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Pankaj Kumar Jha

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Pankaj Kumar Jha

Introduction

That literary compositions (and not just 'historical' narratives) are useful raw materials for historians to work with, has long been established across different hues of historical writing and does not demand justification any more. What constitutes historical literature, as against literary composition, continues of course to be debated. My paper focuses primarily on two texts written in Sanskrit by Vidyapati in 15th-century Mithila. One is a writing manual, titled *Likhanāvalī* and written at the behest of King Purāditya Girinārāyaṇa in the chieftaincy of Droṇāvāra in Nepal terrain, part of Mithila in the 15th century. The other one is the more famous *Puruṣa Parīkṣā*, a treatise on manliness written 'under instructions from Raja Śiva Simha' of Tirhut. The first one carries model letters and model documents, the second is a compilation of stories narrated with a view to put forth examples of manly conduct. Though neither of the two may be dated with certainty, it is almost certain that they were composed sometime in the second decade of the 15th century.

My aim is to examine depictions of gender and caste in a political context in these two texts. It goes without saying that the three aspects are enmeshed into each other and one reason why I had to make my

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paper sound so ambitious in its sweeping reach is because it appeared to me that it was impossible to discuss any one of these aspects and ignore the other two. Hence, I will try to explore the three aspects together, as well as separately, in *Likhanāvalī* and in *Puruṣa Parīkṣā* by looking at (i) the manner in which the two texts are framed and organized (ii) what they actually say about the three aspects (iii) what they leave unsaid but presume, and (iv) by noting down interesting omissions. But before that a brief introduction of Vidyapati would be in place.

I

Vidyapati was a prolific poet, playwright and writer. Apart from the two texts mentioned above, his compositions include a work of semi-historical nature, *Kīrtilatā*; three published volumes of songs, *Padāvalī*; a play about a love affair between a married king and the daughter of a rich businessman, *Maṇimanjarīnāṭikā*; another play by the title of *Gorakṣavijaya* that deals with tantricism; a book on law called *Vibhāgasāra*; a narrative on aesthetics of love called *Kīrtipatākā*; a work on the Śaiva rituals and philosophy called *Śaivasarvasvasāra*; a treatise on spiritual merits of ritual donations called *Dānavākyāvalī*, a book written apparently on the subject of geography but primarily containing a selection of stories from the above mentioned *Puruṣa Parīkṣā* and interestingly titled *Bhūparikramaṇ*.

Some of these, like *Kīrtilatā* and *Kīrtipatākā* are in different registers of Avahaṭṭa, very close to Maithilī. Avahaṭṭa, according to scholars of Hindi literature was an artificial literary language that was appreciated widely among scholars of north India during fourteenth through seventeenth centuries. Most of his songs, which constitute the mainstay of his popularity among the Maithil population, especially upper caste women, in Mithila were composed in a language that is identifiably Maithilī though a few verb endings are different from the current Maithilī and some of the words used have clearly gone out of currency. Others are in Sanskrit, a language that continued to enjoy an elite status in early modern times. Except for *Puruṣa Parīkṣā* and some portions of *Kīrtilatā*, none of these works are available in English

translation. Several manuscripts of most of these works have been found in various parts of Nepal, Mithila and, in some cases, even as far as Rajasthan.

In the absence of any direct and unambiguous information, the date of Vidyapati's birth is disputed. The estimated year of his birth is in the range of 1350s to 1380s. Shivprasad Singh in his biography of Vidyapati estimates it to be 1374 on the basis of a collation of 'internal evidences' from the author's own works.[1] This appears plausible. He was born in a Brahmin family of a small village called Bisapi in the modern district of Madhubani in Bihar.[2] As Subhadra Jha noted, 'Vidyapati was born in a family of learned men who were famous for their erudition. In the works of this poet, this tradition is seen in its full culmination'. However, Vidyapati refrained from giving systematic details of his own ancestry in any of his works though two of his immediate male ancestors were associated with the local court.[3] He did refer to two of his illustrious ancestors, namely Gaṇeśwara and Vīreśwara in *Puruṣa Parīkṣā* as a wise counsel to Harsiṃhadeva of Karṇāṭa dynasty and as a generous minister of Mithila respectively.[4]

Mithila enjoyed a semi-autonomous position first within the Delhi Sultanate and later under the Jaunpur Sultanate. The chieftaincy of Mithila was with the Karṇāṭa dynasty followed by the Oinivāra dynasty sometime in the first half of the14th century. But sometime in 1371

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[1] Shivprasad Singh, *Vidyapati*. Allahabad: Lokbharati Prakashan, 1957. Tenth Edition, 1992.

[2] It is agreed by scholars that the Bisapi mentioned by Vidyapati and his contemporaries is same as the present day village of Bisaphi in the district of Madhubani in Bihar. The descendants of Vidyapati continue to live there.

[3] Biman Bihari Majumdar, "Vidyapati and His Age", in S.H. Askari and Qeyamuddin Ahmad, (eds), *Comprehensive History of Bihar*, vol. 2, part I, Patna: K.P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1983, p. 367.

[4] Vīreśwara is referred as generous (*dānaśīla*) and kind (*kāruṇikaḥ*) whereas Gaṇeśwara is referred as expert in sāṃkhya philosophy and jurisprudence (sāṃkhyasiddhānta pārgamo daṇḍanītikuśalo). See, Vidyapati, *Puruṣa Parīkṣā*, (Henceforth referred as *PP.*) edited by Surendra Jha 'Suman', Patna: Maithili Akademi, 1988, pp. 54 and 71.

CE,[5] a Turkish commander Malik Arsalān killed the Oinivāra ruler Raja Gaṇeśwara and annexed the territory of Tirhut, until the successors of Gaṇeśwara (Kīrti Siṃha and Śiva Siṃha) grew up to be bold enough to challenge and defeat Arsalān with the help of the Shārqī ruler, Sultan Ibrāhim in 1401 or 1402 CE. They re-established the reign of the Oinivāra dynasty in the region under the suzerainty of the Shārqis. Vidyapati seems to have been friends with, and in the service of, Kīrti Siṃha and Śiva Siṃha and he seems to have almost certainly visited Jaunpur with the two aspiring princes to enlist the support of the Sharqi ruler. He reported the whole incident in considerable detail in his famous *Kīrtilatā.*

For a major part of his career, Vidyapati seems to have been in the service of the Oinivāra dynasty and it was to different members of the extended family of Kīrti Siṃha and Śiva Siṃha that most of his works are dedicated. It is not very well known that in recognition of the poet's steadfast service, the Oinivāra lord, Śiva Siṃha decided to grant (the taxes) of the poet's native village Bisapi to him as reported in a copper plate inscription.[6]

II

Historians are deservedly notorious for reducing books and documents composed in the distant past into sources that could be extractively mined for pieces of information, with complete disregard to their textual integrity and sometimes even contextual specificity. Increasingly, however, it is realized that the structure of a text is equally

[5] The date of this event is given as the Year 252 of Lakṣmaṇa Era (henceforth LE). The era is named after the Sena ruler, Lakṣmaṇa of Bengal. It was in the court of Lakṣmaṇa Sena that the famous poet Jayadeva flourished. A slab fixed in the doorway of Lakṣmaṇa Sena's palace, mentions Jayadev as one of the five gems in the ruler's court. See, G.A.Grierson, "Vidyapati and His Contemporaries", in *The Indian Antiquary,* vol. XIV, 1885, p. 183. Unfortunately, it is not definitively known as to when exactly Lakṣmaṇa Sena ruled and hence there has been a dispute about when exactly this era started. Most scholars today agree that it started in the 1119 CE, while some would prefer 1109 CE.

