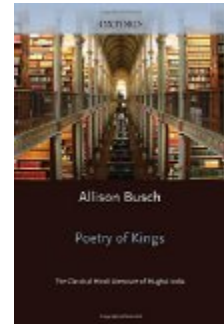


Allison Busch. *Poetry of Kings: The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India*. South Asia Research Series. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 368 pp. \$74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-976592-8.

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Hindi Literature in the Mughal Era

In the sixteenth century, the regional Rajput kingdoms of Gwalior and, from the end of the century, Orcha, both in the central part of northern India, emerged as centers of vernacular poetry in Brajbhasha, and particularly in Orcha, miniature painting (often named “Malwa painting”) that illuminated Brajbhasha poetry and poetic manuals. The flamboyance of the regional courtly culture developed in political and cultural interdependence between the Mughal imperial court and the regional kingdoms. While for the arts this imperial/sub-imperial interdependence and cross-fertilization have been examined in considerable depth, if not exhaustively, Brajbhasha literary production at the courts is now addressed, for the first time comprehensively, by Allison Busch in her book *Poetry of Kings*.

Busch examines the vernacular poetic tradition in Brajbhasha as it reached its zenith under conditions of cultural interdependence, conditions not just concomitant but momentous for the rise of the Brajbhasha courtly literary tradition, as the author argues. Brajbhasha poetics was raised to an unprecedented height by Keśavdās, who worked under the patronage of the Bundela court of Orcha. The scholarly vernacular poetry that he wrote and for which he, in a magisterial fashion, formulated the rules in two poetic manuals bears the designation *rīti*, literally “method,” hence poetry following “methodological” poetics. *Rīti* poetry was first of all court poetry, but its tradition was taken far afield into wider milieus until it met its end toward the end of the nineteenth century.

The *rīti* tradition did not fare well in a period that witnessed the emergence of literary histories as projects of nationalism. Hindi literary history came to sideline *rīti* literature—courtly literature being ipso facto suspect—as *l’art pour l’art*, decadent, frivolous, and the opposite of what was demanded now: vigor, spontaneity, and a social reformist didactic mood, in brief usefulness for nation building. Hindi literature was felt and needed to be liberated from the shackles of outmoded traditions. The literary scholar Ram Chandra Shukla designed a periodization of Hindi literature in which *rīti* was viewed more or less as the degenerate issue of a now exhausted but formerly more vital tradition, namely, *bhakti*. *Rīti* did not figure as it should, as early modern, but was labeled medieval, hence requiring supersession by the truly modern. Shukla’s view has tenaciously dominated textbooks long into the last century. The interest in *rīti* has, however, abided, both in literary studies and in art historical studies on painting, where *rīti* texts—and particularly the manuals of Keśavdās—met with almost insatiable reception.

Busch’s focus is on Keśavdās, the matchless luminary of *rīti* poetics. In chapter 1, she reviews his great poetic manuals *Rasikpriyā* (1591) and *Kavipriyā* (1601) as well as his minor poetic writing and poetry. In chapter 2, she examines the principles of *rīti*. She then widens the focus to capture the intellectual milieu in which court poets worked and interacted (chapter 3) to subsequently address the issue of the link between imperial and sub-

imperial literary culture (chapter 4). From this she moves her focus to the regional courts who were, the foremost patrons of Brajbhasha literature, with the intention to elucidate the intellectual dynamics at play in the regional courts, whose rulers occupied high status at the Mughal court (chapter 5). The last, sixth chapter is devoted to the fate of *rīti* literature in the colonial and postcolonial periods.

Emphasizing the political dimensions in which the oeuvre of Keśavdās inserts itself, the author examines how, in the course of his literary production, the poet subtly adapted his art to the political requirements of the Orcha rulers who during his time rose to an influential position at the imperial court. She shows how Keśavdās building on Sanskrit scholarly poetic models and the tradition of Brajbhasha poetry cultivated in Gwalior used the model of the righteous divine king Rāma to extol the patron he served—as was the task of a court poet, thus underpinning the ascendancy of the Bundela king at the Mughal court.

