Masāne kī horī

Singing life in the cremation ground

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Named after the Hindu spring festival of *holī, horī* songs generally portray the frolicsome play of the day with the throwing of coloured powders by Kṛṣṇa as the main protagonist pranking Rādhā and the *gopī*s in Braj. The *horī* analysed in the present paper shows idiosyncrasies unveiling religious, theological, and ritual significance, besides offering precious insights into a 'living tradition:' the celebration of *holī* in the city of Banaras, at the cremation ground in *Maṇikarṇikā ghāṭ,* where *śaiva* devotees enact and 'actualise' the *horī.* The song depicts Śiva playing *holī* in the cremation ground with his retinue of ghostly creatures that are his favourite companions along with *aghorīs.* In place of colours, Śiva tosses the ashes from funeral pyres. In his divine dance and drumming, Mahādeva uses the poisonous snakes adorning him as water-guns to squirt venom instead of *gulāl*. The atypical choice of Śiva in one of his fearful manifestations as the subject of a *horī* is discussed through references to philosophical and theological interpretations and specific symbolism. The apparent contradiction of the celebration of a lively festival in the setting of the cremation ground, resolved in the divine character of Śiva, is illustrated and contextualised starting from textual analysis.

Keywords: Śiva, *holī,* cremation ground, *horī,* Hindustani semi-classical music, Hindustani folk songs, Banaras

1. Introduction[1]

This article, in line with the conceptualisation of music as a 'social text,' attempts to highlight the function of song texts as mirrors reflecting—among others—religious, ritual, and social meanings and

[1] Note on transliteration: the transliteration of words originally in Devanāgarī script and the use of Hindi follows the method adopted by McGregor (*Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, 1993) mediating between a phonetic transcription and scientific transliteration. Therefore, I have opted for the transliteration system of Sanskrit omitting the 'a' when silent. Sanskrit terms are written in their conventional transliteration system universally accepted by scholars when they appear in a specific Sanskrit context, otherwise the system for Hindi has been used. Sanskrit words in common use—such as *śaiva, saṃsāra* etc.—are written according to the system of Sanskrit. Names of deities and mythological characters (e.g., Rāma, Śyāma, Mahādeva,

practices. The present argument does not purport to be an exhaustive ethnographical study, nor does it aim at providing a musicological analysis of the song presented here. Its underlying intent is to describe an idiosyncratic musical expression in which music is seen and enacted as much as it is heard. The connection between words, song, and performance illustrates how song texts are loaded with extra-musical meanings embedded in the collective cultural memory and function as commentary on rituals and beliefs. The following investigation of the lyrics of a particular *horī* represents a starting point for the exploration of music forms overlooked by scholarly research. The study of song texts sheds light on the complex significance attached to the music and the lyrics in their close interplay with the performative context and socio-cultural background.

Given the lack of literature and general paucity of studies on the topic, the basis for the present research has been provided by my time spent conducting fieldwork and living in the household of eminent exponents of the *Banāras gharānā* (music school, lineage). Although I did not have the chance to witness a *masāne kī holī* performed in a cremation ground, I could personally assess the immense popularity of the song known by the same name which is commonly sung in Varanasi during the spring festival. I had the opportunity to listen to this *horī* several times in different contexts (festivals, *holī milan*s, public and private gatherings—*mafhil*s and *baiṭhak*s—concerts...) performed on the occasion of Holī both by professional and amateur musicians and vocalists.

Among the countless festivals marking the Hindu calendar, *holī* is certainly one of the most important and popular events. Occurring in spring (*vasant*, *basant*) on the full moon day of the month of *phāgun* (*phālgun pūrṇimā,* in February-March), the festival is celebrated with gusto throughout the entire subcontinent in different traditions varying across regions. It is especially meaningful in North India and particularly cherished in the Braj region, i.e., in the places dear to the Krishnaite devotion.

The religious significance of *holī* is rooted in the Puranic story of the burning of the demoness Holikā, who was summoned by her brother, the demon king Hiraṇyakaśipu, to kill his son Prahlāda, a pious devotee of Viṣṇu who refused to worship his father as a god. The ritual bonfire lit on the eve of *holī,* in which effigies of Holikā are burnt, symbolises the triumph of good over evil and reminds devotees of the victory of Viṣṇu, in the form of the *avatāra* Narasiṃha (the 'lion-man'), over

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Prahlāda etc.) are written in their sanskritised form. Analogously, words such as *rāga* and *tāla*—widely known in their Sanskrit form—have been given in their conventional sanskritised spelling. Hindi terms in common use—such as Hindu, Hindustani, etc.—which have entered the English dictionary are written with their English spelling. Names of well-known places—such as Varanasi or Banaras, Vrindavan, and Awadh—and names of contemporary performers and institutions are given in their anglicised form, without diacritic marks.

