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Poetry of kings: the classical Hindi literature of Mughal India.

Allison Busch

Oxford University Press, 2011. xx + 339 pp.

Reviewed by Ghanshyam Sharma

No matter how pacific an invader's ultimate aim may be at the outset, invasions are generally a determining factor of significant upheaval in the life of a country. One cannot underestimate the influence of the Mughal Empire and the British Raj on all spheres of human life in India. The outsiders not only spread Islam and Christianity in India, they brought linguistic diversity, architectural skills and technical know-how. Undoubtedly, these intrusions contributed greatly towards the enrichment of an already vibrant intellectual life in India.

Nevertheless, recent research findings suggest that the Mughal reign and British rule were also, to varying degrees, the principle cause of a major break in the millennial Sanskrit literary and cultural tradition, leaving an epistemic void in India's intellectual history. As a result, a profoundly rich and sophisticated Sanskrit literary tradition gradually ceased to exist, and, perhaps due mainly to these invasions and rule, no serious attempts were made by the Indian intelligentsia to contribute towards a continuation of the Sanskrit literary tradition in local vernaculars. Needless to say, the great literary and philosophical traditions of Sanskrit—the entirety of classical Indian scholarship—had to bear the full brunt of this ongoing process which lasted almost six centuries.

Divergent hypotheses put forward by scholars have tried to account for the underlying causes of this epistemic decadence in the cultural and literary history of India during the period of Mughal Empire and British Raj. In her very impressive volume, Allison Busch admirably embarks upon the challenging task of re-evaluating the Mughal era's literary achievements. In *Poetry of Kings*, Busch critically analyzes the history of pre-modern Hindi literature, scrutinizing in particular the courtly Braj poetry of the Mughal era, widely known as *rīti* poetry (the courtly poetry of classical Hindi literature) which was produced in northern India during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In order to analyze the distinct esthetic characteristics of *rīti* poetry, she chooses the pre-eminent *rīti* poet

Keshavdas, who has been largely disparaged by modern historians of Hindi literature due to his love for obscenity and his *recherché* style.

In her in-depth analysis of *rīti* poetry, Busch vigorously puts forward a new persuasive hypothesis. She claims that, mainly as a result of British colonialism, Indians gradually grew disenchanted with their beautiful literary past, abandoning *rīti* poetry altogether. In particular, owing to this disenchantment, the Hindi literary world did not accord to *rīti* the credit it deserved. In order to counter British colonialism, Busch argues, the Indian literati, in the name of modernity, discarded most of India's literary past. She writes: "Many aspects of Indian culture came to bear the stigma of decadence by this period [of colonialism], but *rīti* literature fared particularly poorly under the new epistemological regimes of colonialism and nationalism." (p. 11)

Throughout her critical analysis, Busch singles out British colonialism and Indian nationalism as the most significant causes of the unfair treatment that *rīti* poetry has received from Hindi literary criticism. However, her passionate enthusiasm for establishing that British colonialism played a decisive role in the disgrace of pre-independence era *rīti* literature is not duly supported with sufficient historical facts. British colonialism did indeed contribute broadly to the make-up of the Indian intelligentsia, yet its aim had not been to dethrone *rīti* poetry from the literary arena. In her preferential treatment of *rīti* poetry, Busch appears to not distinguish between Brajbhasha—the language spoken in the Braj area—and *rīti* poetry. At Fort William College, the British did indeed favour Khari Boli (a Western Hindi dialect from which modern standard Hindi derives, spoken mainly in the rural surroundings of Delhi and western Uttar Pradesh), but only because of its wider acceptability as a lingua franca, and not as a rejection of Brajbhasha. Had the British rulers had any such biased attitude against Brajbhasha, they would not have appointed Lallulal—a native Brajbhasha speaker from Agra—at Fort William College where, in the fullness of time, he would write *Premśāgar* in a hotchpotch of Brajbhasha, certainly not in pure Khari Boli. Furthermore, a push for Khari Boli was deemed proper to develop it as a language of prose rather than to counter *rīti* poetry.

While expatiating on the complexity of the phenomenon, Busch superbly pinpoints an intellectual conflict between "the logic of colonialism (India needed to be rescued from its political and cultural decline under Mughal rule) and nationalism (literature needed to be more vigorous, and to serve the Hindu motherland)" (p. 237). However, she overlooks many

other decisive factors which played an equally important role in the decline of *rīti* poetry.

First, it is not 'Indian nationalism' per se which wanted to serve the Hindu motherland, but a sort of 'leftist-cum-progressive' ideology—to which most of the Indian intelligentsia unknowingly adhered—which is to blame for the denigration of classicism in India. It was the intelligentsia which, in the name of nation-building, discarded much of classical Indian heritage. These very scholars were responsible for classifying not only the Hindi poetry of different periods, but also almost all of Indian classical heritage. Second, strange as it may seem, in the land of the Kāmasūtra, any serious study of *rīti* poetry was seen to imply a particular interest in obscenity. When and how this outlook developed in India is a topic of separate study, but it happened well before the arrival of the British and certainly not during the British Raj. Finally, let us consider Busch's disappointment at the way in which *rīti* poetry is classified. Needless to say that the history of Hindi literature has to be rewritten to a great extent, keeping in mind all the new research findings about classical Hindi literature. However, one can find such injustice in almost all the classifications in the history of world literatures.

A further limitation comes in the Glossary of technical terms, where Busch has not been fully attentive in providing correct definitions (see for example, the terms *tatsama* and *tārīkh* carelessly translated as 'pure Sanskrit word' and 'Persian royal chronicle' respectively). In her attempt to harmonize the diacritics, Busch has appropriately and intelligently chosen to either adopt or adapt two different systems of transcribing titles and technical terms from Hindi, Sanskrit and Persian. Nevertheless, I find her decision to eschew the use of diacritic marks for Sanskrit names (p. xvii) somewhat counterproductive.

Minor diacritical inconsistencies aside, *Poetry of Kings* is a superbly drafted masterpiece on pre-modern Hindi poetry. It will undoubtedly prove to be essential reading not only for those Western scholars who wish to concentrate their efforts on a better understanding of *rīti* poetry, but also to the body of Hindi scholars in India who for different reasons have totally abandoned any serious study of classical Hindi poetry. Busch authoritatively demonstrates that she knows the trees as well as the wood of Braj poetry. With her extraordinary knowledge of the *rīti* genre, Busch has laid down major claims in the field of the history of Hindi literature, which require serious scholarly attention in order to be fully appreciated. The Hindi literary community will undoubtedly be delighted to receive

other volumes by Busch on related topics in the field of medieval Hindi literature.

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