Article

Jain Narrative Literature in Brajbhāṣā: Discussions from an Understudied Field

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Abstract: Jain narrative literature in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Apabhramśa is rightly recognised as one of South Asia’s great cultural heritages and a vital source of material for insight into premodern Jain teachings, practices, and everyday life. However, Jain studies is yet to fully engage with the rich archive of Jain narrative literature in Brajbhāṣā, and a wealth of untapped manuscript material is waiting to be explored. In this article, I argue that by going beyond the too-broad moniker of “Jain Hindi literature” to recognise Jain narrative literature in Brajbhāṣā as a distinct category, we may better understand the Jains of early modern North India as partakers of a wider literary and religious culture. More particularly, by comparing the form and religious outlook of Rāmacand Bālak’s Sītacarit, a seventeenth-century Rāmāyaṇa treatment, with the works of the more well-known Banārsidās, we see that even amongst the Jains who used Brajbhāṣā, considerable variety of outlooks and approaches existed.

Keywords: brajbhāṣā; Jainism; narrative; satt; bhakti; vernacular; Banārsidās; Sītacarit

1. Introduction

When we think of Brajbhāṣā, the vernacular language of the Braj region of North India, the first image that pops up might be that of Krṣṇa as the son of cowherders, gobbling ghee or playing the flute. This image is typically linked with the bhakti poets of North India.1 Yet the emphasis on Brajbhāṣā as a supreme vehicle of Hindu bhakti in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while not at all wrong, is still the product of historical hindsight, clouding the actual diversity of literature that was produced within what was a wider culture of Brajbhāṣā. Through the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, Brajbhāṣā poets and audiences across North India composed, performed, and enjoyed Sufi romances, courtly poetry, and advanced treatises on a variety of subjects, from medicine to musicology, and much else besides.2 Amongst these poets and audiences were the Jains.

In the seventeenth century, Digambara laymen who lived and travelled across the region covering Jaipur, Agra, and the classical ‘vraja bhūmi3 of Mathura and Vrindavan shifted from using the mixed Gujarāti-Rājasthānī vernacular of Western India, commonly known as Maru-Gurjar, and took to composing in the by then transregional vernacular Brajbhāṣā. The most famous exponent of this body of Jain literature is the seventeenth-century merchant Banārsidās, whose diverse body of literary works, including his uniquely intimate autobiography, the ArdhaKathānaka, remains of constant interest to scholarship. Banārsidās is also the most visible early exponent of the gnostic-leaning adhyyātma

1 In South Asian religious history, the concept of ‘bhakti’ commonly refers to the practice of devotional religion. For an introductory discussion of the concept in the context of early modern North India, see Plau (forthcoming).
2 A defining study of the courtly aspects of Brajbhāṣā literary culture is Busch (2011).
3 ‘The land of Braj’.
movement, a central precursor to the rise of Terāpanth Digambara Jainism in the following century. The exact causes of the adoption of Brajbhāṣā by Banārsīdās and his contemporaries may not be decisively uncovered, and might not even have been a wholly conscious choice. Indeed, it might simply have been due to the fact that a new group of Jains simultaneously took up composing works in whatever vernacular was more relevant to them. However, this shift to a transregional language not typically linked with Jain literature does allow us to explore the extents to which ideas and motifs circulated across a wider culture religious and literary culture, and help us to think of Jains not as solitary agents preoccupied with their own affairs, but as active partakers in the wider life of South Asian culture and society. While we have some excellent studies of individual Jain Brajbhāṣā poets, the field of Jain narratives in Brajbhāṣā remains, despite a vast manuscript archive, almost wholly un tapped.4

This article attempts to address this lacuna by interrogating a particular text and using it as a potential entry point into the wider field of Jain narrative literature in Brajbhāṣā. This text is Rāmcand Bālak’s Sītācarīt, a mid-seventeenth century version of the Jain Rāmāyaṇa narrative. The language and religious concepts of the Sītācarīt are broadly similar to those of Banārsīdās, and may indeed be seen as indications of an adhyātmā leaning. That is not to say that all Jain Brajbhāṣā poets were part of the same Banārsīdās-oriented context or expressed the same outlook. Bālak’s emphasis on bhakti and his broadly popular, humoristic tone, and perhaps even the epic narrative format in itself, indicates a wider audience than the more niche study sessions that seem to have been the core centers of activity for Banārsīdās and his fellow adhyātmikas.5 Yet, this article can only be an initial step towards richer, more exhaustive studies of Jain Brajbhāṣā narratives.

But why does the narrative format matter? I have two reasons. The first is simply due to coverage. As we will see, most studies of Jain Brajbhāṣā poets have tended to focus on those who composed shorter works, such as songs or song cycles. Narrative compositions also did circulate, and some of them, like the Sītācarīt, were popular for centuries. The other, more substantial reason concerns a particular feature of the narrative. While Jains indeed have excelled in the production, and importantly, preservation of narrative literatures in Sanskrit and Prakrit across a variety of genres, their later, vernacular narrative productions have not always met with the same level of interest. The tendency among both Jains and scholars is often to privilege the earlier iterations of the famous story material and go on to assume that later, vernacular tellings represent watered-down “reader’s digest” versions. Yet, we know from studies like Lutgendorf (1991) that vernacular narratives in non-Jain traditions could be singularly inventive as well as culturally influential on levels not far removed from their classical forebears. Jain narratives in Brajbhāṣā emerge as an untapped site for studies of early modern Jainism.

2. Jains, Maru-Gurjar, and Brajbhāṣā

Any study seeking to engage with Jains’ usage of Brajbhāṣā meets with the fundamental question of to what extent we can confidently speak of “Brajbhāṣā” as a readily defined mode of language usage in the first place. As Clines (forthcoming) has argued, very convincingly, the emerging vernaculars of North India in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries were closely interrelated. Unlike in the Sanskrit high tradition, formal grammars were few and far between, and irregularity was the norm. Moreover, literatures, like people, circulated widely across regional and geographical boundaries, carrying local markers of speech to new areas and frustrating attempts by later scholars to establish regional-specific trajectories of linguistic development. A case in point is that of Brajbhāṣā itself, which notionally stems from the Braj region, covering Vrindavan, Mathura, and Agra, but which had by its heyday in the

4 I discuss these studies in the following section.
5 See Cort (2002a) on the adhyātmika study groups. It is important to note that bhakti has a long history in Jainism; see Cort (2002b).
seventeenth-century, evolved into a transregional literary language cultivated in courts, madrasas, and temples across North India and beyond.

The most universally acknowledged category of language used to delineate the vernaculars seems to have been that of ‘bhāṣā’—simply ‘[informal] language’. Bhāṣā, then, would refer to any and all of the vernaculars that scholars of the last century have attempted to delineate into exclusive categories. More distinct ideas of linguistic boundaries first arose in the nineteenth century, not uncommonly on the back of emerging ideological or nationalistic ideas of the recent past, and attempts to retroactively fit the historical terrain with the map will frequently be problematic. It is perhaps the very association of Brajbhāṣā with the idea of the Hindu bhakti movement of the sixteenth century onwards, and in turn, representations of that movement as a proto-nationalism, that has caused the relative invisibility of Jain Brajbhāṣā compositions over the last century. Any attempt to confidently speak of Jain Brajbhāṣā as a readily identifiable entity must acknowledge these crucial difficulties. The “Jain Hindi” moniker, while broad, is indeed a very useful and well-informed notion.

And yet. “Jain Hindi” covers a bewildering array of literary activity, covering everything from songs (pada) and song cycles of different types, treatises, and narratives in all kinds of metrical structures. Similarly, “Jain Hindi” was produced by both Śvetāmbaras and Digamberas of different persuasions, by bhattārakas, renunciates, and laymen, and across great swathes of North India. We must acknowledge that even within the ‘bhāṣā’ category, particular forms of language use did emerge amongst distinct groups of producers and consumers of literature, and that is what I propose to do when I speak of Jain Brajbhāṣā. The seventeenth-century emergence of Digambara laymen who produced literature in a language that as we shall see, is recognizably Brajbhāṣā, even as it contains many traces of Rājasthānī and Gujarātī, forces us to consider at least this particular milieu on its own terms.

