

# LITERARY RESPONSES TO THE MUGHAL IMPERIUM: THE HISTORICAL POEMS OF KEŚAVDĀS

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**ABSTRACT** The penetration of Mughal power into previously autonomous regional kingdoms produced significant political, but also literary effects. In this article, I trace the advent of the Mughal political order to the princely state of Orcha (located in what is now north-western Madhya Pradesh) through the eyes of Keśavdās (fl. 1600), the leading poet from that court. Keśavdās is famous in Hindi literary circles as one of the progenitors of the Brajbhasha *rīti* tradition, a constellation of courtly poetic and intellectual practices that flourished in a climate of mixed Mughal and sub-imperial patronage. There is a pronounced tendency to think of Keśavdās's work (and that of most *rīti* poets) as a corpus of baroque, purely decorative poems largely comprising time-worn erotic and devotional themes. This preliminary study of Keśavdās's three historical poems will help to complicate such an understanding by bringing into our conceptual purview a fuller range of *rīti* textual expression. These lesser known works by one of the foremost *rīti* poets are certainly striking for their literary accomplishments, but they also serve as an invaluable window onto a critical moment in Orcha history. They constitute the perfect testing ground for the enterprise of retrieving historical meaning from the literary sources that were the dominant form of pre-modern Indian courtly self-expression, and the methodology employed here is to critically engage both aesthetic and historical perspectives simultaneously.

**KEYWORDS:** *Brajbhasha, early modern India, Hindi literature, historical poems, Indian historiography, Keshavdas, Mughal empire*

## Literary Transitions, Political Transitions

Keśavdās's life was marked by several major transitions, which need to be foregrounded in any account of his writing. Descended from a line of Brahman

pandits who had served the kings of Orcha and nearby Gwalior, Keśavdās made a significant break with tradition by eschewing Sanskrit, the long-established prestige language central to Indian courtly life, in favour of the humbler Hindi dialect of Brajbhasha. He expanded Brajbhasha's horizons from an idiom mostly considered suitable for composing lyric poetry about Krishna to one that could encompass a range of more worldly and erudite – even recondite – themes and genres.<sup>1</sup> It was in large measure a series of literary transplantations from Sanskrit that initially enabled this vernacularizing process, and these are prominent in the poet's best known works, the *Rasikpriyā* (Handbook for poetry connoisseurs, 1591) and *Kavipriyā* (Handbook for poets, 1601), major textbooks of poetry principles that derived much of their subject matter from the field of classical literary science (*alāṅkāra śāstra*), as well as the *Rāmchandracandrikā* (Moonlight of Rāmchandra, 1601), the first Brajbhasha experiment with the *mahākāvya* (courtly epic) style.

A major political repositioning that took place in the world outside Keśavdās's texts complements the notable linguistic and literary shifts taking place within them. During the poet's own lifetime the kingdom of Orcha was subsumed into the Mughal empire. The advent of Mughal rule clearly stimulated a profound impulse to record it, and to try to make sense of it, for in the course of his 30-year career as a writer Keśavdās composed three works of historical poetry – a substantial portion of his eight-work oeuvre, in fact – that emphasize Orcha-Mughal political relations: the *Ratnabāvanī* (52 verses about Ratna, 1583?), the *Vīrsimhdevarit* (Deeds of Bir Singh Deo, 1607), and the *Jahāngīrjascandrikā* (Moonlight of the fame of Jahāngīr, 1612). The first is a short narrative poem that highlights the valour of the Orcha prince Ratnasena in warding off the forces of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. The next is a lengthy chronicle of the life of Ratnasena's brother (and the future Emperor Jahangir's collaborator) Bir Singh Bundela (r. 1605–27), whom history would later enshrine as the most accomplished and powerful ruler the Orcha dynasty ever knew.<sup>2</sup> The *Carit* is partly a family history (*vaṁśāvalī*), partly a detailed record of contemporary politics, partly a treatise on statecraft, and partly a literary masterpiece in the grand *mahākāvya* style, beautifully elaborate in the best of earlier Sanskrit traditions. Keśavdās's last work, the *Jahāngīrjascandrikā*, written towards the end of his life, is a collection of ornate praise poems in honour of Jahangir.

### Poetry as History (I)

My use of the modern term 'historical poem' benefits from some clarification, for Keśavdās himself never used the term. A distinct category of *aitihāsik kāvya*, as historical poetry is now designated in modern Hindi (to set it apart from genres such as the devotional or erotic) would not have been seen as necessary in his conceptual world. Nor did he or any other member of the pre-modern Hindi interpretive community group the *Ratnabāvanī*, the *Vīrsimhdevarit*, and the *Jahāngīrjascandrikā* together in the way I propose to do here. My assertion that these three works should be linked together as a series of historical poems – chronologically connected, meaningfully structured literary accounts of the crucial

events of their place and time – stems from a post facto understanding of political outcomes that would not yet have been fully visible to an early 17th-century observer. Viewed from a 21st-century vantage point, however, these three works allow us to track the penetration of Mughal power from a moment of initial incursions through a period of contestation to an eventual acceptance of the new political order.

Although these works have much to tell a historian about the political (and cultural) life of Keśavdās's day we should never lose sight that they are, at base, literary documents. Keśavdās was no court chronicler. Unlike his Persian-writing contemporaries at the nearby Agra court he did not process political events in a mode that would necessarily be recognized as historical, at least in the modern sense of the term. The three texts under consideration here exhibit some fidelity (and also infidelity) to known historical events, but they must obey particular literary protocols in accordance with their specific genres. As in the case of kingly poetry in Sanskrit (clearly the major literary model for Keśavdās), the need to cultivate the heroic mood (*vīra rasa*) or to emphasize the ideal traits of the hero (*nāyaka*) can steer the works from realist to hyperbolic narrative registers. There are times when a literary necessity (that the hero be a noble figure) is directly pitted against a historical reality (the hero was not always such a figure). Furthermore, the historical works of Keśavdās (particularly the *Vīrsimhdevcarit* and the *Jahāngīrjāscandrikā*) are at least partly conceived in the literary mode of the panegyric (*praśasti*). The very purpose of panegyric is, of course, to praise the patron, and it is perhaps the rule rather than the exception for the truth – or what the positivist historian would call *the* truth – to become pliant in the service of such eulogizing aims. The poet conjures up through lavish imagery and idealizing turns of phrase the majesty, even quasi-divinity, of the ruler. Literary devices such as onomatopoeia and elaborate, multi-layered puns (*śleṣa*) provide great scope for celebrating the esthetically true rather than the factually true.

This interface between imaginative, eulogizing and historical registers does give rise to substantial interpretive challenges, and perhaps this is why such challenges have been infrequently undertaken. For the corpus of Brajhasha poetry on historical themes has not generated the interest it merits either on the part of Hindi scholars or historians.<sup>3</sup> If the former find historical poems low on the scale in terms of their esthetic merits, the latter tend to be put off by the literary embellishments of court poets, and strongly distrust a form of historical discourse that is not anchored in the perceived sureties of verifiable facts.

Whereas in the colonial period the types of strategic omissions and literary flourishes found in Indian historical poetry may have prompted scholars to decry the 'Hindu lack of historical sensibility', in our current postcolonial age it is almost a commonplace to recognize that other peoples in other places and times have exhibited forms of historical consciousness and expression that may be radically different from those of western modernity, but are no less valid for being so. South Asia in particular has been a fertile site for investigating alternative modes of processing and producing history, and recent scholarship has allowed us to gain some analytical purchase on these matters.<sup>4</sup> India did not fail to become a historical society: it is a differently-historical one.

Here I would like to make the case that one of these different modes of history, one that was widespread in elite courtly circles in India for something on the order of two millennia, was a strongly literary mode. When traditional pandits wrote kingly history they chose genres of poetry such as the *mahākāvya* and *carita*. ‘Expressive’ forms of Indic inscriptional discourse, one of the primary methods of representing kings’ lives and deeds (and thus arguably a profoundly historical enterprise), are utterly indistinguishable from *kāvya* in style.<sup>5</sup> A general Indian indifference to clear disciplinary boundaries between literature and history is also evident from the reception of the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa* as the first work of Sanskrit literature (*ādikāvya*) alongside its recognized status as history (*itihāsa*), with apparently no conceptual qualms about the genre overlap. In short, many features of the Indian textual terrain suggest the irrelevance of a clearcut distinction between these two ways of seeing and writing about human experience.

