Abstract

Scholars have rightly questioned the periodization of early modern Hindi literature (fourteenth to mid-nineteenth century) into two major thematic and temporal categories, often described as binaries: an early bhaktikāl (era of devotion), and the later rītikāl (era of mannerism). It is now common to understand bhakti and rīti as complementary modes of poetic expression rather than oppositional styles that poets had to identify with entirely. This paper uses the perspective of poet-saints (sants) to argue that, although the sants share many features with the rīti poets in terms of genres and register, they diverge fundamentally from them on the topic of the proper motives of composing verse. The criticism that the sants register with selected rīti themes – conflicts which would later figure in the writings of Hindi literary historians in the nationalist era – can be seen as anticipating the modern bhakti versus rīti distinction.

Keywords: Early modern India, Hindusim, Hindi, Sundardās, Rīti, Bhakti

The interrelation of bhakti and rīti

The prevalent Hindi historiographies define early modern Hindi literature (fourteenth to mid-nineteenth century) by categorizing the poetry in two thematic timeframes as bhaktikāl (period of devotion, 1318–1643) and rītikāl (period of mannerism, 1643–1843). While the project of writing histories of Hindi literature started in the nineteenth century (noteworthy are De Tassy 1870–71; Sengar 1967 [1878]; Grierson 1889), however, the tendency of designating different eras under certain themes emerged and was consolidated in the twentieth century (three principal accounts are: Miśra et al. 1972 [1913]; Śukla 1988 [1929 and 1940]; and Tripathī et al. 1973). In these histories – of which Śukla’s is the most popular and influential – poetry pertaining to bhakti (that is devotional or religious literature) is said to have flourished earlier than the rīti-period, when “mannerist”, “secular”, or “courtly” poetry was written in Brajbhāṣā – the language of the Braj region adopted not only by Kṛṣṇa devotional poets but which was also prominent in the court circles of early modern north
India. The *bhakti-rāti* binary in these historiographies goes far beyond a simple temporal sequence. They are construed as opposites in theme, style, social imagination, and patronage. *Bhakti* poetry was considered spiritual and spontaneous: it spoke of personal devotion to god and, being expressed through the vernacular languages, it made religious experience more inclusive and participatory for people of all social strata. However, *rāti* poetry (*rāti* literally means custom or tradition, but more specifically the tradition of poetic ideals and compositions) was described as lacking originality (*mauliktā*) since it took much of its inspiration for composition from Sanskrit poetics (*kāvyā*). *Rāti* poetry, for example the works of Keśavdās discussed in detail in this essay, was also considered to be ornate, eroticized, and hyperbolic in praising the courtly elites who patronized and appreciated such literature. Thus, *rāti* poetry finally came to designate a kind of literary culture that was representative of the decadence of Hindu princely states under the Muslim Mughal rulers of north India.

Scholars have rightly questioned the rigidity of this timeframe and the assumptions of nationalist historians in evaluating the literature of this era on the grounds that such a schematic classification hampers our understanding of the Hindi past. Many poets do not fit into either of the “tropes” about *bhakti* versus *rāti* under which early modern Hindi poetry was largely understood. Several *rāti* poets flourished during the so-called *bhakti* period, and there are other poets who can be described as having both *bhakti* and *rāti* sentiments in their poetry (Busch 2006: 42–5). Similarly, many devotional poets worked during the so-called *rāti* era when devotional communities themselves grew immensely. Scholars have therefore largely come to understand *bhakti* and *rāti* as modes of poetic expression rather than as fixed identities for poets to inhabit. For example, Rupert Snell (1994: 153–70) has shown that Bihārīlāl’s (born early 1600s) deeply felt devotion to Kṛṣṇa is inseparable from his highly cultivated poetic technique. In the same way, the poetry of Ānandghan (d. 1757), who flourished in the *rāti* period, was enjoyed in both courtly and religious centres. Ānandghan masterfully weaves mundane and divine love in his poetry. The reception of Ānandghan’s multifaceted poetry presents an interesting case of contested identities of a poet: over time the compilers of Ānandghan’s poetry considered him either a Vaiṣṇava (devotee of the god Viṣṇu and his incarnations), or a lover-poet encompassing all aspects of human love in his ornate *rāti*-style quatrains (Bangha 2001; 2007). A case similar to that of Ānandghan can also be seen in Heidi Pauwels’ study of king Sāvant Śimh of Kishangarh (1699–1764), who wrote under the pen name of Nāgarīdās. His oeuvre presents an excellent example of the “loving embrace” of scholastic (i.e. *rāti* style) works, devotional motifs like Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa sporting in Braj, as well as Sāvant Śimh’s yearning to settle in Vrindavan. Although Sāvant Śimh abandons his courtly affairs and settles in Vrindavan in the later period of his life, we cannot describe an early courtly and later devotional phase in his poetic life as we can for Ānandghan. These themes were intertwined in his poetry throughout his literary career, and the devotional references to Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa served as a way for him to construct his personal life (Pauwels 2005).
Thus, recent scholarship has questioned the rigid binaries presented by earlier historians in their portrayal of the Hindi literary past, and in doing so has opened new ways of studying early modern Hindi poetry. The majority of the poets discussed by these scholars, however, either lived in courts or were kings themselves. Their inclinations towards the rīti or “courtly” mode of expression might therefore be seen as a function of their social identities. To complement these studies, this paper examines a poet of a very different social identity: a poet-saint or a sant from the nirguṇ tradition of bhakti. Sundardās (1596–1689) – a prominent disciple of Dādū Dayāl (1544–1603) – is considered to be an expert in poetic art of the saint tradition (the sant paramparā), and illustrates how a devotional poet could engage with topics that are traditionally considered to be favourites of the poets of rīti style.

