

9. Listening for the Context: Tuning in to the Reception of *Riti* Poetry¹

Allison Busch

Beginning in the sixteenth century, Indian poets began to cultivate new styles of vernacular literature that became spectacularly successful at the courts of the Mughal period (1526-1857). Instead of adopting the Sanskrit language preferred by their forebears, the members of this (generally) Brahman community chose to express themselves in Brajbhasha, a literary dialect of Hindi. And thus was born a style of poetry today known as “*riti*”, so called because of the tradition’s signature genre, the *ritigranth* or poetry manual that drew significant inspiration from classical *alankarashastra* (rhetoric).

At first glance, the performative dimensions of these often highly scholastic texts are less obvious than those of their *bhakti* (“devotional”) counterparts (see Hawley and Novetzke in this volume). *Bhakti* literature was often set to *ragas* and collectively sung, whereas it is the exception rather than the rule for music to figure overtly in the transmission of courtly Hindi literature. Virtually no paratextual evidence points towards musical accompaniment. Nor do *riti* authors generally discuss the connections between poetry and music, despite their prolix discourses on nearly every

1 Research for this contribution was supported by grants from the American Institute of Indian Studies in conjunction with the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Columbia University Summer Grant Program in the Humanities. Special thanks go to Shefalika Awasthi, Pankaj Sharma, Chandramani Singh, and Giles Tillotson for their assistance at the Jaipur Pothikhana. I am grateful to Francesca Orsini for her detailed feedback and also to my research assistants Justin Ben-Hain, Ronnie Dreyer, and Christine Marrewa Karwoski.

other topic, from figures of speech (*alankara*) to characters (*nayikas* and *nayakas*) to metrics (*chhand*) to literary mood (*rasa*).²

And yet for those with eyes to see—or, more aptly—ears to listen, it is possible to reconstruct some of the aural landscape of early modern Hindi court culture. Some genres, like genealogy and panegyric, have embedded performative features and appear insipid or even unintelligible if confined to the written page. Occasionally one also finds suggestive textual evidence about the performance cultures of early modern India. I begin with a few general examples culled from the extensive oeuvre of Keshavdas—widely hailed as the progenitor of Hindi’s *riti* style. Keshavdas was employed by the rulers of Orchha, a small regional kingdom that, like many others, was incorporated into the Mughal Empire during the reign of Akbar (r.1556-1605). Select poems by other *riti* poets like Amrit Rai, Narottamdas, and Padmakar, some marked by dazzling aural acrobatics, will confirm some of the evidence about courtly performance that we see in Keshavdas. Another approach is to consider how court poetry, like music, functioned as a repertoire that could be tailored to suit different contexts, as with the poetic competitions known as *samasyapurti*. A range of disparate sources, including Sanskrit poems and treatises on rhetoric, Brajbhasha song texts and commentaries, as well as memories from the Persian tradition, uncover further intriguing signs of the reception contexts for *riti* literature. We encounter recitations and other types of “tellings”: debates from within a *mahfil*, snatches from long-ago conversations between an author and his patron, as well as hints about what teachers told their students and their styles of imparting knowledge (see also Pellò in this volume).

Tellings in the Texts of Keshavdas

Keshavdas’s *Kavipriyā* (*Handbook for Poets*, 1601), a foundational Brajbhasha work in the *riti* style, is a good place to begin this investigation. Sanskrit *kāvya* (poetry) and the formal vernacular poetry traditions that partially derive from it are unthinkable without a written textual culture,³ but certain

2 A rare exception is the *Kāvyarās* attributed to Jai Singh (probably not one of the famous Kachhwaha kings by that name), which concludes with a short section on *raga* and *svara* (musical notes); *Kāvyarās*, vv. 501-21, ed. by Devendra (Jodhpur: Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, 2002), pp. 149-51.

3 When it comes to early modern Hindi, Keshavdas’s profoundly transformative contributions to a phenomenon that Sheldon Pollock has called “literarization” cannot be overestimated. Pollock distinguishes literization—simply writing the vernacular—

elements of Keshavdas's poetry also bear strong performative markers. Take the *Kavipriyā*'s opening chapter on royal genealogy (*rajavamsha*), which can be seen as stemming both from documentary compulsion and a ritualistic urge to orally proclaim the glory and longevity of his patrons:

brahmādika kī binaya teṃ, harana sakala bhuvabhāra
sūraja-baṃsa karyo pragaṭa, rāmacandra avatāra

tinakeṃ kula kalikālaripu, kahi 'kesava' ranadhīra
gaharavāra ihi khyāti juta, pragaṭa bhayo nṛpa bīra

karana nṛpati tinakeṃ bhae, dharanī-dharma-prakāsa
jīti sabai jagatī, karyo bārānasī nivāsa

pragaṭa karana tīratha bhayo, jaga meṃ jinake nāma
tinakeṃ arjunapāla nṛpa, bhae mahonī grāma

garhakumḍāra tinakeṃ bhae, rājā sāhana pāla
sahaja indra tinakeṃ bhae, kahi 'kesava' ripukāla

At the request of Brahma and the other gods
and to lighten the suffering of the world,
[Lord Vishnu] incarnated himself as Rama,
[the first king of] the solar dynasty.

Keshavdas says, that dynasty gave rise to King Bir of Gahadavala fame,
Fearless in battle, an enemy of wayward times.

He had a son named Karan—the very embodiment of virtue on earth.
He conquered the entire world and made his home in Varanasi.

Karan sponsored a pilgrimage place, known in the world after his name.
He had a son named Arjunpal, who settled
the village of Mahoni [in Bundelkhand].

He had a son named Sahanpal, [founder] of Garhkundar.
Keshavdas says, his son was like Indra himself, a destroyer of enemies.⁴

Keshavdas continues in this vein for thirty or so verses before reaching his own contemporaries. The continuous string of *dohas* (couplets) and the

from literarization, the forging of literary discourse. See Sheldon Pollock, *Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), p. 298.

4 Keshavdas, *Kavipriyā*, vv. 1.6-10, ed. by Vishvanathprasad Mishra (Allahabad: Hindustani Academy, 1954), pp. 94-95. In the last line *sahaja indra* can also be taken as a proper name (and some manuscripts read *sahaja karana* instead). All translations from the Hindi are my own, unless otherwise specified.

trochaic cadences of the end rhyme stress the continuity of the lineage over countless generations and produce an almost ritualistic effect, as do tag phrases such as *tinakem*, a recurring honorific genitive (highlighted in bold type) that links one generation to the next.⁵

One strategy, then, for determining the likely mode of reception of a text is to try to identify potential performative features. Another is to be alert to references *within texts* that bring into view the importance of performance in the daily life of Indian courts. For instance, in the same chapter of the *Kavipriyā*, Keshavdas concludes his description of Orchha dynastic history with a detour into the musical culture sponsored by his patron. Raja Indrajit, the poet proclaims, “had a full command of music and gathered together an assembly (*akhāro*) [of talented people]”. This is the first attribute he mentions, as if he saw it as his royal patron’s special distinguishing feature.⁶ Equally if not more interesting, Keshavdas also composes an extensive paean to a group of six female courtesans (*patura*), celebrated variously as musicians, dancers, and poet-composers, whose talents animated the cultural life of that court:⁷

The fingers of Rangray are the epitome of expertise.
 As soon as she touches the drum, the room comes to life with sound.
 Rangmurti’s lovely feet dance to the beat of Rangray’s drum.
 They are perfectly synchronised,
 having mastered the study of music in tandem.
 The experts have expounded every theoretical aspect of music—
 Rangmurti reigns over them all, embodying perfection in her dance poses.
 These courtesans are skilled in dancing, singing, and playing the vina.
 They are all studious [or: they all recite] and the incomparable
 Pravinray composes poetry.⁸

5 As in “*tinakem*... *bhae* [of X was born]”, that is, X had a son.

6 Keshavdas, *Kavipriyā*, v. 1.41 (1954), p. 97.

7 Ibid., vv. 1.42-61, pp. 97-99. On the figure of the *patura* (also *patara*), see Premalata Sharma, ‘Sampādakīya bhūmikā’, in *Sahasras*, ed. by Premalata Sharma (New Delhi: Sangit Natak Akademi, 1972), pp. 125-29. Skilled female performers (some of them acquired through the slave trade or conquest) were highly prized status symbols in this period, according to Ramya Sreenivasan, ‘Drudges, Dancing Girls, Concubines: Female Slaves in Rajput Polity, 1500-1850’, in *Slavery and South Asian History*, ed. by Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 140-46.

8 Keshavdas, *Kavipriyā*, vv. 1.53-56 (1954), p. 98. Additional verses from this passage are translated in Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 39.

The last line is ambiguous. Often the Brajbhasha term *kavitt* simply means “poetry”, but this was precisely the period when one of the premier *riti* metres, a quatrain known as the *kavitt*, was gaining a wide following.⁹ *Kavitts* (along with *savaiyas*, another popular verse that became all the rage in courtly literature) have a distinctly musical rhythm. They are assumed to have been sung or chanted,¹⁰ and to this day they comprise part of the *kathak* dance repertoire.

Another major work by Keshavdas, the *Vīrsim̐hdevcarit* (1607), an idealised biography of Indrajit’s brother Raja Bir Singh Deo Bundela (r.1605-1627), contains countless references to performed poetry. Traversing the narrative in various places is an almost bewildering array of bard-like figures with names like “*magadh-sut*”, “*bandani ke put*”, “*bandijan*”, and “*dasaundhi*”. The division of labour among these various court professionals is not always easy to fathom over the gulf of centuries, but a few details can be made out. Keshavdas informs us that the *magadh-sut* and *bandani ke put* called out benedictions (*baranata jaya/jaya bolata*) to the king at the commencement of a polo match.¹¹ Later in the same scene, a musician beats his drum in celebration and a *baital* (i.e. Baitalik, a panegyrist) commends Bir Singh’s prowess at polo with a recitation (*par̐hyau gīta*).¹² The tasks of the *bandijan* included waking up the royal household and praising the king as he entered the *darbar*.¹³ During the coronation scene that caps the work, a *dasaundhi* named Sahibray is honoured with a gift of cloth.¹⁴ Dr Kishorilal, who wrote a painstaking modern commentary on this complex work,

9 Tulsidas, for instance, composed an entire collection of quatrains, his *Kavitāvalī*, within just a decade or so of the *Kavipriyā*. See Imre Bangha, ‘Writing Devotion: The Dynamics of Textual Transmission in the *Kavitāvalī* of Tulsīdās’, in *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia: Explorations in the Intellectual History of India and Tibet, 1500-1800*, ed. by Sheldon Pollock (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 144-46.

