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Krishna's Neglected Responsibilities: Religious devotion and social critique in eighteenth-century North India[*]

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Abstract

This article examines the literary strategies employed by a devotional poet who wrote about recent events in the eighteenth century, in order to shed light on contemporary notions of social responsibility. Taking the poetic treatment of Ahmad Shah Abdali's invasion of North India and the sacking of Vrindavan in 1757 as its primary focus, the article will discuss how political and theological understandings of lordship converged at a popular level, such that a deity could be called to account as a neglectful landlord as well as venerated in a *bhakti* context. It examines the redaction of tropes inherited from both *vaisnava* literature and late Mughal ethical thought, and considers the parallels between the *Harikala Beli*, a Braj Bhasha poem, and immediately contemporary developments in Urdu literature, particularly the *shahr ashob* genre. As such, it uses poetic responses to traumatic events as a guide to the interaction between multiple intellectual systems concerned with human and divine expectations and obligations.

Introduction

When a poet is dedicated to the timeless experience of the divine, how might he go about writing about current affairs?

[*] I am indebted to Jayesh Khandelval for granting me access to the unpublished Braj texts from the Ras Bharati Sansthan used in this article. I am grateful to Imre Bangha for first telling me about the *Harikala Beli*, and for his guidance in its interpretation. Translations in this article are my own, unless otherwise attributed. Thanks are also due to Rosalind O'Hanlon, Gavin Flood, Francesca Orsini, Muzaffar Alam, Carla Petievich, John Stratton Hawley, Allison Busch, and Katherine Butler Schofield. Needless to say, any mistakes are my own. Research for this article was kindly supported by the European Research Council, the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (UK), and the Spalding Trust.

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Eighteenth-century Indian authors developed various forms of social commentary and literary responses to recent history. This entailed both innovative genres such as the Urdu *shahr ashob* ('the city's misfortune') and the nuanced reconfiguration of historical narratives in Persian, which aimed to provide relevant 'warnings' for contemporary readers and rulers[1] or to underline the authoritative status of the writers themselves.[2] Beyond the circles of urban poets or *nawabi* bureaucrats, however, we become less familiar with pre-colonial literary strategies for social critique.

This is especially true of writers from religious communities, such as the *bhakti* cults of Mathura and Vrindavan: it is often tacitly assumed that such intellectuals had a purely theological outlook and would not engage critically with the ephemeral world of politics and society around them, unless to eulogize their recent saints or to enter into some sectarian contest.[3] This article will indicate the inadequacies of such an assumption by examining the *Harikala Beli* ('The Song of Hari's Art'), a work from 1760 written in the Braj Bhasha dialect of Old Hindi. Written in the wake of Ahmed Shah Abdali's recurring invasions of northern India, and in particular the massacre and pillage in 1757 of Vrindavan by his army, the poem describes recent atrocities in lucid detail, comments on the trials of the town's refugees, and situates these traumatic events in the wider political context of Mughal decline. The author of this extraordinary work, Caca Hit Vrindavandas (*circa* 1700–*circa* 1787), is generally remembered as a *bhakti* poet, and to this day members of his sect, the Radhavallabh Sampraday, use his

[1] See, for example, the *'Ibratnama* ('Book of Warning') of Fakir Khair ud Din Muhammad (d. 1827), portions of which are translated in Elliot, H.M. and Dowson, J. (1877). *The History of India, as Told by its Own Historians: The Muhammadan Period*, Trübner, London, Vol. 8, pp. 237–254.

[2] Chatterjee, K. (1998). History as Self-Representation: The Recasting of a Political Tradition in Late Eighteenth-Century Eastern India, *Modern Asian Studies*, 32:4, pp. 913–948.

[3] There is, of course, supporting evidence for such assumptions. See, for example, Sheldon Pollock's assertion that not one Varanasi intellectual recorded the region's absorption into the Mughal empire in the seventeenth century, in Pollock, S. (2001). New Intellectuals in Seventeenth-century India, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 38:3, p. 19. For recent approaches to the interaction between religious traditions and society, see O'Hanlon, R. and Washbrook, D. (2012). *Religious Cultures in Early Modern India: New Perspectives*, Taylor and Francis, Abingdon.

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vast output of devotional songs and poems in their ritual worship. His religiosity is not an aside to this piece, but characterizes his discussion and analysis of recent events: as well as recounting the slaughter of priests and monks, he addresses his poem directly to his god. At the centre of the disaster in Vrindavan sits Vrindavan's lord, Krishna, and the poem takes the form of a complaint to the deity. This lordship was not merely an epithet or theological formula, but was coloured by concepts drawn from Mughal political culture. As such, the complaint articulates certain expectations and obligations of the deity which draw on a contemporary social understanding of protection and the responsibility of rule. This suggests that in a period of political disruption and confusion, critical observations on the status quo could be expressed through a religious idiom, and that the god himself could be held to account.

In this article I will first discuss the literary provenance of the *Harikala Beli*, and argue that its defiance of typical generic conventions is suggestive of its eighteenth-century context, one which lent itself to innovation, and hybridization of forms and styles. In particular, the idiosyncrasies of this Braj Bhasha work by a sectarian Hindu poet convincingly correspond with parallels in immediately contemporary Urdu literature. As such the poem speaks to recent scholarship's advances in the expanding epistemology of vernacular sources of history and multilingual approaches to literary culture.[4] Just as the traumatic context of the writing shaped the form of its literary representation, contemporary notions of ethical government and social obligation were brought to bear on the theological formulation of the poem's argument. I will discuss how the period's disruption of these political codes influenced the poet, such that his argument with Krishna concerns trust, in a social sense, rather than faith, in a theological one. Crucially, this suggests that by the eighteenth century Hindu traditions of divine protection could be redefined through worldly, historically conditioned political expectations, such that a *bhakta* was a dependant in the household of his god, as much as he was a devotee.

[4] See, for example, Chatterjee, P. (2008). Introduction: History in the Vernacular, in R. Aquil and P. Chatterjee *History in the Vernacular*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, pp. 1–24, and the other essays included in this volume. For a discussion of new approaches to multilingual history, see Orsini, F. (2012). How to do Multilingual Literary History? Lessons from Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-century North India, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 49:2, pp. 225–246.

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History and poetry

By reconsidering the conventions of Indo-Persian chronicles and expanding pre-colonial historiography to include vernacular poetry, recent scholarship has developed our sense of the new forms of history-writing that rose to prominence in the 'early modern'[5] period and has demonstrated the value of the factual kernels in such works.[6] In reference to Braj Bhasha literature, Allison Busch has argued that rather than looking for a reified *aitihasik kavya* genre, dependent on the assumptions of modern historiography, more can be drawn out from a greater appreciation of the various vernacular genres, such as family history (*vamsavali*), panegyric (*prasasti*), and the many forms employed in courtly poetry and treatises on statecraft.[7] Such works contain significant material for historians yet have their own rules of genre and style and do not follow the restrictions or characteristics of chronicles and other formal modes of historical narrative.

In her discussion of the Urdu *shahr ashob*, Carla Petievich suggests that vernacular poets were able to express themselves with greater liberty than court clerks: while Mirza Rafi 'Sauda' (1713–1781) and Mir Taqi 'Mir' (1724–1810) vented their frustration and dismay at the state of Delhi in their lifetimes, chroniclers were encumbered by a *farman* passed by the emperor Muhammad Shah, which censored any mention of the Persian invasion of India in official histories of his reign.[8] The encounter between poetry and historical events therefore fostered another kind of record, one that was subject to the personal experience of poets or their communities, rather than necessarily

[5] My understanding of 'early modern' in the South Asian context is informed by Pollock, S. (2006). Comparative Intellectual Histories of the Early Modern World, *International Institute of Asian Studies Newsletter*, 43, pp. 1–13; and Chatterjee, P. (2012). *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, pp. 73–77.

[6] See, for example, Rao, V.N., Shulman, D., and Subrahmanyam, S. (2001). *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600–1800*, Permanent Black, Delhi.

[7] Busch, A. (2005). Literary Responses to the Mughal Imperium: The Historical Poems of Keśavdās, *South Asia Research*, 25:1, pp. 31–54.

[8] According to the *Tarikh-i-Chaghatai*. See Petievich, C.R. (1990). Poetry and the Declining Mughals: The Shahr Āshob, *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 25:1, p. 101. Mir's famous autobiography, the *Zikr-i Mir*, provides another form of literary history of the period that is perhaps more 'normative' than his poetry. See Naim, C.M. (1999). *Zikr-i Mir: The Autobiography of the Eighteenth Century Mughal Poet: Mir Muhammad Taqi 'Mir' (1723–1810)*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

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subservient to the agenda of a courtly or imperial patron.[9] In this vein Petievich argues that the *shahr ashob* is 'a unique social document. It communicates to the interested reader the *personal* impact of the already recorded and well-known facts.'[10]

Early modern historical discourse took shape in multiple, separate genres that had their own hermeneutical grammars. As this Urdu genre demonstrates, languages and styles developed to accommodate these new literary modes of discussion. Thus Muzaffar Alam's seminal treatment of Persian as the register of political culture underlines the different connotations of North Indian languages. According to the *Tuhfat al-Hind* (*circa* 1675–1700), Sanskrit, maintaining its position as the heavenly language (*deva-bani* or *akash-bani*), was deemed inappropriate for *mlechha* Mughal discourse, while Prakrit, as the *patal-bani*, or language of the subterranean realms, was too lowly for the workings of empire. In this scheme, the vernacular or Bhakha, Alam argues, was the preserve of music and love poetry, and again inappropriate for the more weighty demands of politics.[11] However, too strict a categorization would be misleading. On the one hand, Persian persisted as a literary and musical language in its own right throughout the eighteenth century. Likewise, the vernaculars developed their own trajectories in conversation with, or in parallel

[9] Written approximately ten years before the *Harikala Beli* in Bengal, the *Maharashta Purana* of Gangaram (MS 1751) recounts in some detail the Maratha raids in Bengal between 1742 and 1744. Gangaram describes the invasion in graphic detail, as well as the attitudes of politicians and the trials endured by villagers. Dimock suggests the author was more motivated by recording history than other, poetry-oriented writers such as Vanesvara Vidyalankara (the court poet of Burdwan), who also provided accounts of the raids (as in the Sanskrit *Citracampu*, 1744). While it is beyond the purview of the current essay to compare this text to the *Harikala Beli*, it should be noted that the *Maharashta Purana* also rejects a mythological apologia for recent events, and did not represent a return to moral order in its conclusion. Unlike Vrindavandas, however, Gangaram understood the invasion as a punishment for sinful behaviour and the neglect of Radha and Krishna's worship. See Dimock, E.C. and Gupta, P.C. (1985). *The Mahārāshṭa Purāṇa: An Eighteenth-Century Bengali Historical Text*, Orient Longman, Hyderabad; Rao et al., *Textures of Time*, pp. 236–239; Chatterjee, Introduction, p. 6.

[10] Petievich, Poetry and the Declining Mughals, p. 103, emphasis in the original.

[11] Alam, M. (2004). *The Languages of Political Islam: India 1200–1800*, Hurst, London, p. 135. For a discussion of the *Tuhfat al-Hind* in relation to Braj Bhasha literature, see McGregor, S. (2003). 'The Progress of Hindi, Part 1: The Development of a Transregional Idiom' in S. Pollock *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, pp. 942–944.

