bengali and the latter in Braj-bhāṣā. Both provide interesting information of a personal and devotional nature.

The only problem with these two works is that they are not “history”; they do not provide accurate chronological or factual detail for the purposes of modern academic scholarship. The authors are operating in a different paradigm, in which such concerns are not prominent. What is essential for these writers is to impress

⁷ The author, Narahari Cakravarti, says that his father had become Viśvanātha’s disciple in Saidābād. This would mean his father was initiated sometime before 1679. As Viśvanātha probably lived for another fifty years after that, and as Narahari’s account mentions the passing away of Viśvanātha, it was probably written shortly after his demise. The dates mentioned here are discussed in detail below.

⁸ A copy of an autograph manuscript dated 1900VS was kindly provided by N.C. Bansal.

upon their readers the spirit of *bhakti* of their respective biographical subjects. Even authorities within the Gauṛīya movement have pointed out that the main worth of these particular books is devotional and not strictly historical.⁹

It is difficult to generalise, and each book must be taken case by case. In the *Narottama-vilāsa* we find a collection of traditional anecdotes about the life of Viśvanātha Cakravarti. Thus, it is a mixture of very interesting “oral history” and pious tradition.¹⁰

The issue is further complicated with the description of miraculous events such as the appearance of lights at the birth of Viśvanātha Cakravarti or his ability to write in the rain without getting wet.¹¹ It would be inappropriate to refer to these incidents as “history”, as they rely on a belief in supernatural powers which is not within the domain of academic research. Yet in the same paragraph there is reference to Viśvanātha’s birth and childhood in the village of Deva-grāma in the Murshīdbād district of Bengal, which is a widely accepted “fact”.¹²

Thus, although some aspects of the *Narottama-vilāsa* are obviously not appropriate for historical purposes, one would nevertheless not like to “throw the baby out with the bath water”. Many of the details furnished in the *Narottama-vilāsa* are valuable insights into the life of Viśvanātha Cakravarti and a historian is perhaps best advised to be like the legendary *hamsa* bird, which drinks only the milk from the mixture of water and milk.

Therefore, for the purposes of “historical enquiry”, one is obliged to make a *selective* use of traditional sources. Leaving aside miraculous incidents as non-verifiable, and making allowances for the non-historical nature of the works, the traditional accounts can be safely accepted as “based on historical events”, particularly with regard to plausible descriptions of non-controversial happenings.

⁹ Rosen (1991) p.8-11. Rupert Snell (1994 2) remarks that historical research is *referential*, whereas traditional Indian hagiography is *reverential*. He quotes Mahipati as saying that what these biographers “sought by writing about the lives of the saints was their company, *sat-saṅga*.”

¹⁰ For other reflections on the historicity of this work and others of the sect, refer to D.C. Sen (1917: 169-183), S.K. De (1961) B.B. Majumdar (1939: 506-515 and 1965:81), A.K. Majumdar (1965: 81) Dimmock (1966: 41-67), Rosen (1991:8-11), Stewart (1994, 1991), Burton A.P. (1995 p.3-5).

¹¹ *Narottama-vilāsa* Chapter 13.

¹² E.g., Mītal 1965 p. 338; Bansal 1980 p. 302.

The account of the *Narottama-vilāsa* is most valuable when the details of the story conform with documentary and manuscript evidence. The balancing act is where to draw the line.

Rupert Snell has remarked a recent re-evaluation within academic circles of traditional sources:

More recent research on this literature, however, sees it as addressing and revealing facets of belief and attitude which, though at some remove from historical actuality, lie at the very heart of the traditions they represent.¹³

This “anthropological” approach accepts traditional accounts for what they tell us about the belief system of the people concerned. This approach, however, does not resolve the question at hand but rather crosses the river at a point further down stream¹⁴, for the question still remains: what do these traditional sources tell us about the events of the times?

The narrations of the *Narottama-vilāsa* tell us what was current within the tradition about Viśvanātha Cakravarti in the period just after his passing away. They tell us of the existence of a traditional version of the events, and their historical strength lies in their relative proximity to the period. Their historical weakness is their fusion with articles of faith and metaphysics.

