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# The Feminization of Love and the Indwelling of God: Theological Investigations Across Indic Contexts

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**Abstract:** Our essay is a thematic exploration of the malleability of idioms, imageries, and affectivities of Hindu *bhakti* across the borderlines of certain Indic worldviews. We highlight the theological motif of the feminine-feminised quest of the seeker (*virahiṇī*) for her divine beloved in some Hindu expressions shaped by the paradigmatic scriptural text *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and in some Punjabi Sufi articulations of the transcendent God's innermost presence to the pilgrim self. The leitmotif that the divine reality is the "intimate stranger" who cannot be humanly grasped and who is yet already present in the recesses of the *virahiṇī*'s self is expressed with distinctive inflections both in *bhakti*-based Vedānta and in some Indo-Muslim spiritual universes. This study is also an exploration of some of the common conceptual currencies of devotional subjectivities that cannot be straightforwardly cast into the monolithic moulds of "Hindu" or "Muslim" in pre-modern South Asia. Thus, we highlight the essentially contested nature of the categories of "Hinduism" and "*Indian* Islam" by indicating that they should be regarded as dynamic clusters of constellated concepts whose contours have been often reshaped through concrete socio-historical contestations, borrowings, and adaptations on the fissured lands of al-Hind.

## 1. Introduction

The scholarly literature on Hindu socio-religious systems, produced over the last four decades or so, has directed our attention to the sheer diversity of ways of envisioning and inhabiting the world that have developed within dense networks of Vedic texts, commentarial traditions, and guru-based lineages. With respect to the study of Vedantic exegetical theology, in particular, academic discourses have moved away from monolithic essentializations such as "Hinduism = Advaita"—instead, recent work on Vedānta foregrounds multiple formations of *bhakti*-shaped Vedantic milieus and also highlights the historical crisscrossings between devotional meditation, ritual practice, and Advaitic self-knowledge (*jñāna*). From this perspective, our essay is a contribution to this developing body of literature on Vedantic theological systems and seeks to explore a relatively understudied feature—the conscious cultivation of a feminine persona by the spiritual aspirant on the pathways of devotional love. From another vantage point, we move into even more unexplored conceptual territory by developing a textually-grounded theological conversation across conceptual, experiential, and affective registers of certain Hindu and Indo-Islamic devotional universes. We begin with a sketch of the key motivations that direct our comparative research before going on to discuss the theological theme of feminine-femininised longing in some lyrical lineaments of Punjabi Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) and north Indian devotional (*bhakti*) milieus. We seek to foreground certain key dialectics that suffuse these poetic streams of Indic religiosity (namely, the dialectics of separation and union, hiddenness and presence, life and death, and joy

and sorrow) and that characterize the essence of the spiritual longing as an agonised questing after an intimate but ever-elusive beloved, much like the subjectivity of a woman racked with pain in separation (*virahiṇī*).

## 2. The Centrality of Peripheries

As a result of the Saidian turn in the critical study of religion, it has become increasingly clear that the Indic "East" and the Christian European "West" became densely entangled, across an asymmetrical differential of colonial power, in representing "Hinduism" as one singular formation (Halbfass 1988; King 1999). The social construction of the "Hinduism" that gradually emerged in the Punjab and in Bengal, through various micro-struggles on the ground, was guided by dense intellectual engagements with an array of interlocutors such as Indian Muslims, British colonial administrators, Sanskrit-rooted traditionalists, Anglicised reformists, and others (Inden 1990; Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993). We place Muslims at the top of this list because they constitute, so to speak, the elephant in the room—in the voluminous literature on how some prominent Hindu intellectuals constructed a sense of existential and collective self, across movements such as the Brahmo Samaj (established in 1828) and the Arya Samaj (established in 1875), a significant lacuna is a systematic study of their specifically *intellectual* transactions with Muslim thinkers.

To sketch with broad brush strokes some of these encounters across Bengali social universes, Rammohun Roy (1772–1833) received an education in Arabic and Persian at Patna and became familiar with the Qurʾān, Islamic jurisprudence, and theology (*kalām*), and also the poetry of Rūmī and Ḥāfiẓ (Ghani 2015); Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905) would often quote Ḥāfiẓ's verses (Sastri 1919, p. 148); the extensive prose writings of his son Rabindranath (1861–1941) on the "Hindu-Muslim question" have recently received some analytical discussion (Choudhury 2012); and Girish Chandra Sen (1835–1910), a disciple of the charismatic Keshub Sen (1838–1884), translated the Qurʾān into Bengali (in 1881) and also composed some treatises on Islam (De 1995, p. 24). However, because of various socioeconomic shifts and sociocultural transitions, such as the adverse impact on Muslim peasants of the Permanent Settlement of 1793, the absence of state patronage for madrasas, the abolition in 1837 of Persian as the official language of the courts, the emergence of Hindu groups that began to stridently invoke Vedic templates of the Mother Goddess (*Devī*; *Bhārat Mātā*) towards a cultural nationalism, and so on, some Bengali-speaking Muslims in the mofussil became distanced from Anglicised centres in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Ali 1988; Islam 1969; Mannan 1969). Thus, histories of Bengali literature, often constructed by Hindu intellectuals, could consign texts produced by Muslims to a peripheral cultural layer called "Musalmāni Bāṃlā" or claim that they did not have sufficient literary value (Kaviraj 2003). Moving westward, while the Arya Samaj is often associated with militant attitudes towards Muslims (Thursby 1975), one of its most influential figures, Lala Lajpat Rai (1865–1928), significantly notes in his autobiographical reminiscences that his father studied in a Persian school where the "lofty character" of the Muslim head teacher had "influenced all his pupils and Islamised their outlook". Though he did not formally embrace Islam, at one stage of his life, he recited the *namāz* prayers and observed the *ramaḍān* fast. Rai further informs us that his mother was born to a Sikh family where the people hated Islam, and yet "by an irony of fate [she] was wedded to a man who was a lover of Islam and a friend of Mussalmans, and who renewed every day his threat to turn Muslim" (Nanda 2003, pp. 283–84). Rai, who joined the Arya Samaj in December 1882, concludes this account with these words: "The soul nurtured on Islam in infancy, and beginning adolescence by seeking shelter in the Brahmo Samaj, began to develop a love for the ancient Hindu culture in the company of Guru Datta and Hans Raj" (Nanda 2003, p. 293).

Though Rai's spiritual trajectory—from Islam to ancient India to the Aryas—is somewhat uncommon, it is not entirely idiosyncratic for individuals from his socio-religious milieus, and it highlights two points that are highly significant for our essay. On the one hand, the intellectual formations, the affective structures, and the social subjectivities of many influential figures associated with Hindu modernities were distinctly moulded or modulated by Indo-Islamic traditions. This thin