[6] *The Indian Antiquary*, vol. XIV, 1885, pp. 191–92.

significant for its historicized reading.[7] Let us begin then, with a brief outline of these two compositions.

Likhanāvalī begins with salutations to Lord Gaṇeśa before paying obeisance to the earthly patron, Purāditya.[8] Written in two somewhat different registers of Sanskrit prose, its language is heavily stylized in parts though other parts were composed in everyday language without much burden of elaborate metaphors. It is divided into three plus one parts. It carries roughly about fifty-three model letters and thirty-one model documents. The letters are all in the first three sections and seek to set examples of how to write to seniors, juniors and equals respectively. The letters are addressed to those in the family and more frequently to those in the politico-administrative hierarchy. The documents, all in the fourth section, exemplify how business and administrative transactions needed to be properly documented. They are all intended to be fictitious but their contents and framing strategies may be analysed to yield useful insights. Only one manuscript of it is extant. It was published for the first time in 1901 and at least once again in 1969.

Puruṣa Parīkṣā begins with salutations to Bhagavatī, broadly identified with Goddess Śakti. It is written in easy Sanskrit prose and carries about forty-four stories. It is divided into four parts, one of whose parts is rather distinct, so again three plus one parts. A number of its manuscripts have been found in different parts of Mithila, Nepal and Bengal. This text has had a long afterlife with translations, from 19th century onwards, in Bengali, Maithilī and English, the latter by G.A. Grierson. The best way to understand the organization of *Puruśa Parīkṣā* is to look at the way it actually begins after the peremptory salutations, etc. Let me cite the first story of the text which frames the forty-four stories that follow:

> In the city of Candrātapā, there once was a king by the name of Prārāvara, whose lotus feet was adorned by the

[7] See for example, Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Genealogy: Form and Function in Medieval History Narrative", *History and Theory*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1983, p. 46.
[8] Vidpyapati, *Likhanāvalī*, edited and translated into Maithilī by Indrakant Jha, Patna: Indralay Prakashan, 1969, p. 1. Henceforth cited as *Likhanāvalī.*

pollen of the flowers in the garlands of thousands of kings from regions up to the oceans. He had a daughter by the name of Padmāvatī, who was beautiful in all her elements and full of all the desirable virtues. As her childhood receded, the king was ceased with anxiety about finding a suitable groom for her, appropriate to the family pedigree.

For, a man might be hardworking and
Earning riches by legitimate means
Righteous, gentle and free of anger and other vices
Yet, if he has a daughter, his heart will be filled with worries
About finding a suitable groom and fear of being refused

What is to be done then, he asked Sage Subuddhi. Because,

Never take a decision entirely on your own in important matters

Even the wise are liable to commit mistakes and suffer from delusions

The Raja said, 'O, Sage! I have a daughter by the name of Padmāvatī. Who the groom for her should be, kindly consider and give instructions'.

The sage said, 'O, Rājan! Choose a man'.

'O, Sage! One who is not a man cannot be a groom in any case'.

The sage said, 'There are many men on this earth who only have the physical shape of a man. What I mean is that you should give up on those who are men only in appearance and go for a [real] man'. After all,

Those looking like a man you can easily find,
while real men are rare
It is difficult to find a man with qualities
that I am about to declare

Thus,

The man who is valorous, intelligent and learned is a real male
(vīraḥ, sudhīḥ savidyaśca puruṣaḥ puruṣārthavān)

The rest are men merely by appearance, animals they are without a tail
(tadanye puruṣākārāḥ, paśavaḥ pucchavarjitāḥ)

The king said, 'How, then, does one identify the valorous one, etc.?'

The sage replied:

'One adorned with bravery, discretion and enthusiasm is a man of valour
(vīraḥ śaurya vivekābhyām utsāhen ca maṃḍitaḥ)

Earning glories for his parents, He might be born to whatever lineage
(mātāpitroralṃkrtu kule kutrāpi jāyate)

Lack of fear is bravery, discretion — the ability to discern the good from bad
(śauryam karpaṇya rahitam, viveko dhīhitā-hite)

Enthusiasm is the will to exert oneself, these three maketh a valorous man.'

There are four types of valorous men: the generous one, the kind one, the warrior, and the truthful one. *(dānavīro, dayāvīro, yuddhvīraḥ, satyavīraśca)*

Thus,
Hariścandra was the generous one, Raja Śivi the kind one, Pārtha was the warrior type, the truthful one was

Yuddhisṭhira.

'O, Sage!, the Raja quipped, 'These men belonged to another era. We cannot learn anything from their example in this era.' For,

The character of the Kṛtayuga-born cannot be a source of education in Kaliyuga,
Due to changes brought about with time, these examples cannot be followed.

Men no longer have that kind of intelligence, nor that strength,
For those born in the Kaliyuga, there is no such truth either.

Hence, please enlighten us about the character of the valorous only through stories of those men born in times of the Kaliyuga.

The sage said,

The learned have already told the stories of Satyuga, Dvāpari and Tretā.

I will tell you tales of the Kaliyuga.[9]

A student of history will be quick to notice at least three interesting elements in this story: (i) what appeared in the beginning merely to be all about finding a suitable boy moves swiftly to open up a wide didactic space for a full-fledged exploration of what constitutes a man nay, a real man, possibly a politically successful man; (ii) that a man's valour did not depend on his birth, an assertion that is brought home with the phrase, '*kule kutrāpi jāyate*'; (iii) the author consciously located the stories that are to follow in this-worldly time and wanted his reader to note as much. I will come back to examine, and hopefully be able to see beyond, these observations as I proceed.

III

[9] All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

What does one make of a text that seeks to lay out in great detail through stories the true characteristics of a Real Man? Of course, it is a treatise on the substance and fruits of being a *puruṣa,* that is, to say *puruśārtha*. Typically, the word *puruṣārtha* stood for dharma, artha and mokṣa, the three fruits of meritorious conduct. Interestingly, however, the word may be literally translated as 'masculinity'. Yet, the text is surely much more than that. After all, the traits of valor, intelligence and learning are not abstract qualities. *Puruṣa Parīkṣā* constitutes these qualities through ostensibly real life stories, told in a manner that grounds the idea of the Real Man in the clumsy, tactile and imitable world of lived experience. It is instructive to note that according to Vidyapati himself, one of the aims of the book was to make the young appreciate *nīti*.[10] It is hardly surprising then that from Grierson to the more recent commentators, most scholars variously refer to it as a manual on politics, as a treatise on political morality or even ethics, and I must admit that it is not an entirely inappropriate characterization. For, even apart from the author's own assertion, the content and tone of the stories in the book clearly establish the fact that it is meant as a didactic manual for maintaining political order.

That the text presumed the field of politics to be exclusively a male domain is equally true. So far as medieval political theorists were concerned, only men were capable of, and hence expected to, cultivate the qualities of a good political subject, in both sense of the latter word: in the sense of those who had political power and initiative as well as in the sense of those who were 'subjected' to that power, the subjects of the state so to say.

Reality though could sometimes spill out of such idealism, as Vidyapati was to discover soon. Within a decade of the composition of *Puruṣa Parīkṣā*, the author of *The Test of Man* ended up writing *Śaivasarvasvasāra* under instructions from a woman ruler of Tirhut,

[10] '*śiśūnāṃ siddhayartha nayaparicitenūtanadhiyāṃ*'. See *PP.* p. 2.

