

Piotr Borek 
piotr.borek@uj.edu.pl
(Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland)

A Rajput from the Deccan Shivaji's Discursive Identities

ABSTRACT: This article explores Shivaji's use of Braj Bhasha poetry to construct and assert his identity in the furtherance of his royal consecration and realisation of his geopolitical ambitions. Departing from the cultural environment of Deccani sultanates with their established patronage of Dakani and Persian, Shivaji employed Braj to appeal to Hindu aristocracy, most notably Rajput chiefs, linking himself genealogically to the Sisodia Rajputs. *Śivrājbhūṣaṇ*, poetical treatise commissioned by him, blends indigenous Hindu themes with Persianate royal imagery, reflecting complex political and cultural strategy to claim legitimacy and imperial status.

Drawing on Dirk Kolff's hypothesis on warrior identities (1990), the article attempts to consider Shivaji's Rajput affiliation as both pragmatic and indicative of flexible social identities shaped by military alliances. The study situates one of Shivaji's literary and political endeavours within a broader tradition of Braj Bhasha literary cultivation in the Deccan, tracing its origins to Shivaji's father, Shahaji, and poets such as Cintāmaṇi Tripāṭhī. This trans-regional literary engagement reinforced Shivaji's royal authority and positioned him within the competing cultural landscapes of early modern India.

KEYWORDS: Braj, Deccan, linguistic ecology, Rajput, Shivaji

Introduction

Shivaji Bhosle (1630–1674), viewed as a historical figure, is usually ascribed with two predominant identities. The first is the Hindu identity, which up to this day plays significant role in Indian historiography. The second is the Maratha identity, frequently emphasized by Indian historians from Maharashtra.¹ However, these constructions tend to obscure the more complex and nuanced portrayal of his identity that emerges out of one among several literary projects patronized by Shivaji.

In the present paper, I focus on a treatise (*rīti-granth*) composed in Braj Bhasha, the literary language which belongs to Hindi literary tradition and is associated predominantly with the Hindi belt of North India. The treatise was commissioned by Shivaji on the eve of his royal consecration, which took place in 1674 in Raigarh. *Śivṛāj-bhūṣaṇ* (1673), composed by Bhūṣaṇ Tripāṭhī (1613–1715), formerly discussed in the light of my earlier research as part of a broader project of political legitimization of the new rulership (Borek 2019), presents its patron as embodying two additional identities. One is geographical or rather geopolitical, the other links the patron to the specific circle of élite warriors.²

¹ It cannot be ignored that *Śivṛāj-bhūṣaṇ*, the poem explored here, has its own history as a literary artefact used for the sake of supporting the construction of both Hindu and Maharashtrian identities of Shivaji. This history started over a century ago when Gaṅgāviṣṇu Śrīkṛṣṇadās of Lakṣmīveṅkaṭeśvar Press, in the introduction to his edition of *Śivṛāj-bhūṣaṇ*, praised the agents who had put the poem to print for the first time: “In fact, the indescribable benefits coming from these three gentlemen flew down not only on the Maharashtra descendants, but on those who are proud of their Aryan faith (...).” वास्तवमें ये तीनों महाशयोंका समस्त महाराष्ट्रप्रजाके ऊपरही नहीं किंतु आर्यधर्माभिमानी, काव्यज्ञ, रसिक, सहृदय लोगोंपर भी अवर्णनीय उपकार हुए हैं (...) (Śrīkṛṣṇadās 1918: 23).

All translations from Hindi and Braj Bhasha are by the author of this paper.

² Next to Kolff (1990), this article also draws inspiration from Dominique-Sila Khan’s concept of multiple identities (2003 [1997]: 18, 22 and 162). While Sila Khan has primarily explored the phenomenon of dual religious identity in depth, I apply this idea here to the realm of multiple political identities.

My examination of the poem's linguistic context and its internal evidence seeks to offer a more nuanced understanding of Shivaji's identity. On one hand, this portrayal affirms certain earlier interpretations, but on the other, it introduces a new dimension that has so far remained unexamined. It is, of course, nothing new to associate Shivaji's identity with the Deccan, regardless of the ongoing debates over how he and his contemporaries may have understood the term. My interpretation of selected passages from the treatise supports existing claims regarding Shivaji's Deccani identity, if not a form of Deccani patriotism³ attributed to him. However, the same poem—through both its content and language, as well as the very fact of its composition—also reveals Shivaji's deep affiliation with the world of the Rajputs. It is important to clarify that this form of identification does not align with the common or colloquial notion of a Rajput as a member of a specific lineage or clan exclusively associated with Rajasthan. Rather, the attribution I propose holds validity within the framework of Dirk Kolff's (1990) study concerning the broader meaning of the term *rajpūt/rājput*, the notion which I come back to closer to the end of the paper.

