

Salacious Songs: *Khemṭā* Dance and Participatory Printed Media in Nineteenth-Century North India

ABSTRACT

Songbooks were an especially popular product in the colonial-era book industry of northern India. From cheap chapbooks to multi-volume tomes, collections of lyrics covered a range of tastes and genres, appealing to different social settings and performance practices. This article excavates the worlds of music-making invoked by these books through the case study of *khemṭā*. The *khemṭā* dancing girl was a low-status performer, associated with the playboy culture of early-nineteenth century Calcutta. *Khemṭā* lyrics were considered especially salacious and sensual, and the common view today is that the genre was geared towards titillation rather than artistry. Following the exile of Wajid 'Ali Shah of Awadh (r. 1847–1856) to Calcutta, this genre began to be choreographed and performed in the royal court, and the former king began to collect—and compose his own—*khemṭā* lyrics. By the late nineteenth century, *khemṭā* dancers were performing at fairs across northern India, and their verses were being compiled and printed in different scripts and languages.

Khemṭā's increasing popularity challenges the general impression of the late nineteenth century as a period of rising conservatism posed against “decadent” literary and musical forms. This view of the period presents an obstacle to making sense of the activities of Muslim lyricists, choreographers, dancers, and songbook editors. Countering this narrative, this article considers how *khemṭā* was printed, read, sung, and danced, and the modes of listening and arousal embedded in the printed song text.

From the 1840s onwards, songbooks were an especially popular product of the North Indian book industry (Orsini 2009, 81-105; Williams 2016).¹ From cheap chapbooks to multi-volume tomes, collections of lyrics covered a range of tastes and genres, appealing to very different social settings and performance practices. This essay considers the worlds of music-making invoked by these books through a case study of *khemṭā*. While music historians have examined the lyrical pasts of classical and semi-classical genres—especially *dhrupad*, *khayāl*, and *ṭhumrī*—lower-status forms have received less attention (Delvoye 2010; Magriel and du Perron 2013; du Perron 2007). That said, scholars working with Bengali sources have

demonstrated the wealth of social material embedded in street songs (see especially the work of Sumanta Banerjee and Anindita Ghosh); for Hindi-Urdu sources, on the other hand, Francesca Orsini has interrogated how the printed popular lyric can shed light on evolving modes of literary consumption and enjoyment (Banerjee 1998a; Banerjee 2002, 84-118; Ghosh 2013; Orsini 2009).

The *khemṭā* dancing girl was a low-status performer, associated with the playboy culture of early-nineteenth century Calcutta. *Khemṭā* lyrics were considered especially salacious and sensual, and it is generally thought that the genre was geared towards titillation rather than artistry. To this day, *khemṭā* often carries negative connotations in Bengali: the expression, “*ghomṭār bhitār khemṭā nāc*” (*khemṭā* dance beneath the veil), suggests hypocrisy, or wickedness under the veil of virtue.² However, this consensus—which has generally developed out of studies particularly focused on mid-century Calcutta—neglects a larger musical landscape and a longer history of media consumption. By the late nineteenth century, *khemṭā* dancers were performing at fairs across northern India, and *khemṭā* lyrics were being printed in different scripts and languages. *Khemṭā*'s popularity seems to defy the general impression of the late nineteenth century as a period of rising conservatism, public morality campaigns, and a rejection of “decadent” literary and musical forms (Gupta 2002; Kidwai 2004; Walker 2014, 89-98; Williams 2017; Williams 2023).

This article considers the activities of varied lyricists, choreographers, dancers, and songbook editors, to reconsider how we conceptualize “popular” music. How did musical fashions trend across regions and languages? How might songbooks, manuals, and satires usefully be read as colonial-era music media, in which literary and musical forms were combined and experimentally constituted? Rather than presenting a linear narrative of a uniform genre, I argue *khemṭā* referred to a variety of forms and structures that were printed,

read, sung, and danced. I also explore the modes of listening and arousal embedded in the songbook.

How did musical tastes and styles become fashionable and mobile in northern India before the advent of commercial recording and technological sound reproduction? Across the nineteenth century, different varieties of performing artists routinely travelled as part of their profession and certain forms became popular as they moved between regions; as such, this article considers several specific moments of circulation and exchange, especially between the urban music lovers of Lucknow, Calcutta, and Rampur. However, the popularity of a musical object, idea, or practice manifests across multiple domains, and not only at the level of sound; that is, aside from the actual music that is heard, a trend spreads through paramusical material and allied media forms. In the digital age, these allied media forms might include journalistic reviews, merchandise, websites analyzing lyrics, and social media posts. Similarly, in nineteenth-century India, songbooks, newspaper editorials, satires, and mixed-format (i.e., textual and performative, prose and verse) literatures mediated the popularity and spread of musical terms and practices. In this article, I examine a range of popular books in Bengali, Urdu, and Hindi, and read them as participatory media.³ Authors and editors arranged and printed song lyrics for a variety of reasons and were not simply inscribing or documenting a vocal performance. Francesca Orsini has argued that the printed song text connected with non-textual practices, eliciting the affective engagement and enjoyment of listening to a live performer (Orsini 2009, 81). I suggest that these texts were participatory, in three senses. Firstly, the printed forms of music mediated how the reading and listening public accessed (through lyrics, terms, notations, names of performers) and interpreted music (in terms of its aesthetic and social connotations). Secondly, editing and printing musical words allowed a variety of listeners to creatively engage with music, by prescribing, describing, notating, and curating music on paper: in this sense, I suggest, print can be

examined as a sonic practice (see van Orden 2015). Finally, printed song texts did not simply respond to music, but inspired trends and encouraged specific forms of music-making: these books were participatory media, in the sense that they provided a form of “feedback” to performance culture, cultivated particular tastes, and spread musical fashions.

