

CONFESSIONS OF A 17TH-CENTURY
JAIN MERCHANT: THE
ARDHAKATHĀNAK OF BANĀRASĪDĀS¹

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ABSTRACT The subject of this article, the *Ardhakathānak* of Banārasīdās (a Jain author from Jaunpur), is an autobiographical poem in the Braj Bhāṣā dialect of Hindi dating from 1641 AD. The article examines the construction of the text, looking at the creative ways in which Banārasīdās builds subtle literary devices by exploiting features inherent in Hindi and in the metres chosen for the poem. It is suggested that a conventional critical approach to the poem, following traditional Sanskrit literary categories, can fail to perceive the strengths of this decidedly vernacular composition, and that a new methodology of vernacular aesthetics is needed to do it justice. The problems of maintaining the poem's literary qualities in English translation are explored, both by examining published prose versions and by an experiment with metrical English verse.

KEYWORDS: *aesthetics, alliteration, autobiography, Braj Bhāṣā, Hindi literature, Jainism, linguistic register, mannerist, metre, Mughal history, pastiche, poetry, prosody, translation*

Nearly four centuries ago, in AD 1641, a remarkable text was written in Agra. The *Ardhakathānak*² is a third-person autobiographical poem by Banārasīdās, a Jain born in Jaunpur; the text is in the Braj dialect of Hindi with more than a touch of Khaṛī Bolī, north India's lingua franca.³ Banārasī wrote it when he was 55, and he gave it a title meaning 'a half-story' or 'half a tale' because of a Jain tradition which looks to a human lifespan of 110 years. With a cruel irony of the kind that sits well with Banārasī's own reflections on the bittersweet nature of human experience, he died soon after completing the text.

Banārasī is the author of several well-respected works on Jainism, but the *Ardhakathānak* is unique because of its being, arguably, the 'first autobiography in the Indian tradition'.⁴ Leaving an assessment of this claim to literary historians, my aim here is rather to analyse the construction and texture of a poem which brilliantly conveys the dilemmas of a complex individual. Banārasī's stirring tale is

replete with villains, emperors, charlatans, paramours, acts of kindness and cruelty, remorse, metaphysics, storms, slapstick, scurrility, scatology, eschatology, Jainology, sex, violence, and a farting camel. I shall return to this fragrant beast later; but my main interest is the way in which Banārasī tunes his language and his composition to produce a profound meditation on the fluctuations of phenomenal existence. My focus is on the poetic architecture of Banārasī's verse, and on the implications of ignoring or demolishing this architecture when translating a text such as the *Ardhakathānak* for an English readership. I also address the reception given to the text by critics whose conventional categories often seem insensitive to the subtleties and ambiguities latent in this poem, and to the techniques through which these qualities are manifested by a highly skilled and self-aware poet keen to present a unique vision of the worlds around and within him.

Too scurrilous to be promoted by any conservative religious or literary faction, the *Ardhakathānak* long remained a rarity: manuscripts are few and far between, and the text may even have been suppressed within the Jain tradition because of the self-confessed waywardness of Banārasī's life.⁵ Despite its importance as both literature and history, the *Ardhakathānak* has never been much studied, and until Mukund Lath brought out a brilliant and highly innovative monograph in 1981,⁶ it was hardly known outside Hindi scholarship. In this article, I shall argue that the text has been misinterpreted and under-analysed by the overly formulaic processes of the Hindi critical tradition.

To prime the pump, here are some verses from the beginning of the text, which totals some 675 stanzas. Banārasīdās starts with an encomium to the *tīrthāṅkar* Pārśvanāth, also known as Banārasī, after whom he is named. He then introduces his story with these words:

दोहरा जिन पहिरी जिन जनमपुर नाम मुद्रिका छाप ।
सो बनारसी निज कथा कहै आपसौं आप ॥ ३ ॥

चौपई जैनधर्म श्रीमाल सुबंस । बनारसी नाम नरहंस ॥
तिन मन मांहि बिचारी बात । कहौं आपनी कथा विख्यात ॥ ४ ॥

जैसी सुनी बिलोकी नैन । तैसी कछु कहौं मुख बैन ॥
कहौं अतीत दोष-गुणवाद । बरत मानताई मरजाद ॥ ५ ॥

भावी दसा होइगी जथा । ग्यानी जाने तिसकी कथा ॥
तातैं भई बात मन आनि । धूलरूप कछु कहौं बखानि ॥ ६ ॥

That 'Banārasī' who bears the name of the birth-town of the jīna [the *tīrthāṅkar* Pārśvanāth], tells his own story:

That paragon called Banārasī, of the Jain faith and the Śrīmāl clan,
thought to himself, 'I should make my tale known in the world.

'Let me say in words what I have heard, what I have seen with my eyes; let
me tell of past faults and virtues, observing the customary proprieties.

‘As for the future, that is a tale that only the wise can know. Thus I shall call to mind things that have already occurred and describe them in broad strokes.’⁷

This distinctive first-person voice is rarely used after this introductory section, which constitutes a kind of authorial preface.⁸ The verses quoted here alert us to several things: Banārasī is going to be open with us in confessing faults as well as virtues; but he is not promising any modesty in terms of his own status; he is aware of the limitations imposed on himself firstly by convention and secondly by ignorance of the future (and later he denies responsibility for any falsehoods by saying that he is simply reporting what he has heard⁹). Among other things, these lines give an early warning that Banārasī is going to be pulling our legs linguistically from time to time, as indicated by stanza 3: the word *jina* means first ‘he who’, then reappears in the meaning ‘*tīrthāṅkar*, Jain saint’, and then appears with its consonants inverted in the possessive pronoun *nija* ‘his own’ – so Banārasī is the very reverse of a *tīrthāṅkar*! Hold onto your seats, warns the author, this is going to be an exciting ride.

Banārasī was writing at a time when the stylized *rīti* or ‘mannerist’ poetry of poets such as Bihārīlāl and Keśavdās was fashionable in literary and court circles; but he seems to have had little patience with what he perhaps saw as their obsessive fantasies and extravagant conceits.¹⁰ In a text called *Samaysār nāṭak* – a commentary on a Jain theological work – Banārasī lists the artificialities of such poets in a *kavītt* and concludes in the last line:

योहि झूठी जुगति बनावें और कहावें कवि,
येते पर कहैं हमें शारदा को बर है ॥¹¹

Faking false contrivances, they make the claim of being poets,
claiming yet the favour of the sacred muse Saraswati.

Banārasī’s allusion to *jūṭhī jugati* or ‘false contrivances’ does not quite imply a wholesale contempt for literary conventions per se, and the *Ardhakathānak* itself offers plenty of material for *alaṃkāra*-spotters; indeed, the author tells us that his education included the study of texts on rhetoric, and his text features self-consciously literary set-pieces such as a description of the city of Jaunpur and its social composition in terms of caste.¹² Accordingly, the Hindi critics are encouraged to visit upon the text their standard taxonomic approach – one which consists largely of measuring the individual conceits of the poem against the elaborate benchmarking of traditional rhetoric. So far so good: but does their technique go far enough? A close reading of the *Ardhakathānak* shows that Banārasī’s compelling narrative does not rely exclusively on devices drawn from the *alaṃkāra* manuals, but rather makes much poetic capital from structural devices of many different kinds: end-rhyme and internal rhyme, word order, parallelisms, the juxtapositioning of complementary or ironically contrasting items and ideas, the deployment of particular words at privileged points within the poetic line, and so forth. If these structural effects are less protuberant than the jug-like bosoms described by the mannerist poets, it is because they consist not

merely of artificial literary prosthetics but of a skilful manipulation of innate features of the colloquial language.

Most of those few scholars who have written about the *Ardhakathānak* stress its 'simplicity': Eugenia Vanina says with a spry reductionism 'It is written in the simple, vivid and bright Hindi of a well-educated person';¹³ while the critic Mulchandra Jain assumes that the text was written 'in a great hurry' (*barī śighratā se*).¹⁴ If standard criticism has overlooked the text's sophistications, as these observations suggest, it may be precisely because its qualities are invisible to the traditional systems of analysis; if the composition of the text is straightforward it is *knowingly* so, and any rhetorical 'simplicity' is belied by the refinement of its narrative techniques.

How is 'simplicity of style' to be described in critical terms? Setting the tone for his scholarly commentary, Ravindrakumar Jain glosses simplicity with its bombastic opposite:

उनकी शैलीका सारल्य किसी भी दशमें उत्तेजना अथवा भावावेशसे भाराक्रान्त होकर
अस्वाभाविक नहीं हुआ है।¹⁵

The simplicity of his style is under no circumstance rendered unnatural by the burdensome imposition of an excitant stimulus or access of emotionality.

The register here again tells us something about Hindi critical conventions, to which I shall return in due course. But my main theme is Banārasī's craft: I hope to show, through an analysis of examples, how Banārasī uses organic literary devices to make a 'simple' tale into a complex orchestration of ideas.

