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Forgotten Colloquies
Synergy of Eighteenth-Century Kishangarhi Authors

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Abstract This chapter seeks to contribute to expanding the canon of classical Hindi literature in three ways. First, it introduces the voice of a woman author who was a domestic slave in a royal Rajput household. Second, it moves away from the author as solitary male genius by foregrounding collaborative and dialogic modes of literary and other artistic production. Finally, it highlights the diversity of registers accessed within early modern 'Hindi' beyond what is often called 'Braj' and the affective work accomplished in doing so.

The chapter presents a case study of mid-eighteenth-century 'Braj' literary production from the small Rajasthani principality of Kishangarh, focusing on the synergy of the author–pair Sāvant Singh, the crown prince, and Banī-ṭhanī, one of his concubines. He sponsored paintings of the Kishangarhi school and she was the purported model for the distinctive traits of its portrayal of feminine types. While he is a star in the firmament of Braj literature under his pen name Nāgarīdās (Nāgrīdās), her literary work that carried the signature *(chāp)* Rasikbihārī is often overlooked. On the basis of newly discovered manuscript material, this chapter introduces her poems and brings them into conversation with his. First, it articulates methodological considerations, interrelating literary dialogic interaction of his and her poetry with visual art production. It further expands the dialogic approach to encompass response poems from their broader circle, including the powerful Nimbarkan abbot Vṛndāvandev Ācārya. Since the group shared poems in different idioms, the chapter reflects on the social milieus in which such 'heteroglossia' occurred and identifies emotional vectors carried by each register.

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Beyond the Canon of Great Men: The Forgotten Voice of a Woman Poet

One of the great poets in the canon of Hindi literature is Nāgarīdās, nom de plume of Sāvant Singh (1699–1764), the Rajput prince of Kishangarh-Rupnagar. He is best known in Hindi literature for his Braj Bhasha poetry in praise of the love play of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. His importance is evidenced by the hefty two-volume edition of his oeuvre by the Nāgarī Pracāriṇī Sabhā (Gupta 1965). He is also well-known in the Indian art world, as he had several of his own poems illustrated by his favourite painter, Nihālcand, who was instrumental in shaping the Kishangarh school of painting (Haidar 2011). The distinctive traits of the figure of Rādhā in this school are often said to be inspired by those of one of his concubines known as Banī-ṭhanī, or Miss Made-up (a theory first ventured in Dickinson and Khandalavala 1956). Before she became the prince's mistress, she was a slave-girl, purchased in 1727 (vs 1784) and appointed within a few years as singer *(gāyan)* in the retinue of Nāgarīdās' stepmother, the Kishangarhi queen known by her patronym as Bāṅkāvatī (Khān 2015: 377). Not only did Banī-ṭhanī perform at court, but she also composed her own songs. Compared to her much-debated role in the development of the Kishangarhi paintings' distinctive traits, very little interest has been shown in her poetry. An example from the influential volume on Kishangarhi painting by Mohinder Singh and Doris Schreier Randhawa reads thus:

> Bani Thani… was a beautiful girl who also professed interest in Hindi poetry. She became Sawant Singh's mistress. It is conjectured that the bloom of her youth and beauty not only roused unholy thoughts in the hearts of men who saw her, but also provided inspiration to the Kishangarh artists, to whom credit is given for the invention of the Kishangarh facial formula (Randhawa and Randhawa 1980: 9–10).

While the authors mention Banī-ṭhanī's interest in poetry in passing, they foreground her beauty as what inspired the dazzling Kishangarhi court culture. The Randhawas are just one example of an art-historical discourse which resulted in Banī-ṭhanī's fame as 'India's Mona Lisa', while her literary output was neglected. The argument of this chapter is that it was not just her looks but also Rasikbihārī's creative output that stirred the prince and his retinue. Her performances must have been very moving – and on top of that, she composed her own songs, which he appreciated, as evidenced by his including them in

his anthologies. The consequence was that not just his but also her poems were performed in temple worship, and their songs are till today often sung together.

