



## Kāvyaṛth - Encounters with Hindi Poetry

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### — BIHARILAL —

#### Three couplets from the *Satsaī*

Bihari's *Satsaī*, a nominal "seven hundred" verses of independent but mutually complementary couplets, is a rare casket of treasures. The poet lived in the early 17th-century and enjoyed the patronage of Jai Singh Mirza of Amber (Jaipur); his *Satsaī* has been popular ever since. Hardly a single manuscript library in northern India is without a copy, and the poems have inspired countless artists working in a variety of courtly ateliers, producing fine miniature paintings on themes from the *Satsaī*.

During the four centuries separating his time from ours, scores of commentators have also engaged with Bihari's verses, indulging a trainspotter-like dedication to the task of identifying figures of speech and ornament (*alaṅkāras*) and classifying heroines. Though this *rasa-śāstra* approach is valuable in its own terms, it does not venture beyond the conventions of Sanskrit poetry, and has little to say about Bihari's innovative use of vernacular structural techniques that lie outside the realm of classical rhetoric. The conventionally-minded commentators mostly limit themselves to teasing out the various strands of meaning in a highly conventional 'naming of parts'. Such taxonomic endeavors are essentially philistine, because the effect of a poem derives not from its 'parts' themselves but from their holistic interaction: multivalency of meaning does not depend on the parallel existence of two separate meanings in a punning relationship, but rather from their infinitely subtle blending. Just as the weaver's combination of two plain colours in the warp and weft of his loom produces the iridescence of shot silk, so do intertwined meanings or allusions produce the glowing depth of poetry. In fact, this very image is used by the poet to describe the beauty of a girl in whom *physical maturity* and *childish innocence* are the warp and weft of adolescent charm:

छुटी न सिसुता की झलक झलक्यौं जोबनु अंग ।  
दीपति देहु दुहँनु मिलि दिपति ताफता रंग ॥

*Infancy's shine has not left, and Youth has shone forth in her body;  
The two blending in her glowing frame give a taffeta lustre.*

Or with greater license:

*A woman's lustre limns those limbs  
whose childish glow still shines:  
a taffeta effulgence shows  
in twinned and braided twines.*

Putting aside the problematic questions of translation style, a few issues of basic *meaning* need to be dealt with.

By 'taffeta' is meant the kind of fabric known in Hindi as *dhūp-chāh*, 'light & shade', in which contrasting colours give a shimmering effect; 'taffeta' and its etymon *tāftā* reflect Persian *tāfta*, 'twisted', though actually the 'shot silk' look is gained by contrasted fibres in the warp and the weft respectively, rather than in the twisted yarn itself. Be that as it may, the image very effectively suggests the effect of the sum being more alluring than its component parts.

English has no single-word equivalent of *jobana*, 'youth' as a stage between childhood and adulthood and yet wholly without the spotty implications of 'adolescence'. It resists adequate translation.

Another obstacle to the modern reader may be a wholesome aversion to Lolitaism – the falling of the male gaze on maidens of tender years. We have to turn the clock of sensibilities back to much earlier times, when an idealised lover in Indian poetry was perhaps thirteen or fourteen – as severely underage to us as Shakespeare's yet-to-menstruate Juliet:

My child is yet a stranger in the world;  
She hath not seen the change of fourteen years,  
Let two more summers wither in their pride,  
Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride.

*Romeo and Juliet*, I.2

The latter couplet, whose ‘ripe’ is a mere vowel away from the ‘rape’ from which Capulet would protect his daughter, rests its case with a determined (and *dohā*-like) end-rhyme, appealing to morality by equating ‘bride’ with ‘pride’; but social conventions are against him, and Paris responds drily, ‘Younger than she are happy mothers made’. Meanwhile, back in premodern India, doubts about ripeness do not disturb the author of the Sanskrit *Anaṅgaraṅga* — a sexual manual written by Kalyana Malla a century or two before Shakespeare and Bihari’s time (see how Bihari’s rhyme *aṅga/raṅga* chimes with its title!) — which specifically probes the technical problems of intercourse with ‘unripe’ fourteen-year-olds. In short, we have to leave our modern sensibilities at home when visiting poetry from this pre-modern period.

