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Toward a History of Kāvya Literature

edited by

Yigal Bronner
David Shulman
Gary Jubb

Oxford University Press
For Vidwan H. V. Nagaraja Rao

udanvac-chinnā bhūḥ sa ca nidhir apāṁ yojana-śatam
sadhā pānthah pāśā gagana-parimāṇam kalayati /
iti prāyo bhāvāḥ sphurad-avani-mudrā-mukulitāḥ
satām prajñānmetah punar ayam a-stāṁ vijayate //
—Subḥāṣitaratnakosa 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 Riti Tradition

ALLISON BUSCH

guru guna 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 riti 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 alankāraśāstra (literary theory) into Brajbhasha. They greatly facilitated the kāvya enterprise by writing

1. The word riti 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 riti 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 riti doctrine espoused by Vāmana).
poetics manuals known as *rittigranth* (books of method). The *rittigranth* 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, *riti* authors deepened the Braj poetic repertoire by adopting, and adapting, Sanskrit literary styles. *Muktaka* (freestanding) poems on *śringāra* (erotic) and *prāśasti* (political) themes, staples of the Sanskrit literary assembly, were re-tooled by *riti* poets for their patrons. A few *riti* authors also took up the challenge of writing extended works of *prabandha kāvya*.

However obviously rooted in traditions of Sanskrit *kāvya*, *riti* 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 *dīṅgāl* 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 nava* (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. Moreover, while *riti* 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 *riti* 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 *riti* texts were able to reach new audiences and serve the evolving cultural needs of courtly communities.

Like Sanskrit court poetry before it, *riti 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 *māṇḍābārs* 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 *Māncarit* (Biography of Man Singh, c. 1595), and Kesavdas’s *Vīrśimhdevacarit* (Biography of Bir Singh Deo Bundela, 1607). My third case study is a work of *alankārāsūtra* 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 Lalitlalām (Finest Lover, 1660s?) of Mātrīrām Tripaṭhi, 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 Māncarit 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 Māncarit might be considered a proto-rāti 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 Māncarit'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

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³ As noted by H. Blochmann in A‘in-i akhbari Vol 1, p. 363.
much discussed. Little known to cultural historians of this period, however, is the figure of Man Singh as presented in vernacular kävyas. Few would even be aware that we have kävya works about him.

In fact, two surviving kävyas go by the name of Mäncarit. Like so many works of the genre, both tack in interesting ways between historical and literary imperatives. I have discussed elsewhere the earlier Mäncarit (1585), by one Amrt Rāi. This shorter work has more of a Rajasthani profile, although there are some Braj bhasha verses mixed in. The second work, under consideration here, is Narottam’s longer and more thematically wide-ranging Mäncarit, which, while not detailing every aspect of Man Singh’s long and distinguished career as a Mughal mansabdār, does more justice to the designation carit. Narottam’s Mäncarit 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 kävya. Since Narottam’s Mäncarit 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 kävya. 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, but Narottam seems

5. As observed by Bhadani 1992, Rajput literature is an underutilized resource for Mughal historians.
7. Although the text’s editor Gopalnarayan Bahura uses the designation Māncarit rāso the author himself simply entitles his work Māncarit. Māncarit, vv. 19, 36–37, 43, 431–32.
9. Kālidāsa introduces one of his mahākāvyas with the self-deprecating remarks:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{kva svaśīpaḥ bhava vāṃśa, kva cālpaśīpaḥ matih/} \\
\text{titirur duṣṭarṣam mohād uḍpясśamīṃ sāgaram/} \\
\text{mandah kaviyaśāhpaśārthi gamiṣyāmy upahāśatām/} \\
\text{prāśn eradicate phale lobhād udvihaṃ iśa vāmaṇābh/}
\end{align*}\]

(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). Raghuvāṃśa 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 Sarasvati's grandeur as being akin to "a frog without a tongue." Here he plays on a well-attested negative comparison between Viṣṇu's serpent companion Śeṣaṇāga, 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" (mūrka, fool) and "matikhinu" (matikṣina, devoid of intelligence). 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 mangalācarans and stutis. As though to cover all the theological bases, the poet supplements the usual paeans to Gāṇeśa and Sarasvati with an elaborate series of invocations to the goddess, Viṣṇu (including two daśāvatāra sequences), Śiva, and Gāṅgā 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. Narottam also sought the blessings of the earlier poetic tradition in the following kavi-prasamsā (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 Vārāruṇi, clever Māgha; remember Bīlhaṇa 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 (pāiṣṇa prasāda), I have recounted the virtues of Man Singh in a biography.

Narottam's apotheosis of past poets is underscored by the placement of the kavi-prasamsā amidst a raft of mangalācarans and his telling use of the term prasāda (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.

12. Māṅcarit, 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 Honstmann notes that Amber had four state deities (2002, 145).
Although he omits the quintessential ädikavi or “first poet” Valmiki, whose name heads many kavi-praśamśa lists, Narottam situates his own poetic efforts in a very clear lineage of kāvyā luminaries. While Vyäsa and Kälidäsa (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 Bilhana, the author, of the Sanskrit historical kāvyā Vikramänkadevacarita. He also permits one vernacular poet to gatecrash the gathering: Cand Bardäi, credited with the authorship of the Prthviräjräso. The presence here of Cand Bardäi 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 prasäda 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 kāvyā, but I couldn’t even string together one letter.” Fortunately the merciful goddess SarasvatI 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 kāvyā. Indeed, one could even say she “commands” him to write it: on two occasions Narottam refers to his Devi’s injunction to write as a hukam, using not the language of bhakti with its stress on divine grace but an Islamicate administrative term. 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 kāvyā past and diffidence in the face of the literary giants in whose footsteps he finds himself limping along, the Mäncarit 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 mahäkāvyä tradition, which had a time-honored role in memorializing the deeds of kings for posterity:

