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Braj beyond Braj: Classical Hindi in the Mughal World

by
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Introduction

Throughout the course of my sabbatical in India this year it has been a privilege to meet many colleagues and Ph.D. students working in the field of Hindi literature. I have learned much from hearing about their projects on diverse subjects ranging from Dalit literature, the rise of Hindi journalism, Bhojpuri film lyrics, feminist hermeneutics, and many other topics. It is to detract nothing from the worth or intrinsic interest of these subjects to mention that I have been struck by the modern focus—even presentism—of literary study in Indian universities. It is rare indeed to encounter scholars who do their primary research on Brajbhasha or Avadhi texts, which is to say the premodern or “classical” Hindi literary heritage. As a professor who often teaches the subject I would be the first person to state that modern Hindi literature is one of the world’s most fascinating and multifaceted traditions. Few literatures can boast of such diversity, which includes the colonial experiments at Fort William College, the rise of print culture, Harischandra and his *kavi-maṇḍal* (poets’ circle), the so-called *navjāgaraṇ* (renaissance) and reformist impulses that spawned the social realism of the Dvivedi period, the many *vāds* that include Hindi’s home-grown Romanticism under the *Chāyāvādī* poets, *Pragativād* (progressivism), and *Prayogvād* (experimentalism), not to mention the emotional starkness of partition literature or *Nayī Kahānī* (modernist short fiction), or the new perspectives contributed by strains of *āṃcalīk sāhitya* (regional writing), as well as Dalit and women’s writing. Clearly there is much to detain the researcher of modern Hindi literature.

That said, there is also much to recommend the study of Hindi’s classical traditions. And the field of Hindi has a lot to lose if we don’t foster new research about them. In this

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paper I discuss the promise of classical texts for developing new approaches to Indian literary, social, and even political history.

What is Classical Hindi?

The term "classical" is a fraught one, no doubt, but I employ it in the sense of beautiful and important literature that merits attention centuries after it was written. My own research centers on the classical literary texts composed in Brajbhasha between approximately 1550 and 1800. I do not mean the *bhakti* texts you have probably all heard of—the *pads* of Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir—which have been much elucidated by scholars.¹ I want to direct attention to the texts you have probably never heard of: the hundreds of Hindi works written in courtly contexts during the Mughal period.

The very term Brajbhasha that is generally used as a catch-all rubric for one important branch of the classical Hindi corpus (another major branch being Avadhi) references the mytho-poetic landscape of the Braj *maṇḍal* and Krishna lore. But this narrow Vaishnava framing does not do justice to the diversity of Hindi in the early modern period (c. 1500-1800). Although the name "Brajbhasha" is the one that stuck, most poets of the day did not use the term, overwhelmingly preferring the simple designation "Bhasha" as a descriptor of their language and literary culture.² Thus due caution about anachronism, as well as some awareness of the religious and cultural diversity that a term like "Braj" masks, is critical when we approach the texts of this period. Whatever its present name may suggest about its past origin in a specific geographical place tied to Hindu religious life, Brajbhasha was in fact a highly versatile poetic idiom that was cultivated by many communities. Used by Vaishnavas as a vehicle for *bhakti*, it was transformed into a major court language during the reign of Akbar (r. 1556-1605). An extensive network of Braj poets connected the Persephone world of the Mughal court with Rajput, Vaishnava, and mercantile centres. Brajbhasha became the preferred literary idiom for poets, religious seekers, as well as a good number of Hindu, Jain, and Sikh intelligentsia. It was also the language of some of the poems collected in the *Guru Granth Sahib* when the Sikh scripture was compiled in 1604. In short, classical Hindi writers operated in a pluralistic landscape, and served various clientele. It is precisely some of this variety that I try to capture when I speak of a "Braj beyond Braj."

Towards a Postcolonial Historiography of Precolonial Hindi Literature

Given India's legacy of colonial oppression many Hindi scholars of today are understandably concerned with articulating new conceptual spaces of post-colonialism, the worthiest of enterprises, to be sure, but one whose purview needs to be expanded to include

the literary past. Precolonial Hindi is not to be shunned, as it often is today. It is to be understood. And, I argue, it is to be understood with a critical lens on the received wisdom of Hindi literary historiography. Whereas the field of classical Hindi has attracted some very rich research in the area of *bhakti* literature, which is what I call the tradition's salvageable past, many important writers and texts with more secular profiles have barely been studied. Those that have been studied have too often been trapped in conceptual structures dating to the colonial period. Since the publication of Ramchandra Shukla's *Hindī sāhitya kā itihās* in 1929, it has become usual to speak in particular ways about the Hindi past.³ In the conventional literary historiography the much revered *bhakti* tradition is often counterposed to an equally hated *rīti* tradition, a more vexatious and less claimable past consisting of hundreds of texts commissioned at Indian courts (Mughal, Rajput, Pahari, but also Deccani) during the early modern period. In Shukla's day these once prized texts came to be reviled as the shameful legacy of India's supposed late precolonial downfall.⁴ We need to understand the extent to which the hating of this classical courtly past, *apne atīt se nafrat*, is a product of colonial and nationalist thought structures. To understand these thought structures is to overcome them, a conceptual shift that would allow us to reclaim a vast precolonial archive to which we can pose an untold number of entirely new research questions. Aside from being desirable in its own right, such a scholarly initiative also has the potential to contribute important insights to postcolonial studies. Precolonialism must be part of postcolonialism.

Discomfort with Courtliness

Since the Hindi literature under review here was produced in courts, let me now turn to say a few words about this subject. One problem I have been trying to come to terms with in my work is how to find the space to talk about Indian courts, and to think about them seriously as cultural institutions. Hindi courtliness conjures up complicated images of Mughal-period luxury and decadence, but also a high culture produced by Brahman intellectuals, both of which have come under suspicion (for different reasons) at various moments in the evolution of Indian historiography. Both Mughal patronage and Brahman literati are crucial to understanding *rīti* literature.

The last few decades have opened up the fields of history and literature to exciting new perspectives, as epitomized by the rise of subaltern studies and the stunning success, amply evident in the case of contemporary Hindi studies, of new domains of Dalit cultural production and Dalit criticism. While recovering the voices of non-elites is an invaluable contribution to historiography and literary study, one fears, at least in the field of Hindi literature, that the pendulum has swung too far. Recovering the voices of non-elites should

not be equated with forgetting the voices of elites, which is what I see happening when we ignore Hindi's classical past. In modern democratic India's climate of anti-casteism, what could be more retrograde—or so seemingly runs the logic—than to study the *rīti* literature of Brahman pandits produced in the courts of “feudal” India? In the generally left-leaning circles of global academia, it is as though even to study the literary production of the higher castes automatically marks one as a reactionary.⁵ Granted that a full account of Indian history is impossible if we take into consideration only the sources produced by and for the ruling powers, but we most certainly cannot have anything approaching a reasonable account of the past without them. A literary history of India without factoring in Brahmans and courts is absurd. They were critical to the literary culture but also to the society of their day, and because courtly modes of cultural behaviour do not survive in our time does not mean they were unimportant in their own. They are of indisputable importance for anybody who wishes to understand India's cultural history.⁶

Still, in the modern world where democracy has emerged as the supreme form of polity, it has become more of a challenge to explain why courts need to be taken seriously as cultural institutions. Courts were the major political and cultural centres and the financial basis of so much of premodern life the world over but they carry a lot of baggage these days, and this is perhaps no more so than in India, where there were just so many of them. Courts are mostly dead as an institution, and this fact brings with it an important historiographical problem. Ian Copland in his work on Indian princes in the lead-up to Indian independence has usefully drawn attention to the teleology of failure that attends discussions of Indian courts in the modern period.⁷ Of course, using the very word “prince” instead of “king” in English, which must be a colonial legacy, would seem to doom Indian rulers to a diminutive and silly stature, presiding over postage stamp courtlets rather than being regal masters of important territory.⁸

In a post-courtly world it is indeed a challenge to find the right vocabulary and analytical models for discussing courts and court culture. Monarchy is today considered direly unmodern or, worse, extravagant and socially exploitative. The fact that some of India's most important kings in recent history were Muslim also makes this topic potentially a sensitive one. It does not help the case for analytical rigor on the literary culture of the premodern period that since the heyday of Romanticism in the nineteenth century, which had a defining role in shaping modern literary sensibilities, court poetry has been stigmatized as too lavish and too slavish, too elaborate and too learned.

I must confess that I have been quite shocked by the treatment of the courts that relate to so much of Hindi's literary heritage. Not in Western sources on Hindi literature, which have mostly just ignored classical texts produced in courts (another glaring omission in modern scholarship, which I cannot address here), but in Hindi ones. I find much not just to be wary of in the Hindi-language literary historiography—some of the discussions are absolutely alarming.⁹ The standard approach is to introduce courtly Hindi with a discussion of the

paristhitiyām (conditions) of the day. Before readers encounter a single *rīti* poem they are bombarded by an arsenal of diatribes against India's lamentable decline, which are then detailed as the purportedly necessary backdrop for understanding the literature.¹⁰ Even in relatively recent books, including one bearing the promise of field-changing insights with its title *Hindī sāhitya kā navīn itihās* (A new history of Hindi literature), two hundred years of classical Hindi literature are embedded in the stalest of colonial and nationalist *topoi* about the late Mughal past:

Sāmājīk dr̥ṣṭi se bhī is kāl ko ādi se ant tak ghor adhaḥpatan kā yug kahā jā saktā hai. Is kāl mē sāmantoād kā bolbālā thā. ...Sāsak varg vilāsītā aur vaibhav mē ākaṅṭh nimagna thā. Surā aur sundarī unkī dainik caryā ke pramukh aṅg the.

