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Rāṅgey Rāghav's Literary Biographies, *Loī kā tānā* and *Ratnā kī bāt*, in the 1950s and the Debates on the Status of Indian Women and Dalits

ABSTRACT: The article proposes to investigate the political and ideological uses of Hindi literary biography, with focus on two texts by Rāṅgey Rāghav, *Loī kā tānā* ("Loi's Warp") and *Ratnā kī bāt* ("Ratna's Speech"), based on lives of Kabir and Tulsīdās respectively. The relevance of Rāghav's biographies goes beyond the merely literary and derives from the ideological and political functions played by these texts in the period they were written. Viewed by Rāghav as complementary works with a didactic and ideological value, they move away from the 'brahmanical' interpretations of the early modern Hindi poets by scholars of the 1920s and 1930s. To understand Rāghav's motives and strategies, one needs to examine the ideological and political context in which he recast values linked to the main figures of the early modern devotional (*bhakti*) literature. As the 1950s witnessed debates on the status of Indian women and Dalit communities, the same becoming crucial to Hindi literary sphere, special attention needs to be paid to the representation, in Rāghav's biographies, of Loī and Ratnā—Kabīr's and Tulsīdās' wives respectively—who embody some of the politically and ideologically progressive slogans which Rāghav projected on to these poets. The present work, based on recent studies on literary biography (Benton 2005, 2011, Middlebrook 2006, Miller 2001), is also an attempt to investigate some of the

intellectual and ideological aporias which seem to have affected Hindi literary progressivism since the first decades of the postcolonial period.

KEYWORDS: Hindi literary biography, *bhakti*, Dalit, Women's Studies

The "uses" of Hindi literary biography

By focusing on White's theoretical assumptions about the function of imagination (1973) in any representation of the past, it must be admitted that literary biography, though often neglected in literary studies, is one of the literary fields that have contributed most to the construction of images concerning literary authors of the past.

Drawing boundaries which distinguish literary biography from other related fields is still a problematic task. Many theoretical studies on literary biography look for a clear-cut distinction between the "factual biography," which "opens out toward the whole of historical knowledge, its statements … meant to signify particular, authentic events" (Schabert 1982: 9) and the "fictional biography," in which "biographical facts … arranged within a self-referential system of utterance, are used figuratively, as signs which stand for more or something other than themselves, and are seen together in a creative vision of inner experience" (*ibid*.). However, literary biography, differently from other kinds of secondary genres literature, such as literary criticism and historiography, has been investigated in the last years as a "hybrid" genre,[1] in which it is not easy to mark any clear-cut distinction between the fictional and the factual dimension, namely between "data and empathy, histoire and recit, between utilitarian reading and aesthetic reading" (Holden 2014: 919). This hybrid and smoothed out nature of biography and, in particular, literary biography, is well described by Miller, who states:

[1] "Literary biography then is a hybrid art in which a body of facts is crossbread with the arts of narrative. In distinguishing between historical events and their discourse of representation, narrative theory is responsive to this hybridity" (Benton 2005: 52).

> We should not see biography as a failed empirical science striving to produce definitive, objective results but doomed to failure. Nor should we take the extreme of post-modernist line which completely collapses the distinction between biography and fiction, regarding both as undifferentiated 'textual constructs.' Instead, we should regard it as an amphibious art form, which ideally has both to obey the constraints of evidence and to respond creatively. (Miller 2001: 169)

Literary biography is a field "that acknowledges the recit and histoire as complementary dimensions, that recognizes the latter as a 'given' (albeit an incomplete and debatable one), and reflects the tensions that this asymmetry produces'' (Benton 2005: 48). Therefore, it needs to be made clear that by using the term "literary biography" instead of other definitions, such as "biographical fiction" the present study deliberately aims to highlight, in the context of Hindi literature, the forms in which this hybrid dimension reveals itself.

This perspective, indeed, could also cover Hindi literature whereby, besides many other areas, literary biography has contributed to the establishment of a symbolic link between contemporary Hindi readers and Indian poets of the past. Despite such relevance, Hindi literary biography has been much less investigated than other related areas, such as autobiography and literary historiography. Therefore, given the scarcity of studies on the subject, it is necessary to introduce some general remarks on the genre. Primarily, it is relevant to note that Hindi literary biographies, not unlike other "literary artefacts" (White 1978) which engage with history, have heavily differed in content, style as well as uses. With regard to the content, in the first quarter of the 20th century, many Hindi biographies were devoted to poets linked to Sanskrit literary field, with preference for Bhaṇbhatta (Hortsmann 2002: 126–127) and Kālidāsa, authors of the 'golden age' of Indian classical literature. Further, the main protagonists of many biographies were poets and devotees (*bhakt*s) of the early modern period. Indeed, the lives of Kabīr, Ravidās, and Tulsīdās have been re-produced by contemporary biographers on several occasions during the 20th century (Sinha 2019). Finally, especially in the last years, many biographies have been written in order

to portray the lives of modern writers, with focus on those embodying specific political values. For example, Premcand (1880–1936), one of the pillars of Hindi and Urdu literature, is the subject of the literary biography *Kalam kā sipāhī* (1962, "Soldier of the Pen"), by Amṛt Rāi (1921–1996), Premcand's son.

As far as style is concerned, Hindi biographies have greatly differed in the way the writers have selected and used historical sources on which they based their narratives. This choice is viewed as one of great importance, especially when biographers addressed lives of classical authors. In such cases, the narrators had to make a selection between a great variety of primary sources, starting with histories produced by *cāraṇ*s and *bhāt*s, through hagiographical works brought out by the Indian *sampradāy*s, to the *tazkirā*s and spiritual biographies written by Indian *sūfī*s (Orsini 2002: 178–179). The selection of historical sources would have not been an easy task. The biographers who had already been engaged in writing historiographical and critical works often re-used the epistemological criteria they had already followed in the related fields of historiography and literary criticism. When the biographers did not possess the in-depth knowledge of the subject authors, they were more eager to re-work the narratives already established by critics and historians. In the introduction to *Mānas kā haṃs* (1972, "The Goose of the Mānas Lake") Amṛtlāl Nāgar (1916–1990) writes:

> At the time I wrote this work, I kept receiving very inspiring letters from two greats friends of mine, Rām Vilās Śarmā and Narendra Śarmā. … I express my deep gratitude to these two friends. Books such as Dr. Motīcandra's *Kaśī kā itihās*, and *Akbar*, a book written by Rāhul Sāṅkṛtyāyan, have made a strong contribution to the design of the historical background, while the *Tulsīdās*, by Dr. Mātāprasād Gupta, and Dr. Udaybhānu Siṃh's *Tulsī kāvya mīmāṃsā* provided a lot of help with the construction of the story.[2]

[2] "is upanyās ko likhte samay mujhe apne do parambandhuõ, rām vilās śarmā aur narendra śarmā baṛe hī preraṇādāyak patr aksar milte rahe. … in bandhuõ ke prati apnī hārdik kṛtajñatā prakaṭ kartā hũ. ḍā. motīcandra likhit 'kāśī kā itihās' tathā

In other cases, Hindi biographers attempted to construct historical framework of their works by using primary historical sources in a newer and innovative way by adding some invented and imaginary (*kalpnīk*) elements. Such choice was often aimed at filling lacunae in the lives of the subject authors. In other cases, it was just a stylistic choice: the biographers added imaginary elements—often concerning the romantic lives of the poets—with the intention of making the biographies more attuned to the literary taste of common Hindi readers.