This article traces the different forms and connotations of *khemṭā* across a broad geography, to consider both the connections between them as well as their disparate variety. Beginning in colonial Calcutta in the early nineteenth century, I examine the early recorded traces of *khemṭā*, before considering the impact of the arrival of Wajid ‘Ali Shah’s court-in-exile (post–1856) on local musical styles and tastes. I then trace the circulation of this Bengali performance practice into northern India, especially Rampur. The article then considers *khemṭā*’s varied appearances across Hindi songbooks, Bengali Muslim musical narratives, and, ultimately, the diasporic music scene cultivated in the Caribbean.

A “Not Over-Modest Performance”: What was *Khemṭā*?

Khemṭā was primarily known as a dance-form and song genre and is mostly associated with Bengal (and possibly Purab). The dance and genre were derived from *khemṭā tāl*, which is still well known today, and sometimes thought of as a variant of *dādrā tāl*. However, it was not included among the “canonical” *tāls* in the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁴ At least in Bengal, it is thought that the rhythm circulated for popular—rather than elite or art music—genres.

However, the distinction between popular and elite art proves problematic in a nineteenth century context. In western European music studies, the “Popular” has been theorized as referencing either a “non-dialectical” artform (following Adorno) or as a site of negotiation between classes (following Stuart Hall) (Meisel 2010; Paddison 1982; Hall 1981). The class question has similarly loomed large in studies of colonial-era music-making.

Sumanta Banerjee framed *khemṭā* as pertaining to street culture, physical comedy, and erotic humor: all associated with the urban masses, that is, the *choṭolok* (lower classes), rather than the “gentile” *bhadralok* (Banerjee 1987).⁵ However, sound has the capacity to seep across social boundaries, and music rarely belongs to a single and discrete party; people from quite different social situations overheard, avidly listened to, and emotionally indulged in the sounds of *khemṭā*. It therefore makes little sense to talk about *khemṭā* as a purely plebeian form. Wealthy, elite audiences patronized *khemṭā*, and musicians involved with the early roots of the genre were entangled with upper-class families.

Khemṭā was already a well-known dance in Calcutta by 1840, when a Bengali newspaper columnist wrote an essay on the possibilities of creating a Christian musical entertainment modelled on a Hindu *līlā* (referring, in this case, to a sung religious narrative drama), and suggested—presumably ironically—that *khemṭā* dancing girls could be recruited for missionary work.⁶

Commented [A1]: Do you mean 'sarcastically'?

It would, therefore, be advisable, in order to give a taste of the pleasures of the *Christha-līlā* to their native fellow-subjects, that they should raise a subscription for having Mussulmání dancing girls instructed in the mode of conducting it...If, indeed, those girls who practice *khemta* dancing were taught the *Christha-līlā* (of which we have, however, heard no proposal as yet), they might tread upon the breasts of the assembly (*i.e.* prove all-powerfully alluring and subduing), and find a ready entrance by the charms of their song for the praises of the Son of God.

The translator footnoted “*khemta*” as “A species of not over-modest performance, which cannot be further described.”

We have a much fuller account of *khemṭā* from some twenty years later, in Kaliprasanna Sinha's satirical sketches of urban life recorded in his *Hutom Pýāncār Nakṣā* (1862) (Sinha 1957, 5, 38, 31-2, 24).

The scent of jasmine flowers wafted with the gentle breeze so that the city became heady with it. On both sides of the road, a *khemṭā* dance was being rehearsed in a house, and many people came to a halt in the street to gawp: hearing the cling and clang of the ankle bells and cymbals, they revelled in a heavenly delight...

Khemṭā is a really astonishing dance. The important *babus* of the city spend almost every Sunday watching it in their gardens. So many, together with their sons, nephews, and son-in-laws, are sitting absorbed in the peerless pleasures of *khemṭā*. Several of these *babus* strip the women naked and have them dance the *khemṭā*; sometimes, if they don't give them a kiss, they won't get a tip. No one speaks a word of this! ...

Once, in the vicinity of the city's Shyambazaar, in the house of one aristocratic bigwig, a performance of *Bidyā-Sundar* was happening. The house's second-born *babu* was sitting and listening to the play with his clique. In front of them, Malini and Bidya were singing, "The fire of love blazes so very long, who is he, that foreigner?" and collecting handfuls of tips. Two sixteen-year-old (*stud bred*) youths, dressed as handmaids, were going round and round, dancing *khemṭā*...

Pyalanath Babu had a great reputation in the courtesan and *khemṭā* salons!

These passages suggest that *khemṭā* could be found in a variety of settings: dancers performed in their own establishments, or in the private gardens of aristocratic houses, where the sounds of the bells and cymbals could be heard from the streets. Kaliprasanna indicates—with more than a touch of irony—that the dance was an astonishing spectacle and was evidently titillating: the images of wealthy men, sitting with their male relatives and friends, watching their dancers strip and forcing them to kiss them, was an indictment of *babu* culture, but also suggests that *khemṭā* was understood less as a prestigious art form and more as a striptease. The reference to the performance of *Bidyā-Sundar* is also useful, as it suggests that *khemṭā* entailed dancing in circular motions and could be performed by young male actors in female roles (Bhattacharya 2003). Kaliprasanna switched into English to call these young men “stud bred”: precisely what was meant is now unclear, but the phrase seems to be a comment on either their pedigree or sexual availability.

