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History of a Polyglossic Literary Culture. On the Decline of the History of Hindi Literature

SUMMARY: One of many Western categories which prove to be unsuitable to South Asian evidence is the history of literature (meant as the history of a single language). With reference to the Hindi literary traditions, the logic of this concept created huge gaps. One of those (16th to 18th century) has been filled with the history of literatures written in genetically close but different languages. The problem is being solved by the most recent scholarship with the new concept of literary cultures which should replace the old category of the histories of one-language literatures. The extension and adaptation of the sociolinguistic concept of diglossia may provide a theoretical justification and a tool for such reform to be definitively undertaken and accepted by the scholars. This preliminary suggestion is offered after a selective sketch of the problems imposed by the linguistic variety in the area discussed.

KEYWORDS: *rīti*, *bhāṣā*, Braj, Hindi, literary culture, sociolinguistics, diglossia, polyglossia, nationalism.

In the present article¹, I deal with the idea of history of literature as it is reflected in Hindi literature and its representations, and subsequently with the problems of its published accounts. The existing concept of the history of monolingual literature proves misleading, especially with reference to North India, where the so-called history of

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Hindi literature prevalently comprises a number of important literary languages, such as Braj or Avadhi. I argue that their literary production was subsumed under the label of Hindi literature at the beginning of the 20th century. The space that had been occupied by former literary languages has undergone the process of appropriation by Khari-boli (*kharī bolī*) Hindi. This process, as I will show using mostly Vasudha Dalmia's argument, is a strongly ideological result of nationalist efforts. What justification for including several literatures under one Hindi label can be offered instead? The main aim of this article is to use the sociolinguistic concept of diglossia as the basis for such justification. This solution will consequently support the substitution of the monolingual frameworks of the history of literature with Sheldon Pollock's concept of literary cultures.²

Methodological inspiration

The problem of incompatibility of some 20th century Western methodologies adopted by humanities with the requirements for the study of non-European civilizations is likely to be faced by anyone who attempts to undertake the latter one from the very beginning of their endeavour. Modern thought contributed to the emergence of several dominant forms of science that tended to be based on empirical evidence limited to Europe or the Western world at best. Consequently and logically, no contemporary scholar working on an *exotic* culture should express astonishment when feeling that the range of material he deals with does not suit the methodology he hoped to apply. But even if such is the case, many a study proceeds with its reconstructions in spite of the fact that

² By formulating my critique of the foundations of conventional histories of Hindi literature and their alternative justifications, I do not intend to suggest that Braj or Avadhi literary traditions have not been studied in their own right. This article is rather a contribution against the general tendency of writing monolingual histories of literature. Thanks to the argument of the polyglossic situation in North India, I would rather consider all of them to be several components of one wider tradition.

its author is often aware of such drawbacks. This may be caused by personal ambitions or an academic ethos stemming from or imposed on such authors by their professional links to institutions, be it university or other. The authority of their predecessors might be an additional factor pervading the pride and tenacity, being ethnocentric in character.

A wide spectrum of such impositions was depicted and radically conceptualized as *theft* by Jack Goody (Goody 2006).

What has characterized European efforts, as in much simpler societies, has been the propensity to impose their own story on the wider world, following an ethnocentric tendency that emerges as an extension of the ego-centric impulse at the basis of much human perception, and the capacity to do so is due to its *de facto* domination in many parts of the world (Goody 2006:13).

The anthropologist proposes within this explanatory note a reason why Europe assumes the whole world should be expected to develop along the lines and patterns originating from the metropolis.³ Although the above-cited critique concerns the *theft* of time and space, I consider it applicable to the history of literature, which is a discipline shaped in Europe in a way probably not seen by South Asia before the advent of Western domination.

