

# In-Between Biography: Ramacharana's Shankaradeva and Amar Singh's Surdas

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**Abstract:** In the reign of Maharana Amar Singh II of Mewar (1698–1710) poems attributed to the Brajbhasha poet Surdas were for the first time subjected to a process of selection that caused them to represent the childhood of Krishna alone—apart from any other aspects of the deity's life story. Remarkably, this innovation happened in a visual environment, in a set of fifty miniature paintings tagged *Sursagar*, that is, 'Sur's Ocean'. Thus it seems that the ocean itself was reformatted, emerging as this particular lake. After that point in time the poet came increasingly to be thought of as a specialist in Krishna's childhood. Was this, in effect, his life? Was his biography leveraged onto the life-story of the deity he cherished most in such a way as to create a sort of 'in between' biography? We will approach these questions with substantial help from Phyllis Granoff's study of the influential biography of Shankaradeva attributed to Ramacharana.

**Keywords:** Ramacharana, Shankaradeva, Amar Singh II, Surdas, Granoff

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In her classic essay ‘Pilgrimage as Revelation’, Phyllis Granoff presents us with a wonderfully textured appraisal—and in parts translation—of the *Shankaradeva-charita* ascribed to the Vaishnava Assamese intellectual Ramacharana Thakur, whose life was just getting underway at the time of Shankaradeva’s death in 1568. Actually, however, there seems to have been a bit of generational prestidigitation involved. This biographical work was probably composed a century later, around 1688, and attributed to Ramacharana so as to lend it the kind of authority that only an eye-witness observer could have.<sup>1</sup> Similar acts of biographical back-reading are not hard to find elsewhere in South Asia, and the biography of the poet who has been so much the focus of my own work is a case in point. This is Surdas (Sur for short), the legendarily blind poet who came to be regarded—perhaps in the course of his own lifetime—as the very best of Brajbhasha poets. In this regard, his reputation is comparable to the one that Shankaradeva commands for Assam and Assamese, and indeed the two poets must have been contemporaries for at least parts of their lives. What can be learned by comparing the biographical processes that attend these two literary giants?

As in the case of Shankaradeva, the biography of Surdas that came to be most widely accepted is attributed to an author who probably lived within the lifespan of the poet himself, though he would have been only a boy at about the time the poet must have died. This is Gokulnath, and his special position as biographer follows from the fact that he was one of the grandsons of the great philosopher-theologian Vallabhacharya, that is, ‘preceptor Vallabha’. Within the religious community that understands Vallabha to have been its founder, the Pushtimarg (path of fulfilment), Vallabha is believed to have been the initiating guru of Surdas. This belief is based on what we read in one chapter (‘Surdas ki Varta’, an account of Surdas) of a longer work of composite biography called the *Chaurasi Vaishnavan ki Varta* [Accounts of Eighty-four Vaishnavas], all of these Vaishnavas being depicted as pupils of either Vallabha or his son Vitthal-

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<sup>1</sup> Granoff, ‘Pilgrimage as Revelation’, 200, note 10; Neog, *Early History*, 5–7, 22–24.

nath. The earliest manuscript of the *Chaurasi Vaishnavan ki Varta* appears to be dated 1640.

As I have tried to show in earlier writing, I do not believe that the *Varta's* account of the initiatory encounter between Surdas and Vallabha can be accepted as fact. There are multiple contradictions, all of which are handily explained if we see this story as serving the purpose of painting a life-story for Sur that would draw him into the Vallabhite fold.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, another early biographer—even earlier, in all likelihood—remembered things differently. This is Nabhaji, also called Nabhadās, who composed a stanza (*kavitt*) about Surdas as an entry in his own effort at composite religious biography, the *Bhaktamal* [Garland of Lovers of God], which spanned many more religious communities than the Vallabhite. There too, the matter of sectarian lineage (*sampradāya*) arises, and there too, Vallabha appears in such a context, but Nabhaji apparently knew of no connection between Vallabha and Sur. The *Bhaktamal* was composed somewhere around the turn of the seventeenth century, and it says the following:

What poet, hearing the poems Sur has made,  
will not nod his head?  
Epigrams, phrasings, assonance, portrayals—  
everywhere his standing is very great:  
Speech and loving sentiment he sustains,  
conveying their meaning in wondrous rhyme.  
In words he expresses Hari's playful acts,  
which are mirrored in his heart by divine vision:  
Birth, deeds, virtues, and beautiful form—  
all are brought to light by his tongue.  
Others cleanse their virtues and powers of insight  
by tuning their ears to his fame.  
*What poet, hearing the poems Sur has made,  
will not nod his head?*

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<sup>2</sup> Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 184–88; *idem*, *Sūrdās*, 19–36.

sūra kavita suni kauna kavi / jo nahiñ sira cālana karai  
 ukti coja anuprāsa barana / asthiti ati bhārī  
 vacana prīti nirvāha artha / adbhuta tuka dhārī  
 pratibimbīta dibi diṣṭi hṛdaya / hari līlā bhāsī  
 janama karama guna rūpa sabahi / rasanā parakāsī  
 bimala buddhi guṇa aura kī / jo yaha jasu śravanani dharai  
 sūra kavita suni kauna kavi / jo nahiñ sira cālanak<sup>3</sup>

