

# INDIAN LITERATURE – Early Modern Period

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## POETRY

### 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) in north India. Somewhat in contrast to devotionalism, the *riti* school of Hindi poets clung to a more mannerist style, inspired by Sanskrit models. 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, illustrated 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 still-used grammar and other works, but his extraordinary contribution to Tamil literature 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 (*dharma*) 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 (Krishna, 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 Krishna.

**Ritipoets** The language of Braj was developed into a literary language by a slightly later group of poets who wrote *riti*poetry. In contrast to 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 skilled writer in 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 Krishna worship, is 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), whose poetry is less self-consciously academic and emotionally powerful. His best-known work is the *Satsai* ('Seven Hundred Verses'), inspired by devotion to Krishna, 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 *ManasaMangal*, *ChandiMangal* and *Dharma Mangal*. This poetic genre is representative of the early modern period in that the poems are 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 excellent prose, he is best remembered for his vast output of poems in the tradition of Krishna devotionism. 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 convey enormous political advantages. Examples include composition in Oriya (*DandiRamayana* 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 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 skill 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

**AbulFaizl** Among the many poets patronised by the Mughal emperors, the outstanding name is AbulFaizl (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, and many turned instead to the inchoate language of Urdu, with its greater mix of Indo-Aryan words. Not surprisingly, this choice was made by 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 *Tempavanireveals* an eclectic mixture of European and Tamil elements. What later contributions did Europeans make to the writing of Indian literature?
2. Urdu has a complex linguistic and political history that underpins the cultural history of early modern India. More research needs to be done on the literary cultures of Muslim courts in central 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

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### Texts

1. Surdas, trans. RushilRao

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. WinandCallewaert 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

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.

## DRAMA

### Overview

Although India never again produced drama that rivalled classical Sanskrit theatre, this period generated a variety of interesting forms. Three trends can be identified. First, in the absence of patronage at the Muslim courts, drama moved from the palace to the temple. Second, in doing so, particularly in south India, it became more ritual performance than textual enactment. And third, again in south India there was the emergence of drama (and other literary forms) at minor courts of the Nayak kings during the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In these turbulent times of European advance and Muslim retreat, these new drama forms, often composed in a mixture of Tamil, Telugu, Marathi and Sanskrit, were satirical, with a good deal of farce.

### North India

**Ram Lila** Based on the text of Tulsidas's *Ramayana* (16<sup>th</sup> c. CE), Ram Lila ('Play of Rama'; *lila* carries both meanings of the English 'play,' plus a connotation of divine play) is a hugely popular drama that is still performed annually throughout the Hindi-speaking regions of north India. With elaborate costumes, it is staged outdoors over a series of nights, typically ten, though in Varnasi it stretches to 31. Dialogue is minimal, and reciters are used to chant verses from the Hindi text. Although we have no reliable evidence prior to observations by Europeans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it seems reasonable to assume that the Ram Lila formed sometime in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

**Pandava Lila** Another popular drama in north India is Pandava Lila, which takes its name from the five Pandava brothers, protagonists of the other great epic of the *Mahabharata*. Unlike Ram Lila, however, it is written and performed in the Garhwali language spoken in the mountainous region of Garhwal.

Performances are temple rituals loosely based on textual versions of the epic, and different villages focus on different episodes in the epic story. It, too, appears to have emerged sometime in the period between 1600-1800 CE.

**Nautanki** Unlike the preceding two traditions, Nautanki is a secular theatre tradition, drawing on popular tales from Hindu and Muslim traditions. Dialogue is usually in Hindi, while libretti are often in Urdu. There is a strong

satirical strain in the plays of Nautanki, as revealed by its original name of *svang* ('impersonation', 'mime'). As with the other north Indian theatres of this time, its history is poorly documented, although most scholars believe it coalesced into its present form sometime around 1600 CE.

### South India

**Terukkuttu** As in the north, south India a popular theatre form based on the *Mahabharata*. Terukkuttu ('Street Theatre') is a ritualised enactment of episodes from Tamil versions of the epic text. The plays, which are performed over a series of nights (from one to 18), focus specifically on the character of Draupadi, the wronged wife of one of the Pandava brothers, and are performed in temples dedicated to her. Again, song dominates over dialogue.

**TolpavaKuttu** TolpavuKuttu ('leather puppet play') is a traditional shadow puppet play based very closely on the Tamil *Ramayana* (12<sup>th</sup> c. CE). It is performed over a number of nights (typically 8 to 41) in certain temples on the border between Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The puppeteers memorise and recite thousands of verses from the medieval text, while peppering their all-night performances with humorous banter.

