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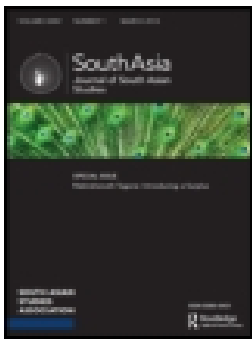
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ARTICLE

Hydroaesthetics in the Little Ice Age: Theology, Artistic Cultures and Environmental Transformation in Early Modern Braj, c. 1560–70

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ABSTRACT

Examining the visual tactics of framing flowing water in landscape painting and riparian architecture in Braj, a pilgrimage centre in North India where the god Krishna is believed to have spent his youth, the essay foregrounds a new conception of hydroaesthetics that emerged with the onset of the Little Ice Age (c. 1550–1850), a climatic period marked by catastrophic droughts and famines in South Asia. An engagement with the hydroaesthetics of beholding the river Yamuna's passage through Braj, the essay argues, brings to the forefront a reciprocal relationship between artistic practices based on a theological aesthetic of venerating the natural environment and ecological calamities. In doing so, the essay attempts to delineate a possible methodology for an ecological art history.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetics; architecture; early modern; eco art history; ecology; Hinduism; painting; pilgrimage; Vaishnavism; Yamuna

*tribhiih sarasvatam toyam saptahena tu narmadam |
sadyah punati gangeyam darsanad eva yamunam ||*

The river Sarasvati purifies one after three days. The river Narmada purifies one after seven weeks.

The Ganga purifies one immediately. Yamuna purifies one who beholds it.¹

Diagonally cutting across the picture plane, the blue river flows beyond the border of the painting to a space elsewhere, a space that is, conceivably, beyond representation (Figure 1). It is the transversal movement of the fleeting diagonal, more than the height of the vertical or the repose of the horizontal, that allows for the precipitous passage of the river through the bucolic landscape of Braj, a pilgrimage centre in North India where the divine Krishna was believed to have spent his youth.² A visual translation of a verse from the *Bhagavata Purana*, one of the most widely recognised and, certainly, the most popular

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1. *Haribhaktivilasa, Vol. II* (Vrindavan: Rasbihari Lal & Sons, 2006), p. 328.

2. Braj, sixty miles south of India's capital New Delhi and thirty miles north of Agra, is a ninety-square-mile pilgrimage centre surrounding the city of Mathura in Uttar Pradesh. The sixteenth-century discovery of specific sites in the region that were purportedly associated with Krishna's life led to Braj becoming a key pilgrimage centre in North India. See Alan W. Entwistle, *Braj: Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1987); and David L. Haberman, *Journey Through the Twelve Forests: An Encounter with Krishna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).



Figure 1. Krishna's water sport, Isarda *Bhagavata Purana*, c. 1560–70. Opaque watercolour on paper, 18.8×25.2 cm. Source: The San Diego Museum of Art, Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, 1990.586. Reproduced by kind permission of The San Diego Museum of Art, California, USA.

of all Hindu scriptures, the painting illustrates Krishna's amorous play in the river Yamuna.³ Tired from the pleasures of love, Krishna—who has lost all inhibitions—enters the water of the flowing river with his beloved devotees. Thus begins the water sport or the *jal krida*. 'With looks of love, the young women around him laughed and splashed him vigorously, O King! Worshipped with showers of *kusuma* (queen of the night) flowers by the celestial beings in their aerial chariots, Krishna disported himself like an elephant in *lila* (play) pastimes, even though he is content within himself.'⁴ Surrounded by cowherd women (*gopis*), the bejewelled body of Krishna flows with the turbulent undercurrent of the river towards an arena beyond the yellow margin that marks the limit of the painting, of representation itself.

3. Book 10 of the *Bhagavata Purana*, written in South India in the ninth or the early tenth century CE, was a foundational text for sixteenth century Vaishnavism or the worship of Krishna/Vishnu. The first section of the text describes Krishna's early life and his divine play (*lila*) with the cowherd women (*gopis*) of Braj. See Ravi M. Gupta and Kenneth R. Valpey (eds), *The Bhagavata Purana: Sacred Text and Living Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

4. Edwin Bryant (trans.), *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God: Srimad Bhagavata Purana Book X* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 141.

Certainly, the artists' deliberate transgression of the bounded borders of the folio has not gone unnoticed by art history.⁵ The paintings in the c. 1560–70 manuscript, now known as the Isarda *Bhagavata Purana*, have become, for scholars, exemplary of a new visual language that had emerged in response to pictorial conventions developed by the imperial atelier under the Mughal emperor Akbar (1542–1605). As scholars have noted, the innovative use of white delicate lines to demarcate the turbulent waves of flowing water, and the disregard for pictorial margins in the manuscript, also appear in contemporaneous paintings produced at the Mughal court.⁶ The Isarda *Bhagavata*, then, becomes decisive for mapping the sweeping transformations in painting traditions in South Asia that ensued in the sixteenth century with the establishment of the Mughal Empire. Indeed, a number of folios from this manuscript seem to have used an analogous visual strategy, one that is organised around highlighting the aqueous dynamism of flowing water, while accentuating the river within the picture plane.⁷

Yet the act of reading this new imaginative technique of representing water solely as an outcome of Central Asian Timurid aesthetic regimes introduced by the Mughals in North India also serves to idealise the landscape in a manner that occludes linkages between the natural environment and human action upon it. Thus, rather than positing the Isarda *Bhagavata* as a closed discourse, significant only to the internal history of the art of the Indian subcontinent, this essay places imaginative acts of seeing water in an expanded field that encompassed aesthetic practices, natural resource management and environmental catastrophes that occurred with the formation of the Little Ice Age (c. 1550–1850), an epoch that also saw the emergence of a new Vaishnava (the worship of Vishnu/Krishna as the supreme godhead) theological aesthetics in Braj based on venerating the natural environment. Flowing beyond the confines of paper, the river Yamuna in the Isarda folio thus allowed for the formation of a moral horizon that highlighted seeing the fluid materiality of water as an aesthetic experience. Certainly, the rendering of the river in the manuscript had its visual genealogies in the painterly cultures of the Mughal court. But, at the same time, the manuscript offers critical perspectives on an incipient sixteenth-century opticality that underscored the act of seeing water. Moving from the depiction of the flowing river in a single folio in the Isarda *Bhagavata Purana* to monumental riparian architecture that emerged in response to global droughts, this essay places hydroaesthetics in intrinsically interconnected fields that link localised aesthetic practices to the expanded non-human trans-territorial arena of water scarcity and famine. Doing so opens up new paths in art history, ecological passages that bring to the forefront a reciprocal relationship between artistic practices and the natural environment.

