The Strange Afterlife of Vidyāpati Thākura (ca. 1350–1450 CE): Anthological Manuscripts, Linguistic Confusion, and Religious Appropriation

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Abstract

This article examines the difficult aspects of working with anthological manuscripts and printed editions of lyrical vernacular poetry in South Asia by focusing on the textual reception of Vidyāpati Thākura. In his own life, Vidyāpati wrote technical treatises in Sanskrit, historical narratives in Apabhraṃśa, and a corpus of lyrical poems (padas) and two dramas in the vernacular Maithili language. While his technical works remained relatively static and limited in their circulation, Vidyāpati’s lyrical poems had a more enduring and geographically widespread effect on the languages, literatures, and religions of Mithilā and Eastern India (Bengal, Orissa, and Assam). The anthologies of padas, usually called “padāvalīs”, whatever their historical manifestation or locality, were usually collections of disconnected padas without contextual narratives or explanations.

This analysis focuses on the difficulty of working with free-standing small lyrical poems, which were never conceived of as unified textual entities, in both organized padāvalīs and small disposable manuscript handbooks (pochtis). The padas were used pragmatically by elite poets, devotional saints, and musicians from the 15th century CE onwards. This creates problems when one tries to trace physical remains and textual sources from this period. There exists a gap between the Maithili padāvalīs of the 16th and 17th centuries and the Bengali Vaiṣṇava padāvalīs writing in a hybrid Bengali-Maithili kunsprache of the 18th and 19th centuries. Since the linguistic and poetic variations and total number of attestations are so extensive, what relationship can be inferred between the Maithili padāvalī tradition and later anthologies based on manuscript and other textual evidence? I argue for a strategy of closely reading the variances and additions to the bhaṇītā (poetic signature) that reveal an appeal to the courtly prestige of Mithilā, even in the devotional communities of Bengal.

Keywords

Manuscript studies, India, Musicology, Bengali Literature, Religion of Bengal, Vaiṣṇava literature, liturgical manuscripts, methodology of philology, court literature, vernacular literature in South Asia

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# Articles

In the Age of Non-Mechanical Reproduction: Manuscript Variation in Early-Modern South Asia  
**Arthur Dudney, Neeraja Poddar**  
Page 1

Manuscript Variations of Dabistān-i Mazâhib and Writing Histories of Religion in Mughal India  
**Sudev Sheth**  
Page 19

Power Permutations in Early Hindi Manuscripts: Who Asks the Questions and Who Gives the Answers, Râmâñand or Kabîr?  
**Heide Pauwels**  
Page 42

The Strange Afterlife of Vidyâpati Ṭhâkura (ca. 1350–1450 CE): Anthological Manuscripts, Linguistic Confusion, and Religious Appropriation  
**Christopher L. Diamond**  
Page 72

Prefatory Notes on Persian Idioms of Islamic Jurisprudence: Reasoning and Procedures of Law-Making in Premodern Islamicate India  
**Naveen Kanalu**  
Page 93

Replication and Innovation in the Folk Narratives of Telangana: Scroll Paintings of the Padmasali Purana, 1625–2000  
**Anaïs Da Fonseca**  
Page 112

Nectar or Arrow: Cases of Missense Textual Mutations in Early Kabîrian Padas  
**Zhang Minyu**  
Page 134
“Publishing” and Publics in a World Without Print: Vernacular Manuscripts in Early Modern India

TYLER WILLIAMS

146

Reviews


RICHARD A. LESON

169


LYDIA YAITSKY KERTZ

173


Winston Black

176

List of Manuscripts Cited

183
The Strange Afterlife of Vidyāpati Ṭhākura (ca. 1350–1450 CE): Anthological Manuscripts, Linguistic Confusion, and Religious Appropriation

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The Problem with Padas

The study of premodern manuscript traditions of lyric poetry and poetic anthologies (padas and padāvalīs) from eastern India presents a paradox. As one of the most widespread of the padāvalī traditions and one of the earliest North Indian vernacular sources, the padas of Vidyāpati (a Maithili poet of the early fifteenth century CE) accurately represent the kind of textual paradox in question. Namely, that there exists a large number of small pothīs (loose-leaf manuscripts), without attribution of scribe or patron, scattered around the region, large poetic compendiums from Bengal (pada-samgrahas), and conversely, an abundance of later period texts in Bengal belies the scarcity of attested manuscripts from the period between Vidyāpati’s life and his renewed popularity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries CE in both Mithilā and Bengal. This incongruity not only has stymied a stemmatological study of the transmission and circulation of Vidyāpati’s vernacular corpus between Mithilā and wider eastern India, but also has led to scholarly neglect of small, semi-disposable pothīs.
of *padas* across the region.\(^1\) The conflict between the self-presented narrative of the manuscript tradition, the narratives of long-accepted literary historians in the modern period, and popular traditions presents an opportunity to scrutinize the fractured process of memory and meaning making for premodern literary texts.

