

# SACRED SUBVERSIONS: BHAKTI, ANDROGYNY AND QUEER AFFECT IN BENGALI VAISHNAV LITERATURE

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**Abstract:** Drawing on queer theory and affect studies, this paper examines queer religiosity within Bengali Vaishnav traditions from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, a period marked by intense *Bhakti* expression in vernacular literature. Through a close reading of Vaishnav *Padavalis* by poets like Chandidas and Govindadas, it explores how devotional lyrics of *viraha* (separation) and longing for Krishna are voiced through Radha and other female devotees. Male poets and practitioners thus perform feminine subjectivities, subtly unsettling, fixed gender roles within a theologically sanctioned framework. The study argues that these devotional practices constitute a form of

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spiritualized queerness, where divine love enables gender fluidity and non-normative affect. Engaging Vaishnav-Sahajiya theology, particularly its esoteric model of Radha–Krishna union as mystical androgyny, the paper demonstrates how early Bengali Vaishnav literature articulates embodied, premodern queer spiritualities beyond modern Western identity categories.

**Keywords:** *Bhakti, Gender, Mystical Androgyny, Queer Devotion, Vaishnav Padavalis.*

## 1. Introduction

Long before the terms of LGBTQ+ or queer theory found their way into world academia, the Indian subcontinent has harbored a long-standing tradition of gender fluidity, erotic pluralism, and other forms of spiritual subjectivity. Same-sex love, gender transformation, and non-normative eroticism are natural aspects of Indian religious and social life and are attested in textual, mythological, and oral traditions through centuries (Vanita and Kidwai 320). India has an extraordinary involvement with queer embodiments, whether in mythological texts, classical works like the *Kamasutra* or various folk traditions of the region (Doniger and Kakar 195). Sex change, cross-gender performance, and the concept of third nature (*tritiya-prakriti*) as a socially accepted category, not an aberration, and non-heteronormative relationships are presented in large numbers, and described as a socially acceptable and spiritually significant aspect of the human and divine experience (Sanyal and Maity 64). Similarly, Hindu epics provide various accounts of gender change and androgyny e.g. Shikhandi of the *Mahabharata* and the divine being *Ardhanarishvara*, which symbolically combines the male and female energies (Nanda 85). The existence of *Hijra* and *Aravani* people, who played important roles in ritual and social practices, also explains how gender-variant identities were not a hidden phenomenon but instead became an integral part of society (Hinchy 157). Goldman notes that in Hindu literary and religious traditions, transsexuality and its importance take rather a central place. He says, “Few cultures have accorded this phenomenon so prominent a place in the realms of mythology and religion as has

that of traditional India” (Goldman 380). This native repository undermines the longstanding argument of queerness or “erotic justice” (Kumar 341) as a Western importation instead it discloses a centuries-old cultural grammar that acknowledges the fluidity of gender and desire, most of which were later repressed under British moral and legal systems like the enactment of Section 377 (Gupta 4817).

Vernacular Bengali became a significant channel of religious expression and literary work in medieval Bengal. By the fourteenth century, a rich mass of Bengali literature, with local versions of the epic tales, had started to grow, with a change of Sanskrit into forms more easily available to devotional and poetic practice (Sen 165). The spread of Vaiṣṇava *Padavalis*, *Mangala Kavyas*, and *Śūnyapurāṇa* are additional examples of how Bengali was used by established and new religious groups and how the latter could spread theological ideas to large groups in the society (Czyzykowski 92). Medieval Bengal devotional world was a colorful tapestry of songs, desire, and spiritual closeness. Within India, one of its most influential threads is the *Bhakti* movement which thrived between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries and expressed some of the most suggestive expressions of divine love in the subcontinent. This movement reconstituted the view of God and divine relationships, as did the Sufi movement in the Perso-Arabic tradition. Deities were no longer revered solely as distant, superior beings; instead, they were approached as friends, lovers, spouses, and even children. This reconceptualization allowed close and flowing forms of devotion and inculcated what Jaydeep Rishi calls a “fluidity of gendered structure” (Rishi 3) between the deity and the devotee. Through a process of domestication, envisioning deity as a lover, it enabled forms of intimacy that exceeded the conventional boundaries of marriage and family (Dasgupta 655). These folk lyric literatures, sung in temples, village meetings and small groups of devotees, is based on the emotional relationship between Radha and Krishna, the poignant feel of *viraha* (separation), the ecstasy of reunion and the nuances of mystical longing (*bhava*) (Vaishnav *Padavali* n.d.; Dimock 146). Rather than mere romantic allegories, these poems were vehicles through which devotees could communicate with

