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Hathrasi Rasiya: An Intermediate Song Genre of North India

Peter Manuel

Abstract: *Hathrasi rasiya is a traditional song genre of North India's Braj region, performed by semi-professional members of music clubs (akhārās) and informed by a complex set of prosodic schemes, with secondary melodic aspects. As these schemes involve, however tangentially, a kind of music theory, and the genre is patronized by local elites and enjoyed by connoisseurs, it constitutes a member of the "intermediate sphere" of regional genres that share features of both classical and folk musics. Although currently in a state of decline, Hathrasi rasiya flourished vigorously in the twentieth century. This article surveys its formal features and its place in Braj music culture and in the broader category of North Indian intermediary genres.*

Introduction

In North India there exists a variety of music genres that, though generally categorized as "folk," exhibit considerable sophistication, are animated by a certain sort and degree of explicitly articulated theory, and are to some extent sustained by the patronage of connoisseurs from the local elite. In another publication (Manuel 2015) I have characterized these diverse genres as constituting an "intermediate sphere" exhibiting idiosyncratic sorts of affinities with both classical and vernacular folk musics. One such genre is Hathrasi *rasiya*, also called *akhārā-bāzi rasiya* after the *akhārās*, or clubs, in which its performers organize themselves. Throughout the Braj region southeast of Delhi, Hathrasi *rasiya* flourished vigorously in the twentieth century, especially in the format of musical-poetic duels between two *akhārās*, performed on open-air stages for audiences often numbering more than two thousand. The excellence of an *akhārā* would be judged by the erudition and cleverness of its lyrics—often composed on the spot to respond to the rival *akhārā*—and also by the lead singers' vocal skill and command of a set of complex prosodic-melodic verse types. In this essay I seek to document and offer interpretive perspectives on this genre, which merits study both for its own richness and for the ways it is representative of other intermediary genres elsewhere in the subcontinent.

In 1989–90, when I was conducting fieldwork for my 1993 book *Cassette Culture*, I researched various forms of the Braj folk genre *rasiya* as a case

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study in cassette-based commercialization. While my research focused on the playfully erotic folk-pop style of cassette *rasiyas* that had emerged, I became intrigued by Hathrasi *rasiya*, an elaborated form of the genre named after the town north of Agra that constitutes its epicenter. I undertook a fair amount of research on it, interviewing several leading performers and connoisseurs,¹ attending events, and collecting recordings. Since it was not my primary research focus, I wrote only a few pages about it in two publications (1993, chap. 9; 1994) and expressed the hope that some more-qualified scholar would document this dynamic genre with the rigor and depth it merits before it disappears altogether. Since 25 years have now passed without any such study emerging, I have been inspired to revisit my research materials and share with the interested public whatever I gleaned from my exertions, however incomplete my research was.

Aside from this essay, Hathrasi *rasiya* has almost completely escaped scholarly attention, and as a genre it is scarcely disseminated outside the Braj region in any form. An Indian scholar, Usha Banerjee, wrote several pages on the genre—primarily its poetic aspect—in her informative 1986 dissertation on *rasiya*, but this work, aside from being in Hindi, remains unpublished and unavailable.² In the years around 1990, a few commercial cassettes (including bootleg tapes of live performances) were marketed locally, but these are long gone (except in my own collection), and at present the genre does not appear to be represented either on commercial recordings or on such a forum as YouTube (except for my own recent postings that supplement this article). In this respect its status is quite different from that of the related intermediary art forms of *naṭanki* and *rāslīlā*, which have been the subject of several exemplary scholarly studies (such as Hansen 1992).

In the aforementioned article (Manuel 2015), I proposed the notion of an “intermediate sphere” consisting of traditional Indian music genres that, while typically regional rather than pan-regional, exhibit to some degree features that otherwise distinguish classical music. These latter include a grounding in theory (by which I mean the explicit description of music in terms of formal aspects such as scale degree, mode, and meter), dependence on elite patronage, and a “sophistication” reflected in an elaborate, showy performance style grounded in command of a variety of named subgenres and musical entities. I categorized the constituents of the intermediate sphere into five groups: light-classical music (especially *thumri* and *dādra*), sophisticated professional folk song (of regional hereditary performers such as Rajasthani Manganiyārs), *dhṛūpad*-related devotional genres (such as Braj-region *haveli sangīt*), sophisticated drum traditions (such as Banaras-region *nagāra* playing), and sophisticated prosody-driven genres.

Hathrasi *rasiya* constitutes a prime constituent of the latter category of intermediate-sphere song. On the one hand, it is a regional genre drawing heavily from local folk tunes; its performers are largely innocent of *rāg* and *tāl* theory, and most of its audiences are of the lower classes. On the other hand, its performers cultivate a virtuosic vocal style and deploy a variety of complex prosodic schemes that are properly or conventionally rendered in particular melodic forms; as such, the explicit prosodic theory governing these forms comprises, by extension, a certain sort of music theory, however unrelated to that of Hindustani music. Further, Hathrasi *rasiya*'s public performances are generally sponsored by members of the local elite, who, together with enthusiasts of other social classes, cultivate a sense of connoisseurship about the art form. Lyricists themselves must be steeped in Hindi and Braj-bhāsha classical poetic traditions and mythology. Collectively, these features distinguish the genre from less elaborated forms of folk music and also make it well deserving of scholarly documentation.

***Rasiya* in Braj Music Culture**

The Braj region (or “Braj *mandal*”) comprises the area in which the Braj-bhāsha dialect of the Hindi language group is spoken as the traditional vernacular. The region, and especially the towns of Mathura and Brindavan, are famous throughout India as the legendary abodes of the god Krishna, in his amorous pastoral mode. Pilgrims come from all over the country to visit these and other nearby sites, and accordingly, a stylized version of Braj-bhāsha was cultivated since the sixteenth century throughout North India as the primary language for Krishnaite poetry and the related, ambiguously secular *ritī* verse. Braj culture and music were further historically enriched by proximity to the courts of Gwalior, Agra, and Delhi, such that, for example, forms of Vaishnavite devotional song (what are now called *samāj gāyan* and *havelī sangīt*) evolved as parallel forms to the classical *dhṛūpad* of court and concert hall.

