

# Prthviraj Raso : A Look at the Poem Itself

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THE STORY of Prthviraj has been part of the popular narrative tradition of North India for centuries. Its best-known and most influential source is a medieval Rajasthani poem called *Prthviraj Raso*, which has been variously dated from the twelfth to the fifteenth century. The *Raso* is attributed, by its own testimony, to the poet Cand Bardai, whose identity and historicity have been subject to much critical controversy.

Through the centuries which elapsed between the *Raso's* creation and its last manuscript retelling, the main outlines of the poem remained relatively stable. In particular, the last, climactic events of Prthviraj's life retained their form and sequence. But while the narrative skeleton remained, the body of the poem continued to evolve. The result was that the *Raso* became something of a textual jungle. The *Raso* as we know it today exists in four versions, which differ so radically in length that the longest is more than twenty-three times the length of the shortest. Thirty-four manuscripts of the long version (about 30,000 couplets) have been discovered, twelve of the medium version (about 10,000 couplets), five of the short version (about 3,500-4,000 couplets), and two of the shortest version (about 1,300 couplets). One manuscript of the shortest version, found in Bikaner, is considered the oldest of all<sup>1</sup>. According to Narottam-

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das Swami, none of these manuscripts dates from before the time of Akbar (1556-1605).<sup>2</sup>

If the poem's multiplicity of texts is confusing, its patchwork of languages is no less so. The *Raso's* language, which combines archaisms with later accretions, has been described by one critic as a 'peculiar, tasty *khicri*,' or stew, of "Vedic, Sanskrit, Pali, Paisaci, Ardhamagadhi, Maharastrī, Sauraseni, Magadhi and other late Prakrits, Apabhramsa, Desya, Old Rajasthani, Old Gujarati, Punjabi, Braj, etc., together with Arabic, Persian, and Turkish words."<sup>3</sup> The poem is metrically complex as well: some of its seventy-two kinds of verse are so obscure that not even their names occur in later Hindi literature.<sup>4</sup>

The extant *Raso* texts are thus numerous, lengthy, diverse, and linguistically forbidding. Linguists who have read them have used them chiefly as a word-quarry. Translations in Western languages have been few and far between.<sup>5</sup> And many Indian critics who have studied the poem have become enmeshed in historical controversies about the identity of the poet Cand Bardai, and the reliability of the *Raso* as a bardic chronicle.

Yet the poem's cultural and literary value is independent of—and much greater than—its historical accuracy. As a principal cornerstone of early Hindi and Rajasthani literature, the *Raso* is of immense importance. Dr. Syamsundardas considers it 'no exaggeration' to call the *Raso* the *Mahabharata* of Hindi literature, for "in it is that same strange mixture of history, poetry, and morality."<sup>6</sup> Other critics cherish the *Raso* as a monument to patriotic loyalty, since Prthviraj, "India's last Hindu emperor", goes down "fighting for his country" against the Muslim invader Sahabuddin.<sup>7</sup> Despite such widespread recognition, it is easy to agree with Dr. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi that "so far very little attempt has been made to understand the work's literary importance."<sup>8</sup> Such an attempt will be made in this paper.

The number and diversity of *Raso* texts have led some scholars to believe, as Dr. Dwivedi puts it, that "to select the pearls of original poetry from the ocean of interpolations is absolutely

impossible." But Dwivedi himself, far from sharing such pessimism, had edited (with Namwar Simha) an abridged recension of the shortest version of the *Raso* which must, he argues, be fairly close to the original poem.<sup>9</sup> Dr. Mataprasad Gupta, while rejecting many of Dwivedi's specific claims, agrees with his general approach.<sup>10</sup> Dr. Gupta himself edited a recension of what he takes to be the earliest form of the *Raso*—and his recension is also an abridgment of the shortest version.

Dwivedi, Simha, Gupta, and others thus maintain that the earliest *Raso* is much more likely to have resembled the shortest extant version than any of the longer ones. They offer arguments based on linguistic and historical evidence to support this view. I will offer arguments based on literary evidence internal to the *Raso* to support the same view.

In this paper, I use the Gupta recension as my basic text. The choice is partly one of convenience, since Gupta includes a literal modern Hindi translation and notes with his text. But I also prefer Gupta's more-rigorous adherence to the irreducible minimum plot which forms the heart of the shortest version (Dwivedi and Simha include accounts of Prthviraj's prior marriages with Inchini and Sasibrata, which Gupta omits). Gupta confines his recension to what he takes to be the three central episodes, the core story, of the original *Raso*; the killing of Kaimas, the marriage of Samyogita, and the killing of Sahabuddin.