Sundardās: Life and works

Sundardās became a disciple of the poet-saint Dādū Dayāl at an early age. Dādū Dayāl’s sect is called the Dādūpanth (the path of Dādū) and its main abode is in Rajasthan. The Dādūpanthi Rāghavdās (1665), in his Bhaktamāl (garland of devotees, 1660: vv. 419–22), writes that Sundardās was from the merchant caste, a Sāhūkār (Vaiṣṇava) of “būsar” lineage. Similarly, Sundardās calls himself būsar in his poetry. The būsar lineage is a branch of the present day Khanḍelvāl Vaiṣṇava community and connects itself to its ancestral village “Khanḍelā” located in the Shekhawati region of north-eastern Rajasthan. Rāghavdās writes that at the age of 11, Sundardās abandoned his house and left for Banāras (Varanasi or Kashi), where he studied vedānta and the purāṇas. In Banāras, Sundardās received training not only in the prominent philosophical knowledge systems, but possibly learned poetic skills as well. From Banāras, Sundardās returned to Rajasthan and settled in Fatehpur-Shekhawati (north-eastern Rajasthan), which was ruled by the Kāyamkhānī kings (a small gentry under the Mughals) during his time. It was in Fatehpur that Sundardās probably wrote most of his works.

Sundardās’s entire corpus expands up to almost 1,000 published pages. His oeuvre was critically edited by the master textual critic and scholar of bhakti traditions, Purohit Harinarāyaṇ Śarmā, in 1937. Much of our knowledge of Sundardās’s life and works is based on the erudite introduction that the editor wrote for this edition, which is the culmination of his lifelong research on Sundardās. This paper relies on the Śarmā edition for Sundardās’s works. Rameścandra Misra published an edition of Sundardās’s works in 1992, and editions prepared by the modern-day followers of Dādū Dayāl have made Sundardās’s works more widely accessible. Monika Horstmann (1983) has translated a chapter on bhakti from Sundardās’s scholarly poem Gyān Samudra (the ocean of knowledge) and a shorter poem Gurukṛpā-aṣṭaka (eight verses (or verse-sets) of gurus’ blessings). Horstmann has also written a chapter that helpfully situates Sundardās in the larger sant tradition and examines the Sufi influences that are intertwined in his two short poetic
compositions (Horstmann 2014). In general, however, Sundardās has not received a great deal of scholarly attention in English-language scholarship.

The lifespan of Sundardās – most of the seventeenth century – bridges the bhaktikāl and rītikāl as traditionally conceived, and the same can be said for his oeuvre. In his fundamental orientation, Sundardās was a sant. Throughout his corpus he honours his guru Dādūdayāl and proudly situates himself in the tradition of sants like Nāmdev (fl. thirteenth–fourteenth century) and Kābir (fl. fifteenth century). He also composes a good portion of his poetry in sākhī (couplets) and pad (lyrical songs), which are the representative genres of sant poetry. Along with these staple sants, Sundardās wrote a text entirely in quatrains, i.e. in Savaiyā and Kavitt metres. This text is named as the Savaiyā, often called Savaiyā Granth (hence SG in quotations) or Sundarvilās (the joy of Sundar) by modern editors. Both of these metrical forms (savaiyā and kavitt) are much more a characteristic of rītī poetry. The Savaiyā Granth has become the basis for Sundardās’s fame in modern north India, where it has appeared widely in print since the late nineteenth century. While the savaiyā and kavitt metres were also employed by other devotional poets such as Tulsīdās and Raskhān as well as by Dādūdayāl’s disciple and Sundardās’s close ally Rajab (fl. sixteenth century), Sundardās’s virtuosic use of this metre put him in conversation with his contemporary courtly or rītī poetic circles, where writing poetry in multiple forms of savaiyā metres was highly prized. Sundardās’s deep interest in the metrical tradition and using multiple metrical forms to craft devotional and philosophical poetry for the sant audience is also seen in his scholarly poem, the Gyān Samudra (GS in quotations), written in 1653. The Gyān Samudra also shares many features with the so-called rītigranths (handbook of poets or poetic theories) which is a defining genre of rītī poetry. Some of the metrical forms Sundardās uses in the Gyān Samudra were rarely seen in earlier Hindi bhakti poetry.

I will argue, primarily on the basis of Sundardās’s Savaiyā Granth and Gyān Samudra (with relevant examples from his collection of couplets: sākhīs), that, despite the many features his poetry shares with the rītī poetic tradition, he contrasts starkly with the rītī poets in his motives for composing poetry. Sundardās registers his criticism with tropes like śṛṅgārīkā (the erotic sentiment) and nāyikā bheda (types of heroines in poetry), nakh-sikh (head-to-toe descriptions) which were prominent in the rītī tradition. These tropes of rītī poetry with which Sundardās and other sants – who engaged with the tradition of poetics considerably – express their disagreements would later be enshrined as the representative tropes of the diverse rītī poetic tradition, and when the pioneers of nationalist historiography wrote about them, they connected these tropes with poets living in the age of courtly decadence. Although the categories of bhakti and rītī were not always conceived in the schematic and oppositional way that nationalist historians of literature conceived of them, it is not the case, either, that the categories themselves were fashioned in the modern period. This paper aims to show that the distinction was both known to Sundardās and

1 Horstmann’s (2021) book, which studies the close relationship of bhakti and yoga in the seventeenth century manuscripts, discusses Sundardās’s poetry pertaining to yoga in great detail.
his contemporaries, and also structured the way they thought about the landscape of literature in their own time.

A sant’s response to rīti poetry

Monika Horstmann (2014: 233–63) writes that the sant s were extremely proud of having shown the “middle way” (madhī mārga) between Hinduism and Islam. It should be argued, then, that Sundardās was far more invested in establishing another sort of middle way. While Horstmann rightly indicates that Sundardās carved a niche for himself with respect to saguṇ Viśnuna orthodoxy, this was not his only concern as a poet. Sundardās was also interested in participating in the evolving scholarly discourse on metre and structural poetic devices that is now commonly referred to as rīti, and he sought to appropriate the conventions, themes, and techniques of this emerging classical poetry for the sant-bāṇī tradition. This was his most prominent “middle way”.

Sundardās was finely attuned to the discourse on aesthetics that is often called rīti in modern scholarship, but he used it for purposes radically different from those that modern characterizations of rīti would lead us to expect. He borrowed from earlier traditions of rīti poetry and Sanskrit poetics (kāvyā) in order to cater to the needs of a new and decidedly non-courtly audience: the sants, whose modes of literary production (bāṇi or sant-bāṇī: sayings of the sants) are often understood to contrast with those we call rīti kāvyā. Although it is erroneous to designate the sant-bāṇī that predated Sundardās as not having literary qualities, like the way early literary historians such as Rāmcandra Śukla characterized sant poetry, it is certainly true that Sundardās transformed it by engaging with the classical and courtly poetic discourses of his time.

