

The Anxiety of Innovation: The Practice of Literary Science in the Hindi/*Riti* Tradition

Kesavdas has described the various gestures of Radha and her lover according to his understanding of them. May master poets forgive his audacity.

Rasikpriya□

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In conjunction with the extension of Mughal and sub-imperial courtly patronage networks in seventeenth-century north India, the literary and intellectual ambitions of Hindi writers underwent unprecedented expansion. The Hindi dialect of Brajbhasa, once predominantly a vehicle for devotional lyrics about Krishna, achieved new prominence in the more secular spheres of elite courtly discourse.¹ The traditional knowledge system of literary science (*alankarasastra*) in particular, one of the core disciplines of Indian scholarship before the advent of colonialism and a cultural space long monopolized by Sanskrit intellectuals, emerged as a fertile site for the development of both vernacular poetics and poetry. Brajbhasa renditions of Sanskrit treatises on literary topics were commissioned at dozens of courts spanning all the way from north India to the Dakhan. In fact, so central was this genre – often termed the *ritigranth* (book of systems) – to the literary life of late precolonial India that modern Hindi literary historians routinely term the entire period from 1650 to 1850 the *ritikal* (period of literary systems).²

The Brajbhasa *ritigranths* possess an unusual status as both theoretical and literary documents. They consist of sequences of definitions of Sanskrit poetics topics (*lakshan*) alternating with verses that illustrate variations on those topics (*udabaran*). Typical of the *ritigranth* in both Sanskrit-derived content and classificatory style is the following eightfold analysis of female characters (*ashtanayikabheda*) excerpted from Kesavdas's *Rasikpriya* (Handbook for Poetry Connoisseurs, 1591), one of the earliest vernacular works on literary systems:

All female characters may be described in keeping with an eightfold system. These are called “the one with her lover under control,” “the anxious,” “the one who has decorated her bed,” “the stubborn,” “the angry,” “the woman whose lover has gone far away,”

“she whose lover did not keep the tryst,” and the “one who goes out boldly to meet her lover.” Know all these to be the eight types of *nayikas* [heroines].³ After outlining his overarching system the poet proceeds to delineate each of the eight subtypes of female characters individually, augmenting each with example verses. An illustration of how the complementary system of definitions and example verses works is as follows:

A definition of “the anxious”□

Kesavdas says that “the anxious” is a woman whose lover doesn't show up for some reason, causing her heart to fill with sorrow.□

An example of the hidden type of “the anxious”□

Said the anxious woman to herself□

Is it some business,

Or did his cowherd friends detain him?

Is this a day of fasting for him?

Did he fail to pay a debt?

Did he get into a fight?

Has he suddenly taken a religious turn?

Perhaps he is unwell?

Or his love for me is false?

Is it the rain clouds that have scared him off

In the middle of the night?

Or is he testing my love?

Again today he hasn't come!

What could be the matter? (vv. 7.7–8)□

Employing this style of classification and illustration early authors of the *ritigranths* undertook the wholesale systematization of both vernacular poetics and poetry. The genre spread quickly, and it came to serve as a major vehicle for Brajbhasa textual expression, affording the language a new status in courtly circles, and eventually enabling it to pose a formidable challenge to Sanskrit.

In striking contrast to its extensive cultural reach in early modern times, the Hindi *riti* tradition is today little studied and poorly understood. Modern readers tend to feel bewildered by the hypertaxonomical style of *riti* authors, whose works catalogue dozens, even hundreds of types of *nayikas* or *alankaras* (figures of speech), complete with subtypes. In contrast to the simplicity and naturalism celebrated as characteristic of premodern Hindi's better-known corpus, *bhakti* literature, the *riti* poets' use of a high register of vernacular diction and preoccupation with time-worn themes from Sanskrit have come to be viewed as representative of the decadent and mannerist tendencies of a tired feudal age. Whereas *bhakti* poetry has been embraced by modern scholars, who seem especially to value its forms of demotic expressivity, *riti* literature by virtue of its association with late medieval courtly life has been dismissed as stilted, retrograde, and reactionary. This explanatory model, which seems to stem partly from a generalized post-Romantic distaste for courtly literature, and partly from now-outdated theories about India's late precolonial decline, completely misconstrues the valence of literary classicism in the *riti* world.⁴

As I shall demonstrate in detail below, the unfavorable reactions to *riti* that predominate in modern Hindi scholarship were not even remotely shared by members of the literary public in early modern times. For Braj writers and connoisseurs *alankarasastra* was a crucial complex of literary modalities upon which the very existence of poetry and literary criticism depended. *Riti* literary protocols follow a very different logic from the styles of modernity (or *bhakti*), and it is perfectly reasonable that this should be the case. What is astonishing, however, is how little of an attempt has been made to identify and understand those protocols and logic. Dismissive attitudes towards the courtly styles of Hindi literature have long served as an obstacle to serious scholarship on the subject.⁵ But if we suspend judgment and try to think outside the narrow constraints of modern literary biases, which deem courtly literature stilted and insincere, or which expect of poetry or intellectual practices something other than what premodern Indians expected, it may be possible to develop an appreciation for *riti* literary trends from the perspective of their own cultural milieu. This is my primary goal here.

One crucial factor to understand is that practitioners of the Hindi *riti* style began under the shadow of Sanskrit, and forging connections to classical traditions was a sine qua non of early vernacular literary and intellectual life, particularly in courtly circles. Although more *bhakti*-oriented sixteenth-century Brajbhasa writers such as Kripāram (fl. 1540) and Nanddas (fl. 1570) already evince some interest in the classical *alankarasastra* themes that would become the defining feature of *riti* literature, later court poets such as Kesavdas (fl. 1600)

and his successors put *riti* styles and methods on the intellectual-historical map. During the seventeenth century more than ever before, Sanskrit poets and literary theorists were compelled to share the prestige and patronage they had so long monopolized, as vernacular writing expanded in scope and met with increasing acceptance. Tracing how this new acceptance of Brajbhasa came about, particularly the processes of cultural and intellectual fortification that were required for the elevation of a vernacular with formerly modest aspirations to an elite status, offers one starting point for a reevaluation of the history of *riti* literary culture. In examining this subject I consider how Sanskrit intellectuals responded to the growing popularity of the vernacular style, as well as how Brajbhasa poet-intellectuals reflected upon both the constraints and new creative potential of their medium during a moment of intense growth for Hindi writing. I explore the methodologies that underpinned the developing field of Brajbhasa *alankarasastra*, with a focus on the intellectual and poetic contexts in which courtly styles flourished. I conclude with some remarks on the meaning and value of *riti* literary systems for Hindi poets and scholars of the late precolonial world.□

Vernacular Incompetence?

Both in South Asia and elsewhere early modern literary cultures typically insisted on a strong distinction between the status of local and prestige languages, and emergent vernacular writers often faced an uphill battle for symbolic capital. In South Asia, an otherwise common enough linguistic chain of command was further entrenched by several Sanskrit ideologies that seemingly ruled out any hope for the acceptance of vernacular writing.⁶ From the perspective of one firmly rooted in a Sanskrit worldview, the movement between classical and vernacular languages was unidirectional, and that direction could only be downward. To be a vernacular writer was to exhibit both a linguistic and an intellectual failing. The hierarchies involved are implicit at the most basic lexical level. Vernaculars were by definition "corrupted" (*apabhraṣṭa*) languages, and their low status may be divined from the fact that they apparently did not even merit their own names: they were usually just called "language" (*bhasa*). The very word *Sanskrit*, in contrast, denotes (and connotes) the height of dignity: it means "perfectly formed." Sanskrit was also widely venerated as the "language of the gods" (*devavani/sravani*). It is hard to know how one could even begin to compete with a language that claimed not only perfect but divine status.

Traditional hierarchies concerning the inferior intellectual status of vernacular writing were doubtless enshrined in theory; nonetheless, actual practice during the *riti* period reveals a far more complex picture, in which

the relational dynamics of Sanskrit and Brajbhasa were being renegotiated – particularly in the disciplines of literature and literary science. If hardly a much-vaunted fact in Sanskrit circles, it was not uncommon for Sanskrit poets to borrow their themes from vernacular languages. For instance, Brajbhasa poetry is widely held to have influenced Jagannatha Panditaraja (d. c. 1670), who is often hailed as the last great Sanskrit poet-intellectual before the vernacular wave began to erode the once-solid embankments of classical textual authority.⁷ Furthermore, although the reverse process was certainly more widespread, the existence of Sanskrit commentaries on and translations of Brajbhasa works from this period suggests a new degree of credibility and acceptance for vernacular writing.⁸

Striking testimony to a new sense of the validity of vernacular scholarship is offered by Akbar Shah's *Sringara-manjari* (Bouquet of Passion, c. 1660), a Sanskrit *alankarasastra* text written at the Golconda court. The *Sringaramanjari* is, to my knowledge, unprecedented in its citing of Brajbhasa authors as sources alongside Sanskrit literary authorities – as though they were newly perceived as intellectual equals. In the opening to the *Sringaramanjari* two of the earliest Braj *ritigranthas*, Kesavdas's *Rasikpriya* and Sundar's *Sundarsringar* (Beautiful Adornments, 1631), share the designation “principal text” (*pramukhagrantha*) with such illustrious Sanskrit works as Dhananjaya's *Dasarupaka* (Ten Genres, late tenth century), Mammata's *Kavyaprakasa* (Light on Literature, mid-eleventh century), and Bhanudatta's *Rasamanjari* (Bouquet of Emotion, probably c. 1500).⁹ No less remarkable for what it articulates about new perceptions of vernacular authority is the *Sringaramanjari*'s own textual history: the work had originally been composed in Telugu, from which it was translated into both Brajbhasa¹⁰ and Sanskrit.

