

6-15-2020

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Recommended Citation

saha, shandip (2020) "From Vaiṣṇavas to Hindus: The Redefinition of the Vallabha Sampraday in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *International Journal of Indic Religions*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 3 , Article 3. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.shawnee.edu/indicreligions/vol2/iss3/3>

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From Vaiṣṇavas to Hindus: The Redefinition of the Vallabha Sampradaya in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

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Abstract:

Much has been written in scholarly literature about the formation of religious identities under colonial rule, but little attention has been paid to the religious community known as the Vallabha Sampradāya and its encounter with British Orientalists and Hindu reform movements of the nineteenth century. This community's devotees came largely from the Rājput nobility and the Gujarātī mercantile community whose patronage transformed the Sampradāya's religious leaders -- known as mahārājas -- into wealthy property owners who wielded a considerable amount of social and political influence in both Rajasthan and in the major urban centers of the Bombay Presidency. The Sampradāya's public image, however, took a beating at the hands of disaffected devotees, Hindu reformers, and British Orientalists who critiqued the mahārājas' lavish lifestyles and accused them of promoting sexual immorality. This paper will examine the critiques of the Sampradāya in the nineteenth century and how the community's mahārājas took the step to regain its religious legitimacy in the public arena by abandoning its centuries-long identification as Vaiṣṇavas to become members of the larger religious construction known as Hinduism or *sanātana dharma*.

Keywords: Vallabha Sampradāya/ Puṣṭi Mārga; Braj Bhāṣa; Kṛṣṇa; Vaiṣṇavism;

Introduction

The theology of the Vallabha Sampradāya -- popularly known as the Puṣṭi Mārga -- has always emphasized the unique nature of the community's religious identity. The religious texts in Sanskrit and Braj Bhāṣa produced between sixteenth and early parts of the eighteenth centuries stress that the Sampradāya constituted a special spiritual elite distinct from all other religious communities because its members relied wholly on Kṛṣṇa and his divine grace. The argument of this paper is that the nineteenth century represented a turning point in the history of the Puṣṭi Mārga.

As the Sampradāya's leadership came under attack for its affluent lifestyle and the Puṣṭi Mārga became increasingly represented as a heretical religious sect, the community instead, began to reinterpret the exclusivist elements of its theology in order to claim that the community indeed belonged to a much larger entity known as Hindu or *sanātana dharma*.

While this redefinition of Vallabhite identity helped the community to gain some of the greater societal acceptance it so desired, it would also have the long-term effect of creating an unresolved religious dilemma for devotees about the degree to which they should engage with mainstream Hinduism without having to sacrifice their identities as Puṣṭi Mārga Vaiṣṇavas.

The Articulation of Puṣṭi Mārga Religious Identity in Sanskrit and Braj Bhāṣa Literature:

The Puṣṭi Mārga was founded by Vallabha (1479-1530), as an alternative to the practices associated with *smārta* Hinduism which Vallabha collectively called the “Path of Rules” (*maryādā mārga*). Once devotees were initiated into the community by means of the *brahmasambandha mantra*, they were purified by the divine grace (*puṣṭi*) of the Supreme Lord Kṛṣṇa and were required from that point onwards, to live a householder’s life that expressed its devotion through selfless service (*sevā*) to Kṛṣṇa in the form of divine images known as *svarūpas*. Furthermore, since divine grace provided for all that devotees needed, there was no reason for devotees to turn other deities or religious paths for their spiritual or material needs. They were to rely wholly on Kṛṣṇa and no one else. It was this reliance on Kṛṣṇa’s grace that made the community so unique for Vallabha. It was a fully independent, self-sufficient, and closely-knit group of spiritual elect who, being infused with divine grace, desired nothing else but to love Kṛṣṇa’s form (Bennett, 1993; Narain, 2004, 2009)³.

³ Bennett and Narain’s text constitute two of the more comprehensive and very readable texts on Vallabhite philosophy and practice.

