

**Understanding the *Mughal Book of War*:
A Translation and Analysis of Abu'l-Fazl's
*Preface to the Razmnama***

by

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Abstract

The Mughal emperor Akbar (1542-1605) commissioned the translation of a number of texts from Sanskrit into Persian, one of his most ambitious projects being the *Mahabharata*, India's celebrated epic. Akbar called this the *Razmnama* or 'Book of War' on account of the great conflict at the heart of the narrative. In 1587 he asked his courtier Abu'l-Fazl ibn Mubarak to write a *Preface* to the *Razmnama*. This thesis is a study of that *Preface*. My thesis is divided into several parts. To begin, I look at Abu'l-Fazl and the Translation Bureau, the department set up by the Mughals to undertake translation work. I then turn to the sources that document the translation of the *Mahabharata* and identify the translation team. After reviewing the scholarship on Abu'l-Fazl's *Preface*, I turn to my larger aims: a translation and analysis of the *Preface* in order to understand Abu'l-Fazl's relationship to his tasks as a writer and his relationship to the Persian version of the epic. My aims also embrace allied problems, namely Abu'l-Fazl's understanding of the social groups for whom the translation was intended and his relationship to emperor Akbar.

Keywords: Sixteenth century India, Mughal Empire, Emperor Akbar, Translation, Abu'l-Fazl ibn Mubarak, *Razmnama*, *Mahabharata*

Dedication

For Akbar, uncle and martyr. He would have appreciated this.

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Abbreviations

- AA *A'in-i Akbari*, by Abu'l-Fazl ibn Mubarak, 3 vols., translated by H. Blochmann and H. S Jarrett. Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1873-1948.
- AN *Akbarnama*, by Abu'l-Fazl ibn Mubarak, 3 vols., translated by H. Beveridge, Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1907-1939.
- BL British Library
- JAOS Journal of the American Oriental Society
- JRAS Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society
- MT *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh: By 'Abdul Qadir bin-Muluk Shah Known as al-Badaoni*, 3 Vols., translated by George S. A. Ranking, Wolseley H. Lowe, and Wolseley Haig. Calcutta: 1884-1925. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 1990.

Note on Conventions and Transliteration

This thesis follows the transliteration conventions of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* but without diacritical marks, see <http://ijmes.chass.ncsu.edu/authorresources.htm>. Persian words are transcribed according to the system used by *Iranian Studies*. For Indian names and places, a simplified system is also used. All words that have entered common English usage are spelt as they appear in dictionaries. In all languages, the titles of works and technical words are given in italics as they stand. Citation follows *The Chicago Manual of Style* (16th ed.)

Chapter 1.

Introduction

*After a long period alone with my heart, I understood
that one must write as though one is in the time of utter happiness*
Abu'l-Fazl, *Preface* ¹

Islam arrived in South Asia in the eighth century and the Sultans of Delhi established themselves as a viable power on the northern plains of India by the close of the twelfth. The Tughluqs developed the first genuinely pan-Indian Islamic kingdom, not matched until the sixteenth century when the Mughals formed a powerful and enduring empire. Akbar (1542-1605) was the third ruler of the dynasty, succeeding his father Humayun in 1556.² He ascended the throne aged thirteen and ruled under a regent, Bayram Khan, for five years before claiming power and embarking on campaigns of expansion that took the frontiers of his kingdom to Afghanistan in the north, the Godavari River in the south, Bengal in the east and Sind in the west.

Although earlier Muslim rulers had engaged with their non-Muslims subjects in a number of significant ways—notably in the Deccan and in Malwa—Akbar is remembered as the first king who was courageous enough and powerful enough to cross the social

¹ See chapter two, p. 5.

² Among many histories of the Mughals used here for basic information, see the relatively recent Harbans Mukhia, *The Mughals of India* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

and religious borders of his kingdom in a substantial and sustained way.³ While remaining Muslim, Akbar aimed to resolve the complex issues surrounding his Muslim and non-Muslim subjects and their interactions. Under Akbar's influence, the early Mughal court developed a lively literary culture that aimed to understand the indigenous traditions of the Indian people, albeit through a Persianate lens. The stage was set in 1582 when Persian was declared the official language of the court: members of the imperial bureaucracy were required to learn Persian, including a large useful number of Hindus who sought employment in the government.⁴ As part of a policy of peace for all (*sulh-i kul*), and the implementation of Persian as the 'language of empire', a number of works in different languages were translated into Persian with the support of the king. These works allow for an understanding of the Mughal milieu, especially the translations of Hindu works from Sanskrit. These were built out of the linguist and textual materials of both traditions and document the exchange between them. As something new, at least on the scale of resources devoted to their preparation, the translated Sanskrit texts are part of the dynamic literary landscape that was emerging at the time in northern India.

The Mughal court was multi-lingual. The royal library (*kitab khana*) of the Mughals, now dispersed, had books in many languages including Turkish, Arabic and Persian.⁵ Sanskrit manuscripts were also present.⁶ This means that these languages

³ A useful overview from a literary point of view for this MA thesis is Carl W. Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Arabic and Persian Translations of Indian Languages," *Iranian Studies* 36 (2003): 173-95. For the Deccan, see Richard M. Eaton, "The Rise of Written Vernaculars: The Deccan 1450-1650," in *After Timur Left: Culture and Circulation in Fifteenth Century North India*, eds. Francesca Orsini and Samira Sheikh (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 111-29. For Malwa, Norah M. Titley, *The Ni'matnama Manuscript of the Sultans of Mandu: the Sultan's Book of Delights* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005). For the literature on pre-Mughal engagement with Indian sources, see Ashok Kumar Das, *Paintings of the Razmnama: The Book of War* (Ahmedabad: Mapin, 2005), to which should be added a number of works such as Sriramula Rajeswara Sarma, *Thakkura Pheru's Rayanaparikkha: A Medieval Prakrit Text on Gemmology* (Aligarh: Viveka, 1984). Pheru was the mint master in the Khalji court.

⁴ See Muzaffar Alam, "The Pursuit of Persian: Language in Mughal Politics," *Modern Asian Studies* 32 (1998): 317-49.

⁵ Some account of the books is found in Pramod Chandra and Daniel Ehnobom, *The Cleveland Tuti-Nama Manuscript and the Origins of Mughal Painting* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1976) and Jeremiah Losty, *The Art of the Book in India* (London: British Library, 1982).

were understood and read, at least by some. The first Mughal emperor Babur (1483-1530) wrote his memoirs, the *Baburnama*, in Chagatay Turkish and also knew Persian.⁷ There can be little doubt that most people had some speaking ability in the local vernaculars. Persian speakers and authors had been in India from an early time, a famous example being Amir Khusrau of Delhi (d. 1325).⁸ Over the centuries, a local or regional form of the Persian language developed, and Indo-Persian culture, with many Turkic elements, flourished during the period of the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526).⁹ At the same time there was contact with the Persian of Central Asia and Iran, especially Safavid Iran during Humayun's period of exile there. Turkish had come to India with the medieval Turkic dynasties (the Tughluqs being prominent among them) but despite an ethnic presence and contacts with central Asia, dialects of Turkish did not thrive in India. A working knowledge was maintained, however, as shown by a Turkish grammar and vocabulary, explained in Persian, with a panegyric in prose and verse to Muhammad Shah (1702-48) to whom the work is dedicated.¹⁰

In many parts of India during Akbar's reign there was an inclination away from Sanskrit toward local vernaculars, often developed through the first step of vernacular

⁶ In the court-sponsored *A'in-i Akbari* (hereinafter AA), Abu'l-Fazl mentions that Akbar's library held numerous Sanskrit texts, see *A'in-i Akbari*, 3 vols., trans. H. Blochmann (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1873-1948), vol. 1, 103.

⁷ See Stephen Frederic Dale, *The Garden of the Eight Paradises: Babur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India (1483-1530)* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

⁸ Amir Khusrau was practised in the many styles of Persian poetry which were developed in medieval Persia. He soon became an iconic figure in the literary and cultural history of the Indian subcontinent. See, Sunil Sharma, *Amir Khusrau: The Poet of Sufis and Sultans* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005).

⁹ Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam: India 1200-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 119; also see A. Rashid, *Society and Culture in Medieval India, 1206-1556 AD* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1969).

¹⁰ Charles Rieu, *Catalogue of the Persian Manuscripts in the British Museum, London*, 3 vols. (London: British Museum, 1879-1883), 2:512, no. Add 16,759. Rieu's catalogue is hereinafter cited as Rieu, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts*. The dictionary dedicated to Muhammad Shah is not alone; for other dictionaries and a philological study of fifteenth-century material: Dilorom Karomat, "Turki and Hindavi in the World of Persian: Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century Dictionaries," in *After Timur Left: Culture and Circulation in Fifteenth Century North India*, eds. Francesca Orsini and Samira Sheikh (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 130-65.

commentaries on older texts.¹¹ Concurrently there was a great devotional or *bhakti* movement sweeping through central and northern India.¹² This religious movement sought expression through the Hindi language, notably the Braj dialect, and culminated in texts by Tulsi Das that are still sung and regarded as inspired. These literatures were not, however, the focus of reproduction and translation into Persian at the Mughal court in the time of Akbar.¹³ Rather, the desire was for a rendering of a special sort, namely, the creation of a unique Indo-Persian literature, drawing on the Sanskrit classics, most notably the *Mahabharata*. The translation of the *Mahabharata* was commissioned by Akbar and the text was named the *Razmnama* by him. The extensive *Preface* to the translation was composed by Abu'l-Fazl, one of the king's most prominent courtiers. It is my goal in this MA thesis to explore this *Preface*. It is a unique document in the literary history of Persianate India and its importance and reason for selection may be summed up as follows: (a) the *Preface* enjoys a singular position in the translation literature as the only contemporary account that is part of a translation that documents the translation process; (b) it outlines the reasons why the translation was undertaken; (c) it describes the potential readers of the translation and addresses their likely criticisms; (d) it analyses the difficulties of dealing with text sources and their interpretation, and finally; (e) it reflects on the challenges faced by an individual charged with the task of writing the introduction to an extensive work that was of particular interest to the king. In addition, and perhaps because of the king's interest, Abu'l-Fazl builds his *Preface* round his eulogist vision of kingship, embodied in the person of emperor Akbar. This gives the *Preface* historical and political importance beyond its literary core.

¹¹ Deven M. Patel, "Source, Exegesis, and Translation: Sanskrit Commentary and Regional Language Translation in South Asia," *JAOS* 131 (2011): 256-66.

¹² A useful introduction is Heidi Pauwels, *In Praise of Holy Men* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 2002), more recently see Imre Bangha, "Early Hindi Epic Poetry in Gwalior: Beginnings and Continuities in the *Ramayana* of Vishnudas," in *After Timur Left*, eds. Orsini and Sheikh, 365-402.

¹³ The translation of Tulsi Das seems to come much later: Rieu, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts* 2: 56, no. OR 1249, dated 1804 is the oldest copy I have traced so far. An abridged version of the *Ramayana* of Valmiki and Tulsi Das in Persian was published in the late nineteenth century: Parameshri Sahaya Masrur and Lalah Chanda Mal Chand, *Vazifah-yi Faiz* (Agra: Matba'-yi Mufid-i Am, 1893), not available to me.

Abu'l-Fazl ibn Mubarak

The ancestors of Abu'l-Fazl were from Yemen in Arabia and were part of the Quraish tribe of the prophet Muhammad.¹⁴ His grandfather, Shaikh Khizr, lived in Sind but moved to Nagaur, a city in Rajasthan known as a Sufi centre. It was in Nagaur that Abu'l-Fazl's father, Shaikh Mubarak, was born in 1506. He was learned in metaphysics and the philosophical thoughts of Ibn Sina, and the Ishraqi wisdom tradition.¹⁵ A notable scholar himself, Shaikh Mubarak ran a school of philosophy in Agra that attracted notable scholars from outside India and his two sons, Abu'l-Fazl and Faizi, were both highly educated as a consequence. Faizi was the eldest son and excelled in the art of poetry, elegant prose and philosophy.¹⁶ He had composed over one hundred poetic works while at the court of Akbar and soon earned the title of the *Malik al-Shu'ara* (king of poets).

Abu'l-Fazl, the second son, was born in 1551 and, it is said, could read and write Arabic by the age of five. The unique atmosphere in his father's house allowed him to amass an unusual amount of general knowledge. His devotion to learning was astonishing to his contemporaries: he would critically study all the works available to him and soon formed an independent judgement. By fifteen he had acquired an understanding of the Ishraqis, Sufi thought, and the subtleties of the Greek philosophers whose works had been translated into Arabic.¹⁷ Shaikh Mubarak moved to Agra in 1543 and set up a *madrassa* there, his special field of instruction being philosophy. He attracted a number of scholars, including the celebrated 'Abdul Qadir Bada'uni,¹⁸ and

¹⁴ See R. M. Eaton, "Abu'l-Fazl Allami," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. 1, Fasc. 3, pp. 287-289, which my comments draw on.

¹⁵ A school of philosophical and mystical thought, founded by Suhrawardi (1155-1191), with Graeco-Oriental roots built on a critique of Aristotelianism and advocating a Neo-platonic method that considered philosophy more than rational inquiry. Ishraq is commonly used to refer to the 'internal illumination' or acquisition of knowledge based upon a mystical unveiling (*kaslif*). See Mehdi Amin Razavi, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1997).

¹⁶ AA, 3: 469.

¹⁷ Saiyid A. A. Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar's Reign* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1975), 91.

¹⁸ A. S. Bazmee Ansari, "Abd-al-Qader Bada'uni," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Vol 3, Fasc. 4, pp. 364-365.

entered into service at court. After an audience with Akbar he seems to have realised that the emperor was receptive to suggestions and open to changes in policy. Realizing that the court was the best place to introduce reforms and strengthen the cause of faith as he saw it, Shaikh Mubarak endeavoured to carve out a place in the royal circle for Abu'l-Fazl and his burgeoning talents.

The Mubarak family, however, had difficulty when faced with traditionally minded contemporaries. Shaikh Mubarak—who expressed in a discussion his views in favour of the Mahdavi teachings of Muhammad Jaunpuri—suffered immensely because he became known by the *'ulama* as a supporter of heresy. Conspiracies were hatched against the Mubarak family and they were driven out of Agra. It was then, perhaps, that Abu'l-Fazl realized the true underlying problems of the empire, as he himself saw the need for religious toleration and the peaceful coexistence of religious groups. According to Bada'uni and other learned men at the court, “Shaikh Mubarak, in as far as he pretended to be a Mahdavi, belonged to the class of innovator, and was not only himself damned, but led others to damnation.”¹⁹ This attitude deeply impacted Abu'l-Fazl as he and his family were in fear of victimization by the orthodox jurists and their allies. This continued until a senior noble at the court of Akbar came out to support Mubarak and asked: “Has the world come to an end or is the Day of Resurrection at hand that in his court malicious fanatics have their way and good men are confounded?”²⁰ Friends of the Mubarak family also began to intercede and described Shaikh Mubarak as a man of piety and humble resignation. As a result, Akbar summoned him to court and he soon introduced his sons Abu'l-Fazl and Faizi, their capabilities having already been brought to the king's attention through Mirza 'Aziz Koka.²¹ Abu'l-Fazl subsequently presented to the emperor commentaries on the *Ayat al-Kursi* and *Sura al-Fatiha* on separate occasions and gained Akbar's appreciation.²² He was soon an active participant in the

¹⁹ Bada'uni, *Muntakhabu-t-tawarikh*, 3 vols., Trans. George S. A. Ranking, Wolseley H. Lowe and Wolseley Haig (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 1990). (hereinafter *MT*) For this citation see vol. 2: 199

²⁰ *AA*, 3: 505.

²¹ Also known as Kotaltash. He was the foster brother of Akbar and remained one of the leading nobles at the court.

²² *MT*, 2: 199.

well-known debates at the *Ibadat khana* or 'House of Worship' where he came into contact with Hindu philosophers who considerably influenced his thought. He particularly refers to Madhusudana, about whom I give some detail below.²³ Abu'l-Fazl also conversed with Zoroastrian religious leaders, Jesuit missionaries and developed a friendship with the Jains. It was with an air of contempt after hearing the discussions at the *Ibadat khana* and the disparity of views among the '*ulama* about their own faith that Akbar decided to be free of their influence. He was quoted as saying to Shaikh Mubarak "Since you are my teacher why do you not free me from dependence on these Mullas?"²⁴ It is in this light that Abu'l-Fazl mentions in the *A'in-i Akbari* that justice was the way forward for the establishment of peace and prosperity in the empire.²⁵ As Blochman says: "Abu'l-Fazl led his sovereign to a true appreciation of his duties and from the moment that he entered the court, the problem of successfully ruling over mixed races ... was carefully considered, and the policy of tolerance was the result."²⁶

Abu'l-Fazl had obtained a systematic grounding in Arabic philology and literature, as noted above. In the debates at the *Ibadat khana* the traditional Arabic phrases that the '*ulama* quoted to support their arguments were shown to be unsound and the '*ulama* soon found they were no match for Abu'l-Fazl's intellect and quick wit. He confronted ancient prejudices without committing himself to any particular position. Abu'l-Fazl was, in Rizvi's estimation, an outstanding intellectual figure, and a versatile scholar who was cosmopolitan in his outlook and even-handed in his dealings with the religious communities of India.²⁷ During his time at the court of Akbar, Abu'l-Fazl composed a key work that has already been cited: the *Akbarnama*. This is a comprehensive and invaluable source for the history of Akbar's time. It consists of three volumes and is a record of Akbar's ancestors through to the reign of Humayun and continues in depth up to Akbar's 46th regnal year (1602). The *A'in-i Akbari*, the third volume of the

²³ See section 'translation team' in this chapter; further detail about the *Ibadat khana* is also given below.

²⁴ *MT*, 3:33.

²⁵ *AA*, 1:12

²⁶ *AA*, 1: xxix

²⁷ Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, 123.

Akbarnama, is three volumes in itself. It contains an administrative account of Akbar's empire and the apparatus of the court. Abu'l-Fazl's close links to Akbar ultimately led to his death in 1602. He was assassinated at Antri, near Orccha, in a plot contrived by the Mughal Prince Salim—later emperor Jahangir—who was impatient for the throne.

Akbar's Translation Bureau

To produce the translations from Sanskrit and other languages, Akbar established a house of writing (*maktab khana*) where court historians and scholars were instructed to translate works into Persian.²⁸ Aside from the inter-religious debates sponsored by the emperor, the Translation Bureau is the most well-known product of the social and cultural interactions fostered by Akbar. He had ordered the translation of various works of a technical nature, such as texts on astronomy and mathematics, but the largest and most ambitious undertaking was the translation of the Indian epics.²⁹ The Translation Bureau was at its most active in the 1580s with a focus primarily on the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. I will turn to the inception and completion of these projects below.

From an early age Akbar had spent his time learning how to become a skillful ruler and, by some reports, with less-than-diligent tutors, he had little opportunity to develop his reading and writing skills. Although this led to him being illiterate (a point directly addressed by Abu'l-Fazl as we shall see in chapters two and three), he was always on a quest for knowledge and had books regularly read out to him.³⁰ Among the works that caught his interest were legends and works of history.³¹ He also had the verses of Persian poets such as Rumi, Hafiz and Firdausi read aloud to him.³² Among

²⁸ The Translation Bureau of Akbar is discussed in Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History* (all of chapter six is relevant).

²⁹ N. S. Shukla, "Persian Translations of Sanskrit Works," *Indological Studies* 3 (1974): 179.

³⁰ Akbar's illiteracy discussed in Ellen Smart, "Akbar Illiterate Genius," in *Kaladarsana*, ed. J. G. Williams (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 99-107.

³¹ Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, 205.

³² Despite Akbar's love of Rumi, and a deep appreciation of him also by Abu'l-Fazl, a complete *Mathnavi* was not available in India, see Muzzafar Alam, "Mughal Philology and Rumi's *Mathnavi*," in *World Philology*, ed. Sheldon Pollock et al (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 178-200.

his known favourites was the *Hamzanama*, an Arabic collection of tales narrating heroic exploits of Amir Hamza, the uncle of the Prophet Muhammad. In fact Akbar enjoyed the book so much that he commissioned large illustrated pages of it.³³ With Akbar's interest broadening alongside his intellectual and religious hunt for knowledge, he began commissioning translations of a wide range of texts into Persian.

In 1574 Akbar appointed 'Abdul Qadir Bada'uni to his court as a historian and translator, asking him to translate the *Thirty-Two Tales of the Throne (Simhasana Dvatrimika)*. This was a thirteenth-century Sanskrit tale that took the throne of the legendary king Vikramaditya as its focus. According to the story, there were thirty-two little statues round the base of the throne and when king Bhoja of Malwa attempted to sit on the throne each statue took turns to pose a difficult question for Bhoja to answer.³⁴ After *Tales of the Throne*, Akbar ordered Bada'uni and Shaikh Bhavan to translate the *Atharva Veda (Bed Atharban)*, an anthology of hymns, incantations, and magical spells of great antiquity. Its translation went on until 1583 when it was abandoned.³⁵ Around the same time, Akbar's widening curiosity led him to create the *Ibadat khana* at Fatehpur Sikri, his new capital. This became a meeting place where spiritual leaders and people of different religious beliefs—including Hindus, Jains and even Catholic Jesuits—would gather for discussion, creating an opportunity for a vigorous exchange of views in theological and philosophical matters.³⁶ By the late 1580s Akbar appears to have become an avid supporter of religious tolerance, aiming to solve the issues surrounding religious diversity and conflict in his empire. This led him to creating a new association,

³³ See John William Seyller and W. M. Thackston, *The Adventures of Hamza: Painting and Storytelling in Mughal India* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, 2002).

³⁴ There was a long interest in Bhoja and his legacy, see R. B. Golzadeh, "On Becoming Muslim in the City of Swords: Bhoja and Shaykh Changanal at Dhar," *JRAS* 22 (2012): 115-127.

³⁵ See *MT*, 2: 212. In M. Athar Ali, "Translations of Sanskrit Works at Akbar's Court," *Social Scientist* 20 (1992): 39 where the problems encountered by the translators are explained.

³⁶ An early study is Vincent Smith, "Akbar's 'House of Worship', or 'Ibadat-Khana'," *JRAS* (1917): 715-722 but more recently see Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi, "Religious Disputations and Imperial Ideology: The Purpose and Location of Akbar's *Ibadatkhana*," *Studies in History* 24 (2008): 195-209. On the Jesuits, see Gauvin A. Bailey, *The Jesuits and the Grand Mogul: Renaissance Art at the Imperial Court of India, 1580-1630* (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 1998); Pierre Du Jarric, *Akbar and the Jesuits: An Account of the Jesuit Missions to the Court of Akbar*, trans. C.H. Payne (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1996).

called the *Din-i Ilahi* or 'Faith of the Divine,' an amalgam of practices including elements of Islamic Sufism, Hinduism, Christianity, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism.³⁷ In this context, but for reasons that are not explicitly stated in the sources, Akbar became interested in the Sanskrit epics and related works, ordering translations of the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Harivamsa Purana*, and the *Kathasaritsagara*.

The *Mahabharata*

The most ambitious undertaking of the Translation Bureau was India's celebrated 'national epic', the *Mahabharata*, named after Bharata, the legendary emperor who founded the Bharata dynasty and established a mighty kingdom. His realm was called Bharatavarsha, the 'country of Bharata', a term that became a name for India itself. The core Bharata story is known to have existed in about the first century CE, but a number of stories and poems were added to it over time, until it became the great story—the word *maha* means 'great'—in the fourth or fifth century.³⁸ As it stands now, the *Mahabharata* is a vast work, filling nineteen volumes in the printed Sanskrit edition.³⁹ For this reason and for its content too, the *Mahabharata* is rightly called an 'epic.' It shares this term with its sister text the *Ramayana*. Regional variants of both are many, and commentaries and derivative stories are found all over Asia. The secondary literature on the epics is vast and written in several European and Indian languages.⁴⁰

³⁷ The foundational study is Makhanlal Roychoudhury, *The Din-i-Ilahi; Or, The Religion of Akbar* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1952), often reprinted and now in a fourth edition. For a more recent assessment, Heinrich von Stietencron, "Planned Syncretism: Emperor Akbar's Religious Policy," in *Hindu Myth, Hindu History, Religion, Art, and Politics* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), 173-93 and Aziz Ahmad, "Din-I Ilahi," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman et al (Leiden: Brill, 2011). Insight into how the later Mughals regarded the new faith is found in Z. U. Malik, "The Eighteenth Century View of Akbar," in *Akbar and His Age*, ed. Iqtidar Alam Khan (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1999), 249-53.

³⁸ Dieter Schingloff, "The Oldest Extant Parvan-List of the Mahabharata," *JAOS* 89 (1969): 334-38.

³⁹ *The Mahabharata*, 19 vols., edited by V. S. Sukthankar et al, (Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, 1933-1966). A long project of translation was started by J. A. B. van Buitenen and continues under James L. Fitzgerald and others.

⁴⁰ John Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics: A Comprehensive Guide to the Mahabharata (and the Ramayana) and Scholarship on them* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

Like any text that is so big, old and complex, there has been a long history of engagement, commentary, and translation. Perhaps the most well-known extract from the *Mahabharata* is the *Bhagavad Gita*. This is a poetic and philosophical work of great importance that has circulated separately for many hundreds of years. In a recent book, Richard Davis has explored the history of the *Gita* charting how it came to be composed, how it was transmitted, and what it meant to successive generations of readers.⁴¹ How the understanding of the *Gita* has evolved, and how the text has prompted response, also holds true, I think, for the *Mahabharata*, the container in which the *Gita* has been transmitted down the ages. The key point for this MA thesis is that like the *Gita*, the *Mahabharata* was an active text in the Mughal period, sufficiently known to draw the attention of the royal court and to inspire translations.

James Fitzgerald, a leading authority on the *Mahabharata*, has outlined how the epic justifies itself in three ways: (a) as a work providing a vision of the ultimate reality as the supreme god Vishnu; (b) as a sacred scripture (or Veda) which was endorsed, possessed and supported by Brahmins, the priestly class; (c) as a law-book (*sastra*) which supported royal action after the example of Krishna—an incarnation of Vishnu himself.⁴² This places the work in religious terms: it is the ultimate point of reference.

Source Materials

The translation of the *Mahabharata* was commissioned by Akbar in 1582 and finished in 1584.⁴³ Bada'uni informs us that Akbar bestowed the title *Razmnama* or 'The Book of Wars' on the translation and that "Shaikh Abu'l-Fazl ... wrote a preface of the

⁴¹ Richard H. Davis, *The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2015).

⁴² James L. Fitzgerald, "India's Fifth Veda: the *Mahabharata*'s Presentation of Itself," in *Essays on the Mahabharata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Brill: Leiden, 1991), 150-70.

⁴³ This is according to the calculations of Ali, "Translations of Sanskrit Works," 41, citing the account and dates given by Bada'uni. Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, 210 says the project started in AH 990/CE 1583 without citing his source (990 = 1582-83). Yael Rice, "A Persian *Mahabharata*: The 1598-1599 *Razmnama*," *Manoa* 22 (2010): 126 says the process took four years to complete, from 1584-1588, perhaps including everything up to Abu'l-Fazl's *Preface*, but even then 1587 seems more likely based on the evidence I have found, see immediately below.

length of two quires (*juzv*) for that work.”⁴⁴ With his characteristically critical attitude, Bada’uni could not help adding that this was “contrary to the dictates of the commentary on the *Ayat al-Kursi* that he had composed.”⁴⁵ The tone of this remark adds weight to his testimony that Abu’l-Fazl wrote the *Preface*. Any doubt in the matter of authorship is removed by Abu’l-Fazl himself who plainly says in the introduction to the *Razmnama* that the task was assigned to him: “they have designated me, despite the fact that I have lost the techniques of speech, as the author of this essay and I have been given permission from the court of the king to speak properly and appropriately about the subject.”⁴⁶

Aside from the *Preface*, the process of writing down the translation of the *Razmnama* in Persian was entrusted to Naqib Khan. A short biography of him is given below.⁴⁷ According to several manuscripts of the *Razmnama*, he took one and a half years and finished the task in Sha’ban AH 992 (August-September, 1582 CE).⁴⁸ He was helped in the matter by Mulla Shiri, Muhammad Sultan Thanesari, and Bada’uni.⁴⁹ Then the poet Faizi—Abu’l-Fazl’s elder brother—was asked, as Bada’uni reports, “to convert the rough translation into elegant prose and verse, but he did not complete more than two sections.”⁵⁰ That was in year AH 990/1582 CE.⁵¹ Rizvi has noted that it is difficult to

⁴⁴ *MT*, 2: 331. Shailesh Zaidi, *Hinduism in Aligarh Manuscripts: Descriptive Catalogue of Persian Mss. of Maulana Azad Library, A.M.U., Aligarh* (Delhi: Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna, 1994), 1 states Abu’l-Fazl wrote his introduction in 1587 and thereafter Akbar bestowed the title, but does not cite a source for this information. He appears to be following Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, 212.

⁴⁵ *MT*, 2: 331.

⁴⁶ See translation in chapter two, p. 2.

⁴⁷ See section ‘translation team’.

⁴⁸ Rieu, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts*, 2: 57, no. Add 5638-5640. These volumes date to 1761-63 CE. H. Ethe, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in the Library of the India Office*, 2 vols. (Oxford: University Press, 1903-37) 1: 1087, IOL no. 1944, also mentions Naqib Khan and the time he took. As Ethe notes, this manuscript is almost identical to IOL no. 1943 which dates to 1737 so it seems likely that IOL no. 1944 is also of the mid-eighteenth century. The India Office is now merged with the British Library, but the numbers have been retained.

