

South Asia Research
Series Editor
Patrick Olivelle
A Publication Series of
The University of Texas South Asia Institute
and
Oxford University Press

INDIAN EPIGRAPHY

A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit,
Prakrit, and the Other Indo-Aryan Languages
Richard Salomon

A DICTIONARY OF OLD MARATHI

S. G. Tulpule and Anne Feldhaus

DONORS, DEVOTEES, AND DAUGHTERS OF GOD

Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu
Leslie C. Orr

JIMUTAVAHANA'S *DAYABHAGA*

The Hindu Law of Inheritance in Bengal
Edited and Translated with an Introduction and
Notes by
Ludo Rocher

A PORTRAIT OF THE HINDUS

Balthazar Solvyns & the European Image of India
1740–1824
Robert L. Hardgrave

MANU'S CODE OF LAW

A Critical Edition and Translation of the
Manava-Dharmasāstra
Patrick Olivelle

INNOVATIONS AND TURNING POINTS

Toward a History of *Kāvya* Literature
Edited by
Yigal Bronner, David Shulman, and Gary Tubb

NECTAR GAZE AND POISON BREATH

An Analysis and Translation of the Rajasthani Oral
Narrative of Devnarayan
Aditya Malik

BETWEEN THE EMPIRES

Society in India 300 BCE to 400 CE
Patrick Olivelle

MANAGING MONKS

Administrators and Administrative Roles in
Indian Buddhist Monasticism
Jonathan A. Silk

SIVA IN TROUBLE

Festivals and Rituals at the Pasupatinatha Temple
of Deopatan
Axel Michaels

A PRIEST'S GUIDE FOR THE GREAT FESTIVAL

Aghorasiva's Mahotsavavidhi
Richard H. Davis

DHARMA

Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative
Alf Hiltebeitel

INNOVATIONS AND *TURNING POINTS*

TOWARD A HISTORY
of
KĀVYA LITERATURE

edited by
Yigal Bronner
David Shulman
Gary Tubb

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trademark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

Published in India by
Oxford University Press
YMCA Library Building, 1 Jai Singh Road, New Delhi 110 001, India

© Oxford University Press 2014

The moral rights of the authors have been asserted

First Edition published in 2014

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted
by law, by licence, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics
rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the
above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the
address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

ISBN-13: 978-0-19-945355-9
ISBN-10: 0-19-945355-1

Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro 11/14
by SPEX Infotech, Puducherry, India 605 005
Printed in India by Avantika Printers Pvt Ltd, New Delhi 110 065

For Vidwan H. V. Nagaraja Rao

*udānvac-chinnā bhūḥ sa ca nidhir apāṃ yojana-śataṃ
sadā pānthah pūṣā gagana-parimāṇaṃ kalayati /
iti prāyo bhāvāḥ sphurad-avani-mudrā-mukulitāḥ
satāṃ prajñōnmeṣaḥ punar ayam a-sīmā vijayate //*
—*Subhāṣitaratnakōṣa* 1223,
by Rājaśekhara

The earth is hemmed in by the sea.
The sea stops after a thousand miles.
The sky is measured day after day
by the sun in its rounds.
That's the way of the world:
all things are sealed and confined—
only the wise man's flash of insight
knows no bounds.

The Classical Past in the Mughal Present

The Brajbhasha Rīti Tradition

ALLISON BUSCH

guru guṇa sāgara

R. S. McGregor, in memoriam

A. Literary Newness in Dialogue with Tradition

Dynamic innovations occurred in Indian *kāvya* that can be linked to the new cultural repertoires of regional courts during the height of Mughal rule. These innovations are distinctive features of the Brajbhasha *rīti* tradition,¹ the neoclassical style of Hindi literature that took root in north India from the late sixteenth century. While Brajbhasha is relatively well known for its wealth of *bhakti* (devotional) texts, few people are even aware that the language was also a major medium for *kāvya*. During the early modern period the Brahmin literati employed by regional north Indian kingdoms elevated the vernacular to a new expressive and social capacity by transplanting the core elements of Sanskrit *alaṅkāraśāstra* (literary theory) into Brajbhasha. They greatly facilitated the *kāvya* enterprise by writing

1. The word *rīti* literally means “way” or “method” but is in the context of Hindi literary history perhaps best translated as “classical” or even “neoclassical.” The term is used to characterize the complex, Sanskritizing tendencies of courtly Brajbhasha literature. Although *rīti* is a *tatsama*, its early modern Braj usage should not be confused with the word’s earlier semantic life in Sanskrit literary theory (such as the *rīti* doctrine espoused by Vāmana).

poetics manuals known as *rīti*granth (books of method). The *rīti*granth genre became astoundingly popular: not just poets but kings, aristocrats, the intelligentsia, and connoisseurs from merchant communities were keen to partake of the new Braj *kāvya*. In addition to writing theoretical works, *rīti* authors deepened the Braj poetic repertoire by adopting, and adapting, Sanskrit literary styles. *Muktaka* (freestanding) poems on *śṛṅgāra* (erotic) and *prāśasti* (political) themes, staples of the Sanskrit literary assembly, were re-tooled by *rīti* poets for their patrons. A few *rīti* authors also took up the challenge of writing extended works of *prabandha kāvya*.

However obviously rooted in traditions of Sanskrit *kāvya*, *rīti* literary culture also had specifically vernacular concerns and features. The cultivation of Hindi narrative forms by both Sufis and Jains since at least the fourteenth century had paved some of the way for aspirants to vernacular *kāvya*. Vaishnava devotion was a major inspiration, both spiritual and poetic, for many courtly authors of the Mughal period; the Rajasthani performance traditions known as *dingal* and the popular *rāso* (martial ballad) genre added new local inflections to the repertoire. Although not unrelated to the *rāso*, or indeed to the earlier Sanskrit poems foregrounding *vīra rasa* (the heroic sentiment), we see a heightened interest in historical *kāvya* in our period that can be considered a new characteristic of the early modern vernacular polity.² Moreover, while *rīti* texts contain many lexical and thematic features that demonstrably hark back to classical Sanskrit *kāvya*, the texts also bear unmistakable signs of their Mughal-period provenance. In short, the *rīti* aesthetic is a unique blend of the old and the new; it mixes cosmopolitan Sanskrit with more local narrative and lexical registers; here and there we also see Islamicate touches. By adapting to a range of literary, cultural, and political changes the authors of *rīti* texts were able to reach new audiences and serve the evolving cultural needs of courtly communities.

Like Sanskrit court poetry before it, *rīti kāvya* in Brajbhasha was a critical component of the aesthetic and political program of Indian kings. In this essay I look at three specific instances of vernacular *kāvya* commissioned by Rajputs (regional Hindu rulers) who were critically allied with Mughal power, serving as *manṣabdārs* or high-ranking officials in the administration. The first two are lively narratives about leading Rajput kings who served the cause of the empire during the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir: Narottam Kavi's *Māncarī* (Biography of Man Singh, c. 1595), and Keśavdās's *Vīrsimhdevcarī* (Biography of Bir Singh Deo Bundela, 1607). My third case study is a work of *alanikāraśāstra* that serves

2. On the new importance of historical texts generally in western India during this period, perhaps a byproduct of the encounter with the Mughal documentary state, see Ziegler 1976; Saran and Ziegler 2001.

to showcase the *muktaka* style of Brajbhasha court poetry: the *Lalitlālām* (Finest Lover, 1660s?) of Matirām Tripāṭhī, which was dedicated to King Bhao Singh of Bundi. All three authors are indebted to longstanding traditions of Sanskrit *kāvya* but at the same time employ their vernacular medium in distinctly new ways, and one concern is to highlight some of the interesting literary and linguistic textures of these works. Another is to discover how Braj authors positioned their texts in relation to earlier Sanskrit *kāvyas*. Since all three works feature Rajput kings who served as Mughal administrators, it will also be instructive to consider some of their political valences.

B. New Directions in Indian *Kāvya*: The *Māncarīt* of Narottam Kavi

Since the medieval period, the regional courts of western India had given literary shape to their courtly aspirations by patronizing works in a variety of languages, including Sanskrit, Apabhramsha, Old Gujarati, and Rajasthani. With the growing popularity of Brajbhasha from the sixteenth century, poets would increasingly adopt the new literary idiom, but the change did not occur overnight. Many Rajput kings of the Mughal period continued to sponsor Sanskrit writers as well as Rajasthani poets working in a different vernacular register from their Braj counterparts. Narottam Kavi's *Māncarīt* might be considered a proto-*riti* text in that the author has not fully acclimated to the Braj that courtly literati everywhere were in the process of adopting. He chose to mix verses in Rajasthani and Braj and even included a half dozen Sanskrit poems in his work, as though he could not quite make up his mind what *kāvya* should look like. However we might characterize the *Māncarīt*'s slightly eclectic linguistic profile, the work is a splendid early example of the reinvention of *kāvya* at the regional courts of Mughal India.

The subject of Narottam's *kāvya*, which he presents to his readers as a *carita* or idealized biography, is not just any king. Man Singh Kachhwaha was arguably the leading Rajput king of his day. He grew up at the Mughal court and had a spectacularly successful career as one of Akbar's most esteemed generals. We know a prodigious amount about Man Singh from Persian sources, particularly his military exploits in the northwest and subsequently as governor of Bihar and then Bengal, where his promotion in 1601 to the rank of 7000 meant that for at least a brief time Man Singh was ranked higher than any other Mughal noble.³ His outstanding architectural legacy—Man Singh avidly built temples, mosques, and palaces wherever he was posted—has also been

3. As noted by H. Blochmann in *Ā'in-i akbari* Vol 1, p. 363.

much discussed.⁴ Little known to cultural historians of this period, however, is the figure of Man Singh as presented in vernacular *kāvya*s. Few would even be aware that we have *kāvya* works about him.⁵

In fact, two surviving *kāvya*s go by the name of *Māncarīt*. Like so many works of the genre, both tack in interesting ways between historical and literary imperatives. I have discussed elsewhere the earlier *Māncarīt* (1585), by one Amṛt Rāi. This shorter work has more of a Rajasthani profile, although there are some Brajbhasha verses mixed in.⁶ The second work, under consideration here, is Narottam's longer and more thematically wide-ranging *Māncarīt*, which, while not detailing every aspect of Man Singh's long and distinguished career as a Mughal *manṣabdār*, does more justice to the designation *carit*.⁷ Narottam's *Māncarīt* is not dated, but we can be certain that the poet was a contemporary of Man Singh (d. 1614) since he explicitly mentions leaving Rampura (a small kingdom to the south adjacent to Mewar, now in the state of Madhya Pradesh) for Amber, drawn by the king's charisma and also—the poet makes clear—the chance to further his financial prospects by presenting him with a *kāvya*.⁸ Since Narottam's *Māncarīt* contains no details about Man Singh subsequent to his career as governor of Bihar (Man Singh's sphere of operation was transferred from Bihar to Bengal in 1594), it seems likely that the work was written close to that date.

Let us first examine how the author introduces his *kāvya*. It is certainly a trope among Indian poets to decry their inadequacy, and here Narottam Kavi finds himself in the company of no less than Kālidāsa,⁹ but Narottam seems

4. See Asher 1992, 1995; "Śeṣ viśeṣ kiṃcit," in *Māncarītāvalī*, ed. Bahura: 46–67; Casc, ed., 1996.

5. As observed by Bhadani 1992, Rajput literature is an underutilized resource for Mughal historians.

6. Busch 2012.

7. Although the text's editor Gopalnarayan Bahura uses the designation *Māncarīt rāso* the author himself simply entitles his work *Māncarīt*. *Māncarīt*, vv. 19, 36–37, 43, 431–32.

8. *Māncarīt*, vv. 47–48. Cf. Bahura 1990, 21.

9. Kālidāsa introduces one of his *mahākāvya*s with the self-deprecating remarks:

*kva sūryaprabhavo vaṃśa, kva cālpaviṣayā matih/
titīṣur dustaraṃ mohād uḍupenāsmi sāgarāṃ//
mandah kaviyaśahprārthī gamiṣyāmy upahāsyatām/
prāṃśulabhye phale lobhād udbāhur iva vāmanah//*

(An incommensurable distance gapes between the solar race and the limited capacity of my intellect/Deluded, I wish to cross on a raft an ocean difficult of passage// Stupid, I seek a poet's fame but will surely find myself a laughing-stock/I'm like a dwarf stretching his arms to reach a fruit that can only be obtained by the tall). *Raghuvamśa* 1.2–3.

actually to be suffering from a crisis of confidence in view of several passages from the introduction that far exceed the standard professions of humility, as when he describes his limited expressive powers in the face of Sarasvatī's grandeur as being akin to "a frog without a tongue."¹⁰ Here he plays on a well-attested negative comparison between Viṣṇu's serpent companion Śeṣanāga, who has 1,000 tongues, and mortal poets who have only one tongue with which to express themselves, the twist here being that pathetic Narottam lacks the speech organ altogether. Other less than flattering self-characterizations include "mūrikhu" (*mūrkhā*, fool) and "matikhīnu" (*matikṣīṇa*, devoid of intelligence).¹¹

Perhaps it was to redress the shortcomings rued in this piteous *recusatio* that Narottam sought an extra measure of divine intervention for the successful realization of his poetic aims through a prolix array of opening *maṅgalācaran*s and *stutis*. As though to cover all the theological bases, the poet supplements the usual paeans to Gaṇeśa and Sarasvatī with an elaborate series of invocations to the goddess, Viṣṇu (including two *daśāvatāra* sequences), Śiva, and Gaṅgā Devī. The work doesn't even get underway until more than 40 verses in, which feels like a slow start when the total verse count is 432. Perhaps as a fledgling vernacular poet he felt he needed all the help he could get.¹² Narottam also sought the blessings of the earlier poetic tradition in the following *kavi-praśamsā* (praise of poets):

Many poets have inhabited the earth, consider them to be gods.
 Nobody is the equal of Vyāsa. Revere Kālidāsa.
 Bring to mind Vararuci, clever Māgha; remember Bilhaṇa
 and Jayadeva, whose devotion was rewarded with a vision of the lord.
 Immortal is the name Govardhana,
 Cand [Bardāi] created vernacular poetry.
 I worshipped them all and, receiving their grace (*pāiya prasādu*),
 I have recounted the virtues of Man Singh in a biography.¹³

Narottam's apotheosis of past poets is underscored by the placement of the *kavi-praśamsā* amidst a raft of *maṅgalācaran*s and his telling use of the term *prasādu* (Sanskrit, *prasāda*), which had distinctly religious overtones in the climate of north Indian *bhakti*. The verse provides insight into how a vernacular poet writing at the turn of the seventeenth century conceptualized the literary past.

10. *Kavi dādura ika jīha bina*, *Māncarīt*, v. 8.

11. *Māncarīt*, vv. 25–26.

12. *Māncarīt*, vv. 1–18; 41–42. Of course the poet's complex theological stance may also reflect the remarkable array of religious choices available in the region in this period. Monika Horstmann notes that Amber had four state deities (2002, 145).

13. *Māncarīt*, v. 19.

