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In service of God and Geography: Tracing Five Centuries of the Vallabhacharya Sampradaya. Book review: Seeing Krishna in America: The Hindu Bhakti Tradition of Vallabhacharya in India and its Movement to the West, by E. Allen Richardson

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In Service of God and Geography: Tracing Five Centuries of the Vallabha Sampradaya

The range of scholarly interest in the Vallabha Sampradaya is as extensive as the path by which this Krishna-centered devotional sect has evolved, thrived, and adjusted to shifts in power, politics, and geography over the past five centuries.[1] Much of this scholarship is oriented toward specialists of Indian *bhakti* (devotional) movements and Sanskrit treatises and commentaries, and those interested in the patronage relations between sectarian communities, Mughal states, and Rajput kingdoms. Indeed, the Vallabha Sampradaya's development into an influential *bhakti* community is a story that illustrates much about Hindu sectarian community construction and the political and textual maneuvers intended by its leaders to anchor the new Sampradaya within the Vaishnava *bhakti* landscape of northern and western India. E. Allen Richardson has written a highly readable account of the Vallabha Sampradaya that does not presume specialist background knowledge or familiarity with the concept of *bhakti* and other common vocabulary of Hindu traditions and ritual practices. Richardson balances his focus on the historical and material realities of the Vallabha sect's rise to wealth and power over a vast geography with a sensitive appreciation of the devotional practices that characterize membership in the Sampradaya. In *Seeing Krishna: The Hindu Bhakti Tradition of Vallabhacharya in India and Its Movement to the West*, Richardson offers a portrait of movement and mobility—of religious leaders (*goswamis*); iconic forms of god (*swarup-s*), texts, and teachings; and of devotees—that, in its avoidance of reductionism to Western concep-

tions of religion and religious behavior, offers a thoughtful historical account of how a devotional community continues to thrive thousands of miles away from its points of origin.

Seeing Krishna is divided into three parts, each with a set of complementary chapters. Part 1 is concerned with the early history, organization, theology, and ritual practices associated with the Vallabha Sampradaya, which is also known as Pushtimarg. Part 2 takes a closer look at the patronage networks and mutually beneficial relationships that leaders of the Vallabha Sampradaya cultivated with reigning powers during the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries and, in so doing, that ensured the sect's growth and wealth. Part 3 chapters focus on the migration of Pushtimargiya followers to the United States and Canada and include ethnographic material collected by Richardson from attendance at Pushtimargiya events, conversations, and correspondence with devotees.

Richardson's guiding framework, as he moves from the historical materials in parts 1 and 2 to the slightly more ethnographic content of part 3, is the metaphor of movement, characterized by a shift in location; a "sacred journey"; a dramatic change in social and economic circumstances necessitating a physical move; or, like Krishna in the *ras lila* (Krishna drama), fleeting appearances and disappearances, and "changing locations at will" (p. 8). In this emphasis on a quality of movement as a key characteristic of the Vallabha Sampradaya, Richardson

suggests that its leaders were primed for the emergence of strategies, and, when circumstances required it, they demonstrated their skills to contain and manage changes. This sense of mobility, Richardson argues, is what accounts for the Vallabha Sampradaya's geographical shifts within India and its later dispersal to places outside of India.

Founded by Vallabhacharya (1479-1531), the Vallabha Sampradaya's early history and subsequent growth was characterized by the movement of its founder from the south of India to the Krishna-centered region of Braj and its surrounding villages. At Govardhan Hill in Braj, the *swarup* (icon) of Krishna in the form of Shrinathji reveals itself, and this moment, termed by Richardson as the "theophany," becomes the historical, if not hagiographical, beginning for the Vallabha Sampradaya. Vallabhacharya's successor is his son, Vitthalnath (1515-85), whose successors are his seven sons. Through the patriline connected to Vallabhacharya, the Sampradaya is both consolidated and dispersed as each of the seven sons is recognized as the head of a branch of the Vallabhkul (descendants of Vallabhacharya) and associated with a *gaddi* (throne, or seat of authority). The male head of each *gaddi*, who is also known as *goswami*, is responsible for the daily care of the *swarup* which resides in the *haveli* or mansion associated with a *gaddi*. Richardson's account of the Vallabha Sampradaya's expansion from Braj outward to Rajasthan and Gujarat includes historical materials that document the patronage relationships between *goswamis* and various rulers. Richardson makes a direct connection between the sites chosen for *havelis* and the resources available for the support of the *gaddi*: *goswamis* who successfully mingled and established relations with local rulers, whether Mughal or Mewari, could receive land grants, grazing rights, and whole villages for taxation and rent collection; and, these resources would sustain a thriving *haveli* whose renown as a pilgrimage destination would then ensure economic gains to the surrounding areas. Richardson sketches the expansion of Pushtimargiya lines of patronage that supported the highly aestheticized dimensions of the Pushtimargiya *bhakti*, such as its *pichhavai* (silk scroll) paintings, elaborate ornamentation and dress of the Krishna *swarups* (*shringar*), palace-like *havelis*, devotional poems (*padas*) and songs (*kirtans*) for daily performance in *havelis*, and the production of lavish culinary delights (*bhog*).

