

INDIAN POETRY – Postclassical Period

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Contents

Part I : Early Postclassical Period

Part II : Late Postclassical period

Early postclassical poetry

Overview

Two major developments in poetry occurred during the early postclassical period. The first, which occurred in both Sanskrit and Tamil, is the composition of myths (in verse) and poetry under the influence of devotionalism. Although devotionalism (or *bhakti*) began in the classical period, it flourished somewhat later when a new religiosity emerged in which an individual worshipper imagined and nurtured a direct bond with a specific god or goddess. Contemplation of abstract spiritual ends gave way to this more active engagement with deities who were given human-like qualities of generosity and compassion. The second major development in this period, which is more particular to Sanskrit, is the continuation of the *kavya* tradition, especially *maha* ('great') *kavya* poems, which themselves are influenced by the rise of devotionalism.

Sanskrit myth

Genre While there is no precise literary genre that corresponds to the (perpetually misunderstood) Western category of 'myth,' most of what we would consider mythic is contained somewhere in the vast compendia of the *puranas* ('old,' 'of old times'). Creation myths were already told in the Vedic texts, and new ones (often variants of earlier versions) were composed during later centuries, right up to the early twentieth century. Unlike the Vedas, however, the myths were never memorised, word-for-word, and many different versions of each myth exist.

History As with many Indian literary forms, myths were not created by a single author, written on paper or palm leaf. Instead, these massive texts (ranging from 15,000 to 80,000 verses) drew on earlier and contemporary oral tradition, including the Upanishads, the *Dharma Sastras* and the great Sanskrit epics. In order to control this literary hydra, Sanskrit tradition has compiled a canon of 18 or 20 (depending on how you divide the texts) *maha* ('great') *puranas*, which were written, following earlier oral compositions, from about 250 CE to 900 CE. The oldest surviving myth text (of the *Skanda Purana*) is a Nepalese manuscript dated 810 CE.

Deities The majority of these myth texts are devoted to Visnu, while others tell the stories of Siva, Devi (the goddess) and Brahma. These four are the chief deities of classical Hinduism. The comparatively greater emphasis on Visnu in the myths reflects the preference of the Gupta rulers (4th-5th c. CE), when the earliest versions of many myths were composed.

Function It is often said that the *puranas* are more a tradition than a text. And as a traditional explanation of everything from the creation of the world to the details of a particular ritual, they are the reference books of Hinduism. If one has a question about anything in the Indian world—an historical event, the genealogy of a king, an astrological calculation or moral dilemma—these wide-ranging compendia provide the answer. Hindus, however, are usually more interested in the ritual efficacy of these mythic texts, their ability to breathe spirit into a stone statue and thus to enable a god or goddess to bestow favours on worshippers. Hindu myths also offer moral guidance, spectacle and, not least of all, entertainment.

Themes While the *puranas* do not have a linear narrative, they do circle around core themes. Stories of Visnu focus on the protective powers of his *avatars* (especially Rama), although later myths tell the story of love between Krishna and his consort Radha. The myths of Siva, and his wife (in various forms) and their children, provide the opportunity to domesticate the gods and to generate family drama. Siva himself is a figure of many aspects, including a fascinating dichotomy of the 'erotic-ascetic' (to use Wendy Doniger's phrase). Although a close conceptual relationship between sexual desire and bodily mortification is not exclusive to Hindu tradition, it is

elaborately articulated in the Saiva myths, again and again, as if the myth-makers are unable to resolve the paradox. If Visnu embodies grace and salvation, Siva represents power and passion. Devi, the goddess, also has many manifestations. As Kali, she is death. As Siva's wife, Parvati or Uma, she is protection. As Durga, she is the slayer of the buffalo-demon. As Visnu's wife, Lakshmi, she is wealth.