Although he omits the quintessential *ādikavi* or “first poet” Vālmiki, whose name heads many *kavi-prasāṃsā* lists, Narottam situates his own poetic efforts in a very clear lineage of *kāvya* luminaries.¹⁴ While Vyāsa and Kālidāsa (a conveniently rhyming pair—Braj poets were always looking for a good rhyme) would be expected to prevail over such a list, note how Narottam Kavi does include Bilhaṇa, the author, of the Sanskrit historical *kāvya* *Vikramāṅkadevacarita*.¹⁵ He also permits one vernacular poet to gatecrash the gathering: Cand Bardāi, credited with the authorship of the *Pyṭhvīrājraśo*. The presence here of Cand Bardāi is both a nod to local Rajasthani traditions and a telling sign that vernacular poets could now assert claims to membership in an elite group no longer confined to Sanskrit writers.

Apparently the *prasāda* of past poets—even that of a vernacular one—did not prove adequate to shore up the poet’s shaky ego. He succumbs to another fit of despair: “My heart became set on writing *kāvya*, but I couldn’t even string together one letter.”¹⁶ Fortunately the merciful goddess Sarasvatī comes to the rescue. She appears to the poet in a dream to assuage his feelings of insecurity and to convince him that he is, in fact, capable of writing *kāvya*. Indeed, one could even say she “commands” him to write it: on two occasions Narottam refers to his Devī’s injunction to write as a *hukam*, using not the language of *bhakti* with its stress on divine grace but an Islamicate administrative term.¹⁷ The goddess’s intervention is successful. Upon being granted her *darśan* the poet finds himself miraculously blessed with literary ability.

Although the poet shows reverence for the classical *kāvya* past and diffidence in the face of the literary giants in whose footsteps he finds himself limping along, the *Māncarī* both can and cannot be assessed in terms of its congruence with Sanskritic norms. On the one hand, the poet is acutely aware that he is writing in the *mahākāvya* tradition, which had a time-honored role in memorializing the deeds of kings for posterity:

Countless master poets (*kavirājā*) of old composed *mahākāvyas*.

As time marches forward kings pass away but their deeds are heard in
this world,

14. Sheldon Pollock 1995 has approached the *kavi-prasāṃsā* genre as an index of literary canonization from within the Sanskrit tradition. Verses of this type also display an awareness of historical chronology. On the general notion of Vālmiki as the *ādikavi* see Pollock 2006, 75–89.

15. I owe this insight to Cynthia Talbot.

16. *Māncarī*, v. 22 (*jīya meṃ kāba karana kī pāi, akhkhara eku na jurāi āi*). For the sake of clarity, here and in other citations from this text I have made slight modifications to the orthography (such as changing *ṣa* to *kha* and standardizing the representation of nasals).

17. *Māncarī*, v.23, 32. Cf. v. 90. On similar topoi associated with vernacular beginnings see Pollock 2006, 309–16.

enduring in an [imperishable poetry-] body.

Their names are still heard, as though they inhabited this place, that house.

In the Kaliyug, what other means is there to propagate the fame of the deserving?

Man Singh of the Kurambha¹⁸ lineage,
may your fame remain on this earth.¹⁹

The *cariṭ*'s general architecture and literary techniques would certainly be familiar to any reader of classical poetry: the aura of royal *prāśasti* that pervades the work; set pieces like a *nagara-varṇana* (description of the city) of the Kachhwaha capital at Amber or a portrait of the royal women in *nakḥ-śikh* (toe-to-head description) style; the imagined sexual delights of the *nāyaka* (hero) in traditional *śṛṅgāra* modes; his heroic exploits in vivid battle scenes infused with *vīra rasa*. These are fairly generic ingredients of *kāvya* and could just as easily have been written a millennium before. However, the work also bears unmistakable signs of literary newness. Narottam does not allow us to forget that his is a *Hindi kāvya*. Occasionally a modern reader of some of the more obscure Rajasthani portions of the text might beg to differ, but the poet himself saw his mission as one of writing "in simple language, so that everybody can understand."²⁰ In one of the introductory verses where he explicitly mentions the classical *rasas* or literary moods (in this case *śṛṅgāra*, *vīra*, *karuṇa*, *adbhuta* and *hāsa*, or the erotic, heroic, pitiful, fantastic, and comic) that inform his work, he also trumpets its distinctive non-Sanskrit meters including the *dohā*, *caupāī*, and *arill* (he uses many others, as well).²¹ Nor does one have to look very hard to spot major shifts in literary orientation. We have already alluded to the deep religiosity of the work's preface, which is very much a product of its early modern *bhakti* milieu. Numerous other changes can be detected.

Narottam evidently did not feel at ease with some of the *kāvya* models that he had inherited. One of the expectations for a classical *nāyaka* is to display not just martial but also sexual prowess. From his location at a Rajput court of circa 1600 where seclusion of women was the norm, Narottam seems deeply ambivalent about the expectation that he should celebrate the beauty of Man Singh's queens. Before embarking on this unsettling *śṛṅgārik* mission the poet prudishly invokes the following Sanskrit *śloka*:

lakṣmī mātā śivā mātā mātā ca brahmaputrikā
rājñah patnī guroḥ patnī svamātā mātaraḥ smṛtāḥ

18. This (alongside its variant Kurma) is a traditional title of the Kachhwaha kings of Amber.

19. *Māncarīt*, v. 88. Daṇḍin makes similar remarks in *Kāvya-darśa*, 1.5.

20. *Sūdhī bhāṣā cālī anathu sabahī je pāvahim*, v. 37. G. N. Bahura has also drawn attention to these lines in Bahura 1990, 21.

21. *Māncarīt*, v. 36–37.

Lakṣmī is a mother, Pārvatī is a mother, and so is the daughter of
Brahmā.

The king's wife, one's guru's wife—these are to be considered one's own
mother.²²

Through this display of maternal reverence he evidently wants his readers to understand that the highly sexualized imagery he employs derives from the conventions of the genre and not from any improper personal feelings toward his patron's wives. As though needing to underscore this point, he twice mentions that his descriptions of the king's women are "just by inference" (*unamāna*, Sanskrit *anumāna*), even hinting that he studied *kāvya* works like the *Naiṣadha-carita* in order to be able to write these intimate details about the harem.²³

Whatever classical texts our studious poet might have mined, he often resorts to distinctly more contemporary techniques. Of the three poets considered in this essay, Narottam was the most drawn to composing intensively descriptive scenes modeled on local bardic styles. A lively sequence in the lilting *nārāc* meter is a typical *nakh-sikh* of the royal women fashioned in completely atypical language and meter. It begins:

calai ti cāla cālahi, sabai ju haṁsa-bāla hī
caranna ratta jāvakam, su kām̐ma-keli-pāvakam
dīpai anopa piṇḍurī, ji kām̐ma-keli-iṇḍurī
jugalla jaṅgha rambha ye, manau kanaka khambha ye
su kaṭṭi hīna rājahī, ti kiṅkanī virājahī
gambhīra nābhi pekhiye, ti kām̐ma-rūpa lekhiye...

The women strut about with the gait of young geese,
Their feet are reddened by henna, a fire to flare up love-play;
Calves of singular splendor, a stable ground from which to mount passion,
These thighs of delight, shaped like plantain-tree trunks, recall golden
columns.

Their slim waists look beautiful, encircled by bands of bells.
Behold their deep navels, wells of desire...²⁴

The point of this verse, which is best appreciated when read out loud in the original since its expressive power derives predominantly from its phonic effects,

22. *Māncarīt*, v. 92.

23. *Māncarīt*, v. 91, 93. Such stylized literary descriptions are—and this may be no coincidence—in keeping with the mostly non-representational nature of Rajput portraiture. On the general suppression of individual features in favor of stylized portraits, see Aitken 2002.

24. *Māncarīt*, v. 94.

is to evoke the bustle of the women's quarters of the palace, a place of consummate joy and pleasure for the king and a needed diversion from his taxing military duties. While metrical variation is of course an important component of Sanskrit *kāvya*—it helps to delineate scenes, mark emphases, and generally sustains the reader's interest over the course of a long work—Narottam in this case capitalizes on the special linguistic and poetic resources available to him as a vernacular poet. His technique is often to supplement shorter workaday meters (usually *dohās* and *arills* in Braj) with digressions into more expansive Rajasthani verse forms that were conditioned by the domain of oral performance. These segments help to conjure up a particular type of atmosphere—in this case, the world of the harem—and also to create auditory interest.

Some of the most dramatic irruptions of vernacular bardic style into the text are not in the boudoir, however, but on the battlefield. Indeed, one of the primary ways we know we are in the sixteenth century and not the sixth is that the *nāyaka* Man Singh is constantly fighting the Mughal wars. This *kāvya*—in addition to its literary features—also epitomizes a new type of history that was produced in great abundance at the Rajput courts of early modern India. Narottam includes, for instance, a long section devoted to Man Singh's storied encounter with the Mewar king Rana Pratap Singh at the battle of Haldighati in 1576. An adequate analysis of the truth claims of this text—there are considerable divergences from the better known Mughal records—regarding this celebrated historical event, which Colonel James Tod once referred to as “Mewar's Thermopylae”,²⁵ requires an essay of its own. Here I wish to focus on the innovative formal and linguistic features of the work, especially Narottam's facility with styles from Rajasthani poetics. The following verse in the *bhujāṅgprayāt* (the name suggests the motions of a cobra) meter captures perfectly the clamor of Man Singh's army en route to Mewar with its emphasis on the soundscape of the battlefield.

*bhāi dhundhi dhundhe, ju dhundhe disānam, baje tāmā tāmanti thāmam
nisānam*

*urī renu gainam lupyau teja bhānam, bajī bhāgamai rāga kedāra tānam
huī sindhumai sindhu āsā ti ānam, bhayau rāgamai rāgu mārū amānam
milī fauja faujam riṅgī thāna thānam, saje ānga āngeni jodhā juvānam
gahe bāna kammāna bedhanti tacchī, udai gainu pankhī su baiṭhe baracchī
huvau cakka saum cakka vīyoga²⁶ ānam, huī hāka hākam na būjhanti kānam
kiye mukhkha rāte na dīsai bhalānam, cale kātaram āpu kīne palānam...*

25. As noted by Talbot 2007, 23.

26. Emended from “cakkavi yoga” in the printed text. Chakva birds are held to endure separation from their mates at night.

tupakke havāi na jānaum avājaiṃ, calī nāragāṛī chuṭe megha gājaiṃ
kuhakkai ru jambūru sammūha sāje, gahai khagga jāganta svāmitta kājai

Dust clouds dimmed the view in every direction, war drums blared.
 The dust rose to the heavens, blocking the sunlight.
 The auspicious notes of Rag Kedar warded off doom.
 The strains of Rag Sindhu resounded everywhere, Rag Maru brimmed
 forth.²⁷

Squadrons merged as the forces marched forth from halt to halt.
 The soldiers were all decked out in armor, bows at the ready, arrows
 flying.
 Birds flew away in terror, taking refuge in the trees.
 [mistaking day for night] Chakva birds separated from their lovers.
 Who could hear a thing above the deafening din of battle?
 With their blood-spattered faces, who could see properly?
 The faint of heart went running ...
 Cannons exploded, fiery arrows flared, you wouldn't believe the racket!
 Explosions roared like thunderclouds,
 Missiles and the camel-mounted guns were in full force,
 Soldiers, swords drawn, were keen to serve their sovereign.²⁸

We are swept up into the action, mesmerized by the commotion of men, elephants, and horses, the whirring of arrows, the exploding of cannons. Older *kāvya* images (the dust kicked up by war animals, which blocks the sun, is an ancient one) blend in with the terminology of the Mughal military machinery: its *fauj* (Persian for “army,” here translated as squadron) and newfangled weaponry like the *havāi* (“airborne,” arrows propelled in the air by means of gun powder²⁹), an Arabic word modified with a Persian suffix. Some of the effects are also folksy and even humorous, as when the pusillanimous enemy soldiers scamper to get out of the fray. But the real literary bravado stems from Narottam's masterful manipulation of *vaiṇa sagāi* (kindred sounds), an alliterative technique characteristic of *dingal* poetry. Sanskrit poets were of course not strangers to alliteration—Subandhu's *Vāsavadattā* is a case in point from very early in the *kāvya* tradition—but *vaiṇa sagāi* functions slightly differently.³⁰ It is a

27. The word Maru refers to an Indian melodic structure but it also means war drum, desert, and death, all appropriate to a battle scene as conceived by a poet from Rajasthan.

28. *Māncarī*, v. 213.

29. I rely heavily on Bahura's glosses of the weaponry in *Māncarī*, pp. 255–56.

30. On Subandhu's use of alliterative compounding see Bronner 2010, 33–38, and also Chapter 9 in this Volume. The subtle workings of *vaiṇa sagāi* are helpfully elucidated in Kamphorst 2008, 89–108.

sophisticated expressive technique of oral poetry, not written prose, and it works by intensifying the rhyme (itself not very common in Sanskrit literature) through the supercharged layering of structured repetitions, assonance, and stress patterns. Its hypnotic, tension-building effects are ideal for setting the scene, as in this lead-up to the battle at Haldighati.