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to, Persian,[12] and Braj Bhasha, the language of the *Harikala Beli*, had a significant position in the Mughal domain and provincial courts, where it was understood as an appropriate idiom for treatments of history.[13] Naturally, the choice of language determined to some extent the stylistic conventions and generic devices of the final historical work, which in turn influenced the conceptual framework of the writer's representation of past experience.[14] Therefore to make any sense of Vrindavandas, a *bhakti* poet writing on recent events in Braj Bhasha, it is necessary to understand how he constructed his history, how he understood his activity as a writer, and for whom he was writing. Clearly, in writing this text, Vrindavandas was aware that recent or current events were appropriate subject matter for a poetic work. However, my discussion of the text will demonstrate that he did not reconstruct the past according to the conventions of court histories, or with a patron's agenda in mind. While the *Harikala Beli* is unlike his other more 'conventional' devotional works, his social commentary and observations are framed as a complaint to a deity as much as to any human audience. Therefore we must continue to bear in mind that Vrindavandas' repertoire defined him as a devotee whose works speak to a divine recipient. Critically, his commentary on the political sphere is embedded in a particular *bhakti* world view cultivated in Vrindavan.[15]

[12] See, for example, Truschke, A. (2011). The Mughal Book of War: A Persian Translation of the Sanskrit Mahabharata, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 31:2, pp. 506–520.

[13] See Busch, A. (2010). Hidden in Plain View: Brajbhasha Poets at the Mughal Court, *Modern Asian Studies*, 42:2, pp. 267–309; Busch, A. (2011). *Poetry of Kings: The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; Busch, A. (2012). Portrait of a Raja in a Badshah's World: Amrit Rai's Biography of Man Singh (1585), *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 55, pp. 287–328; Talbot, C. (2012). Justifying Defeat: A Rajput Perspective on the Age of Akbar, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 55, pp. 329–368; Pauwels, H. (2009). The Saint, the Warlord, and the Emperor: Discourses of Braj Bhakti and Bundelā Loyalty, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 52, pp. 187–228.

[14] For a discussion of the multiple approaches to history-writing, see Amin, S. (2002). 'On Retelling the Muslim Conquest of North India' in P. Chatterjee and A. Ghosh *History and the Present*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, pp. 24–43.

[15] This distinguishes Vrindavandas from other, contemporary Braj Bhasha poets who commented on the same period, such as Tilokdas. See Irvine, W. (1897). Nādir Shāh and Muḥammad Shāh, a Hindī Poem by Tilōk Dās,*Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 66:1, pp. 24–62.

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To this day Caca Hit Vrindavandas is remembered and respected by the Radhavallabh Sampraday.[16] He was initiated into the sect himself in 1738 (1795VS) and lived in Vrindavan at the Radhakant temple, the house of his guru, Hit Ruplalji, for almost 20 years.[17] It seems likely that while Vrindavandas was a dedicated devotee, he did not take the vows of ultimate renunciation himself: the Radhavallabhis do not typically prioritize this over and above householder *bhakti*, and in the only known portrait of Vrindavandas, though he is shown with a congregation of *bhakta*s, he sits to the side and is distinctively represented in a layman's garb.[18] His major contribution was a substantial collection of song texts written in Braj Bhasha, dedicated to the community's worship of Radha and Krishna.[19] Almost two decades spent contemplating the Divine Couple were brought to an abrupt end when the Afghan army of Ahmad Shah Abdali entered the Jat territories, invaded Mathura and Vrindavan, and slaughtered their inhabitants. The *Harikala Beli*, completed in the

[16] See Khandelval, J. (2002). *Caca Srihit Vrindavandasji ki Vani Autsavik Padavali*, Radha Press, Delhi; Busch, *Poetry of Kings*, p. 205; Entwistle, A.W. (1987). *Braj, Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage*, Forsten, Groningen, pp. 55, 74, 208, 212, 304. For Radhavallabhi theology and literature, see Snatak, V. (1958). *Radhavallabha Sampradaya: Siddhanta Aur Sahitya*, National Publishing House, Delhi; Snell, R. (1978). Scriptural Literature in the Rādhāvallabha Sampradāya, *Bulletin of the International Association of the Vrindaban Research Institute*, 4, pp. 22–30; Snell, R. (1998). The Nikuñja as Sacred Space in Poetry of the Rādhāvallabhī Tradition, *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies*, 7, pp. 63–84; Beck, G.L. (2005). *Alternative Krishnas: Regional and Vernacular Variations on a Hindu Deity*, State University of New York Press, Albany; Williams, R.D. (2011). 'The Poetry of Cācā Vṛndāvandās and the Rādhāvallabhite Sect in 18th Century North India', MPhil thesis, University of Oxford, Oxford.

[17] Snatak, *Radhavallabha Sampradaya*, p. 514; Khandelval, *Caca Vrindavandasji*, p. 11. Snatak suggests that Vrindavandas was born between 1693–1708 (i.e. 1750–1765VS). His last known works date from 1787 (1844VS).

[18] The painting, in the care of the Norton Simon Museum, California, is catalogued as '"Portrait of Vaishnava Teachers", Kishangarh *circa* 1775–1800. Opaque watercolour and gold on paper.' Vrindavandas, dressed in a red *jama*, sits below his guru, Hit Ruplal Gosvami, and the guru's brother, Kisorilal. Opposite them sit a group of *bhakta*s, all labelled: Gopaldas, Krishnadas, Premdas, and Kasidas. One unidentified *bhakta* performs obeisance with all his limbs (*sastang pranam*), and another plays a drum. The group is assembled in a clean circular space, before a temple structure, with a river (presumably the Yamuna) flowing in the background. See Pal, P. (2004). *Painted Poems: Rajput Paintings from the Ramesh and Urmil Kapoor Collection*, Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, Fig. 77, p. 165.

[19] According to Imre Bangha, although 20,000 verses of Vrindavandas are available, he is thought to have composed 100,000. See Bangha, I. (1997). The Harikala Beli and Ānandghan's Death, *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*, 57, p. 231. The most extensive published collection of Vrindavandas' works appears in Khandelval, *Caca Vrindavandasji*.

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Asarh month of the Vikrama year 1817 (June–July 1760), represents Vrindavandas' meditation on these personally devastating events. The poet tells us how he himself witnessed the invasion, and fled initially to Farrukhabad. From there he joined the other refugees fleeing Braj, and eventually found protection with Suraj Mal, the king of Bharatpur (r.1757–63). Vrindavandas' representation of events in this work marks a striking departure from the poet's standard *bhakti* repertoire, and is unique in its approach.

It is important to note that the poem does not attempt to represent a specific patron: the text's provenance is stated as Bharatpur, and the king 'Sujan Simh' (that is, Suraj Mal) is named. However, these references seem primarily contextual, and there is little indication that Vrindavandas was claiming Suraj Mal as his patron. The work does not relate to the king's affairs, so much as to the plight of the Radhavallabhis themselves. Indeed, the tone of the poem suggests the bewilderment and loss felt by the community, rather than any optimistic, politically charged statement, characteristic of courtly panegyric.[20] As I will discuss further, the poet's representation of Krishna, and his systematic exploitation of *puranic* material, which reveals the god's manipulative personality, is quite different from other inter-textual approaches, such as the political exploitation of the *Ramayana* across the early modern period.[21] Pollock suggests that the latter epic gestures to a grounded divine order, focused on the royal figure, and a fully developed, demonic 'Other'.[22] By contrast the *Mahabharata* lends itself to political disappointment, disenchantment with the world (*vairagya*), and a 'fundamental bifurcation of the (hegemonic) spiritual and the political, symbolically coded in the bifurcation of the principal characters'.[23] While it makes sense for a Krishna-*bhakta* to discuss this god rather than Rama, nonetheless Vrindavandas selected these specific materials from the Krishna narrative purposively, and the effect is one of discord rather than

[20] This is in contrast to a near-contemporary, courtly account of Suraj Mal's political and military career during the same events, the *Sujanacaritta* of Sudan Kavi. See Das, R. (1923). *Sujan-caritta*, Nagaripracaran Sabha, Kashi.

[21] See Pollock, S. (1993). Rāmāyaṇa and Political Imagination in India, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 52:2, pp. 261–297; Lutgendorf, P. (1989). 'Rām's Story in Shiva's City: Public Arenas and Private Patronage' in S.B. Freitag *Culture and Power in Banaras: Community, Performance, and Environment 1800–1980*, University of California Press, London, pp. 34–63.

[22] Pollock, Rāmāyaṇa, pp. 264, 283.

[23] Ibid., p.284.

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legitimization of a Hindu ruler. We might interpret this as a familiar quality of *bhakti* literature: outside of the courtly domain, writing could express the devotee's own demands or expositions without considerations of financial backing.[24] In this regard Vrindavandas' conclusions do not contribute to any identifiable political agenda, but rather to the reconstitution and morale of a community in exile.

'Kabul made its onslaught'

Vrindavandas situates the Afghan invasion of 1757, and Krishna's betrayal, in the wider context of what he perceived as the decline and decadence of the Mughals:[25]

The emperor erred in politics, the provinces blundered in their aims.
For many days they wailed (over their) goblets, and Kabul made its onslaught.
All the nobles were inebriated with whoring, intoxication, and drinking:
Behold them, drowning in the black stream of passion and darkness.
Delhi became the cat that saw and feared the biting dog,
Muhammad Shah had erred already:[26] now who shall we blame?
Now the dynasty of Babur and Humayun has been run out.
This grief has spread and their subjects must lament[27] their fate.[28] (117)

[24] For a discussion of alternative forms of patronage to royal support, such as merchants and local service gentry, see Sreenivasan, R. (2005). 'Genre, Politics, History: Urdu Traditions of Padmini' in K. Hansen and D. Lelyveld *A Wilderness of Possibilities: Urdu Studies in Transnational Perspective*, pp. 75f.; Sreenivasan, R. (2007). *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen: Heroic Pasts in India c.1500–1900*, Permanent Black, Delhi, p. 13.

[25] For a discussion of decadence as a topos in Mughal literature to explain political failure, see Schofield, K.B. (2012). The Courtesan Tale: Female Musicians and Dancers in Mughal Historical Chronicles, c.1556–1748, *Gender and History*, 24:1, pp. 150–171.

[26] Presumably referring to the invasion of Nadir Shah (1739).

[27] Alternative translation: 'their subjects are punished by fate'.

[28] nīti pātasāha ūkyau sūbani manasūbā cūkyau
bahuta dinani jāṁma kūkyau kābila darauro kiye.
besyā-mada-pāna kari chaki gaye amīra jete
raja-tama kī dhāra kārī būḍe koṁ bilokiye.
dillī bhaī billī kaṭelā kuttā dekhi ḍarī
bhūlyau mahamada sāha pahileṁ aba kāhiṁ ṭokiye.
bābara himāūṁ kau calāū aba baṁsa bhayau
tākau yaha phailyau soka parajā karma ṭhokiye.

