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Raskhān the neophyte: Hindu perspectives on a Muslim Vaishnava

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A special regard is reserved for those of one culture who successfully achieve the transition into another one. Such a figure is the sixteenth century Hindi poet Raskhān, identified by tradition as a Pathan named Sayyid Ibrāhīm, perhaps of Pihani in Hardoi district,¹ and renowned for his elegant and impassioned verses in praise of Krishna. As with many literary and religious personages of the period, little can be said with any historical certainty about the circumstances of his life; but the Vaishnava hagiographic tradition supplies an appealing story to contextualize and accommodate the uncomfortable fact that some of the best-known and most loved of all Krishna-lyrics in Hindi are attributable to the pen of a Muslim. This hagiography provides an unusually graphic illustration of Hindu attitudes towards the Muslim community, whose leaders held temporal power throughout the heyday of North Indian Hindu *bhakti* from the early sixteenth century. The aim of this paper is to investigate these attitudes and to observe how the sectarian tradition treats the arrival of so unexpected a guest into the Vaishnava fold.

There are, of course, several North Indian Muslim poets of the pre-modern period who, for various reasons, composed in one or other of the literary dialects which in the modern nomenclature fall under the umbrella of 'Hindi': one thinks immediately of Sufi poets like Malik Muhammad 'Jāyāsī' who adopted Avadhī as their literary language, of Braj Bhāshā poets such as Abdur Rahīm Khānkhānān, and of the great Kabīr. But none of these figures worked primarily in the tradition of *sagan bhakti*, in which the divine is represented uncompromisingly in terms of an anthropomorphic Hindu deity, and in which much of the orthodoxy of Hindu thought and mythology is rigidly maintained. Raskhān, by contrast, exhibits the intensely emotional attitudes typical of *sagan bhakti* verse; and his poetry shows too the zeal and fervour typical of neophytes the world over.

Who then was Raskhān? In the text *Prem vātikā* traditionally ascribed to him, a couplet refers to Raskhān's leaving Delhi because of an insurrection which had reduced the city to a burning-ground:² an ambiguous chronogram in the text yields 1584 or 1614 as the date of its composition.³ But the attribution of the *Prem vātikā* to Raskhān is as

uncertain as the identity of the historical events to which the text refers, and discussions of the historicity of these references are largely inconclusive (although a consensus locates Raskhān in the second half of the sixteenth century). One intriguing issue which is generally overlooked is the significance of the poet's pen-name. The form 'Raskhān', barely attested elsewhere,⁴ is usually parsed as a Sanskrit compound, *rāsa-khānākhāni*, with the rather solecistic sense 'a mine of aesthetic essence'; and it is in this sense that the name does supplementary duty as an epithet of Krishna when it appears as the *chāp* or *taxallus* in a line of verse.⁵ Yet this interpretation overlooks the possibility of reading *-khān* as the typical Pathan designation, having a distinct spelling in the Persian script (i.e. *xān*), but graphically indistinguishable from the other sense when written in Sanskrit Devanagari. Given this ambiguity, we must recognise a chicken-and-egg problem here: does the name 'Raskhān' derive from a Pathan background, or does the attribution of such a background itself derive from the existence of such a name? The uncertainty of the historical situation makes the latter explanation a possibility at the very least.