What I propose here is an addition to the analyses of “the *rīti* movement as a timely strategy of Rajput courtliness and, moreover, a critical tool for the expression of Rajput identity” (Busch 2011: 171) and thus it conforms with Allison Busch's understanding of Rajput identity as a transregional cultural sphere of aristocratic network, i.e. that the Rajputs across various courts shared political aspirations, claims to ancient, kshatriya lineages, and *rīti*, or the 17th-century Braj Bhasha literary culture.

³ For a large discussion on Shivaji's Deccani patriotism and its possible ideological nature, both of which do not necessarily have to inform the practice, see: Kruijters 2009: 153–189. Kruijters also refers, in detail, to various understandings of the geographical Deccan that might be ascribed to Shivaji and his close contemporaries (*ibid.*: 166–172).

From Dakani to Braj Bhasha

In the 17th century, Braj Bhasha courtly literature was not widely established in the Deccan, although several indicators suggest attempts to extend its reach beyond North India. This literary culture—of highly ornate Braj poetry composed and performed in courtly settings—was closely associated with the Mughal Empire, particularly the imperial court and the Rajput élites which aligned themselves with Mughal authority. Influential cultural circles across much of North India adopted and actively adapted Braj Bhasha literature, which had already served as a medium of literary expression in certain courts as early as the 15th century.⁴

Scholarship on Braj Bhasha courtly culture, in addition to studies on so-called *bhakti* literature, further supports the view that Braj emerged as a rising cosmopolitan language. As Busch notes, “Brajbhasha was unusually versatile as a linguistic medium because it could be refined like Sanskrit, without sacrificing broad comprehensibility” (2011: 183). Its intelligibility across northern regions clearly contributed to its dynamic development in the 17th century. Braj Bhasha eventually reached the Deccan where the existing literary practices in Dakani—a linguistically related vernacular—may have facilitated its reception and comprehension.

Nevertheless, literary production in the 17th-century Deccan reveals more intricate political and cultural dynamics of privileging Braj Bhasha over Dakani, a locally established medium of literary expression. While Braj Bhasha literary culture remained largely confined to élite circles and was predominantly authored by brahmin poets, its reception extended beyond brahmin-controlled domains. These poets “shared their cultural knowledge with the court” (*ibid.*: 184), often rendering their works highly pragmatic—as vehicles for political messaging and historical narration. Thanks to the linguistic flexibility of Braj Bhasha, contemporary symbols of kingship could

⁴ This early timeframe refers to Viṣṇudās’s Braj Bhasha adaptations from Sanskrit composed around 1435 and 1442 (cf. McGregor 2003: 917).

be accommodated more readily than in Sanskrit, which had traditionally occupied this cultural space. Braj Bhasha courtly literature, deeply reliant on Sanskrit *alankāraśāstra* ('poetic theory'), with its array of tropes, motifs, and literary figures, thus emerged as a new mode of literary authority in regions where Sanskrit had long dominated—and within a world where Persian held the prestige of administrative, political, and aesthetic power.

It is within this cultural and political milieu that *Śivrajbhūṣaṇ* must be situated. Shivaji's engagement with Braj Bhasha courtly literary culture was a strategic move to assert royal legitimacy—one that went beyond the symbolic. The content of the poetic treatise reflects Shivaji's pursuit of political and military alliances, the latter of which is articulated almost explicitly. The act of commissioning and composing a work in Braj Bhasha can thus be interpreted as a deliberate attempt by the patron to position himself within the evolving geopolitical order.

Among the languages of aesthetic cultivation in the Deccan—according to the classification by Richard Eaton (2005: 140 and 2014)—we find Telugu, Dakani, and Persian.⁵ If Arabic and Persian were the dominant languages of state authority in the Deccan, Shivaji is known for his relatively successful efforts—later continued by his son Sambhaji—to introduce Sanskrit for similar administrative and ideological purposes. This move was not merely about legitimizing his kingship within powerful brahmin circles, as noted by Bendrey in his study of the *Rājābhīṣekaprayoga* (cf. 1960), composed by Gāgā Bhaṭṭ who was brought from Varanasi to Raigarh. Nor was it limited to the commissioning of the *Śivabhārata* (cf. Laine 2001). More significantly, it included the *Rājavyavahārakośa*, a lexicon compiled by Shivaji's minister Raghunāth Paṇḍit that aimed to translate current administrative and legal terms from Persian and Arabic into Sanskrit (cf. Bhadraraj 2007). This latter initiative can be interpreted as an attempt to replace Persian as the language of state authority in territories carved

⁵ In Shivaji's case, considering the territorial extent of his dominion around the time of his coronation, Telugu (more closely associated with the eastern Deccan and the former Golconda Sultanate) can be set aside.

out from the Bijapur Sultanate and now under Shivaji's control. In this context, the act of bringing the poet Bhūṣaṇ to court in Raigarh may be seen as part of a larger, deliberate project to reconfigure the linguistic ecology of the new kingdom. The more relevant question becomes: how could Braj Bhasha serve as a viable alternative to Dakani, the idiom used for artistic and expressive purposes?