The incongruence caused by the lack of sources from the earlier Maithili period and the profusion of sources from the later Bengali period raises several questions. With only a handful of *padas* occurring across all, or the majority, of older sources, what is the internal relationship among the “earlier” Maithili sources, and what kinds of textual development can or should be mapped? In the eighteenth through nineteenth centuries CE, the number of *padas* attributed to Vidyāpati in Bengali *padāvali* collections multiplied dramatically. Though only rarely coinciding with the older Maithili sources, *padas* attributed to Vidyāpati occur in large numbers in both large *pada-samgrahas* (*pada* collections) and small *padāvali* *potbīs*. In the premodern period, the attribution of poems to early and more authoritative poets was a frequent phenomenon.\(^2\) This created problems for any would-be stemmatologist trying to assess authenticity. Preferring older sources that exclusively feature the *padas* of Vidyāpati, most modern scholars have discounted and ignored the widely distributed and extant *potbīs* containing *padas* of Vidyāpati along with those of other lyric poets. Instead of trying to find the “real Vidyāpati” by relying on stemmatological studies of textual transmission, what can these “fake” Vidyāpatis in later centuries tell us about the poetic aspirations and designs of their actual authors and readers? What quality of Vidyāpati’s do they emulate or state explicitly?

The compilers and authors of both Maithili and Bengali *padāvalis* and *potbīs* capitalized on the literary prestige and authority of Vidyāpati and the

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\(^1\) There is a larger discussion to be had as to the assumption of the eastern regions of South Asia (Bihar/Jharkhand, Bengal, Orissa, Assam, and parts of Nepal) as a discrete cultural unit.

\(^2\) A similar phenomenon was established for the tradition of famed Vaishnava poet-saint Śūr Dās by John S. Hawley. This is especially true for the colossal *Sur Sāgar* collection of the poet’s verses, which was sometimes expanded to seven to nine thousand poems; see John Stratton Hawley, *Śūr Dās: Poet, Singer, Saint* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984), 35–63.
court of his patron Śiva Siṃha (r. 1410–1414 CE). Thematic and narrative elements that were adapted from the courtly Maithili culture of Vidyāpati to the Vaiṣṇava Bengali milieu feature most prominently in the bhanītās of each pada, which are often dedicated to the kings and queens of the court of Mithilā. While a few dozen padas occur across the major Vidyāpati sources, the small, but numerous patbīs of later centuries rarely feature any but the most famous padas. Evaluating the language, literary style, and historical references of the bhanītās across these sets of manuscripts uncovers a tradition of literary self-fashioning by the compilers and consumers within the Vidyāpati tradition that hints at a more dynamic history of vernacular transmission and identity-making.

Though the approaches of this study could be applied broadly to lyric poetry collections from the early premodern to colonial periods, I have chosen to focus specifically on Vidyāpati due to his early date (ca. 1350–1450 CE) in relation to other north and east Indo-Aryan vernacular traditions, the breadth of his influence in eastern India (from Nepal to Odisha, Assam to Bihar), and the independent textual histories of his poetry in Mithilā and Bengal. This article is an articulation of the status questionis of the Vidyāpati textual tradition and is an attempt to map the relationship between the sources for a Vidyāpati tradition, which are often considered in a segregated manner. After comparing a select pada that occurs in three of the Maithili padāvalī manuscript sources along with an “inauthentic” pada of a small patbī from nineteenth-century Bengal that features many commonalities, it becomes clear that it is impossible to develop any clear picture of direct transmission directly from Mithilā to Bengal (and by extension to Assam and Odisha) that does not selectively ignore a large number of manuscript

3 For a detailed introduction to the most famous king of the Oinvāra dynasty of Mithilā, see Upendra Thakura, History of Mithilā: From the Earliest Times to 1556 A.D., 2nd ed. (Darbhanga: Mithilā Institute, 1988 [1956]), 247–60.

4 A bhanītā is a poetic signature distich that features as the last line of a pada.

5 I have provided a broad and average dating for Vidyāpati’s life. Others have proposed shifting the timeline back a few decades, but most have said that Vidyāpati lived past the age of ninety. For a systematic summary of proposed dates, see Muhammad Shahidullah, “The Date of Vidyāpati,” Indian Historical Quarterly 20, no. 3 (1944): 211–17.
sources. An examination that considers the actual state of affairs of manuscripts (of all varieties) as they are currently accessible along with practices of memorialization serves to problematize long-held assumptions of historical continuity. Twentieth-century literary historians, often lionized because of their social status within South Asian literary institutions, claim an unbroken lineage between the “original” Maithili Vidyāpati and the Vidyāpatis who emerge in later centuries. This study attempts to reconstruct literary methods of self-presentation and memorialization on the part of the compilers, editors, and readers of the padas of Vidyāpati. Instead of taking the assumptions of literary historians literally, this study aims to take their imaginaries seriously and to investigate the methods of their construction.