10 On the *kavitt*, see R.S. McGregor, *Hindi Literature from its Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1984), p. 118; Rameshchandra Sharma, *Hindī kavitt-sāhitya kā vikās* (Jaipur: Aruna Prakashan, 2007), pp. 23-24, 25-31, 51-60.

11 Keshavdas, *Vīrsim̐hdevcarit*, ed. by Kishorilal (Allahabad: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, 1997), v. 19.3; here and elsewhere I refer to this edition, unless otherwise noted.

12 Keshavdas, *Vīrsim̐hdevcarit*, vv. 19.17-18 (1997), p. 379.

13 Ibid., vv. 21.16-17, 26.48, pp. 402, 484. Other *riti* works suggest that *bandijan* had additional roles, for this same term is used to describe the performers of a *virudavali* in a military environment, discussed below in Padmakar’s *Pratāpsim̐hvirudāvalī*, in *Padmākarganthāvalī*, ed. by Vishvanathprasad Mishra (Varanasi: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 1959).

14 Keshavdas, *Vīrsim̐hdevcarit*, v. 33.23 (1997), p. 596.

glosses the *dasaundhi* as a *charan*,¹⁵ who along with *bhats* were charged with keeping written genealogical records and reciting poetry at Rajput courts.¹⁶

The presence of these various figures seems to indicate that performed poetry was a staple of daily life at Orchha,¹⁷ but it is not clear whether Keshavdas always records the actual practices of his court, for in some cases he may simply have been emulating the normative descriptions of Sanskrit *kavya*, in which it is expected that perfect kings have stately assemblies, and their courts should naturally bustle with devoted retainers.¹⁸ Although he never cites his classical sources directly, he had carefully studied authorities such as Kalidasa, Bana, and Dandin. And for Keshavdas the encounter with Sanskrit classics was through texts, not tellings: he knew them because he read them. The assiduous copying of manuscripts and commentaries throughout the early modern period illustrates how *readership* was absolutely central to literary culture.

In an elaborate description of the court of Bir Singh Deo Bundela, Keshavdas even mentions Orchha's flourishing book culture: "*baiṭhe lekhaka likhata apāra dasa sata sahasa lakṣa lipikāra*" [There sat countless writers writing, hundreds and thousands of them].¹⁹ Words such as

15 Ibid.. This meaning is confirmed by R.S. McGregor, *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 485, and *Hindīśabdsāgar*, ed. by Shyamsundardas, Balakrishnan Bhatt, Amir Singh, and Ramchandra Shukla (Varanasi: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 1965), p. 2236. The term is evidently attested in both Jayasi and Sur.

16 The functions of Bhats and Charans are briefly described in Norman Ziegler, 'The Seventeenth-century Chronicles of Mārvāra: A Study in the Evolution and Use of Oral Traditions in Western India', *History in Africa* 3, 1976, pp. 129-31, 137-38; Janet Kamphorst, *In Praise of Death* (PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2008), pp. 31-36, 221-30, 256-60.

17 In a few scenes Keshavdas also employs a considerable amount of technical terminology from music and dance. See, for instance, Keshavdas, *Vīrsimhdevacarit*, vv. 20.32-38 (1997), pp. 394-97.

18 Compare the references to Magadha-sutas and Bandi in Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa: Ayodhyā (Book Two)*, trans. by Sheldon Pollock (New York: New York University Press and JJC Foundation, 2005), pp. 64-65; 114-15. Imre Bangha (drawing on Gopalnarayan Bahura's edition of the *Pratāpaprakāś*) notes the importance of poetic performance in some strikingly similar daily routines of King Pratap Singh of Jaipur recorded at the turn of the nineteenth century. See 'Courtly and Religious Communities as Centres of Literary Activity in Eighteenth-century India: Ānandghan's Contacts with the Princely Court of Kishangarh-Rupnagar and with the Maṭh of the Nimbārka Sampradāy in Salembad', in *Indian Languages and Texts Through the Ages: Essays of Hungarian Indologists in Honour of Prof. Csaba Tottossy*, ed. by Csaba Dezso (Delhi: Manohar, 2007), pp. 313-14. The parallels are suggestive but do not allow us to decide definitively whether poets relied largely on literary formula or recorded the lived experiences of their courts.

19 Keshavdas, *Vīrsimhdevacarit* v. 27.5 (1997), p. 487, preferring the "likhata" of the

“*lekhaka*” (writer), “*likhata*” (writing), and “*lipikara*” (scribe) leave no room for doubt that Orchha—and this became typical of Rajput courts of the Mughal period—was actively transmitting literature, scholarship, and historical records through manuscripts.²⁰ Indeed, within a half century of Keshavdas’s completing the *Kavipriyā*, its genealogy served as a written archive for the Jodhpur historian Mumhata Nainsi, who based his account of the Bundela dynasty on it.²¹ Raja Indrajit, the patron of the *Kavipriyā*, was himself a scholar who painstakingly wrote a Brajbhasha commentary on the Sanskrit works of Bhartrhari.²² Nonetheless, written texts, while important, are not the only medium that had currency at this court.

A “description of the city” (*nagaravarnana*), also from the *Vīrsimhdevcarit*, highlights the importance of recitations of religious texts at Orchha in the early seventeenth century:

The city resounded with the sweetness of song,
 enchanting like Madhava’s Mathura.
 Bells, cymbals, horns, pipes, and sitars played.
 The city was bustling with *kirtan* in the towering temples.
 Some were listening to *harilila*,
 others were singing songs of Rama and Krishna. ...
 People were honouring their ancestors with rites and worshipping,
 paying homage to Hari.
 One would recite the Puranas, another would listen,
 yet another intoned the prescriptions of grammar.
 Still others were practicing mantras and teaching yoga.²³

As always, the relationship between a poetic genre like the *nagaravarnana* and the lived experience of the citizens of Orchha in the seventeenth

Vishvanathprasad Mishra edition for “*likhana*”. It is possible that Keshavdas or Raja Bir Singh Deo intended a comparison with the Mughal *kitabkhana*. On the arts of writing at Akbar’s court, cf. *Ā’in-i Akbarī*, Abu’l Fazl, ed. by D.C. Phillot, trans. by H. Blochmann (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 2008), I, pp. 102-13.

20 The disproportionately high number of Hindi manuscripts surviving from the seventeenth century has been noticed by many scholars. According to Imre Bangha (2011, p. 141), hundreds of thousands of Hindi manuscripts are extant from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries and relatively few from before. On the increasing tendency to document historical events by the seventeenth century, see Ziegler (1976), pp. 131-35.

21 See *Nainsī rī khyāt*, ed. by Badariprasad Sakariya (Jodhpur: Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, 1960), I, pp. 128-31. I thank Dalpat Rajpurohit for the reference.

22 R.S. McGregor, *The Language of Indrajit of Orcha* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

23 Keshavdas, *Vīrsimhdevcarit*, vv. 18. 1-2, 7-8 (1997), pp. 368-70.

century is difficult to assess.²⁴ It is arresting, though, that a poet famed for his written contributions to the formal traditions of *riti* poetry and rhetoric *should* highlight the auditory nature of certain forms of textual experience: the communal performance of religious songs and the oral transmission of knowledge systems such as grammar and yoga.

Perhaps the most intriguing case of a “telling” in Keshavdas’s oeuvre is a description of *his own performance* at the court of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir. This occurs in his last work, the *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā* (*Moonlight of the Fame of Jahangir*, 1612), which is set in Agra. The opening frame story likens the text to a sermon (quite literally a telling!) delivered by the poet Keshavdas on the relative importance of Fate (*bhagya*) and Human Effort (*uday*). His listener (and the probable patron of the work) is Iraj Shahnavaḥ Khan, the son of the famous Mughal general and acclaimed Hindi poet ‘Abd al-Rahim Khan-i Khanan. Another intended listener, as evident from the title as well as numerous panegyric poems, was Emperor Jahangir (r.1605-1627). In the final scene Keshavdas mentions that the emperor enjoyed his work, purportedly addressing the poet with the following Braj *doha* (couplet):

Ask for your heart’s wish, Keshavray [i.e. Keshavdas],
I am pleased (*rījhe*) with your poetry in every respect (*mana krama bacana*).²⁵

Keshavdas uses the suggestive verb *rījhna*, to be pleased, which specifically connotes a connoisseur’s delight upon hearing a poem or song performed, one possible implication being that the *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā* was read out loud to the emperor. Among the features that make performance the most likely mode of delivery for this text is the following panegyric verse, part of a larger poetic sequence on Jahangir’s ostensible vassals. Keshavdas engages in intense verbal acrobatics, concatenating carefully-chosen place names that begin with specific Nagari characters (in the case of this verse “ga”, “a”, “sa”, and “kha”).

gaura gujarāta gayā gorāvāne gopācala,
gandhāra gakhkhara gūṛha gāyaka ganesa ke
araba airāka ābū āsera avadha aṅga

24 A helpful introduction to the genre of the “description of the city” is A.K. Ramanujan, ‘Toward an Anthology of Indian City Images’, in *Urban India: Society, Space, and Image*, ed. by Richard G. Fox (Durham: Duke University, 1970).

25 Keshavdas, *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā*, v. 198, ed. by Kishorilal (Allahabad: Sahitya Bhavan, 1994), p. 148. Unless otherwise indicated, subsequent references are to this edition.

*āsāpurī ādi gāṇva argala subesa ke
sambhala singhala sindhu sorathā saubīra sūra,
khandhāra khuresa khurāsāna khāna khesa ke
sāhina ke sāhi jahāṅgīra sāhijū kī sabhā
“kesaurāya” rājata haiṁ rājā desa desa ke*

The kings of Gaur, Gujarat, Gaya, Gondwana, Gwalior,
Gandhara, and Gakkar, special admirers of Ganesh;
The well-appointed kings of Arabia, Iraq, Mt. Abu, Aser, Avadh,
Ang and Ashapuri, have established residence.
The nobles and dependents of Sambhal, Sinhala, Sindh, Saurashtra,
Saubir, Sur, Kandahar, Khuresh, and Khorasan—
Keshavdas says, the kings of many countries adorn the court of
the shah of shahs, Emperor Jahangir.²⁶

Although I have attempted a rough translation here, the “meaning” of this verse can only be realised in performance. Note the long list-like quality of the passage, almost hypnotising with its heavy alliteration. One of the text’s modern editors stresses that the verse displays Keshavdas’s geographical knowledge,²⁷ and to be sure some of the places—Kandahar, Khorasan, Sindh, etc.—were areas of pronounced Mughal political concern. Others, such as Arabia and Iraq, were part of a wider Muslim geographical imaginary. A palimpsest of an older Sanskritic worldview, fully consonant with the poet’s training, is also visible. Place names like Anga (Eastern Bihar) and Sinhala (modern Sri Lanka) were not relevant Mughal administrative terms but instead hearken back to an ancient tradition of geopolitical description in *kavya* that gave expression to universalist political aims through representations of sovereigns claiming authority over all the Indian regions. Employing virtuoso alliteration, Keshavdas cleverly assimilates both older and newer political paradigms to present Jahangir as supreme among kingly vassals in the style of a universal emperor (*maharajadhiraja*) from classical India.²⁸ While virtually incomprehensible on the printed page, in

26 Keshavdas, *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā*, v. 99 (1994), p. 94. Three more verses follow in the same vein. My translation draws on Kishorilal’s modern Hindi rendition.