This passage reflects a significant development in *jātrā* dramatics a decade earlier: around 1847, an Oriya hawker-turned-dramatist, Gopal Urey (1817–1857), had taken over a *jātrā* troupe and prepared a theatrical retelling of *Bidyā-Sundar* (Roy 2018). Gopal had been “discovered” by a wealthy music enthusiast, Radhamohan Sarkar, and had studied vocal music—especially *ṭhumrī*—with Radhamohan’s music teacher, Harikishan Mitra (Lahiri 1905, 360-1; Banerjee 1990, 82-3; Roy 2018, 100ff.). His libretto alternated between dialogue and songs, predominantly composed in *āṛ-khemṭā* and *khemṭā tāl* (Mukhopadhyay 1914); it is thought that *khemṭā* dance had been introduced to Gopal’s troupe by Keshey Dhobā (i.e., the “washerman”), who had encountered it in Chinsurah and brought the techniques with him to Calcutta (Banerjee 1998a, 102-6; Bhattacharya 1972, 231). Scholars

from Gaurishankar Bhattacharya to Rajyeshwar Mitra have suggested that it was the popularity of Gopal Urey’s songs that made *ār-khemṭā* fashionable (Bhattacharya 1972; Mitra 1990, 182), although we should recall that *khemṭā* had already become popular before 1840.

Following this trend, over the 1850s and 1860s, different kinds of writing incorporated lyrics set to *ār-khemṭā* and *khemṭā*. These included entertaining stories where the narrative was compiled from excerpts of prose, verse, and song texts, such as *Mohan Manoharā* (Captivating Enchantment, 1859),⁷ as well as in farces that ridiculed the decadent lifestyles of the city’s playboys, such as *Rāñṛ Bhāñṛ Mithyā Kathā Tina Laṅe Kalikātā* (Calcutta is made up of Prostitutes, Fools and Lies, c. 1863): in this case, the body of the text is in dialogue form, but opens with a song set in *ār-khemṭā* and *rāḡiñī* Jaṅglā (Anon. 1863, 1).⁸ Bengali songbook production gathered pace from the 1840s (Williams 2016, 487), and these mixed-format books indicate how the editorial work of adding *rāḡ* and *tāl* settings was becoming a common practice across different genres. However, it is not clear how readers read these musical labels: many would not have known how to perform the songs but may yet have appreciated the associations of *ār-khemṭā*. Some authors poked fun at this musical editorial: in *Ki Majār Śanibār* (What fun on Saturday!, 1863), the introductory song is set to “*rāḡiñī* Quacking (*krorpyāñk*)” and “*tāl* Drumgrowl” (*dañḡphoñs*) (Sikdar 1863, 1).

By the mid-1850s, lyrics set to *ār-khemṭā* were circulating in songbooks, divorced from *jātrā* scripts and narratives, as in Priyamadhab Basu’s very short (sixteen pages) *Saṅḡītaratnamālā* (Garland of Music Gems, 1855) (Basu 1855, 15).

rāḡiñī jhīñjhīñṭ khāmbāj | tāl ārkhemṭā

prāñ ei śeṣe karile |

man curi bidyā śikhe adhinere kāñdāüle |

horechis aneker man, se sab baṭe jāni prāñ,

se pratijñā kothāy ekhan, sakal bujhi pāsarile ||

Love, you did it in the end.

You learned the art of stealing hearts, and made your victims weep.

You robbed many hearts, I know how it all goes, my love.

Where are your promises now? You've forgotten everything we'd agreed.

The lyric voices the complaint of a woman who has been betrayed by her playboy lover. What is particularly appealing about this example is how the narrative of betrayal unfolds one line at a time: taken in isolation, each phrase of the lyric demands its own response. The “art of stealing hearts” is almost a commendation of the playboy’s prowess, a celebration of seduction. Likewise, “I know how it all goes, my love” suggests that the woman has wittingly fallen for his charms, resigning herself to the pleasures and pains of being played. It is only with the final line that the audience learns what the refrain means: she knew he was a player, but he promised that he was hers alone and against her better judgement she accepted his vows, but sure enough, in the end, he did betray her after all.

It is unclear precisely which performance context Priyamadhab edited this song for, but over the 1850s and 1860s, dancing girls known as *khemṭāvālī* became fashionable entertainers. Sumanta Banerjee suggests that they were considered “low brow” and inferior to *baiji* courtesan singers. They were distinguished in terms of their musical register (local or cosmopolitan) and their sexual availability: in theory, the *khemṭāvālī* sang raunchy Bengali repertoires, while the *baiji* sang Hindustani genres, and while the *baiji* might fashion herself as an artiste, the *khemṭāvālī* was considered a sexual as well as musical entertainer (Banerjee 1998a, 89; Banerjee 1998b, 12-13; Bhattacharya 2003).

The Bengali repertoires of female singers and entertainers in Calcutta were collected and published out of the popular presses of Battala district, in volumes such as *Kalikātār*

Beśyāsaṅgīt (Prostitute music of Calcutta, 1894, 148 songs), *Thiyeṭār Saṅgīt O Beśyāsaṅgīt* (Theatre Music and Prostitute Music, 1897, 45 songs), and *Beśyā Saṅgīt* (Prostitute Music, 1911, 174 songs) (Bandyopadhyay 2001).⁹ This kind of literature did not elevate the profile of individual women as creative artists: the texts were not connected to particular singers, but only the undifferentiated sweep of the city's prostitutes and actresses. Devajit Bandyopadhyay has identified a core of sixty songs which were repeated across these works, suggesting their enduring popularity and circulation. The most popular Bengali songs associated with dancing girls were written in *khemṭā tāl*. In many of these lyrics, the singer provocatively describes her own beauty (Bandyopadhyay 2001, 76):

[Rāg:] *Sohinī Bāhār* – [Tāl:] *Khemṭā*

āṅkhite kī phal tār je nā dekhe tāy
rūpete birūp rati jār tulanāy

ghan jini keśa dhare elāita hale pare
cikan cikur tār caraṇe luṭāy
tār mājhe mukhchānda jiniye śarad cānda
dibāniśi sama śobhe saral śobhāy
se aṅger nāhi tula nahe kṛśa nahe sthūla
heriye kanakalatā lājete lukāy
yaubaner kule tāy kamal mukul prāy
hrdayer mājhe sāje yogīre bhulāy
kṣīṅatar kaṭi tār bipul nitamba bhār
gamanete dole ghan, nija garimāy
yubajan badhibāre bidhi ya gaṛeche tare
iṅgite madan yār moha hoṃye yaṃ

What is the point of eyes that don't see you?

