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The King's Poetic Body
Historical Record and Literary Aesthetics in Nineteenth-century Rajasthan

ABSTRACT: This article considers the relationships between poetry, comportment, and performativity in early-19th century Rajput courts. I argue that in their historical and textual representations, court intellectuals fashioned kings' poetic bodies, which coded their behaviour through literary conventions—drawn from Sanskrit and Hindi poetics and more local traditions of Rajasthan—and modelled refined, aesthetically nuanced dispositions for later rulers. I foreground these intellectuals' interest in pleasure and play, and underline the significance of sexuality and embodiment in their accounts. My focus is on the *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya*, which narrates the lives, reigns, and passions of the rulers of Amer-Jaipur. The text was first written in Sanskrit, and then re-interpreted in Hindi prose, and I suggest this vernacular interpretation speaks to an evolving understanding of kingship in the colonial period.

KEYWORDS: Jaipur, kingship, play, Rajputs, sexuality

> And then the eulogists and bards (*bandi-cāraṇ log*) gave a superb performance of their brand-new compositions with music and instrumental accompaniment, in order to wake the Maharaja, and they entreated him:
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> "Maharaja, because you are deeply immersed in the delight of a good sleep, the tiger-shaped-like-the-sun has slaughtered the elephant-shaped-like-the-darkness, and the East has turned red with its blood."[1]

This dramatic wake-up call comes from a vignette in the middle of the *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya* (*Epic Poem on the Dynasty of Victory* / *The Family of Jai Singh*), a poetic chronicle (1674 *śloka*s) of the rulers of Jaipur from the early 19th century.[2] The text was originally composed in Sanskrit for Maharaja Jai Singh III (r. 1819–1835) by Sītārām Parvaṇīkar, a prolific scholar and poet. This was followed by a vernacular interpretation (*bhāṣānuvād*) in (Khari Boli) Hindi prose,[3] prepared in the late 19th century by one Kṛṣṇa Śāstrī for either Ram Singh II (r. 1835–1880) or Madho Singh (r. 1880–1922).[4] This text tied together various threads

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1 इतने में वंदि चारण लोग भी महाराज कों जगाने के लिये नये २ रचनों के साथ गीत वाद्यादि उचित कार्य करते थे व प्रार्थना भी करते थें कि महाराज आप सुनिद्रा सुख मे लीन होने के कारण यह सूर्य रूपी सिंह ने अंधकार रूपी हाथी कों मार डाला उसी खून सें प्राची दिशा लाल हो गया । (*Jayavaṁśa mahākavyā*, f. 102a).
All translations are my own, based on my readings of the Hindi text of the *Jayavaṁśa mahākavyā*, unpublished manuscript no. 1824, Pothikhana, City Palace, Jaipur.

2 This wake-up call should be seen against the broader context of auspicious customs for awaking a deity or king, including the South Indian (especially Telugu) *suprabhātam*. Awaking the *mūrti* ('temple icon') of a deity is part of the ritual life of North Indian *vaiṣṇava* bhakti communities. It also recalls elements of the Sanskrit *mahākāvya* tradition, where bards wake up kings with music and poetry, as in the *Raghuvaṃśa* and *Śiśupālavadha* (Kālidāsa 2024: 112–115; Māgha 2017: 349–377).

3 It is striking that the Hindi was prepared in Khari Boli, rather than an eastern Rajasthani dialect. There was already a long tradition of prose writing in dialects such as Dhundhari. It is possible that this text was partly intended to educate a ruler in Khari Boli, perhaps in readiness for communications in Hindustani.

4 The Hindi text has never been published, and this essay is based on a manuscript in the Pothikhana collection, The City Palace, Jaipur (Accession no. 1824). I am grateful to the staff of the City Palace museum, especially Mrinalini

in early modern history writing, preparing an account of the royal family in which the ruler's daily life, the character profiles of kings, and the events of their reigns were deeply entangled. The work appears to have been intended for princes and kings to learn about their forebears, and as such might be read as a family history, and perhaps part of a king's education, rather than a monument to the kingdom's rulers intended for wider circulation. In this passage, the sleeping maharaja is the patron, Jai Singh's father and predecessor, Jagat Singh (r. 1803–1818).

The description of how the bards would wake the king with music and lyrical poetry is emblematic of several broader characteristics of this text, especially the close examination of the king's personal life and the daily movements of his royal body, the pronounced role of service providers—in this case the eulogists and bards, *bandi-cāraṇ*—and the visceral quality of poetry in the life of the court, where aesthetics imbued the everyday with imagery and literary colour. In the poem, each ruler's reign is compressed into a sequence of pilgrimages, military campaigns, gifts to brahmins, festivities, and poeticised courtly pleasures. This wake-up call comes between two of Jagat's core duties as king: sex and war. In this precise moment, the king is especially somnolent after an extended sequence of sexually sporting (*krīḍā*) with his concubines, and once he wakes up, he launches a new military campaign in Marwar, over the right to marry a princess of Mewar (see below).