27 “*Is se keśav ke bhaugolik jñān kā bhī patā caltā hai*”, *ibid.*, p. 95. Some of the place names are obscure but glosses of the less obvious ones include: Gaur, either a region near Kandahar (in the reading of Kishorilal) or Bengal; Gondwana, near the Narmada river in modern Madhya Pradesh; Gakkar, a region in the Northwest of Punjab; Aser (also Asir), an important medieval fort town in central India; Sambhal, possibly Sambhalpur; Saubir, a region near the Indus river; Sur, a city in Afghanistan.

28 These verses are reminiscent of the famous *digvijaya* (conquering of the quarters) passage from canto four of Kalidasa’s *Raghuvamśa*, in which Rama’s ancestor King Raghu proclaims his universal sovereignty by traversing all four quarters of the subcontinent. See *Raghuvamśa*, ed. by Rewa Prasad Dwivedi (New Delhi: Sahitya

performance this and related verses would have had the effect of suggesting the immense power and reach of the Mughal Empire with Jahangir at the helm.²⁹

Performative Features of Poetry

Certain types of verses, like the panegyric just cited, allow us to infer their performative settings through style. Linking together a chain of epithets (*virudavali*) was another aural technique that Brajbhasha (and Sanskrit) poets used to express the power of their royal patrons. Amrit Rai, an approximate contemporary of Keshavdas from a regional kingdom further west, begins his *Māncarī*, a biography of the Kachhwaha ruler Man Singh (r.1589-1614), with a long series of epithets that combine literary flourishes with specific references to his patron's accomplishments:

govindamandirasthitishāpanācārya
rāṇapratāpasindhukumbhodbhavadeva...
mayūmaidānamānamardanapratāpa
udayācala-āvairimārttaṇḍa
uttarakhaṇḍapracandagadhagūḍhavaajrābhigāta
khurasānavīraketajaitikhambha
khurasānamīranīrapratāpasahasrārjuna...
ḍhillīśvarasāhiakabarapratāparūpa...
mahārājādhīrājākūrmmeśvara māna ciraṃ jīva

He presided over the establishment of the Govindadev temple.
 A second Agastya, he drank up the ocean of Rana Pratapa...
 A consummate crusher of enemy pride on the battlefield at Mau,
 A sun rising over the morning mountain of Amber,
 A lighting bolt striking the formidable,
 impenetrable forts of the Northern lands,
 Victory pillar on the battlefields of Khorasan,
 Thousand(-armed) Arjuna to the lifeblood of the Mirs of Khorasan...
 The embodiment of the strength of Shah Akbar, lord of Delhi...
 Long live lord of the Kurma dynasty, emperor among kings, Man Singh.³⁰

Akademi, 1993). On this classical model of representing political sovereignty in the Sanskrit cosmopolis, see Pollock (2006), pp. 239-58.

29 Similar "geographical" set pieces are attested in other more or less contemporary works (such as Amrit Rai's *Māncarī*, written for Man Singh Kachhwaha, and the *Kavīndrakalpalatā* of Kavindracharya, who was connected to Shah Jahan and Dara Shukoh. Both works (although not these specific passages) are discussed further below.

30 Amrit Rai, *Māncarī*, in *Māncarītāvalī: amber ke suprasiddh rājā mānsingh ke carit se*

The mostly Sanskrit discourse achieves a significant portion of its meaning from the rhythmic, incantatory effects of its stately compounds. To be present in a royal assembly where such a list of epithets was intoned would have been to partake of the body politic in a symbolic but also profoundly experiential manner. Scholars have remarked on the ritual dimensions of courtly panegyric, an effective tool for political incorporation.³¹ This chain of epithets is also noteworthy for the peculiar eruptions of distinctly non-Sanskrit language into its otherwise heavily Sanskritised register, including expressions such as the “mirs of Khorasan” or a Persian word for battlefield (“*maidān*”). This text comes down to us, then, as a performance of Man Singh’s authority powerfully expressed in classical Indic tropes that simultaneously encode the contemporary Rajput reality of service in a Persianate imperial order.

Amrit Rai’s *Māncarīt* is filled with performative elements. At one strategic moment in his “description of the city” he uses a four-verse sequence in the *jiya* metre for a sustained description of the gardens that ennoble his patron’s realms in the Kachhwaha capital of Amber (near modern Jaipur). Note how the expressive punch is handled entirely by performative features, from the brilliant alliteration to the sense of sheer plenty conjured up by the long, cantering list:

dekhe vicitra su bāga bahu bidhi phūla phala taruvara ghaṇe
campā campelī mālatī vara veṣa maurasirī vaṇe
ketakī kuñja kumoda kūjāṇi kevarā pādala mahā
piya pārijātaka marua maṇi jāhī juhī johī jahā

Many varieties of gardens could be seen,
 dense with flowers, fruits, and fine trees.
 There were champa and jasmine flowers of magnificent form,
 groves of pines,
 Clusters of ketaki blooms, water lilies, screwpines, grand trumpet flowers,
 Lovely coral trees, basil, and jewel-bright jasmine.

sambandhit pāṇc rājasthānī racnāṇi kā saṅkalan, ed. by Gopalnarayan Bahura (Jaipur: Maharaja Savai Man Singh II Sangrahalay, 1990), p. 2. The word “Kurma” refers to the Kachhwaha lineage.

31 Cf. Julie Scott Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 43-44. Stewart Gordon has drawn attention to the practice of *khil’at* (symbolic gifts of cloth) and, in South Asia, the exchange of *pan* (betel nut) as rituals of political incorporation. Publicly performed panegyric can perhaps be considered in a similar light. See *Robes of Honour: Khil’at in Pre-colonial and Colonial India*, ed. by Stewart Gordon (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

āṃle amba anāra aṃvilī nimba nimbū nāragī
sundara sadāphala sada supārī seba sapatālu ṣagī
jāmūṇa jāmbhīra vijaura aṃjira jarada jaradālū ghaṇe
kaṭahala karaumḍā nāliyara baḍhi veli vaṇa vaḍhahala vaṇe

Dense orchards of myrobalan, mangoes, pomegranates,
 tamarind, neem, lemons, and oranges.
 Delectable citrus fruits, excellent betel nut, apples, and plums flourished.
 Jamuns, limes, figs, and copious orange apricots,
 Jackfruits, corindas, coconuts, large bells, and barhal trees.

pīpala palāsa palaraka pīlū mahu makoī phārase
bara bāsa beri babūra bāriva tūta taiṃdū tāri se
khīraṇi khajūrī khaira khūhaṇi jāhi kivaṃ agaṇita gaṇe
*baranau banāi binoda bāhira bāga ati bahu bidhi baṇe.*³²

Pipal, palash, palarak (sheesham) and pilu trees,
 mahuas and gooseberries and phalاسas
 Consummately fragrant jujubes, acacias, barivs,
 mulberries and musk melons sweet as palm fruit.
 Khiranis, date palms, mimosas, milkhedge—
 countless in number are the varieties!
 I joyfully describe all the types of gardens and groves
 on the outskirts of the city.

While I have attempted a literal translation here, it hardly does justice to the impact of a verse like this at its moment of delivery. That English is an impoverished idiom when it comes to distinguishing subspecies of jasmine, limes, and other Indian flora is a trivial problem in comparison to how a silent written medium is unable to recapture the mood of an original that positively exploded with sounds. Note how the lines crescendo in their enumeration of the various plants (*jāhī juhī johī jahā, āṃle amba anāra āvilī, nimba nimbū nāragī*) and nearly succeed in recreating the lushness of three-dimensional space.

The western Indian provenance of Amrit Rai's text partly explains his affinity for bardic techniques, such as the flair for alliteration and comprehensive description. Another is his social location, for, according to Gopalnarayan Bahura, Amrit Rai was probably from the Bhat community whose literary compositions had a special relationship to performance.³³ He uses similar language effects in a lively sequence of verses (also from the description of the city) on the subject of performance itself:

32 Amrit Rai, *Māncarī*, vv. 97-99, in Bahura (1990), p. 16. The printed Hindi spellings have been lightly emended for clarity.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

Here (*kahūṃta*) brahmans recite the Vedas in their distinct manner,
 Consecrating King Man Singh with their mantras.
 Elsewhere (*kahūṃta*) *pandits* recite (or read)
 with all their intellectual might,
 Debating every domain of scholarship under the sun.
 In one part (*kahūṃ*) of the realm authoritative sermons
 on ancient lore take place all day long.
 Elsewhere (*kahūṃ*) the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* are recited.
 Somewhere (*kahūṃta*) well-trained performers
 play the *vina* with concentration,
 Accompanied by dedicated percussionists.³⁴

Amrit Rai uses enriched, sonorous language to convey the sumptuousness and sophistication of the royal capital. The insistent repetition of the indefinite “somewhere” (*kahūṃ*, *kahūṃta*) at the beginning of most lines strengthens the feeling that Man Singh’s kingdom is simply brimming with knowledge and artistic expertise. Clever *pandits*, talented storytellers, and expert musicians bring lustre to the realm. As the poet remarks hyperbolically, “When the king listens (*sunai*) to music and is swayed by the lilt of poetry, Sheshanaga himself is entranced by the singular sounds (*amolita bola*)”.³⁵

Another biography of Man Singh from the same court, written about a decade later by one Narottamdas, also contains a description of the city that celebrates the king’s musical soirées. “Nobody hosts better musical performances than King Man Singh”, remarks the poet.³⁶ He composed this verse to cleverly mimic the *bols* or structured syllables called out during a dance recital:

tāgṛidi tāgṛidi tāgṛidi theiyam,
jāṃkhina jāṃkhina jāṃkhina leiyam
gāṃmana gāṃmana gāṃmana geiyam,
*pāṃgura pāṃgura pāṃgura seiyam.*³⁷

34 Ibid., vv. 130-31, p. 21. Compare the passage from the *Vīrsimhdevcarit* cited above in note 23.

35 Ibid., v. 142, p. 22.

36 Narottamdas, *Māncarit*, v. 100, in Bahura (1990), p.156. The Kachhwahas are also associated with the patronage of music treatises during Akbar’s period. See R. Sathyanarayana, ‘Introduction’, in *Nartananirṇaya of Paṇḍarika Viṭṭhala*, ed. by R. Sathyanarayana (Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1994), I, pp. 15-21.