Sundardās treats the traditional topics of poetics, such as prosody, with remarkable humour while presenting them to a non-scholarly audience. He avails himself of kāvyā discourses in the project of creating a bāṇi that is not just religiously sensitive but aesthetically well-formed. He writes in the following verse that poetry written in uneven metres hobbles along like a lame man (khurāvata nara) and agitates poets and connoisseurs:

nakha śikha sūdhā kavitta parhata ati nīkau laaggai,
anga hīna jau parhay sunata kavijana utthi bhaggai.
akṣara ghāṭi bāṛhi hoi khurāvata nara jyom callai,
māṭa ghāṭai bāṛhi koi manau matavārau hallai.
auṛhera kānā sau tuka amila, arthāhīna andhau yathā,
kahi Sundara harijasa jīv hai, harijasa bina mṛita kahi tathā.2

Reading poetry that is beautifully crafted from head to toe is extremely pleasurable.
If someone reads poetry lacking the necessary limbs, though, poets will get up and run.

2 This is the first verse of Sundardās’s “kavitā lakṣaṇ” (qualities of poetry), a text compiled under the miscellaneous poems (phūṭkar kāvyā) section. See Sundar Granthāvalī, (vol. 2), p. 972 (Śarmā 1937).
When the syllables are arranged unevenly, poetry falters like a lame man. It staggers like a drunkard when the syllables are irregular and uneven. Bad rhyming is like a crooked, one-eyed person, and meaningless poetry is blind. Sundar says the life of a poem is the glory of Hari. Without that glory, poetry is as good as dead.³

The particular anthropomorphic metaphors used here are found in Sanskrit and Apabhramśa sources⁴ and in a text that is closer to Sundardās in terms of time and language. It is striking how closely the imagery and terminology that Sundardās employs in this verse evoke a similar discussion of “flawed poetry” (sadoṣa kavitta) that appears in the Kavipriyā (beloved of poets, 1601) of the major rīti poet Keśavdās:⁵

chanda birodhī paṅgu gani, nagna ju bhūṣana hīna,
mitaka kahāvai artha binu Kesava sunahu praviṅa.⁶

Consider poetry that contradicts the rules of metre to be lame, if it is without ornaments, it is naked.

If poetry has no meaning it is called dead, says Keśav, listen, expert one! [or: listen, “Pravīn”]⁷

As we see, then, Sundardās agrees with Keśavdās on metre: poetry that does not follow metrical rules falters like a lame man and garners no respect among connoisseurs. Yet the two poets diverge fundamentally when it comes to their opinion about the proper motives that ought to generate poetry, thereby giving it its jīv or soul. Keśavdās, harkening back to the Sanskrit kāvya tradition, says that the life of poetry is meaning (artha),⁸ but for Sundardās its life comes from extolling Hari’s fame (harijas).⁹ By designating harijas as the life force of

³ All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
⁴ “ṣrutidūṣṭaṣṭarthatvādāya kāṇṭavahājanatvādāya iva sābdārthadvāreṇa dehadvāreṇeva” (being harsh on the ears (ṣrutidūṣṭa) or having an insufficiently developed meaning (apuṣṭā), which take place through word and meaning (respectively), are like being one-eyed (kāṇṭa) or having a limp (khaṇja), which take place in the human body). See Sāhita-Darpaṇa of Viśvanātha Kavirāja, p. 62 (Kauśik 1978). Similar metaphors can also be seen in Prākritpaṅgulam (verse 10), a seminal treatise on Prakrit and Apabhramśa language metres.
⁵ Keśavdās (fl. 1600) was a Brajbhāṣa poet who lived in the court of Orchā. His treatises on various topics of poetics are considered to be “the birth of Hindi classicism” (Busch 2011: 32–7).
⁶ Keśav Granthāvalī (vol. 1), p. 101 (Miśrā 1954).
⁷ Keśavdās puns the word praviṅ, thus there are different translations provided. Praviṅ, also known as Rāy Praviṅ, was a courtesan at the Orchā court in the time of Indrajit. Keśavdās devotes a considerable section of his work to describing Rāy Praviṅ in the first chapter of Kavipriyā (Poets’ beloved) – according to the text, he composes the Kavipriyā for her instruction. Keśav Granthāvalī (vol. 1), pp. 97–9 (Miśrā 1954).
⁸ “mukhyārthahatirdauṣo” (Flaw is that which prevents principal meaning in poetry). See Kāvyaprapākaśa of Mammat Bhatta, p. 245 (Śāstṛī 1972).
⁹ The word hari denotes a general meaning of God and should not be confused with the Hindu god Viṣṇu.
a poem, Sundardās was constructing a way for devotional poetry to be accommodated within the conceptual world of kāvya. As long as the poetry fulfils this objective of harijās, he says, the poetry in question will live on. Likening poetry to a temple and harijās to the image of the deity within it, Sundardās says:

racanā karī aneka bidhi, bhalau banāyau dhāma,
Sundara mūrati bāharī, devala kaune kāma. (Sākhī 17: 25)

People have created poetry in many ways, as if constructing a stylish abode.
But Sundar says, without an image, what is the use of a temple?

In Sanskrit kāvya, the question of the jīva or ātman (soul or essence) of literature was discussed in terms of concepts of poetics (e.g. rasa, alankāra, guṇa), but Sundardās introduces a distinctly devotional concept into this role. Despite Sundardās’s emphasis on the significance of aesthetics to the efficacy of the bāṇī, the above couplet makes it clear that devotion to the Lord is of paramount importance.

