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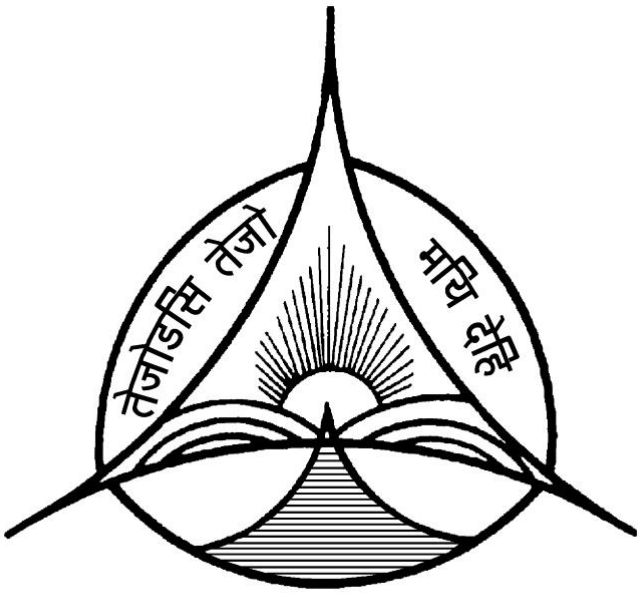

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Engendering *Śṛṇgāra*, Procuring Love: *Sakhi, Duti,* and Go-between in *Rīti* Poetry

RUCHIKA SHARMA*

A servant maid, or faithful nurse,
Says Keshavadāsa, or a barber's spouse,
A dancer, or a woman neighbour,
A gardener's wife who roams about:
A female bangle or betel seller,
A goldsmith girl, or of mixed caste.
Woman recluse, or the wife clever
Of one who in ornament works
With silk and gold threads—these I deem
The nayaka and the nayika's bosom friends,
And when of mutual love they dream
The two use them to serve their ends (Bahadur 1990: 193)

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Dūtika: Hearken, hearken, beautiful Kānāi:
I give the maiden Rādhā to your care,
A lotus-damsel, softly-wrought,
And thirstier bee than you.
The feast of honey is prepared—
Only forget the Archer's cruelty,
Touching her bosom gently
As an olifant a lily.
Making excuse to count her necklace pearls,
Your hands may lift the burden of her breasts:
She does not understand the ways of love,
But now consents, and now refuses.
The shirīsh-flower is not more delicate than she, therefore
Inure her to the Archer's way by little steps—
The poet Vidyāpati lays down

* Assistant Professor, Department of History, Gargi College, University of Delhi, New Delhi. Email: ruchika.sharma@outlook.in.

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This prayer of a messenger upon your feet.[1]

The first passage from Keśavdāsa's *Rasikapriya* (Handbook for Poetry Connoisseurs, c.1591), enumerates various women who could serve as *duti*, or secret messenger, between the *nāyaka* (hero) and *nāyikā* (heroine). Composed in *Braj bhasha* (language), Keśavdāsa's writings are considered complex and pioneering works of the vernacular *rīti* tradition of early modern poetry.[2] In the second passage, a couplet by *rīti* poet Vidyapati (1352–1448 CE), we hear the *duti* addressing the *nāyaka* as he meets the *nāyikā* for the very first time. The *duti* here performs one of her essential tasks—of presenting the *nāyikā* to the *nāyaka,* while also introducing and physically describing her to the readers. She turns into the voice of the poet, along with playing the pertinent task of a messenger—procuring love—as she brings Radha (*nāyikā*) to Krishna (*nāyaka*). She cautions Krishna to proceed gently with Radha, who she professes 'does not understand the ways of love'.

I. Who is *Sakhi*?

This paper endeavours to carve out the literary character of *sakhi*, which loosely translates as 'friend' in English, as a way to talk about the category of domestic service in all its layered perception. Domestic service, dependent on caste and familial ties, and different from the category of labour, acquires a nuanced connotation in the early modern South Asian context. Even in the case of pre-industrial Europe, Raffaella Sarti (2006) argues that domestic service was at the same time an employment and a type of relationship. She points out that the only difference between people who were likely to be classified as servants was having a master, rather than performing a certain specific task. Interestingly enough, in the case of the *sakhi*, we only find her by her role—a certain comfort of waiting on the *nāyikā*, as well as being the only person with an inkling of what is going on in the heroine's mind.

As a literary category, s*akhi* is not exclusive to the early modern vernacular poetic genre of *rīti,* which continues the traditional concepts, classifications and tropes of early Indian Sanskrit and Tamil literature. All of these writings refer to her in a variety of ways due to a host of roles ascribed to her. She could certainly be a *duti* (messenger), a confidante (*sakhi*), and at times, *kuttani* (procuress or go-between)—terms that are used interchangeably unless specified. *Sakhi* assisting *nāyikā* in her toilette is a popular visual in Pahari and other early

modern regional paintings (Plate 1), which is why she often gets simplistically translated as a maid in English. Her roles, however, overlap and remain diverse. Speaking for each of the absent lovers, listening to the couple's hopes and sighs, even commenting on the affair to a friend, the *sakhi* acts out in poetry the roles of both speaker/poet and listener/reader (Aitken 1999: 86). Similarly in *rīti* poetry, she not only carries the messages or describes the *nāyikā*'s beauty to enamour *nāyaka*, she also offers words of advice to the lovers during a lover's spat, writes messages for often inexperienced *nāyikā*, and carries them to and fro, enhancing the representation of the *śṛṇgāra rasa*. In Keśavadasa's *Rasikapriya*, the *sakhi* enunciates the *nāyikā*'s adornment, almost unveiling the *nāyikā* for the readers as well as the *nāyaka*.