The task at hand, then, is to clarify some methodological issues pertaining to the use of literary documents in the service of historical inquiry. An earlier methodology tended to center on the enterprise of trying to harvest ‘true facts’ from what were perceived to be the overgrown weeds of a fanciful literary account. But trying to isolate the ‘literary’ from the ‘historical’ has all kinds of pitfalls. For the reasons just elaborated, it seems first and foremost culturally inappropriate in a pre-modern Indic context. It is also subject to error, for it is all too easy to mistake a literary trope for a true account, and vice versa.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, a model that insists on separating out the historical and literary strains of discourse becomes increasingly difficult to endorse in light of recent theories about the grounding of all historical discourse in structures of narrativity.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps poetry and history should not, and cannot, be neatly pried apart and forced to inhabit discrete genres – not even in the West, where there is a much longer tradition of trying to enforce these distinctions.

One thing is certain: in the works of Keśavdās the strands of historical and literary discourse are deeply interwoven. We will do justice to such historio-literary impulses by not restricting the inquiry to verifiable truths about past events (the building blocks of history) but by extending it to include modes of presentation, shifting voices, and the themes that emerge above and beyond the level of particular details (the building blocks of literature).<sup>8</sup> Particular details in these historical poems may not be objectively true, as when Keśavdās downplays or even outright ignores events that interfere with his themes of kingly splendour and glory, but when viewed in terms of an overarching textual logic, their immanence in a larger field of meaning may be quite revealing – historically revealing, in fact.

### **Poetry as Political Resistance: the Imagined Exploits of Ratnasena Bundela**

The *Ratnabāvanī* is the perfect example of how a text can express something that may be false in terms of brute facts about historical events, while giving voice to another kind of truth in terms of its literary logic. Written at the very outset of Keśavdās’s career not long after the Mughals definitively defeated Orcha in the

1570s, the work is a short martial tale that commemorates the steadfastness of Ratnasena Bundela in an ill-fated battle. Viewed in a manner that honours the work's literary dimensions (and with the benefit of a retrospective historical angle) the *Bāvanī* is a powerful document about Orcha resistance to Mughal power, and what was clearly the increasing futility of such resistance by the last quarter of the 16th century.

The work begins with a feud breaking out between the Orcha King Madhukar Shah (r. 1554–92) and the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605). Akbar dispatches an army of formidable strength (60,000 men, we are told) and Madhukar's young son Ratnasena valiantly agrees to lead the kingdom's troops (numbering just 4000) against the emperor's forces. There is not much suspense to the story, for from the very outset Keśavdās leaves no doubt about the outcome:

He was the son of Madhukar, King of Orcha, and Ratna was his name.  
 He fought the Mughal emperor, and attained heaven.  
 Here I will tell something of his deeds, and how he fought.  
 He was skilled in warfare and he killed many fierce enemies.<sup>9</sup>

Ratnasena is thus introduced to us as a tragic hero, a martyr for the cause of Orcha sovereignty.

Although the *Bāvanī* does not accord the Orcha state an actual victory over the Mughals, the text's more literary features, notably its stylistic, lexical and overall thematic profile, work on many levels to establish Ratnasena's moral victory, downplaying – indeed, directly undermining – Mughal authority. First, the *Bāvanī* is markedly different in style from Keśavdās's subsequent works (all more closely linked to Sanskrit courtly genres), and this was a compositional orientation that had not only literary but also political implications. The work's *chappay* (sestet) meter, consonant clusters, Prakritizing archaisms, and martial onomatopoeia all clearly situate it in the literary field of the Old Hindi *rāso*.<sup>10</sup> It has been argued that the primary function of the *rāso* was to express Rajput resistance to Muslim power.<sup>11</sup> While one may want to nuance this 'counter-epic' model by seeing the *rāso* tales as animated more fundamentally by political than religious antagonisms, it remains a useful rubric under which to examine a work like the *Bāvanī*. The oppositional *rāso*-like tone evident in metrical and lexical structures is further heightened through the text's strong degree of demonizing imagery, and layers of epic intertextuality. The Mughals are constructed as the quintessential enemy figure, typed as hated 'Mlecchas,' 'Turks' and 'Paṭhāns.' Ratnasena, in contrast, is a paragon of righteousness variously likened to hallowed heroes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* such as Rāma, Aṅgada and Hanumān.

Epic resonances that conjure up themes from the *Mahābhārata* (or, more precisely, the *Bhagavad Gītā*) are also prominent. Keśavdās's text, however, features a different god, and a radically different message. Just as the prince departs for the battlefield with his troops Rāma, disguised as a Brahman, turns up and tries to persuade Ratnasena to flee – summing up Orcha's pathetic plight in the face of the Mughal invasion with the following words:

When your troops take one look at the overwhelming Paṭhān forces,  
 Who will stay by your side and fight?  
 Listen, Ratnasena, son of Madhukar Shah,  
 How will you fight this battle without losing face?<sup>12</sup>

The lengthy debate that ensues between Rāma and Ratnasena – a lively instance of the dialogue style (*samvād*) for which Keśavdās is justly famous – is characterized by an almost perverse inversion of Kṛṣṇa's famous exhortations to Arjuna that he must fight. Each of Rāma's attempts to forestall Ratnasena's virtually-certain death in battle is introduced by the Sanskrit phrase 'Vipra uvāca' (the Brahman said), further underscoring a connection with the discursive field of the *Gītā*. But Ratnasena adamantly refuses to follow the Brahman's advice, countering each plea to surrender with verses such as this one, which marks his strict adherence to the martial code of honour (*pati*):

You can destroy a plot of earth, and it will return.  
 You can scorch a vine, and it will grow again.  
 When fruit and flowers fall from the tree,  
 They are the source of a new generation of plants.  
 Even knowledge completely forgotten can be retrieved.  
 If you lose money, or backslide from your religious practices, you can recover.  
 Everybody knows you can get back your personality, character or intelligence.  
 If you lose your life you will be reborn.  
 But if you lose honour, it can never be regained.<sup>13</sup>

It turns out that god has just been testing Ratnasena all this time. Now satisfied with the prince's soldierly integrity, he rewards him by revealing his Rāma form. Again, intertextual resonances loom large, for who could read such a passage without recalling how Kṛṣṇa famously revealed his universal form (*viśvarūpa*) to Arjuna in chapter 11 of the *Gītā*.<sup>14</sup> Other deities from on high also magically appear and compose eulogies to the prince, endorsing his brave resolve to fight. In the end, however, Rāma's predictions all come true. A long battle takes place in which Ratnasena's troops are indeed overwhelmed, and the young prince dies a heroic death in combat, his self-sacrifice prompting the admiration of even the emperor Akbar, who makes a brief cameo appearance.<sup>15</sup>

But there's a catch. Actually there are several catches, which catapult us right into the center of questions about the value of literary works for gaining an understanding of the Indian past. From a strict historical perspective the *Bāvanī* can be an utterly infuriating source. Although the text is mainly peopled by personages whose historicity is indubitable like Madhukar Shah, Ratnasena and Akbar, Rāma and other deities are obviously less amenable to a historicizing methodology. Issues of textual transmission also leave us with some doubts about the reliability of the work. Particularly puzzling is that a self-professed 'collection of 52' is actually in its only printed edition a *tirpanī*, a collection of 53 verses, and one manuscript reportedly has 68 verses.<sup>16</sup> Divine battlefield visitations and numerical nitpicking aside, the most confounding thing is that the *Bāvanī*'s account of Ratnasena's battle against the Mughals is completely contradicted by the events reported in Keśavdās's later *Vīrsimhdevucarit*. In the latter text Ratnasena is said to have served on Akbar's side! Corroboration from other sources allows us

to conclude that the *Carit* rendition of events is the ‘historically true’ one. Ratnasena *did not* die in 1578 at the hands of Akbar’s invading army; in fact the Mughal takeover was not even a particularly bloody affair. When King Madhukar Shah could resist Mughal power no longer, Ratnasena and several other Orcha princes were placed in Mughal service, and Ratnasena actually died fighting *for* Akbar in the 1582 Bengal campaign.<sup>17</sup>

What are we to make of these dramatic discrepancies in versions of the same events composed by the same author? Is there a way to conceive of the earlier work as something other than a blatant misrepresentation of events? R.S. McGregor, one of the few Hindi scholars ever even to have mentioned the *Bāvanī*, suggests that it was largely a poetic exercise and does not linger over its altered construction of Orcha-Mughal politics.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps his analysis can be taken further by probing the possible meanings of the text’s poetics. If the *Bāvanī* lacks the facticity of more overtly historical works, its poetic features certainly articulate another kind of truth. Interweaving *rāso* and epic registers allows Keśavdās to fashion an alternative political universe in the world of his literary text. The poet is not defiant enough of the facts to claim that the Orcha king actually won out against the Mughals (there are limits beyond which this otherwise admittedly truth-bending court poet will apparently not go), but he certainly puts a more glorious spin on the affair. The *Bāvanī* version of the Mughal takeover accords Ratnasena far greater agency. The hero chooses his fate of dying on the battlefield, and it is an honourable end: the self-sacrifice of a noble and loyal warrior who tried to save his father’s kingdom from defeat. Perhaps the literary account of Ratnasena’s death can also be interpreted as an expression of the pain the members of this fiercely independent Bundela royal clan felt at being forced ultimately to capitulate to the Mughals. Ratnasena’s death is thus a metaphor for the death of Orcha sovereignty. However it is to be understood, Keśavdās’s literary portrayal gets right to the heart of a matter of deep contemporary concern: the fervent wish that the Mughals could be resisted in the face of a new historical reality where resistance is no longer possible.