⁴⁹ See *AA*, 1: 105. *MT*, 2: 329-31. Abu’l-Fazl’s full statement on the matter is given below.

⁵⁰ *MT*, 2: 329.

determine the share of the contributors, and that “on the whole, the work is not disjointed. It seems that Naqib Khan finally rewrote it to make it a unified whole.”⁵² This is a plausible explanation but it seems to me that Faizi’s work was never incorporated. This is supported by a manuscript, India Office no. 1945, which consists of the first two Parvans of Faizi’s poetical paraphrase.⁵³ As Ethe notes, “part of the same flowery translation by Faizi” is preserved also in manuscripts at Oxford.⁵⁴ It therefore appears that the Faizi version was transmitted separately, quite apart from any editing by Naqib Khan of the parts by different contributors.

The imperial copy of the *Razmnama*, made with many miniature paintings, seems to be the one kept in the Palace at Jaipur.⁵⁵ Internal evidence from the paintings shows that it was well underway by 1584, the year in which Daswant, a gifted artist and court favourite, committed suicide.⁵⁶ Scribal notes in the margins, studied by art historians, indicate paintings continued to be made for the manuscript until December 1586.⁵⁷ Abu’l-Fazl’s *Preface* came after this. The date of the *Preface* is shown by the following remark about Akbar embedded in the *Preface* itself: “His good fate is strongly determined because from the beginning of his reign, which is now thirty-two years, every other king, scholar, sage, or even the common man who have thought about opposing

⁵¹ AH 990 fell in a single western year. Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, 210 cites “India Office Ms. 761” for this date, but that manuscript is of the *Anwar-i Suhaili* and has no reference to Faizi. Rieu, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts*, 2: 57 says the epic was turned into elegant prose by Faizi, citing: “*A’in-i Akbari*, Blochmann’s translation, 104” but this too seems incorrect. The text actually says: “The *Lilawati*, which is one of the most excellent works written by Indian Mathematicians on Arithmetic, lost its Hindu veil, and received a Persian garb from the hand of my elder brother, Shaikh ‘Abdul Faiz-i Faizi.” This refers to the *Lilavati*, for which see Ethe, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in the Library of the India Office*, p. 1112, IOL no. 1998. In any event, Faizi’s poetic work on the *Razmnama* was begun AH 990 because Bada’uni mentions this under his account of events in that year.

⁵² Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, 210.

⁵³ Ethe, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in the Library of the India Office*, pp. 1087-88, IOL no. 1945.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1088.

⁵⁵ For which see Das, *Paintings of the Razmnama*.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 12. As Das notes, the death of the artist is reported by Abu’l-Fazl.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

him, have lost.”⁵⁸ Taking this evidence and adding thirty-two years to the date of Akbar’s accession gives 1587. Later in the *Preface*, Abu’l-Fazl also makes this statement about the king: “He is an intelligent person who is conscious of everything from the time he was a year old child until now—in his mid-forties—and God-willing he will have the prospect to live even longer because of the order he brings to the world.”⁵⁹ This is not precise, but if we take Akbar’s year of birth in 1542 and add 45 years we arrive again at 1587. Any question about the date is removed by a statement in the final part of the *Preface* where Abu’l-Fazl refers again to regnal year 32 and states the equivalent is AH 995.⁶⁰ After the *Preface* was complete, it was transmitted with copies of the *Razmnama*, some of which were being illustrated by court artists into the 1590s.⁶¹

The Jaipur copy of the *Razmnama* is out of reach and the text has not been available to scholars for more than a century. Therefore we depend on other copies, of which there are many, some from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but most from the eighteenth.⁶² Drawing on a number of these manuscripts, S. M. Reza Jalali Naini and N. S. Shukla prepared an edition that was printed in Tehran between 1979 and 1981.⁶³ My translation of Abu’l-Fazl’s *Preface* uses this edition and throughout I refer to this as the “printed text.” The page numbers of the printed text are inserted into my translation to allow the translation to be positioned against that text.

⁵⁸ See translation in chapter two, 18. Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, 212 notes the year as 995/1587 but does not cite his source. Humayun died in January 1556. Thirty-two years after that gives January 1588 but with the Hijri years being slightly shorter, late 1587 is likely, therefore, I agree with Rizvi.

⁵⁹ See chapter two, p.13.

⁶⁰ See chapter two, p. 22 and chapter three, where the date is analyzed.

⁶¹ 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 (2011): 507; Das, *Paintings of the Razmnama*, 16 deals with the paintings, some dated as late as 1617.

⁶² The Jaipur *Razmnama* may not, of course, have Abu’l-Fazl’s *Preface*. The last date we have for activity in the royal *Razmnama* is late 1586, while the *Preface* was written starting in 1587. It is possible, therefore, that the *Preface* was finished too late for inclusion and so was transmitted only with subsequent copies. This may have encouraged the supplementation that is evident in the later parts of the text, for which see below.

⁶³ S. M. Riza Jalali Naini and N. S. Shukla. *Mahabharat: buzurgtarin manzumah-i kuhnah-i mawjud-i jahan bih zaban-i Sanskrit* (Tihiran: Kitabkhanah-i Tahuri, 1979-81).

In addition to the printed text, I have also used a manuscript in the British Library for comparison because it is the oldest copy available and was not used by Naini and Shukla. While the discussion of specific differences and choices of words are found in the notes to my translation, here I would like to make some general observations about the British Library manuscript. This copy was collected by N. B. Halhed (1751-1830). After a period in India, during which time Halhed wrote *A Code of Gentoo Laws* (1776) and *A Grammar of the Bengal Language* (1778), he returned to England in 1785. The British Museum purchased his collection of manuscripts on his death in 1830. The *Razmnama* was registered under the numbers Add. 5641-5642.⁶⁴ With the separation of the British Museum and British Library in the 1970s, the *Razmnama* went to the British Library but kept the same numbers.

The work is in two volumes and dates Zulhijjah AH 1007 (= June/July 1599 CE). The first volume has Abu'l-Fazl's *Preface* and Parvans or chapters 1-11 of the Persian translation. The text has a later table of contents and synopsis of the whole work in Persian, with references to the folios of the British Library copy. According to the colophon at the end of the table of contents, it was compiled by Basant Rae, son of Kasiram, son of Raemal, a Kayath in the service of Shaistah Khan in the year AH 1098.⁶⁵ Shaistah Khan, known as Mirza Abu Talib, was the maternal uncle of Aurangzeb and *subadar* of Bengal from 1664 to 1688. The additional text was added at the end of this period. The important thing about Shaistah Khan was that his grandfather was Mirza Ghiyas Beg (d. 1622). He emigrated to India from Iran after 1577 and rose to high office under Akbar. Given that the British Library *Razmnama* belonged to his grandson Shaistah Khan, and that this family never fell from favour (and thus retained their possessions), it may be that the British Library copy of 1599 was made for Mirza

⁶⁴ Rieu, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts*, p. 2: 58; Jeremiah P. Losty, *The Art of the Book in India* (London: British Library, 1982), 47.

⁶⁵ Rieu, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts*, p. 58. A copy, number 1929 in the India Office Collection, was based on British Library no. Add. 5641-5642. It has the table of contents by Basant Rae and was finished in 1774 by a scribe working for the East India Company. The manuscript belonged to Sir Charles Wilkins, the early Sanskrit scholar. See Ethe, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in the Library of the India Office*, 1: 1082 (no. 1929). The fact that this copy was based on Add. 5641-5642 is shown by the date AH 1007 which has been taken from the original, as Ethe notes. Thus Add 5641-5642 seems already to have been in the collection of Halhed by the time no. 1929 was made.

Ghiyas Beg and his family and thus an elite copy, made for an important noble. This suggestion gains some credence given that Bada'uni reports that once the imperial *Razmnama* had been completed and embellished with illustrations in many copies, "the nobles too were ordered to have it transcribed by way of obtaining blessings."⁶⁶ This is further corroborated by Abu'l-Fazl's report that Akbar ordered a copy of the *Razmnama* sent to Prince Murad in 1591.⁶⁷ The British Library copy appears, therefore, to be one of these elite versions.

The main difference between Abu'l-Fazl's *Preface* in the printed text and the British Library manuscript is that the manuscript is shorter. It ends after briefly setting the stage with the key characters, starting with Bharata. Abu'l-Fazl then mentions Kuru—the king who gave his name to Kurukshetra or the 'field of Kuru' near Thanesar—followed by Vichitravirya. The latter had two sons, Dhritarashtra and Pandu, the two sides (Kaurava and Pandava) that eventually fell out and ended up at war.

At the end of his brief summary, Abu'l-Fazl says: "He had two sons with the names of Dhritarashtra and Pandu and you will read his strange life story in this book."⁶⁸ This is where the *Preface* in the manuscript of 1599 ends. A number of possibilities present themselves. One is that this is an abbreviated version, i.e. that the British Library copy was a short copy, made for Mirza Ghiyas Beg. Why he might have had a short copy is something about which we can only speculate. However, the fact that this copy has a decorated title page but no miniature paintings supports the idea that it is an abbreviated version, made with a minimum of expense. A second possibility is that the British Library copy was based on an imperfect copy that was missing the later sections of Abu'l-Fazl's introduction. This is not a compelling explanation because the text of the 1599 copy does not break off in an unnatural or illogical way, and it seems unlikely that a copy made as early as 1599 would have been based on an imperfect text. The third possibility is that the British Library copy represents the actual state of Abu'l-Fazl's introduction in 1599 and that the further text given in the printed edition (and manuscripts

⁶⁶ *MT*, 2: 319-21. Cited in Ali, "Translations of Sanskrit Works," p. 40, whose translation we follow.

⁶⁷ Das, *Paintings of the Razmnama*, 11.

⁶⁸ See translation in chapter two.

on which it is based) was added at a later time. In favour of this interpretation is the fact that Abu'l-Fazl's literary reputation increased after his death in 1602. Subsequent copyists may have incorporated material from elsewhere to elaborate the introduction and added further summaries of the story that were thought to be necessary or helpful to readers. And indeed this is what happened to the 1599 copy in the late 1600s when a detailed table of contents was added, as just noted above. A similar summary is found in the printed text which gives an account of the story Parvan by Parvan.⁶⁹ A close reading of the later sections of the introduction in the printed text shows some breaks and repetitions, which also point to parts being added. The most notable is where the story is summarised and it is said that: "after thirty-two years Yudhishthira, with the aid of divine intervention, came to realize the unfaithful nature of this world." He then made preparations to leave his cares behind and journey to the hereafter. We are then told: "All these adventures are meticulously mentioned in this book," and we are given a verse by way of conclusion. The story then starts all over again, and this time it says: "Yudhishthira ruled for thirty-six years."⁷⁰ This repetition and direct disagreement regarding the number of years—within the space of a few lines—can only be explained by the fact that we are reading a text that has been brought together from a number of different sources. Further problems are noted in my notes to the translation. I think it is reductionist and a little early to dismiss all the material in the introduction that does not appear in the British Library manuscript. At this point we are unlikely to be able to answer the question fully until the Jaipur copy from the 1580s is available for study, or review all the surviving manuscripts available and compare them, something beyond the scope and aims of this MA thesis. For the sake of completeness here, I am including the full translation of the printed edition.

Translation Team

Although Abu'l-Fazl enjoyed a reputation as a translator after his death, he did not, actually know Sanskrit and he did not translate the *Mahabharata*. He admits this—more or less—in his introduction to the *Razmnama*. He first says: "Since I did not have

⁶⁹ The translation of this summary is given in chapter two.

⁷⁰ See the translation in chapter two, p. 33 where the contradiction is noted.

the facility and wealth, I asked some ... real men of letters to take on the responsibility of expressing this very long narrative and asked them to commit to the assistance of fulfilling such a great goal.”⁷¹ Then later, in his description of the justification for the translation, he makes this statement: “There is,” Abu’l-Fazl says, “no other book more comprehensive and well-known and detailed than this one. Indeed, all astute intellectuals and language experts have gathered and unite to pursue the task of translating such a book skillfully and justly.”⁷² Bada’uni also refers to the translation team. In his account of how he became involved, he mentions that Akbar “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.”⁷³

The names of those in the team are not given in the running text, but in the colophon of the *Razmnama* preserved in the British Library (Add. 5638-41, folio 481b), the following statement is found: “Naqib Khan, son of Abd al-Latif al-Husaini, translated [this work] from Sanskrit into Persian in one and a half years. Several of the learned Brahmans, such as Deva Misra, Satavadhana, Madhusadhana Misra, Caturbhuj and Shaikh Bhavan read this book and explained it in Hindi to me.”⁷⁴ This is confirmed in the text itself where the Indian interlocutors are referred to directly, as noted by Audrey Truschke.⁷⁵ What this means is that the Sanskrit was explained by learned Brahmins to Naqib Khan in Hindi and that he then wrote down what he had heard in Persian.

⁷¹ See chapter two, p. 2.

⁷² See chapter two, p. 18.

⁷³ See *MT*, 2: 330.

⁷⁴ The passage noted first in Rieu, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts*, 2: 57, and later in Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, pp. 209-10, who reads the names, without citing his manuscript source, as “Debi Misra, Satuwani, Madhusudhan Misra, Chaturbhuj Misra and Sahikh [sic] Bhawan.” In Ali, “Translations of Sanskrit Works,” 41, the transcription of the names is garbled, as noted by Das, *Razmnama*, 11, but Das does not advance the identifications. The most recent assessment (still with gaps) is Truschke, “The Mughal Book of War,” 507.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

Naqib Khan was not, therefore, the translator, at least in the modern sense of a single author—as I am, for example, the translator of Abu'l-Fazl's *Preface* for this MA thesis. Rather he was the leading member of a team of experts working to Akbar's orders.⁷⁶ He was, in any event, the grandson of the famous historian Mir Yahya of Qazvin and the son of Mir Abd al-Latif.⁷⁷ The latter left Iran for the court of Humayun because he was persecuted as a Sunni, but arrived in AH 963 after Humayun's death. He was well received by Akbar who made him his tutor. His son Mir Ghiyas al-din 'Ali became one of Akbar's favourites and the king conferred on him the title of Naqib Khan in AH 988/1580-81 CE. This was just before Akbar commissioned the translation of the *Mahabharata*. According to Rieu, the *Tazkira al-Umara* or 'History of Notables' (BL Add 16,703) reports that Naqib Khan was the translator of the *Mahabharata*. Abu'l-Fazl gives a first-hand acknowledgement in the *A'in-i Akbari*. The *Mahabharata*, he says, is "one of the ancient books of Hindustan," and "was translated from Hindi into Persian by Naqib Khan, Maulana Abd al-Qadir Bada'uni and Shaikh Sultan Thanesari. It comprises some one lakh couplets. His Majesty named this ancient epic the *Razmnama*."⁷⁸

Other than Naqib Khan, the Indian scholars named in the British Library colophon are not easy to identify, although the listing has been noted on several occasions without, however, much effort made to identify the individuals.⁷⁹ Shaikh Bhavan is the best known, having assisted Bada'uni in the attempt to translate the *Atharva Veda*.⁸⁰ He came from the Deccan and converted to Islam and, according to Truschke, appears in several Persianate histories of the period.⁸¹ Caturbhujia could refer to the same

⁷⁶ Ali, "Translations of Sanskrit Works," 40, gives Bada'uni's critical account of further individuals involved and what they were able to achieve.

⁷⁷ The information here is drawn from Rieu, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts*, 2, 57.

⁷⁸ See AA, 1: 105. Bada'uni confirms this, as noted above.

⁷⁹ For example Najaf Haider, "Translating Texts and Straddling Worlds: Inter-cultural Communication in Mughal India," in *The Varied Facets of History: Essays in Honour of Aniruddha Ray*, ed. Ishrat Alam and Syed Ejaz Hussain (Delhi: Primus Books, 2011), 115-24, and Ali, "Translations of Sanskrit Works," 41.

⁸⁰ As mentioned above.

⁸¹ Truschke, "Naqib Han, Razm-nama," in *Perso-Indica*, <http://perso-indica.net/work/razm-nama> (retrieved July, 2015). Further biographical information about Shaikh Bhavan is in Ali, "Translations of Sanskrit Works," 38-39.

Caturbhuj Das who made a separate translation of the *Thirty-Two Tales of the Throne* in addition to that prepared by Bada'uni. This work was called *Shahnama*; there is a manuscript of this text in Oxford.⁸² Deva Misra (or Debi Misra) and his area of knowledge can be identified thanks to the following remark by Bada'uni:⁸³

At other times, a Brahmin of the name of Debi was pulled up the wall of the fort, sitting on a *charpai*, till he arrived near a balcony where the emperor used to sleep. 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, as Brahma, Mahadev, Bishn, Kishn, Ram, and Mahamai, who are supposed to have been men, but very likely never existed, though some, in their idle belief, look upon them as gods, and others as angels. His Majesty, on hearing further how much the people of the country prized their institutions, commenced to look upon them with affection.

The other names in the list are difficult to identify apart from Madhusudana.⁸⁴ Clues about him are found in the *A'in-i Akbari*. In the first volume, Abu'l-Fazl gives a long table of the learned people of his time. Among the first class of holy men, who "understand the mysteries of both worlds," he includes a series of famous people. As might be expected, many are Muslim saints, but in the first class he includes the

⁸² Eduard Sachu and Hermann Ethe, *Catalogue of the Persian, Turkish, Hindustani, and Pushtu Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library: Part I: the Persian Manuscripts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889) no. 1324. Bada'uni's translation of the text, not traced so far, is reported as missing from the royal library at an early stage.

⁸³ See *MT*, 2: 258. Also noted in Rizvi, "Dimensions of *Sulh-i kul* (Universal Peace) in Akbar's Reign and the Sufi Theory of Perfect Man," in *Akbar and His Age*, ed. Iqtidar Alam Khan (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1999), 18 without, however, citing Bada'uni.

⁸⁴ Those that can be identified are mentioned in Dinesh Bhattacharyya, "Sanskrit Scholars of Akbar's Time," *Indian Historical Quarterly* 13 (1937): 31, cited in Sanjukta Gupta, *Advaita Vedanta and Vaisnavism: The Philosophy of Madhusudana Sarasvati* (London: Routledge, 2006), 6.

following Indians: “13. Madhu Sarsuti. 14. Madhusudan. 15. Narain Asram. 16. Hariji Sur. 17. Damudar Bhat. 18. Ramtirth. 19. Nar Sing. 20. Parmindar. 21. Adit.”⁸⁵

In this list, number 14. Madhusudan is the well-known Vedanta scholar Madhusudhana Sarasvati. Valerie Stoker gives further information about him. He was from Bengal but lived in the city of Varanasi, where he authored the *Advaitasiddhi* in c. 1585. This responded to a work from south India by an author named Vyasatirtha. As Stoker says: “That Vyasatirtha’s criticisms of these rival Vedanta systems proved incisive is evident in the fact that for the duration of the sixteenth century, and even into the seventeenth, both direct and indirect responses to his works were being composed, not only in south India but as far north as Varanasi.”⁸⁶ The philosophical content of the debates is less historically important for my MA thesis than the fact that this example shows how the Brahmins of India had networks covering wide areas. Learned individuals were able to get hold of the manuscripts that interested them from almost anywhere, showing that there was an on-going and lively discourse among philosophers outside the Mughal court.⁸⁷

Status of Scholarship

The status of scholarship on this topic can be divided in two strands: that dealing with the *Preface* itself, and that dealing more generally with the *Mahabharata* and other translations. In terms of the first strand—the writing on Abu’l-Fazl’s *Preface*—the seminal discussion is found in Saiyid A. A. Rizvi’s *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar’s Reign*, already cited several times in this chapter.⁸⁸ In the context of his description of the Translation Bureau, Rizvi devotes four pages to the *Preface*, giving

⁸⁵ See AA, 1: 538-547.

⁸⁶ Valerie Stoker, “Polemics and Patronage in Sixteenth-Century Vijayanagara: Vyasatirtha and the Dynamics of Hindu Sectarian Relations,” *History of Religions* 51 (2011): 131.

⁸⁷ Gupta, *Advaita Vedanta*, 5 expresses surprise at the distance: “Varanasi, the accepted place of activity for Madhusudhana, is far removed from Vijay Nagar... it is plausible to think that the fame of these two great scholars [Madhava and Sayana] may have taken a long time to reach Varanasi.” The career of Shaikh Bhavan, who came from the Deccan, shows that such movement was entirely possible and that people moved over great distances.

⁸⁸ I will not list early notices, for which see Ernst, “Muslim Studies of Hinduism,” 174. Those items dealing specifically with the *Razmnama* not mentioned by Ernst are given in my bibliography.

a summary of its key points, but necessarily simplifying Abu'l-Fazl's thinking and omitting many details.⁸⁹ Rizvi also gives a translation of a short passage (dealing with the translation team), but his source for the Persian is a *Razmnama* printed in Lucknow by the Nawal Kishore Press.⁹⁰ Published in 1975, Rizvi's book has become a landmark study that has shaped much subsequent scholarship on the Translation Bureau and the *Razmnama*. Indeed later writers have normally followed Rizvi's analysis due to his well-balanced treatment.

The only scholar otherwise who has dealt with Abu'l-Fazl's Preface is Carl W. Ernst. In a wide-ranging article called "Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Arabic and Persian Translations of Indian Languages," Ernst revisited the sources, and for the *Razmnama* used the Tehran edition of 1979-81, the same edition used as the basis for the translation given here in chapter two. Ernst offered a translation of several passages from Abu'l-Fazl's *Preface* and used these to advance his reassessment of translation literature in the Indian milieu. The specific passages are noted in chapter two, and I will return to them again in chapter three.

Ernst's study, published in 2003, is more than a systematic re-examination of the *Razmnama* and related sources. He attempts to move beyond the terms of reference framed by Rizvi and specifically questions the understanding of the translations as expressions of a 'liberal outlook' or exercises in 'religious tolerance'.⁹¹ The emphasis on the idea that the translations were meant to build bridges between the Hindus and Muslims and to address Akbar's goal of reducing religious factionalism, while certainly true, may be traced long before Rizvi.⁹² But as Ernst says:

Abu al-Fazl was interested in the philosophical and religious content of the epic, from the perspective of an enlightened intellectual whose cosmopolitan vision had

⁸⁹ Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, 207-210.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁹¹ As in, for example, John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 36-40.

⁹² As in Yael Rice, "A Persian Mahabharata: The 1598–1599 *Razmnama*," *Manoa* 22 (2010): 126.

moved him out of a strictly defined Islamic theological perspective. But I think it is fair to say that this intellectual project was thoroughly subordinated to the political aim of making Akbar's authority supreme over all possible rivals in India, including all religious authorities. The translation of the Sanskrit epics was not an academic enterprise comparable to the modern study of religion; it was instead part of an imperial effort to bring both Indic and Persianate culture into the service of Akbar.⁹³

The view that the translation project can be seen as an instrumental policy, and part of an imperial ambition to legitimize Akbar as king, and the Mughals as an Indo-Persian power, is also seen in an article published by M. Athar Ali in 1992.⁹⁴ Ali closely examined the evidence in the Persian texts and offered new observations on the date of the translations and the contributions of those involved. The value of this essay is underlined by the fact that it was reprinted in *Akbar and his Age* in 1999.⁹⁵

After a considerable hiatus, Audrey Truschke entered the field with a new study of the *Razmnama*.⁹⁶ Extending the work of Ernst, who she cites, Truschke has argued that the translators of the *Razmnama* approached the *Mahabharata* as a mixture of imaginative history, political advice, and a great story that resonated with the Indo-Persian literary tradition of the time, and, concurrently, served as a vehicle for imperial ideology. Truschke has also published articles on Sanskrit-Persian grammars, the Jain responses to the debates at Fatehpur Sikri, and Brahmanical accounts of their engagement with the Mughals. These articles are listed in my bibliography and cited in those places where the information is relevant to my discussion.

⁹³ Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism?," 182.

⁹⁴ Ali, "Translations of Sanskrit Works," 38-45.

⁹⁵ The paper is reprinted exactly, and under the same title, in *Akbar and His Age*, ed. Iqtidar Alam Khan (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1999), 171-80.

⁹⁶ See Truschke, "The Mughal Book of War," 506-520. This article was published in 2011.

Aim of the Present Work

While the publications outlined above shed valuable light on Akbar's Translation Bureau and the *Razmnama*, we are left asking how Abu'l-Fazl positioned himself in relation to the translation and how he approached his task as the author of the *Preface*. Abu'l-Fazl's understanding and representation of the social groups for whom the translation might have been intended, and his relation to Akbar as his king and patron, also remain key questions. These can only be answered by a close examination of Abu'l-Fazl's *Preface*. To answer these questions I have, as a result, provided a translation in chapter two, and a commentary and analysis of themes in chapter three. The justification for my focus on this material is given above at the start of this chapter. To that I only add the comment of Audrey Truschke who has observed: "Most Indo-Persian translations are severely understudied; many moulder away in manuscript libraries, unpublished and in want of sustained philological attention."⁹⁷ This explains the scope and aims of the present MA thesis. Abu'l-Fazl's text is barely studied—as shown in the survey of the relevant literature just given—and it has never been translated into English or any other language. This means that historians without Persian have resorted to English translations of the small parts available, while even those with Persian tend to be deflected by Abu'l-Fazl's difficult and complex literary style.

By way of clarification and conclusion, I should note that my research questions do *not* embrace an exploration of the complex religious fabric of the Mughal empire or the general nature of translation activities in the Islamic world. My concern is simply with what Abu'l-Fazl says in his *Preface*. This approach means that I take Abu'l-Fazl's writing as an indication of what he and the court thought about the *Razmnama* translation. As a prominent courtier under Akbar, and as the king's chronicler and avid supporter, Abu'l-Fazl is an important source. He is not, of course, the only source, but in view of his close connection to Akbar and his involvement and knowledge of court activities, his account provides a point of departure for a host of contexts that can be left for those in the future to explore.

⁹⁷ See Truschke, "Indo-Persian Translations: A Disruptive Past," Seminar 671 (July 2015). (http://www.india-seminar.com/2015/671/671_audrey_truschke.htm)

Chapter 2.

Translation of the *Preface to the Razmnama*

[page1] Oh, You! The one by whom the whole world is intoxicated,

All desperately on their way to seek you,

With many writing boards gone black and many pens broken,

None could manifest your actual essence (نقشی ننگاشتند) as it is.¹

Alas! Alas! The drop of existence (ذره امکان) is lost in the desert of astonishment and darkness. Many friends would talk about the possibility of the mercy of the sun and would step from the abyss of decay and bewilderment into the peak of insight and highness above the sky. These very people would brag about their imaginary treasure of knowledge which possesses no value in all existence (وجود) and would describe it as precious wealth of the world of possibility (امکان) and count it as grand attributes of the highness of the holy spirit of God.

Oh, You! The one to whom both worlds are devoted,

All that is or is not praise You,

Thoughts alone do not lead us to you,

No one but you is aware of your mystery,

Swear to our feebleness,

We must admit our insufficiencies,

You who grants life to all creatures,

On your path, there is nothing we can pursue but being a slave of yours!

It is the custom of humble people of need (خاکیان شاهراه) to consider all things that they have acquired from the book of perfection and knowledge (کتاب الکیمال و باب المعرفة), according to their sight, wisdom, strength, and ability, as free from any deficiency.

¹ It is in this opening quatrain that Abu'l-Fazl sets the context of the preceding essay. You here refers to God, and the quatrain is about the pursuit of knowledge about man's existence.

[page 2] They attribute all their knowledge to God's domain, realm and oneness and name it as praising of Him. Sadly, it seems that these kinfolk's tradition and duty has been to proceed in this way—step by step—and to write down all the words that come out of their mouth with all thirty-two teeth. And all of a sudden they were soaked in sweat from embarrassment and the whole world mortified. Though more contemplation was made to this end, they ended up in silence again.

No one, not even the sage (دانا) nor the vagrant (اوباش) was aware,
That the alligator came crawling as blind as a bat.

To those divinely selected, topiaries of the land of morals (چمن پیریان ریاحین اخلاق), openers of our eyes to creation's mysteries, eternal praise be to them. Those who at this court of greatness have forgotten their books of knowledge and instead led a life of ignorance and talk of nonsense:

Those intoxicated folks who have lived pleurably,

Those who even without any wine, can be drunk,²

Do not seek righteousness and wisdom from them,

Since they are the fellows who have thrown books into the fire.

After all the words I have written to punish prying people and also after appreciating all the equity (انصاف) I have used in wisdom's realm, I have been judicious and avoided exaggeration (در محکمه عقل بی مزاحمت)³ and for the sake of the honesty I had with myself, they have designated me, despite the fact that I have lost the techniques of speech, as the author of this introduction. I have been given permission from the court of the king to speak properly and appropriately about the subject. In the meantime, I have been given the permission to express some specific concepts which I have learned in true mystical schools (مدرسه تحقیق) and which were hidden in the unconscious. I have praised God for all these things and made myself ready for this goal. Since I did not have the facility and wealth, I asked some poor folks (دست کوتاه بنان) but who were real men of letters (خامه شکافته)

² See chapter three for a discussion of the groups referred to here.

³ In the printed text this sentence is written as "انصافی که بی مزاحمت اوباش و هم دادم" and "وهم" (*wahm*) can be translated as "imagination," and is one of the mental faculties (he has been judicious without exaggeration in imagination). However in the manuscript the phrase is written as "انصافی که بی مزاحمت اوباش و هم و آدم" meaning the sentence is left without a verb. The difference between the two texts can be due to a misreading, resulting in a misspelling.

(زبان) to take on the responsibility of expressing this very long narrative and asked them to commit to the assistance of fulfilling such a great goal.

