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Ganeshbihari Mishra (1873–19??),
Shyambihari Mishra (187?–1947),
Shukdevbihari Mishra (1879–1951)

An Early Moment in the Development of Hindi Literary History

Translated from the Hindi and introduced
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The development of modern Hindi as a national language and object of formal academic study was attended by a process of negotiation between earlier local standards of literary excellence and newer criteria imported through colonial contact. The first decades of the twentieth century in particular were characterized by a spirit of institution-building and intent rethinking of the very purpose of literature. This was a foundational moment for Hindi literary history, criticism, and canon-building, and one in which the Mishra brothers, whose work is featured here, played a critical part.

One of the tensions visible in the work of the Mishra brothers stems from their attempt to reconcile colonial reformist notions and nation-building imperatives with their strong appreciation for the Hindi literary heritage, one that was distinctly non-Victorian and non-modern in its literary ethos. Although English-educated and obviously well-trained and sympathetic readers of English literature—

Shyambihari earned both MA and DLitt degrees in the subject from Allahabad University—the Mishra brothers were also comfortable inhabitants of the older domains of princely and *zamindari* privilege and the cultural forms that underwrote them.¹

Ganeshbihari, Shyambihari, and Shukdevbihari Mishra (as the brothers are known on the rare occasion when scholars bother to individualize them) contributed prolifically to the Hindi public sphere in the early twentieth century. They wrote countless essays on literary topics for *Sarasvati* and other contemporary Hindi journals. They were also active on the boards of Hindi literature's bedrock institutions: the Nagari Pracharini Sabha (Society for the Promotion of the Nagari Script, founded in Banaras in 1893), and the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan (Hindi Literary Council, founded in Allahabad in 1910). They produced several works of Hindi criticism, as well as fiction and poetry—most of it forgotten today. What they are widely remembered for is the *Misrabandhuvinod* (Delight of the Mishra Brothers), a magisterial three-volume work of literary history, which was the first comprehensive attempt made from within the Hindi community to craft a historical narrative for their own literature.²

The *Vinod* gives eloquent testimony to the kinds of deliberation and negotiation that went into formulating the Hindi canon during the nationalist period. A veritable polyphony of early-twentieth-century cultural currents reverberates through the work, with multiple voices competing for attention: the modern, the traditionalist, the reformist, the nationalist, even the feudalist. As is clear from their deliberations on the work's name (excerpted below), the Mishra brothers are full of self-doubt about whether they are worthy practitioners of the modern discipline of literary history, and their choice of a

¹ The two younger Mishra brothers, for instance, Shyambihari and Shukdevbihari, held high-ranking positions in the princely states of Orcha and Bharatpur.

² An earlier literary history by Shivsingh Sengar, *Sivsimhsaraj* (Lotus of Shiv Singh, 1878), also has some literary-historical merit, but it is written in the form of a compendium of biographical sketches rather than a history. In just a few years the *Vinod* would be overshadowed by Ramachandra Shukla's influential *Hindi Sahitya ka Itihas* (1929), a work more thoroughly modern (and less ebulliently celebratory of Hindi) in its tone.

distinctly traditional title—the word *vinod* harkens back to medieval courtly practices of royal entertainment—exposes a certain ambivalence about the modern literary-historical model. Also of note is the Mishra brothers' strikingly powerful response to colonial ideologies that decried India's literary backwardness. When all is said and done, the Mishra brothers refuse to accept the charge that their much-loved literary traditions are inferior to those of their colonial overlords. They seem at times to be trapped between competing thought worlds, where a coherent account of the literary past and the needs of the literary present eludes them. Their work illustrates the inconsistent hold that nationalist reformist logic had on even its own advocates and practitioners.

The Delight of the Mishra Brothers: A History of Indian Literature³

The Original Conception Behind the Book

In the December 1901 (V.S. 1958) issue of *Sarasvati* magazine we expressed our interest in writing a work on the subject of Hindi literary history. We described the matter as follows on pages 410–11: "We have decided to write critical accounts of the poetry of the language's finest one hundred poets both ancient and modern, and on the basis of these articles to put together a book called 'The Birth of Hindi', or 'The Eminence of Hindi' (or some other comparable title).⁴ In it we want to recount the rise and fall of Hindi from its birth until the present day and the ups and downs it encountered in between. The logical form for such a work to take—unless we go to excessive lengths—would be to present a compilation of critical accounts of the various authors. Therefore we have begun the process of writing the accounts, and when through the grace of Shiva we manage to complete accounts of the top one hundred poets we will make an effort to collate them into the aforementioned book. We have described our venture in such detail because it is our hope that perhaps a collaborator might endorse the initiative and come forward to help

³ *Misrabandhuvinod* (Allahabad: Hindi Granth Prasarak Mandali, 1913), vol. 1, pp. 1–2, 4–5, 28–33.

