

Two photographs reproduced here (illus. 58 & 59) were collected by Rai Bahadur Radha Krishna, the Director of the Archaeological Museum at Mathura, sometime before 1915. They were part of an extensive batch of two dozen sent to William Ridgeway (exPresident of the Royal Anthropological Institute and Disney Professor of Archaeology at Cambridge) for inclusion in the latter's treatise on dance (published in 1915 as *The Dramas and Dramatic Dances of nonEuropean Races with Special Reference to the Origin of Greek Tragedy*) and were evidently collected in Mathura. Rai Bahadur Radha Krishna carefully documented the pictures he sent to Ridgeway, including quotations

from the *Premasagar* and matching photographs of *ras lila* performances with paintings of the same events. Braj - the land of Krishna's birth - had been steadily revitalized by pilgrims from the sixteenth century onwards and it appears through these images as an enchanted realm inscribed with an affective and performative significance through mass devotion. It is this space, a bounded pastoraPS world delimited by particular sites (Mount Govardhan, the villages of Brindaban, Nandgaon and Barsana) and its pastoral metonyms (vegetative fecundity and a topological repletteness), within which Nathdvara painting operates.



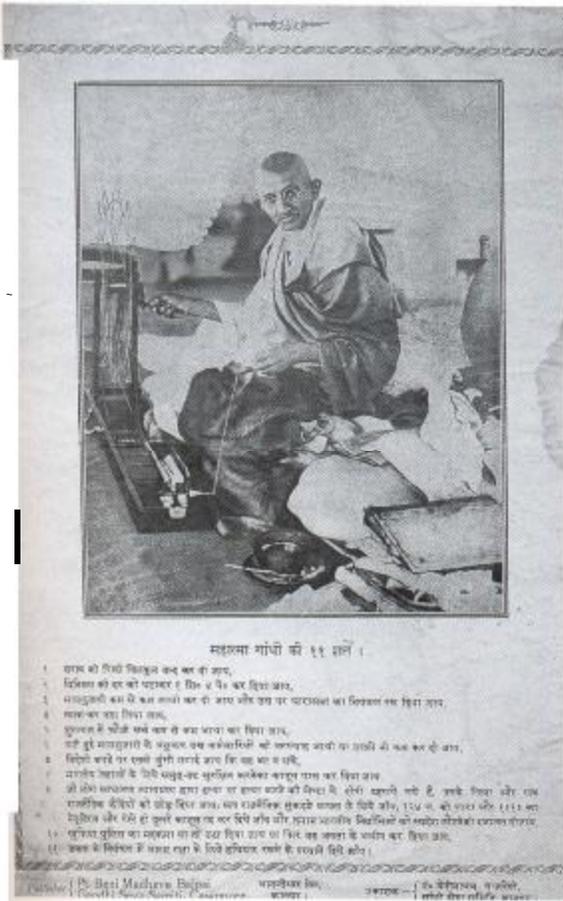
58 Krishna departs with Akrur for Mathura in the Brindaban *ras lila*, before 1915. Albumenprint on card.



59 Studio photograph of *ras lila* participants dressed as Radha and Krishna, BrindabanfMathura. before 1915. Albumen print on card.

The painted images are credited as 'From a native painting' by Ridgeway but originate in all probability from Nathdvara and may have been copied by a Mathura photographic studio, Bharat Hitaishi, which was established in 1900'6 and is known to have been selling photographic prints of paintings at around this timeY The photographic originals (now in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge) are inscribed 'Designed and painted by B.B.M.'

This juxtaposition of the performative and two-dimensional alerts us to a crucial feature of the early twentieth-century Nathdvara painting communities:



60 Azadi ke Paigambar ki Ghosana (Proclamation of the Proposal for Freedom). A broadside showing Gandhi at his *charkha* and listing his main teachings. Issued by the Gandhi Seva Samiti, Cawnpore, printed by Anandeshwar Press. Late 1920S.

their immersion in a performative faith in which painted images played an instrumental role. Indeed we could go so far as to claim the Brindavan *ras lila* was to the Brijbasi style what the Star Theatre's mythological plays were to the early Calcutta picture presses.