Quotations from the *Harikala Beli* are from my own edition (unpublished). I have consulted three nineteenth and twentieth century manuscripts in the Ras Bharati

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By the time of the succession of Alamgir II in 1754, the authority of the Mughal emperors had been severely undermined by other powers in northern India.[29] Perhaps it was for this reason that Vrindavandas does not refer to Alamgir, or to his predecessor Ahmad Shah (r. 1748–1754), but to Muhammad Shah (r. 1719–1748), who had not ruled for almost a decade. By 1757 Mughal wealth was exhausted, Maratha armies from the south were plundering Delhi, Jat authority in the east was expanding, and Rohilla Afghans had taken control of large areas to the east and north of the capital.[30] Against this background, Ahmad Shah Abdali launched a series of campaigns into northern India, and by the early 1750s held authority in Lahore, Punjab, and Multan.[31] When the vazir of Delhi, Imad-ul-Mulk, appointed Adina Beg governor of Punjab and tried to retake Lahore, Abdali crossed the Indus again in 1756. He drove out Adina Beg and proceeded to a defenceless Delhi. Alamgir II was deposed and Abdali had his own name read out in the city's prayers to declare his sovereignty over the territory. He then initiated a month-long loot of the city and slaughter of its inhabitants.[32] He ultimately granted the city back to the emperor, marrying his son to Alamgir's daughter, a match that came with a dowry of Punjab and Sind. Ahmad Shah thus established his authority in the region through symbols and strategies, such as the reading of the *khutba* and marriage alliances, but also with acts of terror.

On 22 February 1757 Abdali continued into the Jat territories to claim tribute from Raja Suraj Mal, then the wealthiest ruler

Sansthan, Vrindavan (of these, only the twentieth century manuscript gives a complete text), and an abridged version published by Varma, T. (1988). *Yugyugīn Braj,* Bharatiy Itihas Samkalan Samiti, Benares, pp. 223–231. Translations take into account variant readings, as indicated with footnotes.

[29] See Robinson, F. (2007). *The Mughal Emperors and the Islamic Dynasties of India, Iran and Central Asia, 1206–1925*, Thames and Hudson, London, p. 172; Sarkar, J. (2007). *Fall of the Mughal Empire Vol. II, 1754–1771*, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, pp. 1–27. Sarkar problematically represented Alamgir II as a reclusive and joyless 'old goat' who 'turned his belated elevation to sovereignty into an opportunity for making rapid and numerous additions to his harem'. (p. 2). For an abridged translation of a history of Alamgir II's reign, see *Tarikh-i Alamgir-Sani*, in Elliot, *History of India*, pp. 140–143. For an introduction to the divisive, anti-Islamic historiography of pre-colonial India, including the role of Elliot and Dowson's translations, see Metcalf, B.D. (1995). Too Little and Too Much: Reflections on Muslims in the History of India, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 54:4, pp. 951–967.

[30] Robinson, *Mughal Emperors*, pp. 171ff.

[31] Sykes, P. (1940). *A History of Afghanistan*, Macmillan, London, Vol. 1, pp. 356ff.

[32] For a discussion of this period in Delhi, and Urdu literary responses to the times, see Russell, R. and Islam, K. (1969). *Three Mughal Poets: Mir, Sauda, Mir Hasan*, Allen and Unwin, London.

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in Hindustan. Suraj Mal was firmly resisting Abdali's intimidating presence in North India, and had previously rejected his summons. Abdali's response was twofold: first, he raided the fort of Ballabhgarh. According to a contemporary Persian text by Ghulam Hasan Samin, who accompanied Abdali's troops during the invasion, here Abdali left 'an extraordinary display! Wherever your glance fell nothing else was to be perceived but severed heads upon lances, and the number could not be less than the stars in the heavens.'[33] From there Abdali sent two of his officers, the Rohilla chieftain, Najib-ud-Daulah, and Jahan Khan, with 20,000 men to Mathura and Vrindavan. He ordered that the entire territory be put to the sword. According to Samin's manuscript, booty was declared a free gift to the looter: this would have been especially popular after the violent plunder in Delhi, when Abdali imposed a strict demand for sole possession of the spoils and punished any self-interested soldiers.[34] The army was further instructed to bring the heads of infidels to the tent of the chief minister, who would draw up an account and reward them with five rupees for every head.

As the Afghans approached, the Marathas fled towards Agra, while the Jat, Jawahar Singh, raised an army of 5,000 to prevent their entry at Chaumuha, eight miles north of Mathura. After nine hours of fighting the Jats were defeated, with 3,000 casualties.[35] The army entered Mathura on 28 February, two days after Holi, when the town would have played host to an especially large body of pilgrims. An 'indiscriminate massacre'[36] followed and the city was burned. On 6 March the army continued to Vrindavan. According to Ghulam Hasan Samin's account:

> Wherever you gazed you beheld only heaps of the slain. You could only pick your way with difficulty, owing to the quantity of bodies lying about and the amount of blood spilt. At one place, we saw about two hundred children in

[33] Translation by Irvine, W. (1907). *Ahmad Shah, Abdali, and the Indian Wazir, 'Imad-ul-Mulk (1756–7)*, Bombay Education Society's Press, Bombay, p. 22.

[34] Russell, *Three Mughal Poets*, p. 31.

[35] Pande, R. (1970). *Bharatpur up to 1826: A Social and Political History of the Jats*, Rama Publishing House, Jaipur, p. 65; Singh, R.P. (2007). *Studies in Jat History, Volume 1, Ballabhgarh*, Harman Publishing House, New Delhi, p. 40; Qanungo, K.R. (1925). *History of the Jats: A Contribution to the History of Northern India*, M.C. Sarkar, Calcutta, pp. 102f; Natwar-Singh, K. (1981). *Maharaja Suraj Mal, 1707–1763: His Life and Times*, Allen and Unwin, London, pp. 66f., who says that there were 10,000 in the Jat army.

[36] Sarkar, *Fall of the Mughal Empire*, p. 84.

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a heap. Not one of the dead bodies had a head . . . The stench and fetor and effluvium in the air were such that it was painful to open your mouth or even draw a breath.[37]

For a week after the massacre of Mathura, the river Yamuna flowed red; when Samin visited two weeks later it was still yellow. Visiting the huts of the *bairagi* and *sanyasi* ascetics, he found their decapitated heads tied to the severed heads of cows. Abdali himself arrived in Mathura on 15 March, and Vrindavan four days later. When he finally returned to Afghanistan it was with 28,000 animals laden with loot.[38] In his poem, Vrindavandas looks back at events in this campaign, especially the massacre of significant devotees. Having invested himself fully in the religious life of Vrindavan, he watched the total desecration of the centre of his spiritual universe.

Returning to *Harikala Beli* verse 117, it is apparent that Vrindavandas condemns the Mughals and their failed administration, which paved the way for 'Kabul'. He represents the royal house of Delhi as a terrified, retreating, and impotent institution. The last line of the *kabitta* passes judgement: the Mughal government was responsible for the miseries borne by the people. Here the events of 1757 are shown not just as a tragedy, but as an unjust failure by those in power. However, Vrindavandas does not lay all the blame on the human actors: he reasons, 'the intelligent do not normally assign blame in one direction, a disharmonious pair was made on both sides'. (17.3)[39] As the poem continues, the greater portion of blame is repeatedly assigned to Krishna. Here it is imperative to understand the god as a historical agent within the context of the poem and its author's world view. Krishna is placed at the centre of contemporary events:

The Yavans came twice and harassed the people:
During the years 1813 and 1817.[40]
It is Hari who played two tricks, and took away everyone's pride.
Before, you were gracious towards your servants.
Now I perceive and understand this that the Lord has instructed:
In relation to the body, everything is like a dream.

[37] Irvine, *Ahmad Shah*, pp. 22f.
[38] Robinson, *Mughal Emperors*, p. 173.
[39] eka aura doṣa na vicārata vivekī je
dohūṁ ora banyo asamaṁjasa hī joṭo hai.
[40] Vikrama years: in Common Era, 1756 (when Abdali entered India) and 1760.

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Vrindavan's Beloved Beauty,[41] no one's power is effective,
Behold the great wonder: fear has become like a game.[42] (184)

As the divine agent, Krishna had stripped everyone of their pride and certainty: he had humiliated the Mughals, shown no protection to his devotees, and ultimately turned on the Afghan army. After the massacre in Vrindavan, Abdali's army moved towards Agra, but yielded ultimately to a cholera epidemic and was forced to retreat to Afghanistan.[43] Vrindavandas suggests that Krishna was responsible for this turn of events too:

With the Yavans the value of priests, cows, and sadhus decreases.
Having invited them, then your greatness resounded in Braj.
You started the fire, yet it is you who go to put it out.
You allowed the theft, yet you come to keep guard.
Vrindavan's Beloved Beauty, the Lord is clever in both ways:
Like the art of the magician, it cannot be seen.[44] (24.2–4)

Vrindavandas does not invoke Krishna as a medium of expression, but as a responsible party, understood according to certain historically conditioned responsibilities.[45]

[41] The poet's *chāp*, or signature stamp: *vṛṇdāvana hita rūpa*, translated by Imre Bangha (1997) and kept here as 'Vrindavan's Beloved Beauty'. This formula appears in various guises throughout the poems, and may be read both as the dedicatory shorthand for three significant names (Vrindavandas—Hita Harivamsa—Ruplal Gosvami), as well as a divine epithet.

[42] ṭhāraha sai teraha au aṭāraha sai satraha varṣa
duhūṁ bāra āya jamana janani tāpa dayau hai.
Hari hī dvai kalā kheli sabani kau haryau garva
dāsa kau tau pahileṁ āpa śrī mukha nirmayau hai.
caitau re cetau upadeśa prabhu karyau hai yaha
deha-sanabaṁdha saba supana sama bhayau hai.
Vṛṅdāvana hita rūpa basa na calyau kāhū kau
dekhau mahā acaraja bhaya khela so hvai gayau hai.

[43] Natwar-Singh, *Maharaja Suraj Mal*, p. 68.

[44] bipra gaū sādhuna kī ghaṭatī karāī yamana
tāhī kauṁ bulāya bṛja pherī phīra duhāī hai
āga kau lagāvau bujhāyabe kauṁ tumahī java
corī hūṁ karāvau puni paharau deta āī hai.
Vṛṅdāvana hit rūpa doū bidhi kuśala nātha
bājīgara kī sī kalā parai na lakhāī hai.

[45] For a discussion of the difficulties in projecting secular historiography into pre-colonial South Asian texts, see Chakrabarty, D. (1997). 'The Time of History and the Times of Gods' in L. Lowe and D. Lloyd *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, Duke University Press, Durham, p. 39.

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Literary considerations

The unique provenance of the poem may account for its unusual features and problematic style. Vrindavandas does not draw on imagery that we might usually associate with betrayal in a *bhakti* context: rather than channelling the voice of the spurned *gopi*, the poet looks instead to episodes from *puranic* lore familiar from the *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavata Purana*.[46] This is noteworthy in itself, given that the Radhavallabhis are thought generally to direct themselves only to Krishna's relationship with Radha, viewing other portions of his narrative as irrelevant.[47] That said, while Vrindavandas incorporates accounts from the *Puranas* of Krishna permitting the destruction of those dearest to him, he does not follow these texts in elaborating a mythological justification, involving curses and oaths, to excuse Krishna's behaviour.[48] The effect is to underline the poet's doubt and uncertainty as he reflects on his immediate history. Rather than projecting the present into the timeless past of the Krishna narrative, this poem draws religious conceptions into contemporary reality.

