

INTERPRETATIONS OF KABĪR: LINGUISTIC, LITERARY AND HISTORICAL ISSUES

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Interpretation of religious and literary creations of poets belonging to the North Indian *bhakti* movement calls for a complex approach that integrates purely philological methods with a literary analysis of the oral traditions and broader context of historical developments. Study of a particular utterance or idea expressed in a verse or distich should take into account several contextual levels: the poem (*pad*), the anthology (*vāṅī*) in which the poem in question occurs, and the manuscript that often contains works of other authors with a similar basic outlook (*pañc-vāṅī, sarvāṅī*). Comparisons of several manuscript collections containing the same or similar material may bring to light significant rephrasings and reformulations, sometimes with subtle changes in meaning. The focus on the basically oral and performative character of the tradition goes a long way toward better understanding of the textual variability of a particular literary corpus. Long time changes in the political *milieu* in different regions of North India in which various branches of the *bhakti* tradition had to operate might have significant impact on the thematic range and presence or absence of elements of social criticism in works attributed to particular authors.

It is certainly an encouraging and perhaps significant tendency observable among participants at various thematic conferences and sessions – the present one is no exception – to stress the need to pay greater attention to broader contexts of topics currently under study or discussion, and to bring into play new methods and interdisciplinary approaches. I feel and hope that these ideas, and the concerns that stand behind them, represent a new style of thinking that gradually transforms research strategies in the field of Indological studies; at the same time I sense a clearly perceived need to project these trends into classrooms and curricula at the university level. It is obvious that without this second step these new trends may be in danger of becoming mere transient fashions; that they will leave their traces in books, but will not be able to influence, in a decisive manner, the research habits and strategies of present-day students, which in turn means those of future generations of scholars.

There can be little doubt that the main way in which innovative and interdisciplinary approaches can reach classes is the appropriately adjusted curricula; but any formal changes in them would be of little consequence, if they were not filled with specific content and concrete topics. One of these thematic fields that deserves the attention of scholars in the context of furthering interdisciplinarity is *bhakti* – particularly if understood as a complex history of literary and religious traditions that we can see forming and developing in the broad area of North India from the 14th century onwards. As I have been engaged in a study of one such tradition for some time now, I shall venture to put forward few observations and suggestions based on my own experiences in this field.

At one of our previous meetings, in Vilnius in 2006, I presented a paper with a few suggestions on possible methods of analysis that could be applied to a specific variety of Old Hindi (labelled often by terms *sadhukkaṛī*, or *khicṛī bhāṣā*). One characteristic feature of this variety of speech is that it does not yield to a simple grammatical treatment in which paradigms can be neatly ordered in a few synoptic tables. At the same time, it is also obvious that the capability to comprehend this literature in its original form is the first necessary precondition for further serious research in this field. The text selected to demonstrate my approach – originally developed by our late colleague Vladimír Miltner – was a *pad* attributed to the medieval *sant* and poet Kabīr (ca. 1444 – ca. 1516). At that time my intention was to apply the described method in preparing a reader of Kabīr's (or Kabīrian) *pads* – a reader that could be used by students in Indology university courses. This task I hope to have now finished. But when I tested it in class, I could clearly see how the purely linguistic analysis of the text is in itself insufficient for correct comprehension: the *pads*, although interpreted more or less correctly from the point of view of morphology and syntax, remained often elusive so far as their actual meaning and intent was concerned. Here the necessity of understanding a broader context (or set of definable contexts) emerged with great clarity and urgency. I shall try to delineate the most important of them and identify several desiderata for future research as well as for teaching.

One of the first questions a researcher or a student who sets out to interpret this kind of literature should ask, concerns the legitimate unit of analysis. Is the basic unit a concrete *pad* under study? Or is it a collection of *pads* attributed to the same author – but then the question is, a collection put together by whom? Perhaps by one of the three religious traditions, the *panths*, that have preserved Kabīr's (or Kabīrian) verses in their own textual corpuses? We can choose between the Sikh tradition in the *Ādi Granth*, the eastern, Kabīrpanth tradition of the *Bījak*, and the western Dādūpanthī tradition preserved in the so called Kabīr *vāṇīs*. Or should we take as a basis a modern edition of a *Kabīr granthāvalī* – a title which today includes three or four different variants of Kabīr's (or Kabīrian) poetry? Or should we perhaps understand as the immediate context a concrete manuscript in which the relevant *pad* has been found? As far as Kabīr's poetry is concerned, no two manuscripts appear to contain the identical repertory of *pads* and *sākhīs*; those poems that do occur in more than one manuscript often contain a number of more or less significant variant readings. The answer to these questions will of course depend on the focus of a particular research project, but whatever its final aim may be, the detailed information about the source manuscript concerned should be understood as of fundamental importance.

