



*Four Horses.* Abigail King.

# TRANSLATING THEOLOGY: A TEXTUAL EXAMINATION OF AKBAR'S RELIGIOSITY

**This paper examines the translation movement of Hindu epics from Sanskrit to Persian spearheaded by the sixteenth century Mughal emperor Akbar. Many historians understand this phenomenon as a cultural accommodation by the emperor to attain legitimacy amongst a heterogeneous populace. This paper, in contrast, seeks to locate this effort within a broader theological project by Akbar to unite Hindu and Sufi thought in order to imbue a corporeal divinity within himself. To do so, this paper explores the religious milieu in which the texts were translated through courtly histories and through recorded commentary by the emperor's contemporaries. Despite the indisputable political expedience of the translations, one can argue that an experimental impulse to reconfigure Mughal theology was the foundational term of the initiative. This argument would thus dismantle a popular perception of a rigid, strictly defined empire and instead offer one of a notably porous and assimilatory Mughal identity.**

**Akhil Jonnalagadda**  
Written for Ruling Hindustan  
(HIST 494)  
Dr. Lisa Balabanlilar

## Introduction

The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, have presented an enduring backdrop for the cultural imagination of the region. Since their creation, thought disputably to have occurred between the third and fifth centuries B.C.E., the two stories have been retranslated, reinterpreted, and reintroduced into the social consciousness of India and, later, the surrounding Asiatic regions.<sup>1</sup> It is no secret that, in this time, the South Asian subcontinent bore witness to explosive cultural diffusion through the ceaseless flow of trade, migration, and conquest. What we are left with today is a region with seemingly remarkable continuities and inexplicable contradictions that have charged historians with the duty of careful study and elucidation. In this effort,

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1. John Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 25.

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the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* reveal themselves to us as a sort of cultural palimpsest: if we were to peel back the layers of their perpetual refashioning, we may locate within them how ideology has ebbed and flowed in the region.

In this paper, we will examine the role played by the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* within the Mughal Empire as repurposed vehicles of ideology under Akbar's rule. Emperor Akbar, who reigned over the Mughal Empire during the latter half of the sixteenth century, oversaw a colossal project of translation that resulted in the courtly production of Hindu epics in Persian. Combined with his theological interests, his governing ideologies, and his personal idiosyncrasies, this movement was situated within a complex matrix of Akbar's deeply enigmatic beliefs. We may, however, explore the efforts of translation to excavate an ideological impulse and derive a better understanding of the movement's intent. Many eminent scholars of Mughal history maintain that the translation of Hindu epics into Persian was a sort of cultural accommodation in order to minimize factionalism and promote Hindu-Muslim relations in a religiously variegated society. Rather than a theological exploration that retains the religiosity of the texts, the translations are understood instead as a mix of political and aesthetic modes of discourse produced to reflect the empire's diversity and entrench the emperor firmly within the cultural bedrock of Hindustan.

However, a deeper consideration of the religious milieu of Akbar's reign, of the emperor's own spiritual conception of his corporeality, and of the longstanding dynamism of the Mughal identity may force us to complicate this prevailing conclusion. I aim to argue that the translation of these epics, rather than being done with the excision of their intrinsic theology, was *driven* by a spiritual impulse that sought to unite Hindu and Sufi thought which only then suffused into the empire's political orientation. We can locate the translation within a broader attempt to reconfigure the inner logic of Mughal theology in order to imbue a corporeal divinity *within* the emperor himself, a strategy that— while inherently political— can hardly be dismissed as one of simple political expediency. Finally, in studying how this theological reformulation permeated into the Mughal character, we can perhaps construct an understanding of the empire's cultural identity as not one that was rigid yet tolerant to its diverse subjects but rather as one that was inherently fluid, creative, and assimilatory of its myriad influences.

### ***Razmnamah & Akbari Ramayana: A Context***

Before confronting the intricate political calculus embedded within their

translations, we should first understand the texts themselves and their extensive interpretative capacity. The appropriative power of South Asian folklore cannot be understated. The folklorist A.K. Ramanujan explained how “stories about stories, frame stories, and nested ones, as well as various self-referential devices like plays within plays,” are plentiful within the Indian classical tradition.<sup>2</sup> Because folk literature rarely remains crystallized and untouched, “whole epics tend to be repeated, remembered, reworked, and renewed, not just translated but transmuted utterly, in the many languages of India.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we must not gloss over this aesthetic mimesis as a simple predilection for referential anachronisms; every recurrence of a poem or story intervenes into an existing cultural system as abound with refashioned signifiers or, as Ramanujan poetically put it, as “mirrors again that become windows.”<sup>4</sup>