If the prince included her poems in his oeuvre, how come they have been neglected? A major factor may well have been the first lithograph edition of his collected works in 1898, where her poems were excised from the anthologies in which he had included them. To be sure, they were gathered in a separate section, but at the very end and without explanation as to the identity of this mysterious author who signed as Rasikbihārī. Unfortunately, this separation of the couple's poems ended up both obscuring her talent and the interrelation of her songs with his. I have been engaged in a project to collect these and other songs by Rasikbihārī and recover the dynamic interrelation with matching songs by Nāgarīdās. The material presented here draws examples from that more encompassing work *(The Voice of India's Mona Lisa).*

Methodological Reflection on Intertextuality

How to reconstruct the colloquies between the prince and his concubine? The easiest, more direct way, is context-wise, going back to the manuscript evidence of his anthologies and identify where their songs are paired together. Nāgarīdās' collection of the calendrical cycle, *Utsav-mālā (UM),* and his more thematically organized *Pad-muktāvalī (PMĀ),* are particularly productive from this perspective. For the former I have been able to consult an undated manuscript from the Mathurā Janmabhūmi Library (Kṛṣṇa Śodhpīṭh Pustakālay 13254-365138, henceforth *MJB*), the colophon of which states it was a gift by the abbot of Salemabad, the Nimbarkan monastery near Kishangarh (*salemābada kā mahanta kī bheṁṭa havo*, fol. 40r).[1] For the latter, a manuscript that contains a colophon with the date 1746 (vs 1803) was obtained from Bābā Raṇchoṛdās from the temple of Śrī Kalyāṇ Rāy in Kishangarh (henceforth *Kh*; for a description, see Khān 2015: 35 ff. and plate 2). This manuscript contains poems that were added later. Perhaps after Sāvant Singh was exiled from his hometown in 1748, he recycled it because he lacked access to new paper on the road, or he simply found it handier to squeeze in new poems in the existing anthology. This is supplemented with the newly discovered

1 Undated, but the abbot likely was Vṛndāvandev Ācārya, who was close to the Kishangarh royal house and recognized guru of the then-queen, Bāṅkāvatī, Sāvant Singh's stepmother.

undated manuscript of Rasikbihārī's own songs, a performance diary *(bayāz)* that was produced by or for her during the last part of her life and in which she pairs her own songs with his and others (henceforth *RB:* full description in the appendix of my book).

In addition to this contemporaneous evidence, sometimes later collections group poems that may not be connected in the earlier ones, yet represent links that singers made, possibly from memory. The same holds true for contemporary performances by temple singers as recorded by ethno-musicologists (e.g., Beck 2011).

To determine matching pairs of poems, the contextual placement is complemented with content-analysis. Interchange between pairs thus is supported with evidence from within the text of the songs themselves. Matching songs often share the same theme, related to a specific time of day or of the season. Indicative of paired composition is common use of particular tropes and key words, further reinforced by technical elements, such as the melodic and rhythmic patterns *(rāg* and *tāl).* Often meter and rhyme are shared, as well as the linguistic register, marked by grammatical shibboleths. While some of these traits may be generically typical for the shared theme, the greater the density of such common features and the more unusual the choice of words the poems have in common, the stronger the evidence for the connection.

In addition, more subtle associations can be detected among poems related to particular visual representations, even if only Nāgarīdās' song is associated explicitly with a painting, its counterpart by Rasikbihārī may be interrelated with it through the visual description. There is now documentation that paintings were displayed as poetic compositions were performed. For Kishangarhi paintings we have concrete evidence from the aforementioned Bābā Raṇchoṛdās manuscript *(Kh),* which includes a stray folio bound with the rest that starts with instructions for a performance:

> *māna ke citrapaṭānusāra krama likhyate. Prathama citra ke darasaṇa hota pahlaĩ kāphī rāga kī alāpacāranaĩ pāñca dohā… ādi. Prathama pada gāvanau (yah): … tathā… yā pada ko bhona dayai pīchai citra paṭa kau darasaṇa hoya, taba e dai pada gāvanai… so yā dutiya pada maĩ dainai ye...* (*Kh* fol.165v)

> Here is written the sequence for canvases with images that depict 'pique' *(mān).* Before observing the first image, come five *dohās* for *ālāp* of *rāg* Kāfī (quotes the first line of a *dohā*), etc. First song to sing is this: (quotes the first line of a song) and also (quotes

Table 7.1 Evidence for Exchanges between Nāgarīdās' and Rasikbihārī's Pairs of Poems

Content-wise: from within text	Context-wise: placement of text
Theme Time: time of day / season Key words and tropes	Nāgarīdās' anthologies *Utsav-mālā (UM)* and *Pad-muktāvalī (PMĀ)*
	Rasikbihārī's own songs with his in her performance diary or *Bayāz* (RB), undated
	Associations with paintings
Rhyme Meter	Later collections
Rāg (melodic pattern) *Tāl* (rhythmic pattern)	
Register (linguistic shibboleths)	

> the first line of another song). After presenting his song, there is a viewing of the canvas with picture. Then intone this song for singing (quotes the first line of another song), and the second song to present is (quotes fully yet another song).

