

---

**Williams, Tyler / Malhotra, Anshu / Hawley, John Stratton (Hg.):** *Text and Tradition in Early Modern North India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press 2018. XLII, 448 S. 8°. Hardbd. ₹ 1395,00. ISBN 978-0-19-947886-6.

Besprochen von **Hans Harder**: Heidelberg / Deutschland,  
E-Mail: h.harder@uni-heidelberg.de

<https://doi.org/10.1515/olzg-2022-0086>

This edited volume is the latest outcome of a long-term cooperation, dating at least from the 1980s, among an international group of scholars interested in precolonial literary production in New Indo-Aryan languages of India. The series of workshops and conferences has been documented in many publications, such as the volumes edited by Monika Thiel-Horstmann,<sup>1</sup> Mohan K. Gautam and Godard Hendrik Schokker,<sup>2</sup> Monika Horstmann<sup>3</sup> and Imre Bangha.<sup>4</sup> The present book originated in a conference in Shimla in 2012. Initially mostly focussed on Bhakti

---

**1** *Bhakti in Current Research, 1979–1982. Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Early Devotional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages, St. Augustin, 19–21 March 1982.* (Collectanea Instituti Anthropos 30.) Berlin: D. Reimer Verlag 1983.

**2** *Bhakti in Current Research 1982–85. Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Devotional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages, Noordwijkerhout 1985.* (Kern Institute Miscellanea 10.) Lucknow/Ghaziabad/Delhi: Indo-European Publishers 2000.

**3** *Bhakti in Current Research, 2001–2003. Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference on Early Devotional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages, Heidelberg, 23–26 July 2003.* (South Asian Studies 44.) New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors 2006.

**4** *Bhakti Beyond the Forest. Current Research on Early Modern Literatures in North India, 2003–2009. Papers Presented at the Tenth International Bhakti Conference Early Modern Literatures in North India Held at Sapientia, Hungarian University of Transylvania, Miercurea*

research, the group has somewhat widened its scope over the years to include concerns such as historiography in ‘vernacular’ languages, epic literature of the *rīti* type, the role of music in lyrical corpora, etc. The roughly 450 pages of the volume reviewed contain chapters by altogether 21 authors and cover quite a range of areas, topics and concerns. As Tyler Williams and Anshu Malhotra point out in the “Introduction”, the book features literary developments from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries in not less than seven languages: Sanskrit, Persian, Bengali, Avadhi, Braj Bhasha, Urdu, Marwari, and Gujarati.<sup>5</sup> The introduction and many of the individual chapters relate to Sheldon Pollock’s scheme of vernacularisation, and the book’s contents are grouped under four sections: “Between Cosmopolitan and *Bhāṣā*”, “Poetic Genres and Personalities”, “History in Hindi”, “*Sampraday* and Beyond”. The historical label of “early modernity” is used throughout the book to refer to the time from the fifteenth (or even thirteenth) to the eighteenth centuries, adopting a not very old practice of applying this term to South Asian literary history, and “highlighting some significant ways in which an Indian ‘ecumene’, to use Christopher Bayly’s term, began to shape a public life” (p. xxviii).

Part One is spearheaded by Imre Bangha’s “The Emergence of Hindi Literature: From Transregional Maru-Gurjar to Madhyadeśī Narratives”, in which the author invokes an impressive panorama of early literature in traditions classed as Apabhramsha, Avadhi, Braj, Sadhukkari, Rekhta, etc. He then proceeds with an overview and linguistic discussion of old Gujarati texts written in Maru-Gurjar – a term he takes from Jain scholars – from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. He argues that this is whence in the fourteenth century *madhyadeśī bhāṣā* (i. e. the later-day ‘Hindi’, a term he simultaneously problematises and asserts) literature evolved through a number of shifts and spill-overs: “However obscured this tradition may be today, it contains the earliest known literary works in the Hindi belt that can be considered to be at the fountainhead of literature in the largest language of India” (p. 25).

Arthur Dudley in his “Urdu as Persian: Some Eighteenth-Century Evidence on Vernacular Poetry as Language Planning” looks at the linguistic and literary continuum between Persian and Urdu, tracing how the latter assumed this name and shed the appellation *rēhtah*. Dudley provides a nuanced account of how the relation

between Persian and Urdu was redefined and eventually a clear dividing line drawn in the aesthetical debates among writers such as Saudā, Mīr, and particularly Ārzū (Sirāgud-dīn ‘Alī Ḥān). Interestingly, he also complicates the notion that Urdu was “more natural” than Persian, seemingly a commonplace claim in nationalist historiography.