37 Narottamdas, *Māncarit*, v. 101, in Bahura (1990), p. 156.

Inert on the page, these lines do not make much sense. Read aloud, they bring to life the courtly salons of Mughal India, conjuring up the rhythms and whirls of a Kathak performance.

Rich, aurally-infused verses of this type are entertaining but they are also a suitable testament to both the righteousness and the good taste of the king, whose duty it was to enrich the agricultural bounty of the land and promote the arts. While traditional in style, the writers of this court may also have felt a special compulsion to celebrate Amber's gardens and musical culture because of the contemporary Mughal concern with them.³⁸ And the praise of Amber also makes a crucial argument about local sovereignty in an age when Hindu rulers had been subsumed ineluctably into the Mughal imperial system: Rajput kingdoms are stately and controlled by just, luminous rulers who provide amply for their subjects. The auditory experience of such luscious verses would have served to dramatically underscore this political point.

The Performance of Martial Poetry

The many performative set pieces in Indian court literature of this period reflect different moods, since poets deliberately suffused their sense with layers of sound to suit particular contexts. One important domain was martial poetry, where onomatopoeia and the manipulation of specific combinations of phonemes was thought to impart *ojas* or "martial spirit" and was thus considered especially effective for conveying military prowess in works characterised by *vira rasa* (the heroic sentiment).³⁹ Whereas Amrit Rai prefaced a larger narrative poem with a "chain of epithets", two centuries later Padmakar, who spent part of his career at the same court, devoted two entire works to this motif, both in a heroic vein. His *Pratāpsīṃhvirudāvalī* is an extended paean to the exploits of his Kachhwaha patron Raja Pratap Singh (r.1778-1803) and includes several lively scenes that stress the bustle and cacophony of battle:

38 Babur famously complained that India lacked proper gardens (which for him meant those with running water), as though it were a major civilisational deficiency. See *Bāburnāma*, trans. by Wheeler Thackston (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), pp. 350, 359-60.

39 A representative statement from classical poetics is in V. Raghavan, *Bhoja's Śṛṅgāra prakāśa* (Madras: Punarvasu, 1963), p. 348.

*udagga khagga jaggamagga tyom umagga som gahaim
 samagga agga agga hvai su bairi bagga kom dahaim
 umaggi jaggi jamagim samagga magga mem lasai
 alagga ugga uggahum su dugga dugga mem trasai.*

Riled up with passion, the soldiers grabbed their fiercely gleaming swords.
 The entire battalion surged ahead to decimate the enemy forces.
 Fuses ignited, the cannonballs exploded forth,
 lighting up the whole battlefield.
 The [enemies] who were unscathed were filled with wrath;
 they sheltered in the forts, taking fright.

*su opa kopa opaci su cau copa som saje
 karala kala jala se utala phala som gamje
 humaniki hanika hanika kai bamaniki banika jhanikahim
 tamamiki teja tau mem tanamkahum na samkahim...*

Fiery-tempered, the armour-clad warriors deployed energetically.
 Fearsome as the noose of death, they rushed forward in a wave.
 They leapt, roaring their battle cries, swelling with anger,
 Sparked with a passionate inner light, unwavering.

*taham jakkajakk thakkathakk thakkathakk dhālana ki
 tupakana ki taratara banana sarasara macata su kharakhara bhālana ki
 gajaghanana ghananana goli gananana kanana sananana maci rahit
 topana ki ararara bhupara bhararara gharaghara ghararara ati umahi.*

Crazed with intensity they jostled, shields clanging.
 Guns blazed, arrows whirled by, and lances crashed together.
 Elephant bells jingled, bullets shot forth,
 and the nearby jungles echoed with sound.
 Cannons boomed, the earth trembled,
 as people everywhere were agitated.⁴⁰

These are quintessential examples of poetry that incites *vira rasa*. Thanks to an abundance of guttural and geminate consonants, we hear the din and clamour of warfare, the metal-on-metal sound of swords and shields clashing; we see the terrifying cannonballs flashing through the sky; we feel the intensity of battle as soldiers dash into the fray, ready to fight to the death. These verses remind us that battlefields were soundscapes as well

40 *Pratāpsimhvirudāvalī*, vv. 71-73; 88-89, in *Padmākargranthāvalī*, ed. by Vishvanathprasad Mishra (Varanasi: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 1959), pp. 283, 286.

as landscapes and, in fact, martial styles of music and recitation were part of the very ambience of war.

In his *Himmatbahādurvirudāvalī*, Padmakar concludes a dramatic opening verse sequence on the mustering of the armies with a description of the conch shells, drums, and horns that spurred the warriors to fight:

When warriors blow the conches,
The Elephants who guard the cardinal points scatter in all directions.
The incessant rumble of the kettledrum resounds, riling up the soldiers.
Martial odes blare forth, accompanied by music,
 proclaiming their might everywhere.
The sound of the drums pervades the earth,
 fomenting anxiety in enemy kings.
The rising percussive tempo booms like thunderclouds.
Fine poets recite a *virudāvalī*—upon hearing it,
 the warriors rush forward, galvanised.
Wherever bards intone martial verse,
 they become excited and are eager to fight.⁴¹

There is no reason to think that Padmakar is indulging in mere poetic licence, for his mention of instruments and the like is supported by other evidence on the importance of the soundscape of battle for his milieu.⁴² Aside from its aesthetic and panegyric properties, *vira rasa*-infused poetry would have served the practical purpose of spurring on the warriors.

Poetic Repertoires and Tailoring Production to Diverse Patrons

Alongside performances *in* poems and poems *as* performances we can also investigate the ways in which poets were performers (see also d’Hubert and Sharma in this volume). Sometimes poets literally did double duty as singers. The Sanskrit term *vaggeyakar*, “poet-composer”, nicely

41 *Himmatbahādurvirudāvalī*, vv. 39-42, in *ibid.*, p. 8. Later in the work the performers known as *bandijan* are said to declaim the *virudāvalī* (vv. 57, 182-83), and Muslim performer castes such as *nakib* and *dhadhi* are also mentioned (v. 81), pp. 9, 26, 12.

42 None Arjun Singh, the captain of one of the warring parties featured in this poem, apparently invented his own style of tambourine, known as a *laggī*, for leading his warriors into battle; Lala Bhagvandin, ‘None arjun siṃh kā saṅkṣipt hāl’, in *Padmākarkṛt himmatbahādurvirudāvalī*, ed. by Lala Bhagvandin (Varanasi: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, [n.d.]), pp. 31-32.

encompasses this dual role. For instance, Akbar's famous court musician Tansen performed his own compositions, and seventeenth-century writers like Kavindracharya Sarasvati and Jagannatha Panditaraja are remembered as singers in Mughal sources.⁴³

Whether or not poets were also active as singers, they shared with their musical brethren the need for technical mastery and developing a repertoire. Rigorous immersion in poetics can indeed be considered comparable to musical training—musicians knew their *ragas* (melodic modes), *talas* (beat cycles), and would have memorised snatches of lyrics, while *riti* poets were highly trained practitioners of a sophisticated craft who sharpened their skill by mastering literary theory, which in India was considered a *shastra* or formal science. Knowledge of the correct use of *alankarashastra*, the “science of ornaments”, was essential since poets were sometimes expected to compose extemporaneous verses on diverse topics in *samasyapurti* competitions, on which more below.⁴⁴

Many *riti* poets were also itinerant, and factoring in shifting performance environments goes a long way towards explaining the striking repetitions of compositions that we find across an individual author's oeuvre. Expected to participate in poetry competitions and to present occasional verses, poets would have been prompted to recycle lines or to retool them for changing contexts. Thus they, like musicians, developed repertoires. The technology of modern publishing makes repetitions easy to spot, but in premodern times patrons probably just assumed that a given panegyric was composed for him alone. The following *kavitt* by Keshavdas occurs with only very minor changes in two separate places in his collected works. The first appearance in the *Kavipriyā* reflects a pedagogical setting—the point

43 On Tansen, see Françoise “Nalini” Delvoye, ‘Les chants *dhrupad* en langue braj des poètes-musiciens de l’Inde Moghole’, in *Littératures médiévales de l’Inde du Nord*, ed. by Françoise Mallison (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1991), pp. 141-43; idem, ‘The Image of Akbar as a Patron of Music in Indo-Persian and Vernacular Sources’, in *Akbar and His India*, ed. by Irfan Habib (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000a), p. 200. On Kavindracharya, see Allison Busch, ‘Hidden in Plain View: Brajbhasha Poets at the Mughal Court’, *Modern Asian Studies* 44.2 (2010), 289-92. The case of Jagannatha is discussed in Audrey Truschke, ‘Cosmopolitan Encounters: Sanskrit and Persian at the Mughal Court’ (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2012), pp. 54-55.

44 As Keshava Mishra puts it in his *Alaṅkāraśekhara*, a Sanskrit poetry manual composed in a township near Delhi in the sixteenth century: “*kurvanti kavayaḥ śaktāḥ samasyāpūraṇādikam*” (skilled poets engage in the completing of verses and other similar activities). *Alaṅkāraśekhara*, v. 18.2, ed. by Pandit Shivadatta and Kashinath Pandurang Parab, 2nd edn (Bombay: Nirnaya Sagar Press, 1926), p. 63. Keshava Mishra provides some examples of the technique in the subsequent canto.

is to illustrate how to use numbers as the basis for poetic ornamentation. Keshavdas outlines objects and concepts associated with the numbers one through ten before consolidating the lesson through two examples (a companion poem treats the numbers from six to ten).⁴⁵ Doubling as a eulogistic poem, in the *Kavipriyā* the *kavitt* is dedicated to his then-patron, Raja Indrajit of Orchha. In writing the *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā* more than a decade later, Keshavdas updated the poem.⁴⁶ Here I excerpt the version from the *Kavipriyā*, marking with square brackets the small portions that were later changed in the *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā*:

*eka thala thita pai basata prati jana [jiya]*⁴⁷
dvikara pai desa-desā kara ko dharanu hai
triguna kalita bahu balita lalita guna,
gunina ke gunataru phalita karanu hai
*cāri hī padāratha ko lobha [cita nita-nita]*⁴⁸
dībe kauṃ padāratha-samūha ko paranu hai
*[kesodāsa indrajīta bhūtala abhūta]*⁴⁹ *pañca-*
bhūta kī prabhūti bhavabhūti ko saranu hai

He lives in one place, but inhabits the hearts of one and all.
 He has only two hands, but collects taxes⁵⁰ from all the lands.
 He is comprised of three elements, endowed with many beautiful qualities.
 He brings the talent-trees of the talented to fruition.⁵¹
 He himself craves only the four aims of life,⁵²
 While vowing always to give generously.
 Keshavdas says, Indrajit is unprecedented on this earth:

45 Keshavdas, *Kavipriyā*, vv. 11.1-23 (1954), pp. 160-63.

46 Compare *Kavipriyā*, v. 11.22 (1954), p. 163, with *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā*, v. 33 (1994), p. 50.

