Seeing Radha/Being Radha
Singing Ashta Chap Poetry and Thumri

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I trace this back to the day I began to learn thumri. My guru Naina Devi had said—'Sita, Lakshmi, Savitri . . . these are held up as role models for other women. But we are singers. We are different. To sing thumri you must understand Radha. You must become Radha.'

She repeated this often over the years I spent with her. Sometimes she would tell me — Radha broke all rules in her love for Krishna. She risked everything. You must love like that if you want to sing thumri.

I take it that Naina Devi was not suggesting to me that every aspiring singer of thumri enter into an adulterous relationship. So what did she mean, how was I to become Radha, and who *was* this Radha I had to become?

An old sarangi player from Banaras, cried out, deeply moved by the beauty of the bandish (the musical composition) by Sanad Piya that he was teaching me: 'This is the heart of Radha that speaks thus! Bitiya to sing this you must know Radha.

I repeat the bandish after him:

नाहीं बोलूं रे, मैं तो से
चले जाओ, बालम छेड़ो मत, जाओ ।।
सनद कहत नित रहत सौतन के संग
अजहू आये मेरे, बालम छेड़ो मत, जाओ ।।

Nahi bolu re mai tose
Chale jaao balam chhedo mat, jao.
sanad kahat, nit rahat soutan ke sang
Ajahu aye mere pas, balam, chhedo mat, jaao.

'I won't speak to you
Go away now, don't bother me
Sanad says, "You're always with this other woman.
Today you come to me!
Go away now, don't bother me."'

Where is Radha in this bandish? She is not mentioned by name; she is not there even by implication because it is not Shyam or Kanhai who is addressed here, but a nameless balam. So why did Hanuman Mishra think of Radha?

There are, of course, other bandishes that could be seen as in the voice of Radha. Here is one in which the nayika playfully 'quarrels' with Kanhaiya: हम तुमसे कीन्ही रार, अरे हाँ साँवरे कन्हैया ।। 'Dark one, Kanhaiya', she says, "I'll tease/quarrel with you.'

Radha's presence is only implied here. I can presume that it is she who speaks thus, but it *could* equally well be any other (gopi) addressing Kanhaiya. The antara (the second part of the bandish) both opens up the speaker's identity by referring to the 'raas' — where Krishna danced with each of the gopis, *and* hints at the identity of the speaker as Radha — she is the one who has vainly imagined/hoped that she was the only woman partnered in the dance — her vanity leads to her loss. But this bandish only mentions ' raas'; it does not mention this story that I recall as I sing:

बृन्दावन में रास रचो है,
मोर मुकुट धरैया
मुरली अधर बजैया
अरे हाँ साँवरे कन्हैया।।

Brindavan me raas rachao hai
Mor Mukut dharaiya
Murali adhar bajaiya
Are han saavare kanhaiya

'You who wear a peacock feather in your crown
Brindavan comes alive with your raas
You who hold a flute to your lips
Dark one, Kanhaiya!'

I recall also that singers (and dancers) speak of Radha as *the* female protagonist, *the* nayika, indeed, the most perfect, the uttam nayika. In each bandish it is she who speaks, she whose voice is heard, it is her emotions that are expressed. But because each bandish is in the voice of a different nayika, Radha's identity changes from bandish to bandish: she is at once the young, inexperienced mugdha, the mature praudha, the angry khandita, the confident swadhinapatika, the eager and fearful abhisarika. Who is Radha then? Which of the many many images that the bandishes give me is the 'real' Radha? Is there a real Radha at all? And then even were I to elide the identities of all named

and unnamed, implied and explicitly identified nayikas into the single (complex) identity of Radha, I am still faced with the problem of how *I* am to become to be Radha.

Naina Devi's exhortation to me to be Radha also forces me to make some sense of my engagement with thumri, to see how my ordinary life in the ordinary world and the magical moment of singing might be (or might not be) related, and to try and see how these two seemingly contradictory lives and selves might in fact be seen as one whole. I need to ask further, what kind of 'whole' this is. Is it a seamless whole? Or are contradictions an integral part of it? Do contradictions distract from what it is, or do they enhance its quality? And finally, and perhaps most importantly, I have to ask how I am to sing these bandishes so that I am true, both to them and to myself.

This is my task as a student of music, a singer.

How does this task position me vis-a-vis the question of 'images and self-images'? First of all the work of being a singer requires of me that I internalise, rather than reject, the images given to me by my traditon—internalise them consciously, willingly, eagerly, so that these images become mine, become me. I become, I am what I sing. It also asks of me that I colour the images with my special meaning, so that *they* now become me. I have to ask, therefore how the image(s) of Radha as it comes to me from the bandishes is to be internalised by me—how it has to become self-image. But also, I have to ask how this given image becomes mine in a way that is interactive and dynamic, which involves equally *my* image (or self image) informing and transforming the given image of Radha.

