

## A Sūfī listening to Hindī religious poetry:

### Mīr Abdul Wāhid Bilgrāmī's Haqāyaq-i Hindī.<sup>1</sup>

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#### Introductory remark

The Haqāyaq-i Hindī is a 16th Century polemical work that defends the use of Hindu (in fact Krishna bhakti) poetry in *samā'* sessions of Sūfīs. It does so by explaining the meaning of fragments of this poetry against an Islamic mystic background. It is thus very interesting to study Hindu-Muslim interaction in the sixteenth century. The work is often seen as an example of 'syncretism', but a closer study reveals that such is not unproblematically the case.

First some caveats. Unfortunately the work has only been published in Hindī translation, the original in Persian has not been edited at all, let alone text-critically. Hence, the major handicap of this study is that it is based on a secondary source (see bibliography). The available translation in turn is based on a single manuscript<sup>2</sup> (Rizvī 2014 VS, p. 32-33). This manuscript is in bad condition and no other manuscript has come to light so far. Further, the translator says that the Hindī lines quoted in the manuscript are written 'carelessly' in the Persian script, which casts doubt on the exactness of his rendering. How much is the result of his *Hineininterpretierung*, and how much is original?

This is particularly problematic as the translator, A.A. Rizvī, is a staunch defender of the idea that Muslim and Hindu mysticism are essentially the same. This seems to be the tenet of several of his books (i.a. his Muslim Revivalist Movements in Northern India in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries), and may have influenced his translation.<sup>3</sup>

A further limitation of this study is that, though I have made extensive use of all the catalogues of Mughal documents published so far, I have not been able to find reference to *farmāns* on grants to Abdul Wāhid himself. Field-research would be necessary to trace

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally prepared as a field exam for Professor Alan Entwistle in Autumn 1992. I am grateful to him and to Naseem Hines, now at Harvard University for their help in understanding this text. All mistakes are of course my own. I have only slightly rewritten my student paper for intelligibility, but not updated it in the light of research since. I feel that it is still a valid contribution, since misunderstandings about this text keep proliferating.

<sup>2</sup>This document is preserved in the Aligarh University, Ehsan Collection. The copy was made in 1756 by Sayyid Imām Shāh Gadā.

<sup>3</sup>As far as the historical background is concerned there is yet another problem of unavailability of primary sources. An important source on which Rizvī relies heavily is the mid-18th century history of poets from Bilgrām by Mīr Gulām Alī Āzād Bilgrāmī. The Ma'āsir al-Kerām. has been edited by Mufid Ām Murasālay in Agra in 1917. This work is unfortunately unavailable to me. (It is now available as an e-book via Wordcat from Alberta University. I thank Carl Ernst for this reference.)

any such document in e.g. the collection of "Bilgram Documents" preserved at the Department of History of the Aligarh Muslim University (see the bibliography in Bilgrāmī 1984, p. 233).

It is within these limits that the following paper is a study of the historical context of the Haqāyaq-i Hindī, and a comparison between Bilgrāmī's and the Krishna bhakta's interpretation of the poetry.

## I. Contextualizing the work

### 1. *The Author: Mīr Abdul Wāhid Bilgrāmī.*

Abdul Wāhid was born in 1509-10 (915 A.H.) in a family of Sayyids with some Sūfī traditions. It seems that they were Shi'ite.<sup>4</sup> The history of his family is apparently well-documented.<sup>5</sup> They seem to have received landgrants, and to have run regularly into conflict with other local *zamīndārs*. Conflicting land-claims between *jagirdārs*, state officers and grantees seems to have been a common problem in that period.<sup>6</sup> Due to these conflicts they often moved and at some point an uncle of Abdul Wāhid seems to have moved to Gaughāt, which is the alleged meeting place of Sūr Dās and Vallabhācārya (acc. to the Sūrdās kī Vārtā). Abdul Wāhid married a girl from Kannauj, and seems to have settled there (MT III p. 106). A meeting with Akbar allegedly rendered him 500 *bīghas* of land and a kind of stipend (*siyūrgāl*).<sup>7</sup>

None of the Sūfī teachers with whom he studied is well-known, but love of music was a trait of at least one of them, namely of Shaykh Muhammad Husain from Sikandra (MT III p. 105-6). Badaonī mentions his devotion for the Shaikh (MT III p. 106).

He returned to Bilgrām, where he died in 1608. He left his sons, Firuz and Tayyib, a *khānqah* (monastery), as can be inferred from a document recording about a *madad -i*

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. Rizvi1975, p. 181. Like many other alleged Sayyid families in India, they traced their descent to Sayyid Abdūl Farah of Wāsīt (Blochman in note on AA, p. 425).

<sup>5</sup>Unfortunately, Rizvi does not give any details about landgrants he seems to have used.

<sup>6</sup>It was not until the situation had gotten really out of hand under the *sadarat* of Abdun-Nabi, in fact until 1578, that Akbar took measures to rationalize his administration in this respect. Cfr. Bilgrāmī 1984, p. 27-30.

<sup>7</sup>No document about this grant is found in the descriptions of mughal *farmāns* that I have checked. Rizvī seems to base his account mainly on the mid-18th Century hagiography Ma'asir-ul Kerām, by Mīr Gulām Alī Āzād Bilgrāmī (ed. Agra, Mufid Ām Mudrasālay, 1917. This work was not available to me).

