Introduction

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This volume collects together the papers presented at the 14th session of the International Conferences on Early Modern Literatures in North India (ICEMLNI). In format, the conference represents a forum of current research without being restricted to a main theme. Nonetheless, the papers shared certain international academic issues and foci. Accordingly, grouped by categories, these are not rigid but fluid and thereby reflect the state of current academic debates. This introduction begins by delineating the widely shared topics, then briefly summarizes the individual contributions.

General Topics

Reviewing the scope of ICEMLNI

The thematic scope of ICEMLNI is loosely bounded by limits of time and region. The issues and scholarly approaches reflected in its proceedings over a little less than five decades have evolved, sharing developments in South Asian studies at large. One theme, however, has remained as a fairly constant focus, namely, manuscript studies. Accordingly, a self-conscious historical review of ICEMLNI which aims to re-adjust the orientation of future research calls for taking cognizance of its own history as well as the pivotal role of manuscript studies.

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Cosmopolitanisms in the vernacular age

According to a seminal, much debated theory, the first millennium CE has been claimed as an age of Sanskrit cosmopolitanism embodying the aesthetic expression of courtly political power. This theory needs to be put into perspective by taking into account the non-Sanskrit literary traditions of the same period, which were carried over into the early modern period, characterized by the emergence of vernacular literatures, and further on to the modern period (Cort).[1] Only in this way can a truncated view of the literary history of South Asia be avoided and the grand system with its tributaries be adequately mapped.

Continuities

The heyday of the early modern vernacular literatures of North India span roughly the fifteenth to the turn of the eighteenth into the nineteenth century. This volume is an invitation to appreciate this huge range of time and literary production as also a dynamic trajectory from the previous period, with Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Apabhramsha whose themes it digested, into the modern literary period (Cort, Ravishankar, Pastore). Critical for literary modernity was the impact of print culture, the novel and quite diverse forms of audience emerging as readerships, and increased mobility in the dissemination of literature (Cort, Boccheti, Murphy). This was stimulated by the novel political and social challenges of the colonial period, which also accounted for the hardening of language boundaries and the intensification of conflicts involving one cultural profile pitched against another and the superiority of one language over another. The topics, literature, and ideologies of early modern literatures fertilized literary modernity. The period of early literary modernity in North India is therefore one of continuity backwards and forwards across the boundaries of time. Philosophical reasoning during this period engaged with classical concepts to find new answers (Ganeri 2011, Minkowski 2011), and this found expression also in the vernacular literatures, either in independent works (Murphy) or in translations (Ravishankar, Pastore).

1 Names of authors not followed by a year refer to chapters in this volume.

Vernacular Vedānta

There has been a surge of interest in the field of Vedānta, especially the vernacular texts written in the Advaita tradition. Several articles in this volume (Ravishankar, Pastore, Murphy) implicitly or explicitly engage with the concept of 'Greater Advaita Vedānta' proposed by Michael Allen (2017, 2020, 2022), which has been pivotal in this context. One of the main roots of this concept was the *Sanskrit Knowledge Systems on the Eve of Colonialism* project led by Sheldon Pollock and others in the early 2000s.[2] This project inspired Classical Indologists, who generally had been occupied with the pre-Islamic period, to take seriously the Sanskrit texts produced in the early modern period (*c*.1550–1750). However, while the project explored a wide range of topics, the exploration of Vedānta was decidedly missing.

Christopher Minkowski (2011) was one of the first to address this lacuna. Minkowski's publication was also significant in his proposal to study the social history of Advaita. His seminal work further prompted a special issue of *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, edited by Michael Allen and Anand Venkatkrishnan (2017) which was based on a panel titled 'Advaita Vedānta on the Eve of Colonialism', and a special issue of *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, edited by Jonathan Peterson (2020), which explored multilingualism in the study of Advaita. Allen's concept of 'Greater Advaita Vedānta' is central in this current of scholarship. Critiquing the approach of 'Classical Advaita Vedānta' taken by earlier scholars who had focused on the canonical texts written in Sanskrit, Allen proposed expanding the study of Advaita by including: (1) vernacular texts; (2) non-philosophical texts such as dramas; and (3) Yogic, Tantric, and bhakti texts that blended Advaita teachings. Ravishankar's and Murphy's works in this volume exemplify (1) and (3) while Pastore's chapter falls under (2).

