



Pankaj Jha. *A Political History of Literature: Vidyapati and the Fifteenth Century.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Illustrations, tables, chart. 272 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-948955-8.

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A Political History of Literature: Vidyapati and the Fifteenth Century is a significant contribution to the growing body of scholarship on the “long” fifteenth century.[1] This term designates the period that was already underway with the disintegration of the Delhi Sultanate, and certainly by the sack of Delhi in 1398 by the Turco-Mongol emperor Timur. When Babur defeated the last Lodi sultan of Delhi in 1526, and more precisely with Humayun’s return to India in 1555, the long fifteenth century ended—and the Mughal Empire, which took great pride in its Timurid heritage, began. Situated between two empires, the long fifteenth century is sometimes perceived as having little historical significance. This book argues, in contrast, that often some of the most innovative literary cultures flourished “in the cracks between the great dynastic periods” and in small centers (p. 37). The book also suggests that the ideological engagements of the Mughal Empire cannot be fully understood without grappling with the fifteenth century and learning from the historical imperatives this multilingual literary culture had for the subsequent political formations.

The book uncovers the outstanding versatility of the fifteenth-century poet-scholar and polyglot Vidyapati with three of his texts, composed in Sanskrit and Apabhraṃśa, and explores “deep histories” that lay behind literary compositions. The

book has five chapters organized in two parts: “Contexts” and “Texts.” The first two chapters in the “Contexts” part focus on Vidyapati and his career, the cultural zone of Mithila in north Bihar, and the literary and political contexts of the fifteenth century. Each of the later three chapters in the “Texts” part are rich studies of three of Vidyapati’s texts, namely, *Likhanāvalī*, *Puruṣaparīkṣā*, and *Kīrttilatā*. Both parts are preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion.

Vidyapati has been much appropriated in the ever-growing folklore in the region of Mithila where he is a cultural icon who forms the modern Maithili identity. In Bihar there is a town named after him, Vidyapati Nagar (or Vidyapati Dhāma), where monuments and a memorial are dedicated to the poet-scholar and commercial outlets bear his name. Many of us get a blurry picture of Vidyapati’s career in the literary histories of north Indian vernaculars. Take for example the histories of Hindi literature where Vidyapati is placed in the “miscellaneous” (*phuṭkar*) section of what is known as the “primal age” (*Adi kal*) of Hindi literature. Evidently, the various topics on which Vidyapati composed, in several languages and scripts, shows that no modern labels—devotee or court poet—can fully capture the vibrant career of the author. Therefore, Pankaj Jha’s work is commendable as he brings into light the author, historical as

well as legendary, situating him in the growing discussions on the fifteenth century. In this engagement of a historian with literature, Jha draws on Sanskrit, Persian, Apabhraṃśa, and Hindavi textual traditions in mapping out the multilingual literary cultures of the fifteenth century—the essence of which Vidyapati embodied. Jha strives to go beyond what he calls the “surgical strikes on texts to extract ‘history’ that bypasses the literariness of a composition,” since he considers that “a literary expression, among other things, is an intervention in the dynamic flow of history: a wager in an ongoing conversation—real or imagined” (p. xxiv). Vidyapati’s writing provides a different perspective on this period, where most historians have relied primarily on Persian chronicles. Thematically, Vidyapati’s oeuvre is wide-ranging, as Jha writes: “there was law, love, writing, political ethics, biography, rituals, tantricism, ‘geography’, romantic play, ritual donations (*daṇa*), and a vast corpus of songs for a variety of occasions” (p. xxi).