### ‘This New Kind of Politics’

Keśavdās’s second historical poem, the *Virsimbhdevcarit*, takes us forward almost two and a half decades to a considerably altered political (and literary) landscape. That by the early 17th century the tenor of Orcha-Mughal political relations had changed dramatically is already evident even from the poet’s choice of vocabulary and stylistic registers. The Mughals are no longer susceptible to the same degree of othering: the words ‘Paṭhān’ and ‘Turk’ do not have the pejorative valence that characterized their usage in the *Bāvanī*, and the term ‘Mleccha’ has completely vanished from the lexicon.<sup>19</sup> There are also profound shifts in esthetic orientation. Whereas the *Bāvanī* owed much of its literary profile to early Hindi martial genres the very title of the later work proclaims its participation in the more refined, courtly *carita*, the mandate for which was to craft an exemplary life history of a king or other notable figure – in this case Keśavdās’s patron the Orcha prince Bir Singh Deo. In 1607, the year this text was written, the *carita* was not a genre that

had currency in Brajbhasha, and the choice to rework this older literary form afforded Keśavdās an opportunity to experiment with a classical palette of courtly *kāvya* styles. The composition of this work coincides with the accession of Bir Singh to the Orcha throne after he ousted his elder brother from power. These literary and political correspondences should not be viewed as merely coincidental. On the contrary, a new style of Brajbhasha literature was, it seems, precisely required for expressing the complexities of Keśavdās's particular historical moment.

Keśavdās's *Carit* is a monumental composition, extending over 33 lengthy cantos, incredibly complex in its interweaving of contemporary politics, stock *kāvya* imagery, and timeless political-moral themes (*nīti*) from Sanskrit.<sup>20</sup> Roughly the first third of the work comprises a reasonably accurate account, in a relatively simple narrative style, of known historical events – particularly the competition between Bir Singh and Ram Shah for the Orcha throne. Upon Bir Singh's definitive victory in canto 14, however, the text departs markedly from the realist vein and expands into the poetically rich, timeless and idealizing terrain associated with high Sanskrit *kāvya* – a style no doubt deliberately chosen because of its long history of underwriting kingly authority. The story culminates in a particularly elaborate cluster of verses that celebrate Bir Singh Deo's coronation (*abhiṣeka*) by a coterie of gods – the ultimate endorsement of the upstart prince's new kingly status.

Bir Singh's ascent to the throne was endorsed not only by heavenly authorities, but also by the earthly prince Salim. Intimately related to the chronicling of Bir Singh's life story, it turns out, is not just the local dynastic struggle, but also a larger story of how Orcha came under full Mughal hegemony. After Madhukar Shah died in 1592, Ram Shah inherited the throne by the law of primogeniture. In the early years of the 17th century Bir Singh (the youngest of Madhukar's eight sons and thus nowhere close to being in line for the throne) rebelled repeatedly against his brother. He also engaged in several skirmishes with the armies of Emperor Akbar, the ally and overlord of Ram Shah. These already complicated political intrigues would ramify yet further, for during this exact same period the Mughal prince Salim became estranged from his father Akbar, setting up a separate court in Allahabad. Bir Singh attended Salim's new court there, and the two youths forged a strategic alliance, which would prove consequential for both the Orcha and Mughal political establishments. Salim showed considerable favor to Bir Singh, but this did not come without a cost. At Salim's behest he assassinated Shaikh Abu'l Fazl, Akbar's beloved friend and a luminary of his court (famous author of the *Ā'in-i Akbarī*), because Salim viewed him as a serious threat to his political future. The murder of Abu'l Fazl crystallized the political alliance and friendship between the two insubordinate princes. Akbar died in 1605 and Prince Salim became Emperor Jahangir. He was now in a position to reward Bir Singh for his services. When Bir Singh effectively usurped the Orcha throne from Ram Shah, he did so with the backing of an imperial *farmān*. These events form the general historical backdrop to the *Carit*, and many are recorded in the opening cantos in lively detail.

We have noted that the text is a combination of eyewitness account and ornate poem. It is difficult, and conceptually undesirable, to try to separate the

'historical' and 'literary' elements out, for even in the first part of the work where the tone is primarily realistic and expository in tone, there is a compelling poetic logic at play, which needs to be factored into any analysis of the text's historical meanings. As we shall see, history and a subtle commentary on that history are operationalized in one and the same work, and what are normally regarded as purely literary devices – elements such as compositional techniques, authorial voice, characterization, and metrical choice – have much to contribute to the analysis.

It immediately strikes a modern reader of the *Carit* that the reality of what Keśavdās saw taking place before his eyes was far from consonant with the classical ideals of kingly literary representation that his genre required: his 'hero' Bir Singh did not always behave so heroically, nor were the ostensible villains Ram Shah and Akbar so unequivocally villainous. Whereas his one earlier experiment with high Braj *kāvya* the *Ramcandracandrikā* depicted the life story of Rāma, paragon of kingly behavior, it must have been considerably more challenging to transpose the treachery and bloodshed of recent Orcha history into the utopian domain of classical courtly *kāvya*. As though precisely to set the tone for exploring this moral confusion, the poet's frame story features an argument between the personified character traits of 'generosity' (*Dāna*) and 'greed' (*Lobha*), foreshadowing the inappropriateness of brotherly strife, and the greed for political power, which will emerge as recurring problems in the *Carit*. These issues are first articulated by Greed (and appropriately so):

I am all confused upon hearing of this new kind of politics (*Rājanīti yaha nāi*)  
 One hears that a father may bear two sons,  
 And both may grow to be law-abiding and dutiful.  
 But I've never heard of a case where both sons can be king!  
 Explain to me what happened – who lost, and who emerged victorious?<sup>21</sup>

There had never been much question in the reader's mind as to which of the two qualities, generosity or greed, holds a position of ethical superiority. What is not always crystal clear in the text is what positions Ram Shah and Bir Singh occupy along this spectrum.

When it comes to reporting the various battles between the two brothers, authorial sympathies seem to shift as though, the title of the work notwithstanding, the poet occasionally forgets that Bir Singh is the *nāyaka* (as opposed to the *pratināyaka*, the enemy) of the work. For instance, in one of the attacks on Ram Shah recorded in canto 14 Bir Singh's army is labeled 'the demon forces' (*nisācaragana* – hardly the expected valence for the hero's troops!) whereas Ram Shah's general, Bhupal Rao, is likened to Hanumān.<sup>22</sup> The parallels hinted at here truly confound the reader, who is left not knowing which side to root for. Because if Bhupal Rao is Hanumān, the implication is naturally that Ram Shah is Rāma (this parallel is of course further underscored by the prince's name). And if Ram Shah is Rāma then Bir Singh is . . . (Rāvaṇa?). But how can Rāvaṇa – the quintessential demon figure of Indian literature – be the hero of this tale? Wait! Who is greedy for power in this work? Who is the enemy? Where is the generous hero that we were hoping for? The confusion expressed by the character Greed in

the opening lines regarding ‘this new kind of politics’ is thrown into high relief. These vacillations in authorial sympathy could certainly be deliberate. It may be that the reader, paralyzed by the structural confusion, is meant to root for neither. Or it may be that Keśavdās himself was conflicted, and the work is thus a mirror of the poet’s own confusion. Nor need there be a singular explanation. Is it not precisely the domain of literature where multiple truths are possible rather than the singular truth of western-style history? Perhaps literary narratives have an advantage over other historical modes in dealing with political complexities because they eschew clearcut interpretations, allowing greater scope for nuanced characterization and views from multiple reference points.