This short study is not intended to be a comprehensive study of the Vidyāpati tradition in either the Maithili or Bengali/Brajabuli recensions. Even so, it is useful to provide a survey of the current status of manuscripts relating to the Vidyāpati tradition and to consider their relation to one another. This will progress to a close reading analysis of one of the very few padas that occur in the majority of Vidyāpati-related manuscripts. The final section of this paper concerns a pada found in a small nineteenth-century pothī from the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Kolkata. This pothī, while “inauthentic” according to traditional perspectives, contains a reference to Vidyāpati’s famous patron, Śiva Siṃha, and his queen, Lakhimā Devī. This reveals an interesting impressionistic association on the part of the author between Vidyāpati and his patrons as a source of meaning and authority.

It is necessary to discuss his life and context briefly before turning to his manuscript and textual tradition. Said to be born in the village of Bisphī, in the Madhubanī district of Mithilā, Vidyāpati was closely associated with Oinvāra kings of Tirhut (ca. 1325–1556 CE), especially with Śiva Siṃha and

6 I have tried to consistently refer to simply “Vidyāpati” when I mean to evoke the historical figure and author and to refer to the “Vidyāpati tradition” when I intend to refer to the entire corpus and history of memorialization that is attached to the poet’s name.
his queen and later independent ruler Lakhimā Devī (r. 1416–1428/9). The courts of both monarchs are remembered in colonial and modern plays, novels, and film as the golden era of culture and scholarship in Mithilā. This contributes to the later assertions of this paper that Vidyāpati’s memorialization is largely due to the imagined courtly culture of the Oinvāra court. As an orthodox brahmin-smārta (ritual specialist of the priestly caste) courtier of a small, quasi-independent Hindu kingdom, Vidyāpati’s main intellectual and artistic contributions were a set of technical treatises on ritual and ethical issues (inheritance, letter-writing, and so on). Being versatile, Vidyāpati also composed two historical narratives (the Kīrttilatā [ca. 1420] and the Kīrttipatāka) on the political and military exploits of Prince Kirtti Siṃha. Vidyāpati’s vernacular corpus includes between two hundred and three hundred paddas and two small plays (Gorakśavijaya and the Maṇimañjari), which also contain lyric poems.

7 The village of Bisphi is currently the site of several monuments and institutions dedicated to the memory of Vidyāpati. Along with a community and cultural center, several Śiva temples feature prominent pictures or statues of Vidyāpati within their precincts. For a full transcription of the much-discussed deed granting the village to the poet, see Vidyāpati-Padāvalī: Nepāl Se Prāpta Vidyāpatī Ke Padom Kā Saṅgraha, 3 vols. (Paṭānā: Bihāra-Rāṣṭrabhāsā-Parisad, 2012), 1:19–20. Thakura, History of Mithilā, 259–61.

8 A prominent example of twentieth-century memorialization of the court of Śiva Siṃha and Lakhimā Devi is the 1937 dual Bengali and Hindi production by New Theatres. This film cemented the Vidyāpati-Śīva Siṃha-Lakhimā triad as the central narrative of the padāvalī’s backstory. In this case, the film features an illicit love triangle between the three. Interestingly, the Bengali version’s lyrics, modeled as paddas of Vidyāpati, were written by Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976). Debaki Bose, Bidyapati/Vidyapati (Calcutta: New Theatres Limited, 1937).

9 The Vibhāgasāgara, the Likbanavali, etc.

10 The Kīrttipatāka survives only as a single fragmented manuscript. This text’s remains, edited last in 1960 by Umesh Mishra, would be important to reassess in the light of the padāvalī’s association with Śīva Siṃha as both were patronized by the king and the former provides some historical context to his reign, including his military exploits against local representatives of the Sultanate. Umesh Mishra, ed., Kīrttipatāka (Allahabad: All India Maithili Sahitya Samiti, 1960).

11 There is some question as to whether Gorakśavijaya in its entirety was composed by Vidyāpati, as its ascription is based on the contained paddas in Maithili that bear Vidyāpati’s name in the bhanītā. The Sanskrit and Prakrit prose text of the play do not contain any overt mention of an author. In either case it would be interesting to investigate this play as an additional site of memory construction around a possibly Nāth/Śaiva tradition of Vidyāpati. See Herman Tieken, Karin Steiner, and Heidrun Brückner, eds., “Songs Accompanied by
Vidyāpati’s legacy extends to other cultural spheres within premodern South Asia. He is cited in the ‘Ain-i Akbari of Mughal historian Abū al-Fażl as a famous composer of the popular song genre of Bihar designated as “laccharis.”12 There is some confusion of whether a “lacchari” is identical to the more well-attested genre name of “nacārī.” This refers to the erotic padas or life-cycle songs that are devoted to Śiva and the Goddess, both of which feature in the Maithili and Nepali padāvali manuscripts and in oral performances. Bengalis Vaiṣṇavas (a.k.a. Gauḍiya Vaiṣṇavas) revere Vidyāpati for being a favorite composer of Krṣṇa songs of Caitanya (1486–1534). In the Caitanya-Caritāmṛta of Krśndās Kavirāja (b. 1496), Caitanya is described as both reciting and attentively listening to his disciples, Svarupa Dāmodara and Rāmānanda Rāya, recite the verses of Vidyāpati.13 The layered pedigree from secondary sources often obscured the accounts of Vidyāpati’s Maithili works by historians of early vernacular eastern Indic literatures. It often had the effect of presupposing literary prestige and eminence when in reality we cannot say with any surety as to whether manuscript versions of Vidyāpati’s padāvali circulated as far and as deeply as has been claimed.