Sundardās’s exposition of poetics

Sundardās’s Savaiyā Granth and Sākhīs are grouped according to the themes of the poems, called āṅg or chapters. This thematic classification was a common anthological practice within the sant-bāṇī tradition, one that arguably began with the Dādūpanthī poet-saints. There were two major anthology traditions of the Dādūpanth that compiled the work of a diverse array of bhakti poets using the thematic model: the Sarvāṅgīs and Pañcvāṇīs. The Sarvāṅgī tradition (Iraqi 1985; Callewaert 1993) compiles the works of more than a hundred poet-saints and the Pañcvāṇī tradition (Callewaert and de Beeck 1991) compiled works of five poet-saints specifically: Kabīr, Dādū, Ravidās, Nāmdev, and Haridās. Many themes (āṅg), such as finding a true Guru, separation (vichoha or viraha), illusions (māyā) and so on are identical in the Pañcvāṇī and Sarvāṅgī traditions and for that matter in most anthologies of Sant poetry. Sundardās introduces new themes such as vacan vivek (discerning speech) in his Savaiyā Granth and Sākhīs to discuss the importance of poetic aesthetics in the ongoing sant-bāṇī tradition and thus exert an influence on sant communities that resulted in a greater concern with poetics and aesthetics.

In the thematic chapters on vacan vivek, Sundardās talks about sant-bāṇī in the abstract, before providing concrete contexts from social life to help laymen understand his exposition. He emphasizes the importance of ornate poetry well equipped with poetic figures (alankāra) and metres. Sundardās all but forbids substandard bāṇī, i.e. poetry that either lacks a proper metre or rhyme scheme, or that it is not sung beautifully:

bolīye tau taba jaba bolibai kī sudhi hoi,
na tau mukha mauna kari cup hoi rahiye.
joriye u taba jaba joribau u jāmnī parai,
tuka chanda aratha anūpa jāmāin lahiye.
Speak only when you know how to speak,  
otherwise shut your mouth and remain silent.  
Create [poetry] only when you know how to craft it,  
so that unparalleled rhyme, metres and meaning are obtained.  
Sing only when you have a suitable voice,  
so that listening, the heart is captivated.  
Where rhyme or metre is amiss, or where meaning is not achieved,  
Sundar says, never utter a bāṇī such as that!

After setting the criteria for acceptable bāṇī, Sundardās proceeds with a lengthy exposition whose purpose is to associate this discourse on aesthetics with the social contexts and literary tropes his audience knew and preferred. In the following sākhī, for example, Sundardās uses a metaphor to describe people who know in aesthetic terms what a good bāṇī should be. He likens such people to experts who know prized horse breeds, and relegates those who speak subpar bāṇī to the status of boors – those whose knowledge goes no farther than mules:

Sundar ghar tājī handhai turkina kī ghursāl,  
tākai āge āi ke ṭaṭuvā phaire bāla. (Sākhī 17: 17)

Sundar says, in a stable of Tāzikistānī or Turkish horses  
Why would you walk around with a little mule?

In the vacan vivek section of the Sākhīs, Sundardās goes on to assert three classifications of bāṇī, giving them a hierarchical order:

Sundara vacana su tribidha haiṁ uttama madhya kaniṣṭa.  
ek kaṭuka ik carparai ek vacan ati miṣṭa. (Sākhī 17: 15)

Speech is threefold: supreme, average and sub-par;  
One is bitter, another is acrid, and one is exceptionally sweet.

Alluding to the threefold classification of kāvyā common in Sanskrit, Sundardās associates these three types of bāṇīs with contemporary poetic trends. Personifying poetry as a woman was a long-established tradition inherited from Sanskrit literature, and often adopted in rīti poetry. But for Sundardās there were limits. While he may have agreed with Keśavdās’s general thoughts on the relevance of aesthetics in poetry, he eliminates from bāṇī the erotic sentiment, a

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10 Daṇḍin and Mammaṭa both give threefold classifications of kāvyā. For Daṇḍin the three types are: prose, poetry, and mixed, see Kāvyādarśa (The ideal of poetry) of Daṇḍin, p. 14 (Miṣrā 1972). Mammaṭa categorized kāvyā according to the excellence created by word and meaning, see Kāvyaprakāśa (The light of poetry) of Mammaṭa Bhaṭṭa, pp. 30–2 (Śāstrī 1972).
major theme not only in Keśavdās’s corpus but also one of the largest single
types of content in high vernacular poetics (kāvya) at the time. To gain a
sense of what Sundardās rejected, let me offer the following dohā (couplet),
where Keśavdās personifies poetry as a woman using the art of the pun (śleṣa):

\[ jadapi sujāti sulachani, subarana sarasa subrita, \\
    bhūṣaṇa binu na birājahīn, kavitā baniṭā mitta.^{11} \]

Though well-born, virtuous, of good complexion, and charming and of
good character,
My friend, without [proper] ornaments neither poetry nor women are
resplendent.

Sundardās uses similar vocabulary and retains the parallel between speech and
womanhood, but he clearly excludes the eroticized element from his description
of what good speech should be:

\[ ek bāṇī rūpavanta bhūṣaṇa baṣana aṅga, \\
    adhika birajamāna kahiyata aisī hai. \]
\[ ek bāṇī phāte ūṭe ambara urhāye ānī, \\
    tāhū mānhi biparīti sunyata taisī hai. \]
\[ ek bāṇī mritaṅkāḥ bahuta śiṅgarā kiye, \\
    lokani kau nīki lagai santani ko bhai sī hai. \]
\[ Sundara kahata bāṇī tribidha jagata mānhi, \\
    jānai kou catura prabīna jākai jaisī hai. (SG kavitt 14: 2) \]

One type of bāṇī is beautiful, decorated with ornaments and well-clothed;
very well respected, she [this bāṇī] is described in this manner.
Another bāṇī drapes herself with tattered and ruined clothing;
when a bāṇī like this is heard, it sounds unfavourable.
The third type of bāṇī, loaded with a lot of śṛṅgār, is dead;
she may please the common public, but sants dread her.
Sundar says, in the world there are three sorts of bāṇī.
Only experts and clever people can see the differences between them.