In a different context, Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (1992) have highlighted how the courtly rhetoric around the sexual life and military prowess of the king were

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Venkateswaran, for enabling me to access this manuscript. In his comprehensive study of this collection, Gopal Narayan Bahura (1976: 85) suggested that the Hindi translation was prepared by two pandits, Lakṣmīnāth and Kṛṣṇa Śāstrī, during the reign of Ram Singh II (*ibid.*). Manuscript No. 1824 includes Kṛṣṇa Śāstrī's name in the core text as the name of the translator, while a second hand has added both names in the margins. Lakṣmīnāth may be an erroneous reading of Lakṣmaṇ, Sītārām's father's name, who appears in the core text close to the colophon. This manuscript provides the date VS 1942 (1885 CE), which would fall under the reign of Madho Singh; however, this date might refer to the copying of this text, rather than the date of the translation itself.

foundational to the political ideology of Nāyaka kingship in early-modern South India. Certainly, there are strong parallels and continuities between this 19th-century Sanskrit/Hindi chronicle and the 17th-century Telugu texts they examined, especially those written in the *abhyudayamu* genre: that is, a day in the life of the king, which celebrated the daily erotic prowess of the ruler, who was stylised as the embodiment of a literary archetype, blurring the boundaries between the god in his temple and the king on his throne, and manifesting in his body the ideology of *bhoga*, pleasure and largesse.[5] Notably, the work was composed as a *mahākāvya*, which Indira Viswanathan Peterson (2003) has interpreted as a "court epic": a work that celebrated and idealised the courtly world through elaborations of Sanskrit poetics (*kāvya*), especially figures of speech (*alaṃkāra-śāstra*). This longer history, ultimately reaching back to the 4th–5th century, interacted with more contemporary concerns in Jaipur, including a political scandal around Jagat Singh's love life and rumours around the paternity of his successor, Jai Singh III.

In this article, I consider the literary modes of imagining the historical past and the person of the king that provided the foundations for the *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya*. I focus my attention on the unpublished Hindi interpretation of this work, as this text contains additional commentary and explanatory glosses that elucidate how 19th-century readers made sense of older literary conventions for portraying royalty.[6] On the basis of this reading, I suggest that court intellectuals framed historical rulers as literary personae, imbued with the qualities of Sanskrit poetics (*kāvya*) and classical Hindi (Braj Bhasha) "mannerist" aesthetics (*rīti*). The result was an abstraction of erudite, aesthetically nuanced kingship, which was seamlessly passed down across rulers over time.

Here my interpretation is informed by Ernst Kantorowicz's assertion in *The King's Two Bodies* (1957) that the monarch was assigned

[5] E.g. the *Raghunāthanāyakābhyudayamu* of king Vijayarāghava Nāyaka (r. 1634–1673), who also examined his father's love life. See Rao et al. 1992: 57–90.

[6] For an extensive discussion of the Sītārām's Sanskrit original, see Baṁsal 1991. See also Śāstrī 1980.

both a corporeal "body natural" and a "body politic", one shaped by theology, politics, and law that transcended his mortal frame. While Kantorowicz's focus lay with medieval Europe, his model resonates with studies of Rajput kingship, especially regarding the ritual preparation of the ruling monarch's body (Horstmann 2006; Horstmann 2013). The non-corporeal, ritualised dimension of the royal body lay in tension with the historicisation and identification of specific rulers' profiles (as in biographical *carit-kāvya* and painted portraiture), and spoke to evolving notions of kingship in the world of distributed power and clans.[7] Beyond ritual, my reading is also informed by global scholarship on performance and affect in the ideological construction of the king's body. Historians of early-modern France have drawn focus to the performative power of the king's body in court dance: Mark Franko considers the coded and textured "body theatrical" of the king, articulating "the monarch's real or imagined subjectivity, his physical body, and the erotics of his spectacle" (2003: 76). In the same way, I suggest this Sanskrit-Hindi account of the rulers of Jaipur aestheticised their bodies and personae, installing lived kingship into poetic bodies, in a way that communicated courtly ideals and ideologies. More than an exercise in poetics, I suggest this abstraction and aestheticisation of the king's body had social effects—a strategic performativity (in the Butlerian sense)—in that the *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya* served as a form of comportment literature for princes and new rulers, and could be deployed to conceal and redirect attention away from uncomfortable truths about kings' historical misdemeanours.

I first introduce the historical context surrounding the *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya*'s composition, and the troubled legacy of Jagat Singh. I then consider the literary ideology and cultural imaginary of the text, foregrounding courtly ideals related to pleasure and play. I suggest that these dimensions speak to evolving notions of Rajput kingship, which had implications for discourses around sexuality and women's bodies, as seen throughout the text. I conclude by reflecting on the

[7] On Rajput historiography and *carit-kāvya*, see Busch 2012 and Busch 2017. On Rajput engagements with painted portraiture, see Glynn 2018.

rationale behind the Hindi interpretation of the *mahākāvya*, and its later 19th-century provenance.

