

INDIAN ESSAY – Early Modern Period

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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 establish firm ground.

Indo-Persian

Theory of Kingship This treatise of governance was written by Abul Fazl (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, this idea of a person with esoteric knowledge of god had passed to a temporal ruler. 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 furthest 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*) reveal his personal views on current affairs. The letters are divided into five sections, according to whether they are addressed to kings, statesmen, friends or strangers.

Sikh

The canonisation of Sikh scriptures, which took place in the 15th and 16th 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, producing 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 of Bengal, who was captured by Portuguese pirates as a young boy. A Catholic missionary 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

Another even more intriguing example 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. 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 Roberto Di Nobili (1578-1656 CE), who spent nearly five decades in India. His major work, in Tamil and 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 *Veta Vilakkam* ('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 *Meynavilakkam* ('Explanation of the Highest Knowledge'), a commentary on the *advaita* ('non-dualism') philosophy written by Madai Tiruvengadunathar, an official in the court of Tirumalai Nayak. His contemporary, Civaprakasara wrote a number of interpretations of Saiva Siddhanta philosophy and Tamil grammar. And very late in this period, Civanana Munivar (d. 1785) produced a voluminous commentary on *Civananapotam*.

Petitions

From the mid-18th 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 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 language dominated, now other, more demotic voices are included. Especially in attempting to trace the development of prose writing, such as the essay, less exalted forms, like letters to the editor of newspapers and political tracts, are studied. But these types of writing really 'literature'?
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, how did this strand of writing interact, if at all, with the continuing tradition 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?

Reading

Muzaffar Alam and François Delvoye and Marc Gaborieau, *The Making of Indo-Persian Culture. Indian and French Studies* (Manohar, 2000)

K. Ayyappa Pannicker (ed.), *Medieval Indian Literature: an Anthology* (Sahitya Akademi, 2000)

Stuart Blackburn, *Print, Folklore and Nationalism in Colonial South India* (Permanent Black, 2003)

Ronald Stuart McGregor, *Hindi Literature from Its Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century* (Harrassowitz, 1984)

Texts

1. From *Ain-i-Akbari* by Abul Fazl, 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.