

# Dreams, songs and letters: Sectarian networks and musical archives in eighteenth-century North India

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*Early modern poets conventionally began their compositions by praising and invoking the blessings of their higher authorities, be they their gods, gurus or courtly patrons. In the eighteenth century, North Indian society was particularly unstable, and the relationships between these different power brokers proved volatile. This article considers how intellectuals attached to religious households navigated the challenges of the period, particularly invading armies, religious reforms and forced migration. I examine the works of Vrindavandas (c. 1700–87), a Brajhasha poet and lay devotee of the Radhavallabh Sampraday, and provide contextualised readings of two of his poems, concerned with recent history and the contemporary political climate.*

*Vrindavandas was not a scribe or chronicler in a conventional sense; however, closer examination of his works reveals the porous boundaries between scribes-cum-recorders and other kinds of intellectuals. Here, I consider how Vrindavandas' literary activity included copying archival sources, recording recent history, documenting dreams and emotions, and folding different senses of temporality into a single work. This article asks how far his poetic works gesture to a distinctively eighteenth-century mode of literary expression and reflexivity, and how performing these poetic archives through reading, singing, and musical accompaniment provided the sect with tools to navigate a turbulent political landscape.*

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In a painting from late eighteenth-century Kishangarh, devotees from a minor vaishnava sect, the Radhavallabh Sampraday, are sat together in an assembly. Sometime between 1775–800, the artist captured the distinctive details of the devotees' faces and bodies and each individual was named with a miniature inscription: the image seems to stand apart from more typical paintings of perfected but impersonal *bhaktas*

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(devotees), so, at first glance, it is tempting to view the painting as faithfully documenting a historical gathering.<sup>1</sup> However, since these named devotees can be traced in sectarian sources, it is apparent that the painter, identified as Vicitra (Ray Sevak), was not chronicling a single moment. Like contemporary images of royal dynasties that represented multiple generations sat together, this imagined scene flattened the passing of time by positioning together living devotees with their long-dead friends and teachers. The *bhaktas* are represented in the context of *samāj gāyan*, congregational singing, in which lyrical poetry is recited to musical accompaniment, to cultivate an emotionally charged, aesthetically saturated experience of Radha and Krishna.<sup>2</sup> The gods are depicted indirectly in the painting, their blue and golden footprints shimmering in the shrine at the back of the scene. Arranged in a circle, the devotees sit with their manuscripts, rosaries, a *tānpūrā* and a *pakhāvaj* drum. However, they have not been depicted in the moment of singing: instead, they are listening contemplatively to the haloed guru, Ruplal Ji (1681–744), whose open hand suggests that he is delivering a sermon. He is sat alongside his son, Kishorilal (1720–88), dressed in white, and his disciple, Vrindavandas (fl. 1737–87), in red.

There are only a handful of known paintings of members of the Radhavallabh Sampraday from this period, and this particular example indicates why that might be the case.<sup>3</sup> The Radhavallabhis were not a large sect, and unlike their neighbours in northern India, the Gaudiyas and the Pushtimarg, they did not manage major temple complexes. This painting follows a different visual logic from other images of shrines and priests produced in the same period. Rather than foregrounding a *mūrti* (idol) of a deity, framed by the built surroundings of a temple structure, here the focus is on a social circle, music, and the words of the guru. Ruplal is not authorised by either an iconic image of a god or a king, which raises the question of patronage: in this case, an inscription suggests that Vicitra was working for a ruler, but the patron is not named. This implies the Radhavallabhis were in dialogue with, but ultimately distanced from royal courts and temple institutions.

The Radhavallabhis were a religious minority and for a time were considered heretical. Although they suffered a series of disasters over the eighteenth century, this same period saw the proliferation of literature associated with their sect, the establishment of new temples and the consolidation of new regional branches. Collectively, early modern Radhavallabhis were an extremely productive literary community. It is believed that the disciple in this painting, the poet Vrindavandas, composed between 20,000 and 100,000 verses himself.<sup>4</sup> Such sectarian poets have largely been overlooked and occupy a marginal space in literary and religious histories: they constituted a roaming sectarian network without a single centre,

<sup>1</sup> See Pal, *Painted Poems*, Fig. 77, p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> Thielemann, *Musical Traditions of Vaiṣṇava Temples in Vraja*; Tanaka, *Hindō Kyōto No Shūdan Kayō*; *idem*, 'The Samāj-gāyan Tradition'; Beck, *Sonic Liturgy*.

<sup>3</sup> See also Goswamy and Bhatia, *Painted Visions*, p. 178.

<sup>4</sup> Bangha, 'The Harikalā Belī and Anandghan's Death'.

they were not associated with a particular courtly sponsor, and their works were primarily read and sung internally, rather than being incorporated into the larger Hindi literary and musical arenas. The sect was a middle-tier religious society and was essentially self-sufficient, in that it drew on the financial support of devotees and disciples, but was also a platform for patronage in its own right: we need to think of networks of goswami families, moving households and charismatic gurus who supported assemblages of poets, singers, musicians and retainers in their orbits.

In this essay, I consider how the experience of dislocation and migration impacted on the mental worlds of people attached to these Radhavallabhi households, focusing on Rupal's disciple, Vrindavandas. The majority of Vrindavandas' poems were intended for congregational singing: lyrics that provided a commentary to the ritual year, describing and facilitating the encounter with Radha and Krishna, pulling readers and listeners into the timeless pleasures of the gods' lovemaking in the hidden groves of a transcendental Vrindavan. However, over a number of longer poems, Vrindavandas also provided a commentary on the political and social challenges the sect faced over the eighteenth century, and his observations provide insights into the world of intellectuals who operated outside royal courts or major religious institutions.<sup>5</sup> The eighteenth century is a thinly explored chapter in the history of bhakti, falling between the establishment of the major sectarian lineages over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on the one hand, and the colonial era on the other. Examining the case of the Radhavallabhis in the turbulent decades of the late eighteenth century, and their own reflections on earlier moments of upheaval, sheds light on the specific challenges of this period.

On the surface, Vrindavandas was not a scribe or chronicler in a conventional sense: indeed, he worked in tandem with a personal scribe, who signed off manuscripts as Kelidas. Instead, he is remembered as a prolific litterateur, songwriter and bhakti poet. However, following the observations elsewhere in this volume, closer examination of his life and works reveals the porous boundaries between scribes-cum-recorders and other kinds of intellectuals. Here, I consider how Vrindavandas' compositions contributed to the life and work of his community during a challenging period of its history, and how his literary activity including copying archival sources, recording recent history, documenting dreams and emotions, and folding different senses of temporality into a single work. I go on to suggest that Vrindavandas' poems reflect an archival sensibility, and that his personal accounts of the world around him gesture to new forms of literary subjectivity and positionality.<sup>6</sup>

### **Vrindavandas**

Vrindavandas was born in Braj in the early eighteenth century. By that time, Vrindavan had been established as a major pilgrimage centre for two centuries;

<sup>5</sup> Williams, 'Krishna's Neglected Responsibilities'.

