



Reimagining the “Idol Temple of Hindustan”

Textual and Visual Translation of
Sanskrit Texts in Mughal India

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I will toss the Brahmanical thread
From this writing onto the neck of time.
With every note I strike on this instrument
I will fill the gong of the sky with noise.
I shall take the melody of India’s tune
And strike a song in perfect Persian.

—*Abu al-Fayz ibn Mubarak (Fayzi),
Nal va Daman*¹

The late sixteenth-century Mughal court overflowed with literary and artistic talent. Fayzi, Amir Fathullah Shirazi, Naqib Khan, ‘Abd al-Qadir Bada’uni, Shaykh Sultan Thanisari, Haji Ibrahim Sirhindi, Mukammal Khan Gujarati, Shaykh Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak, ‘Abd al-Rahim Khan-i Khanan, Qasim Beg, Sayyid Ali Tabrizi, Khwaja ‘Abd al-Samad, Basawan, Keshav (Kesu) Das, La’l, Mukund, Farrukh Beg—these are only some of the individuals mentioned by name in Mughal chronicles.² They flourished along with other known and unknown poets, writers, and artists at the court of Emperor Akbar, the third Mughal ruler (r. 1556–1605). Akbar and other imperial elites devoted extensive financial resources to support this pool of creative talent, which produced illustrated and un-illustrated manuscripts that traversed literary, linguistic, and artistic traditions. Collectively, court writers and artists incorporated stories and ideas from numerous sources, especially Sanskrit works, into new literature written in Persian, the administrative and predominant literary language of the Mughals. Poets and writers often formulated rich descriptions of this imaginative process, such as in the verses above that use visual and auditory descriptions to capture the transformative power of mixing cultures. Artists similarly used illustrations to weave together Indian and Islamicate traditions.³ Ultimately, these intellectuals and artists generated the cultural efflorescence that defined this period and redefined visual and textual practices on the Indian subcontinent.

Imperial histories and prefaces to translations often laud Akbar as the genius behind such projects. When taken at face value, they suggest that the emperor’s vigorous personality was the driving force behind the remarkable intellectual energy witnessed at his court.⁴ We know from primary source materials and surviving manuscripts, however, that a vast range of participants were involved in imperial cultural projects. Their decisions and collaborations were required at every level of the enterprise. As Fayzi (d. 1595), Akbar’s poet laureate who is

Fayzi Translates an Ancient Book

*With a hundred charms I am bringing an
ancient book
from Hindi into Persian, the language of the court.
I stroll to see with friends
the idol temple of Hindustan.*

—Fayzi's *Mahabharata*

quoted above, reminds his readers in one of his translations, “In that breath, which is in the poet / the poetry is mine and the ambition the shah’s.”⁵ In other words, the creative impetus did not originate with the emperor alone. Any given work was shaped by a constellation of talented writers, patrons, and artists. These individuals came from varied backgrounds: Central Asians and Persians who were attracted to India by the opportunities available at the Mughal court; descendants of families that had emigrated over the preceding centuries from the greater Islamic world; and local Indian Muslims, Hindus, and Jains.

Mughal chronicles are rich with the names of people involved in literary and artistic endeavors. In this regard, a most valuable source is the *A'in-i Akbari* (Institutes of Akbar), written in the 1590s by the court historian Abu al-Fazl 'Allami (1551–1602). However, even such a plentiful source offers tantalizingly few details about the contributions a given individual made. Often artists and writers whose names appear on the manuscripts themselves are omitted from the *A'in-i Akbari* altogether.⁶ Other Mughal sources offer additional references to specific intellectuals and artists, yet they too give only a partial view at best, generally providing little or no information about individual responsibilities within a given translation project.⁷

In this essay, we seek to capture the agencies of the often anonymous artists and authors who created specific translations and manuscripts. Following Mughal practices, we take translation to be a broad, diffuse notion that involved both textual and visual elements in a given work.⁸ Many translations were text-based renderings from one language into another, while others were reworkings of stories previously rendered in Persian. We also include in our understanding of “Mughal translation” classic Persian and Indo-Persian works in the form of luxury books that were illustrated by imperial artists who integrated Indian literary and visual motifs, stories, and iconographies. In combining art-historical and philological approaches to the textual and pictorial aspects of Mughal manuscripts, we explore how translations at Akbar’s court were multi-dimensional projects with overlapping aesthetic, literary, and political objectives.

Support for Translation Projects at Akbar’s Court

During the nearly fifty years of Akbar’s reign, scribes, authors, translators, and artists flourished under Mughal patronage. The emperor, members of the royal family, and court elites commissioned new works and lavish manuscripts. Between the 1570s and 1590s alone, dozens of illustrated manuscripts were produced in the imperial atelier on subjects such as history, philosophy, and literature.⁹ These manuscripts included original poetry and prose compositions, fresh translations of texts from other languages, and copies of Persian literary classics. The majority of the nobility, as well as the creative talent at court, worked within Persianate literary, artistic, and cultural traditions.¹⁰ Many were of Iranian or Central Asian descent. Akbar also incorporated increasing numbers of Indians, both Muslim and non-Muslim, into imperial governance

and other aspects of court life. These efforts diversified the nobility and created an environment in which intercultural literary and artistic engagements garnered favor and support.

Indian texts stand out as a focus of Mughal imperial interest. Translators rendered at least one dozen texts from Sanskrit into Persian during Akbar's reign, of which the two most extensive are the Indian epics the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, discussed below.¹¹ During this same time, Mughal poets also recast Sanskrit tales as Persian poetry, such as Fayzi's celebrated Persian narrative poem (*masnavi*) *Nal va Daman*, which was based on the well-known Sanskrit story of the lovers Nala and Damayanti.¹² Writers at Akbar's court also continued the long-standing tradition of retelling the Sanskrit storybook *Panchatantra* (Five Tales), of which Abu al-Fazl's *'Iyar-i danish* (Touchstone of Wisdom, 1590–95) is a notable instance.¹³ These translations and transcreations were frequently illustrated, and thereby artists participated in the process of “translating” these works for new readers. Older canonical works from the Persian literary corpus—such as the much celebrated twelfth-century *Khamsa* (Quintet, a collection of five poems) of Nizami (d. 1209) and the thirteenth-century *Khamsa* of Amir Khusraw Dihlavi (d. 1325)—were also visually interpreted to speak to a contemporary Mughal audience.¹⁴ Through a vibrant process of selective adaptation, drawing on textual and visual elements from multiple Indian and Persian traditions, court writers and artists created dynamic renditions of familiar and new stories.

People and Places behind Mughal Translations

Translation projects depended upon the active participation of patrons, translators, artists, and others who acted as cultural intermediaries. No top-down set of instructions guided Mughal translations; imperial histories never offer a full-fledged theory of translation. Rather, individuals working at every stage shaped the texts and manuscripts that became defining works of Mughal literary culture and of the Indo-Persian tradition more broadly. People in these roles had a mix of imperial, vocational, and cultural affiliations. Notably, people of diverse religious backgrounds undertook various positions, and an individual's religion rarely, if ever, determined his contribution.¹⁵ Here we offer a tentative sketch of the often-overlapping groups and some of the key individuals involved in Mughal translation activities.

The major financial supporters—and the primary audience—of Mughal literary and artistic endeavors were the imperial elites and members of the royal family. While most in this group were Muslims (of Persian, Central Asian, Turkish, and Indian origins), the nobility also included Hindus, especially Rajputs. Many Hindus at court, whose native languages were typically Indian vernaculars, learned Persian in order to occupy administrative positions.¹⁶ They thus constituted part of the audience for Mughal Persian translations. Likewise, Muslims took a keen interest in Indian traditions and knowledge systems based in the Sanskrit language sphere. 'Abd al-Rahim



5.1. Narsingh (attrib.), *Akbar Presiding over Discussions in the Ibadatkhana*, from the *Akbarnama* (Book of Akbar). Mughal India, ca. 1600–1603. Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper, 43.5 × 26.8 cm. Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin (In 03, fol. 263b)

Khan-i Khanan (d. 1626), a highly placed general in the imperial army under the emperors Akbar and Jahangir (r. 1605–27), for example, employed poets working in multiple languages and commissioned his own illustrated copies of the Mughal versions of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.¹⁷ His atelier was highly esteemed, and artists often entered his workshop from the Mughal court (rather than following the more common trend of moving from sub-imperial to royal employment).¹⁸ Abd al-Rahim was himself an accomplished poet in several languages, including Hindavi (premodern Hindi).¹⁹ He also translated the *Baburnama*, the memoirs of Akbar's grandfather, from Chagatai Turkish into Persian and presented it to Akbar in 1589.²⁰

Another notably multifaceted individual and a highly influential tastemaker was Abu al-Fazl 'Allami. Abu al-Fazl was one of Akbar's chief ministers and author of the most extensive history of the period, the *Akbarnama* (of which *A'in-i Akbari*, referred to above, constitutes the final volume). He was the architect of much of Akbar's imperial persona, and perhaps for this reason he was often viewed as an overseer of translation projects, such as the *Razmnama* (Book of War, the Persian rendering of the *Mahabharata*). Abu al-Fazl wrote only a preface for this translation, but the entire work has sometimes been mistakenly attributed to him, even as early as in the seventeenth century, a few decades after it was completed.²¹ His older brother was Abu al-Fayz ibn Mubarak, better known as Fayzi (or, toward the end of his life, Fayyazi), Akbar's poet laureate and a frequent translator who often described his translations in especially expressive language.²² Akbar's mother, Hamida Banu Begum (d. 1604), was another renowned patron; she owned a copy of the Persian *Ramayana*, likely produced by the royal atelier.²³

Members of Hindu (particularly Brahman) and Jain religious communities served as cultural intermediaries for the ruling class, informing the Mughal nobility about Indian philosophies and ideas. Many Hindu and Jain intellectuals were not directly employed by the royal household but frequented the imperial court. Others resided at court for extended periods. Jains exposed the Mughals to a wide range of practices described in untranslated Sanskrit sources, such as performing impressive mental exercises and reciting Sanskrit names of the sun.²⁴ Some Jains even provided instruction to royal princes.²⁵ Both Jains and Brahmans performed astrological functions at court, such as conducting rituals to counteract inauspicious alignments of the stars

and casting horoscopes.²⁶ Unlike their Indian counterparts who learned Persian and joined the imperial administration, these individuals generally remained situated within Sanskrit and vernacular cultural realms and entered only selectively in the Persophone world.