Etiological myths Many of these Sanskrit myths are etiological, that is, they give explanations, usually for the origin or appearance of things. Cosmogonic myths, for example, explain the creation of the world, from an egg, primeval ocean or deity. One of the best-known of these etiological myths, in the Saiva corpus, explain how Ganesa got his elephant head. When Parvati was bathing, she told her son to stand guard and prevent anyone from approaching. Siva (Parvati's husband) came near and chopped off the head of his impudent son who dared to order him to stop. The repentant husband then promised his angry wife that he would replace their son's head with the first one he could find. And that first head was on an elephant.

Sanskrit kavya

Post-Kalidasa Following Kalidasa, the great exponent of classical Sanskrit poetry and drama during the Gupta empire, Sanskrit poets continued to experiment. In particular, Kalidasa's successors wrote accomplished works in the *mahakavya* genre (which Kalidasa himself had perfected), usually by reworking material from the Sanskrit epics. While all these later poets pay homage to Kalidasa, and while most of them write competent and at times original material, they never surpass the master.

Magha Perhaps the most highly regarded of Kalidasa's successors was Magha, who lived in the seventh century CE and lived in a small court in Rajasthan. His most enduring work is *ShishupalaVadha*, a *mahākāvya* based on a story in the *Mahabharata*. Magha is much loved by critics and scholars, who praise his technical skills and verbal dexterity in deploying 23 different metres. The imprint of devotionalism is evident in this poem, in which the poet glorifies Visnu as the preserver who slays an evil king.

Other poets Bhatti (probably 7th c. CE) wrote *mahakavyas* based on episodes from the Rama story, the most famous being the *Ravanavadha*. Bharavi (probably 6th c. CE and probably from south India) wrote the *Kirātārjunīya*, modelled on earlier tellings of same story from the *Mahabharata* and considered one of the finest of the *mahakavyas*. Bana (7th c. CE), who was also a playwright, wrote poems collected under the title *Candisataka*, while Kumaradasa (7th c. CE) is remembered for his retelling of the 'rape' of Sita (*Janaki-harana*) from the Rama story. Lastly, we should mention Anandavardana, a ninth-century poet from Kashmiri who composed the *Devasataka*.

Tamil devotional poetry

History We can trace the historical development of devotionalism from the late Upanishads and the epics (especially the *Bhagavad Gita*), but in this period it took a more explicit and exuberant form. By 500 CE, Hinduism had embraced a new religiosity, in which an individual worshipper imagined and nurtured a direct bond with a specific god or goddess. For some, as yet unknown, reason, this major development in Indian culture and literature first surfaced in Tamil and then spread north to the Kannada area (another Dravidian language) and then to every literary language in the sub-continent.

Gods as kings As a result of devotionalism, gods replaced the kings of classical Tamil poetry as the object of the poet's attention. The king's palace became the god's temple, and the king's patronage, which kept the bards alive, became the boons given by a god to his devotees. The poet often assumes the role of lover or beloved toward the god. This transition is also evident in one type of poem known as *arruppatai* ('guide'), in which one poet guides another poet to particular destination. Whereas the destination in the classical poems was the court of a generous patron, now the destination is a deity and his temple. The common literary feature of all 'guide' poems is that they allow the poet to describe the natural beauty of the land that leads to the patron god. This skill is most fully developed in the *TirumurugaArruppatai* ('Guide Poem to Lord Murugan') by Nakirrar (7th c. CE).

Nayanmars Tamil bhakti poets who composed songs in praise of Siva were collectively called the Nayanmars ('Servants of the Lord'). They usually focused on a specific form of Siva associated with a specific region, temple or story. Some of their poems have a raw, wounded quality, often literally in the description of bodily mortification. Sometimes that poetic ferocity is directed against Jain and Buddhist scholars, philosophers and

mendicants, who had considerable influence in south Indian kingdoms and towns at the time. These songs (often called ‘hymns’) in praise of Siva were later collected in the *Tirumurai* (‘Sacred Way’) a 12-volume compendium. From this massive work we know the names of 63 poet-saints who composed thousands of hymns. Another important anthology is *Tiruvacakam* (‘Sacred Sayings’), a late (9th c. CE) compilation of Siva poems by Manikavacakar. This poet, a councillor at the court of a Pandya court in Madurai, has become one of the best loved of the Saiva saints in Tamil, whose poems are still sung today.