**Kathakali** Kathakali ('Story-drama') is a highly sophisticated theatre, or opera, performed in central Kerala. One of several related drama forms found on this southwest coast region, it consists of a number of plays written in a Malayalam heavily influenced by Sanskrit and dating from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and early 17<sup>th</sup> century CE. Sanskrit verses recited by vocalists explain the action, while the actors, in elaborate costumes and face paint, 'speak' the dialogue by dance, gesture and eye movement.

**Teyyam** Further up the northern coast of Kerala, Teyyam is another ritualised drama form that we can trace back to this period. Like Kathakali, from which it is surely derived, it uses elaborate costumes, especially headgear, face paint and the language of gesture. It is a heavily ritualised form, performed only in temple compounds, and involves intense spirit possession.

**Yakshagana** Similar in performance mode, but not textual base, to the above traditions, Yakshagana is a theatre form performed in the Kannada- and Telugu-speaking areas of south India. The Telugu tradition, which emerged in minor courts during this period, employs a high-literary Telugu (mixed with Sanskrit) to create plays ostensibly devotional but laced with mockery, usually directed at Brahmins. The Kannada tradition, which uses stories from the epics, is more serious, ritual theatre performed in temple precincts.

**Kuravanci** Another largely parodic theatre form of south India is Kuravanci ('Play of the Fortune-Teller Lady'). This text-based Tamil theatre arose in the eighteenth century in the courts of noblemen and temple festivals. Fortunately, we can date the first play, the *KuttralaKuravanci*, to 1718. Like most of these early modern drama forms, singing dominates over dialogue, although there is a more or less fixed plot. A tribal fortune-teller woman pines for her high-born lover and sings of the beauty of her hilly homeland. Her bird-catcher husband tries to find her, and the tribal couple are reunited, but not before all the characters, from tribesman to king, are made the object of satire.

**NontiNatakam** NontiNatakam ('The Gimp's Play') is yet another popular and satirical drama that appeared during this period in the Tamil country. Scholars date the first texts to the late 17<sup>th</sup> or early 18<sup>th</sup> century and pinpoint the action to the large city of Madurai. The play is narrated by a one-legged thief who is cheated out of his ill-begotten gains by a courtesan. Forced to steal to replenish his funds, he grabs a king's horse but is punished by amputation. A holy man sends him to a temple, where a god restores his missing limb (possibly a hint of Christian influence). Despite the devotional overtones, and as with other dramas of the time, it has elements of farce and parody.

**CavittuNatakam** CavittuNatakam ('Stamping Play') is a unique form of drama that arose during the latter half of the sixteenth century in Kerala among the region's recently-arrived Christian community.

While it draws on local drama traditions in its theatrical elements (a stage manager, for example, who comments on and translates the action), the stories are biblical. Plays of Charlemagne and of St. George are performed on feast days, at weddings and other major events by the Catholic community of Kerala.

### Questions/discussion

1. Many of the drama traditions that arose or took final shape in the early modern period involve satire, parody or farce, or all three. Some cultural historians have explained this as a response to the fragmentation and new ethnic mix of society during this period (see Narayana Rao et al, below). Even if this is not a simple one-to-one causal relation, can we explain literary history by reference to such macro-cultural history?
2. There is very little evidence that Muslim courts, either of the opulent Mughal Emperors or the smaller kingdoms in the Deccan, patronised drama. Some scholars have challenged this, repeating the mantra that ‘absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,’ and indeed there are creditable references to Akbar hosting drama at his court. A future ground-breaking study of the hidden theatre at the Muslim courts would be welcome.

### Reading

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### Texts

1. From *Kuttrala Kuravanci*, trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom

There courting monkeys gather fruit and offer them as gifts,  
 And heavenly poets beg for fruit that the monkey couples scatter.  
 There passing hunters gaze upwards inviting the gods to descend.  
 Venerable saints come there to tend their herbs and rare plants,  
 Where water rears up from sweet streams, reach skyward and pour down,  
 While the sun-god’s chariot wheels and horse’s hoofs slip on the spray,  
 Our mountain belongs to the god who wears the crescent in his hair.

2. From *Bhishma Vijaya* (Yakshagana), trans. Shivarama Karnath

[Two persons appear on stage holding a curtain. From behind the curtain a mask of Ganesh peeps at the audience. Two women dance and offer prayers to Ganesh, remover of obstacles.]

[palace of a king]

King: Listen to me, minister. It is not a lie. I am very worried. My daughter, now beautiful and young in age, is ready for marriage. Invite the kings, send them letters, let my daughter select a husband.

[Another king is addressed by a servant]

Oh, king. The king of Kashi has sent letters to kings everywhere, to come and win his daughter in a fight. But you, who are brave and who do not care for anyone, neither on earth or in heaven, you have been done a great injustice. You are not invited.