The 675 stanzas of the *Ardhakathānak* are mostly in a fairly free mixture of *caupāī* quatrains and *dohrā* (*dohā*) couplets. His models must have included such texts as *Madhumāltī* and *Mrgāvātī*,¹⁶ Awadhī Sufi epics built on regular sequences of similar metres, because he tells us that he used to recite these poems to small groups of poetry-lovers (at a time in his life when his mercantile career was at a low ebb and he lived off the charity of a *kacaurī*-maker). There may be no truth in a legend which associates Banārasī with the great Tulsīdās (and which blithely records that Tulsī gave Banārasī a 'certificate' confirming the quality of our hero's writing),¹⁷ but Banārasī probably knew of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, Tulsī's classic Awadhī interpretation of the Rāmāyaṇ, formed in the mould established by sufi poets writing in Awadhī; the *Rāmcaritmānas* was written just a dozen years before Banārasī's birth. An interesting contrast is to be made between the compositional style of epics like the *Rāmcaritmānas* and the more modest proportions of the *Ardhakathānak*. The former is written in regular sequences of *caupāī* quatrains punctuated by *dohā* couplets, and the *caupāī* has a long rhyme cadence that accounts for no less than a quarter of the entire poetic line. Its energetic stride marches out in fine epic style, making it perfectly designed for prolonged narrative recitation. Feel the weight and energy of the *caupāī*'s rhyme syllables in this quatrain from Tulsīdās:

कबि न होउँ नहिं चतुर कहावौं । मति अनुरूप रामगुन गावौं ॥
कहैं रघुपति के चरित अपारा । कहैं मति मोरि निरत संसारा ॥¹⁸

I'm no poet and I don't claim to be skilled; I sing of Rāma's virtues as
best I can. My intellect, ensnared in the world, is no match for
Raghupati's unfathomable deeds.

For his *Ardhakathānak*, however, Banārasī adopted not this *caupāī*, but the less common *caupāī*, shorter by one *mātrā* (the basic metrical measure or 'instant') in name, line-length and rhyme. What a difference a *mātrā* makes! Banārasī's *caupāī* ends not with the striding spondee (GG, - -) that lends the epics their magisterial progress, but with a much less energetic trochee (GL, - -) or iambus (LG, - -), these two often rubbing shoulders within a quatrain unit; whereas Tulsī's formulaic apology quoted above is subversively couched in the almost stridently self-confident rhythm of a *caupāī* cadence, Banārasī's shorter *caupāī* is characteristically more circumspect (and his occasional modesty is less contrived than Tulsī's brilliantly arch apology). Here is the stanza in which Banārasī drums up an audience:

मध्यदेस की बोली बोलि । गर्भित बात कहौ हिय खोलि ॥
भाखूं पूरब दसा चरित्र । सुनहु कान धरि मेरे मित्र ॥ ७ ॥

Mukund Lath translates:

I will narrate my story in the common language of middle India . . . freely revealing all that lies concealed . . . Listen attentively friends as I unveil my past.¹⁹

Unlike Tulsī's hero (Rāma), Banārasī's hero (Banārasī!) does not have to march anywhere: he has no bridges to build, and his significant enemies are inner ones – in which circumstances the undeclamatory 15-*mātrā caupāī* line suits him very well. He switches between this metre and *dobā* couplets for a change in narrative rhythm,²⁰ and occasionally injects a different metre for a set piece such as this fine *kavitt* in praise of a dear friend:

नवपद ध्यान गुन गान भगवंतजी कौ
करत सुजान दिङ्ग्यान जग मानिये ।
रोम रोम अभिमान धर्मलीन आठौ जाम
रूप धन धाम काम मूरति बखानिये ॥
तन कौ न अभिराम सात खेत देत दान,
महिमान जाके जसकौ बितान तानिये ।
महिमानिधान प्रान प्रीतम बनारसी कौ,
चहुपद आदि अच्छरन्ह नाम जानिये ॥ ४८६ ॥

Notice how the wording of the last foot, *cabupada ādi accharanba nāma jāniyai*, indicates that 'through the initials of the four verses his name is known'. Banārasī sets a little competition for the reader: who was the subject of this acrostic? The answer is *na – ro – t[ta] – ma*, Narottamdās, a trading partner of Banārasī. (The published text gives the game away by adding the fun-spoiling rubric '*Narottamdās stuti*', but never mind!) Mukund Lath's translation successfully maintains the acrostic in English, with the relevant syllables capitalized – a convention that is, of course, not available in Indian scripts:

NAaturally devout, he is ever meditating on the true path
 His thoughts never stray from God
 For he is a man of true knowledge
 Wise, and renowned for his wisdom.

RObust, handsome as a god
 He is a delight to behold
 A haven of beauty as of wealth
 And yet never forgetful of the call of dharma.

TAke a selfless man, and you have him
 Remember his gracious gifts
 And the seven tracts of land he gave away in pious grants.
 Come let us act as the vanguard, bearing his fame to all.

MArk him, he is dear to me as life,
 A weighty soul, a worthy man
 Can you not guess who he is?
 Just take the first syllable of every stanza
 And you will have his name

NA RO TA MA²¹

So the text offers many pleasures, large and small. And yes – ‘oh dear yes’ – the *Ardhakathānak* tells a story. After a brief canter through a little family history, the poet imposes a break in his narrative rhythm, unceremoniously cutting short what was threatening to become a lengthy genealogy: the text slows to walking-pace with the birth of Banārasī’s father Kharagsen in 1608 Vikram Samvat (AD 1551). The young Kharagsen grew quickly into a successful merchant, with business enterprises and partnerships in Agra and Jaunpur. Banārasī himself was born in AD 1586. After some elementary schooling in commerce, the young Banārasī followed his father into a mercantile career which began in childhood and took him from his birthplace in Jaunpur to such trading centres as Banaras, Allahabad, Gwalior and Jaipur.

Banārasī’s lifetime was the heyday of Muḡhal power and he saw a succession of changes on the imperial throne; the news of Akbar’s death in 1605 came as such a shock that Banārasī fell down the courtyard steps in a faint, painfully cutting his head on the paving-stones. In a fetching cameo of domestic detail, we are told how his mother applied burnt cloth to the wound, evidently knowing that the styptic and antiseptic qualities of this folk remedy would benefit the injured 19-year-old. But if Banārasī’s community of merchants lived under the imperial shadow, it was local potentates such as Nawaj Qilij Khan who had an even more direct impact on their fortunes, and some of Banārasī’s travels were necessitated by flight from oppression rather than the pursuit of profit. He went through a succession of business and marital partnerships, and most of his profits, like his first two wives and *all* of his nine children, were early casualties to fate, leaving Banārasī sorely aware of the flux of human fortune, or rather, of the inexorable working-out of *karma*. Periods of piety and scholarship came and went as part of this chiaroscuro of experience, alternating with bouts of *āśiqbāzī* when Banārasī played the lover-boy for all he was worth – inspired, as one commentator

has it, by the treatises on erotics (*Kokśāstra*) that Banārasī had read as a precocious teenager.

These events, complete with formulaically stated dates, are mostly recounted with a plain narrative style that ensures a crisp and efficient telling of the story, and acts as the perfect foil to the occasional set-pieces in which a more self-consciously literary voice appears. But the style that I am still rather perversely describing as 'plain' is actually shot through with countless little sophistications that enliven the text quite brilliantly. I want now to show off just a few of these features in some detail.

Similar to all poets working with defined structures, Banārasī is well aware of the simple alchemy inherent in the repetition of word or sound, and he skilfully moulds his phonetics to the need of the moment. A line from the description of his father's birth reads:

भयौ हरख खरचे बहु दाम । खरगसेन दीनों यहू नाम ॥ १७ ॥

There was joy, and much wealth was spent; he was given the name 'Kharagsen'.

Or as Mukund Lath's expansive and more articulate version has it:

Muldas was overjoyed and spent great sums in celebrating the happy event. The new-born was named Kharagsen.²²

The alliteration running through *harakha*, *kharace* and *kharaga* makes a joyful fanfare of this line and is a typical example of Banārasī's modest but skilful craftsmanship; this formal feature marks a significant distinction between verse and prose composition, and an immediate loss is all too evident in prose translations when the feature is lightly abandoned.²³

Alliteration can also become part of a structuring technique within the verse architecture. See how Banārasī marshals his verbs in this description of his forebears:

पहिरी माला मंत्र की पायौ कुल श्रीमाल ।
थाप्यौ गोत बिहोलिआ, बीहोली रखपाल ॥ १० ॥

They donned a garland inscribed with a *mantra* and entered the 'Śrīmāl' clan; they established the 'Biholiyā' *gotra* as [sometime] defenders of Biholi.

Each quarter-verse has its own verb form. The first three quarter-verses are separate clauses with verbs at the beginning, where the foregrounding brought by this special placement energizes the action: thus three events which established Banārasī's ancestors in the Jain fold are clearly identified – *pahirī*, *pāyau*, *thāpyau* (they 'donned' the sectarian garland, 'gained' identity as Śrīmāls, and 'founded' the Biholiyā *gotra*). This triplet of participles is further reinforced by shared 'p' alliteration. The fourth quarter breaks the pattern, though Banārasī enjoys another little joke here, for the 'p' alliteration is handed on to the very last word of the stanza, *rakhapāla*, in which *-pāla* is the fourth and final verbal element of the couplet! There is nothing unique, perhaps, in Banārasī's exploitation of verse structure as part of the rhetoric of composition; but given the effectiveness with which he uses these devices to express and elaborate his meaning, it is surprising

that the role played by structure in the achieving of literary effect receives so little attention from the Hindi critics.

