A heroine in the pangs of separation or a soul longing for the divine? Re-appropriated voices in the poetry of kathak dance repertoire

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Abstract

The paper explores the ambivalent nature of poems that are part and parcel of the kathak dance repertoire in the context of a changing system of dance patronage during the 19th and 20th centuries in North India. Through a textual analysis of selected thumrī songs, the author investigates the use of śṛṅgāra rasa (erotic sentiment) in this poetic genre in relation to its original, secular function and its interpretation in religious idioms. The comparison of traditional thumrīs with the compositions prevalent on the modern, classical dance stage shall underline a shift in the character of kathak performance (from romantic, sensual and intimate to devotional and impersonal). The attempts to locate thumrī in the shastric framework and to ‘purify’ the content of these poems from the imprints of its lineage with tawā’ifs culture is examined as part of the process of reinventing kathak in response to the tastes of a new class of patrons and performers and matching this art to the vision of Indian cultural heritage, propagated by nationalists.

Keywords: kathak, thumrī, Indian dance revival, nāyikā-bhedā, dance

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Kathak is regarded as one of several classical Indian dance forms. It emerged in the north of the subcontinent, under the influences of both Hindu and Muslim culture. Nowadays, the Islamic substratum is largely veiled. The kathak repertoire is dominated by stories and motifs from Hinduism, and its aesthetic conventions are set in the frame of Sanskrit aesthetic theories. In particular, the dance explores the motif of rās-līlā\(^1\) – the amorous dalliance of lord Krishna with cowherdesses (gopīs) – as well as his childhood pranks. These scenes are portrayed in a rather realistic way, mirroring the every-day life of an Indian village. The heroine (often termed as a nāyikā) is basically a folk woman, depicted in a relationship with her lover: waiting for him, thinking of him, meeting him, getting ready or going for a rendez-vous. The motif of rās-līlā appears in several parts of the kathak performance: from rhythmical ṭukrās, torās, and kavitts, through more expressive gats (gaits), to ṭhumrīs – lyrical compositions, developing the emotional layer of the story. In ṭhumrī, the body language is reinforced by rich, mimetic expression and vocal elaboration of the poem.

The erotic theme (śṛṅgār) in kathak performance appears to be ambiguous and multidimensional. Most contemporary kathak artists emphasise its religious significance, considering the theme solely as a metaphor for the relationship between a devotee (a women, often Radha) and the god (Krishna). They often refer to the rich corpus of bhakti poetry that has developed this symbolism. Apart from ṭhumrī, kathak dancers also perform to the verses of famous bhakti poets, like Kabir, Surdas, Tulsidas, or Mirabai, which emphasise the devotional understanding of the rās-līlā theme. Bhakti poetry has been included into the kathak repertoire around the middle of the twentieth century, whereas ṭhumrī constituted a part of it since the nineteenth century. The research on the evolution of the latter genre in the twentieth century indicates that there has been a tendency to exclude more sensual elements from ṭhumrī performance, and reintroduce the songs as a devotional art, matched to the context of modernity.\(^2\)

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1 If no other language is indicated, the transcribed Indian terms in this paper are mostly Hindi words. Some of the words derive from Sanskrit, but are in common use among kathak dancers and dance scholars. The quoted lyrics are predominantly in the Braj Bhasha dialect of Hindi.

The paper traces the parallel process in the context of kathak performance, focusing on thumrī songs, which accompanied the dance. I consider this shift as a symptom of a broader process of the ‘spiritualisation’ of kathak that constituted the dance revival since the 1930s. In order to examine the process in terms of kathak repertoire, I shall refer to selected examples of thumrī songs used in kathak performance and compare their interpretations in the changing, historical context. I aim to highlight the ways in which the sociocultural and political circumstances have triggered and determined the transformation of kathak performance from a form of secular entertainment to classical, “high art”, enriched with an aura of spirituality.

1 A history of re-appropriation

Kathak is recognised as one of the classical Indian dances, whereas thumrī is classified as semi-classical, or the light classical genre of hindustānī music. A number of dance critics and kathak dancers claim that this dance is a product of an unbroken, centuries-old tradition. According to popular historiographies, each classical Indian dance is rooted in the dance tradition, described in Sanskrit treatises on performing arts – particularly the Nāṭya-śāstra. At the same time, it is believed that kathak originated from a tradition of storytelling, transmitted by male performers, called kathakas, of an alleged Brahmin origin.³ At the beginning, these wandering bards would spread the Hindu epic stories through melo-recitation, movements and gestures, in temples and courtyards, and later also in the courts of Hindu rajas, and Mughuls.

The shift to Muslim courts (dated approximately sixteenth century) is usually considered to be the main factor of kathak secularisation. In order to respond to the sensibilities and tastes of Muslim audiences, the artists would master the techniques of pure dance that nowadays characterise this dance form: a series of pirouettes, fast footwork, and rhythmical improvisation. The Mughal courts are regarded as the environment of the ongoing synthesis of Hindu and Persian dance traditions, devotional art of kathakas, and entertainment in the form of performing arts, provided by courtesans. Some dance historians also point at the spread of bhakti, Sufism, Vaishnava cults, and performances of the ras tradition, as important influences shaping kathak.

The “Golden Era” of kathak is attributed to the reign of nawab Wajid Ali Shah (1847–1856), during which Lucknow flourished as a centre of culture and arts patronage. There are several hereditary families of male dancers credited for transmitting kathak up to the present day in the system of three main kathak “schools”: Lucknow, Jaipur and Banaras gharānā. In the case of Lucknow gharānā, on which I focus here, this function is attributed to only one clan – descendants of artists employed at the nawab’s court – brothers Kalka and Bindadin Maharaj. Both nawab Wajid Ali Shah and Bindadin Maharaj are also known as thumri composers, who popularised and refined its form. Three sons of Kalka: Achchhan, Lachchhu and Shambhu Maharaj, started to teach kathak to non-hereditary dancers. The son of Achchhan – Birju Maharaj is considered the greatest living master and the leading authority in determining the criteria for kathak authenticity.

The emphasis on the importance of hereditary clans of male teachers occurred along with a process of marginalising female dancers in kathak history: the courtesans called tawā’ifs (Ur. tawā’iif). Although they had contributed much to the development of dance and music in North India, nowadays many historians and artists deny that the tawā’ifs ever danced kathak. Besides, there are almost no thumri songs ascribed to female authors. The reason for the exclusion of courtesans as kathak artists lies in the broader context of sociocultural transformations, linked to the decolonisation and the accompanying cultural renaissance in India over the first half of the twentieth century.

From the end of the nineteenth century the status of dancers in South Asia had been gradually decreasing, partly due to the collapse of the former system of patronage, as well as the Anti-nautch campaign – the colonial propaganda – aimed at prohibiting institutions of temple danseuses (devadāsī), courtesans (tawā’ifs) and other dancing girls (generally termed by the British as “nautch”). Dance started to regain social respectability since the 1920s, thanks to the initiatives of Indian intellectuals, who relocated selected dance forms to new dance schools, and started to “purify” performing arts, to make

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4 nawab (Ur. nāwāb) – an honorific title granted to (usually Muslim) rulers who were provincial governors in the princely states in South Asia, subordinated to Mughal emperors. The kingdom of Oudh (Avadh) ruled by Wajid Ali Shah was annexed by British in 1856, and the nawab was exiled to Kolkata.