Stala-puranas One feature of Saivadevotionalism in Tamil, the specificity of place, also defines the Tamil myths (*puranas*) written in this period. Although these Saiva myths are largely derivative of contemporaneous texts in Sanskrit, the Tamil mythographers did add new material and situate the stories in particular temples. For that reason the 275 Tamil myths are called *stala* (‘place’) *puranas*. In effect, they are another form of the ‘guide’ poem, directing worshippers to the many Siva temples that dot the Tamil countryside.

Alvars During the same period (roughly 500 CE-900 CE), the Tamil poets who sang devotional songs to Visnu were known as Alvars (lit. ‘Deep Ones’). These poets are fewer in number than their Saiva counterparts—only 12 names are recorded—but they produced more than 4,000 poems. The worship of Visnu (the preserver) as opposed to the worship of Siva (the destroyer) is predictably less fierce in tone, less visceral in imagery and less uncompromising in its sectarian loyalty. As expressed in the Alvars’ poetry, the approach to Visnu is a mixture of contemplation, mythological drama and rapturous love.

Nammalvar The most prolific and highly regarded of these Vaisnava poet-saints is Nammalvar (‘Our Alvar’). Born into a high caste (but not a Brahmin) in the 9th century CE, the young man went on pilgrimages to sacred places, including many in north India. Although he died at 35, his poetry was lauded as the ‘Fifth Veda’ or the ‘Tamil Veda’, and images of the poet were cast in bronze and installed in major temples in south India.

Tiruvaymoli Nammalvar composed more than one thousand poems, which were anthologised a century or so after his death in a collection known as *Tiruvaymoli* (‘Sacred Speech’). The verses draw on the mythology of Visnu, especially his ten avatars, but they luxuriate in describing his physical and spiritual characteristics. The thousand poems of the *Tiruvaymoli* are interlinked to make a coherent whole by a unique poetic device: the last syllable of each poem is used as the first syllable of the next poem. The result is a garland of sound and sensibility.

Tamil epic poetry

While Tamil poets did not favour epic poetry to the same degree that Sanskrit poets did, they did compose several major works. The most famous of these, *Cilappatikaram* of the classical period, had a Buddhist sequel in *Manimekalai* (c. 6-7 c. CE). The eponymous heroine of this latter work is, in fact, the daughter of the hero of the earlier poem. Her mother is a dancing girl at court, who becomes a Buddhist nun when she learns that her former lover has died. The daughter also becomes a nun, and much of the epic is a dialogue between various religious doctrines, in which Buddhism emerges triumphant.

New genre

A new Tamil genre that developed in this period is the *ula* (‘procession’). Again, it shows the influence of devotionalism. Previously, poets described the procession of a king but now they described the procession of a deity. Like the *stala-puranas*, this genre gave full vent to poetic description, this time of a city, with its crowds and different types of people. For this reason, it is often drafted into service by historians of the period, desperate for any social documentation. The earliest known example of this genre is the *Nanavula* by Ceraman Perumal (8th c. CE).

Questions

1. Hindu myths have endured to the present day, depicted in film, television and comic books. What can account for this longevity?
2. Hindu mythology, both Sanskrit and Tamil, is cognate with other mythologies in the Indo-European world, such as Norse. Compare these two geographically distant traditions in terms of characters and social function.
3. Compare the devotionalism in Tamil poetry with similar attitudes in early Christian theology. What are the key differences?

4. The Tamil versions of the Sanskrit myths are distinguished by their specificity of place. How does this physical grounding make a difference to the tone and function of these texts?

