Introduction

The production of Indo-Muslim cultures in North India resulted from an intense interaction and exchange of ideas that has been partly erased or suppressed in the increasing bifurcation between Hindu and Muslim in modern times. This paper will look at literary production, and in particular the emergence of a new medium for poetic expression in Delhi in the early eighteenth century, then called Rekhtā, or “mixed language,” meaning a mixture of Persian and the language of Delhi, or Dihlavī. Nowadays this medium has come to be called Urdu, and it has become associated nearly exclusively with “Muslim” literary production.

This case study shows how multiple registers of Hindi-Urdu language and literature were fluid in the early eighteenth century, before they hardened in the nineteenth century as they were regrouped as

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1 The term Rekhtā was in use before the eighteenth century, see Imre Bangha, “Poetry in Mixed Language: A Survey of Rekhtā Literature in North India,” in ed. Francesca Orsini, Before the Divide (New Delhi: Orient Longman, forthcoming), but the particular fashion of “early Urdu” poetry was perceived as new at the time.

two discrete units: “Muslim-Urdu” and “Hindu-Hindi.” Contemporary understanding of the origins of Urdu and Hindi is colored in hindsight by the emergence of the nation-states of Pakistan and India. The association of Urdu with Muslims, with the Persian script and with Persian themes and poetics is now commonplace, as is that of Hindi with Hindus, with the Devanāgarī script and Sanskritic themes and poetics. Hindi and Urdu are now perceived to be different languages with separate histories and literatures. This process of bifurcation is now well-understood to have been a product of the nineteenth century. Yet, in the eighteenth century, there was no such strict differentiation. What seem to be hard boundaries now were permeable in the past. Much is to be gained by recovering what the linguistic field looked like before this divide. How, by whom and for whom were different registers of Hindi-Urdu literature used at particular points in history?

The emergence of Urdu poetry is a significant moment, and this paper will recover one piece of evidence to reconstruct the way it was sympathetically received in non-Muslim, non-Persianized milieus. The emergence of Rekhtā/Urdu poetry was occasioned by the arrival of the dīvān of Walī Dakanī in 1720/21. This import from the Deccan inspired a new wave of poetry in imperial Delhi. Histories of Urdu typically focus on the happenings in Delhi, but this paper will explore how this new cosmopolitan fashion caught on in provincial centers, such as the Rajasthani principality of Kishangarh. I will be looking at a complex triangulation of exchanges between the Deccan, Delhi and Rajasthan.

I present a case study of one agent in these complex processes, prince Sāvant Singh (1699-1764), crown prince of Kishangarh. He was an avid sponsor of the arts, poetry and miniature painting, and he is best known for his impact on the latter. From 1735 till 1748, he ran an atelier that developed the distinctively lyrical Kishangarhi style of painting, specialising in Rādhā-Krishna themes. This so-called “sub-imperial style” was developed by artists trained at the Mughal court.

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3 See Christopher King, One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in nineteenth century North India (Bombay, Oxford University Press, 1994).

4 For more information on Kishangarh, in particular the art, see Navina Najat Haidar, The Kishangarh School of Painting (c. 1680-1850), 2 vols, Ph.D. Dissertation. (Oxford University, 1995).