Viśvāsa Devi.[11] Yet, we should not forget that facts like these, whether we are talking about Viśvāsa Devi or Raẓiyyā Sultan or several other queens that we come across, do not take away from the conceptually gendered terrain of politics. A more truthful reflection of the maleness of political power perhaps was the fact that even when a female ruler occupied the throne, the qualities she would be ideally attributed and praised for were masculine qualities.[12] Moreover, for a woman to become a sultan or reigning queen was still possible; to be appointed to an important administrative position was a near impossibility.[13]

Yet, women were not irrelevant to the construction of this exclusively male domain of politics. The author constructed the feminine, as much as the 'less than masculine', as a prop to throw the truly male into bolder relief. Narrating the characteristics of the warrior men (*yuddhavīra*), the following śloka sets the tone of contrast between the *yuddhavīra* on the one hand and the children, the fearful men and the women together on the other:

> Cowards, children and women live the life of dependence,
> Lions and the good men depend on their own prowess.[14]

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[11] Padma Singh, the younger brother of Vidyapati's patron, Raja Śiva Siṃha succeeded the latter to the throne of Tirhut. And Viśvāsa Devī soon succeeded her husband Raja Padma Siṃha. See, *Śaivasarvasvasāra*, edited by Indrakant Jha, Patna: Maithili Academy, 1979, pp. 4–6. Henceforth cited as *Śaivasarvasvasāra*.

[12] Juzjānī, for example, thought that Raziyyā lacked the 'good fortune of being counted amongst men'; see Minhāj-i Sirāj Jūzjānī, *Tabaqāt-i Nāśiri*, edited by Abdul Hay Habibi (Kabul: Anjuman-i Tarikh-i Afghanistan, 1963–64), p. 457, cited in Sunil Kumar, *Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate, 1192–1286*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007, p. 260. Less explicitly, yet to a great extent, Vidyapati attributed traits to Viśvāsa Devī in the beginning of *Śaivasarvasvasāra*, which he would associate with men in *Puruṣa Parīkṣā*. See, *Śaivasarvasvasāra*, pp. 6–8.

[13] It is a different matter altogether that historians of Mughal state often celebrate the apparently cosmopolitan and universally inclusive character of its nobility without bothering to so much as mention that no woman could ever hope to be a mansabdar.

[14] *Parāśrayeṇa jīvanti kātarāḥ śiśavaḥ striyah?*
siṃhāh satpuruṣāścaiva nijadarpopajīvinaḥ. See, *PP*, p. 20. Another śloka about women's destiny also expressed similar sentiments. See, *PP*, p. 56.

Yet, the possibilities for the 'less than male' were much wider than those for the women. While women were repeatedly noted to be constrained by their ineffable nature, failings of men were due to inclement circumstances. A queen in the story about the bright one (*sapratibha kathā*) has this to say:

> A man's predicament might be condemnable, not he himself
> Due to her son's virtues, a woman is called the bearer of gems.[15]

Indeed, the best of men still needed to be cautious while dealing with women in their lives. For,

> Marked by turbulence and intensity, illusions and delusions
>
> Women and river have identical characters.
>
> Always disposed to go down, even if you take them up along a higher path
>
> They will keep going lower and lower down without effort.[16]

Indeed, even a man with all the manly qualities might not be man enough if he could not resist being subdued by the charms of a woman. The śloka cited above actually occurs in the context of a *pratyudāharaṇa kathā* i.e., 'counter-example story' about a *ghasmara* who is defined as 'a man who in spite of being valorous, intelligent and learned is fettered by the feminine charm and is under the control of a woman'.

While all the stories of *PP* seek to illustrate, through *udāharaṇa kathā*, how to be a real man, and through the *pratyudāharaṇa kathā*, how not to be one, there is no dearth of descriptive and didactic observations about women. All the stereotypes associated with women, and more, can be found. Thus her sexual appetite is interminable and

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[15] *PP*, p. 60.

[16] The śloka is recited incidentally by the Lord of the Yavanas, Sihābuddin Shāh (aka Mohammad Shihābuddin Ghori) who armed with this wisdom proceeds to use his rival Jayacandra's wife and chief queen in order to defeat him. See, "*Atha Ghasmara Kathā*", in *PP*, pp. 218–30.

eight times that of men;[17] she would do anything to seduce a man once she was seized with desire;[19] she would laugh at the cowardly men while for a 'manly' man, she was always a game; in fact, they were almost represented as fruits of masculinity, trophies to be won;[19] that the true power of a woman lay in her chastity if she was unmarried and in her fidelity if she was married;[20] and so on and so forth. While *Puruṣa Parīkṣā* refrains from explicitly laying out the ostensibly positive details of the woman's burden in this gendered division of duties and traits, the *Likhanāvalī* does briefly touch upon it. Thus, a model letter written by a traveling young man to his mother at home makes it a point to mention the nurturing role of mother and compares her with Ganga.[21] Another letter written by the mother of a young woman advises her thus:

> [W]e have heard reports of your ill-repute on account of dissatisfaction with sister-in-law [*nananda*, i.e., husband's sister] and quarrels with the rival wife. That distresses us. Though daughters—children are always a source of anxiety for parents, yet we cannot hear (i.e., it is painful to hear) so many stories so unbecoming of you who is [otherwise] so very virtuous, expert in household work and devoted to Guru. Even if the sister-in-law is vicious, co-wife is jealous and ill-disposed towards you; still you should give up garrulity and conduct yourself according to your own nature. Indeed, humility helps in both the worlds and brings good fortune. Be devoted to your lord (i.e., husband) and follow his instructions every moment.[22]

That our author kept the women confined to the household and primarily focused on their supporting role to male folks within the family

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[17] See *PP*, "*atha dhūrta kathā*" (the story of the cunning one), p. 216.

[18] *PP*, "*atha nispṛha kathā*" (the story of the abstinent), pp. 236–44.

[19] *PP*, p. 51 and p. 77.

[20] However, such women, referred as *satī*, were rare, and were usually found only one in a thousand. See, *PP*, pp. 110–14.

[21] *Likhanāvalī*, p. 5.

[22] *Likhanāvalī*, pp. 27–28.

is hardly surprising. And of course, neither *Puruṣa Parīkṣā* nor *Likhanāvalī* recognized the clear tension between believing that women were incorrigible by nature and simultaneously prescribing a whole set of virtuous conduct for them. More interesting for us however, is the fact that the conduct of women was often framed in the context of political and social order and not merely in terms of simply awarding or denying character certificates to individual women. Two very different stories vividly illustrate the point.

The first one is ostensibly about the infallible wisdom of a Brahmin learned in the Vedas wherein a Raja of Avanti, besotted with sexual desire for a Vaṇik woman relentlessly pursued her. When all his machinations failed in the face of the resolutely *pativratā* and satī woman, he tried to bring her down by accusing her of adultery. When the vedavijña Brahmin publicly demonstrated the innocence of the woman, the Raja faced ignominy and could save himself and his kingdom only after he fell at the feet of the Brahmin (not at the feet of the woman) and apologized.[23] Even more instructive is Vidyapati's version of the story about how Jayacandra of Kānyakubja lost his kingdom to the Lord of the Yavanas, the ruler of Yoginipura (i.e., Delhi) Sahāvdīna. When Sahāvdīna was faced with repeated defeats in battle after battle with Jayacandra, he conspired to target the Chief Queen of Jayacandra. Even though Jayacandra was blessed with an extraordinarily loyal and learned minister by the name of Vidyādhara, the latter could not save his kingdom since the queen herself had turned disloyal. In fact, Sahāvdīna too was made to dump the queen and kill her. The story ended with a couplet:

> Women are a means for fun, love her and treat her like a beloved
>
> Prohibited it is to be under their control, else your misery is assured[24]

What the śloka did not specify but several stories repeatedly asserted was that the gender specific conduct was a necessary condition

[23] *PP*, pp. 110–14.