The traditional 'biography' of Raskhān is that given in the Vaishnava hagiology *Do sau bāvan vaishnavan kī vārīā* (hereafter DVV), 'Chronicle of the 252 devotees of Vishnu'. This text is an important channel for the teachings of the Krishnaite sect known as the *Pushpī mārg* or 'Way of Fulfilment', a devotional cult which traces its history to the teachings of the Brahmin theologian and votary Vallabhāchārya (1479-1531).⁶ The 252 disciples to whom the title refers are the initiated disciples of Vallabhāchārya's second son and spiritual heir Viṭṭhalnāth (c. 1516-1586); Vallabhāchārya's own disciples are described in a similar text entitled *Caurāsī vaishnavan kī vārīā* (hereafter CVV). 'Chronicle of the 84 devotees of Vishnu'. Both these texts, important examples of early Braj Bhāshā prose, are ascribed to Viṭṭhalnāth's son Gokulnāth (1552-1641): but they were probably compiled from largely oral traditions by a great-grandson of Viṭṭhalnāth's called Harirāy, whose lifespan is given in the sect's notoriously optimistic chronology as 1591-1711. While compiling the text Harirāy intercalated his own commentary entitled *Bhāvprakāś*, which emphasizes the spiritual implications of the text and interprets the narrative along more narrowly defined sectarian lines than the original author had felt necessary; in so doing, Harirāy's aim is to maximize the didactic potential of the chronicles as parables of the holy life.

Raskhān is not the only Muslim character in the Vaishnava hagiographical tradition of the DVV and CVV narratives. While few Muslims feature as the subjects of conversion, the not infrequent references to contemporary Hindu/Muslim relations offer an important sidelight on the political and cultural background against which North Indian Vaishnavism flourished in the centuries of Muslim hegemony. The hagiographers' striking use of the term *barī jāti* or 'senior race' to denote

Muslims is itself a very revealing indicator of a social as opposed to a spiritual hierarchy; and the tension which existed between Hindu subjects and Muslim overlords is explicitly referred to in a number of the *vārīā* episodes. The *vārīā* of one Padmanābhdās in the CVV,⁷ for example, tells how the devotee's *śhākur* or Krishna-image was carried off as loot by a 'Mughal army', and how the Vaishnava fasted until it was returned to him after the intervention of the freebooter's wife, who feared incurring the sin of causing the Vaishnava's death: reading this episode in the historical context points to a parallel with the fate of the image of Shrināthji, the principal *svatīp* or deity-image of the Vallabha sect, which had to be removed from Braj to escape Muslim iconoclasm during the reign of Aurangzeb, and which now provides the focus of sectarian activity at Nathdwara in Rajasthan.

A less sympathetic portrayal of Muslim character is given in the CVV chronicle of a Kshatriya devotee named Dāmodardās Sambhalvāre (Parīkh 1970: 46-47), whose wife, anxious as to the outcome of her pregnancy — itself granted as a boon by Vallabhāchārya — consulted a woman with special powers to discover the sex of her child. Because of the sectarian insistence on the importance of single-minded faithfulness of devotion to the chosen *guru*, such a consultation constituted the sin of *anyāśray* or 'resort to another authority', and was punished by Vallabhāchārya who foretold that the child would be born as a *mlecch* — here synonymous with 'Muslim'. The child's mother, once aware of the fact that she carried a *mlecch* in her womb, desisted from the service of the deity; and when the child was born he was disowned to be reared by a wet-nurse. The *Bhāvprakāś* commentary, evidently anxious to distance the pious parents from the 'uncleanliness of their unfortunate child, adds that the boy did not actually become a *mlecch* until reaching the age of ten.

A banal association of degenerate habits with Muslim personality is exemplified at various points in the hagiographies, and serves to underline the unlimited salvific potency of Krishna's grace, which has the power to overcome even such daunting obstacles as the misfortune of being born into a Muslim lineage! One of the most intriguing Hindu/Muslim confrontations described in the texts, however, has a different emphasis; this is the meeting between the blind poet Sūrdās (born c. 1479) and the emperor Akbar, as told in the CVV in an account which portrays Akbar as being endowed with wisdom and discrimination. Akbar summons Sūrdās to his court, and being very impressed by his spirituality attempts to reward him with gifts of wealth and land. But Sūrdās scornfully rejects such worldly considerations, and curtly forbids Akbar ever to bother him again. The ingenuousness of the story, in which the emperor of Hindustan meets his match in an other-worldly Vaishnava devotee, has a forthright charm; but the commentator Harirāy feels constrained to interpose an explanation of the anomalous fact that a Muslim such as Akbar should be sufficiently perspicacious to be able to appreciate Sūr's spiritual qualities:

So the emperor Akbar was endowed with discrimination. How so? He had become a non-Hindu (*mlecch*) through a transgression of correct ritual practice; in his previous birth he had been a Hindu celibate (*brahmacārī*) by the name of Bālmukund,⁸ and one day when he drank unfiltered milk a cow's hair entered his stomach. And because of that transgression he became a *mlecch* in his next birth. (Parikh 1970:418)

Thus the representation of Akbar as an apostate Hindu neatly explains his liberality towards Sūrdās (and indeed towards Hindus generally, for Vaishnavism flourished under his rule). But Akbar's sympathetic liberality is nothing when compared to Raskhān's complete commitment to Vaishnava sentiments; and in explaining the anomaly of Raskhān to an orthodox Hindu readership the author of his biography in the *vārā* has recourse to a sectarian convention in which contemporary flesh-and-blood devotees are identified with characters in the eternal and wholly transcendental world of Krishna's *līlā*. This convention allows the particular circumstances of the birth and hierarchical status of individual devotees to be depicted as subordinate in importance to the true nature of their eternal souls, and thereby justifies the inclusion of Raskhān in the inner circles of devotees initiated by the sect's most prestigious *guru*. Specifically, Raskhān's transcendental persona is that of a *gopī* with the name 'Ras-siddhā' ('Endowed with passionate feeling'), itself a kind of elucidation of the poet's name.

A *Bhāvprakāś* gloss at the head of the chronicle of Raskhān in the CVV explains that he was a *rājas bhakt*, meaning that his devotion was manifested in terms of the quality *rājas* or 'urgent passion'. This contextualization seeks to accommodate the paradox of Raskhān's character, with its juxtaposed attributes of piety and passion — twin elements fundamental to the doctrine of the *Pūshṭi mārg*, in which renunciation is not highly valued and in which physical enjoyment (*bhog*) is sanctioned on condition that the object of enjoyment be first dedicated to Krishna. Raskhān's Muslim background notwithstanding, many elements of the chronicle follow an entirely conventional or even formulaic pattern, especially in the importance to the devotee of seeking a *darśan* or 'vision' of the deity, the literal and realistic interaction of the devotee with the deity himself, and in the core narrative element which describes the yielding of a soul lost in the world to the grace of Krishna through the all-important medium of initiation by the *guru* Viṭṭhalnāth, here referred to as Gusāin (= *gosvāmī*). The original narrative, written in episodes called *prasang*, is somewhat less than twice the length of the following synopsis:

Episode 1. Raskhān, living in Delhi, was enamoured of the son of a merchant; he watched him night and day, and even ate his leftovers. When chastised by his fellow Muslims, who said his actions had made him an 'infidel' (*kāphar*), Raskhān said, 'I am as I am; but if you say anything to me I'll knock you down on the spot!' (*thaur mārtāngo*). So

everyone became wary of him.

Episode 2. One day in conversation a Vaishnava said to another, 'One should have attachment to the Lord as this Raskhān has to that merchant's lad — he roves around after him without fear of public slander or caste displeasure! Seeing Raskhān standing engrossed some way off, the other Vaishnava clapped his hand to his head and stuck his nose up in the air [*māihō dhuñāyo aur nāk caphāī*]. Raskhān saw this and threatened him: 'Was it about me that you did that? Tell me or I'll knock you down on the spot!'. When Raskhān drew his sword the Vaishnava nervously explained, 'If you loved the Lord as you do that boy, you would find fulfilment'. Raskhān asked, 'Whom do you call "Lord"? I know nothing of this.' The Vaishnava replied that the Lord was the one from whom all the magnificence of the world derived. Asked how he was to be recognised, the Vaishnava showed him a picture of Shrināthji. Immediately on seeing this image, tears sprang to Raskhān's eyes and his mind was turned (*man phiri gayo*); and his love for the boy came to an end.

[*Bhāvprakāś* commentary.] Attachment is divine in essence, and even if worldly will ultimately lead the soul towards God.