It seems that for a long time biography genre remained marginal in the context of Hindi literature, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s; in this period the literary works that did not conform to certain moral and aesthetical parameters proving their historicity were marginalized by Hindi literary critics.[3] The rise of imaginative trend in the literary biography can be traced back to the 1940s, when some biographers decided to put aside the normative trends of the 1920s. Interestingly, one of the writers to explore such new direction was Hazārī Prasād Dvivedī (1907–1976),[4] probably the most important Hindi literary critic after

rāhul sāṅkṛtyāyan likhit 'akbar' pustakõ ne 'aitihāsik pṛṣṭhbhūmi sājone mẽ tathā sva. dā mātāprasād gupt kī 'tulsīdās' aur ḍā udaybhānu siṃh kṛt 'tulsī kāvya mīmā̃sā' ne kathānak kā ḍhā̃cā banāne mẽ baṛī sahāytā dī" (Nāgar 2017: 10). All the translations from Hindi are by the author of this paper.

[3] This tendency also characterizes the assessment of early modern Hindi poetry and its authors. Śukla, for example, in the essay *Hindī sāhitya kā itihās* (1929, "The History of Hindi Literature"), blames the early modern *sūfī* poet Malik Mohammed Jayasī for his decision to interfere with the historicity of the events narrated in the *Padmāvat* by adding to the narrative many imaginative ingredients. Śukla distinguishes two parts of this poem: the second one, which engages with events concerning the clash between prince Ratansen and sultan Allauddīn, is deemed as more authoritative on the historical level. This section is therefore praised for its literary value by the literary scholar. On the other hand, the first part of the poem, which engages with love between Ratansen and Padminī, is deemed by Śukla as less relevant on the historical level and, for the same reason, is also criticized on the aesthetical level.

[4] Hazārī Prasād Dvivedī studied at the Viśva Bhāratī University, founded in Shantiniketan by the Bengali poet Ravindranāth Ṭhākur. At this center Dvivedī developed interest in early modern Indian devotional literatures and, in particular, literature of *sant*s and *baul*s. In the next years Dvivedī began studying the *nirguṇ*'s poetry and,

Rām Candra Śukla (1884–1941).[5] Dvivedī intermingled historical ingredients with imaginary ones in the biography *Bhāṇbhaṭṭ kī ātmakathā* (1947, "The Autobiography of Bhanbhatt") and paved the way for this new field of Hindi literature. Interestingly, other literary critics, such as Nāmvar Siṃh, saw Dvivedī's use of imaginary gossip (*gapp*) about love (*prem*) as a device employed to bring attention of the new Hindi readers to historical issues they had studied so far only within the purview of scholarly language of Hindi literary criticism:

> What he calls gossip is not only the expedient he uses to lighten the burden of his scholarship: it is also the art he uses to reduce his feeling of detachment from reality and there is no doubt that he made this element part of his own character. The art of making 'gossip' was deeply intertwined with Dvivedi's uninhibited character and there is no doubt that it was the most specific aspect of his literary production.[6]

After all, the literary biography, seen as an hybrid field, usually grants to literary biographers the possibility of extending critical avenues represented most often by literary criticism and historiography. Indeed, this genre provides the option to use "narrative techniques that are excluded from the expository prose of most current critical scholarship"

particularly Kabīr's poetry. After the publication of the essay, *Hindī sāhītya kī bhūmikā* (1940, "Introduction to Hindi Literature"), Dvivedī devoted an essay to Kabīr in 1942. For a study of Hazārī Prasād Dvivedī in the intellectual and ideological context of the 1930s and 1940s, see: Siṃh 1982, Wakankar 2005.

[5] Śukla is usually considered, along with Śyām Sundar Dās (1875–1945), the major figure of Hindi literary criticism of the 1920s and 1930s. He was the author of the first canonical work of Hindi literature, *Hindī sāhitya kā itihās*, and wrote many aesthetical essays on different literary topics. These essays were collected in the anthology of essays *Cintāmaṇi* published in 1939.

[6] "jise ve gapp kahte the, vah paṇḍitāī ke bojh ko halkā karne kī hī vidhi nahĩ thī, udāsī ko kam karne kī bhī kalā thī aur kahne kī āvaśyaktā nahĩ kī use unhõne apne svabhāv kā aṅg banā dīyā thā. dvivedī ke phakkaṛpan se is 'gapp' kī kalā ka gahrā riśtā thā aur yah kahnā asangat na hogā kī sāhitya mẽ unkī apnī vidyā yah 'gapp' hī thā" (Siṃh 1982: 142).

(Holden 2014: 918). As a matter of fact, literary biography requires "the skills both of the researcher and of the artist to reach its full potential" (Middlebrook 2006: 17). Probably, such potentiality as an alternative tool of "critical enquiry" (Holden 2014) was gauged by Dvivedī, who included literary ingredients hitherto excluded from literary criticism, the other major literary field to which he made significant intellectual contributions.[7] Nevertheless, many criticisms were levelled at the Hindi literary biography as a genre throughout the 20th century. Primarily, literary biographies were charged with being written with spiritual and religious ends in mind (Zamindar 1972). Indeed, mainly—but not only—for such reasons, especially during the 1940s and 1950s, some Buddhist Dalit scholars began promoting biographies of *bhakt* poets like the early modern *nirguṇ* devotee Ravidās.[8] Indeed, as highlighted by Tapan Basu: "The production of these biographies, almost all of them more or less written in the tradition of hagiographies, was part of a project to inculcate a sense of self-esteem among ordinary Dalit by offering them worthy Dalit role models" (Basu 2017: 47). Further, it is also true that the biographers, even when not aiming to fulfil specific religious goals, often crafted works devoid of literary value, especially when meant for didactic ends. This was a factor which certainly set the milestones for the development of creative elements of Hindi literary biography. Another methodological problem concerns the difficulty for Hindi literary criticism to make a clear-cut distinction between literary biographies and other related literary fields of Hindi literature, such as literary

[7] However, it must be clear that the same Dvivedī saw literary biography not so much a proper literary field but a kind of divertissement: in this field he placed those narratives that could not find place in literary criticism, which he evaluates as more relevant for the Hindi readers than literary biography.