Note on translation: all the translations from Hindi and Sanskrit are by the author, if not otherwise stated.

Hiraṇyakaśipu to restore *dharma.* The spring festival also celebrates Kṛṣṇa's play with Rādhā and the *gopī*s. Indeed, the merrymaking of the day appears as an imitation of the mischievousness of the god who takes delight in throwing coloured powder on the milkmaids of Braj.[2]

In South India, *holī* is linked to the divine character of Śiva and revives the well-known episode of the incineration of Kāma (*Kāma dahana* or *Madana bhasma*). Mahādeva, disturbed in his deep meditation, incinerated the god of love who attempted to shoot him with the five-flower arrow. After Kāma's wife, Rati, performed hard penance for forty days to plead with Śiva for her husband's life, Kāma was restored, but in the bodiless form of desire (*Śiva-purāṇa*, *Rudrasaṃhitā*, II, 3). *Holī,* thus, takes on the connotation of the festival of love celebrating the comeback of Kāma, forty lunar days after *vasant pañcamī*[3].

Although *holī* is a Hindu festival, its relevance is not limited to the religious and ritual dimensions since it encompasses specific cultural and social significance. Its secular connotation comes to the foreground during its celebration when a temporary suspension of the established social order in terms of gender, religion, age concerns, caste hierarchies, and behavioural restrictions occurs. Role reversal and licentiousness, and physical and verbal transgression are the dominant motifs of the day. People throw coloured powder (*gulāl, abīr)* and squirt watercolours on one another with a type of water gun/syringe (*pickārī*). The frolicsome and permissive mood of the day includes the singing of abusive and ribald songs (*gālī*s or *gārī*s, *jogīrā*s, and *kabīr*s[4]), dancing, drumming, and often the consumption of intoxicants, such as *bhāṁg*.

As most religious festivals coincide with a new season cycle, *holī* marks the beginning of the spring, when the new crops are ready to be harvested, a crucial time in a traditional society based on agricultural livelihoods.

An integral part of the merrymaking of the auspicious day is the singing of *horī*s, songs named after the festival, that are centred on the description of the joyful mood typical of *holī* imbued with spiritual overtones. The lyrics usually feature the deities of Kṛṣṇa, sometimes also Rāma and Śiva engaged in tossing *gulāl*, using *pickārī*s or singing joyful tunes.

This article examines a unique *horī* whose non-conformist nature is perfectly consonant with the spirit of the festival. This song, standing out from the conventions of the genre, has a particular

[2] On *holī* or *holikā* and its origin see Kane (1974: V, pt. 1: 237-240).

[3] *Vasant pañcamī* is a Hindu festival falling on the fifth day of the bright half of the month of *māgh* (January-February). This day, considered the beginning of spring and herald of *holī,* is dedicated to *Sarāsvatī-pūjā,* the ritual worship of the Goddess of knowledge, music, art, speech, wisdom, and learning.

[4] On *jogīrā*s and *kabīr*s see Caranti (2022: 94).

religious, theological, and ritual relevance and offers precious material for the anthropological inquiry of a 'living tradition' related to a specific celebration of *holī* in the city of Banaras.

2. The music genre of *horī*

Named after the spring festival of *holī,* the music genre of *horī* includes a rich tapestry of varied music forms crossing different musical expressions. *Horī*'s 'intra-genre heterogeneity' (Henry 1991) can be explained by referring to its folk roots and its existence in a variety of forms and styles spanning from purely folk to semi-classical and art music.

As a folk song (*lok gīt*), *horī* is linked to the folk music of *rās* and *carcarī* that originated in the Braj region and informed the genre of *ṭhumrī* as well (du Perron 2007: 42). On the other hand, the interaction and mutual influence with art music are evident in the forms of *horī dhamār* and *horī ṭhumrī*. *Horī dhamār* is also called *pakkī horī*. The term suggests strict adherence to musical grammar and, therefore, a greater affinity to the art music genre par excellence of *dhrupad*. *Horī dhamār* is considered a 'sub-genre' of *dhrupad* and is, however, included in its repertoire. The form of *horī ṭhumrī*, also known as *kaccī horī*, is characterised to a greater extent by freedom and flexibility in the presentation of the *rāga* or music mode. Indeed, *horī* is generally regarded as a *ṭhumrī* sister-form, if not even a kind of *ṭhumrī*, a so-called 'semi-classical' genre, given its intermediary nature between art and folk music.[5] The distinctive feature between the two forms lies in the content of the lyrics since the two genres share musical and stylistic elements.