It is the devotional requirements for the care of the Pushtimargiya *swarup* in each *gaddi's haveli* as well as the devotional expectations for laypersons that Richardson so excellently describes. For beginning students of

North Indian *bhakti*, Richardson's descriptions of such concepts as *bhakti*, *bhava*, *darshan*, *murti*, *swarup*, *puja*, and *seva* are spare and yet evocative. Richardson is sensitive that readers, and perhaps his own students too, may struggle to comprehend aspects of devotional practice that seem outside of more familiar Western categories of religious experience. He thus guides the reader to appreciating the theological foundation and devotional aesthetic of Pushtimarg without overwhelming references to texts or philosophical vocabulary. Whether in seventeenth-century India or in twenty-first-century United States, Pushtimargis, in the *haveli* and in the home, direct devotional emphasis on the loving care of the Krishna *swarup*. The desire to give and receive *pushti*, or "nourishing grace," guides the actions of the devotee. By daily caring for the *swarup*, and receiving the nourishing grace of Krishna, the devotee can hope to experience, as Richardson writes, a "higher realm" (p. 38). *Seva* in Pushtimarg, Richardson points out, fosters a highly intimate relationship between the one serving and the object of the service. The desired outcome for those performing *seva* is the transformation of the self, that is, an ontological outcome that would result in the surrendering of the self. When the Vallabha Sampradaya travels to the United States and Canada, it is, as Richardson observes, the jarring clash between the imperative to succeed, to go out into the world and achieve the "American Dream," and the internally motivated desire to surrender the self and form a relationship with Krishna, that may be difficult for the younger generation to reconcile (p. 172).

Richardson's ability to travel back and forth in a narrative sense, as both an analyst of Pushtimarg, from the perspective of a historian, and as a sensitive observer of a tradition as it is practiced, adds to the analytical merits of *Seeing Krishna*. Readers unfamiliar with the Vallabha Sampradaya will gain an understanding of this *bhakti* sect that neither overlooks its rootedness in history nor its strategies for gaining power and wealth. Simultaneously, readers will gain an introduction to the texture of Pushtimargiya devotional practices that are contextualized in time and space. Pushtimarg, Richardson conveys, emphasizes surrender to Krishna, but this deeply personal objective is situated within a devotional community with a long history that has directly affected its material and political strength. For example, Richardson provides documentary evidence outlining how the Vallabha Sampradaya interacted with Mughal and Rajput rulers to secure its economic stability through three centuries. This interaction of Pushtimarg with Mughal and Rajput leaders is well known and Richardson's analysis of

these complex relationships of patronage illuminates the avenues by which a sectarian movement ensured its survival. Likewise, it is the educational background, wealth, and social capital of the Gujarati Pushtimargiya followers that supports their plans, following migration to the United States, to create a “sacred geography” in rural Pennsylvania that attempts to reproduce the spatial and sensory qualities of being in Braj, India.

Whereas patronage underwrote and fostered the growth of the Vallabha Sampradaya in earlier centuries, Richardson writes that it is “globalization” that shapes “Pushtimarg in the modern world” (p. 101). Following migration to the United States, the educated and well-to-do Gujarati Pushtimargiya followers deployed their entrepreneurial skills and devotional determination to construct *havelis* and various simulacra of the sacred geographies in India. Richardson’s focus in this last part of *Seeing Krishna* is to document the variety of events that constitute Pushtimargiya achievements in the United States and Canada, including the construction of Vraj, the “spiritual headquarters of the Vallabha Sampradaya in the Western world,” and numerous other *havelis* (p. 111).