The Maithili Manuscript Sources

While Vidyāpati’s memory is alive and well in contemporary South Asia, the actual trail of manuscripts falls short of leading us back to the “original”

So-Called Bhanītās in Dramatic Texts,” Indische Theater: Text, Theorie, Praxis, Drama Und Theater in Südasien 8 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 63–75.
Vidyāpati. Generally, three manuscripts from the earlier Maithili period (fifteenth to sixteenth centuries CE) have been used as sources for the Vidyāpati tradition. All but the earliest manuscripts have been destroyed or have disappeared. Even between the three earlier sources, only a handful of padas occur in all three. Similar problems of attribution occur in other early North Indian poet corpuses. In the case of the burgeoning Kabir tradition across North and Western India between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries CE, Callewaert describes interaction of oral traditions and scribal-manuscript culture, “act[s] like a fog and pollution, creating a nebulous environment in which it becomes difficult to find the original version of the songs.”14 Like Callewaert, I seek to turn “fog” itself into insight.

**Nepal Manuscript**

The oldest and most “authoritative” palm-leaf manuscript (ṭālapatra) still available, the Nepal Manuscript (hereafter NM) has been the standard authoritative source for twentieth-century scholars of both Mithilā and Bengal by which later collections were assessed. This manuscript was first reported by Kāśī Prasād Jayasvāl in 1936 in the Government Library of Nepal (a.k.a. The Nepal Darbar Library).15 Later, the Maharaja of Darbhanga, Kāmeśvara Simha (1907–1964), sponsored two copies of the manuscript to be deposited in the Patna College Library and the Patna University Library.

This manuscript probably dates from the first half of the sixteenth century, though no date, location, or name of a patron or scribe is included in the text itself, which is written in the Maithili script, variously called

15 This palm-leaf manuscript consists of 108 folia. The last leaf is numbered as 109. Leaf number 104 is marked as number 105 in error. Each leaf is approximately 8 × 2.25". The Nepali label, which is superinscribed in Nepali Nāgari, reads “Vidyāpati ko Gīta” (“the Songs of Vidyāpati”). Subhadra Jhā, *The Songs of Vidyapati/Vidyāpati Git Sangraba* (Banaras: Motilal Banarsidass, 1954), 115.
Mithilākṣara or Tirbutā.16 This manuscript contains 288 total *padas*, of which 261 are ascribed to Vidyāpati in the *bhanīta*. According to Subhadra Jha, a few stanzas are missing in various *padas*. He is clear that this is not due to any degradation of the manuscript but to scribal omission. He infers this from missing end-rhymes and interlinear poetic allusions.17

Twenty-six other poets’ *padas* are included in this collection. Thirteen *padas* are ascribed to eleven different poets, and thirteen are unattributed. Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, and Śakti are the focal subjects of the *padas*. The poems dedicated to Śiva and Śakti/Devi (also called nacārīs) are usually said to be devotional, while the nominally Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa-centric *padas* are said to be more overtly erotic, mannerist, and courtly. Many twentieth-century collections of Vidyāpati’s *padas* have included the *padas* of the NM with varying levels of acceptance and authority. Nagendranath Gupta’s influential collection included 219 of the 261 *padas*.18 This edition has been influential for later editors in Bengali and Hindi language collections. A recently republished edition of the NM, by the *Bihār-Rāṣṭrabhāṣa-Parisad*, has made the task of collating occurrences of particular *padas* much easier. According to this edition, there are concurrences in other manuscripts as shown in Table 1.19

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16 This script closely resembles the Bengali and Assamese scripts. Though contemporary Maithili is written in *Nāgarī*, many Maithil Brahmins continue to cultivate *Mithilākṣara* for ceremonial and religious purposes.


