

Introduction:
**History and Other Engagements with the Past in Modern South Asian
Writing/s. Varia**

The present issue of *Cracow Indological Studies* is the second dedicated to the subject outlined in the subtitle: *History and Other Engagements with the Past in Modern South Asian Writing/s*. We thus continue with our investigation into the manifold ways that South Asian literatures are concerned with the past. Specific texts that have been put under scrutiny by the authors of articles in the present volume, do not only comment on, replace, complement or reconstruct the existing historical narratives, but often create new functional modes of depicting the past. Out of the six papers included in the current volume and subscribing to the subject of our editorial project set forth in the twin issues of *Cracow Indological Studies* (2021), three pertain to the literary texts composed in Hindi, while the other three focus on writings in Persian, Punjabi and Tamil respectively.¹

Two additional papers that have been accepted for publication this year are not related to the overall concept of the volume and are accordingly published in the *Varia* section.

¹ The arrangement of articles in the volume and of references to particular contributions in the present introduction relies only on the alphabetical order. In the first case this is the alphabetical order of authors' names, and in the second—of languages referred to in the papers. We do not aim to give particular importance to any of the literary cultures of South Asia. The dominant number of studies on Hindi literature reflects the actual response we got from the scholars in the initial stage of our editorial work.

Hindi

Numerous studies on contemporary Indian literatures bring us close to understanding of some specific writings as competitive to professional historiography. Such a conclusion seems often quite obvious as in many cases the works of literary fiction prove exceptionally successful in rendering finer dimensions of human condition of the past and in relation to it, an accomplishment rarely seen in works authored by conventional historians. This has already been amply demonstrated by way of literary texts analysed in the studies offered to the reader in the previous issue of *Cracow Indological Studies* (e.g., Vuille 2021).

Richard Delacy, in an attempt to re-frame the reading of the famous Hindi novel by Bhīṣma Sāhnī, *Tamas*, provides a fresh and distinct perspective on yet another instance of a literary work that tries to fill a lacuna in the traditional content of history-writing. Starting with the existing theories on the disparate functions of literature and historiography, Delacy comes to the conclusion that “while the formal historical narrative had failed to capture the human drama of partition, fictional writers had succeeded in representing the pain, trauma and loss suffered by ordinary people...” Delacy further suggests that what speaks for the historiographical essence of *Tamas* is not only the way its author, Bhīṣma Sāhnī, depicts the actual trauma of the difficult-to-face, contested past through the fictional in the novel, but also the historico-literary context of the publication itself. Sāhnī’s work revisits the Partition more than two decades after it actually took place and at a time when most of the prominent works of Hindi prose—produced within the literary culture he, too, was participating in—remains still true to the ideals of social realism and stays focused on the present. Such deliberate positioning of Sāhnī’s text—which in Delacy’s words often relies on “affective strategies and tropes in its representation of the past”—serves as a strong reason to consider the novel a legitimate and, most of all, necessary retelling of a so far too shallowly told history of the traumatic events.

However, contemporary Hindi literature does not function only as an important field complementing the expressive potential of

the so-called traditional history; it is also a highly contested sphere of influence where different versions of history clash in a fight for their own bit of turf. Scholarly investigations reveal that the representatives of the underprivileged communities have, time and again, consciously chosen literary domain as a stage for introducing and re/telling their past. This is especially true of communities that had been consistently neglected in, if not outrightly erased from, the mainstream narratives, both historical and literary. Monika Browarczyk situates her article within the new and rapidly growing stream of studies focused on the disempowered, invisibilized and silenced groups, and introduces us to four Hindi autobiographies by Dalit authors. In her exhaustive and well-argued paper, she showcases selected instances of prose narratives contextualised through conscious political claims put forward by Dalit communities—with Dalit History Month as a bold example of a protest against the widespread social, cultural and historical neglect—and reads them as deliberate and effective attempts on the part of their authors to engage with India's past. In fact, those narratives constitute the most literal and straightforward ways of engagement as they act as a medium through which Dalit writers introduce into the already existing historiographical traditions new, so far usually excluded evidence pertaining to their communities. Browarczyk observes, “it seems that due to the near absence of earlier written histories coming from within the community and communicating its unique historical experience, these life writings self-reflexively perform the function of Dalit histories.” Browarczyk's analysis of the said Dalit autobiographies, and her academic reflection on the nature of their entanglement with the present and through the present with the past, bring us close to understanding how a significant segment of contemporary Hindi literature becomes often not only a prime exercise in Dalit history writing, but also an opportune and powerful forum capable of accommodating voices of protest against widespread epistemic violence.