Countless master poets (kaviräjä) of old composed mahäkāvyas. As time marches forward kings pass away but their deeds are heard in this world,

14. Sheldon Pollock 1995 has approached the kavi-praśamśa 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 Valmiki as the ädikavi see Pollock 2006, 75–89.
15. I owe this insight to Cynthia Talbot.
16. Mäncarit, v. 22 (jïya mem kaha karana ki pai, akhkhura eks na jurat aï). For the sake of clarity, here and in other citations from this text I have made slight modifications to the orthography (such as changing sa to kha and standardizing the representation of nasals).
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 Kurambha\textsuperscript{18} lineage,
may your fame remain on this earth.\textsuperscript{19}

The \textit{evar}’i’s general architecture and literary techniques would certainly be familiar to any reader of classical poetry: the aura of royal \textit{pratasti} that pervades the work; set pieces like a \textit{nagara-varnana} (description of the city) of the Kachhwaha capital at Amber or a portrait of the royal women in \textit{nakh-\textit{\textbar}} (toe-to-head description) style; the imagined sexual delights of the \textit{n\textbar{\textbar}yaka} (hero) in traditional \textit{s\textbar{\textbar}g\textbar{\textbar}a} modes; his heroic exploits in vivid battle scenes infused with \textit{\textbar{\textbar}ra} \textit{\textbar{\textbar}sa}. These are fairly generic ingredients of \textit{k\textbar{\textbar}ya} 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 \textit{Hindi} \textit{k\textbar{\textbar}ya}. 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.”\textsuperscript{20} In one of the introductory verses where he explicitly mentions the classical \textit{\textbar{\textbar}r\textbar{\textbar}as} or literary moods (in this case \textit{s\textbar{\textbar}g\textbar{\textbar}a}, \textit{\textbar{\textbar}ra}, \textit{kar\textbar{\textbar}na}, \textit{adb\textbar{\textbar}hu} and \textit{\textbar{\textbar}sa}, or the erotic, heroic, pitiful, fantastic, and comic) that inform his work, he also trumpets its distinctive non-Sanskrit meters including the \textit{doh\textbar{\textbar}a}, \textit{cau\textbar{\textbar}pi}, and \textit{ar\textbar{\textbar}li} (he uses many others, as well).\textsuperscript{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 \textit{bh\textbar{\textbar}k\textbar{\textbar}ti} milieu. Numerous other changes can be detected.

Narottam evidently did not feel at ease with some of the \textit{k\textbar{\textbar}ya} models that he had inherited. One of the expectations for a classical \textit{n\textbar{\textbar}yaka} 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 \textit{s\textbar{\textbar}g\textbar{\textbar}d\textbar{\textbar}ri} mission the poet prudishly invokes the following Sanskrit \textit{\textbar{\textbar}l\textbar{\textbar}oka}:\

\begin{verbatim}
\textit{\textbar{\textbar}l\textbar{\textbar}k\textbar{\textbar}m\textbar{\textbar}i  m\textbar{\textbar}t\textbar{\textbar}a  s\textbar{\textbar}v\textbar{\textbar}a  m\textbar{\textbar}t\textbar{\textbar}a  m\textbar{\textbar}t\textbar{\textbar}a  c\textbar{\textbar}b\textbar{\textbar}ra\textbar{\textbar}m\textbar{\textbar}p\textbar{\textbar}u\textbar{\textbar}t\textbar{\textbar}r\textbar{\textbar}k\textbar{\textbar}a}
\textit{\textbar{\textbar}r\textbar{\textbar}j\textbar{\textbar}n\textbar{\textbar}a  p\textbar{\textbar}t\textbar{\textbar}n\textbar{\textbar}i  g\textbar{\textbar}u\textbar{\textbar}\textbar{\textbar}r\textbar{\textbar}h  p\textbar{\textbar}t\textbar{\textbar}n\textbar{\textbar}i  s\textbar{\textbar}\textbar{\textbar}w\textbar{\textbar}m\textbar{\textbar}t\textbar{\textbar}a  m\textbar{\textbar}\textbar{\textbar}t\textbar{\textbar}a\textbar{\textbar}r\textbar{\textbar}h  s\textbar{\textbar}\textbar{\textbar}m\textbar{\textbar}\textbar{\textbar}t\textbar{\textbar}a}
\end{verbatim}

18. This (alongside its variant Kurma) is a traditional title of the Kachhwaha kings of Amber.
19. \textit{M\textbar{\textbar}na\textbar{\textbar}r\textbar{\textbar}i}, v. 88. Da\textbar{\textbar}n\textbar{\textbar}d makes similar remarks in \textit{K\textbar{\textbar}p\textbar{\textbar}d\textbar{\textbar}d\textbar{\textbar}r\textbar{\textbar}a}, 1.5.
20. \textit{Si\textbar{\textbar}d\textbar{\textbar}hi  bh\textbar{\textbar}\textbar{\textbar}j\textbar{\textbar}a  c\textbar{\textbar}l\textbar{\textbar}\textbar{\textbar}i  a\textbar{\textbar}r\textbar{\textbar}\textbar{\textbar}t\textbar{\textbar}b\textbar{\textbar}h\textbar{\textbar}u  j\textbar{\textbar}e  p\textbar{\textbar}\textbar{\textbar}w\textbar{\textbar}h\textbar{\textbar}i\textbar{\textbar}n\textbar{\textbar}}, v. 37. G. N. Bahura has also drawn attention to these lines in Bahura 1990, 21.
21. \textit{M\textbar{\textbar}na\textbar{\textbar}r\textbar{\textbar}i}, v. 36–37.
Lakṣmi is a mother, Pārvatī is a mother, and so is the daughter of Brahma.
The king’s wife, one’s guru’s wife—these are to be considered one’s own mother.  

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” (anumāna, Sanskrit anumāna), even hinting that he studied kavya works like the Naisadha-carita in order to be able to write these intimate details about the harem.