Reading

Wendy Doniger, *Hindu Myths* (Penguin, multiple editions)
Anisile T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Vol. 1 (Columbia, 1988)
J.A.B. van Buitenen, *Classical Hindu Mythology* (Temple University, 1978)
Daniel Ingalls, *Sanskrit Poetry* (Harvard, 2000)
Indira Peterson, *Design and Rhetoric in a Sanskrit Court Epic: the Kirâtârjunîya of Bhâravi* (SUNY, 2003)
Norman Cutler, *Songs of Experience: the Poetics of Tamil Devotion* (Indiana, 1987)
A.K. Ramanujan, *Nammalvar: Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Vishnu* (Penguin, 2005)
David Schulman, *Tamil Temple Myths Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the Tamil Saiva Tradition* (Princeton, 2014)
Paula Richman, *Women, Branch Stories, and Religious Rhetoric in a Tamil Buddhist Text* (Syracuse, 1988)

Texts

1. From the poems of Nammalvar, trans. A.K. Ramanujan,

We here and that man, this man,
and that other-in-between,
and that woman, this woman,
and that other, whoever,
those people, and these,
and these others-in-between,
this thing, that thing,
and this other-in-between, whichever,
all things dying, these, things,
those things, those others-in-between,
good things, bad things,
things that were, that will be,
being all of them,
he stands there.

[Note: 'He' in the last line refers to Visnu. Each of the Tamil personal pronouns ('he,' 'she,' and 'it') has three forms: 1) for near the speaker, 2) far away and 3) in the middle. There is also a distinction between 'we' (inclusive) and 'we' (exclusive)].

2. From *Tirumurai*, a poem by Appar about Siva

We are not subect to any; we are not afraid of death; we will not suffer in hell; we live in no illusion; we feel elated; we know no ills; we bend to none; it is one happiness for us; there is no sorrow, for we have become servants, once and for all, of the independent Lord, and have become one at his beautiful, flower-covered feet.

3. From *ShishupalaVadha* by Magh, trans. SubhadraJha

Then the warrior, winner of war, with his heroic valour, the subduer of the extremely arrogant beings, he who has the brilliance of stars, he who has the brilliance of the vanquisher of fearless elephants, the enemy seated on a chariot, began to fight.

4. From *Kirâtârjunîya* by Bharavi, trans. Sampadananda Mishra,
O man who desires war! This is that battlefield which excites even the gods, where the battle is not of words. Here people fight and stake their lives not for themselves but for others. This field is full of herds of maddened elephants. Here those who are eager for battle and even those who are not very eager, have to fight.

Part II : Late Postclassical Poetry

Overview

Two significant developments occurred during this fertile five-hundred-year period in Indian literature. The first is the advent of Muslim rule in north India that led to the emergence of Indo-Persian literature. From about 1000 CE, poets and scholars at the Muslim courts, especially in Delhi and the Deccan, adapted and developed several major forms of Indo-Persian poetry. The second, not unrelated, phenomenon is the burst of devotionalism across the subcontinent. Continuing on from the earlier devotional poems in Tamil, devotionalism spread from one regional language to the next, like a traveller, eventually reaching Assamese in the far northeast corner of India in the late 15th century.

Devotional Poetry: South India

Kannada The immediate successor to the earlier Tamil *bhakti* tradition was devotional poetry in Kannada, another Dravidian language in the adjacent territory to the north. These Kannada poets (c. 1000-1200 CE), who included non-Brahmans and women, created a new and simple form of verse (the *vacana*, 'speech') in which they sang songs to Siva. Known as Virasaivas ('Militant/Heroic Saivas') or more commonly today as Lingayats, they used this simple verse form to propagate their spiritual vision and egalitarian social ideals. The best known poet was Basavanna, a Brahmin who threw away his sacred thread to establish a community of equals.