As in the case of Shankaradeva, there is another body of information to which we can turn to form an image of the poet in question, if not precisely his life story. This, of course, is the poetry itself, and in both cases the evidence at hand takes us back into the sixteenth century.<sup>4</sup> For Surdas we have an anthology written in Fatehpur, some hundred miles to the north of Jaipur, in which 239 poems bearing Sur's oral signature appear, some of them more than once. This manuscript is dated to 1582, and it is clearly based on two earlier ones, since it maintains their independent formatting and numbering as part of its own record. We have no direct evidence about when Surdas lived or died, but it seems entirely reasonable to assume that he would have been active either in 1582 itself or not long before. Again, the parallel with Shankaradeva is intriguing to contemplate, and so is the possibility that the poetry itself, in the course of its reception, contributed to the biography of both poets. Certainly, Gokulnath strung much of what he said about the life of Surdas on certain compositions he attributed to him—they bore his signature. Following a biographical impulse that is familiar in India, Gokulnath imagined the context in which these poems might have been generated and thus wove them together so that they formed a life story for the poet. Not all of these appear in the Fatehpur corpus, by the way, another warning sign as to their having come from the mouth of the historical poet himself. They could well have been composed later in Sur's name—the practice was common—and perhaps to tell this poet's story in the way it would make best sense for Vallabhites.

<sup>3</sup> Nābhājī, *Śrī Bhaktamāl*, 557.

<sup>4</sup> For Śaṅkaradeva see, e.g., Neog, *Early History*, 163, 166–67.

There was another way in which a group of poems might come to constitute the poet's biography, however. One could build for Sur what would in effect be a life-story highlighting a set of poems sorted by means of a different biographical pattern, one pertaining to his favorite deity. This, without a doubt, was Krishna. From birth and infancy forward, Krishna's story was first told in the *Harivamsha Purana* (first–third c.) and then subsequently in other forms including the one provided by the *Bhagavata Purana*. No Brajbhasha version of the complete *Bhagavata Purana* seems to have existed in the time of Surdas, although Nandadas, probably somewhat younger than he, embarked on such a project in about 1560–1570. He finished only a small part of the task. Yet *Bhagavata* or not, we do see a certain biographicalization process in manuscripts where Sur's poetry is anthologized. Some among them came to be dignified with the title *Sursagar*, 'Sur's Ocean', since the corpus was so considerable; our first extant *Sursagar* dates to the year 1640, written at Ghanora in the Bhil country to the south of Udaipur. This idea took hold in the editorial imagination. Increasingly the Krishna poems belonging to Sur's oceanic set were arranged so as to comment on the biography of the deity—poems about his birth coming first, succeeded by the episode in which his father Vasudeva rescued him from the clutches of evil king Kamsa, then proceeding to the outburst of celebration that followed when the good news of Krishna's birth was received in Braj. The blessed event was understood to have happened in the house of Nanda and Yashoda, who became his foster parents. And so forth.

Then, at a specific place and time, a group of these poems was transported into another medium as well: painting. Poems of Surdas, originally independent, were implicitly linked to tell the story of Krishna. When this happened, we also got, by implication, something of a linear picture of how the poet spent his days—namely, contemplating his favorite divinity. In that way there emerged for Sur a kind of in-between or meta-biography, a chronicle of the poet seen chronicling the life of the god. We have no name for an implicit biography of this sort, but that doesn't mean there shouldn't be one.

Things take a different shape with Shankaradeva, but the analogy is close enough to be thought-provoking. Phyllis Granoff shows us

how Shankaradava's reputed biographer, Ramacharana, participated in a devotional culture that understood Shankaradeva to be Krishna himself. (Krishna himself, after all, was quite a performing artist.) If Shankaradeva was Krishna, then it was no surprise that he should possess literary excellence as well. Obviously we have here an important disparity from the way in which Surdas's life was understood, but I have found that Phyllis's way of depicting the motives, tensions, and layerings that went into the making of the *Shankaradeva-charita* along these lines nonetheless provides an intriguing framework for thinking about the meta-life of Surdas that emerges in the Mewar paintings to which I have referred.

These miniature paintings of Krishna were produced over a period that stretched roughly between 1660 and 1730, and apparently with ever-increasing frequency over that time-span. Each of them attempted to cast in a visual mode what Surdas had expressed in poetry. Some 150 of these miniatures are extant and now spread around the world, and in each of them we see not only the god but the human being who called him to verbal life. Occasionally Surdas is shown more than once in a single painting. 150 is an astonishing number, giving us far more depictions of Surdas than we have for any other poet, vernacular or otherwise. In each painting we see Sur observing a certain moment in the life of the god. Sometimes he enters the narrative frame directly, but more often we see him in a pavilion or forested area set aside for his musical contemplation. As he sings about scene after scene in Krishna's life—we usually see him holding little cymbals (*manjirā*) as he does so—his own life seems to take its shape from Krishna's. He does not change appreciably from one scene or stage to the next, as one might expect in a conventional biography, but it is clear that his life is to be understood as being fundamentally shaped by that of his chosen divinity.