'I cleaned her feet with the pumice stone,
and with red dyed I did them deck,
and then her lovely eyes adorned
with collyrium: around her neck
a garland placed; ornaments on
her body: now the glass she holds
wherein her beauty she gaze:
who will now, as a nayaka throw
a side long glance on her, and take
her gently in his lap; and out
of deep affection, fondly place
a betel in her quivering mouth?' (Bahadur 1990: 212).

She plays a central role during the *viraha* (love in separation), ultimately making the lovers' union possible. She also accompanies the *nāyikā* on the rendezvous or acts as a chaperone, another frequent theme in local paintings of 19th century regional states.

II. Radha or Nāyika; Sacred or Erotic?

The question of the overlap in Radha's sacred and profane portrayal as *nāyikā* has been adequately dealt with (Siegel 1978; Miller 1975), raising pertinent questions about Radha's depiction in devotional (bhakti) as well as courtly (*rīti*) poetry. Nadia Cattoni argues that Radha had been depicted as so many women that she slowly became a 'nobody', or rather, is turned into a stereotypical woman, the archetypal heroine, a *nāyikā* among others (2015: 68). It cannot be truer for the *nāyikā* of court poetry of the *rīti kavya*. I would contend that the two are not necessarily dichotomous, as the sentiment of love and its expression retains similar

passion and depth in both genres. The manner in which the *nāyikā* of *rīti* turns into Radha, similarly the poetry of devotion insinuated the language of desire. Kabir, one of the prominent 15th century Vaishnava bhakti saints, calls out to god like this:

My eyes are heavy with sleep, my love,
Come, let us go to bed
Lovelorn, my body quivers and quakes (Das 1992:11).

The *sakhi,* however, remains mortal, with some symbolism of the mediation between god and the *bhatka* (devotee). While providing a personal service, the *duti* could belong to so many classes and categories that the task of situating her in the category of domestic servant becomes daunting, although she belongs to the urban, aristocratic landscape in early India as well as the early modern era. The relationship between the *nāyikā* and *duti,* symbiotic as it may be, remains asymmetrical.

III. *Sakhi*—A Classical Perspective

Classical Sanskrit and Tamil literature of early Indian aesthetics goes on to detail the *bhāva* (emotions) and *rasa* (expressions). These texts, written primarily for an urban population, were devoted to love, pleasure and the performing arts, and seek to stimulate the sentiment of love or the *rasa* of *śṛṇgāra,* which was considered a means to pleasure (*kāma*) (see Nadarajah 1995: 6). The *nāyaka* and *nāyikā* have been classified (*nāyaka–nāyikā bheda*) on the basis of their emotional and psychological state, physical appearance, age, experience and behaviour during both aspects of *śrngar*a—love in union (*sambhoga*) and separation (*vipralambha*). These treatises go on to elaborate the characters and conventions used as tropes in such literature, performing arts, sculpture, poetry, and so on, to enhance these expressions. The *duti* or *sakhi* are characters who help bring the two together. One of the basic conventions was that the *nāyaka* and *nāyikā,* just like their readership and patronage, were *nagarka* or the urban elite. Much before *rīti* poetry, classical Sanskrit and Tamil literature of early and early medieval India reminded us how, as a literary classification and a dramatic character, *duti* remains central for her services in conjuring up the *śṛṇgāra,* a favourite theme in poetry, performance and literature.

The two prominent Sanskrit works of early India that discuss the category of *duti* are dramaturgical *Nātyaśastra* of Bharatmuni (4th century CE) and *Kamasutra* of Vātsyāyana (3rd century CE). They also compose lists of women who can secretly work as go-between to bring the *nāyaka* and *nāyikā* together. Vātsyāyana devotes an entire chapter entitled *Dutikarmaprakarnam* where he classifies them into eight types: (a) who performs the entire job; (b) who does only part of it; (c) who bears letters only; (d) who acts on her own account and gets involved with the lover herself; (e) who acts for an innocent young woman; (f) a wife who serves as go-between; (g) a mute go-between; and (h) who carries a message of double meaning. Here the classification focusses on the different kinds of *duti*, without the classification of who could be one, like the *Rasikapriya* of a later day. The *Nātyaśastra* in Chapter 34 discusses a number of other people besides the hero and heroine. In case of separation, and suffering caused from this separation, it is suggested that the *nāyikā* could send a message across with a *duti*, who is 'expert in love affairs'. The *duti* in turn speaks to the man concerned of the *nāyikā*'s pitiable condition, and also conveys matters related to passionate love (Nadarajah 1995: 11). In the section on courtesans, the work enumerates the types of women who may be used as female messengers—'a wise woman, a female storyteller, a female ascetic, or a woman of the stage, an intelligent woman, a female neighbour, a female friend, a maid servant, an unmarried girl, a craftswoman, a foster-mother, a nun or a female fortune-teller.'