As hinted above, *horī* songs portray the frolicsome play typical of the festival of *holī* with the throwing of coloured water and powder at one another, reminiscent of the pranks Kṛṣṇa played on the *gopī*s. The inspiring themes are mostly the episodes of the *dān-līlā* (the 'play of the toll')[6] as portrayed by the sixteenth-century *bhakti* poet Sūrdās. In this narrative, while the milkmaids of Braj are going to the market to sell their products, Kṛṣṇa demands to taste them. When the *gopī*s refuse to pay the 'toll' of milk and curd, the god waylays and harasses them: he grabs them, tears their veils, and breaks their bangles, clay pots, and jars full of milk. This motif, extensively developed primarily by Sūrdās and *aṣṭachāp* poets, probably dates to ancient Tamil sources, including the *Cilappatikāram* and heterogeneous material (narrative, myths, and folk tales) that is mainly transmitted orally. The *dān-līlā* theme underpins songs related to the spring festival of *holī* and, specifically, is at the core of the genre

[5] On 'semi-classical' and 'intermediate' music genres see Manuel (2015) and Caranti (2022).

[6] *Sūrsāgar* X, 1459/2077–1749/2367. It is interesting to note that the *dān-līlā* covers 290 *pad*s, at least in the edition I consulted (Vājpeyī 1942).

of *horī*, although it features an important variation: in *horī*, Kṛṣṇa's shenanigans consist mostly of throwing *gulāl* at the *gopī*s or sprinkling coloured water with the *pickārī* rather than breaking their earthenware pots (du Perron 2007: 179).

It can be said that *horī* is predominantly in a Krishnaite idiom, even though there are certain songs depicting Rāma playing with golden *pickārī*s in Awadh or Śiva enjoying the merrymaking with his consort Pārvatī. If Rāma and Sītā enjoy *holī* with modesty and moderation, Kṛṣṇa is conventionally represented as a mischievous prankster, whereas Śiva is depicted as the loving householder, engaged in the celebration with Pārvatī and child Ganeṣa, or as the wild ascetic.

From a musical point of view, semi-classical *horī*s are set to the *rāga*s and *tāla*s (rhythmic cycles) typical of *ṭhumrī*.[7]

Horī, similarly to its cognate semi-classical music genre of *kajrī*, can deal with social and political issues. In the years before Independence, *horī*s and *kajrī*s were composed as a means of propaganda. It has been pointed out that "the political function of holī is far from dead, though for intellectuals it has become a medium that is published rather than performed" (Kumar 1988: 151). After all, the denomination '*horī*' indicates not only a music form but also a literary genre since it refers to a written composition featuring the theme of the genre or presented in connection to the time of the festival of *holī*. The same holds true for *horī* sister-forms: *caitī*, *kajrī*, and *jhūlā* (Caranti 2022: 113).

3. *Masāne kī holī*: the Holī of the cremation ground

The celebration of *holī* holds special significance also in Banaras, the city sacred to Śiva. Even more important and unique to Varanasi is the so-called *masāne* or *śmaśān kī holī* ('the Holī of the cremation ground') also known as *citā bhasm kī holī* ('the *holī* of pyre ashes'), which takes place in the very dwelling of the god, at *Maṇikarṇikā ghāṭ*, on *phālgun śukl dvādaśī*, the day after *raṅgbharī ekādaśī* and five days before *holī*. It is believed that the day of *raṅgbharī ekādaśī* marked the *gaunā*[8] ceremony of the divine couple of Śiva and Pārvatī: Lord Śiva after the marriage—that took place on *śivarātrī*—brought his consort from the Himalayas to his permanent abode in Banaras, and the arrival of the bride was celebrated by playing with *gulāl*. The very next day (*dvādaśī*), Śiva wanted to celebrate with his ghostly

[7] Among the most common *rāga*s of *horī* there are *Khamāj, Kāfī, Bhairav, Bhairavī, Pīlū, Kalyāṇ, Purvī, Tilak Kāmod,* and *Toḍī*. As far as the *tāla*s are concerned, some of the most frequently found are *Dīpcandī, Tīntāl,* and *Jat*.