5 Some historians argue that Raigarh gharānā should be recognised as the fourth kathak school, as Raigarh was important centre of kathak patronage under the reign of raja Chakradhar Singh.
them acceptable for modern audiences. As demonstrated by a number of scholars (Matthew H. Allen, Pallabi Chakravorty, Avanthi Meduri, Uttara Asha Coorlawala), the Indian classical dance revival, denotes not only a process of breathing new life into the art, but a broader metamorphosis of many aspects of the tradition, so that it could be examined as its reinvention\textsuperscript{6}, or the invention of a new tradition.\textsuperscript{7} Among these aspects, the textual layer of the dance performance has undergone a significant shift. As is noticeable from the interviews with senior \textit{kathak} artists, formerly the dance and vocals were complementary to each other in the process of communication. Therefore, we can assume that along with the dance, songs – as an integral part of the performance – have been also refashioned, in response to new, social functions, ascribed to the classical Indian performing arts.

The distorted visions of \textit{kathak} history, discrediting \textit{tawā'ifs} as \textit{kathak} dancers, emerged together with the process of \textit{kathak} “classicisation”, formally launched in the 1950s in modern dance academies. The process denoted considerable changes in repertoire, technique, aesthetic conventions, social importance and system of training. The \textit{kathak} revival was marked by few specific tendencies that can be termed as hinduisation, sanskritisation\textsuperscript{8}, standardisation, institutionalisation, and democratisation.\textsuperscript{9} These tendencies were crucial for shaping the Indian national culture, and the concurrent construction of a national identity.\textsuperscript{10}

The classical dance renaissance was a project of Western-educated, middle class elites, intending to re-appropriate the art according to puritan values, as a tradition representing “high culture”, supposedly restored from the great past of India. New notions of female chastity, drawn from Victorian morality,

\textsuperscript{8} The concept of sanskritisation, introduced in sociology by Srinivas (1956) and Raghavan (1956), was used in dance anthropology in the context of \textit{bharatanatyam} ‘revival’ by Coorlawala (2004) to name the process of the incorporation of the Sanskrit aesthetics into the classical Indian dance. Similarly to \textit{bharatanatyam}, \textit{kathak} has been linked to old Sanskrit treatises, mostly \textit{Nāṭyaśāstra} and \textit{Abhinaya darpaṇa} through the implementation of certain conventions, aesthetic rules and nomenclature from these texts. Nowadays, the students of \textit{kathak} institutes learn about \textit{Nāṭyaśāstra} concepts in theory classes or from various manuals.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibidem.
pushed the institution of *tawā’ifs* towards the margins of society. Dancers belonging to this community embodied an unrespectable model of femininity. On this account, they were discredited as *kathak* inheritors, and replaced by upper-caste women from “good”, often Brahmin families. Performances were relocated to newly founded, public auditoria, and the training became formalised in dance schools, and academies, under the government patronage, in order to make education in *kathak* accessible to students from various, social groups.

The revivalists undertook an effort to standardise *kathak*, in order to adjust it to the vision of classical dance, propagated as an emblem of national heritage, founded on Sanskrit/Hindu legacy. These postulates corresponded to a romantic imagery of India, drawn from Orientalist discourse that crystallised a notion that the culture of India was ancient or refined, grounded in Hindu spirituality. Sanskrit aesthetic theory became a part of formal *kathak* education (leading to academic diplomas in dance), raising the status of the dance as a classical, sophisticated art. In succession, to bridge the existing gap between *kathak* technique and shastric conventions, Sanskrit nomenclature from old treatises has been introduced to name the postures, movements, gestures, mimetic expressions, and sentiments demonstrated in *kathak*. The subjects of the presentation started to be explained in terms of *rasa* theory\(^{11}\) and the classification of heroines (*nāyikā-bheda*)\(^{12}\), in reference to the *Nāṭya-śāstra*\(^{13}\).

\(^{11}\) The theory of *rasa* (skt. “essence, “taste”, “flavor”) – the key-concept of aesthetic experience in old Indian art theory, formulated in the *Nāṭya-śāstra*, and later commented by numerous Sanskrit theorists of arts. In the light of *Nāṭya-śāstra*, *rasa* is an “aesthetic flavour” evoked through presentation of corresponding emotions (skt. *bhava*) by a performer, regarded as the ultimate goal of the art. Most of the *Nāṭya-śāstra* editions enumerate 8 *rasas* (erotic, comic, pathetic, furious, heroic, terrible, odious, marvellous), while Abhinavagupta (c. 1000) adds the taste of tranquility.

\(^{12}\) *nāyikā-bheda* – a convention of presenting female characters in arts according to specified types. In the *Nāṭya-śāstra* heroines are classified into variety of types, on the basis of their age, social background, temperament, behaviour toward her lover, love experience, situation and emotions experienced in the amorous relationship. The convention is vividly explored in Sanskrit literature of *kāvya type*, Hindi poetry of *rīti* style, miniature paintings and performing arts.

\(^{13}\) *Nāṭya-śāstra* – is an important Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts, attributed to the legendary sage Bharata, compiled between 2nd century BC and 3rd century AD. It describes many aspects of stage productions (theatre, music and dance), including structure of the play, division of theatrical space, types of dramas, heroes and heroines, types of acting, body movements, mimes and gestures, costumes and make up, theory of aesthetic experience, and
To disconnect *kathak* from its previous, secular function in the courts and *koṭhās* (courtesans’ salons), artists started to suppress its erotic tone and smother it with devotional connotations. A similar tendency to emphasise the spiritual and religious dimension in the revival of *hindustānī* music has been traced by Janki Bakhle, as populist rhetoric of *bhakti* nationalism, propagated by Paluskar, whose initiatives aimed at the “recovery” of the sanctity and purity of Indian classical music. In dance, this objective was to be achieved by the modification of repertoire and the sacralisation of spaces for training and performance.

2 The purification of *kathak* performance

The tendencies to purify and sanctify were instrumental in the modification of the textual layer of *kathak*. Some poetical-musical genres (like *ġazals*) have been superseded by others (*bhajans*). In this process, *ṭhumrī* has partly lost its popularity in the *kathak* repertoire. Additionally, many poems have been rewritten in order to match the sensibilities of new patrons and audiences. Some of the lyrics have been changed, or reinterpreted in terms of devotionalism (*bhakti*). The manipulations in the content of *ṭhumrī* were facilitated by an ambiguity of the *śṛṅgāra* theme. Many erotic songs, depicting love between a man and a woman, or addressed to a male patron, could have been framed within Krishna mythology. By reworking ancillary means of expression, they could also gain a spiritual dimension. Especially in dance performance, such a reinterpretation could have been achieved by erasing all the seductive movements, gestures, mimes, and glances that were made by courtesans in order to reinforce the sensuality of the performance and stir the imagination of potential clients.

The new class of female performers were instructed not to move their hips, not to bite their lips and to avoid contact with the audience.

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15 For instance, placing the statues of gods (particularly Krishna and Siva Nataraja), performing *puja*, or invocation to gods on stage, setting national dance festivals in old temple sites.

The new generation of non-hereditary kathak dancers have also quit singing while dancing. Previously, songs were sung mainly by a dancer who used to enrich the lyrics with abhinaya (gestures and mimetic expressions) and voice modulation. In between the vocal sections, more dynamic elements of dance (especially footwork) were executed. Usually, the performance started from “seated abhinaya” – an artist would sing in a sitting position, demonstrating its poetic and symbolic nuances through glances and expressive gestures. Then, the tempo would pick up and the artist would start dancing. This style of enacting thumrī while sitting is still continued by senior gurus of Lucknow gharānā of kathak, but it is increasingly rare on stage.

