

12. Texts and Tellings: *Kathas* in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

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Wrestlers, mimics, actors perform, *pandits* recite the scriptures.
Songs, sounds, stories full of *rasa*, it's a good pastime,
The fort people are happy and give handsome rewards.¹

In the ecology of performance genres in early modern India, *kathas* or stories are pretty much ubiquitous. We find them recited at courts and in village assemblies, at the foot of citadels and in courtyards, in temples and sufi assemblies, even occasionally from the pulpits of mosques—and they are also one of the standard markers in the description of cities, as in the quotation above (see also Busch in this volume). In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in particular, *kathas* account for a significant percentage of literary production. The *kathas* we have from that period are written texts, typically in verse form, but they are texts that clearly bear the traces of their oral-literate nature—they were meant to be read or recited aloud and mostly refer to themselves with verbs that have to do with telling and listening, as other contributors to this volume also point out.² Copied artfully or scappily in different scripts, with

1 Malik Muhammad Jayasi, *Kanhāvat*, ed. by Shivsahay Pathak (Allahabad: Sahitya Bhawan, 1981), p. 21.

2 The most comprehensive and holistic study of a Hindavi *katha* text in performance and of text and performance is Philip Lutgendorf's *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). About the *Rāmcaritmānas'* (*Mānas* for short) own relationship to written and oral textualities, Lutgendorf notes that although Tulsidas uses the verb "to read" (*bācnā*) when written

or without illustrations, and translated into different languages, they clearly circulated across, and wove together, the layered and multilingual literary culture of North India, much like songs. In fact, two of the three tales from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries I discuss in this essay—Isardas’s *Satyavatī kathā* (1501) and Alam’s *Mādhavānal Kāmakandalā* (991 AH/1582)³—were held together in manuscript copies in Kaithi script from the eighteenth century by the same individual in Ekadla village of Fatehpur district (UP), alongside copies of Jayasi’s *Padmāvat*, Qutban’s *Mirigāvatī*, and Manjhan’s *Madhumālatī*—tangible evidence that these tales were once part of a common repertoire.⁴

Whatever their specific topic, Hindavi *kathas* written in this period share two noticeable features. They either anchor the story in or refer to epic and Puranic characters and/or narratives, even when they subvert them or quickly leave them behind. And they combine and blend instruction and entertainment, so that even sections that are specifically marked as dealing with spiritual-philosophical or technical knowledge (*gyana*) often contain a significant amount of humour.

This essay explores these two features across a number of *kathas*, but with particular focus on the rewriting of epic-Puranic women’s characters and their agency in Bhima Kabi’s *Ḍaṅḡvai kathā* and on the display and discussion of musical knowledge in Alam’s *Mādhavānal Kāmakandalā*.

communications such as letters are “read”, nowhere is the verb used in reference to reading the *Mānas* itself—the verbs commonly used are “to recite” (*kathnā*), “to tell” (*kahnā*), “to sing or chant” (*gānā*), and “to listen” (*sunnā*), the same terms used in our *katha* texts (pp. 37-38). The word *katha* occurs as many as 180 times in the *Mānas*, often in reference to Tulsi’s own narrative (the term “book” or *granth* is sometimes used but never with reference to his own text), and he speaks of composing the text after having listened to the story of Ram “again and again” from his guru, slowly and gradually grasping and deepening his understanding of it (p. 23).

- 3 The third is Bhima Kabi’s *Ḍaṅḡvai kathā* (1493), ed. by Shivgopal Misra (Allahabad: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, 1966).
- 4 Shivgopal Misra, *Satyavatī kathā tathā anya kṛtiyāṃ* (Gwalior: Vidyamandir Prakashan, 1958), p. 24. Apart from the epics (*Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*), other tales that were rewritten and retold (rather than translated) across North Indian vernaculars and Persian in this period include *Mirigāvatī* (in Persian *Rāj Kunvar*), *Madhumālatī* (as *Gulshan-i Ma’ānī*), *Padmāvat*, and the *Mādhavānal Kāmakandalā* discussed here. See R.S. McGregor, *Hindi Literature from its Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1984); for the full history of the Padmavati/Padmini story before and after Jayasi, see Ramya Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen: Heroic Past in India, c.1500-1900* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007).

How were the *katha* texts from this period performed? Barring Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas* (1574), whose performance "life" continues to the present day and has been studied in an exemplary fashion by Philip Lutgendorf, we don't really know. Yet—and this is one of the assumptions behind this volume—current performance practices help us ask the right questions regarding past performances, even though the actual form of the performance may have substantially changed.⁵ For example, Lutgendorf argues that even at the time of the composition of the *Mānas* we should not presume that this written *katha* "was intended to stand by itself without further mediation or that its early 'telling' consisted only of reciting its text".⁶ Besides, the "slow, systematic, storytelling recitation, interspersed with prose explanations, elaborations, and homely illustrations of spiritual points" that is typical of *Mānas katha* performances now reflects, Lutgendorf argues, Tulsidas's own point about the Ram *katha* as being "mysterious, profound, enigmatic" and *requiring* exposition, because only a listener who is a "treasury of wisdom" can grasp its inner meaning.⁷ Aditya Behl has highlighted the

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- 5 Other studies of contemporary *kathas* in performance include Annd Grodzins Gold, *A Carnival of Parting: The Tales of King Bharthari and King Gopi Chand As Sung and Told by Madhu Natisar Nath of Ghatiyali* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Susan S. Wadley, *Raja Nal and the Goddess: The North Indian Epic Dhola in Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); J.D. Smith, *The Epic of Pabuji: A Study, Transcription and Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Shyam Manohar Pandey's transcriptions of the different versions of the Lorik-Chanda oral epic: *The Hindi Oral Epic Canainī (The Tale of Lorik and Candā)* (Allahabad: Sahitya Bhawan Ltd., 1982) and *The Hindi Oral Epic Tradition: Bhojpurī Lorikī* (Allahabad: Sahitya Bhawan, 1996-2005).
 - 6 Lutgendorf (1991), pp. 119-20. Even completely oral performances, such as the contemporary telling of the stories of King Bharthari and King Gopinath in rural Rajasthan, exhibit a complementarity between (oral) text and oral exposition. Madhu Nath's "performance alternates regularly between segments of sung lines, accompanied by music which he plays himself on the *sārangī*—a simple stringed instrument played with a bow—and a prose 'explanation' (*arthāv*). In this explanation he retells everything he has just sung, using more colourful, prosaic, and often vulgar language than he does in the singing. The spoken parts are performances or communicative events as clearly marked as the musical portions are. Whereas Madhu's ordinary style of speaking is normally low-key and can seem almost muted, his *arthāv* is always enunciated distinctly and projected vigorously. The *arthāv*, moreover, often incorporates the same stock phrases and poetic conceits that occur in the singing"; Gold (1992), p. 9. Interestingly, Gold chose to translate the *arthāv* rather than the sung text as more representative of Madhu's artful performance.
 - 7 Lutgendorf (1991), p. 118, quoting *Mānas* 1.30b, and p. 115. Tulsidas seems to occasionally throw in obscure verses, brief allusions, and references to religio-philosophical doctrines that cry out to be explained and developed; for examples of "mysterious verses" and the ways in which *katha* expounders explain them, see

importance of the enigmatic form in Hindavi sufi *kathas*: “Sufi romances are composed enigmatically because of a fundamental problem or enigma with which the spiritual users had to grapple”.⁸ Obscurities in the text—Lutgendorf and Behl both suggest—can thus be read as clues to points in the narrative text that would attract oral exposition.

Lutgendorf’s study importantly shows the *multiplicity* of formal and informal performance practices that have grown around a particular *katha* text, the complementarity between text and exposition, the expert knowledge that both performers and listeners possess and that is orally transmitted, the mixture of knowledge (*gyana*), devotion, emotion, and entertainment that the *katha* text and its performances activate, the formulaic elements and yet the artfulness of it all. But while Lutgendorf understandably considers many of these characteristics peculiar to the *Mānas* as a devotional text, we will see that many of the same elements come into play across a whole spectrum of *kathas*.

Epic-Puranic Frames

So many are the references to the epics and the Puranas even in *kathas* that have ostensibly little to do with them that we may speak of an epic-Puranic continuum that includes also romances and ritual tales (*prem-kathas* and *vrata-kathas*). Why are such epic-Puranic references and/or framing so ubiquitous?⁹ One possible explanation is that authors and storytellers may have wanted to tag their original stories onto the familiar epic-Puranic repertoire to strengthen their value and/or acceptability, and because telling was customarily presented as a “re-telling”—as scholarship on the “many Ramayanas” has amply shown.¹⁰ But while

ibid., pp. 221-23. Lutgendorf’s book explores a whole range of readings, tellings, and performances of the text, from private reading to public recitation to singing to ritual enactment. Even reading practices (*pāṭh*) range from private individuals to professional reciters, at home or in a temple, including the full recitation (*pārāyaṇ pāṭh*) in nine days, one month, and the “unbroken recitation” (*akhaṇḍ pāṭh*) within twenty-four hours—usually a sponsored ritual event; ibid., pp. 54, 60, 79.

