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The Oxford Handbook of the Mughal World

(In Progress)

Richard M. Eaton (ed.), Ramya Sreenivasan (ed.)

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190222642.001.0001>

Published: 2020

Online ISBN: 9780190222659

Print ISBN: 9780190222642

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CHAPTER

Sanskrit and Vernacular Literatures at the Mughal Court

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190222642.013.31>

Published: 20 November 2023

Abstract

India has long been a profoundly multilingual space, and the Mughal court is no exception. When the Persian language was given a boost of imperial patronage during Akbar's reign, the process was governed not so much by supersession as by dynamic interaction with other local poetic and intellectual traditions. This chapter foregrounds two of India's "other" early modern textual cultures, Hindi and Sanskrit, exploring how they fill out the picture of Mughal courtly life. The chapter also considers representations of the polyglot Mughal court and imperial politics beyond the royal center, including in Rajput courts and in popular sources.

Keywords: Mughal, Sanskrit, Hindi, vernacular, literature, court culture, translation, patronage, polyglot

Subject: Asian History, History

Series: Oxford Handbooks

Collection: Oxford Handbooks Online

Multilingual Mughals

Mughal India conjures up the mellifluous cadences of Persian poetry. And rightly so. Muzaffar Alam has suggested that by some important metrics, more Persian literature was created in Mughal-period India than in any other Muslim dynasty anywhere.¹ He and others have also argued forcefully that Persian, with its long heritage in multicultural societies, served an important sociopolitical function as an imperial language that could tie together India's disparate and polyglot nobility.² India was on the eastern end of a vast geographical expanse that connected Persianate societies "from the Balkans to Bengal" in a cosmopolitan cultural and political ecumene.³

The "polyglot" does not disappear so readily from this picture, however. Recent research has pointed to the importance of engaging with India as a profoundly multilingual space, where multiple textual cultures bumped up against one another.⁴ When the Persian language was given a boost of imperial patronage during

Akbar's reign, the process was governed not so much by supersession as by dynamic interaction with other local poetic and intellectual traditions. This chapter foregrounds two of India's "other" early modern textual cultures, Hindi and Sanskrit, and considers how they fill out the picture of Mughal courtly life.

It is commonplace today to make straightforward associations between languages and religious identity. Thus, for many, Sanskrit and Hindi are (problematically) considered the self-evident patrimony of Hindus, while Persian and Urdu are "Muslim" languages. These neat formulations are, however, misleading, and it is instructive to probe where they break down. Persian was a medium of education for Hindus and Muslims alike during the Mughal period, and it was only the deformations of colonial-era reform that saw the language unceremoniously ejected from Indian public life (though it remained a major medium of education in the nineteenth century and hovers still in modern India's judiciary and administrative lexicon).⁵ Hindi, for its part, has a long heritage of being cultivated in India's Muslim communities, and Hindi poets from various religious backgrounds found an audience alongside their Persian counterparts in a variety of Delhi Sultanate, Mughal, and Deccani settings.⁶ Sanskrit was also assiduously cultivated long into what Sheldon Pollock has typed "the vernacular millennium," and it continued to be widely recognized as an authoritative language of intellectual and political life in the sultanate and Mughal periods.⁷ As I (Audrey) have stressed, many Sanskrit works can be directly associated with Mughal patronage, and the Mughals also frequently translated Sanskrit texts into Persian.⁸ *Prashasti* or "praise addresses" were routinely composed, in both Sanskrit and Hindi, to celebrate Mughal rulers. These will be a special focus of the chapter, though we also consider how traditional forms of Indian sovereignty were encoded in a variety of courtly literature and songs that were presented in Mughal settings.

Another way that Hindi and Sanskrit functioned in this period were as languages of discourse *about* the Mughals. While the Mughals were busy commissioning Persian chronicles at the imperial court (such texts have been the nearly exclusive textual archive for writing Mughal history), the pens of Hindi and Sanskrit authors at regional courts remained busy. Much of Rajput court culture, for instance, evolved in concert with imperial symbols of authority, some highly eclectic, as the Mughal emperors consciously drew on diverse cultural and political styles of sovereignty. The Rajput courts from which so many Mughal *mansabdars* (ranked officials) were sourced as the military lynchpins of the empire did not typically sponsor Persian writers. Instead, they widely preferred literary compositions in Sanskrit and Hindi, both in dialects of Rajasthani and the more transregional Brajbhasha dialect that became prominent from Akbar's day. The chapter considers instances of how both Hindi and Sanskrit were highly pertinent to Mughal-period literary and political culture in ways that often complement and sometimes contest the more well-known Persian discourse.

One of the problems we encounter when trying to document "the polyglot" in Mughal-period literary history is that textual communities often policed their boundaries, even if not always in explicit or even consistent ways. Brahmin authors writing in Sanskrit during the Mughal heyday maintained an almost total silence about the wide variety of ways that they served the Mughals.⁹ This was consistent with a centuries-old ambivalence among Sanskrit pandits about working for *mlecchas*, as Muslims were often known.¹⁰ Jain writers, in contrast, were not only willing to engage with imperial power but also wrote extensive narratives about their activities at the Mughal courts.¹¹ Persian authors, for their part, typically did not widely report about literature that was not in Persian. This problem is acute for Akbar's period, when so many Mughal literati were immigrants from Persia who lived fairly elite and sheltered lives.¹² As recent arrivals to the subcontinent, many would not have been literate in Hindi, and certainly they did not know Sanskrit. In later generations, however, there was often greater visibility for polyglot writers, and a facility with Hindi could be a prized cultural attainment in the *tazkiras*, the biographical compendia that were central to affirmations of literary worth in the Persian ecumene.