Of course, the delineation of this milieu’s use of Brajbhāṣā is far from problematic, and must be discussed in some detail. The starting point here is what is commonly referred to as Maru-Gurjar, the vernacular language of Rajasthan and Gujarat in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As is by now probably not too surprising, the very concept of “Maru-Gurjar” comes with its own set of intractable linguistic and conceptual challenges. I will not attempt to untie this knot here, but rather, for the sake of analytic clarity, simply acknowledge these difficulties and still press on with the “Maru-Gurjar” concept as a moniker covering the early modern, regional vernacular of Rajasthan and Gujarat and their affiliated variations. So what stops Maru-Gurjar from being Brajbhāṣā, and Brajbhāṣā from being Maru-Gurjar? How does one demarcate languages with fluid boundaries?

An aid comes from Ross (1997) concept of koinisation. This is the process whereby languages, like the koine Greek of the Hellenistic period, when shifted to new regions, gradually weaken the emblematic features that link them to particular groups or localities, opening the door to features from other languages and dialects, but still not proceeding to level their emblematic features to the point that they become new languages. They are transregional vernaculars, capable of containing features from different streams of linguistic influence, even while retaining their own distinctive grammatical and syntactical features.

As we shall see, this is the case of the Brajbhāṣā of the Sītācārit; the earliest layers of its manuscripts contain many Maru-Gurjar words, but always employ them within a grammatical structure that is fundamentally Brajbhāṣā. I will, in the following section, give a description of the language of the Sītācārit with a particular reference to its relations to Maru-Gurjar features. For now, we must briefly consider Maru-Gurjar by itself.

6 The introductory verses of many early modern compositions, both by Jains and non-Jains, typically state that their work is in ‘bhāṣā’, regardless of the actual format of vernacular language in any given work. See, for instance, the Jain medical writer Nainsukh’s introduction to his late sixteenth-century Vaidyamanotsava: “vaidyagrantha samasta kau racau subhāṣā anā” (“I have gathered all the wise books and made one in good, everyday language”) (Nainsukha 1668). All translations are mine.

7 The bhattāraka was a class of Digambara scholar-monks entrusted with the care of the tradition’s temples and libraries. For a study of the shifts in their influence in the early modern period, see Detige (2014).

8 I will not here enter into the debates, following Pollock (2006), surrounding the socio-historical dimensions of the process of vernacularisation in South Asia.
2.1. Maru-Gurjar

Bangha (2018) argues that Maru-Gurjar, in fact, represents the earliest literary vernacular tradition to be preserved in North India. The very name of the language—Maru-Gurjar—is a subject of some controversy, reflecting in parts the recurring issue of language boundaries. The language was first described by Tessitori (1914), who labelled it “Old Western Rajasthani”. As Bangha (2018, p. 6) notes, Gujarāṭī scholars have since come to refer to it as Old Gujarāṭī, whereas their Rājasthānī colleagues have favoured the Maru-Gurjar label—“Maru”, referring to the “desert” of western Rajasthan. I follow Bangha in referring to the language as Maru-Gurjar, who argues that the term is more fitting for the later period of the language’s history, roughly the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which is what occupies me here.

Bangha (2018, p. 10) further records how the historical development of Maru-Gurjar led to a number of regional variations, and eventual emerging languages, such as Mārvāḍī and a crystallising Gujarāṭī, with scholars disagreeing on the exact interrelationships of these. Providing a comprehensive linguistic description of Maru-Gurjar consequently falls beyond the scope of this study, but we may, for example’s sake, draw on Tessitori (1914) to briefly consider some of its characteristic features. Briefly put, Maru-Gurjar can be approached as embodying the intermediate stage between Apabhraṃśa and later Rājasthānī, Gujarāṭī, and their related languages, such as Mārvāḍī. For instance, Tessitori mostly defines Maru-Gurjar in its deviations from Apabhraṃśa, indicating their close relation. A case in point is the present tense of the Maru-Gurjar verb, which in the third person singular is identical with that of Apabhraṃśa but omits the Apabhraṃśa h in the third person plural (see Table 1).

Table 1. Present tense of Apabhraṃśa and Maru-Gurjar verb in third person singular and plural.

| Apabhraṃśa 3rd sg | Maru-Gurjar 3rd sg | Apabhraṃśa 3rd pl | Maru-Gurjar 3rd pl |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| karaī | karaī | karaī | karaī |

In the later stages that Bangha referred to, the third singular develops into Gujarāṭī kare and Mārvāḍī karai. Yet, as late as 1631 we see Samaysundar, a Śvetāmbar mendicant and leading Maru-Gurjar poet, employing the distinctive -aī ending in his Sitārāṃcaupāṭ. Similarly, the phonological inventory of Maru-Gurjar is identical with that of Apabhraṃśa, with the exception that Apabhraṃśa’s characteristic initial n and medial m qualify are in Maru-Gurjar replaced by dental n and nn.

But the forms of Apabhraṃśa, even while continuing the process of morphological reduction typical of the Middle Indo-Aryan languages, were inflected in case clusters (nominative-accusative, vocative, instrumental, locative, and genitive-dative-ablative). In Maru-Gurjar, however, the reduction has evolved further towards the analytic system indicative of New Indo-Aryan languages. Inflected case endings are given for the nominative-accusative, instrumental-locative, ablative, genitive, and vocative. Tessitori (1914, p. 182) acknowledges that these may, on the whole, just as well be regarded as direct and oblique markers. Relationships of case are increasingly expressed through a variety of postpositions with different provenances, many of which survived in the languages that succeeded Maru-Gurjar. For instance, the genitive postposition lānaiī may be related to Apabhraṃśa lanaī “connected”), while the alternative genitive postposition rāiī—most likely a shortened form of Apabhraṃśa keraī (“connected”)—carries over to Mārvāḍī rā.

Maru-Gurjar was predominantly used by Gujarāṭī Jains already in the twelfth century and expanded in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to become a transregional vernacular and later diversified, through encounters with other dialects, into different regional literary vernaculars.

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9 Table adapted from Tessitori (1914).
10 “E aḍhātra ṁaṇḍa ṇe ṇe jān karaī pāt jī ṇe ṇe”, (Samaysundar 1959, v. 1.7).
11 Tessitori (1914, p. 55) also posits an /, though it is unattested in his manuscript material.
stimulating the development of the equally transregional Madhyadeśī. Today’s Rājasthānī and Gujarātī both evolved from Maru-Gurjar, and elements of both appear in the Sītācarīt manuscript recensions. Early Maru-Gurjar literature typically consisted of hymns and narratives, sometimes including or building on elements of Apabhṛṃṣa literature, especially in using the caupāṭ metre. Bangha (2018, p. 9) notes that other genres, such as the song format phāg, only rose to popularity with Maru-Gurjar, and demonstrates the popularity of this literature by pointing to the many manuscript copies of individual titles and the continuing currency of Maru-Gurjar hymns amongst Gujarātī Śvetāmbara communities. A genre of Maru-Gurjar literature that is especially noteworthy in the context of this study is the rāsos or rāsa, a form of epic narrative that already existed in Apabhṛṃṣa iterations. In the Jain context, rāsos are typically popular narratives elucidating Jain principles through stories of successful Jains. A Rāmāyaṇa-based Maru-Gurjar rāso, Kesārāja’s Rāmaśaṅkarasāyan, circulated from the early seventeenth century onwards, and indicates that the tradition of narrative literature in Maru-Gurjar continued alongside the rise of Jain writing of similar narratives in Brajbhāṣā.

2.2. Jain Brajbhāṣā Poets

The Jain poet composing in Brajbhāṣā in the seventeenth century that is best known to research is the Digambara merchant Banārsīdās. While his most famous work to scholarship in Western universities may be the autobiographical Ardhakathānāka, primarily written in caupāṭ and doṭā metres, he also wrote a diverse body of verse, including shorter stories on Jain mythological themes using the kaviṭ metre, and even an Adhyātma-gīt, where Rām appears as an analogy for the Jina (McGregor 1984, pp. 203–4). To the Jain tradition, Banārsīdās is primarily remembered for his Samāysār Nāṭak, a seminal commentary on the eighth century philosopher Kundakunda’s Prakrit Samayasthāra, a central work to Digambara Jainism. With the Samāysār Nāṭak, Banārsīdās became a prominent leader of the adhyātma-movement, a loosely organised group of laymen who rejected ritualism in favour of mystic realisation of Jain doctrines. Besides the Ardhakathānāka, no full-length narrative work is attributed to Banārsīdās, and besides his commentaries, his remaining works, collected in the greatly popular compendium Banārstvālaśa, includes short to medium-length texts in a variety of metres on matters of doctrine. Banārsīdās’s Brajbhāṣā shows both Rājasthānī and Avadhī features. In this Maru-Gurjar-inflected usage of the language, Banārsīdās’s Brajbhāṣā is emblematic of Jain Brajbhāṣā authors of the seventeenth century.