(As far as the social order is concerned, this was through and through an epoch of terrible decline. It was the heyday of feudalism.... The ruling classes were steeped up to their neck in decadence and luxury, the greater part of their days spent indulging in wine and women.)¹¹

This just happens to be one convenient example, but such decrying of India's *paristhitiyām* during the late Mughal period is ubiquitous in Hindi historiography. While there are a few welcome exceptions, most Hindi books on courtly literature begin by lambasting the lax morality and decadence of the courts in which it was produced. Let me just say that I don't think the problem is with courtliness per se. I think it's probably ok if you are Kalidasa and the court is that of the Guptas. That's some kind of wonderful classical court in India's glorious ancient past. Nor is it that modern Hindi scholars have a uniform disgruntlement with *Muslim* courts. Appreciative legends abound about Amīr Khusrau and Akbar. There is something more specific to the period—the late Mughal period—and a grave discomfort with Hindi courtliness in particular. What is, academically speaking, my direst concern in this historiographical scenario is that while most of the long-enduring assumptions about India's so called medieval decadence have been forcefully critiqued in English-language scholarship dating back decades, their basis in colonial ideology exposed, the study of premodern Hindi literature continues to move along on some perilously rickety tracks. Even very recent Hindi scholarship on Mughal-period texts remains enmeshed in orientalist and nationalist clichés.¹² I have argued elsewhere that Hindi's *madhyakāl* (medieval period) should not be allowed to extend all the way to 1857.¹³ Can the idea still be entertained in the year 2009 that *ādhuniktā* (modernity) could only begin with British colonialism? What kind of Indian “early modernity” might be masked by such a model? Why do we accept that the colonizers defined the terms of modernity? Why is so much of the classical, courtly (and, as I try to suggest below, political) past either ignored or treated as a source of shame?

There is an irony here that persistently troubles me. I am certain it is no exaggeration to state that Indian scholars have been the most significant contributors to the global field of post-colonial studies. This field, as far as I can tell (and I would love to be corrected on this), has been dominated by Indians writing in English, either in universities outside of India, or in metropolitan India. I have found myself wondering about the circulation of such findings to researchers working in the Hindi language, who are quite naturally the authors of most works of Hindi scholarship. This linguistic and intellectual in communication has yielded a peculiar state of critical disjunction, or so it seems to me, where the right hand of Hindi-language scholarship does not appear to know what the left hand of English-language scholarship in the same area is doing. Whereas most English-language scholarship long ago discarded notions of India's medieval "decline" (and most historians would feel serious hesitation about a medieval period that lasts until well into the nineteenth century) these remain fundamental to even current conceptualizations of classical Hindi literary traditions. An extreme formulation of this problem, and one whose irony hardly needs to be pointed out, would be to suggest that in the early twenty-first century the voice of the postcolonial speaks in English, whereas the orientalist voice is still alive, speaking in Hindi. We need fresh thought on the classical Hindi past.

Towards a Social History of Indian Poets

With this in mind, let me now direct our fuller attention to the kinds of approaches one might consider adopting. I am personally interested in the rich aesthetic world of classical Hindi texts, but here I will limit myself to sketching out some aspects of the dynamic social history and vibrant intellectual lives of the poets who dignified the courts of early modern India with their literary achievements. I conclude with some remarks about how the Brajhasha corpus may be tapped as a historical resource, with a particular interest in strategies for reading some of these texts politically.

What did poets actually do in Indian courts? Do we too readily assume that they just sit around all day writing flattering poems, that the entire patron-poet relationship is attended by base *ji huzūri* (obsequiousness)? In the modern period court poets have too unreflectingly been deemed careerist sycophants who shamelessly praised their patrons without any regard for moral truth. The Persian scholar Julie Meisami has put the matter aptly:

It is often assumed that panegyric poets (and court poets in general) are either frustrated artists unable to cast off the restrictions of courtly protocol and write freely as they wish, or second-rate hacks who sell their inflated and insincere verses to the highest bidder.¹⁴

In fact, poets played a remarkably wide variety of roles and such stereotypes need to be put to rest. While we have little historical evidence for the Birbal-Akbar stories that are part of the folk imagination today, the figure of Birbal illustrates powerfully that one of the roles of a court poet was to counsel the king. Court poets may thus profitably be understood as part of the knowledge economy of premodern society.¹⁵ One of my recent projects has been to track what can be known about the Brajhasha poets who worked at the Mughal court. I found there to be surprisingly little reliable research on this topic. Modern nationalist framings of Hindi as a Hindu language have perhaps prevented us from adequately investigating the roles that Hindi poets played in Indo-Muslim contexts, a problem exacerbated by inadequate historical data. Let me suggest how one can begin to excavate the lives of Brajhasha poets who served Mughal patrons, using a variety of sources that bring into focus a fascinating level of social complexity. Here I limit myself to two figures, Sundar Kaviray and Kavindracharya Sarasvati, but the approach can be generalized.¹⁶

I begin with Sundar. Little scholarship exists on Sundar. Until just a few years ago, the Hindi tradition seemed to suffer from an astonishing case of literary amnesia about him and many others like him.¹⁷ It doesn't help that he has often been confused with the Dadupanthi *sant* poet Sundardas. The Sundar to whom I am referring is completely different: he is a Mughal poet, associated with the court of Shah Jahan (r. 1628-57). Sundar's most important contribution to classical Hindi literature is the *Sundarśṛṅgār* (Sundar's love poems), a work that was much acclaimed until the early twentieth century, when under nationalism the Brajhasha courtly past came to be repudiated. We know that this text was read avidly not only at the Mughal court but by the nobility of Golconda and myriad kings in Rajasthan: dozens of manuscripts and commentaries on the work survive.¹⁸ The *Sundarśṛṅgār* also made it onto the syllabus of a famous Brajhasha school founded in Bhuj, Gujarat, in the eighteenth century, and the text continued to circulate widely in the nineteenth century through printed editions.¹⁹

The *Sundarśṛṅgār* is an important early Brajhasha example of the genre known as *nāyikābheda*, in which poets catalogue the various female characters who inhabit Indian poetry. While this theme has a long history in discussions of *śṛṅgāra rasa* (the erotic sentiment) in Sanskrit literature, short introductory manuals on the topic became a staple of Indian court literature of the early modern period, beginning with the *Rasamañjarī* (Bouquet of sentiment, c. 1500), the seminal Sanskrit treatise by Bhanudatta Mishra.²⁰ The Braj versions of these manuals, known as *rīti-granthas* (books of method), were used as educational handbooks and showcases for poetry, while some can also be considered learned contributions to centuries-old debates in Indian literary theory. A few of the most popular *rīti-granth* texts—including Sundar's—were painted in the regional courts of Rajasthan and



the Punjab Hills [see Figures one and two, pp.15–16, for reproductions of two rare paintings of the *Sundarśṅgār*, courtesy of Sotheby's, New York]. The love themes that *rīti* texts encapsulate—with Krishna and Radha the implied or explicit *nāyaka* and *nāyikā* (hero and heroine)—were part of an aural repertoire, as well, and it may be that Mughal patrons were exposed to this particular element of Indic literary culture through the *dhrupad* singers who were patronized by the court from the sixteenth century.

The early date (1631—most *rīti* works date from after 1650) and Mughal provenance of the *Sundarśṅgār* reveal that Indo-Muslim patronage played a crucial role in the development of Brajbhasha as a classical literary idiom. The work also suggests that classical Hindi texts served to educate the emperors and Mughal nobility about Indian literary practices, a supposition that seems to be confirmed by Abu'l Fazl—who not only devotes most of his discussion of *sāhitya* (literature) in the *Ā'in-i akbarī* to the topic of *nāyikābheda*, but even suggestively refers to the existence of manuals where one could read up about the topic.²¹ These manuals—at least the ones that the Mughals would have accessed—were most likely written in Brajbhasha. While Sanskrit works were occasionally commissioned at the Mughal court, compositions in Brajbhasha were naturally far more accessible to an Indo-Muslim readership. In his colophon Sundar explicitly addresses the issue of his work's comprehensibility. He says,

I carefully composed this work *Sundar's love poems*, bringing it from the language of the gods (*sura-bānī*) into the language of men (*nara-bānī*) so that the path of *rasa* could be understood by everybody.²²

Accessibility must have been an important factor behind another of Sundar's works thought to have been commissioned by Shah Jahan: the *Siṃhāsambattīsī* (Thirty-two tales of the lion-throne), a Braj version of the Sanskrit classic *Siṃhāsanaśatī*. Sundar's original text is now lost, but it was known to Kazim Ali Jawan and Lallulal, two munshis who produced a Hindustani version of it at Fort William College. The nineteenth-century French literary historian Garcin de Tassy was also aware of *Sundarśṅgār's* Mughal patronage context.²³ Even if we do not have the original Braj *Siṃhāsambattīsī* today, the very fact of its existence, especially when considered in relation to evidence from the same poet's *Sundarśṅgār*, suggests that Mughal patrons contributed in as yet unrecognized ways to the vernacularizing of formal Sanskrit texts in this period. This is some of what we can learn from the Hindi evidence about Sundar.

If we turn our attention to recollections from the Indo-Persian tradition, we learn something very different about Sundar. In fact, it is astonishing to discover that the Persian court historians Abdul Hamid Lahori (author of *Padshāhnāmāh*) and Muhammad Salih Kanbo (author of *Āmal-i šālīh*) think of him not as a Braj poet but as a courtier and diplomat.

Although they call him Sundar Kab Ray (i.e. Kavirāy), 'Sundar, king of poets,' they give no inkling that they actually know anything about his poetry. Sundar Kab Ray, it turns out, was not somebody who just showed up on Shah Jahan's doorstep to talk to him about Indian poetry in 1631. Theirs was a longstanding friendship dating from when Shah Jahan was still Prince Khurram: Sundar had accompanied him on the Mewar campaigns in 1614. In the words of Banarsi Prasad Saksena, Sundar (here confusingly labelled Sundar Das) was one of the prince's "chosen... men who stuck to him through thick and thin."²⁴

Kanbo and Lahori recount a series of episodes that reveal how Sundar was dispatched by Shah Jahan to suppress the rebellions of Hindu rajas. His most important diplomatic missions were to the court of the Orchha King Jujhar Singh Bundela (r. 1627-34), who instigated numerous disturbances early in Shah Jahan's reign. As a Hindi-speaking Hindu from nearby Gwalior, Sundar may have been perceived to have a diplomatic edge over a Central Asian or Iranian Muslim member of the court. That said, the diplomatic missions to the Orchha court were patently unsuccessful, for Jujhar Singh and his son Prince Bikramajit were executed in 1636, an incident that was grimly illustrated by Shah Jahan's court painters [see Figures three and four, pp.17-18, for reproductions of these paintings from the *Padshāhnāmāh*, courtesy of Windsor Castle]. Regardless of the outcome, the case of Sundar 'Kab Ray' dramatically highlights that Brajbhasha poets served the Mughal court not just as literati but also in other capacities; perceptions of them can differ markedly in Persian and Hindi sources.