[page 3] Oh God, the divine being, enlighten me with rays of knowledge,

Fix my broken heart without Your passion and love,

It is very rude of me to ask for closeness,

If You are pushing me away, still keep an eye on me.

To all the sharp, accurate and insightful people who are already aware⁴ of God's effective wisdom (حکمت بالغه)⁵ and are explorers of perplexing issues, it is no secret that regarding divine discourse, from the time news of those living were heard and the life of those diseased have been written down, they have been blinded and silenced. Therefore, all their efforts have aided in the destruction of the meadows of the "self" and their attempts to water the desert (of "self") have been in vain and senseless. If, by chance, a frustrated person was enlightened and given the hidden truth of creation, he would be silenced as soon as he opened his mouth to reveal the truth. This is due to the harm caused by the effect of this wine-like power or sometimes the shrewdness of people of the age. Since the existing people of the time have betrayed him, either out of credulousness or benevolence or sometimes bad intentions and egocentricity, it led him to a path of non-existence and therefore made a forgotten feature out of him.⁶ Because all the kings of the country, who are the lords of the world (اساطین عالم), oftentimes thought that the appearance of such a man was a conspiracy against their kingdom and the order of the common people, they paid no heed to any other advice on the issue. If by any chance, they were informed of differing ideas, they considered it dispensable and part of a religious matter (معاملات دینی) by those who were deceivers on issues of *fatwa* and affairs of jurisprudence (متغلبان منصب فتوی و متعلقان امور فقاہت). These leaders of masters

⁴ In the printed text the word "واقفان" is used, which means "aware," however, in the manuscript the original word is "واصلان" which can be translated as "connectors or those who join (put together) reason and sense." Within context, the word from the manuscript seems more meaningful as the text is in fact talking about those people who try to use both their reasoning and emotions to reveal the truth.

⁵ Manifest wisdom (*hikmat al-baligha*) is beneficial or effective knowledge that leads to action and right conduct in manners. In the *Qur'an* (54:4-5, 16:125) the Prophet is asked to call people to the way of God with *hikmah*.

⁶ Abu'l-Fazl may be referring to his experience as a courtier at Akbar's court, as the courtiers, for a variety of reasons, have led him to be neglected at the court of Akbar.

of imitation and who are mere symbols of ignorance and folly, would cause him (the frustrated person) to withdraw from the sharp criticism of those vain and worthless people. Today is marked by the emergence of God's esoteric name (اسم الباطن)⁷ and revelation of God's all-covering grace (رحمت فيض عام), [page 4] according to God's insight and divine inspiration to a great number of people. This is the king, the world of the soul and the soul of the world, namely, the 'lord of the age,' (پادشاه زمان) whose graceful being is articulated in this text. Therefore, only a person who is insightful enough and a truth-seeker at heart can be properly granted high levels of understanding and can acquire accurate knowledge and consequently transfer this grace to the common and the elite alike.

The earth is honoured to be embellished with the vitality of his throne (تخت),

Fulfilling the greatness of this promise as the crown of the sky (تاج زاسمان).

It is no secret to intellectual and astute people that whenever this happens to a person of common nature, it could either lead him to non-existence or else the whole issue would turn to be quite the opposite. Thus one must be obedient to it and today which is a day of victory, blossoming of knowledge and insight, and a time to renew the system of creation, one should notice that oracular mercy and grace (فيض غيبية) have been bestowed upon the heart of the 'lord of the age'. It is obvious that time has come for the inwardly-blind⁸ people of the whole universe to be given sight and time for the dead heart of nature to be given life and in this way, the true essence of the kingdom and the throne⁹ would be determined and specified. Since the king has had a great fate and had been granted a good countenance, he has also been given precious spiritual leadership (سلطنت معنوی) ability as well, which is well worth his kingdom and the whole divine realm

⁷ Some custodians of the religious sciences have been entrusted with God's "inner name" (*ism al-batin*)—as opposed to (*ism al-zahir*) "exoteric name"—which allowed them to penetrate the inner thoughts of individuals. *Ism al-batin* can be referred to those learned in "the secret of the souls" (*asrar al-nufus*) and refers to esoteric knowledge, such as that of Akbar.

⁸ I have used the word "inwardly-blind" for "کوردرودان" which means those who are blind in mind and heart. However, in the manuscript the word "دردنان" is used which can come to mean "the time has come for all blind people to gain sight."

⁹ In the printed text we have the word "سر" used for the word "throne," which means above. However, in the manuscript the word "سریر" is used which literally means throne.

(لوای ظل الهی). This is a gift to the chosen one (برگزیده خدا) which is indeed deeply rooted, coming from centuries ago and presently being established in his kingdom.¹⁰

In praise of the great Lord Abu'l-Muzaffar Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar,

The warrior king whose kingdom may God make eternal (خلد الله ملكه),¹¹

In God's greatness, one is deeply astonished to mention a name of such greatness, who is the leader of all men of God (پیشوای خدا شناسان) and preceptor (مقتدای) of all guide seekers in Him.¹² Even if one tries hard to pay proper tribute to him, one could not do so perfectly. [page 5] If one's diction is permitted to be used to describe in detail this absolute guide (هدای علی الاطلاق) and leader, one would be ashamed realizing the true nature and truth of this fact;¹³ moreover, he is ashamed [at the extent of] of his own [lack of] common sense and conduct.¹⁴ This is because, whatever others say or write [about him] will be coloured by their own mood and talent and thus neither be appropriate for the highness of the one to whom the tribute is paid, nor reflect any of his benevolence and graciousness which is known to all the sacred ones in the heaven. Therefore, the proper praise will be expressed simply by those living on this dusty earth.

I know nothing about praising Him,

[But] the thought of such an endeavor is perpetual,

My body is poorly-dressed and my soul is like the Messenger's soul,

On the surface I feel like a snowstorm, but deep in my heart, like the River Nile,

Just as the earth needs rain,

¹⁰ Here Abu'l-Fazl is describing the foundation of Akbar's rule and the establishment of his kingdom as created through his special leadership qualities and descent, see chapter three for further details.

¹¹ This sentence does not appear in the manuscript and can be viewed as a later insertion signaling the next section which is, in essence, praise of the king. "خلد الله ملكه" meaning may God preserve his kingdom, see Hans Wehr and J. Milton Cowan, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic: (Arabic-English)* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Spoken Language Services, 1994): 294.

¹² Abu'l-Fazl views Akbar as the leader of, not only his own empire, but of the whole world: Akbar is a universal king who holds importance second to God, and perhaps uses an intended pun on "greatness" with the word Akbar meaning 'great'.

¹³ Abu'l-Fazl means that it is impossible to fully describe the greatness of the emperor and it is when one attempts to do so that he realizes and is embarrassed to learn that Akbar's greatness cannot be condensed into words, primarily because it is grander than one perceives.

¹⁴ Meaning that the common man cannot completely fathom or verbalize the true essence and greatness of Akbar and any effort to do so would be in vain.

The mind and soul need knowledge.

I wish all those similar in mind to Plato, and those who are wise like Aristotle, could bear the responsibility of this vital matter in order to reach some understanding regarding the height of the essence of this very splendid man, and therefore remind people of the greatness of his being and legitimacy (حقیقت او حقانیت).¹⁵ Or, I wish all groups of people, young and old, could delve deep into thought so that collectively they could compose something that is appropriate for the court of the king and would be subject to commendation (ثنا خوانی).

How may my feeble hands ever reach perfection?

The passage of time even causes the vitiation of jewels.

Eventually, after a long period of time spent alone with my heart I understood that [for such an endeavor] one must write as though you are in the time of utter happiness and understand the status of the deputy of God (خليفة الله) and write in a way that would embellish your phrases and express your obedience.¹⁶

If one is to be eulogized by some words of admiration and praise,

You are the one truly deserving all that.

Thus, some of those naturally inclined to the pursuit of meanings (تجرد منشان معانی), who could imitate some discourse, brought an end to that notion [of discourse] in a way which seems sanctified (تقدس) and mature (بالغ نظر).

Who is he, of whom I am talking so furtively?

Permit me to state one hundred [more] cultured details about him,

[page 6] He is the king for whom,

I come out of my secret guise and talk.

¹⁵ I have chosen to translate “حقانیت” as legitimacy, because within this context Abu'l-Fazl seems to be expressing the great qualities of the emperor in order to express sincere validation for his role as king of the empire. The word “حقیقت” seems to separate the idea of authenticity and truthful-being from the word “حقانیت”, which refers to a larger issue concerning Akbar and his realm as a whole.

¹⁶ Here Abu'l-Fazl could be referring to the method used to write a preface for such a grand project and the importance of “muqaddimah” as a tool for highlighting important themes to be discussed or worthy of notice by both the commissioner and writer. It is also a reference to the style of embellished writing as being an indication of those serving of it. The approach here, and above, where Abu'l-Fazl states that whatever others say or write [about him] will be “tinged” by their own mood and talent,” is remarkably modern in that it states all writing is subjective.

He is the gem of the crown of all kings, the *qibla* of those conscious of God (قبله خدا) (آگاهان),¹⁷ the light of all nights, hope for the whole generation of mankind, the highest rank of nobles, crowned victor of *Qur'anic* justice (نصرت قرآن عدالت قرین),¹⁸ the sovereign of the seal of the state (خاتم دولت فرمانروایی), ink of the sword of conquest, a unique exemplar among all exemplars, the secret in the written lines of all the names of God, the revealer of hidden secrets (اسرار غیبی), a companion to secluded people, the servant of the only divine being (بندۀ یگانہ معبود), an astute person of sensitive moments, the owner of all coinage in the imperial treasury,¹⁹ the artist of imaginary innovations, healer of beautiful faces, painter of all the colours in the mirror of concepts, the essence of the formality of wise sayings, the complete organizer of senses and wisdom, the record-book of craftsmen now and forever, the moderator of imperial customs, giver of bread to all mankind, deputy of people in front of God, keeper of all wishes and dreams, solver of all problems, the guard of divine treasures, comfort for the whole universe and all ages, organizer of the whole world from ground to sky.

Fury will stop the whole process of creation,

Justice (عدل) will enslave and enchain tyranny (ظلم),

Even the hardest stones will be softened by the strength of blood-shed,

The mercy of the lion will calm everything down,

Present age will not tolerate soft and tough behavior,

¹⁷ The word *qibla* indicates the direction to which Muslims turn at prayer. For those like-minded people, Abu'l-Fazl seems to be saying, Akbar is the direction to which those conscious of God should turn, as they know the truth of things as they really are and understand the true essence of their king and his intentions and are able to express their "admiration and praise" of him.

¹⁸ Akbar is described as the one who has brought about the victory of the *Qur'an* which is to be just. Justice is a central theme in the *Qur'an* and its importance can be understood from these lines, "Do not let hatred for a people incite you into not being just" (Surat al-Maida, 8). In parallel to that, the emperor through the translation of the *Mahabharata* seems to be a perfect example in the eyes of Abu'l-Fazl in bringing justice to the diverse population of Akbar's realm.

¹⁹ The symbol of sovereignty in the Mughal Empire were reflected in the authority of the coin. The successful operation of coin minting within a political structure created an excellent opportunity for transactions with experts, such as bankers and money changers. In turn this encouraged the money market to flourish, which in turn would attract business. This surge of business activity in turn would make the ruler less dependent on foreign sources of funds for the financial support of his rule. See J. S. Deyell and R.E. Frykenberg, "Sovereignty and the "SIKKA" Under Company Raj: Minting Prerogative and Imperial Legitimacy in India" *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 19 (1982): 1-25.

The cosmos will not conceal the truth from majority nor the minority (قليل و كثير).²⁰

He is the owner of power who simultaneously rules over many vital and different issues, which indeed need separate time, energy, and wisdom. He conducts state matters confidently and executes them well. He replies to all the responsible subordinates who are busy in the court, in a very convenient manner, as if all his attention had been on that very matter and he had been thinking about it all the way through.

The king who is candid in his court and with his men,

Will be able to think better and not surrender to doubt and illusion (وهم),

He will be capable of revealing the truth now and hereafter,

He is the one who knows about the use of proper language and is able to develop it.

[page 7] He is a creator who is so skilled in putting in order the affairs of the Kingdom and fulfilling his role in [controlling all rules and regulations] of the caliphate (نقوش خلافت).

According to the understanding of scholars and the wise who have thought about this matter, it is astonishing to think how the former kings (سلاطين ماضى) may have reigned over the country without such commands and orders.²¹

The whole universe is under his [Akbar] kingdom and protection,

The whole providence of earth is based on his order and command,

If his highness does not give permission to all creatures to move,

Not a single word will be uttered from the depth of their being.²²

He is patient enough to do whatever task is required of him, despite the fact that he has many men and subordinates, who are qualified and quite efficient in their fields, to carry

²⁰ Abu'l-Fazl is referring to cosmology: the concept of the revelation of the truth of life and the universe. According to him, the truth is out there to be found, perhaps referring to Akbar's reign as the time for the ushering of a new revelation.

²¹ This is a direct contrast, and so veiled criticism of the earlier political set up in India: i.e. the Sultans of Delhi. Abu'l-Fazl is praising centralised power in the person of the king. For more on the Sultans of Delhi see: Satish Chandra, *Medieval India: From Sultanat to the Mughals* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1997).

²² This is a clear statement of absolute power of the king, again in contrast to the court of nobles under the Sultanate who placed and removed Sultans and were known for their intrigues.

²² Akbar was the first Mughal king to make the institution of kingship divine in theory as well as in practice. Owing to its divine origin the kingship acquired was to be used for the welfare of the state and its people. See K. N. Chitnis, *Medieval Indian History* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2003): 60-63. In the *A'in-I Akbari* Abu'l-Fazl describes the idea of kingship as being further characterized by paternalism, benevolence, unselfishness, justice, and impartiality. AA, 1: 3-4.

out the tasks. But he remains faithful and committed and is assured that the outcome of these highly-important issues matter. Therefore, it is not fair to pay less attention to some aspects and cease to pursue them.²³

The power of all cosmos is relying on his person,
The treasures of both worlds are measured by his justice,
Not living whimsically nor greedily,
He has assumed the burden of two worlds,
The common people are unaware of his burden,
And traitors are all oblivious [as though asleep] while he is awake and aware.

His complete power and strength is evident in the large number of formal tasks he undertakes and in fact he has given some form of spiritual unity (وحدت معنوی) to them; and thus, it has made him an innovator in all aspects and also one in search of God's satisfaction and lasting awareness.

He is the one in possession of the royal throne,
He is the one confirmed and certified by God,
There is no science (علم) without him at the core,
There is no fortune without his interference.

His wisdom is ample, in a way that he does not need exceptional knowledge in order to carry out important and complicated deeds and in issues relating to finance, he needs no agent, minister, or consultant. **[page 8]** All managers and executives of the age take their necessary commands, which may be in detail or in general and which are instructive for all, from his inborn capabilities that make him aware of all hidden secrets.

Oh, you, the one by whom the whole universe is honored,
You are more than all creation and less than the creator,
You are the one whose existence gives credit to all beings,
Your shadow is like God's grace spread over the age.

He is intelligent enough not to be distracted when it comes to any form of power and high rank, which is suggested by the [past] greatness and might of his government.²⁴ All

great men and all tyrants of the age melt away by observing him and drown in the sea of fear.

Eternal bliss lies in his surroundings,

All celestial difficulties (نوايب فلکی) are hidden and covered due to his opposition,

If he grants a glance into one's eyes, he would see embarrassment,

And if he wishes to implement his policies upon a rock,

Due to his command, the dust of the rock would turn into *mandragora* (مهر گیاه),²⁵

And huge stones would turn to ashes due to his strength.²⁶

Despite being in his youth and experiencing all sorts of pleasures and victories, he is still a pure hearted person always at war with his instincts, thus preventing his body from being immersed in mere material pleasure. He endeavors hard to do away with tyrants of the country and take into service some spiritual men (روحانیت).

Wisdom seems to have raised him soul-wise,

Soul seems to have raised him, character-wise.

He is attached to religion (دین), and has inborn and divine characteristics and innate moods of inspiration which many other gifted people and critics of human attribute lack.

Despite all this, he is still seeking perfection.²⁷

He possesses everything, though quite innocently he makes requests of others.

²⁴ The word "ناصیه" in the printed text, is written as "ماضیه" in the manuscript (perhaps a scribal error) and means "forehead." I have based my translation on the wording of the manuscript, "ماضیه" which means all actions done in the past and this relates contextually to Akbar's history in governing his empire.

²⁵ Mandragora is an ancient medicinal plant that was believed to have medicinal and magical effects. It was known to induce passion as well as conception. See, Howard R Turner, *Science in Medieval Islam: An Illustrated Introduction* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 153.

²⁶ This qasida presented here by Abu'l-Fazl is from Anvari (1126–1189). Anvari was a Persian poet and learned in astronomy. His poems were collected in a Divan, and contain panegyrics and eulogies amongst other works. His panegyric in honor of the ruler of Khorasan, Sultan Sanjar (1117–1157) gained him royal favor, allowing him to enjoy the patronage of two of Sanjar's successors.

²⁷ Abu'l-Fazl is perhaps referring to the *insan-e kamil* or "perfect man" which originates in the *Qur'an* and Hadith. According to Oliver Leaman, *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 2006), it means the "person who has reached perfection," referring to the prophet Muhammad.

He is an instrument of knowledge (دانش دستگاہی)—without any exaggeration in my expression—who, although, never acquired any form of scientific preparation (مقدمات علمی) or was never schooled officially (تحصیل معلومات رسمی), whenever he begins to pay heed to a scientific matter exceptional in its type and accuracy, [page 9] he later declares such sophisticated statements with his ‘tongue that interprets the unseen’ (زبان غیبی ترجمان), that scholars of the time and cultivators of wisdom (حکمت پروران), who had burnt the midnight oil (دود چراغ خورده) and studied in deep contemplation, fail to comprehend. Therefore they engage themselves in the task of finding an answer worthy of respect.

He is the king who has been trained by the teacher of the heart,

And is guided by his mind in order to understand,

For experts in the field of research, it is totally worth,

Developing the divine sciences out of his intellect (زعقل او).

He is a unique person of grand nature (فطرت بلند) who behaves, with all craftsmen and artists that have made an outstanding contribution to their profession, in a way that shows he possesses great knowledge on the given subject. He speaks so subtly and precisely that to the so-called experts it seems he has been training in these fields for years.

He is a judicious man, who knows everything from the beginning of time to eternity,

Every inch of him is art and every single word beset with wisdom.

He is so sensible that due to his grand taste, he conducts every task with the help of unique experts, and therefore, he collects all professions together around himself, which is indeed unlikely for a king to do so. And so, he has invented many things at which all craftsmen look in amazement.²⁸

All artists and craftsmen who face him,

²⁸ In the AA, 3: 314 Abu'l-Fazl writes, “Artists of all kinds are constantly employed at the Imperial Court where their work is subjected to the test of criticism.” Naturally the fame of Akbar’s court attracted to it master craftsmen and artists from all parts of his dominions and further. He also invited foreign craftsmen to train Indians in new styles and techniques.

Are stunned, and speechless as (their own) hammers.²⁹

He is the chosen one (برگزیده) who, from the beginning of his youth, holds [within him] the book of life (صحیفه زندگانی) and is influenced by factual reasoning (عقل هیولانی). The light of truth and guidance shines from his forehead and the effects of the merits of his piety emerge from the fate of his horoscope (زایچه اقبال). And when there is no standard language to describe something, he uses exquisite words, symbols, and descriptions that originate from only him. Such accounts are narrated in detail by [those] respected and virtuous [men] of God.

[page 10] His universal protection (جهان پناهی) is eternal,

May his kingdom (پادشاهی) last forever,

He is so pure in essence that when in his embryonic stage (زمان جنینی), he was a unique jewel originating inside the womb and blessed with life. A light radiated from the forehead of the blessed and chaste Maryam Makani and it was so luminous that when people saw it they thought a light was being shone on her.³⁰

He is the one who spreads light to enlighten the world,

He is also much endeared and loved by all creation.

He is a pious man who seeks divine grace and acceptance and due to his aspirations and great ambitions, he is respected by the young and the old, the poor and the rich, the noble and the ignoble whether in public or in private. He is always in their hearts. His magnificence, sobriety and dignity is both formal and spiritual. He is always in search of the truth in every drop of existence.

Oh, great king, we wish your kingdom to last forever,

²⁹ In the printed text, the phrase is written as “شمع سان” while in the manuscript it is “نیشه سان”. This simile means “like a candle” or as in the manuscript “like a hammer” and both are speechless. The difference in readings could be attributed to the difficulty in understanding the original text. Abu’l-Fazl seems to mean that craftsmen become “mute like a tool,” just like their own hammers: the hammer cannot do anything—or make a hammering noise—without the craftsman and in Abu’l-Fazl’s comparison the craftsman is as silent as his own tool without the animating force of the king.

³⁰ The mothers of the Mughal emperors were held in the highest respect and many of them were given lofty titles. Akbar’s mother Hamida Banu Begam was given the title of Maryam Makani meaning ‘Mary of both worlds’ or ‘occupying the place of the virgin Mary’. A light was said to have emanated from her face before Akbar was born. Annemarie Schimmel, Corinne Attwood and Burzine K. Waghmar, *The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art, and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004): 63, 147, 143.

May your life be eternal like the course of creation,
 All wishes which pass through our thoughts,
 Lie close to you, like a royal bride (عروس ملک).

He is the fighter who undertakes the defeat of anger and lust, which are the source of all fights and conflicts in the world and responsible for the destruction of good deeds and honesty, and he is able to dominate them and bring them under his control.³¹

The whole world is under his control and command,
 The whole cosmos is dependent on his order on issues of good and evil,
 Fate asked him for protection and safety,
 Destiny gave him its leash, asking him to take it wherever he wished.

He is a being of grace, and has always been generous, lavishly giving away many treasures to the people of his age, and in this way, he has never let a needy person request for anything.

Wherever there is discourse on the truth of the rain,
 Those short-sighted imitators, due to brevity.³²

[page 11] would say that clouds get their water from the seas,
 And then, wind will devote itself to the process and rain is produced,
 This is by its own virtues a legend, that is it, and no more needs to be said,
 It is like the fact that when one is embarrassed, one's palms sweat.

He is benevolent to all strangers and due to his unique training, just like when alchemizing (کیمیاه) soil, he aids people who are in the state of unhappiness in attaining a good fortune.

Soil turns to gold only as a result of your grace,
 Poison turns sweet as a result of your reflections,
 The land on which you trod will become wealthy and full of treasures,
 The heart in which you dwell will be fortunate and lucky.

³¹ I have based my translation here on the manuscript as the printed version only includes these lines: "صف شکنان معارک جهان و مراد" as opposed to the longer "صف شکنان معارک فرمان خود ساخته" "سدادند، تابع حکم و بنده فرمان خو ساخته افکنان میدان صلاح و".

³² The line in the printed text is "تقلیدیان مختلفی از روی اختیار..." and is translated as "various imitators would say with authority...", while the same line in the manuscript is "تقلیدیان مختصر از روی اختصار", which I have translated as "those short-sighted imitators would say due to brevity".

He is the brave-hearted who has conquered many lands on his own and with few companions and has changed the whole world in a single moment.

He is indeed the whole world inside his hidden cover,

His pure heart encompasses many universes in one.

Alone and single-handed, he has been able to fight all other kings,

That makes him both a king and a hero.

He is a knowledgeable person, who has decreased the rank of many of his nobles who lacked in high intelligence, until they gained a good understanding of the truths and subtleties of government (حقایق و دقائق حکمی).³³

Words are not sufficient enough to be able to praise our king,

Alas, the castle is too high and the ladder too short to let one enter it.

To reach his grace's frescoes and his altar of greatness,

Our rope of knowledge is too short.

He is the handsome³⁴ person to whom all great masters of inner and outer (صوری و معنوی) peace and harmony are associated. He is on [such] a [grand] journey that all of God's creatures seek guidance from him in the heuristic path of ethics (اخلاق).³⁵

Pious educators deserve good merit,

From merely being in your council and company.³⁶

³³ In the printed text, it reads "حقایق علمی و دقائق حکمی" however, the word "علمی" meaning scientific is not used in the manuscript. I have based my translation on the text of the manuscript as Abu'l-Fazl seems to be speaking about the nobles at Akbar's court who lacked intelligence specifically in the field of government, who were required to know both the truth and details of Akbar's government.

³⁴ From his early youth Akbar displayed an extraordinarily appealing personality. Akbar's persona was imposing and attractive beyond the usual hagiography and image-making clinging to any ruler or leader. Thus, one of his greatest admirers and his eldest son, Salim, later known as Jahangir described his father's appearance as "inclining to be tall; he was of the hue of wheat; his eyes and eyebrows were black, and his complexion rather dark than fair..., his august voice was very loud, and in speaking and explaining had a peculiar richness. In his actions and movements he was not like the people of the world, and the Glory of God manifested itself in him." Cited in John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 44-45

³⁵ I have based my translation here with help from Lynette G. Mitchell and C. P. Melville, *Every Inch a King: Comparative Studies on Kings and Kingship in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (Boston: Brill, 2013).

³⁶ The complete version of this short verse is not in the printed text and I have used the manuscript edition for translation here "سزد ز حاشیه مجلس تو بردارند معلمان ادب کارنامه اخلاق" It

[page 12] He is grave and very gentle and is always cautious with maidens and is in no way lost in lust for them. He does not pay attention only to their appearances and has in several instances also prevented lustful men from being overly desirous of them. He insists that if such an incident occurs³⁷ to the inhabitants of his guarded kingdom (محروسه), he would evidently not marry any of those girls because, common people (رعایا) have rights over them.³⁸

I would not call it purity (عفت), because what I have witnessed with my senses, is one hundred times more pure than that.³⁹

He is the owner of all things valuable and in a single glance he can purify any impure golden iron that salespeople of the age have given to him. Also, due to his sacred attention, the corrupt inner nature of many people have been stripped away,⁴⁰ uncovering their true nature, and thus allowing them to swim in the sea of knowledge. All those, who wandered on the dark path of imitation (تقلید), were left astonished. One must be grateful that they have now found a leader for their group (قافله را رهبری پیدا شد).

He is the one who is always seeking guidance and many people who were lost in the darkness of their path have been guided toward their true purpose and direction, only by virtue of his divine grace (برکت الهیه).⁴¹

He is the leader of every group,

emphasises Akbar's authority on issues relating to ethics, referring perhaps to the knowledge of action based on *akhlaq* (morality), which emerges from the company of the king.

³⁷ Referring to the men lusting for maidens.

³⁸ According to Abu'l-Fazl in his *A'in-i Akbari*, Akbar had mentioned on numerous occasions that "had I formerly possessed the knowledge which I now have, I would never have chosen a wife for myself; for upon old women I look as mothers, on women of my age as sisters, and on girls as daughters." According to Abu'l-Fazl "If any well-known courtier wanted to have a virgin they should first have his Majesty's permission," and if they failed to do so "they would be punished and censured." AA, 1: 192, 211.

³⁹ Abu'l-Fazl does not mention a subject for this verse, but it is clear from the preceding lines that he is referring to Akbar and his qualities of virtue and purity.

⁴⁰ The phrase in the printed text, "درون خرابان معمر بیرون" has the word "خرابان" omitted from the manuscript. The sentence would be incomplete without the word, which means corruption and follows the word درون which means inner.

⁴¹ In the printed text, we have the phrase "بمیامن برکات او" while the same phrase in the manuscript appears with an extra word "الهیة" changing the phrase into "بمیامن برکت الهیه او". This changes the sentence from "by virtue of his grace" to "by virtue of his divine grace."

He is the center of all things certain,
All innocent entities that dwell high above the skies,
Shine brightly before his eyes,
He is the axis of everything in the universe,
The whole universe revolves around only him.

He is of such high ranks that due to his graceful perception of reaching perfection, many wild animals, in seeing his power and greatness, become tame. Many foolish (استعداد بی) people, after having been in his company, have stepped away from the swamps of humanity and worldly pleasures.

He is a very kind-hearted person. When people of different groups, particularly children, lay eyes upon his handsome appearance (جمال), such calmness and trust takes over them, that no other being can bring this serene and unruffled feeling to them.

Oh to exist! Live a pleasurable life,
As he is all kindness and mercy, both in body and soul,

[page 13] He is a highly attentive person, who through his spiritual connection (روابط (معنوی), can resolve the most complex issues.

He is the goal to which all efforts are intended,
And the strength for survival,
But in terms of sovereignty,

He is indeed the head [for the body] of his kingdom,⁴²

The universe is abundant while you are the king,
The country is serene and peaceful while you are ruling it.

Your every breath is influential as you can cure many diseases that other physicians may not have been able to, and this is merely because you have paid particular attention to the given matter. I should mention that I have personally witnessed on several occasions that he found the remedy for an illness that aided in the patient's swift recovery.

