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The Presence of the Real: *Jalarāmkathā* and the Experience of the Transcendent

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Abstract Rarely is the presence of the Gujarati saint *Jalarāmkathā* (1799–1881) felt more immediately, and indeed collectively, by his devotees in India and throughout the diaspora than when his narrative is recited during the *Jalarāmkathā*. This article examines the multiexperiential nature of the *Jalarāmkathā* as it unfolds through various transcendental mediums, all of which center on the *kathākār*, a public teller of the narrative. It is framed by recent scholarly discussions regarding Robert A. Orsi's suggestion that we need to go beyond the modern, liberal, Western historiographical paradigm and allow the real encounter with the gods to be brought back into scholarly conversation and analysis. In this respect, the article argues that *kathā* in general, and the *Jalarāmkathā* in particular, not only provide the conditions for Orsi's notion of "abundant event" to become manifest, whereby the presence of the transcendent is fully experienced by the devotees, but also shed further light upon the notions of "abundant space" and "abundant performance." 21

Keywords Jalarām Bāpā · Gujarati Hinduism · Hagiography · *Kathā* · *Jalarāmkathā*

The main ability of the *kathākār* when he is narrating is visualizing something in his mind....I try to tell the people with the words a picture; sometimes with a good narrator it is not just telling but he shows the picture.¹

In my previous work on the Gujarati Hindu saint Jalarām Bāpā (1799–1881), I focused on the central importance of the saint's hagiography in terms of the tradition's notions of ethical and social action and the nature of related miraculous events in the contemporary context that support this action (Wood 2015, 2018). In some respects, this article follows on from the discussion on how the narrative of Jalarām has been, and continues to be, presented to wider audiences (Wood 2018). The focus of the article, however, is rather the relationship that is developed between the devotee and the saint and the personal and collective experience that devotees have, not only of the presence of the saint, but also of the divine in the form of the god Rām and the figure of the legendary storyteller Vyās, during the performance of the tradition's central narrative, the *Jalarāmkathā*.

The Problem of Absence

A number of issues arise when attempting to provide and contextualize an informed and insightful account of the presence of a dead saint experienced during the recitation of a religious narrative in a school hall in North West London. Despite being very real, unique, and transformative, the experience of the transcendent² for devotees of Jalarām during recitation of the saint's hagiography, or *kathā*, refuses to conform to what might be considered the modern, liberal, Western historiographical worldview.

The problem becomes amplified when one reads the hagiography through an intellectual lens. Such a lens has been shaped, for example, by what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000, as discussed in Monge 2016: 19) describes as the hegemony of Ludwig Feuerbach (2004) and Émile Durkheim (2000). Of course, viewing the narrative through this lens has its benefits: It can, for instance, shed light upon the social, economic, and political conditions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gujarat. We may thereby gain a historical insight into the nature and importance of religious authority and diversity, the state of gender and caste relations, and the impact, minimal as it was, of the British colonial project. In short, such a view would satisfy the Western criteria for historical "truth" and "verification." Furthermore, we may gain an insight into the lives, efforts, and examples of two devout, spiritual figures—Jalarām Bāpā and his wife Vīrbāī—who worked together to alleviate the suffering and hunger of those who lived in and around the village of Virpur, near Rajkot in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat.

This domesticated and somewhat sociological account of the lives of Jalarām and Vīrbāī is, however, only one layer of the narrative. It negates the miraculous nature of some of the events within it. It requires us to interpret such events not so much as tropes, but as "'social facts,' which are dependent on human society for their existence" (Monge 2016: 19, discussing Chakrabarty 2000). This reading would, as Chakrabarty suggests, satisfy the two largely unchallenged assumptions when it comes to understanding such narratives through the Western intellectual lens. Firstly, it would locate the story of Jalarām and Vīrbāī in a frozen "frame of a single and secular historical time,"

¹ Piyushbhai Mehta, *kathākār* and Hindu priest, in conversation with the author, July 2017.

² When speaking about the transcendent I recognize the technical Christian roots of the term but am in no way attempting to reduce what Gerard Oberhammer describes as "the complexities of Indian thought to settled Christian equivalents" (Clooney 2003: 450; also see references cited therein for Oberhammer). What I am suggesting is that here the transcendent is that which resides beyond this worldly experience but that can be encountered by those who are confined by this worldly experience in certain circumstances, for example, during the recitation of religious narratives.

cementing the events within a specific interpretation of the past, present, and future (Chakrabarty 2000: 16). Secondly, it would locate the human experience of the transcendent other in the “ontologically singular” context (Chakrabarty 2000: 16) where the conscious and the unconscious would remain separate. In this respect, the gods and the spirits can be said to exist, but, as Rico G. Monge suggests, only as a by-product of a society’s “collective effervescence” (2016: 19). While for Jalarām’s devotees the presence of the saint and other transcendent figures is not questioned, the Western intellectual interpretation negates presence and promotes absence.

This absence is largely determined by considerations of epistemology and historiography and is something that has become an accepted normative view in the modern world. Robert A. Orsi (2008: 15) points out that some anthropologists have attempted to overcome the limitations of modern critical theory through extensive ethnographic fieldwork. For instance, Gananath Obeyesekere has observed Sri Lankan cultures “‘where other forms of the reality principle operate’ establishing ‘a pathway whereby fantasy can come out into open consciousness’” (1984: 167, cited in Orsi 2008: 15) and where it is accepted and understood in the light of everyday reason. Ursula Rao (2002) also encountered the transcendental “other” when she examined the belief in divine agency in a temple in Bhopal, India. Here she describes how devotees fully experience the presence of the divine in the form of, among other phenomena, miracles, and then highlights the conflicting ways in which such experiences are accommodated in the discourse on modernity. Rao concludes that in similar cases a straightforward rational bureaucratic explanation of such phenomena and experience is inadequate and that “no one can claim a monopoly of interpretation. The result is a situation in which the struggle over different forms of rationalities is never fully resolvable” (2002: 10).

As Orsi observes, Obeyesekere tends to remain fixed upon the binary distinction between the “mystic” East and the “rational” West, whereas Rao suggests that a more fluid approach should be adopted when examining the miraculous and divine agency. However the question still remains: How are we, as ethnographers in the study of religions, to negotiate a path of understanding that overcomes the limitations of reading of the saint’s narrative through a Western historiographical lens? When speaking of the experience of the supernatural and, by extension, the miraculous, Susan Sered (2003: 217) attempts to dispense with binary oppositions, suggesting that they assume a contentious “hierarchy” of the sort that can be found in related dualisms; for example, Western/Indian, superior/inferior, and (for our purposes) snap frozen/here and now. It could be suggested that if the concept of the miraculous becomes instead part of a “shifting lexicon that helps us make sense out of the experiences that comprise our work, we begin to think in terms of continuums” (Sered 2003: 217). This continuum thus leads us from modern Western informed skepticism concerning the miraculous to what Rao describes as a modern “struggle over traditions” where “whether to keep, abolish, rework or reinvent [the miraculous worldviews] is considered part of the modern condition” (2002: 8; emphasis in the original).