Akbar's army comes in for a particularly rich, expansive treatment in another diŋgalesque passage that stresses ethnic diversity. Descriptions of the army are a *kāvya* staple, and had been used earlier in Sanskrit poetry to signal a powerful transregional political culture.³¹ An early modern writer like Narottam is likewise interested in a conception of power that encompasses vast geographic reach but his showcasing of military cosmopolitanism may also evince a tinge of othering as in this verse, also in *bhujāṅprayāt* meter, which consists mostly of an intentionally bewildering list of ethnic groups:

*caḍhe saṅga sevā ju rūmī ruhele mile koṭi kābilli sohai akele
daye muṇḍa tāṣī ju sāṣī ti sohai, laye hātha kammānna amṁānna mohai
cakattā ujabakka ikka atagge, ji sandhī nilāi firāṅgī kalaṅge
ruhele ruhammī ru hammi suhānnī, habassī hasammā juhannī sravānnī
turakkānna makkānna pannī pavaṅge, sahānī juhannī khuresī sapaṅge
niyāji ti kāji subhai sūra sāde, kasalle masinī jure seṣajāde
paṭhānam amānaṁ bhile tega gorī, mile loha lodī su kambo ti korī
ghane saṅga keūka lahora lambe, kaḍhai tega vegam ji amṁāna jhumme
kijalvāsa muṇḍam ginai ko nilaṅge, mulattānna cukkī tite āi aṅge*

The extreme verbal acrobatics thwart any attempt at translation; the sounds are the sense. The highly structured incantatory effects of the original create a sense of relentless marching, conjuring up a massive, indomitable army assembled from the Muslim territories to the northwest (Kabulis, Pathans, Lahoris, Multanis—the list is long and complicated). Aside from the wonderful atmospherics—often the bardic meters are called into service for richly suggesting the mood of an event rather than merely narrating it—Narottam also probably intends a satirical effect. He needed to modify the names of all these foreign groups in accordance with Hindi phonetic and metrical principles (thus Chaghtai becomes *Cakattā*, Uzbek *Ujabakka*, Qureshi *Khuresi*, Turks *Turakkānna*, etc.) but some of these derivations sound ludicrous; rhymes and playful touches like “paṭhānam amānaṁ” (countless Pathans!) and “keūka lahora lambe” (all those tall Lahoris!) also contribute to the humor. As with the royal women, Narottam doesn't claim real knowledge of his subject matter, capping the passage with the

31. Pollock 2006, 246.

remark, "the Muslims (*meccha*, Sanskrit *mleccha*) of the earth have many castes (*jāti*), Hindus know nothing about them!"³²

While the main narrative point here and elsewhere in this *kāvya* is that the heroic *nāyaka* Man Singh is indispensable to Akbar, a stalwart general leading the Mughal troops steadily from victory to victory—and this is of course the main documentary value of the poem—the text also offers the chance to study the look and feel of the Mughal Empire from the point of view of those more peripheral to its workings, such as a Brahmin court poet resident at Amber who perhaps had little experience of distant people and places on the northwestern frontier. Narottam leaves no doubt about his feelings toward the emperor, whom he portrays almost reverently as a great patron of Hindus and even something of an honorary Hindu. The poet especially approves of Akbar's personal habits and policies: he worships Viṣṇu and bathes in *gaṅgājāl* (Ganges water); he does not sanction the killing of animals; he has repealed the taxes on Hindu places of worship. "This is Hindu rule, who says it is Turk?" editorializes Narottam, adding "[Akbar] loves Hindus, he's turned against the Turks." The poet goes so far as to claim that Akbar is an incarnation of Arjuna, the celebrated warrior from the *Mahābhārata*, whose chariot was driven by Kṛṣṇa in the great clash between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. In Narottam's estimation it was the Pāṇḍava hero's terrible sin of killing his clan that caused him to be reincarnated as Akbar, taking a "demon [that is, Muslim] birth" (*asura janamu*).³³

Caugān (polo), a favorite pastime of Akbar, also comes in for brief literary treatment. A *nagara-varṇana* of Amber mentions its polo grounds and the subject of polo comes up on several occasions, as when Akbar invites Man Singh to a match.³⁴ As though needing to explain this detail, Narottam says, *kali ke kumvara khilahim caugāna* (the princes of the Kaliyuga play polo), clarifying that it can be considered an appropriate pastime for a Hindu king and thus rightly merits mention in a *kāvya* about a royal personage.³⁵ The contemporary Mughal view of polo is helpfully elucidated by Akbar's court historian and ideologue Abū al-Faẓl, whose *Ā'in-i akbarī* is a detailed account of various contemporary practices and institutions:

His Majesty devises means of amusement, and makes his pleasures a means of testing the character of men... Superficial observers look

32. *Māncarī*, v. 231–32.

33. *Māncarī*, vv. 123–25. Akbar's interest in vegetarianism is also much discussed in the Persian chronicles of his reign. See *Ā'in-i akbarī* Vol 1, pp. 64–65, 164, 176 and *Muntakhab al-tavārikh* Vol. 2, p. 331.

34. References to polo can be found in *Māncarī*, vv. 56, 69, 139, 274.

35. *Māncarī*, v. 68. The title *kumvar* (Sanskrit *kumāra*) refers specifically to Hindu princes.

upon this game as a mere amusement and consider it mere play; but men of more exalted views see in it a means of learning promptitude and decision. It tests the value of a man, and strengthens bonds of friendship. Strong men learn in playing this game the art of riding; and the animals learn to perform feats of agility and to obey the reins. Hence His Majesty is very fond of this game. Externally, the game adds to the splendour of the Court; but viewed from a higher point, it reveals concealed talents.³⁶

Abū al-Faẓl stresses both the physical and moral virtues of the game that give it a rightful place in Mughal court culture. Man Singh had been attending the court since his youth and would certainly have imbibed this Mughal perspective on the game, and thus the Persianate practice of *caugān* also found a place both in his native city of Amber and in *kāvya* produced under his patronage.

Other concessions to Persian culture in the *Māncarīt* can be gauged from the work's language textures. Despite writing poetry in one of the premier Sanskrit genres, Narottam selectively employs Perso-Arabic and Turkish words, sometimes in highly marked ways. (We have already noted scenes where Devī was giving the poet a *hukam*). A few common Persianized phrases, like *makhamalla firāngiya jeba* ("beautiful foreign velvet") are associated with the early modern textile trade but also clearly have royal and military connotations (in the case of caparisoned horses).³⁷ As already intimated, the idiom of warfare is frequently non-Sanskritic, in keeping with the Mughal context, hence the prevalence of words like *jang* (battle), *tīr* (arrow), and *topcī* (cannoneer). Occasionally the poet forges unexpected compounds that playfully mix Sanskrit and Persian. Thus in a *śṛṅgārik* scene Narottam laments the depredations of *manamātha-fauj* (Kāmadeva's army), deftly combining Sanskrit "perturber of the heart" with the Persian word for army; in depicting a battle he celebrates an indomitable warrior with the epithet *mahājor* (of great force), combining the Sanskrit word "great" with Persian *zor* (strength, Brajified to *zor*).³⁸

The dramatic choice of Persian over Sanskrit vocabulary in some scenes, while frequently conditioned by the exigencies of the early modern economic and military environment, is also, less mechanistically, driven by literary imperatives. One of these is straightforward, the penchant for end rhyme in Braj poetry—the ability to use Persian words dramatically increases the stock of possibilities. The other is subtler, the desire to impart a Mughal feel to particular portions of the *kāvya*. In passages requiring Akbar's direct speech, for instance,

36. *A'īn-i akbarī* Vol. 1, pp. 308–9.

37. *Māncarīt*, v. 280. Similar phrases are found in vv. 75, 219.

38. *Māncarīt*, vv. 153, 376.

the poet seems to go out of his way to employ a kind of pidgin Persian, as though to mimic the expected register of a Muslim king. Perhaps humorous effects were also intended: in a scene where Man Singh is summoned to lend his assistance in suppressing Rana Pratap Singh of Mewar (a prelude to the celebrated Haldighati incident mentioned earlier), the emperor says he is concerned about having received many “petitions,” expressed as *firādi* (from Persian *faryād*).³⁹ The poet then cleverly concocts a verse in which he manages to rhyme the distinctly non-Braj phrase *dara hāla* (*dar hāl* is Persian for “in this state”), with *sāhi jalāla*, a Brajification of Akbar’s regnal title Shah Jalaluddin.⁴⁰

One of the most poignant passages in the work, and an exceptionally good example of Narottam’s use of Persianized Braj, reports the death of Akbar’s beloved minister Birbal, whose squadron was ambushed by the Yousufzais in a grim turn of events during the northwestern campaigns of the 1580s. Akbar is depicted gravely in a *darbār* scene (Perso-Arabic words marked in bold type):

baiṭhe hute sāhi dīvāna,
ṭhāḍhe mecha jite dhara khāna
aurau rāuta rājā rāi, bhai firādi tahām kī āi
sāhi bajūra bulāi kai, pūchī hai taba bāta
ko jajhyā ko ūbaryā, loha lagyā kisa gāta
taba vaha bolai bola sāhi suvihāna jū
saba patisāhi fauja gāi tihim ṭhāna jū
aisā juluma khudāi na kāhū dekhiyā

The emperor was seated in the royal court,
the earth’s Mlecchas and Khans stood around him,
as did all the Raos and Rajas.

Just then a petition from there (the Northwest) was brought to his
attention.

The shah called in his attendant, and asked what was the matter:
“Who died, and who was saved? Who has been wounded?”

He (the attendant) said these words, “Blessed majesty,
all the imperial forces were lost.

I’ve never seen such a catastrophic manifestation of divine will.”⁴¹

This Persianizing technique (and there are many other examples of it both in this text and elsewhere in Brajbhasha court poetry⁴²) is a special feature of early

39. *Māncarīt*, 205. A similar type of Persianization occurs in vv. 146–47.

40. *Māncarīt*, v. 207.

41. *Māncarīt*, vv. 317–19.

42. Persianized Braj style is a well-attested feature of *rīti* poetics. For a brief discussion, see Busch 2010, 89–92.

modern Hindi *kāvya* and one not easily available to Sanskrit writers, whose medium—long heralded for its linguistic purity as “the refined language” or, more grandiosely, “the language of the gods”—could not use “mleccha” words with anywhere near the same prodigality.

If the writers of early modern Hindi *kāvya* were engaging with cosmopolitan Persian, we also have the sense that Sanskrit, India’s other cosmopolitan language, was losing some of its linguistic hold. This is not to deny its critical importance to the vernacular *kāvya* enterprise. We have already discussed the privileging of Sanskrit writers in Narottam’s *kavi-praśamsā*, and as a Brahmin court poet he approached his literary task with one foot firmly planted in the soil of classical literary culture.⁴³ The *Māncarīt* even contains the occasional *śloka* in the language of the gods (one was cited earlier), although several are riddled with errors, and with a frequency that makes it difficult to ascribe them to scribal incompetence. This suggests that the poet was much more comfortable in a vernacular medium.⁴⁴

Narottam’s *Māncarīt*—both stylistically and substantively—is recognizably *kāvya*, of course, but it is at the same time profoundly unfamiliar. Braj meters, the aural pyrotechnics of Rajasthani bards, the descriptions of Mughal armies and the routine use of Persian words in Mughal scenes, *apabhraṣṭa* Sanskrit—all contribute to a more hybrid Hindi literary ethos. Something was shifting in a world where vernacular literati were beginning to assert themselves. A new type of *kāvya* in a rich vernacular idiom was in the making—and it was here to stay.

C. The Self-presentation of the Orchha Court in the *Virsimhdevcarit* of Keśavdās

The next major work of Hindi *kāvya* to be commissioned at a *manṣabdār*’s court was Keśavdās’s *Virsimhdevcarit*, also known as *Vircarit*. It was written in 1607 and thus only about a decade after the *Māncarīt*, but it indexes a dramatic leap forward in the development of Brajbhasha literary culture. The Braj *carita* genre, which also had some currency in *bhakti* circles, had become an important

43. Aside from the poets overtly mentioned in his *kavi-praśamsā* Narottam also refers to the *Naiṣadhacarita* of Śrīharṣa, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, the *Amaruśataka*, and the *Bhāvaśataka*. See *Māncarīt*, vv. 71, 91.

44. Incorrect Sanskrit forms can be spotted in several verses that were clearly intended to be pure Sanskrit. Examples include *Māncarīt*, vv. 1, 121, 272, 310. R. S. McGregor has similarly noticed incorrect Sanskrit in a Braj commentary on Bhartṛhari by King Indrajit of Orchha from approximately the same period. See McGregor 1968, 13.

mode of political expression.⁴⁵ Like Narottam's extended poem about Man Singh, the *Virsimhdevcarit* is a biography of a leading Rajput official—in this case Bir Singh Deo Bundela, who had a close relationship with Akbar's son Jahangir. Both works construct elaborate literary arguments about exemplary kingliness using the time-tested methods of classical *kāvya* while at the same time evincing remarkable new early modern inflections. The obvious similarities between the works may be no coincidence. Man Singh and Bir Singh Deo not only knew one another but were also in fact neighbors on the Yamuna riverfront in Agra.⁴⁶ Keśavdās also mentions that Man Singh Kachhwaha attended the Bundela king's coronation.⁴⁷ Perhaps Bir Singh was inspired by Man Singh in his choice to commission a monumental *carita*. Certainly the Bundelas, an arriviste clan from a frontier territory in the badlands of central India, were watching very closely what higher status Rajputs were doing.⁴⁸ In light of this point it seems of more than passing significance that after an opening *maṅgalācaraṇ* to Śiva, Keśavdās begins his *kāvya* with a verse that positions Bir Singh Deo third—after the Kachhwaha and Sisodia rulers—in the hierarchy of Rajput kings of his day:

First is Raja Man Singh Kachhwaha, who conquered the seas in all his
might.⁴⁹

Second is Rana Amar Singh Sisodia, who caused the elephants of the
enemy kingdom to lose their courage.⁵⁰

45. The *Sudāmacarita*, which tells the moving story of the reunion of Kṛṣṇa with his destitute childhood friend, was popular with Braj poets, with versions by Narottamdās (not the same as the Amber poet), Haldhar, Nanddās, and (possibly) Ālam dating from the sixteenth century. See McGregor 1984, 99–101, 194; Snell 1992.

46. Kolff 2002, 128.

47. *Virsimhdevcarit*, 33.15. Citations are to the Kishorilal edition unless otherwise specified.

48. Some aspects of Bir Singh's architectural program have been linked to prior buildings sponsored by Man Singh. See Rothfarb 2012, 66–68; 81–86. On the Bundela clan as "spurious Rajputs" whose political and cultural choices were intimately linked to social mobility, see Kolff 2002.

49. This is a slightly odd image for somebody who made his name fighting in the deserts of Kabul and Rajasthan. Keśavdās is probably gesturing toward Man Singh's career in Bengal (a period not covered by Narottam Kavi).

50. Famously, the Sisodias of Mewar were the last major Rajput clan to hold out against the Mughals and did not submit until Jahangir's reign, in 1614. The stature of Rana Amar Singh during this period is confirmed by some remarks of Jahangir, who characterized him as "one of the major landholders and rajas of Hindustan, whose chieftainship and command, and that of his fathers and forefathers, are accepted by all the rajas and rais of this land." *Jahāngirnāmah*, p. 149.

Third is Raja Birsingh Bundela of Orchha, whose harrowing depredations were a source of intolerable grief to Akbar.⁵¹

Viṣṇu created all three kings to protect royal families and to destroy enemy dynasties.⁵²

A lengthy *vaṃśāvalī* (genealogy) in the next chapter is similarly concerned with making claims about the clan's stature, tracing as it does the Bundela lineage to the Gahadavalas of Banaras and ultimately even further back to the solar dynasty of King Rāma.⁵³

Like all Rajput communities since Akbar's day, the Bundelas were deeply embroiled in Mughal politics and preoccupied with securing—sometimes contesting—their position within the new imperial order. Coming to terms with Mughal hegemony was an ineluctable reality for Indian royal houses like the Kachhwahas and the Bundelas (the Sisodias of Mewar were generally a little harder to convince on this point), but this did not preclude the need to assert one's kingly stature in one's own region. Such assertions became more urgent at precisely the time when regional kings were struggling with their curtailed sovereignty under the Mughal regime. Just as Persian textual culture was critical to shaping the public face of the Mughal emperors—what is the *Akbarnāmah*, commissioned by Akbar, after all, if not a *carita* of sorts about the emperor—Braj *kāvya* had an important role to play in the self-presentation of Rajput kings. The court poets of Man Singh and Bir Singh, who experimented with the resources of *kāvya* as a creative outlet while simultaneously asserting the martial prowess and kingly noblesse of their patrons, were the trendsetters in this regard.⁵⁴ Narottam tends to emphasize Man Singh's exemplary service to Akbar across the Mughal landscape—from Haldighati to Kabul to Rohtas (a capital that Man Singh built in Bihar). Keśavdās is more concerned with Bir Singh's hard-won battles at home: his struggles as a junior prince to become the king of Orchha, and why this new political arrangement is for the best.

51. Bir Singh Deo rebelled against Akbar (and against his own brother Ram Shah, see below) after allying himself with Prince Salim during the latter's rebellion against his father. Another cause of Akbar's grief is Bir Singh's murdering of his court intellectual and cherished confidant Abū al-Faḍl.