8 A. Behl, ‘Introduction’ to *The Magic Doe: Qutban Suhrawardi’s Mirigāvatī*, trans. by A. Behl and ed. by Wendy Doniger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012a), p. 29.

9 Except, for example, Bajid’s tales, which do not refer to them; see Bangha in this volume.

10 A.K. Ramanujan’s essay ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation’ first appeared in Paula Richman’s collection *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); see also Richman’s further collection *Questioning Ramayanas: A*

A.K. Ramanujan's pioneering work highlighted the subversiveness of oral ("folklore") tellings, we will see that written tales could also offer bold twists on familiar epic characters and stories. Bhima Kabi's *Ḍaṅgvai kathā*, for example, rewrote the character of Subhadra and of other female characters from the *Mahābhārata* in a way that emphasised the importance and agency of the local Rajput women for whom he composed the tale.

Bhima, who also authored a version of the Chakravyuha story from the *Mahābhārata*, tells us that the wife and daughter of his Baghela chieftain or small king patron loved the Puranas and the *Mahābhārata*. Significantly, both women are named: his wife Manikdei is "a [*pati*] *vratī* who knows *vrata* *dharma*"; like Durga and Bhavani personified, she is devoted to *dharma* and always listens to the Vedas and Puranas, while her daughter, Ghatmadei, enjoys listening to the "*Bhāratha kathā*".¹¹ Such evidence shows that the authors and tellers of these tales also recited the Puranas and the epics—the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*—to their patrons.¹²

Puranas proclaim "frequently and often at considerable length" in so-called *phalashruti* verses (lit. "fruit of listening") the efficacy and the benefits that accrue from listening to, reciting, or copying them or making others do so.¹³ But *phalashruti* verses and instructions to listen to the tale "with undivided concentration" (*mana lāi*) invariably tag *kathas* from this period, whatever the topic. In Isardas's *Satyavatī kathā* the *phalashruti* stanza at the end declares the merit of listening to (as well as telling) this *katha* to be equal if not surpass that of many other rituals like pilgrimage or gift-giving to Brahmins. Knowledge is again mentioned as one benefit accrued:

South Asian Tradition (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000). For the *Mahābhārata*, see A. Hildebeitel, *Draupadī Among Rajputs, Muslims and Dalits: Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

11 S. Misra (1966), p. 84, stanza 4.

12 Another indirect piece of evidence is the Brahmin *kathavachak* from Kannauj chided by Vallabhacharya for earning money from expounding the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* along with other texts; he then turned to reciting the *Mahābhārata* to a "local king"; Shyam Das, *Eighty-four Vaishnavas* (Delhi: Butala Publications, 1985), pp. 31-37.

13 Indeed, listening to a *katha* or a *puran-katha* is presented as one of the most efficacious ways of cultivating a love for God, if not *the* most appropriate way in the Kali age; Lutgendorf (1991), pp. 57, 115; he also quotes the six-chapter *māhātmya* contained in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* that details the merits that accrue from reciting or listening to the text or presenting a copy to a devotee (p. 58); see also Hawley in this volume.

Whoever listens intently (*mana lāt*) to the tale of Satyavati loses their
 great sins (*mahāpāpa*).
 Knowledge springs in the mind of the listeners as if they'd heard the
 Vedas and Puranas,
 As if they'd given gifts and money (*dravya dāna*) to the Brahmins
 and dispatched them honourably;
 As if they'd performed ritual obligations [*"nema, dharma, acārā"*]
 and gained *darshan* of Deva Gopala;
 As if they'd bathed in all the *tirthas*, visited them, and given gifts.
 The fruit of telling the story equals listening to the thousand names of God;
 Isar *kabi* sang and it was as if he'd travelled to scores of *tirthas*.¹⁴

Listening to tales, the evidence shows, was thus presented and perceived as a meritorious and beneficial activity (see Khan, Sharma, and Bard in this volume). But we also see here a generic feature at work, one that we may link to performance context and audience expectations. Each tale modulates and combines registers of instruction and entertainment—through humorous/subversive situations, vivid dialogues, emotional scenes, displays of technical knowledge, and so on—so that drawing a line between “entertaining” and “enlightening/instructive” tales seems quite artificial.¹⁵ Rather, all these seem to have been ingredients that a good author and teller even then needed to be able to combine (and elaborate on depending on the audience’s mood). For example, good and bad rule is one of the topics upon which the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* instruct. So *katha* authors and tellers included, normally in the introductory section, a discourse on Kaliyuga and the instability and confusion prevailing in the world, and on good and bad rule—often extremely brief but nonetheless there. Even if there is little in Isardas’s *Satyavatī kathā* to suggest a courtly milieu—with its focus on a wife’s trials, penance, and reward for the sake of her husband’s health, the

14 S. Misra (1958), p. 94, stanza 58. See also the *phalashruti* in the *Ḍaṅḍavai kathā*, which implicitly equates the tale to a Purana: “If you hear the Purana you have *dharma*, if you listen to the Purana knowledge [*gyāna*] arises. Who has *dharma* gets wealth and sons, people without it are like beasts. For this reason Bhima proclaims [*gohrāvā*], forget everything and set your heart on Vishnu”. A few stanzas later, some lines that may be additions, since they do not appear in all the manuscripts, draw a direct link to this *katha* and the Puranas: 8.1-3, S. Mishra (1966), p. 87.

15 E.g. of the storytelling performances of Bharthari and Gopichand, Ann Gold says, “Like most of Rajasthan’s popular folk tradition these meshed with the audience’s twin passion for entertainment and enlightenment”; Gold (1992), p. 14.

story reads largely like a ritual *vrat-katha*—its introductory section still contains one stanza about unjust rule:

In a country where the king is evil (*mada*), no good man dwells.
 The mind of a stupid ruler is like the moon of the fourth night, blank.
 First he makes promises to the Brahmins,
 then he takes all the wealth himself.
 He considers gold equal to glass (*kañcana kām̐ca barābara dekhai*), and sin
 equal to virtue.¹⁶

This forces us to ask the question of what terms like *gyana* (knowledge), *bhava* (emotion), and expressions like listening to tales “*mana lāi*” (with concentration, bringing the mind-heart to bear upon) meant for audiences in this period.

Intertextual references to other characters and other stories must have been even then one of the pleasures of *katha* performances, and one of the skills that storytellers displayed, in performance possibly through the digressions that are endemic in many storytelling performances and traditions.¹⁷ Such intertextual play was of course based on the assumption that the audience would be familiar with the characters, stories, and situations hinted at and could savour the correspondence while listening to the performance and admire the storyteller’s ability to weave those references into the story.¹⁸ Thomas de Bruijn has spoken of the *katha* as a “dialogic genre”, so fundamental is this intertextual play to

16 S. Misra (1958), stanza 4, pp. 66-67.

17 Intertextual references often work as terms of comparison in evaluative descriptions: e.g. Indra, Krishna, Rama, *kinnara*, Kama, and Kubera are all invoked to praise in extravagant terms Madhavanal’s impressive appearance, his supernatural beauty, his wealth, and his attractiveness. Or else they help making a general point: Madhavanal cannot escape the line of his fate (*karama rekha*) any more than the Pandavas could their exile, or Raghava when he bore the consequences of Narada’s curse upon his father; it was because of fate that King Harishchandra found himself a humble water-carrier, and that Bali the king of the monkeys lost everything; *Ālamkṛt Mādhavānal Kāmakandalā*, ed. by Rajkumari Misra (Allahabad: Ratnakumari Svadhyay Sansthan, 1982), pp. 39-40. For intertextual references in Persian *qissas*, see Khan in this volume.

18 For a brilliant analysis of Surdas’s use of this device in his song-poems and the effect it has on listeners, see K. Bryant, *Poems to the Child-God: Structures and Strategies in the Poetry of Sūrdās* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), and Hawley in this volume. That the ability to refer to or to link a verse, a name or a situation to other characters and stories is still highly valued in oral exposition is supported by evidence in Lutgendorf (1991) and Gold (1992).

its narrative and performance logic, for example, in Malik Muhammad Jayasi's use of the Rama story in his *Padmāvat* (1540).¹⁹

In his observation of contemporary *Mānas katha* performances, Philip Lutgendorf notes that the invocation and the communal singing (*kirtan*) at the beginning of a performance, besides setting up the ritual-devotional time-space, "give the speaker a measure of the audience's mood, which will be crucial to the success of his performance". What about the framing that is *written* into *kathas* from this period, what clues does it give us about the way authors, tellers, and audiences perceived tales?