This continues on the next folio recto, about mid-page:

> *ye do(hā) dayaĩ pīchai dūsarā citra paṭa kau darasaṇa hoya, taba pada tau vahī gãyai jāvanau… tā mai phiri daine ye dohā….* (Bābā Raṇchoṛdās manuscript folio numbered 166r)
>
> After giving these *dohās*, there is viewing of a second canvas with an image. Then this song is to be sung (quotes the first line of a song), and then again these *dohās* to be given… (*Kh* fol. 165v and 166r).

The specifics of the documentation of the painting on the theme of *mān* ('pique') are difficult to trace. The main point of note is that from these instructions that survive in the page bound together with manuscript *Kh*, it is evident that Nāgarīdās organized soirées for which he scripted the sequence of paintings to be shown and matching compositions to be sung. We know his own poetry was penned on the back of some paintings (Pauwels 2015: 156–73). While the limited fragment does not

quote any of his or Rasikbihārī's songs, it is reasonable to assume his and hers were thus composed to be sung for similar soirées, as images were displayed. The evidence used to establish exchanges between pairs of poems is systematized in Table 7.1.

Applications from the Calendrical Cycle

Some beautiful examples of such forgotten interchanges come from the cycle of poems for the autumnal festival of Sāñjhī, when prepubescent girls make flower designs for the goddess of that name in order to obtain good husbands. Nāgarīdās himself has been closely associated with this festival as celebrated in Vrindavan. According to the early-nineteenth-century poet Gopālkavi, he started a fair at Brahmakund in Vrindavan, during which his own and others' Sāñjhī poems were recited in front of Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa images (Haidar 1995: 121; Entwistle 1987: 412–13). His oeuvre contains several such poems, including longer ones used as the basis of a performance for the festival, still performed at the Rādhāvallabha temple in Vrindavan.[2] The plot involves Kṛṣṇa dressing up as young girl in order to infiltrate Rādhā's group of friends engaged in the rites. The reaction when they meet each other is lovingly described in this seasonal poem from the prince's pen:

Rāga Pūrvī ikatāla
rahe dou badana nihāri nihāri
phūlana bīnata syāma sakhī uta, ita śyāmā sukuvāri
latā karani me rahi gaï ita, uta sakaiṁ kauna niravāri
nāgariyā mili naina duhuni ke, baḍe ***ṭhagani ṭhagavāri*** (*UM* 54)

Enthralled, both of them stare at each other's face.
One is a dark 'girl-friend', picking flowers, the other is young Śyāmā.
One has frozen, garland in hand, the other wondering how to release her.[3]
Nāgariyā: as their eyes met, the master trickster was tricked!

2 *Sāñjhī-phūl-bīnani-samaī-saṁvād*, 'Dialogue for the Occasion of Flower Gathering for Sāñjhī' (Gupta 1965: 2.85–8).
3 Or: 'puzzled who "she" may be'.

The poem matches well one of the famous paintings of the Kishangarh school depicting Rādhā's party gathering flowers (Dickinson and Khandalavala 1959: 32–3, plate 7).[4] The poet has zoomed in on the right side of the painting where Rādhā is enthroned. The cross-dressed dark-complexioned Kṛṣṇa appears before her, offering a garland in a basket. As his eyes meet hers, he appears mesmerized in fascination. Nāgarīdās concludes that the master trickster was tricked, or more literally, the great cheat *(ṭhag)* was himself tricked, that is, completely taken in by Rādhā's beauty.

What has not been appreciated thus far is that Rasikbihārī actually wrote a response for the same season, in the same rhythmical cycle *(iktāl),* with a very similar rhyme *-ārī* (just lengthened last syllable) and metre (16 + 11/12 *mātrā*s, due to lengthening of the last syllable). Nāgarīdās was excited enough about her response that he included it in the seasonal anthology under the section of Sāñjhī, right after his own:

Ikatāla
khelaiṁ sāṁjhī sāṁjha pyārī
gopa kuṁvāri sāthaṇi liyāṁ sāthe, cāva so catura siṁgārī
phūla bharī phiraiṁ phūla leṇa jyauṁ, phūla rahī phulavārī
rahyāṁ ***ṭhagyā*** *lakhi rūpa lālacī, prītama rasika bihārī*
(*UM* 55)

The darling girl plays Sāñjhī at dusk.
She gathers the young milkmaids around her, decked out smartly.
Arms full of flowers, they wander to pick yet more: flowerbeds seem to keep blooming.
Staring, dearest Rasika Bihārī, a lecher for beauty, was tricked himself.