[8] One major Buddhist Dalit scholar who played important role in spreading religious ideas concerning this *nirguṇ bhakt* poet was Candrikā Prasād Jigñasu (1885–1975), author of *Sant pravar ravidās saheb* (1956, "Ravidās, The Most Excellent Among the Sants") (2011: 215). In parallel to Jigñasu, Buddhist scholars such as Bhadant Bhodānand (1874–1952) and Īśvardatt Medhartī (1900–1971), also raised political claims of Dalit communities in Kanpur and Lucknow, cities where they established their own Buddhist centers (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2002, 2004, 2011).

historiography and autobiography. In Hindi literature, such uncertainty was partially caused by Hindi biographers themselves, who used in a interchangeable way classifications such as *jivnī* ('biography, life'), *upanyās* ('novel'), *itivr̥tt* ('chronicle'), *itihās* ('history'), and *aupanyāsik jivnī* ('fictional biography') to define this genre. Among these classifications, *aupanyāsik jivnī* is the one which best embodies the creative nature of literary biography; however, it is not sufficient to explain the hybrid and articulated nature of literary biography, which the present study attempts to show, can be found also in some Hindi works. Finally, it is important to stress that sometimes the writers deliberately decided to cross, in a creative way, the boundaries which separate genres such as the biography and the autobiography. For instance, in the famous work *Śekhar: ek jivnī* (1941, "Śekhar: A Biography"), Ajñeya (1911–1987)[9] blended his own autobiographical experience of the 1930s with some semi-fictional elements in order to portray revolutionary (*krantikārī*) feelings shared by the majority of Hindi writers during the period before the independence (Govind 2017; Shingavi 2016).

Rediscovering the political uses of literary biography

One feature of the contemporary Hindi literary biography often neglected by many previous studies and further investigated in the present work concerns the political and ideological function of these literary texts. This lack of interest in Hindi literary biography as a political genre is quite surprising. Much attention has been given, with good reason, to autobiography: many Dalit writers, especially since the 1990s, used autobiographical texts to counter, through accounts of their own lives, the hegemonic narratives of "brahmanical" writers who relegated Dalits to the margins of Hindi literary sphere. Further, autobiographies have been crucially relevant for the self-expression of Dalit women writers.

[9] Ajñeya has also contributed significantly to the development of avant-garde trends of Hindi contemporary poetry. Indeed, along with seven other poets, he contributed to the famous poetic anthology called *Tār Saptak* (1943).

The latter often portrayed, in their autobiographies, double marginalization to which they were subjected within the society as a whole, as well as within their own communities where their voices have often been marginalized by their menfolk (Browarczyk 2013).[10] Certainly, since the 1990s, especially after the publication of the *Kabīr ke ālocak* (1997, "Some Literary Critics of Kabīr") and *Kabīr ke kuch aur ālocak* (1999, "Some Other Literary Critics of Kabīr"), Dalit writers found literary criticism to be a field in which they could counter the processes of "brahmanization" of Indian society on a political level.[11] Therefore, it is necessary to hark back to the initial question: are Hindi literary biographies of the 20th century, if compared to autobiographies and historiography, devoid of any ideological and political functions? The present article aims to prove that even these literary texts were used by Hindi writers as ideological and political tools. In the context of these remarks, it is important to point out that both Kabīr and Tulsīdās have been assessed by respective historians (Orsini 1998, Wakankar 2005, Mangraviti 2019), writers, and literary biographers keeping different political ends in mind. These ends have varied over time and according to different political circumstances in which the works were

[10] This condition has been well described by Kausalyā Baisantrī in her autobiography, called *Dohrā abhiśāp* ("Double Curse").

[11] In this work, Dharmvīr aims to de-construct all narratives established by previous literary historians and critics on the early modern Indian poet Kabīr. Following Dharmvīr's assessment, these scholars tried to attack (*ākramaṇ*) the original religious and political identity of this sant. However, the historical and critical position which was taken by Dharmvīr was deeply criticized by those who think that Dharmvīr himself, not differently from the previous scholars, aimed to project onto Kabīr slogans of contemporary Dalit movement. Further, other scholars stress that Kabīr's clan, namely that of the weavers (*julāhā*), was quite different on a sociocultural level to other clans, such as that of the barbers (*nāī*), which has been equally connected by Dharmvīr to Dalit identity. From this perspective Dharmvīr's study shows tendency to encompass in a unique histographical category claims coming from clans which were quite different (Pachauri 2000). Further, Dharmvīr's perspective has also been criticized by Agravāl, who defended the Kabīr-Ramānand link, deeply blamed by Dharmvīr as the outgoing of the "brahmanization" of Kabīr's thought by Hindi literary critics such as Dvivedī (Agravāl 2009).

written. After all, following Kathryn Hughes, "biographical writing is always deeply rooted in the intellectual concerns of its moment of production" (2010: 555). The categories used by the biographers are not neutral but reflect historical circumstances of the production of the biography. Indeed, not differently from historians, who establish different narratives on the basis of their political ideas and affiliations (Rigney 1990), biographers can project on to the authors specific historical facts as well as political symbolism. In light of this assumption, the years following Indian independence were crucial for the re-assessment of political symbols linked to Kabīr and Tulsīdās. A number of factors from this period had an impact on the moment of production of the biographies of the said devotional poets. The debates concerning the Hindu Code Bill, which dominated the Hindi public sphere from 1950 to 1956, were a major *raison d'être* for such a re-assessment. Indeed, both Rāmdhārī Siṃh 'Dinkar' (1908–1974) as well as Saksenā Prasād Kamleśvar (1932–2007)[12] in the well-known critical essay *Nayī kahānī kī bhūmikā* (1966, "Introduction to the New Short Story") deem reforms of the 1950s to be the main factor that brought forward a "re-assessment" (*punar mūlyāṅkan*) of the religious and literary tradition of *bhakti* (Mangraviti 2020: 71–72). Further, during the 1950s and the 1960s some new literary trends, such as satire, were eager to re-assess the devotional poets in unexpected and unconventional ways and towards various ideological and philosophical ends (*ibid*.: 73–81).[13]

[12] Kamleśvar, along with Bhīṣma Sāhnī (1915–2013), Kṛṣṇā Sobti (1925–2019), Mannū Bhaṇḍārī (1931), Mohan Rākeś (1925–1972), Rājendra Yādav (1929–2013) and many other writers, was a leading figure of the *nayī kahānī* movement in the 1950s and 1960s. In the literary essay *Nayī kahānī kī bhūmikā* he paints vivid picture of the ideological and aesthetical debates which took place in the Hindi literary sphere of the postcolonial period. For a study of the *nayī kahānī* in the context of the political debates of the 1950s see: de Brujin 2017, Mani 2019, Singh 2016.