This problem of contemporary politics conflicting with the lofty literary ideals required of his genre is perhaps no more pronounced than when Keśavdās recounts Bir Singh’s gruesome murder of Abu’l Fazl. It is true that according to high *kāvya* norms the hero is supposed to be valiant on the battlefield, and to wipe out his enemies. But in no poetry manual is it written that the hero should be an assassin. How does Keśavdās handle this glitch in the real-life story?

At first pass the poet seems eager to pre-empt any possible criticism of his patron’s role in the murder. Keśavdās even allows Bir Singh to bank some readerly goodwill by suggesting that he initially tried to appeal to Salim’s higher nature:

Considering political expediency (*Rājanīti guni*),  
Overcoming fear, and maintaining clarity of thought,  
Bir Singh folded his hands and entreated,  
‘You are the master and he (Abu’l Fazl) the slave, Excellency.  
Is it therefore fitting to display such wrath?  
A lord shows leniency towards his servants.  
It is a mark of lordship (*prabhutā*) to protect . . .  
Please don’t harbour a grudge against him.  
Give up your anger, and make peace!’<sup>23</sup>

Another exonerating characterological strategy (but one altogether unsuccessful in its effect) is employed when Keśavdās momentarily resorts to a polarizing idiom he inherited from Sanskrit literature by comparing Shaikh Abu’l Fazl to a demon (*asura*) and Bir Singh to an avatār of Viṣṇu (*nṛsiṃha*).<sup>24</sup> But the poet does not bother to sustain the limp metaphor for more than one line. Perhaps in his heart he knew that such traditional black-and-white imagery was wholly inadequate to the task of describing this modern constellation of political events.

In fact, what follows is a surprisingly glowing description of the Shaikh. Abu’l Fazl’s death is treated with a narrative generosity that approaches reverence: his body is said to have emitted a miraculous fragrance at death, indicative of his spiritual power. Emphasized in a string of eulogizing verses are Abu’l Fazl’s nobility; his intrepidity on the battlefield; even his support for Brahmans – all high terms of praise in the classical Hindu literary imagination. Again we are confused about the valence of heroism in this work: the Shaikh is not supposed to be the hero; he was just described as a demonized enemy (*asura*). But the actual hero Bir Singh is almost wholly ignored, and when it comes time to describe the act of murder itself Keśavdās only accords the scene a couple perfunctory lines, as

though he felt it were something to be narratively dispensed with as quickly as possible.

Bringing to a heightened pitch the tone of Keśavdās's temporary moral elevation of Shaikh Abu'l Fazl above his own patron in the work is an entire subsequent canto devoted to Akbar's grief at the loss of his dear political advisor and friend. Recall that Akbar – ally to Ram Shah – was Bir Singh's sworn enemy, and several violent encounters between their armies are detailed in the *Carit*. Readers are thus quite surprised to see that Bir Singh's court poet writes with great tenderness and empathy for not just the Shaikh whom Bir Singh murdered, but also for the Mughal emperor himself. The following verse in the *Kuṇḍaliyā meter*, characterized by structured repetitions that intensify the drama of the moment, poignantly emphasizes how Akbar is caught in a cycle of inconsolable grief at the loss:

Spoke Khan Azam consoling words  
Which the emperor could not discern  
Azam exhausted himself consoling the emperor  
Who understood not a word  
Who understood not a word  
His eyes streamed like clouds releasing rain  
Says Kesav, the cloud burst forth with maddening grief.  
How could the flooding ocean of the emperor's grief be contained?  
Whoever tried to console the emperor over and over,  
Exhausted himself with the words he spoke.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, for a protracted passage extending over two cantos Keśavdās appears to forget all about the glory of Bir Singh – the text's sympathies lie entirely with the 'enemies' Akbar and Abu'l Fazl. When Keśavdās celebrates the dignity and bravery of Shaikh Abu'l Fazl, or dilates upon the depth of Akbar's sorrow, the poet builds narrative tension and drama, but perhaps there is more at stake here than issues of literary mood or compositional architectonics. As we have come to expect in these literary texts, there are of course several possibilities. Was this a poetics that served to critique his patron's politics? Perhaps Keśavdās's display of uncertain loyalty was not possible in a face-to-face conversation with King Bir Singh Deo, so he sought an opportunity to express his views through his poetry.<sup>26</sup> Or was the poet expressing the deep sadness that Bir Singh himself felt when forced – and as a subordinate he must have felt forced – to carry out the assassination? It may also be that this text's probing, almost modernist manipulation of traditional themes, its rejection or at least undercutting of the more typological characterizations characteristic of *rāso* and *kāvya* modes, is a literary strategy perfectly designed to bring in the complex shades demanded by the new kind of politics of its day.

## Poetry as History (II)

In thinking through questions of how literature and history intersect it is instructive to compare Keśavdās's treatment of the Abu'l Fazl incident with the version recounted in Jahangir's autobiography. While not overtly proclaiming itself a history in the manner of works from the Perso-Arabic *Tārīkh* tradition, the

*Jahāngīrnāmā*, with its detail-oriented and often strikingly confessional style, does have much to commend itself as a historical source for the period, and is generally treated as such. The death of the Shaikh is mentioned already in the preface (written by Muhammad Hadi):

. . . Although Arsh-Ashyani [Akbar] was sorely distressed by the murder of the shaykh through this act His Highness's [Jahangir's] bravery and manliness were noticed, and it resulted in his going to pay homage at his father's court and their ceasing little by little to be on bad terms.

The matter resurfaces in expanded form in Jahangir's own words from the body of the text:

Shaykh Abu'l Fazl, one of the shaykhzadas of Hindustan who was outstanding in his learning and wisdom, had ostensibly adorned himself with loyalty and sold it to my father for an exorbitant price. He was summoned from the Deccan, and since he was suspicious of me he was always making snide remarks. At that time, because of the corruption of mischief-makers, my exalted father's mind was quite turned against me, and it was certain that if [Abu'l-Fazl] succeeded in reaching him he would create more discord and prevent [me] from rejoining [my father]. It was therefore absolutely necessary that he be prevented from reaching him. Since Bir Singh Deo's territory lay in his path, and at that time [Bir Singh] was in the circle of insurgents I sent him a message that he should waylay the miscreant and dispatch him to non-existence, in return for which he could expect great rewards from me. Success smiled on the endeavour, and as Abu'l-Fazl was passing through [Bir Singh Deo's] territory, [Bir Singh] blocked his path, scattered his men in a skirmish, and killed him, sending his head to me in Allahabad. Although this caused distress to his Majesty Arsh-Ashyani [Akbar], in the end it resulted in my being able to proceed to kiss the threshold of my exalted father's court without fear, and little by little the bad blood between us subsided.<sup>27</sup>

One major point of contrast between Keśavdās's version of the tale and these two excerpts from Jahangir's memoirs is the absence of any mention of Bir Singh trying to dissuade his Mughal patron from commanding him to carry out the assassination. If Jahangir's more matter-of-fact account does not deign to mention what is at any rate only an alleged conversation between him and his Bundela underling, his text still has its own way of trying to mitigate the morally questionable nature of the murder. Prominent in the *Jahāngīrnāmā* excerpts is the idea that Abu'l Fazl's murder was instrumental in bringing about a higher good: ultimate reconciliation with his father Akbar.

Whether the conversation mentioned in Keśavdās's *Carit* ever took place is forever unverifiable, and ultimately beside the point. What is more to the point is how remarkably similar the two authors' versions of the same events actually are when stripped down to bare facts. Both Keśavdās and Jahangir mention the murder of Abu'l Fazl without apparently wishing to linger over the details; like Keśavdās, Jahangir acknowledges the noble qualities of the Shaikh, as well as the grief of his father at his courtier's demise (though note that the emperor treats these matters dispassionately, without elaboration). But whereas Keśavdās processed a troubling political event through the medium of a *carita* in a richly-

enhanced *kāvya* mode, Jahangir did so through a royal memoir written in a more realist vein.

Who is to say which spin (for they are both surely spins) is the true one? Why should we insist upon a single truth? There are always multiple, and sometimes irreconcilable, angles on the same event, and events percolate through narrative filters in their retelling regardless of their ultimate consignment to literary or more conventional historical discourse. In the traditional hierarchy of Mughal-period historiographical sources Keśavdās's text would typically be relegated to the category of untrustworthy 'Hindu lore'. In contrast, as part of an esteemed tradition of Persian court chronicles the *Jahāngīrnāmā* ranks high on the truth-scale. Yet both versions of the Abu'l Fazl episode are shaped by literary elements, whether in their tone, or compositional emphasis, or degrees of poetic figuration. If Keśavdās's literary mode has many moments of poetical flourish, the emperor Jahangir surely experienced his own genre constraints. As a king engaged in autobiographical pursuits he was hardly at liberty to confess to every dark deed in his presentation of royal self, and thus the core plot of his version of the murder story has an understandably different focal point from that of Keśavdās: the perceived necessity of removing Abu'l Fazl from a political triangle with his father. But regardless of the different narrative strategies it is the congruence between the accounts that strikes us most, prompting the reflection that the division between categories such as 'history' and 'literature' is not particularly meaningful here.