A second Braj poet from the reign of Shah Jahan, this one even more fascinating for his social complexity, is Kavindracharya Sarasvati. Compared to Sundar, Kavindra is a relatively well known figure.²⁵ Perhaps his greatest claim to fame is that he successfully lobbied the emperor to rescind the hated *jizyah* (poll tax) levied on Hindu pilgrims. Poets from far and wide wrote verses in his honour, which have come down to us in two separate volumes: the *Kavindrachandrodāya* (Moonrise of Kavindra, in Sanskrit) and *Kavindrachandrikā* (Moonlight of Kavindra, in Braj). The very existence of this type of work—anthologies of poems by dozens of authors that have the combined effect of dramatically celebrating the learning and political acumen of a prominent contemporary—are testament to highly potent mechanisms for the dissemination of culture and ideas at work in the early modern period, which have hardly been studied or theorized. I will return to this matter of Indian cultural networks in due course, but for now I just want to highlight that the praise addresses to Kavindracharya illustrate powerfully how intellectuals long before the modern age were effective at functioning collectively in the public domain.²⁶

Once again we also see some interesting discrepancies in the sources that we have for understanding the social history of court poets, with Hindi and Sanskrit texts revealing events that are not known in the Persian tradition, and vice versa. One challenge is how to



negotiate between the different types of personalities that emerge in these sources. For instance, neither Kavindracharya's successes in having the *jizyah* rescinded nor the fervent acclaim of the Hindu literati was recorded in the Persian histories. Perhaps the reversal of an imperial policy, particularly as an accommodation to Hindu interest groups, was not the kind of thing one discussed in an official court history.²⁷ Persian sources are widely assumed to be more "trustworthy" (i.e. closer to Western history?) than Indic ones, which are more "literary" in nature. This is a position that bears revisiting.

In Persian texts Kavindracharya is mentioned, but only very briefly. The emphasis here is his skill in composing Hindi poetry and—unexpectedly—*dhrupad* songs. Muhammed Kanbo reports on how Kavindra was received at the court:

Kabindar Sanyāsī kih dar tālīf-i dhrupad ū taṣnīfāt-i hindī salīqah-'i durust ū mahārat-i tāmm dārad bih dargāh-i 'ālam-panāh rasīdah rukṣat bār yāft. va taṣnīfātish pasand-i khātir-i mubārak uftādah bih khil'at ū in'am-i dū hazār rūpiyah mubāhī gashtah sar-i 'izzat bih awj-i falak bar afrūkht.

(Kavindra Sanyasi, who composed exquisite, perfect *dhrupad* songs and Hindi works, arrived at the court of The Refuge of the World [i.e. Shah Jahan] and received permission to enter. When his compositions had pleased those with blessed minds, he was honoured with a robe and a gift of two thousand rupees and his esteem illuminated the peak of the sky.)²⁸

When Mohammed Kanbo speaks in tandem of "*dhrupad* songs and Hindi works" (*tālīf-i dhrupad ū taṣnīfāt-i hindī*), he is almost certainly referring to the *Kavīndrakalpalatā*. This fascinating, multi-tasking collection of verses includes *dhrupads* and *bishnupads* (songs to Vishnu), metaphysical poetry, as well as a very large segment of *praśasti* (political poetry) addressed to Shah Jahan and Dara Shikoh.

Many of the *praśasti* verses in *Kavīndrakalpalatā* are standard fare, the kinds of things Sanskrit poets had been composing for centuries. However, the fact that the poet writes in Brajhasha, and addresses the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan rather than Bhoja or some other Hindu king of old, makes these verses far from standard. One benefit of using a hybrid vernacular like Braj was that it allowed for the creative admixture of Perso-Arabic vocabulary in a manner formally proscribed by Sanskrit grammar, as when Kavindra celebrates the emperor's multi-cultural competency with the following lines:

*Kurāna purāna jānē, vedani ke bheda jāne,
etī rījha etī būjha aura kaho kāhi haī
Sumera ko sauno deta, dīna dunī dono deta*



(He knows the *Qur'ān* and the *Purāṇas*, he knows the secrets of the Vedas. Say, where else can one find so much connoisseurship, so much understanding? He gives a Mount Meru worth of gold, he gives this world and the next.)²⁹

The pairing of *kurāna*, a typically Braj way of rendering the word *Qur'ān*, with *purāna* deftly underscores Shah Jahan's ecumenism: rhyme has a magical way of demonstrating the ontological unity of things otherwise thought to be completely different. This is a literary technique that would have been virtually impossible in Sanskrit, where rhyme was rare. The use of Braj instead of Sanskrit also allows Kavindra to tap into the Muslim thought world by invoking the Arabic concept of *dīn* contrasted with *dunī* (i.e. *duniyā*), that is, religion versus worldly life. These sprinklings of Perso-Arabic vocabulary no doubt aided comprehension when a vernacular poet presented his work in a Persianized court; one also wonders whether Brajhasha poetry was a medium that could foster new types of conversations across communities, conversations that would have been possible neither in Sanskrit nor in Persian.

We noted above the existence of two collections of praise addresses to the pandit. As noted by V. Raghavan, the Sanskrit one contains a detail not available in either Hindi or Persian sources, helping to contextualize how the pandit's Braj work *Kavīndrakalpalatā* may have been presented at court: in a teaching environment. Or at least such would seem to be the import of the term *sambodhayan* (addressing/lecturing) in this line by Purnananda Brahmacharin from the *Kavīndracandrodaya*:

Dillīśvarasya nigamāgamaśāstrabuddhyā, sambodhayan pratidinaṃ trijagat kavīndrah...

(Everyday the King of poets in the three worlds [i.e. Kavindra] lectures the Lord of Delhi according to his knowledge of the Vedas, their auxiliary texts, and *śāstras*....)³⁰

This reference to Kavindracharya's teachings by one of his contemporaries appears to correspond to a sixty-verse segment of the *Kavīndrakalpalatā* on the weighty subject of *tattvajñān* (metaphysics), in which the pandit takes the emperor on a whirlwind tour of the major principles of Indian philosophy. One wonders if in a multi-confessional environment a special resonance accrued to statements like, "Know there to be doctrines of many types, [but] they say that God is one."³¹ More puzzling, considering the Muslim audience for the work, is the capping of a verse with the rather pointed query, "Why do Turks pray and fast?"³² Perhaps the point was to question all external manifestations of religiosity—Hindu or otherwise. Whatever may be the case, one comes away from the text with the distinct feeling that Pandit Kavindracharya, a distinguished author of many learned Sanskrit texts, sought to teach Shah Jahan about religious matters. And the medium was his Brajhasha poetry.



The cases of Sundar and Kavindracharya dramatically highlight some of the multi-faceted roles of classical Hindi court poets and their texts, helping to overturn the stereotypes of sycophancy that are thought to attend the poet-patron relationship. Sundar was a gifted poet and one of the earliest known vernacular writers of *nāyikābheda*; his work may have played a role in educating Shah Jahan about Indian literary conventions. He was also a friend of the emperor, and an envoy entrusted with important diplomatic missions. The personality of Kavindracharya Sarasvati, too, has many layers: he served the cause of Hindus in general as a political activist, and he was respected as a religious authority by Shah Jahan and Dara Shikoh. He was an author of books in both Braj and Sanskrit, which allowed him to reach diverse audiences. The Mughal sources remember him especially for his musical compositions, for which (along with his Braj poetry) he was rewarded handsomely.

In short, we stand to learn something important about literary, but also social history, when we study the texts and contexts of classical Hindi poets (we stand to learn even more when we supplement the Hindi sources with a multi-lingual archive that includes writings in Sanskrit and Persian). I would now like to suggest some other lessons that we can learn from studying the classical Hindi tradition.

The Brajbhasha Kavikul

If one could take a snapshot of north Indian courtly life in the early modern period, it would reveal that Brajbhasha poetry is something just about every king had in his cultural repertoire by the second half of the seventeenth century. A network of itinerant poets served as the agents of transmission of literary styles and techniques from court to court, and much evidence projects the idea that these were like-minded writers who shared literary presuppositions, practices, and courtly predilections across impressive distances. One mode of self-conception of these court professionals can be traced with considerable precision: Braj poets often use the term *kavikul* (where *kavi* means poet and *kul* means family or community), an important, if little theorized, mechanism of social formation in this period. Keshavdas, one of the foundational poets of the Brajbhasha courtly style, closed his *Rasikpriyā* (Handbook for poetry connoisseurs, 1591) with an address to the *kavikul*:

In this manner, Keshavdas has pronounced his opinions on success and failure in the expression of literary emotion. May the community of poets (*kavikul*) correct him where he has erred.³³

For the poet Cintamani Tripathi (fl. 1650), the *kavikul* was a concept so central that he featured it in the title of his magnum opus the *Kavikul-kalptaru* (Wish-fulfilling tree for the

community of poets).³⁴ Other poets may not use the exact phrase *kavikul* but they employ a variety of equivalents, and with a frequency that commands attention, as when Cintamani's brother Matiram closes his *Rasrāj* (Primary sentiment,) with an invocation to the *sukavisamāja*:

Samujhi samujhi saba rījhahai, sajjana sukavisamāja
Rasikan ke rasa ko kiyo, nayo grantha rasarāja

(I have composed this new work, *Primary sentiment*, for the delectation of connoisseurs. May the community of master poets understand my work, taking pleasure from it.)³⁵

If these references to literary community were merely sporadic, one might be content to pass over them as mere stock expressions. But their sheer number (one can find hundreds of such passages in premodern Braj texts) demonstrates unequivocally that being rooted in a broad community was a defining component of what it meant to be a poet in this period. It was, in fact, precisely such a *kavikul* (in this case we can speak of both Sanskrit and Braj literary communities) that made it possible for Kavindracharya to receive praise addresses from poets all over the country to commemorate his actions on behalf of Hindu pilgrims.