Cort (2015) points to the importance of translation to Banārsīdās, identifying how particular titles have indexical or iconical relationships with earlier Sanskrit texts, and notes that Banārsīdās himself claimed proficiency in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and vernacular languages, underlining the multilingual and intertextual elements within Jain vernacular literature, as well as the inventiveness embedded in Banārsīdās’ translation practice.

Other studies by Cort on various kinds of Jain devotional songs written in Brajbhāṣā are helpful in establishing the spread and influence of Jains’ use of that language for literary and religious purposes, and by extension, indicating the contours of the Jain Brajbhāṣā tradition, of which Bālāk was a part. Cort (2013a) examines the role of Brajbhāṣā hymns in Digambara bhakti, focusing on specimens by the late seventeenth to early eighteenth century poet Dyānātrāy, identified by Cort as the most

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12 This development of Maru-Gurjar as suggested by Bangha (2018), especially in its intermediate transregional period, corresponds with Ross (1997) conceptualization of koine. In personal correspondence, Claus Peter Zoller has pointed out to me how Ross uses the term “lects” when speaking of koine, so as to avoid engaging with the language/dialect discussion.

13 A lavishly illustrated manuscript of the Rāmaśaṅkarasāyan is available (Kesārāja 1990). Many of its images feature Śvetāmbara ascetics, leading its modern-day publishers to suggest that the manuscript was commissioned by or for a mendicant milieu.

14 The caupāṭ-dōṭā combination is a fundamental building block of vernacular North Indian poetry. Snell (2009) discusses Banārsīdās’s use of metre, noting its indebtedness to Sufi epics such as the Madhumālā (which Banārsīdās even describes reciting, Ardhakathānāka, v. 335–43), which also inspired the Rāmcaritmānas. Snell (2009, p. xiii) notes that Banārsīdās mixes his metres more freely than what is seen in these epics, not unlike Rāmcand Bālāk.

15 This Adhyātma-gīt is also known as the Adhyātalampadaparvaprakṛti.
popular of his kind. The language of the Dyānatray songs quoted by Cort indicates a more formally developed Brajbhāsa than that of Banārsidās. Another influential poet was Ānandghan, who was active in the latter half of the seventeenth century and whose popular songs, according to Bangha (2013, pp. xxx–xxxi), display a Brajbhāsa with Rājasthānī and Gujarāṭī features, whereas his hymns are in “a mixture of Rājasthani and Gujarati”. Dyānatray and Ānandghan both remain popular and influential, due to the longevity of their songs among practising Jains. Cort (2013b) explores Jain poets such as these, including Banārsidās, who wrote Holī songs that exemplified an allegorical understanding of the celebration, establishing a Jain counter-narrative to established non-Jain equivalent genres. These studies show that Bālak’s Sītācarit appeared in a context where other Jain Brajbhāsa poets were actively engaging with a variety of genres and practices that were shared amongst the wider community. Yet the poets Cort and Bangha describe are primary writers of hymns, songs, and similar short works, and the writing of longer narrative literature by these Jains remains insufficiently accounted for.

The only study of Jain narrative literature in Brajbhāsa is a broad survey by Jain (1976), which encompasses the period from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century. Given the lack of similar works, Jain’s title is important, and its arguments must be discussed in some detail. The first thing to note about Jain’s study is that it does not enter into the discussion of how and why Jains turned to produce literature in Brajbhāsa. Jain states that Brajbhāsa was popular at the time but does not explore the matter further (Jain 1976, pp. 28–47). Jain lists 54 individual titles for this period, 18 of which are available in print. The study then organises the titles into a tripartite categorisation of mahākāvya, defined as narrative epics that deal with heroic or sacred subjects, khaṇḍakāvya, having neither heroic nor sacred subject matter, and ekārthakāvya, which focus on the entirety of a single protagonist’s life (Jain 1976, pp. 21–3). This categorisation seems somewhat arbitrary—the Sītācarit is registered as an ekārthakāvya, but is also described as being of literary quality, pertaining to a mahākāvya (Jain 1976, p. 21).

Jain’s ensuing analysis of the texts is underpinned by two categorical stances. The first is that Jain narrative literature is intrinsically religious, to the extent that it is “inappropriate”16 to approach the texts without rooting them in Jain religion (Jain 1976, pp. 20–21). The second is that the period covered by the study was marked by excessive warfare, societal decline, and a Hinduism threatened by Muslim, and later English, rulers (Jain 1976, pp. 28–47). As a result, Jain’s readings of the various texts emphasise iterations of Jain identities as demarcated from various threats, be they external aggressors or improper Jain practices. This emphasis does not allow Jain to explore the texts’ possible interrelations with non-Jain sites or agents of literary production, or as already mentioned, to ask why they are written in Brajbhāsa in the first place, beyond pointing out that the language was popular beyond the Braj region (Jain 1976, p. 263). The bulk of the book is devoted to categorising the various features of the texts. The Sītācarit is grouped with texts containing elements of Rājasthān (Jain 1976, p. 265).

It is noteworthy that among the texts and authors highlighted by Jain, Rāmchand Bālak’s Sītācarit, with its mid-seventeenth century dating, is among the earliest. It is instructive to consider the dates of the other early narrative works (see Table 2).

As the table shows, Rāmchand Bālak was amongst the first wave of Jains to write narrative literature in Brajbhāsa. Amongst the other authors of the list, we know that Bhūdardās, Nemicandra, and Ayājrāj Paṭnī all were members of the Khaṇḍelvāla Jain community, while Vinodilāl was an Agravāl Jain; all four being laymen. Their geographic spread included Rajasthan, (Nemicandra was active in Amer, Ayājrāj in Sanganer), Agra (Bhūdardās), and Delhi (Vinodilāl), covering fields of influence from both the classical Brāj region and Rajasthan, were a Maru-Gurjar inflected Brajbhāsa seems to have been increasingly current amongst some lay Jains authors from the seventeenth century onwards.

16 ‘Anucit’.
Table 2. Early Jain authors of narratives in Brajbhāṣā.\textsuperscript{17}

| Author          | Title                  | Date       |
|-----------------|------------------------|------------|
| Rāmcanḍ Bālak  | Sītācarit              | 1657       |
| Āskaraṇ         | Nemicandrikā           | 1674       |
| Lākṣmīdās       | Śrenīkārītra            | 1676       |
| Ajayrāj Pāṭnī  | Nemināthcarit          | 1678       |
| Vinodilāl       | Bhaktamār Bhasā-Kathā  | Born later 17th century |
| Lākṣmīdās       | Yasodacaritra          | 1724       |
| Bhūḍhārdās      | Pārśva Purāṇ           | 1732       |
| Nemicandra      | Devendrakīrti          | “          |

All this leaves us with a picture where Jain vernacular literary production shifted from its Maru-Gurjar orientation in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries towards a more formal Brajbhāṣā in the later eighteenth century, and where the language of the most researched exponents of Jain Brajbhāṣā literature in the seventeenth century still displays some Rājasthāni and Gujarāti features. Yet the style, scope, and variety of narratives written by these Jains remains unexplored, especially in terms of their interrelations with the genres and tendencies of the wider culture. In other words, the role of narrative literature in Brajbhāṣā amongst these Jains is not sufficiently accounted for, and the Sītācarit emerges as one of the earliest specimens of that literature.

3. The Sītācarit—Language and Outlook

The Sītācarit was completed, according to the text itself, in 1657 (VS1713),\textsuperscript{18} and it was composed by a Rāmcanḍ Bālak, about whom we know nothing beyond the fact that he was a Digambara. The work is an inventive take on the Jain Rāmāyaṇa narrative, heavily emphasizing Sītā as a paragon of Jain virtue. It seems to have been popular in its day. In my visits to research archives and temple libraries in Agra, Bharatpur, Jaipur, and Delhi I was able to view eighteen manuscripts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, twelve of which were complete. Only four of the manuscripts provide information linking them to specific sites; these are all minor towns outside of today’s Jaipur and Agra. Many more manuscripts are listed in catalogues, and even more must have been in circulation. I will here first describe some of the main features of the Sītācarit’s language, arguing that it is indeed Brajbhāṣā, albeit with features from Maru-Gurjar. This language is similar to that of Banārsīdās’s, even in the names of concepts describing various aspects of religious experience. However, the Sītācarit diverges from Banārsīdās in its heavy emphasis on bhakti devotionalism, using the unique effects of the narrative format to present a model of practice and reflection, where bhakti towards Sītā becomes as potent as the insights and devotion she is seen to embody.