In the case of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, Lutgendorf has drawn attention to the importance of how the four sets of tellers and listeners of the *Mānas* match the four descending ghats to the "Lake of the Deeds of Ram". This Puranic framing turns Tulsidas's Ram *katha* into a kind of Purana while also underscoring the devotional message of the telling. The tellers and listeners include Shiva and Parvati (just as in 'Abd al-Rahman Chishti's *Mir'āt al-makhlūqāt* in Muzaffar Alam's chapter in this volume), the crow Bhushundi and Garuda, the sages Yajnavalkya and Bharadvaj, and finally Tulsidas and his audience.²⁰ In both the *Mānas* and the *Mir'āt al-makhlūqāt* this framing therefore inserts the story into the Puranic logic of divine intervention—with previous curses and boons explaining the birth and actions of various characters (for Tulsidas particularly in the first book). In the *Mir'āt* the framing also acts as an authenticating and familiarising device. Yet while in the *Mir'āt* the frame helps combine the different Indic and Islamic temporalities of creation, in the *Mānas* the multiple levels of narrators give a tangible sense of the eternal temporality of the story—it has always existed and it is eternally retold, even as or before it happens.²¹ The multiple narrators also underscore the special theme of the *Mānas*, i.e. the saving power of devotion and of Ram's name in

19 Thomas de Bruijn, 'Dialogism in a Medieval Genre: The Case of the Avadhi Epics', in *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture*, ed. by F. Orsini (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010), pp. 121-42. For a systematic survey of epic-Puranic references in Hindavi sufi romances, see Umapati Rai Chandel, *Hindī sūfī kāvyā meṃ paurāṇik ākhyān* (Delhi: Abhinav Prakashan, 1976).

20 Lutgendorf (1991), p. 25.

21 Famously, the first tellers of the story are Ram's own children. Lutgendorf (1991, pp. 24-25) observes that in the *Mānas* Tulsi draws attention to the multiple narrators so often that "one must assume it to be an important element in the poet's strategy; evidently Tulsi expected his audience to remain continuously aware of all four narrative frames".

the Kali age—Bhushundi, Shiva, and Tulsidas are all eloquent on this point.²²

A simpler epic-Puranic framing device appears almost ubiquitously in the Hindavi tales of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—whether they actually reworked epic-Puranic material or not, and not necessarily to produce the same effects. In Isardas’s *Satyāvātī kathā*, for example, written at Joginipur-Delhi, this framing device provides simply a stepping-stone for the narrative, though it arguably also lends weight to the tale and underscores the benefits accruing to listening to it.²³ After invoking Ganesha, the power of the Goddess Jalpa (*Jālapā māyā*), and Rama’s compassion and listing the requisites of a good king, Isardas has Janmejaya ask Vyasa *rikhi* (*rishi*) where the five Pandavas went while in exile. After naming the places they visited in the first seven years, Vyasa comes to the eighth year, when the Pandavas reached Jharkhanda and had *darshan* of the sage Markandeya. In the ensuing dialogue between the Pandavas and Markandeya, the brothers ask the sage for a “book full of *rasa*” (*grantha rasārā*), so that:

listening to it our dharma may increase,
we may attain the path of salvation and our sins may be removed.
The mind wanders if the body/one (*jīu*) is renunciant (*bairāgī*).
Today we have found a great treasure, o Guru, a great fortune.
Tell us something, Gosain, that will awaken our *gyāna*.²⁴

Satyavati’s *katha* is, implicitly, that book, and though these two sets of Puranic narrators play no further part in the narrative, the link has been established.

After an invocation to Ganesha, to Sharda (Sarasvati), and to Shiva, Bhima Kabi begins his *Ḍaṅgvai kathā* (in “*pasu bhāṣā*”) with a summary description of his story—as one would do in performance—and links it directly to the *Mahābhārata* and its heroes:

22 Lutgendorf (1991), pp. 28-29.

23 The *Satyāvātī kathā* is only one of a number of tales circulating in this period that have *sat* in the title (the most famous of them is probably *Mainā-sat*) and that deal with women’s duty and religion. The story develops very much along the pattern of the *vrāt-kathas* that Lutgendorf mentioned above. See also Amy Bard in this collection for Shi’i homoforms.

24 S. Misra (1958), pp. 68-69. A similar stanza is found in the eighth stanza of the *Ḍaṅgvai kathā*, see S. Misra (1966), p. 87.

*sārada au ganesa baru dīnhā, taba maiṃ kathā arambhai kīnhā;
 tehi pāche saṃvareuṃ ganānāha, karahu bhīma daṃgau parḡāha.
 krisna sana kasa maḍī hurārī, kaise paṇḍau līnha ubārī;
 so kabi bhīma kahau samujhāī, paṛhe guṇe te pātaku jāī.
 au kahau srāpu urbasī dīnhā, kaise urbasī ghorī kīnhā,
 jāke kahe anega kali, duritana jāīṃ parāī,
 kṛṣṇa caritra kachu gāvau, bhāratha kathā bicārī । 2 ।*

Sharda and Ganesha gave a boon, then I could begin my story.
 After that I praise Shiva [Gananath], make Bhima look after Dangai [Dangau].
 How the fight with Krishna began, and how the Pandavas saved him.
 Explain and recount it, Bhima the Poet, so that by reading
 and considering it sins may go.
 Sing of how Urvashi was cursed and turned into a mare.
 So that by telling it the many sins of Kaliyuga may be forsaken,
 Consider the *Bharatha kathā* and sing some of Krishna's story.²⁵

Then, over two stanzas, Bhima Kabi considers the characteristics of the present age, Kaliyuga: everyone has forgotten ascetic practices, prayers (*japa tapa*), and vigour; hypocrites control everything; Brahmins and cows are no longer revered; temples and pilgrimage places are empty; crooks serve lowly masters and masters praise crooked deeds; nobody thinks about the future or the transience of everything and everyone—which he suggests is the topic of his story.²⁶ There follows a praise of Kashi (Banaras) and a brief “discussion on knowledge”, to which we return below.

But the most striking thing about this tale is the way it uses the familiar characters from the *Mahābhārata* to fashion a story that drastically subverted the epic story in order to speak directly to the concerns of his patron's milieu. Remarkable in this is the important, indeed decisive, role that women characters play. Not so much Urvashi-turned-mare, the narrative ploy, but even more significantly Krishna's sister and Arjun's wife Subhadra, and to a lesser extent Duryodhana's wife. They are the ones who direct the action and who articulate the primacy of kinship ties over those of subordinate rule. Taken together with the explicit mention of the Baghela chieftain's wife and daughter as possible patrons of the tale, already mentioned above, this telling suggests a particular historical moment and location in which women of the local elite could

25 S. Misra (1966), p. 82. Explain (*samujhāī*), consider (*bicārī*, *guṇe*—also singing), recount (*kahau*), sing (*gāvau*)—all these verbs are employed to describe the text and its telling.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 85-87, stanzas 6-7.

and did find a narrative voice through their counterparts in the tale. It is worth spending some time on this aspect of the *katha*.

Strong Women: The *Kathā* of Dangvai or the Epic Overturned

The *Ḍaṅḡvai kathā* is an original take on the *Mahābhārata* that uses epic-Puranic characters—at times deploying their familiar characteristics (Bhima’s bravery and strength, Narada’s trouble-making, Shakuni’s wiliness), but mostly freely twisting them and their relationships to suit the story—to weave a tale that responds closely to the concerns of its own milieu.²⁷ The *Ḍaṅḡvai kathā* comes from a Baghela milieu, though it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where geographically. Simon Digby reminds us that the Baghelas, like the Ujjainiyas and the Bachgotis, were major suppliers of military manpower to the Jaunpur Sultans and later allies of Sher Shah. They were therefore among the “spurious Rajput” groups whose kings (*bhuārā* <*bhūpāla*) were more like chieftains and whose courts would have been rather small affairs, though later in the sixteenth century Virabhanu and his grandson Virabhadra became close to Humayun and Akbar and established themselves at Rewa. The values that the story embraces are those of subordinate chiefs of limited means, who have to negotiate between the call of honour and the reality of subordination.²⁸ The call of honour demands, for example, that one protects anyone who seeks shelter or supports one’s kin. But the reality is one of subordination, forced compliance, exile, and punishment at the hands of one’s overlord. In particular, the tale revolves around three issues and choices: whether to surrender a treasured object (or woman) or keep it and flee; whether to give shelter or refuse it; and whether loyalty to one’s kin comes before loyalty to one’s overlord. Women play a vocal and forceful role in all these choices.

27 There are a few other works by this name: a *Ḍaṅḡvai Parva* by one Balvir (1608Vi, *NPS Khoj Report* 1917, Nr 13), a *Jikrī Daṅḡ Rājā kī* by one Totaram ([n.d.], *NPS Khoj Report* 1932, no. 220), and an anonymous *Ḍaṅḡvai Purāṇa* (*NPS Khoj Report* 1935, Nr 152); S. Misra (1966), p. 51.

28 See Simon Digby, ‘Two Captains of the Jaunpur Sultanate’, in *Circumambulations in South Asian History: Essays in Honour of Dirk H.A. Kolff*, ed. by J. Gommans and O. Prakash (Leiden: Brill, 2003), p. 165; and Hirananda Shastri, ‘The Baghela Dynasty of Rewah’, *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, no. 21 (Calcutta: Govt. of India, 1925).

