

## EXPLORING THE DIVERSE RELATIONSHIPS IN THE LIFE OF THE JAIN TRADER BANARASI DAS (1641CE-1690CE): A STUDY OF 'ARDHAKATHANAKA'

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### ABSTRACT

*Banarasi Das was a Jain merchant who lived in 17th-century Mughal India. His autobiography named "Ardhakathananaka" (Half a Tale) is the first autobiography written in the Indian language. In the larger context of historiography, the use of autobiography as a historical source is highly debated. The reading of an autobiography is essential to reconstruct the social and cultural life of people in pre-modern times which is absent from the standard "historical sources" we are referring like court chronicles. In contrast to modern autobiographies, this is a community-based understanding and representation of self. Here we attempt to look at the different layers of relationships he had in his life which is represented in his autobiography. The relationship between different institutions has always been studied in history. In that sense, we hope to find out the multiplicities and complexities involved in his different kinds of relations which ultimately shaped his life. This will hopefully provide a larger picture of pre-modern societies' moral ethics and relations between common people which is hardly available in other sources.*

*This scholarly endeavour attempts to highlight a range of social norms and moral relationships, principles made evident in the seminal story. It undertakes a systematic exploration outlining a thematic framework for understanding medieval Indian society, with a deep emphasis on the conduct of traders, prevailing social customs, alliances, and the principles of Jainism. This investigation carefully highlights the mixed aspects of the lives of middle-class men, including aspects such as scholarship, professional decisions, prosperity, family dynamics, domesticity, religious integration, rationality, Social Relationships, and self-discovery. Furthermore, this study is based on a brief examination of the Varanasiya sect within Jainism.*

**Keywords:** *Autobiography, Merchant ethics, family structure, emotions, feelings, Court Chronicles, Jain merchant, Relationships, Alliances*

### RELATION WITH STRANGERS

A question that may arise in the reader's mind is what might have triggered an ordinary merchant to compose his autobiography. The reason given by the author Banarsidas is fairly simple-

*I will now relate to you the story of my life because it occurred to me that I should make my history public Tirthas are mere water, there is*

*nothing in it, see. Images are but stones, brother, they say nothing, see. Puranas and Quran are just words, remove the veil from thy soul, Kabir judges by experience: all these are but trumpery.<sup>1</sup>*

First, we are looking at the relations he formed or had to form with strangers in different situations. Some events mentioned in his autobiography have been taken to exemplify the nature of this relationship. Firstly, due to the terrible

act of Governor *Nawab Qilji Khan, Kharagasen* and other merchant families fled from Jaunpur. He was very desperate and sad. Banarasi Das describes that in this wretched hour, Karamchand Mathur who lived there, befriended the unhappy Kharagasen. He invited Kharagasen and his family to his house thoughtfully vacated his house and moved to other quarters. Kharagasen was refusing this offer but Banarasi Das tells us that he repeatedly invited him in his humble ways. It is plausible to point out that the work was composed to release pent emotions. He wrote *Ardhakathanak* at the age of 55 when he was settled in Agra with his third wife. His nine children had died making him childless.

*I married thrice and had two daughters and seven sons. But all my children died, and now my wife and I are alone like winter tress that has shed all greenery, standing bare and denuded.*

Banarasi Das tells us that Karamchand told to Kharagasen "You are my master. Consider me as your slave. Be gracious to me and come with me to my house". He adds that they had a pleasant life there and Kharagasen and Karamchand became good friends hereafter. There is no clarity in Banarasi Das's words about the kind of obligation Karamchand had to Kharagasen. He wants to present it as the generosity of a person to some strangers who lost everything. But what, one might pertinently ask, of a Persian Influence? The Mughal regime under which Banarasi Das wrote was strongly influenced by the Arabic-Persian Culture. Banarasi's impulse towards writing an autobiography could quite imaginably have had its source in the Arabic-Persian tradition where such expressions are by no means rare. Babur was himself an avid memoir writer. He probably derived his inspiration from his forefathers, Timur and Changez, who had also written autobiographical accounts. Emperor Jahangir, during whose reign Banarasi spent his youth in Agra, was again a devoted Journal writer but it is not convenient because he does not say anything about why he selected them among a lot of refugees or whether it was offered to many people which seems unrealistic. But what we can make out from this piece of story is the idea of mobility and

