

Review Essay**By Swagata Bhattacharya*****Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture.* Ed. Francesca Orsini. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2010. Print.**

The outcome of a workshop on “Intermediary Genres in Hindi and Urdu” organized by Professor Vasudha Dalmia at the 18th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies in Lund, Sweden, on 2005, *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture*, is an attempt to rethink aspects of the literary histories of the two Indian languages, Hindi and Urdu. The book is a much-needed informative read for students of Comparative Literature and for those who are interested in the study of Indian literature and the history of Indian literary culture. Edited by Francesca Orsini, a Reader in Literatures of North India at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture* reassesses the definition and identity of language, and examines the various literary traditions keeping in mind the historical, political and cultural developments of the two languages. Detailed and careful studies of the origin and development of Hindi and Urdu have earlier been found in Amrit Rai’s *A House Divided: The Origin and Development of Hindi-Urdu* (1984), *Hindi and Urdu since 1800: A Common Reader* (1990) edited by Christopher Shackle & Rupert Snell, and Shamsur Rahman Faruqi’s *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History* (2001). However, *Before the Divide* is not concerned with the historical

development of Hindi and Urdu as Indian languages and their consequent rivalry to dominate the Indian literary scenario, rather the book concentrates on tracing a trajectory of Indian (more particularly North Indian) literary texts and genres composed in both the languages.

Before the Divide, aptly titled, is a collection of eight essays with a delightful introduction by the editor which lays down very clearly that it was only in recent years that the issue of language definition was identified as an area of ‘problem’ by colonial linguists. Orsini points out that in pre-colonial India the distinction between Hindi and Urdu was not as clearly defined as it is today because at that point of time they were devoid of the baggage of respective religious affiliations thrust upon them. It was perhaps John Borthwick Gilchrist, Professor of Hindustani at Fort William College, Calcutta, who identified language with script and religion, suggesting that Urdu and Hindustani, using the Persian script, were mostly the language of North Indian Muslims, while Hindi which made use of the Devanagari script was the language of the Hindus. This division between Hindi and Urdu is a reflection of the colonial ‘divide and rule’ policy where each language comes to represent a corresponding religion— Hindi the Hindu society and Urdu the Muslim. The divide is clearly a manufactured, fabricated phenomenon backed by political and religious necessity. This language partition preceded the political partition of the nation which prompted Abdul Haq to remark in 1961, “Pakistan was not created by Jinnah, nor was it created by Iqbal; it was Urdu that created Pakistan”. The essays in this volume attempt to revive the pre-colonial tradition of literature composed in both the languages since pre-colonial India was very much a multilingual society, with a remarkable tradition of the co-existence or diglossia between classical languages as well as the vernaculars.

The first essay by Imre Bangha, Lecturer in Hindi at the Oriental Institute, University of Oxford, is on “Rekhta: Poetry in Mixed Language: The Emergence of Khari Boli Literature in North India”. Starting with Amir Khusrau, Bangha cites examples of various poets composing ‘rekhta’ (poetry in mixed language) right from the thirteenth century, through Mughal period down to the eighteenth century when rekhta appears in the new name of ‘khariboli’ mixed with Perso-Arabic vocabulary— this hybrid language is known by the name of Urdu in today’s world. The celebrated Urdu poet Mir referred to his language not as Urdu, but as Rekhta, which according to him was poetry written in the style and manner of Persian poetry, but in the language of the exalted court of Delhi. Bangha discusses six different types of Rekhtas which were taken up by people of all religious affiliations, ranging from Sufi circles, to Nirguna sants, Krishna bhaktas and even certain Sikh authors of the *Janamsakhis*. Bangha cites several examples of the various types of Rekhtas which make the otherwise informative and the longest essay in the present collection an interesting read. The following is an example from Amir Khusrau, where the first half of each line is composed in Persian, and the other half in Braj Bhasha—

Zi hal-i miskin makun taghaful, duraye naina banaye batiya,

Ki tab-i hijran na daram ai jan, na lehu kahe lagaye chatya...

(Do not be negligent towards this poor one— you hide your eyes and invent excuses.

Since I do not have the strength to bear the separation, o my love, why don’t you embrace me at once?)

The second essay in this book, “Riti and Register: Lexical Variation in Courtly Braj Bhasha Texts” is by Allison Busch, Assistant Professor of Hindi-Urdu Language and Literature at the

University of Columbia. Busch analyses the writings of Keshavdas, Chintamani Tripathi, Bhushan Tripathi, Rahim and Raslin, and examines how Persian words have been paired with words derived from Sanskrit to create a distinct Riti tradition in ancient India. Busch states how the Riti corpus was literally defined on the one hand, by its adherence to Sanskrit literary norms and the brahminical culture, and on the other by its closeness to the vernaculars. In fact, *Ritigrantha*, the book on the method of Riti was designed to be a vehicle for disseminating classical literary ideas in a vernacular medium. Like Bangha, Busch too cites several examples from each of the five poets to illustrate her essay.

