The *Ardhakathanaka* by Banarasi Das: a Socio-cultural Study

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Any researcher into the pre-modern history of India inevitably faces the problem of source material, and the creative genius of medieval Indians furnishes us with a wide range of sources; innumerable files of original documents, multi-volumed chronicles, bulky treatises, etc. A great number of travelogues enables us to view medieval India through the eyes of visitors from all parts of the globe. The source to be analysed in this article will hardly stand comparison with the above-mentioned materials. It is a biography of an insignificant man, a family history of modest middle-class people unconnected with court intrigues and political battles. And the title of the book is anything but serious. *Ardhakathanaka* means "Half a Tale". The author, a Jain merchant named Banarasi Das, completed it in 1641, being fifty-five at that time; the ideal life span of the great Jain sages was believed to be one hundred and ten years. Thus Banarasi, who harboured no ambitions to equal the great sages, titled his autobiography "Half a Tale", displaying a somewhat bitter humour (he died shortly after completing the book).

Banarasi was a resident of imperial Agra where famous court historians lived and worked hard to describe and praise the pomp and glory of the Mughals, deeds of valour and statecraft, court intrigues, wars and coups. And Banarasi, a modest shopkeeper, ventured into competition with them, knowing quite well that his work would be limited to an audience from a narrow circle of true friends and kinsmen. He had no illusions about the fate of his book: "Evil-minded men would mock it, friends would read and recite it."[1] Banarasi wrote his life story in order to make his life experience known to coming generations. Many intelligent and socially responsible people of all countries and epochs did so with the same purpose in mind.

The *Ardhakathanaka* is a relatively new source for researchers in Mughal history. It was discovered by the Nagari Pracharini Sabha and first published by the celebrated specialist in medieval Indian literature, Dr Mataprasad Gupta, in 1943.[2] Then Dr N. R. Premi, the author of a well-known study of Jain literature and history, published the text in 1957.[3]

[1] Makund Lath (ed., trans.), *Half a Tale. Ardhakathanaka* (Jaipur, 1981), p. 96 (English), p. 275 (Hindi). This article is based on the Hindi text as produced by Dr Lath. The quotations are translated by the present author and this translation in some cases differs from Lath's. Lath's English rendering is also referred to for the readers' convenience. The source is hereafter abbreviated to *AK*.

[2] Mataprasad Gupta (ed.), *The Ardha-Katha* (Allahabad, 1943).

[3] N. R. Premi (ed.), *The Ardhakathanaka* (Bombay, 1957); by the same author, *Jain Sahitya aur Itihas* (Bombay, 1956).

A Ph.D. thesis on Banarasi's life and literary work was submitted in Varanasi by Ravindra K. Jain in 1966.[4]

Last but not least, Dr Mukund Lath published the text with an English translation, or rather rendering, in 1981. This book also includes a scholarly preface which throws light on historical aspects of the text, Banarasi's religious background, etc., as well as detailed commentaries and a very interesting appendix (to be discussed below in more detail). Two years later Dr Lath published his introduction to the text and translation in Delhi under the title *Half a Tale: a Study in the Interrelationship Between Autobiography and History*.[5]

Nonetheless, the source has received scant attention from scholars and Dr R. C. Sharma published his English rendering of the *Ardhakathanaka* under the somewhat bitter-sounding title: "A neglected source of Mughal history".[6] Indeed, only a few scholars have referred to it in their research works, and these mostly in connection with the economic problems of Mughal India. For instance, Professor Tapan Raychaudhuri in the *Cambridge Economic History of India* quoted from the *Ardhakathanaka* while discussing small-scale trade and industrial castes.[7] For his study our text was but a minor source. At the 33rd session of the Indian History Congress (1972) R. C. Sharma presented his paper titled "Aspects of business in northern India in the seventeenth century". This paper was mainly based on evidence from the *Ardhakathanaka* concerning business communities, partnership rules, capital formation, etc.[8]

The reason for such neglect lies in the character of the work and the position of its author. Most researchers concerned with Mughal history deal with socio-economic, administrative and political problems. Banarasi Das was but a commoner; he had no authentic information about affairs of state, and if he discussed historical events, it could add little, if anything, to the well-known chronicles and documents. For a study of the Mughal economy the *Ardhakathanaka* does furnish some valuable material, but it lacks statistics and the data it provides is by the nature of the text incidental and limited geographically.

The present author, fully acknowledging the contribution of those who have discovered this text, translated or rendered it into English and analysed at least some of its contents, intends to discuss the phenomena of socio-economic, cultural and religious life as reflected in Banarasi's autobiography. But this discussion has a broader purpose: that of trying to suggest an approach to medieval literary works as sources for historical research.

Medieval literary works, the *Ardhakathanaka* being no exception, can no doubt be dismissed as minor or insignificant sources for historical studies compared with chronicles and documents which offer much more direct information and even statistics. This is true if we follow a traditional approach to history and concentrate chiefly on political events, forms of property, modes of production and the faceless "masses". But if we want to understand the mentality of a medieval Indian, to evaluate the social, cultural, ethical and

[4] Ravindra K. Jain, *Kavivar Banarasi. Jivani aur Krititva* (Varanasi, 1966).
[5] Unfortunately, this book is inaccessible to the present author. [6] *Indica*, VII (1970), pt. 1–2.
[7] *The Cambridge Economic History of India* (Cambridge, 1982), i, pp. 264, 341–3, 351.
[8] Published in S. Chandra (ed.), *Essays in Medieval Indian Economic History. Indian History Congress, Golden Jubilee Series* (Delhi, 1987), pp. 222–8.

behavioural values of the epoch, the humble life-story of Banarasi becomes a source of immense value.

