Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Arabic and Persian Translations from Indian Languages

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE ISLAMIC AND HINDU religious traditions? Variations on this question inevitably come to mind in any attempt to assess the significance of the past dozen centuries of South Asian civilization, during which time significant Muslim populations have played important roles, interacting with Indian religions and cultures from a variety of perspectives. Although frequently this kind of question is posed in terms of assumptions about the immutable essences of Islam and Hinduism, I would like to argue that this kind of approach is fundamentally misleading, for several reasons. First, this approach is ahistorical in regarding religions as unchanging, and it fails to account for the varied and complex encounters, relationships, and interpretations that took place between many individual Muslims and Hindus. Second, it assumes that there is a single clear concept of what a Hindu is, although this notion is increasingly coming into question; considerable evidence has accumulated to indicate that external concepts of religion, first from post-Mongol Islamicate culture, and eventually from European Christianity in the colonial period, were brought to bear on a multitude of Indian religious traditions to create a single concept of Hinduism. Third, there is a significant difference between medieval Islamicate and modern European approaches to Indian religion and culture. It is the thesis of this paper that, although many Muslims over the centuries engaged in detailed study of particular aspects of Indian culture, which may appear in a modern perspective as religious, there was for the most part no compelling interest among Muslims in constructing a concept of a single Indian religion, which would correspond to the modern concept of Hinduism. While this thesis could be tested in many different contexts, the translations from Sanskrit into Arabic and Persian offer a particularly promising ground for examining Muslim approaches to Indian culture.

The cultural movement between the Indic and Islamicate civilizations has spanned well over a millennium. The translation movement between the Indian and Islamic cultures is still rarely studied, though as a cross-cultural event the movement from Sanskrit into Arabic and Persian is comparable in magnitude and duration to the other great enterprises of cross-cultural translation (Greek philosophy into Arabic and Latin, Buddhism from Sanskrit into Chinese and Tibetan). The following sketch is offered to suggest new lines of interpretation, to clarify the significance of this translation movement. The impetus for establishing this taxonomy is a larger study in which I analyze the translations of a text on hatha yoga, The Pool of Nectar, into Arabic, Persian, Turkish,
and Urdu. I should emphasize that the classification outlined here is still tentative, especially since the bulk of the Persian translations from Sanskrit still remain in unedited manuscripts. In most cases, little progress has been made since the work of turn-of-the-century manuscript cataloguers. This large field of research is therefore basically unexplored, and it is to be hoped that this study will encourage more work along similar lines.

As a first analytical approach to the subject, I suggest that among the translations from Indian languages into Arabic into Persian, four main categories of texts stand out as having special importance: 1) early Arabic and Persian translations on practical arts and sciences; 2) Persian translations of epics from the time of Akbar, having primarily political significance; 3) Persian translations of mostly metaphysical and mystical texts from the time of Dara Shukuh; and 4) Persian translations of works on Hindu ritual and law commissioned by British colonial officials. To this list one may also add original Persian works on Indian religions by Hindus as well as recent Indological studies by Iranian scholars. As this division suggests, attitudes toward Indian religion as reflected in these translations tended to be defined by the particular political and intellectual interests of the translators, rather than by any internally generated sense of the coherence of Indian religious traditions. I would argue that it is only in the fourth phase, in the British colonial period, that Persian and Arabic translations from Indian languages were viewed as representing Hindu religion as it is understood today.

1. This study, entitled The Pool of Nectar: Muslim Interpreters of Yoga, is in preparation and should go to press soon. My critical edition of the Arabic text, together with the principal Persian translation, will be published separately.

Practical Arts and Sciences

The initial interest of the early Arabic translators from Sanskrit was primarily in scientific works on mathematics, medicine, toxicology, astronomy, and alchemy; a number of works of this kind were translated during the heyday of the Abbasid caliphate in the ninth and tenth centuries, apparently by Indians residing in Baghdad, though few of these survive. A well-known result of this scientific exchange was the transmission of Indian numerals and the zero notation, later known in Europe as Arabic numbers. The same practical emphasis was also characteristic of some of the early translations from Sanskrit into Persian commissioned by the Turkish sultans of Delhi. As an example, when Sultan Firuz ibn Tuqluhq besieged the hill fortress of Nagarkot (Kangra) in 1365, his army plundered nearby temples and acquired a library of thirteen hundred Sanskrit books. Out of this booty, only a single work, "a book on natural philosophy and auguries and omens," was translated into Persian by a court poet, under the title Dalâ‘il-i Firûz Shâhî (The Demonstrations of King Firuz); from the description it seems that this work contained elements of astronomy and divination. Although this particular treatise seems not to have survived, a historian of the Mughal period who saw it commented that it was a useful work, "containing various philosophical facts both of science and practice." Bada‘uni, who perused the same work in Lahore in 1591, found it "moderately good, neither free from beauties nor defects," and he commented that a number of works had been translated from Sanskrit during the time of Firuz, mostly on "profitless" subjects such as music and dance. In all these instances there seems to be little interest in the religions of India, at least in comparison with the practical sciences. The story of Sultan Firuz indicates that, despite the possibility of access to a full range of Sanskrit texts, the specific interests of potential patrons of translation remained quite limited in terms of subject matter.

This practical trend in Muslim attitudes toward Indian thought seems to have been the rule, though there were some exceptions. Stories of Buddhist origin, particularly the cycle later known in Europe as Barlaam and Ioasaphath, were related by Muslim authors such as the tenth-century Brethren of Purity (Ikhwan al-safa‘), who employed


6. On the basis of Jain records, Mahdi Husain has suggested that Jain scholars writing in Sanskrit were the “philosophers” with whom Sultan Muhammad ibn Tughluq (d. 1351) associated. If correct, this would still indicate a fairly specialized interest in a minority tradition that is not today considered part of the “Hindu” fold. See Mahdi Husain, Tughluq Dynasty (Calcutta, 1963), 315–39.
these stories particularly for moralizing purposes. The only early Muslim scholar to show sustained interest in Indian religious and philosophical texts was the great scientist and philosopher al-Biruni. He translated a number of Sanskrit works into Arabic (including selections from Patañjali’s Yogasūtras and the Bhagavad Gītā) in connection with his encyclopedic treatise on India. Although the authors of Arabic books on sects and heresies, such as al-Shahrastāni (d. 1153), generally devoted a section or a few pages to the religions of India, no other Arabic writer followed in al-Biruni’s footsteps as a specialist on Indian religion and philosophy. Wilhelm Halbfass has attempted an assessment of al-Biruni’s contribution, praising him for his fair and objective approach to India:

A clear awareness of his own religious horizon as a particular context of thought led him to perceive the “otherness” of the Indian religious philosophical context and horizon with remarkable clarity . . . Unlike Megasthenes, Biruni did not “translate” the names of foreign deities; nor did he incorporate them into his own pantheon, and of course he did not possess the amorphous “openness” of syncretism and the search for “common denominators.” That is why he could comprehend and appreciate the other, the foreign as such, thematizing and explicating in an essentially new manner the problems of intercultural understanding and the challenge of “objectivity” when shifting from one tradition to another, from one context to another.