In addition to this inter-ocular domain we need also to see the Nathdvvara aesthetic championed by the Brijbasi brothers in relation to the rise of Gandhian politics in the 1920S and the emergence of a powerful terrorist alternative in the early 1930S. Gandhi had returned to India in 1915 and thrown himself into public politics two years after that. The 1920S were characterized by the creation of a

nationalist mass-movement with a strong peasant following strongly articulated (at least by Gandhi and Sardar Patel) within a devotional idiom. The individual, physical, body became a new site for an ethicized political practice: the production of *khadi* (homespun cloth), vegetarianism and other interventions on one's own body became a new means of performing an ideal vision of community (illus. 60). There was a powerful homology between this Gandhian practice and the Brijbasi's Vallabha imagery.¹⁸ In 1931, however, both were confronted with a violent and popularly attractive alternative in the form of the socialist and atheistic Bhagat Singh.

After his arrival in Karachi the elder brother, Shrinathdasji, spent four years exploring business opportunities before starting the framing shop. During the early years of this business he came to appreciate the possibilities of picture publishing and after five years, in either 1927 or 1928, a decision was made to publish their own images. This was precipitated by the arrival one day in their shop of a Sindhi client bearing a photograph of his young son dressed as Krishna in a style reminiscent of phalke's early filmic representation (illus. 64).

A travelling representative for the Berlin printers Grafima had at some point before this contacted Shrinathdasji and showed him samples of the reproductions which the firm he represented could produce. A number of original paintings were sent to Germany for reproduction as postcard-sized bromide prints.⁹ A 1930 calendar, actually printed in 1928, reproduces 49 of these designs around a much larger image of what must have been the fiftieth - *Patit Pawan Ram* (illus. 65). The contrast between the beautiful colour originals (mostly 10 x 14 inches) and the small (3Y2 x 5 inches) bromide reproductions is striking and the reasons for choosing this means of reproduction are not completely clear. One very positive feature, which would have done much to offset their small size and subdued presence as compared with, say, Ravi Varma prints, was their overseas production. A German origin signified quality and the allure of the exotic at this time. A Brijbasi catalogue published in 1933 makes very frequent references to their superior quality: 'Pictures listed below are printed in a famous German workshop (*germani ke ek mashahur karkhane mem*) and are by photographic machines (*photographik mashinon*) and the paper used is very good quality, thick and glossy (*chikna*).²⁰ Further, they are printed in attractive colours (*akarshak rangon*) and have a 'wonderful brightness' (*gazab ki chamak*). Later in the catalogue further flourishes are added: the pictures are 'handsome' (*khubsurat*), printed in 'beautiful'



61 *Lord Krishna*, The first Brijbasi image, inspired by the photograph of a boy dressed as Krishna. First published as a bromide postcard in 1928, this image is a later copy, published in *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita* (Ahmedabad, 1950).

(*khushnuma*) colours on 'thick and excellent' (*mote aur bariya*) paper. The Brijbasis even went so far as to claim that 'other pictures in the market cannot even be compared to the shadow of our quality pictures'.

It is also common to see the phrase 'Printed as German' on later Indian-made prints. This was an attempt to appropriate the cachet of foreign printing in a manner that would not make the Indian publisher liable to any legal proceedings. Grafima was later able to produce 10 x 14 inch hand-tinted bromide prints and after 1931 larger colour offset litho prints (20 x 28 inches) came from Peter May Verlag in Dresden. Prints were also imported from Topan in Japan. These



62 The same image reworked as part of an advertising placard for S. S. Brijbasi, c. 1930.

German supplies were suspended during the war, however, and the firm's images were then printed in Nagpur and Bombay.

