Cracow Indological Studies
Vol. XXVII, No. 2 (2025), pp. 103–122
https://doi.org/10.12797/CIS.27.2025.02.06

Heidi Pauwels
hpauwels@uw.edu
(University of Washington, Seattle)

The Performativity of Rajput Kingship
Mobilizing Mood and Myth in Kishangarhi Paintings and Poetry[1]

ABSTRACT: This paper looks at the performativity of Rajput kingship, taking up the case study of the Rathor house of Kishangarh. Studying historical cases of legitimation and illegitimation from the first half of the 18th century, it argues that affect and emotions played an important role in the process. Specifically, different players challenged and asserted power positions through multi-medial mobilization of "myth" integrated with evocation of different moods against the background of sacred time and space. In this process, gender played an important role, as female divinities and palace women were involved both as objects in the males' royal displays, but also with room for an agency of their own.

KEYWORDS: Mahabharata, masculinity, palace women, Rajput painting, Ramayana

---

[1] This paper was first presented at the "Women at the Court" conference organized in December 2023 at University of Lausanne by Nadia Cattoni and Melina Gravier. I am grateful to the organizers and the audience for their inspirational work, for stimulating discussions and insightful comments. The data with which I am working are findings from my monograph (Pauwels 2023), which was made possible by grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, AIIS and NEH.

Introduction. Power imaginaries at court

Pathbreaking work with regard to early modern kingship in England has set the stage for investigating historical connections between authority and image making (culminating perhaps in Sharpe 2009). In India too, interrelation of painting, religious imagery, and public performances in legitimizing rule has been investigated, in diverse contexts, from the Rajput court of Kota (Peabody 2003) to South India (Branfoot 2018). Time and place are important considerations. Legitimation and, importantly, illegitimation of power take place in intertwined geographies of court, shrine, temple, as well as the bazar. Festivals as well as ordinary time provide opportunity for events where power is staged in rituals and processions to highlight interconnections of divine and cosmic order. Inspiring recent studies have highlighted the role of affect in the performativity of kingship by means of the creation of moods through music at the Mughal court (Schofield 2024) and the Avadh court (Williams 2023), and with special attention to emotion production in interrelating painting and the built environment in Mewar (Khera 2020).

This paper seeks to extend those insights with focus on power imaginaries of the lesser-studied principality of Kishangarh in the first half of the 18th century. It makes for a fascinating case study because of its prolific cultural output, including in painting and poetry. This lends itself well to a methodology of synoptic reading (Pauwels 2019) that involves detecting visual interocular as well as interaural or intertextual connections (Pauwels 2008: 25). The findings confirm that preserving and establishing power hegemony is a dialectic process, not just one-way ideological indoctrination. The interchange includes modeling how the intended audience can participate and coopting key players in doing so. In that regard, this paper will foreground the often-neglected role of women. I argue that palace women's contributions can matter crucially, both when co-opted as objects in power imaginaries of rulers, but also as agents themselves, and that such is the case for both royal women and performers at court.

Royalty in Radha-Krishna's world

Since the mid-17th century, the Rathor principality of Kishangarh was ruled from Rūpnagar, which was named after its founder Rup Singh (r. 1644–1658). Rup Singh's grandson Raj Singh was the ruler through most of the first half of the 18th century (r. 1706–1748). He was close to Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah (r. 1707–1712), his relative by marriage, and later to Muhammad Shah (r. 1719–1748). Raj Singh is perhaps best known for his cosmopolitan ambitions that led him in the cultural realm to commission paintings from Mughal atelier painters who would portray him as a player at the Mughal court.[2] However, there was another aspect to Raj Singh's image-making, one that catapulted him into a yet higher realm, the divine world of Krishna devotion. In contrast to the male-dominated Mughal-style portraits, here the landscape was dominated by a feminine element. These paintings were executed by the glamorous painter Bhavānīdās, who originally worked for the Mughal atelier, but engages here in a more complex style of image making. What was at stake here?

Attributed to Bhavānīdās is a set of paintings from c. 1730 that foreground besides Krishna one of his queens, Rukmini.[3] Notable among those is *Rukmini Garlands Krishna* which portrays the arrival of Krishna's wedding procession (*barāt*) at the residence of the bride, who leans over the balcony to welcome him with a garland (Haidar 2011a: 533, 543: fig. 11). Remarkably, it features portraits of the members of the royal family as Rukmini's family, welcoming Krishna as their new son-in-law. Navina Haidar, curator at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, has noted that this is remarkable

---

2 One famous group portrait *Emperor Muhammad Shah with Courtiers and Rāj Singh of Kishangarh* (published Pauwels 2015: 66, plate 1) is attributed to Bhavānīdās' son, Dalcand, who first worked in Muhammad Shah's atelier side by side with Citarman II, then for Abhai Singh in Jodhpur, and eventually around 1727 to Kishangarh (McInerney 2011).