Jains and Brahmins also participated in the religious debates that Akbar hosted at court. Abu al-Fazl and others mention the 'Ibadat Khana (Place of Worship) at the palace complex at Fatehpur Sikri as one place where such exchanges took place.²⁷ A well-known painting from a dispersed illustrated copy of the *Akbarnama* (fig. 5.1) shows a discussion among religious representatives. Each group of participants possesses books in different formats, including a scroll, bound codices, and cloth bundles for palm-leaf manuscripts. Books used at such gatherings would have been written in different languages: Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, Latin, and European vernaculars such as Portuguese. Of the texts depicted here, only one—a vertical scroll (a traditional Indian manuscript format)—is placed by itself at the painting's center. Attention is further drawn to it by smaller pictorial details: the scroll is placed on a bookstand and lit by two lamps; it is framed by the carpet pattern; the gazes and gestures of the figures direct the viewer's eye toward it; and all the horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines underlying the painting's compositional structure also converge at it. Although the scroll's function here is unclear, the emphasis given to it strongly suggests the importance of Indian textual traditions for the Mughals and their direct access to those sources of knowledge, made possible by visiting Brahmins and Jains.

Brahman and Jain cultural informants who were proficient in Sanskrit were complemented by other Indians, largely Hindus, who likewise participated in multicultural aspects of Mughal court life. Some individuals, such as the poet and musician Birbal (d. 1586), served as companions to the king.²⁸ Others, such as Tansen, were famed musicians. Shaykh Bhavan, a Hindu convert to Islam, was a notoriously lively character who often assisted with Mughal translations and shocked the court with his unconventional interpretations of Sanskrit texts (suggesting that the Vedas permitted Hindus to eat beef, for example).²⁹ Also present were court poets, such as Giridhar Das and Chandar Bhan Brahman, whose names indicate their Hindu origins but who composed Persian works, sometimes on Indian themes, for the pleasure of Mughal rulers.³⁰

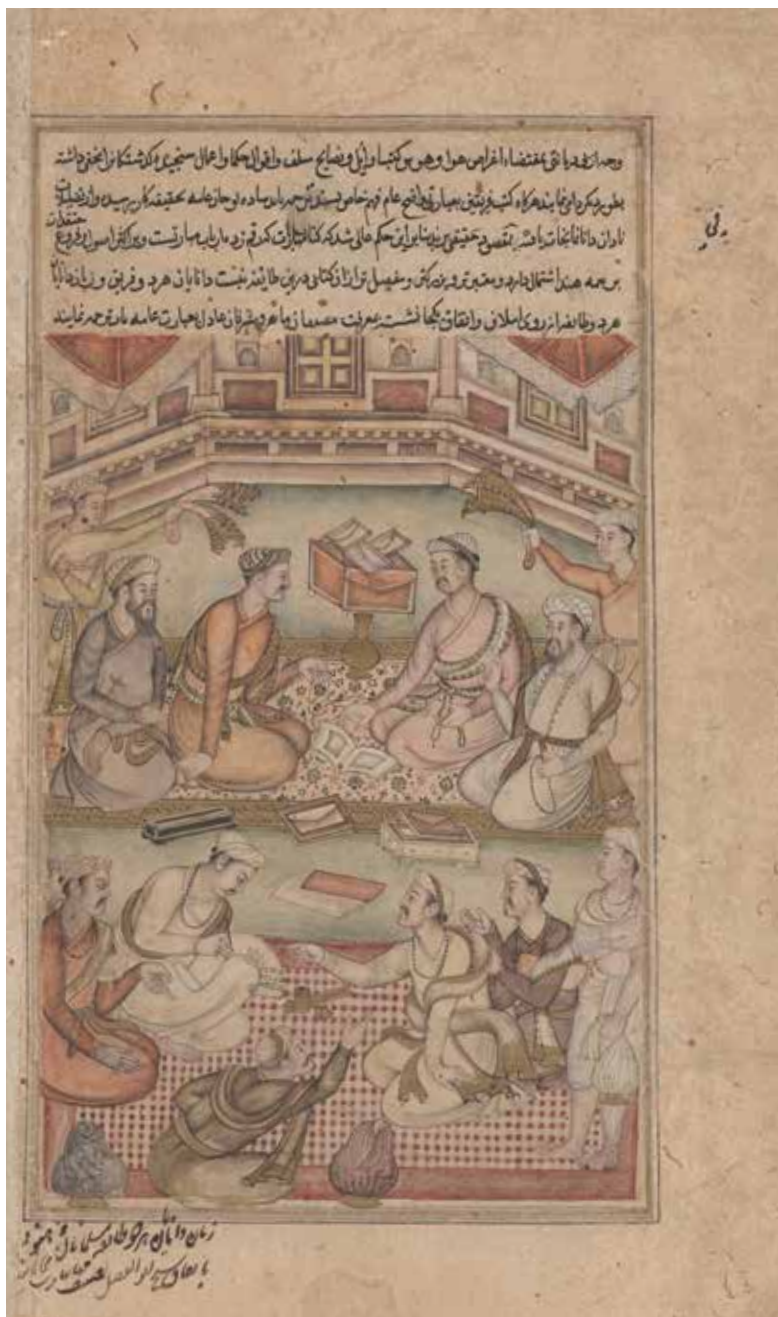
Translators were another critical group in imperial intercultural projects. Nobody involved in Mughal translations knew both Sanskrit and Persian.³¹ Thus, Persian-speaking translators, largely drawn from the ranks of Mughal elites, such as Abu al-Fazl and Fayzi, joined forces with Sanskrit-proficient Indians, primarily Brahmins. The two groups communicated verbally with one another in Hindavi, a shared vernacular, and the written translations were based on successive stages of interpretation from Sanskrit to Hindavi and Hindavi to Persian. This collaborative process is attested in a colophon to the Akbari *Mahabharata*.³²

The verbal translation method is also confirmed by a late sixteenth-century illustration (fig. 5.2). The image accompanies Abu al-Fazl's preface to the *Razmnama*,

Collaborative Translation

Naqib Khan, son of 'Abd al-Latif al-Husayni, translated [the Mahabharata] from Sanskrit into Persian in one and a half years. Several of the learned Brahmins—such as Deva Mishra, Shatavadhana, Madhusudana Mishra, Caturbhujia, and Shaykh Bhavan, who embraced Islam due to the attention of His Blessed Majesty who has replaced Sulayman—read this book and explained it in Hindi to me, a poor wretched man, who wrote it in Persian.

—Colophon (1599) in *Razmnama* (London, British Library, Person Oriental Ms. 12076). Trans. adapted from M. Ali, "Translations of Sanskrit Works at Akbar's Court," 41



5.2. Hindu and Muslim Scholars Translate the Mahabharata from Sanskrit into Persian, from the *Razmnama* (Book of War). Mughal India, ca. 1598–99. Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper, 29.5 × 20 cm. Free Library of Philadelphia, Rare Book Department, John Fredrick Lewis Collection (Lewis M18)

and the text at the top of the page mentions that scholars and linguists of both groups sat together in one place, with sources that were agreed upon as reliable, and using their expert knowledge they translated the epic into a common language. A marginal note in Persian in the bottom left corner succinctly explains: “The linguists of both groups, Muslims and Indians, wrote out the *Mahabharat* together with Shaykh Abu al-Fazl.”³³ The painting is a nearly full-page illustration depicting two seated groups of people, arranged in parallel horizontal registers, reading, writing, and engaged in animated discussion within an architectural setting.³⁴ The Persianate translators are gathered in the upper part of the composition, and their Brahman counterparts occupy the painting’s lower portion. The two groups are distinguishable from one another only by minor costume details that reflect their religio-cultural affiliations.³⁵