the sacred and take part in a spiritually transformative mode of devotion where emotional intensity and personal identification with the divine were regarded as spiritually transformative (Chakravarty 2013, 15; Kinsley 160). Even, however, there is a presence of a dramatic literary and theological act: even though *Padavali* poets were mostly men, they often wrote in the voice of Radha or the *gopis*, assuming feminine subjectivities with such fine tuning of the heart. This cross-gendered ventriloquism, where male poets address the desiring heroines, abandoned lovers or women as captivated by spirits imparts a slight yet significant disruption into the gender logic of the era (Lorea 5; Pillai 5). In assuming Radha's voice, the poet does not merely narrate her desire; he inhabits it. He enacts her desire, her fragility, and her rapturous fusion with Krishna, thus unsettling, fixed binaries of masculine and feminine devotion (Hayes 683). These devotional practices imply that gender in the *Padavali* tradition is not an essential identity (Butler 1990, 143), but a dynamic affective mood, which can be achieved by embodied poetic utterance.

In contemporary India, the rise of national conservatism has fabricated gender and sexuality as the locus of cultural anxiety, moral panic, and ideological struggle. Such centralization of Hindu nationalist rhetoric has repeatedly placed non-normative genders and sexualities as foreign intrusions, often labeled as an offshoot of "Western decadence" which risks the survival of civilization and national unity (Jaffrelot 320). In this ideological paradigm, what is commonly referred to as "radical gender ideology" is presented not as a liberating discourse but as an indicator of moral corruption, demographic, and cultural degradation. These narratives contrast with Indian history and religious records, as this paper illustrates a historical acceptance of gender plurality, erotic fluidity, and spiritual androgyny. In a wider Indian perspective, national conservatism is not just a political philosophy but a cultural project of selective sterilization of tradition. Nivedita Menon identifies, contemporary anti-gender discourse in India is based on a strategic amnesia that eradicates indigenous histories of gender variance to promote heteronormativity as timeless and authentically Indian (Menon 63). The revival of Section 377-era moral arguments in public

discourse, despite its partial decriminalization in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* case (2018), illuminates how legal development coexists with cultural regression, demonstrating a lack of correspondence between constitutional modernity and social conservatism (Narain 53).

It is against this backdrop of modern moral conservatism and the continuing heteronormative discourse shaped by the legacy of Section 377 that it becomes important to reclaim indigenous religious and cultural traditions that once articulated non-normative gendered and affective subjectivities. Thus, these poetic performances by Chandidas and Govindadas are not merely an aesthetic decision: but in fact, acts of spiritualized gendering subversion, which exposes what can be viewed as evidence of queer affect within an ostensibly orthodox *Bhakti* tradition. The *Padavali* poets, especially Chandidas and Govindadas, infuse their songs with a devotional fluidity that enables the practitioner to transcend stable categories of gender, selfhood, and desire. Their lyrics saturated in emotional extravagance, submission, and erotic desire, perform a kind of mystical androgyny, a disintegration of gender differences, which finds great appeal among the esoteric modes of the Vaishnav-Sahajiya tradition (Czyzykowski 100; Chakravarty 2024, 152). The Vaishnav-Sahajiya, which mostly worked at the fringes of mainstream Vaishnavism, expressed a theology where Radha and Krishna are not external deities but internalized energies, female and male principles whose union took place in the practitioner’s body (Hayes 684). Devotion in this paradigm is an embodied, transformative practice: to love Krishna is to be Radha; to desire Radha is to acknowledge the feminine in oneself. *Padavali* songs are therefore formed through this perspective as a place where queer spiritual subjectivities are made, practiced, and sanctified (Pillai 9; Lorea 20). They appear as counter archives to present-day nationalist arguments that gender fluidity indicates social decay. Rather, these customs depict that the current sneering of “radical gender ideology” was once part of spiritual prosperity, theological wisdom, and devotional intimacy. The *Bhakti* focus on affective extravagance, gender transgression, and embodied devotion alludes to another scale of prosperity, which is not based