The very first set of bromide postcard designs printed in 1928 was registered in Calcutta in July 1928.²¹ M. L. Carg, the current proprietor of Brijbasi's Delhi branch, suggested that the early bromide prints would largely have been used as postcards for correspondence. The possibility that they would have found a quite different market niche to the technically superior colour lithographs, available from the Ravi Varma Press among others, goes some way to explaining why these small and unspectacular products should have been so commercially successful. All the cards I have seen from this period bear identical standard information on the



63 *Shri Murlidhar*, c. 1930, postcard published by Jugatram & Co., Bombay.



64 Still from D. G. Phalke's film, *Shree Krishna jamma*, 1918.



66 The painter Ghasiram Hardev Sharma, c. 1925, albumen print.

Although they rebuked this first painter, later on they realized that it was not going to affect their market because wealthy people would still buy the paintings. Earlier the hand-made paintings used to sell at a very cheap price. Later they realized that with mass reproduction word about Shrinathji and other gods would spread - people would be more aware of religion - and in turn it would affect their market. Now the value for hand-made paintings increased. It was something that could not be bought in volume. They became very supportive of our printing because they realized that it had an effect on their own market, it [increased] the price for hand-made paintings: the value increased and at

the same time they also found an additional market - lithoprinters - and it created a greater general demand for religious items because of a greater awareness created through the spread of pictures in every household.

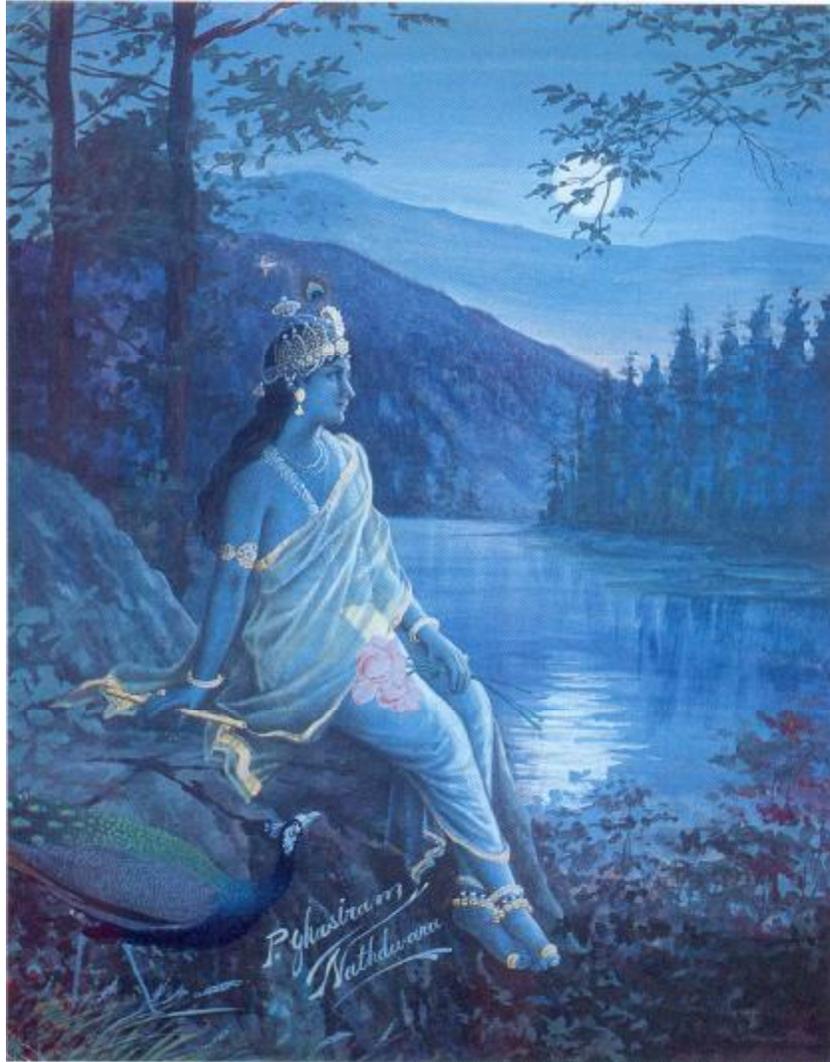
A Hem Chander Bhargava sample book (c. 1948) includes several prints of paintings by Ghasiram, probably dating from the last years of his life and published posthumously in the 1930S. They are noticeable for what to a modern eye looks a rather anaemic colour range and in many respects are very different from later Nathdvara artists such as Narottam Narayan. Ambalal stresses the revolutionary impact of his work on a style that was rapidly stagnating: 'the glowing aniline water colours imported from Europe thrilled him, and the use of transparent glowing colours thereafter became his hallmark'.²⁶ When contrasted with other Nathdvara painters who ventured into the mass market, however, this judgement appears somewhat puzzling. What is striking about Ghasiram's paintings as opposed to, say, Khubiram or Narottam Narayan is their very strongly marked 'traditionalist' Nathdvara identity.