That Brajbhasa was now functioning alongside Sanskrit as a major transregional language of letters at a Dakhani court is another telling index of its new cultural status. Nor was its literary presence at Golconda particularly exceptional. Compositions in Braj and other dialects of Hindi were also routinely sponsored by the Maratha courts.¹¹ The name *Brajbhasa* (language of Braj) may have once marked the language's cultural and linguistic ties to the Braj/Mathura area of north India, which was celebrated as the center of Krishna lore, but by the second half of the seventeenth century Brajbhasa had clearly moved far beyond its original parameters – both geographically and expressively.

Although there is evidence that Brajbhasa writing was acquiring an unprecedented degree of circulation and intellectual cachet, it was not always readily embraced. There is indeed much evidence of profound ambivalence towards its literary and scholarly potentialities. Kavindracharya Sarasvati, for instance, one of the most

reputed intellectuals of the mid-seventeenth century, spoke of his sense of shame (*lay*) at writing in the vernacular, and this sentiment was echoed by many anxious vernacular-using pandits and poets of the day.¹² And yet for all this pandit's disclaimers, there are strong tensions between his professions of vernacular inferiority and the actual strength of his vernacular writerly persona. Kavindra may have expressed shame at using *bhasa*, but he nonetheless wrote in both Braj and Sanskrit and, judging from his extant works, he did so to almost an equal extent. In fact, the very contours of Kavindracharya's life work appear to illustrate a newer pattern of vernacular-classical parity, hardly the older paradigm of vernacular inferiority.¹³

The *Radha-madhava-vilasa-campu* (The Love-Play of Radha and Krishna, henceforth *Campu*) of Jayarama Pindye, Kavindra's fellow Maharashtrian and contemporary, is similarly contradictory in its unease about vernacularity while simultaneously endorsing it. At first glance, Jayarama's *Campu* would appear to be a veritable paean to polyglossia: the work is composed in a combination of Sanskrit and eleven regional languages (*desabhasa*), and the author boldly proclaims himself to be a master of poetry in twelve languages.¹⁴ But upon closer scrutiny the reader remains confused about the relative status of Sanskrit and *bhasa* in this text. The division of linguistic labor is unequal: the first ten cantos are written exclusively in Sanskrit, and it is only in the last chapter that the other languages appear – all lumped together as though the very structure of the work were designed to cast the vernaculars in the role of dilettantish pretenders. Heightening the tension surrounding the status of Sanskrit versus other languages is Jayarama's own apparent confusion about how to handle the multilinguality of his *Campu*: he vacillates on several occasions about whether he has actually written a Sanskrit work or a *bhasa* one.¹⁵

The stated reason for keeping the single *desabhasa* canto separate from the ten Sanskrit ones further attests to Jayarama's perception of linguistic hierarchies. He repeatedly asserts that it would be inappropriate to include vernacular poems in the Sanskrit section of his *Campu*.¹⁶ And yet while Jayarama's insistence on keeping the Sanskrit and vernacular domains of expression absolutely separate appears to shore up traditional notions of Sanskrit purity and supremacy, we know that such a stance conflicts radically with the actual practices of the poet's own day. Jayarama's narrative makes clear that Sanskrit and vernacular poets were *simultaneously* present at a real-life poetry contest that was sponsored by the court of Sahaji Bhonsle (father of the famous Maratha Sivaji), the poet's patron. Vernacular and Sanskrit poets may have shared the same cultural arena in his lived experience, but Jayarama somehow could not allow them to do so in his textual world.¹⁷ Whereas relegating the

vernacular compositions to a final appendix-like chapter (*pranta*) may suggest that Jayarama intended readers to view them as inferior to the weightier themes inspired by his Sanskrit muse, ultimately the actual execution of the work belies such a proposition. The eleventh canto of Jayarama's *Campu* is almost as long as all the Sanskrit cantos put together, and it contains dozens of vernacular poems of breathtaking vibrancy in a range of different dialects (including Brajghosa and other variants of premodern Hindi).¹⁸ If anything it is the vernacular poetry that shows real originality in the work, for at least five of the ten Sanskrit cantos are almost lifeless hyper-literary tableaux: conventional descriptions of Radha and Krishna (*nakhasikha*), the seasons (*shadritu-varnanam*), and renditions of other tired motifs like the lovers' "waterplay" (*jalakerida*) or their flower-strewn bed (*pushpasayya*). This *Campu* serves as a metaphor for one of the most important phenomena of seventeenth-century courtly life: despite the earlier doctrines that denied its expressive validity, *bhasa* had begun to impinge upon the traditional dominance of Sanskrit.

If concerns about vernacular legitimacy loomed large in the consciousness of Sanskrit writers and occasionally engendered uncomfortable emotions, they were bound to be equally, if not more, pressing for Hindi writers, who were in a far weaker cultural position. The status of vernacular writing was certainly a central concern for Kesavdas, by general scholarly consensus the first *riti* poet. Kesavdas made an indelible mark on literary history when he steered the once homely language of Hindi into new expressive domains by producing several foundational poetics treatises in the *ritigranth* style. In addition to the *Rasikpriya*, Kesavdas wrote the *Kavipriya*, Handbook for Poets, 1601), as well as the first formal work on Braj metrics, the *Chandamala* (Garland of Metrics, 1602). With highly elaborate literary compositions such as *Ramcandracandrika* (Moonlight of Ramcandra, 1601) and *Jahangirjascandrika* (Moonlight of the Fame of Jahangir, 1612) he also imparted a new vernacular shape to Sanskrit genres like the courtly epic (*mahakavya*) and panegyric (*prasasti*), respectively. Kesavdas's personal profile – no less than his intellectual and literary one – points toward the major cultural shift that the early *riti* tradition represents. He came from a lineage of Sanskrit pandits who had served the courts of Orcha and nearby Gwalior. His father, Kasinatha Misra, had authored an astrological treatise in Sanskrit, the *Sighrabodha* (Quick Understanding). The vocation of his elder brother Balabhadra was to recite the Sanskrit Puranas for the Orcha king Madhukar Shah (r. 1554–92).¹⁹ Thus, by turning his attention exclusively to vernacular compositions, Kesavdas made a significant break with family tradition. Profoundly aware of the literary frontier he was crossing, he stated in a now famous verse:

In his family even the servants

Did not use the vernacular. □

But the slow-witted [*mandamati*] Kesavdas
Became a *bhasa* poet. (*Kavipriya*, v. 2.17)

The self-description "mandamati," like Kavindra's "laj," or Jayarama's peculiar procedure for handling non-Sanskrit poetry in his *Campu*, appears to signal a feeling of apprehension about vernacularity, and a deferential attitude towards classical authority. But aside from the obvious fact that the slow-witted do not know they are and do not declare it, other indications in Kesavdas's oeuvre prompt us to be wary of taking this "slow-witted" poetic persona completely at face value. The opening to his *Ramcandracandrika*, for instance, initially reads as a reprise of the self-deprecating sentiments from the *Kavipriya* verse, but the overall effect of this passage suggests that he is toying with his readers. Kesavdas starts out in a humble enough manner: □

There was a Sanadhya Brahman by name of Krishnadatta Misra. He had an exemplary character, and he was famous throughout the land. He held the title "king among pandits," and was endowed with every virtue. Krishnadatta had a son named Kasinatha, who had boundless wisdom – like Lord Ganesa. Kasinatha studied all the Sanskrit scholarly texts, and synthesized many different theories. To Kasinatha was born a slow-witted son, the poet Kesavdas. He wrote *The Moonlight of Ramcandra* in the vernacular [*bhasa*]. (vv. 1.4–5) □

Complicating Kesavdas's tone of ostensible vernacular humility here is his paradoxical appropriation of Sanskrit literary prestige in a series of subsequent verses. In a scene well-suited to Kesavdas's own poetry of vernacular beginnings, Valmiki, venerated as the first poet of Sanskrit literature (*adikavi*), appears to Kesavdas in a dream, and inspires the fledgling Brajghosa author to write his own version of the *Ramayana* (vv. 1.7–21). Valmiki's presence at the very outset of Kesavdas's story evokes a complicated metatextual resonance about literary beginnings, but it also has the effect of tapping into Sanskrit textual authority and rescripting it to shore up the claims of vernacular writing. For if seeking blessings from a hallowed Sanskrit predecessor appears to suggest humility, its opposite is also in evidence: the usurping of Sanskrit cultural space by the suggestion that a *bhasa* *Ramayana* can take its place.