It can be seen that the so-called critical editions often pay insufficient attention to this manuscriptological aspect of the study of medieval literary works and traditions. To give just one example – the manuscript I used as a source of Kabīr's *pads* had been discovered and brought to the attention of the scholarly public in an edition (*The Millenium Kabīr vāṇī*) by Professor Winand M. Callewaert. In the Introduction (Callewaert 2000, p. 21) he gives only a very short description of the manuscript (just 8 lines) and characterises it as a *pañc-vāṇī* – a term used for Dādūpanthī collections of *sākhīs*

and poems attributed to five *sants* who enjoyed exceptional popularity and authority in Dādūpanthī: namely Dādū, Kabīr, Nāmdev, Raidās (Ravidās) and Hardās. But the inspection of the contents of the manuscript (available to me in a microfilm copy by courtesy of the Südasien Institute, Heidelberg) presented a different picture: the original is a huge *pothī* (book, codex) of 692 folios, and lists as first items a *vāñī-saṃgrah* of Dādū, *vāñī-saṃgrah* of Kabīr, and next a “*vividh vāñī-saṃgrah*” that contains, apart from texts of the remaining three *pañc-vāñī sants* mentioned above, other works of more than seventy different authors. These *vāñī* sections are followed by works of other medieval *bhakti* authors, and also by *nāthpanthī* texts (the *Gorakh-bāñī* found in this manuscript is, to my knowledge, the earliest extant version of this important work).

The present owner of the *pothī* (Śrī Sañjaya Śarmā Saṅgrahālaya evaṃ Śodha Saṃsthāna, Jaipur) has identified as its scribe Rāmdās Dādūpanthī, and as dates of the compilation the *saṃvat* years 1671 to 1678 (= 1614 to 1621 C.E.). If this dating is correct, then the codex contains certainly one of the oldest Dādūpanthī manuscripts and probably the second oldest manuscript containing a Rājasthānī version of Kabīr’s *pad*s. As such it is a highly interesting subject of study in its own right – not only for its 370 *pad*s attributed to Kabīr, but also for its overall content which, among other things, represents the immediate context of its Kabīrian repertory. Finally, attention should be paid also to the negative side of the selection, to authors the manuscript does not include – for example, there is not a single *pad* attributed to Mīrābāī.

My first suggestion therefore concerns the need to publish at least the most important pieces of the huge mass of extant manuscript material – either printed on paper, or in electronic, digitalised form. The handwriting of the presently discussed manuscript is of such outstanding quality that it can be used, with some training, in university courses – the writing is clean, with some basic explanation easily legible. To motivated students the contact with authentic source material may be of additional interest.

An awareness that what is being studied is a Dādūpanthī presentation of Kabīr should motivate students to look more closely at the Dādūpanthī tradition itself, at its own preferences and possible biases that could have made themselves felt in the way the members of the *panth* collected, selected, edited and passed on the Kabīrian material. Here the comparison with the repertory contained in the *Bijak* and *Ādi Granth* will be of great interest and importance. The number of *pad*s common to at least two of these three collections is very small, and even a comparison of one or two *pad*s in their different variants may be quite instructive.

The second question, inseparable from the first, concerns the authorship of the studied *pad*s. Over the last forty years this problem has been periodically revisited by several scholars and approached from different points of view.¹ I believe that studies of North Indian *bhakti* literature and vernacular poetry in general may profit from following up the recent methodological advances made in the study of oral poetry, particularly by Finnish scholars, some of whom have devoted considerable attention to Indian oral

¹ Particularly relevant in the present context is Hawley 1988, p. 269–290; Vaudeville 1993, esp. p. 131–147; Callewaert 1998, p. 405–417; Novetzke 2003, p. 213–242, with a good discussion of different levels of authorship in the context of living Marāṭhī *kīrtan* performance tradition.

traditions.² Recent descriptions of living oral traditions pay considerable attention to their essentially performative character: both individual and collective oral presentations are essentially performances in which the text (often accompanied by other performing arts, such as music, dance, etc.) varies from one performance to another, depending on the immediate circumstances and context – the particular occasion, composition of audience, mood of the performer, etc.

Considering the fact that Kabīr presented his ideas and poetry in oral form (several *sākhīs* attributed to him state this in an unambiguous way), we should probably take into account the organic variation concept when deliberating about the possible “original” versions of his *pad*s. In an oral tradition there may be more than one authorial version and, of course, more than one variant of each of these possibly several authorial versions when these are presented by other performers before their different audiences. The extant Kabīrian texts incorporated into different collections (be it *pañc-vāṇīs*, *sarvāṅgīs*, or other types of anthologies) reflect this orality-based diversity. The texts that have come down to us in the manuscripts appear to be products of intermingling of the two parallel existing traditions, the oral and the written.

