The Mughal *Book of War*:
A Persian Translation of the
Sanskrit *Mahabharata*

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*I*n 1582 the Mughal emperor Akbar underwrote a Persian translation of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, thus transforming the great Indian epic into a Mughal courtly text. The court poured many resources into producing the translation, and the resulting text, called the *Razmnāmah* (*Book of War*), remained a seminal literary work in Mughal circles for decades. While scholars have long been aware of the *Razmnamah* and its centrality to Mughal literary culture, few have seriously treated the textual content of this translation. Indologists have spilled much ink in repeatedly listing the dozen or so Sanskrit-Persian translations produced in Akbar's court, including the *Razmnamah*.[1] Some have tried to account for Akbar's translation project as a whole and framed his endeavor as an enlightened religious policy or an act of political legitimation.[2] The *Razmnamah* in particular has drawn attention from scholars who have studied the illustrations of the text and Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak's preface to the work.[3] Yet all this scholarship lacks what must be the central pillar for understanding the *Razmnamah* or any translation: an analysis of the text itself. In this article, I begin to correct

1. See, e.g., M. Athar Ali, "Translations of Sanskrit Works at Akbar's Court," *Social Scientist* 20 (1992): 38–45; A. B. M. Habibullah, "Medieval Indo-Persian Literature relating to Hindu Science and Philosophy, 1000–1800 A.D.," *Indian Historical Quarterly* 14 (1938): 167–81; S. Rashid Husain, "Some Notable Translations Rendered into Persian during Akbar's Time," *Islamic Culture* 55 (1981): 219–39; Muhammad Bashir Husayn, "Mughaliyah daur meih Sanskrit aur 'Arabi ki Farsi tarajum" ("Persian Translations of Sanskrit and Arabic during the Mughal Period"), in *Tarikh-i adabiyat-i Musalmanan-i Pakistan va Hind* (*History of the Literature of Pakistani and Indian Muslims*), vol. 4, part 2, *Farsi adab (1526–1707)*, ed. Maqbul Badakhshani (Lahore: Punjab University, 1971), 774–804; Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, "King Akbar and the Persian Translations of Sanskrit Books," *Annals of the Bhandarkar*

Institute 6 (1925): 83–107; Fathullah Mujtaba'i, "Muntakhab-i Jug-Basasht, or Selections from the Yoga-Vasistha attributed to Mīr Abu'l-Qāsim Findiriskī" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1976); S. A. Reza Jalali Naini, "Persian Translations of Sanskrit Works," in "Special Issue on the Occasion of 50 Years of the Agreement of Indo-Iranian Cultural Relation," *Journal of the Indo-Iran* (2008): 68–86; M. A. Rahim, "Akbar and Translation Works," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan* 10, no. 1 (1965): 101–19; and N. S. Shukla, "Persian Translations of Sanskrit Works," *Indological Studies* 3, nos. 1–2 (1974): 175–91.

2. On the former view, see Roderic Vassie, "Persian Interpretations of the Bhagavadgītā in the Mughal Period: With Special Reference to the Sufi Version of 'Abd Al-Rahmān Chishtī" (PhD diss., School of Oriental and African Studies [SOAS], University of London, 1988), 16–18; and Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot, *India before Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 140, 146. On the latter point, see Carl W. Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Arabic and Persian Translations from Indian Languages," *Iranian Studies* 36 (2003): 179–83.

3. On the illustration of the *Razmnamah*, see Milo Cleveland Beach, *Mughal and Rajput Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 23–35; Asok Kumar Das, *Paintings of the Razmnama: The Book of War* (Ahmedabad: Mapin, 2005); and John Seyller, "Model and Copy: The Illustration of Three

this omission by offering a first attempt at an in-depth study of the *Razmnamah* in comparison with its Sanskrit sources. In so doing I aim to more precisely understand why Akbar's court was interested in the *Mahabharata* and how the translators created a new Mughal epic of deep relevance to the imperial court and polity.

I pursue my analysis of the *Razmnamah* in two sections, focusing first on the Sanskrit sources of the *Razmnamah* and then on the translation practices one finds evidenced in the Persian text. In the first section, I describe how the translators accessed Sanskrit materials and identify the source texts that were used to produce the Persian translation. This larger framework provides both conceptual and literary tools to further investigate the nature of the *Mahabharata* as the Mughals knew it, and identifying the original Sanskrit texts also enables us to proceed with comparative textual analysis. In the second section, I examine the text of the *Razmnamah* in comparison with its Sanskrit sources to highlight some of the Mughal translators' key strategies in reimagining the epic in Persian. This close reading traces several literary paradigms that provide insight into the crucial role the *Razmnamah* played in the production and reproduction of a Mughal imperial culture. Taken as a whole, my analysis aims to show the central place of the *Razmnamah* in the politico-cultural fashioning of Akbar's court, whereby the Mughals developed a new type of Indo-Persian imperial aesthetic.

Textual Sources

From the beginning, the *Razmnamah* was a collaborative effort that required interactions across linguistic boundaries, drawing Sanskrit and Persian intellectuals into a common task. The Sanskrit side is silent about its role, but the Mughals emphasized their cross-cultural partnership in the text of their new translation. Nobody involved in the project knew both languages (such bilingualism would not, it seems, be widespread for another generation or two), and as a result two teams of translators were assembled.[4] On the Persian side, Naqib Khan led the effort and was assisted by Mulla Shiri, Abd al-Qadir Bada'uni, and Sultan Thanisari.[5] These men served Akbar's court in a variety of other capacities; Naqib Khan was known as a historian, Bada'uni a secretary, and Mulla Shiri a poet.[6] Multiple histories from Akbar's reign mention the Persian translators but tell less about the participants on the Sanskrit side of this exchange. A colophon of a 1599 *Razmnamah*, now housed in the British Library, serves as the main source of information on these Brahmans: "Naqib Khan, son of Abd al-Latif al-Husayni, translated [this work] from Sanskrit into Persian in one and a half years. Several of the learned Brahmans, such as Deva Misra, Satavadhana, Madhusudhana Misra, Caturbhuja, and Shaykh Bhavan . . . read this book and explained it in Hindi to me, a poor wretched man, who wrote it in Persian."[7] The Mughals offer no information about the specific roles assigned to each translator, but the social framework of transmitting the text orally between two groups has several noteworthy implications.

As Naqib Khan's colophon specifies, the Mughal and Brahman translators communicated orally via their shared tongue of Hindi. Practically, this oral transmission is reflected in phonetic changes in transliterated Sanskrit words throughout the *Razmnamah*, as well as a

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Razmnāma Manuscripts," *Archives of Asian Art* 38 (1985): 37–66. On Abu al-Fazl's preface, see Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar's Reign: With Special Reference to Abu'l Fazl* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1975), 209–14; and Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism?" 180–83.

4. On the lack of Sanskrit-Persian bilingualism in Akbar's court, see Abu al-Fazl's comments in *A'in-i Akbari*, ed. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (Delhi: Matba' Isma'ili, 1855–56; Aligarh, India: Sir Sayyid Academy, 2005), 360.

5. Abu al-Fazl mentions three of the translators, excluding Mulla Shiri, whereas Bada'uni mentions all four. Abu al-Fazl, *A'in-i Akbari*, 96; Abd al-Qadir Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-tavarikh*, ed. Captain W. N. Lees (Calcutta: College Press, 1865), 2:319–21.

6. Naqib Khan contributed to *Tarikh-i alfi*. Nabi Hadi, *Dictionary of Indo-Persian Literature* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1995), 451. He is also described by Saint Xavier, a visitor to Akbar's court, as one "whose office is to read [the King] histories." Quoted in Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Frank Disputations: Catholics and Muslims in the Court of Jahangir (1608–1611)," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 46 (2009): 482. See also Nizam al-Din Ahmad's comments in *Tabaqat-i Akbari*, quoted in Shireen Moosvi, ed. and trans., *Episodes in the Life of Akbar: Contemporary Records and Reminiscences* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1994), 44. Bada'uni calls Mulla

Shiri a Hindi poet, which may mean that he either was born in India or wrote in a north Indian vernacular (*sha'ir-i hindi*; Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-tavarikh*, 2:55). Bada'uni is best known as the author of *Muntakhab al-tavarikh*, an unofficial history of Akbar's reign.