If, as has been suggested, the shortest extant version is closest to the original poem, then it must follow that the longer versions were expanded from it incrementally, through piecemeal additions. While hard to prove, this assumption is nevertheless persuasive, and consistent with the narrative structure of the *Raso*. Prthviraj's age can be calculated as thirty-seven or thirty-eight at the time of his death,<sup>11</sup> and the core story covers only the last two years or so of his life. Thus the poem offers ample scope for expansion through the description of earlier events in his career. And the longer versions are, in fact, given their bulk by repetitions, conventionalized multiplications of standard

events—usually wars and marriages—which antedate the events of the core story. It is easy to see how, in the course of innumerable recitations and recopyings, the bulk of the poem could grow, as the most popular additions became semi-established parts of the *Raso*. The effects of such a process, carried on for several centuries, are described by Ojha and Sarma: "In the short versions the number of wars and marriages is small, in the medium and long versions the number has kept growing. In the shortest one, in the short two, in the medium five, and in the long eighteen marriages are described. Similarly, in the shortest version two wars, in the short five, in the medium forty-three, and in the long fifty-nine wars are described."<sup>12</sup>

With regard to the core story itself, however, the situation is strikingly different. Its three crucial events—the killing of Kaimas, the marriage of Samyogita, and the killing of Sahabuddin—form a logically and artistically integrated sequence. Their interrelationship is so systematic, and so consciously expressed within the poem itself, as to support the view that they formed, if not quite the whole of the original *Raso*, at least the core of it. For the *Raso* without them would hardly exist, since they provide both its climax and its conclusion. Moreover, since the shortest extant version of the poem contains little else than the core story, while no version omits it,<sup>13</sup> a strong case for its narrative and historical priority can obviously be made.

In the next three sections of this paper the three episodes of the core story will be summarized and analyzed, primarily as described in the Gupta recension. The analysis will show how organized and effective are the literary devices used in this core story, and how powerful and unified their impact. My argument is thus aimed at demonstrating both the undeniable literary artistry, and the probable historical priority, of the core story.

As the poem begins, Raja Jaycand of Kannauj has resolved to assert his supreme sovereignty by holding an imperial *rajasuya* ceremony. Overruling his ministers' reluctance, he insists on the value of the ceremony in establishing his glory (*kirtti*).<sup>14</sup> And

glory, he argues, is a form of immortality: "What has not died and left the earth? Whose glory is in full flower, he does not disappear" (12).<sup>15</sup> Jaycand assembles his tributary kings, and sends a messenger to Delhi to demand Raja Prthviraj's presence at the ceremony.

When the message is delivered, Prthviraj is in the company of his venerable *gurus* (priests), and hesitates to speak in their presence. One of the *gurus*, speaking on his behalf, indignantly rejects Jaycand's demand. The *guru* describes Prthviraj's own glory, including his having three times taken Sahabuddin Gori, the Muslim ruler of Ghazni, prisoner in battle.

Angered by this rebuff, Jaycand decides to hold his daughter Samyogita's *swayamvar* (marriage-choice) instead—and to use a golden image of Prthviraj as a doorkeeper for the occasion. When Prthviraj hears of this fresh insult, he decides in council with his warriors to attack and disrupt the *swayamvar*. His court poets eulogize his past conquests, and urge him to marry Samyogita himself—since she wishes it, and since he alone is worthy of her. He agrees to the plan. It is plain that Prthviraj's glory is not his personal property, but rather the collective possession of his whole court, all of whom share in its lustre and have a stake in upholding it.

In Kannauj, Samyogita, just twelve years old, is at play with her companions. She is so exquisite that for the *samyog* (marriage) of Samyogita ('married'—a provocatively chosen name), only Kamdev, the god of love, would seem suitable (20). And she has firmly pledged her word (*vacan*) to take Prthviraj as her husband.<sup>16</sup> Her resolve is born of admiration for his glorious feats of arms, which she recounts; his sword, she says, has "thundered upon the *gori* earth like a cloud" (36). '*Gori*' not only means 'white, light-coloured, fair', but contains a narratively important pun as well, for it refers to Sahabuddin Gori, the archenemy whom Prthviraj has repeatedly overcome in battle.

Jaycand sends a female messenger (*duti*) to dissuade Samyogita from this ill-advised choice of a husband. The argument

between the two women is one of the poem's most moving and beautiful passages. Samyogita, rejecting the woman's arguments, insists on the steadfast (*sthir*) upholding of one's word: "Life lasts only as long as the *vacan*; when the *vacan* goes, a man dies." The woman argues that love is transient, and can be constant (*sthir*) only as long as youth and beauty last. Samyogita replies, "Neither your mother nor your father is beautiful like you. The wealth of youth is inconstant (*asthir*); can water stay steady (*sthir*) in cupped hands?" (39-40). Against all the woman's blandishments she remains firm.

