

MULOSIGE Modules:

Orature, World Literature and Mobility: Exploring Northern India Popular Culture

Reading List Description

The topic of this reading list, compiled by Catherine Servan-Schreiber, is dedicated to “Orature, Mobility, and World Literature, with a view on North India”, and as such it involves an interest for the mobility of literature as well as for the literature on mobility. In the same tradition as the Brittany “flying sheets complaint literature” or the Brazilian “cordel literature”, India has its own chapbook literature. On the basis of this literary specific media, the ambition of this study is to rehabilitate Orature in the history of Literature, to show the vitality of a popular book market, to re introduce the role of the chapbook production and creativity in the history of the book printing industry in India and to compare this field with similar literary trends of World literature.

In order to present a history of a North Indian regional literature by dealing with the printing conditions and circulation of Orature texts, Servan-Schreiber underlines certain continuities in modes of circulation between pre colonial, colonial and contemporary periods, whether they be in patterns of travel, the circulation of oral literature, the spread of merchant networks or the circulation of labour. In studying these peculiar patterns of mobility, the idea is not to restrict the study to people, but to associate the circulation of people with that of texts or objects. In that perspective, there is a narrow line between anthropology, literature and history. Therefore, the reading list will not include only essays on literature, but will go beyond, to include history, history of book printing, sociology, anthropology, and even archaeology.

This reading list developed out of a week long course given at SOAS “[Orature, Literature and History: Exploring Northern Indian Popular Culture \(19c-20c\)](#)” (SOAS, 29 - 31 May 2018) by **Professor Catherine Servan-Schreiber** (CEIAS, Paris) and **Camille Buat** (Sciences Po, Paris and University of Göttingen).

Reading List contributor:

Professor Catherine Servan-Schreiber is a Research Fellow at the Centre for South Asia (CNRS/EHESS), Paris, and she also teaches Bhojpuri and Avadhi languages and literature at INALCO (Paris).

Starting from the study of Bhojpuri and Avadhi medieval texts, Servan-Schreiber has published several books and articles on Bhojpuri oral traditions. Her work on the Bhojpuri migration from India to Mauritius and Surinam through the process of indentured labour/ l’engagisme led her to study the influence of Afro-Malagasy sega music on the Bhojpuri popular musical style as it developed in the Indian Ocean diaspora; some of her conclusions can be accessed through her article on ‘[Tropical Body Language](#)’ in Samaj (2011). Servan-Schreiber has also organised the international conference on ‘The Global circulations of Jazz’ at the Musée du Quai Branly (Paris) with Stéphane Dorin in June 2014. Her publications include the pioneering and comprehensive Histoire d’une musique métisse à l’île Maurice. Chutney indien et séga Bollywood (Riveneuve,

2010), and Indianité et créolité à l'île Maurice (Purusartha, Ehess, 2014). She has also created a [website on Indian music in Creole lands](#) with Nadia Guerguadj.

Beat One - [Theoretical Frames for Orature and Mobility](#)

From collecting archives on the fieldwork to exploring narrative patterns, a line-up of useful works are being presented, but to begin with, to settle the theoretical frame of the topic, the reader is invited to submerge in the work of the 3 historians, Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, with their volume *Society and Circulation, Mobile people and Itinerant culture in South Asia 1750-1950*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2003. Their essay is pathbreaking in suggesting the outlines of a different framework for historical analysis. Merchant circulation, pilgrimages, cartography, policing, labour mobility and the movement of itinerant groups, from colonial administrators to itinerant bards, have a link with the production and the circulation of a popular literature. Undeniably, the study of Orature cannot be undertaken without taking into account these factors.

[Readings](#)

Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Éd.) [Society and Circulation. Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750-1950](#). Delhi, Permanent Black, 2003 *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 60, no. 2 (2005): 342–44. doi:10.1017/S039526490002480X.

Beat Two - [Uttar Pradesh and Bihar: Hindi and Bhojpuri](#)

The region considered is the Uttar Pradesh and Bihar areas where Hindi and Bhojpuri languages are spoken. Its literary background cannot be separated from its specific economic conditions: the mobility touches every home, and the image of the exiled *Bidesiya* haunts the local literature. It is important to keep in mind the working conditions of the audience of Orature, to take into account the fact that the influence of Bhojpuri chapbooks pervades in a huge scale of territories.