An alternative concept

The problems with South Asian literatures arise, as I am able to argue thanks to Goody's general concept of *theft*, due to the imposition of European categories on South Asian cultures. Those cultures have developed their own ways of dealing with the past and present but have been overshadowed in consequence of a range of historical processes

³ The term metropolis understood as the center of the colonial world is used here in a somehow allegorical sense, i.e. it refers to the European or so-called Western institutions and networks which elaborated the patterns that were then superimposed on or accepted by the other (predominantly non-Western) intellectual circles.

conditioned by colonialism. What flaws can arise when some extraneous evidence is forcefully put into already established frames? The example I discuss here shows the outcomes of the incompatibility of the history of literature as a domain of human sciences with South Asian reality. There are several dilemmas that the researchers of Hindi literature need to struggle with at the very outset. My main interest concerns strictly the range of languages that should be included.⁴ This issue underwrites a simple but vivid question: what in fact is Hindi? The Western need to categorize, therefore to rationalize, to simplify or to make everything match its own system of knowledge, requires from the historians of literature to name what they write in such a way so that it characterizes the content of their accounts as precisely as possible. And what if there is no name for that? And indeed this was and in a way still is the case with what we name Hindi, that is an ultra simplified concept, especially in reference to the literature.

A much wider concept than the history of literature in its conventional monolingual understanding is the idea of literary culture proposed by Sheldon Pollock. It legitimizes—unlike the former one—the co-existence of several language literatures under one label.

There are good reasons for arguing—and many have argued this for the past two decades or more—that anything can be literature; that the term needs to be understood pragmatically rather than ontologically, as pointing to ways certain texts are used rather than defining what those texts inherently and essentially are (Pollock 2006: 2).

This way of understanding literature as a pragmatic entity contests linguistic features or language itself as the main factor deciding about the division of the literary scope. Therefore, such a definition of literature implicitly suggests that different languages may be part

⁴ The justification for including some languages into the wider tradition of Hindi belt, which I am proposing in this article, should be also helpful to solve the problem of the beginnings of Hindi literature. The latter is definitely an outcome of the linguistic variety specific to North India in this case.

of one literary culture. I assume that some common subjects, similar roles that the vernacular languages played at courts, in politics or in the religious life in the vernacular era⁵ in North India are markers of their pragmatic intersections. Additionally, the literature composed in several languages used to gain interest of the listeners or readers within the same temporal and geographical space.

Hindi as generalization

From the linguistic point of view, contemporary Hindi is an Indo-Aryan language, heir to the speech of Delhi (McGregor 2007: 946) known as Hindi or Hindui. Most of all, its grammar, but also the lexical roots, let us link the modern language with this pre-modern idiom used in North India. The term as presently understood covers a whole range of languages spoken in many Indian states from Rajasthan to Jharkhand and from Himachal Pradesh to Madhya Pradesh. Contemporary Hindi literature uses predominantly so-called Modern Standard Hindi that is based on the Khari Boli. It may again differ from writer to writer, depending on the authors' background, mostly in terms of the roots of the registers they apply—Sanskrit or Arabic/Persian, and this even leaving aside the debate on the Hindi-Urdu division. The problem of consistency and doubts of what the history of Hindi literature is appears due to the fact that many texts listed in the existing histories of Hindi literature have been written in various languages. Especially the accounts on the literary period(s) of Bhakti and Riti (*rīti*) refer to the texts written in the distinct forms of *bhāṣā* or *bhākhā*.⁶ The lan-

⁵ Pollock's interest in literary cultures focuses on the binary concept of cosmopolitan and vernacular languages. The observations and comparisons between Europe and India led the scholar to distinguish two great periods in the history of the literary cultures. He calls them millennia. The first millennium after Christ is the period of cosmopolitan languages: Sanskrit and Latin, the second—vernacular (cf. Pollock 2006: 437–467).

⁶ The authors of the Riti and Bhakti texts used the term in both variants to name the vernacular language that became their main tool.

guages identified as Braj (*braj*) or Avadhi (*avādhi*) are today virtually extinct as the medium for the contemporary literature. Therefore, from the linguists' perspective, most of the available histories of Hindi literature would be in fact the collective histories of many North Indian languages. What justifies then this vagueness or the hybrid content of the works of the literary historians of India?