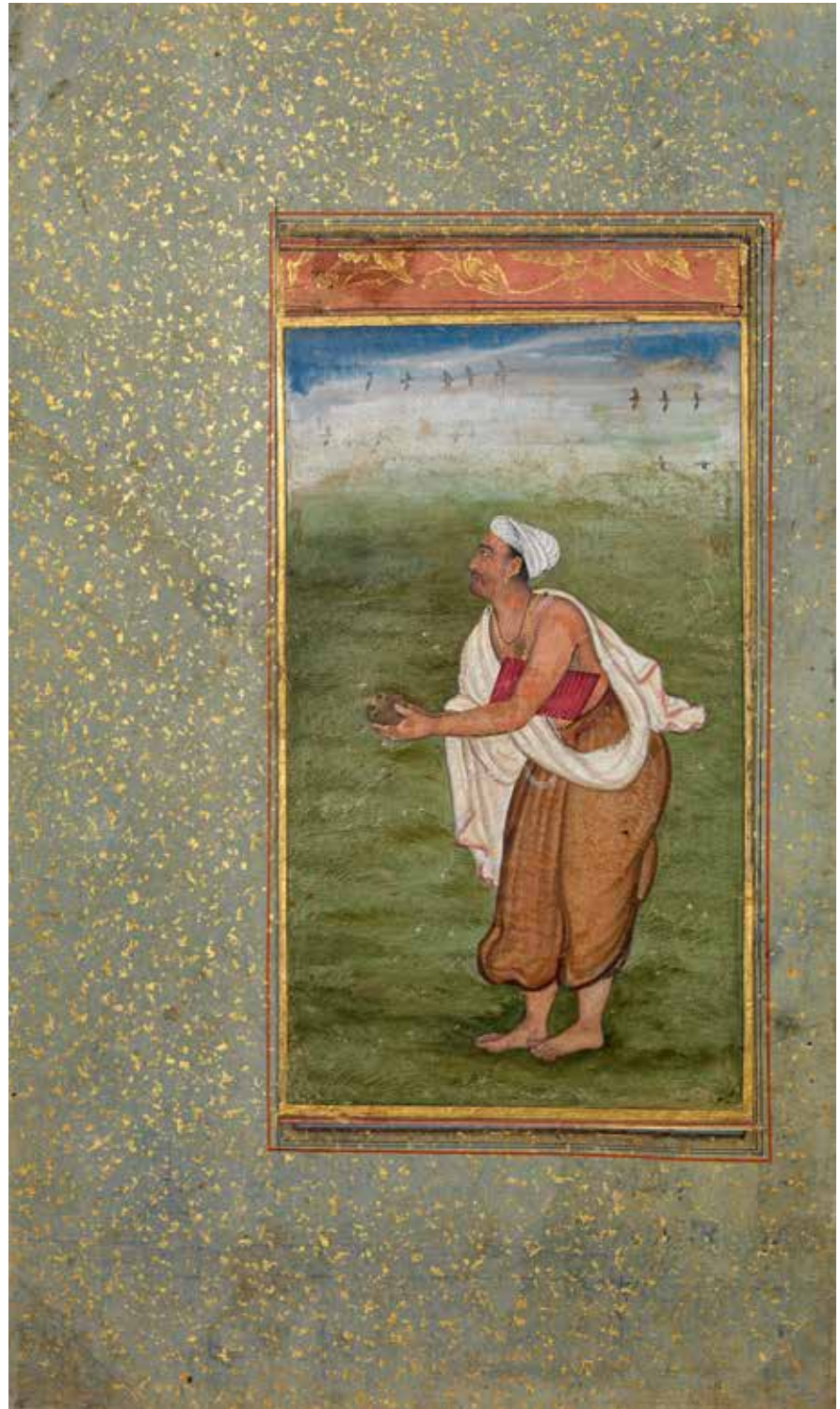
Textual analysis has shown that the Mughal *Razmnama*, while a relatively close textual translation at many points, is not based on a single source. It combines at least two Sanskrit versions and some oral stories, and the final selection of episodes was likely the outcome of discussion and debate among the Brahman translators.³⁶ The artists have visually detailed the mechanics of this complex translation process in this painting. Three cloth bundles (the traditional Indian method of storing and transporting manuscripts) at the bottom of the painting and the vigorous conversation among the Brahmans above suggest the distillation of various oral and written sources into the new Persian version of the text. Near the top of the painting, the multiple source texts below are consolidated into a single large box, which is filled with codex-format books bound in an Islamicate style. The box of books creates a central vertical axis that both organizes the composition and alludes to the textual transmission. Strategically placed along this axis are pen boxes, books, and hands pointing at books or raised in conversation, which draw further attention to the complicated process of knowledge exchange.

In the lower left of the painting is a figure of a Brahman writing on a scroll in Devanagari, the script in which Sanskrit and Hindavi were often written in North India at the time. According to the lead translator, Naqib Khan, the vernacular translations of the Sanskrit texts were conveyed orally and not through intermediary written texts. Could this curious detail be meant to depict a project to which Abu al-Fazl refers in his preface but which, as far as we know, never came to pass: the rendering of Persian texts into Hindavi or Sanskrit?³⁷ More generally,

the depiction of multiple Sanskrit manuscripts, including a freshly inscribed scroll, invokes and reverses an oft-repeated Islamicate literary trope that Brahmans kept their texts concealed from prying Muslim eyes.³⁸ The presence in this image of Persian manuscripts of translated Sanskrit works suggests that the power of Mughal patronage finally succeeded in bringing these “hidden books” into view.

The final key group of individuals engaged in creating Mughal translations comprised the artists. They worked in the imperial atelier (*tasvirkhana*), were trained in either Safavid-Timurid or Indian painting traditions (or both), and came from diverse social and religious backgrounds. Although it is tempting to privilege an artist’s religious and ethnic background in assessing his stylistic contributions to a particular painting or manuscript, the question of artistic agency cannot be reduced to a given individual’s faith or community of origin. A skilled (Hindu) artist such as Keshav (Kesu) Das, for example, demonstrated creative freedom and versatility, masterfully executing Persianate scenes, Indian images, and even the earliest known Mughal depictions of Christ’s crucifixion, inspired by European prints and drawings.³⁹ No doubt his talent, rather than his Hindu background, accounted for his being one of seventeen artists singled out for praise by Abu al-Fazl in his *A’in-i Akbari* from among “more than one hundred artists who have become famous masters” and from the even larger group who either “approach perfection” or “are middling.”⁴⁰ As was conventional in Persianate traditions, Keshav Das typically represented himself in self-portraits (fig. 5.3) as a humble and lowly artisan, simply dressed and barefooted, a mere servant to his king. In reality, however, Keshav Das and other artists played a crucial role in forming Mughal imperial culture.

Mughal artists often based their illustrations on the accompanying text, taking their cues from the first or last lines on the page or presenting several narrative moments in a single image. These practices allowed them broad stylistic and iconographic leeway to introduce layers of meaning in both fresh translations and established Persian works.⁴¹ An example of the latter is provided by an image in Akbar’s deluxe illustrated copy of Amir Khusraw Dihlavi’s *Khamsa*,⁴² a renowned and often



5.3. Keshav Das (attrib.), Self-portrait. Mughal, late 16th century. Opaque watercolor on paper, heightened with gold, 25 × 15 cm. Williams College Museum of Art, Museum purchase, Karl E. Weston Memorial Fund (81.44)

illustrated Persian-language poem.⁴³ In the painting accompanying the tale of the Arab princess in the Sandalwood Pavilion, the artist Mukund added new stratum of interpretation by drawing upon multiple cultural and visual traditions (fig. 5.4). The text tells of the wrongly deposed and exiled prince Rama⁴⁴ who received three magical gifts to help recover his kingdom: an invisibility ointment, a sleep-casting spell, and a supernatural demon or *div* devoted to his service.⁴⁵ Mukund illustrated two successive moments in the story. The central pictorial space shows Rama meditating on the stone sculpture of a deity in Egypt in order to conjure the *div*, as he was instructed to do. The foreground illustrates a later moment, when the *div* has materialized to assist Rama in his quest to regain the throne. Mukund employed several artistic conventions typical of Akbar-period paintings: he divided the composition into three parts and constructed multiple spaces by using architectural elements; he located the main subject in the upper half of the picture; and he situated the scene in sixteenth-century India through costume and setting. He also included extra-textual details to generate meanings that would have resonated with contemporary audiences. For example, the tower in which the sculpture is set has architectural parallels in victory towers and pillars of fame familiar in India, and more broadly in Indian temple architecture.⁴⁶ Most interestingly, the painting also reflects the linguistic ambiguity of the term *div*, “demon” in Persian but also the Persian transcription of the Sanskrit *deva* (god). The variant meanings of *deva/div* are brought into focus when the Egyptian god is represented as a seated, four-armed, crowned, and bejeweled Vishnu-like Hindu deity, but the *div* at the bottom of the painting resembles a conventional Persianate demon, with horns, fangs, talons, and a dappled and ornamented hairy body, as seen in Persian copies of the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) and in contemporary Indo-Persian manuscripts.⁴⁷ Through such use of multivalent imagery, the artist has here advanced a cross-cultural reading of a Persian classic that would speak particularly poignantly to a Mughal audience. Such transverse understandings were even more readily pursued in imperial translations from Sanskrit, and we now turn our attention to these works.

Sources and Precedents for the Akbari Translations

The Persian translations of Sanskrit works and their accompanying paintings demonstrate that Akbar’s translators and artists drew freely upon an array of visual, textual, and oral traditions in their approaches to Indian stories. While it is not possible to determine what individuals may have personally viewed, the ruling elites, translators, and artists would have had multiple sources of access to Indian imagery. The imperial treasury held a range of Hindu and Jain devotional images collected during military campaigns.⁴⁸ Members of the nobility also visited Hindu and Jain temples across northern India. Even artists who were not part of such royal entourages would have seen temples, whose interior and exterior decoration included a rich repertoire of wall paintings and elaborate sculptural programs that featured, among other

FACING PAGE 5.4. Mukund, *The Story of the Wrongly Exiled Prince as Told by the Princess of the Sandalwood Pavilion*, from the *Khamsa* (Quintet) of Amir Khusraw Dihlavi. Mughal India, 1597–98. Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper, 28.5 × 19 cm. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, acquired by Henry Walters (W.624, fol. 203b)





5.5. *Krishna Overcoming the Serpent Kaliya.* Sundaraperumalkoil, Tamil Nadu, Vijayanagara period, ca. 15th century. Bronze, 66 × 33 × 22.9 cm. Courtesy of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, The Avery Brundage Collection (B65B72)

subjects, representations of the Hindu deity Vishnu, especially his incarnations as Krishna and Rama (key figures in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, respectively). Images of the Hindu deities were also widely used in public ritual processions on the occasion of religious festivals (fig. 5.5). Additionally, the Indian epics and other Sanskrit myths were brought to life in both public and private settings through recitation, dance, and music.