Given the emphasis that was placed on the unique nature of the community's religious identity, it is not surprising that the concept of *anyāśraya* has always been central to the theology of the Puṣṭi Mārga. Anyāśraya means to seek refuge in another individual or set of beliefs that are outside the realm of the Puṣṭi Mārga (Dalmia, 2014; Saha, 2014). Vallabha does make indirect references to this concept in his Sanskrit works, but the term is used explicitly in Braj Bhāṣa devotional works compiled and edited between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One of these Braj Bhāṣa texts is a collection of sayings attributed to Vallabha's grandson, Gokulnāth (1557-1640), and is known within the Puṣṭi Mārga as "The Twenty-Four Nectarian Utterances of Gokulnāth (*Gokulnāth ke caubīs vacanāmṛta*). Gokulnāth emphasizes that anyāśraya is considered to be the greatest hindrance (*mahabādhak*) on one's spiritual path and defines it as forsaking the Puṣṭi Mārga for another religious path. He also defines anyāśraya as viewing or keeping an image of Kṛṣṇa that is not a consecrated Puṣṭi Mārga image, going to pilgrimages sites not associated with Puṣṭi Mārga or using goods for sevā and that have been touched by non-members. Gokulnāth makes it clear that those who counsel devotees to seek their happiness and well-being in the maryādā mārga and any deity outside Kṛṣṇa are ignorant and foolish (*durbuddhi*) individuals who will lead good devotees astray (Gokulnāth, 1996)⁴. The still much read and revered *vārtā sāhitya* – the collection of Braj Bhāṣa tales about exemplary Puṣṭi Mārga devotees compiled between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries -- also emphasizes Gokulnāth's teachings about anyāśraya. According to the *vārtā* texts, consorting with devotees of another sampradāya or doubting the word of Vallabha or of any of successors is akin to a woman abandoning her wifely *dharma* by leaving her husband for another man or selling one's *dharma* to the highest bidder (Saha, 2006: 238).

The results of committing anyāśraya can be quite severe in Puṣṭi Mārga literature. In the case of Vallabha, following the maryādā mārga can provide one with only limited happiness for one will only achieve union with *akṣara brahman* or the formless aspect of the Divine which is but one small manifestation of Kṛṣṇa's divine form. Others, according to Vallabha, may be condemned to ignorance and jump from one religious path to another bereft of Kṛṣṇa's grace (Redington, 2000: 45, 47). In the case of the twenty-four utterances, Gokulnāth states that committing anyāśraya can result in the devotee being reborn as a dog or consigned to the depths of hell. In the *vārtā* literature, individuals are generally shunned by other devotees for acts of

⁴ See, in particular, utterances 1, 4, 12, 16, 24 where Gokulnāth details the dangers of anyāśraya and the karmic results of swerving off the path of proper Vaiṣṇava conduct by entertaining impure thoughts and speech.

anyāśraya.

Given the emphasis these texts place on the uniqueness of the Puṣṭi Mārga and the consequences associated with compromising that status, the concept of *satsang* figures prominently in Braj Bhāṣa texts such as the Twenty-Four Utterances and the vārtā literature. Regularly meeting with other initiated members on a regular basis for the sharing of consecrated food (*prasād*) and the discussion of religious topics serves the purpose of fostering solidarity within the community and manifesting Kṛṣṇa's presence among his devotees (Saha, 2006: 236). In short, devotees are enjoined to maintain the overall spiritual well-being of their community by creating a well-knit, self-sufficient community that is dedicated to supporting devotees in living a life where all their actions are done purely out of the desire to love and glorify Kṛṣṇa.

How, then, did members of the Puṣṭi Mārga represent themselves to others? In the vārtā literature, devotees refer to themselves and other religious communities in terms of sectarian affiliations. Thus, when devotees speak amongst themselves in the vārtā literature, they usually refer to themselves as Vaiṣṇavas. When, however, they describe themselves to individuals outside their community, they refer to themselves as Vaiṣṇavas who are members of the 'Vallabhi Sampradāya' or as Vaiṣṇavas who are disciples of Vallabha or Viṭṭhalnāth (1515-1585), Vallabha's son and successor (Saha, 2014: 328-329). The smārta brahmins who follow pūjā rituals are termed as following the maryādā mārga while other religious communities who worship Śiva or various forms of the goddess are known as Śaivas, Tantriks, and Śāktas. The vārtā literature, however, does not specifically name any other Vaiṣṇavite communities except for the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas who were active in the Braj area during the same time as the Puṣṭi Mārga in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They are referred to in terms of their ethnic background as Bengalis.