[8] With the *gaunā* ceremony, common throughout northern India, the bride is brought to her husband's place after the farewell to her parental home (*vidāī*).

attendants (*gaṇa*s) as well. Hence, a special *holī* was played with *bhūta*s, *piśāca*s, *preta*s,[9] and *aghorī*s who smeared each other with the ashes from the funeral pyres. References to this eerie playful activity are found in several *śaiva stotra*s, such as the *Śivamahimna-stotra* (24):

> O, You who play in cremation grounds, o Destroyer of Smara,[10] your companions are *piśāca*s,
> Your body is smeared with ashes of funeral pyres, Your garland is a string of human skulls.
> All your conduct seems to be inauspicious, yet, o Bestower of boons,
> You are the Supreme Auspiciousness to those who remember You. [11]

Every year, a special *holī* is played at the burning *ghāṭ* in Banaras to commemorate such an event, according to a tradition that is regarded as immemorial. Before this celebration, devotees make an offering at the temple of Bābā Mahāśmaśāna Nātha, at *Maṇikarṇikā ghāṭ.* Traditionally, the festivity begins at noon and continues until evening. Recently, a grand ritual procession in honour of Śiva (*śobhāyātrā*) is held from the temple to *Hariścandra ghāṭ,* the second most important cremation site in the city, although traditionally the *holī* celebration used to take place at *Maṇikarṇikā ghaṭ,* the main burning ground. On this occasion, it is a custom to ritually consume *bhāṁg,* the narcotic drink made of hemp sacred to Śiva. The *ghāṭ*s echo with chants of '*Hara Hara Mahādeva*' and resound with the singing of *Khele masāne meṁ horī Digambara.* Devotees attired as Śiva's *gaṇa*s dance, shout, play *ḍamru* and cymbals mixing with a large crowd of onlookers, tourists from India and abroad, and members of the *Ḍom* and *Cāṇḍāl* communities, the castes of caretakers of the cremation ground. In 2022, the event occurred on March 15th and was organised by the Kashi Mokshadayini Seva Samiti, a local NGO involved

[9] Specifically, *bhūta*s are restless night-wander ghosts or spirits of the dead. *Preta*s (lit. 'gone forth [from the body],' 'departed') are a category of spirits of the dead who have not yet found peace since they are trying to reach the *pitṛloka* (the 'world of the Fathers') and wander restlessly. In order to appease and guide them in the transition, *preta*s are offered *piṇḍa*s, rice-balls symbolising the body of the deceased. If feeding and worship rituals are not properly performed by the mourning family, *preta*s can become *piśāca*s and torment the living. *Piśāca*s are a kind of flash-eater goblins. Eck aptly describes them as "the unsatisfied spirits of the dead, especially the spirits of those who have died violent or unnatural deaths, or those whose death rites were improperly performed" (Eck 2015: 339).

[10] Another name for Kāma, the god of love.

[11] श्मशानेष्वाक्रीडा स्मरहर पिशाचाः सहचराः चिता-भस्मालेपः स्रगपि नृकरोटीपरिकरः।
अमङ्गल्यं शीलं तव भवतु नामैवमखिलं तथापि स्मर्तॄणां वरद परमं मङ्गलमसि॥ २४॥

in social works founded by a *Ḍom Rājā*[12] for granting funeral rites and cremation to unclaimed dead bodies.[13]

4. *Khele masāne meṁ horī Digambara*

The *horī* singled out in the present article shows interesting idiosyncrasies for both lyrics content and performative context that are often closely interrelated. The song depicts Śiva playing *holī* in the cremation ground with his retinue of *bhūta*s and *piśāca*s, the ghostly creatures that are his favourite companions, along with *aghorīs.* In place of *gulāl*, Śiva tosses the ashes from funeral pyres. The *horī* qualifies itself as atypical: there is no Kṛṣṇa nor Rādhā, neither lovers nor *gopī*s. In his divine dance and drumming of the *ḍamru*, Mahādeva uses the poisonous snakes adorning him as *pickārī*s to squirt venom instead of colours. This song, commonly sung in Banaras and Uttar Pradesh, is also known throughout North India and rendered in various styles, spanning from *bhajan* and *lok gīt* to more refined 'semi-classical' ones.[14] Interestingly, despite the great popularity of this *horī*, I was not able to find this song text in any of the several *bhajan* anthologies and various collections I consulted. The written sources available are mostly versions taken from the Internet.[15] I retrieved the only complete published text from a Marathi fiction novel (Karve 2020: 186). The following is my transcription of the lyrics based on the rendition by *pt*. Channulal Mishra, one of the most renowned vocalists of the *Banāras gharānā*.[16]

1. खेले मसाने में होरी दिगंबर खेले मसाने में होरी |
2. भूत पिशाच बटोरी दिगंबर खेले मसाने में होरी |

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[12] He is the highest-ranking member of the community traditionally considered untouchable. The *Ḍom Rājā* is the custodian of the sacred fire used to ignite funeral pyres. On *Ḍoms* see Bryant and Peck (2009: 564).

[13] https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/varanasi/holi-festivities-begin-with-rangbhari-ekadashi-in-kashi/articleshow/90213154.cms?frmapp=yes&from=mdr.