red strand of South Asian cultural history that stretches from the 1820s to the 1940s remains an untold narrative because of its abrupt scission at Partition and its subsequent engineered elision in postcolonial variations of Hindu religious nationalism. Farina Mir ([Mir 2006](#)) has argued that an examination of the Punjabi *qissā* ("story") literature, which blended Perso-Islamic and local styles, shows that Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims in the late nineteenth century participated in an ethos shaped by the vocabularies and the practices of piety that cut across religiously communalised boundaries. More broadly, in the Perso-Islamic milieus of the late Mughal era, scribes (*munshīs*) were appointed to teach Persian to children of respectable Muslim as well as Hindu families. Moving deeper into the premodern centuries, a significant body of academic literature has highlighted the circulations of material culture, such as coins, dress, and sculptures, across "Hindu" and "Muslim" milieus from the early eight to the early thirteenth centuries ([Flood 2009](#)) and drawn our attention to the writings of particular figures such as Amīr Khusrau, who developed highly sympathetic accounts of the socioreligious dimensions of the people of the subcontinent ([Gabbay 2010](#)); Dārā Shukōh, who tragically tread the borderlines of heterodoxy by boldly declaring that explanations of the Qur'ān are to be found in the *Upaniṣads* and presenting the reference to a "protected book" (*kitāb maknūn*) in the Qur'ān (56: 77–80) as a pointer to the *Upaniṣads* ([Friedmann 1975](#), p. 217); the Rajput prince Sāvant Singh (1699–1764), who wrote voluminous poetry in Braj-bhāṣā with the *nom de plume* Nāgrīdās ("devotee of sophisticated Rādhā") and also wrote poems in Urdu/Rekhta with sonorous Persian words and distinctive imageries ([Pauwels 2012](#)); and so on. From the fourteenth century onwards, the quest for dynamic translational equivalences generated a distinctive genre of Indo-Islamic texts in which Vedantic and yogic categories were hermeneutically re-located on Qur'anic landscapes ([Stewart 2001](#); [Khan 2004](#); [Hatley 2007](#); [Dalmia and Faruqui 2014](#); [Ernst 2016](#); [Irani 2018](#); [d'Hubert 2018](#)). Thus, regarding the first Bengali account of the life of the Prophet, the *Nabīvaṃśa* of Saiyad Sultān (c.1615–1646), Ayesha Irani has argued that its textual layers are constituted by an interweaving of Sufi, Vaiṣṇava, and Nātha Yoga motifs, so that by moving across cosmopolitan Perso-Arabic and Sanskrit and vernacular Bengali registers, we can read the *Nabīvaṃśa* as an "Islamic purāṇa", a song of praise to the Prophet resembling a Hindu *maṅgala-kāvya* or a biography of the Prophet akin to a *carita* of a Hindu figure ([Irani 2016](#), p. 392). The *Nabīvaṃśa* was preceded by the richly symbolic *premākhyān* literature in which some Sufis from Avadh, such as Malik Muhammad Jāyasī (1477–1542), who composed an Avadhi retelling of the narrative of Kṛṣṇa (*Kanhāvat*) ([Pauwels 2013](#)), sought to rework vernacular Hindu-Hindavī idioms into Persian Sufi cosmological systems. While Jāyasī's near contemporary, Mīr Abdul Wāhid Bilgrāmī (d.1569), articulated in his *Haqā'iq-i Hindī* an elaborate array of allegorical readings with Kṛṣṇa as the reality of a human being, the cowherd women (*gopīs*) as angels, the Yamuna and the Ganges as the sea of unity (*wahdat*) and the ocean of gnosis (*ma'rifat*), and the flute of Kṛṣṇa as the production of being out of non-being ([Alam 2012](#), p. 178), around a century later, Hindu poets with Vaiṣṇava names such as Śrī Gopāl and Brindāvan Dās would gather around the Sufi poet Mīrzā Abdul Qādir "Bīdil" (1642–1720) at Delhi, whom they took as their master (*sheikh*) and on whom they produced a memorial literature that followed Persian canons ([Hawley 2015](#), p. 91).

On the other hand, however, it is precisely these Indo-Islamic and *bhakti*-structured milieus of premodern South Asia that are sometimes romanticised in an ahistorical manner as an idyllic enclave of "Hindu-Muslim" amity. Nationalist historians tended to project these milieus as the panacea for a land scarred by communal conflicts, thereby constructing the "good Muslim versus bad Muslim" binary that continues to shape various socio-political discourses in India. Nuanced historical studies, however, have interrogated these overly modularised re-presentations of, for instance, Dārā ([Gandhi 2020](#)) as the "good Muslim" and Aurangzeb ([Truschke 2017](#)) as the "bad Muslim", and have argued that we should not anachronistically apply our present-day categories such as "liberal", "secular", and "tolerant" to premodern intellectual engagements. Thus, while the stances of Sufis were indeed characterised by modes of cultural synthesis and accommodation, they usually affirmed the finality of Islamic monotheism and at times called for the exclusion of Hindus from administrative offices ([Alam 1989](#)). For instance, Abdul Rahmān Chishtī (d.1695) can strikingly mention the *Gītā* as a book in

which Kṛṣṇa teaches the secrets of Islamic monotheism (*tauhīd*) and in his *Mirʾāt-al-Makhlūqāt*, written in the narrative style of a Hindu *purāṇa*, can also affirm the ultimacy of the message of Muhammad (Alam 2012). Conversely, in the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, while some Pathan disciples of the Bengali Hindu saint Caitanya (1486–1534), who were given names such as "Rāma Dāsa" and "Bijuli Khān", are said to have become renowned as Pāthān-Vaiṣṇavas (Prabhupada 1975, Volume 7, pp. 232–34), the socio-ritual alterity of Muslims is clearly marked by the repeated invocation of the pejorative category of *mleccha* ("foreigners outside Vedic orthodoxy").

Therefore, although our inquiry is primarily centred on some Hindu and Indo-Islamic *theological* motifs, it has been necessary to also sketch the *socio-cultural* contours of their locations, since any such inquiry has to be alive to their contested histories and their fraught receptions. The narrative construction of premodern Hindu interactions with Muslim milieus is, as we have seen, caught in a binary trap—*either* one vehemently rends the richly synthetic Indo-Persianate tapestries that once stretched across significant swathes of the subcontinent (Gilmartin and Lawrence 2000; Eaton 2019; Nair 2020), as seen in the writings of V.D. Savarkar (1883–1966) and M.S. Golwalkar (1906–1973), *or* one nostalgically projects a dewy-eyed dreamworld of Hindu-Muslim "brotherhood" (Hawley 2015, pp. 292–93). In this essay, we instead gesture towards a *via media* that would highlight both the *affective* vocabularies of devotional love that continue to be translated across Indo-Islamic worlds and the *agonistic* (but not necessarily antagonistic) processes through which these circulations of theological ideas have been mediated.

Such a theoretical pathway would contribute to the ongoing attempts—from the disciplinary perspectives of social anthropology, political theory, and so on (Gottschalk 2000; Assayag 2004)—to decentre monolithic projections of "Hinduism". The claim that medieval Muslims can be placed within either "good" or "bad" categories either covertly presupposes or overtly declares that there is one normative Hinduism out there with respect to which such sweeping evaluative assessments can be readily offered. The methodology that we propose, and begin to develop, in this essay would instead point to the dense conceptual negotiations through which particular Hindu *dharmic* systems have been configured vis-à-vis spatially contiguous forms of Indian Islam, and, conversely, Islamic vernacularized visions (Karim 1959, pp. 165–75; Sharif 1969; Alam 1989; Uddin 2006; Harder 2011; Ricci 2011; Chatterji 1996, p. 17; Eaton 2009, p. 197; Bellamy 2011; Bose 2014; Rahman 2015) have been developed through exchanges—adversarial as well as hospitable—with their environing Hindu linguistic-cultural milieus. When contemporary Deobandi Muslims in Uttar Pradesh characterise their neighbouring Barelvi Muslims as "crypto-Hindus" (Gugler 2015, p. 175), because of particular practices followed by the latter such as the celebration of the death anniversary of saints, the intercession of a saint on the pathway to God, and so on, they might be deeply intrigued to learn that certain Hindu groups—such as the Arya Samaj, monastic Advaitins, and others—would denounce precisely such practices as insufficiently "Hindu". Therefore, given the formation of "Hinduism" in late colonial and postcolonial India through active contestations with some Islamic worlds, the question, "Whose Hinduism? Which Hindus?" turns out to be deeply intertwined with its mirror-inverse query, "Whose Islam? Which Muslims?". From within this dialectical conjuncture, the disciplinary field called "Hindu Studies" can be re-envisioned as "Studies of al-Hind", so that to avoid the two conceptual polarities that we indicated above—*either* a Manichean antagonism *or* an Arcadian accord between "Hindus" and "Muslims"—we would have to undertake a systematic exploration of how Hindu theological motifs that have been developed from distinctively *dharmic* roots have at times been restructured during their socio-historical passages along distinctively Islamic routes.