The Puṣṭi Mārga in the Nineteenth Century:

The self-perception of Puṣṭi Mārga Vaiṣṇavas as an independent, self-sufficient, community of spiritual elect had served the entire community well right into the nineteenth century. The descendants of Vallabha – collectively known as mahārājas – served as the spiritual guides of the Puṣṭi Mārga community and presided over a devotee base made largely of members from the Rājput nobility and the wealthy Gujarātī baniyā community of the Bombay Presidency.⁹ Rājput patronage of the mahārājas enabled the mahārājas to establish a network of shrines across Western, Northern, and Central India whose financial affairs were administered by the

community's baniyā devotees in Bombay. Money was sent to trusts located in Bombay and then donations were redistributed to the community's various mahārājas and their family members who maintained the community's temples. Thus, the mahārājas held a considerable amount of power over their devotees. Of these mahārājas, one of the most well-known ones were the so-called *tilkāyats* who presided over the Puṣṭi Mārga's major place of pilgrimage in Nathdwara which was in the Rājput state of Mewar. It was in Nathdwara where the image of Śrīnāthjī, the community's principal deity of adoration was housed. The tilkāyats, like other mahārājas based in Rajasthan, were active in local regional politics while the mahārājas located in the Presidency used their power to threaten their devotees with possible expulsion not only from the Puṣṭi Mārga, but also from their *jāti* if they committed an act of anyāśraya by questioning the authority of the mahārājas (Peabody, 1991; Saha, 2007; Shodhan, 2001; Taylor, 1997)⁵.

The influence of the mahārājas, however, began to progressively wane towards the late nineteenth century. The image of the community was damaged, in part, by the actions of the Nathdwara tilkāyat, Giridhar (1842-1902) whose attempt in 1873 to establish Nathdwara as an independent Rājput state resulted in his forcible removal by the British and the Mewar royal court (*darbār*). The replacement of Giridhar with his then minor son, Govardhanlāl (1862-1933) triggered a long-running legal battle for the Nathdwara temple and its considerable wealth that would only come to an end in 1903 (Saha, 2007). Discontent, meanwhile, within the baniyā community over the mahārājas' authoritarianism culminated in the infamous 1861 Maharaja Libel Case. The case revolved around charges of sexual and religious misconduct against the mahārājas, but it gradually came to also include charges of devotee harassment and witness tampering (Haberman, 1993; Shodhan, 2001). The Sampradāya won the case on a legal technicality, but the case ultimately resulted in a grotesque caricature of Puṣṭi Mārga theology as an orgiastic and hedonistic religious system presided over by degenerate and sexually deviant religious leaders.

The Libel Case was followed in 1875 by the attacks on the mahārājas by Dayānanda Sarasvatī (1824-1883) who described the Puṣṭi Mārga as a heterodox sect within Hinduism and the mahārājas as false and perverse religious teachers whose alleged claims of divinity were contrary to the true Hinduism of the Vedas (Jordens, 1998). These were followed by two exposés and one satirical drama about the mahārājas written between 1895 and 1912 by

⁵ These texts all provide different perspectives on Rājput and baniyā patronage of the Puṣṭi Mārga.

an author who wrote under the name of Swami Blākaṭānanda or 'Mister Blākaṭ' for short (Blākaṭānanda, 1858, 1895, 1912). Blākaṭānanda claimed in his writings that he and previous generations of his family were all members of the Puṣṭi Mārga and that he was a childhood playmate of the eminent mahārāja, Devakīnandanācārya (1859-1903) of Kamavan in Braj (Blākaṭānanda, 1912: pt. 1, 23).⁶ Blākaṭānanda goes on to state that his actual name is Giridhar and he was initiated into the Puṣṭi Mārga by one Pannalāl. Giridhar became the manager of a Puṣṭi Mārga temple in Multan before coming to Kanpur somewhere in the first decade of the twentieth century. He made a name for himself by exposing individuals who were engaged in the embezzlement of funds from a school with which he was associated and later, in 1911, he donated 2700 rupees to a local university in Kanpur. It is not clear when or how Giridhar became Blākaṭānanda the renunciate. He only states that he became a renunciate in his old age and that his name was derived from the Sanskrit words for sorrow (*bila*) and removal (*kaṭa*). Consequently, Blākaṭānanda, means 'the one who dispels sorrow' and once he had become a monk, he became the President of the Navaratna Committee and the founding ācārya of the Hiranyagarbha Sampradāya about which nothing is known (Blākaṭānanda, 1912: pt. 2, 6-9).