Then Raskhān asked, 'Where does this beloved (*mahbūb*) live?'; the Vaishnava replied, 'This beloved lives in Braj'. Raskhān asked for the picture; and the Vaishnava, realising Raskhān to be a divine soul (*daivī jīv*), gave it to him. Raskhān set off for Braj, visiting numerous temples but nowhere finding an image with Shrināthji's distinctive form. Finally his wanderings brought him to Govardhan; but when he tried to enter the temple the doorkeeper threw him out unceremoniously. Raskhān went to the nearby lake of Govindkund, thinking to himself that such stringent security must surely indicate the house of the *mahbūb*, since he had never been thrown out of any other Hindu shrine. So he sat there with eyes fixed on Shrināthji's temple, mouthing the words 'My *mahbūb* dwells in that house!', and resolving not to leave without having *darśan* there.

After three days, Shrināthji thought to himself that Raskhān would soon expire from hunger, and feeling compassionate towards him he accoutred himself in a guise identical to that in Raskhān's picture, and accompanied by his retinue of cows and cowherds he appeared to Raskhān on the top of Govardhan hill, playing his flute. Raskhān realised this to be his *mahbūb*, and rushed to grasp him (*pakaranī kōn doryo*). But Shrināthji vanished, and went to Gokul where he awakened the sleeping Gusāinji by stroking his hair. Gusāinji greeted him with the salutation, 'Homage to the one who removes the suffering of his devotees' (*bhaktatāpanivārakāya namaḥ*). Then Shrināthji told him, 'There is one who is a divine soul but who has been born in the Muslim community (*burī jāti*). I have given him *darśan* but he ran to grasp me. You initiate him (*tākoṅ nām deti*), then I shall accept him.'

Gusāñjī asked why Shrināthjī had come in such a hurry, and was told, 'Because he came to touch me; and my vow is that to those whom you initiate I shall speak, them I shall touch, and their food-offerings I shall eat. To no one shall these three things be granted save by your connexion (*sambandh*)'.⁹

Delighted, Gusāñjī ferried the Yamuna and rode to Govindkund; and Raskhān, seeing Gusāñjī's gaze fixed on Shrināthjī's temple as he alighted from his horse, realised him to be Shrināthjī's friend (*mitr*). He approached him and said, 'Sāhib, the *mahbūb* to whom I am greatly attached lives in this house; kindly introduce him to me!'. Gusāñjī made him bathe, and initiated him through his grace; he then had a servant take Raskhān into the temple for *darśan*. Gusāñjī sounded the temple conch and made the afternoon food-offering; then Raskhān had *darśan* of Shrināthjī and was greatly pleased. When Raskhān made as if to leave, Shrināthjī grabbed his arm and said, 'Hey you old sod, where are you off to now?' (*are sāre, ab kahān jā hai?*). And so from that day whenever Shrināthjī went grazing the cattle he would take Raskhān with him, and the divine sports (*līlā*) that Raskhān saw there he would describe in his verses. So it was that he acquired the attitude of a milkmaid (*gopī bhāv*).¹⁰

The story of Raskhān's conversion is a straightforward parable of sectarian priorities. Yet the narrative itself has a very special flavour, which can perhaps be seen even if dimly in the synopsis above. Raskhān is portrayed as an archetypal Pathan, the traditional attributes of his race being represented in near-caricature: the starting point for the tale is Raskhān's paedophilia, and subsequent developments in the narrative hinge on the fervour and violent immediacy of his reactions to the unfolding events (with the timorous Vaishnavas providing a perfect narrative foil); even after his conversion, his devotion is expressed in markedly physical terms as he runs to grab Shrināthjī. Raskhān is shown as experiencing things in an extremely literal and consequently unskillful way, his heart on his sleeve; and he does not understand what is going on around him until very unequivocal and clearly-expressed explanations are offered him. In short, he is portrayed as something of a buffoon, completely at the whim of his passions and only accidentally brought to the realization of God's grace.