5. Pramod Chandra and Daniel J. Ehnbohm, *The Cleveland Tuti-Nama Manuscript and the Origins of Mughal Painting* (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1976); Martin Lerner, *The Flame and the Lotus: Indian and Southeast Asian Art from the Kronos Collections* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984); Steven Kossak, *Indian Court Painting: 16th–19th Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997); and Darielle Mason (ed.), *Intimate Worlds: Indian Paintings from the Alvin O. Bellak Collection* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001).

6. Khandalavala and Mittal write: 'We feel that by the time the new [Isarda] *Bhāgavata* was executed at least some painters of the Delhi–Agra region working in the pre-Mughal Hindu tradition had achieved... greater technical dexterity than their predecessors'. Karl Khandalavala and Jagdish Mittal, 'The Bhagavata MSS from Palam and Isarda—A Consideration in Style', in *Lalit Kala*, Vol. 16 (1974), p. 30.

7. See, for instance, a folio depicting Krishna stealing the clothes of the bathing cowherd women in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Accession no. 1972.260).

Theological Aesthetics: Seeing in the Little Ice Age

The aesthetic, economic and cultural significance of water has, undoubtedly, received significant attention in recent years. From Fernand Braudel's foundational *La Mediterranee* to more recent histories that have emphasised the inherent connectedness that constituted the early modern period, the fluidity of water as liquid space that links land masses through trade and migration has become fundamental in shaping the global horizons of political and cultural histories.⁸ At the same time, scholars have studied riparian architecture, canals, port cities, drainage systems, aqueducts, fountains and scientific experiments that harnessed the force of water.⁹ Scholars have also explored the representation of water in the visual arts.¹⁰ Expanding on this line of enquiry by bringing together the ocular and the natural environment, this essay asks, what did it mean to see water in sixteenth-century Braj?

In sixteenth-century North India, the act of seeing was of great consequence. Theoretical developments and experimentations in the field of vision had led to the growing popularisation of spectacles, while encyclopaedic treatises composed at the Mughal court, for instance Muhammad Fazil Miskin Samarqandi's *Jawahir ul-'Ulum-i-Humayuni* (c. 1539), deliberated on optics and alchemy.¹¹ Within the sixteenth-century ecumenical worlds of Vaishnava piety, the act of seeing had accrued further philosophical and theological density. The Vaishnava theologian Rupa Goswami (c. 1489–1564) thus writes in the liturgical text *Bhaktirasamrtasindhu* (*The Ocean of the Essence of Devotional Rasa*, c. 1541): 'Simply by seeing Him (Krishna), I am feeling great happiness. Oh, I have wasted so much time trying to become self-realised through impersonal cultivation. This is a cause for lamentation!'¹²

8. Fernand Braudel, *La Mediterranee et le monde mediterraneen a l'epoque de Philippe II* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1949). For more recent engagements, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Nancy Um, *The Merchant Houses of Mocha: Trade and Architecture in an Indian Ocean Port* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

9. Jutta Jain-Neubauer, *The Stepwells of Gujarat in Art Historical Perspective* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1981); and, more recently, Julia A.B. Hegewald, *Water Architecture in South Asia: A Study of Types, Developments and Meanings* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), are some texts that have drawn attention to the typologies of water architecture in South Asia. Michael Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual: Temples and the Establishment of the Gods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), focuses on ritualism and water management at a specific archaeological site in central India. Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom (eds), *Rivers of Paradise: Water in Islamic Art and Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), focuses on the visual culture of water in diverse parts of the Islamic world. In comparison, there is a significant body of scholarship on European hydrocultures. See, for instance, Chandra Mukerji, *Impossible Engineering: Technology and Territoriality on the Canal du Midi* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Katherine W. Rinne, *The Waters of Rome: Aqueducts, Fountains, and the Birth of the Baroque City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), among others.

10. See, for instance, John House, *Monet: Nature into Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

11. For the history of the manuscript, see Muhammad A. Ghani, *A History of Persian Language & Literature at the Mughal Court, with a Brief Survey of the Growth of Urdu Language [Babur to Akbar]* (Allahabad: Indian Press, 1930). The use of spectacles in sixteenth century India is discussed in Iqbal G. Khan, 'Medieval Theories of Vision and the Introduction of Spectacles in India c. 1200–1750', in Deepak Kumar (ed.), *Disease and Medicine in India: A Historical Overview* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2001), pp. 27–40; and Tutul Chakravarti and Ranabir Chakravarti, 'Painted Spectacles: Evidence of the Mughal Paintings for the Correction of Vision', IDSJ Occasional Paper 38, Kolkata, Institute of Development Studies, 2012.

12. David L. Haberman (trans. and ed.), *The Bhaktirasamrtasindhu of Rupa Gosvamin*, (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 2003), p. 22.

The ocular-centric theological aesthetic proposed by Vaishnava theologians in Braj emerged from a reformulation of the theory of *rasa* (a mode of experiencing aesthetic enjoyment) to articulate a new devotional culture based on the experience of loving Krishna.¹³ Indeed, according to sixteenth-century Vaishnava philosophies, for instance the c. 1541 *Bhaktirasamrtasindhu*, the aesthetic experience of seeing Krishna had the power to fundamentally transform the one who was seeing. The popularisation of a new form of Vaishnavism in Braj in this period thus created a vocabulary of religiosity where yearning for Krishna as a lover became the ideal form of devotion or Bhakti. In her lyrical songs of devotion, Mirabai (c. 1498–1546), a Bhakti poet and Krishna devotee who purportedly visited Braj, wrote:

Friend, my eyes have been hit by the arrow of love.
His sweet form has taken over my thoughts and pierced my heart to the depths.
Friend, my eyes are acting so strangely...
How long have I been standing here in this house, gazing down the road?
Friend, my eyes have been hit by the arrow of love.
The dear Dark Lover (Krishna) is my breath,
The root, the source of my life.
Friend, my eyes are acting so strangely...
Mira is sold into the hands of the Mountain Bearer (Krishna).
People say she has lost her mind...¹⁴

Moving away from earlier orthodox practices of venerating Krishna as a supreme god-head, this new liturgy of Bhakti allowed for the articulation of a more intense emotional devotion centred on seeing Krishna.