If the epic *Ramcandracandrika* is ambiguous in its stance towards the status of Brajghosa writing, several stylistic features of Kesavdas's scholarly works invite us to view his professed diffidence as a mere literary convention, perhaps one ironically intended to bring precisely his cleverness into sharper focus. For instance, in many of the definition verses in his *ritigranths* Kesavdas ingeniously capitalizes on two special features of Hindi composition, the *chap* (poetic signature), and the struc-

tural dynamics of the *doha* (couplet) meter, to imply that he is anything but lacking in competence as a vernacular scholar. Typical is his definition of the “sentiment of quiescence” (*santarasa*) from the *Rasikpriya*:

Saba te hoyā udasa-māna, basai eka hi thaura,
Tahi so samarasa kahata, ‘kesava’ kabi-siramaura.
(v. 14.37)□

There are two possible translations of this verse, the first of which construes the *chāp* (a variant of the poet’s name, “kesava,” which is indicated by quotation marks in the fourth quarter) as a mere statement of the poet:

Kesavdas says,
When the heart remains still,
Indifferent to worldly things,
The best poets define that as
The sentiment of quiescence.□

Another possible translation semantically incorporates the poetic signature:□

When the heart remains still,
Indifferent to worldly things,
Kesavdas, best of poets, defines that as
The sentiment of quiescence. □

The way the *doha* is structured in the original Braj, with “kesava” juxtaposed to “best of poets” (*kabi-siramaura*) and the grouping conveniently filling out a discrete verse quarter of eleven metrical counts, strongly encourages the second interpretation. This surreptitious form of self-praise in fact turns out to be a common feature of Kesavdas’s *lakṣhan* verses (and those of many other *riti* authors as well).²⁰ The persona of the slow-witted vernacular poet may have constituted a placating gesture towards Sanskrit literary authority (albeit deployed in the very act of transgressing that authority), but it would be a serious mistake to interpret it too literally as a reflection of true vernacular incompetence.²¹

The Paradox of Vernacular Newness

Unfortunately, this point seems to have been lost on many scholars who, perhaps taking Kesavdas too much at his word, have failed to read him or later *riti* writers with the care they deserve. The near-universal assessment of modern Hindi criticism is that the field of Braj *alankarasastra* lacks the scholarly merits of its Sanskrit counterpart, a claim that warrants more careful exploration. Consider first the illogicality of Hindi literary criticism’s two widely divergent constructions of what it meant to make the transition from Sanskrit to vernacular authorship: forgoing any attempt at a coherent account of linguistic and cultural processes, the sole consideration seems to be whether the text under scrutiny is a *bhakti* or *riti* work.²² In a *bhakti* context vernacularization is hailed as “liberation” from the classical language, where the homely dialects of (supposedly) everyday speech fought for and were accorded representation in the field of the literary.²³ When it comes to *riti* poets’ use

of the vernacular, however, and their strong reliance on Sanskrit models and method, modern critics have not emphasized the new, creative aspects of the transformation. When compared with their Sanskrit-using forebears, *riti* writers are frequently dismissed a priori by reason of the very linguistic medium they employed: the choice to use Braj instead of Sanskrit apparently suffices in itself to prove that *riti* scholars are men of diminished intellectual powers and that their works are paltry imitations of more authoritative classical studies.²⁴ The inadequacy of these assumptions becomes obvious if we look closely at the theoretical works of *riti* authors and try to make sense of their methodologies. An analysis of the processes at work in early vernacular *alankarasastra* texts will elucidate the more subtle features of Brajbhasa literary science – with particular reference to how *riti* authors posited new knowledge formulations.

In some cases it is true that *riti* authors do not exhibit much interest in developing bold new theories. It is often possible to identify one or more classical sources for the definition portion of any given *riti* text, and doubtless some *lakṣhans* of Brajbhasa *ritigranth*s are indeed simply paraphrases of Sanskrit models. But no matter what the intellectual aspirations of a *riti* author, the accompanying example verses – the actual literary practice – almost invariably consists of original poetry.²⁵ In cases where the theoretical apparatus is largely derived from Sanskrit the *ritigranth* genre would be more accurately characterized as a poetry anthology rather than a scholarly work. Here the definition verses merely supply a framework upon which the writer can erect his larger poetic edifice.

Many *riti* authors, however, did show considerable interest in *alankarasastra* as a theoretical, and not just a poetical, enterprise. And yet there is a curious contradiction in their practice. For all their apparent radicalism in eschewing the time-honored language of courtly intellectual life, and the trumpeting of their vernacular works as new theorizations, many early Brajbhasa scholars also insist that they have not departed from existing Sanskrit traditions. How can we reconcile both claims?

The paradoxical nature of vernacular newness is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in chapter 3 of Kesavdas’s *Kavipriya*. After preliminary chapters on his court, his king, and himself, the author embarks upon his treatment of vernacular literary theory in earnest with the classical subject of *doshas*, literary flaws that mar the aesthetic beauty of poetry. In composing this constellation of introductory literary principles Kesavdas does not strictly follow Dandin’s *Kavyadarsa* (Mirror of Literature, seventh century) – otherwise a major Sanskrit source book for the *Kavipriya*.²⁶ Rather, he begins by adducing several unprecedented categories of literary flaws, which at first makes the work appear refreshingly new. Yet this innovation ultimately proves to be very

measured. The first flaw that Kesavdas defines for his readers is the “flaw of blindness” (*andhadoshā*), an entirely new category, but one intended precisely to proscribe poems that violate tradition!²⁷ On the one hand, the poet is questioning the authority of Sanskrit, forging a new vernacular style, and engaged in writing one of the first treatises on Brajbhasa poetics. On the other, he tells his readers that they should under no circumstances contravene literary tradition. Since a developed tradition of *alankarasastra* did not yet exist for Braj, it is difficult to see how the inviolable poetic path (*pantha*) to which he refers could be anything other than a Sanskrit one.

As is the standard procedure in a *ritigranth*, Kesavdas reinforces his definition of the *andhadoshā* with an example verse that develops his point. Here the example verse is presented in the form of a parody, which serves as a humorous warning about the potential aesthetic disaster that lies in wait for an inexperienced poet striking out on his own:

Seeing her soft lotus-like breasts in bloom,
The moon face of her lover beams in delight.
Her eyes dart quickly like monkeys,
The corners red like Sindur powder.
Her lower lip is sweet like butter,
Seeking metaphors for her beauty Kesavdas despairs.
There she stands, that desirable woman,
Like lightning or a roaming deer –
She moves slowly like an elephant. (v. 3.8)□

The mixed metaphors and infelicities in this verse are innumerable, but the most egregious errors concern the poet’s flagrant disregard for tradition. First of all, a woman’s breasts should be firm like lotus *buds*, not soft like *blooming* lotuses. The images in the next line are a precarious combination because according to poetic convention (*kavisamaya*) the moon causes certain lotuses to wither. In line three Kesavdas’s imaginary clumsy poet gets the part about women’s eyes darting quickly right, but when it comes to the standard of comparison (*upamana*), he makes a serious blunder in choosing the animal. In Sanskrit poetry beautiful women are doe-eyed (*mrigakshi*), not monkey-eyed! Furthermore, when it is a question of the movement of eyes, fish (*mina*) or wagtails (*khanjana*) are preferable images because they are consecrated by tradition as metaphors for speedily moving objects. In line five the hapless poet has bungled things again. Lower lips are indeed soft and sweet, but they should be compared to the red bimba fruit – not to pale yellow butter. The message any would-be poet takes away from this opening passage of the *Kavipriya* is that vernacular composition must be rooted in classical imagery. For Kesavdas the foundational premise of vernacular poetics seemingly automatically constrains its newness.

This ambivalence between innovation and adherence to tradition is not peculiar to Kesavdas; it would con-

tinue to reverberate among later Brajbhasa scholar-poets. Cintamani Tripathi, one of the major *riti* intellectuals to emerge after Kesavdas, expresses a similarly contradictory logic about the nature of vernacular newness in the opening to his magnum opus, the *Kavikul-kalptaru* (Wish-Fulfilling Tree for the Brotherhood of Poets, c. 1670):

I, Cintamani, have carefully considered the precepts of books written in the language of the gods [i.e., Sanskrit], and I am expounding a theory of vernacular literature ... I describe the system of vernacular literature according to my intellectual ability.²⁸

If his lexical choices have the significance I think they do, Cintamani viewed himself not so much as a translator of his Sanskrit source texts, but as someone engaged in a new theorization (*vicara*) of vernacular literature (*bhasa kavita*). The statement “according to my intellectual ability” (*budha anusara*) further suggests that the poet is providing his own perspective. But clearly the question of what it meant to write new literary theory in Brajbhasa was complicated. The very fact that one can apparently develop such a theory only upon consulting Sanskrit precepts reveals a core dependency on the classical language.

