Introduction

The honor of being dubbed “Indian Mona Lisa” goes to an eighteenth-century Rajput style bust portrait featuring a lady with veil in profile. No one actually claims that this painting was modeled after Leonardo da Vinci’s famous sixteenth-century Italian one; it is rather meant as a mark of distinction for the striking painting officially known as Portrait of Radha, after a Goddess and unofficially known as “Banī-ṭhanī,” after a prince’s concubine. What are the stories behind these labels? Neutrally referring to the portrait as “Lady with Veil,” this book explores what the names expose and what they conceal. Each chapter incrementally reveals the historical flesh-and-blood woman purportedly behind the canvas, unraveling the “Indian Mona Lisa” trope, probing into the mysteries of the Goddess portrait that came to stand for eternal Rajput spirituality, and presenting the debut of the voice of the concubine, Banī-ṭhanī, as she simultaneously unveils and veils herself in poetry as in painting.

The portrait’s official designation refers to the Goddess Rādhā, the young cowherdess or Gopī, beloved of Krishna, the handsome young cowherd-God who seduces with his alluring flute play in his pastoral homeland of Braj. Rādhā’s all-consuming longing for the ever-elusive Krishna is one of the most-portrayed themes in Indian art. Underneath this attractive surface lies divine passion and Hindu bridal mysticism: The Goddess Rādhā’s yearning for the God Krishna signifies the longing of the human soul for God. A book on India’s Mona Lisa then involves immersing oneself in the world of devotion (bhakti) for the divine pair Rādhā and Krishna.

This particular portrayal of Rādhā belongs to the Rajput school of painting from Kishangarh, a small principality in Rajasthan on the well-traveled road between the trading town of Jaipur and the Sufi pilgrimage center of Ajmer. It is regarded as the archetype of the style of this school, representing its distinctive exaggerated profile with curvaceous eyes nearly meeting the end of the arcs of the perfect brows, with long nose, pronounced chin, and retreating forehead. Dating from the mid-eighteenth century, this portrait was likely commissioned by the then Crown-Prince Sāvant Singh (1699–1764) from his favorite painter Nihālcand. The prince’s collaboration with the artist to produce depictions of Krishna’s romance with Rādhā is the high point of the
Introduction

Kishangarhi school. Nihālcand often based his creations on the devotional poetry and songs that the prince composed himself under the pen name of Nāgarīḍās, as is surmised to be the case for “Lady with Veil.” The intimate interchange between aural and visual arts, so distinctive of Kishangarhi cultural production, will be a fil rouge in this book.

The label “Bani-θanī,” by which this portrait is known popularly, exposes another layer of meaning. This is the name of the real-life model on whose physiognomy the exquisite features of the Goddess are purportedly based. Who is this woman who everyone recognizes but hardly anyone knows? She proves to be as elusive as her name, which is actually a sobriquet: banī-θanī means “dressed up and fully adorned (lady)” and can be translated as “Miss Made-Up,” “Miss Decked Out,” “Miss All Dressed Up” – a proper stage name for a glamorous performer who became a concubine of Sāvant Singh. She shared his intense devotion for Rādhā and Krishna to the point that after he lost his throne, they moved together to Krishna’s homeland Braj, the pilgrimage center between Delhi and Agra. Together, they lived out their lives devoted to their belief and their art. Their memorials, close to one another in the sacred city of Vrindaban, still stand witness to their joined devotion that reaches beyond death. Or so goes the romantic story. Is there any truth to it? This book draws us into the world of palace slaves in Rajput harems, following the young talented singer who became a prince’s concubine, and eventually was memorialized as a devotee.