Tamil Following the group of Tamil poets (Alvars) who sang in praise of Visnu, a court poet composed a Tamil version of the *Ramayana*. The poet Kampan (12th c. CE?) did not simply retell the Sanskrit story; he reinvented it as a full-blown devotional epic in which Rama is indisputably the avatar of Visnu. (The epic text of 24,000 lines is actually called *Rama-avataram*.) The son of a temple drummer, Kampan wrote a work that is considered the jewel in the crown of Tamil literature. His writing is witty, and often satirical, powerful and imaginative. In his composition, Rama and Sita become characters with the full spectrum of emotions and ambiguities. No one since Kampan has combined such beautiful language with such depth of feeling.

Telugu The south Indian language of Telugu flourished during this period, gaining largely from the fruitful interaction between Sanskrit and Tamil court traditions. The early centuries of this period saw a number of influential translations and retellings of the *Mahabharata*, but the best-loved poem is Srinatha's 13th-century reworking of the *Ramayana*.

Malayalam A similar pattern is evident in Malayalam, the last of the four Dravidian languages. The *Ramacharitam* (11th-12th c. CE) is an accomplished epic poem in Malayalam. Later, a number of mostly court poetic forms were written in the mixed Sanskrit-Malayalam language called *manipravalam*. One of the earliest of these poems is the 13th-century *VaisikaTantram*, which offers professional advice to a prostitute or courtesan by her mother.

Devotional Poetry: North India

Marathi Devotionalism moved from Kannada to the neighbouring language of Marathi, where it was developed by several poets. The most influential poet was Namdev (13th-14th c. CE), who (like the Kannada poets) composed fiercely sectarian verse (this time in praise of Visnu) in a simple metre in order to reach common people. Most of his compositions are better called 'songs' since they are words meant to be sung in the *bhajan* and *kirtana* tradition.

Maithili The north Indian Vaishnava *bhakti* tradition continued to flourish in other north Indian languages. Vidyapathi (14th-15th c. CE) wrote his poems/songs in a language that is closest to Maithili, but heavily influenced by Sanskrit, particularly the Sanskrit of Jayadeva.

Hindi One of the most celebrated, and revolutionary, poets of north Indian *bhakti* is Kabir (15th c. CE). Born into a low caste of weavers that soon converted to Islam, Kabir's intense poetry reveals a mixture of Hindu and Islamic mysticism. He is most remembered for his rejection of caste and sect in favour of a humanism, which has been lauded by later Indian figures, including Tagore and Gandhi. His universal appeal is underlined by the fact that many of his poems/songs are included in the Sikh holy scriptures.

Bengali In the manner of Kabir, the Bengali poet-mystic Chaitanya (15th c. CE) also renounced caste, ritualism and idol worship, perhaps through the influence of iconoclastic Islam. Chaitanya's poems, however, show a more sectarian slant and glorify Krishna as the supreme reality.

Assamese From Bengali, and largely from Chaitanya's neo-Vaishnavism, devotionism found a home in Assamese. Here the leading light was Shankardev (b. 1449 CE). More than a mere poet, Shankardev was a skilled musician, playwright, linguist and social reformer. His most enduring work, *KirtanaGhoshā*, is a collection of powerful, short poems that are well-known to most Assamese today.

Sanskrit The outstanding work of Sanskrit devotionism in this period is *Gita Govinda* by Jayadeva (12th c. CE). Ostensibly a poem in praise of Krishna, it in fact reveals the dark dangers of passion and the pain of separation, in both human and divine attachments. The poem includes a dramatization of the 'eight moods' of the heroine that provides inspiration for Indian classical dance, music and literature.

Panjabi The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak (b. 1469 CE) composed nearly one thousand poems in a mixture of old Panjabi and old Hindi. Like many *bhakti* poets, he used a language that appealed to common people and forms borrowed from folk tradition. In particular, he adapted a folk-lyric in which the poet is cast as a village girl pinning for her absent lover (the Lord).

Indo-Persian poetry

Qasida One of the preeminent poetic forms of Indo-Persian literature in this period is the *qasida* (panegyric ode). An early master of this genre was Abu'l-FarajRuni (d. 1091 CE), who lived in Lahore. A later exponent was Šehāb-al-Din Maḥ-mera (13th c. CE), who introduced overtly religious themes into the *qasida*. Another was BadrČāči (14th c. CE), who wrote in abstract, metaphysical language and was revered by later literary tradition.

