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Introduction

The ascetic, devotional sect of the Mahānubhāvs —‘Those of the great experience’— arose, like the much more popular *bhakti* movement of the Vārkarīs centered in Paṇḍharpur, in thirteenth century Mahārāṣṭra. These two movements, which were seminal in the origin and development of Marāṭhī literature, remained separate and independent, never coming into any significant contact with one another.¹ The Mahānubhāvs believe in five manifestations (*avatārs*) of the One God whom they call Parameśvar (‘Supreme Lord’), the sole source of isolation (*kaivalya*) or liberation (*mokṣa*) to whom is directed exclusive devotion.

¹ The Marāṭhī scholar V. B. Kolte suggested that the founder of the Vārkarī movement, the great Jñāndev (d. 1296), might have written his *Jñāneśvarī* as a direct counter-response to Mahānubhāv doctrine (see Kolte 1950). This hypothesis, however, seems far-fetched. Even R.D. Ranade argued that the Mahānubhāvs made current certain Yoga practices which might have influenced some of Jñāndev’s writings. Nonetheless, he observed that Jñāndev owed almost nothing or very little to this tradition (Ranade 1982: 27-29). Though according to the Mahānubhāv *Smṛti-sthaḷ* (chap. 244) it would have been a Mahānubhāv to turn the thoughts of the Vārkarī saint-poet Nāmdev (1270-1350) to Kṛṣṇa, inspiring his song of repentance *My days have passed to no purpose*, this is most probably a hagiographic invention.

These are the so-called ‘five Kṛṣṇas’ (*pañca-kṛṣṇas*), comprising two deities —Kṛṣṇa himself and Dattātreya— and three sect figures: Cakradhar (d. 1274), the founder of the sect, his predecessor Guṇḍam Rāūl (d. 1287-1288), Cakradhar’s *guru*, and Cāngdev Rāūl, Guṇḍam Rāūl’s *guru*. The early period of the sect is dominated by the figures of Cakradhar, Guṇḍam Rāūl, and Cakradhar’s successor Nāgdev, also known as Bhaṭobās (d. 1312-1313). The Mahānubhāvs non-conformity with respect to mainstream Hindūism appears evident at a first glance: the sect rejects the caste system and the entire *varṇāśrama-dharma* ideology as well as the *Vedas* and all brāhmaṇical authority; in order to safeguard their identity and avoid brāhmaṇical persecution Mahānubhāvs had to go underground and develop a secret script to preserve their scriptures; they accept on equal terms both untouchables and women and created an order of female renunciators alongside one of men; they compound asceticism and devotion in a rigorous and at the same time original way, which reinforces their sectarian, elitist character; they are strict monotheists and devalue the entire Hindū pantheon (except Kṛṣṇa and Dattātreya) repudiating the brāhmaṇical ritual apparatus and the worship of gods (*devatā-pūjā*); philosophically, they appear to be the sole *bhakti* group to embrace dualism (*dvaita*), opposite to the non-dualist devotionism (*advaita-bhakti*) dominant among the Vārkarīs and in the whole of the Marāṭhī cultural area; their temples are famous as healing centers, to which people flock in hopes of being exorcized and freed from malevolent spirits and demons (*bhūts*); finally, for some particular aspect of their doctrine and practice, the influence upon them of other religions such as Jainism and even Islām has been postulated. Here, I will offer an overview concerning the origins and main religious and doctrinal characteristics of the Mahānubhāvs, discussing those aspects which appear especially revealing of their difference.

If, in the beginning, the Mahānubhāvs knew a fairly rapid expansion, especially in the northern and eastern regions of Mahārāṣṭra —the old districts of Khāndeś and

Nāgpur, and especially the Varhāḍ or Vidarbha/Berār area, in which they have always been strongest— around the end of the fourteenth century their movement had already split into thirteen ‘sub-sects’ (*āmnāya*, a term often associated with Śākta Tantrism). The Mahānubhāvs went silently underground aiming at a defensive isolation from the larger Hindū context. They never became a popular movement and always centered themselves in remote areas, gathering in monasteries (*maṭhs*) situated in decayed and removed villages. To this day, the sect’s main cult center is Ṛddhipur (modern Rītpur) in Varhāḍ, a small tumble-down village north of Amraoti: this is the town where Cakradhar met his master Guṇḍam Rāūl and attained enlightenment from him. Although the prominent leaders among the early Mahānubhāvs were all brāhmaṇs (often converts from the prevailing *advaita* vaiṣṇavism), their followers were and are mostly non-brāhmaṇs, that is, low caste people and even untouchables.