When Prthviraj hears of this *vacan* of hers, he is moved, and begins to return her love. Newly restless, he does not remain *sthir* (43)—a word which at once recalls Samyogita's firmness—in Delhi, but goes away on a hunt, leaving his capable and loyal chief minister Kaimas in charge of the city (In the longer versions of the *Raso*, Kaimas' ability and dedication are emphasized by accounts of his previous battles on Prthviraj's behalf.<sup>17</sup>).

But now Kaimas falls helplessly into the power of Kamdev; "the ways of the divine are indeed strange" (43) comments the poet. Driven by desire, Kaimas slips into the palace by night to meet Karnati, a *dasi* (maidservant/concubine) of Prthviraj's. The chief queen is alerted; angered by the affront to Prthviraj's dignity, she sends a maidservant of her own to inform him. He returns quickly and secretly from his hunt. Aiming by sound alone (*sabdvan*) is a special skill of his, and no sooner does he enter the darkened place than his 'vile' (48) fingers prepare the arrow. He is so angry that his first arrow misses, but his second strikes Kaimas dead, in the darkness, in the midst of his pleasure (Karnati's fate is not mentioned at this point.). Prthviraj buries Kaimas secretly, and returns to his hunt unobserved.

But Saraswati, goddess of speech and patron of poets, tells the story of the murder to Prthviraj's court poet (*bhatt*), Cand,<sup>18</sup> in a dream. She overcomes his doubts, and causes her own words of poetry to rise to his throat (51-52). Early the next morning, when Prthviraj returns to Delhi with his entourage, Cand is prepared to confront him. When Prthviraj asks his

warriors where Kaimas is, no one can tell him. Cand, however, gives such cryptic replies that Prthviraj presses him to explain. At length Cand tells the whole story, making plain both his firm loyalty to Prthviraj, and his horror at the deed. The deed is irrevocable, Cand says, and "what will come of this *pralay* (catastrophe)?" (61). The word *pralay*, which actually means the destruction of the universe at the end of each temporal cycle, is as stark and forceful an image as the poet has at his command.

Cand's description of the killing of Kaimas as a *pralay* is prophetic rather than immediately relevant, for it is clear that Prthviraj will not suffer any direct harm as a result of his deed. On the contrary, his warriors, fleeing in terror from this ominous confrontation between the king and the privileged court poet, all feel that Kaimas has committed a frightful, ineradicable sin (62-63). But the poet insists on the imagery of disaster: for Prthviraj, he tells us, "the four watches of the night had passed like four *yugs* (ages)" (62). And at the end of every four *yugs*—as a medieval Indian would instantly realize—comes the fearful time of *pralay*.

Kaimas' widow approaches Cand, asking only for her husband's body. Cand comforts her with thoughts of the transience of all life, and goes to Prthviraj with her plea: "Lord, your glory (*kirtti*) devoured a lotus" (66). But Prthviraj, desiring (*kirtti*) (68), is reluctant to surrender Kaimas' body. When Cand persists, Prthviraj suddenly discovers a way to settle the question, while saving face himself. He tells Cand, "I will give you Kaimas, and my misgivings (about your loyalty) will end, when you present me to Raja Jaycand" (69).

Everything is arranged then. Kaimas' widow burns herself to death on her husband's pyre as a *sati*. Prthviraj and Cand fall on each other's necks and bathe each other in tears (71).<sup>19</sup> Most important of all, preparations are begun for Prthviraj's journey to Kannauj. He had previously planned a conventional military foray, with a sizable body of troops, to disrupt the *swyamvar* of Jaycand's daughter. But his new, and foolhardy, inspiration is to make the trip in disguise, with only a small escort, so that

he can be presented, unrecognized, before Raja Jaycand in Jaycand's own court.

With a small escort of picked troops, Prthviraj and Cand arrive in Kannauj. Then Cand, secure in his privileged status as a poet, visits Jaycand's court, with Prthviraj disguised as his *pan* (betel-leaf) bearer. When questioned by Jaycand, Cand describes Prthviraj—and tactfully assesses Prthviraj's glory as equal to Jaycand's own.

As a gesture of courtesy, Jaycand calls in his maidservants to offer *pan* to Cand. One of these maidservants, identified as a former *dasi* of Prthviraj's, shows such embarrassment on seeing the disguised Prthviraj that his identity is almost discovered. She is not named in the Gupta recension, but is described as having tangled hair, and as telling her secret constantly to those she meets (124). She is Kaimas' paramour, Karnati! (In every other *Raso* version I have seen, she is clearly and matter-of-factly named as Karnati).

