

Reconciling Surdas and Keshavdas: A Study of Commonalities and Differences in Brajhasha Literature

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Abstract: Surdas and Keshavdas are two of the most prominent poets of early Hindi literature, who wrote in Brajhasha, a language of the masses. This was a literary tradition that grew in the late medieval to early modern period and produced compositions that were not only widely read in their time but became and remain a staple in cultural memory even today. There have been ample and detailed studies about both these poets. However, much lesser effort has been made in attempting to examine whether these two icons can be brought closer to each other in how we understand them and their compositions. This is the context behind this paper.

This paper begins by examining Brajhasha literature as a cultural development and contextualising it in its historical roots, main stylistic features and relationship with the Mughal court. It then moves on to the lives of Surdas and Keshavdas individually to get a sense of similarities and differences between them. Ultimately, the aim of this paper is to suggest elements of similarity between the works of both our poets, and through them draw broader inferences about the traditionally perceived dichotomy between bhakti and rīti genres of Brajhasha literature, which has also been questioned by many. The paper seeks to extend this line of inquiry by arguing that thematically there are many points of commonality between Surdas and Keshavdas, and the bhakti-rīti dichotomy is not so solid.

Keywords: Brajhasha; Hindi literature; Surdas; Keshavdas; bhakti poetry; rīti poetry; Mughal period; vernacular literature

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The Bhāṣā of Braj

Literature composed in Indian languages has had a long and rich history. From the Sanskrit *mahākāvya* (epics) to various compositions in vernacular languages, Indian literature offers plenty of material that can be studied not only for their literary or aesthetic value but also their historical significance and symbolism.

By the late medieval to the early modern period¹ Brajhasha had become a very prominent language of literary production in north India. Braj is also identified with the geographical area prominent in Indian spiritual and mythical imagination as being associated with Lord Krishna's childhood, mainly focussing in and around Mathura and Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh. Hence, the term 'brajhasha' implies the *bhāṣā* or language of Braj, and the name of the region is used to refer to the language as well. This region saw a significant growth of Vaishnavism from the sixteenth century onwards, and as has been argued by some, this association of Brajhasha with Vaishnavism, and especially with the cult of Krishna, bestowed on it a degree of primacy compared to other regional varieties of Hindi in terms of literary compositions.² The Vaishnava cult has been associated with *bhakti* poetry, which began in south India long before it spread to the north and which is marked by poems depicting intense devotion and love to one's personal God. A lot (but not all) of the literary production in Brajhasha also fits in this *bhakti* framework. Vaishnavism was finding firm footing in the medieval period in various parts of India outside the south, leading to the emergence of various sects and literary compositions. By identifying specific geographical localities in the Braj area as the places where Krishna's

¹ Different studies show slight variations in locating the period of Brajhasha prominence. See, Allison Busch, "Hidden in Plain View: Brajhasha Poets at the Mughal Court," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (2010): 267-268, accessed 27 March, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/27764657; Rupert Snell, *The Hindi Classical Tradition: A Braj Bhāṣā Reader* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1991), 29; Sandhya Sharma, "Keshavadasa and His Braja Poet: A Proof of Historical Consciousness," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 68, Part One (2007): 399, accessed 9 April, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44147852>.

² Snell, *A Braja Bhāṣā Reader*, 30. Stuart McGregor has argued that while Brajhasha (and Avadhi) cannot historically and linguistically be said to be dialects of modern Hindi, as the former two preceded the latter as literary languages, however, from the perspective of a present-day study of literary cultures of north India, they can be regarded as part of a "composite 'literary tradition of Hindi'". See his, "The Progress of Hindi, Part 1: The Development of a Transregional Idiom," in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 913.

līlā—talked about in the *Bhāgavata Purāna*—had actually happened in history, the south Indian theologian Vallabha (1479-1531) and the Bengali mystic Krishna Chaitanya (1486-1533) gave a new literal significance to Braj; Brajbhasha thus came to be regarded as the natural language in which contemporary devotional literature was produced.³ However, ultimately, Brajbhasha literature came to encompass a lot more than just devotional themes, and also spread beyond the geographical limits of the Braj region.

Gwalior, to the south of Agra, is perhaps the earliest identifiable centre of literary composition in Brajbhasha. A poet called Vishnudas began a tradition of composing vernacular narrative on Sanskrit themes by producing adaptations in Brajbhasha from the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* called the *Pāṇḍavcarit* (1435) and the *Rāmāyanakathā* (1442) respectively.⁴ Vishnudas's work is considered important because he is said to have established a vernacularising tradition, which was to be followed by many after him, by reviving the old epic traditions of Krishna and Ram in a new popular dimension.⁵ This is just one example of the antecedents of Brajbhasha. In terms of language, vocabulary, content, style and imagery, it drew something or the other from the Apabhraṁśa, the Sanskrit *Purānas*, the Persian and the Sanskrit lexicons, folksongs and so on.⁶

The literature produced in Brajbhasha was not marked by stylistic homogeneity. Various kinds of texts were produced. The *pada*, composed of rhyming couplets in a simple meter and meant to be sung, comprised the more common form in the *bhakti* verse. Surdas and Mira both wrote in this style. Bihari was a master in the *dohā* or couplet form. The *dohā* figures most prominently in Kabir also, as well as in narrative epic poems alongside the *caupāī* or quatrain. Along with this, contemporary hagiologies of poet-saints leading a *sampradāy* or sect, such as Vallabha and Chaitanya, were also produced. Of these quasi-historical sources, the Vallabhan *vārtā* chronicles, an early example of Brajbhasha prose, are considered among the most important. Certainly, this heterogeneity of styles also extends to the subject matter and themes on which such literature was produced. In terms of content, *padas* focused on the descriptive eulogies of Krishna and his *līlā*, describing the deity in his childhood, in his romantic adventures, while separating from the *gopis* and so on. While written rather simply, they were meant to evoke a feeling of deep devotion in the lay devotee and were valued as compositions meant to be sung. As touched upon before, the *dohā* could center on devotional as well as erotic or narrative themes. It could also be used to compose works eulogising the poet's patron; the verses could be inspired from incidents at the patron's court. Court poetry too, of course, was a form in itself. While this court poetry (*rīti*) was conventionally understood as marking a phase distinct from the purely religious and devotional *bhakti* poetry in traditional histories of Hindi literature, the ambiguity of a clear secular-religious dichotomy has also been suggested. As this vernacular court poetry reflected Sanskritic elements, it came to be analysed according to the conventions of *alankāraśāstra*, the science of Sanskrit literary rhetoric. This included multiple aspects: one, a classification of the hero and heroine of the tale (*nāyak-nāyikā bheda*); two, an analysis of the literary figures of speech such as alliteration, metaphor, double entendre, etc.; three, dealing with prosody, known as *chandaśāstra*, and so on. Keshavdas' scholarly works on such poetics in Brajbhasha literature are especially important. Codifications of poetic conventions and a body of literary analysis meant that soon poetry began to rely increasingly on certain go-to rhetorical descriptions, such as describing the heroine from top to bottom or listing attributes like *solah śṛṅgār* or 'sixteen adornments'.⁷

Brajbhasha and the Mughals

While discussing the context in which Brajbhasha was becoming prominent in North India as a medium of literary expression, it is important to remember the political backdrop of the time. It might seem counter-intuitive to think that in a period where the culturally-different Mughals were ruling over large parts of the subcontinent, that too with their centres of Delhi and Agra not far from the nucleus of Brajbhasha literature, this relatively newer kind of indigenous literary tradition would have developed. That the leading political, literary and courtly language of the time was Persian cannot be disputed. However, Brajbhasha very much was present and indeed flourished. Moreover, it did not exist as an 'underground' language away from the corridors of Mughal power. Brajbhasha poets interacted with Mughal political elites in various ways. Some among this political elite were patrons, and some even composed Braj literature themselves.