3.1. Language

A major challenge when describing the language of the Sītācarit is that of manuscript variations. I am here indebted to Cerquiglini (1999) emphasis on the mutability inherent in the early vernacular French manuscript traditions, stemming from the very mutability of the emerging French vernacular itself. While the philological instinct may be to delineate and organise these variations, eventually producing a categorial Urtext, Cerquiglini’s insight is that when dealing with highly fluid early modern vernaculars, embracing variation serves us better than abolishing it. The same holds true for the Sītācarit. For instance, nasalisations and postpositions routinely vary greatly across the manuscripts.

\textsuperscript{17} All dates, except from those of Bālak, are from Miśra (1997, pp. 337; 277–78; 422–23; 26; 475; 45). A Jīnhar s.a (d. 1707) could have been active exactly contemporaneously with Bālak, but Miśra (1997, p. 162) describes his language as being Maru-Gurjar rather than Brajbhāṣā.

\textsuperscript{18} The text dates the completion of the text to the month of Māgha in VS1713. According to Snell (1991, p. 50), Māgha falls in the part of year when 56, not 57, should be deducted to get the AD date.
An illustrative example is the frequent alteration between Brajbhāṣā kau and Rājasthānī nai for the dative postposition, which both occurs between manuscripts and seems interchangeable within others.

There are two major factors for this, besides the fundamentally fluid character of early modern North Indian vernaculars. Firstly, the Sītācarit was composed at the juncture where Jains shifted from various iterations of Maru-Gurjar to Brajbhāṣā. As I show in the following, there are lingering traces of especially Rājasthānī influence and these are handled differently in different manuscripts. The second factor is the time span of the manuscripts themselves, ranging from the early eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth. Over time, scribes seem to have developed different ideas, of which forms needed correcting, and how. For instance, the eighteenth-century manuscripts generally show a greater proliferation of tadbhava variations than those of the nineteenth century, where consistent tendencies towards tatsama take their place.19 Moreover, there is a gap of over sixty years between the Sītācarit’s composition and the earliest manuscript available to me. Yet some linguistic patterns do appear, and while we may not be able to order the many variations under hard and fast grammatical rules, it is possible to point to general tendencies that are consistent across the manuscripts. As I show, the language of the Sītācarit can be described as a Brajbhāṣā that wears its Maru-Gurjar influences lightly.

My aim here is not to provide a full grammar of Brajbhāṣā as it appears in the Sītācarit, with every single grammatical feature described—that would be a work beyond the scope of this study. It is, instead, an attempt to identify and describe some of the more salient features of the language of the Sītācarit, and to do so with sufficient precision to enable us to say where it sits on the spectrum between Maru-Gurjar and its offshoots, as described by Tessitori (1914), and Brajbhāṣā as used by the canonical poets that form the reference point for Snell (1991) Brajbhāṣa grammar. That is not to say that I am unaware of the limitations of grammatical analysis when it comes to the fluid nature of early modern vernacular languages. Yet I would again argue that we may use linguistic categories, also in the form of grammatical rules that cumulatively define a given language and give it boundaries that distinguish it from other languages, even while acknowledging that the borders can be more porous than the grammars/grammar sometimes allow. In the case of Maru-Gurjar, the problem becomes more acute in that its exact linguistic status as separated from entities such as Old Western Rājasthānī or Old Gujarāṭī is not entirely clear. In fact, in the following, as above, I follow Tessitori’s grammar of “Old Western Rājasthānī” when talking of Maru-Gurjar.

The majority of the language of the Sītācarit conforms to the typical forms of Brajbhāṣā grammar. A case in point is the pronouns. For the first person pronouns, the Sītācarit features mainī20 for the singular and hamu21 for the plural. In the oblique, the singular is mujha, mujhi/ани,22 or less frequently, mohi/m.23 and mo/m.24 The oblique plural first person is hamaj/m.25 We note the complete absence of the Old Western Rājasthānī, Gujarāṭī, and Mārvāḍī forms given by Tessitori, such as amh̄e/amhi/jame/me for the plural.

In the second person, the Sītācarit features the singular tū, though rarely, and tuma26 and āpa27 interchangeably in both singular and plural. The oblique tujha and tumhā28 are frequent, but the usage of the latter varies greatly across the manuscripts. A (1729), and especially B (1727), at times, use

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19 Tadbhava and tatsama are classical concepts in Indian linguistics. Whereas tadbhava (“coming from that”) denotes words that have a traceable origin in earlier Indo-Aryan languages, especially Sanskrit, tatsama (“same as that”) refers to loanwords that appear unchanged from the Sanskrit.

20 “kachhu ika varnana maināi kahāṁ”, SC.151.

21 “tāśa hukāma hamu kauṇ karau”, SC.163.

22 “loka ādita mujhā kau taj”, SC.89. I use “mujhə/an” and similar representations to indicate the varied, frequently random usage of nasalisation across the manuscripts.

23 “rice dāna d̄o mohi”, SC.38.

24 “kṛpā kari no parai”, SC.1471.

25 “khyā hamain upāgaṇa”, SC.187.

26 “yaḥa kauṇ tuma vyahau sahit”, SC.798.

27 “maināi mana vānchita ḏāpā sava e”, SC.398.

28 “tαu tumhā gunhau karanau sava māpha”, SC.812.
tumha, even in contexts where a direct sense is intended, such as ‘laḍau tumha hamārai sāthi’ (SC.893).\(^{29}\)

The inconsistency is striking, and neither of the two manuscripts seem to operate a full separation between the direct tuma and the oblique tumha. There is instead a free mixture of both forms.

Greater variation is seen in the possessive pronouns, where we have the first person singulars merau,\(^{30}\) the second person tumhārau\(^{31}\) and both hamārau\(^{32}\) and mhārau\(^{33}\) in the first person plural.\(^{34}\) Tessitori attests mhārau as Mārvāḍī, but hamārau is far more frequent in the Sītācarit.

We find a similar situation in the interrogative pronouns, where the Sītācarit frequently uses Old Rājasthānī forms, such as kinya,\(^{35}\) kavana,\(^{36}\) and oblique kina,\(^{37}\) though Brajbhāṣā’s direct kauna\(^{38}\) and inanimate kaha\(^{39}\) are equally, if not more, frequent. Kisakika\(^{40}\) also appear.

For the third person pronouns, Brajbhāṣā singular direct yaha and singular and plural direct e are common, and so is singular oblique ihi/jha, also attested as Old Rājasthānī singular ablative, though this appears just as frequently in direct positions and has apparently lost its ablative aspect. Most striking is the high frequency of Old Rājasthānī direct eha, but this is anyhow a common feature of Brajbhāṣā, too.

The overall impression is one of Brajbhāṣā usage that sometimes alternates with scattered specimens of Maru-Gurjar derived forms. We might postulate that over time the scribes could have ironed out archaic forms and that the relative paucity of Maru-Gurjar inflected pronouns in the Sītācarit is a reflection of such tendencies. A case in point is the still high frequency of eha, which is often used as one half of a rhyming couplet and so would be more problematic to change. This would also explain the infrequent separation between categories such as direct, oblique, instrumental, and dative postpositions. The pattern is fluid and individual scribes shape it in individual ways.

The same holds true for the postpositions. For the dative, we find variations of the Brajbhāṣā kauṁ,\(^{41}\) but the Rājasthānī na\(^{42}\) is very frequent. Similarly, the Brajbhāṣā ablative and instrumental taim\(^{43}\) alternates with the Rājasthānī thaim.\(^{44}\) The manuscript B (1727) almost always chooses the latter, while A (1729) chooses the former. Maru- Gurjar and later Rājasthānī taṇau\(^{45}\) is also common, but so is Brajbhāṣā kau.\(^{46}\) The high frequency of these two postpositions emerges as one of the clearest marker of influences from the Maru-Gurjar sphere in the Sītācarit.