on demographic dominance or moral rigidity but on affective richness, spiritual expansiveness, and relational selfhood (Vajpeyi 2012). In this way, reading *Padavali* poems by Chandidas and Govindadas against the grain of current national conservatism reveals the paradox of national gender politics: the very practices criticized as manifestations of cultural impoverishment were central to India's devotional abundance. Quite on the contrary, gender fluidity in the *Bhakti* archive marks a civilization confident enough to conceptualize divinity beyond strict binaries (Brown 18). The revival of such traditions is not, then, merely a scholarly act, but a kind of political intervention, a gesture that disrupts exclusionary national narratives and reclaims queer spirituality as an indigenous resource rather than an imported threat.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholarly studies of the Vaishnav-Sahajiya tradition provide essential context for understanding the theological foundations of gender subversion within the *Padavali* corpus. Vaishnav-Sahajiya was a devotional movement that was popularized throughout Bengal and exalted human erotic love, especially *parakīyā-rati*, or love that flings the social norms, as an exclusive metaphor of the divine union. It was a tradition working at the boundaries of orthodoxy, and, as such, incorporated its knowledge into rich verse, secret rituals, and symbolic embodiment (Britannica Editors 2025). This image is refined by Robert Czyzykowski's philological project, who revealed how Sahajiya adepts combined vernacular idioms of the Bengali language with Sanskrit metaphysical systems, giving a surreal mystical discourse to the process of bodily change, sexual symbolism, and internal yogic action as the major technologies of devotion (Czyzykowski 95). Based on a cognitive-religious model, Glen Alexander Hayes explains that Sahajiya *sādhana* was built on an embodied re-fashioning of selfhood, by developing an imaginative internalization of womanhood in the ritual performances of *Radha-bhava* by men (Hayes 690).

Under the gender and queer-theoretical approaches, researchers have started to stress that cross-gender identification in Bengali devotional practice is not an ornamental trope, but a

key theological mode. The ethnographic investigations of Baul-Fakir lineages by C. E. Lorea prove how transvestism, gender fluidity, and androgynous embodiment can be regarded as coherent spiritual practices that find appeal among even older Vaishnav-Sahajiya ideas of inner duality (Lorea 32). Sharon Pillai takes an analogous approach to *Bhakti* discourse and feminist and queer material by suggesting that this poetics of longing and surrender creates other possibilities of subjectivity other than the heteronormative desire (Pillai 12). This is especially true of the work of Saumitra Chakravarty, who follows the centrality of mystical androgyny in the works like *Caitanya-Maṅgal* by Jayayaananda and shows how the meeting of male and female divine energy influences theology and praxis in the environment of Bengali devotional practices (Chakravarty 2024, 132).

These traditions are further placed in a longer intellectual history of Bengali Vaishnavism by foundational work by Edward C. Dimock. As shown by Dimock, Sahajiya texts conceptualize the body as the primary locus of spiritual realization with Radha and Krishna being re-conceived as internal values and not as external deities (Dimock 255). De’s work on Vaishnav literary culture also provides emphasis on the way the *Padavali* poetry exists in a symbolic world where devotional emotion, erotic desire, and metaphysical embodiment constantly and repeatedly intersect (De 1986). Collectively, these academic categories, historical, philological, cognitive, feminist, and theological offer a model upon which *Padavali* lyrics can be read as performative practices of queer spiritual subjectivity. Instead of interpreting the adoption of feminine voices by male poets as a mere rhetorical strategy, these studies indicate that such forms of speech are a part of larger devotional ontology that permits, indeed, demands, otherwise fluid crossings between gender, embodiment, and desire. Contemporary scholarship has also observed that such traditions are increasingly marginalized in contemporary India because of the rise of national conservatism that sees gender studies itself as ideologically questionable (Menon 72). Scholars of Indian politics note that gender and sexuality have turned into battlegrounds where concerns about national decline or prosperity are projected, which often leads to the delegitimization of academic research

into queer histories (Narain 62). In this atmosphere, the renegotiation of Sahajiya and *Padavali* traditions acts as a corrective historiography, an intonation of indigenous epistemologies of gender plurality that challenge the contemporary binary between national identity and gender fluidity.