Akbar's court also enjoyed frequent contact with living members of both Hindu and Jain communities and, through such relationships, with Indian material cultures. For example, the Jain writer Padmasundara visited the imperial court in the 1560s and wrote a text for the Mughal monarch on Sanskrit aesthetic theory.⁴⁹ After Padmasundara's death, the imperial library absorbed his collection of manuscripts, which Akbar later gifted to Hiravijaya Suri, a Jain religious figure who resided at the Mughal court in the early 1580s.⁵⁰ The court had ties to Vaishnavite communities (followers of Vishnu, especially in his Rama and Krishna avatars) that may have facilitated greater exposure to the deities and their exploits.⁵¹ Mughal elites also periodically interacted directly with Hindu yogis or ascetics, and some of these engagements inspired illustrations and literary works.⁵² For example, in 1567 Akbar witnessed a battle between warring bands of Hindu ascetics that was included in at least four separate histories of the period, one of which features a detailed double-page illustration of the conflict.⁵³ Imperial artists also depicted Hindu ascetics in illustrations of earlier dynastic histories. Babur (r. 1526–30), the founder of the Mughal empire, recorded a visit to a renowned monastery of Nath yogis near Peshawar in his memoirs, the *Baburnama*. Although he reports his disappointment at seeing no yogis

there, an Akbar-period painting of this episode constructs a scene teeming with yogis engaged in ascetic activities.⁵⁴

Apart from first-hand exposure to Indian individuals, practices, and images, the Mughals also inherited textual and visual traditions of imagining Indian culture. Well-known works such as the *Shahnama* purport that the sixth-century Sasanian physician Borzui visited India in part to obtain a copy of the popular Sanskrit storybook, the *Panchatantra*.⁵⁵ Later world histories, including some that were popular among the Mughal ruling elites, incorporate abridgements of Hindu and Buddhist narratives.⁵⁶ These works were illustrated both before and during Mughal rule. Sanskrit texts had

also been rendered into Persian (and Arabic) in India before the advent of the Mughal Empire, under the auspices of the Delhi Sultanate, Kashmiri kings, and other rulers.⁵⁷

Moreover, poets writing in Persian had long employed Indian-based tropes, such as Hindu idols and temples, and wrote extensively about the subcontinent. For instance, the prolific Indo-Persian poet Amir Khusraw Dihlavi was known as the “Parrot of India.”⁵⁸ Khusraw incorporated the richness of India’s physical, linguistic, and cultural landscapes in his Persian poetry and prided himself on his Indian identity, writing: “I am a Turk of Hindustan, I answer in Hindavi / I don’t have Egyptian sugar to speak Arabic.”⁵⁹ In many ways, the preeminent Mughal poet Fayzi followed in Khusraw’s footsteps and was recognized, even in his day, as having “like Khusrau conquered the seven climes all at once with his Indian sword.”⁶⁰ Fayzi expressed the same sentiment thus:

I have become exceedingly tipsy
Because I have wine from the sugar of India.
When I sprinkle draughts across time
‘Well done!’ will pour out of the cup and wine.⁶¹

Given this rich history of imagining the Indian subcontinent, Akbar’s court had many models through which to approach the textual and visual aspects of Sanskrit stories. Mughal translators and artists built upon this rich heritage and also pursued new directions in creating some of the most important illustrated manuscripts for understanding cross-cultural encounters in early modern India.

The *Mahabharata*: Writing and Visualizing an Indo-Persian Epic

The *Mahabharata* was one of the most extensive translation projects that the Mughals ever undertook. The text of the epic is notably long in Sanskrit, extending to seven times the length of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined.⁶² In eighteen volumes it tells the story of a catastrophic war between cousin-brothers, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, over the throne of India and includes several lengthy sections of royal advice. In 1582, Akbar ordered the translation of the entire Sanskrit epic, plus its hefty appendix, the *Harivamsha*, which largely details the life of Vishnu’s incarnation as Krishna.⁶³ It took a team of Mughal and Brahman scholars several years to complete the text.

Many modern scholars have casually proclaimed the Mughal interest in the *Mahabharata* to be religious, a pernicious misunderstanding that continues to plague current scholarship.⁶⁴ It is uncertain what the Mughals knew about the *Mahabharata* when they began the project, but the epic had long spoken to the political needs of Indian rulers who frequently patronized copies of the work.⁶⁵ Mughal translators, such as Abu al-Fazl and the historian Bada’uni, indicate that they viewed the text as a historical work. By chronicling crucial events in India’s long history of kingship, it offered



5.6. *Fighting Arjuna, Susharma Unleashes the Suparna Weapon which Invokes Garuda*, from the *Razmnama* (Book of War). Mughal India, ca. 1616–17. Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper, 37.7 × 22 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1955 (55.121.34)

guidance to the Hindustani sovereign Akbar.⁶⁶ The *Mahabharata* project is thus best understood within the wider context of the preoccupation at Akbar's court with regularly commissioning new histories (e.g., multiple accounts of Humayun's reign, *Tarikh-i khandan-i Timuriyya*, *Tarikh-i alfi*, *Chingiznama*, and *Akbarnama*) as well as manuscripts and translations of older chronicles (e.g., *Jami' al-tawarikh* and *Baburnama*). Many of these works strategically situated the Mughal dynasty within a ruling lineage, such as that of Genghis (Chinggis) Khan or the line of Timur (Tamerlane). The *Mahabharata* (retitled *Razmnama*) cast the Mughals as following from the long, glorious ranks of India's pre-Islamic kings.

Once the initial textual translation was finished, the emperor and other leading Mughal patrons commissioned illustrated copies of the *Razmnama* during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.⁶⁷ The paintings communicated key aspects of the narrative to a Persian-speaking audience, often building upon the text by incorporating an array of Indian and Persianate visual traditions. For example, in a painting from the 1616–1617 *Razmnama* commissioned by 'Abd al-Rahim Khan-i Khanan, the artists took up a dramatic battle moment starring the great warriors Arjuna and Susharma (fig. 5.6). Seen in a chariot on the upper left, the hero Arjuna, a military powerhouse on the Pandava side, unleashed arrows against his Kaurava opponents that turned into snakes and bound their legs. His adversary Susharma (on horseback on the right) countered the attack by invoking a weapon that summoned a majestic eagle-like bird known as Garuda, which devoured the snakes. Although this scene had been previously illustrated in the imperial master copy of the *Razmnama*, it is imagined rather differently here.⁶⁸ 'Abd al-Rahim's artists took their cue from lines 3 through 5 in the text accompanying the painting:

Thousands of snakes appeared in the enemy army and coiled around the legs of every person. Strength began to leave the enemies, and they started to die around Arjuna. When Susharma saw the situation he released an arrow that Garuda, *meaning Simurgh* [emphasis added], had given to him. Suddenly Garuda appeared and ate all the snakes.⁶⁹

The text here diverges from both Sanskrit sources and other *Razmnama* copies. Whereas manuscripts of many Sanskrit *Mahabharatas* and Persian *Razmnamas* state that Susharma's weapon conjured up multiple *garuda* birds,⁷⁰ this copy mentions only a single avian. Moreover, the scribes (or translators) explicitly draw a cross-cultural equivalence between a *garuda* and a *simurgh*, the mythical bird from ancient Persian traditions. Using this textual correspondence as their cue, the artists have represented Garuda here as a magnificent Persianate bird with flowing multicolored tail feathers,

swooping down through the center of the painting. Imagining the Simurgh in this form, deriving from representations of the Chinese phoenix, has numerous precedents in Timurid and Safavid painting, some of which were likely familiar to Mughal artists. For instance, it is very similar to a Simurgh in a 1440 *Shahnama* commissioned by the Timurid prince Muhammad Juki that was in the Mughal imperial library collection and bears the seals of several Mughal rulers from Babur through Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707).⁷¹ In this way Mughal artists interlaced the iconographic tradition of Persian painting with an Indian mythic context in order to animate and deepen a textual translation.

In other *Razmnama* manuscripts, artists depicted Garuda far more in line with Indian conventions. For example, a 1605 *Razmnama* illustration of a story earlier in the epic shows Garuda with a human body,⁷² as he is often imagined in Hindu sculptures. In another painting from a ca. 1590 copy of the *Harivamsha* appendix (fig. 5.7), Krishna rides on a *garuda* who is a composite creature: an Indian-looking crowned humanoid with the elaborate colored feathers of a Persian *simurgh*. Paintings from other *Razmnama* manuscripts also occasionally follow more conventional Indian imagery for other subjects. For instance, a painting from the *Harivamsha* ca. 1595 shows Krishna dancing on the head of Kaliya, the king of snakes (fig. 5.8). The Mughal artists have depicted Krishna in a pose that immediately recalls sculptures of the same subject that were prevalent across the subcontinent (see fig. 5.5).