47 Spelled *jīya* in both the Kishorilal and Vishvanathprasad Mishra editions of *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā*, a variant that does not alter the meaning.

48 In *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā* the text indicated in square brackets is replaced with the poet's signature and a correlative marker: *kesaudāsa jihi*.

49 In this line Keshavdas makes a major change, switching out the name of the patron to whom he addresses the verse: *sāhina kau sāhi jahāṅgīra sāhi āhi*.

50 Here there is a pun on the word *kara*, which means both "hand" and "taxes".

51 The poet cleverly plays on different meanings of the Brajbhasha word *guna* (Sanskrit/Modern Standard Hindi *guṇa*). The three elements are the three *gunas* from *Sāṃkhya* philosophy: *tamas*, *rajas*, and *sattva* (lethargy, energy, and quiescence); *gunas* are also "qualities" in the sense of virtues; in Indian literary theory *guna* is, additionally, a technical term referring to the phonological properties of words; and *guṇī* or *gunī* (singular of the Brajbhasha *gunina*) means a talented person, often a musician, poet, or scholar.

52 In the classical Hindu conception the four aims of life are *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha* (virtue, gain, pleasure, and release).

He is made up of the five elements,
yet he protects the material prosperity of the entire earth.

Much of the wording is verbatim. The only significant emendation is in the service of invoking the new patron: the half-line “Keshavdas says, Indrajit is unprecedented on this earth” is replaced with the metrically equivalent “the emperor of emperors, Jahangir, is...”. Perhaps one quarter of the *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā* draws in similar fashion on earlier material, especially *Kavipriyā* and *Vīrsiṃhdevcarit*.⁵³ It is natural that poets would have wished to refine their compositions over time, but they also clearly recycled favourite poems to please new patrons.⁵⁴ The substitution of patron names has been noted for the performance of *dhrupad*, as well.⁵⁵

The preference for free-standing verses (*muktaka*) over longer narratives (*prabandha*) among writers of this period also points towards the need to see compositions as units of entertainment from the poet’s repertoire that were presented in performance venues on different occasions, rather than constituting a coherent written text. As Lakshmidhar Malviya observes, poets did not just set out to write a work of *muktaka*: they gathered together material into a collection crafted—and performed—over time.⁵⁶

53 Also compare Keshavdas, *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā*, vv. 34-35, 43-45 (1994), pp. 51-52, 61-62, with (respectively) idem, *Kavipriyā* 11.23, 8.5, 8.28, 8.26, 6.7 (1954), pp. 163, 139, 143-44, 118. Close parallels can also be drawn between the performance of poetry in the courtly assembly in *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā*, vv. 185-92 and Bir Singh Deo’s coronation scene in *Vīrsiṃhdevcarit*, vv. 33.32-47 (1997), pp. 600-10.

54 Examples abound. Jagannatha Panditaraja probably wrote his *Jagadābharaṇa* (Ornament to the world) originally as an encomium to the Mewar ruler Rana Jagat Singh (r.1628-1652), but the work is nearly identical to *Prāṇābharaṇa*, a panegyric presented to Maharaja Pranamarayana of Koch Bihar (r.c.1632-1659; 1661-1665) and one manuscript also suggests the use of its praise addresses for Mughal royalty. See P.S. Ramachandrudu, ‘Introduction to the Second Edition’, in *Panditaraja Kavya Samgraha*, ed. by K. Kamala (Hyderabad: Sanskrit Academy, Osmania University, 2002), pp. xlv-vi; and Jatindrabimal Chaudhuri, *Muslim Patronage to Sanskrit Learning* (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 2009), pp. 62-63. For another example of such repurposing, see Audrey Truschke (2012), pp. 79-80.

55 In the *Sahasras* commissioned by Shah Jahan, the lyrics of the famous composer Nayak Bakshu were collected, but the names of the original patrons (Man Singh Tomar, Muzaffar Shah of Gujarat) were replaced with the name “Shah Jahan”. See Françoise “Nalini” Delvoye, ‘Indo-Persian Accounts on Music Patronage in the Sultanate of Gujarat’, in *The Making of Indo-Persian Culture*, ed. by Muzaffar Alam, Françoise “Nalini” Delvoye, and Marc Gaborieau (Delhi: Manohar and Centre de Sciences Humaines, 2000b), p. 270.

56 Thus, the *Satsaī* of Matiram, a lengthy compilation of 700 or so stanzas, contains 176 couplets recycled from *Lalitlalām* and his other works. See Lakshmidhar Malviya, *Bihārīdās kī satsaī* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan: 2008), I, p. 3.

Performance, Improvisation, and the Transmission of Literary Knowledge

As much as we can surmise about premodern literary performances, a fuller understanding is all too frequently thwarted by the dearth of detailed accounts.⁵⁷ Still, the evidence, while sparse, is not entirely lacking. A suggestive passage in chapter seven of the Sanskrit rhetorician Rajashekara's *Kāvya-mīmāṃsā* (*Investigation of Poetry*, early tenth century) discusses recitation practices, which he intriguingly classifies according to regional styles. Thus, the southern (*draviḍa*) *kavi* is said to be heavily inclined towards sung poetry, Kashmiris (*kāśmīraḥ*) prone to nasalisation, and those from the plains (*pāñcāla-maṇḍala*) praised for their mastery of versatile poetic forms and proper pronunciation.⁵⁸ *Riti* writers were as a rule silent on this subject, but modern scholars have speculated about different recitation styles for the *kavitt*, proposing a distinction between the more archaic and dramatic *ludhakant* mode, often associated with martial poetry, and the gentler rhythms of the so-called *padmakari shaili*, said to be suited to erotic compositions.⁵⁹ There is also some evidence, as we shall see, that poets would explain their verses at the time of performance.⁶⁰

As far as the setting for such recitation, it is reasonable to envision a scenario, much like the *baithak* or *mahfil* associated with other related performance cultures, in which a poet recited his work (or another's) in front of a specialised audience of connoisseurs, whether at court or in a private salon. The *sabhā* or *mahfil* was a place for entertainment, but also a space in which participants might display or hone their cultural knowledge in oral discussions. The anonymous author of the *Ghunyat al-munya*, a fourteenth-century treatise on Indian music and dance, notes how his

57 We know much more about modern *kavi-sammelans* and poetry competitions. See Dayashankar Shukla, *Hindī kā samasyāpūrti kāvyā* (Lucknow: Ganga Pustakmala Karyalay, 1967), pp. 32-33, 87-212; Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 80-89. How closely modern performance practices reflect those of earlier times is difficult to assess.

58 Rajashekara, *Kāvya-mīmāṃsā*, ed. by C.D. Dalal, R.A. Sastri, and (revised and enlarged by) K.S. Ramaswami Sastri Siromani, 3rd edn (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1934), pp. 33-34.

59 Rameshchandra Sharma (2007), pp. 55-57. Sharma draws on the work of Nagendra, a leading post-independence Hindi scholar. "Padmakari" is in all likelihood a reference to the late *riti* poet Padmakar (1753-1833), who of course did write plenty of martial poetry as well.

60 Pollock (2006), p. 87.

patron, Abu Raja, occasionally arranged a concert of Persian and Indian music in order to foster “sweet relaxation”. Various discussions evidently ensued in the intervals between songs:

Those present in the assembly often requested the intricacies of verses (*shi'r*)... to be explained to them. And my patron... out of his vast ocean of eloquence, brought to [the] surface the pearls of meaning. ... Sometimes they enquired about the mysteries of sound; he by the vibrations of the moods of that master of exposition rendered threadbare the screen concealing music, thereby revealing her to all.⁶¹

While this passage references a musical soirée, the emphasis on how the patron would discuss the meaning of the lyrics is directly relevant to the reception of poetry.⁶² In this scene, the *mahfil* was a place where the patron showed his mettle. More frequently, performances involved the rigorous assaying of the skills of those employed by the patron, whether musicians, poets, or scholars.

Poets who may have spent some of their time in a quiet study composing their verses at leisure also had to compose publicly, under pressure, and to offer, using the apt phrase of Rao and Shulman, “a poem at the right moment”.⁶³ There is much general anecdotal evidence about how the patron or convener of a literary assembly would set exacting topics (*samasya*) and poets oblige them by fulfilling (*purti*) the demand. *Samasyapurti* anecdotes typically feature in literary lore as evidence of a poet’s brilliance.⁶⁴ Tales of one-upmanship abound, as with Padmakar and Thakur, whose rivalry is said to have manifested in poetic duels at the court of Anupgiri Gosain.⁶⁵ Some legends stress the defiance of political authority. Often a courtesan

61 *Ghuniyatu'l Munya: The Earliest Persian Work on Indian Classical Music*, trans. by Shahab Sarmadee (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research in association with Northern Book Centre, 2003), p. 4.

62 An illuminating discussion of this text is in Aditya Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012b), pp. 292-94.

63 Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, *A Poem at the Right Moment* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

64 We see many examples of poetic bravura in the *Bhojaprabandha*, a sixteenth-century account of purported proceedings from the court of the celebrated King Bhoja of Dhara, but the text is not exactly amenable to historical inquiry of a positivist sort since competitions for line-filling occur among wildly asynchronous poets such as Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, and Dandin; Narayana Rao and Shulman (1999), pp. 159-68. Various *samasyapurti* competitions are detailed in Shukla (1967), pp. 24-27, 72-86.

65 Imre Bangha, *Scorpion in the Hand* (Delhi: Manohar, 2014), p. 18.

or devout *bhakta* scores a point against the Mughal emperor with a timely poem.⁶⁶

Extemporaneous compositions might be required in various contexts. Motilal Menariya relates a somewhat fanciful tale about how the *riti* poet Vrind supposedly secured employment at the Mughal court (Aurangzeb's grandson Azim us-Shan became his patron). Aurangzeb presented him with the following *samasya*: "*payonidhi pairyo cāhai misarī kī putarī*" [a figurine made of sugar seeks to swim the ocean]. The first *purti* was unsuccessful:

Placing all their faith in the supreme godhood,
sages and holy men bear witness.
God sustains the existence of life forms both movable and movable,
whom He holds dear.
Vrind says, He is supremely powerful in everything
and from his grace the miraculous unfolds:
The lame can scale a mountain, the mute can recite scripture,
so why shouldn't a figurine made of sugar seek to swim the ocean?