For purposes of the present essay I would like to focus on fifty of these manuscript illustrations. These clearly form a set, and are numbered from one to fifty on the pages themselves. Owing especially to the appearance of a particular style of handlebar moustache, but on other stylistic grounds as well, these can reliably be attributed to the reign of Maharana Amar Singh II, who ruled Mewar from 1698 to 1710. Almost certainly they were produced in the royal ateliers.

Twenty-nine of these paintings are extant today, dispersed throughout India, Europe, and the United States. I will call them, as a group, the Amar Singh *Sursagar*, with something of the same license that Phyllis took when she named the *Shankaradeva-charita* Ramacharana's for short.<sup>5</sup> To set the scene, let me show you the first page in the Amar Singh *Sursagar*, one of those on which the very name *Sursagar* appears, though it is written *śūr sāgar*. It can now be seen at the San Diego Museum of Art. (Figure 1) Phyllis's study of the *Shankaradeva-charita* attributed to Ramacharana helps us see these paintings in a special light, so I would like to return to that essay before proceeding farther.

There, before bringing us into the presence of the *Shankaradeva-charita* itself, the throne room or temple sanctum (*garbha grha*) of the essay, Phyllis takes us on a little tour of relevant archetypes—*mandapas* (porch-pavilions), to extend the metaphor. She starts with what has come to be understood as the master biography of Shankaradeva's namesake, the great Advaita intellectual named Shankara who was active around 800 CE. Thus, she hints at the fact that the genre of Indian biography has a substantial history, and suggests that it might have been understood as an important aspect of the background readers would have in mind as they approached the *Shankaradeva-charita*. She also brings more immediate predecessors into the scene, in particular the biographies of Chaitanya that had been generated in Bengali in the course of the sixteenth century. She cites the two most famous of these directly: the *Chaitanya Bhagavata* of Vrindavandas and the *Chaitanya-charitamrta* of Krishnadas Kaviraj. And then she selects a theme. With forthright craft Phyllis draws attention to the fact that pilgrimage journeys form significant aspects of these narratives, just as they do in the Assamese *Shankaradeva-charita*. This is the reason for her title, 'Pilgrimage as Revelation', and she highlights the anomaly implied by the fact that a great devotional figure, a fully realized human being, would seem to need to go nowhere in the cause of self-perfection. Why make any pilgrimage, in that case?

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<sup>5</sup> See Hawley, *Sūrdās*, 260–94.



