

*Masihi Kavya:
Reading Christian Devotional Literary
Expression in Hindi*

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Abstract

The poetic contours of Hindi (Hindavi) are deeply shaped by the literary expressions of spirituality associated with medieval Hindu and Sufi traditions. Readers of bhakti voices in Hindi are familiar with panths, paramparas, silsilas and poetic shapes of pada, doha, chaupai, and musical renditions such as bani, bhajan, and kalam. While northern India has witnessed the proliferation of Christian denominations as Protestantism, and inter-theological debates between Islamic and Christian scholars as well as metaphysical debates between pundits and theologians especially in Delhi, Agra, Aligarh and Punjab in the early modern period, the literary expressions of devotion in Christianity in northern India have received little attention outside Christian knowledge circles. The early phase of Hindi Christian writings consisted largely of theological debates and evangelical expression, while in more recent times, we find devotion taking a prime place in poetries, songs and bhajans being composed in Hindi. This paper intends to explore contemporary Hindi Christian devotional poetry, especially the work of Shivraj K Mahendra and other contemporary collections such as *Aradhana ke Geet* and *Kavita Mein Shubh Sandesh* (Sarojini Arya); reading them with a focus on poetics—metaphors, linguistic registers and texture of language to draw attention to the relationships as they exist between language, religion and emotions. This focus on Christian bhakti in Hindi will allow us to explore the

variegated lives of the language itself and recognize that spiritual expression is the most virile way of infusing life into any language that naturally refuses to be contained by religious straitjacketing. This approach will point towards analyzing the psychological and literary shaping of reading cultures themselves, beginning with the question of which spiritual traditions can lay direct and complete claims on Hindi and how our reading orientations and exposure shape associations and literary expectations when we encounter Christian spirituality in Hindi.

Keywords: Hindi-Christianity- Masihi- bhakti-literature

Introduction

A study of the relationship between Hindi language and Indian Christianity historically takes us back to the nineteenth century when the text book printing activities of the Christian Mission Society in north India, the establishment of Fort William College in Calcutta and the circulation of English (Christian) education in the vernaculars forged colonial, evangelical and educational bonds between Indian Christianity and Hindi language. Vasudha Dalmia in *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions* (1997) has highlighted the ideological underpinnings of imperialists and nationalists and the roles played by lexicographers, printers, missionaries, teachers and translators in the standardization of Hindi as we know it today. The nineteenth century was witness to the shaping of modernity through Western education; it was also witness to the differential mechanisms whereby “Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan” came to be popularized in Hindu nationalism and found support in imperial divisiveness. Dalmia identifies Western nation-state models of linguistic and religious nationalisms as being imposed on the socio-cultural framework of India (Hindustan) that resulted in administrative and missionary focus on identifying a “pure and unadulterated” language for Hindus. This task of purification meant that at the levels of schools and colleges, in printing presses and scholarly enterprise, and later at courts too, Hindi/Hindui/Hindavi was to be carefully promoted for Hindus alone with the use of the Devanagari script. It is important to note that Hindustani was the literary language prevalent in northern India, while Avadhi, Braj, Rajasthani and other bhashas were the lingua

franca in rural parts of north India. Urbanization and the concomitant need for standardization furthered the imperial project by fuelling and sustaining the cultural differences between Muslim and Hindu ways of life to become hardened and exclusivist differences between Urdu-Muslims and Hindi-Hindus in early modern period.

The purification process of ridding Hindi of all “foreign” influences made extensive use of bhakti literature wherein all the literature of the sampradayas was subsumed under “sanatana dharma” and bhakti became Hindu devotion while similarly Sufi silsilas and their literature was contained within an Islamic identity formation. Even though “dargahs” have survived as icons of non-divisive faith traditions in India, it is not difficult to notice a growing Islamization of these Sufi sites of devotion. Even so, these sites remain open to devotees and seekers of all faith traditions, as I have witnessed Hindus, Sikhs and even Buddhist seekers at Nizamuddin dargah in Delhi. In India, dargahs and even churches such as St. Michael’s church in Mumbai have been witness to Hindu, Muslim and Christian spiritualities sharing in the sacred geography of the land. Indian medieval period testifies to even state-patronage for intercultural and non-sectarian religiosities as in the kingdom of Akbar, while in the early modern period, this trend sustained in the living traditions with small states and rulers writing, composing and supporting inter-faith literatures, as for instance, Mughal patronage to Vallabha and Pushtimarg sampradays in the Mathura region and Nawab Wajid Ali Shah (1847-56) composing Persian-heavy poetry in Brajbhasha. The reductionism of Hindi and Hindu religiosity, as noted, was carefully crafted and meticulously executed through later day patronages especially from the mercantile class and imperial educationists. Slowly and steadily, Hindi became a language of Hindu expression—religious as well as cultural.