Who was the woman behind the pretty face? Was there an actual “Miss Decked Out” who sat for the portrait, or was she more of a “Miss Made-Up” in the sense of invented? And if made up, by whom? If not, did she manage to get her say about how she was represented in painting? This book will examine the life of a performer nicknamed Bani-θanī, employed by the Kishangarh court, who became one of Sāvant Singh’s concubines (pāśbān). It unpacks how she came to be seen as the model of the painting. However, the focus is on her own literary accomplishments, as not only did she perform, but she also composed her own devotional Rādhā–Krishna poetry under the pen name Rasikbihārī. Sāvant Singh included some songs with that signature in his hymnals for festival occasions and the colophons confirm that Banī-θanī was the poet in question. An accidental discovery of her performer’s notebook,

1 The political events of this tumultuous phase in Sāvant Singh’s life are the topic of my previous book. For a quick overview of Sāvant Singh’s life, in particular after his exile, see Pauwels 2017: 13–28 (table with dates on 24–5).
2 I owe the pun to my colleague Purnima Dhavan who first suggested it.
3 Among others, an 1887 manuscript of Nāgarīḍās’ Utsav-mālā, preserved in the Kishangarh royal collection (Peṛī 6B), includes several songs with signature “Rasikbihārī” that are introduced as “by another poet” (anya kavi krita). The colophon states explicitly “when marked here as ‘by
which registers the texts of many more songs she herself composed toward the latter period of her life, provides the opportunity to peek behind the purdah of the iconic painting’s canvas.

The case of the Indian Mona Lisa, then, leads to the Goddess Rādhā, but also to a flesh-and-blood woman: the concubine Banī-thanī. She was the lover of the prince, but also a lover of divine love, composing in praise of Rādhā and Krishna’s romance under the devotional name Rasikbihārī. This book analyzes discourses about her by others, but it foregrounds her own songs and how she availed herself of opportunities for self-fashioning. Beyond the artwork, it points to zanānā or women’s quarters politics, women’s contributions to literature and religious performance, as well as intertextuality of a literary couple’s shared experiences of divine romance.

Fields of Inquiry

The explorations that went into this book have provided opportunities to draw from and provide food for thought for several scholarly fields of inquiry. Building on recent scholarship in terms of art history, this is a case study for thinking about mimesis, portraits, and idealizations of women in Indian art, testing these against what we know about the actual historical woman. In terms of the history of Hindi and Urdu literature, the book introduces a long-silent woman author with the pen name “Rasikbihārī” who contributed to both. It features her previously unknown compositions on the basis of newly discovered manuscript material. The study of her poetic interaction with her patron makes this a first-time study of an early-modern Indian literary couple while not autobiographical, Banī-thanī’s oeuvre can be read for hints of self-fashioning and autobiographical pose. It reveals a Rajput palace woman who climbed the ladder from slave to concubine, enriching the history of domestic slavery and that of nonconventional households. In terms of performance studies, her case illuminates that of the paradigmatic courtesan performing devotional as well as secular music. Listening carefully to her rediscovered voice allows us to push beyond the courtesan’s erotic repertoire, to explore the possibility that sexual power was not the only thing at stake in her relationships with her audience. Without romanticizing from the hindsight of contemporary notions of companionate love, the case of Sāvant Singh and Banī-thanī shows that there was more to the patron–concubine relationship than consumption/provision of erotic commodities. They reveled together in exploring the new trends in music and literary idiom at the time, including the vogue of Urdu

4 I owe this point to Monika Horstmann.
4 Introduction

poetry, then called Rekhā. As indicated by their Vaishnava names Nāgarīdāsī and Rasikbihārī, they also engaged with one another on the devotional plane as equal companions, as female assistants or sakhīs to the divine pair. In terms of religious studies, the book deepens our knowledge of devotion (bhakti) for Rādā and Krishna and documents women’s contributions to the eighteenth-century religious shifts that went into the making of modern Hinduism. Focusing on the women’s quarters in the palace, rather than the male public space of temple and court, it presents a previously neglected perspective on devotional songs. Thus, beyond the purported painter’s model, we meet a woman performer who expressed in her songs a love that crossed mundane and spiritual realms.

