

Poetic border-crossings: Tulsidas as the 'Indian Shakespeare' in Hindi's colonial literary history

Fashioning what is considered the first literary history for modern Hindi, British civil servant George Grierson in his *Modern Vernacular Literature of Hindustan* (1889) used a structured comparison with an early modern English literary legacy. In this story, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and India shared a 'golden age'; Elizabethan and Mughal courts were progressive patrons; Indian poets were worthy contemporaries of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton; and the British rulers had brought about a nineteenth-century 'Renascence' following a period of 'medieval' stupor. These comparisons were often chronologically confused and seemingly superficial, yet served a programmatic and influential design of Hindi literary heritage. As a companion to Grierson's own geographical survey of India's languages, the literary history crossed borders both real and imaginary into Indian and English literary spaces and pasts.

This paper enquires into Grierson's allusions to sixteenth-century poet Tulsidas as the 'Indian Shakespeare' through the following set of questions: Which aspects of Shakespeare did Grierson's comparison summon? What did it have in common with other notable receptions of Shakespeare in colonial-era evaluations of Indian literary traditions, and how did it differ from them? What can we infer about the layered afterlife of Tulsidas -- and of Shakespeare -- as sixteenth-century touchstones in the nineteenth-century colonial imagination? More broadly, reflecting on why this comparison may have proved expedient for Grierson will foreground that the past had variable and strategic uses for historiographical narratives in thrall to political injunctions.