[13] Hariśaṅkar Parsāī (1924–1995) was, among the many voices of the *nayī kahānī*, the author who was most inspired by the iconoclastic and satirical vein of Kabīr's poetry. Since the 1950s, he wrote many satirical sketches and short stories in which he made different "uses" of Kabīr's poetry. However, later, in the 1980s, he

By investigating Hindi literary biographies of the devotional poets written in the 1950s, the article aims to answer a few critical questions linked to the political relevance of the specific field during this historical period. To be more precise, by exploring narratives concerning Ratnā and Loī, there is an attempt to study the ideological commitment of Hindi literary biography of the 1950s to the debates concerning the status of Indian women. Further, there is an analysis on the reflection of the political and ideological issues of Dalits in these literary works. One important issue concerns the criticism—by Dalit writers—of the progressive non-Dalit intellectuals such as Rāghav, the author of the two biographies in focus, for their ambiguous ideological position towards Dalits and, in particular, towards Dalit women writers. Some years back, Rājendra Yādav, the editor of a progressive Hindi literary magazine *Haṃs*, was strongly criticized for having exploited issues related to feminism and the Dalit question, despite the visibility he gave to many Dalit writers (Brueck 2014: 35–36) by showcasing them in *Haṃs*. However, such ambiguous positions towards these themes have older roots dating back to the period immediately preceding and following India's independence.

Rāghav in context

Among writers linked to the progressive literary movement, Rāṅgey Rāghav (1923–1962) was one of the most committed to writing literary biographies of the early modern Hindi poets. These works were written in a period crucial for Rāghav personally as well as for the development of the post-colonial Hindi public sphere. In the 1940s, Rāghav was a part of the All-India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA),[14]

decided to leave Kabīr and embrace the poetry of Tulsīdās. For study of the different uses Parsāī made of Kabīr's and Tulsīdās's poetry see: Mangraviti (2020).

[14] The first conference of the AIPWA was held in London in 1935. The AIPWA was established by a group of Indian university students and young writers, most of whom wrote in Urdu. The first conference of the association in India was held in 1936, in Lucknow. In parallel to the foundation of the AIPWA in the city, the All Kisān Sabhā

a left-oriented literary association which, especially during the 1930s, had as its members many Indian authors coming from different cultural backgrounds (Namboodiripad 2011: 87–98). Rāghav was not simply a member of the AIPWA; he also contributed significantly to many political activities of the organization and oversaw the AIPWA affairs in Agra. Here, he collaborated for many years with Rām Vilās Śarmā (1912–2000) and other progressive writers and literary critics. Later, in the early 1950s, not unlike other writers ideologically close to the Communist Party of India (CPI) (Mallick 1994), Rāghav was progressively involved in many cultural activities of the Indian National Congress (INC).

It was in 1954 that Rāghav wrote the biographies devoted to the pillars of early modern Hindi literature, Kabīr and Tulsīdās. *Loī kā tānā* ("Loi's Warp") was Rāghav's first literary biography, followed by *Ratnā kī bāt* (''Ratna's Speech''). Nonetheless, this was not the first time that Rāghav ventured into writing texts concerning early modern poets. During the years he spent at the University of Agra, he pioneered the studies on the *nāth* poetry by presenting a PhD thesis on Goraknāth.[15] Further, in the early 1950s, he published several articles on Tulsīdās and other early modern poets in the progressive journal *Haṃs*.[16] Moreover, besides the biographies devoted to Kabīr and Tulsīdās, he wrote similar work on the life of Vidyāpati.[17] Unlike other progressive

(AKS) and the All Indian Theater Association (AITA) were also established. The AIPWA was a Marxist-inspired association, and it played major role in the cultural and political debates which took place in India during the 1940s and 1950s. Nevertheless, especially after the Partition, it split in two distinct groups: a new group was founded in Pakistan and the AIPWA eventually lost prestige. For a study see Pradhan 2017 [1979]: 21–37.

[15] This study, called *Gorakhnāth aur unkā yug* ("Goraknāth and his times"), was published later, in 1963.

[16] One of Rāghav's articles on Tulsīdās' poetry is "Tulsī kā samanvayavād" ("Tulsī's syncretism"), published in 1951. This article proves Rāghav's deep knowledge of early modern poetry and, in particular, of Tulsīdās, whom he considers a major pillar of the cultural unification of India during the early modern period.

[17] The biography devoted to this the early modern Maithili poet and called *Lakhmā kī ankhẽ* ("Lakhmā's Eyes"), was published in 1957.

writers of the 1950s, such as Yaśpāl (1903–1976), who wrote the novel *Divyā* (1945), Mohan Rakeś (1925–1972), author of *Āṣāṛh kā ek din* (1958, "One Day in Āṣāṛh"),[18] and many others, he aimed to recast in 'progressive terms' authors belonging to Indian history. Rāghav's biographies came to be deemed as "classics:" indeed, they were praised as sources of inspiration by Bhīṣma Sahnī and Amṛtlāl Nāgar who during the 1970s and early 1980s wrote dramas and biographies based on the lives of Kabīr and Tulsīdās. The year in which Rāghav's both works were published was of crucial importance to the political debates around the Hindu Code Bill which began in the years following the independence. The Indian National Congress (INC) began enacting laws such as the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, the Hindu Succession Act, and, above all, the Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act, viewed not only as political but also "symbolic" victories over the chauvinistic and reactionary tendencies affecting Indian society (Sinha 2012; Subramanian 2010; Som 1994). The symbolic value of these reforms had a great impact on Hindi writers of the generation: indeed, as stated by Kamleśvar in *Nayī kahānī kī bhūmikā*, it was precisely the desire to reform Indian society that led postcolonial Indian citizens living in the 1950s and 1960s "to ask distinct personal questions" (*apne apne praṣṇ cihn lagānā*) regarding Indian literary and religious tradition (Kamleśvar 1966: 9). Significantly, these reforms had been put forward specifically through the actions of the Dalit scholar, Bhīmrāv Rāmjī Āṃbeḍkar (1891–1956), who, in works such as *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) and *Who Were the Shudras* (1946) proclaimed himself a supporter of political claims made by Kabīr and other early modern *nirguṇ* poets. However, the constitutional measures meant to reform Indian society were heavily opposed by many Hindu nationalist parties such as the Rām Rājya Pariṣad

[18] *Divyā* is an historical novel set in the Indo-Greek state of Madra; the background of the story is the conflict for the political supremacy in India in the 1st century B. C., the era that follows Alexander the Great's invasion of Northern India. Rakeś's drama, *Āṣāṛh kā ek din*, is inspired by Kalidāsā's life.