The Interaction of Literati and Audiences and New Ways of Disseminating Literature

Over the previous sessions of the ICEMLNI conference, attention has been increasingly given to the nexus of literarati and audiences, in many cases patron audiences, their shared habitats and intellectual cross-fertilization. Literature was as much produced for audiences as it was challenged and inspired by them (Cort). Religious or other issues expressed in literature were not layed out before their recipients to consume, but

2 www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pollock/sks/, accessed 9 February 2025.

rather grew to a large extent out of interaction with these recipients (Cort). The nexus between literati and audiences could be specific to certain social or sectarian communities, but rather than being restricted by this, it expanded to cater to multiple audiences (Boccheti, Tekiela). Literatures leave the courts or inner-sectarian confines and come into dialogue with lay intellectuals. They reflect multiple cultural sensibilities and accordingly use multiple or polyvalid linguistic and stylistic registers. Production, performance, and reception of literature were thus also acts of negotiation about cultural preferences. Cultural coherence and divisiveness co-existed. Latent or overt cultural difference was not played down, but negotiated and sought to be contained in multiplicity.

Gender

For almost two decades, scholarship on early modern North India has made dramatic progress in retrieving female agency from the archives (Sahai 2006, Sreenivasan 2006, Thilak 2022, Schofield 2024), as well as from literature and painting (Cattoni 2019, Pauwels 2019). The literary and archival study of the court musician presented in this volume (Pauwels) fits squarely into this programme.

Sūrdās

This volume also takes up various debates which have continued at the ICEMLNI forum since its beginnings in the late 1970s. One concerns the figure of Sūrdās, whose poetry unfolded under Krishnaite auspices, as masterfully and comprehensively studied in its many facets by Bryant and Hawley (Bryant and Hawley 2015, Hawley 2016, to name only two conclusive publications). The volume goes beyond the construct of Sūrdās, the blind singer. One examines more multifocal hagiographical images of Sūrdās, or several Sūrdāses and their historical moorings (Nagasaki). Another contribution opens a robust perspective onto Sūrdās in the Sant tradition of Rajasthan, where he is represented by a huge corpus of poetry roughly coterminous with the earliest testimonies of the Krishnaite Sūrdās (Zrnic). Sūrdās is also, ironically, a marker of sharply divergent notions of intellectual property in traditional South Asia and in modern law (Hawley).

Rajasthan as Epicentre

The ICEMLNI took its origin with a manuscriptological focus on Rajasthan, mainly thanks to the tracing since the 1970s of a great number

of manuscripts in the libraries of Rajasthan and neighbouring states by Winand M. Callewaert. In this volume, Callewaert himself reminisces about his campaigns. One of the results of the study of the relevant manuscripts is an advanced insight into the enormous impact of the yogic tradition in Rajasthan and wider parts of western India. Its extent brings to mind P. D. Baṛthvāl's dictum that the Sant tradition was a specialized current of the yogic tradition (Baṛthvāl 2003: 75–6). Three essays bring this to attention (Ravishankar, Zrnic, Horstmann). Particular to Rajasthan is the literary idiom of Dingal with its *gīt* genre whose character and enormous proliferation rest on socio-historical circumstances calling for elucidation (Turek).

Genres

The vernacular literature of North India almost starts with the effulgence of the Sufi romance, which remains pervasive in written and oral form during the whole early modern period; this is also duly reflected in the previous volumes of the ICEMLNI and its predecessor format. In the present proceedings the issue follows this genre of literature in the context of multiple recipients and the polysemy of one of its central motifs (Boccheti, Tekiela). This approach hearkens back to the issue of the multiple audiences of early modern literature mentioned above.

Summary of Chapters

Addressing the topic of the history of ICEMLNI, the volume opens with a historical summary by **Danuta Stasik** which shows its gradual development from discourses on manuscriptology and the literary text mainly in the bhakti tradition, and in relative isolation from its conditions of production and reception, to literature of a broad spectrum shaping and reflecting its period, and mobilizing often interconnected networks of authors and audiences.