3 Haidar considers it possible that the Rukmini paintings belong to the same series, since they are roughly of the same dimensions, even though they differ stylistically (1995: 112–123, n. 41–42).

because the Puranic story actually features an abduction of the higher-class young lady, though in the classical *Bhāgavata purāṇa* version, this is presented as requested by the princess herself, so it becomes more of an elopement (*ibid.*: 543–544). Even there, the bold abductor Krishna has to fight first the groom she was originally engaged to, and then her family, in particular her brother, before carrying her off to his capital Dwarka where he weds her properly. This Kishangarhi painting's arrival of the groom on his horse at the bride's home as customary for arranged weddings elides completely that violent aspect. The mood is entirely romantic (*śṛṅgāra*). What type of royal image-making is going on? Is the suggestion that Rūpnagar is a second Dwarka?

In line with a synoptic approach, it may be useful to look for matching textual production. The Rukmini paintings may have been intended to illustrate a work, *Rukmiṇī-vivāh*, authored by Raj Singh himself (Khan 1974: 30).[4] This raises the question why that story of elopement figured so importantly at the court. Could it be related to the famous incident of 1660 involving the princess Carumatī, either a sister or aunt of Raj Singh? Her marriage to Aurangzeb was under negotiation, when she, like Rukmini, took the initiative to invite someone else to marry her instead. In this case it was Raj Singh of Mewar and the 1660 event is well-documented in Mewar sources, one of which provides her letter in which she suggests that the king would be following in Krishna's footsteps (as related in the *Rāj-vilās: Hari jyõ*, 'like Hari').[5] To compensate Aurangzeb, a marriage was organized for another Kishangarhi woman with one of Aurangzeb's sons, the later emperor Bahadur Shah. The matter may well have received renewed attention early in the 18th century when Amar Singh II of Mewar arranged marriages of his sister and daughter in Jodhpur and Jaipur on condition "that they would not now marry their daughters to the *Turk*s under any

[4] This has not been published, but in a manuscript of *śrī mahārāj siṅgh jī kī vānī*, preserved in the Kishangarh Durbar Library, *peṭī* 7 no. 158, *Rukamnī-haran* starts on fol. 144v (श्री महाराज सहिब श्री राज सिहजी कित रुकमनी हरन लिख्यते दोहा).

[5] See Sharma 1962: 139–140. The quote from Man Kavi's *Rāj-vilās* is canto 7, v. 31.

circumstances."[6] In such circumstances, Raj Singh may have sought to stress the Mewar, and deemphasize the Mughal match, at least for an audience of his Rajput peers. While its exact significance remains unclear, in both painting and poetry Krishna's wedding to Rukmini looms large. Raj Singh was keen on portraying the Kishangarhi royal family as Krishna's welcoming in-laws, integrated in the mythological scene of Rukmini's wedding.

Raj Singh's second wife, known by her *patronimicum* as the Bāṅkāvatī Queen also subscribed to the *imaginaire* of royalty painted/written into Krishna's world. Her guru was Vrindāvandev Ācārya, abbot of the seat of Krishna devotion of the Nimbārkan lineage in nearby Salemabād, who had brokered this second marriage of Raj Singh's. He is known to have visited Rūpnagar by invitation of the queen. One such visit in 1725 was documented in detail in the account books as lasting for several months (Śaraṇ 1966: 14). One aspect of the ceremonial functions he carried out involved the recitation of *Bhāgavata purāṇa,* the Sanskrit scripture of Krishna devotion. Such reciters are called *śukadeva* after the narrator of that scripture. There is a painting *Śukadeva Muni Comes to Kishangarh and Is Received by All Inhabitants* (Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin SMB 47.113; Pauwels 2023: 83), which shows not just a delegation of the king and courtiers, but also of the queen and her ladies ecstatically receiving the holy man, depicted as a long-haired naked ascetic.[7] Whether or not the painting was sponsored by the queen herself, it commemorates the participation of the court ladies in the holy man's visit in a mood of ecstatic devotion (*bhakti*). This artwork too resonates with Kishangarh-produced poetry. The queen, under the pen name Brajdāsī, later undertook to translate *Bhāgavata purāṇa* in the vernacular, a task she completed in 1755. In the work itself, *Brajdāsī bhāgavat*, she credited her guru Vrindāvandev Ācārya as her inspiration (see Śarmā 1996). In her composition, the queen wrote herself into Krishna's world as a *gopī* taking part in

[6] Sreenivasan 2004: 63, on the basis of *Vīr vinod*, see Śyāmaldās 2007 [1886]: 2.1: 437.

[7] The image can be viewed via Artstor. For reference, see Museum für Asiatische Kunst in the bibliography.

the story (Horstmann 2018: 131). This is on a par with the world view of Krishna devotion that encourages devotees to imagine themselves as participating in Krishna's world. However, it is not just an esoteric part of personal worship, but, as is clear from the paintings, integrated with one's public persona. Again we can see interocular and interaural resonance of court productions, this time by the queen.