The real world was always messier than the textual world, at any rate. And even textual worlds show more permeability than has generally been acknowledged. Long before the Mughals arrived in India, we can

document various kinds of exchanges and literary experimentation across textual communities. Al-Biruni, working at the Ghaznavid court in the eleventh century, famously produced pioneering accounts of India for an Arabic and Persian readership. The Tughluq rulers Muhammad bin Tughluq (r. 1325–1351) and Firuz Shah (r. 1351–1388) invited Jains to their courts, and Firuz Shah sponsored the translation of the Sanskrit *Brihatsamhita* (Great Compendium) into Persian. Jinaprabhasuri, a Jain monk who spent several years in Muhammad bin Tughluq's employ, authored three Persian-language praise poems of the Jinas.¹³ In the fifteenth century, Kashmiri and other regional Persianate rulers, such as the sultans of Gujarat, patronized Sanskrit writers, demonstrating a commitment to traditional Indian knowledge.¹⁴ Sufi writers, for their part, also translated Sanskrit works into Persian over several centuries.¹⁵ And some of the earliest significant Hindi poetry that we have was by Muslim authors writing in a Sufi vein.¹⁶ We even find Muslim poets like Abd al-Rahman (Abdala Rahamana in Sanskrit) who tried their hand at Apabhramsha in the *Sandeha-rasaka* (ca. late thirteenth century).¹⁷

Indian literary history, then, surprises and rewards us at every turn when we employ a rubric that focuses on nodes of interaction rather than on language traditions in isolation. This is the premise of *Culture and Circulation*, a 2014 book that I (Allison) coedited.¹⁸ It is also the premise of this chapter. Persian can be considered the principal language of Mughal court life—on this point there is no real cause for dispute—but there were always vital forces of intellectual interaction and cross-pollination that a multilingual approach allows us to see with fuller clarity than when we use Persian sources alone.

Hindi and Sanskrit Poets at the Mughal Court

To state the matter succinctly, the “Persianate” dynasty of the Mughals was no less multilingual than any other in South Asian history. The evidence is everywhere for those with eyes to see, or “hidden in plain view,” as I (Allison) have argued elsewhere.¹⁹ By examining anew established texts and expanding our purview to nontraditional sources and texts in languages other than Persian, we can reconstruct many multicultural facets of Mughal court culture.

Even the shadowy evidence in official Persian texts allows us to piece together quite a good picture of the polyglot Mughal court. A brisk sampling of passages from iconic texts such as Abu al-Fazl's *Ain-i Akbari* (Akbar's Institutes) and Jahangir's memoirs serves to make the case. Abu al-Fazl's lengthy entries on *sahitya* (literature), nine *darshana* (philosophical systems), and other Sanskrit knowledge systems—brimming with various untranslated Sanskrit technical terms—evinces the court's recognition of Indian knowledge systems.²⁰ As I (Audrey) have shown, Brahmin and Jain intellectuals routinely participated in learned discussions with the emperor.²¹ The books that were kept in the *kitab-khana* (imperial library) also reflect the polyglot interests of the court, including works in Hindi, Kashmiri, and Sanskrit.²² One of the most powerful expressions of the Mughal interest in Indian literature is the robust translation of Sanskrit texts into Persian, totaling more than a dozen works, including the entirety of both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* sponsored by Akbar. The *Ramayana* became associated with Mughal royalty, and multiple subsequent retranslations of the epic into Persian were dedicated to the reigning Mughal emperor.²³ Because nobody involved in the Akbar-period translations was fluent in both Sanskrit and Persian, all the translations were completed in pairs (or teams, for the longer texts), and spoken Hindi served as the medium of communication between the Sanskrit literati and Persian translators.²⁴

Hindi was also a language of literature and learning in its own right at Akbar's court. For instance, Abu al-Fazl refers directly to Emperor Akbar's knowledge of Hindi verse: “The inspired nature of His Majesty is strongly drawn to composing poetry in Hindi and Persian (*guftan-i nazm-i hindi u farsi*), and he exhibits a subtle understanding of the finest points of literary conceits.”²⁵ Akbar also enjoyed vernacular *dohras*, without needing them to be translated into Persian, according to a Mahdavi who visited his court.²⁶

Jahangir, for his part, used Hindi words in his memoirs. As I (Allison) have discussed elsewhere, a Hindi praise poem penned by Keshavdas for Jahangir, the *Jahangirjaschandrika* (Moonlight of the Fame of Jahangir, 1612), stresses the emperor's knowledge of *nayika-bheda* (catalogue of female characters), one of the principal literary motifs of the era expressed in both Sanskrit and Hindi.²⁷ Jahangir also records his appreciation for a eulogy of himself recited by a Hindi poet brought to the Mughal court by a Rajput *mansabdar* and refers directly to his brother Daniyal's (d. 1604) being at least a halfway decent composer of Hindi verse.²⁸ Gang, a Hindi poet, seems to concur and, among his more than seventy-five praise verses to Mughal kings, princes, and nobles, devotes a disproportionate number of verses to Dan Shah (Daniyal).²⁹

Some forms of Hindi poetry were sung, and these proved popular in Mughal circles. For instance, Brajbhasha songs known as *dhrupad* were a staple of court culture over the reigns of multiple emperors. In Akbar's time, Tansen was the most famous *dhrupad* singer. His descendants—including Lal Khan, Khush-hal, and Vishram, among others—kept the tradition of Hindi singing alive at later Mughal courts.³⁰