Crucial for the appreciation of the literary vernaculars of South Asia within the full spectrum of literary languages in the subcontinent has been Sheldon Pollock's theory of the cosmopolitan millenium of Sanskrit literature having been superseded by the rise of the vernaculars in the second millenium, which were implicitly no longer cosmopolitan but regionally oriented (a theory fully articulated in Pollock 2006). **John E. Cort** examines how communities of literati and intellectuals straddling the Sanskrit, Prakrit, Apabhramsha, and vernacular literary languages defined and deployed cosmopolitanism. He reviews the

ongoing debate on and criticism of Pollock's theory. One of the objections raised against the theory is Pollock's narrow view of literature as wed to political power, thereby functioning as an aesthetic instrument of power, and his consequent neglect of non-courtly literature. This point was also made by scholars working with non-Sanskrit, multilanguage literature cultivated in multilanguage circles of literati and audiences. Cort argues from the vantage point of Jain literature, taking as a test case the Śvetāmbara text, Nemīcandra's Prakrit *Ṣaṣṭiśataka* of *c*.1200, whose fate in both Śvetāmabara and Digambara intellectual life he follows into the age of print. He examines the multilinguality of the several authors who apprehended the text in a number of ways. He shows the inextricable connection between the Sanskrit literary culture delineated by Pollock, and Jain intellectual culture, which had produced Sanskrit grammars since the sixth century and reflected on the appropriate use of linguistic idioms for distinct purposes. Jain culture has always been self-consciously multilingual. It flourished in networks of authors and patrons, typically represented by erudite Jain mendicants interacting with educated laymen. While Brahmanical culture, depending on court patronage, considered Sanskrit to be the only acceptable literary medium, Jain culture defined the ideal cosmopolitan intellectual as essentially multilingual. This is reflected in the Jain format of multilingual compositions giving rise to a distinct genre of performance. Consequently, Cort sees at work different notions of cosmopolitanism, of which Sanskrit cosmopolitanism is one and the multilingual is the other.

Akshara Ravishankar examines the Braj Bhasha adaptation of the *Bhagavadgītā* made by Teghnāth, a court poet at Gwalior, in 1500. Ravishankar focuses on elements of the original omitted by Teghnāth. She finds that these were a result of the author's leanings towards the Advaitic tradition, which led him to relegate to the background the debate about Vedic authority versus experiential knowledge. His monism is yogically coloured, so that physical practice and the reverence for the guru are emphasized without necessarily being warranted by the Sanskrit original. What Ravishankar remarks as omissions turn out to be the result of a yogically inspired change of perspective. In this way the author not only makes a contribution to the topic of the continuity of Sanskrit tradition, particularly the early modern phenomenon of a 'Greater Advaita', but also throws light on the prevalence of yogic thought in western India during the early modern period, a topic which also features in the essays by Zrnic and Horstmann.

Annalisa Boccheti examines the symbolism of painting in the *premākhyān Citrāvalī* by Usmān (1613 CE). Her contribution to the

premākhyān genre touches simultaneously upon a number of the general topics outlined above, namely, circulation of literature, multilinguality, and mixed audiences. While this kind of symbolism has been examined for Sanskrit and Persian literature, its function in vernacular literature has awaited appraisal. By identifying Islamic notions behind the tropes of painting and the picture gallery and taking stock of their parallels in the Indic tradition, Boccheti explains how the vernacular phrasing of Sufi principles was opened by Usmān to both Sufi and Advaita interpretation and thereby made accessible for Muslim and Hindu audiences alike. Usmān also exemplifies creativity and an idiom of its own kind incarnated from the widely circulating Perso-Arabic and Sanskrit tradition and the broad narrative lore of his day.