Sundardās asserts that bāṇī well equipped with rhetoric (bhūṣan), proper
rhymes, and metres, garners respect among clever ones and connoisseurs
(catur pravīn), but bāṇī spoken against one’s wellbeing (viparīt) and not
properly crafted (phāte ūṭe ambar) is of a low standard. Even though he adopts
this classical metaphor of comparing poetry to a woman, he excises the erotic
sentiment. We see this especially in his description of the third sort of bāṇī.
This acrid bāṇī (catpaṭī), as he calls it elsewhere in his Sākhī Granth (collection
of couplets, 17: 15), is the sort in which there is a discussion about śṛṅgār (erotic
sentiment) that may please ordinary folk but is deeply frightening to the
sentiments of the sants (santanī ko bhai sī hai). Sundardās’s diction is crucial

^{11} All words after “jadapi” in the first line should be read as a pun (śleṣa) for poetry and
woman (kavitā-banitā). Keśav Granthāvalī (vol. 1), p. 112 (Miśrā 1954).
to his śleṣa in this third category, because he refers specifically to a woman’s śṛṅgār. The word śṛṅgār is multivalent: on the one hand it is synonymous with bhūṣan (ornament), as used in Keśavdās’s dohā above, on the other it carries the baggage of śṛṅgārīktā (erotic sentiment) and its evident associations with eroticized rīti literature. On this account Sundardās warns his audience – in his words, the sant community – about the negative effects of śṛṅgārik poetry. The intertextual reference and careful diction attest to both Sundardās’s familiarity with Keśavdās’s oeuvre, and his ability to use those very same categories to caution against the temptations to which language such as Keśavdās’s may lead.

Composing didactic poetry with literary excellence enabled Sundardās to preach to a like-minded audience yet simultaneously refine it. Being aware of the literary culture that existed beyond the borders of sant literature in his own time, Sundardās criticized some of the major genres and works of rīti literature. He connected the nāyikā-bhedā aspect of rīti poetry with the popular nārī-nindā (denouncing or censuring the women) theme of sant-bāṇī, in which a woman is traditionally compared to worldly pleasures (māyā) and forsaken for the path of devotion:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{rasika priyā rasa mañjarī aur siṅgār hi jāmī}, \\
caturāī kari bahut bidhi viṣaīn banāī āmnī. \\
viṣaīn banāī āmnī lagata visayana kauṁ pyārī, \\
jāgai madana pracaṇḍa sarāhain nakha śikha nārī. \\
jyoin rogi miṣṭhān khāi rogahi bistārāi, \\
\text{Sundara yah gati ho j tu rasika priyā dhārā. (SG kuṇḍaliyā 9: 5)}
\end{align*}
\]

Knowing rasikpriyā, rasmañjarī and śṛṅgār;
and bringing them together, many topics [or worldly pleasures] can be described cunningly, with poetic expertise.

Many topics [or worldly pleasures] are described, which gratify covetous men; when women are glorified from head to toe, such descriptions fiercely provoke sexual desires.

Just as an ill-person prolongs an illness by eating sweets,
Sundar says, so does happen with people who hold onto the Rasikpriyā.

Here Sundardās uses a pun (śleṣa) on words like rasikpriyā (the connoisseur’s beloved) in the first and last lines and on rasmañjarī (bouquet of emotion), śṛṅgār (erotic sentiment) and viṣaīn (topics or desires) throughout the verse. Each of these words relates generally to heroines and aesthetics in kāvyā. The first three words serve as the title of a specific text in the rīti genre such as Keśavdās’s Rasikpriyā (1591) and the Sundar-Śṛṅgār (1631) composed by Mughal emperor Shahjahan’s court poet Sundar-Kavirāy. Rasmañjarī in Sundardās’s verse refers to Bhāṇudutta’s Sanskrit treatise on the nāyikā-bhedā composed in the 1500s and also its vernacular adaptations, the earliest in this tradition is the Rasmañjarī of Nanddās (fl. sixteenth century), one of the eight great poets associated with the bhakti sect of Vallabhācārya. This shows that Sundardās was clearly reading and critiquing these major treatises. Sundardās satirizes the scholarly texts prominent in courtly circles, primarily because
these poets rhapsodize about women with cunning wit (caturāṭ kari ... sarāhaṁ nakha-śikha nārī). He cautions his sant audience about listening to glorified nakhir-śikha descriptions, warning that they might kindle sexual desire. This criticism of Sundardās of such texts did not go unnoticed by the later generation of poet-saints. However, the poetic device of punning that Sundardās used in naming these texts becomes simpler later when the Niranjanī poet-saints in Rajasthan as well as the Śvāminārāyaṇī poet-saints in Gujarat express their disapproval of the same texts for their imagined sant communities and likeminded audience. The poet-saint Harirāmdās (fl. eighteenth century) of the Niranjanī Sampradāya – the community flourished in proximity with the Dādūpanthīs in Rajasthan (Williams 2014) – thought about Keśavdās and his corpus:

Keśavdās composed marvelous texts on the erotic sentiment,
Because of these qualities his birth as brahmin went in vain just like born as ghost.
He obtained the birth of ghost, then who sang the virtues of nirguna,
Even being born in the weaver caste, Kabīr got liberated through good poetry.
That poetry is better, there is no doubt in it,
Where abandoning the sentiment of eroticism, god is described. (Translation, Baid 2013: 128)

Though underpinning the importance of Keśavdās’ oeuvre, which might have served as a model for Harirāmdās himself as he wrote treatises on metres and rhetoric, he still places Kabīr above Keśavdās for primarily being a poet-saint of devotional orientation.

It is important to note that bhakti themes are not absent from the world of rāti poetry and it is rightly said that the developments in Vaishnava aesthetics – prominently by the disciples of Caitanya Mahāprabhu (1486–1533) – in the sixteenth century contributed to the emergence of the courtly rūtigranth genre (Busch 2011: 33) – a genre that describes “methods” of poetry. Describing the Kṛṣṇa-gopīs rās-lilā (love plays of Kṛṣṇa and the cowherd ladies) based on the models of nāyikā bheda was not only prevalent in the literature of Kṛṣṇa-worshipping communities but also attracted poets who were devoted to Rāma in the early modern period (Burchett 2018). However, in their engagement with the long-established kāvya traditions, the sants liked nāyikā bheda, nakhir-śikha and elaborate depictions of śriṅgār far less. Amatory themes in sant-poetry deal mostly with the separation (viraha) motif, where the poet-saints take

12 The Śvāminārāyaṇī poet-saint Muktānand possibly borrowed from Sundardās where he names Rasikpriyā and Rasmāṇjari and forbids their reading for his sant audience. Muktānand’s Vivek Cintāmaṇi (especially the vacan vivek and nārī nindā sections) show immense intertextuality with Sundardās’s vacan vivek and nārī nindā chapters. See Muktānand Kāvyam (Muktānand 2001, vol. 1: 104–7).