[14] Interestingly, a gloomy version of this song, interspersed with verses from the *mantra Svasti na indro vṛddhaśravāḥ* (*Ṛg Veda* I, 89, 6) has been included in the soundtrack of the 2021 crime-thriller drama streaming television series *Aarya* (season 2). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVUhmadSdU0

[15] https://m.facebook.com/yehbanarashai/photos/a.176071839080803.36434.176063635748290/919370398084273/ https://www.jagran.com/blogs/sadguruji/%E0%A4%A6%E0%A4%BF%E0%A4%97%E0%A4%AE%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%AC%E0%A4%B0-%E0%A4%96%E0%A5%87%E0%A4%B2%E0%A5%87%E0%A4%82-%E0%A4%AE%E0%A4%B8%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%A8%E0%A5%87-%E0%A4%AE%E0%A5%87%E0%A4%82-%E0%A4%B9/ https://sujamusic.wordpress.com/category/artist/channulal-mishra/; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1l7F_lL6ex0

[16] This rendition is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48hZq_H9w_8)

3. लखि सुंदर फागुनी छटा के, मन से रंग-गुलाल हटा के

4. चिता-भस्म भर झोरी, दिगंबर खेले मसाने में होरी |

5. गोप ना गोपी श्याम ना राधा ना कोई रोक ना कौनो बाधा

6. ना साजन ना गोरी, दिगम्बर खेले मसाने में होरी |

7. नाचत गावत डमरूधारी, छोड़ै सर्प-गरल पिचकारी

8. पीते प्रेत थपोरी दिगम्बर खेले मसाने में होरी |

9. भूतनाथ की मंगल होरी देखि सिहाएं बिरज की छोरी

10. धन-धन नाथ अघोरी दिगंबर खेलैं मसाने में होरी ||

1. Plays *holī* in the cremation ground, Digambara plays *holī* in the cremation ground.

2. Has gathered *bhūta*s and *piśāca*s, Digambara plays *holī* in the cremation ground.

3. Look at the splendour of the beautiful day of *phāgun* and remove the coloured *gulāl* from the mind!

4. With the pouch full of ashes from funeral pyres, Digambara plays *holī* in the cremation ground.

5. There is no cowherd nor cowherdess, neither Śyāma nor Rādhā, there is no stop nor any obstacles.

6. Neither lovers, neither beautiful women. Digambara plays *holī* in the cremation ground.

7. Dances and sings, the *ḍamru*-holder sprinkles snake venom with *pickārī*-snakes.

8. *Preta*s drink it and applaud. Digambara plays *holī* in the cremation ground.

9. In seeing the auspicious *holī* of Bhūtanātha, the women of Braj are stunned.

10. Blessed are the *nāths* and *aghorīs!* Digambara plays *holī* in the cremation ground.

Line 1. Digambara, 'Sky-clad,' is the only name of Śiva in this *horī*. It refers to Bhairava as Bhikṣā mūrti, his aspect of 'Supreme mendicant' who wanders the world begging for alms with Brahmā's skull cup (*kapāla*) in order to atone for his sin of beheading the god. Bhikṣā is stark naked with a snake around his waist, having no other garment than the sky. In this song, he is covered with the ashes of the dead from the cremation pyre. He wears snakes as necklaces and dwells in the burning ground (*masān* or *śmaśān* in Hindi) located at *Maṇikarṇikā ghāṭ* in Banaras.[17]

[17] On this myth and references to *Purāṇa*s see Kramrisch (1981: 287-300). The episode of Deodar forest (*Liṅga-purāṇa* I, 29, 5-9), in which the playful aspect of Śiva is emphasised as against his terrifying form, is also connected to Śiva as Bhikṣātāṇa. The cheerful connotation of this episode is consonant with the joyful and licentious nature of *holī*. A famous sculpture of Bhikṣā mūrti is found in Bṛhadīśvara Tanjore described by J.N. Banerjea (1974: 483).

*Line 2. Bhūta*s, *piśāca*s. Śiva's beloved companions are all kinds of ghosts, ghouls, and goblins which earned him the epithet of 'Bhūtanātha' (line 9), 'Lord of the ghosts.' Their wild play described in these lyrics is reminiscent of the creepy scene portrayed by Bhārtendu Hariścandra in his mythological drama S*atya Hariścandra* (Hariścandra 1935: 215-219).

Line 3. Phāgunī. It is the second day of the bright fortnight of the month of *phāgun* (Skt. *phālguna śukla dvādaśī)* in February-March, the day after *raṅgbharī ekādaśī* when the *masāne kī holī* is celebrated.