In all Ghasiram's images the relation of figure to landscape is very similar to that in earlier Nathdvara images. The effect, consequently, is an immersion of relatively small figures in characteristically lush foliage-covered landscapes. Figures are also typically deployed along a single horizontal plane in the foreground of the painting. However, in Ghasiram's *Ras Lila* and *Panchabati* the influence of photographic studio conventions and foreign 'scenery' prints²⁷ is perhaps evident in the receding landscape on the far left of both images, which leads the eye out into the far distance.

Ghasiram's *Yogiraj Shri Krishna* (illus. 67), published by Brijbasi as a bromide card in 1928, manifests a further aspect of the hybridity that is still apparent in other early Brijbasi images. It combines the sentimentality of romantic kitsch with the dark brooding intensity and richness of Nathdvara landscapes.²⁸ It was images such as these²⁹ that earned the censure

of the Director of the Lalit Kala Akademi and coorganizer of the 1993 National Museum Ravi Varma exhibition, the painter A. Ramachandran. In an attempt to establish the aesthetic worth of Ravi Varma oils, Ramachandran decried the artist's 'oleographs' and vilified those painters who had subsequently been forced to 'incorporate popular Ravi Varma elements in their works': 'A pathetic example of this can be found in the works of Ghasiram, a traditional painter of Nathdwara, who made vulgarized versions of Radha

and Krishna paintings by copying picture postcards.'³⁰ Although by this stage Ghasiram was clearly producing work aimed at a specific market, it would be misleading to accept Ramachandran's criticisms. Indeed, while conceding the enormous influence of earlier commercial art in this Ghasiram image, I would argue that despite such hybrid amalgams Ghasiram, and the flood of Nathdwara artists who followed him, led to a marked 're-traditionalization' of this genre of mass-produced art.



67 *Yogiraj Shri Krishna*,
Ghasiram, c. 1928,
gouache.

Khubiram Gopilal was another prolific contributor to both Brijbasi's and Hem Chander Bharagava's early lists. Some of Khubiram's early images are clear copies of earlier Ravi Varma chromolithographs, such as his 'Mahalaksmi', which, apart from the characteristic fecund claustrophobia of twentieth-century Nathdvara paintings, is very similar to the Ravi Varma Press's very first print, the standing Lakshmi (see illus. 37).

5.5. Brijbasi also published paintings by Hiralal Udayram (1858-1928), who had worked with Ghasiram. Ambalal records that, in addition to Brijbasi, Hiralal's work was published by Hem Chander Bhargava, Nathmal Chandelia of Calcutta and Jaipur, and by Harnarayan and Sons, then based in Jodhpur. It was Harnarayan who was first to publish the work of the Nathdvara artist who would come to dominate popular Hindu art in the second half of the twentieth century, B. G. Sharma (see chapter 7).