Vrindavandas' reluctance to conflate historical content with mythology extends to him challenging Krishna's conduct. He thus distanced his work from other early modern texts, including the *Shrinathji ki Prakatya Varta* (late seventeenth century),[49] which relates the evacuation of the Pustimarga *murti* to Nathdvara in the supposed course of Muslim violence.[50] The *Varta* ultimately conformed to *puranic* protocol in its accounting for traumatic events: the god *chose* to leave

[46] Other South Asian poets have discussed the inequality inherent in the human–divine relationship. Tamil poets such as Nammalvar lamented their condition of having to wait for divine favour, while writers in Telugu inverted this relationship, representing the devotee as having power over God's affections. Vrindavandas did not refute this inequality, but clarified its terms, and the consequent expectations incumbent upon Krishna. See Ramanujan, A.K., Rao, V.N. and Shulman, D. (1994). *When God is a Customer: Telugu Courtesan Songs by Kṣetrayya and Others*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.

[47] See, for example, Snell, Scriptural Literature, pp. 22–30.

[48] See O'Flaherty, W.D. (1976). *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, University of California Press, London, pp. 258–261.

[49] Smith, F.M. (2009). Dark Matter in Vārtāland: On the Enterprise of History in Early Puṣṭimārga Discourse, *Journal of Hindu Studies*, 2, pp. 27–47; Peabody, N. (2003). *Hindu Kingship and Polity in Pre-colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 53f.

[50] Although it is generally assumed that the migration of deities from Braj was a precautionary measure in view of Aurangzeb 'Alamgir's increasingly hostile policies towards Hindu institutions, this was not always the case, as with the Pushtimarg deity, Balkrishna. See Entwistle, *Braj*, pp. 183–184.

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Braj because he had promised to visit a girl in Nathdvara, so he instructed a Muslim devotee to commission an army against his temple (while also banning this 'demonic' *bhakta* from entering his sanctuary again).[51] The text also celebrated the violent retribution of the devotees against Muslims. By contrast, in Vrindavandas' text there is no elaborate apologia for Krishna's behaviour that might account for the invasion, such as a 'higher plan'; and the devotees themselves were killed without the possibility of revenge. In terms of literary development, this reflects a further shift from the mythologization of historical content: Vrindavandas did not opt to rewrite contemporary reality. Instead, the reader (or listener) is confronted with Vrindavandas' unmediated disappointment and anger. The *bhakta*s put their faith in Krishna and lived in Braj as his servants; he argues that this was a relationship of mutual understanding and expectation, by which the god was expected to protect the devotees. By failing to defend the *bhakta*s from the Afghans, Krishna betrayed them.

In terms of Vrindavandas' reconstruction of recent history, his work differs significantly from the courtly Braj Bhasha works discussed by Allison Busch, particularly with respect to genre and structure.[52] In *riti* poetry, authorial strategies included a protagonist, the *nayaka*, as presented through the heroic mood (*vira rasa*) and virtuous traits that are readily recognizable, coloured perhaps by the praise of a patron (*prasasti*). So much is apparent in the sixteenth-century text, the *Ratnabavani* of Keshavdas: here the reification of the royal champion, the hero of Rajputana, eschews basic historical content and dramatically revises his biography. However, there is no obvious hero or single protagonist in the *Harikala Beli* nor, for that matter, a particular enemy (*pratinayaka*).[53] In their absence, the text is suffused with moral ambiguity and questioning. What is more, the reader and poet alike have to grapple with this ambiguity by themselves. In other texts moral uncertainty may provide a platform for a deity to proclaim a great truth to the bemused mortals, as when Keshavdas placed the

[51] Likewise, a prose text, the *Kamban Vilas* (n.d., extant manuscript dated 1891), suggests that Muslim oppression 'was merely a pretext for the removal of the deity called Radhavallabh from Vrindaban to Kaman' when the said deity wished to enjoy a 'forest exile'. Ibid., p. 110.

[52] Busch, *Poetry of Kings*.

[53] Perhaps the dead devotees themselves, who are eulogized towards the end of the text, are the closest to heroes: but they are not developed in this capacity and merely appear as hagiographical portraits.

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god Rama in the narrative of the *Ratnabavani* to discuss the ensuing war. However, there is no such moral authority in the *Harikala Beli*. This is a pointed silence, emblematic of the perceived absence of the god when the Afghans entered Braj, but also of the despair of the poet as he struggles for an explanation. As such the *Harikala Beli* reflects a literary shift away from earlier frameworks and the development of an idiosyncratic voice.

Moreover, Vrindavandas' imagery and stock of metaphors is extremely distinctive. At times, familiar language from the Braj canon is rendered in a disquieting form. For example, in verse 30 the poet describes the reaction of the inhabitants of Vrindavan to the arrival of Abdali's army:

As soon as they saw the great *mleccha* army,
They withered like lotus buds.
Vrindavan's Love, how can we call you blessed?
In Nanda's dwelling you have turned from boy to girl.[54]

The lotus buds, a staple of Braj poetry, wither in imitation of the *bhakta*s' frailty in defeat and death. The image of Krishna's feminization in the following line may also be located in other works, including *Caurasi Pada* 47.4–5, *Gitagovinda* 12.10, and the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* 4.15.1–181.[55] However, these references are playful, suggesting that Krishna is overwhelmed by his love for Radha, subjugated by her, and is therefore considered to be the 'female' in the relationship. Here Vrindavandas sharply redirects this image and uses it to charge Krishna with cowardice and unsuitable behaviour.

Elsewhere in the poem we encounter images that are less familiar. The poem opens with a visionary experience in Farrukhabad, revealing Vrindavandas troubled and distraught following the invasion and massacre of 1757.[56] As he watched a performance of the *Rasalila*

[54] Baṛī sainā malekṣa kī dekhata hī kumhalāya gaye mānauṁ kaṅja kalī
Vṛṅdāvana hita dhani kaiseṁ kahauṁ bhayau naṅda ke dhām lalā kai lalī.

[55] For this episode in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana*, see Doniger, W. (1981). *Sexual Metaphors and Animal Symbols in Indian Mythology*, Banarsidass, Delhi, p. 103; for the *Gitagovinda*, see Miller, B.S. (1997). *Gītagovinda of Jayadeva: Love Song of the Dark Lord*, Columbia University Press, New York; for the Caurāsī Pada, see Snell, R. (1991) *The Eighty-four Hymns of Hita Harivaṁśa: An Edition of the Caurāsī Pada*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi.

[56] For a translation of the early portion of the text, including the passage referred to here, see Bangha, The Harikala Beli. Rosalind O'Hanlon has discussed near contemporary political and military culture in Farrukhabad in O'Hanlon, R. (1997).

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and heard a song by the poet, Anandghan, who died in the massacre, he suddenly had a vision of a twelve-year-old boy. Distinguished by this specific age, we assume (but are not told) that the boy is Krishna himself. The boy leapt from a high building and landed on his back, but stood up again apparently unharmed. He then showed Vrindavandas that Anandghan and all the other dead *bhakta*s were not dead at all, but were even now sitting together and watching the performance. Then suddenly the boy leapt up and fell to the ground again. From this repetition Vrindavandas understands that the Afghans would return, and this prompts him to leave Vrindavan altogether and stay away for a further three years.

This unusual imagery is described in a straightforward account, without any stylistic elaboration. The notion of the boy plummeting to his death and surviving only to perform the same feat again is unsettling: it is a macabre illusion, and in his anxiety the poet has been emotionally manipulated. This illusory death should perhaps be understood as a metaphor for the historical tragedy in Vrindavan: the deaths of the devotees are similarly illusory within the context of the vision, as the victims are seen watching the performance. That the performance was the *Rasalila* is key: this dramatic reproduction of Krishna's 'play' is designed to intoxicate the emotions of the devotees, and draw them into participation with the divine experience. Through the *Harikala Beli* Vrindavandas also relates his own understanding of how this divine 'art' (*kala*) operates: Krishna plays, and draws his devotees into his sport. However, in reality this sport is disturbing, bloodthirsty, and costs its participants their lives. This novel manipulation of conventional concepts regarding the *bhakta*'s relationship with Krishna, coupled with haunting and macabre imagery, results in a unique work that bears testimony to the traumatic circumstances of its composition.

Vrindavandas' poem contains strong parallels to other works of the same period, also relating to Abdali's invasion, but written in Urdu by Muslim poets and collectively termed '*shahr ashob*'. Studies in this genre indicate a tradition of literary continuity, on the one hand, and radical creativity, on the other. The 'city's misfortune' can be traced back to bawdy and often obscene (*hazaliyah*) accounts of a city's residents, particularly its beautiful young men and tradesmen, in Persian and

Issues of Masculinity in North Indian History: The Bangash Nawabs of Farrukhabad, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 4:1, pp. 1–19.

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Turkish.[57] However, when the genre crystallized in Urdu in the early eighteenth century, the template for humorous praise was satirically distorted to represent a city that had become addled by the decadence and disgrace of the new power-brokers.[58] In certain cases the ruined and desolate city is understood as a reflection of the beloved's cruelty,[59] but more often these texts mediate the historical trauma of a besieged or looted Delhi, expressed with poignant realism. Like Vrindavandas, Mirza Rafi 'Sauda' frames the period's chaos in terms of the self-aggrandisement and disloyalty of the nobility in his long *shahr ashob* of 1757, the year of Abdali's invasion of Braj.[60] According to Ishrat Haque's discussion of the genre, the poets pointedly challenged the political indifference of the ruling classes to the fate of the empire's subjects, and reminded them of their duties. Similarly, Vrindavandas questions Krishna keeping his distance from Vrindavan at the time of his sanctuary's desolation, reminding the deity of his responsibilities. The ruined landscapes of Delhi and Vrindavan had much in common, and Vrindavandas and Sauda both describe the perils of the lawless roads between them:

We have slipped from Vrindavan, we dwell in another's house.[61]
We are swallowed by misfortune. We are destroyed by the Yavan army.
We forgot about chanting the mantras, and singing of God.
We are separated from mother and father. Dispute with lowly people resounds.
Vrindavan's Beloved, in this way we become terrified in our minds.
We have lost our home and property. Hari has played out his art and cheated.[62] (Vrindavandas, 25)

Those in the country are strong and seditious,

[57] See Ahmad, N. (1968). *Shahr-Ashob*, Maktabah Jami'ah, Delhi; Pegors, M. (1990). A Shahrashob of Sauda, *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 25:1, pp. 89–97.

[58] Urdu poets associated with this genre include Hatim, Jauhari, Asif, Tajalli, Mus'hafi, Nazir, Kamal, and Jur'at.

[59] Sharma, S. (2004). The City of Beauties in Indo-Persian Poetic Landscape, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 24:2, pp. 73–81.

[60] Haque, I. (1992). *Glimpses of Mughal Society and Culture: A Study Based on Urdu Literature*, Concept, New Delhi, p. 66.

[61] Alternatively, 'in exile' (*paravāsana meṁ*).

[62] Dhāma sauṁ khase haiṁ, base haiṁ parvāsana meṁ,
bipati sauṁ gase haiṁ, nase hai yavana dala sauṁ.
Bhūle japa jāpa sauṁ, hari ke alāpa sauṁ vichohau,
māī-bāpa sauṁ, macyau hai bāda khala sauṁ.
Vṛṁdāvana hita sauṁ bhayabhīta bhaye citta sauṁ,
nyāre dhām-bitta sauṁ, hari khelī kalā chala sauṁ.

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what *amirs* [nobles] there are are feeble,
And those who detain us on the road are in cahoots with them . . . (Sauda)[63]

Vrindavandas' verse appears in the context of the *bhakta*s fleeing the haven of Vrindavan, and having to negotiate with the 'lowly' (*khala*, also suggesting 'wicked') on the roads. While the parallel in Sauda does not represent the anxiety of the refugee, both passages signify confrontations on the roads as evidence of destabilization, a precarious situation, and, most significantly, a sense of anarchy in the absence of a strong lord, be he an *amir* or a god.