The fact that Hindi and Sanskrit literary cultures existed alongside Persian in Mughal society is, then, undeniable. We next ought to consider: What were the concerns of Hindi and Sanskrit writers and their patrons? Here we especially rely on the genre of *prashasti*, short praise poems that survive in great numbers from the Mughal period and allow us to explore a wide range of themes that were of concern to Mughal audiences. A brief sampling of *dhrupad*, or song-texts, will also be considered, along with select themes that emerge in connected or *prabandha* works. Relevant material in Hindi and Sanskrit was commissioned in various contexts. Some poems and songs were directly addressed to the emperor. Others were produced at the behest of nobility and well-wishers of the Mughal king. Writers from farther afield at regional courts with ties to the empire also have much to contribute to the discussion. It is particularly fascinating to try to understand constructions of Mughal power from more peripheral locations far from Agra or Delhi. Accordingly, in the following three sections, we begin with examples from Akbar's period and then highlight some interesting passages that tell us something about political relationships, going all the way up into Aurangzeb's reign. None of this is exhaustive or definitive. It aims to give a sense of the range of expression we can find in early modern Hindi and Sanskrit literary texts connected with or about the Mughals.

The King as Lover

Poetry of praise has been one of the most enduring courtly genres in South Asia. The Sanskrit *prashasti*, or praise address to kings, has been connected to the very invention of *kavya* (formal literature); and as an integral part of the inscriptional discourse of classical and medieval India, it was closely tied to political expression. Praise poetry was also a major genre of Persian (for instance, the *qasida*). In the early modern period, Brajbhasha praise compositions are also well attested. As Julie Scott Meisami has cautioned, we should not be too quick to dismiss praise genres as the useless flattery of courtly sycophants, an all-too-common reaction of modern readers who are not accustomed to the formal literary protocols of premodern genres.³¹ When they are read with subtlety and attunement to the various contexts in which they operated, *prashasti* poems become an important gauge of Mughal social and political relationships.

Sanskrit praise addresses to Akbar are attested from early in his reign. For instance, Padmasundara, first associated with the court of Raja Maldeo of Jodhpur, is thought to be the first Jain to arrive at the Mughal court, in 1569. Akbar commissioned from Padmasundara a treatise on the cornerstones of Indian literary expression. Both the title and the strategies of the work, known as *Akbarasahishringaradarpana* (Mirror on the erotic sentiment as reflected in Emperor Akbar), induct the emperor into the world of Sanskrit courtly aesthetics. This idea of the king as a true lover persisted across the generations of Mughal emperors, also cropping up in Hindi poetry. For instance, Sundar Kaviray, a Brajbhasha poet from Gwalior, wrote the

Sundarshringar (Beautiful Passion, 1631) early in Shah Jahan's reign. Like Padmasundara's Sanskrit work, *Sundarshringar* constitutes an introduction to key ideas from classical aesthetics, and both works contain example verses featuring the Mughal emperor.

When read side-by-side, Padmasundara and Sundar Kaviray offer some compelling parallels that demonstrate how Mughal kings were integrated into the aesthetic world shared by Sanskrit and Hindi poets. In dedicatory verses, both poets detail the Mughal family line, with Padmasundara introducing the "Chaghatai lineage" (*jatish chagattabhidha*) and Sundar opening with the Mughal ancestor of Amir Timur (*mira taimura*).³² Padmasundara and Sundar insert the name of their respective patrons Akbar and Shah Jahan into select verses, thereby associating the Mughal emperor with classical ideas of the king as lover or *nayaka*. For instance, in one verse, Padmasundara identifies Akbar as the locus of *rasa* (aesthetic emotion), writing, "Akbar is a golden vessel of erotic passion (*shringara*)."³³ Shifting the gaze to one of others looking at the king, Sundar exclaims, in a verse heavy with alliteration in Hindi, that "catching a glimpse of Shah Jahan makes the heart leap up, pleasure courses through the body."³⁴

Padmasundara and Sundar both offer numerous example verses that put the emperor at the very center of the action. For instance, in a verse where a girlfriend (*sakhi*) speaks to the *nayika* (female character or heroine), Sundar invokes Shah Jahan's perspective as a *nayaka*:

Why do you hide this from me? You are just confusing me.
Who do you think I am? As though I would believe your false protestations.
You have stolen the heart of your bridegroom Shah Jahan—
Everybody knows this perfectly well.
Don't you see that as soon as he looks at you your lover's glance becomes unsteady?
It lingers over you alone, among all the women.
Like a mass of mantras it rushes in, stealthily, to linger.³⁵

Padmasundara, too, imagines Akbar as an aesthete, embodying the *rasas* in his relationships with women with help from Padmasundara's handbook on aesthetics:

With this composition on the radiating beauty of the nine *rasas*
that are bursting forth in the definitions of heroines [*nayika*]
illustrated by clever verses,
may Lord Akbar spend his days and nights
propitiating a beautiful woman
who has the sign of fame that concurs with Kama's *rasa*.³⁶

Other writers of the period took a similar tack. Kavindracharya, who composed various Brajhasha songs and poems for Shah Jahan, stressed the idea of the king being a *dakshina nayaka*, an adept lover who can treat his wives equally, from classical Indian poetics.³⁷ Some compositions arguably have a Sufi resonance, echoing authors such as Hafiz and Amir Khusrau, which suggests the possibility of reading Kavindra's vision of love in a cosmopolitan Persian frame. For instance, in one *dhrupad*, Kavindra addresses the Mughal emperor as a seeker on the path of love:

Her beautiful body was the earth, her heart a flower garden, and her glances a sprinkle of water.
Love's vine burst up, thrived, and began to bloom.
Now she withers from the sun of separation, although nothing is lost until now.
O Shah Jahan, you are the lover who must renew joyful love.
To fall in love is easy but to pursue it is difficult. Only one who knows how to conquer his anger can do it.
When you've set out on the path of love, then do what it takes to foster faith in love day by day.