It is important to clarify that this analysis concerns the use of Dakani by the political élite, and not its broader use in socio-religious contexts. In other words, the focus here is on Dakani's courtly and aesthetic functions that Braj Bhasha courtly literature was also designed to fulfil. Shivaji utilized both Sanskrit and Braj Bhasha to affirm his Hindu identity. In *Śivrajbhūṣaṇ*, Bhūṣaṇ presents Shivaji as a Hindu king seeking alliances with other Hindu rulers. Yet this shared religious identity, in opposition to Muslim powers, does not fully explain the strategic adoption of Braj Bhasha literary culture in Shivaji's court in the Deccan. Both the poet and his patron appear to have found it politically expedient to appropriate a common idiom that implicitly undermined the political legitimacy of Muslim rulers by reducing their significance to a shared religious identity. Shivaji's situation required him to address two audiences: Hindu rulers already familiar with Braj Bhasha literary conventions and local population embedded in a different transregional literary tradition—namely, Dakani. On the one hand, he sought to integrate himself into a literary culture that was geographically and stylistically distant. On the other, his position was facilitated by a composite “Hindi” idiom, enriched through centuries of interaction with Persian and Arabic registers.⁶ This hybrid linguistic environment likely made Braj Bhasha more accessible to audiences familiar with Dakani or with the Persian-infused vernaculars.⁷ Given

⁶ For an overview of the multi-track development of Hindi which, in my opinion, supports the assumption on comprehensibility of Braj and Dakani literary cultures, see Bangha 2011.

⁷ Comprehensibility of Dakani—as a literary language associated with the Deccan—and Braj Bhasha by their respective audiences can be justified at least within the frames of history of their development. E.g., compare Bangha's conclusion on the closeness of Braj Bhasha to Hindavi (*ibid.*: 81) and the following

the performative nature of Bhūṣaṇ's treatise—reflecting a broader tradition in which oral performance still held precedence over written texts—the local linguistic context would have favoured Braj Bhasha over Sanskrit and even Persian in terms of comprehensibility and resonance with courtly audiences.

A Rajput from Deccan: geographical and cultural identities

Among the notable texts prepared for Shivaji's royal consecration is the Sanskrit *Śivarājābhīṣekaprayoga*, composed by Gāgā Bhaṭṭ, a brahmin brought from Varanasi. His presence was essential, as Shivaji needed to legitimize his claim to kingship and, even more so, as he needed a suitable royal genealogy (Busch 2011: 190–191). This concern with dynastic legitimacy is also echoed in *Śivrājābhūṣaṇ*, where the issue is addressed once again. In the Braj Bhasha composition, Shivaji gets explicitly linked to the Sisodia clan, a prominent Rajput lineage. A clear statement on one of Shivaji's forefathers says:

A great hero, lord of the land appeared in this lineage
He took the name Sisodia—[the one who] offered [his] head to God.⁸

Remarkably, the poet does not inform the audience that Shivaji's ancestor was born into the Rajput clan of Sisodias (*sīsodiyau*) but rather, that he himself chose such an identity. The quoted verse belongs to one of the opening sections of the poem, namely *rājvaṃśvarṇan* (Skt. *rājvaṃśavarṇana*), a conventional passage adapted from the Sanskrit literary tradition, reconstructing the royal lineage of the hero.

concise comment on the history of Dakani: “The emergent language Hindawi had travelled in the south with Muslim rule[r]s and common people who settled there only in the early fourteenth century due to historical and political reasons. It flourished as a literary language known as Dakani or Dehlavi till almost the end of the seventeenth century (...)” (Dua 1992: 383).

⁸ महावीर ता बंस में भयौ एक अवनीस ।
लियौ बिरद सीसोदियो दियौ ईस को सीस । (VB, v. 5).

I view this reference as a significant textual signpost, one that is later reinforced by the aesthetic portrayal of Shivaji, aligning him with a broader world of martial aristocracy that had traditionally operated within the Mughal imperial sphere. It is also not a coincidence that the poet identified Shivaji with the specific clan of Sisodias. Unlike many other Rajput clans that allied with the Mughal army, the fame of the Sisodias of Mewar, especially with its figure of Maharana Pratap (1540–1597),⁹ must have been useful for the poet and his patron at the least as a symbol of resistance against the Mughal Empire.

The discourse on the lineage is not limited to the opening section. In one of the several stanzas that explicitly identify Shivaji's enemy as a "barbarian" (*mleccha*) he is portrayed as the leader of the south and the warrior of the Solar lineage, the very same that elsewhere in the treatise is explicitly linked to the Rajput clan of the Sisodias:

O Lord of the South. You are the only loyal to the land and thus you are attractive.