This moment of encounter between two refugees from the same disaster gives a startling, ironic fillip to the narrative. Because of Kaimas' murder, Karnati has fled to become a *pan*-bearer in the court of Jaycand—and Prthviraj has undertaken the rash adventure of becoming a *pan*-bearer (to Cand) in the court of Jaycand! Discovery of Prthviraj's identity is narrowly averted, for the bystanders assume that Karnati's reaction was caused by the unexpected sight of Cand, Prthviraj's close companion. After further courtesies, Jaycand assigns to Cand, as any honoured guest, a fine palace. In it Prthviraj goes peacefully to sleep that night.

Jaycand, by contrast, sacrifices sleep for the elaborately described delights of music, dancing-girls, and dalliance—which is, as he himself makes clear, his nightly custom (121). The next morning, when he inspects his magnificent army, he is literally staggering with fatigue (136).

Later that day, he pays a courtesy call on Cand. Cand orders his own *pan*-bearer to be self-controlled (*sthir*), and offer *pan* to Jaycand. But Prthviraj's pride will not permit him to keep

up his self-chosen role. He gives Jaycand such an angry glare (*vakra drsti*), and offers the *pan* so forcefully—like Indra offering a lightning bolt (231)—that Jaycand guesses his true identity. At once Jaycand orders an attack by his army.

Prthviraj's escort, one hundred picked Rajputs, now rally to his side. But while Jaycand's huge army is engaged in preparing for battle, there is somehow an interlude. Prthviraj asks his small troop to wait for him, while he takes a look around the town. Puzzled, but confident—since he has given his word to return—they agree. Prthviraj then wanders along the banks of the Ganges, and idly begins feeding pearls to the fish; he becomes so absorbed in this pastime that he forgets all else.

Samyogita, confined by her father in a nearby palace, sees Prthviraj, and sends a maidservant to call him to her. She declares her love, wins his heart, marries him in the informal *gandharva* style (i.e., by mutual choice), and sends him off to battle—all in the space of twenty-six lines (153-4). Prthviraj hurriedly rejoins his warriors, and explains the reason for his delay. The enthusiastic Rajputs insist on rescuing Samyogita and taking her back to Delhi; Prthviraj agrees, and goes to fetch her.

Despite her burning lovesickness, however, Samyogita is not pleased (164) to see her lord return so soon, without having fought for her love. She beats her brow; what good, she asks her companions, is a lover at whom people point their fingers? (165). But when she discovers that her new husband has every intention of fighting to the death with her father, she is reassured, and goes with him gladly (Grierson describes this insistence on bloodshed as part of the "very remarkable marriage customs" of Rajasthani bardic poetry.<sup>20</sup>).

The ensuing battle is described with far more attention and careful detail than the later one with Sahabuddin. This battle with Jaycand is in fact the climactic military adventure of the *Raso*. The battlefield becomes a scene of mass slaughter, so full of fallen bodies that the hovering vultures can scarcely get near (192). After the day's carnage, Prthviraj and Samyogita spend their wedding night on the battlefield. The following day is more

of the same, with Prthviraj's small troop steadily being reduced; the poet lovingly names and memorializes each hero who falls.

At this point, Prthviraj's warriors try to persuade him to take Samyogita and set out for Delhi, while they block Jaycand's pursuit. He indignantly refuses, claiming it a matter of pride for him to stay. They reply that his duty as a king is to protect his cities, while theirs is to protect him: they are fighting for the death-glory (*maran-kirtti*) of Jaycand, and the life-glory (*jivan-kirtti*) of Prthviraj (211). Cand agrees with them: a hero who dies is blessed (212), but for Prthviraj, greatness lies in taking Samyogita back to Delhi. Finally Prthviraj is persuaded. At dawn the next day, he kills seven maddened elephants with one last arrow, and sets out for Delhi with Samyogita as the gods hail his victory from the skies (215-6).

The remaining warriors go down one by one in heroic glory, each in turn holding off Jaycand's whole army long enough for Prthviraj to gain another few miles. The poet describes their deaths in heartfelt and extravagant detail. By the time the last hero has fallen, Prthviraj has reached Delhi.

Prthviraj, having returned triumphant to Delhi with his beautiful new bride, is seemingly at the height of his glory. Yet not only has the glory been purchased by a costly expenditure of his best warriors' lives—but it is also being undermined by its new chief object and token, Samyogita.

For Samyogita is, in her own way, as stubbornly proud as Prthviraj: she does not—and seemingly cannot—adjust her behaviour to suit changing circumstances. We have seen her defying her father, loving his enemy, insisting on the supreme power of love. As a wife, she remains true to her romanticism: all for love, the world well lost for love. She so enmeshes her new husband in dalliance that he loses his faculties, he thinks of nothing but pleasing her, he literally does not know night from day (245). As the months pass, in this erotic idyll, Prthviraj's subjects become disaffected. But he and Samyogita remain oblivious.