Theologians proposed that faith (*sraddha*) and ritualistic practice (*sadhana*) would eventually allow the devotee to directly (*saksat*) perceive Krishna to attain transcendental bliss. As a religious aesthete, the devotee of Krishna was thus expected to inculcate the *sringara* (the erotic *rasa*) of the cowherd women through play with Krishna in the groves and forests of Braj. It is only after attaining bliss in the worldly Braj that the devotee could access transcendent Braj as a partaker in perpetual play or *lila* with the Supreme Being. Vaishnava theologians delineated four forms through which the Supreme Being appears in this world as embodied: in scriptural texts such as the *Bhagavata Purana*; through the aural presence of Krishna's name uttered; in the geographic space of Braj; and in the icon worshipped in the temple.¹⁵

It is certainly not a coincidence that the sudden development of pilgrimage practices, as well as a theology of place, occurred in Braj in the mid sixteenth century, a period also marked by droughts and famines of unprecedented intensity. As climate historians have noted, the period approximately between 1550 and 1850, now known as the Little Ice Age, had witnessed the climate of the middle latitudes becoming generally harsher with

13. See David L. Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation: A Study of Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); John S. Hawley, *At Play with Krishna: Pilgrimage Dramas from Brindavan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); and Barbara A. Holdrege, *Bhakti and Embodiment: Fashioning Divine Bodies and Devotional Bodies in Krsna Bhakti* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

14. Parashuram Chaturvedi, *Mirabai ke Padavali* (Prayag: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, 1973), *pad* 14, as cited in Nancy M. Martin, 'Rajasthan: Mirabai and Her Poetry', in Edwin F. Bryant (ed.), *Krishna: A Sourcebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 250.

15. Holdrege, *Bhakti and Embodiment*, p. 96.

expanding glaciers.¹⁶ While the flow of polar continental air masses extended over large parts of Europe, farmlands were destroyed in Norway and Iceland. In other parts of the world, the climatic phenomenon of the Little Ice Age caused greater frequency of droughts. In West Africa, the Sahel, that is the dry frontier of the Saharan fringe, pushed southward in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, causing a series of calamitous droughts.¹⁷ In Mexico, catastrophic droughts of great intensity occurred between 1545 and 1580.¹⁸ From 1554 onwards, the frequency of droughts increased in South Asia as well.¹⁹

It appears that the development of a new Vaishnava theology in Braj from the mid sixteenth century onwards, alongside the production of remarkable illustrated manuscripts narrating Krishna's life and large-scale riparian religious architecture that delineated the materiality of water, paralleled the increasing frequency of El Nino-induced droughts. Lasting between 1554 and 1556, the first of these droughts, which would continue well into the eighteenth century, ensued with the failure of the monsoon.²⁰ Writing on the drought of 1556, Abu'l Fazl, Akbar's panegyrist and close companion, noted: '[T]here was a terrible famine in many parts, and especially in the province of Delhi. Though they were finding signs of gold, they could see no trace of corn. Men took to eating one another; some would join together and carry off a solitary man, and make him their food'.²¹ Describing the famine as *Khashm-i-izad*, divine wrath, Abd-al-Qadir Badauni, an eyewitness to the devastation in the Delhi–Agra region, likewise wrote that the 'scarcity of rain, and shortness of grain' led to 'man eating his fellow-man'.²² While apocryphal accounts of cannibalism during climatic catastrophes abound in early modern narratives, the droughts between 1554 and 1556 had certainly led to a crisis in terms of agrarian production and the availability of food crops. That the elite of North India, too, were affected by the drought becomes apparent in the Mughal courtier Abu'l Fazl's complaint that during the scarcity, his family of seventy could only obtain a *seer* (two pounds) of grain, 'which was set to boil in earthenware vessels, and the warm water distributed'.²³

Within four years of the 1556 drought, we see the artists of the Isarda *Bhagavata* visualising a system of representing the materiality of the river Yamuna that exceeded a hydrology that disciplines, measures and subordinates water's geological force. The natural undoubtedly shaped the aesthetic. But such a reading would also have to proceed with caution. As products of very different dynamisms, the linkages between painting practices and drought should not offer either a deterministic history of the environment's agency or a reductionist non-anthropocentric history of art. Rather, a transversal movement from the optical sensibility made visible in the Isarda *Bhagavata* to the natural environment, and vice versa, could, perhaps, offer a relational field that makes visible the political,

16. Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

17. Sam White, 'Climate Change in Global Environmental History', in John McNeill and Erin Maulden (eds), *A Companion to Global Environmental History* (London: Blackwell, 2012), p. 401.

18. John R. McNeill, 'Envisioning an Ecological Atlantic, 1500–1850', in *Nova Acta Leopoldina*, Vol. 114, no. 390 (2013), pp. 21–33.

19. Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556–1707* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1963).

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 101–9.

21. H. Beveridge (trans.), *The Akbar Nama of Abu-l-Fazl, Vol. II* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1907), pp. 56–7.

22. G. Ranking (trans.), *Muntakhabu-t-tawarikh by 'Abdu-l-Qadir ibn-i-Muluk Shah known as al-Badaoni, Vol. I* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1898), p. 550.

23. H.S. Jarrett (trans.), *The Ain-i Akbari by Abul Fazl-i-Allami, Vol. III* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1894), p. 489.

social, theological and aesthetic imperatives of water.²⁴ Both these episodes, I suggest, led to a new hydroaesthetics centred on water systems.

Materialising the Riverscape

Discovered in the collection of the landed estate of Isarda, eighty miles south of the city of Jaipur, the now dispersed c. 1560–70 *Bhagavata Purana* is, undeniably, a significant manuscript in the history of painting in South Asia. Produced in the Delhi–Agra region, the 23 extant folios from the manuscript depict events from Krishna's life, as narrated in the tenth book of the *Bhagavata Purana*.²⁵ Crucially for us, paintings in the manuscript, when read alongside contemporaneous riparian architecture, provide a deeper history of seeing water as a form of beholding that foregrounds the riverscape within a world of affective aesthetics and the large-scale rearrangement of the natural environment that ensued in 1554.

Although coeval, there is, however, no evidence to bring these two moments—one environmental and the other artistic—together. But certainly, it was water as affect—the connections between droughts in South Asia and the institutional responses to it—that intimately bound them. Indeed, in the wake of a succession of extensive droughts that emerged with the Little Ice Age, the Vishram Ghat in Mathura, the principal *ghat* for pilgrimage in Braj, became the locus of a number of architectural endeavours that made seeing the flowing Yamuna central to an appreciation of water (Figure 2). Especially in pilgrimage sites such as Braj, *ghats* (platforms beside water bodies with steps that provide access to the water) are typically used for liturgical purposes.²⁶ Given the powerful symbolism of the river Yamuna as the daughter of the sun god Surya, the Vishram Ghat in Mathura, a town that had become the epicentre of pilgrimage in Braj, had already functioned as a site for solar worship prior to the thirteenth century.²⁷ Sixteenth-century liturgical texts, however, assert that this *ghat* was the precise location where Krishna had rested after killing his evil uncle Kamsa.²⁸ Hence, the name Vishram Ghat or the Ghat of Rest.