Then the bounty that is love (*vitta-hita*) will increase just like afternoon shadows.
Know in your heart, O Shah Jahan, that this is the way to love.³⁸

In other *dhrupads*, Kavindra collapses multiple cultural contexts into one, depicting the imperial court as a space steeped in Sanskrit and Hindu norms. For instance, in one *dhrupad*, he depicts Shah Jahan playing Holi with multiple women in the palace.³⁹ In addition to being compelling poetry, the depiction of the Mughals playing Holi is historically accurate.⁴⁰

Modern scholars have sometimes approached love poetry without the subtlety it merits, deriding the lascivious ways of premodern rulers. In fact, kings and the court professionals around them crafted cultural styles and political identities out of various components, including architecture, painting, and literature.⁴¹ We would do well to see their engagement with aesthetic theory, elaborated in both Sanskrit and Hindi texts of the period, as part of that broad royal self-presentation.

Knowledgeable Kingship

Some Sanskrit and Hindi *prashasti* verses about the Mughals stress knowledge systems. When Keshavdas composed verses to honor Jahangir, he specifically highlighted the emperor's facility with *nayika-bheda* (typology of female characters). Kavindracharya, in some of his compositions, celebrated Shah Jahan's knowledge of the technical details of Indian music, as well as of Sanskrit philosophical systems (*darshanas*).⁴² Others attested that Kavindra taught Shah Jahan about Sanskrit learned traditions (*shastras*).⁴³ In some cases, Indian authors were pointing out a passion or hobby of the emperor, one that can also be confirmed in other sources. Shah Jahan was a real aficionado of Indian music, as were many members of the Mughal nobility.⁴⁴ In other cases, *prashastis* may have served a more instructive purpose, informing the ruler about particular domains of knowledge, or even suggesting to the emperor ideas he needed to know. Above, we saw Padmasundara giving Emperor Akbar advice about love, and Kavindra doing likewise for Emperor Shah Jahan.

One masterful indicator of sovereignty in early modern India was the command over broad expanses of knowledge both worldly and mystical. This was a widely disseminated view of Akbar, for instance. Abu al-Fazl, influenced by Ishraqi illuminationist philosophy, spoke of Akbar as having "universal intelligence" (*aql-i kull*) and being the "light of the sun of essence and shadow of God."⁴⁵ We have already referred to Akbar's desire to grasp Indian knowledge through his ambitious translation projects. Azfar Moin, importantly, also raises the Mughal emperors' projections of sacred sovereignty. For instance, in paintings commissioned from court artists, Jahangir presents himself performing miracles and doing rituals that draw from the imagery and ideas of multiple traditions.⁴⁶ These had been part of the operation of spiritual and worldly authority in Iran and Central Asia since at least the time of Timur (r. 1370–1405).

Hindi and Sanskrit compositions of the period shed light on more local ways of expressing sacred sovereignty. Akbar, for instance, learned the practice of reciting the one thousand Sanskrit names of the sun (*Suryasahasranama*) from a Jain monk. This practice was legible according to several different belief systems, a commensurability which must have made it a potent imperial symbol.⁴⁷ Ishraqi philosophy placed great emphasis on light imagery, and auras of light are routinely associated with Akbar in Mughal paintings. Tellingly, Akbar's own father Humayun used to appear in the *gharokha*, an upper story balcony from which the emperors displayed themselves, at sunrise. Padmasundara began his *Akbarasahishringaradarpana* with a benedictory verse that praises light, *jyoti*, which he equated with Rahman (God).⁴⁸ Akbar seems to have understood the power of multivalent images of the sun and light as compatible with many religious traditions, enabling him to reach a diverse range of audiences as he cultivated his political self.

Some poets drew on multiple traditions, often using a classical idiom updated to speak to their early modern context. A verse attributed to the Mughal poet Gang (fl. late sixteenth century) and addressed to the Mughal prince Daniyal encapsulates what I (Allison) have called “the classical past in the Mughal present”:⁴⁹

The king of Alkapuri (Kuber), who has (at his service) thousands of *yakshas*,
Whose abode houses the nine treasures [of Indra] amassed by his 1,000 commands (*hajar hukum*),
Who has [at his disposal] the immortal unaging 33 crores of deities who stand in waiting with their
hands folded in Indra’s heaven,
Who has the fearsome form of crores of death’s messengers,
Who look on with mouths gaping—what man has ever escaped him?
Kavi Gang says, O shah, you are the throne of the Chaghatai clan (*chakatta ke takhat*),
but your orders (*hukum*) are like the [Hindu] lords of the directions.⁵⁰

Here we see the updating of classical aesthetic norms (often with an admixture of Persian) to suit the needs of early modern patrons. Similarly, in a Sanskrit praise poem to Jahangir that is shot through with alliteration and other sound-based word play, Harideva Mishra at one point addresses the emperor as *Jahangira Mahavira*, with *mahavira* (literally, great hero) indicating Jahangir’s martial strength as Mughal emperor and also placing him within a known Sanskrit framework.⁵¹