A holistic understanding of Hathrasi *rasiya* should situate it in the context of Braj folk music as a whole and, more specifically, as a particular subgenre of *rasiya*, and, finally, as a sister genre to other local forms of “cultivated” vernacular music, especially as performed in *nauṭanki* theater. Many forms of Braj folk music can be seen as counterparts of genres found throughout North India, including women’s wedding songs (*vivāh gīt*), childbirth songs (*sohar*), seasonal songs (e.g., the rainy-season *sāvan*), work songs, and the like. Devotional music includes miscellaneous *bhajans*, *languriyā* songs to the local goddess Kaila Maiya, and an abundance of Krishnaite songs. Songs of the

vernal Holi season are particularly popular and diverse, given the importance of the playful and mischievous Krishna in that festival.

Rasiya constitutes an important category of Braj folk song, cultivated in a wide variety of styles. The word *rasiya* traditionally means “epicure” and, by extension, Krishna, who is explicitly or implicitly the favored subject of most traditional songs in the genre. A few Krishnaite literary *rasiyas*—intended especially to be sung in *rāslilā*—were composed by classical Braj poets such as Chandra Sakhi (in the 1790s) and Chacha Brindavan Das (1765–1850) (Banerjee 1986). In modern times, traditional *rasiya* is most quintessentially thought of as a Holi-season folk song, sung to one of a set of traditional stock tunes, typically portraying the amorous dalliances of Krishna with the peasant girls of Brindavan, and especially with Radha, his favorite consort. During Holi, *rasiyas* are performed in diverse local forms by villagers, professional entertainers, and participants in temple song sessions (including *samāj gāyan*) and also in *rāslilā*. *Rāslilā* is a Holi-season “intermediate” theater form of Brindavan and Mathura, rendered by hereditary specialists (*rās-dhārīs*), whose art also includes *kathak*-like dance and light-classical song forms such as Holi sung in *rāg Kāfi*. *Rasiya* singers often perform on local All India Radio in Mathura and elsewhere, usually with *sārangi* rather than harmonium accompaniment. The cassette boom of the 1980s promoted a largely new form of *rasiya*, typically featuring a solo (usually male) vocalist singing saucy (*masāledar*, “spicy”) verses set to traditional tunes or similar newly composed ones. In these playfully titillating—and often controversially lewd—songs, the archetypal personae of the annoying but charming Krishna and the ambivalent Radha or village lass conflate with the traditionally flirtatious duo of the young man (*devar*, *jijā*) and his elder brother’s wife (*bhābhī*, *sālī*), or for that matter, any libidinous man and the young peasant woman he woos (Manuel 1993, chap. 9; 1994). Such themes are entirely traditional but have constituted a disproportionately large percentage of commercial *rasiyas*. Around 2000, the advent of VCDs (and a few years later, DVDs) allowed the addition of a visual element—typically, a couple dancing and cavorting in the countryside (see Manuel 2014). *Rasiya* and the related genre of *languriyā*, aside from their traditional forms, constitute the main genres of Braj commercial folk-pop music (see Manuel 1993, chap. 9; 2014). Hathrasi *rasiya* has evolved as a particularly elaborate form within the broader category of Braj *rasiya*.

The Emergence of Hathrasi *Rasiya*

The origins of Hathrasi *rasiya*, like those of other regional vernacular musics, are relatively obscure. On a general level, they may cohere to those of counterparts found elsewhere in the subcontinent. In many parts of North India, am-

ateur singing enthusiasts (usually men) gather regularly at a temple or some other venue to perform, for their own entertainment, some kind of local folk song, in a spirit of camaraderie, collective fun, and perhaps religious devotion, typically with *dholak* (barrel drum) and harmonium accompaniment. In Banaras and the Bhojpuri region, for example, these genres include the *kīrtan* (*bhajan*) groups documented by Slawek (1986), the Ramayan groups studied by Lutgendorf (1991), and the singers of vernal *chowtāl* (*cautāl*), which also flourishes in the Indo-Caribbean diaspora (Manuel 2009). In some cases, as such groups proliferate, a spirit of friendly competition may arise, leading members to cultivate greater lyric variety and a more elaborate performance style, which may accordingly come to be animated by an idiosyncratic form of musical and prosodic theory that may be wholly independent of that of Hindustani music. In certain of these genres, the competitive dimension may be formalized through public musical-poetic duels (usually called *dangal*), performed for large audiences, some of whose members cultivate a kind of vernacular connoisseurship.

Hathrasi *rasiya* may have evolved along these general lines, while drawing eclectically from local folk song, the tradition of classical Braj-bhāsha poetry, and extant intermediary genres such as *naṭanki* theater. While one theory claims that its roots lie in the town of Deeg (west of Agra), oral tradition more commonly attributes its origin to four friends—Lallu, Bhajna, Nattha, and Chiranji—who in the 1870s visited Bharatpur (near Deeg) for a festival (*melā*), where they had occasion to enjoy and familiarize themselves with local *rasiya* singing.³ Returning to Hathras, they formed two *akhārās* (Lallu-Bhajna and Takia) in which they and other enthusiasts cultivated this genre, which went on to acquire its own distinctive form and, from the 1890s, inspired the creation of other *rasiya akhārās*, which proliferated over the decades.