"instability" which was an important and common factor in pre-modern life especially in merchant communities.<sup>2</sup>

One another incident that is important is when he moves to Fatehpur. He received hospitality from an Oswal Jain, Bhagavati Das who was a scholar in the religious realm. He stayed there with his family and said that he had a happy time with them. There are a lot of examples to show the idea of mobility. One important thing that we have to notice is the "host-guest" relationship between strangers. Compared to modern times where the idea of "stranger" is always read with the idea of fear it is important to understand it was necessary for people including women and children in pre-modern times to be guests of "stranger" which we read only as a part of unusual calamities. From Banarasi Das's telling we get to know the huge number of times that he had to deal with strangers as a guest and host.<sup>3</sup>

One important event that we get from his life is his first merchandise expedition which was to Agra. He went with a group of merchants with a lot of goods. But on the way he got stuck at Etawa which was on the outskirts of the city. But soon dusk arrived, and it started raining heavily. He could not find any place to shelter but all doors were closed. He tells us that one woman showed kindness to give them shelter but her husband drove them out.

He said that even in a small hut where they seek shelter at last, they had to face a lot of shouting and neglect from its owner. One another such example is his travel with his father and Narottama, where they were caught in the middle of a forest by a robber. He tells us by some trick played they escape from the robbery. But this is important to understand how this was a part of a merchant's life to face these incidents which formed the cultural and ethical world of pre-modern societies<sup>4</sup>. This is an example to show the kind of lifestyle an ordinary merchant had in the Mughal period. The traveling routes and means created a situation of familiarizing the "unusual" as a part of the profession.

## PARTNERSHIP

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There are numerous incidents which make clear that business partnerships existed in the Mughal period. This is the only source giving evidence of partnership. Therefore, in conventional histories of trade, the idea of business partnership did not come. Firstly, he narrates that "In the year 1633, Kharagsen went to live in Jaunpur. He established a firm in partnership with a wealthy, good-natured merchant named Ramdas of the Agarwal clan and entered the business in a big way." They had a satisfying and fruitful partnership and they were happy in their arrangements.<sup>5</sup> They were keen businessmen, sharing a genuine sense of mutual regard. This is a very good example of partnership in business not only with family ties but also with friends or even acquaintances. Which was generally not seen as a part of the trade in the Mughal time. We have Banarasi Das's words which gives us the idea of business partnership at that time. He tells us that when he was rescued by the brother of his father-in-law after his big loss at Agra, he started a partnership with a man called Dharamdas, an Oswal Jain originally from Delhi. But he mentions that he was the dark sheep of the family, who kept bad company and had odious habits. However, 39 autobiographical accounts only appeared in India with the advent of the Mughals. 40 Among these, Baburnama was the earliest and records Babur's life between 1480-1530.<sup>6</sup>

Yet he proved to be a good partner for Das and they lived like close friends and earned profit. From the incident, we can get the forms and nature of the business partnership of that time. Banarasi Das clearly mentioned that they had a proper deed of partnership which was duly affixed by their own signatures before setting up the business. He gives us the details of the proper settling of accounts before ending the partnership and creating proper papers. So the relationship between business partners was highly professional even if they were close friends or even family members. He gives us an incident where he becomes partner with Sahu Sabal Singh Mothiya who was a spoilt man who was very lavish and sunk in activities like music and other

things. He tells us that it took a lot of time to get rid of him and to get his accounts settled.<sup>7</sup>