If in Ghasiram's early work we can see the most obvious linkage between mass-produced images and the aesthetic of nineteenth-century Nathdvara painters, it was the artist Narottam Narayan Sharma (1896-1992; illus. 68) who from the mid-1930s came to define a new dominant Nathdvara style that was to dominate the market until the mid-1950s, when B. G. Sharma's brighter palette found national acclaim.

PASTORALISM, PERSPECTIVE AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Narottam's work most powerfully embodies what we might term 'neo-traditionalism'. I mean by this a conscious return to an earlier representational style. The move to an earlier imaginary practice also implies a partial repudiation of perspectival techniques and the wider calculating analytic of colonialism. Narottam's work exemplifies this most clearly, but he is part of a wider movement away from the 'strategic mimicry' of early presses such as the Calcutta Art Studio.

I have suggested that my reading of the history of mass-produced Hindu ritual art shows that this early



68 The painter Narottam Narayan Sharma, c. 1930, silver print.

period of strategic mimicry and experiment with perspective is replaced in the late 1920s by a form of 'neo-traditionalism'. In the new Nathdvara aesthetic, which very rapidly conquered the whole of India, there is less stress on a realist chronotope and fewer explicit attempts at linear perspective. Parallel to this there are a much larger number of composite images and portraiture becomes much more frontal and symmetrical. Rather than a window on reality, the images become icons whose foundational rationale is an engagement with the viewer. This can also be partly explained through the growth of an increasingly rural market for images for whom the ritual utility of images became paramount - this entails the triumph of what O. P. Joshi refers to as *darshani* images over *katha* images, that is the triumph of devotional images that permit mutual looking, over narrative images whose main function is pedagogic.

Parallel to the eclipse of the picture plane in Nathdvara images there is an increasing stress on the surface, rather than depth of the image. Compositions come to be carefully framed and crowded by sympathetic landscapes. These landscapes are the antithesis of the *tour d'horizon* that Anderson suggests is

characteristic of the nationalist novel.³³ Nathdvara images are marked by a singularity, a claustrophobic specificity. The example par excellence of such a landscape is Narottam Narayan's *Murli Manohar* of 1934 (illus. 69), reputed to be the best-selling image in the history of the industry. This depicts Krishna playing the flute in a landscape that is formally similar to that in Ravi Varma's *Vishvamiitra Menaka* (see illus. 35). The central figure is placed slightly to the left of the picture, and the right side of the image is filled with a waterfall. In the Ravi Varma image, however, the waterfall is distant and conventionally sublime, drawing the eye out to infinity. Narottam's waterfall, by contrast, is shunted dramatically forward and the misty clouds surrounding the full moon collapse the pictorial depth, flattening the picture dramatically and giving it a surface density and plenitude. Vishvamiitra and Menaka are figures placed conventionally within a landscape (it could almost be mistaken for a tourist photograph of a couple picnicking in the Yosemite); but the landscape around Krishna in *Murli Manohar* is clearly an exudation of his central figure.

This point is made more powerfully in Narottam's image of a meditating Shiva (which appears under different titles including *Kailash Pati Shankar*; illus. 70 & 71). Here, the landscape that surrounds Shiv is literally of his own making: the river Ganges sprouts from his head as he sits high in the Himalayas, immersed in deep transcendence on a tiger-skin. The water that flows to his left (or right depending on the process used and date of the print) originates from him. All is equally part of him and thus distance and nearness lose their conventional cartographic significance: he is not a figure in landscape, but an animating force in a world of his own creation.