A verse by Kavindracharya, given prominence as the first composition in an opening chapter on *kavitts*, praises Shah Jahan in a similarly multivalent fashion. In one Braj verse, he begins with the sun associations that already held meaning for the Mughal court. He then lists a range of Hindu deities and figures from puranic legends—including Vyasa, Vibhishana, Ashvatthaman, Varuna, and others—that are associated with Hindu cosmogony. He concludes by invoking Shah Jahan’s Persian regnal title, *Sahib Qiran-i Sani* (a second Sahib Qiran) in connection with a Hindu motif, writing: “May Shah Jahan, a 2nd Lord of the Conjunction (*sahiba kirana sani*), remain forever, as the hood of Sheshanaga.”⁵² As Azfar Moin has discussed, *Sahib Qiran* was a potent title used by Timur to project sacred sovereignty.⁵³ In ending by invoking this phrase, Kavindra draws a “dynamic equivalence” between a Persianate title that was redolent with associations of sovereignty and an ancient motif of Indian kingship: the protection of the earth. We might even see in such a verse an embrace of the Mughal penchant for globes, a new way of representing the earth in early modern India.⁵⁴ Globes appear frequently in paintings from Jahangir’s court, often with Jahangir standing atop of them as king and conqueror. In any case, Hindi and Sanskrit poets often depicted the Mughals as world conquerors who were greater than all other rulers. For instance, in one verse, Kavindra says that other kings are like wells, ponds, and streams, but the Second Lord of the Conjunction, Shah Jahan, is like the ocean.⁵⁵

After Shah Jahan, the Mughals’ relationship with Sanskrit and Hindi diverged. When Aurangzeb ascended the throne, Kavindracharya, who wrote in both Sanskrit and Braj, was the last remaining link between the Mughal court and Sanskrit intellectuals. Aurangzeb discontinued Kavindra’s stipend as a way to distinguish himself from Dara Shukoh, his eldest brother and his main competition for the throne.⁵⁶ Dara had pursued various translations of Sanskrit texts into Persian and other cross-cultural activities involving Sanskrit thinkers and texts during his princely years.⁵⁷ But some of the subimperial courts continued to support Sanskrit learning. For instance, in 1686–1687 Shaysta Khan, Aurangzeb’s uncle, sponsored a table of contents for the Persian *Mahabharata* that had been translated during Akbar’s reign.⁵⁸ Chaturbhuj Mishra also composed an anthology of Sanskrit poetry for Shaysta Khan, titled the *Rasakalpadruma* (Wishing Tree of Aesthetic Emotion). The work promised to delight Shaysta Khan with the nine rasas.⁵⁹ Several verses name the work’s Mughal patron explicitly, and Shaysta Khan also personally contributed several verses to the anthology, a rare case where a member of the Mughal royal family appears to have learned Sanskrit.⁶⁰

During Aurangzeb’s reign, the Mughals continued to engage and, in some ways, deepen their interest in Hindi knowledge systems. As I (Allison) have argued elsewhere, Aurangzeb likely sponsored some Braj

poets, such as Zamir, who composed Hindi poetry under the pen name “Nehi” (the lover). Aurangzeb perhaps even composed Hindi poetry himself.⁶¹ On one occasion, Aurangzeb sent a Brajbhasha poet named Kab on a diplomatic mission to Jaswant Singh of Jodhpur. Prior Mughal kings had also sent Hindi poets to negotiate with Rajputs, such as Sundar—mentioned earlier for his Brajbhasha verses on Shah Jahan—who visited Bundela courts to promote Mughal interests. Many of Aurangzeb’s sons and grandsons also supported Braj poets, some of whom introduced further poetic innovations. For instance, Aurangzeb’s grandson Azim us-Shan patronized Vrind (1643–1723) over several decades. When Azim us-Shan became governor of Bengal, Vrind moved with him from Delhi to Dhaka, where he wrote the *Nitisatsai* (Seven Hundred Verses on Ethics), his most celebrated work, in 1704. A bit earlier, in 1691, Vrind wrote the *Shringarshiksha* (Instruction in Passion) on *navika-bheda* for another patron, a prominent Muslim family in Ajmer. He begins the work with praise, not to the conventional Ganesha or Krishna, but rather to the denominationally neutral *prabhu* (lord). Azim us-Shan’s brother, Rafi us-Shan, wrote Hindi poetry himself under the pen name “Nyayi” (the just).⁶²

Many discussions of the Mughals halt with Aurangzeb’s death in 1707, but the imperial engagement with Brajbhasha appears to have continued until the very end of the dynasty in the mid-nineteenth century. For instance, Muhammad Shah (r. 1719–1748), popularly known as Rangila, was fond of the arts, including both composing and consuming Braj poetry. One Braj poet in his ambit was Savant Singh “Nagridas,” possibly a student of Vrind. Braj poetry more generally flourished in the eighteenth century, one example being the gathering of Brajbhasha poets in Agra in 1737, which Ray Shivdas recorded in the unpublished *Sarassar* (Essence of the Aesthetic).⁶³ Even later Mughals, including Shah Alam II (r. 1759–1806) and Bahadur Shah Zafar (r. 1837–1857), wrote Braj poetry.