The detail Rasikbihārī provides is different from Nāgarīdās'. Her attention turns to the smartly dressed milkmaids. The description perfectly fits the painting's loving detail of the girls' outfits, as does her drawing attention to their merging into the flowerbeds in the next line. In her last line, she too zooms into the right side of the painting, where the pair stands face to face, and she clearly responds to the prince's poem, using the same image of the deceiver deceived. Surely,

4 This painting can be viewed on the internet at www.goloka.com/docs/gallery/kishangarh/01kishangarh/02-sanjlila-large.html, accessed 2 February 2025.

Nāgarīdās meant for his audience to enjoy the similarities and contrasts between this set of poems, including how both bring out different aspects of the painting.

Applications with Matching Keywords

The theme of Kṛṣṇa as the trickster *(ṭhag)* may well have been a favorite trope the pair shared. It shows up also in another set of matching songs, when Rādhā is taking in Kṛṣṇa's bewitching beauty, described as *ṭhagārau,* with reference again to the deceiver, the trickster. The following is classified in Nāgarīdās' thematic anthology under the section *Raina rūpārasa* (The Passion of the Night's Beauty).

Rāga Soraṭha kā kẖyāla, ikatāla
re ***sāṁvaliyau*** *sājana* *mhāṁrau*
rūpa ***ṭhagārau kāmaṇagārau****, mohai mana sagalāṁ* *rau*
hiya maiṁ ***basiyau*** *rasiyau lobhī, madana mantra baiṇāṁ* *rau*
nāgarīdāsa huvau mana ceḍo, matavālā naiṇāṁ *rau* (*PMĀ* 529; *Kh* fol. 138)

'O my dark handsome lover.
Your enchanting, bewitching beauty enchants my heart wholesale.
Dwell in my heart, you eager lover, with the maddening spell of your utterances.'
Nāgarīdās [says]: 'My heart has become the slave of your intoxicating eyes.'

In this case, Nāgarīdās did not include Rasikbihārī's poem in his anthology, but in her performance diary we can locate one that overlaps in wording and in register:

saiṇa raṁgīlā ***sāṁvalā,*** *ho mana mohana pīva*
ākhiyāṁ āgaiṁ hī rahau, pala pala vārauṁ jīva
mhārau jiya *ṭhāṁmaiṁ* ***basaiṁ,*** *prītama parama anūpa*
rasika bihārī mana ***ṭhagyo, kāṁmaṇagārau*** *rūpa* (*RB* 6)

Your secret signs signal passion. Dark One, you are my love, my heart's enchanter.
Remain within my sight. For every blink of the eye, I give up my life.

My heart belongs with you, my dearest, my incomparable love
Rasika Bihārī, my heart was waylaid by your bewitching
beauty.

Both poems share not just the common epithet *sāṁvalā* for Kṛṣṇa, but also both play with expressions for the heart to belong, using the verb *bas-* 'to dwell, to settle', he in the imperative, speaking as Rādhā, encouraging Kṛṣṇa to dwell in her heart *(hiya maiṁ basiyau),* she asserting as Rādhā that her heart dwells with Kṛṣṇa *(mhārau jiya thāṁmaiṁ basaiṁ).* But the clincher that gives away the interrelation between the poems is the reinforcing of the theme of enchantment by means of a shared rare keyword, *kāmaṇagārau*, meaning 'bewitching'. The word is rare enough to warrant a gloss by the editor Kiśorīlāl Gupta.[5]

Fascinatingly, this unusual term also shows up in the oeuvre of Rasikbihārī's patroness' guru, the abbot of the aforementioned nearby Nimbarkan monastery of Salemabad, Vṛndāvandev Ācārya. His works, collected as *Gītāmṛta-gaṅgā (GGĀ)* include this song:

pyārā lāgo chojī pyārā the to mhāṁnaiṁ (pyārā)
mhāṁ kī cālai to thāṁneṁ chātī sauṁ, kade karāṁ nahīṁ nyārā
sūrati thāṁharī ***kāmaṇagārī…***
thāṁharī chāṁjī araja karāṁ chāṁ, darasaṇa dejyau dhūtārāṁ
śrī vṛndāvana prabhu ḍarāṁ lāgāṁ sauṁ, nahiṁ to cālāṁ thākī
lārāṁ
(*GGĀ* 13.26, p. 161)

You look so sweet, you always are dear to me.
If I had my way, would I let you leave my chest? Not ever will
I let you part.
Your face is bewitching…
I am yours, I beg you to give me a rendez-vous, you cheat.
Vrindāban's Lord, I'm afraid [of what people say], otherwise,
I would have come to you.