Baramasa*Baramasa* (lit. 'twelve months') is an older Indian genre that describes the seasons and the months of the year. This Indian genre, popular at the folk level, was brought into Indo-Persian literature by Mas'udSa'd-e Salmān in the late 11th c. CE. The *baramasa* format, in which the singer longs for the seasons, provided an opportunity for the Persian-influenced poets to sing songs of separation on both secular and divine levels.

Masnavi The *masnavi* is a flexible form using rhymed couplets to describe romantic love and make didactic observations. Indo-Persian poets in this genre were, like Muslim poets throughout the Islamic world, guided by the *masnavi* of Rumi, the Persian poet, who was himself inspired by Sufi religious ideas.

Gazal Indo-Persian writers produced their most subtle work in the *gazal*, a short lyric of rhymed couplets mixing the conventions of a love poem with those of drinking song. The verses draw almost entirely on landscape, flora and fauna from Iran for imagery, the most famous example being the contrast between the rose (*gul*) and the nightingale (*bulbul*). The language uses a highly complex poetic vocabulary, made even more enigmatic by the Sufi religious themes that supply the content. Many *gazals* express deep emotions of longing and loss, on both the level of ordinary human experience and the mystical experience of god.

Amir Khusrau Among the many *gazal* compositions in this period, those of Amir Khusrau (1253-1325 CE) are regarded as the finest. Critics both then and now admire his concise style, in which each verse

encapsulates a complete moral point of view. Like most accomplished Sufi poets, his work combines asceticism with aestheticism. Amir Khusrau, who served as court poet during the Delhi Sultanate, was a prolific and popular writer. In addition to writing odes, riddles and legends, some of which are still studied today, he is credited with developing the influential *qawwali* genre of devotional song by fusing Persian and Indian music traditions.

Questions

1. Hindu devotionalism is a movement with many strands, but in essence it refers to a personal, intense and often fraught relationship between a worshipper and a god or goddess. Some critics have compared the relation between a bhakti poet and a deity to that between a lover and a beloved. Analyse Hindu devotional poetry as a form of divine love. Select three poets for close reading, and then include a writer of similar love poetry from outside India for comparative purposes (for example, Sappho, Rumi, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila or Shakespeare).
2. Several north Indian bhakti poets were either Muslims or influenced by Sufism. Analyse the work of three north Indian poets for their religious content. Do they, for instance, transcend the categories of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim'?
3. Bhakti poets in north lived during the formation of an Indo-Persian cultural synthesis that drew influences from Persia, Turkey and Central Asia. However, whereas that synthesis is documented primarily at the courts of Muslim rulers, these poets were itinerant singers and mystics. How is their ambiguous position outside the social mainstream revealed in their poetry? Analyse the work of these poets to identify any correlations between literary creation and society position.

Reading

VinayDharwadkar (trans.), *Kabir: The Weaver's Song* (Penguin, 2003)

John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices. Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours* (OUP, Delhi 2012)

John Stratton Hawley, *The Memory of Love: Surdas Sings to Krishna* (OUP, 2009)

John Stratton Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India* (OUP, 1988)

A.K. Ramanujan (trans.), *Speaking of Siva* (Penguin, 1973)

Kenneth Bryant, *Poems to the Child-God* (California, 1978)

Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Premodern India* (California, 2006).

Texts

5. Kannada poem by Basavanna, trans. A.K. Ramunujan, 1973

The rich will make temples for Siva.
What shall I, a poor man, do?
My legs are pillars,
the body the shrine,
the head a cupola of gold.

Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,
things standing shall fall
but the moving ever shall stay.

6. Hindi poem by Kabir, trans. RushilRao, 2010

Hiding in this cage
of visible matter

is the invisible
lifebird

pay attention
to her

she is singing
your song