⁴² This section has come in two different forms in the printed text and the manuscript. In the printed text, it appears as "در سر همت لقای در بر قوت، دلی، در روان ملک، رای، بر تن دولت، سری" which I have found difficult to render into English in terms of the style and seemingly inappropriate commas. I have used the manuscript version for translation here and it reads, "در سر همت، بقای در بر قوت، ولی، در، "روان ملک رانی، بر تن دولت، سری"

His mercy (مرحمتش) has healed our wounds,
 He has been consolation for our somber hearts.
 His speech is profound. He knows many languages and speaks with each person with their own form of speech. He also blends some Indian language which he managed to learn though his Turk ancestry and creates new and unusual meanings and concepts.
 You must ask him the secrets of all connoisseurs,
 Since he is the one who knows the language of birds, other than Solomon.⁴³
 He is the asylum of sanctity (ولایت پناه), and although he hides himself in cloaks and covers, some of his perfect disciples (مریدان کامل اخلاص) who by virtue of their attention, talents and good manners, have managed to notice these qualities in him. It is apparent sometimes that he, despite being involved with mundane activities, is in fact, meditating deeply and reflecting on God's infinite nature and is thereby flying high in unification with Him.
 We are the trainees of the kindness he bestows upon us,
 During a feast, we crave to be in seclusion with him,
 Let us not base our judgement on superficial things,
 Let not our guise of unity turn into multiple forms.
 [He is the only guide who trained professionals and spiritual followers consider as possessing divine talent and skill. Therefore, he trains his sincere followers through the most dependable sources, that is, the four constituents of sincerity (*ikhlas*), so that they can reach their goals in the guidance meetings of the king at his court. In compassion, make me one of your own; make me a dancer in your joyous gathering place. Bestow goodness onto me from (the four folds of) your ample virtue, allow me to smell the scent of the four gardens of sincerity.]⁴⁴

⁴³ The *Qur'an* recognizes Solomon (سليمان) as a prophet and divinely-appointed monarch. He was a king of ancient Israel as well as the son of David and believed to be a wise and just ruler. He is believed to have been bestowed God-given gifts and talents, including the ability to speak to animals. For more see the chapter on Solomon in Brannon M. Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran: an Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis* (London: Continuum, 2002).

⁴⁴ This paragraph in the manuscript is not provided in the printed text. This paragraph seems to take on a different *Qur'anic* tone compared to the lines preceding and following it. "The four constituents of sincerity" and "the four gardens of sincerity" seem to echo the declaration of Gods unity in the 112th Sura in the *Qur'an*, called "Surat al-Ikhlās" which consists of exactly four *ayats*. I

[page 14] It is true that on several occasions some [supposedly] devoted followers of the lord of the state and government failed to obey and acknowledge him, or due to their short-sightedness and lack of providence would tend to oppose him and act in haste. These followers were not granted permission to enter the court and were witness to the king's dislike of secret wrongdoings, as that is not something a true king would do. Do not fool others as deceiving is not a rule of chivalry.

Dear God, let me appreciate his efforts which are indeed immense.

He is a wealthy man, whose eternal destiny is compliant with his rational policy (تدبيرات) (عقلی) and on his determination (اراده) no other image is engraved but God's and in his hope no other meaning and purpose is found but God.

Fate would act in the way you desire,

The state would govern the country as you wish,

To prove the claim that there is no one like you,

Your face [alone] stands as evidence.

He is the one whose nature is enlightened (روشن ضمیری) and illuminates our hearts.

Although at times he may seem to be entirely engaged with dull and materialistic pursuits (امور ظاهری), he is in fact thinking about the concerns of the people of all different groups (طوائف انام). Many high-ranked scholars have stories to tell in relation to this. Without exaggerating or flaunting, all that this great man of honesty (صادق) and purity (مخلص) has declared is beyond the scope of books.

Your words cannot be written as stories,

Nor can they be expressed using all the languages of this world,

I have witnessed [in you] such magnificent faculties,

That cannot be found anywhere else.

He is an intelligent person who is conscious of everything from the time he was a year old child until now—in his mid-forties—and God-willing he will have the prospect to live even longer because of the order he brings to the world. He holds such magnificent inner and outer qualities, that no biographer can fully describe and write down. He also

will not speculate as to why a later copyist decided to add/omit this section in the copying process.

recalls a plethora of animal names, both wild and domestic; from elephants to sparrows, he knows every one of them one by one.

[page 15] All entities in meadows, be it thorns or flowers,

Are filled with his understanding,

All creatures on grazing lands, including lions and elephants,

Are blessed with his mercy and compassion.

He is a man of stature, whose good manners and mild temper have attracted many inhabitants of the earth, from the east to the west. Due to his grand qualities, many people who had left their familiar territories and became forgotten foreigners were made to feel at home.⁴⁵

When the benevolent rush toward him,

Then the whole cosmos will also follow him,

When the taste of language can be acquired through praising him,

Then the leaves on trees would also open up and speak.

He is a pious and good-tempered person who knows all 'the four-fold foundations of ethics' (اصول چهارگانه اخلاق)⁴⁶ which only good-natured and hardworking people become conscious of through years of effort and abstinence; and even then, they will have not achieved much. What he has gained is empty of any sort of pompousness and in fact

⁴⁵ Akbar attracted many foreigners to his empire from Persia and other parts of Asia. Blochmann has calculated that three-fourths of the poets and more than one-third of the doctors and musicians at Akbar's court were foreigners. Cited in S. M. Edwardes and H. L. O. Garrett, *Mughal Rule in India* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1995), 252. Akbar was interested especially in promoting social, cultural and intellectual contacts with Iran by identifying literati and persuading them to settle in India, where their presence would assist Akbar in re-establishing the empire, that was once unstable. See Sheldon Pollock, *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 159.

⁴⁶ Alfarabi (870-950 C.E.) regarded as one of the main founders of Islamic philosophy, is known for his many interpretive works on Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy and his most concise virtue catalogue is given in *Fusul al-Madani (Aphorisms of the Statesman)*; trans, 1961). According to Alfarabi, the four ethical virtues are moderation, courage, liberality (generosity) and justice. He believes that religion and philosophy can be harmonized, and that the exercise of virtue is in itself a spiritual act. See, Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues A Handbook and Classification* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2004): 49-50. Also, Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), a renowned Muslim theologian, jurist and philosopher, defines the four principle virtues as being wisdom, courage, temperance and justice and believed they are based on the analysis of the faculties of the soul. Mohamed Ahmed Sherif, *Ghazali's Theory of Virtue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 38.

they have a divine aspect to them. His conduct is considered the best and the most perfect of all.

The scale according to which his manner and conduct are calculated,

Must extend the scope of the earth and the sky.

He is a kind-hearted person who has no desire to kill and eat animals. Sometimes seven long months pass before he eats meat and if it was not for the sake of gaining strength and vigor, he would not be content to eat even then. In many meetings he has often declared that human beings are really unfair to slaughter animals in order to feed themselves, while there are many other sources of food.⁴⁷

Even with the use of one hundred *Qur'an's* (بصد قرآن),

One could not reach the conclusion he has reached,

Through the four principles (چهار امهات) and the seven worlds.⁴⁸

His speech is very gentle and as soon as he notices a person whose father is not around to offer kindness to him, he pays undivided attention to them. **[page 16]** People consider him as their refuge and the king of the world (شاهنشاه گیتی پناه). He provides support to everybody and they see him as their grandfather due to his fatherly benevolence.

Praise to the mother of all time (زمادر دهر) who has given birth to such a man,

Whose kindness is like that of a father for the whole universe.

His is a person of detached nature who rules many lands and kingdoms, and possesses treasures that other kings wish to have even a portion of. He has everything in his treasury, due to God's greatness, yet he does not pay any notice or attention to them.

⁴⁷ Akbar's vegetarian practices are touched on in *AA*, 3: 332 and *MT*, 2: 261; for further discussion see chapter three.

⁴⁸ In the cosmology of many religions including Islam, Catholicism, Judaism and Hinduism, there is the belief that there are seven heavens above earth. According to the *Qur'an* and Hadiths, Muhammad ascended to each of the seven heavens on his *Mi'raj* journey. This is when God instructs Muhammad on Muslim prayer. The earliest account of this ascension was written by Ibn-Ishaq (A.D. 702 to 768) in his biography on Muhammad. See J. R. Porter, "Muhammad's Journey to Heaven," *Numen* 21, Vol I (1974): 64-80 also Brooke Olson Vuckovic, *Heavenly Journeys, Earthly Concerns: the Legacy of the Mi'raj in the Formation of Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2005). The concept of seven heavens is also present in Hinduism, where the God, Lord Vishnu, is believed to live in the seventh heaven. For a comprehensive introduction to Hinduism see Axel Michael and Barbara Harshav, *Hinduism: Past and Present* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2004). Here, Abu'l-Fazl is using universal religious references that would appeal to a vast readership, which I shall expand on in the analysis.

Oh God, so long as the world continues to have water and colour,
As long as the world is able to rotate and pause,
Make the universe unique for this great king,
Ask every drop of existence to aid him in whatever pursuit he carries out.
He is of strong and respected descent (نہال). He comes from a group whose people are renowned for giving speech and also for being resilient before materialistic temptations which has never prevented them from spiritual growth. There is no need to mention, as it is obvious, that his body is a source of help and protection and with no doubt, his position in stages of perfection, has reached the highest point. That is why one can immediately differentiate his boundless heart and extraordinary speech from others.
Blessed be God (تبارک اللہ) for creating such a pure-hearted person (گوهری پاک),
Because of his purity, even his body is considered holy (تقدس),
When he is in a situation to be praised,
It is right to call the gem of the spirit (گوهرجان), the dust of the body.⁴⁹
His good fortune and fate is strongly determined because from the beginning of his reign, which is now thirty two years, every other king, scholar, sage, or even the common man who has thought about opposing him, has lost. [page 17] Every person understands his (Akbar's) true nature according to his own talent. When one attempts to rise above his knowledge, one has willed wrongly and will be disgraced in front of everybody and that will certainly be torture for them.
Oh great king, when you are infuriated and enraged,
The letter of death (نامہ آجال) is removed from your dagger,
The earthly kingdom seeks repute in your service,
The luck of Jupiter (سعود مشتری) is dependent on your character.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Here Abu'l-Fazl uses the word "گوهر" skillfully, referring to the essence of the soul as a gem—a rare quality that he believes was given to Akbar by God.

He is a man of countless attributes. Many wise men attempt to write about his magnificent qualities, but their efforts are in vain as they are unable to list all of his perfect traits.

Wisdom must be silent when it comes to him,

There must be less pretentiousness and more politeness,

Do you know who he is? His position is higher than a king and lower than a God.

He is the just Sultan (سلطان عادل),⁵¹ the perfect reasoning, a definite reason to know God, the final resolution of every benevolence, the leader of true paths, namely Abu'l-Fath Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar Padshah Ghazi (ابوالفتح جلال الدین محمد اکبر پادشاه غازی).⁵² May his umbrella of protection, justice, and kindness spread over all who seek happiness through determination. May he be safe and strong.

⁵⁰ The late sixteenth century saw the near-simultaneous occurrence of two momentous events: the 'Grand Conjunction' of Jupiter and Saturn in 1583 and the end of the first Islamic millennium in 1591. In the same year, Akbar ordered the compilation of a universal history, the *Tarikh-i Alfi*. The title, "The Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction" (صاحب قران) refers to a ruler whose horoscope features this conjunction, ushering a time of world-conquest and justice. See, Stephen P. Blake, *Time in Early Modern Islam Calendar, Ceremony, and Chronology in the Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Jupiter, is also known in Hindu mythology as Brhaspati, and is a god and Vedic deity known for wisdom and eloquence. For more information on Hindu Gods see: T. R. R. Iyengar, *Dictionary of Hindu Gods and Goddesses* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2003).

⁵¹ Upheavals during the tenth and eleventh centuries led to a new wave of mirrors for princes, written by government officials and religious scholars, defining the rules of good governance. In Sunni political theory there came a shift in emphasis from the caliphate to the reality of the sultan as the key figure in Muslim political order. An important treaty of this kind was *The Book of Government* by Nizam al-mulk (d.1092). The text stresses that the sultan must do justice and gives techniques towards that end. Al-Ghazali's *Book of Council* emphasizes that "the ruler must understand that God loves a just sultan," and that the principle function of kingship is to establish order in society and uphold the teachings of the true faith. Cited in Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 231-232.

⁵² The word used is *ghazi* (غازی), meaning those kings who exercise jihad on frontiers of *dar al-harb*. When Babur entered India he began learning about the histories of that region and he soon became familiar with certain archetypal ghazis who had raided the subcontinent before him. This practice culminated in the climactic scene of the battle of Kahuna, after which Babur gained control of Hindustan and assumed the title of ghazi. His reference was to the eleventh century Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna, the ghazi king and first conqueror of India and possibly the Ottoman Murad II. Babur was forced to present himself as a ghazi king in the same fashion as the Ottomans and the Ghaznavids, because for political reasons he needed to associate himself with the Sunni powers of high prestige in India. Abu'l-Fazl here reminds us that Akbar assumed that title. Ali Anooshahr, *The Ghazi Sultans and the Frontiers of Islam A Comparative Study of the Late Medieval and Early Modern Periods* (London: Routledge, 2009): 11-13.

Oh God, for as long as the skies continue to rotate,
Do not deprive this world of his majesty,
As the end of the world is hidden under the ring (زیر نگین باد),⁵³
May he hold the key of the world (کلید عالم) under his sleeve.⁵⁴

Due to his rightful guidance, the king of the believers of God and the leader of those lost in the dark, brought about a new dawn and a new beginning. [page 18] Those poor merchants with bags full in their hands felt embarrassed and remorseful. The group who thought they were destined to eternal happiness—awakened from the ignorance in which they had been living—began regretting the past times and became followers of the Divine Lord (ارباب حق). These people then turned toward the king for knowledge and insight. The king is looking to correct every group of people, mainly out of his true nature. Everyone—including those who are friends or enemies, relatives or strangers—are always equally respected by him. Since that is the way all physicians act when facing a physical ailment, why should he not be regarded as the head of all physicians, who tries hard to cure the ailment of common people?⁵⁵ In fact, for his own understanding, he decided to explore the reason for the hostility that divided the Muslims, Jews and Hindus and in doing so realized that their denial of one another was all too obvious.

⁵³ The gem or jewel Abu'l-Fazl mentions here in this verse refers to the ring of Solomon, which would allow him to imprison demons and help him in the building of Jerusalem. "My Lord, forgive me and bestow upon me a kingdom such as none other after me will deserve. Surely, You are the Bounteous Giver (*Qur'an* 38:35)." Joesphus, a first-century Romano-Jewish scholar, historian and hagiographer, mentions that this legendary ring of Solomon derived its curative effects and power from the secret name of God inscribed under its seal. For the comprehensive history of Solomon and his life see Steve Weitzman, *Solomon: The Lure of Wisdom* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

⁵⁴ The image of the key is used as a metaphor for wisdom. Solomon in his magical treaties titled *Key of Solomon* believes that aside from knowledge, health and power, there is much to be gained from learning the secrets of nature. He believed that this knowledge was hidden, and for those who could access these secrets of life, could unlock the door of wisdom. This key apparently revealed invisible forces in the natural world, like the blowing of the wind and the movement of the stars, the untapped energy concealed within minerals and plants and the miraculously self-forming machinery of the human body. Weitzman, *Solomon* (2011): 76-77.

⁵⁵ Here Abu'l-Fazl compares the ignorance of the people as an ailment that a doctor, Akbar, would be able to heal and enlighten. This idea of the king as the physician of the people can be seen in *Nasirean Ethics* of Nasir al-Din Tusi (1201-1272), where he sets out to bring philosophy and jurisprudence together. In his *Akhlaq-i Nasiri*, he states that the aim of political science is equilibrium, like the analogy with medicine; the statesman is "the world's physician." See, Roy Jackson, *Fifty Key Figures in Islam* (London: Routledge, 2006), 120-121.

Therefore, in realizing this, he decided to translate the authentic books of the different groups (کتاب معتبره طایفتین) into another language, so that both groups could have the pleasure of benefiting from the perfect knowledge; thus forgetting their enmity and hostility and seeking the divine truth.⁵⁶ In this way, they could learn about their flaws and shortcomings and therefore endeavor to correct their manners in the best way possible. Also, there are some groups of people who are ignorant and excessive in amusement and pleasure (آدم هرزه کار). People from different social groups have come along and introduced themselves as scholars and have trained the masses under false teachings and practices. In fact this pretentious bunch, whether due to their lack of knowledge or foolishness, according to their lust and greed, have hidden the authentic books of advice, words and teachings of sages and the weighty actions of the ancients, and instead posed them in a different way. When books of different groups are translated in a way that is simple, clear and pleasant, many credulous people will be able to reach the truth and thus be saved from being misdirected and led astray by the false interpretations of the interfering and ignorant people who pretend to be wise. Therefore, it is an important task to translate the *Mahabharata*, which is about the many skills of kings and covers many principles, including the smaller issues and beliefs, of India. In fact there is no other book more comprehensive and well-known and detailed than this one. Indeed, all astute intellectuals and linguists have gathered and united to pursue the task of translating this book skillfully and justly.

[page 19] In addition, some biased, irreligious (بی دینتی) people and leaders of derivative practice (پیشوایان اهل تقلید) 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

⁵⁶ Meaning that significance should be put on acquiring the knowledge of all different groups and religions, as opposed to insisting on the importance of the beliefs of one group over another.

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.⁵⁷

Furthermore, common Muslim people who have not studied religious books (کتب آسمانی) (ودینی) carefully and have not paid attention to the ancient history of past times, including that of the Indians and others, and have not pondered the sayings of their great men such as Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq⁵⁸ and Ibn 'Arabi⁵⁹ believe that human origin dates back seven thousand years and consider all the improvements in scientific facts and conceptions to be only seven thousand years old. Therefore, it was gracefully decided to translate this precious book, which includes age-old facts about the universe and the operation of the whole world and the people living in it, in a way that is easy to understand. This is so that the foolish people could be chastised and distanced from their false beliefs. Then, it would be evident for them that all these subtle facts and figures—about which no one has a clue as to their origin—are indeed credible. Besides, kings of all independent countries are particularly interested in learning the historical matter [written in the *Mahabharata*], and the reason for this is that the logic embedded in its history is in fact an instruction for everybody, making it very popular and enjoyable to learn about the past. They need to understand the difference of the time and people of

⁵⁷ This is an important paragraph for the context of the translation and is explored in chapter three.

⁵⁸ Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (702-765 AD) is the sixth Shia Imam and an important figure in the development of early Muslim thought. He made major contributions to science, philosophy, literature and 'irfan (gnosticism). He adopted Taqiyya, a form of religious dissimulation, or a legal dispensation whereby a believing individual can deny their faith when in fear or at risk of significant persecution. See Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) and Kazuo Morimoto, *Sayyids and Sharifs in Muslim Societies: The Living Links to the Prophet* (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁵⁹ Ibn Arabi (1165- 1240) is known as a scholar of Islam, Sufi mystic, poet, and a philosopher. He was born in Andalusian Spain, the center of a flourishing and cross-fertilization of Jewish, Christian and Islamic thought. Several hundred works have been attributed to him, of which approximately 100 are in manuscript form. Ibn 'Arabi believes the "perfect man" (*insan-i kamil*) is the complete image of this reality, and how those who truly know their essential self, know God, that is, through self-manifestation one acquires divine knowledge. For more see Ibn al-Arabi, *Sufis of Andalusia: the Ruh al-Quds and Al-Durat Fakhirah* (London: Routledge, 2008) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna, Suhrawardi, Ibn 'Arabi* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).

then and now, in order to value the present time, which should be spent on [learning about] divine issues (مرضيات الهى). [page 20] Therefore, it is no question for this great man of knowledge [Akbar] to translate this book, as it consists of much information surrounding this history. A group of linguists, who are known for being knowledgeable and moderate people,⁶⁰ have gathered, and translated the book mentioned here with thorough and subtle attention in a way that all words and phrases are clear and comprehensible. Thus, people of other groups have taken the responsibility to distribute all of its volumes to different places⁶¹ and this person, Abu'l-Fazl Ibn Mubarak, who is both curious and enthusiastic by nature, was appointed to write a sermon (خطبه)⁶² about this translation. Due to the valuable nature of this task, the present writer has been very eager to make observations on it and collect its true and valid background, and to also make it clear from the beginning to end, for those inquisitive people who seek the truth in order to quench their thirst for knowledge.

It is no secret to the commentators and critics of the new and old narratives that in Indian families, whether they are of the wise, the abstinent or the ascetic, that they may all disagree on issues related to how the universe has been created. Among these disagreements, in this book we will encounter thirteen of the alleged bases for creation. Although, if one treats the subject justly, there is no explanation which is devoid of doubts, and they have all been denounced or rejected to some degree.

The starting point for the secret of creation,
Cannot be observed by human eyes,
God has not knitted⁶³ this rope of fate in such an easy way,
That its roots are easily comprehended by individuals,

⁶⁰ Akbar's team of translators is discussed in chapter three.

⁶¹ Bada'uni mentions in his *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh* that copies of the book were sent to Amirs. See chapter three.

⁶² Abu'l-Fazl refers to his *Preface* as a *khutba*, which is a form of public preaching in the Islamic tradition, given especially in mosques. This means that Abu'l-Fazl viewed the *Preface* as serving more than just an introduction and with larger spiritual objectives.

⁶³ There are two different words used in the printed text and the manuscript for the word 'knitted'. The difference may be based on the similarity of the two words "بافت" in the printed text and "تافت" in the manuscript. The former means "knitting" and the latter means "forming." For the sake of clarity I have used the former for the translation of this line.

The clue of God's power,
Cannot be found effortlessly by common people.

Pursuing the above issues is reason for some wise men to not doubt any further about its validity, and in some ways it can be considered proof for those who easily and after slight contemplation, dismiss it. **[page 21]** In some other ways, it is also very helpful for sensible men to stop and muse over it and thereby welcome and accept it after deep observation. This odd division [of the *Mahabharata*] is not concerned only with the aforementioned issue, but also characterizes the many purposes that this book tries to fulfill. It also consists of knowledge of Bhishma, providing ample points about the principles of courtship and how a king must rule his land.⁶⁴ All of the good and pleasant information that is mentioned here is gathered together and appreciated by many experts. I must admit that it is not evident whether the problem [of the dismissal of the *Mahabharata* text] is because of a partial understanding of the text or a lack of knowledge on the part of translators, which would result in them writing things incorrectly, merely out of comparison and incorrect guesses, or due to flaws in the original text. The present author desired to spend some of his precious time to explain this problem, but on second thought, decided not to write a lengthy and tedious speech. Therefore, he has forsaken the idea and will explain only some of the points that are appropriate and beneficial.

In this ancient valley of existence, who has gained more than just a name?

Who has been able to find out the essence of all movements?

To deliberate this hidden spell is erroneous,

Who has seen the beginning of the world and who has seen its end.

Biographers and historians all claim that according to Indian tradition, the cycle of the creation of the universe consists of four periods. The beginning of the first period is seventeen lakhs⁶⁵ and 28,000 years and this period is called Satya Yuga.⁶⁶ In this period

⁶⁴ In the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma is the eighth son of Kuru King Shantanu and he devoted himself to protecting the throne of Hastinapur. The Bhishma Parva, the sixth of eighteen books of the *Mahabharata*, describes the story of Bhishma on his death bed, giving a discourse on moral and social responsibility.

⁶⁵ Indian word for 100,000.

all creatures in the world live in peace and comfort. The rich and poor live serenely alongside all superior and inferior people and all seek honesty and good deeds in their occupations. They all spend time meditating on divine issues and people typically live as long as one Lakh.

[page 22] The second period is named Treta Yuga and lasts usually about twelve Lakhs and 96,000 years. In this period, people's lives are based on God's satisfaction and they live as long as 10,000 years.

The third period is called Dvapara Yuga and lasts eight Lakhs and 604,000 years. In this period the way of life for people is based on good speech and good behavior and they usually live as long as 1000 years.

The fourth period is known as Kali Yuga and lasts for four Lakhs and 32,000 years. In this period the behavior of people is based on wrong doings and immoral deeds and they live as long as one-hundred years. The rule is that the more this period lasts, the more is added to the years of the Dvapara [the third period], and when the time of Kali Yuga is more than the time of Dvapara, the latter will last longer and equal to the time of Treta. And when the time of Kali Yuga is more than Treta it will be equal to the first period, i.e. Satya Yuga. According to Indian calculations, the history of the reign of King Akbar which is thirty-two years, is 509 years in Jalali and 956 years according to ancient Persian calendar and in Greek it is 1909 and in the Indian calendar it is 1640, and in Arabic 995 years. Therefore, 4680 years has passed over the Kali Yuga period. What a wonder is the fact that the world is really old and decayed.

The origin of this ancient world is known,

There is not a single word written from the past,

Regardless of how much I search in the sky,

There is no sign of its beginning and its end.

All Indian scholars agree on the fact that there is no starting point for this world, however, they believe that after the creation of the four well-known elements in the world, the fifth—Akasa or empty space—was created. Even before the wise men of India

⁶⁶ For the yuga system, see Heinrich von Stietencron, *Hindu Myth, Hindu History, Religion, Art, and Politics* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005).

confirmed this, common people already agreed on this point that the sky was supposed to be created out of this Akasa. **[page 23]** However, after summoning all experts and intellectuals, it was agreed and announced that they do not believe in such a source of creation for the sky and therefore they called that void space in the air Akasa, and put forward the idea that things which are known as stars are in fact the holy essences of great and sophisticated men who have soared above as a result of an abstinent and ascetic life and long hours of prayer. Their lifestyle has made their figure illuminate, become spiritual and so full of devotion that they could reach high ranks of existence and therefore able to fly above the skies.⁶⁷

There is a different meaning to every word,
There are different depths in every sea,
But nothing can untie this knot,
The one who knows how is yet another wonder.

The great Lord and creator created a concrete person of a pure race, who is called Brahma, and though there are disagreements on the issue, he is said to be born out of nothingness and is to be the tool for creation and a cause for the whole universe. As you will notice in this book in detail, Brahma specifically created the human race from a concealed place within and divided it into four groups: Brahmana (براهمن), Ksatriya (چھتری), Vaisya (بیش), and Sudra.⁶⁸

Members of the first group were appointed as leaders and guides due to their efforts in meditation, asceticism and for accepting limitations and observing all rules and regulations.

Members of the second group were specified as leaders and governors of material pursuits in order to bring peace and order to the whole world.

The third group was appointed to work in farms and markets and the like.

And finally the fourth group was appointed to be in different types of service. And in pursuit of God's validation (تا بیبات الہی) and divine intuitions (الہامات ربانی), the great Brahma composed a book called Veda (بید), **[page 24]** which is filled with ample advice

⁶⁷ This refers to the Indian idea that the stars are the essence of holy men who have risen up to the heavens on account of their sanctity. This is found in astronomy where the constellation known as the Great Bear in the west is referred to as the 'Seven Sages' in India.

⁶⁸ For more on these four groups see chapter three.

about the correct path to daily happiness for all people. It is a divine scripture (کتاب الہی) consisting of concrete logic, which includes principles on how to bring all creatures in unity with each other and to put order among all groups. These different principles have been divided into divine comprehensive categories. It is written in a way that even common people are able to understand in each time period, from the past to the present, and can therefore find the straight and true path.

This divinely related scripture is called Veda (وید) and contains one hundred thousand Sloka (اشلوک), which consists of four Carana (چرن) and each Carana is no less than one Aksara (اچھر) to a maximum of twenty six Aksara. One Aksara is in fact one letter or sometimes two to three. Experts and scholars in India agree that this strange collection has lived for one hundred years outside of commonly recognized history, where every year is three hundred and sixty days and each day is one thousand and four typical days and each night is one thousand Caukadi (چوکری).⁶⁹

Respected Indian scholars have also concurred that since the beginning of this scripture, many Brahmas have appeared in the world and lived in disguise and under cover. They state that based on all that we have inherited from their biographies, the current Brahma is believed to be the one thousand and first Brahma and he is fifty-one years old.⁷⁰ Praise be upon him who is great and praise worthy. What a creation and creator! I am astonished at hearing such narratives, so much so that I cannot easily express it and feel a sense of enthusiasm that I cannot put in words.

I have a heart immersed in various thoughts and wishes,

That cannot escape the desire to search for wisdom and knowledge.

I am a man in awe in the garden of wisdom, who is wandering around spending many years in the pursuit of knowledge, and though my mind may be defective I have always searched for gems of insight in the garden of wisdom.⁷¹ [page 25] The further I go through the pages of this book and other sources, comments and guidebooks, and the deeper I go in its details and pages, the more bewildered and amazed I become. If I

⁶⁹ See chapter three for an analysis of this passage about the poetic structure.

⁷⁰ For the time system of Brahmas, see the analysis in chapter three.

⁷¹ "بستان" means garden, referring to the garden of wisdom and the world of knowledge around us. In the printed text however the word "دبستان" (school) is used meaning school of wisdom.

make imperfect judgments, I will use a reasonable interpretation that is fair enough to admit its faults, and if I happen to cross out some of the phrases and sayings that are absolutely new and innovative, I am indeed the one to blame due to my own boldness, which has driven me out of justice and on a path to the realm of harmful doings.

When a person who is really sincere and pure in his actions and understandings makes the effort to study about his ancestors and searches deeply while testing his wisdom and struggles with other wise groups, he will also be able to assure ignorant people of their fallacy. Therefore many of those who act with wrong intentions will be oriented toward the light and truth since the false statements will lose their validity and the only thing which remains is remorse, humiliation, and mistrust.

So how can one trust in the knowledge he has gathered and not doubt what he has learned? And how could he believe in the status of great leaders and (their) predecessors and accept these representations as real in view of the fact that all these things are actually in beautiful disguise and are nothing but sheer imitation? And when one trusts them, will he not be humiliated and embarrassed among the wise and suffer eternal torture? Therefore, it is much better to reject or acknowledge an idea, according to the different understandings of various talented people in different times and then one can come to the conclusion about which point is good and which is not.

There is nothing familiar coming from the secret world,

There is no sign coming from the absent world,

[page 26] The whole universe is rotating in seven circles,

No sound can be heard beyond all the seals.