In Puranic fashion, the story begins in the god Indra's heaven, where the sage Durvasa (later also called Gorakh and clearly a Nath yogi in appearance) has come as a welcome and honoured guest (“*baṛa pāhuna*”). A dance performance by the *apsaras* Urvashi is organised for him, but the beautiful courtesan (“*pātura*”) is dismayed: his ascetic appearance, described in detail, contrasts horribly with her own beautiful and adorned form.²⁹ Urvashi decides to dance ungracefully and out of rhythm,³⁰ and the irate sage curses her to descend to the earth and become a mare (*ghorī*) by day and a woman by night. Only when the magical “three-and-a-half” *vajra* weapons strike will she be freed from the curse.³¹ We can see here a further transformation of the character of the heavenly nymph Urvashi and of her story with Pururavas. Unlike the Urvashi of the *R̥gveda*, the *Mahābhārata*, and Kalidasa's *Vikramorvaśīya*, Urvashi here is a courtesan, there is no love story with Pururavas, and the curse turns her into a mare, not a vine.³²

After some wandering on earth in a geographical setting that is markedly epic-Puranic, the mare Urvashi ends up in a forest full of local trees and flowers.³³ Informed by his gardener, King Dangvai of Dangi

29 S. Misra (1966), p. 91.

30 “*ulaṭi pulaṭi kai nācai, milai na tārau tāra*”; *ibid.*, p. 9115, *doha*.

31 I was finally able to find out what the “three-and-a-half weapon” was thanks to a Persian translation of another *katha*, *Mirigāvati*: “the three-and-a-half weapon is an expression relating to four people – one is the Bhim's weapon, one is Parasuram's, one is Hanuman's and the half is Duryodhan's” and it is it is made of copper, iron, and bronze; *Mirigāvati*, Chester Beatty, ms In 37, fol. 94r.

32 For a brilliant archaeological exploration of the story of Urvashi and Pururavas in Sanskrit sources, see D.D. Kosambi, ‘Urvasi and Pururavas’, in *Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962), pp. 42-81.

33 The mare initially descends onto the world of men in “*Jambudvīpa desa*” and roams the forests of Dandakal and Kedali, the mountains of Binjha (Vindhya) and Vindhyaadhar, Kanauj *des*, the country of the Kurus, Kamani, Banga and the mountains of Tilangi, Kashmir, Jalandhar, Chaupar [?], and Naipar (Nepal) [21], before stopping at a “forest near Kashi” full of local trees and flowers—“*kela, nariyara, dākha khajūrī, candana, arga sipari pūrī. kaṭahara, baṛahara bera khīranī, aura sadāphara nimbū jāmunī*”, 22.4-5; S. Misra (1966), p. 93. Ann Gold notes that “Distinctive to Madhu's telling is a general concern for mundane detail: many descriptions of actions and relationships, well understood or easily imagined in village thought, that do not advance the story line but rather situate it in familiar experience... Such familiar scenes or situations may, moreover, be suddenly spiced with magical occurrences or divine intervention: donkeys talk to village elders, a guru's play spoils the carefully crafted pots; messengers come from heaven to straighten out the king and save his subjects. It would seem that Madhu and his teachers, in adapting a traditional tale for village patrons, elaborate both the familiar and the magical to strike a captivating blend”; Gold (1992), p. 63.

desa comes to see the beautiful mare and is smitten at once.³⁴ But after coming face to face with him, the mare escapes. Despite their precious horses (*tokhara* and *tajana*), all his horsemen fall behind in the chase and only King Dangvai is left to follow her at nightfall. He then sees her transforming into a beautiful woman (*triya rupa*) and is frightened at first—is she a female demon or ghost or one of the eighty-four yoginis, was she sent by the gods to ensnare him? Yet he still grabs her reins and mounts her—a metaphor for intercourse since she has already turned into a woman? The figure of the seductive woman-mare who attracts and is pursued by the male protagonist is familiar from other tales from this period (in Qutban’s *Mirigāvatī* she is a doe), but notably here Urvashi does not lure away Dangvai but surrenders to him.³⁵ Urvashi the mare here seems to be a figure of territorial conquest, and a trophy that incites pride and envy.

Urvashi tells him her story and begs him to keep her, though in hiding. Dangvai is overjoyed: “I’ll have a nine-fold treasure (*naunidhi*) sitting at home!” he exclaims a few times.³⁶ Back at the palace, Dangvai’s queens ceremonially welcome the mare, decked in all her finery. Dangvai keeps her hidden in his picture gallery (*citrasārī*) and spends all his time with her. Eventually one of his queens, Padmavati, finds out the truth.

Meanwhile Narada—the Puranic messenger and trouble-maker—informs Krishna. He praises the mare’s beauty to the skies and advises Krishna to take her from Dangvai by force (*ajorī*). Krishna, who now will have no rest until he has acquired the mare, sends an envoy, ostensibly just to enquire about the truth of this report. Dangvai protests that he knows nothing about it, though he is in no doubt as to what the “enquiry” entails: “I am your slave, he repeated several times. Whichever horse or elephant you want from the treasury, I’ll give it to you”. Krishna’s request then becomes more explicit, and is accompanied by a threat: “If

34 The terms used are *lāgi samādhī* (S. Mishra, 1966, p. 94, 23.5.), suggesting a moment of mystical encounter similar to the one in Qutban’s tale; see Behl (2012a), pp. 111-16.

35 Wendy Doniger has written extensively on the seductive (and threatening) mare vs. the pacific and nurturing cow, but Urvashi’s sexuality here does not appear to be threatening; see Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, ‘Sacred Cows and Profane Mares in Indian Mythology’, *History of Religions* 19.1 (1979): 1-26, and *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

36 S. Misra (1966), pp. 97-98, 27.6, 28.10.

Dangvai wants to keep his *ghara* (house), he must give up his *ghori* (mare), so Krishna said".³⁷ The second envoy adds his own word of advice:

Who in the three worlds will save you? Krishna will strike wherever you go.
If you want to save your life and enjoy your kingdom,
Take the mare with you and flee today to the quick.³⁸

Dangvai swears that he will never give up the mare as long as he lives and indirectly accuses Krishna of being a bad king—which lord (*ṭhakura*) has ever been seen taking someone else's wife by force (*barabasa*)?

Wherever a lord behaves poorly, how can his subjects live?
If a lord (*ṭhākura*) does not observe dharma, fate/Brahma makes him
dwell in hell.³⁹

What sin (*gunahbāta*) has Dangvai committed against Krishna? He will rather leave his country (*desa*) for the sake of the mare.

Envoys travel to and fro, each advising Dangvai either to surrender the mare or flee Krishna's wrath. His wives, whom Dangvai consults in the women's palace (*antahpura*), advise him to submit to Krishna, surrender the mare, and beg for forgiveness: thirty-three thousand gods look up to Krishna, who has killed many demons, they remind him; "never be an enemy of one like him, give him the mare and fall at his feet".⁴⁰ But Dangvai is determined to leave. A cadence of "*chāṃḍe*", "*chāṃḍesi*" ("he left") marks Dangvai's pathetic exile.

Dangvai's flight takes him to several epic-Puranic characters: the Ocean, Sheshnaga, Vibhishana, Kubera, Duryodhana, and Yudhishtira. Each of them, though, refuses his call for shelter and protection.⁴¹ In the netherworld Sheshnaga, the Lord of the Snakes, feels it is beyond his power to give shelter to Dangvai, since he is indebted to Krishna for his domain ("*Hari ke rākhe rahuṃ patārā*").⁴² Ravana's half-brother

37 Ibid., p. 100, 32.3.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., p. 100, 33 *doha*.

40 Ibid., p. 102, 36.4.

41 The Ocean argues that he has already had to suffer at Murari's hands when, in the Tretayuga, Ramchandra had "tied up" the Ocean in order to cross over to Lanka; in fact, the Ocean retells Rama's story in one stanza. Ibid., p. 104, 38.

42 Ibid., p. 104, 40.2.

Vibhishana, to whom Dangvai turns next, is similarly indebted to Krishna,⁴³ and moreover Krishna is a “*baṛa ṭhākura*”, a great lord.⁴⁴

Dangvai then approaches the *Mahābhārata* heroes one by one. First he goes to Duryodhana, the head of the Kauravas. But Duryodhana trembles when he hears his plea: “Who will give you shelter, *bīra*⁴⁵ [...] Who will embrace (*aṅgvai*) enmity with Krishna? Go elsewhere, for I do not dare show pride (*garava na karata*) toward Hari”. Besides, Duryodhana adds, Krishna is close kin (*niyari saḡāt*).⁴⁶ Yudhishtira first asks why Dangvai has come without “Lakshmi or wealth” to offer and without attendants (*parigraha*).⁴⁷ He is just as adamant as Duryodhana in refusing to take Dangvai’s side against Krishna, their affine.⁴⁸ If they give shelter to Dangvai now, they will regret it later, for their fate is threaded with Krishna’s (“Whatever the fate of the five Pandavas, it is the fate of the sixth, Narayana”). But Yudhishtira is ready to arrange a reconciliation (*meru*) if Dangvai hands him the mare. To do otherwise would be madness, for who opposes the ruler of the three worlds? And “who will die for someone else’s death?”⁴⁹

By this stage the desperate Dangvai is ready to kill himself. Amidst loud cries he prepares a pyre on the banks of the Ganga with the intention of immolating himself alongside the mare/Urvashi. But his luck turns, for it so happens that Subhadra—Arjuna’s wife and Krishna’s half-sister—has gone to bathe in the river. Deeply struck by the sight of such distress, she enquires after his fate and then resolves to help him, whatever the consequences.⁵⁰ And when Dangvai doubts her ability to act upon her offer (“on whose strength do you want to protect me?”), she replies proudly that she is powerfully connected. It is an impressively assertive self-introduction, very far from the elision of women’s names

43 Because—as his avatara as Rama—he gave him the kingdom of Lanka.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 106, 42.4.

