



## Keshavdas and his poetic nemesis

Keshavdas (c. 1555-1617) is one of the most erudite and brilliant poets from the heyday of the Rīti tradition of Braj Bhasha poetry. His work represents the confluence of Sanskritic and vernacular literary components in a wide array of devotional, romantic, scholarly and historical themes.

Keshav's *Kavipriyā*, 'The Poet's Favourite' (c. 1601), is essentially a pattern-book of literary tropes and metaphors. But it is also more than this: Keshav's well-chosen method of instruction is to instruct *delightfully*, and his 'example' verses are not merely stylistic types or models, but real articulations of poetic wit and feeling in their own right. Keshav's musical words, images, rhythms and internal rhymes tumble over each other like currents in a mountain stream. We will look closely at the metrical composition of a sample stanza, then read a second example before finally encountering a mocking pastiche of Keshav's style by a slightly later poet with a very different agenda.

The Sanskritic tradition of *alaṅkāraśāstra*, the science of poetics, boasts sufficient categories to label every conceivable poetic trope – and then some. And yet poets such as Keshavdas, while heirs to that tradition, wrote in vernacular metres such as *kavitt* (*kabitt*) and *savaiyā* that fall beyond the remit of the Sanskrit pandits, and we need a further set of tools with which to appreciate the structure and aesthetics of a poem such as *Kavipriyā*. Our focus here will be on the structure of one of his preferred metres, the *kavitt*.

The lavish and baroque metaphors of this style of poetry have a culturally remote but contemporary and relishable parallel in the English metaphysical poets. In his poem 'The Weeper', Richard Crashaw (1613-1649) famously described the lachrymose eyes of Mary Magdalene as:

...two faithful fountains;  
Two walking baths, two weeping motions,  
Portable and compendious oceans.

Rather than develop an extended metaphor (one that builds detail around a single image), the poet sets out an elaborate list of mutually complementary *separate* metaphors, scouring his imagination for more and more extravagant invocations of his subject. Each image in turn proves inadequate and is supplanted by a new one; hyberbole is heaped on hyperbole. Keshav works similarly in describing Radha, the epitome of the sublime and graceful heroine, in a *nakh-sikh*, a lingering 'toe-to-head' tour of her charms, a pilgrimage along the trail of ultimate beauty. In our section of *Kavipriyā* he visits such sites as her waist (slender as the charity of a miser, slim as the falsehood of truth), her fingernails (goads for the carriage of Love; pens to inscribe Passion's victory), her cheeks (lakes for the crocodiles of her ear-rings; a smooth course for the running of Kamdev's chariot), or her voice (sister of song; the very veena of the goddess of eloquence). We will focus on a stanza describing Radha's laugh or smile; but note that Keshav withholds the identification of his subject until the final line, turning the preceding descriptive metaphors into a series of riddles for the reader.

This trope, in which alternative and successive images are listed in long sequences, is traditionally articulated with the word किधौं, (that is, कि धौं) meaning 'either', but implying a tour of competing options: 'should we call it X?...or is it Y?...or perhaps we could say it is Z?' The word कि (occurring both within किधौं, and independently as 'or') happens, incidentally, to be the only Persianate loan in these two stanzas: Keshav's register is generally Sanskritic.

But enough talk. The poem:

किधौं मुखकमल में कमला की जोति किधौं  
चारु मुखचंद्र चंद्र चंद्रिका चुराई है ।  
किधौं मृगलोचन मरीचिका मरीचि किधौं  
रूप की रुचिर रुचि रुचि सों दुराई है ॥  
सौरभ की सोभा कि दसन घन दामिनी कि  
केसव चतुर चित ही की चतुराई है ।  
एरी गोरी भोरी तेरी थोरी थोरी हाँसी मेरे  
मोहन की मोहनी कि गिरा की गुराई है ॥

Either the lustre of Lakshmi lies in the lotus of her face, or  
her lovely moon-face has stolen the moon's moonlight;  
either it is the light of a mirage in her deer-eyes, or  
the lovely lustre of her beauty cleverly concealed.  
The splendour of her fragrance, or the lightning of her teeth, or,  
Keshav, the skillfulness of her skillful mind itself —  
O fair and artless girl, your slight little *smile*  
is the enchantress of my Mohan, or the fairness of Saraswati.

We can now begin to observe how the brilliance of Keshav's imagery and fluid language is set within the firm structure of metre, like gems clustered on the structure of a finger-ring.

In order to sit comfortably on the page, *kavitt* meter is usually printed in eight lines, as here; but its structure and rhyme show it to be a quatrain, a four-line meter.