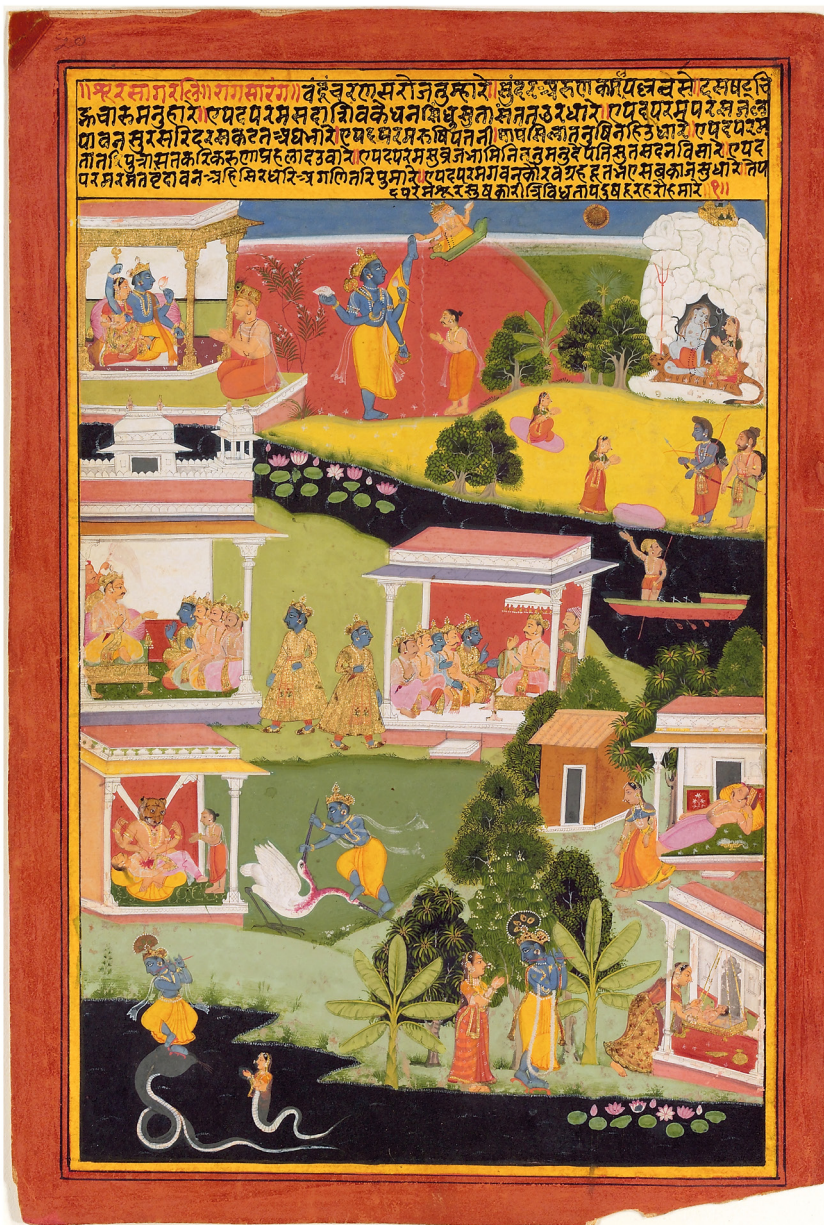


FIG. 1 'I bow in praise before your lotus feet'. Illustration to *vandōṅ carana saroja tumbāre*, or as here spelled, *vandū carañ saroj tumbāre* (compare NPS 94). #1 in the Amar Singh *Sūrsāgar*. Raga *sāraṅg*. Circa 1700, 36.9×24.7 cm. Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, San Diego Museum of Art, 1990.610.



This theme of paradoxical pilgrimage becomes one of the most fascinating features of Ramacharana's depiction of Shankaradeva. Like the authors of the *Chaitanya Bhagavata* and *Chaitanya-caritamrta*, as Phyllis shows, the author of the *Shankaradeva-charita* engages these pilgrimage journeys explicitly. Indeed, this is one of the tools he has at his disposal to show that Shankaradeva actually supersedes Chaitanya: he overcomes the need to make pilgrimage more conclusively than Chaitanya, for Shankaradeva is more truly Krishna than he is. Phyllis widens the landscape by including the biography of Shankaradeva's namesake as well, the eighth-century philosopher familiarly known as Shankaracharya. Shankaradeva is made to subsume the narratives of these two earlier divines into his own—and by implication the central preoccupations and beliefs of the Advaitan and Gaudiya communities they represent as well.

Phyllis also highlights the matter of place, and indeed that term appears in the title of the volume where she and Koichi Shinohara published this essay along with a number of others: *Pilgrims, Patrons, and Place*. The three places that emerge as most significant in Ramacharana's biography of Shankaradeva—Vrindavan, Jagannath Puri, and Dvaraka—emerge as signifiers of different registers of reality. They build upon one another in a process of narrative superimposition, as Phyllis shows. In respect to the trip to Vrindavan, the life story of Shankaradeva is made to encompass and thus supersede the theological pillars of Gaudiya thinking, Rupa and Sanatana Gosvami. The same thing happens with respect to Chaitanya when Shankaradeva travels to Jagannath Puri. And when it comes to Shankaradeva's pilgrimage to Dvaraka, he appears as Krishna himself. Thus, in both locative and narrative dimensions—the full span of northern India and a generous chunk of its *bhakti* history—Ramacharana's account displays Shankaradeva's supremacy. At the same time, we see the supremacy of Assam itself, both the place and the language. Assam is where Shankaradeva reigns supreme. Why travel anywhere else, you Assamese? All this Phyllis compounds under the heading of 'Pilgrimage as Revelation'.

In the case of the Amar Singh *Sursagar* we have rather a different scene, but there too place and compounded biography matter. Quite by contrast to many earlier collections of poems in which the name

of Surdas (or some other closely related form) appears, as we have seen, the Amar Singh *Sursagar* is clearly sequential and hews to the life story of Krishna. Earlier collections of Surdas poems included poems that dramatized the world of Rama and Sita or stepped back from such an immersive mode to feature the literary personage of the poet himself. Here at Udaipur, by contrast, we find ourselves following a carefully formed narrative that traces Krishna's birth and growth. Such narrativization as a mode of organizing Surdas's poems had preceded the Amar Singh moment, but that ranged well across his whole life, from the Mathura jail where he was born to the great battle at Kurukshetra and on to Dvaraka, where he reigned as king. Now, however, the scope is restricted to poems of Krishna's childhood. The place dimension, therefore, was never far from home. Beautifully, the artists involved depicted Krishna's place as *their* home, or at least the home of their patrons and presumed spectators. They showed us palaces that could have been built in Mewar, just as later Udaipuri artists introduced Udaipur-style sluices to channel the flow of the River Yamuna, bringing to the Braj landscape a technology that was crucial in their own Mewar terrain but in not the region where Krishna was born.<sup>6</sup> All this would have looked familiar to the eyes for which this set of folios was undoubtedly intended. We see the cowherds of Krishna's native Braj countryside at the margins—outside the gates, so to speak—but Krishna never goes there himself. Here Braj is mapped onto Mewar, just as Ramacharana's Krishna, via Shankaradeva, came to dwell in Assam. (Figure 2) Place matters.