Rosina Pastore examines Bhūdev Dube's transcreation of the vastly influential *Prabodhacandrodaya* of Kṛṣṇamiśra (eleventh century), titled *Prabodhacandroday nāṭak* and published by the Naval Kishore Press in 1893. In doing so, she captures aspects of three of the general topics delineated above, namely, the continuity of themes through the centuries, the renewed interest since the early modern period in the Advaita tradition, and the changes in the dissemination of literature, setting in with print as it was cultivated by an influential publishing house. Dube translated into modern Hindi Brajvilās' Braj Bhasha translation of this work, bearing the same title, of 1760. Dube's published translation represents only a fragmented adaptation of Brajvilās' work; it nonetheless entirely reflects its underlying trends of thought. Pastore contrasts Dube's strategies with those of Bhāratendu Hariścandra, who also engaged with the *Prabodhacandrodaya*, and explains the intentions of both authors in the wider perspective of the relevant literary production of their period. Both represent literature which no longer depended on court patronage but envisaged an educated modern readership, a readership of citizens navigating the challenges of their time and the loosening of traditional moorings in the face of colonialism. While both authors took up these challenges, their foci differed starkly. Dube emphasized religio-philosophical reflections in an Advaita vein, while Bhāratendu sought to consolidate Hinduism as Vaishnavism.

The topic of 'Greater Advaita' links **Anne Murphy's** contribution on the role of 'Greater Advaita' in Gurmukhī script publications with the Ravishankar's contribution. Murphy's reference period is, however, the later nineteenth century, the fully developed age of print, almost four centuries after the period focused on by Ravishankar. On the evidence of Advaita literature in Gurmukhī in pre-print manuscripts and its continuity in print culture, she argues against the claim that the engagement with Advaita had its renaissance in the colonial period. The roots

of this she rather traces back to Vijayanagar and, after Vijayanagar culture dispersed into the regions, notably to Banaras. Udāsī and Nirmala intellectuals participated in non-sectarian Advaita discourses and in their turn had an impact on Banaras. She exemplifies this with the *Vicārmālā* of Anāthdās, the English translation of which appeared as early as 1886. Through print, this text made a considerable impact on Sikh education. In its terminology, the text itself is fluid in meaning and open to interpretation in various directions, including but not limited to Sikhs. This, then, is an example of texts connecting with multiple places and traditions. Murphy's contribution is thus relevant for the topics of continuity and the dissemination of literature varying with its media.

Heidi Pauwels studies the contribution to Hindi literature made by Rasikbihārī, also known as Banī-thanī, who was the concubine of Sāvant Singh, crown prince of Kishangarh and poet, known by the name of Nāgarīdās. Her contribution is relevant to the general topic of gender in that it addresses the case of a female artist of subaltern status by birth but risen to the status of a highly acknowledged aesthete and creative collaborator at court. It also addresses literary multilinguality in terms of a heteroglossia of poetic registers and its causes. Pauwels' aim is to trace Rasikbihārī's distinguished position and considerable recognition in the kaleidoscope of literature and bhakti religion, noble female and male literati–connoisseurs, and their mentor of religion at the court of that princely state. On the basis of archival and copious literary evidence, Rasikbihārī – who asserted her female voice in the guise of a male name – is examined as a partner in creativity with Nāgarīdās, their poetry often referring to and reflecting that of one another. The genius of that poetry Pauwels traces to the model literary culture of the Mughal court. In the context of Kishangarh, the aesthetic sophistication of this translates into a multilinguality comprising courtly and regional registers of poetry. In this, Braj Bhasha, Rekhtā, Punjabi, and Rajasthani idioms coexist and evoke respective aesthetic sentiments. Poetry and poetic performance are mutually reinforced by painting and bhakti practice so that the courtly ambience forms a complex frame of literary, visual, and devotional aesthetics.

