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From one empire to the next: The reconfigurations of "Indian" literatures from Persian to English translations

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the first translations of Sanskrit literature into English in the late eighteenth century and how they can be contrasted with pre-existing cultures of translation in India, and in particular with Mughal precedents. Following a brief survey of Sanskrit and Persian theories of translation, the article offers a study of British reconfigurations of Indian literatures in translation and highlights British orientalists' tendencies to either disavow or reject their reliance on Indian literature in Persian. This move towards absenting Indo-Persian precedents and presenting English translations as new, essentially distinct, and superior created a symbolic space where English could challenge and replace a Persian culture of translation, projecting British colonial rule as the new dominant force dislodging the Mughals in India.

KEYWORDS

Indian literature(s) in translation; Indic, Persian, English cultures of translation; trans-creation; orientalism; sanskritisation; *Bhagavad-Gītā*, *Mahābhārata*, *Hitopadeśa*, *Śakuntalā*, *Gītā Govinda*

The first English translation of *The Bhăgvăt Gĕĕtă* (1785) was prefaced by Warren Hastings's letter to Nathaniel Smith. In it, the governor general defended the project in terms that would sound attractive to the members of the East India Company, including a reference to the legacies they would leave behind them: "these will survive when the British dominion in India shall have long ceased to exist, and when the sources which it once yielded of wealth and power are lost to remembrance" (1785, 13). This comment showcases the intimate relationship between empire, imperial legacy, and translation.

This article discusses the imperial imaginary that emerged from the translation projects of Indian literatures in English and in comparison with the treatments of Indic literatures under previous Mughal imperial rulers. Raymond Schwab in *La Renaissance orientale* (1950) and more recently historians of South India and the early British colonial period (Rocher 1993; Alam and Alavi 2001; Raj 2001, 2007; Tavakoli-Targhi 2001) have written extensively on how British orientalists relied on Persian interpreters, scholars, and relay translations to access "Indian" literatures. British orientalists' expertise in Persian gave them easier access to Persian translations of "Indian" literatures. Moreover, they also commissioned Persian translations for their own literary projects; they hired *munshis* and *pundits* – that is, Persian and Sanskrit language teachers and scholars – some of whom were still serving or had served at the courts of regional Mughal rulers.[1] Still, in a move that symbolically repeated the erasure and replacement of Mughal rule

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in India, British orientalists tended to ignore the effects of using Persian as a relay language, except when working on court cases where they expressed distrust towards the Persian interpreters employed at the Court (Raj 2001, 197–204). In the context of the British colonisation of India, the use of the term "original" was crucial in legitimising the scientific quality of the orientalists' translations and works to a Western readership but it overlooked relay translations and neglected the influence of other traditions of translation.

Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi (1996), who worked on these Persian translations and Persian scholars' works instrumental in the development of orientalism, refers to this phenomenon as orientalism's genesis amnesia. My intention is to complement his study by contrasting European, Sanskrit, and Indo-Persian traditions of translation, and to suggest a parallel between the world of politics and the world of literature. It seems that British new colonial administrators used Persian to infiltrate the *zamindari* (land-owning) system of Mughal governance (Cohn [1985] 1996; McLane 1993) and to read Indic literatures, at least before Indology as a separate discipline was established in Britain in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Tavakoli-Targhi (1996) argued that, more often than not, this Persian mediation was disavowed. My point is that disavowal worked hand-in-hand with a belief that English translations of Indian literatures should not look like their "unfaithful" Persian counterparts. In this article, I explore the literary and political consequences of these practices and beliefs.

First, I offer an overview of the translations of Indic literatures commissioned by Mughal rulers, considered alongside the first collections of Indian manuscripts in England and translation projects in English undertaken during the 1780s and 1790s. Then I ask why British orientalists either ignored and masked Persian precedents or imagined their translation projects as antagonistic to them? I argue that British orientalists were operating within a specific tradition of translation that differed from the Indo-Persian one. Failing to acknowledge a plurality of approaches to translation and presupposing theirs as universal, the orientalists tended to view Indo-Persian precedents as deficient, if not entirely fake. Moreover, by pretending to work on a clean slate – while in fact depending on Indo-Persian scholars and their translations – and by removing Persian texts from the corpus of Indian literatures, British orientalists were instrumental in devising what I call an imperial imaginary. That imperial imaginary would not only symbolically erase Mughal presence in India but also make claims about its own universality and its ability to "represent" Indian literatures authentically. As opposed to Mughal and Persian "obfuscation" and "miscegenation", English translations were viewed as capable of manifesting literatures and languages neglected by Eastern rulers and natives alike.

Indian cultures of translation

Historians of the subcontinent have written extensively on the Mughal period and undermined narratives treating Mughal presence in India as extraneous. On the contrary, they focused on the processes of cross-fertilisation between elements of Indic and Islamic cultures and exposed the experiences of people whose lives or careers straddled languages, literary traditions, and continents (Alam and Subrahmanyam 2007; Subrahmanyam 2011; Dalmia and Faruqui 2014; Lefèvre, Županov, and Flores 2015; Truschke 2016).