The legacy of Jagat Singh

The *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya* tells the story of the rulers of Amer-Jaipur, culminating in the reign of the presiding king, Jai Singh III (r. 1819–1835). The author of the Sanskrit original, Sītārām Parvaṇīkar, was a Maharasthrian brahmin whose family had been embedded in the Jaipur court for generations. Sītārām was a prolific scholar: forty-one Sanskrit works have been attributed to him, most notably his commentary on Kālīdāsa's seminal *mahākāvya*, *Kumārasambhava* (Baṁsal 1991: 40–43). In the *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya*, he discussed his own family history and commemorated the names of his parents, Suhīrā and Lakṣmaṇ who may have been the *dīkṣā-guru* of maharaja Jagat Singh (Clémentin-Ojha 1999: 50). In particular, he provided a detailed account of his great-great-grandfather, Mādhav Bhaṭṭ, who was originally from Parvaṇī village but settled in Banaras before relocating to Amer under Bishan Singh (r. 1688–1699), where he was appointed tutor to the two princes, the future Jai Singh II and Vijay Singh (below). This appointment reflected the ascendancy of Maharashtrian brahmins in intellectual networks and arbitrations in the 17th century—especially those with credentials from Banaras—and the increasing brahmanisation of the Jaipur court in the 1700s (Venkatkrishnan 2015; O'Hanlon 2011; Horstmann 2006). Sītārām's family retained their position in the inner circles of the court through to the mid-19th century: his brother, Sakhārām Bhaṭṭ, was the astrologer royal (*śrījī ke jyotiṣī*) and one of Ram Singh II's tutors (Clémentin-Ojha 1999: 50).[8]

The *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya* concludes with an idealised image of Jai Singh III's dominion: the king upholds *dharma* and learning, rewarding brahmin scholars and decimating the darkness of ignorance

[8] Sītārām also singled out his father in his discussion of the scholars of his generation (*Jayavaṁśa mahākavyā*, f. 94b).

with the intensity of the sun. Jaipur itself is populated with pious citizens, brimming with brahmins, benign deities, and temples. While there are specific details here—we are told how brahmins are gifted laddus every Tuesday at the Hanuman temple—there is a sense of a perfected kingdom that transcends historical time. History contends with other priorities embedded in the *mahākāvya* genre: in Peterson's words (2003: 10), "court epics may tell a story and may impart moral values in doing so, but their primary function is to adorn and beautify, and thus render auspicious, the persons and milieu that they celebrate." As Māyā Baṁsal noted in her study of the Sanskrit text (1991: 33), Sītārām appears to collapse the distinction between Jai Singh II and his own Jai Singh III: although they do have separate reigns, the latter is almost an extension of his illustrious namesake. In this sense, the title of the *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya* suggests continuity and a celebration of Sawai Jai Singh II through to the author's present. This gestures to the author's larger strategy in his reworking of historical memory and his casting back the present into the halcyon days of a century before.

Writing this literary chronicle, Sītārām would have had to negotiate the complex politics around Jai Singh's birth and succession. His predecessor, Jagat Singh, had infamously antagonised the nobility by elevating one of his concubines (*pāsvān*), Raskapūr, to the same status as his royal wives; it is said that he then made her queen of half of his dominion, minted coins in her name, and rode with her on the same elephant in public processions. The popular memory of this episode[9] has been shaped to some extent by James Tod, who memorialised Jagat Singh as:

> (…) the most dissolute prince of his race or of his age (…) We shall not disgrace these annals with the history of a life which discloses not one redeeming virtue amidst a cluster of effeminate vices, including the rankest, in the opinion of a Rajpoot—cowardice. (Tod 1957 [1832]: 303)

[9] The Raskapūr episode is the subject of several Hindi and English novels, including Śarmā 2001 and Pandey 2023.

Tod called Raskapūr Jagat's "Aspasia"—that is, the lover of Pericles, remembered in various sources as a foreigner, a courtesan and brothel keeper, and a corrupting influence in politics—while the Rajput historian Śyāmaldās called her a base whore (*adnā kasbī*) (Sreenivasan 2006: 147). Finally, when Jagat's clansmen considered deposing him, he appeased them by having Raskapūr and his former ministers imprisoned at Nahargarh (Tillotson 2006: 75).

Jagat Singh was also embroiled in a war with Man Singh of Jodhpur over the right to marry a princess of Mewar, Kṛṣṇa Kumārī (Sarkar and Sinh 2009: 314–315). In 1810, Kṛṣṇa Kumārī had been instructed to commit suicide to bring the competition over marrying her to an end, but the war had continued to rage for another eight years, drawing in Daulat Rao Sindhia, Yashwant Rao Holkar, and Amir Khan of Tonk. Jaipur was severely embattled over this period, ultimately leading to Jagat Singh's signing a treaty with the British East India Company in April 1818, setting an annual tribute of Rs 8 lakh, or a fifth of Jaipur's total revenue (Tillotson 2006: 73). Jagat died in December, without an heir. According to Tod's account of this period, rival factions in the court jostled to appoint a puppet ruler, when—quite by surprise, three months later—one of Jagat's widows announced that she was pregnant. This was verified by the women of the zenana, and Jai Singh III was born in April 1819 (*ibid*.: 78; Stern 1988: 68–70). Understandably, these events are narrated in the *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya* without any suggestion of tensions, attempted depositions, or disputed pregnancies. We are told Jagat had several wives, many "pleasure wives" (*bhogpatnī*), and enjoyed himself with two courtesans (*veśyā*), Gaurī and Raskapūr. Raskapūr was greatly beloved (*nihāyat prītipātr*, f. 94b) but part of an ensemble of companions, and there is no mention of her infamous rise and fall. The narrative later describes how the court rejoiced at the news of the queen's pregnancy, *before* the death of the king.

