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When Blindness Makes for Sight

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It is quite rare for a Hindi poet to be depicted in manuscript illustrations of the works he is believed to have composed, yet this does happen with Surdas. Was it perhaps Sur's blindness—his “invisibility” with respect to the objects of his vision—that made it possible for manuscript illustrators to include him in the Krishna-*līlā* scenes they painted without fearing that they might compromise the integrity of Krishna's charmed Braj world?

I will raise that question in connection with the earliest *Sūrsāgar* illustrations that have come down to us, those produced in the Mewar region sometime between 1700 and 1720 CE. As Ken Bryant was the first to show, a major feature of poetry attributed to Surdas—especially in *pads* that make their appearance early on in the life of the *Sūrsāgar*—is the phenomenon of “occluded memory,” whereby the poet causes members of his audience to forget what they know so that he may surprise them with that knowledge all over again. Must the force of such moments of epiphany be lost when an artist supplies an illustration that is meant to be seen during the entire time such a poem is being performed? With the illustration plainly in view, isn't the hearer being invited to see the outcome all along? We will consider a series of pages that emerge from these early eighteenth-century Mewari manuscripts to see what the answer might be.