### 3. Methodology

This article uses close textual analysis of *Padavali* poems written by Chandidas and Govindadas and interprets them in the intersecting frames of the queer theory, affect studies, and Sahajiya theological models. Close reading allows focusing on the finest textures of language, metaphor, voice, emotional cadence, and performative position, with the help of which the poems create desire and devotional subjectivity. The chosen readings are exemplary in the sense that they anticipate *viraha* (longing because of separation) and always assume the voice of devotion by a woman, which is a characteristic dominant in cross-gender identification in the medieval Bengali *Bhakti* tradition. For Chandidas, the study will be based on the English translations of Sri Aurobindo, especially *Radha's Appeal* and *Radha's Complaint in Absence* (Sri Aurobindo, n.d.-a; Sri Aurobindo, n.d.-b). These translations are particularly renowned to maintain the lyrical intensity as well as the emotional subtleties of the interiority of Radha. For Govindadas, the present research is based on the English translations by Kusakrathadas found on the *Bhakti-Vaishnav* site (*Padavali*, n.d.). Under the influence of translations, the analysis is still sensitive to original metaphors, Sanskritic repetitive devotional patterns and to affective registers of Bengali Vaishnav poetry.

These poems are interpreted in dialogue with *Sahajiya* theological ideas, as presented by modern scholars, to put their treatment of internal androgyny, eroticized devotion and the embodied experience of divine love into context. Applying the *Padavali*s to queer theory and affect studies assists in how the gendered subjectivities are not merely reflected but constituted and modified in a devotional voice. Therefore, methodology is the combination of both literary analysis and theological and

theoretical investigation as it will demonstrate how these seemingly conventional lyrics perform these unobtrusive types of gender fluidity and queer spiritual embodiment.

#### 4. Analysis

The poetry of Chandidas contains one of the earliest and most striking examples of gendered devotional subversion in medieval Bengali Vaishnavism. His *Padavalis*, though written by a male, constantly occupy the feminine interiority of emotion by Radha. In his poem, *Radha's Appeal*, Chandidas renders Radha's voice with an intensity that collapses the distinction between poetic persona and devotional embodiment:

I, Radha, thought; without my life's sweet lord  
His absence slew my soul as with a sword.  
If one brief moment steal thee from mine eyes,  
My heart within me dies.

(*Sri Aurobindo, n.d.-a*)

This articulation of longing registers not merely as metaphorical desire but as visceral, corporeal suffering. The visualized wound “with a sword” expresses affective materiality, Radha's body turns into the place where the devotional pain can be felt as real. Importantly, the poet does not look at Radha in an external narrative sense, but he is Radha, who is doing her desire, vulnerability, and subjectivity in the first-person voice. This kind of performance is reminiscent of Judith Butler, who sees gender as being performed in terms of repetitive actions, and not an ontological essence (Butler 1990, 159). In this instance, the devotional voice becomes a gendered performance that allows the male poet to embody feminine interiority that is authorized under the *Bhakti* theology. At this point, Ruth Vanita's observation about the connection between the male mystic poets and their spiritual devotion rings true. Vanita notes that the male mystic poets tended to imagine themselves as the “brides of God,” taking feminine positions of subject in order to show the devotional desire (Vanita 220). Through this self-fashioning, Chandidas expressed the intimately personal and profound emotional connection with the divine beyond traditional gender roles.

In another poem, *Radha's Complaint in Absence*, Chandidas

amplifies the devotional anguish through a self-interrogating lament:

O heart, my heart, a heavy pain is thine!  
 ... What other cure but death?  
 (*Sri Aurobindo, n.d.-b*)

Chandidas's direct address to his heart as Radha's own heart not only embodies the tumult of emotion that Radha experiences but also the splintering of the self that *Sahajiyas* view mystical subjectivity as being fractured, stratified, and able to house multiple selves (Hayes 695). Radha becomes both subject and object of lamentation, embodying an affective multiplicity that aligns with queer affect theorists such as Eve Sedgwick, who suggest that affective intensities tend to disturb the integrity of the normative self (Sedgwick 2003). The theorization of effect of affect by Sedgwick, most particularly, her idea of the non-linear, non-rational, and unstable beyond capacity, is reminiscent of the interior rupture of Radha. To Sedgwick, affect disrupts the identities that appear to be tidy and reveals the self as permeable, inconsistent and constantly in process (Sedgwick 142). The dissolution of the self into the one who suffers and the one who sees suffering in the lament by Radha becomes an act of the statement expressed by Sedgwick that strong emotional states are unable to be contained within a single, unified subjectivity (Bradway 85). The devotional suffering which Radha describes goes beyond the reason of stable gender identity and rather, it is a queer affective surplus, an intensity which does not allow closure and unveils desire as a force which dislocates and decenters the self. In this way, the internal speech of Radha turns not only into a poetic tool but also an in-depth queer performance of subjectivity, where an appeal becomes a self-opened space of multiplicity, vulnerability, and transformation (Cvetkovich 188).

