

# INDIAN POETRY – Early Modern Period

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## Overview

This period saw devotionalism continue its immense influence on Indian poetry in the form of regional Ramayanas, which became the signature text of any literary language. The urge to sing of god in the local tongue also led to the recognition of a new literary language (Braj). Somewhat in contrast to bhakti, the *riti* school of Hindi poets clung to a more mannerist style, inspired by Sanskrit. Indo-Persian poetry flourished under the well-heeled patronage of the Mughal emperors in Delhi and under more regional courts in the Deccan (central India).

## Devotional: south India

**Arunagirinathar** The tradition of Tamil devotional poetry reached its apogee with Arunagirinathar, whose dates are uncertain but late 15<sup>th</sup> or early 16<sup>th</sup> century seems likely. Other poets came later, but his verse is the culmination of a rich interaction between Sanskrit and Tamil poetics that had been brewing for a thousand years. The result, particularly in Arunagirinathar's masterpiece (the 1400 stanzas of *Tiruppukal*) is a magical confection of dazzling images and linguistic juggling. Some might say that the formal cleverness of the writing outshines its emotional depth, but even today his songs are sung by ordinary people with great pleasure.

**Beschi** An unlikely contributor to Tamil poetry in this period was an Italian-born missionary. C.J. Beschi (1680-1742 CE) spent four decades in the Tamil country, writing a grammar that is still used today and other works. His extraordinary achievement in Tamil is crowned by *Tempavani*, a long devotional poem in praise of St. Joseph, Beschi's patron saint. Throughout the poem the biblical story is Indianised and Tamilised, so that Joseph is made a prince who chooses the life of an ascetic (like the Buddha) until a sage convinces him to take up his duty (*dharmā*) as a householder. The poem, with about 3,600 four-line verses, was completed in 1726 but remained buried in private collections until it was published in 1853. Even then many Tamil scholars refused to believe that a European could have written such an accomplished epic in refined Tamil.

## Devotional: north India

**Ravidas** An influential mystic, poet-saint and social reformer of this period is Ravidas (late 15<sup>th</sup>/early 16<sup>th</sup> c. CE?), who wrote searing songs in Hindi. Born to a low caste of leather-workers in the Punjab, his poems were heavily influenced by the egalitarianism of the Sikh movement and are included in the Sikh scriptures, which remain our primary textual source for Ravidas' work. Like Kabir, Ravidas articulated the *nirguna* concept of god, that is, a god without attributes.

**Surdas** An equally influential Hindi poet-saint, and contemporary of Ravidas, is Surdas (late 15<sup>th</sup>/early 16<sup>th</sup> c. CE?). Surdas, however, wrote in Braj (a language closely related to Hindi and spoken in the Mathura region) and envisioned god (Krshna, in his case) as very much with attributes (*saguna*). His collection of poems (*Sursagar*) is said to have contained 100,000 poems, though only 8,000 survive, in which the poet achieves a subtle blend of mystical and sensual love.

**Mirabai** Among Surdas' contemporaries was Mirabai, a Rajput princess, who composed poems in a mixture of Braj, Rajasthani and Gujarati. As one of the few female poets recognised in literary histories, and one caught up in the Hindu-Muslim conflicts of her age, she has attracted a wealth of legends and attributions, many of which are considered spurious. The poems credited to her show an intense devotion to Krshna.

**Riti** The language of Braj was developed into a literary language by a slightly later group of poets who wrote *riti* poetry. In contrast to the earlier and contemporaneous devotional poems of longing and loss, the *riti* poets were more 'rule-bound' by Sanskrit poetics and wrote with more formal constraints.

**Keshavdas** A key figure of this genre was Keshavdas (1555-1617), a Brahmin who was brought up on Sanskrit learning. He, however, wrote his poems in Braj, a language spoke in the region of Mathura. His large output of poems, in the Vaisnava tradition of Krshna worship, are anthologised in major collections, such as *Rasikpriya* and *Kavipriya*. He also composed panegyrics to kings and patrons, moralistic verse and technical treatises on poetry.

**Biharilal** More highly regarded then and now among the *riti* poets is Biharilal (1595–1663 CE). Certainly Biharilal’s poetry is less self-consciously academic and emotionally powerful. His best-known work is the *Satsai* (‘Seven Hundred Verses’), inspired by devotion to Krshna, and especially the love of Radha (cow girl) for the ‘Dark Lord.’ Nevertheless, Biharilal represented a return to the *bhakti* poetry of a few centuries earlier, in which Hindu and Muslim elements complemented each other.

**Mangal-Kavya** *Mangal-kavya* (‘poems of benediction’) were composed in Bengali as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE, but the flowering of the genre took place in the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most of these devotional poems are dedicated to a specific god or goddesses, the three most popular being *Manasa Mangal*, *Chandi Mangal* and *Dharma Mangal*. This poetic genre is representative of the early modern period in that the poems represent a synthesis of classical and local literary-cultural traditions. For example, Chandi is a Bengali form of Parvati, wife of Siva, while Manasa is a Bengali goddess of snakes who was assimilated into the Hindu pantheon.