Halbfass’s admiration for the scholarly achievement of al-Biruni is certainly justified, but these remarks call for some qualification. First of all, as stated earlier, al-Biruni’s perception of the “otherness” of Indian thought was not just hermeneutical clarity with regard to a pre-existing division; it was effectively the invention of the concept of a unitary Hindu religion and philosophy. Furthermore, Halbfass’s praise of al-Biruni’s bold proclamation of “otherness” obscures the fact that he had to engage in a


remarkably complex interpretation of his sources with many "Islamizing" touches. His translation of Patañjali’s *Yogasūtras* was based on a combination of the original text plus a commentary that is still not identified, all rephrased by al-Biruni into a question-and-answer format. Like the translators of polytheistic Greek texts into Arabic, al-Biruni rendered the Sanskrit “gods” (*deva*) with the Arabic terms for “angels” (*malā‘ika*) or “spiritual beings” (*rūḥāniyyāt*), surely a theological shift amounting to “translation.” He was, moreover, convinced on a deep level that Sanskrit texts were saturated with recognizable philosophical doctrines of reincarnation and union with God, which required comparative treatment: “For this reason their [the Indians’] talk, when it is heard, has a flavour composed of the beliefs (*‘aqā‘id*) of the ancient Greeks, of the Christian sects, and of the Sufi leaders.” Consequently, al-Biruni made deliberate and selective use of terms derived from Greek philosophy, heresiography, and Sufism to render the Sanskrit technical terms of yoga. But al-Biruni’s rationalistic approach to Indian religions remained isolated and almost forgotten, while his Arabic version of Patañjali was described by at least one reader as incomprehensible.12 There is some superficial reference to al-Biruni’s work on India and the Patañjali translation in the *Bayān al-adyān* or *The Explanation of Religions* of Abu al-Ma‘āli, written in Ghazna in 1092.13 It appears, however, that the principal readers of al-Biruni’s work on India were interested in it mainly from a historical and administrative point of view; the world-historian and Mongol minister Rashid al-Din (d. 1318) drew extensively on al-Biruni’s geographical information, while the Mughal wazir Abu al-Fazl ʿAllami (d. 1602) apparently had al-Biruni’s work in mind when he compiled a detailed but uncritical survey of Indian thought in his Persian gazetteer of Akbar’s Indian empire.14 Today, both al-Biruni’s work on India and his translation of Patañjali exist in unique manuscripts, suggesting an extremely limited circulation. I would like to suggest that al-Biruni’s concept of a unified Indian religion, as a polar opposite to Islam, lay forgotten until it was resurrected in an even more radical form by European scholarship a century ago; the growth of the Muslim concept of Hindu religion took place largely without reference to al-Biruni. Since Sachau’s edition (1886) and translation (1888) of al-Biruni’s work on India were undertaken at the suggestion of the board of the Oriental Translation Fund, and were entirely subsidized by Her Majesty’s India Office, it is tempting to locate this work’s historical importance primarily within the larger political


concerns of colonial Orientalism. Al-Biruni’s rationalistic and reifying approach to religion, which had practically no impact on medieval Islamic thought, is much more palatable to the modern taste, and this explains his popularity today.

**Historical and Political Texts**

The second large category of translations from Sanskrit consists of the mostly epic texts rendered into Persian during the time of Akbar. This phase of translation was dominated by historical and political considerations. Most modern discussions of the Mughal period, which speak confidently about translation of Sanskrit religious texts into Persian, fail to notice any ambiguity in the phrase “religious text.” Today, with a comfortably solid notion of Hindu religious texts in place in the curriculum, we have no hesitation in treating epic works like the *Mahābhārata* and the *Ramāyana* as religious. Nonetheless, the prominent courtly and martial features of these texts furnish the occasion for questioning the assumption that the Mughals viewed their contents as religious. As we have seen, the early translations from Sanskrit into Arabic and Persian focused primarily on practical arts and sciences. Patrons of Persian learning in the later Indo-Muslim courts were also interested in translations on practical subjects, such as erotics, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, farriery, and in particular music. Rarely, we hear of pre-Mughal translations of epic texts from Sanskrit into Persian. As early as the eleventh century C.E., a partial Persian translation of an old recension of the *Mahābhārata* was achieved, and in the fourteenth century C.E. the *Bhagavatā Purāṇa* was translated. The ruler of Kashmir, Zayn al-Abidin (d. 1470), had the *Mahābhārata* translated into Persian, along with the Sanskrit metrical history of Kashmir, *Rājatarangini*; he was, moreover, a patron of Sanskrit literature, and he commissioned the Sanskrit historian Srivara to translate Jami’s romantic Persian epic on Joseph and Zulaykha into Sanskrit. But the remarkably high number of translations of the epics commissioned by the Mughal emperors suggest that they have a special importance connected with the political posture of that dynasty. In this connection it should be recalled that collections

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16. See, for instance, works on erotics and farriery translated from Sanskrit to Persian and dedicated to ‘Abbād Allah Qutbshah of Golconda (d. 1672) and Muzaffar Shah II of Gujarat (d. 1526), listed by Marshall, 227, no. 792; 548, no. 621A. On Indian music see the numerous translations listed by Ethé, nos. 2008–33, and in particular Husaini, *Indo-Persian Literature*, 227–47, for a detailed description of the *Lahjat-i Sikandar Shāhī*. For further examples of translations on practical subjects see also C. A. Storey, *Persian Literature* 2: 4–5, 17, 26 (mathematics); 38, 93 (astronomy); 231, 253–54, 266 (medicine); 394–96 (farriery); 412–22 (music); 439 no. 13 (alchemy).


of Sanskrit narrative literature, principally the *Pañcatantra* and the *Hitopadeśa*, had been translated into middle Persian during the Sasanian period; when stories from this tradition were later put into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (d. 759) under the title *Kalila wa Dimna*, they were valued in Arabic literature primarily for their political significance.19

The political context for the Mughal interest in Sanskrit lies in the imperial program devised by Akbar and followed in varying degrees by his successors. Although earlier writers on the Mughals have treated this interest primarily as an indication of liberal personal religious inclinations on the part of Akbar, this romantic conception should yield to a more realistic analysis of policy aspects.20 It is highly anachronistic to read an Enlightenment virtue of “tolerance” into the religious politics of the Mughal era. The original precedent for Akbar’s policies of patronage of multiple religions is probably best sought in the Mongol era, when the prudent insurance policy of the “pagan” Mongols gave generous treatment to Buddhists, Christians, Taoists, and Muslims. Akbar’s family conceived of their regime as a continuation of the neo-Mongol empire of Timur (Tamerlane); like Timur, Akbar was furnished with a genealogy that included Chingiz Khan, but in his case it was extended to include the Mongol sun-goddess Alanquwa. The symbolism of world domination inherent in the Mongol political tradition was given an ingenious philosophical and mystical twist in the writings of Akbar’s minister Abu al-Fazl, who interpreted Akbar’s role in terms of the Neoplatonic metaphysics of Ishaqī Illuminationism and the Sufi doctrine of the Perfect Man. This metaphysical apparatus was invoked not merely for its own philosophical consistency, but essentially to undergird the authority of Akbar in an eclectical fashion.21

