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Reflections on Culture and Circulation in Early Modern India

Approaches to Indian literature have changed dramatically since I first entered the field over two decades ago. This is not the place to catalogue all of the important developments, though it seems salient to note a few. Many of us no longer relegate so much of Mughal-period Indian literature to a 'medieval past, even if scholars writing in Hindi still frequently use the term *madhyakāl*, but see it as a threshold of something new (hence the category 'early modern'). And literature of this period is no longer synonymous with specifically religious literature. The official title of our conference, the admittedly unwieldy 'International Conference on Early Modern Literatures of North India' (ICEMLNI), is a gesture toward a more capacious understanding of the textual past, even if the shorthand 'bhakti conference' is still in use among participants.

The 'Early Modern Literatures of North India' is a vast subject, encompassing a wide range of genres and subjects in a multitude of languages. Much of this textual past has yet to be explored. As Imre Bangha reminds us, Hindi manuscript culture proliferated dramatically after 1600,[1] and Hindi is only one of the major languages in play during this period. Muzaffar Alam, for his part, notes the extraordinary achievements of the Mughal dynasty in the Persian language: 'In terms of sheer profusion and variety of themes, this literary output probably exceeded that produced under every other Muslim dynasty.'[2] Most of us are only familiar with a tiny fraction of early modern India's textual culture. Often out of necessity or by inclination we burrow down into one particular tradition and this is in spite of the fact that India then and now has always been a profoundly polyglot place.

Scholars have grappled with the interplay between language ecumenes, proposing frameworks to make sense of them. Sheldon Pollock's model of the 'cosmopolitan' and 'vernacular' in literary culture has been very influential, particularly for theorizing how a whole panoply of Indian and Southeast Asian languages drew expressive sustenance from Sanskrit.[3] Shantanu Phukan's idea of an 'ecology'

1 Bangha (2011), pp. 140-41.
2 Alam (2004), p. 122.
3 Pollock (2006), especially chapters 8–10.

of languages has been a valuable strategy for understanding the investment of Mughal-period Persian intellectuals in Hindi literature.[4] More recently, Francesa Orsini has been highlighting the importance of multilingual approaches to Indian literature[5] and a collection of essays that Thomas De Bruijn and I edited sought to foreground the cross-pollination of literary cultures within India.[6] When operating in a multilingual setting authors make certain choices that we need to understand far better than we currently do. They may have been responding to different audiences when they made these choices. Some authors then, as now, may compose in the vernacular in full view of more cosmopolitan options (Sanskrit, Persian, or, in today's world English) whether because of education and life chances or a personal leaning toward a particular mode of writing. Choosing one language over another may offer different rewards, depending on the context. But writers were usually aware of different possibilities, and their work was colored by other languages in the literary field even if they hewed closely to one.

The following essays are in part an invitation to think across and between languages. The educational and lexicographical texts at the heart of Arthur Dudney's formulations, the institutional armature of Persian in India, are a good basis for reflecting on language interactions since genres like primers and dictionaries were responsive to their immediate social and geographical contexts.[7] By the seventeenth century, Persian was no longer an essentially foreign language but was deeply embedded in Indian linguistic and literary culture. Translations, or in some cases transcreations, of prior works have been around for a long time in India and are also a productive way to think about language relationships. Marc Tiefenauer's essay studies the processes by which complex ideas from Sanskrit theology and diverse Indic knowledge systems were rendered into a Perso-Islamicate thought world.

Dudney offers a tantalizing glimpse of the life of Persian in the *qaṣbah*, the provincial towns that, though secondary centers when compared to cosmopolitan cities like Delhi or Agra, were nonetheless critical to administration. *Qaṣbah*s may also have been far more important in cultural terms than we currently understand. It is typical to associate Persian with high Mughal court culture, even if recent scholarship has pointed to the ubiquity of the language at the middle and even lower rungs of society.[8] The figure of ʿAbdul Wāsiʿ Hānsawī (fl. late seventeenth century), who

4 Phukan (2001).

5 One programmatic statement is Orsini (2012).

6 De Bruijn and Busch (2014).

7 Lexicography has been a relatively understudied subfield in India, though R. S. McGregor's study of early Hindi dictionaries (2001) masterfully illuminates language interactions and provides some evidence of precolonial framings of language. Also see Walter Hakala's excellent recent book (2016).

8 Recent work on the Persian munshi by Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (2004) and Rajeev Kinra (2015) are now indispensable to how we think about the Persian bureau-

animates Dudney's paper, shows us another view of the Persian cosmopolis. ʿAbdul Wāsiʿ was a member of a class of everyday teachers who kept the cogs of Persian education moving. Numerous works of his can be excavated from Indian manuscript libraries. His *Risālah* (*Essay*) on the rules of Persian, in part a digest of earlier lexicographical studies, was evidently in wide circulation. His *Ġharāʾib al-Luġhāt* (*Oddities among Words*) in particular bears testament to how Indic words were encompassed into Persian. This work suggests that Persian, often hailed as a quintessentially cosmopolitan language today, could operate in something of a vernacular register. This evidence of vernacular Persian was later somewhat erased since Sirāj al-Dīn ʿAlī Ḳhān Ārzū, a more sophisticated courtly intellectual than his provincial counterpart, rewrote ʿAbdul Wāsiʿ Hānsawī's text as *Nawādir al-Alfāẓ* (*Wonders among words*), and huffily rejected expressions he viewed as rustic solecisms.[9] The boundaries of *fasāhat* (linguistic purity) needed to be policed.