The two epics at hand have cemented their persisting import within the Indian literary canon. Ramanujan famously wrote that “a text like the *Mahabharata* is not a text but a tradition,” and that “it used to be every poet’s ambition to write a *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, both texts embody the incessant metamorphosis of Indian folklore and present themselves as ever-evolving nuclei of Indian political and cultural logic. Sheldon Pollock asserted that the *Ramayana*, for example, has “supplied, continuously and readily, if in a highly differentiated way, a repertory of imaginative instruments for articulating a range of political discourses.”<sup>6</sup> Pollock went as far as questioning whether any other South Asian text has “ever supplied an idiom or vocabulary for political imagination remotely comparable in longevity, frequency of deployment, and effectivity.”<sup>7</sup>

It is in this context that we arrive at Akbar’s project of translating these epics to Persian, the language of the Mughal court. Akbar’s religious policy during his reign would be described today as notably tolerant of non-Muslim religion and culture. His “maintenance of power depended upon the success of his strategy to incorporate Hindu and other religious and political factions into the imperial bureaucracy, and to allow a degree of autonomy in various regions of the empire,” which manifested in his admission of non-Muslims into the royal administration, his abolition of a Hindu pilgrimage tax, and his marriages to daughters of several

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2. A.K. Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 21.

3. Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays*, 21.

4. Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays*, 25.

5. Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays*, 162.

6. Sheldon Pollock, “*Ramayana* and Political Imagination in India,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (May 1993): 262.

7. Pollock, “*Ramayana* and Political Imagination,” 262.

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high-ranking Hindus.<sup>8</sup> In 1574, Akbar established a translation bureau within which his top scribes and secretaries were tasked with translating a range of Sanskrit texts, including the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.<sup>9</sup>

In 1582, Akbar had the latter translated as an abridgment entitled *Razmnamah* (Book of War) that was evidently intended for more than private consumption amongst the royal court. Abu'l Fazl, the emperor's grand Vizier, wrote the following in the translation's preface:

Some biased, irreligious (یتن اید یب) people and leaders of derivative practice (دی لوقت لها نایاوش یپ) in India think their beliefs are the best ever. Therefore, they consider their ridiculous views as free from any defect, and they keep imitating others and instructing the gullible with their own teachings without pursuing any further study; resulting in the distribution of false notions. They regard the true followers of Muhammad's religion, whose respectable views and the true essence of their sciences they know nothing about, as owners of mere vain and senseless words and discredit them completely. Due to his great wisdom, the king asked for the *Mahabharata* to be translated in the best way possible, since it contains many points about these types of people. Translating this book will enable those extreme sceptics to adopt a moderate attitude and it will also make the gullible feel embarrassed about what they believed and therefore be led to the actual truth.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, we can presume that the translation effort was made for the purpose of propagation throughout the empire's populace. The Persian-translated *Akbari Ramayana* was completed in 1588, and while it was not as widespread as its textual counterpart, it still became quite popular amongst elite circles; the manuscript was said to have "passed down through the line of Mughal sovereigns, and flyleaf inscriptions confirm that it was viewed frequently," even during the reign of Akbar's grandson, Shah Jahan.<sup>11</sup> The sheer longevity and widespread consumption of the translated texts reveals an emergent need to understand the project's purpose: what was it done for, and what did Akbar and his court stand to gain from it?

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8. Yael Rice, "A Persian Mahabharata: The 1598-1599 Razmnama," *Manoa* 22, no. 1 (2010), 125-31.

9. Rice, "A Persian Mahabharata," 125.

10. Raziieh Babagolzadeh, "Understanding the Mughal *Book of War*" (MA diss., Simon Fraser University, 2015), 49.

11. Audrey Truschke, *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 209.

## Truschke &amp; The Politics of Translation

Modern scholars of the Mughal Empire have taken this issue up with due enthusiasm. Despite the complexity with which the question presents itself, a consensus appears to have emerged regarding the motives of Akbar's translation efforts. Audrey Truschke argued that religion featured less prominently in how the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were received, and that the translations were viewed by the Mughals not as theological works but as opportunities to acculturate these stories for a predominantly Islamic audience.<sup>12</sup> This position was best encapsulated in Truschke's interpretation of the *Razmnamah* in her groundbreaking book, *Culture of Encounters*, and can be summarized by the following: the *Razmnamah* drastically rewrote the religious framework of the *Mahabharata*, as evidenced in its truncation of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a spiritually dense chapter of the original poem, and in its repositioning of the Hindu deity Krishna. These changes then indicate that cultural intelligibility — rather than theological interest — motivated the translation project.

