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A Review Symposium: Literary Cultures in History

Sheldon Pollock, ed., *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, Berkeley/Delhi: University of California Press/Oxford University Press, 2003, xxix, 1,066 pp., price \$80.00.

The 'review symposium' is not a form that readers of the *IESHR* are likely to have seen with great frequency in this journal, with the possible exception of the reviews some two decades ago of the two volumes of the *Cambridge Economic History of India*. Occasionally, however, the appearance of a work of great ambition and scope calls for such a response, and this is the case of the work under review here, itself the product of a long gestation process, initiated by Sheldon Pollock and Velcheru Narayana Rao, and brought to fruition, after a number of conferences and meetings, under the sole editorship of Pollock at the University of Chicago. This is a work, as its blurb explains, that must be considered 'a grand synthesis of unprecedented scope', and claims moreover to be 'the first comprehensive history of the rich literary traditions of South Asia'. We gather besides that in it 'an international team of renowned scholars considers fifteen South Asian literary traditions—including Hindi, Indian-English, Persian, Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Urdu—in their full historical and cultural variety'. As a result, this book is likely to be read not only within the field of South Asian studies, but also by specialists of other areas seeking a definitive statement on the state-of-the-art where the literary history of South Asia is concerned.

Readers will be aware of other past projects that have attempted versions of the literary history of South Asia, while espousing very different formats. The series of 30 volumes that appeared between 1973 and 1987 under the general editorship of Jan Gonda, entitled *A History of Indian Literature* (published by Otto Harrassowitz), is a case in point, and we have also seen more recent attempts by the Sahitya Akademi in India, for example. However, the volumes edited by Gonda, while undoubtedly of vast scope, are also notoriously uneven in their coverage. Further, they cannot be said to have any claims to making a synthesis of any kind, and even when

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successful as individual volumes, serve the principal function of handbooks that summarise and present (often in a chronological framework) the relevant materials, whether 'classical Marathi literature', 'Musicological literature', or 'the Puranas', to take but three examples.

The particular interest of the volume edited by Sheldon Pollock is that it attempts to make a series of explicit historical arguments, and that it also draws on the talents of scholars whose principal focus is not the history of literature. Thus we have historians, anthropologists and political theorists as much as traditional literary scholars included amongst the list of authors. As such, the appearance of this volume thus seems particularly significant at a moment when an increasing interest is being shown by historians of South Asia in the literary materials that are available for the study of the South Asian past. Such a change is also reflected in the changing composition of essays published in the *IESHR*, including in a special number in which Pollock himself was a participant (Vol. 38, No. 1, 2001). For this very reason, we also considered it important to have a critical engagement with this project, as the reviews that appear below indicate.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam

Department of History
UCLA

I

As its name implies, Pollock's *Literary Cultures in History* is an attempt—incredibly, the first ever—to historicise the study of Indian literature in a serious, not merely technical, way. It is a grand project, conceived on a monumental scale, and the result is a series of deeply engaging essays on many of the South Asian regional literatures, essays framed by Pollock's own complex and powerful statement on Sanskrit poetry and the particular problematic that he articulates. (One happy way to state this simply is found in the section-heading: 'What were Sanskrit poets choosing when they chose to write in Sanskrit?') Not everyone will agree with the terms and parameters of the discussion as defined here, or with specific judgements and perceptions; but make no mistake, the field has been irrevocably transformed. This is a book one can sink one's teeth into, and the challenges it poses will sustain us for many years to come.

Why have we never had a deeply historical, integrated, truly analytical account of any Indian literature? Perhaps we should ask ourselves a related, even more fundamental question: why are there almost no serious critical and interpretative studies of even the great Sanskrit *mahakavyas*, for example? In over 200 years of modern Indology, with its various achievements and failures, this lacuna is perhaps the most glaring of all. I leave the two questions unanswered, remarking only on the terror of interpretation that seems to have gripped, for generations, an entire academic domain. We should, however, try to formulate for ourselves the

underlying meaning of a crucial term like ‘historicising’. In chapter after chapter, we see the authors struggling to define external correlates to distinct literary modes—the social and institutional contexts of literary production, the impact of political power and its warring ideologies, the cultural channelling of the imagination, problems of authority, canonisation and taste, and the ambiguities inherent in periodisation *per se*. Any real history problematises temporality even as it privileges factuality of one kind or another; or we could say that history emerges only out of a perceived dissonance between two or more rival, often mutually exclusive, experiences of living in time. If we apply this principle to South Asian literary history, we find an enduring conflict between linear developmental sequences proceeding through a relatively even temporal unfolding—something like our default, naively post-Newtonian notion of time—and sequences based on unexpected (non-linear) juxtapositions, profound intertextual resonances, persistent recurrence and repetition, a metaphysics of disjunction and prolepsis, and a complementary concern for integrated wholes (in this case, large-scale poetic works). I will return to some of these elements below.

Though I will have something to say about Pollock’s understanding of developments within Sanskrit, my remarks are limited mainly to the four essays on south Indian literatures: Norman Cutler on Tamil, D.R. Nagaraj on Kannada, Velcheru Narayana Rao on Telugu, and Rich Freeman on Malayalam. Sadly, Cutler and Nagaraj, both of them creative, insightful scholars, are no longer with us. All four essays take up, from a regional perspective, themes adumbrated in Pollock’s opening statement. Nonetheless, they can hardly be said to share a single method. Cutler studies Tamil literary cultures as seen through highly variable prisms of distinct literary histories, mediaeval, proto-modern and modern. It is almost as if literature itself were more or less immune to such attempts to frame and organise it—or literature is what is left over after the artificiality of each such selection and narrativisation is exposed. There is something a little unsettling about this conclusion, seen in the context of a volume such as this. Nagaraj is interested primarily in conflict, negotiation and resistance, as the title of his essay makes clear (‘Tensions in Kannada Literary History’). Listening carefully to his texts, he hears them asking questions of their readers—very often, rather plaintive questions relating to what is felt to be an oppressive norm or a failure of subjective authenticity. Narayana Rao explicitly renounces the straightforward chronological approach, which he finds distorting, in favour of something closer to the second form of temporality outlined above; this is a strongly historicised vision with a fundamentally intertextual core and a pronounced sensitivity to the living, community-based contexts of composition and reception. The last place one would look for a classical Telugu book, in this perspective, would be a library (heaven forbid) or, for that matter, the pages of a manuscript or printed volume. Freeman, an unusual blend of field anthropologist and literary philologist, is a keen observer of social context and institutional sites of literary production; he gives us by far the most nuanced account of Malayalam literary typology ever attempted.

Certain striking themes, and certain closely connected problems, recur in all four essays. One problem is evident in the mere distribution of domains; perhaps inevitably, these four south Indian literatures appear to be slightly walled off from one another, as if a latent nationalist or regionalist teleology were built into the very terms of observation and discussion. (Narayana Rao deliberately protests against this form of projected, or rather retrojected and heavily anachronistic regional identity.) I know it couldn't be helped. But a history of south Indian literary cultures would be infinitely richer—and, I think, closer to actual praxis—if the four languages could be seen as interacting within what is, in effect, a single system which also included, of course, Sanskrit poetry and poetics, and not in primarily oppositional or conflictual terms. Let me try to spell out something of what this might mean.

Part of the difficulty springs from the heart of one of Pollock's most powerful and valuable insights. He has written cogently of processes of regionalisation which, in the course of the second millennium A.D., and in tandem with other historical forces, ultimately dismantled or displaced the universalising features of the 'Sanskrit cosmopolis'. There is, of course, a fascinating parallel with the fate of Latin culture in relation to the emerging regional literatures in late-mediaeval and Renaissance Europe—here I would recommend the iconoclastic and incisive discussion by Joseph Farrell¹—and, as in Europe, one might be tempted to look for the moment or moments when Sanskrit 'died'. In Pollock's telling phrase, 'Sanskrit writers (...) ceased to make literature that made history' (p. 100). We need to be clear about this: Pollock is referring to *belles-lettres*, especially large-scale *kavya*, and *not* to erudite (*sastric*) production, which retained its cosmopolitan reach right up to modern times. As with so many deep insights, there is something both right and rather wrong about this one. Clearly, when Bharavi wrote his *Kiratarjuniya* in the sixth century, the project of a major Sanskrit poem meant something quite different from what it meant for, say, Sakalya Malla's unusually inventive *mahakavya*, the *Udara-raghava*, from the fourteenth-century Deccan. Bharavi, like Kalidasa or Magha or Sriharsa, was read all over the Sanskrit cosmopolis, as Pollock shows; Sakalya Malla had a mostly local audience. And that is only the beginning of an analysis of difference. Still, there is some reason to feel that, as in the case of Mark Twain, the reports of the death of Sanskrit (poetry) have been somewhat exaggerated.

We might look for an answer to this particular question posed by Pollock's essay by examining more seriously the transitional poets from the turn of the second millennium—Bilhana and Ksemendra in the north, Murari apparently in the east, and a few of their contemporaries or predecessors (such as Abhinanda and the so-called Pala poets). Were they primarily 'cosmopolitan' or 'local'? What do these labels suggest? Do they show us something of the changing modes of patronage, the new audiences, the shift in the poet's conception of himself and in

¹ Joseph Farrell, *Latin Language and Latin Culture*, Cambridge, 2001.

his or her praxis? We have to remember that the cosmopolitan poets such as Bharavi and Magha were professionals, members of a non-official guild, practitioners of a well-defined craft—the production of polished (*ullikhita*) poetry in Sanskrit for consumption by a refined elite. Rajasekhara gives us a fascinating portrait of the guild in normal operations in his *Kavya-mimamsa*. But in mediaeval south India, the role of Sanskrit poet merged more or less completely with that of the learned scholar, grammarian, theologian, or commentator. Such poets addressed a rather different clientele from that of, say, Sriharsa. Patronage, too, split into several streams—the royal courts, the temples and mutts, and an autonomous track that we might think of as self-consciously secular, sophisticated, and urbane, cutting through sectarian and even regional allegiances. This third track, fostered by a middle-level elite, produced poetry of a very high order, in Sanskrit as in the mother-tongues; it is still waiting to be clearly recognised and studied on its own terms.