<sup>6</sup> C.f. Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*; Pollock, 'New Intellectuals'.

however, the way in which the sanctity of that space was conceptualised had entered a transitional, evolutionary phase. Following the evacuation of Srinathji in 1669 and the destruction of the Keshavdev temple in Mathura in 1670, many of the Vrindavan deities were moved to other parts of Braj or further afield to Rajasthan.<sup>7</sup> Pilgrims continued to pour into Vrindavan, but they could no longer take *darśan* (audience) from all the deities that had been installed there over the previous generations. The Radhavallabhi deities were evacuated sometime after 1669, and installed in a new temple at Kaman (48 km west of Vrindavan) between 1682 and 1785.<sup>8</sup> Over that century, Krishna cults were no longer concentrated in one location, and this had implications for how these religious societies operated. While the seventeenth century saw disputes within families of goswamis over the rights to serve prestigious deities, the removal of these gods to the outside world created opportunities for alternative forms of authority within a sect, and new ways to imagine a sacred place.

Vrindavandas was initiated into the Radhavallabhi Sampraday by Ruplal (died c. 1744) in 1738. Vrindavandas wrote for his guru followed by his son, Kishorilal, and lived for some time in the Radhakant temple in Vrindavan.<sup>9</sup> This chapter of his life was brought to a traumatic end in 1757, when the army of Ahmed Shah Abdali raided North India and pillaged Delhi, Vrindavan and Mathura. While many Radhavallabhis were killed, Vrindavandas joined a party of refugees that went to Bharatpur and then Farrukhabad. There, in 1760, he set down the final verses of a poem about the incursion, the *Harikalā Belī*, composed as a bitter complaint to Krishna, rebuking the god for his neglect of his birthplace and devotees.<sup>10</sup> Over the following decades, Vrindavandas and his personal scribe, Kelidas, left a paper trail by noting the place of composition in his colophons. After Farrukhabad, he went to Kosi (40 km north-west of Vrindavan), and then was largely back in Vrindavan and Braj over the 1760s through to 1774, when he began writing in Kishangarh. He was based there for five years, including a period in Pushkar around 1776. In 1782, he was in Bharatpur again, and a year later returned to Vrindavan, where he remained up until his final works in 1787.

Vrindavandas' paper trail of poems and songs provides a sense of the movements of his community. He also reflected on the migrations of the Radhavallabhis during the decades before he took initiation, especially in a poem from 1767, the *Hita Rūpa Caritra Belī* ('Creeper of the Life-story of Hita Rūpa' or

<sup>7</sup> Peabody, *Hindu Kingship*; Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*.

<sup>8</sup> Entwistle, *Braj, Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage*, p. 185.

<sup>9</sup> For discussions of Vrindavandas' life and career, see Khandelval, *Caca Srihit Vrindavandasji; Snatak, Radhavallabha Sampradaya*, pp. 512–76; Mital, *Braj ke Dharma-Sampradayon ka Itihas*, pp. 424–27.

<sup>10</sup> Bangha, 'The Harikalā Belī and Ānandghan's Death'; Williams, 'Krishna's Neglected Responsibilities'.

‘Creepers of the Deeds of Love and Beauty’; hereafter *HRCB*), a hagiographical account of his guru, Ruplal.<sup>11</sup>

The narrative of the *HRCB* emerges through a series of episodes, memories and visions lined up into a linear story. While Vrindavandas called this a *belī*, suggesting a creeper, the text is less of an organic unity and more like a series of interlocking units. This structure echoes musical strategies of performance and arrangement in *samāj gāyan*, whereby various texts and voices are tied together into a thematically coherent sequence or ‘chain’ (*śṛṅkhilā*).<sup>12</sup> The narrative units have their own textures, metres and priorities; some were pre-existing documents, which Vrindavandas inserted into the narrative; others were stories or songs he had heard; and many are his own lyrical compositions. These different narrative units were then fastened together by episodes depicting voluntary travel and forced migration. Vrindavandas charted Ruplal’s movements around Braj, especially Kaman and Barsana; celebrated his visits to Varanasi and Allahabad; and documented his taking asylum in Delhi in 1723, the beginning of a 20-year period during which he could not safely return to Vrindavan. Both forms of movement are significant: I suggest that voluntary travel articulated Ruplal’s charismatic authority, while forced migrations were represented to stress the Radhavallabhis’ enduring resilience, and to explore a theological problem. In sectarian literature, devotees ask to be taken under the shelter or protection (*śaraṇa*) of God, and to experience divine bliss in Vrindavan: but if you cannot live safely in Vrindavan, and God is not offering you protection from persecution and violence, then how can you go on authentically hoping for *śaraṇa*? For Vrindavandas this was not an abstract question, but one he felt keenly throughout his life and did not necessarily resolve.

The main drama of the *HRCB* revolves around a period of religious persecution by the Maharaja of Amber. As several scholars have recently explored—including Monika Horstmann, John Stratton Hawley and Kiyokazu Okita—from the 1720s onwards, Maharaja Sawai Jaisingh II (r. 1699–743) orchestrated an exercise in defining vaishnava orthodoxy.<sup>13</sup> Delegates from the different vaishnava sects were instructed to present theological statements on points of doctrine and practice, and

<sup>11</sup> Since there is no published edition of the *HRCB*, I am working from an undated manuscript of the text preserved in Ras Bharati Sansthan (Vrindavan). I am grateful to Jayesh Khandelval for granting me access to this copy. In this essay, I also occasionally refer to citations of the text as published in Khandelval, *Caca Srihit Vrindavandasji*.

<sup>12</sup> Tanaka, ‘Śṛṅkhilā’. It is unclear what varieties of text or genre might have influenced Vrindavandas’ compilation-style history writing. Medieval and early modern chronicles did not demand a single voice or narrative style, and could stitch together different source materials into a new unity. For example, see Wink, *Review of Asif*.

<sup>13</sup> Horstmann, *Der Zusammenhalt der Welt*, on the Radhavallabhis see especially pp. 173–74; Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*; Okita, *Hindu Theology*; Burton, A. P. ‘Temples, Texts, and Taxes: The Bhagavad-gītā and the Politico-Religious Identity of the Caitanya Sect’, unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Australian National University, 2000’.

were asked to demonstrate their authentically Vedic credentials.<sup>14</sup> It appears that following Jaisingh's appointment as governor of Agra (1722–23), the Maharaja began to interrogate the religious communities based in Vrindavan, and convened a synod to debate their position within the *catuh-sampradāy* ('four sects') model.<sup>15</sup> At that time, Ruplal was the leading authority within the Radhavallabh Sampraday, and he refused to comply with Jaisingh's demands or attend the synod: he maintained that the priorities of the sect lay in the experience of divine love, and was therefore an essentially internalised path. As Horstmann has noted, this meant that the Radhavallabhis did not see their religious practices as subject to the norms of *varṇāśrama-dharma*, so were not prepared to commit themselves to certain 'orthodox' rites and obligations, including honouring *ekadāsī* rules.<sup>16</sup> According to the poem, Jaisingh responded by persecuting the Radhavallabhis and driving Ruplal's family out of Vrindavan<sup>17</sup>:

In the year 1780 [1723CE] outrage spread through the forest  
of the shelter of the supreme dharma—oh!  
Gods, ancestors, and ghosts were stirred up—upon the proclamation  
each one of them resolved to spread across the land to every refuge—oh!  
Sants and mahants and goswamis, their hearts tormented—because of that  
great lord  
they could not settle. There is nothing else to say—oh!  
Sri Ruplal [said,] I offer my life to the supreme dharma,  
Radha's Bridegroom, refuge of the righteous, grant protection upon my  
head—oh!  
Taking his family with him, he settled in Indraprastha (Delhi):  
even there the lord did not give him peace of mind, but turned bitter ...  
Vrindavan's Loving Beauty, even the lord does not protect dharma;  
with deceit and trickery no intelligence remains.