Hindi as invention

Hindi in the form that dominates in contemporary Indian literature did not develop only as a consensus negotiated between the writers' idiolects. It should be rather considered as a colonial-cum-nationalist product. The process of such formation is to be observed in the 19th and early 20th centuries and started, to put it emphatically, within concrete institutional frames. Fort William College was founded in 1800 in Calcutta with the initial idea to train colonial officers in Indian languages. The formation of the Hindustani language department held by John Gilchrist exposed the first need for generalization. The construction of a new category of one language was not only, as I have already suggested, a means to simplify and understand things, but also had two very practical reasons. First of all, colonial rule over India must have seemed extremely energy consuming without one national language. Secondly, it was virtually impossible to manage the whole range of languages and dialects within even such a big institutional project as Fort William College. Therefore, the choices had to be made. As Vasudha Dalmia points out in her book *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*,

The concept of a national language was initially introduced by the British and applied to the Indian situation. They found no single language which could claim national status. However, under the Mughals, it was the composite language, which went by the name of *hindavī* or *hindustanī*, which was understood in some measure across the breadth of the subcontinent. In the complex linguistic situation in the country, the British perception initiated a process which, in case of Hindustani, quickly led to the split and to the creation of Hindi and Urdu, as the national languages of Hindus and Muslims respectively, and to their subsequent development as two autonomous print languages. (Dalmia 1997: 146)

As Dalmia argues, “[...] the British could obviously have no vested interest in either developing the regional languages as mediums of public communication or for that matter in propagating any single Indian language as the *lingua franca* of British India.” The credit for enforcing the influence of Hindi goes in Dalmia’s view to the nationalists:

After the mid-century, however, the concept of Hindi as the language of Hindus, with vast territorial and ideological aspirations, was appropriated by nationalists and henceforth developed almost exclusively by them (Dalmia 1997: 147).

She traces three stages of Hindi’s constitution. The language underwent dichotomization (Hindi/Urdu), standardization and nationalist historicization. The last stage explains how it happened that the 20th century literary historians incorporated Braj literature within the history of Hindi literature following the Western patterns.

The great ideological movement, which Hindi came to be associated with, was offered by the devotional bhakti movement, which came to be seen as the Hindu response to the threat posed by Islam (Dalmia 1997: 148).

Those arguments show that the scope of literatures to be observed in Shukla’s (Shukla 2002, first published in 1929) and subsequent literary histories of Hindi is a Western type account biased by the nationalist ideas. From the historico-literary point of view, by no means can it be an argument for maintaining the account on the Braj literary production within what we call the history of Hindi literature today. The triple process as described by Dalmia is not so specific to North India only. Pollock’s illustration of the idea of literary cultures with reference to French literature shows us that not identical, but at least analogical situations apparently had taken place in Europe as well: “[...] if languages come to distinguish nations, it is in part because nations are made by turning languages into distinctive national markers.” (Pollock 2003: 11).

The tyranny of one language

“Early Hindi novels of the late 19th century mirror on the one hand the dedication to ‘pure’ Hindi as a vehicle of social reform and national (Hindu) identity, designing model characters with the purpose to educate the reading public.”⁷ This observation made by Barbara Lotz gives us the first idea about the early success of the Khari Boli and the colonial project.

The fact that the dominance of Hindi in its form initiated within the institutional frames of the Fort William College in the early 19th century was more the effect of its supporters’ struggle for supremacy than a mere consensus between the writers’ idiolects can be read from the defensive responses on the literary scene. As Valerie Ritter notices, “By 1928, criticism of Braj Bhasha was strong enough for Makhanlal Chaturvedi to write defensively (and incorrectly) in his review of Ratnakar’s *Gangavataran* that ‘the time of disrespect for Braj is over, the time for its renaissance is coming’” (Ritter 2010: 262). The most audible exponent of the nationalist idea to adopt one national language by rejecting the still rich variety of literary languages was Mahavir Prasad Dvivedi (1864–1938). The story of the repudiation of Braj language by “one of the most significant architects of Hindi modernity” has been convincingly presented by Allison Busch. As the editor of the most influential Hindi journal, Dvivedi possessed a powerful propaganda tool.