Historical and social environment

Banarasi Das completed his autobiography (or, to be more precise, autobiography-cum-family history) at the end of 1641. It was a period of relative prosperity for the Mughal state. Though Banarasi started his family history in a remote period before the Mughal invasion, the first date mentioned by him was 1543. In this year Banarasi's grandfather Muldas joined the service of a Mughal noble in Malwa. This noble was a jagirdar and a brave soldier of the Emperor Humayun.[9] For Banarasi this date was an event in the family history and nothing more: he did not mention that Humayun had been a refugee at that time.

Such an approach to history is a feature of Banarasi's text. All the events he was destined to witness are described through the effect they had on our author's family, surroundings or business. Banarasi did have some interest in history and in his account of his native city of Jaunpur he briefly reviewed the pre-Mughal rulers of this place. But political events are reflected by Banarasi through the understanding of a commoner. Thus the revolt of the crown prince Salim against his father Akbar is described by Banarasi as a misunderstanding or "much ado about nothing". The real motives of either Salim's "hunting expedition" in the vicinity of Jaunpur or Akbar's irritated reaction were unknown to Banarasi and his family members and neighbours who were simply scared by the impending danger of war. In his preface and commentaries Dr Lath dealt at length with Banarasi's perception of historical events and mistakes in narrating them.[10]

What really makes our text significant is its vivid description of middle class values and life style, which were generally neglected by chronicles and official documents. The main background of the story is not the royal palaces or battlefields, but the city bazaars, crooked streets, caravansarais and trade routes. Banarasi provides us with information on the daily life of the towns folk, their business activities and social relations, the religious and cultural life of the trading communities and their relations with the Mughal authorities which is more valuable than any chronicle or travelogue on which many a work on medieval India is based.

Banarasi and his family belonged to the middle ranks of the mercantile community. They could boast of neither big capital nor huge profits. Compared with some of his contemporaries or near-contemporaries like Shantidas Jawahari or Virji Vorah, Banarasi, who went on his first trading expedition with capital worth 200 rupees, was a poor man, superior in his financial and social position only to small vendors and petty shopkeepers.[11] This stratum of the mercantile community was in most cases unnoticed by either chronicle-writers or foreign travellers who preferred to write about "merchant princes".

In Mughal India, much like any medieval society, the majority of the population was

[9] *AK*, p. 224 (Hindi), Lath's English translation omits this date.

[10] *AK*, pp. 38–40 (English), pp. 242–3 (Hindi). See also Lath's preface and commentaries.

[11] See, for instance, M. P. Singh, *Merchants and Local Administration and Civil Rights in Gujarat-Aligarh University. A Miscellany* (Aligarh, 1964), p. 223; *The English Factories in India. A Calendar of Documents in the India Office* (Oxford, 1907), pp. 11, 148, 158.

engaged in agriculture while the towns played important roles as centres of trade and industry. Among the important trade centres of northern India Banarasi made special reference to Agra, Delhi, Jaunpur, Allahabad, Patna and Khairabad along with some other minor towns of the Gangetic valley.

Jaunpur, Banarasi's birthplace, was a well-known industrial and commercial centre. As far back as early in the fifteenth century it was described by the great Maithili poet Vidyapati Thakur as a beautiful and flourishing city. According to him, the bazaar of Jaunpur was so full of goods and so crowded, it was "as if Ocean set aside his pride and came there".[12] Though by Banarasi's time Jaunpur had lost its status as a capital of the Sultanate, it was still a flourishing city. Banarasi gives no information about its population, but since there were fifty-two caravansarais, fifty-two bazaars and fifty-two mandis (wholesale markets for agricultural products),[13] Jaunpur was evidently a populous centre of commerce and industry. Banarasi listed thirty-six professional castes of craftsmen,[14] but his contemporary like Abd ur-Rahim Khankhanan mentioned many more in his poem "Nagar Shobha". These sources enable us to reconstruct the system of labour division in the urban industries of medieval India.[15]

Banarasi and his father dealt mostly with jewellers' goods and in addition sometimes with textiles and other commodities. Commercial activities were carried on by a number of trading castes. Banarasi's family belonged to the Srimali Jains; our author reproduced a family legend that his forefathers were princely Rajputs,[16] but this story was perhaps a mere fiction. Many lower castes, especially traders and craftsmen, tried their best to elevate their status and invented legends to justify their claims.[17]

The text offers us rich material on business rules and ethics, especially those concerning the partnership of merchants. According to Banarasi, who described some of his and his father's experiences, partners had equal shares in profits and losses; they kept separate accounts. If a partnership was to be dissolved, one had to obtain the consent of all its members and have all mutual obligations and accounts cleared appropriately. A written statement had to be prepared and signed by all partners. The *Ardhakathanaka* describes a well-developed system of credit, promissory notes (hundis) and other forms of commercial and financial activities.[18] There is a reference, though brief and unclear, to a merchant participating as an employer in the process of industrial production. After his failure in Agra Banarasi received financial assistance from his wife and mother-in-law, bought some coarse cloth, had it washed and bleached and then sold it.[19] This is an illustration of an important socio-economic process which was developing in medieval India along with the deepening labour division in crafts. When the market was restricted and most operations in the technological process were carried on by a craftsman and his family, the producer

[12] Vidyapati Thakur, *Kirtilata* (Jhansi, 1962), pp. 58–67. [13] *AK*, p. 5 (English), p. 226 (Hindi).