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 nāric meter is a typical nakh-sīkh of the royal women fashioned in completely atypical language and meter. It begins:

calai ti căla călahi, sabai ju haṁsa-bāla hi
caranna rattā jāvakaṁ, su kāṁma-keli-pāvatāṁ
dipai anopa pindūri, ji kāṁma-keli-indūri
jugalla jaṅgha rambha ye, manaṁ kanaṅa khambha ye
su κaṭṭi hina νṛjahi, ti kīṅkani νṛjahi
gambhirā nābhī pekbiye, ti kāṁma-rūpa lekbiye...

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...

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,

23. Māncarit, 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.
24. Māncarit, 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 kāvyā—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 dohas 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 kāvyā—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", 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 bhujangprayāṣ (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 tāma tāmanti thānam nisānam
uri renu gaināṇi lypau teja bhānam, baji bhāgamai rāga kedāna tānam
bui sindhumai sindhu āśi ti ānām, bhayau rāgamai rūgu māṛu amānām
mīlī faujā faujām rīṅī thāna thānam, saje aṅgā aṅgeni jodhā juvānam
gāhe bāhā kammāna bedhantic tācchi, udāi gainu pankhī su bāībe banacchi
bhauvau cakka sawy cakka viyogānā bhānam, baiśā hākham na bījhanī kānam
kiye mukhkha rāte na disai bhalānam, cale kātaraṇī āpu kine palānam...

25. As noted by Talbot 2007, 23.
26. Emended from "cakkāvi yoga" in the printed text. Chakva birds are held to endure separation from their mates at night.
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 kävya 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 haväi ("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 dīngal poetry. Sanskrit poets were of course not strangers to alliteration—Subandhu’s Vāsavadattā is a case in point from very early in the kävya 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.
29. I rely heavily on Bahuras’s glosses of the weaponry in Māncarit, pp. 255–56.
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 dingalesque passage that stresses ethnic diversity. Descriptions of the army are a kāṣṭya staple, and had been used earlier in Sanskrit poetry to signal a powerful transregional political culture. 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 bhūjāṇgaṇavatī meter, which consists mostly of an intentionally bewildering list of ethnic groups:

\[
cadhe saṅga sevā ju rāmī ruhele mile koṭī kābili sohai akele
daye munḍa tāśi ju sāśi ti sohai, laye bāṭha kǎmmāṇa ammāṇa mohai
\]
\[
cakattā ujabakka ikka atage, ji sandhi nilāṭi fīrāngī kāḷāṅge
ruhele ruhammī ru hammī suhāmmī, habassī hasammī jūhammī sāvāmmī
\]
\[
turakkāmmā makkāmmā pānnī pāvāngī, sahāmmī jūhammī khureṣi sāpāṅge
\]
\[
niyājjī ti kājī subhai sāra sāde, kasalle maśini jure sēṇājāde
\]
\[
pāṭhānam amānām bhile tega gori, mile loḥa lodo su kāṃbo ti kori
\]
\[
ghane saṅga kekṣa lahora lambe, kadhaṭī tega vēgām ji ammāṇa jhumme
\]
\[
kījāṭhīsa muṇḍam ginai ko nilāṅge, muṭṭāṃna cukhi tīte āi aṅge
\]

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 Cakatṭā, Uzbek Ujabakka, Qureshi Khuresi, Turks Turakkāmmā, etc.) but some of these derivations sound ludicrous; rhymes and playful touches like “pāṭhānam amānām” (countless Pathans!) and “kekṣa 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

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

While the main narrative point here and elsewhere in this kātya 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 gangājal (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" (asurajanamu).  

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.  

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 kātya about a royal personage. The contemporary Mughal view of polo is helpfully elucidated by Akbar's court historian and ideologue Abū al-Fazl, whose A'īn-i akbari 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. Māncarit, v. 231–32.
34. References to polo can be found in Māncarit, vv. 56, 69, 139, 274.
35. Māncarit, 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-Fazl 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 kävya produced under his patronage.

Other concessions to Persian culture in the Māncarit 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 Devi was giving the poet a hukam). A few common Persianized phrases, like makhmalla fintaigya 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 topec (cannoneer). Occasionally the poet forges unexpected compounds that playfully mix Sanskrit and Persian. Thus in a īrīgārik 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 jor).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 kävya. In passages requiring Akbar’s direct speech, for instance,

37. Māncarit, v. 280. Similar phrases are found in vv. 75, 219.
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 cele-
 brated Haldighati incident mentioned earlier), the emperor says he is concerned
 about having received many “petitions,” expressed as firädi (from Persian
 faryây). The poet then cleverly concocts a verse in which he manages to rhyme
 the distinctly non-Braj phrase dara häla (dar häl is Persian for “in this state”),
 with sahi jalâla, a Brajification of Akbar’s regnal title Shah Jalaluddin.

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 You sufzais in a
 grim turn of events during the northwestern campaigns of the 1580s. Akbar is
 depicted gravely in a darbär scene (Perso-Arabic words marked in bold type):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{baithe hute sâbi divâna,} \\
\text{thâdhe mecha jite dhara khâna} \\
aauru râuta râja râ, bhai firädi tahâm kî äi \\
sâbi bajâra bulâi kai, pühi hâi taba bâta \\
ko jaihyä ko úbaryä, loha lagyä kîsa gâta \\
taba vêba bolâi bola sâbi suvihâna jî \\
sâba patisâbi fauja gai tihim thâna jû \\
aisâ juluma khudâi na kâhû dekhiyâ
\end{align*}
\]

The emperor was seated in the royal court,
the earth’s Mlechas 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.”

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

40. Mâncarat, v. 207.
41. Mâncarat, vv. 317–19.
42. Persianized Braj style is a well-attested feature of râj 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 grandiously, "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-praśāma, and as a Brahmin court poet he approached his literary task with one foot firmly planted in the soil of classical literary culture. The Māncarit 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.