Blākaṭānanda does not talk about the nature of his sampradāya or its theological outlook but, like Dayānanda and many other leaders of nineteenth century Hindu reform movements, he measured all religious communities against the so-called golden age of Hinduism represented by the teachings of the Vedas. Consequently, for Blākaṭānanda, there was nothing about the Puṣṭi Mārga that could be called 'Vedic'. There was nothing in the Vedas that specifically referred to Kṛṣṇa and while the *Yajurveda* did refer to the word, 'puṣṭi', it referred to general well-being and prosperity and not to divine grace. The mahārājas could not claim to lead a Vedic sampradāya, Blākaṭānanda continued, when they completely disregarded the *varṇāśramadharmā* system by remaining as householders rather than becoming renunciates (Blākaṭānanda, 1912: pt 2, 25-26). Furthermore, the mahārājas were not willing to uphold social causes such as cow protection because, according to Blākaṭānanda, they categorically stated that it was beneath them to be involved in such causes.

⁶ Blākaṭānanda's claim, however, does not make sense. The Devakīnandanācārya whose picture is reprinted in Blākaṭānanda's volume was born in 1858 which is the date given for the earliest of Blākaṭānanda's tracts. It thus becomes difficult to verify Blākaṭānanda's claims given there is no information about his birth date in his writings nor is he mentioned by biographers of Devakīnandanācārya. For biographies of Devakīnandanācārya, see (Śeth, 1915) and (Vaidya, 2009).

It was, however, the moral behavior of the mahārājas that led Blākaṭānanda to believe that the mahārājas were heretics. Since the brahmasambandha mantra required devotees to dedicate their mind, body, and wealth in the service of Kṛṣṇa at the time of their initiation, the mahārājas, Blākaṭānanda argued, used their status as Kṛṣṇa's earthly intermediaries to not only appropriate their devotees' wealth for themselves, but to also engage in sexual misconduct with female devotees within the community. This charge was not new. This was the very same accusation made against the mahārājas during the Libel Case. Blākaṭānanda, however, took his charges to a new level by stating that the greed and sexual appetites of the mahārājas led to acts of criminal and deviant sexual behavior. The mahārājas had become obsessed with Muslim courtesans whom were invited to perform at marriages and birthday celebrations, they engaged in acts of financial fraud and murder, and they forced women with whom they had affairs to have abortions (Blākaṭānanda, 1858, 1912: pt 2, 33-36). The mahārājas also used the re-enactment of the Kṛṣṇa's rās-līlā with the gopīs as an excuse to dress and be photographed in women's clothing. Thus, Blākaṭānanda concluded, there was nothing Vaiṣṇavite or Vedic about the Puṣṭi Mārga. The mahārājas were using the guise of Vaiṣṇavism to practice left-handed Tantra and the greatest proof of this was the Śrīnāthjī image in Nathdwara. Devotees believed that the Śrīnāthjī image miraculously manifested itself to Vallabha in Braj, but according to Blākaṭānanda, it was the image of a *bhairava*. The mahārājas and their associates had engaged in a conspiracy to conceal this truth by preventing devotees from having close access to the image (Blākaṭānanda, 1912: pt 2, 44, pt 3: 9-17).

The Redefinition of Puṣṭi Mārga Religious Identity:

There were at least three direct responses to Blākaṭānanda's charges from within the Puṣṭi Mārga of which only one is available. This text, called *Blākaṭānanda Timira Bhāskara* (Śarmā, 1912), attempted to refute Blākaṭānanda's charges by providing evidence of the mahārājas' charitable activities and morally upright character. The tract, however, was so concerned with the minutiae of Blākaṭānanda's charges, that it did very little to address two much larger and important issues: how to rehabilitate the public image of the Puṣṭi Mārga and how to strengthen the weakening bonds between the mahārājas and their devotees. Devotees increasingly found new ways to bypass the religious authority of the mahārājas and as efforts grew in the nineteenth century to forge a pan-Hindu religious identity under the label of sanātana dharma, the mahārājas found Vallabhite theology being increasingly excluded from

these efforts because it was considered to have no relation to the Vedas and the *Upaniṣads*.