All prominent playwrights and poets of classical Sanskrit literature like Kālidāsa, Shudraka and others, employ *duti* as an important aspect of establishing *śṛṇgāra*. In a world segregated by gender and caste hierarchies, the only character who moves freely between personal and public spaces is the *duti.* She is the secret messenger who exists in these writings solely for the purpose of inducing and promoting conversation between the hero and heroine. Of course, there is the male friend or the *duta*. But the love as affliction, which enables the male gaze to classify women as they are made to react differently to it, is largely achieved as carried and conveyed by the *duti*.

IV. Erotico-religious writing

Between classical Sanskrit and Tamil poetry, and vernacular *rīti* poetry of northern and eastern India of the 16th–17th centuries, Jayadeva's *Gitagovida* becomes another important erotico-religious text. However, the approach in Sanskrit love poetry generally, and in the *Gitagovinda* specifically, is ornamental and sensual rather than discursive or philosophical (Siegel 1978). In *Gitagovinda*, we witness Radha's heart filled with love and passion after a long separation, and its consummation (*sambhoga śrngar*a) is represented as a layered experience for the reader. The poetic perspective, argues Barbara Stoler Miller, follows the movement of Radha's friend (*sakhi*), who places herself between the parted lovers to describe the condition of each to the other. She goes on to add the *sakhi*, central to that union, along with the poet and the audience as they all share the experience of secretly participating in the play of divine love (Miller 1984: 16). Radha too requests the *sakhi* or *sahacari* to convey her feelings to Krishna, and yearns for the magical times with him. It is the *sakhi*, then, who conveys Radha's *viraha* to Krishna in this erotic and mystical lyrical poetry, as Radha turns into a powerful consort, prepared to share Krishna's divine love. The *śṛṇgāra* in lover's union comes to its conclusion with the efforts of *sakhi.* It is also here that the *nāyaka* and *nāyikā* turn into Krishna and Radha, and for *rīti* poets, the way is paved to use them as one and the same.

Some would like to see this as the new (medieval) liveliness that bursts the shell of this (love lyrics) archaism (Caitanya 1979: 21). Many scholars would claim that Jayadeva's approach was robustly male, in contrast to that of Vidyapati (during the *rīti* period), who has an almost feminine approach.[3]

V. *Sakhi* in *Darbari Rīti* poetry

Rīti poetry flourished in medieval north India in *Braj bhasha* and other north Indian vernaculars in roughly the early modern era. The term *rīti* means stylistic (in Sanskrit), but in this period, the term had prescriptive import, referring to composition 'in proper style'; i.e., in accordance with the concepts, categories, topics and rules set forth in the manuals (of poetic theory illustrated by archetypical verses).[4]

Braj language is often relegated to its devotional associations with Krishna, or is ignored due to the assumption that the Mughals did not patronise it, owing to the extensive royal patronage to Persian language as well as Persian culture.[5] However, the production of vernacular textual culture was quite well established, even during the pre-Mughal era. The *premākhyāns* (Sufi *Hindavi* romances) were being composed in *Avadhi* dialect as late as the mid-16th century. As soon as the early Mughal rule starts to firmly establish its foundations, the liberal and cosmopolitan Persian is chosen over many other languages. *Braj bhasha*, by virtue of geographical proximity to Agra, as well as the rise of the Krishna bhakti cult, could not be ignored by the Mughal political elite. Therefore, as early as Akbar's rule, we see an attempt at accommodating *Braj* literary culture in various artistic spaces, especially in poetry, literature and music.

As Sheldon Pollock would argue, a key site for understanding vernacularisation is literary culture. It is here, he goes on, that we most clearly perceive intentional language change and encounter the most significant representation of a society's self-understanding and a polity's power (1998: 41). The genre of *rīti* poetry, however, gets blamed for its *darbari* (courtly) nature which used a non-elite language, and its themes largely resting on the *śṛṇgāra rasa*. It is only recently in the works of Allison Busch (Busch 2010) and Sandhya Sharma (Sharma 2011) that we get to read the political linkages between *rīti* poetry and the regional courts the *rīti* poets came from, and the overarching imperial court of the Mughals. Allison Busch attempts to highlight the instances of circulation between Hindi and Persian, as well as regional and imperial cultural realms (2010: 306). She brings out that *Braj bhasha* cannot be reduced to being 'folk and simple', but needs to be read also as a language cultivated and patronised by the urbane, cosmopolitan elite of the time. Audrey Truschke's recent research (2016) also brings out the multi-linguistic ethos of Mughal rule by way of continued royal patronage of Sanskrit, along with a host of translations from Sanskrit to Persian, between 1560 and 1660. The heterogeneous Mughal elite spoke, read, recited and sponsored literature of different languages, despite Persian being the official language.