This queen became regent for the infant Jai Singh, and her ministers, Mohandās and Rāvaljī (that is, Bairī Sāl of Sāmode), disinterestedly took over the running of the kingdom "free from the influence of the sins of desire and greed" (*rāg-lobhādi doṣõ sẽ rahit hokar*, f. 103b). Reality was more complicated. The queen regent governed

the kingdom from within the zenana with her advisors, Jothā Rām (a *baniyā*) and Rūpān (one of Jagat's former concubines), much to the frustration of the British. The Rāvaljī mentioned in this poem was the Company's preferred appointment, but the queen had denied him access and promoted Jothā Rām instead. This led to a deteriorating relationship with the British, who engineered a vote of no confidence among disaffected *ṭhākur* nobles in 1826. This was nullified and the Company resident withdrew from Jaipur in 1830. Five years later, just as Jai Singh was on the verge of attaining his majority, he died unexpectedly. The British used the suspicious circumstances of his death as grounds to expel Jothā Rām and Rūpān from the court and reinstate Rāvaljī. In the turbulence around the young king's passing, a mob attacked the Rajputana agent and his party (the notorious "Blake Murder" incident), after which Jothā Rām was sentenced to death. From 1839, the British claimed the right to oversee regencies in Jaipur, conclusively dismantling the political authority of the zenana (Sarkar and Sinh 2009: 317–319; Stern 1988: 70–80). All these developments were smoothly reimagined in the narrative.

Beyond this streamlined, undramatic version of events, the text enveloped Jagat Singh and the other rulers of his dynasty in a poetic rhetoric of pleasure, which managed the interpretation of his reign for Sanskrit and Hindi readers through the conventions of *vilāsa* literature.

Poetics, pleasure, and play

In many ways, the text speaks to the established themes of *mahākāvya* more generally: as Daṇḍin outlined in his treatise on poetics, the *Kāvyadarśa*, the *mahākāvya* was expected to include wondrous descriptions of cities, playing in pleasure gardens and water, parties, love-making, wars, and weddings, all of which can be located in this account of Jaipur's past (Peterson 2003: 8). At the same time, Sītārām and his Hindi interpreter, Kr̥ṣṇa Śāstrī, were writing at the tail end of a related development in courtly poetics, the *vilāsa* chronicle. Such chronicles constituted a form of life writing, focused on the careers

of rulers, especially their engagements in sex and war. This style of writing proliferated from the 17th century onwards across Rajput and Sikh contexts (Vig 2020), in Sanskrit, Braj Bhasha, and literary dialects from Rajasthan (Talbot 2022). Conventions from transregional, elite poetics converged with local Rajput conceptions of the gendered relationship between conflict, fertility, land, sexual relationships, and progeny (Harlan 1992). Poets had varied strategies and priorities in how they represented their patrons and their forebears, informed by larger shifts in historical consciousness in the early modern period.[10] In Amer-Jaipur, most chronicles of this type were written in Sanskrit (for an overview, see Baṁsal 1991: 13–22), such as Kṛṣṇa Bhaṭṭ's *Īśvaravilāsa mahākavyā*, dated c. 1749 (Horstmann 2006). In Mewar, Braj Bhasha appears to have been more popular (Williams 2022).[11] The *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya* is somewhat unusual for being translated and read across both Sanskrit and the vernacular.

As a concept, *vilāsa* suggests delight, pleasure, and play. In Rajput courtly contexts, "play" became a highly nuanced concept in the self-fashioning of kings. Rulers were expected to enjoy, delight, engage with the arts, play with male companions, flirt with women, and "sport" with them sexually. This culture drew upon a medieval ideology, as explored by Daud Ali, by which kings were understood to "enjoy" their realms and their subordinates' domains: in this context, court literature enumerated royal enjoyments (*upbhog*), pleasures (*vinod*), and sports (*krīḍā*) (Ali 2004). This overlapped with Rajput expressions for their relationship with land, which was "eaten" or "consumed" (*dhartī khāṇo*, *dhartī bhogṇo*) by the ruler (Saran and Ziegler 2001.1: 113). Beyond this classical sense of considered enjoyment, in the early modern period, courtly patrons and intellectuals

[10] On developments in early-modern Hindi historical poetry see, for example, Busch 2012, Williams et al. 2018, Talbot 2018, Borek 2020. On the larger landscape of historical consciousness, see Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam 2003 and Chatterjee 2009. On 17th-century forms of history writing in Rajput courts, see Talbot 2007.

[11] Including *Rājavilāsa* (1677–1680), *Sirdāravilāsa* (c.1740), *Jagavilāsa* (1746), and *Bhīmavilāsa* (1822).

developed a new fascination with the concept of play, informed by the pervasive spread of Krishnaite poetry: the older categories of pleasure and play were reinterpreted through the *vaiṣṇava* connotations of *līlā*, the theological concept that reality is the unfolding of the divine play.

The king's celebrating a festival, watching a dance recital, or frolicking with female attendants in a garden all shared a ritual-like quality. Following Johan Huizinga's seminal theorisation of play, André Droogers explored how play provided a platform for realising alternative realities. Here, I follow Droogers' definition of "ritual as the temporary emergence and playful enactment, in its own right, of a shadow reality" or "counterreality" (2012: 105), according to which play has "the capacity to deal simultaneously and subjunctively with two or more ways of classifying reality" (*ibid*.: 75), experimenting with the possibilities of different symbols in parallel to ordinary life. Rajput play was highly mannered and expected to enact ideals—what Schechner called "restored behaviours" (1985)—to play and to become something beyond themselves through patterns of behaviour modelled on aesthetics and theology.

