intrinsic part of the Dalit movement; in Candravār this is absent. Buddhism is not amalgamated with Sant Dharm, as in Kanpur among the educated Śiv Nārāyaṇīs. In Candravār Dhām, Buddhism is considered to be a social gospel, not a path to salvation.

The shifting meanings of a textual tradition within the realm of an oral tradition are obvious. Although the *Gurū anyās* does not mention caste at all, there is general agreement that Svāmī Śiv Nārāyaṇ was born to abolish caste. This is paradoxical insofar as even within the Śiv Nārāyaṇ *saṃpradāya,* there was neither connubium nor commensality between the different *jātis.* They only partook in the communion, the *mohanbhog,* of the sect.

Questioning the Tropes about *'Bhakti'* and *'Rīti'* in Hindi Literary Historiography

Allison Busch

'Early Indian Spirituality' *versus* 'Late Courtly Decadence'

This article probes the stigma that has come to be attached to Brajbhasha poets from the *rīti* period of Hindi literature, and the frequent (but frequently unwarranted) gulf in critical esteem that separates the treatment of *bhakti* and rīti literature in modern Hindi scholarship. I begin by briefly surveying the original conception behind the terms *bhaktikāl* (period of devotion) and *rītikāl* (period of high style) as they crystallized in Hindi literary historiography, querying whether the foundational poetic principles that these terms purport to encapsulate are reliable indexes of Brajbhasha textual history. The standard narratives about *bhakti* and *rīti* that have become entrenched in the field of Hindi studies recapitulate a number of colonial-period tropes about Indian spirituality and courtly decadence, and their survival long into the post-colonial period has not attracted the critique it merits. I am hardly the first person to register discontent with the concepts of *bhakti* and *rīti* as primary organizing categories for 'medieval' Hindi literature. Recently a number of Western scholars have stressed the overlapping *bhakti* and *rīti* personas of some prominent seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poets, and here I will be adding my voice to this emerging chorus with reference to the literary profiles of even earlier poets like Viṣṇudās (fl.1435), Kṛpārām (fl.1541), Nanddās (fl.1570) and Keśavdās (fl.1600), features of whose work challenge the very idea of literary history's traditional *bhakti-rīti* dividing line.[1] The terms *bhakti* and *rīti* have also been the object of occasional scrutiny by a range of Hindi critics, who have occasionally proposed alter-

1. For the inseparability of *bhakti* and *rīti* in the work of Bihārīlāl (b. early 1600s) see Rupert Snell, 'Bhakti versus Rīti? The Satsaī of Bihārīlāl,' *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 3.1 (1994), pp. 153-70. New work by Imre Bangha, 'Lover and Saint: The Early History of Ānandghan's Reputation,' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 11.2 (2001), pp. 175-90, and Heidi Pauwels, 'Romancing Rādhā: Nāgarīdās' Royal Appropriations of *Bhakti* Themes,' *South Asia Research* 25.1 (2005), pp. 55-78, on Ānandghan and Nāgarīdās respectively, has encouraged a more complex analysis of *bhakti* and *rīti*, tending to view them as choices in a repertory of poetic voices rather than fixed identities.

natives for naming and periodizing the principal constituents of the Hindi corpus.[2] But these relatively minor adjustments do not go far enough in correcting the slant of the core ideological orientations that underpinned the creation of the categories in the first places, and my purpose here is to intensify this corrective process.

The question I am raising about the validity of these literary-historical categories is no simple matter of nomenclature. To query the logic behind the categories *bhakti* and *rīti* is simultaneously to engage a larger set of intellectual concerns about how India's precolonial literary past has been viewed and represented over the last two hundred years: what is valued (religious literature), and what is not (courtly literature), why this should be the case—particularly when it is not clear that watertight binaries like 'religious' and 'courtly' literature were invariably meaningful to premodern Hindi poets—and who has historically been empowered to decide such matters. For it's hardly news to declare that literary values are not naturally-existing universals but part of culturally-constructed interpretive regimes, which, under conditions of colonialism, generally enforced particular ideologies about 'native' literary modes or, under conditions of nationalism, demanded acute selectivity about the literary motifs that could be allowed to represent the modern Indian state.

There is not much about either colonial regimes or nationalistic projects that is conducive to an unproblematic appraisal of a region's cultural heritage. In the unequal interpretive milieu of late nineteenth-century India the literary prejudices of the British were often accepted without sufficient debate or rigorous critical analysis. In some cases Indians were actively indoctrinated into feeling a new sense of shame—or in more extreme situations hatred—for their formerly-prized literary heritage. Under pressure to conform to Western poetic regimes such as Romanticism, many traditions were reevaluated, found wanting, and then subjected to rehabilitation.[3] The perceived need for India's cultural rehabilitation fed directly into the stream of nationalist thought, and fostered the conditions for a modernizing literary ethos spearheaded in Hindi circles by reformers like Mahāvīr Prasād Dvivedī (1864-1938). During the heyday of early nationalism in the first decades of the twentieth century, when Hindi was increasingly being mobilized as the linguistic flagship of the Indian nation, creating socially useful literature for the changing conditions of modern India emerged as a compelling desideratum, and the many aspects of Hindi's literary past that were not in keeping with such modernizing aims were summarily dismissed. These

2. See note 16 below.

3. A valuable study of Urdu literature's (often unfortunate) encounters with 'Wordsworthian' aesthetics is Frances Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. Comparable processes in Hindi have not been as well documented or critiqued.

choices are directly reflected in the historiography of the period, a historiography that remains today substantively unchanged from the 1920s.