Truschke wrote that “the Mughals indicate discomfort with the perceived Hindu message of the *Bhagavad-Gita* by drastically shortening and altering this section;” while the original Sanskrit chapter extends to a little over seven hundred verses, it occupied a “mere few pages of the *Razmnamah*.”<sup>13</sup> Even within the scanty reproduction of the *Gita*, the abstract reflections on Hindu philosophy and yoga embedded in the original text were displaced. Instead of providing an ethical climax as it does in the original, the focus in the translation seemed to be fixed solely on the chapter's plot content.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Akbar's translator truncated “other religiously tinted portions of the text, such as a segment on pilgrimage locations in book nine.”<sup>15</sup> While Truschke maintained that the translators retain much of the *Mahabharata*'s Hindu religious framework with a discernible infusion of Islamic theological concepts, she concluded that the diffusion represents a “series of uneven attempts to remain faithful to the *Mahabharata* while producing a culturally intelligible story for an Islamicate audience.”<sup>16</sup> In doing so, she dismissed any internal theological experimentation as being done merely to

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12. Audrey Truschke, “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): 515.

13. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 116.

14. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 116.

15. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 117.

16. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 117.

accommodate the work to a diverse readership.

Truschke solidified her argument by exploring how the deity Krishna, who offers divine advice to the warrior Arjuna in the *Gita*, is depicted in the *Razmnamah*. The Persian *Bhagavad-Gita* “opens like the Sanskrit with Arjuna instructing Krishna to position their chariot between the two armies ready for war,” but when Arjuna has his famed crisis of conscience, “the Persian Krishna speaks to him as a wise teacher but not as a divine incarnation,” revealing a conspicuously Islamic positioning of Krishna as a messenger, distinct from God, rather than as a divine being himself.<sup>17</sup> This posturing, curiously enough, is inconsistent elsewhere in the *Razmnamah* where Krishna is “portrayed as an Indian *deva* and alternatively equated to *khuda*, the Islamic God.”<sup>18</sup> Truschke found this as confirmation that the *Razmnamah* purposefully retooled the source material to be less theologically incongruent and that the varying representation of Krishna reveals the “treatment of religious elements in the *Razmnamah* as reaching toward cultural accommodation for a predominantly Islamic audience rather than tied to any calculated theological objectives.”<sup>19</sup>

In this vein, Muzzafar Alam described the Persian rendering of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* as simply efforts to “make the major local texts available and thus to dispel the ignorance about the Hindu traditions” in a desire to build an empire where “both Shaikh and Brahman could live with minimum possible conflicts.”<sup>20</sup> We can then conclude that both Truschke and Alam, despite the latter’s marginal emphasis on this argument, would agree that the translations were purely political and aesthetic projects of legitimacy by Akbar’s court that sought to culturally accommodate religiously diverse communities within the empire. It is important to note a significant presupposition within this claim: if Akbar’s courtly translations were intentionally exclusionary to any particular theological bent, an emergent implication is that the Mughals’ own Islamic religious sensibilities were rigid, strictly defined, and impermeable. Furthermore, to deem the project as one of tolerance and “cultural accommodation” is to also then assume that the Mughal court possessed a sharp discernment of religious communities as distinct within the empire. In order to examine the validity of these implications, we can begin by studying the theological milieu of Akbar’s rule.

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17. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 117.

18. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 117.

19. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 117.

20. Muzzafar Alam, “Pursuit of Persian,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 2 (May 1998): 335.

Religion & Universalism Under Akbar

Akbar's reign can be fairly characterized as one marked by strident religious iconoclasm. The spiritual terrain under his rule was steeped in creative experimentation of theological beliefs, much of which was driven by the emperor himself. Despite the empire's ostensible identification with being nominally Islamic, Akbar frequently assumed the license to diverge from what would have been understood as orthodox ritual and belief. For instance, Akbar "forbade Islamic prayers, fasting and the pilgrimage and allowed the day of resurrection and judgment to be openly doubted and ridiculed at court," replaced the Islamic calendar with a Persian solar one, promoted the study of philosophy in lieu of religious studies, and even "suggested that ablution be performed before having sex" rather than after (as is sanctioned by normative Islamic law).<sup>21</sup> Akbar's disaffection with orthodox Islam coincided with a deep engagement with contemporary Sufi doctrines of unityism — which asserted that "to worship Allah, there are many ways and foundation of each religion is on the truth" — and with regular interaction with Hindu philosophers and practitioners.<sup>22</sup>

Abdul Qadir Al-Badaoni, Akbar's courtly historian and translator, wrote extensively — and often bitterly — about Akbar's interaction with Sufi and Hindu thought. In Volume II of his court historical account, *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh*, Al-Badaoni wrote the following:

Samanas and Brahmans (who as far as the matter of private interviews is concerned gained the advantage over every one in attaining the honor of interviews with his Majesty, and in associating with him, and were in every way superior in reputation to all learned and trained men for their treatises on morals, and on physical and religious sciences, and in religious ecstasies, and stages of spiritual progress and human perfections) brought forward proofs, based on reason and traditional testimony, for the truth of their own, and the fallacy of our religion, and inculcated their doctrine with such firmness and assurance, that they affirmed mere imaginations as though they were self-evident facts, the truth of which the doubts of the sceptic could no more shake.<sup>23</sup>

21. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 237.