## FRIENDSHIP

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He gives us a detailed account of his friendship with two men- Narottamdas and Thanmal Badaliya- in his second venture to Agra. He took shelter in Narottam's house when he lost his money again. He says that Narottam considered him as his own brother and treated him with a lot of love and care. He tells us that they later became business partners and toiled together. But there is an interesting turn that happens in the relationship where we can see the complexities of relations. Narottam's father calls him back to Agra saying that Banarasi Das and Kharagasen are trying to exploit him. Das says that Narottam became extremely emotional after reading this and said sorry for his father. In the autobiographical work of Banarasi Das, he mentions a lot of books that he wrote but the only creative piece he adds is the eulogy he composed for Narottamdas. Therefore, it is important to understand how Narottam served as an emotional strength for Banarasi Das. It is quite understandable because since the merchant community never stayed with their family so long, they always tried to get other emotions back up in their life. Narottama's presence was very important for Das. Still, they were professional in their business relationship. Das clearly tells us that they settled their account and kept records of separation properly. One another incident is where we can see the friendship between Banarasi Das<sup>8</sup> and a shopkeeper when he lost his business and roamed around the market of Agra singing and reciting poems. He could not go back home because of the severe loss he faced. He tells us that he used to borrow food from that shopkeeper on credit, but when the shopkeeper got to know about the actual situation, he started giving food for free.

Here we can see how dependable he was even to strangers. Even if we cannot draw a general statement about that time, we can understand how the life of an ordinary merchant is always in turmoil

where his properties can be stolen or he can be cheated as Banarasi Das was which makes him poor within a short time which ultimately leads to dependence in various kinds. He tells us a story about his friendship<sup>9</sup> with the new governor of Jaunpur- *Cini Qilji Khan*. He tells us that their relations lasted for so long through thick and thin. He tells us that they studied together three texts. This is also very important that his relations are mostly characterized by his interests. Even if his friend has great political power, Banarasi Das does not mention that side of their relationship.<sup>10</sup> Whether he used the relationship for his political needs or not is not relevant because he mentions that their interest in learning keeps them together. This helps us to understand the attempt to violate the conventional characteristics that we attach to a merchant or a governor.

## SPIRITUAL RELATIONS

One another kind of relationship he formed was a friendship with a spiritual bond. He tells us an incident where he became greatly in friendship with Bhanchand who was a disciple of Abhaydharma. This friendship led him to be involved in the study of religious texts of Jainism. He says that he had become quite religious and did his best to acquire the 8 merits of a good Jain. He gives us some incidents where he got cheated by false saints. Here we get an idea of where he became overwhelmed in religious rituals as a result of different relations. One important incident is his friendship with Arathmal Dhor, who was part of a religious movement that believed in the mystic doctrine of the Spirit. This led to a change in his religious and spiritual beliefs. He says that there was a true sense of renunciation took place in him which even led to renouncing all the rituals.

He marks this part as a dark time of his life so does not say much about it. He mentions three friends of his at that time which was another dark episode who were Chandrabhan, Udaykaran, and Then. They were all very fond of clowning and horseplay. They shut our room, shed their clothes,

and danced. He tells us that his irreverent attitude continued and his name became shady and hollow in society. He gives this account with a tone of regret because he has become religiously devout again by the time he writes this incident. An important point is that, through the changing nature of the relationship we can understand the changing mental state of him. Most of his relations determined his ideas about life at that time. This kind of relationship can be seen as his attempts to break the value system of his community and society which tied him in certain ways. He is a merchant by profession but gets happy only when he is involved in the production of knowledge. This dilemma is reflected in his relationships. Some relations are the result of his attempt to stay in his value system whereas others are attempts to break the barriers.<sup>11</sup>

## RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN FAMILY

Author Banarasi in his work *The Ardhakathananka* has given umpteen examples of relationships within in family that held an important part in his life. These relationships not only acted as emotional bonds but also involved many other aspects. We have incidents where family bonding helped them to face troubles in his and his father's lifetime which not only helped to ease their problems but also maintained their honor also. The very first example that the author illustrated is from Kharagsen's, his father's early life when his grandfather Muldas died and the Mughal Chief confiscated their property. Kharagsen and his mother were left with nothing. During this dark phase of their life, they went to Madan Singh Sirmal who was his maternal grandfather's elder brother. Madan Singh welcomed them with open arms and treated them with regard and affection. From the gesture of Madan Singh, it is quite visible that he saved mother and son from further humiliation and suffering.