³ Snell, *ibid*, 31.

⁴ McGregor, "The Progress of Hindi, Part 1," 914, 917.

⁵ *Ibid*, 918.

⁶ Snell, *A Braja Bhāṣā Reader*, 32.

⁷ For a detailed discussion on the various kinds of literary forms within Brajbhasha literature, their thematic heterogeneity and use of some common elements, see, *ibid*, 32-36. A detailed study of the perceived *bhakti-rīti* dichotomy and its historical and ideological bases of construction is Allison Busch, "Questioning the Tropes About 'Bhakti' and 'Rīti' in Hindi Literary Historiography," in *Bhakti in Current Research, 2001-2003*, ed. Monika Horstmann (Delhi: Manohar, 2006), 33-47.

In fact, patronage of Hindi by Indo-Muslims was not very recent anyway; regional sultanate courts and Sufi *khānqāhs* gave Hindi textual production an impetus.⁸ Although not found under Babur and Humayun, from Akbar onwards there is evidence of the interest of the Mughal elites in languages of north India. Akbar was said to be conversant in Hindi and so were his successors. This is only logical as he grew up in India. Moreover, marriage alliances with the Rajputs meant that emperors like Shah Jahan and Jahangir were born to Rajput mothers. The administration under Akbar also included many Hindus who were not only naturally versed in Hindavi languages, but who also composed Braj poetry or were patrons of Vaishnava institutions. High-ranking officials of Akbar such as Todar Mal and Man Singh were such patrons. In 1580, Mathura, which was located at a close distance to the early imperial capital of Agra, was incorporated in the *śūbah* of Agra. Thus, even though Persian was the language of the administration and ties to Turkish were still maintained, indigenous languages like Brajbhasha were becoming an area of interest for the Mughal elites.⁹ An important courtier and general of Akbar, Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khana produced literature of high quality. He is known to Hindi literature as the poet Rahim whose compositions, such as the one below, are read even today by school students in their Hindi classes:

*Rahiman dhaga prem ka, mat todū chatkai,
Tootey phir se na milay, milay gaanth padi jai*¹⁰

*Rahim says, don't break the thread of love,
Once snapped, it doesn't mend; if it does, it bears a knot.*¹¹

His case has been said to be an example of a cultural symbiosis fostered by the interaction between a Muslim political elite and a large Hindu populace.¹² But does one example suffice, or does it become an exception to the prove the otherwise rule? Under Akbar, Braj poets by the name of Karnesh and Manohar are recorded. Todar Mal, the emperor's revenue administrator, is also said to have composed Braj poetry, and so did Faizi, Akbar's Persian language poet-laureate and brother of Abul Fazl. Birbal, one of Akbar's 'Nine Jewels', was also a Braj poet. Abul Fazl credited Akbar himself with some Hindi compositions.¹³ Another poet in this period whose compositions were numerous and who was held in high acclaim was Gang. Serving at Akbar's court, various *praśasti* or panegyric verses dedicated to multiple Mughal elites like Akbar, Jahangir, Rahim, Raja Man Singh, Birbal, and Prince Daniyal, are attributed to him. He is said to have been a masterful representative of the bardic tradition of Hindi literature. His fame can be gauged by the fact that he was considered an equal of Tulsidas by the eighteenth-century literary critic Bhikharidas.¹⁴ Others like Keshavdas of Orchha were also aware of political developments around this time, even if their association with the Mughal court is difficult to ascertain. Orchha had been annexed by Akbar's armies in Keshavdas' youth.¹⁵ At the same time, it can be said that sometimes the relations between Braj poets and the Mughal emperors were ambivalent. A legend about an encounter between Surdas and Akbar suggests that upon hearing the poet's praise, the emperor invited him to his court. He asked Sur to sing his praises for which the latter could be rewarded whatever his heart desired. Sur declined to entertain the emperor's wish and the only reward he asked for was to be excused.¹⁶ However, it has also been suggested that this episode was not one of separatism over syncretism as the parting between Sur and Akbar was amicable, and that this was an example of the relationship between secular and spiritual power with the latter reigning supreme.¹⁷

⁸ See, Busch, "Hidden in Plain View," 273, for a brief overview. See also, Muzaffar Alam, "The Pursuit of Persian: Language in Mughal Politics," *Modern Asian Studies* 32, No. 2 (May 1998): 318-319, 344, accessed 15 February, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/313001>, for instances of association of Indo-Muslims with Hindavi languages before the heyday of Mughal rule and also among regional sultanates.

⁹ Busch, "Hidden in Plain View," 274.

¹⁰ Rakhshanda Jalil, "Meet Abdur Rahim Khan-e-Khanan, Who Was Also the 'Bhakta' Poet Rahim Das," Scroll.in, 27 August, 2016, <https://scroll.in/article/814998/meet-abdur-rahim-khan-e-khanan-who-was-also-the-bhakta-poet-rahim-das>.

¹¹ Translation mine.

¹² Snell, *A Braja Bhāṣā Reader*, 33.

¹³ Busch, "Hidden in Plain View," 275-276.

¹⁴ Amaresh Datta, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature: Volume II, Devraj to Jyoti* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1988), 1364. See also, Busch, "Hidden in Plain View," 276-277.

¹⁵ Busch, "Hidden in Plain View," 277-278.

¹⁶ See, John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 182.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 183.

During Jahangir's reign, Keshavdas' association with the Mughal court appears more solid as evidenced by his *Jahāngīrjascandrikā* (Moonlight of the Fame of Jahangir) written in 1612. As the name suggests, this was a *praśasti* and was set in the imperial court in Agra, although it is not clear whether he presented this work to the emperor. Jahangir's referencing to a class of Hindi poets in the *Jahāngīrnāmā* in favourable terms might suggest that Braj language had a greater currency at his court.¹⁸ Shah Jahan's court hosted many Braj poets and musicians. Descendants of Tansen (whose Braj music was present at Akbar's court) like Lal Khan and his sons Khush-hal and Vishram, were present at the Mughal court. We come across names of Braj poets like Harinath who are known to be associated with Shah Jahan. The emperor was also said to have had encounters with Biharilal. Sundar, Kavindracarya Sarasvati, and Chintamani Tripathi are also among such poets of high esteem associated with Shah Jahan's court.¹⁹ While the extent of Aurangzeb's patronage to Braj poets is unclear, it is suggested that such patronage nevertheless continued during his reign, albeit encouraged more by the princes and nobility than by the emperor himself.²⁰ Aurangzeb's sons and grandsons were also said to be enthusiasts of Braj.²¹ Thus, the association of the Braj literary tradition with the Mughal political elite seems to have been a fairly long one. In an imperial hierarchy, Persian would have remained the first language, but Brajbhasha also found its place in the courts. At the same time, many Brajbhasha achievements came from courts other than that of Mughals, or away from royal courts at all.