22. Cemil Kutlutürk, "A Critical Analysis of Akbar's Religious Policy: Din-i Ilahi," *International Relations and Diplomacy* 4, no. 6 (June 2016): 409.

23. Abdu-L-Qadir Ibn-I-Muluk Shah Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh Vol.II*, trans. W.H. Lowe (Patna: Academica Asiatica, 1973), 264.



Al-Badaoni, who made no hesitation to repudiate the “reviling attacks against our pure and easy, bright and holy faith,” unveiled the unyielding enthusiasm with which Akbar approached Hindu thought and practice.<sup>24</sup> On the next page of his text, Al-Badaoni wrote:

At one time a Brahman, named Debi who was one of the interpreters of the *Mahabharata*, was pulled up the wall of the castle sitting on a *charpai* till he arrived near a balcony, which the Emperor has made his bed-chamber. Whilst thus suspended he instructed his Majesty in the secrets and legends of Hinduism, in the manner of worshipping idols, the fire, the sun and stars, and of revering the chief gods of these unbelievers, such as Brahma, Mahadev, Bishn, Kishn, Ram, and Mahama (whose existence as sons of the human race is a supposition, but whose non-existence is a certainty, though in their idle belief they look on some of them as gods, and some as angels). His Majesty, on hearing further how much the people of the country prized their institutions, began to look upon them with affection. He became especially firmly convinced of the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, and he much approved of the saying: “*There is no religion in which the doctrine of Transmigration has not a firm hold.*” And insincere flatterers composed treatises in order to establish indisputable arguments in favor of this thesis.<sup>25</sup>

Evident in his embittered description was Akbar’s growing desire to assimilate what he found alluring within Hinduism, regardless of its incompatibility with Islamic philosophy, into his own theological framework. Al-Badaoni continued by deriding arguments nascent within Akbar’s spiritual practice concerning “the Unity of Existence, such as idle Sufis discuss, which eventually lead to license and open heresy” and which were to become “a chief cause of the weakening of the Emperor’s faith in the commands of Islam.”<sup>26</sup>

This exploratory impulse — urged on by the emperor himself — to problematize orthodox Islamic practice and coalesce discrete theologies into a unified cultural system was a hallmark of Akbar’s religious discourse. Court histories, some accounts written by Al-Badaoni himself, attested that “Akbar engaged in certain

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24. Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh Vol.II*, 264.

25. Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh Vol.II*, 265.

26. Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh Vol.II*, 266.

Sanskrit-inspired religious practices, like sun veneration” against the counsel of Islamic doctrinal scholars.<sup>27</sup> As explicated above by Al-Badaoni, the emperor was influenced strongly by the theory of transmigration, a cornerstone within traditional Hindu doctrine. Akbar was also said to have “appreciated the value of Hindu gods and goddesses” and once even “observed some rites which were customary among the Hindus.”<sup>28</sup> This practice was simply a personal manifestation of what was to become a wider imperial ideology of universal peace (*sulh-i kull*) that preached open-minded engagement between disparate belief systems. While scholars have “frequently conflated *sulh-i kul* with modern concepts of toleration,” it is better understood as a spiritual orientation that “enjoined individuals to seriously weigh ideas from different traditions and adopt perspectives that superseded those espoused by their own communities.”<sup>29</sup>

The internal logic of *sulh-i kul*, hence, eclipses that of a pragmatic political strategy to circumvent sectarian strife; it was instead one of incessant theological reflection and reconfiguration intended to locate a perennial “truth” and subsequently suffuse through the cultural milieu of the empire. From this quest emerges Akbar’s own spiritual enterprise, *Din-i-Ilahi*. The term *Din-i-Ilahi* was used by Al-Badaoni—translated as “Divine Religion”—in his *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh* with regards to a declaration of conversion made by Mirza Jani Beg, a ruler of the city Tattha, who was said to have signed the following record: “I who am so and so, son of so and so, do voluntarily, and with sincere predilection and inclination, utterly and entirely renounce and repudiate the religion of Islam, which I have seen and heard of my fathers, and do embrace the ‘Divine Religion’ of Akbar Shah.”<sup>30</sup> The tradition, manicured carefully by Akbar himself, marked a “disassociation from traditional and imitative Islam” and sought to engender a “universal peace and religious freedom” founded upon a shared theological architecture.<sup>31</sup>

### Akbar’s Immanent Sacrality

The actual principles and practices of the *Din-i-Ilahi* are certainly of consideration, but the tradition’s significance here lies rather in what it asserted about Akbar himself. The steady invalidation of traditional Islamic belief can fairly

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27. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 131.

28. Kutlutürk, “A Critical Analysis,” 410.

29. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 152.

30. Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh Vol.II*, 314.