Refined pleasure and play are embedded throughout the *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya*. The text provides an extensive description of how Jagat Singh used to indulge in romantic playtime, strolling through a forest of pleasure (*vihār van*) with his desirable women (*kāminī*), that is, his domestic slaves and concubines. He spoke to each one, noting a flower or tree and giving it an erotic interpretation:

> In this way Jagat Singh was sporting (*bihār kartā thā*) with his beloved beauties in the forest of pleasure, resplendent with the season. It is appropriate that True Men (*satpuruṣ log*) should put aside even indispensable work to fulfil the wishes of their dependents.
>
> In this manner, in that forest of pleasure, King Jagat Singh was standing delighted with all his beauties, hand in hand with some of them, to behold the brilliance of the season, and was saying to one of them:

> "Come, beloved, behold the spring creeper is climbing the mango tree and is trembling terribly in the wind, as though it too has been pierced by Kamdev's arrows, in the guise of blossoms, and has been overtaken by her lover."...
>
> The King said to (another) lotus-like woman,[12] "Behold this jasmine: because she has flowered she is pleasured by bumble-bees, she is bent low, laden with blossoms, and is filled with fragrance." Hearing the king's loving words, the woman lowered her moon-bright face.[13]

These flirtations distilled the essential imagery of erotic poetry and applied them in practice: the king was expected to charm his companions with *kāvya*-infused language. Following this tour of the forest, the poet described the king taking these women to a pool for water play (*jal-krīḍā*), followed by the more overtly sexual pleasure play (*bhog-krīḍā*).

The king's satisfying many women in the forest invokes the image of Krishna and the *gopī*s, while the water play was a long-established, widely used motif for depicting kings in *mahākāvya* (Peterson 2003: 107–115). To practice play (*krīḍā*) was to enact and embody poetry. In this instructive text, setting aside business to engage in pleasure—not for one's own enjoyment, but rather to satisfy one's subordinates—was the charge of good rulers, or more specifically, the True Men (*satpuruṣ log*). *Satpuruṣ* has a range of moral and metaphysical meanings, referring to honest or good people, the metaphysically self-realised, or

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12 The poet refers to the archetypal ideals of beautiful women (*kāminī*), of whom the "lotus-like" lady (*padminī*) is the most beautiful.

13 इस तरह ई ऋतूं से शुशोभित होता हुवा उस विहार वन मे महाराज जगत् सिंह प्यारी कामिनीयों के साथ विहार करता था यह उचित है कि सत्पुरुष लोग अपने आश्रितों के मनषा पूरी करने के लिए आवश्यक कार्यो को भी छोडतें है (६१) उस विहार वन मे इस प्रकार सब कामिनीयों के साथ ऋतु की शोभा कों देखने के लिए आनंद् वशात् किसी२ के हाथ के साथ हात मिलाता थके राजा जगत् सिंह किसी कामिनी को ऐसा कहता था (६२) कि अये प्यारी ये देखो वसंत लता आम के ये उपर चढी हुई है और बायू से निहायत कंप रही है पुष्पों के छल से कामदेव का वाणों से भी बिद्ध हुई है मानो जार से मिली हुई ... (६३) किसी पद्मिनी जाति स्त्री के साथ राजा कहता है इस मल्लिका कों देखो पुष्पित होने के कारण भृङ्गो से भोगी जाती है मंजरीयों के भारवशात् नम्र हुई है सुगंध सें भरी हुई वह कांता ऐसे राजा के साभिप्राय वाक्य कों सुन करके अपने मुख चंद्र को नम्र कर लिई (६४) । (*Jayavaṁśa mahākavyā*, ff. 98a–b).

the Supreme Being. In this context, all of these meanings are brought to bear in the person of Jagat Singh, who righteously plays and pleasures his female companions, following Krishna's model. By playing like the playful god, the ruler can aspire to a higher mode of being.

This reading resonates with a treatise on poetics (*rītigranth*) prepared for Jagat Singh by the poet Padmākar, the *Jagatvinoda* (*World-Amusement* or *Jagat's Pleasure*). This text explored the qualities of male and female archetypes (*nāyaka-nāyikā bheda*) and outlined the components and expressions of emotion and experience. These gendered archetypes were modelled on stories relating to Krishna and the *gopī*s, coloured by courtliness: as when Padmākar introduces the section on male archetypes (*nāyaka*):

> In a palace of exquisite quality, a youth is looking at a maiden,
> He is called the *nāyaka*, erudite in poetry, music, and taste.
>
> These are the qualities of a *nāyaka*:
>
> Though he subjugates the world, he is a youth, stripping the *gopī*s:
> In all three worlds, there is none as beautiful as him.
> Padmākar says: aloft in the kadamba tree with their apparel,
> This wise one delights in his own trickery.
> He is the crown-jewel connoisseur, a glittering sea of fine music,
> He builds up a shining treasury of virtues and qualities.
> The majestic master of the rights of land,
> Like Nanda's Krishna, he is a delightful beloved man.[14]