[II]

Sūr sūr Tulsī śaśi, uḍagaṇa Keśavadas
*Ab ke kavi khadyota sama, jaha taha karata prakāśa.*²²

Sur is the Sun, Tulsī, the Moon; Keshavdas is the stars
*The rest are like fireflies, flickering here and there.*²³

The above anecdote throws light on the esteem of the two poets under consideration in our study. Surdas has been compared to the Sun, and Keshavdas to the stars. Tulsidas is often held as the gold standard of early Hindi literature and here both our poets are mentioned in the same breath as him, indeed Sur is placed on an even higher pedestal. There are other versions of this verse as well, one which reverses the position of the first two poets, that is, Sur as the Moon, and Tulsī as the Sun. Regardless of how we frame it, it is clear that Tulsī and Sur were the two brightest poets. Keshavdas, likened to the stars, was the only one even named alongside them. All others are painted in the same brush and are subsumed under "ab ke kavi" (the poets of today). In another version of this verse, "ab ke kavi" is replaced by "bāki sab," implying everyone else. Irrespective of with whom the comparison is being drawn, it is clear that alongside Tulsī, Surdas and Keshavdas are the highest of the literary elites. Being anecdotal, there are different versions of the above verse as well. However, this version seems the most logical.

The reason for starting this section of the paper with this verse and its analysis was to emphasise, one, the tallness of both the poets under our consideration, and two, to suggest a strand of similarity in their otherwise seemingly divergent lives and careers. Such similarities and differences shall be subsequently elaborated in this and the following sections.

The Blind Bhakta of Krishna

Ab tau yahai bāt man māni
Chāḍau nāhin Syām Syāmā kī Briṇḍāban rājdhānī
Bhramyau bahut laghu dhām bilokat chanbhaṅgur dukh-dāni
*Sarvopari ānaṇḍ akhaṇḍit Sūr maram lapiṭānī.*²⁴

¹⁸ Busch, "Hidden in Plain View," 279, 281.

¹⁹ Ibid, 285-294.

²⁰ Ibid, 294.

²¹ Ibid, 297.

²² This is a famous anecdotal verse in Brajbhasha, which does not seem to have been attributed to a particular author. For a mention about this verse, see, John Stratton Hawley, *The Memory of Love: Sūrdās Sings to Krishna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8. The transliteration of the verse here has been done by me to the best of my knowledge. I am grateful to my grandfather, a Hindi and Sanskrit literary enthusiast, for shedding more light on these few lines for me in a telephonic communication.

²³ Hawley loosely explains the meaning of this verse in this manner, without giving a word-by-word translation. The translation here is based on his one. See, *ibid*.

Now this alone is my heart's pleasure:
I shall not leave Vr̄ndāvan, Śyām and Śyāmā's royal domain.
I have wandered much, seeing lesser abodes—transient and grievous;
[but now] Sūr has embraced the inner truth of undivided and supreme bliss.²⁵

The above *pada* by Surdas might be an appropriate beginning point for talking about his life and the context in which he wrote, much of whose compositions centred around Krishna *bhakti*.

The legend about the poet's life is that he was born in 1478 to a Brahmin family. Blind at birth, he was still blessed with an inner vision through which he perceived the divinity of Krishna. He came in contact with Vallabh who led him to follow the *Bhāgvata Purāṇa* as a model for his compositions. It is said that upon his death, Sur claimed he perceived no difference between Krishna and Vallabha and that any of his verses could apply equally to both.²⁶ Of course, there are various versions explaining Surdas' blindness. Some tales say he was blind at birth, while another legend says that once Sur was granted a vision of Krishna and then asked the deity to take away his sight so that nothing he sees in the future might dilute the spectacle of the divine vision he had just witnessed.²⁷ Regardless of the circumstances of his blindness, what is more certain is his poetic and religious merit was widely acknowledged, both in his time and ours.

Surdas' authority has been attested in different ways. We noted the verse perhaps celebrating him as being higher than even Tulsidas. But there are many more examples. The court of Afghan ruler Islam Shah Suri, who displaced the Mughals for a brief period of time, was celebrated by the writer of the seventeenth-century text *Afsānah-i-Shāhān* (Tale of Kings), Muhammad Kabir, for having hosted accomplished poets like Surdas. Although the historicity of this supposed episode and even the whole text has been questioned, it nevertheless suggests that Surdas' fame was such that courts of rulers who were far removed from the poet's geographical or literary centres of influence also claimed his presence.²⁸ We had noted previously that Bhikharidas hailed Tulsi and Gang as two masters of poetry. That same text also mentions a long line of Braj poets and begins by taking the name of Surdas first (Keshavdas is mentioned second). Surdas' primary position might have been noted for his literary excellence.²⁹ The theologian Nabhadās and the poet Hariramvyas celebrated Surdas as the finest craftsman of the *pada*.³⁰ In another strain, the poet has been bestowed honour and authority by giving his works Sanskritic roots. This is the position of Vallabhites, followers of the theologian Vallabh whose disciple Sur supposedly was. The Vallabite narrative is that Sur's poems are essentially translations of the *Bhāgvata Purāṇa*, the Sanskrit text to which Vallabh was most deeply devoted and the contents of which were miraculously transmitted to the poet by his master. Thus, the Braj texts are given an implicit Sanskritic basis. Sanskrit, of course, was the tongue of the learned and the Gods, the language of the classics, signifying the high-culture. However, it has been suggested that Sur's verses did not simply copy the contents of the *Bhāgvata* and present them in a vernacular. His early verses are said to have contained theological positions very different from the *Purāṇa*.³¹

A further point can be made as well. As with some other vernacular texts, they often surpassed in terms of popularity the "original" Sanskrit text(s) which inspired them. The *Rāmāyaṇa* we most widely know and reproduce today is not the Sanskrit version of Valmiki; it is the *Rāmcharitmānas* of Tulsidas. In this case, the Sanskrit text is the parent text of Tulsi's work; that perhaps cannot be said about Sur's case, at least with the same level of confidence. However, Tulsi's classic is not celebrated because of its Sanskrit roots. It is celebrated because of its literary, devotional, and philosophical excellence, and because it made Lord Ram so deeply revered by the masses at a time when Krishna *bhakti* was the most prominent. Thus, Tulsi's work has been called "arguably the greatest ode to Lord Ram."³² Similarly, even if we say that Sur's *padas* were rooted in the Sanskrit *Bhāgvata*, their claim to fame cannot be attributed to just this fact. The literary and devotional value of the work cannot be discounted.

²⁴ Snell, *A Braj Bhāṣā Reader*, 84 (see No. 3). Snell has reproduced the *pada* in the Devanagari script. For the sake of uniformity, I am using the Roman equivalents to reproduce the *pada* here.

²⁵ Ibid, 85.

²⁶ Ibid, 38.

²⁷ See, Hawley, *The Memory of Love*, 12-14.

²⁸ Ibid, 19-20.

²⁹ Ibid, 20-21.

³⁰ Hawley, *Three Bakti Voices*, 185.

³¹ See, Hawley, *The Memory of Love*, 15-18.