**Dayaram** The Gujarati language gained literary status toward the end of this period, largely through the writing of Dayaram (1767-1852). Although he wrote prose, he is best remembered for his vast output of poems in the tradition of Krshna devotionalism. In particular, he developed the *garbi*, a type of lyrical verse sung while dancing during a ritual.

**Ramayanas** Another major contribution to north Indian devotional poetry during this period was the production of Ramayanas in regional languages. In most cases, the composition of the Rama story was seen to elevate a regional language to literary status, a condition that would later have enormous political advantages. Examples include Oriya (*Dandi Ramayana* also known as *Jagamohana Ramayana*), Kannada (*Torave Ramayana*), Malayalam (*Adhyathmaramayanam*) and Marathi (*Bhavartha Ramayana*), all 16<sup>th</sup> century, and a Gujarati *Ramayana* in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

**Tulsidas** The most influential of all these Ramayanas, however, was that composed in Hindi by Tulsidas (1532-1623 CE). His *Ramcaritmanas* is often called the ‘bible of north India,’ and certainly no other Hindi text matches the literary sill and cultural status of this epic rendering of the Rama story. Tulsidas transformed the Sanskrit text so thoroughly that recitation of his poem became (and still is) an act of worship. The influence of this text is underpinned by the fact that it is the textual basis for an immensely popular dramatic enactment of the Rama story in north India.

### Muslim

**Abul Faizl** Among the many poets patronised by the Mughal emperors, the outstanding name is Abul Faizl (Shaikh Abu-al-Fazal-ibn Mubarak, 1547-1595). In addition to his well-known biography of Akbar (Akbarname, for which see the article on ‘auto/biography’), he translated Hindu story literature into Persian, produced a list of 59 poets (including several Hindus) at Akbar’s court and wrote letters that have survived. Somehow, he also found time to compose a large number of poems in the Persian genres of *qasida*, *ghazal* and *rubai*.

**Urdu** Not all poets favoured Persian, many turning instead to the inchoate language of Urdu, with its greater mix of Indo-Aryan words. Not surprisingly, this choice was made by several writers living away from Delhi in the smaller but still sophisticated Muslim courts in the Deccan (central India). Two representative figures, who mainly wrote *ghazals* in Urdu, are Ibrahim Adil Shah II (1580-1627), a ruler of Bijapur and Mansabdar Allah-wirdi Khan (early 18<sup>th</sup> c.), a nobleman and military officer in the Muslim court at Hyderabad.

### Questions/Discussion

1. The first European to write a major text in any Indian literature was the 18<sup>th</sup> century Italian missionary J.C. Beschi in Tamil. A close study of his epic poem *Tempavani* reveals an eclectic mixture of European and Tamil elements. What later contributions did Europeans make, not the study but to the writing of Indian literature?
2. Urdu has a complex linguistic and political history. Research that history as a way of understanding the cultural history of early modern India.
3. Compare the poetry of Surdas with that of Biharilal, both of whom wrote in the then-recently elevated literary language of Braj. Surdas’ verse is said to be ‘sensual’ and Biharilal’s to be ‘rational’, but is that contrast supported by a reading of their poems?

## Reading

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)  
Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (North Carolina, 1978)  
Muzaffar Alam, The culture and politics of Persian in Precolonial Hindustan. In Sheldon Pollock (ed.), *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (California, 2003), pp.131-198

## Texts

1. Surdas, trans. Rushil Rao, 2010

Krishna said, 'O fair beauty, who are you?  
Where do you live? Whose daughter are you?  
I never yet saw you in the lanes of Braj.'

Radha said, 'What need have I to come this way?  
I keep playing by my door.  
But I hear that some son of Nanda  
is in the habit of stealing butter and curds.'

Krishna said, 'Look, why should I appropriate  
anything that's yours? Come, let's play together.'

Suradas says: By his honeyed words,  
Krishna, the crafty prince of amorists,  
beguiled Radha and put her at ease.

2. Ravidas, trans. Winand Callewaert and Peter Friedlander

Ravidas says, what shall I sing?  
Singing, singing I am defeated.  
How long shall I consider and proclaim:  
absorb the self into the Self?

This experience is such,  
that it defies all description.  
I have met the Lord,  
Who can cause me harm?

3. From *Tempavani* by Beschi, trans. B.G. Babington, 1823

Who is ignorant that Death fears not the strong bow dreaded by enemies,  
Nor the works in verse or prose of such as have made all learning their own,  
Nor the splendour of the king's sceptre, sparkling with innumerable refulgent rays,  
Nor the beauty of such as resemble the unexpanded flower?

4. From *Tiruppukal* (song 1304) by Arunagirinathar

I do not wish to dwell in this illusory body,  
built of the sky, water, earth, air, fire and desires.  
Enlighten me, that I may praise the glory of your holy name  
in the wise, beautiful Tamil tongue,

O Lord of the celestial heavens,  
who protects the Kurava woman of the sweet, child-like words,  
who wields the spear which destroyed the majestic hill  
and wears a garland of scarlet flowers  
where bees dance seeking honey.