13 For example, several Niranjanī poet-saints wrote vernacular texts relating to Vedānta, Purāṇa, Upaniṣads, Bhagavad Gītā, Sanskrit epics, and treatises on metrics, but themes like Nāyikā-bheda and the sentiment of śriṅgār did not feature much in their corpus. See Tyler Williams’s PhD dissertation (2014: 215–24). Also, personal email communication with Tyler Williams 21 November 2017.
the persona of women (signifying the soul separated from god) and long for a union. The depiction of love in union (śaṃyog śringār), which is the major theme in poetry focused on Kṛṣṇa and the gopīs and had a major influence on the nāyikā bheda descriptions in early modern Hindi poetry, had limited scope for the sants. Therefore, the sants were giving their poetry a different character from even the sagun Vaishnava literature written on Kṛṣṇa-Gopī love-plays. The Niranjanī poet-saint Harirāmdās starkly criticizes the poetry that draws on the Kṛṣṇa-gopī love plays themes of the Bhāgya Purāṇa (Baid 2013: 127–8). In the same vein, considering texts such as Rasikpriyā and Rasmaiñjārī as titillating (jāgāi madana pracaṇḍā), Sundardās demands his audience strive for knowledge and well-articulated speech by providing a set of revised poetic manuals. His criticism of the nāyikā bheda and the sensual aspect of rīti poetry is not mere reproach on the part of a sānt, but a different vision of which Sanskrit texts one should study and what poetic devices could play a role in crafting meaningful bāṇī. Although he certainly endorsed some structural features of Keśavdās’s literary science on aesthetics, Sundardās intended to replace the content of these rīti texts with a different type of poetry handbook, one that catered to the prospective sants. It was in his Gyān Samudra that he constructed an alternative to the courtly rītigranth. The Gyān Samudra matches them point for point – in metrical discourse, narrative strategy, language, and register – and yet it supplies quite a different content, one borrowed from different knowledge systems that suit the sants’ ideology: that is bringing the philosophies of Yoga, Śaṅkhya, and Advaita Vedānta into conversation with bhakti.

Crafting a poetic handbook for the Sants

The rīti-granth are Brajbhāṣā scholarly texts that teach “the tradition of poetic art” (kāvyā-kalā kī rīti) for the proper enjoyment of poetry. Having a strong foundation in traditional Sanskrit poetics, these rītigranth comprised a major genre of the literature that emerged from early modern Brajbhāṣā courtly circles (Busch 2011: 102–4). As textbooks on literary science, these rītigranth adopted a “description and example” (lakṣan-udāharaṇ) technique to describe topics like nav-rasa (the nine sentiments of kāvyā), nāyikā bheda (types of heroines and their descriptions from “head to toe” (śikh-nakḥ), prosody (chanda), rhetoric (alaṅkāra), and so on. In Sundardās’s Gyān Samudra we observe several of the structural features that arise in these courtly rītigranth. Sundardās arranges his text as a Sāṅg-Rūpak (metaphor with all of its elements) – a common method of presenting theoretical texts in Sanskrit and vernaculars – where the “ocean of knowledge” (Gyān Samudra) contains the five waves (ullāśa) of Guru, bhakti, Yoga, Śaṅkhya, and Advaita Vedānta. In this ocean, poetic metres are like oysters that hide the pearls of meaning (artha), and one must be a true diver (marjīvā) to obtain them:

jāti jīti saba chandana kī bahu sīpa bhaī ihiṃ sāgara māhūṁ,  
hai tina main mukatāphala artha lahaiṁ una kaun hita saum avagāhīṁ.  
Sundara paithi sakai nahiṁ jīvata dai ḍubāi marjīvīhai jāiṁ,  
je nara jāna kahāvata haiṁ ati garva bhare tinakī gami nāhūṁ. (GS, 1: 7)
Meters of all types have become the many oysters in this ocean. In them pearls take meaning: for your benefit plunge in and reach for them. Sundar says certain divers cannot enter, however expert: Those who become arrogant because people think them knowledgeable cannot enter this ocean.

While the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsīdās may precede the Gyān Samudra in its use of the “oyster and pearl” image, Sundardās tailors it to his own special purpose. To see how he does this in vivid terms we might turn to the opening chapter of the Gyān Samudra. There he ambitiously claims to have composed this poem in “metres of all types”. By this, Sundardās seems to mean that he incorporates the metres of Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Bhāṣā (vernacular), such as bhujaṅgī, troṭaka, rorā, savaiyā, chappay, and so on. Therefore this text is important, as Sundardās makes it so, not only for the philosophical content but also for its style of composing and introducing metres of various types to a vernacular audience. The language of the Gyān Samudra is heavily Sanskritized and full of technical terms. This style is characteristic of the rītigranth handbooks and appears less frequently in bhakti poetry but gained prominence among the sant communities such as the Dādūpanth and Niranjanī Sampradāy in the seventeenth century. What we see in Sundardās is an effort to bring the two traditions together. The descriptions of the Guru, bhakti, Yoga and Advaita Vedānta are underpinned by Sundardās’s knowledge of the Bhagavad Gītā, Bhāgvata Purāṇa, Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, Ḥaṭhyoga Pradīpikā, and the Upaniṣads. He sometimes presents a Brajbhāṣā version of what is written in Sanskrit and often re-contextualizes the original Sanskrit texts, tailoring them to suit his innovative purposes. Observe, for example, how he presents his “description of the Guru” (guru-lakṣān):

sadā prasanna subhāva pragaṭa sarbopari rājai
tripta gyāna vigyāna acala kūṭastha bīrājai.
sukha nidhāna sarvagyā māna apamāna na jānai,
sārāsāra bibeka sakala mithyā bhrama mānai.
puni bhiddyante hriḍi granthi kaun chiridyante saba saṁsārayam,
kaẖi Sundāra so sad guru saẖi cidānandaghana cinmayam. (GS, 1: 15)

He is eternally happy and rules the hearts of everybody.
Filled with knowledge and science, he sits neutral without wavering.
Abode of happiness, knower of all, he is yet indifferent to honour and dishonour.
He has the discretion of all essences and considers the world illusionary and fake;
In the realm of his heart, too, illusions are pierced, and all doubts are torn asunder.

