Translation and State: The Mahabharata at the Mughal Court

WILLIS, MICHAEL. (Ed.). 2022. *Translation and State: The Mahābhārata at the Mughal Court*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter.

Reviewed by ADRIJA DUTTA

> *"How many Ramayanas? Three hundred? Three thousand? At the end of some Ramayanas, this question is sometimes asked: How many Ramayanas have there been?"*

A. K. Ramanujan opens his essay titled *Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation* with these lines, emphasising that across South Asia and South East Asia, there have been as many as three thousand versions of the epic *Ramayana*; each of these versions carries distinct cultural, temporal, and political markers in their narration. The process of translation in South Asia traditionally and historically has not adhered to the Western-oriented principles of fidelity and faithfulness to the source text. The practice of translation in South Asian history has been one of rewriting or retelling of the source tale rather than that of unwavering equivalence. When epics like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* travel throughout South Asia across time periods, via the means of Translation, they get modified and transformed with each such initiative, giving birth to many versions of the same source text - to the extent that the original gets lost in the process, forgotten in time and memory.

The Mahabharata, the longest epic in the world, has its fair share of translation anecdotes. Over the years, the epic has been translated within the Indian subcontinent to and fro numerous languages and cultures. *Translation and State: Mahābhārata at the Mughal Court* is an exploration in this regard; it takes up the cause of *Razmnāmah,* the Persian translation of the *Mahabharata,* produced during the course of Akbar's reign. However, it is not the translation proper of the epic that the book deals with. Specifically, it is the study of the

Preface of *Razmnāmah*. The *Preface* is authored by Abū al-Faẕl, one of the prominent courtiers at the court of Akbar.

The Introduction to the book registers the involvement of a number of scholars who have worked together to put forth this study. Edited by Michael Willis, the book is co-authored by Razieh B. Koshtely, Saarthak Singh, Muntazir Ali and Hajnalka Kovacs. Along with Muntazir Ali, John Seyller has contributed to drawing up the appendices attached at the end of the study; the bibliography has been drawn by Vafa Movahedian.

The study of *Razmnāmah* has previously been the fodder of academic inspection by various scholars. However, Michael Willis, in the book's Introduction states the unique arena which the present study devolves into. *Translation and State* grants specific focus to the *Preface* of the Persian translation of the *Mahabharata*, the colophon(s) of the manuscript, and the diversity of narratives that these have elicited over time. With the aim of documenting the historiography surrounding the composition of the *Preface*, the authors look into the various manuscripts of *Razmnāmah* that are available to the present date. The Manuscripts made available by the British Library Board, Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum (Jaipur), Free Library of Philadelphia and the one printed in Tehran are taken altogether and juxtaposed in exploration, to arrive at certain conjectures with regards to the dates, sources, authenticity of *Razmnāmah*, as they give "fresh insights into the composition and structure of Abū al-Faẕl's *Preface* and a better understanding of how writers and translators worked in sixteenth-century India" (Willis XI). In this light, the book takes a very deductive approach, arriving at conclusions through a method of close scrutiny and in that process, offering important documentation of history from a literary point of view.

The book is spread across four chapters, padded by an Introduction at the beginning, 4 appendices (Notations in British Library *Razmnāmah*; Colophon, Notations and Seal of the *Razmnāmah* in the India Office Collection; The Philadelphia Fragment of Abū al-Faẕlal-Faẕl's *Preface*; Colophon of the Jaipur *Razmnāmah* and its Seals and notations) and a Selected Bibliography at the end; in between, the study is enriched by the

inclusion of as many as 49 illustrations, demonstrating the various manuscripts referred, colophons, seals, as well as paintings of the king and the translators involved in the composition of *Razmnāmah*. The rigour of the research that the Study has undertaken is apparent through the eighteen pages of the Bibliography and the abundance of footnotes, which occur at the end of every page of the text.

The context of *Razmnāmah* and the position of Abū al-Faẕl as the author of its *Preface* are understood in the book with reference to the patronage of Akbar. Before the court culture of Akbar's regime is dived into, something to which the very composition of *Razmnāmah* is inextricably connected, the authors gauge the linguistic scene prevalent in pre-colonial India; stock is taken of the translations that occurred across various linguistic communities within the nation. Keeping the time period of the 6th to 19th century in mind, the author thrusts upon the prevalence of Persian as the language of the state and the flourishing of a particular breed of Indo-Persian culture under the reigns of the Delhi Sultanate in India.

India has always been a country that has registered a vast corpus of texts coming from different parts of the world; the era of the Delhi Sultanate saw the flourishing of this activity as translations into different forms of Persian accelerated; the field of scholarship stretched as diversely and widely as astronomy, music, medicine etc. It is within this potboiler of a socio-cultural milieu, which the book locates Akbar and his reign, stating how he "is remembered as the first king to cross the social and religious borders of his kingdom in a sustained manner" (Willis 4).

Akbar's court was marked with a negotiation of various linguistic associations; it had "developed a lively literary culture…albeit through a Persiante lens" (Willis 4). The languages in court involved Turkish, Arabic, Persian and even Sanskrit. The book, thus, works extensively to show the singular authorial position that the activity and practice of translation occupied within the Mughal court culture. In a very appropriate sense, the Study offers a view of translation in practice, an activity that has been prevalent in India since times immemorial. It is through translation, that Akbar's court could register polyphony of cultures and linguistic identities, leading to the construction of a tolerant agenda under his reign. The production of

Razmnāmah can be located within this light, as the epic was ordered by Akbar to be translated from Sanskrit to Persian, with a request being issued to Abū al-Faẕl to author a Preface.

