The Govardhana legend may be viewed from several angles: as a lītā or caritra, i.e. as a particular episode in the Puranic narratives relative to the Cowherd god legend, the episode being usually known as govardhana-dharana, ‘the lifting of the Govardhana hill’; as the underlying myth which accounts for the all-Indian (though predominantly northern Indian) cult of mountain and cattle known as ‘Govardhanapūjā’ or the ‘Annakūṭa’ festival; as the ‘historical’ occurrence which was the cause for the manifestation of Śrī Govardhanji or Śrī Nāthji, as this mountain deity is known in the Braj area. The latter view is held by modern Krishnaite sects in general and particularly by the Vallabhi or puṣṭi-sampradāya sect, a sect founded by Vallabha in Braj at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The sect holds its main deity Śrī Nāthji as the svarūpā, i.e. the ‘own form’ or ‘essential form’, of Śrī Kṛṣṇa Himself, who chose to manifest His divine nature under that Form in a miraculous manner on the Govardhan hill. 2

Classical Indology mostly knows of the Govardhana legend through the Puranic accounts of the govardhana-dharana episode. The other aspects of the myth have not been much investigated, but for a few ethnographical papers dealing with some aspects of mountain and cattle festivals in India. 3 As to the sectarian literature in Sanskrit (mostly on the Gaṇḍīya or Chaitanyite side) and in Braj (on the Vallabhi side), it has not been critically studied so far. The present article constitutes an attempt at sifting all the material available from various sources, literary and otherwise, including the material yielded by fairly recent excavations in the Braj area. Some information was also collected by the author in the course of field-work conducted in the Braj area during the last years.

The word govardhana has been interpreted by Growse as meaning ‘a rearer of cattle’ or ‘a nurse of cattle’, 4 though its literal meaning is clearly ‘an increaser of cattle’. The divinized hillock also known as Gīdrājī, ‘King of hills’, is conceived of as a benevolent deity primarily concerned with the fertility of the cows and the welfare of the cowherd folk. We know that this deity is worshipped all over northern India by the pastoral tribes, diversely known as Ahīras, Gwālās or Gopas. The feast itself is known as govardhana-pūjā or more frequently annakūṭa (Annakūṭ) as mentioned above, the word annakūṭa referring to ‘mountain of food’ offered to Kṛṣṇa-Govardhan. The feast is also celebrated by a large number of non-pastoral Hindus, especially in the rural areas, on the day after Divālī, i.e. on the first day of the bright half of the

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month of Kārttika. The next day (Kārttika śukla 2) is sacred to the river goddess Yamunā (the Jamna). Though very popular in Vaiṣṇava homes all over India, the Annakūṭ festival is not a Vaiṣṇava festival, the pastoral folk themselves being primarily Śaivite and Devī-worshippers. Besides, as we shall see, the feast assumes a markedly non-Brahmanical, primitive character, all the more so in the Braj context. Yet, in Vaiṣṇava homes, it assumes a Krishnaite colour since Hindu tradition identifies Śrī Girirāj with Kṛṣṇa-Gopāl, the Cowherd-god.

The Annakūṭ festival

A description of the festival as it is celebrated in the Braj area will be useful here. For the villagers of Braj, the feast takes on even more importance than the Divālī festival itself. It is a very big affair in which the women of the household take the principal part.5 Preparations begin just after Dassera (dasahara) the day consecrated to Viṣṇu (Piśā chāla 10) and end on Divālī day: they last twenty-one days in all. A lot of time is spent on the preparation of numerous delicacies to be offered to Śrī Govardhan on the Annakūṭ day: traditionally, the offerings should consist of chappan bhog, i.e. fifty-six different items of food.

The festival is celebrated in the inner courtyard of the house. On the ground women make an anthropomorphic representation of the deity Śrī Govardhan Girirāj with cowdung. The body is figured by a large square with a conical head over it, two parallel feet under it and one or even two risen arms above it. On all the four sides of Śrī Govardhan, small weeds and cotton balls represent the vegetation growing over the hill. On the top of its head a lighted lamp is placed. A big hole in the midst indicates its mouth (tunāda, ‘snout’), which is to be filled with food. Within the square representing the ‘inside’ of Govardhan, a number of smaller objects, also made of cow-dung, are placed: a model watchman (cauktidār), a model dog, model cows, a pot to be filled with milk and some toys to entertain the young deity. Some miniature household implements are also displayed around (such as a churning-stick, a stove etc.). Gaurī and Gaṇeśa, as the two presiding deities, also moulded in cow-dung and suitably dressed, are placed as well. It is in front of that elaborate representation that the women place all the dishes they have prepared, filled with all sorts of cooked food plus a heap of food-grains: this display is known as Annakūṭ which, as we have seen, is now the name given to the festival itself.

The pūjā itself is to be performed in the evening. The presence of a Brāhmaṇ priest is not required but there must be at least one cowherd by caste, together with at least one cow and one bull. The officiating cowherd recites a few set couplets extolling the holy mountain, Śrī Girirāj, and then he fills the effigy’s mouth with milk, khīr, purīs and sweetmeats. Then the cowherds and the cattle circumambulate the ‘Govardhan’, symbolically performing the parikramā of the holy hill, while ringing