At length the concerned *Raj-guru* (royal priest) comes to

Cand, asking why the king has not been visible for six months. Cand explains that Prthviraj is in love with a woman—a woman who has made him forget not only other women, but also the service of *gurus* and gods, his glory, his land, and his warriors (254). Admiration outweighs reproach as Cand describes Samyogita's qualities. But Cand and the Raj-guru decide that they must arouse the king, since Sahabuddin Gori has taken advantage of Prthviraj's heedlessness to mount a major invasion.

Fearfully Cand and the Raj-guru present themselves at the magnificent palace where Samyogita holds sway; all the palace attendants are beautiful *dasis*, and warriors no longer attend the royal court (262-3). The two send in to Prthviraj a letter warning of Sahabuddin's aggressive designs, together with a desperate verbal message: "Gori (Sahabuddin) is in love with your realm, and you are in love with Gori (the fair one)!" (265). The same kind of wordplay which Samyogita once used in glorifying Prthviraj is now used in reproaching him.

The awakening is instant: Prthviraj reads the first line of their letter, and collapses to the ground in shame (266). He puts off his dalliance like an old garment (268). Samyogita, still urging the claims of love, seeks even now to detain him. Life without love is death, she insists (in another passage of superb beauty); the days come and go, but the soul has fled. "If the land is your wife, then so am I—make me a part of you! . . . When the lake dries up, the lotus cannot remain behind" (268).

But Prthviraj hardens his heart, and reminds her bitingly of the very basis of their relationship: "You worshipped (the strength of my) arms, and now, deluded one, you talk of love!" (269). Moreover, he has dreamed a confused and ominous dream. A beautiful woman began to flirt with him; her husband seized his arm and started a quarrel; then suddenly the whole scene vanished, as voices called out "Thief! Thief!" (270). Samyogita herself calls Cand and the Raj-guru to help interpret this puzzling dream, and appropriate sacrifices are made. The dream's literal meaning is not made clear, but its threatening evocation of the Kaimas episode, just before the final battle,

makes its narrative function that of an omen.

The final battle itself receives surprisingly little descriptive attention. The role of Prthviraj's army—which is now in disarray through his neglect—is understated, so that his solitary glory shines more clearly. Though the carnage is as terrible as ever, individual acts of heroism and prowess are not described. In the end Prthviraj's army is decimated, and the scattered survivors are driven from the field. Prthviraj remains alone; when his enemies see him it is "like demons seeing a god" (286). They taunt him, and he catches one of them in the face with a last arrow at close range. This is his final act before his capture.

Now, the poet explains, evil days are at hand. By the will of the Creator (Vidhata), Prthviraj's fortunes have been reversed, and no one can escape what the Creator has written down for him (287-8). But Prthviraj does *not* accept or adjust to his fate. *Din palatau, palatau na manu* (287)—his fortune changed, his mind did not change.

Sahabuddin makes his son king of Delhi, and takes the captive Prthviraj back with him to his capital, Ghazni (in Afghanistan). Six months later, Cand hears appalling news: Prthviraj has been blinded by his captor, and every moment passes "like a lifetime, or like an age to him in captivity" (290). Cand, in his deep loyalty, is struck down by this fearful news, and falls to the earth. When he recovers, he does not hesitate. Abandoning sons, friends and this whole illusory world (*maya*), he sets out for Ghazni (290). For the journey he dresses as a wandering ascetic, ash-smearing, with tangled hair. He has "the strength of Saraswati, and the strength of his own throat, and the heart of a great hero"; Hindus take him for a deity, and Muslims for a saint (292).

Cand arrives at Ghazni, and describes Sahabuddin's court with honest admiration for its magnificence. He steps out into the road as the royal procession is passing, and blesses Sahabuddin—with his left-hand (302). When the Shah asks his name, he replies that he is the court-poet Cand who served Prthviraj. Hearing of his lord's captivity and blinded condition, he has

resolved to become an ascetic, and is on his way to Badri, in the Himalayas, to perform austerities. The Shah explains quite candidly how he came to blind his captive. Even in his humbled condition, Prthviraj never altered his angry, arrogant glare (*vakra drsti*) (303). Sahabuddin orders that Cand be treated as an honoured guest; but Cand cannot enjoy luxury any more than a corpse can enjoy the love of beautiful women (304).