From other accounts, we learn that Sikandar Lodi, the Afghan ruler of Delhi between 1489 and 1517, had allegedly erected a mechanical contraption to prevent pilgrims from performing customary rituals at the Vishram Ghat.²⁹ Sectarian literature tells us that the contraption would result in pilgrims sprouting a beard when they attempted to perform rituals there.³⁰ Other narratives suggest that Sikandar Lodi had assembled a machine at the Vishram Ghat that automatically circumcised Hindus who went there. In retaliation, the Vaishnava reformer Vallabhacharya (1479–1531) wrote an incantation on a piece of

24. The transversal relationality that connects diverse ecologies is discussed in Felix Guattari (Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton, trans.), *The Three Ecologies* (London: Athlone Press, 2000).

25. Folios survive in collections including the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the San Diego Museum of Art, the Alvin O. Bellak collection in Philadelphia, the Goenka collection in Kolkata, the Gopi K. Kanoria collection in Patna, the Kronos collection in New York and the Paul F. Walter collection in New York.

26. See Hegewald, *Water Architecture in South Asia*.

27. The sixteenth-century *Mathuramahatmya* refers to a sculpture of Surya being worshipped beside the Yamuna at Mathura, possibly in the vicinity of the Vishram Ghat. *Mathuramahatmya* (Vrindavan: Rasbihari Lal & Sons, 2007).

28. Entwistle, *Braj*, p. 311.

29. Frederic S. Growse, *Mathura: A District Memoir* (Allahabad: North-Western Provinces and Oudh Government Press, 1874), p. 142.

30. Entwistle, *Braj*, p. 135.



Figure 2. Vishram Ghat, Mathura. Source: Author's photograph, 2012.

paper and gave it to his followers, asking them to hang it above one of the main gates at Sikandar Lodi's capital in Delhi; as a result, Muslims who passed under the gate lost their beards. A repentant Sikandar Lodi then removed the contraption. Indeed, strategically poised at the entrance to the fertile Gangetic plains, the control of Mathura had become vital for control over the riverine system which had, by this time, become crucial for the trade route connecting North India to coastal Bengal and beyond. Thus, as it flowed through Mathura, the river Yamuna also became an important symbolic space within the moral economies of sixteenth-century North India.

It was during the reign of Sikandar Lodi that Vaishnava reformers such as Chaitanya (1486–1533) and Vallabhacharya arrived in Mathura to preach a new Krishna devotion based on venerating the natural environment of Braj.³¹ Sectarian literature informs us that, after arriving in Braj in 1515, Chaitanya embarked on a mission to discover the sacred sites of Braj, starting with the Vishram Ghat. He embraced trees and creepers, collapsed in ecstasy on seeing embodied land, and leaped into the dark blue waters of the Yamuna, imagining Krishna perpetually playing in the river.³² The performative piety of

31. Responsible for establishing the Pushtimarga sect after his c. 1492 pilgrimage to Braj, Vallabhacharya would play a significant role in the sweeping spread of the Bhakti movement in North and west India. Chaitanya, a Vaishnava reformer from Bengal, had established the Gaudiya Vaishnava sect. See Richard Barz, *The Bhakti Sect of Vallabhacharya* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1992); and Joseph T. O'Connell, *Religious Movements and Social Structures: The Case of Chaitanya's Vaishnava in Bengal* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1993).

32. *Caitanya Caritamrta of Krsnadasa Kaviraja: A Translation and Commentary* (New York: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1975), especially the *Madhya lila*.

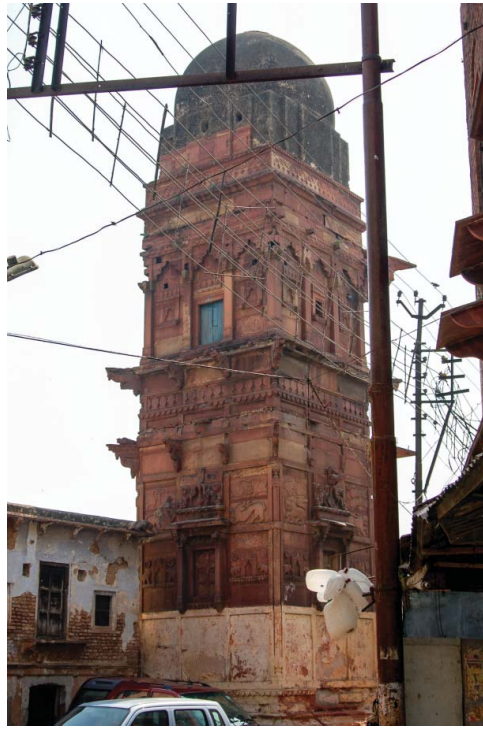


Figure 3. Sati Burj, Mathura, 1570. Source: Author's photograph, 2012.

Chaitanya's pilgrimage was thus centred on a bodily experience of natural phenomena. This mode of experiencing the topos, however, had resonances in the tenth-century *Bhagavata Purana* where Uddhava, Krishna's closest companion, took aesthetic pleasure in seeing the Yamuna, the forests and the blossoming trees of Braj.³³ Uddhava then wished to be reborn as a creeper in Braj so that the feet of devotees and the dust of Braj would cover him in rapturous love. In this sense, the sixteenth century reclaiming of the Vishram Ghat during Sikandar Lodi's reign was grounded on a moral claim to space as embodied.

Very soon, Chaitanya's devotees, especially members of the Kachhwaha dynasty that ruled from the kingdom of Amber in contemporary Rajasthan from the eleventh century onwards, built a series of structures at the Vishram Ghat.³⁴ The only extant structure from this period, the Sati Burj, is a 55-foot-tall quadrangular tower constructed in 1570 by Bhagwantdas (r. 1574–89), the ruler of Amber (Figure 3). Bhagwantdas was not only one of Akbar's closest allies, but had also patronised a number of temples in Braj after being initiated into Chaitanya's Gaudiya Vaishnavism.³⁵ Constructed in red sandstone, the same material concurrently being used by Akbar to build the Mughal capital of Fatehpur Sikri (c. 1571–85), the monumental verticality of the Sati Burj in Mathura, along

33. *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend*, p. 201.

34. Asim K. Roy, *The History of the Jaipur City* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1978), p. 227.

35. Bhagwantdas sponsored key temples in Braj, including the Haridev temple in Govardhan.



Figure 4. Upper level, Sati Burj, Mathura, 1570. Source: Author's photograph, 2012.

with its Mughal materiality, would certainly have visually charged the spatial fabric of the Vishram Ghat.

It is worth noting that the Sati Burj in Mathura and the Isarda *Bhagavata Purana* manuscript from Agra were contemporaneous. Both the sandstone structure and the painted folios in the Isarda manuscript reveal an attempt to engage with the visual form of the river Yamuna, particularly as it could be seen from the *ghats* of Braj. Indeed, a door-like opening on the upper level of the tower may have functioned as a viewing portal to see the Yamuna as it flows past the Vishram Ghat (Figure 4). Bhagwantdas' predecessor, Ratan Singh (r. 1537–48), had also built a 'ten-pillared' palace for royal pilgrimage beside the Vishram Ghat.³⁶ Given the dense urban build-up in the vicinity of the *ghat* over time, traces of the palace have entirely disappeared. However, descriptions of the palace certainly suggest that the structure provided a suitable viewing gallery for the Amber court.

