

# At a Sufi-Bhakti Crossroads: Gender and the Politics of Satire in Early Modern Punjabi Literature\*

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## INTRODUCTION

Aditya Behl argued in a short but important essay in 2007 that “the formulation of new religiosities in the new regional languages of the subcontinent” – those we generally designate by the term *bhakti* – “was an intensely interactive and plural affair, with genealogies that have to include Islam in a historically complex way.”<sup>1</sup> He calls this the “greatest gap or silence” in the historiography on *bhakti*: its refusal to acknowledge “the role of Islam and Islamic religiosity in the formation of the *bhakti* movement, assuming for the movement a singularity” that excludes this possibility.<sup>2</sup> Behl explored this line of inquiry with reference to the Avadhi *prem-ākhyān* tradition, demonstrating how imagery and themes from texts such as the *Rāmcharitmānas* by Tulsidas rely upon antecedent Sufi texts.

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<sup>1</sup> Aditya Behl, “Presence and Absence in Bhakti: An Afterword,” 322.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

A workshop at Jadavpur University just a year earlier, which resulted in a 2011 volume edited by Kavita Panjabi, pursued a parallel set of issues, to seek “echoes and intertextualities” between Sufism and *bhakti* traditions.<sup>3</sup> It is the intention of this essay to pursue Behl’s suggestion along the lines laid out in Panjabi’s book, to outline a method for examining the intersection of Sufism and *bhakti* traditions. In so doing, we move beyond the problematic term of “syncretism” and the composite (which have been significantly critiqued in the existing literature), as well as that of “influence”: as Carl Ernst has noted in an insightful essay, the rhetoric of influence is all too often used to “explain away” phenomena, such that the “mechanical character of the influence metaphor obscures the role of selection and intentionality that takes place in any thinker’s evaluation of previous formulations.”<sup>4</sup>

Such a move away from “influence” allows us to consider chosen and concurrent commonalities among Sufi and *bhakti* ideas and practices, as a way of thinking through the relationship of Sufi cultural production to those categorized comfortably today under the term *bhakti*. The goal, in short, is to challenge this comfortable separation, to explore parallels between these purportedly separate domains of religious experience, expression, and tradition, to bring them into a single conceptual field that moves beyond the declaration of religious difference that has undergirded the denial of the commonalities that join them. Sufism, in short, may need to be as centrally a part of the story of *bhakti* as traditions that are now designated as “Hindu,” just as a wealth of recent literature has demonstrated the complex convergences between Sufism and Yoga as allied technologies of self-formation and transformation in early modern South Asia.<sup>5</sup> By arguing this, I do not deny the technical, philosophical and institutional meanings of *bhakti* outlined, for instance, so well by Karen Pechilis, which do adhere often quite closely to conventionally defined religious identities and understandings of religious difference.<sup>6</sup> We can see an obvious parallel in Sufi contexts, where there has been for centuries extensive elite textual production in philosophical, instructional, and scientific subjects in Persian as well as in Urdu and other

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<sup>3</sup> Kavita Panjabi, ed., *Poetics and Politics of Sufism and Bhakti in South Asia: Love, Loss and Liberation*.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Ernst, “Situating Sufism and Yoga,” 15, 17. On syncretism, see discussion in Anne Murphy, “Sufis, Jogis, and the Question of Religious Difference: Individualization in Early Modern Punjab through Waris Shah’s *Hir*.” There is a valuable overview on the literature on Sufism and *Bhakti*, and some of the ways this relationship has been described, in the introduction to Panjabi, *Poetics and Politics of Sufism and Bhakti*.

<sup>5</sup> This literature is discussed in the context of an analysis of Wāris Shāh’s text in Murphy, “Sufis, Jogis, and the Question of Religious Difference.”

<sup>6</sup> Karen Pechilis, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, Introduction.

languages. The connections mentioned in passing above between Sufism and Yoga are strongly expressed within such elite philosophical and scholastic texts, such as Carl Ernst has explored in depth in recent years, so even in such contexts commonalities can thrive. But they are not the only context that matters. Intellectually- and spiritually-initiated audiences are assumed, for example, for the *prem-ākhyān* that Behl discusses: those versed in Sufi philosophical thought and associated practices.<sup>7</sup> This does not mean, however, that these were the only readers of such texts: as Ramya Sreenivasan argues well, *prem-ākhyān* such as *Padmāvat*, her focus, were received by early modern audiences “both as a Sufi ‘tale of love,’ and as lay, heroic romance,” and we cannot assume only an adept and religious interpretation.<sup>8</sup> Thus if we resist the temptation to do as Pechilis argues that orientalists did – to fail to “view different texts’ discussions of bhakti as distinctive” (and the same can be said of Sufism) and to “mire historical studies in the search for origins” – we can understand the intersections between Sufi and *bhakti* domains at the peripheries (outside of elite languages such as Persian and Sanskrit, outside of high courtly settings), without negating the larger institutional, performative, and tradition-centered dimensions of these domains, and without attributing a directionality and/or a discourse of origin vs. derivative for the features that characterize them.<sup>9</sup>

## SUFI/BHAKTI CONVERGENCES

Punjabi literary production provides an appropriate location for the examination of the conversations possible at the periphery, given that Punjabi was not adopted by any religious tradition as a primary and elite language of literary production.<sup>10</sup> The correspondence between Sufi and quintessential *bhakti* expressions is most vividly seen in the lyric, such as that by the mid-eighteenth century Punjabi Sufi poet Bullhe Shah (1680–1757), who composed lyrical poetry that is still valued today among Punjabi Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus alike, challenging conventional religious distinctions that since 1947 divide Punjabis across the Indo-Pakistan border. This can be seen clearly in oft-cited and beloved verses such as:

<sup>7</sup> Aditya Behl, *Love’s Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379–1545*.

<sup>8</sup> Ramya Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen: Heroic Past in India, 1500–1900*, 59.

<sup>9</sup> Pechilis, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Murphy, “Writing Punjabi Across Borders,” 68–91; and idem, “Punjabi in the (late) Vernacular Millennium,” forthcoming. Although there are Punjabi elements to the compositions of the Gurus, Punjabi was not definitively chosen for Sikh cultural production until the modern period. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Braj came to the fore as the language of Sikh literary production.

*bullha kī jāṇāñ main kauṇ  
nā main momana vicca masītāñ, nā main vicca kufara dīāñ rītāñ.*

Bullha [says], what do I know about who I am?  
I am neither a believer in mosques, nor do I believe in the rites of the non-believers.

*hindū nā nahīñ musalmāna  
bhae nirañjaṇa taja abhimāna<sup>11</sup>  
suñnī nā nahīñ hama shīā  
sulhā kulla kā mārga līā  
bhūkhe nā nahīñ hama rajje  
nañge nā nahīñ hama kajje  
ronde nā nahīñ hama rasde  
ujaṛe nā nahīñ hama vasde  
pāpī nā sudharmī nā  
pāp puñna kī rāha nā jāṇāñ  
bullhā shahu jo hari chita lāge  
hindū turaka dūjana tiāge.<sup>12</sup>*

I am not a Hindu, nor a Muslim.  
I have forsaken pride and become stainless.  
I am neither Sunni nor Shia,  
and have taken the path of equanimity towards all.  
I am neither hungry nor well fed,  
I am not naked and not clothed.  
Neither do I cry, nor do I laugh.  
I am neither uprooted, nor am I well settled.  
I am neither a sinful nor righteous person,  
and I know nothing of the paths of merit and fault.  
Bullhe Shah says: that one whose mind is fixed on Hari  
Abandons the duality of Hindu and Turk.