In forming these *akhārās*, the singers were able to draw on various customs and entities. One sort of resource was the literary circles devoted to the cultivation and appreciation of Sanskrit and classical Braj-bhāsha poetry, in which field Hathras enjoyed some prominence; before the advent of *rasiya akhārās*, *rasiya* was, on the whole, a simple folk-song type that had no particular presence in these literary circles. Perhaps more directly important were other sorts of extant *akhārās*, especially those devoted to wrestling (*kushti*), *jhūlnā* folk song, *lāvni* (or *khyāl*, not to be confused with its classical namesake), and a folk theater form called “Turrā-Kalagī.” Presentations of *jhūlnā*, *lāvni*, and Turrā-Kalagī all most characteristically took the form of an agonistic duel between rival *akhārās* (see Hansen 1992, 65–70). The *rasiya akhārās* were also able to enrich their art by borrowing omnivorously from various local musics. Aside from *lāvni* and *jhūlnā*, these included traditional regional *rasiya* tunes, assorted melodies of neighboring towns and regions, and the

song forms used in the local version of music-and-dance theater, called *swāng* or *naṭanki*. Hathras, indeed, together with Kanpur, was one of the two primary centers of *swāng/naṭanki*, which evolved more or less contemporaneously with Hathrasi *rasiya*,⁴ and which came to flourish throughout the Hindi belt in close connection to regional counterparts, notably Rajasthani *khyāl*, Haryanvi *sāng*, the Agra-region *bhagat*, and to some extent, *rāslīla* (see Hansen 1992, chaps. 2, 3).

In the early 1900s the *lavnī*, *jhūlna*, Turrā-Kalagī, and wrestling *akhārās* declined, and the *rasiya akhārās* spread, in some cases evolving out of those same groups (Banerjee 1986). Although Hathras (population ca. 170,000) is in some respects an undistinguished “mofussil” provincial town, it features a number of public and private gardens in which citizens are fond of relaxing and congregating. It became the custom for culturally inclined members of the local elite to sponsor *rasiya dangals* in these gardens, especially in the season stretching from the springtime Holi festival through the Chāṭh festival in October–November (winter being too cold for outdoor gatherings). Many members of the gentry also supported the *akhārās* in other ways, such as providing some sort of meeting place or clubhouse. By the 1950s *akhārās* had been founded in other towns, such as Aligarh, Mathura, and Agra, and *rasiya dangals* came to constitute lively aspects of cultural life throughout the Braj region. The heyday of Hathrasi *rasiya* appears to have been roughly the middle half of the twentieth century. During this period, according to my informants, some 70 *akhārās* were operant in the region, of varying degrees of professionalism and renown.

During my 1989–90 research, the consensus among my informants was that *akhārā-bāzi rasiya* had declined but was far from dead. Usha Banerjee wrote in 1986, “The dangals were held under elite patronage until 20–25 years ago; however, at present these people do not exhibit the same zeal.” Hoti Sharma, a retired *akhārā* poet of local renown (of the Halvāi Khāna *akhārā*), lamented to me that the genre had declined dramatically because of the spread of mass-mediated entertainment, especially cinema and television. Pappu Sharma, a gifted younger singer (of the Bangali Sankirtan Mandal of Hathras), echoed this sentiment, adding,

There are fewer singers nowadays, and people are caught up in their businesses. They work all day, come home at night, and there’s no time for anything. And inflation affects everything. People used to perform for fame and fun; now they need money, so it has become too expensive. This inflation and demanding of money have ruined the image of *rasiya*.⁵

Others noted that while *rasiya* was still performed, audiences increasingly wanted to hear film tunes rather than traditional melodies. Vijendar Sharma, lead singer and *ustād* of the Kiccho Lāl *akhārā*, told me,

There are fewer *rasiya* programs nowadays, because for three rupees you can go to a film and see everything. When *rasiya* started, there wasn't any cinema, and even after cinema came, *rasiya* continued to be popular, because *akhārās* always made it fresh. But now people are less interested in traditional music. *Sāngit* [*swāng*] is also declining for the same reason. That's why we use film tunes alongside traditional tunes, to keep people happy so that they'll stay all night.

At the same time, these singers insisted the genre remained vital, in however reduced a capacity. Vijendar noted, "*Rasiya* will still persist in one form or another; our *akhārā* is quite busy, and we have several young members." Another singer told me, "It may be declining, but tonight there are at least ten programs happening, in different towns." Several *akhārās* were still active in 1990, including the Lallū Bhajna, Halvāi Khāna, Chhitar Shrivān, Kālī Pāltan, Vipra, Tika Ghāsi, Bairag Lāl, Kiccho Lāl, and Ghanda Lakshman. One of the *dangals* I attended that year, in Brindavan, attracted an audience of at least two thousand people. At present, while large *dangals* are still held, knowledgeable informants assert that the genre is slowly expiring. One Gyanprakash, a scion of the Bedhadak *akhārā* (and a current Delhi-based advocate), told me,

Earlier during my grandfather's time and in *rasiyas* organized by my father, they generally used to recite mythological stories with great sense of Hindi literature, with much poetic questioning and cross-questioning over mythological texts. This has sharply declined. Vulgar cheap poems/ballads are taking over without any poetic theme and literature.⁶

Rasiya Akhārās

The *rasiya akhārās*, like those devoted to wrestling and other pursuits, are voluntary social organizations. *Rasiya akhārā-bāzis* (*akhārā* members) proudly note that they are open to people of all castes and religions; the vast majority, however, are Hindus. *Akhārā-bāzis* are not members of hereditary musician castes. As musicians, they might be informally spoken of as "*Saraswati bhakts*," that is, devotees of that patron goddess of the arts, though they might also be seen as Krishna *bhakts* because of *rasiya*'s traditional association with that deity. Aside from such sectarian inclusiveness, the *akhārās* are strictly for men, which, among other things, allows the singers and poets to indulge in a degree of ribaldry, especially in the form of double-entendre (*do-arth*) verses. However, as Usha Banerjee wryly pointed out to me, "In the *akhārās* only men are allowed, but they all become women." Banerjee was referring to the fact that Krishna *bhakti* (devotion to Krishna) is conceived, voiced, and enacted from the female persona, which would be manifest in any amorous or Krishnaite devotional song, and especially in such dancing as might accompany it. (For a fine example of this phenomenon, one can see my YouTube

posting “Hathrasi *rasiya*,” in which the bald and homely-looking singer Vidha Babu dances, with exquisite grace, the part of a village lass.⁷) To some extent, the stylistic difference between Hathrasi *rasiya* and less cultivated forms of the art parallels that of other genres worldwide, which are performed in distinct styles by men and women; the male styles are typically showy and extravagant, emphasizing solo bravura display, often in free rhythm, as opposed to female styles placing more emphasis on straightforward collective singing (see, e.g., Sugarman 1989).