<sup>14</sup> The Gaudiyas, who had previously been favoured by Jaisingh's Kachvaha forebears in Vrindavan, enjoyed precedence in Amber, especially when Govindadev arrived in the kingdom in 1707, ultimately to be installed in the Surya Mahal temple (1727). Theological representatives of the sampraday consented to Jaisingh's new demands, and Baladev Vidyabhushan responded with two scriptural commentaries, the *Brahmasūtrakārikābhāṣya* followed by the more developed *Govindabhāṣya*. The other sects in Amber—including the Vishnuswamis, Ramanandis, Harivyasis and Nimbarkis—were concerned by the ascendancy of the Gaudiyas, and priests from these communities petitioned for the right to serve the major Gaudiya deities, especially Govindadev, Gopinath and Madanmohan. This was in effect a continuation of the previous century's contests for custodianship of the worship of deities in Vrindavan: now the competition had spread over a larger field, with a larger number of players, and with even higher stakes, since now Jaisingh was challenging these smaller communities to prove that they conformed with his own sense of authentic vaishnavism.

<sup>15</sup> Burton, 'Temples, Texts, and Taxes', pp. 110–19; Mital, *Braj ke Dharma-Sampradayon ka Itihas*, p. 422.

<sup>16</sup> Horstmann, *Der Zusammenhalt der Welt*, pp. 173–74.

<sup>17</sup> Vrindavandas, *Hita Rūpa Caritra Belī* (hereafter *HRCB*), unpublished manuscript, Ras Bharati Sansthan, Vrindavan, vv.287, 290.1 and 290.4. All translations are my own.

In these narrative units, Jaisingh is not directly named: instead, the date and the proclamation (*duhātī*) help the audience identify the lord (*nṛpa*, *mahānṛpa*). It is possible that Vrindavandas chose to be discreet because the relationship between the Radhavallabhis and Jaipur had changed by the time he was writing in 1767: tensions were resolved with Ishvari Singh in 1744 and, by the late eighteenth century, Radhavallabhi intellectuals were writing works dedicated to the Jaipur Maharajas.<sup>18</sup> However, un-naming Jaisingh was also a poetic choice, rendering him into a disembodied disturbance; his outrage spreads across Vrindavan—that is, the forest (*vana*)—the centre of gravity of the sacred universe. The ripple is felt through the three worlds: the agitated flight of gods, ancestors and ghosts suggests that the Maharaja acted against the cosmic order of heaven, earth and the underworld.

Vrindavandas had used this literary device before, as in the *Harikalā Belī* (1760), when he described the arrival of the Afghan army that raided Vrindavan<sup>19</sup>:

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. (21.1)

Vrindavandas' strategy of poeticising hostile forces, be they Afghan soldiers or Rajput rulers, magnifies their crimes as a catastrophic event, but also disarms them by removing their own instrumentality and reducing them to symptoms of the Kali Age: Jaisingh becomes but one calamity in the unfolding of God's universe, and a test of the devotees' resolve<sup>20</sup>:

<sup>18</sup> According to Vrindavandas, when Ruplal heard about Jaisingh's death (from Gujarmal, the faujdar of Sonipat and Panipat), he wept with compassion; see Khandelval, *Caca Srihit Vrindavandasji*, p. 43. That Pratap Singh commissioned one of Kishorilal's relatives, Gosain Candralal (fl.1767–78), to compose the *Bhāgvat Sār Paccīṣī* (1797) indicates improved relations between Amber and the sampraday. Gosain Candralal wrote some 28 works in Sanskrit and Brajbhasha and was guru to a number of poets, including the Brajbhasha *kāvya* master Dayanidhi and the Sanskrit intellectual Priyadas of Rewa, who, it is said, prepared a Radhavallabhi *bhāṣya* of the Brahmastra, perhaps in the early nineteenth century. A generation or two before, the Radhavallabhis had been punished for refusing to produce this kind of text, yet had maintained a commentarial tradition in their own theology, along with sung poetry, and were evidently happy to provide a *bhāṣya* under different political circumstances.

<sup>19</sup> Vrindavandas and R. D. Williams, ed., *Harikalā Belī*, unpublished critical edition, vv.18.1–2 and 21.1. Quotations from the *Harikalā Belī* are from my own edition (unpublished). I have consulted three nineteenth- and twentieth-century manuscripts in the Ras Bharati Sansthan, Vrindavan (of these, only the twentieth-century manuscript gives a complete text), and an abridged version published by Varma, *Yugyugin Braj*, pp. 223–31.

<sup>20</sup> Vrindavandas, *HRCB*, v.289.



Like the touchstone of gold, dharma was tested through suffering then,  
purified by suffering, the hidden-essence of the Couple was revealed.

Vrindavandas integrated the persecution of the Radhavallabhis into a sectarian worldview, interpreting the plight of the *bhaktas* as an opportunity for divine revelation. Throughout his poems, the themes of disclosure, insight and opening one's eyes to reality are deployed to make sense of the obstacles the sect faced over his lifetime.

Besides these reflective episodes, Vrindavandas also described the experience of fear and uncertainty when the Radhavallabhis were expelled from Vrindavan and went in search of safety. Following the Afghan incursions<sup>21</sup>:

We traipse between villages, and your name is becoming defiled.  
Why did we become your servants, marked as your household?  
We have slipped from your abode, we dwell in another's house.  
We are swallowed by misfortune. We are destroyed by the Yavan army.

The *Harikalā Belī* in particular reflects Vrindavandas' outrage and grief at being ripped from Vrindavan: he complained that God was sanctioning the abuse of his devotees, and disrupting their peace with his unfathomable but essentially cruel game.<sup>22</sup> He underlined the humiliation of having to leave the ultimate abode—the *dhāma*, that is the home of the Lord, or Vrindavan—and becoming a refugee in 'paravāsana', that is, 'another's house' or 'exile'. As Vrindavandas travelled through the 1750s–70s, he returned to the themes of dislocation, frustration and suffering again and again, as in the *Ārti Patrikā* (1778)<sup>23</sup>:

This body has experienced the torments of the hell of the Yamana (*jamana ki jama kī jātanā*).  
Now, your house and home is within my very body.  
Now for some 10 or 20 years you have opened up the warehouse of distress and have made it known that the potent delights of Braj have shut up shop.