Govindadas, the other *Padavali* author, expands this devotional feminization through more sensuous, corporeal imagery. In one of his widely cited *Padavalis*, translated by Dimock, Radha speaks:

The marks of fingernails are on your breast  
 and my heart burns.  
 Kohl of someone's eyes upon your lips

darkens my face.  
I am awake all night—  
your eyes are red.

(Dimock as cited in *PoemHunter*)

These lines preeminently highlight bodily evidence, fingernail marks, smeared kohl, reddened eyes, that make erotic infidelity and devotional desire a reality. The *viraha* (separation) registers in the body signify one of the most important *Bhakti* effects where pain is interpreted as sacramental: the body is the place where the absence of God is inscribed (Goswami and Thielemann 23). The hallmark of the poetic persona used by Govindadas is the colloquial signature phrase, which often appears at the close of such songs, yoking the male devotional subject to the lyrical expression of the feminized voice of Radha. This identification and distance generate a liminal devotional subjectivity that erases fixed gender binaries.

Additional *Padavali* lines reinforce this devotional androgyny. In another poem attributed to Chandidas, Radha declares:

Without Krishna, how shall I live?  
My body is as a lotus scorched by frost;  
my heart trembles like a doe strayed from its herd.

(*Chandidas, trans. Sen, 1992*)

The heartbeat, the frost-scalded body induce the feeling of vulnerability and female frailty, yet these images are conveyed through the voice of a male poet. This act of Radha is thereby a technology of self-transformation, which is quite similar to the practices of *Sahajiya* where the devotees internalize in their own bodies Krishna (masculine energy) as well as Radha (feminine energy) (Dimock, 187).

These gendered performances are informed by the Vaishnav-Sahajiya tradition directly. The erotic love between a man and a woman as a form of Sahajiya theology, according to scholars like Czyczykowski, is a symbolic representation of cosmic union: the love of Radha and Krishna is internalized rather than mythologized (Czyczykowski 102). The practitioner tries to reach mystical androgyny, the combination of feminine and masculine principles in the self. Glen Hayes argues, Sahajiya

*sādhana* helps in accommodating these “possible selves” that allow the devotees to move fluidly between gendered selves as a part of their religious practice (Hayes 695). These understandings shed light on why *Padavali* poets can seamlessly inhabit Radha’s persona, *Bhakti* becomes in this instance a kind of queer spiritual embodiment, which relies on theological teachings that already celebrate gender fluidity and inner metamorphosis. Ruth Vanita’s work on queer and feminist South Asian studies highlights that those kinds of devotional feminization cannot be disregarded as literary norm. Instead, they are another affective economy where the feminine voices written by male authors are given legitimate possibilities of spiritual subjectivity (Vanita 267). The *Padavali* tradition, therefore, exists as a delicate archive of queer affect, where devotion confounds heteronormative limits and opens spaces for alternative gendered experiences within a respected religious structure.

Furthermore, theologians argue that this mystical androgyny is not metaphorical, but very experiential: the aim of *Sahajiya sadhana* is not to imagine the voice of Radha, but to experience in oneself the harmonious unity of the feminine (Radha) and masculine (Krishna) energies (Chakravarty 2024, 185). Such theological practice echoes an internal marriage, not just of hearts, but also of genders. *Bhakti* practices, therefore, gain a new political dimension in contemporary India under national conservatism when interpreted through the prism of global development models, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which prioritizes inclusion, gender equality, and the empowerment of marginalized identities as indicators of social progress (United Nations 2015). Although national conservative discourses view gender diversity as a demographic disturbance or a threat to cultural survival, the *Bhakti* model offers a different scale of prosperity based on ethical pluralism and spiritual receptiveness. For modern youth negotiating identity within polarized political contexts, these traditions present a historical counter-narrative that challenges the binarism between national identity and gender plurality (Vajpeyi 140). Therefore, rather than indicating moral or cultural impoverishment, the gender-fluid devotional practices described by Chandidas and

Govindadas point toward a different, more spiritual form of prosperity grounded in relational ethics. The rediscovery of these traditions allows for a critical questioning of contemporary policies and ideologies that marginalize gender studies and queer histories, demonstrating that India’s religious past complicates the exclusionary logic of national conservatism.