One extraordinary feature of the *kavikul* is that these poets mostly wrote in a very similar idiom. Whether writing in Orchha in Bundelkhand (as Keshavdas did), or at the Mughal court in Agra (as Sundar, and perhaps Cintamani did), or in Raigarh in Maratha country (as the brother of Cintamani and Matiram, Bhushan Tripathi, did), the Braj *kavikul* was producing praise addresses and literary biographies for courtly patrons; poetry depicting the love of Radha and Krishna; scholarly works on topics from *alankārasāstra* (literary theory), such as *nāyikābheda*, in the *ritigranth* style. In carefully researching and crafting their texts, the *riti* poets were in dialogue with their literary forefathers from the Sanskrit tradition, a *kavikul* of bygone days. They were also in conversation with contemporary peers—the *kavikul*'s vast circulatory sphere of court professionals. And even when the poets never met one another they were bound together by a literary consensus about classical aesthetics, which encouraged a certain uniformity, even conformity of genres.

What are we to make of this vast commitment to courtly aesthetics, spreading over vast reaches of territory and, I should stress, *not* in Persian—the language of the dominant power of the day or in Sanskrit, the language of the dominant powers of earlier days—but in Hindi? I couldn't disagree more with those scholars (and there have been many) who have seen the Hindi literature written during the two hundred years prior to colonialism as emblematic of a weakened, moribund Hindu culture disintegrating under late Mughal rule. Even the venerable Hindi literary critic Nagendra, who was comparatively sympathetic to Braj



courtly literature, is known to have said “*ākhir pūre do sau varṣ tak hindī ke kaviyō ne kiya hī kyā?*” (What, in the end, did Hindi poets actually do during this two hundred year period?)³⁶ A more idiosyncratic, but no less damning, assessment of this corpus comes from the Mishra brothers, three pre-eminent Hindi literary historians writing a few years before Ramchandra Shukla:

Hundreds of books were lost or destroyed in ancient times because we did not have trains, telephones, a postal system, printing presses or libraries. We lacked these things, so poets could not find out what others were writing, with the result that hundreds and thousands of books kept getting produced on the same subject. It would be difficult to exaggerate how terribly the lack of a printing press has harmed our intellectual circles and our language.³⁷

It is hard not to read the phrase “hundreds and thousands of books” as a thinly-veiled critique of the *rīti* genre. In the skewed interpretive regime of colonial and nationalist discourse, highly intelligent and meritorious poets are constructed as incompetent dullards instead of vibrant social actors. It is ironic that the Mishra brothers regret India’s lack of print technology in the Mughal period, whereas what we are in fact observing is a preprint literary culture that fulfilled many of the same functions, one that was for instance capable of standardizing and enforcing literary norms through its own sophisticated mechanism: the writing and widespread use of poetry manuals. It does not bother me so much that stinging words about Hindi cultural incompetency were uttered in 1913 or even in 1949 (the year Nagendra’s book *Rīti kāvyā kī bhūmikā* first came out)—what bothers me is that we still largely accept them day. We look back on the Hindi courtly past (often without actually bothering to study it) and see it as a source of regret and shame. This is profoundly misguided.

How else might we want to think about these texts? I have already suggested that we take our cues not from modern commentators, whose analyses are riven by anachronistic and ill-informed biases, but Brajbhasha writers, trying to understand what they themselves thought that they were doing in constituting themselves as a *kavikul* in the early modern period. One major reason *rīti* poets consistently wrote in classicizing genres is not because they were incompetent or lacking in the technological resources of colonialism, but because Sanskrit literary norms held powerful sway over the emerging field of Brajbhasha poetry and literary theory, which even a passing familiarity with the history of vernacularization in India would reveal to be hardly anomalous.³⁸ The textbook genre favoured by *rīti* poets, in which invoking classical authority was an expected literary stance, fostered a high degree of systematicity and was particularly well-suited for structuring a strong sense of literary

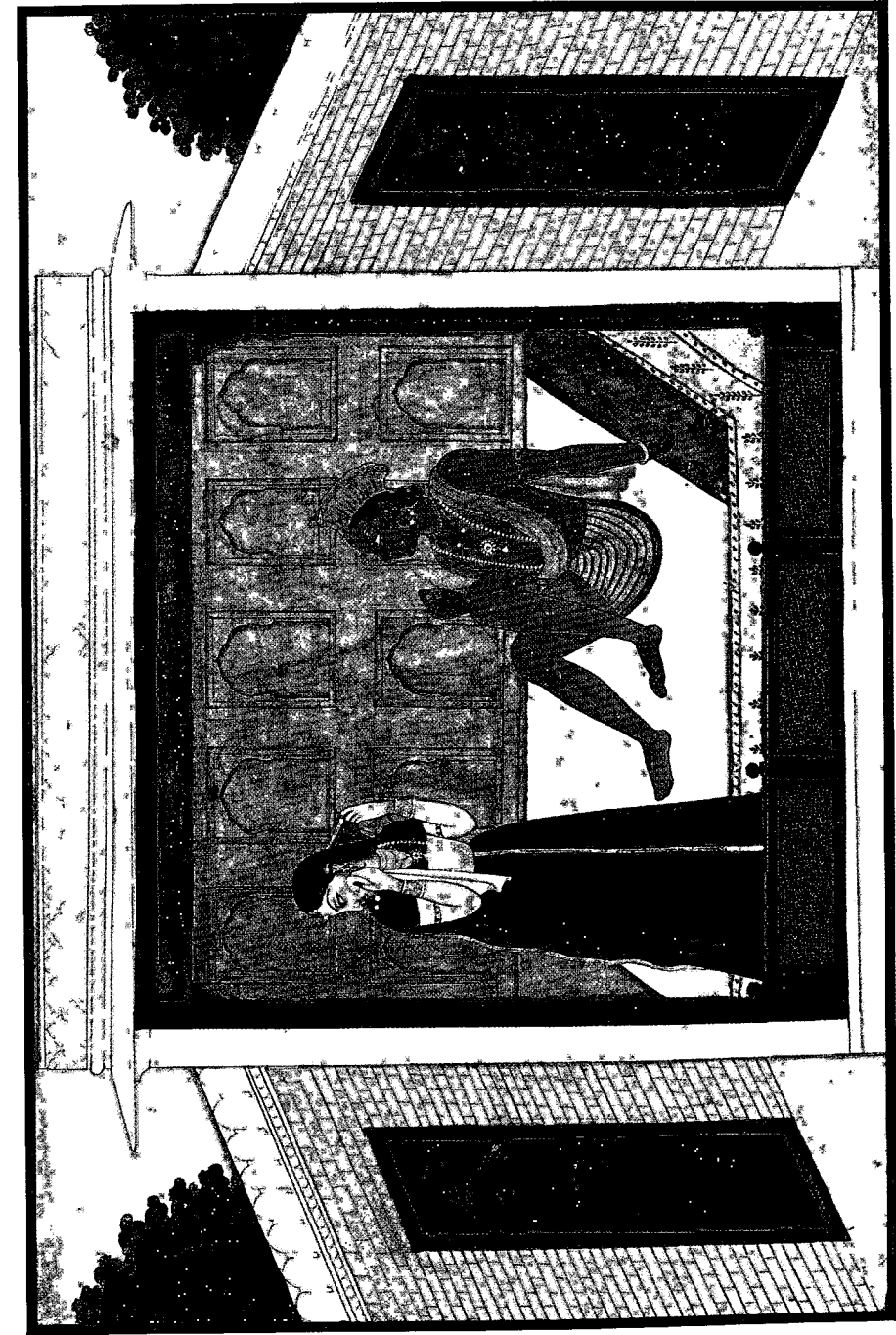


Fig. 1. Krishna gazes longingly at Radha as she prepares to leave him. An illustration from the *Sundarśrigaṛ*. Guler or Kangra, c. 1780. Opaque watercolour heightened with gold on paper. Photo courtesy of Sotheby’s, New York.