Satish Chandra highlights the shifting consciousness from tribe or ethnicity to certain cultural mores as reflected in Persian poetry. However, the rise of vernacular poetic forms such as *rīti* around the 16th–17th centuries represented a parallel trend. Since the Mughal nobility

acquired a more composite flavour, religion was no more a common ground for communication (Chandra 2003: 35). I would also argue that the moral perspective on *rīti* poetry robs it of the wide variety of themes it covers, as well as all that it stands for. The poetry composed for regional and Mughal courts, for the warrior class largely, and the male gaze was not only erotic but also layered with the connotations of the prevalent service culture, and the centre–peripheral relationships between the Mughal court and the regional courts. If *rīti* poets wrote about *nāyikā bheda*, they also composed *Jangnama, Chhatra Prakas, Sujan Charita* for their regional as well as Mughal warrior patrons. Keśavdāsa not only wrote *Rasikapriya* for poetry connoisseurs, but he also composed the extremely political *Jahangir Jas Chandrika* and *Veer Charita*. Political metaphors, which are aplenty in *rīti* poetry, along with the focus on the extremely descriptive erotic aspect, does appear to be an interesting combination, although they are not as polar as they might appear to 'modern' sensibilities.

Due to a similar time frame as well characters, *rīti* poetry gets pitted against the preceding bhakti literature. However, the conspicuous overlap between the spiritual and sensual, as well as the role of the *sakhi* or *duti* as confidante, inducing *śṛṇgāra*, continues without much change in both genres. The *nāyaka* and *nāyikā* who were already transformed into Krishna and Radha with *Gitagovinda*, could now easily slip into those roles and back as *rīti* poetry was largely patronised in the political courts. Apart from being the hero and Krishna, the third role added to the *nāyaka*'s lyrical portfolio was that of the patron King, whose name is often interchanged with that of *nāyaka* or Krishna during the course of the poetry. The political might and sexual bravado of the local chieftains, ruling their smaller kingdoms, often get underlined as these poets indulge in unabashed flattery (for continued sponsorship) of the patron Kings by inserting their names in *rīti* poetry, turning them into the *nāyaka/*Krishna during the course of the poetry. Bihari in his *Satsai* (seven hundred verses) goes on,

घर घर तुरकिनि, हिन्दुनी देंति अतीस सराहि.
पातुनि राखि चादर, चुरी तैं राखि जयसाहि.[6]

The *duti* and her serviceability, however, remains constant—from Sanskrit scholarly treatises, didactic texts, Sanskrit *kāvya, Gitagovinda* and now to *Braj rīti kāvya*.

VI. Crossing the Threshold

In the depiction of *śṛṇgāra rasa*, as it comes across in *rīti* poetry, Vidyapati clearly portrays Radha's love for Krishna as illicit, which is only hinted at in *Gitagovinda* as the drama takes place in secrecy and during the night. It is now that we witness the *sakhi* in her full glory. Her sheer presence in public space could be used to help the younger, often inexperienced, *nāyika*. For it is the *sakhi* or *duti* who continues to be there for the *nāyika* in every situation of the vernacular poetry. With the possibility of finding a solution and also as an act of sharing the most intimate details of the affair, Vidyapati's innocent *nāyika* pours her heart out to her *sakhi*:

But in my clumsy innocence
Alone, with none to aid,
I could not please…
The spell of passion went
I said
Nothing (Archer 1987: 105).

The terms and roles of *duti* as messenger, and *sakhi* as the confidante, are often interchangeable, with no differentiation, in both textual and poetic realms. Some fascinating researches on the representational paintings of Pahari and other schools in Rajasthan, borrowing themes from *Gitagovinda, rīti* poetry, especially the *Rasikapriya* of Kesavdāsa, or *nāyikā-bheda*, do treat *sakhi* as an aspect of the larger discussion on femininity. Molly Emma Aitken, while raising concerns about spectatorship and femininity in Kangra style painting, treats the *sakhi*'s appearance as largely a part of the thematic structure of these paintings, which gets articulated through the actions and gestures of the women's attendants, as it draws a relationship between the women pictured in the paintings and their viewers (1999). Another work focussing on painted poetry attempts to dwell on the visual portrayal of the *sakhi.* Annapurna Garimella, in exploring aspects of love and devotion in Rajput paintings, highlights a powerful discourse of eroticism that revolves around the secret display of feelings, on the lovers' covert actions, and on their exposure by *sakhis* (1998: 93). Among others, Sudhish Pachauri's recent writing on *rīti* poetry presents it as a celebration of

sexuality, where the *sakhi* or *duti* is mentioned as a medium between the *nāyaka* and *nāyikā.* He goes on to call them professionals, in the sense that the list of possible *dutis* given by *rīti* poets, like Abdul Rahim Khan-i-Khanan, Kesavdāsa and others, was based on the nature of their jobs. That brings us back to the passage we started with from the *Rasikapriya* (a handbook for the poetry connoisseurs) of Kesavdāsa, court poet of Raja Indrajit Singh of Orchha, around the last decade of the 16th century. Kesavdāsa goes on to write this fairly complex work in *Braj bhasha*, where we get an exhaustive list of women who may carry secret messages between the two. But the recent historiography does not consider *duti* and *sakhi* as a literary category to be a specific group within the larger discussion in historical writing—art, literary or otherwise.