*ma'ash* of land to these two for maintenance of the *khānqah* of their deceased father, dated 1652 AD.<sup>8</sup>

## **2. Other Works by Abdul Wāhid Bilgrāmī**

Apart from the Haqāyaq-i Hindī, elaborately described infra, Bilgrāmī is the author of another explanatory work on technical terms, this time from Sufism, the Sab-i Sanābil (Seven ears of grain). This work consists of seven chapters and has been edited by the Qadiriyya silsilah.

His other works are only available in manuscript form. The Hall-i Šubahāt and Kalimāt-i Cand are both Sūfī manuals. The Šarah-i Nuzhat ul-Arvāh, as the title indicates, is a commentary on the Nuzhat ul-Arvāh by Rukn ud-Dīn Husayn (dated 1111-12). And of course, Bilgrāmī has written poetry, a collection (*divān*), which is again only available in manuscript form, but Badaonī praises his poetry and quotes two examples (MT III p. 107).

The historian Badaonī also mentions the commentary on the Nuzhat ul-Arvāh, and attributes to him several treatises on technical terms of the Sūfīs (*iṣṭilāhāt*), specifying the 'Sanābil'. He mentions 'many other able compositions besides'. The Ā'in i Akbarī does not give any specifics about Bilgrāmī.<sup>9</sup> It would be interesting to study these works with an eye to confirming or refuting the apparent switch to orthodoxy in Bilgrāmī's later life (see below), but that is well outside the scope of this study. I will focus on Haqāyaq-i Hindī only.

## **3. The historical situation.**

Bilgrām, situated in the modern district of Hardoī, had in 1540 been the site of a decisive encounter between Humayūn and Sher Shah Sur, in which the former was defeated.

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<sup>8</sup>This document informs the *jagirdārs*, *karorīs* (tax-collector) and *gumashtas* (rent-collector, representative of zamindār) of the *pargāna* Bilgrām of the grant, it bears the seal of Sa'ad Allah Khan. Cfr. Tirmizi 1982, p. 30-31 (no. 92). Acc. to Rizvī the names of Bilgrāmī's four sons were Abdul Jalīl (died in 1647, hence not mentioned in the grant of 1652), Firoz (died in 1655, 3 years after receiving the grant), Yahiyā (no date of his death given, but since he is not mentioned in the grant, he might have died before 1552) and Tayyib, his main pupil (died in 1656, also shortly after the grant). This seems consistent with the information given by the document.

<sup>9</sup>Blochman refers to the information given by Badaonī: a commentary to the Nuzhat ul-Arvāh and treatises on technical terms a.o. the Sanābil.

During the Mughal rule, Bilgrām was a *pargāna* in the *sarkār* of Lucknow (i.e. *suba* Avadh).<sup>10</sup>

There was a natural rivalry between the Sayyids of Bilgrām, to which Abdul Wāhid belonged, and the Uthmani and Farshawri Shaykhs, who usually held the office of *qāḍī* of Bilgrām (Enc. of Islam p. 1218-9). Several incidents in Bilgrām, mainly about the post of Qāḍī are documented in royal *farmāns* of the period. There was a dispute about division of income going on around 1570 among rivalling *qāḍīs*, as a *farmān* about the settlement with the seal of Akbar of this dispute between Qāḍī Abdus Samad and Qāḍī Kamal (who had been appointed in 1563) proves.<sup>11</sup> This might not have completely settled the matter, since a *farmān* issued by Akbar in 1592, alludes to the dismissal of Qāḍī Kamāl from the *Qaḍāt* of the *pargāna* Bilgrām at some time previous (not specified) and conditions of his reinstatement by Shaham Khan Jalayar, the *jagirdār* of the *pargāna*. He also receives a landgrant, which is apparently at the expense of other *jagirdārs*, not specified in the *farmān*.<sup>12</sup> It is against this backdrop of economic strife and dependence upon the goodwill of royal delegees, that we have to understand Haqāyāq-i Hindī. In this work, the polemics about *samā'* find a new and convinced defender of the use of Hindu lyrics in *samā'* sessions.

The central issue of Haqāyāq-I Hindī regards the controversy about the use in *samā'* of texts in the vernacular. This debate is of course much older than the 16th Century. To give just one Indian precedent: in the mid 14th Century the Firdausiyya saint Sharaf ud-Dīn Maneri reportedly spoke out strongly against this practice except for the very advanced. But his contemporary, Gesu Daraz considered 'Hindwī' particularly well-suited for religious songs (Schimmel 1982, p. 135).

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<sup>10</sup>Acc. to Badaonī it was situated in the dependancy of Kanauj i.e. suba Agra, but the *farmāns* etc. give the dependancy of Lucknow.

<sup>11</sup>This is clear from esp. the *farmān* dated 20 Safar 978 A.H., in the possession of Qāḍī Shariful Hasan Bilgrāmī from Aligarh and shortly described in the NRPR no. 7, 1976, p. 111. several other *farmāns* describing a.o. the appointment of Kamal in 1563, a later award to Qāḍī Muhammad Yusuf in the *pargāna* (1599), and the appointing of Bhikari, son of Kamāl to Qāḍī under Jahangir in 1628.

