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“Madhav tuya abhisarakh lagi”: Resonance of the padavali in “Rajmohan’s Wife”

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Abstract

The focus on *Rajmohan’s Wife* (1864), a rather forgotten text, has come to constitute a significant postcolonial hermeneutic. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee could have easily opted for writing fiction “based on a Victorian narrative model to which colonial education had exposed a new generation of urban Indians” (“Afterword” Mukherjee 137-8) and publish it through offshore publishing houses like Macmillan. However, the narrative discourse in *Rajmohan’s Wife* is fashioned through such tools that clearly refutes the allegation that “Bankim never really intended to publish *Rajmohan’s Wife*... [it] was clearly a rehearsal, a preparation for something else” (Ghosh 2005, 118).

The attempt of rendering contemporary Indian society in English fiction by English authors constitutes “the most important strand” (Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality* 16) and as Anjaria observes in *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel* (2012), the “realism in the colony” is shaped by a self-consciousness on the part of novelists about their difference from Europe and its form of realism. *Rajmohan’s Wife* presents a society in transition, with a detailed portrayal of the village of Radhagnj. The core interest of the novel revolves around the deep and yet unsanctioned love between Matangini’s love for Madhav This paper will attempt to explore how the author, steeped within the paradigm of “Sanskritic learning, Vaishnava devotionalism” (Raychaudhuri 106) and

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popular tradition of Vaishnav padavali frames Matangini's love for Madhav within an inherited indigenous oral culture and incorporates it within this novelistic discourse. This can be read as an interesting colonial strategy of the author negotiating between various kinds of his readership.

Keywords: vaishanava devotionism, orality, padavali

In one of his verses under the *abhisar* section, the noted *padavali* [collection of short verse] poet Govindadas describes the nocturnal journey of Radha through rough terrain and stormy turbulence to be united with Madhav or Krishna, a name which etymologically means the inescapable pull of love

Madhav tuya abhisarak lagi
Dutar pantha gamandhani sadhaye
Mandir yamini jagi (51)

The title of the essay harks back to one of the most popular verses that resonates through the contemporary culture of Bengal in an attempt to re-read the narrative politics of one of the earliest Indian novel written in English, *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864). As an early novel in English authored by one of the seven students belonging to the first graduating batch of the University of Calcutta, *Rajmohan's Wife* reveals Bankim Chandra Chatterjee "experimenting to create a narrative form previously not part of the Indian literary heritage, and writing in a medium hitherto largely untested as a mode of literary expression" (Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality* 17). Bankim's growing up is steeped in the traditions of "Sanskritic learning, Vaishnava devotionism", and his novels are often permeated with resonances of "the

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Vaishnava cycle of ceremonies held round the year centred on the centuries-old family temple of Radhaballabh, Krishna as Radha’s beloved” (Raychaudhuri 106). The pervasive cultural influence of *kirtanias* and *padavali* dealing with Radaha’s *viraha* surfaces in Bankim’s Bengali novels as Girijaya sings in *Mrinalini*, Haridasi Baishnabi sings in *Vishbriksha* and Bankim quotes verses from Vidyapati in *Kapalkundala*. As a novelist in Bengali he draws upon Western and classical Indian and contemporary Bengali texts but the textual politics in *Rajmohan’s Wife* makes Bankim’s negotiations with orality immensely interesting. As an Indian writing novel in English, Bankim seeks to focus upon the individual in relation to society “when romance was the acceptable narrative mode and there was no precedent as yet of mimetic rendering of contemporary domestic life in fiction” (Mukherjee, “Foreword” vi). He builds a realistic backdrop within which he sets the socially unsanctioned love between Matangini and Madhav, with strong resonance of Radha and Krishna’s *viraha*, that flows and swirls around the societal claim “let us forget each other. Let us separate” (55)ⁱ moment.