While coinage with Sanskrit formulas and patronage of different religious institutions (including “Hindu” ones) was a feature of most Indo-Muslim regimes, what distinguished the Mughals under Akbar was their attempt to refocus all religious enthusiasm of whatever background onto the person of the emperor.22 Akbar’s sponsorship of the translation of Sanskrit works was part of the overall literary phase of his reign, which included the regular reading aloud of works from the canon of Persian court literature, history, and Sufism. He assigned to the task a number of courtiers who were scholars of Persian but presumably ignorant of Sanskrit; they were assisted, however, by Sanskrit pandits, so that, from a literary point of view, the translation process probably involved a considerable amount of oral explication in vernacular Hindi prior to the composition of the Persian “translation.” Some translators, like Bada‘uni, assisted in this project much against their own inclinations. The extent of the sustained translation enterprise can be judged from the numerous manuscript copies, some lavishly illus-


22. For coinage with Sanskrit and patronage of non-Muslim religious institutions, see my *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (Albany, 1992), 47–53. On Akbar as the center of all religions, see Harbans Mukhia, *Historians and Historiography During the Reign of Akbar* (New Delhi, 1976), 70.
trated, and the repeated revisions and new translations (in both poetry and prose) of particularly valued texts. In political terms, the inclusion and translation of Sanskrit works was designed to reduce intellectual provincialism and linguistic divisiveness within the empire. Sanskrit and Hindi romances, such as the story of Nala and Damayanti, seem to have been integrated into a literary continuum along with Near Eastern fables like the story of Majnun and Layla or the tales of Amir Hamza. Abu al-Fazl appears to regard the epic Mahābhārata and Ramāyāna primarily as histories of ancient India with biographical and philosophical overtones. This even holds true of Puranic extensions of the epic, such as the Harīvamsa, which Abu al-Fazl describes only as a biography of Krishna. Akbar himself entitled the Persian translation of the Mahābhārata as the Razmānāmah or The Book of War, underlining its character as a martial epic.

Abu al-Fazl's complicated vision of the purpose of the Mahābhārata translation is worth examining in detail. On the one hand, he observes that the epic does contain remarkable philosophical and cosmological perspectives of great complexity. Abu al-Fazl notes that at least thirteen different Indian schools of thought are mentioned in the text. On the other hand, he points out that a quarter of its 100,000 verses are devoted to the martial epic of the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, making it a vade mecum for the conduct of war and battle, and much of the remainder is "advice, sermons, stories, and explanations of past romance and battle (bazm o razm)." In one long passage in his introduction to the Persian translation of the Mahābhārata, Abu al-Fazl recounts a series of justifications for the translation project, all couched as an expansion of his encomium to his patron Akbar, who is eulogized in the most hyperbolic of terms. Abu al-Fazl outlines five major objectives: reducing sectarian fighting among both Muslims and Hindus; eroding the authority of all religious specialists over the masses; deflating Hindu bigotry towards Muslims by revealing questionable Hindu doctrines; curing Muslim provincialism by exposing Muslims to cosmologies much vaster than official sacred history; and providing access to a major history of the past for the edification and guidance of rulers (the traditional ethical justification for history). This passage is translated here in full:

(1) Inasmuch as the fine method of physicians of the body in physical remedies is always such (as the body), the pleasing disposition of the physicians of the soul will be according to a higher method. So why should this not be the noble nature of the chief healer of chronic illnesses of the soul (i.e., Akbar)? When with his perfect comprehension he found that the squabbling of sects of the Muslim community (millat-i Muhammadi) and the quarreling of the Hindus increased, and their refutation of each other grew beyond bounds, his subtle

23. John Seyller, Workshop and Patron in Mughal India: The Freer Ramayana and other Illustrated Manuscripts of 'Abd al-Rahim (Zurich, 1999).
26. Ibid., 1: xi-xli.
mind resolved that the famous books of each group should be translated into diverse tongues. Thus both factions, by the blessing of the holy words of the revered perfect one of the age (again, Akbar), holding back from excessive fault-finding and perversity, should become seekers of God. Having become aware of each other’s virtues and vices, they should make laudable efforts to rectify their own states.

(2) Likewise, in every group there are some who account themselves religious authorities, on the basis of extreme, frivolous, and ignorant theories that have been advanced. They have made representations that are far from the royal road of firm wisdom, with frauds and deceptions that are memorable for the masses. These unfortunate deceivers, whether from ignorance or irreligiousness, confirm themselves in a different style in accordance with their selfish and lustful goals, having concealed the books of the ancients, the advice of the righteous, the sayings of the wise, and the weighty deeds of predecessors. Whenever the books of both factions are translated with a clear expression, understandable to the masses yet pleasing to the elite, the tabula rasa of the masses attains reality, and is rescued from the idiocies of fools pretending to be wise, thus reaching the goal of reality. Therefore the sublime decree went forth concerning the book of the Mahābhārata, written by masters of genius, containing most of the principles and applications of the beliefs of the Brahmins of India, than which there is no book more famous, greater, or more detailed among this group. The wise of both factions and the linguists of both groups, by way of friendship and agreement, should sit down in one place, and should translate it into a popular expression, with the knowledge of judicious experts and just officials.

(3) Likewise, the irreligious partisans and credulous leaders of India have a belief in their own religion that goes beyond all measure, and whether from lack of discrimination or ingrained injustice, they consider the embellishments of their beliefs to be free from error, taking the path of blind imitation. Having made certain representations to the artless masses, they are prevented from realizing their goals and become rooted in false beliefs. They regard the group of those who are connected to the religion of Muḥammad (dīn-i Ahmādī) as utterly foolish, and they refuse this group ceaselessly, although they are unaware of its noble goals and special sciences.

Therefore, the subtle intellect (of Akbar) desired that the book of the Mahābhārata, which contains the jewels of the goals of this group, should be translated with a clear expression, so that deniers should restrain their denial and refrain from intemperance, and so that the artless believers, having become somewhat embarrassed by their beliefs, should become seekers of God.

(4) Likewise, the common people among the Muslims, who have not read well the pages of scriptures and religious books, and who have not opened the admonition-seeing eye to the diverse histories of the age belonging to the Chinese, the Indians, etc., and who have not even read the words of the great ones of their own religion, such as Imam Jaʿfar Sadiq, Ibn ʿArabi, and others, believe that the beginning of humanity was some seven thousand years ago. They consider the scientific realities and intellectual subtleties that are famous and well-known among the peoples of the world as the products of the thinking
of the men of the past seven thousand years. Therefore the beneficent mind (of Akbar) decided that this book, which contains the explanation of the antiquity of the universe and its beings, and is even totally occupied with the eternity of the world and its inhabitants, should be translated into a quickly understood language, so that this group favored by divine mercy should become somewhat informed and retreat from this distasteful belief (in the recent creation of the world). It will become clear that these subtle sciences and subtle understandings have no obvious end, and these precious jewels of wisdom have no beginning.

(5) Likewise, the minds of most people, especially the great kings, love to listen to histories, for the wisdom that is contained in the divine makes the science of history attractive to their hearts, for it supplies admonition for the wise. Taking counsel from the past and counting it as bounty for the present time, they may expend their precious hours in that which is pleasing to God. Therefore kings are most in need of listing to the tales of their predecessors. Thus the wisdom-nourishing mind (of Akbar) had complete oversight on the translation of this book, which contains illustrious examples of this science. For this reason a group was gathered together of wise men who know languages, distinguished for broad wisdom and wide reading, far from partisanship and contentiousness and close to justice and equity, and they translated the aforementioned book with deliberation and penetration, with clear expressions and familiar terms. Different groups of people love to take copies to different corners of the world.27

Abu al-Fazl was interested in the philosophical and religious content of the epic, from the perspective of an enlightened intellectual whose cosmopolitan vision had moved him out of a strictly defined Islamic theological perspective. But I think it is fair to say that this intellectual project was thoroughly subordinated to the political aim of making Akbar’s authority supreme over all possible rivals in India, including all religious authorities. The translation of the Sanskrit epics was not an academic enterprise comparable to the modern study of religion; it was instead part of an imperial effort to bring both Indic and Persianate culture into the service of Akbar.