## 3. The "Eternal Feminine" in the Bowers of *Bhakti*

One of the reasons why the vocabularies of *bhakti* have been skilfully reworked several times into Islamic idioms is that their affective tones of purgation, loss, lamentation, and recovery are deeply resonant with certain styles of Sufi questing for the eternal unknown within the immediately accessible. Within the specialism of "*Bhakti* Studies", scholars have contested the monolithic projection of "the

*bhakti* religion", which is said to be associated exclusively with the soteriological systems of *saguṇa* personalism established by preceptors such as Rāmānuja (1017–1137), Madhva (1238–1317), and others, and pointed out that *bhakti* should be understood more broadly in its registers of loving attachment, embodied practices, aesthetic forms, and communitarian frameworks. Thus, we may speak of patterns of *bhakti* also in the Advaita *nirguṇa* contexts of the trans-personal absolute, where *bhakti* would characterize the attachment of the finite self towards the qualityless Self and the yearning of the former to attain the perfection of the latter (Sharma 1987, p. 44). Following this historicized understanding of the pervasion by multiple vocabularies of *bhakti* of Hindu milieus shaped by scriptural texts such as the *Bhagavad-gītā* (*c*.200 CE) and the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (*c*.900 CE), the crucial term *bhakti* can be translated, reflecting its etymological roots, as "participation" or "partaking", so that, for *bhakti* pioneers, it is their "sharing" in divinity that animates their creative poetry (Prentiss 1999, p. 24). If, as John Cort (Cort 2019, p. 103) says, it is perhaps not "going too far to say that there is no such thing as bhakti. There are bhaktis", we should not be surprised to encounter exquisitely evocative expressions of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa motif produced by Bengali poets whom we could call "Musalmān *bhaktas*". These poets, whose imaginative landscapes were structured by Sufi spiritual idioms, allegorised the divine conjugal pair in terms of the relation between the human lover and the divine beloved, and in order to present their teachings in ways that would be readily intelligible to their neighbouring Hindus and to Muslims who may not be familiar with Sufism, they recast the Hindu narratives into symbolic forms (Bhattacharya 1945, p. 102).

Consider, for instance, this poem by a certain Irfān, where the first five lines do not allow us to ascertain the religious identity of the composer who re-presents him-self as feminine:

Tell me, my girl-friend, what am I to do now?

Without my friend (*bandhu*) my life has no companion,

I keep on waiting every day for my friend.

In that waiting I go about floating on sorrow,

If I were to find my friend, I would hold on to his feet.

Irfān says—My friend is the flute player,

By playing on that enchanting flute he stole my heart away. (Bhattacharya 1945, p. 48)

The stock-in-trade imageries of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* poetry, as immortalised in the demotic idioms of Vidyāpati (c.1300 CE), Caṇḍīdās (c.1400 CE), and others, can be readily discerned here—a very humanised Rādhā pining in bewilderment for the seemingly indifferent Kṛṣṇa and confiding to her girl-friend that her distraught self burns away in the agonising fires of the pain of separation (*viraha*). Thus, we hear Caṇḍīdās evoking the somatic intensities of the consuming pathos that rages through the heart of a disconsolate woman who is devastated at her desertion by the dark divinity:

Who can understand

The fire, love,

That forever burns?

I bear it as I can.

Who can say

That love is a boon?

Love is disquieting.

My ribs are charred

As I brood and brood.

Tears pour down

And my shameless heart is never at rest.

As a second fate

Love lords my life. (Bhattacharya 1967, p. 75)

This maddening pathos that disperses the feminine-femininised self riven with the pain of separation (*virahiṇī*) from the divine reality—who is always so near and yet so far away—also drives the questing of Rajjab Alī Khān, a disciple of the *bhakti* poet Dādu (1544–1603):

The virahiṇī wanders about day and night without seeing her Beloved.

Says the devotee Rajjab: she burns, for the boundless pain of viraha has arisen in her. (Schomer 1987, p. 79)

Again, in the lush landscapes of the Sufi romances (*premākhyān*) composed in Hindavī and Bengali, the Hindu theo-aesthetics of *bhakti-rasa* and the rural *bārahmāsā* songs enacting *viraha* are delicately reworked to present the gendered quest of a connoisseur who cultivates, through "detachment" (*zuhd*) and "remembrance" (*ḏhikr*), a highly refined "taste" (*ḏhawq*) for God through poetry and music. In the intricately layered Sufi cosmologies of Mir Sayyid Manjhan's *Madhumālatī* (1545), love (*prema*) is not a fleeting human emotion but is the eternal adhesive through which the tissues of the "unity of being" (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) are glued together, and thus the narrative frame of the text itself is an iridescent circle of love within which Manohar ("Heart-captivating") meets the heroine Madhumālatī at night, gets separated, and painfully works his way back to her through various halting places. In re-activating, through the symbolic codes of Hindavī poetry, the primordial bond (Qur'ān 7:172) between God and humanity, Manohar and Madhumālatī become the relishers of the *rasa* ("juice") of *prema*, such that the traveller (*sālik*) is the lover (*'āshiq*) who sees in his/her love for the human beloved (*'ishq-i majāzī*) a reflection of the love for the divine beloved (*'ishq-i ḥaqīqī*) (Behl and Weightman 2000). Thus, Rādhā's passionate love (*rati*) for Kṛṣṇa, the bewitchingly beautiful Lord and the truest object (*viṣaya*) of human love, becomes the cultural analogue for re-expressing in the regional (*deśī*) language of the *hinduān* ("people of Hind") the *ḥadīth*, "I [God] was a hidden treasure, and I wanted to be known", so that the entire world is to be envisioned as a shimmering self-disclosure of God reflecting the eternal beauty (Schimmel 1975; Chittick 1979; Schimmel 2003).

In a middle Bengali rendition of the narrative *Majnūn Laylā*, Daulat Uzir Bahrām Khān (c.1600 CE) deftly infuses the Perso-Arabic idioms of "veiling", confusion (*ḥayra*), and selfless love (*maḥabba*) with the vernacular valences of *viraha*:

[Lāylī says:]

The fire in my mind burns without respite

Strength, intellect, happiness, purity—all have I lost

In solitariness do I stay enclosed in *biraha*.

In this way the grieving *birahiṇī* suffers always

As she lies close to death (*mṛter prāẏ haiẏā*). (Sharif 1984, p. 129)

[Majnu says:]

Without the queen (*īśvarī*) of my heart, let me die!