The *akhārās*—like *bhajan* and *cautāl* clubs (called *gol* or *mandal*)—have formalized structures with personnel holding specific roles and titles. The most important figure is the *ustād*, who must know how to extemporize verse and who should be erudite in mythology, history, and prosody. The *ustād* is elected by the members and is installed in a ceremony in which he is given a special turban. The *khalifa* is the chief administrator, who organizes programs, deals with patrons, and performs other functions. While the *ustād* may compose poetry (at his leisure or during a *dangal*), the *akhārā* also has a designated poet, or *kavi*, who assists in this capacity. Generally, the verses are sung by a lead singer, though this role may overlap with that of the *ustād*. The vocalist must have a strong voice, especially in the upper octave where most of the singing takes place, enabling him to be heard in contexts where amplification is not available. Most rank-and-file *akhārā-bāzīs* are chorus members, singing refrain lines and completing the lead singer’s verses by shouting out the final word. Often an *akhārā* will feature a *janāna* (from Urdu, *zanāna*) or female impersonator, who adds an element of visual entertainment by dancing onstage. Finally, accompaniment is provided by instrumentalists, who may or may not be *akhārā* members and who play harmonium, *dholak*, *nagāra*, or *tassa* (*tāsa*, *tāsha*), and perhaps clarinet.

The *akhārās* generally charge fees for their performances, but I was told that only the core members of the top *akhārās* (such as Vijendar Sharma) were able to make a living solely through performing. All the *akhārā-bāzīs* I met appeared to be working class or perhaps shopkeepers; although several were clearly well educated in Hindi, none spoke English.⁸ Aside from their musical focus, the *akhārās* constitute social clubs of a sort, with a place where members may relax and socialize. On two occasions in my research, having ascertained the whereabouts of some singer, I showed up unannounced at his place of business (a fabric store, or a milk-vending kiosk), and shortly after I had indicated my interest, a cohort of neighborhood *akhārā-bāzīs* mysteriously materialized and treated me to a delightful song session.

Between the 1960s and the 1990s the *akhārās* published many dozens of chapbooks of the favorite poems of their *ustāds*; these cheap pamphlets could be used especially by *akhārā* members themselves, when they perform at

Figure 1. A chapbook of *rasiya* texts, “*Rasiya Dangal Victory*.”

events other than *dangals*, in which they might draw from their extant repertoire. (Figure 1 shows a cover from such a book, “*Rasiya Dangal Victory*,” from the Kiccho Lāl *akhārā*.) Some verses enjoyed more than ephemeral renown among enthusiasts; a few informants fondly recalled a verse of Hoti Sharma, popular during the fervor of the Independence movement:

Sitī dairai āzādī terī rel, musāfir jāmeñ baiṭh calo.

The freedom train’s whistle is blowing; all aboard, travelers!

During the period of my fieldwork, coinciding with the peak of the cassette boom, I found about a dozen commercial cassettes of Hathrasi *rasiya*. A few of these were live recordings of *dangals*; a few others featured only a solo singer, such as those of Vidha Babu, who accordingly spoke dismissively of them;

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perhaps the best, in terms of musical quality, was that of Pappu Sharma, an excerpt of which I have posted on the YouTube site supplementing this article.

The Dangal

The *akhārās* may perform at different sorts of events. An individual *akhārā* might be contracted for a wedding, religious ceremony, political rally, government function, or some other event. In such contexts the *akhārā* performs songs appropriate to that occasion, traditional items, or verses previously composed by their own poets. However, the quintessential performance format is the *dangal* (which rhymes with “jungle”) or duel.

The *dangal* is generally sponsored by a wealthy patron, who contracts the two (or occasionally more) *akhārās* by sending them a peon bearing formal invitations and token gifts of cardamom. A *dangal* I attended in Brindavan in March 1990 was fairly typical. In a spacious plaza near the bus station, a stage had been erected and adorned with canopies, banners, and flags, and an amplification system was set up. A crowd of around two thousand people had gathered. Most were men, but in one area there were several dozen women, who were evidently able to free themselves from domestic duties. The two *akhārā* teams (Bairag Lal and Chandu Lala) sat on opposite sides of the platform. After an introduction by an emcee and a prefatory tune played by the instrumentalists, one of the *akhārās* commenced its portion, with two lead singers standing at a mike and narrating, in song, some episode of Krishnaite lore. A poet hovered nearby and occasionally prompted verses in the singer’s ear. The chorus, with instrumental accompaniment, sang refrain lines. A *janāna* was also onstage, sometimes dancing a few steps, but mostly standing about, occasionally in front of the singers. The latter projected well and sang with conviction, though sometimes, to my ear, a bit out of tune. On occasion, a singer clambered through the audience to accept a cash tip (*nazrāna*) proffered by some enthusiast, perhaps singing a few lines and flourishing the rupee notes as he did so. After 40 minutes or so, the other *akhārā* took over and proceeded in similar fashion for a similar period, after which there was a short break for audience members to chat and purchase refreshments. Then another set commenced, with the *akhārā* who sang last now starting off, and the event proceeded for several more hours.

The singing in fact follows a conventional format. By choosing a random number, one of the *akhārās* is selected to begin. This *akhārā* then commences by insulting the other *akhārā*, in song, and then, over the course of perhaps half an hour, presents a narrative that ends with some question or point of view to which the other group must respond. The first *akhārā* might sing in favor of one political party or make a particular sociopolitical argument, to

which the other *akhārā* has to respond by adopting the contrary side. As one singer told me, “If they sing for Congress Party, we sing for Janta Party, and if they sing for Janta, we do the opposite.” Alternately, some esoteric mythological riddle will be posed; I was told of an instance when an *akhārā*, stymied by one such challenge in the middle of the night, sent one of its members to bang on the door of some erudite local pandit to learn the answer. The singing generally commences in the prosodic-melodic format called *chand* and then proceeds to a specific traditional *rasiya* format, such as *caukariya* or *ṭhaḍḍā*. The *akhārā*’s presentation concludes with an interlude of light entertainment in the form of a *cīz* (lit., thing or tune), meaning a film tune to which new verses have been set. The rival *akhārā* then takes the stage, with the poet and/or *ustād* responding to the first team by extemporizing verses, using the same prosodic-melodic forms as the first *akhārā*. This entire trade-off might last an hour or so; after a break, the two *akhārās* then proceed to new topics, continuing, in some cases, through six or eight “innings,” perhaps extending until dawn.