The role of the ocular in engendering spatial perception was key to the tower's iconographic programme. One enters the Sati Burj through a doorway flanked by talismanic diagrams (*yantras*) carved in stone. Frequently depicted on temple walls, magico-ritualistic diagrams were characteristically used as visual aids for meditation or believed to possess astrological and magical benefits.³⁷ On the right side of the gateway is the five-pointed star (*pancakona yantra*) that symbolises the five material elements (*mahabhuta*) of ether, air, fire, water and earth (Figure 5). In the heart of the diagram is a schematic

36. Roy, *The History of the Jaipur City*, p. 227.

37. Gudrun Buhnemann (ed.), *Mandalas and Yantras in the Hindu Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).



Figure 5. *Pancakona yantra* (talismanic diagram), Sati Burj, Mathura, 1570. Source: Author's photograph, 2012.

lotus symbolising the pilgrimage centre of Braj. According to Gaudiya Vaishnava literature, Krishna and his consort Radha occupy the epicentre of the lotus, and devotees use illustrations of this celestial landscape as a device for concentration during meditative practices.³⁸ Hagiographic accounts inform us that Chaitanya had brought liturgical manuscripts to Braj that discussed talismanic diagrams as meditative devices.³⁹ Thus, the depiction of such ritualised diagrams on architectural surfaces in Braj would certainly not be out of place. Framed by a miniature gateway and two elephants, the diagram as an apotropaic schema was unquestionably intended to be seen ritually.

The architectural language of the tower itself had two distinct sources. The decoration, especially the use of archways as an architectural motif, as well as its vertical emphasis, had its source in pre-Mughal architecture. We see repeating archways, for instance, on the façade of the c. 1500 Gwalior fort in central India, built by the Tomar ruler Man Singh (r. 1486–1516) (Figure 6). The well-known Chittor tower, a nine-storeyed structure completed by the Sisodia dynasty in Rajasthan in the fifteenth century, is, likewise, an easily recognisable visual source.

At the same time, the use of imperial Mughal red sandstone, projecting eaves, and the limited use of anthropomorphic imagery suggests that the Sati Burj was designed using similar architectural typologies to those being incorporated into Fatehpur Sikri, thirty

38. For modern representations, see Tony K. Stewart, 'Replicating Vaisnava Worlds: Organizing Devotional Space through the Architectonics of the Mandala', in *South Asian History and Culture*, Vol. 2, no. 2 (April 2011), pp. 300–36.

39. Sectarian accounts indicate that Chaitanya had collected these texts during his pilgrimage to South India, prior to his arrival in Braj. See Edward C. Dimock, *Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaisnava Sahajiyā Cult of Bengal* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 220.



Figure 6. Façade, Man Mandir, Gwalior, c. 1500. Source: Author's photograph, 2014.

miles south of Mathura (Figure 7).⁴⁰ Indeed, the constructions in Mathura and Fatehpur Sikri commenced in 1570 and 1571, respectively, making these two architectural projects contemporaneous. The persistent evocation of red sandstone, the stone used to build Akbar's fort-palaces, within the soteriological space of sixteenth-century Braj then suggests that practices of imagining the pilgrimage centre involved seeing space, not only through a metaphysical order, but also as construed through contemporaneous expressions of political power.

The homology between the Mughal capital in Fatehpur Sikri and the Amber court's Sati Burj in Mathura persists throughout the tower's architectural programme. Indeed, Akbar had also used a viewing window (*jharoka*) in his palace complex in Sikri. The imperial *jharoka*, the public viewing window in the records office (*daftarkhana*) from where the emperor ceremonially presented himself to his subjects, was likewise constructed in the 1570s. It has been suggested that Akbar had derived this custom of displaying the imperial body from Hindu liturgical practices that prescribed the act of seeing the

40. Along with the Sati Burj, the 1590 Govind Dev temple patronised by Man Singh I (1550–1614), the son of Bhagwant-das, with sandstone quarried from the ridges near Fatehpur Sikri, indicates the emergence of a new architectural typology in Braj in conversation with contemporaneous Mughal architecture. See Catherine B. Asher, 'The Architecture of Raja Man Singh: A Study of Sub-Imperial Patronage', in Barbara S. Miller (ed.), *The Powers of Art: Patronage in Indian Culture* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 183–201.

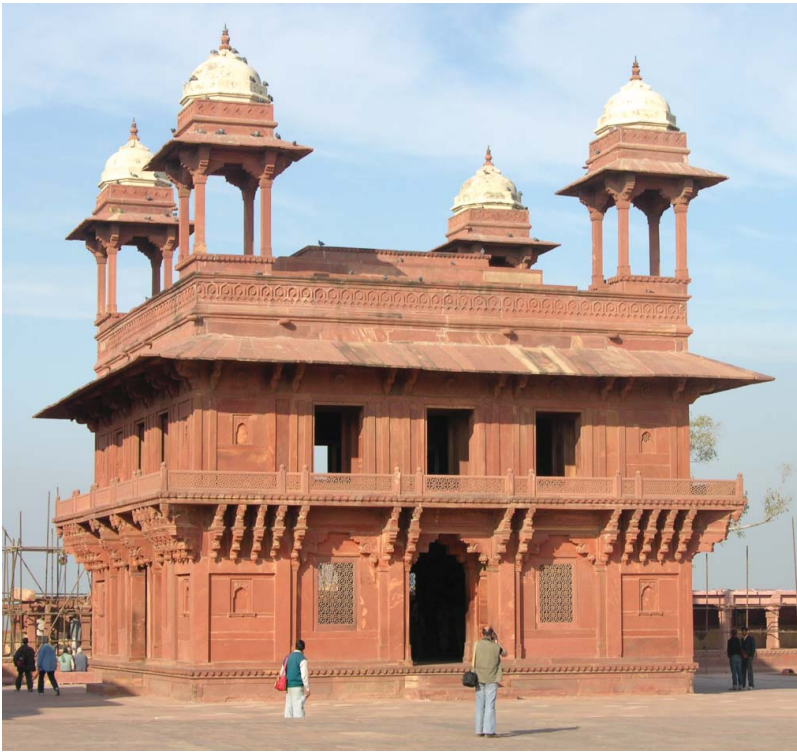


Figure 7. *Diwan-i khass* (private audience hall), Fatehpur Sikri, c. 1571. Source: Author's photograph, 2012.

divine body (*darsan*), that is ritually glancing at the icon in a temple, as a form of gaining merit.⁴¹ While, in the Mughal context, Akbar could be seen as adopting the ocular-centric practices intrinsic to Hindu liturgy to enunciate the idealised sovereign body, the use of the same architectural device at the Vishram Ghat presents a wholly different sensibility of vision and the gaze. For unlike the imperial *jharoka* in Fatehpur Sikri, designed to be looked into from outside, the positioning of the viewing window on the upper level of the Sati Burj suggests that it functioned as an optical apparatus to look out of, to behold the Yamuna flowing past the Vishram Ghat. Indeed, located almost fifty feet above ground level, the viewing window of the Sati Burj could not have served as a framing device for viewing the members of the Amber court from the streets of Mathura. Instead, it provided an unhindered view of flowing water, underscoring the role of beholding the Yamuna as fundamental to pilgrimage practices at the Vishram Ghat.