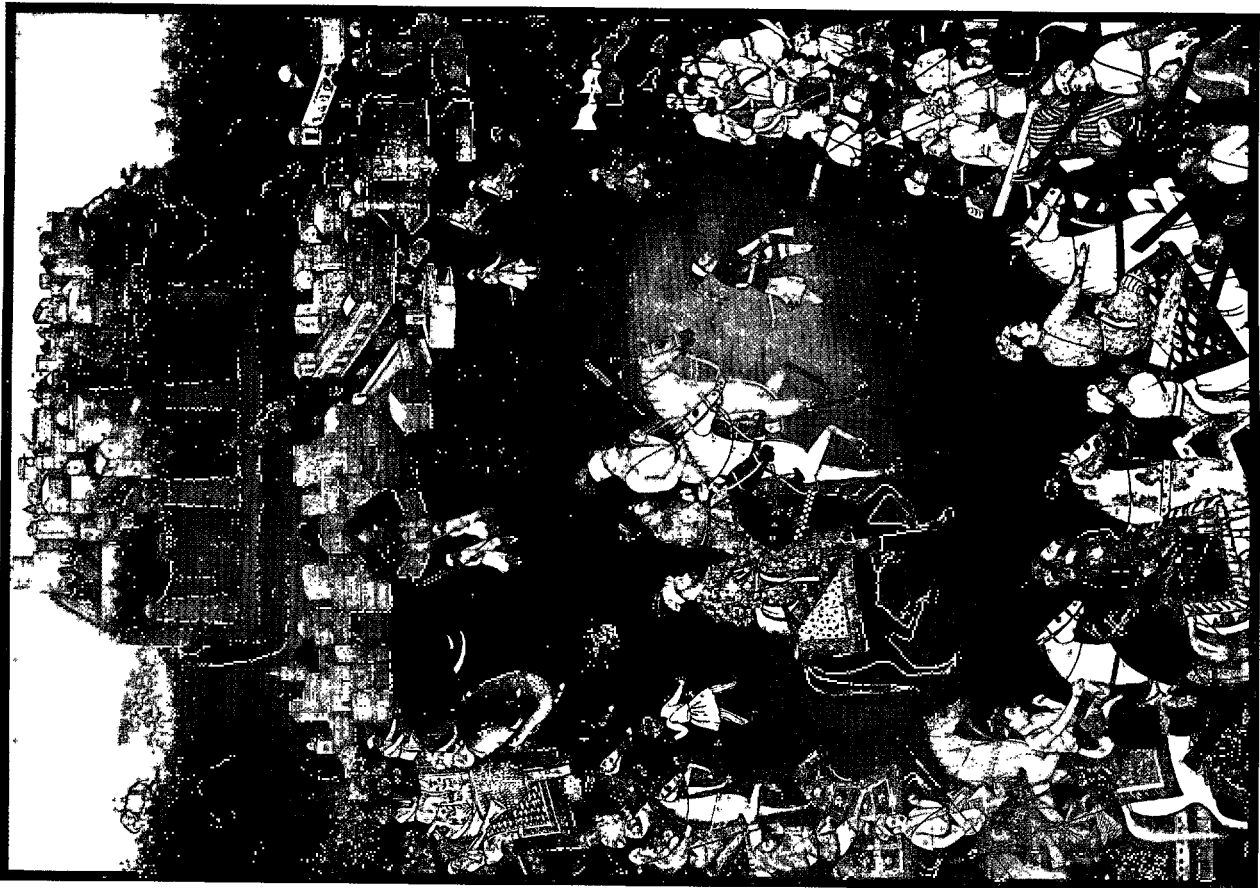
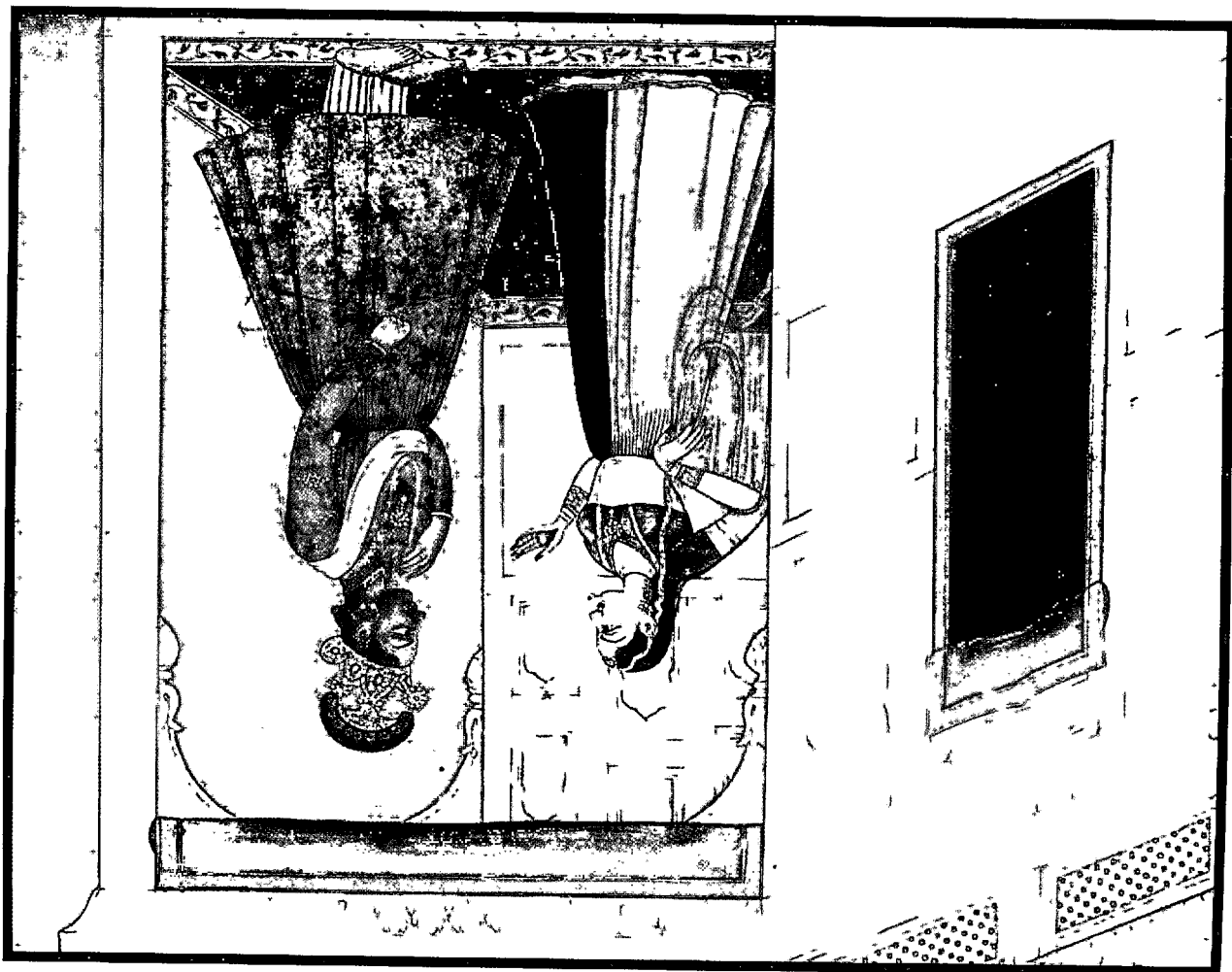


Fig.3. The capture of Orchha by imperial forces. Reproduced from the *Padshāhnāmāh*, from the Royal Collection © 2005, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, courtesy of Windsor Castle.

Fig.2. Krishna faces a reproachful Radha. Illustration from the *Sundarsingār*. Guler or Kangra, c. 1780. Opaque watercolour heightened with gold on paper. Photo courtesy of Sotheby's, New York.



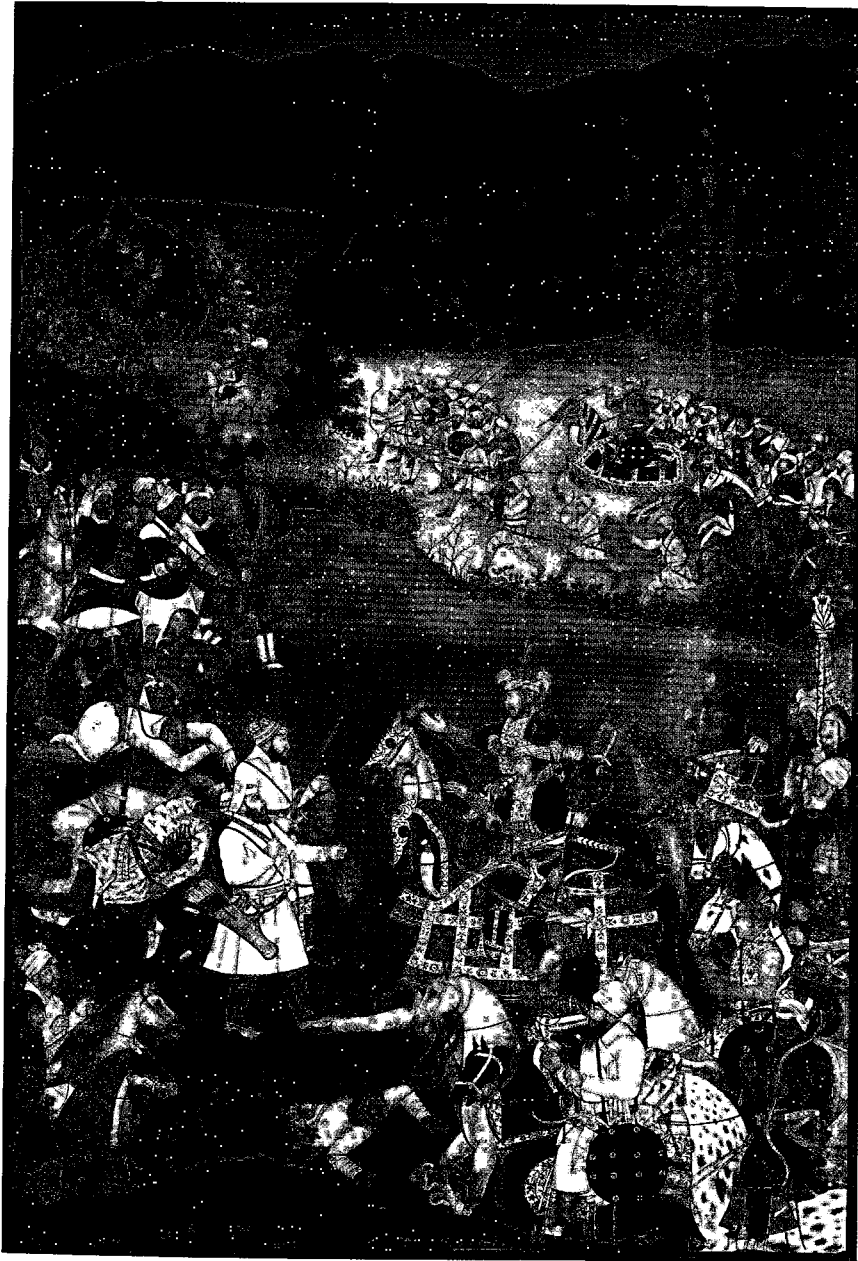


Fig.4. Khan Dawran receiving the heads of Jujhar Singh and his son Bikramajit in 1636. Reproduced from the *Padshāhnāmāh*, from the Royal Collection © 2005, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, courtesy of Windsor Castle.