There is no other like you, merciful to the poor, [and] who brutally erased the faith of the barbarians.

Shivaji! The poet Bhūṣaṇ claims that no one succeeds to become equal with you.

In the Solar (*sūra*) lineage, you are the crest-jewel of warriors (*sūra*), you create the glory of the house.¹⁰

Assuming that Bhūṣaṇ, as a skilled poet, did not commit a *doṣa*—that is, the error of using single word twice and endowing it with the

⁹ For actual research on Maharana Pratap of Sisodia clan, his values and ambitions, see e.g. Hooja 2018. The appellative of Sisodia started to be used in the 14th century for the ruling family of Mewar and prince Hammir (r. 1326–1364), famous for his resistance against another Muslim ruler, Muhammad Khalji (Hooja 2009: 329). Hammir became the hero of Nayacandra Sūrī's Sanskrit text, *Hammīra-mahākāvya*, composed in Gwalior in the first decades of the 15th century and belonging to a tradition of Hindu epics of resistance (Hens 2020: 40).

¹⁰ दच्छिन-नाइक एक तुही भुवि-भामिनि कौ अनुकूल है भावे ।
दीनदयाल न तो सो दुनी अरु छेच्छ के दीनहि मारि मिटावे ॥
श्रीसिवराज भनै कवि भूषन तेरे सरूपहि कोउ न पावे ।
सूर के बंस में सूर-सिरोमनि है करि तूँ कुलचंद ॥ (VB, v. 167).

same meaning—the repetition of the word *sūra* can be read as a device which associates the Rajput identity with that of a warrior. In this regard, the stanza may be read as evidence of how Bhūṣaṇ perceived and articulated Shivaji's Rajput identity. The poet simultaneously affirms his patron as a suitable king and situates the stanza within the literary culture through a concise reference to an *alaṅkāraśāstra* category: the term *dacchina-nāika* carries a *śleṣa* meaning, referring both to a dexterous hero, or lover who captivates a woman, and to a skilful leader or ruler.

Bhūṣaṇ, a brahmin from Tikvampur near Kanpur in North India, had prior experience composing texts in the mode proper to *Śivrajbhūṣaṇ*—infused with *vīr ras*, or the heroic sentiment, and stylistically influenced by Persian—for other patrons, including the Bundela ruler Chatrasal (1649–1731).¹¹ Although heroic poetry is relatively rare in the 17th-century Braj Bhasha courtly literature, it was not unfamiliar to the aristocratic milieu of the northwestern subcontinent, particularly the Rajputs who, for this purpose, also used Braj Bhasha, though in its regional form (known in Rajasthan as Pingal). Although *Śivrajbhūṣaṇ* is formally classified as *rītigraṇth*, i.e., a genre firmly rooted in the Braj Bhasha literary culture, its heroic tone and martial orientation suggest that it might have been crafted with a specific audience in mind: the ruling class fashioned in the Rajput manner.

Richard Eaton notes that “the sultanates affirmed their Deccani identity by patronizing Dakani literature” (Eaton 2005: 144). In this context, it is pertinent to ask why Shivaji went beyond such linguistic policy of his territorial predecessors. I assume that by commissioning *Śivrajbhūṣaṇ*, he sought to appeal to the Rajput aristocracy of North India. This was achieved, in part, through the construction of a royal genealogy and through a rhetorical strategy to impose a new linguistic framework upon his intended audience. This strategy is particularly

¹¹ Out of the three available poetical compositions attributed to Bhūṣaṇ, *Chatrasāldaśak* offers the main trace of Bhūṣaṇ's engagement with Chatrasal's court. Moreover, as Omprakāś Śāstrī, the editor of *Śivābāvanī* (the third existing poem by Bhūṣaṇ) states, the text of *Chatrasāldaśak* has been acquired from the oral tradition (Śāstrī 1969: 13).

evident in stanzas that diminish or even mock the Rajputs' service in the Mughal army. Such portrayals may have been designed to attract or persuade Rajputs to join the political and military alliances that Shivaji sought to forge. The following stanza serves as just one of several illustrative examples of this rhetorical diminishment:

Who does not feel excited to obtain it when seeing how attractive it is? To conquer the world, it offers means of stratagem and force.

[But] the one who gets it, soon becomes poor—Bhūṣaṇ says—it is useless to be associated with it!

The fame [like a] desirous woman aimed to take control of the Lion-Headman Shivaji. She subdues everyone but is not able to subdue him in any way.¹²

Unsteady, [she] cannot stay with anyone [even] a year. He considers the honour of being a *sūbedār* in the Mughal army to be just like a courtesan.¹³

Numerous instances in the poem affirm Shivaji's claim to a Deccani identity. One such example may be illustrated through a synecdochic stanza that, on a literal level, praises the grandeur of Shivaji's sword:

Your sword became the shield of the south (*dacchina*),
the wall for the North and the death for the Muslims.¹⁴

This statement outlines Shivaji's political and territorial ambitions at and around the time of his royal consecration. This broad identification

¹² Up to this point the stanza offers—as a figure of *śleṣa* ('double entendre')—an alternative reading:

"Who does not desire to meet her on seeing her beauty?