In a region where rigid grammar regimes had never dictated the uses of the vernacular language, *Sarasvatī* became a new authority on correct Hindi. And ‘correct Hindi’ would now have a highly circumscribed range. [...] Dvivedi set out to enthrone Khari Boli as the only legitimate form of Hindi literary expression. He implemented a draconian editorial policy for *Sarasvatī* magazine, accepting only Khari Boli poetry submissions (Busch 2011: 220–221).

⁷ Barbara Lotz, seminar in Cracow, 11/04/2013: „Whose language is it anyway? A brief literary journey through the Hindi Urdu Controversy.” The excerpt is part of the invitation abstract of the lecture.

As Busch states, his influential essay “Kavikartavya” published in 1901 “was larded with disdain for Braj” (Busch 2011: 221). His argument that the Braj poetry was not much more than a continuous repetition of always the same outdated threads became influential enough to kill the interest of the future historians if not in Braj than at least in Riti courtly literature. “Khari Boli was perhaps not beautiful the way Braj was [...], but it had modern utilitarian values.” (Busch 2011: 222) Therefore, Khari Boli was projected as a better vehicle for the modern prose, again for nationalist purposes. It is not unjustified to suggest that its success lay partially in the lack of its popularity in the early modern era, equal to Braj. From the colonial and nationalist points of view, the poetical themes of Braj literature were perceived feminine enough to fail to serve the heavy nationalist discourse.

In *The Modern Vernacular Literature of Hindustan* published in 1889, George Abraham Grierson called the new Hindi language a wonderful hybrid invented by Europeans (Grierson 1889: 197). But at the same time he notices what kind of artificial construct this pure Hindi was. The new medium of literary prose “has been adopted all over Hindustan as the lingua franca of Hindus, for a want existed which it fulfilled.” (Grierson 1889: 197) He does not specify how and who exposed such a want, whether the Indians or the colonial power, but notices the failure of this nobody’s vernacular to become the language of poetry. Grierson, who was probably the most competent European to express his view on the then state of Hindi literature, confirms that the influence of the new language was the result of the deliberate struggle even before Dvivedi’s propaganda: “The greatest geniuses have tried and it has been found wanting at their hands.” (Grierson, 1889: 197).

Diglossia/polyglossia

Grierson’s above-cited description reveals the co-existence of different languages within the same literary culture and—what is important here—both of them shared to some extent the same function of vehicles

for literature. The specific distortion that characterized the situation in Grierson's times derives from the fact that prose developed in Hindi, whereas poetry was still being written in the "better grounded" literary vernaculars, with the dominance of Braj. To describe this situation I propose to adapt for our (or literary historians') purpose the term *diglossia*. The studies on diglossia have already become a recognizable branch of sociolinguistics. The word was introduced into English and defined in 1959 by Charles A. Ferguson as a "relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include standard or a regional standards) there is a divergent highly codified superposed variety" (Ferguson 1966: 435). Ferguson's definition of highly codified superposed dialect may raise some doubts about the applicability of the term to the Braj-Hindi situation, but the theory based in its origins on the studies on four pairs of dialects (Swiss German & German, French & Creole, classical & Egyptian Arabic, *katharévusa* and modern Greek with the fifth of Tamil given as the perfect model) had been left as an open concept or proposition and later on successively developed. The most significant steps to be observed for our purpose are further extensions of the sociolinguists' working area not only from dialects to the pairs of genetically close languages, but also to the pairs constituted by relatively distant languages (Fishman 1970: 73–89; a brief sketch of the related extended studies on diglossia in Schiffman 1997: 208–216).⁸ Diglossia in the context of the literary cultures in North India, as I briefly propose, would be the co-existence of two literary languages in the same time, space and society.⁹ Additionally, whereas diglossic societies make

⁸ As I aim here to propose the use of the term diglossia for the description of the discussed situation of Braj, it is for a different occasion that I leave the detailed comparison of Ferguson's model and of the later extended characteristics of diglossic evidence with the features of the languages forming a bi-pole situation of the literary culture in North India.