52. *Viṛsimhdevcarit*, 1.2. In this last line the word "narasiṃha" is a *yamaka* meaning both "king" (lion among men) and the fourth avatar of Viṣṇu. For a slightly different translation of this verse, which entertains the intriguing possibility that Keśavdās is also here invoking the ideas of the tortoise and Hayagrīva avatars of Viṣṇu, see Pauwels 2012, 152 (and notes 51–54).

53. *Viṛsimhdevcarit*, 2.22ff.

54. The puzzling absence of Mewar from the Braj literary record until much later in the seventeenth century is discussed in Busch 2011, 185–88.

Keśavdās was even better positioned than Narottam to inaugurate a new style of vernacular political *kāvya*. While both poets were demonstrably conversant with the masterpieces of Sanskrit literature, Keśavdās also took a keen interest in *alaṅkāraśāstra*. He is known to this day as a major innovator in the field of Brajbhasha poetics. His *Rasikpriyā* (Handbook for poetry connoisseurs, 1591), an ingenious reworking of Rudrabhaṭṭa's Sanskrit *Śṛṅgāvatilaka*, became an instant bestseller among vernacular literati. Keśavdās followed up with a *Kavipriyā* (Handbook for poets, 1601), which was based on several classical sources including Daṇḍin's *Kāvyaadarśa*. He also wrote a short treatise on metrics, the *Chandamālā* (Garland of metrics, 1602). Keśavdās was just as interested in the practice of *kāvya* as he was in its theoretical foundations. He wrote three *prabandha kāvya*s for the three subjects he found particularly worthy of this type of elaborate poetic memorialization, and which thereby acquired a certain degree of equipollence: Lord Rāma, his patron Bir Singh Deo Bundela of Orchha, and the Mughal emperor Jahangir. They are treated, respectively, in his *Rāmcandracandrikā* (1601), *Virsimhdevcarit* (1607), and *Jahāngīrjascandrikā* (1612). The *Rāmcandracandrikā* and *Virsimhdevcarit* in particular are monumental works (numbering 39 and 33 cantos, respectively) of a length and complexity only rarely attempted by Brajbhasha poets.

Like Narottam, Keśavdās was acutely conscious of the Sanskrit past and the long shadow that it cast over aspirants to vernacular literature. In the opening to his *Rāmcandracandrikā*, a bold attempt at writing a Brajbhasha *Rāmāyaṇa* (but one whose fame was ultimately eclipsed by the slightly earlier Avadhi version of Tulsidas), Vālmiki appears to the poet in a dream, authorizing his literary mission.⁵⁵ Although Keśavdās does occasionally refer to himself as a *mandamati bhāṣākavi* (slow-witted Hindi poet),⁵⁶ he does not seem to have been subject to the same crisis of confidence that plagued Narottam. A single verse to Śiva serves as an adequate opening—the unlocking of his muse apparently required no further divine intercession—and by the third stanza of the *Virsimhdevcarit* we already find the poet proclaiming:

In that city [Orchha, the Bundela capital] the wise and famous
Keśavdās was considered an ornament to the Brahmin lineage.
Hearing of the wondrous deeds of Bir Singh Deo, he composed a
prabandha on the strength of his own intelligence.⁵⁷

55. For a recent discussion of the *Rāmcandracandrikā*, also known as *Rāmcandrikā*, see Stasik 2009, 117–26. As she notes, one arresting update to *kāvya* imagery is the comparison between women's breasts and polo balls.

56. *Kavipriyā*, 1.17; *Rāmcandracandrikā*, 1.5.

57. *Virsimhdevcarit*, 1.3 (... *tibi pura prasiddha 'kesava' sumati, bipra-baṁsa-avatamaṁsa guṇi budhibala prabandha tini baraniyo bira caritra bicitra suni*).

Although he did pay lip service to the topos of writerly incompetence, Keśavdās didn't really mean it. The *Virsimhdevcarit* is the sixth of his eight works, and he was already well established as a major Brajbhasha poet.⁵⁸

Less established at this juncture was the rule of his patron Bir Singh Deo Bundela, who, with the backing of Emperor Jahangir, had recently usurped the Orchha throne from his elder brother after a series of hostilities that had led the two claimants to the brink of fratricide. I have discussed elsewhere the general importance of Keśavdās's historical poems for understanding critical events that took place at Orchha around the turn of the seventeenth century, and why Brajbhasha *kāvya* commands our attention as a source of Mughal history.⁵⁹ Keśavdās, like Narottam before him, and many other Braj poets since, combined elements of history and poetry in fascinating ways. The baseline tempo of the *Virsimhdevcarit* is set by the rhythms of the familiar *dohā-caupāī* popularized by earlier Avadhi poets,⁶⁰ a workaday meter that lends itself particularly well to a court historian's task of reporting. But Keśavdās also uses more elaborate meters like the *kavitt* and *chappay*, and, as we will shortly discover, is intently interested in the fine points of literary craftsmanship. He was just as much a poetician as a historian.

As for Keśavdās's approach to history, we cannot understand it without being attuned to the literary intricacies of his *kāvya*. Let us first direct our spotlight to some dramatic instances of intertextuality that come into view when we juxtapose two *kāvyas* from the poet's own oeuvre. Since Keśavdās had written a *Rāmāyaṇa* in 1601, just six years before the completion of *Virsimhdevcarit*, he had to hand a stock of *kāvya* compositions that celebrated ancient India's paradigmatically just king. A close reading of the *Rāmcandracandrikā* and *Virsimhdevcarita* in tandem reveals that several passages bear a striking resemblance. The poet was being neither lazy nor forgetful. He had a political point to make about the history that was unfolding before his very eyes.⁶¹

One virtuoso instance of Keśavdās's literary recycling epitomizes a central theme of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story: brotherly sacrifice and service.⁶² Rāma, recently banished from Ayodhya at the ruthless Kaikeyī's insistence, has just begun his

58. His extensive career is the subject of Busch 2011, chapter 1.

59. See Busch 2005.

60. Keśavdās uses a 15-*mātrā* variant of the (16-*mātrā*) *caupāī*, known as *caupahī*.

61. For an insightful discussion of intertextuality in Sanskrit literature, including what the authors aptly term "inversive, even subversive intertextual reference," see Bronner and Shulman 2006. On Bāṇa's recontextualization of a critical passage by Subandhu, see Bronner 2010, 50–55.

62. Brotherly harmony, a *sine qua non* of peaceful dynastic succession, is in Sheldon Pollock's estimation a crucial political focus of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and one that distinguishes it from India's other great classical epic, the *Mahābhārata*. Pollock 2005, 18–22.

14-year exile and is stationed at Chitrakut en route to a more total *vanavāsa* in Dandaka forest. Rāma's younger brother Bharata, who had been conveniently absent from the court when Kaikeyī forced Daśaratha to banish his cherished first-born son and have Bharata installed on the throne instead, returns home to find Ayodhya desolate.⁶³ Hearing of his mother's perfidy, he refuses to become king and rushes to Chitrakut, hoping to persuade Rāma to return and resume his rightful position. Bharata's precipitous arrival in the forest is a moment of serious tension in the epic. His irascible brother Lakṣmaṇa even threatens to kill him. The dust kicked up by the horses of Bharata's retinue—reminiscent of an army approaching to do battle—cast a pall over the sky, blocking out the sun (as we saw in Narottam's poem), a turn of events given the following explanation by our poet:

How could the sun god stand to see strife within his own family?
Knowing this, the earth hived itself off from the sky.⁶⁴

In Keśavdās's *Rāmāyaṇa* (as in Vālmiki's) the misconception is quickly cleared up and no battle ensues; Bharata agrees to act as Rāma's regent and takes his elder brother's sandals with him back to Ayodhya as a token of the real king's royal presence. Everybody can now breathe a sigh of relief.

No such relief mitigates the tension surrounding rightful succession in the case of Bir Singh Deo Bundela and his elder brother Ram Shah—neither in real life nor in Keśavdās's *kāvya*. Compounding the reader's discomfiture in the *Virṣimhdevcarit* is Keśavdās's relentless use of *Rāmāyaṇa* imagery to devastating ironic effect. Since the eldest Bundela prince bears the same name, Keśavdās is readily able to suggest parallels between Ram Shah and Rāma. He recounts that, upon Akbar's death and Jahangir's accession to the Mughal throne (in 1605), there is a brief moment when the two warring brothers are poised to reconcile. Ram Shah and Bir Singh meet, and we are told that the younger brother honored his elder, "as Bharata did Rāma."⁶⁵ But this classical image of brotherly

63. Daśaratha's capitulation to Kaikeyī in passing over his first-born son was held up as a negative example for later cases of Indian dynastic succession, as when Bilhaṇa remarked, "*rāmasya pitrā bharato'bhiṣiktaḥ kramam samullāṅghya yad ātmarājye/ tenothitā strijita ity akīrtir adyāpi tasyāsti digantareṣu*." (By transgressing order and making Bharata his heir, Rāma's father went down in infamy: To this day, wherever you turn, he is known as "the pawn of women"). *Vikramāṅkadevacarita*, 3.40. I am grateful to Yigal Bronner for the reference (and translation).

64. *Rāmcandracandrikā*, 10.22. Rāma and indeed many later Indian kings were considered (or wished to be considered) *sūryavamṣī* (of the solar race).

65. *Virṣimhdevcarit*, 9.54. Elsewhere Bhupal Rao, Ram Shah's nephew and ally, is tellingly compared to Rāma's trusted companions, including Hanumān, Sugrīva, Aṅgada, and Lakṣmaṇa. *Virṣimhdevcarit*, 14. 2–5; 14.21.

harmony is not to be sustained. Ram Shah Bundela is disappointingly lacking in the ideal kingly qualities of his namesake, as the poet constantly reminds us.⁶⁶ The contrast between epic and reality is stark.

The *tour de force* of irony, however, is in the construction of *Virsimhdevcarit* Canto 12. After a series of failed negotiations between Bir Singh and Ram Shah, the only remaining recourse is war. The poet describes the younger brother Bir Singh approaching Ram Shah's palace in an almost exact reprise of Bharata's arrival in Chitrakut in his *Rāmcandracandrikā*—with several phrases and even whole verses repeated nearly verbatim, including the one just excerpted about the sun looking on in horror at the “strife within his own family”. The perverse inversion of *Rāmāyaṇa* ideals proves impossible to ignore.⁶⁷ In both the *Virsimhdevcarit* and real life the younger brother *does* go to war against his elder. He not only covets the throne but usurps it. Keśavdās's use of a *Rāmāyaṇa* intertext is jarring. Far from evoking the stately ideals of the epic, it serves as a telling comment on the devastating breakdown in the moral order of kingship and a dire political problem at the court epitomized by the poet's own wry remark: *rakṣaka loga te bhakṣaka bhae*, “protectors have turned predators.”⁶⁸

Let us not forget that this is a work at once of history and *kāvya*. Despite being morally unsavory and attended by a degree of authorial ambivalence, ousting Ram Shah from power is, narratively speaking, a moment of triumph for Keśavdās's hero, because the best man has won and political stability has been re-established in the kingdom. All bloodshed ceases in Canto 14, when Bir Singh, is confirmed in his authority over Orchha by Emperor Jahangir.⁶⁹ But there are nearly 20 cantos left to go. From Canto 15 the poet suddenly dispenses with the task of reporting the sometimes unseemly events that led to the removal of Bir Singh's own brother from the throne,⁷⁰ and turns wholeheartedly to a more purely *kāvya* enterprise. If this was at times difficult to achieve in real life, it is in

66. Ram Shah is generally characterized as greedy, deceitful, and lacking in both moral and physical vigor, but his lack of kingly legitimacy is perhaps nowhere more tellingly articulated than in the image of his royal luster (*rājyaśrī*) wandering from pillar to post. *Virsimhdevcarit*, 10.10. This image can be found in Bilhaṇa too. See Chapter 17 in this Volume.

67. Compare *Virsimhdevcarit*, 12.21ff with *Rāmcandracandrikā*, 10.17ff.

68. *Virsimhdevcarit*, 14.56.

69. Keśavdās mentions the royal *farmān* (edict) in *Virsimhdevcarit*, 14.61–63. Ram Shah, who sent a daughter to Jahangir's harem in 1610, continued to hold a *jāgīr*, and his nephew Bharat inherited the erstwhile king's title upon Ram Shah's death in 1612. See *Jahāngīrnāmāh*, 104, 140.

70. The nadir would have to be Bir Singh's murder of Abū al-Faẓl at the behest of Prince Salim, which brought the two princes into an alliance that would secure both of their political futures. For a comparison of Keśavdās's treatment of this notorious episode with how it is handled in the *Jahāngīrnāmāh* see Busch 2005, 37–43. The need to delicately manage Jahangir's own role in the incident caused considerable unease for Persian authors as well. See Alam and Subrahmanyam 2011, 133–45.

elaborate segments of poetry—a more pacific realm of literary imagination—where Bir Singh Deo can be established as an ideal king most effectively.

For the next dozen or so cantos, Keśavdās concerns himself with a rich variety of poetic sequences that help to establish his patron as a high-status royal *Kshatriya*. While Keśavdās, writing in *madhyadeśa* (central India), did not share Narottam's penchant for Rajasthani poetics, the works do share an interest in fusing the classical tools of cosmopolitan *kāvya* with more contemporary and local elements. The work straddles the realms of the Sanskrit past and the Hindi—and now deeply Mughal—present.

Keśavdās was never one to acknowledge his sources—there is no *kavi-praśamsā* anywhere in his oeuvre—but a reader even slightly familiar with the classics of Sanskrit literature can easily point to a wide array of intertexts in the *Virṣimhdevcarit*. Central to the middle cantos of the work is a detailed poetic celebration of the grandeur of Orchha that proves to be a surreal combination of observed experience and literary tropes. It is quite an experience to be given a tour of the city of Orchha circa 1600, but it is difficult to shake the feeling that we are simultaneously traversing the pages of a book. The ghosts of the Sanskrit past are particularly haunting here. When Keśavdās says that the touch of the palace women's feet caused the ashoka trees to bloom in springtime is it because he had been reading Kālidāsa?⁷¹ Did Subandhu speak through Keśavdās, who described the moonrise as: *gaganagāmini gaṅgā nīra, phūlyau puṇḍarika so dhīra ... madana nṛpati ko gaganā niketa, rajata kalasa so duvau sameta* (radiant like a white lotus blooming on the celestial Ganges... a silver vessel draped with durva grass in the heavenly mansion of King Kāmadeva).⁷² Does the spirit of Harṣa hover over the *madanotsava* (spring festival) staged in Bir Singh's palace garden?⁷³ Do we hear an echo of Jayadeva in the luxuriant description of spring from the same canto, when Keśavdās writes the lines *taralita komala malaya samīra ... lalita lavaṅga latā hindola* (the gentle breeze of Malaya swaying... a swing nestled among the clove vines)?⁷⁴

71. *Virṣimhdevcarit*, 22.26 *carana prahārana pramudita bhae soka asokana teṃ janu gae*. The idea that the kick of a beautiful woman causes ashoka trees to blossom is widespread in Sanskrit literature. It is a central theme of the *Mālvikāgnimitra*, act three; also see *Meghadūta*, v. 75.