Through articulations such as these, Christopher Shackle has argued, Bullhe Shah and other Sufi lyricists have “molded in the Panjab a diffuse conception of South Asian religious identity that is as immensely influential as it is dimly understood.” He names their *nirguṇ bhakti* and Sikh predecessors and

<sup>11</sup> As Shackle notes in his translation of this verse, this parallels a verse by Rumi. Christopher Shackle, *Bullhe Shah: Sufi Lyrics*, 389.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 68; see 69 for Shackle’s translation. My translation differs slightly.

contemporaries from the other side of the Muslim-Hindu divide as contributing to this ethos as well.<sup>13</sup> This is, then, a shared religious imaginary that is expressed in different forms and traditions, “marked more,” he tells us, “by class than creedal separations.”<sup>14</sup> Shackle argues that it is both the grammatical and thematic content of these lyrics as timeless and eternal that allows them to cross boundaries – of time as well as creed and space – and which “gives Sufi poetry its power in shaping a distinctive language of identity.”<sup>15</sup> Religion is not, in this view, the central articulation point; social categories that cross religious boundaries take precedence. Shackle does somewhat reverse his position on this point in recent work, but the commonalities he highlighted earlier are what is important here.<sup>16</sup>

Bulleh Shah, then – like *nirgun bhakti* poets such as Kabir and Guru Nanak – reaches across and extends community boundaries. This has allowed him to be interpreted in a variety of ways, for a diversity of audiences. As Robin Rinehart has argued, interpreters of Bulleh Shah construct a multi-faceted and “portable” Bulleh Shah that can be interpreted to fit the needs of different communities and historical moments.<sup>17</sup> The lack of an early manuscript tradition for Bulleh Shah only enhances the multiplicity of interpretations, as versions of his compositions are likely to have changed over time and a single definitive version cannot be defined. Thus, for legendary Pakistani literary critic and Punjabi language advocate, Najm Hosain Syed, Bulleh Shah represents “the class of artists who felt intensely the need of discovering time through live contact,”<sup>18</sup> and for historian Ayesha Jalal, “Bulleh Shah is a particularly fiery protagonist of the individual Muslim’s sense of identity,” thus providing evidence for the long-standing autonomy of the individual in Sufi poetry of Punjab.<sup>19</sup> Bulleh Shah – or, rather, the Bulleh Shah tradition that presents itself to us – is marked by its diversity of production, reception, and interpretation.

Bulleh Shah makes frequent reference to the romantic narrative or *qissā* tradition of Punjab, which is related to the broader *prem-ākhyān* and *qissā* traditions of

<sup>13</sup> For the quotes in this and the prior sentence: Shackle, “Beyond Turk and Hindu: Crossing the Boundaries in Indo-Muslim Romance,” 57.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>16</sup> Shackle argues that while the interests of these traditions (the *nirgun bhakti* and Sufi) are in some ways strikingly parallel, Punjabi Sufi poetry cannot be “properly understood without wider reference to the larger religious and literary traditions by which it is so intimately informed”: Islam. Shackle, *Bulleh Shah*, xi. I discuss the logic of such a position in Murphy “Sufis, Jogis, and the question of religious difference.”

<sup>17</sup> Robin Rinehart, “The Portable Bulleh Shah: Biography, Categorization, and Authorship in the Study of Punjabi Sufi Poetry,” 53–87.

<sup>18</sup> Najm Hosain Syed, *Recurrent Patterns in Punjabi Poetry*, 82.

<sup>19</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam Since 1850*, 21.

northern India in other new Indo-Aryan vernaculars – as well as Persianate and Quranic story traditions that circulated widely – but with distinctive Punjabi narrative elements and geographic ties. As described by Shackle, “these local romances participate profoundly in both the Islamic and the Indic worlds but also emerge as entities *sui generis* independent of either.”<sup>20</sup> The most well-known of these, about the lovers Hīr and Rāñjhā, finds frequent reference in Bullhe Shah’s *œuvre*.

*hājī loka makke nūn jānde, merā rāñjhā māhī makka.*<sup>21</sup>

Hajis go to Mecca; Mecca is in my Rāñjhā.

and

*rāñjha rāñjha kardī, huṇa main āpe rāñjhā hoī  
saddo mainūn dhīdo rāñjhā, hīra nā ākho koī.*<sup>22</sup>

Saying “Rāñjhā, Rāñjhā,” I myself have become Rāñjhā .  
Call me Dhīdo Rāñjhā; no one should call me “Hīr.”

It is indeed clear through these brief examples that “devotion” constitutes Sufi cultural production, practice, and ideology. This is particularly so in vernacular and informal (non-institutional, non-scholarly) contexts; here, *bhakti* and Sufism coincide. We can see this in Bullhe Shah’s intimate lyrics above: the longing and the passion, and the merging with God: *main vicca hamūn rahī nā rāī, jaba kī tuma saṅga prīta lagāī*: “There is no bit of ‘I’ left within me, since love for you has overcome me.”<sup>23</sup> We also see here the male poet adopt the voice of a woman – *main chūhareṭarī hān sacche sāhiba dī darbāron*: “I am a sweeper girl from the court of the True Lord” – this is a literary positioning that was marginalized in formal Urdu literary contexts but was a staple of both Braj literary production, both devotional and courtly, and Sufi devotional works.<sup>24</sup> The differences as well as parallels between these instances of gendered-speech

<sup>20</sup> Shackle, “Beyond Turk,” 62.

<sup>21</sup> Shackle, *Bullhe Shah*, 60–61, n. 38.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 248–89, n. 145.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 230; for his translation see 231. Carla Petievich has noted the link of “emotional intensity” between Islamicate court poetry and *bhakti* poems. Carla Petievich, *When Men Speak as Women: Vocal Masquerade in Indo-Muslim Poetry*, 13.

<sup>24</sup> *Idem*, “Gender Politics and the Urdu Ghazal: Exploratory Observations on Rekhta versus Rekhti,” 223–48. For the quotation of Bullhe Shah: Shackle, *Bullhe Shah*, 224; our translations coincide, see 225.

in relation to literary expression are important to note. In the context of Urdu literary tradition, the explicitly marked woman's literary voice has been deemed "problematic" in modern historiography on the tradition, reflecting in part, as described by Carla Petievich, the sense of it being "a contamination from the 'Indian' or 'Hindu' elements in the South Asian environment."<sup>25</sup> Yet, as Petievich points out, creations in this vein were an established part of the canon of Urdu literature. In Punjabi, this is certainly the case, with the earliest accepted author of Punjabi works, the Sufi Baba Farīd, composing from a female perspective in his devotional verses. This, of course, mirrors a parallel set of choices made by *bhakti* poets, who also adopted a female narrator's perspective in works dedicated, for instance, to Krishna, but also among the Sikh Gurus, who often adopted the voice of the female seeking fulfillment in the bridegroom, God.<sup>26</sup> Such gendered literary enactments relate further to Shantanu Phukan's insights into the emergence of early Hindi/Hindavi in relation to Persian and Sanskrit. He sees the emergence of Hindi alongside Persian as allowing for a particular kind of emotional expression that, in Phukan's words, acted "not as an instrument of conversion, nor yet as a concession to the simple sensibilities of rural folk, but as an effective vehicle for the expression of such emotional states and modalities of knowledge as can better be captured by it"; it was also as such particularly associated with the feminine voice, such as C. M. Naim argues can be seen in the "Indic" mode of the Ghazal, as opposed to the "Persian."<sup>27</sup>

This engendering mode, then, provides another intersection point between the two, Sufism and *bhakti*: the exploration of female voices and positions – as well as their appropriation. As Aditya Behl cautions us, female figures are normatively configured in spiritual projects such as are visible in the *prem-ākhyān* tradition in accordance with "a deep cultural misogyny in which women's erotic bodies draw the seeker out of himself and on to the path to God, while the women themselves are ultimately sacrificed in the annihilation of the narrative universe." As he notes elsewhere, "[w]omen, in this misogynistic formulation, are beside the point; they are good for marriage and procreation, or seductively arrayed to excite the ascetic on his mystical quest for the juice of love."<sup>28</sup> That is to say, the female as object

<sup>25</sup> Petievich, *When Men Speak*, 4; on "problematic," 20. See below for a discussion of *rekhtī* and the discomfort that it also inspires.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. For discussions of the Sikh tradition, see Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent*.

