

Braj beyond Braj: Classical Hindi in the Mughal World

by
Allison Busch

Introduction

Throughout the course of my sabbatical in India this year it has been a privilege to meet many colleagues and Ph.D. students working in the field of Hindi literature. I have learned much from hearing about their projects on diverse subjects ranging from Dalit literature, the rise of Hindi journalism, Bhojpuri film lyrics, feminist hermeneutics, and many other topics. It is to detract nothing from the worth or intrinsic interest of these subjects to mention that I have been struck by the modern focus—even presentism—of literary study in Indian universities. It is rare indeed to encounter scholars who do their primary research on Brajhasha or Avadhi texts, which is to say the premodern or “classical” Hindi literary heritage. As a professor who often teaches the subject I would be the first person to state that modern Hindi literature is one of the world’s most fascinating and multifaceted traditions. Few literatures can boast of such diversity, which includes the colonial experiments at Fort William College, the rise of print culture, Harischandra and his *kavi-maṇḍal* (poets’ circle), the so-called *navjāgaran* (renaissance) and reformist impulses that spawned the social realism of the Dvivedi period, the many *vāds* that include Hindi’s home-grown Romanticism under the *Chāyāvādī* poets, *Pragativād* (progressivism), and *Prayogvād* (experimentalism), not to mention the emotional starkness of partition literature or *Nayī Kahānī* (modernist short fiction), or the new perspectives contributed by strains of *āṃcalik sāhitya* (regional writing), as well as Dalit and women’s writing. Clearly there is much to detain the researcher of modern Hindi literature.

That said, there is also much to recommend the study of Hindi’s classical traditions. And the field of Hindi has a lot to lose if we don’t foster new research about them. In this

* This is a revised version of the talk presented at the India International Centre on 23 February 2009.