Views from Beyond the Imperial Court

So far, we have stressed Hindi and Sanskrit compositions that were produced at the very heart of the imperial court and, as far as we can tell, presented to the Mughal emperors or, in a few cases, to Mughal nobles. There are also countless fascinating views of the empire from farther afield, in texts that likely were never intended for imperial eyes. Many Brajbhasha and Sanskrit poets were peripatetic. That some Braj poets—such as the brothers Bhushan and Chintamani Tripathi—traveled into the Deccan, far beyond the Hindi heartland of northern India, testifies to the growing prestige of Brajbhasha during this period.⁶⁴ In what follows, we examine a small sampling of Hindi and Sanskrit works commissioned by imperial supporters and detractors with a focus on the range of political insights that can be gleaned about the Mughal dynasty.

Emperor Akbar was a popular figure who occasioned many colorful accounts. Stories of his interactions with his minister Birbal (d. 1583), also a Brajbhasha poet, tend to present the emperor as a stupid dolt.⁶⁵ Legends from Vaishnava communities show a kind of “talking back” to the emperor, as in a famous episode when Akbar wishes that the bhakti poet Surdas would sing the king’s praises and even perform at the royal court.⁶⁶ Surdas curtly rejects the trappings of power, and this is a theme that can be found in Jain texts as well. A famous courtesan from Orchha who figures prominently in the work of Keshavdas is also shown talking back to the king.

Most striking of all, however, is the sheer number of episodes that show Akbar in a positive light at the discretion of Sanskrit and Hindi writers. For instance, I (Audrey) have studied several Jain-authored Sanskrit texts that contain lengthy sections on interactions between Jain leaders, mainly monks, and Mughal elites. Jains used their connections with the Mughal emperors to push for concessions on behalf of their local communities, such as bans on animal slaughter and relief from having to pay pilgrimage taxes.⁶⁷ Akbar and Jahangir both were swayed enough by Jain (and Hindu) concerns about the noninjury of animals

that they sporadically practiced vegetarianism and refrained from hunting.⁶⁸ Many Jain-authored Sanskrit texts imply that Akbar and, less frequently, his vizier Abu al-Fazl, nearly converted to Jainism.⁶⁹ Still, Jain accounts of the Mughals are not entirely positive. For instance, in his *Bhanuchandraganicharita* (Acts of Bhanuchandra, ca. 1620), Siddhichandra presents Jahangir, at one point, as an angry drunkard, “his eyes rolling about on account of alcohol.”⁷⁰

Let’s see how some of this filters into the world of a Hindi text written at the behest of Man Singh Kachhwaha (r. 1589–1614), a Rajput king from Amer who was one of Akbar’s highest-ranked imperial officers. The Kachhwahas had married directly into the royal family, and Man Singh was the uncle of the future Shah Jahan. He himself practically grew up at the Mughal court. At the same time, as a member of Kachhwaha nobility with a stronghold in Amer (near modern Jaipur), he had local cultural commitments. It was typical of this court and, as mentioned, other Rajput centers to sponsor literature written in Sanskrit or Hindi rather than Persian. One of the Kachhwaha court poets, Narottam, the author of a *Mancharit*, a biography of Man Singh from circa 1595, saw fit to stress the more “Hindu” elements of the emperor in a series of praise poems. For example:

He (Akbar) always worships Hari and bathes in Ganges water.
Nobody kills living beings. He does not extract (rapacious?) taxes.⁷¹

Here Narottam seems to be referring directly to the concessions to Jain and Hindu sensibilities that had resulted in imperial mandates against animal slaughter. In another verse from the same section, Narottam explains the unusual *asura* (lit. “demon,” here calling attention to a Muslim identity) status of the emperor in terms of avatar or incarnation theory, speculating that in an earlier birth Akbar had actually been a Hindu—and none other than the great warrior Partha (Arjuna) of *Mahabharata* fame:

Partha has taken another form on earth, incarnating as Akbar.
He found himself in the Dvapara yuga and conducted himself accordingly.
He respected the Vedas and Puranas, and rescinded the pilgrimage tax.
He loves Hindus, he’s turned against the Turks.
Arjuna, though an intimate of Vishnu, had lost his senses
and destroyed his family in a war.
That is why he had to take a demon birth (*asura janamu*),
and Vishnu dispatched Man Singh to be his Bhima.⁷²

Akbar appears as an honorary Hindu, one who is conversant with Hindu texts and an advocate for Hindu ways. There’s a little twist, of course. Since Narottam was in the employ of Man Singh, he also includes a special tribute to his patron, depicting Akbar and Man Singh as brothers, Man Singh being a Bhima to Akbar’s Arjuna. A more subversive aspect of Narottam’s *Mancharit* is that he often places Man Singh, *not* Akbar, at the center of the action.⁷³

Man Singh was evidently deeply committed to his own self-presentation as a ruler, since he sponsored not just one but two biographies of himself. In all likelihood, Man Singh was responding to Akbar’s own interest in self-narration, since the emperor also commissioned, from Abu al-Fazl, a grandiose Persian *Akbarnama* around the same period. The other *Mancharit*, written slightly earlier by one Amrit Rai, also deftly combines praises of Man Singh with praises of the emperor. Notably, several of Amrit Rai’s verses had also drawn on the avatar concept. For example:

The ocean of Kali yuga has extended its reach. All moral virtue has lapsed.
The waves of greed leap up, the foam of error sprays.
Those who depend upon its waters are floundering.
Like the valiant sage Agastya,

Akbar has now evaporated the ocean of baseness,
extracting countless treasures and the gems of truth.
How can Amrit Rai recount them?
He has rescued dharma, virtue, and generosity from drowning,
as Varaha rescued the earth.⁷⁴