Bhakti in Hindi Poetry

An overview of the historiography of Hindi literature ascertains the devotional literary expression to ‘bhaktikaal’ and the early parts of ‘ritikaal’ with the ‘adhunik kaal’ (modern period) heralding new waves of ‘nayi kavita’, ‘nayi kahani’ and

literary movements like chayavaad, prayogvaad and pragativaad shaping the development of Hindi literature. With the focus on subaltern representation and literary criticism as stree vimarsh (feminist discourse), Dalit chetana (Dalit consciousness), Adivasi dhara (indigenous sensibility) and others, the modern texture of Hindi literature has seen little to no literary expressions of devotion or spiritualism barring a few exceptions like the prolific writings of Amrita Bharati (b. 1939)¹ which have received attention in Western academic studies but ironically none in Indian scholarship. In the context of spiritual poetry, there are lone works and voices as that of Dr. Naresh (b. 1942)² and some other spiritualists, who are not considered literary artists primarily.

The modern period of Hindi literature saw a cohesive and considerable proliferation of bhakti poetry in what came to be called Dwivedi Yug, marking roughly the period from the last decade of the nineteenth to the first two decades of the twentieth century. This period is highlighted with the poetry of Hindi bhasha stalwarts like Maithilisharan Gupt, Ayodhya Singh Upadhyaya 'Hariaudh', Siyaramsharan Gupt amongst others. This was the period when Hindu emotive and cultural identity was standardized through bhakti projecting as rashtra-bhakti (patriotic devotion). Poetry of this period was aimed at consolidation of Hindu spiritual and social ideals, with deification being merged with nationalism, and *devotion (bhakti)* becoming the tour de force of the Hindu nationalist movement. This period also involved a reorientation of Hindu ideals themselves with poets openly criticizing caste system, patriarchal double standards and other ills within a projected Hindu nationalism. In religious self-expression, purity and tolerance became the bywords with Hariaudh stating that the Vedas are the original founts of all wisdom of all religions as in the following lines:

Bane panth mat jo dharam ke sahare
 Kahin hon kabhi ho sakege na nyare
 Chamakte mile jo ki ganga kinare
 Khile neel par bhi wahi gyan tare
 Damakte wahi tiver par dikhaye
 Mississippi kinare wahi jagmagaye

(All the cults that have come from any religion
 Can never, wherever they be, become original,
 Those that were found shining on the banks of Ganga,
 They were the stars of wisdom that lit up the skies.
 The same stars were seen shining on the Tiber skies

The banks of Mississippi were lit by the same stars)

Maithilisharan Gupt invokes Ram, Buddha and Jesus in one breath to highlight the common principles of compassion and non-violence as the core of all religious teachings in the world (Hindu, p.13), while in his poem '*Bharat-Bharati*', he too, like Hariaudh, makes generic claims to Hindu spiritual wisdom being the font of all religions of the world:

Yunan hi keh de ki who gyani-guni kab tha hua
 Kehna na hoga ki Hinduon ka shishya who jab tha hua
 Hamse alaukika gyan ka alok yadi pata nahin,
 To woh Arab Europe ka shikshak kaha jata nahin

...

Tha Hinduon ka shishya Isa, yeh pata bhi hai chala,
 Isaiyon ka dharm bhi hai Baudha sanche mein dhala

(Let Greece tell us when it acquired wisdom and knowledge?
 It will have to be said it was only after they became disciples of Hindus
 If Arabia had not received the knowledge of higher word from us,
 How could it have become the teacher of Europe

...