The verbal forms are on the whole in line with the Brajbhāṣā verbal inventory outlined by Snell, though plural nasalisation is highly irregular in the manuscripts. The Maru-Gurjar 3rd person present tense –i ending, familiar from Apabhramśa, does not appear at all. Rather than comparing the full array of forms, it is instructive to consider Drocco (2017) comparative work on ergative functions in Old Western Rājasthānī, as Tessitori described it, and in Brajbhāṣā prose texts. Drocco finds that

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29 “You fought against us.”
30 “bhāmanḍala merau vīra”, SC.986.
31 “maṁ sāṅga tumhārai līgā”, SC.508.
32 “susū hamārau desī tumu”, SC.34.
33 “tulha sāṁga na bhalaū ko mhārau”, SC.509. The alternative mahārau appears in one instance: “bacana na māṁaṁ mahārau”, SC.1232.
34 Tessitori separates between genitive –au endings and locative and dative –aim endings for mhūr-. Dative mhūrai appears once in the Sītācarit (SC.509). Hamaiṁ is otherwise the norm for first person plural oblique.
35 “yaso rāja kua karaū”, SC.2191.
36 “rāja kalai kavana hai vāta”, SC.497.
37 “aisau juddha kīṭo kīna vīra”, SC.1018. This example shows that the distinction between direct and oblique use of the interrogative pronouns is not always maintained.
38 “kalai kavana kavi vacana vicāra”, SC.3.
39 “tuma sāṁga kalai kuna grīma”, SC.1248.
40 “iṣa vana māṁo kīlu kīma”, SC.60.
41 “namom namom tuma kau”, SC.134.
42 “dehu bharathai na rāja”, SC.388.
43 “musa taim voṭl vaima”, SC.88.
44 “kavaraṁ kīṭo sanēha pirathidhura thaim”, SC.137.
45 “maṁśī sara ráṣvanam tuṇau kahai vīla suvicāra”, SC.1663.
46 “tau jaladhī kau nītra na soṣa”, SC.1699.
the latter material does show verbal agreement even with postposition-marked objects in perfective constructions, which is not expected to appear in what he terms “classical Braj”, but is indeed a defining characteristic of “Mārvāṭi (i.e., Rājasthānī)” (2017, p. 207). This feature, however, never appears in the Sītācarit. If anything, the Sītācarit frequently uses the ergative nai/ni or the objective marker kau in perfective constructions, though marked and unmarked constructions are freely mixed, and the perfective verb never agrees with a marked object. This situation enforces the impression of a Brajbhāṣā that draws on individual words from Maru-Gurjar derived languages, but uses them according to the grammatical structures, not of those languages, but of Brajbhāṣā. When they do appear with any degree of consistency, such as the pronoun eka, they seem to do so not out of grammatical necessity, but for reasons of metre and rhyme.

As for the vocabulary, the Sītācarit primarily draws on the Sanskrit register of Raviṣeṇa’s Padma Purṇaṇa, its self-attested main source. See, for example, the following verse, which is quite typical in its Sanskritic register:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ekā devasa subha karma prakāśa} & \quad \text{One day joyful karma arose} \\
\text{Sītā geśa caḷyaun jinadāśa} & \quad \text{Sītā went to the house of a servant of the Jina;} \\
anauvrītī chullika paravina & \quad \text{Skillful, vow-holding Kśullaka.} \\
tapa kari vāpu kūṇau ati śīna & \quad \text{He performed asceticism long and hard.}
\end{align*}
\]

We notice how the first line could with only minor moderations have been reshaped into a Sanskrit locus absolutive compound phrase. Elsewhere, the Sītācarit uses a range of both tatsamas and tadbhavas, more frequently the latter. For instance, variations of hṛṣṇa (“heart”) are plentiful, whereas the hṛdaya approximation hridaya appears only once (SC.95). Manuscript variations also attest to significant levels of confusion and creativity in handling Sanskrit terminology. In the above example, anauvrītī appears in C (Bālak 1711) and D (Bālak 1761), while A (Bālak 1729) gives anodhart, B (Bālak 1727) anovart, and E (Bālak 1751) anovarti. Similarly, the name of the sage Kśullaka (Chullika) also appears as śulika (1729, 1727) and chulaka (1761). In other cases, the manuscripts broadly agree on tadbhavas, such as in chohart for aksauḥṣṭa (SC.1385). The overall impression is one of tatsamas being treated with varying degrees of awkwardness. It is, of course, impossible to say whether this is entirely caused by manuscript copyists or was present already at the time of composition, but the at times close relationship between the Sītācarit and the Sanskrit Padma Purṇaṇa does indicate that Rāmcand Bālak was comfortable with using Sanskrit. The question is then whether he employed tadbhavas current in his day, leaving later scribes to modify them into tatsama-approximations, or employed a highly tatsama-oriented vocabulary that the manuscript tradition struggled to come fully to terms with. In light of the otherwise quite unassuming aesthetics of the Sītācarit, discussed in more detail later, my assumption is that the former guess is more correct, but we may probably never know.

Alongside the Sanskrit-derived words in various stages of mutation is also a range of words of Perso-Arabic origin. Examples include tahākīkā (SC.8), khālaq (SC.12), khabar (SC.124), sāhab (SC.92), qarār (SC.350), fauja (SC.1440), and qaulah (SC.1072). Some of these, such as khabar, appear frequently, especially when used as fixed adverbial phrases, such as “sitāva de” (SC.592). Intriguingly, the manuscript scribes have on the whole had far less difficulty with the Perso-Arabic forms than the tatsama-leaning Sanskritic forms. Whereas the latter vary widely across manuscripts, the Perso-Arabic are strikingly consistent with variations appearing to only be down to minor spelling preferences.

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47 See, for instance, “ratanajatī ko rāma nai puchī sava hī vātā”, SC.1120, which is close to modern standard Hindī. More common are constructions such as “uṣa paṃṣṭ naṃ rāma jī rāṣṭvaṃ”, SC.860, which take the Rājasthānī naim as the objective marker and drops the ergative nai. In either case, the verb does not agree with the marked object.

48 Tahākīkā (“truly; truth”) is used similarly in the Ardhaṅkathaṇḍaka, v. 521 (2009, p. 216): “e kahai e tuṣṭa tahākīkā - e kahai bhavapari tīṭhā”. (“One said, ‘Truly, they are thugs!’ The other said, ‘It’s true, they are merchants.’”) Both Bālak and Banārsīdās have a penchant for rhyming tahākīkā with tīṭhā; the rhyme is used four out of the five times tahākīkā appears in the Sītācarit.
In sum, the Sītācarit presents a Brajbhāṣā that wears its at times plentiful Maru-Gurjar elements lightly and that draws on and mixes Sanskritic and Perso-Arabic registers. In Bakhtin (1981) terms, the Sītācarit’s range of registers sits closer to the heteroglossic. This indicates that the Sītācarit is a reflection of a multilingual context, where effective vernacular works drew on a variety of impulses. At the same time, there is no doubt that this variety of registers is embedded within a grammatical framework that is fully Brajbhāṣā.

3.2. Outlook—Bālak and Banārsīdās

Banārsīdās (2009, v. 174) autobiographical Ardhakathāñaka features a reference to a “Rāmcand Bālak”.49 This Bālak is one of two disciples of a monk of the Śvetāmbar Kharatara Gaccha sect, Abhaydharm, with whom Banārsīdās studied for a while in Jaunpur. Banārsīdās (2009) states that this meeting happened in 1600, and that he himself was 14 years at the time. If the epithet bālak (“young”) referred to this Rāmcand Bālak’s age at the time, indicating that he was of the same age as Banārsīdās or younger, he would have been in his late 60s or early 70s in 1657, when the Sītācarit was completed. It is difficult however to connect the allegedly Digambara poet Bālak with the Śvetāmbara monk of the Ardhakathāñaka. Even so, the possibility remains that the Digambara elements on view in the Sītācarit may be comparable with the form of Digambara adhyātma mysticism that Banārsīdās himself embraced in his later life. The Ardhakathāñaka itself can be read as Banārsīdās’s spiritual journey towards this goal. While the adhyātma movement’s main site was in Agra, and included Dyānātrāy, Cort (2002a) has shown that Jain adhyātma milieus also arose in Delhi and Multan, and that the latter primarily was composed of former Śvetāmbara monks of the Kharatara Gaccha. This does open the possibility that the poet Rāmcand Bālak might have been the person referred to by Banārsīdās, but we may probably never establish this with any degree of certainty. However, Banārsīdās remains an essential reference point for studies of Jain Brajbhāṣā literature, due to both his relative popularity in modern-day research and to his influence in the adhyātma-movement.

