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BIHARILAL
HE SPOKE OF LOVE

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BIHARILAL

HE SPOKE OF LOVE
Selected Poems from the Satsai

Translated by
RUPERT SNELL



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INTRODUCTION

The Poet Biharilal

Biharilal (known also as Biharidas and simply as Bihari) was born about 1600 C.E., and although he inhabited a historical period that is now usually called the early modern, his poetry belongs to genres reaching back for hundreds of years and is nothing if not traditional. He composed his *Satsai* (Seven Hundred Poems) in the early or middle years of the seventeenth century under the courtly patronage of Jai Singh Mirza of Amber (Amer) in Rajasthan. Though we know little more of Bihari's biography than this, his poetry is a confluence of acuity, tenderness, and artistic creativity. He writes about love and beauty, and about the condition of those who fall victim to both or either.

As we might expect with a text beginning with the personal pronoun *merī* ("my"), a careful reading gives us real insights into the character of the poet. Of his outer life, however, we know little more than this bare sketch penned by R. S. McGregor: "Bihārīlāl, a Caturvedī (Caube) brahman, was born most probably at or near Gwalior around the year 1600. His father, Keśavrāy, was a fine poet. Tradition ascribes to Bihārīlāl periods of residence at Vrindaban and at Agra in early life; what is certain is that he became a dependant of king Jaysimh [Jai Singh] Mirzā of Amber (Jaypur [*sic*]: 1617–67)."¹

Literary historians have tried to cut through the accre-

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tions of legend to find the provable essentials of Bihari's life. But at the same time they have been eager to promote the status of this most admired poet, and hence have been loath to depart too far from the received biography, which is hagiographical in tone and purpose. Accounts of Bihari's circumstances related by even the most respected Hindi-medium literary studies are based on sources that collapse under the lightest interrogation, and we lack any hard data on which a reliable life of Biharilal could be constructed. In his wide-ranging work *Kavivar Bihārī* (The great poet Bihari), the celebrated Bihari scholar Jagannathdas "Ratnakar" unwittingly exemplifies this dilemma. On the one hand, he favors a commonsense discrimination of the plausible from the implausible as he sifts and evaluates various quotations from commentaries and other sources; on the other, he proceeds to relate an explicit version of Bihari's life that even purports to record individual conversations and is generally marked by an almost fairy-tale naïveté.²

At the core of the traditional version of Bihari's life is a brief verse biography in forty-eight couplets, the anonymous *Bihārī-bihāra* (Bihari's Roamings, or rather "A Rambler's Amble").³ The *Bihārī-bihāra* recounts the main elements of the received biography, though it is impossible to say whether this is the original source or merely a compendium of legendary material. The text, written in the first person, gives an account of Bihari's life that may be summarized as follows:

Bihari was born on Wednesday, the eighth day of the light fortnight of the month of Karttik, V.S. 1654 [1597

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C.E.], in Madhupuri (Mathura). His father was Keshavdev, a Chaube brahman; his grandfather, Vasudev. At some time, Bihari's parents came to Vrindaban, and Bihari studied Sanskrit and his own vernacular as well as music and other subjects. The emperor Shah Jahan, visiting Vrindaban, was sufficiently impressed by Bihari's music⁴ and poetry to invite him to court at Argalpur (Agra). There he recited *ghazals*, songs, and poetry to the emperor; and on the day when Shah Jahan's son was born, Bihari was called upon to recite verse to an assembly of fifty-two kings of India. The poet was rewarded with an annual stipend. He later visited the Mirza Raja of Amber, called Jai Singh or Jai Shah and known as a brilliant warrior. Initially, Bihari had no access to Jai Singh, and the royal servants would not intercede for him; he languished unregarded for two full months. But when Jai Singh became obsessed with a young queen or concubine and began ignoring affairs of state, Bihari wrote a poem [see verse 26] that was laid in Jai Singh's bed-chamber; this brought the king to his senses. Jai Singh rewarded Bihari and commissioned more verses; each couplet earned him a gold coin, prompting his aspirations, and after completing the work within two months, Bihari took permission to leave the city. A bond of love drew him to Vrindaban, the center of Krishna worship. He wrote poetry for many other kings, but nowhere found the respect he had known at Jai Singh's court. Losing his taste for poetry, he took to the devotional life: "Bihari Lal" became "Bihari Das," the date of this renunciation of the world being Monday, the seventh

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day after the new moon of the month Madhumasa (Chaitra), V.S. 1742 (1685 C.E.).