While other 'seekers' in the text may feel quite strongly the suffering caused by their separation from God, and consciously lament the wasting of a godless life, their pain tends largely to be interiorized, with little outward display of histrionics; there is no real parallel for the description of Raskhān's frantic tour of the Braj temples, culminating in his ejection from the sectarian site at Govardhan and his ensuing three-day vigil and fast. In the extravagance of its description this episode is of the nature of a *masnavī* tale of the anguish of separated lovers, and the author's choice of such a genre-based style of narrative seems deliberately intended to

reflect the Muslim cultural background of its protagonist.

Yet it is in its diction that the most clearly distinct flavour of Raskhān's *vārtā* is to be seen. By and large the language of the DVV is heavily Sanskritized, and uses a register of vocabulary which is appropriate to the pious and reverential contents of the *vārtā* stories. There is a substantial reliance upon the use of formulae, both narrative and lexical, as a result of which any departure from the established register stands out all the more strikingly. In this Vaishnava context, certain modes of address and status-specific titles follow a well-defined pattern: witness the use of the designation 'Gusāñjī' for Viṭṭhalnāth, and of 'Shrijī' for Krishna himself. Any deviations from this narrowly prescribed and entirely conventional pattern immediately smack of the secular, and that quality itself implies profanity (whether intentional or caused by ignorance of the usual conventions). The reader of the *vārtā* is thus brought up short when he finds the deity being referred to as *mahbūb*, for despite the currency of that term in the Sufi context its tone here is as unexpectedly secular as equivalents such as 'sweetheart' or 'poppet' might be in the English idiom. When Raskhān first asks, 'Where does this sweetheart live?', his Vaishnava interlocutor replies, 'This sweetheart lives in Braj', retaining not only the designation *mahbūb* but also the verb *rahat* — far too temporal and commonplace a word to be considered worthy of normal use with reference to Krishna himself! The reply is thus intended to be ironic, and such irony, which is not without humour, contributes a subtle subtext to the outwardly naive paratactic construction of the hagiology narrative.

An effect similar to that achieved by the term *mahbūb* is intended by Raskhān's ingenuous use of the title 'Sāhib' to address Viṭṭhalnāth, where the better-briefed Vaishnava would prefer the standard honorific 'Mahārāj'. Likewise and to an even greater degree the use of the word 'friend' (*mitr*) in respect of Krishna is conspicuous here — for although the canons of *bhakti* recognise friendship as a legitimate model for the votary's relationship with god (alongside the preferred attitudes of servile humility and of parental or romantic fondness) the word *mitr* is hardly expected in this context. As an extension of the 'friendship' idea, Raskhān is made to ask Viṭṭhalnāth to 'introduce' him to the deity, as though he were seeking some merely social connexion with a banal expectation as to the outcome — *tum mokeri milāy deū to bohot ācho hai*. Most remarkable of all the lexical choices in the text is in Krishna's delightfully brusque and profane challenge to Raskhān as he makes to leave the temple — 'are sāre, ab kahān jā hai!' With its blunt use of the familiar *tū* register, and with its vocative *sāre* (= *sāle*, Hindi/Urdu's favourite term of abuse, whose literal translation would by no means soften the tone of the English rendering 'old sod' given above), such a sentence is surely intended to have a considerable rhetorical impact on the reader. The challenge to Raskhān is an affectionate one, and in suggesting a close rapport between Krishna and Raskhān is of course a

vindication of the Pathan's status as a devotee of the inner circle; but at the same time there is no escaping the disparaging tone of the language, and the Vaishnava author of the text is clearly enjoying the implied subjugation of this non-Hindu devotee while yet praising his innately spiritual character.