The connection of the Bundela king with the Mughal court brings in the issue of the Brajbhasha poets and Brajbhasha poetry in that web of power. Addressing this link is a great merit of the study. For Keśavdās, this is particularly salient because he also wrote a panegyric of Emperor Jahangir. Analyzing the testimonia, Busch comes to the conclusion that there is no conclusive evidence of Keśavdās's access to the Mughal court. Two minor corrections seem apposite here. First, while discussing the role of the high-ranking courtier Rājā Bīrbal as possible mediator, Busch cites Kavipriyā, but produces a contradiction between her translation and the original text by adding unnecessary quotation marks in the original that give the Brajbhasha phrasing an unequivocality it actually lacks. Second, Busch's point that in Kavipriyā 6.76 the Orcha prince Indrajīt is mentioned in tandem with the influential Rājā Bīrbal is not confirmed by the passage that eulogizes the paragons of largesse, all of them divine with the exception of two: Amarsingh of Mewar and Rājā Bīrbal, Indrajīt being absent from the list.

Busch rightly dwells on the issue of Brajbhasha poets working in the penumbra of the Mughal court. While Brajbhasha poetry was avidly received in court culture, it is hard to know to what consequence its political content was digested. The brisk criticism some Brajbhasha poets articulated of Mughal rule are not known to have met with reproof. Was this literature read at the Mughal court with different eyes, passing as politically inconsequential?

While laying out the principles of Brajbhasha aesthetics (chapter 2), Busch comprehensively summarizes how they represented a science that had to be mastered by both poets and connoisseurs. This is what conferred high status on the works of Keśavdās. Mastering these gave access to participation in the recreational (but not leisurely) facets of court life in which a courtier's position was also confirmed by his aesthetic competence. The ability to absorb and reproduce *rīti* poetry ranged as a marker of genuine belonging to the courtly sphere. Discussing Keśavdās's impact on disciples, Busch naturally mentions his favorite woman disciple, the courtesan Pravi. The figure (2.1, p. 73) of the PraviN garden and palace of Orcha, however, abets deceptive romantic conclusions. Keśavdās's PraviN was not raised to the honor of figuring in the highly political architectural language as it was articulated by King Birsingh in the space of Orcha's palace and temple complex. According to the historian Edward Leland Rothfarb, the PraviN palace and garden rather postdate Shah Jahan and may be attributed to the regnal period of King IndramaNi (1672–75).[1]

Busch discusses the performance conditions of Brajbhasha poetry and the ways in which poetic creativity unfolded within the rigidly regulated scientific poetic system. This is of prime importance, both as a topic in its own right and for the fate of the Brajbhasha tradition in a colonial and postcolonial world with radically different literary sensibilities. Short, single-stanza poems, arranged according to the *rīti* aesthetic categories, operated differently from epic poems, which were meant for the comparatively relaxed recreational royal assemblies. Single-stanza poetry demanded that the listener or reader apply himself studiously to them. They were hard, delicious nuts to crack, and to cope with them served the aesthetic perfection of aspiring poets and cultured courtiers or other elites alike. It is not by chance that Rasikpriyā and Kavipriyā and a number of similar texts by other authors were illuminated by miniatures. Education in poetic aesthetics and the arts fused with contemplation in the erotic mood, which blended with the religiously colored bhakti mood. The actual intimate gatherings of connoisseurs became a popular topic especially in much later Pahārī painting, where groups of connoisseurs are shown passing around paintings or reciting and responding to stanzas from *rīti* poetry, these stanzas being decipherable for the delighted spectator in the paintings that illustrate them.[2] Busch describes the various registers of performance of Brajbhasha poetry and the subtle ways in which poets made creative adjustments and brought together the Indic and Persianate linguistic registers. This is a del-

icate exercise, for it can be assumed—though often not conclusively proved—that the *rīti* poets made conscious choices from the alternate registers, even when using by that time long established topoi and phrases in which the Indic and the Persianate registers were fused. Speaking of creative adjustment, a certain linguistic liberty can be noticed, but not in all of the cases mentioned: Keśavdās does not change the phonology of the word *bhūmi* (the earth) to adapt it to alliteration with /p/, for the resultant word *puhumi* is not derived from *bhūmi*, but is a vernacular equivalent of *pRthivī* (p. 92).