The third essay, titled “Dialogism in a Medieval Genre: The Case of the Avadhi Epics”, is by Thomas de Bruijn, an independent scholar based in Leiden University, the Netherlands. Bruijn observes that the Avadhi epics of medieval India served as dialogic genres that encompassed different religious contexts mainly for both Bhakti and Sufi patronage. His essay examines the composite genre of medieval Avadhi epics which was developed as a cultural form by Indian Sufi poets but practiced with perfection by the sixteenth-century Bhakti poet Tulsidas. In his essay Bruijn compares elements from Jayasi’s *Padmavat* and Tulsi’s *Ramacaritamanas* to demonstrate how Tulsi had situated his text within an inter-textual framework to provide a model for narrating a religious epic that was respected and patronized in a local context.

The next essay, the fourth one is, “Barahmasas in Hindi and Urdu”, by the editor herself, Francesca Orsini. She speaks of the intermediate genre called ‘barahmasas’, which are found to be both secular and religious in nature, as well as composed in both Hindi and Urdu. Contrary to the present perception of barahmasas as only a kind of folk song, there had been a significant literary

tradition that attests to the attractiveness of this genre for poets in all literary languages of North India for ages. Even the Sufis, from Mulla Daud to Jayasi, have composed barahmasas. Orsini goes on to define the various types of barahmasas— braj bhasha barahmasas, urdu barahmasa, religious barahmasas and so on. By citing several examples from various poets, she shows how the definition of a genre as ‘open’, ‘dialogic’ or ‘flexible’ applies particularly well to barahmasas.

The fifth essay, “Sadarang, Adarang, Sabrang: Multi-coloured poetry in Hindustani Music” is by Lalia Du Perron, Associate Director of the Centre for South Asia at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Du Perron examines and illustrates the truly multi-hued dimension and range of Hindustani music where religion and language could never come as a barrier. Her work is based on the study of song-texts which have rarely been included in discussions of the Hindi literary tradition before, and her particular emphasis is on ‘khyal’ and ‘thumri’. Du Perron illustrates her work with references from Persian manuscripts as well as from Raskhan, Paluskar, and Brindabani Sarang performed by Pandit Bhimsen Joshi, among others.

The sixth essay is by Christina Oesterheld of the Department of Modern South Asian Studies at the South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg. Her “Looking Beyond Gul-o- Bulbul: Observations on Marsiyas by Fazli and Sauda” examines how Fauzi’s and Sauda’s ‘Urdu’ works have contained considerable amounts of Hindi words and expressions which were perfectly understandable at the time of their compositions, but render themselves unintelligible to modern readers. Her essay is entirely based on the study of ghazal as a genre and the analysis of the works of Fazli and Sauda whose simultaneous use of the ‘gul’ (representing Perso-Arabic tradition) and the ‘bulbul’ (marker of the Hindi tradition) have lend ghazals the charm they are known for.

The seventh essay, “Changing Literary Patterns in Eighteenth Century North India: Quranic Translations and the Development of Urdu Prose”, is by Mehr Afshan Farooqi, Assistant Professor of South Asian Literature, University of Virginia. The essay traces the development of Urdu prose in the eighteenth century as a distinct genre created as a result of the rift between Hindi and Urdu. How Urdu as an independent language was initially rejected as ‘elementary’ (because of the overwhelming presence of Persian and Arabic words in early Urdu prose) or condemned as ‘religious’ and how it finally developed into a language in which literary prose could be composed, is the subject-matter of this essay.

Finally, the last essay, “Networks, Patrons, and Genres for Late Braj Bhasha Poets: Ratnakar and Hariaudh”, by Valerie Ritter, Assistant Professor of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago, cites examples from the works of Ratnakar and Hariaudh who wrote in Braj Bhasha. It was a language positioned at the brink of Hindi-Urdu divide in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and was already receding as a language option for modern poetry when Jagannath Das ‘Ratnakar’ and Ayodhyasingh Upadhyay ‘Hariaudh’ chose to compose their poems in this language. Ratnakar’s and Hariaudh’s poetic careers demonstrate how Braj Bhasha as a medium of courtly and devotional poetry evolved very briefly as a selfconsciously ‘modern’ idiom, and then largely withered in the canon of the dominant modern Hindi language.

This collection of essays has concentrated mainly on intermediary genres, those which fall between the high literary traditions of both the Hindi and the Urdu languages. Hence, we have discussions on subjects such as Riti poetry, ghazals, barahmasas, rekhtas. All of them speak of the presence of multiple literary traditions and the practice of experimenting with mixed vernacular as

well as oral traditions, completely disregarding the ‘purist’ tendencies displayed by modern literary historians. Pre-modern India was habituated with the dialogical divisions created by the nexus between genre, social structures and content. Sadly, that concept is at odds with the monologic divide placed by modernity between the Hindu and Muslim cultures, and this why *Before the Divide* is a useful guide for students and researchers of Comparative Literature. The delightful examples cited within the essays make them even more interesting and enlightening along with their lucid language and writing styles.

Works Cited

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