I have mentioned the *Chaurasi Vaishnavan ki Varta*, which contains the *Surdas ki Varta* as one of its eighty-four constituent elements, and it is notable that the manuscript believed to be its earliest—the one dated 1640 (V.S. 1698)—is housed at Kankarauli, only about fifty miles from Udaipur. You would think that might have some bearing on the way the Amar Singh *Sursagar* develops, especially since after 1672 the Vallabha Sampradaya, which had come to be

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<sup>6</sup> This theme of the Udaipurization of 'foreign' landscapes is prominent in Khera, *The Place of Many Moods*, especially 46–55. On sluices, see for example 'Krishna and his Friends Celebrate Holi in the Forests of Vrindavan'.



FIG. 2 'I just can't wake him up, good woman'. Illustration to *nābin jagāi sakati, suni suvāt sajanī* #45 in the Amar Singh *Sūrsāgar*. *Rāg lalit*. Circa 1700. Bharat Kala Bhavan, Banaras, 1799. Compare Nāgarīpracāriṇī Sabhā *Sūrsāgar*, poem 819.

resident in Kankarauli and in the town later to be called Nathdvara, enjoyed royal patronage—not exclusive patronage, to be sure, but patronage nonetheless.

Yet the Amar Singh *Sursagar* seems to know nothing of this, or at least it refrains from showing us any such thing on the page. We have a handful of paintings from the 1720s or 30s that reveal a Vallabhite impress, but Surdas is not among the poets there invoked.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, nowhere in the collection of Sur's poetry that had been amassed by the beginning of the eighteenth century did any possible mention of Vallabha occur. If Sur was Vallabha's pupil, the painters of the Amar Singh *Sursagar* certainly reveal no knowledge of that fact. Rather, they—and perhaps their textualist advisors—selected poems for inclusion in the Amar Singh *Sursagar* that seemed to take it for granted that Sur had direct visual access to his Lord, unmediated by the presence of any guru. This happened precisely through his blind eyes. Thus, just as the matter of gurus and prior Vaishnava exemplars is carefully dismissed as irrelevant in the *Shankaradeva-charita*—Shankaradeva supersedes them all—so here the blind poet's direct access to Krishna seems to leave no room for a mediator in the form of Vallabha. The difference is that prior sectarian formulations are not even invoked. If any earlier formulation is being superseded, it is of a different kind: visual depictions of the Sanskrit *Bhagavata Purana*. Again 'direct access' may be involved. Would the child Krishna really have spoken Sanskrit to his parents, friends, and then lovers? Brajbhasha seems far more likely. In this respect, since Braj is universally acclaimed as Krishna's home territory, Brajbhasha has quite a different status from Assamese.

It is understandable, perhaps, that Sur's poetry rather than his biography should have emerged as the subject for a series of paintings. But they do at the same time serve as a record of how he was conceived at that place and at that point in time. As we have seen, every page of the Amar Singh *Sursagar* displays not just an episode in the life of the young god but a picture of the poet who depicts that life. The interest of the poet's own story is his intimate presence

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<sup>7</sup> Hawley, *Sūrdās*, 256–60.





FIG. 3 'His tiny little feet—she supports them, helps him walk'. Illustration to *sūcham caran calāvati bal kari* (compare NPS 738). #11 in the Amar Singh *Sūrsāgar*. Raga *devagaṇḍhār*. Ca. 1700, 28.6×20.4 cm. Yale University Art Gallery, the Vera M. and John D. MacDonald, B.A. 1927, Collection, 2001.138.28.

in the life story of the god whom he depicts in poetry—poetry that is sung. Indeed, as so many of these portraits of Sur show, he is very actively doing the singing. Thus the substance of his life, as we see it in painting, is the very substance of his song, his poetry. Every page of the Amar Singh *Sursagar* is suitable for conveying this reality, but in Phyllis's honour let me show you page eleven as an example: it is now housed at the Yale University Art Gallery (Figure 3).<sup>8</sup>

As we can see from this example, one biographical feature belonging to the poet—and one alone—is essential: his blindness. In all but one of the many paintings of Surdas that emerge from Udaipur at this point in time, he is clearly shown to be blind. There is nothing in the poetry itself that compels one to draw this conclusion about the poet, but it had evidently become a matter of faith at some time in the first half of the seventeenth century. It is fundamental to the Vallabhite *Surdas ki Varta*, and it may even be hiding in the 'divine vision' (*dibi diṣṭi*) that Nabhaji finds in Sur, but it also serves as the central stimulus for parallel biographies of the poet that adopt a different story line to account for it. For Gokulnath, Surdas is blind from birth, but in the first datable poem bearing Sur's signature where the blindness theme becomes explicit, we get quite a different picture—blindness that descends with old age. Neither view—blindness from birth or from cataracts—is to be seen in poems of Surdas that can confidently be shown to have circulated in the sixteenth century, Sur's own time.<sup>9</sup> The first poem to depict such a thing in clear detail is to be found in a Dadupanthi *Sarvangi* anthology dating to 1736 and coming from the Jodhpur region. It reads as follows:

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<sup>8</sup> Śaṅkaradeva was also remembered as being interested in the visual arts. As Phyllis tells us, 'In the many texts that describe his life and deeds, Śaṅkaradeva is also depicted as a pioneer in creating visual representations of the life and deeds of Krishna'. (Granoff, 'Illuminating the Formless', 120). She offers as an example the massive tapestry familiarly called *Vrindavani Vastra*, which was on display at the British Museum from January to August of 2016. See Primary Sources, *Vrindavani Vastra*.