³² A focussed study of Tulsi's magnum opus is, Pavan K Varma, *The Greatest Ode to Lord Ram: Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas; Selections & Commentaries* (Chennai: Westland, 2020).

Surdas' magnum opus is the *Sūrsāgar*, literally the 'Ocean of Sur'. This massive compilation has however not been composed solely by Surdas. It has been suggested that it is not a single chronological work in which every *pada* connects to the next. Even though its contents highlight the life journey of Krishna, it is argued that the earliest manuscripts did not arrange the verses sequentially to narrate the deity's life. The early manuscripts were thus in the form of anthologies.³³ Moreover, the collection grew over time. The oldest manuscript attributed to Sur is said to contain only 239 poems. Indeed, the compilation was called *Sūrsāgar* for the first time only in 1640 to refer to a manuscript that contained 795 poems. And by the nineteenth century, a manuscript attributed to Sur contained over 10,000 poems.³⁴ Thus, it has been suggested that while the original version of what eventually became the *Sūrsāgar* contained only some hundred verses, probably all composed by Surdas himself, over time many other poets also added to this compilation. Thus poems that were signed originally by other poets also joined the corpus in a modified form where the signature was that of Sur's. Thus, this was a gradually evolving "tradition" of poetry. It bore the name of Sur across its verses, the mark of his authority and legitimacy, but these were composed by other poets as well who would have probably wanted their own works to be bestowed the fame of Surdas.³⁵ It is however a moot point asking whether all these numerous verses were written by one poet. However, in identifying them as part of one tradition and even the works of one poet, the literary memory that speaks of and to these compositions recognises only one man, Surdas, as the poet who recreated the life of Krishna in this splendid manner and whose works are sung to inspire devotion and love for the deity. Many others who followed this same pattern became a part of a whole tradition identified synonymously with Surdas.

The Life and Times of Keshavdas

It is perhaps a testament to the acclaim of Keshavdas that his name keeps coming up in the lists of greatest poets even when one is not focussing on him exclusively. As shall be noted subsequently, his works have been considered pioneering in many aspects and are celebrated for their literary brilliance but also for their political awareness and historical consciousness.

There is a lot of variation in dating Keshavdas' birth, as can be expected. Vijaypal Singh has dated his birth to *samvat* 1618,³⁶ which in the English system corresponds to the year 1562. However, estimates even range from *samvat* 1508 to *samvat* 1624,³⁷ that is, from 1452 to 1568 AD; a range of over a hundred years. The exact date of the poet's birth is not much of our concern anyway. However, going by the most recent studies, his birth has been dated to 1555 AD by most.³⁸ What is undoubted is that Keshavdas of Orchha (in present day north-western Madhya Pradesh) flourished around the late sixteenth to early parts of the seventeenth century. A *Sanādhyā* Brahmin pandit by birth, his was a family of elite scholars. His distant ancestors were bestowed the title of *paṇḍitrāja* (king among scholars) from the Tomar kings. His grandfather Krishnadatta Mishra was under the employ of King Rudrapratap, the founder of the Orchha kings. The poet's father, Kashinath Mishra, was a master of Sanskrit *śāstras* (sciences) and was honoured at the court of the king Madhukar Shah, son of Rudrapratap, who reigned from 1554-92. Keshavdas' brother, Balabhadra Mishra was also a scholar of Hindi and wrote books.³⁹ In the second part of his *Kavipriyā*, Keshavdas reconstructs in detail his own family history. Writing in the *dohā* meter, the poet tells us about his lineage in the verses number four to sixteen of this section. Starting from very early ancestors like Kumbhvar, Devanand, Jayadev, Dinkar (who was titled *paṇḍitrāja*), he traces his lineage to his grandfather, father, elder brother, himself, and his younger brother Kalyana.⁴⁰ Clearly, Keshavdas' family was one of scholars, intellectuals and men of culture. This makes it all the more interesting that Keshavdas chose to write in Brajhasha and not Sanskrit. He was well-versed in Sanskrit, and it was the language of the classics, but he chose the language of the people to compose his works. This break from tradition and turning to a language not considered as high and refined as Sanskrit led him to even call himself *maṇḍmatī* or dim-witted, especially because even the servants in his family spoke Sanskrit.⁴¹

³³ Hawley, *The Memory of Love*, 24.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, 25-26; Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 28.

³⁶ Vijaypal Singh, *Keśav aur Unkā Sāhitya* (Delhi: Rajpal and Sons, 1961), 33.

³⁷ For a brief overview of various dates, see, K.P. Bahadur, *The Rasikpriyā of Keshavadāsa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1972), xxxi. Bahadur himself seems to be dating Keshavdas' birth to *samvat* 1612, i.e., 1556 AD.

³⁸ See, Busch, "Hidden in Plain View," 277; Sharma, "Keshavadasa and His Braj Poet," 399.

³⁹ See, Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings: The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 23-24; Bahadur, *The Rasikpriyā*, xxxii. Sandhya Sharma identifies Keshavdas' father as a court poet in Madhukar Shah's court named Krishna Datta, not Kashinath Mishra. Cf. Sharma, "Keshavadasa and His Braj Poet," 399.

⁴⁰ Vishwanath Prasad Mishra, ed. *Keśava Granthāvalī*, Volume I, 3rd ed. (Allahabad: Hindustani Academy, 1990), vv. 4-16 on 99-100.

⁴¹ Busch, *Poetry of Kings*, 23.

Keshav's family also had a history of royal patronage as has been hinted above. The poet's two most famous patrons were Indrajit Singh and Bir Singh, both from Orchha. Indrajit Singh was the younger brother of Ram Shah, the ruler of Orchha. One of Keshav's earliest and most famous works, the *Rasikpriyā*, was composed for this patron. Bir Singh, famous as Bir Singh Bundela, was Indrajit's brother and the most famous Orchha ruler. The work *Vīrsimhdevcarit* (1607) was composed in honour of Bir Singh. Amar Singh, son of Maharana Pratap and ruler of Mewar has also been suggested as a possible patron of Keshav, in whose honour the poet dedicated some lines of his *Kavipriyā*.⁴²

The political background in which Keshavdas wrote had to do a lot with his compositions. It is true that he emphasised and eulogised his own native place and its rivers, forests, etc., and his own caste.⁴³ However, his works were also rooted majorly in the contemporary politics of the time. It has been suggested by Allison Busch that taken together, the *Ratnabāvanī* (52 Verses About Ratan, around 1583), the *Vīrsimhdevcarit* (Deeds of Bir Singh Deo), and the *Jahāngīrjascandrikā* (Moonlight of the Fame of Jahangir, 1612) form a series of chronologically connected historical poems, detailing the subsumption of the state of Orchha into the Mughal fold; tracing the situations described in these works helps reconstruct the penetration of Mughal power, initially from occasional incursions to ultimately the establishment and acceptance of a new political order.⁴⁴

Differences Abound

Thus, towards the end of this section it can be said that Keshavdas and Surdas, both poets par excellence, were very different in their own ways. Both were Brahmins but the trajectories their careers followed were vastly different. First, we know more about Keshavdas' biography and family history through his own works. He was born in a line of scholars who had been associated with royal courts since generations. Surdas by contrast does not give us much about his own family history. We know he had some contacts with the Vallabhite sect but his identity did not stop there. Indeed, as has been stressed before, reconstructing Sur's life and analysing his works strictly through Vallabhite sources does not lead us to productive results always.