Heleen De Jonckheere addresses the Hindu post-funerary ritual of *śrāddha* as it was seen by Jains. Reasoning strictly theologically, Jains would be expected to denounce this ritual, for in Jainism there is no transfer of merit from one person to another or from the living to the dead through Brahmanical mediation. This does not preclude that Jains have debated this ritual, which is at the heart of Hindu ideas of the fate of the ancestors and the principle of the efficacy of meritorious deeds. The author examines the treatment of the *śrāddha* ritual

in the *Dharmaparīkṣā* ('Examination of Religion') by the Digambara Jain Manohardās (1649), a work evolved from the composition by the same name of Amitagati (tenth century). Manohardās was a Khandelvāl merchant from Sanganer, a centre of Digambara Jain lay intellectuals of his period. His work is preserved in many manuscripts, a fact which points to its popularity. De Jonckheere positions this work in the lively Jain debate on that ritual topic. While arguing against the ritual in conformity with Jain religious principles, Manohardās displays a broad tableau of moral criticism on which Jains and Hindu alike would agree, and also draws on the wealth of folk literature. In sum, Manohardās does not sweepingly dismiss the ritual custom *per se* but the false hopes attached to, and the moral vices surrounding it, due to wrong belief.

John S. Hawley opens a series of three contributions on the topic of Sūrdās: his own and the subsequent one by Hiroko Nagasaki addressing the figure of Sūrdās in art and hagiography, respectively, while the third, by Biljana Zrnic, is dedicated to the corpus of poetry assigned to Sūrdās in the Sant tradition of Rajasthan making the transition to the topic of the Rajasthani manuscript tradition. Hawley points to the radical difference in the traditional versus contemporary perception of the right of an author over his or her product. He targets a dissonance that may arise between academia and its agents on the one hand, and tradition on the other. The case is that of the image of Sūrdās as it has appeared in India with modifications in publications or on a stamp for seven decades. It provides the iconic representation of Sūrdās, the blind singer, while the author of the original version of this image and all its later modifiers remain anonymous, though the respective images were freely circulated in Indian print and on the Internet without its copyright ever being claimed by anyone or copyright infringement being alleged. When Hawley tried to include the image in a book published by a US publishing house, this was denied to him for want of the copyright holder's permission. The absurdity of the problem led Hawley to trace the evolution of the Sūrdās icon in Indian print with the many nuances and their causes and, finally, to retrieve its most probable prototype, a miniature from Udaipur from around 1660, made by an anonymous painter.

Hiroko Nagasaki's essay follows up the hagiographical portrayal of Sūrdās which points to two or three poets who are mixed up in the critical editions. Nābhadās speaks in his *Bhaktamāl* of two distinct Sūrdāses, the blind Sūrdās and Surdās Madanmohan. His commentator Priyādās mentions only Sūrdās Madanmohan, supposedly because the Gauḍīya sect, of which Priyādās was a member, associates Sūrdās Madanmohan with this and makes the poet a disciple of Sanātan Gosvāmī. In

treating Sūrdās Madanmohan as a singular figure, it has a parallel in eighteenth-century Punjabi sources. As for Dādūpanthī hagiography, it mentions a separate figure, Bilvamaṅgal Sūrdās. Persian sources describe him as a singer at Akbar's court and point to his origin in Lucknow, whereas in later Punjabi sources he figures again as a single person. This shifting identity is fused in the single Sūrdās represented in the corpus of poetry in his name. However, it clearly emerges that the Krishnaite Sūrdās represents only one tradition, though this flourished and has continued flourishing, to an extent overshadowing other perspectives on that evasive figure.

Biljana Zrnic investigates the Sūrdās corpus transmitted in seventeenth-century Dādūpanthī manuscripts. Founded on a painstaking collation of seventeenth-century Dādūpanthī and closely related manuscripts, she provides evidence of the relatively small number of poems bearing the signature of Sūrdās shared with the critical edition of the poems transmitted by the Vaishnava Sūrdās tradition (Bryant and Hawley 2015). She proves that the continuous Dādūpanthī tradition, which is traceable back to practically the same time as the earliest manuscripts of the Vaishnava Sūrdās tradition, was independent from that tradition, and she also analyses the differences between the Sūrdās tradition in the various early Dādūpanthī codices and the manuscript material inspired by this. This analysis establishes that Dādūpanthī compilers of manuscripts drew from a pool more ancient than the earliest available manuscripts of their sect and that the Dādūpanthī tradition did not proliferate in the same way as the Vaishnava tradition. Modifying this overall picture, Zrnic also points to Sūrdās' poetry shared with the Vaishnava Sūrdās tradition, notably in a manuscript also otherwise open to the particularly Vaishnava tradition. Her analysis thereby reveals two clearly distinct traditions and their interaction, which indicates degrees of *local* interaction between the respective lines of tradition.