My body is deathlike (*mṛtabaṯ*) and I give up all family honour (*lāj-mān*). (Sharif 1984, p. 131)

These medieval strains echo through some contemporary Bengali sociocultural milieus in their reworkings in the *bhakti*-inflected songs that Rabindranath Tagore composed. Tagore's religious standpoints defy any straightforward characterisation in terms of doxographical classifications such as Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita, and so on (Sen 2014); moreover, in his songs, he does not usually *name* Kṛṣṇa as the elusive beloved of his feminine-femininised self. However, as in the following

instance, his anguished lament is a modernist variation on the profound Vaiṣṇava paradox that one tends to forget the divine not because the divine is cosmically *distant* but precisely because the divine is immanently *proximate*:

> The night that is passing, how do I bring it back?
>
> Why do my eyes shed tears in vain?
>
> Take this dress, my girl-friend (*sakhī*), this garland has become a burden—
>
> Waiting in desolation on my bed (*biraha-śayane*), a night such as this has passed.
>
> On a futile quest (*abhisāre*) have I come to the banks of the Yamunā,
>
> Carrying futile (*bṛthā*) hopes, I have loved so deeply.
>
> Finally, at the end of night—pallid face, tired feet, and indifferent mind,
>
> What wretched home do I return to?
>
> Better to forget then, why do I shed these tears any more?
>
> Alas, if indeed I must go, why does the heart look back?
>
> How long will I wait, like a fool, at the door to the bower at morning?
>
> The springtime in my life is gone! (Tagore 1938, p. 370)

It is precisely these assonances, affectivities, and allegories of *viraha* that constitute the common currency of conceptual commerce across manifold *bhakti* and Sufi borderlines (White 1965, p. 120). These transactions were facilitated by the development in north India, between 1450 and 1700, of certain styles of trans-regional Vaiṣṇaiva *bhakti* that were significantly inflected by Sufi motifs, values, and institutions. This Hindu ethos of devotional self-*effacement* emerged through a projected opposition to tantric Śaiva-Śākta and yogic religious forms, and in didactic verses and hagiographical literatures, the Sufi-Vaiṣṇava axis represented tāntrikas and yogīs as self-*asserting* individuals (Burchett 2019, pp. 310–11).

This enactment of theocentric self-surrender, sustained by the sociality of the female friend (*sakhī*), becomes a breathing osmotic tissue at the Sufi-Vaiṣṇava interfaces and is performed in some *bhakti* milieus with the symbolic form of a feminised human self (*jīva*) who undergoes a spiritual incineration in the blazing love (*prema*) for the God of supreme love.[1] While it is expressed in some highly distinctive ways by Hindu singers and by Sufi poets, the resonating wavelength across these sonic-verbal milieus is the paradox of the "intimate stranger"—for the human lover, it is precisely a developing sense of God's *presence* that generates an agonisingly painful awareness of God's *absence*. On the one hand, the devotee wants to "possess" the deity, for a lover can never have enough of the intimacy of the beloved, but, on the other hand, precisely because the beloved here is the *non*-finite eternal, the *finite* lover can never "circumscribe" its transcendental strangeness. It is this theological dialectic of absence-*in*-presence that generates the exquisitely sweet pathos that suffuses *bhakti* poetry, and it is also expressed, as we will see, through the Islamic idioms of Bābā Farīd (c.1175–1265), Bulleh Shāh (1680–1757), and others. To think that one has apodictically attained God is to be cast at once into the despair of desertion, but precisely through that "dark night of the soul", one can begin to discern God's presence even more clearly (Sanford 2008, p. 87).

In various styles of *bhakti* sensibilities, the motif of divine sport (*līlā*), which emerges from scriptural foundations such as the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (*BhP*), is employed to engage with this paradox. The supremely personal Brahman, Kṛṣṇa, who is the majestic governor of the world, is also sweetly

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1　We are aware of the European and the Christological roots of the English term "God". In discussing Hindu worldviews such as Advaita Vedānta or Sāṃkhya-Yoga, we would avoid using such terms. However, the Vaiṣṇava-*bhakti* sensibilities that we discuss in this essay are pivoted on the notion of the divine reality as omnipotent and omniscient and as entering into loving relationships with individual human beings. These theological principles are adequately reflected in the English term.

accessible to his doting devotees—whether as a little child throwing a tantrum, a mischievous friend grazing cows, or an adorable lover (Sheridan 1986). However, human beings cannot encapsulate the non-finitude of Brahman, and thus we hear repeated reminders that the seemingly human Kṛṣṇa is not just another child, friend, or lover. Thus, we arrive at the paradox that, in the case of the supreme lovers of Kṛṣṇa, such as the archetypal cowherd women (*gopīs*), the more ecstatically they experience Kṛṣṇa's presence, the more painfully they become aware of Kṛṣṇa's absence, and the more agonisingly they are torn apart by the pain of this absence, the deeper they move into the inexhaustible depths of Kṛṣṇa's presence. In the "theo-dramatic" narrative of Canto X, Chapters 29–33, the *gopīs* abruptly leave their domestic chores and rush out to meet Kṛṣṇa playing on his enthralling flute; each woman is filled with the conceit that Kṛṣṇa is dancing with her alone; Kṛṣṇa disappears, plunging them into grief; wracked with pain, they begin to look for Kṛṣṇa, and finally, they are blissfully reunited with their Lord-Lover (Schweig 2005, pp. 172–73). The leitmotif here—that runs like a golden thread through a vast body of *bhakti* materials such as the sixteenth-century songs of Mīrābāi and their contemporary trans-creations in Bollywood movies—is structured as follows: excruciatingly painful indeed is the *viraha* where the lovers single-mindedly centre their existential core solely on the (seemingly) absent God; their human lives are thus shattered by the unbearable weight of the wound of love but precisely in and through that brokenness lies their purgative healing in the heart of divine love (*BhP* X.29.10–11). Thus, paradoxically, divine strangeness is even more soteriologically charged than divine familiarity in drawing decentred devotees nearer to their regenerative centre of desire, Kṛṣṇa, who is intimately bound to them (*BhP* XI.2.55). The supremely beloved Kṛṣṇa engages in a delightfully oscillating soteriological sport (*rāsa-līlā*) of absence and presence—in moments of divine presence, he yet makes the exemplary *gopīs* acutely aware of God's non-finitude that they cannot humanly grasp (Kinsley 1995). Thus, to push the paradox to its breaking point, Kṛṣṇa's presence *is* Kṛṣṇa's absence—Kṛṣṇa is the uncanny guest in the home of the lovesick heart.

A key motif of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, centred around the *BhP*, is precisely this *rāsa-līlā* tryst, which is presented by exegetical-theological systematisers such as Rūpa (1489–1564), Jīva (1513–1598), and others as a temporal window into the "esoteric" love that animates the eternal hyphenation of Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa. The *BhP* is envisioned as a theo-aesthetic drama in which the transcendental characters are Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa and their celestial attendants, such that the latter are ineffably different-and-nondifferent (*acintya bhedābheda*) from the former, and by emulating the latter, human devotees learn to situate themselves temporally within the narrative matrices of this timeless play. All the world's a stage, then, and human actors undertake the spiritual discipline of relishing the binitarian love at the heart of being by becoming inscribed into the divine script modulated by separation-*in*-union. The corporeal intensities with which this script is performed generate a devotionally restructured body that enacts the love of God by chanting and contemplating (*smaraṇa*) the divine names and exuberantly singing, weeping, and dancing. The goal is to experience, at the highest *rāgānuga-bhakti* stage, the intensely passionate *mādhurya-rasa*, which is an unadulterated non-egocentric love (*prema*) for God, and this spontaneity was paradigmatically enacted by the *gopīs* (Holdrege 2013, p. 173; Gupta 2007, p. 4; Kapoor 2008, p. 110). For the cultivation of this *rāgānuga-bhakti*, whose phenomenological intensities resonate with those of ʿishq and *maḥabba*, a devotee vicariously participates in the mood (*bhāva*) of a particular attendant of the divine couple, by adopting the dress and the habit of that dear one (Chakravarti 1969, p. 215; De 1961, p. 177). In one such "homologised" remembrance (*līlā smaraṇa*) that meditatively follows the eightfold division of the day of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa in paradise (Vṛndāvana), devotees can project themselves humbly as a particular handmaiden (*mañjarī*) to Rādhā or as a servant of a girl-friend (*sakhī*) of Rādhā and vitalise a spiritually perfected form (*siddha-rūpa*) that is inwardly female (McDaniel 1989, p. 49; Wulff 1984, p. 29). More concretely, Bhaktivinoda Thakur (1838–1914) indicates that a devotee can have the spiritual identity of a young girl, be placed in one of the groups of *sakhīs*, receive assignments from a principal *gopī*, and so on (Dasa 1999, pp. 222–29). Through this psycho-cosmological mapping of the sacred territory of Vṛndāvana, the *mañjarī-* or the *sakhī*-attendants on earth develop a fine-tuned

femininised subjectivity that "exemplifies a paradoxical status of savoring divine sensuality through heightened senses yet not desiring ego-gratification" (Sarbadhikary 2015, p. 107).