In his essay “Vidyapati o Jaidev” Bankim Chandra Chatterjee observed that “sahitya desher abasthae jatiya charitrer pratibimba matra”ⁱⁱⁱ (190) [literature is a reflection of the condition of the nation and the national character] and *Rajmohan’s Wife* can be explored as a significant text that negotiates the emerging textual traditions with the Vaishnav poetic tradition popularized through the oral traditions of *kirtan*. Bankim could have easily opted for writing fiction “based on a Victorian narrative model to which colonial education had exposed a new generation of urban Indians” (“Afterword” Mukherjee 137-8).The Indian elite became acquainted with the ideal of individualism that clashed “with the hierarchical and

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role-oriented structure of traditional Indian society” (Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality* 68). The emergence of the genre coincided with a process of an immense social transition in nineteenth century India that required a renewed approach to the premodern literary cultures. However, as Meenakshi Mukherjee argues, a “form cannot be superimposed upon a culture which lacks the appropriate conditions to sustain its growth” (99). The nineteenth century Indian author’s novel writing in English inevitably came to involve the demands of the newly emerging form and the response to the premodern literary inheritances. In “Bangla sahityer ador” [Popularity of Bengali Literature] Bankim Chandra becomes the spokesperson of the contemporary vernacular literature marked by a synthesis of the nouveau culture, social transition and inherited tradition that involved a new realism: “ete cutlet ache, brandy ache, bidhabar bibaha ache- vaishnabir geet ache” (45) [the contemporary vernacular literature includes cutlet, brandy, widow-remarriage and song of the Vaishnavi]ⁱⁱⁱ. The nineteenth century Indian writer of novel had to function in a volatile space of strong cross-currents and Bankim’s “primary challenge was the achievement of realism while remaining faithful to the reality of social order which generally inhibited individual choice” (Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality* 68). Within this context the observation of Meenakshi Mukherjee that Matangini’s solitary journey in dark night is “redolent with literary echoes of Radha’s *abhisara* in Vaishnava poetry” (Mukherjee “Afterword” 145), needs to be explored further to bring out the interaction of orality and textuality.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee had an interesting intellectual and cultural locus standi. With the introduction of Western education the educated colonial native was often plunged in terrible moral crisis as he tried to negotiate between Western education and his inherited

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tradition as can be seen in the anecdote of Duff explaining rainfall as a scientific phenomenon with the help of the boiling kettle concludes with the general mood of scepticism among the students: “If your account be the true one, what becomes of our Shastras?”(560)Bankim grew up in Kanthalpara, in the vicinity of eminent Sanskrit scholars of Bhatpara and earned proficiency in Sanskrit. Bankim Chandra, an alumni of the Midnapur Collegiate School, Hooghly Mohsin College, Presidency College, and Calcutta University, must have journeyed through a similar mental struggle that is far more intense than the protagonist of *Kalikatakamalalaya* (1823). However, his ideology and creativity have often been traced back to his “Sanskritic learning, Vaishnava devotionism” (Raychaudhuri 106). In his *Krishnacharitra* he makes efforts to assert his unshaken belief in tradition: “ami nijeo Krishna ke swayam vagabhan baliya driro biswas kari; paschatya shiksar parinam amar ei haiyache je, amar se biswas driribhuta haiyache” (407) [I firmly believe in the divinity of Lord Krishna; as a consequence of the impact of Western education my belief has become profounder]. He observes that the cultural, mental and intellectual fabric in the culture of Bengal is marked by the pervasive presence of Krishna and the Vaishnav verses revolving around the figures of Krishna and Radha.

His family had five deputy magistrates in two generations and “achieved a status in the new colonial context higher than the one they enjoyed in traditional Brahmin society” (Raychaudhuri 108). Being deputy magistrate however didn’t absolve him of the stigma of “petty servants” from higher officials though he did enjoy the appreciation and friendship of a few British administrators like the Lieutenant Governor Sir Ashley Eden. He had become conscious of the colonial otherness since his childhood memory of accompanying his

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teacher's family to the house of District Magistrate Mollet and not being invited to go within for tea (Raychaudhuri 108). He was critical of the pathetic subservience displayed by the educated natives and in his satirical piece "Babu" published in *Lokrasahya* he mocks the clan who are "paravasha paradarshi, matri vasha birodhi" (11) [skilled in foreigner's tongue; hater of his own mother tongue].