According to My Own Understanding

Despite the frequently overpowering demand for compliance with Sanskrit literary norms, the corpus of Brajbhasa *ritigranths* does contain much that is unmistakably new. To pinpoint the exact nature of this newness can seem an elusive prospect. Given the long-standing primacy of Sanskrit as the medium of intellectual expression, perhaps we need to begin by asking what arenas of innovation were even open to *riti* writers for creating new theorizations of the classical themes of *alankarasastra*. Newness – particularly its pre-modern manifestations – can exist in a range of subtle forms, in which case finely calibrated interpretive tools are needed to identify it.²⁹ We will almost certainly fail to see alternative forms of newness if we adhere too closely to the paradigm of how change looks from the viewpoint of Western modernity, and this is in my view one major failing of modern approaches to the intellectual life of the *riti* period.

As one of the cornerstone works of the Hindi *riti* tradition, Kesavdas’s *Rasikpriya* is a particularly useful exemplar of the styles of newness that manifest themselves in early vernacular scholarship. At first glance the *Rasikpriya* appears to be a very close adaptation of the *Sringaratilaka* (Ornament of Passion) by the Sanskrit rhetorician Rudrabhatta (ninth century?). Kesavdas follows virtually the same order of treatment of the subject matter as his source, and significant lexical borrowings in the definition verses show his reliance on Rudrabhatta to be beyond doubt. Looking no further than

these obvious similarities, one would erroneously conclude, as so many modern Hindi critics have concluded in the case of *riti* writers across the board, that Kesavdas simply plagiarized from his Sanskrit predecessor. The reality is much more interesting; the *Rasikpriya* is both new and not new in complex ways. The *Sringaratilaka* may well be Kesavdas's guide through the principles of *alankarasastra*, but as often as not he veers off on his own detours.

One such detour is to invent variations on his predecessor's organizing categories, particularly in places where the original Sanskrit text provides only a cursory treatment of the subject. A good example of how the *Rasikpriya* expands upon the *Sringaratilaka*'s classificatory scheme is the treatment of lovers' meeting places (*milana-sthana*) in chapter 5. Rudrabhatta lists the possible occasions for lovers' rendezvous only in a single verse, not furnishing even one example. Kesavdas, seizing this opportunity for creative ramification, develops the kernel of Rudrabhatta's idea into a major theme of an entirely new chapter on the various aspects of falling in love. He gives a complete example of nearly every occasion for the meeting of lovers mentioned in passing in the *Sringaratilaka*, and he also proposes new categories of his own.³⁰ As though to hold up a signboard marking out his vernacular innovations, Kesavdas closes this particular chapter with a statement that was to become the refrain of *riti* poet-intellectuals: "I have composed this passage according to my own understanding" (*kabe apni mati anusara*, v. 5.41). However else he may think of his relationship to tradition, in the writer's own estimation, he was often intending to create new knowledge.

If Sanskrit *alankarasastra* constituted the main well-spring of intellectual heritage for Kesavdas, earlier Hindi poetry of the *bhakti* style also contributed in significant ways to the shaping of his scholarly profile. Among all of Kesavdas's works the *Rasikpriya* in particular is steeped in a *bhakti* worldview, which serves, too, to differentiate the work markedly from its Sanskrit source text. Perhaps the most obvious point of departure is that the *nayakas* and *nayikas*, the heroes and heroines, who people Rudrabhatta's poems are generic, whereas the main actors in Kesavdas's verses are not just any handsome man or woman, but objects of veneration to him: the deities Krishna and Radha.³¹

Kesavdas's reverential stance towards Krishna and Radha underpins numerous points of theoretical divergence. For instance, neither Kesavdas nor Rudrabhatta endorses literary representations of lovers who pine so much for their beloved as to reach the point of death (*marana-avastha*), but whereas Rudrabhatta gives the reason that such poems lack beauty (*asaundaryat*), for Kesavdas the crucial point is that his poems are about god, and he could not possibly describe the death of someone immortal and indestructible.³² Or when it comes to

the three broad types of *nayika*, Kesavdas entirely omits one of the categories in his Sanskrit source, the *samanya nayika*, the "public woman" or courtesan: "And as for the third type of *nayika*, why should I describe her here? The best poets have said that one should not ruin good poetry by including tasteless [*birasa*] subjects. Here I have described all the *nayikas* according to my own understanding of them" (vv. 5.39–40).³³ The omission of the *samanya nayika* – a popular literary character in Sanskrit poetry – makes perfect sense in terms of the specificities of Kesavdas's more *bhakti*-oriented textual universe: how could Radha, the primary *nayika* of the *Rasikpriya*, ever be cast in the questionable role of the courtesan?

A devotional orientation towards Krishna and Radha also colors Kesavdas's treatment of the theory of *rasa*, or emotion in literature. The sentiment of passion (*sringara rasa*), given priority of place by all literary theorists both Sanskrit and Braj, is in Kesavdas's formulation further defined as being the specific purview of Krishna.³⁴ When it comes to his treatment of the various affective responses and physical gestures (*bhavas/havas*) that interact to contribute to the full complement of *sringara rasa*, the love of Radha and Krishna is posited as the main substratum:

Passion [*sringara*] arises from the love of Radha and Krishna. From the force of their emotion arises my theory [*bicara*] about the physical gestures [*bhavas*] of love. (v. 6.15)□

In this case, too, Kesavdas's new formulations of his subject matter are nothing if not absolutely deliberate, as evident from the way he concludes the discussion: "Kesavdas has described the various gestures of Radha and her lover according to his understanding of them. May master poets forgive his audacity" (v. 6.57).□ Kesavdas again foregrounds his new approach, although in this case (if we are to take him at his word) the poet's otherwise bold assertion of independence from the Sanskrit source material is tempered by a qualm about whether he is being too audacious. Whether the request for forgiveness is wholly ingenuous or not, perhaps it was obligatory, given the power of the vernacular's rival.

The intellectual processes and attitudes that we are observing here were by no means limited to Kesavdas's writings. Cintamani's detailed treatment of the classical subject of phonological principles (*gunas*) in his opening to *Kavikulkalptaru* is another good example of the technique of postulating vernacular difference without departing radically from the rubric of Sanskrit *sastra*. At first glance Cintamani's ideas – like those of Kesavdas – may appear mostly to mimic a Sanskrit source (in this case Mammata's *Kavyaprakasa*). There are certainly many demonstrable lexical borrowings; the order in which he treats the various *gunas* is also identical to that of Mammata, as is the framework for understanding them.³⁵

Nonetheless, closer scrutiny reveals a new orientation to the subject matter. First of all, Cintamani does not merely repeat verbatim Mammata's viewpoint on the subject of *gunas*; he elaborates considerably on competing systems, laying out the basic tenets, and writing original poetry to illustrate the categories omitted by Mammata. More significantly, he also puts forward a radically new conception of one of the primary categories, *madhurya-guna*, the phonological mode of sweetness:

In the case of love-in-union a pleasurable experience melts the heart. This is called *madhurya* – the very essence of poetry. (v. 1.14)□

Cintamani's definition of *madhurya* certainly resembles Mammata's exposition in most respects,³⁶ but the last quarter of the *doha* unexpectedly proclaims that *madhurya* is the very essence (*tattva*) of poetry. No Sanskrit theorist, to my knowledge, singles out any one *guna* as superior to the others – certainly not to declare it poetry's essential feature. In isolating *madhurya* as a special poetic property Cintamani subtly, yet tellingly, offers a new assessment of vernacular literature.³⁷ As is frequently the case with Kesavdas's reformulations, it seems possible to relate the subtle theoretical shift to a specifically *bhakti* context because in its less technical sense *madhurya*, the quality of sweetness, had both aesthetic and theological associations with the love of Radha and Krishna, and Radha-Krishna motifs had constituted the primary heritage of Braj literature until the *riti* period.³⁸ In what we can now recognize as a larger trend among *riti* intellectuals, Cintamani does not allow his revised treatment of the Sanskrit *guna* systems to go unremarked. He proclaims, "There are certain categories of *gunas* that were theorized by the ancients, and I am writing about all of them here – according to my own understanding" (v. 1.30).

As Brajbhasa began to encroach on some of the cultural space that Sanskrit had always occupied, the question of how the relationship between these two languages would be renegotiated naturally arose. For instance, was Brajbhasa an appropriate linguistic medium for all subjects, or did it have a more limited scope than Sanskrit? Perhaps Cintamani's historical positioning at a later stage in the development of *riti* intellectual life than Kesavdas afforded him a clearer perspective on this question. At first glance his bifurcation of literature into the categories of "prose" and "poetry" in the opening lines of the *Kavikulkalptaru* seems almost banal, a mechanical reiteration of one of the most basic tenets of Sanskrit literary thinking:

Literature is defined as expression replete with sentiment. In Sanskrit, literature is twofold: prose and poetry. A composition in meter is called "verse," and "prose" is without meter. Hearing a vernacular verse composition, good poets derive pleasure. (vv. 1.4-5)□□

In the unassuming manner seemingly characteristic of the Braj intellectual, Cintamani is actually saying something of great significance. It is Sanskrit that comprises the two categories of poetry and prose; although prose is not entirely beyond the scope of *bhasa*, the special purview of vernacular writing is considered "versified" (*chandanibaddha*) literary discourse.