In comparison with your beauty, even Rati is ugly.¹⁰

Holding her cloud-black hair, spread out loose,

Her glossy hair extends to her feet.

And within that hair the moonfaced one beats even the autumn moon,

Both day and night she is beautiful with a natural radiance.

That body is without equal, neither thin nor fat,

Even the golden flower hides in shame when it sees her:

In the blossom of youth, she is like a lotus bud.

Taking her into his heart, the yogi forgets himself.

Her waist is slender, her hips vast and full,

Her motion solid and swinging, pleased with herself.

God created her to captivate youths

Yet, with a gesture, even Madan himself becomes enchanted.

Besides these salacious songbooks, *khemṭā* also appealed to drummers and students of instrumental music. Manuals on specific instruments—predominantly in Urdu and Bengali—became fashionable from the 1860s, and by the 1870s the varieties of *khemṭā tāl* were being explored and prescribed in some detail. In his *Bādyaśikṣā* (Instruction in Instruments, 1878), Kedarnath Gangopadhyay provided notated examples of the *ṭhekā* and *paran* for *ārkhemṭā*, “*deśī*” *khemṭā*, and “*Kaśmīrī*” *khemṭā* (Gangopadhyay 1878, 7-9, 17-20, 28-31). Kedarnath also provided commentaries on these rhythms, from the perspective of performance and teaching (Gangopadhyay 1878, 20).

Songs in *khemṭā tāl* almost always appear as *jalad* (fast), because in a *jalad* rhythm it is sweet, and several of the preceding *tāls*' *bols*,

parans, and *tehai* can work with it. For many, there is a sense that if students should practice and become accustomed to the *bols* of *khemṭā tāl*, it then becomes difficult to play a *bol* as a clear “*ihā*” rhythm (*laya*); however, this is, in every respect, erroneous; therefore, it is sweet and fits as a *vilambit*, *dun*, *pradun*, middle (*madhya*) or final (*śeṣ*) rhythm.

Each *tāl* was further accompanied by a set of song lyrics in different *rāgs*.¹¹ These lyrics were just as suggestive and erotically-charged as those in the songbooks. It also appears that they were not included merely for reference, since Kedanath combined Bengali punctuation (such as the *dāñri* [[]]) with European speech marks and commas, to guide an aural performance of the text. Such a combination of punctuation can be seen in the following verses.

rāginī jhijhiṭ-khāmbāj | tāl āṛkhyāmṭā

“*keman kore mālā niye, eli hīre etakṣane |*
rāñṛ hayē ki śār hayēcha, bhayā rākhnā kichu mane |
nāgar niye rāt kāṭābi, sakāl belā ghumiye rabi,
ḍube2 jal khāibi, marbi lo tui, ulo hīre,
marbi lo tui madan bāṇe ||”

How come you’ve turned up so late, bringing this garland, my diamond?
What a brash ox you’ve been since you became a whore, keep a bit of fear in your heart.
Spending the night with your lover, the sun sleeping in through the morning,
Losing yourself in your affairs, it’s going to get you killed, my diamond,
Cupid’s arrows are going to get you killed.

True to form, this *khemṭā* lyric is highly colloquial and plays with the figure of the “*rāṅī*”, (widow or prostitute). A woman warns her sex-crazed friend that she is putting herself at risk, like someone drowning yet still having another drink (the literal meaning of *ḍube ḍube jal khāibi*, a phrase referring to illicit sex). Kedarnath was clearly unperturbed by these themes and did not sanitize the genre for his drumming manual.

Bengali *Khemṭā* in the Courtly Arts of Lucknow

Calcutta *khemṭā* might have remained a defined Bengali art form, had it not been for the arrival of the Nawab of Awadh, Wajid ‘Ali Shah (1822–1887). Exiled from Lucknow following the East India Company’s Annexation of Awadh in 1856, Wajid ‘Ali Shah erected a new court in the southern suburb of Matiyaburj, and for the next thirty years Laknavi culture diffused through the city, coloring elite fashions with a taste for Hindustani trends (Williams 2023).

Wajid ‘Ali Shah was a music connoisseur and innovative composer, choreographer, and director. Over the three decades he spent in exile, the Nawab set up his own palace printing press and published four Urdu volumes on music and dance, including three song collections. Wajid ‘Ali Shah’s lyrics covered a broad range of genres which today would be considered “classical” (e.g., *dhrupad* and *khayāl*), “semi-classical” (e.g., *thumrī* and *ghazal*), but also included his own take on local repertoires, including *khemṭā*.

The journalist ‘Abd al-Halim Sharar (1860–1926) compiled two Urdu histories of Matiyaburj, where he had been raised, and noted that among the dance instructors maintained there, one taught the court dancers Bengali *jhumur*, and another *khemṭā*. Sharar provided a note for his readers unfamiliar with *khemṭā*: “a particular kind of dance of Bengal, in which beautiful women whirl around and shake their hips in various styles. In Calcutta, it is very fashionable.” (Sharar 1951, 66)

The *khemṭā* was not only performed by women at Matiyaburj, but also by troupes of Bengali *bhāṇḍ*s. The *bhāṇḍ*s (often called “mimics” in secondary literature) were singers, dancers, and comic actors who assumed different guises to present farcical and satirical sketches. Wajid ‘Ali included a number of these sketches in *Banī* (1877). Following his prescriptions, the *bhāṇḍ* would impersonate a Bengali water carrier, sweeper, milkmaid, and *khemṭāvālī* (Shah 1877, 136-7).¹²

He takes the form of a *khemṭivālī*—that is, tying up his sari, and decorating himself with all the Bengali ornaments—and he says, “Bengali *khemṭivālī* dance like this.” His companions say, “Like what?” Then the following is danced with a rhythm (*laya*) and sung with a melody (*sur*):

āstāi:

<i>aur jatanā shohite na re</i>	I cannot bear this pain any longer
<i>ami eki abalā tā kalo nārī</i>	I am a helpless and wretched woman

āntarā:

<i>ekalo ghuri ekalo ki ami</i>	I roam alone, I remain alone
<i>shankule shunno dekhi ami</i>	Everything I see is empty
<i>eki he huppo ki banacarī</i>	The only thing left is to become a hermit.