The historiographical continuity between Sanskrit and Persian literary traditions can be glimpsed further in the case of Tahir Muhammad Sabzawari, an official in the employ of Akbar, who in 1011/1602-3 made abridged prose translations of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the Mahābhārata, and its appendix the Hariyamāna.28 Four years later, when he wrote a world history in Persian called Rawżat al-ṭāhirīn or The Garden of the Pure, one of the five sections contained Indian historical traditions culled from the Mahābhārata and other Sanskrit epics.29 The only translated text that Abu al-Fazl specifically refers to as scriptural or religious is an incomplete version of the Atharva

27. Abu al-Fazl, Mahābhārata, 1: xviii-xx. In translating the third sentence of this passage, I have emended the printed text to read juhūd-i hunūd (“the quarreling of the Hindus”) instead of jūhūd u hunūd. Also, in the first sentence of the second paragraph under point (3), I read raʿg instead of rogā (meaning raʿg wa ẓamān, i.e., jewels).

29. Marshall, Mughals in India, no. 1768.
Veda, "which, according to the Hindus, is one of the four divine books."30 No copy of this survives, however. Another popular Sanskrit text, the Singhāsan Battīsī or Thirty-Two Tales of the Throne, concerned the fortunes of the ancient Indian king Vikrama-ditya; one of the Persian translations of this work presented to Akbar was entitled Shāhnāmah or The Book of Kings, the very same as the title of Firdawsi’s epic on Persian kingship.31 The evidence suggests that one of Akbar’s purposes was the absorption of Indian traditions of kingship into a form that he could take advantage of. One of the likely political fruits of the translation project was the rumor, noticed by the European traveller Oranus, that Akbar was the tenth incarnation of Vishnu.32 Another piece of symbolic fallout was the custom of weighing the emperor in gold, which, as Abu al-Fazl noted, was a custom that Indian tradition associated with both beatitude and universal monarchy.33 Perhaps most importantly, Akbar’s project succeeded in permitting the interweaving of two historical narratives. Many Persian world histories and histories of Mughal India continued to portray a single line of political authority drawn exclusively through Muslim rulers, back through the sultans of Delhi to their Central Asian and Iranian predecessors. But a significant number of Indo-Persian dynastic histories would place the later Mughals in a series of “the kings of India” beginning with Yudhishtihra and the heroes of the Mahābhārata.34 In the same vein, Firishta (d. ca. 1633) prefaces his famous history of Indo-Muslim dynasties with an account of Indian epic history drawn from the Mahābhārata that is completely interwoven with the heroic cycles of the Persian Book of Kings.35 Eventually, as a result of this process, the Ranas of Udaipur and the Sisodia Rajputs, noble Hindu houses in Mughal service, adopted genealogies traced to Persian kings.36

Metaphysical and Mystical Texts

After the political phase of translation we can distinguish a third group of Persian translations from the Sanskrit, in this case focusing on works that may be called metaphysical or mystical. This type of translation typically mediated Vedantic philosophical and mystical texts through a loose oral commentary provided by Indian pandits; this was rephrased in the Sufi technical vocabulary, presenting the texts as a kind of gnostic (Persian ma‘rifat), and frequently amplifying their contents by the insertion of Persian mystical verses. Many Sanskrit works were translated by members of the circle of

30. Abu al-Fazl, The Ā’in-i Akbari, 3: 110–12. This translation, entitled Atharban in Persian, was entrusted to Bada‘uni, but he abandoned it after failing to find a competent pandit.


32. J. Talboys, ed., Early Travels in India (16th & 17th Centuries) (Calcutta, 1864; reprint Delhi, 1974), 78.


34. Storey, Persian Literarture, 1: 133 ff. (general histories), 1: 442 ff. (histories of India).


Akbar’s great-grandson Dara Shukuh (d. 1659). Banwali Das, also known as Wali Ram (d. 1667–68), an accomplished poet and historian in Dara Shukuh’s service, produced a Persian translation of Prabhodhachandrodaya, a Vedantic theological allegory in dramatic form composed by Krishna Das for the eleventh-century Chandella king Kirtivarman. This translation was entitled Gulzär-i hâl yâ tulâ’-i qamar-i ma’rifat, meaning The Rose-garden of Ecstasy, or the Rising of the Moon of Gnosis; Banwali Das regarded the text as a veritable “bouquet of reality and gnosis.” In describing the genesis of the original text, Banwali Das related it to classical Indian metaphysical works, calling the latter “books of Sufism and unity (tasawwuf wa tawhid)” and “texts of Sufism.”

It is also likely that Banwali Das had a hand in a translation of the shorter version of the Yoga Vâsiṣṭha, a treatise on Vedantic metaphysics that employs narrative to explore the nature of illusion and reality; this was commissioned by Dara Shukuh because of his dissatisfaction with earlier versions. Another scholar in the service of Dara Shukuh, Chandarban Baharman (d. 1657-8), translated a Vedantic work of Śankara, the Ātma-vilâsa, under the title Nâzuk khayâlât or Subtle Imaginings. Both of these Hindu munshis (or scribes) were intensively involved in the Persianate culture of the Mughal court, and both wrote Persian poetry in the Sufi mystical style; Banwali Das even took instruction from Dara Shukuh’s Sufi master Mulla Shah, and in his translation work from Sanskrit he was forced to rely on the oral Hindi commentary of a well-known pandit. There were other contemporary students of Indian mysticism outside the circle of Dara Shukuh, such as ‘Abd al-Rahman Chishti (d. 1683), who produced a Sufi interpretation of the Bhagavad Gîtâ in a text called Mirâât al-haqâ’iq or The Mirror of Realities.

In addition to translations, one may include in the metaphysical category several original Persian treatises by Muslim authors from different historical periods, who explored questions raised by Vedantic texts and related them to Islamicate philosophical and mystical themes. An early example of this kind of text is Fayzi’s Shâriq al-ma’rifat or The Illuminator of Gnosis, which dealt with topics taken from the Yoga Vâsiṣṭha and the Bhâgavata Purâṇa; as the title suggests, this study was carried out in terms of categories derived from the Ishraqi or Illuminationist philosophy of Suhrawardi.