Dudney makes many valuable observations about the interactions between Persian and vernacular that are legible in lexicography, but the relationship between Ārzū and ʿAbdul Wāsiʿ also speaks to larger issues in Indian literary culture, particularly some of the social geographies of the multilingual literary field. ʿAbdul Wāsiʿ did not achieve the fame of his near-contemporary Ārzū. He did not trade in the wares of courtly *fasāhat* by writing poetry but instead he toiled in the more workaday provincial world of education and lexicography. His memory has been nearly erased, but finding traces of him through the appropriation of his material by influential figures like Ārzū (whatever his snobbery about usage, Ārzū did evidently consider the work of ʿAbdul Wāsiʿ important since he drew heavily on two of his works) prompts us to examine more closely our assumptions about metropole and periphery in the constitution of literary excellence and their position along the vectors of cultural circulation. The profile of ʿAbdul Wāsiʿ Hānsawī drawn here, sketchy though the historical record is, raises important issues for early modern literary and social history and encourages us to seek richer models to handle the diverse social and multilingual encounters in the Indian textual record.

Multilingualism is equally central to Tiefenauer's essay. Probing a little known treatise on embryology, the *Upanikhat-i Garbha* (*The Secret Science of Embryology*),

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cracy in India. Sumit Guha (2004), pp. 26–27 has demonstrated the trickle-down of Persian into Marathi at the level of local bureaucracy. Certainly Persian was still an important part of Indian education well into the nineteenth century. Some of the earliest Hindi authors, like Devakinandan Khatri (fl. 1890) and Premchand (active in the early decades of the twentieth century), received a Persian education.

9 Ārzū scoffs at words like *chatrī* (a feature of Rajput architecture) that were not in Delhi usage. Linguistic snobbery was of course widespread in India over the longue durée. Witness the need for the Sanskrit language to be policed by *śiṣṭa* people, namely the Brahmins of Āryavārtā (Desphande 1993). And many thinkers militated against using *grāmya* (rustic) words, considered a *doṣa* (flaw) in poetry.

whose translation from Sanskrit into Persian was sponsored by none other than the famous Mughal prince Dara Shukoh (1615–1659), he offers up a vision of translation theory and practice that raises larger questions about the hermeneutics of cultural exchange. In the complex act of translation, a very wide range of strategies can be followed for rendering concepts into another language. The Sanskrit embryological text in question was embedded in the Brahminical thought world, elements of Sāṃkhya, Advaita Vedanta, and Ayurveda comingled. How did Persian scholars 'cope' with all of the embedded references and prior texts?[10] Drawing on the work of Vladimir Ivir, Tiefenauer examines the strategies of borrowing (that is importing a loan word from the source language), definition, literal translation, substitution, lexical creation, omission, and addition. These techniques might also be used in combination, or in other surprising ways. For instance, borrowing loan words can itself be a multilingual act, when the translator chooses to let a combination of Sanskrit and Hindustani words speak in their own cultural register on the Persian page. Here Tiefenauer is in the good company of other South Asia scholars who have investigated the deeply cultural components of translation. Tony Stewart, for instance, has found translation theory a useful framework for exploring how Muslim and Hindu cultural systems were mediated through 'dynamic equivalence.'[11]

For Tiefenauer, translation can shade into diplomacy, as when strains of Indian theology and philosophy were rendered into an Islamic worldview. Exuberant references to theistic gods were tamped down with a generic Advaita formulation or flattened into epithets for Allah, reducing their theological awkwardness for Muslim readers.[12] Transmigration, the rebirth of souls into a womb, was a similarly unacceptable idea in Islam (which conceives of a singular afterlife of the body) and it needed to be managed. It is particularly fascinating to observe how Quranic references sometimes served as suitable glosses for the Sanskrit terminology. Quranic equivalences made Hindu concepts legible in a new framework, though they also profoundly altered their meaning. Overall, the act of translation is consistent with Dara Shukoh's larger vision of the conformity of Hindu philosophy with Islamic monotheism.

Much of today's university curriculum, in India and abroad, centers on a fairly restricted literary canon; students are naturally eager to read works deemed excellent by generations of readers. But forays into lesser known or minor works should not be seen as merely mining for esoterica, when scholars are able to excavate important patterns that bear on larger cultural issues. Reading beyond the canon, as these essays show, can expand our knowledge of early modern textual culture and the methods we can employ to approach it.

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10 On 'prior text' see Becker (1995), pp. 285–288.

11 Stewart (2001).

12 On the need to avoid theological awkwardness in the translation of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* into Persian at Akbar's court, see Truschke (2011).

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