Here, the guru too uses Rādhā's voice describing her fascination with Kṛṣṇa's handsome appearance, calling him a trickster *(dhūtārāṁ).* Their relation here is obviously further evolved, in terms of intimacy as well as her experience with his cheating. Yet, she remains mesmerized with her lover, as if bewitched by his beauty *(kāmaṇagārī).* The conversation around that term seems to have extended beyond the

5 Gupta 1965: 1.424 (and 1.414) fn.

composer pair. One may well surmise that the guru held forth on the unusual term *kāmaṇagārī*, which led them all to compose around it *ex-tempore.*

There is yet another shared feature between the three poems, which becomes noticeable especially in the exaggerated display of regional idiomatic features seen in the guru's poem. Vṛndāvandev Ācārya has Rādhā speak here in a strong Rajasthani register, as is clear from the pronominal forms and verbal conjugation throughout (underlined in the poem above). The editors of *Gītāmṛta-gaṅgā* have made this explicit by marking the poem as 'Marvāḍī'. This draws our attention to something else that Rasikbihārī's and Nāgarīdās' poems have in common: they too included some Rajasthani shibboleths in their songs (also underlined above). The link between the poems is strengthened by the guru's rhyme on *-ārā(ṁ),* which matches closely that of Nāgarīdās on *-āṁ rau.* The latter is more Braji, but the guru's more Rajasthani, especially the last rhyme word *lārāṁ,* which is a Rajasthani perfective used adverbially.

Perhaps the king and his concubine were inspired by the guru's composing in a Rajasthani register. Or might it have been the other way around? Was Rasikbihārī perhaps first to compose in the idiom of the women's quarters in Kishangarh, deemed fitting for Rādhā's confessing to her confidantes about her fascination for Kṛṣṇa? This case of the three matching poems is a good example of how such interactions, lost when the poems are separated in distinct editions for each poet's oeuvre, can be reconstructed through close attention to the dialogic aspects of composition. Such recovered colloquies allow us to savour forgotten delights of poetic interchange in a social and performative context.

Broadening the Conversation

To grasp the significance of this broadening of the circle of composition, it is pertinent to introduce Vṛndāvandev Ācārya. He had been the abbot of the Salemabad monastery near Kishangarh from 1697 and would remain so till his death in 1740. He was not a provincial ascetic, but an influential counselor of Jai Singh II, founder of Jaipur, whom he assisted in his religious reform projects to promote orthodoxy. While his religious and political role is known to historians, the testimony of his poetry in its interrelation with that of the Kishangarh crown prince and his concubine reveals a hitherto unknown, more private side of this important historical figure. Gurus of this type often had strong personal connections with local rulers, but their relations with

the *zanānā* women – mothers, stepmothers, wives, and concubines of the rulers – is often overlooked or downplayed in historical writing, even if there are archival traces.

In this case, the abbot had a strong bond with the Bāṅkāvatī queen 'Brajdāsī' of Kishangarh. According to her own testimony, he had in fact brokered her marriage to Sāvant Singh's father, which took place in Vrindavan on Cīr Ghāṭ, probably in Jai Singh II's headquarters there.[6] Once ensconced in Kishangarh, the new queen maintained close links with Vṛndāvandev Ācārya, whom she herself professed in her later translation of *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* to be her guru.[7] There are records that document in detail his 1725 extended visit to the then-capital Rupnagar.[8] He was received by the king and the women outside the city gates and stayed for an extended period. Such important religious occasions were often commemorated in painting: perhaps this one is referenced in a Kishangarhi image preserved in the Berlin Museum für Asiatische Kunst.[9] It depicts in the upper half the arrival in town of a naked, long-haired, blue-skinned holy man, being greeted outside the city gate at the banks of the lake by the palace women as well as by a separate delegation of the king and his courtiers. In the lower half of the painting, the same holy man is seen instructing the king, his courtiers, and a group of holy men. Such scenes are often interpreted as a mythical *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* recitation by the composer Śukadeva Muni, but may well be intended to commemorate an actual such recitation ceremony, where the reciter was hailed as a Śukadeva. The prominent presence of the ladies and the queen in the welcoming party suggests the Bāṅkāvatī queen's role in the event.

Vṛndāvandev Ācārya is often regarded as one of the teachers of Nāgarīdās. He is portrayed teaching music to the young prince and other disciples in a painting on the wall in the abbot of Salemabad's

6 Śarmā 1996: 1.12 and 1.14–15. Also Clémentin-Ojha 1999: 86–8. The area now called Jai Singh Gherā is adjacent to the Yamuna at Cīr Ghāṭ (Case 2000: 13–14).