I would not waste more time on this issue were there not a deeper question involved, one that touches on the very nature of linguistic reality in relation to poetic creativity throughout mediaeval south India. For one thing, life and death are not fully reducible to statistics, nor to questions of the range, velocity and intensity of transmission or the volume of production. No one will deny that, statistically speaking, the great bulk of surviving Sanskrit poetry comes from the second millennium A.D. and from sites deeply bound up with mature regional cultures at work in several mother-tongues. But so what?² Are these works any good? As good as Bharavi? We are hardly in a position to pass judgement: how many of us have read the ‘regional’ Sanskrit literatures in any depth?³ In any case, there is a question here. There are books for whom one truly enlightened reader might be enough (this seems to be the implication of Bhavabhuti’s famous statement of alienation from his own generation: ‘Those who disregard me today may, or may not, know something; but someday somebody will turn up who shares my nature—for time is limitless and the earth is wide’). One can’t help wondering about the particularity, intensity and complexity of those forms of poetic expressivity embodied in given second-millennium works. Indeed, a certain kind of intensity may well make up for a loss of geographical purchase. To take only one example: in recent weeks I have been studying, together with my colleague Yigal Bronner, Vedanta Desika’s *Hamsa-sandesa*, a fourteenth-century *sandesa-kavya* modelled on Kalidasa’s *Megha-duta*. Its breathtaking complexity depends entirely on a self-conscious conversation between a highly local cultic or mythic imagination and the classical

² J. Hanneder’s critique of Pollock, ‘On “The Death of Sanskrit”’, *Indo-Iranian Journal*, Vol. 45, 2002, pp. 293–310, cites fairly massive evidence of literary and scholarly creativity in Sanskrit from the centuries after its alleged demise (including modern short stories and novellas that are said to be unusual); but counting texts will not solve the problem Pollock poses.

³ The 2005 Summer Academy in Regional Sanskrit Poetry, under the auspices of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, aims at elaborating an analytical methodology for the study of these second-millennium Sanskrit texts.

materials that went into building that imagination. There are things even Kalidasa couldn't say—because he didn't have the privilege of reading Kalidasa. If you know how to read it, the *Hamsa-sandesa* must be one of the most beautiful of all Sanskrit lyrical poems.

Let us take the next step. The more serious difficulty we face derives from the remarkably resilient dichotomies produced by our a priori categories—that is, by the way we have set up the problem. One might have thought the days of recalcitrant binary oppositions were over. Still, there is a constant temptation to treat Sanskrit—that is, the entire literary and authoritative culture couched in classical Sanskrit—as somehow 'other' or 'outer' in relation to what is regional, spoken, organic, or domestic. It is absolutely astonishing to see how easily 'Sanskrit', in this wide sense, evokes again and again a certain identifiable menace—a structured, systemic, mostly oppressive set of normative and authoritarian codes that the hapless regional culture has somehow to internalise. Indeed, this sense of the looming threat of the normative and the hierarchical even works its way into Pollock's vision of Sanskrit itself seen 'from the inside out'. Often it seems as if a life-and-death struggle were going on between those voices seeking, against all odds, to maintain some form of autonomous subjectivity and the lethal grip of the cosmopolitan, impersonal *sastric* order. The former—for example, the Kannada *vacanakaras*, in Nagaraj's reading—inevitably sing in Kannada, the mother-tongue; and they tend to be embattled with the 'Sanskrit cosmopolitan order' whenever it reaches 'scandalous proportions' (p. 349). At one point Nagaraj even speaks of 'the process of policing metrical forms by the consensual institution called literature' (p. 339)—and these phantasmagoric Orwellian policemen naturally speak only Sanskrit. This is at least as absurd as the modern Dravidian nationalist mythologies with their hordes of invading Brahmin aliens stamping out the pristine, un-Sanskritised cultures of the south. Literary history is not a good arena for nurturing resentment and settling scores.

In fact, all four of the essays on south India register varying degrees of dissatisfaction with this opposition. Nagaraj himself says it most clearly: 'The categories of cosmopolitan and vernacular, functioning as dichotomous opposites, may not be adequate for treating Indian literatures' (p. 335). Narayana Rao states, in the context of a discussion of Annamayya's fifteenth-century *padams*: 'The opposition is not between Sanskrit and Telugu, as it is often perceived to be, but between arcane and accessible diction' (p. 421). This is a 'law' of general applicability in South Asia, one operative within Sanskrit poetry no less than in that of the spoken languages. Of course it is always possible for a Sanskritic text or corpus to crystallise, momentarily, in a perceived conflictual or tense configuration vis-à-vis a particular text or corpus in, say, Tamil or Kannada. Such things happen. Think of the *accatelugu* poets of the late sixteenth century who, imitating the model of Persian poets who wished to 'purify' their works of Arabic, tried to write a Telugu poem without any borrowings from Sanskrit (Narayana Rao, p. 384). But *accatelugu* is a very minor branch of Telugu poetry. It is much more common to find Telugu poets re-Sanskritising Sanskrit, often in very creative ways, as Narayana Rao

shows in a penetrating analysis of Srinatha. Is such re-Sanskritised Sanskrit entirely internal to a Telugu poem, Telugu or Sanskrit? What might such a question mean anyway? It would seem to me far more fruitful to begin elaborating a model in which the relations between ‘mother tongue’ and ‘Sanskrit’ could be mapped, on the basis of actual practice, in their obviously interlocking and contrasting patterns—not merely oppositional, in some raw or residual sense, but also complementary, inverted, multi-directional, synecdochic, iconic, reflective, ironic, harmonic, mutually intensifying, and so on. This field is wide open, and the challenge well worth taking on.

Of course, there is still considerable significance to the fact that a great Telugu poet such as Krishnadevaraya (early sixteenth century) also chose to write a Sanskrit play, the *Jambavati-parinaya* (see Pollock, p. 95). We would like to know what motivated this choice—what composing in straight Sanskrit meant to a great master of Sanskrit-in-Telugu (if we insist on maintaining the etymological fiction and its inherent categorical distinction in relating to a work like this poet’s forbidding masterpiece, the *Amukta-malyada*). Sanskrit, by the way, is no stranger to the subjective. In any case, there is no doubt about the existence of concurrent, differentiated registers in mediaeval south Indian poetry—in all of the four major languages—and sometimes, though probably not very often, it makes sense to isolate one of these registers as ‘Sanskritic’. The problem is particularly acute in Malayalam, where indigenous theory (in the *Lilatilakam*, fourteenth century) distinguishes among ‘competing language forms then current in Kerala’ (Freeman, p. 443), with ‘Sanskrit’ and ‘*Kerala-bhasa*’ clearly marked off from one another. But even in Kerala it is highly doubtful that Sanskrit can stand in a primarily oppositional role vis-à-vis ‘Dravidian’, which is at best a purely linguistic category. A different logic seems to be operating in the mature, sixteenth-century Malayalam *kavyas*, as Freeman’s wonderful examples seem to suggest. If we need a set of rules governing the transitions between registers or domains, we might do well to attempt a historical grammar of the imagination, within which language, too, will find its place. Such a grammar would also deal with issues of framing, temporality, the shifting degrees or intensities of what is felt as real, and part-whole relations; with respect to the latter, it would make the entirely appropriate demand that we, like the *catu* traditions of oral literary criticism, try to come to grips with whole *kavya* works and to interpret them, indeed, as integrated, expressive wholes situated within wider, continuously evolving systemic fields.

I want to conclude with a few remarks about Tamil, the corpus I know best. One thing that comes through clearly in Cutler’s essay is the need to rethink the by now hard-and-fast lines of conventional periodisation. The great nineteenth-century scholars like Tiricirapuram Minatcuntaram Pillai knew something (actually, a great many things) that we do not. The curriculum of study that they pursued is itself a strong form of literary history, and it is not—here I disagree with Cutler—ahistorical in nature, a vision of Tamil literary production as a timeless, or simultaneous, seam. In fact, one could claim that the traditional education in

the mutts actually highlighted works that embody significant innovation, at defined moments or periods, as a cardinal organising principle, seen within an ordered continuum or *longue durée*—works such as Ativiraramapantiyar's *Naitatam* or other compositions of the sixteenth-century Tenkasi Renaissance, to coin a term.

Our current notions of the developmental sequence in Tamil poetry have become brittle and self-perpetuating, and they tend to mask truly revolutionary 'events' such as the inward turn into the recesses of language as an objective, musical-mathematical force from the thirteenth century onwards, or the emergence, some 400 years later, of the major discursive, proto-novelistic forms such as we see in Turaimankalam Civappirakacar's *Pirapu-linka-lilai*, to name but one. We also have a problem in determining what counts as 'literature' in this tradition: Cutler shows convincingly that the Saiva and Vaisnava canons of *bhakti* poetry were actually seen to be outside the boundaries of this category (Nagaraj makes a similar observation for the Kannada *vacanas*). There are also very distinctive issues relating to continuity or its opposite, amnesiac breaks, that are specific to the Tamil case. Cutler ends his essay with a little scholarly jewel, a brilliant section devoted to the fifteenth-century anthology known as *Purattirattu*. He shows how the mere process of anthologising, selecting and reframing gives trenchant expression to the values and self-perception of the tradition, and he correctly points to the 'non-sectarian or transsectarian literary culture' that generated and consumed such texts (p. 311: see remarks on the third track mentioned above). As is well known, the *Purattirattu* also includes verses drawn from the ancient, so-called Cankam corpus; clearly, these poems were still current and widely known in the fifteenth century. When, then, did they go missing, so to speak? Vast cultural resources are invested today in the narrative we all learned, that of the loss of these precious poems and their subsequent recovery, in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth, by scholars such as S.V. Damodaram Pillai and U. Ve. Caminataiyar. No one would want to deny the great merit of these pioneering scholars. Still, one unfortunate consequence of the standard narrative, and of the enormous prestige it imparts to texts that were both very old and, perhaps even more important, supposedly lost and regained, is the overwhelming neglect in our generation of the late-mediaeval Tamil classics, once the bread-and-butter of a Tamil education. The late-mediaeval poets were themselves very much aware of the long tradition within which they sought to situate themselves. Thus when Kacciyappamunivar composed his *Tanikaippuranam* on the shrine at Tiruttani in the mid-eighteenth century, he casually threw in some 600 *akam* verses in the Cankam mode—in effect, an entire embedded *kovai* arranged along mediaeval lines but at the same time profoundly continuous with the ancient contents and conventions. How old were the palm-leaf manuscripts that served the modern editors of the Cankam corpus? It is perhaps not so hard to get lost if so much is to be gained by being found.