In his letter to Jogendra Chandra Ghosh, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee states that he is "not at all ambitious of finding European readers" and feels that it is "an ambition" of "obtaining a hearing from the educated portion of my [his] countrymen" (*Letters on Hinduism* 14) that induced him to choose English as a medium of expression for his polemic prose writings. The authorial politics of prioritizing the culture-specificity of an indigenous source culture in the chosen host language that is a seminal part of the colonial narrative poetics and politics becomes evident from the opening passages of *Rajmohan's Wife* where there are code-switchings like "salads" (2) and "khompa" (81). Bankim's decision of not providing any cultural footnote is significant since his contemporary, Reverend Lal Behari Day provides a detailed glossary of Indian terms in his *Govinda Samanta* (1874). When the narrative eye/"I" describes "salads" (2) growing in the kitchen garden adjacent to the "zenana" (1), in *Rajmohan's Wife*, it is not a sign of Bankim Chandra suffering "from an uncertainty about his audience" (Mukherjee, "The Beginnings of the Indian Novel", 92) because in "Rajmohaner stri" Bankim Chandra refers to "kichu bartaku shakadi" (995) [some brinjals and leafy vegetables] growing in the courtyard adjoining the "antahpur" thereby identifying a familiar reality for the Bengali reader. Bankim Chandra does not provide any foot note as a cultural hyphen for the European readers and leaves it to such

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readers to negotiate their way towards the Source Culture. The undefined space of intended readership becomes crucial in determining the technique of realism since the author also traversed between the elite space in the incomplete *Nisith rakshasir kahini* [The Tale of the Ogress of Night] and the contemporary social milieu.

Simultaneously, Bankim Chandra is located in the complex history of intellectual modernity within which Indians were engaged in a transformation of their moral universe as they fell in love and related to women in their lives in a new manner and they became thoughtful about their own moral life in an unprecedented fashion. In the opening chapter of *Govinda Samanta* Reverend Day provides a “bill of fare” where he observes how the Indian novel writer in English is very much constricted in the handling of romantic love:

I would fain introduce love- scenes; but in Bengal— and for the matter of that in all India— they do not make love in the English and honourable sense of that word. Unlike the butterfly, whose courtship, Darwin assures us, is a very long affair, the Bengali does not court at all. Marriage is an affair managed entirely by the parents and guardians of bachelors and spinsters, coupled with the good offices of a professional person, whom the reader may meet with in the course of this narrative. Of dishonorable, criminal love, there is no lack; but I do not intend to pollute these pages with its description. (pp 3-4)

The early Indian writer of fiction operated “in a society bound by extremely restrictive conventions of marriage” (Mukherjee *Realism and Realism* 8) and felt rather inhibited in exploring romance and love. The aesthetics of the nineteenth century novel presumes ordinary, unexemplary individuals who are “often confused, usually imperfect, unable to live up to the principles they believed in, morally flawed and vulnerable” (Kaviraj 30). However, they respond to choices and situations and engage in a search for his/her own self as

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fashioned by experience and self-reflection. The protagonists in *Rajmohan's Wife* also occupy a transitional space reflecting the societal currents. The eighteen-year-old protagonist Matangini's speech is free of any East Bengal accent and indicates that she "was born and brought up on the Bhagirathi in some place near the capital" (3). The following chapter "The Two Cousins" introduce Madhav as one in love with Calcutta and marked apart from the village by his "cambric shirt and English shoes" and a single ring on his finger (8). Madhav's familiarity with the city and the English culture become his sign of moral superiority. Yet, the way in which Bankim weaves the emotional bonding between Matangini and Madhav can be located within the context of the oral tradition of the unfulfilled love of Radha and Krishna in the Vaishnavite literary tradition.