In the first chapter, “Vidyapati and Mithila,” Jha helpfully provides us a detailed profile of the poet-scholar’s multilingual corpus. Eleven out of his sixteen texts are in Sanskrit, three in Avahatṭha/Apabhraṃśa, and one is in multiple languages—Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Maithili. His songs (*paḍs*), later compiled into a collection (*paḍāvalī*), which form the base of Vidyapati’s fame, are in Maithili. Jha considers Mithila an “atypical” region as it was away from major trade routes and political centers. This small chieftaincy has remained a sort of semiautonomous principality under the three major sultanates of the “long” fifteenth century: Delhi, Jaunpur, and Bengal. The region had an astonishing tradition of scholars, and many luminaries flourished before Vidyapati. This is where the Navya-nyāya (new logic) philosophical tradition was founded and important works on Dharmaśāstra and vernacular scholarship were written. Vidyapati’s own lineage had fine scholars, such as the early fourteenth-century Sanskrit author Caṇḍeśvara who composed a treatise on

shaping the state and also wrote many books on law.

The most striking discussion in the second chapter is the several ways Jha theorizes multilingualism and its specific characters in the fifteenth century. The most common polymorphous form of multilingualism can be seen in the registers chosen by Vidyapati, wherein verb endings are slightly modified and meters and genres are “tweaked” across languages. Mixing languages and stock vocabulary from several languages in a text is also seen in this period—similar to how the eighteenth-century rhetorician Bhikhāridās described Brajhasha. Another way to comprehend multilingualism in the fifteenth century is to consider it polycentric, since it grew in bigger centers of power, such of Gujarat, Malwa, and Gwalior, as well as “outlying” areas (in Jha’s phrase), such as Mithila and Kashmir (p. 232). A third feature of multilinguality in this century, Jha notes, is that it affected major languages as well other speech forms that developed in vernacular languages. Being multidirectional where Persian and Sanskrit would “influence” and take inspirations from the vernaculars was the fourth feature of multilingualism in this century. The latter is a more elusive form of multilingualism where some authors mention their sources, but many do not. Jha proposes that “a historian can trace such forms of embedded multilingualism through a careful exploration of the intertextuality of extant compositions. In other cases, it is important to ‘extrapolate’, as realistically as possible, life outside of the text” (p. 65). Jha also shows that multilingualism was not just a characteristic of the fifteenth century but was happening through a longer period and became more visible from the thirteenth century onward. Vidyapati was situated in this kind of context, and each of the next three chapters are devoted to three unique works of the poet.

Vidyapati wrote his *Likhanāvalī* (handbook on writing) at the request of his patron Purāditya Girinārāyaṇa early in the fifteenth century. This San-

skrit handbook was a guide to the scribes on how to frame state documents and letters. It consists of model letters written for one's equal, inferior and superior, as well as letters for business purposes. Jha describes that the Arthaśāstra of Kautilya has detailed reflections on the art of writing state writs and documents and there was a strong tradition of framing copper plate inscriptions in Sanskrit, which certainly resonate with Vidyapati's work, but the very idea of putting together a compendium of such model letters by the poet barely has a precedent in Sanskrit. There is another fifteenth-century Sanskrit manual on framing such writing, the *Lekhapaddhati* compiled in Gujarat. Jha suggests that *Likhanāvalī* should be placed in a different political context than the *Lekhapaddhati*, as it uses a greater amount of Perso-Arabic vocabulary. The Insha tradition in Persian of compiling model documents and letters for scribes was a distinct genre by the thirteenth century and the Sufis cultivated *maktubat* tradition to inscribe instructions. The organization scheme and discourses in the model letters of Vidyapati resonate more with the Persian tradition. However, Jha makes an important remark that it is hard to assume that Vidyapati knew Persian, and more correctly, "these erudite traditions [Sanskrit and Persian] had already been somewhat quotidianized and probably sublimated by the fourteenth and fifteenth century into a richer, more complex, and more accessible pool of literary resources, cutting across linguistic boundaries" (p. 120). Another important observation Jha makes, drawing from the discourse of the model letters, is that "the processes of the cultivation of prized skills, the fructification of grand ideas, in short the disciplinary formations—ideational as much as coercive—continued to gather even as scholars and poets competed for patronage from smaller, often subordinate, states with humbler ambitions. It is only fair to assume that political imagination did not necessarily shrink with imperial fortunes" (p. 129).