Again, several verses later,

The amazing Shah Jalal [al-Din] rules his realm.
His measureless power adorns the three worlds.
The armies of the lord of Delhi encompass the ten directions.
Nobody can see to the end of his war elephants, cavalry, and infantry.
The emperor upholds dharma. His rule stabilizes the earth ...
The sun is his constant lamp, cleanser of all sin ...
Acclaim for his virtue has spread to distant shores.
He is magnificent, just, a man of great attainments.
The goddess Lakshmi shares her time between Vishnu's embrace
and nestling at Akbar's breast.⁷⁵

In a benediction to the emperor in the opening of *Mancharit*, Amrit Rai acknowledges Akbar's Timurid and Chaghatai heritages—which earlier we saw noted by Sundar in Braj and Padmasundara in Sanskrit, respectively—while using language freighted with meaning in terms of Sanskrit notions of sovereignty:

Born in the lineage of Timur, son of Shahi Humayun,
that great hero is renowned in the three worlds.
He is a portion of the supreme being (*parama-purusha*)
descended to earth to destroy the suffering of others.
He is a fitting Chaghatai (*chagatta*) sovereign, protector of the entire earth.
Long live Shahi Jalal [al-din Akbar], conquer of the world!⁷⁶

When Amrit Rai invoked the idea of a portion, an *amsha* of the supreme being, he was drawing on an age-old view that Indian kings held within themselves a portion of god. The idea of god's descent to earth for the protection of humankind is also an ancient view, encapsulated early on in the *Bhagavad Gita* with the phrase *dharmasansthapanarthaya sambhavami yuge yuge* ("I descend, age after age, to establish dharma").⁷⁷

We do not know whether the Mughal emperor would ever have heard or known about these representations from the Hindi biographies of Man Singh. But members of the nobility often commissioned Hindi and Sanskrit praise poems as a gesture of respect to the emperor. Sometimes they had agendas, as when Rudrakavi wrote a Sanskrit praise poem to Abd al-Rahim Khan-i Khanan seeking protection from the imperial army during Jahangir's reign (it appears to have worked, although how a Mughal noble understood a Sanskrit poem remains unclear).⁷⁸ Other works forged connections between the emperor and local rulers for a local audience, such as the Jain Sanskrit texts discussed above. This is perhaps the case with the biographies of Man Singh, where rhetorical flourishes and elaborate passages, scaling heights of almost epic grandeur to extol Man Singh's regal comportment and military valor, assert visions of local sovereignty by a raja within a Hindi textual domain. Thus, there was potential scope for subversions of imperial authority outside the world of Persian.

Still, as mentioned, more often than not, Sanskrit and Braj authors depicted Akbar in a positive light, and one wonders why. Reductive and instrumentalist explanations do not fully explain the operations of power in these texts. Appreciative, even awesome, visions of Akbar are so ubiquitous across the languages of Mughal India that one inescapable conclusion seems to be that he was revered by many groups as a

legitimate sovereign authority. Drawing principally on Persian sources and visual evidence, Azfar Moin has stressed the public performances of power and mobilizations of mystery that attended the personas of many Mughal emperors. These also happened in far more local idioms. As mentioned, Sanskrit poems that were current in Mughal circles also stressed that Akbar was an avatar of Vishnu. Badauni, a member of Akbar's court, who favored a stricter interpretation of Islam than many, found the idea abhorrent, which is why he recorded his objection in his clandestine history of the period.⁷⁹ However, for Hindi and Sanskrit writers, Akbar's alleged avatar status would have been the ultimate praise. That such poems abound attest that a Muslim emperor could be conceptualized in terms no different from those that have been used to describe many a king in South Asian history. The early Hindi literary record from Amer further underscores this critical point, attesting that, in the first few decades after Akbar consolidated the empire, one of the leading local courts perceived him as a just king, who could be conceived of in a manner consonant with the representations of respected sovereigns during nearly fifteen hundred years of Sanskrit (and later, Hindi) literary history. One conclusion we might draw is that Mughal rule operated by virtue of its dominance, but that it was dominance *with* hegemony, and hegemony of a peculiar sort, fashioned in part by the appropriation of powerful traditional conceptions of justness.⁸⁰

It is arresting, although not uncommon, to encounter Muslim *badshahs*, even after Akbar, being praised in the quintessentially Sanskritic terms of kingship that typify the work of poets like Keshavdas and Kavindracharya. This circulation of panegyric motifs and the mobilizing of linguistic and literary equivalences across Hindu and Muslim religious communities also hint at a much larger point about premodern Indian cultural logic: the commensurability of political figures regardless of religious affiliation. This has important implications for us today since we too readily retrofit modern ideas of Hindu-Muslim difference on the political life of the past. At times, Hindi poets, particularly, did write about two religions, although they often depicted the Mughal kings as protectors of both Hindu and Islamic traditions. For instance, Keshavdas praises Jahangir as protector of both religions (*duhum dina kaum sahiba*) in 1612.⁸¹ In his circa 1660 Rajasthani *Binhairaso* (Tale of Two) about the princely succession struggle that broke out in 1657, Maheshdas Rao says that Shah Jahan ruled over the two paths (*raha dahumvai*).⁸² Kavindracharya describes Shah Jahan as "knowledgeable in both the Quran and Puranas" (*kurana purana janem*).⁸³