### Portrait of a Perfect King

Ironically, the distinction between historical and literary modalities seems if anything more applicable to a conceptual division within the single genre of the *Carit* itself. In the first 14 cantos the ethos of the *Carit* is not all that removed from the straightforward expository style of modern historical discourse and, as we observed above, the extra poetic elements, where present, can perhaps be profitably seen as hints from the author about his own views on the events being narrativized. Beginning in canto 15, however, Keśavdās abandons all pretence of realism to embark on a completely different type of project: illustrating through the lushest poetic imagery available to him that Bir Singh is, in fact, a perfect king. Notably absent now are the moments of authorial ambivalence that haunted the earlier part of the work. It is as though Bir Singh's definitive victory and Jahangir's support for the junior prince's claims to power require a new unambiguous tone of royal affirmation.

We return to the frame story: Generosity and Greed set out to visit Bir Singh's capital at Orcha, newly named 'Jahangirpur',<sup>28</sup> and a long excursus into a timeless, highly conventionalized mode follows. This departure from the storyline – from any real focus on the actions and conversations of the characters – in favor of pure, estheticized description, is fully in keeping with *mahākāvya* norms. Poets working in this genre are supposed to pause to dilate upon the perfections of a king's dominions (its natural beauty, its seasons, its buildings, its marketplaces) and subjects (their adherence to the law, and their high standard of living), and to record every sumptuous detail of life in the royal palace.<sup>29</sup> Apparently not wanting

to miss out on any opportunity for poetic enrichment of his text, Keśavdās takes this model to its extreme: as Generosity and Greed stroll through Bir Singh's kingdom they praise everything in sight. Typical in their flavor and content are the following verses, which elaborate, respectively, the beauties of some local scenery, and a few activities from King Bir Singh's daily routine:

#### **Glorious Bir Lake**

When Generosity and Greed set out to see Jahangirpur  
 They saw a huge array of forts, towns and villages –  
 How could I possibly recount all their names?  
 They saw lakes and rivers that made them glad.  
 Then they approached 'Bir lake.' Seeing the magnificent Bir lake  
 They sought the appropriate terms for describing it.  
 It gives such pleasure on earth, this body of water!  
 It is marvelous, clear, vast, and profound in its depths.  
 It is home to blossoming flowers, bright like a star-lit sky.  
 It is a place of great coolness, where the heat of summer is forbidden entry:  
 Abode of scents, a place of beauty, effacer of the world's cares  
 Like the goddess Candika in its dark hue.  
 The tall waves are a cluster of clouds releasing their spray in the wind  
 At sunset the water takes on a red quality,  
 Waves shimmering like lightning, removing the sorrow of men's hearts.  
 Night and day peacocks dance in all directions to the spray of the lake  
 The lotuses bloom, their white luster like moonlight . . .

#### **A day in the life of Bir Singh Bundela**

Bir Singh bathed in Ganges water, and honoured all the gods.  
 He heard the Puranas recited, and gave the gift of a cow  
 Before taking his sumptuous meal.  
 After eating he went into the women's quarters to take pleasure.  
 He then climbed to the jewel-studded terrace,  
 Looking out in joy at the forest expanse.  
 Bir saw the mangos in bloom, swaying in the gentle Malaya breeze.  
 The trees were slender, like the arms of Kamadeva, or delicately woven banners.  
 The charming clove vines were like swings,  
 Propelled by bees stirred in their passions.  
 The beautiful cuckoos cooed gently,  
 As though delivering a message from spring.  
 Then the king saw the festival pavilion,  
 And along with beautiful women he listened to the special program.  
 The drums of the god of love resounded in victory,  
 All were steeped in love's magic . . .<sup>30</sup>

Even amid this apparently deeply unhistorical portion of the text attention to matters of literary texture – far from steering us off track – actually enhance our interpretation of the historical moment the *Carit* aims to portray.<sup>31</sup> The point of these images of consummate physical splendor is to reinforce the moral perfection of the king's domains. Lavish style has a corollary in the political arena.<sup>32</sup>

The verses are intensely iconic, celebrating in painstaking detail every aspect of the majesty of King Bir Singh, and the bounty of the land over which he rules.

'Bir Lake' (*Bīr Sāgar*) still exists in modern Bundelkhand, and if the name is any indication it probably was in fact created or in some manner enhanced by Bir Singh Bundela.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the poetry may partly commend a real-life charitable action on the part of the king in the domain of waterworks. But regardless of the lake's actual historicity, the poetic descriptions do another kind of work here. Bir Lake is paradisiacal; it is a protective realm where unpleasantness (like the gruelling hot summer of the Indian midlands) is filtered out; it is a joyful place, 'effacer of the world's cares' – a precise analogue of the expectations the subjects would have for the efficacy of Bir Singh's rule. The same logic informs the poet's expansive treatment of the subject of the king's day (only a tiny portion of which was excerpted here). The poet dilates almost reverently on a combination of his patron's religious duties (listening to Puranic recitations; the donation of a cow) and the idyllic royal diversions (*vinoda*) that foreground his personal beauty and charisma. The theme of royal perfection, as manifested in the person of the king but also mirrored everywhere around him, is not just evident in these two brief excerpts; it is developed extensively, obsessively even, for a dozen full cantos – more than a third of the work. Following immediately upon the more action-packed opening of the story these leisurely descriptive cantos construct an entirely different image of Bir Singh. He is the perfect *dhārmik* king, from whom the stain of an earlier murder has been washed completely clean.<sup>34</sup>

It is a shame that the complexities of *rīti* literature, with its reliance on Sanskrit literary techniques and classical Indian courtly topoi are so often shunned as ornate and overdone. We miss the point entirely if we cannot understand how critical it is to the logic of this text that these cantos are here, and precisely that their form (and what may appear to unaccustomed modern readers their almost painful wordiness) is critical to their content. The two are utterly inseparable, both poetically and politically. For this section, far from being some superfluous addition pasted into the narrative, needs to be read as a complex and protracted argument about political legitimacy. It is an argument that relies not on the drudgery of historical facts, but on the grandness of poetry: its rich language, stylistics and thematics. The original performative meanings are unfortunately lost to us as modern readers who are forced to experience this poetry in a woefully one-dimensional, private manner as static words on the page. But one could speculate that a public reading of such a text would have accorded contemporaries a far richer sensory experience, allowing the king's subjects to participate in the glory of his royal persona. This literary celebration of every possible praiseworthy feature of Bir Singh Deo and his kingdom is testament to his fitness to rule, and it is a fitness to rule that is precisely to be measured by the text's grandeur. The two are intended to reinforce each other.

### The 'Hindu' Emperor Jahangir

Keśavadās's last historical poem the *Jahāngīrjascandrikā*, a collection of 200 verses in panegyric (*praśasti*) style, continues in the same vein of lavish literary expression that characterized the later cantos of the *Carit*, but its subject is now the Mughal emperor.<sup>35</sup> It might seem that a text exclusively oriented towards *praśasti* is the

least likely of any of the *kāvya* genres to yield much in the way of useful historical information, or what we may be unquestioningly and narrowly habituated to think of as ‘useful’ for historical purposes. Although the *Candrikā* purports to be set in a real-life place, the Mughal court, a place peopled by known historical individuals, the work constitutes an almost surreal intersection between fictional and factual modalities. Indeed, if anything the *Candrikā* contains yet denser layers of figuration than the *Carit* – its esthetic veil over mundane reality rendering the text almost impenetrable to the would-be fact finder. Still, if we stretch the category of history beyond the merely documentary to include the larger rubric of cultural history this text does have much to tell us about its place and time of production. Matters of style, theme and subtleties of word choice – normally considered the purview of literature rather than history – offer clues as to how a Brahman pandit processed his regional court’s relationship to the Indo-Muslim political establishment. Probing Keśavdās’s perceptions of this encounter in turn opens up access to issues such as regional-imperial political relations and Hindu-Muslim cultural dynamics in early-modern India, which are obviously critical components of the larger history of the period.