Line 4. Man se raṅg-gulāl haṭā ke. In the celebration of this *holī,* there are no colours nor *gulāl*, not even in the mind or heart of the devotees. In the case of Śiva, the supreme ascetic and renouncer detached from life and death, there are no hues but only colourless ashes, a *memento* of the transience of everything. This symbolic connotation becomes clear by referring to the meaning of the word '*vairāgya*' as 'without *rāga*, where *rāga* stands for both colour and worldly passions since passions colour the mind. Śiva himself is the supreme *vairāgī* since he is not 'coloured' by the emotional involvement in experiences and attachment to the *saṃsāra.* For this reason, to play Śiva's *holī* it is necessary to remove the *gulāl* of passions.

Line 5. Nā koi rok nā kauno bādhā. The *masāne kī holī* celebrations are endless and so is the divine game of *pralaya*, the dissolution of the universe symbolised by the ashes. In Hindu cosmology, there are different types of *pralaya* including a *nitya pralaya* implying the death of any being that is born (for example, in *Agni-purāṇa* 368 and *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* IV, 35-38). The *holī* played by Śiva is part of his eternal *līlā* having its climax in the *pralaya* as the end of multiplicity and re-establishment of the primordial unit. According to the metaphysics of Kashmir Shivaism, an instant *pralaya* occurs coinciding with the *nimeṣa*, the 'closing of the eyes' of Śiva, signifying the withdrawal of his attention to the world, leading to its dissolution. The atemporal alternation in Śiva of the states of *unmeṣa* and *nimeṣa*, respectively the opening and closing of his eyes, corresponds to the continuous alternation of the emanation and dissolution of the universe.[18]

Line 6. Nā sājan nā gorī. This bizarre celebration is not meant for lovers, given its ascetic connotation as opposed to the mainstream *holī.* Furthermore, it seems that, according to tradition, couples are not allowed to join this event.

Line 7. Nācat, gāvat ḍamrūdhārī. This line depicts Śiva as Naṭarāja, the 'King of dancers' who performs the cosmic dance of the dissolution and manifestation of the universe. The *ḍamru* (or *ḍamrū*), the double-headed hourglass-shaped drum, symbolises the primordial sound or *nād,* the sacred syllable *oṃ* from which the manifestation of the universe arises. The *ḍamru*, one of the most important attributes of the

[18] On the topic see, for example, *Spanda-kārikā* 1 with the commentary *Spanda-nirṇaya* by Kṣemarāja (Singh 2004: 5-23)

god, has a deep and complex symbolic meaning in *śaiva* theology where it signifies the initial stage of the unfolding of the universe arising from the union of Śiva and Śakti symbolised respectively by a downward-pointing and an upward-pointing triangle[19] corresponding to the two sections of the *ḍamru*.

Line 8. Sarp garal. Snakes are Śiva's fundamental ornaments and serve as his sacred thread, bracelets, and necklaces. The serpent has rich symbolism. It recalls Kuṇḍalinī, the latent feminine energy lying dormant at the base of the spine. In Śiva, who wears snakes as garlands and uses them as *pickārī*s, Kuṇḍalinī is but another aspect of himself, as the manifestation of *śakti* in the human body. The snakes adorning Śiva also represent desires and passions which do not affect the god as one who has completely subjugated *māyā* by cutting the snake-like ropes of attachment. Lastly, among the several symbolic imports of the serpent in the Indian tradition, the shedding of the skin by the snake has the allegorical meaning of freeing the self from its separate individuality (Coomarswamy 1937: 40).

Line 9. Biraj kī chorī. The "women of Braj" are the *gopī*s of Vrindavan who unconditionally love Kṛṣṇa. As mentioned above, their frolicsome play with a mischievous Kṛṣṇa is a trope of *horī* songs.

Maṅgal. This word could be interpreted also as the *chāp*—the 'seal' or pen-name—of the author. The song is popularly said to be attributed to one Maṅgal Bābā of Banaras, although there is no evidence in support of such a thesis. However, according to this reading, these verses could be translated: "Maṅgal of Bhutanātha says: «In seeing [this] *holī,* the women of Braj are stunned»."

Line 10. Nāth. The *nāth panth,* also known as *nāth sampradāya,* is a Hindu religious path, *śaiva* in orientation, dating back at least to the XI century. It comprises castes of both ascetics and householders. The heterogeneity of their lineage stems from its origins in the tantric schools of different traditions. *Nāth yogī*s were mainly associated with a *sādhanā* based on yoga, tantric practices, rituals, and alchemy.[20]