This does not, however, help us to fully overcome the problem of transcendental or divine absence. I suggest that this would necessarily involve engaging more closely with the multilayered, polyvocal, and elaborate series of miraculous encounters where the transcendent is commonplace and the borders between religions and social stratifications become blurred. As Chakrabarty (2000, discussed in Monge 2016: 19) might suggest, space needs to be created that allows historical truth to speak for itself while at the same time allowing for the existentially transformative and the subjective to present us with further possibilities. As Jessica Frazier points out, miracles for devotees of Jalarām, particularly when discussing the diasporic context as we do in this article, have become religious touchstones, serving as not only concrete links to Gujarat, but also as an “upwelling of the divine in the person of the saint[,] provid[ing] an apt medium for travelling communities” (2014: 320). In this way, devotees manage to transcend the need to locate themselves within some authentic notion of India to experience his presence, for them Jalarām has passed “physically and spiritually through geographical space to dispense blessing throughout his community of devotion” (Frazier 2014: 320).

This presence is part of what Orsi (2008) describes as an “abundant event.” For him, such events allow individuals and groups to experience a “radical presence or realness[,]...[a] face-to-face presence of humans and gods to each other” (Orsi 2008: 14–15), and it is an experience of the real that defies description. Orsi suggests that such phenomena trace their origins back to an event where the human and the divine are present to each other and that all else happens because of this initial event, an event that can be and is re-experienced in the here and now. Neither is an abundant event limited to its source. It radiates out through a network of routes, “beyond the place where the transcendent broke in to time” (Orsi 2008: 15). Such events, Orsi continues to note, are very much part of devotional culture, but importantly, they are nothing out of the ordinary for those who experience them: “they are anticipated, longed for, and even expected” (2008: 14). What is important here is that they are beyond the conceptual range of the modern, rational, and (in this case) Western worldview in terms of epistemology and historiography. Indeed, Orsi is encouraging us as scholars to talk about something more, something that is not reducible to history or to geography. The *Jalarām kathā* is an example *par excellence* of that which offers us the opportunity to apprehend and to expand upon the relationship between scholarship and the experience of the presence of the transcendental, which for many is an everyday occurrence and which is as real for devotees as the people around them (Orsi 2012: 85).

It is here, therefore, that I feel compelled, like Monge, to consider Orsi’s position and to frame my research in a way that allows us to consider bringing the gods and the spirits more fully and comprehensively back into scholarly

conversation and analysis and to replace their absence with their presence. In order to do this, Orsi promotes the development of an “abundant historiography” that allows us, as ethnographers of religion, to assume presence and dismiss absence by refusing to reduce the meaning of the miracles to sociological categories (Monge 2016: 20). This article therefore follows Orsi and others in an effort to place the narrative of the saint and its performance at the center of the discussion. I also build upon Orsi’s foundations and illustrate how the very essence of the *Jalarāmkathā* is fundamentally founded upon the devotees’ experience of three layers of abundance—those of presence, space, and performance—all of which radiate from the recitation of the narrative of the saint. In doing so, I hope to illustrate that the transcendent is fully present for the narrator and the audience during the *kathā* and that grounds for what Orsi terms “abundant events” are both established and experienced.

The Initial Event: Miracles, Narrative, and Presence

The *Jalarāmkathā* is the performance of the key events and miracles in the life of the saint Jalarām Bāpā.³ When speaking about the miraculous in the Jalarām tradition, the word *parchā* is preferred⁴ over other expressions that approximate to the term “miracle.” Such expressions include, for example, *alaupik*, which is an event or phenomena that deviates or departs from that which is considered normal; *adbhut*, which is an extraordinary event; and *vismay*, indicating “wonder and astonishment” (Davis 1998: 8). *Parchā* refers to the blessings of the saint, and the miraculous abilities of Jalarām may be understood as having a direct meaning for his followers in terms of the actual experience. Here we witness what Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah refers to as participation between the saint and his devotees, where the devotees “are in a relation of contiguity, and translate that relation into one of existential immediacy and contact and shared affinities” (1990: 107) with the saint. Jalarām’s *parchās* are a means of bonding, rather like the notion of *darśan*, where the devotee gazes at the deity and the gaze of the deity falls upon the devotee, cementing the relationship between the two.

All of the events included in the *Jalarāmkathā* performance are taken from Saubhagyachand Rajdev’s *Bhakta Shri Jalaram* (1966), which was first published in 1958 in Gujarati and is recognized as the core hagiography within the Jalarām tradition. From a historical perspective, the hagiography presents the life story of the saint and discusses the work that he carried out in the Saurashtra region in the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century. According to devotees, Rajdev spent many years traveling through the region collecting oral testimonies from those who knew or had encountered Jalarām, or resided in the village of Virpur where the saint was born, lived, and died. According to Rajdev, Jalarām was brought up in a merchant family and had numerous encounters with the many holy men who passed by Virpur. At the age of sixteen he was married to Vīrbāī, and later undertook a two-year pilgrimage to a number of sacred sites around the subcontinent. On his return, Jalarām took initiation at the feet of the (regionally) well-known *guru* Bhojalrām, and at the age of twenty he and Vīrbāī opened up an *annakṣetr*, a free food kitchen, for holy men and for those living in poverty in the region. This became Jalarām’s life work, and he developed a popular reputation based upon his ethic of feeding all, “irrespective of caste, creed, or religion...he regarded all with the same kindness—the Sikhs, the Muslims, the sadhu or the garhasthya, man or beast” (Rajdev 1966: 20). Furthermore, as well as presenting an ethical approach that transcended religious and social distinctions, the narrative tells of Jalarām and Vīrbāī’s tireless physical work; for example, they undertook manual labor in the fields, ground corn, and provided free food and water during the famines that plagued the region at that time (Shah 2006: 68). Finally, the narrative informs us that Vīrbāī died in 1879 and that Jalarām passed away two years later (Rajdev 1966: 64–68).

Jalarām’s reputation would have been confined to the immediate locality during his lifetime, and much of his gradually developing reputation was based on the oral narrations of his life and deeds. These narrations work on a number of levels and, from the outset, illustrate how thin the line is between the devotees’ understanding of Jalarām’s human nature and the divine qualities attributed to him. As Charles S. J. White points out, “most saints are considered to be divine and often receive public worship in the manner of divinities” (1974: 309). For instance, before Jalarām was born, his special nature and destiny were prophesized by Raghuvardāsī, a saint from Ayodhya (Rajdev 1966: 1), who told Jalarām’s mother, “He will be a great devotee....His name will be written in golden letters in the history of Bharat” (Shah 2006: 6). This special nature was further confirmed when, at the age of five, Jalarām was visited by another, this time unnamed, *saṁnyāsī* who after blessing the child mysteriously disappeared, after which “Jalaram was completely changed as if...he had a revelation of his past birth. He began to utter the RAM MANTRA” (Rajdev 1966: 2; emphasis in the original).