The dynamic positioning of verbs in this phrasing ensures rapid progress through the author's early history: this is just a preamble to the main narrative and he does not want to dawdle.²⁴ Elsewhere, we find that action sequences, or sections of the story where Banārasī wants to speed up the narrative, often feature staccato sequences of verbal forms. The accident that befell Banārasī when he heard of Akbar's death is one of many dramatic episodes in the story. Here is the climax:

आइ तबाला गिरि परचौ सक्यौ न आपा राखि ।
फूटि भाल लोहू चल्यो कह्यौ देव मुख-भाखि ॥ २४९ ॥

He swooned and fell, he could not help himself –
his head cracked and blood flowed, he cried out the word 'God'.

This 16-word couplet is sprightly with no less than *nine* action-packed verbal forms, helping the narrative to scutter along at a literally cracking pace. English prose, with its heavy load of obligatory pronouns, conjunctions and articles, cannot emulate Banārasī's verb-intensive phrasing and tends to sound flat and pedestrian in comparison.

Elsewhere, when he needs to convey a sardonic tone rather than a dramatic sequence of events, Banārasī uses the reverse technique of *suppressing* rather than maximizing verb forms; and the result can be a clipped phrasing, rich with irony. Some months after Banārasī was born, his proud father took the baby on a grateful family pilgrimage to the Jain shrine of Pārśvanāth at Mount Samet in Bihar. The priest there recommended that the boy-child, whose birth-name was Vikramājī, be renamed 'Banārasīdās' after the Jain *tīrthāṅkar*. Banārasī shows a typical disdain for the purveyors of organized religion as, with curling lip, he tells us how the priest pretended to go into *samādhi* to communicate with a *yakṣa* on the matter of the boy's future:

तब सु पुजारी साधै पौन । मिथ्या ध्यान कपट की मौन ॥
घड़ी एक जब भई बितीत । सीस घुमाइ कहै सुनु मीत ॥ ८९ ॥

Then that priest held his breath (sham absorption, false silence!)
and when some minutes had passed he turned his head and said,
'Listen friends . . .'

and he goes on to explain that a *jaccha* (*yakṣa*) of Pārśvanāth had appeared to him in a vision to say that the boy should be called Banārasī. Through the wholly verbless parenthesis *mīthyā dhyāna kapaṭa kī mauna*, which translates readily into English with the same withering effect 'sham absorption, false silence', Banārasī demolishes the priest's affectations pointedly and economically: damn the fellow, no point in squandering good lineage on *him*.

These examples, then, give a glimpse of Banārasī's skill in narrative composition. The pleasures of his text are organic ones, flowing from a skill akin to that of a master carpenter whose jointings and dovetails show a deep understanding not only of design but also of the inherent strengths of his materials, and which

consequently give as much aesthetic pleasure as do the more obvious (but also more superficial) marquetry inlays and veneers applied to the surface of the product. This may to some extent be an inconspicuous, unplanned and spontaneous process: but there is art in it nonetheless, and on many occasions it is wholly intentional and deliberate. The knowing exploitation of this talent is shown most clearly in Banārasī's descriptions of his own birth – a superb piece of self-promotion, even if the critics miss its implications and describe Banārasī as modest and self-effacing. Banārasī lists horoscopic details in an elaborate three-line build-up which leads eventually to the epiphany of his own appearance in the world, and which is complete with such nice little Sanskritic obscurities as the word *rabi-nanda* (a patronymic for Śani, 'son of the sun') for Saturday:

संबत सोलह सै तेताल । माघ मास सित पक्ष रसाल ॥ ८३ ॥

एकादसी बार रबि-नंद । नखत रोहिनी वृष कौ चंद ।

रोहिनि त्रितिय चरन अनुसार । खरगसेन घर सुत अवतार ॥ ८४ ॥

In the year 1643 [1586 A.D.] in the pleasant 'bright' half of the month of Māgh, on the eleventh day – a Saturday – under the asterism of Rohiṇī and the moon of Vṛṣa – in the third foot of Rohiṇī – in Kharagsen's house a son appeared.

Nobody else's horoscope is given the detail that Banārasī lavishes so lovingly on himself in these lines. But what is most noteworthy here is not the detail itself so much as the orchestration of it in a crescendo leading up to the word *avatāra*: this is no mere routine birth announcement, but the portentous and self-serving proclamation of an incarnation of a particular individual, namely Banārasī himself. And see too his master-stroke: the birth description is made to fall in a verse bearing that most auspicious of numbers, 84 – surely no coincidence, even if the critics have again overlooked it.

In anticipation of my analysis of translation techniques, it is again worth marking the perhaps inevitable loss involved in reducing such carefully elaborated verse constructs to the humdrum medium of English prose. This birth story is a case in point; its amassment of technical detail makes for very dull and obscure reading if translated with plodding literalness as in my version above, motivated as I was to demonstrate the precise sequencing of the information in the original in order to preserve the climatic cadence. Here is the same passage in Mukund Lath's version:

In the year Vikram 1643 (A.D. 1586), another son was born to Kharagsen. It was a Saturday, the 11th of the bright half of the month of Magh. The constellation ascending over the horizon at his birth was Rohini. It had covered three-fourths of its zodiacal sign. The moon was in Taurus.²⁵

This prose rendering restores an easy readability to the passage; but notice how Lath's lucid new sequencing of Banārasī's material undermines the build-up by announcing the birth *before* giving the background, with the result that the episode fizzles out with an astrological detail ('The moon was in Taurus') rather than climaxing with the dramatic announcement of the birth itself; the elegance

of the English prose has been achieved at the cost of the rhetorical impact of the original verse structure.

Neutrally balanced prose also loses the punchy effect of parallelisms in the very next stanza, 85:

दीनों नाम विक्रमाजीत । गावहिं कामिनि मंगल गीत ।
दोजहि दान भयौ अति हर्ष । जनम्यौ पुत्र आठए वर्ष ॥ ८५ ॥

The new[-]born was named Vikramajit. Kharagsen had waited eight years for the birth of this boy. The event, therefore, occasioned much joy and the whole household rang with the propitious songs of young women. Generous gifts were distributed to the poor.²⁶

The bustle of celebrations, reminiscent of Tulsī's accounts of the birth of Rāma, is again portrayed through busy phrasing with four clauses beginning with verbs: *dīnau*, *gāvahī*, *dījahi*, *janamyau*, the last of which reiterates the birthing itself. The rhyme words *jīta*, *gīta*, *harṣa* and *varṣa* are bright and celebratory in inference and allusion. In describing his own appearance in the world, albeit in the third person, Banārasī leaves a calling card that is hardly to be ignored.

As with the drama of birth, so with death. A few verses earlier, Banārasī had described the sudden and painful death of his father's first employer, a wealthy Jain *dīvān* in Bengal. All his wealth could not save this man, Rāi Dhanā, from the sudden onset of illness during a pilgrimage. Sitting in his tent, Rāi Dhanā was suddenly seized with stomach cramps and was quickly translated to another realm:

कही न मुखसौं बात किछु, लही मृत्यु ततकाल ।
गही और थिति जाइ तिनि, ढही देह दिवाल ॥ ६१ ॥

Rai Dhana gave up his life instantly, before a single word could escape his mouth. His body fell like a crumbling wall and his soul left for another abode. (Lath, p. 8)²⁷

Lath's translation faithfully renders the striking imagery of the crumbling wall (an image of particular impact in a climate where the cohesion of mortar is annually threatened by the alternation of intense heat and monsoon rain); but again a prose version inevitably sacrifices the structural potency of a stanza composed on a cleverly contrived formula in which each quarter of the quatrain begins with its own starkly rhyming participle – *kahī*, *lahī*, *gahī*, *ḍhabhī* – dramatically emphasizing the sudden arrival of death in the midst of life. In emphasizing the helpless passivity of death, the intransitivity of the final participle, *ḍhabhī*, stands in nice contrast to the transitive trio preceding it.

A related aspect of Banārasī's craft is the way in which he weaves continuities and connectivities into the fabric of his narrative. For an example of this process we join him at the point where he has just told his wife about a disastrous business venture in Agra – an event resulting in yet another cash-flow problem. (He was, in Nemidas Jain's excellent phrase,²⁸ a *kacce vyāpārī* – a distinctly half-baked merchant.) Banārasī's wife quickly saw that his initial stories of success were a pack of lies, and he had to admit his failure. The frame story here is in

Banārasī's standard third-person narrative, while the first-person voice that we hear intermittently from the third line belongs to his wife.