A commercial (and perhaps bootleg) cassette of part of a live performance, which I obtained in 1990, represents a typical *dangal* exchange. This event pitted against each other the Bairag Lal *akhārā*, led by Vidha Babu, and the Kiccho Lala *akhārā* of Vijendra Sharma. Bairag Lal took the stage first and commenced by insulting Sharma, singing in *chand* format:

Listen, Vijendra, I will make a monkey of you; I will spit in your mouth; I will piss on you; I will have you sold into slavery for a mere hundred rupees; your singing is backward and primitive. . . . [addressing the audience:] He stole from us the *cūri* [bangle] *bhajan*; now watch how I will make him struggle.

Vidha Babu then proceeded to narrate, in *ṭhaḍḍā rasiya* format, a convoluted mythological tale, evidently derived from Turrā-Kalagī tradition, involving a missing girl, her bereft father, a special bangle, a flying horse, a boatman, a sage, and ultimately, a demon who was subdued by a magic mantra. He concluded, “When you sang this tale, you left out this part; now I challenge you to explain; who used the mantra, and what exactly was it?”

The *akhārā* then concluded its set by singing a film parody. Specifically, the singer announced the song—“Ajā tujhko pukāre merā pyār,” from the 1968 film *Neel Kamal*—sang the opening lines of the original, and then sang a set of new lyrics. These were unremarkable verses in the same romantic vein but used phrases—such as *gaune wāli rāt* (wedding night)—more typical of local folk song.

Sharma’s Kiccho Lala *akhārā* then took the stage, commencing with obligatory sung abuse (“If you mess with me, I’ll kick you in the gut and you’ll die right there and then. . . . I am worth a hundred thousand rupees, not a

hundred”). Sharma then challenged Bairag Lal’s claim to “own” the tale of the bangle and the magic horse, asserting that the song was in fact created by their own former *ustād*. Eventually, extemporizing verses in the same *ṭhaḍḍā rasiya* format, he narrated further episodes from the tale and answered the riddle posed by Bairag Lal. He then announced, “Since they sang a *tukrā* [here, a film-song fragment], we’ll do one too.” He then sang the opening verse of “My Name Is Lakhan” (from *Ram Lakhan*) and proceeded to insert new verses, along these lines: “You are a dull-witted ass; your *langoṭhī* [waist garment] fell open in the middle of the courtyard.”

One can easily imagine the entertainment such a performance offers to its audience. The narration, to be sure, proceeds at a leisurely pace, but the program presents a combination of facetious verbal jousting, traditional mythology, cleverly reworked film songs, spirited singing, and artful spontaneous deployment of a complex set of traditional prosodic-melodic schemes, to whose form we now turn.

Prosodic and Melodic Schemes

Hathrasi *rasiya* is to some extent a text-driven art, in which the song lyrics—whether consisting of abuse or long-winded narrative—are the primary focus of aesthetic interest. At the same time, a singer is expected to render these lyrics with considerable virtuoso flair and musicality. Vocalists sing at full volume, almost shouting, and generally in the upper octave, in a style clearly honed for large, open-air venues before the advent of amplification. To be sure, the singing does not exhibit the richness of North Indian classical music; the modal resources are limited (generally conforming to “major”-sounding Bilāval or Khamāj *ṭhāṭs*, or tunes reminiscent of *rāg Pīlu*), and singers do not exhibit a vast palette of melodic ideas, nor do they cultivate the execution of fast virtuoso *tāns*. However, many of the lead singers—including those presented in the Internet posts supplementing this essay—are gifted performers who sing with great power and expressivity and with impressive command of the numerous melodic schema employed in the genre. In terms of musical skill and style, they could be ranked alongside the better *qawwālī* singers or the Langās and Manganiyārs of Rajasthan.

Most of the named patterns used in Hathrasi *rasiya* are at once prosodic and melodic entities, constituting specific verse forms sung in particular associated melodies. Singers and poets must be adept in both familiar and obscure patterns, especially for deployment in a *dangal*, where one *akhārā* must respond to the other in the same pattern—whether common or esoteric—used by the other.

A few techniques are purely poetic or, more specifically, phonemic in nature. One of these is *bemātrik chand* (meter without *mātras*), in which no long vowels are used (such that the verse would be written in *devnagari* script only in consonants), such as the following:⁹

Har har bhaj mat ḍar mat pal bhar
Chal har khan bas yeh kartab kar

Another technique is *adhar chanda*, in which there are no labial consonants, such that the singer's lips never close:

Gāyengī gīt goria gāne ke sajanī
Kaskegī kasak kaṭhor kahāne kī sajanī

If an *akhārā* deploys such verses, the responding *akhārā* is obliged to answer in the same fashion. Both these techniques are encountered in various other vernacular poetic and song traditions, including nineteenth-century *bandish thumris*.

Aside from such displays of purely rhetorical interest, most of the technical terms and named formal entities pertain to lyrics specifically as sung, that is, with both poetic and musical dimensions. Among basic nomenclature (shared with other Hindi vernacular song forms) is the *ṭek* refrain (cf. *sthāi*), typically of two lines; the subsequent lines are called *kari*, whose even-numbered lines generally feature a rhyme (*tuk*) matching the second *ṭek* line. If the *tuk* rhyme consists of several syllables, it could be called *jhar*. *Milān* is the *tuk* ending of the last *kari* line, which then segues to the *ṭek*.