From here on, *parchās* fully characterize the life story of Jalarām. From an early age, he developed close relations

³ While many of these accounts of miracles may seem to parallel the Christian gospels, there is no recorded encounter with missionaries in any of the narratives, and as Mattausch (1998: 126) points out, the Christian project had made very little progress in the region at that time. Furthermore, the miraculous events involving the local Muslim community also appear to suggest that Jalarām was, like a number of other late medieval and early modern saints, unconcerned with religious affiliation; indeed, such encounters were not uncommon. See Roy-Burman (2005), and Khan (2004).

⁴ See Wood (2018: 40).

with *sādhus*, the wandering ascetics in the region; and the themes of visiting holy men and prophecy continued after his death. The first account of Jalarām’s *parchās* involved giving a group of *sādhus* free cloth from his uncle’s shop. This naturally upset his uncle, but when he measured the cloth, he “found it was not an inch less....Even the sannyasis were stunned. Jalaram knew this was God’s doing. He was convinced that to serve a sadhu was to serve God Himself” (Soni 1984: 6). Similar events also took place later in the saint’s life. “Bapa gave clothes to thousands of persons continuously for four days and yet the stock was not exhausted” (Soni 1984: 51). An idol of Hanumān appeared mysteriously out of the earth after another visit from a *sādhu*, at the site of which Jalarām later built a temple (Rajdev 1966: 13; Soni 1984: 11). Finally, following the theme of divine manifestation and inexhaustibility (see below), at a gathering of over a thousand *sādhus* at Jalarām’s *āśram* just after his death, a mysterious “saint arrived,...went into the storeroom, (then upon emerging declared)...‘Let this store be inexhaustible.’...Many learned people said that Bhakta Shri Jalaram had come in the guise of a Saint. Others said that God himself had appeared in the guise of the 238 saint” (Rajdev 1966: 72–73).

Perhaps the most important episode in the lives of the saint and his wife occurred when Vīrbāi agreed to accompany an elderly and rather stubborn *sādhu* into the nearby forests. This mysterious *sādhu* disappeared and Vīrbāi was left with his bag (*jholī*) and stick (*dhokā*) when she heard a “divine voice in the sky saying, ‘*Sati, sati*, I congratulate you on your devotion....The “jholi and the dhoka” given by me may be kept as my emblems in your ashram and worshipped regularly’” (Rajdev 1966: 34). Both Vīrbāi and Jalarām were now understood by devotees to have been directly blessed by the god Rām, and according to Ramanlal Soni, “Virbai Ma was a venerable woman now as she had been accepted as an offering by Shri Hari 248 Himself” (1984: 23).

Parchās permeate the fabric of the narrative and involve the common themes of feeding and unending food supplies, healings, and resurrections. In a striking resemblance to the story of the *akṣayapātra* in the *Mahābhārata*,⁵ Rajdev observes that “Saint Jalaram began to acquire all supernatural powers and he came to acquire the power of ‘Inexhaustibility.’ To whatever vessel he touched, the vessel became inexhaustible” (1966: 21). Jalarām’s reputation for healing was also widespread in the region, and he miraculously cured snakebites (Soni 1984: 41), alleviated blindness (Shah 2006: 37), and saved a young Muslim boy from a seemingly incurable condition (Shah 2006: 31). He also revived dead livestock. In one notable example, he engaged with three Muslim merchants and brought back to life the birds that they had killed in order to eat later (Soni 1984: 31). Furthermore, in what appears to be the apex of his miraculous feats, he resurrects a young boy believed to be dead and who later becomes the only person that Jalarām initiated (Soni 1984: 44). Finally, Jalarām visited his sister and an old friend after his physical self had passed away (Soni 1984: 62–63).

The Nature of *Kathā*

It was only when many of his devotees traveled to East Africa that Jalarām and his story became more widely known, not only among the Hindus, but also among the Sikhs and Muslims from Gujarat. Devotees have spoken of a very close-knit Gujarati community in British East Africa from the beginning of the twentieth century to the late 1960s, especially among the Lohānās.⁶ Devotional worship in this context was fluid, crossing religious and social boundaries with ease, and Jalarām became a prominent religious figure in this diasporic environment. It was during this period that Rajdev completed his hagiography of Jalarām, and the main body of Jalarām’s story was later translated into English from the 1958 Gujarati edition and published in 1966. Since the forced migration of thousands of Hindu and non-Hindu Gujaratis from East Africa to the UK from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, the Jalarām community has become well established with two substantial *mandir* or temple communities in London and Leicester and with numerous Sanātān Dharm⁷ temples housing Jalarām’s image.

This article is based on research carried out among Jalarām devotees in the Greenford community in North West London. While I worked closely with a number of male and female devotees of various ages, diverse backgrounds, and places of birth, the most important informant was the *kathākār* Piyushbhai Mehta. His considerable experience as a storyteller, not only of the Jalarām story, but also of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, has informed a great deal of my understanding regarding the nature of *kathā*. As such, I have attempted to provide as much ethnographic material as possible, drawing on interviews with Pandit Mehta and devotees who conducted and attended, respectively, the two *kathā* events that I was present at. The first *kathā* was held in January 2017 at the Dhamecha Lohana Centre in Harrow; and the second *kathā* took place in June 2017 at the Canon High School in Edgware. Both

⁵ The wondrous *akṣayapātra* was an inexhaustible vessel given to the Pāndava king Yudhishthira by Sūrya. It provided a never-depleting supply of food to the Pāndavas (see *Mahābhārata*, Vanaparvan, Chapters Two and Three).

⁶ A substratum of the Vaiśya merchant caste, specific to the Gujarat region of India.

⁷ When I speak of Sanātān Dharm, I am referring to a wider, more rationalized approach to belief and practice underpinned by Neo-Vedānta philosophy as well as popular Purāṇic literature. Sanātān Dharm tends to favor the Sanskrit traditions at the expense of the so-called “little traditions” and have a dominant drive towards Vaisnavism with an emphasis on *bhakti* (Vertovec 2000: 12), although in my experience any number of regional and pan-Hindu deities, gurus, and saints may be found in Sanātān Dharma mandirs throughout the diaspora.

were sponsored by local devotees, referred to as *jajmāns*, and the performances were over three evenings on both occasions, each drawing an audience of between four to six hundred devotees. The recitations, which lasted for approximately three hours each evening, were followed by a free communal meal of Jalarām *prasād*, blessed food, provided by the *jajmān* sponsors.

