

Sant orature and poetics

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Oveshadowed by the towering figure of Kabir, other Sants from the Eastern/Purab region – Malukdas, Paltudas, Bhikha, Gulal – have made it into Hindi literary histories, but only as “three-line poets.” “Not poetic enough”, was the verdict of Hindi literary historians like the Mishra brothers or Ramchandra Shukla, even Pitambardatt Barathwal, and usually greater attention has been paid to their religious message and position than to their poetry. But not only did Sant orature form a large part of poetic experience for audiences beyond literati groups, it would be simplistic to see their orature as a completely separate realm from that of *kavya*. Sant poets often called themselves poets/*kavi* and used the same poetic forms (*kabitta*, *rekhta*, *kundaliya*) as courtly poets, though with different results. In fact, this paper will argue, Sant poets provide a fruitful viewpoint to observe the workings of the multilingual and multilayered literary culture of the region. Sants “ventriloquised” practically *all* poetic and popular idioms available in north India: seasonal Holi, Phag, and swing songs; Barahmasas; women’s wedding songs (Mangal), in *both virahini* and *pativrata* voices; children’s alphabet-learning poems (both *kakhahara* and *andalif-be*); the Perso-Urdu/Sufi idiom of *‘ishq* (*isk/asik*) and the pain and madness of love (*dard-divana*) and attendance at the court of the *pir*/God; the languages of Islamic preaching and of bhakti; hymns and ritual songs (*stotra*, *sahasranama*, *arati*); songs of travel; yogic vocabulary and “upside-down language” (*ulatbamsi*). Rather than delineating a particular idiom as “Sant idiom”, Awadh Sant poets stamped *all* idioms as their own. Linguistically, they moved with equal ease between quasi -Persian (Maluk), Braj Bhasha, and Bhojpuri-inflected Hindavi. Ken Bryant’s heuristic distinction between Vaiṣṇava poetry as “dramatic” and Sant poetry as “dialectical” characterizes only part of the poetic idiom of Awadh Sants. By taking the existing works of Malukdas (1574-1650 ca), Gulāl (d. 1700), Bhīkhā (d. 1791?), and Paltūdās (ca. 1710-1780), and mindful of Ken Bryant’s lesson that the devotional poem is a song, an experience, an event, in which duration, rhythm, repetition, refrain, suspense, and resolution are key (1978), this paper will try to find the appropriate critical language to describe the orature and poetics of Awadh sants in the context of the other poetic tastes and languages current in the area.