In order to draw the landscape in which the mobility patterns settles, two studies can be really helpful. First, the study of Dirk Kolff, ***Naukar Rajput and Sepoy, the Ethnohistory of Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450-1850***, (Cambridge, 1990) on military labour in North India. This study mobilizes literary sources of the Orature repertoires to challenge long-held assumptions about the nature of military power and peasant society in Northern Indian before British ascendancy. The second one is related to the history of tea industry of Assam. Many of the tea-garden workers of Assam come from the Hindi/Bhojpuri speaking belt and keeping in mind the colonial structure of the plantation system, through the book ***One Hundred years of servitude: Political Economy of tea Plantation in colonial Assam*** by Rana Behal (Tulika books, 2014), we can see emerge the relation between the workers, the traders and the peddlers of the Eastern parts of India.

[Readings](#)

Behal, Rana. (2014) [One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political Economy of Tea Plantation in Colonial Assam](#) (New Delhi: Tulika Book).

Kolff, Dirk. (1990) [Naukar Rajput and Sepoy, the Ethnohistory of Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450-1850](#), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Beat Three - [Popular Publishing](#)

As it happens that all the Orature repertoires of the performers have been printed in chapbooks and are sold along with their trajectories, the reference to Frances Pritchett's history of Fort William College Publications, which is exposed in her book ***Marvelous Encounters, Folk Romance in Urdu and Hindi*** (Delhi, Manohar Publications, 1985) is quite indispensable. In this book, she follows Hindi and Urdu popular *Qissa* (tale, story, narration) editions and Publications, that is to say the circulation of Indian popular literature from Arabo- Persian background genre. A good way of understanding the importance of this book is also to read the review of it made by Kathryn Hansen, "**Urdu Folklore and the Qissa. A Review article of Frances Pritchett's *Marvelous Encounters, Folk Romance in Urdu and Hindi***" in *Annual of Urdu Studies* 7, 1990, 111-116.

Moreover, the comparison with the situation in South India, in Tamilnad, is available, thanks to the fascinating study entitled "**Songsters of the Crossroads, Popular literature and print in colonial Tamilnadu**", by A.R. Venkatachalapathy. In this study, the scholar deals with the term *gujilee*, which is commonly used to designate popular publishing. The word "gujilee" comes from "kuchilee", an evening bazar in town, and Venkatachalapathy shows how the place -name became the metaphor for that popular literature. His study, which documents the elite contempt for popular publications, is based on a rich corpus of actual chapbooks and ballads, and a reconstruction of this world is attempted, focusing both on production and diffusion (in *South Indian Folklorist*, vol. 3, n° 1, October 1999, 49-80).

[Readings](#)

Hansen, Kathryn. (1990). "Urdu Folklore and the Qissa. A Review article of Frances Pritchett's *Marvelous Encounters, Folk Romance in Urdu and Hindi*" in *Annual of Urdu Studies* 7, 111-116.

Pritchett, Frances. (1985) *Marvelous Encounters, Folk Romance in Urdu and Hindi* (Delhi: Manohar Publications)

Venkatachalapathy, A.R. (1999). "Songsters of the Crossroads: Popular Literature in Colonial Tamilnadu", *South Indian Folklorist*, vol. 3, n° 1, October 1999, 49-80.

Beat Four - [The History of Book Printing](#)

Nevertheless, in order to appreciate and evaluate the place of the chapbooks production in the circulation of Orature as well as in the market book economy, we need to refer to general works on the history of book printing. The French-Canadian volume ***Les mutations du livre et de l'édition dans le monde***, under the direction of Jacques Michon and Jean-Yves Mollier, Les Presses Universitaires Laval et l'Harmattan, 2001, reflects the works of the Cultural History Department of Saint Quentin en Yvelines University. The chapter « **The spread of three European publishing models throughout the world** », and the chapter « **The book and the circulation of ideas** », give good bases for tackling the world of book printing, through British, German and French models. Regarding India itself, we can have recourse to two masterly studies : **B.S. Kesavan's *History of Publishing in India***, Delhi, National Book Trust, vol. I, 1985 and of course, Abhijit Gupta's work entitled ***The history of the Book in the Indian Subcontinent***, in Oxford Companion to the Book, eds Michael Suarez and Henry Woudhuysen, OUP, 2010.