The first *kathā* was a lavish spectacle, and the sizeable stage was bathed in choreographed lighting that played over the *kathākār* and the *mūrtis* or sanctified images of Jalarām and various deities. The first day of the *kathā* witnessed the recital of Jalarām's previous lives, his birth, visitations by various mystical saints, and the first *parchās* that he performed as a child and young man. Halfway through the session, the music began to reach an almost ecstatic pitch and many devotees started to sing and dance enthusiastically. One young devotee, dressed as Jalarām, appeared on the stage from behind a curtain of dry ice to give *darśan*. The session carried on with much the same heightened sense of devotion and drew to a close after about three hours. The second day of the *kathā* was concerned with Jalarām's early life and his marriage to Vīrbāī. Here the narrative was, once again, expanded into the emotional and visual sphere as the wedding ceremony of Jalarām and Vīrbāī was re-enacted, by about forty devotees, who carried the *mūrtis* of Jalarām and Vīrbāī in procession through the audience, accompanied by rasa dancers, community elders, and respected religious personalities. The session also incorporated the tireless work of the saint and his wife and the central importance of Vīrbāī in Jalarām's endeavors. The third and last day of the *kathā* saw the narrative turn to the *parchās* that Jalarām had performed during his life and to his eventual passing which elicited displays of genuine emotion, not only from the *kathākār*, but also among all of those gathered.

The second *kathā* that I attended was somewhat less dramatic in terms of the staged re-enactment of events, but the sense of devotion and emotion was palpable throughout as similar themes were narrated to a responsive audience.

In general, the performance of *kathā* plays a hugely important role in the lives of Hindus around the world, ensuring, as it does, continuity of tradition from one generation to the next. It also promotes communal and personal religious identity, cementing a very real and experiential relationship between the central characters in the narrative, be they the gods, goddesses, and/or saints and devotees who come to listen and take part in the recitations. Surprisingly, however, little scholarly work has been done on the subject of *kathā*. As McComas Taylor points out, when writing on the *Bhāgavata* *kathā*, in various Indian contexts such "performances deserve scholarly attention as they are an important and burgeoning feature of the Hindu religious landscape" (2013: 262). Furthermore, Philip Lutgendorf observes that such events remain "a principal form of religious instruction and popular entertainment" (1995: 227) and, though little studied in academic circles, may act as a springboard for excursus on mystical matters and philosophical *kathā*.

Kathā, as Lutgendorf (1995: 227) points out, is an occasion where the performer (*kathāvācak* or *vyās*) is invited by individual patrons (*jajmāns*), or community leaders, or temple management trustees to retell or discourse on a sacred story. As *kathākār* Mehta explains, "*kathā* means a narration, we describe the beauty of the all mighty," but he went on to explain that it is not just about the gods and the goddesses, or the heroic epic figures such as Kṛṣṇa and Rām, or the retelling of the Bhagavad *Gītā* or the *Rāmāyaṇa*. *Kathās*, as we have established, also tell the stories of figures such as Jalarām where the narrator invites the audience to "try to understand the ideas and the philosophy or virtues" of such religious personalities.⁸

The *kathākār*, as Taylor (2013: 263) notes, is often a highly trained professional storyteller whose fee, as well as the expenses involved in hiring and arranging the venue and the cost of catering for those who attend, is covered by the *jajmān*. *Kathās* can also range in size from smaller events held in local mandirs to much larger international events that attract thousands of devotees and are held in substantial public areas. For instance, in 2016, the Leicester Hindu community welcomed Rameshbhai Oza, a renowned Gujarati *kathākār*, to hear him read from the *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* as part of his UK tour, and he went on to perform a full *kathā* at an eight-day festival held in the Melton Road area of the city.⁹ To give another example, in 2017, Gujarati-born Morari Bapu, an internationally renowned *kathākār*, recited a nine-day *kathā* to audiences in the SSE Arena, Wembley, an event that attracted over ten thousand devotees and was broadcast live online to a global audience.¹⁰

For Jalarām devotees, however, size and location are rarely considered important, as *kathās* offer more than just the opportunity to engage with the story on a mundane worldly level. Indeed, I would suggest that, in many respects, when listening to the *Jalarāmkathā*, the realities of the outside world are left outside the performance arena. The rest of the article examines the direct and deep emotional experience of its central character, Jalarām, that devotees have at these events. There is, however, much more on offer; as I illustrate, *kathā* also provides devotees with a direct experience of Vyās, the legendary archetypal narrator of Hindu classics, and, furthermore, a direct experience of the divine in the form of Rām through the material presence of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In short, the *Jalarāmkathā* is a premier multiexperiential event for those present.

⁸ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, July 2017.

⁹ *World Hindu News*, June 29, 2016. Available at: <https://www.worldhindunews.com/2016/06/29/54387/hindu-katha-festival-encourages-young-people-to-adopt-a-grandparent/> (accessed July 13, 2020).

¹⁰ *Eastern Eye*, October 11, 2017. Available at: <https://www.easterneye.biz/couple-behind-bapus-religious-event-reveal/> (accessed July 13, 2020).

***Rāmāyaṇa*, Ritual, and the Presence of Rām**

The relationship between Rām and Jalarām Bāpā is a central theme in the hagiography of the saint. It is believed that, as mentioned above, Rām visited Jalarām and Vīrbāi in the guise of a *sādhu* on two occasions and that Rām blessed Jalarām's *sadāvrāt*, charitable kitchen (Shah 2006: 14–16). Whenever devotees prostrate themselves at Jalarām's feet, he is quick to remind them to praise Rām, not him: "Brother! If you want to fall, fall at Rāmji's feet" (Shah 2006: 12). Furthermore, any miracles that Jalarām performed are attributed to Rām: "Brother, all this was due to Rām's Grace" (Rajdev 1966: 17). When I asked one of the mandir priests what it was that underpinned Jalarām's religious worldview and practice, he answered, "In Jalarām Bāpā's philosophy it just says you can continue the chanting of Lord Rām's holy names and read *Rāmāyaṇa* scriptures when you get the chance."¹¹ Indeed, according to several mandir spokespersons, the *Rāmāyaṇa* was seen to be the central religious text for the tradition, and they attempted to follow the example set by Jalarām who was

a devotee of *Rāmāyaṇa*. He had full faith in Rām, and he used to read *Rāmāyaṇa* every day and evening at Virpur with his devotees. But his philosophy is a simple philosophy. In *Rāmāyaṇa* it is written, it means if you can help the other people, the poor people, you are the religious person.¹²

The importance of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the *kathā* ritual was obvious and played a central role in the events that I attended. On both occasions, the *kathās* were preceded by a *pūjā* ceremony in the house of the *jajmān* and the *kathākār* carried a sizeable eighty-year-old edition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* on his head as he entered the *jajmān*'s house where it was placed in the living room on a shrine dedicated to Jalarām. Various offerings of fruits and flowers were showered upon the shrine as the host family sang devotional bhajans and lit incense. The *Rāmāyaṇa* was then passed from the shrine to the heads of each member of the *jajmān*'s family before being ritually carried through almost every room in the house by the eldest daughter of the family accompanied by the *kathākār*.