14 “jugūni manjū mani sīpa sohā” (The Caupāṇs) are the oysters that hide pearls (of meaning). Rāmcaritmānas 1: 37 (Tulsīdās 1992).
15 Also see Rameścandra Miśrā’s (1992) commentary on this verse in his edition of Sundar Granthāvalī.
Sundar says, one whose heart is immersed in bliss and united with the Brahma – that one indeed is the true Guru.

The second line of this verse, *tripta gyāna vigyāna acala kūṭastha birājay*, forms an exact Brajbhāṣā translation of a phrase from the *Bhagavad Gītā*. While the *Bhagavad Gītā* version ascribes these characteristics to a yogi, Sundardās re-contextualizes the phrase so that it describes the Guru. The śloka (couplet) in the *Bhagavad Gītā* reads as follows:

\[
jñānavijñānatriptātmā kūṭastho vijitendriyah, \\
yuktam ityucyate yogī samaloṣṭāṃmakāṇcanamah. \text{(Bhagvad Gītā, 6: 8)}
\]

The man whose soul is filled with knowledge and science, who sits neutral without wavering and controls the five senses - That yogi, it is said, is united with God, for whom dirt, stone, and gold are all equal.

In the fifth line of his *Guru-lakṣāṇ*, Sundardās similarly reframes the verse that describes the encounter with Brahma from the *Upaniṣads*, fashioning the verse which takes up this encounter so that it describes not Brahma but the Guru instead. The phrase “*puni bhiddyante hridi granthi kaun chiddyante saba saṃśayam*”, (in his heart illusions are pierced and all doubts are torn asunder) is a Brajbhāṣā and “popularized” Sanskrit rendition of the following line from the *Mundaka Upaniṣad*: “*bhidyate hṛdayagranthiḥ chidyante sarvasaṃśayāḥ*”.16 In the two lines we have just considered, Sundardās thus “traditionalizes” his teachings by seeking parallel expressions in Sanskrit philosophical works, explaining in effect that Brahma or a yogi can represent the Guru (of *sant* poetry), but in doing so, paradoxically, he introduces an important innovation into *sant* ideology – a scholastic one17 – as this kind of direct reference to Sanskrit śāstra was less frequent in *sant* poetry prior to Sundardās’s writings.

This kind of effort is by no means confined to the *Gyān Samudra*’s early verses. Sundardās’s language register becomes even more sanskritized and filled with philosophical terminology in the later three chapters of the *Gyān Samudra*. There he describes Yoga, Sāṃkhya, and Advaita Vedānta. Consider what happens when he explains the process of doing various yogic postures (*āsana*) in verse. For much of this description he quotes the Sanskrit text *Hṭhayoga Prādīpikā* directly:

\[
ye daśa prakāra ke yama kahe haṭha prādīpikā granthah mahaṁ, \\
so pahilai hī inakaum grahai calata yoga ke pantha mahaṁ. \text{(GS chappay 3: 8)}
\]

16 *Mundaka Upaniṣad*: 2: 2: 9 (Olivelle 1996). See Rameścandra Miśra’s (1992) commentary on this verse in his edition of *Sundar Granthāvali*.

17 Justin Ben-Hain’s (2014) thesis explores a similar example of an innovative yet (paradoxically) traditional appropriation of the Vallabh-Sampradāya’s *Caurāśi Vaishvan ki Vārtā* in the form of a commentary. The process of one text’s encompassment and appropriation into a new text was not uncommon in early Hindi.
These are the ten types of Yama [religious observances] described in the book called Haṭha Pradīpikā.

Having grasped them first, one may progress in the path of Yoga.

This transformation of śāstra-based knowledge so that it became accessible to the sants and the vernacular audience had a great deal to do with making the Gṛṇṭ Samudra an early modern classic. The Sanskritized register of Brajbhāṣā that Sundardās created made the text more widely accessible than would have been the case otherwise. It became less vernacular, less regional, and more capable of wide circulation. This accomplishment did not go unnoticed. Within the Dāḍūpanth, Sundardās came to be accorded the title “the next Śaṅkarācārya” very soon indeed. That phrase occurs in the Bhaktamāl of Rāghavdās, which was composed only seven years after the Gṛṇṭ Samudra itself. But that was not the end of Sundardās’s fame. About a century later the Rāmsanehī Sampradāy, another sant community, would recognize the importance of Sundardās’s treatise on ornate poetry in their own Bhaktamāl. The abundant presence of Sundardās’s Gṛṇṭ Samudra manuscript in various Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute (RORI) libraries throughout Rajasthan suggests that this text was read by a broad range of audiences – by communities of sants and courtly circles as suggested by the colophons and catalogue descriptions. The popularity of this poem also led to its transcriptions into Gurmukhī script. And in 1749, when a Brajbhāṣā school was established in Kutch, Gujarat by the ruling elite, to inculcate in the minds of future court poets the learned and refined poetic art of that time, the texts assembled included not only rītī-poetry, which was certainly predominant, but also the two texts discussed in this essay: Sundardās’s Gṛṇṭ Samudra and his Savaiyā Granth. What could better vindicate the project on which he had embarked?

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18 Bhaktamāl of Rāghavdās, v. 419. (Rāghavdās 1965).
19 Bhaktamāl of Dayālādās, v. 410. (Dayālādās 1980).
20 During my fieldwork, I found information on around 80 manuscripts of the Gṛṇṭ-Samudra, ranging from the late seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, which are now preserved in various RORI centres in Rajasthan as well as in Punjab and Gujarat. According to the catalogue of the Pothīkhānā Museum, City Palace Jaipur, the manuscripts of the Gṛṇṭ-Samudra there bear the seals of Jaipur royalty and of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. Manuscripts of the Gṛṇṭ-Samudra are preserved in the Aina Mahal manuscript archives in Bhuṣ (Gujarat). A manuscript of the Gṛṇṭ-Samudra was also prepared for personal reading by the king of Kutch Rāo Desaljī (r. 1718–41).
21 At least four Gurmukhī script manuscripts of the Gṛṇṭ Samudra are preserved in the Punjab Digital Library. I thank Simranjeet Singh for introducing me to the Punjab Digital Library, email communication on 29 December 2012. Including the Gṛṇṭ Samudra, several of Sundardās’s works, including his Savaiyās, the Guru Sampradāyā, and the Adbhut Updeś Granth are transcribed in Gurmukhī and preserved in the Punjab Digital Library.
22 Dalpatrām Dāhyābhāī (1820–98), a student of the Brajbhāṣā Pāṭhśālā in Bhuṣ, who is our earliest source of information on the Pāṭhśālā and its syllabus, notes the importance of the Gṛṇṭ-Samudra for precisely the reason that it teaches “knowledge” in many diverse metres. See the “syllabus” of the Pāṭhśālā quoted in Mallison (2011: 171–82).
Conclusions