31. Kutlutürk, “A Critical Analysis,” 415.

be recognized as a calculated siphonage of power from the courtly orthodox establishment to the emperor himself. Truschke quoted Abu'l Fazl, who refers to this power struggle by declaring that “Akbar will no longer allow the supposedly learned of Islam undeserved authority” and will instead offer “himself as a superior replacement,” thereby supplanting the role of theologians by “recalibrating the

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nature of knowledge” itself.<sup>32</sup> This is contextualized within a broader attempt by Akbar to reformulate Mughal power so as to implant it within himself. Through a wide array of political and symbolic acts, Akbar “built upon his personal appeal to establish animate or metaphor of the Emperor’s person as an embodiment of the Empire.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, the imperial system was consolidated within the emperor himself — to challenge his authority was to debilitate the empire.

This ideological inflection towards an embodied dominion did not, however, remain within a plane of political materiality. Within Akbar’s religious experimentation was a concerted effort to lift theology from doctrine and scripture and locate divinity itself as *immanent* within the emperor. Pervasive through Abu'l Fazl’s historical panegyric, the *Ain-i Akbari*, was an attempt to “demonstrate either openly or subtly with every possible rhetorical device, his master’s superiority to ordinary men.”<sup>34</sup> For example, he elevated Akbar above other kings by imbuing the emperor with a sublime resplendence that was tantamount only to that of the divine — “Although kings are the shadow of God on earth, he is the emanation of God’s light.”<sup>35</sup> However, this imperial construction of a corporeal divinity — in notable continuity from Akbar’s active engagement with perennialist unityism — cannot be distilled into an immutable, pre-existing theological framework. What we find instead is an assimilation of heterogeneous notions of divinity into a unified conception that privileged Akbar as a universal embodiment of sacrality.

32. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 128.

33. John Richards, “Formulation of Imperial Authority Under Akbar and Jahangir,” in *The Mughal State 1526-1750*, ed. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 129.

34. Richards, “Formulation of Imperial Authority,” 129.

35. Abul Fazl-I-Allami, *Ain-I-Akbari Vol. I*, trans. Colonel H.S. Jarrett (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society), 631.

Azfar Moin's *The Millennial Sovereign* laid much of the groundwork for this argument. Moin noted that Akbar's claims of sacred kingship were made "in an idiom of messianism and enacted with rituals of sainthood" that exploited the then-oncoming Islamic millennium to proclaim his innate sacrality.<sup>36</sup> The completion of a millennium since the Prophet's death unfurled the possibility of a new dynastic cycle, the founding of which would necessitate a sacred presence or, as Akbar professed himself to be, a "Renewer of the Second Millennium (*Mujaddid-i Alf-i Than*)."<sup>37</sup> This sovereign declaration was predicated upon a deeply embodied sacrality; the millennial Renewer was said to have been reborn to inaugurate the oncoming millennia, reestablish his link with divinity for the next thousand years, and pivot the new era "not on a new doctrine or interpretation of law but on taking the place — bodily and spiritually — of a sacred entity."<sup>38</sup> This claim was buttressed by chronicled stories of "divine light" finding its perfection within Akbar after multiple reincarnations through history and even of "infant Akbar's ability to speak Jesus-like in the cradle."<sup>39</sup>

Widespread recognition of Akbar's immanent spirituality led to his hesitant but eventual acceptance of the role as the era's designated spiritual mediator. Thus, Akbar assigned himself the responsibility to "to end the unquestioned following of tradition (*taqlid*) which had only caused dissension and confusion and in its place offer reasoned judgment (*ijtihad*)."<sup>40</sup> From this context emerges a lucid understanding of Akbar's sacrality and its resultant devotional movement. As Moin wrote, Akbar "openly acknowledged his patronage of radical and antinomian Sufi groups who venerated him as divine; his support for the arguments of the Jesuit priests against their Muslim adversaries; his impatience with traditional Islamic law; his need to recruit and patronize men from all creeds and castes across India, Iran, and Transoxania; and, finally, his thinly-veiled performance as the saintly guide and spiritual master of all humanity."<sup>41</sup> Akbar was disinterested in the subversion or replacement of any religion; by asserting himself as a sacred sovereign, the heralded saint of the era, Akbar postured himself as not *against* any religion but rather *above them all*.

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36. Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, 203.

37. Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, 206.

38. Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, 210.

39. Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, 213.

40. Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, 218.

41. Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, 223.

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The appropriation of myriad philosophical systems (i.e. metempsychosis, reincarnation, illumination theory, and so on) to undergird messianic claims discloses Akbar's intent to position himself as not only the rightful arbitrator of all traditions but also as a universal figure of divine immanence. Akbar's reign bore witness to an active ontological restructuring; the supramundane descended, much to Al-Badaoni's dismay, from a position of exteriority that ineluctably transcends man and flowed instead from a sublimated reconceptualization of the emperor himself. In doing so, the authority of the orthodox Islamic order steadily diminished, and the Mughal emperor's expansive political and theological power was made indistinct from his corporeality. There is undoubtedly room to suggest that this was a result of political arithmetic to crystallize imperial legitimacy. However, Akbar's theological orientation exists as the foundational term upon which such political implications emanate. Codes of religious tolerance supersede the function of political efficacy. They are better understood, their inherent political import notwithstanding, as demonstrations of a fluid personal religiosity that was only *then* translated into imperial strategy.