The attempt of rendering contemporary Indian society in English fiction by English authors constitutes "the most important strand" (Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality* 16). The narrative in *Rajmohan's Wife* provides a detailed picture of Radhagunj, Rajmohan's cottage, Mathur and Madhav's respective mansions. In the fourth chapter in *Rajmohan's Wife*, "The History of the Rise and Progress of a Zemindar Family" the economic, social and cultural currents are interwoven so as to trace the residual, dominant world order. A picture of residual culture is provided through Bangshibadan Ghoshe, the menial servant of a zemindar family, who amasses the wealth of his master which he distributes among his three sons. His eldest son Ramkanta purchased estates, expanded his wealth and bequeathed it to his son Mathur who was sealed from the impact of English education "which he condemned as a thing not only useless but as positively mischievous" (16-7). The second son Ramkanai proved extravagant, moved to Calcutta and engaged in unprofitable mercantile schemes and

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eventually became ruined. However, his son received the best education and while Mathur became “an exceedingly apt scholar in the science of chicane, fraud and torture” (17), Madhav’s lack of material inheritance is compensated by the inheritance bequeathed to him by his childless uncle Ramgopal. This backdrop is inserted mid-way in the narrative in order to locate the star-crossed lovers Mathur and Matangini within the social praxis. These city-bred individuals settle down in Radhaganj – Matangini as the wife of Rajmohan and Madhav is married to her younger sister Hemangini. Rajmohan becomes involved in the robbery at Madhav’s house planned by Mathur and Matangini overhears the plot to steal Ramgopal’s will bequeathing his property to Madhav. In the tumult that ensues, Matangini chooses to walk out of her home and marriage but is abducted by the lascivious Mathur and finally rescued by Madhav and Mathur’s first wife Tara. She returns to her parental home and is financially supported by Madhav till her death.

This realistic paradigm can hardly accommodate the complicated passions of Matangini and Madhav. In his essay “Vidyapati o Jaidev” Bankim Chandra observes that the florid, melodious *geetikavya* celebrating love is conducive to the mental make-up of the Bengalis. The *padavali* broke away from traditional high culture to involve a cosmopolitanism and the Maithili verses of Vidyapati popularized the traditions around Radha. In the *padavali* of Gaudiya Vaishnava cult Krishna and Radha is portrayed as primal nature who cannot be deflected from her course of love and also feels vulnerable and caged despite the joyous abandon of her *abhisar*. In his *Krishnacharit* Bankim Chandra refers to the fifteenth chapter of *Brahmabaibarta Purana* where Krishna hails Radha as the female principle, the core of creative energy and addresses Radha as “*mool prakritiriswari*”, “*srishte*

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radharvuta”, “*twam stri pumanaham, Radhen etivedeshunirnayam*”. The *padavali* poetry of Govindadas, Chandidas and Gyandas begins to focus more on Radha’s consciousness as she becomes synonymous with loss and suffering.

Rajmohan’s Wife opens with Matangini lost in a state of brooding anxiety blended with a “sorrow nursed in her heart” (3), that reminds of Radha as rendered by Chandidas:

Radhar ki hai laan tare byatha
Basiya birale thaka yee kale
Na shuney kaharo katha
Sadai dheyane chahe megh-paney
Na chale nayan-tara
Birati aharey ranga baas parey
Jemat yogini para (29)^{iv}

Radha is always so immersed in the thought of Krishna, “*sadai dheyane*”, that she is hardly aware of the world around – “*Na shuney kaharo katha*” and she engages in a strict meditation like a “yogini”.