Even when Mughal artists turned to Indian visual traditions, they often invoked the Islamicate world in more subtle ways. Both the 1605 Garuda and the ca. 1595 dancing Krishna paintings illustrate stories that fit easily into the popular Islamic category of *aja'ib* (marvels) that were often associated with India. Persian and Arabic writers had long been captivated by fantastical Indian stories, dating back to at least the sixth century with the rendering of the *Panchatantra* tales into Middle Persian.⁷³ One of Akbar's earliest and most ambitious artistic commissions was the *Hamzanama*, a highly imaginative account of the adventures of the Prophet Muhammad's uncle Hamza. The Mughal artists recast this Persian romance into an Indian setting, producing a truly stunning manuscript of which only a few folios survive today.⁷⁴ A penchant for the "incredible" and the "marvelous" likely also fed into the Mughal interest in the *Mahabharata*.

After the *Mahabharata* was translated and illustrated—as the *Razmnama*—the Mughal elite viewed it repeatedly, and Akbar's court also tried to rework the text a few times. Most notably, in the late 1580s, Akbar ordered his poet laureate, Fayzi, to rewrite the *Razmnama* by embellishing its prose and adding poetic verses. However, Fayzi only completed the first two (of eighteen) books before abandoning the project.⁷⁵ Far more successful was Fayzi's *Nal va Daman*, a Sanskrit love story that



5.7. *Krishna and Indra*, from the *Harivamsha*. Probably Lahore, ca. 1590. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 43.5 × 32 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, bequeathed by the Hon. Dame Ada Macnaghten (IS.5-1970)



is found in many texts, including the third book of the *Mahabharata*, but which Fayzi claims to have heard from an Indian storyteller.⁷⁶ Fayzi retold the legend within a Persianate romance framework akin to Nizami's classic Persian love story *Layli va Majnun*, and his *Nal va Damant* prompted many imitations in both Persian and Urdu over the next few centuries.⁷⁷

In many ways, one of the most fruitful receptions of the *Razmnama* was its frequent recopying and illustration, often on the orders of members of the imperial administration. Hundreds of manuscripts of the work survive today, including at least a dozen fragmentary illustrated copies dating from the late sixteenth century to the nineteenth century.⁷⁸ Through the paintings, artists continually imagined the Indian epic story anew for Indo-Persian audiences and often developed new meanings for the epic beyond its initial textual translation.

The *Ramayana*: Envisioning the Mughals as Indian Kings

In the late 1580s, Akbar's court took up the translation of India's other great epic, the *Ramayana*, which narrates the life of King Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu who descended to earth in order to defeat the destructive demon Ravana. The Sanskrit *Ramayana*, ascribed to the sage Valmiki, has many facets. The work self-identifies as the first instance of Sanskrit literature (*adi-kavya*), it has been frequently revered as a religious text, and the story features the heart-wrenching love saga of Rama and his wife Sita. But, particularly during the second millennium CE, many Indians understood the epic as being fundamentally about kingship.⁷⁹ Even today, the Sanskrit-derived expression *ram-rajya* (Rama's rule) refers to an ideal, ethical political system.

The Mughals approached this royal text at a moment when writers in other Indian contexts were also retelling Rama's story in vernacular languages. Many of those works adapted and altered aspects of the epic, such as Tulsidas's Hindavi rendition (*Ramcaritmanas*, ca. 1574) that amplified Rama's divinity far beyond Valmiki's Sanskrit version. The translators at Akbar's court relied on Valmiki's Sanskrit text and rendered all seven books into Persian prose, likely utilizing a team of translators similar to those employed in the *Razmnama* project.⁸⁰ The translation's decision makers overall ignored the literary verse form of the Sanskrit text and retold the *Ramayana* in straightforward Persian prose.⁸¹ The resulting Akbari *Ramayana* developed the promising possibility that the work could constitute an Indian "mirror for princes" for the Mughal sovereign, a theme that had also drawn imperial attention to the *Mahabharata*.

Even more than the translators, Akbar's artists exerted a concerted effort to transform the *Ramayana* into a text that belonged to their contemporary setting. One telling example comes from the final book of a copy produced in the imperial atelier in the 1590s. The manuscript was in the library of Akbar's mother, Hamida Banu Begum, and after her death in 1604 it was owned by Prince Salim, the future emperor Jahangir.⁸² In its final book, the *Ramayana* describes the first meeting of Rama with his estranged

FACING PAGE 5.8. *Krishna Dancing on the Head of Kaliya*, from the *Harivamsha*. Mughal India, 1590–95. Opaque watercolor with gold on paper, 30.9 × 18.8 cm. Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Oxford, lent by Howard Hodgkin (L1118.101)

5.9. *Rama Meets His Teenage Sons*, from the *Ramayana*. Mughal India, 16th century. Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper. The Museum of Islamic Art, Doha (MS.20.2000, p. 906)



teenage sons when they came to the royal court and sang before the king of his own life adventures. The Persian prose, in keeping with the descriptions in the Sanskrit text, mentions that the boys played musical instruments and intoned the tale with “bold, sweet voices.” But these narrative elements are given new strata of meaning in the painting on the facing page (fig. 5.9). The artists placed the performance within a distinctively late sixteenth-century Mughal setting. The red sandstone architecture in the painting bears strong similarities to palaces at Fatehpur Sikri, Agra, and Lahore. Also reminiscent of Mughal court scenes is that the enthroned Rama, his sons, and the sage Valmiki are seated on a raised platform in an inner courtyard space located within successive walls. The image of Rama’s sons as musicians resonates with the actual presence of Indian musicians, like Tansen, at Akbar’s court. Additionally, the musical instrument depicted in the painting is a *bin* or *vina*, which appears repeatedly in images produced by Akbar’s atelier as the Indian instrument of choice.⁸³

For Akbar’s court, a crucial motivating factor for importing the *Ramayana* into Indo-Persian frameworks seems to have been its ability to speak to Mughal notions of rulership. The paintings articulate this link more than the text, which, from what we can ascertain at this still early stage, does not overtly note a parallel between Emperor Akbar and King Rama.⁸⁴ It is difficult to overlook this suggested relationship in many illustrations, however. In figure 5.9, for example, Rama is dressed in Mughal fashion and has Central Asian facial features, remarkably similar to portrayals of the emperor in paintings of the *Akbarnama*.⁸⁵ Ancillary details of the setting—such as the type of throne, carpets, tiled floors, and luxury objects, such as blue-and-white ceramic vessels and long-necked bottles—are also typical in depictions of court scenes from this period.⁸⁶

In the insinuated blurring of Rama and Akbar, it is important to recall the Mughals’ familiarity with Vishnu, Rama’s divine identity. More crucially, both Persian and Sanskrit texts attest that Akbar relished being identified as a new incarnation of Vishnu, often indicated by his just rule and desire to protect cows and Brahmans. Brahmans seem to have presented this idea to Akbar and bolstered their claim by asserting that Sanskrit texts foretold his birth as an incarnation of Vishnu. This comparison was not a light exercise. On the contrary, Akbar identified great imperial promise in adapting the stories, norms, and expressions of other religious and cultural traditions. Perhaps the greatest contemporary attestation to the power of such attempts is found in the opposition to Akbar’s multicultural projects. For example, Bada’uni, one of the *Ramayana* translators, was asked to write a preface to the new Persian text and refused, even though he risked the king’s wrath.⁸⁷

The Akbari *Ramayana* often further mingled Indian and Islamicate traditions, both in the choice of language and vocabulary and through visual elements. For example, an episode early in the epic features Rambha, an alluring heavenly being, trying to distract the determined sage Vishvamitra, whose severe austerities threatened even the gods. This story was illustrated in a copy of the Persian *Ramayana* produced

Brahmans Flatter the King

[Cheating imposter Brahmans] told [the king] repeatedly that he had descended to earth, like Ram, Krishan, and other infidel rulers who, although lords of the world, had taken on human form to act on earth. As flattery, they presented Sanskrit poetry allegedly uttered by the tongues of sages that predicted a world-conquering padshah would arise in India. He would honor Brahmans, protect cows, and justly rule the earth. They wrote such nonsense on old papers and presented it to him. He believed every word.

—Bada’uni, *Muntakhab al-tawarikh*, 2:326

Akbar Is Described as an Avatar of Vishnu

Since Brahma was described by the Veda as changeless and beyond this world, therefore Akbar, great ruler of the earth, was born to protect cows and Brahmans. His pure name is celebrated across the ocean of shastras in scriptures and histories. It is established forever in the three worlds. Thus with his name this work is composed. It is no surprise that cows were protected by Lord Krishna, son of Gopala, and the best of the twice born guarded by the Ramas, gods of the Brahmans. But it is truly amazing that the lord Vishnu descended in a family of foreigners that loves to harm cows and Brahmans. Akbar protects cows and Brahmans!”

—*Parasiprakasha* of Krishnadasa, ed. Vibhuti Bhushan Bhattacharya (Varanasi, 1965), 1, vv. 2–4



5.10. Mushfiq, *At Indra's Insistence, Rambha Approaches Vishvamitra to Distract the Sage from His Austerities*, from the Freer *Ramayana*. Mughal India, 1597–1605. Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper, 27.5 × 15.2 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., gift of Charles Lang Freer (F1907.271, fol. 61)

in the early seventeenth century under the patronage of ‘Abd al-Rahim (fig. 5.10). As in parts of the *Razmnama*, the translators here use marked Islamicate terminology, especially from mystical Sufi contexts.⁸⁸ They describe the sage Vishvamitra with terms such as *‘abid* (devotee or worshiper) and note his *riyazat* (hardships), *‘ibadat* (worship), and *zuhd* (asceticism). The text also retains certain Sanskrit terms, such as *kokila*, a type of bird that the translators define as “black and famous among Indians,” and *apsarah* (heavenly maiden), while simultaneously describing the *apsarah*’s beauty with the Persian phrase *husn o jamal*, often used in mystical texts for describing the majesty of the spiritual beloved. The painting mirrors this concentrated linguistic mixing. It intermingles Indian and Persian elements in the verdant setting for the episode, juxtaposing Indian banana and mango trees with tall cypresses intertwined with floral blossoms and frequently seen in Timurid and Safavid paintings. Seated within a ring of fire, Vishvamitra possesses two types of manuscripts: a vertical scroll (Indian) and two codices (Islamicate), which also seem to bear writing in different scripts. His other possessions are an ink pot (a Persian ceramic type with blue-and-white decoration) and a metal water vessel with an Indian shape.⁸⁹ Such textual and visual fusions echo the implied collapse, seen elsewhere, of Rama and Akbar, an Indian and an Indo-Persian monarch, respectively, and help create a *Ramayana* that is well suited to Mughal multi-cultural tastes.