The disconnection of the singer-dancer leaves less scope for improvisation. Now, a dancer has to subordinate his/her own bodily expression to the rhythm, dictated by the musicians, and vice versa. Actually, it would be extremely tiring for a performer to execute both elements in the limited time allotted to a modern dance show. Before the process of kathak classicisation, during all night private gatherings (mahfīl), an artist had plenty of time to perform and take breaks. In turn, due to the rich, slowly developing abhinaya, the spectators were happy to watch one good soloist over several hours. Moreover, abhinaya – being a subtle, intimate form of communication – can be appreciated only at a close distance from the performer. Consequently, larger auditoria required a dancer to convey the narrative through bodily movements rather than mime, so the dancers deliberately started to give up or limit abhinaya.

Furthermore, the former system of patronage allowed an adept to devote significant time to training in singing, dancing, playing instruments, composing poetry, and mastering abhinaya. This could not be fully recreated in modern dance academies, where dance classes have limited length. Modern female dance students often treat dance training as an additional accomplishment, not a main profession. This approach was also shaped by the Anti-nautch movement. The image of a woman both dancing and singing was too related to the figure of a tawā’if. A professional danseuse (earning a living from dance) was at that time still considered to be synonymous with a prostitute, so respectable ladies preferred to remain “amateur dancers” – earning from other professions, or being supported by their husbands.¹⁷ The

¹⁷ Nowadays, the situation is changing, and many dancers want to be regarded as professional dancers. Nevertheless, the ability to both sing and dance is vanishing in kathak. Dancers have no time to become fully accomplished in music, or vocal, so a singer and a dancer
practice of performing for free helps in refashioning kathak as not only a form of entertainment, but a kind of spiritual mission. On the other hand, the performers must have enough private or government funds to develop their career.

One of the kathak danseuses, who continues the old tradition of seated abhinaya, and singing to dance (including ḡazals) is Uma Sharma. She was, however, criticised for this practice by “kathak Queen” Sitara Devi, a daughter of the hereditary guru Sukhdev Maharaj. She complained that in this way, Sharma brings kathak “back to the brothel”.\textsuperscript{18} Other dancers, like Damayanti Joshi, decided to perform abhinaya only while standing, since the seated abhinaya was particularly stigmatised.\textsuperscript{19} A similar “cleansing” of ṭhumrī from the “seated abhinaya” was noticed in the world of hindustānī music. In the 1970s there were almost no female vocalists who would continue this practice in concert halls.\textsuperscript{20} Concerning the musical aspect of kathak performance, the disappearance of the accompanying sarangi – an instrument that has been also discarded for its association with tawā’if culture – has also been observed.

According to Sharma, Birju Maharaj and herself are the last artists who perform the “real kathak”, with its essential qualities of abhinaya.\textsuperscript{21} Various dance historians also tried to re-evaluate the art of seated abhinaya, claiming that it has been evolved by Shambhu Maharaj.\textsuperscript{22} The presence of a dancing male on stage neutralised all associations with the tawā’ifs. It was only the female body that could be read as sexual and sinful. This may explain why Sharma provoked controversy for singing ḡazals, or presenting “seated abhinaya”, while the same elements, exposed by Birju Maharaj, with a face smeared with sandal paste, are highly appreciated by the audience (see picture 1).

Along with the shifting emphasis on bhakti mood, a gradual decrease in the popularity of ḡazals has also been observed. Nowadays, ḡazals, expressing Muslim sensibilities, and “relegated” to film or pop-culture\textsuperscript{23}, are almost out of fashion as an accompaniment for kathak (see picture 2). Mean-

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{18} Arjun Mishra, pers., conv., Lucknow, April 11, 2015.
\bibitem{19} Damayanti Joshi: Manaka’s daughter, Materials of Sparrow, 1998, p. 20.
\bibitem{20} P. Manuel, pers. conv., New York, February 24, 2016.
\bibitem{21} U. Sharma, pers. conv., New Delhi, March 27, 2014.
\bibitem{22} S. Kothari, op. cit., p. 33.
\bibitem{23} P. Manuel, Thumri, ghazal..., p. 249.
\end{thebibliography}
while, \textit{ṭhumrī} – refashioned as a light-classical musical genre – is still taught to students and performed to dance, especially by exponents of Lucknow \textit{gharānā}. The problem of their association with \textit{kοṭhā} culture could be resolved through a manipulation of the content, which was a manageable task due to the ambiguity of the Radha-Krishna theme, suggestive language, and possibility for various ways of interpretation in \textit{ṭhumrī}.

Figure 1: Birju Maharaj illustrating the motif of \textit{cher-chāṛ}, New Delhi 2015 (photo by author).
3 The ambiguity of śṛṅgāra

The love stories of Krishna and the gopīs (Radha in particular) are popular motifs both in rīti and bhakti poetry. The former is considered highly sensual and secular, while the latter – metaphorical and spiritual. This may explain why rīti poetry24, exploring human love (skt. laukika śṛṅgāra), found no place in the kathak repertoire, in spite of its strong association with court culture. Instead, in reference to bhakti poetry, the motif of the gopīs’ longing for Krishna prolonged thumrī and kathak as an exposure of divine love (skt. alaukika śṛṅgāra). The poets of bhakti tend to identify themselves with the heroine, as a symbol of a devotee (bhakta), or an individual soul (jīvātmā), yearning for union with the Universal Soul (paramātmā), personified as Krishna. The same perspective has been taken by kathak performers. By enacting the bhakti songs, inducing religious feelings, the dancers could raise their social acceptance.25 To clarify the difference, dance critics, historians, and artists themselves tend to highlight the bhakti dimension in kathak. “It is worth noting that a major lot of the Kavya, used as complimentary to nṛtya,

24 rīti poetry – Hindi poetry, produced between 1700–1900, specified by rich use of poetic figures, borrowed from Sanskrit poetry theory and dominated by erotic themes (śṛṅgāra).
is Bhakti oriented, and not Riti oriented” – argues Chetna Jyotishi Beohar\textsuperscript{26}, the former director of Kathak Kendra. She expounds:

Krishna is a wonderful blend of alaukika plus laukika līlas... a disciplined expression of human behavior is evident in plenty in Kṛṣṇa’s character. If one visualizes the relationship between Gopīs and Kṛṣṇa in the light of Jīvātmā-Paramātmā philosophy, there remains absolutely no reason for doubt about the orderliness of behavior between the two. Because then, the emotions become boundless, and the so-called Laukika and societal controls become thin. \textsuperscript{27}

The court culture in nineteenth century North India fostered the patronage and production of \textit{rīti} poetry, in which \textit{śṛṅgāra rasa} had rather secular connotations. Nevertheless, the academic approach to the \textit{bhakti-rīti} division, shared by Snell is to locate both moods on a continuum, recognising that the devotional was never fully replaced by the mannerist, and that, in any case, the line of distinction may be difficult to trace.\textsuperscript{28} In my opinion, this situation is relevant to the tradition of \textit{ṭhumrī} in \textit{kathak} dance, especially if we consider the plethora of communities performing these songs, and various contexts of its presentation.