It has also been found that Jesus was a disciple of Hindus
 Christianity has been molded in the frame of Buddhism)

(*Bharat-Bharati*, 8.66,68)

In the following two decades, 'chayavad' became a stylistic trend in which abstraction and romanticization became the defining features of Hindi poetry and bhakti was replaced with surreal and transcendental spiritualism in the hands of Pant, Prasad and Nirala. In the period following chayavad, modernism has concerned itself with thematic focus of subaltern voices and stylistic experimentations as free-verse (nayi kavita), anti-poem (akavita) and other interventions. A scanning of modern Hindi poetry revealed scarce references to Christian images such as 'Isa ke pankh' (the wings of Jesus) in Muktibodh's poem 'Chand ka Muh Tedha Hai'.

The consolidation of Hindu emotive-poetic expression has led to straitjacketing of spiritual expressions as either Hindu specific or non-literary when it comes to contemporary Hindi poetry. In this context, the 'masihi kavya' (Christological Poetry) of writers like Mahendra and Arya assume an important place in the trajectory of development of Hindi poetry. Felix Wilfred (2014) points to 'becoming Christian' as the central feature of Indian Christianity because unlike in the West, Christianity in India has to engage with pluralistic religious and spiritual traditions necessitating a natural inter-cultural dialogue in its growth and development. Indian Christian poetry in the contemporary period indicates to such developments through creative literature.

Hindi Christian literature has primarily consisted of evangelical and institutional literature that has involved translations of hymns and tracts and publications and distributions of sermons. A leading theologian, Father Camille Bulcke's (1909-1982) contributions to Hindi literature are well known as are his efforts at inter-spiritual dialogue through his enriching work on Ramkatha tradition and Ram-Christ inter-faith spirituality. Rakesh Peter-Dass (2019) has identified two gap areas in the studies of Hindi Christian literature in India. The first gap area is the relatively less attention and engagement that Hindi Christian literature has received in the field of Indian Christian scholarship. This fact is important also because the history of Hindi Christian expression is intrinsically linked with the history of urbanization, setting up of printing presses and the intersectionalities in the Hindi-Hindu reform movements. The second gap area that Dass points to is the reliance of Hindi Christian writers on Western sources while engaging almost negligibly with Christian scholarship in other Indian languages. Dass provides an

important insight into the fact that Hindi Christian literature is non-Brahmanical in nature, being written by people belonging to subaltern social categories like Dalit and Adivasi (indigenous/tribal). This could explain the existence of a third gap area that I would like to explore in this field. This is the glaring void in Hindi literary scholarship when it comes to the study of Hindi Christian literature. Renu Singh's *Hindi Sahitya Mein Isayi Missionariyon ki Bhumika (The Role of Christian Missionaries in Hindi Literature)* (2008) is a noteworthy scholarly work among the few studies of Hindi Christian writings. This work includes a detailed overview of the writings by missionaries that have contributed to the growth and development of Hindi language, grammar and a brief overview of their contribution to literary arts. In this study, there are two distinctive chapters—one on Kabir and one on Tulsidas that make a comparative study of Christ's social consciousness and that of the two prominent Hindi bhakti poets. As an attempt at inter-spiritual dialogue, this academic study paves the way for contextualizing Hindi bhakti poetry beyond categorical poetics. In Hindi studies, there is scholarly attention given to figures like Father Camille Bulcke, which reveal a tendency to highlight Hinduized Christianity as acceptable and worthy of inter-cultural explorations. There is a clear discomfort with Christological writings, and it is not difficult to see the Hindi-Hinduization of literary traditions as a major contributing factor to this epistemological block. Even within the growing field of subaltern studies in Hindi literary criticism, there is a dearth of any focused engagement with the writings of Hindi Christian poets.