The Urdu texts directly refer to the invasions of Nadir Shah (1739), followed by Abdali, and the accounts of Mir are especially striking when read alongside Vrindavandas. In the course of the latter incursion, Mir's patron, Raja Nagar Mal, fled to Mathura and then, like Vrindavandas himself, sought refuge in the Jat territories, where Mir remained from August 1760 to 1771.[64] Mir included the massacre of Braj in his autobiography: 'His army stretched forth its hand of destruction, and Mathura, which was a prosperous and populous city, eighteen kurohs [36 kms] this way, was put to the sword.'[65] His account of Delhi's fate in 1760, when Abdali's army returned, is expressed in stronger terms:

The cries of the devastated people of the city reached the seventh heaven, but they went unheard by the Shah [now Shah Alam II], who remained engrossed in his own thoughts since he regarded himself as a dervish. Thousands of wretches, in the midst of that raging fire, scarred their hearts with the mark of exile and ran off into wilderness and, like lamps at dawn, died in the cold air—while the blackguards tied up innumerable defenceless people with ropes and dragged them off to their own camp. It was a reign of tyrants.[66]

Thus both Mir and Vrindavandas are critical of the Mughal emperor's irresponsibility, and the propensity to lose oneself in religiosity to the extent of neglecting the disaster at hand.[67] The two authors recount the pitiless treatment of the invasion's victims and express their frustration and torment under recurring, ceaseless tribulations. Mir's apocalyptic vision of Nadir Shah from 1739 anticipated Vrindavandas' complaint about Krishna: 'He brings fresh

[63] Sauda, *Mukẖammas Shahr Āshob*, unpublished manuscript, verse 3, cited by Petievich, Poetry and the Declining Mughals, p. 102.
[64] Haque, *Glimpses*, p. 67; Naim, *Zikr-i Mir*, pp. 19, 77.
[65] Translated by Naim, *Zikr-i Mir*, p. 77.
[66] Ibid., p. 85.
[67] See *Harikala Beli* verse 20, cited below.

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calamity upon us daily, Our hearts are nothing but wounds from that heart-afflicting One.'[68] These poets wrote in response to a shared trauma, such that 'their expression of the times took a form unprecedented'[69] in their own, distinctive schools of literature. It is possible that Vrindavandas' writing about Muhammad Shah, a decade after the latter's reign, owed something to hearing recent works commenting on Nadir Shah's invasion; it is also plausible that the court of Suraj Mal, asylum to both Mir and Vrindavandas at the time of the *Harikala Beli*'s completion, created a space for exchange between complaints in Urdu and Braj Bhasha.[70]

In terms of longer literary traditions, the poets of *shahr ashob* and the *bhakta*s of Braj drew on correspondent but ultimately distinct canons of imagery and poetic values. While the commonalities between Vrindavandas and Mir are particularly compelling, it would be inaccurate to read the *Harikala Beli* as entirely consonant with the *shahr ashob* genre as a whole. Innovations by the Urdu poets associated with this genre may be understood as a specific set of responses to (or rejection of) aspects of Persian poetic culture, in particular, their characteristic engagement with the artisanal and working classes in their representations of the world of the *bazaar*.[71] Lehmann and Behl have both identified how Shaikh Muhammad Wali Nazir Akbarabadi (1735–1830) described various trades in order to present a gritty vision of urban culture, in all its emotional and sexual variety.[72] However, the emphasis on the urban in the *shahr ashob* is not a concern in Vrindavandas' work, who directed his attention instead to a series of slain ascetics and priests, stitching a hagiographical thread instead.

[68] *Shikāyat-e-Shahr kā Māh*, cited and translated by Petievich, Poetry and the Declining Mughals, p. 100.

[69] Petievich, Poetry and the Declining Mughals, p. 104.

[70] For other studies of the interaction and shared histories of Hindi and Urdu literary genres, which were prised apart into separate categories over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see the essays in Orsini, F. (2010). *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi; and more recently, Pauwels, H. (2012). 'Literary Moments of Exchange in the 18th Century: The New Urdu Vogue Meets Krishna Bhakti' in A. Patel and K. Leonard *Indo-Muslim Cultures in Transition*, Brill, Leiden.

[71] Lehmann, F. (1970). Urdu Literature and Mughal Decline, *Mahfil*, 6:2–3, pp. 125–131.

[72] Ibid. Behl, A. (2005). 'Poet of the Bazaars: Nazīr Akbarābādī, 1735–1830' in Hansen and Lelyveld *A Wilderness of Possibilities,* pp. 192–222, and Heitzmann, J. (2008). *The City in South Asia*, Taylor and Francis, Abingdon, pp. 103–105.

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His work is similarly atmospheric, but reconstructs a very different, *bhakti*-oriented society. Moreover, this society is fatally wounded, the victim of unforeseen destruction and trauma. By contrast, the impoverished or anarchic world of *shahr ashob* tradesmen is not the primary focus in itself, but rather representative of a wider climate of confusion and decay.

Thus while Vrindavandas' work describes a specific, intrusive event that unravels the order of Vrindavan's universe, the Urdu poets rather gesture to a larger mood of dissatisfaction and despondence, that might be read either as symptomatic of a change or rupture on a cosmic scale (*inqilab*), or as a more worldly discontent with the times.[73] Urdu poets such as Nazir Akbarabadi or Ghulam Husain Rasikh (*circa* 1749–1823) may well describe 'the "strange" or "magical" transformations visible in the social and cultural order',[74] but without the trauma and almost apocalyptic quality felt in Mir or Vrindavandas' work. In the *Harikala Beli* no one is safe: for idle kings and pious *bhakta*s alike, every activity has been compromised by the times.

O Ji, loving Shyam, what game have you lost yourself in?
The Great Death has come: the Yavans became a tormenting torturer.
The wise lost themselves in knowledge, the proud were lost in pride,
The mindful were lost in meditation, ascetics in tapas, chanters in recitation.
Householders forgot themselves in house and work, kings in their comforts.
All living beings are afraid, the hearts of *sadhus* tremble.[75] (20.1–3)

Framing the catastrophe in Vrindavan as a rupture on a cosmic scale and structuring his account as a confrontation with Krishna distances Vrindavandas from the Urdu poets. The commonalities between his experience and that of Mir suggest that their social and literary concerns converged in Abdali's wake. Thereafter the Urdu genre continued along its own trajectory, with the likes of Rasikh, and became increasingly distant from the *Harikala Beli*.

[73] Lehmann, Urdu Literature, p. 130.
[74] Heitzmann, *The City in South Asia*, p. 105.
[75] ejū kahūṁ kautika maiṁ bhūle ho sanehī syāma
āyau mahākāla yamana bhayau tāpa tapanau.
jñānī bhūle jñāna abhimānī sanamāna bhūle
dhyānī bhūle dhyāna tapī tapa japī japanau.
gehī kāma-dhāma bhūle bhūpati viśrāma bhūle
jīva-jantū akūlāne sadhu hiye kapanau.

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A suit against God

While the *shahr ashob* only denounces human actors for their negligence and callousness, Vrindavandas extends the same attack to the divine—and, as such, ultimately culpable—agent. Although his world view is evidently *vaisnava*, the scriptures are employed merely as evidence in the suit, rather than its basis. At times Vrindavandas seems to despair of his god: 'Vrindavan's Beloved Beauty, I do not trust you anymore. The discerning know you to be like this.' (13.4) It is significant that the complaint is primarily a question of 'trust' (*bharoso*). This poem and subsequent devotional works indicate that Vrindavandas did not reject belief in, or the worship of, the god that betrayed him. However, he evidently felt it was within his rights to challenge Krishna on account of his neglect. The god had a reputation as 'tender to the bhaktas' (*bhaktabatsala*), and this reputation was now tarnished. In one of the final couplets, Vrindavandas declares in no uncertain terms:

You are the infamous master, who has let the devotees go.
In this there is no doubt: everyone knows this.[76] (187)

Krishna was 'infamous' (*kuyasha*) because although he was understood to be the store of compassion (*kripanidhana*), he had shown no mercy. Indeed, this concludes a steady attack on Krishna's reputation from the early verses of the work, where Vrindavandas outlines the god's character as a cowardly betrayer of his loved ones:

Before your birth the voice of heaven spoke and
Increased Kamsa's sin, and threw misfortune upon your father.[77]
You settled the one who knows all the dharma of this earth
In the forest for fourteen years, where he bore many pains.[78]
You abandoned the loving people of Braj to separation, yet
Your heart was not moved at all, even by their weeping.
Vrindavan's Beloved Beauty, I do not trust you anymore.
The discerning know you to be like this. (13)

You are called strong, yet there is none weaker than you:

[76] kuyaśa dhanī kau hoya sevaka kī ghaṭatī parai
yāmeṁ saṁśa na koya bāta bidita yaha jagata meṁ.
[77] That is, Vasudeva.
[78] This suggests that Krishna was responsible for engineering Rama's exile.

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You fled out of fear of your enemy, you went and hid in the water.[79]
But if you think differently, then listen to my testimony:
I saw the Yavan army of death, turned my back and fled.
You did not take up weapons in the Mahabharata, you grovelled in Magadha,
And Bhimasena killed [Jarasandha] in your clever trick.[80]
Vrindavan's Beloved Beauty, if it is you who defeat us,
You spoil your companionship in an instant.[81] (14)

This characterization represents Krishna, in the words of Bimal Krishna Matilal, as a 'devious manipulator'.[82] For Matilal, the Krishna of the *Mahabharata* cannot be subjected to a classical form of theodicy, since he does not have the prerequisite omnipotence that would hold him supremely accountable. However, 'The concept of God ... must include a reference to morality and justice ... [and in] this respect, as we all know, the character of Kṛṣṇa comes under serious criticism.'[83]

[79] Possibly referring to Krishna as *Ranchor Raya*, the king who fled in battle: he abandoned his fight with Jarasandha and fled to Dvaraka, the island home of Krishna's family, the Yadus. In the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*, Krishna himself destroyed the city, having slaughtered the men of his own family, and watched their women and children struggle for survival against a flood and abduction. In the Sanskrit corpus this is accounted for through various techniques, such as sages' curses, oaths, and liberating deities from the human realm. As already noted, Vrindavandas does not use any of these explanatory devices. See O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil*, p. 261.

[80] Krishna advised Bhima to kill Jarasandha, the king of Magadha, by tearing his body in two in such a way that the pieces could not reattach. He did not fight Jarasandha himself.

[81] janama teṁ pahaleṁ akāsabānī bola kaiṁ jū
kaṁsa kai baḍhāyo dosa bipati ḍārī bāpa kauṁ.
bhuvā ke subana saba dharma hi ke jānanahāra
bana meṁ basāye caudaha varṣa sahyau tāpa kauṁ.
braja ke anurāgī jana chāṁḍe biyoga māṁhi
tanaka hūṁ na bhīje hiya aise hūṁ alāpa kauṁ.
Vṛṅdāvana hita rūpa hamahūṁ kauṁ bharoso nāṁhi
jānata haiṁ bivekī loga aura hī teṁ āpa kauṁ. (13)

kahiyata balavāna aipai tuma teṁ na nibala koū
ripu ḍara bhāje he jāya chipe jala meṁ.
jo pai kachu māno bilagu to pai sākhi mo pai sunau
pīṭhi dai palāneṁ dekhau kāla-yamana-dala maiṁ.
bhāratha meṁ na āyudha dhare māṁgī bhīṣa
māryau tāhi bhīmasaiṁna āpa nipuna chala meṁ
Vṛṅdāvana hita rūpa hama to yadi āpu hi ke
hāryau to bigāri ḍāre saṁgahūṁ ke pala meṁ. (14)

[82] Matilal, B.K. (2002). 'Kṛṣṇa: In Defence of Devious Divinity' in J. Ganeri *The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal: Ethics and Epics*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p. 95.