कहत सुनत अर्गलपुर बात । रजनी गई भयौ परभात ॥
 लहि एकंत कंत के पानि । बीस रुपैया दीए आनि ॥ ३७५ ॥
 ए मैं जोरि धरे थे दाम । आए आज तुम्हारे काम ॥
 साहिब चिंत न कीजे²⁹ कोइ । पुरुष जिए तो सब कछु होइ ॥ ३७६ ॥
 यह कहि नारि गई मां पास । गुप्त बात कीनी परगास ॥
 माता काहूसौं जिनि कहौ । निज पुत्रीकी लज्जा बहौ ॥ ३७७ ॥

Here is my attempt to match the matter-of-fact tone of the original in a tetrameter which turns out much more clumsily than intended:

When Agra's tale was told and heard
 The night was gone and dawn appeared.
 In solitude she took him, and
 pressed twenty coins into his hand.
 'The sum I'd saved – by self misled –
 today will serve *your* needs instead!
 'O husband mine, have not a care –
 a man but lives, and *all* is there!'
 This said, she went to mother's side
 these secret matters to confide.
 'Tell no-one, Mother, of this tale:
 let daughter's modesty prevail.'

At first sight, Banārasī's three *caupaīs* are plain enough, their only obvious distinction from natural prose being the use of such standard poetic inversions as *bhayau parabhāta* 'came dawn' and *yaha kahi nāri gāi mā pās* 'so saying, [his] wife to her mother went'. Yet there is no blandness here. Banārasī's natural poetic talent for exploiting linguistic resonances maximizes the organic harmonies of the language; and although I actually chose this passage to illustrate a straightforward 'fluency of narrative', a closer reading reveals a sophisticated structural framework that brings an astonishing coherence to the sequence of verses. Almost every line has its own little half-hidden pleasures; and as if the links of rhyme, cadence and alliteration were not enough to forge connections between the verses, further kinds of connectivity bind the whole together. The passage repays a close reading:

कहत सुनत अर्गलपुर बात । रजनी गई भयौ परभात ॥

The parallelism of *kahata sunata* 'saying and hearing' is mirrored by that of *rajani gāi* and *bhayau parabhāta* – the 'going of night' and the 'coming of dawn'.

लहि एकंत कंत के पानि । बीस रुपैया दीए आनि ॥ ३७५ ॥

The play of *ekanta kanta* emphasizes the intimacy of a moment 'alone with her beloved' – in 'solicitous solitude' as it were, the two words huddling affectionately close in the middle of the verse; and the absolutive *lahi* is sweetly ambiguous,

having both ‘hand’ and ‘money’ as possible objects – she ‘takes’ rupees in her hand, she ‘takes’ his hand to receive the gift.

ए मैं जोरि धरे थे दाम । आए आज तुम्हारे काम ॥

Money that the *wife* had put aside turns out to be useful for the *husband*: the inversion is reflected in the parallel position of the two pronouns, *māī* being the first-but-one word of the first foot, *tumbāre* being the last-but-one word of the second. A sweeter domestic coupling would be hard to contrive.

साहिब चिंत न कीजै कोइ । पुरुष जिए तो सब कछु होइ ॥ ३७६ ॥

A proper 17th-century wifely bashfulness is expressed in the ambiguous wording of this line, the directness of whose message (‘husband, fear nothing: if you but live then all is well’) is cloaked under the impersonality of proverbial speech which can be read as a third-person statement (‘a lord should fear nothing: if a man but lives then all is well’). There is a clear contrast to the much more direct tone of address to her mother, using two direct imperatives, in 377: *jini kahau . . . bahau*.

यह कहि नारि गई माँ पास । गुपत बात कीनी परगास ॥

A unity is brought to the line by the ‘*g*’ and ‘*p*’ alliteration in *gaī . . . pāsa, gupata, paragāsa*. But that’s not all: the ‘secrecy’ of *gupata* is reversed in the ‘disclosure’ of *paragāsa*, with the alliteration now appearing in inverse order, ‘*g . . . p*’ reappearing as ‘*p . . . g*’.

माता काहूसौं जिनि कहौ । निज पत्रीकी लज्जा बहौ ॥ ३७७ ॥

Here the *jini* of ‘do not speak’ is literally reflected in the *nija* of ‘your own daughter’ (compare the *jinalnija* reference discussed in the context of stanza 3 earlier), emphasizing the fact that by breaking confidentiality the ‘mother’ who is the subject of the first verse will reflect on the ‘daughter’ who is the subject of the second.

These features may not be deliberately contrived figures of speech, but rather the result of a poet exploiting the natural proclivities of his language. I am not aware that traditional *alamkārasāstra* has developed a system of calibrations to measure such effects, and they fall beyond the very narrow scope of conventions used by the critics.³⁰ From the perspective of reader or audience, they are felt spontaneously and unanalytically, perhaps with a consciousness that the text contains both music and rhythm, without anyone needing to identify the tune.

What inspires Banārasī’s most striking verse is the juxtaposition of dark and light themes within a single moment of time, and hence in a single verse: the constant game of hide-and-seek between well-being and suffering is one of his most favoured themes, and seems to epitomize the philosophical attitude towards mundane existence that he seeks to portray in this text. In this next couplet he refers to the irony of simultaneous births, weddings and deaths in his household:

नानी मरन सुता जनम, पुत्रबधू आगौन ।
तीनों कारज एक दिन, भए एक ही भौन ॥ १०७ ॥

यह संसार बिडम्बना, देखि प्रगट दुख खेद ।
चतुर चित्त त्यागी भए, भूढ़ न जानहि भेद ॥ १०८ ॥

Grandmother's death, a daughter's birth, the coming of a bride:
All three events, on a single day, occurred in the same place.

Seeing the world's masquerade yields grief and regret;
The wise become detached, fools know not the cause.

Notice the wryness with which the three events are reported in the first line here: inauspicious death and auspicious marriage respectively form the outer members of the trio of possessive compounds, *nānī marana . . . putrabadhū āgauna*, with the birth of a daughter (*sutā janama*) sandwiched ambiguously between these two extremes as a very mixed blessing – nice baby, shame about the gender! It's all part of human experience, says Banārasī – experience that flows on as inexorably as the sequence of 'n' alliteration which runs through this couplet and is enshrined in its rhyme scheme. As in the earlier passage describing the sham meditation of the priest, the verbless setting-out of items here in the first three quarters of the couplet helps this effect by making the list a very bald one, and Banārasī might have been content to leave it at that; but he goes on to gloss the events in a second couplet, one which in turn emphasizes the duality of events by referring to the duality of levels of understanding among the people of the world. Wise folk learn to cast a cold eye on the dilemma of the world: the *bhae* or 'becoming' of the events is immediately reflected in the *bhae* or 'becoming' of their detachment, expressed through a perfective verb because the wise people's apprehension of life's ironies is immediate, while cause and effect are further emphasized by the paired pairs of the aspirate *bh* in the second lines of the two couplets.

Elsewhere in the text, ironies are presented merely through the juxtaposition of bald statements, with no expository verse to spell things out for the reader. An example of this technique comes towards the end of the text at a point where Banārasī is summing up his domestic history. This key synoptic passage calls naturally enough for economical style of phrasing, but even a recognition of this cannot prepare us for the starkness of Banārasī's darkest and most devastating couplet in the entire poem:

नौ बालक हूए मुए, रहे नारि नर दोइ ।
ज्यों तरवर पतझार ह्वै, रहैं ठूँठसे होइ ॥ ६४३ ॥

A full nine children lived and died:
bereft, the parents twain –
as trees, at leaf-fall, stumps remain.

The participles *hue* 'came into being, were born' and *mue* 'died' are ironically echoed by the third verb *rahe* 'remained', all three being grouped together in a little sequence that stresses the inexorable dance of birth, death and loneliness (but

with the parents' *rahe* isolated metrically from the children's *hue mue*, an incisive caesura symbolically and ironically imposing bereavement on top of juxtaposition); and the numerousness of the nine children at the beginning of the line (*nau*) is mocked by the reduced binary parents left alone at the end (*doi*). Furthermore, Banārasī brings double emphasis to the contrasted numbers in the line: in neutral wording elsewhere in the text, numerals are routinely placed not before but *after* the noun they qualify (as in *ihī bidhī māsa doi jaba gae* 'when months twain had passed in this way', stanza 352),³¹ implying that *nāri nara doi* shows conventional word-order; but when a numeral precedes its noun, as in *nau bālaka* (with the further suggestion of *nau* as *nava*, 'young children'), we know that an emphasis is intended – a full *nine* little children.

This technique of ironic contrasts, expressed structurally and cryptically by harnessing the parallelisms of couplet construction, lies at the very heart of Banārasī's understated purpose. The snakes and ladders of his fortunes are an obvious and intriguing aspect of the text, and they come in many varieties: the fluctuations of his personal health, the succession of marriages, births and deaths, the vicissitudes of business life (from profit to loss), the changing fortunes of his inner, spiritual life, and the crazy extremes of his behaviour in which he is alternately a paragon of piety and a self-confessed clown and philanderer. At the end of the text he takes stock of all this in a striking confessional inventory, worth quoting in full here because it comprises nothing less than a summary of all his judgements of his own self. It is significant that in this listing of virtues and faults he allocates exactly five couplets each to the credit and debit sides of his character. Since there is a structural purpose to the way in which this section is composed, it is helpful to preserve this structure in the English translation, and to provide each item with a serial number. (Lath's expertly restructured and slightly expanded rendering is given in the footnote for comparison³²).