This brings us to a close examination of literary scholarship itself. In 1812, the first compositions in khari boli (standardized Hindi) were undertaken by Rev. John Chamberlain who wrote under the pen name 'Aasi', followed by missionary poets such as John Parson, John Christian, Father George Prakash and others until mid-20th century. In later 20th century and contemporary writings, there are hymns and spiritual poetry in Hindi written by Vimala Dorothy, Manju Jyotsana, Father Dilraj Dungdung, Vamana Tilak, Vandana Mataji, Shivraj Mahendra, Sarojini Arya, Komal Masih, Christopher Peter; plays by Satya Prakash Patani, Father Gyan Prakash, John Anand and novels by Cherubim Barno Sahu, Robin Shaw Pushp, Peter Paul Ekka, Asha, Shireen Bharati among others as well as other narratives including short stories, biographies and literary criticism. In the world of music, there are commercial and local artists popularizing Hindi Christian devotionals,

and platforms like Spotify, YouTube and social media have no dearth of Hindi Christian lyrics and poetry. Yet, these narrative forms remain limited to a closed readership and audience in the Indian Christian community. It is also important to note that special issues of journals, magazines and periodicals that focus on bhakti/spirituality/devotion/religious literature in India, do not find any significant representation of Christian spiritual expressions. The academic engagements with 'bhakti' are a case in point. Due to a categorical understanding of human experience, bhakti literature has been bound up in categories like 'Hindu Bhakti', 'Sufism', 'Jain Bhakti', 'Vernacular Bhakti', 'Saguna Bhakti', 'Nirgun Bhakti', 'Yoga-Bhakti', 'Women's Bhakti', 'New Age Bhakti' and so forth. These categorizations compel scholars to locate the sacred experience within existing philosophical vocabularies of religions, theologies, linguistic or cultural domains. These approaches take away the trans-personal and cognitive experiences of Bhakti itself, popularizing certain modes of expressions that lead to invalidation of other modes such as women's diaries, children's songs, non-institutionalized religious/spiritual expressions and others. An instance of this is the obsession with Mirabai's poetry that is over-read for eroticism and medieval feminism. Most studies on Mira are content to see a Rajput-queen rejecting the social institution of marriage and turning to Saguna Bhakti, an anthropomorphic devotional school of medieval spirituality. These assessments are driven by the need to locate and analyse, categorize and teach, that end up in ignoring the yogic language of Mira's verses, her guru-discipleship and the debates around it, and her coded and carefully structured poetics itself. Another way of looking at limited understanding of spirituality is to see how much of scholarly engagement has emerged with respect to the ecotheological and ecospiritual writings by Adivasi poets such as Jacinta Kerketta and Joram Yalam Nabam, contemporary Adivasi poets composing in Hindi. Their poetry is spiritual and evokes indigenous mysticism that is rooted in reciprocity and responsibility between the human and trans-human forms. In what category can we fit their spirituality in?

In the context of Christological bhakti in India, literary studies have not shown engagement with devotional literature of Mahendra, Arya, Tilak or Vandana Mataji, perhaps because this kind of writing doesn't fit into the domains of Indian spiritual expressions. Bhakti seems to have become a religious fossil, a doctrine or an event that happened with the Hindus in the past, and binary assessments that make

Hindu-Bhakti and Islam-Sufi and sometimes Sikh-Bhakti, Jain-Bhakti, Buddhist-Bhakti and others valid categories of examination but not Christian-Bhakti. This dis-ease invites us to revisit our understanding of Bhakti itself and the literary inheritance we have in the form of literary criticism and theoretical interventions in the same. We are compelled to reflect on whether inter-spiritual dialogue is possible in the study of devotional literature itself. When reading about Krishna-bhakti, we come across the verses of Tājībī, Raskhan and other Muslim saints who made Saguna Bhakti the centre of their devotional compositions. In the Preface to *Hamare Muslim Sant Kavi (1984)*, Vankhede Guruji uses a quote by Bhartendu Harishchandra that says, "On these Muslim men of god shower/ Blessings of thousands of Hindus" while Tājībī's famous lines of devotion to Krishna are, "Hun to Mughlani Hinduani ho Rahungi main" ("I am a Mughal but I will become Hindu in love"). Rajeev Sharma has written the first biography of Prophet Mohammad in Marwari titled *Paighambar ro Paigham (The Prophet's Message)* and has uploaded in open access in 2015. Iqbal's Urdu translation of the Gayatri Mantra is well known, while Ramayana has found multiple adaptations and inspirations in Urdu poetry, even after the linguistic nationalism of Hindi-Urdu divide had come to stay in modern India. Apart from inter-spiritual references, invocations and inspirations, literary criticism can carve a space for inter-faith dialogue in its own way too. Hindi literature has much to offer which criticism and pedagogy can absorb and channelize to create grounds for inter-spiritual correspondences; and to use Arvind Sharma's phrase, make "reciprocal illuminations" possible. In the field of theo-poetics too, it is possible to incorporate inter-religious dialogue by assessing literary theories in the light of different aesthetics—for instance, dhvani theory in the light of Christian mystical poetry, or messianic poetics to better understand bhakti poetry.