45 “Brother” as well as “hero”.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 108, 45 *doha*.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 108, 46.4.

48 “Hari keeps *gotiyāi* with us, for us the source of much joy”. *Ibid.*, p. 109, 47.3.

49 *Ibid.*, 47 *doha*, p. 109.

50 She wonders: “Have you raised your hand against your sister or have you killed a Brahmin? Did you come abroad to trade and have lost all your wealth gambling? Have you been the cause of your family’s ruin, or has the king taken all you had? Have highway men robbed you by force, or have you stolen someone else’s mare?”; *ibid.*, p. 110, 49.2-6.

and the prohibition to utter their husbands' that we are accustomed to recognise as a feature of patriarchy:

*haum̐ patibratā pārtha kai nārī, au ahibarana kera mahatārī;
jeṭṭh dudistila bharahī bhīm̐vā, devaru nakule au sahadevā.
pāṇḍu sasura au kontā sāsū, indraprastha hama bhūjaim̐ rājū.
bāsudeva kai bahinī, nāum̐ subhadrā mohim̐.
aba jani cintā manai, karihaum̐ nirabhai tohim̐.⁵¹*

I am Partha's *pativratā* wife and Abhimanyu's mother.

Yudhishtira and Bhima the mace-bearer are my *jeṭṭhas* (older brother-in-laws), Nakula and Sahdeva my *devars*.

Pandu and Kunti are my in-laws, and we enjoy the rule of Indraprastha.

I am Basudeva's sister, Subhadra is my name.

Now stop worrying, I'll relieve you of your fear.

This assertive and active Subhadra is also a far cry from the tearful figure of Subhadra in the *Mahābhārata*.⁵² When she suggests that Dangvai go to Bhima, and he again expresses his doubts, since he has tried the Pandavas before, she assures him that Bhima will keep his word to her, as she has had occasion to appreciate in the past:

*taba asa bacana subhadrā kahaī, mohim̐ bharosa bhīma kara ahaī.
bācābandha bāṇha mohi dharī, bahuta bharosa kara karī.*

Then Subhadra said: "I trust Bhima.

He keeps his word and will support me, I have relied on him a lot".⁵³

Subhadra knows how to work on Bhima. First she has him acquiesce to any request from her, which he happily does, then she praises him at length for his strength and valour (*paurukha*) by reminding him of

51 Ibid., p. 111, 50.7-9, *doha* 1.

52 In the epic Subhadra figures first as the woman Arjuna falls in love with and carries off at her own brother's suggestion. She then has to assuage Draupadi's jealousy by submitting to her. After she gives birth to Abhimanyu she is taken to Dwarka, while the five Pandavas go into exile accompanied by Draupadi. She next appears as Abhimanyu's grieving mother, and once again as a figure of grief who pleads with Krishna to revive Abhimanyu's posthumously (still)born son, Parikshita, who is the only Pandava male left. And when the Pandavas ultimately leave on their "great journey", she is left behind as guardian to the Yadava heir, Vajra Yadava; see textual references in Vanamala Bhawalkar, *Eminent Women in the Mahābhārata* (Delhi: Sharada Publishing House, 2002), Vol. 2, pp. 337-51.

53 S. Misra (1966), p. 112, 51.9-10.

all the heroes he has slain. Finally she mentions Dangvai, saying she has already promised to protect him with Bhima's support. If Bhima now refuses Subhadra will burn herself alive together with Abhimanyu, a final touch of emotional blackmail. But Bhima is unconcerned about consequences. The fact that she could count upon him "is a blessing for me", he says.⁵⁴

So while with Bhima we have the most uncompromising statement of the ideology of valour and protection—he gladly takes on the burden of Dangvai's gratitude and will not surrender him to anyone, for it is now a question of his own honour and shame—the strategist is Subhadra. Such is the strength of Bhima's purpose that Yudhishtira's brothers and Kunti, each sent to make Bhima see sense (otherwise whatever trust they have with Krishna will be destroyed), are won over by Bhima's forceful argument: "If I surrender a man who sought refuge with me, there will be no greatness (*baṛāī*) left among us five brothers".⁵⁵

Nobody breaks an alliance (*prīti-uccheda*) the day one's lord is in trouble.

If you die in the service of a Brahmin you reign over thousands of rebirths.

If you go to a pilgrimage place when death approaches, you either revive
or you go straight to heaven.

But if you surrender a man who sought shelter,
you are reborn twenty-one times in hell.

One who lusts after the wife of a friend, relative, or guru,
Earns as much sin as the one who withdraws shelter.⁵⁶

Even with Pradyumna—Krishna's son who has been sent as an envoy and who recounts the ten avatars in order to remind the Pandavas who they are going to war against—Bhima stands firm: glory (*jasa, sobhā*) does not depend on victory or defeat, but on doing the right thing. And Krishna himself will earn no glory in the world by attacking the Pandavas for the sake of Dangvai's mare. Pradyumna can only report back to Krishna that the Pandavas, his close allies in the *Mahābhārata*, are not afraid of him: "They do not talk sense (*sidhai bātā*), they speak of oath (*sapata*) and glory (*jasa*)".⁵⁷

54 Ibid., p. 114.

55 Ibid., p. 108, 45 *doha* a.

56 Ibid., 63, p. 120.

57 Ibid., 72.4, p. 126.

So while risking the wrath of Krishna (called “*bara sultānu*”) over a petty chief and his trophy woman/mare is presented as foolish and suicidal, it is also what Rajput honour demands. In a still more extraordinary twist, even the Kauravas, after Nakula goes to enlist their support, come to fight Krishna alongside the Pandavas! The logic of the *Mahābhārata* is completely overturned in order to make the point that a Rajput must support his kin and retinue in trouble. True, Duryodhana wavers at first, but again it is his wife Bhanamati who speaks up in support for one’s kin over selfish interest—“Glory spreads from winning and losing”, she says, “Listen *swami*, wealth and the earth belong to no one”.⁵⁸ If you make the wrong choice you can always blame it on sins and *karma* in previous births (*purbil*), she adds. (Wily Shakuni instead had suggested abstaining and taking over the kingdom after Krishna has killed all the Pandavas.⁵⁹) While the wives of the subordinate chieftain Dangvai advised prudence and compliance, the wives of lineage Rajputs advise supporting kin and the choice of enduring glory over short-term interest—transience is one of the truths at the heart of this *katha*.

As the mighty clash between the two armies approaches—gods and semi-gods enlist with Krishna, while human allies join the Pandavas and Kauravas—Duryodhana has second thoughts. He curses Bhima, saying: “To hell with your manliness (*manusāt*)! The whole army is disappearing in the fight, who will be left to do valorous deeds afterwards? ... Our honour (*pati*) will disappear alongside our army”.⁶⁰ Like other *kathas* of this period, there is no alternative to going to war, and the preparations, the clash, and the battlefield strewn with corpses and limbs attacked by jackals, crows, and female ghosts provide opportunity for a lively description which one feels storytellers could expound upon at leisure.⁶¹ But who can win? And should Bhima be killed by Krishna, of all people? The story finds another solution. While Bhima and Krishna are locked in combat, their disc and mace get so entangled that Hanuman has to go to disentangle their weapons (*bajra*). In so doing, the magical “three-and-a-half” weapons come together, Urvashi is released from her curse

58 S. Misra (1958), stanza 83.5 and *doha* a, p. 131, emphasis added.

59 *Ibid.*, 84 *doha*, p. 132.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 142, 100.4-5 *doha*.

61 In the *Dangvai kathā* the war is narrated with longer stanzas detailing the many participants, the mountain-like elephants, the horsemen and foot soldiers, the earth trembling under their weight, the warriors’ individual exploits, and the battlefield (*ibid.*, pp. 134-45); the description is very similar in Jayasi’s *Padmāvat*.

and whisked off to heaven, and Bhima can take Dangvai to submit honourably to Krishna:

“*Deva*, the reason for this great battle, that beautiful woman, has gone to heaven. The mare for whom this fracas (*caucadu*) broke out has climbed on an air craft and gone to heaven”.

Dangvai felt regret in his heart: “Fate led my heart astray.

I disobeyed Basudeva (Krishna), I brought grief to the Kauravas and Pandavas”.

Dangvai thought to himself: “I have been deficient in my action.

How can I wash the sin (*kalanika*) of the mare, Gosain!?”⁶²

At first Krishna reproaches the Kauravas and Pandavas: “Those I gave kingdoms to enjoy today rose up in arms against me”.⁶³ But when Duryodhana grasps one of his feet, Karna grasps the other, and Arjun pleads with him, Krishna lifts them all up in an embrace. Proper farewells seal the peace and everyone returns to their domains.