Several other Kishangarhi paintings portray the sage Śukadeva Muṇi preaching to a mythical audience, which consists of courtiers as well as ascetics. The individual faces seem life-like, to the point that one wonders whether they were portraits meant to be recognized as actual courtiers and ascetics partaking in the event. The court regularly organized such recitation of *Bhāgavata purāṇa*, one of which is documented to have taken place during the rainy season of 1742. The organizer, one of Raj Singh's sons, Sawant Singh, commemorated the occasion with *Śrīmad-bhāgavata-pārāyaṇa-vidhi-prakāśa* (BhPVP), an anthology of vernacular poetry, in which he included both his own and that of his courtiers. These poems involved the praise of the reciter, addressed as *śukadeva*. Also included in this anthology is poetry by Sawant Singh's concubine (*pāsbān*), a court singer known as Banīṭhanī, who wrote under the pen name Rasikbihārī. She wrote a *savaiyā* for the occasion:

The moment he started to recite, the joy of *bhajan* spread all around,
so it did.
The nectar of the story of Rasikendra Bihārī, he gave to all to drink,
so he did.
Even those uninitiated left satisfied, but ecstasy overtook those truly tuned in,
so it did.
Eyes brimming with tears, our heart flew from our grip, drawn straight to Him,
so it's gone.[8]

[8] कीनौं उचार जिही छिन मैं भजानंद आनंद छयो सु छयो हैं ।
श्री रसिकेंद्र बिहारी जु की कथा आसव प्याय दयो सु दयो हैं ।
जे हे अभावकी तेई गये छकि भावक रंग ठयो सु ठयो हैं ।
लोचन भीज रहे सु रहे मन हाथ तैं रीझ गयो सु गयो हैं ।। (BhPVP 24; Gupta 1965: 2.418).

We see here the concubine taking poetic agency, and being publicly acknowledged as contributing to the royalty-sponsored devotional gathering, where the mythical and the courtly mingle and the sentiment is ecstatic devotion. It is tempting to correlate this historical occasion with one of the *Śukadeva* paintings that shows also ladies in the audience, *Śukadeva Reciting the Bhāgavata-purāṇa to King Parīkṣit/Sāvant Singh* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, M.71.49.2, LACMA henceforth; see Pauwels 2015: 186–187, plate 15). Again, performance of kingship included sound and image for the sake of integrating the Rajput world into Krishna's realm.

Raj Singh's sons, the next generation, followed in their father's footsteps. Their claims to the throne are made visible in portraiture in the traditional way through equestrian portraits, or via the suggestion of nomination by the father, but also with reference to mythology. Fateh Singh was the first to be groomed as crown prince. The inscription on his equestrian portrait states "picture of young maharaja, lord Fateh Singh, Rajasthan, Rupnagar" (*tasvīr mahārāj kuṁvār śrī fateh siṅghjī kī rājasthān rūp nagār*).[9] Elsewhere the prince is shown in official audience with his father (Pauwels 2017: 19, fig. 1.2). Yet, there is also evidence of the prince's portrayal as participating in Krishna's world. Thus, a painting of a prince among cowherds surrounding Radha and Krishna is by archival record of 1827 related to Fateh Singh. The painting is named *Tāmbūl sevā* (*Serving of betel*) and its tenor is of servility or *dāsya bhāva* (Delhi National Museum; Mathur 2000: 46–47, plate 5). Fateh Singh though never was crowned as he predeceased his father. His talented brother Sawant Singh became the new crown prince. His equestrian portrait, attributed to Sītārām, immediately shows a different type of engagement: Sawant Singh himself is portrayed with a slight bluish color, as if he is not just participating in Krishna's world, not just a servile devotee, but identified with God himself (LACMA)!

[9] Picture attributed to Dalcand (The British Museum).

Father-son dialogue in painting

Sawant Singh and his father Raj Singh sponsored paintings that seem to respond to one another. Several interocular references indicate they were interrelated. What conversation was taking place through the medium of these paintings? I submit that what was playing out in these portraits constituted a form of competition between father and son around different styles of rulership. I will analyze below two sets of paintings, one related to sponsorship of particular religious images, the other of visions of Krishna's divinity and how a ruler embodies that.

Set 1. Looking up to the deity

The first set is of garden portraits, both from the hand of Bhavānīdās. The father is identified in inscription that gives the painting its title as *Raj Singh Approaching a Temple* (c. 1725–1730). The second is a decade or two later (1745) and only attributed to Bhavānīdās, but it is a strikingly similar portrait of the son, *Sāvant Singh in a Garden* (preserved in the Sackler Museum at Harvard, Cambridge). The parallels in composition, architecture, body position, costume, and stylistic detail prompted Haidar to juxtapose them (2011a: 533–534 and 540: fig. 9b). This is unlikely to be arbitrary. One would surmise that the interocular references were intended by the painter and deliberately commissioned by his patrons. What is going on here?