Giving an example from his own life, Banarasi talked about Tarachand Tambi, the paternal uncle of his first wife. When Banarasi Das was trying to establish his business at Agra, he was facing constant loss struggled day and night, and was living

in miserable conditions, Tambi came to his rescue. He not only provided the author a place to live but also salvaged him from his miserable conditions and even paid his rent dues. The most interesting point in this incident was that when Tambi reached Banarasi's house, Das had visitors. Tambi understood the delicate situation and did not address the author in front of his visitors and waited till they left. This shows that Tambi protected Banarasi from humiliation and kept his honor<sup>12</sup> intact as Madan Singh did for Kharagsen and his mother.

Family ties came in handy to maintain honor and helped to create own identity and economic sustainability. One can understand this with the example of Sunderdas, the paternal uncle of Kharagsen. He was a merchant dealing in Gold and Silver at Agra. He gave an opportunity to Kharagsen to be his partner in his business after Kharagsen had invested his money in the venture. People spoke about them as father and son because they had many common traits as both were generous in nature and skillful in arts. As Sunderdas filled the void left by the death of his father. He proved himself as Sunderdas's son in a true sense by taking responsibility for his daughter after his wife's death. He found a suitable groom for her and bestowed her with a large dowry in gold and precious things and presented her with her rightful share of her father's wealth. Thus, one can say that their relationship did not end with death, the responsibilities<sup>13</sup> attached to that relationship are to be carried out irrespective of irreparable loss.

One can see that since he was a member of a merchant family, the values and ethics he got from there corroborated the merchant community values system of the time. When Banarasi became a small merchant on his own in Shahzadpur by selling cowry shells, he handed over the small profit to his grandmother who in turn celebrated this by distributing sweets among friends and relations. But when he wanted to gain the knowledge his father rebuked him by saying "Give up your foolish pursuit of learning since learning is for brahmins and bards. A merchant's son should tend to shop. Do not forget

that a man who is too studious has to beg for his food." Thus, it can be said that success in a mercantile community does not belong to an individual but to his whole family. Thereby making the whole family celebrate small profits and frown on small losses.<sup>14</sup>

One most important relation we have to look into is the husband-wife relationship. It is very important to note that the modern idea of "companionship" and conjugal intimacy did not exist at that time. Therefore, the historical tools of analysis of gender should be used very carefully in the pre-modern context. The best way to discuss the husband-and-wife relationship<sup>15</sup> is to compare it with the extramarital love affair he had. He tells us that love was one of his strongest passions. He describes how he has been deeply involved in this relationship where he stole money and jewels from his father so that he could buy her costly presents. He describes himself as a slave of his lover. Even he says that he paid no attention to his family's honor when he thought of his beloved. Here we can see the contrast in his relationship with his wife. The idea of love was completely different from the present idea of love. It was an erotic feeling for him that could not be fitted into a family system. Erotic love always existed outside the family, to a woman with no sense of responsibility or dependence. He is telling us that when he fell ill he was looked after by his wife. That was a relation where we find strength, durability, and a sense of dependence. Banarasi Das's relationship with different female members of the family shows the complexities of the relationship involved at that time, peculiar to the merchant family. When he returned to his wife's home from Agra as a failure in business, his wife forced him to narrate his ordeal in Agra and she consoled him by saying "God gives man both joy and sorrow".