Narottam's Māncarit—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 Virsimhdevarcit of Keśavdās

The next major work of Hindi kāvya to be commissioned at a mansabdār's court was Keśavdās's Virsimhdevarcit, also known as Vircarit. It was written in 1607 and thus only about a decade after the Māncarit, but it indexes a dramatic leap forward in the development of Braj bhasha 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-praśāma Narottam also refers to the Naiṣadha-carita of Śrīharṣa, the Bhāgavatapurāṇa, the Amanvatsaka, and the Bhāviłanga. See Māncarit, vv. 71, 91.

44. Incorrect Sanskrit forms can be spotted in several verses that were clearly intended to be pure Sanskrit. Examples include Māncarit, vv. 1, 121, 272, 310. R. S. McGregor has similarly noticed incorrect Sanskrit in a Braj commentary on Bhartrhari by King Indrajit of Orchha from approximately the same period. See McGregor 1968, 13.
mode of political expression. 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 kingship 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. Kesavdās also mentions that Man Singh Kachhwaha attended the Bundela king's coronation. 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. In light of this point it seems of more than passing significance that after an opening mangalācaran to Siva, Kesavdās 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. Second is Rana Amar Singh Sisodia, who caused the elephants of the enemy kingdom to lose their courage.

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 Narottamadas (not the same as the Amber poet), Haldhar, Nandadas, and (possibly) Alam dating from the sixteenth century. See McGregor 1984, 99–101, 194; Snell 1992.


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 Raiputs" 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. Kesavdās 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 rajas of this land." Jabāṅgīr-nāmah, p. 149.
Third is Raja Birsingh Bundela of Orchha, whose harrowing depredations were a source of intolerable grief to Akbar.\textsuperscript{51}

Vis\=nu created all three kings to protect royal families and to destroy enemy dynasties.\textsuperscript{52}

A lengthy \textit{vam\=ti\=vali} (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 Räma.\textsuperscript{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 Kachwahas 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 \textit{Akbarnāmah}, commissioned by Akbar, after all, if not a \textit{carita} of sorts about the emperor—Braj \textit{kavya} 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 \textit{kavya} as a creative outlet while simultaneously asserting the martial prowess and kingly noblesse of their patrons, were the trendsetters in this regard.\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{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 against rebellion against his father. Another cause of Akbar's grief is Bir Singh's murdering of his court intellectual and cherished confidant Abū al-Fāżl.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Virsimhdevcarit}, 1.2. In this last line the word "narasi\=npa" is a \textit{yamaka} meaning both "king" (lion among men) and the fourth avatar of Vis\=nu. 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 Vis\=nu, see Pauwels 2012, 152 (and notes 51–54).

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Virsimhdevcarit}, 2.2ff.

\textsuperscript{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 alankārāśāstra. He is known to this day as a major innovator in the field of Brajbhasha poetics. His Rasiṣṭhprīyā (Handbook for poetry connoisseurs, 1591), an ingenious reworking of Rudrabhatta’s Sanskrit Śṛṅgaratilaka, became an instant bestseller among vernacular literati. Keśavdās followed up with a Kathāprīyā (Handbook for poets, 1601), which was based on several classical sources including Daṇḍin’s Kavyadarsa. He also wrote a short treatise on metrics, the Chandaśālā (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 kāvyas 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 Rāmcandracandrika (1601), Virsimhdevcarit (1607), and Jahnāgrījascandrika (1612). The Rāmcandracandrika 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 Rāmcandracandrika, a bold attempt at writing a Brajbhasha Rāmāyana (but one whose fame was ultimately eclipsed by the slightly earlier Avadhī version of Tulsidas), Vālmīki appears to the poet in a dream, authorizing his literary mission. Although Keśavdās does occasionally refer to himself as a mandamati bhāṣākavi (slow-witted Hindi poet), he does not seem to have been subject to the same crisis of confidence that plagued Narottam. A single verse to Siva 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 Rāmcandracandrika, also known as Rāmcandrika, 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. Kathāprīyā, 1.17; Rāmcandracandrika, 1.5.

57. Virsimhdevcarit, 1.3 (... tīhi para pūrṇiddha kesāvī samati, bipra-bāṇa-avatārya guṇi budhikīlā prabandha tīti karunīyo bira cārtra bicītra sunt).
Although he did pay lip service to the topos of writerly incompetence, Kesavdās didn’t really mean it. The *Vrisimhdevarī* is the sixth of his eight works, and he was already well established as a major Brajbhasha poet.\footnote{His extensive career is the subject of Busch 2011, chapter 1.}

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 Kesavdās’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.\footnote{See Busch 2005.}

Kesavdās, like Narottam before him, and many other Braj poets since, combined elements of history and poetry in fascinating ways. The baseline tempo of the *Vrisimhdevarī* is set by the rhythms of the familiar *dohā-caupāi* popularized by earlier Avadhi poets,\footnote{Kesavdās uses a 15-śātrī variant of the (16-śātrī) *caupāi*, known as *caupahi*.} a workaday meter that lends itself particularly well to a court historian’s task of reporting. But Kesavdās also uses more elaborate meters like the *kavitī* 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 Kesavdās’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 *kāvya* from the poet’s own oeuvre. Since Kesavdās had written a *Rāmāyana* in 1601, just six years before the completion of *Vrisimhdevarī*, he had to hand a stock of *kāvya* compositions that celebrated ancient India’s paradigmatically just king. A close reading of the *Rāmcandracandrikā* and *Vrisimhdevarī* 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.\footnote{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 Bāna’s recontextualization of a critical passage by Subandhu, see Bronner 2010, 50–55.}

One virtuoso instance of Kesavdās’s literary recycling epitomizes a central theme of the *Rāmāyana* story: brotherly sacrifice and service.\footnote{Brotherly harmony, a *sine qua non* of peaceful dynastic succession, is in Sheldon Pollock’s estimation a crucial political focus of the *Rāmāyana* and one that distinguishes it from India’s other great classical epic, the *Mahābhārata*. Pollock 2005, 18–22.} Rāma, recently banished from Ayodhya at the ruthless Kaikeyī’s insistence, has just begun his...
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 Kaikeyi forced Daśaratha to banish his cherished first-born son and have Bharata installed on the throne instead, returns home to find Ayodhya desolate. 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 Laksmana 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.

