SHifting Semantics in Early Modern North Indian Poetry: Circulation of Culture and Meaning

Thomas de Bruijn

The papers in this volume explore convincingly how cultural products and practices in early modern North India cross boundaries between communities and defy being fixed to a single social, cultural, or geographical location. The analysis of these fluid cultural practices and practitioners in this volume aptly illustrate the “circulation of culture” that characterizes this environment. The present essay describes another aspect of this phenomenon, as it focuses on the shifts in the semantic program of literary texts in early modern North Indian vernaculars that coincide with the circulation of this material across different milieus. It proposes a reading that does not frame these changes as a “corruption” introduced by the transmission of the text, but rather as the effect of a mechanism that enables texts to be ported to various cultural contexts without losing their evocative power.1

Through an analysis of a sample of poems attributed to the North Indian poet Kabir, this essay analyzes how these texts accumulated various overlapping meanings as they traveled in a hybrid cultural environment. It builds on earlier research considering the transmission and structure of the corpora of North Indian vernacular textual traditions that brought to light the composite nature of these collections and the many variations in the wording of the poems. By following the development of the meaning of these texts as they traveled through time and cultural space, this essay proposes to extend the notion of circulation beyond the words to the meanings of North Indian poetry from this period.

1. Circulation of Poems

Recent research on the major collections of poetry in North Indian vernaculars has demonstrated convincingly that these texts circulated among various milieus and took on new shapes as well as new meanings in the

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1 For a critique of the application of Eurocentric notions of textual purity to Indian literary history, see the introduction.
process. This insight has fundamentally undermined the notion of a stable textual tradition in which philological research can distinguish authentic poems. In many cases, collections of poetry existed as a repertoire for oral performers before they were recorded in manuscripts.

One form of circulation was the adoption of the work and the historical persona of the poets by religious movements. This adoption was often constructed by means of hagiographical accounts that made the poet into a religious hero whose life exemplified the movement's outlook, accompanied by sectarian compilations of his work. In this process many new verses were added in the name of the poet and existing texts were edited to make them fit the sectarian ideology. As a result, it is very hard to define the outlines of the historical figure and the original work of the early modern poets on the basis of these sources.

An example of this circulation can be found in the corpus of poetry attributed to Surdas (prob. sixteenth c.). Comparison of various manuscripts of his poetry with the Sūrsāgar—the collection compiled in the Vaishnava milieu of the Vallabhan sect, which was oriented towards devotion to the figure of Krishna—showed that only a limited set of poems can be traced back to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century manuscripts. Within this earliest layer of sources the poems also show a remarkable ideological diversity, which does not always match the later image of Surdas that was constructed in hagiographical accounts of the Vallabhans (Hawley 1983, 1987; Bryant 1978).

The poetry of Kabir is associated with the Sants, a religious movement that focused on devotion to a nameless god and was influenced by ascetic orders such as the Nathyogis. Poems in his name appear in collections of various traditions, such as the Ādi-granth of the Sikhs, the Pañcvāṇī compilations of religious poetry revered by the Dadupanthi movement in western North India, and the Bījak—the collection compiled by the Kabirpanthi sect, which is based in the northeastern region around Banaras and has taken the poet as its patron saint.

The reconstruction of the corpus of authentic Kabir poems has proven to be very difficult. The analysis of the manuscripts in which his poetry is recorded demonstrates that the various collections have only a limited number of poems in common, and that the circulation of this material spurred tremendous variety in the wordings of the texts (Callewaert 2000: 1–19). Just as in the case of Surdas, the early collections in which Kabir