[83] Ibid., p. 100.

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In this vein Vrindavandas delivers his criticism at the level of moral obligation and responsibility to the *bhakta*s.

This obligation is couched in terms of prevailing codes of social practice and the expectation that the lord of the land would protect his dependants: both notions were defined and refined in the context of a Mughal polity.[84] Early in the poem Vrindavandas lists Krishna's epithets, only that he might reveal them to be false claims:

Appreciator of virtues, full of compassion, great discerner of love,
Tender to your devotees, we always sing of your noble fame.
You have fulfilled your promises in every age, and the sacred texts bear witness.
The shelter of those who seek refuge; no other was born to take your name.[85] (16.1–2)

Vrindavandas structures his argument such that sacred texts are brought forward as evidence (*sakhi*) that Krishna has promised to be the shelter for his devotees (*sharanagatapala*), a responsibility that was his alone.[86] This is, in effect, a methodical outline of a suit against the god.

The promise becomes a recurring theme in the text, and is especially pronounced in the concluding verses:

Hail! Hail! Moon of Braj! Nanda's delight! Sophisticate of virtues!
For the sake of the *bhakta*s protect your fame and honour, O store of virtues!
You bound yourself with a promise: to always delight the *bhakta*s of Braj.

[84] Mathura (and Vrindavan) had been under Mughal influence from the sixteenth century on, and underwent revival from the 1540s when Sher Shah developed the infrastructure between Delhi and Agra. In disputes over families' rights to superintend the worship of deities, contestants could invoke both the *hakim* of Mathura and the emperor himself. This prevailed in the seventeenth century when Aurangzeb 'Alamgir himself abitrated in such disputes. From the first half of the eighteenth century the territory was increasingly dominated by the family of the Jat leader, Badan Singh, who was titled 'King of Braj' (*braj rāj*). See Entwistle, *Braj*, pp. 144–145, 153, 183, 194–195.

[85] guṇagrāhī karuṇāmaya prīti ke pārakhū baṛe
bhaktavatsala birada sadā gāvata hai bāṁkurau.
saba yuga nibhāyau bhaleṁ sākhi śruti agama hai
śaraṇāgatapāla nāma nāhi dūjau āṁkurau.

[86] This strategy of engaging the divine listener by recounting their celebrated feats was conventional in non-polemical, devotional contexts and *stotra* literature. See Gonda, J. (1977). *Medieval Religious Literature in Sanskrit*, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, pp. 232–270. For an example in Braj Bhasha, see Hawley, J.S. (2009). *The Memory of Love: Sūrdās Sings to Krishna*, Oxford University Press, New York, p. 183.

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'I will hold its various beauties and will not go from the land of Braj.'
I remember your words, Lord. I entreat you in this way.
Saying this, Vrindavan's Beloved Beauty, now you set in place a calamity[87]
for unalterable *bhakti*, O Hari![88] (185)

These lines suggest that the traditional imagery of Krishna, drawing on allusions to the narrative of his time living in Braj ('Moon of Braj' and so on), has now developed into a conceptually formal bond with social responsibilities. On this basis, according to Vrindavandas, the devotees entered into a relationship with Krishna that was coloured with notions of socio-political protection as much as *bhakti*. As a result, when the devotees were massacred, and the survivors forced to flee their homes and negotiate their way through the perils of the countryside towards an alternative refuge, this was evidence that the god was a bad landlord:

We traipse between villages, and your name is becoming defiled.
Why did we become your servants, marked as your household?
Vrindavan's Beloved Beauty, O Hari! You have taught us a good lesson:
We are your servants by birth, and have always been harmed.
Good and bad are yours alone, so rectify this yourself,
So that the shame does not hang from your neck like this.[89] (23.2–4)

These lines gesture to early modern systems of household management, drawing on larger Mughal ideologies of reciprocal social relationships and loyalty.[90] This style of complaint, though made against a deity, was perhaps informed by the wider context of the

[87] 'Calamity' (*bali*) may also read 'sacrifice' or 'very (great and unalterable *bhakti*)'.
[88] jayati jayati brajacaṁda naṅdanaṅdana guṇa nāgara
jana hita rakṣā karau birada lajjā guṇa āgara.
yaha tuma bāṁdhī peja sadā braja jana sukha bhārihauṁ
dharihauṁ rūpa aneka hauṁ na braja dhara te ṭarihauṁ.
bacana āpane sudhi karahū prabhu ihi bidhi yaha binatī karī
bhani vṛṅdāvana hita rūpa bali aba thapau bhakti acala harī.
[89] phirata haiṁ gāma gāma bigarata hai tumhāro nāma
kāheṁ teṁ dāsa bhaye rāvare ghara āṁke haiṁ.
Vṛṅdāvana hita rūpa ho hari bhalī sicchā daī
jāti hama gulāma te tau sadāī te bāṁke haiṁ.
bhale bure āpa hi ke āpuhī sudhāra lehu āvai
jyoṁ na lāja jū gala parā āpa ghāṁ ke haiṁ.
[90] See O'Hanlon, R. (2007). Kingdom, Household and Body: History, Gender and Imperial Service under Akbar, *Modern Asian Studies*, 41:5, pp. 889–923; Moin, A.A. (2012). *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam*, Columbia University Press, New York, pp. 212–217; Balabanlilar, L. (2012). *Imperial Identity in*

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eighteenth century: a state of 'disrepair' in the mechanisms basic to the Mughal administration. The poem seems to voice the anxiety felt at ground level amid the decay of the *zamindari* infrastructure. Alam has suggested that there would have been a general loss of faith in the systems of nobles and officials following the rapid growth of revenue-farming (*ijara*) in the first decades of the eighteenth century, which implied 'men motivated by gains, without any checks and supervision to which a government official, albeit theoretically, was subjected'.[91] Generally speaking, scholarship has reconstructed political norms and the configuration of ethical government on the basis of prescriptive texts and accounts of the healthy, ideal condition of the state. As such, this poem presents an alternative dimension: the expectations of a god, lord, or ruler, in times of extreme adversity. Malik describes how the failure of authoritative bodies 'to organize unity against anarchic diversity is the crucial fact of history of this period, and may account for the prevalent "restlessness", that appeared everywhere in society, now separated from sovereign authority of the state'.[92] The breakdown in structures of authority and the weakness of sovereignty may have informed Vrindavandas' frustration with Krishna's apparent neglect of his responsibilities.

Krishna's responsibilities in this work correspond to a prevailing conception of ethical government.[93] According to Vrindavandas the deity was obliged to look favourably on those under his care and provide for their welfare. Just as the slain *bhakta*s were his loyal devotees, so

the Mughal Empire: Memory and Dynastic Politics in Early Modern South and Central Asia, I.B. Tauris, London, pp. 142–145.

[91] Alam, M. (1986). *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–48*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p. 42.

[92] Malik, Z.U. (1990). The Core and the Periphery: A Contribution to the Debate on the Eighteenth Century, *Social Scientist*, 18, p. 14.

[93] For the expectations inherent in late Mughal forms of government, see Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam*, pp.57–80; Bayly, C.A. (1998). *Origins of Nationality in South Asia: Patriotism and Ethical Government in the Making of Modern India*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, especially pp. 63–97; Richards, J.F. (1984). 'Norms of Comportment among Imperial Mughal Officers' in B.D. Metcalf *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, University of California Press, London, pp. 255–289; Vanina, E. (1996). *Ideas and Society: India Between the Sixteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp. 23–59; Hintze, A. (1997). *The Mughal Empire and its Decline: An Interpretation of the Sources of Social Power*, Ashgate, Aldershot, pp. 28–49. For the longer history of these expectations in South Asia, see Richards, J.F. (1998). *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, Oxford University Press, Delhi; and in South India, Rao, V.N. and Subrahmanyam, S. (2009). Notes on Political Thought in Medieval and Early Modern South India, *Modern Asian Studies*, 43:1, pp. 175–210.

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was he expected to remain loyal to their companionship, apply his strength against any threatening party, and be constant in offering them refuge. The poet represents the refugees as part of Krishna's household (*ghara*), and underlines the disgrace that besmirches the god's reputation, since his servants have been forced to find shelter in another's house.[94] Therefore there was an assumption that the deity was an appreciator of virtues (*gunagrahi*), who would acknowledge and respond to the devotion of his dependants by fighting for their cause and defending Braj.

From king to *zamindar*, lordship was legitimized over the course of the early modern period through codified engagements with its subjects.[95] Bayly has discussed how in the conceptual space of eighteenth-century Mughal legitimacy, 'kingship, essential for the building of a coherent body of supporters, retained its character as redistribution, protection and incorporation in the localities'.[96] Together these three principles authorized the lord to settle conflicts and provide an essential balance to a localized corporate community: the well-being of a political system's constituent members assured the integrity of the whole.[97] Kumkum Chatterjee has further demonstrated that by the later eighteenth century, when the longevity and legitimacy of political institutions was especially volatile, the happiness and ease of the common subject was the hallmark of good government.[98] While Bayly's underlying framework largely draws on Indo-Muslim *hikmat* and *akhlaq* traditions of humoral balance between human, territorial, and natural elements, we might readily assume that by Vrindavandas' period these had become digested within wider, non-specialist notions of government, and had become reconciled to Hindu notions of the political character of deities.[99] Furthermore, Lehmann underlines

[94] Cf. verse 25, presumably referring to the Jats.

[95] For examples of regional studies of South Asian polities in the eighteenth-century, see Cohn, B.S. (1962). Political Systems in Eighteenth Century India: The Banaras Region, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 82:3, pp. 312–320; and Price, P.G. (1996). *Kingship and Political Practice in Colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 9–39.

[96] Bayly, *Origins of Nationality*, p. 214.

[97] O'Hanlon, Kingdom, Household and Body, p. 891.

[98] Chatterjee, History as Self-Representation, pp. 927–929.

[99] Bayly, *Origins of Nationality*, pp. 11–20. Recent scholarship has identified processes of Islamicization and the expansion of Islamic secular culture into areas erstwhile considered resolutely 'Hindu', including notions of kingship, temple architecture, and 'religious' literature. See, for example, Wagoner, P.B. (1996). 'Sultan Among Hindu Kings': Dress, Titles, and the Islamicization of Hindu Culture at Vijayanagara,

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the place of consumption in Mughal notions of 'cultural leadership', often critiqued in later times in the Urdu poets' portrayals of late Mughal kings, nobles, and patrons.[100] If we add consumption as a fourth category to Bayly's formula of redistribution, protection, and incorporation, then the political character of a Hindu god comes sharply into focus.