The rituals concerning the *Rāmāyaṇa* appeared to be of central importance in establishing the overall protocol of the *kathā*. It was explained to me that placing the *Rāmāyaṇa* on the heads of the *jajmān*'s family was not only acknowledging their special place and role in the ceremony and performance, but also indicated that they were surrendering respectfully to god. Furthermore, the presence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the house of the *jajmān* and the process of carrying it from one room to another was seen to be a way of blessing the entire house and all of those who lived in it. As the *kathākār* put it: "It is a blessed book, so to bless our entire home we go through all the rooms with the book to bless them and the home."¹³

On each occasion, once the domestic *jajmān pūjā* was concluded and the blessing of the house complete, the family and guests would enjoy a communal meal before the *Rāmāyaṇa* was carried out on the head of the mother of the family. The *jajmāns* and the *kathākār* then drove to the *kathā* venue. I was interested to find out why the *Rāmāyaṇa* was placed in such a prominent ritual position as opposed to, for example, the saint's published hagiography. Here the *kathākār* spoke of his direct empathy and relationship with the saint: "I personally think that Jalarām Bāpā has tremendous love for the *Rāmāyaṇa*. He lived his life according to the principle of *Rāmāyaṇa*. He had lots of love for Rām. So I thought that it would [bring] more happiness to Jalarām if I put the *Rāmāyaṇa*."¹⁴

The *jajmān*'s family and the *kathākār* were greeted at the venues with some considerable enthusiasm as members of the community gathered singing *bhajans* accompanied by *ḍhol* drum players. The *Rāmāyaṇa* was again ceremoniously carried through the throng and passed from the head of the senior female *jajmān* to other women relatives and friends as they daubed vermilion on each other by way of celebration. When I inquired why the women had apparently taken ownership of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *kathākār* explained that "Normally women have a more devotional heart, they like to sing and dance.... And even though the first woman with the *Rāmāyaṇa* on her head was a *jajmān*, she was passing it to other women, but the book is the personification of Rām."¹⁵

This personification and presence of Rām through the *Rāmāyaṇa* took on further ritual connotations. Once inside the main hall of the venue, the mother of the *jajmān* family took back the *Rāmāyaṇa* and, accompanied by the *kathākār*, took it to the *vyās piṭh*, the seat located center stage, upon which the *kathākār* would later sit to recite the *kathā*. Thus, the stage was both ritually blessed and transformed by the presence of the *Rāmāyaṇa*; as was explained "when you are putting *Rāmāyaṇa* there, it is presence of Lord Rām.... [The stage] becomes like a temple."¹⁶ The

¹¹ Mandir Priest, in conversation with the author, June 2013.

¹² Mandir spokesperson, in conversation with the author, June 2013.

¹³ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, January 2017.

¹⁴ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, January 2017.

¹⁵ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, February 2017.

¹⁶ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, February 2017.

Rāmāyaṇa, therefore, is seen as the actual presence of the deity, and the deity in the form of the book performs the requisite ritual purifications and transformation of space from mundane to sacred.

This way of relating to and seeing the text is not dissimilar to the way that sacred texts are seen in specific ritual contexts in a number of other Indic traditions. For example, *Gurū Granth Sāhib* is approached and worshiped by the Nānaksar tradition as a living entity and Gurū Nānak himself is expected to manifest from it (Doabia 1981, cited in Nesbitt 1985: 71). Furthermore, in a similar ritual context to that of the Jalarām tradition, Taylor observes that during the performance of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in a Garhwal community in Northern India,

the text is also empowered by its discourse....Worship offered to the text is the same as worship offered to God (*Bhagavān*) himself, and that the text is God in physical form. This was also reiterated by the exponent on many occasions. The text was treated with great reverence at all times, and was borne on the head whenever it was moved from one place to another (2011: 207).

In the *Jalarāmkathā* tradition, the presence of Rām is confirmed by the presence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself and cements not only the relationship between Jalarām and Rām, but also between Rām and the devotees of Jalarām. As the *kathākār* noted, “There is a similarity between Lord Rām and Jalarām, so I personally think I should put *Rāmāyaṇa* there when I recite the *Jalarāmkathā*, and when I am reciting this...there is the presence of Lord Rām through the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rām is lord and Jalarām is devotee.”

The Vyās Piṭh

The second layer of presence that I wish to discuss is one that is experienced by the *kathākār* himself. It is the direct and transformative experience he undergoes while sitting on the *vyās piṭh*, the “lap” of Vyās, the great storyteller. Lutgendorf offers us an insight into similar events when commenting on the ways in which certain performances, for example, Rāmlīlā of Ramnagar, require that the actors access a state that facilitates a manifestation of the divine within them, but little more is discussed concerning the reality of encounters between the teller, the listener, and the central characters of the *kathā*. In the case of the *Jalarāmkathā*, the experience is profoundly deep. The *kathākār* is not only influenced by the presence of Vyās, he actually becomes Vyās.

Vyās is the legendary sage “who is attributed with the authorship of the Mahābhārata and the eighteen major Purāṇas” (Geaves 2008: 975), although Ron Geaves observes that the name may have been employed as a generic title for a compiler or arranger of sacred texts and applied to many eminent sages. While he did not compose them, Vyās is also believed to have put together the Vedas in their present form after they had been revealed to the ancient Ṛṣis, the seers (Flood 1996: 35). He is also, according to Piyushbhai Mehta, the incarnation of “Lord Visnu”;¹⁷ Vyās taught the scriptures to his disciples and the place where he sat to do this is called the *vyās piṭh*, the seat or the lap of Vyās. The *vyās piṭh* at the *kathās* that I attended took the form of a raised *divān* throne that was placed center stage and surrounded by images of Jalarām and Vīrbāī. As mentioned earlier, the *Rāmāyaṇa* had been ritually placed upon the lectern in front of the *vyās piṭh*, thus sanctifying the stage, and to the right of the seat was placed the *kathākār*’s harmonium and his iPhone which listed some two hundred *bhajans* that might be played during the event. Prior to the event, the *divān* is also ritually purified.¹⁸ Once the seat had been appropriately prepared, Ganes’ā and various other deities were invited, the *Rāmāyaṇa* was positioned, and prayers were said to bring down the presence of Vyās.

The *vyās piṭh* is thus understood to be a holy place where the experience of Vyās is fully possible, but before this can happen the *kathākār* needs to surrender “to disconnect...from the material world, to surrender your body to Vyās, then it is not you who speaks it is Vyās who speaks.”¹⁹ The *kathākār* explains that Vyās passes the message of the story through his body, bringing about a spontaneous experience that directs the tone and theme of the *kathā*, something akin to the mystical experience of becoming Vyās himself.

During the *kathā*, so many devotees tell me, that when I sit there I become a different person....It’s not me it is Vyās himself who is guiding me in my body. Why are people giving respect to that place, even when I was twenty-one people came to touch my feet, even the elderly people gave respect to me when I am on the *vyās piṭh*, they are not giving respect to me they are giving it to Vyās.²⁰

Much of this is seen to be the result of the *kathākār*’s ability to narrate the story in a certain way, and that ability is seen to come from the energy and spontaneity that the *kathākār* experiences when seated upon the *vyās piṭh*.