As Busch points out, the self-perception of *rīti* poets, one among the various categories of intellectuals at the early modern courts—though often also serving in other functions in the court system—is reflected in their referring to themselves as a family of poets who act as transmitters of a scholarly aesthetic tradition originally deriving from Sanskrit, but now superseding Sanskrit by a refined Brajhasha system. She points to networks spreading widely over northern India and by this raises a point deserving further probing. South Asian social organization exhibits typically professional or other group organizations. Literati and scholars of various descriptions were organized similarly and entertained networks all over the subcontinent. What was at stake for each of these and how they negotiated their position also vis-à-vis each other has been intensely discussed of late (Sheldon Pollock and Rosalind O’Hanlon). In connection with this, Busch’s examination of the *rīti* poets’ corporate self-perception forms a relevant and original contribution within this ongoing discourse.

In the colonial period, the model of courtly poetry was superseded by totally different concepts and modes of literary production and reception of literature, enhanced by the accessibility of literature in print. This is an oft-told story. The ideal of scholarly training in literary aesthetics, considered mandatory for both poets and audience (and thereby naturally predicated on an elite culture from where it was eventually disseminated also to the common public), was superseded by an understanding of the poet (*kavi*) as divinely inspired and identified with the Vedic *vipra*, conceived as an ecstatic seer. At work was a romantic concept of spontaneous creativity read back into the hoary past. Past and present now formed the axis along which vitality and spontaneous, emotional outpour of genius operated. A con-

current, complementary concept was that of literature as a medium of civic education and infusion of vigor into the new, nationalistically oriented Indian. In this program, *rīti* literature represented the diametrically other, decadent, and sensuous, and was seen as diverting attention from nation building. This went hand in hand with new reading habits. The arena of literature was no longer a gathering of connoisseurs in a highly stratified society, but access to literature became more common, its function being often avowedly moral edification. “Everyman’s Library” had no use for *rīti*. A feverish, hothouse rehabilitation of *rīti* under the dictatorial aegis of the literary historian Nagendra proved abortive.

Busch’s elegantly written book traces the *rīti* tradition up to its expiry. Beyond exploring the dimensions of Keśavdās’s oeuvre, the special achievement of her study lies in examining the *rīti* tradition while placing it squarely in the social and political context of its period, taking stock of it as a joint project of imperial and sub-imperial patronage, and providing a comprehensive treatment of *rīti* principles. This book will be welcome by everyone wishing to familiarize themselves with this tradition, for the discussion of *rīti* literature has hitherto been dispersed over a disciplinary and chronologically wide range of studies.

Notes

[1]. Edward Leland Rothfarb, *Orchha and Beyond: Bundela Architecture and Art under Raja Bir Singh Dev* (Mumbai: The Marg Foundation, 2012), 98.

[2]. For miniature painting inspected in gatherings of connoisseurs, see, for example, two Kangra miniatures in B. N. Goswamy and Eberhard Fischer, “Purkhu of Kangra,” in *Masters of Indian Painting*, ed. by M. C. Beach, E. Fischer, and B. N. Goswamy (Zurich: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 2011), 2:724, 231. For poetry by Bihāri illustrated by and rendered verbatim in a miniature painting showing a gathering of connoisseurs, I refer to a Pahāri miniature in the unpublished collection of Eva and Konrad Seitz.

H-Asia review editor’s note on missing diacriticals: Horstmann sent her review with the standard diacriticals needed to transcribe Indic fonts into Roman. But software deficiencies do not allow their insertion here. I have therefore used ‘R’ (*pRthivi*) to indicate the vocalic ‘r’ and ‘N’ to indicate the retroflex nasal (PraviN).

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