It is within this larger ocular culture that we could place the Isarda *Bhagavata Purana* manuscript. The Isarda manuscript was only one in a series of illustrated manuscripts produced in this region in the sixteenth century. A c. 1520–40 *Bhagavata Purana* with over two hundred extant folios that comes from Palam, now a suburb in southwest Delhi, signals towards the larger artistic cultures that had developed in the cosmopolitan worlds

41. Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot, *India before Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).



Figure 8. Krishna's water sport, Palam *Bhagavata Purana*, c. 1520–40. Ink and watercolour on paper, 16.5×22.2 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alvin N. Haas, 1971.171. Source: Reproduced by kind permission of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

of sixteenth-century Delhi and Agra (Figure 8).⁴² Largely independent of the Mughal court, these artistic cultures had evolved alongside new Vaishnava devotional and pilgrimage practices that profoundly transformed the North Indian ecumene in this period. Moving away from earlier orthodox practices of seeing the divine as a supreme godhead, the symbolism of *Bhakti* or divine love, where the devotee imagined herself/himself as Radha, Krishna's consort, consequently shaped new forms of poetic traditions and artistic practices.⁴³

Commissioned by two Vaishnava merchants, the 1520–40 Palam *Bhagavata* provides us with an apposite point of comparison with the Isarda manuscript that had been produced only a few decades later. As one of the earliest known illustrations of the *Bhagavata Purana*, the Palam manuscript can be placed within a specific fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century painting tradition that had evolved in the Delhi–Agra region. Indeed, along with the Palam *Bhagavata*, a number of contemporaneous manuscripts produced in and around the mercantile urban centres of Delhi and Agra shared an aesthetic sensibility characterised by the use of flat monochromatic bands to delineate the background,

42. See Daniel J. Ehnbohm, 'An Analysis and Reconstruction of the Dispersed *Bhagavata Purana* from the *Caurapancaśika* Group', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1984.

43. For Vaishnava poetic traditions, see Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings: Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

angular figures in silhouette profile, and compartmentalised units bordered by solid lines.⁴⁴ Scholars have provisionally identified this new artistic sensibility as the early Rajput School.⁴⁵

Water occupies a significant place in a number of folios in the 1520–40 Palam *Bhagavata*. Thus, in a folio depicting water sport or *jal krida*, we see Krishna with the cowherd women of Braj in the river Yamuna. Working with a limited palette of colours, the artist has carefully contrasted bands of intense reds and blues to draw the viewer's attention towards the river, which occupies central place within the picture plane. Crucially, colour is also effectively used to delineate spatial division between the worldly *prakata* Braj and the divine realm, the *aprakata*, from where celestial beings shower Krishna with floral wreaths. Unlike the painting illustrating the same verse in the 1560–70 Isarda *Bhagavata* folio, the folio with which our discussion on water ensued, the Palam artist seems to have maintained veracity in his visual translation of the verse. Consequently, along with the presence of celestial beings, Krishna, in a moment of amorous impulse, reaches out to his devotee. As the *Bhagavata Purana* states, Krishna 'was like the king of the elephants who had lost all inhibitions with his female elephants' during water sport.⁴⁶

In the Palam folio, the river Yamuna is depicted in a characteristic fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century basketwork pattern with clearly marked white parallel lines against deep blue water. Undoubtedly, the technique of mobilising parallel lines to suggest flowing water has a long history in South Asia, one that can be traced back to as early as the first century BCE. A narrative relief on the eastern gateway of the Great Stupa from the cluster of Buddhist funerary structures at Sanchi, for instance, depicts the miracle of the Buddha walking on water (Figure 9). The turbulent waves of the flooded river on the c. 50 BCE gateway are also represented by repeating parallel lines. A first-century CE relief sculpture from Mathura, ninety miles south of Palam where the manuscript under discussion was produced, depicts the child Krishna being carried by his father to the house of his foster parents. Once again, we find the use of parallel lines to visualise the overflowing river Yamuna (Figure 10).

While it would be difficult to ascertain whether the artists of the Palam *Bhagavata* were aware of this particular convention of depicting water, the passage from stone to paper had certainly already occurred in Vaishnava aesthetic cultures by the fifteenth century. A late fifteenth-century manuscript illustrating the poet Bilvamangala's *Balagopalastuti* (*Praise for the Young Lord of the Cowherds*) shows Krishna, attended by cowherd women, lifting the Govardhan mountain (Figure 11). As one of the earliest representations of narratives from Krishna's life in painting, fifteenth-century illustrated manuscripts of the *Balagopalastuti* from western India had foreshadowed the new aesthetic cultures of what is now tentatively designated as the early Rajput School.⁴⁷ Notably, the river Yamuna in the folio flows across the lower edge of the painting. The river mirrors the contours of the Govardhan mountain that the young Krishna lifts with one finger to protect the

44. See, for instance, a 1516 illustrated manuscript of the *Aranyaka Parvan* of the *Mahabharata* produced in Agra in the collection of the Asiatic Society, Bombay.

45. John Guy and Jorrit Britschgi, *Wonder of the Age: Master Painters of India, 1100–1900* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011); and Andrew Topsfield (ed.), *In the Realm of Gods and Kings: Arts of India* (London: Philip Wilson, 2004).

46. *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend*, p. 141.

47. See Elinor Gadon, 'An Iconographical Analysis of the *Balagopalastuti*: Early Krsnabhakti in Gujarat', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1984.



Figure 9. Detail, eastern gateway, Great Stupa, Sanchi, c. 50 BCE–50 CE. Source: Author's photograph, 2012.

inhabitants of Braj from the torrential rain sent by Indra, the king of gods. The undulating lines of the river and the mountain operate as a powerful framing device to allow the viewer-devotee to contemplate Krishna's miraculous act. Water, simultaneously threatening and life-saving, is central to the narrative. On the one hand, Krishna shelters Braj from torrential rain that threatens to flood the riverbanks, potentially inundating the villages in the region; on the other, it is the river Yamuna, marked by rapid parallel lines, which is the primary water source sustaining the agricultural and pastoral communities of Braj.