Both father and son are portrayed strolling in a garden, looking up to a palace tower. The inscription on the father's portrait indicates that the king is approaching the temple, gazing up to the image of Krishna (Śrījī), which can be distinguished in the tower.[10] This could be a visual reference to the king's signature in his poetry, where he would refer to his deity as Nagadhara ('Mountain-holder'), one of the epithets of Krishna (Nāgarīdās' *Pad-muktāvalī* 272–273 in Gupta 1965: 325–326).

[10] The Hindi inscription reads: श्रीजी द्वार पधारा है, "approached the temple of Śrījī" (Haidar 2011a: 540: fig. 8: 532).

The son, Sawant Singh, by contrast, is looking up to a lady behind the screen in the cupola and he would sign his poetry, with his religious initiation name, Nāgarīdās ('servant of Nāgarī') referring to one of the epithets of Radha, thus stressing the son's preferential devotion for the goddess. One can see here another interocular reference, to a painting also featuring a lady with a garland under a cupola, though not behind a screen, namely the aforementioned *Rukmini Garlands Krishna* (also attributed to Bhavānīdās). In that case looking up to her was Krishna himself, her groom approaching on horseback, and both father and son were portrayed in that painting in subordinate roles. This clever interocular double referencing was probably enjoyed by both father and son. It hints at differences in religious preference, the father posing more humbly in this portrait of piety, whereas the son emphasizes the romantic (*śṛṅgāra*) and shows a streak of self-promotion as Krishna himself. It should be said though that a more mundane explanation identifies the lady behind the screen not necessarily with Radha, but with Sawant Singh's aforementioned mistress Banī-ṭhanī.

Set 2. Becoming Krishna: attracting gopīs

To be sure, Raj Singh had preceded his son in poses evoking Krishna himself in a romantic (*śṛṅgāra*) context. An inscription identified him as a blue Krishna playing Holi with several *gopī*s in *Raja Raj Singh of Kishangarh Celebrating the Holi Festival* (estimated to date from the 1725–1730 period, Sven Gahlin, London).[11] The Holi motif is echoed in a probably slightly later *Krishna Celebrates Holi with Radha and the Gopis*, attributed to Nihālcand (preserved in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, MFA).[12] Krishna's features in that case show likeness to those of Sawant Singh. Looking for interaural resonances, the identification can be supported with poems by the prince, that allow for ambiguity, for example:

---

[11] Recently sold by Sothebys, see Sotheby's.

[12] The image can be viewed at MFA Boston. On the painter, see Haidar 2011b.

His turban colored with saffron, his face shines with the flame of youth.
On his forehead red with powder, two curls of hair sway playfully.
Brows arched, a soft smile makes its way into the heart, as he wields his amorous glances.
Young girls who gaze at Nāgarīdās have their hearts swept away.[13]

This follows conventions of the genre where the last line of the song contains the signature (*chāp*) by the poet, writing himself into the divine vision described, but usually as a witness to Krishna's divine play (*līlā*). In this case though, the poet's name also stands for Krishna himself, who is after all Radha's greatest servant or devotee.

There is another matching set where royalty is surrounded by admiring women. *Prince Resting After a Hunt* (dated c. 1740; in Collection Gopi Krishna Kanoria, Patna; Pauwels 2023: 110: fig. 3.5) portrays Raj Singh as having laid down his sword, as he is resting near a river, next to the dead buck he has hunted. With his left arm stretched out, he seems to relate his feat to a bevy of admiring ladies, who are gathered there fetching water and bathing. The mood is a combination of the heroic and romantic. Carey Welch noted that the clothes drying on the trees to the right hint at Krishna's famous theft of the clothes of the *gopī*s (*vastraharaṇa*), suggesting a comparison of the king with mischievous Krishna (Welch 1997: 371, plate 249). There is again what seems like a response to this painting in a portrait, *Sawant Singh and Bani Thani in a Mango Grove*. This one too has been attributed, at least for the faces, to Nihālcand (Delhi National Museum; see Pauwels 2023: 98: fig. 3.1). The crown prince's pose is parallel to his father's with his sword resting nearby, but there is no hint of an animal hunt and the *rasa* is entirely romantic. Rather, the barge waiting on the river implies a boating trip (*naukā-vihār*). There is only one lady admiring the prince, though two ladies in the bushes in the background are gossiping, which suggest a clandestine affair. Both hero and heroine

[13] केसरि रंग रंगी पगिया मुख जोबन जोति खुली हैं ।
तैसिय भाल गुलाल लाल अलाकैं जुग झूमि झुली हैं ।।
भौंह कसी मृदु हंसी उर बसी मैंननि सैंन तुली हैं ।
नागरीदास नवल जुवतिन की मनसा देखि डुली हैं ।। (*Horī kī māñjh 1*, Gupta 1965: 2.166).