What we need, at that level, is to refer to the methodology proposed for tackling the prosopography of printers, by Frederic Barbier, French famous historian of the book printing, and specialist of the German model of printing. Of particular relevance is his work, ***Histoire du livre***, Paris, Armand Colin, 2000; his writings on the prosopography of European printers from Strasbourg and Lyon are very stimulating and give a methodology for inquiring into the dynasties of printers established in Mumbai, Delhi, Patna Varanasi and Calcutta.

Readings

- Barbier, Frederic. (2000). *Histoire du livre*, (Paris: Armand Colin)
- Gupta, Abhijit (2010). "The history of the Book in the Indian Subcontinent". In *Oxford Companion to the Book*, (eds.) Michael Suarez and Henry Woudhuysen, (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Michon, Jacques and Jean-Yves Mollier. (2001). *Les mutations du livre et de l'édition dans le monde*. (Les Presses Universitaires Laval et l'Harmattan).
- Kesavan, B.S. (1985). *History of Publishing in India, Vol. I* (Delhi: National Book Trust)

Beat Five - [Bhojpuri Peddlers](#)

The Bhojpuri peddlers Servan-Schreiber studies are not a homogeneous group, socially or in religious terms: they include Hindus as well as Muslims, sanyasis or Madaris as well as petty merchants and their itineraries are as varied as the style and substance of their repertoires. The advent of the Independence does not appear to have a very direct impact on the realms of their circulation, which included parts of India and Nepal, but their working conditions were changed by the print revolution which allowed a few enterprising publishers to cash in on the popularity of their repertoires to develop a thriving business in the production of chapbooks. The advent of print led to a reorganization of existing circuits and some transformations of practices. This is where the help of the archaeological survey conducted by D.R. Patil, *Antiquarian Remains of Bihar*, Patna, Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute (1963), is so useful. It gives a fully detailed documentation on the region, through an exhaustive description of its Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist monuments which are used as halting places for the performers and their audience. Knowing the importance of *khanqahs* (sufi hospices) and *dargahs* (muslim saints tombs) for the transmission of Orature, it will be profitable to complete this survey with the works of the great scholar Sayid Hasan Askari on medieval Bihar and Sufism in Bihar. With the help of such studies, and through a viewpoint focused on the itineraries of the wandering singers who sing these repertoires, and that of the peddlers who sell the books (*paikar*), Servan-Schreiber has been able to show that the circulation of chapbooks was linked with the sale of opium, of cattle and birds, and with the traffic of arms and munitions, via the saltpeter production of the region.

A good opportunity for checking the stakes of this mobility pattern will be then to consult Laurence Fontaine's *Histoire du colportage en Europe, XV^e-XIX^e siècle*, Albin Michel, 1993. There, Laurence Fontaine stresses the influence of rural sources and not only urban, to show the relation between the nets of traders, the local bourgeoisie and the peddlers. Her chapter "*Réseaux de libraires et colporteurs de livres*" (Nets of booksellers and peddlers) relies on examples taken from France, Switzerland, Spain, Italy and Portugal. What is striking is that she underlines a circulation pattern which starts from the mountain to go towards the plain, which is opposite to the case in North India. A useful concept that we can borrow at that step, is that of "cultural mixed places", or "cultural composite places", elaborated by the sociologist Stéphane Dorin, and which he developed in his thesis on "*La globalisation des formes culturelles. Le Jazz et le rock à Calcutta*" (Paris, EHESS, 2005), and his article « *Swingin' India. Circulations coloniales et postcoloniales du jazz en Inde* », *L'Homme*, n° 202, 2012. Such an analysis developed on the relation between Indian music and World music is quite stimulating, and can help us analyzing the relation between Indian Orature and World literature.