The autobiographical mode of the first-person narrative is belied by the banal tone of the verses: had he written his own story, the master poet Bihari would surely have achieved something more sophisticated than the markedly humdrum account summarized in translation here. (Indeed, it might be asked why someone who has self-confessedly renounced the world would indulge in autobiography at all, especially given the lack of an autobiographical tradition in Indian literature of that period.)⁵ Furthermore, the chronologies expressed in the text are not borne out by almanacs of the years concerned.⁶ For insight into Bihari's poetry, therefore, we must turn inward to the evidence of the text itself; but this requires first knowing something about the language in which it was composed.

Braj Bhasha as a Literary Language

Braj Bhasha is the language of the Braj region, located a hundred miles to the south of Delhi.⁷ Places of pilgrimage within this locale, such as Vrindaban, Mathura, Govardhan Hill, and the Yamuna River, have long been associated with the Krishna narrative that forms a major current in the devotional tradition known as bhakti, which involves emotionally charged worship of the godhead. Through this Krishna connection, the supposedly rustic regional dialect of Braj Bhasha came to engender a prolific vernacular literature

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anchored in Krishna narratives. From approximately the fifteenth century, local traditions of folk song and popular hymnody were grafted onto the classical heritage of Krishna lore inherited from the Sanskrit Puranas, producing many interrelated genres of poetry. The bucolic setting of Krishna's childhood and adolescence in fondly imagined riverside groves touched Braj Bhasha with sweetness, while its performance in song tinged it with a unique musicality and lyricism (and to this day, the lyrics of Hindustani music—the north Indian tradition—are imbued with this language). In the sixteenth century, vernacular Krishna poetry reached such an ascendancy that the Braj dialect became generalized for literary purposes far from the Braj homeland and its Krishna narrative; until the Delhi dialect of Khari Boli began, in the nineteenth century, to prevail in a movement toward modernity and a growing sense of national identity, Braj Bhasha held sway as the poetic dialect par excellence right across the so-called Hindi belt of northern India.

The History and Structure of the Satsaī

The Braj Bhasha of the *Satsaī* is a literary construct, heavily influenced by the Sanskrit textual tradition but also replete with loanwords from Persian and Arabic, reflecting the influence of Mughal culture on the Rajput courts.⁸ And just as the language itself owes a great debt to its Sanskritic forebears, so too the tropes of the poetry derive very largely from devotional and courtly genres of earlier centuries. A particularly potent and beloved trope is the bittersweet sorrow of “love

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in separation” (*viraha*), which forms one of the main themes of Bihari’s *Satsai*:

Your absence is a rare and matchless fire:
it flourishes in monsoon rains.
No waterfall, oh Lal, can douse its blaze.⁹

The poems thrive on inference, and this one rests on the interpretation of the rainy season as a cruel time when separated lovers must *remain* separated, travel being impossible; a further trope is that of the paradox, in which the lover’s burning passion is inflamed rather than extinguished by rainfall. Rather than grouping them thematically, most recensions of Bihari’s text present the poems in an apparently random order, allowing themes such as *viraha* to rub shoulders with lush descriptions of the heroine, caustic comments on rustic philistinism, praise of a royal patron, aphoristic statements on life generally, or observations on God’s shameful failure to fulfill his mandate as savior in a troubling world.

Most of the conventions, themes, meters, and sentiments found in the text have their roots in earlier literature. The title *Satsai*, perhaps bestowed by a compiler rather than by the poet himself, derives from the Prakrit word *sattasai*, which in turn reflects the Sanskrit *saptaśati*; the meaning is “seven hundred,” or “seven centuries,” referring to the notional number of individual couplets constituting such a work. Many Indic texts have such numerical names, typically indicating a collection of independent stanzas whose disparate contents do not yield a descriptive title; Braj Bhasha