The real impetus for change came from Nathdwara under the auspices of Govardhanlāl, the tilkāyat of Nathdwara. Govardhanlāl gave lectures criticizing the ignorance of both devotees and his fellow mahārājas concerning the philosophy and history of their religious community. He lamented that learned mahārājas who wrote erudite commentaries and exemplary devotees like those found in the vārtā literature were now a thing of the past in the Puṣṭi Mārga. This ignorance among the mahārājas and their devotees, Govardhanlāl continued, was made even worse by what he termed their “turning away from proper conduct (*ācār vimukhtā*)”(Govardhanlāl, 1998b: 311-313). He stated that, as devotees and mahārājas strayed away from the proper ethical conduct befitting Vaiṣṇavas, the type of bhakti preached by Vallabha would never have any effect on community members. Govardhanlāl thus proposed the importance of the mahārājas actively taking part in the future of the Puṣṭi Mārga by giving proper spiritual advice, educating devotees through the opening of schools to teach the younger generation of devotees, and by publishing Puṣṭi Mārga texts in Sanskrit with readable commentaries so devotees could have access to Vallabha’s teachings in their most pristine form (Govardhanlāl, 1998b: 314-315).

The emphasis on Sanskrit texts was not surprising. In an effort to restore the tarnished image of his community, the mahārāja at the center of the Libel Case repudiated Braj Bhāṣa texts as being inaccurate representations of Vallabha’s teachings while Govardhanlāl went on the offensive by giving public speeches that argued the Puṣṭi Mārga, too, was the inheritor of Hinduism’s Sanskritic tradition and its teachings were in direct accordance with Vedic scriptures. All *smṛti* texts, Govardhanlāl stated, including the *purāṇas* helped to illuminate the deeper mysteries contained within the Vedas and the Upaniṣads and thus it followed that the two key texts for the Puṣṭi Mārga – the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* and the *Bhagavadgīta* - both were Vedic in nature. He pointed to those passages in the Gīta and the Bhāgavata that extolled bhakti as an easier path towards liberation, which could only be traversed with the devotee’s willingness to subsist purely on the grace of Kṛṣṇa. For Govardhanlāl, then, there could be no doubt about the orthodox nature of Vallabhite theology. It was grounded in the teaching of the Vedas and Upaniṣads and, consequently, the Sampradāya, could take its rightful place with all other religious communities that comprised the larger complex known as sanātana dharma (Govardhanlāl, 1998a).

What, then, became of the concept of anyāśraya? The Braj Bhāṣa and Sanskrit literature

that had been central to the lives of devotees stressed the negative consequences of consorting with those who followed the *maryādā mārga* or followed forms of Kṛṣṇaite bhakti different from that of the Puṣṭi Mārga. Speaking on his father's behalf, Govardhanlāl's son, Dāmodarlāl (1892-1932), stated this was not quite the case. It was, Dāmodarlāl stated, only considered to be *anyāśraya*, the moment that one began propitiating deities for specific material or spiritual rewards for this broke the devotee's commitment to rely purely on Kṛṣṇa and his grace. The performance of Vedic rituals or the daily recitation of Vedic prayers (*sandhyavandanam*) hardly constituted *anyāśraya* for these were all directed at deities who were all partial manifestations of Kṛṣṇa's divine form. In other words, attending or even performing rituals associated with the *maryādā mārga* or paying one's respects to deities other than Kṛṣṇa was not considered *anyāśraya* if they were performed with the understanding that they were being performed purely as an expression of selfless love for Kṛṣṇa. Thus, Dāmodarlāl assured devotees, they were neither contravening sampradāyik teachings by engaging themselves with communities categorized by Vallabhite theology as following the *maryādā mārga* (Dāmodarlāl, 1998).

