Indian Satire in the Period of First Modernity

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Transcription and Style

The transcription of Bengali does not especially indicate *y* in the quality of a glide as in contrast with *y* in other positions.

The transcription of Hindi and related languages is that used by R. S. McGregor, *Hindi-English Dictionary*, Oxford and Delhi 1993.

For the older strata of both Bengali and Hindi, including related languages, *a* has been retained where functional in prosody.

For Tamil, the transcription follows the *Tamil Lexicon*, published under the authority of the University of Madras, Madras 1982 (repr.).

Urdu is transcribed according to the system used by R.S. McGregor, *Urdu Study Material*, Delhi 1992, but modified by preserving the final mute *h*.

The British and American spellings of English as used by the respective contributors of the volume have been allowed to co-exist.

Monika Horstmann and Heidi Pauwels

Introduction

This volume brings together essays on satire written in the Indian vernaculars, mainly from the period of first modernity. Satirical writing blends into other forms of literary expression of which a few are also examined here and thereby representing cases challenging our understanding of satire.[1]

Satire is a form of literary expression produced by the satirist's indignation at behaviour and conditions where truth or ethics is distorted, where hypocrisy, amorality and folly prevail, the root cause of these being basically a false consciousness.[2] Satire is not blame or abuse on which a literary form is superimposed so that if this was removed blame or abuse as one may hurl against one's adversary in ordinary speech would remain. Satire is a literary form which deconstructs in order to reconstruct. The satirist attacks faults and the faulty to unmask the moral distortion perceived by him and uproot it. Satire fuses the aesthetic and ethical: it seeks to simultaneously "amuse and abuse" (Aiyar 2005: i); it is characterized by an element of

1. an attack or censure of vice and evil in society
2. the use of rhetorical and dramatic irony to effect its critique

Entering the world of satire, we risk our "former consciousness" to become "uninhabitable when the work of the satirist is done" (Connery and Combe 1995: 1). At its farthest end, then, satire may amount to moral utopia.

The study of satire, along with the term *satura*, is rooted in the study of Roman satire. The idea that satire was a typically Roman genre of literature has been conclusively revised,[3] and instead of taking satire as a genre it is now more appropriately understood as a form of discourse which may slip into various genres and which invades genres with the intent to deconstruct these. While there are satires that form self-sufficient works, the satirical discourse is more pervasive. This applies also to the Indian case, and typically the Indian satirist is an author firmly grounded in the literary traditions of his region and period on which he draws for his purpose. These he wields as his satirical weapons, which only cut because author and audience are familiar with them. Satirists want to make their audience laugh as they realize the follies the authors castigate. This requires that both, author and audience, have a broadly common understanding of the ills diagnosed by the satirist. This is

1 All papers were originally presented at the 21st European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies in Bonn in 2010.

2 Arntzen 1989: 1–17; Quintero 2008: 1–11.

3 For the much debated etymology and meaning of *satura*, see NPEPP 1115; for classical satire and a wider definition taking account of satirical writing beyond the "entirely Roman" satire of a "canonical" group of authors, see Keane 2008: 31–51.

where the popular traditions and literary strategies unfold their capacity to captivate an affirming audience. Accordingly one may find in satire a mixture of great erudition and racy popular stories or performance modes as vehicles to reach a wide public.

Satire may be humorous, but it is not confined to the category of humour. Humour usually does not deconstruct in order to morally reconstruct, but is rather tolerant of the incongruencies and unexpected twists that produce the humorous effect. By contrast, satire wishes to abolish the cause of its ire. Irony, also an ingredient of satire, highlights incongruence by on the surface of it saying the opposite of what is intended. It is not necessarily governed by a moralistic impulse. Quite typically irony is used to express that which cannot be reconciled with the world as it is, such as the behavior of the gods in relationship to the norms of the world (Bhattacharya). Satire appearing in a work in stark incongruity with the genre it is claimed to belong to may also serve as an indicator of the true character of that work, as shown by Pauwels who thereby proffers to establish a Sufi work as a persiflage.

Understood in the fashion delineated, Indian satire cannot be contained in the indigenous classical category of *hāsya-rasa*, the sentiment of humour, nor in genre definitions like *prahasana*, farce, or *bhāṇa*, humorous monologue dramas.[4] If at all one thinks of a genre that has a particular propensity for satire, it is according to the Indian understanding and restricted to the religious discourse that of *upadeśa*, instruction, where the satirical serves as the key to the ultimate goal of instruction on religious liberation (Monius, Horstmann).

The satirist does not mince words. He flatly refuses debating the nice dogmatic principles held forth by the wrong-doers that set them onto a course of glaringly false action. The satirist is more interested in the fruits than in the roots of the tree on which these grow. Laughter produced by satire is often aroused by the satirist's flippant rejection of the reasons, principles and lofty theories with which the erring may justify their blameworthy actions, which, instead, he parades as absurd follies.

In their majority, the contributions of this volume discuss satire written in the period of first modernity. Exceptions to this are three. First, the contribution by Monius, who discusses Tamil Jain satire and thus literature from India's most ancient vernacular tradition, then that by Israel, whose essay focuses on Christian Tamil satire from the mid-18th century which implicates western missionary intervention; and finally, Harder's concluding essay in this volume which constitutes an attempt to delineate the characteristics of satire in the colonial period in contrast with pre-colonial satire.