In *Rajmohan’s Wife* Matangini is similarly “too absorbed in her own thoughts to heed the appearance of external nature” (57), her tresses are “tied up in a careless knot on her shoulder” and her perfect form is “almost entirely bare of ornaments” (3). Initially she is reluctant to accompany Kanak to the river Madhumati and cites Rajmohan’s injunction. Kanak’s use of the metaphor of cage refers more to Matangini’s self-withdrawal than prohibition and when Kanak indicates the presence of Madhav, her reddened face and quivering lips betray the inner tumult preceding the decision: “Let us go, but is it wrong?” (3) The novel thus opens with the hint of unrestrained passion and unsanctioned love that may

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have a precarious position within the contemporary literary precincts but forms the core of the Vaishnav literary tradition: “Soi^v, kene gelam Jamunar jaley?” (34) [Why did I venture into the waters of Yamuna] As Madhav fixes his gaze on Matangini under the twilight sky, the narrative does not apparently reveal rendezvous since it includes Mathur’s lascivious glance but the description of Madhav “fascinated by the sight as a deer is by the sound of the flute” as the wind blows away the veil from Matangini’s face (9) becomes an infinite resource of strength. Matangini formidably faces the wrath of Rajmohan by asserting: “I had gone because I thought there was nothing wrong in it” (12). This unexpressed love is a secret she could only share with Kanak just as Radha shares her desperate longing for Krishna with her close *sakhi*. In the sixth chapter Matangini lies down under a single beam of the moon with “her *anchal* thrown off from her bosom towards the waist” (29) and delves into this memory of “inexhaustible love”: “One painful remembrance, painful but too sweet in its painfulness not to be brooded over again and again, still connected her past happiness with her present lot.” (30). The world around her is the darkened room and her entire consciousness is illumined with the refracted memory of her love.

Matangini has her own inner resources, inner recess of energy and strength which the analogy between Matangini’s raised eyes and lightning suggests at the very opening section. In the tenth chapter when Rajmohan confronts her for foiling his robbery and blasts her for this illicit relation and her furtive nurturing of this passion, Matangini is described as “the half guilty and half innocent woman” (60) whose inner tumult merges with the external storm lashing through the night:

Aamar chitwa shalemata wahati

bandha chilo dibarati

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Khipta kaila kataksha-ankushey (34)

Her passions go on rampage with the frenzy of she-elephant broken free of all shackles but she declares with a deterministic firmness and calmness: “I love him – deeply do I love him; long loved I and I love him so. I will also tell you that words have I uttered which, but for the uncontrolled – *uncontrollable madness of a love you cannot understand*, would never have passed these lips. But beyond this I have not been guilty to you.” [italics mine] (61). Rajmohan is cast aside from this whole experience and reduced to another who can only despoil the purity of love. This assertion does not draw upon the lyricism or mysticism of Vaishnav poetical inheritance but the broken syntax, the pause does remind of Catherine’s confession of her love in *Wuthering Heights*.

The title of the seventh chapter, “Love can Conquer Fear” is embedded within the Vaishav philosophy of the soul remaining awake all night for journeying through arduous paths, darkness and danger to merge with the One or Krishna/Madhav:

Madhav tuyā abhisarak lagi
Dutar pantha gaman dhani sadhaye
Mandir yamini jagi (51)

Matangini perceives that this is a solitary journey – and she “must go herself” (38). She decides not to implicate Rajmohan but has to struggle with the lurking darkness and the fanciful fears. However, “her noble love expanded and rose” beyond the “appalling dangers” (38) and she steps out wrapped in a coarse bed-cloth. As a resolute soul she walks into the mango grove where she finds the voices of the robbers. In order to avoid discovery, she takes

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shelter in the Kalindi-like dark pool reminding of Chandidas's verse about Radha's preoccupation with dark: "kalojol dhalitey sai Kala porey mone" (80)[Bathing in the dark waters reminds of dark Krishna]. To conceal her radiant face, she loosened her dark tresses "lest the fair complexion of her lily face should betray her" (41) and such an effacement of the self is symbolic of her merger with the One in her soul. On reaching Madhav's house she passes the information to her sister Hemangini but Madhav insists upon hearing details from Matangini. She appears before him as Rajmohan's wife -with her sari carefully drawn over her forehead, contrary to the first image of her returning from Madhumati with her pitcher. She refuses to divulge the source of her information and requests Madhav to conceal the fact that she has been the informant. She displays a firmness at an hour of crisis that separates Matangini from the typical nervousness and helplessness associated with women.