As in the *Harikalā Belī*, Vrindavandas speaks directly to Krishna with a mixture of devotion and rebuke. The intimate way he challenges God is not out of the ordinary, but the harsh pairing of the sacred river Yamana with Yama (death/hell) would be shocking, were it not for the historical desolation of Braj in the 1750s. Throughout the *Ārti Patrikā*, Vrindavandas maps the sufferings of the world around him onto his own body, keenly expressing his grief and bitterness.<sup>24</sup> While he deploys a

<sup>21</sup> Vrindavandas and Williams, *Harikalā Belī*, vv.23.2 and 25.1.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, 'Krishna's Neglected Responsibilities'.

<sup>23</sup> Verse in Khandelval, *Caca Srihit Vrindavandasji*, p. 73.

<sup>24</sup> The *Ārti Patrikā* has been compared to the *Hanumān-Bāhuk* of Tulsidas (c.1532-c.1623), which also describes the poet's personal afflictions. See Srivastava, *Caca Vrindavandas krt Bhramar Git*, p. 14.



range of images, including these Sant-like metaphors of the marketplace, the tropes routinely have a visceral meaning: *greha* has the primary meaning of ‘house’, but also suggests ‘body’, and the ‘warehouse’ (*bhaṇḍāra*) of distress can also imply ‘stomach’, internalising the miseries of the age into the poet’s ravaged physical form.

### Networks and Letters

How did a minor sect survive in exile and in direct confrontation with the Maharaja of Amber? Despite the exodus of major deities in the late seventeenth century, Vrindavan had continued to be a magnetic node in a transregional network throughout the 1700s, and attracted new disciples and pilgrims<sup>25</sup>: the wealthier ‘spiritual tourists’ built houses in Braj and became benefactors of select temples and families of goswamis.<sup>26</sup> Devotees from mercantile or business backgrounds seem to have become increasingly important over the eighteenth century.<sup>27</sup> Although Vrindavandas suggests Jaisingh was a devastating force, it appears that it was possible for some religious households to reject his proposals without major consequences, perhaps because they could rely on mercantile support and funding. For example, the priests of the Gaudiya temple dedicated to Gopinath had their own reservations about the new Jaipur model of sectarian affiliation: Burton and Hawley have discussed a letter (c.1706–18) by one Shyamcararandas that challenges Jai Singh in no uncertain terms.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, the Gopinath temple appears to have continued operations as normal: it is alleged that Jai Singh himself made additions to the temple<sup>29</sup> but, perhaps more significantly, temple *adhikārīs* (custodians) were gifted two groves in Vrindavan by a banker (*sāhūkār*) from Bengal in 1725.<sup>30</sup> This pious donation indicates how the transregional pilgrim network could provide a material infrastructure for religious communities during uncertain times.

While there was a core of brajbasi devotees among the Radhavallabhis, many of Ruplal’s generation had come to Vrindavan from elsewhere, including the Punjab, Badaun, Narvargarh, Delhi, Bhelsa and Etawah.<sup>31</sup> Taking initiation in Vrindavan did not dissolve these connections, which were reactivated in times of crisis. While Ruplal and his household fled to Delhi during Jaisingh’s reign, other Radhavalabhis turned elsewhere: Gulablal went to Etawah, and Candsakhi took shelter in the court of Raja Udot Singh in Orchha.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>25</sup> c.f. Pauwels, *Mobilizing Krishna’s World*, pp. 71–106.

<sup>26</sup> The settlement of wealthy devotees was noted in Tieffenthaler, Anquetil Du Perron, and Rennell, *Description historique et géographique de l’Inde*, pp. 203ff.

<sup>27</sup> Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, especially pp. 163–96.

<sup>28</sup> Burton, ‘Temples, Texts, and Taxes’, pp. 121–22; Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*, p. 201.

<sup>29</sup> Entwistle, *Braj, Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage*, p. 412, following Gopal Kavi’s *Vrṇḍāvāna dhām anurāgāvali* (1843) (on this text see p. 272).

<sup>30</sup> Habib, ‘A Documentary History of the Gosā’ins’, p. 154.

<sup>31</sup> For example, Mital, *Braj ke Dharma-Sampradayon ka Itihas*, pp. 412–13.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 423.

To be forced out of Vrindavan was to enter a larger landscape with competing spiritual arenas. Ruplal and his disciples navigated this landscape by drawing upon their family and disciple networks, cultivating Ruplal's reputation in different cities, and consolidating a distinctive sectarian identity and religious practice.

Vrindavandas refers to lay disciples from professional classes in different poems, often calling them *mahājana*, which could be read as a great person, a great devotee or a merchant. In the *HRCB*, he provided a penetrating account of a *mahājana* named Mayarama, who offered Ruplal his house in Delhi<sup>33</sup>:

Mayarama the merchant became a devotee of Hita Ruplal, and now offers  
submissive devotion.

Coming to Vrindavan he heard his discourse, which changed the way he thought.  
In the company of saints, he was drenched in tears, the creeper of desire grew  
up anew.

Vrindavan's Love and His Beloved! he invited him into his own house.

These mercantile devotees provided an important support network: following the Afghan incursion of 1757, Vrindavandas praised one Lakshman Singh, who hurried into Braj in order to assist the refugees:

His mind abundant with the service of the Guru,  
this merchant took delight in the supreme dharma.  
Highly skilled in the attitude of humility,  
his mind remained filled with songs to Hari.  
Hearing of the Yavan terror,  
he knowingly abandoned everything and came to the Forest.  
Behold, from the fervour of his bhakti  
he achieved the abode of Vrindaban.  
He was very kind to the destitute devotees,  
and spent all his wealth for Hari.

Vrindavan's Love, again and again we praise Lakshman Singh. (*Harikalā Belī* 182)

To cultivate these networks of disciples, Ruplal and other contemporary gurus needed to amplify their reputations, and preaching tours became especially significant activities. Vrindavandas records several of Ruplal's tours, including eight months spent in the cities of Gujarat, at the behest of Ramakrishna Mehta, where he initiated many new disciples.<sup>34</sup> Around 1706, Ruplal went eastwards for a four-year journey to Allahabad, Varanasi, Patna and, ultimately, Puri. The inhabitants of Varanasi were depicted as ignorant and deluded: they were 'laden with the mud of karma' (*karma kīca bhare*), and 'did not understand the essence of the scriptures'

<sup>33</sup> Vrindavandas, *HRCB*, v.390.

<sup>34</sup> Khandelval, *Caca Srihit Vrindavandasji*, p. 34.

(*būjhyau nahī śruti sāra*).<sup>35</sup> This presented a foil for Vrindavandas to describe Ruplal's enlightening discourses, which earned him a reputation there.