भाषाकबित अध्यातम मांहि । पटतर और दूसरौ नांहि ॥
 छमावंत संतोषी भला । भली कबित पढ़िबे की कला ॥ ६४७ ॥
 पढ़ै संस्कृत प्राकृत सुद्ध । विविध देसभाषा प्रतिबुद्ध ॥
 जानै सबद अरथ कौ भेद । ठानै नही जगत कौ खेद ॥ ६४८ ॥
 मिठबोला सबहीसौं प्रीति । जैन धरम की दिढ़ परतीति ॥
 सहनसील नहिं कहै कुबोल । सुथिरचित्त नहिं डावांडोल ॥ ६४९ ॥
 कहै सबनि सौं हित उपदेस । हूदै सुष्ट न दुष्टता लेस ॥
 पररमनी कौ त्यागी सोइ । कुबिसन और न ठानै कोई ॥ ६५० ॥
 हृदय सुद्ध समकित की टेक । इत्यादिक गुन और अनेक ॥
 अलप जघन्न कहे गुन जोइ । नहिं उतकिष्ट न निर्मल कोइ ॥ ६५१ ॥

647 [1] In vernacular poetry and spirituality he has no equal. [2] He is forgiving and finely content in nature; [3] fine is his art in reciting verse.

648 [4] He recites 'Sanskrit' [sic] and Prakrit faultlessly and [5] is knowledgeable in various regional vernaculars. [6] He knows the distinctions of words and meanings and [7] is not fixated on worldly cares.

- 649 [8] Sweetly voiced and friendly towards all, [9] he has a firm faith in the Jain way. [10] He is tolerant and speaks no calumny; [11] he is steady of mind, not erratic.
- 650 [12] He gives beneficent counsel to all, [13] is of virtuous heart and has no trace of wickedness. [14] He abstains from congress with paramours and [15] is not fixated on any other vices.
- 651 [16] He is pure at heart and a support of evenhandedness; and he has many other such virtues. Whatever slight and meagre qualities he has are laid out here; none of them is either excellent or free from blemish.

कहे बनारसी के गुन जथा । दोषकथा अब बरनों तथा ।
 क्रोध मान माया जलरेख । पै लछिमी कौ लोभ बिसेख ॥ ६५२ ॥
 पोतै हास कर्म का उदा । घर सौं हुवा न चाहै जुदा ॥
 करै न जप तप संजम रीति । नहीं दान पूजा सौं प्रीति ॥ ६५३ ॥
 थोरे लाभ हरख बहु धरे । अलप हानि बहु चिंता करै ॥
 मुख अवद्य भाषत न लजाइ । सोखै भंड कला मन लाइ ॥ ६५४ ॥
 भाखै अकथकथा बिरतंत । ठानै नृत्य पाइ एकंत ॥
 अनदेखी अनसुनी बनाइ । कुकथा कहै सभा महिं आइ ॥ ६५५ ॥
 हो निमग्न हास रस पाइ । मृषावाद बिन रहा न जाइ ॥
 अकस्मात् भय व्यापै घनी । ऐसी दसा आइ कर बनी ॥ ६५६ ॥

- 652 Banārasī's qualities have been laid out here; now I describe the litany of his faults. [1] Anger, pride and delusion cast a ripple on him [lit. 'are a line on water']; [2] but he has a particular greed for lucre.
- 653 [3] [. . .?] and his karma had borne fruit;³³ [4] he does not like to be apart from his home. He performs no religious observance or self-control, and [5] and has no fondness for charitable giving or worship.
- 654 [6] He takes great delight in a little profit and [7] worries deeply over a minor loss. [8] He is not ashamed to say unspeakable things and [9] he avidly studies indecent arts.
- 655 [10] He recounts things that should not be told and [11] cuts a caper when he finds himself alone. [12] He makes up tales of things neither seen nor heard, [13] and regales company with deceptions.
- 656 [14] He becomes engrossed in comic situations and [15] cannot desist from falsehood; [16] great fears overcome him without warning, such is the state that befalls him.

For a merchant such as Banārasī, of course, 'balancing the books' is second nature. The interest of this most confessional portion of the autobiography is frequently highlighted by the critics, not least for its touching inclusions: his 'faults' include the rather forgivable tendency to break into a little dance when he finds himself alone (*ṭhānai nṛtya pāi ekanta*), as described in stanza 655; and the confession of waggishness given in 656 is fully borne out by the playful orthography of 648 in which a boast of perfect Sanskrit pronunciation is belied by the exploded conjunct character in the vernacular spelling *samsakṛta* – a wittily self-mocking irony. But the most significant characteristic of this passage, typically unnoticed by the critics, is the fact that each of the two paired lists of qualities and faults comprises a set of 16 items, making this a doubly-stated *solah śṛṅgār*, a

conventional listing of an idealized poetic heroine's 'sixteen adornments' which form part of the rhetorical stock-in-trade for Hindi poets. 'Here I am', says Banārasī, 'warts and all!'.³⁴ The critics' silence on Banārasī's use of a literary convention may reflect their unwillingness to recognize such a personal (or autobiographical) appropriation of a formula whose traditional and *approved* purpose is the description of an ideal (or mythic) woman.

In reading Banārasī's self-referential *solah śṛṅgār* we should remember that his tale is nothing more than an *interim* account: at least rhetorically, the author was expecting another 55 years of trading in the business of this world. The couplet which introduces his behavioural balance-sheet is a sure indication of this:

अब बनारसी के कहीं बरतमान गुन दोष ।
विद्यमान पुर आगरे सुखसौं रहै सजोष ॥ ६४६ ॥

Now let me speak of Banārasī's present virtues and faults
as, currently, he lives contentedly with his wife in Agra city.

By adding *vidyamāna* to *baratamāna*, and throwing in an adverbial *aba* for good measure (the three words indicate respectively 'present, current, now'), Banārasī shows that this is no *final* reckoning: the word *baratamāna* (Sanskritic *vartamāna*) in particular alludes to the cyclical nature of time and hence to the inevitability of change. Passing over the way in which Banārasī playfully hints at further meanings in the phrase *vidyamāna pura āgare* (a phrase which might be taken to refer to 'present, past, and future'), I wish to focus on the fact that Banārasī is not concerned to make a final, true-for-all-time statement on the world or his place in it, but rather to stress, in tune with Jain attitudes, an acceptance of transitoriness and relativity in material existence. In my reading, this whole poem, though certainly a 'confessional' of sorts, is a long way from having contrition as its purpose; nor does Banārasī make any smug assumptions about his own future, whether material or spiritual. The *Ardhakathānak* is an open-ended movie, with '*Ardhakathānak* II' (or perhaps '*Uttarakathānak*?') eagerly awaited by distributors and audiences alike.

In this respect I take issue with the way in which the major Hindi-medium study of the *Ardhakathānak* characterizes Banārasī's attitudes. Ravindrakumar Jain stresses Banārasī's remorse at his earlier irresponsibilities as though this were a true confessional penned by one who has seen the light, learned from his mistakes, and come to regret the error of his ways. To this end he exaggerates the blackness of Banārasī's dark deeds, insisting that the horrible illness that infected him at the age of 15 was nothing less than syphilis, whereas the (meagre) medical evidence suggests it was merely a metabolic disturbance such as porphyria³⁵; this retrospective diagnosis may be cold comfort for the sufferer, but the distressing symptoms of this illness are at least free of the social stigma of sexually transmitted disease. The Hindi literary historian Ramchandra Shukla, in his very brief mention of the *Ardhakathānak*, again characterizes the story as a movement from dissolute youth to reformed maturity, and this seems to be the interpretation taken by *all* the Hindi critics; indeed, it sits comfortably within the conventional 'darkness to light' conversion topos so typically encountered in formulaic

hagiography.³⁶ (Paul Dundas, by contrast, looking at the text within the context of Jain history, gives a more perceptive reading of Banārasī's journey as a spiritual progression rather than a moral one.³⁷) By stressing the depth of Banārasī's fall, the Hindi critics celebrate the prodigal's eventual return to the straight and narrow; but by postulating an absolutist morality, they bank on the very certainties and supposed realities that Banārasī's wily philosophical vision has been at such pains to undermine.