Wajid ‘Ali’s detailing the costumes, dialogues, and Bengali songs for these performances indicates the extent to which he had invested in the street performers of Calcutta and entertainers who had low social status in the city.

This particular song had been composed at least nine years before *Banī*, since it was first published in one of the king’s song collections, *Nāju* (1869), where it appears as a *dādrā* lyric by his first wife, Khas Mahal (Shah 1869, 263). Khas Mahal (c. 1820–1894) was Wajid

‘Ali’s senior *nikāh* wife, and a highly accomplished poet and music enthusiast in her own right (Williams 2023, 131-55). While the Persian headings to these *dādrās* declare them to be “of Bengali language” (*dar zabān-i banglā*) it is more accurate to consider the majority of them “Banglafied” Hindustani, rather than Bengali proper. Wajid ‘Ali and Khas Mahal shifted between dialects and languages in very short pieces, teasing their listeners with different sounds and levels of intelligibility (Shah 1869, 260).

āmīn tumheñ bāḍo bhālobāshī
bhaiyo parbash gorī le prān more

I love you very much,
I have been overwhelmed, that fair one took my soul.

Here the Bengali is very simple: it appears in the first line (*āstār*), but even then Wajid ‘Ali has used the Hindustani *tumheñ* rather than the Bengali *tomāy*. In the *antarā*, where the interest of the lyric lies, the song slips into Brajbhasha.

In other examples the slide between languages is playfully explicit (Shah 1869, 264).

āsho boshō nā bolo Bangalin, merī jān
ānkhen terī rasa rasīlī bhauen caḥhī kamān

[In Bengali:] Come, sit, but do not speak Bengali, [in Hindustani:] my dear,
Your eyes flow wet and passionate, drawing (open) like a bow.

On paper, in this verse by Khas Mahal, it is the Hindustani phrase in the *antarā* that carries the more significant image; however, in performance, if the singer repeated and elaborated the opening line, it would be the Bengali phrasing that would have the greatest impact on the audience. Other examples follow the same technique: the first line stresses a reference to

Bengal or Calcutta, while the second line is more conventionally poetic and, in a sense, universal (Shah 1869, 261):

tumi kālkoṭā bārī ceno
āmī tomhār mayā cunnī, pāgal hoye phirte ceno.

Do you know that Calcutta house?

I knew your mystique, and am wandering through madness.

Although we cannot be certain how the Bengali visitors at Wajid ‘Ali’s court might have responded to these songs, it seems that his Banglafied lyrics were not especially popular. This is not particularly surprising: as already noted, even the simple phrase, “I love you very much” is corrupted with Hindustani. Bengali musicologists and compilers of songs included a number of Wajid ‘Ali’s compositions in their anthologies: his works appear transliterated into the Bengali script, alongside those of Bengali lyricists, which indicates that for this circle of musical publishers and readers Matiyaburj was considered part of Bengal’s musical heritage as early as 1870.¹³ However, all of Wajid ‘Ali’s transliterated songs in these compilations are from his Urdu compositions: “Lucknow *Thumrī*” had been appropriated by Bengali musicology, but his Banglafied *dādrās* had been left behind.

Scandalizing Rampur

The incorporation of *khemṭā* into exiled Lakhnavi culture propelled the genre across North India. One *khemṭā* dancer named Nanhi is known to have travelled to perform at a festival in Rampur, and the poet Mir Yar ‘Ali Jān Saḥib (1818–1886), writing around 1867, described the pleasure, confusion, and embarrassment of her uninitiated audience (Jan 1950, 116).¹⁴

The cheery pandit claps his hands and says:

I cannot tell – is she fair or is she dark?

The Brahman’s sister-in-law gets embarrassed by this dance.

Nanhi, a package of magic – she’s a Calcutta girl.

This *khemṭā* – they don’t know it or dance it.

It’s some dance from the east – over here they don’t dance it.

In the painted image that accompanies this verse in the manuscript of this poem it is striking how Nanhi is dressed and coiffured in a distinctively Lucknow style: Kaliprasanna Sinha had mocked Bengali *babus* who had been inspired by Wajid ‘Ali Shah’s arrival in Calcutta to dress in the Laknavi “*fashion* (like a baiji’s pimp)”¹⁵ (Sinha 1957, 24), but this illustration also indicates how Bengali dancing girls were influenced by Laknavi trends.

This moment, captured in Rampur, complicates the historiography of nineteenth-century dance.¹⁶ The circulation of *khemṭā* demonstrates that an art form could be considered sordid and associated with low-status performers but nonetheless thrive. This is not necessarily surprising, except that studies of colonial-era dance usually focus on the refashioning of middle-class mores, reform campaigns that condemned female performance culture, and the marginalization of dancing girls. Despite the regulation of prostitutes and the anti-*nautch* campaign, a low-status dancing girl crossed the subcontinent to perform at a royal fair. Condemned cultures continued to find support, and audiences continued to relish the salacious pleasure of erotic lyrics and sensual physicality.¹⁷

Hindi *Khemṭā*

Although Nanhi’s dance caught her audience at the Rampur fair off guard, *khemṭā* was soon to become a popular Hindi genre. Francesca Orsini has noted the increased production and accessibility of song books from the late 1860s onwards (largely lithographed until the 1890s) (Orsini 2009, 81–105). An early set of Hindustani *khemṭā* lyrics in Jagadamba

Sahay's *Sadā Bahār* (Ever Spring, 1882) reflects different approaches to the genre outside of Bengali: some are Brajbhasha in flavor, while others echo themes from *ghazal* songs and Urdu poetry, with references to *mahfils* and the impassioned gaze (*nazar*) (Orsini 2009, 97; Sahay 1882, 8–9).