<sup>12</sup>This document is dated *shawwal* 1000 A.H. It is shortly summarized in Tirmizi 1989, p. 68. In fact even in much later times the *Qaḍāt* of Bilgrām seems to have been highly controversial, as is witnessed by a *Sadaqat Nāma* of 1856 by Qāḍī Sharif Ahmad, claiming that his ancestors had been holding the *Qaḍāt* of Bilgrām (NRPR 1976, p. 113).

The debate on *samā'* was still very much on the foreground in Bilgrāmī's days, esp. among the courtiers of Akbar. The father of Abdun Nabi<sup>13</sup> had written a treatise on the legality of *samā'*. His son, who was *sadr* of Akbar, came into the limelight by refuting his father's theories and this may be a reason why he came to Akbar's attention. In his function as *sadr*, which he held from 1563 till 1579, he was responsible for the allotment of *madad -i ma'ash* or *siyūrghāls* (stipends). His distaste for *samā'* may have played a role in his decisions, although he appears to have been mostly interested in getting bribes and surrounded himself with sycophants (Bilgrāmī 1984, p.19-31).

I suggest that it is not coincidental that it is exactly in this period that Abdul Wāhid Bilgrāmī wrote his *Haqāyaq-i Hindī* (1566-7). I grant though that it is possible that Bilgrāmī obtained his *siyūrghāl* before, during the *sadarāt* of Shaikh Gadā'i Kanboh Dehlavi (from 1555 till 1560). Gadā'i is known to have organized *samā'* sessions at his house that even Akbar is said to have attended (Bilgrāmī 1984, p. 14 quoting Badaonī vol. II p. 29-30). He is even reputed to have composed songs himself, acc. to Badaonī: "...[he] used to compose and sing hymns and religious songs after the Indian manner, to which pursuits he was passionately addicted" (MT vol. III p. 122-23).

There were other important public personae to take a position in the debate about *samā'*. One was the father of Abul Fazl and Faizī, namely Shaykh Mubarak of Nagor. Early on in his career he was opposed to singing and dancing, and he strictly followed the Śarī'a. But later, apparently after visiting the tombs of the Chistis in Delhi around 1570, his attitude seems to have changed. (Rizvi 1975, p. 98). Badaonī says about his one time teacher: "...he was so devoted to singing that he was scarcely for a moment of the day at ease without being employed in listening to the chanting of hymns psalms, mystic melodies and music." (MT III p. 118).

Another public figure was Badaonī himself, who too seems to have been much preoccupied with the problem of *samā'*, which he thoroughly disliked. Such is clear from an incident he describes of Sindhīs singing Indian melodies in the *khānqah* of Shaikh Nizām ud-Dīn of Ambethī (near Lucknow) (MT III p. 39). It should not come as a surprise then, that *samā'* was the subject of one of the bitter discussions in Akbar's *Ibādat Khāna* (erected 1575) (Rizvi 1975, p. 117).

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<sup>13</sup>Named Shaykh Ahmad (acc. to Badaonī) or elsewhere Ruknuddin (acc. to Shaikh

In such an environment Bilgrāmī's enthusiastic defense of *samā'* could not remain unnoticed. Surprisingly though, he is portrayed as a more sober Muslim in Badaonī's account of 'Shaykh' Abdul Wāhid of Bilgrām in his Muntakhab ut Tawārīkh: "He used formerly to indulge in ecstatic exercises and sing ecstatic songs in Hindī and fall into trances, but he is now past all this." (MT III p. 106). Abdul Wāhid is the 23rd 'holy man in the Imperial service' that he describes, and Badaonī recounts his visit to Bilgrām in 1569-70, when he met him. The date of the Haqāyaq-i Hindī is given at the end of the document to be 1566-67 (974 A.H.). This means that Bilgrāmī's 'change of heart' is at the best a very recent one. One should keep in mind that Badaonī's personal orthodox convictions, amply illustrated by the quotations given above, may have colored his perception. Also, the Shaykh was much older than Badaonī, who was 30 years old at the time (he was born in 1540). The fact that the meeting took place when the historian was in a particularly weak spot<sup>14</sup> may also have softened the author's otherwise not so mild criticism. But the fact remains that Badaonī considers him an orthodox Muslim. He does not refer explicitly to the Haqāyaq, nor does Abul Fazl. Who, surprisingly, even classifies Bilgrāmī in Ā'in 30 as the 130th among the learned men of the time within the fifth class, "the bigoted" who "cannot pass beyond the narrow sphere of revealed testimony (*naql*)" (AA, p.616-7). This is all the more surprising, since Abul Fazl classifies much higher (second class) Muhammad Gaus Gwaliyarī, who translated the Amṛt Kuṇḍa (Bahrūl Hayāt), an initiative comparable to that of Bilgrāmī. Abul Fazl's account seems to reinforce Bilgrāmī's later switch to orthodoxy.

In summary, while the situation is complex, it seems at least obvious that Bilgrāmī's work is a response to debates on *samā'* that were the order of the day at this time. Against the background of economic strife of local groups for government grants, it seems possible that he was trying to sway the contemporary *sadr*, Abdun Nabi, who was known to hold views inimical to the practice. There is some evidence that Bilrāmī may have changed his ways, as they were perceived as heretic, and that he succeeded in being regarded a 'sober orthodox' later in life.

## II. The Haqāyaq-i Hindī.

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Abdul Haq Muhaddis Dehlavi in Akhbar ul-Akhyar).

