Madhumalati
An Indian Sufi Romance

By Thomas de Brujin

Medieval literature only rarely reaches a worldwide audience. Partly this has to do with the lack of effective translations. The publication of a complete translation and extensive commentary of the sixteenth-century Hindi romance Madhumalati in the Oxford World’s Classics series is therefore a major feat. Aditya Behl joined up with Simon Weightmann to produce a translation of an example from a remarkable literary genre: the medieval Sufi romances, written in Hindi, or medieval Avadhi.

Agniyuger Agnikatha “Yugantar”


Agniyuger Agnikatha “Yugantar” offers a complete reprint of the Bengali revolutionary nationalist weekly Yugantar (New Era), which began in September 1906 and was finally closed down by the Police in June 1908 on charges of sedition. Even more than the daily paper Bande Mataram in English, the vernacular Yugantar brought the anti-British revolution to the lower middle-classes in imperial Calcutta and the mofussil towns in the hinterland. The numerous editorials written in the same period by Sri Aurobindo (Arbuthnot Chase in British intelligence reports) were indirectly seditius. But the content of Yugantar, which was chiefly written by his associates, was closer to direct revolutionary propaganda (among others in articles describing the act of guerilla war and the making of the headman) than anything else.

British intelligence in Calcutta and Shimla regarded the Yugantar with supreme distrust. In 1918 the Rowlatt Report (the report on seditius and revolutionary activity in British India and abroad), called “Yugantar poison”. Many issues of Yugantar were prosecuted on the charge of sedition and wag-\r\n\nning against the King Emperor. The exemplary influence of Yugantar (its office indeed harbouring the guerilla group headed by Sri Aurobindo younger brother Barin) can be understood from the fact that the Punjab revolutionary Har Dayal started a Yugantar Ashram in San Francisco in 1911. From this Ashram Har Dayal published his Urdu journal Ghadr (Mutiny) in much the same vein as the proscribed Yugantar from Calcutta. Ghadr also formed a guerilla group that fought in the British in India (the famous Bhagat Singh was a member of this group). Yugantar had set an important trend in the Indian Freedom movement revolutionary propaganda through cheap journals in the vernaculars (Yugantar had cost only one paisa) and a band of armed revolutionaries dedicated to liberate the motherland.

The present book is unique because it gives a complete historical source that was hitherto almost inaccessible. Even the India Office Library in Lon-\r\ndon does not have a full set. The complete collection had been preserved by the founder of the Sri Aurobindo Institute of Culture, Mrs Jaya Mitter. In the introduction, Amalendu De highlights the historical importance of the documents. This source publishes - although in all Bengal - throws much light on the dissemination of nationalist consciousness in the formative period 1905-1908. < Dr Victor A. van Bijlert (BPCL Chair), IIM Calcutta>

Bengal: Rethinking History


If a single volume of which it is eminently appropriate that is published by the International Centre for Bengal Studies exists, it would be the present one. Dedicated to the memory of the distinguished historian of and from Bengal, Amales Tripathi, this book contains ten well-argued and extensively researched essays on the historiography of Bengal (undoubtedly in the sense that it comprises both modern Bangladesh and the State of West Bengal). The great theme that runs through the essays is: what direc-\r\ntions can historians take after the demise of nationalist top-down history, the fade-out of orthodox Marxist historical analysis, the lack of effective translations. The publication of a complete translation and extensive commentary of the sixteenth-century Hindi romance Madhumalati in the Oxford World’s Classics series is therefore a major feat. Aditya Behl joined up with Simon Weightmann to produce a translation of an example from a remarkable literary genre: the medieval Sufi romances, written in Hindi, or medieval Avadhi.

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The works of the Indian Sufi poets were produced at the crossroads of literary and religious traditions of India and the Islamic world. During the first centuries of Islamic presence in India (fourteenth to sixteenth centuries), a rich body of literature by Islamic Sufi poets came about, written in the vernacular languages of the regions under Islamic rule. In this poetry, Indian sto-\r\nties and the symbolism from Tantric y\r\noga meet with the elegance of Persian lyrical poetry. The choice for Indian languages reflects the deep accultura-\n\ntion of the Indian Sufis, who, from early on, had established a firm position in the Indian religious landscape, seeking contact and even competition with local religious sects, ascetics and yogis for patronage and the favour of pilgrims. The cult of the graves of Sufi saints became the focus of religious worship in both Hindus and Muslims.

Outside the court environment or the inner circle of a Sufi convent (dargah) where orthodox, non-localized Islam flourished, a dialogue of cultural iden-\r\ntities existed in which the struggle for political or cultural capital created alliances of many sorts. In the case of the Sufis, mystical speculation existed both as a purely theoretical framework within the closure of the dargah and as a practical meditational exercise in which many techniques from Indian yoga were adopted.

This eclectic cultural background cre-\n\ntated the perspective that is present in the romances in Hindi. The poets took the poetical framework of the Per-\n\nsian mavar, but the aesthetics were based on Indian theories of rasa and dhkani. The story is not spectacular; the prince Madhumalati meets Madhu-\n\nmalati at a young age and, immedi-\n\ately, they fall in love. After a short meeting the prince is carried off by fairies and separated from his beloved.

Both have to overcome many obstacles and arduous journeys to find each other again and be reunited in lasting love. In the eyes of the mystic, the realization of a love that is “out of this world” is a metaphor for the mystic’s path to knowledge and experience of the divine in this world. This hermeneutic forms the basis of the transformation of the love-story in which various Indian tales are conflated.

Many of the tales that the Indian Sufi poets used as sources for their romances can historians take after the demise of nationalist top-down history, the fade-out of orthodox Marxist historical analysis, the lack of effective translations. The publication of a complete translation and extensive commentary of the sixteenth-century Hindi romance Madhumalati in the Oxford World’s Classics series is therefore a major feat. Aditya Behl joined up with Simon Weightmann to produce a translation of an example from a remarkable literary genre: the medieval Sufi romances, written in Hindi, or medieval Avadhi.

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