[19] The upward-pointing (*ūrdhvumukha*) triangle and downward-pointing (*adhomukha*) triangle are usually interpreted as symbols of Śiva and Śakti when they appear together in a mystic diagram (*yantra*). According to several Tantric schools, this is the traditional interpretation of the intersected equilateral triangles forming the *ṣaṭkoṇa yantra* that is also found inscribed in the *hṛdaya cakra* or *anāhata cakra* and considered the graphical expression of *kāmakalā* (Padoux 2013: 66-69, White 1998: 178-179, Pellegrini 2013: 218 n.4). The four triangles apex upward and the five triangles apex downward forming the *srīcakra* are usually interpreted as symbolising Śiva and Śakti, as in Lakṣmīdharā's commentary on *Saundarya-laharī* (quoted by Subrahmanya and Ayyangar 1972: 4). See also Bühnemann (2003: 42, quoting Bhāskararāya), Padoux (2013: 26), Zimmer (1974: 147), and Daniélou (1964: 219; 352-354).

[20] On the *nāth sampradaya* see Mallinson (2011), Lorenzen and Muñoz (2011), Lorenzen (2011), and Upādhyāya (1965).

Aghorī. Lit. 'non-terrifying.' A group of Tantric renouncers known for their extreme ascetic practices, such as wandering naked smeared in ashes,[21] dwelling in cremation grounds, and the ritual consumption of intoxicants. It is common for them to use human bones as ornaments and a human skull as an alms bowl. They have been described as "a broad collection of Indian religious traditions that seek to achieve a psycho-spiritual state of nondiscrimination in which there is no fear of or aversion to any person or object" (Barrett 2008).

5. *Śiva:* the wild divine player

This horī appears all the more peculiar since it offers a depiction of Śiva's counter-conventional godly nature, which is an uncommon theme in frolicsome *horī* folksongs. The protagonist is Śiva reminiscent of his manifestations of Bhikṣā, characterised by a note of uncontrolled wildness. He is an outsider, completely unconcerned about purity, auspiciousness, and the boundaries of *varṇāśrama*s, beyond dharma norms, categorisations, and conventional distinctions (Eck 2015: 97).

In the *Śiva-purāṇa*, Śiva is even described as *kumārgā niratāyātha vedā'dvatyāgine haṭhāt*, i.e., "the one who is engaged in following bad paths and who had strongly abandoned the Vedic path" (*Śiva-purāṇa*, *Rudrasaṃhitā,* III, 31, 47). It is the tension and final reconciliation between apparent opposites and conflicting attributes—almost in antithetical terms—the very quintessence of the god. He is the greatest *yogī* and a dutiful householder, he is dreadful yet auspicious, inspiring distaste and protection at the same time, he is the destroyer and the preserver. This baffling ambivalence ultimately resolves in Śiva's transcendental nature as a form of *Brahman* beyond any duality and conceptualisations.

The transcendence results in the divine madness and aloofness to the ephemeral worldly matters and human vicissitudes of the *saṃsāra*. The wildness and unrestrained attitude defeat the limitations and necessity of the human mind to understand reality by erecting categories and discerning predictable patterns. The frenzied dance and the bizarre play outlined in the lyrics of the *masāne kī horī* should be considered in this light. This song is indeed a celebration of the *līlā*, the divine sport of Śiva. The extraordinary, creepy, and wild *holī* played in the cremation ground is the expression of a divine action that is aimless and spontaneous just as the manifestation of the universe is purposeless and playful. Contradictory as it may seem, the celebration of life, in the form of the revelry of *holī,* takes place at the burning *ghāṭ*, the place of death. This play reveals the transcendence of God and the

[21] Not always and not all the *aghorīs* wander naked. Most of them are usually dressed in black or white garments or wear at least a loincloth (*laṁgoṭī*).

detachment of his devotees disentangled from the phenomenal reality dominated by the illusion of *māyā* and epitomises the reconciliation of life and death, once they are considered in the light of the eternal *līlā.*

The dance of Śiva is itself an expression of this *līlā* and signifies the manifestation of the universe and, at the same time, its destruction and dissolution preliminary to a new emanation.

6. A ground for play: the liminal space of the śmaśān

The locale of the divine play, where Śiva enjoys the company of his beloved cohort of ghostly spirits, is the main burning *ghāṭ* at *Maṇikarṇikā* in Banaras. The *śmaśān*—also called *rudrākrīḍa*[22] ('the play of Rudra') or *rudrabhūmi* ('the land/place of Rudra,' Liberale 2005: 4)—is traditionally located at a riverside, on the outskirts of the city in the southern direction; it is indeed opposite to the inhabited area, as an unsafe and polluted space loaded with impurity. The peripheral connotation associated with the burning ground reflects the very character of Śiva as an outsider, at the margins of the established conventional order, bordering the outrageous and frightful. Yet he is the very captivating manifestation of life.