Besides his sermons, when Ruplal travelled, his charisma was articulated through miraculous healings and displays of his control over spirits. In his Gujarat tour, he exorcised seven ghosts and later, in Varanasi, he cast out one from the possessed daughter of a disciple<sup>36</sup>:

Dyaldas's beloved daughter  
was struck by a ghost (*preta*), her body was filled with torment.  
She had departed, left like a wooden puppet,  
her father's mind was overcome with worry.  
She had been going to her wedding when she became pained,  
her mother was rapt with pains.  
They brought her and threw her at the feet of the gurus:  
'Take this disciple under your protection!'  
Seeing her the guru felt compassion in his heart:  
she was gravely overcast by the shade of the ghost.  
Embracing her, he made her his disciple,  
he gave her the name of the lord, and all the sickness left her.  
For eight watches, he instructed on the emotions,  
he taught them to keep service (*sevā*) in their hearts.  
The shade of the ghost knew no [further] births  
when devotion to the Queen expanded in its heart.

By describing the exorcism, Vrindavandas underlined Ruplal's saintly qualities, and his ability to offer salvation through Queen Radha not only to the sick but also to the hungry ghosts that had possessed their bodies. While in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Radhavallabhi gurus were able to establish their credentials by virtue of their proximity to the sacred sites of Braj, and the physical icons of deities worshipped there, now the gods had migrated and the temple network had become decentred, so alternative forms of authority and charisma were required for a sect on the move.

The dispersal of the Radhavallabhis beyond Braj required integrating mechanisms and refined tools for communication, and letters and song texts became especially influential forms. In the *HRCB*, Vrindavandas transcribed letters when they were relevant to the unfolding narrative. When Ruplal fled Jaisingh and sought asylum in Delhi, he was followed by Mahant Jugaldas and Swami Nandaram, who wanted to encourage him to come to a compromise. Ruplal did not meet with them, but composed a versified letter, presumably as a form of public proclamation on

<sup>35</sup> Vrindavandas, *HRCB*, v.202.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, vv.210–13.

his position,<sup>37</sup> which Vrindavandas inserted into his own account of the period, over 30 years later.<sup>38</sup> Other letters were less poetic and more functional, appearing complete with dates, addressees, and listed family members and disciples. For example, Vrindavandas inserted a letter Ruplal received from his father, Harilal (c. 1640–723), during his eastern tour<sup>39</sup>:

Daily, his father, Shri Hita Harilal, got up and remained by the roadside.  
So much time had passed over the four previous years.  
Then, anxiously, he sent his disciple to the forest,  
he went quickly [and said]: ‘Now I shall tell you about my suffering!  
The guru of supreme compassion, with great affection in his heart,  
wrote this letter with so much love, which I have come bearing in haste.’

A true copy of the letter written by Goswami Shri Harilal by his own hand.

Hail Shri Radhavallabh! Fond wishes and prostrations of Baba Ji, Shri Kunjlal Ji:  
(your) health, wellness, mind, the supreme life, the beloved.  
To Ruplal Ji.

Auspicious thoughts and fond wishes of Harilal, Mukundlal, Ghanshyamlal.  
(We are all) well here, and hope that you are always well. Referring to: a letter arrived many days ago, and seeing that letter we write a letter (to communicate) our well-being. Baba, come quickly that you may fill our eyes that have been empty for so long. Come quickly, that satisfaction would be our treasure; and dedicated to God, ‘Jai Radhavallabha!’ to the priests Jagan, Sabal, Mukund, and his son Krishnadas. Quickly, son, now bring yourself (here), for so many days have passed. By the Divine Couple! Remove to Pushkar, and prostrate before the attendant of Madhusudan. If Vatsapal and Gopal should come with their friends,

<sup>37</sup> c.f. O’Hanlon, ‘Letters Home’.

<sup>38</sup> Khandelval, *Caca Srihit Vrindavandasji*, p. 38

<sup>39</sup> Vrindavandas, *HRCB*, inserted between vv.188–89. I am grateful to Monika Horstmann for her advice on translating this letter. On Harilal, see Mital, *Braj ke Dharma-Sampradayan ka Itihas*, pp. 416–17. Original text reads:

*atha patrī Gosvānmi Śrī Harilāl Jī ke hastā akṣar likhī tākī jathā prati utārī. Śrī Rādhāvallabho jayati. Bābā Jī Śrī Kunjalāl jī kau āsīrvāda. svasti śrī mat param prānna priyaci. Rūpalāla Jī jogya lī. Śubha cintaka Harilāla Mukūndalāla Ghanasāyāmlāla ke āsīrvāda daṇḍavata vañcanaiñ ihāñ kusala hai [.]. tuhmārī kusala sadā vāñchata haiñ [.]. aparāñca patrī āēñ bahuta divasa bhaye heñ su kāheñ te patrī deṣata patra kuśala kau liṣaneñ [.]. bābā tuma vegi dai āvau hamāre naiñna tuma hau aba bahuta dina bhaye śālī bhare [.]. vega āvau sañtoṣa dhana hai hamārī auru iṣṭa kī sapta hai pujārī jagana savala mukuñda cha vū kau beṣā Kṛṣṇadāsa kauñ jai Rādhāvallabha vega dai lālā kauñ lai āvau dina bahuta bhaye haiñ [.]. jugala hari jī harī puhakara Madhusūdana bhṛtti kī daṇḍavata vatsāpala vā gopāla apānaiñ snehī sain sātha āveñ tau bhalī hai [.]. miṭī kārttika vadi 9 sañvat 1760 [.]. pātisāha dillī āe haiñ gurū para muhīma haiñ. mājī bhābhājī bhuvājī amṛto badīnaun nañdo nanhiyāñ vicitrī kī asīsa [.]. bīkānaiñra ke mahājana haiñ. vaisnava haiñ jaitasī ke bañdhu varga haiñ ye kachū cāhaiñ tau rupaiyā dījau inkauñ gayā karibe kī āsa hai.*

then that would be good. Dated 9th Kartik, 1760 [1703CE]. The Emperor of Delhi has come. He had important business with the guru. Your mother, sister-in-law, Bhuvva Ji, and Amrit send their greetings, and the wonderful blessings of Nandi and the little ones. This is a merchant/devotee (*mahājan*) from Bikaner. Being a vaishnava, he is like our relative. Should he want something then give him some money—he hopes to visit Gaya.

These prose letters interrupted the flow of the verse poem, and, I suggest, impacted on the way the text was read in two ways.

First, even when he did not transcribe them, Vrindavandas made regular references to devotees writing, receiving and reading letters, and highlighted their emotional responses<sup>40</sup>: these were affective practices, and the inclusion of a letter written by Rupal's father, Shri Harilal, injected his voice into the 'telling' of the poem. Second, 'pasting in' letters changed the expectations of the poem's genre: in addition to the recurrent invocation of dates, these non-literary texts constituted a form of archive. Documenting and transcribing the internal communications of the family network was a departure from conventional hagiography and other forms of commemorative writing, and speaks to larger shifts in how writers like Vrindavandas employed new literary strategies to examine the past.