They also highlighted the dynamics of particular courts and specific periods propitious to the meshing of cultures, languages, and peoples, such as the courts of Emperor Akbar in sixteenth-century Delhi, Agra, and Fatehpur Sikri or the court of the Nawabs of Awadh in eighteenth-century Lucknow.

In fact, traditions of translation between various vernaculars, as well as between vernaculars and Persian, existed in India long before European languages arrived and English became the global language of translation (Alam 2003; Patnaik 2006; Karimi-Hakkak 2009; Krishnamurthy 2009; Choudhuri 2010; Khan 2017; Satyanath 2017; Tharakeshwar 2017). Carl Ernst (2003) details the corpus of Persian and Arabic translations of Indic literatures and indicates four different phases in its constitution. This chronological framework helps situate the specific impulse of British orientalists in the longer history of Persian translation in India. First, Ernst notes the early translations by Indians residing in Baghdad from the period of the Abbasid caliphate and in Delhi from the period of the Turkish sultans, with a special focus on farriery, music, and the erotic; then, political works based on epics from the time of emperor Akbar onwards; third, metaphysical and mystical treatises from the time of prince Dara Shikoh; and fourth, works on Hindu ritual and law commissioned specifically by British residents.

Audrey Truschke (2011, 2016, 101–141) focused on the second phase identified by Ernst and analysed the Persian translations of Sankrit epics, such as the *Mahabharata* turned into the *Razmnama* ("Book of War") in 1584–1586, which served as "a mirror of princes" for the education and glorification of emperor Akbar. The first large translation projects were undertaken at the end of the sixteenth century, when Mughal power was consolidated in the subcontinent. For instance, Panipati's *Dastan-I Ram u Sita* ("Tale of Ram and Sita") and Giridhardas's *Ramayana*, both dedicated to emperor Jahangir, recast the Sanskrit epic in two different ways – the first one as a love story and the second as a heroic tale – thereby showing the creativity of Indo-Persian translation practices. Similarly, Aurangzeb's Islamic devotion never prevented him from maintaining contact with Sanskrit and Hindu scholars and from commissioning new Persian renditions of the *Ramayana* (Truschke 2017, 40–48).

All studies mentioned above allow us to grasp the variety of Mughal and Muslim engagements with Indic and Hindu literatures and highlight the "creative" nature of translation practices. Additionally, Indian literary critics have discussed the specificities of translation traditions in India (Patnaik 2006; Karimi-Hakkak 2009; Krishnamurthy 2009; Choudhuri 2010; and especially Satyanath 2017 and Tharakeshwar 2017). Their essays focus on pre-Mughal eras and deal with concepts of translation outside Persian as well as European literary worlds. Generally, these studies are strong on philology but weak on contextualisation. Likewise, the question of the politics of translation is insufficiently addressed: we get a sense of the main concepts and how Indian poets or philosophers used them, but not why these concepts were privileged above others, or what political and ideological formations at least partially account for the demise and replacement of genres and languages. For instance, when Patnaik notes that "Medieval Indian saw the 'translation' of many popular Sanskrit works into the regional languages […] to the masses" (2006, 148) it is not very clear who the masses were, which texts were translated, and what political objectives supported such translation projects. Indra Nath Choudhuri's essentialist conclusions about adversarial Western and Eastern literary traditions are equally problematic,[2] even though his essay encourages emic thinking about categories used in Indian literary criticism.

This being said, Patnaik does provide a word of caution regarding the Sanskrit tradition, explaining that it has its own set of protected and untranslatable texts, such as the Vedas and mantras. Patnaik also addresses the (Eurocentric) remark that classical Indian literatures had no translation theory by highlighting the fact that theory was rarely addressed separately but rather inserted in works of fiction. For instance, he quotes the *Visnudharmottara* (Part 3, ch. 2, v. 1–9) and Bharata's *Natyashastra*, which is a classical text on dramaturgy, highlighting the trans-modal quality of aesthetic traditions in India (2006, 155), with concepts like *dosas* (defects, such as *qudartha* or circumlocution, *arthantara* or digression into irrelevance, *arthahina* for incoherence, and *ekartha* for tautology), *gunas* (qualities, including *slesa* or apt use, *prasada* or clarity, *samata* for evenness, and *madhurya* for sweetness), *alamkara* (ornamentations), *bhavas* (emotions conveyed in a work of art), *rasa* (the emotional orientation of a work of art), and *riti* (style) being used across music, painting, dance, as well as literature (156). Patnaik argues that these concepts apply to Indian poetics at large and to translation into Sanskrit and from Sanskrit into the vernaculars.