have a halo around their head, identifying them as Krishna and Radha, indeed, the prince's skin texture is blue. Yet, as the title of the painting indicates, the painting was interpreted as a portrait of Sawant Singh and his mistress (Pauwels 2023: 101–102). If that is the case, one wonders what motivated the prince to commission the portrait. Art historian and Kishangarh courtier Faiyāz 'Alī Khān has surmised that the liaison of the prince with Banī-ṭhanī would have been a case of trespassing on the father's prerogatives, since she was originally an enslaved singer appointed in Raj Singh's queen's retinue. As long as his father was alive, Sawant Singh could not take his stepmother's singer officially as his concubine (Khān 2015: 379). Was the son making here an allusion in the commissioned painting that he wanted only one *gopī* out of the whole harem of ladies available to his father? Or is the chronology of the paintings the other way around? Did the father commission his painting to assert himself as the true master in response to his son's bold suggestion of a liaison with the pretty singer? Whatever may be the case, this seems to be about views of masculinity and kingship. Raj Singh asserts a more heroic masculine, kshatriya-oriented domination in his portrayal of female admiration for the king's hunting exploits. The son presents an alternative, stressing the romantic hero, who can afford to become enthralled without needing to assert dominance. In both cases, women play a major role in asserting triumphant kingship.

Change of guard: from romantic to martial Krishna and Rama in exile

Whereas leadership style between Sawant Singh and his father differed, we can detect a more fundamental shift with the takeover of the kingdom by Sawant Singh's younger brother. At the time of his father's death in 1748, Sawant Singh happened to be in Delhi, which afforded his younger brother Bahadur Singh with the opportunity to usurp the throne. Bahadur Singh commissioned his own portraits in a different style, depicting a smart and scheming persona, as in a c. 1750

depiction of himself with a thick white mustachio in martial pose: *Bahadar Singh Showing off his Skill in Archery* (private collection in Germany; Pauwels 2017: 19: fig. 1.4). In his choice of mythology too, he seems to have favored a different aspect of Krishna, not as the flute-playing cowherd, beloved by women, but rather the martial Krishna of the Mahabharata.

A striking image dating from his reign depicts a famous Mahabharata battle scene. Krishna in anger prepared to kill his grand-uncle Bhishma, who was fighting on the Kaurava side, while Arjuna is prostrate begging him not to do so, as he would break his vow not to fight in the war himself (Delhi National Museum; Mathur 2000: 86–87, n. 25). The stance this blue Krishna dressed in saffron assumes bears a strikingly similarity with that of Sawant Singh as Krishna in saffron playing Holi in the aforementioned painting, to the point one might suspect the same *charba* ('stencil') was used to draw his profile. However, instead of on a palace terrace covered with red powder, Krishna here finds himself on the blood-drenched battlefield, sporting a weapon, the *cakra* ('disc'), in his raised hand. He is confronting not Radha, but a white mustachioed Bhishma, who has drawn his bow and is about to discharge an arrow. This could well be based on the portrait of Bahadur Singh mentioned above. Strikingly, Krishna doesn't loom as large as he did in the Holi painting, he is rather dwarfed by the horse-drawn chariots that confront one another, while in the background the Pandavas wage their war with their Kaurava cousins. Would this mythological confrontation be intended to mirror the Kishangarhi fratricidal war? Was Bahadur Singh making fun of his deposed brother, in a move of "illegitimation"? Or was it possibly intended to sway Sawant Singh, who had marched to attack his usurped hometown, first in alliance with Jaipur, then with the Marathas. Whatever the case may have been, eventually Sawant Singh's son with the help of the latter would reconquer part of the kingdom and be installed as king there (Pauwels 2017: 18–25)?

Recently, another Mahabharata war-themed painting has surfaced that seems to belong to this same series, with a similar sky over rolling hills in which miniature soldiers lay slaughtered with birds of prey

circling over them. In the foreground Bhishma on a bed of arrows delivers his final sermon, surrounded by the Pandavas and Krishna, as well as ascetics of various kinds. This evokes the Śukadeva Muṇi paintings introduced above. Actually, one of the ascetics bears striking resemblance to the long-haired Nimbārkan sage visiting Kishangarh in the portrait that featured also the palace ladies welcoming him. Presiding over the scene is a venerable figure with white mustache, presumably Yudhishthira, whose face bears resemblance to Bahadur Singh's.[14] What exactly the new ruler intended when commissioning this series remains unclear, but the choice to shift Krishna imagery from romantic to martial scenes seems quite apt to make his own bid for legitimacy.

How did Sawant Singh respond to these moves of his brother to "illegitimize" him? He sought refuge in Krishna's Braj, where he settled in 1752, as can be deduced on the basis of his 1753 auto-biographical pilgrimage account, *Tīrthānand* (Pauwels 2017: 26–28). A painting of him dressed in saffron like an ascetic, has been interpreted as fitting a retirement scenario in the Kishangarhi mansion in Vrindaban, now called Nāgarī Kuñj. He is portrayed as engaged in recitation of sacred scripture in front of a fountain, but he is not alone. Several women figure in the background, one of whom, also in saffron, approaches him with a garland. It has been surmised that this is Banī-ṭhanī, as she accompanied him in his exile, and both their *samādhi*s are preserved near one another, adjacent to Nāgarī Kuñj (*ibid*.: 211–216).