I have already suggested that Nathdvara painting is highly theatrical, both in Michael Fried's sense and in its clear continuity with the devotional performativity that unfolds each year in Braj. The Nathdvara imagery that Brijbasi conveyed to the rest of India takes as its reference point the landscape of Braj and addresses the spectator (in part) through the conventions of the *ras*



69 Narottam Narayan Sharma, *Murli Manohar*, 1950s offset print of a c. 1934 image, published by S. S. Brijbasi. Reputed to be the biggest-selling image in the history of the industry.

lila, the annual performative recreation of Krishna's activities in Braj.³⁴ But of equal importance is the impact of photography in creating the Nathdvaraf Brijbasi allure. This is exceptionally clear in the case of *Kailash Pati Shankar*, in which the central figure of Shiv is without question modelled directly, or indirectly, via a photograph. Narottam's family are hesitant to acknowledge this, but it is clear from other of his images that he overpainted photographs.³⁵ The fascination and power of *Kailash Pati Shankar* lies in part in the tension between, on the one hand, the depiction of Shiv in a world he has created, and the friction that arises from his hyper-real, photographically montaged disjunction with his setting. Nathdvara painting



70 Narottam Narayan Sharma, *Kailash Pati Shankar*, c. 1935 chromolithograph published by S. S. Brijbasi.
The contrast between this and the following illustration demonstrates the dramatic impact that the lithographic artisans had on the original images from which they worked.

simultaneously rejected the colonially authorized technology of perspective at the very moment that it adopted another technology - photography - that gave it a direct route to a hyper-reality.

Photography was eagerly embraced in Nathdvara during the nineteenth century to picture *pichhvais*, as we have seen (see illus. 54), but also *goswamis*, the priests who tend Shrinathji. Very early (c. 1860s-70s) carte-de-visite sized albumen prints of *goswamis*, crudely pasted onto yellow card, can still be easily found in Udaipur. Such photographs were also clearly the basis for the portraiture in early *manoratha* paintings. This highly conventionalized form of representation shows Shrinathji in various adornments with on each side, at the bottom of the picture, groups of *goswamis* and devotees attending to the *svarup's* needs. *Manorathas* were a painterly genre,³⁶ which then also appeared in chromolithographic form. *Shrinathji ka Annkut*,³⁷ published by a small press in the nearby town of Kankroli, depicts eight *goswamis* together with four sari-clad devotees disposed symmetrically beneath the deity (illus. 73). It is clear that the *goswami's* faces are reworkings of photographic portraits, and in some similar examples they were actual collaged photographic images.³⁸

Studio photography now makes possible a variation on the picturing of this relationship between humans and the deity, for most Nathdvara photographic studios offer clients a painted backdrop depicting Shrinathji, which allows them to adopt the devotional poses associated with *manorathas* (illus. 72).

The *manoratha* also leaves a powerful trace in many of the most successful NathdvarafBrijbasi images. Narottam Narayan's *Shree Sulyanurain*, for instance, appropriates the formal structure of the *manoratha* (illus. 74). Like Shrinathji, Satyanarayan is commonly described as an *avatar* of Krishna.³⁹ Narottam's image endows the central figure of Satyanarayan with Shrinathji-like direct 'theatrical' vision. The viewer is immediately hailed by his gaze and we are commanded to reciprocate. On either