Traditional sources have been used in this dissertation to corroborate assumptions which have been formed using the limited “historical” evidence of the archival and manuscript material. Thus traditional sources have been used to fill out the narrative framework established by stronger historical evidence. As in any history, the reader is asked to make allowances for the varying quality of the various sources. B.B. Majumdar reminds us of the hermeneutical fragility of any attempt at writing “history”:

Narahari Chakravarti was a diligent historian, a fine biographer, an expert in prosody, an expert geographer of the areas surrounding Mathura and Nabadwip.... His account ...might not be absolutely free from historical errors. But the same sort of doubt may be raised

¹³ Snell, R.(1994) p.1.

¹⁴ An image borrowed from R.D. Baird (1986: 200).

against all historians from Herodotus to Tarachand.¹⁵

Although Majumdar is perhaps a little generous in his evaluation of Narahari Cakravarti as a historian, the point is valid. Even archival documents used in this research may not be “true” in some absolute sense. There is no guarantee that the authors of these government documents were in full knowledge of all the facts of the events and disputes they arbitrated on. They recorded what they were told and what they felt to be the facts of the case, but whether that always corresponded to the events is not guaranteed. And more often than not, they recorded only part or one side of a story.

All sources, whether traditional or “official”, whether oral or written, necessarily only record a version of a story. A history such as this attempts to bring together all these versions of the story and let them all contribute each in their own way to represent the events of the period. *Caveat lector* - let the discerning reader form an impression of the period taking into account the varying values of the sources involved.

This dissertation by necessity adopts the hermeneutic mode of the discipline of history which, in the words of Schleger, is based on the elementary creed that one must find out “whether or not something actually happened, whether it happened in the way it is told or in some other way.”¹⁶ These often unexpressed ideological foundations are theoretical aims which are of course impossible in practice and even if partially possible are not the end of all enquiry. Of equal importance, especially in a historical investigation which includes religious tradition, is to know what different people said happened, what different people believed happened, and the possible reasons for this.

In this regard, the method adopted in this research resembles the method of New Cultural History.¹⁷ The approach of this dissertation is in some ways similar to the approach of Natalie Zemon Davis in her classic, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, where she uses diverse evidence to shed light on the famous story of Martin Guerre. Here I have used archival evidence not only from the life the author and his disciples but also from the politico-religious debates of the period to provide a framework from which to analyse the text of the *Sārārtha-varṣiṇī*. The approach adopted here could be viewed as part of a larger trend to blur the boundaries between History, Cultural Studies, Anthropology, and Religious Studies.

¹⁵ B.B Majumdar 1965 p.81.

¹⁶ August Schlegel quoted by Harvey (1966: 4) and Neusner (1974: 39).

¹⁷ See for example, *The New Cultural History*, edited by Lynn Hunt (1989).

All history is an act of interpretation, and even though this project claims to be “an archival investigation” without any particular theoretical stance, it must nevertheless take account, in the interpretive task, of the stance of the interpreter. It is not quite so easy to assume the “perfect impartiality” of a theoretically disinterested observer when the very enterprise of “history” is an ideology in itself. This is particularly the case when one uses the tools of historical enquiry on cultures and periods where those values were perhaps not shared. It is all too easy to integrate these cultures on our own terms and absorb them along western academic lines.

Another theoretical and methodological issue faced in this study is the tension between archival records and religious tradition. Being at the interface of politics and religion, this study proposes to bring together disparate sources such as archival documents and “pious legends”, which are normally treated as incompatible. It is true that they are born of conflicting epistemology, but they co-existed in the society of the time, so there should be a place for both of them in a history of the period. Both archival sources and “pious legend” have their limitations in what they can tell us. This dissertation proposes an integrated approach viewing them as complementary sources, rather than contradictory. Our method entails using both sources in a way that takes into account their respective shortcomings. Where there are discrepancies, rather than proclaiming tradition right or wrong, our approach will be to look for insight into the mechanisms behind the development of traditions.

Nevertheless, the primary focus of this project is on the archival material and on establishing as far as possible the series of events connected with the rise of religious patronage in the period. To this framework the traditional sectarian sources can be added to enrich the history with details, traditions, beliefs, and the world-view of the practitioners.