Nāgarīdās continued composing Krishna devotional poems, but he also turned to the other great epic, Ramayana. In 1749 he compiled an anthology of verses, *Rām-carit-mālā*, not coincidentally as he found himself in exile in a Ramayana-like scenario with his younger brother on the throne. Yet, his retelling paid less attention to the scheming against Rama and the hardships of *ban-vās* or 'exile in the forest,' than to his loving relationship with Sita and with his brother Bharata, resulting in his ultimate triumphant return to Ayodhya. For this work,

[14] I have not been able to find the current whereabouts of the painting, but it can be viewed at a commercial websites (Pixels; Fine Art America).

Nāgarīdās claimed inspiration from visiting the sacred site of Galtā, a Rāmānandī monastery near Jaipur (*ibid*.: 82–83 and 162–196).

This too is echoed in the visual arts. There are several Kishangarhi illustrations of Ramayana. While it is difficult to determine who commissioned them, a painting of Rama and Sita in the forest (Private Collection; Okada et al. 2011: 148–149) looks conspicuously like the reverse image of the aforementioned Nāgarī Kuñj image. The Vrindaban mansion has given way to the jungle, and the fountain has grown into a waterfall. Here Rama is depicted as engaged in meditation with his sword and shield laid down nearby, like Krishna's in the mango grove image. Perhaps this is based off the same *charba.* Sita is depicted in the same pose as the *tulsī* plant, worshiping lady in the Nāgarī Kuñj image, only here she is positioned as walking away from Rama rather than towards him. She is instead walking towards the peacocks to feed them, reminiscent of the same bird descending into the courtyard of Nāgarī Kuñj. There are more Ramayana related paintings, including one of Bharata welcoming Rama back in Ayodhya attributed to Sītārām (c. 1780, formerly Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Kolkata; Okada et al. 2011: 7). Was this Sawant Singh's vision of a future reconciliation? It seems then that while his brother turned to martial fratricidal Mahabharata, Sawant Singh revisited fraternal harmony of Ramayana.

Did art follow life or the other way around? Eventually, life followed the scenario drawn in art: in 1756, the brothers agreed on a reconciliation contract, brokered by the Nimbārkan abbot. This involved certifying the split of the kingdom with Kishangarh remaining in Bahadur Singh's hands, while Sawant Singh's son ruled from Rūpnagar. Arguably their stepmother, the Bāṅkavatī queen also played a role here. She had been composing her *Brajdāsī bhāgavatam* with the express aim of ending the family struggles (*gṛhakalaha*), and the work was concluded exactly in this period. While authoring a translation may not seem a significant political intervention, it surely bought her some prestige and standing. She ended up playing a role in the eventual reunion of the kingdom after the death of Sawant Singh's son.

Un-making Krishna-Radha

How did these visions of divine kingship fare with posterity? There is a *Portrait of Maharaja Savant Singh with Consort, Bani Thani* (preserved in The Cleveland Museum of Art with a composition remarkably similar to the mango grove one of Sawant Singh and Banī-ṭhanī as Krishna and Radha (Pauwels 2017: 4). However, there are also significant differences between the two images: for one, the prince's skin color is not blue, further, only he has a halo, but not his consort. In fact, the lady looks rather like a servant, as she brings the wine flask and cup. She is not comfortably seated sharing the carpet with the patron, rather kneeling on part of it to serve him. In the background too there are changes: the observers of a secret rendez-vous have turned into ordinary domestic servants bringing delicacies for the prince to enjoy. All women look alike with the distinctive Kishangarhi profile, that was reserved only for the concubine in the mango grove image. Likely this was a later image, perhaps deliberately downplaying the earlier associations of Sawant Singh with divinity. At the same time, the extra-ordinary liaison with Banī-ṭhanī is reduced to a master-servant relationship.

A further recasting can be seen at work in a lithograph of Nāgarīdās's works by the Kishangarh court towards the end of the 19th century (Gauḍ 1898). In this period under colonial rule, the king, Shardul Singh, was at pains to assert his authority as one of Hindu orthodox kingship (*sanātana dharma*) at the same time as an enlightened westernized one. The scholar Bābū Rādhākṛṣṇa Dās from the Nāgarīpracāriṇī Sabhā was engaged to write the scholarly foreword. The essay sought to include Nāgarīdās into the canon of Hindi bhakti poetry as it was being established at the time, but had little patience for Banī-ṭhanī and her own work. Dās dismissed her as at best the author of a few seasonal Holi songs.[15] The courtier who composed the bulk of the devotional retelling of Kishangarh history did not even mention

[15] This notwithstanding the fact that the edition of Nāgarīdās's works has a little appendix with works by Rasikbihārī that her patron had included in his anthologies.

her, but exalted the queen Brajdāsī as a devout *pativratā.* Both women's literary contributions are passed over in silence. Tellingly, the portrait of Nāgarīdās provided in the lithograph was based on the Nāgarī Kuñj image *sans* the ladies. Women were literally cut out of the picture, foregrounding solely the ascetic devout prince. Even as he became included among the stars of Hindi literature, Nāgarīdās was cut off from his networks, lost his significant others, and was isolated as a singular genius, aloof from the mundane world. Such was the result of a process of unmaking the Krishna-Radha associations.