[She knows] how to win mankind with customary trickeries and coercion.

She quickly dispossesses of the wealth [of] the one to whom she comes. Bhūṣaṇ says that a sexual intercourse with her [will] bear no fruit."

¹³ देखत सरूप को सिंहात न मिलनकाज जग जीतिवेकौ जामे रीति छल-बल की ।

(...) जाके पास आवै ताकौ निधन करति बेग भूषन भनत जाकी संगत निफल की ।

कीरति-कामिनी राच्यौ सरजा सिवा की क्यों हूँ बस कैसेकै न बस करनी सकल की ।

चंचल बरस एक काहू पै रहै न गनिका सम निहारी सूबेदारी दिल्लीदल की । (VB₂ v. 149).

¹⁴ (...) तेरौ करवार भयो दच्छिनकौ ढाल भयो हिंदकौ दिवाल भयो काल तुरकानको । (VB, v. 68).

of the king with the territory he claims serves merely as an introduction. While Shivaji acknowledges the competing powers in the south as his adversaries, he consistently asserts his authority as the sovereign of the Deccan:

Lord of the Deccan, your hands raise the bow, the evil men of the forts fall into them.

Bhūṣaṇ gives you blessings, then bows to you. You release the arrows, the lives of the Muslims are lost.¹⁵

Another illustrative statement of the king's identification with the south, articulated in explicit contrast to the north, declares: "The Breaker of Delhi, the Pillar of the Southern Direction, the Embodiment of Pride, shine[s]!"¹⁶ Although the geographical reference to the southern direction appears straightforward, in most instances the term *dacchina* in the treatise refers specifically to the political region of the Deccan—namely, the sultanates of Bijapur and occasionally Golconda, both of which are invoked several times in the poem. For example, the poet suggests that Shivaji's victories over these sultanates were mere child's play, after which he proceeded to triumph over the Mughal emperor:

He conquered Golconda and Bijapur in his boyhood,
Upon reaching manhood, he conquered the emperor of Delhi.¹⁷

Ultimately, the references to the enemies in the south are concluded with a strong emphasis on their religious affiliation, which serves in the poem as a unifying characteristic of all adversaries—both northern and southern. As Bhūṣaṇ portrays Shivaji, "he conquers the entire south, destroying the faith of the barbarians."¹⁸

¹⁵ (...) दच्छिन के नाथ सिवराज तेरे हाथ चढ़ै धनुष के साथ गढ़-कोट दुरजन के ।
भूषन असीसैं तोहिं करत कसीसैं पुनि बाननिके साथ छूटे प्रान तुरकान के । (VB, v. 104).

¹⁶ (...) दिल्ली-दलन दच्छिनदिसिंभन ऐंड-धरन सिवराज बिराज । (VB, v. 123).

¹⁷ (...) गोलकुंडा बीजापुर जीत्यों लरिकाई ही में ज्वानी आएँ जीत्यों दिल्लीपतिपातस्याह । (VB, v. 13).

¹⁸ (...) भूषन जीनि लई सब दच्छिन छेच्छनि को घरमो घनु नासौ । (...) (VB, v. 294).

Shivaji's identification with the Deccan is not conveyed solely through explicit geographical references. Perhaps more significant is the recurrent use of the titles *sāh* or *sāhi* in connection with his person. To clarify, Shivaji is not directly designated by the use of such words in the same manner as Adil Shah, Nizam Shah, or Qutb Shah (in each case: *sāhi*), or the rulers whom the poet frequently invokes as his adversaries. However, it is no coincidence that the direct reference to Shivaji's father, Shahaji, is repeatedly and strategically employed in its vernacular form *sāhi* to evoke an association—initially a phonetic one—with the supreme rulers of the Deccan. The most common designation for the poem's central figure, next to *sivājī* or *sivrāj*, are the epithets referencing him as the son of Shahaji (*sāhi*), including various collocations such as *sāhi ke sivājī* ('Shivaji of Shah[aji]'), *sāhi tanai* and *sāhi suta* ('son of Shah[aji]'), *sāhi ke supūta* ('good son of Shah[aji]'), and *sāhi ko nanda* or *sāhinanda* ('joy/son of Shah[aji]'), like e.g. in VB, vv. 13, 59, 100, 124, 134, 135, 184, 245 or 289. The treatise culminates with the laudatory description: "The Lord of the South, lion and great warrior, son and pollen of Shahaji, Shivaji."¹⁹

Bhūṣaṇ introduces also a new epithet for his patron: *siva sāhi*. On one level, this is a simple compound of the names of the chief and his father. However, as a figure of *śleṣa*, it may also signify a king, or *śāh* who can be identified with the god Shiva. Near the conclusion of the poem, Bhūṣaṇ explicitly declares, "Shiva[ji], son of Shah[aji], you have become the *śāh*" (*sāhitanaī siva sāhi bhaī*, VB, v. 312).