The dominant idea amongst critics is that notions of "originals" and "copies" make little sense and that one should favour the idea of trans-creation. The question is no longer to assess how much a translation may depart from or follow an original. Rather it is about how well it internalises and re-invents it, adding or hiding topics, extending or condensing metaphors, appending commentaries, and so on and so forth (Patnaik 2006, 154). In a context where much of the cultural heritage would be transmitted orally, the notions of "authors" and "original" works could not possibly mean the same as in late eighteenth-century England, where print had become the dominant form of cultural transmission and where the status of the author had been codified in the form of copyright. Patnaik's discussion of "authorship" in the Indian classical context is useful here:

> We talk of Valmiki's *Ramayana* and we also talk of Tulsi's *Ramayana* or Kamban's *Ramayana*. It is never felt that one is the original and the other the copy. It is as if the story of Rama exists somewhere in the Indian tradition and each poet has made it his own. […] Ownership of the story belongs to no individual but to a collective tradition. Often scholars use the expression "transcreation" to look at such works. (Patnaik 2006, 245–246)

In the same vein, Choudhuri explains that the Sanskrit term denoting translation is *anuvada*, meaning repetition of a Vedic text with different wording, or simply "recoding" (2010, 115) and that literary value lies not so much in the capacity of a poet to produce an original work but rather to revitalise and reinvent it, sometimes to a political end.

Similarly, critics of Persian translation tradition have emphasized its creative capacity in the medieval period, when Persia was controlled by Abbasside, Buyid, and Seljuk empires, and then later under Mughal rule in India. Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak writes that in the medieval period "the approach to translation was essentially utilitarian and pragmatic in nature" and "[t]ypically, texts were subjected to a variety of changes, they were simplified, annotated, abridged, illustrated with pictures and diagrams, amended through sequels, or otherwise altered to suit the specific needs of the patron and the new readership" (2009, 495). Importantly, Karimi-Hakkak draws a line between religious texts whose translations tended to be literal and other scientific and philosophical texts where the approach of translators was much more flexible. The *lingua franca* in the

region was Arabic and scholars were at least bilingual: they would usually write in Arabic first and then self-translate into Persian, and "this is one reason why the border between translation and original work, as envisaged in that culture, appears blurred to us" (ibid, 496). As in the Indian classical contexts of translation, the modern classifications of authors and translators, original and copy, are irrelevant.

Given India's multilingual contexts and the courts' policies of cultural accommodation, translations were established as recreations. For instance, Stefano Pellò (2014) explains how in the *tadhkirah* (history) production in Awadh, poets such as Bhagwan Das "Hindi" in *Safina-yi hind*, would recast Hindu characters into Islamic subjects and assimilate Hindu religious and cultural themes into a Perso-Islamic ecumene. Pellò concludes that Bhagwan Das "Hindi" placed himself and other Hindu poets of Persian from Lucknow in an "open" and "extended" framework of belonging (2014, 156). These assimilatory strategies going both ways between Persian and Indic cultural, literary, and linguistic spheres are important to the argument of this article as points of comparison with the strategies of replacement deployed by British orientalists at the end of the eighteenth century. While relying on the existing structures of power and of knowledge, orientalists constructed an image of British colonial rule in contrast to Mughal precedents, promising an independent and direct access to (Sankrit) India. The second part of this article is an attempt to understand what British orientalists meant when they claimed to translate against and without Indian pre-existing cultures of translation at a time when the British colonial administration was presenting itself as an antagonist to Asiatic "despotism" and as the new bearer of the law.

Orientalist collections of "Indian" literature

In this section, I analyse the contents of the catalogues of Eastern manuscripts compiled by eighteenth-century British orientalists in India (Fraser, Guise, Scott, British Museum) and introduce the first catalogues devoted specifically to Sanskrit literature (Chambers, Jones).

Arthur Anthony Macdonell confirmed James Fraser's claim that his forty-one "Sanskerrit" manuscripts "formed the first collection of that kind ever brought into Europe" (Fraser 1742, vi; Macdonell 2004). Fraser's catalogue contains predominantly manuscripts in Persian and Arabic but also includes a limited number of manuscripts in Sanskrit, namely commentaries of *Purana* (myths, legends, lores), *Śastra* (book of precepts, rules, manuals), epic poems, lexicons and grammars, several manuscripts on the history of Rajah dynasties in northern India, and two translations of Sanskrit into Persian. Fraser's catalogue of Indian manuscripts, the first to be published in English, highlights the fact that, at least until the end of the eighteenth century, "Indian literature" meant, for reasons of linguistic proficiency and political expediency, a corpus written in Persian or available in Persian translation.