The bulk of what came to be rejected under the colonial and nationalist enterprises were the kinds of courtly writings now lumped together under the rubric of '*rīti* literature.' Traditional courtly litterateurs' predilection for erotic themes and Sanskrit-style literary taxonomies came to be newly viewed as the self-indulgent hallmarks of a tired and decadent feudal past, a past tha. he growing Hindi literary public became increasingly anxious to repudiate. Once esteemed as the gems of poetic craftsmanship that had commanded fame and fortune in the *samasyāpūrti* (poetry contest) culture of early-modern courtly life, *rīti* works were now reviled as baroque, showy, and stilted. It was not just the aesthetics of *rīti* that came under attack. The poetry became morally suspect because it seemed to lack any higher purpose and its *raison d'être* (or so it was often accused) was to please rich, undeserving patrons of a medieval social order rather than to edify the masses. In contrast, the religious (*bhakti*) features of the Indian poetic terrain were perceived to be more in accordance with the radical reformist values of the period, garnering prestige in the modernizing literary imagination. For instance, when Indian society had come under repeated attack for its treatment of women and the lower castes, premodern *bhakti* literature seemed creditable for an almost modern-style progressivism. With certain blinders on (one would have to ignore, for instance, Tulsī's infamous dictum that women and low castes, like drums, are especially suitable for beating[4]), *bhakti* religion and literature could be constructed as a potential answer to some of the social ills deemed to be plaguing Indian society.[5] *Bhakti* could even be deployed in the service of nationalist causes: a new coinage for patriotism (*deśbhakti*) gave an older term with limited parameters an expanded scope and a purposeful, topical ring.[6] In short, *bhakti* literature could be dressed up in new clothes and made to appear

4. *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsīdās, 96th ed., Gorakhpur: Gītā Press, 1993, v. 5.58.6.

5. Rāmcandra Śukla made the perceived connection between (nirguṇ) *bhakti* and colonial-period reformist values explicit when he stated, 'These religious mystics bestowed a great gift on illiterate and low-caste people. They made a commendable effort to uplift them, giving them some sense of higher things, emphasizing purity of conduct, rejecting religious ostentation, and instilling a sense of self-worth. When Westerners referred to them by the term "religious reformers" it was with this in mind.' Rāmcandra Śukla, *Hindī sāhitya kā itihās,* 29th ed., Varanasi: Nāgarī Pracāriṇī Sabhā, 1994, p. 39. (Translations from the Hindi here and elsewhere are my own.)

6. Maithilī Śaraṇ Gupta, one of the Hindi tradition's most celebrated Dvivedī-period poets, exhibited a striking blend of patriotism and *bhakti* in his famous poem *Sāket.* See Harish Trivedi, 'The Progress of Hindi, Part 2: Hindi and the Nation,' in *Literary Cultures in History,* ed. by Sheldon Pollock, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 990. Hariaudh's *Priyāpravās* was a dramatic retooling of Kṛṣṇa-Rādhā themes for a modern reformist context. See Karine Schomer, *Mahadevi Varma and the Chhayavad Age of Modern Hindi Poetry,* 1983, repr. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, p. 10.

democratic, pragmatic, and morally exemplary, whereas *rīti* was constructed as its antithesis: it seemed feudal, frivolous, and morally suspect. It did not hurt *bhakti*'s case that it also had more in common with Western literary sensibilities like Romanticism, and Christian religious tenets like monotheism, which were of course the cultural preferences of India's colonial rulers.

The Origins of Modern Hindi Classificatory Systems

Decades of colonial and reformist thinking about Hindi were eventually distilled into definitive historiographical shape in 1929 with the publication of Rāmcandra Śukla's highly influential *Hindī sāhityā kā itihās* (History of Hindi literature). The cornerstone of Śukla's work was its fourfold periodization scheme (*kāl vibhāg*), which is worth laying out in full detail here because it remains, after much debate but ultimately with only minor modifications, the dominant system for conceptualizing Hindi literature:

1. Ādikāl	(Vīrgāthākāl)	{Vikram 1050-1375}
2. Pūrv madhyakāl	(Bhaktikāl)	{Vikram 1375-1700}
3. Uttar madhyakāl	(Rītikāl)	{Vikram 1700-1900}
4. Ādhunik kāl	(Gadyakāl)	{Vikram 1900-1984}

These Hindi categories and Hindu dates translate as follows:

1. Beginning period	(Period of heroic songs)	{CE 993-1318}
2. Early medieval period	(Period of devotion)	{CE 1318-1643}
3. Late medieval period	(Period of style)	{CE 1643-1843}
4. Modern period	(Period of prose)	{CE 1843-1927}[7]

At first glance these categories may seem utterly banal and hardly worthy of clamorous critique. But it is surely worth pausing to ask how Hindi literature ended up with a medieval period that extends all the way into the mid-nineteenth century, when—historians must universally agree—the expiration date for anything that could reasonably be called 'medieval' had long passed in the West. The idea that Hindi literature (like India) could only achieve modernity with the advent of the British seems upon closer scrutiny more