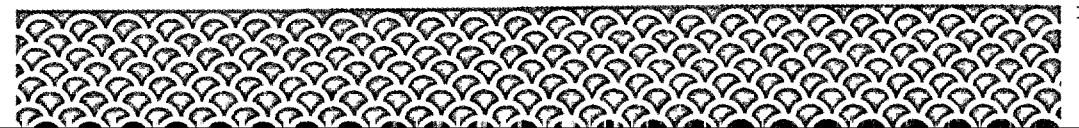
belonging from within the confines of a manuscript culture. Another way to theorize the extraordinary commitment to classical aesthetics in this period—recall that *rīti* poetry was almost universally adopted by the courts of the day and that hundreds of Brajbhasha poetry manuals were produced during this period—is to try to understand the nature of the cultural work that classicism did for the patrons who adopted it as a literary style. The new Braj handbooks certainly brought pleasure to the court but mastering *rasa* theory, knowing the principles of poetic excellence, understanding the subtleties of *nāyikās* and all the dimensions of *śṛṅgāra* poetry were also skills that marked one as a person of learning and refinement. *Rīti* texts thus helped to constitute new communities of connoisseurs. And for Mughal patrons, as I have already suggested in the case of Sundar and Abu'l Fazl, they were especially useful for educating a Persianate readership about India's classical literary traditions.

Hindus had History, and They Wrote it in Hindi

Whatever overlay of classicism characterizes *rīti* literary culture, present concerns were also articulated. Although the Rajput kings of early modern India had the functional Persian required for participation in Mughal administration and court life, Brajbhasha was more culturally relevant in their *watan jāgīrs* (home territories) than Persian, and it was these regional courts that cultivated the richest range of genres in Brajbhasha. For instance, we observe in some Braj texts a strong genealogical imperative, which was a critical strategy of self-presentation for Rajput kings but also almost certainly a response to the system of Mughal rankings that helped to underwrite political success.³⁹ Another response to Mughal power was a new orientation towards history and political commentary.

In this last section I would like briefly to explore how classical Hindi texts, an under-utilized archive for historians of early modern India, are a resource for understanding local experiences of Mughal rule. This is the subject of a new book that I am currently researching. The first point I would make is that there are vast quantities of Brajbhasha historical literature—dozens, maybe even hundreds of texts. I am not trying to pull a William Dalrymple, who recently took Indian scholars to task for ignoring hundreds of documents in the National Archives pertaining to the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah II but, honestly, why are classical Hindi texts not more widely known as a major historical tradition? Let's leave aside the unpublished texts (manuscript collections in India are not exactly world famous for their accessibility to scholars). Quite a few have actually been published and, if we include Rajasthani texts, which are not always easy to distinguish from Braj ones in the early modern period, then we are looking at a truly major corpus.

Scholars of Hindi and Rajasthani literature have actually been arguing for a Hindi historical tradition for decades, but theirs has been a rather quiet argument, and I am not



certain their voice has been heard loudly enough. There is, in fact, a decent-sized corpus of scholarship on Hindi *vīr kāvya* and *aitihāsik kāvya* (heroic and historical poetry), but this research effort has played out in fits and starts rather than being the comprehensive initiative that the Hindi historical tradition surely merits.⁴⁰ Occasionally one has also heard a scholarly voice that has perhaps been too shrill, or driven by nationalist concerns, as when poetic representations of Shivaji are excavated, or the Rajasthani *rāso* was once framed as a Hindu counter-epic, a literary response to Muslim invasion.⁴¹ In general, though, I don't think we have heard enough about the Hindi historical tradition. Are we still caught up in a colonial trope about how Hindus failed to produce history? I hope not. I'm tired of the colonial rhetoric of premodern Indian failure (an occupational hazard, it will now be clear, for a scholar of *rīti* literature). Space constraints only permit me to outline a few features of the corpus and give a couple examples of Braj historical poetry by way of suggesting why these materials must be further explored, and freshly theorized. Hindus did have history, and during the Mughal period they wrote it in Hindi.⁴²

Let me indicate just a sampling of the types of works that we have. There are accounts in Brajbhasha and Rajasthani of regional courts' early encounters with the Mughals. Keshavdas' first work, the *Ratnabāvanī* (Fifty-two verses about Prince Ratnasena), for instance, tells the story (well, his version of the story) of how the kingdom of Orchha was taken over by the Mughals.⁴³ Two works variously entitled *Māncarīt* or *Māncarīt rāso* (Biography of Man Singh), in mixed Rajasthani and Brajbhasha, detail the activities of Man Singh Kachhwaha, the leading Rajput general of Akbar's day.⁴⁴ Reporting on Mughal succession struggles was also a popular pastime for classical Hindi poets. The circumstances behind Aurangzeb's signal victory over his brothers in the war that broke out in 1658, still lamented in the popular Hindu imagination today, attracted several lively poetic accounts, as did the war of succession between Aurangzeb's sons Muazzam and Azam Shah in 1707, and Farrukh Siyar's defeat of Jahandar Shah in 1713.⁴⁵ Any student of eighteenth-century politics in particular will find the Braj corpus an exceptionally interesting cache. The unpublished *Harikalābelī* of Vrindavandas, who took refuge at Bharatpur after the sack of Mathura by Ahmad Shah Abdali in 1757, offers a valuable firsthand perspective on the political turmoil of the day.⁴⁶ Those looking to understand the rocky political relations between the Mughal court and the Jats of Bharatpur, or the machinations of warlords in Bundelkhand such as Anup Giri Gosain, would do well to listen to what Brajbhasha poets have to say.⁴⁷ This is a non-exhaustive introduction to a rather variegated cluster of different genres that I would like to bring together analytically under a more unified purview. Too often these works have been discussed in isolation (often by the editor of one of them), but what in my view we have not done enough of in the field of Hindi is to treat these as a *historical tradition*.

Ok, but is all of this really *History* with a capital H? I don't think I want to enter into that debate just now, except to suggest that we study the classical Hindi record for what it actually is, and not foreground the issue of whether it conforms to the European post-Enlightenment definition of history. These are literary texts, and they are historical at the same time—although not necessarily in the rectilinear, documentary mode that we associate with modern history. The authors of Indic historical poetry tend to mix more factual and literary registers, but just because they did not produce “pure” history does not mean their writings should be rejected as so much fantastical yarn-spinning. As proposed by Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam in their work on the South Indian *karaṇam* tradition, one strategy is to read closely for the “textures” of a text: some portions will be primarily poetic in intent, whereas others resonate more factually.⁴⁸ A student of Hindi history can also draw methodological sustenance from a host of recent scholarship that seeks to understand various forms of historical practice in premodern South Asia.⁴⁹ Take the eulogistic genres known as *praśasti*, which encompass a wide range of poetical and inscriptional practices. Once simply mined for isolated historical nuggets or dismissed as power-legitimizing doggerel, they can prove to be crucial indexes of culture and power when approached in a more nuanced fashion.⁵⁰ Literature was typically the mode in which history in general and the political in particular found expression in India until this older spectrum of truth regimes was supplanted by the historiographical traditions of the West under colonialism.

Brajbhasha historio-literary culture, for its part, came into its own during the Mughal period, making it instructive to compare the textualizing strategies of *rīti* writers to those of their Persian counterparts. Unlike the Persian *tārīkh* (court chronicles), Braj histories are not generally annalistic. Instead of focusing on precise dates and details, for the most part Hindi court intellectuals wrote something we could call enriched histories, which were informed by *kāvya* standards. Their historiographical contributions took the form of poetry, genealogies, and idealized biographies. Strict adherence to factual reporting was not necessarily the aim (although it sometimes was). *Rīti* histories can in some cases be considered oppositional histories, in which Rajput courts (the usual sponsors of such texts) put forward their own versions of events, and their own constructions on the politics of their day.

If there are methodological challenges to using the classical Hindi corpus as a historical archive, the texts also hold a lot of promise. Although my work at this age is still preliminary, my hope is to refine an approach that does justice to both literary and historical concerns. While we no doubt stand to learn all kinds of miscellaneous information about how ghee was stored in the old days, what was sold in the marketplaces of the sixteenth century, or what types of horses were in Man Singh's stable,⁵¹ etc., we need methods of



historical excavation that do not completely ransack the texts' literary qualities. I want to argue that close attention to "literary" features such as genre and register does not hinder but actually contributes to our understanding of historiographical modalities. I would say that we always want to look at the argument of the text, which is an act of interpretation, not of fact harvesting. What are the modes of self-presentation of the particular court at which it was produced? What is the logic of the work or poem as *kāvya*? What can an analysis of the choices poets made about language and tone contribute to the discussion? As I will presently demonstrate, Braj poets were extremely attuned to these matters. Is it possible to argue out the ways in which style has substance?

Here I will give just three examples of how Braj poetry, for all its literary qualities, may be read with sensitivity as a window onto history. The Braj *kavikul*, I have already suggested in the case of Kavindracharya, did not withhold commentary on Mughal politics. Some works, notably the *Śivrajbhūṣaṇ* of Bhushan Kavi, which though presented in the format of a *ritigranth*, a textbook on classical poetics, are highly political—even satirical—in their effects. Let us take a look at a fairly typical verse by this court poet of Shivaji, which can be meaningfully unpacked for historical analysis by using the toolbox of literary criticism:

*Dārūna duguna durajodhana te avaraṅga, bhūṣana bhanata, jaga rākhyo chala maṛhikai
Dharama dharama, bala Bhūma, paija Arjuna, Nakula akila, Sahadeva teja caṛhikai
Sāhi ke Sivājī, gājī karyo dilī māṁhi caṇḍa paṁḍavanahu te puruṣāratha subaṛhikai
Sūne lākhabhauna te kaṛhe pāṁca rāti maī ju dyausa lākha caukī te akele āyo kaṛhikai*

(Bhushan says, Aurangzeb, who is twice as cruel as Duryodhana, has deceived the world. Ghazi Shivaji has exhibited prowess even greater than that of the Pandavas. He mobilized the moral courage of Yudhisthira, the strength of Bhima, the fortitude of Arjuna, the intelligence of Nakula and the power of Sahadeva. The five of them were able to get out of a wax house in the dark of night—Shivaji on his own escaped from 100,000 watchmen in broad daylight.)⁵²

This verse is meant to serve as an example of *vyatireka alaṅkāra*, a figure of speech predicated on the *nāyaka* (hero) of the verse exceeding some kind of expectation. How does Shivaji prove himself to be a worthy object of this *vyatireka*? The poet refers to a famous historical incident from 1666, when Shivaji escaped from Aurangzeb's court in Agra (not Delhi, as the verse says—Braj poets sometimes do deliberately change the facts, but they also get their facts wrong). Let us examine both the language and the literary modes at work here.