("Council of the Kingdom of Rama;" henceforth, the RRP).[19] All the devotional poets, particularly Tulsīdās, were seen by Harnārāyaṇ Ojhā 'Karpatrī' (1907–1980), the leader of this party, to be the main representatives of the élite and the brahmanical political model. Karpatrī saw Tulsīdās as a traditional voice speaking against any kind of reform of the socio-cultural and political conditions of Hindu women as well as the Dalits. For instance, in an essay called *Marksvād aur rāmrājya* (1957, "Marxism and the Kingdom of Ram"), elucidating on the role of women depicted in the ideal *rāmrājya*, Karpatrī makes it clear that in such a kingdom "the woman will remain forever the lady of the house" (Ojhā 1957: 581) and her marriage "will happen just during the childhood age" (*ibid*.: 577). Further, especially when discussing Dalit and other lower caste social groups, Karpatrī laments the sociocultural and political rights the Congress was proposing to grant to these communities during the 1950s. What is relevant to point out in the context of this article is that the ideas about Tulsīdās, expressed by Karpatrī at many rallies as well as in numerous political-philosophical essays, urged Marxist scholars to promote a revisionist progressive interpretation of poets belonging to the *bhakti* literary tradition. Karpatrī was quite often referred to by the Marxist literary scholars as a revivalist who attempted to use Tulsīdās's teachings to promote the policies of the RRP. A critical work with marked political value which inspired literary biographies in focus was written by Śarmā, a close friend and comrade of Rāghav during the 1940s and 1950s. Śarmā, a well-known literary critic, emphasized the progressive and egalitarian views of Tulsīdās in order to contradict Karpatrī.

> Tulsīdās, who did not grant any specific rights to man, taught both of them [the man and the woman] to fulfil their marriage duties.

[19] This party, founded in 1946 by Karpatrī, launched many Hindu inspired campaigns in the 1950s. Further, in 1952, 1957 and 1962, it won several seats in the Lok Sabhā and Vidhān Sabhā. The RRP is usually seen as one of the parties inspired by Hindu worldview and a predecessor of parties such as the Viśva Hindū Pariṣad (VHP) and the Bhārata Janatā Pārṭī (BJP).

> Unfortunately, those who believe in the superiority of man are entrenched in the grim defence of the verses in which women are represented as uneducated and vile. … Moreover, even in today's society women are deprived of their rights. The state of subordination in which they live does not allow them to be happy.[20]

The representation of Loī and Ratnā

It is relevant to point out that one of the most specific features of Hindi literature of the 1950s and the 1960s consisted of writers' attempt to re-evaluate, in a more egalitarian way, the socio-cultural and political values linked to female protagonists (Mani 2016: 21–41; 2019: 242–245). How did such a re-evaluation take place? According to Preetha Mani, the female characters portrayed during this period were no longer subjected to the task of "bearing" or "transgressing" certain moral codes (2019: 241). Indeed, although the post-independence period was a moment of "silence" (2016: 22) for women's activism, stuck between opposite ideological positions,[21] on the literary level writers tried to depict intellectual autonomy of these characters, less idealized than those found in the works of the 1920s and 1930s. Certainly, writers linked to the *Nayī kahānī* movement, such as Kṛṣṇā Sobtī (1925–2019), Mannū Bhaṇḍārī (1931–2021), or Uṣā Priyaṃvadā (b. 1930) played a major role in re-casting the values and symbols connected to female characters in Hindi contemporary literature of the period; in this they followed the way paved in the 1920s by Mahādevī Varmā (1907–1987),

[20] "puruṣ ke viśeṣādhikārõ ko na mān kar tulsīdās ne donõ ko samānrūp se ek ho brat pālne kā ādeś diyā thā. lekin viśeṣādhikār vālõ ne ḍhol gaṁvār ādi jaisī panktiyõ to gaṛhlĩ. … vartamān samāj mẽ bhī nārī adhikār vañcit haĩ. parādhīntā mẽ use sukh nahĩ hai" (Śarmā 1954: 175).

[21] According to Mani (2016: 22) one of the main reasons of this impasse was the quarrel between activists who backed the supremacy of the liberal and secular Nehruvian state and others who supported the juridical role of sectarian community laws, which were mostly based on traditional and religious/spiritual principles.

one of the first Indian women writers to use autobiography to express in an original way her personal views on contemporary Indian society.[22]

Is such an aesthetic shift also present in Rāghav's biographies? The answer is not obvious. At first sight, Rāghav's political goal seemed to portray the psychology of female characters in a more realistic and articulate manner. Indeed, Loī and Ratnā are, arguably even more than Kabīr and Tulsīdās, the two main protagonists of Rāghav's biographies. This narrative decentralization is reflected in the titles of the biographies where there is no mention at all of the male devotional poets. Before Rāghav's works, Maithilīśaran Guptā (1886–1964) had carried out a similar operation in *Sāket* (1931) which was still deeply affected by the patriarchal representation widespread in Hindi literary works of the 1930s. A similar goal was pursued in the early 1930s by Bhagavatī Caraṇ Vermā (1903–1981), author of *Citralekhā* (1934) and by Yaśpāl in the novel *Divyā*:[23] the authors presented Citralekhā and Divyā, the heroines of the two works, as firm and stubborn characters involved in a fight against the ethical constrains of the age in which they live. However, Rāghav was arguably the first Hindi writer to adopt such a kind of decentralization in the representation of the lives of early modern devotional poets. Indeed, in Nirālā's poem *Tulsīdās* (1936) one may find a more traditional and conventional way of showcasing women characters.

The narrative ingredients used to portray female characters and their relationship with the devotional poets were not totally imaginary or invented. Indeed, Rāghav, who calls both works alternatively chronicle (*itivṛtt*) and biography (*jivnī*), by exploring possibilities offered by this hybrid genre, aimed to write his works not only by utilizing

[22] Varmā, who was the main editor of the literary journal *Cãd*, was also one of the earliest Hindi women writers to express their own "right to feel" through biographical and autobiographical writings. The phase to which this women writer belongs is called by Orsini the radical-critical phase of women writing, during which women writer entered the Hindi public sphere (Orsini 2002: 274–289, 2004).

[23] For example, Divyā, the main character of this historical novel, prefers being an independent prostitute than a mistress in a noble house. For study of Yaśpāl's work see: Madhuresh 1968.

information provided by the hagiographies, but also on the basis of deductions (*niṣkarṣ*) he drew from the verses of the two authors (Rāghav 1954a: 4). Therefore, these biographies are not to be seen only as fictional works, since, although based on the free interpretation of hagiographies and texts related to the *bhakt*s, they are intended to be also authoritative on the historical level. After all, the ability of constructing new elements based on the personal reading of the texts of the narrated authors is, as Lejeune would say, the basis of the "literary biographical contract" (1982: 192–222), on which the biographer—who is also "an attentive reader" (Middlebrook 2006: 5–18)—constructs his own relationship with the narrated author. The sources which inspired this realistic picture of Kabīr were to be found in the Anantadās' *Parcaī*,[24] in the Sikh's Guru Granth sāhib, and in the Vārkarīs' hagiographical tradition of Mahīpati's *Bhaktāvijay*; especially in the last two works, indeed, there are some references to Kamāl (Lorenzen 1991: 51). Further, especially for the description of Kamāl, Rāghav was inspired by some verses which are popularly linked to this Kabīr (Rāghav 1954a). As far as Loī is concerned, however, Rāghav, who neglected the *Bhaktamāl* and the stories on Kabīr by the *Kabīrpanthi*s, was inspired mostly by verses in which the same Kabīr mentions Loī.