⁴ This and other parenthetical remarks occur in the original text.

us by contributing some of the entries, or indeed by even undertaking the writing of the book. If scholars assist us we will accomplish our desired aim (writing the book) quickly, otherwise such an enterprise is likely to take years."

Its Name

At first we were going to call this work "The History of Hindi Literature" but when we reflected on the seriousness of history as such we felt that we were not really worthy of the task. And there is no scope in a work of history to treat all writers great and small. One would have to focus principally on high points and major shifts in the language, with only a tangential treatment of the poets. But for us the poets are a major focal point, so this book treats matters besides history as well. We made every effort to include historical matters and major events in this work but we did not exclude issues that would be considered extraneous to a work of history. In our view, a history is made more comprehensive by examining all the major and minor poets as well as their oeuvres. This method also reveals the eminence of the Hindi corpus. If a reader needs to find out about a particular poet, the comprehensiveness of material will prove beneficial. For these reasons we thought it was unnecessary to preserve some purist form of a history by leaving out the names of minor poets and works. Nonetheless, in order to preserve chronological order we organized the work according to time periods and at the beginning of the work we also provided a brief historical overview. We did not call the work a history, instead entitling it "The Delight of the Mishra Brothers". But we subtitled it "A History of Hindi Literature and Ode to Poets" owing to the fact that we used a chronological order, and that we included relevant historical information.

Comparative Literary Accomplishments

Even if in our language the compositions of poets belonging to the "average category" have been deemed average,⁵ they are still praiseworthy when seen in light of the literary accomplishments of other

⁵ In the section previous to the one excerpted here the Mishra brothers lay out their elaborate system of categories (*shreni*) for classifying various poets. Some writers are dignified with the status of being a leading poet

languages. India experienced a decline in everything from the time of Shankaracharya, but literature is an exception to this rule. In comparison with the most developed countries India has no lack of intellectual greatness, and there may be many reasons for our terrible decline, but lack of ideas is not one of them. In India since Gautama Buddha's day we have seen a strong penchant for compassion. And religion has developed vigorously here in comparison to other places. These two factors have combined so that when it comes to the cultivation of knowledge in India we are preoccupied with issues like kindness towards living beings and the inconsequentiality of this world.⁶ Because of our extreme compassion the desire to prevent the suffering of others has become so pronounced that some of our most charitable types do not even pause to consider whether the sufferings of the objects of their compassion may arise from personal shortcomings, or from some other reason. As a result, thousands of able-bodied men in India do not want to work and remain content to milk the compassion of others for generations on end. In this manner priests, hereditary ritual specialists, the descendants of spiritual leaders, all kinds of Brahmins, etc.—countless men—live in far better circumstances than ordinary labourers without doing the slightest bit of useful work.

In earlier times we lacked any real competitive drive in India, but, in order to improve our material conditions, cultivating a more ambitious spirit will be of supreme importance. Without it, no individual will want to work and because of the shortage of hard-working people our country will go into utter decline. In India Dharma, Karma, and various traditional customs, as well as our insistence on compassion and the impermanence of the world, have been allowed to degenerate

(*shreni-nayak*), whereas others are merely of the "average type" (*sadharan shreni*). Additionally, some poets may not fit into a particular category (*shreni-hin*).

⁶ Here, in insisting on qualities like intelligence and compassion, the Mishra brothers seem to be responding to the kinds of charges of intellectual inferiority and moral degradation typically levelled against Indian society by British reformers. Nonetheless, as the following remarks indicate, they remain under the sway of colonialist discourses about Hindus as too otherworldly and insufficiently concerned with practical matters.

so that—just look at any of our rites—they just seem to foster laziness. Unfortunately, in our country envy has been an intractable force. This, along with the feebleness of our enterprising spirit, has slowed the development of unity. These are the reasons why the strength of our society was crushed and our country deteriorated further. But this decline can be attributed to the increasing influence of an excessive degree of noble sentiments, with the result that no true degradation occurred in our period of decline. And no diminution took place among our scholars—it is simply that where some inappropriate theories held sway our national intellectual talents were stunted.