The *katha* captures dramatically the fear (*khabhāru*) and desperate quest for shelter that warriors out of favour must have felt, crying for shelter outside the gates of other chiefs, pleading that they were being persecuted through no fault of their own, and appealing to their helpers’ principles (like valour, *purukhārathu*), or else flattering them into taking their side. In the tale, the other chiefs first welcome the wandering chief with respect, but are quick to send him off when they realise what enemy they would make if they gave him shelter.

With regard to the conflict of duty that arises between loyalty to one’s lord (and sometimes kin) and assistance to one’s brothers, the *katha* articulates several positions: some see it as an opportunity to advance their interests, others (like Yudhishtira) blame the shelterer for jeopardising their position for the sake of a nobody and for abstract principles. Significantly, the wives Bhanmati and Subhadra argue that, when the currency is *sata* (truth and virtue), fame and a good name are more important than victory or defeat, or indeed death. At the same time the *katha* suggests that a good overlord should *not* demand everything and anything from his subordinates and should be quick to accept their apologies if they submit after taking up arms against him. While drawing upon the familiar set of *Mahābhārata* characters, then,

62 S. Misra (1958), p. 146, 105.3-7 and *doha*.

63 *Ibid.*, 106.4, p. 147.

Bhima Kavi fashioned both a gripping tale that turned the epic tale upside down and powerful and articulate women characters in whom his elite women patrons may have wanted to find themselves reflected.

Varieties of Knowledge

To a greater or lesser extent knowledge (*gyana*) is advertised and included as a theme in many tales from this period. That debates around spiritual knowledge were popular in this period is proved by the genre of imaginary *goshthi* or *samvad* between well-known spiritual figures or between characters embodying opposite views, often with sharply satirical or simply humorous edges. We find *gyan goshtis* mentioned or briefly sketched in several *kathas* from this period.⁶⁴

Take the miniature *gyan goshti* between the sage Durvasa and his body in the *Ḍaṅgvai kathā*. Durvasa, we are told, has caused much suffering to his body by practising ascetic penance in Kashi for a thousand years. The five senses (*pañcabhūta*) decide to leave his body, complaining that “he has given us much trouble (*kaṣṭa*)”. When the sage, shaken out of his trance, asks them to explain themselves, they declare over two stanzas that he has been a terrible master, without any desire that they may fulfil and unconcerned with worldly shame. “In this world everything appears as *rasa*, and without Vishnu nothing tastes sweet”:

You find happiness through your body,
 no good comes without the body, they say.
 We are the ones who allow life on earth, who is dearer than us?
 We are the ones who maintain or sway *satta* [*sata*],⁶⁵
 we can destroy or reduce to begging.
 We make people laugh or cry, we are the ones who show disaster;
 If one knows yoga (*joga juguti*), then we are his slaves”.⁶⁶

64 For *goshthi*, or discussion over points of spiritual knowledge or religious practice, as an early modern devotional genre in Hindavi, often with Gorakhnath as one of the debaters, see David Lorenzen, ‘Sain’s *The Kabir-Raidas Debate*’, in *Praises to a Formless God: Nirguṇī Texts from North India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 169-204; see also Eleanor Zelliot, ‘A Medieval Encounter Between Hindu and Muslim: Eknath’s Drama-Poem Hindu-Turk. Samvad’, in *India’s Islamic Traditions*, ed. by Richard Eaton (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 64-82.

65 A polysemic word whose meanings include “essence”, “vigour, energy”, as well as “virtue”; see R.S. McGregor, *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992, 32nd impression 2003), p. 977.

66 S. Misra (1966), 11.3-5, *doha*, pp. 88-89.

After “having a *gyan goshti* and assuaging the five senses”, Durvasa leaves for Mount Kailasa.⁶⁷ The debate is hardly developed here, but since there is much textual variation among the manuscripts at this point, with several verses added to the speech by the five senses, we may take it as an indication that storytellers and scribes found this a good place to expand.⁶⁸ Jayasi inserts a fully-fledged *gyan goshti*, humorous and yet profound, at the end of his retelling of the Krishna *katha*.⁶⁹ The debate is between Krishna and Gorakhnath over the relative merits of *bhakti*'s *bhoga* (enjoyment) of *rasa* and of renunciant yoga, and while nobody is the winner, the debate articulates Krishna's “mystery” of *bhoga* more convincingly.

And while *gyana* often refers to spiritual knowledge, there is one particular form of knowledge that tales and their tellers particularly claim to impart, which is knowledge related to music and performance art (see d'Hubert, Miner, and Busch in this volume). The poet-performer (whether singer or storyteller) bestowed authority and value upon himself through his display of technical musical knowledge, usually through performance scenes *within* the tales (e.g. d'Hubert and Miner). The narrative pace slows down, details increase the “density” of the telling,⁷⁰ and with a mirroring effect the characters' connoisseurship reflects back the connoisseurship of the poet-performer and of his patrons. The romance between the talented Brahmin musician Madhavanal and the beautiful courtesan Kamkandhala predates this period, yet the numerous retellings in North Indian vernaculars (and one in Persian) from this period suggest a recurrent interest in the characters and the story.⁷¹

67 Ibid., p. 90, 12.1.

68 See *ibid.*, p. 89.

69 See Parameshvarilal Gupta, *Malik Muhammad Jāyasī kṛt Kanhāvāt* (Banaras: Vishvavidyalay Prakashan, 1981), pp. 314-18; for a fuller discussion see my ‘Inflected *Kathas*: Sufis and Krishna Bhaktas in Awadh’, in *Religious Interactions in Mughal India*, ed. by V. Dalmia and M. Faruqi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014); for a different interpretation, see Heidi Pauwels, ‘Whose Satire? Gorakhnāth Confronts Krishna in *Kanhāvāt*’, in *Indian Satire in the Period of First Modernity*, ed. by Monika Horstmann and Heidi Pauwels (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), pp. 35-64.

70 For density see Lutgendorf (1991), p. 191. In Alam's tale, there are many variants and interpolations in the manuscripts for this episode, suggest that these episodes were particularly important for storytellers.

71 R.S. McGregor lists a Sanskrit play by Anandadhara (c.1300), a narrative poem (*prabandha*) by Ganapati in Gujarati (1528), two Rajasthani versions, a *chaupai* by the extraordinarily prolific Kushallabha (1559); *Hindi Literature from the Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1984), p. 62. The editor of Alam's

Musical connoisseurship (*guna*) is a central theme of the story between the Brahmin musician and the courtesan dancer-singer. It is also key to the characterisation of the king and patron. *Guna* is a polysemic word at this time (see also Busch in this volume)—it refers generically to “talent” (King Gobind Chand of Puhupati is first called “multi-talented”, “*bahu gunā*”) or specifically to aesthetic, and particularly musical, talent and connoisseurship. The term *catura* (clever) is used as a synonym, while its antonym *mūrkhā/mūrḥa* (stupid, also *abibekī*) means clueless, devoid of musical understanding. *Gunī* (talented, knowledgeable) can mean talented and knowledgeable, or simply a “musician”. Kamkandala is first introduced as “*pātara gunī*”—a talented courtesan—even before the head-to-toe description showcases her beauty and, as Behl suggested, arouses passion (*shauq*) in the listeners as well as in the characters of the tale.⁷² But Madhavanal’s beauty and talent also arouse dangerous desire in the women of the city of Puhupavati, so much so that their irate husbands force the king to order him to leave!⁷³

Listen, King, to what we say, Madhona has entranced all the women.
He plays [lit. “does”] *ragas* and bewitches them, they all go after him
with doe-like gait.⁷⁴

King Bhopati, reluctant to send away such a talented musician, tests Madhavanal’s power by asking him to play at court. Bewitched, all the king’s maids forget what they are doing and come running. The king has

text, Rajkumari Mishra, also lists a *vilasa* by Madhava (1600), a Gujarati version by Damodar Kavi, a Brajbhasha one by Rajkavi Kesa (1717), a Rajasthani one by Jagannatha Kavi (1744), and several more; *Mādhavānal Kāmakandalā*, ed. by Rajkumari Mishra (Allahabad: Rajkumari Svadhyay Sansthan, 1982), p. 15. To these should be added Haqiri Kashani, the author of a Persian *masnavi* version called *Maḥẓ-i ‘Ijāz [The True Miracle?]*, 1091H/1680]; *Haqīriya’s Masnavī The True Miracle (Mādhavānal Kāmakandalā)*, ed. by Yoga Dhyan Ahuja (Delhi: University of Delhi, 1965); see Prashant Keshavmurti, ‘Haqīrī Kāṣānī, *Maṭṭnawī-i mādhavānal-kāmakandalā mausūm ba maḥẓ-i ‘i’jāz’*, *Perso-Indica*, <http://perso-indica.net/work.faces?idsec=16&idw=122>; I am grateful to Imre Bangha for the reference.