From the Italian to the Indian Mona Lisa in Art History

Much has been written on the Italian Mona Lisa, but there is hardly anything on her Indian counterpart. This book will start by tracing the journey of “Lady with Veil,” to Portrait of Radha, “Bānī-ṭhanī,” and “Indian Mona Lisa,” not unlike what University of London historian Donald Sassoon has done for the legend of the Italian Mona Lisa (2001). This book’s main purpose, though, is not the biography of a work of art (such as Bohm-Duchen, 2001: 38–67), but rather an archival and historical contextualization for Bānī-ṭhanī herself, the historical woman supposedly portrayed. Like the recent coauthored book by da Vinci expert Martin Kemp and Italian archivist Giuseppe Pallanti, it seeks to “capture a whiff of reality for the participants in the story of the portrait” and aspires to give a taste of the “complex texture” of their lives (2017: 1). Unlike the book on da Vinci, this one will not focus on the painter himself, who has been studied by the specialist on the topic, curator at the Metropolitan Museum, Navina Haidar (especially 2011b), but rather on the model, whose tale of upward social mobility in the midst of turbulent times is not unlike Mona Lisa’s, touching similarly upon the history of slavery and contemporaneous monasteries.

At the heart of a book on an Indian Mona Lisa lies the issue of mimesis or re-presentation. I am building on recent work of art historians such as City College of New York’s Molly Aitken (2010) and Jawaharlal Nehru University of Delhi’s Kavita Singh (2013), who have pushed beyond the reductionist interpretation of Rajput art as simulation of its Mughal counterpart. A sharp
distinction between the two styles in any case essentializes unhelpfully and overlooks multiple exchanges and mobility, in particular among artists.\(^6\)

Interrelated is the vexed issue of portraiture in India, which was long deemed to be irrelevant due to the purported lack of realism in Indian art. Here again, Rajput is often opposed to Persian- and occidental-influenced Mughal art.\(^7\) This essentializing view of Indian portraiture has long been nuanced by art historians though it survives in popularizing articles about the Indian Mona Lisa. Already in his classical essay on Indian portraiture, India’s foremost art historian B.N. Goswamy specified that Rajput painters were interested in portraiture but “to capture an inner reality, the essence of a person rather than the accident of his appearance” (1987: 193).\(^8\)

The inclination to deny physical resemblance of portraits is all the stronger with regard to elite women whose seclusion supposedly precluded artist observation. That notion has been challenged by nuanced studies of women’s patronage of art and self-fashioning in portraits that have problematized the assumed lack of agency of the women portrayed (e.g., Aitken 2002; Hingorani 2002/3). Through newly discovered primary evidence of the poetry that the Indian Mona Lisa purportedly portrayed, this book provides a unique test case for thinking on women’s agency in art. Yet, while engaging with issues of gender in Indian art, it strives to avoid all-too-easy preconceived notions inherited from Western art history and its feminist readjustment (informed by Dehejia 1997b: 1–21).

As a point of departure for each chapter, the book uses an image, usually a Kishangarhi painting. This is intended to help visualize the texture of Banī-thani’s life with the caveat that these paintings are not straightforward documentation. What they represented at the time is illuminated by identification of interocular references to other contemporaneous paintings, as well as

\(^6\) For a recent articulation of this argument, building on the path-breaking archival work of Indian art historians B.N. Goswamy, Naval Krishna, and others, see also Guibransen 2017: 133, 136–8, 177–82.

\(^7\) Colgate University’s art historian Padma Kaimal gives an excellent overview of the secondary literature (1999: 59–60); a thoughtful monograph on the topic of portraiture in early India is by then curator at the Louvre Abu Dhabi Project Vicent Lefèvre (2011); School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (SOAS) art historian Crispin Branfoot recently edited a volume on the topic (2018: 5–22). For Mughal portraiture and the debate about verisimilitude, see George Washington University’s art historian Mika Nafis’s work (2018: 222–42).