<sup>27</sup> Shantanu Phukan, "Through a Persian Prism: Hindi and Padmāvāt in the Mughal Imagination," 87 for quote; see overall discussion 72ff; see also Shantanu Phukan "The Rustic Beloved: Ecology of Hindi in a Persianate World," 15 ff. and C. M. Naim "Transvestic Words? The *Rekhti* in Urdu," 6.

<sup>28</sup> Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic*, 100 for first quote, 81 for second.

within a spiritual journey is still yet an object: to speak as a woman is not to give women a voice. Kumkum Sangari's early work on gender within *bhakti* contexts provided powerful insight into such "contradictions" in the appropriation of the female voice by male poets, where "a sustained and complex adjustment with patriarchal values is the uneasy companion of an otherwise egalitarian *bhakti* which offers direct access to god, claims a single origin for all humans, and describes the body, the heart, the soul and true knowledge as ungendered."<sup>29</sup> A. K. Ramanujan reminds us that we must remember the profound difference between different *bhakti* saints, along gender lines:

The males take on female personae: they are feminine, yearning, passive toward a male god. Before God all men are women. But no female saint, however she may defy male-oriented "relational" attitudes, takes on a male persona... Like the untouchable and the low-caste saint, she needs shed nothing, for she has nothing to shed.<sup>30</sup>

As Petievich notes with reference to *rekhtī*, Urdu compositions in the voice of women by men, such works also tell us not so much about women and their experiences, but instead about "what it means for men, who keep women secluded and socialize with other men, to invent a parody of their own idealised love literature, and to perform it for other men while impersonating women, for laughs."<sup>31</sup> Thus, to appropriate the emotional register of women is not to empower them, and to speak as a woman is in a sense to accept and appropriate the position of abjection, not to challenge it.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Naim argues, we can see *rekhtī* as a satirical verse that "aimed to entertain its male audience by making gross fun of females"; it was made only more appealing because "it also pretended to be a view from the inside – in fact it claimed to be the very words of those whom it ridiculed."<sup>33</sup> We will return to the importance of satire below.

<sup>29</sup> Sangari, "Spiritual Economy," 1544.

<sup>30</sup> A. K. Ramanujan, "On Women Saints," 324. See also Sangari, "Spiritual Economy," 1540 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Petievich, "Gender Politics," 242 for quote, see also 241. Naim agrees with the assessment that such appropriations of the female voice and female experience were "highly entertaining." Naim, "Transvestic Words," 17; on the genre as a whole, see *ibid.*; on the "uneasy" feeling that accompanies discussion of this genre in histories of Urdu literature, see *ibid.*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> This is parallel to Fuller's insight into the structure of Hindu worship as replicating the relationship between a wife and husband: the devotee is a woman before God, engaged in service. To embrace abjection in relation to a higher figure (such as God) along such lines is certainly not to challenge it. Christopher Fuller, *The Camphor Flame. Popular Hinduism and Society in India*. See important discussion along these lines in Sangari, "Spiritual Economy."

<sup>33</sup> Naim, "Transvestic Words," 17.



With this caution in mind, however, we can also see that *bhakti* and Sufi articulations may be associated with alternative models for gender formation, what Panjabi calls “a field of liberated gender significations.”<sup>34</sup> Anshu Malhotra has suggested just this in her recent study of the Punjabi poet Piro in the early nineteenth century. Although the figure at the centre of her study takes a path more easily defined as *bhakti*, joining the devotional community gathered around the teacher Gulabdas, it is clear that this occurred at the crossroads of “the advaita monist doctrine of the pantheistic permeation of the Brahman in the universe and the Sufi belief in *wahdat-ul-wujūd*, or the Unity of Existence” and that the poetic compositions from the community more broadly moved seamlessly between what we now see as separate religious traditions.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, as Malhotra brilliantly shows in the work overall, Piro’s voice as that of a woman is distinctive from those of men.

The treatment of gendered social formations, both liberatory and not, therefore provides a valuable entry into the complex connections between and within Sufi and *bhakti* social worlds. We can extend this further to examine other social formations enacted through and alongside gender in these two contexts. This paper will proceed in this direction, paying particular attention to Petievich’s observations regarding the impersonation of women as working “for laughs.” Satire, it is argued here, is one important dimension of the treatment of gendered social formations at the Sufi/bhakti crossroads, at times a form of but also sometimes without critique of the social formations being satirized. This is a large topic, so the constraints of space necessitate this as a suggestive rather than conclusive exercise, but specifics of the text in question will suffice to demonstrate the value of this line of thinking.

## WĀRIS SHĀH’S HĪR

Bullhe Shah’s engagement with the story of Hīr-Rāñjhā, which allows him to explore in depth the emotional registers of Hīr and Rāñjhā’s relationship and to explore devotion to Rāñjhā as analogous to and expressive of devotion to God, relies upon a highly selective reading of the full Hīr-Rāñjhā narrative. As Petievich notes, “Lyric poems do not tell a story as ballads” – and other narrative forms – do. “Their impact

<sup>34</sup> Panjabi, *Poetics and Politics of Sufism and Bhakti*, 40. This is most striking among female *bhakti* saints, which provide models that break out of the Sītā/Sāvitrī model. Ramanujan, “On Women Saints,” 324.

<sup>35</sup> Anshu Malhotra, *Piro and the Gulabdasis: Gender, Sect and Society in Punjab*, 161 for quote, see also 163.

is emotional rather than informative of events, and their content a meditation on the generally hapless condition of human love.<sup>36</sup> As we have seen above, Hīr's emotional state is Bullhe Shah's preoccupation, in keeping with *bhakti* expressions of longing, love, and desire. This episodal nature of such an engagement with the Hīr-Rāñjhā story is not exclusive to lyric poetry; Farina Mir's work has shown that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century printed texts of the Hīr-Rāñjhā story also took this form, highlighting individual scenes or sections of the story and assuming prior and fuller knowledge of the entire narrative.<sup>37</sup> Mir argues that these episodal renditions of the narrative in the colonial period took on a particular character, tending to focus on themes of "proper pious conduct and devotion."<sup>38</sup> The Hīr-Rāñjhā story has thus commonly been used in "shorthand" to intervene in multiple ways in particular religious and social domains with different emphases among short episodic portrayals, from the earlier compositions of Shah Hussain and Bullhe Shah that emphasized ecstatic and passionate devotion, to more recent versions that address current social and religious issues. (As the range of films produced in the last thirty years attest, this process continues in the present: every performance of the narrative is indeed expressive of its performance context.) The different comprehensive *qissā* versions of the narrative also have their particular approaches and interpretations of the narrative.<sup>39</sup>

The most famous version of the Hīr-Rāñjhā story in full narrative form is the mid-eighteenth version by Wāris Shāh, named for its heroine, *Hīr*.<sup>40</sup> Wāris Shāh's text is generally understood as a Sufi text, with several strong narrative links to the Avadhī *prem-ākhyān* tradition from the 14th to 17th centuries, and as a representative of the Punjabi *qissā*, a narrative story genre with roots in the Persian tradition, in the *masnavī* form, but which was particularly productive across new Indo-Aryan vernaculars in the early modern period. Hīr's narrative

<sup>36</sup> Petievich, *When Men Speak*, 16.

<sup>37</sup> Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>39</sup> There are many versions of the Hīr-Rāñjhā story, including the sixteenth century version by Damodar, and brief mention in the *Vars* of Bhai Gurdas, and in the *Dasam Granth*. The narrative also inspired several narrative versions in Persian. See Shackle "Transition and Transformation in Varis Shah's Hir," 244–47 and footnotes 4, 5, 9, 10 on these pages. See also discussion of different versions in Jeevan Deol, "Sex, Social Critique, and the Female Figure in Premodern Punjabi Poetry: Vāris Shāh's 'Hir'," 141–71.