In addition, the domain we might call 'Tamil Sanskrit' or 'Sanskrit in Tamil' is no less rich, varied and creative than in any of the other south Indian regions—despite the regnant prejudice that would have us believe that Tamil is the least

Sanskritised of the southern languages. It is true that, historically speaking, the Tamil literary tradition was sustained largely by a non-Brahmin elite; yet we find here, too, patterns of profound symbiosis rather than any stable forms of opposition, and not much that is moribund. A striking verse from the *Naitatam* (sixteenth century; see above) says that when all the kings of the earth came to Damayanti's wedding, in order to communicate with one another they happily, or lovingly, spoke only in Sanskrit (*arputan evarun teva-pataiyin araivar*, 12.7—following and extending Sriharsa's *Naisadhiya-carita* 10.34). Here is one evident benefit of the diglossia or, better, polyglossia that was the normal socio-linguistic reality in all of southern India for at least the last thousand years. Clearly, the model we should be seeking for *all* the regional literary cultures must aim at explaining, before all else, the particular forms of resonance, enrichment and novelty that resulted from this deep interweaving of these cultures with one another and with Sanskrit on all levels. There is much that is truly new, even revolutionary. (One of Nagaraj's most fascinating observations, though it gets lost under the debris of his ideological discontent, points to the use of Sanskrit by Kannada poets as a 'secularising' force: p. 346.) What is it, then, that could be said to die? Not, apparently, Cankam poetry, with its ramified literary grammar; not the classical stylistic and metrical-musical paradigms set by Nannaya for Telugu and by Pampa, Ponna and Ranna for Kannada; and certainly not that powerful, readily available enhancement of linguistic experience and perception that we typically call 'Sanskrit'. Thus in thinking about the regional languages in relation to classical or canonical Sanskrit sources, whether *kavya* or *sastra*, and in attempting to understand the Sanskrit poetry produced in some relation to these full-fledged regional literary cultures, we might, in general, prefer a language of transformation and innovative depth—including that radical transmutation of Sanskrit syntax, metrics, lexis, aesthetics, and linguistic imagination that produced in south India, over centuries, 'a sea-change/into something rich and strange'.

David Shulman

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

II

As I write this review, Mu. Arunachalam's massive 14-volume history of Tamil literature through the centuries (*Tamil Ilakkiya Varalaru*, Thiruchittrambalam, 1969–75), interestingly not referred to at all in the late Norman Cutler's fine essay on Tamil literary culture in this volume, is being reprinted after some 30 years, in a sense substantiating Cutler's argument that 'modern visions of the Tamil literary sphere (. . .) incorporate the chronological dimension' (p. 288).

Sheldon Pollock's massive and breathtaking edited volume *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* is a major landmark in conceptualising and practising a new kind of literary history at a time when questions such as

Is Literary History Possible? are being raised.⁴ The erudition and sophistication that this book manifests, and the understanding it furthers, call for celebration. In a postcolonial situation where it is difficult to come across anyone familiar with, not to speak of expertise in, more than one literary culture of India, 17 scholars have come together to speak about at least 15 literary cultures. Apart from the linguistic diversity, the range of source material used, the disciplinary perspectives, the wide temporal periods covered also make it impossible for any one scholar to speak about the whole volume. This review is confined to the Dravidian literary cultures with an accentuated Tamil inflection.

Sheldon Pollock, in putting together this volume, has specifically disavowed organisation 'according to gross language family—Dravidian and Indo-Aryan, for example' as it would 'marginalize in advance the powerful influence that Sanskrit (...) had on Dravidian' (p. 33). However, by bunching the four essays on Tamil, Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam together as Part 2 of the volume under the rubric 'Literature in Southern Locales', it is not clear if he has been able to avoid the feared pitfalls.

Norman Cutler's 'Three Moments in the Genealogy of Tamil Literary Culture' is the first essay in this part. Through a study of the autobiography of U. Ve. Swaminatha Iyer, Cutler explores Tamil literary culture in the later half of the nineteenth century—the world of literary production in the Saiva mutts, systems of patronage, U. Ve. Swaminatha Iyer's move from the world of mutts to the world of modern education, and how he ultimately found his *métier*, recovering and editing and publishing classical Tamil texts. The second moment that Cutler considers is the emergence in the twentieth century of the genre of the history of Tamil literature with its accent on the chronological dimension, and argues that 'the writing of literary histories is itself a distinctive mode of literary culture' (p. 305). Cutler then takes up the treatment of canonical texts—*Tirukkural*, *Cilappatikaram* and *Kamba Ramayanam* in these literary histories. From these two modern moments, Cutler then moves on to take a look at the fifteenth-century literary anthology, *Purattirattu*, to see how a pre-modern literary culture was enacted. Here, he takes up the question of canonisation at various moments in Tamil literary tradition and argues that *Purattirattu* 'is informed by a much greater degree of consciousness of a specifically literary heritage' (p. 307; emphasis in the original) by inter alia drawing attention to the absence of (religious) sectarianism in the choice of texts anthologised. Cutler sums up by pointing out that despite the rupture in the pre-modern and modern envisionings of literature, 'Tamil literature' is a meaningful category and that in each of the three moments, 'there is an underlying sense that the Tamil language provides an arena for the creation of, transmission of, and reflection upon literature' (p. 319).

D.R. Nagaraj, in his essay on 'Critical Tensions in the History of Kannada Literary Culture', posits a significant connection between public inscriptions and

⁴ David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?*, Baltimore, 1992.

literary works between the fifth and twelfth centuries, which he argues posed problems for the formation of the epic imagination. For Nagaraj, 'the beginning of inscriptional writing (...) makes an assertion about the cultural identity of a language'; 'a critical moment in the process of vernacularization' (p. 326). The historical unity that existed between the institutions of state and religious power in this period is ruptured in the twelfth century, which in turn leads to a new conception of language at odds with the hierarchies imposed by the Sanskrit cosmopolis. This is Kannada's moment in the vernacular millennium. *Kavirajamarga* becomes the exemplary text that was itself 'a major actor in the process it was trying to theorize' (p. 331). At this vernacular moment in the twelfth century, radical new epistemes about the social and cultural order emerge and 'an entirely new communicative form appeared, along with a new religious practice' (p. 347) in the form of the Virasaiva movement and its literary form, the *vacana*. The elimination of the king and the court from the discourse of literature is a major achievement of the *vacanakaras*. Within a few centuries, however, the rebels were incorporated within the very order which they opposed.

Velcheru Narayana Rao, in his essay on 'Multiple Literary Cultures in Telugu: Court, Temple, and Public', puts forward a constructivist argument that 'Telugu literature' as a category did not emerge until the early decades of the twentieth century, when literary historians produced it for pedagogical purposes. Many disparate traditions existed in pre-modern times which were reformulated into 'a linear and continuous story' (p. 384) of the history of Telugu literature. Narayana Rao focuses on four traditions, viz., the Brahmanical tradition, the anti-Brahmanical tradition, the courtly tradition and the temple tradition. In Narayana Rao's arguments, too, in a separate section on 'The question of literary language', Sanskrit figures prominently in Telugu literary culture. By the eleventh century, the Sanskrit understanding of the textual world becomes hegemonic. Sanskrit sources are acknowledged while non-Sanskrit sources are not.

Rich Freeman's 'Genre and Society: The Literary Culture of Premodern Kerala' takes an anthropological perspective on the social context in which Malayalam textual practices were produced. Akin to Narayana Rao, Freeman also takes a constructivist view of what is now defined as Malayalam literature. The focus is mainly on performative forms and forums and the central question for him is how Malayalam has defined itself in relation and contradistinction to Tamil and Sanskrit. In this, *Lilatilakam* (fourteenth century) is a crucial text, seen by modern scholars as defining the originary moment of Malayalam language. Using this text, Freeman analyses in detail the style of *manipravalam* with its distinct mixture of Sanskrit and Keralabasha. (Given the avowed comparative perspective that the volume adopts, it is surprising that Freeman does not consider the earlier *manipravalam* used in Tamil literary culture by Jain and Vaishnava scholars and commentators.) Tamil is given a special place in this text. He then goes on to elaborate on the courtesan culture exemplified in *Lilatilakam*. Further issues that he explores are the Tamil poetic form of *pattu*, the *kavyas* of Cerusseri, and the

genre of messenger poems. From the heavily Dravidian literary culture prior to the sixteenth century, Freeman traces a shift to a Sanskritic Puranic religiosity exemplified in Eluttaccan's *Adhyatma Ramayana*. This 'domesticated religious textuality' (p. 479), he argues, gets incorporated into performative contexts and genres such as *kathakali* and *tullal*.

Evidently, a substantive part of the volume is informed by Sheldon Pollock's argument about the Sanskrit cosmopolis that obtained in the first millennium and the vernacular millennium which replaced it in the next. Pollock himself has written at some length on Kannada and to a certain extent on Tamil (with respect to Tamil public inscriptions in the later part of the first millennium). Tamil's problematic position within the cosmopolitan/vernacular paradigm has been acknowledged parenthetically on occasion by Pollock himself: 'The new literary textualizations of regional languages in South Asia have enormous temporal depth, covering (the Tamil case aside) almost a millennium'.⁵ At places, Pollock has also elided the Tamil question by remaining silent about an earlier millennium of writing and literary production in Tamil and instead refers only to how 'Tamil literature experiences a new surge of creativity' in the new millennium.⁶ One would have expected this volume to address this issue squarely.⁷

The essays on Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam are informed by this notion of a vernacular millennium. Nagaraj's essay, which does show signs of its posthumous finalisation, especially draws attention to the consciousness of the major Kannada authors about the larger responsibility entailed upon them with the new process of vernacularisation and points to the way in which the Kannada language transgressed boundaries set by Sanskrit cultural formation. Narayana Rao's essay on Telugu literature fits in more neatly within the agenda set out in the introduction by Pollock by exploring the multiple literary cultures centred on court, temple and the public. Rich Freeman looks at the social contexts in which pre-modern textual practices created Malayalam literature. In fact, all these essays are in some sense concerned with 'the primary moments of vernacularization'.⁸ However, interestingly, and disappointingly, Norman Cutler's is the only essay that does not engage with the vernacular millennium at all. In fact, his bibliography does not even mention any of Pollock's work.

There are also other marked contrasts between the essays on Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam on the one hand and Tamil on the other. The theory of *marga/desi* is

⁵ Sheldon Pollock, 'Literary History, Indian History, World History', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 23 (10–12), 1995, p. 119.

⁶ Sheldon Pollock, 'The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, A.D. 300–1300: Transculturation, Vernacularization, and the Question of Ideology', in J.E.M. Houben, ed., *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit: Contributions to the History of the Sanskrit Language*, Leiden, 1996, p. 243.

⁷ Herman Tiekens, *Kavya in South India: Old Tamil Cankam Poetry*, Groningen, 2001, is, to use a phrase that Tiekens himself employs to describe the people depicted in the *akam* poetry, a 'foolish' attempt to force Tamil into the cosmopolitan/vernacular paradigm.

⁸ Sheldon Pollock, 'The Cosmopolitan Vernacular', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 57 (1), 1998, p. 31.

central to the literary cultures of Kannada and Telugu as Nagaraj and Narayana Rao view them respectively. Nagaraj asserts that ‘in fundamental ways, *desi* is one of the defining features of Indian literatures’ (p. 334) and characterises the specific manifestation of the *desi/marga* tension in the history of Kannada prosody as ‘a dazzling story’ (p. 338). He also complicates the notion of *desi* by arguing for multiple *desis* in the specific context of Kannada. Similarly, Narayana Rao’s essay is also informed by the notion of *marga/desi* and how the traditional opposition where *marga* equals Sanskrit and *desi* Telugu was reformulated during Vijayanagara times on the basis of style.