The second catalogue containing Sanskrit manuscripts was published more than half a century later, in 1793. It belonged to Samuel Guise, surgeon to the general hospital at Surat, and had been compiled between 1777 and 1792. In the preface to the catalogue, the collector displays his knowledge of Mughal interest and patronage of Indic literature and desire to invest money in acquiring Indic literatures in Persian translation (Guise 1793, 4). Guise's catalogue lists only three manuscripts in Sanskrit and one in Tamil, the rest pertaining to Persian and Arabic languages, with 199 and 92 manuscripts

respectively. Unlike those, the manuscripts in Sanskrit and Tamil bear no specific titles but only a brief explanation of the topics covered in them (divination, medicine, calculation of the nativity) with the exception of entry no. 302, which indexes the "Mahabarut". This lack of precision as well as Guise's reliance on a mid-seventeenth century European travel narrative to inform readers on Indian literatures reveals that philological knowledge regarding Indic literatures had stalled since then.

In addition to Fraser's and Guise's, the catalogues of Jonathan Scott and of the British Museum, compiled by William Ouseley – two renowned orientalists of the period, both specialising in Persian – were published in the *Oriental Collections* (1797–1800). Scott's catalogue is comprised of Arabic and Persian manuscripts of histories, annals, collections of letters, and romances but contains no manuscripts in vernacular Indian languages and no translation of Indic literatures. Ouseley gathers in the pages of the *Oriental Collections* the details of the Oriental manuscripts held at the British Museum. The catalogue gives a transliteration of the titles of the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish manuscripts and provides information regarding their authors, circulations, and translation in English. No translations (in Persian) of Indic literatures appear there.

The British Museum published its own full catalogue in 1782. It had a final section on "Oriental Languages", which contained manuscripts in Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, as well as eighteen volumes from the Malabar region, eleven from China, and others belonging to "Various East-Indian Languages" (namely Sanskrit, Marathi, Bengali, and Malay). By 1782, the British Museum possessed only five manuscripts in Sanskrit, including a "Vedh", a "Shaster", described by the compiler as "glosses and comments on the Vedh", the "Baguban Gita", a grammar of the Sanskrit language, and one last unidentified volume (Ayscough 1782, II:904; Harris 1998). The only other institution to have published its catalogue of Eastern manuscripts was the Bodleian Library but it contained no manuscript in Indian languages or in translation (Uri 1787).

The first two catalogues of Sanskrit manuscripts were published at the very end of the eighteenth century. The first belonged to Sir and Lady Jones and contained copies of epic poetry (*Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*), myths and legends (*Puranas*), lyric and mystic poetry (such as the *Gita Govinda* by Jayadeva), and many other manuscripts of poems and tales, including the *Śukasaptati,* which was the Sanskrit version of the popular Persian collection of tales entitled *Tuti Namah*. The catalogue also included glosses on and extracts of the *Vedas*, a grammar, vocabulary, and one dictionary of Sanskrit. Garland Cannon confirms that Jones had planned to publish a Latin translation of a short version of Panini's grammar and that a lexicon of 10,000 Sanskrit words was prepared for him by a pundit, but that he was not able to complete both projects before his untimely death (1990, 353–354).

The second is a catalogue "written at the desire of Sir Robert Chambers by a learned *Pundit*, who lived in his family" (Ouseley 1797–1800, 3: 93). Chambers "virtual" catalogue lists all the major works in Sanskrit literature selected by his pundit for the benefit of European orientalists. It begins with the four *Veda* and continues with the eighteen *Puraṇa* and eighteen *Upa* (minor) *Puraṇa* and then moves to the genres of *itihasa* and *kavya*. The catalogue is not only a list of major titles but also an occasion to teach English readers the specifics of Sanskrit literary poetics and provide the adequate terminology with explanation. The descriptions are very basic but indicate a decisive attempt to use emic categories. For instance, the *Mahabharata* is described as "a famous *Ittihass* (i.e. historical

poem)" "belonging to the Shaster (or Science) of Poorans" (ibid: 101). Distinguished from *itihasa*, the genre of *kavya* is said to include all other "books there are in verse" and the *pundit* then lists the most famous ones. He also indicates subcategories in the genre of *kavya*, namely the "*Natick*" (*natya*, or drama) and the "*Alungear*" described as works about prosody, introduces the science of recitation of the *Vedas* with the "*Chundoh Shaster*", and distinguishes between serious historiography and pleasurable history written in the form of "*Sabet*" (3: 153, 154).

The catalogues indicate a budding investment in Sanskrit by British orientalists based in India at the end of the eighteenth century. Crucially, these manuscripts were meant to permit "direct" access to Sanskrit literature, indicating suspicion against the Persian intermediaries who translated the texts (Hatcher 2005, 691). The result is not a dismissal of Persian literature as such but a monolingual parsing between Indian languages and literatures which had to a large extent and for centuries been imagined co-extensively. According to this grammar of languages, Hindi was separated from Urdu, Bengali was cleaned of its Arabic and Persian elements, and Persian considered as extraneous to the Indian ecumene. The removal of vernacular, Persian, Muslim, and Mughal elements from the Indian canon occurred at the same time as British colonisation expanded territorially and gradually replaced the Mughals as new rulers.