Luther Obrock’s “Muslim *Mahākāvya*s: Sanskrit and Translation in the Sultanates” deals with three fifteenth-sixteenth century Sanskrit texts, the *Sulaimacarita* (being the biblical story of David and Bathsheba with *kāmaśāstric* allusions), the *Rājavinoda* (an exhortation of the Gujarati Sultan Maḥmūd Bēgarā), and the *Kathākaṭuka* (a Kashmiri Yūsuf-Zulaiḥā version with a Śaiva spin). Taking his inspiration from scholars such as Richard Eaton, Phillip Wagoner, Finbart Flood and Ronit Ricci, Obrock portrays Sanskrit as one of several players in a very multilingual set-up. Sheldon Pollock, the butt of some critical remarks in the “Introduction” for downscaling the role of Bhakti literature in vernacularisation, is again challenged by Obrock for his “death of Sanskrit” hypothesis (p. 59).

Samuel Wright (“Making Sense of *Bhāṣā* in Sanskrit: Rādhāmohan Ṭhakkur’s *Mahābhāvānusārīṇī-ṭikā* and Literary Culture in Early Eighteenth-Century Bengal”) studies Rādhāmohan Ṭhakkur’s Sanskrit commentary on his compilation of Bengali Vaiṣṇava *padābalī* named *Padāmṛtasamudra*. After an overview of the compilations of Vaiṣṇava verses around at that time and their respective qualities, Wright discusses the terminology (*saṃskṛta-* vs. *bhāṣā-/deśabhāṣā-*) the commentator uses for analysing the *pada*-s, and the way he resorts to established literary tropes, particularly *śleṣa-*, to explain what happens in the poetry (pp. 82 ff.). The author attributes such elevation of Bengali verse to literariness to Ṭhakkur’s scope “to codify the *kīrtan* as a formal genre in vernacular literary culture” (p. 90).

The last chapter in this section, Tyler Williams’ “Commentary as Translation: The *Vairāgya Vṛnd* of Bhagvandas Niranjani”, recovers a little-known seventeenth century text from Rajasthan that renders Bhartṭhari’s *Vairāgyaśataka* into Braj Bhasha. Williams deals first with the way the author and his peers, though not using any of the current terms for it, were aware of translating, as their apologies for such vernacular renderings show. He argues that in the given context such gestures only occur when literary merit is at stake, not in the case of purely religious motivations (p. 107). Williams sees the significance of the text in that it makes the cultural capital of Bhartṭhari’s craft available in the vernacular to “kings, princes and courtiers who were more comfortable in the vernacular”, and commentary/translation as an important practice “through which

<sup>5</sup> Ciuc, Romania between 22–24 July 2009. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Language names in this review are as a rule given in an Anglicised form.

‘Hindi literature’ was created in the early modern period” (pp. 114 f.).

Section Two is less cohesive than the other sections of the book, and contains a rather loose array of chapters with heterogeneous concerns. Raman P. Sinha in “Poetry in *Ragas* or *Ragas* in Poetry? Studies in the Concept of Poetic Communication” investigates the use of *rāgs* by various authors, implying that high diversity of *rāgs* corresponds to little breadth in themes (Mīrābāi) and vice versa (Kabīr). Stating that we cannot know how particular *rāgs* were executed in early modern times, Sinha complains that twentieth century singers often care little about the prescribed *rāgs* in the texts.

Next, Jaroslav Strnad’s contribution “Searching for the Source or Mapping the Stream? Some Text-Critical Issues in the Study of Medieval *Bhakti*” addresses early modern *Bhakti* literature from the angle of manuscriptology. Since urtext reconstructions are highly problematic, he argues that intertextual links and manifold textual loans between various traditions are a more promising area of exploration. To enable such research, Strnad calls for the digitisation of large corpora of texts.

Issues of historical authorship also concern Hiroko Nagasaki: in her chapter on “Duality in the Language and Literary Style of Raskhan’s Poetry”, she examines the hypothesis that Raṣḥān/Ras’khān, allegedly a Pathan from Delhi who converted to Vaiṣṇavism, was two persons. Nagasaki analyses his metres and Sufi and *Bhakti* imagery to conclude that she is not convinced by the “duality” thesis.

In “Religious Syncretism and Literary Innovation: New Perspectives on *Bhakti* and *Rasas* in the *Vijñānagītā* by Keshavdas”, Stefania Cavaliere studies a sixteenth century ‘Hindi’ adaptation of Krishnamitra’s *Prabodhacandrodaya*, an allegorical fight between *viveka-* and *mahāmoha-*. Cavaliere’s special concern is to see how Keśav’dās relates *Bhakti* to the nine (not eight) *rasa*-s, and to portray his stance as a syncretism between monistic (Vedānta) and dualistic (*Bhakti*) traditions.