In Varanasi, the cremation ground is not situated on the outskirts, instead, it is in the heart of the city and adjacent to temples. Here, the sacred fire used to ignite the pyres is said to have burnt incessantly since time immemorial.[23] *Maṇikarṇikā* is also considered a sacred bathing *tīrtha*, a holy ford and a place of pilgrimage for Hindus. The *śmaśān*, under the jurisdiction of Śiva—differently from all the others controlled by Yama, the god of death—holds tremendous salvific value: it is endowed with a purification power, being a "living and transforming symbol" where there is "the transformation of life and of death" (Eck 2015: 251). The entire city of Banaras is a *mahāśmaśān* and is defined '*avimukta*': it is 'never forsaken' by Śiva, not even at the time of the dissolution of the universe and always bestows *mokṣa*, the liberation from the cycle of birth and death characterising the *saṃsāra*.

Just as Śiva is the synthesis of the apparent *coincidentia oppositorum*, the cremation ground, where life is perpetually confronted with the presence of death, becomes the metaphor for the permanence of impermanence and, thus, a symbol of the universe.

[22] *Krīḍa* and *līlā* are synonyms but usually, in several *śaiva* contexts, the former term is more common.

[23] For a vivid and detailed description of *Maṇikarṇikā ghāṭ* see Eck (2015: 248-251).

7. Conclusion

This article arises from the need to propose a more multidimensional picture of the song texts that until now have been neglected, to some degree, by scholarly attention for different reasons. In the first place, they have not been regarded as 'serious' music worth in-depth consideration, both on a musical and a literary/textual level. On the other hand, the growing interest over the last few decades in popular music led scholars to focus to a greater extent on folk-oriented musical expressions in which texts have paramount importance. In this way, the 'in-between' music genres have been somehow overlooked. The wide 'intermediate sphere' of Hindustani music (Manuel 2015), which includes a multiplicity of heterogeneous forms, still offers a considerable scope of exploration. The need for a thorough understanding of song texts belonging to these genres requires studying music as a 'social text' whose meaning derives from a "dialectical interaction between adjacent texts [...] and cultural and biographical contexts" (Shepherd 1991: 175). In outlining cultural-specific realities, music mirrors values, behaviour, and conceptualisations (Nettl 2005: 218). The song analysed in the present paper not only portrays but also informs, to a certain degree, social life. It aptly demonstrates the primary aural and performative connotation of music texts in India. Indeed, the *horī* presented here is actualised in performance and can be regarded as an expression of a 'living tradition.' Rather, it prompts a reflection on the retention of a traditional practice whose origins, believed to be particularly ancient, are located in a distant, immemorial past that has to be preserved since it reinforces a sense of identity challenged by the changes of modernity.

The uniqueness of this kind of song, strongly emphasised from within the tradition itself, underpins a sense of recognition functional to the specific cultural reality of the city of Banaras, often considered a symbol of the 'Great Indian tradition' (Singer 1972).

The distinctiveness of this *horī* echoes the idiosyncrasies of Varanasi characterised by a lifestyle marked by the festive mood of *mastī* or *mauj*, the *joie de vivre*, leisure, and delight, better understood as «"a philosophy of pleasure moulded to the truth of social life," or as the *rasa* (flavour) of life, or sometimes as the *vigyān*, *vidyā* (the science, the wisdom) of life"» (Kumar 1988: 99).

It is an essential component of the *banārsīpan* or 'Banarsiness,' arising from the juxtaposition between the prerogative of enjoying life and the constant presence of death, according to a disposition that combines religiousness and spirituality with a pleasure-loving attitude (Lutgendorf 2000: 24-26). Such a peculiar ethos finds its *raison d'être* in the very reality of Banaras, as the city of *mafhil*s—gatherings for music, dance performances or recital of poetry—and courtesans on the one hand; on the other, the holiest city in the world, the ideal place to die and where *yogī*s meditate on funeral pyres.

These two apparently conflicting aspects perfectly merge and harmonise in the divine character of Śiva which can somehow be considered the archetypal embodiment of *banārsīpan*.

The *mastī* derived from the singular *holī* unfolding in the cremation ground offers an occasion for a joint mode of entertainment and celebration that allows the challenging of convention, the established order, and subordination by relating to Śiva: the identification with his eccentricity and *phakkaṛpan* ('carefreeness') legitimises transgression and sublimates it in a devotional perspective. Ultimately, from a religious and philosophical viewpoint, it is just a display of the transience of human existence and the ephemerality of *saṃsāra*.

This *horī* in its *prima facie* paradoxical flavour epitomises the quintessence of the city abode of Śiva, a good place to live and to die, where every day is a festival and where Bābā Bholenātha plays *holī* in the cremation ground every day, where life and death are transcended and become a joyful and boisterous festival.

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