In *Sadā Bahār*, *khemṭā* (spelled *khimṭā*) is understood effectively as a genre (in the same sense as a *khayāl*) and assigned a *rāg* (particularly Bhairavī and Sāraṅg). However, later song collectors were less certain. For example, the *Rāg Prakāś* (Light of *Rāg*, 1898) used a variety of different annotations to prescribe performance for a range of lyrical forms: songs were marked by a combination of genre, a named “melody” (*sur*), a given *tāl*, or a *rāg*. *Khemṭā* appeared sometimes as an unqualified genre and sometimes as a *tāl* (“*pacṛā*, *tāl khimṭā*”, “*sur gaurī*, *tāl khimṭā*”). In one instance, *tāl khimṭā* is applied to a *jhūmur*, another song form primarily associated with Bengal, but now in Hindi.

The songs in *Rāg Prakāś* (1898) were all attributed to a Goswami poet, Shri Shyamsakhe, and were compiled as a book of devotional songs by a Rama-devotee based at Kanak Bhavan in Ayodhya. Shyamsakhe channeled *khemṭā*'s sensuality and indulgent attention to the body into a new direction, appropriate for the sect's emphasis on *sakhī-bhāva bhakti* (adopting the devotional stance of God's handmaid) (Shyamasakhe 1898, 111).

khimṭā rāginī jhañjhauṭī

karakigāī re morī karake kaṅganavāñ

rāma lalā dhari ke jhikajhore giri gāī jāte aṅganavāñ

śyāmasakhe saiñyāñ ke rasa chākī ghare āī pari ke paganavāñ

How I ached, oh how my bracelets ached

Holding onto Rama, my darling, all my limbs came tumbling down

Shyamsakhe, drunk on the Lord's juice, I came home tripping over my feet.

Shyamsakhe's lyrics vary in length, between two, three, and four lines, all rhyming, and often with a half-line refrain which could be incorporated between verses, extending the song further. The language of the lyric is perhaps a little unconventional for *sakhī-bhāva*, as the eroticism would normally indicate *śṅgāra-bhāva* instead: it is possible that the Ramrasiks, who serve the divine couple Rama and Sita, would sing these as “mood music” for the couple's pleasure. The aching, clumsy limbs certainly echo the visceral lyrics of Bengali *khemṭā*. The overt sexuality of the genre was maintained even in a devotional setting, and some of Shyamsakhe's songs are hardly prudish (Shyamasakhe 1898, 133).

khemṭā

lāl baṅgalā chavāvo mahārājā

bārahadarīke baṅgala banāvo khasakhasaṭṭiyā lagāvo mahārājā

atara gulābanakera phuhāre pacaraṅgapaṅga vichāvo mahārājā

śyāmasakhe palaṅgo parapaṛhī carḥatī javānī ki jora mahārājā

My darling, I erected a house, oh Maharaja,

I built a twelve-door house, I set up screens of fragrant grass, oh Maharaja,

I sprinkled perfume and roses, I spread a bed of five colors, oh Maharaja,

Shyamsakhe – I would lie down on my bed and ride the union of youth, oh Maharaja!

However, not all Hindi lyricists preserved the sensuality of Bengali *khemṭā*, and some seem to have understood it as a structure for conventional—but not overly explicit—themes. In his *Rāg Sāgar* (Ocean of *Rāg*, 1899), Umadatta Vajpeyi of Dalipnagar labelled his lyrics

with “rāg”, meaning either a specific rāg (e.g., “rāg des” [i.e., *Deś*]) or simply as a “song” (e.g., “rāg rekhta”). In this case, a song explores the emotional entanglement between Radha, Krishna, and their devotees (Vajpeyi 1899, 15-16).

rāg khemṭā

*jhūlana calo hiṇḍorane vṛṣabhānu nandanī
sāvana kī tīja āī, nabhaghora ghaṭā chāī
meghana jharī lagāī, pare būnda mandanī
sundara kadama kī ḍārī, jhūlā paryo hai pyārī
dekho kumara hahārī, saba dukkha nikandanī
paharo suraṅga sārī, māno binaya hamārī
mukhacanda kī ujārī, mukhahāsa phandanī
mama māna sīkha līje, sundara na dera kījai
hamato biloka jīje, tūhai gati gayandanī
śobhā lakho bipinakī, phūlīlatā drumanakī
suna araja rasika janakī, karoṅ caraṅa bandanī*

Let’s go on the swing, Radha, Vrishabhanu’s darling girl [refrain]

The monsoon Tīj festival has come, lowering clouds rumble in the sky,

clouds are pouring down, raindrops falling softly.

A swing hangs from a branch of the lovely kadam tree, darling!

She sees him and shivers, she who destroys all suffering.

Wear a beautiful sari, accept my entreaty,

with your dazzling moon-bright face, your ensnaring smile.

Take a lesson from my pride, do not delay, my beauty,

I come alive when I see your elephant gait.

Beholding the beauty of a lotus, the creepers flowered on the trees,

Oh hear the petition of the *rasik* devotee: I salute your feet.

The tone in this example is less explicitly sensual and the voice belongs to an aesthetically stimulated devotee (*rasik*) rather than a seductive dancing girl. However, there is a trace of a lively rhythm in certain parts of the verse, as in the verbs of the fourth line (*līje ... kījai ... jīje*).