72. *Virṣimhdevcarit*, 22.34–35. Compare the line *puṇḍarikam iva gaganagāmiṅgaṅgāyāḥ ... rājatakalaśa iva dūrvāpravāśaśabalāḥ manobhavābhīṣekasya* from *Vāsavadattā*, pp. 247–48. This parallel has been noted by Bhatnagar 1991, 255. Several other similarities in these two passages make Keśavdās's use of Subandhu's work beyond a doubt.

73. Compare the first act of *Ratnāvalī*.

74. *Virṣimhdevcarit*, 22.18–19. Cf. *lalitalavaṅgalatāpariśīlanakomalamalayasamīre*, *Gita-govinda*, p. 27. Although Keśavdās's phrase is an almost verbatim rendition of Jayadeva, Subandhu had used the similar tag *komala-malaya-mārutōddhūta*. This is quoted in Bronner 2010, 37.

If Keśavdās is in some important sense conversing with Sanskrit writers of the past, as readers we are also apparently eavesdropping on a conversation the Braj poet is having with himself. To tell us that Orchha is *Rāmacandra kī purī* (Lord Rāma's city) is on the one hand to make a trite observation about his patron's royal virtue.⁷⁵ On the other hand, when the poet once again builds into his *kāvya* layers of *Rāmāyaṇa* intertextuality we cannot help but wonder if he is toying with us, as when cantos 16 and 18 draw heavily on the poet's *nagara-varṇana* of Ayodhya from his own *Rāmcandracandrikā*.⁷⁶ Since it is impossible for a reader familiar with both of these *mahākāvyas* not to be struck by the parallels, one cannot but assume that the same intertextual resonances were present for contemporary audiences, too. The striking point in this case is that the *Rāmāyaṇa* intertext no longer feels subversive or ironic in its effect. We got the point that Ram Shah's governance was distinctly not *rāmrajya*. Are we now to understand that because of Bir Singh's rule Orchha has become Ayodhya? Was the performance at court of the *Virsimhdevcarit* in some sense a performance of the Bundela king as Lord Rāma? Of course, elsewhere in the text the poet informs us that Orchha is also Jahangirpur (city of Jahangir), a reminder that whatever argument one wanted to make about *rāmrajya*, the reality of Bundelkhandi politics at the turn of the seventeenth century was considerably more complicated.⁷⁷

The Mughal conquest of Orchha was part of Keśavdās's own lived experience since it took place during the reign of Bir Singh's father Madhukar Shah (r. 1554–92). While this singular political fact did not have anything that could reasonably be called a transformative effect on the poet's craft, one does not have to look far to find instances of how his *kāvya* reflects some of this contemporary reality. Clearly the subject did not pique the curiosity of Keśavdās in the manner of Narottam, but the *Virsimhdevcarit* does contain a few lively descriptions of the Mughal army and in this text, too, there are instances of a slightly Persianized style in scenes that prominently feature the emperor or members of the Muslim nobility.⁷⁸ A description of Bir Singh's court (note that he uses the Persian word *darbār*, not the Sanskrit *sabhā*) in Canto 17 interweaves classical and Mughal

75. *Virsimhdevcarit*, 18.5; in a later verse (18.29) the poet describes Bir Singh Deo Bundela's minister Kanhardas as "a friend, like Vasiṣṭha was to Daśaratha, Viśvamitra to Rāmacandra".

76. A sampling of comparable passages is *Virsimhdevcarit*, 16.3–7; 16.10; 16.13–18; 18.9–12 with (respectively) *Rāmcandracandrikā*, 1.38–40; 1.29; 8.3–5; 1.48–50.

77. *Virsimhdevcarit*, 14.61. 18.22.

78. In *Virsimhdevcarit*, 12.16, for instance, Keśavdās calls attention to the variable complexions of the soldiers: the light-skinned Turks and darker Hindus. In a passage where Akbar dispatches troops to bring Bir Singh in line he uses a similar register to that employed by Narottam for the Birbal episode referenced earlier (vv. 3.14–16).

symbols of political authority: if kingly charity (*dāna*) and administering justice (*nyāu*, that is, *nyāya*) are old, the branding of horses (Persian *dāgh*) and the suggestion of a paper bureaucracy (*daftār*) are new.⁷⁹ Some other “Mughal updates” to *kāvya* norms include a chess game (*shatranj*) mentioned in a description of the harem, which also sports a range of Islamicate furnishings.⁸⁰ It is true that painting pictures of the beloved has a long history in Sanskrit literature, but at least one of Keśavdās’s mentions of portraiture with its stress on representational accuracy is highly suggestive of Mughal practices.⁸¹ The pearl-studded throne of his patron has a distinctly Mughal cast, and one strongly suspects that some of the rooms mentioned in the description of the palace, like the storehouse for dried fruits and nuts (Persian *mevā*) or the perfumery have some relationship to imperial styles.⁸² It would be unwise to stake too much on this point, to be sure—Sanskrit *kāvya* has any number of descriptions of palaces he could have been referencing—but a few of Keśavdās’s topics have at least a passing resemblance to those discussed in the *Ā’in-i akbarī*. The sumptuary and leisure practices of these courts were certainly in dialogue with one another, and there may be at least some kind of oblique connection between the two texts. Although Keśavdās’s is usually far more cursory than Abū al-Faẓl’s, his Persian counterpart, some themes they treat in common include a palace storehouse for cloth, the fruitery, the perfumery, the treasury, manuscript production, and painting.⁸³ Keśavdās’s dedicating of an entire nineteenth canto to the subject of *caugānavarnanām*, a description of Bir Singh playing polo, similarly takes on a special significance when we recall Abū al-Faẓl’s remarks about polo from the *Ā’in-i akbarī*. Since set pieces on elements of royal *vinoda* (enjoyment) like hunting or

79. *Virsimhdevcarit*, 17.7.

80. Chess is mentioned in *Virsimhdevcarit*, 20.19. While much of the imagery is fairly traditional, a few expressions such as *dulicā* (carpet, probably from Persian *gālicā*, according to McGregor 1993, 505), *palāṅga-ṣosa* (bedcover, with the Persian suffix *posh*), *gulābana* (of roses, from *gulāb*), and *makhmalā* (velvet, from *makhmal*) lend freshness to the passage. *Virsimhdevcarit*, 21.6–10.

81. *Jāke je guṇa rūpa bicitra, taḥaṁ taḥaṁ tāke citrai citra* (portraits were taken that captured a person’s varied characteristics and form). *Virsimhdevcarit*, 17.11 Also note the reference to “the floor’s exquisitely beautiful carpet as though painted by a painter” (*bhūmi dulicā sobhā sanyau, manau citere citrita banyau*), *Virsimhdevcarit*, 17.11. Other references to painting occur in 20.19 and 20.30.

82. *Virsimhdevcarit*, 21.13. It should be noted that plenty of the expressions have nothing to do with Mughal culture, such as the *mānāsālā* (room where a woman goes to sulk, v. 21.14), reminiscent of the classical idea of a *kopabbavana*.

83. Compare *Virsimhdevcarit*, 21.12–14, 27.5 with (respectively) Book One, *Ā’ins* 31, 28, 30, 3–5, 34. Keśavdās’s references to painting are recorded in note 81. I have discussed the possibility of such a textual dialogue between Abū al-Faẓl and Amṛt Rāi, the author of the earlier *Māncarit*, in Busch 2012, 319–25.

a palace festival had always been a part of *kāvya*, it was not much of a stretch for the poet to add a segment on polo. Still, even in his description of a polo match he does manage to impart an Indic twist: in a reprise of the *digvijay* a (conquest of the quarters) theme from classical poetry, Keśavdās imagines that Bir Singh's polo balls incite terror in the lands of distant kings.⁸⁴

A *hayaśālāvarṇana* (description of the horse stables) is another good example of a literary set piece that draws simultaneously on the poet's own imagination, elements of Mughal culture, and the Sanskrit courtly-literary past. While Abū al-Faẓl, too, had discussed horses in his *Ā'in-i akbarī*, the textual dispositions of these two court intellectuals couldn't be more dissimilar. Abū al-Faẓl limited himself to a dry catalog of horse breeds and the sums allotted for the monthly maintenance of war animals, the overall point of his work being to establish Emperor Akbar as a just ruler with a sophisticated bureaucracy.⁸⁵ Keśavdās, for his part, wants to convince us of Bir Singh's regal majesty by using a grandiloquent, not a workaday register. His *kāvya* invites us to marvel in astonishment at the Bundela king's horse collection and to experience the stables in a more sensory manner. He also evidently saw a chance to dazzle his readers with a 15-verse onomatopoeic poem structured by the order of the Devanagari syllabary (*kakaharā*). The alliterative effects are best signaled with a few lines from the poem itself:

kulhā kumaita kai yaha ghanai, kuhī kusala kilakī kūdanai
kuraga karariyā kāre barna, kacchī pacchī ke mana harna
khurani khilaiṃ bhūtala khecarī, kharakati kharaka khalani koṃ kharī
khandhārī khalakahi sukha deta, upaje khurāsāna ke kheta

[Bir Singh's stables are] filled with Kulha and Kumait (bay) horses.
 The Kuhis excel at whinnying and jumping,
 Kuragas and Karariyas are black in color,
 Kachhis astonish the birds—their hooves fly over the earth until
 suddenly they are aloft.
 Intense terror afflicts the enemies [who behold these horses]
 The horses from Kandahar, reared in the land of Khurasan,
 give pleasure to the world (*khalaka*, from Perso-Arabic *khalq*).

84. *Virsimhdevcarit*, 19.19. In an unusual poetic conceit, the court bard requests that the polo balls wielded by the king be granted *abhaydān* (quarter) after being hurled astonishing distances. As noted by the text's editor Kishorilal in his modern Hindi commentary on the verse, this is a genteel way for the poet to suggest that the game be brought to a close.

85. Abū al-Faẓl discusses horses in Book One, *Ā'ins* 58, 79; Book Two, *Ā'in* 2.

The poet continues with the letters *ga*, *gha*, *ca*, *cha*, and so forth, proceeding in alphabetic order through (most of ⁸⁶) the Devanagari script, concluding with the line *hīrā hiranāgara hīsane, haraṣita haumṣa harasulāi bane* (the Hiras and Hiranagaras are prone to neighing, the Harsulas are attractive with their animated temperaments).⁸⁷ The sound effects are a stroke of performative genius, propelling the listener right into the scene. We can just hear the trampling of the earth under the horses' feet as the long poetic catalogue of horses is intoned by the poet. But the text with its dramatic flourishes of Turkish, Arabic, and Persian words and Central Asian place names also conjures up a real, contemporary world of Mughal power and a key military commodity of the age. *Turaki taruna tīra sī cālī* (the young Turkish horses are swift as arrows) runs a line from the *tā's*.⁸⁸ When we get to the *bā's* we encounter the phrases *balake bādāmī balivanta, bīra balocī bane ananta, badakasāna upaje bahu besa, dai paṭhae bālukā naresa*. (Balkh horses are almond-colored and strong, brave horses from Baluchistan are very beautiful. The horses of Badakhshan come in many forms, the King of Balkh has sent them).⁸⁹ While the *hayaśālāvārṇanam* is most immediately a chance to accompany the poet on a fascinating poetic journey, the exotic horses also invoke the Mughal imperial culture in which his patron participated.⁹⁰

The description of the stables also proved a chance to showcase his knowledge of a Sanskrit *śāstra*. The last segment of Canto 17 digresses into the world of *śālihotra* (disquisition on horses), where we learn the little known fact that "in ancient times horses used to have wings, and fly at will"⁹¹ before the poet treats us to a truncated lesson in equestrian science. Horses, like so many objects of *śāstrik* scrutiny, are *uttama*, *madhyama*, and *adhama* (best, middling, and inferior); they can also be divided into a fourfold classification that corresponds to the *varṇa* (caste) system governing human social behavior. We even learn a little bit about veterinary diagnostics when the poet alerts us to the signs of illness,

86. It is not possible to begin a word with some letters, such as velar and palatal nasals.

87. *Virsimhdevcarit*, 17.26–40.

88. *Virsimhdevcarit*, 17.33.

89. *Virsimhdevcarit*, 17.36–37.

90. If here I have stressed the exoticizing dimensions of the horse sequence in Canto 17 (the lines are not altogether different in effect from Narottam's verses on the armies in Kabul in their invoking of distant, unfamiliar worlds), some more local literary precedents can be cited. See for instance the two descriptions of horses in *Padmāvat* (Story of Padmini, c. 1540), vv. 46, 496. I thank Thomas de Bruijn for the reference. The Jāyāsī parallel has also been noted by Kishorilal in *Virsimhdevcarit*, p. 353. An even more proximate parallel is the elaborate diŋgalesque description of the horses in Amṛt Rāi's *Māncarī*, which forms part of the *nagara-varṇana*, vv. 120–28 (published in *Māncarītāvalī*, ed. Bahura).

91. *Virsimhdevcarit*, 17.43.

including his humorously *grāmya* (lowbrow) warning about sickly horses that *mūtai bāra bāra aru hagai* (piss and shit all the time).⁹² While the poet's decision to include a canto on horses in his lengthy *nagara-varṇana* of Orchha may well originate in an impulse to record a real life stable on the palace grounds,⁹³ the passage is also breathtaking in its literary gymnastics, politically suggestive with its hints of Mughal imperial geography, and at the same time oddly encyclopedic with its embedding of elements from a local Indian knowledge system.

Similar in its almost surreal didacticism but otherwise a far cry from micturating and defecating equines is another excursus in the final six cantos (28–33): into the realm of classical Indian political thought (*nīti*). The problem of power is as old as Indian literature itself, central to both the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*—and many texts since. It is no less central centuries later in the realm of Brajbhasha *kāvya* (and Bundela politics). Dāna (Charity), one of the characters from the allegorical frame story who had been relegated to the background for most of the narrative, now takes on a pivotal role as mentor to the king. When Bir Singh expresses his disillusionment with recent Orchha political history, Dāna counsels him on the vagaries of *rājasrī*, royal power:

rājasrī ati cañcala, tāta, tāhū kī saba sunijai bāta
dhana sampati aru jobana garva, āni milai aviveka akharva
rājasrī saunī hota prasāṅga, kauna na bhrasṭa hoya yahi sāṅga

(Śloka)

*yauvanam dhanasampattiḥ prabhutvam avivekitā*⁹⁴
ekaikam apy anarthāya, kimu yatra catuṣṭayam

śāstra sujala dhovatahū jāta, malina hota saba tāke gāta

Royal power is fickle, my friend, now listen to an account of it, as well:
 When wealth, property, youth, and pride are compounded by total
 ignorance,
 consorting with royal power is courting corruption.

(Sanskrit couplet)

Youth, wealth and property, power and ignorance. Just one would be
 to invite disaster, to say nothing of all four.

92. *Virsimhdevcarit*, 17.73

93. Stables are still extant today at the rear of the Orchha palace. Bundelkhand was also an enormous base of military recruitment for the Mughals, although generally more focused on infantry than cavalry. See Kolff 2002.