A clear aversion toward the Mahānubhāvs became evident as early as the latter half of the fourteenth century. Paradigmatic of the disfavor with which they came to be looked upon by Hindūs and of their willingness to separate themselves from brāhmaṇical orthodoxy so as to protect their distinctiveness, was the transcribing of their sacred works, written in Old Marāṭhī, into various ciphers or letter-substitution codes which they themselves invented. The most common among these ciphers and the first to be introduced around the middle of the fourteenth century was the *sakaḷa lipī*, the cipher of ‘all’ (*sakaḷa*) as it was used throughout the sect, traditionally ascribed to Ravaḷobās.² In those days, the Mahānubhāvs’ adoption of a secret script was not devised out of fear of Muslim oppression, but rather out of

² The script was first deciphered in 1910 by V.K. Rajwade (see the *Bhārata Itihāsa Saṃśodhaka Maṇḍala Reports*, Poona, *śaka* 1832, p. 78 and *śaka* 1835, pp. 58-59). For an explanatory presentation of this cipher, invented as all other ciphers by members of the Upādhye sub-sect, see Raeside 1970: 328-334.

fear of orthodox brāhmaṇism, which became all the more rigid in its violent opposition and persecution of the sect. Mahānubhāvs were so successful in their secretive attitude that they remained practically unknown for about five hundred years, that is, until the end of the nineteenth century. Actually, they were even able to expand beyond the borders of the Marāṭhī cultural area. Around the sixteenth century an offshoot of the Mahānubhāvs, known as the Jai Kṛṣṇi *panth*, developed in Punjāb and as far as in what is now Pakistān, with monasteries in Lahore and Peshāwār (and perhaps even Kabul). The Mahānubhāvs' link with this offshoot was strongly maintained until partition.

Outside of their own closed circles, and precisely because of being perceived as separate from mainstream Hinduism, the Mahānubhāvs were met with prejudices and distrust by common people, especially by the brāhmaṇs of the districts in which they flourished. According to D.D. Kosambi, the Mahānubhāv «protest group» would go back to the ideals of a tribal, communal life:

Black garments, absolute rejection of the caste system, organization into clan-like sub-groups, sharing among members, and a greatly simplified marriage ritual (*gaḍa-baḍa-guṇḍā*) prove this, though a few leaders of the sect later accumulated some property, with a concomitant thirst for Hindu respectability (Kosambi 1962: 33).³

Although this hypothesis of a sort of tribal, egalitarian background seems untenable, Mahānubhāvs were certainly never entirely accepted by the local people, being perceived as different and strange. Indeed, there are proverbs and idiomatic sayings in Marāṭhī which are derogatory of the 'Mānbhāvs': they are said to be hypocritical and two-faced,

³ Kosambi also argues that «Mahānubhāvas take Sāṃdīpani as Kṛṣṇa's *guru*» (Kosambi 1962: 24). Sāṃdīpani is the name of a sage (*muni*) and a master-at-arms who instructed Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma according to the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*. In my reading of Mahānubhāv literature, however, I have never come across such belief.

immoral and lustful beggars who carry their sticks upside down, thieves, and cunning people in general. Brāhmaṇical enmity and hatred towards the sect, both in Mahārāṣṭra as well as in Gujarāt, comes out very clearly in the following decree promulgated in 1782 by Mādhavrāo Peśvā:

The Manbhaus are entirely to be condemned. They are to be entirely outcasted. They have no connection with the four castes nor with the six Darśanas. No caste should listen to their teachings. If they do, then they are to be put out of caste (in Farquhar 1984: 322).

For centuries Mahānubhāvs suffered in silence such offences.⁴ Still in 1885-1887, Sir William Wilson Hunter in *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* (vol. XII, p. 58) presented an account of the Mahānubhāvs which was both inaccurate and filled with popular misconceptions. In it, we read that its supposed founder, one Kishen Bhat⁵ said to be the spiritual guide of a king ruling in Paiṭhaṇ around the middle of the fourteenth century, was made an outcaste because of his marriage with a woman of the lowest of Mahārāṣṭra's three untouchable castes i.e. that of the rope-makers Mātāṅgas or Māṅgs: the very name Mānbhāv/Mānbhāu is said to be derived from it.⁶ The professed celibacy of the male and female members of the sect—who all have their heads

⁴ Still in the nineteenth century, a Muslim from Ellichpur noted that there was bitter enmity between the Mahānubhāvs and the brāhmaṇs of the district and that, even though many people oppressed them, they never complained (Kolve 1962: 148).