In Tamil literary culture, despite the long and often contradistinctive engagement with Sanskrit, the categories of *marga* and *desi* do not exist. Similarly, the *campu*, the genre of courtly epic missing prose and verse that permeates Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam literary cultures, is virtually unknown to Tamil. While *kavya* is used across Indian literary cultures to mean practically all forms of high poetry, in Tamil (even granting that the Tamil term *kappiyam* comes from *kavya*, as Cutler suggests) it is used in a much narrower sense of an epic genre. In this context Pollock’s assertion that ‘The theory no less than the practice of Sanskrit *kavya*, as almost every chapter in this volume demonstrates, was the single most powerful determinant of vernacular conception of literature until it was supplemented or displaced by Persian and English counterparts’ (p. 41) does not quite stick despite the ‘almost’ which may be argued to exclude Tamil. The near silence about *Tolkappiyam*, the great Tamil grammatical text, in the volume is also very interesting. Apart from one reference to it in Cutler’s essay and a more substantive statement in Nagaraj’s (as an important text that ‘registers a complex process of negotiation and exchange between [the cosmopolitan and the vernacular]’, pp. 331–32), there is nothing about *Tolkappiyam* which configures a very different view of literature and the world. Even conceding that much of the terminology of Tamil grammar is a translation (here one may note Narayana Rao’s comment that ‘It is curious that in a language [Telugu] used to “translate” a large number of Sanskrit texts, there is no word equivalent to “translation”’ [p. 421] *Tolkappiyam* has one: ‘*mozhipayarppu*’, literally ‘language transfer’) of concepts from Sanskrit literary culture. (Here mention must be made of Cutler’s proclivity to give in parenthesis Sanskrit equivalents for Tamil terms; spelling ‘Saivism’ as ‘Shaivism’ with an ‘h’ and using ‘purana’ instead of ‘puranam’ detract not only from the transliteration scheme adopted but also tend to conform Tamil to Sanskrit.) Why Tamil should choose to translate rather than adopt them, as other languages have done, is a question for detailed analysis.

In the face of such incompatibilities and incongruities in terminology, it is somewhat inexplicable that Pollock should assert that ‘In general, the state of literary taxonomy was a steady one and nearly two thousand years. And in this we can perceive both a victory and a defeat of Sanskrit literary culture’ (p. 61).

I am not making a case for Tamil exclusivity here. As this volume of sophisticated and erudite essays bears out, ‘the force of literary creation and propagation’ is not ‘hermetically sealed off from contact and cross-fertilization with other languages

and their literatures' (p. 319). Far from it. But the marked epistemological differences, especially in the case of Tamil terminology, need to be problematised. The notion of a Sanskrit cosmopolis, and a vernacular millennium that undermined that cosmopolis, while extremely productive in terms of understanding most literary cultures in pre-modern India, is evidently debilitating in the case of Tamil. Similarly, Pollock's notion of the Sanskrit cosmopolis as a 'transregional cultural formation in the premodern world',⁹ documented through the inscriptional record, while being extremely persuasive and convincing, does not factor in the whole corpus of Tamil inscriptions in the centuries before the Common Era.¹⁰

Further, even the scattered references in this volume in the essays on the literary cultures of Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam and even Sinhala indicate, Tamil was a significant presence, even if it was not a cosmopolis, across a wide region. The Tamil *Periyapurānam* is crucial to the Kannada Virasaiva world, which in turn was transmitted to Telugu. (Mention may also be made to its Sanskrit translation as *Upamanyu Bhakta Vilasam*.) As Narayana Rao acknowledges, 'Tamil is a canonical language for Vaishnava Telugu poets'. Even despite Freeman's many vague and ambiguous references to the pervasive Dravidian elements—when it seems to actually mean Tamil—it seems that well up to the immediate pre-modern period, Malayalam literary culture cannot be understood except in relation to Tamil (and Sanskrit). Charles Hallisey's statement in the essay on Sinhala literary culture that 'the conventions and vocabulary of Tamil literature left an indelible mark on Sinhala poetry'; the authoritative status that a seventeenth-century Sinhala author gives to Tamil (p. 729); and the influence of the Tamil grammar *Viracoliyam* on Sinhala grammar, where it produces a unique 'grammar with poetics, a combination not found in Sanskrit' (p. 729) attest to the transregional influence of Tamil. Any attempt to theorise literary culture in India would necessarily have to contend with the Tamil question. (It might not be unfair to think that Hindi and Urdu, with two essays each, have taken a disproportionately large share of the space.)

Another issue that may have to be seriously considered if the gains of the present volume are to be furthered would be to expand the historical focus. While one would not want to be an Oliver Twist asking for more, there is too much on the pre-modern in many of the literary cultures explored in the essays. It is especially so for the Dravidian languages. While modern and contemporary notions (especially nationalism) that have shaped the understanding of the pre-modern have been problematised in all the essays, the non-engagement with modern literary culture may easily slip into an Indological denial of modernity to many languages.

Coda

The year of Meenakshisundaram Pillai's death is given variously as 1876 (p. 272) and 1875 (p. 273). 1876 is the correct date.

⁹ Sheldon Pollock, 'The Sanskrit Cosmopolis'.

¹⁰ See Irvatham Mahadevan, *Early Tamil Epigraphy: From the Earliest Times to the Sixth Century A.D.*, Chennai and Cambridge (Mass.), 2003.

p. 287, 35n. The first Tamil novel, *Pratapa Mutaliyar Carittiram* by S. Vedanayakam Pillai, was first published in 1879 and not 1876—a mistake repeated countless times in English writings on Tamil literature.

A.R. Venkatachalapathy

Madras Institute of Development Studies
Chennai

III

The first histories of north Indian literatures, written during the colonial and nationalist periods, were heavily involved in crystallising communities around language and cultural identity. This is why, although India was a deeply multi-lingual society, with multiple traditions of knowledge and of literary production conducted in specific languages and a marked diglossia between ‘classical’ languages and the ‘vernaculars’, literary histories were, and still are, written in terms of separate, single-language traditions—in north India as the competitive and teleological histories of (‘Hindu’) Hindi and (‘Muslim’ or secular) Urdu. The alternative to the fractious history of Hindi vs Urdu has been a narrative of ‘composite culture’, where selective syncretic traditions have been taken as definitive evidence that culture acted as a great cohesive force in the mixed Indo-Muslim polity. Either narrative has had to exclude so much of literary production to prove its point that the first steps, for all those who are sick and tired of them must be, first, to revisit the ground, second to start asking some basic questions, and third to put together the available pieces again. The essays by R.S. McGregor and S.R. Faruqi in the volume take the first two steps admirably, with a wonderful wealth of material and judicious analysis. That in putting the pieces back in a different way McGregor and Faruqi should shy away from doing so *together* is, however, somewhat of a disappointment.¹¹

Drawing upon his unmatched knowledge of early Neo-Indo Aryan (NIA) and mediaeval Hindi texts, McGregor gives us a truly erudite synthesis. His geographical map of the centres of Hindi literary production includes Gwalior, the Braj-Agra area, Orchha and Banaras, with additional centres in Avadh and Mithila. Apart from stray evidence of the use of vernacular (the eleventh-century *Raulavela* inscription at Dhar and twelfth-century glosses to the Sanskrit grammar *Uktivyakti-prakarana* from Banaras), the Gwalior court under the Tomar dynasty emerges in the fifteenth century as the ‘earliest identifiable centre of cultivation of Braj Bhasa poetry’. Vernacular poetry had already started a century earlier in Avadh with the sophisticated and ‘fully-bilingual’ Sufi romantic epics, while in Mithila

¹¹ In formulating this review in relation to the two essays by McGregor and Faruqi, I have benefited from an extensive discussion with Daud Ali, Sudipta Kaviraj, Imre Bangha, Lalita Du Perron, Samira Sheikh and Katherine Brown on 25 Feb. 2005. Any mistake or misrepresentation is, of course, mine.

Vidyapati was experimenting with a form of Apabhramsa. Indeed, Apabhramsa seems unfortunately to fall between the chairs of Sheldon Pollock's essay and of this: the important role it played in parallel with Sanskrit literary culture and as a precursor of NIA literary genres, practised as it was in north India until the fifteenth century, deserved a separate treatment. By the fifteenth century, the confluence between western devotionalism and northern Nath yogi traditions produced its first north Indian Sant poets with Kabir and Raidas, and '[b]y about 1400, Sant teachings spread from Rajasthan to Banaras' (p. 934).

In his earlier history, McGregor had called the sixteenth century the 'mature period',¹² and truly this century witnessed the explosion of Krishna devotionalism and the consolidation of *sampradayas* in the Braj area, though 'non-sectarian poets were also active and numerous'. This efflorescence is usually explained in terms of Akbar's liberal policy, but in fact it was during the reign of the supposedly unsympathetic Sikandar Lodi that the Krishnaite *sampradayas* first came and settled in Braj.¹³ McGregor underlines the generative power of such phenomena for Braj Bhasha literature—from songs to hagiographic tales, to more erudite *prabandha-kavya* and theoretical texts of theology and poetics (first in Sanskrit and then also in Braj Bhasha). Central to this phenomenon is the figure of the poet-scholar Nanddas (fl. 1585), as McGregor is keen to point out that the Braj Bhasha literary culture centred around Krishna devotion was not first popular and then 'mannerist', but mannerist *and* popular from the start; in fact, new popular elements kept appearing in poetry and mythology. In parallel to this development, it was at the Bundela court of Orchha that the sophisticated style of Braj Bhasha poetry known as *riti* developed, a kind of poetry which took the whole of north India by storm and constituted one of the two elite forms of vernacular poetry for the next three centuries. McGregor sees Kesavdas, the accomplished initiator of this trend, as someone 'conscious of the cultural role that is to be played by Braj Bhasha as the recipient and communicating agent of older tradition'; he mentions the 'open access' that Braj Bhasha won him to Birbal, Akbar's minister at the Agra court, but in the context of a book on 'Indian literary culture' much more could have been said (as Allison Busch has done in her work) on the new and mixed audiences that Braj Bhasha *riti* poetry swiftly acquired.¹⁴

Ramaite poetry in the sixteenth century is clearly influenced by contemporary Krishna poetry and devotionalism, but Tulsidas's great success is in producing an original synthesis which could 'win over maximum assent for his larger view of religion and culture from the Krishnaising Ram sectarians'. That he should choose Avadhi *chaupai* and *doha* as developed by Avadhi Sufis is 'natural', yet more could

¹² R.S. McGregor, *Hindi Literature from Its Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century*, Wiesbaden, 1984.

¹³ Allan W. Entwistle, *Braj: Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage*, Groningen, 1987, p. 136.