My interpretation of *sāhi* as a marker of royal identification linked to the political domain of the Deccan is further supported by other frequent occurrences of the term in the poem. These instances predominantly serve as vernacular designations for Shivaji's adversaries, such as *edil sāhi* (Adil Shah, the sultan of Bijapur), *sāhi nizām* (Nizam Shah, the sultan of Ahmadnagar), and *sāhi kutub* (Qutb Shah, the sultan of Golconda). In one particular case, the term extends its reference to the north, namely to the Mughal seat of power, when the poet

¹⁹ (...) 'दच्छिन नरेस सरजा सुभट साहिन्द मकरंद सिव' । (VB, v. 289). Apostrophes reproduced as found in Miśra's edition.

alludes to Aurangzeb by calling him *pātsāhi* or *pātsāh* ('emperor').²⁰ Such explicit lexical identifications position Shivaji not only as a ruler equal to the prominent sovereigns of the Deccan but also within the nomenclature characteristic of the Islamic aestheticization of kingship.

On the one hand, the examples of Shivaji's identification cited above may be understood as another instance of transregional Decani royal symbolism, consistent with Stewart Gordon's analysis of the elements constituting the "kingly aura," such as *shamshīr* ('sword'), *chatr* ('[royal] umbrella'), *āftābgīr* ('pear-shaped sunshade'), and *taxt* ('throne')—all couched in Persian (2016: 43). However, given Shivaji's strong brahmin entourage and his explicit claim to Hindu kingship—manifested at the least by his submission to royal consecration according to Hindu rites—these frequent references in how Shivaji is addressed also serve as crucial instruments for elevating him to imperial status and positioning him glamorously among the chiefs aligned around the Mughal centre of power.

The north is never explicitly identified as a region with which Shivaji associates himself, nor as a significant target of his territorial ambitions; however, symbolic claims to the northern direction are boldly articulated. Shivaji is consistently portrayed as an ideal warrior, and his purported humble origins align his biography with those of many Rajput chiefs, whose elevated status similarly stemmed from ambition and achievements attained during their lifetimes.²¹

A notable and frequently discussed feature of the treatise—often viewed as controversial by scholars of conventional Hindi literary histories—is its heavily Persianate vocabulary. The incorporation of Persianate terms, particularly those related to the discourse of power,

²⁰ Or, at times, the poet ridicules the emperor with a vernacular pun on his name—*avarāṅga sāhi* (also *sāh* and *sāhī* in VB, vv. 58, 240, 242, 325), where the phonetic play of *avarāṅga* implies a man with feeble limbs. The epithet *avarāṅga* becomes one of the most common terms used to denote Aurangzeb in the poem.

²¹ On achieving the status of Rajput and for contradiction to the stereotypical views—common within the social history of India—that the Rajput-ness could be only ascribed by birth, see e.g., Kolff 1990: 54–74; Asopa 1999: 40–52; Chatopadhyay 2001: 161–191 and Szyszko 2011.

military affairs, and administration, has been documented in earlier texts, as Busch's study on Man Singh of Amer and Akbar demonstrates. *Śivrajbhūṣan* is richly infused with Persian and Arabic words, not only evident in numerous *śleṣa* instances where double meanings are constructed through interplay between Hindi/Sanskrit and Persian/Arabic registers (cf. Borek 2020). While such Persianate vocabulary is uncommon within the broader courtly Braj Bhasha literary culture, Busch's case study suggests that this linguistic blending often appears in poetry focused on Rajput relations with the Mughal court (cf. Busch 2012).

Historico-literary context of the enterprise

Without any earlier occurrences of Braj Bhasha in the Deccan, the project of integrating Braj courtly literary culture into the Deccani world of aesthetic cultivation might mistakenly appear as a radical or experimental disruption of the existing linguistic ecology. However, the available evidence suggests that Shivaji's decision to engage Bhūṣan was not a risky or unprecedented endeavour. The introduction of ornate Braj poetry into the Deccan dates back at least a decade earlier. Studies in literary and social history already reveal a tradition of composing Braj Bhasha works within Shivaji's own lineage.²² As Sumit Guha's study shows, the poet Jayrām Piṇḍye worked for Shahaji during his tenure as a general of Adil Shah. Jayrām's example is significant for two reasons. First, it demonstrates how poets circulated tales of Shahaji's generosity, thereby attracting other poets to the Bijapuri court on their journey to the north. Second, it provides early evidence of Braj being used alongside eleven other languages in the multilingual *Rādhāmādhavavilāsacampū*, composed by Jayrām in a courtly setting (Guha 2011: 58–59).