¹⁷ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, April 2018.

¹⁸ Traditionally this may have been done with cow’s urine or Gangā water.

¹⁹ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, April 2018.

²⁰ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, April 2018.

Piyushbhai Mehta elucidated, “When you sit on the *vyās piṭh* and pray to the almighty to give you the power of words, it is a blessed place. You pray and surrender to Jalarām, and you get the spontaneity of the words during the *kathā*. You get inspiration.”²¹ In this sense, the *kathākār* is empowered to create the atmosphere and the conditions for the experience of presence, but the devotees themselves also contribute to this experience. As the *kathākār* continues:

When I describe it like this, they will visualize this picture of Virpur in their mind....One lady after the telling came to me and said “I was one hundred percent in Virpur when you told the story.” Their involvement and the atmosphere create the vibes that you can feel you are in Virpur.²²

Jalarām Bāpā

The third and final layer of presence at the *kathā* is one that all those present at the performance experience and is perhaps the most important—that of Jalarām Bāpā himself. For many devotees his presence at the *kathā* is something that is expected, emotionally charged, and exceptionally important. Of course, in various Indic traditions, especially those subsumed as part of Hinduism, the presence of the divine is largely unquestioned when it comes to temple devotion. The image of the deity which has been consecrated during the *prāṇapratiṣṭhā* ceremony becomes a *mūrti*, an embodiment of the divine,²³ and thus the divine is believed to be present, whereby “contact between the devotee and deity is exchanged through the eyes” (Eck 1998: 7). William H. Deadwyler suggests that the presence of the deity “makes the temple quite literally the house of God....The deity is regarded as the factual owner and proprietor of the temple” (1996: 83). The important difference in the case of Jalarām is that, at least on the official level, he is not considered divine and the images of him that are present at the *kathā* are not temple *mūrtis*. Jalarām’s presence is therefore—and as stated by many devotees that I spoke to—experienced in multiple contexts and locations by devotees and is not fixed to any specific *mūrti* or temple that might be dedicated to him.

I was puzzled by this somewhat, as my understanding was that an image could only become a *mūrti* through the *prāṇapratiṣṭhā* ceremony which anchors the image to the location where the ceremony has taken place, in most cases the *mandir*. But often the venues where *kathās* are performed are not consecrated or sacred locations, and thus the image has to be transported to the venue. Therefore, as far as I understood, it could not be considered a *mūrti* as *mūrtis* cannot be relocated. This, however, was not seen as a problem, as the image of Jalarām could receive *bhāvapratiṣṭhā* whereby the love and devotion of devotees and priests can draw down the presence of the saint in the same way that *prāṇapratiṣṭhā* can, irrespective of location. Thus the presence of Jalarām in his *mūrti* is assured and can be felt in any number of locations, consecrated or otherwise. Furthermore, devotees and the *kathākār* told me that they could tell from the expression on the face of the *mūrti* that Jalarām was present and that he was happy: “It is natural...[that] the vibes are coming like that and if you are doing something good and you see the *mūrti* you will feel that he is happy....The *mūrti* always looks happy during the *kathā*.”²⁴

Such multilocal presence is recorded in the hagiography. In one example, Jalarām, now an elderly man, greets a female devotee on her return to Virpur. It is the middle of the day and the sun is hot, so he offers her a jar of cold water. They walk together for a time until Jalarām explains that he must go on ahead of her. The account continues: “When Galal reached the outskirts of the Virpur she saw a pyre burning there. All the people of the village were lamenting. She asked who passed away. The reply was ‘Jalarām Bapa’” (Soni 1984: 62). Such personal and direct experience of Jalarām’s presence has been described to me by many devotees. One male devotee, for example, said, “I truly experienced *pūjya* Jalarām Bāpā’s presence during my son’s hospitalization and could see him in white traditional clothes all around me.”²⁵ Another male devotee spoke of undertaking pilgrimage by foot from Rajkot to Virpur, a distance of some sixty kilometers and becoming ill on the way.

I could not walk anymore and this was at eleven at night. Then I met a person who told me that there is no reason to come by foot, Bāpā has given me this message that you should hire a vehicle to come. I believe that the person who came with the message was no other than Jalarām Bāpā, who would be there at that time of night on the road?²⁶

Furthermore, another male member of the Greenford community, who volunteers at the local *mandir* and claims

²¹ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, June 2017.

²² Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, June 2017.

²³ For a full account, see Eck (1998: 52–53).

²⁴ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, June 2017.

²⁵ Devotee 1, in conversation with the author, April 2014.

²⁶ Devotee 2, in conversation with the author, April 2015.

not to be a religious person, told me that four years previously he had been serving food in the *mandir*'s *sadāvrāt* on the day of *rakṣābandhan* (the "bond of protection") when an elderly man dressed in traditional Gujarati attire wearing a white turban and carrying a stick entered the dining room.

I said "Jai Jalarām."...He did not answer me and gave me a broad smile and raised his hands and gave me (a blessing)...This strange thing and I looked to the side but then I could not see him again....Then the priest at the time said "Jalarām Bāpā himself has come to you." That was a great experience for me.²⁷

These are all individual experiences of devotees and they contribute to an ever-growing record of *parchās* and manifestations of Jalarām in the UK in the Indian context. What is interesting here is that often, when I asked devotees whether they have experienced Jalarām's presence, they answered in a way that seemed to suggest that the question was a little pointless, that of course they feel his presence and experience him personally almost all the time. As one female devotee put it, "Jalarām Bāpā is here. We feel it. We feel it like you might think Jesus is here. He is everywhere. I have much faith in him, and Jalarām Bāpā is with you."²⁸ What makes the experience of Jalarām different during the *kathā* is that it is a collective, instantaneous experience. Jalarām is present in the venue, wherever that might be, and conversely geographical, historical, and physical limitations are transcended as those present are transported to Virpur to be with him. As the *kathākār* put it:

I think, personally I will tell you like this, Jalarām Bāpā is already in my heart, but at these times I feel like I am with him in Virpur, like I am a witness of the incidents that I am narrating....(And in respect of the devotees in attendance) ...if you are listening you are surrendered to God or to Jalarām Bāpā, you feel like you are also in Virpur....If you surrender you will be concentrating one hundred percent and feel that you are part of the story and of Bāpā's life.²⁹

Finally, I was interested to find out whether the feeling of Jalarām's presence was a constant aspect of devotees' lives—beyond the *kathā*. For some, often those from older generations, this seemed to be the case, but for others the struggle to maintain a constant sense of Jalarām's presence was a very real one. This was elucidated in terms of cosmological cycles. According to devotees, we are immersed in the darkness of the Kali Yuga. This means that morals and "piety will decrease day by day, until the world will be wholly depraved" (*Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 4.24.77; Wilson 1840: 483). Thus the darkness of this world era makes it difficult to remain wholly focused upon one's devotional life and to be fully involved with Jalarām. As the *kathākār* observed, "In this Kali Yuga it is not possible for anyone to be fully involved. Our engagement is only temporary."³⁰ He continued, however, that *kathā* offers an opportunity to fully engage, providing the means and the conditions to feel Jalarām's presence: "when you engage, when you plug in, when you switch on, you will get the power....The more chances to feel Jalarām is when you are listening to the *Jalarāmkathā*....Our mind is more engaged in *kathā*,...but it depends upon how much the *kathākār* is involved!"³¹