<sup>40</sup> There is no critical edition of Wāris Shāh's text; the version used here (Śarīf Šābir, *Hīr Vāris Shāh*) is well regarded (see comment, for example, in Shackle, "Transition," 259, footnote 32; personal communication, Denis Matringe, September 2015). I refer here to that text, with reference also to Piārā Singh Padam, *Hīr Vāris Shāh*. For a discussion of the manuscript tradition and exemplary printed editions, see Shackle "Transition"; Deol, "Sex, Social Critique," 151–52 and Denis Matringe, "Hir Waris Shah," 228–30.

link to the *prem-ākhyān* tradition is found in the way the hero of the text takes on the persona of a Jogi<sup>41</sup> or mendicant in pursuit of true love, an act that symbolizes the soul's search for God. Thus, when becoming a Jogi, Rāñjhā makes clear his reasons: *sānūn joga dī rījha tadokanī sī jadoñ hīra syāla mahobata kītī*: "I have had a passion for jog ever since I fell in love with Hīr of Syaal."<sup>42</sup> There are indeed mystical/religious dimensions to the story of love at the centre of Wāris Shāh's text. When Hīr is challenged regarding her love for Rāñjhā, and is forced to face the Qazi who would wed her to another, she invokes religious claims as well as the sanctity of love to support her position: she argues that: "Where the love of Rāñjhā has taken up residence, there can be no sway of the Kheras" (the Kheras being the more elite clan her family married her into); here she utilizes the same verb used at the beginning of the work to describe what happens when Sufi patriarch and probably most beloved Sufi saint of the region, Bābā Farīd, takes up residence in Punjab.<sup>43</sup> At the end of the tale, we hear Rāñjhā's commentary on his state at losing Hīr: lamentation of *vijoga* or loss or separation, because of which Rāñjhā does appear at times ready to truly embrace being a Jogi, in despair, and even exhibits some of the miraculous powers of his role.<sup>44</sup> There are also allegorical ways to read the text, as scholars have highlighted, but these function on a high, summary level.<sup>45</sup>

There are however features that distinguish the text from the *prem-ākhyān* tradition, as well as from the larger *qissā* or narrative tradition of which it is a part. Much more than elements of the mystical, we have the mundane, the everyday: we have little representation of the "marvelous," which Frances Pritchett identified as a characteristic feature of the *qissā* genre in her foundational work on it.<sup>46</sup> This

<sup>41</sup> This is the vernacular spelling of the term "Yogi," as it is used in Wāris Shāh's text.

<sup>42</sup> Šābir, *Hīr*, 163, v. 284; Padam, *Hīr*, 130, v. 282. As Christopher Shackle points out, he is described as a *faqīr* as soon as he left home, so in his adoption of full Jogi status is a sense that "his implicit identity" has been "explicitly revealed." Shackle, "Transition," 257.

<sup>43</sup> Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 208; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 207; she does this again in Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 217; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 216.

<sup>44</sup> Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 607; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 601. Rāñjhā promises to cure Hīr (after this verse for some time the issue of Jogis and their medicinal practices and their efficacy are debated); it seems he almost is a Jogi (Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 371; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 369). Rāñjhā proves himself to be a Jogi to Sahitī through a simple test, and asks her to tell Hīr to come. She agrees, and asks him for a boon, recognizing him as Jogi (Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 501; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 498). It is almost as if Rāñjhā is a Faqīr at times: He says he has had enough of the world (Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 577; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 572). Later, Rāñjhā prays and Sahitī's love, Murad, appears (Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 587; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 582). After this, the two couples escape.

<sup>45</sup> Deol, "Sex, Social Critique," 146–47. The classic association of longing for God is made reference to here, and the lover as an aspect of divine does play in the text to a degree.

<sup>46</sup> Frances Pritchett, *Marvelous Encounters: Folk Romance in Urdu and Hindi*; for an extensive exploration of genre, see Pasha Khan, *The Broken Spell: The Romance Genre in Late Mughal India*.

does not make the text unique however: Francesca Orsini's more recent work, as discussed further below, suggests a diverse set of thematic interests and antecedents among *qissā* works.<sup>47</sup> This does not necessarily mean a break with Sufi traditions: in this concern for the mundane we can see a link between Wāris Shāh's work and that of his contemporary, Bullhe Shah, whose work expresses "worldly identities, rooted in the realities of everyday life."<sup>48</sup> This too is a parallel with the vernacular poetry of a *bhakti* orientation. But in Wāris Shāh, that mundane is characterized by intense interactions among people, often in conflict. The key to the convergence between Sufism and *bhakti*, in this text, therefore does not lie in its overt convergences with the mystical elements of the *bhakti* canon.

At times, the most appropriate way to think about this text may not be through analogies with high Sufi literature and the classical Persian *masnavī*, as is formally appropriate for it in terms of genre, but Parsi and other forms of traditional theatre, such as *Nautanki* (indeed, there are moments when Bollywood does not seem far off). Francesca Orsini has noted the importance of the *naql* performance tradition in the genealogy of the *qissā*, particularly for those with the markings of a less elite context; this is a particularly appropriate observation for Wāris Shāh's text.<sup>49</sup> Satire, irony, and farce recur. Najm Hosain Syed, one of the foremost Punjabi literary critics in Pakistan, has thus called its primary mode "comedy": a "comedy, though unrestrained to the extent of boisterousness, still more a means of irony than hilarity."<sup>50</sup> How else can we explain the outrageous portrayal of young women attacking Kaido, Hīr's uncle, when he tells Hīr's parents about her activities with Rāñjhā?<sup>51</sup> How else do we view the portrayal of young women engaging in uncontrolled behaviour in public, on their own, and the violent girl-fight between Hīr and Sahitī, her sister-in-law, about Rāñjhā?<sup>52</sup> These instances contribute to a sense of exceeding boundaries and norms, a theme which pervades the text, as well as its sense of humour. We thus see a

<sup>47</sup> Francesca Orsini, *Print and Pleasure: Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India*.

<sup>48</sup> Shackle, "Beyond Turk and Hindu," 58.

<sup>49</sup> Orsini, *Print and Pleasure*, 114–15.

<sup>50</sup> Syed, *Recurrent Patterns*, 45. For more on irony, see Shackle "Transition," 249.

<sup>51</sup> Hīr and her friends attack Kaido for telling on Hīr regarding her behaviour with Rāñjhā, described by Wāris Shāh as being like the attack of Lahori forces upon Mathura, *faujān shāh diyān vāriṣā mār mathurā dhau phir lāhor nūn āiyā neñ*: "Like the armies of the Shah have attacked Mathura and returned to Lahore" (Šābir, *Hīr*, 76, v. 141; Padam, *Hīr*, 92, v. 139; in Padam *dhau* is *daurī*, which works better for the line). The girls attack Kaido and burn his home.

<sup>52</sup> Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 548–58; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 543–53 on the girls out on the town, until Hīr gets bitten by a snake (a ruse to bring Rāñjhā to her); for Hīr and Sahitī's fight, see Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 416–18; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 413–15. This fight is reminiscent of a broader "quarrelsome woman" motif; see Naim "Transvestic Words," 18 ff.

portrayal of the holy man or *faqīr* as a commonality, across religious idioms, in a spirit of alterity, but also, as the absurd. Kaido, Hīr’s evil uncle, is portrayed as a mendicant or *faqīr*, and Rāñjhā himself becomes a Jogi – a Jogi who seeks his love. Why is Kaido so upset when Hīr’s friends attack him, after he has revealed Hīr and Rāñjhā’s secret love to her parents? He complains that his opium and *bhang* have been stolen from him.<sup>53</sup> It is important to remember that this use of farce and humour does not mean the text is “unserious.” Although classical Indian aesthetic theory is certainly not the only principle operating in this text, it is valuable to recall Lee Siegel’s observation that, for classical Indian literature, there is no absolute distinction between tragedy and comedy.<sup>54</sup> The comedic itself has a serious import, and what we have here is a blurring of humour and satire (more on this distinction below), and the interlacing of modes of narration and literary referencing that Sreenivasan highlights in her reading of *Padmāvat*.<sup>55</sup>