First consider Bhushan's lexical choices. His handling of Emperor Aurangzeb's name is etymologically corrupt but thematically brilliant. In Persian the word Aurangzeb is a flattering title, meaning "adorning the throne." In Bhushan's hands the word "Aurang"

is transformed into "Avaraṅga." According to Braj phonetics this is a plausible enough pronunciation of the emperor's name, but it also invokes the combination of the Sanskrit lexemes "ava" and "raṅga," which together mean something like "sickly pale"—a point that could hardly have been lost on a Brahman like Bhushan. Now look at the epithet the poet chose for Shivaji: *ghāzī*, the Arabic word for Islamic conqueror (for the faith), an unexpected choice indeed for this Hindu leader, but one that adds a militant tone of righteousness.⁵³

If we want to further understand Bhushan's technique and the larger argument of this poem, we need to appreciate how the poet takes a current event and embeds it in a *Mahābhārata* episode, which adds a stylistically rich, commentative dimension. The verse has likened Avaranga to Duryodhana (only Avaranga is worse), and Shivaji is superior to all five of the noble Pandavas put together—hence his suitability for exemplifying a *vyatireka alaṅkāra*. The verse attests to the enduring relevance of classical epic modes for processing contemporary events in Hindi historical texts. It is also a good example (and there are many others) of a Hindi poet "talking back to the empire."⁵⁴

My next example is by the poet Lal Kavi of the Panna court, whose *Chatraprakāś* (Light on Chatrasal, c. 1710) is a remarkable biography of the Bundela leader Chatrasal and an excellent example of regional history from the classical Hindi tradition.⁵⁵ Lal Kavi recounts how Chatrasal and his brother Angad were enlisted to fight in the Mughal army by Mirza Raja Jai Singh of Amber. Pay special attention to the language here:

*Milikai nṛpa jayasimha saī, angada lie bulāi
Manasiba bhayau duhūna kau, rahe sanga sukha pāi
Rahe sanga kūrāma ke aise, nṛpa virāṭa ke paṁḍava jaise,
Yadyapi manasiba manasiba nāhīm, saba taī umagi adhika mana māhīm!*

(Chatrasal and Angad met with King Jaisingh.
They both took up mansabs, remaining together happily.
They remained together like tortoises,
like King Virata, who stood by the Pandavas.
Even though the mansabs were not appropriate,
their hearts were exuberant.)⁵⁶

Again, note the poet's invoking of a figure from the *Mahābhārata*: King Virata, who sheltered the Pandavas when they lived incognito at his court during the thirteenth year of their exile. Lal Kavi also manipulates Brajhasha register in interesting ways. It is impossible, in fact, to capture in translation the effect of line four of the original Braj text with its play on the Perso-Arabic words *manṣab* (Mughal administrative unit) and *munāsib* (appropriate). In Persian these two words are completely unrelated—the s's are written with the distinct letters



saad and siin respectively—but these differences are irrelevant to the ear of a Hindi speaker or the pen of a Braj poet. The vowel character and length can also be fudged, allowing *munāsib* magically to become *manasiba* and resulting in a clever pun based on two invented homonyms. The choice of Brajified Persian words creates a Mughalizing effect appropriate to a scene in which two *manṣabdārs* are recruited into the Mughal army. As often the case in Bhushan's poetry, as well, we also detect a dig at the Mughal political establishment.⁵⁷ While I can only gesture towards this point here, texts like Bhushan's *Śivrajbhūṣaṇ* and the *Chatraprakāś*, written in Brajbhasha in the Maratha and Bundelkhand hinterlands, which is to say far away from the urban strongholds of Mughal power and beyond the reach of Persian chroniclers, have something important to tell us about the local ways of being historical, and of being political, in early modern India.

Brajification

Some of the literary effects we are witnessing here stem from a process I call "Brajification," the ability of Braj poets to mold their language in dramatic fashion in accordance with the needs of particular contexts. Brajbhasha can be a delightfully impure language, with poets freely mixing Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and local words together to create interesting expressive effects. Centuries later Brajbhasha's hybridity and lack of regularized grammar would be much derided by nationalist critics such as Mahavir Prasad Dvivedi (1864-1938), who spearheaded a movement to repudiate the language because of its association with what he perceived to be outdated premodern literary values but also its linguistic failings, promoting in its stead the standardized form of Khari Boli now naturalized as the Hindi of today.⁵⁸ Let us not permit such nationalist-period pedantry to interfere with our appreciation of this early modern literary style. The power of Braj political poetry often stems from wonderful twists that are possible precisely because of the special linguistic flexibility of this ungrammaticalized vernacular idiom.

Let us look at one last example of Brajification from the *Jaṅgnāmā* (Book of War, c. 1713) of Shridhar, which despite its Persian sounding name is a Braj account of the struggle between Farrukh Siyar and Jahandar Shah for the Delhi throne. When they wrote in a historical vein, classical Hindi poets generally reported on events of critical interest to the regional courts where they were most commonly patronized, but they could even apparently serve as Mughal historians (this practice is not much attested, however, since Mughal history was usually written in Persian). The *Jaṅgnāmā* is noteworthy for its strong degree of Persianization, a register that doubtless made sense given the Mughal subject matter. Also striking is the work's eyewitness feel.⁵⁹ One wonders if Shridhar was a soldier on the winning side, or some kind of embedded Braj court reporter (to use the present-day

journalistic lingo for foreign correspondents stationed in war zones). He seems to know exactly how many *kos* away the enemy stood at each juncture of the battle, and lists by name the many (mostly Muslim) army commanders who were present. Here is how Shridhar lets us know his low opinion of Jahandar Shah, just at the turning point in the narrative:

*Ika roja baiṭhe maujadī madirā baḍhāyo mauja ko
Utsāha sō cita cāi bhari kari hukuma navaroja ko
Tehi bīca āi khabari, āe farukh shāhi kanoja ko
Aru ejudīm bhāge lae hamarāha sigarī fauja ko*

(One day Moiz uddin [Jahandar Shah] was sitting, intoxicated with wine. He was filled with the urge to celebrate Nauroz, so he gave the order. Just then he got the news that Farrukh Siyar had reached Kanauj, and Aiz-uddin [Jahandar Shah's son] had fled, taking the whole army with him.)⁶⁰

Notice Shridhar's wonderful sleight of hand: the name Moizuddin (aka: Jahandar Shah), which is supposed to be an elevated Arabic title (*mo'izz al-dīn*, strengthener of the faith) is Brajified to *maujadī*, implying that the emperor is a drunken playboy caught up in *mauj-masī* (frivolous pleasure) and unfit for rule.

In assessing this verse and the two by Bhushan and Lal Kavi I have been especially interested in how the tools of literary criticism—understanding the valences of language use, reading for tone or cultural logic—can deepen a historical hermeneutics of classical Hindi texts. Although the colonial-period dictum that "Hindus lack history" has been solidly debunked, much work still remains to be done towards identifying the extent and nature of Indian historiographies, not to mention developing better techniques for reading non-conventional sources like poetry as history.

Conclusion

My goal here but also in my research more generally is to show why classical Hindi texts are worth our attention. I have tried to unseat the tropes—they are as prevalent as they are intellectually indefensible—that have reigned too long about classical Hindi's courtly decadence, gesturing toward rich domains of social, intellectual, and political life that we could actually try to understand, if only we would turn our attention to them. We have observed the roles of classical Hindi poets as literati, pundits, social actors of various types, and political commentators. They also—and I hope to tell you much more about this in my next book—were historians. I have been surprised to discover just how many examples of historical poetry there are in the classical Hindi corpus, a volume that appears to attest to the urgency of negotiations with Mughal power for the regional kingdoms of North India



during this period. It also seems likely that some awareness of the Indo-Persian *tarīkh* tradition was seeping into the consciousness of *rīti* authors, who themselves occasionally spent time in residence at the Mughal court, and whose patrons certainly did. In a day when the Mughal elite set so much of the cultural and political agenda, perhaps the domain of Braj textuality could serve as a space in which local courts and even soldiers—as Shridhar seems to have been—had a voice. Whatever or whomever it was they were narrativizing, *rīti* poets were deeply engaged with the changing exigencies of Mughal rule, expressing themselves in new forms of poetry. Braj authors, I have stressed, were manifestly uninterested in the concerns about language purity that preoccupied their Sanskrit- and Persian-writing peers (or indeed the strident reformers who transformed Hindi utterly during the last century). On the contrary, hybridity—not purity—needs to be seen as integral to the language’s literary, cultural, and political power. Brajbhasha spoke to mixed groups, and about them.



Notes

¹ A few recent studies of these seminal *bhakti* figures are Horstmann (ed.) 2002; Hawley 2005, 2009; Wakankar 2006; Agrawal 2008.

² Hariharnivas Dvivedi proposed that the term Brajbhasha may have come into currency during the seventeenth century due to the agency of Bengali Vaishnavas, who had developed their own poetic idiom, Brajbuli, imagined to be the speech of Krishna and Radha. See Dvivedi 1955: 59-62. The earliest instance of the term Brajbhasha of which I am aware is by Bhikharidas in his *Kāvyanirṇay* (Critical perspective on literature, 1746), v. 1.14. Brajnath, an exact contemporary, praised the *rīti* poet Anandghan for being *brajabhāṣā prabīna*, “skilled in Brajbhasha.” See Bangha 2001: 187.

³ This foundational periodization of Hindi literature is outlined in Shukla 1994: 1.

⁴ Reacting to the dramatic effects of Shukla’s historiographical intervention, Sudhish Pacauri puts the matter succinctly: “*do sau sāl kī racnā ‘hūn’ kar dī gai*” (the literary output of two hundred years was pronounced ‘inferior’). Pacauri 2001: 177. On some of the factors that contributed to the rejection of *rīti* literature in the early twentieth century, especially Victorian morality and nationalism, see Gupta 2000.