Thus the Hindi literary historian would tame and sanitize a dangerously wayward pre-modern author in order to accommodate him within a neat moral universe whose parameters have been determined by a highly conservative Vaiṣṇav and/or Jain piety. Banārasī's world is much more ambiguous and layered – and far more interesting – than his critics are ready to admit. The sanitizing phenomenon is seen most graphically in Ramesh Chandra Sharma's 1970 article (in English) on the *Ardhakathānak* as 'a neglected source of Mughal history'. A relevant passage from the autobiography finds Banārasī struggling with a spiritual dilemma, being drawn to the religious life on the one hand while rebelling against mere ritualism on the other. Banārasī concludes:

करनी कौ रस मिटि गयौ, भयौ न आतमस्वाद ।
भई बनारसि की दसा जथा ऊंट कौ पाद ॥ ५९५ ॥

I had wandered into a spiritual void, for although I had lost faith in Form, I was unable to savour Spirit. I hovered between earth and heaven, befouling the air like a camel's fart.³⁸

Fallon's unsurpassed 19th-century *Dictionary of Hindustani proverbs*³⁹ lists the proverb referred to here: *ūmṭ kā pād, na zamīn kā na āsmān kā*, 'When the camel breaks wind, it reaches neither to the earth nor to the sky', that is, 'Always hanging half-way; imperfect'. The idiom graphically (or rather, sonically and odorifously) conveys Banārasī's perception of being in limbo, of being lost in suspension between the material and the spiritual, while his scatological allusion unequivocally expresses a sense of self-deprecation. Sharma, on the other hand, chooses to interpret *pāda* as 'foot', and offers us the prim translation 'Thus Banārasīdās became like the foot of a camel', adding the gloss 'an idiomatic phrase, meaning useless'⁴⁰ – the foot of a camel being as 'useless', presumably, as the wing of a bird or the wheel of a cart! Such misinterpretations do poor service to the intentions underlying Banārasī's tale.

One looks in vain for engaged discussions of vernacular stylistics in the meagre critical writing on Banārasī – or for that matter on literature of the period generally. The preoccupations of Hindi literary history can be strangely philistine, being concerned with influences and chronologies at the high cost of an appreciation of textual texture, detail and aesthetic effect. The praise offered to Banārasī by his critics is too fulsome to be precise, and too formulaic to be sensitive. They are carried away in a tide of Sanskritic bombast without noticing the vernacular subtleties of Banārasī's writing; they speak of his modesty without noticing his sly self-promotion; and they overplay the significance of his allegedly prodigal change of heart, being desperate to sanitize him before admitting him to the Hindi literary canon. When biographical detail is in short supply they spin it

out of the very air as blithely as any medieval hagiographer.⁴¹ They have done their best to form or reform Banārasī in their own preferred image – reinforcing the moral status quo in loyal service of ‘Mother Hindi’ (to use Ravindrakumar Jain’s phrase)⁴² – and consequently obscuring the poet’s literary personality. It is ironic that Mulchandra Jain should refer to Banārasī having written the *Ardhakathānak* ‘in a great hurry’, as reported earlier, when the hurry seems rather to have been in the critic’s reading of it. Furthermore, issues of a kind of competitive nationalistic pride sometimes peep through the moral judgements: Ravindrakumar Jain notes the paucity of autobiography in Hindi when compared with the West, where, he says with disdain, even ‘whores, thieves, bandits and murderers’⁴³ have written their own life-stories.

If the articulation of Banārasī’s voice depends very substantially upon a tightly bound verse construction – together with an arsenal of literary devices such as alliteration and internal rhyme – then it follows that reducing the poem to a prose version in English will entail substantial damage and loss, and we have already seen some isolated examples of this process. So much of the substance of Banārasī’s poem lies in either the subtext or the specific nature of the wording that translating it becomes an almost impossible challenge. A choice needs to be made in respect of translation styles: should the translator be content simply to ‘carry across’ the basic meaning of the narrative, or should some attempt be made to emulate, imitate or replicate those structural elements which provide the original with its formal backbone? I feel myself to be something of a camel’s fart in this area, hovering halfway between a preference for a grounded expositional prose (of the kind favoured by Mukund Lath) on the one hand, and on the other a more aerial attempt to reproduce features of the original in some kind of English verse reconstruction. The perils of the latter, however, are all too evident. Take the story of a false sannyasi who gave or sold Banārasī a mantra, the year-long repeating of which – in the solitude of the lavatory! – was supposed to yield a *dīnār* a day in perpetuity. The story runs through stanzas 209 to 218 and ends, inevitably, with a realization of the mantra’s worthlessness. But the climax of the episode comes in stanza 212 with the summation of the sannyasi’s sales-pitch:

पूरन होइ मंत्र जिस बार । तिसके फल का कहूँ बिचार ॥
 प्रात समय आवै गृहद्वार । पावै एक पड़्या दीनार ॥ २१२ ॥

When the chanting’s one year old, of its fruits be then foretold:
 At the door, betimes, behold! A coin there lies, of precious gold!

Unusually, but very appropriately in this description of the sannyasi’s aggressive advertising promotion, a single rhyme rings out through all four quarters of the *caupai* stanza, the sequence *bāra* / *bicāra* // *dvāra* / *dīnāra* culminating in the announcement of the prize itself, the *dīnār*; and for added emphasis, the last quarter consists almost entirely of long syllables in an emphatic climax of dramatic revelation. But my rhymed version above, trying too hard to reproduce these effects and to anticipate the golden prize through a similar rhyme-scheme, seems leaden and contrived, and lacks all the rhetorical impact of the original. We had better drop it in favour of Mukund Lath’s neutral prose version:

The man who persevered in this practice . . . was sure to be rewarded by a gold dinar on his door-steps [sic] the day after the end of a year . . .⁴⁴ (Lath, p. 34.)

Mukund Lath's skilful rendering of the *Ardhakathānak* has been well received since its publication in 1981.⁴⁵ It bridges three and a half centuries in a trice; but in bringing the text to today's readership it gives Banārasī a modern character that strains credibility. Not content simply to decant Banārasī's carefully bottled verse into shallow bowls of elegant prose, Lath takes the much more heinous step of translating Banārasī's semi-detached third-person narrative into a fully-engaged *first-person* voice. Such audacious licence seems to reflect Mulchandra Jain's fantastically naive assumption that Banārasī knew everything there was to know about autobiography,⁴⁶ and in so doing Lath assimilates a cranky medieval chronicle to a smooth modern drama largely devoid of Banārasī's subtly ambiguous layerings. Literalness replaces multivalent suggestivity; the understated collocation of opposites – the subtly ironic heart of Banārasī's style – is replaced by overt statements that busily link effects to their causes, leaving little space for inference or creative ambiguity.

To a romantic like myself, the loss of Banārasī's archaic aesthetic is hardly less regrettable than the narrative anachronism of the modern English prose medium. Casting about for an English model on which to fabricate a plausible poetic translation style for Banārasī, I came across John Taylor (1578–1653), the so-called 'water poet' – a Thames wherryman and a prolific versifier who made journeys on foot and by boat up and down Stuart England, describing his adventures in jaunty but thoughtful prose-and-verse pamphlets that brought him a few useful shillings when they were published on his return to London.

Taylor was Banārasī's close contemporary, and he made his 'last voyage and adventure'⁴⁷ – from London to Hereford and Gloucester – in the summer months of 1641, the very year of the *Ardhakathānak* itself. Now it is true that Banārasī and Taylor are chalk and cheese in many respects, not least in their individual fates, for whereas Taylor went on to write another five works after completing his projected 'last' voyage, Banārasī survived only a couple of years after writing the story of 'half his life' at age 55; and more significantly, from a western perspective, Banārasī's indifference to landscape and to the process of travel align him very much with Indian conventions.⁴⁸ But for all this, one feels that the two authors would have had much in common, and many an excellent conversation.

Taylor combined an often unsuccessful career as sometime wherryman, sailor and publican with that of poet and champion of water transport, just as Banārasī the theologian and devotee was variously a merchant (not a very good one), a jeweller and a writer of love-poems (who in an ironically romantic fit of piety threw the manuscript of a collection of romantic lyrics from a bridge in Jaunpur into the fast-flowing Gomti river). Neither poet is of the first water artistically, though both knew how to turn a phrase to very good effect. Both knew also life's ironies, and both had many a tart commentary to offer on the purveyors of religion. Banārasī would have felt quite at home with Taylor's capitalized preface to his 1642 narrative:

THE MANNER OF HIS PASSAGES AND ENTERTAINMENT TO AND FRO, TRULY DESCRIBED WITH A SHORT TOUCH OF SOME WANDRING AND SOME FIXED SCISMATIKUES, SUCH AS ARE BROWNISTS, ANABAPTISTS, FAMILIES, HUMORISTS AND FOOLISTS, WHICH THE AUTHOUR FOUND IN MANY PLACES OF HIS VOYAGE AND JOURNEY'.⁴⁹

Such parallels between Banārsīdās and Taylor may be accounted sufficient justification for an experimental translation of the former in the style of the latter: to attempt, in other words, an Englishing of Banārsīdās in a pastiche of 17th-century verse. One particular passage from the *Ardhakathānak* suits our purpose well because its narrative of financial insecurities was one that is found frequently in the work of both poets. In 1613, the year in which John Taylor found new employment as a 'king's waterman . . . responsible for ferrying members of the royal family and court',⁵⁰ Banārsī decided to dissolve a business partnership in Agra, and to move to Khairabad, north of Lucknow. The profit from his two-year partnership had been short-lived, giving Banārsī one of his many opportunities for observing the fickle nature of material gain. He says (*Ardhakathānak* 364–69):