Readings

- Dorin, Stéphane. (2005). *La globalisation des formes culturelles. Le Jazz et le rock à Calcutta* (Paris: EHESS)
- Dorin, Stéphane. (2012). *Swingin' India: Circulations coloniales et postcoloniales du jazz en Inde*. *L'Homme*, 202(2), 169-192. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-homme-2012-2-page-169.htm>.
- Fontaine, Laurence. (1993). "Réseaux de libraires et colporteurs de livres" In *Histoire du colportage en Europe, XV^e-XIX^e siècle*, (Albin Michel)
- Patil, D.R. (1963). *Antiquarian Remains of Bihar*, (Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute)

Beat Six - [Textual Aspects of Orature](#)

Now we shall turn to the textual aspect of Orature, with a focus on the North India Epic Context and its revenge stories repertoires which offer a lively and important trend in Orature. ***The Revenge of Laciya Rani, The Revenge of Vijaymal, Gauraiya or Reshma Cuharmal***, are some of the main titles of this corpus of texts. Meanwhile, we shall cross the character of the Honour bandit. Whereas he bears similarities with the “great warriors portraits” which are studied by Ramya Sreeneevasan (Warrior-Tales at Hinterlands courts in North India c. 1370-1550”, in F. Orsini and S. Sheikh, eds, ***After Timur Left. Culture and Circulation in Fifteenth Century North India***, Oxford, OUP, 2014, 243-272), his ambitions are different and so are the political implications of the narration of his achievements. A good way of measuring the literary and anthropological crossings these epics performances involve is to read Badri Narayan’s essay ***Documenting Dissent Contesting Fables, Contested Memories and Dalit Political Discourse***, Simla Institute of Advanced Studies, 2001. A way of understanding more precisely the impact of Orature temporality among the audience, at the level of the singer’s is to allude to “the tragic short-cut process” as it has been enlightened by Nello Zagnoli in his analysis of the Italian Chronicle of the bandit Musilino, who created the revolt Movement in Reggio and resistance. His story belongs to the Sicilian Cantastorie repertoires in Calabria. The Cantastorie or Canzuneri are wandering singers in the South of Italy, and Sicilia. They describe *cronache* (news in short) or *cronca nera, frattaci* (blood news). In Calabria, the police confiscate the chapbooks which print such stories and encourage the audience to violence: Nello Zagnoli, ***“Les derniers des Cantastorie. Chant et changement en Calabre méridionale”***, *Littérature orale arabo-berbère*, 19-20 (1988-89), 177-235. This analysis can be completed by the collective publication ***Les Temps épiques. Structuration, modes d’expression et fonction de la temporalité dans l’épopée***, 2019, under the direction of Claudine Leblanc and Jean Pierre Martin, 2019. The question of the use of ancient and medieval epics in contemporary contexts has been the main reflection of Florence Goyet’s work. She has related it to “le travail epic” (the epic work) through examples taken from Greece and Japan. In her book, ***Penser sans concept : fonction de l’épopée guerrière. Iliade, Chanson de Roland, Hôgen et Heiji monogatari***, Paris, Champion, 2006, she shows that the epic is an intellectual tool to solve a historical complex situation. It is the place where new values are elaborated, and where a new political order is thought of.

[Readings](#)

- Goyet, Florence (2006). *Penser sans concept : fonction de l’épopée guerrière. Iliade, Chanson de Roland, Hôgen et Heiji monogatari*, (Paris: Champion)
- Leblanc, Claudine and Jean Pierre Martin (2019). *Les Temps épiques. Structuration, modes d’expression et fonction de la temporalité dans l’épopée*. (REARE)
- Narayan, Badri (2001). *Documenting Dissent Contesting Fables, Contested Memories and Dalit Political Discourse*, (Simla: Institute of Advanced Studies)
- Sreeneevasan, Ramya (2014). “Warrior-Tales at Hinterlands courts in North India c. 1370-1550”, in F. Orsini and S. Sheikh, eds, *After Timur Left. Culture and Circulation in Fifteenth Century North India*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 243-272.
- Zagnoli, Nello (1988-9) “Les derniers des Cantastorie. Chant et changement en Calabre méridionale”, *Littérature orale arabo-berbère*, 19-20, (Paris: CNRS & EPHE) 177-235

Beat Seven- [Orature Revenge Stories](#)

But other levels of comparison are useful too, and we shall wonder which kind of similarities Orature revenge stories partake with such famous novels as Balzac's *La vendetta* (1830), or Mérimé's *Colomba* (1840), or with the short story "The red handkerchief" by Gobineau (1872). Afterwards, coming back to India, we shall refer to the scenario of the revenge-story settled in the Punjabi novel *Pinjar* (The skeleton) by Amrita Pritam (1950).