The next day, the Shah calls Cand into his presence and asks the reason for his visit. Cand asks a boon of the Shah. In childhood, Cand says, Prthviraj once boasted that he could kill seven alligators with one arrow—and that too with a blunted arrow, with the point removed. Now Cand is consumed with a desire to see this amazing feat performed; once this last desire is fulfilled, he will be properly desireless, and fit to go to the forest (310-1). The Shah laughs mockingly. Prthviraj is blind and weak, he says, and his mind is destroyed; your wish is vain. But Cand persists, and eventually the Shah agrees. He orders alligators to be caught, has Cand taken to Prthviraj's prison, and declares that he himself will watch the resulting spectacle (312).

For the last time, Cand is reunited with his lord. Urgently, passionately, he exhorts him to remember his past glories, fulfil his word, to become once again his best and bravest to self (314-6). Prthviraj's clouded mind becomes clear, and his courage returns, but he doubts his ability to perform the feat that Cand envisions. Cand—using all his poet's power of speech—begs him to make a last desperate effort, and to accept death as the result. The body is imperfect, and only the soul finally real, he urges. The body is made of the five elements, "trapped in the net of old age," and "playing under the eye of time" (318-9).

The feat he describes to Prthviraj is not, of course, the slaying of seven alligators, but a far more daring and climactic effort: the killing of Sahabuddin. For Prthviraj is—as we have already seen—formidably skilled in archery, and especially in *sabdan*, the aiming of arrows by sound alone. Accordingly,

Cand now goes to Sahabuddin with a shrewdly designed appeal: Prthviraj is in a strange mood, he says; he has lost the will to live, he is much changed, he insists that only upon receiving your order will he perform the feat (320). The Shah gives his word to utter the command as Cand has asked (322). The stage has been set.

Cand is supremely happy; all his desires have been fulfilled. His last words to Prthviraj are confident; firm with the weight of destiny accomplished: "Don't be astonished, O King; strengthen your spirit. Whatever you gave to Kaimas, that which was done by you has come to you. That same heaven (Amarpur), O King, is also being given to you. Who can erase the decree of the Creator? . . . With one arrow, destroy the words of the enemy" (325).

Prthviraj has risen to this fate, and by now even welcomes it. If he had two arrows, he says, he would kill the Shah and the alligators too (323). As the moment approaches, the poet builds the tension by degrees. He describes the way Prthviraj rubs his hands with dirt, and prepares the bow (326). The Shah's first command seals his fate as he utters it, for Prthviraj places the arrow in his bow. At the second command, Prthviraj draws the bow back against his ear, and stands in readiness. The third command is, no sooner heard, than the Shah falls to the earth, dead (326). At the same time, Prthviraj's death occurs. (Other versions describe the death in more detail, generally as a double suicide: Cand pulls out a knife and stabs himself, then passes the knife to Prthviraj, who does the same.<sup>21</sup>)

The Gupta recension of the *Raso* ends at this point. After the brief statement of Prthviraj's death, only six lines remain in the poem: "Cand, Biradiya says, hearing the sound of the Raja's dying and the Shah's being killed, the deities rained down flowers from the sky on Prthviraj's head. The earth, which had been in bondage to the infidel, now burst out laughing like a young woman. The grass-blade (the body) joined the grasses, and the light (the soul) joined the Light. This unique *Raso* is *saras* (flavourful) with new *ras* (flavours; senti-

ments); its *chand* (verse-forms) Cand has made like nectar. It evokes love, heroism, compassion, abhorrence, fear, amazement, and peace" (327-8).

In summarizing the story, I have emphasized the remarkable degree of interdependence among the three important episodes. On the most detailed level, particular words come to carry great weight. The word *sthir*, for example, describes a patient endurance under stress, a stubborn determination that knows how to bide its time. Samyogita is *sthir*; she insists that genuine love must be *sthir*. But Prthviraj, in his love for her, cannot stay *sthir* in Delhi; he goes hunting, thus setting the stage for Kaimas' fall. Again, Cand tells his disguised royal *pan*-bearer to stay *sthir* and serve Jaycand—but Prthviraj cannot, and his recognition by Jaycand results in a disastrous battle. Far from being *sthir*, Prthviraj has an incurably arrogant style of his own, which is epitomized in his *vakra drsti*, his furious glare. It is this *vakra drsti* which reveals him to Jaycand, thus unleashing open war, and it is the same *vakra drsti* which provokes Sahabuddin to blind him in his captivity. The wordplay based on *gori* and *Gori* has already been noted. To Prthviraj in captivity every moment passes like a *yug*; the simile recalls the night of Kaimas' death, with its four watches which passed like four *yugs*. Cand's initial perception of the killing of Kaimas as a *pralay*, an act of doom, is borne out by later events, and then is echoed in Cand's own last words to Prthviraj.