<sup>14</sup>Badaonī was recovering from the injuries he had occurred shortly before in a fight with the angry family members of a youth he had seduced. Bilgrāmī seems to have comforted

**1. General Remarks: polemics and the title.**

The main objective of Haqāyaq-i Hindī is a polemical work, as is clear from the introductory and concluding sections of the work, as well as the beginning of chapter 2. Bilgrāmī's concern is first to defend the spiritual value of instrumental music per se, and second to defend the use of lyrics of the Hindus in *samā'*.

Bilgrāmī starts out with an invocative prayer, in which he seems to emphasize his identity as a Muslim: "O God... Let me die as a Muslim" (p. 35). He goes on with an ode to music, 'the sound of love', forging an elaborate justification by comparing the 'dried wood' of the musical instruments to the tree 'talking' to Moses (Mūsa) at Yaman. Next, he argues that the meaning of words can never be totally explained and that they gain meaning according to the spiritual level of the *sādiq*. He argues that what may seem heretic to the listener, should not be judged at face value, it may be an utterance understood by the spiritually advanced only (this is a recurring theme in the work, also on p. 50 and at the end, p. 103). Immediately afterwards though he asserts the opposite: those who do not appreciate music are the ones who are lost (p. 37).

Bilgrāmī is even more direct in his introduction to the second chapter. He gives 'proof' that it is valid to interpret the lyrics of the 'kāfirs' as truth. He does so by a negative parallelism: if the Quran itself contains an appeal to the kāfirs and mentions kāfirs (like e.g. Pharaoh, and Abu Jahel), then why could the lyrics of kāfirs not contain part of truth? In his concluding section he emphasizes (anticipating a polemical response?) that his explanation is not complete, that much deeper truths are hidden in the songs he tried to explain, and that many people misunderstand them and reject them (p. 103). He seems to argue that in fact the same can be said about the Quran, quoting the commentator Abd Allāh Ibn-i Abbas (the 'father of Quranic exegesis').

Implicit in all these arguments is the belief that the religious texts of every community contain truth, but that the right understanding is not in the literal but in the secret meaning, only known to few. Hence the meaningful title of the work: Haqāyaq-i Hindī: Truths (plural of *haqq*) of the Indians. One could also interpret the term 'Hindī' as referring to the language of the poems he quotes, but not necessarily in the modern understanding of the NIA language (also called Khaṛī Bolī), but rather to NIA vernacular of the time. It may refer rather to the indigenous Indian character of the texts described, similar to how

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him: "...his was the first visit that had on my wounds the effect of an ointment, and he

Abul Fazl uses the word in his Ā'in -i-Akbarī, where he speaks e.g. of the "Hindī" story of Nāla and Damayantī (AA, p. 113. See also p. 110).

## **2. Organization and method**

Haqāyaq-i Hindī consists of three chapters, of which the first allegedly explains terms from '*Dhruva padas*', the second from '*Visuna padas*' and the third from 'other places' apart from the two earlier mentioned (see also *infra*).

The structure is straightforwardly lexicographical. The author first quotes a term or oral formulaic expression from Hindu *padas*. The more he proceeds in his work, the longer the formulas, often he quotes even a distich. These quotations are interesting for the study of oral formulas: they clearly have a metrical value, ready units to fit in a metrical pattern. Unfortunately it is not clear in how far Rizvi (the translator) has emended these formulas while reconstructing them from the *Nastaliq* transcription. But Bilgrāmī himself seems to be aware of the metrical value, since he introduces them with reference to the meter: e.g. the *duharā* (13-11 metre) distich on p. 48.

After the quotation, the author proceeds to explain it. Usually he exemplifies with the quotation of an *āyat* from the Quran, a quote from a Hadīth or a Sūfī work. Then follows usually (but not always) an illustration of the general idea with a *chand*, sometimes a *padya* (p. 49, 50, 52, 67, 74, 77) or *rubāī* (p. 46, 55). He has a *mathnavī* at the beginning of the work and of chapter 2. This seems to indicate that the author was familiar with the Persian and the Hindī genres of versification.

Research about his quotations is beyond the scope of this study. Suffice to say that often Bilgrāmī neglects to specify author and work. It would be interesting to trace the Hadīth's and Quranic verses that he quotes, and to compare with their popularity in works by other Indian Sūfīs. As pointed out already, he refers to the Quranic interpreter of the first generation, Abdul Ibn-i Abbas (p. 103) and 'Ummar (the second Khalīfa) (p. 73).

As far as the mystics are concerned, Husain ibn Mansūr al-Hallāj (died 922) is alluded to on p. 53 and actually quoted on p. 102. References to this legendary 'martyr of love' are a well-established theme in Sufism (Schimmel 1984, p. 115-116). Also Shaykh Shiblī from Bagdād is quoted (on p. 74). As is to be expected, he quotes Ibn 'Arabī, more specifically his Futuhāt al-Makkīya (Bilgrāmī calls it the Risāl-i Makkīya on p. 51 and 62). Khāqānī

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said, "These wounds are the roses of love"..." (MT III, p. 106).

from Shirvān, the qasīdah-poet (died 1199) is mentioned on p. 84. Other quotations are from the Sūfī *Ain ul Kuzāt* (p. 73) and the reference to a Sūfī work the *Kaśf ul Isrār* (p 102).