²² This field still awaits a deeper study. However, Kṛṣṇa Divākara (1970) offers an extensive overview on poets composing in "various [linguistic] forms of Hindi" (Divākara 1970: 1) who were patronized by the Bhosle rulers, including Shivaji and his father Shahaji. For more on the fashion of patronizing multiple literary languages at one court, see e.g., Bangha 2011.

Another telling example is that of a prominent *paṇḍit kavi* ('learned poet') Cintāmaṇi, Bhūṣaṇ's elder brother, who was "extensively patronized by Indo-Muslim nobility in both the Deccan and the north, and possibly by Emperor Shah Jahan himself" (Busch 2011: 187). Cintāmaṇi's patronage under Rudrashah Solanki of Citrakūṭ, a minor Rajput ruler, is particularly illustrative of the pragmatic and aesthetic deployment of Braj courtly literary culture, or Braj Bhasha itself. An early manuscript (vs 1812, i.e. 1756 CE) of a text known under various titles, such as *Chandalatā*, *Chandovicār*, or *Bhāṣāpiṅgal* (composed c. 1662–1664, *Vernacular Prosody*),²³ leaves little doubt that it was composed for Shahaji. Notably, from the very first stanza, the brahmin poet blesses his patron, using the vernacular form of his name, *sāhi*.²⁴ Internal evidence further supports this identification: the third stanza presents Shahaji as the pollen (*makrand*) of the Bhosle family, already identified as belonging to the Solar lineage (*sūrajvaṁsi*).²⁵ It is crucial to note that the attribution of Solar lineage to the Bhosle family did not originate with Gāgā Bhaṭṭ's Sanskrit work, often credited with fabricating Shivaji's genealogy, but was already present in the Braj literary tradition. Bhūṣaṇ's contribution to this lineage discourse was—as already mentioned—to link the Bhosles explicitly with the Rajput Sisodia clan, further reinforcing their noble status.²⁶

Cintāmaṇi's treatise on metrics is a highly ornate example of a theoretical work by a *paṇḍit kavi* whose presence at the Bijapuri court likely aimed to familiarize the audience with the emerging literary style. This effort represents a historically significant introduction of both Braj literature and, importantly, the authoritative precedent of a leader claiming his *sūrajvaṁsī* (*sūrajvaṁsi* in Bhūṣaṇ's idiolect)

²³ My thoughts go to the late Allison Busch who shared with me the complete digital copy of this manuscript.

²⁴ (...) चिंतामनि कवि साहि कौं देत असीस (CV, v. 1; word division mine).

²⁵ सूरजवंसि भुसिला लसत साहि मकरंद (...) (CV, v. 3; word division mine).

²⁶ Despite some controversies and suppositions that this poetical treatise could have come into existence through the patronage of Makrand Shah of Nagpur, Divākār convincingly argues that *Bhāṣāpiṅgal* has been composed at Shahaji's court, before his death in January 1664 (1970: 35–37).

descent to appeal to Hindu counterparts and potential allies. In other words, this can be read as a conscious exercise that was deliberately exploited a decade later when the project of establishing a new Hindu kingdom reached its climax. Moreover, the adaptation of the literary culture shared by Hindu gentry serving the Mughal empire was also a means to aestheticize the emerging regional power, thereby addressing the geopolitical dynamics of the northern subcontinent.

What does it mean to be a Rajput?

Until this point, I have sought to interpret and contextualize the poetic image of Shivaji as constructed to position him within a Rajput milieu. It is important to clarify that I do not suggest Bhūṣaṇ relied on factual or genealogical evidence when ascribing Shivaji's lineage to the Rajput Sisodia clan. Rather, this specific linkage should be understood as an element of the discursive construction of identity—an identity shared with the Rajputs and, as the poem's context makes clear, with Bhūṣaṇ's intended audience and Shivaji's potential allies.

One may rightly question the credibility of such a construction: if Rajput identity were strictly a matter of birth, this portrayal would not have been convincing at all. My argumentation implies that the understanding of Rajput identity in the 17th century (cf. Saran and Ziegler 2001.1: 66) was considerably more fluid and expansive—not only for Bhūṣaṇ and his literary circle but more broadly. This assumption is not novel, nor solely derived from my reading of *Śivrājbhūṣaṇ*, as it seeks support in Kolff's seminal study on shifting identities of militarised peasantry of North India. Kolff posits a compelling hypothesis that identities such as Rajput, Sayyid, or Pathan were, at times, subject to choice and negotiation, with historical precedents of individuals transitioning between them (1990).²⁷