Having introduced this archetype, Padmākar went on to enumerate the different varieties of *nāyaka* and provide poetic descriptions for

[14] सुन्दर गुण मन्दिर युवा युवति बिलोकै जाहि ।
कविता राग रसज्ञ जो नायक कहिये ताहि ।
अथ नायक लक्षण । कवित्त ।
जगत बसीकरन ही हरण गोपिन को तरुण त्रिलोक में न तैसी सुन्दराई है ।
कहै पद्माकर कलानि को कदम्ब अबलंबनि सिंगारको सुजान सुखदाई है ।
रसिक शिरोमणि सुराग रतनागर है शील गुण आगर उजागार बड़ाई है ।
ठौर ठकुराई कोजु ठाकुर ठसकदार नन्द के कन्हाई सो सुनंद के कन्हाई है । (Padmākar 1882: 33).

each one. It is striking that his overarching criteria was that the man should be conversant in the arts, specifically poetry (*kavitā*), music (*rāga*), and the underlying concept of affect (*rasa*). The *nāyaka* is also defined by context and activity: he belongs in a palatial setting and engages in courtly romance. Significantly, in this quatrain that provides the foundational image for archetypal masculinity, Padmākar chose the vision of Krishna playing a trick on the *gopī*s: snatching their clothes while they were bathing and holding them ransom from a tree, leaving them humiliated and naked in the water (as in *Bhāgavata purāṇa* 10.22; Bryant 2003). He experiences joy (*sukhadāī*) through his trickery (*kalāni ko*). This masculine ideal is intended to be disarmingly delightful and characterised by his erotic playfulness. Padmākar also draws attention to the surprising, miraculous quality of this play: Krishna is busy stealing the *gopī*s' clothes, flirtatiously disarming them, when he is in fact the Supreme Being, who has control over the entire world (*jagat basīkaran*). This is a comment on his unexpressed majesty, wilfully set aside for the pursuit of pleasure and *līlā*. This ideal of putting power aside for playtime is made explicit in the description of Jagat Singh's flirtations in the forest. Nonetheless, the *nāyaka* remains the true noble (*ṭhākur*), invested with the right to land (*ṭhaur*). Notably, Padmākar invoked the king in this passage, making *jagat* the first word of the first definition of ideal masculinity. *Nāyaka* status can be aspired to, and mortal men can perform the divine model through accomplishment in poetry, music, and erotic play. This dimension of the royal *nāyaka* was inseparable from the other components of noble kingship itemised in the *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya*, including securing the well-being of the people, building water tanks, and so on (f. 94a).

In the case of Jagat Singh, the monumentalising of his courtly *līlā* in the *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya* offered a poetic "counterreality," rewriting the memory of his reign and indiscretions. The chronicle fashions Jagat Singh a literary body as the ultimate player-cum-paramour and presents a model of how rulers should behave through morally sanctioned, aesthetically charged play.

Self-fashioning, statehood, and sexuality

This modelling suggests that for these early 19th-century readers, the conventions or mannerisms (*rīti*) of poetic texts were not confined to literature but also understood as scripts for comportment and aesthetic self-fashioning. This grew out of a much longer history in Sanskrit court literature (Ali 2004), as well as early-modern engagements with Braj Bhasha genres, as when Rajput patrons had their likenesses embedded in painted albums of *nāyikābheda* and *rāgamālā*, identifying themselves with the literary models of *nāyaka*s and *rāga*s (Glynn 2018). In the 18th century, court intellectuals and painters attended to the moods of local places, aestheticising the living king, his court, and kingdom (Khera 2020). The aesthetic ideology of the king's poetic body was part of a larger shift in statecraft. Under the Mughals, the personal relationships between Rajput kings and the emperor changed how power was conceptualised in Rajasthan: the older notion of shared authority and clan-based brotherhood (*bhāībandh*) was qualified or outright challenged by a system that prioritised the god-like king. With the increasing autonomy of Rajput kingdoms, amid the 18th-century dissolution of the Mughal empire, rulers turned to ritual, bureaucracy, and caste-based legislation to reshape and administer their territories (Cherian 2023; Horstmann 2013). The court itself was a social body that needed to be disciplined (Elias 2014), prioritising the persona of the king at its centre.[15] Resources and family pedigree were not enough for rulers to maintain their support networks and the loyalty of their peers: from the sexual appetites of the flirtatious king to the diets and sexual practices of his subjects (Imam 2014), Rajput polities demanded the theorisation, ritual regulation, and—in the case of courtly subjects—aestheticisation of the body.