Sanskritizing Indian literature and the orientalist order

British orientalists' interest in Sanskrit was embedded in a colonial context and tied to developments in linguistics. Sanskrit was placed at the very beginning of a line of languages, called by William Jones the "Indo-European" line, and conceived of as the mother tongue and fountainhead of all European literatures (Trautmann 1997; Franklin 2011, 1–42). In his "Third Anniversary Discourse" to the Asiatic Society delivered in 1786, Jones states that Sanskrit bears to Greek and Latin

> a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source. (1799c, 26)

British orientalists would then argue that in collecting and translating Sanskrit manuscripts they were excavating not only India's past but also their own.

Furthermore, the qualities they saw in the language, namely its "antiquity," "copiousness", and "exquisiteness" (Jones 1799c, 1:19–34; Carey 1804, iv), made it comparable with Greek and Latin and therefore turned it into a legitimate object of literary enquiry. Sanskrit literature acquired its pedigree by being put on a par with Latin and Greek literatures (Dodson 2007, 25–37) and therefore expanded the canon of classical literatures from which modern writers could draw their inspirations (Kejariwal 1999, 73–74). For instance, Richard Hole judged the style of the *Gita* to be sublime insofar as it compares with "several passages in Hesiod's *Theogonia*, and more strikingly the battles of Angels in Milton" (1797, 13–14).

David Kopf judiciously reminds us of the fact that in the late eighteenth century only very few British Company servants showed the inclination and skills to pursue Indian knowledge and that, amongst them, only four, namely Jonathan Duncan, Sir Charles Wilkins, Sir William Jones, and Henry Colebrooke, were studying and translating Sanskrit. Alexander Hamilton is a major omission in Kopf's list of early British Sankritists. Indeed, after Hamilton returned

from India, he stayed in Paris between 1802 and 1806 to catalogue the Sanskrit manuscript collections at the Bibliothèque Nationale. He was appointed professor of "Sanscrit and Hindoo literature" at Haileybury College, London, in 1808 and taught the next generation of renowned Sanskritists in France between 1802 and 1806 (Volney, Schlegel and Jean-Louis Burnouf, the father of Eugene Burnouf) and Germany after 1813 (Bopp, Frank, and Schlegel) (Rocher 1968). Kopf disagrees with the notion that their Indian context was the only factor determining their pursuits and insists that these orientalists were first and foremost classicists and that their formations shaped their approaches to Sanskrit language and literature (1969, 22–42). In a similar mode, Kapil Raj noted:

> Of the minority of Englishmen […] who had a penchant for intellectual pursuits […] most were, in the fashion of the "Great-school"-and-Oxonian, High-Church élite of the eighteenth century […], obsessed with classical thought and scripture. […] Not surprisingly then, their understanding of South Asia and its inhabitants was shaped by their own education and training. (2011, 66)

Despite this shared quality, the language of Indian classics is often disqualified as obscure, absurd, and bombastic. For instance, in their prefaces to *The Bhăgvăt Gĕĕtă* both Hastings and Wilkins mention the presence of obscure passages and warn readers against applying European standards of taste to a text that was so remote from them (1785, 7, 24). The argument is restated in *The English Review* calling the *Gĕĕtă* "one of the most valuable literary curiosities" ever translated in English, requesting allowance for its "obscurity" and "mixture of absurdity and bombast", which is presented as the hallmark of oriental compositions, and indicating the "tracks of sublimity" admirable to lovers of Homer and Milton and the "philosophical religion" it contained and that "a Christian will venerate" (1787, IX: 100). Thomas Maurice commended the *Gĕĕtă* for its "venerable antiquity" and for the "genuine information" concerning India and its early history that may be gleaned from it and other "faithful versions of the Sanscreet" (1800, 9). Indian literature is sought after in its Sanskrit version, and because it looks like a classic when wrapped in the garb of this "antique" language. Arguably, English "literature", by which I mean vernacular literature, was still not taught at universities in Britain either and so the occlusion of Indian vernaculars is not surprising per se.

In the case of the India though, the occlusion of vernacular languages is concomitant with the foreignization of Persian and the Sanskritization of India (Mufti 2016, 99–145; Pollock 1993). And in the case of India, these processes served a colonial movement of divide and rule between Muslims and Hindus. Added to this historical situation is the philosophical context proper to Europe and in which new theories about the origins of languages were formulated. Instead of placing the origin of speech in the individual, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1746), Johann Gottfried Herder (1772), and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1822) explained that language's point of origination was the community and that it would therefore reflect the characteristics or "genius" of that community. Safeguarding the purity of the language from foreign "invasions" was key in securing the integrity of a (linguistic) group. John Richardson called languages the "most unerring guide" and "great barometer" of the "barbarity or civilization of a people" indicating "the virtues and the genius" as well as "the vices and the follies of a people" (1777, 1).