Perhaps this is what is meant by 'raga ko apnana', 'bandish ko apnana' (making the raga, or the bandish your own) that as students of music, we are constantly exhorted to do. Perhaps this making of the bandish one's own means just this interactive, two-way process, where the given text (with its many renderings through history) and my forming self, learn to come together in a special relationship.

How am I to sing—this, is an on-going search. The moment I feel I have learnt something, understood something, I find myself at the beginning of another, even more difficult, search. The poet Iqbal says:

हर इक मकाम से आगे मकाम है तेरा
हयात ज़ौक–ए–सफर के सिवा कुछ और नहीं।।

Har ik makam se aage makam hai tera
Hayat zauk-e-safar ke siva kuch our nahin.

'Beyond each resting place, lies a new destination.
What is life but a journey lived beautifully.

So taking my cue from him, perhaps the path to that perfect understanding of the raga and its incarnating bandish lies in dealing with the small everyday problems of riaz—understanding the bandish as *given*, learning how to sing a note so that it seems not to sound from *my* voice but from all around me; trying to understand who I am and why I sing these songs—small questions, but even these are perhaps not answerable in a single lifetime.

These questions are perhaps somewhat different from the other questions this seminar might raise and which deal with the tension between an image that society might use to define a person or group, and the latter's resistance seen in the form of the articulation of a self image. Yet, my task as a singer also requires me to consider this latter question. I have to ask how these images, and the bandishes in which these images are embedded make sense in the context of my life. Are they meaningful to me, are they 'relevant', do they speak to my somewhat harassed living-in-the-modern-world self?

At first glance, perhaps not. I think of a favourite bandish:

हमसे न बोलो, पिराई मोरी अखियां राजा।।

hamse na bolo, pirai mori akhiyan raja.

'My eyes are sore (with weeping). Don't talk to me now.'

This image of the pining, coy, or angry nayika is laughably un-me. And even more obviously ridiculous, at my age, is the image of the very young nayika, when I sing a bandish like

बारी उमर लरकैंया
न छेड़ो मोरा सैंया।

Bari umar larkaiya,
Na chhedo mora saiya

'Don't trouble me, don't tease me—
I who am only such a very young girl'.

This apparant lack of fit between one's self and life and (one's self image?) and the image of the narrating woman is a problem any modern thinking performer of a traditional repertoire faces, and this problem has been dealt with in many ways. Some singers have written new (and apparently more relevant) texts to be set to traditional ragas. Some (dancers, especially) have composed or choreographed pieces set to modern poetry, sometimes in languages that are quite different from the one used historically and traditionally. Yet other performers have focussed on form, worked with its abstract beauty, and let *that* be

the meaning of what they do. Another approach attempts to read and highlight the many meanings available to us in these forms and the texts that the form uses to explicate itself. Both texts and forms are essentially open-ended, and so performers have always found it possible to make a contemporary statement through a very traditional text and form.

My understanding and experience of thumri singing has led me to believe that my life, and the life of my world does find expression in the many many meanings that are spun out in thumri's bol banao singing. I also realise that even the bald text is never finalised; it is never a once-and-for-all given. There are many versions of any one text, and each of these versions is further created anew and differently at the moment of singing, through improvisation. I realised this again very sharply, in the course of a lesson with Pandit Chandrashekar Rele. Rele ji taught me the familiar bandish 'Hamse na bolo' singing it as *he* would sing it—differently, and yet similar to the way my guru Naina Devi would sing it and had taught me. The shock of discovery was when he taught me the antara. The pining nayika, the virahotkanthita of the bandish as I had learnt it from Naina Devi had vanished. In her place was a sharper, angrier woman a khandita. Moreover, here was not an uttam nayika, gently bemoaning her plight, but a samanya, an ordinary woman of the world demanding her rights, her due: The nayika of Naina Devi's bandish had lamented:

सगरी रैन मोहे तरपत बीती
अब भोर होत आये हो राजा।
हमसे न बोलो।।

Sagari rain mohe tarpat beeti
Ab bhor hot aye ho raja
Hamse na bolo

'I've spent the night in torment, Now, at dawn, you come!
Don't speak to me.'

But Rele ji's bandish had her say

साँझ कहे मोहे झलनी गढाई दे
होत बिहानी बिसर गई बतियां राजा।
हमसे न बोलो।।

Saanjh kahe mohe jhoolani gadhai de
Hot bihani bisa gai batiya, raja
Hamsa na bolo.

In the evening you promised me a nose ring.
Now, in the dawn, you've forgotten your promise.
Don't speak to me.'