72 R. Mishra (1982), 18.1, p. 15, also 26.2, p. 21; Behl (2012a), p. 33.

73 “One woman fell down, entranced; another brought her hands to her lips. One whose eyes locked with his left the pond and came near him. One forgot to keep her clothes in order, another let her hair loose, besotted. One lay aside her ornaments, another took off her waistband. One woman got up and moved towards him, like a spotted doe on hearing a tune. *Doha*: Madana [like Kama, the god of love], took the bow with the five flower-arrows and the woman was struck on the spot. With their graceful gait, they were all entranced, like gazelles by a hunter”; *ibid.*, 10, p. 9.

74 *Ibid.*, 13.4-5, p. 11.

no choice but to exile him. Unlike other sufi tales of quest, Madhavanal's journey as a *bairagi* is very short. In a mere two lines he reaches the city of Kamavati, where the beautiful Kamkamandala resides. By contrast, the two musical performances in Kamavati take up twenty stanzas and include a complete list of *ragas* and *raginis* (cf. Miner and Appendix).⁷⁵

When Madhavanal arrives, a musical performance is about to begin at the court of King Kamaseni. Madhavanal, a stranger, is stopped from entering by the doorkeeper and has to listen from outside:

Madhav sat at the gate door, there was a tournament (*akhārā*)
 in the abode of the king.
 When the string-instrumentalists (*tantakāra*) sang,
 twelve played the Mridanga,
 The fourth among them was incompetent,
 he had only four fingers in his right hand.
 The rhythm and the melody were broken but the stupid people
 did not understand anything.
 Who would be such a connoisseur of melody (*suragyāni*)
 —everyone was stupid in the king's assembly.
 Who would notice the broken rhythm in the tune of the *mridanga*
 among twelve players?⁷⁶

But Madhavanal, sitting outside the door, beats his head in despair at the fault "since he knew rhythm and bad rhythm (*kutāla*), the seven notes, and could recite (*bakhānai*) all the characteristics (*pramāṇa*) of music".⁷⁷ He has recognised that the fourth among the twelve players has a wax finger and is pretending to play. King Kamaseni is duly impressed and rewards him most handsomely, and the whole assembly is equally impressed by Madhavanal's handsome appearance. Alam is spurred to sing the praise of talent/music (*guna*) over two stanzas:

Seeing this *gunī* (musician/talented one),
 connoisseurs (*guni jana*) were delighted
 —who would be if an ignorant (*niguni*) was there?⁷⁸
 If anyone has *guna* within, from king to pauper everyone respects him.
 No one questions high or lowly status, one who has *guna* sits high.

75 R. Mishra (1982).

76 Ibid., 27.2-5, *doha*, p. 22.

77 Ibid., 28.2, p. 22.

78 "*Nigunī jani koi hoī*" can have several meanings, depending on the meaning of *jani* (people or "don't"): "Let no one be untalented" or "who is untalented?"

The talented man who goes abroad sells his wares at greater price.
 Just as a mother rears her son, *guna* always bestows happiness.
 Without *guna* one's ancestors fall from heaven,
 without *guna* one's mouth utters lowly words.
 Without *guna* one is like a man blind, without *guna* one is a bird without wings.
 When you fall into bad times and lose your wealth,
 if you're talented your talent stays with you.
 If you have *guna* in your body then wealth will come and you will get it
 again.⁷⁹

Kamakandala recognises a fellow *guni* and prepares to sing and dance particularly well for his sake.⁸⁰ As in the *Mirigāvātī* passage described by Allyn Miner in her essay, the musical performance is carefully detailed, if not realistically described: the different types of musical instruments played, the different *ragas* and *raginis* (see Appendix),⁸¹ the stage (*rangabhumi*) adorned with lamps and torches, and the various rhythms (*talas*). The list of *ragas* and *raginis* (*ragaputras* are mentioned rather than listed) appears to work more as a display of knowledge and possibly as a mnemonic device than as a narrative/diegetic element.⁸² Intriguingly,

79 Ibid., 32 *doha* and 33, p. 25; one of the manuscripts (ms "B", undated, from Bundi) also has the following *soratha*: "*Guna* is your king, *guna* is the garland, *guna* is the friend, *guna* is the mother. God gave fortune to the one with a forehead full of *gunas*"; *ibid.*

80 "A very clever insightful man has come. There is always an *ausara* [i.e. a *naubat*, a musical session] in the royal court, but no ignorant knows whether it is good or not. This one who has come is bright like a phase of the sun, full of understanding of rhythm, scale, and sound. He has cast off defects far and wide now that he makes *guna* move by knowing the difference between the seven (notes?)" ; *ibid.*, 34.1-4, p. 26; the meaning of "*Sāt bheda jau guna sañcārai*" (34.4) is unclear.

81 All "intoned together" (42.1, p. 32). This is where the complete *Ragamala* comes in, stanzas 36-40. The various *talas* are also sung in unison (! "*sakala tāla milau*", 42.3, p. 32).

82 Alam's *ragamala* is almost identical to that appended at the end of the *īdi Granth* (which, as Allyn Miner shows in her essay, does not represent the *ragas* actually used in the *Granth*). This has prompted much debate as to its origin and the direction of its circulation, since Alam's *Mādhavānal* (1582) predates the oldest available manuscript of the *Granth* (1604). The *ragamala* fits metrically with the rest of Alam's text, but even here it is more of a set piece than part of the narrative. His list of *raginis* corresponds most closely to Ksemakarna's *Rāgamālā*, composed in Rewa in 1570 (see Table 14.1 in Miner's essay), which could have provided a common source for both Alam and the early Sikh circles. I am grateful to Imre Bangha for telling me about the debate, and to the group who read the *Mādhavānal* together in 2011-2012: Imre Bangha, Richard Williams, Yuthika Sharma, Robert Skelton (for the *ragamala* section), Preeti Khosla, and Professor Shyam Manohar Pande.

the *ragamala* is one of the sections of the *katha* that contains the highest number of variants. Copyists or storytellers found this episode a good place to add comments or to break the long list of *ragas* and *raginis* by coming back to the performance or the characters, or by inserting rhythmic lines like those in real performances. This is how one scribe or storyteller broke the compact list of *ragas*:

Madhav thought in his mind—"This is how she has done Dipak:
 She has pictured his wives with his sons through her gait,
 that accomplished *apsara!*"
 Dipak gave much joy, Madhav is an expert Brahmin.
 After arranging the women, she harnessed the notes of Sri raga.
 They sang Sri raga all together, combining it with his five women.
 Oh Madhav—gem among Brahmins, jewel of the courtiers and skilled—here,
 Forsaking all laziness of his body, and knowing Kandala,
 he displayed all his qualities,
 He expounded Lakshmi (Sri) raga,
 and they drank the immaculate water to the full.
 Their hearts' desire fulfilled their minds' desire,
 the courtly lady took up the Megh raga.⁸³

Kamakandala then shows her skill with rhythms (*talas*):

They all sang together in unison when the courtesan set foot on stage,
 They pronounced the scale (*sargama*) in the Jhakut rhythm,
 they considered the sound of the steady refrain.⁸⁴ (?)
 Brahma *tala* and Chutput *tala*,
 all the *talas* were coordinated into one rhythm. ...
 Turning over⁸⁵ the *dhruva dhruvad*, she sang *bisnupada* verses,
 Clever and accomplished Madhavanala understood all the *bhāvas*.⁸⁶

And here *all* the manuscripts apart from the one used by the editor insert rhythmic lines like those sung in actual performances:

83 Ms "B", *ibid.*, p. 30.

84 "*thira riu (?) jo sabada bicarai*" is unclear.

85 "*Mura mura*" could also mean, "Turning back to look at him".

86 *Ibid.*, 42 *doha*, p. 33.

*theṛ theṛ theṛ theṛ saba karahīṃ, tathaka tathaka kai mukha uccarahīṃ
dhapaka dhapaka saumḥ dhapaka dhalaṅga, damaka damaka driga drimridaṅga*⁸⁷

Kamkandala is thus said to have sung all the *ragas* with their *raginis* and *ragaputras* in one session. This not only impresses her extraordinary skills upon the listener but provides the author (and storytellers) with the chance to spell out the full system of *ragas*. In a similar fashion, the fact that she and her fellow singer-dancers are said to have “intoned all [the *ragas*] together” and sung all the *talas* in unison is clearly impossible but points to their complete knowledge and extraordinary virtuosity. The density of the text is unmistakable here.

The narrative rhythm picks up once we turn from this ideal performance to a diegetic incident. Kamakandala is demonstrating another talent by dancing with a bowl full of water balanced on top of her head and explaining her dance movements with syllables when a bee, attracted by the scent of sandalwood paste on her breasts, comes and starts biting her. But—and here lies her virtuosity—Kamakandala does not miss a step. She draws in air from her mouth and nose and pushes it out through her nipple, driving the bee away! Once again, only Madhavanal has noticed her trick, and delighted by her art he promptly gives her all the precious gifts the king had just bestowed upon him—“Clever one met clever one”.⁸⁸ But his gesture angers the king to no end, and Madhav is thrown out of this city too, though not before berating the king and his assembly for their lack of musical insight:

You, king, are undiscerning (*abibekṛ*), you cannot discriminate
talent from the talentless.