Over the last 20 years, we have seen a growing appreciation for how early modern intellectuals articulated new forms of historical consciousness, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These forms can be traced across several simultaneous developments, including the growth of history writing among communities of scribal professionals, including *munshīs*, *kanakkuppillais*, and *karanams*.<sup>41</sup> Treatments of the past by writers from these communities often had a different flavour from earlier works or compositions by court poets, especially in their scepticism towards heroes and their critical distance from rulers (by virtue of their social position, as contracted service providers), their self-conscious displays of erudition (telling their readers and peers about their extensive reading of earlier sources) and even extolling the moral virtues of studying the past. Beyond these new service groups, this appreciation of temporal depth and change can also be traced in the works of Sanskrit scholars, who, increasingly from the seventeenth century, mapped their disciplines through chronological periods.<sup>42</sup> Cynthia Talbot demonstrates how vernacular poets employed 'recourse to history' in their works, as in the *Rājavilāsa* of Man Kavi, a Rajput chronicle from c. 1680, in which the political actors of that time examine earlier chapters of Sisodiya history in order to strategise and resolve new challenges before them.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, recent studies

<sup>40</sup> Vrindavandas, *HRCB*, vv. 192–93, 380–84.

<sup>41</sup> Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*; Alam and Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World*, pp. 396–428.

<sup>42</sup> Pollock, 'New Intellectuals'.

<sup>43</sup> Talbot, 'A Poetic Record', p. 473.

have highlighted the poetics of history in the case of Hindi, through a range of texts by courtly poets who redeployed earlier genres (including *raso*, *carit*, *vilās*) in their treatments of politics and biography.<sup>44</sup> These new studies of early modern histories are attentive to the agency of the authors in repurposing and innovating, and, in some cases, suggest that writers consciously reworked relatively stable historiographical conventions in order to challenge prevalent ideologies.<sup>45</sup>

Read alongside these other historical narratives, Vrindavandas also appears to be a relatively independent thinker, owing to his mobility between courts and his allegiances to a sect rather than a court. This critical distance from rulers can be seen in rebuke of Jai Singh, but also in his often dark, despairing view of a world that is not readily redeemable: in this regard, his tragic and detailed account of contemporary traumas echoes other eighteenth-century texts, like the Bengali *Mahārāshṭa Purāṇa* of Gangaram.<sup>46</sup>

At the same time, the *HRCB* is highly unusual, especially in its inclusion of Harilal's letter. The standard practice in early modern Hindi historical poetry was to integrate events, memories and earlier sources into a single poetic form: even if the metre changed from *dohā* to *kavitta*, ultimately the historical text would read as a seamless composition. Discussions between historical actors would be reproduced in rhyming verse, and readers would be presented with paraphrased accounts of letters and other historical documents, but not the items transcribed in their original form.<sup>47</sup> Vrindavandas' decision to reproduce rather than to report reflects an original sensitivity to his sources, which gives his poetry an archival as well as narrative purpose. The *HRCB* calls for further exploration of Hindi works from the eighteenth century, since this kind of archival sensibility is currently associated with better-known, significantly later works, like the *Vṛvinod* (published from 1886 onwards) of Shyamaldas (1836–93).<sup>48</sup> It is unclear if Vrindavandas had been influenced by literary precedents: Bengali vaishnavas already had a practice of both transcribing and paraphrasing (or 'tradapting' into Bengali) letters within hagiography,<sup>49</sup> but it is also possible that he had been influenced by the contemporary fascination with Persian belles-lettres (*inshā*), given that his other works (including the *HKB*) seem to have taken inspiration from other Persianate genres (such as *shahr ashob*),<sup>50</sup> writing as he was in a period of original literary

<sup>44</sup> Busch, 'The Poetry of History'; *idem*, 'Unhitching the Oxcart of Delhi'; *idem*, 'The Poetics of History in Padmakar's Himmatbahādurvirudāvalī'; Pinch, 'War and Succession'; Rajpurohit, 'Making the War Come Alive'.

<sup>45</sup> Anooshahr, 'Indo-Persian historian and Sindh-Persian intermediary'.

<sup>46</sup> Dimock and Gupta, *The Mahārāshṭa Purāṇa*.

<sup>47</sup> For example, Talbot, 'A Poetic Record', pp. 466–68.

<sup>48</sup> Talbot, 'The Mewar Court's Construction of History'.

<sup>49</sup> Gaudiya authors transcribed Sanskrit letters into hagiographical works, including *Karṇānanda*, *Prema-vilāsa* and *Bhakti-ratnākara*. See Lutjeharms, *A Vaiṣṇava Poet in Early Modern Bengal*, p. 60.

<sup>50</sup> Williams, 'Krishna's Neglected Responsibilities'.

cross-fertilisation.<sup>51</sup> Besides these brief communications, Vrindavandas and several of his Radhavallabhi peers cultivated an epistolary literature (in Hindi, *patra-sāhitya*): poems on devotional and theological subjects, termed *patra* or *patrikā*. It is possible that these verse ‘letters’ were a practical response to the sect’s dispersal over the course of several migrations, when written communication networks were deployed to define a sectarian culture. This archival sensibility goes beyond letters: besides his epistolary sources, I suggest the poet’s incorporation of songs and dreams might also be understood as curating a core of Radhavallabhi experience and memory for a dispersed community.

### Songs and Feelings

Song lyrics were a second form of documentation inserted into the body of the poem. Songs were integral to Radhavallabhi worship and theology: most of the sect’s writers, including Vrindavandas, were primarily composers of lyrics designed for congregational singing, *samāj gāyan*, during which the experience of the divine is enacted through emotionally saturated musical performance.<sup>52</sup> To this day, Radhavallabhis treat these lyrics, in their voiced or manuscript form, as *vāñī*, a word which might be loosely translated as ‘voice’ or (in the sense of scripture) ‘word’, and is used to distinguish these verses from mundane poetry and their manuscript receptacles from profane books (*pustak*).<sup>53</sup> The sect’s reverential treatment of *vāñī* underlines the power of the voiced or written song as an inscribed vessel of sacred experience and as a platform for engaging with the divine realm. By voicing the *vāñī* in sung performance and worship, Radhavallabhis participate in a shared, embodied experience that they consider transhistorical, connecting connoisseur (*rasika*) devotees across the generations. In this sense, the *vāñī* can also be thought of as an affectively resonant sound archive.

Several of the songs in the *HRCB* are compositions by protagonists in the poem, often inspired by specific episodes in the narrative: for example, when Rupal received a vision of God as Jagannath of Puri, he processed his experience by writing a *viṣṇupad* lyric<sup>54</sup>:

He sang of the perfection of those feet, the bliss they bestow  
Shri Hita Rupal wrote this *vāñī*:

<sup>51</sup> Pauwels, *Cultural Exchange*.

<sup>52</sup> Williams, ‘A Theology of Feeling’.

<sup>53</sup> Snell, ‘Scriptural Literature in the Rādhāvallabha Sampradāya’.