Second, Sur was not a court poet like Keshav. Even though we noted his name appearing in the list of poets who supposedly performed at royal courts far distant from the geographical regions associated with him, those lists and the works they appear in are not of high historic value and were likely only used to bolster courtly image rather than provide facts. The legend about Sur's encounter with Akbar and him rejecting the emperor's wish to perform at the court may or may not be true but it does throw light on a tendency of distance from royal courts that we can infer about Surdas. His work was instead for the masses, to be sung, enjoyed and used to express their devotion and love to Lord Krishna, and of course was an expression of his own devotion for the deity. Keshavdas instead enjoyed royal patronage like his family members before him and composed various works dedicated to various rulers, as noted above, and also to poets and scholars. Indeed, he is held as a pioneer of Hindi *rīti* or court poetry for his excellence in that literary field.

Third and as an extension to the previous point, Keshav's work speaks a lot to the political situations around him, while Sur's does not. Not all of Keshav's work is a historical source of facts, of course. Yet, there is an awareness in him of the contemporary scenarios and his works bear a mark of such situations. Surdas by contrast seems to be removed from the politics of his day and age even though it's not as if his period was devoid of any political dynamism. For one, his time period was marked by the transition from the Delhi Sultanate to the Mughal empire and would have seen three Mughal emperors sit on the throne. Yet, Sur's *padas* remain more devotional than political.

Lastly, we know which works Keshavdas produced and when. There is clear evidence for that. The compositions attributed to him did not expand enormously over time. With Surdas, we have an entire literary tradition with its constituent verses growing significantly over time. Thus, how we read and interpret the works of both these poets is very different. Questions of authorship have to be negotiated while doing so.

[III]

As mentioned above, Surdas and Keshavdas seem very different from each other. But, can we still make an effort to find elements of commonality in their works? This section now takes a look at some of the works produced by both these poets and tries to arrive at such points of similarity.

⁴² Bahadur, *The Rasikpriyā*, xxxvi-xxxvii.

⁴³ Ibid, xxxv.

⁴⁴ Allison Busch, "Literary Responses to the Mughal Imperium: The Historical Poems of Keśavdās," *South Asia Research* 25, no. 1 (May 2005): 32-33. Accessed 30 March, 2020. doi:[10.1177/0262728005051606](https://doi.org/10.1177/0262728005051606).

Prestige and Influence

The most obvious point of similarity between Surdas and Keshavdas is their enormous influence and the prestige their compositions brought not only to their own persons but also to the broader ‘institutions’ or cultures with which they were associated.

Keshavdas in his association with the Orchha court fulfilled many different roles of a poet and intellectual, but also political and moral guide, friend, and guru to the rulers of the kingdom. This was a time when Mughal power was overshadowing the political sovereignty of many regional kingdoms. It has been suggested that the latter however managed to retain some forms of sovereignty in their cultural and literary achievements, which is where someone like Keshavdas became important.⁴⁵ In his personal capacity as a poet too, his works were hugely influential. He has been held as a pioneer of *rīti* literature by many modern scholars, as noted earlier. Some of his works were unprecedented in not just their stylistic achievements but also in elevating Brajbhasha to the level of an established language for literary expression replete with theories, principles, and a system of aesthetics. As a scholar, Keshav composed the first comprehensive body of classical aesthetics theory in a vernacular form in north India through his three *rītigranths*: the *Rasikpriyā*, the *Kavipriyā*, and the *Chandmālā*; his contributions have been understood as a foundational piece in the “birth of Hindi classicism”.⁴⁶

The influence of Surdas was different in some ways but some essential points of similarity can also be made. We have noted how he became the progenitor of a whole tradition of *bhakti* writings devoted to Krishna, so much so that thousands of verses came to be added to the *Sūrsāgar* corpus over time, in all likelihood by a host of other poets who claimed their poetry in the name of Sur to make it all the more glorious. He inspired a folk tradition, which was in the very nature of his poetry. They tell the stories of Krishna in his various stages of life and of his divine deeds. Even now, his devotional verses are sung in temples and other religious settings. In this regard, Surdas is different from Keshavdas. Unlike the ‘star’ of Braj literature, the supposedly blind poet did not produce scholarly texts on poetics meant to be studied and understood by younger poets and scholars. And unlike Sur, Keshav’s texts while meant to be accessible to common masses (“I have written in Bhasha [the vernacular] so that even a fool can grasp the hidden doctrine, measureless, unfathomable, without end”)⁴⁷ could not have been sung by groups of devotional *bhaktas*. There is obviously no *Keśavasāgar*, or Keshav’s Ocean.

Yet the essential similarity remains, well, same. Both were able to inspire whole literary traditions and cultures in their own ways. Even though Sur was not the only one writing devotional *padas*, and nor was Keshav the first to write a *rītigranth*,⁴⁸ the influence of both the poets in their respective fields was often much greater than their peers.

Although this similarity is not directly concerned with the literary aspects of the poets’ compositions, it is an important result of their works. However, this is also a somewhat generic point of similarity. Such conclusions can be drawn for many. Tulsidas can similarly be said to be essentially similar to Sur and Keshav because his *Rāmcaritmānas* is one of the best known Indian literary texts of any period. Thus, even though the influence and prestige of Sur and Keshav *does* make them very similar in one respect, we need more concrete bases to qualify this similarity.

Krishna Imagery and Vaishnava Influence

Amid the study of Keshavdas’ courtly compositions and in an effort to find the historical symbolism from his works, one might overlook the rich and illustrious Radha-Krishna imagery he draws upon to exemplify the scholarly principles in his *rītigranths*. Thus, in his *Rasikpriyā*, Keshavdas explains Sanskrit-based literary models in a vernacular rendition and illustrates the theoretical definition verses (or *lakṣaṇ*) by using original poetry as an example.⁴⁹ As a result of Vaishnava flourish in the sixteenth century, the Sanskrit literary models were being increasingly explained using such related imagery. Hence, *śṛṅgāra* or passion, which was considered the leading *rasa* in Sanskrit poetics, was illustrated more and more by the story of Radha and Krishna, being suffused with *bhakti* or devotional themes as well.⁵⁰ It is suggested that in choosing Krishna and Radha as the *nāyaka* (hero) and the *nāyikā* (heroine) respectively of his poems, Keshavdas was refining the *Rasikpriyā*; his poems were spiritually exalted and at the same time lost “nothing of love’s delight.”⁵¹ For instance, the poet explains the definitions of ‘frustrated love’ as a literary motif and which includes four kinds of separations that

⁴⁵ Busch, *Poetry of Kings*, 29.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 32.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 55.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 33.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Bahadur, *The Rasikpriyā*, xxxviii.

can happen between lovers: separation after initial infatuation, that due to a sorrowful incident, that due to a quarrel, and that which happens because of a journey away from home.⁵² The poet then proceeds to give an example of this 'frustrated love' after Radha's initial infatuation:

*Don't show me flowers—without Hari they are oppressive thorns.
Take away the garland, it upsets me as though it were a snake.
Don't fan me with fly-whisks or fans.
Keshav says, a fragrant breeze maddens me like a whirlwind.
Don't apply sandal paste, it's akin to scorching my body.
I don't want the vermilion powder, it's a fire to my limbs.
And don't feed me any betel, friend—it's poison to me.*⁵³