A section of the book deals extensively with the *Maktab Khanah* that was established by Akbar to facilitate the translations of texts across Sanskrit and other languages to Persian. An intriguing account of the Translation Bureau has been skillfully extracted from an illustrated folio found within a scattered edition of *Razmnāmah*, which boasts a considerable number of illustrations. This particular folio, as the book proclaims, was completed around 1598-99 and is currently housed in the Free Library in Philadelphia. The book not only includes an image of this remarkable folio but also devotes a substantial portion of its text to describing the illustration and deriving essential insights from it.

Attributed to the artist Dhanu, the illustration boasts of the translation team involved in the creation of *Razmnāmah*. The illustration, as the section corroborates, gives the readers a glance into the figure of Naqib Khan (who had translated the Mahabharata from Sanskrit into Persian, through the intermediary language of Hindi), who is shown sitting facing Akbar. This particular illustration becomes an important source of studying and understanding the composition and the involvement of the translation team - consisting of not a singular figure, but many - associated with the production of *Razmnāmah*.

Chapter 2 of the book provides the readers with the entire text of the *Preface*, translated from Persian to English by Hajnalka Kovacs at Harvard University. One can discern the numerous poetic quotes that Abū al-Faẕl decorates his prose with, with the intention of elevating and validating the tone and essence of the work. The *Preface* considerably dabbles in an appraisal of Akbar, to the extent that a clear parallel is established between the ruler and divine author. Abū al-Faẕl also summarises the story of the Mahabharata, parvan by parvan.

Running across 55 pages, this translation of the *Preface* is punctuated by 234 footnotes. Kovacs' translation is rendered in a logical yet archaic manner of English. The abundance of footnotes

helps the readers to contextualise each cultural element that makes its way into the narration.

The various parts of the *Preface* are examined, and in doing so, it undoes the scores of meanings that are embedded within its fabric but are not apparent. It dwells deeply into the subjectivity that Abū al-Faẕl, as an author and a translator of the text, assumes. What he achieves strategically is to establish himself apart from the popular milieu of writers and scholars of his time, and portray himself as someone placed beyond such materiality and triviality.

What is embedded is the subtle attack against the workings of the *Ulama* (a group of Islamic scholars, acknowledged for their expertise in the fields of Islamic jurisprudence and theology; these scholars were extensively engaged in writing on and around Islamic texts). In this instance, Abū al-Faẕl seems to take an anti-establishment approach to the scheme of things, and the book points out this intention crucially.

It is this sustained antagonism towards the Ulama that helps Abū al-Faẕl segue into his extended praise of Akbar as the king. The book elaborates on how the *Preface* captures the existent dialectics between '*Taqlid*' (adherence to derived authority or imitation, during the act of poetic creation; aka, the ulama) and '*Tahqiq*' (critical inquiry through analysis). Under the reign of Akbar, "the absolute dominion of imitation (bayt altasalluṭi taqlīd) – which throughout the passing of years and the turning of centuries stood on a firm foundation – was demolished and became the seat of the caliphate of critical inquiry." (Willis 72).

Akbar is imagined as "the Emperor of the Age…the cream of human beings and the elect from among the righteous of the sons of Adam" (Willis 127). This particular vision of the king as presented in Abū al-Faẕl's words is unravelled in the study, and it seeks to explore the ulterior agenda which it shrouds underneath. Via painting a word-picture of Akbar, wherein he is praised in a positive light, in a persuasive language and with great conviction, it seeks to hide - or even evade - the autocratic nature of his government. The contribution of the study becomes significant in undoing the fabric of the textual material, by distinguishing clearly what Abū al-Faẕl

writes on the surface versus that which he actually tries to evade or shun away. The centralization of power that was on its way under the throes of Akbar is underplayed; as such centralisation is written off as being ultimate and positive:

> "He is sovereign who is the Refuge of the World. In regulating the world,/The tablet of his thought is the register of divine decree." (Willis 134).

One concern that the last chapter deals with, which deserves mentioning, is the conjecture that the Mughals discerned a cautionary tale in the *Mahabharata*, beyond its literary and anecdotal value. Willis argues that the *Mahabharata* ultimately is not a happy tale; it is one of destruction and erasure of identities and cultural memories; it is "about India itself and about great kingdoms that had been lost and regained there" (Willis 178). The cautionary tale that the epic provides for Akbar, as the book conjectures, cuts close to the quick: Delhi sultanate finds in the tale a reflection of their autocracy and the subsequent foresight of their doom. For the Mughal rulers, the epics held significance beyond serving as conduits for imperial ideology and entertaining narratives. They also functioned as dire cautionary tales, offering a sombre reminder of the precarious dynamics of power within the Indian subcontinent.

Appropriating this concern, a fairly daunting yet original take on the events, these are the words with which the book ends:

> *The Mughals knew well that they ruled a place where an epic bloodbath had taken place and they knew also that they been chased from their throne by a wily usurper. Returning from exile and wandering, would they – like their ancient forerunners – succumb to bickering, civil war and fratricide? Would they see their exalted womenfolk denigrated and themselves dying one by one in a tragic manner? Would their great king end his days grief-stricken, old and lonely?* (Willis 178)

References

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