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itself boasts a number of *Satsaīs*, each a collection of poems on a set of themes, and Bihari's is among the first. The closest model for his *Satsaī*, however, is from a much earlier time: it is the Prakrit *Sattasaī* perhaps compiled (and partly composed?) by a monarch called Hala, who lived and ruled in the Andhra area of south India at some time in the early centuries of the Common Era.¹⁰

Several of Bihari's couplets reflect models to be found in Hala's compilation, and an example using a literal English prose translation and a contemporary English verse rendering will serve to show the depth of field behind the conventions of Braj Bhasha poetry. The English prose translation:

Oh traveller! Look here—in the mid-day even the shadow
(of a man) does not slightly come out, lying hidden un-
der the body (itself), out of fear of the Sun's heat. Why
should you not then take rest (in our house)?¹¹

A contemporary English verse translation by the poet Arvind Krishna Mehrotra humanizes the poem and makes it more comprehensible:

Afraid of midday heat,
Even your shadow
Stays under your feet:
Come into the shade, traveller.¹²

The substance may seem slight, but a well-attuned reader approaching the Prakrit poem with a sympathetic knowledge of its conventions would find much more here than

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some inconsequential chat about the weather. The poem's significance lies in an implied subtext, and the words themselves are the tip of an (unseasonal!) iceberg of meaning. The "traveller" is an actual or potential or imagined lover, and the speaker is an enamored woman who uses the summer heat as a pretext to lure him into her house. The references to "shadows" and "bodies" have a double purpose: they make a naturalistic poetic observation of the fact that shadows shrink to nothing at high noon, while their physicality hints at the sensual implication of the female speaker's words—hinting that "I would like to be where that shadow is, under your body." No names or other details attach to the protagonists, though neighboring couplets may add missing detail, deepening the reader's insight into their experiential world. The intimate symbolic connection between landscape and human relations runs deep within the poetry.

The same conceit of "shadows shrinking away at noon" appears in a couplet from Bihari's *Satsai*:

Settling within the dense wood,
lurking deep within the house: at summer's noon,
even shadow seeks shade.¹³

Like its Prakrit model, the Braj poem only *implies* the speaker's romantic intention (without which either couplet would be little more than a high-temperature pastoral), but Bihari hides the inference even more deeply, going so far as to omit even the traveler from the tale. Thus the task of understanding an individual poem is made possible only by the reader's

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familiarity with such conceits and by the broader context of the genre as a whole. Each stanza in a text of this kind helps contextualize and explain all the others.

If Bihari subtracts from the poem's content by dropping the traveler, he adds to its depth with new allusions reflective of Braj poetics. First, his reference to the "dense wood" evokes the bucolic environment and lush setting of Radha-Krishna trysts—a narrative habitat that features very commonly in early modern vernacular poetry, as we shall see below. Second, the poem makes specific mention of the summer month Jeth, hinting at another medieval genre postdating Hala, namely the vernacular "song of the twelve months" in which romantic conceits such as the laments of separated lovers are projected onto the modulating backdrop of the annual calendar. Third, the personification of the summer heat, incipient in the Prakrit poem, where the verb "hide" suggests a sentient subject rather than an inanimate one, is taken further by Bihari with verbs such as "to settle" and "to want or seek." And fourth, Bihari's couplet uses alliteration in ways typical of Braj poetics, for example in bringing a cohesion to the final quarter of the poem, "even shade desires shade" (*chāhau cāhati chāha*), foregrounding it as a kind of punchline or key to the verse as a whole. Since the aesthetic effect of poetry derives as much from such finely worked-out effects as from the raw materials of its basic conceits, Bihari's poems are very much more than mere derivative copies of earlier originals: the vibrancy of a poem derives from its present detail rather than its past history.