### **FICTION**

### Overview

Fiction writing in India took a variety of forms during this period. Historical fiction in Indo-Persian genres (*qissa/dastan* and *masnavi*) flourished at Muslims courts in Delhi and the Deccan. A greater emphasis on romance and adventure features in a number of significant prose poems. Historical ballads also appeared, largely from Hindu writers and mainly in Tamil, in which the near-continual warfare between Hindu, Muslim and European imprinted itself on the literary imagination. Finally, a ground-breaking prose story was written in Tamil in the mid-18<sup>th</sup>

century, though it did not appear in print until the following century. The stage was thus set for the emergence of Indian modern fiction.

### Indo-Persian

**Hamzanama** The *Hamzanama* (or *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza*, ‘Adventures of Amir Hamza’) is representative of the multiple literary and cultural influences that converge in this period. The picaresque text draws on the Indo-Persian genre of oral storytelling (*dastan/qissa*) to narrate the story of Amir Hamza, the legendary uncle of the prophet Muhammad. The hero is put through a series of escapades, including narrow escapes from deceitful friends and dangerous animals. Many versions of the work circulated orally and in manuscript, but a canonical text was produced when an illustrated Persian manuscript was commissioned by the Mughal emperor Akbar in about 1562 CE.

**Padmavat** Another multi-layered historical narrative in this period, with many versions and influences, is the *Padmavat*. Epic in scope, like the *Hamzanama* (and other narratives of the period), it is a fictionalised account of a 14<sup>th</sup>-century battle between a Hindu king and a Muslim attacker. Although written from a Hindu point of view, it shows the influence of Indo-Persian literary models. The story turns the bare bones of history into a morality tale that expresses the joy of transcendental love and the union of a human soul with god. We have a 1540 CE manuscript written by Malik Muhammad Jayasi in Awadhi (a north Indian language closely related to Hindi), but the story is much older and generated many later textual versions.

**Urdu** Urdu, which received little encouragement at the Mughal court in Delhi, flourished under the patronage of Muslim rulers in the Deccan, especially at the courts of Golconda and Bijapur. Sufficiently distant from Delhi, writers in these smaller kingdoms still drew on Persian literary forms but injected more Indian substance to forge a new literary identity of Deccani Urdu literature. The long historical narrative, in the *masnavi* genre, was their preferred vehicle of literary expression.

**Kamal Khan Rustami** Among the many talented writers of Deccani Urdu was Kamal Khan Rustami (17<sup>th</sup> c. CE). Supported by Muhammad Adil Shah of Bijapur, he wrote *KhawarNama* (1649 CE), which borrowed its title from a 14<sup>th</sup>-century Persian text. This long (23,000-line) *masnavi* is an historical narrative based on the military exploits of Ali, son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad.

**Nusrati** Nusrati, Rustami’s contemporary, also wrote epic *masnavi* as court poet of the Bijapur ruler Ali Adil Shah II. He was a prolific writer, but his most celebrated work is *Ali Nama* (1665), a narrative poem chronicling the military campaigns of his patron. With vivid imagery and religious fervour, Nusrati describes how his Muslim patron defeated the Mughals and later the Mahrattas.

### Romance

**Telugu** The *Pratapacharitramu* by Ekambaranathudu (late 16<sup>th</sup> c. CE) is an important milestone in the development of narrative fiction in Telugu. Although earlier works in the language had utilised prose interspersed with verse, this is the first fully fledged prose poem.

**Kannada** A similar status in the adjacent language of Kannada is held by Nanjundakavi (early 16<sup>th</sup> c). Among his many historical fictions, the best known is the colossal *RamanathaCharite*, in which he invents a complex plot of palace intrigue. A queen falls in love with her stepson, who refuses her advances, after which her love turns destructive. But the writer imbues the older woman’s passion with dignity. In the end, of course, the prince wins glory by defeating an invading Muslim army.

**Oriya** An author who produced similarly original romantic narratives in the Oriya language was Narayana Das (also 16<sup>th</sup> c. CE). While he followed the tradition of earlier poets by weaving together mythological characters with folktale motifs, unlike them he produced stories with a clear narrative line. His successor was NilambarBidyadhar (18<sup>th</sup> c. CE), whose *PrastabaChintamani* shows a similar skill in telling the story of a prince who gets lost on a hunting trip. When he is taken in by forest dwellers, he falls in love with their daughter. A clichéd tale, perhaps, but told with a vivid imagination.

**Tamil** The category of romantic narrative poem is represented in Tamil by *Viralivitutu* ('The Message sent by a Virali [female singer]'). Written in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century by CuppiratipaKavirayar (b. 1758), it follows the fortunes of a young, educated man who leaves his wife after a domestic quarrel. He falls into a trap set by a prostitute, escapes and wanders from court to court before returning to his wife.