7. British Library (BL) Persian Additional (Add.) 5642, f.481b and BL Oriental (Or.) 12076, f.138b; also translated in Ali, "Translations of Sanskrit Works at Akbar's Court," 41. I have corrected the names to reflect the original Sanskrit forms. This colophon is available in later manuscripts as well, although often lacking "bih hindi"(in Hindi) (e.g., BL India Office [IO] 1702, Aligarh Muslim University, University Collection No. Persian/ Ikhbar 2, Delhi National Museum 63.47). All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

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quoted line of Old Hindi in the fourteenth book of the epic.[8] Moreover, the Mughal translators actually write the Brahman narrators into the *Razmnamah* itself and thereby frame the entire Persian *Mahabharata* in terms of a story being told across cultural lines. The *Razmnamah* consistently repeats slight variations on the expressions "then the narrators of the story said" and "then the Indian storytellers relayed." Such formulations occur at the beginning of most of the epic's eighteen books and many times throughout each section. The *Razmnamah* also preserves the various other narrative frameworks of the *Mahabharata*, in which a bard tells the story as he heard it at the snake sacrifice of Janamejaya and so forth. Therefore, the Indian storytellers who are omnipresent throughout the *Razmnamah* are certainly the additional layer of Sanskrit pandits who narrated the story to the late-sixteenth-century Mughal court. Here the translators begin a process that they continue to pursue through various translation strategies: namely, reframing the *Mahabharata* as a work that belongs in a contemporary Mughal context.

Despite the attention paid to hearing the *Mahabharata* tale, Mughal records contain no mention of what Sanskrit texts they used as the basis for their translation. We are left to infer the source Sanskrit materials from the numerous clues and references within the Persian translation itself. By the late sixteenth century, the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* textual tradition consisted of at least a dozen different versions that are typically defined by discrete scripts and associated with particular regions.[9] Thus the Kashmiri *Mahabharata* is written in Sarada, the Tamil version in Grantha, and so forth. The versions can be loosely grouped into two grand recen-

sions, the northern and the southern, that differ from one another primarily in their inclusion or exclusion of particular episodes and ordering of the stories. Within the northern and southern recensions, each regional version is further defined by its own additions to the text and variant readings.[10] If we can identify the version of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* within this corpus used to produce the *Razmnamah*, then it becomes possible to analyze Mughal translation strategies by reading the original and the translation side by side.[11] Determining the Sanskrit source texts for the *Book of War* also reveals some key features of the Mughal interest in this Indian epic.

Overall the Sanskrit informants communicated the text accurately and in detail to the Mughal translators. The Persian text is not a line-by-line rendering of the Sanskrit original, but the *Razmnamah* contains all eighteen books of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, plus the *Harivamsa* appendix, and the storyline is largely unchanged, complete with most of the smaller side stories and digressions.[12] The ordering of the stories and inclusion or exclusion of certain sections attests quite clearly that the majority of the *Razmnamah* follows the northern recension of the *Mahabharata*.[13] Beyond its broad storyline, the *Razmnamah* contains further internal evidence that indicates the source regional version, primarily by faithfully reproducing the *Mahabharata*'s long genealogical lists and names of various gods. Such lists have substantial variants among regional *Mahabharata*s, and thus we can use the *Razmnamah*'s transliterations of these sections to see which version must have been in front of the Sanskrit pandits who read the names to the Mughal translators. This mode of analysis, however, presents some difficulties since the Mughals did not adopt any standard-

8. *Mahabharat: Buzurgtarin Manzumah-i Kuhnah-i Mawjud-i Jahan bih Zaban-i Sanskrit* [*Razmnamah*] (*Mahabharata: The Oldest and Longest Sanskrit Epic*), ed. S. M. Reza Jalali Naini and N. S. Shukla (Tehran: Kitabkhanah-i Tahuri, 1979–1981), 4:389.

9. For a discussion of *Mahabharata* recensions, see V. S. Sukthankar, "Prolegomena," in *The Mahabharata for the First Time Critically Edited* [*Mahabharata*], ed. V. S. Sukthankar, S. K. Belvalkar, and P. L. Vaidya (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933), 1:v–cx.

10. For a discussion of the nonregional nature of the different recensions, see Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 223–37.

11. While it is beyond my purposes here, the *Razmnamah* may also hold important implications for the critical edition of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* (Sukthankar, "Prolegomena," 1:xxviii).

12. The *Harivamsa* is recognized as an integral part of the text by the Mughal translators (Abu al-Fazl, "Muqaddamah," 40). Akbar's *Harivamsa* has not been printed, but a copy from his court is available in the Lucknow State Museum (A.N. 57,106).

13. I have checked key components of all eighteen books of the translation against the critical edition of the Sanskrit text in making this determination as well as Abu al-Fazl's preface, in which he summarizes the epic based on the *parvasangraha* (the table of contents given in the opening of the *Mahabharata*). Note that since the books of the *Mahabharata* often circulated separately, checking each book individually is important. I have not determined the *Harivamsa* recension because the text has not been printed. Book 14 is the exception in not following the northern recension, as I elaborate on below. For Abu al-Fazl's summary, compare "Muqaddamah," 37–40, and *Mahabharata*, 1.2.

ized transliteration system and the names often vary among *Razmnamah* manuscripts. Moreover, the master copy of the translation produced for Akbar's court, while extant, is now held in the collection of the Maharaja of Jaipur and is inaccessible to scholars. Finally, the Sanskrit manuscripts of the northern recension are themselves rarely as old as the Mughal translation, and therefore a certain amount of temporal dislocation taints any reliance on the critical edition of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* for such precise analysis. Despite these obstacles, a comparison of several lists of names in the Sanskrit text with both the printed *Razmnamah* and select sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century manuscript copies reveals that the *Razmnamah* consistently corresponds most closely with the Devanagari version of the *Mahabharata*.[14]

On its own, the Devanagari version yields little insight into the Mughal encounter with the *Mahabharata* since it was the most eclectic and widespread of all the versions of the epic, often drawing extensively on other regional traditions. Also the Devanagari version had gained widespread currency across north and central India by the late sixteenth century, and so it appears that the Mughals did precisely what one would have expected and found the most easily available, popular redaction of the story to render into Persian.[15] However, the *Razmnamah* deviates from its overall reliance on the Devanagari version in one case that provides deeper insight into the particular Mughal interests in this Sanskrit epic: the fourteenth book is drawn from a separate text altogether.

This book, the *Asvamedha Parvan* (*Horse Sacrifice Book*), is based on the *Jaiminiyasvamedha*, an alternative and starkly different Sanskrit retelling of this section of the epic.[16] The *Jaiminiyasvamedha* is an anonymous work, likely composed in the twelfth century, that proved popular both in Sanskrit and in vernacular translations.[17] Most crucially for the Mughals, the *Jaiminiyasvamedha* is a much more exciting and vivid tale than its canonical counterpart. In its fourteenth book, the *Mahabharata* tells the story of Yudhisthira's decision to perform the horse sacrifice to solidify his kingship. However, the sacrifice quickly gets put on hold as Krishna digresses into a long discourse on philosophical ideas, often characterized as a rehashing of the Bhagavad Gita. In short, it's a lot of talk and no action. In contrast, the *Jaiminiyasvamedha* omits Krishna's speech altogether and instead relates Arjuna's adventures as he travels around India following the sacrificial horse. He stumbles upon a kingdom where only women live, visits a place where all men are born and die within the same day, and has his head cut off and reattached by Krishna. Arjuna also fights his own son in a dramatic battle, and the middle of the book contains a digression into the wars and dramas of the *Ramayana*.[18] In Persian, these lively and bizarre narratives fall easily into the category of *dastan* (narrative literature) that was often full of *'aja'ib* (fantastical elements).