The motif of \textit{śṛṅgāra} in a dance performance could have already raised divergent associations in the court milieu, allowing various ways of decoding the message. Male \textit{kathaks}, who are believed to perform more devotional pieces, could have used the songs as a vehicle to praise Krishna and Radha, whereas courtesans could have aimed to evoke erotic sentiments through the same stories, in order to attract clients. Taking into consideration their profession and religious affiliation (the majority of the \textit{tawā’if}s were Muslims), we can assume that the courtesans must have shared a secular approach toward the Krishna stories, and they appreciate the artistic qualities of the theme. Peter Manuel identifies \textit{ṭhumrī} and \textit{ġazal} performance in the nineteenth century as primarily a courtesans’ repertoire, designed to accompany \textit{kathak} dance.\textsuperscript{29} The investigation of old \textit{ṭhumrī} content, along with the social context of the performance, indicates that many of \textit{ṭhumrīs} were dance-

\textsuperscript{26} Ibidem, p. 124.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibidem, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{29} P. Manuel, \textit{Thumri, ghazal, ...}, p. 243.
songs of seductive character, mainly performed by dancing girls, during mah-fils.

As pointed out by Lalita du Perron, although \textit{thumrī} usually expresses the voice of women, there are few \textit{thumrī} lyrics, ascribed to female composers.\textsuperscript{30} There are, however, some records of female authors of these songs.\textsuperscript{31} Apart from courtesans, there was a group of male artists, who composed \textit{thumrī} songs, using the agnomen ‘Piya’. Nowadays, they are mostly credited for the authorship of \textit{thumrī}. Some songs are believed to be written by \textit{nawāb} Wajid Ali Shah, under his pen-name ‘Akhtar Piya’. We can suspect that, when the \textit{tawā'if}s were marginalised, male dancers could have adopted their songs, and included them in their own repertoire, slightly reworking their content, and emphasising the \textit{bhakti} element.

Both \textit{kathak} and \textit{thumrī} are believed to have been developed in nineteenth century Lucknow, particularly due to the patronage of Wajid Ali Shah.\textsuperscript{32} The granduncle of Birju Maharaj – Bindadin Maharaj – apart from being a great dancer, is considered a prominent \textit{thumrī} composer. The compositions ascribed to Bindadin are most frequently performed by present-day \textit{kathak} dancers. It is commonly believed that he wrote around 1500 \textit{thumrī} songs\textsuperscript{33}, although \textit{kathak} dancers perform a limited number of compositions. According to Jyotishī, only 30–40 \textit{thumris} of Bindadin are in vogue, and Birju Maharaj himself performs \textit{abhinaya} on just a few selected compositions.\textsuperscript{34} Contemporarily, \textit{kathak} dance is enacted with \textit{thumrī} mostly by Lucknow \textit{gharānā} exponents. Birju Maharaj, and his son Jai Kishan Maharaj, continue to compose such songs.

\section{The aesthetics of \textit{thumrī}}

Generally, \textit{thumrī} songs are short compositions, written in Braj Bhasha, designed for solo presentation and interpretation. They can be elaborated by dancers and singers. On the one hand, we can distinguish \textit{nṛtya pradhāna}

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\item \textsuperscript{30} L. du Perron, \textit{Hindi Poetry}...
\item \textsuperscript{31} P. Chakravorty, pers. conv., Swarthmore, February 17, 2016.
\item \textsuperscript{32} There are, however, many other theories about earlier origin of \textit{thumrī}, linking the genre with both Sanskrit texts, and folk traditions.
\item \textsuperscript{33} L. Garg, \textit{Kathak nṛtya}, Hathras 1969, p. 30. According to Khokar, Bindadin composed around 150 \textit{thumris}.
\item \textsuperscript{34} C. Jyotishī, op. cit., p. 128.
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ṭhumrī, used in the performances of kathak dancers, and courtesans, who conveyed the poetic content through body movements, glances and mimetic expression. On the other hand, there are gāna pradhāna ṭhumrī, rendered by vocalists, using interpretation and manipulation of voice. Both variants share common themes.\(^{35}\)

According to another categorisation, the compositions can be classified as bandiś ṭhumrī and bol banāv (or bol banao) ṭhumrī. Both bandiś and bol banāv ṭhumrī primarily evoke śṛṅgāra rasa. Bandiś\(^{36}\) focuses on playful, light subjects, like Krishna’s pranks and teasing cowgirls. These motifs provide narrative more suitable for fast and rhythmic presentation through dance movements and gestures. Bandiś ṭhumrī was developed by courtesans in the Lucknow court. Bindadin Maharaj also mainly composed this type of ṭhumrī. Bol banāv\(^{37}\) ṭhumrīs are slower, with shorter lyrics, devoid of coquetry, intended to be performed in a more poignant way. It emphasises melodic improvisation over suggestive gestures and text. As a vehicle for profound, emotional expression, it explores the motifs of loneliness and separation from a beloved (viraha). This style of ṭhumrī has been developed in Benares, under stronger folk influences.

As pointed out by Peter Manuel and Lalita du Perron, the thematic scope of ṭhumrī themes in the eighteenth century was broader than the contemporary repertoire, including both religious and obscene material, reflecting the social life of courtesans. More frivolous compositions seemed to disappear from the modern repertoire, or they have been “re-appropriated” by replacing “vulgar” words with neutral ones. Bandiś ṭhumrī gradually lost its popularity, and was replaced by the more abstract and slower bol banāv ṭhumrī. In the context of kathak, bandiś ṭhumrī is still performed, as the predominant form of Bindadin’s legacy. Nevertheless, it is often introduced as devotional compositions in kathak performance. The motif of viraha is explained as a metaphor of an individual soul yearning for union with the divine (para-mātma).\(^{38}\)

In terms of textual layer, ṭhumrīs are rather simple lyrics, mostly lacking in originality, using the same, conventional motifs and phrases. The ambiguity inherent in the words, or a theme of a song, provides a space for creative

\(^{35}\) Ibidem, p. 126.

\(^{36}\) bandiś – lit. “composition”, “structure”, “tying”, “limitation”, “a pattern (of music)”.

\(^{37}\) bol banāv – musically conveying the same sentiment as the words convey.

\(^{38}\) N. Joshi, Compositions of Maharaj Bindadin, “Sangeet Natak Akademi Bull.” 15–16, April 1960, p. 34.
elaboration of the text through vocal, *abhinaya*, gestures and movements. Therefore, the art of *ṭhumrī* can be fully appreciated only on stage, where the performer can extract the multiple layers of meanings. This polysemy is not limited to the aforementioned *śṛṅgāra* theme, but also occurs in other, secular motifs. We can point to it in the exemplary *ṭhumrī*, ascribed to Wajid Ali Shah:

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\text{Father, I’m leaving my parental home.} \\
\text{The palanquin is lifted by four (water-)carriers} \\
\text{What’s mine, what’s not mine – it’s all left behind.}^{39}
\]

There are at least three possible interpretation of this song. Literally, the lyrics speak of a bride, leaving her home in a palanquin. On a symbolical level, it can depict a funeral procession. On a different political level the *ṭhumrī* evokes the historical moment of the annexation of Oudh by the British colonisers, who forced the *nawāb* to leave Lucknow and move to Kolkata\(^{40}\). The event is invoked in another *ṭhumrī* ascribed to the *nawāb*:

\[
\text{At the time of leaving Lucknow,} \\
\text{After what happened to Ali} \\
\text{In every palace a *begum* was weeping} \\
\text{As I depart, the world passes away.}^{41}
\]

The motif of separation is articulated from a female perspective, in relation to a precisely indicated lover – a secular patron, a *nawāb* himself, who is both the author of the lyrics, and an addressee of the love message. The vocabulary reflects the reality of his court and harem, called “the palace of fairies” (*parīyoṃ kā khānā*).

\[
\text{Go Fairy, bring Wajid Ali Shah} \\
\text{I will be your handmaiden then} \\
\text{Nothing is pleasing without Akhtar Piya}^{42} \\
\text{Take my news [to him].}^{43}
\]

---


41 jab choṛ cale lakhnaū nagāri / tab hāl-i ali par kyā gujāri / mahal mahal mem begam rove / jab ham gujare duniyā gujari (P. Banerjee, op. cit., p. 33), transl. by author.