A basic and potentially confusing term is *chand*. In the general sense, *chand* means “prosodic meter,” and hence, some of the forms covered later, such as *caukaria rasiya* and *ṭhaḍḍā rasiya*, are types of *chand*.¹⁰ However, *chand* is also used in a more specific sense to designate a particular verse form, usually of three and a half lines, and sung to a particular tune, as shown in example 4 and as heard in the Internet postings accompanying this article. Most *dangal rasiya* sets begin with items in this form, preceded by a free-rhythmic *dohā* (a couplet, in the meter by that name). This style of *chand* is an example of an *akhārā-bāzi* invention or borrowing (perhaps from *jhūlnā akhārās*) that is not found in traditional *rasiya*; Hoti Sharma told me that it was introduced by Aligarh singers around the 1940s–50s.

The term *rasiya* is also used in both broad and narrow senses. At a *dangal*, for example, all the music is *rasiya* in the general sense, but that term also designates, more specifically, the section following *chand*, wherein are heard such specific *chands* (i.e., prosodic-melodic forms) as *caukaria*, *ṭhaḍḍā*, *jikrī*, and the like, which are unique to Hathrasi *rasiya*. Thus, a *rasiya* set generally

consists of *chand*, followed by *rasiya*, and concluding with a *cīz*, that is, a film-tune parody.

There are several kinds of Hathrasi *rasiya chand*. Two of the most common are *caukaria* and *ṭhaḍḍā*. *Caukaria* has a 2-line *ṭek*, segueing to a 4-line *kari*, whose last line rhymes with the *ṭek* and thus serves as the *milān*, which returns to the second line of the *ṭek*, as in the following devotional verse:

ṭek: *Rāja sut prānan pyāro*
 Are te jae na phāro
kari: *Santon ne bharmāye piyā, tum tikhchā hare jī*
 Aise bachan āpne dīne, swāmi bin bichāre jī
 Rājpat tum sab de dete, karte anta gujare jī
 (milān:) *Ham sampat tiji ke chali dete, sah lete dukh bhāro*
ṭek: *Are to jae na phāro*

Ṭhaḍḍā rasiya takes a few different forms. In the most common form, the two lines of the *ṭek* need not rhyme; they segue to a 4-line *kari*, whose first three lines rhyme with each other (as *jhar*), and whose final line, the *milān*, rhymes with the second line of the *ṭek*. A *dohā* is inserted before the *milān*, as in the following:

ṭek: *Ab tu dhari ishvar ko dhyān*
 Drisht terī mukti hai jāegī
jhar: *Rahiyo hai sādhu alakh jagāe*
 Dārī ja maiya bhiksha āe
 Chali jab Sītāji harshāe
dohā: *Sitā māta kuṭise, lāi kand phal phūl*
 Jogi jab kahane lagyo, karo no itnī dur
milān: *Bandhī na bhiksha laun māt, teri sab nishphal jaegī*

Ṭhaḍḍā rasiya is shown in example 5 and also heard on the Internet posting. Other forms of *rasiya chand*, with which I will not tire the reader, include *choṭī rangat*, *tukaria*, *dupāhia*, *tikaria*, *jikri*, and *derh tukiya rasiya*. The latter (*rasiya* of one and a half *tuks*) is a simple and flexible form, in which two *ṭek* lines (which may or may not rhyme) segue to a 2-line *kari*, whose second line (the *milān*) is shorter and rhymes with either line of the *ṭek*. Many folk *rasiyas* adhere to this form, including the most familiar Holi-season *rasiya*, “Aj Braj meñ holi hai rasiya,” several renditions of which can be heard on YouTube.

As can be heard on my Internet postings, most songs in *chand* or Hathrasi *rasiya* form proceed by alternating verses sung solo, in free rhythm, without *dholak* accompaniment, with rhythmic sections, in medium-tempo *kaharva*, in which the chorus reiterates the last line of verse, before a cadence brings the section to a halt and the next verse is rendered. The chorus also concludes each of the soloist’s lines by shouting the final rhyming word.

At various points in Hathrasi *rasiya*, and most typically in the *chand* section, the vocalist may insert familiar folk tunes, with either traditional or new lyrics. In particularly common usage are the most familiar traditional folk *rasiya* tunes and other tunes, such as *Kāsganji bahr*, *sāvan* (or *malhār* rainy-season song), *Mevati rasiya* (from the Mev/Meo community to the north of Brindavan), *Rohtaki bahr* (a tune from Rohtak, northwest of Delhi), or one of the two or three standard *languriyā* tunes. In the *akhārā-bāzī* context, these may all be referred to as *Hathrasi bahr*, that is, Hathrasi meter (or here, tune). The term *Hathrasi bahr* thus denotes not a specific tune but rather the general usage of extant folk melodies—especially a few familiar *rasiya* tunes—in Hathrasi *rasiya*. Three of these are shown in examples 1–3.

The forms, styles, and even personnel of Hathrasi *rasiya* have traditionally overlapped with those of its sister art, Hathrasi-style *swāng/nauṭanki*, whose performers are also organized in *akhārās* (located in Hathras or elsewhere). *Swāng* has traditionally availed itself of a wide variety of song forms, from regional folk tunes to stylized, more text-driven versions of *bandish thumri*. *Swāng* vocalists also sing a version of *chand*, which differs slightly from the *akhārā-bāzī rasiya* one. However, the core *swāng* dialogue format is the *dohā-caubolā-daur* sequence, whose three sections are set to those specific prosodic meters and sung to conventional associated tunes in free rhythm. Also common in Hathrasi *swāng* is a melody called *bahr-e-tavīl* (Urdu, lit., weighty meter). These entities are presented in Hansen (1992, chap. 8) and need not be reproduced here. Hathrasi *rasiya* singers are generally familiar with these forms and occasionally sing *bahr-e-tavīl* (as a Hathrasi *bahr*) and a form of *caubolā*.