Another significant conceptualization of Brajbhasa's relationship to Sanskrit is found in Cintamani's treatment of *doshas*. In formulating his new category of the "flaw of rawness" (*kacidosha*), that is, unpolished language, Cintamani states:□

Language that does not follow the usage of good poets is known as 'raw.' [The language of] the area around Mathura and Gwalior is considered fully ripe. ... And some even say the [language of the] Mathura/Gwalior region is the 'language of the gods' (vv. 4.6, 4.9).³⁹

Of interest here is Cintamani's recognition that whereas Sanskrit is not a language that could be localized, Brajbhasa partook of greater geographic specificity. Of even greater moment is Cintamani's unprecedented idea that the term "language of the gods" (*suravani*) may be used to designate Brajbhasa. Perhaps this appropriation of the classical language's terminology is intended to convey Cintamani's sense that Brajbhasa – with a growing body of *alankarasastra* to support it – was now just as capable of refined expression as Sanskrit.

And yet if the confidence levels of Brajbhasa intellectuals increased over time, as the vernacular embodiment of *alankarasastra* not only took hold but eventually supplanted that of Sanskrit, most *riti* writers continued to express deference to their classical predecessors, and voiced anxieties about their own abilities to contribute new theorizations. As late as 1746, after dozens (perhaps hundreds)⁴⁰ of *ritigranthas* had been written in Brajbhasa, Bhikharidas, one of the greatest vernacular rhetoricians, is still compelled to say:□

I studied the Sanskrit texts
Candraloka and *Kavyaparakasa*.

I understood them,

And made their ideas beautiful in the vernacular.

From other sources, too, I adopted the path of poets.

...

But even though I may express my own opinions,

I still feel anxiety about that which

I have created myself [*rabhai svakalpita sankha*].

Therefore, I have mixed my own opinions

With classical precepts –

May poets forgive any faults.

The wise will understand that which is felicitous,

May they correct that which is not.⁴¹

A century and a half after Kesavdas had shown scholars of systematic literary thought that such systematicity was not only necessary but possible in the vernacular, the

very execution of the project apparently remained a source of anxiety. Or was it simply anxiety? Mixing older Sanskrit ideas with newer vernacular ones – innovation through renovation – was obviously the modus operandi of *riti* intellectuals, and this dual process of simultaneously reprising and reconfiguring the dominant tradition may need to be seen as far more than an act of deference. It was also a self-promoting self-affiliation with the dignity and power of a literary culture of the past that proclaimed Brajbhasa's intellectual and aesthetic merits in the contemporary world. The simultaneous advocacy of both vernacular newness and conformity to Sanskrit tradition may – far from being the puzzle it first seemed when we were confronted with Kesavdas's theories about blindness to tradition from the *Kavipriya* – actually be emblematic of a more complex power play on the part of Brajbhasa literary culture.

Colonized Epistemological and Literary Spaces

Perhaps it is not easy to understand the significance of what may seem like mere microrefinements of pre-existing theories, when our own conceptual instruments are attuned to far less subtle gradations of newness. Clouding our vision further is a colonial-period legacy of ridiculing traditional Indian epistemological methods. As has been insightfully discussed by Bernard Cohn, Brahmanical intellectual practices were regularly dismissed by colonial administrators as being focused on memory, repetition, and long, taxonomical lists that appeared to befuddle rather than clarify matters through their sheer amplitude. Implicit in such a construction was the criticism that only unintelligent or intellectually depleted people could possibly confine their analysis to the minutiae of type and subtype rather than larger issues of “substance.” British patterns of knowing were, in contrast, presented as based on reasoned argument – analytical and discriminating.⁴² Such (mis)characterizations of Indian epistemology and unfavorable comparisons with Western modes of scholarship were but one arm of a larger body of colonial discourse that tended to characterize the cultural terrain of late-medieval India as exhausted and therefore in need of the restorative influence of British rule.

If Indian knowledge practices in general were thus dismissed, a culturally generous approach to Indian literary styles was hardly likely to be forthcoming.⁴³ Even early Western scholars who did avow the merits of Indian literature frequently complained that it was stilted and overly elaborate; following rigid literary systems was thought to stifle creative spirit, impeding access to the more “natural” forms of expression favored by Europeans since the heyday of Romanticism.⁴⁴ Although Indian *rasa* theory has attracted the attention of some modern intellectuals, for the most part canonical Indian systems have never been taken seriously in academic writing.⁴⁵

Depreciatory terms like *mannerist* or its Hindi equivalent, *ritibaddh* (“bound by convention”) foreclose rather than enable discussion of the creativity and power of traditional poetics theory. And since the late nineteenth century a nationalist preoccupation with newer themes of reform, social justice, and political independence, combined with the assimilation of modern Western genres like the novel, has contributed to an almost total repudiation of earlier poetic modes.

Although nowadays the principal *riti* literary systems such as *nayikabheda* and manifold classifications of *alankaras* are dismissed as half-baked and silly – tired relics from a feudal courtly culture – I believe it is incumbent on us, as modern students of this premodern literature, to be wary of simply rejecting the traditional categories out of hand. That is easy enough to do. Far more challenging, however, is to try to understand what these categories meant to the people who used them, and why they mattered so much. Surely there are more intelligent (not to mention historically sound and culturally sensitive) ways to understand this massive commitment to cultivating a form of knowledge on the part of serious intellectuals than to dismiss the *ritigranth* as the decadent failure of a moribund literary culture.

We have already come some way towards understanding the *riti* phenomenon as a set of vernacular intellectual practices, but other dimensions also need to be considered, such as how *riti* methodologies served as an axis for the functioning of courtly literary communities, and what the actual uses of the popular *ritigranth* genre were. In the final section of this article I invite readers to step away from modern prejudices about *riti* to consider evidence from a range of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources that will bring greater complexity into the picture.

The *Ritigranth* in Practice

A useful point of departure for better understanding the function of literary systems in India's premodern cultural circles is a passage from the unpublished *Sarasa-sara* (Essence of the Aesthetically Endowed) of Ray Sivdas, which portrays with great liveliness a gathering of Brajbhasa poets that took place in Agra in 1737:□

In Agra there was once

A meeting of the poets' community [*kavi-samaja*].

Those who had a penchant for poetry came

And met with glad hearts.

All the well-known poets met.

They decided to create a new book,

Having established new categories

And expressive modes [*rasa*].

Thus, the poets met and shared their ideas,

Each according to his ability,

With deference to literary systems [*riti*].

All who were present listed

The possible categories with pleasure:
 According to the extent of their intellect
 They set out the extensive range of categories,
 With the idea that other poets
 Would correct any shortcomings.
 The poets were of differing opinions,
 But wise authorities were present
 In keeping with whose opinions
 This new book was composed.⁴⁶

This vignette of a premodern literary conference affords access to an intellectual vista replete with concerns certainly very different from our own, but no less valid for being so. There are several points to note. First, the passage is infused with a sense of the dynamism of the *riti* literary environment, belying the British historiographical proposition that the late precolonial period (particularly the eighteenth century) constituted a waning cultural climate. Second, understanding the intricacies of specific categories in the literary system was clearly a primary intellectual pursuit. This corroborates much of what we have already observed in the works of Kesavadas and Cintamani: new knowledge was fashioned within the confines of the existing literary system by assessing the continuing viability of older *bhedas*, or classificatory distinctions, reconfiguring them as necessary, and occasionally proposing new ones. And each poet brought “his own understanding” into play.⁴⁷ A final point to consider is what the *Sarasasara* suggests about the functioning of the Brajghosa literary community. A detailed awareness of the plethora of literary types and subtypes formed the substratum of core knowledge that allowed a group of intellectuals to be in dialogue with one another, and to participate in a network of meanings that were intelligible to all. This point merits further investigation, for it constitutes one of the fundamental, if undertheorized, dimensions of *riti* literary culture.

In the case of the Agra conference recorded with such enthusiasm in the *Sarasasara*, a group of Brajghosa intellectuals was present at the same assembly, allowing us a glimpse of how the classical literary systems were, quite literally, a focal point around which scholars converged. But the actual physical co-presence of scholars was not necessary for the constitution of a larger intellectual community. The community and national formations that, it has been argued, later became possible through the technology of print culture, have been well documented in modern scholarship. Beginning in the modern period – according to the now-classic image – two readers of the same newspaper, living in separate parts of a country, could find themselves participating in a shared cultural space across great distances without ever physically meeting.⁴⁸ But clearly the stimulus of print culture, albeit strong, is not a prerequisite for the development of such notional, or “imagined,” communities, for the *ritigranth* seems to have enabled a strong

sense of literary brotherhood (*kavikul*) from within the confines of a manuscript culture.