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Radha and Krishna as Hero and Heroine

The amorous narratives of Radha and Krishna loom large in the *Satsai*, and although only about a tenth of the seven hundred couplets mention these protagonists by name, retailers of the text—commentators and artists alike—often read them into the action throughout. The *Satsai* is essentially a conflation of two tropes: Radha-Krishna narratives in their bucolic Braj setting, and a set of stylized “hero and heroine” motifs inherited from Sanskrit and Prakrit forebears. For the most part, individual couplets separate the two tropes of devotional and courtly or human love, as shown respectively in the following two examples:

His body blends with shadow, hers with moon;
two souls are one, as Hari and Radha
roam the lane.¹⁴

On the festival of Teej, her rivals dressed in finest garb
and gems; but how their faces crumpled when they saw
her rumpled clothes.¹⁵

The first of these two couplets, reflecting the divine sport of Hari (Krishna) and Radha in the groves of Braj, would not be out of place in a wholeheartedly devotional work; the second portrays love rivalries typical of ancient Indian poetical texts, including the *Saptaśatī* tradition. But the following couplet conflates these two genres and has Shyam (Krishna) appear on the stage of a courtly drama:

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Seeing her in company, Shyam touched a lotus
to his brow; she caught him in her mirror ring
and held him to her heart.¹⁶

This drawing together of two narrative strands is not the work of Bihari alone but reflects the poetic interests of the so-called Rīti school of Braj Bhasha poetry, a type of aesthetic movement developed primarily by court poets in the seventeenth century. Here, revisited stylized tropes of categories of hero-and-heroine poetry merge with genres of Krishna poetry that had developed in the first major flowering of Braj Bhasha verse in the sixteenth century.

The heroine, then, is a plural or composite figure. As we have seen, she may be Radha, drawn from bhakti narratives; or she may be any one of a cast of time-honored rhetorical types such as “she whose husband is abroad”, “she who has elaborately prepared for the arrival of the lover”, or the “victim of unfaithfulness”.¹⁷ Fair of countenance, she outshines the moon and is invisible in moonlight, though her presence is betrayed by her own fragrance; if her fair face does not lighten night’s darkness, her teeth certainly will when she smiles; her fairness contrasts with Krishna’s dusky coloring—for if the beloved is Radha, then the lover is Krishna. Gold is invisible against the fair skin of the heroine but is revealed by touch; a forehead mark of sandalwood that blends invisibly with her brow stands out when her skin is flushed with wine, and her white jasmine garland shows up on her chest when it withers and darkens. Thus she is innately superior to all the standard objects of comparison;

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the circumstances of these events—the touching of skin, the drinking of wine, the night-withering of flowers—all bear an erotic charge, and indeed such implicit components are often the “point” of the poems.

So slender is the heroine that the very existence of her waist is a matter of philosophical speculation; so extreme is her beauty that the inadequacy of conventional descriptive tropes itself becomes a conventional trope. Her eyes shoot coquettish arrow glances from arched brow bows. Juliet-like,¹⁸ she may be on the cusp of maturity, blending girlhood with adolescent ripeness, but she becomes a consummate lover, adept in the “superior position.” The agony of *viraha*, or love-in-separation, threatens her sanity and her life. It makes her burn with a passionate heat that even affects the local microclimate; once-happy associations now seem to her like torture, and the cooling moon scorches her.

Meetings of lover and beloved have to be contrived amid conservative social restrictions, with family elders being a particular impediment (though a husband’s handsome younger brother may divert a young wife); fortunately, much can be communicated by a touch or a stolen glance, and the village setting offers potential for many fleeting encounters. Tall-standing crops make convenient trysting places—at least until harvest time. Jealous rivalries abound between co-wives striving for their shared husband’s attentions, especially when a young bride joins the household, a dangerous moment for her aging rivals. Love is often personified, especially as the love god Kamdev. A favorite technique is that of the tableau, a descriptive sketch frozen in time like

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a still shot in a movie, which makes the short couplet echo long in the mind.

When offended by her lover's faithlessness, the heroine sulks with a jealous anger that her female companions, the *sakhīs*, or go-betweens, are hard pressed to overcome. Meanwhile the *sakhīs* delight in noting the poorly concealed physical evidence of the lovers' clandestine escapades. Many couplets are open to several interpretations—is the heroine describing herself, or is a *sakhī* describing her?—and although this multivalency is essential to opening up the poetic potency of the couplets, the commentators see it as their responsibility to close it down, specifying the dramatis personae and silencing much of the semantic echo that lies at the heart of the poetic principle.