The very word adhyātma has a long and complex history. It is composed of the prefix adhi (“above, over”) and the noun ātma, which with its range of meanings (“self, soul, essence, etc.”) is in itself a central term in the history of South Asian religions. Adhyātma, then, can be understood as a “supreme self”, but also in the general adjectival sense of “spiritual”. An early example of adhyātma being used in such terms is Bhāgavatgītā (Radhakrishnan 1949, v. 8.3) where it is described as “the true nature of the indestructible, highest brahman”.50 Earlier still is its appearance as a member of the classical triad of the physical (“adhibhautika”), the divine (“adhidivīka”), and the spiritual (“adhyātmika”), which appears already in the Upaniṣads and customarily in later philosophical and medical treatises.51 An influential appearance of the concept is in the title of the Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, a Rāmāyaṇa telling in Sanskrit of the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century that sees Rāma not only as an incarnation of Viṣṇu, but of supreme reality itself (brahman) itself. This Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa is generally acknowledged to have had a defining influence on Tulsīdās and his Rāmcaritmānas.52

In the Jain context, the concept is closely linked with the adhyātma movement of the seventeenth century, which, as we have seen, centered around Banārsīdās and was a mystically inclined movement among Digambara Jain laymen of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Today it is more widely recognized as a historical catalyst for the development of the Terah and Bīsa Panths, the main traditions of contemporary Digambara Jainism. However, Flügel (2006) notes that Digambara mysticism in no way was the invention of the adhyātma movement. Indeed, one of the movement’s central documents, Banārsīdās’s Samaysār Nīlak, is in the main a commentary on the (at latest) eighth century Digambara philosopher Kundakunda’s Samayasarā, indicating the longevity of the teachings that underpinned the

49 I refer to Chowdhury’s edition of the Ardhakathāñaka (Banārsīdās 2009).
50 “aksaram brahma paramam”, sthābhāvā “dhīyatam ucyate”,
51 See, for instance, Taittirīya Upaniṣada 1.7.1 (Angot 2007).
52 For instance, see Lutgendorf 1991, p. 7.
movement in the seventeenth century. But the word \textit{adhyātma} itself does not seem to have been current in Jain circles prior to Banārsīdāś, and remains linked with the movement.\footnote{It is tempting to speculate on whether the adoption of the term in the seventeenth century could stem from the general influence of the \textit{Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa} from the early sixteenth century onwards.} Even so, the movement’s place in the history of Digambara Jainism, and especially in view of the more formally defined positions that followed in its wake, does mean that it can be difficult to view its seventeenth century iteration on its own terms. Flügel (2006, p. 340) argues that the \textit{adhyātma}-group, primarily centered around Agra, and the beginnings of the Terah Panth-movement, focused in Jaipur, were initially distinct but related lay groups that became close to indistinguishable to later history. So while Banārsīdāś was a strong and vocal proponent of \textit{adhyātma}, and a definite group did emerge on the basis of his teachings; it is also true that the exact span of activities and practices of these groups remain difficult to precisely delineate. The same holds true for the reach of its influence into the realms of popular Jain practices and meetings, for which I think the \textit{Sītācarit} primarily would have been intended.

Because of these very difficulties, I believe it is most helpful to approach the \textit{adhyātma}-movement of Rāmcand Bālāk’s day not as a consistent set of doctrines, but rather as an influential \textit{mood} or \textit{perspective}, not unlike how Hawley (2015) has argued we may understand the contemporary \textit{bhakti} “movement”. Through this approach we may recognize \textit{adhyātma}-tendencies without necessarily having to peg them onto a formal, traceable organization, but rather acknowledge them as affinities within a wider current. This \textit{adhyātma} mood involves a general turning away from outward ritual, considered artifice, and towards inner meditation. Here it is useful to turn to Banārsīdāś’s compositions, especially where he touches on the \textit{Rāmāyaṇa}, and see how he himself presents \textit{adhyātma} there, and in turn attempt to square Banārsīdāś’s position with that of the \textit{Sītācarit}. This will allow us to compare more directly the \textit{adhyātma} mood and perspective with that of the \textit{Sītācarit}, so as to see whether we find direct echoes.

\textit{Banārsīvīlása} is a collection of Banārsīdāś’s shorter and medium-length works on doctrine, compiled by one Jagjivan, a fellow poet and \textit{adhyātma} devotee, in 1644, shortly after Banārsīdāś’s death.\footnote{I use the 1905 edition of the \textit{Banārsīvīlása} and give page numbers, not verses.} It is an important source of knowledge about seventeenth century Digambara Jainism in general, but especially important here in light of the potential linkages between Banārsīdāś and Rāmcand Bālāk. The references to the Rāmāyaṇa story in the \textit{Banārsīvīlása} allow us to directly compare the two poets’ vocabularies and perspectives on mutual subjects in more detail. The main appearance of the Rāmāyaṇa story in the \textit{Banārsīvīlása} is part of the \textit{Adhyātamatapadapankti}, a cycle of songs with affixed \textit{rāgas} that illuminates parts of the \textit{adhyātma} world-view. Its sixteenth song encompasses a refrain and seven couplets in the \textit{vr̥n. dāvanī rāga} and deals explicitly with the \textit{Rāmāyaṇa} story. It may well be quoted in full:

\begin{quote}
(\textit{t.eka}) virājai rāmāyaṇa ghaṭa māhiṁ; marami hoya marama so jānai, mūraaka mānai nāhiṁ, virājai rāmāyaṇa

ātama rāma guṇa guṇa lachamana sitā sumati sameta; subhapayoga vānaradala maṇḍita, vara viveka raṇakheta virājai .

dhyāṇa dhanuṣa ṭaṅkāra sora suni, gat viśaṅditi māga; bhat bhasma mithyaṁata laṅka uṣṭh dharaṇa āga virājai . .

jare aṅgāna bhāva rākṣasakula, lare nikāṁchita sūra; jūjhī rāgadveṣa saṅsāra samaiti gādha ca kaścācāra virājai . .

vilakhata kuṇḍhakaraṇa bhavaśivibhrama, pulaṅkita mana darāyēva; thakita udāra vīrā mahiravaṇ setuvaṁdha samabhāva, virājai .

mūrchna maṁdodārī durāsā, suṣaja carana hanumāna; ghaṭt caturgaṇi paraṇati senā, chuṭe chapakahacija bāna, virājai . .
\end{quote}
The Ramayana shines in the mortal body. Insightful is he who knows the inner truth; fools do not know it.

Rām of the ātma55 is knowledge, Lākṣmaṇ is qualities, Sītā the great mind. Auspiciousness is found amongst the band of vānaras, the greatest insight on the field of battle.

Hearing the twang of the bow of dhyāna, worldly pleasures flee. As the flame of concentration arises, the deluded mind of Lāṁkā turns to ash.

The rāksasas' bhāv of ignorance burns as the heroes of passionless minds fight. The general fights the rāg of enmity and the fortress of doubt shatters like glass.

The unconscious Maṁdodarī is faithlessness, the feet of Hanumān the world itself. The multitude of four legged ones are the humble army, they release the arrows of the chapakaguna.

Seeing the power and quality of the cakrasudārṣaṇa Viṁbīṣaṇa’s faith arose. How could he return to the earth of Rāvan, that jewel-less world of beings?

In this way, in every sādhū’s mortal body, rages the battle for sahaja. From the perspective of everyday life it is the Ramayana—from that of absolute insight it is Rām himself.

Banārsīdās presents a vision of the Ramayana as an inner drama that plays out within the body of the devotee. For those who possess kevalgyān, the absolute omniscience achieved by only the most successful Jains, the Ramayana story is Rām itself. As indicated by the song’s second line, this Rām is the Ātmarām—the true, inner Rām, which I here believe is closely akin to the radical self-insight at the core of the adhyātma perspective itself. Similar references to the liberating power of ātma appear in Bālak’s Sītācarit:

jina āgyā hiradai dharī jāgyau ātama bhāva
āpa jāṁni vaṁy gyāna hai kriyā āpa ṭharāya
SC.1541

By holding the commands of the Jina in the heart, the mood of the ātma awakened,
You will know by that knowledge to restrain your actions.

This call to “restrain” actions is in keeping with the general adhyātma outlook of valuing the attainment of supreme religious insight (kevalgyān) over worldly deeds, which only serve to accrue hurtful karma. The motif frequently appears in Bālak’s Sītācarit.