In Keśavdās's Rāmāyana (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 Virsimhdevcarit is Keśavdās's relentless use of Rāmāyana 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." But this classical image of brotherly

63. Daśaratha's capitulation to Kaikeyi in passing over his first-born son was held up as a negative example for later cases of Indian dynastic succession, as when Bilhana remarked, "nāmaṇya pitā bhanu-bhisektaḥ kramāt samullanāha yad anmāṇyaḥ tenehāśā strijāta ity akirittā adyāpi tasyātā digantātreyuḥ." (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"). Vikramānkevatara, 3.40. I am grateful to Yigal Bronner for the reference (and translation).

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

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.  

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 Rämcandracandrikä—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 verse inversion of Rämäyana ideals proves impossible to ignore. 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. Kesavdäs’s use of a Rämäyana 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: 

raksaka loga te bhaksaka bhae, 
“protectors have turned predators.”

Let us not forget that this is a work at once of history and kävya. 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 Kesavdäs’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. 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, and turns wholeheartedly to a more purely kävya 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 (rdjyasri) wandering from pillar to post. Virsimhdevcarit, 10.10. This image can be found in Bilhana too. See Chapter 17 in this Volume.

67. Compare Virsimhdevcarit, 12.21ff with Rämcandracandrikä, 10.17ff.

68. Virsimhdevcarit, 14.56.

69. Kesavdäs mentions the royal farmän (edict) in Virsimhdevcarit, 14.61–63. Ram Shah, who sent a daughter to Jahangir’s harem in 1610, continued to hold a jágir, and his nephew Bharat inherited the erstwhile king’s title upon Ram Shah’s death in 1612. See Jahängirnämäh, 104, 140.

70. The nadir would have to be Bir Singh’s murder of Abu al-Fazl 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 Kesavdäs’s treatment of this notorious episode with how it is handled in the Jahängirnämäh 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, Kesavdās concerns himself with a rich variety of poetic sequences that help to establish his patron as a high-status royal Kshatriya. While Kesavdās, writing in madhyadesa (central India), did not share Narottam’s penchant for Rajasthani poetics, the works do share an interest in fusing the classical tools of cosmopolitan kävya with more contemporary and local elements. The work straddles the realms of the Sanskrit past and the Hindi—and now deeply Mughal—present.

Kesavdās was never one to acknowledge his sources—there is no kavi-pratama 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 Virsimhdevcarit. 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 Kesavdās 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 Kesavdās, who described the moonrise as: gangagāmini gangā nīra, phīlyau pūṇḍarīka so dhīra … madana nrpati ko gaganai niketa, rajata kalasa so duvan sameta (radiant like a white lotus blooming on the celestial Ganges… a silver vessel draped with duva grass in the heavenly mansion of King Kāmadeva).72 Does the spirit of Harṣa hover over the madanotava (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 Kesavdās writes the lines taralitā komalā malaya samāra … lalitā lavanga lataḥ hindolā (the gentle breeze of Malaya swaying… a swing nestled among the clove vines)?74

71. Virsimhdevcarit, 22.26 cavana pahārana pramudita bhāye vahana tēṣa jana gac. 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 Mālavīkāgnimitra, act three; also see Meghadūta, v. 75.
72. Virsimhdevcarit, 22.34–35. Compare the line pūṇḍarikam iva gaganagāmimānirghiyth… njatakalasā ina dūravipratātaśabaleh manevbhaśbheṣeṣaṣya from Vāsavadatta, pp. 247–48. This parallel has been noted by Bhatnagar 1991, 255. Several other similarities in these two passages make Kesavdās’s use of Subandhu’s work beyond a doubt.
73. Compare the first act of Ratnavali.
74. Virsimhdevcarit, 22.18–19. Cf. lalitālavangalatāpāritānākamalāmahāyamānir. Gita-govinda, p. 27. Although Kesavdās’s phrase is an almost verbatim rendition of Jayadeva, Subandhu had used the similar tag komala-malaya-māraṇādibhūta. This is quoted in Bronner 2010, 37.
If Kesavdās 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. On the other hand, when the poet once again builds into his kāvya layers of Rāmāyana 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-vārya of Ayodhya from his own Rāmcandracandrikā. 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 Rāmāyana intertext no longer feels subversive or ironic in its effect. We got the point that Ram Shah’s governance was distinctly not rāmrājya. Are we now to understand that because of Bir Singh’s rule Orchha has become Ayodhya? Was the performance at court of the Vīrsimhdevcarit 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 rāmrājya, the reality of Bundelkhandi politics at the turn of the seventeenth century was considerably more complicated.

The Mughal conquest of Orchha was part of Kesavdās’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 Kesavdās in the manner of Narottam, but the Vīrsimhdevcarit 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. 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. Vīrsimhdevcarit, 18.5; in a later verse (18.39) the poet describes Bir Singh Deo Bundela’s minister Kanhardas as “a friend, like Vasishtha was to Daśaratha, Viśvamitra to Rāmacandra”.
77. Vīrsimhdevcarit, 14.61. 18.22.
78. In Vīrsimhdevcarit, 12.16, for instance, Kesavdās 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 (nyāya, that is, nyāya) are old, the branding of horses (Persian dāgh) and the suggestion of a paper bureaucracy (daftar) are new. 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. It is true that painting pictures of the beloved has a long history in Sanskrit literature, but at least one of Kesavdās’s mentions of portraiture with its stress on representational accuracy is highly suggestive of Mughal practices. 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 meva) or the perfumery have some relationship to imperial styles. 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 Kesavdās’s topics have at least a passing resemblance to those discussed in the A’in-i akbari. 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 Kesavdās’s is usually far more cursory than Abū al-Fazl’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. Kesavdās’s dedicating of an entire nineteenth canto to the subject of caugāna-varṇañam, a description of Bir Singh playing polo, similarly takes on a special significance when we recall Abū al-Fazl’s remarks about polo from the A’in-i akbari. 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 dulicä (carpet, probably from Persian gilicä, according to McGregor 1993, 505), palanga-posa (bedcover, with the Persian suffix posh), gulänä (of roses, from gulāb), and makhamala (velvet, from makhmat) lend freshness to the passage. Virsimhdevcarit, 21.6–10.