¹⁴ Allison R. Busch, 'The Courtly Vernacular: The Transformation of Brajbhāṣā Literary Culture (1590–1690)', PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, 2003.

be said, as Thomas De Bruijn has recently done, about the subtle cross-influences between texts which, within Hindi literary history, have been presented as belonging to two separate streams (and two separate communities). This separateness is belied both in intertextual references and by a partly overlapping history of recitation.

If there is at all an agenda in McGregor's essay, it seems to be to prove that 'Sanskritised Hindi' was not an 'invention' of the nineteenth century, as both George Grierson and other critics of modern Hindi suggested, but a recurrent feature in the Hindi literary tradition. This seems undoubted, but there is a deeper level at which his essay does not question the basis of the Hindi story, which sees Braj Bhasha and Avadhi (but not Urdu) as part of the cultural identity of the modern Hindi-Hindu community. To take community and cultural identity as the unproblematic bases for a literary history that is so fragmented and diversified in terms of language, region and taste made a lot of sense in the nationalist period, but a more dispassionate historical look now would take 'textual communities' and 'cultural identities' (in the plural) as changing over time. Were the many adaptations from Sanskrit into Braj Bhasha in the seventeenth century, for example, really due to 'a wish for the reassurance of defining values of one's culture in terms of achievements of the past during a time of social and political uncertainty' during the reign of Aurangzeb and after? Perhaps they were, but perhaps they carried a different set of meanings.

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's is certainly a more revisionist approach, and he confronts several received assumptions in Urdu literary historiography head on. He is rightly severe both with those who want to deny Urdu's claim to the 'Hindi' literary tradition, with those who have dismissed the popular, Indian roots and traditions of Urdu, and with a literary history that has privileged Delhi as the centre and arbiter of Urdu literary culture and has quietly silenced the contribution of other centres and of the many Hindu poets. Faruqi casts his net wider than older histories of Urdu, but it could have been wider still, as Sayyida Ja'far and Gyanchand Jain have done in their five-volume history of Urdu literature before 1700.¹⁵ What he does admirably is to ask some basic questions: why is there such a gap between the first putative literary attempts at vernacular poetry by Mas'ud Sa'd Salman (1046–1121) and Amir Khusrau (1253–1325) and the first available Hindavi texts even in Gujarat and the Deccan: the Gujri songs by Sheikh Bajan (1388–1506) and Fakhr-ud-Din Nizami's *masnavi* (1421/2) in the Deccan? And, more strikingly, why is there *no* Hindavi poetry and prose in north India *at all* before the seventeenth century, despite the fact that sources indicate that it was the common *lingua franca* of both Muslims and Hindus? He suggests that the efforts by elite poets such as Ma'sud Sa'd Salman and Khusrau should be considered casual and not in accordance with any established mode of writing. For this reason, they were not preserved. By contrast, since the Sufis addressed themselves to specific groups of followers

¹⁵ Sayyida Ja'far and Gyan Chand Jain, *Tarikh-e Adab-e Urdu, 1700 tak*, 5 volumes, New Delhi, 1998.

and devotees, it was natural for their prose and poetry to be preserved, orally or in writing. Sufis in Avadh wrote *also* in Avadhi, and no Sufi seems to have made Hindi/Hindavi a vehicle of literary expression in the north before Shaikh 'Abdul-Quddus Gangohi (1455–1538)—certainly none from Delhi. Faruqi suggests that the reason why Sufis did not adopt this language in the early centuries was the universal popularity and general understandability of Persian in the north, obviating for the Sufis the need to use Hindi/Hindavi for their popular discourse. Moreover, the popularity in the north of Rekhta, that is Hindavi and Persian mixed, seems to have retarded the growth of independent Hindi/Hindavi literature (pp. 837–38).

Gyanchand Jain and Sayyeda Ja'far, in their history, have dug up many stray vernacular verses by several Sufis in north India as preserved in Persian *malfuzat* and *maktubat* from the fourteenth century onwards. What kind of Hindi they are in remains to be seen, and Faruqi's argument that no Hindavi *literary text* was written (or preserved) still stands, but the impression even from these occasional references is that Sufi saints who composed poetry were not ignorant of, or indifferent to, popular Hindi genres. Further, stray utterances and sayings in the vernacular suggest that their discourses may have been *recorded* in Persian, but that perhaps were spoken in a language that at least contained vernacular expressions, much as Latin sermons did in contemporary Italy. While it is undeniable that a vernacular literary culture developed only at the regional Muslim courts of the Deccan, in Gujarat and in Jaunpur on the basis of Indian literary models—both popular models and highly literate ones (poets like Shaikh Ahmad Gujarati claimed knowledge of Telugu and Sanskrit)—do we know enough about literary culture in Delhi and Avadh to rule out any vernacular activity during the Sultanate and early Mughal periods? Did perhaps the popularity of music and of song genres, for example, pave the way for the later popularity of what came to be known as Braj Bhasha poetry among the Mughal and post-Mughal elites? Mir 'Abdul Wahid Bilgrami's *Haqa'iq-i Hindi* (1566), for example, contained *dhrupad* songs and justified their use in Sufi *sama*'.¹⁶ Once again, more pieces need to be put together.

Two, then, appear to me to be basic shortcomings in these otherwise admirably erudite accounts. First, the multi-lingualism that pervaded north Indian society is not taken enough into account as a *condition* and a *generative principle* of the literary system. The two essays discuss diglossia only in terms of, respectively, Sanskrit-Hindi and Persian-Urdu, with the classical languages providing pools of vocabulary and literary models, but Shantanu Phukan has rightly suggested that, at least until 1700, in north India we need to think in terms of Hindi and Persian. When Faruqi does discuss (and what an interesting and informed discussion it is!) the impact of Sanskrit literary theory on Deccani and Gujri poets, we also miss a sense of the socio-literary context in which this familiarity was acquired, and of the avenues of its dissemination. This brings me to the second problem,

¹⁶ S.A.A. Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, Vol. I, Delhi, 1978, p. 350; also Muzaffar Alam, 'Assimilation from a Distance: Sufi Accommodation in Awadh Society', in S. Gopal and R. Champalakshmi, eds, *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology*, Delhi, 1996, p. 174.

the fact that the stories of Hindi and Urdu are still told as separate stories and not as parts of a common story that also necessarily comprises Persian, Sanskrit and music. Once we start telling it as a *common* story and join together the pieces in a geographical and chronological fashion, we can begin to see the range of available options and lines of influence at any given time and place, and we can start asking ourselves the reasons behind certain literary-linguistic choices and fashions.¹⁷

Let me give just three examples, which are really three questions. Faruqi's big question regarding Hindavi/Urdu concerns its 'early' beginning in the north, its subsequent development in the Deccan and Gujarat, and inexplicably long silence in the north, where almost 'nothing' can be found until 1700 because Persian was 'universally' understood in Sufi circles and courtly circles were not interested. But what happens when we start seeing Sultanate Delhi as a place where, for example, Apabhramsa continued to be used by Jains until at least the sixteenth century, and where semi-popular texts like the *Qutubshatak* emerged, with its tale of Sultan, dervishes and *dhadhinis*?¹⁸ What do we know about the songs sung at the *dargah* of Nizamuddin Awliya and his successors? How does Faruqi's hypothesis square with Muzaffar Alam's story, in the same volume, about the *decline* of Persian in the fifteenth century and the general trend towards vernacularisation? Certainly, Chishti and Shattari Sufis and the regional courts of Jaunpur and Malwa (not to speak of Gujarat and the Deccan) were familiar with and cultivating some form of 'Hindi', whether for songs, *dohas* or narrative poems.

Another example. How do we put together the infectious popularity of Braj Bhasha *rīti* poetry starting from the sixteenth century, a popularity that went straight to the heart of Akbar's court (as we saw from Kesavdas's own account) and spread among Muslim elites, with the sudden cultivation of Rekhta poetry in Delhi from 1700? Are they two different stories or are they part of the same narrative? From Muzaffar Alam's account we discover that the growth and development of vernacular literature, especially in the sixteenth century and after, went hand in hand with a growing spread of Persian outside the court, among Hindu elites and even artisanal classes. This suggests a process of *parallel* diffusion of Persian and vernacular literary production and even wider consumption. What does it tell us about the kind of literary culture that north Indian society produced?

A third question. What happens when we try to insert other elements—such as music and singing—into the picture? When we consider, as Alam does in the case of Persian, the kinds and levels of literary education that formed the basis for the cultivation of poetic tastes? Frances Pritchett in this volume does a wonderful job of sketching Urdu literary education, based on the personal *ustad-shagird* relation, but the accounts only speak of Persian and Rekhta in the eighteenth and

¹⁷ See Shantanu Phukan, "'Through Throats Where Many Rivers Meet': The Ecology of Hindi in the World of Persian", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. XXXVIII (1), Jan.–Mar. 2001, pp. 33–58.

¹⁸ *Qutubshatak*, ed. Mataprasad Gupta, Delhi, 1967; B.N. Goswamy, 'In the Sultan's Shadow: Pre-Mughal Painting in and around Delhi', in R.E. Frykenberg, ed., *Delhi Through the Ages*, Delhi, 1986.

nineteenth centuries. What had happened to the taste for Braj Bhasha in that elite—the same Braj Bhasha *dhrupad* and *khyal* songs would be in? Why don't we have Persian dictionaries explaining Braj Bhasha terms like the *Tuhfat al-Hind* until the late seventeenth or eighteenth century?

Obviously, I don't have answers to any of these questions, but they are the first to arise when we start to consider Hindi, Urdu and Persian as part of the same story. Multi-lingual and multi-ethnic societies and societies with varying levels of literacy and education are bound to create a multiplicity of 'socio-textual communities' (Pollock's term). And since this was *not* a single-language history, it will require different *methods* from those of single-language histories. Issues of language definition, multiple diglossia, multiple contexts of literary production and circulation, linguistic choice and motivation, literary and cultural exchange, competition and accommodation—all of these need to be addressed in a context of multi-lingualism. What I have in mind is something like María Angeles Gallego's analysis of the languages of mediaeval Spain.¹⁹ The situation there was just as complicated, with a mutually recognised 'multiple diglossia' between Latin ('low' Latin) and the Castilian Romance (vernacular), classical and spoken Arabic, and Hebrew. Gallego's account shows that language use and diglossia played themselves out differently in the three religious communities and in two distinct political set-ups—Christians, Muslims and Jews in Christian and Muslim kingdoms. After establishing these parameters—political set-up, domain of language use (both literary and non-literary, for example, administrative, or spoken), community and occupation—Gallego is able to connect each type of language use and textual production with a specific motivation.²⁰ Similarly, in north India we do not witness a process of straightforward 'vernacularisation', but rather a complex situation of multiple diglossia, with a new 'high language' (Persian) coming in, Apabhramsa and Sanskrit established in their respective domains, and the development of *several* vernaculars (Avadhi, Hindavi, Braj Bhasha) used for literary purposes with none of them taking over. And the use of a 'Hindi' diction by Persian courtly and Sufi poets may indicate a desire to evoke the intimate world of female domesticity, 'macaronic' parody or simply stylistic virtuosity.²¹

Setting aside divisive debates over language definition (Hindi or Urdu?), one can take on board local taxonomies (*bhakha*, Hindavi, etc.), but then had better

¹⁹ María Angeles Gallego, 'The Languages of Medieval Iberia and their Religious Dimension', *Medieval Encounters*, Vol. 9 (1), 2003, pp. 107–39.