### **3. Reconstruction of the material used by Bilgrāmī.**

The material from which Bilgrāmī draws the key terms and oral formulas that he tries to explain, seems to be mainly Krishna-poetry. The first chapter draws from '*Dhruva pada*', as opposed to '*Viṣṇu pada*', according to the author's classification. Apart from some initial terms connected with music, this is *nāyikā-nāyaka* ('*Rīti*') poetry, starting out with formulas for a *nakha-sikha* description of the *nāyikā* (with sometimes a related full line or distich). Some key terms from bridal poetry are explained, and the final bulk comes from *māna* poetry.

The distinction between chapter 1 and 2 is an artificial one, since the terms occurring in the first chapter may just as well be straight out of the erotic Krishna and Rādhā (and/or Gopīs) poetry. Perhaps the difference is that the second chapter deals with terms exclusively belonging to Krishna poetry: epithets of Krishna and attributes typical for him (flute, peacock-feather crown, yellow garments), other personae and geography of his mythology (including Kaṃsa and Dvārkā) and references to Braj's cowherds and their activities (including the butter-stealing incidents and *Dāna līlā*). The material of Bilgrāmī must have included *Bhramara Gīta* poems (Songs of the Bee or Uddhava's message), *Dāna līlā*, a little bit of *Bāla līlā*, some references to heroic and erotic (Kubjā) exploits in Mathurā, and to Dvārkā, although none of Krishna's queens is mentioned.

The third chapter seems to deal with seasonal themes (the so-called '*samaya ke pada*' or more traditional '*Bārah Māsā*'), starting out with the cold season, proceeding to spring with its fauna and flora and festivals. There seems to be a bridal section, then the rainy season is described with all its natural phenomena and finally the swing festival (Hindolā), Divālī and Holī. This chapter occasionally includes loosely connected proverbial lines (p. 92, p. 95).

What then was the material he worked with? He may be working with an oral tradition of songs performed in his *khānqah*. Or he may have used a manuscript. That Bilgrāmī starts out his work by explaining musical terms is of course not strange in a work defending *samā*'. One might also speculate that he is referring to the informative *rāga* and *tāla* -tag at the beginning of every poem. He indeed occasionally mentions the *rāga* of the poem from

which he quotes,<sup>15</sup> and, as mentioned before, in one case gives the metre: *duharā*. This seems to be a clue to the fact that Bilgrāmī was actually working with one manuscript, in which *rāga* and *tāla* were indicated, and the term '*duharā*' was used before a *dohā* was quoted. The reference to Sarasvatī is perhaps based on the invocation at the beginning of the manuscript he used.

If he used a manuscript, one wonders whether this was an anthology from several poets or one particular poet. It is a pity that Bilgrāmī does not comment upon the practice of adding a *chāpa*, so we do not know whose Braj poetry he is quoting. Perhaps an indication about the sectarian origin of the poetry is the term '*puṣṭivāk*' (p. 52). Bilgrāmī gives a rather obscure explanation: he says it means support in time of turmoil. This might refer to an initiation mantra, perhaps one specifically from the Vallabha sect or Puṣṭi Mārga? It is interesting in this connection that Bilgrāmī's family reportedly moved at one point to Gaughāt, the alleged meeting place of Vallabha and Sūr. But in the first place the association of Sūr with the Vallabha Sampradāya dates from a later period. Further, there is nothing in the fragmentary poetry quoted that has a distinctive Vallabhan ring. A decisive answer could only be given if the fragments can be traced to a particular poet, but in the absence of glossaries of their works (and critical editions) this is an impossible task.<sup>16</sup>

### III. The Sūfī's and the bhakta's explanation

#### 1. *Difference between the Sūfī and the bhakta or the tantric interpreter: the methodology.*

A first difficulty for a comparison between the Sūfī's and the bhakta's interpretation of erotic mystic poetry about Krishna is the very absence of interpretative lexis in the Krishna movements. Theological works, like e.g. the *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* by Rūpa Gosvāmī, do indeed give long enumerations of 'ingredients for religious poetry,' elaborating on the exact meaning of the terms in lexicon style.<sup>17</sup> They also are concerned with establishing an 'orthodox' tone to their works, as exemplified by the multiple quotes

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<sup>15</sup>He gives *rāg* Gavāī (p. 48), Sohū (p. 95) and Jaitśrī (p. 101).

<sup>16</sup>Of the contemporary poets glossaries do exist only for Sūr (BBSK) and the already somewhat later Kevalrām (Entwistle 1983). I have a glossary for Harirām Vyās. I did not succeed in trying to identify the fragments with the help of this material.

<sup>17</sup>A good example is Rūpa Gosvāmī's treatment of the *prasādhana* (attributes) in the section of the *uddīpana-vibhāvas* of the *prathama vibhāva laharī* in the *dakṣiṇa vibhāga* of Rūpa's *Bhakti Rasāmṛta Sindhu* (ed. Dr. Nagendra), p. 191-198. Rūpa simply

from authoritative scriptures. But no spiritual meaning is given for the 'ingredients'. Likewise, pre-modern commentaries on Braj Bhāṣā poetry, like e.g. Premdās (fl. ca. 1736 AD),<sup>18</sup> commenting on the Hit Caurāsī, restrict themselves to describing a beautiful vision of the divine love-play, to contextualizing and paraphrasing the poem. They do not try to systematically expound the spiritual meaning of the poetry. This kind of interpretation of poetry is however part and parcel of the Sūfī tradition, at least since Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240), who interpreted his own poetry in the Tarjumān al-ašwāq (Schimmel 1982, p. 40-41). As far as bilingual lexica are concerned, Bilgrāmī has a precedent in the 14th Century Ghunyat al-Munyat by an anonymous author (Delvoye 1991, p. 148).