Under these circumstances, any attempt by authors of “critical editions” to arrive at the “original version” (at an “Ur-text”) is probably futile – in my opinion, such an edition amounts to little more than an addition of another variant to the already existing ones. The structure of the *pad* with its relatively free ordering of more or less self-contained distichs³ is an ideal form for variation through interpolations and/or elisions, as the need may be, of lines, distichs, and even larger blocks of text. Here researchers and students will profit by applying to their Indological topics methodological approaches developed first in the field of ethnography and cultural anthropology.

But researchers should not restrict their comparative activity to variants ascribed to one and the same author only. Comparisons of texts found in the Kabīrian corpuses with works ascribed to other medieval poets (*sants* and *nāths*) may bring to light surprising parallels with word-for-word correspondences not only of particular phrases, but of whole distichs, and in several cases even of complete *pad*s attributed in their colophons (*bhaṇitās*) variously to different authors. In the case of Kabīrian literature from Rajasthan we can see striking parallels with phrases and verses found in the works of Dādū, Gorakhnāth, and to a lesser degree in those attributed to Nāmdev. Modern literary theories working with the (variously articulated) concept of intertextuality may help in providing useful guidelines and frameworks for a systematic mapping of this so far little studied aspect of medieval Indian literature.⁴

² See, e.g., the collection of articles edited by Honko 2000. Of particular interest from the methodological point of view is the editor’s introductory essay “Thick corpus and organic variation: an introduction”, *ibid.*, p. 3–28. The analysed Indian material was published by Honko, Gowda, Honko and Rai 1998. A shorter report of this project, in the form of an article, “Variation and textuality in oral epics: a south Indian case” can be found in Honko 2000, p. 351–372.

³ Some of the distichs have been found to be originally independent *sākhīs* included in one of the thematic chapters in the *sākhī* section of the *vāṇī*. They were utilised as kernels around which a *pad* could crystallise through addition of new material that expanded and commented upon the central idea contained in the original *sākhī*.

⁴ A good introduction to different theories of intertextuality is Allen 2000. More focussed on particular problems of text transmission in the context of oral traditions is Bauman 2004; of particular interest in the

Finally, there is the historical context. In the case of the Rajasthani tradition this includes the study of the inner development of the Dādūpanth, which for a long time acted as the principal vehicle of transmission and dissemination of Kabīrian poetry in a large area of western India. Here a single example demonstrating the importance of the historical context may suffice. As we now know, thanks to the researches of M. Thiel-Horstmann, in the first third of the 18th century Dādūpanth had to yield to official pressure of the ruling authority of the area, the Kacchvāhā Rājā Jai Singh II, and to exclude from its ranks all śūdras and Muslims. This order issued in the year 1732 C.E. also demanded that from that time on the abbot of the *panth* should be a Brahman.⁵ It is very probable that this outside pressure was not without effect on the way the *sākhīs* and *pads* of Kabīr were presented in performances organised by the *panth*, and also written down or copied from older manuscripts by Dādūpanthī scribes. The perceptible softening of the originally sharp criticism of Brahmanical narrow-mindedness and arrogance found in the older variants of Kabīr's *pads*, and still present in the *salokus* of the eastern Kabīrpanthī recension of the *Bījak* collection, is probably connected with this change of political climate. This one instance of clear political interference brought to light by the German scholar has perhaps not yet received the attention it deserves – at least not in the sense of turning the serious and systematic attention of literary historians to immediate historical contexts presented in the form of detailed micro-histories of the areas and regions in question.

To sum up – it is obvious that any earnest study of medieval *bhakti* traditions must start with the linguistic analysis of extant texts, but it must not stop there: proper understanding of their content and historical development is impossible without an analysis of extant manuscripts and without application of appropriate text-critical tools. Ideally, manuscripts containing repertoires, textual variants and versions of particular works, should be studied with view to their time and place of origin. This will allow scholars to see the processes of developing, and also the contrary tendencies of de-emphasising particular themes in their proper historical contexts. It appears that *bhakti* is a field of study where the need for a greater degree of integration of linguistic, text-critical, literary and historical study is particularly obvious. But the call for interdisciplinarity has, in the opinion of the present author, a more general validity and represents one of the more important desiderata in Indological studies in general.

present context is the last chapter, "Go, My Reciter, Recite My Words": Mediation, Tradition, Authority, p. 128–158.

⁵ Thiel-Horstmann 1991, p. 22. Gold (1994, pp. 242–264) notes the process of a gradual Rajputisation of the *panth*, but does not mention the existence of Rājā Jai Singh's order concerning the regulation of its membership. The most recent addition to our knowledge of the changing intellectual and religious climate at the Kacchvāhā court in the first half of the 18th century is the detailed study by Horstmann 2009.

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