After the robbery is successfully warded off, the ninth chapter, "We meet to Part" signals a volcanic phase of pent-up passion, awareness of imminent separation and the rupture of the love which thrust Matangini and Madhav into terrible crisis and stirred a compelling need to redefine selfhood and mutual relationship. During the final meeting, Matangini buries her face in Madhav's palms and bathes them with her tears "so that Madhav trembled under the thrilling touch" (53). She, too, trembles with the intensity of her passion, aware of this being possibly their last meeting and makes her final testimony of love – "too deeply have I loved you- too deeply do I love you still, to part with you forever without a struggle" (53). Madhav's eyes are "suffused with tears" and exults in her name – "Matangini dear, beloved Matangini" prompting her query: "say Madhav, do you then love me still?" (55) Madhav recollects his composure and reminds how they set duty above love and

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implores her to forget- “let us forget each other” (55) but Matangini’s self-surrender reminds of Radha who offered her entire self to Krishna with the ritualistic basil leaf and sesame:

Madhav, bahut minati kari toyel
Dei tulasi til e deha samarpilu
Daya janu chhor bimoy| (104)

She vows to erase him from her thoughts but “the first thing she did after leaving Madhav was to remember; to remember and hang with rapture on each word he had uttered, - on each tear he had shed” (57). Thus, she exists in her thoughts of Madhav and he, too, is also unable to preserve his vow of forgetting and muses on Matangini’s disappearance and the “deep and tender feeling which he had stifled in his breast at such cost, seemed to burn with redoubled fervour” (95). This remembrance “of the forbidden and fond interview” (57) produces an ecstasy and it engrosses her soul in such a way that she becomes oblivious of the impending storm- both literal and metaphorical. She steps out in the frightening darkness thunder and lightning with the firm resolution of leaving her home- “teja bigeha” and making her body sacrificial: “premak lagi upekha bideha”:

Ghana ghanaj hanaj hanaba jarnipat
Shunoite shrabane maram jarijata
Dasha disha damini dahan bithar
Heraiteu chaki lochan-tar
Ithey jadi sundar ite ja bigeha
Premak lagi upekha bideha (53)

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When she returns to her room from Madhav’s mansion, she has already moved beyond the confines of home with the ecstasy of the meeting. She fends off Mathur’s lust with her *yogini*-like display of fierce resistance and vow of starvation and she is rescued from his dungeon in an almost lifeless state. Yet, with all her energy, dynamism and complexity Matangini fades out much like Radha out of the grand narrative of *Mahabharata* and the narrator exercises his omniscience– “History does not say how her life terminated, but it is known that she died an early death” (126).

The reader familiar with Krishna’s journey from Vrindavan to Mathura and Radha’s agony of abandonment in the popular Vaishnav literature discovers Bankim Chandra’s redefinition of tradition and selfhood in the concluding section of the novel. It has been argued that the novel winds rather hurriedly with Matangini fading into early death but this happens only after her transcendence that seems to be the inevitable consequence of the rapturous though momentary meeting with Madhav. Matangini’s inner resilience and strength enables her to transcend, to choose and to assert her selfhood. The home/world binary that Partha Chatterjee forwards in his analysis of colonial discourse comes to be severely interrogated through the figure of Matangini who subverts the sanctified home/idealised wife core and the marked resonance of Radha makes the reworking a strategic exercise.

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Notes

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ⁱⁱ All translations have been attempted by the writer unless otherwise mentioned.

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^{iv}All quotations have been taken from Khagendranath Mitra, Sukumar Sen, Viswapati Chaudhuri and Shyamapada Chakrabarti eds. *Vaishnav padavali*

^vThe female companion is addressed as *sakhi* or *soini* in Vaishnav literature

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