The next chapter is on Vidyapati's *Puruṣaparīkṣā* (The Test of a Man), where Jha situates the text

within the ideals of gender, caste, and politics of the time. Written for king Śivsiṃha of Tirhut, this Sanskrit treatise is a compilation of forty-four didactic stories illustrating prime traits of recommendable manly conduct. Such stories in Vidyapati's words teach the young to appreciate *naya*—righteous or virtuous conduct—that resembles the Sanskrit tradition of *nīti* or ethics. Besides the Sanskrit *nīti* texts—of which the chapter presents a rich discussion—the concept of manliness (*Jawānmardī*) for political agents was also prevalent in Persian tradition, which Jha notes should not be contrasted only with the feminine. The protagonists of all stories in the treatise are twice-born men. Vidyapati deployed the norms of the Varṇa system for social harmony and stability of political power. The striking feature of Vidyapati, Jha says, is that in his epistemological world the truth of the Vedas and Śāstra should be deployed empirically. In Vidyapati's pragmatic and "this worldly" approach he wove "notions of social and perhaps 'religious' propriety with political power" (p. 167). Due to such vision of inculcating values of ideal male conduct the text was appealing in modern India. It also appeared in print in London in 1826 and George Grierson translated it in the early twentieth century.

The last chapter of the book maps out the many worlds of *Kīrttilatā*, Vidyapati's only major extant work in Avahaṭṭha. Vidyapati mentioned his language choice vividly in the text, however, the Apabhraṃśa/Avahaṭṭha mystery seldom received scholarly attention. Jha lucidly discusses the development of Avahaṭṭha and its difference with Apabhraṃśa concluding that "what distinguished Avahaṭṭha from Apabhraṃśa, it would appear, among other things was an increased number of *tatsam* words—loanwords from Sanskrit. Equally striking was the inclusion of a large number of Persian words" (p. 195). *Kīrttilatā* is a tale of the author's patron Kirttisimha's journey to Jaunpur on foot, together with his brother, to seek help from the reigning Sharqi sultan (*Paṭisāha*). With this aid, Kirttisimha wins back the throne of Tirhut

from the usurper Malik Arsalan and the Sharqi overlord “performs” the coronation ceremony for Kirttiṣiṃha. The text draws inspirations from epic-literary context of the Ramayana as well as from the Sanskrit *caritas* or historical narratives. Though the protagonist is a chieftain ruling a small territory and his political aspirations are humble, the text nonetheless sets high moral and ethical ideals for the ruler. The text brings Indic ideals of *puruṣārtha* close to those from the pre-Islamic Persian practice, such as kissing the feet of the emperor (*Pāṭisaḥa pabush*). Eulogizing the Sharqi sultanate as abode of authority to which many kings are paying their allegiances, local rājās hopefully and fearfully look for royal grace, the *pāṭisaḥa* protects dharma and his reign extends to limitless frontiers, he has performed *digvijayas*, all were the conditions of imperium that Vidyapati idealized and aspired for.

Jha moves beyond the usual practice of investigating “influences” on literature in suggesting that genres and their histories, the forms and organization of texts, language choice and words, all factor to a great degree in poets’ engagement with different literary traditions. This is true with the multilingual and cross-pollinating, yet parallel, literary worlds of the fifteenth century. Vidyapati’s political imagination of the imperium and the various forms of multilingualism in which his texts were situated bring together the literary sensibilities and ideologies of Sanskrit, Hindavi, and Persian, which were quite similar to what the Mughal Empire cultivated and thrived on a century later. This book is an example of rigorous scholarship and should be read widely.

Note

[1]. Francesca Orsini and Samira Sheikh, eds., *After Timur Left: Culture and Circulation in Fifteenth-Century North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014). This volume “investigates the links between politics and cultural production” as manifested in literary forms, genres, and language choices (p. 2). It contains thirteen essays by a

range of scholars based in Europe, the United States, India, and the United Kingdom.

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