We can then perhaps dismantle the notion that "religious tolerance" was enforced as an exclusively political objective. An ideology of tolerance, divorced from any interest in theological diffusion, presupposes sharp distinctions

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between the religiosity of the imperial court and that of the empire. In that model, a lenient emperor may detachedly accommodate cultural minorities through policy while firmly maintaining his own theology. However, the cultural identity of the Mughal empire, especially under Akbar's reign, failed to retain any strictly defined religious sensibility. The incessant flow of multicultural influence through the empire's borders and an imperial assimilatory predisposition forced its identity into a state of perpetual flux that allowed for radical experimentation at the highest level. Akbar's determination to arbitrate all religious sensibilities in

his domain emerged from a campaign to *destabilize religious distinctions* as a whole, and it manifested in an assertion of his own universal divinity and of the universality of spiritual truth. Therefore, arguments of pure political utilitarianism become untenable; which populations in particular was Akbar pandering to with his policies, and how can we unerringly extricate such policies from his theological project of universalism?

### Locating Theology Within Translation

Understanding Akbar's theological formulations as beyond *exclusively* political accommodations suggests a more expansive way of also approaching courtly cultural productions. If we were to embed the translation movement within Akbar's broader project of fashioning a universal imperial religiosity, we may find ourselves arriving at a different conclusion than did Truschke who, once again, contended that the translations of Hindu epics were done with the purposeful excision of their intrinsic theology. A broader examination of the translation project as a whole, however, unveils an indisputable attention devoted by the Mughal translators to Hindu theology. Abu'l Fazl, for example, wrote freely in the *Ain-i Akbari* about the tenets and practices of Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist philosophical schools.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the spiritually dense chapter abbreviated from the *Razmnamah*, was rendered into Persian "as a freestanding text several times during Mughal rule, and the first translation may have been in Akbar's court."<sup>43</sup> Its diminution within the *Razmnamah*, therefore, becomes an isolated incident — albeit a notable one — that may perhaps be negligible within the larger context of Sanskrit-to-Persian translation.

In order to properly situate the translations of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* within Akbar's theological enterprise, we must also account for his personal involvement with the project. Official court histories presented the *Mahabharata* as closely connected with the Mughal sovereign by describing how Akbar employed "some of the chief literary stars of his time to participate in the translation and retranslation processes" and consulted "with the *Razmnamah* translators regularly."<sup>44</sup> Truschke remarked on Akbar's eager participation in the movement by stating that he "never devoted equivalent resources to another translation and rarely to another manuscripts (the Akbari Ramayan being a

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42. Abul Fazl-I-Allami, *Ain-I-Akbari Vol. III*, trans. Colonel H.S. Jarrett (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society).

43. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 117.

44. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 102.

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notable exception).<sup>45</sup> We can find evidence of Akbar's intervention within the following passages in Al-Badaoni's *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh*:

Among the remarkable events of this year is the translation of the *Mahabharata*, which is the most famous of the Hindu books, and contains all sorts of stories, and moral reflections, and advice, and matters relating to conduct and manners, and religion and science, and accounts of their sects, and mode of worship, under the form of a history of the wars of the tribes of Kurus and Pandus, who were rulers in Hind, according to some more than 4,000 years ago, and according to the common account more than 80,000. And clearly this makes it before the time of Adam: Peace be upon him! And the Hindu unbelievers consider it a great religious merit to read and copy it.<sup>46</sup>

Accordingly, he became much interested in the work, and having assembled some learned Hindus, he gave them directions to write an explanation of the *Mahabharata*, and for several nights he himself devoted his attention to explaining the meaning to Naqib Khan, so that the Khan might sketch out the gist of it in Persian. On the third night the Emperor sent for me, and desired me to translate the *Mahabharata*, in conjunction with Naqib Khan. The consequence was that in three or four months I translated two out of eighteen sections, at the puerile absurdities of which the eighteen thousand creations may well be amazed...Nevertheless, I console myself with the reflection, that what is predestined must come to pass.<sup>47</sup>

Hence, the translations were not as a dispassionate courtly endeavor conducted in the lower ranks; Akbar, in the midst of his creative religious reformulations, closely oversaw the project. While the degree of collision between his metaphysical musings and the translations is unclear, it is unlikely given his oft-exerted influence that the two were wholly disconnected.