This is not to say that Indian writers only produced encomia, however. When writing for non-Mughal patrons, poets both used the Mughals as a bar for praise and condemned them as a loathed enemy, depending on the context. For instance, between the late sixteenth century and the late seventeenth century, the Hada Chauhans of Bundi sponsored both Sanskrit and Brajbrasha works that adapted Mughal imagery to praise Hada leaders and also discussed Hada service to the Mughals. One Bundi Hindi court poet, Matiram, praises king Rao Bhao Singh (r. 1658–1682) by likening him, in separate verses, to a Mughal *patshah* (*badshah*) and Indra.⁸⁴ In contrast, Matiram's brother, Bhushan, wrote the *Shivrajbhushan* (Ornament to King Shivaji, 1673) for Shivaji, a Maratha warrior king who was a military foe of Aurangzeb. In the work, Bhushan praises Shivaji for conquering the *mlecchas*. Writing for Shivaji in Sanskrit at the same time, Paramananda takes both tactics, at different points, in his *Suryavamsha* ([Dynasty of the Sun], better known as *Shivabharata* [Shivaji's Epic], ca. 1675).⁸⁵

The subject of Mughal history also crops up in later Sanskrit and Braj works, some as late as the eighteenth century. In a pair of twinned Sanskrit works written for Jagacchandra of Kumaon in the 1720s, Lakshmiapati details the Mughal political intrigues after the death of Aurangzeb Alamgir.⁸⁶ Some intellectuals translated Akbar-period histories into Sanskrit and Hindi. For instance, in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, somebody produced a partial Sanskrit translation of the *Akbarnama*, called *Sarvadeshavrittantasangraha* (Collection of Events across the Land).⁸⁷ At least three copies of a Hindi translation of the *Ain-i Akbari*, penned by Gumani Ram Kayasth in the eighteenth century, survive in Jaipur's royal collection. Such works attest to the enduring interest in Mughal politics, far beyond the royal center and after the zenith of the Mughal Empire.

Conclusion

A comprehensive picture of Mughal India can only be had by piecing together multiple types of sources—with different languages, genres, places of composition, and audiences—which is what has been attempted in this chapter and in this Oxford handbook. The expertise of just one type of scholar simply will not be enough for such a project. A collective, multilingual view helps us to better understand the complex processes of cultural and political accommodation between a powerful dynasty of Muslim rulers and other local stakeholders. Hindi and Sanskrit works help us to glimpse the dissemination of ideas on Mughal sovereignty, even as we have barely scratched the surface of these resources here. As Allison reminds and challenges us in her 2010 article on Braj poets at the Mughal court, “These are all stories waiting to be told.”⁸⁸

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Notes

Editor's Note: Allison Busch drafted much of this chapter before her untimely death in 2019. Audrey Truschke synthesized Dr. Busch's notes, filled in where needed, and edited. This chapter is being published as co-authored, and we are honored to present some of Dr. Busch's hitherto unpublished research.

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- 74 *Mancharit* of Amrit Rai, in *Mancharitavali: Amber ke suprasiddh raja mansimh ke charit se sambandhit pamch rajasthani rachnaom ka sankalan*, ed. G. Bahura (Jaipur: Maharaja Savai Man Singh II Sangrahalay, 1990), v. 185, translated in Allison Busch, “Portrait of a Raja in a Badshah’s World: Amrit Rai’s Biography of Man Singh (1585),” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 55, no. 2 (2012), 299.
- 75 *Mancharit* of Amrit Rai, excerpts of vv. 172–176, translated and discussed in Busch, “Portrait of a Raja in a Badshah’s World,” 309–310.
- 76 *Mancharit* of Amrit Rai, v. 2 (Allison and Audrey’s translation).
- 77 *The Mahābhārata, for the First Time Critically Edited*, ed. V. S. Sukthankar, S. K. Belvalkar, P. L. Vaidya, et al. 19 vols. (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–1966), 6.26.8.
- 78 Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 81–86.
- 79 Truschke, 39–40.
- 80 Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

- 81 *Jahangirjaschandrika*, v. 31.
- 82 *Binhairaso* of Maheshdas, published as *Binhairaso: Badshah shahjaham ke shahajadon ke yuddhen ka dharnan*, ed. S. Shekhavat (Jodhpur: Sanchalak Rajasthan Prachyavidya Prasishthan, 1966), p. 2, v. 9. On this text, see Allison Busch, “The Poetry of History in Early Modern India,” in *How the Past Was Used: History Cultures, c. 750–2000*, ed. Peter Lambert and Björn K. U. Weiler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 165–178; and Busch, “The Rulers of Bundi in Mughal-Period Literary Culture,” in *Bundi Fort: A Rajput World*, ed. M. C. Beach (Mumbai: Marg, 2016), 105–106.
- 83 *Kavindrakalpalata*, p. 4, v. 8; verse translated in Busch, *Poetry of Kings*, 93.
- 84 Busch, “Rulers of Bundi,” 101, 104.
- 85 Audrey Truschke, *The Language of History: Sanskrit Narratives of Indo-Muslim Rule* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), chap. 6.
- 86 *Abdullacharita* of Lakshmiapati, published as *The Ābduḷlāh-carita by Lakṣmīdhara*, ed. J. B. Chaudhuri (Calcutta: Pracyavani, 1947); *Nripatinigarbhitavritta* of Lakshmiapati, ed. J. B. Chaudhuri (Calcutta: Pracyavani, 1959).
- 87 *Sarvadeshavrittantasangraha or Akbarnama: Being an Abridged Sanskrit Rendering of the Persian Akbarnama*, ed. S. Jha (Patna: Patna University, 1962/63).
- 88 Busch, “Hidden in Plain View,” 301.