The mention of the jhoolani in this version also reminds me that the one who both sing this song, and the voice that speaks here *is* no Radha, but a tawaif (a courtesan-singer), whose patron has removed her jhoolani and is to give her in exchange, a laung (another kind of nose ornament) at the nath-utarwai ceremony (also called missi). This ceremony marked the young tawaif's entry into a life of performance and active sexuality. When singing *this* bandish then, Rele ji's version, I find myself juggling at least two characters—legendary Radha, *and* the historical (and legendary tawaif) So who am I to be? Moreover, I encounter this improbable coming together of Radha and the courtesan singer in many texts. Sometimes Radha is foregrounded, sometimes the courtesan, but the two play hide-and-seek with each other through song after song. What sense am I to make of this. Am I to think, as Dimock would have me understand, that as among the Vaishnava-Sahajiyas, all women are of the nature of Radha? This seems to be essentialising both Radha and all women. Nor does it help me understand how men who sing thumri (and indeed they do too) are then to become Radha. Elsewhere I have tried to explain how thumri's bol banao style of playing with the many possible ways of saying the same word or phrase—'Hamse na bolo' for instance—along with thumri's style of opening up raga boundaries (thus opening out both textual and musical identities and meanings) leads to the articulating of many meanings hidden in a simple and often very conventional line of poetry. It also leads to the opening up and questioning of the notion of a fixed identity. This style of singing helps me grapple with some of these problems.

Once, singing for a group of teenaged girls I chose the rasiya bandish 'Mrignayani ko yar naval rasiya', and encouraged them to see themselves as beautiful (for what else does mrignayani mean?), with a beauty that is disinterested in its own perfection, in fashion shows and international contests, or even with accepted notions (images?) of what is feminine. We began to hear the bandish as describing Radha (the doe-eyed one whose beloved is the young rasiya, Krishna) as a beautiful woman, a woman glowing with love and happiness, kindness, generosity and a true caring for the world. We arrived, I think, at another understanding of beauty. I think we also experienced ourselves, each other, and the world as filled with this beauty that I might sometimes choose to call Radha.

The bol banao style of singing, and working thus with texts helps *me* to understand how to internalise the bandish. It becomes for me real and believable. It speaks to me about my life and my world. I can identify with this nayika, and so with the nayikas of other bandishes. But these nayikas are still not necessarily Radha. Why did Naina Devi and Hanuman Mishra mention Radha? Is 'Radha' just a convenient name that one might use instead of the more generic 'nayika'. Who —or what—is Radha? Where do I find her image? Who tells me about her and how do they speak?

I find many, many answers.

Scholarly works tell me that there was no such woman; that until quite late, the texts do not mention a Radha. (Even the story of Krishna is one put together from diverse sources, added to at different times). Radha appears nowhere in the mahabharata. Indeed Krishna himself here is depicted as King and statesman rather than naughty child, cowherd/flute-player and charming lover. The Harivamsa (circa second century AD) does not mention Radha either, though it does mention Krishna's amorous sporting with the gopis. Both *Vishnu Purana* (circa 300-600 AD) and *Bhagavata Purana* (circa 600-900 AD) single out one gopi as Krishna's favourite, with whom, during the raas he disappears in order to teach the others humility; she too is abandoned for the same reason. This gopi, though special, remains unnamed. It is only in the thirteenth century that puranic literature finally mentions Radha. Folklore and poetry however mention the name Radha earlier; she appears in these traditions as early as the sixth century AD, but these are scattered references. It is only in the beautiful twelfth century poem *Gita Govinda* by Jaideva that Radha finally comes centre stage. In all these traditions, Radha, along with the other gopis, is seen as a symbol of the human soul longing for the divine, and Radha herself is not seen as the spouse of Krishna, nor as herself divine. She is not seen here as a goddess.

However, in the works of Nimbarka, written around the time of the *Gita Govinda*, Radha comes to be considered Krishna's eternal consort the devi sitting on his left side. A little later, in Chandida's *Srikrishnakirtan*, she becomes an incarnation of Vishnu's consort, Lakshmi. By the time of Vallabhacharya and Chaitanya (sixteenth century and later) Radha becomes even more important than Lakshmi, just as Krishna supercedes Vishnu. Thereafter in a sense she supercedes Krishna himself—it is to her that prayers are addressed, and Vaishnavas greet each with the words 'Radhe Radhe!'