जो पाया सो खाया सर्व । बाकी कछु न बांच्या दर्व ॥
 करी मसक्कलि गई अकाथ । कौड़ी एक न लागी हाथ ॥ ३६४ ॥
 निकसी घौघी सागर मथा । भई हींगवाले की कथा ॥
 लेखा क्रिया रूखतल बैठि । पुंजी गई गांड़ि मैं पैठि ॥ ३६५ ॥
 सो बनारसी की गति भई । फिरि आई दरिद्रता नई ॥
 बरस डेढ़ लौं नाचे भले । ह्वै खाली घर कौं उठि चले ॥ ३६६ ॥
 एक दिवस फिरि आए हाट । घर सौं चले गली की बाट ॥
 सहज दिष्टि कीनी जब नीच । गठरी एक परी पथ बीच ॥ ३६७ ॥
 सो बनारसी लई उठाइ । अपने डेरे खोली आइ ॥
 मौती आठ और किछु नाहि । देखत खुसी भए मन माहि ॥ ३६८ ॥
 ताइत एक गढ़ायौ नयौ । मोती मेले संपुट दयौ ॥
 बांध्यौ कटि कीनी बहु यत्न । जनु पायौ चिंतामनि रत्न ॥ ३६९ ॥

We may look first at Mukund Lath's seamlessly fluent rendering, which brings a quotidian matter-of-factness to the very engaging episode. (Incidentally, this version leaves unresolved the allusion to a seller of *hīng* – the pungent herb-extract *asafoetida* – who, perhaps proverbially, had apparently been taken aback in an unpleasant encounter of an anal kind when sitting under a tree to count his takings.)

[. . .] But it had all been consumed in expenses, and at the end I had no earnings left. The hard months of toil and effort had come to naught, yielding not even a single cowrie-shell. I had churned an ocean to obtain but a snail. Like the proverbial hing-seller, I sat down quietly to take stock of my gains only to discover that I had foolishly lost all. For a whole year I had danced a mad dance for the sake of money but in the end I was as empty-handed as before.

Yet fortune did grant me a small favour before I left Agra. I was walking down a lane near my home one day, when I espied a small packet lying on the street. I immediately picked it up and quickly walked back home. The packet contained eight pearls, the sight of which thrilled me beyond measure, I felt I had found the

magic gem which grants all desire. I had a hollow talisman made for myself and hid the pearls in it. I tied this talisman to my waist, concealing it with great care and caution . . .⁵¹

This conversion from verse to prose works as well as any prose translation can, and helps make Lath's English *Half a Tale* one of the most readable translated texts from the entire pre-modern Hindi canon. Lath makes happy decisions regarding almost every detail of the passage, for example in retaining culture-specific allusions such as cowrie currency and the churning of the ocean – allusions whose cultural, symbolic or metaphorical freight arrives undamaged at the sympathetic English reader's door. He helpfully glosses those aspects of metaphor whose implications might otherwise be lost, for example in stressing the negativity of 'dance' imagery by rendering Banārasī's *nāce bhale* with an additional adjective in 'I had danced a *mad* dance' (compare Sūrdās's famous *aba māī nācyau bahuta gopāla* and other contexts where dancing is portrayed as wayward indulgence); and he adds narrative rhythm to the passage by inserting a paragraph break, starting his new paragraph with the conjunctive insertion 'Yet fortune did grant me a favour before I left Agra' as a very free substitute for *eka divasa phiri āe hāṭa* 'one day he came again to the market').⁵² As noted before, Lath's most intrusive impositions are the first-person narrative, the entirely modern tone of an almost confabulative narrative style, and the untying of the tightly-rhymed verse construction. The quiet and almost insidious effect of rhyme lies in its suggesting of connectivities between ideas, or conversely in its making ironic phonetic parallels between ideas which are antonymous towards each other. A proper analysis of this phenomenon cannot be attempted here, but studying the full text of the *Ardhakathānak* reveals many instances in which rhyme is an essential structural component of Banārasī's narrative technique. What follows, therefore, is my verse pastiche, which takes a ride on John Taylor's wherry in an attempt to suggest the period texture and feel of Banārsīdās:

So now he founde he'd lost all he had gain'd,
 For not a peny of his wealth remain'd.
 Those laboures long had lastly led to nought:
 Two emptie hands declar'd all they had bought.
 The brynie depths he'd churn'd, to no availe –
 His onely gaine a loathesome little snayl!
 Beneath a tree he sat, as in that "hing-man's" farce
 Whose capital, alack, went up his arse.
 Just so was our Banarsi's proper fate,
 Once more a pauper, as he'd been of late.
 For sixe months more than twelve he'd daunc'd his daunce
 Yet profited by nothing but mischance.
 Then one day as he set off to the mart
 And on his usual path from home did start
 By chance upon the grounde there fell his gaze
 And saw a sight to gladden and amaze
 For on a purse his eye fell quite unbidden
 A purse he garner'd home in garment hidden.
 Inside, eight pearles (no more) their lustrous lighte
 A mass of heartie wonder and delighte!

**A nouell locket swifflie he had made
 And in its inner lair the pearls he layde;
 And kept it at his belt, securely bound
 As though some mistick wishing-gem he'd found...**

In this short passage I have tried to emulate Banārasī – with all the licence required by a poor translator – by using grammatical parallelisms, phonetic play and other effects to buttress meaning; examples are the ironic complementarity of the four participles ‘found . . . lost . . . gain’d . . . remain’d’ in the first couplet, the metonymy of ‘two empty hands declared all they had bought’ in the second, and the ‘n’ and ‘l’ alliteration lavished on the pearly treasure trove in the later line that reads ‘and in its inner lair the pearls he layde’. But ultimately it seems that an archaizing translation – or at least my attempt at writing one – is doomed to failure: trying to be true to the spirit of the original, it ends up sounding merely drunk on it, and as for the search for an authenticity of period voice, what comes to mind here is the sign in the antique-shop window that boasts of ‘genuine reproductions’. The theorists and literary historians who police the streets of translation studies never fail to prosecute such dubious dealing. But I would like to feel that my experiment deserves to be considered a *noble* failure; for its purpose is to direct serious attention to the much-neglected detail of this fine text, in which autobiography is doubtless spiced with fiction, and yet through which shines a very distinctive historical personality. I wish, therefore, to end with a reaffirmation of the centrality of the original poem in its own form and language, particularly at a time when scholarship in pre-modern Hindi is in sad decline in its own country. I have tried to show that the idealistically motivated and narrowly prescribed agenda of the Hindi critics has blinded them to Banārasī’s real craft, and that translation, whether archaizing or modernizing, allows only a limited vision of Banārasī’s text, which English can show only through a glass darkly. The *Ardhakathānak* repays close reading not merely as a narrative record, but as an example of the real potency of vernacular verse, fed by the organic resources of its language and rich with subtle resonance. Even the most supple prose translation falls a long way short of catching what the *Ardhakathānak* has to offer; for as Banārasī himself perhaps implies in his own title, the narrative itself is only half the tale.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Allison Busch for a detailed and outstandingly useful critique of an earlier draft of this article; and to Imre Bangha, Vasudha Dalmia, Avinash Kumar, Rakesh Pandey, Nilanjan Sarkar, Atreyee Sen and Tony Stewart, for their comments and/or their help in the pursuit of materials. My folly in sometimes overlooking good advice itself deserves a witheringly critical couplet from Banārasīdās.
- 2 This is the form of the title that appears in the text itself ; it is also cited as ‘*Ardhakathā*’ (Mātāprasād Gupta, (ed.), *Ardhakathā*, Allahabad 1943).
- 3 The language is not ‘eastern Hindi’ as stated by Eugenia Vanina in her article ‘The *Ardhakathanaka* by Banarasi Das: A Socio-Cultural Study’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 5, 2 (1995), pp. 211–24 (p. 217).