Presence, Space, and Performance

In his essay, "Holy Negotiations in a Hindu Heartland," Kerry P. C. San Chirico 603 discusses Orsi's concept of abundant events, experiences of the real that defy description, and then unpacks the idea of abundant spaces. He suggests that there are "places that are irreducible to mere geographic territory" and that when it comes to Indic religions, "there are spaces that point beyond themselves to a 'higher' reality...*a-lokic*, literally 'not of this world,' 'transcendent'" (San Chirico 2016: 196). He continues that in such spaces, the humans and the gods "sanctify...space" (San Chirico 2016: 196). In my view this is very much the case when it comes to the *Jalarāmkathā*, and indeed any *kathā*: The real experience of the presence of Jalarām Bāpā is felt in a space that has been sanctified by three layers of abundance: Rām, Vyās, and, importantly, Jalarām and that has become transcendent for the duration of the *kathā*. The creation of abundant space is crucial in the experience and performance of the *Jalarāmkathā* and is characterized by the very lack of specific location requirement. Indeed, it cannot be confined to geographical territory. The events spoken of in the narrative may have occurred in the village of Virpur in Gujarat but they have traveled with the devotees to East Africa and well beyond, and indeed during the *kathā* devotees mentally travel back to Virpur to re-experience them. Those events would have been encountered in numerous locations throughout the diaspora, locations that would have been charged by the presence of the saint, Vyās, and Rām.

²⁷ Devotee 3, in conversation with the author, April 2018.

²⁸ Devotee 4, in conversation with the author, January 2017.

²⁹ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, January 2017.

³⁰ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, January 2017.

³¹ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, January 2017

As we have seen, in many cases the venue for the performance is often entirely mundane in nature, a school hall or a community center for example. The transformation of the hall into an abundant space occurs as the *kathākār* draws in the presence of the sacred and transcendent and transforms the venue into what might usefully be termed a *tīrtha*, a sacred crossing place. Here, the devotees encounter Jalarām as he crosses over from the realm of the transcendent into the hall and resides there for the duration of the *kathā*. In this respect, the actual physical location is irrelevant to the creation of abundant space and the space becomes blessed by the presence of Jalarām. At the same time the devotees too become blessed when they enter the venue: they do not just believe in Jalarām, they experience him. One might also suggest that during the *kathā*, the hall is a place, but at the same time is not of that place or indeed of that time. It has become the Virpur of two hundred years ago. It has become the abode of Rām where the storyteller Vyās sits. Furthermore, it becomes an abundant space because it is here that the devotees have experienced the transcendent. It is sacred because they have engaged with the narrative, re-lived the miracles, been part of the performance, and traveled along those routes that Orsi (2008: 15) discusses that branch out from the original event itself.

The creation of abundant space also creates the opportunity for *tīrthayātrā*, pilgrimage, that is both physical and mental. The physical part involves taking a short trip across the suburbs of North West London. It is the mental *tīrthayātrā* that is significant, involving the spiritual journey back in time and across oceans to nineteenth-century Virpur. As Orsi suggests, the route is the “routes of the really real, the [devotees travel] conduits of presence out beyond the place where the transcendent broke into time” (2008: 15). The fact that abundant space in this context is moveable makes no difference to the devotees, but it is in turn dependent upon the last level of abundance that I wish to discuss, the development of abundant performance.

In recent years, the *Jalarāmkathā* has become more lavish and innovative, with highly skilled musicians who attend very closely to the tone of the narrative and the *kathākār*. The musicians accordingly play music that enhances the mood of the section of the narrative that is being related. The use of lights and other stage effects heightens the general atmosphere. As regards my own research, earlier I described the scene at Dhamecha Lohana Centre, where the stage was swathed in dry ice, the music reached crescendo pitch, and a young devotee dressed as Jalarām was greeted on stage with much devotional fervor. Furthermore, there may be specific re-enactments of certain moments in the narrative. Here, the *kathākār* introduced the idea of inviting the whole audience to the wedding of the saint and Vīrbāi as it was re-enacted, and the procession passed down the central isle to eventually congregate on the stage. This played a substantial part in the second day of recitation and marked another innovation. As Piyushbhai Mehta said, “there was no play performance of Jalarām’s life and I put it to the trustees, this big new idea, and they accepted it and it was popular, and now all the *kathākārs* are doing the wedding celebrations in the *kathās*.”³²

In the examples mentioned above, it is the devotees’ physical, visual, aural, and emotional involvement with the narrative that is central. If we can speak about abundant space providing the basis for mental *tīrthayātrā*, then abundant performance augments that space providing the opportunity for physical involvement. Abundant performance therefore builds upon both event and space and provides the devotee with the opportunity to physically and mentally embark on the journey with Jalarām, an experience that is fully shared by all of those present including the saint himself. The devotees present are now fully part of the narrative. Abundant performance relies upon its own ability to expand beyond the original narrative and space in a number of ways. The *kathā* is abundant because it allows flexibility to expand upon the themes found in Rajdev’s narrative and to push out the boundaries, removing the narrative from that snap-frozen condition that I referred to at the beginning of the article. The story of the saint and his wife becomes fluid and open to interpretation by the *kathākār* who may focus upon one aspect of the narrative and allow it to expand, even take central place in the performance. Take for example Rajdev’s version of events when it comes to Vīrbāi. While she is mentioned many times in the original version of the book, Vīrbāi often plays a secondary role in later editions. Yet in the *kathās* that I attended, the *kathākār* gave Vīrbāi a more prominent role, taking an aspect of her part in the narrative and expanding upon it according to his understanding. As the *kathākār* explains, “I emphasize her because people know about Jalarām Bāpā but they do not know so much about Vīrbāi’s life and sacrifices, so I try to emphasize the other side of Jalarām’s life.”³³

This is what I mean by the performance becoming abundant. It is abundant because it can be interpreted and experienced in a number of ways by the *kathākār* and the audience, and these experiences and interpretations emanate out from the original. Sometimes this is planned, and other times it is spontaneous. As the *kathākār* observes:

This is what should be in *kathā*, seeing things from your own perspective...because everything is not written, sometimes you try to imagine....*Kathā* is not just the recital of that which is written but you add your own thoughts, your power of imagination, you say that I feel this is how it was or the reason why Jalarām did this.³⁴

³² Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, January 2017.

³³ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, January 2017.

³⁴ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, January 2017.