Simultaneously, in puranic literature, once Radha appears around the thirteenth century in such works as the *Devi Bhagavata*, and the

Naradiya, Padina, Brahmanda and *Brahmavaivarta* puranas, the image of Radha changes from that of a symbol of the human soul to that of feminine cosmic and redemptive power. In these texts, Krishna the King and statesman loses place to the cowherd lover; Krishna's story is framed differently. Indeed the raison d'etre for Krishna's incarnation is the bliss of raas; this takes precedence even over the killing of the tyrant Kamsa. Now Radha appears with a name and a fully formed identity. She is the special gopi of the raas, she is the one who implores Krishna to return the gopi's clothes when he steals them. In other poetic works, Radha—acquires a husband, a mother-in-law, a sister-in-law (all named), a place of birth. Her parents are named. We now know the village of her mother's parents, and even the name of her maternal grandmother's natal village. She is spoken of as 'Barsane ki naar', and as 'Vrishnabhan Dulari', not only as Krishna's beloved. The mythic Vrajbhumi, now located firmly in real geographical space, abounds with the sites where she has walked, bathed, done her shringar, played on swings, crept surreptiously to rendezvous with Krishna. The squalor and poverty of the small towns that constitute the area known as Vraj, mask these sites which mythic, now exist here, today. *This* is where Radha walked; *this* is where she swept the courtyard. Myth and legend, are now as real (more real?) as the here and now. As the legend grows, Radha acquires a special friend and confidante from among the other gopis—Lalita Sakhi—and a rival (the sautan, the bairan of my songs), for Krishna's affections—Chandravali.

In our time too Radha continues to hold the imagination. Dharmvir Bharti's Radha (*Kanu Priya*) questions Krishna's infidelity, and life choices. Sonal Mansingh in the dance production *Radha Speak* takes out of Jayadeva's mouth the loving description of Hari playing in the forest with the gopis, and makes Radha speak. When she does, the ashtapadi Chandana Charchita becomes not just straight description, but angry shocked accusation. This Radha is different now from the uttam nayika I have been used to seeing. Her perfection now permits of ordinariness, faults; it permits of me, my emotions.

Theologians and followers of the Vaishnava sampradayas speak of Radha as Krishna's shakti. Others speak of her as a goddess, an aspect of Devi. Yet others point to the relationship between the words Radha and Dhara—Radha they say is that creative flowing spirit that links human devotion with the divine. And Ramakrishna, like Chaitanya before him, believed that the path to adoring Krishna was to take on Radha's persona and experience her emotions.

For poets and painters Radha is an inexhaustible source of

inspiration. Bihari opens his *Satsai* with an invocation to Radha—who is here no innocent village girl, no 'naveli naar, gavaar', but, 'nagari' —urbane, sophisticated, whose very shadow brings joy to Shyam, is the greening of all that is dark and lifeless.

मेरी भव बाधा हरो, राधा नागरी सोय
जा तन की झाई परै, श्याम हरित दुति होय।।

Meri bhav badha haro, Radha nahgari soi
Ja tan ki jhai parai Shyam harit duti hoi.

'Remove the obstacles of existence clever Radha
You whose very shadow makes Shyam rejoice, makes all things green!

Nandadas, astounded by her beauty attempts a little magic to avert the evil eye of nazar: 'Sundar mukh par varu tona' Gadadhar Bhatt bemoans his inability to describe this limitless wonder with his puny imagination: 'Amit mahima, itai budhi thori'

Miniature paintings show her as Bani Thani Radha, as the abhisarika, as the vasakasajja . . .

Bewildered, I ask, where am I in all this?
Then I remember a verse from Siraj Aurangabadi:

वो अजब घड़ी थी वो जिस घड़ी, लिया दर्स नुस्खा–ए–इश्क का
के किताब अक्ल की ताक में ज्यूँ धरी थी, त्यूँ ही धरी रही।।

Vo Ajab ghadi thi vo jis ghadi liya dars nuskha-e-ishq ka
Ke kitab akl ki taak me jyun dhari thi tyun hi dhari rahi.

How strange that moment when I first experience the draught of love!
The book of knowledge in its niche, stayed where it was, untouched.

Is Siraj telling me to put the books back onto their shelves, and look for Radha elsewhere. What is the nuska-e-ishq which he seems to think might hold the answer?

I recall a conversation with the theatre director Anuradha Kapur: we had rather excitedly arrived at the understanding that to describe someone/something in great and loving detail, is to actually *see* that which has been described. *That* is the point of the detailed (if conventional) description of, for instance, Surdas' poetry. 'Varnan' is the path to 'darshan'. Surdas describes, and so, blind as he is, he *sees*, and,

traversing the path of his varnan, we too see with him.

I work with this idea—again with a group of teenaged boys and girls. We read, then sing Surdas' beautiful poem about the power and the powerlessness of description.

उपमा हरी तनु देखी लजानी
कोऊ जल में, कोऊ बननि रही दूरी, कोऊ कोऊ गगन समानी।।

मुख निरखत ससि गयो अम्बर सौं तड़ित छबि हेरी
मीन कमल कर नयन चरन डर जल में कियो बसेरी।।

मुख देखी अहिराज लजानै बिबरनि पैठे धाई
कटि निरखी केहरि डर मान्यौ बन बन रही दुराई।।

गारी देत कबिनन की बरनत श्रीअंग पटदर देत
सूरदास हमकौ सरमावत नाऊं हमारौ लेत।।

Upma hari tanu dekhi lajani
Kou jal me, kou banani rahi doori, kou kou gagan samaani

Mukh nirakhat sasi gayo ambar so, tadit dasan chabi heri
Meen kamal kar nayan charan dar jal me kiyo baseri.