42 Pen name of Wajid Ali Shah.

43 jā tū pari vājid ali šāh ko là de / hoūṃgi terī cerī re / akhtar piyā bina kuch nahiṃ bhāve / le jā sandeś hamāra re (Ibidem), transl. by author.
The *thumris* attributed to Wajid Ali Shah use many conventional motifs from old Indian literature (both Sanskrit and “folk”), such as the figure of a messenger, or a storm, disturbing the heroine on her way to her beloved. The sensual aspect of *viraha* seems to be overwhelming, due to overt allusions to a sexual reunion.

Lightning keeps flashing,
How can I reach your bed, oh Dear?
Thunder roars, heart suffers (shakes in fear)
I had sent news to Akhtar Piya.\(^{44}\)

Some songs have a personal, romantic tone, sometimes overtly erotic, exposing a woman’s desires, emphasised by suggestive *abhinaya* in a performance. More sensual depiction of *viraha* appears in *thumris* ascribed to courtesans, like Begam Akhtar (who was also skilled in dance).

You woke me up from my dream.
When I was young and unripe
my lover took me to his village.
Now, when I’m passionately missing him,
he has gone to a foreign land.\(^{45}\)

Nature is often the witness of the heroine’s state of mind. Natural phenomena, like rain, singing of birds, or changing seasons, intensify her moods:

The season of rain is my enemy.
Clouds roar in the month of Asarh
My beloved has gone to a foreign land.
The peacock, papiha, frog, and chatak twitter.
Friend, I cannot stand the pangs of separation now,
As if my heart is broken.\(^{46}\)

---

\(^{44}\) *camak camak camke bijariyā / kaise ke āum piyā torī sejariyā / bādar gajre jiyyā tarse (larje) / akhtar piyā sang bheji khabariyā* (P. Banerjee, op. cit., p. 32–33; Maya Tak, *Thumri aur kathak nrtya*, p. 98), transl. by author.

\(^{45}\) *sovat nind jagāe ho / jab maiṃ rahlī bārī na bhārī / tab saīyān lā gavan / jab maiṃ bhal bār taras ke / tab saīyān calā bides* (P. Manuel, *Thumri in Historical..., p. 22), transl. by author.

\(^{46}\) *barṣa rūt bairī hamāre / mās asāṛh ghaṭā ghana garajat / piyu perdes sidhāre / mor, papihā, dādar, cātak, piyu piyu karat pukāre / ab na sahat sakhi catur birah duḥkh nikarat prāṇ hamāre* (P. Banerjee, op. cit., p. 48), transl. by author.
Similar imagery of a messenger and nature in the depiction of viraha can be found in the Bindadin ṭhumrīs. The addresser of a love message is often Śyām – “the Dark One” – a term that recalls an association of Krishna, bringing the poem to a more metaphorical, devotional level.

May someone go and convey the message:
Since he has gone, he hasn’t even asked about me
I cannot stand the arrow of separation
I passed rainy season without seeing you
Binda, I cannot live without meeting Śyām
May someone go and tell (him).47

Some courtesans also took the perspective of Radhika in the performance. An example is a ṭhumrī, sung by a Muslim courtesan, Gauhar Jaan:

O traveller, just tell Girdhāri (Krishna) when you see him
That Radha has no more tears, has he forgotten Braj?
Come to me Sāṃvariya,48 let me embrace you
Your eyes are full of liquid
Whomsoever you gaze upon, you control
I can find no peace...
Your eyes are full of liquid.49

A similar motif of charming eyes, which takes away the whole peace and dream of a mistress, is found in a ṭhumrī created by a male, Muslim composer, Saeed Khan:

Your eyes are full of charm
(I have) no sleep at night, no peace in the day
I toss and turn, day and night.50

---

47 jāy kou kahāṃ, jāy itnā sandeśvā koi kaho / jabse gaye morī sudh hū na linī / birahā ke bān ham se nā saho/ barsan jo bīte daras bin / bindā bin mile Syām hamse nā raho / jāy koi kaho (Ibidem, p. 45–46), transl. by author.
48 Sāṃvariya = “one with dark skin” (Krishna).
49 are pathik girdhāri sun itni kahiyo ter / dig jhar layi rādhika ab brij bhūlat pher / ā ja sāṃvariya tohe garava lagā do / ras ke bhare tore nain, sāṃvariya / ras ke bhare tore nain / jehi chitavat tehi bas kari rākhat / nāhi pade maika cain sāṃvariya / ras ke bhare tore nain (V. Sampath, op. cit., p. 283; L. du Perron, Hindi Poetry..., p. 168), transl. by author.
Another thumrī by the same poet recalls the scenery of Braj region, indicating Krishna as the reason for viraha. The thumrī was often sung by Shambhu Maharaj, who generally favoured Khan’s compositions over Bindadin’s (his uncle) songs. He found them more proper for a longer elaboration of abhinaya, so that he could develop the first verse over an extended period:

In which alley has Śyām gone?
I’ve searched Gokul, I’ve searched Brindaban
I’ve searched all over the four pilgrimage sites,
Oh dark one, Oh my love.51

As may be noticed, the motif of viraha in the old corpus of thumrī often uses the figure of Krishna and gopi, drawn from Vaishnava metaphoric. Whether it had been performed by a Hindu bhakta, or a Muslim courtesan, most thumris present an image of a woman longing for union with her beloved. She has no peace, cannot sleep, thinking of him day and night, as if he has cast a spell on her. The ambiguity of viraha provides a space of double meaning through which the performer could negotiate his/her own identity: as a devotee, as a women in love, or as a seductress. Vidya Rao explains the parallel ambiguity of the songs, sung by courtesans and other performing communities, in various contexts:

... the immediate performing context, the identity of the performer, as well as that of the listeners, determines its intension, inflection, and reception. The same Dadra sung by a tawaif in a Mujra, or by the same tawaif at an urs festival in the dargah or shrine of a sufi saint is, each time, inflected differently. Sung by a ‘modern’ artist, at a sammelan, or sung at the mehfil by a male ustad – the Dadra reveals different meanings and possibilities of reception.52

In fact, the Muslim tawā’ifs sometimes took Hindu names, probably when they performed for Hindu spectators. Similarly, they could elaborate the rāslīlā theme, merely as an aesthetic motif, without any intention to raise religious feelings. This approach is still shared by some Muslim exponents of

51 kaun gāli gayo Śyām / gokula dhūṃḍhī brindāban dhūṃḍhī / dhūṃḍh phīrī caraṃ dhāma / sāvariyyā saiṃyāṃ (Text and transl. L. du Perron, Hindi Poetry..., p. 139).
Skiba, A heroine in the pangs of separation...

kathak. For instance, Rani Khanam perceives the theme of rās-līlā as an integral part of kathak tradition, and does not refrain from the artistic development of this motif.\textsuperscript{53} Such an attitude can also mirror the formerly existing fluidity of cast and religion, especially in terms of artistic creativity. The thematic scope was circulated among various communities. Certain conventions of presenting the motif are still reproduced by contemporary artists. In the following example of viraha, in the ṭhumrī composed by Jaykishan Maharaj, one can notice recurrent metaphors, similes, conventional motifs and phrases, known from the old corpus of texts.