\(^8\) See also Bautze 1995: 125–30. Similarly, more recently, Crispin Branfoot with regard to life-size sculpted portraitures in the Tamil region in the last five centuries has put it as follows, “These portraits do not usually attempt to represent the physical appearance of their subjects, though . . . some . . . approach this, but were instead actively involved in the construction of the subject’s public royal identity” (2018: 191). A case study illustrating as much has just been published on portraiture of the nineteenth-century Jhala rulers at Jhalawar by art historian Isabella Nardi (2020). See also Sachdev and Tillotson 2008 on Jaipur portraiture; for a related visual treat, see the online catalogues from the Anil Relia collection in Ahmedabad. Online: www.theindianportrait.com/, last accessed December 16, 2020.
interrelations with texts. The latter in particular bring to life the interchanges of the poet and visual artist, their interplay of prompt and response (savāl-javāb). One source of inspiration here is Columbia University’s art historian Vishakha Desai, who provides excellent analytical tools to study those interactions (1995; 2000). Another is the Ashmolean’s Andrew Topsfield’s masterly analysis of the Mewar painter Sāhibdīn’s pictorial compositions after the sixteenth-seventeenth-century poetic work, Keśavdās’ Rasik-priyā, which he compares with musical exchanges (1986: 31). Each of the introductory images in itself opens a door to further art-historical exploration.

From Banī-thanī to Rasikbihārī: “A Woman Writing in India”

The book’s main project is to recover the voice of a forgotten woman author. In doing so, it adds a new entry for the path-breaking, and since publication three decades ago ever-expanding, encyclopedic Women Writing in India volumes edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (1991). The trail of Banī-thanī alias Rasikbihārī leads to a whole zanānā full of ladies producing poetry, including the presiding queen, whose pen name was Brajdāsī.9 Banī-thanī is one of the few poietesses/performers whose woman patron’s work has also been preserved (the rarity of which is noted in Schofield 2012: 151). Yet hers is not to be dismissed as elite “harem” literature. Rasikbihārī’s is the voice of a slave girl who managed to develop her talents to climb the social ladder. The intent in recovering her voice is not just to “put her on the map,” but to commit to a deeper methodological engagement, grappling with how to hear non-elite voices. To listen for the concerns beyond the clichés of the genres performed in elite contexts requires careful thinking about what persona is adapted, and to whom, with whom, and against whom her poetry speaks. In that sense, it follows the spirit of Tharu and Lalita’s project.

Banī-thanī and some of her fellow inmates of the Kishangarh zanānā have been mentioned in regional literary histories in Hindi.10 Yet overall, her voice has remained unheard, notwithstanding the ubiquity of the portrait purportedly based on her facial features. This book attempts to restore the subjechtod and social networks of the woman who was reduced to an object of spectators’ pleasure. Over the centuries, her memory remained submerged, but it is possible to retrieve it, first thanks to Sāvant Singh’s incorporation of her poetry in his own anthologies, and now also independently because of the discovery of a remarkable document that I argue is her performance notebook, or Bayāz (see Appendix). Though the manuscript does not have a colophon, it dates

9 On whom see Horstmann 2018: 130–5, who also translates a sample of her work (159–65).
from her lifetime and it was written for or by Rasikbihārī, noting her favorite poems as she heard them, her own poems as she performed them, and those of Nāgarīḍās, likely as he recited them to her. This makes the manuscript very exciting as it affords a glimpse into the creative process that inspired the poet-pair within their broader artistic networks.

Introducing the First Early-Modern Indian Literary Couple

The intertextuality this manuscript offers enables hypothetical reconstruction of actual exchanges. Rasikbihārī’s Bayāz is a document of literary sociability as it places her own songs in relation to those of others.\(^{11}\) These are mostly fellow bhaktas working in the same idiom, but also in Urdu (then called Rekhtā) and Persian. The poetry is not uniformly in the idiom of Classical Hindi that is associated with Krishna devotion and hence somewhat misleadingly termed Braj Bhāshā.\(^ {12}\) It crosses current language boundaries, as is not uncommon for devotional songs, partaking in a wideranging North Indian bhakti idiom (Pauwels 2010d). It represents a vernacular multilingualism in that it incorporates elements of literary as well as colloquial Rajasthani (Marwārī and Dhillādī), as well as Punjabi, and at times shades toward Rekhtā, what we would now call an Urdu register. Responses to other poets may be asynchronous, engaging in dialogue with masters from the past, or synchronous, with voices of the poet’s present. In both cases, the history of Hindi and Urdu is enriched by revealing networks, recovering affective relationships and moments of inspired and shared delight.