In *Loī kā tanā*, Raghāv who certainly was an attentive reader of Kabīr's poetry, made an original selection from among the hagiographies concerning Kabīr's life: in this way he attempted to compose in a coherent way his own realistic narrative by stressing the familiar life of the poet. He also put aside all the miraculous and extraordinary facts concerning this Kabīr. In Raghāv's biography Kabīr's son Kamāl, who is also the first-person narrator,[25] recounts in a detailed way the psychology of Loī, focusing on her "separation"

[24] For a detailed study of Anantadās' *Parcaī* see Callewaert 1994, 2000, Lorenzen 1991.

[25] One of the most fascinating aspects of Rāghav's biography of Kabīr concerns precisely the decision of making Kabīr's son the narrator of the work. The events narrated begin in the years following the death of his father, a period in which Kamāl engages in the search for Kabīr's spiritual heritage in Indian society.

(*virah*) from Kabīr. It must be admitted that, especially in the political context of the mid-1950s, the re-assessment of this literary motif had also a meta-narrative and political value—it indirectly reflected current debates on divorce, which were at the center of the programs of the INC. It was Karpatrī who expressed his opposition to women's right to divorce in the *Hindū koḍ bil pramāṇ kī kasauṭī par* ("About the proof of the authority of the Hindu Code Bill"). This was also his main point of ideological confrontation with the INC. Rāghav's choice to put the narrative focus on Loī's (and Ratnā's) perspective during 'separation' from their spouses was an interesting case of "refraction"[26] of Kabīr's and Tulsīdās's stories. Loī, as Rāghav points out in the introduction to the biography, is depicted as representing the socio-cultural and political claims of the communities located at the margins of the early modern socio-political system. In contrast to other progressive writers of the period, Rāghav uses the word Dalit, term popularized in the 1950s by Ambedkar and his followers, to define the identity of this character. Such usage of the term is quite interesting if one considers the fact that the popularization of the Hindi Dalit literature will occur only in the 1990s.[27]

Further, Rāghav, similarly to what Dharmvīr would do in the 1990s, explicitly criticizes Rām Candra Śukla for his adherence to the brahmanical historiographic model.[28] By criticizing Śukla, Rāghav

[26] Following Lefevere's point of view, some literary genres, such as the translation and the biography, have the specific power to produce a "refraction," namely to alter in a new or unexpected way the meaning and the function itself of the primary sources on which these genres depend. All these genres, however, while betraying the original meaning of the primary sources convert it into a new system of values and, by doing so, they guarantee also the existence of these. This issue has been treated by Lefevere in a number of essays on translation and other genres: for a comprehensive study of the Leverian use of this concept see: Lefevere 1981, 1982a, 1982b, 1995.

[27] The rise of the Hindi Dalit literature occurred after the upsurge, in Maharashtra, of the Dalit Panthers literary and political movement in the early 1970s. For a comprehensive study of this literature see Hunt 2014; Brueck 2014.

[28] Rāghav states that: "The master Rām Candra Śukla was a brahmanical literary critic. He viewed Kabīr as a pure follower of *nirguṇ* trend. He stated that Kabīr never

connects himself to the historiographical and critical progressive methodology introduced in the 1940s by Dvivedī who in 1940 published *Hindī sāhitya kī bhūmikā* ("Introduction to Hindi Literature") and later, in 1942, famous monography devoted to Kabīr (Wakankar 2005). Great impact on Rāghav's re-construction was played also by the aforementioned Buddhist Dalit scholars who, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, re-cast the historical values linked to the early modern *nirguṇ* poets. Indeed, these scholars, by connecting the roots of Buddhism with the Dalit heroes, had a great influence on the "trend of narrativizing the history of India from perspectives alternative to those of mainstream nationalist historians;" further, the "rise of Dalit pamphlet was particularly symptomatic of the growth of a new literary culture, or rather, a new literary counterculture" (Basu 2017: 48).

Rāghav himself seems to have exploited Dalit slogans in order to link them to political ends of the progressive/Marxist writers of the 1950s. Being a weaver (*julahī*), Loī is depicted as a member of the working class which actively engages with a progressive and reformist construction of the society. This is in contrast with Kabīr who—especially during the period of separation from his family—is engaged in ascetic and spiritual practices (*sadhnā*). Loī's own spiritual practice is deeply rooted in her societal commitments. Such a depiction of Loī is quite clear in Kamāl's words:

> Mother used to say: your father is a good man, but the only thing I am unhappy with is that in spite of being wise, he has forgotten his own nature. Even if we were only an illusion, there was no need for him to leave home like cowards do. If he wanted to overcome craving, emotional entrapment and passion what was the need for him to go into wilderness to do it! We should serve God exactly where we need his presence.[29]

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aimed to establish a new way. … This perspective is brahmanical and must be rejected. It is not scientific." ("ācārya rām candra śukla brāhmaṇvādī ālocak the. unhõne kabīr ko nīras nirguṇiyā kah diyā. ve kah gaye haĩ ki kabīr ne koī rāh nahĩ dikhāī. … yah sab brāhmaṇvādī dr̥ṣṭikoṇ hai ata: tyājya hai. avaijñānik hai." Rāghav 1954a: 4).

[29] "ammā kahtī thī tere dādā acche ādmī haĩ, par mujhe ek hī dukh lagtā hai kī ve itne samajhdār hote hue bhī apnī asliyat ko bhūl gae. agar ham māyā bhī the, to unhẽ kyā

Rāghav's narrative on Loī, although inspired by progressive ideas, seems in this context to be deeply influenced by the markedly patriarchal literary motifs of the 1920s and 1930s. As a matter of fact, Rāghav's work is characterized by strong idealization of the woman, represented as a keeper or protector (*rakṣak*) of the family; further, Loī, as the above passage shows, is committed to the ideals of service (*sevā*) both within the society as well as her family. No less evident are the many references Rāghav makes to the political ideals advocated by the nationalist Hindu politicians of the 1950s. The first evidence of the covertly reactionary description of Loī is found in the clear hierarchical relationship between her and Kabīr. Loī does not try to reveal her feelings directly to the mystic, rather they are often reported to him in an indirect way by characters such as Kamāl, acting as mediators between the two protagonists. Kabīr is portrayed as a wise (*samajhdār*) person: why? Because he understands Loi's criticism and lets her express her thoughts, mediated by Kamāl's words. However, as clearly expressed in the text, she experiences shame (*lajjā*) whenever she lets her voice be heard. Therefore, the radically ambiguous tone of the biography is reflected in the image that symbolically summarizes the contents of this "progressive" work, that of Loī spinning the warp thread (*tānā*) for the fabric while she awaits the return of her partner.[30]

Rāghav's intellectual position appears even more controversial in the second biography, the title of which is dedicated to Ratnā, Tulsīdās's wife. The two works, as Rāghav declares in the introduction to *Ratnā kī bāt*, were conceived by him as ideologically complementary. Indeed, although Kabīr and Tulsīdās are certainly different poets from many points of view, both are seen as major representatives of Indian history:

kāyarõ kī tarah ghar choṛ jānā cāhiye thā! lobh, moh, kām ko jītnā thā to ekānt mẽ jākar kyā choṛnā! jahā̃ bhagvan kī zarūrat hai vahī̃ to uskī sādhnā karnā cāhie" (Rāghav 1954a: 65).