It therefore became incumbent upon British orientalists, when faced with hybridised vernaculars, to either belittle them or dismiss them entirely from the literary domain.

Nathaniel Halhed, author of the first Bengali grammar, disparagingly remarked that Bengali had been "corrupted" by "foreign" (i.e. Persian and Arabic) influences and was devoid of any literary achievement. He envisaged his own grammar as a means to "purify" the language and as an opportunity to include and translate specimens of Sanskrit literature, to which speakers of this "insipid" vernacular should return (1778, 189–190). Therefore, in addition to this process of compartmentalisation of languages and literatures implemented by the orientalists, Persian and other vernacular Indian languages were removed from the "authentic" and "original" Indian literary canon. Vernacular literatures suffered the double penalty of being marked with heterogeneity and orality,[3] while orientalism placed cultural value on written literatures.

The *Bhăgvăt Gēētă*, *Hĕĕtōpădēs*, and *Sacontalá*: imagining direct translations as forms of political distinction

Charles Wilkins had been established in Kolkata since the early 1770s as a senior merchant and printer of the East India Company. He moved to a retreat in Varanasi to study Sanskrit and the *Mahabharata* and with the help of Brahmins started to translate sections from the epic. More specifically, his efforts focused on *The Bhagavad Gita*, which he translated and published in 1785. After coming back to England in 1786, he translated fables from *The Hĕĕtōpădēs of Vĕĕshnŏŏ-Sărmā* (1787) and *The Story of Dooshwanta and Sakoontala* (1795), published first in the second volume of *The Oriental Repertory* in 1793 and then as a separate pocket-size volume in 1795.

The play *Sacontalá*, the second publication marketed as a "direct" translation from Sanskrit was published in 1789. Its translator Sir William Jones continued with the publication of *Ṛtusaṃhara The Seasons: A Descriptive Poem* in 1792. Both texts were advertised on their title pages and in their prefaces, as "original," "ancient", and "venerable" and approved of as direct translations from the Sanskrit. In another essay entitled "On the Musical Modes of the Hindus" (1799a), Jones cautioned his readers against relying on Persian and Urdu translations to access Hindu literature, stating "that a man, who knows the Hindus only from Persian books, does not know the Hindus" and "that an European, who follows the muddy rivulets of Muselman writers on India, instead of drinking from the pure fountain of Hindu learning, will be in perpetual danger of misleading himself and others" (423). Orientalist efforts here conformed to the principle of "objectivity", defined by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison as "seeing without interference" (2010, 17).

The objective regime of truth stands on the opposite pole from the syncretic method deployed by Indo-Persian literati. As Truschke detailed in *Culture of Encounters*, their method was indeed to collect versions of a Sanskrit text, condense it into one, and orally translate it into Hindustani, before turning it into Persian. Then, translated texts underwent generic reshuffling. For instance, according to the Sanskrit tradition, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* count as *kavya* (poetry), *itihasa* (mythology/history), *smṛti* (scriptures that are "remembered", as opposed to authorless and sacred Hindu scriptures known as *Śruti*, meaning "that which is heard"), and *puranic* (encyclopaedic) literature (Tripp 1981; Malamoud 2002). Abu al-Fazl translated the *Mahabharata* into the genres of *tarikh* (history) and *nasihat al-muluk* (mirror of princes) with the addition of *'aja'ib* (marvels) for the instruction of kings. Therefore, the *Razmnamah* is not just a translation of the *Mahabharata* in the modern sense of the word but a reinvention. Abu al-Fazl

drastically reduced and altered the dialogue between Arjun and Krishna and dispensed with all the theological and philosophical parts of the *Mahabharata* that did not sit well with an Islamic worldview. In contrast, the political advice of Bhishma, which roughly represents 25% of the total of the *Mahabharata*, rises to 40% in the Persian version (Truschke 2016, 111–125). The result of these translation projects commissioned by the Mughal rulers was less to make Sanskrit literature available to a Persian-speaking audience than to treat "the Sanskrit tradition a living part of Indio-Persian culture" (ibid., 103).

Observed from a comparative angle, the orientalists' translations appear radically different, not so much in their methods (since they also compile and condense manuscripts and use intermediate translations in Persian and in Latin) as in the functions ascribed to translations. Their point was not to make the Sanskrit tradition "a living part" of English culture but to treat it as antiquity providing insights in the origins of European languages and literatures and in the customs and attitudes of contemporary Indians.