'Aja'ib qualities frequently featured prominently as a mode of interpreting the other in Islamicate encounters with Indian culture both before and after the Mughal era.[19] The pen-

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14. In addition to a variety of shorter checks, I have analyzed three lists of names in detail, selected for their length, variants, and distribution: the snake names in book 1 (*Mahabharata*, 1.52.5–17; *Razmnamah*, 1:52–53), the names of Siva that are not present in the critical edition but appear in book 12 of much of the Devanagari corpus (*Mahabharata*, vol. 16, app. 1, no. 28, ll. 160–346a; *Razmnamah*, 3:394–408), and a list in book 13 (*Mahabharata*, 13.151.2–50; *Razmnamah*, 4:211–13). Chief among the early manuscripts I have consulted are BL Persian Add. 5641/5642 (dated 1598–99), Aligarh Muslim University, University Collection No. Persian/Ikhbar 2 (1604–5), and Birla *Razmnamah* (1616–17). In addition BL Or. 12076, which contains books 14–18, is dated 1598–99, and the Lucknow *Harivamsa* A.N. 57,106 likely dates to the 1590s (Robert Skelton, "Mughal Paintings from Harivaṃśa Manuscript," *Yearbook—Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington* 2 [1970]: 52).

15. Sukthankar, "Prolegomena," 1:lxii–lxiii; Pollock, *Language of the Gods*, 229.

16. Art historians have long known that the fourteenth book of the *Razmnamah* follows the *Jaiminiyasvamedha* but have not commented on the implications of this beyond the illustrations. Thomas Holbein Hendley, *Memorials of the Jeypore Exhibition* (London, 1883), 4:29; more recently, see Seyller, "Model and Copy," 46.

17. On the date, see J. D. M. Derrett, "Greece and India Again: The Jaimini-Aśvamedha, the Alexander-Romance and the Gospels," *Zeitschrift für Religions und Geistesgeschichte* 22 (1970): 22–27. On the *Jaiminiyasvamedha*'s popularity, see Petteri Koskikallio and Christophe Vielle, "Epic and Puranic Texts Attributed to Jaimini," *Indologica Taurinensia* 27 (2001): 71–74.

18. W. L. Smith describes some examples in "Strīrājya: Indian Accounts of Kingdoms of Women," in *Vidyārṇavavandanam: Essays in Honour of Asko Parpola*, ed. Klaus Karttunen and Petteri Koskikallio (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 2001), 471–75. See also the summary of *Jaiminiyasvamedha* in the introduction to *Mahabharata*, 18:xxiv–xliv. The Persian references for the stories I mention above are the kingdom of women (*Razmnamah*, 4:292–94), the men who live a single day (295–96), Arjuna's head problems (365–66), Arjuna's battle with his son (299–309 and 350–56), and adventures from the *Ramayana* (309–50).

19. Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 19; Aditya Behl, "The Magic Doe: Desire and Narrative in a Hindavi Sufi Romance, circa 1503," in *India's Islamic Traditions, 711–1750*, ed. Richard Eaton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 197–99.

chant of the Mughals in particular for fantastical stories is demonstrated by the labor Akbar's court devoted to illustrating the *Hamzanamah* (*Tales of Amir Hamza*) for several years preceding the *Razmnamah* illustrations.[20] Abu al-Fazl even compares the *Razmnamah* to the *Hamzanamah* and exclaims how the former is even more astonishing than the latter, bordering on the unbelievable.[21] Moreover, Akbar's translators seem to have encountered Sanskrit texts through the framework of *'aja'ib* elements from the very beginning. When the Mughals initially decided to engage with the Sanskrit tradition, they selected the *Atharva Veda* as the first text to be translated, a work that contained largely spells and charms as the Mughals understood it. Bada'uni, the first translator to tackle the text, describes the *Atharva Veda* in his history of Akbar's reign primarily by noting some oddities of the work.[22] *Dabistan-i mazahib* (*School of Religions*), a mid-seventeenth-century Persian text, explicitly articulates the Indo-Persian opinion that "spells, incantations, magic, devices, and tricks are contained in the [*Atharva Veda*]."[23] After exhausting three translators, the Mughals ultimately declared the *Atharva Veda* too difficult to understand and abandoned their inaugural translation project. But they continued to emphasize an *'aja'ib* framework in their encounter with the *Mahabharata*.

Abu al-Fazl summarizes in his preface to the *Razmnamah* the contents of the epic and frequently remarks on the wondrous nature of the stories contained in it. He often lapses into hyperbole to express his astonishment, exclaiming, "I see such agitation in myself from hearing such stories that what can I write?" and "In this book, such extraordinary things are on every page, every section, and every chapter."[24] As I set out in detail in the next section, the *Razmnamah* often exhibits *'aja'ib* features

that frequently appear in *dastan* tales, such as magical spells (*afsun*). The Mughal court seems to have celebrated the marvelous quality of the *Asvamedha Parvan* in particular by disproportionately illustrating this section in the first illuminated manuscript.[25] In light of this emphasis overall, *'aja'ib* features are likely what drew the Mughals to the *Jaiminiyasvamedha* and even, in some ways, to the *Mahabharata* as a whole.

However, this argument is complicated by the possibility that the Mughal translators may not have been aware of the multiplicity of *Mahabharata*s and thus may not have made a conscious choice to translate one version over another in the fourteenth book.[26] The translation flows seamlessly from the earlier thirteen books based on the Devanagari version into the fourteenth book based on the *Jaiminiyasvamedha*, and no Mughal work ever frames the fourteenth book as different from the rest of the epic as a single, strange tale. Nonetheless, if not the Mughals themselves, then most likely the Sanskrit informants, who surely provided copies of the *Mahabharata* to Akbar's court, decided to use the *Jaiminiyasvamedha* by preference to any other version of this book. As participants in Sanskrit literary culture, these individuals would have been aware of the different versions available and likely presented the *Jaiminiyasvamedha* for translation because they thought the Mughals would appreciate its captivating, lively narrative. Regardless of who selected the *Jaiminiyasvamedha*, the decision highlights *'aja'ib* elements as an important characteristic in Mughal courtly translations, by either their own choice or the perception of their Sanskrit informants. The Mughals outline their interests and understandings of the *Mahabharata* much more precisely in the translation itself, to which we can now turn armed with the ability to compare the Persian and Sanskrit texts.

20. Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, 205–7; Milo Cleveland Beach, *The Imperial Image: Paintings for the Mughal Court* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, 1981), 58–59.

21. Abu al-Fazl, "Muqaddamah," 34.

22. Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-tavarikh*, 2:212–13.

23. *Dabistan-i mazahib*, ed. Rahim Rizazadah Malik (Tehran: Kitabkhanah-i Tahuri, 1983), 139.

24. Abu al-Fazl, "Muqaddamah," 24, 24–25.

25. Despite not being the longest, book 14 is the most heavily illustrated *parvan* of the Jaipur *Razmnamah* (Seyller, "Model and Copy," 46).

26. However, later readers of the *Razmnamah* seem to have been aware of this shift in book 14. See the colophon in a *Razmnamah* copied in 1729 (Aligarh Muslim University, Sir Suleman 35/22), also reproduced in Shailesh Zaidi, *Hinduism in Aligarh Manuscripts: Descriptive Catalogue of Persian Mss. of Maulana Azad Library, A.M.U., Aligarh on Hindu Legends, Philosophy and Faith* (Patna, India: Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, 1994), 22.

Translation Practices

The Mughals employ multiple translation strategies throughout the *Razmnamah* to produce an imperially relevant text. Three types of literary practices offer particularly valuable insight into how the Mughals fashioned their *Mahabharata*: the preservation of Sanskrit words in translation, the overlay of different religious traditions, and the insertion into the text of Persian poetry. First, the transliteration instead of translation of Sanskrit words enabled the Mughals to develop a Sanskrit-inflected linguistic register throughout the *Razmnamah* that highlights the foreign, Indic nature of the *Mahabharata*. Second, in attempting to make sense of the religious aspects of the *Mahabharata*, the translators incorporate their own Islamic notions and a monotheistic God while simultaneously retaining Indic gods and spiritual elements. However, despite the crowded divine landscape, the Mughals also studiously avoid any deep theological reflections in the text. Overall, they seem to draw on religious sentiments as a means of loose acculturation for a new audience while definitively precluding any religious reading of the epic. Last, the translators sprinkle hundreds of verses of Persian poetry throughout the *Razmnamah*. These articulate the sentiments of the *Mahabharata* in a way culturally relevant to a Persian-speaking elite and also particularly develop areas of the epic that address kingship and politics. Together these three translation practices participate in the creation of a Mughal imperial aesthetic and designate the *Razmnamah* as a seminal Indo-Persian epic.