81. Jāke je guna rāpa bicitra, taham taham tāhe citrä cira (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 dulicä sobhā sanjāv, manau citre ciritä 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 mānaśātā (room where a woman goes to sulk, v. 21.14), reminiscent of the classical idea of a kopabhasana.

83. Compare Virsimhdevcarit, 21.12–14, 27.5 with (respectively) Book One, A’ins 31, 28, 30, 3–5, 34. Kesavdās’s references to painting are recorded in note 81. I have discussed the possibility of such a textual dialogue between Abū al-Fazl and Amṛt Rāi, the author of the earlier Māncarit, in Busch 2012, 319–25.
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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, Kesavdās imagines that Bir Singh’s polo balls incite terror in the lands of distant kings.84

A hayasālāvānana (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-Fazl, 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-Fazl 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 Kesavdās, 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, kuhi kusala kilakī kūdanai
kuraga karariyā kāre barna, kacchhi pacchi ke mana harna
khurani khilaim bhūtala khecari, kharakati kharaka khalani kom khari
khandhārai 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-Fazl discusses horses in Book One, Āins 58, 79; Book Two, Āin 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 hirä hiranägara hisane, harasita haumsa harasulai 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 taruma tina si cäli (the young Turkish horses are swift as arrows) runs a line from the ta's. 88 When we get to the ba's we encounter the phrases balake bädämi balivanta, bira baloci bane ananta, badakasäna upaje bahu beta, dai paṭhæ bälukä naresa. (Balkh horses are almond-colored and strong, brave horses from Baluchistan are very beautiful. The horses of Badakhsan come in many forms, the King of Balkh has sent them). 89 While the hayasälävarnanam 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 sässtra. The last segment of Canto 17 digresses into the world of säslihotra (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 sässtri scrutiny, are uttama, madhyama, and adhama (best, middling, and inferior); they can also be divided into a fourfold classification that corresponds to the varña (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 Padmahut (Story of Padmini, c. 1540), vv. 46, 496. I thank Thomas de Bruijn for the reference. The Jäyasi parallel has also been noted by Kishorilal in Virsimhdevcarit, pp. 353. An even more proximate parallel is the elaborate dīngalesque description of the horses in Amṛt Rāi's Māncarit, which forms part of the nagara-varṇana, vv. 120–28 (published in Māncaritāvali, ed. Bahura).
91. Virsimhdevcarit, 17.43.
including his humorously grämya (lowbrow) warning about sickly horses that mütai bāra bāra aru hagai (piss and shit all the time). While the poet's decision to include a canto on horses in his lengthy nagara-varnana of Orchha may well originate in an impulse to record a real life stable on the palace grounds, 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 (niti). The problem of power is as old as Indian literature itself, central to both the Mahäbhärata and Rämäyana—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 rājyaśri, royal power:

rājyaśri ati cañcola, tātā, tābū ki saba sunijai bāta
dhana sampati aru johana garva, ani nilai aviveka akharva
rājyaśri saum hota prasanga, kauna na bhraṣṭa hoyayahi saṅga

(Śloka)
yauvanam dhanasampattiḥ prabhutvam avivekitaḥ
ekośam apy anarthaḥ, kimyatra catuṣṭayam
śāstra sujala dhovatah jata, malinā hota saha 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. Virendrdevacari, 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.\textsuperscript{95}

Here and throughout the "niti cantos," Keśavdās routinely peppers his text with Sanskrit aphorisms, adding another complex inter-textual layer. Keśavdās has literally taken a page out of Bāna's book, drawing on the śukanāsopadesa section of Kādambari.\textsuperscript{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 kävya 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 subhāśīta (gnomic) literature, Dāna delivers an elaborate sermon on nājadharma (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 (danḍa), and numerous other related topics. Despite the didactic nature of the final section, Keśavdās does not abandon the kävya techniques that had served him so well elsewhere in the work. In one of the most complex ślesa verses in all of Braj literature Keśavdās equates Bir Singh with the trimūrti. The device of ślesa 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.\textsuperscript{97}

In the final sermon of this kävya, 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

\textsuperscript{95.} Virsimhdevacarita, 29.17–20.

\textsuperscript{96.} Note, for instance, how closely Keśavdās's phrasing in the last line resembles Bāna's: yasunānāmbhe ca prabhā śāstrajalapraṇāsāsanānimādi kālasyam upayāti buddhibh, Kādambari, p. 216. This and other borrowings from Bāna are noted in Bhatnagar 1991, 257–62.