Such sensuous invocations of "our Sister in heaven" can devotionally reweave the psycho-physiological textures of the practitioner's physical body (*sādhaka-rūpa*)—thus, in the early eighteenth century, Kṛṣṇadāsa Bābā once became so absorbed in his-her service of beautifying Rādhā that it seemed to bystanders that s-he had become unconscious for around three hours (Haberman 1988, p. 92). A sub-tradition—whose view was condemned in 1727—subversively pushed this argument to the conclusion that male devotees should cross-dress and put on the clothes and ornaments of women, because their true identity is that of a *gopī* (Haberman 1988, p. 98). This spiritual reconstruction of affectivity lives on within these milieus; more recently, Charles Brooks (Brooks 1990, p. 276) reports that a devotee showed him the sari that he would wear to viscerally experience Rādhā's love, and that another spoke with a "gentle feminine voice", which was attributed by locals to his spiritual practice. Across religious matrices, these feminised sensibilities appear in the poet Bulleh Shāh, who is also said to have donned characteristically feminine attire and once danced in a paroxysm of ecstasy before his spiritual master, Shāh 'Ināyat Qādirī (1643–1728). Now, to what extent these Hindu and Indo-Islamic recalibrations of gendered spaces can be situated within the *écriture féminine* of feminist theorising is a topic that we leave aside for another day—whether en*gendering* a femininised persona or identity in a socio-ritual body into which is inscribed the androcentric ethos of *varṇa*-inflected Hindu cultural spaces is to be read as an agentially empowering project for women or as a toothless piety that leaves socio-political asymmetries unchanged on the ground is a vexed topic that has to be systematically explored through the critical lenses of theological anthropology, political theory, social anthropology, and others (Hiltebeitel and Erndl 2000; Hawley et al. 2019).

To return, then, to the *bhakti* modes of vicarious participation in divinity, the bodies of *bhaktas* become soteriological sites on which they alternately experience the searing pain and the temporary joy of the *gopīs* in an ongoing dialectic of felt separation and rediscovered union (Wulff 1984, p. 155). The temporary disjuncture is shaped by Rādhā's vigorously assertive *māna* or love-in-anger at Kṛṣṇa's seeming desertion, evocatively delineated by Paramānand, a disciple of Vallabhācārya (1479–1531 CE):

> I'll stay angry indeed, I'll stay angry.
>
> When [Kṛṣṇa] comes to the house,
>
> then I'll speak angry words to him.
>
> If he tries to make up, I won't do it . . .
>
> If Paramānand's lord throws himself at my feet,
>
> I'll still be stubborn. (Sanford 2008, p. 123)

Devotees who inhabit the contingencies of "human history" know, however, that in "transcendental time", the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa conjunction is eternally established, so that all's well that ends well:

> Having placated her, [Kṛṣṇa] came to [Rādhā].
>
> Wherever the lovely one went, stopping here and there,
>
> he followed her.
>
> She acquired much beauty from that māna . . . (Sanford 2008, p. 145)

At the intersections of Vaiṣṇava and Sufi devotion, this purgative reconfiguration of the aesthetic sensorium—through effusive patterns of art, music, poetry, architecture, and dance—points to the spiritual discipline of re-centering the human lover in the radiant heart of the divine beloved. The intricate Vaiṣṇava conceptualizations of the *re*turn, along the pathways of *prema*, of the human lover-beloved to the divine lover-beloved resonated through some of the Indo-Persianate milieus of "Bīdil", whom we encountered earlier, and are also echoed, as we will see, in the "bridal mysticism" of Bābā Farīd and Bulleh Shāh. In the Punjabi Sufi milieus of the latter, the tormented *virahiṇī* becomes

consumed by love even as she herself consumes the nutrients of love, for—to reiterate our paradox of the "intimate stranger"—the lover may become temporally divorced from her beloved, but their primordial union is never severed. Thus, our exploration so far reflects, and also reinforces, the reminders of several scholars that the ethno-linguistic spheres of "Persian", "Urdu", "Punjabi", "Hindi", and "Bengali" (Orsini 2010) should not be regarded as neatly congruent with confessional communities such as "Hindu", "Sikh", or "Muslim". While Muslim scholars such as Masīḥā Pānīpatī (d.1640) translated the *Rāmāyaṇa* into Persian, some Hindu disciples of "Bīdil" enshrined the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa motif within the stylistic canons of Persian poetry. Indeed, as Stefano Pellò notes, in the early eighteenth century, "it is not generally possible to distinguish a Persian *ghazal* written by a Muslim from another Persian *ghazal* written by a non-Muslim, as it is not generally easy to distinguish a Persian *masnawī* rendering of a Vaishnava narrative done by a Muslim from one accomplished by a non-Muslim" (Pellò 2014, p. 22). Thus, Amānat Rāy deftly transposed the pivotal Canto X of the *BhP* into the form of a *masnawī* that opens with these lines resonating with idioms ultimately traceable to the paradigmatic Sufi mystic and theologian Ibn ʿArabī (1165–1240):

> In the name of the Beloved [*jānān*] of the world [*jahān*],
>
> who is hidden from the eyes of people.
>
> The world is the mirror [*āyīna*] where His beauty [*ḥusn*] appears,
>
> no place is devoid of His light [*nūr*]. (Pellò 2014, p. 34)

## 4. Indo-Muslim Iterations: Conceptualising the *Virahiṇī* Motif Across Punjabi Literary Landscapes

A central Qurʾanic motif that undergirds certain Sufi styles of devotional praxis and poetic expressivity is the pre-eternal covenant (*mīthāq*) established between God and humankind; described in Sūrah 7:172, this primordial covenantal "moment" comes to signify the paradigmatic instantiation of human beings "bearing witness" to the reality of *tawḥīd* (oneness). As the Qurʾān narrates, in this "meta-historical" communion (Lewisohn 2015, p. 150), the whole of humankind was brought forth from the descendants of Adam to attest, in unison, to the fundamental existence and unicity of God. The Sufi poetic imagination is thus animated by a profound yearning to *re*-inhabit, in and through the particularities of worldly finitude, this pre-cosmic proximity to the divine; the human soul, in virtue of its "primordial nature" (*fiṭrah*), retains the memory of this transcendental testification and, in its realised state, strives to orient itself to the telos of divine union (Nasr 2002, p. 7). Employing the terms of Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī (1207–1273), the human soul is like the reed-flute, which, severed from its abode of the reed bed, yearns to return to its homeland (Mojaddedi 2004, p. 4).