### 5. Theological and Mystical Implications

The performative gender reversals in the *Padavali* lyricism have far-reaching theological, emotive and conceptual consequences, in showing how medieval Bengali *Vaishnavism* had an exceptionally protean sense of self. When the male poets address the issue as Radha, who has been desiring, who has been feeling the corporeal pain, her blissful union and her painful separation, they are doing more than assuming a literary persona. They perform a devotional shift where gaps between genders are bridged by relations and affect and mysticism. This movement from male authorial identity into a feminized devotional subjectivity is very close to the Vaishnav-Sahajiya ideal, wherein the devotee is invited to possess both halves of the divine couple, internalizing the erotic desire of Radha and the ecstasy of Krishna in their own spiritual body (*dehe-sādhana*). As Edward C. Dimock and Glen Hayes observe, the Sahajiya model is based on the development of a subtle body where the masculine and feminine energy circulate, interact, and ultimately, they merge (Dimock 298; Hayes 692). Thus, the lyric voice is the location of mystic androgyny, embodied theology that resists societal fixed gender roles.

Such devotional enactments also illuminate how *Padavali* poetry queers orthodoxy from within. These poets do not disavow Vaishnav theology; on the contrary, they enhance it with its affective and performative potentials. Their queerness is not contemporary sexuality but a relationality and self-fashioning which disturbs normative binaries, male/female, self/other, mortal/divine. As S. Pillai and Ananya Vajpeyi posit, the discourse of *Bhakti* frequently employs the effect as an anti-structure to a social order: longing, vulnerability, and surrender are the forms, which help the devotee to overcome the constrained

ego (Pillai 13; Vajpeyi 225). According to the Butlerian model which suggests that gender identity is created through repetitive practices (Butler 1988, 526), in *Padavali* poetry, the repetitive practices (or acts) consist of devotional utterances, emotional intensities, and poetic transformations.

The theological interests are also of the same importance. The fusion of Radha and Krishna, which has traditionally been explained in terms of the metaphysics of *bhedabheda* (difference-in-non-difference), is re-conceived in this as an internal spiritual action. Mystical androgyny is not only a metaphor but a soteriological end, which is pursued by researchers, who observe that *Sahajiya* practitioners aimed to achieve this union not only through contemplation practice but also through embodied experience (Urban 102). The poetic gestures of Chandidas when he writes as Radha, or when according to Govindadas, he switches between being a spectator and participant in the divine game, are indicative of this interiorized process of union: devotion becomes a way of harmonizing gendered energies into one, but relational, spiritual self. Even the feeling of *viraha* which is commonly regarded as feminine suffering, serves as an ascetic and erotic training that re-arranges the affectionate body of the devotee. *Viraha* in Vaishnav poetics, as Anand Venkatkrishnan demonstrates, is both an emotional condition and a mystical method as it creates maximum receptivity to godly presence by increasing the absence (Venkatkrishnan 95).

The most notable thing is that these gendered metamorphoses are still embedded by the orthodox devotional terminologies. Chandidas and Govindadas rely on canonical narratives, scriptural metaphors, and developed liturgical tropes; their originality is neither to deny them but to refract them through an embodied prism that favors fluid subjectivity. Their subversion is thus quiet but potent: instead of challenging tradition overtly, they reveal the inherent fluidity already latent within Vaishnavism. The result is a devotional literature that is at once orthodox and radical, tenderly pious yet profoundly destabilizing in its implications for identity, embodiment, and gender.