[24] *PP*, p. 230.

not just for individual happiness but also for social order and political stability. At stake in the story cited above is not the historical veracity of Vidyapati's retelling of the well-known incident: more insightful is the way our author molded the story to suit his own didactic agenda and inscribe a gendered political lesson.

IV

The ideal political domain for Vidyapati was exclusionary in other respects as well. His incredibly elaborate inventory of manly traits was not represented as accessible to any and every man. In fact, only men of certain social standing determined by birth might aspire to the qualities outlined in *Puruṣa Parīkṣā*. Other men and all women were mere props for the privileged few who had the opportunity and the ritual sanction to cultivate such virtues as the stories held aloft. Consider the fact that in each of the *udāharaṇa kathās* of the book, the protagonist with illustrious character was an upper caste man: roughly half of them were brahmins, a quarter were Rajputs while the rest were either vaiśyas or of unidentifiable ritual status. In the *pratyudāharaṇa kathās* (wherein a counter example is given simply to demonstrate the opposite of prescribed conduct), on the other hand, the protagonists included characters from varied social background.

A story about the 'back-biting' kind, set during the reign of Candragupta Maurya, illustrated the author's essentialist perception about caste/varṇa and endogamy. Here's a summary of the story: A boy was born to a poor brahmin couple. But his father died early and his mother was forced to abandon him. A vaṇik neighbour named Somadutta took pity on him and brought him up. He got his saṃsakāras done by a Brahmin and arranged for a Kāyastha to teach him. However, a Buddhist monk who saw the boy recited the following śloka:

> Born to mean brahmin parentage, fed by a vaṇik's bread
> Educated by a kāyastha, he will be mean-minded.[25]

[25] '*kṣudrabuddhi*' is the word. See, *PP*, p. 84.

When the brahmin boy grew up and started receiving generous patronage from the court, instead of being grateful to the vaṇik he started extorting money from the latter by invoking his new-found power and position. While the Vaṇik was reduced to penury, the brahmin boy became even more ambitious and started making disparaging remarks about the famous minister, Rākṣasa to the king and vice versa. However, the clever minister and the king discovered the boy's ploy to create mistrust between them. But the story did not end here. 'Going by his conduct', said Raja Candragupta, 'it appears that he must be an illegitimate child (*jārajoyamiti*, literally 'born to someone else', i.e., by someone other than his mother's duly wed husband)'. On further enquiry, the Raja proved to be right, as the boy's mother admitted that he was born not of her Brahmin husband but a Cāṇḍāla who had once sneaked into her hut.

It is not difficult to see that this is a cleverly crafted story. The Buddhist monk was at least partially right so far as the boy's character was concerned. However, use of the phrase, 'mean Brahmin parentage (*hīna-dvija-kule*)' by the monk proved to be misplaced, as the author revealed in the end that Kṣudrabuddhi was actually born to a Cāṇḍāla father.[26] A more interesting irony in the story is the fact that it is the famously 'low-born' Candragupta Maurya who insisted on finding out the parentage of the boy.

Elsewhere, Candragupta is referred as a Vṛṣala or an outcaste and his ascendance to the throne of Kusumapura is credited entirely to the avenging Brahmin Cāṇakya. In fact, in the entire story about the *ubhayavidya* (i.e., one learned both in Vedas and folk wisdom), Candragupta is rarely mentioned except as an incidental recipient of the brahmin's grace.[27] It is also probable that the author of *Puruṣa*

[26] It would appear that this was almost a formulaic ploy in stories to discover the lowly origins of a man after he was found to have conducted himself in an immoral manner. Nizamuddin Auliya's malfuz, *Fawai'd al Fua'ad* has a similar story about a Sayyid's son from a slave girl whose conduct was unbecoming of his Sayyid provenance. It was later found that the slave girl had cohabited with another slave. See, Amir Hasan Sizji, *Fawai'd al Fua'ad*, translated into English by Bruce Lawrence, New York: Paulist Press, 1992, p. 352.

[27] See, *'atha-ubhayavidyakathā'*, *PP*, pp. 122–28.

Parīkṣā used the uncommon word Vṛṣala for Candragupta, instead of the more common Śūdra or *antyaja*, not just because that was the word[28] used by Cānakya for Candragupta but also because the latter words immediately conjured up images of the ritually impure.

Clearly the fact of Candragupta's position as a king, as a piece of history (much like the reign of Viśvāsa Devī) stood embarrassingly beyond the pale of Vidyapati's didactic disposition. Hence, the laboured attempt, on the part of the author, to place the agency elsewhere and sanitize the story to carry a favourable lesson.

If we set aside the testimony of *Puruṣa Parīkṣā* for a moment and turn to *Likhanāvalī*, we also come across a different kind of hierarchy: one that is operative in the politico-administrative domain. The very structure of *Likhanāvalī* follows a pattern that reveals this official ladder: the first three letters are addressed to a brahmin preceptor by Brahmin disciples and a king respectively; this is followed by the next three letters to father, mother and elder brother; and this is followed by a series of letters addressed to the king, which in turn was followed by some addressed to a minister and so on. As I have argued in a forthcoming paper, the whole text of *Likhanāvalī* might be read as a reflection on a series of relationships that are either political or perceived as crucial for political harmony. So far as caste/varṇa is concerned, the fault line that emerges is just one: that between the Śūdras on the one hand and the rest of the society on the other. Śūdras in fact were nonchalantly described as a subhuman slave category especially in the fourth section (that related to business transactions) but also occasionally in the first three. Here is, for example, my translation of a letter written presumably by an upper caste man to his elder brother:

> May it be well. To the most adorable elder brother, a tree-like resting place for affection and care, comparable to father, Thakkura Śrī so and so goes this letter from so and so village, by Śrī so and so conveying a hundred salutations. By the boundless affection of the respectable brother's feet,

[28] See V.S. Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit–English Dictionary*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965, p. 386.