Each poetic line has 31 syllables, composed as 8+8+8+7. The *kavitt* is something of a maverick within Hindi prosody, in that its syllabic structure is formulated by the *number* of syllables alone, without regard to their individual length or 'weight'.

A note on the poet's name. We call him 'Keshav', automatically restoring an etymological श to the word; but he calls himself 'Kesav', and as we shall see later, this spelling is essential in the functioning of certain tropes. Both in small details and in broader terms, we need to avoid treating Braj Bhasha, a fine and noble vernacular, as a kind of debased Sanskrit!

The rhythmic break or caesura after the second foot usually coincides with a word-break (allowing the four lines to be printed as eight); but the caesurae after the first and third quarter-lines, *here shown with spaces*, are rhythmic only. To put it another way, these caesurae may fall *within* a word, yielding the kind of caesura-enjambment that we see in lines **two** and **three** —

किधौं मुखकमल में कमला की जोति किधौं  
चारु मुखचंद्र चंद्र चंद्रिका चुराई है ।  
किधौं मृगलोचन स- रीचिका मरीचि किधौं  
रूप की रुचिर रुचि रुचि सों दुराई है ॥

सौरभ की सोभा कि द- सन घन दामिनी कि  
केसव चतुर चित ही की चतुराई है।

एरी गोरी भोरी तेरी थोरी थोरी हाँसी मेरे  
मोहन की मोहनी कि गिरा की गुराई है ॥

Rhythmically, each line of our sample stanza consists of seven four-syllable feet plus a final three-syllable foot:

किधौं मुख / कमल में / कमला की / जोति किधौं /  
चारु मुख / चंद्र चंद्र / चंद्रिका चु- / राई है।  
किधौं मृग / लोचन म- / रीचिका म- / रीचि किधौं /  
रूप की रु- / चिर रुचि / रुचि सों दु- / राई है ॥  
सौरभ की / सोभा कि द- / सन घन / दामिनी कि /  
केसव च- / तुर चित / ही की चतु- / राई है।  
एरी गोरी / भोरी तेरी / थोरी थोरी / हाँसी मेरे /  
मोहन की / मोहनी कि / गिरा की गु- / राई है ॥

The significance of this pattern is that the first syllable in each foot is one that can bear a stress. This yields a rhythmic pattern like that of the rare “first paeon” meter in English — a foot of four syllables, the first being stressed. Stress, as distinct from syllable length, is not usually considered an important feature in Hindi prosody, but our sample stanza does lend itself to such a reading.

This structure supplies a fixity of basic rhythm against which to play an endless game of variations featuring rich patterns of internal rhyme, of assonance (pairings of vowel sounds) and/or of consonance (pairings of consonant sounds). We find adjacent feet echoing each other (कमल में / कमला की; सौरभ की / सोभा कि द-), while other feet have internal repeats (चंद्र चंद्र; थोरी थोरी) or mirrored patterns (-चिर रुचि). These effects are all enhanced by being set against the regularly-repeated architecture of the rhythmic line. Thus the purpose of the line construction is to supply a standard rhythm against which these phonetic and rhythmic variations can be heard to best advantage.

Let us now look at end-rhyme – a much more fixed and disciplined feature than the endemic internal rhyme that embroiders the stanza so freely! The final foot consists of the fixed phrase **-राई है** occurring in each line, providing a null rhyme (one that pairs identical words); this is preceded by a rhyme with variable consonant in the last syllable of the penultimate foot: **चु- / दु- / -तु- / गु-**.

किधौं मुख / कमल में / कमला की / जोति किधौं  
चारु मुख / चंद्र चंद्र / चंद्रिका **चु-** / **राई है** ।

किधौं मृग / लोचन म- / रीचिका म / रीचि किधौं  
रूप की रु / चिर रुचि / रुचि सों **दु-** / **राई है** ॥

सौरभ की / सोभा कि द- / सन घन / दामिनी कि  
केसव च- / तुर चित / ही की **चतु-** / **राई है** ।

एरी गोरी / भोरी तेरी / थोरी थोरी / हाँसी मेरे  
मोहन की / मोहनी कि / गिरा की **गु-** / **राई है** ॥

These are the two rhyme elements known to the Urdu tradition as *qāfiya* or fixed end-rhyme, and *radīf* or varying pre-final rhyme.

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We now move on to a later stanza in the Nakh-sikh sequence. Here the poet declares his subject in the opening line: the stanza is in praise of Radha's *tongue*, glimpsed with tantalising briefness when she speaks:

देखत हीं आधु पलु बाधिजति बाधा सब  
राधाजू की **रसना** सुरूप की सी रानी है ।

आछी आछी बातनि की जननी सी जगमगै  
रसनि की देवी किधौं पचि पहिचानी है ।

केसोदास सकल सु-बासु कैसी सेज किधौं  
सकल सु-जानता की सखी सुखदानी है ॥

किधौं मुखकंज में सकति कौनौ सेवें दुज  
सबिता की छबिता की कबिता निधानी है ॥

On glimpsing it for half a moment all impediment is impeded —  
Radha's *tongue* is like a queen of beautiful form.