### Ballads

**MaturaiViran** *MaturaiViran* ('The Hero of Madurai') is one of several Tamil historical ballads composed in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. This text, datable to 1680-1700, uses simple verse to tell the story of a low-caste man who violates social codes but becomes a local god. He elopes with a high-caste woman, defeats the army sent to punish him and is then enlisted by the king of Madurai to rid the city of thieves. The hero again runs off with a royal woman and is summarily quartered. When the repentant king asks a goddess to restore his limbs, the hero refuses and is worshipped as a god. Even today, MaturaiViran is still worshipped as a god in villages near the city of Madurai.

**Muttuppattan** Muttuppattan is another Tamil historical ballad, but with a very different kind of hero. In this story, which scholars have dated to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the eponymous hero is a Brahmin who falls in love with two Untouchable women from a caste of leather-workers. In a very affecting scene, the Brahmin hero tries to convince their father that his love for his daughters is genuine. The father then asks him to make leather sandals (touching leather was taboo for Brahmins) as a demonstration of his love. The Brahmin does so and the marriage is held, but the hero is later killed when defending his father-in-law's cattle. He then becomes a god worshipped in local villages.

**Tampimar** The *Tampimar* ('Little Brothers') is a Tamil historical ballad set in Travancore, a kingdom that ruled most of modern-day Kerala and part of the Tamil country from 1729 until Independence in 1947. Unlike the other ballads, however, it includes named historical figures from that time, focusing on an internecine war between two factions of the ruling family of Travancore. Like the other ballads, though, the heroes (the two brothers) die a violent death and are deified by local people.

**Desinku Raja** Desinku Raja is an historical ballad written in Telugu, probably in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. It narrates the heroism of a Hindu Raja (Desinku) who dies on the battlefield defending the fort of Gingee from a Muslim army. This work is raised above the level of ordinary storytelling by three tender scenes: when the queen says goodbye to the army on the eve of battle, when the raja's friend (a Muslim) dies from brave but foolhardy action and when the victorious Desinku is rewarded by his overlord.

### Prose tale

While most of the narratives mentioned above were composed in verse, prose tales were also written and adapted in this period, as before, by drawing on existing story literature. One particular work, however, the story of 'Guru Simpleton' (*ParamattaKuruvinKatai*) occupies a unique place in the literary history of India. It is the first piece of fiction in an Indian language written by a European. C.J. Beschi (1680-1742?) was an Italian-born missionary who spent four decades living in the Tamil country, where he wrote not only an epic poem, two grammars and several essays, but also this first example of fiction—all in Tamil. Beschi's genius is that he took a series of existing oral tales and wove them into a (more or less) coherent story in eight chapters.

### Questions/Discussion

1. The theme of Hindu valour against Muslim invaders is found in several examples of historical fiction produced in this period (echoing the Muslim versus Christian stories narrated in the medieval south Slav epics). On the other hand, themes of war and heroism do not feature prominently in the Indo-Persian narrative poems and stories of the same period. Is there a political or literary explanation for this anomaly?

2. The Urdu literature produced in the Deccan is not as well-known as the Indo-Persian literature produced in Delhi. Is this best explained by the greater scholarly and public attention given to the Mughal Empire? How was Deccani Urdu regarded by Hindu and Muslim scholars during the early modern period?



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## Text

From the *Hamzanama*, trans. Mamta Dalal Mangaldas and Saker Mistri

Once upon a time, there lived in India a young emperor who loved to ride wild elephants. He used to roam far and wide with his soldiers, through the forests and mountains of his kingdom, crossing deep and fast-flowing rivers, in search of these mighty beasts.

One day, when the young emperor was out riding in the forests of Narwar in North India, he saw a herd of wild elephants. He chased them deep into the woods and ordered his men to use rope snares and capture the elephants. The huge legs of the elephants became entangled in the ropes and as they struggled to free themselves, the emperor leapt on to the back of the leader of the herd. Digging his heels behind the matriarch's ears, he commanded the wild beast to be calm. Once the elephants were subdued, the emperor left his soldiers in charge, and rode back to the camp to rest in his tent.

On the evening of the elephant hunt, the sun set quietly over the forests. It did not want to disturb the Ruler of Rulers, the Badshah, the Noblest Emperor of all times: Akbar the Great. In Akbar's camp the men were bustling about, waiting for Darbar Khan, Akbar's court storyteller. The emperor loved listening to tales of magic and adventure, and took his storyteller with him wherever he went. Akbar sat in a large and resplendent tent, drumming his fingers impatiently on the rubies and diamonds on his throne.

When Darbar Khan finally entered the royal tent, Akbar leapt up to embrace him and said fondly, 'Come, and amuse us with one of your stories.' Then he turned to his men, 'Darbar Khan can tell a different story every day, for a whole year. He is a wonderful storyteller. When he describes a rainstorm, you will shiver and feel the cold wind on your face. If he portrays a battle scene, the very ground trembles with the sound of horses and elephants in full charge.'