7. Śukla, *Itihās*, p. 1. The terms indicated in bold face are still standard in the field. This system did not just emerge *ex nihilo*. The works of earlier literary historians such as Śiv Singh Sengar, George Abraham Grierson, and the Miśra brothers all need to be factored into our understanding of how a literary past was first generated for Hindi. An overview of these matters is Allison Busch, 'The Courtly Vernacular: The Transformation of Braj Literary Culture (1590-1690),' Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2003, pp. 55-76.

likely to be an unexamined relic of a paternalistic colonial worldview than a sound classificatory principle for literature.[8]

Of most critical importance to this discussion, however, is Śukla's surprising bifurcation of medieval literature into an earlier '*bhakti*' period and a later 'rīti' period. Śukla took two major trends in Hindi literature, the devotional and the courtly, trends that we will find to be far more logically distinguishable in terms of stylistic and patronage configurations, and accorded them a new temporal significance that no one had ever before attributed to them. Furthermore, the dates for these newly-posited historical epochs acquired a strangely arbitrary specificity: we are asked to believe that the early (*pūrv*) or '*bhakti*' portion of the proposed medieval period began precisely in CE 1318, and lasted just until the year 1643, at which point it supposedly underwent a shift, transitioning to a later (*uttar*) entity characterized by '*rīti*'.

Any careful reader of Śukla's *Itihās* soon discovers that new periods were not the only things being proposed. Inherent in the model (although its fullest instantiation would await a rash of post-Independence literary-histories) is a sense of pronounced hierarchy between *bhakti* and *rīti* in terms of their larger literary and socio-cultural merit. Whereas the category *bhakti*, pregnant with positive connotations of spirituality, betokens what is generally constructed as a hallowed Indian cultural trait, the very idea of 'rīti' suggests some kind of medieval excess. Frequently glossed in English by the regrettable term 'mannerist', *rīti* does not just innocently mean 'style', a literal translation of the Hindi word, but carries the derogatory implication of 'too much style'.

Aside from dissatisfaction with the names and the cultural assumptions that lurk behind them, Śukla's model sparks other pressing questions. Why was the category of medieval Hindi literature split into two at the particular point he proposed, and what were the historical grounds for seeing a split between *bhakti* and *rīti* in the first place? It is difficult to think of anything that happened in 1643 (1700 Vikram era) to make this year an important turning point for Hindi literature. No major political event occurred that year, nor was any epoch-making literary text produced. In fact, the 1640s were a decade of relative quiescence in the otherwise remarkably dynamic seventeenth century, where virtually nothing of significance seems

8. Śukla cannot be held fully responsible for the way he carved up Hindi literary production into beginning, medieval, and modern periods. The perception that Indians were static inhabitants of a long-enduring medieval realm prior to the arrival of the British is a well-attested part of colonial discourse. There was also a literary-historical precedent for some of this terminology in *Miśrabandhuvinod* (Delight of the Miśra brothers) by Ganeśbihārī Miśra, Śyāmbihārī Miśra, and Śukdevbihārī Miśra, vol. 1, Allahabad: Hindīgranth-prasārak Mandalī, 1913, which featured the divisions 'early medieval Hindi' and 'advanced medieval Hindi,' although with dates substantially earlier and therefore less questionable than those proposed by Śukla. See Miśra et al., introduction to vol. 1, p. v.

to have occurred in the entire field of Hindi literature. Of course, literary historians can only sketch an approximate picture of literary trends, and they can hardly be expected to defend every periodization with absolute rigor. One surmises that for Śukla the sheer volume of 'medieval' texts rendered that category unwieldy, and the nice, round number of 1700 in the Hindu Vikram calendar presented itself as a convenient midpoint for dividing the material into two more manageable sections.

Was there a solid intellectual basis for the radical new concept that medieval Hindi literature consisted of two historically distinct phases?[9] This is where *bhakti* and *rīti* are supposed to come into play. For Śukla the four proposed eras of Hindi literature could be distinguished by their principal tendencies (*pravṛttiyāṁ*), such as the heroic (*vīra*) spirit of the *rāso* genres in the beginning period, or in some cases a major literary event (*pradhān sāhityik ghaṭnā*) like the rise of prose (*gadya*) in the modern period.[10] And one period led directly into another through a chain of causality that stemmed from political or cultural strengths and weaknesses. Under this thought system the heroism of the beginning period could not be sustained under 'Muslim rule,' which necessitated a turn inwards during the *bhakti* or 'early' (*pūrv*) stage of medieval literature.[11] Notably, it was during this *bhakti* period that Hindi is said to have reached a state of 'maturity' (*prauṛhtā*) before passing on the baton to *rīti* poets. The *rīti* or late (*uttar*) medieval phase, however, was constructed as a more scholarly and stilted style of writing that was too limiting and largely disappointing given the promise shown by earlier *bhakti* writers. One of Śukla's central findings on the subject of *rīti* literature was, 'People should have felt a strong sense of a lack (*abhāv*) but that never dawned on them.'[12] And in his account of the *rītigranth* (book of method), the *rīti* period's preeminent genre and a major vehicle of precolonial intellectual life in Hindi, Śukla repeatedly decried the poets' 'errors' (*bhram/bhrānt dhāraṇā*) and 'bungling' (*gaṛbaṛī*), their 'mistaken' (*pramādvaś*) and 'incoherent' (*asaṁgat*) ideas. He implied that during this era immediately preceding the modern period Hindi was running out of creative stimuli, to the point of risking stagnation:

9. The question of whether or not it makes sense to split medieval Hindi literature into two periods has subsequently been raised by other scholars, notably Gaṇpaticandra Gupta, who holds that the medieval period is best viewed as a single unit (spanning the years from 1350 to 1857) throughout which a range of literary trends like *bhakti*, *rīti*, and martial traditions coexisted. See Gaṇpaticandra Gupta, *Hindī sāhitya kā vaijñānik itihās*, Candigarh: Bhāratendu Bhavan,1965, pp. 4-7; 149-54. It is regrettable that this otherwise cogent system is marred by its reductionist treatment of 'Muslim rule' as religiously intolerant, prone to war, and overly luxury-loving.

