

## Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court

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It is becoming increasingly clear that our understanding of the Mughal Empire, and early modern empires in general, is benefiting greatly from work dedicated to overcoming preconceptions of power, authority and imperial culture. Within a historiographic tradition dominated by the teleological narrative of Britain's imperial inevitability, the history of the Mughal Empire has often been subsumed into longer-term histories of India, sometimes as little more than a footnote. Yet, during the 16th and 17th centuries, the Mughal Empire was one of the most powerful empires in the early modern world. It oversaw a huge geographical landmass, ruled over more people than any contemporary power, and governed a population with diverse religious, cultural and political histories. In traditional interpretations of the empire they did so through a heavy handed, top-down approach that John Richards described as an 'autocratic centralism' that drew heavily on Persian administrative traditions and the military organisation of 'Turkic-Mongol conquest empires'.<sup>(1)</sup>

Counter to this trend, recent research has started to reveal some remarkable evidence about how the Mughal Empire functioned, with particularly interesting work being done regarding its government's relations with its subjects, with other states and with other cultures. Integrating the Mughal Empire into wider discussions around global history has been particularly challenging, but it is essential work both for early modern empires and global history. This focus on connection, encounter and cultural interaction has presented a number of avenues for examining the Mughal Empire. In particular, the relationship between the Mughal Empire and other states, in Central Asia and Europe, has received considerable attention. In Sanjay Subrahmanyam's *Courtly Encounters* these issues of communication and exchange are assessed across early modern Eurasia. He suggests that the dynamics of encounter in courts during this period can be better understood if we recognise attempts to engender understanding rather than perceive them as spaces of perplexity and confusion.<sup>(2)</sup> A major confluence of the world's travellers, trade and power, the Mughal court has offered numerous opportunities to scholars seeking to better understand cultures of encounter in the early modern world.

In Audrey Truschke's superb book we are presented with an innovative, thought provoking re-assessment of cultures of power in the Mughal court. Rather than focussing on relations with other states, *Culture of Encounters* provides a detailed, stimulating analysis of the ways in which the Mughal administration used

language, literature and art as a means of managing relationships with its new subjects. She argues that the traditional focus on Persianate elements in Mughal role have ‘obscured the close imperial relationship with the Sanskrit cultural world as well as the multicultural nature of Mughal power’ (p. 3). In doing so, these cross-cultural contributed to the construction of authority and ‘their dynamic interweaving of politics and culture can be identified as the solid bedrock on which they built their empire’ (pp. 4–5). By patronising Sanskrit at court the Mughal elite sought to understand what it meant to be rulers of India. Rather than seeking to win over Indian communities with their interest in Sanskrit, Mughal rulers saw these texts as ‘a particularly potent way to imagine power and conceptualise themselves as righteous rulers’ (p. 18).

Focussing on the period from the rule of Akbar onwards (r. 1556–1605), Truschke’s analysis rests on an array of material produced by a Mughal court that supported the production of Sanskrit texts and the translation of Sanskrit material into Persian. Additionally, through this engagement with Sanskrit literati and texts the ruling elite encouraged similar practices in regional centres. Carefully reading original and translated material, predominantly in Persian and Sanskrit, Truschke approaches these centres of translation from a variety of contexts and her interpretation is embedded with a deep understanding of the particular local circumstances of a text’s creation. In doing so she ‘exposes the flaws in monolingual analyses of early modern India when contacts between cultures were more often pivotal rather than peripheral’ and enables her nuanced interpretations of texts that might otherwise be quite familiar (p. 17). As she points out, ‘few academics value (or find the time to pursue) the painstaking work of reading a translated text, alongside its original where possible’, yet in doing exactly that Truschke is able to dramatically alter our perspective of both these texts and the wider history of the Mughal court (p. 103). In addition to enabling a new reading of texts, this approach allows Truschke to present Sanskrit as a frontier within India and build on connected histories of the region.

Across the six chapters of the book, Truschke uses these texts to examine specific intersections between Sanskrit and the Mughal court. Chapter one discusses how direct patronage and looser forms of affiliation facilitated the development of connections between Sanskrit intellectuals and the Mughal elite. The following three chapters each assess the ways Sanskrit entered the Mughal court through translation, adaption and integration. The second chapter focusses on Sanskrit texts produced with Mughal support or for consumption by the ruling class; the third considers Persian translations of the *Mahābhārata* and the creation of a new epic, the *Razm-namah*; and the fourth examines Abū al-Fazl’s treatment of Sanskrit knowledge in his official history of Akbar’s reign, the *ʿAin-i Akbarī*. Chapter five looks beyond the royal court to investigate how Jain and Brahmanical communities wrote in Sanskrit about the Mughals, reflecting on the impact of imperial authority on local communities. In the final chapter Truschke looks at the reception of Akbar’s interests in Sanskrit by members of the ruling and intellectual elite. Across these chapters, a vast array of material is presented to support the central argument of this book – that by weaving together culture and power the Mughals were able to act in truly imperial ways.