God's various roles include that of savior, and he may be chastised for failing in his supposed duty as remover of suffering; hence the occasional derogation of the divine. In a more mundane setting, many couplets read like occasional poems from the royal court, perhaps deflating pretentiousness or targeting some courtly occurrence of hubris, boorishness, or other human folly. Bihari's role as court poet is also seen in a handful of encomiums to his patron, Jai Shah; at least one couplet refers to his famous mirror-work room that tourists can still peer into—though no longer enter—in the palace at Amber. But these panegyrics seem a little dutiful, like tears forced to an actor's eye, suggesting that a laureate role may confine or chafe the creative spirit, or simply fail to inspire it.

He Spoke of Love

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May Radha the sublime, whose golden glow 1
greens Krishna's raincloud blue,
clear from my path the hindrance of the world.¹

As breasts, hearts, eyes, and hips 2
hold sway in body politic,
astute king youth gives all a handsome raise.²

Eagerly intent, and goaded by the god of love, 3
rushing on in rivalry:
her heart, her wits, her eyes.

The lady merged with moonlight, 4
lost from view; her friends swarmed after,
following a thread of fragrance.³

With fearful dread I saw the moon rise in the lane 5
when by a happy circumstance
the bees that thronged around me dimmed its glow.⁴

Her loveliness will thrill you, handsome Lal, 6
as it thrilled me; she gleams so bright it seems
her lily garland's jasmine golden.⁵

Idly sidling, spilling soul's secrets, 7
blind to occasion, ever changing,
luster drunk: these errant eyes.

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- 8 You saved a single elephant,
then quit as savior, so it seems.
You turn a fine deaf ear to my poor cry.⁶
- 9 Shame's moorings torn, my heart's sent reeling—
a wayward craft wheeling
in the whirlpool of those charms.⁷
- 10 From deep inside her veil she throws a glance,
contrives sweet touch of shadows,
and is gone.⁸
- 11 As though well schooled by love in yogic lore,
her eyes reach out to her temples
in search of union.⁹
- 12 A visit to her natal home yields joy,
while distance from her lover leads to grief:
in balance, like Duryodhana, she dies.¹⁰
- 13 Glimmering through fine veil, a matchless glow—
a budding bough of the tree of paradise
gleaming, glinting, in ocean's waters.
- 14 Beauty, that brigand, struck my traveler eyes,
dazzled them with her body's sheen, noosed them
with a silken smile, ditched them in the dimple on her
chin.¹¹

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- A thousand efforts cannot draw it out: 15
like salt in water, Mohan's form
infuses my heart.
- The bedded flower shall surely bear its fruit 16
if saved from scorching anger; oh gardener,
just tend your bed with drops of tenderness.
- Pān* juice on eyes, eye black on lips, foot lac on brow: 17
well met, well done, well come indeed.
Your look becomes you, Lal.¹²
- Those smiling eyes— 18
shy and proud, languid yet thrilled;
their dawning luster tells a tale of night-felt joys.
- He spoke of love: she smiled, glanced at her friends; 19
and one by one, delightedly,
they made excuses, took their leave.
- Though strained on cresting her breast, his gaze 20
strove onward to her face; then tumbled down
chin-dimple dell—and lies there still.
- It faces each in turn, then turns away: 21
the needle of a compass is her gaze,
which settles finally on him alone.¹³

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- 22 Speaking, spurning, thrilling, fretting,
meeting, blooming, blushing—
in a public place, all is said with eyes alone.
- 23 You yearn for my rival, and stumble as you walk.
For all your treachery, your coming here
cools the yearning that burns my heart.¹⁴
- 24 Seeing her in company, Shyam touched a lotus
to his brow; she caught him in her mirror ring
and held him to her heart.¹⁵
- 25 The barber's wife began to lac the lady's feet;
thinking it the lac ball,
she rubbed the lady's heel over and over.¹⁶
- 26 No pollen yet, no sweet nectar, no blooming flower;
the bee's already held within the bud,
so who can tell what the future may hold?¹⁷
- 27 Your absence is a rare and matchless fire:
it flourishes in monsoon rains.
No waterfall, oh Lal, can douse its blaze.¹⁸
- 28 The more the bride's young body finds its glow
the more her rivals' faces
lose their gleam.¹⁹