Abu Fazl's preface to the *Razmnamah*, in detailing the imperial intent behind the text's production, indicates that the translation was even meant to aid Akbar's quest to resist theological sectarianism and seek "the divine truth."<sup>48</sup> In the same text, Abu'l Fazl refers to Hindu conceptions of cyclical time to refute Islamic

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45. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 102.

46. Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh Vol.II*, 329.

47. Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh Vol.II*, 330.

48. Babagaolzadeh, "Understanding," 48.

contentions on the age of the universe (“common Muslim people...believe that human origin dates back seven thousand years...therefore, it was gracefully decided to translate this precious book, which includes age-old facts about the universe”), thus imbuing the *Mahabharata* with the remarkable authority to displace traditional Islamic theology.<sup>49</sup> The Persian text itself, contrary to Truschke’s interpretation, is a site of abundant theological entanglement as it “reproduces much of the *Mahabharata*’s theological framework intact, including the concept of *avatāras* (incarnations of gods), Sanskrit terms for god, and many specific deities and their stories.”<sup>50</sup> The translators simultaneously overlaid the entire story “with a monotheistic Islamic deity” (the translators frequently placed “Allah alongside his Hindu counterparts” and, at one instance in the story, recast Hindu gods as “intermediaries between humans and Allah”).<sup>51</sup>

This active blending of theological landscapes suggests — in striking resemblance to Akbar’s own religiosity — a purposeful engagement between otherwise discrete theological frameworks. Akbar’s incision into the Hindu text and infusion of Muslim concepts should not be seen as an Islamization of the *Mahabharata*. On one instance recorded — with notable disdain — in the *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh*, Akbar publicly chastised Al-Badoani, the text’s chief translator, for including a line in the text that denoted a strict application of traditional Islamic theology:

Two days before the entrance of the Sun into Aries, the Emperor called to me to come from the window in the public and private audience-chambers; and said to Shaikh Abu-l-Fazl, “we thought that so and so” (meaning the writer of these pages) “was an unworldly individual of Sufi tendencies, but he appears to be such a bigoted lawyer that no sword can sever the jugular vein of his bigotry.”<sup>52</sup>

The line in question, as Al-Badaoni continued to say, referred to “the general Resurrection, and the Last Judgement, and things contrary to his own fixed tenets, who never talked of anything but metempsychosis, and so suspected me of theological bias and bigotry.”<sup>53</sup>

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49. Babagaolzadeh, “Understanding,” 49.

50. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 115.

51. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 115.

52. Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh Vol.II*, 413.

53. Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh Vol.II*, 413.



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Here we are faced with evidence of textual excision of theology that, unlike that of the *Bhagavad Gita*, was not targeted towards Hinduism. When considered in conjunction with Akbar's personal theology and his creative license on the translations, we can argue that the selective exclusion of religious philosophy may have been driven by a determination of whether its inclusion would have fit within the emperor's universalist theological framework — hence the wholesale rejection of Al-Badaoni's "bias and bigotry" — rather than *purely* in an attempt to make the text "intelligible to a new readership."<sup>54</sup> The Hindu-Muslim theological binary presupposed by an interpretation of the texts as "accommodating" is rather collapsed in the translations and replaced instead with symbolism stemming from Akbar's unique politico-religious ideology.

We can discern further proof of Akbar's theological calculus being latent within the translations by locating his claims to sacrality within the texts. The Hindu epics, once again, offered an immensely appropriative infrastructure that is constitutive of certain exploitable narratives that mediate "the religious, that is, the divine or numinous, and the political," or life within the human polity.<sup>55</sup> The *Ramayana*, for example, presents a "powerful — because direct and unequivocal — imaginative formulation of the divine king as the only being capable of combating evil."<sup>56</sup> When examined as such, the Mughal translation of the *Ramayana* as an attempt to appropriate this meaning system in its projection of Akbar as King Rama within its miniatures.<sup>57</sup> In the *Razmnamah* we bear witness to a similar fashioning of likeness of Akbar to the character Karna, whose conception by the Sun-God paralleled Akbar's claims of descent from divine light.<sup>58</sup>

Abu'l Fazl's preface to the *Razmnamah*, as suggested before, also denoted a theological intervention into the Islamic orthodoxy and explicitly lauded the superlative, divine character of the emperor as the "lord of the age."<sup>59</sup> Interestingly enough, when asked to write a similar preface for the *Akbari Ramayana*, Al-Badaoni unsurprisingly declined in a tirade against "that black book, which is naught like the book of my life."<sup>60</sup> The emperor's identification with divine — or at least divine-adjacent — Hindu characters and the attempts of self-fashioning his sacrality in the texts' peripheral accompaniments seem superfluous within

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54. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 118.