Like the mother of fine words it shines,  
or is faintly recognized as goddess of flavours.

Keshavdas, it is like a couch for all fragrance, or  
a delightful confidante of all wiseness;

or some power which the twice-born serve in the lotus mouth,  
lustre of the sun, or poesy's abode.

Let us pick out a detail or two from each of the four lines in this fine stanza:

देखत हीं आधु पलु **बाधिजति** बाधा सब  
राधाजू की रसना सुरूप की सी रानी है ।

1. On glimpsing it for half a moment all impediment is impeded —  
Radha's *tongue* is like a queen of beautiful form.

The medial -ज- in **बाधिजति** is an alternative for the more conventional -य-, a glide between the stem बाधि- and the passive ending -अति. The conceit of 'impeding [the effect of] impediment' alludes to the frequently-invoked role of Ganesh as 'remover of obstacles' — a function here transferred to Radha.

आछी आछी बातनि की जननी सी जगमगै  
**रसनि** की देवी किधौं **पचि** पहिचानी है ।

2. Like the mother of fine words it shines,  
or is faintly recognized as goddess of flavours.

In the second line, **रसनि** (oblique plural of रस, equivalent to Khari Boli रसों) plays against **रसना** 'tongue' in line 1. An untranslatable range of meanings around the verb **पचि-** yield the parallel sense of 'after much toiling' and 'absorbing [taste etc.]'.

केसोदास सकल सुबासु कैसी सेज किधौं  
सकल सुजानता की सखी सुखदानी है ॥

3. Keshavdas, it is like a couch for all fragrance, or  
a delightful confidante of all wiseness;

Bearing in mind the equivalence or interchangeability of *e/au* vowels in Braj, notice how **Keshav** (Kesav !) likes to play his own name against such words as कैसी.

किधौं मुखकंज में सकति कौनौ सेवें दुज  
सबिता की छबिता की कबिता निधानी है ॥

4. or some power which the twice-born serve in the lotus mouth,  
lustre of the sun, or poesy's abode.

The word **दुज** (< द्विज) 'twice-born' has double reference: as *Brahmins* (whose initiation to adult brahminhood is a second 'birth') and as *teeth* ('reborn' after the falling of the milk-teeth of infancy).

Looking at line structure, we find similar features to those described for the previous stanza. Most of the caesura enjambments break the word at morphemically 'appropriate' points: in such matters, Keshav's instincts are like those of a careful editor who allows hyphenated line-breaks only when they make syllabic or etymological sense (e.g. by splitting the word 'careful' as 'care-ful' rather than as 'car-eful').

देखत हीं / आधु पलु / बाधिजति / बाधा सब  
राधाजू की / रसना सु- / रूप की सी / रानी है ।  
आछी आछी / बातनि की / जननी सी / जगमगै  
रसनि की / देवी किधौं / पचि पहि- / चानी है ।  
केसोदास / सकल सु- / बासु कैसी / सेज किधौं  
सकल सु- / जानता की / सखी सुख- / दानी है ॥  
किधौं मुख / कंज में स- / कति कौनौ / सेवें दुज  
सबिता की / छबिता की / कबिता नि- / धानी है ॥

The rhyme scheme here is contained within the final foot: the *qāfiya* is simply है, and the *radīf* is made up of the two preceding syllables: रानी, -चानी, -दानी, -धानी.

देखत हीं आधु पलु बाधिजति बाधा सब  
राधाजू की रसना सुरूप की सी रानी है ।  
आछी आछी बातनि की जननी सी जगमगै  
रसनि की देवी किधौं पचि पहिचानी है ।  
केसोदास सकल सु-बासु कैसी सेज किधौं  
सकल सु-जानता की सखी सुखदानी है ॥  
किधौं मुखकंज में सकति कौनौ सेवें दुज  
सबिता की छबिता की कबिता निधानी है ॥

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A broader survey of verses in *Kavipriyā* would show that many of the features outlined here occur — with variation — throughout the poem. Interspersed with *kavitt* verses is the *savaiyā*, a dactylic quatrain to be introduced elsewhere in *Kāvyārtha*. In playing these two stylistically contrasted metres against each other, Keshavdas maintains a tradition established by such poets as Tulsidas, who used the same pairing to great effect in his eponymous *Kavitāvalī* (c. 1610 A.D.)