94. Here I prefer the reading *avivekitā* in the Mishra edition to that of Kishorilal (*avivekitah*).

Even when cleansed by the pure water of the *śāstras*,
a body tainted by royal power remains soiled.⁹⁵

Here and throughout the “*nīti cantos*,” Keśavdās routinely peppers his text with Sanskrit aphorisms, adding another complex inter-textual layer. Keśavdās has literally taken a page out of Bāṇa’s book, drawing on the *śukanāsopadeśa* section of *Kādambarī*.⁹⁶ The interleaving of Sanskrit phrases with Brajbhasha paraphrases doubly reinforces the message but also contributes a sense of authority and stateliness to the vernacular text and, by extension, to King Bir Singh Deo himself. I am not aware of another Brajbhasha *kāvya* that deals so centrally with the themes of royalty and governance, even to the extent of incorporating a long discourse on the subject right into the narrative. In a series of passages that meld the stark political exigencies expounded in *arthaśāstra* discourse with the aphoristic blandness of *subhāṣita* (gnomic) literature, Dāna delivers an elaborate sermon on *rājadharmā* (kingly conduct), explaining practices such as *dāna* (charity and public works), the supervising of one’s ministers, messengers, and other court personnel, building strategic alliances, expected codes of military conduct, the proper administration of justice (*daṇḍa*), and numerous other related topics. Despite the didactic nature of the final section, Keśavdās does not abandon the *kāvya* techniques that had served him so well elsewhere in the work. In one of the most complex *śleṣa* verses in all of Braj literature Keśavdās equates Bir Singh with the *trimūrti*. The device of *śleṣa* is more powerful than a mere simile because it produces a deep equivalence between objects at the level of language itself. Here one reading (*pakṣa*) describes the king, and three parallel readings construct the images of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva.⁹⁷

In the final sermon of this *kāvya*, Dāna, resorting again to a tripartite categorization, explains to Bir Singh that kings are base, middling, and supreme. Base kings are those who accede to power without regard for the proper rites (Keśavdās tactfully fails to mention this, but Bir Singh is, in fact, a king who came to power through irregular channels). Middling and supreme are those

95. *Virsimhdevcarit*, 29.17–20.

96. Note, for instance, how closely Keśavdās’s phrasing in the last line resembles Bāṇa’s: *yauvanārambhe ca prāyāḥ śāstrajalaprakṣālananirmalāpi kālasyam upayāti buddhiḥ*, *Kādambarī*, p. 216. This and other borrowings from Bāṇa are noted in Bhatnagar 1991, 257–62.

97. *Virsimhdevcarit*, 32.14. To illustrate the technique: the line *rājai dvijarāja pada bhūṣaṇa vimala* may be construed in four separate ways: “for whom the swan is a beautiful foot ornament,” that is, whose vehicle (*vāhana*) is the swan (*Brahmāpakṣa*); “who bears the mark of Bhṛṅgu’s kick” (*Viṣṇupakṣa*); “whose head is adorned with the crescent moon” (*Śivapakṣa*); “who is a beautiful ornament to the feet of Brahmins,” that is, who bows at the feet of Brahmins (*Bir Singh pakṣa*). Conflating a king with divinity is a typical use of *śleṣa*. See Bronner 2010, 6, 85.

kings crowned by Brahmins and divine beings respectively. When Dāna grants his pupil Bir Singh a boon, the Bundela leader asks to be installed as a supreme (*uttama*) king. One by one various deities, including the personifications of Dharma (moral rectitude), Jaya (victory), Utsāha (martial valor), Ānanda (joy), Bhāgya (good fortune), and many other royal prerogatives, arrive for the coronation of Bir Singh and his wife Parbati. In an extended *darbār* scene they present poems in his honor and adorn him with a *tilaka*, investing him with the title of king but also with a portion of themselves.⁹⁸ A parrot observing the court ceremony recounts to a mynah bird:

He was a younger son of Madhukar Shah,
But now he has become the eldest...
Lord Dharma and his attendants have arrived
To award him everything. King Bir Singh embodies a portion (*kalā*) of
Lord Viṣṇu.⁹⁹

A dizzying array of gods, birds, and of course people are present at Bir Singh's coronation, but Dharma gets the last word. He enjoins Bir Singh to rule justly and then blesses him. The work comes to a close with Dharma's bestowal of three boons: human suffering is to be alleviated by hearing Bir Singh's story (*Biracarita*); Dharma will reside in the Bundela king's heart; and Jahangir will be granted a long life.

Whether we focus on the more factual historical cantos early in the work, the ultra-literary passages with their rich imagery and multiple layers of intertextuality, or the intensely sermonizing, quasi-Sanskrit *nīti* segments that most overtly deal with injunctions about royal comportment, the *Vīrsimhdevcarit* constantly reveals itself as a substantial literary and political argument in support of Bir Singh's rise to power. In all likelihood commissioned for the coronation, the work was also, perhaps, a consummate act of public relations. More than any of these elements, the *Vīrsimhdevcarit* was also a vehicle for expressing a degree of local sovereignty as Mughal overlordship became naturalized in Bundelkhand. The Mughals sit at the margins of this *kāvya* (although we are never allowed entirely to forget them—Bir Singh may demand boons for his own sake but he also asks Dharma to grant the emperor a long life). It is the Bundela Rajput who occupies centerstage. While Bir Singh is accorded some attention in Persian texts like the *Jahāngīrnāmah*, from a Mughal perspective he was but one of many *manṣabdārs* who kept the empire running through military service, displays of loyalty at court, and outlays of capital on public

98. *Apāne-apāne aṃsa dai, kiye tilaka abhiṣeka*, *Vīrsimhdevcarit*, 33.12.

99. *Vīrsimhdevcarit*, 32.43.

works and architecture. He was just a bit player in the dominant Persian discourse of the day. In Keśavdās's Brajbhasha *kāvya*, however, he is the star of the show.

D. Being Sub-imperial: Multilayered Cultural Identity in
the *Lalitlalām* of Matirām Tripāṭhī

While still inchoate in the early seventeenth century as Keśavdās's career was drawing to a close, *rīti* literature signaled a new way of asserting Rajput courtly values in a vernacular, if still paradoxically classical, idiom. This style of Braj classicism would be widely adopted by the courts of Rajput *manṣabdārs* in the course of the seventeenth century. In this last section I examine the case of Bundi, where Matirām Tripāṭhī was commissioned to write his *Lalitlalām* (Finest lover), a spectacular instance of the *muktaka* style of *rīti* poetry. Although earlier Bundi rulers had commissioned a Sanskrit *mahākāvya*, the *Surjanacarita* (Biography of Surjan Rao, c. 1590?) of Chandrashekhara,¹⁰⁰ the *Lalitlalām* is significant for being the first known Brajbhasha work to be produced at the Bundi court, evidence of both a shifting cultural preference for vernacular *kāvya* as well as the wider transmission of *rīti* literary culture across western India in this period.¹⁰¹

Matirām Tripāṭhī is rightly considered one of the finest poets of the full-fledged *rīti* style. Unfortunately, while he bequeathed to posterity a significant literary inheritance, he left almost nothing with which to reconstruct his biography. It is hard to assemble more than a few scant sentences about him. He hailed from a family of litterateurs based in Tivikamapur (near modern Kanpur), which happens to be the hometown of Akbar's famous minister Birbal. Along with his brothers Cintāmaṇi and Bhūṣaṇ, who were also famous *rīti* poets, Matirām is emblematic of a whole class of circulating Brahmin court professionals who entered the service of the regional kings of early modern India and even, on occasion, performed their Braj poetry for Mughal emperors.¹⁰² Like Keśavdās, Matirām was both a *kavi* and an *ālankārika*. He wrote exclusively in

100. Candrasekhara completed the *Surjanacarita* in Banaras, possibly during the reign of the Bundi king Bhoj Hada. For a recent analysis, see Talbot, 2012.

101. More research is needed on the literary history of Bundi. Perhaps there are works that have not yet come to light. The *Prithvirājraśo*, whose author Cand Bardāi was invoked by Narottam Kavi in a passage cited above, was evidently known to the Bundi court from at least the days of Raja Bhoj since Candrasekhara devotes an entire canto to the life of Prithviraj Chauhan. (Cynthia Talbot, personal communication; McGregor 1984, 18, 123).

102. Cf. O'Hanlon 2007, 370. Recall that Narottam Kavi migrated from Rampura to Amber in order to write *prāsasti kāvya* for Man Singh. A few details about Matirām's brothers Bhūṣaṇ

the *muktaka* style, never attempting a lengthy *mahākāvya* in *prabandha* format. His *Satsaī*, which rivals in excellence the more famous *rīti* work of the same name by Biharilal (court poet to Mirza Raja Jai Singh of Amber, Man Singh's descendant), is a beautiful anthology of 700 couplets that must have riveted the audiences of his day. His *Rasrāj* (Supreme *rasa*) and *Lalitlalām* are both treatises on aesthetics written in the *ritigranth* (textbook) format and for the *Lalitlalām* a clear provenance can be established: it was commissioned by Raja Bhao Singh Hada of Bundi (r. 1658–82).¹⁰³ Although undated, the terminus post quem of the work is 1658 since Matirām mentions the war of succession that broke out between Aurangzeb and his three brothers—a war in which Bundi's own royal succession was expedited since Bhao Singh's father Satrusal (r. 1632–58) lost his life fighting on Dara Shikoh's side.

Matirām is nearly as reticent about his reasons for writing *Lalitlalām* as he is about sharing autobiographical details. A single verse reveals his motivations:

The fine poet (*sukabi*¹⁰⁴) Matirām wrote this poetry-filled work
Lalitlalām, a storehouse of ornaments (*bhūṣaṇa-dhāma*), for the
 pleasure of Bhao Singh.¹⁰⁵

Despite its brevity—the work hardly totals 400 verses—the *Lalitlalām* delivers a strong impact on several levels. Quite apart from the emphasis on pleasure referenced by the author himself, the work additionally contains some fine examples of *bhakti* poetry as well as many verses that allude to contemporary politics. It also had an educational mission: by virtue of its structure, the *Lalitlalām* purports to be a treatise on *alankāraśāstra*, a manual on the correct use of rhetorical tropes. Perhaps the Bundi king asked his court pandit Matirām for some lessons in the fine points of literature, for being a dignified Rajput king in Mughal India required not only displays of military might, but also of sophistication and connoisseurship. Commissioning Brajbhasha manuals on *kāvya* was one way to achieve this. These manuals also played a role in the education of the senses. Cultivating pleasure, or *bhoga*, was a longstanding kingly virtue in India.

and Cintāmaṇi are in Busch 2010, 100–8; Busch 2011, 188–96. In his *Jahāngīrjascandrikā*, Keśavdās performs his poetry for the Mughal emperor and he may have written the very work with that intention.

103. Matirām is also credited with several other minor works but scholars disagree about the attributions and patronage contexts, and there is inadequate historical information to adjudicate the matter. For a brief overview of his purported oeuvre see Sharma 1983, 5–6; McGregor 1984, 176–77.

104. Like Keśavdās, Matirām does not seem to suffer from a crisis of confidence. Elsewhere he refers to himself with similar expressions. See *Lalitlalām*, vv. 159, 184, 219, 224.

105. *Lalitlalām*, v. 38.

Matirām's slightly cryptic title *Lalitlālām*, here translated as "finest lover," may have been a reference to the concept of a *lalita nāyaka* (romantic hero) from Indian poetic theory, a flattering gesture toward the patron (for whom he actually uses the epithet *lalitlālām* in one verse) because it suggests that he is sophisticated, attractive to women, and knowledgeable in the ways of love.¹⁰⁶

In keeping with his ostensible educational mission, the poet devised an elaborate sequence of *lakṣaṇa* (definition verses) to explain to his patron the basics of Indian tropology. Most of the *alāṅkāras* under discussion originate in Sanskrit literary theory, but the poet does present a few *bhedas* (categories) of his own and otherwise updates the classical imagery with many interesting vernacular twists, particularly in the *udāharaṇa* (example verses) that accompany the definitions. A section of the work on *vakrokti* (oblique expression) begins as follows:

Vakrokti-lakṣaṇa

*śleṣa, kāku soṃ artha kī, racanā aura ju hoyā
bakra ukti soṃ jānie, gyāna salila matī dhoyā*

Śleṣa-udāharaṇa

*mere mana tuma basata hau, main na kiyau aparādha
tumhaiṃ doṣa ko deta, hari, hai yaha kāma asādha*

Definition of vakrokti

There is another type of composition that centers on multiple meanings or irony. Those who have purified their intelligence in the ocean of wisdom term this "oblique expression."

First example: multiple meanings (one possible reading)

You dwell in my heart, I have done nothing wrong.
Who is blaming you, Hari? This is a hopeless matter.

First example: multiple meanings (an alternate reading)

You have overpowered my heart, I have done nothing wrong.
Who is blaming you, Hari? This love/desire is unattainable.¹⁰⁷

The technique of *śleṣa* originates in Sanskrit poetics, but this instance of word play stems from special conditions of vernacular speech. The word *basata*

106. *Lalitlālām*, v. 250. Sharma 1983, 7, suggests other possible ways of understanding the compound, settling on *cāru-camatkār* (beautiful wonderment). Another proposal is that *lālām* here means *alāṅkāra*. A loose translation would then be "a manual on tropes suitable for those of refined sensibility." See Omprakash 1973, 339–40.

107. *Lalitlālām*, vv. 369–70.

is derived from the Braj root *bas-*, which means both to dwell (Sanskrit *vas*) and to overpower (Sanskrit *vaś*). The word *kāma*, for its part, can actually be derived three ways: as the *tadbhava* “action/matter” (Sanskrit *karma*), the *tatsama*, “love,” (Sanskrit *kāma*) and also from the Persian word *kām*, “desire.”¹⁰⁸ Vernacular language, which must be denigrated as *apabhraṣṭa* (corrupted) if viewed by the ancient ideology of Sanskrit purity, is a wonderful semantic tool for the early modern *rīti* poet in search of new *śleṣa* possibilities, a challenging poetic domain whose interpretation did indeed require, to cite Matirām, that both author and audience possess—an “intelligence purified in the ocean of wisdom”.

Some of Matirām’s example verses, far from merely elaborating on a theme from classical poetics, do an entirely different kind of work, doubling as highly political poems that feature his patron King Bhao Singh Hada or another member of the Bundi royal line. Like Keśavdās, Matirām is entirely silent about his sources, but he may have known the *Pratāparudrīya* of Vidyānātha and the *Ekāvalī* of Vidyādhara (both from the fourteenth-century Deccan), Sanskrit treatises on rhetoric in which political poetry is similarly embedded.¹⁰⁹ A slightly pedestrian illustration of the *ananvaya alaṅkāra*, a trope in which the *upameya* (object being compared) is the same as the *upamāna* (standard of comparison), doubles as a *vaṃśāvalī* of the Bundi kings:

The majesty of Surjan can be found in Surjan alone.
 Bhoj is like Bhoj in the determination (also pride) that fate
 accorded him.
 Says Matirām, Ratnesh resembles Ratnesh in accomplishments of
 the sword.
 Gopinath was a second Gopinath in filial duty.
 Satrusal can be compared to Satrusal when it comes to martial valor.
 I have seen the world but never did I see the luster of Bhao Singh,
 the Bhao Singh of kings.¹¹⁰

This verse illustrating the concept of an *upamā* does a lot more than reinforce a point about literary theory:

Divan (minister) Bhao Singh is the one Rajput whose spirit
 grows fourfold upon engaging in battle.