<sup>9</sup> Hawley, *Sūrdās*, 31–34.



Now I am blind; I have shunned Hari's name.  
 My hair has turned white with illusions and delusions  
     that have wrung me through till nothing makes sense.  
 Skin shriveled, posture bent, teeth gone;  
     my eyes emit a stream of tears;  
     my friends, a stream of blame.  
 Those eyes once ranged as free as a cat's,  
     but failed to measure the play of Time  
 Like a false-eyed scarecrow failing to scatter  
     the deer from the field of the mind.  
 Surdas says, to live without a song for the Lord  
     is courting death; his sledge stands poised  
     above your waiting head.<sup>10</sup>

aja hoñ andha hari nāma na leta  
 māyā moha bhrami sūjhata nahīñ vūjhata  
     āye nara sīsa sīroruha seta  
 sakucita aṅga utaṅga bhaṅga dija  
     driga jala śravata urāhata heta  
 kari sutanta mañjāra āṣa lauñ  
     krīḍata kāla nahīñ laṣata aceta  
 mriga bijhuna kai kāja mana jaisaiñ  
     mānauṅ race bijhukā ṣeta  
 sūra dāsa sa bhagavanta bhajana bina  
     parai muṅḍi mudagira jama beta

In the record that emerges at Udaipur, not a trace of such self-lamentation can be found. For one thing, the poet is far too absorbed to feel it, and he is much younger than such an image of Surdas would suggest. His beard is black. There is no hint that we are dealing with a poet tested and wizened by age. What we are made aware of, rather, is one thing alone. Namely, with his blind eyes—doubtless precisely

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<sup>10</sup> The poem appears on folio 102a of a *Sarvāṅgī* accessioned to the Maharaja Man Singh Pustak Prakash Research Centre, Jodhpur, as Hindi manuscript no. 1359/14, *pad saṅgrah*.

because of his blind eyes—he is able to see what ordinary mortals find it so hard to bring into their field of vision. This is the reality of the deity who stands behind and before our daily life, not at its periphery. Krishna inhabits its most common, intimate aspects. This may well have been what Nabhadās was referring to in the short adulatory description of Surdas that he includes in his *Bhaktamal*. The phrase at issue is *dibi diṣṭi*, but there is nothing that actually requires us to take this as evidence of the poet's blindness, about which he says nothing. Perhaps, in fact, it could have been the other way around, with Nabha's well-known account serving as the point of genesis for the legend of the poet's blindness. But the contrary is easier to imagine. Maybe the historical Surdas did grow blind in old age—I do not doubt it. The reigning legend of his blindness, however, made it a fact of forever. He had to see with his famous blind eyes to see what he saw at all.

Are there any points at which the issue of intertextuality emerges as an important consideration with respect to Surdas? On the one hand, as I have argued, there is nothing in these visual portraits of the poet that indicates anything more about Sur's life story than his blindness. We see no specific Vallabhite stamp. The arc of the poet's 'life' that emerges in the Amar Singh miniatures stops with the arc of Krishna's childhood. There is no hint of the determinative *ras lila*, though it does make a startling appearance in a large-format painting that emerges at some time during the reign of Maharana Sangram Singh II, who succeeded Amar Singh II.<sup>11</sup> In this respect the absence of Krishna's love-filled adolescence in the Amar Singh *Sursagar* presents a considerable contrast to the *Surdas ki Varta*, where at the end of his life the poet is absorbed into the divine *ras lila* and reference is made to one of his poems so as to determine what he sang when this happened. After a familiar pattern, we are made to believe the poetry was generated by what was happening at a particular moment in the poet's life. In the account attributed to Ramacharana, Shankaradeva is heralded as being more conclusively divine than his predecessor Chaitanya, and is worshipped as such. At Udaipur, by contrast, the

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<sup>11</sup> 'Krishna and his Friends Celebrate Holi in the Forests of Vrindavan'; text transliterated by Richard J. Cohen in Dye, *The Arts of India*, 500.

divine status of the poet is not at issue. Rather, he shares in—and is shown through his poetry to produce—the divinity of the god himself, depicted in narrative terms. It's a different kind of intertextual 'in-between'.