Shivraj Mahendra's poetry collection *Masih Meri Manzil (Christ, My Destination)* (2008, 2017) offers a valid point of entry into Hindi Christian literary expression. This collection of poems is a series of reflections on the poet's own experiences of conversion and Ordination. These conversion narratives, like other conversion narratives, are important because they bring to light the spiritual experiences and social dimensions of these experiences into focus, besides enriching poetics through intimate lyricism. In the history of Indian Christian literature, prose and poetry in Marathi, Tamil, Malyalam, Bengali and English have brought to readers,

spiritual narratives of first- or second-generation conversions, frames of reference for education and new woman and other social debates, perspectives on reform movements in modern India and music and poetics through hymns and bhajans. In Hindi, we find the earliest publications as pamphlets and one autobiographical account of the conversion of Bhayaharn Das, titled *Kaise Paya Muktidata, arthat Bhayaharn Das ka Itihas (How I Found the Saviour, or the Shepherd Convert of Monghyr)*, written for him by Ram Singh and published by Rev. Thomas Evans, a Baptist missionary in 1877. Such pamphlets and accounts were encouraged by missionaries for evangelical purposes, while in the present context, they can present important perspectives on a society, nation and individual's evolution, if studied critically. Hindi literature has consisted of pamphlets, guidebooks, sermons, mostly translations, theological tracts as by Bishop Din Dayal, Sadhu Sundar Singh, Benjamin Khan and others. This field is especially rich in hymns and songbooks, notably among them *Aradhna ke Geet, Masihi Geet Sangraha* and *Kavita Mein Shubh Sandesh* by Sarojini Arya.

Shivraj Mahendra's devotional poems demand a literary space of their own—in Hindi poetry as well as in Christian literature. These first-person epiphanies are significant in taking Hindi Christian poetry beyond congregational relevance and performative contexts. These are standalone poems that can be read to understand the spiritual experiences of an individual through a range of tonality and inflexions that nudge their way into the poetics of bhakti in Hindi language. These forty poems compel the readers to recognize Christian Bhakti as valid poetics in Hindi—their structure and organization demonstrate the poet's self-consciousness in carving a space for Christian bhakti in Hindi poetry. The signature poem at the end titled 'Aao Rachna Karein Naveen' ('Come, Let us Create Anew') is an exhortation to fellow Christian poets to compose poetry in Hindi while the poem titled 'Tu Kab Majdoor Banega' ('When Will You Become a Labourer') highlights the possibility of enriching a poetic and spiritual space that is fertile and capable yet hasn't witnessed significant compositions or change in north India. In this collection, some poems resonate with the bhakti-nationalism phase of Hindi poetry; poems are calls for awakening, a spiritual regeneration that is not limited to a religious denomination but an awakening that is holistic in getting rid of social ills such as corruption, greed, lies and superstitions. The poems 'Usne Kaha Tha' and 'Masihi' are particularly significant as they point to a self-reflexive

dialogue within the community of believers where the poet is clear and insistent in pointing out the dissonance between avowed bhakti and true bhakti, between who is claims to be 'masihi' and who actually is. These poems point to a level of spiritual maturity in the poet, something that medieval bhakti poets demonstrated when scathing criticisms of religiosity and invocations of true spirituality were the tour de force of spiritual writings in India. Mahendra's poems are direct addresses to believers who pretend and project, who are far removed from Christ himself, who profess devotion but remain mired in ignorance and darkness. These poems use symbols of crucifixion, martyrdom and the body of Christ, reminding us of Richard Crashaw's poems where he invokes Christ's body and wounds and blood as affective theo-poetics. In lines as:

Maine masih ke ghav dekhe hain
Kabhi tumhare aansu tapke hain?