> all is well here. [I] wish all is well there [too]. Matter is that I cannot disobey the order you gave to free the fettered Śūdra even though he wishes harm [to me] and even though I had tied him up in great anger and with a purpose, hence he was freed the moment I saw your writing. So, therefore, [kindly] do not renounce the flow of affection towards my ever-obedient self.[29]

Indeed, compared to *Puruṣa Parīkṣā, Likhanāvalī* is an elusively simple text that claims to do no more than teach how to write certain kind of letters, and appears merely to describe what the author saw and took for granted. The letters lack the melodramatic quality of an unfolding suspense that most stories of *PP* exhibit. Nor do these model missives have the palpably oral texture that give the tales of *PP* the quality of being grounded in lived experience. Yet, a careful reading of the letters and documents of *Likhanāvalī* may be equally useful. Here's a document from the fourth section, titled *vyavahara likhanāni* or 'Conduct Related Writing' of *Likhanāvalī*:

> Siddhiḥ. In the year two hundred and ninety-nine of the erstwhile King Shri Lakṣmaṇa Senadeva in the tradition of the most revered kings, on Friday the fourteenth day of the bright moon in the month of Bhādṛa, accordingly when written numerically in the sequence of month, fortnight, date and day — Lakṣmaṇa Era 299, Bhādṛa, bright moon, on 14th, the Friday. Further, in the realm of the most revered, adorned with all due procedures, light of good deeds, King of all the three lords [namely] the lord of horses, the lord of elephants and the lord of men, served by thousands of kings, recipient of the grace of Khudā, lauded by panegyrics, Great Sultan Sah's subordinate, Śrī so and so, with all due procedures, Nārāyaṇa-like for the Kaṃsa enemies, committed to the devotion of Śiva, a man of character and light of good deeds, in his kingdom of Tirhut, in the country of Ratnapura, subdivision of Mīgo and village Mimbrā, Śrī so and so Dutta puts in his money for buying male and female

[29] *Likhanāvalī*, p. 6.

> Śūdras. The recipient of this money, needy Raut Shri so and so sold his slave [*dāsaṃ*] of Kevaṭa caste, forty-four years old, dark complexioned, named so and so for Rupees six Taṃkas, similarly his wife [i.e., the slave's wife who is] thirty years old and fair complexioned named so and so for Rupees four Taṃkas, similarly their son — sixteen years old and fair complexioned named so and so for Rupees three Taṃkas, and similarly their daughter, eight years old, dark complexioned named so and so,[30] to look after the cows and perform other duties[31] for the affluent one [i.e. the purchaser] for the duration of the moon and the sun [i.e., forever]. Hereby sold male and female Śūdras 4; sale amount 14. For the performance of miscellaneous duties, due from both parties — 2 each. At the residence of the affluent one, these Śūdras will plough the land, clear the left-overs, fetch water, carry the palanquin and perform all other chores. If ever they flee away, they will be brought back to slavery with this deed as proof [of legitimate claim over them] even if they are hiding beneath the Royal throne. Witness for the purpose are Devadutta, Yajñadutta, Vishṇumitra, etc. and it was written by the Kāyastha Śrī so and so with permission of both parties. Payment due for writing, equally from both — Re 1 each. This is also the payment voucher for the sum of Rupees 14 Taṃkas as sale amount. Money received after due verification [for which] the witnesses are the same as for this deed.[32]

This is only one of the several deeds that purport to record trade in humans. The manner of their trading is hardly different from the manner in which other 'commodities' were bought and sold.

In some senses, this document, probably the longest in *Likhanāvalī*, is also somewhat 'representative' of the text: in its longish

[30] No price for the eight-year-old daughter is mentioned. It is probably to be assumed that since the price for her father, mother and brother adds up to Rupees thirteen, the price paid for her is Rupee One.

[31] The term is *gotrāgotranivārakaṃ*.

[32] *Likhanāvalī*, pp. 42–43.

and stylized characterization of rulers, in painfully recording all the details of the transaction and in marking the political hierarchy by first referring to the Sultan and then to the subordinate Raja. One cannot miss the remarkable fact that though the transaction is dated, it still referred to the reigning Sultan as well as the chieftain. This reference was not meant simply to mark time, but probably to invoke the weight of the state behind the terms of the transaction. The legitimacy of the transaction perhaps also lay in the fact that it was 'duly documented'. Hence the clear assertion that if the sold Śūdras tried to flee, 'they will be brought back to slavery with this deed as proof even if they were hiding beneath the Royal throne' (emphasis mine).

Clearly, from the high pedestal on which the author seated himself, the Śūdras appeared merely as sub-human labouring machines, hardly the kind who could aspire to be a real man, the long list of whose qualities were difficult enough to achieve even for those who had the required opportunity, ritual sanction and material means. Once we understand this, it becomes easier for us to account for the evocative Śloka in the opening story of *Puruṣa Parīkṣā* that at first sight appeared mouthwateringly liberal and even anti-caste:

> Vīraḥ śaurya vivekābhyāṃ utsāhen ca maṇḍitaḥ
> Mātāpitṛoalaṃkṛtu kule kutrāpi jāyate
>
> He who is adorned with bravery, discretion and enthusiasm
> is a man of valour
> Earning glories for their parents, they might be born to
> whatever parentage.

It is still interesting that the author was careful to use the phrase 'kule kutrāpi jāyate' only in the context of a *vīra puruṣa*, i.e., the valorous one, valour being one of the three virtues that he expected in a 'real' man. For the other two traits, namely intelligence and learning, the field was probably not so wide open.

This is not, however, simply to prove that a brahmin courtier of fifteenth century believed in caste/varṇa hierarchy and that he treated politics as a sport played among men, preferably real men. For, that

will amount to labouring the obvious. What is more interesting is the manner in which Vidyapati represented the norms of gender and caste almost always in the context of political power. We have already examined his construction of gender and caste. Let us briefly consider the author's notion of state and political power as it is formulated and expressed in *Puruṣa Parīkṣā* and *Likhanāvalī*.

V

Let me admit at the very start that it is extremely difficult to isolate the author's views on state and politics, in the way we modernists would prefer, from a bunch of homilies on a host of other themes like sin *(pāpa)*, meritorious conduct (*puṇya*), kindness (*dayā*), even apart from caste/varṇa and gender. This difficulty, at least partially, might be a result of the genre of the two texts we are considering. Stories and model letters cannot be expected to present an exposition of any idea in a sustained manner. Yet, political power, even state is ubiquitous in both the texts. Almost every single story in *Puruṣa Parīkṣā* for example is framed either in the backdrop of a state or more directly in terms of how the conduct of a political agent (a king, prince, minister or courtier) can help or harm the interest of the state. To a great extent, this is also true of *Likhanāvalī*, in which a majority of letters is exchanged between political agents and often carry substantive ideas about prescribed and prohibited political conduct. The very first letter written by a king to a priest of Vīreśvara temple in Varanasi 'whose inner being has been purified by the ultimate wisdom of the Vedic doctrines', lists the reasons for his own (i.e., the king's) contentment in a way that might as well be read as a check list of conditions for political stability of a state:

> With the grace of Your feet and by the blessings sent [by you], we are all well and [there is] happiness in our family, good conduct prevails in the realm, army is powerful, attendants are sinless (loyal?), enemies' morale is low and the treasure is flawless, and so [I am in a position to] embrace happiness and peace.[33]

[33] *Likhanāvalī*, letter no. 3, p. 3.

Elsewhere, the king is approvingly addressed as 'full of mercy, charity, moral propriety, discretion and other qualities worthy of a ruler'.[34] Yet another letter counted the qualities of a minister of war and peace as one 'accomplished in the six skills of alliance, antagonism, invasion, firm opportunism, strategic ambivalence and tactical retreat (or refuge).[35] One who overcomes the impact of wrong-doing [in the realm] through his aggressive pursuit of justice,[36] careful in [cultivating] the three basis of mokṣa, deft at defending and aiding to the royal treasure, bright and magnificent, soft in speech and tough in acts, discerning in [giving] advice, informed about secrets of the opponent, discreet in [performing] his duties', and so on.[37] Both texts frequently refer to the king as a giver of sustenance, an expression that *Likhanāvalī* also used for father. If the king did not perform his duties as per norms, all sorts of prohibited conduct could flourish. Loyalty to the king is counted as a virtue, but deposing the king is also allowed in specific circumstances. Reclamation of deserted land for agriculture, looking for new variety of seeds, mobilizing experienced and skilled soldiers of high ancestry, punishing erring officials, etc. are all counted as desirable initiatives that a state could take.