The *Kavipriyā* is a veritable master-class in the aesthetics of poetic style; reveling in a lavish flood of conceits, the poem celebrates its own eloquence as much as it eulogizes the qualities of its narrative subjects, Radha and Krishna. But the lush pleasures of this aesthetic world do not meet universal approval. A younger contemporary of Keshavdas named Sundardas (c. 1596-1689) was a follower of Dadu, the 16th-century proponent of *nirguṇ bhakti*. The ethos of *nirguṇ* can tend towards the puritan; Sundardas rejects the *saguṇ-bhakti* use of human amours as a metaphor for divine love, and snarls angrily at the Rīti poets' romantic inclinations. Perhaps uniquely in the pre-modern Hindi canon, Sundardas specifically targets a fellow-poet for criticism, challenging his indulgent



sensuality and subjecting him to an undeclared but cutting pastiche in which he recycles some of Keshav's favorite images to great effect.

The attack comes in Sundar's *Sundar-vilās*, a hugely interesting text that reveals the poet as a source of feisty energy. *Sundar-vilās* follows a *nirguṇ* genre precedent in being divided into a number of chapters called *aṅga*, each designed to emphasize one or other aspect of *nirguṇ* teaching. The section entitled नारी निंदा कौ अंग 'Chapter on the deprecation of womankind' includes a Kuṇḍaliyā\* verse that targets two of Keshav's best-known works:

रसिक-प्रिया रस-मंजरी और सिंगारहि जानि ।  
चतुराई करि बहुत विध बिषैं बनाई आनि ॥

The *Rasikpriyā*, *Rasmanjari* and other [texts] considered erotic,  
are cleverly constructed with a varied combination of sensuality.

Such sensual poetry, says Sundar, is as harmful to the spirit as sweetmeats would be to the physical health of a sick man (ज्यों रोगी मिष्ठान खाइ रोगहि बिस्तारै). But it is through his pastiche of Keshav's rhetorical style that Sundar cuts most deeply. Let us read a *kavitt* by Sundar that is closely suggestive of Keshav's eulogy of Radha's smile, not only in terms of its profusion of successive images but also in the withholding of the subject until the final line. This time I will not spoil things by revealing the subject ahead of the game!

\*For this metrical form see *Kuṇḍaliyā* elsewhere in **Kāvyaṛtha**.

हाथी कौ सौ कान किधौं पीपर कौ पान किधौं  
ध्वजा कौ उडान कहौं थिर न रहतु है ।  
पानी कौ सौ घेरि किधौं पौन उरझेर किधौं  
चक्र कौ सौ फेरि कोऊ कैसें कै गहतु है ॥  
अरहट माल किधौं चरखा कौ प्याल किधौं  
फेरी खात बाल कछु सुधि न लहतु है ।  
धूम कौ सौ धाव ताकौं राखिबे कौ चाव ऐसौ  
मन कौ सुभाव सु तौ सुन्दर कहतु है ॥

Like an elephant's ear, or a peepul leaf, or again  
the flapping of a flag — it never stays still;

The whirl of water, or a catch of the wind or  
the turn of a wheel — how can anyone hold it?

A Persian wheel's pails or the thought of a spinning wheel  
or a whirling child — wit cannot grasp it at all.

The rolling of cloud and the desire to hold it — thus  
is the nature of the *mind*, says Sundar.

For Keshav, the heroine's smile dazzles like moonlight; for Sundar, the human mind is in constant and fickle motion, like peepal leaves in the wind. Keshav and Sundar use the same genre the same genre and imagery to widely different ends: the former to celebrate a certain brand of sensual spirituality, the latter to excoriate it. Both their titles, *Kavipriyā* and *Sundar-vilās*, are multivalent and allusive, both suggestive of a willful playfulness — and both difficult to translate! One thinks of the aesthetic power ascribed to the arts in the Indian tradition: to experience *rasa* is to transcend the specifics of individual sentiments and attaining a higher state of...what exactly — being? meaning? perhaps truth? Though Sundar is doubtless sincere in his aversion to Keshav's fleshly poesy, his own creations exude no less joy and pride in creating a poetic world of meaning: the sense of palpable and even sensual delight inherent in his title-word *vilās*

is very much to the fore here, suggesting that spiritual knowledge is just as 'relishable' as the pleasures of the flesh.

Perhaps distinctions of context and of argument are subordinate to a higher purpose in poetry: perhaps themes, subjects and even belief systems are nothing more than material details useful in mapping specific and varied routes towards a transcendent ineffable reality through the suggestive power of language. Perhaps *kāvyaārtha*, the meaning and end of poetry, transcends the poet's circumstances.

- Rupert Snell

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