108. The similarities do have an etymological basis: Steingass derives Persian *kām* from Sanskrit *kāma*. Steingass 2007, 1009.

109. Matirām’s brother Cintāmaṇi Tripāṭhī cites the latter in his *Kavikulkalpatā*, another work of *alaṅkāraśāstra* in the characteristic *rīti* style. For a discussion of other possible sources, including Mammaṭa’s *Kāvyaprakāśa*, Viśvanātha’s *Sāhityadarpaṇa*, Jayadeva’s *Candrāloka*, and Appayadikṣita’s *Kuvalāyānanda*, see Sharma 1983, 6.

110. *Lalitlālām*, v. 54.

Matirām says, this is why the fame of Satrusal's son
 spreads in the circles of kings.
 The blazing heat of the Delhi sun has dried up the luster¹¹¹
 of Indian kings like water in a pond.
 Under such conditions, all kingly pride (*rāva maiṃ sarama*)
 has dissolved like salt in the ocean.¹¹²

While the Sanskrit literary heritage upon which so much of *rīti kāvya* is based had many ways of giving voice to *vīra rasa*, these poems and many others like them speak not so much of kingly classicism but of the here and now, indexing the extent to which political concerns were a core component of *rīti* aesthetics.¹¹³

As with other sub-imperial texts like the *Māncarīt* and the *Virsimhdevcarit*, the *Lalitlalām* contains important clues about the self-conceptions of local Rajput courts that were subject to Mughal rule. Some of Matirām's verses stress Bundi grandeur—one could even say Bundi independence. The extraliterary mission of an elaborate *būndī-varṇana* (description of Bundi), for instance, is to proclaim the beauty and sophistication of the capital city and, by extension, the exemplary nature of Bundi rule. In the words of Matirām:

jagat-bidita būndīnagara, sukha sampati ko dhāma
kalīyuga hūṃ maiṃ satyayuga, tahāṃ karata bisrāma
paṭhata sunata mana dai nigama, āgama, samṛti purāṇa (smṛti, purāṇa)
gīta-kabitta kalāni ko, tahāṃ saba loga sujāna...
tā nagari ko prabhu, baro hārā surajana rāva.
racyo eka saba gunina ko bara biraṃci samudāva

The city of Bundi is well known to the world for its wealth and
 happiness.
 The golden age reposes here, even in the iron age.
 The *Vedas*, *Purāṇas*, and authoritative traditions are recited, and all
 listen attentively.
 All are connoisseurs of singing, poetry, and the arts...
 Rao Surjan the great is the founder of the city.
 Lord Brahmā established there the finest talents (*gunina*).

111. The Braj word *pānīpa* means both water and luster.

112. *Lalitlalām*, v. 41. Keśavdās used similar imagery in the opening to his philosophical work *Vijnāngītā*, 1.17.

113. While, to be sure, not all *rīti* works are as political as this one, there are plenty of similar examples, including the *Śivrajbhūṣaṇ* (Ornament to Shivaji, 1673) of Matirām's brother Bhūṣaṇ, written for the famous Maratha king's coronation.

The 15-verse passage, too lengthy to quote in full here, further elaborates everything that makes Bundi an idyllic place: its architecture, painting, music, markets with purveyors of finely embroidered cloth, heart-ravishingly beautiful women, gardens, ponds, and even warbling song birds.¹¹⁴ With the exception of a single reference to luxury textiles (*jarakasa*, Persian *zarkash*, v. 13), Matirām's descriptions are very much composed in the stylized *kāvya* mode of a *nagara-varṇana*, lacking the more Mughalized specificity that we find in some parts of the *Māncarīt* and the *Virsimhdevcarīt*. There are no polo grounds in Matirām's Bundi capital; he prefers a more traditionally Indic representation of the city from classical *kāvya*.

Bundi had been a tributary state to the Mughals for nearly a century—since Rao Surjan Hada surrendered the Ranthambore Fort to Akbar in 1569—but a central point for this text is that there was no insurmountable blow to its stature. Matirām's poetic treatment of him and his son Bhoj, the first two Bundi kings who had to contend with Mughal power, emphasizes their independence. Rao Surjan, “ornament to the Chauhan dynasty,” is portrayed as a noble warrior and a model king of old, both *dhārmik* and *dānī* (law-abiding and munificent). Through a telling act of omission Matirām lets him off the hook for ceding Ranthambore to the Mughals: the incident—one much stressed in contemporary Persian sources—is completely elided from his Braj account.¹¹⁵ In the case of Rao Surjan's son Bhoj (r. 1585–1607/8), Matirām does not discuss the king's role as a military leader under Akbar, which is the main impression a Mughal text like the *Akbarnāmah* affords. Instead we are told that this Bundi ruler “protected the pride of the Hindus,” (*hinduna kī rākhī sarama*), “rendering lame the foot of the emperor's authority” (*sāhi ko hukuma-paga paṅga bhau*).¹¹⁶

In other cases—particularly for more recent generations who were deeply accustomed to the empire—Matirām emphasizes the more positive aspects of Mughal military service. Ratan Singh Hada (r. 1608–32) is said to have “prospered in the joys of imperial battles,” a remark expressed in fittingly Persianized Braj as *sāhani saum rana-raṅga maim jītyo bakhta-bilanda*.¹¹⁷ Even the death

114. *Lalitlālām*, vv. 6–22.

115. As insightfully noted by Cynthia Talbot 2012, the Sanskrit court poet Candrasekhara from an earlier generation was extremely selective in reporting how Bundi lost its independence to the Mughals. In his *Surjanacarita* Candrasekhara, downplays the siege of Ranthambore fort and Mughal *manṣabs* (administrative assignments) are recast as the king's pious acts in Hindu pilgrimage centers.

116. *Lalitlālām*, vv. 25–26.

117. *Lalitlālām*, v. 27. Many passages in the *Jahāngirnāmah* confirm that Ratan Singh was rewarded with generous *manṣabs* and titles, first “Sarbulandi Rai” and later “Ram Raj,” his leadership on campaigns in the Deccan and as governor of Burhanpur being particularly commended by the emperor. See pp. 177, 181, 304, 317, 394, 396, 407, 422, 427, 430, 433, 449.

of Satrusal Hada (r. 1632–58), the father of Matirām's patron, in the Mughal war of succession is given a strangely rosy spin when Matirām commemorates him as the “incarnation of Kshatriya dharma” (*chatra-dharma-avatāra*) and extols his having “held his ground on the battlefield, knowing it to be a Kshatriya Kashi—a city of liberation from transmigration for warriors (*jisa jāni kai chatrina kauṃ rana-kāsi*).”¹¹⁸ While the poet's verses about the earliest Hada kings tend either to ignore the Mughal relationship or to contest it, by Matirām's account more recent generations were not only resigned to these political realities but even welcomed them. Bhao Singh, for instance, is presented as the “protector of imperial honour” (*pati pātasāha kī*) and the [upholder of the] reputation (*ijati*, from Persian ‘izzat) of the Umraos, the Mughal nobility.¹¹⁹ If you can't beat them, you might as well join them.

A close study of the language and imagery of this *kāvya* reveals the complexity of the Bundi court's cultural and political identity. The text weaves in and out of contemporary and classical registers, with the latter serving to stress how the Bundi kings were paradigmatic Hindu rulers. Bhao Singh, like virtually every king in *kāvya* and *prāsasti* texts, is wise (*parama prabīna*); a paragon of dharma (*dharamadhurīna*); kind to those in need (*dīnabandhu*); and a fierce warrior who routs his enemies (*dujjana bihāla kari*). This last expression is gently Persianized (one meaning of *behāl* is flustered), but elsewhere the poet's frequent use of *tatsama* (pure Sanskrit) compounds for capturing royal stateliness is undoubtedly a deliberate invocation of ancient political registers. In some places the poet emphasizes the Hindu identity of his patron (recall the line cited earlier in which Bhao Singh's forefather Bhoj was celebrated for his protection of Hindu honor). Indeed, the first time we encounter Bhao Singh Hada in the text Matirām proclaims him to be the shield of all the Hindus (*saba hinduna kī dhāla*) and the protector of dharma and correct religious observance in an era of domination by Turks.¹²⁰ On other occasions the poet types his patron *hinduvāna pati* (lord of the Hindus) and, in a more Mughal political register, *divāna hinduvāna ko* (“minister” or, more loosely, “leader” of the Hindus).¹²¹ If all of this is suggestive for its signaling of a protectionist stance toward Hindu groups, Bhao Singh is elsewhere intriguingly typed *divāna duhūṃ dīnani kauṃ* (leader of the two religious communities), clarifying that any celebration of Hinduness did

118. *Lalitlālām*, vv. 31; 33. Elsewhere in the work Satrusal is shown protecting Hindu temples and cows. See, for instance, v. 272. Satrusal's death is also given brief attention in a Mughal source: *Ma'āşir al-umarā* Vol. 1, p. 405.

119. *Lalitlālām*, v. 131. And when his father died fighting for Dara Shikoh, the crucial point is that he died honourably (*rāja rākhi*, v. 195). Cf. the expression *rāja-lāja ko nidhāna* in v. 262.

120. *Lalitlālām*, vv. 34–35.

121. *Lalitlālām*, vv. 36, 79.

not at the same time entail enmity toward Islam.¹²² Matirām powerfully encapsulates the multilayered self-conception of a *manṣabdār* like Bhao Singh in a telling string of epithets: *jānapati*, *dānapati*, *hārā hinduvānapati*, *dillipati-dalapati*, *balābandhapati hai* (“the Hada king is discerning and munificent, he is lord of the Hindus, the emperor’s general, and king over the Aravalli Mountains”).¹²³ Again, note the mixture of traditional kingly values like connoisseurship and liberality with some newer requisites that reflect early modern political conditions. The juxtaposition of *hinduvānapati*, *dillipati-dalapati*, and *balābandhapati*, quite apart from the terms’ incantatory sonorousness, is a telling indicator that being a vaunted “Hindu” leader was not in the least incompatible with being a Mughal army commander. Also note the stress on a more local identity: *balābandhapati*, “King over Balabandh, that is, the Aravalli Mountain range in western India.”¹²⁴ Elsewhere in the *Lalitlālām* one finds variations of this epithet, including *balābandha sulatāna/suratāna*, *balābandha pātasāha*, *balābandha ko divāna*, which reconfigure Persian political vocabulary by investing it with a new local salience.¹²⁵ Aurangzeb may rule Delhi, but Bhao Singh is Sultan of Bundi and the nearby Aravallis.

Staging power locally like this, from within the constraints of imperial service, emerges as one of the main thrusts of Matirām’s work, and was, we may presume, a vital concern for his Bundi patron. The claim to being Sultan of the Aravalli mountains salvaged a degree of sovereignty for a clan of Rajput kings who spent the better part of their years fighting the Mughal wars (the Bundi kings were particularly active in the Deccan campaigns). In one of his final verses Matirām presents his patron’s authority in terms of precisely this combination of local sovereignty and Mughal service:

kahai matirāma dilipati kauṃ baṛhāi deta
satrusāla nanda balābandha sulatāna hai

Matirām says,
the son of Satrusal increases the stature of the king of Delhi.
He is emperor of Aravalli.¹²⁶

122. *Lalitlālām*, v.140. Keśavdās had characterized Emperor Jahangir in a similar manner in *Jahāngīrjāscandrikā*, vv. 31, 168.

123. *Lalitlālām*, v. 36.

124. *Balābandh* is a rare word meaning “Aravalli.” See *Hindī śabdśāgar* Vol. 7, 3409.

125. This idea of the Bundi kings being supreme in their region occurs repeatedly in the work. See for instance *Lalitlālām*, vv. 36, 52, 58, 74, 103, 165, 398. Such hybridized Islamicate titles are reminiscent of *rāya-suratāna* (Sultan among Hindu kings), an epithet of the Vijayanagara ruler Kṛṣṇadevarāya. See Wagoner 1996.

126. *Lalitlālām*, v. 398.

If in the grand scheme of Mughal statecraft Bhao Singh and the other rulers of Bundi were but small cogs in an enormous military machine, political authority looked rather different when viewed from a Rajput's own territory. It was on home turf in places precisely like Bundi, away from the urban strongholds of Mughal power and beyond the reach of Persian chroniclers—indeed, precisely in a Brajbhasha *kāvya*—where a Rajput *manṣabdār* and his poet could both give voice to concerns about contemporary political life and make claims about their own royal and cultural stature.¹²⁷

E. Conclusion

The consolidation of Mughal power catapulted regional rulers like Man Singh Kachhwaha of Amber, Bir Singh Deo Bundela of Orchha, and the Hada rulers of Bundi into a new orbit of political relationships. In this transformed world, Rajput kings had to address multiple constituencies: they negotiated their prestige vis-à-vis the Mughals, who dictated many of the political terms; they jostled for power with rival Rajput houses;¹²⁸ they also displayed their royal worthiness to members of the local court and the *prajā* (subjects) of their home territory. These were complicated political maneuverings that required a complicated array of cultural idioms. Under Mughal rule Rajput kings were widely exposed to Persianate culture—whether attending the emperor's court or serving in imperial military campaigns. While some, like Raja Jaswant Singh of Jodhpur and the Maratha King Shivaji, frequently wrote official letters in Persian, early Rajput kings did not sponsor Persian literature to a significant extent.¹²⁹ Persian did not become their primary cultural language, at least not the one they chose to cultivate when they were back in their capitals, away from the Mughal wars. The kingly virtues of Mughal *manṣabdārs* were best expressed in non-Persianate literary idioms. From around 1600 the generally Brahmin class of *rīti* poets—trained in Sanskrit and thus well positioned to draw upon the political epistemes

127. Studies of Rajput architectural patronage similarly reveal how the regional kings of Mughal India negotiated multiple identities in local and cosmopolitan settings. See Asher 1992; Asher and Talbot 2006, 148–51; Rothfarb 2012.

128. Recall how Keśavdās explicitly situates Bir Singh Deo Bundela in relation to contemporary Kachhwaha and Mewar kings in *Virṣiṃhdevcarit*, 1.2, cited earlier. Matirām also alludes in several places to competition among *manṣabdārs*, as when Bhao Singh is said to inspire their envy (*manasabadārana ke mana lalakata haiṃ*, *Lalitlālām*, v. 122).

129. One does encounter exceptions to this rule, and certainly there is evidence for Rajput engagement with Persian literature, as when Jahangir mentions that Rai Manohar Kachhwaha was able to compose Persian poetry. *Jahāngirnāmāh*, p. 30.

of Sanskrit literature—began to forge a new tradition of kingly *kāvya* that spoke to the needs of the present in a suitably classical albeit updated idiom. Some, like Narottam, made it clear that this was what they were doing. Keśavdās and Matirām, for their part, left to posterity the interpretation of their actions but in either case there isn't much room for doubt that they actively invented a new classical idiom of Hindi.