18 Nagendranath Gupta, *Vidyāpati Ṭhākurer Padāvalī* (Kalikātā: Baṅgiya Sāhitya Pariṣat, 1909)

Rāmbhadrapur Manuscript

The Rāmbhadrapur Manuscript (hereafter RM), discovered in the eponymous village in North Bihar, was the second major source of Vidyāpati’s padas for twentieth-century scholars seeking to authenticate padas found in Bengali sources. It is regarded by some to be of equal age as the NM. This manuscript “disappeared” in the late 1980s, stolen from the archives at Patna University. Unfortunately, this “theft” is a common story for many manuscripts relating to the Vidyāpati tradition.20

From the description given in the Bhar-Rāṣṭrabhāṣā-Parişad’s edition, we know that this palm-leaf manuscript was incomplete, missing the first ten folia. While only sixty padas include a bhāṇītā clearly attributing them to Vidyāpati, many later editors attribute a larger number of padas from this manuscript to Vidyāpati. Śivānanda Thākur, in his well-regarded and conservative Viśuddha Vidyāpati Padāvali (1938), cites forty of these padas, and Mitra and Majumdar’s more wide-ranging collection includes ninety-three.21

Taraunī Manuscript

The Taraunī Manuscript (hereafter TM), also named for the village of its discovery in the Madhubani district of Mithilā, was originally made available to several scholars in Calcutta by Mohinimohan Gupta. Nāgendranāth Gupta eventually came to use the TM for his influential edition of Vidyāpati’s Padāvali.22 After completing his work, Gupta donated the manuscript to the

20 In a recent conversation, Raman Jha of the Department of Maithili at the Lalit Narayan Mithilā University in Darbhanga, Bihar, told me that most likely the manuscripts were destroyed, lost, or misplaced and that “theft” was a convenient excuse given by local bureaucrats and librarians. I cannot confirm or deny these claims, but it is likely due to the current state of these libraries. Sadly, this is the end of the investigative trail as far as the Mithilā-based manuscripts are concerned.
library at Calcutta University. Since then, the manuscript, like so many others, has been lost. Nāgendranāth Gupta’s edition and a more recent edition by the Bibār-Raṣṭrabhāṣā-Pariṣad are the only sources available for this manuscript. Because the manuscript is missing and because of an unclear publication history, there are a disputed number of *padas* in this text. Gupta cites that there were 231 *padas*, of which 101 clearly had Vidyāpati’s bhaṇitā.23

**The Bengali Padāvalīs**

The *padas* of Vidyāpati and his successors in Bengal can largely be tied to the literary history and output of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava followers of Caitanya (1486–1534). Caitanya himself is said to have enjoyed Vidyāpati’s *padas* not as a rasika (connoisseur) of literature, but as a bhaṅka (devotee) by Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja in the *Caitanya-Caritāmṛta*. From the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, several large compendia of *padas* were assembled. These *padāvalīs* are distinct from their Maithili counterparts in their devotional and liturgical provenance. The language of these devotional anthologies of Bengal is usually said to be “Brajabuli,” variously claimed as a dialect of Maithili, a Mischsprache or a Kunstsprache. There are varying opinions as to whether this is closer to Maithili or Bengali, but it is usually described as Maithili-inflected Middle Bengali used only in the context of devotional *padas*. An analogous tradition exists in Assamese (called “Brajavuli”) and in Oḍiā.24 The tradition of Brajabuli literature in Bengal extends from the time of Vidyāpati until the late nineteenth century CE, when Bengali reformers began using contemporary Bengali as their preferred poetic medium.

Though most of the large Bengali *pada* collections contain thousands of individual *padas* by historically Maithili and Bengali poets, a much smaller number of *padas* can be traced directly from the older Maithili sources. Out of the more than three thousand *padas* in Vaiṣṇava-dāsa’s (née Gokulānanda

Sen) Padakalpataru (late eighteenth century CE), only four padas can also be found in the NM, and an additional ten can be found in other Maithili sources.25 Other prominent Bengali/Brajabuli padāvalis/pada-samgrabas include the Kṣanadā Gitacintāmaṇi (early eighteenth century CE), Radhāmohan Thākura’s Padāmrta-Samudra (mid-eighteenth century CE),26 Dinabandhu Dāsa’s Samkirtanāmrta (1771 CE),27 and the Kīrttanānada (likely early nineteenth century CE).28

Additional Sources

Two centuries after his death, Vidyāpati evolved from being merely a successful and popular local court poet to be the very standard by which Maithili lyric poetry was discerned and emulated.29 In addition to the padāvalīs, which are contextualized collections of padas, there are a few additional textual sources for Vidyāpati’s padas. In the seventeenth century, Locanadāsa, under the order of either Narapati Thākura or Mahinātha Thākura (ca. 1690–1720 CE), composed a long treatise on the classical music of then contemporary Mithilā, focusing upon local regional variations of music and poetry, called the Rāgatarāṅgini (“Waves of Melody”).30 This

25 This is the largest Bengali/Brajabuli padāvalī. The bhanitās of 161 padas mention Vidyāpati. Mitra and Majumdar use only twenty-four padas.
26 Total 746 padas. Sixty-four padas are attributed to Vidyāpati by their bhanitās. Mitra and Majumdar use sixty of these padas.
27 Twenty-four poets with 491 padas. Ten padas are attributed to Vidyāpati. Of these, two are ascribed to the “Bengali Vidyāpati” by Mitra and Majumdar.
28 The date of the original manuscript is unknown, but the first printed edition was published in 1826. Of the 659 total padas of this collection, approximately 580 are attributed to Vidyāpati. Mitra and Majumdar included only thirty-eight in their edition.