7 Śarmā 1996: 1. 31–2; BDBh 1.1.1–6 and 12.13.48–50.

8 This visit is described with precise dates (from vs 1782 the fourth day of the dark half of Māgh till the last day of the dark half of Cait), registration of gifts, and full calculation of expenses in a historical document preserved in the Kishangarh archives, dated 1725 (vs 1782 *Ittilāq bahī*), cited by Śaraṇ 1966: 14 n.1.

9 The image is not dated. The Museum estimates its creation around c. 1780. If so, it may be a later copy of an earlier commemorative original. The image can be viewed at: Sukadeva-Muni Kommt Nach Kishangarh Und Wird von Allen Bewohnern Empfangen. Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Kunstsammlung Süd-, Südost- und Zentralasien, SMB. https://jstor.org/stable/community.15719138, accessed 10 February 2025.

living quarters (reproduced in Pauwels 2017: 46, fig. 2.3).[10] In the picture, he is reading from his collected works, *Gītāmṛta-gaṅgā*, which in its current edition includes at the very end, as the fourteenth chapter *(ghāṭ),* a musical instructional piece (1998: 189–92). This work is an abbreviated generic description of the basics of Hindustani music, intended to be learned by heart by young students. While no women are present in the image, one may well surmise that as guru of the Bāṅkāvatī queen, he also taught the women in the *zanānā*. It is very likely he knew Banī-ṭhanī well: a poem of his mentioning her name as the rhyme word is conspicuous that way:

> *Rāga Kānharau Darbārī*
> *dhani dhani āju kī gharī pyārī, padhārī piya paiṁ* ***bani ṭhani***
> *baḍhī chavi dūna rī cūnarī pahirai, cūni aṁgiyā kasi bāṁdhī tani tani*
> *nakha sikha rūpa bharī vidhi āpa, karī kara ati kamanī mani*
> *vṛndāvana prabhu āi dhāi aṁka bharī, līnī kīnī rasa bhīnī surata raṁgani* (*GGĀ* 7. 18).
>
> Blessed is today's moment, as the sweet girl has joined her lover, all dressed-up *(banī-ṭhanī).*
> Her beauty is magnified by the shawl she wears, which matches her tightly tied bodice.
> From top to toe she has decked-out herself expertly, fixing gorgeous jewels on her arm.
> Vrindāban's Lord has come running to embrace her, holding her tight in passionate love play.

This poem seems to fit very well the stylized portrait, popularly known as 'India's Mona Lisa', for which Banī-ṭhanī supposedly was the model.[11] That famous painting has been identified as a *nāyikā* of the type *vāsaka-sajjā*: 'All dressed up *(sajjā),* awaiting her lover in her room

10 While the painting is modern, it is based on an older work preserved in Śrī Jī Kuñj in Vrindavan. Śaraṇ provides a sketch of it (1966: page facing 38).

11 The official title is 'Portrait of Radha'; it is estimated to date to *c.*1740 (opaque watercolour and gold on paper. 48.2 × 35.2 cm, kept in the Royal Collection). It was first published in Dickinson 1950: 35, more accessibly in Dickinson and Khandalavala 1959: plate IV, and reproduced as a print distributed by Lalit Kala Akademi. It is widely reproduced in print and on the internet, accessible via wikimedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bani_Thani#/media/File:4_Radha_(Bani_Thani),_Kishangarh,_ca._1750,_National_Museum_New_Delhi.jpg, accessed 20 December 2020.

(vāsaka)' (Dickinson 1950: 35). In Vṛndāvandev Ācārya's description, the shawl *(cūnarī),* tight bodice *(aṁgiyā),* and arm ornaments match the painted portrait. The final line of his poem takes the logical next step with the arrival of the long-awaited lover. If the portrait was indeed modeled after Banī-ṭhanī, it seems quite possible that the guru's poem was intended as a double-entendre, the reference to the portrait of the divine Rādhā, while simultaneously pointing to the flesh-and-blood concubine of the prince.

In discovering Vṛndāvandev Ācārya's exchanges with Rasikbihārī's and Nāgarīdās' poetry, it has been possible to widen the circle of engagement and the milieus of these exchanges, in particular the role of music and painting in the creation of their songs. In other words, they were not the products of devotion in isolation, but of lively exchanges in social gatherings of the type documented above by the folio with a script for such soirées.