(I have seen Christ's wounds
Have you ever wept for them?)³

...

Koi sun sakta hai?
Masih aaj bhi
Crus par rota hai
Kya tumhara dil nahi rota hai?

(Can anyone hear?
Christ still weeps on the Cross
Does your heart not weep?)

The poet is addressing those who call themselves 'masihi' (Christian) and uses the refrain 'Main Masihi Nahin Hun' (I am not Christian). In an ironic self-criticism, the poet, through a series of rhetorical questions, asks the Christians to rethink their Christianity—whether it is a religious affiliation only or whether Christianity lies 'in becoming Christian'. The poem ends with the lines

Vidambana yahi hoti hai

Aksar

Masihi to hota hai

Masih nahi hota hai

(This is the contradiction

Often

Christians remain

While

Christ is absent)

This is a powerful criticism of religiosity, and it reminds us that devotional poetry has always highlighted incongruities in spiritual expression and conduct, whether it be in the medieval Bhakti and Sufi compositions, in vachanas, abhangas and padas, or in contemporary bhakti poetry as that of Mahendra.

In a poem that I find to be the strength of this collection, titled 'Usne Kaha Tha' ('He Had Said'), the poet writes in a tone of familiarity and criticism, an intimate personal address to a community while using the third person pronoun to defamiliarise at the same time. Let us see the following lines:

Usne kaha tha jakar chele banana

Inhe dekho yeh to khud chele nahi ban pa rahe hain

Usne kaha tha shubh sandesh sunana

Inhe dekho yeh to khud buri khabar bane ja rahe hain

(He had said

Go and make disciples

Look at them

They are not able to become disciples themselves

He had said

Spread the Good News

Look at them

They are themselves turning into bad news)

The play of pronouns as 'usne' and 'inhe' is brilliant as it demarcates the voice of Christ from the non-followers, the true from the fake, the spiritual from the corrupt. In a series of contradictions between what Christ said and what people are doing, the poet is able to address the so-called followers of Christ who are 'unable to become disciples themselves', while in an evangelical sense, he is also addressing non-believers too, though not in a denominational or sectarian sense. In an ulatbani Kabir says, "Paap karein te hari milein, paap karein te chain/ Paap kare sab kuch mile, isliye paap karo din rain" (Sin gives you peace, sin takes you to God/Sin gives you everything, keep at it night and day) he is using his ulat-bansi style to distinguish between what the world wants and what it deserves—Hari as superficial god, the deity of worldly rituals and rites and the true Hari who cannot be got with the rituals of ignorance. These are not prescriptive lines as many interpreters believe and find illogical syntactic and phonetic breaks to interpret this doha (couplet). All devotional poems need not be prescriptive, there are various ways of composing poetry, and devotional poems are particularly clever in the use of symbolism and suggestion. W. B. Yeats used gnostic and hermetic symbolism in talking about the 'second coming' while Blake reiterated that he prefers Hell to Heaven and Devils to Angels. Poetry invites us to explore meaning through a cognitive process that involves inference, suggestion and layers of cognition, as the dhvani theory or the Symbolist manifesto highlight. In the poem under discussion, the cognitive dissonance created with the use of 'usne' and 'inhe' is the poetic of inversion that is the strength of this poem.

In this collection, there is a poem 'Ishvar Putr' ('Son of God'), where the poet has deliberately used colloquial Hindi in place of standardized Hindi, in a tone reminiscent of avadhi-braj devotional poetry. This poem stands apart from other compositions in its metrical rhythm and stuti-path (remembrance-utterance), evoking the Ramkatha path of *Ramcharitamanas* and other medieval compositions. The lines read as:

Sat adi sat hain Ishu Masih
 Asat ke sab bhaav mitavein
 Jagat ke sab tam harein, au
 Antas mein jyoti-pushp khilavein

(Jesus Christ is the eternal truth
 He erases all sentiments of un-truths,
 He snatches all the darkness of the world,
 He makes flowers of light blossom in the heart)

There are some poems that make use of Hindustani while most are composed in khari-boli or standardized Hindi. While reading these poems, one notices the use of Christian images, symbols and referents and that makes it important to understand that symbols and referents in religions are an integral part of spiritual vocabulary itself.