Bhuja dekhi ahiraj lajaane bibarana paithe dhai
Kati nirakhi kehari dar manyo ban ban rahi durai

Gari det kabinan ki baranat shi-ang patdar det
Surdas hamko sarmavat naom hamarou let

Seeing Hari's form, the similies are abashed.
Some hide in the water, some in the
forest, some seek refuge in the sky.
Seeing his face the moon fled to the sky, as did the lightning on
seeing his teeth
The fish and the lotus, for fear of his hands and feet and eyes
made their abode in the water
Seeing his arms, great serpents were put to shame and slithered
into their holes
Seeing his waist, the lion was afraid and stayed hidden in the
forests.

Using the similies to describe his auspicious body abuses the poets' description. 'Surdas', the similies say, `You take our name and put us to shame.

We start with the notion of blindness and seeing.

What does it mean to be blind; what does it mean to see? Can you be sightless and yet see? Can one have the gift of vision and yet be blind? Can one see in other ways than through the eyes?

Have you ever felt blind with rage? Have you ever blinded yourself to something you know to be wrong, shut your eyes, refused to see, because you were afraid?

Can you see with your skin, your nose, your ears, your tongue, your heart? Does the skin see what the eyes do? Does the heart?

Are there ways of seeing that do not depend on sighted eyes? Can the blind see? And if so, what do they see?

We move to the poem, read it aloud, taste its sounds as we say it, and move to its lilt and fall. We hear it with all our being. Then we ask —What do you see? Do you see snakes slithering into their holes, fish darting in sun-dappled streams, lions prowling through forests, a full moon, an inky black night? Do you see a beautiful boy — with your face or mine—an ordinary everyday boy, with an ordinary everyday face that glows with the beauty lent to it by a blind poet's love?

We speak of Surdas.

Surdas spoke and sang this poem, and Surdas was blind. He was blind from birth, some say. Others say he extinguished the light of his seeing eyes, because, entrapped in seeing the sights of the mundane world, those eyes had lost sight of the beauty of Krishna: he blinded his eyes the better to see. But whatever the story, Surdas was blind when he sang this song, so blind, that in Hindi, 'to be a surdas' means 'to be blind, sightless.'

'Seeing Hari', says Surdas, 'the similies are abashed'. Do similies have eyes, then? Can they see? Or do they see as Surdas does?

We explore the idea that in this poem Surdas is playing a little game. He is using the conventions of poetry to break those very conventions. He talks about Hari's beauty in conventional ways but all the time he suggests that Hari's beauty cannot ever be described. 'I cannot describe Hari's beauty', he seems to say, 'words are not sufficient', he seems to say, 'and yet'—is there a glimmer of a smile in his empty eyes?—'what else do I have but words to name, describe, paint for you the vision of Hari's beauty that my heart sees?'

As he speaks, as I read, as we sing, Hari of the indescribeable beauty stands before me. As I read, the words fly off the page, become Hari, and I see Hari as Surdas saw him, with something other than my eyes. Blind Surdas gives me then, the gift of a greater, richer vision.

Surdas uses the common similies of Hindi poetry. Eyes are always fish-like in their length and largeness, in their swift, darting glances.

Waists are always as slim as a lion's. Faces are as radiant as the full moon; arms are as graceful and sinuous as serpents. 'Seeing' Hari, the similies are at a loss. 'Seeing' Hari, Surdas is at a loss. How to describe to you and me, poor, blindly sighted creatures, this vision of extraordinary beauty that he sees? The similies are not enough he says, Poetry is not enough, sight does not suffice to encompass this vision.

But wonderfully, he sets us on the path to seeing through ordinary description, conventional poetry, the usual similies. He describes snakes, lions, fish, the moon—things we have all seen and he has *not*, and we see them again, clearly now. Our vision has been cleansed by his blindness: We see snakes, fish, and lotus as if for the first time. And knowing that seeing with the eyes is not enough, we learn with blind Surdas to see into the heart of beauty, to see the face of Hari.

Then all conventions are freed, all similies hide themselves, all our angers, silly pleasures, jealousies, ambitions vanish into thin air, vanish under the ground, vanish into forests and bottomless rivers. Then suddenly we *see*, truly see, the world around us, the world as it is, and the world as lit by the beauty of its inner truth.

We ask each other then—Would you have believed that we needed a blind man to help us see?!

'Varnan' is more than just ordinary, utilitarian description. It seems to suggest a lingering, loving recalling, but also an imagining. So too 'darshan' is not ordinary seeing - we learn to see with eyes other than the physical ones; we see with a blinding radiance. 'Gaze', in the words of Sadanand Menon ('Master of Arts', *The Hindu*, 11.10.98) 'is transformed to vision'.