Applications with Matching Registers

The echoes between the abbot's and Rasikbihārī's poetry are not limited to the isolated instance cited above. Elsewhere too, the guru's compositions in regional style matched Rasikbihārī's. For descriptions of strong *viraha*, 'love in separation', the guru occasionally used a distinct Punjabi register (shibboleths underlined):

hāy mainūṁ choḍi gayā mahabūb
***bhauṁha kamāna** driga bāṇa amā, **ghāyala** kari gayā khūba*
ghūṁghara vālī julaphaiṁ mainūṁ (maiṁḍā), vāṁdhi kulapha kītī kāma
vrindāvana prabhu prema dī ḍorī, lāma gayā bekāma (*GGĀ* 4.60)

Alas, my lover has left me.
The bow of his brows, the arrow of his glances, o my, wounded me deeply.
With his curly hair tresses, he tied me up, what need would he have for locks?
Vrindāban's Lord with just a rope of love halted the vanguard's advance.

Rasikbihārī responded in kind, peppering her poem similarly with Punjabi shibboleths (underlined), further emphasized by her choice of one such for her rhyme word:

Titāla
tīkhe naiṁna kanhāī taiṁḍe, pala pale khūna karaṁde
***bhauṁhaiṁ** tau **kamāṁna** tanīṁ, palakaiṁ tīra paraṁde*
*kitte **ghāyala** pare karāhaiṁ, dila nahīṁ dhīra dharaṁde*
rasika bihārī nitti vāra karaṁde, ṭāre nahīṁ ṭaraṁde (*PMĀ* 596, *Kh* fol. 151r)

Kanhāī, your sharp eyes draw blood with each batting of your eyelids.
Your brows are strung like bows, your eyelids strike like arrows.
So many fall down, wounded, groaning. Their hearts fail to keep up.
Rasika Bihārī keeps attacking relentlessly, even if you brush them aside, they don't budge.

The shared keywords of these Punjabi-register songs 'brows like bows' and 'wounded' refer to a more violent expression of the *viraha* theme, in a comparison with battlefield scenarios. The Persianate etymology of the words as well as the images resonate with the newly popular Rekhtā poetry. Perhaps we should speak of *firāq* rather than *viraha*. One can see here a contrast with the theme that, as we saw earlier, was deemed fit for a Rajasthani register, namely confidences expressed in women's speech. This points to the affective work accomplished in adopting different registers. In the more Persianate universe, the beloved typically does not reciprocate the lover's feelings, and behaves heartlessly, even cruelly. This is quite distinct from the more domestic world of Braj. Central in Rekhtā is the urbanite *majlis,* where liaisons are made, hearts broken, and lovers left bleeding on the floor. By contrast, Kṛṣṇa may be accused of breaking hearts, but he does not typically plant daggers in his victims' chests. Even when his passionate love-making is compared to violent battle, he tends not to leave his conquests wounded to moan among those abandoned on the battlefield.

Were the poets here inspired by the new rage for Rekhtā poetry in Delhi? The Kishangarh house maintained a residence in Shahjahanabad where the family frequently sojourned during Muhammad Shāh's reign.[12] The Bāṅkāvatī queen seems to have stayed in the capital regularly with her retinue. It has been documented that in 1732

12 H. H. Mahārāj Brajrāj Singh, personal communication 25 July 2011; 'Kishangarh Rāja's House' is located on the lower right on the map of 1857 in Hearn 1906: facing p. 172.

(vs 1789), she hosted there a special religious function for her personal deity *(arcā samāroh)* to which were invited singers and ascetics from Salemabad, as well as others from the pilgrimage town of Vrindavan in the Braj area (Śarmā 1972: 281). The Kishangarhi family and its associates partook in the vibrant local cultural scene. Shahjahanabad's multiple festivals, literary gatherings, and musical soirées are well-known thanks to the description popularly referred to as 'Marvels of Delhi', *Muraqqa'-e Dehlī*.[13] This Persian report of the mid-century Delhi entertainment scene revealed also the musical fashions of the time being *kabitt*[14] and *khayāl*, which were performed at the 'colorful' imperial court of Muhammad Shāh 'Rangīlā', as well as at noblemen's gatherings, and in the city's less lofty entertainment settings.[15] These cosmopolitan fashions influenced the visitors from Kishangarh. The Bāṅkāvatī queen 'Brajdāsī', Rasikbihārī, and Nāgarīdās all composed poetry marked as '*kabitta*' and '*khyāl*'.[16] Some of the latter poems were in a more Urdu or Punjabi register. One may well envisage the fashions from these urban social milieu to have carried over to the provincial court, where they mixed with the more domestic, rural ones of Braj, preferred in pilgrimage circles.