²⁰ For example, while Christians shifted to Romance, Muslims and Jews had more complex language behaviour. Muslims used Arabic and Jews Hebrew for religious and socio-legal texts; Jews wrote important literary works in Hebrew for *cosmopolitan consumption*, and both created new mixed varieties of (Arabo-Romance and Judeo-Romance) for *internal consumption* within the community. Multi-lingual intellectuals were channels of cultural transmission: under the patronage of king Alfonso X the Learned (r. 1252–84), who set up a 'School of Translators' at Toledo, Jewish scholars (who were reluctant to use Latin) translated texts from Arabic into Castilian, while Christians translated from Castilian into Latin; Gallego, 'The Languages of Medieval Iberia', pp 112, 118–19.

²¹ For the first, see Phukan, "'Through Throats Where Many Rivers Meet'"; for the latter, see Imre Bangha, 'Rekhta Poetry in North India' (forthcoming).

look at the language of texts—those which are extant!—in terms of register, and think of the range of possibilities available and the reason behind specific choices.²² Works on diglossia suggest that rather than thinking purely in terms of High vs Low language we need to think of more restricted linguistic varieties: the vernacular can be either a *koine*, a regional dialect, a local vernacular, a specialised jargon. Also, they suggest that rather than as a sharp dichotomy, it is better to think of diglossia as a continuum, which makes register all the more significant. Sudipta Kaviraj in his contribution to the Pollock volume has suggested that Bengali poets had the option of writing in ‘Sanskrit-near’ or ‘Sanskrit-far’ Bengali. We could adapt this spatial metaphor to both the High and Low language: ‘ornate Persian’ vs ‘simple Persian’; ‘Persian-near’ or ‘Persian-far’ and ‘Sanskrit-near’ or ‘Sanskrit-far’ vernacular. Each time it was a specific choice with a specific motivation within the multi-lingual world.

Two final points. The first is that we need new maps that will include Hindi, Urdu, Persian and Apabhramsa. We need historico-geographical maps, starting from the Sultanate period, which go beyond Delhi and take into account regional kingdoms and the network of cities and the qasbas of Avadh and Bihar.²³ We also need topologies that will map the spaces of literary production and consumption,²⁴ in order to note the contiguity or distance between literary actors and to move beyond impressionistic and anecdotal evidence of ‘cultural contact’ between writers and performers of different traditions. Finally, we need a map of literary genres.

Genres, and this is my second and final point, are useful to find one’s bearings in a literary culture. Every literary culture has its system of genres and operates a kind of ‘division of labour’ in which each genre ‘specialises’ in a particular range of emotion and experience. Genre, Gian Biagio Conte has argued, is a strategy for the poet (a strategy, not a handbook);²⁵ it also gives indications to the reader and is part of the author-reader ‘contract’ which each text can then choose whether or not to fulfil; for these reasons genre is useful both for interpreting the text and its play with generic conventions, as well as for situating a text within the broader horizon of the literary culture. Finally, and this is all the more true in a multi-lingual literary system, genre often acts as a dynamic element in literary change:

²² As Imre Bangha suggests most sensibly, it is not useful to try and define the language of works that are not extant, at least not in their original form, like Gorakhnath’s *bani* and Amir Khusrau’s Hindi compositions; Imre Bangha, personal communication. Shantanu Phukan also proposed to move away from anachronistic explanations for choosing the vernacular as the ‘voice of the people’.

²³ A point made forcefully by Mushirul Hasan, *From Pluralism to Separatism: Qasbas in Colonial Awadh*, Delhi, 2004.

²⁴ Bearing in mind that communities of readers are usually larger than communities of writers: e.g., manuscripts of Braj Bhasha poetry in Bihar are very numerous, but Braj Bhasha *poets* are very few; Imre Bangha, personal communication.

²⁵ Gian Biagio Conte, ‘Genres between Empiricism and Theory’, in Conte, *Genres and Readers*, trans. Glenn W. Most, Baltimore and London, 1986, pp. 105–28.

innovations are often borrowings. Specific genres are mentioned in the two essays—McGregor shows how the *prabandha-kavya* ‘treats’ the ‘matter of Krishna’ differently from the *pad*, and Faruqi notes that Urdu literary culture in Gujarat and the Deccan favours the *masnavi*, while that in the north centres around the *ghazal*—but a more systematic, and comparative, treatment of the issue of genre could have told us a lot about historical, geographical and social differences, and about continuities and discontinuities.

A history of north Indian literary culture must necessarily be a collaborative project, given the range of linguistic abilities required. That in a collaborative project such as this the most eminent scholars in the field should have each told his own story rather than holding a conversation cannot but feel, therefore, like a missed opportunity.

Francesca Orsini
University of Cambridge

IV

B.K. Nehru recounts a story told to him by Motilal Nehru about an experience the latter had in 1928 while sitting in his compartment in a train about to leave Howrah station. He was recognised from the platform by a Bengali Muslim gentleman in ‘frock coat’ and *turki topi*, who greeted him in a heavy Calcutta Hindustani:

The gentleman in the red cap was very effusive: ‘*Bauri khoshi hoa aap se milke, bauri khoshi hoa*’ [‘Delighted to meet you, delighted’]. Panditji said he could not help saying, ‘*Achchha aap bhi Urdu bolte hain*’ [‘Oh, you too speak Urdu?’]. At which the gentleman, highly excited at the insulting implication replied, ‘*Hain, boley ga noin, boley ga noin, nobi Miyan ka joban ...!*’ [‘What! Not speak it? Not speak the language of the Prophet?’].²⁶

This funny little story from the Nehru family (and thus from the annals of Indian nationalism) condenses a great deal of the complexity of the language conflict that helped tear apart the fabric of society in north India in the modern era: in his unselfconscious sense of the inherent superiority of the ‘Urdu’ version of the northern vernacular, this Kashmiri-U.P. Pandit and leading light of the Congress is indistinguishable from the Muslim *ashraf*; what the Calcutta Muslim utters here and thinks of as ‘Urdu’ is an elemental vernacular performance whose larger linguistic universe could just as well be identified as ‘Hindi’; and this common north Indian vernacular, when identified as ‘Urdu’, comes to acquire a sacred quality for this Bengali-speaking Muslim, as ‘the language of the Prophet [*nabi*]’. A whole series of antinomies that structured the discourse of the Hindi-Urdu

²⁶ B.K. Nehru, ‘Memories of a Shared Culture’, in *Common Heritage*, ed. Muhammad Ali Siddiqui, Karachi, 2000, p. 64.

conflict—elite versus subaltern, alien versus indigenous, Hindu and Muslim, the sacred and the secular—are thus visible in this amusing, possibly apocryphal, anecdote.

The Hindi-Urdu conflict is perhaps unique among the language conflicts that have proliferated in numerous societies across the world in the modern era in the seeming unavailability of an ‘objective’ viewpoint—historical, morphological, literary-critical—from which the most basic features of the history of this linguistic and literary complex may be formulated. Even the most careful scholarly interventions seem unable in the end to avoid assuming the perspective of one or the other set of rival historical claims, that is, to avoid lapsing into the *polemic*, now at least a century and a half old, that has defined the terms of literary-historical and even linguistic discussion in this terrain. This seems true to some extent of the contributions on Hindi and Urdu in *Literary Cultures in History*, the monumental reconsideration of the literary history of the subcontinent undertaken by a number of literary scholars of the Indian languages from across the globe under the overall synthesising efforts of Sheldon Pollock, one of the leading Sanskrit scholars of our times. The papers by Shamsur Rahman Faruqi (on Urdu) and Harish Trivedi (on Hindi) in particular do not eschew the polemical mode, and the ones by Frances Pritchett (on Urdu) and Stuart McGregor (on Hindi), while they appear at first glance to be in a more neutral register, in fact merge imperceptibly at various points with some of the historical claims that have traditionally been made in the interest of the particular ‘language’ about which they happen to be writing.²⁷

But the situation is not really symmetrical here. Faruqi, who is arguably the most influential and prolific literary historian and critic of Urdu writing today, makes the most concerted effort to address the history of the polemic itself, as a prelude to discussing the emergence and evolution of the Urdu tradition. His main contribution here may be his careful historical analysis of the various terms by which the literary tradition now referred to as ‘Urdu’—Hindvi, Hindi, Dihlavi, Gujri, Dakhani, Khari Boli, Rekhta, *zaban-e urdu-e mu‘alla*—has been known at various points over the centuries. Faruqi’s explicit purpose is to take apart the assumption, introduced by early British Orientalists of various stripes and shared, unfortunately, by nationalist publicists of Hindi since the late nineteenth century, that ‘Urdu’ developed as a language of military conquest, around the encampments of various Muslim invaders. In the eighteenth century, when the British first attempted to systematise their encounter with the language of north India, ‘the *urdu*’ referred to the seat of Mughal power, namely the city of Shahjahanabad, or Delhi. Hence the term *zaban-e urdu-e mu‘alla* (shortened sometime to *urdu-e mu‘alla* and even simply to *urdu*) meant ‘the language of the exalted city/court of Shahjahanabad’ (p. 806). And from some contemporary texts, at least, it is clear that this term referred originally not to the forms of vernacular language practice we today call

²⁷ In accordance with the journal editors’ request, my remarks here focus on the Urdu contributions.

Urdu, but to *Persian* (pp. 806–7).²⁸ Only from the late eighteenth century can *zaban-e urdu-e mu'alla* and its abbreviations be said to ever refer to the vernacular. Even at that point, however, the term more commonly used for the language of their writing by 'Urdu' writers is *Hindi*, that is, the language of Hind, usually in order to distinguish it from Persian, with 'rekhta' often used as a designation for poetry written in this *rekhta*—that is, 'scattered' or 'mixed'—language. This continued to be the case well into the middle of the nineteenth century, when writers like Syed Ahmed Khan, and even Ghalib, continued to use 'Hindi', 'Rekhta', and even 'Hindi' as the designation for their literary language. In other words, until the late eighteenth century, and in fact well into the nineteenth, vastly different registers of writing, to say nothing of spoken language practices, could co-exist within the same set of overlapping rubrics. In Faruqi's convincing argument, it is only when 'Hindi' is begun to be appropriated in the polemics of the 1860s for the emergent Sanskritised modern Hindi—that is, the same Khari Boli grammatical base as Urdu, but written in Devanagari and with an elaborate Sanskritisation (and de-Persianisation) of vocabulary—that this overlapping use of the terms begins to disappear from view. As Faruqi points out, even so iconic a poet of 'Urdu' as Iqbal, when explaining, in the teens of the twentieth century, his turn to writing in Persian rather than the vernacular, used for the latter the term *Hindi* (p. 806). The new publicists of Urdu as well as those of Hindi progressively exacerbated the split—for instance, in the case of the former, by excising the enormous contribution of writers of Hindu origin to the history of the literature they claimed as exclusively their own, and by failing to examine in any serious way the links of literary Urdu to the variety of spoken forms of the vernacular, thereby further strengthening and establishing the conception of Urdu as a Muslim and elite practice. These publicists of Urdu in the early twentieth century, such as Maulvi Abdul Haq and Syed Sulaiman Nadvi, were not for the most part themselves writers who are held to be significant for the development of its imaginative literature, but critics, scholars, and even some professional propagandists.