10. Śukla, 'Foreword to first edition,' in *Itihās*, pp. 5-6.

11. Śukla, *Itihās*, p. 34.

12. Śukla, *Itihās*, p. 131.

> The tradition of writing *rītigranths* also proved an obstacle to the extensive development of literature. The poets ignored the diverse forms of nature, the various concerns of life and the many mysteries of the world. Literature became in a way bound, and limited in scope. Its field was limited. The literary stream (*vāgdhārā*) began to flow only in narrow rivulets... .[13]

And the contrast with Śukla's more favourable treatment of *bhakti* literature—its spiritualism, its purported advocacy of social uplift and Muslim-Hindu unity (just to name a few of its vaunted qualities), is striking.

It is no secret that Śukla wrote his *Itihās* in a hurry, and it was never intended to be viewed as the last word on Hindi literary history. The work was originally designed to be an introduction to the *Hindī śabdsāgar* (Ocean of Hindi words), the first scholarly Hindi lexicon of the modern period, and not the comprehensive literary historical milestone it has subsequently become. It is telling that in the foreword to the first edition Śukla explicitly stated that he had not conducted any significant new research into what he was newly terming the *rīti* authors, preferring to draw on earlier sources like the *Miśrabandhuvinod*.[14] His ideas were only meant to be 'preliminary indicators.'[15] It is therefore all the more surprising that so much of his model remains intact.

It is not that there was never again to be another literary history for Hindi. Dozens have been written since 1929, in both Hindi and in English. There have been numerous corrections and augmentations to the state of general knowledge about the Hindi past. New texts have been discovered, and Śukla's findings amended accordingly. Collected works (*granthāvalī*) and studies of key authors continue to be published in Hindi. There have also been fervent debates about Hindi's literary-historical categories and the periods they encompass, with some scholars even going so far as to propose new categories for organizing Hindi literature. But the proposed new names have done little to alter the core terms of engagement with respect to late precolonial Hindi literature. It is telling that the new historiographical construct that was accorded the most credence as a proposed replacement for *rītikāl* proved to be *śṛṅgārkāl* (period of eroticism). To advocate a *zeitgeist* of eros rather than mannerism does not advance the cause very far, for its

13. Śukla, *Itihās*, pp. 130-1.

14. Distinctly lacking in the *Miśra* brothers' work, however, is the dismissive tone that characterizes Śukla's analysis of rīti. The time constraints he faced in assembling his teaching notes into a book are mentioned in Śukla, 'Foreword to first edition,' in *Itihās*, p. 4.

15. *'Rītikāl yā aur kisī kāl ke kaviyoṁ ke sāhityik viśeṣtāoṁ ke saṁbandh meṁ maiṁne jo saṁkṣipt vicār prakaṭ kiye haiṁ, ve digdarśan mātr ke liye'* (The cursory opinions I have expressed with respect to the literary specificities of poets from the *rīti* period or any other period are merely preliminary indicators). Śukla, 'Foreword to first edition,' in *Itihās*, p. 6.

defining concept still participates in the very same cultural field of courtly decadence as *rīti*.[16]

The *rīti* period continues to be treated as a time of cultural embarrassment—even failure—long after Śukla wrote his *Itihās*.[17] In addition to being guilty of 'mannerism', the charge of 'decadence' always seems to hover over Brajbhasa poets from the *rīti* period, for according to the logic of literary history at its crudest, these poetic vices are the necessary concomitant to writing at a later moment. Often considered a standard symptom of this putative decadence-disorder is *rīti* poets' concern with literary convention and ornament (*alaṅkār*). But serious students of premodern Indian literature know that these were the essential building blocks for most poetry, even that of many *bhakti* authors, up to the modern period. After all, it is not without good reason that literary theory, one of the most sophisticated branches of learning in precolonial India, was known as the 'science of ornaments' (*alaṅkāra-śāstra*).