After its initial translation, the *Ramayana* became very popular among Persian readers, and was retold in no fewer than two dozen distinct Persian versions over the next three centuries.⁹⁰ Equally interesting is the warm reception of Mughal illustrations of the work, which mark the beginning of illustrated manuscripts of the *Ramayana* in multiple languages. There is little surviving evidence for a pre-Mughal tradition of illustrated *Ramayanas* in manuscript form.⁹¹ After the efforts of Akbar’s atelier, however, many Rajput rulers followed suit. The Mewar *Ramayana*, an ambitious commission by Maharana Jagat Singh in the 1640s and

intended to rival—if not surpass—Akbar’s *Ramayana* in size and illustration, is a noteworthy example (fig. 5.11).⁹² Jagat Singh’s manuscript contains 400 paintings, 158 of which were executed by the leading court artist Sahibdin, who was a Mewari Muslim. Modern scholars frequently draw attention to Hindu artists who worked under Muslim rulers, but the reverse was not uncommon, especially at Rajput courts. While such



activities never created a unified syncretic culture, they indicate how Mughal visual translation practices informed multiple traditions on the subcontinent.

Conclusion: Continual Translation

For Akbar's court, translating Sanskrit works such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* and illustrating Indo-Persian classics like Amir Khusraw's *Khamsa* were multistep processes that required the participation of numerous individuals and professional groups, especially skilled artists. While it often proves difficult to trace the precise contributions of specific individuals given the fleeting references available in primary sources, many people—from the imperial patron down to the scribes, artists, translators, and cultural informants—had a hand in shaping a particular manuscript. Crucially, attempts to translate Indian stories and ideas for a Mughal audience

5.11. *Coronation of Rama*, from the *Ramayana*.
Mewar, 1649–53. Opaque watercolor and ink on paper,
27.23 × 39 cm. The British Library, London (Add Ms.
15297 [1], fol. 203a)

continued long after the initial textual rendering was completed. Scribes continually recopied manuscripts, sometimes emending the text to further adapt Sanskrit stories within Indo-Islamic culture. Artists, both within the imperial Mughal court and far beyond, repeatedly illustrated the *Razmnama*, the Mughal *Ramayana*, and other Persian texts in innovative ways that spoke across multiple textual and visual cultures.

Mughal translation projects offer a compelling vision for how an Islamicate dynasty produced visual reflections of its unique combination of cultural heritages that included Central Asian, Persianate, and both Muslim and non-Muslim Indian traditions. Many of Akbar's translators and artists viewed the Sanskrit epics as especially dynamic within imperial culture because they provided models of Indian kingship. The illustration of these works—alongside earlier Mughal chronicles, such as the *Baburnama*, and established Indo-Persian poems, such as Khusraw's *Khamsa*—provided an especially constructive means of exploring their wide-ranging roles in a multicultural imperial tradition. The resulting fusions of Indian and Persianate approaches created manuscripts wherein the text and images worked in tandem to redefine the contours of Indo-Persian aesthetic culture. The individual agencies and decision making of all involved in such creative processes add depth to Fayzi's bold aims of "tak[ing] the melody of India's tune, and strik[ing] a song in perfect Persian" as a purposeful collective effort, well beyond a single poet's rhetorical conceit.

NOTES

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- 1 Fayzi, *Dastan-i Nal va Daman* (Tehran, 1956), 36. All translations are by the authors unless otherwise noted.
- 2 Throughout this essay we cite both English and Persian editions of Mughal histories where possible. We particularly rely on Abu al-Fazl's *A'in-i Akbari* and Bada'uni's *Muntakhab al-tawarikh*.
- 3 We use the terms "Islamicate" and "Persianate" in their standard senses to denote cultural traditions beyond the religious boundaries of Islam and the geographical area of Persia, respectively. We also use the term Indo-Persian to refer more specifically to the Persianate tradition as it developed on the subcontinent.
- 4 Abu al-Fazl's preface to the *Razmnama* is a notable example of attributing a translation entirely to Akbar's individual wisdom and volition.
- 5 Fayzi's *Mahabharata*, British Library, India Office Islamic Ms. 761, fol. 186b.
- 6 The most concentrated sections on artist and poets are found in book 1 of the *A'in-i Akbari* of Abu al-Fazl: Persian ed. H. Blochmann, 3 vols. (Calcutta, 1872, repr. Frankfurt, 1993), 1:111–18 (artists), 1:235–62 (poets); and English trans. H. Blochmann and P. C. Phillott, 2 vols. (Calcutta, 1927, repr. Delhi, 2001), see sections "The Arts of Writing and Painting" and "The Poets of the Age" in vol. 1. For attempts to collate the information available from various sources on specific artists, see Milo C. Beach, Eberhard Fischer, and B. N. Goswamy, eds., *Masters of Indian Painting*, vol. 1, 1100–1650 (Zurich, 2011); and Som Prakash Verma, *Mughal Painters and Their Work: A Biographical Survey and Catalogue* (Delhi, 1994).
- 7 See, for example, 'Abd al-Baqi Niha-wandi, *Ma'asir-i Rahimi*, 3 vols. (Calcutta, 1924–27); Nur al-Din Muhammad Jahangir, *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri* (Tehran, 1980); and Wheeler M. Thackston, trans. *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India* (Washington, D.C., 1999). For a compilation of Mughal historical sources, see Manik Lal Gupta, *Sources of Mughal History, 1526 to 1740* (New Delhi, 1989).
- 8 We rely here on the work of textual scholars, such as Muzaffar Alam, Carl Ernst, and Sunil Sharma, and art historians, such as Milo Cleveland Beach, Barbara Brend, Asok Kumar Das, and John Seyller, among many others.
- 9 For a useful listing of Akbar-period manuscripts, see the appendix in Bonnie C. Wade, *Imaging Sound: An Ethnomusicological Study of Music, Art, and Culture in Mughal India* (Chicago, 1998). See also the essays on many specific Mughal artists in *Masters of Indian Painting*, 1:97–290, 305–74.
- 10 For further discussion of Akbar's engagements with Persian literati, see Muzaffar Alam, "The Pursuit of Persian: Language in Mughal Politics," *Modern Asian Studies* 32, no. 2 (1998): 317–49; and Riazul Islam, "Akbar's Intellectual Contacts with Iran," in *Islamic Culture and Society: Essays in Honour of Aziz Ahmad*, ed. Milton Israel and N. K. Wagle (Delhi, 1983), 351–74.
- 11 Of the numerous Indian languages, Mughal patrons in the late sixteenth century were attracted primarily to materials in Sanskrit (imperial interests would increasingly turn to works in vernacular languages during the seventeenth century). Akbar's court also translated works from Latin, Portuguese, Arabic, and Turkish. The most thorough account of Mughal Sanskrit to Persian translations remains Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar's Reign, with Special Reference to Abu'l Fazl, 1556–1605* (New Delhi, 1975), chap. 6. For more recent discussions, see Najaf Haider, "Translating Texts and Straddling Worlds: Intercultural Communication in Mughal India," in *Various Facets of History: Essays in Honour of Aniruddha Ray*, ed. Ishrat Alam and Syed Ejaz Hussain (Delhi, 2011), 115–24; and M. Athar Ali, "Translations of Sanskrit Works at Akbar's Court," *Social Scientist* 20, no. 9–10 (1992): 38–45.
- 12 Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Faizi's *Nal-Daman* and Its Long Afterlife," in idem, *Writing the Mughal World: Studies on Culture and Politics* (New York, 2013), 204–48.
- 13 The Indian *Panchatantra* has had a long history of translation and illustration in the Islamic world. It was first rendered into Middle Persian, and later into Arabic and modern Persian numerous times. Some of its translations and reworkings include *Kalila va Dimna*, *Anvar-i Suhayli*, and *Iyar-i danish*. For discussions of illustrated manuscripts of some of these works, see Mika Natif, *Explaining Early Mughal Painting: The "Anvar-i Suhayli" Manuscripts* (PhD diss., New York University, 2006); Bernard O'Kane, *Early Persian Painting: Kalila and Dimna Manuscripts of the Late Fourteenth Century* (London, 2003); and Ernst J. Grube, ed., *A Mirror for Princes from India: Illustrated Versions of the Kalilah wa Dimnah, Anvar-i Suhayli, Iyar-i Danish and Humayun Nameh* (Bombay, 1991).
- 14 See Barbara Brend, *Perspectives on Persian Painting: Illustrations to Amir*