If we want to enlarge the study of chapbooks, and replace it inside the World Literature, we can compare the Indian Orature situation with Brittany, through the study of the flying sheets complaints by Daniel Giraudon, "**Chanteurs de plein vent et chansons sur feuilles volantes en Basse-Bretagne**", published in *Ethnologie Française*, Musiques dans la rue. Terrains de jeu, 1999, 1, 22-33. But of course, one of the most relevant comparison is offered through the cordel literature. We need therefore its specialists expertise. Jean-François Botrel studies Spanish « **narrativa caballeresca breve** », texts and Orature tellings of various typologies, as the reader can find in « **Littérature et imprimés de cordel dans la péninsule ibérique** » in R. Lemaire et A. Moreau (eds), **Catalogue de l'exposition Des conquêtes de Charlemagne au Brésil. Le Moyen-Age européen dans la littérature populaire brésilienne**, Poitiers, Médiathèque François Mitterrand, 2000, 21-29. As to the cordel literature of the Cantadors of Brazil, several names characterize this literature: *estorias de trancoso*, *folhetos de feira*. In fact, these "folhetos" express the Portuguese feeling of "saudade", or nostalgia in order to remember of beloved persons who have disappeared or lots places, lost belongings. This oral style and its chapbooks printing have been studied by Julie Cavaignac : « **Romances d'exil. Littérature de cordel et migrations au Brésil** ». *Autrepart* 1, 1997, Les Arts de la rue dans les sociétés du Sud. The access to the Brazilian cordel literature can be completed with Claudia Neves Lopes's article « **Edition et colonisation, le marché éditorial entre le Brésil et le Portugal** », which is published in the volume that I have already mentioned, *Les mutations du livre et de l'édition dans le monde*, under the direction of Jacques Michon and Jean-Yves Mollier, 360-373.

Readings

- Cavaignac, Julie. (1997). "Romances d'exil. Littérature de cordel et migrations au Brésil". *Autrepart* 1, Les Arts de la rue dans les sociétés du Sud.
- Giraudon, Daniel (1999). "Chanteurs de plein vent et chansons sur feuilles volantes en Basse-Bretagne", published in *Ethnologie Française*, *Musiques dans la rue. Terrains de jeu*, 1, 22-33.
- Lemaire, R. et A. Moreau (eds), (2001). *Catalogue de l'exposition Des conquêtes de Charlemagne au Brésil. Le Moyen-Age européen dans la littérature populaire brésilienne*, (Poitiers: Médiathèque François Mitterrand), 21-29
- Neves Lopes, Claudia. (2001). "Edition et colonisation, le marché éditorial entre le Brésil et le Portugal Michon". In: Jacques Michon and Jean-Yves Mollier. *Les mutations du livre et de l'édition dans le monde*. (Les Presses Universitaires Laval et l'Harmattan), 360-373.

Beat Eight - [Orature and the Cinema](#)

And we shall end the reading list with an escape into the cinema world, with two "epic films" which pay homage to Orature through the relation between the performers and the audience. One is the Bhojpuri film *Bidesiya* (1963) , by S.N. Tripathi, the music composer, which shows a poetry singing competition in Village India, and the other, the Brazilian film *Antonio Das Mortes* (1969), by Glauber Rocha. This film, while focusing on the bandits of honor, the Cangaceiros in the Nordeste of Brazil, and using the epic song of the riding Saint woman, shows a display of Orature which is very similar to that of North India.

Seeings

Rocha, Glauber. *Antonio Das Mortes* (1969).

Tripathi, S.N. *Bidesiya* (1963).

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