In certain political commentaries rooted in Islamic traditions, God's distance from the world is maintained. Justice (*'adalet*) in the human realm may be rewarded with divine approval, but is ultimately the responsibility and dispensation of the human emperor.[101] This is a familiar theme in the *shahr ashob* literature, as in a *mukhammas* by Qa'im, which denounces Shah Alam II following the battle of Sakartal in 1772:

What kind of a king is this who is intent on injustice?
An entire world is protesting against him.
A lout himself, he has a brigand army,
The honour of the people is defiled by his rule,
He is the shadow of Satan, not the shadow of God. [102]

However, it is apparent that in a *vaisnava* scheme it was possible to judge divine activity by the same standards that existed in the human realm. In daily ritual practice, over the course of *puja* and the circulation of *prasad*, the temple deity is the central node in a community's economy of distribution, display, and consumption

Journal of Asian Studies, 55:4, pp. 851–880; Ghosh, P. (2005). *Temple to Love: Architecture and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Bengal*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indiana; Kapadia, A. (2013). The Last Cakravartin? The Gujarat Sultan as 'Universal King' in Fifteenth Century Sanskrit Poetry, *The Medieval History Journal*, 16:1, pp. 63–88.

[100] Lehmann, Urdu Literature, pp. 125–131. Cf. Talbot, Justifying Defeat, pp. 357–359.

[101] For example, see the Iranian theory of the circle of justice articulated by Jalal al-Din Dawani in the *Akhlaq-i Jalali*, as discussed by Streusand, D.E. (1989). *The Formation of the Mughal Empire*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, p. 27. The recasting of Timurid doctrines by the Mughals has been analysed by Balabanlilar, *Imperial Identity*. The responsibility of the Islamic ruler to orchestrate justice in his realm provided an opportunity for the patronage of religious scholars in courtly settings; see Hartung, J-P. (2011). 'Enacting the Rule of Islam: On Courtly Patronage of Religious Scholars in Pre- and Early Modern Times' in A. Fuess and J-P. Hartung *Court Cultures in the Muslim World: Seventh to Nineteenth Centuries*, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 295–325.

[102] Cited in Sharma, The City of Beauties, p. 78.

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of wealth and provision.[103] In the context of pre-colonial Braj's pilgrimage economy, the scope of this integral process was enormous, on a par with the ritual and festal practices of kings. Monika Horstmann has shown extensively how both the material and symbolic aspects of this configuration surrounding the deities' worship conferred legitimizing authority onto kings, particularly in the late Mughal period, as the landscape of Braj was drawn into the palaces of Jaipur, a 'bower turned stone'.[104]

Vrindavandas gestures to a secondary dimension that is perhaps harder to quantify: that the gods bore their own social clout, as well as conferring it on human kings. For this poet, Krishna was not operating in relation to a courtly patron, but was economically and ideologically independent and, as such, responsible for his attendant community of dependants and followers. These responsibilities entailed the same political principles of redistribution, protection, incorporation, and consumption. This argument finds a parallel in Akio Tanabe's notion of the 'sacrificial' community in the Khurda kingdom of Orissa (1572–1804), which draws together the tutelary goddess, king, and community: 'Sacrifice here refers to the actions which were performed as a duty of a part dedicated for the whole. Such sacrificial activities should be thought to have included not only rituals but also politico-economic activities in the cultural paradigm.'[105] Following this reading, it is apparent that the Hindu devotee could approach his deity with social and political, as well as soteriological, aspirations. Therefore, in the context of the *Harikala Beli*, we can recognize Vrindavandas' self-representation as a claimant and dependant of Krishna, as well as a *bhakta*.

[103] See, for example, Peabody, *Hindu Kingship*; and Packert, C. (2010). *The Art of Loving Krishna: Ornamentation and Devotion*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

[104] Horstmann, M. (1999). 'The Temple of Govindadevajī: A Symbol of Hindu Kingship?' in N.K. Singh and R. Joshi *Religion, Ritual and Royalty*, Rawat, Jaipur, p. 120. See also Horstmann, M. (1999). *In Favour of Govinddevjī: Historical Documents Relating to a Deity of Vrindaban and Eastern Rajasthan*, Manohar, New Delhi.

[105] Tanabe, A. (1999). 'Kingship, Community and Commerce in Late Pre-colonial Khurda' in N. Karashima *Kingship in Indian History. Japanese Studies on South Asia* 2, Manohar, New Delhi, p. 199.

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Agency in death

The conflation of social and theological commentary and critique in the *Harikala Beli* approaches its conclusion through eschatological imagery and horrific accounts of the devotees' deaths. We have already read in verse 20 (above) Vrindavandas' striking observation that the 'hearts of *sadhus* tremble', showing how even the (theoretically) unshakeable were shaken by the Afghan presence. The final portion of the poem depicts the deaths of the renunciates in hagiographical terms, celebrating their resolution in the face of persecution. In a sense Vrindavandas finds solace in their determination before their terrible fate, and applauds their dedication to religion, despite the callousness of their deity. Indeed, despite his outrage and grief, Vrindavandas hints early in the text that he has not abandoned his religion after all, and his text is driven by the premise that there is evidence of religion's excellence within the trauma and tragedy. As such, we might view the poem as a framework for the victims, giving the murdered devotees a pious self-control and a degree of agency over their deaths, which was comforting to the survivors of Vrindavan. The victims of torture, including Krishnadas and the yogi, Yadavdas, are described as achieving their spiritual goals through their resolve in the face of torment. Rather than claiming that Krishna embraced the souls of his slain devotees, it is rather the devotees who actively acquired Krishna by their spiritual strength:

Krishnadas remains rapt in the intoxication of the divine couple's emotion.
The Yavan came, the creation was shaken, but he was not at all afraid.
He increased his firm resolve on the feet of the Delight of Vyas.[106]
Nonetheless, the *mleccha* tormented him in various ways.
His great desire for the dust of Braj remained night and day:
He mixed his body with the dust according to his true vow.
Vrindavan's Beloved, the path of love is distinctly crooked.
He is only like himself: no new simile can be given.[107] (177)

[106] Referring to Krishna in relation to Vyas, the compiler of the *Mahabharata*.

[107] kṛṣṇadās chakani soṁ chakeī rahe jugala bhāva
āyau jamana hālī sṛṣṭi bhāyahūṁ na bhaī hai.
byāsanaṁdana caranani sau gāḍhī ati niṣṭhā bāḍhī
yadyapi malekṣani tāpa nānā bhāṁti daī hai.
raja kī abhilāṣa baḍī rahata ho nisi dina
vahī deha raja meṁ sāṁce pana sauṁ milaī hai.
Vṛṅdāvana hita ananya vāṁke hita rīti patha
unkī sama veī upamā na banai naī hai.

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Indeed, at least two ascetics—Premdas and Bhagvandas—cut themselves into pieces in order to claim total agency over their deaths and spiritual aspirations:

When he heard the *mleccha* coming, by his own hand
He hacked himself vehemently into pieces—what can I say?
Vrindavan's Beloved Beauty, by his will he made his body meet the dust,
What can devotees not do? It is truly wondrous.[108] (180.3–4)

Similarly, Vrindavandas commemorates a temple priest who died in the defence of his shrine, and a merchant who hurried *into* Vrindavan when he heard about the massacre, in order to assist the survivors. The virtuous deeds of the *bhakta*s are considered on their own terms, rather than in relation to Krishna: whatever he did must be borne on their heads, as his servants, but the wonderful quality of their deaths is their own. The *bhakta*s sanctified themselves rather than being blessed by an external, divine agent.[109] The divine agent himself is a dangerous combination: capricious, but also the orchestrator of the Dark Age. This latter dimension had an immediate bearing on how Vrindavandas understood the Afghans.

The Afghan army is at the centre of the eschatological landscape, but although it is represented as a barbaric force, it cannot be characterized in terms of Aziz Ahmad's reading of 'counter-epic' literature, exemplified by the Hindi *raso*s.[110] Indeed, the work gestures to Sreenivasan's sense of 'more complicated histories of accommodation between traditions that are now invariably thought of as mutually hostile'.[111] Vrindavandas refers to the Afghans as *mleccha* or *yavans*, both broadly used generic terms.[112] They are

[108] tāhū ne maleccha kauṁ ju agama suni apane hātha
ṭūka ṭūka kari kai deha ḍārī kahauṁ kahā.
Vṛṅdāvana hita rūpa samajhi raja milāyau tana
kahā na upāsī karaiṁ ai pai kautika mahā.

[109] Cf. Pauwels, H. (2010). Hagiography and Community Formation: The Case of a Lost Community of Sixteenth-Century Vrindāvan, *The Journal of Hindu Studies*, 3, pp. 53–90, especially p. 68.

[110] Ahmad, A. (1963). Epic and Counter-Epic in Medieval India, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 83:4, pp. 470–476.

[111] Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives*, p. 13.

[112] For a discussion of these terms in the context of representing 'Muslim' communities, see Metcalf, Too Little and Too Much, p. 958, and Talbot, C. (1995). Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37:4, pp. 692–722, especially pp. 698–699.

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dehumanized, but the poet's condemnation is ultimately limited: they are an expression of the Dark Age, rather than villains proper. This is especially pronounced in a parallel between Samin's aforementioned Persian account and the poem. As Samin followed the Afghan army across Hindustan, he observed from a distance of eight *kos*[113] that the dust from the horses' hooves rose up into a giant cloud, 'as if it were a mountain stretching its head to heaven'.[114] In the *Harikala Beli* this same cloud is rendered into a symptom of the final destruction of the world:

Fear in each direction, fearlessness had not one place,
Even by their thundering the clouds wound the people.
A great terrible wind rained down a haze of dust.
Death dances on our heads, looming over us like a crazed elephant. (18.1–2)

Just as the clouds gather at the time of destruction, the flying dust of the
Hooves of the *mleccha* army overcast the heavens.[115] (21.1)

The end of the world is ultimately a divine prerogative. By drawing contemporary experience into the Hindu imagination, Vrindavandas denies the Afghans their moral agency: the responsibility is placed with Krishna. Here then, the Muslim army is an impersonal force, the apocalyptic weapon of the true agent, the Hindu god.

The *Harikala Beli* therefore contributes to our understanding of Hindu-Muslim perspectives in the pre-colonial period. This nuanced text does not invoke an anti-Muslim idiom, despite Vrindavandas' traumatic first-hand experience. Rather than defining unitary religious identity markers, the poem reflects how eighteenth-century 'Hindu' writers engaged subtly with a culture and economy shaped by 'Islamicate' influences. The victims are *bhakta*s caught in a localized

[113] The distance indicated by one *kos* varies regionally, between 1.5 and 2.5 miles or more. Therefore the cloud of dust was visible from anywhere between 12 and (over) 20 miles away.

[114] Irvine, *Ahmad Shah*, p. 7. The representation of an army through a cloud of dust is a familiar image in Sanskrit poetics. For example, *Raghuvamsa* IV:29–30, in Devadhar, C.R. (1985). *Raghuvamśa of Kālidāsa*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, pp. 63–64.

[115] diśā bhaī bhaya kī abhaya kī na ṭhaura koū
ghaṇahū ghaharāya kai karata jana ghāva re.
mahā ugra pavana gavana raja baraṣai hai
nācata sira kāla matta hāthī jyauṁ chāva re. (18.1–2)
pralai kāla ghaṭā jaisī umḍī malekṣa senā
uḍī khura reṇu tāsauṁ nabha chāya gayau hai. (21.1)

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tragedy: they are not 'Hindus' in any supralocal, communal sense.[116] The eulogizing of *bhakta*s in this poem might be understood as defining or reifying an identity for the *vaisnava* community, in line with Talbot's conception of 'social history' as constructing 'representations of community that emphasize internal features of solidarity'.[117] However, the poet does not elaborate on this with a longer history of Vrindavan: the devotees are particularized as individuals, drawn together only in the single moment of trauma. Like Talbot's Telugu texts, the *Harikala Beli* is not characterized by a pejorative, anti-Muslim stance. The Mughals are weak politicians, and the Afghans, a terrifying force, but neither party is demonic. Despite their brutality, Vrindavandas does not launch an attack on the soldiers themselves.