I recall another music session with children. 'Why do we describe?', we had asked, and arrived at the understanding that we describe in order to share with another the experience of something seen or heard or imagined. And also that it has been possible to describe because we saw or heard in such detail, with such care and attention. To describe is to share; and to share is to build a relationship—to care enough, to love. Description itself is not possible unless we had cared enough to start with, to see, as Surdas for instance sees, beyond what is visible.

I remember now a fragment of another poem read a long time ago. Radha, adorning herself for her meeting with Krishna, looks at her reflection in her mirror. Her heart and mind are so full of Krishna, that she cries out with love and longing: 'Radha! Radha!', forgetting herself, and so becoming what she imagines and recalls.

I ask then, does seeing help us to become, to be what we see? Does

this mean then that by describing, I learn to see, and by seeing, I become that which I see?

Trying to answer this I turn to two sets of bandishes - the first, a set of more descriptive poems where the identities of describer and described are apparently clearly set out; the second, bandishes where there is no describer: these bandishes are subjective articulations of the narrator's feelings. Generally, I find (though this is not always so) that the poetry of the Ashta Chhaap poets provides me with many examples of the former type of bandish, while thumri bandishes are often (though again, not always) of the latter type. Surdas, the best known of the Ashta Chhaap poets provides several interesting examples of both, and indeed of an in-between type, where, even within the text, the narrator/singer moves from more objective description to more subjective experience, or vice versa.

I am a thumri singer. So my choice of thumri bandishes is self-evident. Why do I choose to look at the poems of the Ashta Chhaap poets? The Ashta Chhaap (a phrase translated by some scholars as the eight seals) are the eight poet singers who are considered instrumental in inspiring Vallabhacharya (founder of the Vallabha sampradaya or pushti marg) to include music as part of the offerings made in the temples (or havelis as they are known) of Nathadwara and also Brindavan. The eight poets are Kumbhandas, Surdas, Krishnadas and Paramanandadas, and in the next generation, Nandadas, Govindswamy, Chittaswami and Chaturbhujdas. The bandishes composed by these poets form the core of the musical offerings made in the havelis; and for this reason, these compositions and this style of singing are known as Haveli sangeet. The compositions of other poets such as Chandrasakhi and Gadadar Bhatt also form part of this repertoire.

Haveli sangeet is devotional music, sung in the temples by male hereditary musicians known as kirtankars who are attached to the temples for seva (service) of the deity. The texts have been composed primarily by male poets. Thumri on the other hand, is sung by women, courtesans, for the (secular) entertainment of elite male patrons in courts, mehfils or kothas. It is erotic in nature ('shringar rasa pradhan' Naina Devi used to say) and highly expressive music. It is oriented moreover to attracting and securing patronage for the singer. Some musicians and musicologists believe that thumri singers might, in an earlier time, have been, like the devadasis of South India, attached to temples and so served a religious rather than secular function. But by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries thumri is clearly not a religious form; it is clearly a secular form of entertainment for an elite male clientele.

There is however some relationship between haveli sangeet and thumri. Naina Devi would often tell me that haveli sangeet was one of the sources of thumri gayaki (along with others like the 'folk' songs of the purab region—eastern Uttar Pradesh—and sufi poetry and music). Indeed listening to haveli sangeet I am struck by the similarity in the way of enunciating and articulating the note—swar ka lagar, swar ka nikas—and the fluidity of voice required by both forms. There is also, of course, the presence of the Radha-Krishna pair who in haveli sangeet are seen as divine; in thumri as ordinary mortals, made divine by love or perhaps, a divine pair, made comprehensible and mortal by love?

The two forms are different in terms of their contexts and intention and in the reception of the performance. They are different also with respect to the gender, identity and status of the performers. There are differences also in the singing styles, the accompanying instruments used, and finally, as mentioned in the poetry—the poetry of haveli sangeet being clearly devotional, and often more descriptive, more objective. The poetry of haveli sangeet is longer (each poem is much longer than thumri's average of four simple lines)—this itself makes the singing style different, somewhat more 'fixed' than thumri's highly improvised bol banao style of singing what are primarily romantic lyrics, that describe a woman's subjective state.

The experience of working with and singing some of the poems from the Ashta Chhaap poets and the traditional thumri compositions gives me some clues to understanding some of the questions I face. It seems to me that the answer to the riddle, the path to making a bandish my own, lies in somehow dissolving the line between the objective, what is out there, what is imaged, and my subjective experience, my own self-image?.

I shall begin then with a few typical, descriptive bandishes from the Ashta Chhaap poets:

Here is a verse in which Surdas describes the beauty of Radha's eyes. (Radha is not mentioned, but who else could this be?)