\textsuperscript{97.} Virsimhdevacarita, 32.14. To illustrate the technique: the line nājai dvijarāja pada bhūtana vimulā may be construed in four separate ways: "for whom the swan is a beautiful foot ornament," that is, whose vehicle (vahana) is the swan (Brahmāpakṣa); "who bears the mark of Bhṛgu'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 ślesa. 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), Ananda (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 niti segments that most overtly deal with injunctions about royal comportment, the Virsimhdevcarit 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 Virsimhdevcarit 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 kavya (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 mansābādārs who kept the empire running through military service, displays of loyalty at court, and outlays of capital on public

98. Apane-apane ansa dai, kiye tilaka abhiśeka, Virsimhdevcarit, 33.12.
99. Virsimhdevcarit, 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 Tripaṭhī

While still inchoate in the early seventeenth century as Keśavdās’s career was drawing to a close, rītī 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 mansabdārs in the course of the seventeenth century. In this last section I examine the case of Bundi, where Matirām Tripaṭhī was commissioned to write his Lalitlalām (Finest lover), a spectacular instance of the muktaka style of rītī poetry. Although earlier Bundi rulers had commissioned a Sanskrit mabhākāvya, the Surjanacarita (Biography of Surjan Rao, c. 1590?) of Chandrashekharā, 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 rītī literary culture across western India in this period.

Matirām Tripaṭhī is rightly considered one of the finest poets of the full-fledged rītī 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 Tīvikamapur (near modern Kanpur), which happens to be the hometown of Akbar’s famous minister Birbal. Along with his brothers Cintāmaṇi and Bhūṣan, who were also famous rītī 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 Raj poetry for Mughal emperors. Like Keśavdās, Matirām was both a kavi and an ālankārika. He wrote exclusively in

100. Chandrashekharā completed the Surjanacarita in Banaras, possibly during the reign of the Bundi king Bhoj Hadā. 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 Prithvirājōpāya, whose author Cand Bardāl 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 Chandrashekharā 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 prāśasti kāvya for Man Singh. A few details about Matirām’s brothers Bhūṣan
the *muktaka* style, never attempting a lengthy *mahākāvya* in *prabandha* format. His *Satsai*, which rivals in excellence the more famous *riti* 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 *Rasraj* (*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). 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 (ṣukabi) Matirām wrote this poetry-filled work *Lalitlalām*, a storehouse of ornaments (*bhūṣana-dhāma*), for the pleasure of Bhao Singh.

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 *alankārasāstra*, 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.
Matirām’s slightly cryptic title Lalitalām, here translated as “finest lover,” may have been a reference to the concept of a laṭita nāyaka (romantic hero) from Indian poetic theory, a flattering gesture toward the patron (for whom he actually uses the epithet Lalitalām 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 laksana (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-laksana**

śleṣa, kāku sonu artha ki, racana auro ju hoya  
bakra ukti son jānie, gyāna salila mati dhoya

**Śleṣa-udāharaṇa**

mere mana tuma basata hau, main na kiyau aparādha  
tumbaim doṣa ko data, 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*
is derived from the Braj root *bas*, which means both to dwell (Sanskrit *vas*) and to overpower (Sanskrit *vas*). 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.”

Vernacular language, which must be denigrated as *apabhrasta* (corrupted) if viewed by the ancient ideology of Sanskrit purity, is a wonderful semantic tool for the early modern *riti* poet in search of new *desa* 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 Bhoj 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 *Pratāparudriya* of Vidyānātha and the *Ekāvalī* of Vidyādhara (both from the fourteenth-century Deccan), Sanskrit treatises on rhetoric in which political poetry is similarly embedded.

A slightly pedestrian illustration of the *anamāyā alanikāra*, a trope in which the *upamāya* (object being compared) is the same as the *upamāna* (standard of comparison), doubles as a *vamsāvali* 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 Bhoj Singh, the Bhoj Singh of kings.

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

- Divan (minister) Bhoj 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 Cintāmani Tripāṭhi cites the latter in his *Kavikūtalalālata*, another work of *alānkāraśāstra* in the characteristic *riti* style. For a discussion of other possible sources, including Mamunatā’s *Kāryapradīpa*, Viśvanātha’s *Sāhityadarpana*, Jayadeva’s *Candrāloka*, and Appayyadikṣita’s *Kavadeśāvanta*, see Sharma 1983, 6.

110. *Lalitālām*, 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 luster\textsuperscript{111}
of Indian kings like water in a pond.
Under such conditions, all kingly pride (ntva māṁ satrama)
has dissolved like salt in the ocean.\textsuperscript{112}

While the Sanskrit literary heritage upon which so much of riti kāvyā is
based had many ways of giving voice to rītī 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
riti aesthetics.\textsuperscript{113}

As with other sub-imperial texts like the Māncarit and the Vṛṣṇipdehyecarit,
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-variṇa (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:

\begin{quote}
jaṅg-jaṅda būndinagara, sukha sampati ko dhāma
kāryaṁgu hūṁ maim satyayuga, tahan karata bīrāma
parbhata sunata mana daī nīgama, ēgama, smṛti purāṇa (smṛti, purāṇa)
gita-kabīṭta kālāṁ ko, tahām saba loga sujāna…
tā nagari ko prabhu, bāṛo hūṛa surajana rāva,
raṇyo eka saba guṇina ko bāra bīrāpi samuḍāva
\end{quote}

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 (guṇina).

\textsuperscript{111} The Braj word pānīpa means both water and luster.
\textsuperscript{112} Lalitlām, v. 41. Kesavdās used similar imagery in the opening to his philosophical
work Vijnāṅga, i.17.
\textsuperscript{113} While, to be sure, not all riti works are as political as this one, there are plenty of
similar examples, including the Śīrṣābhīṣaq (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. With the exception of a single reference to luxury textiles (jarkasa, Persian zarkash, v. 13), Matirām's descriptions are very much composed in the stylized kāvya mode of a nagara-varṣana, lacking the more Mughalized specificity that we find in some parts of the Māncarit and the Virsimhdevarit. 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 dāni (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. 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 Akbarnāmā affords. Instead we are told that this Bundi ruler "protected the pride of the Hindus," (hinduna ki rākhi samad), "rendering lame the foot of the emperor's authority" (sāhi ko dukuma-paga panga bhan).