[14] *AK*, p. 226 (Hindi). The list of castes was omitted in Lath's translation and reproduced in Sharma's article, *Indica*, VII, pt. I, pp. 22–6.

[15] E. Vanina, "Urban industries of medieval India: some aspects of development", *Studies in History*, V (1989), pp. 275–6. [16] *AK*, p. 2 (English), p. 224 (Hindi).

[17] B. P. Mazumdar, *Socio-Economic History of Northern India (1030–1194 A.D.)* (Calcutta, 1960), p. 109.

[18] Discussed at length in R. C. Sharma's paper. [19] *AK*, p. 54 (English), p. 252 (Hindi).

either sold his goods himself or, in many cases, worked to order. But with the development of a market economy a middleman was necessary to bring the separate participants in the technological chain together. At first the banyas just bought ready-made goods from craftsmen, but with the development of the market economy and labour division another form of entrepreneurship came into existence: merchants would buy semi-manufactured articles for further processing by other craftsmen, such as the washermen and bleachers in Banarasi's case. This practice was widespread among both Indian and European businessmen in the late Middle Ages.[20]

The *Ardhakathanaka* is a valuable source for a study of the commerce and business ethics of the epoch. A respectable merchant had to be enterprising, trustworthy, honest and parsimonious; he had to keep commercial secrets and follow in his behaviour a middle course between wastefulness and meanness. Despite the well-known importance of family and kinship in traditional Indian values, the laws and standards of business ethics were to be strictly observed irrespective of family bonds and caste solidarity. Many foreign travellers testified to the extremely high business abilities of medieval Indian merchants.[21]

Business ethics and standards were an integral part of a merchant's education. These, with caste values and ideals were preserved in the family where a future merchant was brought up and trained by his father. Banarasi's schooling was, as Professor Raychaudhuri put it, "utilitarian"[22] and included, along with reading, writing and languages, maths, letter-writing, practical training in cost accounting, book-keeping, testing jewels and drafting commercial documents.[23] Banarasi was nearly thirteen when he started his own small business. The system of education and commercial training was very effective in the families of medieval merchants, as Tavernier observed in his travelogue,[24] but in Banarasi's case it was not so successful. Unlike his father Kharagsen, who, according to our author, possessed all the qualities of an ideal businessman, Banarasi sustained many losses and failed in his commercial activities. These failures were a result of his ignorance in marketing (for instance Banarasi brought a load of textiles to the over-supplied market of Agra), his lack of entrepreneurial skill, inactivity and carelessness.[25]

Indeed, trade in medieval India was quite a risky occupation which required some special skills and abilities. Apart from commercial losses, a trader was always endangered by highway robberies. One such episode is described in our text, and it was only Banarasi's quick thinking that saved him and his companions, as Banarasi recited a Sanskrit sloka, blessed the robbers and was thus mistaken for a Brahman and spared by the God-fearing highwaymen.[26] A travelling merchant had to put up with all the hardships of the Indian climate, but worst of all was the tyranny of the nobles and local chiefs who molested traders and treated them much like the knights in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* treated Isaac of York. Indian medieval literature abounds in evidence of this kind; there were instances of outraged craftsmen and traders fleeing their cities or organising strikes against

[20] I. Ray, *Of Trade and Traders in XVIIth Century India* (Calcutta, 1979), p. 6; A. Chicherov, *India. Economic Development in the XVIth–XVIIIth Centuries. Outline History of Crafts and Trade* (Moscow, 1971), pp. 159–230.
[21] For instance, *Travels in India* by Jean Baptiste Tavernier, Baron of Aubonne (Delhi, 1977), i, p. 24; ii, p. 144.
[22] *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, i, p. 343. [23] *AK*, p. 14 (English), pp. 227, 231 (Hindi).
[24] Tavernier, ii, p. 144. [25] *AK*, pp. 47, 48, 63 (English), pp. 247, 248, 256 (Hindi).
[26] *AK*, p. 60 (English), p. 255 (Hindi).

oppression.[27] In our source we see the governor of Jaunpur torturing rich merchants in order to extract huge sums of money from them, so that they had to flee the city in just the same way as they used to flee plague-stricken places.[28]

It has to be noted, however, that despite all hardships many representatives of the mercantile class were not only rich but powerful; they enjoyed much influence and held high administrative positions. Among Banarasi's contemporaries Todar Mal or Shantidas Jawahari are worth mentioning. Banarasi described such a merchant by name, Rai Dhana who had been a diwan (head of the Revenue Office) under one of the rulers of Bengal. Rai Dhana was not only influential himself, but also employed a number of his caste group and entrusted them with important posts.[29]

Banarasi's youth coincided with the last phase of the reign of Akbar. Being a teenager and a commoner, Banarasi had no information about the fateful events of the period, wars, rebellions and the religious pursuits of the great reformer. The only episode which found its way into Banarasi's narrative was the above-mentioned rebellion of Prince Salim. Of much more interest is Banarasi's description of the events which followed the demise of Akbar. Our author wrote a graphic and very moving description of his and his fellow townspeople's sincere grief and shock as the news of Akbar's death reached them. All business activities in Jaunpur came to a standstill, people closed their doors, put on shabby clothes and did their best to hide their money and jewels. Perhaps it was fear of a civil war, but at the same time, it appears from Banarasi's narrative, Akbar was sincerely mourned by the people for whom he had been anything but an ideal king. Indeed, was it not his loyal servant Chini Qilij who tortured the merchants of Jaunpur? Still, the townspeople mourned Akbar greatly, and Banarasi himself, when the sad news reached him, fell down in a faint and was seriously injured.[30]

Banarasi can hardly be reproached for flattering the monarch, as he narrated this story thirty-six years after Akbar's death, and the demise of Jahangir, as well as Shah Jahan's enthronement, were merely mentioned briefly by him without any emotion.