Let us move to safer ground, and to an appreciation of Bihari’s technique in the composition of his verse. A caesura divides the *dohā* line just over halfway through its length, in the metrical ratio 13:11; we may label the four quarters or ‘feet’ of the couplet as **1A, 1B, 2A, 2B**; this ancient couplet metre is delimited like a metrical tennis-court, and even the most amateur *dohā* poet knows instinctively how to keep the prosodic ball in play. Bihari’s game, however, is at a higher level: for him the metrical placements are not an obstacle or boundary but an energizing aid, more like the physical walls of a squash court than the notional lines of tennis, and he bounces ideas, sounds and words off their hard surfaces with dexterous power. In line 1 he uses the caesura to support a chiasmus, *jhalaka / jhalakyau*. The first of these is a noun, and bears a noun’s static quality: the *glimmer* of infancy lingers, does not go away (and as suits a late lingerer, it comes at the *end* of its phrase). The second is a perfective verb, and hence moves with a verb’s dynamism: a *glimmering has begun*, changing the scene entirely (and as suits a new arrival on the scene, it comes at the *beginning* of its phrase).

The duality of mature and immature beauty, already made specific by the repeat of *jhalak-*, is caught again in the repeat *dīpati...dīpati* in the second line; the first is a participle with feminine *deha* as subject; the second represents the noun *dīpti* ‘lustre’.

In narrative terms, this poem is ‘about’ a particular kind of female beauty; in a more abstract sense, it is ‘about’ the wonder of latency and incipience. But its delights come

equally from the delicate subtlety of its expression, and the precise aptness of its metaphor. While lesser poets might be content with simplistic *dohā* structures (as when an abstract thesis offered in the first line is underwritten by a metaphor in the second), Bihari weaves description, metaphor and meaning together into a much subtler yarn; he takes the conventions of the *dohā* line and embroiders them with the artistry of a true master.

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An early adopter of the principle of recycling, Bihari repeats the same rhyme-syllables in the second *dohā* that we will look at here. But this is a very different poem from the previous one. Using words of an extreme musicality, Bihari extolls the delights of aesthetic pleasure, again underlining his message with a perfect choice of harmonious medium. The proposition is simple: to drown in aesthetic joy is to *find life*, while to be unaffected by such an immersion is to suffer a drowning of a more final kind.

तंत्री नाद कबित्त रस सरस राग रति रंग ।  
अनबूड़े बूड़े तरे जे बूड़े सब अंग ॥

*A singing lute, and poesy; sweet melody of love's joys —  
The undrowned drown, while they are saved who drown indeed.*

This death-to-find-life conceit is fairly commonplace – especially perhaps in India, where such oxymorons as the profound sanity of derangement are well recognised. But Bihari being Bihari, the craft of the poem's structure demands a closer look, and we shall examine a triplet of complementary features, beginning in the first line.

*Phonetically*, line 1 is a carefully controlled sequence of dental consonants and sibilants, providing an unbroken mellifluous flow that speaks of lightness, delicacy and a superabundance of simple joy.

*Lexically*, the decorousness of high art suggested by Line 1 is couched entirely in the classical diction of tatsama vocabulary. The line is entirely Sanskritic – indeed is effectively Sanskrit, but for the more relaxed vernacular compounding.

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*Structurally*, the line is a listing of pleasures in a foursquare formula of two-word compounds, neatly grouped in pairs around the caesura — first *tantrī-nāda* ‘the sound of a stringed instrument’ and *kabitta-rasa* ‘the delight of poetry’; then *sarasa rāga* ‘sweet music’ and *rati-raṅga* ‘the joy of passion’; each phrase could be translated in a number of ways, but the point I wish to make is the neat two-plus-two compounding hinged around the caesura. The whole ensemble is resolutely up-market and classical – even the *tantrī* is surely a celestial veena, Saraswati’s choice of instrument, rather than some mere fiddle.

As we shall now see, the musical and structural limpidity of the first line finds its antithesis in the contrastive disruptions that the second line is about to present. They occur in the same triplet qualities outlined above.

*Phonetically*, line 1’s lightly tripping flow is replaced by a sequence of much more solemn sounds — retroflex consonants combined with long vowels in the thrice-repeated *būre*.

*Lexically*, the pristine world of abstract delights expressed through *tatsama* vocabulary gives way in line 2 to the rough-and-tumble experience of emotional response, suggested by vernacular *tadbhava* phrasing (the only exception being the requisite rhyme-word that provides the structural tie to line 1).

*Structurally*, the neat symmetry of four balanced phrases in line 1 is replaced by a syntax that rides roughshod over the caesura, with the word *tare* belonging metrically to the first half-line but syntactically to the second:

अनबूड़े बूड़े, तरे / जे बूड़े सब अंग ॥

*undrowned drowned, saved / they who drowned utterly*

Seen on its own, such a structural feature might be considered a random event of little significance; but familiarity with Bihari’s poetry suggests that randomness was rarely on his menu. Parallel examples elsewhere in the text indicate that he was fond of using exactly this kind of *metrical* disruption to suggest *moral or emotional* disruption: upsets of the heart, imbalances of the spirit, and other interruptions of placid order.