⁵ In other ethnographic accounts, his name is given as Arjun Bhat or Krishna Bhat.

⁶ In the 1881 *Berār Census Report*, E.J. Kitts wrote (p. 62): «The Brāhmans hate the Mānbhaos [...]. The Brāhmans represent them as descended from one Krishna Bhat, a Brāhman who was outcasted for keeping a beautiful Māṅg woman as his mistress. His four sons were called the *Māṅg-bhaos* or Māṅg brothers» (in Russell 1916: 181). This article on the Mānbhao (pp. 176-183), reporting various popular stories documenting brāhmaṇical hatred toward the sect, is said to have been compiled by combining three sources: notes on the caste drawn up by Colonel

shaved (men also their faces) and typically wear black or ash-grey clothes perhaps in Kṛṣṇa's honor⁷— is also called into question, suggesting a situation of promiscuity and sexual misconduct.⁸ This is due to the fact that the order allows women as well as men to become ascetic renouncers⁹ and that Mahānubhāv monasteries even nowadays house both

Mackenzie and contributed to the *Pioneer* newspaper by Mrs. Horsburgh; Captain Mackintosh's *Account of the Manbhaos* (India Office Tracts); a paper by one Pyāre Lāl Misra, ethnographic clerk. On the Māṅgs, a term derived from Sanskrit *mātaṅga*, see Karve 1968: 33. For another short but useful account on the Mahānubhāvs, see Farquhar 1984: 247-249. See also Gonda 1963: 177.

⁷ Another derogatory story put forward by brāhmaṇs concerning the origin of the sects' clothing is the following: «Krishna Bhat's followers, refusing to believe the aspersions cast on their leader by the Brāhmaṇs, but knowing that some one among them had been guilty of the sin imputed to him, determined to decide the matter by the ordeal of fire. Having made a fire, they cast into it their own clothes and those of their *guru*, each man having previously written his name on his garments. The sacred fire made short work of all the clothes except those of Krishna Bhat, which it rejected and refused to burn, thereby forcing the unwilling disciples to believe that the finger of God pointed to their revered *guru* as the sinner» (Russell 1916: 181-182). The Mahānubhāvs' wearing of dark clothes in Kṛṣṇa's honor is mentioned by various authors: for instance, Ranade observed that «it is probably due to the recognition of this deity [Kṛṣṇa] that they wear dark-blue clothes» (Ranade 1982: 28). Kṛṣṇa literally means black and, in iconography, he as well as Viṣṇu are typically represented bearing a dark-blue complexion, recalling the nocturnal sky or the dark monsoon cloud.

⁸ W. Crooke, noticing how Mahānubhāvs like other *vaiṣṇava* sects have been accused of immorality, wrote: «In former times it is said that marriage between a monk and a nun was symbolized by the pair laying their wallets close together — a practice now denied by the members» (Crooke 1909: 504). Nonetheless, Crooke himself observed how Mahānubhāvs «are a quiet, thrifty, orderly people» and that, although «their rejection of the manifold saints and orthodox gods has brought them into conflict with Brāhmaṇs», yet «they are held in much respect by lower caste Hindus» (*ibidem*). Also Russell, in his account of 1916, wrote the following: «The Mānbhaos are intelligent and generally literate, and they lead a simple and pure life [...]. Their honesty and humility are proverbial among the Kunbis, and are in pleasing contrast to the character of many of the Hindu mendicant orders» (Russell 1916: 176).

⁹ For a comparison with contemporary forms of female asceticism in the Hindū context, based upon a field-research conducted in Vāraṇāsī between 1976 and 1981, see Denton 1991: 211-231.

men and women under the same roof, though living in separate quarters. Suspicions of sexual misconduct, though unfounded, can be traced in the sacred narrative of the founder's deeds, the *Līlā-caritra*, since they remount to the times of Cakradhar himself (Tulpule 1996: 201-211).