We may suggest that the sincere sorrow of the townspeople could be explained by the popularity of Akbar's policies. Akbar was a patron of trade and industry, he abolished many taxes and tolls from merchants and craftsmen, most importantly the humiliating *jizya*.[31] But of even more significance was his religious policy which refused to divide people into "true" and "false" believers and declared all religions to be different but equally true and valid pathways to God.[32] The non-Muslims of Jaunpur and of the whole of Akbar's domains were for the first time recognised not as "kafirs" but as people equal to the Emperor's co-believers, as "other worshippers of God", as Abu-l Fazl called the non-Muslims.[33] It should be noted that Banarasi's brethren held Akbar in high esteem, as we can judge from contemporary Jain literature.[34]

[27] M. Afzal Khan, "The Chalebi merchants of Surat", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress (1979)*, pp. 412–14; *The English Factories in India*, pp. v, 290.

[28] *AK*, pp. 18, 82 (English), pp. 232, 267 (Hindi).

[29] *AK*, p. 7 (English), p. 227 (Hindi).

[30] *AK*, pp. 38–40 (English), pp. 242–3 (Hindi).

[31] Ali Muhammad Khan, *Mirat-i Ahmadi* (Baroda, 1928), pp. i, 181–2.

[32] Kh. A. Nizami, *Akbar and Religion* (Delhi, 1989), pp. 373–8.

[33] Abu-l Fazl Allami, trans. by H. Blochmann and H. S. Jarrett, *Ain-i Akbari* (Delhi, 1978), iii, pp. 5–6.

[34] *Bhanuchandragainicharitam* (Bombay, 1931), pp. 4–7; Shirin Mehta, "Akbar as reflected in the contemporary Jain literature in Gujarat", *Social Scientist*, XX (Sept.–Oct. 1992), nos. 9–10, 54–61.

During the reign of Akbar favourable conditions were created for the development of Hindu–Muslim cultural interaction which proved fruitful in all spheres of social life, the arts, literature, science, etc. Indian languages were enriched by borrowings from Persian, and the language of the *Ardhakathanaka*, eastern Hindi, was evidence of this process. Many non-Muslims of that period learned Persian, the language of state transactions and many a literary masterpiece. This practice was already widespread before Akbar's reign, and Banarasi made special mention that his grandfather Muldas had learned both Hindi and Persian.[35] Speaking of himself, he made no reference to studying this language, but the episode when Banarasi and his co-travellers were falsely accused of robbery and forgery proved that our author did have some knowledge of Persian since he was able to understand the conversation of the Mughal officials.[36]

At the same time many Muslims learned Sanskrit as well as studying the philosophies and literature of India. Banarasi was a friend of a Mughal noble and helped him to study the Jain texts in Sanskrit.[37] Our author was a contemporary of Abd ur-Rahim Khankhanan, Akbar's courtier and poet who, apart from knowing Persian, Arabic, Turkish and even Portuguese was a master of Sanskrit and Hindi and wrote poems in these languages.[38] A number of love poems were composed by Sufi authors who expounded their doctrines using images from Hindu mythology, religious symbols and popular legends. Banarasi specially mentioned that to recite the Sufi love poems like Qutban's "Mrigavati" and Manjhan's "Madhumalati" in the company of friends was his favourite pastime.[39]

Thus reflections from Mughal society, its socio-economic, political and cultural features found their way into Banarasi's life story, but in a specific way, different from chronicles and official documents. We see no direct reference to the principles of state administration or political turmoil, no documentary account of Akbar's religious and social policies, but the events of the author's life, his own attitudes, values and behaviour bore the clear stamp of the epoch with its socio-economic and cultural trends.

Banarasi and religion

The *Ardhakathanaka* furnishes us with much information on the religious life and values of the Jain laity. Throughout Banarasi's narrative we see descriptions of religious ceremonies, pilgrimages, fasts, vows and so on. Pilgrimages to Jain shrines like Mount Samet were an integral part of Banarasi's life. Very often a respectable man organised a pilgrimage party and sent invitations to his friends to join.[40] Vows and penances were an important element of religious life, and Banarasi referred to a variety of these, from the vow to abstain from some kinds of food to the vow by the rich Rai Dhana not to build a new house.[41] Monks and family preceptors played a major role in all spheres of a family's life.

At the same time it emerges from the *Ardhakathanaka* that our author witnessed a very

[35] *AK*, p. 2 (English), p. 224 (Hindi).
[36] *AK*, p. 75 (English), p. 263 (Hindi).
[37] *AK*, p. 65 (English), pp. 257–8 (Hindi).
[38] *Rahim Ratnavali* (Varanasi, 1950). See also C. R. Naik, *Abdur-Rahim Khan-i Khanan and his Literary Circle* (Ahmadabad, 1966), pp. 230–2.
[39] *AK*, p. 49 (English), p. 249 (Hindi).
[40] *AK*, pp. 8, 37 (English), pp. 228, 242 (Hindi).
[41] *AK*, pp. 7, 63 (English), pp. 227, 256 (Hindi).

significant process in the growing "Hinduisation" of Jainism. Thus Banarasi's parents visited a Sati shrine in order to pray for the birth of a son. Banarasi's grandmother was also a devotee of the Sati Aut though Jainism never approved of the ritual of widow-immolation.[42] Since Jainism had created no distinct social ritual for marriage, childbirth, funerals, etc., all social ceremonies observed by the Jain laity were similar to the Hindu traditions, and we see from the *Ardhakathanaka* that Hindu customs and ceremonies were observed by Banarasi's family in many spheres of life.[43] The Hindus looked upon the Jains as people who belonged to a distinct caste. Jainism itself accepted caste division despite the fact that the early Jain communities had been built on egalitarian principles. Whatever person is mentioned in Banarasi's narrative, his caste is in all cases stated by the author.