खंजन नैन सुरंग रसमाते
अतिसय चारु विमल चंचल ये, पल पिंजरा न समाते।।

चली चली जात निकट स्रवननि के, सकि ताटंक फंदाते
सूरदास अंजन गुन अटकै, नतरु कबै उड़ि जाते।।

Khanjan nain suranga ras maate
Atisaya charu vimal chanchal ye, pal pinjara na samate

Chali chali jaat, nikat sravanani ke saki tatank phandate,
Surdas anjan gun atake nataru kabai udi jaate.

These eyes, as large and long as a Khanjan bird, expressive, and intoxicating.
Beautiful beyond words, clear [and clear seeing] with quick-darting glances.
The cage of her eyelashes aren't large enough to hold them in.
They move, run to find her ears (ears that hear the flute)
Breaking all bonds, overcoming all obstacles.
Surdas says: Were it not for her binding kajal, these eyes would have flown away long before this.

As I sing, I *see* Radha, I see her long, large black eyes, and the emotions that flit through them—now joyous, now eager, now searching, now anxious, now confused, now restless, now at peace—as she hears the flute, and searches for the source of that sound. And seeing, I also experience as I sing, her joy, her eagerness, restlessness and anxiety. Those emotions become mine. Are those eyes then also mine?

I notice also the last line—'Surdas anjan gun atake'. It does not say 'Surdas kahe', 'Surdas says'. Is Surdas telling me this then, or am I speaking to him?

I turn to this bandish of Gadadhar Bhatt:

जयति श्री राधिके, सकल सुख साधिके।

कृष्ण दृग भृंग वस्रिामहित पद्मिनी।।
कृष्ण दृग मृगज बंधन सुडोरी।।

Jayati Shri Radhike, sakal sukh sadhike.
Krishna drig bhring visramahit padmini
Krishna drig mrigaj bandhan sudori.

Homage to Shri Radhika, abode of joy.
[Radhika is] that lotus which has the power to hold
Krishna's [flitting/unfaithful] bee-eyes.
That beautiful cord which binds and
holds stable his [wandering] doe-eyes

Singing, I see Radha again. I see her, the beloved of Krishna, beautiful as a lotus in bloom, slender and supple, yet strong—a skein of silk.

But Gadadhar also helps me to see Krishna. Krishna is not described here. Gadadhar doesn't address him and he is not the one to whom Gadadhar pays homage. But describing Radha, he seems to describe Krishna too. Gadadhar makes me see Krishna's flitting black eyes, Krishna's long, large liquid doe eyes. Do I also see/remember in Radha's (here) calm, self-assurance of her supremacy, Krishna's eternal unfaithfulness?

If by describing Radha, Gadadhar makes me see Krishna, might Lalan Piya's thumri bandish describing a beautiful, unnamed (but by no means anonymous) youth make me see both the Krishna implied in his description, and also Radha, whom I imagine as the describer?

तिहारी चितवन चितचोरन लाल।।
रंगीली मदगति मराल चपला सी चाल
चितवन चितचोरन लाल।।

मदन भरी मूरत अलवेली, अंग–अंग प्रभा अनूप नवेली
भृकुटी कुटिल घूंघरारे बाल,
चितव चितचोरन लाल।।

Thihari chitvan chitchoran lal
Rangeeli madgati chapala si chaal
Chitvan chitchoran lal.
Madan bhari murat albeli, ang-ang prabha anup naveli
Bhrikuti kutil ghoongharare baal
Chitvan chitchoran lal.

Beloved stealer of hearts,
[How describe] your glancing eyes,
Your swaying, muderous gait?
[How describe] your Madan-like beauty,
your glowing limbs, your eternal youth
Those wickedly arched eyebrows, that curly mop of hair?
Beloved stealer of hearts!

I see Krishna as I sing. I see him in every face before me. I see Radha seeing Krishna, I see her exulting in this vision of the beautiful boy Lalan Piya describes. And I see Lalan Piya too. It is after all because of him, because Lalan Piya composed this bandish, that I sing it today and I see what I see. Chitchoran Lal and Radha come alive because I sing them into being, because Lalan Piya gives me the bandish to do this. Something of their beauty, of their selves, remains with me, and I hope also with those who have listened, long after the song has ended. For me, the singing of the bandish has been a long journey into other lives, other times. I have been and known other bodies, other selves. Perhaps, briefly I have also seen and been Radha.

Does this mean I have briefly known what it is to be a mythical cowherd girl who was probably born in the twelfth century and who is, eight hundred years later, still a naveli naar? or does Radha mean something else entirely?

I remember again Shrivatsa Goswami's description of Radha as

the dhara, the stream that links human devotion with the divine. Is Radha the binding cord by which I connect myself and my desire to sing to the meaning(s) of music? Is Radha the winding and difficult path to the panghat, the river's edge? Is Radha's elusive identity a way of understanding the shot-silk of musical texts?