⁹ Although I assume it would be possible to compare Sheldon Pollock's cosmopolitan–vernacular relation with Ferguson's H(igh) language vs. L(ow) language model (Ferguson 1966: 430), the 19th century Braj-Hindi

use of two varieties of idioms, one might need a more sophisticated concept or at least another extension of it to polyglossia¹⁰ to describe accurately what we encounter in South Asia. The proposed application of the sociolinguistic tool of diglossia to literary histories obviously requires the inclusion of the written material whereas Ferguson's concept had been elaborated on the basis of oral evidence.

The reality of the di- or polyglossic literary culture existing in the 19th century was nothing new on Indian soil. Some lack of understanding of this specific feature of North India, if not of the whole Indian civilization, lay beneath another argument of Dvivedi's struggle for Hindi's supremacy. According to Allison Busch this phenomenon "appeared to Dvivedi a bizarre and illogical division of linguistic and literary labor" (Busch 2011: 221). Generations of litterateurs needed to accustom the new idiom to different literary forms. But the origins of the division disdained by Dvivedi are not to be seen exclusively in the somewhat artificial imposition within Fort William College's agenda. According to Philip Lutgendorf,

The North Indian verbal artist can enrich his performance by drawing on a wide range of spoken and literary dialects. The parallel vocabularies of Sanskrit, Perso-Arabic, and regional dialects such as Bhojpuri, Avadhi, and Braj Bhasha offer the gifted performer terms and idioms appropriate to various rhetorical strategies (Lutgendorf 1991: 190).

The abilities of the poets in the contemporary Hindi-speaking areas to use consecutively different registers may already raise the alarm that the one-language literature with which we are familiar with in the Western world is not the reality we should forcefully seek for in India. Lutgendorf provides also a more historical picture of

situation is not so clear and requires at least some additional explanation to fit even the actual definitions of diglossia.

¹⁰ The meaning of the term polyglossia is consequently drawn from sociolinguistics, as the extension of diglossia, i.e. obviously with no relation to Bakhtin's heteroglossia/polyglossia concept, better known to literary historians.

the literary culture which, as I anticipated, did not inform the formation of 20th-century Western methodologies with its empirical evidence. As if in response to Dvivedi's nationalist argument against the coexistence of two languages within the same literature, Lutgendorf notes that

Indians are often bi- or trilingual and relatively comfortable with variant dialect patterns. The fact that Braj Bhasha and Avadhi, in their pure forms, were spoken by relatively few people at any given time did not prevent poetry in these languages from being widely enjoyed. Indeed, until this century [20th], these dialects, together with Urdu, were the preferred media of poetry; a person who wished to express poetic sentiments switched into one or another of them, just as Banarasis shift back and forth between Bhojpuri, Khari Boli, and Urdu, according to the context and the person being addressed. We may compare this multivocality to that in the American musical idiom, where, for the expression of certain conventional sentiments, white northern singers assume a southern or African American dialect and accent. (Lutgendorf 1991: 417–418)

Lutgendorf's multivocality becomes here the proposed polyglossia if one consider that the idioms are used or rather chosen with respect to their function.

The concept of diglossia or polyglossia that existed in early modern North India gives us, therefore, a non-nationalist reason to maintain both Braj or Avadhi literatures within the frames of what we understand as *Hindi literary culture*.

Riti as once a dominant Hindi tradition

The argument for diglossia as a specific feature of the literary cultures of India gives us a fresh perspective on both Bhakti and Riti styles and especially on their legitimacy to be part of the history of Hindi literature. Both literary styles, or trends, occupy a vast space in the history of Hindi literature although their main linguistic vehicle is Braj or its dialectal variants. Although there is no apparent evidence that the contemporaries of Bhakti and Riti authors valued any of those styles more than the other, the modern or nationalist discourse showed more disre-

spect to Riti, considering it a vain entertainment, whereas Bhakti could still enjoy appreciation due to the dominant themes of spiritual values.