Jainism made a deep impact on Banarasi's mentality. Thus the death of a person is depicted as a liberation of his or her soul from its earthly bonds. A deceased man is compared by our author to a bird freed from a cage, a tired porter who has got rid of his heavy burden.[44] All unhappy events of human life as well as all misdeeds are explained by the effects of evil karma.[45] Jainism helped Banarasi to withstand courageously all life's trials, all sorrows and losses including the death of all his children. The text abounds in reflections on life and death, the good and evil sides of human nature. The author's religious outlook helped him to endure hard times, but still, despite all this, human nature inevitably manifested itself, and the devoted Jain mourned the death of his near and dear, forgetting for the moment all concepts of religion and philosophy.

Banarasi was a sincere believer, but since by nature he was intelligent and realistically-minded, he had an open and sometimes sceptical view of the world around him, including the dogmas of religion. He loved and respected his parents but this never prevented him from mocking some of their beliefs and superstitions. Thus Banarasi ridiculed his parents' pilgrimage to Sati Aut, when despite the very pious purpose of their journey, they were robbed on the way.[46] The ceremony of offering a newly born baby to the Tirthankara image by a priest who feigned mystical trance is also described in a satirical manner.[47] Unlike many people around him Banarasi was not satisfied with blindly following religion. In many cases his religious zeal had very mundane reasons: thus Banarasi and his friends visited a shrine near Kaul (Aligarh) and offered this prayer to the Tirthankara: "Oh Lord, grant us wealth, for then we shall have an occasion to come and offer worship at your shrine again."[48] Banarasi's temporary apostasy from Jainism, his devotion to Siva and then his return to the fold of Jainism were also for practical reasons.[49]

Banarasi's was an epoch when many religious reformist sects and schools flourished in India. Among these sects those based on Hinduism are generally known as bhakti, though the notion refers to many sects differing considerably in their religious, social and ethical attitudes.[50] Banarasi followed a religion which seemed to be much less prone to reformation of any kind than other religions of India. Nonetheless some non-orthodox

[42] *AK*, pp. 11, 21 (English), pp. 230, 234 (Hindi). [43] *AK*, p. 16 (English), p. 231 (Hindi).
[44] *AK*, p. 8 (English), p. 228 (Hindi). [45] *AK*, pp. 14, 30, 41 (English), pp. 231, 238, 245 (Hindi).
[46] *AK*, pp. 11–12 (English), p. 230 (Hindi). [47] *AK*, p. 13 (English), p. 230 (Hindi).
[48] *AK*, p. 56 (English), p. 253 (Hindi). [49] *AK*, pp. 35–6, 40 (English), pp. 240, 244 (Hindi).
[50] K. Sharma, *Bhakti and Bhakti Movement. A New Perspective* (Delhi, 1987), pp. 1–2; K. Schomer and W. H. McLeod (eds), *The Sants. Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India* (Delhi, 1987).

sects and schools appeared in Jainism. One of these schools, namely the Adhyatma,[51] attracted Banarasi and he joined it as a result of his long-standing spiritual pursuits.

The history of this sect, its doctrines and gurus were described in Dr Lath's preface and commentaries; other scholars like Dr N. R. Premi also elaborated on this subject,[52] and therefore it would hardly be reasonable to merely reproduce their analysis here. But what deserves our special attention is a very interesting text, the *Yuktipraboddha* by a Jain monk Meghavijayya, translated and published by Lath as an appendix to his translation of the *Ardhakathanaka*. This text was written around the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century as a critique of Banarasi Das who had left after him a sect or a group of followers styling themselves as "Banarasiya". Meghavijayya told the story of Banarasi the merchant who at the beginning was a true Jain but then "began to harbour doubts about the truth of his earlier convictions", and asked blasphemous questions like "what was the original form given to precepts by Tirthankaras and what is the fashion in which they are observed today by monks and householders? He asked the monks whether a man who observes a practice in its external form with mind full of impure thoughts may achieve his goal." Further on Meghavijayya relates that Banarasi's followers were mostly merchants, that Banarasi shunned rituals and ascetic practices, protested against adorning Tirthankara images with lavish clothes and jewels and criticized Jain superstitions and blind faith. While Meghavijayya accused Banarasi of free-thinking (*svamata*), Banarasi called himself "a seeker of truth" and insisted that "it was profitless to perform rituals and ascetic exercise, a man should meditate on truth". Meghavijayya believed that Banarasi and his followers were ignorant, undisciplined pleasure-seekers. He lamented that the spreading of heresies like that of Banarasi was a manifestation of the lowest position of the cosmic wheel of time, and as a result people were spoiled, slothful and unbelieving.[53]

From Meghavijayya's work and the *Ardhakathanaka* itself we may presume that Banarasi held a reformist view of Jainism and that his outlook had much in common with the ideas of the bhakti saints. Of course, it would be wrong to project a "Jainist bhakti", for Jainism has a very vague idea of the Godhead, not to mention the idea of a personified God. Since the pivotal idea of bhakti is the ecstatic and mystical love of God, no such attitude was possible within the Jain tradition. Nonetheless, many of Banarasi's social and ethical views, his negative attitude to formal ceremonies, ascetic practices, monkhood or superstitions as well as his emphasis on a devotee's sincerity, truthfulness and moral purity, are very close indeed to the teachings of the bhakti saints, for example, of Kabir:

> Tirthas are mere water, there is nothing in it, see.
> Images are but stones, brother, they say nothing, see.
> Puranas and Quran are just words, remove the veil from thy soul,
> Kabir judges by experience: all these are but trumpery, see.[54]

In Banarasi's time Kabir was very popular, and in the cities of the Gangetic valley, where Banarasi carried on his trading activities, he might have heard at least some of his

[51] This sect was also known as Terapantha. See Muni U. K. Jain, *Jaina Sects and Schools* (Delhi, 1975), pp. 137–8. [52] N. R. Premi, *Jain Sahitya aur Itihas*, pp. 398, 483, 493, 508.
[53] *AK*, Appendix I, pp. 214–22. [54] Hazari Prasad Dvivedi (ed.), *Kabir* (Bombay, 1960), p. 262.

sayings. Banarasi was a contemporary or near-contemporary of many celebrated bhakti poets and thinkers such as Dadu Dayal, Malukdas, Garibdas, Surdas, etc.[55] Thus our author belonged to a wide religious reformist movement which embraced not only Hinduism and Islam (in the form of Sufism), but Jainism also.

But this problem may be considered within a broader perspective. A panoramic view of the medieval world, from Britain to Japan, would disclose an important development evolving through the whole of the Middle Ages and gaining momentum in the later medieval period. Countries, civilizations, religions differed from each other, but religious reformist movements and sects were widespread everywhere and had a significant number of features in common. Important socio-economic, political and cultural processes, different as they were in various countries, brought about a certain disillusionment with "official" religions, a feeling that the original precepts had been "spoiled" by selfish and ignorant people from the ranks of the "professional" priesthood, by other "Pharisees and scribes", as Sebastian Franck put it.[56] It would be out of place here and require a separate article to compare the views and attitudes of medieval reformers from India and Europe (or, say, China and the Arab countries etc.). But some ideas expressed by Banarasi and shared by many thinkers and poets of bhakti, early Sikhism and other schools of medieval Indian reformers, reveal a number of aspects similar to those of, for instance, the urban heresies and Reformation sects of medieval and early modern Europe.

Among these similarities one might mention deep mysticism, the importance of a devotee's inner conviction over all forms of formal ceremony and a critical or negative attitude to "professional" priesthood and monkhood, ascetic practices, idol-worship and pilgrimages. Social ideas, the principle of humility, a middle way between luxury and austerity, the very composition of the reformist sects were in many cases similar, traders and craftsmen being the most active participants.[57] Kabir condemned the "stone-worshippers" and mocked the yogis who "wore coloured clothes but had no colour (i.e. devotion) in their souls".[58] Banarasi asked whether a man who observed religious practices with his mind full of impure thoughts could achieve his spiritual goal, and the answer was negative. Similarly the Lollards held all images and the very Cross to be "but ydols and maade by werkyng of mannys hand",[59] and Erasmus insisted: "You have been sprinkled with holy water, but this accomplishes nothing unless you cleanse the inner filth of your mind."[60] This was not because Kabir had contacts with the Lollards or Banarasi had an opportunity to read the *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*. Here one can observe the manifestation of a general historical process. At a certain stage in the economic, social, political and cultural development of medieval societies a need was felt to reform and

[55] See, for example: W. Callewaert (ed. and trans.), *The Hindi Biography of Dadu Dayal* (Delhi, 1988), p. 37 (English), p. 92 (Hindi); *Malukdasji ki Bani* (Allahabad, 1946), pp. 13–20.

[56] Quoted by H. J. Hillerbrand, *The Reformation. A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants* (New York, 1964), p. 293.

[57] See, for example, S. E. Ozment, *Mysticism and Dissent. Religious Ideology and Social Protest in the Sixteenth Century* (New Haven and London, 1973), pp. 35, 50, 56, 85ff.

[58] Hazari Prasad Dvivedi, *Kabir*, pp. 262, 272.

[59] N. P. Tanner (ed.), *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich, 1428–31* (London, 1977), p. 142.

[60] English translation in D. Webster and L. Green (eds), *Documents in Renaissance and Reformation History* (Stanmore, 1969), p. 176.

purify "official" religion, to bring it closer to the people. And though the reformers themselves aspired to bring their religions back to their ancient and authentic forms, the real meaning of this process was to adjust religious teachings and practices to the changing realities of later medieval society.

The *Ardhakathanaka* as a personal history

The *Ardhakathanaka* appears to represent a new and important stage in the development of the literature and culture of medieval India. Since early times there had existed a tradition of *vamsavalis* or histories of royal dynasties or lineages of repute. There were also *charitas* or biographies of kings, heroes or sages. Last but not least, there was a rich and well-developed hagiography, describing the life stories and spiritual feats of saints and holy men of different creeds. Some bardic poems like the celebrated "Prithviraj Raso" by Chand Bardai were also written in the form of a life-story and even had dates. Apart from the tradition of Muslim chronicle-writing there existed different genres of literature which reflected the historical thinking of non-Muslims.[61]

The *Ardhakathanaka* combines family history and autobiography. The innovatory character of the work manifests itself, firstly, in its reflection of middle-class values and, secondly, in the autobiographical character of the narrative, a very rare genre in medieval literature. The latter factor itself testifies to some important changes in the socio-cultural background of later medieval India.