Here is another thumri in the lovely raga Pilu:

कान्हा मुख से न बोले, बाजूबन्द खोले।।
चम्पा चमेली मोतियन की माला, उतारे हौले हौले।।

Kanha mukh se na bole, bajuband khole
Champa chameli motiyan ki mala utaare haule haule.

Kanha utters not a word, but silently [he] loosens the armband.
Slowly, gently [he] sets aside the garland of champa,
chameli and motiya.

This bandish, I realise, only mentions Kahna. By implication therefore the narrator is Radha. But is it indeed she, who speaks/sings or is it another who stands outside the scene of this drama, witnessing it and describing it? Radha is not mentioned anywhere, nor is it clear whether the narrator is speaking about herself or another. She does not, for instance say mora bajuband, my bajuband. Whose bhajuband is loosened, who sees, who describes? All this is uncertain. Only Kanha is clearly in the frame of this picture. It is he who is present, who acts, whose actions are seen. Though he is silent, his actions speak—he has no need to speak. And yet, I who sing, the nayika who speaks this—were it not for me/her, Kanha would not exist, would not act. It is because of the singer/narrator that Kanha comes into being. I feel then some of the strange power of being able to sing Kanha into being. Is this the power of the nayika, of Radha? Is this what it means to be Radha?

But it isn't clear that the narrator is Radha. Does this mean that Radha exists where she chooses to be, flitting in and out of texts, being in different places at different times, being different people in different moments, becoming me perhaps, letting me become her, because I sing?

In another of Surdas' pads I find Radha playing hide and seek with the bandish, and with me:

Sur makes Radha speak first. The poem begins in her voice. Sur lets me be Radha as I begin the song:

दीजै कान्ह कान्धे को कम्बर
नन्ही नन्ही बून्दन बरसन लागै, भीजै कुसुम्भी अंबर।।

Deejai Kanha kandhe ko kambar
Nanhi nanhi boondan barsan laage, bheejai kusumbhi ambar.

'Kanha, give me the blanket from your shoulder.
Tiny raindrops fall from the sky drenching my flower-red saree.'

Then suddenly it is Sur who speaks, and he makes me, singing, someone who sees and describes, someone who stands outside of the frame of this lyrical picture:

बार–बार अकुलाई राधिका देखी मेघ आडम्बर
हँसी–हँसी रीझत बैठे रहे दोऊ, ओढ़े सुभग पीताम्बर।।

Baar-baar akulayi Radhika, dekhi megh adambar
hansi-hansi reejhat baithe rahe dou, odhe subhag peetambar.

Seeing the thunderous drama of the dark sky
Radha is afraid
Drenched in the rain, delighting in
each other's presence, they sit, the two of them
Draped in a beautiful peetambar.

But Sur has another surprise for me:
He says:
Shiva, Sanak, Narad, all the sages,
All people, all creatures, none can see this [vision].

Sur says:
Not a glimpse of the two, and all unknowing the
cowherds go on with their meal!

How do I, how does Sur see this leela that no one else sees? How is it possible that Kanha and Radha are both unseen and seen by him and by me. How is it that these eyes that see that which is not seen, cannot be seen are saved from the ugliness and violence of voyeurism?

Is it because singing Sur has let me be Radha, be himself, be those oblivious cowherds, those clouds, and that lightning, that red rain-spattered saree, that enveloping, protecting sunshiny peetambar? Does being Radha mean going where the song takes me, opening the boundaries of my mind and body to allow myself to be in many places at the same time? By being many people, by being in many places, by speaking in many voices, I run the risk of losing myself. Losing myself, I also lose notions of myself, my self image. Is this the risk Radha took? Is this fluidity of self the dhara, the flowing stream that is Radha, and

which connects me to the source of music? Singing thus, I experience an opening of the heart, a great joyous, painful lovingness. Is this the meaning of Radha's love? The journey of the bandish, working with it lovingly every day, all my life, filling its pot with my meaning and my love — is this the path of the panghat?

Bandish gives me the space to move back and forth between seeing and being. I describe, and so I see. I make visible and present, and seeing truly and clearly, I become that which I see. Is it so simple then? Becoming many things, many people, I learn to be light, fluid and moving, yet at the same time centred. Is it so simple then? Does it mean that singing true is to become Radha, and becoming Radha is to begin to sing true?

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I have relied largely on bandishes I have received from my teachers Smt. Naina Devi, Pandit Hanuman Mishra, Pandit Chandrashekar Rele and Pandit Mani Prasad, and also those that I have discovered in collected volumes of poetry.

I have dealt in detail with thumri gayaki's extending and transgressing of boundaries in an earlier paper 'Thumri as Feminine Voice', EPW, 28 April 1990.

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