An Indic Register

The Mughal translators employ Sanskrit words and phrases in several different ways in the *Razmnamah* that develop a web of associations between the epic and Indo-Persian forms of knowledge. First, the *Razmnamah* preserves a wide range of transliterated Sanskrit words that lend a heavy Indic register to the Persian text. Many such terms denote culturally specific concepts, such as *gandharb* (*gandharva*), a class of mythical beings; *narak* (*naraka*), the underworld; and *puran* (*purana*), a genre of Sanskrit literature. Other times, the translators invoke Sanskrit words even when there are readily available Persian equivalents, such as *cakra*, *naksatra*, and *pitr*, meaning "discus," "constellation," and "father," respectively. Through the consistent and liberal use of Sanskrit vocabulary on nearly every page of the *Razmnamah*, the Mughal translators actively cultivate a body of Indic knowledge in the text's readers. Moreover, the texture such foreign words add to the language of this work defines the *Razmnamah* as a cross-cultural epic.[27] Certain words, such as *Veda* (*bid* in Persian), might strike us as untranslatable, but the Mughals make an important choice in not employing approximate terms more frequently. *Naraka* could be thought of as *duzakh* (hell), a *rsi* (sage) referred to as a *dana* (wise man), and *puran* transformed into *tarikh* (history). Such loose translations would change the meaning and resonances of the *Mahabharata*, but no less than transliterating and thereby transforming the original Sanskrit words into a crucial component of the cultural idiom of the *Razmnamah*.

In some instances, this process of outlining new vocabulary prompts the Mughals to replace or translate Sanskrit words with other Sanskrit words that had long ago entered Indo-Persian parlance. Here the Mughals both draw on and simultaneously redefine the contours of Indo-Persian culture through their encounter with the *Mahabharata*. For example, Agastya, a sage in the epic whose name denotes the star Canopus, is appropriately renamed Suhayl, the Persian term for the same star, in the *Razmnamah*, an equivalence that had been established as early as the fourteenth century.[28] More interesting, in book 5 of the text, a *purohita* in Sanskrit, a Brahman family priest, becomes a Persian Brahman.[29] *Brahman* had been used in Indo-Persian poetry for several centuries preceding the Mughal Empire in the Persianate sense of an individual devoted to idol worship. The *Razmnamah* redefines this term once more

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27. On Indic literary registers, see Allison Busch, "Rīti and Register: Lexical Variation in Courtly Braj Bhasha Texts," in *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture*, ed. Francesca Orsini (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010).

28. The words are listed in synonyms in Salaksa's fourteenth-century lexicon of Sanskrit and Persian, titled *Sabdavilasa* (Ahmedabad, L. D. Institute of Indology 8311, f.1a, v. 14).

29. *Razmnamah*, 1:470; *Mahabharata*, 5.20.1. See also *Razmnamah*, 3:59, where *purohita* is defined as a Brahman.

by resituating it within an Indic context and explores Brahmans not as a typology or a Persian literary trope but as individuals within elaborate narratives. In this sense, the Mughal translators both tap into an existing framework of Islamicate views of the Indic other and add new cultural specificity to an Indo-Persian register.

In most cases, the Mughal translators clearly intend for readers to learn the Sanskrit vocabulary used in the Persian text in order to understand the story. However, the *Razmnamah* also contains a few more extended quotations of Sanskrit that seem to operate as literary signals rather than linguistically meaningful text. The most noteworthy case occurs in the *Adi Parvan* (*Book of Beginnings*), where the translators insert several full Sanskrit verses during a strong *'aja'ib* moment. In this section, the sage Astika saves the snakes from demise during the snake sacrifice of Janamejaya. The snakes offer Astika a boon in thanks, and he requests a spell that would protect the speaker against venomous bites. The grateful snakes, then, "agreed that no snake will come to the home of anyone who says this spell and that wherever he says it, every snake that is there will flee. The magic is this."[30] Then the *Razmnamah* produces several full Sanskrit verses transliterated into Persian.[31] The linguistic meaning of these lines is irrelevant to the Persian translators, who offer no further explanation or gloss but are interested only in the magical powers contained in the Sanskrit sounds themselves. The verses quickly became corrupt in later manuscripts of the *Razmnamah*, but the Sanskrit was never lost or translated. In fact, three later copies of the text contain separate reconstructions of these verses in Devanagari script in the margins by later readers but still no translation, as some Sanskrit expressions cannot be put into Persian words.[32]

Finally, the *Razmnamah* contains a number of lengthy lists of Sanskrit names and titles, often in genealogies. Most books of the Persian translation contain several such lists, whether epithets of Surya, names of learned sages, or the hundred sons of Dhritarastra.[33] Such catalog-style information accurately reflects the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, but it had also long been crucial to the Islamicate tradition's encounter with India. Babur, founder of the Mughal dynasty, is celebrated for the close attention he pays to native flora and fauna in his memoirs, often detailing the names of specific species in local dialects.[34] Going back further, al-Biruni is careful to preserve lists of place names from the *purana*s in his eleventh-century account of India.[35] The *Razmnamah* expands on this trend in the sheer number of Sanskrit lists it retains in its retelling of the epic story. Early on, manuscript copies of the text were often careful to write out diacritic marks for these names so that their pronunciation was retained in the Persian script that does not normally show all vowels.[36] Later manuscripts, usually copied by Persian scribes without input from Sanskrit intellectuals, often forget the diacritics and bungle the words, but all retain the lists nonetheless. Some even continue to emphasize their importance by overlining the names and numbering them.[37] Even when intelligibility ceases, the idea remains current that cataloging Sanskrit names and retaining foreign, often *'aja'ib* qualities in the text are essential aspects of the Mughal *Mahabharata*.

A Crowded Divine Landscape

Whereas the Mughals treat Sanskrit terms largely within an Islamicate tradition of how to understand an Indic other, they act more liberally in respect to religious elements of the epic. The *Razmnamah* translators keep much of the *Mahabharata*'s religious framework intact but also frequently overlay it with Islamic concepts.[38] The Mughal translators employ many Sanskrit

30. *Razmnamah*, 1:53–54.

31. Naini and Shukla print four verses (*Razmnamah*, 1:54), although most manuscripts I have consulted only offer the final two.

32. Patna, Khuda Bakhsh 2714, f.29b; Srinagar, Oriental Research Library 1294, f.31b; Oxford Bodleian Ouseley 239, f.55b.

33. Respectively, *Razmnamah*, 1:269–72; 4:211–13; 1:122–25.

34. *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1996; New York: Modern Library, 2002), 335–50. Page reference is to the 2002 edition.

35. *Alberuni's India*, trans. Edward C. Sachau, 2 vols. (London: Trübner, 1888; repr. London: Elibron Classics, 2005), 1:299–303.

36. See, e.g., Birla *Razmnamah*, 2:f.481a–82a.

37. See, e.g., Khuda Bakhsh 2718, f.49a–51a; dated 1768.

38. Here I avoid the thorny question of what religious view or views the *Mahabharata* may actually express. Regardless, the Mughals understood the text as representing a more or less cohesive tradition.

terms for divine beings, including *div* (*deva*), *divat* (*devata*), *narayan* (*narayana*), and *bhagavan.* They also articulate the Sanskrit concept of *avatara*s (incarnations of gods) and mention many specific deities. Yet at other points the Mughal translators interpolate Islamic phrases, often in Koranic Arabic, in praise of a monotheistic deity that is no other than the Islamic Allah. For example, the opening of the *Mahabharata* tells of its own recitation, which begins with the narrator praising the Hindu god Brahma. The *Razmnamah* retains this metaframework but recasts Brahma as *khudavand* (God): "When the Suta-puranik [narrator] knew that Shunak and the others desired to hear this story, he began the tale. He started first in the name of God, Great be his Glory and Magnificent his Bounty [*jalla jalaluhu wa 'amma nawaluhu*]."[39] This monotheistic God who prompts Arabic praises appears frequently throughout the *Razmnamah* but not always at the expense of Hindu gods.