It seems obvious that for a Muslim audience an anthropomorphic vision of the divine, let alone an erotic one, is highly suspect, so in need of explanation. Everything is cast in terms of metaphors. This is at the root of the divergence of this work with Braj sectarian readings. While Krishna devotees understand the poetic elaboration of attributes of the divine as a way of '*darśana*', for the Muslim orthodoxy *shirk* lurks in every poetical vision and needs to be justified as a symbol.

Similarly, for the Vaiṣṇava bhaktas the importance of the elements lies in the whole, what matters is to evoke and intensify *rasa*, not the *vibhāvas* and *uddīpanas* etc. per se. For Bilgrāmī's project, on the contrary, the main concern is to justify every individual element in itself. He is not concerned with the meaning of poems as a whole, at the best with a unit of two lines (*dohā*-like distichs). In his zeal to relate the 'ingredients' of the poetry to Islamic mythology, he often disregards of the context. He does so e.g. when he equals the ideal background for the erotic mood in Hindu aesthetics, namely the night, *raina*, to the sin of carelessness<sup>19</sup> or alternatively to the condition of the universe before creation. Another good example is when he relates verses like *rati ke cinha saba prakāra ke bhaye* "love-marks of all kinds appeared" and *adhara kapola naina ānana ura kahi deta rati ke ānanda* "lips, cheeks, eyes, face and breast speak of the bliss of the night" to the day of the last judgement (p. 67).

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enumerates the terms, gives a 'scientific' definition (including the number of holes of the different kinds of flutes of Krishna) and illustrates it with a quotation from poetry.

<sup>18</sup>This is the alleged date of completion of the commentary, and is reinforced by the dates of his guru, Hit Rūplāl. Cfr. Singh and Rāvat (Ed.) 2028 VS, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup>Interestingly this interpretation is similar to the tantric interpretation (By Munidatta) of two instances (r'iN and rait) in the Cāryagīti as *kleśa andhakāra* etc. cf. Kvaerne 1977, p. 54.

Further, Bilgrāmī identifies the messenger Uddhava with the Prophet Muhammad, obviously because both can be called message-carriers. However, this disregards the rejection by the Gopīs (equated with angels) of Uddhav's message (p. 74) (*patiyā*, equated on some level with the Quran).

Bilgrāmī identifies Mathurā with the '*ālam-i nāsut* and Dvārkā with the '*ālam-i malakūt* or *jabarūt*, as stages on the spiritual journey of the Sūfī (p. 78). However, this disregards Krishna's melancholy for Braj and is not congruent with the bhakta's grading scale of *mādhurya* above *aiśvarya*.

Similarly, Krishna's stopping the milkmaids on their way to the market is explained as the temptations of Iblīs. That again disregards the Gopī's halfhearted, playful response. Hence his interpretations possibly may lead to the occurrence within one poem of two contradictory ingredients (positive or negative).

Perhaps in that way Bilgrāmī's analysis is more 'tantric': he approaches the poetry as a kind of secret code with hidden meaning, to be deciphered by substituting terms and expressions by what they really stand for. This is not to say that Bilgrāmī has knowledge of tantric terms. In fact no reference of that sort is to be found in the work. While interpreting the terms Ganges and Yamunā (p. 75), the sun (*sūrya* p. 62) and moon (xix p. 63), the in-laws (*sasurāl* p. 56), the peacock crown (*mora mukuṭa* p. 83), the garden (in a whole line p. 94), the lute (*bīna*, p. 76) or the many-faceted concept of the lotus, he does not touch upon tantric ideas such as those of the commentator(s) on the *Cāryāgīti* (Cfr. Kvaerne 1977, p. 41-60). Perhaps he is aware of tantric ideas about music (p. 36-37 and in his explanation about *muralī* and other instruments p. 75-77), but these have pervaded mainstream bhakti to such an extent that this cannot be unambiguously identified. Moreover, the tantric understanding of poetry is again concerned with an overall experience of the paradoxical ontological status of the reader, whereas Bilgrāmī often loses sight of the forest through the jungle of Hindu metaphors. In that respect he also differs significantly from the Sūfī romances based on indigenous Indian material. E.g. his contemporary Malik Muhammad Ja'isi, also living in Avadh, conveys a coherent Sūfī message in his *Padmāvati*.

## **2. Further differences in content**

The most striking difference in content is perhaps about the concept of *māna* or "pique". Interestingly, Bilgrāmī describes it as sin, as man's turning away from God. This theme does occur in Hindu bhakti poetry, but occurs in a different type of poetry and the key-

word there seems to be *vimukha* (the one with the face turned away).<sup>20</sup> *Māna* -poetry has a different purpose, namely to illustrate the power of the lover over the beloved and the radical reciprocity of love. As such, it is definitely positive (Siegel 1978, p. 145). By contrast, in Sūfī poetry it typically is the beloved who is fickle, while the lover remains steadfast. Perhaps this is the reason for Bilgrāmī's deviating interpretations on p. 60-62 (the *mānini* has turned away from God, and the *sakhī* brings her back to the right path). In fact, he in one place he interprets even *viraha* in this way, as *kufī* (p. 70).