On a larger, thematic level, one concept recurs almost constantly, unifying many actions by many characters. It is that of glory, which includes the upholding of one's word at all costs. This idea of glory is public, even theatrical: it demands by its very nature to be acted out before others. If one's glory is impressed upon—or created in—the minds of others, then it will be transmitted by them to posterity, and will live on for ever. Such glory is believed by all the *Raso*'s Rajput characters to be the highest form of immortality. It motivates Jaycand's *rajasuya* ceremony, Prthviraj's killing of Kaimas, the trip to Kannauj, Samyogita's love of Prthviraj, the willing deaths of

Prthviraj's hundred best warriors, Cand's journey to Ghazni, the killing of Sahabuddin, and the dramatic suicides of Prthviraj and Cand (The love of Kaimas and Karnati is almost the only event it does *not* motivate.). The Rajputs feel that if the highest immortality is purchased at the cost of merely mortal death, then a magnificent bargain has been struck, and one which cannot ultimately be regretted. Certainly the same desire also motivates the strings of victories and conquests and marriages ascribed to Prthviraj in the longer *Raso* versions. But the vision of glory has far more integrity and power in the core story, where the ideal is pushed to its limit, and where even as 'death-glory' it still commands allegiance.

Sahabuddin alone is outside this system to some extent. Not, it seems, because he is a Muslim, but because he is not a Rajput. He wants glory, he wants to uphold the kingly conventions—but even more he wants to win. In the core story, Prthviraj is described as having, previously captured him in battle, then released him, three times. In this way Prthviraj has doubly displayed his glory: by gloriously capturing his powerful enemy, then by gloriously disdaining his power and letting him go free. Sahabuddin is sufficiently outside the feudal code to reject such extreme and impractical behaviour (He does, however, treat Cand honourably as a guest; and he upholds his own pledged word.). Having captured Prthviraj, he prudently keeps him imprisoned. And when angered by Prthviraj's pride, he has no compunctions about blinding his captive. When Prthviraj's Delhi falls under Muslim rule, the poem makes us feel it as very much the end of an era.<sup>22</sup>

Most powerfully of all, the core story is unified by its narrative development. The poem's controlled progression is apparent on so many levels, and the levels themselves are interconnected so deftly that the touch of a sophisticated poet can clearly be perceived. Despite all the *Raso*'s romantic melodrama, its military sound and fury, its preoccupation with pageantry, Trivedi's description of the poem as 'character-based' (*caritra-pradhan*), rather than 'action-based', remains valid.<sup>23</sup> And the



character is that of Prthviraj.

The poem's narrative development falls naturally into a tripartite scheme: the outline of this development is quite straightforward, and since it could be drawn directly from the summary of the core story given above, it need not be discussed in detail. I want, however, to emphasize one aspect of it, which to me is the creative center of the poem: the handling of the two *sabdan* episodes which almost frame the narrative action. Between the first and the second of these two remarkable trials of skill, Prthviraj's fortunes have changed as drastically and dramatically as the poet can arrange. From an arrogant, powerful, glorious king, shooting down a loyal friend made helpless by sexual passion, he becomes a helpless, weak, blinded captive, ruined largely by his own sexual passion. The change in his condition is elegantly expressed by images of light and darkness, sight and blindness. He releases the first *sabdan* in the darkness, unseen, invisible to a victim blinded by passion as well as night. He releases the second *sabdan* exposed in the daylight, vulnerable to all others while himself unseeing. For him light and darkness have seemingly been reversed: the first time he is able to shoot by night as though it were day, but the second time he must shoot by day as though it were night. The first time he escapes all punishment, though the murder is unjustified; the second time results in his death, though the killing is a justifiable act of revenge. The link between the two episodes is Prthviraj's visit to Kannauj. He enters Jaychand's court in disguise, as though still hidden from sight, and meets Karnati, the woman who had been Kaimas' undoing. His own arrogance unmasking him, revealing his true identity—and soon thereafter he meets Samyogita, the woman who is to be his own undoing.

I do not claim that the points I have brought out in this paper exhaust the meaning of the poem; on the contrary, I am very aware that they do not, and that the *Raso* is worthy of far more serious literary study than it has thus far received. The story of Prthviraj is narratively complex and rich enough for a Greek tragedy: a great, noble, flawed hero, brought down by

the results of his own actions, coming in his downfall to understand the limits of his fate and act lucidly within them. The story could also have been developed into a Hindu theophany: Visnu takes birth as Prthviraj, at the request of the other gods, to rid the world of the oppressive tyranny of Sahabuddin. Lakshmi is born as Samyogita: her role is to ensure the encounter with the Shah, as Sita ensured the encounter with Ravana. After the Shah's death, the *lila*, or divine drama, is complete; Prthviraj dies, Samyogita becomes a *sati* and the two immortals return to Vaikuntha in triumph.