Within farcical and mocking postures, in diverse forms and with diverse objects of teasing and derision, we see one element consistently: the articulation of social hierarchies and rules, in tension, and in rupture. Indeed, this is inherent in particular to the Jogi himself, Rāñjhā, who is questioned and accused of being a “fake *faqīr*” throughout, reiterating a trope about the suspect holy man that has a long pedigree in South Asia. Such farcical elements of the text tie into a larger reconfiguration of social and religious roles in the period of Wāris Shāh’s text, the end of what is generally called the “early modern,” just prior to the development of modern forms of social organization and imagination that were, in South Asia, historically linked also to the intrusion of British rule. As Heidi Pauwels has pointed out, citing Lee Siegel’s important work on humour in South Asian classical contexts, a clear distinction between humour – as directed within a social group – and satire – directed at others – is not always clear.<sup>56</sup> Questions of audience of Wāris Shāh’s *Hīr* are thus complex, since it is difficult to determine clearly who is “in” and who

<sup>53</sup> When Kaido seeks justice after the attack by Hīr and her allies, after enduring more abuse from Hīr’s family, the elders call the girls before them and ask why they have treated this *faqīr* in this way (Šābir, *Hīr*, 79, v. 147; Padam, *Hīr*, 94, v. 145. See also the description in Šābir, *Hīr*, 74–75, v. 137–38). Kaido notes that in addition to the destruction of his house, they stole his opium and *bhang* (Šābir, *Hīr*, 78, v. 144; Padam, *Hīr*, 93, v. 142).

<sup>54</sup> Lee Siegel, *Laughing Matters: Comic Tradition in India*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>56</sup> Heidi Pauwels, “‘Whose Satire’ Gorakhnāth Confronts Krishna in Kanhāvat,” 42, 56; see also Monika Horstmann and Heidi Pauwels, “Introduction,” 8–9. This is one formulation of the distinction that Siegel gives; there are others. See for example: “satire is laughter at the vices and follies to which humanity is driven by the agonies of old age, disease, and death; humour is laughter in spite of disease, in acceptance of old age, in surrender to death.” Siegel, *Laughing Matters*, 5. The investigation pursued here does not rely upon a clear distinction between them, nor upon the classical formulation of the humorous that Siegel pursues.

is “outside”; almost everyone in Waris Shāh’s text, it seems, is parodied. Pauwels argues that the *Kanhāvat*, generally attributed to the sixteenth century poet Jayasi but probably composed by another poet in the seventeenth century, possesses features that distinguish it from the *prem-ākhyān* tradition; one of these is the role of satire, which makes it similar to Wāris Shāh’s *Hīr*. Satire certainly does play an important role in *bhakti* contexts, as in Sufi ones: this is particularly the case among the *Sant* poets, as Monika Horstmann has discussed.<sup>57</sup> The most distinctively satirical voice in the *bhakti* canon is of course Kabir’s, who was described in an early essay by Linda Hess as “famous for his solitariness, vigor, fearlessness, and iconoclasm; for his swift and original mind that pierces dark places with sudden probes of light.”<sup>58</sup> The satirical literary form, Horstmann and Pauwels argue, acts to “deconstruct in order to reconstruct”; with this running as a feature throughout the text, Waris Shāh’s *Hīr* is designed to both unsettle and amuse.<sup>59</sup>

## GENDER AND CRITIQUE IN WARIS SHĀH’S *HĪR*

Jeevan Deol highlights an “erotic counter-current” in *Hīr* that he believes “forms a part of the poem’s larger discourse of social critique,” but further argues that this erotic dimension is “counterbalanced by a refusal to acknowledge explicitly the sexual nature of the relationship between Hīr and Rāñjhā.”<sup>60</sup> Such a characterization of the sexualization of Hīr is however untenable.<sup>61</sup> Hīr and Rāñjhā very clearly do engage in sexual intimacy; there is an involved description of Hīr at the end of the text, after she visits Rāñjhā the *faqīr*, where all the marks of her love-making draw attention.<sup>62</sup>

*parnehān dā mainūn aṣara hoyā raṅga zarda hoyā aise vāṣṭe nī*  
*chhāpān khubha gaiyān galhān meriyān te dāgha lāla pae aise vāṣṭe nī*  
*kaṭe jānde nūn bhaja ke milī sān main taniyān ḍhaliyān neñ aise vāṣṭe nī*  
*ronī atharū ḍulhe sana mukhare te ghula gae tatolaṛe pāsa te nī*

<sup>57</sup> Monika Horstmann, “Approaching Sant Satire,” 95–115.

<sup>58</sup> Linda Hess, “Three Kabir Collections: A Comparative Study,” 139.

<sup>59</sup> Horstmann and Pauwels, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>60</sup> Deol, “Sex, Social Critique,” 146, 161. He sees the “main target [of this counter-current as] the hypocrisy of organized religion.” Ibid., 146. While there is truth to this, a critique of religious authorities is only one of a large set of hierarchies and authorities that are portrayed as being challenged (and yet often also triumphant).

<sup>61</sup> On sexuality and gender overall in Hīr Rāñjhā, see Gurinderpal Mann, “Jat Masculinity and Deviant Femininity in a Punjabi Romantic Epic: Exploring Gender Through Waris Shah’s *Hīr*.”

<sup>62</sup> Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 514–38; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 511–33.

*mūdhī paī banere te vekhdī sāñ peḍū lāla hoyā aise vāste nī  
surkhī hoḥhāñ dī āp main chūp laī raṅga uḍa giā aise vāste nī  
kaṭṭā ghuṭiyāñ vicha galokaṛī de dukāñ lāla hoīyāñ aise vāste nī  
mere peḍū nūñ kaṭṭe ne ḍhuḍa māre lāsāñ bukhlañ diyāñ mere māsa te nī  
hora puchha vāriṣa main ḡharībanī nūñ kiyūñ aghde loka mahāsate nī.  
(Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 524)*

I have a bit of jaundice, that is why my colour is a bit yellow.  
My rings have pressed up against my cheeks, that is why there are red marks there.  
I am meeting you after running from a small buffalo calf; that's why the strings [of my *salwār*] are loose.  
I was crying and so tears ran down my face; that is why there are smudges there.  
I was lying down on the roof, watching. That is why my pelvis is red.  
I was sucking on my lips myself, that is why the colour has gone from them.  
That calf pressed up against me, that is why I have become red.  
The calf [then] butted my pelvis with its head, causing welts on my skin  
Ask this poor one again, oh Wāris. Why do sinful people laugh?

The debate regarding gender functions also far more broadly than just in relation to Hīr's sexuality – Sahitī, Hīr's sister-in-law, is central to the text, as will be discussed. The portrayal of Rāñjhā's appearance, in addition to its reception by the Jogis in homo-erotic terms, also adds far more complexity than a focus on Hīr alone allows.<sup>63</sup> Portrayals of Hīr's sexuality, as well as Rāñjhā's, thus contribute to an overall sense of rupture that pervades the work, taking a common sexualized portrayal of the hero and heroine just a bit further, with a measure of mirth and farce, just as all the interactions in the text go just a step too far. These features contribute, to be sure, to the ethos of subversion that pervades the text.