I have no peace without you, Samvariyā
How to pass this night without you?
I have no peace without you

My uneasy heart struggles night and day
I never find contentment
Days and nights I am staring at the road, hoping to see you there
My eyes are petrified
I have no peace without you

My mind is agitated by the separation
There is nothing pleasing at the courtyard of my house
Servant, I am beside myself with weeping
Eyes are yearning to see you
I have no piece without you.\textsuperscript{54}

Some of the songs present the traditional topic in an innovative way. For instance, Jaykishan Maharaj has juxtaposed the two leading thumrī motifs of viraha and cher-chāṛ(teasing of gopīs) in one song. Longing for reunion with Krishna, a gopi recollects all his mischievous deeds and pranks that constitute a motif of cher-chāṛ:

Since he has gone, he has not taken account of me
Why he does so for my love?

\textsuperscript{53} Rani Khanam, pers. conv., New Delhi, April 2, 2015.
\textsuperscript{54} bin tore nāhī cain samvariyā / kāse kaṭe tere bin ye rain / bin tore nāhī cain // vyākul manvā tarpat nisadin / kabhun na pāve cain / bāṭ takūṃ nis din main tori / pathrāye more ye nain / bin tore nāhī cain // virah se vyākul morā manvā/ mohe nā bhāve ghar āṃgnvā / dās ye āṃsū ro ro hāre / dekhan cāheṃ nain / bin tore nāhī cain (J. Maharaj, Mādhurya vol. I, n.d.), transl. by author.
Who will stop me on the way now?
Who will break my water jug now?
Who will disturb my daily routine?
My agitated heart finds no calm
Since he has gone, he has not taken account of me

Listen to me, oh flute, I will never rival with you
Even if you stay forever with Mohan
Servant, I am spiritless without Krishna,
I only hope / desire to meet him
Since he has gone, he has not taken account of me.\textsuperscript{55}

5 When a woman says no...

The motif of \textit{cher-chāṛ} prevails in the \textit{ṭhumrīs} ascribed to Bindadin Maharaj. These songs illustrate a number of scenes: Holi celebrations, love of Krishna and Radha, \textit{gopīs’} yearning for Krishna. Some of the songs are composed in pairs (\textit{jora}), demonstrating the complex, emotional states of the cowherdesses. While in first part they are teased by Krishna, in the second part, they take a role of the aggressor.\textsuperscript{56} This is exemplified in a \textit{ṭhumrī} depicting the motif of \textit{panghat} – women walking with a pot to the riverside, or a well. Krishna often disturbs them and harasses them on a way – breaking their pot by throwing a stone, pulling their veil, holding their hands, etc. One day, in revenge, the \textit{gopīs} grabbed Krishna and made fun of him, dressing him as a woman.

See, Śyām was walking down the road,
As I was going to fetch water
I saw naughty Śyām there
He was looking and smiling mischievously, disturbing my mind
Suddenly he came and jerked my veil
He embraced me and grasped my body
Walking down the road...

\textsuperscript{55} jab se gaye morī sudh hu na linhī / kāhe aiso prīt ve kinhī / koū roke ab morī dagariyā / koū phoṛe ab morī gagariyā / koū ab nit ki rār macāe / vyākul manvā dhīr na pāe / jab se gaye morī sudhhu na linhi // sun bansī tose kabahu na lārībe / cāhe sadā mohan saṅg rahibe / krṣṇ binā dās kachu nāhi / ās milan ki abbhi hai bākī / jab se gaye mori sudhahu na linhi (J. Maharaj, op. cit.), transl. by author.

\textsuperscript{56} N. Joshi, op. cit, p. 33.
Let’s seize Krishna today,
and make him a woman,
Let’s give him nose rings and plait him a braid
Let’s put a bindi on his forehead and dress him in a sari
Binda says: he spreads miraculous beauty.57

Krishna teases the gopīs of Brindavan, especially when they go to the bank of Yamuna, to fill water-jugs. He also steals their clothes when they bathe in the river. The spring celebration of the Holi festival provides another opportunity for men to harass girls. These scenes are depicted in a sub-genre of ṭhumrī, called horī.

How can I go to Jamuna to fetch water?
the sounds of tambourine, mridang and vina are reverberating
today Braj celebrates Holi, Nand is playing (red) colours with gopīs
He rubs red powder into their faces, he shakes their limbs violently
He embraces them and kisses them forcibly
Binda, today Śyām is surrounded by gopīs.58

The motif of cheṛ-chāṛ usually illustrates a situation, in which a woman is afraid that her reputation might be ruined because of the indecent behaviour of her lover. Radha is married, so she has to hide her true love feelings for Krishna, especially in front of the other villagers and her family members. Therefore, she rebukes Krishna, even though, deep in the heart, she is happy about meeting him.

All the men and women are looking,
you have no shame
Why are you always leering so?

58 jal jamunā bharan kaise jāūṃ āj / macī dhūm bajat ḍhap mṛdaṅg bin / khele nand ko lāl horī braj meṃ āj / mukh mije bhal rori aṅg det jhakjhorī / gahi garvā lagāye munh cūme bārājorī / binda śyām gher lino sakhin āj (N. Joshi, op. cit., p. 35), transl. by author.
I have to go now, I will meet you at night, we will stay together and I’ll listen to you.
Let me go home, and come at night,
If my mother-in-law hears us, she will abuse me.\(^{59}\)

As noted by Manuel, the scenes of meeting a beloved in secret can reflect folk life reality, in which arranged marriages were an obstacle for true-love relationships. The beloved is usually referred by *piyā*, *bālam*, *saiyyān*, or *sajjan* – which are all ambiguous terms, meaning both a husband and a lover.\(^{60}\) When he is addressed as *sāma*, *ghan*, *girdhāri*, *kānha*, *hari*, *manmohan*, or *rasiyā* – , the identification with Krishna is clear. The exhortation of a heroine may be also subversive, depending on punctuation that is blurred, or manipulated in a performance:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Don’t touch me, don’t touch me, don’t touch me, my dear / Or:} \\
& \text{Touch me, won’t you?} \\
& \text{Let go, let go, don’t break my bangle.} \\
& \text{All my sisters-in-law will argue with me.} \\
& \text{All the women of Braj will scold me.} \\
& \text{Why did you tear my sari? Leave my } aṃcāl!^{61}
\end{align*}
\]

Depending on where the coma falls, we can consider two possible interpretations of the phrase\(^{62}\):

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{mohe cheṛo mat, jāo saīyān = Don’t tease me, go away, dear} \\
& \text{mohe cheṛo, mat jāo saīyān = Tease me, but do not leave me, dear}
\end{align*}
\]

The negative Hindi particles *mat* or *na* can be placed both before and after the conjunctive verb, so a comma clarifies the conjunction when there are two verbs in the same line. The modulation of voice and *abhinaya* can add a lot to the meaning of words. There are often no commas in the text, so the message shall be decoded in reference to other verses. For example, the general message in the following *ṭhumrī* of Birju Maharaj, can suggest perverse incentive on the part of a *gopi*:

\[\text{(P. Manuel, *Thumri in...*, p. 18), transl. by author.)}\]

\[\text{(L. du Perron, *Hindi Poetry...*, p. 190), transl. by author., } aṃcāl = \text{the endpiece of sari}\]

\[\text{(Ibidem, p. 15.)}\]

\[\text{(Ibidem, p. 191.)}\]
Skiba, A heroine in the pangs of separation...

