CULTURE IN CIRCULATION IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NORTH INDIA: URDU POETRY BY A RAJPUT KRISHNA DEVOTEE

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1. Introduction

This paper seeks to contribute to the study of the circulation of ideas and culture by focusing on the fusion of cultures in eighteenth-century North India. In particular, it will address two types of circulation: first, the confluence of the milieus of court and temple, and second, the movement back and forth from the center to the periphery.

The first half will study the confluence of the milieus of court and temple with regard to the Krishna devotional movement. The proximity of the center of Krishna devotion, Braj, to the seats of Mughal power in Agra and Delhi suggests a close interchange. Indeed, there are many stories of exchange, of the Mughal representatives and even the emperor himself visiting the holy land of Braj or sponsoring its holy men. Furthermore, provincial rulers from all over India, in particular from nearby Rajasthan, made frequent pilgrimages to the area. Temples and monasteries stand as enduring monuments of sponsorship by regional power centers, witnessed by inscriptions and land grants. As will become apparent from our study, this was not a unidirectional process, but one marked by close cooperation: that of provincial rulers working with local agents. I will focus on the circulation of ideas between the regions of Braj and Rajasthan as related in the hagiographies, paying particular attention to the provincial court of Kishangarh (near Jaipur), which in turn had close relationships with the Mughal court in Delhi.

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The second half of the paper looks at the movement between the Mughal court in Delhi and regional political centers, with which it was in touch via a constant stream of visiting courtiers and vassals. This is not a case where the center disseminated a hegemonic culture to the periphery. Rather, cultural production happened in close exchange with regional centers, and provincial agents traveling between different centers played the major role in this interchange. Fertilized by the influx of new ideas and idioms of expression, Delhi became a vibrant center for the arts, where styles of expression originating from the Deccan could be transmitted to visitors from other provincial centers. The focus here will mainly be on poetry, with some asides about miniature painting and music.

There is still much that is not yet understood about this confluence of cultures in which ideas were floating around, fusing into new styles of expression. I will focus here on just one of the notable developments in Delhi at this time, namely the emergence of a new medium for poetic expression. At the time, this new idiom was termed Rekhta, or “mixed language”, but it has now come to be called Urdu (Faruqi 2003). The case of the emergence of Rekhta is particularly interesting, as it promoted a new wave of poetry in imperial Delhi inspired by what was in effect an import from the Deccan. Histories of Urdu typically focus on the happenings in Delhi, but we will explore how this new cosmopolitan fashion caught on in unexpected corners, in provincial centers, such as the Rajasthani principality of Kishangarh. For this part of the paper I will be looking at a more complex triangulation of exchanges between the Deccan, Delhi, and Rajasthan.

I will present a case study of one agent in these complex processes, Sāvant Singh (1699–1764), crown prince of Kishangarh. He was an avid sponsor of the arts, in particular of poetry and miniature painting. A turning point in his life came with the death of his father in 1748, shortly after which his throne was usurped by his younger brother. He attempted to regain his kingdom, but succeeded only partially in 1755 with the help of the Marathas. The kingdom was split and Sāvant Singh gained control only over the nearby satellite city Rupnagar. Disgusted with worldly politics, he placed his son on the throne and retired to the major pilgrimage center of Braj, the site of Krishna’s youthful sporting with Radha. His favorite mistress, nick-named Bani-ṭhanī, herself a Braj poetess, seems to have accompanied him in his self-imposed exile.

Sāvant Singh is best known for his impact on miniature painting. From 1735 until 1748, he ran an atelier that developed the distinctively lyrical