Narrators of this story and local nobles relate the story in this way, that in the second half of the Dvapara (دواپر) period in India in the village of Hastinapura⁷² there was a master named Bharata (بھرت) ruling gracefully and justly. After having ruled over the country through seven generations of his family, Kuru was the elect, the eighth son who inherited the throne, with a Persian name 'Master Kuru' (کور). Two other names are associated

⁷² (هستناپور) Hastinapura identified as Hastinapur in Meerut district, Uttar Pradesh, where archaeological excavations have been conducted. See Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2009), 281.

with him, Kurukshetra (کور کھیت) and Thanesar (تھانيسر),⁷³ while his descendants are known as Kaurava (کوروان). After six generations of descendants, a child was born and became the master of Kauravas and his highly praised name was Vichitravirya (بیچتر). He had two sons with the names of Dhritarashtra (دھرترا اشترا) and Pandu (پاندو) and you will read his strange life story in this book.⁷⁴

Although Dhritarashtra (دھرترا اشترا) was the eldest son, he had not been chosen as the master due to his lack of insight, instead all their descendants were called Pandava (پاندوان) after the younger brother's name.

Let us not hide the fact that Pandu (پاندو) had five sons. Three of them, Yudhishthira (یودھیشتر), Bhimasena (بھیمسین), and Arjuna (ارجن), were born of a woman named Kunti (کنتی) and the other two, Nakula (نکل) and Sahadeva (سہدیو), were given birth by a woman named Madri (مادری). In this book, when the Pandavas are mentioned, it is in fact referring to these five brothers.⁷⁵ Dhritarashtra had one hundred and one sons. One hundred of them were Gandhari's (گاندھاری) sons and the oldest one was named Duryodhana (درجودھن). I should mention that all the names will be referred to in this book. The other son, Yuyutsu (یوگتس) was given birth to by a common woman and when we read about Kaurava (کوروان) in this book, it is referring to these one hundred and one sons.

[page 27] After Pandu passed away due to the fate of stars and God's will, the family of Dhritarashtra inherited the throne and ruled over the country. Although Dhritarashtra was designated as the king, his sons, particularly Duryodhana governed the kingdom. Since identifying enemies and destroying hostile intentions is the very basic rule of controlling a country, Duryodhana always felt anxious and worried about the Pandavas and was always plotting against them. When Dhritarashtra noticed their conflict had gone too far,

⁷³ Kurukshetra is the 'field of Kuru' identified as immediately east of the town of Thanesar (تھانيسر) in Haryana district, north of Delhi. Thanesar is an important location, see R. C. Agrawala, "Early History and Archaeology in Kuruksetra and Ambala Division," in *Haryana Past and Present*, ed. S. K. Sharma, 2 vols. (New Delhi, India: Mittal Publications, 2005), 41-82. In the Mughal period it was an active center; an important monument is the tomb of Shaikh Chillī.

⁷⁴ This is where the manuscript ends; the remaining text is only in the printed text. This later part of the text is subsequent to the time of Abu'l Fazl and for the most part clearly not from his pen, I have not given it detailed attention, as explained in chapter one.

⁷⁵ The text is concerned here with the patronymic name Pandava, the 'sons of Pandu,' explaining that the five sons are all called Pandava despite their different mothers.

he decided to take action and resolve the issue before it worsened, so he ordered houses to be built in the city of Varnavarta and allowed for Pandavas to dwell there in the mere hope of diminishing their hostility and conflict.⁷⁶ However, destiny does not always follow logic and this trick did not work at all. Duryodhana ordered builders to cover and seal Pandavas' houses with tar and oil and then—with a small flame—set the houses on fire, burning all the inhabitants. However, when there is divine intervention, vengeance and envy will not be able to harm anybody.

Eventually, the Pandavas became aware of the whole trick and were ready to fight it. Bhila (بھیل) was a woman also living there with her five sons, in the same way the Pandavas were. The Pandavas set that house on fire and left the city for the valleys and deserts. Bhila burned with her sons and turned into ashes. Beholding this, Duryodhana's spies broke the news to him that it was the Pandavas who burned in the fire and this brought joy and peace of mind to the king. But they were ignoring the fact that if God intended to preserve his people, no one would be able to prevent it, as God's will is higher than any other power. When a person is nominated as the king and lord in his destiny by God, no trick or plan and antagonism can harm God's will-power.⁷⁷

[page 28] After this, the Pandavas went through many hardships, which is narrated extensively in the book and they settled in a city called Kampilya (کنپلا).⁷⁸ In this city, the governor had a kind attitude toward the newcomers and even let them all marry his daughter. She belonged to them and each one of them could stay with the girl for seventy-two days. Since at that time, unanimity and union were considered a precious characteristic of the group, whatever one of the brothers wished to possess, he wished for the other brothers to have as well. That is why these brothers decided to observe the same law in matrimonial issues as well as in general, and due to God's validation (بتأییدات (الہی), it was evident from their faces that they possessed the sort of talent and gift to rule

⁷⁶ Varnavarta is identified as the town of Barnava in Uttar Pradesh. See A. Ghosh, *An Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), 55.

⁷⁷ This is a general statement about the king, and certainly refers to Akbar as ruling monarch. But given the context is one of exile for the Pandavas, it could also allude to Humayun.

⁷⁸ "کنپلا" is identified as Kampil in Farukhabad district, Uttar Pradesh, see Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century* (New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2008), 281.

over the nation. God's will was in fact evident in the way they lived and throughout their generation, and whether young or old. Their bravery, gracefulness and ambition increased by the day, until the time the other members of the family and their king, Duryodhana, were awakened from ignorance and came to realize that the story of their burning had been fabricated. Indeed, these well-known people were the same Pandavas, who had changed their previous ways and, therefore, [the Kauravas] thought it better to explore the facts. If all was true, they [felt] they must prevent the Pandavas from going any further. Pretending to put aside enmities and problems, they thought it a good idea to be friends and thereby make sure that no harm would be done toward them.

After long discussions, and the careful attention the Kauravas paid to them, the Pandavas were brought to Hastinapura, the capital city of the Kauravas. After they were welcomed to the city, the Kauravas tried their best to be hospitable to their brothers. Thereafter, they divided the lands equally in a brotherly way among each other. They granted Indraprastha (اندرپرست), which includes the city of Delhi, and also half of their own lands, to the Pandavas and kept the other half to themselves.⁷⁹ As a result, they came to be on very good terms with each other. However, since it was destined for the Pandavas to rule the world, they increased their power day by day and many people started to join them and benefit from their graceful presence. Little by little their popularity grew in a way that all the people of the Kaurava side were completely obedient to them and would not deviate from their demands. [page 29] However, they [the Kauravas] were still planning to play tricks on them and so they could not advance themselves with this attitude. They were obedient in outward appearance but against them in their minds and hearts. After a while, one of the Pandavas' sons, Yudhishthira, noticed all these games going on and came to the conclusion that it was time to perform the special ceremony of the *Rujasuya yajna* (جگ راجسوی).⁸⁰ It should be noted that the

⁷⁹ Indraprastha is identified as being under the site of the Old Fort in Delhi.

⁸⁰ The *rajasuya* or royal consecration is a sacrifice (*yajna*) performed by ancient kings in India who sought to transform themselves into powerful emperors. The story is told in detail in the first parts of the *Mahabharata*. The main study is J. C Heesterman, *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration: The Rajasuya Described According to the Yajus Texts and Annotated* ('s-Gravenhage: Mouton, 1957).

yajna is a particular ceremony in which the elites get together and dedicate special prayers and gifts to the divine assembly. They made a big fire, with many fragrant things, fruits and grains, that were put into the fire. They threw everything in the fire—which is indeed the main element of all the features of the performance—and granted many sacrifices and charities and therefore, recognized it as a tool to get closer to the great Divine. And for doing this, there are many ways and means, which will be thoroughly described throughout this book. One of the conditions in order to practice the *Rajasuya yajna* ceremony is that some of the masters of different groups get together and prepare all the materials and services for this great performance and then dedicate it to their ancestors.

On the whole, with the confirmation of Yudhisthira, all four brothers of his were determined to conquer the world from east to west and from south to north. And due to Divine grace, this aim was soon accomplished. These four brothers by the aid of God's army were able to journey all over the world and meet up with many kings and governors of different countries, such as Rome, Arab countries, Persian lands, and Transoxiana.⁸¹ They were able to collect many treasures and precious items and then prepared them for the ceremony of *Rajasuya yajna*, and, as it was expected, it was done in the best way possible.

If you are seeking pleasure in heart, avoid all pleasures,

Since the very pain you are suffering will be the cure [for all your torments].

Duryodhana, when observing all these treasures, wealth, and power, could not bear it, and thus, the fire of jealousy, which had been hidden in him for years, suddenly erupted.

[page 30] He summoned all his cunning and wise men to prepare for battle and then called upon the Pandavas. After holding their special ceremony of prayers, they began their gamble on the path to failure. Out of envy, they played tricks at dice,⁸² and committed every possible crime, eventually beating the Pandavas and unscrupulously taking over all their belongings. When there was nothing left for the Pandavas, they made a deal that if they—the Pandavas—could win this last game, they would be given all they had lost. Otherwise, the Pandavas will have to eschew any sort of power and

⁸¹ This wide geographical horizon is not, of course, in the *Mahabharata* itself.

⁸² Pamsa (پانسه) used here is the Hindi word for dice.

disguise themselves in poor outfits and live among wild animals in the desert for twelve years. When this period terminates, the Pandavas will be permitted to come to the civilized world, but for one year none would have the right to remind others who they really were and where they were from. If anyone were to disobey this law, all of them would have to return to their previous dwelling again for another twelve years.

It was the practice of the time to oppose the will of the head of state, and as the Pandavas gave way to opposition, they were exiled to the desert.⁸³

Much luck is hidden and covered,

Those who do not see them are considered wise.

**

Oh yes, why do you wonder about the world, since that is the way of the world,
When there is a nightingale, there will be an owl too, and after a song of mourning there will come some joyful ones too.

Since it is the characteristic of any destined event to circumvent in egotism and ignorance, Duryodhana began to rule independently, without worrying about any disruptions and in complete unawareness.⁸⁴ He had no idea what would come at the end of the day. In any case, the Pandavas were faithful to their vows and went through their vicissitudes with the help of the Divine power and then lived stealthily in the city of Virata (بیرات) for one year.⁸⁵ Although, there were many tricks played on them, due to their strong guard, none were successful. Many thoughts and plans were organized to deceive them, but none worked. [page 31] After a lot of correspondence between the two groups, Pandavas finally managed to convince the Kauravas of their honesty and even accepted five conditions imposed on them. However, in the end, the Kauravas did not give way to any peaceful action and thus both parties called for their armies and

⁸³ This statement expresses a degree of surprise that people in ancient days would oppose the kings placed over them by divine authority. Because the Pandavas do not resist improper opposition, they go into exile.

⁸⁴ The meaning here is that destiny will bypass egotism and ignorance. Duryodhana acts according to his personal interests but is unaware that he will be overtaken by events he does not understand.

⁸⁵ Sanskrit Virata, identified as Bairat, Jaipur district, Rajasthan. Its early archaeology is explored in Raymond F. Allchin and George Erdosy, *The Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia: The Emergence of Cities and States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 244-46.

decided to face each other somewhere near Kurukshetra and Thanesvar. After plenty of marching and preparations, they began fighting, following the rules and rituals of battle in their religion between two foes. They fought in a way that, even the well-known tale of the battle between Sohrab and Rustam⁸⁶ was a small event compared to their battle. There have been many narratives about bravery and heroic actions of these strong men, who had been able to fight even the wildest of animals.

Since the fate of deceivers has always been misery and indignity, therefore, it was master Duryodhana and his men's fate to face death and vanish from the earth completely. Yudhisthira fought for eighteen days nonstop and emerged victorious over his opponents. This event fell in the early years of the Kali age (کلجگ).

Death pities none, destiny is not afraid to put anyone down,

The law of death is true for all people; it is not just a law for you and me alone.

Many storytellers claim that in this enormous battle, Kauravas' army consisted of eleven Aksauhini (کھوہنی) and Pandavas' army had seven. Based on an Indian explanation each Aksauhini includes 21870 forces on elephants, and the same number of soldiers on carriages and 60310 horseback riders and one Lakh and 9350 soldiers on foot. In this strange war, which lasted for eighteen days, only eleven people survived in each group. Four people from the army of Duryodhana survived and joined Yudhisthira's army.

The army included Kripacarya (کریا چارج), the Brahman who was the respected master for both parties and possessed the power to write eloquently, Ashvatthaman (اشوتھامان) who was the son of a doctor called Dronacarya (درونچارچ). Dronacarya was indeed a true scholar. [page 32] There were also, Kritavarma (کرت برما) who was one of the Yadavas (جادوان) and a member of a group named Sanjaya (سنجی) and a friend of Dhritarastra. In naming others, one should mention Satyaki (ساتک) too, who was a relative of the Yadavas and was reputable due to his wisdom and maturity. There was also Yuyutsu who was Duryodhana's brother, though from a different mother and finally Krishna (کشن) who was the lord of all the elites and a symbol of good deeds.

⁸⁶ Sohrab and Rustam is a famous episode from Ferdousi's Persian epic *Shahnameh* where the great warrior Rustam unknowingly slays his long-lost son Sohrab in combat. For an English translation see Jerome W. Clinton, *The tragedy of Sohrab and Rostam: from the Persian National Epic, the Shahname of Abol-Qasem Ferdowsi* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996).

It is such a great fortune that there was a son named Vasudeva Yadava (بستدیوجادو).⁸⁷ His place of birth was Mathura (متھرا).⁸⁸ King Kamsa (راجہ کنس) had ordered this boy killed because astronomers had predicted that the birth of the eighth son in the family of Vasudeva will cause his death. Therefore, Kamsa took Vasudeva and his wife, Devaki (دیوکی), into his own house and imprisoned them in a place where there were eleven chained gates. He had commanded that every child born in this family must be executed. Time passed until the eighth son was born. Due to divine grace and assistance, he was released from those iron chains and was taken to the house of a layman called Nanda (نند) who sold milk and kept cows. The son was hidden for eleven years and eventually was able to kill the so-called master, Kamsa, and granted the kingdom to Kamsa's father, Ugrasena (اوگر سین). He himself was also contributing as part of the government. Since he noticed that the people of the age lacked any sort of wisdom and effort, he decided on reforming that state. Some of the greatest men of the time began to follow him because of his inborn qualities and also observing divine intervention in whatever he did. After thirty-two years, he parted from Nandagopala (نندگوپل) and his house and declared independence in Mathura.⁸⁹ Many strange and exotic stories are told about him and many new legends related to him.

There was a master named Jarasandha (جراسندھ) who came from another land intending to murder him. Another master, Kalayavana (کال جون), came from the west and was master of Mleccha (ملیچھان), whose people believe in no deity and ritual. All these people came with a giant army to defeat this man.⁹⁰ [page 33] Some even say that a master from Arabic lands was also a part of this. The so-called man could not bear all these troops and fled to Dvaraka (دوارکا), which is located beside the shores of Ahmadabad,

⁸⁷ This section turns to the stories in the *Harivamsa*, literally the 'lineage of Hari or Krishna,' an appendix to the *Mahabharata*.

⁸⁸ This refers to the modern city, also called Mathura.

⁸⁹ Nandagopala means the cowherd Nanda, referred to above.

⁹⁰ Mleccha Farsi (ملیچھان) is a general term in classical India for non-Indic barbarians. The main work is Aloka Parasher, *Mlecchas in Early India: A Study in Attitudes toward Outsiders up to AD 600* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharal Publishers, 1991). Here the terms is assimilated into the Indo-Persian understanding.

and lived a life of exile and anonymity for seventy-eight years.⁹¹ When he was 125 years old, he said farewell and journeyed to the other world. The whole story will be told in this book in detail.

After the killing of Duryodhana, victorious Yudhishthira came together with many of his men and declared an independent government, becoming the king of the world. After thirty-two years, Yudhishthira, with the aid of divine intervention, came to realize the unfaithful nature of this world. As it is a quality of excellent and brave people, he then began to detach himself from this materialistic world and sought isolation. With the help of his four brothers, he was able to rise to a respected position and then journey into the hereafter. All these adventures are meticulously mentioned in this book.

You may ask where those great kings are now,
The soil has been fertilized by their eternal presence.

Oh heart, you are well aware that mortality will come after life,
Why on earth do you have such far-reaching wishes?
You made your pledge with existence, not the other way around,
So, why are you complaining about the unfaithfulness of it?

To continue, the Kauravas and the Pandavas lived together and governed the country.⁹² Duryodhana ruled for thirteen years independently and after the war, Yudhishthira ruled for thirty-six years. Collectively they ruled over the country for 125 years. In the end, they had all gone and nothing was left of them, for the time of pleasure and prosperity had come.

[page 34] Oh heart, who permitted you to settle down on earth?
Who asked you to embrace that dear body of yours?
Behold, you are standing as many people have left [this earth],
Now it is time for you to learn a lesson from all those bygones.

⁹¹ Dvaraka is identified here as “beside the shores.” Modern Dwarka is in Devbhoomi Dwarka district, Gujarat.

⁹² The break in the text here, plus the return to the number of years ruled by Yudhishthira and Duryodhana, suggests that this section has been appended to the core text at a later date, as noted above. This is confirmed by the different number years assigned to Yudhishthira, which contradicts the figure just given above.

Praise is to be paid to the Lord who is most graceful. Such a long and extended narrative seems unlikely to have occurred in any period of history before. Neither has there been such eloquent diction observed at any stage of the universe. If I claim that this story is certainly true, I may be going beyond the world of possibilities and if I do otherwise and claim this is all a legend, again I am off the mark.⁹³ Although many scholars with good taste will not give up denigrating its being a legend, it is only fair that wise and incisive men would begin to think and bury all these poisonous thoughts and possibilities. By far this is the fairest thing done, of course, with utmost precaution. If the wise could pay detailed and long-sighted heed and gain ultimate and eternal insight, and thus contemplate the issue and differentiate the whole condition, effort and nature of the people of one era, the people of one community, one town and even one village, they must also behold astutely the differences between human attributes in different ages and hours and must be aware of the states of the remote past and different periods of time, in a way that they can preserve in their minds and memories. For certain there are thousands of such original legends, which are very easy to retell and cannot be a cause of surprise since humans have become accustomed to the way of the world. In fact man has been enslaved by it—the way of the world—and therefore man cannot serve wisdom. Due to this deprivation, which is a result of an underprivileged status, he is not able to recognize and point to the divine power. Therefore, man considers every small original piece as done by creation and due to its repetitiveness and man's clichéd observation, does not give too much credit to it.

You must journey on this path and be guided only by your wisdom,

Since there are a plethora of treasures in it which you can obtain,

[page 35] If the truth is critical and sharp in your taste,

You should swallow it fully, as you will find it very sweet and tasty indeed.

You must take care of your insight by the virtue of courtesy,

Because the deceitfulness of the heart is evident when faced with corrupt insight.

⁹³ These comments return to issues already addressed by Abu'l-Fazl early on in the introduction and point to this section being a later addition. See additional notes below.

Narrators of the story state that after contemplating the old days, old times and old generations, a child was born from the siblings of Arjuna.⁹⁴ This child became the king and was a very kind-hearted man of sound mind. He ruled over the people treating them equally and spent his lifetime meditating. He wished to be informed about his people's reasons for fighting, all the details of that generation's battles, all of the feasts and wars, and all of the congenial speeches that relate to the state. He openly consulted with a wise man and sage named Vaishampayana (بيشم پايان) about this. The man told him that Arjuna must ask one of his wise masters, Vyasa (بياس), about this great story.⁹⁵ Apart from the reason that Vyasa had been participating in the so-called events, he was also aware of the whole story and it is mostly due to him and his explanation that all the events and occurrences of the time have been preserved. He knows everything about it. Undoubtedly, he tried his best to write down whatever master Arjuna demanded. So, the so-called master asked Vyasa to begin writing about the events so that later generations could learn from it and use it as a precious tool. Vyasa began to carry out the task despite his frail body and spiritual involvement. He wrote a story of much grandeur, relating it to other occasions and pleasures, making it a treasure in terms of guidance and for many people in the world to reach their goals. He wrote the stories in the format of a book and thus called it *Mahabharata*. The general notions that were collected from

⁹⁴ This paragraph and the following one give confusing information. The five Pandavas were married to Draupadi and she is said to have had five sons with them, all killed in the *Mahabharata* war. Abhimanyu was born to Arjuna separately but he too was killed in the war. Parikshit, born after the war, survived and was the sole descendant. After Parikshit was killed by a snake, his son Janamejaya was determined to avenge his death. His 'snake sacrifice' became a setting for the telling of the *Mahabharata* story.

⁹⁵ The fault here is that the section introduces a child of the generation of Arjuna who supposedly asked about the Great War and associated events. As noted above, this cannot be the son, but rather the grandson Janamejaya because it is in the context of his snake sacrifice that the epic story is told. Here, however, the explanation reverts to Arjuna. Another reason for questioning the originality of this paragraph is the derogatory tone: describing the events and Arjuna "co-called" contradicts the more serious approach urged above.

people state that “Maha” (مہا) means great and “Bharata” (بھارت) means war and since the book is indeed a story of a great war, the book was called “The Great War”.⁹⁶ However, when all the elites and eloquent people got together and discussed the issue, [page 36] They all agreed that Bharata does not mean war, and quite the contrary, because the book is about the offspring of a well-rooted and long-established family descending from a master called Bharata; therefore, the name of the book was designated as so. The [last] “A” in Bharata stands for kinship and since it is common in the Indian language too and it has some relation to war, the so-called masters believed that the word “Bharata” means “war.”⁹⁷ They considered this man, “Vyasa,” as a holy man. Some other people assert that there is a certain person who is called upon to rehabilitate his people, and some others assume that there is a person who dresses up in different clothes and walks around in disguise and that he would appear soon. Since many people are facing numerous difficulties, he has come from Brahma to solve their problems and reveal the truth about everything. His story is written down in four books (chapters): Rigveda (رگہ بید), Yajurveda (ججر بید), Samaveds (سام بید), and Atharvaveda (اتھیر بن بید) which lexically means resolver and solver of all problems. Because he was created among waters he is called “Dvaipayana” (دوی پا این).⁹⁸ All of the legends relating to this man are thoroughly mentioned in this book. All storytellers throughout time have claimed that Vyasa wrote this strange book containing sixty parts and he wrote it when he was beside the shores of a sea called Sarasvati (سرستی) near Thanesvar and then had

⁹⁶ This statement again points to it being a later addition and an attempt to explain the name *Razmnama* at a time when its origin in the translation bureau was lost. The *Razmnama* being a courtly creation, there could be no question of the name being a “general notion... collected from the people.” This suggests that the explanation is a retrospective explanation imposed on a text that was well known.

⁹⁷ This curious etymology is out of step with the sophisticated and more careful thinking in the early part of the introduction by Abu’l-Fazl.

⁹⁸ Another false etymology attempting to explain the name Vaishampayana by relation to the Sanskrit word *paya*, water. The fact that Abu’l-Fazl had Madhusudana, one of the greatest Sanskrit scholars of the sixteenth century as a close colleague at court (see translation team, in chapter three) suggests this cannot have been written by him. Another flaw is the contradiction regarding the four Vedas, described by Abu’l-Fazl in the *Ain* where he follows the generally accept tradition: “A holy man named Vyasa divided this book into four parts to each of which he assigned a separate name, viz., the Rigveda, the Yajurveda, the Samaveda and the Atharvaveda.”

a remarkable feast in which many various creatures were participating.⁹⁹ This omniscient and wise man distributed those sixty parts among people. Thirty parts were given to a tribe named Devata (دیوتا) that used to speak an Indian dialect called Svagaloka (سرگ) and whose dwellings were beyond the skies.¹⁰⁰ In addition, fifteen parts were given to the inhabitants of Pitrloka (پتر لوک) who also live not on earth but beyond it.¹⁰¹ Fourteen parts were granted to Yaksa (ججهان) and Raksasa's (راکشسان) people and also to the Gadharva (گندھربان) who are creatures that live in the heavens.¹⁰² [page 37] One part was left for the use of human beings and this very part is written in eighteen chapters or Parvans (پرب) with a conclusion called *Harivamṣa* (ھر بنس). In this way he is deemed a graceful man who allows people to benefit from his work.

The first Parvan is called Adiparvan (ادپرب) and explains all the stories about the Kauravas and the Pandavas. It also contains a whole list of chapters and table of contents containing 8884 parts.

The second Parvan is called Sabhaparvan (سبھاپرب) and is about the story of master Yudhisthira who sent away his dear brothers to conquer the whole world and then the story about the great ceremony of the *Rajasuya yajna* and the preparation of the Kauravas made for the gambling game, and so on so forth. This Parvan contains 2511 parts.

The third Parvan is called Aranyaparvan (آرن پرب) and some call it Vanaparvan (بن پرب). This is about the journey of the Pandavas into deserts for twelve years and the events that occurred there. It consists of 11664 parts.

⁹⁹ According to popular legend, Thanesar was built on the banks of the now vanished Sarasvati River. The large water tank in Thanesar, a favourite pilgrimage site even in the Mughal period, is probably the 'sea' referred to here.

¹⁰⁰ This is a mixed up explanation: the gods indeed "live beyond the skies," but they do not speak "Svagaloka." This is a misunderstanding of Svargaloka, literally the "world of heaven," in which the gods live.

¹⁰¹ This is the world (*loka*) of the ancestors (*pitri*).

¹⁰² This refers to the demi-gods (Yaksha), demons (Rakshasa) and celestial musicians (Gandharva). I have not been able to find the idea that the greater epic was divided among these different worlds and different classes of beings in any other source.

The fourth Parvan is called Virata Parvan (بیرات پرب) and it is about the Pandavas returning back from the deserts and their hiding in a city called Virata. This section includes 2050 parts.

The fifth Parvan is called Udyogaparvan (آدوگ پرب) and is about the period when the Pandavas appeared in public and sent messengers to the Kauravas in order to settle down in peace. However, the latter did not accept their offer. A huge war began and the Pandavas prepared a great army as both parties were present in Kurukshetra. This chapter contains 6698 parts.

The sixth Parvan is called Bhismaparvan (بھیکم پرب) and is about the battle and injuries of Bhishma, the grandfather. As a result of that battle many of Dhritarashtra's sons were killed within ten days. The chapter contains 5884 parts.

The seventh Parvan is called Dronaparvan (درونہ پرب) and is mainly about the challenges that Duryodhana faced with Karna (باکرن) and then his designating Dronacharya (دروناچارچ) as the captain of his army, and also stories about his murder and another five-day battle in which Bhishma suffered severe injuries. This consists of 8909 parts.

[page 38] The eighth Parvan is called Karnaparvan (کرن پرب) and is about the further ten days of the battle and the designation of Duryodhana as the captain of the army. It is also about a great man of honour who was well-known as a sage and spiritual leader. It also tells the story of how Yudhishthira fought and eventually fled and also the killing of Karna by Arjuna. This part consists of 4964 parts.

The ninth Parvan is called Salyaparvan (شل پرب) and it tells the story of Salya's captainship and his heroism and then his killing. This is followed by the story of Duryodhana's hiding in a pool and his killing. Then later it tells the story of the many heroes who were killed during the eighteen-day battle in which the Pandavas, in the end, reigned victorious. This Parvan is written in 1220 parts.

The tenth Parvan is called Sauptikaparvan (سوپتیک پرب) and is mainly about the end of the war and Kritavarman (کرت برما) and some other heroes who were great swordsmen. And also about Duryodhana's fights, since he still had some power and energy, and his attacks on the other army. It also tells of the Pandavas who were back home safe while their five sons were killed. Only eight people from the Pandavas survived. The tenth Parvan contains 870 parts.

The eleventh Parvan is called Striparvan (استری پرب) and it narrates the weeping of women from both parties over the dead bodies of their dear ones and their cursing of

Gandhari, Duryodhana's mother. They prayed that after thirty-six years all her people would disappear and all her family would die and she would die after suffering the worst pains and disasters. It contains 775 parts.

The twelfth Parvan is called Santiparvan (شاننت پرېب). After the victory, Yudhisthira began to study about the status of this unfaithful world and asked to leave the life of power and start a life of isolation and asceticism. Vyasa and Kershen (كرت برما) tried to console him, while Bhishma, who was still around, assisted them. Yudhisthira heard many pleasant discussions and in this Parvan all of their fine discourses are mentioned. The principles of courtesy and kingship are all taught in this section which consists of 14732 parts.

[page 39] The thirteenth Parvan is called Anusasana Parvan (آنوشن پرېب) or Dharma Parvan (دهرم پرېب). It is about Bhishma and various charities and donations. It seems that the twelfth and thirteenth Parvan should be put in one Parvan which is filled with Bhishma's advice and the ninth Parvan should be divided into two Parvans. There is no pleasant speech heard from any Brahman on this issue. It is only based on the understanding of the author of this section, which is mentioned in some versions of the *Mahabharata*. However, instead of Duryodhana Parvan (درجودهن پرېب) there is a Gadaparvan (گدا پرېب)¹⁰³ and has 8000 parts.

The fourteenth Parvan is called Asvamedhikaparvan (اشمیده پرېب) and is about the horse sacrifice and matters in relation to it. The reason for mentioning this is that after all the advice Bhishma gave in his meeting with Yudhisthira, he passed-away and Yudhisthira began to mourn heavily and wished to leave all his desires behind and instead live the life of a single man. Vyasa said encouraging words to him and entertained him and asked him to think about the many issues that are of significance in the case of being a king. Therefore, he persuaded him to make sacrifices and conduct a great prayer ceremony. In fact, he intended for these sacrifices to be a punishment for the bad deeds done by the king. This Parvan consists of 3320 parts.

