

Madhumalati

# An Indian Sufi Romance

Forum >  
South Asia

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 Hindavi romance *Madhumalati* by the Sufi poet Manjhan, 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 Hindavi, or medieval Avadhi.

By Thomas de Bruijn

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 stories and the symbolism from Tantric yoga meet with the elegance of Persian mystical poetry. The choice for Indian languages reflects the deep acculturation 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 by 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 identities 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 created the perspective that is present in the romances in Hindavi. The poets took the poetical framework of the Per-

sian *matnavi*, but the aesthetics were based on Indian theories of *rasa* and *dhvani*. The story is not spectacular: prince Manohar meets princess Madhumalati at a young age and, immediately, 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 resonate into a mystical romance.

Whereas many of the tales that Indian Sufi poets used as sources for their

romances end in the union in death of the lovers, the symbolism of the love of Manohar and Madhumalati reflects a much more "benign" mystical doctrine that is particular to the Shattari order of Sufis, to which Manjhan belonged. Behl and Weightmann explain the details of this symbolic scheme in an extensive and thoroughly researched introduction. Weightmann adds an article in which he speculates on even more elaborate symbolical structures in the work. In the introduction the translators also convincingly connect the poet's approach to the religious and political background of the period. This gives the text a locus in time and space, which greatly helps the reader to enjoy the translated verses.

The translation covers the complete Hindavi text, including the lengthy panegyric introduction to the poem, which refers to rhetorical devices of Persian *matnavis*. The translation is in blank verse and does not follow the rhyme or metre of the original. This is an excellent choice because it gave the translators more headroom. The translation is never forced or lost for correct rhyme-words and makes an easy reading while still maintaining the embellishments and stylistic quality of Manjhan's Hindavi. For a modern reader the rich descriptions and elaborate metaphors can appear superfluous and an impediment to the action. Behl and Weightmann have succeeded in making evident that it is the style and manner of narrating that is at least as captivating as the narrative in this genre.

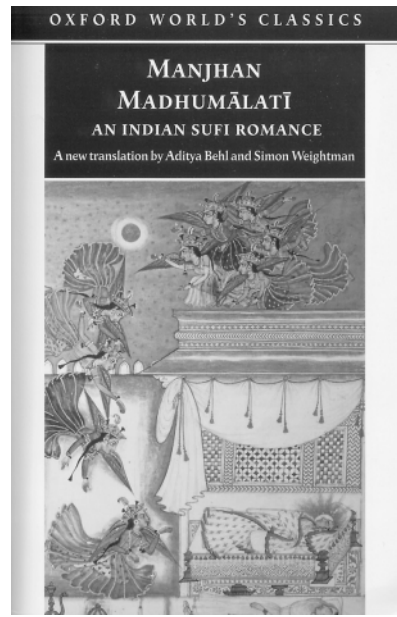
One cannot but complement the translators as they have combined philological precision with poetical fluidity and thus created a very readable translation. It has brought this remarkable text to the attention of a worldwide readership as the *Madhumalati* has not been translated into a non-Indian language before.

This translation shows that works by the Indian Sufi poets are remarkable pieces of literary art. Current research into this genre provides us with a more profound insight into the complex composition of cultural identities in the Indian subcontinent which modernity has flattened into binary opposites. Behl and Weightmann's translation of the *Madhumalati* shows that medieval Indian literature requires intense, erudite attention to reveal the subcontinent's cultural riches. <

reference

Rajgiri, Mir Sayyid Manjhan Shattari, *Madhumalati: an Indian Sufi Romance*, Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Aditya Behl and Simon Weightmann. With Shyam Manohar Pandey. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2000), Series: Oxford's World Classics, pp.336, ISBN 0-19-284037-1

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## Agniyuger Agnikatha "Yugantar"

Review >  
Bengal studies

Bandyopadhyay, Amshuman, *Agniyuger Agnikatha "Yugantar"*, Pondicherry: Prakashana Bibhag, Sri Aurobindo Ashram (2001), pp. 40+XXII+923, no ISBN. Available from: Shabda, Pondicherry 605002; Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, 8 Shakespeare Sarani, Kolkata - 71; Sri Aurobindo Institute of Culture, 3 Regent Park, Kolkata-40.

*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 (Arabindo Ghose in British intelligence reports) were indirectly seditious. But the content of *Yugantar*, which was chiefly written by his associates, was closer to direct revolutionary propaganda (among others in articles describing the art of guerrilla war and the making of explosives!) than anything else.

British intelligence in Calcutta and Shimla regarded the *Yugantar* with supreme distrust. In 1918 the Rowlett Report (the report on seditious and revolutionary activity in British India and abroad), called *Yugantar* "poison". Many issues of *Yugantar* were proscribed on the charge of sedition and waging war against the King-Emperor. The exemplary influence of *Yugantar* (its office indeed harbouring the guerrilla group headed by Sri Aurobindo younger brother Barin) can be understood from the fact that the Punjabi 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 guerrilla group that fought 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 London does not have a full set. The complete collection had been preserved by the founder of the Sri Aurobindo Institute of Culture, Mrs Joya Mitter. In the introduction, Amalendu De highlights the historical importance of the documents. This source-publication - although all in Bengali - 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

Review >  
Bengal

Bandyopandhyay, Sekhar, *Bengal: Rethinking History. Essays in Historiography*, New Delhi: Manohar (2001), International Centre for Bengal Studies, Publication No.29, pp. 326, ISBN 81-7304-400-7.

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, Amalendu Tripathi, this book contains ten well-argued and extensively researched essays on the historiography of Bengal (undivided 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 directions can historians take after the demise of nationalist top-down history, the fade-out of orthodox Marxist historical analysis, the (now) insipidity of the Subaltern studies and lastly the challenges of postcolonial and postmodern history writing. With *Bengal: Rethinking History*, here's a book that at least takes a stance in these matters. The editor already observes in his introduction that postmodern "relativism has [...] destabilized history" (p. 13). This occurred in a "market-driven post-modern world" (p. 13).

The historiography covered in this book moves through all the important topics in Bengal's history: the East India Company, peasants and tribals, labour, the "Bengal Renaissance", Muslim identity, caste and class, women, and lastly, nationalism. This rich work offers a much-needed and long-due exposition of the state of affairs in present-day history writing about Bengal. Moreover, the importance of colonial Bengal as the base of the expanding British-Indian Empire is never lost sight of. Bengal was the first area to undergo the dual experience of colonial hegemony and indigenous dialectical reactions to it. Thus this book is a relevant contribution to our understanding of the highly problematic and deeply contested rise of modernity and nationhood in South Asia as a whole. < Dr Victor A. van Bijlert (BPCL Chair), IIM Calcutta

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