Overall, we see so much of women – in scene after scene – that the work can be characterized overall as a text about women, in all their myriad roles. This overall focus of the text on women in their roles is visible in summary form here,

<sup>63</sup> Deol has emphasized this highly sexual nature of the text, but this is only one aspect of what has been called its "earthy" nature. Deol, "Sex, Social Critique," 158–59. The Jogi figure is only addressed by Deol in relation to the portrayal of Rāñjhā's appearance and its reception by the Jogis in homoerotic terms. Šābir, *Hīr*, 153–54, v. 269–70/Padam, *Hīr*, v. 267–68. Yet, the physical description of Rāñjhā is a recurrent theme in the text, from the first moment of his appearance. It is therefore not surprising that his appearance as a Jogi also captures the attention of the author, who is preoccupied with its description. See Šābir, *Hīr*, 167–68, v. 289–91; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 287–88 (one verse missing); see also Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 307–8; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 304–5; Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 315–16; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 312–13; Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 311; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 308. Deol focuses on the physical description of Hīr.

where we see the response of village women to Rānjhā, the *faqīr*, in a range of modes:<sup>64</sup>

*rānjhā khaparī pakaṛke gaze chaṛhiyā singī divāra ba divāra vajāōndā e  
koī de sīdhā koī pāe ṭukaṛa koī thāliyā purasa liyāōndā e  
koī ākhdī jogīṛā navān baniyā raṅga raṅga dī kiṅga vajāōndā e  
koī de gālīn dhāre māra phirdā koī boldī jo mana bhāōndā e  
koī joṛ ke hatha te kare minata sānūn āsarā faqara de nānū dā e  
koī ākhdī mastiyā chāka phirdā nāla mastiyān ghordā gāōndā e  
koī ākhdī masta dīvānaṛā hai burā lekha jīnaindarī māno dā e  
koī ākhdī ṭhaga udhāla phirdā sūnhā chorān de kise girānū dā e  
laṛe bhīre te gāliyān de lokān ṭhaṭhe mārda loṛha kamāōndā e  
āṭā kanaka dā lie te ghūū bhatā dānah ṭukaṛā goda nah pāōndā e  
vāriśa shāha raṅjheṭaṛā chaṅda chaṛhiyā gharo gharī mubārakān liyāōndā e.*  
(Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 322)

Rānjhā holds his begging bowl, receives the food offerings, and plays his horn from door to door.

One brings white flour, another gives bits of food, while another presents him with a plate with a variety of dishes.

One says, “Here is a newly made Jogi! He plays his instrument with style!”

Another curses him, saying he wanders around like a thief, and yet another says just what she likes.

One places her hands together reverentially and prays: “Give us the protection of the saints.”

Another says, “He wanders around like a besotted servant, singing and staring in a stupor.”

One says “He is like a drunken madman, as if some terrible fate is written on his forehead.”

One says that he is a thug wandering around seeking to abduct someone, and another that he is from a village of thieves.

Fighting and cursing people and making jokes, he earns his keep,

Taking only wheat flour and not taking ghee, breakfast, grains and bits of food.

Wāris Shāh! This boy of the Rānjhā clan is like the rising moon, bringing blessings from house to house.

<sup>64</sup> This is followed by a discussion of different kinds of women, from different castes. Šābir, *Hīr*, 193, v. 325; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 321.



Such a focus on women is not surprising: it is Hīr, the lover of Rānjhā, whose name gives the title of Wāris Shāh's work. Here is her famous entry into the tale, enraged that Rānjhā (who at this point in the story has abandoned his natal home) has taken up residence on her boat. She is transformed by her encounter with Rānjhā:

*karke māro hi māra te pakara chhamakān parī ādmī te qaharvāna hoī  
rānjhe uthke ākhiya vāha sajjana hīr hasa ke te maharbāna hoī  
kichhe vañjalī kana de vicha vālā zulfā mukhāre te pareshāna hoī  
bhinne vāl chūne bīnī chañd rānjhā nain kajale dī ghamsāna  
šūrat yūsafa vekha taimūsa beṭī sane mālake <sup>65</sup> bahuta hairāna hoī  
naina masta kalejāre vich dhāne hīr ghol ghatī qurbāna hoī  
ā, baḡhala vicha baiṭha ke kare galān jīveñ qurbāna kamāna hoī  
bhalā hoyā mai tainūn naha māra baiṭhī kāī nahīn sī gala beshāna hoī  
rūpa jaṭa dā vekha ke jāga ladhī hīra vāra ghatī sargardāna hoī  
vārisa shāha naha thāoñ dama mārne dī chāra chashma dī jadoñ ghamsāna hoī.  
(Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 61)*

Taking a stick in her hand, she beats here and there – the fairy lets loose her anger on the man.

Rānjhā rises, and says, “Oh, dear one,” and Hīr smiles graciously:

With his flute under his arm and earrings dangling in his ears, his curls are scattered across his face.

His wet hair tied in a bun, with a nose shaped like a moon, with eyeliner around Rānjhā's eyes like lines drawn in battle.

With the same kind of surprise as when Zuleika, the daughter of Taimus, saw Joseph, Hīr gives herself up completely, drunken eyes piercing her heart.

She comes, sits next to him, and begins to speak, as if tamed by the bow [and arrow]

“It is a good thing that I didn't hit you by mistake, or do some other indecency”

Seeing the shape of this Jat, she has awoken, and Hīr gives herself up to him again, a helpless waif.

Wāris Shāh says, no one can take a breath, when two pairs of eyes are locked in battle.

While scholars Jeevan Deol and Pankaj Singh have seen Wāris Shāh as overall constructing Hīr's character in subservient terms, I believe the broad contours of the portrayal of her character complicate such a characterization. It is Hīr, in

<sup>65</sup> The sense of this is unclear “with ownership” or perhaps even more obscurely “with tax” is the closest translation I can construe; this has been ignored by prior translators.

fact, who tells Rāñjhā to become a Jogī and return to her: *tainūñ hāla dī gala main likha ghaliāñ, turata ho fakīra teñ āonā ī | kise jogi the jāike banen chelā, svāha lāike kana parāonā ī*.<sup>66</sup>: “I will write to you about everything! Go and become a Faqir and return! Go and make yourself a disciple at some Jogī’s centre, put ash on your body and pierce your ears [as the Nath Jogis do]!” Her agency is complicated and both pragmatic and principled. Her advice to Rāñjhā begins the central theme in the work: the relationship between the role of the Jogī and sexuality, portrayed as being in tension and also in alliance. This indeterminacy of Rāñjhā’s status as a holy man, as well as the theme of the “fake *faqīr*” in general, is important to the anti-institutional orientation of the text and the way in which gender and sexuality are configured in the text, as forces that cannot be denied, that mock the very idea of renunciation itself.<sup>67</sup> Immediately following this is a long series of critical comments about Jats, the caste that both the heroine and hero belong to, albeit with the hero from a less elite lineage within the caste group.<sup>68</sup> This calls attention to the overarching theme of the text: commentary about social categories overall (gender as well as caste), sometimes as satire, and sometimes as critique.

Bālnāth describes the life of *jog* as follows:

*aīsa joga de vā’ade bahuta aukhe nāda anhata te suna vajāūñā vo  
jogī jañgam gaudarī jaṭā dhārī muñḍī nirmalā bhekha vaṭāūñā vo  
tārī lāike nātha dā dhāna dharnā dasvīñ dvāra hai sāsa charhāvnā vo*

...

*udiāna-bāsī jatī satī jogī jhāta istrī te nahīñ pāvanā vo  
lakha khūbśūrata pari hūra hove žarā jīva nahīñ bharmāvnā vo  
kañda mūla te posta afīma bajiyā nashah khāike masta ho jāvanā vo*

...

*kāma krodha te lobha huñkāra marana jogī khāka dara khāka ho jāvanā vo  
ranāñ ghora dā gāūñdā phireñ vaḥshī tainūñ aukharā joga kamāvanā vo  
iha joga hai kama nirāsiyāñ dā tusāñ jaṭāñ kīh joga thoñ pāvanā vo.*

(Šābir, *Hīr*, 150, v. 264)

These pledges of yoga are very difficult, to play the unstruck tune of the infinite, oh!  
To exchange for the pure dress of the sect of Jogis: carrying dreadlocks on the head  
and the dress of a religious order, oh!

<sup>66</sup> Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 223.

<sup>67</sup> This is discussed at some length in Murphy, “Sufis, Jogis, and the question of religious difference.”

<sup>68</sup> See for example Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 225–27; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 224–26; Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 600; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 594.

Adopting the stare of meditation, concentrate on the Lord, and raise your breath to the tenth door, oh!

...

The true Jogi lives in the forest and does not lay eyes on a woman!  
There might be a 100,000 beautiful fairies and nymphs, but do not waste your life.  
Even without marijuana, roots, poppy, and opium, become intoxicated and enjoy.