The fifteenth Parvan is called Asramavasikaparvan (اشمیده پرېب) which is about the isolation of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, Duryodhana's mother, and Kunti, Yudhisthira's mother, and their journey into the forest. They settled down in Kurukshetra where

¹⁰³ This refers to the sixteenth Parvan, the Sanskrit word *gada* meaning club.

Vyasa's home was located. Afterwards, they lived a life of poverty and the Pandavas intended to visit them now and then. It consists of 1506 parts.

[page 40] The sixteenth Parvan is called Mausalaparvan (موسل پرېب) and is about the anguish of the Radovas and Kershen in 320 parts.¹⁰⁴

The seventeenth Parvan is called Mahaprasthanaparvan (مهاپرستهان پرېب) or Mahaprasthanika parvan (مهاپرستهانېک پرېب) and mostly tells the story of Yudhisthira's isolated and secluded life with his brothers and the granting of all his lands to his people and also their journey to the snowy mountains. It is written in 120 parts.

The eighteenth part is called Svargarohanaparvan (سرگارهون پرېب) and is about the praising of the Pandavas' dead ancestors in the mountains and the raising of their bodies to higher stages of creation and so on and so forth. It contains 209 parts.

And eventually the end of the book which is known as *Harivamsa* (هرېنس) tells the story of the Radovas. When master Janamejaya (جنمېجه) heard all these stories about his predecessors, he demanded that there be a connection with the Radovas as well, and so, Vyasa who knew the precise nature of their truth, added the last part of the book, which is about the Radovas.¹⁰⁵

Commonly, every section has 12000 parts and according to this kind of calculation every Lakh has less than 1470 parts and if it is added to every part, it counts up to 18000 parts exactly. Anyway, since these calculations are not deemed credible it is better not to trust any of them. It is best to always keep in mind to follow one's mere forward-looking wisdom and hopefully it will lead to eternal and spiritual happiness.

Oh wise man, your way seems the best to take,

It is the right thing to ask the wise for direction not anybody else.

It can be no secret that from one hundred thousand verses (اشلوك)¹⁰⁶ that is written in this book twenty-four thousand verses relate to the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, which serves as a very helpful instruction manual for those who wish to gain knowledge in this area. **[page 41]** They will be able to learn a great deal about the many teachings and techniques of war and also the many stories written as guidance, sermons

¹⁰⁴ The text here refers to the Yadavas and Krishna.

¹⁰⁵ As mentioned Radova means Yadava.

¹⁰⁶ "اشلوك" refers here to the *shloka*, the most prevalent Sanskrit verse form.

and anecdotes about the feasts and wars of past times, which are of course regarded as valuable. Now that we have a summary of the whole text, this detailed book will truly be satisfying and enjoyable. Nevertheless, one cannot be content with this introduction and should search for more detail in order to comprehend this book better. In this way, one is able to differentiate between true sayings and false ones and one must be intelligent enough not to be easily deceived by various colorful narratives, thus looking at the whole issue as a thought-provoking matter. Sometimes, if it is required, one should even put aside his senses and look to brotherly love and guide those who have been enslaved in the prison of imitation (زندادن تقلید), that has blinded them in making no effort at all, and are thus living ignorantly and do not believe in learning from the wise ones. The wise man must awaken them and be like a crutch to them in order to help them walk properly in the road to knowledge and thus make sure that he is blessed and guided. God forbids that I interfere in His tasks. Only God is aware of everybody and He is the one who knows who to feed and who to let alone. If God permits someone to search and find out for himself, it is out of His great power and if He lets someone imitate others and have no inclination to find out for himself, again it is out of His grace. We cannot be grateful for the former nor can we be permissive of the latter. Oh my heart, whenever there is a benevolent doctor to cure our sick body we are ignorant beside him and must not declare or question anything. A drop of existence, which is the place for man's essence in the divine court, does not have the capacity or the privilege to display the commotion and chaos.

In the whole universe, you are the only one deserving of the kingdom,

From the moment of creation to eternity,

You are the one who can open our eyes to the truth,

And you are the great writer of existence,

The mind which is seeking you is indeed ignorant,

The power of imagination seems lost in your path,

If you forgive and forsake all the guilty men on earth,

Your power will still remain untouched and impenetrable,

And if you burn all the sages in the fire,

Your justice will not be questioned and underestimated at all,

[page 42] Everything is precisely out of your fairness and justice,

All that you do is apply justice (عدل) for all,

Nobody can blame or convict you for tyranny.

Now is the best time to condense our speech on the greatness of God and dedicate some words about our young King who is the lord of our time.¹⁰⁷ He has held me responsible for conducting this huge task, which requires great skill and craftsmanship in discourse and diction. Yet, if I wish to be fair, I would also forget the idea of praising him too, since I cannot do justice to his stature as my pen drops and I am unable to work in the proper way.

This very king will be the eternal lord of the world,

We hope he could achieve whatever he wishes.

May he enjoy a life of youth and prosperity,

May he find happiness in good fortune.

¹⁰⁷ Again, another section that may sound like Abu'l-Fazl, but in my opinion is not. The paragraph borrows a few ideas, but does not handle them elegantly. Moreover the wording “our young king” is not appropriate and out of step with the attitude expressed above (see p. 13): “He is an intelligent person who is conscious of everything from the time he was a year old child until now—in his mid-forties—and God-willing he will have the prospect to live even longer because of the order he brings to the world.”

Chapter 3.

Commentary and Analysis

The *Preface* to the *Razmnama*—given in its entirety in the preceding chapter—provides a basis for a consideration of Abu'l-Fazl's ideas about the *Razmnama* and its purpose. His statements illuminate many issues and could prompt the exploration of a wide range of historical and literary issues. However, within the focused scope of this MA thesis, I have chosen to examine three specific themes that I think are of interest in relation to Abu'l-Fazl and the text presented here in translation. These themes are: (1) writing for the 'lord of the age'; (2) reading the *Razmnama*; and (3) positioning the *Mahabharata* in and outside time. I chart my exploration of what Abu'l-Fazl has to say around these themes through commentary, a degree of paraphrasing, and analysis in equal turns.

To understand Abu'l-Fazl's approach to my three themes, I will follow the organisation and content of his *Preface*. This falls into three parts, with each conforming to one of the themes I have listed. In the first part, after some preliminary remarks about writing, Abu'l-Fazl is concerned with the qualities of a great king and the personality of Akbar. Thus my first section: "Writing for the 'Lord of Age.'" In the second part of the *Preface*, Abu'l-Fazl turns to the *Mahabharata* itself and gives a cryptic survey of those people in India who might be critical of the translation and who, by implication, might benefit from reading it. He also considers the problems a translator faces when confronted with his source materials. This section I have called: "Reading the *Razmnama*." The third and final section of Abu'l-Fazl's *Preface* provides the chronological setting of the *Mahabharata* and maps its cosmological origin as scripture. My third section is thus called: "Positioning the *Mahabharata* in and outside Time." A survey of these themes, taken together, feed into the research problems I posed in chapter one, namely, how Abu'l-Fazl related himself to the translation, how he approached his task as the author of the *Preface*, how he understood and represented

the social groups for whom the translation might have been intended, and how he related to Akbar as his king and patron. I attempt to address these problems in chapter four.

3.1. Writing for the ‘Lord of the Age’

*This is the king: the world of the soul and the
soul of the world, the ‘lord of the age.’
Abu’l-Fazl, Preface ¹*

Abu’l-Fazl opens his *Preface* with some preliminary remarks on the problems of writing. At first glance these remarks seem like a disjointed preamble to his main topic—the greatness of emperor Akbar. But his remarks are, in fact, a four-pronged analysis of the current situation in his world and an assessment of the problems that surround the business of writing in which he is engaged. As we will see, Abu’l-Fazl sees Akbar, and the new age his reign has ushered in, as a solution to the key issues that face Abu’l-Fazl as a writer.

To begin, Abu’l-Fazl notes that the world yearns for the supreme deity and is “intoxicated” by him. But God is beyond reach: “With many writing boards gone black and many pens broken, none can manifest your actual essence as it is.”² There is no point trying to express the nature of God in words because he is indescribable. However, as Abu’l-Fazl notes immediately, “many friends talk about the possibility of the mercy of the sun and would step from the abyss of decay and bewilderment to the peak of insight and highness beyond the sky.” These people “brag about their imaginary treasure of knowledge.” However, this “possesses no value in all existence,” and, despite their assertions, it does not have the attributes “of the highness of the holy spirit of God.”

To whom do these statements refer? This is an important historical question to answer because Abu’l-Fazl has put it at the very start of his *Preface*. With no clues in the *Preface* itself (a characteristic feature of Abu’l-Fazl throughout), we need to seek an

¹ See chapter two, p. 4. The page references are to those embedded in the translation in chapter two. An explanation of the apparatus is given in chapter one.

² See chapter two, p. 1 and the quotes immediately below.

explanation outside the text. Clarification comes, in my view, from Bada'uni's comments about sun worshippers at the Mughal court. Of Raja Birbal he notes: "Birbal the Hindu tried to persuade the king that since the sun gives light to all, and ripens all grain, fruits, and products of the earth, and supports the life of mankind, that luminary should be the object of worship and veneration."³ Bada'uni goes on to say that "several wise men at court confirmed what he [i.e. Birbal] said by representing that the sun was the chief light of the world and the benefactor of its inhabitants, that it was a friend to kings and that monarchs established periods and eras in conformity with its motions." This role of the sun in calendrical matters helps explain why Abu'l-Fazl is concerned with sun worship at the start of the *Preface*.⁴ The calendars of India being defined by the sun's movement, as Bada'uni says, and with calendars being a long-standing concern of kings and the state, Abu'l-Fazl is keen to discount sun worship before he moves on to his main concern, a description of Akbar as the 'lord of the age' and a king who is ruling at a key calendric moment, the dawn of a new millennium.⁵ This is why I believe that these people at the royal court are the "many friends" that Abu'l-Fazl is referring to. Further evidence comes from what Bada'uni goes on to say about the followers of Zoroaster who came from Gujarat, and attracted Akbar's attention, teaching him:

...the peculiar terms, ordinances, rites, and ceremonies of the ancient Persians; so that at last he directed that the sacred fire should be made over to the charge of Abu'l-Fazl, and that, according to the fashion of the kings of Iran, in whose temples blazed perpetual fires, he should take care that it was never extinguished either by night or day—for that

³ See *MT*, 2: 261.

⁴ See the important study Stephen P. Blake, *Time in Early Modern Islam: Calendar, Ceremony, and Chronology in the Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), reviewed in B. Rahimi, *The American Historical Review* 120 (2015): 361-362.

⁵ Sun worship is explored in Catherine Asher, "A Ray from the Sun: Mughal Ideology and the Visual Construction of the Divine," in *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience*, ed., Matthew Kapstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 161-94.

it is one of the emblems of God and one light from among the many lights of His creation.”⁶

The reference to the fact that Abu'l-Fazl was put in charge of the flame helps confirm that the people Abu'l-Fazl is criticising in the opening part of the *Preface* are those who would make the sun a central and key feature of religious worship. Moreover, the real light of the world seems to be Akbar. In his eulogy to the king—as we will see in due course—he opens by portraying Akbar as the light of all nights. Akbar, Abu'l-Fazl says, is the one who “spreads light to enlighten the world/He is also much endeared and loved by all creation.”⁷ In any event, at this point in his opening remarks, Abu'l-Fazl simply brushes these beliefs to one side, acknowledging the real issue that the “drop” of human existence is lost in astonishment and darkness.

Leaving this subject, Abu'l-Fazl turns to what can be described, in broad terms, as the written tradition—a body of knowledge transmitted in written form. Abu'l-Fazl's position is that while God is indescribable and beyond human words, “humble people of need” have acquired understanding “from the book of perfection and knowledge, according to their insight, wisdom, strength, and ability.”⁸ As with many of his comments, Abu'l-Fazl's is not explicit, so we are left speculating about the nature of the texts and the text-holders that concern him. The fault here, in any event, is that such people regard their understanding as free from deficiency, and “attribute all their knowledge to God's domain.” Their tradition and duty, he believes, has been to write down everything, something he critically describes as “all the words that come out of their mouth with all thirty-two teeth.” But this chatter comes to nothing, Abu'l-Fazl says. When they contemplate on matters deeply, it is then that they are embarrassed and, despite every effort, are obliged to fall silent.⁹ Within the context of early Mughal India in the sixteenth century, this would appear to refer to the *‘ulama* who based their authority on an

⁶ See *MT*, 2: 262.

⁷ See chapter two, p. 10.

⁸ See chapter two, pp. 1-2 as also the other quotes in this paragraph.

⁹ Abu'l-Fazl returns to this theme, see the next section.

encyclopaedic command of scripture and jurisprudence.¹⁰ In my view, Abu'l-Fazl is here—as elsewhere—being purposefully vague to allow multiple readings of what he has written. While this makes it difficult for us to hazard guesses about the groups that he could be referring to, the deliberate ambiguity, in my view, appears to have been a way of guaranteeing the longevity of the text so that his statements would not be dated by changes in the immediate historical circumstances.

The next group Abu'l-Fazl calls attention to are those who are “divinely selected,” but who have abandoned the written tradition entirely. These intoxicated mystics—again not named specifically—open “our eyes to creation’s mysteries,” but despite their revelations “have forgotten their books” and “led a life of ignorance and talk of nonsense.” One should not seek righteousness and wisdom from them in Abu'l-Fazl’s view, as they have thrown books into the fire.¹¹ Abu'l-Fazl’s concern, and his basis for criticism, is that without a textual foundation there is no way to judge mystical claims, indeed for him such claims seem suspect.

The opening section of Abu'l-Fazl’s *Preface*—as outlined in the foregoing paragraphs—thus sets out a fundamental conundrum with regard to the visible world, writing, and sacred knowledge. In the first place, God is beyond words. Those who think he can be seen visibly in material things—even the sun—are undone. For those heavily involved in the written tradition, the situation is no better: writing down all the words in the world will not help when matters are examined closely. Saints of high standing have abandoned books entirely and enjoy mystic ecstasy, but their ways are not for us. The heart of the matter—given that Abu'l-Fazl is the writer of a text and rejects claims that have no textual footing—seems to be that writing is limited: new compositions cannot

¹⁰ As an aside, it may be noted that these comments are unlikely to refer to the Sanskrit-knowing elite because, as is well known, they had a strong oral tradition and were not entirely dependent on written texts. Insight into the complexity of theological and philosophical debate of the time is reflected in C. Turner, *Islam Without Allah?: The Rise of Religious Externalism in Safavid Iran* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000). This deals with the Shi’a context and a different *‘ulama* than in India but Turner’s work helps prevent a reductionist approach to the Mughal setting.

¹¹ See chapter two, p. 2. Given Abu'l-Fazl’s tendency to be deliberately vague, I am not prepared to speculate if these lines refer to the Qalandaris or others. Abu'l-Fazl’s approach is ambiguous and resists particularization.

advance understanding or achieve anything, and depending on physical things (and pretending you have received divine mercy from them) is an illusion. The written tradition as received, meanwhile, has limitations and does not grant insight. For a select few, throwing out books entirely is all very well, but this is not a sensible or reliable way forward.

Abu'l-Fazl does not address—at least not immediately—the problems he raises in this assessment. Rather, he turns first to the job at hand: the *Preface* to the *Razmnama*. Reflecting on what he has written—without, he adds, the aid of mystic insight—he informs us that “they designated me, despite the fact that I have lost the techniques of speech, as the author of this essay.”¹² Moreover, Abu'l-Fazl says, he has been given permission from the court of the king to “speak properly and appropriately about the subject.” Noting that he has done some background research and uncovered things “hidden in the unconscious,” Abu'l-Fazl then reports that he made himself “ready for this goal.” But he cannot manage the whole task alone and acknowledges this fact: “Since I did not have the facility and wealth, I asked some ... real men of letters to take on the responsibility of expressing this very long narrative and asked them to commit to the assistance of fulfilling such a great goal.”¹³ This statement refers to the translation team, discussed in chapter one.¹⁴

The Fate of the Learned Writers

After having described how the task of writing the *Preface* came to him, Abu'l-Fazl turns to some reflections on the fate of learned men in society. No matter how versed they might be, “sharp, accurate and insightful people,” he says, “have been blinded and silenced.”¹⁵ All their efforts are in vain and even if somebody happened to stumble on the “hidden truth of creation, he would be silenced as soon as he opened his

¹² See chapter two, p. 2. Here “they” likely refers to Akbar, the plural used for royalty.

¹³ See chapter two, p. 2. This might be read as a reference to the narrative summary that is appended to the *Preface* and is very prosaic in style compared to Abu'l-Fazl. However this cannot be correct because the later portions show indications of being later in date, as explained in chapter one.

¹⁴ See section on the ‘translation team’ in chapter one.

¹⁵ See chapter two, p. 3 as also the remaining quotes in this paragraph.

mouth.” People fear the power of knowledge because they are shrewd, credulous, have bad intentions, or are egocentric. Truly learned men—in which category Abu’l-Fazl includes himself—have always been pushed to the margins, even by the state authorities. “All the kings of the country, who are the lords of the world, oftentimes thought that the appearance of such a man was a conspiracy against their kingdom and the order of the common people.” Therefore, they paid no heed. Indeed, kings, when confronted with “differing ideas,” considered them “a religious matter,” and set them before the *‘ulama*, here violently attacked as “deceivers on issues of *fatwas* and affairs of jurisprudence.” These people, Abu’l-Fazl says, are “masters of imitation” and “mere symbols of ignorance and folly,” who cause learned men to withdraw due to “the sharp criticism of these vain and worthless people.”

While this wording certainly has a topical feel, at least for academic scholars if not struggling students, in historical terms it would be hard to imagine a sharper attack on the religious elite of the Mughal period. Although Abu’l-Fazl seems alone here in his criticisms of the *‘ulama*—he certainly cites no other authorities—we know from Derryl MacLean that the Mahdavi millenarian movement founded by Sayyid Muhammad Jaunpuri also had severe criticisms of the *‘ulama*.¹⁶ They were, in the Mahdavi view, morally incompetent, corrupted by worldly influence, and lacked a ‘masculine’ commitment to the truth. Akbar had a similar views and Bada’uni, himself an *‘alim*, was critical of the *‘ulama* working for the state and taking the opportunity to amass vast fortunes.¹⁷ But all these concerns are swept aside by new developments. Without so much as an introduction, Abu’l-Fazl suddenly gives the bold answer to the problems he has raised, and perhaps also to the criticisms of the Mahdavis: “Today is marked by the emergence of God’s hidden names and the revelation of God’s all-covering grace.”¹⁸

¹⁶ MacLean, “Real Men and False Men at the Court of Akbar: the *Majalis* of Shaykh Mustafa Gujarati,” in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, ed. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000), 199-215. Given that Abu’l-Fazl’s father was accused of following the Mahdavis, as noted above in chapter one, Abu’l-Fazl would have been familiar with Mahdavi tennents. The Mahdavis would, however, have opposed the notion of Akbar as the spiritual pivot of the millennial age.

¹⁷ For example, see *MT*, 2: 311 where Bada’uni expresses shock and disapproval at the vast wealth of Makhdum al-Mulk that was discovered when he died.

¹⁸ See chapter two, p. 3.

This will be revealed “to a great number of people,” in which group Abu’l-Fazl naturally includes Akbar. Indeed, Akbar is the key player: he is “the world of the soul and the soul of the world, namely, the lord of the age.”¹⁹ Akbar holds authority because he is “sufficiently insightful and a truth-seeker at heart.” He has been “granted high levels of understanding and can acquire accurate knowledge and consequently transfer this grace to the common and the elite alike.” Abu’l-Fazl sums up the change with this verse:

The earth is proud to be embellished with the vitality of his throne,
Fulfilling the greatness of this promise as the crown of the sky.²⁰

The word ‘throne’ appears to have a double meaning and allude here to the throne of the king and the throne of God: with the sudden emergence of God’s hidden names and the unfolding of God’s grace in the world, the two are parallel, perhaps even conflated, and present here on earth.²¹ The emperor’s throne, in any event, is honoured by the “greatness of this promise,” that is to say, the promise given in the *Qur’an* that the Day of Judgement will indeed come.

These statements and this point of view—extreme by contemporary standards—are put in context by the millennial preoccupations that dominated the Islamicate world as the year 1000 in the Islamic calendar approached. The start of year 1000 corresponded to October 1591 in the current calendar, so the turn of the millennium was slated to arrive just four years after Abu’l-Fazl began to write his *Preface* to the *Razmnama*.²² The study of the millennial preoccupations of this time has been pioneered

¹⁹ See chapter two, p. 4.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The Taj Mahal, although some fifty years later and from the time of Shah Jahan, was conceived as God’s throne in the garden of paradise, thus showing that God’s throne was a known and present image for the Mughal emperors. See the study of inscriptions on the building, in W. E. Begley and Z. A. Desai, *Taj Mahal: The Illumined Tomb: an Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Mughal and European Documentary Sources* (Cambridge, Mass: Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, 1989).

²² See section ‘source materials’ in chapter one.

by Derryl MacLean and Carl W. Ernst.²³ This line of research culminated in the book *Millennial Sovereign* by A. Azfar Moin, published in 2012.²⁴ This is now regarded as a ground-breaking work, having drawn critical attention from Richard Eaton, Andre Wink, and Audrey Truschke.²⁵ Moin's book struck a cord on account of its comprehensive review of primary sources and its ambition to subvert the standard modes of scholarship on Safavid Iran and Mughal India. The book also triggered a cross-cultural study of sacred kingship by Alan Strathern.²⁶ Moin's work should be read in tandem with Lisa Balabanlilar's *Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire*, also published in 2012.²⁷ Both interventions into the Persianate world attempt to break the 'regional studies' approach that has divided the study of Iran and India. In different ways, both also attempt to show that new forms of royal power were articulated, developed and projected through courtly rituals, astrology, prognostication and mystical sainthood, subjects that tend to be marginalized in the histories of the Timurid, Safavid and Mughal dynasties. These developments have been carried further in a careful comparative study of time and time-keeping in the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires, published by Stephen P. Blake in 2013.²⁸ Taken together, the historiography as it has developed encourages us to read Abu'l-Fazl's extended praise of Akbar with interest and attention, and this is one reason why a full translation of Abu'l-Fazl's text is given here in chapter two.

²³ Derryl MacLean, "The Sociology of Political Engagement: The Mahdawayah and the State," in *India's Islamic Traditions, 711-1750*, ed. Richard M. Eaton (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 150-68, first published in French in 2000; also from 2000, MacLean, "Real Men and False Men at the Court of Akbar," and Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism?" published in 2003 and discussed in chapter one.

²⁴ A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

²⁵ Eaton in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 44 (2013): 289-291; Wink in *American Historical Review* 118 (2013): 1148-1149; Truschke in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46 (2014): 809-811.

²⁶ Alan Strathern, "Drawing the Veil of Sovereignty: Early Modern Islamic Empires and Understanding Sacred Kingship," *History and Theory* 53 (2014): 79-93.

²⁷ Lisa Balabanlilar, *Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire: Memory and Dynastic Politics in Early Modern South and Central Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012). Reviewed R. B. Golzadeh, *BSOAS* 76 (2013): 540-41.

²⁸ Blake, *Time in Early Modern Islam*.

Abu'l-Fazl's praise of Akbar is convoluted and difficult, made more so by the poetic selections he has inserted throughout. It would be a simple matter to dismiss this as a panegyric of little substance, but given what has been just said, the text is important for the ways it shows how Abu'l-Fazl understood and articulated his vision of the king.²⁹ How we should judge Abu'l-Fazl's writing has been a subject of long-standing discussion, if not from the time of the first translation of the *A'in-i Akbari*, then from the analysis published by Peter Hardy in 1985.³⁰ Since that time the tendency—led by Ernst—has been to read Abu'l-Fazl as an author who interpreted Akbar's position as king in terms of the Neo-Platonist metaphysics of Ishraqi illuminationism and the Sufi doctrine of the Perfect Man.³¹ This metaphysical apparatus was invoked, Ernst notes, not simply for philosophical consistency, but essentially to undergird the political authority of Akbar in an eclectic fashion. These ideas anticipate, by more than a decade, Moin's elaborations in *Millennial Sovereign*.³² Moin discussed the illuminationist philosophy of Suhrawardi (d. 1191) in relation to the Mughals, and this too was anticipated by Ernst in an article on Faizi and his illuminationist interpretation of the Vedanta school of Indian philosophy.³³ Meanwhile, in the context of comparative literature, there has been a belated move toward taking the panegyric more seriously as a form.³⁴

²⁹ Annemarie Schimmel, Corinne Attwood, and Burzine K. Waghmar. *The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art, and Culture* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 33 gives a useful if dismissive overview.

³⁰ Peter Hardy, "Abul Fazl's Portrait of the Perfect Padshah: A Political Philosophy for Mughal India—or a Personal Puff for a Pal?" in *Islam in India: Studies and Commentaries*, 2 vols., ed. Christian W. Troll (New Delhi: Vikas, 1985), 114-137.

³¹ Ernst, "The Limits of Universalism in Islamic Thought: the Case of Indian Religions," in *Universality in Islamic Thought: Rationalism, Science and Religious Belief*, ed. Michael G. Morony (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 201; the same ideas earlier in Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism?" p. 179.

³² See, for example, Moin, *Millennial Sovereign*, pp. 36, 209.

³³ Carl W. Ernst, "Fayzi's Illuminationist Interpretation of Vedanta: The *Shariq al-ma'rifa*," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30 (2010): 156-64. Vedanta was known to and discussed by Abu'l-Fazl in the *A'in-i Akbari*, see *AA*, 3: 158.

³⁴ See Rebecca Gould, "The Much-Maligned Panegyric: Toward a Political Poetics of Premodern Literary Form," *Comparative Literature Studies* 52 (2015): 254-88.

In Praise of Akbar

Having declared—as noted in the previous section—that the day has arrived for the revelation of God’s secret names, Abu’l-Fazl elaborates his millennial vision. “Today is,” he says, “a day of victory,” characterized by the “blossoming of knowledge and insight.”³⁵ The whole “system of creation” will be renewed. Grace and special insight have been “bestowed upon the heart of the lord of the age” —Akbar—and the “time has come for the narrow-minded to see,” and for “the whole universe to be given sight.” Even the “dead heart of nature will be given life.” In my opinion, this clears the way for Abu’l-Fazl’s writing of the *Preface* to the *Razmnama*. All the difficulties connected with writing with which he opens—the impossibility of making a contribution, the smug fallacies of those believing in material things as manifestations of the divine, the slavish dependence on the written tradition, the foolishness of those who resort to mysticism, the inevitable obstructions thrown down before men of insight—all are swept away in a single instant by a new and powerful king, and the dawning of the new millennium.

The new age is rich in promise. On the level of government, the “true essence of the kingdom and the throne” will be appropriately fixed because “the king has a great fate and has been granted a good countenance.” Akbar has also been given precious ability in spiritual leadership, which Abu’l-Fazl says, is well worth his kingdom and the whole divine realm. This is “a gift to the chosen one which is indeed deeply rooted, coming from centuries ago and presently establishing his kingdom.”³⁶ Here Abu’l-Fazl is describing the foundation of Akbar’s rule and the establishment of his kingdom based on his qualities of leadership and his traits as a great ruler. He is also referring to Akbar’s descent from Timur and Genghis Khan.

The mention of Akbar’s lineage provides a platform for Abu’l-Fazl to present his central statement about the king. That we are turning to the panegyric proper at this point is signalled by a verse inserted into the the text that continues the millenarian vision by calling on God to keep Akbar’s kingdom “as heaven.”

³⁵ See chapter two, p. 4 as also the further quotes in this paragraph.

³⁶ Ibid.

In praise of the great lord Abu'l Muzaffar Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar,
The warrior king whose kingdom God may keep as heaven.³⁷

Embarking on the panegyric, Abu'l-Fazl opens with a sentence that involves a play of words on 'great'—the literal meaning of Akbar's name—and describes Akbar as the leader of all men and the preceptor of all seekers. Thereafter Abu'l-Fazl does not continue with his chosen theme, but again hesitates, reverting to a version of the problems with which he opened his *Preface*.³⁸ At this point he is concerned with his own diction and worried that it is not up to the task. It is, he says, impossible to describe the depth and greatness of the king and, if other people try, what they write will be "tinged by their own mood and talent." After reflecting in several verses on the greatness of his subject, and impossibility of doing real justice to it, Abu'l-Fazl presents us his working method: "Eventually, after a long period of time spent alone with my heart, I understood that [for such an endeavour] one must write as though you are in the time of utter happiness, understand the status of the deputy of God, and write in a way that would embellish your phrases and express your obedience."³⁹ It is this method—getting in the right frame of mind, allowing oneself to be open to inspiration, and writing in an elaborate way without showing arrogance—that will allow him to overcome the moods and limited talent that might otherwise colour the final product. After expressing these concerns, Abu'l-Fazl proceeds with a frank observation in verse, one that signals he knows his style is a little contrived.

Who is he, of whom I am talking so furtively?
Permit me to speak more about his qualities,
He is the king for whom I come out of my secret guise and talk.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ See the opening remarks in this chapter.

³⁹ See chapter two, p. 5.

⁴⁰ See chapter two, pp. 5-6.

He then starts on his long description of the king and his superlative qualities. While this covers a number of pages, the opening paragraph is, I think, the most important for summing up his vision of Akbar as the 'lord of the age'.