The *riti* poets constituted a large preprint network of poet-intellectuals who traveled to various courts throughout India, creating and nurturing a particular way of literary being, and the primary way of indicating their shared participation in this community was to write a *ritigranth*. In the case of the Agra conference the fashioning of the *ritigranth* was a collective enterprise, but in most cases individual poets contributed their “own understanding” to the larger literary and intellectual community in a single-author work.

Clearly the *riti* authors themselves were aware of participating in a larger cultural world, as evident from frequent references to their intended audience in the colophons of their works. In some cases the literary community is implied, as in King Jaswant Singh’s *Bhasabhushan* (Ornament to the Vernacular, c. 1660), which he closes by stating:

Looking at the Sanskrit texts, I have given shape to their ideas in the vernacular...

I have written this innovative work for the kind of person who is scholarly, skilled in the vernacular, and clever with the literary arts.⁴⁹

The very existence (and future popularity) of this work was a factor of the audience that existed to appreciate it, here defined as a type of person (*tabi nara ke beta...*) who could be considered both a vernacular intellectual (*jo pandita, bhasa-nipuna*) and a master of poetry (*kavita bishai pravina*): the exact profile of the *riti* courtly intellectual. Matiram Tripathi, probably the brother of the poet Cintamani, and an approximate contemporary of Jaswant Singh, speaks of his literary community more directly in the colophon to his *Rasraj* (The Principal Rasa):

I have composed this new work, *Rasraj*, for the delectation of connoisseurs. May the community of master poets understand my work, and take pleasure from it.⁵⁰

It would be difficult to find bolder statements of the *riti* poets’ sense of their works as conduits for ideas that were destined to circulate in a larger literary public.

But how did this literary public function, and what was the role of the *ritigranth* in enabling it? In addition to being works of *alankarasastra* filled with beautiful poetry, *riti* texts clearly played a major role in the most critical domains of cultural and intellectual practice: in the performance and interpretation of poetry, in pedagogy, and in literary criticism. Each of these will be considered briefly in turn.

One fundamental dimension of the *ritigranth* genre was its role in underwriting the courtly culture of performed poetry. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the *riti* works that come down to scholars today as inert, arcane entities had a more eclectic, “multimedia” literary life during their heyday. Brajghosa poetry was

not just read in private: it was sung; it was danced; in courts it was the focal point of competitions such as *samasyapurti*, in which the patron or pandit overseeing the event would propose a point of departure (*samasya*) for the creation of a set of poems. This *samasya* might be the last word or phrase or line of a poem, or perhaps a poetic theme such as a particular type of *nayika*.⁵¹ Poets would then be evaluated on the quality of the poem that they spontaneously completed (*purti*). Success in this kind of competition clearly required a solid background in the various domains of *alankarasastra* encompassed by scholarly writings in the *ritigranth* style.

What of the audiences who read or listened to poetry being declaimed? In order to achieve the necessary interpretive skills, they too had to be versed in the *riti* system. This was particularly crucial when you consider that the most popular Brajbhasa verse form in courtly settings was the *muktak* (“independent”) poem. As its name suggests, the *muktak* is not part of a larger narrative structure. The charm of this verse style is that the reader or listener (*rasika*) steps into the middle of a story. The full story is never told in the poem itself, especially in the case of a short couplet, where there is room only for the sparsest of narrative details. Consider the complex literary infrastructure that must be in place for even a short Brajbhasa *muktak*, like the following one by Bihari (fl. c. 1650), to generate meaning:□

Why do you drive me crazy with all your lies?

You can't hide the truth.

Your eyes, dripping with redness,

Tell the tale of last night's pleasures.⁵²

How is it that a short poem such as this – where the speaker, the addressee and the subject of the conversation are never directly revealed – is readily comprehensible to its audience?

As far as the minimal narrative content of the poem goes, we are simply told that upon seeing somebody's red eyes a woman gets angry. But the metadiscourse of *riti* poetics allows us easily to fill in the rest of the story. In the case of this particular poem we need above all to ascertain the characters. A reader familiar with the basics of *nayikabheda* will readily surmise that Bihari has depicted an encounter between an angry female character (*khandita nayika*) and an unfaithful lover (*satha nayaka*). According to the conventions of *riti* literature red eyes in a man are a clue that he has been up all night making love to someone else. His eyes may be red either from lack of sleep, or because during the heat of passion things got a little messy and betel juice (the proper location of which is the mouth) got into his eyes. Bihari's *dobas* have frequently been celebrated for their quality of being “a small pot that contains the ocean” (*gagar me sagar*). The reason this *riti* poet can say so much in so few words, however, is because the complex of literary

systems provides the context in which to interpret his poetry.⁵³

How did an aspiring poet or poetry connoisseur learn these systems – the price of entrance into the learned courtly circles of early modern India? By studying a *ritigranth*, often with the help of a teacher or pandit. Court pandits – Sanskrit and, in later periods, Braj – were instrumental in the education of young princes and children of the nobility, and some *ritigranth* texts, like the *Kavipriya*, seem to have served as companions to teaching.⁵⁴ In addition to teaching younger students, court pandits also served as mentors to kings, for whom literary connoisseurship was de rigueur and original literary composition strongly encouraged. Many *ritigranths* were written explicitly at the request of royal patrons, and kings commissioned copies of the most authoritative works produced at other courts for their personal libraries.⁵⁵

Reading and learning the principles of *alankarasastra* alone did not transform one into a scholar of this subject. Perhaps yet another way to account for the proliferation of the *ritigranth* genre was that in some cases the writing of such texts itself was part of the learning process (perhaps like a PhD in Hindi literature in modern times?).⁵⁶ Creating a new treatise on *alankaras* or *nayikabheda* demonstrated that a pandit was fit to carry out various tasks: performing in a courtly assembly, educating others, and composing further poetic or scholarly works, such as commentaries – an important, if still largely neglected, domain of *riti* cultural practice.

Brajbhasa commentaries on *ritigranth* texts provide further clues as to how literary systems functioned in premodernity. An extensive treatment of Braj commentarial style is of necessity beyond the scope of the present study (not the least reason is that scarcely any such commentaries have been published); nonetheless, a brief outline of the main concerns of one of Kesavdas's commentators, the poet-scholar Surati Misra (fl. 1740), affords a window on some of the formal interpretive protocols for Brajbhasa literary criticism, and may well be suggestive of larger trends in the genre. Numerous issues are of interest to Surati Misra in his analysis of Kesavdas's verses: the poet's lexical and grammatical choices, the relationship of *Rasikpriya* themes to those of other Brajbhasa writers, as well as textual precedents from Sanskrit. But clearly one of the most pressing sets of questions that engaged this commentator concerns the canonical literary systems, such as identifying the predominant *alankara* of a given verse. In a mirroring of the “*riti*” qualities of the source text, this pandit often augments his *alankara* analysis by citing a Brajbhasa *lakshan* of the rhetorical figure in question.⁵⁷ He also frequently raises points (and contributes yet more definitions) that pertain to the *nayikabheda* system. Does a given verse feature the *nayika*'s words to Krishna, or is it

a conversation between Krishna and her friend (*sakhi*)? What are the criteria for establishing the identity of the *nayika*? The very taxonomical specificities that are so decried by modern critics are crucial determinants of meaning for Surati Misra, as evident from his expatiating on issues such as the difference between a woman who makes bold amorous overtures to a man (*svayamduta*) or one who is merely being clever (*vagvidagdha*); or his analytical distinction between a woman who longs for an absent lover (*virahini*), and the pining of a woman stricken by love's first infatuation (*purvanuraga*).⁵⁸ Kesavdas's refinements of earlier Sanskrit categorizations are yet another topic of great importance to Surati Misra. Some he is in agreement with; others he disputes.⁵⁹ In either case, the critical questions for this prominent early modern intellectual are grounded in the traditional categories of literary analysis, which, far from being pointless interpretive modes, were a matter for careful investigation and vigorous debate.

Conclusion

Exploring in some detail the thought world and cultural practices of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers of the *riti* style prompts us to reconsider current constructions of the intellectual life of late precolonial India. Failure to examine in sufficient depth the modalities of courtly writers has led to many unfortunate and inaccurate representations of *riti* literary culture. The profusion of the *ritigranth* genre in particular has stimulated confusion, bemusement, or downright scorn amongst modern Hindi scholars, but rarely much analysis. The trend in Hindi scholarship is to give courtly literature a wide berth, directing attention towards the more spiritually oriented writings of *bhakti* poets. In seeking to understand the logic and function of Brajbhasa literary science we not only deepen our awareness of the epistemological domains of precolonial Indian life; we also enrich the field of Hindi studies by encouraging scholarly analysis of literary realms beyond the confines of the *bhakti* field.