An example of the pangs of separation can be found, with strikingly similar imagery, in a verse by Surdas:

*That's the way my days are now.
What am I to do, friend? It's really no one's fault
what's happened since Hari turned his loving eyes away.
The musk, the sandal, the camphor, the saffron—
all of them, always, like servants to me—
And the lazy breeze, the moon and tender flowers:
now they have a harsh and vengeful look.
The koels, peacocks, and crested cuckoos
to whom I've given shelter in my garden
Babble night and day as they please.
I forbid it, but they pay no heed.
The saplings I've nurtured with my own hands—watered,
watered into full-grown trees:
Tell them, Sūr, they obscure my line of vision
by sprouting disastrous leaves.*⁵⁴

Sur's verse appears to be highlighting a more permanent separation; indeed, Hawley has presented it in the chapter titled 'Krishna Departs for Mathura, Never to Return' of his work cited here. However, this verse can be said to fall under the broad purview of the frustrated love that Keshav elaborated in his *Rasikpriyā*. Interestingly, Hawley also allows an interpretation of this verse as perhaps the voice of a *gopī* saddened by Krishna turning his attention from her to another woman (and admits that if this is the case, this verse should feature in a different chapter of his collection).⁵⁵ Thus, it might not even be a permanent separation but one very close to what Keshav's verse mentioned earlier would denote. This is further underscored by the very similar imagery. The phenomena and objects ideally associated with love—the breeze, the sandalwood—are now a source of anguish as a result of the longing left in the speaker's heart caused by the separation from Krishna. This is not only highlighted richly in both verses but forms the underlying substance of both. In one verse, flowers become oppressive thorns and the garland a snake, while in the other tree leaves are disastrous because they obstruct the even the sight of a separated lover. Moreover, even though both verses obviously employ erotic imagery, they are also devotional because of the clear identification of Hari, and hence not generic to any romantic poetry.⁵⁶

Again, similar usage and substance is found in another one of Sur's verses:

*It all seems something else these days—
Now that our enchanting Cowherd has gone,
everything in Braj has changed.
Our homes have turned to caverns, lions' lairs,
and the beast is panting for its prey.
You know how they say, friend, that moonbeams are cool*

⁵² Busch, *Poetry of Kings*, 34.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Hawley, *The Memory of Love*, 111.

⁵⁵ See, Note 192.2 in *ibid*, 227.

⁵⁶ See, Busch, *Poetry of Kings*, 35.

and soothing, but we've been scalded instead,
And no matter how much we women shower each other
with water mixed with kumkum and sandalwood powder
And musk from the deer, it all comes to naught
in face of the fever of being apart.
We've heard that love is a life-giving vine,
but now, without Sūr's Lord, it bears a poison fruit,
And deprived of the light from Hari's lunar face
the lotus of our hearts declines to bloom.⁵⁷

It seems as though the verses from Sur could just as well be incorporated in Keshav's scholarly works to illustrate the *lakṣaṇ*. Similarly, many other verses can also be produced to elaborate the point being made. Both Keshavdas and Surdas rely heavily on Vaishnava influenced traditions about Krishna (and Radha). They are the main hero and heroine of many of these verses. Keshav uses them as an ideal couple to illustrate his literary principles about the description of love, and Sur constructs a narrative around a significant event in his lord's life. Both are imbued with devotional thought.

Questioning Authority

Another such similarity, and a fascinating one considering the genres of both poets, is how they dealt with their lord—either the deity or the patron king. It is believed that court poetry is sycophantic and the only job of a court poet is to eulogise his patron. Thus, it has been suggested that *rīti* or court poetry came to be viewed by both colonial and nationalist critics as decadent or devoid of any higher purpose other than pleasing the rich.⁵⁸ However, this understanding of courtly poetry and panegyrics has been questioned in many different cultural and literary contexts as well. In analysing Persian and Arabic *qaṣīdah* or panegyric poetry, Julie Scott Meisami argued that panegyric poets were not, as is often assumed, “frustrated artists” or “second-rate hacks” simply inflating the egos of their patrons; they were instead moral perceptors who presented an idealised form of monarchy to which the monarch should aspire. The ritual function of panegyrics—being read aloud on ceremonial occasions, their “repetitious nature” and so on—allowed the poets to present these ideals for the monarchs to emulate, thus combining both “encomiastic” and “didactic” elements in such poetry.⁵⁹ These observations can be extended to our area of consideration as well, especially in the case of someone like Keshavdas who was, as we noted, a guru, friend, and advisor to the Orchha kings alongside being a court poet. Thus, we see strands of didactic elements in Keshavdas' works.

A key example of this comes from his *Vīrsimhdevcarit*, composed in honour of Bir Singh Deo Bundela and almost at the same time as his accession to the Orchha throne. Bir Singh had captured the Orchha throne by rebelling against his brother Ram Shah. He had allied with Prince Salim (the future Jahangir) when he set up an alternate court at Allahabad opposed to his father and then emperor, Akbar. Bir Singh assassinated Akbar's famed court chronicler Abul Fazl at the behest of Salim. When Salim became Jahangir (that is, ascended the Mughal throne), he backed Bir Singh's takeover of Orchha with an imperial edict.⁶⁰ This conflict for power between brothers and the assassination committed by his patron was not lost on Keshavdas. The poet frames this story in the beginning as a dialogue between the personified traits of Greed and Generosity, however without clarifying which trait Ram Shah and Bir Singh represented.⁶¹ Moreover, the *nāyaka* Bir Singh's armies are called *nisācargana* or ‘demon forces’ in one instance, while Ram Shah's general is called Hanuman, which by extension might imply that Ram Shah was the legendary Lord Ram, while the person he was fighting, the poet's own patron Bir Singh, Ravan.⁶² A similar tendency is seen when Keshavdas deals with the episode of Bir Singh assassinating Abul Fazl, which would have certainly been an uncomfortable event to reconcile in his work: a *nāyaka* could not have been an assassin. Keshav at first shows Bir Singh trying to dissuade Salim from moving forward with the assassination. Abul Fazl is compared to a demon (*asura*) while Bir Singh to a Vishnu *avatār*. However, later the poet glorifies Abul Fazl abundantly, highlighting his spirituality and glorious achievements, and also details Akbar's grief at the loss of his friend. Thus, Keshav sympathises with Akbar and Abul Fazl, almost completely leaving Bir Singh out of the narrative for some time.⁶³

⁵⁷ Hawley, *The Memory of Love*, 113.

⁵⁸ Busch, “Questioning the Tropes,” 35.

⁵⁹ Julie Scott Meisami, “The Poetry of Praise: The Qasidah and Its Uses,” in *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 41-46.

⁶⁰ Busch, “Literary Responses,” 38.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

It has been suggested that these poetic devices could be a way for Keshavdas to critique the politics of his patron, something he probably could not have done in person because of his role as a loyal court poet.⁶⁴ There are other possibilities as well, but this seems like a logical one, especially if we extend Meisami's analysis to our case. Keshav's account is not devoid of praises for his patron; far from it. But, if his role indeed was to act as a moral adviser, he would have needed to touch upon those acts of his patron that were not suited to the high ideals to which he should have aspired. Not possible to perform this task in person because of the conventions of courtly behaviour, a masterful poet like Keshavdas could have resorted to his poetry to fulfil this job.