Having failed to impress the emperor with these bland pieties, the poet tried a less pedestrian approach and was rewarded with an appointment at the court:

Seeing the terrifying, cruel glance of Agastya, it did not budge.
The jostling of the waves ceased,
curbed were the whirling eddies and sea spray.
Says Vrind, all of this was unprecedented, unheard of.
The waters stilled, placid like a mirror, and remained miraculously calm.
When the ocean faced so fearlessly the wrath of Agastya,
why shouldn't a figurine made of sugar seek to swim the ocean?⁶⁷

Poetry composition could be a grueling test. In this imagined encounter between Aurangzeb and Vrind it becomes the skill to be measured in an interview-like situation. And sometimes *samasyapurti* was *actually a test*. Records from an eighteenth-century Braj academy in Bhuj, Gujarat, for instance, indicate that filling in verse lines was a component of the annual

66 Select examples of encounters with Mughal emperors are discussed in Busch (2011), pp. 132-33.

67 Motilal Menariya, *Rājasthānī bhāṣā aur sāhitya* (reprint, Jodhpur: Rajasthani Granthagar, 1999), pp. 134-35; cited in Sudhir Kumar Sharma, *Kavivar Vṛnd, vyaktitva aur kṛtitva* (Delhi: Swaraj Prakashan, 1998), p.12.

examination of aspiring court poets.⁶⁸ In a courtly rather than educational context, the clever handling of a *samasya* was an entertainment for onlookers. Both Vatsyayana (author of the *Kāmasūtra*, a famous treatise on erotics) and Rajashekhara included *samasyapurti* in their enumerations of characteristic courtly pastimes.⁶⁹

One rare account of what by all indications was a real *samasyapurti* in a Deccan court context comes from Jayarama Pindye's *Rādhāmādhavavilāsacampū* (*Love Play of Radha and Krishna*, c.1650), a collection of mixed Sanskrit and vernacular poetry performed for the Maratha king Shahaji Bhonsle (father of Shivaji). Both Shahaji and his son were well-known seventeenth-century patrons of *riti* poetry in Brajbhasha, but they also hosted *pandits*, poets, and connoisseurs conversant in numerous *deshabhasha* or regional vernaculars. Jayarama Pindye, unusually, claims to be proficient in twelve languages, and his *Rādhāmādhavavilāsacampū* features poetry in all of them.⁷⁰

The text also brims with evidence about performance. In a passage near the beginning of the sixth canto, the recitation of what has until this point been exclusively a Sanskrit text is briefly interrupted as Jayarama is formally introduced at court. Here the language of tellings becomes particularly explicit. Jayarama's poem, we are informed, is being intently read out loud (*asmin prabandhe pāpaṭhyamāne*) before a community of connoisseurs (*rasikajanasamāja*), who after hearing it are overcome with wonder (*tacchravaṇena paraṃ kautuhalam avāpya*) and address the professional cantor (*prabandhapāṭhakam*) to learn more about the provenance of the work and

68 Françoise Mallison, 'The Teaching of Braj, Gujarati and Bardic Poetry at the Court of Kutch: The Bhuj Braj-bhāṣā Pāṭhśālā (1749-1948)', in *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia*, ed. by Sheldon Pollock (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 175. This "testing" may go back much further to a tradition of *kavi-parikshas* (testing of poets) in the medieval period; Dayashankar Shukla (1967), pp. 23, 32, speculates that the original inspiration for *samasyāpūrti* may have been the testing of poets, and mentions the modern continuation of this practice for the degree of *acharya* at Kashi Sanskrit Vishvavidyalay.

69 For the canonical 64 courtly arts listed in the *Kāmasūtra*, see the chart excerpted in Daud Ali, *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 76-77. Several others are focused on the literary arts, including "pratimālā", an apparent ancestor to modern parlor games like Antakshari (also a popular game show) and Bait Bazi, where the challenge is to sing/recite a verse that begins with the last letter used by another contestant; cf. *Kāvyaśikṣasā* (chapter 10, p. 53), cited in Shukla (1967), pp. 23-24.

70 Knowledge of India's regional vernaculars, "*deśabhāṣāvijñāna*", is one of the 64 courtly arts mentioned in the *Kāmasūtra*. See note 69.

its author.⁷¹ Throughout, Jayarama frequently invokes the language of listening with words like *śrotavya* (“to be heard”), *śrotum* (“to hear”), and *ākarnya* (“having heard”).⁷²

The sixth canto is also the occasion for a *samasyapurti* competition in the court. One by one, various individuals (often named, underscoring the likely historicity of Jayarama’s account) enter the arena to present their verse(s). The Sanskrit authors are, predictably, Brahmans, some of whom have professions and talents with close connections to performance. Thus, Nilakantha Bhatta and one Tukadeva are praised for their skill in reciting the Puranas, and Vireshvara Bhatta is lauded as a “bee on the lotus in the lake of musical nectar”.⁷³ The *samasyas* often consist of an intriguing first or last line, or sometimes just a partial line. “What shall I do, lord who reigns over Varanasi [Shiva]?” engenders a lament about the futility of learning and pious behaviour when all who die in this holy place—even the lowborn—are automatically granted release.⁷⁴ Nilakantha Bhatta has to complete a verse that ends with the phrase “why a dispute about the goad when the elephant has already been sold?”⁷⁵ Prahlada Sarasvati, justly extolled as “a gladdener of the hearts of poets”, is successful in completing the *samasya* “*gatāgatair eva gatā triyāmā*” [the night passed in equivocation] using a clever *yamaka* (homonym, a subspecies of the pun) that plays on the word *Rāmāyaṇa*:

Should I drink in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, or gaze upon a beautiful woman in bed?
Thus for the aging gentleman the night passed in equivocation.⁷⁶

In the eleventh canto, various Bhasha (vernacular) poets are also shown to perform. One Raghunath Vyas uses the tag “the wives of your enemies roam the forests” as an opportunity to expatiate on Shahaji’s military prowess, the premise being that he routs his enemies and reduces their women to the status of helpless, impoverished widows.⁷⁷ Some poems relate to specific

71 Jayarama Pindye, *Rādhāmādhavavilāsacampū*, ed. by V.K. Rajvade (Pune: Varda books, 1989), p. 226.

72 See, for instance, *ibid.*, p. 228. Also note the references to singers (*gayaka*) and singing style (*gayana-riti*) on p. 246.

73 *Ibid.*, pp. 230-31.

74 This results in *ibid.*, p. 229, v. 204.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 230, v. 211.

76 The *yamaka* in the first line reads, “*Rāmāyaṇam vā śravaṇena peyam rāmāyaṇe vā nayanam vidheyam*” Pindye (1989), p. 230, v. 212.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 246. For a brief discussion of this verse and other noteworthy passages

military campaigns, as when one Alli Khan, extolled as a “*gunijana*” or man of talent, commemorates a recent campaign at Allanggarh by singing a *karka* or martial poem.⁷⁸ In one case a request to illustrate a particular figure of speech is entertained, resulting in a virtuosic quatrain that employs the literary ornament of *yamaka* in all four lines:

*sāheba tom sama kona ahem sūraju sūraja upara tāpa tapo haim
kaunu kahum aba tere mukābala kābala te kārabhāra layo hai
bāndhi jamaddhara sāhem tem majāku sāhe tamājaku bhaiju bhayo hai
sāhiju hi kara leta phiranga, phiraṅgina kom phira raṅga gayo hai.*

Oh lordly one, what warrior is greater than you?
Your fierceness blazes brighter than the sun.
Can anyone anywhere compare to you?
Your influence extends as far as Kabul.
You bind your sword as though it were child’s play
But its slicing instills fear (?)
Shahaji collects taxes abroad and the foreigners turn pale.⁷⁹

Arguably, a Bhasha poet has a special advantage when it comes to homonyms because unlike his more grammatically precise Sanskrit colleagues he can fudge words and add Perso-Arabic vocabulary to augment his lexical stock. Note the last line, which takes the Persian word *firang*, “Frankish” or foreign (probably a reference to the Portuguese), and redistributes the lexemes to create the satirical meaning “*phira raṅga gayo hai*” [then they lost their colour] (i.e., paled due to fright).

The *yamaka* verse just quoted showcases creativity and a poet’s ability to think on his feet, but the whole enterprise of courtly literature was made possible because Indian authors and audiences knew their literary theory.⁸⁰ The patron Shahaji Bhonsle himself references the vernacularisation of motifs from classical rhetoric:

from this text, see Sumit Guha ‘Transitions and Translations: Regional Power and Vernacular Identity in the Dakhan, 1500-1800’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24.2 (2004), 28-29.

78 “*Karakā... allīkhānā gunijana vaha gāyo sāheba pāsa*”, Pindye (1989), pp. 259-60.

79 Ibid. p. 247. The meaning of line 3 of the Bhasha quatrain remains somewhat cryptic. Perhaps “*majāku*” is from *mazāq*, “joke, jest”, and “*tamājaku*” may be related to the Arabic *mazak*—“to cut”. I am grateful to Vivek Gupta for the latter suggestion.

80 In fact, the *Rasamañjarī* of Bhanudatta, a recognised authority in Sanskrit poetics, comes in for special mention in this *champu* when in the Sanskrit section poets are asked to elucidate some of his formulations of *nayikabheda*, the cataloguing of female characters according to literary conventions. Pindye (1989), p. 233.

On one occasion the crest jewel among kings spoke as follows
in the assembly (*majlis māhi*):

Nobody has yet described in Bhasha

the setting or rising of the sun and moon.

Just as the rays of the sun bring a cluster of flowers to bloom

So vernacular poets transform [motifs] and clarify them.

And so a single female character may have many vernacular clothes.

Accordingly, I will elaborate further on the envisioned topic.⁸¹

The passage shows how technical literary knowledge was a basis for performance—and through performance, debate—among connoisseurs. The poet had to demonstrate his knowledge of sometimes subtle distinctions between types of female characters or figures of speech.

That courtly performances had educational potential in which poet-performers set themselves up as instructors to their patrons is a point underlined by other contributors to this volume (d’Hubert, Schofield). A suggestive example from the Braj world is the *Kavīndrakalpalatā* (*Kavindra’s Wish-fulfilling Vine*, c.1650) of Kavindracharya, the esteemed pandit, vernacular poet, and *dhrupad* singer who had close contact with the Mughal court in North India during this period. The *Kavīndrakalpalatā* is a remarkable collection of diverse Braj compositions associated with the patronage of Shah Jahan (r.1628-1658). It contains (in this order) 108 *kavitts* in a panegyric vein, all praising Shah Jahan; 55 *dhrupads* or song texts⁸² containing the emperor’s name; 10 *bishnupads* or “Vishnu songs”; 60 verses in typical *riti* metres (especially *kavitt*, *savaiya*, and *doha*) that are labeled “*tattvajñān*”, which collectively constitute a poetic sermon on Indian philosophy; and a separate set of poems and *dhrupads* dedicated largely to Prince Dara Shukoh. The work thus has the air of being assembled over time through a series of performances and lectures rather than being the product of sustained effort directed at a single coherent written composition.