Riti authors have frequently been criticized for their narrow focus on the minute details of the various *bhedas* of classical literary science. Although in the modern literary landscape (still imbued with Romanticism's legacy) this deep concern with precise categorization is generally viewed as both artistically and intellectually stilted, during the *riti* period it constituted a vibrant and, indeed, indispensable compositional approach. The *ritigranth* genre should also be appreciated for its role in enabling the production and interpretation of courtly poetry. Intelligibility and literary success in courtly venues depended on poets and audiences being conversant with literary systems, and the *ritigranth* was a primary tool for enabling these social and communicative processes. The writing of *ritigranths* also had a largely overlooked sym-

bolic value insofar as it betokened membership in a widespread community of Brajbhasa poets and intellectuals. The knowledge system of vernacular *alankarasastra* constituted a literary consensus that was continually being renegotiated by *riti* authors through their participation in assemblies and their contributions to scholarship.

The assessment of the Brajbhasa *ritigranth* as largely derivative of Sanskrit sources, and therefore intellectually insignificant, is inaccurate. Many *riti* works of *alankarasastra* exhibit a complex weaving together of classical ideas with fascinating innovations upon them. The newness that we see in *riti* texts is not earth shaking – at least not by contemporary measurements. But it is a newness we should take seriously, by attempting to comprehend the logic and functioning of a fledgling branch of vernacular knowledge as it began to put forward increasingly strong claims to a separate existence from Sanskrit. Carving out a new domain of vernacular writing from a Sanskrit mold was not a process undertaken lightly; it engendered a range of anxieties about transgressing age-old language hierarchies. But alongside the uncertainties we hear an unmistakable voice of strength: an excitement about new literary and intellectual possibilities evident in the oft-repeated phrase of the *riti* poet-scholar, “I have composed this passage according to my own understanding.”

The major differences frequently lie at the level of detail rather than at the level of overarching theory. Sanskrit traditions were a respected foundation upon which to draw and improve, and forging a new arena of vernacular literary culture did not require wholly reinventing the wheel. Nonetheless, the embedding of Sanskrit theory into the emerging Brajbhasa literary genres should be understood as far more than a mere imitative gesture. It was also an appropriation of Sanskrit discursive space by an increasingly powerful vernacular intellectual community. And in the end it was Hindi – not Sanskrit – that became the ascendant language for poetic and intellectual expression in the modern period.

NOTES

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¹Brajbhasa was the primary dialect of written Hindi prior to c. 1900, at which point Modern Standard Hindi (Khari Boli) began to achieve cultural dominance. Because I am dealing exclusively with early modern texts in this article, I use the terms *Hindi* and *Brajbhasa* synonymously.

²The term *ritikal* was coined by Ramcandra Sukla in 1929, and it has remained in wide circulation ever since. Ramcandra Sukla, *Hindi Sahitya ka Itihās* (1929; repr. Varanasi: Nagari Prakarani Sabha, 1994), 1.

³Kesavdas, *Rasikpriya*, vv. 7.1–3, in *Kesavgranthavali*, ed.

Visvanath Prasad Misra, 3 vols. (Allahabad: Hindustani Academy, 1954). All Kesavdas citations refer to this edition. All translations from Brajghosa and Sanskrit are my own.

⁴For a welcome attempt to counter modern biases against courtly literature in the case of Persian, see Julie Scott Meisami, “The Poetry of Praise: The Qasida and Its Uses,” ch. 2 in *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). A particularly unhelpful, if regrettably typical, analysis of classicism as reflecting a decline from the simplicity of *bhakti* and a simultaneous fall from the intellectual grace of Sanskrit is the treatment of Kesavdas in Kailash Bhushan Jindal, *A History of Hindi Literature*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1993), 142–8.

⁵The anti-*riti* biases of modern scholars are as evident from publishing tendencies as from explicit arguments. Whereas hundreds of articles and books have been written about *bhakti* authors, aside from a few translations and a couple of stray articles, no scholarship on *riti* literature has been published outside of India. Indian scholarship, for its part, tends to frame *riti* literary practices in a narrative of courtly decadence and medieval decline. One influential account in this vein is Nagendra, ed., *Ritibaddh Kavya, Hindi Sahitya ka Brihat Itihas*, vol. 6 (Varanasi: Nagari Pracarini Sabha, 1974).

⁶For a discussion of some of the complex ideas concerning innate limitations on vernacular expression from a Sanskrit point of reference, see Sheldon Pollock, “The Languages of Science in Early Modern India,” in *Halbfass Commemoration Volume*, ed. K. Preisendanz (Vienna: Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2005).

⁷For recent work on Jagannatha, see Sheldon Pollock, “The Death of Sanskrit,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43:2 (2001): 404–12. For some remarks on interchanges between Sanskrit and the regional languages of South India, see Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, *A Poem at the Right Moment* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 187.

⁸The very first commentary on Kesavdas’s *Rasikpriya*, Samarth’s *Prabodhini*, was a Sanskrit work. See V. P. Misra, “Tikaen aur Tikakar,” in *Kesavdas*, ed. Vijaypal Singh (Delhi, Radhakrishna Prakasan, 1970), 230. King Jaswant Singh’s *Anandvilas* was translated into Sanskrit in 1664, the same year it first appeared in Brajghosa. The dating of the two versions is discussed in Visvanath Prasad Misra, introduction to *Jasvant-simbhagrathavali* (Varanasi: Nagari Pracarini Sabha, 1972), 32–3.

⁹Although Sundar is only mentioned, Kesavdas’s theorization of the *premabhisarika nayika* (lovelorn woman who ventures out to meet her lover) is actually discussed in the Sanskrit text. In the end, Kesavdas’s proposed new category is not endorsed, but this intellectual rebuff has nothing to do with the fact of its vernacularity. See Akbar Shah, *Sringaramanjari*, ed. V. Raghavan (Hyderabad: Hyderabad Archaeological Department, 1951), 2, 37.

¹⁰The Braj translation of Akbar Shah’s Sanskrit version of the original Telugu *Sringaramanjari* was by Cintamani Tripathi (more on whom below). See *Sringaramanjari*, ed. Bhagirath Misra (Lucknow: Lucknow University Press, 1956).

¹¹On the importance of Hindi literature at Sivaji’s court, see Rajmal Bora, *Bhushan aur unka Sahitya* (Kanpur: Sahitya Ratnalaya, 1987), 35. Krishna Divakar, *Bhonsla Rajdarbar ke Hindi Kavi* (Varanasi: Nagari Pracarini Sabha, 1969), is an im-

portant study of Hindi’s popularity at a wide range of early modern Dakhani courts.

¹²On Kavindra’s sense of shame see Kavindracharya Sarasvati, *Kavindrakalpalata*, ed. Jinavijaya Muni (Jaipur: Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, 1958), v. 13, quoted in Krishna Divakar, introduction to *Kavindrachandrika* (Pune: Maharashtra Rashtrabhasha Sabha, 1966), 34.

¹³Vernacular-Sanskrit parity, or at least parallelism, is no less evident in the surprising existence of not one, but two mid-seventeenth-century Kavindracharya festschrift volumes, the *Kavindrachandrodaya* (in Sanskrit) and the *Kavindrachandrika* (in Braj), which honored Kavindra for his role in persuading Shah Jahan to rescind the discriminatory poll tax on Hindus.

¹⁴Jayarama Pindye, *Radhamadhanavilasacampū*, ed. V. K. Rajvade (1922; repr. Pune: Varda Books, 1989), 227.

¹⁵Such vacillations between terming his *Campū* a Sanskrit work and a *dvadasabhasakavya* are especially evident on pages 244–6.

¹⁶Jayarama, *Campū*, 233, 237, 243.

¹⁷In his description of the poetry contest in canto 6, the simultaneous presence of vernacular and Sanskrit poets appears to have created a compositional dilemma for Jayarama, causing him to invent the idea that the vernacular poets performed at a separate poetry contest, which he records later in the work: “Then the vernacular poets put forward themes for composition, each eager to participate. There were compositions on those themes, too [at the poetry contest], but since it is inappropriate to write about them in the context of Sanskrit compositions, I will describe them in a subsequent chapter.” *Campū*, 233.

¹⁸The first ten cantos occupy forty-three printed pages, whereas the last canto alone comprises thirty-three. For further remarks on some of the vernacular poems in this text, see Sumit Guha, “Transitions and Translations: Regional Power and Vernacular Identity in the Dakhan c.1500–1800” in this volume.

¹⁹Chapter 2 of the *Kavipriya* details Kesavdas’s family history. The linguistic proclivities of Balabhadra Misra are ambiguous. If Sanskrit recitation was his occupation (*Kavipriya*, v. 2.16), he certainly did not eschew vernacular composition, because he wrote both a *sikhnakh* (“head-to-toe” description) and a short work in Hindi on Rasa theory (*Rasvilas*, or “Pleasure of Aesthetics”). But the elder Misra brother somehow never attained the fame of his more prolific younger brother. The little-known Balabhadra Misra works were first published in Sudhakar Pandey, ed., *Balabhadrakrit Rasvilas evam Sikhnakh* (Varanasi: Nagari Pracarini Sabha, 1992).