In any medieval society, India being no exception, a man was not looked upon as an individual, but as a member of a particular estate, caste, community or creed. Peculiarities of personal outlook, original ways of thinking and behaviour, one's uniqueness and individuality make a person socially significant and attractive nowadays, but it was not so in the Middle Ages. Medieval man earned respect and social approval by diverging as little as possible from the standards and age-old traditional values of his social group and family. Human life was understood as a repetition of one's parents' and forefathers' way of life and behaviour. An individual was expected to do his/her best in order to reach the standards prescribed by religious precepts, literature and legends for all members of a given social group. Any effort to be different from others was regarded as a misdeed or as a sin; a writer spared no effort to assure his readers and listeners that he had written nothing original and had strictly followed the path laid down by ancient sages and celebrated scholars or poets (such a fact, if discovered in a modern work, would be a stain on the author's good name). Hence all or nearly all traditional biographical writings of the Middle Ages pursued a goal which was totally different from the purpose of modern writings of this kind. They depicted not the individual, but a pattern of behaviour, a tradition embodied in a concrete person. Thus all hagiographical works of whatever religion look very much alike; sometimes they seem to depict the same holy man under different names.[62] The same can

[61] Chand Bardai, *Prithviraj-Raso* (Udaipur, 1955), pp. 1, 23, 144, 223–5ff. See also R. S. Pandit (trans.), *Kalhana's Rajatarangini* (Delhi, 1968); B. P. Ambastha, *Non-Persian Sources of Medieval Indian History* (Delhi, 1984).

[62] See, for example, Charan Brahmanadas, *Bhagatmal* (Jodhpur, 1959); J. Sarkar, *Chaitanya's Life and Teachings* (Calcutta, 1988); Justin A. Abbott, *Eknath. A Translation from the Bhaktalilamrita* (Poona, 1927).

be observed if we look at hero stories. Characters are in most cases static and never change; all the ideal qualities of a saint or a hero are inherent in his character from birth (thus, for instance, Prithviraj gained in a month more strength and wisdom than other children did in a year; Akbar, according to Abu-l Fazl, exhibited all the qualities of a Perfect Man from birth).[63] Age development, if ever related, is described in most cases as a quantitative growth of spiritual and physical strength; thus a child is but a small copy of a grown-up. Inner life is depicted as a journey towards divine truth and spiritual perfection; errors and doubts are described only if a sinner's redemption is to be narrated.

Against this background our text is indeed rich in lively and contradictory characters. Neither characteristics nor deeds, good or evil, are determined by one's caste and creed. But the greatest success is the author's self-portrait. Contrary to the literary conventions of the period, this is not just a progression from child to wise grown-up householder, but the story of a personality undergoing internal changes, crises, conflicts. Banarasi related all the ups and downs of his inner development with sincerity and a sense of humour, with detachment, from the distance of years. The story is related as if the narrator and his protagonists were different persons. Dr Lath unfortunately preferred to use the first person singular in his rendering, and this significantly changed the tone of the text. The problem lies not in grammatical peculiarities or strictness of translation, but in the stages and forms of self-realisation, the level of personalisation peculiar to each epoch and culture.

What makes the *Ardhakathanaka* even more significant for researchers into medieval India's socio-cultural development is a vivid description of the conflict of cultural values in Banarasi's family. It is an established fact that in "traditional" India one's profession, behaviour and values were supposed to be wholly determined by caste status, and whatever was a virtue for a Brahman was looked upon as a misdeed or a sin for a low-caste man. A very popular dictum from the *Bhagavadgita* insisted that it was much better to fulfil imperfectly one's own dharma (*svadharma*) than to fulfil perfectly the dharma prescribed for another person.[64] Non-Hindus also shared this view to a certain extent.[65] The *Ardhakathanaka* leads us to suppose that in reality the relations between one's profession, as well as caste values, and one's personal inclinations, talents and individual views, were not in all cases harmonious. Born into a merchant's family, Banarasi was expected to follow his father's profession and ways of thought, but by nature he was more a poet and a thinker than a businessman; his spiritual pursuit and literary works were more significant for him than profit-making. This conflict of values is well demonstrated in the text by Banarasi's parents and family preceptors admonishing him for studying too much. Learning was traditionally held in high esteem by Indians, and even mighty kings were despised for their lack of education.[66] But even this was not a general value. Banarasi was keen to learn religious texts and literary works, but this inclination, so laudable for a Brahman, conflicted with his caste values and profession. Thus Banarasi's family

[63] Prithviraj Raso, pp. 1, 26–7; Abu-l Fazl Allami, trans. by H. Beveridge, *Akbar Nama* (Delhi, 1979), i, pp. 39–49, 384–5ff. [64] *Bhagavadgita*, iii, 35, trans. by S. Radhakrishnan (London, 1948), pp. 146–7.

[65] See, for example, M. Habib and A. U. Salim Khan (ed. and trans.), *The Political Theory of the Delhi Sultanate* (Allahabad, n.d.), pp. 19, 49, 97–8.

[66] G. A. Grierson (trans.), *The Test of Man. Being the Purusha-Pariksha of Vidyapati Thakkura* (London, 1935), pp. 112–15.

preceptors censured him: "Too much learning behoves a Brahman or a Bhat (a bard); a merchant's son has to sit in the bazaar."[67] All Banarasi's misfortunes and losses in business were due to the fact that this activity was contrary to his personal inclinations. And though a compromise was inevitable, for the sake of family peace and Banarasi's own living, he still had enough courage to allow himself, especially during the later period of his life, to be first a thinker, a poet and a religious reformer, and only then a businessman.