In concretising this dialectic of union and separation, Sufi writers often associate the Arabic word for affliction (*balāʾ*) with the word *balā*, "Yes", which the human souls uttered on the "Day of the Covenant" (Schimmel 1975, pp. 136–37). According to this reading, contained in the primordial "Yes", which signifies the pre-eternal delight of proximity to the divine, is the import of an anguished longing that seeks to recover this bliss of union as the lover treads the tortuous paths of the world. Yet, if it is central to the "mythopoetic romance of Sufism" (Lewisohn 2015, p. 150) that human souls become existentially "deracinated" from their pre-temporal abode of perfect proximity to God, it is also vital to the Sufi poetic tradition that this worldly separation marks no insurmountable *rupture* in the heart of the divine-human relation. As the Qurʾān affirms in Sūrah 50:16 ("We are nearer to him than the jugular vein"), God is immovably present to the human being—indeed, this ongoing ontological immanence is precisely what holds creation in being.[2] In various styles of Sufi poetry, this theological

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[2]  The seminal theologian and jurist Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī (1058–1111) articulates in his *Mishkāt al-Anwār* (The Niche for Lights) the fundamental ontological "poverty" of created being, which exists only because it is continually infused with the light of being by the transcendent "Origin and Fountainhead of Lights" (Gairdner 2010, p. 20).

tenet of God's eternal intimacy to creation is meditatively moulded into the image of the divine lover's enduring presence to the finite beloved; God is "the first lover" (Usborne 1966, p. 27), and this love is paradigmatically manifested in and through the creative (and preserving) activity of God. As the Persian poet Ḥāfiẓ (1315–1390) asserts, "both human beings and spirits take their sustenance from the existence of Love" (Lewisohn 2015, p. 180). It is not, therefore, that the spiritual path binds the human aspirant to God through relational fibres that were formerly *dis*joint (and have been *con*joined for the first time)—rather, the specific, realised state of union that constitutes the Sufi telos represents a direct experiential *inhabitation* of a relationality that is always fundamentally existent.

This dynamic interplay between the metaphysical facticity of union and the spatiotemporal reality of separation is vibrantly enacted in the multiple "spirito-poetic" (Ali 2016, p. 9) tapestries of Indo-Muslim piety. Crucially, in the compositions of Punjabi Sufis, it is through an intricately fashioned *feminine* subjectivity that certain male poets inhabit (and versify) the affective intensity and the purgative purport of spiritual longing.[3] These poets temporarily suspend their masculine identities to imbibe and express the plight of the agonised *virahiṇī*, who comes to represent the archetypal devotee of the divine beloved as she yearns for the lost state of rapturous union. In the verses of Farīduddīn Ganj-i-Shakar (c.1175–1265), popularly known as Bābā Farīd,[4] the longing for God is explicitly presented as the longing of a bride/wife for her absent groom/husband: "had I known I was to separate, tighter would I have tied the bridal knot" (Sagar 1999, p. 88). The female lover passionately bewails her separation from her beloved, in whose absence she suffers intense physical and mental anguish: "I did not sleep with my love tonight and every bit of my body aches" (Petievich 2007, p. 6).

Just as Tagore poignantly versifies the *virahiṇī*'s torment over the privation of her beloved's amorous embrace ("waiting in desolation on my bed"), for Farid, too, the marital bed is no longer the site of unitive bliss; it has become, instead, a potent metaphor for the pangs of separation: "anguish my bed-frame, pain and suffering its woven twine, the ache of separation my quilt and counterpane" (Puri 1990, p. 47). Bereft of her beloved's embrace, the lonesome woman is plunged into an all-enveloping grief and yet remains determined to be united with her love: "my body an oven, my bones burning charcoal: but I shall go to my Love on my head if my feet fail" (Puri 1990, p. 78). Crucially, however, if at one moment the *virahiṇī* declares her unswerving resolve to *go out* and meet her beloved, in another instant, she realises that the one whom she seeks is never, in fact, separable from her: "I went searching for my Love and all the time my Love was with me" (Puri 1990, p. 79). The *virahiṇī*'s anguished pining for the seemingly distant beloved who is, in truth, immediately present to her thus echoes the Vaiṣṇava paradox that the devotee is oblivious to God precisely because of God's indwelling proximity.[5] This dialectic of the "intimate stranger" becomes especially significant in later poetic re-workings of the Hīr-Rāṇjhā motif,[6] wherein the absent beloved for whom Hīr yearns is also the one who dwells mysteriously in her midst (and with whom she is transcendentally united).

For Bābā Farīd, the intensity of the lover's pangs essentially betokens the lover's particular spiritual state, for the torment of separation can only pierce the hearts of those who *actively* long for union with the divine. If, as we saw above, the memory of one's pre-cosmic proximity to God is ineffaceably engraved upon every human soul, the one who yearns for God and experiences the pains of separation from the *non*-finite divine has truly come to inhabit this "memory" as a vitally embodied modality: "where separation does not torture, there mind and body are ground for pyres"

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[3] The feminization of the spiritual quest after the divine is a common trope of Sufi literature. However, it is in the aesthetic and the spiritual sensibilities of *Indo-Muslim* poets that the pining female lover acquires a distinctively sustained literary identity.

[4] Bābā Farīd was the spiritual master of the revered saint Nizamuddīn Auliya (1238–1325). Farid's lyrics constitute "the earliest extant example of Punjabi writing" (Singh 2012, p. 3), and many of his couplets are enshrined in the Sikh *Guru Granth Sahib*.

[5] Al-Ghazālī explicates this theme of the divine hiddenness as a paradoxical concomitant of the divine immanence—in his *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, Ghazālī notes that, just as the bat cannot see in the daylight, not because light is absent but because it is ineluctably *present*, so too is the human eye "blind" to the splendour of God that shines forth immutably (Ormsby 2011).

[6] The tale of Hīr-Rāṇjhā occupies pride of place in the Punjabi literary and cultural imagination; since at least the sixteenth century, this tragic romance has been a favourite motif of Punjabi poets. The most popular rendition is Wāris Shāh's *Hīr* (1766), written in the narrative form of the *qissā*.

([Puri 1990](), p. 47). This recurrent poetic topos of suffering as indicative of the depth and the sincerity of one's spiritual love provides the generative impulse for the epigrammatic trope of the "sweet pathos" that permeates the devotional compositions of both Sufi and *bhakti* poets. The "disquieting" afflictions of love poeticized by Caṇḍīdās are to be understood, across these aesthetic-conceptual borderlines, not as mere emotional excrescences (which are to be finally sublated into the "real" delights of union), but as integrally purgative modes of cultivating, through an active remembering, one's spiritual attunement to the divine absence-*in*-presence. It is therefore not in spite of but precisely because of her burning afflictions that the *virahiṇī* remains truly "alive" to the memory of her beloved and so to the desire for union with him.

Thus, just as Bābā Farīd prays that his sight may survive the dissolution of his body ("Feast, crows, on my wasting flesh, but leave, I pray you, my eyes that I may see my master" ([Puri 1990](), p. 68)), so too does Wāris Shāh yearn to behold the countenance of his divine beloved: "Waris Shah is anxious to see God's face even as Hir longed for her lover" ([Usborne 1966](), p. 193). The tale of Hīr-Rāṇjhā is crucially imbricated in a narratival nexus of distinctive religio-cultural motifs; Hīr's love affair with Rāṇjhā partakes in the specifically Islamic valences of the Yūsuf-Zulaikhā narrative[7] (Hīr is frequently cast in the mould of Zulaikhā as she is enraptured by the beauty of her beloved), even as Rāṇjhā, the cowherd whose enchanting melodies mesmerize the local townspeople, immediately evokes the image of the flute-playing Kṛṣṇa. Notably, just as the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa union is presented as eternally indissoluble, despite their vigorous pursuits of each other along the tempestuous vales of separation, so too is the temporal union of Hīr and Rāṇjhā granted a transcendental anchorage upon the slate of eternity. In Wāris Shāh's *Hīr*, Rāṇjhā asserts that the two lovers were bestowed upon one another on the Day of the Covenant: "on the day our souls said yes, I was betrothed to Hir. In the Tablet of Destiny, God has written the union of our souls" ([Usborne 1966](), p. 181). Taking Hīr as the archetypal feminine lover of God and Rāṇjhā as the divine beloved, the pre-cosmic origin of the Hīr-Rāṇjhā union symbolises the primordial covenantal bond between the divine and the human being, who, bearing the memory of this union, turns longingly to God just as Rūmī's reed-flute yearns for its original abode.