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39. Storey, Persian Literature, 1: 570–72; this work was printed at Lahore in 1901. See also Sharif Husain Qasemi, “Chandra Bhân Barahman,” Elr, 4: 755–56. Another unidentified work on Hinduism by Chandarban, in question and answer form, is found in Berlin. See Wilhelm Pertsch, Die Handschriften-Verzeichnisse der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin, IV, Persischen Handschriften (Berlin, 1888), no. 1081/2.


transitional text was an early version of the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* translated by Nizam al-Din Panipati at the request of Prince Salim (later Jahangir) in 1597. This translation, which Dara Shukuh considered unreliable, was conceived as part of the encyclopedic collection of edifying literature initiated by Akbar, and this particular work was regarded by Salim as falling into the same category with Sufi writings. Prince Salim remarked:

When expert Arabic linguists, specialists in the different sciences, connoisseurs of the arts of poetry and prose, historians, and Indian pundits entered the noble presence in the style of his imperial majesty, . . . the *Magna vi* of Mawlana Rumi, the *Zafarnāmah* [a history of Tamerlane], the memoirs of Babur, other written histories, and collections of stories were read out in turn. Stories containing morals and advice were conveyed to the august hearing. In these days, it is commanded that the book *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, which contains Sufism (taṣawwuf) and provides commentary on realities, diverse morals, and remarkable advice, and which is one of the famous books of the Brahmins of India, should be translated from the Sanskrit language to Persian.42

The translator, however, felt that the Brahmins were closer to the ancient philosophers (i.e., the Greeks), and in any case he proclaimed his intention to gloss over any contradictions, which must be purely verbal.

Dara Shukuh himself supervised the Persian translation of fifty of the most important Indian scriptures, the Upanishads, under the title *Sīr-i Akbar or The Greatest Mystery*.43 He is also credited with a translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* entitled *Āb-i zindagī* or *The Water of Life*, and a version of the Vedas.44 Another Sanskrit work translated for Dara is the *Aṣṭavakragītā*, a dialogue on liberation.45 What is most distinctive about Dara Shukuh’s approach to Indian texts is that he treats them as scripture, in the same category as the Psalms of David, the Gospel, and the Qur’ān.46 Sufis such as Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan (d. 1781) also made this theological concession, but typically with the stipulation that such ancient scriptures had been abrogated by the most recent reve-

42. *Jāg bashisht*, xxx.


44. The ascription of this *Gītā* version to Dara Shukuh is described as doubtful by Storey, *Persian Literature*, 1: 996, n. 1. On the Veda translation, see the description of an autograph MS, Brij Mohan Birla Research Centre, Ujjain (connected with Vikram University, Ujjain), cited in Motilal Banarsidass Newsletter (August 1983), 9.


46. Mir Findariski (d. 1640), who produced a translation of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, showed a similar attitude in these verses: “These words are just like water to the world, pure and enlightening like the Qur’an. / When you have passed through the Qur’an and Prophetic sayings, no one [else] has this way of speaking” (*Jāg bashisht*, p. xxxi).
lation, the Qur’an.\textsuperscript{47} Dara Shukuh viewed the Upanishads as hermeneutically continuous with the Qur’an, providing an extended exposition of the divine unity that was only briefly indicated in the Arabic scripture. Among Dara Shukuh’s original contributions was a comparative study in Persian of the vocabulary of Hindu and Islamic esotericism, entitled \textit{Majma\textsuperscript{c} al-bahrayn or The Meeting-place of the Two Oceans}.\textsuperscript{48} It is interesting to note that this Persian work has been translated into Arabic, Urdu, and Sanskrit.\textsuperscript{49} The \textit{Majma\textsuperscript{c} al-bahrayn} has been unfortunately subjected to superficial interpretations deriving from the inadequate edition and English translation of the text made by Mahfuz-ul-Haq in 1929; luckily this has been superseded by a superior critical edition published by the Iranian scholar Jalali Na’ini in 1956, which was revised again in 1987.\textsuperscript{50} Just to give one example of the problems in the first edition, Mahfuz-ul-Haq translated the title as \textit{The Mingling of the Two Oceans}, intending it as a heavy-handed metaphor for the literal syncretism, or mixing together, of two religions (Hinduism and Islam) conceived as oceans. He evidently was unaware, or considered it unimportant, that the phrase “the meeting-place of the two oceans” is Qur’anic (18:60). In the Qur’an this phrase refers to the place where Moses found the water of eternal life and the mysterious servant of God usually identified as Khizr.\textsuperscript{51} The allusion to the contrast between the legalistic prophet Moses and the esoteric gnostic Khizr forms the basis for Dara Shukuh’s description of the importance of this text.

Dara Shukuh states that after having immersed himself in the truths of Sufi doctrine, he desired to comprehend the doctrines of the Indian monotheists (\textit{muwahhidun}) and realizers of truth (\textit{muhaqqiqun}). “Since [this book] is the meeting place of the realities and gnostic truths of two groups that know God (\textit{haqq-shinās}), it is known as \textit{The Meeting-place of the Two Oceans}. . . . I have written this investigation in accordance with my own mystical unveiling and experience (\textit{kashf wa zawq}), for the sake of my own family, and I have nothing to do with the common people of either community.”\textsuperscript{52} This focus on esoteric truth, and the caustic disregard for external religion that was so characteristic of Dara Shukuh, is described in a distorted fashion by Mahfuz-ul-Haq as

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\textsuperscript{49} The Arabic version of \textit{Majma\textsuperscript{c} al-bahrayn} by Muhammad Salih ibn Ahmad al-Misri, completed before 1771, is found in the Buhar collection (National Library, Calcutta), MS 133 Arabic. The Urdu translation by Gokul Prasad, entitled \textit{Nūr-i ʿayn or Light of the Eye}, was lithographed at Lucknow in 1872. For the Sanskrit version, see Roma Chaudhuri, \textit{A Critical Study of Dârâ Shikhâ’s Samudra-sangama}, 2 vols. (Calcutta, 1954).

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Majma\textsuperscript{c}-ul-bahraín or The Mingling of the Two Oceans}, ed. M. Mahfuz-ul-Haq, (Calcutta, 1929); Muntakhabat-i āğār-i Muhammad ibn Shāhjahān Ḍādiri Dârâ Shukhâ, ed. Muhammad Riza Jalali Na’ini (Tehran, 1335/1956); \textit{Majma\textsuperscript{c} al-bahrayn}, ed. Muhammad Riza Jalali Na’ini (Tehran, 1366/1987-8).


\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Majma\textsuperscript{c} al-bahrayn}, ed. Jalali Na’ini, 2; cf. Mahfuz-ul-Haq, ed. \textit{Majma\textsuperscript{c}-ul-bahraín}, 38.
“an attempt to reconcile Hinduism and Islam.”*53 This simplistic terminology suggests again that Hinduism and Islam are monolithic and unchanging hostile essences that need to be pacified. Dara Shukuh’s interest was in a particular kind of mystical and esoteric knowledge that was shared, in his view, by a small elite within both communities; this he had observed in conversations with Sufis and with accomplished Indian mystics such as Baba La’l Das. The Hindu and Muslim masses, however, were utterly ignorant of this gnosis. Dara Shukuh implicitly accepted the politicized terminology that equated the Hindu with unbelief or infidelity (kufr), even as he questioned, from a Sufi perspective, the opposition between infidelity and Islam.*54 His focus on esoteric doctrine from a Sufi perspective made his approach to Indian religion highly selective.