He is the gem of the crown of all kings, the *qibla* of those conscious of God, the light of all nights, hope for the whole generation of mankind, the highest rank of nobles, crowned victor of *Qur'anic* justice, the sovereign of the seal of the state, the ink of the sword of conquest, a unique exemplar among all exemplars, the secret in the written lines of all the names of God, the revealer of hidden secrets, a companion to secluded people, the servant of the only divine being, an astute person of sensitive moments, the owner of all coinage in the imperial treasury, the artist of imaginary innovations, healer of beautiful faces, painter of all the colours in the mirror of concepts, the essence of the formality of wise sayings, the complete organizer of senses and wisdom, the record-book of craftsmen now and forever, the moderator of imperial customs, giver of bread to all mankind, deputy of people in front of God, keeper of all wishes and dreams, solver of all problems, the guard of divine treasures, comfort for the whole universe and all ages, organizer of the whole world from ground to sky.⁴¹

Note that this paragraph is key in that it maps the king's foundational claims: these qualities of Akbar are the basis on which his power and authority rest. The phrase about the "ink of [imperial decree on] the sword of conquest" is a cryptic (and incomplete) metaphor drawing on traditions about ink and blood. That the ink of a

⁴¹ See chapter two, p. 6.

scholar is holier than the blood of a martyr is a longstanding if debated saying.⁴² Sidestepping questions about the transmission of this Hadith, the point here is that while Akbar used military power as king, his rule is not one of brute force. His “sword of conquest” is not stained with blood, but marked by the ink of imperial decree. The question of good government is a central concern of Abu’l-Fazl. Taking the abstractions given in the paragraph just quoted, Abu’l-Fazl turns to a number of particulars, beginning with the running of the state. Akbar is able, Abu’l-Fazl says, to work simultaneously on “many vital and different issues,” each of which require “separate time, energy and wisdom.”⁴³ No details escape him, and he is “candid in his court and with his men.” This allows them to think clearly and “not surrender to doubt and illusion.” The court, in other words, is not a place of whispers and intrigue. Notably Abu’l-Fazl adds that Akbar “knows about the use of proper language and is able to expand it.” This appears to reference the institution of Persian as the official language of court and Akbar’s ability to expand its usage.⁴⁴ Persian had, of course, been the language of state since the thirteenth century, but we know from Abu’l-Fazl that day-to-day parlance was carried out in the vernacular. The humdrum speech of everyday life does not seem, however, to be a worthy language for the golden age that was about to come. Rather, a more elevated and classical language was called for, especially in matters at court.

The king is also skilled, Abu’l-Fazl reports, at putting things in order by “controlling all rules and regulations.” While this draws on a popular theme in the ‘Mirror for Princes’ literature that reaches back to influential classics like the *Siyasatnama* and *Qabusnama*, in the context of Abu’l-Fazl’s *Preface* this appears to refer to the wide-ranging reforms that were instituted with regard to property and tax collection in Akbar’s

⁴² Despite being cited at an early date, the *isnad* or chain of transmission for this Hadith is regarded as unsound in conservative circles. It was judged, for example, as fabricated by al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (d. 1071 CE). For a useful summary see: <http://islamqa.info/en/11920> (retrieved September, 2015).

⁴³ See chapter two, p. 6. Similar views are expressed by Abu’l-Fazl in opening of the *AA*, 1: 11, under his discussion of the royal household.

⁴⁴ See Muzaffar Alam, “The Pursuit of Persian,” and discussion above in chapter one.

time.⁴⁵ The reforms and increased order cause Abu'l-Fazl to reflect historically: "According to the understanding of scholars and the wise who have thought about this matter, it is astonishing to think how the former kings may have ruled over the country without such commands and orders."⁴⁶ This underplays the centralisation of power under Akbar and his emergence as a powerful monarch. There was resistance to absolutism, as Abu'l-Fazl's wording actually hints, and which Ali Anooshahr's reading of Bada'uni shows clearly.⁴⁷ For Abu'l-Fazl, however, centralised power is only a source of good:

The whole universe is under his [Akbar's] protection and kingdom,

The whole providence of earth is based on his order and command.

If his highness does not give permission to all creatures to move,

Not a single word will be uttered from the depth of their being.⁴⁸

Abu'l-Fazl hastens to add that Akbar is not corrupted by absolute power, that he is committed and responsible, that he takes his duties seriously, and that he is not driven by whimsy and greed. In other words, equity (*insaf*) informs Akbar's exercise of power. He assumes, moreover, great burdens even though his subjects and enemies are unaware. He is not swayed by the trappings of rank and power, thus "great men and all tyrants of the age melt away by observing him and drown in the sea of fear." And despite his youth, his experience of pleasure and his many victories, Akbar is not a voluptuary:

⁴⁵ These are set out by Abu'l-Fazl in the *A'in-i Akbari*, which maps the new monetary, organizational, and regional structure envisaged under Akbar. The 'Mirror for Princes' literature is extensive, see on the *Siyasatnama*, for example, the translation of Hubert Darke, *The Book of Government* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), reprinted most recently in 2000, and Marta Simidchieva, "Kingship and Legitimacy in Nizam al-Mulk's *Siyasat-nama*," in *Writers and Rulers: Perspectives from Abbasid to Safavid Times*, eds. Beatrice Gruendler and Louise Marlow (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2004), 97-131.

⁴⁶ Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, 208 understands this as Abu'l-Fazl saying "that it was only after they [the rules] were promulgated that the consciousness grew that kings were not well advised to rule without them."

⁴⁷ Ali Anooshahr, "Mughal Historians and the Memory of the Islamic Conquest of India," *IESHR* 43 (2006): 274-300.

⁴⁸ See chapter two, p. 7.

“He is still a pure-hearted person always at war with his instincts, thus preventing his body from being immersed in mere material pleasure.”⁴⁹

Given these and other superlative characteristics, Abu'l-Fazl has to deal with the king's illiteracy, something that must have been judged a serious flaw at the time. Admitting that Akbar was never schooled officially, Abu'l-Fazl describes Akbar's knowledge as commendable, systematic, and accurate. Whenever the king turns his attention to a new subject “his meticulous attention to detail is indeed excellent.” And when Akbar pronounces on a particular theme, his words are so profound that “sages and all experts in the field of discourse, who had burnt the midnight oil and spent years on studying and contemplating, are not able to understand.”⁵⁰ As a consequence, they “feel committed to finding an answer and expressing it in a way that is pleasing for him.”

Turning from learned matters to the arts, Abu'l-Fazl says that Akbar speaks to artists and craftsmen “so subtly and delicately that the so-called experts believe he has been trained in these fields for years.” Due to his sensibility and his “grand taste,” he has assembled all the professions around him, but “despite the presence of so many experts he has invented many things at which all craftsmen look in amazement.”⁵¹ This seems to indicate that many of the innovative changes that we see in Mughal architecture—the city of Fatehpur Sikri being a prime example—were due to Akbar's intervention and direction. Abu'l-Fazl's description of the collection of artistic talent is testified independently by the new style of court painting which shows that artists were drawn from many centres, both Persian and Indian, to create a syncretic style that was unique to the Mughals.⁵² The drive to collect talent and create something new can be read as repeating the precedent set by Timur—Akbar's ancestor—in the building and decoration

⁴⁹ See chapter two, p. 8.

⁵⁰ See chapter two, p. 9.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² The strands of influence are explored in Pramod Chandra, *Tuti-Nama* (Graz: Akad. Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1976).

of Samarkand. Ibn 'Arabshah gave a first-hand account of this that is worth quoting in view of the fact that Akbar was attempting to replicate Timurid precedent:⁵³

And he took from Damascus learned men and craftsmen and all who excelled in any art, the most skilled weavers, tailors, gem-cutters, carpenters, makers of head-coverings, farriers, painters, bow-makers, falconers, in short, craftsmen of every kind, and collected Ethiopians ... and he divided these companies among the heads of the army and ordered them to lead them to Samarkand.⁵⁴

Abu'l-Fazl then sums up his coverage of the arts and crafts with this verse:

All artists and craftsmen who face him,
Are stunned, and speechless as (their own) hammers.⁵⁵

This needs to be understood metaphorically. A hammer is a noisy tool, but it is a dead weight, and it will do nothing, without the animating hand of the craftsman who wields it. In the presence of Akbar, Abu'l-Fazl is saying, craftsmen become as inert and silent as their own tools. The idea of the king as an animating force in everything is a recurrent theme in the *Preface*, as the verse cited above clearly shows: "If his highness does not give permission to all creatures to move/Not a single word will be uttered from the depth of their being."

Leaving the issue of craftsmanship behind, Abu'l-Fazl turns to the matter of Akbar's deference to others, especially elders, his "unique and exclusive manners" and the freshness and subtlety of his words. In summary, "His universal protection is eternal,"

⁵³ The literature on Timurid patronage is well developed, see W. M. Thackston, *A Century of Princes: Sources on Timurid History and Art* (Cambridge, Mass: The Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, 1989) and Thomas W. Lentz and Glenn D. Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision: Persian Art and Culture in the Fifteenth Century* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1989).

⁵⁴ Ahmad Ibn 'Arabshah, *Tamerlane or Timur the Great Amir, translated by J.H. Sanders from the Arabic Life by Ahmed Ibn Arabshah* (London: Luzac, 1936), cited in Michael Shterenshis, *Tamerlane and the Jews* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 68.

⁵⁵ See chapter two, p. 9.

says Abu'l-Fazl, "May his kingdom last forever." If this seems to verge on the divine, Abu'l-Fazl removes any doubt with a series of remarks that compare Akbar to Jesus. He was so "pure in essence ... when in his embryonic stage," that "a light radiated from the forehead of the blessed and chaste Maryam Makani—the Mary of both worlds."⁵⁶ This title refers to Akbar's mother, the title having a double meaning that implies she is akin to the Virgin Mary. This is not as exceptional as it first seems. Jesus appears often in Persian poetry and mystical thought, as explored by Annemarie Schimmel.⁵⁷ For Abu'l-Fazl, Akbar shares the same grace as Jesus. This vision of the king accounts, in my opinion, for the images of Akbar with a halo that appear in Mughal painting.⁵⁸ While the halo itself may have been inspired in part by European religious prints that came to the Mughal library and were copied there by local artists (as known from surviving examples), Abu'l-Fazl has his own explanation and elaborates this in the *A'in-i Akbari*.

Royalty is a light emanating from God, and a ray from the sun, the illuminator of the universe, the argument of the book of perfection, and the receptacle of all virtues. Modern language calls it *farr-i izidi* (the divine light), and the tongue of antiquity called it *kiyan-i khura* (the sublime halo). It is communicated by God to kings without the intermediate assistance of anyone, and men, in the presence of it, bend the forehead of praise toward the ground of submission.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ See chapter two, p. 10, also further comments there.

⁵⁷ Annemarie Schimmel, *Jesus und Maria in der Islamischen Mystik* (Munchen: Kosel, 1996) not available in Canada, but see her "CHRISTIANITY vii. Christian Influences in Persian Poetry," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/christianity-vii> (retrieved October 2015).

⁵⁸ Moin, *Millennial Sovereign*, has explored the symbolism of the paintings, especially those of Jahangir. But Moin points out (p. 80) that the halo appears around 'Ali in paintings from the fifteenth century, and examples can be found even earlier in Mongol manuscripts: See Oleg Grabar, and Sheila Blair, *Epic Images and Contemporary History: The Illustrations of the Great Mongol Shahnama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). This thesis is not an art historical study and sidesteps the historiography of that discipline and the problems of influence. A useful study is, nonetheless, Pedro de Moura Carvalho and W. M. Thackston, *Mir'at al-Quds a Life of Christ for Emperor Akbar: a Commentary on Father Jerome Xavier's Text and the Miniatures of Cleveland Museum of Art, Acc. no. 2005.145* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

⁵⁹ See AA, 1: iii.

Abu'l-Fazl then closes his treatment of Akbar's gracious manners, benevolence and pure nature with the following verse:

The scale according to which his manners and actions are calculated,
Must extend the scope of the earth and the sky.⁶⁰

The reference to a scale, and the earth and sky, recalls the imagery that appears in the *Diwan-i Khass* in Delhi. While this dates to the time of Shah Jahan, and is usually thought to represent scales of justice, there is a remarkable parallel in the way the scale is set in a landscape of rolling hills and against a wide background of shining planets and stars. These tie in with the additional element of the moon, on which the scale rests, and the idea of the king as the millennial sovereign who is the 'lord of conjunction.'⁶¹

The king's kind-hearted nature extended even to a love of animals and his inclination to avoid eating meat. Abu'l-Fazl asserts that Akbar "has often declared that human beings are really unfair to slaughter animals in order to feed themselves, while there are many other sources of food."⁶² This is also found in *A'in-i Akbari* where Akbar is reported as saying: "If the scarf of social life were not on my shoulder, I would restrain myself from eating meat."⁶³ Akbar seems to have been encouraged in vegetarian practice by the religion of non-violence preached by the Jain monk Haravijaya who, as noted in chapter one, was at the Mughal court.⁶⁴ The degree to which the nobles practiced vegetarianism can only be speculated on, but Akbar's actions drew the attention of Bada'uni who remarked that: "He prohibited the slaughter of cows, and the eating of their flesh, because the Hindus devoutly worship them."⁶⁵ The wording of Bada'uni suggests that Akbar had an eye toward the vegetarian practices of his subjects

⁶⁰ See chapter two, p. 15.

⁶¹ Moin, *Millennial Sovereign*, all of chapter two is relevant.

⁶² See chapter two, p. 15.

⁶³ See AA, 3: 332, discussed also in Andre Wink, *Akbar* (London: Oneworld, 2009), all of the section 'Hunting and government' in his chapter five is relevant.

⁶⁴ See chapter one, section titled 'translation team' and Shirin Mehta, "Akbar as Reflected in the Contemporary Jain Literature in Gujarat," *Social Scientist* 20, no. 232-233 (1992): 56.

⁶⁵ See *MT*, 2: 261.

in addition to his own feelings in the matter, and even Abu'l-Fazl was obliged to qualify his statement by saying that Akbar took meat to maintain his strength and power.

Abu'l-Fazl completes his praise of Akbar by commenting on his learning, pure heart, and the degree to which he is not tempted or swayed by material things. Those who have resisted him have all failed, and those who try and show they are more knowledgeable have been proven wrong and have faced public humiliation. In conclusion, Abu'l-Fazl returns again to how inadequate words are to his subject:

Wisdom must be silent when it comes to him,
There must be less pretentiousness and more politeness.
Do you know who he is?
His position is higher than a king and lower than a God.⁶⁶

Abu'l-Fazl signals the close of his praise of Akbar by mentioning the king's name (there are no sub-headings or breaks) and adding a poetic verse. This device—a sort of sub-colophon—reads as follows:

He is the just Sultan, the perfect reasoning, the definite
reason to know God, the final resolution of every
benevolence, the leader of true paths, namely, Abu'l-Fath
Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar Padshah Ghazi. May his
umbrella of protection, justice and kindness spread over all
who seek happiness through determination. May he be safe
and strong.
Oh God, for as long as the skies continue to rotate,
Do not deprive this world of his majesty,
As the end of the world is hidden under the ring,
May he hold the key of the world under his sleeve.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ See chapter two, p. 17.

⁶⁷ Ibid., also see notes to the translation.

3.2. Reading the *Razmnama*

*The logic embedded in the divine history [of the Mahabharata]
is in fact a teaching for everybody, making it very
popular and enjoyable to learn about the past.*

Abu'l-Fazl, *Preface*⁶⁸

After his extensive remarks on the great qualities of the king, and his rhetorical flourish in bringing that to a close, Abu'l-Fazl turns his attention to the *Razmnama* itself. This part of his *Preface* is important because it shows how Abu'l-Fazl approached the translation and its likely readers and, for this reason, it will occupy considerable space here. He opens this section with a wide-ranging remark that positions the translation as a whole, but which, in his characteristic way, makes only oblique references to the people who might look at the text.⁶⁹ It is useful to explore these groups, and their likely identity, in order to explain the historical context of Abu'l-Fazl's concerns and the logic of his approach toward the translation.

Merchant Classes

To begin, Abu'l-Fazl compares the appearance of Akbar to the rising sun on a new day: suddenly things are illuminated, new perspectives open up, and people begin to reflect and reassess.⁷⁰ From Abu'l-Fazl's choice of words, it appears that his thoughts embrace the population as a whole. He begins with parsimonious traders and merchants who now feel "embarrassed and remorseful."⁷¹ Then he turns to those "who thought they were destined to eternal happiness," but who are now suddenly aware of "the ignorance

⁶⁸ See chapter two, p.19.

⁶⁹ See chapter two, pp. 17-18. This introductory passage has drawn the attention of Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism?" pp. 180-82.

⁷⁰ The use of solar symbolism to construct the figure of Akbar is explained and put in wider context by Moin, *Millennial Sovereign*, p. 36.

⁷¹ See chapter two, p. 18. The empty-handed or parsimonious merchants referred to here might possibly include the Jain community, which had long held an economic position in Delhi, as noted in chapter one.

in which they have been living.”⁷² The first could be referring to the merchants—big and small—in the big Mughal cities of the time, while the second, pious Muslims in India who were content in their ways.⁷³ After levelling this criticism, Abu'l-Fazl notes that the king seeks the improvement of everyone, whether “friends or enemies, relatives or strangers,” and seeks to cure the disease of social and religious conflict. He is like a physician to his subjects “who tries hard to cure the ailment of common people.” Abu'l-Fazl echoes this medical metaphor in his preface to the *A'in-i Akbari*.

He is continually attentive to the health of the body politic, and applies remedies to the several diseases thereof. And in the same manner that the equilibrium of the animal constitution depends upon an equal mixture of the elements, so also does the political constitution become well-tempered by a proper division of ranks; and by means of the warmth of the ray of unanimity and concord, a multitude of people become fused into one body.⁷⁴

The equilibrium of the body described here rested on the theory of the four bodily humours in Greco-Roman medicine, adopted also in the Indian science of health or *Ayurveda* where the humours are termed *dosha*.⁷⁵ The idea that the king is a physician, and thus responsible for balance in the body of society, is a common motif in Muslim political philosophy, but Abu'l-Fazl extends this to the translation of books so they become a medicine dispensed by the king. This medicine will allow “both groups,” by which Abu'l-Fazl means the merchants and pious Muslims just mentioned, “to have the pleasure of benefiting from perfect knowledge; thus forgetting their enmity and

⁷² See chapter two, p. 18.

⁷³ This division of society is different from the hierarchical view Abu'l-Fazl sets out in his introduction to the *Ain-i Akbari*.

⁷⁴ See AA, 1: iv. The elements mentioned again in AA, 3: 158.

⁷⁵ See D. Wujastyk, *The Roots of Ayurveda: Selections from Sanskrit Medical Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

hostility.”⁷⁶ At this point, translation is mentioned as an anecdote, but the *Mahabharata* has not been introduced as such.

Religious and Legal Establishment

In the next paragraph Abu'l-Fazl drops in criticisms of groups of people who have “introduced themselves as scholars” and have an influence on the masses but are promulgating “false teachings.” This “pretentious bunch” lack knowledge and, driven by “their lust and greed, have hidden the authentic books of advice, words and teachings of sages and the weighty actions of the ancients.”⁷⁷ Who can these people be? Abu'l-Fazl is clearly concerned about them and particularly concerned that they have an influence on the “masses.” A number of possibilities present themselves, but one is clearly dealing with an influential religious group with pretensions to scholarship. Thus the criticism here seems directed at the religious and legal establishment which Akbar made a concerted and effective attempt to control.⁷⁸ The way to undermine the authority of these people in the *'ulama* is to make translations from different traditions that are “simple, clear and pleasant” to read. Direct access to the sources will save the credulous from being misdirected by these “ignorant people who pretend to be wise.” If nothing else, this shows Abu'l-Fazl's faith in the source texts, and the inherent ability of people grasping them if the translations are good. If people can read the sources, they will not be “lead astray.” He then comes to the *Mahabharata*, which he regards as a veritable encyclopaedia of the principles and beliefs of India. The translation of it is a “worthy task” and “astute intellectuals” have been assembled to effect it. This is another direct reference to the team of translators, discussed above in chapter one.

⁷⁶ See chapter two, p. 18.

⁷⁷ Ibid. The wording here seems to echo Mahdavi criticisms of religious experts and jurists, for which see MacLean, “Real Men and False Men at the Court of Akbar.”

⁷⁸ Usefully summarized in von Stietenron, “Planned Syncretism,” pp. 181-82. What Abu'l-Fazl says here, coupled with what he has said above, is in disagreement with the analysis of Alan Strathern, “Drawing the Veil of Sovereignty,” p. 81, where Strathern states: “In Moin's account, the Timurid kings and their rivals and successors in this region were not laboring under the great weight of a tradition assembled in the generations after Muhammad.” This might be, but Abu'l-Fazl does not appear to think so. The idea that the Sanskrit-knowing elite is being referred to has already been discounted above.

Followers of the Devotional Movement

One might think this was enough, but Abu'l-Fazl has other targets that are bothering him. He thus continues:

In addition, some biased leaders of derivative practice in India think their beliefs are the best ever and therefore, consider their nonsensical beliefs as free from any defect, and they keep imitating others and instructing the gullible in their own sayings without pursuing further study whilst making a strong attempt to distribute false notions. Therefore, many Muslim experts, followers of Muhammad's religion, who are not aware of the intentions [of the Indian people] and of their true points and the true essence of their sciences, regard these people as owners of mere vain and senseless words and deny them completely. However, his 'great wisdom' (Akbar) asked to translate the *Mahabharata* in the best way possible, since it has many points about these types of people. Translating this book will help the enemies adopt a moderate attitude and it will also make the gullible feel embarrassed about what they believe and therefore be led to the actual truth.⁷⁹

This difficult paragraph is important because it elaborates the context and motivation for the *Mahabharata* translation. At the start, Abu'l-Fazl is critical of an undefined group who is spreading derivative teachings that are false. Their beliefs, which they hold great, are nonsensical and not based on proper study. The result is that Muslim experts cannot see the full picture and have come to reject the entire Indian tradition as a result. This is evidently problematic because the perfunctory dismissal of the Indian tradition by Muslim doyens only contributes to social and religious friction. The solution, in the eyes of Akbar, is a translation of the *Mahabharata*. This will foster a "moderate attitude" and make the gullible—those who have been swayed by those

⁷⁹ See chapter two, p. 19.

propagating derivative and false teachings—to recognise that they have been duped and so come to a better understanding of the “actual truth.”

There are important questions here because the players mentioned are one of the reasons for the translation. The key is: Who are these people spreading derivative and false doctrines? An important clue is the fact that they are not scholars: they are not basing their ideas on further textual study. They are just copying and “making a strong attempt” to spread their ideas. This means they were engaged in an active process of proselytization. Moreover, the wording of this passage shows these people are not Muslims. This is clear from the contrast Abu'l-Fazl makes with “Muslim experts, followers of Muhammad’s religion,” who might well dismiss Indian knowledge summarily due to their exposure to the false doctrines that were being actively spread. So the people being referred to here may well be a Hindu group of some kind, who were active on a wide social scale. For these reasons I think these criticisms may refer to the *bhakti* devotional revival that was taking place in Mughal lands and influencing some of Akbar’s important subordinates. The influence of the devotional cult on the nobility of the time is shown by the celebrated image of Ram Candra at Orccha. This was brought from Ayodhya, a city connected with Ram devotionism that had been under Mughal rule from the time of Babur. Rani Ganes Kumvar, the wife of Madhukar Shah of Orccha (CE 1554–92), went on pilgrimage there. After seeing a Ram image in a prophetic dream, it was recovered from the Sarayu River and brought back to Orccha and put under worship. An important religious actor in these events, and the celebration of Ram in new vernacular forms of literature, was the devotional poet Kesavdas. He hailed from Orccha itself.⁸⁰

Madhukar Shah, as noted by Allison Busch, was unable to resist the Mughal armies and the kingdom of the Bundela Rajputs was incorporated in the Mughal state. The Bundelas remained Hindus by faith and participated in the surge of religious activity of their time, but they would also have had to accommodate themselves to the

⁸⁰ Allison Busch, “Literary Responses to the Mughal Imperium: The Historical Poems of Kesavdas,” *South Asian Research* 25 (2005): 31–54; also see Busch, “Hindi Literary Beginnings,” in *South Asian Texts in History: Critical Engagements with Sheldon Pollock*, eds. Yigal Bronner, Whitney Cox, and Lawrence J. McCrea (Ann Arbor, Mich: Association for Asian Studies, 2011), 203–25.

Persianate culture of the Mughals. With Mathura, a key centre of devotional activity, just forty miles from the Mughal city of Agra, Abu'l-Fazl would certainly have been aware of the religious activity there and spate of temple building taking place.⁸¹ But he would not have accepted the new type of devotional writing because it was not based on ancient textual sources and their scholarly study. This is revealed in the *A'in-i Akbari* where Abu'l-Fazl gives a long and interesting account of the 'Learning of the Hindus' and remarks that he, as "the writer of this work, has mixed with many of the leaders of thought and has made himself acquainted to some extent with the discussions of the different schools."⁸² He further advises his readers that they "may carefully study them [i.e. the systems of the Hindus] and compare them with the principles of the Platonists, the Peripatetics, the Sufis, and dogmatic theologians."⁸³ There follows a description of the 'nine schools.' This includes the classical schools of Indian philosophy as well as Buddhism and Jainism. After this he continues with an account of other areas of Indian learning (such as the sciences, rhetoric and music), the forms of worship in Hinduism, and the incarnations of Vishnu. In all this there is no mention of the devotional ideas of Abu'l-Fazl's time, even in the description of the Rama and Krishna incarnations. What is found there appears to be drawn from classical myths, not the devotional hymns that were emerging in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For Abu'l-Fazl, then, the product of the *bhakti* movement in the modern vernaculars of north India were nothing but an innovation, inspired by ecstatic devotion and fervent religious love. This material found no place in Abu'l-Fazl's wide survey, even though he, as just noted, mixed widely and made an effort to acquaint himself with different schools. In this context, it is thus noteworthy that the translation project in Akbar's time did not include any works from the Braj dialect, such as the famous works of Tulsī Das, because the Translation Bureau focused on 'classical' foundations.

⁸¹ This is revealed in AA, 3: 317-18 where Abu'l-Fazl says, in his description of the Krishna incarnation, that the events took place at Mathura, "near the metropolis of Agra." So he is perfectly aware of Mathura and its connection with Krishna.

⁸² See AA, 3: 141.

⁸³ Ibid.

My digression into the *A'in-i Akbari* and Abu'l-Fazl's account of Hinduism will, I hope, show that the section of the *Preface* quoted above is referring to the devotional movement and the reinvention of the epic heroes and their stories in a contemporary guise. For Abu'l-Fazl, the way to counter this popular movement was a return to the sources. Just as the *'ulama*, with whom Abu'l-Fazl began, were to be undermined by making sources available in translations that are "simple, clear and pleasant,"⁸⁴ so too the advocates of the *bhakti* movement, who had no textual scholarship and based their authority of a creative recasting of the old stories, were to be dealt by translations from Sanskrit. Making the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* available would show the Persian-reading elites the 'real thing' and those who had been gullible enough to fall for the new religious ideas would feel embarrassed and be "led to the actual truth."⁸⁵ The truth here is not the Muslim faith, as might be first expected, but the truth of the ancient Sanskrit texts, made available in Persian translation. By extension, the truth is also the wisdom of Akbar because he instigated the translation of the *Mahabharata* in the first place.

Common People and Kings Abroad

Abu'l-Fazl is still not quite done. Having dealt with the merchant classes, pious Muslims, the religious establishment, and the *bhakti* movement, he turns at last to "common Muslim people who have not studied religious books and have not paid attention to the old history of past times, including that of the Indians." These Muslims hold the general view that humanity and progress date back only 7000 years. The translation of the *Mahabharata* is the remedy to this problem because it reveals "age-old facts about the universe and the operation of the whole world and the people living in it, in a way that is easy to understand."⁸⁶

Finally, we are told that kings in other countries are interested in learning about the ancient history in the *Mahabharata*. This should be kings in countries where Persian was read and perhaps is indicative of Abu'l-Fazl's ambition that the translation would

⁸⁴ See section immediately above called 'religious and legal establishment'.

⁸⁵ See chapter two, p .19. One cannot help but speculate that this is a criticism of the Bundelas, who eventually got their revenge by killing Abu'l-Fazl.

⁸⁶ See chapter two, p. 19.

enjoy wide circulation. It does not seem to have been taken to Iran as far as I am aware, but it did enjoy circulation in the kingdoms in the Deccan. We find this in the *Tarikh-i Firishta*, composed at Bijapur under the auspices of 'Adil Shah (1580-1627) where the *Razmnama* is discussed as a source for the history of India before Islam.⁸⁷ Abu'l-Fazl then closes this part of his *Preface* with a universal claim: the *Mahabharata* is a "divine history" and "a teaching for everybody."⁸⁸ The epic makes it "loveable to learn about the past" and alerts people to the lesson of history: the "understanding of the value of the present time," which should be spent "on divine issues."

Confronting Textual Problems

Having justified the translation of the *Mahabharata* before its readers and potential critics, Abu'l-Fazl turns next to some textual problems. First, he records that Akbar became aware of the *Mahabharata* and ordered its translation. At his request, a group of experts, "known for being knowledgeable and moderate people," have gathered together and translated the book, "with thorough and subtle attention in a way that all words and phrases are clear and understandable."⁸⁹ This is, yet again, a reference to the translation team, discussed above in chapter one. Then, after some self-effacing remarks, Abu'l-Fazl mentions that he was appointed to write the introduction. He is keen, he says, to proceed quickly and get on with his observations and the task. This seems to prompt another round of concerns about the reception of the work and debates about its content. There are, he says, disagreements "on issues related to how the universe has been created," and some of these debates appear in the text. As with all philosophical issues, "all have been denounced or rejected to some degree." This has led some people to again reject the *Mahabharata* without much thought, while others, after deep musings, come to accept it. The same fate may well befall his introduction: some may reject it out of hand, others may accept it after much thought. This understanding—that every reading makes for a new text—is followed by an exploration of the core problems of translation itself.