⁵ Thus, a recent discussion of John Stuart Mill claims that his “love of poetry and music and art also led him toward conservative thought. Aesthetes always bend to the right . . . To love old art is to honor old arrangements” (Gopnik 2008: 86). On the pitfalls of a literary history driven by identity politics, with a particular concern for how modern critics have misguidedly tried to rescue Kabir from Brahmanical appropriation, see Agrawal 2009.

⁶ Ali 2004 is a good example of fine-grained historical analysis of courts and courtly life in medieval India.

⁷ Copland 1997: 13-14.

⁸ My intention here is not to fault Copland, but merely to highlight a Lakoffian pitfall of language: that the words we use are not just words but encode all kinds of history, thought structures, and bias. See Lakoff and Johnson: 1980.

⁹ A few scholars, such as Pacauri (2002: 138), share my concern about the treatment of courtly literature in Hindi scholarship. This is distinctly a minority position.

¹⁰ Typical of the *paristhitiyām* subgenre is Nagendra (ed.) 1973: 3-23. Some of the damning subtitles include “*rājñītik aur sāmājīk durvyavasthā*” (political and social upheaval) and “*vilāspradhān jīvandarśan tathā patanomukh yugdharm*” (decadent lifestyles and an epoch characterized by declining morality).

¹¹ Singh 1998: 98.

¹² The author of a study published just last year on the Mughal poet Sundar (more on whom below), while making a welcome contribution to *rīti* literary studies in several respects, regrets the *vilāsitāpūrṇ vātāvaran* (environment overly given to luxury) of the Mughal courts, which is held up as a reason for the excessive eroticism and inadequate intellectualism of the writer. Yadav 2008: 7.

¹³ Busch 2006: 36-37.

¹⁴ Meisami 1987: 41.

¹⁵ One attempt to understand India’s late Mughal knowledge economy is Bayly 1996.

¹⁶ This section of the article draws on Busch 2010, an attempt at reconstructing the story of Brajbhasha poets who worked in Indo-Muslim courtly settings.

¹⁷ I searched for his work for years as a Ph.D. student in the 1990s, and finally had to make do with a manuscript copy, which for some reason proved easier to procure than a published book. A new edition has recently been brought out by Ramanand Sharma (2004), which has been followed by the published Ph.D. dissertation of one of his students, Avanish Yadav (2008).

¹⁸ The *Sundarśrīngār* is termed an “authoritative work” (*pramukha grantha*) of literary theory in the *Śrīngāramañjarī* of Akbar Shah, written at Golconda in perhaps the 1660s. See *Śrīngāramañjarī* (ed. Raghavan), 2, 37.

¹⁹ For a sense of the curriculum see the appendix of Mallison 2010. Another useful study of this school is Asnani 1996. The founder of the school, Maharao Lakhpati, even wrote a commentary on the *Sundarśrīngār*, the *Rasdīpikā* (Lamp on sentiment). See Yadav 2008: 26. Ramanand Sharma notes that the work was printed three times in the late nineteenth century (2004: 15-18).

²⁰ Pollock 2009.

²¹ *Ā’in-i akbarī* Vol 3, p. 260.

²² *Sundarśrīngār* (ed. Sharma), vv. 373-74.

²³ See the Fort William College version published as *Singhasun Butteese*, p. 1; *Histoire de la littérature hindouie et hindoustanie* Vol 3, p. 178.

²⁴ Saksena 1958: 17.

²⁵ Some details are available in Raghavan 1940, 1953.

²⁶ This point is made forcefully in Bayly 1996. Also see Novetzke 2007: 255-72.

²⁷ Cundavat suggests this point in her introduction to *Kavīndrakalpalatā*, p. 2. On Shah Jahan’s control of the process of history writing at his court see Begley and Desai, eds., 1990: xv-xxiii.

²⁸ *Amal-i śālīḥ* (ed. Yazdani): Vol 3, p. 122.

²⁹ *Kavīndrakalpalatā* (ed. Cundavat), p. 4, v. 8.

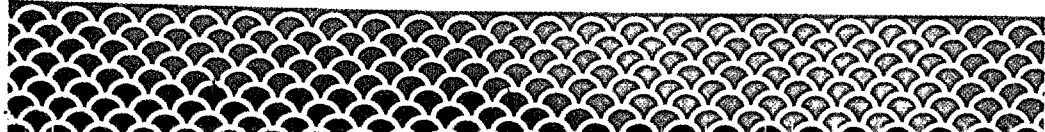
³⁰ *Kavīndracandrodāya*, p. 16 (cited in Raghavan 1940: 161).

³¹ “*Mata nānā vidha taise jānāi, eka bhānti ko alakhu bakhāno,*” *Kavīndrakalpalatā* (ed. Cundavat), p. 37, v. 5.

³² “*Kāhe ko nimāja rojā turuka karata hai,*” *ibid.*, v. 24.

³³ *Rasikpriyā* (ed. Mishra) 16.14.

³⁴ Several later *rīti* works have comparable titles, including the *Kavikul-tilakprakāś* (Light of the forehead ornament of the community of poets, 1709) of Gurudatt Singh ‘Bhupati’ and the *Kavikul-kanṭhābharan* (Necklace of the community of poets, c. 1750) of Dulah Trivedi.



³⁵ *Rasrāj* (Mishra and Mishra, eds.), v. 427.

³⁶ Pacauri 2001: 184 (citing Nagendra 1949: 156).

³⁷ *Mīśrabandhuvinod* Vol 1, pp. 30-31. See Nijhawan (ed.) for translations of excerpts from this text and others like it that contributed to complex debates in the Hindi and Urdu public spheres of the nationalist period.

³⁸ Sheldon Pollock (2006: 283-329) has demonstrated the role of what he calls Sanskrit "superposition," the adoption of classical literary models and lexical style, in the formation of most of the literary vernaculars in southern Asia. Many parallels can also be seen in the superposition of Latin and Greek for the development of European vernaculars in the early modern period. See, for instance, Fumaroli 1984.

³⁹ Other such cases have been discussed in Ziegler 1976: 133-34.

⁴⁰ See, for instance, Tomar 1954; Tivari 1987; Asnani 1997; Sharma 1999; Gupta 2001.

⁴¹ Singh 2001; Ahmad 1964.

⁴² In earlier days they wrote their histories in Sanskrit; outside of North India many other regional languages were also used.

⁴³ The *Ratnabāvanī* and other historical works of Keshavdas are the subject of Busch 2005.

⁴⁴ *Māncarītāvalī* (ed. Bahura).

⁴⁵ The *Binhai Rāso* of Maheshdas Rao (ed. Shekhavat) and the *Chatraprakāś* of Lal kavi (ed. Singh) report on the succession struggle between Aurangzeb and his brothers; the *Satya-sarūpa rūpaka* of Vrind tells of how Muazzam (Emperor Bahadur Shah) defeated Azam Shah in 1707; the *Jaṅgnāmā* of Shridhar is about Farrukh Siyar's defeat of Jahandar Shah. Verses from the *Chatraprakāś* and *Jaṅgnāmā* are discussed below.

⁴⁶ Bangha 2001: 186.

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Sudan Kavi's *Sujāncaritra* (ed. Radhakrishna) and Padmakar's *Himmatbahādur-birudāvalī* (ed. Mishra); a discussion of this last is Pinch 2006: 104-29.

⁴⁸ Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 2003.

⁴⁹ A sampling of the new work that is enriching the field of alternative Indian historiographies by drawing on regional-language source materials in Marathi, Rajasthani, and Bengali includes Guha 2004; Deshpande 2007; Sreenivasan 2007; Talbot 2007; Aquil and Chatterjee 2008; Chatterjee 2008; Curley 2008.

⁵⁰ Sheldon Pollock's analyses of the Sanskrit *praśasti* genre are a case in point (2006). Also see Talbot 2001 for a careful study of the inscriptional records of medieval Andhra.

⁵¹ These are just some of the matters of arcane interest pointed out by Bahura, editor of the *Māncarītāvalī*.

See pp. 7-10.

⁵² *Śivrajabhūṣaṇ*, v. 144.

⁵³ This paragraph draws on a recently published analysis of the Brajhasha register of Bhushan and several other major *rīti* poets. See Busch 2009.

⁵⁴ The phrase is that of Pauwels 2009: 191.

⁵⁵ Francesca Orsini notes how both the *Chatraprakāś* and Bhushan's *Śivrajabhūṣaṇ* attracted much acclaim for their heroic subject matter when they were published by the Nagari Pracarini Sabha in the first decade of the twentieth century, but were never accorded the status of authentic histories. It is ironic that, whereas not even the British were averse to considering these texts history, the admixture of literary qualities made modernizing Hindiwallahs uncomfortable. See Orsini: 2002: 180-81 and note sixteen.

⁵⁶ *Chatraprakāś* (ed. Singh), p. 79. Turtles apparently cluster together in their natural habitat, which would explain the slightly unusual imagery of this verse.

⁵⁷ The financial insolvency of the *manṣabdārī* system is generally held to be a factor in the weakening of the Mughal state under Aurangzeb. See Asher and Talbot 2006: 235.

⁵⁸ Some of these developments are outlined in Schomer 1998: 1-26; Pauwels 2001.

⁵⁹ Lala Sita Ram, an early commentator was also struck by the work's eyewitness feel (1922: 22).

⁶⁰ *Jaṅgnāmā*, v. 201.

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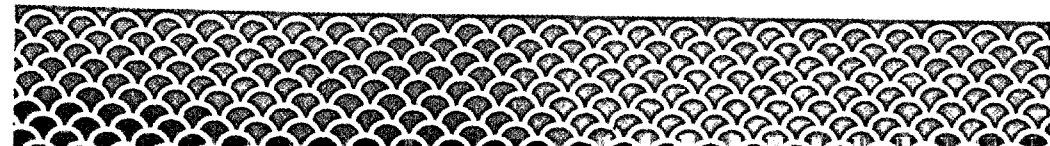
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