Of course the fantasy of drinking at the untainted fountainhead of Sanskrit literature is far removed from what was happening on the ground where British orientalists depended on Indo-Persian literati to access Sanskrit and other Indic knowledges. Jones, for instance, indicates the help he received from Hindu (including Radhakant Sarman and Radhakanta Tarkavagisa) and Muslim scholars, namely Ghulam Hussain Khan Taba'tabai, Mir Muhammad Hussain Isfahani, the "Aristotle of Islam", the musicologist Ali Ibrahim Khan Bahadur, and the paleographer Muhammad Ghaus (Rocher 1989, 1994). Indo-Persian men of knowledge would possess rigorous learning across classical languages (Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic) as well as in Qur'anic and Biblical scriptures, and would be proficient in disputation, accounting, law, politics, history, poetry and literary criticism, with some even trained in mathematics, logic, astronomy and astrology (Raj 2008, 97). In fact, what European orientalists presented as their "discoveries" about Sanskrit language and literature had often been discussed centuries before in Persian and Arabic. Mohamed Tavakoli-Targhi demonstrated that Jones's theory concerning the family of Indo-European languages, had in fact been exposed by Siraj al-Din ʿAli Khan Arzu (d. 1756) whose *Muthmir* was widely circulated amongst the Persian-speaking elites of the subcontinent (2001, 26–28). Whether orientalists did not know about these indigenous precedents or pretended they had no knowledge of them, the consequences remain the same, namely that there was a political interest in presenting their research as entirely original and in staging themselves in direct interaction with Hindus, as Jones and Wilkins did in their letters from Varanasi (Jones 1970, II: 747–748, 756; Rocher 1994, 58–60; Das 2006).

Wilkins in his translation of the *Hitopadeśa* does not conceal his knowledge of the earlier versions in Persian penned by Abu al-Fazl but distinguishes his rendition by announcing that he "scrupulously adhered to the text" and that he "even attended to the form of [his] model" (1787, xii–xv). The subtext here is not just that literalism is better than adaptation. The conversation is not just between diverging strands of translation theory within a single European context. Rather, it is about distinguishing oneself and one's literary practices from Persian predecessors and their preferences for re-invention. In imperial contexts, Venuti's opposition between domesticating and foreignizing gestures in translation and his ethical reading of foreignization as protective and domestication as destructive (1995, 1998, 2010) become problematic. Indeed, from the Indo-Persian point of view, domestication or appropriation of Sanskrit literature indicated the capacity of Mughal rulers to re-invent themselves as part of the Indian ecumene. In

other words, to integrate and rule. Conversely, English foreignized translations construct distant identities and transform Indian literatures into objects of scientific enquiry.

This being noted, when we turn to the actual practices of orientalists, we observe that they too re-invented Sanskrit literature by compiling and synthesising various versions, by resorting to intermediate translations in Persian and Latin, and by accommodating the codes and tastes of their reading public. For instance, Jones explained the method of Latin interlinear and intermediate translation in his preface to *Śakuntala*:

> I soon procured a copy of it; and, assisted by my teacher Ramlochan, began with translating it verbally into Latin, which bears so great a resemblance to Sanscrit, that it is more convenient than any modern language for a scrupulous interlineary version: I then turned it word for word into English, and afterwards, without adding or suppressing any material sentence, disengaged it from the stiffness of a foreign idiom, and prepared the faithful translation of the Indian drama, which I now present to the publick as a most pleasing and authentick picture of the old Hindu manners, and one of the greatest curiosities that the literature of Asia has yet brought to light. (1789, ix)

Interestingly enough, and contrary to Persian, the use of Latin as a transitional language is not considered as an impediment. Yet, Jones's Latin intermediation resulted in the loss of Sanskrit prosody, excision of explicit passages, and suppression of Kalidasa's rich variation in social dialects (Cannon and Pandey 1976, 36).

The Loves of Cámarúpa and Cámelatà translated by William Franklin in 1793 is a fascinating example of that tendency to obliterate intermediary languages and texts. In this case, a Persian text was repackaged and sold as an "ancient Indian tale". The preface does not include details pertaining to the manuscripts used for the translation. However, Joseph Garcin de Tassy, in his 1834 French translation of the same story, remarked that versions in Hindustani, written in Devanagari script and in Sanskrit had existed but were no longer extant. He added that Franklin had used a Persian version for his 1793 translation, and that there were significant differences related to prosody between the Persian version used by Franklin and his version in Hindustani written in Arabic script. While Franklin's was in prose interspersed with verse, his "poëme hindoustani" was couched in the *mathnawi* form, namely a type of poem of indefinite length and based on rhyming couplets. Finally, Garcin de Tassy commented on Franklin's translation techniques, lamenting that he included long and tiresome stories while discarding topographical details (1834, i–vii).

These later indications help us reassess Franklin's presentation of his material. Indeed, Franklin does not mention that he had chosen a specific version of the tale in Persian, and instead advertised his source as an "ancient Indian tale". Furthermore, both him and John Gilchrist were members of the Asiatic Society and while Franklin was busy translating *The Loves* from his Persian version, Gilchrist was occupied translating *mathnawi* couplets to be interspersed in his *Grammar of the Hindoostanee Language* (1796) for the purpose of illustrating linguistic principles (Kidwai 1972, 116–117). The couplets in question were taken from Tahsin al-Din's Hindustani version of the same tale that Franklin was translating from the Persian. Franklin's repurposing is also visible in the glossary added at the end of the volume. The translator presented it as an attempt to elucidate "Sanscrit names" and provide "explanatory notes" pertaining to the pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses and to Hindu customs and beliefs. The tales can then be framed as an ethnographic document purveying information about the Hindu population in India (Dharwadker 1993).