<sup>54</sup> Vrindavandas, *HRCB*, vv.178–80. Text of song lyric:

*jai jai jai jai jai jai śrī jagannātha raṅge / śrī rādhā-vara muralīdhara giravaradhara aṅge / saṅga liyeṅ sesa rūpa suṅdara vala rāñmān / duṣṭa davana bhakti racana pūrana jaga kāñmā / madhya joga māyā śrī sahodra virājaiñ / jaga tārana kārana līlā ju vividhi sājaiñ / nīlagiri nivāsa rāja rāja cakradhārī / jai śrī rūpalāla hita cita dai darasata vana vihārī.*



he recited this fresh *viṣṇupad* on that perfection,  
 his hands playing the *vīṇā* very sweetly.  
 This is that *viṣṇupad*, in *rāga* Bhairav:  
 Jai! Jai! Jai! Jai! Jai! Jai! Shri Jagannath, Passionate One!  
 Blessed Lord of Radha, your limbs bearing the flute, bearing Govardhan!  
 Beside you is Shesha and a woman, beautiful and powerful in form!  
 Destroying evil, creating devotion, oh Creator of the entire world!  
 Within you is Yogamaya, your blessed twin, resplendent,  
 Salvation of the world, cause of the divine play, manifold in adornment!  
 Oh King, you who reside upon the Blue Hill, oh King, you who wield the cakra!  
 Jai! Shri! Ruplal says, seeing the forest of your passion fills my heart with love!

Including these lyrics, marked with *rāga* prescriptions for musical re-enactments, not only added variety to the narrative poem but also expanded the possibilities of reading, performance and memory: songs were artefacts, components of the archive of Ruplal's life-story, which, when activated through music, brought Vrindavandas' readers into contact with the now-deceased guru's experience.

Besides their sacred status as *vāṇī*—that is, as a sonic technology—I suggest that the Radhavallabhis collected, recorded and embedded these song texts into their sectarian histories because they understood the enacted lyric as an archive of sectarian experience and memory. Vrindavandas' text interlaces emotion, music and the past. Tia DeNora has argued that music does not simply express a feeling or internal state but 'is part of the reflexive constitution of that state': when people engage with musical practices, they 'mobilize music to arrive at, enhance and alter aspects of themselves and their self-concepts'.<sup>55</sup> She persuasively discusses music as a medium—which becomes fixed to aspects of past experience and powerfully evokes the emotional content of past relationships or interactions—that moves through time, working as a powerful aide memoire: 'Like an article of clothing or an aroma, music is part of the material and aesthetic environment in which it "once before" was playing, in which the past, now an artefact of memory and its constitution, was once a present.'<sup>56</sup> In a similar vein, Kay Kaufman Shelemay has also argued that songs are especially potent as a means of evoking memories and constructing narratives of the past; when a song is transmitted through repetition, it acquires layers of meanings and memories, becoming a palimpsest of individual and collective experience and emotion.<sup>57</sup> A single song text becomes entangled with multiple performances and hearings, which can be collectively reactivated each time the lyric is sung again. Re-performing that song evokes but also reworks past associations, re-embedding the memory in a new context.

<sup>55</sup> DeNora, 'Music as a Technology of the Self', pp. 41, 35.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47–48.

<sup>57</sup> Shelemay, 'Music, Memory and History'.

Like letters, song lyrics circulated through the Radhavallabhi networks and integrated them.<sup>58</sup> Sharing sectarian songs through manuscript books and social gatherings, especially the *samāj gāyan*, the musical experience of the divine couple became the key practice of the sect as it was decentralised and dispersed. Throughout the sectarian poetry of this period, the true devotee is termed *rasika*, the connoisseur who is saturated and dripping with affective experience, and the *bhāvaka*, the ‘feeler’, especially of love.<sup>59</sup> This emotional community relied on music and text in the absence of a secure location and a central temple cult.

Vrindavandas was based in Kishangarh and Pushkar between approximately 1774–79. Initially, he had sought refuge there from the crown prince, Birad Singh, and stayed in the house of a merchant or grocer (*modī*) named Maharama, where he finished his poem, *Kṛṣṇa Vivāha Utkanṭhā Belī* (The Vine of Desire at Krishna’s Wedding, c. 1774)<sup>60</sup>:

A certain horror befell the Yamana, and the Braj folk became distressed  
 At that time, they left from there, and settled in Kishangarh.  
 The son of the king, Bahadur Singh, who is called Birad Singh,  
 Courteously brought us beside him, and allowed us to rest in his city.  
 Various kinds of people live there, who have affection for God and God’s folk,  
 The king, Bahadur Singh, protects his people there with propriety.  
 The wise merchant Maharama has a beautiful garden,  
 Where this book was completed: a tale of Krishna and love.

This verse indicates how Vrindavandas, identifying as one of ‘God’s folk’, grappled with the entanglement of historical and sacred time: on the one hand, he was writing poems that evoked the love of Krishna’s marriage to Radha in Braj, but at the same time he was forced to flee the horrors facing Vrindavan and negotiate sanctuary in Rajasthan. Again, here the devotees were primarily dependent on merchants, rather than directly turning to a king for shelter. The prince and his father make only a cursory appearance, though it is possible that Vrindavandas’ comment on Bahadur Singh’s (1766–81) righteous rule was informed by the civil war over the throne, between Bahadur and his celebrated *bhakta* brother, Savant Singh (officially resolved in 1757).<sup>61</sup> Over the years, Vrindavandas became closer to the royal court: Bahadur Singh is said to have commissioned both the *Jugal Saneha Patrikā* (‘Epistle on the Couple’s Affection,’ 1779) and *Bibeka Patrikā Belī* (‘Creeper of Epistles of Understanding,’ 1778).<sup>62</sup> Vrindavandas also wrote poems dedicated to

<sup>58</sup> On devotional songs and their circulation in this period, see Pauwels, *Mobilizing Krishna’s World*, pp. 148–57.

<sup>59</sup> Williams, ‘A Theology of Feeling’.

<sup>60</sup> Khandelval, *Caca Srihit Vrindavandasji*, p. 73.

<sup>61</sup> Pauwels, *Mobilizing Krishna’s World*, p. 26.

<sup>62</sup> Snehlata, *Caca Vrindavandas*, pp. 14–15.

Bahadur Singh; however, rather than adopting the eulogising *praśasti* formula of a court poet, he instead incorporated Bahadur into the emotionally-charged Radhavallabhi universe<sup>63</sup>:

A seeker, extracting the wealth of meaning from the speech of the great ones,  
the intense attachment of his heart reveals itself among the *rasikas*.  
Supremely learned and illustrious, his heart saturated with ever new feelings,  
a gnostic, knowing the secret, watching the Couple's play.  
Crown jewel of the Rathaur line, who eternally collects the wealth of devotion,  
blessed is King Bahadur Singh, his fine mind drenched in the mysteries of the  
Couple.