For these reasons we never really fostered utilitarian subjects in the field of literature, but the works we did produce were of an extraordinary quality. Consequently, even the works of ordinary poets—regardless of the fact that they confined themselves to non-utilitarian subjects—still contain a literary sparkle that really delights the heart. Even our most ordinary poets can compete with the finest poets of other languages. In the field of literature we have paid little attention to edifying themes, and have not felt overly constrained by the weight of duty. Our people have always particularly cultivated literature so that both in terms of quantity and literary maturity our poets far outstrip their counterparts in other languages. Numerous maharajas, rajas, seers, religious leaders, and other exceptional people have composed literary works in Hindi—even a fraction of such activity cannot be found in other languages. After looking at the list of titles provided in the *Vinod* and after considering their magnitude, it will be clear that there are far more works of literature in Hindi than in other languages. If at some point Hindi were to be studied up to the MA level, then just the book lists compiled in the *Vinod* alone would be ample material for the curriculum for ten or even twenty years to come.

Still, hundreds of books were lost or destroyed in ancient times because we did not have trains, telephones, a postal system, printing presses, or libraries.⁷ We lacked these things, so poets could not find out what others were writing, with the result that hundreds and

⁷ The relevance of trains and telephones, etc., for the preservation of ancient books is unclear, but the larger signalling of shifts in reading practices and the circulation of Indian texts due to colonial technologies is transparent.

thousands of books kept getting produced on the same subject. It would be difficult to exaggerate how terribly the lack of a printing press has harmed our intellectual circles and our language.

If one reflects clearly and without bias on the matter of literary excellence, it will be evident that here in India we may have produced few utilitarian works but when it comes to books filled with fine expression and argument, otherworldly and pleasurable books, we have contributed prolifically. The depth of our literary expression is tremendous; we just do not have the range of subjects of English. After living in a state of decline and dwelling upon our inferiority in every subject, our self-esteem has sunk to such depths that nothing of our own seems to be of any value when compared to its Western counterpart. This is why even though Hindi literature is of extraordinary merit, people think it is worthless in the face of works by Western authors.

In our *Nine Jewels of Hindi*, we wrote critical biographies of the nine best Hindi poets.⁸ While praising those poets, here and there we also occasionally discussed the relative shortcomings of other languages. A sensitive critic of ours, while extolling our book, somewhat excessively in the well-known monthly magazine *Modern Review*, did also mention that in some places in our book our enthusiasm for Hindi had caused us to exaggerate.⁹ We said nothing there out of mere enthusiasm—when you write literary criticism it is necessary to weigh every word. In this type of writing there is no scope for rapture, but still our sensitive critic thought we were exaggerating. He was too mild to call us wrong so he wriggled out of it by referencing our “rhetorical exuberance”.¹⁰ The reason he can say such things is because many people have mistakenly come to feel that everything Western is

⁸ The *Hindi Navaratna*, published in 1910, was the Mishra brothers' first major work of literary criticism.

⁹ In the March 1912 issue of *Modern Review* (vol. XI, no. 3) the historian Jadunath Sarkar had published a review of *Hindi Navaratna*. (I am indebted to Arthur Dudney for helping me to track down this reference.)

¹⁰ Here I have reintroduced the original English expression used by Jadunath Sarkar, which the Mishra brothers translated as “*umang-jani atyukti*” (elsewhere in the article Sarkar also accuses the Mishra brothers of “cheap rhetorical flourishes”). Generally, however, Sarkar's review of *Navaratna* is favourable.

better than their own. So they wonder how literature alone could possibly be an exception to this rule.

From childhood we begin hearing about how great authors like Shakespeare are, and how their works are so magnificent. And their magnificence then becomes fixed in our mind because we keep hearing over and over about it. In Europe it is the habit of connoisseurs to praise effusively every little thing. The esteemed intellectual [George Bernard] Shaw wrote a nice history of English literature which is, as a rule, taught in our MA courses here. In it he must have said a hundred or more times that such and such quality of such and such poet is the very best in all of world literature. In India, on the other hand, even when something is good, people do not praise it freely. The reason may be jealousy or lack of self-respect or something else, but this is definitely a habit of ours. This is why even our intellectuals are surprised to hear about the merits of Hindi literature. And so an esteemed critic saw praise for Hindi in *Nine Jewels* and began to say that we find this poet great, and that poet great, and all poets great. And in his opinion writing in such a manner is unbecoming to a scholar. If we had deemed all Hindi poets inferior then maybe our critic would have been pleased. But one needs to think carefully before passing judgement. What is unbecoming to a scholar is just to repeat others' ideas uncritically. If you were to put a good Hindi book alongside any more famous English or Persian book and compare them to determine relative literary merits and flaws, the brilliant literary achievements of Hindi would become evident. But if somebody wants to parrot the views of others without even verifying the facts, and decides to reject Hindi because of its impractical subjects, thinking it to be full of hyperbole or lacking coherence, well, what can we say? Enough on this subject.