In the case of sacred literature, orientalists' translations changed the very nature of the texts which were reformulated into objects of scientific discourse. In her essay on the translation of sacred Hindu literature, Hephzibah Israel commented on the fact that the *pundits* and *munshis* working for orientalists were asked to create an authoritative version of a work in a culture where "hitherto the circulation of multiple manuscripts had been the norm" (2014, 559). The *Bhagvad Gita* for instance corresponds to a selection of the *Mahabharata* that was reconfigured as a "self-contained philosophical text" (ibid., 561) and supported by a battery of footnotes, prefaces and other appendices so as to be recreated into an object of orientalist philological enquiry. These additions work as a form of self-display and self-refashioning of the colonial administrator turned into orientalist scholar.

Accommodations were typically kept hidden or presented as exceptional. Jones, for instance, restricted the presence of omissions in his *Gitagovinda* to the passages that were "too luxuriant and too bold for a European taste" and reassured his readers that "not a single image or idea has been added by the translator" (1799b, I: 462). Deviations had to be kept exceptional, while proximity and exactitude were considered as fundamental qualities for any "serious" translation. Hastings praised Wilkins' translation of *The Bhăgvăt Gĕĕtă* for its "great accuracy and fidelity" (1785, xi). In the preface to his translation of the *Hĕĕtōpădēs* Wilkins promised to "have scrupulously adhered to the text" and to have preserved "characteristic features" even when not consonant with European taste and understanding of harmonious composition (1787, xiv–xv). If one must doubt these claims of non-intervention and of directly accessing original India through literature, if one must question the ideological and political underpinnings implied by the disavowal, a thing one must add is the often unspoken intention to pitch English translations against Indo-Persian equivalents, and thereby fashioning not only a different culture of translation but also a different culture of power.

Conclusion

In this article, I have focused on the first translations of Sanskrit literature into English in the late eighteenth century and how they can be contrasted with pre-existing cultures of translation in India, and in particular with Mughal precedents. Despite a heavy reliance on Mughal translations, the strategy deployed by British orientalists consisted in absenting Mughal precedents and in presenting English translations not only as new but as essentially different from them, superior, and more legitimate. While a syncretic Mughal culture of translation relied on rewriting, the orientalists' conception of a successful translation was based on the idea of a direct access to the source texts in their original languages, on the reliability of the translator as a transparent mediator, and on the ultimate distinction between writing and translating. This differing approach was used by orientalists to disparage and dismiss Indian practices as unscientific, tasteless, and useless and to create a symbolic space where English could challenge and replace Persian as the new and superior language of translation.

In this case, the act of translation operated on two levels: one was directed towards the appropriation of India's classical past and the other towards a distinction from and erasure of Mughal precedents. British late eighteenth-century orientalists in Bengal presented themselves as the only true and reliable custodians of Sanskrit literature. This shift of

literary interest from Persian to Sanskrit and the concomitant occlusion of vernacular Indian literatures facilitated the presentation of India as a fixed object of scientific enquiry, as belonging to antiquity, and connected to Britain's ancestral past via the Indo-European linguistic lineage. Persian literary presence in India could then be projected as foreign, unnecessary, and deceiving. By uprooting it outside of the Indian ecumene and by exhibiting their publications as the only reliable ones in terms of providing direct access to a Sanskritized version of Indian literature, British orientalists were creating in texts an imaginary India devoid of Persian presence. They were therefore imaginatively replacing the Mughals and projecting British colonial rule as the new and only dominant force.

Notes

1. For instance, Jones's most well-known *pundits* included Radhakanta Tarkavagisa and Ramalocana Pundit, both of whom contributed to the *Asiatic Researches*, and Sabur Tiwari. The Kavali brothers and Narrain Row worked for Col. Mackenzie in Madras, while Ghulam Hasan Siddiqi Farshawari and Murtaza Husain Bilgrami were employed by Jonathan Scott (Rocher 1989; Khan 1993; Wagoner 2003; Alam and Subrahmanyam 2004; Raj 2007).
2. For instance, when he writes that "European literary historiography, steeped in a tradition of single dominant literary tradition, has always been suspicious of 'the other', the foreign culture entering in their lives through translation" and inversely that India has an "amazing capacity to assimilate alien culture" and to reiterate through translation its "acceptance of the Vedantic oneness" (Choudhuri 2010, 121).
3. For a detailed account of orality, script, and print transmission in South Asian contexts see Fraser (2008, 53–77); Orsini and Butler Schofield (2015). On knowledge systems in precolonial India see (Pollock 2004, 2011).

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