The notion that this transcendental "Yes!" (*balā*) implies also the acceptance of affliction (*balā'*) as the purgative concomitant of love is strikingly articulated by Bulleh Shāh: "O friend, I am struck by eternal love, that love from the beginning of time. It is frying me in a pan. The fried is being fried over again!" ([Singh 2012](), p. 91). The image of "frying" here denotes the existential anguish that the spiritual aspirant must endure as their ego-self is dissolved on the path of love in the experiential modality termed *fanā'* (annihilation). Hīr burns with the agony of separation from Rāṇjhā ("embrace me, Ranjha, for the fire of separation is burning me. My heart has been burnt to a cinder" ([Usborne 1966](), p. 162)), and she is slowly drained of her former beauty and vitality: "I am shedding flesh, reduced to a skeleton, my bones crackle" ([Anjum 2016](), p. 173). This dialectic of life and death is foregrounded by the Sufi poet, Shāh Husayn of Lahore (1539–1593)—as Hīr yearns for Rāṇjhā to re-enliven her moribund spirit, she declares: "because of you I die; to meet you would revive me" ([Petievich 2007](), p. 115). Hīr's "burning" away, therefore, not only represents the emotive intensity of the *virahiṇī*'s tormented longing but also is a metaphor for the progressive erosion of the lover's self-identity through absorption in the memory of her beloved. Hīr's "death" to her worldly self as she burns in the flames of separation is concurrent with her dynamic "revival" (*baqā'*) in the identity of Rāṇjhā.

This poetic iteration of the classical Sufi *fanā'-baqā'* dialectic, where *fanā'* pertains to the lover's loss of the ego-self and *baqā'* to the simultaneous *re*-birth or subsistence *in* the beloved, is vividly brought to life in Bulleh Shāh's verses. Hīr declares that she has, through repetitively calling on his name, become Rāṇjhā her*self*:

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7　Sūrah 12 of the Qur'ān relates the story of Yūsuf and his brothers and provides a brief account of Zulaikhā's attempted seduction of Yūsuf. The tale of Yūsuf-Zulaikhā is re-worked by Sufi writers, most notably by the Persian poet Jāmī (1414–1492), into the archetypal allegory of the feminized soul's longing after God.

Calling, repeating, "Ranjha, Ranjha",

I've become Ranjha myself; everyone call me Dhidho Ranjha,

Call me Hir no more.

Ranjha's within me, I'm within him,

No thought of any other, it's not me calling,

It's he himself, assuaging his own heart. (Petievich 2007, p. 87)

This repetitive remembrance effects the gradual dissolution of Hīr's particularised self so that she abides firmly in, and even assumes, the identity of her beloved. The transmutative act of "naming" here recalls the centrality of *dhikr* ("remembrance" or "invocation") in the discursive elaborations and the ritual practices of the Sufis, wherein the purpose of the continuous recital of the names of God (and other sacred formulas) is to contemplatively attune oneself to the divine reality and so become experientially "absorbed in the Named" (Geoffroy 2010, p. 163). As a practice of remembering, the spiritual alchemy of *dhikr* re-orientates the human being to their primordial divine origin—the one who continuously invokes God's name becomes "extinguished in Him (*al fana' fī-l'madhkūr*)" (Geoffroy 2010, p. 164), just as they once bore perfect witness to God in pre-eternity.

This moment of "extinguishing", however, should not be understood as a pantheistic "collapsing" of the self *into* the divine; indeed, as we see in Bulleh Shāh's verses above, it is Hīr *herself* who paradoxically proclaims the dissolution of *her* identity and her *self*-transformation into Rāṇjhā. There remains, in other words, a particular "self" through which Hīr articulates her decisive *loss* of self. This paradoxical interplay between the overt declaration of "no self" and the authorial/narrative "self" that *expresses* this ontological dissolution of egoity becomes particularly significant in relation to the complementary modalities of *fanā'* and *baqā'*. In several Sufi formulations of the spiritual path, particularly that of Ibn 'Arabī, what is negated in the extinctive moment of *fanā'* is the notion of the ego-self as an autonomous entity that is substantively distinct from God. When the spiritual seeker abides in the state of *baqā'*, having been purged of their erroneous understanding of creation as composed of various self-subsistent entities, they behold all created phenomena as intimately sustained by, and finitely reflective of, their divine ground. On a more devotional register, we might affirm that the transfigured subjectivity that flows from the experience of *fanā'* is one that capaciously beholds the beloved everywhere and in all things. As Hīr meditatively utters the name of her beloved, she *re*cognises, much like the seeker of God, that the one for whom she longs is not straightforwardly separate from her.

If, therefore, in some literary compositions, Hīr declares that she must undertake the arduous journey *towards* her beloved, in others, she is exhorted by Rāṇjhā to simply lift the perceptual veil that prevents her from *re*cognising his intimate presence. Embodying Hīr's unrelenting resolve to actively *pursue* her distant beloved, Shāh Husayn writes: "The streams are deep, the raft is old and tigers stalk the landing. I must go to Ranjha's place; won't someone come with me!" (Petievich 2007, p. 101). As Petievich notes, these verses are strikingly "reminiscent of Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*" (Petievich 2007, p. 10) wherein Rādhā "does not just sit in passive suffering but, at one point, journeys through the jungle at night to meet Krishna" (Petievich 2007, p. 10). Hīr too, as she burns in the fire of her longing, does not simply wait for Rāṇjhā to return to her but resolutely traverses the treacherous landscape to be united with him. Yet, in Wāris Shāh's poem, Rāṇjhā questions his beloved thus: "Why are you searching outside, your lover is in your own house? Put off your veil, my beautiful bride and look if you cannot see your lost lover" (Usborne 1966, p. 143). Although this exchange between the two lovers occurs at a specific point in the narrative (namely, when Rāṇjhā arrives at Hīr's marital home in the guise of a *yogī/jogī*), we could understand Rāṇjhā's exhortation as a lyrical instantiation of the Sufi leitmotif that the divine beloved abides immanently *with* the devotee, whose renewed orientation to the divine marks only a loving attention to the Other who is always already near.

Thus, we hear echoes of the motif of, firstly, Rādhā's union with her "friend" (*bandhu*) after tortured moments of separation, and, secondly, of the *gopīs'* dance with their beloved flute-player—these

moments of union varyingly instantiate, in specific instants of *felt* proximity, the foundational omnipresence of Kṛṣṇa. Rādhā's long sought-after union with Kṛṣṇa marks, paradoxically, the "coming together" of two lovers who are eternally conjoined, and for the *gopīs*, their enraptured swaying to the tunes of Kṛṣṇa's flute embodies their devotional at*tune*ment to the one who already dwells intimately in their hearts. If, in Shāh Husayn's verses too, the pangs of separation compel Hīr to travel outwards and across the hostile terrain to locate her beloved, Rāṇjhā reminds Hīr that there is "no-*where*" to go in *search* of the one who is "now-*here*" and indeed ever-present to her. Yet, even as Rāṇjhā draws Hīr's attention to his unmediated proximity to her ("your lover is in your own house"), he acknowledges his mysterious imperceptibility by adverting to the "veil" that blinds his lover to him. Elsewhere, Hīr thus implores Rāṇjhā, "don't veil yourself in mystery, Beloved" (Petievich 2007, p. 49), and interrogates him sternly, "you and I cannot be separate, so why so coyly obscure yourself?" (Petievich 2007, p. 51).