Allah seems to comfortably coexist with his polytheistic counterparts in much of the Persian *Mahabharata*, complete with the Hindu deities' involvements in earthly affairs and devious behaviors. For example, in the story of Nala and Damayanti, Nala attends Damayanti's *svayamvara*, where she will choose her husband. Damayanti desires Nala, but four *devata*s disguise themselves as Nala in an attempt to trick her into choosing one of them as her husband. In the Sanskrit text, Damayanti appeals to the plethora of gods causing trouble to desist from their deceit.[40] But in Persian, in the midst of *devata*s who all look like Nala, Damayanti prays to God, "God, May He be Exalted and Glorified!" (*khuda-yi 'azz wa jall*).[41] Damayanti then addresses God, beginning: "O Solver of Obstacles and Leader of the Lost [*ay gushayandah-i karha-yi bastah va ay rahnama-yi gumshudigan*]."[42] Here the Koranic reference is unmistakable as Opener (*gushayandah*) and Leader (*rahnama*)

correspond to two of the Koranic names for God.[43] The Islamic notion of a single God apart from the world stands in stark contrast to the multitude of physically present deities in the *Mahabharata*. Yet for the most part, these two worlds seem to meld together happily in the *Razmnamah*.

On occasion, however, the *Razmnamah* more drastically rewrites the religious framework of the *Mahabharata*, such as when the work truncates the Bhagavad Gita and alters the nature of Krishna and his message therein. Here, too, cultural intelligibility seems to trump any interest in ideology, and the treatment of the Bhagavad Gita signals a strong Mughal interest in avoiding theology in their retelling of the epic. In the *Mahabharata*, the Bhagavad Gita offers the final attempt to address the deep moral ambiguities of war before the slaughter ensues. Time seems to stand still, with armies arrayed on both sides of the battlefield, as Krishna teaches Arjuna that he must fight by way of a philosophically dense discourse about the nature of the universe, dharma, and human action. In comparison to seven hundred or so verses in Sanskrit, the Bhagavad Gita occupies a mere few pages of the *Razmnamah*.[44] The Persian translation provides a bare-bones sketch of the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna, including the basic teaching that Arjuna is not morally culpable for killing his kinsmen and should participate in the impending war. However, the *Razmnamah* eliminates any further abstract reflections on the different types of yoga and other concepts so that the focus remains on the battle itself rather than providing an ethical climax of the epic.

In other contemporary works the Mughals show substantial interest in explicating Indian religious ideas, but they seemed to feel that such topics did not belong in the *Razmnamah*. In his *A'in-i Akbari* (*Akbar's Institutes*), Abu al-

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39. *Razmnamah*, 1:2. Note that some later manuscripts, generally written by Hindu scribes, replace mentions of *khudavand* with *bhagavan* (e.g., Hyderabad, Oriental Manuscript Library, Tarikh 266).

40. *Mahabharata*, 3.54.

41. *Razmnamah*, 1:300.

42. Ibid.

43. *Al-fatah* and *al-hadi*, respectively. I am grateful to Hossein Kamaly for this insight.

44. In their edition, Naini and Shukla replace the *Razmnamah*'s meager Bhagavad Gita with the fuller version attributed to Dara Shikuh (introduction to *Razmnamah*, 2:3). The *Razmnamah* text is available in Vassie, "Persian Interpretations," 265–68, corresponding to *Mahabharata*, 6.23–40. Also see *Mahabharat-i Farsi: Bhisma* (Lakhnau: Naval Kishore, 1880–1910), 7–10.

Fazl provides an extensive account of Sanskrit knowledge systems, detailing the positions of nine Indian philosophical schools and various religious beliefs and practices.[45] Moreover, the Bhagavad Gita was translated into Persian several times during Mughal rule, and the first translation may have been in Akbar's court.[46] However, these independent Bhagavad Gitas tell us little about how the Mughals conceptualized the *Mahabharata*, except that they understood the *Mahabharata* and the Bhagavad Gita as separate texts. Some modern scholars have asserted that Naqib Khan omitted the Bhagavad Gita out of respect for Akbar's poet laureate, Fayzi, who had previously translated the work.[47] However, there is no evidence for this reasoning, nor is it certain that Fayzi ever translated the Bhagavad Gita, much less before the completion of the *Razmnamah*.[48] Rather, the reduction of the Bhagavad Gita in the *Razmnamah* is more simply explained as an indication that the Mughals did not want to halt the story for a religious reflection.[49] In other sections, most notably in the *Santi Parvan* (*Book of Peace*), the twelfth book, the translators step back from the narrative to offer lengthy political advice, as I discuss below. Thus it seems that the Mughals wished to avoid the theological content of the Bhagavad Gita in particular.

This understanding of the Bhagavad Gita as theologically awkward in the Mughal reading of the epic is confirmed by how the translators rewrite the content of the shortened Bhagavad Gita to reflect a much stronger Islamic framework than is present in the *Razmnamah* as a whole. The *Razmnamah* Bhagavad Gita opens like the Sanskrit with Arjuna positioning his chariot between the two armies ready for war.[50] When Arjuna has his crisis of confidence, the Sanskrit Krishna speaks to him not only as a teacher but also as an incarnation of the god Vishnu, and articulates a series of ideas about dharma, karma (action), and other Indian philosophical concepts. In contrast, the *Razmnamah* Krishna is the teacher of truth but not a divine figure, and he speaks of God's will as external to himself throughout his discourse. In the *Razmnamah*, Krishna articulates the distinction between himself as a messenger and God quite clearly at the close of the Bhagavad Gita in explaining why he became involved in the war at all: "So long as I am ignorant of what God Exalted has ordained, I do not interfere. If I had not known the state of the Kauravas and the wrath of God Exalted towards them, I would not have come to the battlefield and pressed you on this matter. But I know that they all must be killed and that therein lays the happiness of God Exalted."[51] The strong religious content of the Bhagavad Gita may have compelled the Mughals to rework this section of the epic in particular, but they were not consistent in their vision of an Islamic, almost prophet-like Krishna. Elsewhere in the *Razmnamah* Krishna is portrayed as an Indian *deva* and even equated to *khuda*, the Islamic God.[52] Thus rather than accurately representing Indic beliefs or overwriting them with Islamic ideas, the Mughals aim at a middle ground approach that accommodates multiple positions while erasing any deep Hindu theology.

In light of this varied approach, we can most fruitfully understand the treatment of religious elements in the *Razmnamah* as part of a cultural accommodation rather than tied to any specifically theological objectives. This reading stands in contrast to the work of scholars who have argued, mistakenly in my view, that the Mughals understood the *Mahabharata* as a religious text and that Akbar commissioned its translation primarily to promote mutual understanding between Hindus and Muslims.[53] In its strongest form, this religious reading is based on a comment made by Abu al-Fazl in his pref-

45. Abu al-Fazl, *A'in-i Akbari*, 433–556.

46. There are multiple early modern translations of the Bhagavad Gita into Persian, four of which are attributed to either Fayzi or Abu al-Fazl. More manuscript work is needed to sort out the dates and correct authors of these texts. Y. D. Ahuja, "Some Aspects of the Persian Prose Translation of the Gita Ascribed to Abu'l-Fazl," *Indo-Iranica* 138, no. 3 (1960): 20–27.

47. See, e.g., introduction to *Razmnamah*, 3:32.

48. Also the Mughals seem to have no qualms with retranslating texts, and Akbar commissioned multiple translations of the *Mahabharata*, *Simhasanadvatrimsika* (*Thirty-Two Tales of the Throne*), and *Pancatantra*.

49. Akbar's translators also truncate a section on pilgrimage locations and their associated stories in the ninth book of the *Mahabharata* (9.29–53).