Even if the basic poetic structures of Braj and Sanskrit *kāvya* are similar, distinct new expressive opportunities were afforded by the vernacular medium, very few of which have been theorized in a satisfactory manner. In premodern times Sanskrit was revered as the *suravāṇī*, language of the gods, perfect in form and set in grammatical structure, whereas Braj was a lowly *naravāṇī*, a language of men, imperfect and changeable. Some of the literary power of Brajbhasha courtly poetry often ironically stems from its very "corruptness"—a feature that "perfect" Sanskrit with its linguistic fixity was by definition not supposed to exhibit.¹³⁰ Persian and Arabic words were used creatively to deepen the semantic textures of Brajbhasha *kāvya*, which enabled the development of a new, more hybrid literary register. The interface with the Indo-Muslim political sphere is yet another place where *rīti* poetry departed dramatically from earlier heritage. The practice of *kāvya* in this period necessitated that poets accommodate polo, Islamicate textiles, Persian political vocabulary, and various other signs of the Mughal state with which Rajput courts had been embroiled since the sixteenth century. Political relationships had cultural effects. This linguistic and cultural hybridity constituted one of the most dramatic breaks from Sanskrit in the system of *rīti* poetics, which otherwise had so much in common with classical traditions—to the extent that perhaps fully half of Braj court *kāvya* consists of textbooks on *alāṅkāraśāstra*.

We have explored here the deep ties between the *rīti* style of *kāvya* and the self-presentation of three specific Rajput courts. But the approach is generalizable. There are dozens if not hundreds of instances of similar texts from comparable local courts in the early modern period, which in addition to their noteworthy literary features reveal how culture and power operated outside of Persianate Delhi, Agra, or Lahore. That the Kachhwahas of Amber and other leading Rajput *manṣabdārs* contributed in decisive ways to the consolidation of the Mughal state from Akbar's day is an inarguable fact of early modern Indian history. Less known is a related issue from literary history: the needs of *manṣabdārī* court culture were a substantial factor in the rise of new vernacular forms of *kāvya* during the Mughal period.

The textual ramifications of these new zones of political contact are barely understood, as are the relationships between *rīti* and contemporary Persian texts.

130. Sanskrit could, however, take on shades of its locale, as when writers in Tamil lands inflected their *kāvya* in distinctly regional ways. See Bronner and Shulman 2006.

It can be no accident that the earliest instances of *rīti* literature stem from either the Mughal court or the *manṣabdārī* Rajput courts that were in close dialogue with the Mughals.¹³¹ We have seen in the case of Amber, Orchha, and Bundi that these new textual forms are partly a dialogue with Mughal power and it is certainly arresting to consider that the *Māncarīt* of Narottam was written at virtually the same time as Abū al-Faḥl's far more famous *Akbarnāmah* (composed between 1589–95). New political configurations demanded new types of textuality. The Bundi rulers were patronizing Sanskrit *kāvya* in the 1590s and sponsored a *Surjanacaritra*, only later turning to Brajbhasha. Within a decade—at just about the time Jahangir began writing his memoirs, in fact—the newly coronated Bundela king commissioned a biography from Keśavdās. This brings us to a last point about these texts. Like the Persian memoirs and *tārīkh* (chronicle) traditions, Brajbhasha *kāvya* was history—"history in the vernacular"—produced in accordance with an epistemology that, while hardly historicist in a Rankean sense, constituted a significant narrativization of the past for its local readership.¹³² Narottam Kavi wrote with tremendous poetic flair of Man Singh's victories at Haldighati and in the far-off lands of Kabul and Bihar. In recounting the more local struggles between Ram Shah and Bir Singh Deo Bundela, Keśavdās used a variety of tactics that range from straightforward reporting to referencing the *Rāmāyaṇa* (considered both *kāvya* and *itihāsa* by the Indian tradition), apparently in order to lace his work with intertextual irony. With its interweaving of *śāstrīk* threads into a narrative that also displays considerable verisimilitude, Keśavdās's is a challenging but rewarding type of history to parse. Although couched in a very different genre—a textbook on classical poetic theory—the *Lalitlalām* too contains many references to Mughal politics (the infamous succession struggle waged between Aurangzeb and Dara Shikoh is a case in point) and is also a window onto the complexities of *manṣabdārī* service under several generations of Mughal rulers. *Rīti* literature in Brajbhasha, with its special combination of classical and contemporary idioms, is testimony to the enduring relevance of *kāvya* in the Indian tradition.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Yigal Bronner and David Shulman for inviting me—a vernacular outlier—to a fascinating conference at Hebrew University in Jerusalem at which I benefited from the insights of specialists in Sanskrit *kāvya*. A

131. The critical role of Mughal patrons in the development of classical Hindi courtly styles is discussed in Busch 2011, chapter 4.

132. Cf. Rao et al. 2003. The phrase "history in the vernacular" is that of Aquil and Chatterjee 2008.

fellowship jointly awarded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Institute of Indian Studies enabled some of the research that informs the arguments in this essay. A summer stipend from the Vice Presidential Office of Arts and Sciences at Columbia University also supported the effort. Special thanks go to my colleagues Cynthia Talbot and Frances Taft for their comments and also to my research assistants Justin Ben-Hain, Divya Cherian, Ryan Damron, and Vivek Gupta.

References

Primary Sources

- A'in-i akbari* of Abū al-Faẓl. tr. H. Blochmann and H.S. Jarrett. Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1994.
- Gītāgovinda* of Jayadeva. ed. Narayan Ram Acharya. 9th ed. Bombay: Nirnay Sagar Press, 1949.
- Hindī śabdśāgar*. ed. Shyamsundardas, Balakrishnan Bhatt, Amir Singh, and Ramchandra Shukla. Varanasi: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 1965.
- Kādambarī* of Bāṇa. With the Hindi comm. of Pandey Shri Ramtej Shastri. Varanasi: Chaukamba Vidyabhavan, 1985.
- Kavipriyā* of Keśavdās. In Vol. 1 of *Keśavgranthāvalī*. ed. Vishvanathprasad Mishra. Allahabad: Hindustani Academy, 1954.
- Kāvyaḍarśa* of Daṇḍin. ed. Ramchandra Mishra. 2nd ed. Varanasi: Chaukhamba Vidya Bhavan, 1996.
- Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā* of Keśavdās. ed. Kishorilal. Allahabad: Sahitya Bhavan, 1994.
- Jahāṅgīrnāmāh* of Jahangir. tr. Wheeler Thackston. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Lalitlālām* of Matirām. ed. Omprakash Sharma. Delhi: Sanmarg Prakashan, 1983.
- Ma'āshir al-umarā* of Navāb Ṣamṣām al-Dualah Shāhnawāz Khān. tr. H. Beveridge. Vol. 1. Patna: Janaki Prakashan, 1979.
- Mālavikāgnimitra* of Kālidāsa. ed. Kashinath Pandurang Parab. 8th ed. Bombay: Nirnay Sagar Press, 1935.
- Māncarīt* of Narottam. In *Māncarītāvalī: amber ke suprasiddh rājā mānsimh ke carit se sambandhit pāñc rājasthānī racnāom kā sañkalan*. ed. Gopalnarayan Bahura. Jaipur: Maharaja Savai Man Singh II Sangrahalay, 1990.
- Māncarītāvalī: amber ke suprasiddh rājā mānsimh ke carit se sambandhit pāñc rājasthānī racnāom kā sañkalan*. ed. Gopalnarayan Bahura. Jaipur: Maharaja Savai Man Singh II Sangrahalay, 1990.
- Meghadūta* of Kālidāsa. ed. Sushil Kumar De. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1970.
- Muntakhab al-tavārikh* of Abd al-Qādir Bādā'ūnī. tr. W. H. Lowe. Vol. 2. Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1924.
- Padmāvat* of Malik Muḥammad Jāyasī. ed. Mataprasad Gupta. Allahabad: Sahitya Bhavan, 2006.
- Raghuvamśa* of Kālidāsa. ed. Rewa Prasad Dwivedi. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1993.

- Rāmcandracandrikā* of Keśavdās. In Vol. 2 of *Keśavgranthāvali*. ed. Vishvanathprasad Mishra. Allahabad: Hindustani Academy, 1955.
- Ratnāvali* of Harṣa. ed. M. R. Kale. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996.
- Vāsavadattā* of Subhandu. ed. R. V. Krishnamachariar. Srirangam: Sri Vani Vilas Press, 1906.
- Vijñāṅgitā* of Keśavdās. In Vol. 3 of *Keśavgranthāvali*. ed. by Vishvanathprasad Mishra. Allahabad: Hindustani Academy, 1959.
- Vikramāṅkadevacarita* of Bilhaṇa. ed. George Bühler. Bombay: Government Central Book Depot, 1875.
- Virsimbhdevacarit* of Keśavdās. ed. Kishorilal. Allahabad: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, 1997.

Secondary Sources

- Aitken, Molly. "Pardah and Portrayal: Rajput Women as Subjects, Patrons, and Collectors," *Artibus Asiae* 62(2) 2002, 247–80.
- Alam, Muzaffar and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. *Writing the Mughal World*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011.
- Aquil, Raziuddin and Partha Chatterjee. eds. *History in the Vernacular*. Delhi: Permanent Black, 2008.
- Asher, Catherine. "The Architecture of Rāja Mān Singh: A Study of Sub-imperial Patronage," in *The Powers of Art Patronage in Indian Culture*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- . "Authority, Victory and Commemoration: the Temples of Rāja Mān Singh," *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 3(3) 1995, 25–35.
- Asher, Catherine, and Cynthia Talbot. *India before Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Bahura, Gopalnarayan. "Prāstāvik paricay (introduction)." In *Māncarītāvali: amḍer ke suprasiddh rājā mānsiṃh ke carit se sambandhit pām̃c rājasthānī racnāom̃ kā saṅkalan*. Jaipur: Maharaja Savai Man Singh II Sangrahalay, 1990.
- Bhadani, B. L. "The Profile of Akbar in Contemporary Rajasthani Literature," *Social Scientist* 20(9/10) 1992, 46–53.
- Bhatnagar, Renu. *Keśav-kāvya par saṃskṛt sāhitya ka prabhāu*. Delhi: Parimal Publications, 1991.
- Bronner, Yigal. *Extreme Poetry: the South Asian Movement of Simultaneous Narration*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Bronner, Yigal and David Shulman. "A Cloud Turned Goose," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 43(1) 2006, 1–30.
- Busch, Allison. "Literary Responses to the Mughal Imperium: The Historical Poems of Keśavdās," *South Asia Research* 25(1) 2005, 31–54.
- . "Riti and Register," in *Hindi-Urdu before the Divide*, ed. Francesca Orsini. Delhi: Orient Longman, 2010.
- . *Poetry of Kings: The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- . "Portrait of a Raja in a Badshah's World: Amrit Rai's Biography of Man Singh (1585)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 55(2–3) 2012, 287–328.
- Case, Margaret. ed. *Govindadeva: A Dialogue in Stone*. New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1996.

- Horstmann, Monika. "The Rāmānandīs of Galtā (Jaipur, Rajasthan)," in *Multiple Histories: Culture and Society in the Study of Rajasthan*, eds Lawrence A. Babb, Varsha Joshi and Michael W. Meister. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2002.
- Kamphorst, Janet. "In Praise of Death," Leiden University, Leiden, PhD. diss., 2008.
- Kolff, Dirk. *Naikar, Rajput and Sepoy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- . *The Language of Indrajit of Orcha*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.
- McGregor, R.S. *Hindi Literature from its Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1984.
- . *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- O'Hanlon, Rosalind. "Cultural Pluralism, Empire and the State in Early Modern South Asia," *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 44 (3) 2007, 363–81.
- Omprakash, Dr. "Alaṅkāra nirūpak ācārya." In *Hindī sāhitya kā brhad itihās*, ed. Nagendra, Vol. 6. Varanasi: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 1973.
- Pauwels, Heidi. "A Tale of Two Temples: Mathurā's Keśavadeva and Orchhā's Caturbhujadeva," in *Religious Cultures in Early Modern India*, eds Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook. London and New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Pollock, Sheldon. "In Praise of Poets: on the History and Function of the *Kaviprasamsa*," in *Ānanda Bhārati*, eds B. Channakeshava and H. V. Nagaraja Rao. Mysore: Dr. K. Krishnamoorthy Felicitation Committee, 1995.
- . "Introduction," in *Rāmāyaṇa Book Two, Ayodhyā*. New York: New York University and JJC Foundation, 2005.
- . *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- Narayana Rao, Velcheru, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India*. New York: Other Press, 2003.
- Rothfarb, Edward Leland. *Orchha and Beyond: Design at the Court of Raja Bir Singh Dev Bundela*. Mumbai: Marg Foundation, 2012.
- Saran, Richard D. and Norman P. Ziegler. *The Merṭiyo Rāthors of Merto, Rājasthān: Select Translations Bearing on the History of a Rajput Family, 1462–1660*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 2001.
- Sharma, Omprakash. "Mahākavi matirām," in *Lalitlālām*. Delhi: Sanmarg Prakashan, 1983.
- Snell, Rupert. "Devotion Rewarded: The *Sudāmā-Carit* of Narottamdas," in *The Indian Narrative: Perspectives and Patterns*, eds Christopher Shackle and Rupert Snell. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992.
- Stasik, Danuta. *The Infinite Story: Past and Present of the Rāmāyaṇas in Hindi*. New Delhi: Manohar, 2009.
- Steingass, F. *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary*. Delhi: Manohar, 2007.
- Talbot, Cynthia. "The Mewar Court's Construction of History," in *Kingdom of the Sun*, ed. Joanna Williams. San Francisco: Asian Art Museum—Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture, 2007.
- . "Justifying Defeat: A Rajput Perspective on the Age of Akbar," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 55(2–3) 2012, 329–68.
- Wagoner, Phillip B. "'Sultan among Hindu Kings': Dress, Titles, and the Islamicization of Hindu Culture at Vijayanagara," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55(4) 1996, 851–80.
- Ziegler, Norman P. "Marvari Historical Chronicles: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of Rajasthan," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 13(2) 1976, 219–50.

23

Poetry and Play in Kavikarṇapūra's Play Within the Play*

GARY TUBB

The *Caitanyacandrodaya*, a play depicting the life of the charismatic saint Kṛṣṇa Caitanya, was completed in 1572 and was reportedly first performed in July of that year during the *rathayātrā* festival of the Jagannātha temple in Puri, having been commissioned for that purpose by the Gajapati king of Orissa, Pratāparudra. Near the end of the play, the king himself, standing in the same temple, obligingly encapsulates many of the themes we have been discussing:

King—(listening) What is this song?

Kāśīmīśra—It's about the sweetness of the sound of the
Lord's flute. Your Majesty doesn't understand it because it's
in Bengali.

King—This is amazing, that he,
The fair one reflecting himself
as Kṛṣṇa himself
in the minds of the pious,
is dancing right here,
manifesting Vṛndāvana's *rasa*
here on Nīlādri—

* Portions of this essay were presented in a paper entitled "*Yamaka* in the *Caitanyacandrodaya*" at the 217th Annual Meeting of the American Oriental Society in San Antonio, March, 2007.