...

Destroying lust, anger, greed and ego, the Jogi becomes dust among dust.  
Wandering around singing and gawking at women – it is hard for you to earn Joga.  
This Joga is for the few without hope in the world. What can a Jat like you hope to gain?

Through such extensive exchanges between Rāñjhā and Bālnāth, we see again the consolidation of two interlinked themes that drive the narrative: the relationship between men and women (sexual and otherwise) and what it means to be a Jogi, true and false. We see the beginning of it here: the designation of the appropriate Jogi attitude towards women – and Bālnāth’s doubts that Rāñjhā could ever make his way as a Jogi as a result.<sup>69</sup> When the Nath leader further instructs Rāñjhā and directs him to look at women as sister and mother, Rāñjhā rejects this, invoking his caste status as a Jat: *asīn jāta hāñ nāriyāñ karānvāle asāñ kachkare nahīñ purovane nī*: “We are Jats! We pull ropes. We don’t string glass pearls!”<sup>70</sup> The debate continues until finally higher forces intervene on Rāñjhā’s behalf.<sup>71</sup>

In some ways, Sahitī is the real heroine of the text: she speaks far more than Hīr, and hers is a strong and independent voice. The exchange between Sahitī, Hīr’s sister-in-law, and Rāñjhā comprises a major component of the narrative: 60 verses, with the scene continuing with further conflict among Hīr, Sahitī, and Rāñjhā for more than 50 additional verses.<sup>72</sup> Pankaj Singh has called hers “the loudest and most aggressive voice contesting the idle, impatient, intolerant,

<sup>69</sup> This is the point where the Jogis reject their master’s acceptance of Rāñjhā.

<sup>70</sup> Šābir, *Hīr*, 162, v. 282; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 280. The argument continues until Šābir, *Hīr*, 164, v. 285; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 283.

<sup>71</sup> Intervention of the Panj Pir, Šābir, *Hīr*, 164–65, v. 285; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 283; this is recognized by Bālnāth in Šābir, *Hīr*, 165 v. 286S/284G. The Nath tells Rāñjhā: *charh daur ke jit le kheriyāñ nūñ*: “Leave, go and defeat the Kheras!” Rāñjhā had already been granted Hīr by the Panch Pir. Šābir, *Hīr*, 64, v. 121–22; Padam, *Hīr*, 87, v. 119–20.

<sup>72</sup> From Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 327; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 323 to Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 387, Padam, *Hīr*, v. 384. Deol sees the debates between Rāñjhā and Sahitī as only sexual, but this I think misses their full content. Deol, “Sex, Social Critique,” 162; he talks only briefly about Sahitī’s criticism of Rāñjhā as a *faqīr*, and not about their debates about gender. *Ibid.*, 164.

egotistical, quarrelsome, boastful, imposter Rāñjhā.<sup>73</sup> (Her view thus contrasts starkly with that of Syed, for whom Rāñjhā is “the essential human being... shorn of all recommendations of money or influence” and is “the touchstone for the world.”<sup>74</sup>) Sahitī challenges Rāñjhā, arguing at multiple instances on behalf of women (in contrast to Rāñjhā, who expresses strikingly patriarchal views of women).<sup>75</sup> We can see this as the conceptual centre of the work: a debate between Sahitī and Rāñjhā on the nature of women and men’s relationship, and women and men themselves, alongside the recurrent accusation that Rāñjhā is not a real Jogi because of his inability to abandon sexualized gender relations.<sup>76</sup> Within a few verses of Rāñjhā’s arrival at Hīr’s marital home, Sahitī and he are directly at odds, with Sahitī accusing him of knowing Hīr and being a fake Jogi.<sup>77</sup> The description of types that is seen earlier continues, with debate on the nature of men and women and social categories, such as through these words of Rāñjhā (in which women do not fare well):

*marda karama de naqada hana Sahitīye nī ranān dushmanān neka kamāiyān diyān  
tusīn aisa jahān vicha hora hoiā, pañja seriyān ghaṭa dharvāiyān diyān  
marda hain jahāza nakoiyān de, ranān beriyān hain burāiyān diyān  
mānū bāpa dā nānū nāmos ḍobana patiyān lāha suṭana bhaliyān bhāiyān diyān  
haṛa māsa ḥalāla ḥarāma kapana, ehah kohāriyān hain qaśāiyān diyān.*<sup>78</sup>

Men are rich in action, oh Sahitī! Women do the good of one’s enemies.

You are something else in this world altogether – you come up short by 5 units of measure!

Men are vessels of goodness, and women are vessels of fault.

They sink the names of their mothers and fathers in shame, and throw away the honour of their good brothers

Chopping up bones and meat without regard for clean and unclean,<sup>79</sup> these [women] are the axes of butchers!

<sup>73</sup> Pankaj K. Singh, *Representing Woman: Tradition, Legend and Panjabi Drama*, 62.

<sup>74</sup> Syed, *Recurrent Patterns*, 53, 57.

<sup>75</sup> Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 353.

<sup>76</sup> This debate is prefaced by Rāñjhā’s arrival in the village: he is popular with the young women. When Hīr hears of his arrival, she wonders if it is him (Sabir, *Hīr*, v. 310).

<sup>77</sup> This begins on Šābir, *Hīr*, 205, v. 342; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 339. This initiates a quite fascinating description of joga and the capacious religious world that Rāñjhā inhabits. Šābir, *Hīr*, 210–11, v. 349–50; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 345–46. Later Saida and Aju also accuse him of being a fake Jogi. Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 573; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 568.

<sup>78</sup> Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 353.

<sup>79</sup> *halāl* and *harām*.

And still, 150 verses later, with Rānjhā still voicing a patriarchal condemnation of women and their place in the world:

*jadoñ khalaqa paidā kītī raba sache bañḍiyāñ dā vāṣṭe kīte neñ aihah pasāre  
ranāñ chokare jinna shaitāna rāvala kuta kakarī bakarī uṭha sāre  
aihah mūla fasāda dā hoe paidā jinhāñ sabha jagata de mūla māre  
ādama karha bahishta thīñ kḥuāra kītā aihah ḍāināñ dhuron hī karana kare  
aihah karana fakīra chā rāñjiyāñ nūñ ohnāñ rāo razādare sidha māre  
variṣa shāha hunara sabha vicha mardāñ ate mahariyāñ neñ ‘aiba sāre. (v. 479)*

When creation was born and made true by God, it was made for men.  
Women, servants, jinns, devils, chiefs, dogs, hens, she-goats, camels all:  
these are the roots of strife, and they undermine the foundation of the world.  
Adam was pulled from heaven and destroyed: these demonesses are fated to  
perform such acts.  
Tricking both Faqirs and kings, they turn the pleasure-seeking king into a renunciate  
Wāris Shāh, if all beauty is in men, then all faults are in women.

Sahitī counters, throughout, with animated arguments on behalf of women:

*bhābī aisa je gadhe dī aṛī badhī asīñ ranāñ bhī chiha chahāriyāñ hāñ  
aihah māriyā aisa jahāñ tāzaha asīñ roza-i-mīsāqa diyāñ māriyāñ hāñ  
aihah ḥida dī chhurī je ho baiṭhā asīñ chih diyāñ teza kaṭāriyāñ hāñ  
je aihah guñḍiyāñ vicha hai pīra dhardā asīñ khachariyāñ bāñkiyāñ ḍāriyāñ hāñ  
marda raṅga maḥala hana ‘isharatāñ de asīñ ḥauqa te maze diyāñ māriyāñ hāñ  
aihah āpa nūñ marda sadāōndā hai asīñ nirāñ de nāla diyāñ nāriyāñ hāñ  
ais chāka dī kauna majāla hai nī rāje bhoja thīñ asīñ nah hāriyāñ hāñ  
variṣa shāha vicha haqa safeda poshāñ asīñ horī diyāñ raṅga picḥkārīñ hāñ.  
(v. 415)*

Oh sister-in-law! If he is bound and stubborn like an ass, we women are expressive  
and quick.