50. Vassie, "Persian Interpretations," 265; *Mahabharata*, 6.23.20–22.

51. Vassie, "Persian Interpretations," 268.

52. See, e.g., *Razmnamah*, 1:240.

53. Most recently, Asher and Talbot, *India before Europe*, 140 and 146. See also Ernst's critique of this view ("Muslim Studies of Hinduism?" 178–83).

ace to the *Razmnamah*: "When with his [Akbar's] perfect comprehension he found that the squabbling of the sects of the Muslim community [*millat-i Muhammadī*] and the quarreling of the Hindus increased, and their refutation of each other grew beyond bounds, his subtle mind resolved that the famous books of each group should be translated into diverse tongues. . . . Having become aware of each other's virtues and vices, they should make laudable efforts to rectify their own states."[54] There are serious hermeneutical problems in positing an understanding of a Persian work of two-thousand-plus pages on the basis of a single statement in a preface rather than analyzing the text itself. Moreover, the above passage does not clearly label the *Razmnamah* as a religious work, and in fact, the Mughals appear to have understood the *Mahabharata* much as the epic had generally been interpreted within the Sanskrit tradition: as a text that is not primarily religious but nonetheless involves many gods and addresses religious concerns.[55]

Abu al-Fazl echoes this assessment later in his preface when he speaks more directly about the nature of the *Mahabharata* and describes it as a text of "advice, guidance, stories, and descriptions of war and feasting," or, more concisely, kingship.[56] Indeed, the majority of Abu al-Fazl's preface concerns Akbar's rulership as he praises the emperor with a myriad of different formulas.[57] When pressed to describe the *Razmnamah* according to Persian genre classifications, Abu al-Fazl applies the Persian term *tarikh*, although he goes on to immediately set the *Razmnamah* apart from this wider genre:

> Speech of this extent and breadth, with these strange things and wonders, is not present in the other various histories [*tavarikh*] of the world. There is no trace of this amazing speech in the accounts [*tabaqat*] of the world. . . . Although the lords of the circle of truth do not hesitate to refute the details of this story, nonetheless it is

right that the mind of an intelligent person with discerning vision should reflect and place the essence of these reported things in the realm of possibility.[58]

This characterization of the *Razmnamah* as hearsay, or perhaps more precisely as fantastical history, is consistent with the various elements discussed above. In their continual mentioning of the Indian storytellers who relay the epic, the Mughal translators typically use *avardan*, *nivishtan*, and *akhbar kardan* (to relay, to write, and to tell) to signal this type of distance between themselves and full-fledged believers in the historicity of the *Mahabharata*.[59] Abu al-Fazl also places the *Razmnamah* within the category of disputed *tarikh* or purported history, whereas he does not compare it to the Koran or other religious works.

The *Razmnamah* likewise presents itself not as a theological work but rather as a story where religious elements afford an opportunity for the Mughals to acculturate the *Mahabharata* for a predominantly Islamic audience. The translators themselves may have had no other way of understanding religious aspects of the text than by some rough equivalence with their own tradition.[60] Thus they developed a dynamic equivalence that renders an overly Hindu Bhagavad Gita within a monotheistic framework while truncating the text to avoid devoting too much time to anybody's theology. Where possible the translators also strived toward some conception of faithfulness to the text, and so in other sections, such as Damayanti's *svayamvara*, God and the gods share the stage.

Despite the fact that the *Razmnamah* expresses many basic Islamic ideas, the Mughals were aware of the danger of writing their own theology into the *Mahabharata* and sought to avoid such practices. One of the few recorded incidents concerning the actual translation process addresses precisely this concern of imposing Islamic notions on the Indian epic and

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54. Quoted in Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism?" 180–181; his translation.

55. Concerning traditional understandings of the *Mahabharata*, see Pollock, *Language of the Gods*, 224–25.

56. Abu al-Fazl, "Muqaddamah," 40.

57. Ibid., 4–19.

58. Ibid., 34.

59. Abu al-Fazl in his history of Akbar's reign similarly uses *guyand* (they say) when he is repeating potentially unreliable information. Muzaffar Alam, "The Mughals, the Sufi Shaikhs, and the Formation of the Akbari Dispensation," *Modern Asian Studies* 43 (2009): 164.

60. For a detailed analysis of equivalence theory in a South Asian context, see Tony Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter through Translation Theory," *History of Religions* 40 (2001): 260–87.

demonstrates the Mughals' troubled relationship with the notion of a faithful translation. Bada'uni, one of the translators of the text and an independent historian, describes Akbar's vehement accusation against him in this vein: "[Akbar] called me into the public and private audience hall and said to Shaykh Abu al-Fazl, 'We imagined that this person [namely, Bada'uni] was a young, unworldly adherent of Sufism, but he has turned out to be such a bigoted follower of Islamic law that no sword can slice the jugular vein of his bigotry.'"[61] Bada'uni then relays the particular line that had stirred up so much trouble, a verse located in the fifth book of the *Razmnamah* and authored by Hafiz: "Every action has its reward and every deed its recompense."[62] The addition of Persian poetry to the *Razmnamah* was an established, accepted practice, as detailed below, but this verse was singled out as problematic for its alleged covert reference to Islamic beliefs. According to Bada'uni, Akbar understood the line to refer to the Islamic Day of Judgment, complete with Munkar and Nakir, two angels who judge the newly dead. To defend himself, Bada'uni argued that the ideas of reward and punishment are also present in the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, since everybody spends time in both heaven and hell at the conclusion of the epic.[63] In the end, Bada'uni' successfully convinced the emperor that the verse stands in accordance with Indic ideas, and the line remains in the *Razmnamah.*

This episode demonstrates the deep problems of cultural comprehension that the Mughal translators faced, particularly regarding religion, and also the strong imperial involvement in the translation project and insistence on avoiding the theology in the *Mahabharata* where possible. As mentioned above, direct Islamic references to Allah run throughout the *Razmnamah*. If one considers the translation along with Abu al-Fazl's preface to the text, the Islamic context becomes even more apparent, since his introduction is replete with Islamic

language and praise of God. Given this, Akbar is unlikely to have been upset over an indirect Islamic reference in a single line of poetry. Rather, the emperor seems to have been concerned about the possibility that specific Islamic theological ideas, such as the Day of Judgment and its accompanying angels, might have entered what was supposed to be an Indo-Persian story. Thus, the varying treatments of religious elements throughout the *Razmnamah* seem to be a series of highly interesting (if only moderately successful) attempts to make sense of a complex, different world while keeping any substantial discussion of Indic or Islamic religions out of the text as much as possible.

Poetry and Politics

While the Mughal translators and their patron may have been concerned about writing religious beliefs into the *Razmnamah*, they show no hesitation in adding a decidedly Persianate, courtly context to the *Mahabharata* by incorporating quotations of Persian poetry. The majority of the *Razmnamah* is written in prose, but the translators insert occasional poetic verses throughout the text.[64] These verses recast the literary framework of the *Mahabharata* for an Indo-Persian audience in three distinct ways. First, such quotations inlay the *Razmnamah* with a rich set of intertextual literary associations within the Persian tradition. Moreover, the verses frame crucial moments in the *Mahabharata* in a quintessentially Persian aesthetic, drawing on Persianate poetic tropes and particular modes of expression. Finally, the poetic quotations specify another aspect of the Mughal interest in the *Mahabharata*, namely, its political commentary, by highlighting certain passages on kingship.

The *Razmnamah* contains hundreds of lines of Persian poetry, largely quoted from the great masters of Persian literature, such as Nizami, Hafiz, Sa'di, Sana'i, Anvari, Rudaki, and Mu'izzi. They almost certainly quote from

61. Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-tavarikh*, 2:399. Bada'uni seems to have also incurred this type of questioning regarding other texts (Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, 256).

62. Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-tavarikh*, 2:399. See also *Razmnamah*, 1:478; *Safinah-i Hafiz*, ed. Mas'ud Janati 'Ata'i (Tehran: Chapkhanah-i Haydari, 1968), 192.

63. Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-tavarikh*, 2:400.

64. These poetic lines are original to the *Razmnamah* translation and not the result of later marginal notes being drawn into the text. Bada'uni's incident of being called to Akbar's court for his choice of a particular line demonstrates that the poems were included in the original translation, and the verses are included in the earliest manuscripts of the work from the late sixteenth century.

Indo-Persian and lesser-known poets as well, but identifying all the sources of poetry in the *Razmnamah* remains an unfinished project. The poems are not attributed in the translation, but an educated reader would have been expected to recognize such verses and their authors.[65] In quoting from their rich literary heritage, the Mughal translators participate in a long-standing Persianate method of using quoted poetry to enhance the weight and appeal of a new prose work.[66] This strategy is also seen in other Sanskrit-Persian translations patronized by Akbar, such as the *Panchakhyanah*, a translation of the Sanskrit *Pancatantra* (*Five Tales*), which quotes from Hafiz and Sa'di.[67] Additionally, the interpolation of intertextual references was not uncommon in premodern translation projects more broadly.[68] Such a strategy lends a newly translated text authority by embedding the work within its target culture, in this case the Persian literary canon.