Often the storytelling continued for many hours and was accompanied by music and dancing. As he listened with his head propped on one hand, Akbar found himself wishing that he could read. It would be fun he thought to himself, to be able to read stories on his own—but then, he wouldn't have the wonderful voice and expressive hands of Darbar Khan to transport him to these exciting new worlds.

The musicians took their places, and Darbar Khan in his scarlet robe, bowed low before the emperor. 'Today's tale my Badshah, is from your favourite book: the *Hamzanama*. There is no other book like it in the whole world. The paintings in the book are so dazzling that when you see them, it is as wondrous as seeing the sun and the moon for the very first time. The colours glow like the jewels in your majesty's throne. And the hero of my story, the great Persian warrior Amir Hamza, is as strong and brave...', Darbar Khan smiled, 'well, almost as strong and brave... as you, my Emperor.'



Image from the illustrated manuscript of *Hamzanama*, 1560s

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY

### Overview

As one scholar put it, Indian 'literary tradition...rarely thought in terms of personal histories.' This reluctance changed substantially during the early modern period, when two external literary traditions came to India on the back of political and economic power. The historiographical impulse in Islam, evident in Indo-Persian writing, produced a remarkable series of autobiographies and biographies, mostly at the Mughal court in Delhi. Somewhat later, the arrival of Europeans, and their foreign languages, was another catalyst to self-reflection. The perspective of the outsider seems to have stimulated Indian writers to observe themselves more closely.

### Indo-Persian

**Baburnama** The *Baburnama* ('Book of Babur') is the autobiography of the Babur (1483-1530 CE), the first of the Mughal emperors. It was written in Babur's native Chagatai (or Turki), a language of central Asia, although it is highly Persianised in vocabulary and morphology. It was soon translated into Persian, the language of the Mughal court, and reproduced in illustrated manuscripts. At 600 printed pages, it provides readers with an extraordinary insight into Babur's life in Transoxiana (present-day Uzbekistan, Babur's homeland), Kabul and Delhi. It is a bold political self-statement, a 'mirror for princes' and a valuable source of information about the social and natural world. We learn, for example, about the lack of decent trousers in Delhi, the colours of flying geese and the smell of apple blossoms.

**Later Mughal** Babur's work inspired a number of later Mughal autobiographies, all in Persian. They include the historian Haydar Mirza Doglat's (1499-1551 CE) *Tarik-e rasidi*, which is more self-consciously objective chronicle. A rare insight into women's lives at the Mughal court is provided by *Homayun-nama*, written by Golbadan (Gulbadan) Begim, who was Babur's daughter. *Jahangirnama*, the autobiography of Jahangir, Babur's great-grandson, is a psychologically complex self-examination, revealing the author's various cultural interests.

**Akbarnama** However, the most famous piece of life-writing during this period, and one of the most revealing texts in all Indian history, is the *Akbarnama* ('Book of Akbar'), the biography of Akbar, who ruled from 1556-1605 CE. Written by his court poet, AdulFazl, and exquisitely illustrated by 116 miniature paintings, it took seven years to complete. It covers Akbar's life and reign, but also includes a detailed description of the Mughal administration, from taxation to public works.

**ChaharUnsur** A remarkable autobiography written outside the Mughal court is *ChaharUnsur* ('Four Elements', 1680-1694 CE) by Bidel of Patna (1644-1721). It is a complex and difficult book, composed in rhymed prose, *ghazal*, *matnawi*, *rubai* and other verse forms. Arranged in four chapters (one each for air, water, fire and earth), it contains Bidel's reflections on his life, travels and religious experiences, including dreams and the benefits of silence.

**ChaharChaman** *ChaharChaman* ('Four Gardens') is a memoir written by ChandarBhan Brahman (d. 1662), a Hindu poet who also mastered Persian literary forms and became a *munshi* (secretary) at the Mughal court. While the first two 'gardens' describe historical events, the brief third and fourth 'gardens' are an autobiography, supplemented by his personal letters. Unfortunately, for readers, he ends his short text at the point when he is given a post at court by Shah Jahan.

### Sufi

A popular form of life-writing during the period was a collective biography of sufi saints, or a group of them, following the earlier model set by Attar's 13<sup>th</sup>-century CE text, *Takzirat al-Awliya*. Representative of this genre is *Haft Iqlim* (1594 CE) by Amin bin Ahmad Razi. Individual biographies of sufi saints were less common but not unusual. *Mu'nis al-arvah* ('The Confidant of Spirits'), an account of Mu'in al-Din Chishti, was composed by Jahanara (1614-1681 CE), daughter of emperor Shah Jahan.