For all his success in debunking the notion of Urdu as a tradition alien, or at least not quite indigenous, to India, however, Faruqi too is unable in the end to expand our notion of Urdu literary history in a way as to make the Hindi-Urdu divide a problematic one. The story we are told here is, with some minor revisions, one that is not unfamiliar from earlier literary histories of Urdu: 'beginnings' (now barely visible) in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries (Amir Khusrau), preceded perhaps by a one-shot, and now lost, appearance in the eleventh

²⁸ The word *urdu* itself, Faruqi speculates elsewhere, may have come to mean something like 'royal city', 'court', or seat of imperial authority from the late sixteenth century, when the Emperor Akbar abandoned his seat at the newly built capital, Fatehpur Sikri, in order to create a sort of moving capital that carried the entire central administration with it. See Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History*, Delhi, 2001, p. 28. This book is a more developed version of the article in the Pollock volume. For a third version of this work, significantly different from the other two, see Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, *Urdu ka 'ibtidai zamana: 'Adabi tahzib-o-tarikh ke pahlu*, Karachi, 1999.

century (Mas'ud Sa'd Salman Lahori); then another long gap, followed by the efflorescence in Gujarat and the Deccan in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries (Bahauddin Bajan, Mahmud Daryai, Fakhr-ud-Din Nizami, Khub Muhammad Chishti, Shaikh Ahmad Gujarati, Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah, Mulla Vajhi, Muhammad Nusrat Nusrati, Vali Dakhni); and then finally the flowering in Delhi in the eighteenth (Vali, Khwaja Mir Dard, Mirza Rafi Sauda, Mir Muhammad Taqi 'Mir', Ghulam Hamadani Mushafi). A great deal of the present structure of this canon is due to the labours of 'Abdul Haq in the first half of the twentieth century, who turned the 'discovery' and 'scholarly' publication of rare manuscripts into a sort of cottage industry and almost single-handedly consolidated an Urdu canon, which, like all projects of canon-formation, is significant as much for what it leaves out as for what it includes.²⁹ We do not learn as much as we could from Faruqi about the earlier forms of textuality that were excluded or suppressed by the classical Urdu poetic tradition—known then as 'Rekhta' or 'Hindi'—as it developed in the north, especially in Delhi, from the early eighteenth century. (It is symptomatic of this volume's assumptions that for a look at some of these other kinds of writing, we must turn to McGregor's account of the elaboration of the 'Hindi' tradition, which provides an enormously useful history of the mutual relations between the distinct but overlapping traditions in Brajbhasha, Avadhi and Khari Boli from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries.) If the vast corpus of Braj and/or Avadhi poetry, some of which would fill the historical 'gaps' noted by Faruqi (p. 837), and which includes a large output by Sufis—such as Mulla Daud's *Chandayan* and Miyan Manjhan's *Madhumalati*, to say nothing of the corpus attributed to a troublesome figure like Kabir—is not to be considered part of the larger universe of 'Urdu' literary production, as Faruqi seems to suggest at a couple of points (see, for instance, p. 837), then surely the claim that in the nineteenth century the latter is the encompassing literary culture of the north (see pp. 813–14) cannot really be sustained.

But Harish Trivedi in his chapter misattributes to Faruqi the view that 'before the end of the eighteenth century, wherever "Hindi" was mentioned, it was in fact ("Urdu") that was meant' (p. 960) and engages in an anti-Urdu invective that transports the reader back to the polemics of the nineteenth century and must surely be considered an embarrassment to this otherwise serious and scholarly volume.³⁰ Faruqi's sometimes defensive posture towards hostile claims about Urdu's origins is understandable (but unfortunate) in the context of the relentless marginalisation and suppression of Urdu in India over the last half century, a fact to which Trivedi seems oblivious. Trivedi's defensiveness here, on the other hand, is a sign of the

²⁹ I have put these words in quotation marks because these were often not, strictly speaking, first publications of the texts in question; and the philological and editorial scholarship involved sometimes left much to be desired. For a collection of his editorial introductions, see Maulvi 'Abdul Haq, *Muqaddimat-e 'Abdul Haq*, ed. Dr 'Ibadat Bareilvi, Lahore, 1964.

³⁰ What Faruqi says in his article, so far as I can tell, is something like the following: 'Before the late eighteenth century, whenever the language and literature we today call "Urdu" is mentioned, the term "Hindi" is in fact used'.

paradoxical fact that Urdu continues to haunt the Hindi imagination, despite their vastly different positions and resources in the Indian nation-state. The place of classical Urdu poetry, in particular, in the culture at large is unassailable; there is nothing to rival, for instance, the power of the Urdu *ghazal* form, which, at this point in its history of reception, condenses all manner of desires and structures of feeling linked to the experience of modernity under colonial and postcolonial conditions.³¹ The truth is that both ‘Urdu’ and ‘Hindi’ as we have come to know them represent very *partial* formations, each linking itself to only a small portion of the historical textual output, to say nothing of the variety of spoken forms, of a large linguistic-literary complex for which we have no single name. Urdu was the dominant form of this vernacular through much of the nineteenth century, as the linguistic heir to the Persianate culture of the Mughal empire and its successor states and, after 1837, as the exclusive vernacular language of the colonial courts and lower level bureaucracy in the north. Hindi and its distinct historical affiliations and claims emerged in opposition to Urdu and its dominant position as a language of the colonial state.

None of these types of concern seem to be at work in Pritchett’s contribution, in which the existence and distinctness of an Urdu tradition is simply an unspoken assumption. Nor do I wish to suggest that such defamiliarising questions ought to be a requirement for all scholarship on Urdu and Hindi today. Pritchett, who is the leading English-language scholar of the birth of modern poetics in Urdu, provides a fascinating account of the vicissitudes of the *tazkirah* form in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from the Persian language *tazkirah* of ‘Hindi’ or ‘Rekhta’ poets by Mir (written 1752) to Muhammad Husain Azad’s *Ab-e hayat* (‘The Water of Life’, published 1880), which she views as a transitional and deeply ambiguous form of writing, both ‘the last *tazkirah*’ and ‘the first modern literary history’ (p. 887). She has identified here precisely the problem that continues to hound the study of Urdu literature in the nineteenth century, namely the moment and manner of the disappearance of the ‘traditional’ literary universe and the emergence of the ‘modern’. Following the historical convention established by the first so-called moderns, Azad and Altaf Husain Hali, she locates the moment of rupture in 1857 and its aftermath, which radically transformed the late imperial universe of the *ashraf* that had been the social basis of the literary tradition. Future studies will have to treat this convention itself as part of the history of Urdu literature—it was given a new lease of life in the 1950s and 1960s in the work of the critics Muhammad Hasan Askari and Saleem Ahmed, respectively—and attempt to provide a more complex picture of these transitions, which took place unevenly (and not at the same time) across genres, classes, genders and regions.

There is no doubt that there are now (at least) two literary traditions, each of which is increasingly unfamiliar and even incomprehensible to those trained in

³¹ I have made this argument at somewhat greater length in Aamir R. Mufti, ‘Towards a Lyric History of India’, *Boundary 2*, Vol. 31 (2), 2004, pp. 245–74.

the other, but the lines of demarcation between them are far from clear, and even the most polemical and polarising figures—Trivedi provides an instance here—admit to vast areas of overlap between them at various points over the centuries, to say nothing of the common linguistic stock to which they both relate at the spoken level. It is not enough, however, to speak of ‘Hindi’ and ‘Urdu’ as having ‘twinned’ literary histories, as this volume does, at least in the organisation of its materials. Even this ambition is undermined, however, in the parallel, chronological assignment of material to the contributors on Urdu and Hindi, leaving the impression that what we are concerned with here are two distinct and parallel traditions with roots in some moment or another in mediaeval times. (Faruqi and McGregor cover the earlier periods, and Pritchett and Trivedi the later ones.) The crucial scholarly task here is to show how two different, rival, overlapping, and to some extent unequal traditions have been invented in modern times out of a complex mass of literary and linguistic practices. The very notion of tradition needs to be radically challenged, even as we recognise the power that such a notion continues to exercise in literature and the culture at large. Few, if any, scholars today have equal command over both traditions, so analyses will inevitably be skewed in one direction or the other. The larger goal of such critical literary histories has to be to take analytically apart the assumption of distinct and autonomous literary traditions, each supposedly emerging out of a unique linguistic base, and to chart the discontinuous nature of literary production over time and the heterogeneity of literary and linguistic practices over regions, classes and communities.

The language conflict of north India is a distinctly modern phenomenon, which is not to say that it does not have a pre-colonial prehistory. But it is a conflict that could only have emerged in the form it did as part of the *nationalisation* of culture and society, which took place in the subcontinent under the conditions of colonial capitalism. It is in this sense that the Hindi-Urdu problem is a colonial problem, and not because everything ‘communalist’ is to be blamed ultimately on conscious British policies of divide and rule. It is a notable fact that only the local language conflict of this particular region could have acquired a national dimension, a fact that speaks volumes about the continuities between pre-colonial and colonial society, the consolidation of the Mughal empire having long ago spread the language of its heartland to other regions of the subcontinent. The protagonists of Urdu and their pro-Hindi/Devanagari opponents were in agreement that only the language of this region could provide the common language for the entire nation, but differed on which literary and linguistic practices constituted the authentic language of the region. The Muslim *ashraf* who saw themselves as the guardians of the legacies of the Mughal empire displayed a remarkable arrogance on a collective scale repeatedly in the late nineteenth century—for instance, when they vehemently opposed in the 1890s the call for the ability to use Devanagari ‘characters’ or script on an equal basis with the Persian-Urdu in the *kachahris* of the North-Western Provinces heartland. But they also seem to have understood, more instinctively than otherwise, that ‘the nationalisation of Hindu traditions’, to borrow

Vasudha Dalmia's phrase, would also mean the minoritisation (and hence marginalisation) of everything that came to be marked as Muslim, including, of course, Urdu.