This hydrosocial imaginary played an equally important role in structuring the folio of the Isarda *Bhagavata* manuscript. The prominence of the river and its role in governing the visual narrative, however, distinguishes the 1560–70 Isarda folio. The vital role of water in supporting the ecologies of life may have made the Yamuna central to the aesthetic, religious and cultural practices of sixteenth-century North India. Yet, even as the central theme of the narrative is Krishna's water sport, it seems that the Isarda artist has deliberately used pictorial configurations to draw the viewer's attention to the blue river with lotuses, blooming creepers facing the waterfront, and frolicking cattle. The blue of



Figure 10. Vasudeva carrying Krishna across the Yamuna, c. first century CE sandstone relief, 43 cm, Government Museum, Mathura, 17.1344. Source: Author's own photograph, 2012.



Figure 11. Krishna lifting the Govardhan mountain, folio 58 verso, Bilvamangala's *Balagopalastuti*, late fifteenth century. Opaque watercolour on paper. Source: Wellcome Library, London, MS Indic alpha 1226. Copyrighted work available under Creative Commons Attribution only licence CC BY 4.0 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Krishna's body blends into the liquescent blue of the river, making it difficult to discern the separation between the river and the divine body. Carefully tilting the pictorial plane to create a sense of spatial recession, the artist draws the viewer's attention to the Yamuna flowing diagonally in a wide swath along a central axis and across the surface of the painting.

The implication of this visual innovation becomes legible if we compare the 1560–70 Isarda folio with the 1520–40 Palam folio. Following pre-sixteenth-century conventions, the river in the Palam folio functions like a flat decorative background or a theatrical backdrop in front of which the narrative is played out. While poetic tropes such as the presence of waterfowl and blooming lotuses point towards a shared vocabulary of imagining the natural environment, the Yamuna's movement from the background to the very centre of the picture plane in the Isarda manuscript, it appears, transpired only in a matter of thirty years. As we will see, a dense cluster of philosophical ruminations, theological aesthetics and pilgrimage practices arranges the optical cognisance that directed this visual restructuring.

The Isarda manuscript's significance in art history, however, has primarily rested on the artist's attempt to bridge pre-Mughal aesthetic conventions and the emerging repertoire of the Mughal atelier under Akbar. Scholars have associated the artist's use of delicate white lines to demarcate the turbulent waves of the Yamuna as emerging in negotiation with the growing prominence of Mughal painting in the mid sixteenth century.⁴⁸ One certainly sees a similar mode of depicting the swirling fluidity of flowing water in the *Hamzanama* (*Story of Hamza*), a manuscript commissioned by Akbar around 1562. The imperial manuscript was completed over the next fifteen years. A folio from the manuscript depicting the prophet Elias rescuing Hamza's nephew, Nur al-Dahr, from the sea makes perceptible both the formal and psychological potential of water as it was imagined in the Mughal atelier (Figure 12). Writing on this particular folio, John Seyller notes that the 'sea imperils many a figure in the *Hamzanama*, most often when a storm overwhelms the ship in which they have taken passage'.⁴⁹ It is the ungovernable power and menace of water that the Mughal artist apprehends through curved lines indicating the tempestuous waves of the sea. The delicate strokes of white paint seem to denote the translucence of the cresting wind-driven waves, while sea monsters threaten the doomed Nur al-Dahr. This fluid vitality of turbulent water was also central to the imagination of the river Yamuna flowing through Braj in the Isarda *Bhagavata*, a manuscript that was produced within a decade of Akbar's commissioning of the imperial *Hamzanama*.

In sixteenth-century Vaishnava texts, however, the river Yamuna had a very specific connotation. In Braj, Yamuna was the sensual drops of sweat that emerge during Krishna's lovemaking with his devotees,⁵⁰ ecstatic love in liquid form. The moral, aesthetic and environmental affect of the river Yamuna was thus eulogised in contemporaneous Vaishnava liturgical texts such as the *Yamunastakam*, a sixteenth-century Sanskrit hymn

48. John Seyller, 'Krishna Shares Food with Balarama and the Cowherds during the Rainy Season', in Darielle Mason (ed.), *Intimate Worlds: Indian Paintings from the Alvin O. Bellak Collection* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001), pp. 52–3.

49. John Seyller, *The Adventures of Hamza: Painting and Storytelling in Mughal India* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2002), p. 240.

50. David L. Haberman, *River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamuna River in Northern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 203.



Figure 12. The prophet Elijah rescuing Hamza's nephew, Prince Nur ad-Dahr, *Hamzanama*, c. 1562–77. Gouache on cotton, 68×52 cm. Source: The British Museum, London. Image ID: 00030552001. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Reproduced by kind permission of the British Museum, London, UK.

dedicated to the river by the Vaishnava reformer Vallabhacharya. The hymn ends with the praise: ‘Through you all spiritual powers are attained and Krishna is delighted. You completely transform the nature of your devotees’.⁵¹ For Vallabhacharya, the Yamuna’s material or external form (*adhibhautika rupa*), on the one hand, expanded the liquescence of water to seep into a multi-sensorial experience of the natural ecosystem that encompassed the sand on the river banks, the melodic sound of peacocks, parrots and swans, and the sweet-smelling flowers that adorned the forested river banks. Vallabhacharya writes:

Joyously I honour Yamuna, the source of all spiritual power.
Her expansive sands shine as bright as the lotus feet of Krishna.
Her waters are fragrant with lovely flowers from the lush forests on her banks.
She bears the radiance of Krishna, Father of Cupid,
Who is worshipped by both humble and assertive lovers.⁵²

The river’s internal form (*adhidaivika svarupa*) was, on the other hand, the divine goddess who steered souls into the mystical world of *bhakti*.

Depicting the Yamuna, paintings in the Isarda *Bhagavata* consequently appear to valorise beholding water as a theological aesthetic, a form of non-anthropomorphic hydrolatry that does not disentangle nature from culture. The act of seeing the sacred river in the Isarda *Bhagavata* thus encompasses the riparian ecosystem to include the plant life that rendered the river fragrant, the cows that gathered by the water, and the monsoon clouds as dark as the water itself. At a remove from Krishna’s divine sport, a woman carries water from the Yamuna in earthenware pots, perhaps for domestic use. Unlike the dramaturgical staging of the riverscape in the Palam manuscript, the Isarda *Bhagavata* makes visible the everyday life that surrounds river systems. The image of expansive water in the Isarda manuscript was, one could contend, materialised and shaped by both its theological manifestation and an ensemble of hydrosocial practices played out in, and by, the river that flowed around 860 miles from the glacial formations of the Himalayas to its confluence with the river Ganga and the fabled river Sarasvati in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh. The manuscript then conceives of a moral horizon that highlights seeing the materiality of water as an aesthetic experience that allowed for the advent of an imaginative topography in sixteenth-century North India.