In spite of the wide-ranging focus of her work, some of the most interesting elements of Truschke’s work are in the moments where she critically re-evaluates texts that will be familiar to many readers – such as the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana*. For instance, the detailed treatment of the uses of the *Razm-namah*, a translation and adaption of the *Mahābhārata* into Persian, reveals the numerous ways literature provided a means of participating ‘in multiple imperial interests, including political disputes, poetry and history’ (p. 103). Focussing particularly on additions made to the translation in the form of introductory material or abridgement of the text, Truschke shows how different Mughal literati re-imagined the epic as they revisited it. In addition to these editorial additions, this re-assessment reveals the collaborative elements of these translations – such as Fayz’s *Nal-Daman* in which he integrated tales he heard from an Indian storyteller. The Mughal translators recognised the influence of these collaborative efforts, and Truschke reveals how the *Razm-namah* was self-consciously framed ‘as a story being told across a cultural divide’ (p. 104). In doing so, as they re-created the *Mahābhārata* as an Indo-Persian epic the translators were selective in how they responded to unknown, exotic components of the text – such as its religious components – and created a text that spoke to Islamic sensibilities as much as ‘the literary and political needs of Akbar’s multicultural court’ (pp. 111–5). Presenting these key texts from this perspective reveals not only new detail about their content

and creation but also reveals the complex, overlapping networks of interested parties that utilised Sanskrit texts in the Mughal court.

Whereas much of this book examines these moments of interaction and collaboration, Truschke does not shy away from the conflicting responses in the Mughal court to the encouragement of Sanskrit material. To take one example, in detailing the response to Akbar's translation of the *Rāmāyana*, where Akbar was imagined as an incarnation of Vishnu, she reveals the contested nature of cultural approbation within the Mughal court. While some people responded by supporting the production of further copies and rich illuminations others 'balked at the political claims Akbar sought to advance' (p. 205). These included Badā'ūnī, the most prolific translator in Akbar's court, who disparaged Sanskrit material and condemned the *Rāmāyana* as 'that black book' and refused to write a preface for the translation (p. 206). Truschke identifies how Badā'ūnī's concern regarding the political and religious tensions in Akbar's court altered the production and reception of this text. It also reveals antagonistic relationships between the translators who worked on their production, and Badā'ūnī is particularly critical of Abū al-Fazl, whose preface to the *Rāzmnāmah* was deemed an unnecessary diversification from Indo-Islamic knowledge and focused too much on outlandish material (pp. 207–8). Through this dispute Truschke highlights how encounters with Sanskrit were contested even within the Mughal court, and the continued reception of this material sheds light on the shifting priorities of the Mughal elite.

As these examples suggest, Truschke carefully reconstructs the connections between the Mughal court and Sanskrit texts and thinkers. In doing so, this book embeds the history of the Mughal Empire within a historiography of connected histories and histories of encounter that are, predominantly, focused on the edges of empires, in the free-spaces between different cultures and polities. Not only does this turn a traditional approach to encounter on its head, but also shows how a centralising imperial administration could produce cultural hubs that encouraged ongoing exchanges between seemingly conflicting perspectives. Cross-cultural meetings are presented as foundational to the imperial practices of the state that allowed and encouraged a number of 'cultural frontiers' to exist at the heart of the empire (p. 231). What this approach offers the history of empire is multi-faceted and includes a simple encouragement for scholars to get to grips with new archives and new methodologies for reconstructing the past. It also highlights the importance of reading sources with a better awareness of the cultural and social influences that had a part to play in their creation – a challenge of particular importance for material created in places of overlapping imperial space. Finally, it raises questions about how constructions of power can be examined through practices that run counter to interpretations of state formation that rest on centralisation, control and standardisation.

The great strengths of Truschke's book lie in its detailed re-assessments of texts and we are left with little doubt that her compelling argument will place Sanskrit soundly at the centre of future work regarding the Mughal court. In revealing multicultural encounters at the heart of the Mughal Empire this book contributes much to our understanding of connected histories of the region, and in doing so it presents numerous avenues for further work. While it does show how the empire was a polygot polity that collaborated with its Indian subjects, its predominant focus on a narrow, courtly elite does leave further examination of Mughal cultural encounters tantalisingly unanswered. Truschke is clearly aware that a focus on Sanskrit and Persian literature, produced and consumed in royal circles, does not represent an inclusive history of the region, and she makes no claims to the contrary. Yet, it is hard to read this book and not be encouraged to try and do exactly that. With the multicultural attitudes of the Mughal court laid bare questions must be asked about what that meant for relations between the imperial authorities, their administration, and their subjects. Outside the court how was language and translation negotiated within the empire? How were encounters with new populations understood and practiced? What did their approach to knowledge and Indian rule mean for their diplomatic engagement with other Islamic empires? What can the court's response to Sanskrit reveal about encounter with Europeans?

*Culture of Encounters* is an evocative, expertly researched book that brings the collaborative, sometimes combative, world of translation to life. Truschke's exceptional linguistic talents allow her to present and answer questions about the Mughal court that have the potential to radically alter our understanding of the

empire. In addition to being a brilliant piece of research in its own right, this volume has the potential to inspire scholars to re-examine their own approach to region – I certainly have been.

## Notes

1. John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 58–78.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), pp. 8–30.[Back to \(2\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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