But the story is, after all, developed as a vivid, popular, heroic romance. Prthviraj remains not only an entirely human hero, but even a rather limited one, not at all introspective or aware. All his life he merely does better—more gloriously, more successfully, on a larger scale—what all his peers do. Even in his last hour of life, in his blindness, when he sees his fate clearly, it is revealed from the outside, by Cand's passionate words. Yet he *does* achieve a strong justification, a triumph of sorts. His conventional kingship, his ruinous arrogance, the bitterness of captivity, are balanced by that one final, deliberate, clearly *seen* act, taken in the pride of hopelessness. At the core of the *Raso* is thus a kind of moral drama: the first *sabdan* brings about the last, and the last redeems the first. For Prthviraj, understanding, death, and glory come at the same moment.

## NOTES

1. Narottamdas Swami, *Raso-sahitya aur Prthviraj Raso* (Bikaner: Bharatiya Vidyamandir Sodh Pratisthan, 1963), pp. 53-81.
2. Swami, p. 173.
3. Bipin Bihari Trivedi, *Prthviraj Raso: Ek Samiksa* (Lucknow: Parul Prakashan, 1964), p. 1.

4. Swami, p. 159.
5. The only English translation known to the author is of John Beames and A. F. Rudolf Hoernle, eds., *Prthviraj Rasau; Text and English translation* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1873-1886; Bibliotheca Indica 77, issued in seven fascicles).
6. Mohanlal Vyas Sastri and Nathulal Vyas, eds., *Prthviraj Raso ki Vivecāna* (Udaipur: Sahitya Samsthan, Rajasthan Vidyapith, 1959), p. 593.
7. Sastri and Vyas, p. 694.
8. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi and Namwar Simha, eds., *Sanksipt Prthviraj Raso* (Allahabad: Sahitya Bhawan, 1963), p. 7.
9. Dwivedi and Simha, pp. 12-15.
10. Mataprasad Gupta, *Raso Sahitya Vimars* (Allahabad: Sahitya Bhavan, 1962), pp. 72-75.
11. Cand gives his age as thirty-six years and six months at the time of his trip to Kannauj. Mataprasad Gupta, *Prthviraj Raso* (Circamv, Jhansi: Sahitya-Sadan, 1963), p. 119.
12. Dasrath Ojha and Dasrath Sarma, *Rasa aur Rasanvayi Kavya* (Varanasi: Nagari Pracarini Sabha, V. S. 2016), p. 220.
13. Some discrepancies do exist: for example, the Udaipur medium version places Prthviraj's death on the battlefield during his last war with Sahabuddin. Mohan Simha, ed., *Prthviraj Raso* (Udaipur: Sahitya Samsthan, Rajasthan Vidyapith, 1954; 4 vols.), vol. 4, pp. 1155-1160.
14. Spelling fluctuates considerably in the *Raso*; for simplicity, standard Hindi spellings are used of quoted words.
15. Gupta, *Prthviraj Raso*, p. 12. All parenthesized page numbers in the body of the paper refer to this edition of the *Raso*.
16. In the Udaipur medium version, Samyogita's role is given a prophetic inevitability: she is an incarnation of the *apsara* (nymph) Rambha, who had disturbed the ascetic practices of a seer at Indra's request. As usual, the angry seer

- curses her with a human birth—in which she will destroy the whole lineage of both her father and her husband. Simha, vol. 3, pp. 270-298.
17. Simha, vol. 3, pp. 121-146; pp. 391-405.
  18. The author of the *Raso*, though he calls himself Cand, always speaks of this character Cand, the court poet, in the third person. Moreover, by the end of the *Raso* the character Cand is dead, while the *Raso* poet Cand is very much alive. Therefore the poet cannot be totally identified with his supposed persona—though some critics make such an identification. From internal evidence it can be said only that the *Raso* poet is an omniscient narrator with a special sympathy for one of his characters. For the sake of clarity, I will use the name 'Cand' only for the character, and use 'the poet' for the author; no conclusions about the identity or historicity of the latter are intended.
  19. In the Udaipur medium version, Prthviraj is more openly sorrowful over Kaimas' death, and establishes Kaimas' son upon the now-vacant ancestral throne. Simha, vol. 3, pp. 485-492.
  20. That such fighting was a pundonor before a Rajput wedding is plain from the fact that on two occasions Udan refuses to countenance any marriage which is not accompanied by bloodshed. Introduction, William Waterfield and Sir George Grierson, *The lay of Alha* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), pp. 22-23.
  21. Sastri and Vyas, p. 603.
  22. In the longest version, after the Shah's death his army also attacks and defeats Jaycand. Jaycand is killed—and his severed head rolls emblematically into the Ganges. Dwivedi, p. 180.
  23. Dwivedi, p. 29.