If principles of interpretive generosity concerning other styles of literature from other times, which may be animated by aesthetic criteria potentially very different from those of the present day, do not by themselves prompt the desire for a review of discourses about *rīti*, at the very least we should demand more historical precision of the model, for most of its defining imagery of a supposed decline from *bhakti* to *rīti*, from early to late, from maturity to decadence, etc., is based not on any careful assessment of the empirical data but on vague, unquestioned assumptions about Indian cultural history. Do we not need to be more intellectually wary of designations like 'early' or 'mature' (both associated with *bhakti* literature in

16. The argument for a *śṛiṅgārkāl* is found in Viśvanāth Prasād Miśra, *Hindī sāhitya kā atīt*, vol. 2, 2nd ed., Varanasi: Vāṇī Vitān Prakāśan, 1966, pp. 374-88. For a good overview of important elements in the debates on both the naming practices and periodization of Hindi literary history, see Gaṇpaticandra Gupta and Nagendra, 'Pūrvpīṭhikā,' in *Hindī sāhitya kā itihās*, ed. by Nagendra, 1973. I am struck by how even Gaṇpaticandra Gupta, whose *Hindī sāhitya kā vaijñānik itihās* (Scientific history of Hindi literature) is perhaps the most radical overhaul of Śukla's system, is still able to say that Śukla's ideas about rīti literature are 'in many respects still valid today.' Gupta and Nagendra, 'Pūrvpīṭhikā,' p. 14. A rare work that focuses on the successes rather than shortcomings of rīti literature is Kiśorīlāl, *Rītikālīn kaviyoṁ kī maulik den*, Allahabad: Sāhitya Bhavan, 1971.

17. The trend is found in scholarly writings in English no less than in Hindi. The most influential of the English-language Hindi literary histories designates the entire *rīti* period by the chapter heading 'a waning era,' in contrast to the section on the *bhakti* period, which is entitled 'the years of maturity.' See Ronald Stuart McGregor, *Hindi Literature from its Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 8, pt. 6 of *A History of Indian Literature*, ed. by Jan Gonda, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1984. Compare the recent characterization of *rīti* as a 'degeneration' from *bhakti* in Trivedi, *Progress*, 2003, p. 984.

Śukla's model) as descriptors for creative processes?[18] In the study of art, literature, and other artifacts of culture, the *early* is too easily romanticized as pure, simple, and free from artifice. Many ideas about earlier simplicity or 'classicism' versus later ornateness or 'decadence' seem to have been unthinkingly transplanted from the field of European art history and literature to the Indian cultural terrain. It is not at all clear that these remain useful terms for the cultural history even of their place of origin, let alone for that of India.[19] Literary-historical terms like 'early' and 'mature' also seem suspiciously more relevant as descriptors of processes in the natural world than critical tools for handling man-made literary production.[20] One thing is certain: such concepts do not leave much latitude for any poet that should be unfortunate enough to follow in their wake. For according to a biologic logic based on observing the life trajectory of flowers, or of aging people, what ineluctably happens after the 'mature' phase? Decline, decay, death. At least this seems to have been the fate of *rīti* literature in the eyes of most modern critics, who, in accepting that *rīti* literature is defined by its position as a 'late-medieval' (*uttar madhyakālīn*) cultural entity have usually—even relentlessly—constructed it as the tired, enervated, literary successor to *bhakti*.

Mapping the concepts of *rīti* and *bhakti* onto a linearly temporal structure permitted another teleological problem to enter the historiographical picture. *Rīti* literature was not just 'late medieval,' but its specific point of emplotment on a time line also served to forge an inextricable link with a perceived cultural weakness that had allowed the British to conquer India. A common trend in post-Śukla literary-historical discourse is to introduce rīti poetry with a lament about India's downfall under supposedly decadent, overly luxury-loving Mughal rulers.[21] This practice is not only tedious but also intellectually suspect insofar as the nature and extent of eighteenth-century Mughal decline—once thought to be a fatal rupture point in Indian society according to principles of colonial

18. 'Pūrv madhyakāl' is, as noted above, a synonym for the *bhakti* period. And the word *'prauṛhtā'* is used repeatedly to characterize it. See, for instance, Śukla, *Itihās*, pp. 35, 68, 129.

19. A good exposé of these unhelpful but widespread thought structures is Partha Mitter, '"Decadence in India": Reflections on a Much-Used Word in Studies of Indian Art and Society,' in *Sight & Insight: Essays on Art and Culture in Honour of E. H. Gombrich at 85*, ed. by John Onians, London: Phaidon Press, 1994. I thank Pika Ghosh for the reference.

20. A questioning of the merit of such 'organicist tropes' and a cogent articulation of the need to forge new models for South Asian literary history are offered by Shelden Pollock, 'Literary History, Region, and Nation in South Asia: Introductory Note,' *Social Scientist* 23.10-12 (1995), pp. 1-7. A recent embodiment of alternative literary-historical practice is Pollock, *Literary Cultures*.

21. Typical is Nagendra, *Rītibaddh kāvya*, vol. 6 of *Hindī sāhitya kā bṛhat itihās*, Varanasi: Nāgarī Pracāriṇī Sabhā, 1974, but there are innumerable others.

historiography—has recently been much-debated by historians.[22] And already damaging tropes about *rīti's* connections with Mughal decadence are often further exacerbated by unfavourable comparisons with twentieth-century literary trends such as a new emphasis on prose and more utilitarian poetic sensibilities. Viewed from a modern nationalist perspective *rīti* was historiographically poised to embody the 'backwardness' from which reformers like Mahāvīr Prasād Dvivedī were busy trying to rescue Indian culture. In sum, the modern periodization of Hindi literature as pioneered by Śukla and since his day reaffirmed with few changes by generations of critics constructs *rīti* as the era where medieval literature declined from maturity to near death, before its putative resurrection through the new genres and literary systems infused by the cultural currents of colonial and nationalist modernity.

What is *Rīti*, and When Did it Begin?