As in the *Carit*, the text is introduced by a larger frame story centering on two personified character traits, in this case Bhāgya (fate) and Udaya (literally ‘rising’, but here connoting human agency).<sup>36</sup> Fate and Agency enter into an argument over their relative importance. They seek out the god Śiva, who, they hope, will be able to arbitrate. Śiva, it turns out, is stumped, and prompts them to seek the opinion of the wise emperor Jahangir, whereupon the two set out for the imperial city of Agra. This plot device affords Keśavdās a chance to move the action (such as it is) to the Mughal court, and to set the panegyric mode in motion.

The modern climate of antagonistic Hindu-Muslim political relations, in which Hindus and Muslims are prone to being constructed as ineluctably separate and culturally and religiously incommensurable, leaves us completely unprepared for Keśavdās’s panegyric to the Mughal emperor. In terms of both thematics and style we wait in vain for some obvious measure of difference to present itself that would set apart a ‘Hindu’ king like Bir Singh Deo from a ‘Muslim’ Emperor like Jahangir. But the *Candrikā*’s characterization of Jahangir proves almost completely indistinguishable from portrayals of traditional *kāvya* heroes. The moral perfection of this *nāyaka*-king is enacted through time-tested literary strategies – as when Jahangir is likened to Rāma, a comparison which underscores his heroism and kingly perfection:

Keśavdās says, seeing the moonlight of his face,  
Other emperors lose their courage, becoming meek like birds.  
The dread of Akbar’s invincible son Emperor Jahangir  
Terrifies even Rāvaṇa.<sup>37</sup>

Jahangir emerges as a textbook case for Hindu kingship in countless other respects. He is said to hold an imperial umbrella (*chakra*), symbol of universal sovereignty. He possesses all the traditional skills enjoined for kings in classical manuals of kingship, as when the poet commends the emperor’s wisdom by referencing his (rather improbable) expertise in distinctly non-Persianate subjects

like the six Hindu philosophical systems (*saddarśana*) and the minutiae of literary representations of women (*nāyikā-bheda*).<sup>38</sup> The emperor's subjects also live in textbook cities, which are described not in terms of physical features such as the gardens or architecture for which the Mughals were famous, but through a range of stock literary tableaux that conjure up an impeccable moral universe:

*Nagara-nagara para ghanāi tau gājāi ghori, īti kī na bhīti, bhīti adhana adhīra kī  
Ari nagarīni prati karata agamyāgauna, bhāvai bibhicārī jahā corī parapīra kī  
Bhūmīyā ke nāte bhūmidhara hī tau lekhiyatu, durgani hī 'kesaudāsā' durgati sarīra kī  
Garhani garhoī eka devatā hī dekhiyatu, aisī rīti rājanīti rājai jahāgīra kī*

In Jahangir's cities the only thunderous sound is that of a storm rolling in (i.e. never that of an attacking army).

There is no fear of calamity;

The only concern is to protect the populace from poverty and instability.

There is no illicit sex with improper women;

The only sneaking around is to attack an enemy fort.

The only inconstancy is in literary representations of the myriad emotions.

The only theft is of others' pain.

The only land-grabber to be seen is Śeṣanaga, holding up the earth.

The people are all able-bodied; says Keśavdās,

The only odd-shaped things are the impenetrable labyrinthine fortresses.

On hilltops all you see are temples (i.e. never warring rivals)

Jahangir's rule is ideal in every respect.

Here the textbook quality of kingliness is even a literal one, for an only slight variant of this verse had appeared earlier in chapter eight of Keśavdās's *Kavipriyā* (Handbook for poets, 1601), where he instructed poets on how to construct literary images of kingly glory (*Rājyaśrībhūṣaṇavarnanam*). The original *Kavipriyā* verse had featured Rāma, but in adapting the verse to the *Candrikā* context Keśavdās conveniently substituted the word 'Jahāgīra' for 'Raghubīra' (a common epithet of Rāma), and suddenly a verse in honor of a Hindu god-king could be reconfigured to describe the Mughal emperor.<sup>39</sup>

The interesting question is perhaps not so much what is in this text, as why it looks the way it does. Why did Keśavdās choose to employ this utterly normative estheticizing mode of discourse in his portrayal of the emperor? It would be easy to dismiss such a choice as a lack of poetic creativity, or to attribute the matter to pandit conservatism, or even to the shameless sycophancy of a court poet, bound to proclaim glory regardless of where he perceived it. But to do so would be to miss something important about what it meant for Keśavdās to construct images of the Mughal emperor in terms of this Sanskrit-derived symbolic repertoire of kingship that stemmed back perhaps two millennia in *kāvya* and public *prāśastis*. The historically important point is that for this regional Braj author, in the year 1612, Mughal rule had become fully routinized, and was entirely comprehensible within the traditional Sanskritic episteme of Hindu *dharma* and kingship. And this was a marked departure from how the Mughals were perceived just 30 years prior in Keśavdās's first work, the *Bāvanī*, where they were hated interlopers. Changing conceptions of who holds political legitimacy – one of the most critical

concerns for any historian even of the most materialist sort – can, it seems, be indexed from changes in modes of literary representation.

If for Keśavdās Jahangir was a respected sovereign who merited literary representation in the poetically rich modes of *kāvya*, there are nonetheless some places where the imagery diverges from the boilerplate styles. Close attention to the lexical registers of Keśavdās's last work shows that his interactions with the Indo-Muslim political establishment seem to have caused him to make adjustments to his classical repertoire at the level of language, if not at the level of thematics. The adjustments can be subtle, as in the following *śleṣa* or bitextual verse:

*Kabi, senāpati, kusala kalānidhi, gunī gīrapati*  
*Sūra, ganesa, mahesa, seṣa, bahu bibudha mahāmāti*  
*Caturānana, sobhānivāsa, śrīdhara, bidyādhara*  
*Bidyādhari aneka, maṅjuḥṣādi cittahara*  
*Dṛṣṭi anugraha-nigrahani juta, (kahi) 'kesava,' saba bhāti chama*  
*Imi jahāgīra suratāna aba dekhahu adbhuta indra sama*

See how the emperor Jahangir is as astonishing as the god Indra  
 In his court are poets and generals, skilled artists and discerning scholars,  
 Warriors, officers, stable masters, **shaikhs**, masterminds  
 The clever, the glamorous, the lustrous,  
 A range of entertainers and their companions.  
 There are beautiful songs, haunting to the soul.  
 Keśavdās says, Jahangir is a capable ruler in every respect –  
 He is kind to the deserving, and harsh towards those who break the law.<sup>40</sup>

The Sanskrit literary practice of bitextuality works in such a way that an entire verse can be read in two ways. Here the point of the *śleṣa* is to set up a deep correspondence – deep not just because it articulates a comparison in the matter of a simile but because the connection is reinforced at the very level of language itself, which itself points toward some ontological correspondence – between Jahangir and Indra, king of the gods. Here, the clever manipulation of a single word in an otherwise quintessentially Sanskritic verse reminds us that we are not adrift in some *Puranic* tale about Indra, but at the Mughal court. In the reading of the verse that is intended to refer to Indra the Braj word 'seṣa' (Sanskrit शेष) is to be read according to a Sanskrit register, invoking the nāga companion of Viṣṇu. Pronouncing ष as ख, however, in the common Braj manner, the very same phonemes create the homonym 'Shaikh', invoking the Arabic word for spiritual leader – a suitable member of the Mughal court. Here we find a portrayal of Jahangir according to traditional Sanskrit thought systems, but with a subtle, even modern, Braj twist that seems to acknowledge – however faintly – that Keśavdās lived in a newly-configured social and political world, one that now included Indo-Muslims.