Another differing interpretation is that of Krishna's enemies, whom Bilgrāmī equates with the *nafs*. They are portrayed as totally negative: this is true for the serpent Kaliya (Śeṣanāga) and Kāṃsa (p.77). He does not seem to be aware of the fact that they attain *mokṣā* at the moment they are killed by Krishna. On the other hand Bilgrāmī leaves room for more than a purely negative interpretation of the *Dāna līlā*. On one level he equates Krishna's tricks with those of Iblīs, on the other hand he points out in order to reach God, the self has to be sacrificed (p. 80).

Also interesting is the total absence of reference to pilgrimage. He refers to the 'geographica sancta' of Braj in the abstract, equating it with spiritual states (p. 75) or with the mythological Yaman (p. 77-8), but not e.g. with Meccah or even with Sūfī shrines. One would be hard-pressed to state that Bilgrāmī was not aware of the 'colonization' of the Braj area going on exactly at the time, but he does not refer to it.

Another significant difference comes to light when Bilgrāmī interprets *mora mukuṭa sīsa dhare* "he carries the peacock crown on his head" and *govardhana dhārī* "lifter of the mountain". He speaks of the 'burden of responsibility' taken on by Muhammad (p. 83-4), whereas one of the main concerns of Krishna bhakta is exactly effortless, playful *līlā*. In other places too, Bilgrāmī comes up with strikingly un-Indian ideas, like this equation of the *sasurāl* (in-laws house) with heaven and the child Krishna with the child Jesus. But these do not touch upon fundamental theoretical differences.

### **3. Main similarities**

In a way, pointing out the similarities between Bilgrāmī's and the Krishna bhakta's interpretations is the least productive part of this study, because of the shared field of all mysticism.

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<sup>20</sup>Some examples from the poetry by Harirām Vyās are to be found in Gosvāmī (Ed.)

1. In particular the mystic's metaphor of man's longing for the beloved is shared by Arabic mystical poetry in the Ibn 'Arabī tradition and the *viraha bhakti* in Hinduism (Schimmel 1982, p. 35-41). Hence it is not surprising that Bilgrāmī spends a lot of time explaining the bridal symbolism, touching upon the interdependence of lover and beloved (p. 58-9, 90, 93-4). He states clearly that the *gopī* stands for the true essence of man (p. 74). A metaphor like that of the cry of the *kokilā* becomes for Bilgrāmī the voice of the believer or *momin* (p. 91). The same comparison comes up with the *papīhā*, *dādura* and *mora* (p. 97), which lead the author to a eulogy of strong love and emotion.

2. Further, the concern with *wahdat al-wujūd* (Unity of being), has parallels with Advaita, rethinking of which is the central focal point of the different Hindu schools from Vallabha's *Śuddhādvaita*, to the Caitanyite Gosvāmī's *Acintya Bhedābheda*. Hence, Bilgrāmī's interpretations (at least partially) will often ring true, but his fragmentary approach again blurs the picture.

A concrete example is Bilgrāmī explaining the term *bahurūpī* “impersonator”, as referring to the reflection of God's beauty in every particle of the universe, stimulating the lover to ever-new desire (p. 38). This seems congruent with the bhakta's stress on the 'always new' love of Rādhā and Krishna in general,<sup>21</sup> and perhaps the *Maṇikhambha līlā* (illustrating the 'unbounded economy of love, Hawley 1983, p.142-3 and 270) and *Chadma līlā* (masquerade episodes) in particular. In other words, Bilgrāmī has grasped an important aspect of Krishna bhakti, but in the Krishna poetry this term derives its meaning only from the context.

Another example: Bilgrāmī explains the meaning of *locana* and *netra* by referring to the dualities and contradictions in the sensory world or alternatively to the one who knows, and cannot be understood by ordinary people (p. 41). This is close to the sense in a poem by Harirām Vyās: “What people call wrong, I take for right. Everyone has two eyes, I'm a one-eyed crow<sup>22</sup>” *jāsoṃ loga ādharma kahata haiṃ, soī dharma hai mero; dvai dvai locana saba hī keṃ, hauṃ eka āṃkhi kau dherau* (Vāsudev Gosvāmī 2009 V.S, p. 249,

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2009 VS, pada 113 on p. 219, 116 on p. 220, 146 on p. 228-229 etc.

<sup>21</sup>Without the actual context, it is difficult to find out what the meaning in Krishna poetry might be. I was not able to trace this very word in the *Sūr Sāgar* (BBSK does not give any references and Bāharī does not cite this word), neither in the works of Harirām Vyās. E.g. the use of *bhuivD* in the poetry of Kevalrām (Entwistle (Ed.) 1983) relevant is poem 6.6, 16.5,

<sup>22</sup> Taking *dherau* as rhyme word for *dherhā* (BBSK).

pada no. 230). The basic tenet here, namely that all contradictions ultimately are reconciled in God, is a central concern of Sufism as well as Krishna Bhakti, but the context of the love-song about Rādhā's eyes is not particularly relevant for this interpretation.