Closely related to the problems experienced by the Dalit communities in India but representing an entirely distinct mode of literary engagement with the past forms the core of a contribution focused on

literary biography. As a way of contextualising the background of Fabio Mangraviti's study included in the present issue of *Cracow Indological Studies*, one would like to recall Cynthia Talbot's observation from her work, *The Last Hindu Emperor*, where she talks about the notion of transforming images, "when representations of the past are adjusted to make sense in the present, they can be deployed for contemporary objectives" (Talbot 2016: 7). This is exactly how one could view some 20th-century literary texts written in the atmosphere of emerging visions of Indian progressivism. The study by Fabio Mangraviti is an exercise in re/search of significant literary figures that are re/presented by the writers in ways that certainly underwrite Talbot's statement. Mangraviti explores how modern Hindi biographical texts produced by Rāṅgey Rāghav exploit the field of literary history writing for very specific ideological and political ends. Literary biographies, especially portraying shadowy historical figures such as Loī and Ratnā, respectively the wives of Kabīr and Tulsīdās, obviously cannot claim factual credibility. Conceptually, they belong to a field "that acknowledges the recit and histoire as complementary dimensions" (Benton 2005: 48), and as such they provide members of Hindi literary circles with an opportunity to re-draw the past with the view of impacting and transforming the present. In the case of Rāghav's works, they offer "to carry forward the political claims of reforming the status of Indian women as well as that of the Dalit communities," which, in Mangraviti's parlance, sums up the textual and contextual analysis of the texts in focus and historical circumstances of their composition.

Persian

The history of the early modern media transition in India has become of late a largely discussed domain of scholarly investigations. One example of such an exploration, an article focused on modern editorial practices relating to Malayalam literature and authored by Cezary Galewicz (2021), has already been published in the previous issue of *Cracow Indological Studies*. In this volume, another case study related

to media transition proposes to look at the editorial note in Persian as a historical source for the reconstruction of motives behind the East India Company's engagement with vernacular editorial ventures and the emerging print industry. The circumstances of the reinstatement of an important 17th-century work, *Dabestān-e mazāheb*, a text on various faiths and creeds of the Indian subcontinent, can be reconstructed with the help of correspondence of British officials who found the text useful to their larger political goals and chose to patronize its translation and print, by producing its modern, printed iteration in 1809. In his paper on *Patronage in Literature, Translation and Printing ...*, Oskar Podlasiński widens the scope of evidence helpful in such reconstructions by focusing on the peritextual layer, namely the editorial note by Nazar Ashraf, appended to the critical edition of the Persian text. Podlasiński proposes to read the highly ornate Persian note as a reliable source of knowledge on the reasons of print, process of edition and the goal that was set for the editor of the book.

Punjabi

Maria Puri's study of a 2008 text, *Bikhṛā paḍā* ("Difficult Journey"), published in the first issue of our volume, investigates a specific example of Punjabi historical counter-narrative embedded in the autobiographical genre and operating at the intersection of personal story and the collective tale of the Sikh ethno-cultural ethos (cf. Puri 2021).

In the present issue, the study of a 1989 novel, *Nānak nām charḥdī kalā* ("Blessed are those who Remember God"), authored by Kartar Singh Duggal and analysed here by Anne Murphy, gives rise to an entirely disparate formulation of Sikh history. Published over three decades ago, the novel can be read as a remarkable example of writing the past for the sake of the future. The rather new field of studies—in which professional historians consciously foreground their deep concerns about the future which thus gains the status of the main objective of history-writing—forms the conceptual background of Murphy's analysis of Kartar Singh Duggal's novel. Murphy's study provides an opportune

space to look at ways in which different discourses, the exclusionary and the pluralistic, are brought to coexist in a literary narrative with a view of performing a surprisingly pragmatic function. To characterize this function briefly one may refer to Murphy's statement concerning the past, that, in her words, serves here as "a ground through which the future could be reckoned with." Conceptually linked to the main subject of the volume, yet another segment of Murphy's article appears as thought-provoking, namely the section where she argues that the modern literary example of using the past to envision the future seems to be well grounded in the traditions of Punjabi literature. This conclusion emerges from Murphy's study of the late 19th-century canonical work, *Sundari*, by Bhai Vir Singh. Can we, even if with certain reservations, read the works of prose analysed by Murphy as unexpectedly early instances of rescue history² in literature, to use Ewa Domańska's term?