This reading of events contrasts with twentieth-century accounts, including Natwar-Singh's representation of Abdali, which he draws in contrast to the noble figure of Suraj Mal: 'In the calmest, most dispassionate manner he ordered the massacre of innocent people. Nothing horrified him. Cruelty came naturally to him.'[118] Ironically Vrindavandas uses similarly strong terms to describe Krishna, but not the Afghan. Indeed, there seems to be little evidence in the *Harikala Beli* of Natwar-Singh's assertion that 'This was a full-bloodied religious war conducted in the sacred Braj region.'[119] This view was informed by a reading of Samin's portrait, which attempted to represent Abdali as a champion of Islam, through references to his prayers, asides to his officers explicitly stating that he is an 'upholder of Islam', and his instructions for a chronogram to read 'that I have given Islām peace from the oppression of the infidel'.[120] However, these elements read as superficial glosses over the historical narrative: from his other reported words and actions, Abdali's motivation was hardly religious,

[116] The equally barbarous 'villains' of the Maratha invasions of Bengal (1742–1744) recounted in the *Maharashta Purana* were, like the poem's author, Hindu. Dimock, The Mahārāshṭa Purāṇa, p. 1. For the different kinds of community formation that occurred in early modern Vrindavan, and their relationship to hagiography, see Pauwels, Hagiography.

[117] Talbot, C. (2000). 'The Story of Prataparudra: Hindu Historiography on the Deccan Frontier' in D. Gilmartin and B.B. Lawrence *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, p. 294. A similar concept is found in Nile Green's work on Sufi histories; see Green, N. (2004). Stories of Saints and Sultans: Re-membering History at the Sufi Shrines of Aurangabad, *Modern Asian Studies*, 38:2, p. 424.

[118] Natwar-Singh, *Maharaja Suraj Mal*, p. 64.

[119] Ibid., p. 65.

[120] Irvine, *Ahmad Shah*, pp. 17, 25.

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while Samin's encounter with Muslim victims in Mathura suggests that the Afghan army was not in Braj to protect Islam.[121] Abdali did not have imperial aspirations, but sought to procure income and maintain his following among the military forces of Afghanistan, where he had newly consolidated power. It is apparent that the invasion of Braj was seen as an act of terror against Suraj Mal, who was withholding tribute, rather than Vaisnavism. Moreover, the Austrian missionary, Joseph Tieffenthaler, who had visited the area only a few years before the massacre, described the wealth that had poured into Mathura and Vrindavan as prosperous families built their mansions on holy soil.[122] This, as well as the exodus of the wealthier sections of Delhi society into Jat territories in 1757, increased the financial incentives for an invasion of Braj.[123] Although Vrindavandas was not immediately concerned with the causes of the invasion, he notes the decadent weakness of the Mughals and the failed systems of protection, rather than any virulent assertion of Islam, which underlines the subtlety and nuance of his account.

The continuing need for protection

After the events of 1757 Vrindavandas was compelled to move according to the demands and challenges of a turbulent political environment. From references in later compositions, Vijayendra Snatak traces Vrindavandas' constant movement between politically safe territories: Farrukhabad, Bharatpur (*circa* 1757–1760, 1782), Kosi (*circa* 1761), Kishangarh (*circa* 1774–79), and Pushkar (*circa* 1776), as well as intermittent periods back in Vrindavan (*circa* 1760, 1763, 1766–73, 1780–81, 1783–7) or wandering through the Braj countryside (*circa* 1764–5), punctuated by recurring invasions and conflicts.[124] The *Sevak Jas Viradavali* and *Rasik Paricayavali*, both written in 1787 after some years spent exclusively in Vrindavan, are taken as his final compositions; it is therefore assumed that Vrindavandas died some time thereafter, at almost 90 years of age.[125]

[121] Ibid., pp. 22f.

[122] Tieffenthaler, J., Anquetil Du Perron, A.H. and Rennell, J. (1786). *Description historique et géographique de l'Inde,* Berlin, Vol. 1, pp. 203f.

[123] Indeed, this was not the only time Abdali's armies campaigned in Braj: they returned between 18 March 1760 and 5 April 1761.

[124] Snatak, *Radhavallabha Sampradaya*, pp. 517–521.

[125] Williams, The Poetry, p. 4.

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His works contribute to the Radhavallabh Sampraday's *vani*, a sung textual corpus that serves as the arena for the divine encounter in life and worship. Therefore, despite his confrontational attitude to Krishna, Vrindavandas continued to see his work as an offering and form of service to the deity. This confrontation should therefore be understood as a reminder that, like other forms of service to an overlord, Vrindavandas' *bhakti* should be recognized and reciprocated with protection.

This is spelled out in the concluding verses of the *Harikala Beli*, where Vrindavandas summarizes his argument with an *arilla* verse and then a short series of *soratha* couplets:

These words would produce compassion even in an insentient being.
O Hari, Vrindavan's Beloved Beauty, Syam, may you approve of them.

You are the infamous master, who has let the devotees go.
In this there is no doubt: everyone knows this.

You do not listen attentively, for so little compassion you should be reproached.
You are called the store of compassion! There is not even a rain drop of this.

Syam undertakes his game, and now many wonders are seen.
Creation becomes a battlefield, the supreme religion is firmly established.

Who is more ignorant than me to talk so much to the Lord?
My heart became restless, and thus I entreat you in all your power.[126] (186b–190)

Vrindavandas crafts a bold but persuasive argument. In the same breath he publicly shames (*kuyasa*) Krishna and asks for the god's approval of the work, in recognition of its moving, poetical potency. Thus Krishna is expected to appreciate the strength of feeling in the piece, yet also be reminded of his neglect and irresponsibility.

[126] jaḍa hū kauṅ ye bacana kṛpā upajāyahaiṅ.
Hari hāṅ, vṛṅdāvana hita rūpa, śyāma mana bhāyahaiṅ.
Kuyaśa dhanī kau hoya sevaka kī ghaṭatī parai,
yāmeṅ saṅśa na koya bāta bidita yaha jagata meṅ.
Mana dai sunata na kāna ete daye urāhane,
kahiyata kṛpānidhāna aipai barașata būṅda nahiṅ.
Bājī ropī śyāma kautika dekhyau bahuta aba,
sṛṣṭi bhaī saṅgrāma parama dharma thiru thāpiye.
Hamate kauna ayāna svāmī soṅ etī kahai,
hiye bhaī akulāna samaratha soṅ binatī karī.

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Having outlined the remarkable achievements of the stalwart *bhakta*s, who took on Krishna's torments majestically, Vrindavandas is able to incorporate a sense of wonder into his account of the desolation of Vrindavan. He then humbly recognizes his insignificance before the deity, while investing his apology with the very emotion he hopes will appeal to Krishna. Having laid these foundations, Vrindavandas concludes with a plea for protection that aptly reconciles a typical *bhakti* prayer for theological refuge (*sarana*) with a very worldly need for security:

Glory! Glory! Land of Braj! Glory! flute bearing Protector!
Keep your own forever in the shade of your lotus hands.
Glory! Mistress of the grove, companion to the lord of Vrind, Sri Radha!
Remove all fear from body and spirit, destroy every distress of the heart.
Forever live the sound: Protector of the Earth! Say, Vrindavan's Beloved Beauty, Hari!
Lustrous Lord of the cowherds, risen from two families,[127] now protect the devotees well forever.[128] (192)

Conclusion

In the *Harikala Beli* Vrindavandas discusses his community's immediate and tragic past, drawing history and social commentary into conversation with a literary landscape characterized by his religious devotion. O'Hanlon and Washbrook have outlined the tension between religious texts and historiography in South Asia:

For the faithful, religion represents a transcendental system of meaning, rising above the mutable circumstances of place and time. Yet social and political relationships necessarily take place within particular contexts, to which historians necessarily give emphasis.[129]

The *Harikala Beli* is unlike other works in Vrindavandas' repertoire, and does not follow what might be described as a 'conventional' *bhakti* strategy. Here, expectations that developed from social and

[127] Referring to Krishna's biological, royal lineage and his adopted, pastoral family.
[128] Jayati jayati braja bhūmi, jayati rakṣaka muralīdhara,
kara-kamalani kī chāṅha sadā rākhau apanenu para.
Jaya vipaneśvari sakhī-bṛṅda-nāyaka śrī rādhā,
praṇatana kī bhaya harau meṭi saba hiya kī bādhā.
Nita jayati ghoṣa pālaka mahī, bhani vṛṅdāvana hita rūpa hari,
dhani gopa opa duṅhu kula udita aba rakṣa rakṣa jana su bidhi kari. (192)
[129] O'Hanlon and Washbrook, *Religious Cultures*, p. 1.

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political relationships were deeply entwined with theological world views and a profound meditation on suffering. Vrindavandas grounded his discussion in recent Mughal history rather than scriptural formulations, and did not attempt to mythologize his experience by projecting Krishna into a timeless realm governed by *puranic* protocols. Instead, the *Harikala Beli* presents a case against the deity, drawing on 'timeless' scriptural material as a body of evidence for a contemporary plea, in view of a recent tragedy.

Thus Vrindavandas took the received tradition of Krishna as a manipulating and unfaithful personality, and redacted this understanding according to prevalent social codes regarding the expectations and obligations between an overlord and his dependants. In effect this translated the relationship between a god and his devotee into a social agreement, a mutually understood set of reciprocal expectations. This understanding was developed and coloured by the poet's historical context, particularly the perceived failure of figures in authority to protect those in their service. Here then, Krishna is the supreme authority, who has forsaken the urgent needs of Braj, a territory he had designated as his own. Vrindavandas' dialogue with the deity was an innovative choice of form, arguably more nuanced than alternative avenues which might champion political leaders, or alienate the 'Other' as constructed through religious categories. That Vrindavandas did not follow these strategies—although he was in need of political protection in the fallout from 1757, and had seen his world ravaged by an alien army—raises many questions.

On the one hand, this Braj Bhasha text gestures to a more complicated and connected history of North Indian literature, especially in its similarities to the Urdu *shahr ashob*. Authors associated with disparate genres, languages, religions, and modes of patronage nonetheless experienced the same tribulations and as such their distinctive works were brought, directly or indirectly, into a common conversation with their environment. Read alongside Mir in particular, it is apparent that although Vrindavandas is understood as pertaining to a very different literary canon, there are considerable parallels between his reflections on society and those articulated in Urdu. That the refugees of Delhi and Braj fled the same army and found shelter in the same court at Bharatpur indicates a convergence of experience and a shared social world that informed the parallels in their works.

The example of Vrindavandas also indicates how Mughal notions of lordship and legitimacy were integrated into *bhakti*'s emphasis on finding shelter in the deity, such that 'refuge' (*sarana*) developed

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into a worldly notion as well as a theological concept. This further suggests that deities need to be taken seriously as agents in South Asian historiography and as legitimate patrons and lords in a social capacity.[130] It certainly appears in this text that despite Krishna's behaviour, the dead devotees resolutely maintained their side of the understanding with the god and that Vrindavandas intended to continue with his.

[130] Cf. Chakrabarty, 'The Time of History', p. 39.

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