The Topography of Hydroaesthetics

The vision-centric ideation of the river Yamuna in the Isarda *Bhagavata Purana* and the architectonics of the river-facing Sati Burj tower paralleled the emergence of a new theology based on the veneration of natural phenomena in sixteenth-century Braj. Hagiographic accounts narrate how Vaishnava reformers such as Chaitanya and Vallabhacharya had been responsible for rediscovering the lost sites in Braj associated with Krishna’s life. For instance, during his 1514 pilgrimage to Braj, Chaitanya had found in the topography of the region geographic markers that allowed him to claim Braj as that primordial space inhabited by the divine Krishna. Scriptural descriptions of sacred spaces were marshalled as

51. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

evidence. Thus, a grove on the east bank of the Yamuna became the legendary site of Bhan-dirban, where Krishna had brought forth water from the ground.⁵³

Composed by Narayan Bhatt, a disciple of Chaitanya, the 1552 *Vrajabhaktivilasa* was one of the most elaborate texts ever written on the sacred geography of Braj.⁵⁴ The seventh chapter of the text prescribed the route of the journey through the forests of Braj, a circumambulation of the important pilgrimage sites in the region. Arising out of the larger practice of the circumambulation of temples and shrines, the circular journey through Braj allowed pilgrims to gain merit. Given the significance of forests, rivers and lakes in sixteenth-century constructions of piety, the landscape of Braj was transformed into an iconic space that embodied the structural and conceptual symbolism of a temple. Sixteenth-century texts thus repeatedly reiterate the celestial beauty of the sacred sites in the region, describing in detail the leaves and fruits of trees that gleam like divine jewels. The corporeal topophilia inherent in such sensuous imaginings of the natural ecosystem thus drew the devotee into a bodily relationship with the environment.

Certainly, by the mid sixteenth century, Braj had become an important pilgrimage site in North India, as Antonio Monserrate, a Portuguese Jesuit who visited the region in 1580, attested: ‘Temples dedicated to Viznu (Vishnu) are to be found in many places in the neighbourhood [of Braj], built in spots where the silly old-wives-fables declare that he performed some action’.⁵⁵ Monserrate’s account suggests that Chaitanya’s attempts at constructing a sacred landscape in Braj, a landscape of the gods, had become increasingly popular, with temples built to Krishna’s corporeal presence in the region. It is at this very juncture that a devout family of Krishna worshippers from Agra—thirty miles south of Mathura, the epicentre of Braj pilgrimage—had commissioned the Isarda *Bhagavata Purana* manuscript. The Sati Burj too was being built around the same time.

The ocular emphasis in architecture and painting found reflection in contemporaneous liturgical texts. Attributed to Gopala Bhatta (1503–78) and Sanatana Goswami (1488–1558), both direct disciples of Chaitanya, the c. 1541 *Haribhaktivilasa*, the most authoritative source for Gaudiya ritualistic practices, describes the function of the river Yamuna in Braj thus: ‘Yamuna purifies one who beholds it’.⁵⁶ While immersing oneself in rivers such as the Ganga allowed the devotee to purify herself/himself, the act of absorbing the goddess Yamuna’s theophanic presence through ritualistic beholding, that is taking *darsan* of the river as it flows through Braj, was sufficient to attain purity. Even as established pre-sixteenth-century sacramental norms mandated haptic and gustatory absorption—that is bathing at pilgrimage sites (*snana*) or drinking the water with which an icon is washed (*charanamrita*)—as primary forms of ritual engagement with sacred water, the c. 1541 text clearly demarcated a hierarchy of sacred rivers centred on the privileging of vision, of seeing sacrosanct water.

Given that foundational Vaishnava texts such as the *Haribhaktivilasa* were being composed in Braj in the mid sixteenth century, one could link the vision of the river Yamuna in text, painting and architecture in decisive ways. The privileging of vision, that is

53. Entwistle, *Braj*, p. 298.

54. Narayan Bhatt (Krishnadas Baba, trans.), *Vrajabhaktivilasa* (Kusum Sarovar: Krishnadas Baba, 1951).

55. Antonio Monserrate (J.S. Hoyland, trans.), *The Commentary of Father Monserrate, S.J. on his Journey to the Court of Akbar* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, [1922] rpr. 1992), p. 90.

56. *Haribhaktivilasa*, p. 328.

beholding the Yamuna, in the c. 1541 *Haribhaktivilasa*, the 1560–70 Isarda *Bhagavata* and the 1570 Sati Burj was thus not coincidental. Indeed, read together, Vaishnava texts, painting and architecture reveal an incisive attempt to develop a technique of seeing.

Seeing Transversally

Undeniably, the sweeping rearrangement of both the natural and the human environment in sixteenth-century South Asia provides a perspective on the reciprocal relationship between climate change and artistic production that emerged from the interstices of aesthetic practices, theological economies and widespread environmental transformation. The material culture of water in Braj also presents us with an exemplary site that produces an alternative ideation of an ecological art history articulated from within an early modern world of artistic improvisation, affective aesthetics and political governance. In such an ideation, the act of seeing water becomes the crucial link that connects localised liturgical aesthetics with an expanded non-human trans-territorial arena of water scarcity and drought. In this experience of seeing, natural form—rising water, moving banks, changing flows, water currents and riparian habitat—was not just a system of the environment, but an affective text performing a theological and aesthetic function. The riverscape was thus neither a natural given, nor purely a construction of human experience. Rather, as non-different from the unmanifest world where Krishna plays eternally, the river was a liminal arena that was simultaneously manifest (*prakata*, worldly) and unmanifest (*aprakata*, transcendent). Conceivably, it is this theological coterminity of the manifest and the unmanifest, the visible and the invisible, that also led the artists of the Isarda *Bhagavata* to trace the journey of the river Yamuna diagonally across the picture plane to a place elsewhere, the *aprakata* beyond presence and representation.

The fundamental transformation in visualising water that occurred across painting and architecture practices in this period, I suggest, emerged from concurrent philosophical ruminations on the irreducibility of the landscape, as well as on large-scale transformations in the natural environment that occurred as a result of non-human and human pressure on the habitat. Moving transversally from the depiction of the flowing river in a single folio in the Isarda *Bhagavata Purana* to monumental riparian architecture, this act of visualising connected opticality, ecological awareness and theological philosophy in the early moments of the Little Ice Age, a geological epoch marked by massive droughts on a global scale. Rather than maintaining distinctions between the political, the environmental and the aesthetic, transversality, as Felix Guattari stresses, may, then, allow us to comprehend the interconnectedness between the ecologies of the natural environment, human subjectivity and social relationships.⁵⁷ Or, as Tim Ingold puts it, ‘Ecology, in short, is the study of the life of lines’.⁵⁸

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57. Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, p. 43.

58. Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 103.

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