Our *duti*, who could be a close confidante of the *nāyika,* almost always did not belong to the same class as her. It is nowhere more evident than the *sakhi*'s physical presence in both private as well as public spheres, where she could interact with the *nāyikā*. It is interesting to think of her presence as pervasive in the most intimate moments of the urbane *nāyaka* and *nāyikā*, especially in pictorial depictions (Plate 2). In the visual imagery, just by being present, she is not merely a chaperone but a witness to the amorous moments of the young couple. She not only directs the gaze, but also breaks the boundaries of privacy by being there. The couples' meeting without socially sanctioned marriage is not only being encouraged and assisted, but also watched over by the *sakhi*. As a visual theme, the physical presence of a *sakhi* during the intimate moments of an elite couple is quite common, even in Mughal miniature painting. However, the *sakhi* remains one of the characters in the cultural aesthetics of Sanskrit *kavya*, and then later on, even in the vernacular, which borrows heavily from it.

The *sakhi* is also privy to the innermost feelings of love and passion between them, as she conveys the messages, in her own way, teaching the young *nāyikā* a thing or two. It was usually to establish the innocence and ignorance of the urban, elite *nāyikā* which, when compared to that of the experienced *duti*, shines across the erotic sentiments of *rīti* poetry. The female virtue of elite women is upheld as they are read about, *nakh-shikh* (head to toe) descriptive accounts, in regional courts for the male audience. The *sakhi* hence crosses the

threshold of privacy, both as a friend and as someone who is essential as a category or a trope to fulfil the theme of *śṛṇgāra*.

VII. Many Works of *Sakhi*—Messenger of Love

Kesavdāsa's *Rasikapriya*, as well as earlier Sanskrit and Tamil texts, encouraged using the services of 'professional' women from working classes who did not live in purdah or seclusion like the *nāyikā*, and who could access the public space. K.P. Bahadur, who translated Kesavdāsa's *Rasikapriya*, emphasised how the *duti* should be extremely close to the *nāyikā* so that the latter was conformable enough to talk freely about her attachment. She should have easy access to all quarters so that the *duti* could carry that message to the *nāyaka* without raising suspicion. Hence, women providing other domestic services were sought to conduct the business of love—either due to their access and attachment to the *nāyikā*, or for money. Kesavdāsa has various passages where women from different professions pass the messages to and fro, making it appear like an actual conversation. The following words of the female bangle-seller were taken to the *nāyikā* in *Rasikapriya*, coaxing a message of love out of her:

'If your soul and her's have not met,
What happiness will you derive
By meeting thus? Meet him yourself,
Or ask some woman to describe
Such meeting's joy. If he now strays
Into your eyebrows, how long then
Will you there bind him, tell me pray?
I die on you! Shri Krishna, O! friend,
With garland of flowers you should tie,
If you away turn from him thus,
Your passion's fury will not die!
Beat it to death with lotuses!
How long will you so laugh always,
And with your love explain?
Now with your tongue that message say
Which in your heart so long has lain!' (Bahadur 1990: 200).[7]

Continuing the conversation, she then goes on to talk to the *nāyaka*. She acts as the *nāyikā*'*s* confidante during a separation, lamenting that the *nāyaka* should do what will please her.

‘Why give her sorrow—she who means
Much to you—for whom sad you keep,
Oh! Krishna! Without who, nothing seems
Good to you? Do what her will please.
Blest are you that she loves you so,
What will you get by making fun
Of her? If anger in her grows,
Or else offended she becomes,
You should make haste her to appease,
And beg forgiveness of her: think!
If a glass of milk hot should be
Would you not cool it, ere you drink?’

The *duti* turns into a confidante as she urges the shy, unsure, probably younger *nāyikā* to confide in her. It is after ascertaining her feelings that she conveys them to the *nāyaka*, adding some words of love, some sarcasm, some worldly knowledge in her message. All this turns the *sakhi* into more than just a medium as she conducts the conversation on her own account, although most of the time conveying the *nāyikā*’s message. She almost becomes the voice of the poet, who is the reason *sṛṇgāra’s sanyoga* (love in union) can be conjured up.

As we dwell further on *rīti* poetry, we get to read extremely innovative ways in which the *sakhi* is made to convey *sakhi*’s *virah* (separation) to the *nāyaka*. In fact, artful conversation is one of the desired characteristics of the *duti* because she has to bring the lovers together. In the case of the *nāyaka* and *nāyikā* only being known to each other, the *sakhi* could be instrumental in describing the beauty of the *nāyikā* to the *nāyaka*. Now, this is where the poets often indulge in the *nakh-shikh* description of the *nāyika*, which is one of the essential features of both Sanskrit classical literature as well as *rīti kavya*. Kesavdāsa makes the *sakhi* describe the *nāyikā*, or here, Radha, to Krishna, as such unparalleled beauty that her creator lord Brahma too was enamoured. Not only is she appealing to all the senses, but the usual comparison of the female form with nature is invoked.