In the *Razmnamah*, these poetic quotations also often serve to epitomize the core of particularly emotional scenes according to Persian aesthetic sensibilities. In many cases, the translators incorporate the verses into the actual narrative of the *Mahabharata* and insert them into the mouths of the epic heroes in addition to the more conventional Persian method of using verses to summarize the main moral lesson of a story.[69] A powerful example of the former, in which the Sanskrit epic's characters speak in the language of Persian poetics, occurs at the start of the fourteenth book. Vyasa goes to see King Yudhisthira after the war is over, and Yudhisthira laments the death of his elder brother, Karna, and other relatives:

Now I have regained the places that my ancestors held. But one thing that deeply saddens and distresses me is that Bhisma, our lord and benefactor, Dronacarya, everyone's teacher, and Karna, our elder brother, have passed away. Without them I will gain no peace or pleasure in this kingdom and rulership. I see Karna's houses—where learned men always used to recite the *Veda*s and where religious men and scholars always used to gather and where great alms used to be found—now those houses are empty. The place where if a needy person came, he found so many alms that he would cry out of pure happiness.[70]

To capture the true emptiness of Karna's house and his own grief, the *Razmnamah* Yudhisthira next utters the following lines from a famous *qasidah* by Mu'izzi:

> I see a land devoid of the face of my beloved.
> I see a meadow empty of the stature of that
>   upright cypress.
> That place where the beloved used to wander
>   in the garden with friends
> Is now the dwelling of the wolf and fox, the
>   domain of wild asses and vultures.[71]

These four lines invoke the Persian image of a lost beloved, expressed through a description of the now deserted camp. Persian literature possesses a rich imagery associated with the beloved and abandoned places that has no connection to Sanskrit. Yet these lines constitute the most poignant expression of the *Razmnamah* Yudhisthira's pain, which has become an aestheticized emotion that emerges out of the Persian literary tradition.[72]

Beyond invoking a Persian aesthetic, the Mughals further redefine their version of the *Mahabharata* as an imperial text by singling

65. On reader expectations regarding interpolated poetry, see Julie Scott Meisami, "The Historian and the Poet: Rāvandī, Nizami, and the Rhetoric of History," in *The Poetry of Nizami Ganjavi: Knowledge, Love, and Rhetoric*, ed. Kamran Talattof and Jerome W. Clinton (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 119. That readers met such expectations is demonstrated when they add further lines onto the quoted verses (e.g., *Razmnamah*, 4:220).

66. On the weight of verse in Persian literature and how it functions when mixed with prose, see Julie Scott Meisami, "Mixed Prose and Verse in Medieval Persian Literature," in *Prosimetrum: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Verse*, ed. Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 295–319.

67. 'Abbasi Mustafa Khaliqdad, *Panchakhyanah*, ed. Tara Chand, Hasan Abidi, and Jalali Naini (Tehran: Iqbal, 1984); for Hafiz, see 24, 107, and Sa'di, 19.

68. For example, see Chinese translations of Sanskrit texts from the third century CE. Daniel Boucher, "Gāndhārī and the Early Chinese Buddhist Translations Reconsidered: The Case of the Saddharmapundarīkasūtra," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118 (1998): 497–98.

69. Meisami, "The Historian and the Poet," 99. Also note the example of Bada'uni's verse discussed earlier.

70. *Razmnamah*, 4:219–20.

71. Ibid., 220; Mu'izzi, *Divan*, ed. 'Abbas Iqbal (Tehran: Kitabfurushi-yi Islamiyah, 1940), 597. BL Or. 12076 adds two further lines (f.2b).

72. Also note the lamentation of Bhisma's injury (*Razmnamah*, 2:172).

out the *Udyoga* and *Santi Parvan*s, the fifth and twelfth books, respectively, to heavily adorn with poetry. Both books address at length the topics of *rajya* (political power) and *rajadharma* (proper kingly conduct). The *Udyoga Parvan* (*Book of Effort*) focuses on negotiations to avoid civil war, and the *Santi Parvan* presents extended teachings on how to reconstruct an empire after a bloody conflict. Both books show a heavy density of poetic quotations in comparison to the rest of the *Razmnamah*, where entire books often lack any such citations.[73] The localization of classical Persian poetry in the *Razmnamah* highlights these two passages and their commentaries on kingly rule as central to the Mughal transformation of the *Mahabharata* and the concerns of the royal court. Elsewhere the Mughals also describe both books as concerning kingly advice and rulership in particular.[74] Persian literati had a deep interest in the nature of kingship that stretched back to the inception of their literary tradition and often drew from Indic texts for political advice. Persian writers explored this theme through a variety of textual genres ranging from *masnavi*s such as the *Shahnamah* (*Book of Kings*) to prose treatises akin to European mirrors for princes.[75] These texts reached new heights of visibility in Akbar's court as the emperor had Persian classics on kingship read out to him nightly, and the major court-sponsored history of his reign draws on these literary works to frame Akbar as a just ruler.[76] The *Razmnamah* likewise participates extensively in developing Akbar's kingship, particularly through its poetry-laden sections.

The Mughal translators further frame the *Razmnamah* as a book about kingship in general and Akbar's rulership in particular by drawing heavily from Persianate and Islamicate worldviews in translating the actual contents of the *Udyoga* and *Santi parvan*s. Thus where the Sanskrit *Santi Parvan* praises a king who ensures that each subject follows his *svadharma* (his own ethical code), the *Razmnamah* speaks of a king who brings to earth *rahmat-i ilahi* (the grace of God).[77] In the Sanskrit *Udyoga Parvan*, a Pandava messenger criticizes Duryodhana for depriving his cousin-brothers of their proper inheritance (*paitrka*), but in the *Razmnamah*, Duryodhana has violated divine fate (*taqdir-i khuda*).[78] This second example prompts speculation about the Mughals' specific interest in producing a *Mahabharata* that commented favorably on the contemporary Mughal political situation. In the case of Duryodhana's crime, Akbar's process of empire building and the frequent lack of a clearly established successor for the Mughal throne may have prompted the rejection of inheritance as a sacrosanct foundation for rulership.

Akbar's kingship looms in the background throughout the *Razmnamah* translation project but is rarely directly addressed. While Abu al-Fazl's repeated praise of Akbar in his preface to the translation seems to have little direct connection with an ancient Sanskrit epic, he may merely be externalizing the commentary on the emperor that is embedded in the careful Mughal treatment of politics in the *Razmnamah*. The Mughals not only adorn certain sections on *rajya* with poetry but also tend to translate these portions of the *Mahabharata* at length, even expanding at times on the Sanskrit text.[79] Even beyond the fifth and twelfth books, the Mughal translators seize opportunities to rewrite the epic to reflect the story of Akbar and the Mughal dynasty. One notable example of such an alteration is found in the story of the birth of Karna, the son of Kunti and Surya, the sun god. While still unmarried,

73. *Razmnamah*, 1:462–547; 3:45–203. The section of book 12 with heavy poetry quotations roughly corresponds to the *rajadharma* section.

74. *Rauzat al-tahirin* of Tahir Muhammad Sabzavari, Oxford Bodleian Elliot 314, f.447b; see also Aligarh Muslim University, Sir Suleman 15/2(b), f.147b, f.182a.

75. William Hanaway discusses the wide range of genres covered by *andarz* (advice) literature in "*Amīr Arsalān* and the Question of Genre," *Iranian Studies* 24 (1991): 57–58. On advice literature conceptualized as a genre unto itself see Bo Utas, "'Genres' In Persian Literature 900–1900," in *Literary Genres: An Intercul-*

tural Approach, vol. 2 in *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective*, 4 vols., ed. Gunilla Lindberg-Wada (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2006), 238.

76. Linda Darling, "'Do Justice, Do Justice, For That Is Paradise': Middle Eastern Advice for Indian Muslim Rulers," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 22 (2002): 8–9.

77. *Mahabharata*, 12.67.30; *Razmnamah*, 3:45.

78. *Mahabharata*, 5.20.4–6; *Razmnamah*, 1:470, based on the oldest variant in n. 2.