One could go on stitching together Vidyapati's views on statecraft with the help of the two texts. However, that would be a separate exercise in itself and outside of the scope of this paper. I am more interested here in looking at how these expressions could be inflected by the genre of the text. More importantly, I want to explore the way Vidyapati wove together notions of social and perhaps 'religious' propriety with political power. For, that can help us (a) understand how caste and gender could constitute such important building blocks for apparently 'secular' pursuit of power and (b) engage with contentious arguments among scholars about the status, if any, of secularism and religion in pre-modern India.

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[34] *Likhanāvalī*, letter no. 10, p. 8.

[35] *Saṃdhi* (alliance), *vigrah* (antogonism), *yāna* (attack), *āsana* (waiting still for an opportunity to act), *dvaidha* (policy of playing off an enemy against a friend or vice versa), *āśraya* (taking temporary refuge with a powerful opponent for tactical reasons, especially if the opponent is at war with another enemy).

[36] *pracaṇḍadaṇḍanītinirākṛta-sakala-durvvṛtta-prabhāveṣu*

[37] *Likhanāvalī*, letter no. 12, pp. 10–11.

Predictably, *Likhanāvalī* often articulated the ideas about political conduct in neat formulaic expressions that probably were short hands referring to established ideas. *Puruṣa Parīkṣā*, on the other hand, got itself into clumsier terrain, often putting its precepts in the laboratory of history under testing circumstances to drive home probably some of the same points that find mention in *Likhanāvalī*. In the stories narrated in the former text, the political prescriptives could be challenged in a more dialogical context where the author got an opportunity to elaborate on the details of, and occasionally, even the rationale behind its beliefs.

The story about the repentant one[38] provided an interesting take on the whole question of the source and limits of political power. King Ratnāṃgada of Kampila, the story went, was disposed to be unjust.[39] The reader is warned about the bad consequences that such disposition holds for the fate of the king and his subjects through a series of ślokas, one of which I reproduce here:

> When women turn immoral and kings turn away from dharma
> What is not possible then, it is as if an elephant has gone mad.

All the king's ministers deliberated over the issue. Reluctant to commit the sin of sedition, they invited sages to preach the path of righteous conduct[40] to the king. When the sages tried to persuade the king to give up the path of sin and pursue religious merit,[41] the king asked, 'What is religious merit?' The answer that the sages gave may not, to begin with, justify my translation of the word 'puṇya' as 'religious merit'. The sages said, 'Puṇya is the fruit of staying away from committing violence or coveting other's possessions, etc. and being inclined to kindness, generosity, providing for subjects, conducting yajñas and vṛtas, etc. and generally acting in accordance with the knowledge contained in Vedas.' The king asked, 'What comes out of that [i.e., such conduct]?' The sages replied (and now my translation

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[38] *anuśayīka kathā*
[39] *anyāya pravṛtto babhūva*
[40] *Dharmopadeśaḥ*
[41] *pāpe nivṛtaḥ puṇyaṃ kuru*

acquires some justification), 'That helps accomplish the triumvirate.'[42] The Raja retorted, 'Where is the proof [of that]?' 'Vedas are the proof, God is the promulgator [*vedāḥ pramāṇaṃ, parameśvaraḥ praṇeta*]', replied the sages. The king said, 'How can the Vedas be His creation, when God himself is nonexistent? If He existed, He would have showed up,[43] I could have seen Him too. If He does not show up, then He does not exist. You are all respected sages, why are you pestering me with such fallacies? If you say [these things] again, you will attract punishment.' Thus snubbed, the sages went away. The 'ministers and soldiers' deposed the king and brought in his younger brother instead, and so on. But the rest of the story does not concern us here. In some senses, this is an exceptionable story inasmuch as it hinges the authority of the Vedas not on their practical utility so much as on their divine provenance. In doing so, the story inhabits an episteme that is simultaneously secular and religious. To us modernists, this story, especially the conversation reproduced therefrom, may appear incongruous in the larger scheme of *Puruṣa Parīkṣā.* It is doubtful if that would have been the case for a reader of the text in 15th or for that matter even in the 17th century.

However, this is not to say that no distinction could be made in the pre- or early modern period between explicitly '*religious*' and the *laukik*. On the contrary, the very existence of terms like *laukik* and *alaukik* indicates that such distinctions were made and even respected. Indeed the distinction between texts in the *nīti* tradition and those in the *dharmaśāstra* tradition is hardly challenged by my reading of *Puruṣa Parīkṣā.*[44] Rather, it suggests that Vidyapati's claim of writing it so that 'the young might appreciate *naya*' was not far from truth. However, his was an atypical text on *nīti* in the form of an *udāharaṇa kathā.* Because *Puruṣa Parīkṣā* laid down its *nīti* through 'real life stories', it also in a way exposed the extent to which in the lived world,

[42] *'trivargaḥ sādhyate'*. The *trivarga* presumably refers to '*artha, mokṣa* and *kāma*', i.e., profit, pleasure and salvation.

[43] *upalabhyate*, literally, 'would have been available/perceivable'.

[44] For an extremely interesting and largely persuasive discussion of the whole issue in the context of Telugu-speaking region, see V.N. Rao and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Notes on Political Thought in Medieval and Early Modern South India", *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 43 (2009), no. 1, pp. 175–210.

as against the neater division of textual traditions, *nīti* was undergirded by dharma precepts. It is also interesting in this context that unlike a typical text on *nīti*, *Puruṣa Parīkṣā* does deal, in some detail, not just with *artha* and *kāma* but also with the other two fruits of *puruṣārtha* namely dharma and *mokṣa*. Once we understand this, it becomes possible for us to account for the fact that *Puruṣa Parīkṣā* managed to explicitly lay out its precepts about distinct (and discriminatory) gender and caste roles and weave them together with its ideas about politics and statecraft. If we posit political power in the broader (both modern and post-modern) sense then it is easy to see that dharma sanctioned gender and varṇa categories themselves become a source of authority. Yet, since the overarching epistemological structure of both *Puruṣa Parīkṣā* and *Likhanāvalī* is marked by primarily secular and *laukik* concerns and since it took many its 'social' precepts for granted as we have seen, Vidyapati could treat gender, varṇa and state as part of a continuum, a singular domain of socio-political order. Hence, in spite of all measures of discrimination, this text on *nīti* could still claim to be universalistic in its reach, through a complex discourse in which it was possible 'legitimately' to chant '*kule kutrāpi jāyate*' and still stick to a strict ritual regime.