In 1907, the account of the *Imperial Gazetteer* was utilized in a court case at the Bombay High Court as evidence to acquit an important figure of the Vārkarī movement who had been charged with having spoken offensively about the Mahānubhāvs. It was precisely this case which brought some Mahānubhāv heads of monasteries (*mahants*) to interrupt their long, self-imposed silence and publicly defend their order. Thus, they decided to reveal their secret scriptures to the scholar R.G. Bhandarkar —as testified in an article which he wrote in the *Times of India*, dated 15 November, 1907— and successfully petitioned for a thorough revision of the *Imperial Gazetteer* article. The revised article which appeared in the 1907-1909 version of the *Imperial Gazetteer* (vol. 21, p. 302) retracted the erroneous connection of the Mahānubhāvs with the Māṅg caste, correctly named Cakradhar as the founder of the sect and highlighted that even though celibacy is viewed as the perfect life, the weaker brethren are allowed to marry.

In another article which appeared in 1909, W. Crooke wrote that, besides their celibate section (*bairāgī*), householder Mahānubhāvs —called *gharvāsī*— are divided into nominal adherents following caste rules (*bholā*) and those who ignore caste distinctions (Crooke 1909: 504).¹⁰ In the 1920s R.E. Enthoven also noted that there are householder Mahānubhāvs, called *angvanshils* or *gharbārīs* (the same as *gharvāsī*), who marry by the *gāndharva* or love marriage form and, at the same time, wear the dress of the order and live in monasteries (Enthoven 1922: 430).¹¹

¹⁰ On these divisions within the order, bearing slightly different names, see Russell 1916: 178-179.

¹¹ Enthoven obtained all information for his article on 'Manbhavs' (pp. 427-433) from R.G. Bhandarkar.

The 1907-1909 events marked the renewed contact of the Mahānubhāvs with the outside world and the end of their long isolation. The heretical, even orgiastic nature attributed to the Mahānubhāvs and their writings was proved to be totally unfounded. Meanwhile, their thirteen *āmnāyas* or sub-sects were reduced to just two: the Upādhye and the Kaviśvar, with minimal doctrinal differences between them. Besides the emergence of a new attitude, almost a kind of missionary spirit among Mahānubhāv leaders, the coming into the open of their sacred texts stimulated a great interest among scholars. As I.M.P. Raeside puts it:

Marāṭhī scholars were astonished to find themselves presented with a whole corpus of literature much of which dated from the fourteenth century and was contemporary with the oldest works of Marāṭhī literature known up to that time (Raeside 1976: 586).

Among the first Marāṭhī scholars who rediscovered the Mahānubhāvs in the early years of the twentieth century was V.L. Bhave. To be sure, despite the sect's marginality these documents are most precious, being the earliest extant sources of the very beginning of Marāṭhī language. Many of their early works are in prose, not in verse, and thus provide almost the only important corpus of prose writing in Marāṭhī before the seventeenth century.¹² Moreover, the Old Marāṭhī language of these early texts was to a large extent preserved, being 'frozen' at the stage it had reached at the time when they came to be enciphered. Thus they were not subject to modifications and modernization along the centuries. Already in 1899, B.G. Tilak, in an article published in the journal *Kesarī* about his research on Marāṭhī traditions, had underlined the historical and literary importance of the Mahānubhāv sect. But the Marāṭhī scholar who

¹² For an overview concerning the historical emergence and development of the Marāṭhī language, see Armelin 1980 and Pacquement 2000: 741-763.

in the twentieth century made the most significant contribution to the study of Mahānubhāv literature was V.B. Kolte. Besides Kolte and the above-mentioned Bhave, mention should be made of S.G. Tulpule, who also wrote extensively in English (see Tulpule 1979), as well as of N.B. Bhavalkar, V.N. Deshpande, Y.K. Deshpande, S.K. Joshi, N.G. Kalelkar,¹³ H.N. Nene, and V.K. Rajwade. Among contemporary Western scholars, the greatest authorities on the Mahānubhāvs are I.M.P. Raeside and A. Feldhaus, to whom we owe fundamental studies and critical editions and translations of texts.

Such scholarly interest also contributed to push Mahānubhāvs out of their secretive, closed *milieux*. The principal Mahānubhāv leaders who opened themselves and their libraries to the outside world were Punjābīs. Starting in the 1920s, scholars have emerged even among their adepts and a few personalities among them have recreated some of the lost *āmnāyas*, such as the Yakṣadev *āmnāya*. Between the two World Wars, the *mahants* of the Devadeveśvar monastery at Māhūr (the old Mātāpur) and of the Gopirāj temple at Rītpur have played a prime role in collecting and studying Mahānubhāv works and also in helping outside scholars to understand them. Their successors, however, have not been so active and collaborative. In the mid-1970s, Raeside observed:

The position today is that many *mahantas* within the *pantha* are happy to take their doctrinal difficulties to Professor Kolte to be settled, for he has devoted more study to the Mahānubhāva philosophy and ritual (*vicāra* and *ācāra*) than anyone within the sect. The other half of the sect are strictly orthodox still, and refuse to disclose or even discuss Mahānubhāva beliefs with outsiders (Raeside 1976: 589).