Anglo-Persian Texts

The last major category of Persian translations from Sanskrit and other Indian languages consists of an extensive series of works commissioned by British colonial officials in India, but it may also be expanded to include other Persian translations utilized by Europeans for the study of Hindu law, religion and cosmology. This phase may be known for convenience as Anglo-Persian literature. Here at last we have a series of texts that deal tentatively with “Hindu” or (as it was then known) “Gentoo” religion, from the perspective of religion as understood in Christian Europe. Warren Hastings commissioned a Persian translation of a Sanskrit compendium on Hindu law for the use of East India Company officials, and in 1776 Nathaniel Halhed (d. 1830) produced an English version of this under the title A Code of Gentoo Laws, one of the first translations of a Hindu text available in Europe.*55 A Persian paraphrase of the laws of Manu was prepared for Sir William Jones, and the manuscript contains English and Devanagari marginalia as well as a piece of doggerel Persian verse by Jones using the pen-name “Yunus.”*56 Hastings commissioned in 1784 the composition of a Sanskrit text on chron-


*54. In the opening lines of Majma‘ al-bahrayn, (1), Dara Shukuh quotes a version of a famous verse by the poet Sana‘i (d. 1131), “Infidelity and religion (kufr wa din) are both following in your path, crying, ‘He alone, he has no partner!’” This verse is a quotation from the beginning of the Sana‘i’s classic Sufi epic Hadīqat al-ḥaqiqat. In its original context, it is an illustration of the Sufi concept of mystical infidelity as non-duality (see my Words of Ecstasy in Sufism [Albany, 1985], 63–96). In Dara Shukuh’s version, however, the verse reads, “Infidelity and islām,” giving it a political character implying Hindu and Islamic communities or doctrines. In this he followed the same wording (and implications) as Abu al-Fazl, who is said to have engraved this verse on a temple used by Indian “monotheists” (muwahhidūn) in Kashmir (Abu’l-Fazl A‘īn, 1: liv-lvii). Ironically, this verse as quoted here by Dara Shukuh was seized upon by Awrangzib as evidence of his brother’s apostasy from Islam, despite its classical origins in the Sufi tradition (see Anees Jahan Syed, Aurangzeb in Muntakhab-al lubab [Bombay, 1977], 77).


*56. Pertsch, Die Handschriften-Verzeichnisse, no. 1082. Since this curious Persian verse by Jones (in the meter of the Shāhānāmah) may not have been noticed by his biographers, it may be worth translating, as follows: “Act thus with goodness and justice, Yunus, with compassion for
nology and cosmology, *Purâñärtha Prakâśa*, from which a Persian translation was prepared in 1786 by Zurawar Singh, also on the instructions of Hastings; this in turn was put into English by Halhed.\(^{57}\) Another untitled work on cosmogony, mythology, and history compiled from Sanskrit sources was commissioned by Hastings and composed by one Karparam, of whom Halhed writes that he was "a Moonshy [i.e., munshi or scribe] in the Persian Translator's office at Calcutta. He was well versed in Hindoo learning, and his knowledge of the Persian and Arabic, added to Sanscrit and Bengalee, gave advantage over most of the Pandeets."\(^{58}\) Sir John Murray in 1796 commissioned an unknown author to compose a Persian work entitled *Zakhîrat al-fu’âd* or *The Treasury of the Heart* as a work on Hindu religious duties based on "the Śastra, the purana, the pandits, and the Veda reciters (bêd-khwânân)." While this contained information from both scriptural and oral sources on festivals, cosmogony, and castes, it also provided a guide to the tilak marks worn by various religious groups on the forehead, with illustrations.\(^{59}\)

Regional and sectarian emphases accompanied the encyclopedic tendency in the study of Hinduism through Persian. Some Persian translations were produced for Jonathan Duncan by Anandagâhana "Khwush," who rendered several puranic texts on sacred Hindu places of pilgrimage. His lengthy *Bahr al-najât* or *The Sea of Salvation* (completed 1794) was taken from the Kāśi-khanda section of the *Skanda purâṇa*, describing the mythic features of Benares, and his Persian *Gayā mahâtmya* (1791) concerned the virtues and rituals of Gaya in Bihar.\(^{60}\) The transitional role of Anandagâhana is reflected by a collection of Persian Sufi poems that he completed at the same time (1794) on the model of Rumi's *Mughâvî*, extolling among other things the virtues of Benares and the thought of Dâra Shukuh.\(^{61}\) A number of works on Burmese Buddhism were translated into Persian after 1779 from the Mugh language at the instance of Sir John Murray and others; these included Jataka stories as well as works on law, cosmology, and medicine.\(^{62}\) Some Sanskrit Jain works in Devanagari script, accompanied by commentaries in Persian, were prepared for the French adventurer General Claude Martin in 1796. Andrew Sterling between 1812 and 1821 commissioned an accountant at the Jagannath temple to write Persian translations of Orissi writings about the temple and on local

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\(^{57}\) Ethé, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts*, no. 2003; Rieu, 1: 63–64 (the Sanskrit text is Or. 1124, the Persian trans. is Add. 5655, and the English version is Add. 5657, fols. 163-194). A similar work composed by Kanchari Singh in 1782 is found in Pertsch, *Die Handschriften-Verzeichnisse*, no. 1083).

\(^{58}\) Rieu, 1: 63 (Add. 5654).


\(^{62}\) Pertsch, *Die Handschriften-Verzeichnisse*, 1089 (Jâtaka), 1090–91 (law), 1093 (cosmology), 1094–95 (medicine).
history. Works of a proto-anthropological cast were also produced, prefiguring the later census categories. Among these was Riyāḍ al-mazāḥib or The Garden of Religions, which was composed by a Brahmin named Mathuranath at the request of John Glyn in 1812 and dedicated to the Governor-General of India, Lord Moira; this was a description of Hindu castes and sects, as well as religious orders and non-Vedic groups such as Jains and Sikhs, and it was found very useful by the early Indologist H. H. Wilson. A similar work on castes and mendicant orders was compiled by Col. John Skinner in 1825 from Sanskrit sources that he had translated to Persian. This curious manuscript, entitled Tashrīḥ al-aqwām or The Description of Peoples, contained over one hundred illustrations by native artists.

In addition to the commissioned works, a number of manuscripts of Persian translations of Sanskrit texts such as the Mahābhārata bear the marginal comments of the English officials who owned them. Among such works in the India Office Library, there are quite a few bearing the comments of Richard Johnson, who acquired several of these copies in 1778, and there are even a couple of manuscripts annotated by Sir Charles Wilkins (d. 1826), England’s first notable Sanskritist after Sir William Jones. Halhed’s collection of a dozen annotated Persian translations of Sanskrit texts, some accompanied by his own English summaries and translations, forms the core of the British Library’s collection of this branch of literature.