- 4 There are, of course, substantial arguments to be made about what constitutes an 'autobiography', and it could be said that the full implications of the word are significant only as part of an established genre. (Is Bāṇa's *Kādambarī* a 'novel'?) It might be easier to avoid the mire of genre definitions and say simply that the *Ardhakathānak* is 'autobiographical'. Regarding the possibility of antecedents in the Islamic tradition, Arun Das Gupta notes that Banārasī's text 'was not modelled on the existing autobiographies written in Persian' ('Situating the Individual in Medieval India: an Excursion into History Beyond the Mainstream', in *The Calcutta History Journal*, XVI, 2, July–December 1994, pp. 1–27, p. 7).
- 5 Nathuram Premi (ed.), *Ardha kathānak*, 2nd edn., Bombay 1957, p. 81.
- 6 Mukund Lath, *Half a Tale: a Study in the Interrelationship between Autobiography and History*, Jaipur 1981. My quotations of the original text are taken from the appendix of this edition.
- 7 Translations are my own unless stated otherwise.
- 8 In fact the 'first-person' voice used here is not technically first-person at all, but rather a quoted narrative device introduced with the words 'he thought to himself . . .' (*tina mana māhi bicāri bāta*). Elsewhere in the text, the few further first-person references reflect Banārasī's role as author rather than as protagonist, and typically include brief formulae such as *kahaū kahā laū soi* 'I can say but little of this', or more literally 'how far can I speak of it?' (452); I am grateful to Allison Busch for pointing out further such instances in stanzas 203, 209, 599, 623, 646 and 652.
- 9 हुते पुष्प पुरखा परधान । तिनके बचन सुने हम कान ।
बरनी जथा जथासुत जेम । मूषा दोष नहिं लागै एम ॥ ३७ ॥
- 10 For a discussion of *Rīti* typologies and their representation in literary history, see the articles by Allison Busch and Imre Bangha in this issue.
- 11 Mulchandra Jain, *Jain kaviyō kā itihās: yā prācīn hindī jain kavi*, Damoh, 2464 (*Vīr nirvāṇ samvat*) p. 85, quoting Banārasīdās, *Samaysār nāṭak* (with commentary of Nānā Rāmchandra Nāg), Kolhapur, 1914, folio 150 verso). The full text of the stanza is as follows:
- मांसकी गरथि कुच कलश कहे, कहे मुख चंद जो सलेषमा को घर हे ।
हाडके सदन याहि हिरा मोती कहे ताहि, मांसके अधर ऊठ कह बिब फर हे ।
हाड दंड भुजा कहे कोल नाल काम जुधा, हाडहीके थंभा जंघा कहे रंभा तर हे ।
योहि झूठी जगति बनावे औ कहावे कवि, येते पर कहे हमे शारदाको वर हे ॥ १८ ॥
- 12 See respectively *Ardhakathānak* 169 and 24 ff. The texts mentioned in stanza 169 are entitled *Nāmamālā* and *Anekārtha*, identified by Mukund Lath (p. 160) as being authored by Dhananjaya, a 9th-century Jain author.
- 13 Eugenia Vanina, 'The *Ardhakathanaka* by Banarasidas', p. 224.
- 14 Mulchandra Jain, *Jain kaviyō kā itihās*, p. 129.
- 15 Ravindrakumar Jain, *Kavivar Banārasīdās: jīvanī aur kṛtitva*, Delhi 1966, p. 199.
- 16 *Ardhakathānak* 335.
- 17 Banarasidas Caturvedi, '*Hindikā pratham ātma-carit*', in Nathuram Premi (ed.), *Ardha kathānak*, p. 1.
- 18 Tulsīdās, *Śrī Rāmcaritmānas*, ed. & trans. R.C. Prasad, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass 1990, p. 10. The translation is mine.
- 19 Mukund Lath, *Half a Tale*, pp. 224 and 2.
- 20 These changes from *dohrā* to *caupāi* and back again are not always correctly marked in the headings to the Hindi text given by Lath, from which several metrical headings are omitted.
- 21 Mukund Lath, *Half a Tale*, p. 70.
- 22 Mukund Lath, *Half a Tale*, p. 3.

- 23 The formula *khara- . . . khara-* is repeated in stanza 77, describing the birth of Kharagsen's firstborn (but short-lived) son.
- 24 भई बहुत बंसावली, कहीं कहीं लौं सोइ – 'So much for my genealogy: how far should I labour it?' – *Ardhakathānak* 11.
- 25 Mukund Lath, *Half a Tale*, p. 12.
- 26 Mukund Lath, *Half a Tale*, p. 12.
- 27 Though not relevant to the argument here, the following *savaiyā* – one of the most devastating stanzas in the entire text – also deserves to be quoted here:

पुंन संजोग जुरे रथ पाइक माले मतंग तुरंग तबेले ।
 मानि बिभौ अंगयो सिर भार कियो बिसतार परिग्रह ले ले ॥
 बंध बढ़ाइ करी धिति पूरन, अंत चले उठि आपु अकेले ।
 हारे हमालकी पोटसी डारि के और दिवालकी ओट हो खेले ॥ ६२ ॥

- 28 In Banārasīdās, *Ardha kathānak*, ed. Nathuram Premi, 2nd edn, Bombay 1957, p. 17.
- 29 My reading *kījai* is a tentative correction (for syntax and metre) of the text's *kija*.
- 30 Ganesh Devy, *Amnesia . . .*
- 31 Further examples of this neutral 'noun + numeral' order are in stanzas 11, 18, 326, 343, 352, 352, 362; 'numeral + number' examples showing some degree of emphasis are in 337, 340, 344, 350.
- 32 As a poet I am matchless in composing verses on spiritual themes, which I recite with great art and impact. I know Prakrit and Sanskrit and can intone these languages with faultless pronunciation. I also know many vernacular languages. In my use of language I am ever alive to nuances of words and meanings.

My temper is naturally forgiving. I am easily content, and not readily moved by worldly cares. I am sweet of tongue and good at mixing with people for I have great forbearance and shun harsh language. My intentions are unsullied; so the counsel I give usually proves helpful to others. I have no foul or vicious habits, and I do not run after other men's wives. I have a true, unwavering faith in Jainism, and a steadfast mind which remains unshaken in its determination. I am pure in heart and always strive for equanimity.

These are my various virtues, both small and big. None of them really touch supreme heights and none are quite without shortcomings.

Now for my bad points. I said I have little of anger, pride or cunning, yet my greed for money is great. A little gain makes me inordinately happy and a little loss plunges me into the depths of despair. I am indolent by nature and slow in my work, hardly ever wanting to stir out of my house.

I do not perform sacred religious rituals; I never utter the holy mantras, never sit for meditations (*tapa*) and never exercise self-restraint. Neither do I perform puja nor practise charity.

I am overfond of laughter, and love to poke fun at everything. I delight in playing the clown and acting the buffoon, indulging in these capers with great relish and gusto. I often utter things that should not be said without any sense of shame, revelling in narrating unutterable stories and escapades with much glee. I love to relate fictitious stories, often quite scandalous, and try to pass them off as true especially when I am in the midst of a large gathering. When I am in the mood for fun, nothing can restrain me from telling fanciful lies or untruths.

I sometimes break into a dance when I am alone. Yet I am also prone to sudden, irrational feelings of sheer dread.

- Such is my temper. The good in my character alternates with the bad.
- 33 This line is a little obscure: Lath (*Half a Tale*, p. 94) translates as 'I am indolent by nature and slow in my work, hardly ever wanting to stir out of my house'; Sharma ('The *Ardha-kathānak*', p. 119) translates, 'Although his progeny had been destroyed and his good karmas had dawned, yet he did not want to renounce the world'.
- 34 An alternative convention is that of the *battīs ābharan*, the 'thirty-two jewels' worn by women.
- 35 I am grateful to Dr Alan Spragg for his (feeless) consultation on this point.
- 36 An example of this is seen in Heidi Pauwel's discussion, in this issue, of the periodisation of the literary career of Nāgaridās.
- 37 Paul Dundas, *The Jains*, 2nd edn, London 2002, pp. 192–5.
- 38 Mukund Lath, *Half a Tale*, p. 86.
- 39 S.W. Fallon, ed. R.C. Temple, *A Dictionary of Hindustani Proverbs*, Banaras 1886.
- 40 Ramesh Chandra Sharma, 'The *Ardha-kathānak*: a Neglected Source of Mughal History', in *Indica*, vol. 7 (1970), pp. 49–73 and 105–20.
- 41 See for example Mulchandra Jain's seemingly baseless eulogy of Banārasī's son (*Jain kaviyō kā itihās* p. 24): in order to stress the tragedy of the 'promising' (*honhār*) boy's death at the age of nine, Jain speaks of his eloquence, skill in learning, and physical beauty (*vākya-nīpūntā vidyā kuśaltā aur rūp mādhurī*). None of this detail derives from the *Ardhakathānak* text, the only possible source for such information.
- 42 Ravindrakumar Jain, *Kavivar Banārsīdās* p. 275: *adhyātma sant kavivar banārsīdās ne prāyaḥ sabhī kāvyā vidhāo mē racnāe prastut kar hindī-mā kī abhūtpūrv sevā kī hai*.
- 43 *Ibid.* p. 205.
- 44 Mukund Lath, *Half a Tale*, p. 34.
- 45 For a discussion of some of the issues here see my article 'English Voices for Hindi Verses? Issues in Translating Pre-colonial Poetry', in *Comparative Criticism* 22, 2000, pp. 133–56.
- 46 Mulchandra Jain, *Jain kaviyō kā itihās*, p. 129.
- 47 John Chandler (ed.), *Travels through Stuart Britain: the Adventures of John Taylor, the Water Poet*. Stroud, 1999, p. 183.
- 48 Banārasī shows no interest, for example, in the journey that Kharagsen's mother and her five-year-old son made between Narwar and Jaunpur when their property was seized after the death of Kharagsen, Banārasī's father.
- 49 *Ibid.*
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. vi.
- 51 Mukund Lath, *Half a Tale*, p. 52.
- 52 Structurally, this expansion to the text is illustrative of the effect of Lath's modernizing rendering: whereas the original deals in a straight sequence of concatenated events ('lost money; went once more to market; happened upon a purse') with no conjunction to explicate changes in the direction of the story, Lath's version imposes a pivotal 'yet', an authorial gloss on changing circumstances in 'fortune did grant me a small favour', and an all-seeing, anticipatory allusion to future events in 'before I left Agra'. Such details combine to introduce a novel (and novelistic) aspect to the telling of the tale.

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