This volume represents an important step in the renewal of Hindi and Urdu literary historical studies, but it should not be seen as more than that, that is, an important first step. Future studies in this field will have to devise different and as yet unimagined ways of putting Hindi and Urdu scholarship, and scholars of the other Indian languages, in relation to each other, forms of knowledge that can make visible to us the contours of Hindi-Urdu as *one single language complex in contradiction*, in which the identity of the national formation itself has been at stake. Pollock is to be commended here for this enormous scholarly effort, which will provide the terms of discussion, in emulation as well as argument, for South Asian literary studies for some time to come.

Aamir R. Mufti

Department of Comparative Literature
University of California, Los Angeles

V

Sheldon Pollock has put together a massive volume of close to 1,100 pages tracing and delineating the literary cultures in South Asia. Steven Collins, writing on the Pali literary culture in this volume, cites a Buddhist prayer by an unnamed author who aspires to be a Buddha and in a future life to be skilled 'in all the regional languages and in every single one of the arts (...)' (p. 656). In a sense a part of that prayer is fulfilled when you negotiate this rather formidable volume. It is not possible, nor is it my intention, to review this volume in the short space of this text. It is a *nibida kantara* (dense forest), to borrow an image from a late mediaeval Marathi poem made popular by Tilak when he used the lines from it as signature lines on his newspaper which became a torchbearer of the freedom movement. What I will do instead is to relate my experience of viewing 'Indian language history as cultural history' in the light of the discussions in these essays. I shall do it mainly in the context of Marathi, which for some reason is not covered in this book.

To begin with, one does not understand what Indian writing in English is doing in this volume. The argument is not nationalistic at all. I shall not deliberate upon the much discussed and rather boring question of whether English is an Indian language or not, or more accurately whether Indo-Anglian literature constitutes a part of the literatures of India. It is a trans-regional language. It is the literary language of a class that is pan-Indian. The fact that the producers and consumers of this literature are from the whole of India would place them in a very peculiar way beyond the history of the Indian people who rarely, if at all, live their history

in pan-Indian terms. Their experiences culminate perhaps in a pan-Indian significance as they did in case of the nationalist movement, but they originate and develop necessarily as regional phenomena. It is difficult to locate its social site, to borrow Pollock's useful phrase. (We shall have an occasion to return to this phrase later in another context.) Their main market is also outside India. They (as makers of literature) are thus one step removed from Indian History. It must be of doubtful utility to be so removed from history or be so *post-histoire*. The unnamed Buddhist who was cited by Collins was not hoping and praying for no reason that he would know all the regional languages of India. This prayer came from someone for whom Pali would have been good enough. In a sense this is an extension of the argument of trans-regional languages that Pollock has so carefully built. Sanskrit enjoyed an audience which was greater than any Prakrit or Apabhramsha writing, or so any number of writers in Sanskrit thought. Bilhana boasted once that 'there is no village or country, no capital city or forest region, no pleasure garden or school where (...) young and old, male and female do not read my poetry' (p. 74). In our times we should add that our modern Bilhanas would legitimately boast that they get fatter royalty checks than any writer in a regional language would ever hope to get.

Likewise, it is difficult to see the logic of assigning two chapters for Hindi and Urdu each and leaving out some very rich and vibrant literary cultures out of this survey, unless the fact of these languages being the official languages has somehow made the difference. The numbers do not matter. It inadvertently makes the account of the literary cultures top-heavy, or north-heavy, if you will. It reminds you of the importance the trans-regional languages have had in India, to which Pollock makes a pointed reference in his predictably erudite essay on Sanskrit.

Indeed, his characterisation of Sanskrit, Prakrit and Apabhramsha as trans-regional standardised literary languages (pp. 61–63), is very instructive and useful in understanding a phenomenon in the history of Marathi. In fact, there are two standardisations that we must speak of. One would refer to the traditions of prose (the Mahanubhava writing) and poetry, that is, the Bhakti poetry that begins with Dnyaneshvar (thirteenth century) and reaches its zenith with Tukaram in the seventeenth century. Language in India cannot be understood unless it is related to caste and the modes of expression connected with it. Bhakti poetry standardised language in a way that the language of Chokha Mela, a Dalit, and Eknath, a Brahman, are not removed from each other as the language of a Brahman writer of the nineteenth century like Vishnushastri and that of a Shudra writer like Phule were. Phule took some pride in his being a Shudra.

So we are face to face here with two standardisations. The former was connected with a movement, while the latter was related to its being a function of the aggressive supremacy of the Brahmans. Nemade, a novelist and a critic, has used a (purposefully) pejorative expression of '*anglo-bhataleli*' (anglo-brahmanised) language for the new styles of language that emerged in the British era.

There is a further point, which may be made in this connection. The Marathi that the Bhakti movement developed created a Marathi nationality consciousness

that eventually made possible the rise of Maratha power. It is possible that a similar phenomenon occurred in the Punjab as well. As this volume has left both Punjabi and Marathi out of the reckoning, it is not possible to say what relationship can be seen between the standardisation of the language and the emergence of a supra-caste identity in these areas. But it seems to me to be a plausible hypothesis. Think of a concept like *Maharashtradharmā* which acquired some currency during the time of the first standardisation that we are talking about. It is interesting that the *Dharma* is not only Hindu. If it were so a longer expression would have been unnecessary. The overwhelming number of Marathi-speaking people were Hindus. So the use of the term 'Hindu' would have hardly been surprising or misplaced. It is therefore clear that a language-oriented consciousness is what was intended. The first standardisation was thus political and nationality-oriented.

The second standardisation was also political. It was an attempt at creating an artificial language (in much the same way as Sanskrit was) which would equip this nationality with a linguistic tool with which to deal with modernity and science. Chiplunkar's fascination with Samuel Johnson is thus no accident. However, in the process it acquired features of Brahmanism. It is doubtful if even the Brahmans ever spoke the language that was being popularised as standard Marathi. British imperial authorities contributed to the process. Very much like Sanskrit, it also became an artificial language. It was only to be expected that it would also become an instrument of dominance. There is more than one essay in this collection, like the ones on Hindi or Bangla literature, that refer to the dominance of Sanskrit, or in the case of Urdu or Persian, but they do not quite attend to the caste-*varna* implications of this divide. In Hindi or generally in the secular discourse the word 'composite' refers to the Hindu and the Muslim. It does not refer to the castes or the *varnas*. That makes the exercise of tracing the literary cultures a shade Brahmanistic. It is no less interesting to see that there is hardly any attempt to examine what Bhakti did to a caste-divided Gujarati literary culture. If 'Narasimha destabilized the power structure of the culture in which he was born—just as Gandhi was to do in his turn' (p. 587), he must have dealt with caste in some manner because cultural power was unmistakably caste and ritual-based. He had to redefine what a Vaishnava was. (Sitanshu Yashashchandra's deliberation on Narasi's use of the particle *to* is incidentally quite educative for a non-Gujarati like the present writer.) Collins argues that Pali literature is 'primarily an ideology' (p. 681). One can take the argument a step further. Our literary cultures are primarily ideologies. They were certainly so during the mediaeval period or when India's vernacular literatures were being formed as a consequence and in the process of the struggle against the Brahmanistic ideology of caste and ritual. When Rama advises Lakshmana: 'Base your actions on Dharma', he means, of course, righteousness as Pollock translates the words (cited by Collins, p. 602), but the reference to Kshatradharma in the same verse would suggest that righteousness is *varna*-oriented. It consists in following or for good reason rejecting the Varna Dharma.

If it is right at all to expect that the discussion of literary cultures should primarily locate itself in the caste-divide in the world of a given vernacular, then the essay

that does the utmost justice to that perspective is the one on Kannada literary culture by the late D.R. Nagaraj. In his lucid tracing of the ‘process of recontextualizing the epistemes of the originary movement’ he has very accurately stated the ‘ideological’ position of the *vacanakaras*. He argues that for them ‘the Vedas are recitation, the *sastras* are a chatter of the marketplace, *puranas* are only a meeting of goons’ (p. 362). It reminded me of Tukaram’s (seventeenth century) position that the Vedas are redundant because in any case ‘he alone knows the meaning of the Vedas’, making the Brahmins and Brahmanism redundant. In late nineteenth-century Maharashtra, Justice Ranade and Sir R.G. Bhandarkar started their reformist movement with a revival of sorts of Tukaram. Both these reformers published their essays and lectures on Dharma, taking the tradition of discursive prose in Marathi to a new height. How the question of the relationship between the *vaidik*—another name for the Brahmanical—and the non-*vaidik*, or, as Nagaraj seems to prefer, anti-*vaidik*, is central is demonstrated by a little uncertainty in Nagaraj’s own position. He writes in one place that ‘an intimate enmity existed between the *vaidika*, or Brahmanical, forces and the anti-*vaidika* forces (...)’ (p. 336), whereas later he tells us that Mallikarjuna’s family ‘had both Jaina and *vaidika* vocations, without any conflict between them’ (p. 364). Probably both the formulations are right, indicating yet again that there is no escape from the complexities of the *vaidik* and anti-*vaidik* or non-*vaidik*. In many ways that question is central to the emergence of vernacular literary cultures.

One implication of this conflict is that the question of the emergence of literary cultures is also a question of empowerment. (This should also provide a further reason why a survey of Indo-Anglian writing is so out of place here. It looks towards the market and not towards any empowerment.) The crucial aspect of this empowerment was that it privileged the *desi* over the *margi*. Nagaraj talks of three *desis*. But that is not as important as the thrust of his argument. His discussion (and indeed this volume as a whole) borrows categories from the world of music and uses them as a useful approach to the study of the historical nature of the literary culture. His discussion is also markedly different from the attempts of some Marathi critics to use these categories to deny modernity or its universalism. For them *desi* means a return to some kind of native Shangri-la.

The interesting thing about this excellent enterprise is the historicist account that it presents of all the literature it has considered. It has looked very closely at what Pollock calls ‘the social sites of Sanskrit’ (see pp. 114–20). His social sites are different from the ones that Nagaraj has cited. But the thrust is important. I might as well conclude by referring to a verse from the *Manasollasa*, a work that emphasises that the word is the vital spot of literature (*sabdavidyasya marma*). It is interesting to note that the classical tradition and the *janapada* (peoples’, shall we say) tradition both emphasise the word. The classical tradition argues that the word is powerful (*shaktam padam*). The Bhakti tradition also argued that the word is powerful. Tukaram said the words were a weapon and that he has all the intention to use it.

The picture of the literary cultures of India has to be on a very large canvas. *Malvikagnimitram*, the famous play of Kalidasa, speaks of *lalitabhinaya* (playful acting) with reference to Malavika's gestures. Tukaram might have said that all literature is playfulness precisely because the word is a weapon. It empowers. Probably the differing and emerging ideas of empowerment ultimately establish the relationship between the classical and the vernacular.

G.P. Deshpande
Pune