Sundardās was an early poet-saint whose compositions on topics of śāstra and poetics became focal points for other emerging sant communities – the Niranjanīs early on and later the Rāmsnehiśīs.23 These later generation santīs compel us to re-evaluate the relationship between bhakti and rīti traditions and also revisit the recent scholarship which designates these tropes to be a nationalist construction of modern times. Santos’ engagements with rīti poetry shows that such categories were meaningful in early modern India. During the era of growing popularity of rīti poetry in the seventeenth century, santīs like Sundardās were expanding the very nature of sant compositions. Through the work of Sundardās, Sant bāṇī, which had previously been primarily used for singing or preaching purposes, and mostly composed in couplets (sākhī) and songs (pada) to be performed and discussed in religious gatherings, now came to use the poetic style of high culture and was written in genres and styles of courtly Brajbhāṣā literature. Sundardās’s scholarly poem the Gyān Samudra showed how sant poetry could be written in the scholarly tradition of Sanskrit, Prakrit, and vernacular metres, in a way that resonated with Keśavdās’s Brajbhāṣā Rāmāyaṇa, the Rāmacandrikā, composed to exemplify the metres discussed in his Chandmālā (the garland of metres). The refashioning of religious bāṇī in the mould of literary kāvya that we see in Sundardās’s corpus further led to the composition of a treatise on metrics and figures of speech by sant Harirāmdās of the Niranjanī sampṛdāya. Modelling his work not only on Sanskrit literary theorists such as Vāgbhāta (twelfth century) and Appaya Dīkṣita (sixteenth century), but also on the courtly books of method (rīti granths), Harirāmdās composed his Chandaratnāvalī (the garland of metrical gems) in 1738. It appears as the composition of a highly skilled court poet (Baid 2011: 93–116). Thus, writing rīti granths did not remain an exclusively courtly enterprise in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, unlike court poets such as Keśavdās, who called themselves primarily poets (bhākha kavi), such poet-saints still called themselves santīs. Sundardās often refers to himself as a sant, or just Dādū’s disciple (Dādū kā celā) throughout his corpus. This is similar to Tulsīdās, who identified himself as a devotee of Rām even though his work ranges over almost all the styles of poetic composition prevalent in his time. By making the tradition of poems essential for composing sant poetry, Sundardās not only recognizes the discussions on poetics going on in court circles, but makes them important for sant poetry. Keeping his primary identity as a sant who takes pride in situating himself in the tradition of Kabīr and Dādū Dayāl, Sundardas expends the very idea of a sant who blends devotional themes with the refined tradition of kāvya and inhabits those poetic skills that are learned and exhibited in courtly settings.

Sundardās’s oeuvre, especially the Savaiyā Granth and Gyān Samudra, shows many overlapping features with the rīti poetic tradition with regard to

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23 The poet-saint Dayālldās (1759–1828), who is revered in the Rāmsanehi Sampṛdāya for his discourse on śāstra and purāṇa, and whose ornate poetry is infused with the excellence of metres and rhetoric, is often compared with Sundardās (Citraś 2007: 362 and 407).
form, genre, register, and the composition of didactic and ornate poetry, yet he disparages some of the content that we find in the descriptions of śṛṅgār, the nāyikā-bheda and śīkh-nakh genres that are such prominent aspects of rīti poetry. Thus, he distinguished sant compositions from rīti poetry. Sundardā’s vacan vivek appears to have started a new discourse on aesthetically pleasing bāṇī, which gained acceptance in the sant communities in Rajasthan, Punjab, and Gujarat. For example, the Śwāminārāyanī poet-saint Muktānand (eighteenth–nineteenth century) possibly rephrased Sundardā’s vacan vivek in his text Vivek Cintāmaṇī. The frustrations with rīti poetry enunciated by Sundardā and the Niranjanī poet-saint Harirāmdās in Rajasthan, as well as the Śwāminārāyanī poet-saints in Gujarat, would be expressed by the architects of nationalist literature in the early twentieth century (Dwivedi 1995 [1901]; Pant 1967 [1926]). But the reasons for this discontent had substantially changed: these features of rīti poetry were now seen as some of the prime examples of the decadence the nation was so eager to shed. It cannot be fully proven that this nationalist disapproval was based on Sundardā and his contemporary sant’s criticism of rīti poetry in any historical way. Though Sundardā’s Savaiyā Granth, where he criticized rīti poetry in this way, has been published widely since the late nineteenth century and was the key text for introducing the poet-saint to twentieth-century historiography, it is nevertheless hard to link the criticism of rīti poetry by Hindi authors during the nationalist period to their reading of Sundardā’s work. Assimilating many features of literary science and aesthetics – main features of the rīti world – into his own poetry, Sundardā embraced sāstra-based knowledge while at the same time tailoring it and its styles of theorization to his own ends. The literary science he put forward was entirely in the service of the sant community, their beliefs, and their own distinctive practices.

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Muktānand Kāvyam (Muktānand 2001, vol. 1: 114–6). Sundardā’s texts (the Savaiyā Granth and the Gyān-Samudra) were taught at the Brajbhāṣā Pāṭhsālā (The Brajbhāṣā School [of Bhuj] in Kutch established in 1749). Though Muktānand was not affiliated with the Brajbhāṣā Pāṭhsālā, his familiarity with Sundardā’s texts suggests that they were circulating among the sant communities in the Gujarat region outside of the Brajbhāṣā Pāṭhsālā.
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