The performance is abundant precisely because it provides a much wider experience than just a dry recitation of the original story. It expands to accommodate new ideas and new experiences, and, importantly, it allows for the narrative to move with the events that affect the devotees in their own lives. By this I mean that the story of Jalarām is itself constantly being added to, and the blessings and the presence of the saint that devotees experience whether in their living rooms, at their places of work, in hospitals, or in temples in turn become part of the expanding, abundant performance. Excellent examples of this can be found in the very recent past. At one event, to celebrate the birthday of the saint, the experience of a devotee's seriously ill husband, who had received a direct visitation from the saint in his hospital ward and consequently made a miraculous recovery, was narrated and performed. In a similar instance, the experience of a non-Gujarati, non-Hindu devotee, whose son was in hospital suffering from a potentially fatal illness, likewise experienced the presence of the saint at his bedside. The son made a rapid recovery, and both he and his father are now dedicated devotees of the saint. Both of these events have since been woven into the fabric of the ever-growing narrative and its performance. It is in this way that from the eighteenth through the twenty-first century layer upon layer of abundance is being added to the Jalarām story.

Finally, in examining the nature of contemporary *kathā*, I would like to consider abundant performance in terms of generational language differences and how *kathā* can serve to transcend linguistic borders. It has been over a century since the first Gujaratis migrated to East Africa, and in the last fifty years many have had to migrate to the UK. During that time, the place of spoken and written Gujarati has shifted. As the *kathākār* observes, “the new generation are able to understand Gujarati but they are not so good speaking Gujarati and they cannot all read and write Gujarati so I can imagine that by the next generation the value of Gujarati language will decrease.”³⁵ As a consequence, how the *kathā* is delivered and performed needs to be modified in terms of language to cater for an increasing number of a new generation of devotees. This was something that had been considered by the *kathākār*: “to keep them aware of our scriptures you might need to tell it in English...In the [United] States and the UK there will be an increase in English *kathā*, and at the moment there are so many young people asking me to do the *kathā* in English.”³⁶

It is here that we witness how the abundance of the performance embraces the changes engendered by generational differences and the shift from Gujarati to English in terms of the language in which the *kathā* is narrated. But this is not without its problems, and as *kathās* are increasingly delivered in English, the *kathākār*, when conveying a specifically Gujarati story about a Gujarati saint from a specific region of Gujarat, has to pay special attention to his delivery. As he explains:

When you change the language and the words...I have to put extra effort into every word. When you speak publicly you have to be very responsible for your work, you have to be more careful with the words that you use, especially the English. We can manage it, but the story is written to suit our language and thought, so when I express it in English it may become different.³⁷

The abundant nature of the performance goes some way to accommodate these changes, however, because it can once again move out from the original and transform the experience of those present as it caters for all linguistic needs. What I am suggesting here is that the abundance experienced by the audience during the performance transcends the language in which it is delivered. When the story is performed in the abundant space, the abundant presence of the saint is felt by all in the audience, irrespective of their primary language. As one Greenford devotee summed up:

The *kathā* itself and the *kathākār* create a much deeper religious experience, the audience is very receptive, there is a deeper religious atmosphere....A young audience who may not be as fluent in Gujarati as a language, and they hear or read the translated versions which may not convey the same meaning. At times that is why the dramatization of the event can hold the imagination of the audience.³⁸

To summarize: The recitation of Jalarām's life story at *kathās* creates an abundant event that locates the devotee and the *kathākār* at the center of the narrative in a way that an intellectual, nondevotional understanding of the story is simply unable to do. Far from being absent or nonexistent, the transcendent has indeed broken through the limitations of mere narrative. The saint is fully present while the devotees become part of the story of the saint. They feel and visualize his presence and the places where he performed his *parchās*, where he grew up, and where he was married. As an abundant event, the *kathā* has indeed exceeded “the capacity of modern historiography to comprehend them” (Monge 2016: 20). It has reversed what are referred to here as the assumptions of absence, the dismissal of presence,

³⁵ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, January 2017.

³⁶ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, January 2017.

³⁷ Piyushbhai Mehta, in conversation with the author, January 2017.

³⁸ Devotee 5, in conversation with the author, April 2018.

and the reduction of the events in a narrative to mere social categories. In many respects, the *kathākār*, especially in this context, has accomplished and, to an extent, personified Orsi's wish for a discourse on narrative that goes beyond demythologizing for the sake of anthropological understandings. This, in turn, allows such narratives to "speak truths on their own terms as manifestations of an 'abundance' that exceeds the limitations of modern historical-critical methodology" (Monge 2016: 20).

Furthermore, the *kathākār* has not only brought the divine back into the scholarly discussion (Orsi 2008: 18), but it has also been accessed through the *kathā* itself. For his devotees, Jalarām is and always has been fully present. In fact, the idea of his absence is not even considered. He is as alive to his devotees now as he was in the nineteenth century. His presence is still being experienced. And these phenomena are entirely independent of "social facts" and are unwilling to conform to them (Orsi 2008: 13). In this respect, the *kathākār* has ushered in a comprehensive example of an abundant event to bring about a fully immersive experience of the saint and his life, for both himself and the devotees who have come to participate in the event.

Of course, the event of *Jalarāmkathā* is not fixed to any particular location, therefore allowing for abundant space to be created within which abundant performance can take place. Importantly, this allows the *kathā* narrative to be fully located in the ownership of those who have participated in and engaged with it. The narrative is no longer snap frozen, it has, through the performance, become the actual presence of the saint about whom it was written as well as the deities that facilitate this ownership. Furthermore, the event of narrative is embodied in the *kathākār* who creates the conditions for the saint's presence to be experienced through the abundant performance in an abundant space. As a consequence, Jalarām's story becomes shaped by the fluid nature of the performance, a performance that can take place anywhere from a school hall in a London suburb to a temple in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat, from Leicester to the foothills of the Himālaya. The creation of abundant space and abundant performance thus sharpens the devotee's awareness of the transcendent as it breaks through time and place and allows the devotee to experience a heightened sense of intimacy not only with the saint, but also with Rām and Vyās the great storyteller of the Hindu tradition.

Concluding Remarks

The notions of abundant presence, space, and performance challenge the expectations of the modern, liberal, Western historiographical paradigm of secular religion. These notions are the opposite of abundant and have drained the lived religious experience, which has been internalized, made private to the individual, and separated from other areas of life (Orsi 2008:13). Abundant space and abundant performance directly evoke abundant presence, and the experience is real as the devotees and the central characters of the performance are brought together, even to the point of indicating their appreciation of each other. Furthermore, the entire experience is public, outward, and shared, not only by those who lead the performance, but also by those who partake in the performance. *Kathā* is what Chakrabarty (2000: 20) might describe as truly an "existentially transformative, subjective, and polyvocal" phenomena (Monge 2016: 19), or as one devotee from Greenford put it: "As I (go to) to more and more *kathās* I get more meaning, more depth, and that's why it is important...No book can expand upon this but the *kathākār* can explain from a number of different views, [he] provides a multidimensional experience."³⁹

³⁹ Devotee 6, in conversation with the author, April 2018.

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