Dāmodarlāl's reassurances to devotees about their fears concerning *anyāśraya* opened the door for the Puṣṭi Mārga to engage in greater social activism. He gave a public discourse in defense of the caste system citing the famous *Puruṣa Sūkta* hymn of the *Rg Veda* which proved that the caste system was divinely ordained, and it did nothing but help the unity of India. Each individual performing their *dharma* according to their *jāti* standing was perfectly fine as long as all people were united in the belief that they were working to maintain the spiritual health of the nation. With that unity, Dāmodarlāl, argued, no harm could ever come to the country (Dāmodarlāl, 1998b: 325-326). In a similar vein, devotees across castes lines were also encouraged to play a greater role in the cow protection movement arguing that not only it was the equivalent of worshipping Kṛṣṇa himself, but it again strengthened the physical and moral nature of nation by allowing for the nourishment of the body through products like milk and butter. Meanwhile, the Porbandar-based mahārāja, Jīvanācārya, sponsored the publication of a book in 1906 called *Mūrtipūjā* which contained the transcript of a public address given by the Varanasi born Sanātan apologist, Ambikadatta Vyās, which attempted to defend the practice of image worship across sampradāyik lines against the criticisms of the Ārya Samāj and the British (Jīvanācārya, 1906). What, however, was striking was that in all of these appeals, was that mahārājas like Govardhanlāl and Dāmodarlāl did not talk in sectarian terminology when defending the Puṣṭi Mārga. Svarūpa – the traditional word for an image of Kṛṣṇa in the Puṣṭi Mārga – was replaced with the more traditional term of 'mūrti', the mahārājas presented

themselves as defenders of Hindu dharma, and called upon their devotees to social action in the interests of defending the Hindu religion. Thus, by the early decades of the twentieth century, the Sampradāya had undergone a major realignment in its religious identity. They no longer narrowly defined themselves purely as Vaiṣṇavas, but in much broader terms as Hindus.

Conclusion:

Did this change in religious identity, however, do much to improve the fortunes of the Sampradāya? Devotees certainly seemed to think so and heralded Govardhanlāl's reign as tilkāyat as the beginning of a 'golden age' in the history of the Puṣṭi Mārga. This golden age, however, ended abruptly when Dāmodarlāl's public affair with a Kathak dancer in 1932 resulted in his permanent expulsion from Nathdwara by the Mewar darbār who then disqualified him from succeeding his father as tilkāyat. The Sampradāya was able to weather the scandal in large part because the community's willingness to redefine itself as being 'Hindu' did give the community a greater sense of respectability by allowing devotees to look beyond their primary identification as Vaiṣṇavas so they could play a larger participatory role in the larger Hindu community.

At the same time, however, the shift in the definition of Vallabhite self-identity and the accompanying reinterpretation of anyāśraya that occurred under Govardhanlāl created a certain tension within the community that remains present even today. Websites and blogs maintained now maintained by many maharajas try to define the Puṣṭi Mārga as part of the complex known as sanātana dharma while simultaneously trying to maintain the religious exclusivity of the community by emphasizing differences between smārta religious practices and the single-minded Kṛṣṇa bhakti outlined in Vallabha's teachings. This delicate balancing act, however, has served to leave devotees bewildered. FAQs on sampradāyik websites and discussion forums are full of questions from devotees about whether they are Hindus or Vaiṣṇavas or if their compromising their Vaiṣṇava dharma by showing respect to deities like Gaṇeśa or Durgā or by participating in smārta rituals practiced at other temples or in the homes of friends. The responses from fellow devotees are varied and range from to very strict interpretations of Vallabha's teachings that would bar devotees from visiting non-sectarian shrines to more broad interpretations that are variants on Dāmodarlāl redefinition of anyāśraya so devotees can move beyond sectarian grounds on the condition that are vigilant about maintaining their love for

Kṛṣṇa⁷. In this sense, Govardhanlāl's willingness to sacrifice the religious exclusivity of the Puṣṭi Mārga in the interests of greater social acceptability caused something of a religious identity crisis within the Sampradāya which has yet to be resolved.

⁷ See websites, for example, like <http://shrivallabhsharanam.com/main/faq.html> and http://www.pushtikul.com/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=1674&FORUM_ID=1&CAT_ID=7&Forum_Title=%3Cb%3EDiscuss+it+all.+%3C%2Fb%3E&Topic_Title=Is+Pushtimarg+a+Sanatan+Dharma%3F

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