The point is not that literary processes do not take place in history. Literary sensibilities do change. New literary forms arise. Some genres die out, and others flourish. Patronage conditions shift. Some moments in time seem—whether to contemporaries or later observers or both—especially rich for literature. Other periods may not appear so outstanding. And some of this flux is susceptible to being measured. But we need to measure it with appropriate tools, not with cultural tropes about maturity and decadence, or political tropes centered in the stock imagery of decline and fall.

If we are accurately to mark *rīti's* origins and degrees of separation from *bhakti*, we should at least begin by defining more precisely what this *rīti* is, and see if it is possible to track a transition between *bhakti* and *rīti* with reference to particular authors and places. And once the originary *rīti* moment occurred, if such a thing can be said ever to have occurred, or at least if it can somehow be pinpointed in the context of known Braj textual history, we might be able to determine if an antecedent, and superior, devotional poetry really did give way to a later, inferior, worldly poetry. But we should remain open to other logics for theorizing literary trends, some of which may muddle rather than clarify the boundaries between authors or genres or across time periods. Literary cultures are one of the most significant manifestations of human creativity, and they are nothing if not

22. Recent overviews of critical debates in Mughal historiography are *The Mughal State 1526-1750*, ed. by Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998; *The Eighteenth Century in India*, ed. by Seema Alavi, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002, and *The Eighteenth Century in Indian History*, ed. by P. J. Marshall, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003.

complex. This is a complexity that standard literary history is often ill-equipped to handle.[23]

Indeed, while the basic temporal contours of Śukla's model of an earlier *bhakti* followed by a later *rīti* literature do not completely lack historical validity, there are enough exceptions to warrant a strong sense of hesitation about his approach. It is true that if one focuses on two major cultural developments—the Vaishnava efflorescence in the Braj region from the early sixteenth century, and the expansion of courtly patronage networks from the early seventeenth century—then a linear chain of causality whereby *bhakti* literature in Brajbhasha was eventually superseded by *rīti* styles seem plausible. However, a significant number of texts cannot be accommodated by this paradigm. For instance, how do we account for the poet Viṣṇudās, who composed two epics at the Tomar court in Gwalior between 1435 and 1442? These texts, which were apparently unknown to Śukla, lack the type of religiosity that defines *bhakti* literature, and we need to account for the fact that two major features of rīti, namely court patronage and a more secular spirit, characterized the literary production of a location very near the Brajmandal well before the explosion of Krishnaite literature.[24]

A strictly historical approach to rīti's defining genre, the *rītigranth*, complicates even more dramatically the idea of a transition from *bhakti* to *rīti* in the mid-seventeenth century. The practice of writing textbooks on poetics principles surely dictated his choice of name for the *rītikāl*, but, as Śukla himself acknowledged, in terms of brute chronology *rītigranths* were already being written more than a full century before his proposed beginning date of 1643 for the *rīti* period. Pertinent here is the figure of Kṛpārām, author of the first known Braj work on poetics, the *Hittaraṅginī* (River of love, 1541?), a reworking of Bhānudatta's Sanskrit *Rasamañjarī* (Bouquet of emotion, *c.* 1500).[25] Less equivocally dated is a subsequent Braj version of

23. A pertinent Europeanist's perspective on some of the problems with a historical approach to tracking literary style is that of John M. Steadman, *Redefining a Period Style*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1990, pp. 1-12.

24. The question of whether Viṣṇudās should be considered a specifically Brajbhasha poet has yet to be fully resolved. R. S. McGregor has termed the language of his oeuvre 'early Brajbhasha,' whereas H. N. Dvivedī, the other major scholar to have seriously studied this corpus, distinguishes it as Gwaliyari. See Ronald Stuart McGregor, 'A Narrative Poet's View of his Material: Viṣṇudās's Introduction to his Brajbhāṣā *Pāṇḍav-carit* (AD 1435),' in *The Banyan Tree*, ed. by Mariola Offredi, vol. 2, New Delhi: Manohar, 2000, pp. 335-42; Hariharnivās Dvivedī, *Mahābhārat (Pāṇḍav-carit)*, Gwalior: Vidyā Mandir Prakāśan, 1973, pp. 90ff.

25. Some dispute the chronogram that dates the *Hittaraṅginī* to 1541, and posit borrowings from later authors such as Bihārīlāl or even Raslīn. Neither R. S. McGregor nor Sudhākar Pāṇḍey sees reason to doubt the earlier dating. Significantly, Kṛpārām mentions predecessors (*Hittaraṅginī*; v. 1.4—although whether they wrote in Sanskrit or Braj is unspecified), so even this probable early work may be no absolute beginning point for vernacular poetics, just the earliest available. See McGregor, *Hindi Literature*, p. 124;

the *Rasamañjarī* by Nanddās (fl. 1570). With their highly structured, technical literary expositions these are *rīti* works in form, but they also evince a strong *bhakti* ethos, both in their opening dedications and in the illustrations (*udāharaṇ*) of definitions (*lakṣaṇ*) with Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa verses, raising questions about the extent to which devotional and scholarly orientations can be considered separate.