In particular, Rasikbihārī’s Bayāz allows us to study the poetic interactions of Nāgarīḍās and Rasikbihārī. This study is the first to foreground the dynamics at work between an early-modern literary couple from India. The phenomenon of the author-pair is often exclusively associated with Western modernity (as in Nick Laird and Zadie Smith), with roots in Romanticism (as in Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Godwin). While moving away from the eurocentrism of such assumptions, this book takes into account lessons learned from recent work on Literary Couplings in European literature.\(^ {13}\) Methodologically, the approach is informed by the integration of historical studies with authorship theory. Aware of the need to balance a focus on the

\(^{11}\) It complements what in the Urdu poetic context are imaginary poetic symposia (mushā’irah) reports from biographical dictionaries (taźkirah) that foreground such literary exchanges (Tabor 2014: 55).

\(^{12}\) Cambridge Hindi Professor R. Stuart McGregor has pointed out that the literary use of the idiom came to prominence in late fifteenth century Gwalior, before it flourished in the Braj region (2003: 913–4). The compound term Braj Bhāshā does not seem to be attested till the late seventeenth century, perhaps a more neutral term is Madhyadesīya (see Busch 2011: 8–9).

\(^{13}\) Quoting the title of Thompson and Stone 2006: 321 (summary).
couple’s lives with attention to their poetic output, care is taken not just to describe parallels but also to demonstrate entanglement in the mutual engagement of the literary works (Thompson and Stone 2006: 4). Conscious of the traditional, confining pattern of dominance versus passivity between the partners, instead reciprocal elements are highlighted (312).

In foregrounding the literary partnership of Rasikbhārī and Nāgarīdās, this book challenges the “solitary genius” approach still prevalent in much writing on bhakti. In demonstrating how authorship of bhakti songs is socially constructed, in carefully reconstructing those networks, it places also other authors in a new light. Additionally, the book proposes a reassessment of the role of those who have been marginalized in writing partnerships, including editors and “conduits” for exposure to new trends by highlighting the collaborative nature of composition.


While this book seeks to recover Banī-thānī’s voice, it should be clear that her work is not straightforwardly autobiographical. Recently, sophisticated analyses have been published on life-writing and in particular how women “speak of the self” (e.g., Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley 2015). Among instances of women’s self-presentation that stand out for the late-eighteenth to early-nineteenth century are: the Deccani courtesan Māh Laqā Bāi “Cand,” studied by University of Delhi’s Shweta Sachdeva Jha (2015) and Emory University’s historian of religion Scott Kugle (2010; 2016); and for the nineteenth century, the Punjabi “converted courtesan-devotee” Pīro, by Santa Barbara historian of religion Anshu Malhotra (2017). Applying insights from these works to the slightly earlier case of Banī-thānī provides historical depth to these cases.

Reading Rasikbhārī’s work involves reversing the process applied to modern autobiographers who set out to tell their life history within a Vaishnava frame of reference such as the Rajasthani Marwari merchant wife Banasā Lath (Horstmann 2003). In our case, the Vaishnava tenor is so central that it overwhelms any first-person narration. Relevant here is the trope of the “auto-biographical pose,” as coined by Claremont McKenna College’s Chloe Martinez with reference to the sixteenth-century Rajasthani princess-devotee Mīrābāi (2018). The challenge here is to detect elements of self-fashioning by carefully sifting for clues, as articulated by Malhotra (2017: 76–7). The case of Banī-thānī provides one step in constructing women’s subjectivities as evolving from the early-modern to the modern period, from Mīrā to contemporary times.
Banī-thanī’s social mobility from domestic slave to prince’s concubine (pāsbān) is to be understood in the light of histories of palace women (Walthall 2008), of the household, domesticity and intimacy in “uncommon families” (Chatterjee 2004; Ghosh 2006; Roy 2015), and related to that, of slaves, especially domestic slaves (Chatterjee and Eaton 2006; Major 2012; Sinha et al. 2019). Whereas many of these studies focus on the better documented colonial period, Banī-thanī’s case adds a slightly earlier perspective. While we know that Mughal-era elite women could be powerful political and cultural agents, we know little about those starting on the bottom. The vivid details of this particular case of social climbing bring to life a slave’s upward trajectory in all its historical nuance, carefully documented by thus-far unpublished materials, drawing links between the visual and newly discovered written records that have not been explored together previously. This helps nuance generalizations about female agency over time and over different social milieus.