²⁰Many Brajghosa definitions of Sanskrit poetics terminology devote at least one-quarter of the *doha* to invoking poetic authorities with variations on the phrase “best of poets,” such as “king among poets” (*kavi-bhupa/kavi-rajā*), “wise people” (*sayane loi/sujana*), and “established poets” (*kavi-dhira*). Owing to the compositional necessity of filling in either eleven-count or thirteen-count verse quadrants, the poet’s own name is frequently conjoined with these expressions of praise.

²¹I am indebted to R. S. McGregor for his suggestions on how to interpret Kesavdas’s poetic stance of “slow-wittedness.” For a useful caution against overly literal interpretations of poetic voice in Mughal-period texts from a dif-

ferent sociocultural milieu, see Paul Losensky, "Poetry as Biography and the Modern Fighani: Problems of Defining the Poetic Voice," ch. 2 in *Welcoming Fighani* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1998).

²²The very distinction posited by Hindi critics between *bhakti* and *riti* texts rarely withstands close scrutiny. An excellent discussion of this issue is Rupert Snell, "Bhakti versus Riti? The Satsai of Biharilal," *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 3:1 (1994): 153–70. Also note the centrality of *bhakti* to Ke savdas's *Rasikpriya*, discussed below.

²³A typical formulation is Jindal, *History of Hindi Literature*, 64.

²⁴An example of this theoretical approach is Sukla, *Hindi Sahitya ka Itihas*, 129–33.

²⁵This is actually in notable contrast to most works of Sanskrit *alankarasastra*, in which literary principles were illustrated by excerpting existing Sanskrit poems from famous classics.

²⁶The other two are the *Kavyakalpalatavritti*, a thirteenth-century poet's manual by Amaracandra Yati, and the *Alankarasekhara* of Kesava Misra, written in Delhi in the generation preceding Kesavdas.

²⁷The *andhadoshā* is defined as "birodhi pantha ko." The other new categories set out here are the literary flaws of being "deaf, lame, naked and dead." See *Kavipriya*, vv. 3.6ff.

²⁸Cintamani Tripathi, *Kavikulkalptaru* (lithograph, Lucknow: Naval Kishore Press, 1875), vv. 1.3, 1.6.

²⁹Kaviraj has usefully distinguished between modern and premodern modes of cultural change: "Modern rebellions announce themselves even before they are wholly successful; revolutions in traditional cultures tended to hide the facts of their being revolts." Sudipta Kaviraj, "Writing, Speaking, Being: Language and the Historical Formation of Identities in India," in *Nationalstaat und Sprachkonflikt in Süd- und Südostasien*, ed. Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam and Dietmar Rothermund (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1992), 35.

³⁰Compare *Rasikpriya*, vv. 24ff, with Rudrabhatta's original discussion in *Sringaratilaka*, ed. R. Pischel and trans. Kapildev Pandey (Varanasi: Pracya Prakasan, 1968), v. 2.38.

³¹In fact, except when an undesirable trait is being exemplified, Krishna and Radha are the *nayaka* and *nayika* of virtually every poem in the work.

³²Compare the arguments in *Sringaratilaka*, v. 2.28, with those of *Rasikpriya*, v. 8.54.

³³The three classical types of *nayika* are "one's own" (*sva kīya*), "the wife of another" (*parakīya*), and the "public woman" (*samanyavanita*).

³⁴See the opening chapter to the *Rasikpriya*, particularly v.1.16: "navahu rasa ke bhava bahu, tinake bhinna bicara / sabako 'kesavadasa,' hari nayaka hai sringara." The word *nayaka* creates a slight punning effect, meaning both "hero" and "leading *rasa*."

³⁵The comparable passages on the subject of *gunas* are from *Kavikulkalptaru*, vv. 1.12–28, and Mammata, *Kavyaprakasa* (1936; reprint, Delhi: Parimal Publications, 1985), 421ff. Broadly speaking, Cintamani follows Mammata closely in endorsing the threefold set of *gunas*, and not the tenfold set espoused by early Sanskrit theorists such as Vamana.

³⁶Much of the Braj terminology reprises the Sanskrit origi-

nal and Cintamani even coins a Braj verb (*dravavai* = melts) to capture the sense of Mammata's *druti* (melting). Compare *Kavikulkalptaru*, v.1.14, with *Kavyaprakasa*, 421.

³⁷On this particular innovation of Cintamani's see Vidya-dhar Misra, *Cintamani: Kavi aur Acarya* (Allahabad: Vidya Sahitya Sansthan, 1990), 152, 161.

³⁸The word *madhurya* remained closely tied to Brajbhasa right into the modern period, when this sweetness began to be seen as a flaw rather than a virtue. How could a language that was dripping in sweetness be a suitable vehicle for expressing the more serious concerns of the nation? Increasingly it was felt that only the poetically clumsy but workaday Khari Boli, not Braj, should serve these modern aims. See Heidi Pauwels, "Diptych in Verse: Gender Hybridity, Language Consciousness, and National Identity in Nirala's 'Jago phir ek Bar,'" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121:3 (2001): 455–9.

³⁹The language of both the Mathura and Gwalior regions was also praised by the contemporary Mughal *munshi* Nik Rai. See Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "The Making of a Munshi," in this volume.

⁴⁰The full extent of the *riti* tradition is yet to be fully understood since so many primary works remain unpublished.

⁴¹Excerpted from *Kavyanirnay*, in *Bhikaridasgranthavali*, ed. Visvanath Prasad Misra, vol. 2 (Varanasi: Nagari Pracarini Sabha, 1957), vv. 1.5–7.

⁴²See Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 51ff.

⁴³Macaulay's infamous characterization of the "native literature of India" is too well known to need quoting.

⁴⁴A. B. Keith, who apparently esteemed Sanskrit literature enough to write an entire book on the subject, decried its "obscurity of style," "taint of artificiality," and several other literary tendencies that he considered indicators of a "defect of the Indian mind." A. B. Keith, *A History of Sanskrit Literature* (1900; repr. New York: Haskell, 1968), 9–10.

⁴⁵A welcome exception is Rakesha Gupta, *Studies in Nayaka-Nayika-Bheda* (1967; repr. Aligarh: Granthayan, 1995).

⁴⁶This quotation from Ray Sivdas's unpublished *Sarasasara* is excerpted in Chotelal Gupta, *Surati Misra aur unka Kavya* (Allahabad: Smriti Prakasan, 1982), 21–2.

⁴⁷Note in particular the phrases "each according to his ability" (*jatha jog*) and "according to the extent of their intellect" (*apni mati paramana so*) from the *Sarasasara* passage.

⁴⁸Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 32ff.

⁴⁹Jaswant Singh, *Bhasabhushan*, in *Jasvantsimbgranthavali*, ed. Visvanath Prasad Misra (Varanasi: Nagari Pracarini Sabha, 1972), vv. 207, 209.

⁵⁰Matiram Tripathi, *Rasraj*, in *Matiramgranthavali*, ed. Krishna-bihari Misra and Brajkisor Misra (Varanasi: Nagari Pracarini Sabha, 1964), v. 427.

⁵¹For instance, one poetic challenge for pandits in Sahaji Bhonsle's assembly concerned the elucidation of the difference between *nayikas* both "conscious" and "unconscious" of the arrival of puberty (*jnatayavana* and *ajnatayavana*) according to Bhanudatta's classical description of them. Jayarama, *Campu*, 233.

⁵²*Biharisatsai*, ed. Sudhakar Pandey (Varanasi: Nagari Pracarini Sabha, 1999), v. 11.

⁵³Bihari was one of the rare *riti* poets who did not write a *ritigranth*. But the interpretation of his work is often dependent on the system. Such poets are known as “based on system” (*ritisiddh*) in Hindi criticism. See Visvanath Prasad Misra, *Bihari* (1950; repr. Varanasi: Sanjay Book Center, 1998), 44–5.

⁵⁴That Kesavdas intended his handbook on basic principles of composition and literary topoi to be used in an educational context is stated unambiguously in *Kavipriya*, v. 3.1: “Kesav wrote the *Kavipriya* so that boys and girls would understand the subtle ways of poetry. May scholars look leniently upon any mistakes.”

⁵⁵*Alankarasastra* works comprise a major portion of vernacular holdings in most north Indian royal manuscript collections.

⁵⁶The Mughal soldier Ghulam Nabi “Raslin,” for instance, taught himself Brajbhasa poetics through writing a *ritigranth*. Raslin, *Angdarpan*, in *Raslingranthavali*, ed. Sudhakar Pandey (Varanasi: Nagari Pracarini Sabha, 1987), v. 179.

⁵⁷The *lakshtans* are not attributed, which suggests that they may be the author’s original compositions – a prospect that seems the likelier for the fact that Surati Misra is himself known to have composed several (mostly still unpublished) *ritigranths*.

⁵⁸Surati Misra, *Joravarprakas*, ed. Yogendrapratap Singh (Allahabad: Sahitya Sammelan, 1992), 139, 210.

⁵⁹For plus and minus points, respectively, concerning Kesavdas’s new theorizations about *bhavas* see Misra, *Joravarprakas*, 160, 157.