The verse is ambiguous as to whether Mahinātha commissioned the Rāgatarāṅgini to honor his younger brother Narapati or Narapati himself commissioned the text. For a more detailed summary of this confusion, see Jayakanta Mishra, History of Maithili Literature (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1976), 127–29.
treatise in Sanskrit, Maithili, and Braj Bhasha describes the technical features of various rāgas (melodic structures), tālas (rhythmic cycles), candas (meters), and mātrās (metrical units/morae). The majority of the technical explanations are illustrated with Maithili paddas. Vidyāpati features as the most prominent poet of this collection, with sixty-three paddas. Twenty-eight other poets are included in this collection, including the poems of the complier Locana-dāsa himself. It is clear from the prominence of Vidyāpati’s paddas that Locana incorporates them as exemplars of the tradition as a whole. Vidyāpati is also mentioned in the introductory verses of the third taraṅga (lit. ‘wave,’ here ‘section’) of the text.

Another source often cited by contemporary Vidyāpati scholars is the “oral collection” of George A. Grierson. His 1882 grammar and chrestomathy include thirty-four paddas of Vidyāpati that he recorded during his field research.31 Though I will not consider this collection here, it is important for the record of the popular historical performance tradition of Vidyāpati’s paddas before the complications of modern recording and distribution practices. This collection shows substantial linguistic divergence from the “classical” Maithili and embodies the non-textual tradition of pada transmission within Mithilā.

A Comparison of Sources

After considering the larger mapping of Vidyāpati’s paddas across Maithili and Bengali sources in several centuries from the precolonial period, a different sort of relationship has to be mapped between the manuscripts that remain. This is due to an unclear lineage of manuscripts and the current logistical problems of obtaining further evidence. Comparing one of the paddas that exists with three of the older Maithili sources, one gets a sense of how the tradition of Vidyāpati expanded and commented upon itself within the very body of the paddas. Because the tradition of Maithili/Brajabuli lyric poetry did not have a commentarial tradition until the modern period,

the insights of minor textual variance and emendations deserve added attention.

**THREE OVERLAPPING PADAS**

**NM (Song 24)**[^32]

*Vibhāsa Rāge—*

Suraja sindura vindu cāndane lihae indu |  
Tīthi kahi geli tilake ||  
Viparita abhisāra amiṇa galae dhāra  
Aṅkasa kaela alake  

||dhruvapada||  
Mādhava bheṭali pasāhana beri |  

Ādhara haralaka puchiō na puchalaka |  
Catura sakhijana meli ||  
Ketaki dala lae campaka dala dae |  
Kabarī thoelaka ānī |  

Candane kumkume anśaruci kaelaka  
Samaya niveda sayānī ||  

Bhanaī Vidyāpatītyādi |  

*Trans.*[^33]

In *Rāga Vibhāsa—*

The sun is a spot of vermillion and the moon is a spot of sandalwood written [upon her forehead].  
The date has been told from her *tilaka*.

[^33]: All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
A torrent of nectar flowing backwards,
She goads her hair into submission.

(Refrain)
Oh Mādhava! She has been encountered during the time of her adornment.
Stealing all her dignity without even asking,
Along with the group of her clever female companions.
Bringing ketaki leaves and placing the campaka petals,
They are brought and placed in her tied-up hair.

Her limbs are colored with sandalwood and vermillion.

Vidyāpati says this amongst other things.

**TM (Song 78)**

Suraja sindura bindu caṃdane likhae indu
   Tīthi kahi geli tilake |
Viparita abhisāra amiya barisa dhāra
   Aṅkusa kaela alake ||

(Refrain)
Mādhava, bheṭala pasāhani beri |
Ādara haralaka puchiona puchalaka
   Catura sakhī jana merī ||

Ketaki dala dae campaka phula laē
   Kabarihi thoelaka ānī |
Mṛgamada kuṅkuma aṅgaruci kaēlaka
   Samaya nibeda sayānī ||

Bhanaï Vidyāpati Sunaha abhayamati
   Kuhū nīkaṭa paramānē|

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Rājā Śivasimha rūpanarāyana
Lakhimā dei viramāne

Trans.
The sun is a spot of vermillion and the moon is a spot of sandalwood written [upon her forehead].
The date has been told from her tilaka.
A torrent of nectar flowing backwards,
She goads her hair into submission.

(Refrain)
Oh Mādhava! She has been encountered during the time of her adornment.
Stealing all her dignity without even asking,
Along with the group of her clever female companions.

Bringing ketaki leaves and placing the campaka petals,
They are brought and placed in her tied-up hair.
Her limbs are colored with musk and vermillion.
The time is made apparent, oh clever lady!

Vidyāpati says, “Listen without fear!
It is plain to see that Amāvasyā is soon.”
King Śivasimha is the very image of Narāyaṇa,
[And] is the Lord of Lady Lakhimā.