The original land of Braj as a spoken language is probably the Braj district, an irregular strip of land that stretches from Agra to Aligarh. But taking it as a literary idiom, according to the data on the earliest available texts written in this language, one should immediately spread its original range at least as far as Gwalior. In the 15th century this city was the centre of activity of Vishnudas (viṣṇudās), the first noted poet writing in Braj, and it is where this language was used for official purposes at the court of Tomaras (Stasik 2000:150–151).

The Riti vernacular literature is presented in most of modern accounts as a separate period of literature, distinct from Bhakti. Its beginnings are bound with the poet Keśavdas of the late 16th and early 17th centuries, who operated in Orcha and Jhansi. Although Bhakti literature was by no means limited to its initial lengthened strip of the Braj district, the geographical spread of Riti can serve as a significant indicator of the range of the Braj language, for its literary production was in many cases closely tied to the courts which might have heavily supported the authors. Riti's strictly secular character and the relation of the authors to the rulers whom they served suggest that Braj was the main component of the diglossic or polyglossic schema of many North Indian literary cultures. Although the proximity of Keśavdas's main area of activity to the Braj district, i.e. the possible presence of Braj as a spoken idiom at those courts, might weaken the argument, it is hard to question the diffusion of Braj as a language parallel to the popular idioms of many regions since the late 17th century. The most convincing cases supporting the idea of the rising cosmopolitan character of Riti literature come from the distant courts of Lakhpati Simha (1741–1761) and Shivaji Bhonsle. The significant case of the 18th century court in Kutch in the remote Gujarat illustrated lately by Françoise Mallison discovers not only the presence of single poets supported by the court, but a whole institution promoting the study of the Braj language. Lakhpati, the ruler and patron of the arts in a relatively isolated region of Kutch, is himself credited with the authorship of five major

works in Braj. He founded also the Bhuj Language School. “The institution was entirely financed by the government [...] but neighboring rulers from Rajasthan sometimes agreed to pay the fees of the bardic students sent by them” (Mallison 2011: 173). It would be somewhat strange to assume that the rulers enjoyed listening to poetry which they could not understand. In the Gujarat case we are faced with the activity and the enormous production of manuscripts, the list of which was recorded at the time of the last Jain ācārya (around 1876). Another significant literary heritage that contributes to the argument of the coexistence of at least two complementary languages within one literary culture is to be found among the works of Bhushan Tripathi (*bhūṣaṇ tripāṭhī*), one of the four Tripathi brothers (all of them writers). Bhushan served at the court of Orcha, but then shifted, if we should believe his accounts—for financial reasons—to the court of the Maratha ruler Shivaji Bhonsle. Shivaji hosted also poets composing in Marathi and Sanskrit. We still do not know if the works of Bhushan were ever enjoyed in the site of its creation, or even to what extent they were understood. Nevertheless, his presence in that distant country proves at least that Braj must have been a powerful vehicle of literature and served some larger purposes.

Conclusion

Braj has certainly become a cosmopolitan idiom that has enjoyed a wide interest in many remote areas in North and Western parts of the subcontinent. The spread of Riti literature, as was invited by the courts where Braj was not necessarily the spoken vernacular, indicates that understanding literary cultures in North India cannot be limited to single languages the writings of which developed independently. The coexistence of two or more languages within one literary culture that might be characterized with an expanded concept of diglossia is the phenomenon that characterized those cultures’ formation. This specific feature not anticipated by most of Western historians of literature suggests considering Hindi literature not as a history of one language whose tradition developed along a single line, but rather

as a history of polyglossic literary culture. In this respect modern Hindi gains full legacy to acknowledge Braj and Avadhi as its cultural predecessors. However, it is important to note that this literary culture is geographically and chronologically limited to the space where several languages co-existed, i.e. were understood or at least played significant esthetical, political or social roles within the same society.

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