Another important concept in the Adhyātmapadapāṇḍukti is sahaja, a term with its own complex history in South Asian religions. While its basic etymology suggests meanings akin to “natural” and “original”, it took on elaborate semantic possibilities, especially amongst the Nāth movements, in Tantrism, and the nirgūna mood of bhakti. Without going into too much detail, sahaja can be said to describe a transcendent or mystic state, often accompanied by or facilitating a perfect union or success

55 The concept of Ātmarām is complex, and I translate it like this here rather for clarity than precision.
in attaining the ultimate goals of the tradition in question. As we can see from the above quotations from the Banarsīvilāsa, sahaja has a similar meaning in the adhyātma context. It frequently appears in Bālak’s Sītācarit, such as in the following example:

\begin{quote}
yakātaka dhyāna dharau bhagava\nhvai nih. ´scala sāmāyaka guṇa\ncita main oru nahi ko bhāva\njānyaṃ ātama sahaja subhāva\n\end{quote}

Note how this passage exemplifies the link between the concepts of ātma and sahaja, and there are several similar examples in the Sītācarit. Finally, the reference to the “inner truth” of the Rāmāyaṇa in the very first line of Banārsīdās’s verse—“marma”—is echoed in similar phrases in the Sītācarit; just as Banārsīdās exclaims that “fools do not know” these secret interconnections, Rāmcand Bālak states that “the blind do not see the marma.”

May we then conclude that the Sītācarit represents a full-scale narrative representation of essentially the same religious stance that Banārsīdās reveals in the Adhyātanapadaṣī?

No. For the Sītācarit wedds its adhyātma outlook with an equally strong emphasis on bhakti, and as we shall see, even goes far in establishing bhakti as an equally efficient way to the beatific kevalgyān as knowledge of adhyātma. While Banārsīdās is no stranger to bhakti either, he is primarily occupied with the mystic self-knowledge of adhyātma. Moreover, the Sītācarit places a strong emphasis on the importance of authority and those who embody it, including the munis, Jinas, and especially, the sātis, to the extent that it suggests that worship of these authoritatives brings an equal benefit to that of attaining the insights these authorities embody. Rāmcand Bālak himself says as much, in one of the few examples of his own direct words in the Sītācarit:

\begin{quote}
kahai caṃda aisi guru seva\nbharvasaigara siṃha seva\natīrjula muni pararavo\npratiṣṭhā māhīyala jīma bhāna\n\end{quote}

It is indeed striking that throughout the Sītācarit, we hear more about the benefits of the guru’s words than the words themselves. This is in line with a general trope of the ideal guru in vernacular Digambara poetry, which Cort (2019) has described as being informed by both the ancient Jain tradition of venerating the jina and the emphasis on the guru’s powers in the energised non-Jain religious traditions of early modern North India. That is not to say that its path diverges from that of Banārsīdās; as we have seen, Rāmcand Bālak frequently uses the same vocabulary as Banārsīdās to speak of mystical experiences akin to that of the adhyātma, and Sītā’s ultimate ascension to divine status is framed as an experience infused by sahaja. Yet, the very concept of adhyātma itself never appears in the Sītācarit, and we may hypothesise that Bālak, while familiar with and possibly adhering to adhyātma tenets, was not a full-blood member of the movement. He did, however, clearly compose the Sītācarit within a religious and literary landscape, where Banārsīdās was a looming figure, and he must have been familiar with adhyātma sentiments. Another difficulty arises when we consider that the mystical language used by Banārsīdās and Bālak alike might not be particular to them. As Bangha has pointed out to me in personal communication, Bālak’s and Banārsīdās’s mystic terminology has many overlaps with sant-bhāṣā, the vernacular used amongst non-Jain yogic and tantric practitioners, such as Gorakhnāth, and their followers. Cort (2015) has indeed pointed to a piece in the Banārsīstvīlāsa that explicitly and positively discusses Gorakhnāth’s teachings. This indicates that the flow of influence...

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56 These meanings are discussed by Callewaert and Sharma 2009, p. 2015.
57 “Marama na jñāni anuḍhā”, SC.2310.
58 Muni (“sage”) is a common term of reference for a Jain monk.
amongst Jain Brajbhāṣā authors may not only have gone from Jain to Jain, but across a wider swathe of their social and religious context. However, we cannot fully understand Bālak’s religious stance if we do not consider the peculiar functions of the Sītācārit as a narrative.

3.3. Sati and Bhakti in Narrative

I have written elsewhere about the Sītācārit’s status as a satt-kathā, and can only briefly restate my argument here.\(^{59}\) While the defining works of the Jain Rāmāyana tradition, such as Ravisena’s Padma Purāṇa and Vimalasūri’s Paśima Cariya, all tell the story of Rāma, Lakṣman, and Rāvaṇa with special reference to their status as Great Men (śalākāpuruṣa) of Jain universal history; the Sītācārit is one of several, lesser known Jain Rāmāyanas that twist the tale to focus on Sītā and her status as a singularly devout and accomplished Jain woman—a satt.\(^{60}\) The final act of the Rāmāyana, covering Rāma and Sītā’s return to Ayodhya, Sītā’s banishment to forest exile, and eventual triumph in a public test of her fidelity, is crucial to Sītā’s satt stature. While the narrative of her enlightened approach to supremely challenging circumstances is present already in the earliest layers of the Rāmāyana tradition, the Jain satt-kathās typically shift the balance of the story to primarily be that of Sītā, sidelining Rāma and Lakṣman. The Sītācārit accomplishes this shift by beginning at the very end, with Sītā and Rāma’s return to court after the battle of Lankā, taking great relict in portraying Sītā’s heroic composure in the face of her banishment. The recounting of the preceding events of the Rāmāyana narrative only appears later as the wandering sage Nārada tells the story to Sītā’s twin sons. The final, defining section of the Sītācārit—covering about one sixth of the roughly 2500 verse total—details Sītā’s return to Ayodhya and the great set piece of test by fire of her fidelity. The fire pit is divinely transformed to a royal throne and the renunciate Sītā emerges as the embodiment of a devotional ideal, while Rāma appears confused and unwilling to let go of his desires. It is also on this note that the narrative of the Sītācārit ends. Rāma and Lakṣman venerate Sītā, their story ending without the closure of the śalākāpuruṣa-narrative, while Sītā’s insight, asceticism, and satt-stature are praised in the hymnal tones of a chappay verse.

The Sītācārit’s portrayal of Sītā as an embodiment of an ideal worthy of worship encapsulates the composition’s emphasis on the power and efficacy of bhakti in religious and literary practice. Its opening verses feature an argument, often found in bhakti-leaning vernacular works, where Bālak explicitly states how it is the practice of bhakti towards the teachers and learnings of Jainism that miraculously endows him with the imaginative power needed to compose “a glorious Sītācārit”.\(^{61}\) This model of religious practice, which we may label “attainment through devotion”, runs throughout the Sītācārit as a constant theme, and is most clearly illustrated in the central figure of Sītā herself. As the pit of fire becomes a royal throne and Sītā announces her decision to renunciate, she is praised by munis and gods alike:

\[
\text{ava harasa bhaṣyau sava saṃta} \quad \text{Now all the sants were thrilled} \\
\text{pragatyau sata sīla mahamāta} \quad \text{The true skills of the great beings were manifest} \\
\text{jaga māim aha motti nārī} \quad \text{This great woman was in the world} \\
\text{tina kai nahi kāma vikāri} \quad \text{She could not act harmfully} \\
\text{SC.2483} \quad \text{ }
\]

In her radical embrace of the Jain teachings, in this instance encapsulated by her vows of asceticism, Sītā not only aspires to the qualities of enlightened beings but comes to—crucially—“manifest” them in the mundane world. And by embodying these qualities as a satt, Sītā also becomes an object of veneration. The satt is an ideal in the Sītācārit because she recognises the cause and effect of auspicious and inauspicious karma in life, the stopping of these processes by applying skilful practice,

\(^{59}\) See Plau (2018). My analysis of the Sītācārit’s narrative structure draws on Genette’s (1997) concept of transfocalisation, in which the emphasis of a familiar story is shifted to focus on a new character, theme or motif.

\(^{60}\) In the Jain context, the satt concept does not have any connotation with the ritual self-immolation of the suttee practice made infamous by colonial-era discourse. See Kelting (2009) and Fohr (2015, pp. 55–74).