John E. Cort (“‘This Is How We Play Holi’: Allegory in North Indian Digambar Jain Holi Songs”) looks at the Jaina reception of Holi songs. He describes Holi rites and literary genres, and what Jainas found objectionable in them. However, in order to be able to incorporate this essential cultural given, the author argues, Jainas built up a counter-tradition. Starting with Banār’sidās (1586–1643) and then prominently in Dyānat’rāy’s works, Holi motifs were allegorised into a battle between, for instance, *moh* and *vivek*, or *sumati* and *cetan*. Cort projects these efforts as strategies of ‘taming’ Holi and of softening its subversions: “Saguṇ poets have produced Holi songs that are in many

ways quite similar to those of the nirguṇ poets, reminding us that the saguṇ-nirguṇ distinction, while heuristically useful at times, can also obscure as much as it reveals” (p. 211).

Teiji Sakata, in “Hindi *Bārahmāsā* Tradition: From Narpati Nālha to Present-Day Folk Songs and Popular Publications”, presents a survey of the importance of the *bārah’māsā* tradition “in Hindi Literary Works” (p. 219). He juxtaposes classical *bārah’māsā* examples (Mīrābāi, Keśav’dās et al.) to folk songs and recent popular publications, demonstrating that the genre can be brought down to minimal requirements such as the number of twelve stanzas, as in a *bārah’māsā* on Indira Gandhi. But Sakata insists that even in such cases the *bārah’māsā* is held together as a genre by “a definite *bārahmāsā* feel” (p. 229).

The third section of the book brings together chapters that re-examine texts with historical content and strive for a proper reading and reception of the same. William R. Pinch (“War and Succession: Padmakar, Man Kavi, and the Gosains in Bundelkhand”) treats two late eighteenth century texts by Mān Kavi and Padmākar on the Gosains in Bundelkhand who had dethroned the long succession of Rajput rulers in the area. The authors’ concern with norms of genre and poetics, Williams argues, “should not negate the many ways in which *rīti* poetry met the needs of history” (p. 250), supplying the material for a thicker historiography of the narrated events.

Similarly, Allison Busch in her chapter on “The Poetics of History in Padmakar’s *Himmatbahādurvirudāvalī*”, provides a circumspect analysis of the generic features (*viruda-*, *kāvya-*, *praśasti-*) of the text in order to show how in Padmākar, the historian and the poet come together. In particular, Busch points out the didactic aspects of the poem, stressing that the poet could and did assume the role of an advisor telling the king what his duties were, and thus contesting the image of the court poet as sycophant.

Again focussing on Padmākar, Dalpat Rajpurohit (“Making the War Come Alive: Ḍiṅgal Poetry and Padmakar’s *Himmatbahādurvirudāvalī*”) argues against a distinction between ‘Rajasthani’ and ‘Hindi’ literary history in claiming that Padmākar inherited much from the Ḍiṅgal tradition. He demonstrates how various Braj poets adopted the *vagaṇ/sagāi* style of war descriptions, from metres and imagery down to particular phonetic features such as consonantal gemination (pp. 288 f.)

Shreekant Kumar Chandan contributes an interesting chapter on “Alam: A Poet of Many Worlds”, a poet who joined the Mughal campaign in the Deccan in the late seventeenth century, and converted from a “Bhasha” orientation in his writing to “Dakhani Urdu”. Chandan thus

complicates the notion of *bhāṣā*, which otherwise in the volume refers collectively to non-Sanskrit and non-Persian idioms of poetic composition (p. 307 note 1):

I prefer to use the term ‘Bhasha’ over ‘Hindi’ or ‘Braj’ because the poets of the concerned period refer to their language as *bhāṣā* or *bhākhā*, as opposed to ‘Hindi’ or ‘Brajbhāṣā’ (which is of later coinage). Additionally, the term ‘Braj’ tends to restrict Bhasha literary culture to the Braj geography and also comes with the baggage of suggesting predominantly devotional poetry. In contrast, Bhasha poetry is incredibly diverse, encompassing courtly poetry, love tales, war narratives, epic compositions, ethical discourse, and so on.

What remains a bit puzzling, however, is the editorial decision to include this contribution in the history section, for °Ālam’s historiographical ambitions, if any, are clearly not the author’s concern.

A little closer again to the theme of “History in Hindi” is Heidi Pauwels’ “The Pursuit of Pilgrimage, Pleasure, and Military Alliances: Nāgarīdās’s *Tīrthānanda*”, devoted to Sāvant Siṃh of Kishangarh alias Nāg’rīdās’s autobiographical pilgrimage account from 1753. Sāvant was a potential ruler duped by his brother and sought Maratha allies during a campaign of warfare. Pauwels shows how the political journey was combined with pilgrimage to Vrindavan, in his case, and demonstrates how common such warfare-pilgrimage overlaps were in those days. She thus argues that pilgrimage was not contradictory to warfare, and that pilgrimage had much to do with pleasure, as indeed comes out strongly from her account of Nāg’rīdās’s text.