Language and Symbolism

While reading Christian bhakti poetry in Hindi, the registers of Christian symbols and theological referents bring us to examine another aspect of spiritual literature: the nature of language itself. Is the language of spiritual literature to be assessed with the same qualitative and semantic registers as the language of non-spiritual or secular literature? When the English poet William Blake called for the burning of the Bible as readers were incapable, he said, of understanding symbolic language therein, or when Kabir encodes his messages in his 'ulat bansi' (inverted flute) or when the Siddhas create a 'sandhya bhasa' (twilight language) for sharing their spiritual messages, we are sure to note that spiritual language takes us beyond the associative and denotative stages of language to a state of suggestion (dhvani)⁴. We also understand that religious referents and symbols are an integral part of spiritual vocabulary itself and the poet-devotee is making free use of these encryptions in sharing an experience that is charged in anubhuti (experience) of the individual herself. At times, these compositions are encrypted codes, open to the initiates and attracting the lay; sometimes, these verses are spontaneous outbursts of higher states of consciousness; at times verses are part of ceremonial language itself. In different contexts, these verses/songs deploy sacred, specialized, theological language while in other contexts, especially when it involves ceremony or performance, the language is more accessible. In

gospel poems and bhajans available as music, the lyrics are more accessible while congregational prayers make use of theological terms in higher degree. Mahendra's collection of poems features compositions that explore language in most of these contexts—there are theological terms, archaic language, more generalized words as well as nationalist tones in various poems. Dass proposes that Mahendra's Hindi bhakti poetry brings in a wider perspective to Indian Christian theological developments in Hindi through the range of themes and linguistic variety in the collection.

Exploring theology through creative literature as in hymns, poems, songs, films and theatre in Hindi is a field open to research. Even a close examination of Christian characters in Hindi films, from the naïve but sexually experimental eponymous heroine in *Julie* (1975) to the wise and compassionate Father Braganza in *Kabhi Haan Kabhi Naa* (1994), the lives and dimensions of characters in popular cinema tell their own story⁵. The entry of commercial singers like Shaan, Sonu Nigam and others in rendering Christian hymns in Hindi points to the contradiction in terms of monetary viability but cultural obscurity of Hindi Christian popular arts. As I conclude this article, I invite readers to consider if bhakti poetry can be without yogic metaphors, Saguna similes, siddha symbols, liturgical and theological referents at all? Are religious symbols only representative of denominational impermeability or do they hold within them, an epistemological signification, as W B Yeats said of the soul that “[the soul] communicates in symbols”. In understanding inter-faith spirituality, the experiences of Ramkrishna Paramhansa and Raimon Panikkar who insisted on maintaining the purity of religious vocabulary as aids to inter-spiritual experiences, not as hindrances, can enable us to open Hindi poetry to recognize and validate Christian spiritual experiences, the first step towards any meaningful inter-faith dialogue. Hindi Christianity in creative literature seeks to go beyond the ridiculous Hindi-Hindu, Urdu-Muslim and Christian-English trifurcation that has become the fossilized trinity of cultural fundamentalism in contemporary north India.

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Notes

1. Amrita Bharati has a prolific output, yet scholarly studies of her poetry are rare and available mostly outside India. As a modern spiritual poet, her work invites more engaged readings, given the underrepresentation of women's spiritual writings themselves in India.
2. Dr. Naresh has a prolific output with literary criticism, novels and poetry on the theme of bhakti. Some of his poetry collections include *Pipasit Man*, *Shabd Vinag*, *Adhyatm Satsai*, the titles pointing to their nature and scope.
3. All translations are done by the author of this paper.
4. See Chaturvedi, Namrata. 2018. "Sanskrit Hermeneutics and Christian Devotional Poetry". *International Journal of Asian Christianity*: Vol.1, Issue 1.
5. See Mathew, Ruth Susan. 2021. "The politics of the representation of Christian women characters in select hindi films". *Continuum*, DOI: 10.1080/10304312.2021.1889974 and D'Souza, Ryan A. 2019. "Representations of Indian Christians in Bollywood Movies". Graduate Theses and Dissertations, <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8969&context=etd> accessed on 25/6/2021.