Monika Horstmann reflects on the relationship of Nāth Siddha yoga, laid down in Hindi compositions first transmitted exclusively by the Dādūpanth, and bhakti as it was understood in the Dādūpanthī and wider Sant tradition. Her test case is the Nāth Siddha author Prithīnāth of the second half of the sixteenth century. Tracing basic distinctions in the religious stance of yoga and bhakti, respectively, she subsequently reverses the gaze to capture the shared basic assumptions of yoga and bhakti. These she finds in the principle of enlightenment, the ultimate source of which is the guru, in terms of the actual religious teacher who is in reality identical with the single principle from which all phenomena originate. In the case of Prithīnāth, this is evidenced by a shifting

to and fro between yoga and bhakti. This suggests an appraisal of the yogic strands in Dādūpanthī bhakti – and Sant bhakti in general – as intrinsic, a perception also expressed in the early Dādūpanth's description of Dādū as the most accomplished yogi.

Radosław Tekiela's chapter addresses the significance of wandering as a narrative strategy as it is germane to the genre of romance. He analyses three poems by Jān Kavi (fl. 1614–1664), scion of the Qāyam Khānī dynasty of Fatehpur in Shekhavati, Rajasthan, which was originally comprised of Cauhān Rajputs who converted to Islam. Tekiela elucidates the suggestive potential of that narrative strategy. His point is that wandering – a motif running through entire compositions – operates at several levels and is accordingly appreciated by audiences associating the motif in ways which were shared but also different according to their own cultural backgrounds. Without being overtly religious, however, it converges with the notion of the Sufi pilgrim in pursuit of the divine. On the level of performance strategy, the motif provides for the narrative to meander through exciting adventures the hero has to endure and frequent pauses in the main action by which the audience is kept engaged in the narrative. Tekiela captures this aspect by the literary concept of 'tellability'. Tellability goes some way to conceal the religious message of the narrative, but operates to the satisfaction of connoisseurs of various backgrounds as well as fulfilling the particular religious expectations of Muslim listeners. Jān's compositions are thereby superbly suited for audiences at a court where thriving Muslim, Indic, and also specifically Hindu culture blended.

Aleksandra Turek addresses the Rajasthani genre and linguistic idiom of *Ḍiṅgal-gīt*, poetry of praise of battle and death in combat, commissioned to Cāraṇs by and for the Rajputs. The poetry treats as objects of profuse hyperbolic praise countless Rajputs, named as individuals and genealogically identified, asserting their superior land rights over contestant Rajputs. The genre is marked by a plethora of terms for battle, blood, and soil, and hypertrophic comparison of even the pettiest Rajput with epic heroes. While this makes for a remarkable wealth of lexical variance and displays the erudition of the Cāraṇ panegyrists, Turek is rather more interested in the social history of that culture of violence. She links the genre with the phenomenon of soldier–peasants in search of land and status. Their lifestyle is a violent contest for territory, migration in search of this, and displacement of rivals. This is expressed in the code of the Great Tradition. Its aesthetically specialized, artificial style is deployed for these pragmatic goals and presented in Cāraṇ performance to the respective clan members.

Winand M. Callewaert records the history of his search for manuscripts. His grand project began in the 1970s, with the aim of collecting vernacular manuscripts from the Rajasthani tradition in Rajasthan itself and widely across its borders, studying these himself or making them accessible to other scholars. The microfilm collection he compiled – the Callewaert Collection – has enabled academia to gain deepened insight into the religious and literary dynamics of the region. Almost half a century ago, the search for manuscripts and their retrieval was the same unpredictable and exciting adventure it will – hopefully – remain. Since then, however, manuscript repositories have changed, for better or worse. Incremental change has been made due to new instruments of copying and subsequent digitizing of manuscripts. None of this existed in the 1970s. Inscribed in his own intellectual biography, Callewaert records an important chapter in the history of the study of vernacular literatures of early modern North India.

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