First modernity is here circumscribed as the period from about the mid-15th to the mid-18th century (Subrahmanyam 1997: 736–737). The period saw a more or less global shift that did not depend on a European trajectory, but was rather a

4 Siegel (1987) has treated Indian humour and humorous literary genres comprehensively. He proposed to establish three modes of satire corresponding to the three aims of life (*puruṣārtha*), for which see Monius in this volume, p. 13 with note 22.

"*conjunctural* phenomenon…located in a series of historical processes that brought hitherto relatively isolated societies into contact,…" (Subrahmanyam 1998: 99–100). The modernization that took place during that period is not associated with uniformity or growth of prosperity. Among the shared global characteristics are a heightened self-reflexivity of the individual vis-à-vis the other and society and also the interest in scrutinizing the foundations of seemingly perennial order, of religious and social norms. Due to the vernacularization of literature audiences broadened, and a literature that appealed to or challenged elites and commoners alike held forth against upholders of claims, views and practices in the social discourse. Subrahmanyam (1997: 739) identifies first modernity as a period when the "civilizational constants" that assumed the rank of defining foci in colonial and even post-colonial public and academic discourse were in fact in a flux, negotiable and debated, and lacking the functionality ascribed to them. Finally and also especially relevant to the issue of satire, Subrahmanyam (1997: 739–740) succinctly abstracts the academic discussion by pointing to a further phenomenon characteristic of the period, namely "notions of universalism and humanism [that] emerge in various vocabularies, and yet how these terms do not in fact unite the early modern world, but instead lead to new or intensified forms of hierarchy, domination and separation." This "paradox of enlightenment" inheres in much of the satire discussed in this volume and the latter-day reception of it, so that literature thereby establishes itself as an apt locus of examining the phenomenon.

Speaking of vernacular literature, and by impliction of satire, as engaging broadening audiences requires an examination of the circulation of this kind of literature. Satire seeks the wide audience. What audiences, then, can be identified? Audiences differ not only regionally and by group-specific criteria but also by responding to religious or political satire, these two often intertwined. Most of the cases discussed here come from a religious milieu, though it is taken for granted that religious critique and dissent form aspects of complex discourses whose asymmetry is also related to politics. Only two papers discuss strictly political satire. One is by Oesterheld on satire produced in, and circulated in and outside of, the Mughal court milieu in the late seventeenth century, the other by Harder, who points to the emphasis on the socio-political in colonial satire.

The most ancient case discussed, that of the Tamil Jain satire, implicates monks and the community of Jain "listeners" (lay people) who attended religious discourses of astonishing length. The locus for this are the temples and ad hoc congregations gathering around Jain monks on their permanent circuit.

The peripatetic culture of Jain monks was a powerful disseminator of literature in general and therefore also satire. Jain temple architecture with its spacious open halls is designed to accommodate substantial audiences—not necessarily restricted to Jains—and temple art virtually illustrates the discourses. Jain literature testifies to lengthy works representing *dharmakathās* and thereby including satirical portions

being launched in such venues.[5] Also other religious groups, for example the Sants of northwest India as discussed by Horstmann, disseminated their literature in ways similar to those of the Jains. Religious venues and the market-place were not far from each other. Both provided a space for negotiating differing claims and views. The clichés capturing the performance of Kabīr (Agrawal) and other Sants, depict them as rebelling against orthodoxy as represented by the locally powerful *paṇḍits* and *qāẓīs* by speaking out to a commonly accessible audience. In Bengal, the *maṅgalkāvyas* studied by Bhattacharya are partly linked to the Daśaharā celebrations and performed at festivals named *Jhānpāner melā*, whereas outside of the Daśaharā season they are also performed in villages, and there are troupes of *Manasāmaṅgala* singers who perform for patrons who thereby fulfill a vow (Bhattacharya 2007: x–xi). Occasions such as these bring together plural audiences to whose expectations and variegated life experience they respond. Satire as constituent of the *bhārud* genre of Maharashtra is brought as drama performance before audiences of the widest possible description (Mokashi-Punekar). The dissemination of the debates conducted between Roman Catholics and Lutherans on the one hand and Christians and Śaivas on the other and implicating western missionaries was boosted, as Israel shows in her contribution, by the new print media. These, of course, gain absolutely crucial importance in the colonial period as pointed out by Harder. For the allegedly Sufi *Kanhāvat* ascribed to Malik Muḥammad Jāyasī and examined by Pauwels, it seems clear that the text drew on both learned and popular literary tradition and thereby targeted a wide audience.

As for satirical painting, the point for the moralist intention of satire is not consistently compelling. Unless they targeted contemporary notorious figures and thereby operated as instruments of social control or political ostracism, the satirical paintings in the collection of Ludwig Habighorst, who presents this segment of his collection in his contribution, may have been restricted to the courtly elites and magnates who commissioned them for their entertainment. If the satirized inhabited milieus outside and much beneath the elite, these paintings may have lacked a proper target or reformist intent. This abets the trend of satirical painting blending with genre painting. During the colonial period, however, caricature became a sharp satirical weapon, thanks to the new print media which portrayed the collision of values, attitudes and lifestyles produced by the colonial conditions. Satire now virtually operated as a safety valve against the social, cultural and mental asymmetry and incongruencies of the period.

The papers of this volume have been arranged according to the—admittedly rough and often overlapping—chronology of the satirical texts they examine. Tamil Jain satire, studied by Anne Monius in a ground-breaking study, forms the most

5 For references to Jain literature of roughly the period examined by Monius, see Horstmann below, p. 110. For striking examples among many others of Jain temple art illustrating discourses before congregations in the open halls of temples (*maṇḍapa*), see Dhaky and Moorti 2001.