It is striking that Vrindavandas identified Bahadur Singh first as a devotee, a spiritual aesthete, and a feeler (*bhakta*, *rasika*, *bhavaka*) and only then as a royal dynast. The extent of his involvement with Bahadur's court is uncertain, but it appears that he positioned himself differently from a court poet or panegyrist. The king is not considered on his throne, but rather sitting in the honoured circle of devotees.

The painting discussed at the beginning of this essay was most likely prepared during this period. Bahadur Singh is not present in the image, and the inscription only tells us that the artist was working at the command of an unnamed ruler. The absence of the king perhaps confirms the relative independence of the Radhavallabhis, even while seeking asylum in Rajasthan. The image itself presents an imagined, transhistorical assembly: Ruplal may have passed away as many as three decades earlier, while other participants, like Krishnadas, were casualties in Abdali's incursion, according to Vrindavandas' own testimony.<sup>64</sup> The painting might therefore be understood as another form of archive, working in tandem with the poems and songbooks, which the artist has also depicted beside the Radhavallabhi singers.

### Dreams and Visions

A third form of record in Vrindavandas' poems are dreams and visions.<sup>65</sup> I suggest that Vrindavandas believed that these were significant for three reasons.

First, through visions, the divine reality bleeds into historical time. While the *HRCB* and the *Harikalā Belī* are both concerned with life stories, recent history and current political affairs, peppered with dates and documents, visions of Krishna and Radha are reminders of an underlying meta-reality, where the gods eternally enact their play of love. This nuances the record of crisis, persecution and death, making the reality of lived experience contingent and superficial, and therefore less painful. This is especially apparent in one of the concluding verses of the *Harikalā Belī*<sup>66</sup>:

<sup>63</sup> Khandelval, *Caca Srihit Vrindavandasji*, p. 1309.

<sup>64</sup> Williams, 'Krishna's Neglected Responsibilities', p. 1432.

<sup>65</sup> On dreams in Sanskrit literature, see Doniger, *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities*.

<sup>66</sup> Vrindavandas and Williams, *Harikalā Belī*, v.184.

The Yavans came twice and harassed the people:  
 During the years 1813 [1757] and 1817 [1760].  
 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.  
 Vrindavan's Loving Beauty, no one's power is effective,  
 Behold the great wonder: fear has become like a game.

Second, dreams were letters from God. Vrindavandas described a dream he had shortly after the first of Abdali's incursions, in which he saw many of the *bhaktas* who had died in the massacre, peacefully watching a *rāslīlā* performance; still in the dream, he spoke to a 12-year-old boy (i.e., Krishna) who leapt from a building, got up unharmed and then leapt down a second time. Vrindavandas understood this as a prophecy that the Afghans would come twice, so he kept away from Vrindavan for another three years. Likewise, in the *HRCB*, it is God who gives people dreams (*supanaun diyau* v.183). Receiving visions indicates that the devotees' eyes have been opened to the hidden depths of reality, and that God takes a personal interest in their lives: in the case of Rupilal, visions are further evidence, along with his exorcisms and eloquence, of his charismatic authority.

Third, since dreams are understood as a channel of communication with the divine, they also provide a space for challenging God, and the reflective work of making sense of God's plans. God can disclose insights behind the disturbances and migrations, but Krishna can also be frustratingly silent: at the height of the Afghan crisis, 'We did not get a sign of your feet even in our dreams' (*supane cinhāra caraṇa nāhiṅ karyau āpa kauṅ*).<sup>67</sup> This final image—of God's feet (not) walking through the anxious mind of the devotee—invoked a longer history of theology and iconography.<sup>68</sup> However, reading across Vrindavandas' poems, I would suggest that in the eighteenth century, the feet provided a way of articulating historically specific concerns. The foot, *carāṇa*, should indicate its rhyming partner, *śaraṇa*, shelter or protection. As the Radhavallabhis were forced out of Braj and onto the road, moving between the houses of their disciples or sympathetic kings, they asked themselves, when would *God* provide them with a stable sanctuary? The foot was simultaneously a stamp of servitude, marked visibly across the forehead in the form of the sectarian tilak: calling himself a servant of Vrindavan, Vrindavandas queried God's neglect, but also invested himself in cultivating his guru's reputation and authority. The literary focus on sacred feet in these perturbed poems also gestures to the unknowability and even illogical nature of God. While many of Vrindavandas' songs describe the visible forms and qualities of Radha and Krishna, feet and footprints suggest a subtle intractability; the appearance and disappearance

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, v.26a.

<sup>68</sup> Williams, 'Sounding out the Divine'.

of divine feet express a deeply felt sense of transience and movement: God can no longer be accessed through a *mūrti* in an established temple complex in a secured sacred place, but must be appealed to through music, performed text and emotion.

### Conclusion

Towards the end of his life, circumstances gradually improved for Vrindavandas and his community. Jaisingh's successors were more tolerant of the Radhavallabhis, and Ruplal's son, Kishorilal, established himself as a local magnate in Vrindavan, where he was popularly called 'Sarkār'. He received a *farmān* from Shah Alam, along with several villages through *jāgīrs* gifted to him by Pratap Singh of Jaipur (r. 1778–803) and the rulers of Gwalior. His reputation spread to Gujarat where, like his father, he acquired new disciples, who established a significant regional branch of the sect. One especially prosperous Gujarati devotee, Seth Lallubhai Bhagvandas, erected a *mandir* and *havelī* in Batika, and his own disciples built a new temple back in Vrindavan, where the *mūrti* of Radhavallabh was reinstated in 1785. Vrindavandas himself was recognised as an elder and pillar of the community, and is affectionately remembered as 'Cacaji' (uncle) to this day.

However, for much of Vrindavandas' lifetime, migration and dislocation characterised the Radhavallabhi experience, from the evacuation of the deities to the political exile of Ruplal, to the poet's own migrations. The need to travel led to the development of networks beyond Braj and engaged the support of lay disciples from middling professional and mercantile classes. As the Radhavallabhis travelled, the cultivation of charismatic authority and the circulation of letters and song lyrics proved vital to the project of maintaining a community.

The diffusion of the sect and its authorities impacted on the worldview and modes of expression of poets retained by sectarian goswami households. First and foremost, Vrindavandas composed poems and songs that are read and performed in the context of worship and other bhakti practices. However, a keener sense of context demonstrates how these compositions had other applications, being entangled with his political environment, the social life of his community and the challenges faced by his guru's family. As a result, Vrindavandas' works consider the interplay between a divine temporality and recent history by bringing songs and dreams into conversation with records and letters, inscribing the charisma of his guru, and documenting the emotional journeys of his fellow devotees. The experience of dispersal had unsettled the sect, and untethered Vrindavan from the war-torn landscape of Braj: poets increasingly envisaged the eternal Vrindavan as existing in a parallel dimension that could be experienced through aesthetics and emotions. The reflective work of poet-intellectuals and scribes like Vrindavandas allowed the Radhavallabhis to engage with the otherworldly (*alaukika*) Vrindavan, even as they travelled across the highways and between the safe havens of North India.

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