There is no question that Pushtimargis are “seeing Krishna” in America. Richardson’s interactions with devotees in various *havelis* and events confirms this observation; however, there are challenges to following a tradition that demands an inner surrender of self on a continuous basis when the social context rewards religious behavior focused on “self-fulfillment” and “personal gain” (pp. 170-171). There is the challenge of constructing a sense of coherent community of Pushtimargiya followers whose family ties in India are to one *gaddi* and *goswami* but whose participation in *haveli* activities in the United States may occur under the guidance and teaching of another *goswami* and his wife or visiting members of the Vallabhkul. There are also logistical challenges of needing to bring *goswamis*, priests (*mukhiyas*), specialized musicians and singers, cooks, and others whose services are required for proper daily *seva* of the *haveli swarup*. Pushtimargiya traditions, in their requirements for devotional spaces and sacred geographies that are connected to *gaddis* and *goswamis*, must find “substitutions” and yet these are only partial (p. 176). *Havelis* can adopt and have, as Richardson observes, adopted a “denominational model” allowing for autonomy from the state and for donations to be solicited (p. 179). This denominational model, while financially relevant, also rests on assumptions about religion, religious experience, and membership. Thus Pushtimarg, according to Richardson, is to some extent becoming an American kind of

Hindu group, complete with summer camps, senior programs, standardized curriculum for youth, and community events to introduce their community to those outside of it. These activities are also ones that other Vaishnava *bhakti* groups in the United States, such as the BAPS (Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam) Swaminarayan Sanstha, are supporting. This raises question of competition as a basis for possible changes in how Pushtimarg is representing itself and organizing its activities in America. Though Richardson does not probe further on Hindu sectarian competition in the United States, Pushtimarg as a minority Hindu group in a dominantly non-Hindu social and religious landscape undoubtedly has to address questions of whether its younger generation may find other sectarian Hindu groups more appealing and how its devotional practices, intended for domestic spaces, can be, if at all, broadened to a wider public. Much as the Pew Foundation study cited by Richardson points to Americans’ changing religious loyalties, the matter of loyalty to Pushtimarg in America may be tested by its followers who find its focus on household worship, *haveli*-centered ritual practices, and surrendering to the *swarup* of Krishna in the form of a child at odds with their lifestyle and perceptions of self and community. Richardson defers from answering whether Pushtimargiya identity will change; more wisely he points to the long history of Pushtimarg and its successful resettlement and adjustments to new surroundings over five centuries.

Seeing Krishna is an excellent introduction to the Vallabha Sampradaya, particularly commendable for its extension of the historical lens to the North American diaspora. Richardson’s rapport with a global network of Pushtimargiya interlocutors has added to his ethnographic material and gives a sense of how devotees in North America are thinking about their tradition’s presence outside of India. Readers familiar with ethnographic research may, however, wish for a greater sense of Richardson’s fieldwork and for more of his interlocutors’ actual voices. For example, it is not always possible to discern if the data in part 3 is paraphrased from Richardson’s participant-observation in Pushtimargiya events, or from experiences gathered over time. Another matter that interrupts the easy flow of Richardson’s writing is the absence of authors’ names where their scholarship is directly quoted or cited in the text. For example, Richardson provides Karen Prentiss’s very useful redefining of “*bhakti*” but the attribution to Prentiss only appears in an endnote (p. 13). Perhaps this style choice was intended to ease students’ reading of the text but this concession does obscure the scholarly need to consider

the sources that Richardson has used in the context of the arguments and interpretations he is making. A further comment on sources (other than Pushtimargiya primary source materials): the bulk of Richardson's bibliographic sources do not include more recent scholarship on the Vallabha Sampradaya, including the superb historical, textual, and ethnographic research by Shandip Saha and Emilia Bachrach. The absence of newer sources does not affect the contribution of Richardson's work. However, *Seeing Krishna* deserves a much broader reading audience. In its next incarnation, perhaps there can be some updating of the bibliography to complement the updating of Krishna's movement, from Mount Govardhan, to

Nathdwara, to western Pennsylvania, and elsewhere. Finally, minor typographical errors aside, there is one date that mystifies. The year of Vallabhacharya's birth is initially introduced as 1470 and subsequently as 1478 (pp. 16, 19). Neither matches the more commonly used year, 1479, but perhaps the latter discrepancy is no more than a typo and the former falls in the latitude reserved for holy men.

Note

[1]. All spellings of non-English words follow E. Allen Richardson's usage, including the absence of diacritics in the text.

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