### Hindi

**Ardhakathanak** *Ardhakathanak* ('Half a Story') by Banarasidas (1585-1643 CE) is the first extant autobiography in an Indian language. Whether or not the author had access to the Persian autobiographies of the Mughal court is unknown, but he was clearly a remarkable man. Unsurprisingly, as a poet and scholar, he wrote in verse. As a Jain merchant and a philosophical man, he takes account of his failings and ascribes much to karma, the law of cause and effect. Although he writes of himself in the third person, his 'Half a Story' is autobiographical in that it attempts to

understand the human condition through personal experiences. His skilful interweaving of the domestic sphere with the social, commercial, religious and political worlds of his time reveals his hard-earned views on greed, death, passion, ambition and the pursuit of truth. When he sat down to write, he was 55 years old, half the life-span of 110 recognised in Jain tradition. He died two years later, so his 'half a life' became his whole life.

### Tamil

**TamilNavalarCaritai** *Tamil NavalarCaritai* ('History of Tamil Poets', probably 18<sup>th</sup> c. CE) is a curious text. On the one hand, it is a traditional text, following the much earlier (12<sup>th</sup> c. CE) Tamil anthology of the brief lives of Tamil poet-saints. On the other, such anonymous texts were rare in the early modern period. It comprises 270 *catuverses*, or separate, stand-alone stanzas, that are intended to be memorised.

**AnandaRangaPillai** AnandaRanga Pillai (1709-1761 CE) is not a name known to many students of Indian literature. However, his private diary, written over a period of twenty-five years, is an unparalleled source of information about colonial India, in the same way that Mughal India is revealed by the biography of Akbar. AnandaRangaPillai was a Tamil merchant who rose to considerable influence as the chief agent to the French in their enclave of Pondicherry on the southeast coast. His diary documents, often in excruciating detail, the social and economic life in Pondicherry, while also revealing his own opinions of people, politics and changing times. Written in Tamil, it was not fully translated into French until 1894, and then into English in 1896.

### English

**Sake Dean Mahomet** Sake Dean Mahomed (or Mahomet, 1759-1851 CE) was born in India, where he served in the East India Company's army as a camp-follower and officer. He then emigrated to Ireland, married an Anglo-Irish woman and finally settled in England, where his medical therapies, including his famous shampoo (from Hindi *campo*, 'press') became popular with the British royal family. Here, too, the colonial encounter led to someone experimenting with a new literary form.

**The Travels of Dean Mahomet** He published his autobiography and travelogue, *The Travels of Dean Mahomet*, in Ireland in 1794, which is earliest (surviving) autobiographical writing by an Indian in English. Presenting a young man's life as a soldier in north India in the form of letters to an imagined friend, it offers a picture of this dramatic period of Indian history through the eyes of one individual. Since Dean Mahomed rarely speaks of himself, we might think of his book as a 'memoir.' The 100 or so pages, which are filled with descriptions of camps, manoeuvres, towns and garrisons, also resemble a travelogue. Although its style is not engrossing, the attention to detail and the self-confessed desire of the author to 'acquaint' Europeans with his early life has produced a powerful portrait.

### Reading

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### Texts

1. from *Baburnama*, trans. Wheeler Thackston

Compared to ours, it [India] is another world. Its mountains, rivers, forests, and wildernesses, its villages and provinces, animals and plants, peoples and languages, even its rain and winds are altogether different.

The cities and provinces of Hindustan are all unpleasant. All cities, all locales are alike. The gardens have no walls, and most places are flat as boards.

The parrot can be taught to talk, but unfortunately its voice is unpleasant and shrill as a piece of broken china dragged across a brass tray.

[addressed to Humayun, Babur's son]

Through God's grace you will defeat your enemies, take their territory, and make your friends happy by overthrowing the foe. God willing, this is your time to risk your life and wield your sword. Do not fail to make the most of an opportunity that presents itself. Indolence and luxury do not suit kingship... Conquest tolerates not inaction; the world is his who hastens most. When one is master one may rest from everything—except being king...

Item: In your letters you talk about being alone. Solitude is a flaw in kingship, as has been said. 'If you are fettered, resign yourself; but if you are a lone rider, your reins are free.' There is no bondage like the bondage of kingship. In kingship it is improper to seek solitude....

For some years we have struggled, experienced difficulties, traversed long distances, led the army, and cast ourselves and our soldiers into the dangers of war and battle. . . . What compels us to throw away for no reason at all the realms we have taken at such cost? Shall we go back to Kabul and remain poverty-stricken?

2. From *Mu'nis al-arvah*, trans. Sunil Sharma

It should be known to everyone that the guiding master KhvajaMu'inuddin Muhammad [Chishti] (may almighty God protect his secret) was a *sayyid*, and without doubt was among the offspring of the prophet. There is no disputing this. When the ruler of the age... Shah Jahan (may God preserve his realm), my glorious father, did not have information about the origins of the guiding master, he investigated the matter. I told him repeatedly that the master was a *sayyid* but he did not believe me until one day he was reading the *Akbarnama* and his auspicious eyes fell on the part of the where Shaikh Abu al-Fazl describes briefly the reality of the guiding master being a *sayyid*. From that day on this fact that was clearer than the sun was revealed to the king, shadow of God.