There are indeed many named Indo-Muslims in the text, several of whom merit their own *praśasti* verses. In keeping with *kāvya* norms much of the imagery is completely typological (and ironically so, considering the extent to which the Mughals would become synonymous in the art world with traditions of

individualized portraiture and realism), as when Akbar's famed courtier Rahim is likened to 'Hanumān' and 'Rāma's arrow':

Rahim protected Akbar's sovereignty in every respect.  
 He was as dutiful as the brave Hanumān towards his one master.  
 Rahim's charisma dazzles the entire earth, its splendour like the milk ocean.  
 And his pure motives and limitless nobility are respected everywhere,  
 Just like Ganges water.  
 The Khan of Khans is like Rāma's arrow.  
 It destroys evil and protects the world.<sup>41</sup>

Yet if we turn to the verse eulogizing Jahangir's son Khusrao we again glimpse something new intermixed with the conventional poetics:

*Dīna-jana pālibe kaū kalikāla ghālibe kaū kabi-kula lālibe kaū saba rasa bhīnau hai  
 Desa desa libe kahā saba sukha dībe kahā, jagajaya kibe kahā jibī bratu līnau hai  
 Rājani barhaibe kaū bairīna darhaibai kaū khalaka kī khūbī ko khajāno jābi dīnau hai  
 Gāya bipra rākhibe kaū dekhīyata 'kesaurāya,' sultatāna khusarū khudāī āpu kīnau hai*

Sultan Khusrao has resolved to protect the poor,  
 To wipe out the evils of the Kaliyuga,  
 And to honour his court poets.  
 He has vowed to conquer various territories, the whole world in fact,  
 And to provide every happiness to his people.  
 He promotes worthy kings, and destroys his enemies.  
 He is seen to protect cows and Brahmans, says Keśavdās.  
 He has been bestowed a **treasure house of all earthly good qualities**.  
 He is **like a god on earth**.<sup>42</sup>

Interlaced with the somewhat tired imagery about vanquishing the *Kaliyuga* and protecting Brahmans and cows are some unusual strings of Perso-Arabic words, most notably in line three (*khalaka kī khūbī ko khajāno . . .*). These have no doubt been chosen in part for their alliterative effect, but this peppering of his text with occasional instances of Perso-Arabic vocabulary is something decidedly new in the latter stages of the poet's career, and I would venture that it is a deliberate attempt to produce a 'Mughalizing' effect on the text. Although the phenomenon is far more pronounced in the *Candrikā*, there are a couple instances in the *Carit*, as well – notably associated with Mughal characters, as when Salim and Bir Singh first meet in canto five, or when the poet conveys Akbar's grief at the loss of Abu'l Fazl in canto six.<sup>43</sup>

These lexical innovations are not without their larger political and cultural (and indeed historical) implications. The *Bāvanī*, which was set on the battlefield and depicted an early hostile moment of Mughal-Orcha contact, showed precisely zero Persianization in its style. On the contrary, as noted above, the work employed almost a deliberately archaic, Prakritizing register as though Keśavdās wished to forestall the advent of the Persianate Mughal cultural order through the stylistic mechanisms of his poetry. The dramatic instances of Perso-Arabic vocabulary found in the poet's later writing can hardly be accidental – not for a classically-trained Brahman pandit, whose literary universe was dominated by *alaṅkārasāstra* and *kāvya* norms, and the Sanskrit style that was a corollary. Nor should these new linguistic practices be understood as purely esthetic matters.

Smidgeons of Persian evoked the Mughal courtly environment, but they also seem to indicate a new sense of cultural rapprochement with the Mughals, which evolved in the course of Keśavdās's oeuvre no less than in the political climate of the Orcha state.

## Conclusion

The *rīti* tradition, of which Keśavdās was a founding figure, is often dismissed by modern Hindi critics as an abstruse and decadent set of medieval poetic practices with little contemporary relevance – an assessment that stems in part from its strong reliance on Sanskrit courtly literary codes. But the three historical poems we have examined here, with their changing representations of Mughal power from within a traditional Hindu episteme, have a great deal of relevance for our understanding of the cultural conditions of late premodernity – both esthetic and political. This triad of historical poems by Keśavdās is a fascinating literary map of the responses of one particular regional kingdom as Mughal authority became increasingly entrenched, and an approach that foregrounds the texts' literary features, far from undermining our understanding of the events the poet recorded – actually deepens it. The initial Mughal incursions under Akbar's reign provoked resentment and hatred of the outsiders, as reflected in Keśavdās's earliest poem the *Ratnabāvanī*. But this tone of intense othering does not persist in Keśavdās's later works. By the time he wrote the *Vīrsīmhdevcarit* Orcha-Mughal political dynamics were much more complex, with each Orcha brother being backed by a different Mughal faction. This complexity is mirrored in the esthetic realm of the text. Indeed, the *Vīrsīmhdevcarit* exhibits a polyphony almost worthy of the modern novel, where a range of voices and moral positions are accorded literary representation. In Keśavdās's last work, the *Jahāngīrjascandrikā*, the emperor is fully analogized to Hindu god-kings like Rāma or Indra, and portrayed in the most elevated of classical *kāvya* styles, with an occasional Persianizing twist – potent signs of the Mughals' new legitimacy as rulers.

This study has been an experiment in a multi-layered practice of history, and it is worth taking a moment to highlight the different layers that have been interwoven here. At the most basic level are the details stemming from the pure political factuality of the Mughals' takeover of Orcha – a decisive encounter that 'made history' by dramatically altering the shape of events in the region for decades to come. On another level we could say that the poet Keśavdās quite literally made history because he fashioned in textual format his versions of the events that he witnessed. His viewpoint was clearly not the same as that of a modern historian, for his works integrate factual registers with more mythic ones, and literary protocols sometimes take precedence over the imperative to report 'what really happened'. But it is important to stress that these fictive and factual domains do not conflict in the texts themselves. There they intersect, and enrich each other.

Poetry had a special place in the historiography of regional courts in India, and the Braj historical poems of which the three by Keśavdās constitute a useful case study – but hardly the only available one – have not been much tapped as a

resource for Mughal history, certainly not in a manner that respects the more literary aspects of the genres. Here I have suggested ways in which poetry's fictionality has its own truth, regardless of its factuality. I have tried to make the case that poetry's capacity to push beyond more linear domains of reporting makes its perspective all the more nuanced and therefore potentially more valuable to a historian. In poetry, multiple versions of reality can coexist, and compete in their claims to truth, ultimately affording us a richer perspective if we can develop the critical tools to engage it.

Yet another layer of historical meaning explored here concerns the field of literary history. As a trailblazing court poet working in the medium of Brajbhasha during the Mughal period Keśavdās made literary history with his experimental manipulation of primarily Sanskritized style but also, in a few striking cases, Persianized linguistic registers. And literary processes have a facticity of their own. New styles enter the world at particular historical moments.<sup>44</sup> And style is substance. Style is historically substantial because it is a choice made by an agent of a culture at a particular moment in time, and it offers clues about the intellectual and cultural horizons of pre-modern people, thus contributing valuably to our reconstructions of the past.

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## Notes

- 1 Keśavdās's poetry is famously difficult. Modern critics have been known to refer to him as the 'devil of difficult poetry' ('kaṭhin kāvya kā pret', quoted in Vijaypāl Singh, *Keśav kā Ācāryatva*, reprinted, New Delhi, 1998, p. 10). Some pre-modern readers apparently felt the same way, however, as is evident from Sūrati Miśra's introduction to the *Jorāvarprakāś* (Light of Jorāvar, 1739), commissioned by his patron King Jorāvar Singh of Bikaner, who reportedly approached him with a request for a commentary on the *Rasikpriyā*, saying 'Keśavdās's works are famous for being difficult, and out of all of them, the *Rasikpriyā* is particularly deep. Write a commentary on it so that it will make sense to one and all'. (Sūrati Miśra, *Jorāvarprakāś*, ed. Yogendra Pratāp Singh, Allahabad, 1992, vv. 1.7–8.)
- 2 A brief discussion of Bir Singh's status and numerous accomplishments is Dirk Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy*, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 127–31.
- 3 A couple of recent publications do offer hope that more attention will now be directed to this field. Kiśorilāl has produced new editions of both the *Vīrsimbdevcarit* (Allahabad, 1997) and the *Jahāngīrjascandrikā* (Allahabad, 1994); Bhagvāndās Gupta provides a sketch of some of the key literary sources for Bundelkhand history in

*Mughalō ke antargat Bundelkhand ke Itihās-saṃskṛti ke Hindī Sāhityik Srotō kā Mūlyākan* (Jhansi, 2001).