Surdas also critiques, or at least expresses dissatisfaction with, his lord. His lord isn't a monarch who patronised him to write eulogies in his honour; his lord is the God himself. One might expect a clear-cut supplication and humility to characterise all of Sur's verses about his lord. After all, a *bhakta* is much lower in hierarchy than the lord and possibly lacks any authority to express dissatisfaction with him. However, consider the following verses:

*They say you're so giving, so self-denying, Rām,
That you offered Sudāmā the four goals of life
and to your guru you granted a son.
Vibhīṣaṇ: you gave him the land of Lanka
to honor his early devotion to you.
Rāvaṇ: his were the ten heads you severed
simply by reaching for your bow.
Prahlaḍ: you justified the claim he made.
Indra, leader of the gods, you made a sage.
Sūrdās: how could you be so harsh with him—
leaving him without his very eyes?⁶⁵*

Clearly, Surdas shows signs of disenchantment from his revered deity. The same God (the verse mentions the deeds of both Ram and Krishna, and even other deities, but attributes them to the same being as all those deities are considered *avatārs* of Vishnu) who blessed his devotees, and even demons, with such magnanimity has left another one of his devoted *bhaktas*, Sur himself, unblessed and blind. "How could you be so harsh with him," is certainly a strongly-worded complaint, almost a rebuke.

And in a similar vein:

*What did I ever not do?
Think of my actions one by one
And tell me how you can advertise yourself
as Purifier of the Fallen.
Ever since I was born into the world
and called a living being,
Aside from the evils and errors I've done,
I've simply done nothing at all.
Those who are virtuous, obedient, pure—
how can you help but be drawn toward them?
But to shield someone burdened with fear
proves the lordliness of the Lord indeed.
Oh beautiful dark one, lotus-eyed,
who knows us all inside,
What kind of prayer can be made to you by Sūr,
who is cruel,
who is crooked,
who craves?⁶⁶*

This verse also shows dissatisfaction with the lord, but is more of a plea of help at the same time. This is different from the previous verse as here Sur adopts a more supplicant and humble tone. He paints himself as

⁶⁴ Ibid, 41.

⁶⁵ Hawley, *The Memory of Love*, 181.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 180.

a crooked desperate man who is not virtuous or obedient or pure. But he asks why has the lord, who is known as the “purifier of the fallen” (*patit pāvan*), not purified or saved this fallen poet-sinner.⁶⁷

The verses of both Sur and Keshav are instances where the higher authority is being critiqued, or at least questioned, by those below them. Sur questions his lord, Keshav questions his patron king. This may seem strange intuitively, but it is not so. It is *because* the devotee loves his lord that he can make a complaint. The common wisdom of ‘you get mad at the people you love’ seems to be at play here too. A person not devoted to the lord does not complain; he doesn’t expect anything in the first place. However, the poet here, who is intensely devoted to the lord expects to be blessed for his devotion. When he does not get that blessing, he feels frustrated, disappointed, and disenchanting, and complains to the lord. A similar logic is at play when Keshavdas critiques his patron king. Someone not concerned with the affairs of the state has no reason to critique the bad politics of the king. But, Keshav’s position compels him to do so. He is subservient to the king, but at the same time as an adviser he must question his patron when he goes wrong. It is *because* of his position, and not in spite of it, that he is able to present this critique.

The point here then is this: in verses of both these poets, we find examples of authority being questioned and somewhat subverted. Both are different in many ways—who they question, why they question them, in what capacity this questioning happens—but both question this authority all the same. The underlying logic for this is not a maligned intention to challenge and displace this authority. It comes from a place of devotion and loyalty. Sur obviously could not be malignant towards his master, and Keshav could not have evil intentions against his patron king. This similarity between Surdas and Keshavdas can also be extrapolated to broader frames of *bhakti* and *rīti* literature, which have been questioned by many others as well. One, there is a similarity between both genres in the hierarchy persisting in the poet-subject relations: the poet, be it the *bhakti* saint or the court poet, is subservient to the authority of their overlords, who are also usually the subject of the compositions. Two, it is because of this very position of hierarchical relation and the closeness between the poet and the lord that the former is able to question and critique the latter. Third, both genres are not very watertight to begin with; for instance, Keshav uses ample *bhakti* imagery in not only his *rītigranth*s but also in his own *rīti* compositions such as the *Vīrsimhdevcarit* as well.

Some Other Commonalities

Yet other similarities exist between both poets. Consider the following verse in the *Vīrsimhdevcarit*, in which Keshavdas describes the beauty of the city of Jahangirpur (as Orchha came to be called), specifically the 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 . . .*⁶⁸

And now, this one by Surdas, describing the Ganges river:

*From the lotus of those beloved feet, it is nectar
To divert the bee of a mind of impure thoughts
from the dulling liquor of the senses.*

⁶⁷ See, Note 397.8, in *ibid*, 269.

⁶⁸ Busch, “Literary Responses,” 44.

*It flows with less impurity than even ambrosia,
the liquid of deathlessness. Its form is inner joy.
Its great cooling powers were known by Shiva
when he bore it on his head, casting aside the moon
And caring nothing for mountains or snakes
or the duel in which gods and anti-gods were bound.
In all three worlds, says Sūr, that River-of-the-Gods
is immanent, immortal, and so free.⁶⁹*

The obvious similarity is that both describe rivers in glowing terms. But it is deeper than that. Both poets use the rivers and their beauty and divinity to make larger points about the glory of the city and the God. Keshav uses the imagery of the river to paint the picture of a perfect king and a perfect kingdom. The river keeps the unpleasantness, like the hot summers, out of Bir Singh's realm. It is suggested that the "effacer of the world's care" as a descriptive for the river also serves as an analogy to the expectations that Bir Singh's subjects would have from his rule.⁷⁰ Similarly, Sur uses the imagery of the sacred Ganges to not only eulogise the river itself, but also Vishnu, and specifically his feet, from which the river is said to flow.⁷¹ Thus, both poets use the imagery of rivers to underscore the beauty, divinity, and perfection of more abstract concepts. Of course, imagery of nature is not specific to either Sur or Keshav; it has deep roots in Sanskrit *mahākāvya* traditions. But this point only serves to reinforce the deeper similarities of *bhakti* and *rīti* literature in terms of the influence of Sanskrit literary principles on both genres. The same principle is at work in another one of Sur's verses, also eulogising both the Ganges and Krishna:

*A necklace of pearls to captivate the mind
Glistens on the beautiful chest of Śyām—
a Ganges descending from Himalayan heights to earth.
Its banks are his biceps; its whirlpools, Bhṛgu's scar;
and its oh so lovely waves, his sandal-paste designs.
Fish shimmer brightly in the sparkle of his jewels:
they've left their lakes to come and join
his earring-crocodiles.
Sūr says, a lovely sacred thread flows down his chest
as if within the stream there were
a yet more splendid stream,
And the conch, disk, club, and lotus in his hands
are ganders come to rest on his lovely lotus pond.⁷²*

And here again, when Keshavdas describes Jahangir's cities to mark his ideal rule in his *Jahāngīrjascandrika*:

*In Jahangir's cities the only thunderous sound is that of a storm rolling in
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 Ṣeṣanaga, holding up the earth.
The people are all able-bodied; says Keṣavdās,
The only odd-shaped things are the impenetrable labyrinthine fortresses.
On hilltops all you see are temples.
Jahangir's rule is ideal in every respect.⁷³*

⁶⁹ Hawley, *The Memory of Love*, 196.