Rāgataraṅgni (Song 26)

Ramyā Bhīmpalāsī –

35 This reading is most likely an error. The Rāgataraṅgni and the TM versions of this pada are virtually identical. The reading should be devī ramāne (husband/spouse). I have retained this variation as symptomatic of the problems of relying on printed editions of manuscripts that are no longer available to examine.
36 There is a Śleṣa (pun or double-reading) that can be read here. Śiva Siṁha is equated with Narāyaṇa (a.k.a. Viṣṇu), and his wife Lakhimā figures equally as the goddess Lakṣmī (tatsama equivalent of Lakhimā), who is the spouse of Viṣṇu.
37 Siṁha et al., Vidyāpati Padavali, 2:166.
Suraja sindura bindu cāndane lihae indu
   Tīthi kahi geli tilake |
Viparita abhisāra barisa amiña dhāra
   Aṅkuśa kaela ti(la)ke ||

He Mādhava bhetali pasāhani beri|
Ādhara haralaka puchi (on ne puchalaka
   Catura sakhi ja)na meri||

Ketaki dala lae campaka phula daya
   Kabarī phoelaka ānī |
Mr̥gamada kur̥kumeṃ ūgarucita laölaka
   Samae niveda sayāmni ||

Bhanaī Vidyāpati sunu varajauvati
   Kuhu nīkaṭa paramāne |
Rājā Śivasimha rūpanarāëna
   Lakhimā devi ram(a)ne ||

**Trans.**

In [Rāga] Ramyā Bhimpalāśī—
The sun is a spot of vermillion and the moon is a spot of sandalwood
  written [upon her forehead].
  The date has been told from her tilaka.
A torrent of nectar flowing backwards,
  She goads her hair into submission.

(Refrain)
Oh Mādhava! She has been encountered during the time of her adornment.
Stealing all her dignity without even asking,
  Along with the group of her clever female companions.

Bringing ketaki leaves and placing the campaka petals,
  They are brought and placed in her tied-up hair.
Her limbs are colored with musk and vermillion.  
The time is made apparent, oh clever lady!

Vidyāpati says, “Listen without fear!  
It is plain to see that Amāvasyā is soon.”

King Śivasimha is the very image of Narāyana,  
[And] is the Lord of Lady Lakhimā.

**What to Do with the Pothīs?**

When shifting focus from the Maithili *padāvalī* manuscripts to the more plentiful and neglected Bengali *pothīs*, several challenges arise. The sheer number of *pothīs*, their small size, the lack of contextual information, and the difficulty of collating the individual *padas* all make it difficult to undertake any sort of philological extrapolation of patterns of circulation and reception. Although manuscript collections in Bengal, such as the Manuscript Resource Centre at Calcutta University or the *Bāṅgiya-Sābitya-Pariṣat*, contain many hundreds of *padāvalī pothīs*, scholars pay little attention to them.

Evoking the prestige of the court of Śiva Siṃha and Vidyāpati is a unique feature of what many call the Vidyāpati tradition of *padas*. When adapted to the devotional Vaiṣṇava context in Bengal, the courtly elements never entirely disappeared. While only a few dozen *padas* exist across the Bengali and Maithili manuscript sources, the *bhanitās* of Vidyāpati referencing his patron (and his qualities as connoisseur, or *rasika*) were maintained. W. L. Smith emphasized that the relative antiquity of Old Maithili (vis-à-vis Bengali, Assamese, or Odia) and the cultural memory of Mithilā as a center of *Nyāya* and Sanskrit studies in eastern India led to the enshrinement of Old Maithili poetic standards as part of the embodiment of that culture.38 While Smith and others have focused on the linguistic effects of this memory

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tradition (a path of enquiry that needs further exploration), I propose that an analysis focused on specific cultural markers and clues of rhetoric within the *padas* can also be beneficial for understanding the process of vernacular literary memory and identity formations.

Moving onto one *pothī*-style held in the Asiatic Society in Kolkata, a “close reading” of the poetic-signature (*bhanitā*) of Vidyāpati reveals a link between the uniquely Bengali attestations of particular *padas* and the royal Oinvāra patrons of Vidyāpati in historical Mithilā. While I do not have permission from the Asiatic Society of Bengal to reproduce entire pages of the concerned nineteenth-century *pothī* in their entirety, a small selection of the *bhanitā* in this manuscript demonstrates a clear relationship between the Vaiṣṇava Bengali Vidyāpati tradition and the original court of Vidyāpati and Śiva Simha.

Bhanae vidyāpati varayuvati iha vasa koi na jani |
Rāja Śiva Simha rupanārayya Lachima deī parināma ||23||

Says Vidyāpati, “Oh best of the young women! There is no [other] such compulsion.”

The King Śiva Simha, the very image of Nārāyaṇa, Devī Lachima [sic] is his perfection.