Conclusions

Geographies of power are created through courtly cultural production that evolves over time in relation to gendered agency and mythology in accordance with changing political needs. Like other Rajput states, the Kishangarh court produced varied cultural output, including painting and poetry sung to music that figured in the performativity of their power. What stands out in the Kishangarhi case is the close correlation between this royal family's compositions of their own poetry and the paintings they commissioned. This affords intriguing views in the way they managed the perception of their kingship. Methodologically, the approach to reveal this involves a synoptic approach that pays close attention to interocularity and interaurality of visual and musical expressions of kingship.

During the first half of the 18th century, Raj Singh as well as his sons sought legitimation of their fitness to rule with reference to Krishna mythology through performativity. They wrote themselves into different Krishna *līlā*s celebrating different moods of kingship. One prince positioned himself as servant of the divine pair, assisting in the divine play, in a mood of humble devotion (*bhakti*). Another prince preferred the romantic mood (*śṛṅgāra*) and boldly moved into depicting himself as Krishna. Strikingly, women were foregrounded in the celebration of the ruler's masculinity and power, both as object and subject. This included the way Krishna's consorts, in particular the

goddess Radha, were portrayed as garlanding and adoring the rulers. One notable change is that depiction of *gopī* admiration for Raj Singh shifted to "Radha rules" for one of his sons, Sawant Singh, whose pen name was after all Nāgarīdās.

However, women were not just objects. Flesh and blood women at court also played roles as subjects in legitimation projects of their own. Thus, Raj Singh's Bāṅkāvatī queen and Sawant Singh's *pāsbān* would each create poetry where, like their men, they saw themselves partaking in the divine world, carving out positions of their own design. Mid-century, as political leadership went through transition and conflict, mythological scenarios changed, shifting from romantic exploits of Krishna to the martial epics: the fratricidal Mahabharata for the usurper brother Bahadur Singh, and the exile story of Ramayana for the displaced Sawant Singh. Eventually, in the lithograph produced during the colonial period, the women, especially the concubine, were considered insignificant to how these kings were remembered by their descendants. They were literally cut out of the visual picture. But their influence in poetry endures.

References

Branfoot, C. 2018. *Heroic Rulers and Devoted Servants: Performing Kingship in the Tamil Temple*. In: C. Branfoot (ed.). *Portraiture in South Asia since the Mughals: Art, Representation and History.* London–New York: I. B. Tauris: 165–198. http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350987579.ch-007.

Gauḍ, K. (ed.). 1898. *Nāgara-samuccayaḥ.* Mumbaī: Jñānsāgar.

Gupta, K. 1965. *Nāgarīdās*, 2 vols. Kāśī: Nāgarīpracāriṇī Sabhā.

Haidar, N. N. 1995. *The Kishangarh School of Painting c. 1680–1850*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Oxford: Oxford University.

——. 2011a. Bhavanidas. In: *Artibus Asiae. Supplementum*, 48: 531–546.

——. 2011b. Nihal Chand. In: *Artibus Asiae. Supplementum*, 48: 595–606.

Horstmann, M. 2018. Three Brajbhāṣā Versions of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. In: *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 22(1): 123–174. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11407-018-9222-8.

Khān, F. A. 1974. *Nāgarīdās granthāvalī.* Naī Dillī: Kendrīy Hindī Nideśālay.

——. 2015. *Bhaktavar nāgarīdās.* Ajmer: Abhinav Prakāśan.

Khera, D. 2020. *The Place of Many Moods*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Mathur, V. K. 2000. *Marvels of Kishangarh Paintings from the Collection of the National Museum, New Delhi.* Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan.

McInerney, T. 2011. Dalchand. In: *Artibus Asiae. Supplementum*, 48: 563–578.

Okada, A. T. H. et al. (eds). 2011. *Le Ramayana de Valmiki Illustré par les Miniatures Indiennes du XVe au XIXe siècle.* 7 vols. Paris: Diane de Selliers Éditions.

Pauwels, H. 2008. *The Goddess as Role Model: Sita and Radha in Scripture and on Screen.* New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195369908.001.0001.

——. 2015. *Cultural Exchange in Eighteenth-Century India: Poetry and Paintings from Kishangarh.* Berlin: E. B. Verlag.