Touch Śyām do not grasp my arms
I may forget myself (lose consciousness/purity) when I come toward you
my body shudders, my caution is stricken with fear
I experience unknown pleasure
Touch, touch body, irrigate mind
stay in my eyes, do not leave mind
I am frightened without Brijśyām, oh Friend
I spend a night, palpitating in agony.63

6 Kathak and nāyikā-bheda

Some artists and theorists stress the relevance of the depiction of heroines in kathak and thumrī to the eight types of heroines (skt. aṣṭanāyikā-bheda), described in the Nāṭyaśāstra64. The classification of thumrī themes according to a model of aṣṭanāyikā-bhed is propagated by singers like Naina Devi and Rita Gangooly.65 Many writers (Projesh Banerjee, Madhukar Anand, C. Jyotishi, Anita Sen, P. Manuel) also describe kathak repertoire and thumrī in reference to this classification, attributing a specific type of nāyikā to a particular song. Such categorisation of thumrī is, however, problematic. There is an absence of some types of nāyikās in thumrī, and some of the depicted heroines do not easily conform to a particular type of nāyikā from Nāṭyaśāstra. The portrayal of a mistress can be convergent with a few of these types since in one composition, a heroine could experience several emotional states.

Jyotishi reveals that senior gurus were not acquainted with shastric nomenclature and classification, and used their own descriptive terms in Hindi to refer to a depicted heroine. They illustrated a wider variety of female features, including age and social status. From the several typologies of heroines

65 P. Manuel, Thumri in Historical..., p. 10.
described in Nāṭyaśāstra, contemporary kathak artists and theorists refer almost solely to the aṣṭanāyikā bheda – indicating mostly the states in which a woman finds herself in relation to her lover. Such a selection of motif may be explained by the fact that these criteria seems to be the most neutral, and suitable to the puritan tastes of modern audiences. Other classifications included in Nāṭyaśāstra, based on social background, age, temperament, natural (sexual) disposition, or the manner in which the king treats the ladies of his harem, seem to be avoided in kathak.

Nowadays, only four types of heroine (khaṇditā – “one enraged with her lover”, abhisārikā – “one going to secretly meet her lover”, virahotkaṇṭhitā – “one distressed by separation” and rūpagarvitā – “one proud of her own beauty”) are presented in thumrī dance performance. Students of Kathak Kendra are taught only these songs, expressing the feelings of a young girl (mugdhā), characterised by modesty, purity, shyness, sweetness, and physical charms. The classification does not emphasise the four stages of youth specified in Nāṭyaśāstra in terms of sexual attributes (lips, cheeks, thighs and breasts), temperament and level of excellence in sexual intercourse. There are also no depictions of gaṇikā/samānyā (prostitute or courtesan) in kathak. Elder women, or courtesans, are often depicted in literature as proud and aware of their sexual charms, and these features might have been regarded as unsuitable for a chaste woman to enact.

The pangs of unrequited love are considered to be a better theme for long elaboration than the joys of union, which are almost absent from thumrī verses (especially in bol banāv thumrī). Manuel argues that the dominance of viraha in thumrī may reflect the generality of such circumstances in social reality, where lovers are often separated for economic reasons, arranged marriages, customs, or lack of privacy for themselves in a house. Illegal love (such as between Krishna and Radha) can be idealised as being more true. Courtesans in particular explored this theme, as they rarely entered into formal relations with their beloved.

Apart from the state of separation, there are other kinds of unrequited love, depicted in thumrī and kathak, which are also reinterpreted according to the nāyikā typology.

Why have you come to my house
Having spent the night with co-wife (my rival)

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66 C. Jyotishi, op. cit., p. 130.
67 P. Manuel, Thumri in Historical..., p. 17.
Your red-tainted eyes tell lies
Don’t fall at my feet for forgiveness
Go and stay at her abode
Don’t talk to me
Binda says, I am burning within, but
He doesn’t pay attention.68

This imagery resembles an image from khaṇḍitā nāyikā – a heroine angry with her lover, after discovering his infidelity. An ideal heroine is expected to reproach her beloved with anger that metaphorically means her total subordination to God. When a married heroine secretly goes to meet her lover, it is also automatically understood as a metaphor for the soul, as outlaw relationships are socially unrespectable, so only such an interpretation is acceptable for a modern Indian audience.

As the exact shastric framework has been introduced into kathak by new kinds of performers, the illustration of the particular emotional state of a heroine seems to correspond more to the Sanskrit aesthetic conventions. Moreover, the visual depiction of the lyrics on stage often resembles popular representations of the nāyikā motif in Indian miniature paintings (see picture 3).

Figure 3: Rani Karna Group presentation of the various emotional states of the heroine (nāyikā) in the Khajuraho Dance Festival 2015 (photo by author).

68 kāhe ko mere ghar āye ho / prītap tum rain sohat sang jāge / nainā ratnāre / paiyāṃ na paro ab pyāre kāhe ko / unhi ke ghar raho / jāvo nahiṃ bolo mujhse / bindā suno nahiṃ yah mane / jiyā jāre, kāhe ko. (N. Joshi, op. cit., p. 37), transl. by author.
An example is a thumrī created by Jai Kishan Maharaj, illustrating the motif of a heroine on her way to meet her lover, modelled on the abhisārikā type:

In the madness she goes to see her beloved
She puts a bindu on her forehead, earrings, and garland on her neck
anklet on her feet, bracelets on her hands.
The thought of reunion with her lover makes her smiling inside
In the madness she goes to see her beloved
Furtively, hiding herself from all those who are awaken
Opens the door with trembling heart
The passionate woman takes a lamp in her hand
In the madness she goes to see her beloved
Seeing flashing lightings, torrents of rain,
And darkness, her heart is beating laud
A venomous snake crosses her way
Servant, she got pierced by thorns,
In the madness she goes to see her beloved.69

Such an application of Sanskrit aesthetic theories reflects the efforts to standardise kathak, especially in accordance with the Nātyaśāstra rules. In kathak, the reinterpretation of śṛṅgāra in terms of bhakti went hand in hand with the “sanskritisation” of the dance. Analogous initiatives for incorporating rules from Sanskrit aesthetic theories can be noticed in the course of thumrī modernisation, aimed at disassociating the genre from koṭhā’s culture, and bringing its respectability to the national stage. In fact, many conventions that seem to originate from Sanskrit aesthetics could have equally been imported from folk tradition, such as the motif of viraha. Hereditary performers incorporated a variety of songs from the regional, village repertoire.

The main language of thumrī is Braj bhasha – a leading dialect of old Hindi poetry, spoken in North India, associated with the Krishna bhakti

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69 piyā milan so cali bāvari / bendi bhāl kundal gae mālā / pag nāpur kar kangan dārā piyā basāy hiya mand muskāī / piyā milan so cali bāvari // sab jag jan se corī – corī / kāmpat man kivār jab kholi / kar dipak lai cali bhāminī / piyā milan so cali bāvari // camkat dāminī mūsal barse / andhakār dekhi jiyārā dhaṅke / dekhi āge cali panth viṣadhārī / dās kaṇṭak cubhi jhukī nikāri / piyā milan so cali bāvari (J. Maharaj, op. cit.), transl. by author.
cult, in which music was an important form of worship. As *ṭhumrīs* were composed by Urdu-speaking musicians in Lucknow, there are also Urdu and Khari-boli elements in the language of these songs. Its style represents a confluence of urban/classical and rural/folk traditions. As pointed out by Jyotishi, the *abhinaya* remained closer to folk symbolism than to shastric codes of expressions, which makes the dance more comprehensible for the masses.\(^{70}\)

In the opinion of Manuel, although the majority of *ṭhumrīs* were written during or after *ṛiti* period of Hindi literature, they do not mirror its predominant over-emphasis of Sanskrit poetics and mannerism, because their composers – partly Muslims – were not well-acquainted with Sanskrit aesthetics. We can notice some influence of Sanskrit theory on the modes in which the heroines are depicted and the *bhavas* are defined, but it might equally be an outcome of the later “sanskritisition” of the genre.