Banarasi was a contemporary or near-contemporary of many free-thinkers of the Mughal period, who, perhaps for the first time in Indian history, cast doubt on some age-old dogmas, such as the inviolability and sanctity of tradition and the value system inherited from their forefathers. Abu-l Fazl lamented the fact that "from immemorial time the exercise of inquiry has been restricted, and questioning and investigation have been regarded as precursors of infidelity. Whatever has been received from father, director, kindred, friend or neighbour, is considered as a deposit under Divine sanction and a malcontent is reproached with impiety or irreligion."[68] His brother Faizi styled himself and his co-thinkers as "free-thinkers" and castigated the blind following of tradition.[69] Banarasi's contemporary, the poet Talib Amuli (d. 1627) called on his audience to do something new, whether good or bad, to avoid the repetition of others' life style.[70] The *Ardhakathanaka*, with its emphasis on individuality and Banarasi's struggle for self-realisation, is an important testimony to the changing nature of contemporary values, at least for a narrow circle of free-thinking and inquiring people.

While many ancient and medieval authors are known only from legends, and scholars still debate to which epoch this or that poet really belonged, during the later period of the Middle Ages we notice a strong tendency for literary works to be dated and to include useful information on the author and his life. While in early medieval literature time was hardly perceived, heroes were portrayed as always young and sometimes as having fabulous life spans and historical personages of different epochs were depicted as contemporaries,[71] in later medieval works the passing of time was more clearly taken into account, and real dates appeared not only in chronicles, but even in hagiographical writings, of which the *Janma Lila* by Banarasi's contemporary Jan Gopal was a good example.[72] The *Ardhakathanaka* has an amazing number of dates, some of them being very precise (month and day). This leads us to suppose that our author used something like a diary, for it would scarcely be possible to remember so many dates.

Thus Banarasi's life story illustrates important changes in medieval Indian society and culture, of which the most important were a growing interest in personality, in the development of individual aspects of literature and culture, and the individualisation of creative activities and culture itself. The biographical and, more importantly, the autobiographical writings of the later medieval period were different from the *vamsavalis* and the *charitas* of earlier times since more attention was paid to people's individual

[67] *AK*, p. 33 (English), p. 239 (Hindi).
[68] Abu-l Fazl Allami, trans. by H. Blochmann and H. S. Jarrett, *Ain-i Akbari* (Delhi, 1978), iii, pp. 4–5.
[69] Kh. A. Nizami, *Akbar and Religion* (Delhi, 1989), p. 81.
[70] S. A. Abidi, "Talib-i Amuli. His life and poetry", *Islamic Culture*, XXXXI, pt. 2 (1967), p. 129.
[71] See, for example, Ballala's *Bhojaprabandha. The Narrative of Bhoja* (New Haven, 1950), pp. 32, 51.
[72] W. Callewaert, pp. 33, 63–75 (English), pp. 91, 105–15 (Hindi).

characteristics and the uniqueness of the characters described as well as to the inner life of a person. Old and new approaches sometimes coexisted in the same work: while in Abu-l Fazl's books the image of Akbar is depicted in accordance with the traditions of hero stories and hagiographical works, Abu-l Fazl's autobiographical sketches throw much light on the author's personality, inner life, doubts and crises.[73] The development of biographical and autobiographical genres in medieval literature and the great popularity of epistolary works testify to the growing social interest in individuality, to the development of personalization in literature and culture. It was not by chance that at that time Mughal miniature paintings acquired many of the characteristics of the portrait and in some cases depicted people's physical and psychological peculiarities; neither was it by chance that European techniques, especially in portrait painting, were appreciated and followed by Mughal artists. Our text belongs to those works of medieval literature and the arts which showed new approaches to man.

The *Ardhakathanaka* is also a valuable source for those who study the development of Hindi literature and language in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is written in the simple, vivid and bright Hindi of a well-educated person. Sanskrit and Persian words are numerous, but they are used with care and never annoy the reader. The language abounds in colloquial expressions, similes and proverbs. One example is the proverb meaning "huge efforts bear meagre fruits" parodying the well-known myth of ocean-churning, which occurs in our texts and remains popular with Hindi-speaking people today.[74] The author's skill can be seen, for instance, in the way he describes the death of his father Kharagsen's little brother Ghanmal and the sorrow of his bereaved parents. Here a play on words was employed in a masterly fashion: the word "ghan" was a part of the boy's name and at the same time signified "cloud":

> Ghanmal ghan-dal uḍi gaye, kāl-pavan-sanjog.
> Māt-tāt taruvar taye, lahi ātap sut-sog.
> Ghanmal the Cloud was wafted away by the wind of death.
> Parents remained like trees scorched (by the heat) of grief.[75]

Thus the *Ardhakathanaka* is worth studying by scholars not only of Indian history and culture, but also of literature and language.

Completing his "Half a Tale", Banarasi wished well to all those who would be interested in his poem. And indeed those researching history, literature, culture, socio-economic problems, religion and the ordinary life of medieval India will find much useful material in this little book, of benefit to themselves and to Indological studies.

[73] Compare, for instance, *Ain-I Akbari*, i, pp. 59, 162–70; iii, pp. 478–524.

[74] *Nikasī ghauṅghī sāgar mathā* (Churned an ocean, obtained a snail). *AK*, p. 52 (English), p. 251 (Hindi).

[75] *AK*, pp. 3–4 (English), p. 225 (Hindi). Lath translated "wind of time wafted him away unawares". But the word *kāl* means not only "time" but "death". The latter seems more correct in this case, since Ghanmal was only three years of age.