VI

Equally significant here is the question of the other authority, the authority that our author Vidyapati was trying to exercise in giving legitimacy to his own ideas, whatever they were. That would bring us to the layered epistemological basis for producing the knowledge on *puruṣārtha* and *nīti*. What was the basis for Vidyapati to make the claims about gender, caste and politics that he did? Wherefrom did the author himself derive his authority? Let us, for a moment, go back to the opening story of *Puruṣa Parīkṣā* with which we started. For, that is the only story that Vidyapati tells us directly. He attributed the other stories to the character Subuddhi, a *muni* or sage. Where did the sage's knowledge come from? We saw that Raja Parāvara stopped him from drawing upon the truths of Kṛtayuga, Tretāyuga or Dvāpariyuga. Was not the truth of Kaliyuga different from the earlier yugas: '*na vā satyaṃ*'? Nor did the sage claim to base his ideas in Śaiva, Vaiśnava, Buddhist or any other sectarian philosophy. Just in

case, the reader/listener failed to notice the non-sectarian basis of the sage's pronouncements, the author reasserted the fact again through a conversation between Sage Subuddhi and Raja Parāvara at the beginning of the fourth section.[45]

Having finished his exposition of the different types of valour, intelligence and learning, as Sage Subuddhi prepared to elaborate on the fruits of *puruṣārtha*, the Raja expressed doubts. There were, said the Raja, Buddhists and there were the followers of Vedas and there were others too. All of them get into verbal disputations and it was natural for them to try and disprove each other. What should a mere mortal do? Even the intelligent might find it difficult to steady one's faith in any one of them. Subuddhi's response was twofold. First, he said that in whatever family and tradition the Almighty caused you to be born, you should follow that tradition. Wasn't there only one God? And if there is any discrepancy in your conduct even after that, then only God was responsible. But the sage was quick to add, in what might appear to be a volte-face that in reality the path shown by the Vedas was the most enlightened one. Is it possible to resolve the contradiction in his assertions? Was the Sage simply following his own dharma by preaching the faith of his ancestors? How did he justify this? The path of the Vedas, he went on, was the best because of three reasons: (a) Intelligent and logically thinking people had traversed this path: *yen gacchanti dhīmantaḥ tarkanisṇāta buddhayaḥ*; (b) There was evidence that the predictions of astrological, astronomical and other such sciences were true; and (c) a close linguistic examination (*anvaya-vyatirekābhyāṃ*) yields quick results and its meaning, message and sentence (*artha-saṃvādi-vākyaṃ*) all prove to be of practical value.[46]

No reference, one notes, was made (unlike in the story cited above about the Repentant One) to Vedas being the revealed word of God or any other claim from the realm of faith. Actual physical corroboration,

[45] This section claims to deal with the fruits of *puruṣārtha* since the characteristics of *puruṣārtha* were already described and illustrated in the first three sections.

[46] *PP*, pp. 162–164.

practical aspects derived through linguistic analysis and the example set by 'logically thinking men' were the three reasons cited for the supreme authority of the Vedas. As for the differences amongst the followers of Vedas, the sage said, the difference is only in the names (*nāmni eva bhinna mahaḥ*). For the sages have already determined, by logic, that there is only one god in this world (*nirṇīta munibhiḥ satarka matibhiḥ ca et viśvaṃ ekeśvaraṃ*).[47]

Can we say, then, that our author anchored the authority of the Sage in the Vedas and in logic, fully cognizant also of the fact that the Vedas did not merely denote the four famous tomes but was a short hand for a whole variety of literature of ancient times? Were the Vedas supreme only because their knowledge could yield tangible and desirable results? Let me briefly get into another story, probably the most complex story of our text:

> Once upon a time, there lived Raja Vikramāditya in the city of Ujjayinī. One day, a certain brahmin came to the gates [of his palace]. The brahmin said:
>
> Never should a raja give up the holy task of providing for the subjects,
>
> More so if the subject is a miserable brahmin suffering from an ailment.
>
> Hence, His Highness must protect me, a miserable and ailing brahmin. The raja's heart was filled with pity upon seeing the brahmin in that condition. Curious as to what will happen to the brahmin, the raja said to Varāha, an expert in astrology, 'O, Varāha! Will the brahmin survive?' Varāha

[47] Interestingly, another composition of Vidyapati by the title of *Vibhāgasāra* also has an interesting conversation, at the very beginning of the text, between Śiva and Viṣṇu over the possession of Ganga. The message of that short conversation is also similar to the one put in the mouth of Subuddhi in *Puruṣa Parīkṣā*. See, Vidyapati, *Vibhāgasāra*, edited by Govind Jha, Patna: Maithili Academy, 1976, p. 39.

said, 'He will be cured without having to take liquor (*madyapāna*). He will live for the duration of a man's age [i.e., for hundred years].' On hearing this, the raja thought, 'Being learned in Śāstras, what on earth is he saying? How can he rule out something that has not even been mentioned? Where is the context for the Brahmin drinking liquor? Alright, let's see'.

The raja called for a Vaidya by the name of Hariścandra and asked, 'What is his ailment and what is the cure for it?' The Vaidya said, 'It is the Brahmakīṭa and there is no antidote for it'. The Raja said, 'The Almighty would not provide the medicine for a disease? That is not possible'. The Vaidya said, 'The Brahmakīṭa gnaws at the flesh in his head, that is why he is going crazy with pain. The Brahmakīṭa does not burn in fire; iron cannot cut it; water cannot dissolve it; it is killed only by alcohol. Hence, alcohol is the medicine for it'. The Raja touched his ears and said, 'Yuck! Do not say another word, such a sin! You will offer alcohol to a brahmin?' 'Without that he will not survive,' said the Vaidya, 'that is for sure'.

Raja was most committed to dharma and keen to alleviate others' pain: he called for Ācārya Śabarasvāmī,[48] learned in the Dharmaśāstras and asked, 'What is permitted [under the circumstances]?' The Acārya said, 'If the disease cannot be cured by any other means; if the Vaidya is absolutely sure about it, then the brahmin will not fall from grace upon drinking alcohol'. The Vaidya said, 'If he is cured by any means other than taking alcohol, then the sin will be mine'. Having understood that both were pretty sure about their

[48] It is not clear if this is the same Śabara who famously wrote a commentary on *Purvamīmāṃsāsūtra* in ancient period. See, Sheldon Pollock, "The Languages of Science in Early Modern India", in *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia: Explorations in the Intellectual History of India and Tibet, 1500–1800*, edited by Sheldon Pollock. New Delhi: Manohar, 2011, p. 36 & endnote no. 52.

> own knowledge of their Śāstras, the Raja instructed the brahmin to drink alcohol. As alcohol was brought in, a voice from the sky proclaimed, 'O, Śabara! Don't you dare'. Śabarasvāmī insisted, 'O, brahmin! Go ahead and take the drink. The god of the speech is expert merely in the sum of letters, phrases and sentences. Where is His understanding of Dharma's rulings?' Later on, flowers were showered on Śabarasvāmī's head.
>
> Overwhelmed, the Raja and the courtiers put their trust in Śabarasvāmī and gave alcohol to the brahmin. All his life, the brahmin had never even tasted alcohol. As a result, the brahmakīṭa fell to the ground by the sheer smell of the substance. (The brahmin did not have to even take a sip.). To test the veracity of the Vaidya's assertion, the Raja threw the brahmakīṭa into fire. Yet, the worm did not burn in fire, nor did it dissolve in water, nor could it be cut with iron. But it dissolved in a drop of alcohol. Seeing this, everyone was amazed.[49]

It is pertinent to note that this story is an illustration of the Śāstravijña (i.e., one learned in the Śāstras) and not of the Vedavijña (i.e., one learned in the Vedas) for which there is a separate story. Yet, as we saw earlier, the author cited the tangible truths of astronomy, astrology, etc., as a proof of the veracity of the Vedas. What we cannot of course fail to notice is the momentary clash between the gods in the skies and the apparently logical and practical wisdom of the learned man, Śabarasvāmī, which was resolved in favour of the latter. The truth of the Śāstras and the Vedas, in the epistemological world of Vidyapati had to be demonstrated empirically, if need be, even in the face of the Gods. The author deployed both logic as well as empirical veracity to prove the truth of his homilies. To be sure, he also invoked the authority of the Vedas, but only after reassuring the readers/listeners that the Vedavākya was in line with the thoughts of logically thinking men and empirical evidence.