Different, but by no means insignificant. In the Vallabhite reckoning, as in that of Chaitanya's followers, a significant aspect of building one's biography is to make it subservient to Krishna's own, not as expressed in the entire span of his life but in terms of its archetypal day as defined by his life in rural Braj. One is meant to align one's own day with the eight phases or 'moments' (*ashtayam*, i.e., *aṣṭayām*) of Krishna's.<sup>12</sup> That is where true biography lies. Insofar as Surdas is the archetypal poet of Brajbhasha, then, even as understood in far-away Udaipur, it makes sense that his life story should be patterned after Krishna's. Yes, independent biographies had been generated for the poet, but the more important narrative arc was established by his attendance upon the life of Krishna—in particular, the young Krishna, as represented in the Amar Singh paintings and in a nearly contemporaneous unillustrated manuscript written at Udaipur in 1706.<sup>13</sup> I hasten to add that there is nothing that specifically indicates the *ashtayam* rubric in Mewar, but the spirit, I think, is comparable.

Yet there is one important difference. The rhythm of Krishna's day as celebrated in the *ashtayam* pattern involves a departure from and return to his life at home. In the middle hours of the day Krishna is among his cowherder friends, male and female; before and after he is at home. Much hinges on the distance between the two locales, with appropriate *darsans* and food to mark the departure and return. In the Amar Singh II *Sursagar*, however, the Krishna story is never allowed to achieve this full adolescence. But for the beginning and final poem-paintings, that departure from home is only hinted. On page forty-four, for example, we see the boys playing a game of ball and stick, waiting for Krishna to wake up and join them, but we don't actually see him depart (Figure 4). And on page forty-five, once again,

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<sup>12</sup> Bennett, *The Path of Grace*, 104–07; Packert, *The Art of Loving Krishna*, 35–38; Case, *Seeing Krishna*, 3, 111–50.

<sup>13</sup> Bryant and Hawley, *Sur's Ocean*, xlvi.



FIG. 4 'One after one all the cowherd maidens' sons'. Illustration to *phīrī jāt niraṣ muṣ chin prati*, #44 in the Amar Singh *Śūrsāgar*. *Rāga dhanyāsari* (*dhanāsri*). Ca. 1700, 37×25.5 cm. Rietberg Museum, Zurich, RVI 905. Photograph by Rainer Wolfsberger. Compare Nāgarīpracāriṇī Sabhā, *Śūrsāgar*, 639.

we see two boys herding the cows, but again it is beyond the wall where Krishna's foster-mother Yashoda is still gazing upon him as he lies in bed (Figure 2). Thus he is always accessible in a strictly domestic realm. Molly Aitkin has therefore wondered whether this series of paintings may have been intended for women of the royal household.<sup>14</sup>

One final feature of Phyllis's article on Ramacharana's Shankaradeva deserves to be mentioned in thinking about the Amar Singh Surdas: the indirect impact of the *Bhagavata Purana*. In both cases the *Bhagavata* is part of the larger intertextual domain that is relevant to the understanding of the vernacular literatures in question, Assamese on the one hand and Brajbhasha on the other. About the *Shankaradeva-charita* Phyllis says,

The life of Śaṅkaradeva is here seen as a continuation of the life of Kṛṣṇa, its very events foretold during Kṛṣṇa's lifetime. I might add that this also makes Rāmacarāṇa's text something of a new *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, continuing the account of Kṛṣṇa into the present.<sup>15</sup>

Since there is no effort to represent Surdas as bodying forth the substance of Krishna, it's obviously the case that the life of Sur, however told, is not intended to count as 'something of a new *Bhagavata Purana*'. But the *Sursagar* itself evidently was. Later, as the eighteenth century played itself out, we observe that in several places and several specific manuscripts the *Sursagar* was reformulated so that it would replicate the twelve-skandha format of the *Bhagavata*. This required quite some ingenuity, and many compositions had to be added to the corpus of poems attributed to Surdas to make this seem reasonable and possible.<sup>16</sup> In the visual dimension—in illustrated manuscripts—this seems to be what makes it possible to sometimes see Surdas pictured as reading from a single bound text, quite in defiance of the poem-by-poem way in which Sur's poems seem to have

<sup>14</sup> Molly Emma Aitkin, personal communication, New York, June 11, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Granoff, 'Pilgrimage as Revelation', 189.

<sup>16</sup> Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 194–95, 372; *idem*, *Into Sūr's Ocean*, 19–27; compare Hawley, 'Did Surdas Perform the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*?', 209–30.

been performed and remembered in the sixteenth century, his own time. The *Sursagar*, which originally grew out of an unsystematic or sometimes *raga*-based anthology, thus became definitively narrativized, and narrativized according to the specific narrative canons established by the *Bhagavata Purana*.