- 4 The subaltern studies movement is an obvious example, as is work in the area of 'ethnohistory' such as Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*, Cambridge, 1987 and Phillip B. Wagoner, *Tidings of the King*, Honolulu, 1993. Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*, Princeton, 2000, alerts us to the limitations of relying on exclusively European modes of historicism for theorizing non-European life-worlds. Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*, New York, 2003, constitutes a lively new approach to South Indian history, which skillfully incorporates a variety of literary and folk genres.
- 5 The linkage between literary expressivity and political will in Sanskrit inscriptional practices is made in Sheldon Pollock, 'The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300–1300: Transculturation, Vernacularization, and the Question of Ideology', in Jan E.M. Houben, ed., *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit: Contributions to the History of the Sanskrit Language*, Leiden, 1996.
- 6 One of the few scholarly treatments of (Sanskrit) historical *mahākāvya*s, though otherwise a valuable study, is occasionally marred by this painfully literalist approach: Chandra Prabha, *Historical Mahākāvya in Sanskrit (Eleventh to Fifteenth Century)*, Delhi, 1976.
- 7 Hayden White, *The Content of the Form*, Baltimore, 1987.
- 8 Wagoner, *Tidings of the King*, and Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*, are excellent models for a more sensitive practice that allows literary and historical analysis to coexist.
- 9 Keśavdās, *Ratnabāvanī, Keśavgranthāvalī*, Vol. 3, ed. Viśvanāthprasād Miśra, Allahabad, 1954, vv. 2–3.
- 10 On the self-conscious adoption of *rāso* style in the *Bāvanī* see Vijaypāl Singh, *Keśav aur Unkā Sāhitya*, reprinted, Delhi, 1993, p. 64. The heavy emphasis on consonant clusters in particular marks an utter contrast to the generalized trend linguistic towards svarabhakti or insertion of vowels between consonants in Brajbhasha.
- 11 Aziz Ahmad, 'Epic and Counter-Epic in Medieval India', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 83, 1964, pp. 470–6.
- 12 'Tava parata dīṭhi pāṭhāni kī taba tau ko saṭhṭhahi rahai/suna, ratanasena, madhusāha suva, patti gayē bina kyō rahai?' *Ratnabāvanī*, v. 9.
- 13 *Ratnabāvanī*, v. 12.
- 14 Sanskritic compounds (otherwise rare in this text) like *rāmarūpadarśana* and *svarūpa-varnana* in verses 21 and 27 make this linkage even more explicit.
- 15 Akbar commends Ratnasena's bravery in v. 52.
- 16 This unpublished longer recension is mentioned in Singh, *Keśav aur Unkā Sāhitya*, p. 64.
- 17 See Keśavdās, *Vīrsimhdevcarit, Keśavgranthāvalī*, Vol. 3, vv. 2.42–43; entry for Raja Madhukar Shah Bundela in Navāb Samsām ud daulā Śāh Navāz Khān Śahid Khavāfi Aurangābādī, *Māāsir ul Umrā*, Vol. 1, Braj Ratna Dās, trans. (into Hindi), Varanasi, 1984, p. 145. Bhagvāndās Gupta argues that the *Bāvanī*'s perspective is the 'historically true' one (*Mughalō ke antargat Bundelkhand*, pp. 19–22).
- 18 Ronald Stuart McGregor, *Hindi Literature from its Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century*. Jan Gonda, ed. *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. VIII, fasc. 6, 1984, p. 129.
- 19 'Paṭhān' and 'Turk' now seem to mean, simply, 'Mughal soldier', and (due to a complicated political situation that will be explored shortly) the terms are just as likely to be used for the hero's troops as for enemy forces.

- 20 This is a point the author himself makes in the introduction: ‘Keśavdās has written an authoritative account of the extraordinary deeds of Bir Singh Deo. It is a tale imbued with the nine rasas, with moral concerns, and politics (*navarasamaya saba dharmamaya, rājanītimaya mānal bīracaritra bicitra kiya, kesavadāsa pramāna*)’, *Vīrsīmhdevcarit*, v. 1.6. Very few works of this length and complexity would ever be attempted in Brajbhasha. *Rīti* poets would generally favour the pithiness of a short independent verse (*muktak*) over an extended narrative (*prabandha kāvyā*).
- 21 *Vīrsīmhdevcarit*, vv. 3.1–2.
- 22 *Vīrsīmhdevcarit*, v. 14.21. Other striking *Rāmāyaṇa* parallels occur in vv. 14.2–5, where Bhupal Rao is variously likened to Sugrīva, Lakṣmaṇa, Aṅgada, Hanumān, and Rāma’s arrow. The ironic resonances merely sketched here are emblematic of the work’s complex vision of contemporary politics, to which I cannot do full justice in this short article.
- 23 *Vīrsīmhdevcarit*, vv. 5.63–65.
- 24 *Vīrsīmhdevcarit*, v. 5.76. The murder incident is recounted in vv. 5.73–108.
- 25 *Vīrsīmhdevcarit*, v. 6.24. The *Kuṇḍaliyā* meter is characterized by repeating first and last words (or phrases), as well as repeating half-lines in the transition between lines two and three (represented by lines four and five in the translation).
- 26 Julie Meisami has usefully called attention to the didactic, and not just sycophantic, intentions of court poets from an adjacent cultural world in *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, Princeton, 1987, chap. 2.
- 27 The passages by Muhammad Hadi and Jahangir are found in Jahangir, *Jahāngīrnāmā*, trans., Wheeler M. Thackston, New York, 1999, pp. 10–11, 32–3.
- 28 It would be difficult to think of a more potent sign of the new Mughal hegemony than the renaming of this Bundela stronghold after the emperor.
- 29 There is a long tradition of this literary-excursory practice in Sanskrit *mahākāvyas*. For an overview of common motifs see Prabha, *Historical Mahākāvyas in Sanskrit*. The convention, to my mind, persists even today in the mountain and meadow backdrops of the song interludes of modern Hindi films.
- 30 These passages are from *Vīrsīmhdevcarit*, vv. 15.1–15.7; vv. 22.16–22.20.
- 31 I find this text confirms the analysis of Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam that different modes of discourse have different ‘textures’, which can coexist unproblematically in one and the same text precisely because audiences are able to make sense of shifts in register and meaning, and decode some parts as primarily factual, and others as more embellished, less realist in tenor. See *Textures of Time*, pp. 4–5, 99–100.
- 32 That royal efficacy tends to be expressed in a highly ornate Braj style is no doubt a legacy of Sanskrit. On the Sanskrit tradition of estheticized royal self-expression see Pollock, ‘The Sanskrit Cosmopolis’.
- 33 Two 19th-century Bundela clan histories also mention it as one of Bir Singh Deo’s large scale construction projects. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy*, p. 129.
- 34 The final cantos, which feature a heavy concentration of both Braj and Sanskrit political maxims as a prelude to Bir Singh’s coronation, are also concerned with effacing the stigma of Abu’l Fazl’s assassination by emphasizing the principles of *dhārmik* kingship.
- 35 The exact conditions under which the work was commissioned are obscure, as are any details concerning when and how it might have been performed. One of the palaces in Orcha is named the ‘Jahāngīr Mahal’, which modern locals claim was built for a state visit of the emperor (an occurrence doubted by historians like Kolff – see *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy*, p. 131). It is possible Keśavdās wrote the work on that occasion. Or perhaps the poet accompanied his patron on a trip to Agra, where Bir Singh

maintained a residence, and presented his composition at the imperial court. There is no mention of any such incident in the *Jahāṅgīrnāmā*, but that by no means rules out the possibility.

36 Udaya is also addressed as ‘Udyama’ (human effort).

37 *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā*, *Keśavgranthāvalī*, Vol. 3, ed. Viśvanāthprasād Miśra, Allahabad, 1954, v. 32.

38 E.g. *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā*, v. 34.

39 Compare *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā*, v. 35, with the only slight variant in *Keśavdās*, *Kavipriyā*, *Keśavgranthāvalī*, Vol. 1, ed. Viśvanāthprasād Miśra, Allahabad, 1954, v. 8.5. The change from ‘Raghubīra’ to ‘Jahāgīra’ in this verse (along with a few other minor word substitutions) is simple to execute without affecting the integrity of the *Kavitt* structure, for which it is the total count of (31 or 32) syllables rather than syllable weight that is of the essence.

40 *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā*, v. 114 (after the Hindi translation of Kīśorilāl, *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā*, pp. 106–107). Given above is the ‘Jahāṅgīrpaṅkṣa’ (the Jahangir perspective) of the verse. The alternate ‘Indrapaṅkṣa’ (the Indra perspective) reads as follows:

See how the emperor Jahāṅgīr is as astonishing as the god Indra.  
In his court all kinds of wise deities are present:  
Venus and Kārttikeya, the clever moon, learned Jupiter,  
The sun, Gaṇeśa, Śiva, Śeṣanāga,  
Brahmā, Kāmadeva, Viṣṇu, the Vidyādhara and their lovers,  
And the apsaras like Mañjughoṣā to captivate a man’s heart  
Keśavdās says, Indra is a capable ruler in every respect –  
He is kind to the deserving, and harsh towards those who break the law.

41 *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā*, v.5.

42 *Jahāṅgīrjascandrikā*, v.55.

43 Note for instance the Persianized term ‘Garībniwāj’ used to describe Salim in v. 5.52 or the mixed Arabic-Sanskrit compound ‘Ālamnāth’ as an epithet for Akbar in v. 6.10.

44 The importance of historicizing new cultural trends in Indian intellectual history is eloquently discussed in Sheldon Pollock, ‘Literary Newness Enters the World’, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, Berkeley, in press, opening to chap. 8.

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