Conclusion

This chapter has contributed to diversifying the canon of Hindi poets by introducing a neglected voice of a woman, Banī-ṭhanī, nom de plume Rasikbihārī. While she was celebrated for her physical features, her poetry has been too often bypassed, even though it was inspiring in its own right. Studying her case also works to push beyond the canon of individual literary geniuses, revealing the dialogic intertextuality of some of the better-known celebrated male poets' oeuvre, in particular her patron, Nāgarīdās.

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13 The Deccani official Navāb Dargāh Qulī Ḳhān Bahādur Sālar Jang authored it during his sojourn in the capital on a diplomatic mission that lasted from 1737 until 1741. An (abbreviated) English translation was published by Shekhar and Chenoy 1989.

14 *Muraqqa'-e Dehlī*, Shekhar and Chenoy 1989: 78–9, 83–4, 93, 98, 102, 123; see also Trivedī 2012: 115–16 and Brown 2010: 163.

15 Du Perron 2010. For a short history of *khayāl* in Delhi, see Trivedi 2012: 112–15.

16 The queen is on record as having composed a *Khyāl-sangrah* 'Collection of *khayāl* compositions' (Śāstrī 1972: 279–85). For Rasikbihārī, see her *Bayāz* fols 43r, 48r, 78r, 89r, and *Khyāl Mārvāḍī* on fol. 101r.

The multiple synergies between the prince and his concubine can be recovered by reconstructing forgotten colloquies of the author–couple, carefully selecting poetic responses on intertextual as well as contextual grounds. The circle of interchanges was broadened to involve the Nimbarkan abbot of the Salemabad monastery near Kishangarh, Vṛndāvandev Ācārya, who is documented to have had a strong bond with Sāvant Singh's stepmother, the Bankāvatī queen, who was also Banī-ṭhanī's patroness.

The mixed-gender poetic dialogues thus disclosed also highlight the diversity of registers accessed within early modern 'Hindi'. Beyond what is often denoted by the term 'Braj', classical devotional poetry for Kṛṣṇa included songs in Rekhtā, Punjabi, and Rajasthani idioms. The adoption of (or gesturing towards) each register had less to do with the regional origin of the poets, or even the place of performance. Nor was it gender-limited. Instead, it accomplishes affective work, notably evocation of the language of the *zanānā*, women's quarters, in the case of regional Rajasthani, and of the Persianate Sufi idiom of *firāq*, the violent pain of separation from a cruel beloved, with respect to Rekhtā and Punjabi. Poets of different regions and genders were able to contribute to this linguistic diversity, while performing at the capital, in a regional court or monastery, or in a place of pilgrimage.

How to denote this phenomenon of code-switching or code-signaling? 'Multilinguality' sounds clumsy and presupposes an anachronistic notion that there is one national language, whether Hindi or Urdu. 'Linguistic variation' also presumes a uniform standardized idiom by which variants are to be measured. It furthermore implies randomness, whereas the mobilization of different registers seems quite intentional. Perhaps we can apply here elements of Michail Bakhtin's 'heteroglossia', which is closely associated with socio-ideological linguistic phenomena (Hirschkop 2021).

Sociologically, the data would indicate an aspiration of sophistication underlying the use of these new genres from the Mughal capital, elegant Shahjahanabad, by this up-and-coming provincial court.[17] Such shifting in and out of multiple poetic worlds, with bhakti acquiring Persianate connotations seems connected with a particular musical genre, that of *khyāl*, which has been strongly associated with the court of Muhammad Shāh (du Perron 2010). Clearly the provincial composers

17 The goal here is not to add to the extensive body of theoretical engagement with Bakhtin, but to repurpose the term stressing some of its associations to which he drew attention.

were signaling their cosmopolitanism, displaying their virtuoso skills at inhabiting a wider world.

At Kishangarh, such musical performances were often accompanied with display of illustrations directly related to the poetry sung. The Kishangarhi court thus developed an intricate web of synaesthetic experiences activated in heteroglossic performances, all the more powerful as they were shared in broader social circles. Rather than stemming from a single male genius, the celebrated Kishangarhi culture was produced in vibrant exchange of musicians, theologians, painters, and composers, some of whom were women. Hopefully this case study inspires the discovery of more such instances where women performers played an important role in new literary developments beyond the written letters on the page.

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Abbreviations

Kh	ms. dated 1746 (vs 1803) obtained from Bābā Raṇchoṛdās from the temple of Śrī Kalyāṇ Rāy in Kishangarh
GGĀ	*Gītāmṛta gaṅgā* (Vṛndāvandev Ācārya 1998)
PMĀ	*Padmuktāvalī* (Gupta 1965)
RB	Rasikbihārī's Bayāz, undated ms. in the Kishangarh Royal Collection
UM	*Utsav-mālā* (Gupta 1965)

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