\(^{61}\) Sītācārit vs. 5 (Plau 2018).
and the essence of equanimity and mystic sahaja-quality within the ātman that characterises the jīva’s achievement of this goal. Yet, as the Sītācarit repeatedly underlines, perfect devotion for those who achieve the goal has the power to bestow the same gifts on the devotee. Rāmacand Bālak presents a stance that balances between placing ultimate authority in the hands of the enlightened few and offering a path where each devotee may reach the same religious pinnacle through the supremely potent vehicle of bhakti.

The implications of Sītā’s success are then that we too, as listeners or readers, may gain a similar insight not only by emulating Sītā’s example, but by expressing bhakti for her too, and it is the Sītācarit’s quality as narrative that bears this element out. The very emphasis on Sītā over Rām is achieved not simply by stating that this is so, but through Bālak’s ingenious reordering of the familiar story’s narrative structure, embedding the story of Rām and Laksmana’s heroes within the context of Sītā’s exile. Ultimately, Sītā’s clearheaded insight into the workings of karma becomes the nexus through which we are invited to view the rest of the story.

The technique is used throughout the Sītācarit. Bālak typically does not draw out the religious implications of other events of the Jain Rāmayana story simply by stating these, but rather by rearranging the events of the familiar narrative to highlight interrelations, themes, and insights. In his recounting of the life of Bhāmaṇḍala, Sītā’s brother, Bālak, again completely reorganizes the sequence of events in his alleged source, Raviśena’s Sanskrit Padma Purāṇa. In the traditional telling of the story, Bhāmaṇḍala was, in a former life, a prince who kidnapped a woman from her lover and committed violence by invading other countries. In the next life, Bhāmaṇḍala is reborn as Sītā’s twin brother while the woman’s lover is born as a vengeful asura, a form of deity, who steals Bhāmaṇḍala the baby boy from the cradle and leaves him to grow up in the forest. As a young man, Bhāmaṇḍala finds an image of Sītā and promptly falls in love. When Rām defeats him in an archery contest for Sītā’s hands, an infuriated Bhāmaṇḍala decides to wage war. On his way to the battlefield, however, Bhāmaṇḍala catches a glimpse of the territory he ruled in his previous life, instantly remembers and understands everything, and is reunited with his parents and sister as a brother. The Sītācarit follows this outline, but with several chronological twists. Instead of introducing Bhāmaṇḍala’s story by recounting his previous birth, Bālak reserves this information to the story’s climax, when the enraged Bhāmaṇḍala, about to act harmfully, suddenly remembers his previous lives and is enlightened. As Bhāmaṇḍala’s realization dawns, Bālak recounts the preceding the story that explains not only what has happened before, but coming as the climax of Bhāmaṇḍala’s narrative, highlights why and how previous karma affects the present. The understanding of the purely causal events echo a deeper insight into the workings of karma, and it is an effect that is achieved through playful rearrangement of narrative structure.

This playful element of the Sītācarit is borne out in its distinctive literary form. Here too, Bālak both correlates with and partially departs from Banārsidās. Snell (2005) has noted how the relative lack of traditional poetic devices (alaṅkāras) in Banārsidās’ Ardhakathānakā in no way indicates that the work is lacking in literary merit or artfulness. Banārsidās’ language is frequently oral in tone, but highly alert to the possibilities of metrical rhythm, using one to underline the other. We see a very similar dynamic in play in the Sītācarit, where Bālak hardly ever indulges in any kind of imagery but rather emphasises dialogue and bare-bones storytelling, frequently with a tone of informality and directness that approximates contemporary, everyday Hindi. Examples include Sītā’s twin sons’ parting words as they are about to leave for war—"mātā jī hama calata hai"—and Sītā’s reaction when she is brought into the forest for her exile:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{sītā kahai sunau senāpati isa vaṇa main ki kāma} \\
\text{iḥā kāhū jīnāmaṇḍira nāḥī kahyu kahāṃ tūma rāma}
\end{align*}
\]

SC.60

\[62 \text{ “We’re off, mother”, (SC.120).} \]
Sītā said, “Listen commander, what are we doing in this forest? There is no Jain temple here. What have you said, Rāma?”

The Sītācarīt here lets Sītā speak directly, using unadorned and colloquial language. At the same time, Sītā’s phrases are divided across three of the dohā verse’s four metrical subunits (padas), giving the statements something of the clipped quality of confused speech. It is a striking example of how the Sītācarīt frequently juxtaposes straightforward language with metrical sensitivity, similar to Banārsīdās’s style in the Ardhaṅkathānāka.

However, the Sītācarīt also features an array of poetical meters that are used in a completely free-flowing manner. The typical delineation of a narrative work into shorter segments consisting of cauṇḍa-dohā is familiar from early, influential vernacular romances such as Maulana Daud’s Cāndāyan (1379), Qutbān’s Mrgavatī (1503/1504), and Malik Muhammad Jāyśī’s Padmarat (1540/1541). Tulsīdās too makes use of the cauṇḍa-dohā pattern in his Rāmaratmānas, though the dohā is sometimes exchanged with a sorti, and further forms are occasionally used to highlight moments of increased emotional intensity.63 In contrast, the Sītācarīt is not in any manuscript divided into fixed units, but is instead a single, long composition that alternates between a range of meters, including dohā, cauṇḍa, kavītta (allegedly savaiyā),64 sorti, arilla, chappay, chanda-cāl, and karkhā, as well as several kinds of musical notations in the form of rāgas.65 This range of meters was in line with those used by Banārsīdās and other Jain poets, such as Ānandghan, as well as with the usages of non-Jain Brajbhāṣā poets of the same period. Bālak, however, alternates between these meters completely freely, using the very texture of variation as a building block in his narrative structure. At times, the dohā is used to pass comment on narrative events; at others, it is used for long series of sustained narrative action; and at yet others, it is used in alternation with the sorti, which is the exact inversion of the dohā meter, in dialogues to emulate the ebb and flow of conversation. In this, the Sītācarīt is closer in form to the metrical pyrotechnics of a poet such as Keśavdās, who is emblematic of the period’s elaborate rāti style of poetry and who similarly used free metrical variation for effect, for instance in his own Rāmarat treatment, the Rāmcandrikā (1600). Yet it is more helpful to think of the aesthetics of the Sītācarīt not in terms of degrees of courtly rati influence, but rather as an expression that shares tendencies but is still distinctive on its own terms. As I have noted, Bālak hardly ever uses any of the elaborate poetical effects (alankāras) that permeate Keśavdās’s works. We do better in thinking of the Sītācarīt as representing a distinctive artfulness that draws on a variety of aesthetic tendencies while not fully adopting any of them. This artfulness blends a strikingly informal, unadorned tone, advanced metrical usages, and inventive narrative techniques to create a literary texture that is distinctive, yet clearly informed by multiple aesthetic and religious currents in its day.

Considering the many different aspects of the Sītācarīt as a whole, it strikes me that it is, more than anything, a text that wants to entertain and be understood. Only rarely and incidentally discussing the finer points of doctrinal matters, it is primarily engaged with the possibilities and insights inherent in storytelling.

4. Conclusions

So where does all this leave us? Firstly, it is clear that while we may usefully and confidently speak of Jain Hindī, it is also helpful to zoom in on the particular language characteristics of works like the Sītācarīt and recognize that particular milieus of Jains existed from the seventeenth century onwards that used a Brajbhāṣā comparable to that of non-Jain poets active at the time. And while

63 See Lutgendorf (1991, pp. 13–18) for a discussion of Tulsīdās’s use of meters.
64 There is a tendency in the manuscripts to designate verses in the kavītta metre as being savaiyās. I am grateful to Hiroko Nagasaki for helping me identify this particularity.
65 These metres were for the most part standard elements in the vernacular poet’s toolbox. For the use of rāgas in the Sītācarīt, see Plau (2019).
Banârsidâs has had a towering influence on the way we perceive these milieus, the Sîtâcarit indicates something of their actual scope and variety. The Sîtâcarit is a lone example here, but it is far from the only work of its nature. As we have seen, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the production of dozens of narrative Jain works in Brajbhāsā. Between Banârsidâs and Râmcand Bâlak we may hypothesize a Jain Brajbhāsā cultural field with different views and emphases, consisting of authors and audiences who responded to religious and literary influences from across the entirety of early modern North Indian society, and crafted, enjoyed, and were informed by well-formed, inventive, and unique works. The archives are waiting to be explored.

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