⁷⁰ Busch, "Literary Responses," 45.

⁷¹ See, Note 432.1-432.6, in Hawley, *The Memory of Love*, 279-280.

⁷² Ibid, 90.

⁷³ Busch, "Literary Responses," 47.

Lastly, another point of similarity can also be made between Sur and Keshav, and more broadly also about *bhakti* and *rīti* poetry. Often, elements traditionally associated with one of these genres permeate into and are found in the other as well. For instance, a key element of court poetry is the description of courtly features and the valourisation of the king in battle. After all, bravery in battle is a hallmark of a strong ruler. However, such descriptions are not at all limited to *rīti* literature. Consider these verses by Sur:

*Mādhav, in anger, took the wheel in his hand.
Abandoning the word of the Veda, his own promise,
he did what would please his devotee.
He stepped from his chariot to earth, all astir,
and the moment his foot touched the ground he ran.
The earth could not endure the weight
and shuddered fearfully, as if deranged.
His upper garment slipped down his limbs
and as he lifted his vast, strong arm
It revealed a torso radiant with sweat and blood—
a thundercloud raining pearls and rubies.
Sūr says, when Brahmā saw that fine warrior
and the discus he held, called Fine Vision [Sudarśan],
He fell into confusion, as if this were a new creation
and he a baby, lotus-born upon an umbilical stem.⁷⁴*

*The way his yellow garments fluttered,
The wheel in his hand, how swiftly he ran—
I'll never forget how he appeared
When he stepped from his chariot to earth, all astir.
With bits of dust smeared through his hair he seemed
Like a lion emerging from a mountain lair
on sensing some great, mad elephant.
The same Gopāl who fulfilled my vow,
who brushed aside the Vedic sense of right—
This is the one who's coming to my aid:
such a Lord, says Sūr, and yet so near.⁷⁵*

Both verses talk about the same event from different perspectives. This event is when Krishna in the *Mahābhārata* war, broke his vow (of not wielding a weapon) because of Bhishma, who had himself taken a vow to make Krishna fight in the battle. Thus, the deity broke his own vow to honour the vow of his devotee (Bhishma). The first verse described the event through the perspective of Brahma watching the battle while the second from that of Bhishma himself. Note the vivid imagery in describing Krishna in battle. These glorify him as a warrior, whose skills were divine to begin with. Another even more graphically vivid description of a deity in battle (in this case, Ram) can be seen in the following verse of Surdas:

*Today Rām is raging in battle,
And Brahmā and his company have mounted their chariots—
gods come to witness the fray.
Rām has arrayed his cloud-dark body in godlike armor;
he's set his bow, Sāraṅg, in his hand;
He's purified his arrows, straightened them all,
and fastened his quiver to his waist.
Oceans rumble; Śeṣ's hood trembles;
the wind is crippled to a hush;
Indra laughs, while Shiva smiles and weeps
to see that what he's promised cannot be.
Earth and sky and the directions melt to one
as arrows fill the air like so many rays of sun,
Announcing, as it were, the ending of the world,*

⁷⁴ Hawley, *The Memory of Love*, 160.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 161.

when at a single time the twelve suns rise.
Flags, flagpoles, parasols, and chariots break—
bows, shields, swords, and armor;
Brilliant warriors burn, as in a forest fire
trees are stripped of branches and leaves.
Splashes of blood spatter to the sky
as arrows hit elephants and horses:
It looks like a city where suddenly a great fire
leaps from the straw-carriers' houses.
Headless corpses rise and stagger about in fear,
awakened by burns. They try to flee
While jackals circle, dig for heads from the heap,
snatch them, and chase away.
The fury of Raghupati stokes the blaze,
the sighs of Sītā are the breeze,
And Rāvaṇ's family, stubborn warriors all,
like a forest of thick bamboo
Turns in a second to ash, as if someone
had touched a flame to old, discarded clothes.
Sūrdās's Lord, with the power of his massive arms,
has smashed them in an instant to ants.⁷⁶

Thus, it is important to note that *bhakti* does not only imply worshipping a deity in abstract or praying to them with humble submission. It also involves glorifying the bravery of the deity in battle. Conversely, *rīti* texts constantly rely on divine imagery to drive the point home about the bravery and prowess of the kings, for instance by comparing the patrons to deities. In that regard too, both the poets and their broader genres are quite similar.

A last brief point can also be made here. Surdas was not a contemporary of Keshav. He lived and wrote before the poet from Orchha. However, as the *Sūrsāgar* contains works of poets other than Surdas who probably wrote many years after him, it is possible that some were contemporaries of Keshav or lived after him. In that case, they might have studied the scholarly works produced by Keshav and might have implemented his principles, which could be an explanation for these similarities. And even if we consider 'the' Sur who would have lived and wrote before Keshav, it is likely that his *bhakti* compositions would have influenced Keshav's own writings. Thus, although difficult to prove conclusively, it might be that the traditions and works of both Sur and Keshava influenced each other in some or the other way.

[IV]

Conclusion

Thus, towards the end, some final observations can be made. At a fundamental level, Brajbhasha poetry, which became a major medium of Hindi literary expression in the sixteenth century, was intensely rich in its breadth and scope, and produced poets par excellence. This cultural efflorescence coincided with and was influenced significantly by the growth of the Vaishnava traditions in the Braj region, which incidentally was very close to the centres of Mughal power. The Mughals, who were also spreading their spheres of influence in this period, had a very curious relationship with Braj literature. Even though it was not a language of the administration and remained secondary to Persian in an imperial hierarchy, many emperors, nobles and other political elites not only patronised Braj poets and musicians, but some also produced literature themselves. Through the lives of Surdas and Keshavdas—two poets heralded by observers contemporary and modern as two of the tallest pillars of Brajbhasha literature—we can arrive at points of similarity between the works of even those poets whose careers seem to be widely dissimilar. And drawing on their examples, we can draw broader conclusions about the similarities in two genres of Hindi literature that were traditionally understood to be not only chronologically and stylistically very different but also morally hierarchised: *bhakti* and *rīti* literature. Of course, these two genres are not the same, and this paper does not suggest so. It does, however, seek to extend the line of inquiry that questions this supposed dichotomy between these two genres by relying on the study of two 'celestial' examples from each genre. This dichotomy is hence questioned by pointing to similarities in the works of Surdas and Keshavdas, especially in terms of: one, their own popularity and influence; two, Vaishnava and Sanskrit influences on their works; three, the well-intentioned questioning of authority of their respective masters through their poetry; four, use of elements traditionally associated with the other genre in their own

⁷⁶ Ibid, 171.

compositions; and five, use of common elements such as nature imagery to symbolise and glorify more abstract and broader concepts. To conclude, I posit that in any thematic study of Hindi literature, should themes such as the ones mentioned above be employed as frames of reference, not only would Surdas and Keshavdas be prominently featured but might also be mentioned in similar breaths.

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