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[49] *Śāstravidyakathā*, *PP*, pp. 104–108.

Yet, we cannot miss the fact that there was another source of authority that the Sage Subuddhi and the author Vidyapati Thakkura used to buttress their arguments. This was the authority of history or more appropriately *itihāsa*. The choice of the genre of '*udāharaṇa kathā*' could not have been incidental. *Udāharaṇa* was known in Sanskrit literature primarily as a branch of *itihāsa* (and I hesitate to translate that contentious word.). Kautilya in *Arthaśāstra* for example, thus defined *itihāsa*: '*purāṇaṃ itivṛttam ākhyāyikā udāharaṇaṃ dharmaśāstraṃ arthaśāstraṃ ca itihāsaḥ*', i.e., *itihāsa* is ancient stories, recent history, traditional biographical narratives, stories as examples, didactic texts and political narratives.[50] The fact that Sage Subuddhi claimed to have learnt his lessons from an examination of past went well with the genre of *udāharaṇa kathā* in which he was himself a character.

As we saw, Vidyapati articulated his political ideals through a discourse on *puruṣārtha*. The fact that a ritual hierarchy presumed to be axiomatic underpinned the discourse on *puruṣārtha* indicates that in the lived world of 15th century, the discriminatory regimes of gender, varṇa and politics could be expressed and probably experienced as part of an apparently single continuum of contingent knowledge masquerading as common sense derived from an examination of this-worldly past. Vidyapati drew legitimacy for his ideas rather eclectically from the established tradition of the wisdom of a Sage, the authority of Vedas verified with the power of logic, even the perspicacity of a wandering Buddhist monk. But most of all he yoked his teachings to an examination of a past that was, at least conceptually not very distant. In doing so, he appealed to his readers' common sense more than anything else. A literary device that helped him accomplish the enterprise was the tradition of 'subhāṣita' in Sanskrit literature.

In fact, the whole text of *Puruṣa Parīkṣā*, and occasionally even *Likhanāvalī*, is liberally sprinkled with couplets of unidentifiable origin. These were drawn from the free-floating reserve of an ever-growing śloka tradition, called *subhāṣita*, literally 'well said' and denoting a

[50] Kautilya, *Arthaśāstra*: I, 6, quoted in Introduction to *Rājanīti Ratnākara* by K.P. Jayaswal, Patna: Bihar and Orissa Research Society, 1936, p. 27.

'witty saying' or an aphorism. *Subhāṣitas* belonged both to the folk as well as to the classical tradition, or more appropriately, to a classical rendering of the folk traditions. They represented no particular ideology as such and somewhat like Hindi film songs of today, you could find just about any idea expressed in them. In case, you could not, you could always resort to composing one yourself and simply represent it as part of *subhāṣita*. As such *subhāṣita* represented, not a defined set of ideas but an open-ended, ever growing literary genre: any beautifully crafted Sanskrit couplet was a *subhāṣita*.

VII

By Way of Conclusion

Thus the varied literary traditions of Sanskrit, among other things, helped Vidyapati set aside his own Śaiva predilections and claim that his ideas about *puruṣārtha* or *nīti* were not anchored in any sectarian ideology. In matters of secular law and public morality, he insisted on a higher truth beyond the sectarian quibbles of Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism, Buddhism and so on. His protagonists could receive their share of divine grace from Śiva, Nārāyaṇa, Buddha or Khodā as we saw in one of the letters from Likhanāvalī. So long as the secular power was duly constituted through all established procedures, i.e., the ruler was understood to be *samasta-prakriyā-virājamān*, it did not matter. The phrase, *samasta-prakriyā-virājamān* occurs in *Likhanāvalī* almost every time a Raja or a chieftain or even a minister is mentioned.

It is tempting to think of Vidyapati as a great secular thinker of the 15th century presaging Abu'l Fazl and Dara Shikoh and all the others. But that would be a lazy conclusion to draw that can short-circuit an examination of all that 15th century might hold in store for historians used to skipping the period in embarrassed haste. I would rather rest my case noting a couple of interesting omissions in the texts I have referred to and a question that can help us take the story further. Here are the omissions first:

1. One of the first things one is likely to hear as part of praise of a 'man's personality' in Mithila today (more so if it is about a bride-groom) is how tall he is, how sharp his nose is, or how

fair complexioned is his skin and so forth alongside of course how much he earns. But, enumerating the qualities that constituted exemplary manliness to a marriageable girl's father, even if he was a king, Vidyapati never mentioned any physical quality at all as part of manliness, not the colour of skin, not height, nor any other aspect of physical appearance or endurance. Nor did he directly mention prosperity, though he did occasionally refer to the skills necessary for making a living. Physical skills like archery were mentioned approvingly but he never referred to physical strength or stamina as a quality that a man must cultivate. Interestingly, dance did figure as a *vidyā*[51] though the context suggests that at least some ignorant men thought that dancing was a feminine art. I do not know how far this proved the premise about pre-colonial Indian masculinity in Ashis Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy*. At one level, this might be on account of the fact that the author was primarily concerned about *naya* and *nīti* and after the first story, he probably quickly forgot Raja Pārāvara's project of finding a suitable boy. But, the fact that even physical strength did not figure in his list of masculine qualities does indicate how far we have come. I am in fact reminded of the fact that even our Bollywood heroes up to the late Rajesh Khanna were never celebrated for physical strength.

2. It is interesting that kings are adorned with a variety of adjectives in *Likhanāvalī*: they are described as ferocious in battles, Indra like in their ability to command army, Krishna like for their Kaṃsa enemies and even Nārāyaṇa like in generosity or prowess. Never, however, is there a mention of Ram in any context. This is particularly noteworthy in the light of the fact that Sita was supposedly a daughter of Mithila and hence Mithila was the *sasurāl* of Ram. When, on the other hand, Vidyapati did mention Ram in *Śaivasarvasvasāra*, it was in the context of his humility (*vinayaṃ Rāmasya*) and not prowess. It reminded me of Sheldon Pollock and his famous article, "Ramayana and the Political Imagination".

[51] *PP*, pp. 140–142.

And finally a question that I guess I can engage with only after I have teamed up with a 'modernist' colleague:

An abridged version of *Puruṣa Parīkṣā* was published in 1911 for use in schools 'to replace the animal fables like *Pañcatantra* and *Hitopadeśa* and to provide young boys at school with an introduction to morals, but without the air of 'unreality' that pervaded the fables.[52] Accordingly, several study guides to the text was also published in subsequent years.' Soon it was to be included in the curriculum for the coveted ICS examination.[53] Of hundreds of didactic texts on ethics, politics, morality, dharma and the rest, why did the Colonial Government choose this text for their middle class subjects to learn their moral lessons from?

[52] Daud Ali, *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India*, Cambridge: CUP, 2004, p. 1.

[53] Madaneshvar Mishra, 'Prakāṣakīya', in *Vidyapatikṛt Puruṣa Parīkṣā*, edited by Surendra Jha Suman, Patna: Maithili Academy, 1988, p. i.

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Pankaj Kumar Jha teaches History at Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi, Delhi.

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