¹³ His French unpublished doctoral thesis, titled *La secte Manbhav* (Paris, 1950), appears as the earliest scholarly work in a Western language. Unfortunately, I was not able to see it.

Nowadays, it is quite difficult to estimate the total number of Mahānubhāvs, most of whom belong to the Marāṭhā caste of agriculturists. The *Census of India* has always counted them as Hindūs and never as a separate 'religion'. In 1901, Enthoven estimated their number as around 22,000 (Enthoven 1922: 427-433). Crooke, quoting the 1881 *Berār Census Report* of E.J. Kitts, said that in Berār they numbered 2,566. Crooke added that their numbers are decreasing «perhaps due to the fact that in the present day fewer join the celibate section» (Crooke 1909:504). In R.V. Russell's report it is stated that in 1911 the Mānbhao's religious sect, now become a caste, counted 10,000 members, of whom the Central Provinces and Berār contained 4,000 (Russell 1916:176). Feldhaus has more recently suggested that «a figure of 100,000 to 200,000 today seems likely, although the numbers at pilgrimage places and one's subjective impressions indicate more» (Feldhaus 1988: 279, n.18).

The discovery of Mahānubhāv literature coupled with the Mahānubhāvs' own proselytistic *élan* has contributed to the movements' recent fortune. As Raeside noted, the Mahānubhāvs appear to have achieved an increasing degree of social and religious respectability (Raeside 1976: 599-600).¹⁴ Moreover, as E. Zelliott has observed:

Although it is still in existence, the Mahānubhāv sect is no longer radical. It does accept all castes into its holy orders, but treats them differently according to their high or low status. It does have both male and female orders, but aside from this the Rāūl's radicality seems to have been lost (Zelliott 1987: 134).

¹⁴ Already in the 1930s Ranade reported: «But modern apologists [of the Mahānubhāvs] are announcing that they have ever believed in the caste system; that though they have not recognized the principle of slaughter in Yajña, still they have believed, on the whole, in the Vedas; that they have sanctioned the system of the Āśramas; and that even though they worship Chakradhara as Kṛishṇa, by Chakradhara is not to be understood certainly the man who founded that sect at the beginning of the 11th century [sic!]"» (Ranade 1982: 28).

A note on the term *mahānubhāv* and the movement's self-identity is in order, as still in 1909 Enthoven listed twelve different names of the sect (Enthoven 1909). For the earliest disciples, often called *mahātmās* or 'great souls', the name of the sect was simply *panth*, 'the way'. In the fourteenth century, the *panth* was most commonly known to insiders as the *mārg*, 'the path', or the *para-mārg* 'the path of *para*' or Parameśvar, the One Supreme God, that is, 'the supreme [religious] path'. Mainly outsiders called it the *bhaṭ-mārg*, 'the path of [Nāgdev]bhaṭ', since Nāgdev was the first to do much proselytising (*bhaṭ* being a generic nickname for a brāhmaṇ). The term *mahānubhāv*, common in Marāṭhī where it designates any 'great experiencer', is never found in the *Līlā-caritra*. We find it twice, however, in another important work of the sect: this is the hagiography of Nāgdev, the *Smṛti-sthaḷ* (*The Storehouse of Recollections*), most probably a composite work no earlier than the fifteenth century. Herein (*Smṛti-sthaḷ*, chaps. 53, 233), the term appears as the collective name of the group. In a derogatory way, Hindū outsiders from at least the sixteenth century started calling them Mānbhāvs, not deriving the term from *mahānubhāv* but rather from *māṅghāū*, 'brothers of the Māṅg caste'.¹⁵ The appellation Mahānubhāv has been revived starting with the rehabilitation which followed the disclosure of their scriptures in the twentieth century.¹⁶

¹⁵ Although in Russell's account dated 1916 it is said that the name Mānbhao «would appear to have some such meaning as 'The reverend brothers'» (Russell 1916: 176).

¹⁶ On the Mahānubhāv name, see Kolte 1962: 12-37; Raeside 1976: 599-600; Feldhaus, Tulpule 1992: 24-25.