55. Pollock, "Ramayana and Political Imagination," 281.

56. Pollock, "Ramayana and Political Imagination," 282.

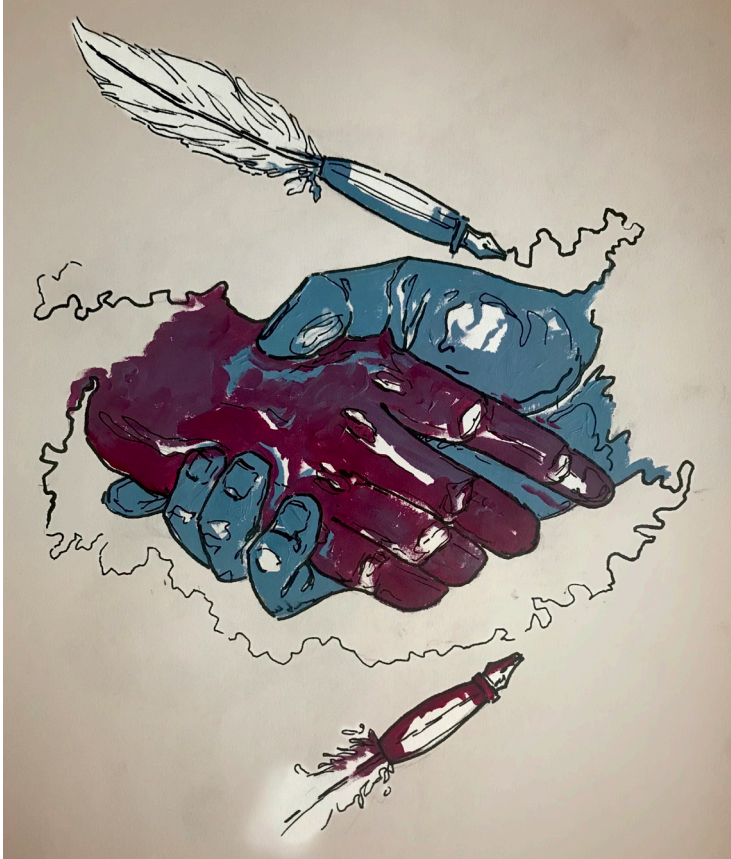
57. Pollock, "Ramayana and Political Imagination," 287.

58. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 122.

59. Babagaolzadeh, "Understanding," 90.

60. Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhabu-T-Tawarikh Vol.II*, 378.

Truschke's conception of the translation movement as a cultural accommodation. Additionally, the theological *mélange* suffused through the texts disputes any notion of a rigid Mughal theology that distinguishes itself from the *other*. Instead,



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we begin to find space to interpret the project as an assertion of Akbar's ceaselessly evolving, organismic theological configuration.

### Conclusion

The translations of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* into Persian under Akbar's reign cannot be seen solely as isolated acts of political pragmatism. Akbar's intricate weaving of a polyvalent, permeable, and self-embodied

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religiosity embedded the translation movement within a moment of theological creativity that imbued the effort with a more nuanced texture than that of utilitarian strategy. The translations may have perhaps signified an inflection point in the empire's trajectory. Akbar's ideology of multicultural assimilation and universalism threaded itself through his descendant lineage without displacing its inner spiritual logic. Akbar's son and successor, Jahangir, "assumed the same universal spiritual status as his father, a status that placed him above all religious traditions and made him the ultimate arbiter of religious truth" as is evidenced by multi-religious symbolism of divinity, renewal, and transcendence within his own courtly cultural productions.<sup>61</sup> Most notably, Jahangir's grandson, Dara Shikuh, immersed himself in Sufi conceptions of universalism and, not unlike his great-grandfather Akbar, interpreted Hindu philosophy as hermeneutically continuous with Islamic doctrine.<sup>62</sup>

The endurance of interest in Akbar's ideas exists within its latent spirituality. Theology exists as a foundational term of any subsequent ideological reproductions by Akbar and his successors. If we reconcile the unmistakable spiritual substance within Mughal ideology with a conception of Mughal identity as one of fluidity and unremitting recalibration, it becomes problematic to conceive of the translation project as a pragmatic accommodation-from-above rather than as an organic product of experimental theological reformulation. If this is the case, the translated *Razmnamah* and the *Akbari Ramayan* must be recognized within the broader genealogies of the perennial epics for their concealed creativity and momentous historical import.

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61. Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, 272.

62. Muhammad Dara Shikuh, *Majma-UI-Bahrain*, trans. Mahfuz-UI-Haq (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1929), 38.

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### **AKHIL JONNALAGADDA** (AUTHOR)

**Hanszen College, '20**

Akhil Jonnalagadda is a senior studying History and Religion. He can usually be found watching low-rated movies, gardening, or lounging under the sun. He isn't sure what's next after graduation, but it will undoubtedly include those three things.



### **ABIGAIL KING** (ARTIST)

**Wiess College, '22**

Abigail King, from Austin, Texas, is a sophomore at Wiess College. She is majoring in Biochemistry and VADA with a concentration in Studio Art. She is also the current marketing manager of The Hoot and Vice President of the Wiess merchandise committee.