Tamil

When looking for literature that could act as an alternative to the professional history-writing, scholars may often come to a seemingly discouraging conclusion that—as Jacek Woźniak puts it—"history and the past ... remain concealed in the background" and are employed by the writer merely to "express his views about the present day and interpret the world of his time." Yet, it is the study on Tamil writings authored by Indira Parthasarathy that helps us to understand better how telling history in India could be performed through the apparently "unhistorical" genres of literature. Here, the hagiographies are read as "authoritative texts, but rather in religious and not historical context."

² Using the term *rescue history* is but an editorial interpretation of the emphasis Anne Murphy gives to the function of the past in the novel. The term has been proposed by a renown Polish historian, Ewa Domańska, in 2008 and refers to a multidisciplinary approach in research on the past, with the main objective of looking for, recovering, preserving and sharing the often forgotten past, documentation, and its various traces that have been omitted or superseded by the mainstream history (cf. Domańska 2014: 13).

Thus, they are unhistorical from the point of view of the conventional history which developed in an epistemological isolation in the West, i.e., ignoring the sense of the past that was shared, for example, by the intellectual traditions of South Asia. However, the texts that belong to this very genre often stand for examples of literary artefacts that yet again widen the conceptual content of history. Although they combine “facts with fiction quite freely”—in Woźniak’s words—“their main task [is] to create a kind of internal hierarchy for the newly developing religious movement and build sense of continuity of the tradition rather than relate bare facts.” We may understand from Woźniak’s analysis that such texts let their readers learn—exactly what Indira Parthasarthy himself had learned in the course of the creative process or the creative life, and what he is perfectly conscious of—“to exploit the cultural content of this tradition for a profitable present and future” (Parthasarthy 1992: 66), an observation that fittingly tags on to Murphy’s reflections on the Sikh view of history in Duggal’s novel. Woźniak’s study of literary works under scrutiny here widens the scope of writings produced within disparate literary cultures of South Asia, writings that have the capacity to retain functions conventionally reserved for the so-called professional history-writing, that too despite their inevitable reliance on what had been, and still often is, uncritically called “myth.” In such cases—as Woźniak rightly points out when expressing his opinion on the play *Rāmāñujar*—one comes face to face with “the tradition-inspired works retelling (hi)story.”

Varia

The Varia section includes two articles related to South Asian linguistics and literature, though unrelated to the main theme of our editorial project.

Alaka Chudal contributes to our volume with her thought-provoking study on the Nepali language, with the main focus on a 20th-century intellectual Ram Mani Acharya Dixit and the nature of his contribution to the standardization of Nepali. The article foregrounds the history of the development of Nepali as a literary medium, especially of modern prose, and the growth of print in both India and Nepal, while attempting

to establish the connection of such developments with the Hindi language movement in India.

The paper by Tomasz Gacek is related to two languages, namely Persian—though of contemporary Iran and not South Asia, as the evidence is drawn from the digital sphere—and Hindi. Gacek's linguistic analysis of computer terminology, conducted on the basis of translations of the Kdelibs4 software package, compares selected lexical items in both languages with the official vocabulary lists compiled and posted by authoritative state bodies. Such a comparison aims to draw conclusions regarding the place of Arabic and English—main vocabulary donors to Persian and Hindi—in the relatively new internet sphere. The author highlights also the problems of syntactic and word-formational patterns in the case of forms discussed, the subject to be explored in detail in future research.

The contributors to both volumes of *Cracow Indological Studies: History and Other Engagements with the Past in Modern South Asian Writing/s* have discussed various ways in which modern literatures of the region engage with the past. Their articles have explored entanglements of the multilingual narratives of the past in numerous, often specific contexts, as in this issue: a religious or underprivileged community's deeply felt need to write down a history that would record their historical participation and their own perspective; telling the lives of historical individuals through the lens of the present day concerns and choosing for that telling the less obvious figures such as women, the less articulate; viewing the trauma of the Partition from the vantage point of the present, with the present impinging on the reading of the past; or else, reworking a Partition narrative with a view of shaping a community's future; and many more. As editors, we would like to express our gratitude to all the authors for participating enthusiastically in our project and offering new perspectives on literary strategies of engaging with the past. We hope that research papers published here will inspire more studies of South Asian ways of telling the past through literatures in different languages as the investigations into engagements

with the past showcased in the two issues edited by us seem to offer a promising and engaging field of study.

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