- Khusrau's Khamsah* (London, 2003) for a comparison of illustrated manuscripts of Amir Khusraw's *Khamsa*.
- 15 In early modern India, religion was often not a primary mode of identity, especially in contrast to connections via language, social location, and kinship groups; see the introduction in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, ed. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (Gainesville, Fla., 2000), 1–20.
 - 16 Educated Hindus, especially of the Khatri and Kayastha classes, often learned Persian at schools (sg. *maktab*, *madrasa*) where the curriculum included a study of Persian classical literature (Alam, "Pursuit of Persian," 326–27).
 - 17 On 'Abd al-Rahim's patronage, see John Seyller, *Workshop and Patron in Mughal India: The Freer Ramayana and Other Illustrated Manuscripts of 'Abd al-Rahim* (Washington, D.C., 1999), 48–58; and Annemarie Schimmel, "A Dervish in the Guise of a Prince: Khan-i Khanan Abdur Rahim as a Patron," in *The Powers of Art: Patronage in Indian Culture*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller (Delhi, 1992), 202–23.
 - 18 Corinne Lefèvre, "The Court of 'Abd-ur-Rahim Khan-i Khanan as a Bridge between Iranian and Indian Cultural Traditions," in *Culture and Circulation: Literature in Motion in Early Modern India*, ed. Thomas de Bruijn and Allison Busch (Leiden, 2014), 91.
 - 19 On 'Abd al-Rahim's Hindi production, see Allison Busch, "Hidden in Plain View: Brajbhasha Poets at the Mughal Court," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (2010): 282–84; and idem, "Riti and Register: Lexical Variation in Courtly Braj Bhasha Texts," in *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture*, ed. Francesca Orsini (Delhi, 2010), 108–14.
 - 20 Wheeler M. Thackston, trans., *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor* (New York, 2002), xix–xx.
 - 21 See, for example, Firishta's comments in the early seventeenth century: *Tarikh-i Firishta*, 2 vols. (Delhi, 1832), 1:6. Firishta (d. 1623) presented his text to his royal patron Sultan Ibrahim 'Adil Shah II of Bijapur in 1606 and continued to revise the text until his death. Abu al-Fazl's preface (*muqaddima*) is printed in vol. 1 of the 1979–81 Tehran edition (ed. Naini and Shukla) of the *Razmnama*.
 - 22 Abu al-Fazl devotes several pages of his *A'in-i Akbari* section on poets to describing his brother and quotes a selection of his poetry (Persian ed., 1:235–43; English trans., 1:618–33). We also have several extant Persian works by Fayzi, including a collection of his poetry (*divan*), his translation of *Lilavati*, his translation of the first two books of the *Mahabharata*, and his poems *Nal va Daman* and *Markaz al-adwar*. A work on Indian philosophy entitled *Shariq al-ma'rifa* is also attributed to Fayzi. He composed two Arabic works: a Quranic commentary, *Sawati' al-ilham*, and a work on prophetic sayings, *Mawarid al-kalim*.
 - 23 On Hamida Banu Begum's *Ramayana*, see Linda York Leach, *Paintings from India* (London, 1998), 40–49.
 - 24 For recent discussions of Jain-Mughal relations, see Shalin Jain, "Piety, Laity and Royalty: Jains under the Mughals in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century," *Indian Historical Review* 20, no. 1 (2013): 67–92; idem, "Interaction of the 'Lords': The Jain Community and the Mughal Royalty under Akbar," *Social Scientist* 40, no. 3–4 (2012): 33–57; Audrey Truschke, "Cosmopolitan Encounters: Sanskrit and Persian at the Mughal Court" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2012), chap. 2; and idem, "Jains and the Mughals," available at www.jainpedia.org/themes/places/jainism-and-islam/jains-and-the-mughals.html (accessed October 15, 2014).
 - 25 Truschke, "Cosmopolitan Encounters," 139.
 - 26 Brahmans often served as official astrologers for the Mughals; see S. R. Sarma, "Jyotisaraja at the Mughal Court," in *Studies on Indian Culture, Science and Literature: Being Prof. K. V. Sarma Felicitation Volume Presented to Him on His 81st Birthday*, ed. N. Gangadharan, S. A. S. Sarma, and S. S. R. Sarma (Chennai, 2000), 363–71. Jains performed at least one astrological ritual for Akbar (discussion in Truschke, "Cosmopolitan Encounters," 145–51).
 - 27 Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi, "Religious Disputations and Imperial Ideology: The Purpose and Location of Akbar's *Ibadatkhana*," *Studies in History* 24, no. 2 (2008): 195–209; and Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, chap. 3.
 - 28 Birbal, best known by this name given to him by Akbar, was born Mahesh Das. For his brief biography, see C. M. Naim, "Popular Jokes and Political History: The Case of Akbar, Birbal, and Mulla Do-Piyaza," *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 24 (June 17, 1995): 1456–64.
 - 29 'Abd al-Qadir Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-tavarikh*, ed. Captain W. N. Lees and Munshi Ahmad Ali (Calcutta, 1865), 2:212–13; English trans. W. H. Lowe (repr. Delhi, 1986), 2:216. Henceforth cited as Bada'uni, Persian ed. and English trans.
 - 30 On Giridhar Das, particularly his *Ramayana*, see Sri Ram Sharma, "Little Known Persian Version of the Ramayan" *Islamic Culture* 7 (1933): 673–78; on Chandar Bhan Brahman, see Rajeev Kinra, "Secretary-Poets in Mughal India and the Ethos of Persian: The Case of Chandar Bhan Brahman" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2008).
 - 31 For further discussion, see Truschke, "Cosmopolitan Encounters," chap. 3; and idem, "The Mughal *Book of War*: A Persian Translation of the Sanskrit

- Mahabharata*," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31, no. 2 (2011): 506–20. Only a few people proficient in both Sanskrit and Persian were affiliated with the courts of Akbar or Jahangir. Krishnadasa and Kavikarnapura both authored bilingual Sanskrit-Persian grammars, and Siddhichandra claims to have known Persian in multiple Sanskrit sources. As far as we know, however, none of these individuals was involved in direct translations of Sanskrit materials.
- 32 British Library, Persian Additional Ms. 5642, fol. 481b ; British Library, Persian Oriental Ms. 12076, fol. 138b; and British Library, India Office, Islamic Ms. 1702, fol. 411a. The colophon is translated in Ali, "Translations of Sanskrit Works at Akbar's Court," 41.
- 33 This inscription partially overlaps with the image and was thus written after the painting's completion. See our earlier comments about the widespread assumption, even at the time, that Abu al-Fazl played a pivotal role in the production of the *Razmnama*.
- 34 According to Bada'uni, translation activity took place in the scriptorium (*maktabkhana*); see Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-tavarikh*, Persian ed., 2:344; English trans., 2:356).
- 35 For example, the Brahman translators wear bead necklaces while two Persianate translators hold prayer beads in their hands.
- 36 Truschke, "Mughal *Book of War*"; and idem, "Cosmopolitan Encounters," chap. 3.
- 37 In his preface to the *Razmnama*, Abu al-Fazl wrote, "When with his perfect comprehension he found that the squabbling of sects of the Muslim community (*millat-i Muhammadi*) and the quarreling of the Hindus increased, and their refutation of each other grew beyond bounds, his subtle mind resolved that the famous books of each group should be translated into diverse tongues." Translated in Carl Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Arabic and Persian Translations from Indian Languages," *Iranian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2003): 180–81.
- 38 In the story of how the Persian minister Borzui learned the *Panchatantra*, the *Shahnama* plays upon the trope of Indians being secretive about their learning. See Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis (New York, 2006), 706–7. Also see al-Biruni's comments on how Indians preferred to restrict access to their knowledge, particularly to foreigners, in E. C. Sachau., ed. and trans., *Alberuni's India: An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws and Astrology of India, about A.D. 1030* (London, 1888), 1:22–23.
- 39 Amina Okada, "Keshav Das," in *Masters of Indian Painting*, ed. Beach, Fischer, and Goswamy, 1:153–66; Milo Cleveland Beach, "The Mughal Painter Kesu Das," *Archives of Asian Art* 30 (1976): 34–52.
- 40 Abu al-Fazl, *A'in-i Akbari*, Persian ed., 1:117; English trans., 1:114.
- 41 An example of the former is the *Mir'at al-quds*, a manuscript on the life of Christ, in which it is evident that the artists relied heavily on the accompanying text for the illustrated subjects. Completed in 1602 and illustrated shortly thereafter, the manuscript was commissioned by Akbar from the Jesuit Father Jerome Xavier (d. 1617). It was written in Persian, and the content was drawn from various European sources. See Pedro Moura Carvalho, *Mir'at al-quds (Mirror of Holiness): A Life of Christ for Emperor Akbar* (Leiden, 2012), 1–6, 54, 74–129.
- 42 The manuscript is in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (W. 624), with several of its folios in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (13.228.26–.33). See John Seyller, *The Pearls of the Parrot of India: The Walters Art Museum Khamsa of Nizami* (Baltimore, 2001).
- 43 Amir Khusraw's *Khamsa*, composed between 1298 and 1302, was one of the most frequently illustrated Indo-Persian literary works from the fifteenth century onward. See Brend, *Perspectives on Persian Painting*.
- 44 Although the name of the deposed prince protagonist from Yemen here is Rama, the character is distinct from the Hindu deity Rama of the *Ramayana*, despite the shared name. It is unclear to us if Khusraw modeled his Rama after the epic hero in any way.
- 45 On this work more generally, see Seyller, *Pearls of the Parrot of India*, 159–68.
- 46 See, for example, Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple* (Delhi, 1976); and Finbarr B. Flood, "Pillars, Palimpsests, and Princely Practices: Translating the Past in Sultanate Delhi," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 43 (2003): 95–116.
- 47 Francesca Leoni, "Picturing Evil: Images of *Divs* and the Reception of the *Shahnama*," in *Shahnama Studies, II: The Reception of Firdausi's Shahnama*, ed. Charles Melville and Gabrielle van den Berg (Leiden, 2012), 101–18; and Seyller, *Workshop and Patron*, cat. nos. 35b, 38b, 244a, 227b, 251a, 295a, 310b, 315a, 332a.
- 48 For instance, a minister from Bikaner known as Karmachandra convinced Akbar to give to Bikaner more than a thousand idols previously taken from Sirohi, see Jain, "Interaction of the 'Lords,'" 47.
- 49 The text is titled *Akbarasahishringaradarpana* (Mirror of the Erotic for Emperor Akbar). It was printed by the Anup Sanskrit Library in 1943 along with some prefatory material. Audrey Truschke discusses this work in greater depth in *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court*, forthcoming.