The implications of the portrayal of the Raskhān and other *barī jārvāre* are indicative of the general attitude of the sect towards 'outsiders' as a whole. The Muslim community is just one of the groups identified in the DVV and the CVV as being potentially alien to the purposes of the sect and, to a greater or lesser extent, threatening to its survival and autonomy; other such groups include movements within Hinduism such as Shaivism and even the generality of *maryādā-mārgī* Vaishnavas, those who adhere closely to the scriptural authority of classical Hinduism and do not subscribe to the doctrines of devotional traditions such as the *Pushjī mārg*. Thus it would be an over-simplification to regard the clearly expressed attitude of the DVV towards Raskhān as being specifically 'racist' or 'communalist' in intention; but the portrayal given in this traditional text of inter-communal distrust and contention, tempered sometimes by a condescending good-humour, is evidence of the stability of cultural perspectives over the centuries.

NOTES

¹ This unsubstantiated claim appears in the *Sivsinh-saraj*: cf. M. Corcoran, 'The life and poetry of Raskhān', in Monika Thiel-Horstmann, ed., *Bhakti in current research, 1979-1982* (Berlin 1983), p. 75.

² D. Bhāṣī, ed., *Raskhān granthāvalī*, 3rd ed. (Delhi 1977), p. 333: *dekhi gadara hira sāhib dīlī nagara masāna; chinahi bādāsā bansakti ṭhasuka choṛī rasakhāna.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 334: *bidhu sāgara rasa indu subha barasa sarasa rasakhānu; prena vāṭikā raci rūcira cira hiya harashi bukhāna.*

⁴ A reference to a poem entitled *Ras khānī* is given by M. Garcin de Tassy, *Histoire de la littérature hindoue et hindoustanie*, 2nd ed. (Paris 1871), vol. 3, p. 447, from an Agra edition of 1858; but this is untraceable. Comical etymologies for the name 'Raskaan' (sic) are offered in Paritap Sharma's novel *Days of the turban* (London 1986), p. 92: 'Some say he ["Raskaan"] was a convert to hinduism. Others say he used the pen name Raskaan, meaning one who has an ear for the essence, but his real name was Rais Khan, which is a muslim name meaning a noble person.'

⁵ An example of this usage is seen in the first line of the following frequently anthologized *savāiyā*, which serves to illustrate Raskhān's poetic style:

mānusha hoñ tau vaiñ rasakhānī
busaun̄ brajā gokula gāyā ke gvālānū;
jo pasu hūn̄ to kahā basu mero
carauñ nita nanda kī dhenu māñjārānū.

palhana hūn̄ to vaiñ giri ko
jo dharyau kara chatra purandara dhārānū;
jo khagā hūn̄ [to] baserau karaun̄
nita kālindī kāla kudamba kī jāṛānū.

'If I am [reborn] as a human then let me be that "Raskhān" and dwell with the cowherds in the pastures of Gokula; if I be an animal, then so be it, let me graze eternally amongst Nanda's cattle. If I be a stone, let me be of that mountain which [Krishna] held as an umbrella against Indra's torrents; and if I be a bird, let me dwell on Yamuna's shore in the branches of a *Kudamba* tree.'

⁶ A succinct introduction to the history and principles of the sect is given by Richard J. Cohen, 'Sectarian Vaishnavism: The Vallabha *sampradāya*', in P. Gaefke and D. A. Utz, ed., *Identity and division in cults and sects in South Asia* (Philadelphia 1984), pp. 65-72. Further detail on the sect and on the *vāṛīā* texts is given in R. Barz, *The bhakti sect of Vallabhācārya* (Faridābad 1976); the dates quoted in this paragraph are from this source.

⁷ D. Parikh, ed., *Caurāsī vaiṣṇavan kī vāṛīā* (Mathura 1970), pp. 32-35.

⁸ 'Bālmukund' is a common enough Vaishnava name; but some play on the word *bāl* as meaning 'hair' may be involved here.

⁹ *sambandh* or 'connexion' refers to the mantra called *brāhmasambandh*, by which devotees are initiated to membership of the Vallabha sect.

¹⁰ B. Sarmā and D. Parikh, ed., *Do sat bāvan vaiṣṇavan kī vāṛīā* (Kankrauli 1953), vol. 3, pp. 299-304.