The *dhrupad* section of the work especially commands our attention. Many of the verses portray light, erotic moments, and are typical of the courtly repertoire of occasional poems: the exultations of the Holi festival as well as scenes where a woman longs for her lover, rejoices in his company, or gives him the cold shoulder with a display of pique.⁸³ Occasionally

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 250.

⁸² Although this section of the work is labeled as “*sāhijahāṃ viśayaka dhruvapadāni*” in the colophon, it contains a few instances of other styles like *kavitt*, *doha*, and *jhulana*.

⁸³ E.g. Kavindracharya Sarasvati, *Kavīndrakalpalatā*, ed. by Rani Lakshmikumari

Kavindracharya draws attention to more technical subjects, however, as when he announces to his patron:

*dakṣina nāyaka ke lachani je kahiyata,
te saba tumahem aru granthani mem je gāī nikāī*

I have explained to you the characteristics of the *dakshina nayaka*
And they have also been well explained [lit., sung] in books...⁸⁴

The *dakshina nayaka* is a well-known term from the Indian *alankarashastra* referring to a man who can manage his love affairs with more than one woman.⁸⁵ This construct of an “adept lover” has natural salience for a king with multiple wives, but this alone cannot account for the insistent focus on such terminology in Kavindra’s songs. A lengthy *dhrupad* on the theme of Holi begins:

*kanaka mahala madhi ritu vasanta maim, khelata śāhi ihi vidhi kī horī
vasana amola ābhūṣana pahiraīm, prauḍhā mugdhā madhyā gaurī
uttima gāvati, uttama nācati, uttima vāda bajāvati
rāga rasa rūpa parasapara nirakhi sukha pāvati.*⁸⁶

It’s the spring season and this is how Shah Jahan
plays Holi in the golden palace.
His fair women—innocent about love, somewhat knowledgeable, and
mature alike—are wearing their priceless jewels and garments.
Finely do they sing, finely do they dance,
finely do they play their instruments.
Swayed by love and beauty, they behold each other and are delighted.

Chundavat (Jaipur: Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, 1958), *dhrupad* section, vv. 18-20, 29-30, 35, 40-44, 52-54, pp. 24-33. A few verses (e.g. v. 49, p. 32) have more political overtones, emphasising Shah Jahan’s might. References are to this printed edition of the text except where otherwise indicated.

84 Ibid., *dhrupad* section, v. 14, p. 24. The expression *gāī nikāī* probably here means “well explained” (“*vistār ke sāth kahnā*” is one definition from the *Hindīśabdsāgar*, p. 1271), but the Hindi verb “*gā-*” also of course means to sing.

85 Sundar Kaviray, a *riti* poet (and diplomat) at Shah Jahan’s court, distinguishes between an *anukūla* (“agreeable”) and *dakṣina nāyaka* as follows: “An agreeable lover is unacquainted with other women even in his dreams; an adept lover looks upon all his women equally and remains constant so that all are happy”; *Sundarśṅgār*, in *Sundar kavirāy granthāvalī*, ed. by Ramanand Sharma (Delhi: Lok Vani Samsthan, 2004), v. 224.

86 Kavindracharya Sarasvati, *dhrupad* section, v. 20 (1958), p. 25. I emended from *nūpa* to *rūpa* (here and elsewhere I have also made a few other minor modifications in spelling, such as replacing *suṣa* with the more standard form *sukha*).

Here, as elsewhere, Kavindra uses the highly marked terms typical of *riti* poetry manuals for *mugdha* (“innocent” in the ways of love), *madhya* (“somewhat knowledgeable”) and *praudha* (“mature”) female characters.⁸⁷ Like many *dhrupads* composed for royal patrons, the composition is partly intended to be flattering—praise for the sexual charisma of kings surrounded by exquisitely beautiful women has a long history in India. But the insistence on *nayikabheda* terminology in Kavindra’s *dhrupads* goes hand in hand with the polymathic brilliance on display in other songs. Thus a number of verses touch upon the science of gems.⁸⁸ Elsewhere it is Shah Jahan’s musical expertise that is praised: he is *sura-jñān*, a connoisseur of melodies/notes.⁸⁹ It is not unheard of for *dhrupad* song collections to be quite broad in their range of topics, and some patrons were very well-versed in Indian music knowledge.⁹⁰ As Nalini Delvoye has noted:

The various historical and cultural contexts in which those [*dhrupad*] songs were composed account for the variety of the themes dealt with in the *dhrupads* compiled in the main collections or recensions known to date. Besides religious and eulogistic subjects, *dhrupad* songs deal with a wide range of other topics such as *nayak-nayika bheda* (dealing with particular kinds of love and types of lovers in different circumstances), the description of nature and seasons, and philosophical or more personal views of life and

87 Ibid., vv. 31, 35-36, 38, pp. 28-30.

88 One verse refers to the traditional stipulation that *ratnas* or jewels total fourteen in number (v. 4); another extols Shah Jahan’s throne (*takht*) with its costly gems (v.24); the next enumerates several types of jewels to praise Shah Jahan as exemplary in the Indic royal practice of *dana* or charity (v. 25). One of the manuscripts of the text from the Jaipur royal palace collection (Pothikhana) includes a short lesson on the science of gems that begins shortly after v. 25: this was omitted from the only published edition of the text (Chundavat, 1958). Some of the discussion is in Sanskrit, but the manuscript uses the abbreviations “bhā” and “pā” for Bhasha (i.e. Brajbhasha) and Parsi (i.e. Farsi or Persian), respectively, in order to signal equivalences across languages. Thus we are informed that the Persian word for *mānik*, ruby, is *yākūt*, etc. *Kavindrakalpalatā*, Pothikhana, manuscript no. 1174, Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum, Jaipur, ff. 18-21. Emma Platt has pointed to a similar process of linguistic but also cultural translation in an astrology treatise from the Bijapur court authored by Sultan ‘Ali Adil Shah (r.1557-1579). See ‘The Authorship and Significance of the Nujūm al-‘ulūm: A Sixteenth-century Astrological Encyclopedia from Bijapur’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 131.2 (2011), 240-41.

89 Kavindracharya Sarasvati, *dhrupad* section, vv. 21, 34 (1958), pp. 25-26, 29.

90 Françoise “Nalini” Delvoye, ‘Dhrupad Songs Attributed to Tānsen, Foremost Court-Musician of the Mughal Emperor Akbar’, in *Studies in South Asian Devotional Literature*, ed. by Alan W. Entwistle and Françoise Mallison (New Delhi: Manohar, 1994), p. 413. On the Mughal nobility’s mastery of Indian music as a *shastra*, see Katherine Schofield, ‘Reviving the Golden Age Again: “Classicization”, Hindustani Music, and the Mughals’, *Ethnomusicology* 54.3 (2010), 484-517.

similar topics, which are roughly the same as those treated by Brajbhasha court poets for the same period.⁹¹

Kavindracharya was evidently keen to purvey information about Indian knowledge systems through the medium of *dhrupad*. Two songs in the *Kavīndrakalpalatā*, extensively laden with recondite terminology from the Nyaya and Vaisheshika schools of Indian philosophy, include such mouthfuls as *sapta padārtha* (“seven elements”), *ṣaṭ-bhāva* (“six states”), *catura abhāva* (“four absences”), *vyadhikarana* (“concomitance without co-existence”), and *upādhi binu vyāpati* (“invariable concomitance”). Imagine somebody in the Western tradition trying to sing Hegel! Both of the “philosophy” *dhrupads* praise Shah Jahan as “*mahājāna*” (supremely wise, suitably assonant with the emperor’s name), and one of them concludes with the line, “the learned Shah Jahan knows all of the fine points (*bheda*, also “secrets”) of these matters, the subtleties of the world”.⁹² A Sanskrit panegyric by one Purnananda Brahmacharin points to how Kavindracharya would regularly address the emperor on points of *shastra*.⁹³ The *tattvajñān* verse sequence that occurs later in the text, devoted to philosophical concerns, does suggest that the pandit gave some kind of Braj lectures on philosophy. A probable teacher-student relationship goes a long way towards explaining the two *dhrupads* focused on Indian philosophy and speaks to a concern with imparting knowledge of traditional Indian disciplines to the members of this Persianate court (see also Schofield in this volume).

The memorisation and oral transmission of knowledge have of course a very long history in India, and many Indian *shastras* bear mnemonic features.⁹⁴ At least some evidence suggests that elements of oral transmission even pertain to the written Brajbhasha poetry manuals characteristic of *riti* literary culture. The very structure of the *ritigranth* genre, which operates

91 Delvoye (1994), p. 412.

92 Kavindracharya Sarasvati, *dhrupad* section, vv. 33, 44 (1958), pp. 28-29, 31.

93 “*Dillīśvarasya nigamāgamaśāstrabudhyā sambodhayan pratidinam trijagatkavīndra*” (Kavindra, famous in the three worlds, would address the emperor every day on the wisdom of the *shastras*, Vedas, and ancillary texts). Cited in V. Raghavan, ‘Kavīndrācārya Sarasvatī’, in *D.R. Bhandarkar Volume*, ed. by Bimala Churn Law (Calcutta: Indian Research Institute, 1940), p. 161.

94 The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, for instance, contains some verses labeled *anuvamśya* or “passed down”; Bharata, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, ed. by K. Krishnamoorthy, 4th (revised) edn (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1992), I, p. 308. Mark McClish and Patrick Olivelle have suggested that the *Arthaśāstra* owes its survival to its use in an educational setting. A redactor introduced “memorable” verses to make topics more teachable. Mark McClish and Patrick Olivelle, *The Arthaśāstra* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2012), pp. xvi, xlii.

by first proposing a definition of a literary concept and then presenting a relevant example verse (the panegyric to Jahangir cited above was an illustration of the *ganana alankara* or trope of poetic enumeration), may owe something to the instructional practices of premodern Indian teachers. One important “performance” of a text like Keshavdas’s *Kavipriyā* was probably for the poet’s own students.⁹⁵ A favourite student singled out early in the work is Pravinray, one of the six *paturas* or courtesans who graced Raja Indrajit’s assembly discussed above. The text is peppered with imperatives such as *sunahu* (listen!) and vocatives, including *prabina*, which may mean either “clever one” or, more likely, address Pravinray herself.⁹⁶ Keshavdas also enjoined his students to memorise his *Kavipriyā*.⁹⁷ Probably this was not mere hubris on the part of a poet since the sentiment is common enough.⁹⁸ As we have seen, a good command of the literary apparatus was a basic requirement of courtly connoisseurship and extemporaneous performance.