This body of translations commissioned by the British is sufficiently large to be indicative of a separate trend and approach to the study of Indian religion, for the special purpose of familiarizing British colonial administrators with the religion of their Hindu subjects. This had a practical purpose beyond the concerns of pure historical scholarship. Witness the project that Sir William Jones took up for the East India Company: the compilation of a digest of Hindu law from Sanskrit texts, for the express purpose of serving as a reliable legal source for personal law in the British-run court system. Not only the Persian translations from the Sanskrit commissioned by the British, but also previous Mughal-era translations (whether belonging to the political or metaphysical categories described above), were all subsumed into a single vision of the religion of the Hindus, from the perspective of the British administrators who used Persian as the language of governance in India. It is often forgotten that Persian, the language of administration and government revenue records in the Mughal empire, continued to be the medium of government in the British East India Company until the 1830s, and in some regions as late as the 1860s. It should not be surprising, then, that figures such as Hastings regarded Persian translations as a perfectly adequate basis for establishing their knowledge of Hindu religion; they evidently considered it to be a medium


64. Rieu, Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts, 1: 64 (Add. 24,035); Sayyid ‘Abbās Allah, Adabiyyāt-i fārsī mēn Hindū’ān kā ḥiṣṣa, (Delhi, 1942), 215, no. 5. This Urdu study is now available in a Persian translation by Muhammad Aslam Khan, Adabiyyāt-i fārsī dar miyān-i Hindūvān (Tehran, 1371/1992).

transparent enough for their purposes. Nonetheless, the interest of the British administrators in discovering the textual basis for personal law for Hindus eventually led them to take extraordinary steps to set up a dyadic opposition between Hinduism and Islam.66

Until the formation of a solid European tradition of Sanskrit scholarship, the earlier Orientalists continued to rely on these Persian translations as the best available guides to Hindu philosophy and religion. The Upanishads were initially introduced to Europeans through several versions of Dara Shukuh’s Persian translation: first, the partial English translation of Halhed in 1782; next, Anquetil Duperron’s Latin version in 1801, which had a significant impact on European thinkers such as Schopenhauer; and then a German translation from Duperron’s Latin, completed by Franz Mischel in 1882.67 European scholars drew upon Abu al-Fazl’s account of Indian philosophy for some of their earliest descriptions of this subject.68 The Sanskrit collection of stories about King Vikramaditya, Singhasan Battisi, was also made known initially through a French version of a Mughal-era Persian translation in 1817.69 As late as 1831, a partial English version of the Mahâbhârata was made available via the Persian translation sponsored by Akbar.70

This period when Persian was the primary mode of access to Hindu religious thought has been largely forgotten in European scholarship. The next generation of Sanskritists after Sir William Jones, particularly British officials such as Sir Charles Wilkins and H. H. Wilson, were usually still familiar with Persian because of their administrative involvement. Increasingly, however, Sanskrit became a subject unto itself, achieving a high level of academic prestige, particularly in the German universities. As scholars began to have full and independent access to Sanskrit literature, they soon cast aside the earlier interpretations gained via the medium of Persian. I would suggest that the mode of scholarship that came to dominate the European study of Sanskrit, especially outside of British circles, self-consciously tried to stand apart from the naive practicality of Halhed and Hastings. Following the model of the Greek and Latin classics, Sanskrit became a classical study; applying the methods of textual criticism developed by Renaissance scholars, Sanskritists began to look for the original textual archetypes, the Ur-text uncorrupted by medieval intrusions. The Persian translations were seen as inaccurate, biased, and faulty guides, an embarrassment to the serious study of true Hinduism. They are now mentioned only as curiosities, or passed over in silence. They are no longer relevant to the modern study of classical Hinduism, which has been


70. David Price, The last days of Krishna and the sons of Pandu from the concluding section of the Mahâbhârata translated from the Persian version made by Naqib Khan, in the time of the Emperor Akbar, published together with miscellaneous translation (London, 1831).
defined precisely as the original Indian religion as distinct from the foreign influence of Islam. We can see this attitude at work already in Sir William Jones: "My experience justifies me in pronouncing that the Mughals have no idea of accurate translation, and give that name to a mixture of gloss and text with a flimsy paraphrase of both; that they are wholly unable, yet always pretend, to write Sanskrit words in Arabic letters; . . . from the just severity of this censure I except neither Abul Fazl nor his brother Faizi." 71

This classicist approach unfortunately has the side effect of relegating to insignificance the participation of Hindus in Persianate and Islamicate culture, together with any effect that this may have had in the development and reinterpretation of Hindu religious thought. 72 While the period of British sponsorship of Persian translations from Sanskrit was brief, perhaps three quarters of a century, it represents a decisive step in the transition toward the eventual establishment of Islam and Hinduism as separate fields of study.

There are a number of other literary phenomena besides the translations from Sanskrit that challenge the standard notion of fixed boundaries between Hinduism and Islam. Little work has been done, for instance, to study the direct patronage of Sanskrit literature by Muslim rulers. 73 While most Sanskrit works dedicated to sultans were belles-lettristic court poetry, some Hindu and Jain officials in the employ of Muslim rulers wrote Sanskrit religious and legal treatises in which they mention their sovereigns. 74 A few Sanskrit works can be found that attempt to construct a relationship between Islam and ancient Hindu scriptures. As an example, a short Sanskrit text called the Alla [Allâh] Upanishad was apparently composed by one of Akbar's courtiers, in order to identify the Muslim deity with the gods of the Vedas, assisted by a combination of the Muslim call to prayer and tantric seed syllables. As late as the nineteenth century, many pandits considered this text a reliable, if obscure, formulation of Vedanta (the curious political context of this work is indicated by its substitution of "Muhammad Akbar," i.e., the emperor Akbar, for the Prophet Muhammad). Indian scholars trained in the classical style of Orientalist scholarship apparently succeeded in eliminating this work from the canon of Hindu scripture. R. Mitra in 1871 trenchantly dismissed this work as


72. The detailed study of European Indology by Raymond Schwab, The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880, trans. Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking (New York, 1984), does not address the significance of the Persian translations at all, but stresses in a classicist manner the importance of access to original Sanskrit texts.


“apocryphal,” “the gross religious imposition” of a “Muhammadan forger” who was betrayed by incorrect Sanskrit grammar and stylistic inconsistencies. I would suggest, to the contrary, that such “apocryphal” works could provide an important source for understanding the way that Hindus understood Islamic theology and ritual in certain political contexts. Another important area for contact between Hindu and Muslim culture is the participation of Muslim authors in indigenous Indian literary genres in modern Indian languages. This often resulted in the use of Hindu themes and structures in surprising ways, as in Padmāvatī, an Eastern Hindi (Awadhi) adaptation of Rajput epic as mystical yogic allegory, written by a Sufi author, Muhammad Ja’īsī; here the unexpected shift is that the Turks are the villains of the piece. Since this category of literary creation covers a large number of unedited texts in a variety of Indian languages, I will only allude to it here in passing as an important topic for research. I am ignoring for the purposes of this discussion the extensive participation by Hindu authors in secular Persian literature, in which they played important roles in the composition of court histories, literary anthologies, and poetry. A sociological study of the effects of Persianate culture on the Kayasths and other groups who served Mughal and other Indo-Muslim bureaucracies would be of considerable interest. Another important topic crying out for treatment is the description of Indian religions by Zoroastrian authors in the Dasatīrī literature, especially the important seventeenth-century survey of religions called Dabstān-i mażāhib.