[30] On the one hand, the image suggests the relevance of Loi as a working heroine. On the other hand, however, the image clearly evokes some classical Western figures, primarily Penelope, as well as those from Indian literary heritage, whose identity is deeply connected to the idealization of the woman as protector of the family.

> Tulsīdās and Kabīr were two champions of Indian history. Both are credited with many different achievements. They represented two distinct streams of Indian thought. The heterogeneity of their thought was brought about by the different perspective of the classes to which they belonged, in other words, by the heterogeneity of their castes. I have already spoken extensively about Kabīr in *Loī kā tānā*. Ratnā was the consort of Tulsīdās and she was also a poetess. Tulsīdās was a great intellectual. In the final phase of his existence, he gained great fame in the circle of the most important intellectual personalities of his time, unlike Kabīr, who found respect among the common people. This will be certainly made more clear by reading both books.[31]

Further, both volumes were intended to be part of the same literary project of re-constructing the roots of Hindi literature.[32] While the first biography portrays figures linked to Dalit issues, the second is focused on characters depicting the revivalist (*punarusthānvād*) tendencies of Indian society (Rāghav 1954b: 6). Needless to say, Rāghav, following in the footsteps of Kamleśvar, Parsāī, etc., declares himself to be a follower of Kabīr.

Crucially, while Rāghav's latent adherence to a reactionary view of women is clear when he portrays Loī's character, in the case of Ratnā—paradoxically—he brings concrete and remarkable changes. She is considered by Rāghav to be an early modern poetess (*kaviyitrī*) (*ibid.*: 5). All information about her is drawn from hagiographical

[31] "tulsī aur kabīr bhārtīy itihās ki do mahān vibhūtiyā̃ haĩ. donõ ne bhinn-bhinn kārya kiye haĩ. unhõne itihās kī do vibhinn vicārdhārāõ kā pratinidhitv kiyā hai. donõ ke vicārõ kā nirmāṇ vibhinn vargõ arthāt varṇõ ke dṛṣṭikoṇ se huā thā. 'loī kā tānā' mẽ maĩ kabīr ke viṣay mẽ likh cukā hū̃. ratnā tulsīdās kī patnī thī aur vah svayaṁ kaviyītrī thī. tulsīdās prakāṇḍ vidvān the. unhẽ jīvan ke antim kāl mẽ apne yug ke sammānit vyaktiyõ dvārā ādar prāpt ho gayā thā. kabīr ko keval jantā kā ādar mil sakā thā. donõ pustakẽ paṛhne par yah bilkul hī spaṣṭ ho jāyegā" (Rāghav 1954b: 5).

[32] Rāghav states that "My next biography, the name of which will be *Ratnā kī bāt*, will engage with Tulsīdās. Then the differences between Kabīr and Tulsīdās will be clearer or, at least, there will be a new study on this issue of Indian history." ("merī aglī jīvnī «ratnā kī bāt» tulsīdās kā varṇan hogā, tab kabīr aur tulsī kā bhed spaṣṭ ho jāyegā varan bhārtīy itihās ke is adhyāy par nayā vivecan spaṣṭ hī hogā." Rāghav 1954a: 8).

accounts, especially from Nabhādās's *Bhaktamāl* and Priyādās's ***Bhakti rasbodhinī***. Not differently from what he does in crafting Kabīr's life, Rāghav aims to establish quite a realistic portrayal of Tulsīdās's life: nevertheless, in his book Rāghav seems to be drawing a picture which follows in a more straightforward way the hagiographic accounts. For this reason, while Kabīr's biography is totally devoid of supernatural and mystic events, here, in some passages, it is possible to find also such kinds of ingredients.[33] Following the hagiographies, Ratnā criticized and finally decided to seek divorce from Tulsīdās, blaming him for foregoing spiritual concerns to pursue his sexual desires towards her. While the classical narrative is present in Rāghav's work, he also seems to add new psychological facets to Ratnā's character, facets not found in the hagiographic accounts:

> Their love combat was strange. The woman never asked for the man to surrender but wanted it, got it. However, any conquest obtained too easily, never satisfies completely … . Ratnā devoted herself entirely to Tulsī and he reciprocated. Then, Ratnā, like a vine, began occupying ever greater space in the relationship, but in the deepest part of her soul, she wished that he would never submit to her entirely but remain firm like a tree. Subsequently, Ratnā begins to feel oppressed by Tulsī's presence … . Every time she looks at Tulsīdās, Ratnā shivers with ecstasy like a wave that, rising during a storm, would look at the firmest rock, hurl itself at it with all its force, every drop of it filled with ecstasy dispersing in a thousand streams of foam; she wanted to experience, through her defeat, also the joy of the victory.[34]

[33] One of the supernatural events narrated in this biography concerns the encounter between Tulsīdās and Hanumān on the banks of the Ganges. This event is narrated in all hagiographic accounts concerning this *bhakt*.

[34] "prem kā dvandv vicitr thā! nārī ne puruṣ kā samarpaṇ mā̃gā nahī̃ thā, parantu cāhā thā. vah use mil gayā. parantu koī prāpti apne āp mẽ purṇsāntvanā nahī̃ hotī … , ratnā ne tulsī par apne āpko nyauchāvar kiyā thā. tulsī ne apnā samarpaṇ. nārī bel kī bhā̃ti chā jānā cāhtī thī, par apne sahaj svabhāv mẽ uske bhītar yah bhī thā ki puruṣ vṛkṣ kī bhā̃ti khaṛā rahe, lacke nahī̃. yahā̃ tulsī ke bhār se jaise ratnā dabne lagī. … jaise vajrveg se uṭhne vālī lahar dṛṛhtam caṭṭhān ko dekhkar uṭhtī hai aur bharpūr udyamśakti

Here, Ratnā does not simply strive to pursue religious ends. On the contrary, she decides to leave home for specific reasons which engage with her inner desire to establish a relationship based on confrontation (*dvandv*) and game (*khel*) (Rāghav 1954b: 89). Further, in contrast to Loī, she aspires to self-realization, and for this reason considers Tulsīdās an obstacle. From this perspective, here Rāghav seems to portray a more emancipated picture of the woman. Indeed, in line with Preetha Mani's views, Ratnā's wish to separate from Tulsīdās derives from reasons which go far beyond an idealized picture of women as subject bearers of positive or negative values.