I have asserted earlier in this article and in another essay (Manuel 2015) that Hathrasi *rasiya* constitutes a sort of “intermediate” genre that exhibits some of the features associated with art musics. Most important in this regard are the manner and extent to which it is informed by a sort of theory, by which I mean the ability of its performers to conceive and explicitly describe some of its formal features in terms of abstract parameters, such as those of mode, meter, and the like. The extent to which such a theory is present constitutes a more significant affinity to art music than such incidental features as the “*ālāp*-like” *dohā* that precedes a metered section or the typically Hindustani vocal ornaments, which are features common in many North Indian vernacular musics. It should be clarified that the sort of theory, however incomplete, that animates Hathrasi *rasiya* is distinctly *not* that of North Indian classical music. For example, none of my numerous informants described melodies in terms of either *sargam/solfège* or *rāg* and *tāl*.¹¹ Rather, *rasiya* theory consists primarily of names of tunes (e.g., *Rohtaki bahr*) and, most important, of prosodic entities, such as syllable counts, components of

verse forms, and especially metrical schemes (such as *caukariā*). These prosodic entities pertain primarily to poetry, but insofar as they are associated with specific or conventional melodies, they can be regarded as constituting, in a secondary or supplementary fashion, a kind of informal music theory. It is this presence of a sort of theory—rather than any specific affinities to Hindustani music or its theory per se—that gives Hathrasi *rasiya* some of the character of an art music. At the same time, however, my intent here is neither to “dignify” Hathrasi *rasiya* nor to exaggerate its quasi-classical status.

Lack of historical data on Braj vernacular culture predating 1900, coupled with my own inability to follow up my 1990 research, prevents me from being able to make any solid attempt to historicize Hathrasi *rasiya*. Nevertheless, I will suggest two historical hypotheses, which might be either contradictory or complementary. One supposition is that there have long been—for centuries or even millennia—music genres in the Braj region (and elsewhere) that have been akin to Hathrasi *rasiya* in constituting cultivated, elaborated versions of regional folk song, patronized by local literati as well as plebeians, in which an entertaining agonistic format inspires an idiosyncratic, quasi-classical sophistication. The contradictory hypothesis is to view Hathrasi *rasiya* (like similar genres elsewhere) as a product of a particular historical moment, conditioned by increased literacy, transportation facilities, regional self-consciousness, and earnest support of local vernacular arts by regional elites. In the late twentieth century, aspects of intensified modernity came to undermine such genres. While my informants cited commercial mass-mediated genres like film music as a menace, I am hesitant to accept such a view, as many live-performance genres—from *qawwālī* to Rajasthani *kathā* renditions—have thrived in tandem with mass-media (especially cassette) dissemination (see Manuel 1993, 177). More important, I suspect, has been a tendency (articulated in one way by Frietag 1987) for regional elites to withdraw patronage from local vernacular events and arts as part of a general polarization of modern Indian culture into three discrete entities: a pan-regional urban cosmopolitan realm, a commercial mass-mediated realm, and a somewhat “residual” folk-traditional realm. This trichotomization is far from complete, however, and intermediate genres like Hathrasi *rasiya* may retain their appeal, adaptability, and vigor, in however reconfigured a niche.

Appendix: Transcriptions

In this section I present schematic transcriptions of three of the most common folk *rasiya* stock tunes and three partial transcriptions of Hathrasi *rasiya* forms. (I have presented a few of these, along with other *rasiya* songs, in Manuel [1994], a publication that, although obscure, is posted on my ac-

Typesetter: "ac" is the beginning of the URL at the top of the next page, so please keep together.

ademia.edu website.) Recorded versions of all of these may be heard, with video presentations of Hindi and English versions of the lyrics, on my YouTube and Vimeo websites, as specified later. The first three tunes, and other *rasiya* stock tunes, are commonly sung with diverse lyrics, which may range from the devotional to the ribald; all verses here are sung by men, adopting the female persona, as is standard in Krishnaite worship, *riti* verse, and Braj genres such as *rasiya* and *languriyā* in general. The standard rhythm, usually provided on *dholak* or *nagāra*, is the basic *kaharva*-type beat ubiquitous in North Indian folk song. (All are transcribed here using C as the tonic note.)

Example 1 presents a sort of quintessential *rasiya* tune, sometimes referred to as “Ghasi Ram’s tarz,” since it was so favored by that mid-twentieth-century singer-composer. The recorded version is from a 1989 commercial cassette by Ram Avtar Sharma and represents the standard style and instrumentation of that idiom. The lyrics are relatively traditional, depicting a wife berating her worthless husband: “One of these days, lover, I’m going to give you such a beating.” The site also presents a video of *akhārā-bāzi* Vidha Babu singing it (with different words) in Hathrasi style at an informal song session.

Example 2 is another familiar traditional tune, here in the commercial cassette style of circa 1989 (sung by one “Prakash”), with an appropriately “titillating” lyric setting that enjoyed prodigious popularity in the 1980s (if not earlier): “The bachelor next door—may lightning strike him!—keeps flashing ten-rupee notes at me.” The lyrics are obviously of modern vintage, but as suggested previously, the theme of the young wife trying to contend with the advances made by the lecherous bachelor next door easily conflates, in however crude a form, with the traditional stock portrayal of Radha, or a Braj cowgirl, protesting (or being obliged to pretend to do so) Krishna’s teasing and flirting. As is usual in such verses, the aesthetic focus and psychological drama center on the woman’s inner conflict, as she is at once annoyed by her suitor, obliged by convention to put him off, but ambivalently desirous, as suggested in the last line, “O sister, I fear that the wall of my own lust may give way.” Both these traditional tunes could be rendered, with appropriate new texts, as forms of *Hathrasi bahr* by an *akhārā*.

The tune of example 3 derives from a film song, “Kisī kā pyār na cūṭe,” in the 1985 film *Ghar Dwar*. This tune became so popular and ubiquitous in commercial and Hathrasi *rasiya* as to acquire, as Usha Banerjee remarked to me, the status of a folk melody, even though its melodic character is quite different from that of traditional *rasiyas*. This particular lyric setting presents the standard folk-song theme of the wife requesting favors and gifts from her husband; here, she asks for sweets and to be taken to the cinema. The source is a commercial cassette by Ram Avtar Sharma.