Although only the written traces survive, the practice of scholarship in early modern India would have been profoundly oral, interactive, and communicative. The *Jorāvarprakāś*, a commentary on Keshavdas’s *Rasikpriyā* by the influential eighteenth-century Braj writer Surati Mishra, is set in the *praśnottarī* or “question and answer” format, itself suggestive of an oral environment in which the questions of a patron or student prompted the scholar to address particular issues.⁹⁹ Surati Mishra was also one of the leading scholars at a conference convened in Agra in 1737 that attracted literati from all over. The “proceedings” of the conference have come down to us in textual form in an unpublished work called *Sarasasāra*. In describing the “rationale for the book” (*granthakāraṇa*), the compiler Ray Shivdas points to discussions among poets and singers:

95 Keshavdas explicitly mentions the reasons for composing his *ritigranth* in *Kavipriyā*, v. 3.1 (1954), p. 101: “So that boys and girls would understand the fathomless ways [of poetry composition]”.

96 See, for instance, Keshavdas, *Kavipriyā*, vv. 3.14-15, 3.45, 6.14, *ibid.*, pp. 103, 106, 119. Vocatives are a common occurrence in *ritigranths*.

97 ‘Wear my *Kavipriya* like a necklace (*kaṇṭhamālā*), by committing it to memory’, *ibid.*, v. 3.3, p. 101. There is a double entendre: the noun *kaṇṭha* means “neck”, whereas *kaṇṭha kar-* is a verbal phrase meaning “to memorise”.

98 See also Bhikharidas, an authority on Indian *alankarashasta* from the eighteenth century, *Kāvyanirṇay*, in *Bhikhāridāsgranthāvalī*, ed. by Vishvanathprasad Mishra (Varanasi: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 1957), Vol. 2, v. 1.9, p. 4.

99 Surati Mishra, *Jorāvarprakāś*, ed. by Yogendrapratap Singh (Allahabad: Sahitya Sammelan, 1992).

I will now tell (*kahata*) the rationale for the book,
 listen carefully (*sunīyaumī cita lāi*)
 to the way that we have stated new categories, applying our intellects.
 Clever poets had heard (*sunai*) many individual poems and *dhrupads*
 that engaged new categories of *nayakas* and *nayikas*.
 They looked to the discussions of them in available books
 and became aware of new categories that had never before been treated.¹⁰⁰

Poets and singers had begun to notice literary schemes that were not covered by the existing books and thus resolved to draft a new *ritigranth* to update the categories. In other words, performance practice had the potential to affect theory.

That poetic theory was a source of public debate in literary salons is also confirmed by Azad Bilgrami in his *Ma'āṣir-al kirām*, a rare Persian *tazkira* (see Pellò in this volume for the genre) that commemorates the achievements of both Persian and Hindi writers. In his entry on Diwan Sayyid Rahmatullah, the governor of Jajmau (near modern Kanpur), Azad recounts an incident that sheds further light on how concepts from *alankarashastra* were assumed knowledge in many early modern *mahfils* and not just for Hindu literati but also for Muslim poetry aficionados. One day, a student of the famous *riti* poet Chintamani Tripathi recited (or read¹⁰¹) a poem that was intended to illustrate the *ananvaya alankara*, a trope in which the object under consideration (*upameya*) is so spectacular as to brook no standard of comparison (*upamana*). The student's example verse was found wanting by the convener of the *mahfil*, Sayyid Rahmatullah, who ruled it an incorrect usage of this figure of speech.¹⁰²

On the strength of this and other examples given here, knowledge of *alankarashastra* was available to the audiences of *mahfils* who listened to poetic performance. The main subjects of *ritigranths*, such as taxonomies

100 Note the emphasis on listening in lines one and three. *Sarasasāra*, Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, MS 2715/1492, folio 28, vv. 119-20 (my emendation, since two verses are mistakenly marked "119"). A related passage from this colophon is discussed in Busch (2011), pp. 197-98.

101 Ghulam Ali Azad Bilgrami, *Ma'āṣir al-kirām* (Hyderabad: [n.p.], 1913), p. 364. Azad uses the verb *khwāndan*, which means both to read and to recite, an ambiguity that speaks eloquently about the tellings and texts problematic. The Sanskrit root *pāṭh-* (modern Hindi *paṛh-*) is similarly bivalent. Cf. Pollock (2006), p. 85 on the Sanskrit word *vācayati*, which "literally means to make [a text] speak".

102 The poem is about the beauty of the *nayika*'s eyes, which in keeping with the trope should have been compared with her own eyes. The inexperienced poet mistakenly uses the epithet "*mṛgākṣī*", "doe-eyed". A more extensive discussion of the passage is Busch (2011), pp. 154-56.

of figures of speech and different types of female characters, were not just the bookish learning of *pandits* (*pāṇḍitya-pradarśan*, as Hindi scholarship sometimes likes to put it), but the basis for energetic debates that were part of a rich performance culture.

Conclusion

A close reading of diverse *riti* works uncovers numerous hints about performance in one of the least expected domains of Hindi literary culture that has today become synonymous with dry scholasticism and pedantry. In certain key respects, the stunning achievements of classical Hindi authors like Keshavdas or Surati Mishra are incomprehensible without understanding the degree to which the *riti* corpus was underwritten first and foremost by a *textual* engagement with the Sanskrit past. Moreover, the explosion in written documents during the early modern period means that much of Hindi literature—even the vaunted song texts of *bhakti* religiosity—was closely tied to manuscript culture. And yet understanding the dynamics of performance is critical even for formal written traditions like the *riti* styles cultivated by the higher echelons of literate society.

Performance leaves few written traces, posing a considerable challenge for literary historians. There are, thankfully, some exceptions, as when Keshavdas celebrates the brilliant *paturas* patronised by Indrajit, or Jayarama Pindye records the spectacle of Shahaji Bhonsle's court as each poet handles a challenging *samasya*.¹⁰³ One way around the paucity of specific records is to track the features of poems that especially mark them for oral delivery. We can learn to listen for the context. For instance, the virtuoso use of alliteration or a predilection for bardic styles in some texts is a good indication that they were probably appreciated in dramatic public presentations. Specific genres like the “chain of epithets” and praise poems

103 Doubtless there are still many untapped sources. A short manuscript from the royal palace library in Jaipur provides written evidence of *samasyapurti* poems by one Pranannath Shrotriya, active during the late seventeenth century. It is just one of more than two dozen works attributed to him, quite a few evidently on *prastavik* (“occasional”) themes that were inspired by specific requests. See Prannath Shrotriya, ‘Basant kī khabari hai’, Pothikhana, MS 3398 (4), Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum, Jaipur; Gopalnarayan Bahura, *Literary Heritage of the Rulers of Amber and Jaipur with an Index to the Register of Manuscripts in the Pothikhana of Jaipur* (I. Khasmohor collection) (Jaipur: Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum, 1976), pp. 314–15. Further written evidence of premodern *samasyapurti* competitions must still be available in manuscript collections, awaiting further research.

in the *muktaka* style are unthinkable without a listener on the receiving end. As with *dhrupad* songs, the patron, or, to use explicitly auditory language, addressee, is even signaled by his name.

Analogies between music and poetry, both staples of courtly assemblies, often prove instructive, which means we do well to study how poems behave like songs, or poets like musicians. Singers and poets alike drew on established repertoires. They shared a penchant for improvisation. They also transmitted knowledge to their patrons through performance. We discover that not just poetry but elements of *shastra* or formal works of Indian theory were read out loud and debated in *mahfils*.

If we grant that patrons were not always silently reading a text (sometimes of course they were), then of necessity a *social* dimension enters into the experience. There is the social complexity of the patron-performer relationship, but also the collective participatory moment of the *mahfil* in which a work is vetted, where multiple listeners interact with a text at the same time. This was a world of listeners *and* readers. Sometimes listeners and readers were one and the same. For instance, a king might enjoy a lively performance in his court and also engage in private perusal of a work (many early modern kings had libraries). But sometimes listeners may not have been readers, particularly in a multilingual environment with various language capacities in play. This raises the possibility that what was a written literary document for some communities was experienced as an auditory culture by others.

A surprising number of Brajbhasha and even some Sanskrit works can be linked to Mughal settings, and yet it is not clear that the patrons always read them.¹⁰⁴ Possibly some works were experienced as tellings, since the dissemination of the *riti* literary ethos did not depend on an exclusively written engagement. Hundreds of poetry manuals were produced in early modern India, and the manuscript tradition is robust, as I have stressed. But evidence does suggest that they may have been experienced in, or in some cases sparked by, oral contexts.

Did the Persianate Mughal emperors access Brajbhasha poetry by listening or by *reading*, by a telling or a text? The *Jahāngīrjascandrikā* is

104 Audrey Truschke (2012), pp. 70-81 discusses the complexities of the Mughal reception of texts in Sanskrit, a language the emperors did not know. Since they did know Hindi, perhaps they partially understood some Sanskrit; possibly a Hindi translator helped to mediate the text; in some cases Mughal elites (such as 'Abd al-Rahim Khan-i Khanan) were linguistically proficient and would have been able to understand; other texts might have served more as symbolic objects.

framed as a sermon by Keshavdas to Rahim's son Iraj Shahnavaz Khan, and the poet claims that he presented the work to the emperor, though nobody claims that Jahangir read it. Emperor Muhammad Shah (r.1719-1748) once gave Surati Mishra an audience at his court and the poet presented several verses to him.¹⁰⁵ Were they also available to him as texts? It was certainly common for Persianate emperors and the Mughal nobility to have considerable cultural competency in local knowledge systems—literature among them—but one can readily access a literary tradition without reading.¹⁰⁶

When we measure texts and readership in terms of a manuscript census, looking for both quantity and indications of script communities, we may vastly underestimate the number of users of a text. A collection of praise poems may exist in a single manuscript at a single court. Some poetry manuals survive in relatively few numbers. As evident from the case of the Braj couplet that was presented in the assembly of Diwan Rahmatullah, reading was in some cases a public performance and thus may not necessarily leave written traces. Clearly much work remains to reconstruct the experiences of Indian literary life in the pre-print era. We come closer the more we learn to factor in both “tellings” and “texts”.

105 A few details are Yogendrapratap Singh, ‘Bhūmikā’, in *Jorāvarprakāś* (Allahabad: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, 1992), pp. 8-9.

106 See Sudipta Kaviraj, ‘The Two Histories of Literary Culture in Bengal’, in *Literary Cultures in History*, ed. by Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), p. 511 (here drawing on Bhudev Mukhopadhyay’s distinction between spoken language and intelligible language).