Banī-thanī is sometimes characterized as a “courtesan” (e.g., Srinivasan 2006: 175). While ill-fitting, it still is productive to look through this lens. First, it invites us to consider who is called a courtesan and why (Feldman and Gordon 2006: 7). The difficulty with the word is that it covers a wide range of different performers and obliterates a multiplicity of nomenclature in the sources, each of which expresses its own nuances. In this case, it is more precise to use the term “trained singer” or gāyan, contextualized in the hierarchies of power of its time and place. Further, integrating insights from courtesan studies alerts us to one of the pitfalls of courtesan studies, namely its susceptibility to moralizations whether from the point of view of bourgeois respectability, or that of the heirs to feudal patronage’s nostalgia (Qureshi 2006). In India, such tensions are apparent in controversies surrounding the anti-nautch movement, still traceable in subsequent efforts to separate the sexually available courtesan from the performer of devotional songs (Cassio 2005; du Perron 2007; for dance Walker 2014a; 2014b; 2014c). Studies on the 14 Relevant specific pathbreaking studies are Ruby Lal’s book on Mughal palace women (2005) and on the exceptional case of Nur Jahān (2018), Varsha Joshi’s (1995) and Priyanka Khanna’s work (2011; 2017) on Rajput women; for women of princely states during the colonial period, see Jhala 2008; 2011, on Maratha women, see Chatterjee and Guha 1999. 15 For the transition from colonial to independent institutions in Jaipur, in particular from durbar gunījan-khānā “House of Virtuosos” to state department, see also the earlier study by anthropologist Joan Erdman (1985: 74–113). 16 For Mughal elite women, see Lal 2005 and Schimmel 2004: 143–166; for Rajput elite women, see Joshi 1995 and Sreenivasan 2006; 2009; more broadly, see Chatterjee 2016. Relevant here is also the recent work by Priyanka Khanna (2017). 17 The South- or East-Indian term devadāśi, or temple-dancer, does not apply here, nor the North-Indian Anglicized “nautch girl” or tawa’īf; the latter is in any case not used in this sense till circa 1800 (Schofield 2012, Walker 2010).
The View of the Devotional Movement (Bhakti) from the Women’s Quarters

Historian Joan Kelly famously called for “restoring women to history and history to women” (1984: 1). Recovering Rasikbihārī’s mostly devotional songs opens as it were a new window into the history of bhakti, from the women’s quarters. This period, the first half of the eighteenth century was arguably a foundational moment of intellectual transformation in precolonial North India in constituting Hinduism as we know it now. The role of religion in governance was actively being rethought. Was there room for women’s agency or at least influence behind the scenes? Kishangarh’s influential neighbor king, the Kacchvāhā ruler Savān Jai Singh II (1688–1743), founder of the city of Jaipur, was one of the main drivers behind the reforms. Like the Rāthaur Kishangarh rulers, the Kacchvāhās had been serving the Mughal emperors. While working to assert more autonomy, the main agenda of Jai Singh’s reforms was not anti-Islam. Rather, he was concerned to reconcile the demands of Hindu orthodoxy (smārta dharma) that were crucial to his leadership profile, with ecstatic bhakti, to which he was personally inclined. To that end, he promoted social and religious reforms for devotional sects within his orbit of influence, challenging them to conform to orthodox caste hierarchical rules and demands (varṇāśrama dharma) and to align themselves with one of the four classical philosophical schools (cātut-saṃpradāya). He also forced a military reorganization of the militia (ākhaḍās) of warrior-ascetics that had been rather loosely organized thus far (see especially Horstmann). This comes across very much like a man’s world.

18 For an overview of the religious situation at the time, see Pauwels 2017: 29–70.