We do not see this happening specifically in the Amar Singh *Sursagar*, but notably, it counts as the first visual narrativization of Sur's poetry that we see in all of India. Yet in this visual realm we do have the *Bhagavata* as an unspoken predecessor. Until the Amar Singh *Sursagar* appeared, the only visual representations of Krishna's childhood, so far as the record attests, would have been the *Balagopalastuti* based on the *Krishnakarnamtra* of Bilvamangala and the *Bhagavata Purana* itself. Only the latter was painted at Udaipur, but several times, including an ambitious sequence apparently undertaken by the famous Sahibdin (ca. 1648).<sup>17</sup> When we come to the Amar Singh *Sursagar*, thus, the prestige of the *Bhagavata Purana* was being actively adapted to new canons of vernacular usage, just as happened in Assam, even though there are no specific visual gestures to establish that status. The fact that Krishna must have been thought to have spoken Brajbhasha in his youth was surely having an effect, and Sur's 'divine vision', mediated through Brajbhasha, must have contributed to this important adjustment in literary history. Indeed, it was visual history at the same time.

How wonderful that all this happened at some distance from Braj! In the *Shankaradeva-charita* the progression from Braj to Odissa to Gujarat helps to underscore such a departure—in favour of Assam and Assamese.<sup>18</sup> Here too, at Udaipur, we have a celebration of Braj far from Braj, not just in the form of a school where Brajbhasha was self-consciously taught and celebrated, as at Bhuj beginning in 1749, but in the form of a literary exemplar that was apparently first given its canonical name—*Sursagar*—at Ghanora and in Udaipur itself, very far from any geographical boundaries one might wish to establish for the land of Braj. I am not claiming that there is any

<sup>17</sup> Topsfield, *Court Painting at Udaipur*, 59–71.

<sup>18</sup> Granoff, 'Pilgrimage as Revelation', 190–94.



direct or explicit parallel between the biography of Shankaradeva attributed to Ramacharana and the *Sursagar* that first takes on literary and visual shape in and around Udaipur. But I do think that the vivid framework Phyllis Granoff provides in her portrait of the *Shankaradeva-charita* helps us to think about the significance of the Amar Singh *Sursagar* in new and productive ways.

How interesting that the poets at the heart of both stories—Shankaradeva and Surdas—should have been late-sixteenth-century figures, and that these subsequent transformations should have come along a century or so later. When they did so, they entered an India whose spoken-language literary production had been substantially enriched by the Vaishnava literary presence that burst forth in the time of the Akbar. The *Surdas ki Varta*, actually, pays tribute to this fact, giving us two chapters in which Akbar is active, courting the favors of Sur. We may doubt the historical veracity of such claims—parallel examples about poets and rulers appear throughout the bhakti literature of north India and elsewhere—but the sense of political context is not misplaced. Not only that, we have an incident of forgery, a theme Phyllis Granoff has brought to light as a familiar feature of literary biography in her essay on Jain poets in medieval times, ‘Sarasvati’s Sons’.<sup>19</sup>

In a way, thus, Surdas was to Braj what Shankaradeva was to Assam. His form was differently perceived. Unlike Shankaradeva, he was never regarded as being in any degree Krishna himself; this kind of role fell, rather, to Chaitanya or Vallabha, the latter being regarded as Krishna’s partial representation (*aṃśāvātāra*). Yet the comparison with Shankaradeva helps us see how intimate others believed the connection between Sur and his lord to be: the Amar Singh *Sursagar* depicts Sur as the direct recipient of Krishna’s self-revelation. He spoke Krishna’s own language, the vernacular language of Braj, and his divinely blind eyes made it possible for him to see the full context of such speech. He did so directly, with no physical filter. Later generations sometimes obscured this crucial fact, accepting the Vallabhite claim that Sur’s inspiration came from Vallabha, who was in turn

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<sup>19</sup> Granoff, ‘Sarasvati’s Sons’, 363.

inspired by the *Bhagavata Purana*. But seen from the point of view of Sur's divine vision, even the *Bhagavata* ends up seeming only an approximation, just as it did to the Assamese when compared with Shankaradeva.

In-between biography? In one sense, yes—told only by implication through the life of Krishna. But in another sense it is as direct an approximation as you can get, or so it was evidently believed to be by a certain group of painters and scribes who gave shape to the story of Krishna's young life in the reign of Amar Singh II. For north India, at least, Surdas has remained the archetypal poet of Krishna's childhood ever since.

Toward the end of 'Pilgrimage as Revelation' Phyllis tells us that in the *Shankaradeva-charita* the master is reported to have undertaken a second pilgrimage journey as well. When he did so, he made a stop at the home of Kabir's daughter, she reports.<sup>20</sup> I too would like to conclude with a halt at the doorstep of Kabir. His renowned couplets have been given many names as they have been collected for posterity—*dohas* (*dohā*: couplet) all over northern India, *shlokas* (*saloks*, i.e., *ślokas*) in the Sikh manuscripts, and *sakhis* (*sākhīs*) in the *Kabir Bijak*, which has its roots in Banaras, his home town. It's these *sakhis* that draw my attention—witnesses: witnesses to the world and to the truth. At Udaipur, the story of Sur's life echoed that perception of what a life should be, even if its form was radically different. In the Amar Singh *Sursagar* Surdas is witnessed as a witness. He too is witness to the real—a different kind of 'real' from Kabir's—and his life is shaped to echo that process of perception.

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<sup>20</sup> Granoff, 'Pilgrimage as Revelation', 197.

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