In a wider Indian context, the dynamics of theology obtain

new energy in the modern-day context of national conservatism and insecurities about what is commonly referred to as “radical gender ideology.” Gender fluidity and queer subjectivities are often interpreted through the lens of conservative political and cultural discourses of present-day India as signs of social decadency instead of spiritual or cultural flourishing (Anand 153). These accounts conflict with *Bhakti* traditions, like *Padavali* poetry, where gender fluidity was not felt as an ideological surplus but as a religious resource that enabled closeness with the divine. Researchers observed that such modern opposition to gender studies and queer politics frequently presupposes the strategic erasure of indigenous religious backgrounds and, thus, the formation of a nationalist-oriented homogenized vision of tradition (Menon 55; Narrain 59). Read between the lines, the *Padavali* archive questions the belief that non-normative modes of gender are a resemblance of cultural impoverishment. Rather, it insinuates that premodern Indian cultures connected spiritual prosperity with affective transparency, embodied transformation, and the ability to pursue various gendered roles. Thus, the mystical androgyny expressed by Chandidas and Govindadas not only disorients medieval gender ideals but also provides a critical response to contemporary national-conservative discourses that attempt to strictly police gender and sexuality under the guise of cultural continuity. Therefore, *Padavali* poetry is evidence of the ability of *Bhakti* to maintain simultaneously devotion and disruption, where the devotee can enter the space where love is the foundation of identity and gender is the path towards spiritual becoming.

## 6. Conclusion

A larger critical review of these readings would propose that the poets of the *Padavali*, Chandidas and Govindadas, are part of a continuum, where gender is not a defined ontological situation, but as a spiritual disposition that enables closeness to the divine. Their poems, which are reflected in the modern Sahajiya tradition, display a devotional world where the borders of gender dissolve and vibrate, where the emotion longing becomes a theological power, and where poetry functions as a transformative medium

that turns the self into a vessel of divine love (Anjum 9). In contemporary Indian debates on national conservatism and gender ideology, these results disrupt the notion that gender fluidity is an indicator of the cultural decay. Rather, the *Padavali* archive shows that gender multiplicity is historically an indicator of spiritual depth, theological prosperity, and affective richness. In an atmosphere, where queer identities are frequently represented as threatening to national integrity, the medieval *Bhakti* traditions show that devotion and gender variance are not oppositional but rather mutually supportive (Vajpeyi 302). This challenges contemporary binaries that oppose religious tradition to queer subjectivity and implies that India's cultural flourishing has always been based on its ability to envision fluid, relational, and transformative subjectivities. When viewed in the light of queer, affective, and theological, these poetic experiments help to understand how premodern South Asian religious literatures incorporated the practices of gender fluidity and identity change well before such terms found their place in the modern theoretical vocabulary. What comes out of such close readings is not just the fact that male poets purport to be using feminine voices, but the fact that medieval Bengali *Bhakti* Movement developed a devotional epistemology where subjectivity itself was porous, shifting, and relational.

The performative act of adopting the voice of Radha is, therefore, not only an artistic tool but also an ontological experiment: when speaking as Radha, the devotee turns into Radha and in being Radha, he/she enters a state of proximity with Krishna. *Viraha*, this devotional becoming, is written in poetic metaphors of wound, fire, trembling, and transformation, being an effective means of displacing conventional presuppositions of the fixedness of gender (Chakravarty 2024, 92). Rather, gender is a spiritual mode, a way of accessing the divine, experiencing and internalizing it. This is exactly what the *Sahajiya* theology demands: that the supreme devotional states are when the fellow of the practice incorporates both male and female forces into a mystical androgyny (Czyzykowski 105).

Drawing from these insights, in a broader sense, one can state that these ideas dispel the enduring myth that premodern

religious traditions maintained unalterable, strict gender distinctions. Rather, the *Padavali* corpus demonstrates that gendered multiplicity was not just condoned but also exalted in the *Bhakti* tradition of medieval Bengal. It proves that gender fluidity did not contradict the religious orthodoxy but, on the contrary, could be in balance with it and even fueled by the devotional theology. This makes the present-day binaries that line queerness against religious tradition complex, as it demonstrates that numerous South Asian devotional movements had strong queer affective registers hundreds of years prior to the creation of the present discourses (Pillai 11; Lorea 28). Ultimately, this paper highlights the necessity of rediscovering marginalized devotional voices, and *Sahajiya* poets, those whose theologies of the body, desire and androgyny provide invaluable information into the historical and current zone of gendered spirituality. At an age when identity, embodiment, and belonging are a global topic of discussion, the *Padavali* tradition provides an inspiring point of departure: it shows how long gender has been a place of imaginative experimentation, and that spiritual practice can make radical possibilities of becoming other.

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