Early-twentieth century Hindi songbooks marked songs of a similar structure simply as “*khemṭā*” (e.g., Mannalal Misra’s *Rāg Rasik* (Bombay, 1908)). Taking these select examples together indicates the lack of uniformity among Hindi songbook editors, as they developed loose systems of prescribing and describing performance practices via the printed page. In these experimental works, *khemṭā* was widely circulated as a musical structure, but the precise nature of that structure was not fully defined. Unlike the Bengali drumming manual, *khemṭā* was variously conceptualized somewhere between a rhythm, *rāg*, genre, and tune.

Muslim Devotional and Caribbean Classical

These episodes in the history of *khemṭā* do not add up to a linear history of the genre, if, indeed, we consider *khemṭā* a singular “genre” at all. The printed archive offers fragmentary glimpses of a broad landscape of circulation, varied applications, and reworking of forms that shared the name. In this final section, I point to two instances that underline the spread and variety of the form. For example, *āṛ-khemṭā* and *khemṭā* surface as storytelling *tāls* in Dobhāṣī Bangla librettos, written in a composite (literally “made of two languages”) poetic idiom, which became increasingly associated with Bengali Muslims in the colonial period (d’Hubert 2018). Combining recited poetry with music, these librettos were popular books in the late nineteenth century. The editors of these librettos were sometimes just as unsystematic about defining what *khemṭā* was as their distant colleagues working in Hindi. In the *Sīt o*

Basanter Kecchā (The Tale (*Qiṣṣa*) of Winter and Spring, 1873), song lyrics are interspersed throughout an entertaining narrative tale. They are called “*gān*” (song) and are further qualified by a combination of other labels, including “*rāgini*” [sic] (not usually named or defined), “*tāl*” (usually defined, e.g., “*tāl postā*”), and “*sur*” (which often suggests a relatively stable melody; here usually defined, e.g., “*bebhāg sure*” or even “*behāg sure*”) (Kader 1873, 29, 28, 50).¹⁸ Thus some lyrics are defined as “*gān rāgini khemṭā*” and “*gān rāgini ār khemṭā*” (Kader 1873, 22, 24), which we might understand as a “song set to a[n undefined] *rāgini* and [*tāl*] *khemṭā/ār khemṭā*”. The lyrics themselves were not especially salacious and were not suited to being performed outside of the context of the narrative, as generally they only reiterated the events of the story (told in *paýar* couplets etc.), as can be seen in the following example (Kader 1873, 22).

tomarā du bhāi hae jāo banacāri |
khujiyā dhuṛiyā li dui bakari |
dhariyā bakari; tāre hālāl kari
ār khun liyā dekhāiba; bādsā hujuri ||

You two brothers, go and live in the forest.
Hunting and searching, go find two goats.
Taking those goats; go prepare them the *halal* way
And then take the blood and show it; oh King, your highness!

Again, English and Bengali punctuation appear in combination to guide the reading or singing of the lyric. It is unclear how far works like this were influenced by wider developments in musical publishing: this *kecchā* also contains many songs in Hindi (in Bengali script), but it is uncertain where or how they were sourced.

This storytelling mode of non-erotic *khemṭā* can also be seen in the *Jalchā Nāma* (The Book of the Soiree, 1873), which the author, Budhu son of Ni' matullah, presents as a Bengali retelling of a Hindi text, and also contains songs set to rhythms and composed in Hindi and “Islamic Language” (e.g., “*gān ichlāmi bhāsāy tāl*”) (Budhu 1873, 8). In portions of this work, a dialogue between a Sufi *pir* and his disciple is arranged in a sung question–answer (*chaoāl–jaoāb*) format, set in *ārkhemṭā* and *khemṭā*, as the following example shows (Budhu 1873, 31-2).

payār chand

pir bale sābās2 murid mor | jeman chaoāl terā temani utar ❀

bale pir terā kadame jore | baet balinu pher gān gāi sure ❀

❀ *gān bānglā tāl khemṭā rāgini khāmbāj ❀*

guru tarāo tare tori ghāṭe lāge ||

asthir haiyā tari bhāsace gānge ❀

bāndā chilām bhabe ese; chārāile jadi dise; tabe gun ṭān kose; bhāṭār āge ||

ār kiñcit dayyā karo; tabe tori jāy pāro; chayjanā bādi ṭāne pechu bāge ❀

legeche caṭāy tori; ṭān deo guru tarāy kari; budhur bhay hole deri; pace ripu jāge ||

In Couplets

The Pir said, “Well done! Well done, my disciple!

An answer just like your question.”

[The disciple] said, “Oh Pir, touching your feet,

I will speak a verse then sing a song to a melody:”

Bengali Song in *khemṭā tāl* and *rāgini Khāmbāj*

Guru, deliver me across to your shore

Unstable, I’m floating across your river

I came into this world a slave; if you allow it, I will be released;

But I'm in short supply of merit; only decline ahead.¹⁹
Give me a little more grace; then you could take your inventory;
the six adversaries would draw back.²⁰
Reaching your sandbank; pull me towards you, oh guru;
Budhu's distress would be removed; for fear that the enemy awakes.

The song was inserted into the question–answer format, and prescribed *rāg* Khāmbāj and *khemṭā*. This indicates how *khemṭā* had become a popular rhythm, and was not incumbered by its urban, erotic connotations: although this book was published in Calcutta, the language and imagery of the work suggests a very different audience from the *babus* of Kaliprasanna Sinha's city, and this indicates the versatility of *khemṭā* as a musical structure.