Similarly, embedded in Sufi discourse is the image of the divine "veils", which varyingly preclude the immediate perception of God in and through created beings. The seeker longs for moments of "unveiling" (*kashf*) in which "spiritual realities" are directly perceived and thus the divine is more truly apprehended (Geoffroy 2010, p. 7). Through the paradoxical character of the *virahiṇī*'s active quest to *find* the one who is immediately (though obscurely) before and with her, we identify a particular feature of the search for God, namely, the dialectic of hiddenness and presence is a quintessentially energising modality of the path itself. The fact that Hīr is "veiled" from Rāṇjhā is precisely what animates her arduous journeying *to* him (as Bābā Farīd highlights, the mark of the true devotee is that they *feel* the torturous pains of separation). We might say that these experiences of a "concentrated" experiential union (both the furtive encounters of Hīr and Rāṇjhā and the human-divine proximity in the moments of unveiling) are intensively focalised *felt* instantiations of the abiding state of a "general" ontological union. As Bulleh Shāh affirmed, Rāṇjhā dwells inseparably within Hīr anyway, and the divine is never straightforwardly "removed" from the human.

The moments of Hīr's "concentrated" union with Rāṇjhā, however, just like the experiences of "unveiling" (*kashf*) for the Sufi, can never be conclusively held on to, and Hīr must bear the pangs of separation even as she delights in the rapture of union ("all sorrows dispatched since that herder's been mine!" (Petievich 2007, p. 55)). Just as Hīr cannot experience forever the bliss of *felt* "concentrated" union with her beloved Rāṇjhā, each *gopī* who longs after Kṛṣṇa's own heart must be decisively disabused of the illusion that Kṛṣṇa is dancing solely with her and so of the misconception that her individual subjectivity has exclusively and exhaustively "encased" the divine reality. Hīr, like the paradigmatic lover of Kṛṣṇa, must come to inhabit the truth that the one whom she seeks *is* invariably present to her, but that this immutable presence emphatically transcends the logic of finite localization. The dialectic of joy and sorrow in love is thus a necessary concomitant of one's search for the elusive beloved who can never be finally "domesticated" or "contained" in one's firm grasp. If God is the supreme *other* who is yet intimately *near*, the experiential flames of separation and the joys of union dynamically modulate one another so that the archetypal *virahiṇī* is impelled to pursue her (seemingly) absent divine beloved even as she dwells intimately and inseparably with him.

## 5. Conclusions

On the religious landscapes of al-Hind, God is the constantly receding horizon towards whom pilgrims progress along pathways of purgative love, energised by their divine beloved who is intimately present to them on their agonising quests. The creative appropriations of the visceral intensities of the *virahiṇī* motif by Indo-Muslim poets typify the dynamically vibrant patterns of conceptual cross-fertilisation across some pre-modern "Hindu" and "Muslim" scriptural worlds and socio-cultural sensibilities. As she actively pursues the heart of the matter who is her divine beloved, she must concurrently undergo a transfiguration in the worldly matter of her heart. The prototypical *virahiṇī* enacts, in historic time, a microcosmic *re*formation of the macrocosmic God–human duality that opens up in cosmic time, and it is through the silent strength of her "active passivity" that she treads on the tortuous paths where worldly ruptures can be healed.

By thus exploring some of the ways that this literary trope is enacted across the *bhakti* and the Sufi religious milieus, we delineate certain thematic resonances and shared poetic imageries that concretise the finite seeker's search for the non-finite beloved. Crucially, the enthusiastic adoption by Punjabi Sufi poets of the *virahiṇī* topos should not be read as a careless conflation of two distinctive symbolic streams and theological traditions—rather, their compositions embody a distinctively "indigenised" form of Islamic piety, which draws on some key theo-aesthetic motifs of Hindu devotional literature in order to fashion a localized Sufi idiom.

Thus, we offer in this essay a specific instance of the *via media* that can facilitate a deeper understanding of agonistic patterns of imagining and inhabiting the world across Hindu and Indo-Muslim milieus. For far too long, the study of oppositions and exchanges across these milieus has been bedevilled—because of the pressures of both colonial inheritances and postcolonial conjunctures—by the ahistorical assumption that one must project *either* radical binaries *or* undifferentiated homogeneities. Instead, the *via media*, in the form of textually-grounded conceptual engagements, would not, on the one hand, reductively condense quotidian densities into monolithic oppositions between "Hinduism" and "Islam", and also would not, on the other hand, erase the socio-historical processes of active contestations through which idioms and affectivities continue to be received, reworked, and reconfigured. Such socio-political projections at the grassroots are, perhaps somewhat unwittingly, reflected in the hyper-compartmentalization of academic silos into *either* "Hindu Studies" *or* "Islamic Studies" (so that real-world figures such as Daulat Uzir Bahrām Khān, Mir Sayyid Manjhan, Amānat Rāy, and Rabindranath Tagore are neither *here* nor *there*). While these present-day disciplinary demarcations do have a salutary effect in generating systematic work on the fine-grained structures of specific texts, they can also deflect our attention from certain shared styles of being-*in*-the-world and belonging-*to*-the-world that continue to flourish, though again not without ongoing contestations, across various South Asian landscapes.

Thus, when the producers of the Bollywood movie *Pyaar Ishq Aur Mohabbat* (2001) were casting around for a title, it is possible that they did not accord any particular spiritual significance to the fact that these three words for love reflect diverse Indic roots and routes. However, as our essay demonstrates, this resonant triad (*pyār, 'ishq, muḥabbat*) is not a linguistic happenstance—in the *longue durée* of various Indic milieus, the seeker's path, structured by an active cultivation of desire for God, is poetically imagined as the human lover's longing for an absent human beloved. Through this literary motif and its distinctively gendered manifestations, the very character of desire for divinity receives an embodied dynamism and a visceral intensity. The popularity of these styles of invoking the God of love and the love of God across South Asian sociocultural spaces would suggest that the currencies of love, while they remain densely rooted in the scriptural economies of *bhakta* Hindus and Sufi Muslims, also possess a certain measure of exchangeability because of which they continue to be transferred across these religious horizons into the many marketplaces of the world.

This exchangeability is structured by the central paradox that is a leitmotif of this essay—the "absent" beloved for whom the *virahiṇī* yearns (and for whom she often embarks on a perilous pursuit) is yet always *with* her. The temporary separations of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa can never dissolve their primordial union, just as Hīr and Rāṇjhā remain bound to each other by divine writ even as they must suffer the torments of worldly distance in their conditions of existential fragility. Just as the archetypal lover of Kṛṣṇa finitely participates in the play (*rāsa-līlā*) that is eternally enacted on the cosmic stage, so too is the *virahiṇī* of the Punjabi Sufi imagination constantly engaged in a dynamic "sport" with the object of her love who variously reveals and conceals himself in enchanting ways that cannot be antecedently willed nor decisively grasped by the female lover. We might say that these divergent affective poles of unitive joy and lonesome anguish participate in, and also finitely recapitulate, the "meta-historical" modalities of blissful witness (*balā*) and agonised separation (*balā'*) that are enfolded archetypally in the pre-eternal covenantal moment. In both *bhakti* and Sufi devotional universes, this lyrical configuration of the spiritual path as a temporally unfolding playfulness underscores the intractable otherness of the

divine beloved, whose immutable presence to the human lover is felt precisely through the affective oscillations between the delights of intimate union and the ordeals of insufferable separation.

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