‘Brahma as lotus flowers has made
Her eyes; her jewelled teeth to wit,
Are as seeds of pomegranate,
And as the bimba fruit, her red lips.
Her laughter rich, he did create

As nectar; as Triveni flows
He did that woman's tresses braid—
That maiden with a voice mellow
As cuckoo's—as a hair her waist!
Her breasts delicious he did form
As twin fruit of the wishing tree!
And poor Brahma did then become
Enamoured of her! Ne'er did see
You, oh! Gopala, my bosom friend's
Whole body; as hue of gold
Is that fair woman, and a scent
Pleasing and sweet from her does flow' (Bahadur 1990: 209–10).

Keeping in mind the gendered segregation of elite, and upper-class (also corresponding castes) women, the only way the *nāyikā* could be seen was through the words of the *sakhi*, who made her available for the male gaze through the poet's writing. As a woman who worked outside her home, the *sakhi* was essential for carrying the message of love, and when the time came, the best person to advise the *nāyikā* about rendezvous sites, or better, accompany her as she goes to meet the lover. Here we have another dramatically portrayed theme in regional schools of painting, where the *sakhi* accompanies the *nāyikā* to such a meeting. The clandestine romance, painted under dark clouds with flashes of lightening, and dense forests, is set to clearly take place outside the permitted parameters of household. One gets the hint of *abhisārika nāyika*—the one who dares to go and meet her lover in the dark, unlike other classifications of the *nāyikā* (married or unmarried) who are in different stages of waiting for the *nāyaka*. In these lines of Bihari, the *sakhi* very cleverly suggests a meeting place, as well as praises the beauty of the *nāyikā*:

सघन कुञ्ज, घन घन- तिमीरू, अधिक अँधेरी राति,
तउ न दुरिहै, स्याम, वह दीपसिखा सी जाति.[8]
(Hey dark lord, it is true that the forest is dense, and the night is dark, making it suitable to meet secretly. But the *nāyikā* as bright as the flame of a burning lamp, won't be hidden as she goes there to meet you.)

Vidyapati's *sakhi* too imparts worldly wisdom to the *nāyika*, persuading her to go to the lover's side.

'Enough! and cast the trouble from your heart.

Be not afraid, go to your lover's side:
Have done with obstinacy, for I tell you
Never can be joy without its pain.

But half a grain of grief, and then a life of gladness
Why are you so averse to this, my girl?
Just for a moment shut your eyes,
As a sick man drinks his draught.

Go, Beauty, go, and play loves game,
Vidyāpati prays for your consent (Thakura 1915: XLVII).'

After the initial meeting, the task of carrying on the liaison and conveying the messages of lovers in separation is possibly the most classic role of a *sakhi*. It is an extremely theatrical and visually appealing one too. It is here that we get a glimpse of *nāyikā-bheda*, or how the heroine reacts to various kinds and stages of relationships. Taking on the role of messenger, in one of the couplets of Bihari's *Satsai*, the *sakh*i, in the role of messenger, explains to Hari, Krishna, or the *nāyaka*, the heart-rending condition of the *nāyikā.*

कहा कहौं वाकी दसा, हरी प्राननु के ईस.
बिरह- ज्वाल जरीबो लखैं मरिबौ भई असीस[9]
(Oh Hari, how do I describe her condition to you. So bad it is to see her burn in the flames of your separation, that wishing her death would be a blessing for her.)

Bihari's verse is written as a compilation of *doha* (couplets), interconnected but without an overarching narrative. Therefore, his *Satsai* has a host of literary aspects put together. Bihari, and other contemporary poets, were writing under the patronage of local landed chiefs who had acquired the status of regional Kings, and probably competed for it too. Hence, while each of them kept certain literary aesthetics, they also tended to develop their own style of writing. Interestingly, the ideas, plots and basic aesthetic remain the same. They employed various ways to put their individuality across in their writing. Ghananand's (c. 1700–1757) *sakhi* elaborates the sorrowful *nāyikā* in his lyrical poem. He portrayed a private emotion of *viraha* in a public court, using verbal as well as extremely physical imagery,

Piri pari deh, chhini rajti saneh-bhini
Kini hai anang ang rang-bori si.

Nain pichkari jyaum chalyaui karaim din rain,
Bagraye barani phirati jhakjhori si.
Kaham laum bakhanaum Ghananamd duheli dasa,
Phagmai bhai jan pyare vah bhori si,
Tihare nihare bin pranani karati hora,
Birah amgarani magari hiya hori si.

(The love affected body of the girl in separation
frail, and yellow with paleness
looks graceful,
as though Kamadeva
had drenched her every limb
with coloured water.
Her eyes seem to be syringes
From which gush tears,
Night and day.
She wanders with her hair dishevelled,
As if disarranged
In a scuffle
While playing Holi.
Says Ghananand, how should I relate
All her distress?
O lover, this innocent girl
By parting from you has become
Like a Holi player;
And not seeing you,
She has lighted the fire of Holi in her heart,
A fire which parches her soul
As green gram parched
In the roasting (Bahadur 1977: 118–19).