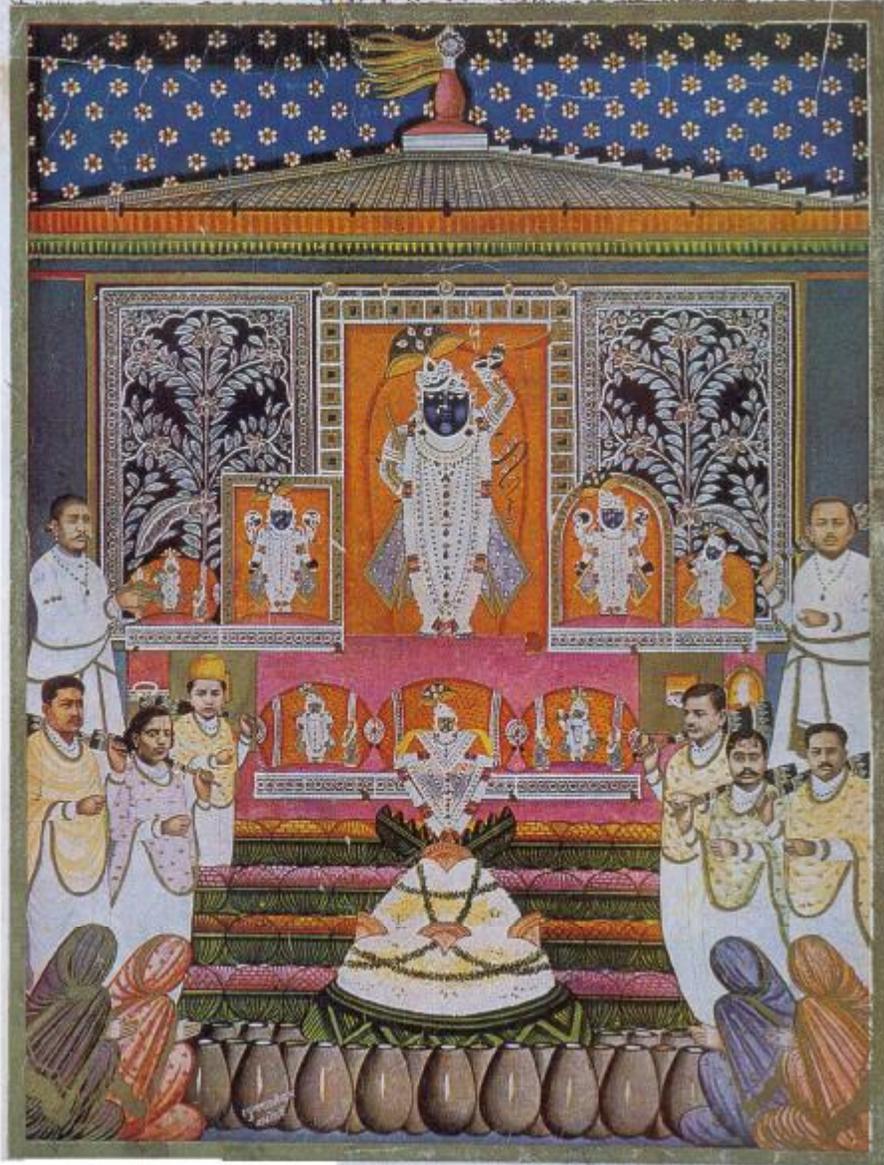
72 Studio photograph (c. 1994) of devotees with wall-painting of Shrinathji, Nathdvara. Photography here replicates conventions established in painting and chromolithography.

side of the deity are devotees whom we see gazing upon Satyanarayan. At the bottom a local Raja receives prasad from the priest. Symmetrical banana leaves (commonly used in Satyanarayan *puja*) at the top of the picture enhance the image's fecund claustrophobia. There is thus an 'absorptive' dimension in the image, but one which serves only to lay the foundations for the central and all important theatrical gaze of the deity, who looks at *us*, the devotee for whom this image has been prepared.

The subsidiary absorptive figures may also be seen as playing the role of critics' recommendations displayed outside a theatre, or the enthusiastic response of reviewers to be found on the covers of some books. They confirm in the viewer of the image the expectation that the deity will be efficacious, for he has already attracted the devotions of those we can see in the image. These figures also serve as prompts, facilitating the 'locking in' of vision between devotee and god that early cinema also struggled to perfect.

The NathdvarafBrijbasi style is strongly marked by its hybridization of photography for its own devotional and theatrical purposes. We should also keep reminding ourselves of the creational moment

* श्रीनाथजी का अन्नकूट *



73 *Shrinathji ka Annkut*. c. 1950. Print published by Raghunath Paliwal & Co., Kankrali, Rajasthan. A chromolithographic example of the *manoratha* genre.