——. 2017. *Mobilizing Krishna's World: The Writings of Prince Sāvant Singh of Kishangarh.* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

——. 2019. *Reading Pictures: Towards a Synoptic Reading Combining Textual and Art Historical Approaches*. In: M. Burger and N. Cattoni (eds). *Early Modern India: Literatures and Images, Texts and Languages*. Heidelberg–Berlin: CrossAsia E-Publishing: 39–54.

——. 2023. *The Voice of the Indian Mona Lisa: Gender and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Rajasthan.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009201698.

Peabody, N. 2003. *Hindu Kingship and Polity in Precolonial India.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schofield, K. B. 2024. *Music and Musicians in Late Mughal India: Histories of the Ephemeral, 1748–1858.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sharma, G. N. 1962. *Mewar and the Mughal Emperors, 1526–1707 A.D.* Agra: Shiva Lal Agarwala.

Sharpe, K. 2009. *Selling the Tudor Monarchy: Authority and Image in Sixteenth-Century England.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Sreenivasan, R. 2004. *Honoring the Family: Narratives and Politics of Kinship in Pre-Colonial Rajasthan*. In: I. Chatterjee (ed.). *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press: 46–72.

Śaraṇ, V. 1966. *Śrī nāgarīdāsjī kī vāṇī: nāgarīdāsjī ke jīvanv̥rtta evaṁ vāṇiyõ kā sanśodhit saṁskaraṇ.* Vr̥ndaban: Śrī Sarveśvar Press.

——. 1972. *Banī-ṭhanījī*. In: V. Śaraṇ (ed.). *Śrī nimbārkācārya aur unkā sampradāy.* Vṛndaban: Śrī Sarveśvar Press: 290–292.
Śarmā, R. 1996. *Śrī brajdāsī bhāgavat*, 2 vols. Salemabad: Śrī Nimbārk Mudraṇālay.
Śyāmaldās. 2007 [1886]. *Vīr vinod: mevāḍ kā itihās,* vol. II. Jodhpur: Rājasthānī Granthāgār.
Welch, S. C. 1997. *India: Art and Culture, 1300–1900*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Williams, R. D. 2023. *The Scattered Court: Hindustani Music in Colonial Bengal*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Internet sources and sources for paintings

Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Accession no. 2002.901. https://collections.mfa.org/objects/398393/krishna-celebrates-holi-with-radha-and-the-gopis?ctx=46428ad3-537e-42c2-a832-4926598bee73&idx=2 (accessed on 18.09.2025).
The British Museum. *Ahluwalia 2008 / Rajput Painting: Romantic, Divine and Courtly Art from India (p. 109, fig. 67).* https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1959-0411-0-3 (accessed on 9.06.2025).
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Accession No. 2001.172. https://www.clevelandart.org/art/2001.172 (accessed on 18.09.2025).
Collection Gopi Krishna Kanoria, Patna.
Delhi National Museum, Accession no. 63.794, no. 63.798, no. 63.800. https://museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/record/nat_del-63-794-4916 (accessed on 18.09.2025).
Fine Art America. *The Death of Bhishma, Mortally Wounded by Arjuna's Numerous Arrows, C. 1760–1770 Poster.* https://fineartamerica.com/featured/the-death-of-bhishma-mortally-wounded-by-arjunas-numerous-arrows-c1760-1770-indian-school.html?product=poster (accessed on 9.06.2025).
LACMA. M.71.49.2. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. *Śukadeva Reciting the Bhāgavata-purāṇa to King Parīkṣit/Sāvant Singh*. https://collections.lacma.org/node/237789 (accessed on 18.09.2025).

LACMA. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. *Maharaja Savant Singh of Kishangarh (r. 1748–1757) as Krishna on Horseback.* https://collections.lacma.org/node/247439 (accessed on 9.06.2025).

MFA Boston. *Krishna Celebrates Holi with Radha and the Gopis.* https://collections.mfa.org/objects/398393/krishna-celebrates-holi-with-radha-and-the-gopis?ctx=9fac07da-53e5-4d0e-ac2b-bb0c4d227864&idx=6 (accessed on 9.06.2025).

Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin SMB, Accession no. 47.113. Artstor. https://library-artstor-org/#/asset/BERLIN_DB_10313802805 (accessed on 3.07.2022).

Pixels. *The Death of Bhishma, Mortally Wounded by Arjuna's Numerous Arrows, C. 1760–1770 Is a Painting by Indian School.* https://pixels.com/featured/the-death-of-bhishma-mortally-wounded-by-arjunas-numerous-arrows-c1760-1770-indian-school.html (accessed on 9.06.2025).

Sackler Museum at Harvard, Cambridge, Accession no. 1995.114. https://harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/310428?position=4 (accessed on 18.09.2025).

Sotheby's. *Raja Raj Singh of Kishangarh Celebrating the Holi Festival, Attributable to Bhavanidas, Kishangarh, Circa 1725–30.* https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/sven-gahlin-collection-l15224/lot.56.html (accessed on 15.01.2025).