In terms of essential meaning, the poem implies an inherent duality in the values of 'being saved'. In the normal convention, one seeks salvation from the ocean of the world by 'crossing over' (*tar-*) to the other side – typically by taking a ride in the boat of devotion to God, perhaps with *guru* as helmsman. But in this couplet Bihari tells us that those who are 'saved' (*tare*) are the ones who immerse themselves in sentiment, drowning themselves in feelings of this temporal world.

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Though Bihari can be described as a poet of love, he was capable of sudden profundities that make us look at his entire output in a new light; and though it is true that he was skilled in *śleṣa* (puns) and other kinds of linguistic play, the true multivalence of his art lies in an ability to blur the boundaries between the world and its antithesis, between the human and the spiritual. The third verse we shall encounter here is a case in point. It is one of a handful of *Satsaī* couplets for which Bihārī chose the *dohā*'s inverted sibling, the *soṛṭhā*, which rhymes at the caesura (here *-dhāra / -pāra*), instead of at the end of the line. The 13:11 ratio is inverted as 11:13.

मैं समझ्यौ निरधार यह जग काचौ काच सौँ ।

एकै रूप अपार प्रतिबिंबत लखियतु जहाँ ॥

*I've seen for sure: the world is blemished glass;  
Unbounded, pure, a single form's refracted there.*

The conceit of this verse is that the perfect and sublime unity of the Divine, being refracted through the imperfect prism of a fractured world, appears to our eyes as a *plurality* of images. Bihari reinforces this meaning in two ways: first through the structure of his composition, and then through a display of 'lexical variety' that *itself* evokes the plurality of the world around us.

The first foot of the *soṛṭhā* metre is short, and in this particular poem has a punchy trochaic rhyme-cadence (*long-short*); Bihari uses it to report an intense epiphany in the first half-line: *maī samajhyau niradhāra*. The rhythm – 'dum diddle dum diddle *dum*' – has a drama that affirms a dynamic process of discovery: '*This* have I *found*, I am *sure*'. The verb *samajh-*, specifically when used in the perfective, already yields a forceful

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sense of realisation that is fixed in a particular moment of time: hence the feeling that an epiphany is being reported here.

The rhythm of **1A** (the first quarter-verse or half-line) is repeated almost exactly in **2A** (the third). In fact, because *ekai* ends with an emphatic *-i*, (= modern Hindi ही) which may be read as a separate vowel, the syllable can be read as a diphthong: एकइ, *ekaii*. There are precedents for such metrical readings elsewhere in the *Satsaī* also.

The matched rhythm of **1A** and **2A** combines with the *-dhāra* / *-pāra* caesura rhyme to unify these two metrical feet. The result is to produce almost a poem-within-a-poem, presenting the gist and heart of the whole couplet in its 'A' feet alone.

मैं समझ्यौ निरधार

एकै रूप अपार

After the drama of the opening phrase, the epiphany itself is delivered in **2B**, *yaha jagā kācau kāca saū*. Orthographies differ in the manuscripts, some showing nasalisation in *kāca* and others not (and some nazalizing *kācau* as *kācau* !); but because a long vowel in Braj may lose or gain nasalization with impunity, the point is not very important. More significant is the fact that alliteration underscores the inherent identity of the noun, *kāca*, and its adjective, *kācau*. We then come to the real question: what is actually *meant* here? Commentators and translators are in many minds about quite how to interpret *kācau kāca* (modern Hindi *kaccā kāca*). Some offer the rather vague interpretation 'this world is false like glass', or '... is a false glass', and one or two say that it is like 'a mirror', and such images yield a reasonably satisfactory image. But I see a more specific one: the inherent fault-lines of an imperfect crystal, capturing light from the emphatically singular form of God (*ekai rūpa*), refract it into the manifold images of the material world. It is a truly sublime vision. Though the world is *kācau* and thus not ultimately true or real, its *very blemishes* themselves refract the divine in creative ways, making their function a positive one, and representing creation as something to be celebrated.

But Bihari's own creativity does not end here: there is a further lexical aspect to be considered. The three words *pratibimbīta lakhīyatu jahā*, whose work is to tell us of the

*variety* of the manifest world, are respectively Sanskritic, vernacular, and Persianate; and these choices represent the full gamut of sources for the Braj language – a complete inventory of Bihari’s lexical options. Thus Bihari’s wording not only *expresses* the ‘diversity in the world’, it also *exemplifies* it! Form is perfectly aligned with meaning. For good measure, the Persianate *jahā* (which also bears a second meaning, ‘there’), is an alliterative synonym for the earlier *jaga*; this again shows that apparent *variety* (in form, in word) reflects an essential *unity* (a single essence, a single meaning).

Biharilal — प्रणाम !

- Rupert Snell