Against this context, the significance of embodiment and sexuality in the *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya* comes into relief. Women feature prominently in this text, especially queens, *satī*s, courtesans, and domestic

[15] Many of these techniques of foregrounding the king's person were inherited from the Mughals. See O'Hanlon 2007.

slave-companions. This would have resonated in a period when queen regents and their companions were significant figures in Jaipur's politics: rulers in their minority sat on the throne for 46 of the 71 years between 1768 and 1839 (Sarkar and Sinh 2009: 313). Beyond this, the chronicle interweaves the themes of war (and heroic affect, *vīra rasa*) and sex (and erotic affect, *śṛṅgāra rasa*).[16] Women's bodies are often invoked in relation to the military power or heroic charisma of the king. Describing the terror and awe of the king's army, the Hindi interpreter explains that the "sound of the *bherī* kettledrums (of the military ensemble) was so powerful that pregnant women had a miscarriage when they heard it, and alongside them, enemies ran far away."[17] Describing the martial majesty of Jai Singh III, Sītārām describes his enemies' wives separating from their husbands and seeking refuge in the trembling trees of the forest. This vignette is configured to remind readers of the Krishna narrative, when the townswomen left their husbands in their beds to seek out their divine lover in the forest.[18] At the same time, the reference to the trees—and allured women—trembling in the forest breeze also recalls how Jai Singh's father, Jagat, flirted with his playmates in the forest of pleasure.[19] All of this is striking, given that Jai Singh III was a child king, and died aged sixteen, which would have curtailed his opportunities to display his prowess in sex and war.

Sītārām came from a family of royal tutors, and education—especially a literary education—is a significant theme throughout the chronicle of the Jaipur royal family. Here too, women and sexuality are closely entangled with learning, refinement, and pleasure. Sītārām narrates how his ancestor, Mādhav Bhaṭṭ, became Jai Singh II's tutor only after his father, Bishan Singh, had put him to the test. Mādhav had boasted, "Such is my talent in teaching that I can force insight even in

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16 On violence in Rajput poetry, see Turek 2024.

17 भेरी का शब्द ऐसा हुवा था कि जिसके सुनने से गर्भिणी स्त्रियों का गर्भ भी गिरते थें साथ हि शतृ लोग भी भागते थें (*Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya*, f. 103a).

18 महाराज के शतृकों की स्त्रिया नगरों कों छोड वन मे वृक्षों के आश्रय लिया (*ibid.* f. 106a).

19 On the *mahākāvya* conventions surrounding women, plants, and play, see Peterson 2003: 107–115.

things as slow-witted as rocks – put me to the test!" To which Bishan Singh replied:

> "If you can instil insight into one lady, my beloved, a slow-witted slave-girl, then you will pass your test." Then Mādhav Bhaṭṭ said, "Oh my King, this cannot be done, for how can she come into my dilapidated house? And should I be coming here with some difficulty just for this trivial work?" The Raja said, "Wise pandit, do not concern yourself with this. The woman shall always come to your home and shall study remaining in *pardah*."…
>
> ...Through Mādhav Bhaṭṭ's teaching, day by day the woman achieved sophistication (*prauḍhatā*) in the *śāstra*s. There are no words for that guru's talent! One night the Raja asked this woman, then sitting beside him, "Tell me, does your learning just consist of the guru struggling away, or has there been some progress too?" As the Raja spoke the beloved woman gave a profound answer on the meanings of the *śāstra*s, and the Raja then gave a retort, and then the two of them debated on whether the answer and the retort were valid statements or not. In this way, in the debate between lover and beloved, the beloved rendered the Raja speechless ("answer-less") with her solid points. Not having any response, the Raja was extremely pleased and enjoyed himself with his beautiful beloved until dawn.[20]

As Bahura explains, it was customary for potential tutors to prove their worth by teaching women of the court, before being granted

[20] मेरी प्रिय किसी मंदबुद्धि दासी को आप ज्ञान बान् करिये तो आपकी यह प्रतिज्ञा सफल होगी तब माधव भट्ट बोला (९०) है नरेंद्र यह बात सध नहीं सकती क्योंकि मेरे टूटे हुवे मकान मे वह कैसे आवैगी और इस लघु कार्य के लिये मै इहां किसतरे आऊंगा (९१) राजाने कहा कि हे सुवुद्धि पंडित जी इस बिषय मे तरक करना नहीं वही स्त्री नित्य आपके घर आवैगी और पडदे मे रहकर पढैगी (९२) ... माधव भट्ट के पढाने से वह स्त्री दिन दिन शास्त्र मे भी प्रौढता को पायी गुरु का यह सानर्थ्य कैसे वर्णन हो सकै (९५) कोई समय रात्रि मे पास बैठी हुई उस स्त्री को राजा ने पूछा कि यह तेरा पढना गुरु की केवल मेहनत ही है अथवा कुछ सफल भी होता है सो कह (९६) राजा के कहने पर उस प्यारी स्त्रीने शास्त्र के अर्थों से गर्भित उत्तर दिया और राजाने उसका प्रत्युत्तर दि और वह उत्तर प्रत्युत्तर ठीक है किनहीं इस बिषय मे उन दोनो को बिबाद हुवा (९७) इस प्रकार प्रिय और प्यारी के बिबाद मे प्यारी ने दृढ युक्तियों से राजा को निरुत्तर किया (९८) राजा निरुत्तर होकर उसपर अत्यंत प्रसन्न हुवा और प्रातःकाल तक उस सुंदरी प्यारी के साथ विहार किया (९९) । (*Jayavaṁśa mahākavyā*, ff. 41b–42a).