The pivotal role played by the *sakhi* often added to the *nāyika's* anxiety; an anxiety about the possible proximity between the *nāyaka* and her. The poets warn their readers about a certain kind of *sakhi* who falls in love with the *nāyaka* as she ferries the *nāyikā*'*s* lovelorn messages to him. Such anxieties had been mentioned by Vātsyāyana as well, where one kind of go-between ends up acting on her own. The *Rasikapriya* of Kesavdāsa makes the *sakhi* confess, where she justifies her closeness to the *nāyaka* which developed as she tried to turn Krishna's mind towards Radha (Bahadur 1990: 213). These are very interesting ways of blurring the identities of the *nāyikā* and the *sakhi*, where the *sakhi* could transform into the *nāyikā* however temporarily. It turns the *nāyaka*, or Krishna, into an allegory of the universally

alluring *bhāva* (emotion) of love. The *nāyaka* thus transforms into the ultimate spiritual lover—Krishna—who is hard to resist. However, our *nāyikā* expresses anger at the *sakhi* after witnessing tell-tale signs, which is dramatically presented in Bihari's writing,

नटि न, सीस साबित भाई लूटी सुखुनु की मोट,
चुप करि ए चारि करति सारी-परी सलोट.[10]
(There is no need to deny it, it's proven you are the one who has taken away my happiness. Now you keep quiet, the creases/folds in your clothes have quietly told me everything.)

In the couplet just before this one, Bihari suggests mockingly in the *duti*'*s* voice, that *nāyikā* just utilises the services of *duti*, because without the *duti* there is no other way to achieve love. Right after establishing love, just as a cast (Bihari uses the Persian word *Kalbut*) is separated from the main structure which can now stand on its own, the *duti* should be too:

कालबूत दूती बिना जुरै न और उपाई.
फिरि ताकैं टारें बनै पाकें प्रेम - लदाइ.[11]
(An arch
cannot be built
without a substructure
for support
till it's strong enough
to stand on its own,
so love cannot germinate without a go-between,
but when it has taken root she's no longer needed.)

Any semblance of emotionally intimate conversation that takes place in the entire genre of *rīti* poetry is only between the *sakhi* or *duti* and the *nāyikā*. *Rīti kāvya* employs the feminine voice for expressions of love, announcements and pronouncements, which is the charge made against it by modern day scholars. *Rīti* poetry does touch upon *vir* (bravery) *rasa*, for it was being patronised by the local landed chieftains and Kings in their own regions as well as by the Mughal nobility and kings. The idea of a s*akhi* as ultimately loyal to her *nāyika* also seems like a befitting idiom of the political culture of those times. It adapts neatly into the centre–periphery political dynamics of the milieu, where the patrimonial–bureaucratic Mughal empire demanded loyalty and allegiance from their officials by turning them into

household dependents. The language of the literature as well as political discourse considered the usage of household categories while explaining power. It naturally spilled over to the vernacular literary traditions, as it increasingly found patronage and audience in the Mughal court.

In almost all the treatises on *rasa, nāyikā-bheda, śrngara*, and so on, we find the roles and terms, *duti* and *sakhi,* used interchangeably and their roles often merged together. However, in the concluding verses of the chapter on the act of the *sakhi* or bosom friends in *Rasikapriya,* Kesavdāsa makes the desperate *nāyika* speak to her *sakhi,* the friend. Differentiating between the two, *nāyika* shares her secret with *sakhi,* as opposite to other women who act as *duti,* but are unable to bring her together with Krishna. She recounts the problem with women of each profession acting as *duti*, who would often fall in love with Krishna, and goes on to make an emotional appeal to the *sakhi,*

'The maid-servant is as midnight
Elusive, the nurse as blaze dwells,
With grief's fire are slaves alight!
Pierced with the nayaka's love themselves
Are the gardener's and barber's wives,
And betel-leaf seller – oh! My friend
You are my only hope! Unite
Me with Shri Krisna, or I will end
My life, and you'll see me no more!
My heart's secret to you I've told.'

VIII. 'हे सखि!' – Her Narrative

The *sakhi* mostly remains a desexualised character in *rīti* verses, despite her obvious expertise in matters of love, but is also eroticised in later regional paintings. The physical proximity between the *nāyika* and *sakhi*, the sensual visuals of applying make-up, or *ubtan*, or holding a mirror to the *nāyika*, often have aesthetic homoerotic connotations in the regional paintings. The verses too talk about the *sakhi* comforting the *nāyika*, or outlining her physical beauty, but most of the time these remain restricted to, and constructed by, the male gaze. The only exceptions where the *sakhi* appears as a sexual being are anxieties of her closeness to the *nāyaka*. This happens when the *sakhi* has to face a jealous *nāyika* for her access to the *nāyaka* as well as the public space. It is often interpreted as a devotional

metaphor due to historical proximity to the preceding bhakti literary era, where the devotee aspires to transcend these worldly barriers to unite with the lord, juxtaposing the language of passion and spirituality. The *nāyaka*, turned into Krishna, could easily represent an adulterous or other-worldly lover to the *nāyika*, but his charm was not lost on the *sakhi* either, despite the fact that she was central only to the creation of a *bhāva* and not act upon it herself.