- 50 Mahamahopadhyaya Pandit Sivadatta and Kashinath Pandurang Parab, eds., *The Hirasaubhagya of Devavimalagani With His Own Gloss* (Bombay, 1900), chap. 14, vv. 91–115.
- 51 For example, the Mughals issued imperial orders related to various temples. See Tarapada Mukherjee and Irfan Habib, "Akbar and the Temples of Mathura and Its Environs," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 48* (1987): 234–50.
- 52 James Mallinson, "Yogis in Mughal India," in *Yoga: The Art of Transformation*, ed. Debra Diamond (Washington, D.C., 2013), 69–84; see also Sunil Sharma, "Representation of Social Groups in Mughal Art and Literature: Ethnography or Trope?" in *Indo-Muslim Cultures in Transition*, ed. Alka Patel and Karen Leonard (Leiden, 2011), 17–36.
- 53 V&A IS.2:61-1896 IS.2:62-1896 published in *Yoga*, ed. Diamond, 172–75.
- 54 Thackston trans., *Baburnama*, 145b–146, 232b–233; Walters Art Museum W.596.22b, published and discussed by Amy Landau and Debra Diamond, in *Yoga*, 180–81, 184.
- 55 Davis trans., *Shahnameh*, 704–8; and *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (New York, 1982–), s.v. "Borzuya" (Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh).
- 56 For example, a copy of *Jami' al-tawarikh* (Collection of Histories), compiled at the Ilkhanid Mongol court at Tabriz (Iran) by the vizier Rashid al-Din (d. 1318) was brought to Mughal India during Akbar's rule. See Sheila S. Blair, *A Compendium of Chronicles: Rashid al-Din's Illustrated History of the World* (London, 1995), 31–33. For more on Rashid al-Din, see chapter 2 in this volume.
- 57 Carl Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Arabic and Persian Translations from Indian Languages," *Iranian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2003): 173–95.
- 58 Sunil Sharma, *Amir Khusraw: The Poet of Sufis and Sultans* (Oxford, 2005), 78.
- 59 Paul Losensky and Sunil Sharma, trans., *In the Bazaar of Love: Selected Poetry of Amir Khusrau* (New Delhi, 2011), xxxi.
- 60 Rasmi Qalandar Yazdi, as quoted in Sunil Sharma, "The Function of the Catalogue of Poets in Persian Poetry," in *Metaphor and Imagery in Persian Poetry*, ed. Ali Asghar Seyed-Gohrab (Leiden, 2012), 240.
- 61 Fayzi, *Dastan-i Nal va Daman*, ed. 39.
- 62 Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York, 2009), 263.
- 63 On the text of *Razmnama*, see Truschke, "Mughal Book of War."
- 64 One recent example is Doniger, *Hindus*, 549.
- 65 Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley, 2006), 223–37.
- 66 See Abu al-Fazl's preface, as quoted and translated in Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism?" 182. Also see Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-tavarikh*, Persian ed., 2:319; English trans., 2:329–30.
- 67 On some of the key manuscripts, see Das, *Paintings of the Razmnama: The Book of War* (Ahmedabad, 2005); and John Seyller, "Model and Copy: The Illustration of Three *Razmnama* Manuscripts," *Archives of Asian Art* 38 (1985): 37–66.
- 68 John Seyller ("Model and Copy," 40–41) mentions the original illustration and discusses how the scenes selected for illustration were often not consistent across *Razmnama* manuscripts. This was true even when the same artists worked on multiple *Razmnama* manuscripts; Yael Rice, "A Persian Mahabharata: The 1598–1599 *Razmnama*," *Manoa* 22, no. 1 (2010): 127–28.
- 69 We have reconstructed the names to reflect Sanskrit pronunciation.
- 70 See, respectively, Adam Bowles, trans., *Mahabharata: Book Eight* (New York, 2006), 1:534–37, and the *Razmnama*, printed as *Mahabharata: The Oldest and Longest Sanskrit Epic: Translated by Mir Ghayasuddin Ali Qazvini Known as Naqib Khan (d. 1023 AH)*, ed. S. M. Reza Jalali Naini and N. S. Shukla, 4 vols. (Tehran, 1979–81) 2:366.
- 71 Barbara Brend, *Muhammad Juki's Shahnama of Firdausi* (London, 2010), 54–55, 148–62.
- 72 Das, *Paintings of the Razmnama*, 32–33.
- 73 Persian retellings of the *Panchatantra* were also popular in Akbar's court, as exemplified by Abu al-Fazl's *'Iyar-i danish* (Touchstone of Wisdom), based on *Anvar-i Suhayli*, and Mustafa Khaliqdad Abbasi's translation of *Panchakhyana*, a Jain version of *Panchatantra*.
- 74 John Seyller, *The Adventures of Hamza: Painting and Storytelling in Mughal India* (London, 2002).
- 75 Fayzi's two *Razmnama* books survive in numerous manuscript copies today.
- 76 Fayzi, *Dastan-i Nal va Daman*, 35.
- 77 Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Faizi's *Nal-Daman* and Its Long Afterlife."
- 78 Early illustrated *Razmnama* copies include the master imperial copy in Jaipur, one dated 1598–99 (five books are in the British Library, Persian Oriental Ms. 12076, and the rest are dispersed), a dispersed ca. 1600 manuscript (on this work, see Seyller, "Model and Copy," 65n3), the Birla *Razmnama* dated 1605 (images printed in Das, *Paintings of the Razmnama*), and the dispersed 1616–17 *Razmnama* (for a reconstruction of the paintings, see Seyller, "Model and Copy," 62–65). In addition, there are numerous later illustrated manuscripts in Indian archives, including several copies held at the Oriental Research Library in Srinagar.

- 79 Sheldon Pollock, "Ramayana and Political Imagination in India," *Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (1993): 261–97.
- 80 For a discussion of the Akbari *Ramayana* and the translators involved, see Truschke, "Cosmopolitan Encounters," 280–84.
- 81 Two examples suffice to indicate the Mughals' lack of inclination to treat the *Ramayana* as poetry. First, the translators made no attempt to capture the aesthetic appeal of the invention of poetry, an episode narrated in book 1 (although they do faithfully transcribe the entire episode). Also, in accordance with the Sanskrit epic, the text preceding the image of Rama enthroned (discussed below) explicitly says that Rama's story ought to be versified. Nonetheless, the Mughal *Ramayana* is in prose.
- 82 John Seyller, "The Inspection and Valuation of Manuscripts in the Imperial Mughal Library," *Artibus Asiae* 57, no. 3–4 (1997): 276, 304–5. This copy is held today in the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar.
- 83 We are grateful to Bonnie Wade for this insight.
- 84 The Akbari *Ramayana* is unpublished, and manuscripts have only recently become available (and are still little studied). Additionally, the text appears to be somewhat fluid between copies. Given these factors, our contention that there is an absence of textual evidence equating Akbar and Rama is highly tentative.
- 85 Susan Stronge, *Painting for the Mughal Emperor: The Art of the Book, 1560–1660* (London, 2002).
- 86 The use of contemporary sartorial details in illustrations of a mythic or historical past is not uncommon and has a long tradition in Persian *Shahnama* paintings. See, for example, Marianna Shreve Simpson, "*Shahnama* as Text, *Shahnama* as Image: A Brief Overview of Recent Studies 1975–2000," in *Shahnama: The Visual Language of the Persian Book of Kings*, ed. Robert Hillenbrand (Aldershot, 2004).
- 87 Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-tavarikh*, Persian ed., 2:366; English trans., 2:378. Akbar's *Ramayana* as we have it today lacks a preface.
- 88 For instance, in the 1605 *Razmnama*, the Garuda image accompanies a few lines that describe how a group of sages (*balakhilya* in Sanskrit) are engaged in *'ibadat* (a Perso-Arabic word meaning "worship" or "devotion"). The text on this image corresponds to *Razmnama*, 1:25–26.
- 89 Seyller, *Workshop and Patron*, 132–33.
- 90 For a list of the distinct Persian *Ramayanas*, see Fathullah Mujtabai, *Aspects of Hindu Muslim Culture Relations* (New Delhi, 1978), 68–71. Many of these works are described in more detail at Perso-Indica: An Analytical Survey of Persian Works on Indian Learned Traditions, accessed October 15, 2014, <http://www.perso-indica.net>.
- 91 Vidya Dehejia, "Rama: Hero and Avatar," in *The Legend of Rama: Artistic Visions*, ed. idem (Bombay, 1994), 1–14.
- 92 J. P. Losty, *The Ramayana: Love and Valour in India's Great Epic* (London, 2008), 10.