The flexibility of *khemṭā*'s connotations cannot be overestimated. The term's versatility was stretched even further in the early twentieth century, on the other side of the world. While *khemṭā* reverberated in many contexts, it was not considered a “classical” genre until it reached the Caribbean. Under extensive indentured labor programs between 1845 and 1917, laborers from northern and eastern India were transported to Trinidad, British Guiana, Jamaica, and Martinique (Manuel 2000, 3). In his study of how North Indian musical repertoires evolved in the West Indies, Peter Manuel noted how “lesser” genres like *khemṭā* (along with *lāvni*, *bīhāg*, etc.) were gradually assigned stock tunes, derived from the basic structure of *thumrī*. Manuel traces *khemṭā* back to a Bhojpuri “light song” genre, and notes that in the Caribbean it was regarded as a flexible, light structure, distinguished by its halting, syncopated meter (between four and six beats, but not five). It is not altogether clear whether *khemṭā* was transmitted orally to the Caribbean, remembered, and gradually adapted; or whether the name “*khemṭā*” circulated via printed songbooks, which provided the inspiration for several other song-types (Manuel 2000, 77–82, 88–91). It was performed by semi-professional male singers in Suriname and Guyana, and was a pre-cursor to Indo-Caribbean

Chutney (Manuel 2000, 83, 162, 170). In Trinidad and Tobago, *khemṭā* was classed as “Classical”, as in recordings like Soodeo Sookhraj’s (d. 1998) “Mora Radha Bansi” on the LP *Tent Singing* (post-1972), accompanied by mandolin, *dholak*, and *dhantal*.²¹

Conclusion

These fragments of *khemṭā* do not lend themselves to a linear history of a multilingual genre, but rather gesture to the creative instability of musical forms in the nineteenth century.

Khemṭā emerges as a *tāl*, a tune, a *rāg*, a dance, a pantomime, and—if we were to look at the Caribbean—a form of “classical” music. That said, generally, when *khemṭā* appeared on the printed page, the word conjured the flavor of salacious embodiment and the motions of stirring hips. Traces of the dance evoked scandal, thrill, and pleasure. Although we conventionally see the nineteenth century as a period of heightening prudishness and sanitization in the performing arts, *khemṭā* complicates the story. It was firmly associated with female desire and desirability already by 1840, and the uninhibited eroticism of *khemṭā* was preserved—and indulged in—across a diverse range of books, from instrument manuals in the 1870s, to Hindi devotional hymns from the 1890s, to Bengali collections of “prostitute music” from the 1900s.

In terms of the history of print, it is remarkable how *khemṭā* became embedded in so many genres and languages over the mid-nineteenth century. Each one of these books reflects a distinctive approach to describing and prescribing music, rhythm, and dance. In certain cases, this was a question of defining *rāg* and *tāl*, or guiding the vocalization of the text through Bengali and English punctuation, or musical notation, or through the visual arrangement of verses on the page. These elements gesture to decisions in musical editorial: which verses should be presented as musical and how? This editorial indicates that publishers across genres were conscious of the aural lives of books and the potential for performing inscribed

sounds off the printed page. These examples also indicate the dynamism of book forms in this period, from narratives that alternated between prose, poem, and song, to manuals that innovatively combined lyrics with musical notation. Several of the authors in this essay were explicitly conscious of the aesthetic appeal of multilingualism and the interplay of dances and sartorial codes, and their works gesture to the pleasures of musical and culture exchange. The instability, broad application, multilingualism, and enduring popularity of *khemṭā* across social communities suggests that we need a more nuanced understanding of the “popular”.

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¹ On the longer history of song collections, see also Schofield 2018.

² I am grateful to one of my anonymous reviewers for directing me to this phrase.

³ On historical approaches to participatory media, see Ekström et al. 2011.

⁴ For example, *khemṭā* is not discussed in the chapter on *tāl* in Radhamohan Sen Das' Bengali music treatise, the *Saṅgītatarāṅga* (1818), nor in the older, longer survey in the Hindi *Saṅgīt Sār* (1799) (Das 1818, 266-76; Singh 1912). On the *Saṅgītatarāṅga*, see Williams 2016.

⁵ For a critical engagement with Banerjee's argument, see Sen 1987.

⁶ Originally published in Bengali in the *Sambad Bhaskar* (est. 1839) and printed in English translation first in *Christian Advocate* and then in *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register* (Anon. 1840, 100-1).

⁷ Songs set in Behāg (Rokhit 1859, 21, 23).

⁸ I am grateful to Abhijit Gupta for this reference.

⁹ On the language of Bengali so-called 'prostitute songs', see Banerjee 1998b, 5–8, 112; Banerjee 1999. On alternative print cultures in this context, see Ghosh 2002.

¹⁰ Rati is the embodiment of sexual desire, the wife of Madan (Kamadeva), the god of love.

¹¹ Jhīñjhīṭ-Khāmbāj, Kālāṅg-Khāmbāj, Multan-Khāmbāj, Sindhu-Khāmbāj, Lalit, Paraj, and Khāmbāj.

¹² The final line of this verse is an amended reading of the earlier version from *Nāju* (Shah 1869), hence the translation is only an approximation.

¹³ Sharma 1870, 22. The "Lucknow *Ṭhumrī*" here is anonymous, but the author was identified as Wajid 'Ali Shah when reprinted (Lahiri 1905, 1003; see also Bandyopadhyay 1940, 86).

¹⁴ On this text see also Jan Sahib 2021; Williams 2017, 606.

¹⁵ The English word "fashion" appears transliterated in the Bengali (*phyāśāne*).

¹⁶ On Rampur in this period, see Khan 2022.

¹⁷ There are parallels here to the ongoing circulation of the Urdu compositions of courtesans in this period (Williams 2017).

¹⁸ I am grateful to Layli Uddin for introducing me to this text.

¹⁹ “*bhāṭā*” is decline but also the ebbing of the river’s flow.

²⁰ Presumably referring to the six cardinal passions (lust, anger, greed, infatuation, vanity, and envy), or perhaps the six senses.

²¹ S. Sookhraj, *Tent Singing by Sookdeo Sookhraj*. Prod. Moean Mohammed. LP. Windsor Records, LP/W025. (1970s).