²⁷ Chattopadhyaya's study justifies similar quests for discursive nature of Rajput identity, by suggesting that "(...) detailed genealogies of ruling clans, which came to be formulated only in the period of change from feudatory to independent status, can hardly be extrapolated for an assessment of actual origin, although some

In certain contexts, warrior identities—despite divergent values and ethos—afforded a degree of social mobility. For example, during Akbar's reign, some groups claiming Sayyid descent were regarded as rustic and their lineage doubted; yet, by Jahangir's time, bravery could serve as sufficient proof of Sayyid status, irrespective of birth. Kolff summarizes this dynamic succinctly in *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy*, noting that “though by definition ‘Sayyid’ was an identity that could be had by birth only, in actual practice it could be acquired by effort or even by luck” (*ibid.*: 15). In a similar manner, Kolff suggests that “Afghans and Rajputs were not really exclusive or even distinct identities” (*ibid.*: 57). Stephen Fuchs had already observed that Hindu military castes converting to Islam could gain admittance into Pathan ranks, often through clan adoption processes analogous to how some wealthy “aboriginals” were assimilated into Rajput castes (1973: 82).

Taken together, these insights emphasize that identities—especially those tied to warrior status—were neither rigid nor solely based on lineage but were actively constructed, performed, and strategically employed in historical contexts such as that of Shivaji.

This may seem quite heretical thing to say, but I suggest that, according to the ways of the North Indian military labour market, in the pre-Mughal period, ‘Afghan’ as ‘Rajput’ were soldiers’ identities rather than ethnic or genealogical denotations. It was merely to register membership of the war-band they had decided to join that, until quite late on, Indian soldiers were known by such names. (Kolff 1990: 57–58)

Apparently surprised by these findings, Kolff allows us to interpret Shivaji's efforts to claim Rajput identity as a pragmatic strategy aimed at aligning with the dynamics of the military labour market and with the literary aesthetization of a ruler. However, Kolff simultaneously proposes that the identity construction—which is also evident in

parts of such genealogies may have been based on genuine tradition” (2001: 174). Chattopadhyaya summarized clearly that “Rajputization was a process of social mobility” (*ibid.*: 185).

Bhūṣaṇ's poem—was not merely discursive or persuasive in intent. From his perspective, Bhūṣaṇ may have been articulating his patron's genuine claim to a specific warrior identity, one that could convince other Rajputs that Shivaji either shared or was willing to share their ethos and values.

Importantly, Kolff's analysis also highlights the military labour market as "a major generator of socio-religious identities" (*ibid.*: 58). He further notes that "often the Rajput to Afghan change—and, one may add, the peasant to Rajput change—was a similar kind of affair indicating the pervading impact of soldiering traditions on North Indian social history" (*ibid.*). This suggests that the fluidity of identity was a common phenomenon shaped by the socio-political realities of soldiering, rather than mere rhetorical construction.

Conclusion

The figure of Shivaji Bhosle is a focal point for narratives of Hindu or Maratha identity in modern Indian historiography. However, my reading of *Śivrājbhūṣaṇ* is an attempt to reveal a far more layered construction of identity, more attuned to the cultural, geopolitical, and literary dynamics of early modern South Asia. Commissioned at a critical moment preceding Shivaji's royal consecration, the text does not merely reaffirm prevailing notions of Hindu kingship; rather, it performs a sophisticated act of political self-fashioning and literary aesthetization that integrates Shivaji into two additional frameworks of identity.

The adoption of Braj Bhasha as a literary medium in a region historically dominated by Dakani and Persianate literary cultures was not a rupture but a calculated cultural intervention. This intervention facilitated Shivaji's participation in an increasingly pan-Indian courtly idiom—rooted in Mughal-Rajput aesthetic practices—while simultaneously asserting the distinctiveness of his Deccani claims. Through Bhūṣaṇ's lexical and rhetorical strategies, Shivaji is constructed both as a legitimate heir to regional power and as a credible participant

in the martial aristocracy that had already shaped imperial politics across North India.

The Rajput identity constructed in *Śivrājbhūṣaṇ* is not genealogically fixed but discursively and performatively constituted, as we could see in a rather superficial reference to the specific clan of Sisodias. Following Kolff's thesis on the fluidity of military identities in early modern India, the Rajput traits ascribed to Shivaji emerge not as an invention but as a persuasive alignment with the ethos of a warrior élite which was not solely limited to Rajasthan. In this sense, the poem's articulation of identity mirrors the composite and mobile nature of identity formation in the period.

The case informs our knowledge on the terms through which early modern South Asian rulers fashioned legitimacy. Far from being bound by rigid categories of religious or ethnic affiliation, such identities were pragmatically crafted across literary and political domains. In this light, Shivaji's engagement with Braj Bhasha courtly culture was a strategic reconfiguration of aesthetic capital—an effort to shape new alliances, assert sovereignty, and inscribe his own persona within a broader transregional narrative of power.

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