In light of the above, it is possible to observe quite a paradoxical ideological situation. In *Loī kā tānā*, despite the apparent adherence to a progressive family model, Rāghav re-formulates the traditionalist and reactionary imaginary relating to women which was common in the 1920s. In Ratnā's story, on the contrary, despite her belonging to a brahmanical social group, Rāghav paints the picture of woman in Hindi literary history in a less idealized and more realistic way. Certainly, as the writer points out in the introduction to *Loī kā tānā*, all the characters in the two biographies are bound by the circumstances (*paristhiti*) (Rāghav 1954a: 7) of the historical period in which they live. As previously highlighted, Rāghav describes Ratnā, unlike Loī, as a poetess. This explains why she is also depicted by Rāghav as the more articulate character of the two. However, from the perspective so far adopted, this reason is not sufficient to understand an apparent ideological contradiction: we must go deeper into the functions which inspire the two works. Rāghav sees the re-assessment of Ratnā's figure in the period in which he lives as more relevant from an ideological and political perspective than the re-assessment of Loī's character. Indeed, unlike Loī, Ratnā is conceived by Karpatrī and other Hindu nationalist intellectuals of the 1950s as an exemplary figure from a religious and moral perspective.

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se usse ṭakrā kar, phen phen hokar bikhar jāne kā ānand bindu bindu mẽ bhar kar, apnī parājay mẽ apnī vijay kā anubhav karnā cāhtī hai, vaise ratnā tulsī ko dekh pulak uṭhī thī" (Rāghav 1954b: 88–89).

Therefore, similarly to what Śarmā argued in his critical essays, Rāghav sets out to contradict the Hindu nationalists on politics and tradition. Propelled by this political need, he is also more inclined to re-shape the psychology of Ratnā, who becomes the catalyst of egalitarian principles in the Hindi literary tradition which—following the meta-narrative function of the biography—would inspire the Divorce Act and other reforms pursued by the INC. However, since Rāghav himself, like many other progressive Hindi writers of his age, is still quite affected by the patriarchal imaginary which—at least on the surface—he aims to contradict, this adherence is vivid especially when he writes about Loī, portrayed by him as the flagbearer of the idealized Indian family and society. From this point of view, Rāghav, as a major progressive voice of the 1950s, on the one hand strove to support the modernizing views on women in Indian society while, on the other—and often in contrast with the Marxist intellectuals—he preserved in his writings many of the patriarchal and hierarchical prejudices rooted in the 1920s.

The rise and containment of Dalit political issues

Following Dharmvīr's evaluation, Dvivedī emerged as one of the major authors of the aggression of Kabīr as a Dalit author in the 1940s and 1950s. However, as previously seen in reference to Rāghav's use of historical ideas earlier established by Dvivedī in his works, the latter was one of the sources of inspiration for authors who raised Dalit issues in the literary domain. The ideological connection of Dvivedī with the "fabrication" of Dalit identity has been recently outlined by Milind Wakankar, who considers Dvivedī as one of the main advocates of Dalits' sociocultural issues (2005). Nonetheless, unlike the subject of the socio-cultural and political rights of women in the Indian society, Rāghav seemed to uphold in an ambiguous way the claims of the Dalits.

The main ideological problem characterizing Rāghav's work is that it tries to assimilate the struggle of Dalits against the brahmanical order as just one facet of class struggle (*varg saṅgharṣ*) (Rāghav 1954a: 8). From this perspective, as it will be stressed by Dharmvīr, if it is true

that Rāghav was—probably even before Nāmvar Siṃh—one of the first Marxist writers to link Kabīr to Dalit identity, he was perhaps also one of the scholars who eradicated the most radical instances of Kabīr's revolutionary thought. It is certainly true that Rāghav stresses the closeness of Kabīr to his audience made up mainly of Dalits who take poet's side in the struggle against the *kazī*, the *paṇḍit*, and the *saṃnyāsin*. "Kabīr saw the life of Dalit people: he had a perspective which was quite different from that of Tulsīdās, a perspective that only a weaver could have."[35] There is an interesting ideological connection between Rāghav's evaluation of Kabīr and that which is present in Dharmvīr's 1997 essay: both see Kabīr as aiming to establish a distinct spiritual path (*rāh*) (*ibid*.: 5). This idea will be further drawn upon by Dharmvīr who blames literary critics for obliterating radical elements of Kabīr's thought and states: "their sole intent is to prevent the abandonment of the Hindu faith and the establishment of a new and distinct Dalit religion."[36]

Rāghav never speaks in the work about the way Kabīr led his own struggle against the groups that historically oppressed Dalits. On the contrary, he seems to prefer a more canonical description of the religious and moral vein of Kabīr's thought. In this way, the poet, not unlike Tulsīdās, is depicted by Rāghav as a reformer committed to the goal of purifying (*śuddhi*) the habits of the early modern Indian society. Sometimes, Kabīr is also described in the work as an embodiment of the political claims of the Dalits: nonetheless, even in these passages, he never explicitly paves a revolutionary path. This is quite clear, for example, when he is asked whether his goal is the erasing of the practice of untouchability. Rāghav's Kabīr explicitly denies such a political goal and, instead, stresses the relevance of establishing a common temple

[35] "kabīr ne jantā kā dalit jīvan dekhā thā, tulsīdās kī bhā̃ti nahī̃, ek julāhe kī bhā̃ti" (Raghāv 1954a: 9).

[36] "un sabkā uddeśya is sambhavnā par rok lagānā hai kī hindū dharm ko choṛ kar bhārat ke dalitõ kā koī nayā aur alag dharm bhī ho saktā hai" (Dharmvīr 1997: Introduction).

(*mandir*) (Rāghav 1954 a: 120). From this perspective, although Rāghav seems quite sensitive towards Kabīr's connection with the political and socio-cultural claims of the Dalit community, owing primarily to his Marxist background and his adherence to Hindu nationalist perspective, he appears to consider Kabīr as a representative of India's national culture. The national culture is regarded by Rāghav as an undifferentiated whole in which the cultural identity and political claims of Dalits are integrated within the more general characteristics of the nation.

Conclusions

In the framework of the present study, there has been a preliminary analysis of some uses of the figure of Kabīr and Tulsīdās for political and ideological purposes in the context of Hindi literary biography. The study has shown the ambiguous ideological position taken by progressive writers during the 1950s. On the one hand, they seemed to carry forward the political claims of reforming the status of Indian women as well as that of the Dalit communities. On the other hand, however, they contributed—as Dharmvīr pointed out years later—to the maintenance of the status quo and the containment of the more radical demands connected to the image of Kabīr and Tulsīdās. The most interesting literary figure devised by Rāghav is, paradoxically, the brahmanical Ratnā, who decides to leave Tulsīdās for reasons which go beyond pure moral and religious obligations. Even so, Rāghav's ideological perspective still seems to be invariably linked to the idealistic and patriarchal model of Loī. The same can be said about the way in which Rāghav treats the issues besetting Dalit communities, despite his claims of upholding political demands of Dalits through the depiction of Kabīr's life. Therefore, in light of what we have stated so far, Rāghav's biographies remain substantially linked to a nationalist-oriented ideological agenda.

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