Such selfless, and illicit love becomes an ideal for the lord (for *Vaishnavas* and *Vallabhacharins*), as opposed to married love, which functions according to the obligations on both partners. The way sacred uses the *śṛṇgāra* to convey devotion and love, the sensual, *rīti kāvya* too borrows Radha–Krishna as metaphors for *nāyika* and *nāyaka*. Even the *sakhi* finds a place in the devotional–erotic combination, which does not seem to be a dichotomy in Sanskrit and vernacular cultural aesthetic. In his translation of Ghananand's love songs, K.P. Bahadur mentions *sakhi bhāva* in the manner of a female friend, which was one of the ways in which devotees of the bhakti cult worshipped god. It means, he goes on, worshipping god, considering him to be one's friend among other ways (1977). The way god leads one to the ultimate aim of salvation, the *sakhi* too leads the *nāyika* to Krishna. The language of desire, of both erotic and devotional verses, required the services of a *sakhi* or a *duti* to make sure that the devotee and the *nāyika* walk the difficult path to their ultimate goal—Krishna.

As we go on to trace *sakhi* in the courtly and textual realm of early modern *rīti* poetry, she appears to be an integral part of the private and elite world. For the most time, she exists as a separate, heterogeneous category, with the possibility of stepping up to be *nāyika* herself. The temporarily blurred identities of *sakhi* and *nāyika*, by way of their love for the *nāyaka*, makes the *nāyaka*, Krishna or the patron King, extremely crucial to the entire genre of *rīti* poetry than has been hitherto explored. Subsequently, the complexities of the *sakhi*'*s* role, and her work uncovered through her literary voice, help us to understand her layered relationship with the *nāyika*, just as domestic service bonds do. The connotations of the *sakhi*'*s* caste and class identity, which are spelled out in the profession she belonged to, give her more freedom, visibility, agency and verbal articulation than the idealised *nāyika*. The *sakhi* gets to establish the *nāyika* by directing the spectator's gaze to the *nāyika*'s body to the largely male audience of *riti* poetry, creating the *bhāva* of *rati* (passion) and hence, *śṛṇgāra* here. Recited in the court, to the King and courtiers, the *sakhi*'*s* voice also spells out the valour and bravery of the *nāyaka* time and again. Addressing the male audience, the interesting way in which *vir*

rasa and *śṛṇgāra rasa* converge makes for an interesting combination of love and might in a regional court competing within the Mughal political framework.

IX. To Summarise

The *sakhi*'*s* role in the realm of a political culture that used the language of loyalty and service together makes it an interesting read. It can be argued that her work was certainly gendered, with a definite class and caste dimension. In early India, the public space was not a bourgeois concept, but defined by caste, gender and class. The physical restrictions and patriarchal control over the movements of upper caste elite women mostly confined her to the seclusion of home. The *sakhi*, as the voice of *nāyaka* or *nāyika*, would then not only be crucial but probably the only way the literary *rasa* of *śṛṇgāra* could be imagined. In doing so, she not only procures love, but also services, and gives voice to the *nāyika* while maintaining her role as the *kalbut* (cast) on which *śṛṇgāra* is metaphorically constructed.

Coming back to the *sakhi*, Ghananand's *nayika* lovingly asks her about the whereabouts of her fickle lover, and asks her to follow him. The *sakhi* has just brought his letter to her, and the *nayika* asks her if he is aware of her sorrow in separation (Bahadur 1977: 84-85). Vidyapati's *sakhi* imparts worldly wisdom to the *nayika*, persuading her to go to the lover's side, something only the boldest *nayika*—the *abhisarika*—does. She is the one who goes out to meet her lover in the dark.

Notes

[1] Prathama Milna, XXXIII.

[2] For an elaborate discussion on the interface of Mughal political order and the princely state of Orchha (where Keśavdāsa hailed from) in the words of Keśavdāsa, see Busch (2005).

[3] See the Introduction in W.G. Archer (1987).

[4] For more details, see Chandola (1982).

[5] For a detailed study of the phenomenal rise of Persian literary culture, especially during the 16th century, see Alam (1998).

[6] प. शशिमोहन बहल, बिहारी सतसई, राजा पॉकेट बुक्स, दिल्ली (see Behel 2010: 200). In Bihari's *Satsai*, which he wrote for Jai Singh of Amber in the first half of the 17th century, he mentions the importance of Jai Singh's bravery and authority, and the important role he played in the Balkh Badakshan campaign. In fact, he

almost credits Jai Singh for saving the soldiers even during the Mughal retreat, highlighting it as his personal political victory.

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[8] प. शशिमोहन बहल, बिहारी सतसई (see Behel 2010: 96).

[9] प. शशिमोहन बहल, बिहारी सतसई, राजा पॉकेट बुक्स, दिल्ली (Behel 2010: 50).

[10] प. शशिमोहन बहल, बिहारी सतसई (Behel 2010: 175).

[11] Ibid.: 122.

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