The rest of the *pada*, not appearing in other *padāvalī* sources, could be dismissed as insignificant ephemera, but if we take the *bhanitā* seriously for a moment, clear structural and thematic connections to *padas* of the Mai-thili substrata of the Vidyāpati tradition are visible. Ignoring the linguistic irregularities of this closing distich of the *pada*, there are two elements directly parallel to the earlier example *padas*. Namely, that in the first hemistich, Vidyāpati beseeches the best of the youthful women, and in the second half, he evokes the figure of Śiva Simha.
A “throwaway” pada in a “throwaway” nineteenth-century potbī can tell us about how the poets and audiences, removed from Vidyāpati by time, region, and linguistic variance, thought of the poet within their own literary and cultural history. Invoking the names of Vidyāpati and Śīva Simha also has the effect of elevating purely devotional-oriented (bhakti) padas to the realm of high or courtly literature. This potbī, like dozens of others, also contains the padas of Govinda-dāsa (1535–1613), often called the second Vidyāpati, though usually taken as more overtly Vaiṣṇava than Vidyāpati. The combination of Vidyāpati and Govinda-dāsa’s padas within a single small potbī has the effect of devotionalizing Vidyāpati’s padas and literarizing the padas of Govinda-dāsa by mutual association. This pairing of Vidyāpati and Govinda-dāsa (and in other cases Caṇḍī-dāsa) was exceedingly common in nineteenth-century padāvalīs. The manuscript collection at Calcutta University contains more than two dozen such small potbīs. Many more are scattered and neglected in other collections.

One of the largest accessible collections of potbī-style collections of Vaiṣṇava padāvalīs is the manuscript library of Calcutta University. Alongside roughly two dozen edited Bengali/Brajabuli volumes, like the Padakal-pataru, this manuscript collection holds nearly seventy-five small potbī-style manuscripts. Facing the challenges of a physically degraded archive, a large number of fragmented manuscripts, and colophons that are either missing or not supplied makes it difficult to divine textual patterns or literary associations. For example, taking a step back and performing a “distant reading” of the archive collection as a whole, one can understand the way that Bengali-Gauḍiya poets imagined Vidyāpati to feature in their own tradition.

In Table 2, one can see all of the potbī-style Padāvalīs in the Calcutta University Manuscript Collection that feature both Vidyāpati and at least one other Maithili/Brajabuli poet. It is clear that there is a much stronger association between Vidyāpati and his fellow Maithili poet Govinda-dāsa and another pre-Caitanya poet Caṇḍī-dāsa than other late-period Brajabuli poets with clearer Gauḍiya identities. While definitive conclusions about the imagined history of Vidyāpati in the Bengali/Brajabuli canon cannot be drawn from a sample reading like this, it can help to nuance qualitative “close readings” and to understand their place in the archive.
**Toward a New Perspective**

Many have begun to question the utility and feasibility of finding any pre-modern poet in their pristine, original Ur-state.³⁹ This challenge to traditional

³⁹ In the case of the Kabir tradition, Strnad advocates for considering manuscripts of different poetic genres (*padas* and *sākhis*) and sectarian affiliations to develop a more inclusive map of manuscript production and consumption. Strnad recommends such an approach without even considering sources outside the manuscript tradition. See Jaroslav Strnad, *Searching for the Source or Mapping the Stream?: Some Text-Critical Issues in the Study of Medieval Bhakti*, Tyler Williams, Anshu Malhotra, and John Stratton Hawley, eds., *Text and Tradition in Early Modern North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 143–58.

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**TABLE 2.** Poets featured in Calcutta University Manuscript Library’s *Padāvālī* collection alongside Vidyāpati.
methods and attitudes can help to shift the conversation and focus when considering poets like Vidyāpati who have complex histories of memorialization that sometimes obscure the ability to map the paths of transmission and circulation. Instead of finding an “original” Vidyāpati or ignoring the Bengali/Brajabuli Vidyāpati for the lack of corresponding sources, the new task becomes mapping trajectories and signifiers of memory construction and appropriation. This manner of examining manuscript trajectories based on both textual history and a history of memorialization can also help to conceptualize the more abstract aspects of developing vernacular identities in eastern South Asia over the last half millennium and premodern traditions of lyric poetry more generally.

For the particular case of Vidyāpati and the tradition that was constructed around him (both poetic and narrative), instead of removing focus from the manuscripts as the primary site of investigation, accessing additional sites of memorialization, whether it be song, film, or physical monuments, expands the number of manuscripts that could be considered as viable sites of critical examination. What has happened is the complete disregard or segregation of the Bengali/Brajabuli Vidyāpati tradition from the Maithili manuscript sources. This is completely at odds with the self-perception of the tradition itself, which maintains its own historical and linguistic continuity. Tracing both the disjunctions and intersections between the tradition’s self-perception and the manuscript evidence becomes the object of study that evinces more realistically productive pathways of inquiry. This article is only a summary of the status quaestionis of the current state of Vidyāpati studies. Much remains to be done even through purely textual/philological studies. Even so, the stagnating field of Vidyāpati studies can be refreshed and opened to many more perspectives with a few of the suggestions of this study.