3. From the diary of AnandaRanga Pillai <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00litlinks/pillai/>

The English have captured the ships bound for Pondicherry, and have received as reinforcement men-of-war from England and other places. This accounts for their activity. Nevertheless they are much troubled owing to their leader, the governor [of Madras], being a worthless fellow, devoid of wisdom. Although Pondicherry receives no ships, her government lacks funds, the enemy has seized her vessels, she is feeble and wanting in strength, and her inhabitants are in misery, although she has all these disadvantages ....when her name is uttered, her enemies tremble...

In times of decay, order disappears, giving place to disorder, and justice to injustice. Men no longer observe their caste rules, but transgress their bounds, so that the castes are confused and force governs. One man takes another's wife and his property. Everyone kills or robs another. In short, there is anarchy...unless, justice returns, this country will be ruined. This is what men say, and I have written it briefly.

## ESSAY

### Overview

Essay writing in the early modern period was often stimulated by religious debate, which was in part generated by the arrival of Christianity and the Europeans. Although traditional commentaries were also written, mostly in the more conservative south, the great majority of discursive prose writings took a position on religion, propagating the true faith and discrediting one's enemies. During this politically chaotic time, as the Mughal Empire declined and foreigners gained more and more control of the country, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Christians used the essay to stake their claims in literary and political culture.

### Indo-Persian

**Governance** An important treatise on governance was written by AbulFazl (b. 1551 CE), the biographer and friend of the Mughal emperor Akbar. It forms the last section of the biography and is entitled *Ain-i-Akbari*. The author's thinking was influenced by Shia tradition and by ideas from classical Greece mediated through Muslim translations and philosophers. The original Shia concept was that a divine light, from the creation, rested in each generation in an *imam*. By Mughal times, however, the idea of a person with esoteric knowledge of god had changed to the belief in a ruler with divine understanding. This line of thinking brought Fazl to treat his subject, Akbar, as a 'philosopher king.'

**Maktubat** *Maktubat* ('Letters') by Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624 CE) is one of the classics of Indo-Persian literature. The author, a Muslim cleric, was the leader of the opposition to what conservatives thought was Akbar's neglect of true Islam. At one point in the text, the author observes that the death of Akbar had given Muslims in India the opportunity to regain the true path of religion

**Nasihah** Indo-Persian literature recognises a special genre of 'advice' called *nasihat* (sometimes referred to as 'mirror for princes').

It is a broad category, including any biography, autobiography or history that offers counsel to rulers. A representative example, but from the late Mughal period at its furthestmost geographic extent, is Abd-al-Hadi Karnataki's work titled *Nasihahnama*. The author describes the political chaos in the Madras region in the mid-18th century and urges landholders and officials to take action before foreigners succeed in conquering the area. It is one of the few Indo-Persian texts to issue a rallying cry to both Hindus and Muslims to defend India against the European threat.

**Chandra Bhan Brahman** Chandra Bhan Brahman (d. 1662 CE) was a Hindu poet who also wrote in Persian, a result of the mixed Indo-Persian culture of his age. His father had been a government official at a Muslim court, and Chandra Bhan Brahman, too, served the ruler of Lahore. He wrote in a wide variety of literary genres, but his collection of 128 letters (*Monsa-at*) reveals his personal views on current affairs. The letters are divided into sections, according to whether they are addressed to kings, statesmen, friends or strangers.

### Sikh

The canonisation of Sikh scriptures, which took place in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, was more or less completed by Guru Gobind Singh in 1706 CE. Gobind Singh and other Sikh scholars produced a number of scholarly appendices, advancing arguments and evidence for their final selection of hymns included in the *Adi Granth*. Gobind Singh also composed a number of shorter writings, similar to Christian catechisms, providing instructions on daily prayer and recitation.

### Bengali

Dom Antonio de Rosario was a prince of a small kingdom in Bengal who was captured by Portuguese pirates as a young boy. A Catholic missionary then rescued him from slavery and initiated him into Christianity with a new name (his original Bengali name is unknown), after which the zealous convert wrote a tract attacking Hinduism. His *Brahman-Roman Catholic Samvad* ('Dialogue between a Brahman and a Roman Catholic') is a short, poorly written, unpublished text, but it demonstrates the influence of colonialism on the development of essay writing in this period.