The inseparability of the concepts *bhakti* and *rīti* seems particularly pronounced in a third 'pre-*rīti*' *rītigranth*, Keśavdās's *Rasikpriyā* (1591). In fact, judging from several striking instances of word play in the *Rasikpriyā*, which merge the terminology of classical aesthetics with that of spiritual practice, it is as though Keśavdās set out to compose a work that would emphasize the synergy between the devotional and scholastic realms. In his opening address to his readers (called *rasik* or savourers), the poet states that Kṛṣṇa should be worshiped as 'he who consists of the nine rasas' (*navrasmay*).[26] Thus, savouring is to be seen as *both* an aesthetic (*rīti*) and a religious (*bhakti*) activity. Further crossovers between these categories occur in the closing to chapter three on the subject of the quintessentially *rīti* topic *nāyikābheda*, where Keśavdās proclaims that the subject matter of his poetry is Rādhā, 'heroine of the world's hero' (*jaganāyaka kī nāyikā*). Similarly suggestive is the *bhakti-rīti* pun '*darśana rasa*' used in the next line to describe lovers' meetings, a phrase which aside from its literal, worldly sense also invokes a devotee's intimate experience of an icon in a temple.[27]

Further confounding the discreteness of the categories is the very title of the work, which may also have been intended as a double entendre. From a *rīti* perspective the compound *Rasikpriyā* yields the translation '*A Handbook for Poetry Connoisseurs.*' But the word *rasik* can also mean 'Kṛṣṇa' and *priyā* (with the feminine long-*ā* ending) would then mean 'beloved,' i.e. Rādhā. From this angle, the work presents itself as a Vaishnava meditation upon God and his lover. Following the traditional custodians of literary history we would have to ask whether Keśavdās was a *bhakti* or *rīti* poet. Although Śukla placed him in the *bhaktikāl*, the real answer is that he was both. The point, however, is precisely that we do not have to make some ultimate determination about whether the *Rasikpriyā* (or the *Hittaraṅginī*, or

Sudhākar Pāṇḍey, Introduction to *Kṛpārām granthāvalī*, Varanasi: Nāgarī Pracāriṇī Sabhā, 1969, pp. 31-40.

26. *Rasikpriyā* of Keśavdās, in *Keśavgranthāvalī*, ed. by Viśvanāth Prasād Miśra, vol. 1, Allahabad: Hindustani Academy, 1954, v. 1.2.

27. *Rasikpriyā*, v. 3.74. The full *dohā* reads, '*jaganāyaka kī nāyikā, baranī Kesavadāsa/tinake darsana-rasa kahaum, sunau prachanna prakāsa*' (Keśavdās has described the heroine of the world's hero. Now I will speak of the joys they experience in seeing one another—listen to the different types, both hidden and revealed).

Nanddās's *Rasmañjarī*) is a *rīti* or a *bhakti* work.[28] Attempts to separate out these elements contravene its spirit.

Aspects of Keśavdās's later, writerly and patronage profile, however, do tip the scales in favour of a more pronounced *rīti* persona when compared with his recent predecessors Kṛpārām and Nanddās. In the case of Nanddās in particular, the *rīti* dimension constitutes only a relatively minor segment of his oeuvre, and his overall profile is that of a *bhakti* writer. But when it comes to Keśavdās, scholarly writings on poetics in the *rītigranth* genre make up a far more significant portion of his overall oeuvre (3 of 8 works[29]). His *rītigranths* are also far more complex than anything in the earlier Brajbhasha tradition, covering an extensive range of topics and showing a predilection for more elaborate meters like *kavitt* or *savaiyā* as opposed to the simple *dohā*. This tendency towards stylistic elaboration also needs to be seen as an important component of any definition of what constitutes rīti. In addition to writing *rītigranth* works Keśavdās also experimented with classical *mahākāvya* modes, and the proliferation of metrical forms coupled with deepening lexical and thematic complexity was certainly a new direction for Brajbhasha literature. Furthermore, aside from genre and stylistic proclivities Keśavdās, unlike Nanddās, composed his works not in religious communities but for kings, and court patronage for Braj poets became a dramatic new force in Hindi literary culture from that point on.[30]

The sense that Keśavdās worked and wrote in a courtly milieu is largely incidental to the *Rasikpriyā*, but it becomes quite pronounced from the time of his *Kavipriyā* (Handbook for poets, 1601), written a full decade later. Although Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa verses are still significant in number, the work has a much greater range of subject matter—some of it distinctly urbane and relatively secular. Keśavdās also frames the *Kavipriyā* within a context of courtly culture, with lengthy introductory chapters that detail his patron's family history, the story of the founding of Orcha, as well as contemporary circumstances at Orcha. An entire section of this *rītigranth* (chapter eight) is devoted to kingly topics. The interest in royal subject matter would reach its highest development in his late *kāvya* works like *Vīrsiṁhdevcarit* (1607) and

28. The same can be said for the case of Bihārīlāl, an argument developed by Rupert Snell in 'Bhakti versus Rīti? The Satsaī of Bihārīlāl,' *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 3.1 (1994), pp. 153-70. Of course, there were significant precedents for this interpenetration of *bhakti* and *rīti* in sixteenth-century Gauṛīya Vaishnavism, where *bhakti* achieved prominence in the domain of aesthetic discourse as a fully-fledged rasa in texts such as Rūpa Gosvāmin's *Bhakti-rasāmṛtasindhu*. An outline of the development of *bhaktirasa* and its place in Gauṛīya theology is Neal Delmonico, 'Sacred Rapture: The Bhakti-rasa Theory of Rupa Goswamin,' *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 6.1 (1998), pp. 75-98.