79. For example, in book 5 compare *Razmnamah*, 1:470–72, to *Mahabharata*, 5.20–21. Overall, the translators render the twelfth book at such length that it comprises roughly one-quarter of the entire Persian text. Perhaps unsurprisingly, later readers seem not to have shared the disproportionate interest of Akbar's court in these two books. This may explain why, in later manuscripts copies, *Udyoga Parvan* is sometimes abridged with the poetry largely excised (e.g., Bombay, Cama Institute 52; Bombay, Asiatic Society 143693). In other manuscripts, *Santi Parvan* is frequently cut off toward the beginning (e.g., BL Persian Add. 5639, BL IO 3013).

Kunti receives a spell (*mantra* in Sanskrit; *afsun* in Persian) from a sage that enables her to call on any god to impregnate her. Out of curiosity, she calls on Surya and their union results in the birth of Karna, whom she promptly abandons to conceal her shame. The *Mahabharata* explicitly notes that before Surya returns to heaven he reinstates Kunti's virginity.[80] The *Razmnamah* alters the tale so that Kunti conceives via a ray of light. As a result, as the text simply says, "She did not lose her virginity."[81] A conception via divine light featured prominently in the story of Akbar's ancestors and has been identified by modern scholars as a crucial component of Mughal imperial identity.[82] In *Akbarnamah*, the official court history of Akbar's reign, Abu al-Fazl tells the story of how Alanquwa, a Mongol princess and ancestor of Genghis Khan, conceived triplet sons via a ray of divine light. According to Abu al-Fazl, the divine light was passed on in a concealed form through the generations until it again manifested itself visibly in Akbar upon his ascension.[83] The *Razmnamah* overtly references this Mughal legend in the modified story of Karna's birth, which links Akbar's political identity with the Sanskrit epic story.

In a passage in the *Santi Parvan*, the *Razmnamah* even steps outside of its own narrative to explicitly address Akbar in a story about King Manu. In this portion of the text, Bhisma is instructing Yudhisthira on how to be a good ruler and introduces Manu as a positive exemplar. The *Razmnamah* translates the story with its own Perso-Islamicate slant, which ends with a positive evaluation of Manu that is closely tied to good wishes for Akbar:

> [Manu] showed compassion and mercy to the entire world and spoke to everyone with visible joy. Day by day, his majesty and pomp increased, and many years passed on earth in his rule and good fortune. Because of his virtuous conduct,

God Exalted granted him a long, generous life. It is hoped, according to the magnificence of God, Praised and Exalted, that the shadow of justice and the compassion of his most exalted majesty, king Akbar—under whose justice, compassion, and grace all people in the world rest—would be perpetual and ever-lasting so long as the world exists.[84]

Here the translators draw on an earlier teaching in Manu's story that "the first responsibility of the subjects is that they must pray for the king" and apply it directly to their own political situation.[85] The passage finishes with the verses:

> O God! This king, a friend to those in need,
> In whose shadow lies the refuge of the world,
> May you grant him long life on this earth,
> May you enliven his heart through obedience
>   to God.
> So long as there is day and night, may the king
>   be on the throne,
> And may prosperity reach the zenith of the
>   sky.[86]

The voice that articulates these good wishes remains unclear. The speaker is either Bhisma, who addresses Akbar across the reaches of time after finishing the story of Manu, or the Mughal translators, who step outside of the narrative framework of the text to offer a few kind words to their patron. Either way, temporal and narrative boundaries are broken to directly celebrate the great kingship of Akbar and to immortalize him by including him in one of India's great epics. This passage furthermore puts Manu and Akbar in close proximity and frames Akbar as a just, praiseworthy Indian king.

Conclusion
Akbar's translators approach the *Mahabharata* as a mixture of imaginative history, political advice, and a great story that deeply interacts with the Indo-Persian literary tradition while pro-

80. *Mahabharata*, 1.104.

81. *Razmnamah*, 1:117–18.

82. Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 146–49.

83. Catherine B. Asher, "A Ray from the Sun: Mughal Ideology and the Visual Construction of the Divine," in *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience*, ed. Matthew Kapstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 170.

84. *Razmnamah*, 3:45. To date, I have found only a single manuscript that replaces Akbar's name with Manu's here (Bibliothèque Nationale France Supplément Persan 1038, f.420a–420b).

85. *Razmnamah*, 3:44.

86. Ibid., 3:45; the first four lines are from *Bustan-i Sa'di*, ed. Nur Allah Iranparast (Tehran: Danish, 1973), 18, lines 4–5. I am unclear about the origin of the last two lines. Note that lines 3 and 4 are missing in many manuscripts of the *Razmnamah*. Nonetheless, I do not think that their addition or subtraction significantly alters the meaning or tone of the text here.

moting an imperial ideology. They highlight the Indic nature of the text by preserving Sanskrit words and emphasizing *'aja'ib* elements while simultaneously placing it in a contemporary context as a tale narrated by Brahmans to the Mughal court. The translators approach religion pragmatically in the *Razmnamah* and avoid both Hindu and Islamic theology. Nonetheless they produce interesting mixtures of the two systems of belief in a series of uneven attempts to remain faithful to the *Mahabharata* while producing a culturally intelligible story for an Islamicate audience. Finally, the Mughals invoke Persian aesthetics throughout the *Razmnamah* and also use verse to mark particular sections of imperial advice and political commentaries.

In light of the overall emphasis on kingship in the *Razmnamah* and particularly given Akbar's appearance in the ancient Indian world, it is tempting to agree with scholars who have suggested that this translation was primarily designed to promote Mughal political objectives.[87] In many ways, my analysis bears out the thesis that the Mughals found common ground between their courtly needs and the *Mahabharata*'s story in the text's commentary on political power. The translators further enhanced this affinity with subtle but meaningful alterations to the text's narrative and content. However, it remains unclear how the empty language of legitimation theory would enable one to more precisely articulate the relationship between Emperor Akbar and the *Mahabharata*.[88] If we say that the *Razmnamah* was intended to legitimate Akbar as a king, then we assume a need for the Mughals to justify their rule through the language of Sanskrit (and Persian) aesthetics, and it is unclear how, why, or for whom such justification would actually work. In addition, we would bar ourselves from pursuing more interesting lines of inquiry: why the Mughals considered Sanskrit to be a valuable political resource in the first place, how they negotiated fusing its cultural tradition with their own, and precisely what such a union looked like in its finished textual form. Moreover, legitimation theory leaves

little room for other considerations that were also at play in the translation, such as the redefinition and cultivation of Sanskrit knowledge in Persian, the blending of religious traditions, and the intertextual literary associations drawn from the Persian tradition. Instead, it seems more fruitful and honest to the translation to postulate that precisely the mix of political and aesthetic modes of discourse is what made the *Razmnamah* an imperially meaningful project in Akbar's court.

The diverse translation strategies employed in the *Razmnamah* also suggest that intertwining multiple understandings of the epic in complex ways was crucial to the Mughal encounter with the *Mahabharata*. Akbar's court further confirmed its interest in fashioning imperial epics full of different readings and possibilities by producing at least two more translations of the *Mahabharata*. In the twenty years after the completion of the original *Razmnamah*, Akbar commissioned two additional versions of the text in Persian, one by Fayzi and another by Tahir Muhammad Sabzavari.[89] Both authors used the *Razmnamah* as the basis for their reworkings of the epic, but they produced radically different versions, with Fayzi inserting his own poetic verses at liberty and Sabzavari heavily abridging the epic story. Neither text has yet been published, but their existence nonetheless attests to the centrality of the *Razmnamah* to Akbar's court culture and raises the question of what further steps such works may have taken in developing a new Indo-Persian Mughal idiom through tellings and retellings of the *Mahabharata*. ⸙

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87. Most important, Rizvi and Ernst.

88. See critique in Pollock, *Language of the Gods*, 511–24.

89. Fayzi was asked to rework the entire *Mahabharata* into verse but only finished the first two *parvan*s, whereas Tahir Muhammad Sabzavari completed his abridged version of the epic (Shukla, "Persian Translations of Sanskrit Works," 180). Copies of

both texts are extant in the Aligarh and the British Library collections, and Fayzi's work is often found in manuscript copies of the *Razmnamah*, simply replacing the first two books.