### Sanskrit

An even more intriguing example of a religious polemic essay is the *Maha Nirvana Tantra* ('Book of the Great Liberation'), which was produced in the 1790s in Calcutta, but passed off as an ancient Sanskrit text. A trio of writers—an English missionary (Wm. Carey), a Bengali pundit (Vidyavagish) and a Bengali scholar attracted to Christianity (Raj Mohan Roy)—collaborated in writing this fraudulent text purporting to explain the Hindu concept of the *brahman* while actually propagating the Holy Spirit of Christianity.

### Tamil

**Roberto De Nobili** The first books in any Indian language written by a European are the Tamil (Telugu and Sanskrit) Christian tracts by the Italian missionary Roberto Di Nobili (1578-1656 CE), who spent nearly five decades in India. His major work in Tamil, which was printed posthumously in 1677-78 (and thereafter in different editions), is a catechism entitled *Nanopatecam* ('Teaching Wisdom'). In 88 sections, he sets out in high-literary and Sanskritised Tamil to explain the mysteries of Christianity to the 'heathens.'

**C.J. Beschi** A century after Nobili, another Italian missionary made an even more lasting contribution to Tamil literature. C.J. Beschi (1680-1742?) wrote not only grammars and fiction but also an argumentative essay called *VetaVilakkam* ('Explanation of the Veda'). In this work, written in the 1720s, but not printed until 1842, Beschi turns his sharp wit not toward Hindus or Muslims, but toward his closest enemy, the Lutherans who had just set up camp in the Tamil country. With his Hindu audience in mind, he accuses the Protestants of using a rustic, ungrammatical Tamil in their own propaganda tracts.

**Commentaries** The Tamil tradition of commentary continued during this period, largely through the patronage of the Nayak kings of Madurai (1529-1736 CE). One example is *Meynanavilakkam* ('Explanation of the Highest Knowledge'), a commentary on the *advaita* ('non-dualism') philosophy written by MadaiTiruvengadunathar, an official in the court of TirumalaiNayak .

One of his contemporaries, Civaprakasara, also wrote a number of interpretations of SaivaSiddhanta philosophy and Tamil grammar. And very late in this period, CivananaMunivar (d. 1785) produced a voluminous commentary on *Civananapotam*.

### Petitions

From the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, when the British East India Company took over the governance of Bengal and Madras, Indians began to write petitions to their new rulers. Landlords, merchants and local rajas wrote long and detailed texts, to complain about unfair taxation, to ask for mitigation and to pursue action in the courts. One petition in 1788, for instance, asked the government to punish two local Tamil officials, a chieftain and a landlord, who had interfered with their temple festival. Caste-bound rules about who could worship, who could wear certain ornaments and who could process were all ripe for dissent and now there was an outside body to which one could appeal. Thus, the newly-arrived colonial state indirectly caused hundreds of Indians to write argumentatively in Bengali, Tamil, Telugu and (if capable) Persian or English.

### Questions/discussion

1. Literary history is a changing field. Where once elite texts in educated languages dominated, now other, more demotic voices are included. Especially in attempting to trace the development of prose-writing and the essay, less exalted forms, like letters to the editor of newspapers and political tracts, are studied.
2. The influence of Europeans on the emergence of the essay in India is difficult to overestimate. They wrote essays and they (or their culture and religion) were the subject of essays written by Indians. The difficult question is to determine how this strand of writing interacted, if at all, with the continuing traditions of religious and grammatical commentary.
3. English enters the frame of Indian literature and the public sphere during this period in the form of newspapers and printed books. By 1800, a few Indian writers began to use the foreigners' language to express themselves (a habit that grew over the next century). Is English, then, an Indian language? If so, when did it become one?

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### Texts

1. From *Ain-i-Akbari* by AbulFazl, trans. Peter Hardy

No dignity is higher in the eyes of God than royalty, and those who are wise drink from its auspicious fountain. A sufficient proof of this, for those who require one, is the fact that royalty is a remedy for the spirit of rebellion, and the reason why subjects obey. Even the meaning of the word *padshah* [emperor] shows this; for *pad* signifies stability and possession. If royalty did not exist, the storm of strife would never subside nor selfish ambition disappear. ...

Silly and short-sighted men cannot distinguish a true king from a selfish ruler. Nor is this remarkable as both have in common a large treasury, a numerous army, clever servants, obedient subjects, an abundance of wise men... But men of deeper insight remark a difference. In the case of the former, these things just now enumerated are lasting, but in that of the latter, of short duration. The former does not attach himself to these things, as his object is to remove oppression and provide for everything that is good.

2. From *Veta Vilakkam* by Beschi, trans. S. Blackburn

These Protestants have poisoned the *amirtam* (sweet ambrosia) of pure Tamil. When they cannot even write the name of their own country correctly [Beschi claimed that they misspelled 'Germany'], how can they hope to use Tamil well? Their translations of the Bible are like gems thrown into the mud, like black ink spilled on a beautiful portrait.