29. The three *rītigranths* are *Rasikpriyā*, *Kavipriyā*, and *Chandamālā*.

30. Kṛpārām's precise literary milieu is uncertain. His reference to the Betwa river, which flows through Orcha, in one of his poems (*Hittaraṅginī*, v. 308) suggests a possible connection to that court. See McGregor, *Hindi Literature*, p. 124.

the *Jahāngīrjascandrikā* (1612), dedicated to an Orcha king and Mughal emperor, respectively.

If one must insist on a watershed moment for a historical transition between *bhakti* and *rīti* literature, then perhaps it should be marked by the composition of Keśavdās's *Kavipriyā,* in 1601, and not the year 1643. But under Śukla's system the most qualified poet for the title of first *rīti* poet was placed in the *bhakti* period![31] And yet the point here is not to quibble over forty years or so. What is at stake is not so much whether the *rīti* period started in 1601 or in 1643, but whether the dichotomous model works at all. The model makes it impossible to account for many premodern Hindi literary practices, given that *rīti* tendencies clearly predate even Keśavdās, and *bhakti* ones postdate him by centuries.

If the *bhakti-rīti* historical model is so tough to map onto known literary conditions, perhaps we should consider moving away from a paradigm structured by fixed dates and stiff categories—and dates and categories based on presuppositions that from a postcolonial perspective have become completely untenable anyway—to a more flexible system that better accounts for the interplay of diverse literary personalities and processes. There are numerous Brajbhasha poets who would fall under the rubric of *rīti* in terms of the era in which they lived, but whose oeuvre cannot be accurately assessed without factoring in *bhakti*. In some cases, a poet's *bhakti* or *rīti* orientation may be given pride of place for a particular community at a particular moment, as when the poems of Ānandghan (fl. *c.* 1740) were anthologized by two different interest groups in two different collections: one that emphasized the religious verses, and the other the erotic ones.[32] Or poets may move back and forth between literary modes over a lifetime, as in the case of Sūratī Miśra (fl. 1740), in whose vast oeuvre can be found both *bhakti*-centered and distinctly *rīti* compositions. Or how do we account for a *'rīti'* author like Nāgarīdās (fl. mid-17th century), who began life as a king, wrote on numerous courtly themes, but ultimately retired a bhakta in Vrindavan?[33] There are all kinds of reasons why terms like *'rīti'* and 'rīti' do have some relevance for the pre-modern literary world: as broad indicators of genre or style or patronage context. But their differentiation on chronological grounds has only a marginal validity at best. Indeed, the two tendencies were actually synchronic, interactive, and often present in one and the same author—or even the same work. Even a cursory glimpse at Braj textual history suggests that *bhakti* and *rīti* seem preferable as general terms

31. Śukla, *Itihās*, pp. 114-19. This choice was critiqued by subsequent scholars, who now mostly do consider Keśavdās the founder (*pravartak*) of *rīti* literature. See Gupta and Nagendra, 'Pūrvpīṭhikā,' p. 15.

32. See Bangha, 'Lover and Saint,' pp. 180ff.

33. Heidi Pauwels, 'Romancing Rādhā,' illustrates how the categories *bhakti* and *rīti* inhibit rather than enhance our understanding of Nāgarīdās.

for encapsulating the expressive potentialities of a poet rather than the inescapable fate of a writer destined to be born in a particular period.

Conclusion

Literary history is supposed to serve as an organizational tool that aids in understanding and theorizing a culture's significant creative processes and trends. In the case of the *bhakti-rīti* system for framing precolonial Hindi textual production the model does more to impede than to advance the understanding of a critical component of north Indian literary self-expression. At the time Śukla's *Itihās* was written, colonial-period historiographical structures were still dictating principles about the contours of the Indian past, and an excess of historical determinism underlies the book's conception. If one of your principal cultural reference points is living under colonial rule, which was an inescapable reality for the pioneering Hindi scholars of Śukla's generation, you needed a model that would account for the political, but also cultural, weakness of India (for the two are generally—no doubt too crudely—perceived to be correlated), which had putatively set the stage for the region's colonization from the eighteenth century. And that weakness was found in the intellectual and literary practices of *rīti* poets, perhaps precisely because Śukla expected it to be there.

The bifurcation of so-called medieval Hindi literature into an earlier, meritorious *bhakti* period and a later, substandard rīti period lingers on as a primary organizing principle more than seventy-five years after its original conception, and its continued survival is a discredit to the field. An important early stream of Brajbhasha writing (but, as evident from the figure of Viṣṇudās, by no means the earliest) is undeniably religious in orientation, which must have provided the inspiration for Śukla. But as Brajbhasha poets began to attract courtly patronage, embrace a greater range of themes, and experiment with stylistic elaboration, a trend already observable at a relatively early moment in the work of Keśavdās, *bhakti* motifs hardly ceased. *Rīti* and *bhakti* aesthetics can indeed overlap in the persona of a single poet or in the lines of a single poem. The terms *bhakti* and *rīti* also point to distinctions in the social worlds—roughly expressible in terms of the court and temple—where literature was produced, but patronage at the one did not preclude patronage at the other. As potentially overlapping socio-aesthetic categories, then, *rīti* and *bhakti* may retain some conceptual validity, but as discrete literary-historical terms they trap us in the logic of early and late, mature and decadent, simple and artificial, and it is a logic that should now be retired when it comes to the scholarly appraisal of the late precolonial Hindi literary past.