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- As our eyes see all around, but not themselves, 29
so God reveals the world entire
but remains unseen.²⁰
- He laughs to see her charming mole applied: 30
“How well, face-like-the-moon, you’ve made
your moon face like the moon.”²¹
- Confounded by the lady’s heels, 31
already madder red, she wonders,
“Who would redden such a foot?”²²
- Bathed in pools of love, 32
these eyes put lilies in the shade;
though lacking kohl, they darken the wagtail’s name.
- How strange the fire of loneliness that’s kindled 33
in her heart: inflamed by rosewater,
tamed by a lover’s gusts of endearments.
- Hiding in the dark wood of your blue sari, 34
they don’t miss their prey: your cheetah eyes
never fail to seize my deerlike heart.²³
- No one can know my loving heart— 35
the deeper it is steeped in Shyam’s dark shade,
the brighter shines its glow.

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- 36 Ah yes! Unveil your face,
that all may feast their eyes:
let the lotus weep, may the moon be mocked.²⁴
- 37 Pining for your company, dear Lal,
she sees the blazing volcano of love
and consigns all happy comfort to the flames.
- 38 It doesn't matter if we're apart—our hearts are joined:
whichever way a kite may fly,
its string lies in the flyer's hand.²⁵
- 39 Paper won't carry it, nor do I dare say it:
your heart alone will bear
the burden of mine.
- 40 What wretch did you befriend,
whom did you ever save, oh savior Raghurai?
You strut about self-satisfied, so falsely famed.²⁶
- 41 My husband's forsaken all memory of me;
to whom shall I call, who will hear?
The wayward monsoon clouds thunder in rivalry.²⁷
- 42 I'd thought our meeting eyes would doubly glow;
who knew your gaze would rankle
like a mote in mine?

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She drew him close in passion's grip, 43
but then her words remained half said:
her lover's shame-filled eyes filled hers with rage.

I told you many times, don't trust those eyes. 44
They soon collide, collude,
ignite the heart.

The time is gone, Kanha, when just a little virtue 45
earned your grace; now even you are giving
at the going rate.²⁸

For years I've cried my rote, but Shyam, you pay no heed; 46
"World Guru, Lord of the World," you too
feel the winds of the world.

Jewels glimmer on every limb of her flamelike frame; 47
douse the lamp, and even then the house will shine
as bright as day.

Her youthful luster grows, yet a childish glint 48
still glows; she shines with mingled brilliance
of shot-silk twines entwined.²⁹

Don't be afraid, dear Shyam, of fuming words: 49
her doting dancing eyes bespeak
an ardent heart.

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- 50 You'll need an almanac around that house:
her lustrous face glows constantly
with full moon's gleam.³⁰
- 51 Bathed, she lingers, dresses her hair;
through fingers and long black strands
her flighty wagtail eyes spy Nandkumar.³¹
- 52 Your brow is smeared with lac—it sears my eyes like fire:
you'll fast deny it, Lal,
but will the glass belie it?³²
- 53 In face of Jai Shah, lakhs are bettered in battle;
and even the unlettered bear off lakhs
in bounty for the asking.³³
- 54 Your gift to me is mine, dwells with my soul;
do not lay that heart, my love,
in rival hands.
- 55 Let others hoard a million, store trillions away;
my wealth is ever Jadupati,
who dispels adversity.
- 56 Scripture's path's untrod, and the world's afraid:
for on the lofty summit of her breasts
the tribesman Kamdev takes a stand.³⁴

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- A raised hand veils her head, reveals her navel folds— 57
then down the lane she goes, screened by her friend,
holding my eyes with a steady glance.
- Laughingly, you gifted it that distant day, 58
and even now, your berry garland
saves her volatile camphor soul.³⁵
- Fair skin, ripening breasts, yellow mark on brow; 59
with flighty eyes and haughty pose
the village beauty strikes me down.³⁶
- A singing lyre, verse elixir, sweet melody 60
of love: they are lost who do not drown
in these, yet saved are they who drown for good.³⁷
- Simply sleek, darkly bright, fragrantly soft— 61
my heart knows no right path or wrong
on seeing her hair in disarray arrayed.
- The vine of love is not burned at all 62
in the fiery blaze of loneliness: it grows
full green and thrusts and thrives.
- Forgo this smiling guise a while: 63
these shining teeth so dazzle me
your face lies hidden in the glow.