The intentions of revivalists and non-hereditary artists to some extent must have influenced hereditary communities, who needed to conform to new standards of classical performance, such as time restrictions or a larger space (to be covered by many dancers). Some senior *gurus* attempt to resist these tendencies. The account of Mohan Khokar reveals that Shambhu Maharaj – the first *kathak guru* in Bharatiya Kala Kendra – seldom performed to Bindadin’s *ṭhumrīs*, but mostly to Naseer Khan’s compositions. But the new generation performs to Bindadin’s compositions, probably because of its suitability for rendering in a moderate tempo. Shambhu Maharaj valued an elegant development of *bhava*, also in a sitting position. For that, he found Bindadin’s *ṭhumrīs* too fast.\(^{71}\) Furthermore, he shared a sceptical attitude toward many ongoing changes in *kathak*, such as increasing the tempo of the dance, *abhinaya* devoid of real flavour, dancers who do not sing themselves, or group choreographies (“ballet-shallet” as he called it). He regarded these new fashions as heralding the end of tradition: “The Kathak dance is brewed in a heady atmosphere of poetry, women and wine and that milieu is lost” – he once said (in an interview with Mohan Khokar)\(^{72}\). Similarly, other artists pointing to the lack of *abhinaya* skills among the new generation of artists deplore that traditional *kathak* is slowly disappearing.\(^{73}\)

In the course of *kathak* revival, the scope of repertoire was also signific-

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\(^{70}\) C. Jyotishi, op. cit., p. 114.


\(^{72}\) Ibidem.

\(^{73}\) Sunayana Hazarilal, pers. conv., Mumbai, February 14, 2014; Uma Sharma, pers. conv., New Delhi, March 27, 2014.
stantly broadened. Senior kathak artists who learned kathak in newly opened dance academies, like Bharatiya Kala Kendra in the 1950s, confess that their guru (Shambhu Maharaj) used to teach them compositions limited to Krishna stories, especially the motifs depicting his pranks and flirtation with gopis, or harassing them during Holi celebrations. Dādrā and thumrī were the two main poetic genres through which the stories were conveyed. Since the 1950s, the devotional component has been extended to include songs of praise (stūti, śloka), or invocations (vandanā) to various Hindu gods (Rama, Shiva, Ganesha, Saraswati, Kali-Durga). Furthermore, the bhajans of famous bhakti poets started to be sung along with kathak.

Figure 4: A group choreography of rāsa-līlā theme (Krishna dancing with cowherdeesses) by Jai Kishan Maharaj Group, New Delhi 2015 (photo by author).

A typical, contemporary kathak performance consists of various rhythmical and narrative compositions, illustrating narratives from Sanskrit epics and puranas. The majority of songs deal with Krishna mythology – rāsa-līlā in particular – but the emphasis on group choreographies seems to be growing (see picture 4). Besides the Krishna’s dalliance, popular episodes from his life often illustrated in kathak include: little Krishna’s stealing of butter

75 Apart from thumrī, nāyikā-bheda motif was illustrated through dhruvapada, dhamāra, horī, and cāncar.
(mākhana-corī), the killing of Putana (pūtana-vadha), Radha and Krishna in a swing (jhūla), Holi celebrations (horī), the stealing of clothes (cīra-haraṇa), raising the mountain (govardhana-līlā), the subduing of the demon-snake Kaliya (kāliyā-damana), the unrobing of Draupadi’s sari (draupadi vastra-haraṇa). Apart from Krishna, other deities are portrayed, especially Rama, Shiva and Kali-Durga. Sometimes, ten incarnations of Vishnu are presented in one longer composition called daśāvatāra. Besides, there are numerous adaptations of kāvya literature, such as Mālatī-Mādhava, Kumāra Sambhava, Gītagovinda, and of classical Sanskrit dramas (ascribed to Bhasa, Kalidasa). The new generation of choreographers interpret various poems in Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, and other South Asian languages, as well as “ballets” on various historical, social, and abstract subjects.

7 Conclusions

This short overview of the ṭhumrī reveals how suggestive and ambivalent the language of these songs can be, generating various possibilities of interpretation. An outcome of the confluence of different traditions (court and folk), the genre makes use of numerous wordplays and suggestive images, so that a performer can oscillate between modesty and obscenity, depending on how she or he enacts the lyrics. There were poems from the old corpus, presenting secular themes, but many of them have disappeared in the course of transmission to the modern stage. If we take into consideration to whom the songs and dance were addressed in nineteenth-century Lucknow, we may assume that they were meant to evoke erotic sentiments, rather than religious feelings. On the other hand, male masters used to teach tawā’ifs more seductive movements and gazes, different from what they taught their own sons. Taking a female perspective is not unusual in bhakti traditions. The nature of śṛṅgāra could oscillate between the erotic and the devotional, depending on the context of the training and performance. The social circumstances of the dance is thus a decisive factor in determining the dominant message, which is often multi-layered within the poem itself.

Since the 1950s, the relocation of the art from courts and red-light districts to national stages and festivals has triggered a considerable shift towards devotionalism – both in the art of ṭhumrī and dance. This emphasis on spiritualism still seems to be dominant in kathak. It can be reflected in the ṭhumrīs composed by Birju Maharaj and his son Jai Kishan Maharaj. The
recently published collection of Jai Kishan’s compositions entitled *Madhurya* contains a number of *ṭhumrīs*, *bhajans*, *kavitts* and other kind of lyrics termed as *jhūlā*, *viraha*, *stuti*, *Mīrā*. The thematic scope of the *ṭhumrīs* remains a motif of pranks and separation. The difference lies in the *chap* (the name of the author inserted in the lyrics) – instead of the poet’s name, the term *dās* (“a slave”, “a servant”) is used, explained in commentaries as signifying both Radha, and a poet. Thus, there is a clear identification of the author with a female agent, a metaphor of *bhakta* (“a worshipper”), placing the whole picture of *rās-līlā* in a devotional context.

Vidya Rao points out that *ṭhumrī*, to some extent, has resisted nationalist projects of appropriation and, therefore, it has fallen lower in the hierarchy of Indian music – as a semi-classical genre. It was not relevant to be a vehicle of heroic taste, and the dominant *śṛṅgāra* still reverberates the echo of *ṭhumrī*’s past. To disguise this link, some songs were dropped from the repertoire, while others were reinterpreted in terms of *bhakti*. The erotic mood was covered by the *purdah* of technical virtuosity.76 Eye-contact between the viewer and the performer has also disappeared. To further “purify” (desexualise) the performer’s body, multiple means of expression have been limited. In the view of Rao, since bodily expression have been replaced by vocal modulations, the performance of *ṭhumrī* has lost much of its emotional power. “By such an amputation, by making Kathak and Thumri separate forms, both suffer a *viraha*, a separation that weakens them to the point almost of death”.77 Nevertheless, at least both art forms have survived the *Anti-nautch* propaganda and, in its modern reincarnations, continue to touch the hearts of many music and dance lovers.

76 V. Rao, op. cit., p. 311.
77 Ibidem, p. 305.
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