access to princes (1976: 50–51). In this telling, both rocks and women are described as slow-witted (*mandbuddhi*). Although the woman here was a slave (*dāsī*) rather than a queen, she was nonetheless reserved for the king and lived in the zenana: Mādhav Bhaṭṭ questions the logistics of teaching her, but the king insists she can travel to his house and remain there while maintaining *pardah*.[21] When the king condescendingly tests her, she wins a debate (*bibād*) by leaving him without any further response in the to-and-fro of answer and riposte (*uttar-pratyuttar*). However, the woman's intellectual accomplishment is marked as the male teacher's achievement, and while the vocabulary for the debate seems serious, her achievement is also glossed as a form of sexual foreplay. By studying, she obtains "sophistication" or "maturity" (*prauḍhtā*): this was a loaded term in shastric understandings of female development, where categories of female archetypes were identified as "mature" (*prauḍh*) to qualify their behavior in sexual relationships. The debate is not between intellectuals, but between lover and beloved (*priya aur pyārī*), which transforms their argument into the playful "quarrel" idealised in romantic courtly poetry. Her intelligence makes her a "beloved beauty," whom the king can "enjoy" (*vihār*). This suggests that women's education in elite disciplines was sanctioned as a means to elevate the king's playmates to afford him greater romantic enjoyment through intellectual play. This passage therefore articulates the connections between literary self-fashioning, sexuality, and the king's pleasure.

Conclusion

When Sītārām composed the *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya*, sometime around the 1820s, he set out to embed the rulers of Jaipur, including his adolescent patron, into a literary universe shaped by the poetic conventions of *kāvya* and Rajput values. This text represents a form of aestheticised life writing, in which the actual character and profile of individual

[21] On zenana protocols, see Sreenivasan 2006 and Joshi 1995.

rulers were sublimated and enveloped by the archetypes of refined kings, dedicated to dharmic justice, brahmanical learning, heroic wars, and embodied pleasures. His depictions of Jagat Singh resonated with other representations of that time: they could be read alongside the painted murals of Puṇḍarīkjī havelī, which depict Jagat in sensual play with his slave-companions, who caress one another and undress to the accompaniment of music (Cimino 2001: 133). Jagat's heir, Jai Singh III, may have been expected to read this work as a family history, a guide to refined comportment and aesthetic self-fashioning, and a personalised guide to *kāvya*. This latter dimension was perhaps the most challenging: a generation later, Kṛṣṇa Bhaṭṭ proclaimed that his Hindi "interpretation will be to everyone's delight,"[22] especially in his explication of the poetry. Throughout his interpretation, he provided plenty of glosses and explanations: "By saying this, the poet's meaning is that…"[23] and so on. The prosaic rendering of the text scraped away the actual poetry of the Sanskrit original, making the content of the *mahākāvya* more immediate and accessible.

This Hindi reworking of the text suggests its continuing relevance to the 19th-century Jaipur court but also gestures to an evolving readership: one which required additional resources to make sense of the nuances of *kāvya* and the king's poetic body. Jai Singh III died as a teenager in 1835, and the next king, Ram Singh II, is remembered as cultivating a cosmopolitan and self-consciously modern environment, informed by the mix of brahmanical and colonial epistemologies he engaged with in his formative years, with classes in Sanskrit, Urdu, and English (Tillotson 2006: 109–137). His reign saw a series of innovations and interventions in the management of his kingdom and is emblematic of a colonial-era "princely modernity" (Peterson 2012) that was quite different from the style of kingship cultivated by his immediate predecessors. Bahura suggested that Kṛṣṇa Bhaṭṭ was working under his direction; while that might be true, as already noted, the manuscript in the palace's Pothikhana offers the

[22] यह भाषानुवाद सब लोगुं का संतोष के होगा (*Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya*, f. 115a).

[23] इस कथन से कबिराज का अभिप्राय मालूम होता है कि… (*ibid.*: f. 95a).

date vs 1942 (1885 CE), which would fall under the reign of the next king, Madho II (r. 1880–1922). That this prosaic and straightforward Hindi text was composed—or at least copied—early in Madho's reign is illuminating. Madho was adopted by Ram Singh II as an adult, and it was noted at the time that he did not have the benefit of the comprehensive and advanced education that was customary for royal princes (Tillotson 2006: 134). It is quite possible that this accessible version of the *mahākāvya* was intended to brief the new ruler on the traditions of his adopted ancestors, including the nuances of courtly poetics, pleasure, and comportment. Given the penetration of colonial and modernised education into the court over the mid-19th century, this text may also have been read as an affirmation of traditional values, foregrounding the curatorial authority of the court's brahman scholars and tutors.

Tod's condemnation of Jagat gestures to the larger set of colonial and Orientalist discourses surrounding decadence and sexuality that informed British and colonial-era Indian attitudes to 19th-century rulers. The *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya* suggests early modern attitudes to the king's body persisted in a colonial, rapidly changing world, but also had to be negotiated, qualified, and explained, in this case through a prosaic interpretation in Hindi. The *mahākāvya* demonstrates how poetics, sexual discourses, and ideologies of play were embedded in disparate areas of the courtly system, from the training of princes to the education of women. This poetry was performative and had social applications, providing an apparatus for how a ruler should speak and behave: the learned king should behave like a living poem. In the case of Jagat Singh, the monumentalising of his courtly *līlā* might be read as a strategic attempt to reinterpret his behaviour through the layering of play, and to rewrite the memory of his challenging reign. The *Jayavaṁśa mahākāvya* was less invested in preserving the characters of historical rulers for posterity so much as refashioning them into dharmic and poetic *nāyaka*s, projecting their eras into a counterreality defined by the terms of pleasure and play.

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