Am I so stupid and a philistine? I delighted in the art,
and could not keep hold of my life!⁸⁹

Though the king has ordered him out of the city immediately, Madhavanal cannot resist spending two nights with Kamkandala. The remaining two-thirds of the tale deal with their pain of separation (*biyoga/biraha*).⁹⁰ While Kamkandala is wasting away in Kamavati (and

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 45.1, p. 35.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 49.1-2, p. 37.

⁹⁰ At the beginning of the tale Alam had told his listeners that his was a tale of “love and separation” (*siṅgāra viyoga*), *ibid.*, p. 5.

will not sing or dance again), Madhavanal seeks refuge with King Vikramaditya at Ujjain. The king is sympathetic, checks that his story is correct by sending envoys to Kamavati, and then successfully lays siege to the city. Once an emaciated and wasted Kamkandala is brought before him he decides to test her love by announcing that Madhavanal is dead. Kamkandala dies on the spot and, once he hears the news, Madhavanal dies too. But the tale is not over. Horrified by the sin he has incurred—a double murder, including that of a Brahmin—Vikramaditya decides to immolate himself on a pyre. The news of his decision spreads across the three worlds, and his old friend the Betala (Vampire)—of the *Twenty-Five Stories of the Vampire* fame—comes to his rescue by bringing *amrit* (ambrosia) from the netherworld. Adding further intertextual references, Alam compares the king to Hanuman, who brought the magic root that revived Laskshman at a crucial point of the war in Lanka.⁹¹ The king now turns physician and, once revived, Madhavanal and Kamkandala can finally come together, after Vikramaditya defeats King Kamasena in battle.⁹² Music and dance, though richly elaborated in the first part of this *katha*, do not appear again.

Conclusions

Alam has made a *katha* in *chaupais*, he first heard it with his ears.

Here and there he placed some *dohas*, and elsewhere *sorathas*.

The ears that listen to this beautiful tale,

full of *rasa* and pleasing to the mind of the learned,

If lovers (*prītivant*) hear it, their love will increase

and they will be happy.

If sensuous *rasika* men hear it (*kāmī rasika purukh*)

they will reflect on this tale night and day.

Pandits, clever people (*budhivantā*) and *gunis*, parsing poets,

praise its qualities (*guna nāma namita* (?)) and tell many tales

again and again. ||172||

91 Ibid., 138 *doha*, p. 99. For a full list of intertextual references in this text, see *ibid.*, 'Introduction', p. 28.

92 Some mss have a longer version that includes the protagonists' former lives; see *ibid.*, p. 19.

At the end of his telling of *Mādhavānal Kāmakandalā* Alam refers both to the metrical structure and to its *phalashruti*—an intensification of love and desire. At the onset he had declared that his *katha* of “love and separation” was “partly mine, partly stolen from others” (*kachu āpana kachu parakrita cūri*) and that “since few listen to this tale in Sanskrit, I have bound it together in *chaupais* in *bhakha*”.⁹³ Taken together, these two statements articulate much of the poetics of Hindavi *kathas* of the time. *Kathas* were tellings, often retellings, and sought to impart spiritual and practical (here musical) knowledge in an entertaining and arresting fashion.

That *kathas* in this period are always re-tellings of earlier—usually epic-Puranic—material is a truism, but we have seen that epic-Puranic framing and intertextual referencing also helped introduce original tales. Some of these drew upon oral traditions—as in the case of Da’ud’s *Candāyan* (1389), which inaugurated the rich genre of sufi *prem-kathas* in Awadhi/Hindavi to which Alam’s sixteenth-century *Mādhavānal* belongs. Others—like the *Daṅgvai kathā*—took epic-Puranic characters as a point of departure to develop a deeply original and local tale. Textual clues like *phalashruti* verses and abbreviated discussions on Kaliyuga, good and bad rulers, or *gyan goshtis*—present even when they are not relevant to the story—thus help us make a historical argument about how *kathas* in Hindi emerge as an independent textual genre, by tagging along epic-Puranic narrative and performative traditions. And the fact that even a relatively little-known and little-copied tale like that of *Dangvai* is mentioned several times in *kathas* written hundreds of miles away points towards the intense circulation of tales in this period, and to the capacious repertoire of storytellers.

Like other essays in this volume, this one has drawn attention to the textual clues that evoke some possible performative practices of these tales—references to speaking and listening, to audiences out there, to “dense” moments in the texts that were likely to attract oral exposition, to manuscript interpolations that suggest the insertion of additions and digressions by performers. The striking presence of a complete *ragamala* in Alam’s *Mādhavānal* as part of the main performance episode shows that tales like this aimed to display and impart technical knowledge—or at least to provide a model for its memorisation. And though we do not

93 Ibid., 6.3, 5, p. 5.

have a living tradition of exposition or *arthav* for these texts as we have for Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas* or the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, or for the oral texts of Bharthari and Gopichand, it is traces such as these that suggest what a storyteller could and would have done with them.

Contemporary studies of storytelling practices remind us of what we do not have and what we need in order to imaginatively transform the text into a telling. Typical of all *katha* performances, Lutgendorf tells us, is a cyclical pattern, "a gradual progression from slowly paced delivery, through a growing involvement by the speaker in his topic reflected in louder and more rapid speech, to an emotional climax"—a pattern similar to that of musical performances.⁹⁴ He also notices shifts in what he calls "performance density" and the conscious use of particular language registers, pronunciation, rhythm, timbre/pitch, or chanting—to underline shifts in emotional register, such as the archaic pronouncing of the final inherent "a" sound to impart a "metrified" effect or echo the near-monotone chanting style of Vedic recitation (191). It is impossible to recover these effects from texts of the past, but these descriptions help us imagine the artful use of voice that storytellers may have brought to bear upon their performances.

While this essay has focused on quite different tales, the same metrical structure (*chaupai-doha*), forms of address, intertextual referencing, alternation between swift diegesis and slow description, between deep *bhava* and lighter fun, and blending of knowledge, instruction, and entertainment can be found in all of them. As Lutgendorf puts it, "The medium of *kathā* is artful language, but its essence is emotional communication".⁹⁵ In some cases the writing is richer in metaphors—Alam's *katha* is particularly original in this respect—in others ornamentation is notable by its absence. But the common coordinates show that both authors and listeners knew how to listen and what to listen for.

94 Lutgendorf (1991), pp. 185, 186.

95 Lutgendorf (1991), p. 242.

Appendix: The *Ragamala* in *Mādhavānal Kāmakandalā*

With each raga are five *raginis*, and she sings (*alāpai*) their eight sons,
 First she “did” the Bhairav raga, her mouth composed his five women:
 First Bharavi and Bilavali, then she sings Puniki [?]⁹⁶ and Bangali,
 then it was the turn of Asaloh—these are Bhairav’s five wives.
 Then she did Deskar and Madhav, after them Lalit and Bilavala,
 Then Malkosh, together with his five wives,⁹⁷
 And their eight able sons—
 Kamakandala speaks them with her mouth. | | 36 | |

After that she intoned Godagari, thereafter Dev Gandhari,
 Then she did Suhuti and Andhyari properly.
 She sang Dhanasiri after that and pointed to the five with Malkosh,
 After that she progressed to Maru and Misthanga,
 Marvar [Mevada], Parbalchand, Kosar,
 Khohkhat and Bhora, Ananda came next, she sang Malkosh with his eight sons.
 Then came Hindol, bringing his five *raginis*,
 The play of rhythm began, she sang beating the rhythm. | | 37 | |

Telangi and Devgiri came, and the beautiful Basanti and Sindhuri,
 She brought the delightful Ahiri to the king, the five wives came along.
 Surmanand, Bhaskar came, Chandra-Bimbu, Mangalan were beautiful,
 Fifth came Sarasban, and Binoda—she sang Basant and Kamoda full of rasa.
 She considered and proposed the eight sons, then came Dipak’s turn.
 She intoned Kachhali, Patmanjari, Todi,
 And after that Kamodi and Gujri with Dipak. | | 38 | |

Kalingi, Kuntala and Rama, Kanvala, Kusuma: the names of the five,
 Gaura and Kanhara and Kalyana—here go the eight sons of Dipak.
 As fifth she sang Siri [Shri] raga, bringing his five *raginis* along,
 She sang Vairati, Gandhari, Gauri and Asavari,
 Then she intoned Sindhavi, and established the five with Sri Rag.
 Malawa, Sarang, Sagara, and that Gaud, and Gambhir
 The eight sons of Sri Raga, Gaud, Gambhir, Hamir. | | 39 | |

Sixth she performed Megha raga, she pronounced with her mouth his five wives:
 The tunes of Sorathi and fair Malari, then she sang Asa and Kunkuni.
 In high tones she did Suho (Suhavi), she showed the five with Megha raga.

96 The text reads “puni Kinnara”.

97 Variant manuscript (a): “She does the Bangala and the excellent Harika, making a play, the Madhukar resounded”.

Bairati, Gandhar, Kedara, Jaldhar, Nata, and Jaldhara,
Then she sang Sankara and Syama—the names of the sons of Megha raga.
She sang the six *ragas* and the thirty *raginis*,
And all the sons with them: eighteen, ten, and twenty. | | 40 | |⁹⁸

⁹⁸ R. Misra (1982), pp. 27-31.