If he is fresh to this world, we were struck on the first day of existence [*roz-e-  
mīsāq*].

If he is a blunt knife, we are sharp, piercing daggers.

If he is a leader among the thugs, we are a flock of clever and elegant beings.

If men are colourful palaces of vice, then we women are mansions of taste and  
flavour.

If he calls himself a man, we are the women who accompany men.

What kind of nerve does this servant have? We have not been defeated by Raja Bhoj.

Wāris Shāh, if men have the right to wear white clothes, then we are the instruments used at Holi to bring colour.

In this we see the conceptual centre of the work: a debate on the nature of women and men, and the spectre of sexuality, alongside and parallel to the problem of renunciation.

Hīr and Rānjhā achieve their goal in the end: after Hīr and Rānjhā escape and are caught, they make an appeal to the prince for mercy and finally gain.<sup>80</sup> This victory is fleeting, however, since Hīr's family murders her to prevent their marriage. Hīr and Rānjhā's near-success, however, comes through Hīr's intercession: it is Hīr who curses the town (not Rānjhā).<sup>81</sup> Rānjhā only helps her enact her curse.<sup>82</sup> Of course, he then gets credit for the Faqir's curse, being the Faqir (or, so it seems).<sup>83</sup> Who has the power here? Deol argues that Hīr's curse is ineffective without Rānjhā's help – so “the world will only heed the words of Rānjhā,” but I do not see this incident in these terms.<sup>84</sup> The text at its very end calls this into question, even as the story quickly ends in Hīr's death, and then Rānjhā's.

## CONCLUSIONS

How is the question of gender configured in Wāris Shāh's text, and what does it do? It emerges within a broader range of debates around social roles and categories, not in isolation. A related central theme relates to caste and status, reiterating themes visible in contemporary texts from what are seen as *bhakti* contexts. In recent work I have called attention to the congruences between the preoccupation with caste in Wāris Shāh's text and contemporary discourses over caste that are visible in Sikh narrative texts dated to the 18th century. One such text, the *Gurbilās Patshāhī Das*, challenges the hegemony of caste and articulates new kinds of social order, represented by the Sikh community, outside of caste hierarchy, designating the Sikh communitarian vision as singularly opposed to caste. While some texts of this period in the same and other genres reassert the importance of caste – in keeping with casteist discourses that prevailed in

<sup>80</sup> Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 593.

<sup>81</sup> Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 608; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 602. See also Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 609; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 603 and Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 610; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 604, for extensive references to other examples of the wrath of God.

<sup>82</sup> Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 611.

<sup>83</sup> Šābir, *Hīr*, v. 613; Padam, *Hīr*, v. 607. Deol gives him credit for it, as well.

<sup>84</sup> Deol, “Sex, Social Critique,” 158.

Vaishnava contexts, for example, in the 17th and 18th centuries – others continued to challenge these formulations.<sup>85</sup> In Wāris Shāh, similarly, we see both the articulation of operative social categories and their critique.<sup>86</sup> I argue elsewhere that the dynamic social positions sketched out in Wāris Shāh are indicative of a larger process of religious individualization in the early modern period, one that is expressed across traditions (particularly with reference to caste). This parallels similar dynamics in *bhakti* contexts, as articulated in the forthcoming work of Martin Fuchs.<sup>87</sup> The spheres of Sufi and *bhakti* are therefore connected through their engagement with parallel social and religious commitments and dynamics, and gender operates powerfully among these.

The eighteenth century was a period of great change in Punjab, as centralized Mughal power waned and successors vied for power in the region (as elsewhere). The religious and social contestation visible in the text under examination reflects this environment. We must therefore then qualify Farina Mir's claim that the dynamics she sees in colonial period versions of Hīr-Rāñjhā reflect the unique pressures of that period, "the contemporary significance and reworking of social structures under colonialism... [and the] expression of anxieties produced by the social mobility induced by colonial rule."<sup>88</sup> We see such reworking happening at this crucial juncture of the eighteenth century, amidst another period of profound political and social change. We can thus see the operation of gender in this text as linked to a larger strategic destabilization of structures and categories of social life, to foreground a kind of possibility, a form of critique as an aspect of early modern religious and social articulation. It would be a misreading to see Wāris Shāh's *Hīr* as plainly and simply liberatory; this is the vein in which Ishwar Gaur reads it in a recent monograph.<sup>89</sup> As Gurinderpal Mann has recently argued in new work, *Hīr*'s rebelliousness relies upon a sense of entitlement enabled by her position within an elite Jat family, so her assertion reinforces and relies on social hierarchies as it challenges others.<sup>90</sup> Lee Siegel has noted that "comedy delights in itself as it delights in the shows and vanities of the world... It laughs for the sake of laughter and for the sake of freedom, of liberation from the constraints of righteousness, wisdom, and holiness. It laughs at freedom too and, finally,

<sup>85</sup> Anne Murphy, "Thinking Beyond Aurangzeb and the Mughal State in a Late 18th century Punjabi Braj Source," 537–54.

<sup>86</sup> For an example of such teasing, see Šābir, *Hīr*, 162–63, v. 283; Padam, *Hīr*, 129–30, v. 281.

<sup>87</sup> Fuchs, "Self-affirmation," Forthcoming.

<sup>88</sup> Mir, *Social Space of Language*, 132.

<sup>89</sup> Ishwar Dayal Gaur, *Society, Religion and Patriarchy: Exploring Medieval Punjab through Hir Waris*.

<sup>90</sup> Gurinderpal Mann, "Jat Masculinity."

at itself.”<sup>91</sup> This is indeed the spirit of Waris Shāh’s text. While we certainly cannot look to Wāris Shāh’s *Hīr* for a definitive rejection of patriarchal gender formations – *Hīr* does die in the end, after all – it does express a kind of alterity. As such it depends as much on the very boundaries it mocks as it denies them, allowing us to account for the text’s simultaneous articulation of social roles, their perversion, and their rejection, with Rañjhā voicing a starkly patriarchal view, in contrast to Sahitī’s challenge. The portrayal of the young women of *Hīr*’s marital home going out and acting wildly must thus be seen at least in part as cautionary, indicating what can happen when young women are given freedom, at the same time that it reveals a level of freedom women are portrayed as possessing.<sup>92</sup>

“Satire,” Lee Siegel has argued, “aims at a redistribution of power.”<sup>93</sup> *Hīr* presents to us, we might say, a process along such lines, not a finished product or set of established or even new social norms. This is perhaps, more than anything else, what joins Sufi and *bhakti* traditions in this articulation: the moments of possibility that are enabled within them, in a moment of critique and satire, but usually without full resolution. This returns us to Kumkum Sangari’s early insights, with reference to *bhakti* traditions: “Mira’s *bhakti* is contradictory; it protests and assists in its appropriations, has both a radicalising potential and a compensatory character... Her *bhakti* is internally poised to lose the ground it sets out to gain. For us Mira represents a struggle, not a victory.”<sup>94</sup> Such moments are particularly present in the cultural resources of early Punjabi as a language and literature positioned in interstitial locations, rather than in courtly and institutional religious contexts, in the early modern period. This can in turn help us to understand in a new way vernacular cultural production outside of court patronage, which has been the location associated with the achievement of literary vernacular status elsewhere in the subcontinent.<sup>95</sup> The emergence of the language of Punjabi as an informal (that is, largely non-elite) literary vernacular in the early modern period, as a language of literature on the *outside*, makes it a particularly appropriate vehicle for the questioning – and the humour – voiced in *Hīr*.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Siegel, *Laughing Matters*, 5.

<sup>92</sup> See footnote 51.

<sup>93</sup> Siegel, *Laughing Matters*, 58.

<sup>94</sup> Sangari, “Spiritual Economy,” 1551.

<sup>95</sup> For example, see Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings: The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India*.

<sup>96</sup> Murphy, “Punjabi in the (late) Vernacular Millennium.”



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