She pacified him by saying "For you this has been a period of suffering. Happiness too will come in its time. Fate must run its course and man must reap the fruits of both his sins and his piety. "She in order to maintain the honor of her husband does not shy away from using her natal connection, as Banarasi's wife requested her mother for the money

and plead her to be discrete about it. It was important for her to keep her husband's honor because there were incidents when she was sent back to her home when her husband faced loss. It is important to notice that she went to her mother, not to her father. Even if we see the idea of honor as a part of men's lives that was a part of the public domain, we can notice that the responsibility of keeping the honor also fell on the shoulders of women. To exemplify this, we can look into an incident narrated by Banarasi Das.<sup>16</sup>

When he faced a huge loss in his business, his mother was blamed by his father for his unlucky venture. This incident shows that for a woman her husband's happiness success and pride matter the most. Thus it can be said for females of the mercantile community, the success of male members was of utmost importance and it was not only attached to the happiness in the household but also honour of family in the community.

## CONCLUSION

Reading an autobiography is not about reading anyone's personal life. But this provides us entry points to a variety of aspects of the economic socio-political cultural life of the time. To reconstruct this, we selected a survey through the various kinds of relationships he narrates in his autobiography. Many relationships he makes in his life have multiple levels, as we saw in the case of his friendship or wife. Many times his relationships helped for economic stability and securing a social position, like his spiritual relations or family. But many other times we find he uses his relationship to break the normative structure of the merchant community and its value system with which he was not happy. His dilemma between this normative structure and his passions which are seen as a violation of ethics are best explained in the study of the nature of the relationship he carried in his life. We hope it can partially give an answer to the question of how he could resolve this dilemma of being a part of a respected merchant family with a lot of responsibilities and on the other hand a person who had a passion in learning and wanted to make his life public.

<sup>1</sup>Makund Lath (ed., trans.), *Half Tale. Ardhakathanaka* (Jaipur, 1981), p. 96 (English), p. 275 (Hindi).

<sup>2</sup> Jahangir Nur-ud-din-Mohammad, *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, (ed.), H. Beveridge, New Delhi, 1968, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Published in S. Chandra (ed.), *Essays in Medieval Indian Economic History*, Indian History Congress, Golden Jubilee Series (Delhi, 1987), 222-228.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, M. P. Singh, *Merchants and Local Administration and Civil Rights in Gujarat*, Aligarh University, A Miscellany (Aligarh, 1964), 223; *The English Factories in India. A Calendar of Documents in the India Office*, Oxford, 1907, p.11, 148, 158.

<sup>5</sup>Zaman, Taymiya R., 'Instructive Memory: An Analysis of Auto/Biographical Writing in Early Mughal India', *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 54, No. 5 (2011), p.679.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid p. 679

<sup>7</sup> Gupta, Arun Das, 'Situating the Individual in Medieval India: An Excursion into History Beyond the Mainstream', *The Calcutta History Journal*, Vol. 16 (1994), p. 7

<sup>8</sup> Chand Bardai, Prithviraj-Raso (Udaipur, 1955), 1, 23, 144, 223-jff. See also R. S. Pandit (trans.), *Kalhana's Rajatarangini* (Delhi, 1968); B. P. Ambastha, *Non-Persian Sources of Medieval Indian History* (Delhi, 1984)

<sup>9</sup> Vanina, Eugenia, 'The Ardhakathanak by Banarasidas: A Socio-Cultural Study', *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (1995), p. 211

<sup>10</sup> Sharma, RC, 'Aspects of Business in Northern India in the Seventeenth Century', *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 33 (1971), 277-278. p. 277-278

<sup>11</sup> Vanina, Eugenia, 'Ardhakathanak: A Socio-Cultural Study', p. 214

<sup>12</sup> Rezavi, Syed Ali Nadeem, 'Mercantile Life in Mughal India', *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 65 (2004), p. 291

<sup>13</sup> Malik, Kalpana, 'The Social World of North Indian Merchants in Mughal Times', Vol. 75 (2014), p.329. 83

<sup>14</sup> Bano, Shadab, 'Masculine Domesticity in Pre-Colonial India', *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol. 77 (2016), p. 237

<sup>15</sup> Bayly, CA. 'Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars.p,234' (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>16</sup> Jain, Shalin, 'Divided Identities: The Jain Sects in Medieval India', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 73 (2012). p.9-11