3. This touches upon another shared theme between Sufism and bhakti, namely disdain for formalistic religion of knowledge and duty, and stress upon spontaneity. This comes up when Bilgrāmī, explaining the line *khelata cīra bharakyo, ubhara gaye thana hāra*, “playing, the cloths got stirred, and full breasts emerged,” follows up with a verse to the effect that Śarī'a, *fatwas* and *qāḍīs* become useless for the one who knows the secret (p. 46); the same idea is expressed later on e.g. when commenting on *mero cola bhaṭakā kuṃvara saṃga* (p. 92) “my garment went with the young prince”: selfcontrol is gone when listening to the beloved.

This conforms with the strong dichotomy between knowledge or *jnāna* and morality or dharma on the one hand and *bhakti mārga* on the other, which is, so prominent in many Vaiṣṇava theological treatises (and for that matter in the *Bhramara Gīta* songs).

While interpreting several other instances Bilgrāmī articulates the idea that mystic concepts cannot be rendered in anything else than metaphoric language, and even then metaphors are not enough to describe them. They cannot be understood except by the advanced. He does so at length e.g. on p. 50. That the mystic experience is impossible to express is a common message too in many Krishna poems.

4. Another example has to do with veils and the lifting of veils. Bilgrāmī explains *ghūṃghaṭa*, as the veil that has to be cast off for obtaining the beloved, and refers to the Zulaikha -Yusūf legend (p. 39. See also Schimmel 1984, p. 57-58). This seems similar to Vaiṣṇava explanations of the *Vastra Haraṇa* episode in the *Bhāgavata Purāna*. Bilgrāmī explains *aṃgiyā phāṭī jobana bhāra*, “the bustier burst under pressure of her youth” with reference to the condition of spontaneously flowing love.

5. The importance of staying in contact with fellow-devotees (*satsaṅga*), and the supervision of a guru is ingrained in both Sufism and Krishna bhakti. Bilgrāmī reads this idea into passages where the *sakhī* functions as go-between, which he of course relates to the Prophet Muhammad (p. 61-2). Indeed, in Krishna bhakti, the *sakhīs* function as 'role models' for the devotees and often *bhakta-kavis* are identified with a specific *sakhī*.

Another creative interpretation of a Hindu metaphor is that of the lotus opening when seeing sun or moon. For Bilgrāmī this refers to man's response towards the *'ummā* and the *walī* respectively (p. 64).

6. Bilgrāmī is very much to the point with regard to other central images in Krishna bhakti, such as the (for outsiders so striking) Hindu concern with butter products (e.g. ghī as essence of milk). He comments that they refer to different kinds of worship (*ibādat*) (p. 79). This is nearly the same as the Hindu's affirmation that milk and butter products stand for different kinds of love (*prema*) (see Hawley 1983, p. 263-6).

Concerning the metaphor of the herdsman and his cows, he correctly comments that the metaphor is about the control of *buddhi* over the body, an explanation commonly given for the meaning of the term Gosvāmī (p. 82-3).

Interestingly, Bilgrāmī touches upon the color-symbolism of the blackness of Krishna. At a surface-level, he equates blackness with sin, but he goes on with a more profound explanation about the *coincidentia oppositorum* (p. 84-5). This is also the intuition of modern interpreters (Hawley 1983, p. 107-15 and Hawley 1980)

7. In one passage, while explaining *tanī* and *banda* and connected with that the line *kārha kaṭāriḥiṃ kaba tana baurī mūrkhā gavāra*, “When to draw the dagger, this body is crazed, foolish, stupid”, he seems to come remarkably close to Hindu ways of thinking about the bondage of karma and the sword of knowledge (of the Shari'at in Bilgrāmī's case) cutting these (p. 53-4).

8. Last but not least, Bilgrāmī's fundamental concern, the legitimacy of *samā'*, presupposes a whole theory about music and sound. In the beginning of his work (p. 36-37) and in his explanation about *muralī* and other musical instruments (p. 75-77), he comes very close to tantric concepts of music (manifestation in the void, Nātha preoccupations with the unstruck sound etc.) and mainstream bhakti theories about the 'moving sound' uttered by the Guru.

Several other explanations by Bilgrāmī could be pointed out as being close to the bhakta's way of thinking, though the explanations seem sometimes confused. One should also keep in mind it might be Rizvī who is reading Hindu ideas into the text he is translating, by word choice of *karma*, *bhakti* etc. in his translation.

#### IV Conclusion.

Bilgrāmī's explanation of terms and fragments from Hindu poetry is an apologia. It is not a document illustrating how a mystic understands mystical poetry from a different religious tradition, but an attempt to justify listening to this poetry by analyzing it into units that can be related in some way to Islamic concepts.

I have speculated that this may be related to economic reasons: in the view of the fact that the *sadr* at the time was suspicious of *samā'*, might the author have been trying to mollify him, so that he could be considered worthy of a grant?

This is not to say that the document has no value for comparing religious approaches. Bilgrāmī seems to be really in tune with the Krishna bhaktas, where mystical traditions meet anyway (III.3). Several other instances however show a barrier. There is an unquestionable loyalty to basic Islamic values in that Krishna is not identified with Allah; another striking example is that he interprets the *geographica sancta* of Braj purely in abstract and legendary terms (cf. III.2). In the end, the very fact of his analyzing parts without concern for the whole is foreign to the Hindu bhakta tradition (in the sense explained under III.1). Thus we cannot take this text unproblematically as an example of syncretism.

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