Of particular significance for the study of religion is a series of original Persian writings on Indian religion written by Hindus, including doctrinal summaries of “classical” Hindu teachings as well as biographies of figures of the medieval bhakti movements. The eighteenth century seems to have been a particularly rich time for the production of these Hindu Persian works. As an example one may consider Makhzan al-‘irfān or The Treasury of Gnosis by Rup Narayan, written in 1717 in Lahore as a guide to the holy places of Brāj. A survey of Hindu creeds, festivals, rituals, and ascetic practices, Haft tāmāshā or The Seven Displays, was written in 1813 by a Hindu convert to Islam known by the pen-name Qatīl, at the request of a learned Shi’i scholar of

79. There is considerable information on this topic in ‘Abd Allah, Adabiyyāt-i fārsī. See also Ahmad Munzavi, Fihrist-i mushtarak-i nuskhā-hā-yi khāṭṭī-yi fārsī-yi Pākistān (Islamabad: 1363/1945/1985), 4: 2135–2200, for a comprehensive list of titles and manuscripts of Persian works on Hinduism, both translations and original works.
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Lucknow.81 One of the last notable examples of original theological reflection by a Hindu in this medium was Raja Ram Mohan Roy (d. 1833), in his Tuhfat al-
muwahhidan or The Gift of the Monotheists, written in Persian with an Arabic preface.82 While some of these texts were written as straightforward expositions of Hindu doctrines or rituals, others engaged more directly with Islamic religious thought, and in the nineteenth century they even began to take on the form of apoloogias for Hinduism against the stereotyped criticisms found in Muslim polemical literature. To this category belong two Persian works composed by Andarman around 1866, Tuhfat al-islâm or The Gift of Islam, and Pâdâsh-i islâm or The Revenge of Islam, both written in defense of Hindu religion.83 Also worthy of interest is Madinat al-tahqiq or The City of Demonstration, written by Karparam in Samvat 1932/1875 as a refutation of a Persian work that attacked Hinduism.84 One even finds a work called Tahqîq al-tanâsukh or The Demonstration of Reincarnation by Anantram son of Karpam (possibly identical with the Karpam just mentioned), composed in 1875 clearly as a defense of that doctrine commonly associated with Hinduism.85 One suspects that these works emerged from the climate of religious disputation that resulted from the attacks of Christian missionaries upon Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism. The fact that they were written in Persian at such a late date may be explained by the continued administrative use of Persian in the Punjab through the 1860s. Even the least self-conscious of these productions necessarily engaged in a complex cross-cultural hermeneutic, by the very choice of the Persian words used to render technical terms from the vocabulary of Hindu religious texts. This neglected field of literature would seem to be especially promising for the study of the concrete relationships that individual Hindu authors worked out to position themselves in relation to the dominant Indo-Muslim court culture.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that the tradition of Persian Sanskritic learning established by Akbar and Dara Shukuh still continues today among a small circle of Iranian scholars. Daryush Shayagan, in addition to his French study of Dara Shukuh, has also written a large survey in Persian on The Religions and Philosophical Schools of India.86 The prolific Muhammad Riza Jalali Na’ini has in collaboration with Indian scholars produced an impressive series of text editions of Persian translations from San-

81. Rieu, Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts, 1: 64 (Or. 476), copied 1850.
83. ʿAbd Allah, Adabiyāt-i fārsī, 216, no. 10, both found in the Lahore Public Library.
84. ʿAbd Allah, Adabiyāt-i fārsī, 216, no. 11, where the offensive treatise is identified as Tuhfat al-Hind. This seems unlikely, since that work is primarily an account of Indian arts and culture that is not in any way critical; see Mirza Khan ibn Fakhr al-Din Muhammad, Tuhfat al-
Hind, ed. Nur al-Hasan Ansari (Tehran, 1354/1975). Perhaps what is meant is the similarly entitled Hujjat al-Hind of ʿAli Mihrabi, which consists of a polemical dialogue between two birds on the merits of Hindu mythology and Islam. The dating of the text by the Indian Vikrama or Samvat era, rather than the Islamic calendar, is a telling index of the polemical character of this work.
85. ʿAbd Allah, Adabiyāt-i fārsī, 216, no. 12, found in Punjab University Library, Lahore.
skrit, including works by Dara Shukuh as well as a critical edition of the Mahābhārata translation sponsored by Akbar.\(^87\) He has in addition authored an original Persian translation of the Rīg-veda, a study of the Sikh religion, an analysis of Hindu mysticism, a comparative study of language and religion among the ancient Aryans, a reconsideration of the treatment of Indian religions in Shahrastani’s Arabic theological survey, and an edition of Dara Shukuh’s Persian translation of the Bhagavad Gītā.\(^88\) To this should be added two Sanskrit-Persian lexicons, co-authored by Jalali Na’ini and Indian scholar N. S. Shukla.\(^89\) Fathullah Mujtabai wrote a Harvard dissertation on the Persian translation of the Yoga Vāsiṣṭha by Mir Findiriski.\(^90\) Outside the circle of scholarly Iranian Indologists, the prominent Iranian philosopher Jalal al-Din Ashtiyani has engaged with Indian religions in a series of critical volumes on comparative religion based largely on European scholarship.\(^91\) Nur al-Din Chahardihi, an indefatigable researcher on the topic of Islamic esotericism, has also turned his attention to Indian traditions. In addition to writing his own study of yoga (which he practices), he has also reprinted a treatise on yoga and divination called Muhīṭ-i ma’rifat (The Ocean of Gnosis) of Satidas son of Ram Bha’i “Arif,” written in 1753-4 and published in Lucknow in 1860. This work, containing sixteen chapters on metaphysics, yoga, and divination, is based on the Hindi (Bhak’ha) work Svarodaya of Charana Dasa, pupil of Sukhadevaji, and the translation contains a considerable amount of sophisticated Persian verse.\(^92\) Modern Persian translations of literary works by Kalidasa and Tagore have also been published in Iran and Afghanistan.\(^93\) In Iran, it seems, there remains a keen interest in Indian religion and


\(^91\) Muhandis Jalal al-Din Ashtiyani, Īdāil-i bashar; tajziya wa tahlīl-i afkār-i ‘īrfān-i būdīsm wa jaynīm, mazāhib-i hindū, (The Ideals of Humanity: Analysis of the Mystical Thought of the Indian Religions of Buddhism and Jainism,) (Tehran, 1377/1999).


\(^93\) Kalidasa, Śākuntala, Persian trans. by Hadi Hasan, Shakuntala yā khatīm-i maqṣūd (Tehran, 1956), also trans. ‘Ali Asghar Hikmat (Delhi, 1957); Rabindranath Tagore, Gitanjali, Persian trans. by Ravan Farhadi, Surūd-i naydīyish (Kabul, 1975).
thought, partially prompted by a sense of the proximity of ancient Indian and Iranian cultures, but which may be expected to continue and resurface in the future.

To sum up, then, the translations from Sanskrit into Arabic and Persian fall into four classes: practical arts and sciences, political works (based on epics), metaphysical and mystical treatises, and works on Hindu religion and law commissioned by the British. The first three categories, which characterize the translations done for Muslim patrons, have little to do with the modern concept of religion. It is only when the lens of the modern European notion of religion is applied that one can view premodern Muslims as having had a clear notion of Hinduism. What are the implications of this conclusion? I would suggest that this points to the need further to complicate our picture of Hindu-Muslim interaction, not to derive it from predetermined concepts of the essential characteristics of a religion. If we wish to take account of historical change within religious traditions, and to understand the diversity within the traditions that, for convenience, we treat as unitary, then it is important to pay close attention to the historical and political concerns that inform any individual act of inter-religious interpretation. To understand a multi-century process of inter-civilizational interpretation, such as the Arabic and Persian translations from Sanskrit, it is necessary to take seriously the hermeneutical structures and categories that guided the efforts of those interpreters. Above all, it is important to try, as much as possible, to avoid reading anachronistic concepts into premodern materials. Only then can we fully appreciate the rich density and texture of the complex religious patterns that are woven into the life of South Asian culture.