Section 4, finally, unites four contributions on Caitanyaite and Vallabhaite Bhakti traditions and communities, focussing on Vrindavan and Ahmedabad respectively. The first of these, “Gopal Bhatt: Carrier of *Bhakti* to the North”, is written by Shrivatsa Goswami, a prominent exponent of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism in Vrindavan. Goswami highlights the contribution of Gopāl Bhaṭṭ, <sup>6</sup> one of the six Gosvāmins, in the institutionalisation and ritualisation of Vaiṣṇavism in Vrindavan. Hailing from Srirangam (and deployed as Caitanya’s caretaker during the four months the latter spent at that temple), Gopāl Bhaṭṭ, argues Goswami, saw his role in Vrindavan as importing refined Bhakti culture and ritual from the South to the North. His discussion of two texts, the *Bhāgavatasandarbhā* (a theological treatise formulating the *acintyabhedābhedavāda*-) and the *Haribhakti-vilāsa* or *Bhāgavadbhaktivilāsa* (a lengthy work on Bhakti

rules, rituals, behaviour etc.), establishes Gopāl Bhaṭṭ as an important founding figure of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism in Vrindavan.

Swapna Sharma (“Gadadhar Bhatt and His Family: Facilitators of the Song of *Bhakti* in Vrindavan”) traces the life and family history of Gadādhara Bhaṭṭ, another early notable amongst Vrindavan-based Vaiṣṇavas who, like Gopāl Bhaṭṭ, had come from the South (Telangana). She particularly points out how Gadādhara Bhaṭṭ’s successors brought about and have maintained a synthesis between Caitanyaite and Vallabhaite traditions, and describes Vrindavan as a confluence of North India, Bengal and South India (p. 362).

John Stratton Hawley, in his “Bhaṭṭs in Braj”, follows a number of Bhaṭṭs, i. e. Brahmins mainly from South India, to Vrindavan, including Gadādhara and his successors, Vallabh, as well as Rūp and Sanātan Gosvāmi,<sup>7</sup> Bengalis with roots in Karnataka who had been de-Brahmanised through Mughal occupation and re-Brahmanised in Braj. Hawley sheds light on the early bridges and later rifts between Vallabhaites and Caitanyaites, and grants insight into the immense process of institution-building in the Braj country by reversing the perspective and foregrounding not *sampradāya*-, but Bhaṭṭ identity.

The section and the book as a whole end with Emilia Bachrach’s chapter on “Religious Reading and Everyday Life”, an anthropologist’s account of contemporary *vārtā satsaṅg* meetings in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The author first provides an introduction to the texts *Caurāsī vaiṣṇavan kī vārtā*, *Do sau bāvan vaiṣṇavan kī vārtā*, and a Gujarati *ḍhol* poem, and then describes *satsaṅg* meetings, recitations of these texts, and the reflections and discussion of those hagiographical materials in relation to the members’ personal lives which she recorded on the spot.

The book is on the whole carefully edited, with some minor exceptions, such as in Rajpurohit’s chapter (*ri* instead of *ṛ*, inconsistent spellings such as “*navrasa*” on p. 282 vs. “*nava-rasa*” on p. 290; also the transliteration of original passages seems unreliable); in Sharma’s chapter, too, diacritics seem to have been introduced later by the editors, apparently not always correctly. There are also a few typos such as “*jukt*” for “*jukta*” (p. 358), “*syngār*” for “*śṛṅgār*” (p. 360), etc. The editors’ convention of introducing terms in italics at their first appearance, not thereafter, makes for a smoother optical impression of the pages, but is sometimes confusing.

The four sections of the book, one or two misfits aside, grant thematic cohesion, and some contributions (particularly in Parts Two and Four) are closely related

<sup>6</sup> The Bengali form of the surname is Bhaṭṭa, but in accordance with the usage in the work reviewed the North Indian form is adhered to here.

<sup>7</sup> All the name forms here are North Indian too.

to each other and make good continuous reading. The authors have different opinions about the validity of the umbrella label of 'Hindi' for some of the linguistic varieties and textual corpora discussed in the book, but on the whole this problem is tackled in a transparent way, e. g. by using the term, when they do, in inverted commas. *Text and Tradition* is certainly an important contribution to the literary and religious developments in early modern Northern India. It assembles quite a range of sound scholarly studies, and appealed to the reviewer as a valid, state-of-the-art sampling of present-day academic research in this field.