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 sābani saum rana-rān̄ga main jirya bakhta-bilanda. Even the death

114. Lalitlām, vv. 6–22.
115. As insightfully noted by Cynthia Talbot 2012, the Sanskrit court poet Candrasekharar from an earlier generation was extremely selective in reporting how Bundi lost its independence to the Mughals. In his Surjanacarita Candrasekharar, downplays the siege of Ranthambore fort and Mughal mansabs (administrative assignments) are recast as the king's pious acts in Hindu pilgrimage centers.
117. Lalitlām, v. 27. Many passages in the Jahangirnāmā confirm that Ratan Singh was rewarded with generous mansabs and titles, first "Sarbulandi Rai" and later "Ram Rai," 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 (jīva jāni kai cha-trina kaum rāna-kāśi)." 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 ki) and the [upholder of the] reputation (ījati, from Persian 'izzat) of the Umraos, the Mughal nobility. If you can't beat them, you might as well join them.

A close study of the language and imagery of this kävya 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 kävya and prāśasti texts, is wise (parama prabina); a paragon of dharma (dharamadhurina); kind to those in need (dinabandhu); and a fierce warrior who routs his enemies (dujjana bihala 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 ki dhāla) and the protector of dharma and correct religious observance in an era of domination by Turks. 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). If all of this is suggestive for its signaling of a protectionist stance toward Hindu groups, Bhao Singh is elsewhere intriguingly typed divāna dāhūn dinani kaum (leader of the two religious communities), clarifying that any celebration of Hinduness did

118. Lalitlalām, 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'āsir al-umarā Vol. 1, p. 405.
119. Lalitlalām, v. 131. And when his father died fighting for Dara Shikoh, the crucial point is that he died honourably (raja rākhi, v. 195). Cf. the expression raja-lāja ko nisāhina in v. 262.
120. Lalitlalām, vv. 34–35.
121. Lalitlalām, vv. 36, 79.
not at the same time entail enmity toward Islam. Matirâm powerfully encapsulates the multilayered self-conception of a mansabdâr like Bhao Singh in a telling string of epithets: jânapatî, danapatî, hôrvâ hinduvañapatî, dillipatî-dalapatî, balâbandhapatî hai (“the Hada king is discerning and munificent, he is lord of the Hindus, the emperor’s general, and king over the Aravalli Mountains”). 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 hinduvañapatî, dillipatî-dalapatî, and balâbandhapatî, 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: balâbandhapatî, “King over Balâbandh, that is, the Aravalli Mountain range in western India.” Elsewhere in the Lalitlalâm one finds variations of this epithet, including balâbandha sulatâna/suratâna, balâbandha pâtasâha, balâbandha ko divâna, which reconfigure Persian political vocabulary by investing it with a new local salience. 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 Matirâm’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 Matirâm presents his patron’s authority in terms of precisely this combination of local sovereignty and Mughal service:

kahai matirâmâ dillipatî kauṃ barhâī deta
sattrusâla nanda balâbandha sulatâna hai

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

122. Lalitlalâm, v.140. Kesâvâdâs had characterized Emperor Jahangir in a similar manner in Jahângirjâscandrikâ, vv. 31, 168.
123. Lalitlalâm, v. 36.
125. This idea of the Bundi kings being supreme in their region occurs repeatedly in the work. See for instance Lalitlalâm, vv. 36, 52, 58, 74, 103, 165, 398. Such hybridized Islamicate titles are reminiscent of nîja-suratâna (Sultan among Hindu kings), an epithet of the Vijayanagara ruler Krsnadevarâya. See Wagoner 1996.
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 काव्या—where a Rajput mansabdār and his poet could both give voice to concerns about contemporary political life and make claims about their own royal and cultural stature.  

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; 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. 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 mansabdārs were best expressed in non-Persianate literary idioms. From around 1600 the generally Brahmin class of riti 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 Kesavadā explicitly situates Bir Singh Deo Bundela in relation to contemporary Kachhwaha and Mewar kings in Virsinhdevacarit, 1.2, cited earlier. Matriśāma also alludes in several places to competition among mansabdārs, as when Bhao Singh is said to inspire their envy (mansabhadāna ke mana lalakāta haim, Laliśālaḥ, 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, Jahangirnāmaḥ, p. 30.
of Sanskrit literature—began to forge a new tradition of kingly kävya 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. Keśavadas 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 kävya 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 suravāni, language of the gods, perfect in form and set in grammatical structure, whereas Braj was a lowly naravāni, 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 kävya, which enabled the development of a new, more hybrid literary register. The interface with the Indo-Muslim political sphere is yet another place where riti poetry departed dramatically from earlier heritage. The practice of kävya 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 riti poetics, which otherwise had so much in common with classical traditions—to the extent that perhaps fully half of Braj court kävya consists of textbooks on alankārasāstra.

We have explored here the deep ties between the riti style of kävya 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 mansabdārs 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 mansabdāri court culture were a substantial factor in the rise of new vernacular forms of kävya during the Mughal period.

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

130. Sanskrit could, however, take on shades of its locale, as when writers in Tamil lands inflected their kävya in distinctly regional ways. See Bronner and Shulman 2006.
It can be no accident that the earliest instances of *riti* literature stem from either the Mughal court or the *mansabdāri* Rajput courts that were in close dialogue with the Mughals. 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-Fāzīl'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 Kesāvdās. 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. 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, Kesāvdās used a variety of tactics that range from straightforward reporting to referencing the *Rāmāyana* (considered both *kāvya* and *itihāsa* by the Indian tradition), apparently in order to lace his work with intertextual irony. With its interweaving of *śāstrik* threads into a narrative that also displays considerable verisimilitude, Kesāvdās'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 *Lalitlālām* 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 *mansabdāri* service under several generations of Mughal rulers. *Riti* literature in Brajbhasha, with its special combination of classical and contemporary idioms, is testimony to the enduring relevance of *kāvya* in the Indian tradition.

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

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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 *rathayātra* 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?

Kāsimīra—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 Vṛṇḍāvana’s *rasa* here on Niladri—

* 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.