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The following three examples present Hathrasi *rasiya* forms, as sung by Pradip “Pappu” Sharma of Hathras. Example 4, from an informal session presented for me (with a single backup vocalist), is *chand*, of the standard three and a half *tukiyas*. (I find it easy to recognize *chand* by the melodic phrase, in the metered section, *ga-ga-pa ma—ga—re-sa*, or E E G F, E, D C.) In this example, and the following two, the words shown in brackets are shouted by the chorus to complete the phrase. Example 5, from the same session, is *ṭhaḍḍā rasiya*, whose tune differs slightly from that of *chand*, especially in the scalar descent from the upper tonic in the metered section. The text here narrates an episode in the tale of Raja Harishchandra, a staple of *naṭṭānki/swāṅg*. Example 6, from a commercial cassette by Pappu Sharma, shows *Kāsganji bahr*, with interludes—for example, at 2:10, and shown as example 6b—of the standard local tune of the rainy-season *sāvan*, during which the young bride typically requests her husband to allow her to visit her natal home, as in this text. The original Braj *sāvan* tune resembles a cell of *rāg Pīlu* (C, D-E♭-D, C, B, - C); when it is sung as a *Hathrasi bahr* in the *akhārā* style, in order to allow the singers to project more loudly, it is generally transposed up a fifth and thus comes to resemble what Hindustani musicians would call *Pancam se Pīlu* (*Pīlu* from *Pa*, the fifth degree, i.e., roughly G, A-B♭-A, G, F♯, -, G . . .).

All these transcribed examples are presented as audiovisual files on the YouTube and Vimeo postings supplementing this article. Examples 1–3 are presented as an audio medley (“Braj *rasiya* hits, late 1980s”); for visual entertainment, I have posted a few dozen cassette covers, in all their sublime resplendence. Examples 4–6 are on the same website, with English translations of the lyrics. The sites may be accessed through searching “Hathrasi *rasiya*,” or via my name, or via the following URLs:

“Braj *rasiya* hits, late 1980s”

<https://vimeo.com/103243608>

<http://youtu.be/1OpJkrW0Jh8>

“Hathrasi *rasiya*—chhand”

<http://youtu.be/JIRWgL4gzaM>

<https://vimeo.com/103334663>

“Hathrasi *rasiya*—thadda *rasiya*”

<http://youtu.be/PvMq3LmVNqk>

<https://vimeo.com/103335733>

“Hathrasi *rasiya*—Kāsganji bahr”

<http://youtu.be/s1SHhcWtOP0>

<https://vimeo.com/103334857>

Example 1. *Rasiya* stock tune; text: “Kau din uth gayo mero hāth.” Example 2. *Rasiya* stock tune; text: “Moku das-das dikhāve bahna noṭ.” Example 3. Film tune, with *rasiya* text: “Māruti car.” Example 4. *Chand*.

Example 5. *Ṭhaḍḍā rasiya*. Example 6a. *Kāṣganji bahr*. Example 6b. *Sāvan*.

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Notes

¹ My informants included Pradip “Pappu” Sharma, Vijendar Sharma, Vidha Babu, Chandu Lala, Hoti Sharma, M. H. Zaidi (*akhārā-bāzīs*); Usha Banerjee, Ram Narain Agarwal, Braj Vallabh Misra, Mohan Swarup Bhatiya, Radha Bihari Goswami, Suresh Chaturvedi (folklorists); and Fateh Krishna and Swami Prasad Kalyanji (*rās-dhārīs*). Research took place primarily in Hathras, Aligarh, Mathura, and Brindavan.

² I am extremely grateful to Banerjee and her husband, Shakha Bandopadhyaya, for having a copy of her dissertation laboriously retyped for me (since the original was too heavy to be borne on the moving scanner of Indian photocopy machines extant at

that time). Since pagination on this copy does not correspond to that of the original, I do not give page numbers in citing this work here. Also of use to me was a concise three-page essay in an ephemeral memorial pamphlet (Vikal 1983).

³ In 1939 one R. L. Batra published a booklet, *Bharatpur Folk Song*, containing notations of a few *rasiyas*, which do not, however, bear any particular resemblance to those typical of Hathrasi *rasiya*. I thank Allyn Miner for acquiring this item for me.

⁴ Hathras was the home of the single most renowned author of *swāṅg*, Natharam Gaur Sharma (1874–1943). Since 1932 it has also hosted Sangeet Karyalaya, an important publisher of Indian music literature, including the Hindi versions of V. N. Bhatkhande's works.

⁵ All interviews were conducted in Hindustani.

⁶ E-mail correspondence, January 2015.

⁷ Accessed July 20, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_sldPRnRKrY.

⁸ A unique personage in this respect is Dr. Devendra Sharma, a scholar, *naṭṭāṅki* singer and director, *rasiya* singer, and son of a prominent *naṭṭāṅki* performer. An energetic, articulate, and multitalented individual, Sharma wrote a doctoral dissertation on *naṭṭāṅki* and currently teaches and directs at California State University, Fresno.

⁹ The following verse examples are from Banerjee (1986). Note that while Hathrasi *rasiya* is a distinctively Braj music form, most lyrics therein are closer to standard *khari-boli* Hindi rather than Braj-bhāsha. In singing or reciting verse, inherent “schwa” vowels would be added after consonants, such that, for example, the first line of this example would be rendered *Hara hara bhaja mata ḍara mata pala bhara*.

¹⁰ Poetic *mātras* count need not be followed rigorously in *rasiya chands*; Hoti Sharma told me, “Forget about *mātras*; our verse depends on *laydāri* [rhythm]; if there are too many *mātras*, it can be adjusted in singing.”

¹¹ Indeed, it would have been greatly helpful to me if anyone had been able to do so, by saying, for example, “You see, *Kāsganji bahr* can always be recognized by that phrase there, where it goes re-ga-re-ga-re-ga-ma-pa.” As it was, it took me a great deal of time, and numerous interviews—during which I sorely exasperated some of my unfortunate informants—before I was able to acquire some understanding of how the various *chands* and *bahrs* operate.

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