⁸⁷ Audrey Truschke, *Cosmopolitan Encounters: Sanskrit and Persian at the Mughal Court* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2012), 303.

⁸⁸ See chapter two, p. 19.

⁸⁹ See chapter two, p. 20.

Abu'l-Fazl wants to understand the rejection of the text on the part of readers, but cannot decide if this results from an incomplete understanding of the text or because of the translators' lack of knowledge.⁹⁰ In other words, an unfavourable reception of the text is due either to an incomplete understanding on the part of readers, or flaws in the translation itself. The flaws in the translation are, in Abu'l-Fazl's view, the result of (a) mistakes on the part of the translators, (b) the introduction of interpretations that are not correct due to incomplete knowledge among the translators, or (c) flaws in the manuscripts.⁹¹ This is an insightful observation; however, having noted all these problems, Abu'l-Fazl then says that due to the scale of difficulties, he is unable to address them: "The present author has desired to spend some of his precious time to explain this problem, but on second thought, he has decided not to write a lengthy and tedious discourse."⁹² He must content himself with a synopsis, the excuse being, no doubt, his sense of urgency surrounding the task.⁹³ Abu'l-Fazl's words, slightly modernised, could find a place in a modern study. His exit, however, is more graceful as he turns to a poem:

In this ancient valley of existence, who has gained more than just a name?

Who has been able to find out the essence of all movements?

To deliberate this hidden spell is erroneous,

Who has seen the beginning of the world and who has seen its end?⁹⁴

After this discourse on the possible criticism of the *Mahabharata* translation and the problems that surrounded its translation and reception, Abu'l-Fazl finally turns to a discussion of history and the narrative proper. This occupies my analysis in the next section.

⁹⁰ See chapter two, p. 21.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Abu'l-Fazl's sense of urgency is revealed by the statement: "Because of the fact that this task is considered really valuable, the present writer has been very eager to quickly write observations on it and collect its true and valid background." See chapter two, p. 21.

⁹⁴ See chapter two, p. 21.

3.3. Positioning the *Mahabharata* in and Outside Time

*I am astonished at hearing such narratives, so much
so that I cannot easily express it.*

Abu'l-Fazl, *Preface* ⁹⁵

Abu'l-Fazl opens his discussion of the story in the *Mahabharata* by describing the chronological system of the four ages or *yugas* of Indian cosmology.⁹⁶ This is known, he says, to all “biographers and historians,” and it is, of course, well known to modern students of Indian history and religion.⁹⁷ This cosmological frame embraces all possible time, from the ‘golden age’ through two declining ages to the final ‘dark age’ of Kali *yuga*. Each age is shorter than the last and each is characterized by worsening conditions. Abu'l-Fazl then attempts to set this Indian chronological system against the reign of Akbar, which he states is currently thirty-two years. This agrees with his statements earlier in the *Preface* where he notes that: “...from the beginning of his reign, which is now thirty-two years.”⁹⁸ This confirms the date of the *Preface* and also confirms that this section of the text is integral and original—and that it was undertaken in AH 995, as noted in chapter one. Abu'l-Fazl then continues by mentioning equivalent years in other calendars: the Persian, Greek, Arab, Indian and, finally, that of the Kali age, which he gives as 4680. The point of all these years is to position Akbar in the chronological systems of the world at the dawn of the millennium. That this is the case is shown by his closing comment: “What a wonder is the fact that the world is really old and decayed?”⁹⁹ The point here is that the world is already ancient and in decline, and that the time for the millennial renewal is coming soon, a dispensation that will come forward under Akbar as a universal monarch.

⁹⁵ See chapter two, p. 24.

⁹⁶ See von Stietencron, *Hindu Myth, Hindu History*.

⁹⁷ See chapter two, p. 21.

⁹⁸ See chapter two, p. 16.

⁹⁹ See chapter two, p. 22.

The Elements and the Indian Social Order

After setting out his chronological framework, Abu'l-Fazl then turns to a summary of the Indian vision of cosmology and creation. This extends the chronological framework with which he started, adding further dimensions, from the Indian point of view, to Akbar and the text of the *Mahabharata*. Abu'l-Fazl first covers the five elements that make up the physical world: earth, air, water, fire, and space. He touches on the controversy in Indian thought about the nature of space (*akasa*). The nature of the controversy is less historically interesting than the fact that he says: “after summoning all experts and intellectuals it was agreed and announced that they do not believe in such a source of creation for the sky and therefore they called that void space in the air (*akasa*).”¹⁰⁰ This appears to be a reference to one of the famous ‘debates’ on religion and philosophy that took place at Fatehpur Sikri under Akbar’s patronage, and thus provides some account of the content of some of the discussions.

From the question of elements—after commenting briefly on Indian ideas about the stars that are seen in the sky—Abu'l-Fazl turns to the creation of the social order by Brahma, the Indian creator god.¹⁰¹ Abu'l-Fazl tells us that “there are disagreements on the issue,” and the god “is said to be born out of nothingness and void and is to be the tool for creation and the cause for the whole universe.”¹⁰² Brahma then created the four groups in Indian society, the priestly caste (Brahmin), the warrior or ruling class (Kshatriya), the merchants and agrarian class (Vaishya), and the servant or laboring class (Shudra). Abu'l-Fazl makes no critical comments on this system of social organisation, his description being neutral to the extent that, we could say that he has glossed over the difficulties of caste and ignored the fact that the textual ideal seldom matched realities on the ground.¹⁰³ One can assume, however, that Abu'l-Fazl would not have had difficulties with caste hierarchy given his prescriptive review of class structure

¹⁰⁰ See chapter two, p. 23.

¹⁰¹ For the stars see my comments in chapter two, p. 23, note.

¹⁰² See chapter two, p. 23.

¹⁰³ Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). All of “Mass Conversion to Islam: Theories and Protagonists,” in chapter one is relevant.

in the opening of the *A'in-i Akbari* and of course the fact that he does not regard this applying to him or others in the Persianate realm.¹⁰⁴

Abu'l-Fazl's Vision of Indian Scripture

After noting the role of each group in the caste system, Abu'l-Fazl passes to the Indian scriptures. This is worth examination here in view of Abu'l-Fazl overarching concern with the authority of texts. He describes the Indian scriptures created by Brahma as the "Veda," a word that has a wide range of meanings in the South Asian context.¹⁰⁵ On one level, the Vedas are the texts from antiquity, generally regarded as the four Vedas and their early ancillaries, notably the *Upanishads*. The *Upanishads* are called *Vedanta*, or the 'end of the Veda.' Despite this terminology being widely known, and known to Abu'l-Fazl as well, the Veda is also said to be all the literature of Hinduism because the word Veda itself means 'knowledge'.¹⁰⁶ This means that any text containing some kind of knowledge might call itself a Veda as way of claiming validity. Accordingly, many later works and teachings declare themselves to be Veda in essence, if not in actual fact. For example, the *Natyasastra*, dated by most authorities to the fifth or sixth centuries CE, describes itself as a Veda even though it is a work on drama and the performance arts—concerns removed from the ritual philosophy of the earlier vedic literature.¹⁰⁷

These details show that for Abu'l-Fazl, the idea of Veda falls in the broad definition, i.e. traditional Indic knowledge of all kinds. It embraces, in his words, "the principles on how to bring all creatures in unity with each other and to put order among all groups of people again. These principles have been divided into different but

¹⁰⁴ See AA, 1: iv-v.

¹⁰⁵ See Sheldon Pollock, "The Revelation of Tradition: *sruti*, *smṛti*, and the Sanskrit Discourse of Power," in *Boundaries, Dynamics and Construction of Traditions in South Asia*, ed. Federico Squarcini (Firenze: Firenze University Press 2005), 41–61, also Pollock, *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia: Explorations in the Intellectual History of India and Tibet, 1500-1800* (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁰⁶ For Abu'l-Fazl on Vedanta, see AA, 3: 158.

¹⁰⁷ Paul Kuritz, *The Making of Theatre History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1988), 68.

comprehensive categories which fall under divine law.”¹⁰⁸ All scripture is, in this view, vedic because it is vedic in its general intention and allows people—in Abu’l-Fazl’s words again—to “find the straight and true path.” The wording of Abu’l-Fazl reveals his Muslim perspective but, more importantly, highlights his concerns with social friction and sectarian infighting, a problem that appears in several places in the *Razmnama Preface*.

From this general position with regard to the Veda, Abu’l-Fazl moves to the specifics of the *Mahabharata*. This too is a Veda and consists of 100,000 verses (*sloka*). He does not actually name the *Mahabharata* at this point, but the designation of the work as a scripture of 100,000 verses—and a Veda—was and is ubiquitous, as noted in chapter one.¹⁰⁹ With the *Mahabharata* containing 100,000 verses, Abu’l-Fazl is obliged to mention the verse form or *sloka* with its four metrical parts or ‘feet’ (*carana*).¹¹⁰

Abu’l-Fazl’s closing focus is the origin of “this strange collection,” i.e. the *Mahabharata*. In charting this he does not cite Vyasa as the author—the traditional attribution—but rather places the text both in and beyond the infinite cycles of Indian time.¹¹¹ He thus notes that learned men agree that the *Mahabharata* existed outside time for one-hundred years, and that each day in this one-hundred year period is 1004 ordinary human days long. This explanation represents the combination of two ideas: (a) the eternity of scripture outside time and (b) the position of scripture in the one-hundred year cycles of the god Brahma. The eternity of scripture outside time, firstly, is said to be a general characteristic of all Vedic texts. The word for this is *apauruseya*, i.e. not derived from a human source.¹¹² In essence, texts of this kind are impersonal and

¹⁰⁸ See chapter two, p. 24.

¹⁰⁹ See chapter one, all of section “the *Mahabharata*” is relevant.

¹¹⁰ The form is explained in C. R. Lanman, *A Sanskrit Reader* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1963), 300. Abu’l-Fazl adds that verses may have up to 26 *aksara* (syllables), see chapter two, p. 24. Each quarter verse of the *sloka* has eight syllables, so sixteen in total; the number 26 mentioned by Abu’l-Fazl would refer to longer metrical forms.

¹¹¹ A key study of Vyasa is Bruce Sullivan, *Krsna Dvaipayana Vyasa and the Mahabharata: A New Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 1990).

¹¹² W. J. Johnson, *A Dictionary of Hinduism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), s.v. This definition finds a parallel in Islam where the *Qur’an* is based on a divine prototype in heaven known as *Umm al-kitab*, the ‘Mother of the Book,’ referred to three times in the *Qur’an*. Abu’l-Fazl does not, however, draw this parallel and this seems to show that he is not prepared to take a

authorless, and so eternal. This understanding is important in Vedanta, a school of thought which, as just noted, was known to Abu'l-Fazl. But the *Mahabharata* is of course also known in time, so set by Abu'l-Fazl in the mythic cycles of time popular in Hinduism. According to this, Brahma, the god of creation, lives for one-hundred years and each 'year of Brahma' (or 'divine year') consisting of the full run of four *yugas*.¹¹³

Abu'l-Fazl does not elaborate on the system or enter into calculations about the huge numbers involved. He only says that each day of the god Brahma is equal to 1004 ordinary human days.¹¹⁴ Continuing along this path, Abu'l-Fazl states that scholars in India agree that since the beginning of this scripture, i.e. the *Mahabharata*, there have been many Brahmas. This shows that certain Indians—unnamed as elsewhere in the *Razmnama Preface*—told Abu'l-Fazl that there were many Brahmas, thus many periods of 100 divine years since the *Mahabharata* came into being. Moreover, the 'current' Brahma is, Abu'l-Fazl says, number 1001 in the series, and this Brahma is presently fifty-one years old.¹¹⁵ All these Brahmas and their years bring an infinite dimension of time into Abu'l-Fazl's discussion and lend antiquity to the text. While this underscores the unfathomable 'pre-history' of the *Mahabharata*, and forms a chronological contrast to the precise position of Akbar against the calendars in which his years were reckoned, Abu'l-Fazl does not attempt to mesh the Brahma years with the Islamic calendar and his millenarian vision for the year 1000.¹¹⁶ This is because his purpose here is to say something about the origin of the text, and specifically to assert that the text is set in a vast system of time and that it is not only extremely ancient but, ultimately,

comparative stance that would reach as far as the *Qur'an*. This would make the *Qur'an* a relative rather than absolute authority, a position he is unwilling or unable to express.

¹¹³ The *yuga* theory of time is explained above; also see G. W. Williams, *Handbook of Hindu Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 38 for a chart with the number of years for each age.

¹¹⁴ See chapter two, p. 24. The number 1004 is not common as the count; it is normally 1000. Abu'l-Fazl further adds that the Brahmas "appeared in the world and lived in disguise and undercover." This appears to conflate the Brahmas with the 'Abdals, the hidden saints who known only to God and who maintain the operation of the world and without whom it would collapse.

¹¹⁵ See above, opening paragraph of this section.

¹¹⁶ See above in this chapter, section: 'The fate of learned men in society and the millennial vision'.

transcendental. He does not mention the sage Vyasa, as already noted. Vyasa does appear later on where we are told that he was a participant in the events recounted in the epic and wrote the text.¹¹⁷ This shows two things. The first is that Abu'l-Fazl wants to present the *Mahabharata* as a timeless text, not one that was written or assembled by Vyasa as a particular author at a particular time. His aim is to raise the text's status, thus making it a subject worthy of attention in his own time. The second point is that Abu'l-Fazl's approach here underscores the fact that the subsequent parts of the *Preface* to the *Razmnama* mentioning Vyasa—and much else—are not part of the original composition, as concluded already on other evidence.¹¹⁸

Abu'l-Fazl Retreats and Concludes

Having mapped the origin of the *Mahabharata* in this way, Abu'l-Fazl turns to a series of reflections by way of conclusion. This is a common pattern in his *Preface*, with the flow of the discussion interrupted by hesitations and subjective digressions. Here, however, the structure is especially convoluted as Abu'l-Fazl moves to his rhetorical finale. In the first place he is impressed, if not overwhelmed, by the *Mahabharata*: "I am astonished at hearing such narratives, so much so that I cannot easily express it and feel a sense of enthusiasm that I cannot put in words."¹¹⁹ Abu'l-Fazl describes himself as a man wandering "in awe in the garden of wisdom." Then he elaborates: "The further I go through the pages of this book and other sources, comments and guidebooks, and the deeper I go in its details and pages, the more bewildered and amazed I become."¹²⁰ Admitting his weaknesses, Abu'l-Fazl tells us that he might have missed something of importance or misunderstood and struck out other things due to his imperfect knowledge. This self-effacement has a purpose, as always with Abu'l-Fazl. His excuses are a defensive strategy that lay the basis for his assertion that sincerity and care are required when making an effort to study the ancestors. I read this as a challenge to his readers. Positing a hypothetical scholar, Abu'l-Fazl says that when "he is deeply

¹¹⁷ See chapter two, p. 35.

¹¹⁸ See chapter two, pp. 33-34.

¹¹⁹ See chapter two, p. 24.

¹²⁰ See chapter two, p. 25, and also the following quotations in this paragraph.

searching and testing his wisdom and struggles with other wise groups, he will also be able to assure ignorant people of their fallacy.” In other words, research is not a private matter. It is undertaken in dialogue with other learned individuals and it has a wider purpose: discoveries are to be applied beyond the scholarly sphere to “ignorant people” whose views are false. We see Abu’l-Fazl here touching again on one of his key themes: the study of ancient texts has a purpose in society. Study and the experience of applying findings will also temper the scholar’s own attitude, making him more tolerant. As he says: “he will accept many of those who act with wrong intentions and ... false statements will lose their validity.” All that will remain with these people is “remorse, humiliation and a mistrust of everything.”

In a curious and characteristic twist, Abu’l-Fazl does not exclude himself from among those who hold false views. After all, has he not just admitted that he is bewildered? Has he not remarked that he is wandering in awe in the garden of wisdom? Has he not said that he might have struck out some crucial lines by mistake? This being so, he closes with a series of questions that seem to cast doubt on the reliability of all knowledge and learning. “So how,” Abu’l-Fazl asks, “can one trust in the knowledge he has gathered and not doubt what he has learned?”¹²¹ This question takes us right back to the issues with which he opened the *Preface*, and in some ways undermines his whole project. In contrast to his earlier remarks, he also doubts that Akbar and the new age is the solution. Now Abu’l-Fazl asks: “How could he believe in the greatness of great leaders and (their) predecessors?” This seems not only to cast doubt on Akbar, but on the historical kings whose story is told in the *Razmnama*. His doubts thus extend to the text itself. How can he accept these representations as real in light of the fact that “all these things are actually in beautiful disguise,” by which Abu’l-Fazl means well-crafted metaphor. Are not these metaphors “nothing but sheer imitation?” And if one misunderstands the text, “will he not be humiliated and embarrassed among the wise and suffer eternal torture?” Faced with this difficulty, Abu’l-Fazl retreats. He asserts that it is better to reject an idea “according to the understandings of various talented people” in the past. Acknowledging precedent, “one can come to the conclusion about which

¹²¹ See chapter two, pp. 25-26, as all the quotes in this paragraph.

point is good and which is not.” He then closes with an enigmatic verse about the inscrutability of the “absent world,” saying that “no sound is heard beyond all the seals.” By the ‘absent world’ I suppose he means history itself, and by the lack of sound from ‘beyond the seals’, I suppose he means not only the seals in Islamic mysticism, but also Muhammad as the seal of all the prophets.¹²² Both indicate that earlier narratives have been superseded and surpassed. For Abu’l-Fazl, then, it appears that the door to history is closed forever.¹²³

¹²² The seals of sainthood (*khatam al-wilayat*) are contrasted in the sixteenth century with the seals of prophesy (*khatam an-nabuwah*) and are central concern of Ibn ‘Arabi, see Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabi* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993) and Gerald T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time: Ibn Al-‘Arabi’s Book of the Fabulous Gryphon* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), all of chapter 5 is relevant. On the folk level, Lloyd D. Graham, “The Seven Seals of Revelation and the Seven Classical Planets,” *Esoteric Quarterly* 6 (2010): 45-58. Given Abu’l-Fazl names Ibn ‘Arabi in the *Preface* (chapter two, p. 19), his references here are probably to the seals of the saints. If my understanding is correct, then this too indicates Abu’l-Fazl has reservations about the millennial vision.

¹²³ See chapter two, p. 26, note. As observed there (and also in the conclusion), I regard this poem as marking the close to Abu’l-Fazl’s original text. The question of Abu’l-Fazl’s theory of history is beyond the scope of this MA thesis and would take the current project into another area of study. However, I note here that the subject has been addressed in Harbans Mukhia, *Historians and Historiography During the Reign of Akbar* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1976), whose views, however, have drawn sharp criticism, see Peter Hardy, review in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41 (1978): 390-390, and E. Sreedharan, *A Textbook of Historiography, 500 B.C. to A.D. 2000* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2004).

Chapter 4.

Conclusion

As set out in chapter one, my aim in this MA thesis has been to translate and study the *Preface* to the *Razmnama* in order to understand Abu'l-Fazl's relationship to his tasks as a writer and the Persian translation of the *Mahabharata*. Additionally, my aims embrace allied problems, namely, Abu'l-Fazl's understanding of the social groups for whom the translation was intended, and his relationship to emperor Akbar as his king and patron. These aims have been addressed in earlier chapters to some degree, but I think it is worthwhile to draw the strands together here by way of conclusion. This also provides an opportunity to make some tangential observations about Abu'l-Fazl and areas of potential research that lie ahead. Of necessity, I should add that my approach remains centred on the *Preface* as a primary source that has not been studied in depth before, and not the *Razmnama* itself.

There can be little doubt that Abu'l-Fazl was a learned scholar and complicated personality and that many of his statements have the potential to trigger a host of associations and further connections. With Abu'l-Fazl a key figure in the most powerful South Asian kingdom of the sixteenth century, these links reach across cultural and literary landscapes of India, creating an intricate web that covers the entire Mughal world. This web makes for an intellectual feast, a scholarly parallel to the sumptuous—and often drunken—banquets organised for the Mughal elite.¹ But these banquets had a purpose, as Balabanlilar has explained, and obesity was not a problem among the nobility. For the intellectual, however, all facts are related to all other facts, and there

¹ Balabanlilar, *Imperial Identity in Mughal Empire*, pp. 61, 158, 164.

seems to be no end in sight. Just as the gourmand can descend into gluttony because all food is related to all other food and there is no reason to stop, so too the temptation with Abu'l-Fazl is to continue from one link to the next across the wide horizon of Mughal history—if not the history of the world. But this MA thesis is not a study of the *Tarikh-i Alfi*, the history of the millennium commissioned by Akbar to celebrate the millenary of the Hijra, and I am not a glutton. My study of Abu'l-Fazl's *Preface* is rather simple *iftar*, taken after days of fasting and study. My purpose is focussed and modest: it is based on a close reading and translation of one source—the *Preface* to the *Razmnama*—and my attempt to explain its organisational structure, logic, factual content, and stated purpose. The *Preface* is indeed a small affair compared to the *Akbarnama*, but nibbling at it carefully can provide the energy we need for future explorations of the many contexts that Abu'l-Fazl's words invoke.

Translation and the Author's Approach to His Tasks

Abu'l-Fazl's approach to the translation of the *Razmnama* is oblique if not ambiguous. He does give a clear indication that he actually read the *Razmnama* but at no point in his *Preface* does he quote the text and comment on it directly, aside from summarizing its plot. This conclusion comes from a critical examination of the *Preface* in the forms that it has come down to us. For this study there are two forms: the first is the oldest manuscript copy dating to the late sixteenth century and now in the British Library; the second is the version as it appears in what I have called the "printed text," published in Tehran between 1979 and 1981. A comparison of these two sources shows that the "printed text" includes a series of supplements found in a number of later manuscripts. The supplements contradict each other, as noted in chapter one, and they are, for the greater part, in a prosaic style that is very different from the earlier parts of the *Preface* that were written by Abu'l-Fazl.

Statements in the *Razmnama*.

The "printed text" lacks apparatus, so it cannot be determined which parts of the supplements came from which manuscripts. This is not an immediate concern for this study because we have the British Library copy as a basis for comparison, a copy that

was made in the lifetime of Abu'l-Fazl himself. The conclusion that can be drawn is that the supplements are indeed supplements, and that the *Preface* to the *Razmnama* grew with the passage of time.² The likely date of these accretions can also be determined from available material, to some extent at least. As pointed out already in chapter one, the British Library manuscript has a detailed synopsis of the contents, written specifically for that copy in AH 1098/1686-87 CE. This synopsis, as noted by Rieu in his catalogue, is keyed to the folios of the self-same manuscript. What this shows is that in 1686-87 this copy of the *Razmnama* lacked a synopsis of the story and that this was thought to be sufficiently important that the task of preparing it was assigned to an individual named Basant Rae and his text inserted into the sixteenth-century manuscript. In other words, copies of the *Razmnama* were circulating without a synopsis of the epic story as late as the 1680s. We find this confirmed at the end of the “printed text” where the following statement is found: “Now that we have a summary of the whole text, this detailed book will truly be satisfying and enjoyable.”³ When read with the surrounding sentences, this is a *de facto* admission that the *Preface* lacked a book-by-book synopsis of the *Mahabharata* and that this was added.

Moreover, the known dates connected with the imperial copy of the *Razmnama* (now in Jaipur) end in 1586 while the evidence points to the *Preface* being started in 1587. It is possible, in my view, that the *Preface* was not finished in time (a problem known to all writers) and that it was not included in the Jaipur copy. However this may be, the *Preface* could well have circulated separately and have been wed to subsequent copies of the *Razmnama* in various forms. This appears to be shown by the British Library copy of the *Razmnama* where the *Preface* ends on a weak note. As kindly pointed out by Derryl MacLean, Abu'l-Fazl would not have ended in this way; he would have closed with an elegant poem. The final paragraph in the British Library manuscript, giving a very brief synopsis, may therefore be excused.⁴ This means that already by the late sixteenth century, when the British Library copy was made, Abu'l-Fazl's *Preface* was being supplemented. The British Library manuscript, in my view, marks the first step,

² This point already made in part in chapter one.

³ See chapter two, p. 41.

⁴ See chapter two, p. 26.

while the “printed text” shows the final result, probably in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An area of research for the future will be to understand these later layers, and through them the reading of the *Razmnama* that took place in late Mughal India. This will be especially interesting because some of the supplements show a studied attempt to replicate Abu’l-Fazl’s style.⁵

Abu’l-Fazl’s Engagement

I have given an assessment of the “printed text” in the foregoing section to show that the final paragraph of the *Preface* in the British Library copy is not the work of Abu’l-Fazl. This is to reinforce my main observation: at no point in the *Preface* does Abu’l-Fazl actually refer to the content of the *Mahabharata* or to the epic heroes. His engagement is more abstract. In his closing lines he refers only to the translation of the *Mahabharata* as a whole, and all he has to say about the content is that it is “about the many skills of kings and covers many principles, including the smaller issues and beliefs, of India. In fact there is no other book more comprehensive and well-known and detailed than this one.”⁶ Elsewhere he observes that “astute intellectuals and linguists” have been gathered by the king to translate the *Mahabharata*, and that help was sought from “real men of letters” to translate the long narrative, and make the necessary commitment to the project which he considers “a great goal.”⁷ These statements suggest that Abu’l-Fazl did not engage directly with the detail of the *Mahabharata*, but rather took a broad overview of the translation. What, then, does he think of it at a distance? An answer comes from the *Preface*, where Abu’l-Fazl records that Akbar assigned the task to him and he prepared himself accordingly.⁸ And he expresses his view in several places which we summarise in the next section.

⁵ This is also a field for future work, and I have pointed to one or two instances in closing lines of chapter two.

⁶ See chapter two, p. 18.

⁷ See chapter two, p. 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*

The Reasons for the Translation

According to Abu'l-Fazl, the process of translation is not simply an academic exercise, but has social and political purposes. These include: (1) abandoning enmity and hostility between groups of people; (2) seeking the divine truth; (3) learning about one's personal flaws and shortcomings; (4) learning the 'weighty actions' of the ancients; (5) being saved from misdirection; (6) helping sceptics adopt a moderate attitude; (7) describing the past history of India and their problem with antecedent beliefs; (8) transferring age-old facts about the universe and the operation of the whole world and the people living in it.

The ongoing enmity between members of different faiths has been a long-standing issue in the ever changing political landscape of India and the dawn of the new millennium has brought new and good reason to rectify this problem by way of spreading knowledge through commission of texts or translations of others. This translation according to Abu'l-Fazl would allow both groups (the one being translated into and the one being translated from) to obtain 'true' knowledge. Abu'l-Fazl therefore, believes in the power of the text and the possibility of its translation. Sources available in translations that are "simple, clear and pleasant" to read will have great effect and therefore, will be transformative.⁹

Abu'l-Fazl Approach to History in the *Preface*

Abu'l-Fazl is well-known as a chronicler and the author of the *Akbarnama*, a multivolume work on the history of emperor Akbar.¹⁰ Much might be said about Abu'l-Fazl's view of history and of his views of himself as an historian, but the key point for this M.A. thesis and its stated aims is what the *Preface* adds to this issue by way of primary data. In one of the closing sections, Abu'l-Fazl describes the idea that the *Mahabharata* exists outside time. He is sympathetic to this explanation, at least to the extent that he records it plainly and does not criticise it.¹¹ This definition of the text as standing outside time finds a parallel in Islam where the *Qur'an* is said to be based on a divine prototype

⁹ See section 'religious and legal establishment'.

¹⁰ *AN*, translated by H. Beveridge, 3 Vols. (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1907-1939).

¹¹ Chapter two, p. 24.

in heaven known as *Umm al-kitab*, the ‘Mother of the Book,’ referred to three times in the *Qur’an*. Abu’l-Fazl does not, however, draw this parallel—a seemingly obvious one from the modern point of view. This seems to show that he is not prepared to take a comparative-religious stance that would reach as far as the *Qur’an*. This would make the *Qur’an* a relative rather than absolute authority, a position he is unwilling or unable to express. This relates directly to an important issue with regard to the classification of the *Mahabharata* as a text. Whereas most modern studies regard it as a religious text central to Hinduism—it does, after all, consider all religious matters and includes religious texts in it—the *Mahabharata* is not actually classed as religious in the Indian tradition. It is rather *itihasa* or history. The fact that divine figures enter history and act on the human stage does not change the fact that it is regarded as a historical record of epic events from long ago. Abu’l-Fazl also takes this view. He repeatedly calls the *Mahabharata* a history.

On this history and its uses Abu’l-Fazl has very clear ideas. Despite history being known, he says, people who are not well read think that human origin and all the improvements in scientific facts and conceptions are seven thousand years old.”¹² The purpose—in fact Akbar’s purpose—with the translation of the *Mahabharata* was to show that “it includes age-old facts about the universe and the operation of the whole world and the people living in it, in a way that is easy to understand.” And they are to understand for a reason, something rather more than simple curiosity. They need to understand, Abu’l-Fazl says, “the difference of the time and people of then and now,” in order to value the present that could be well spent on divine issues.¹³ In other words, the study of history is a spiritual aid, a reminder that time is passing, and that we should spend it wisely, focussing on our future and relationship with God. Bada’uni was also involved in the translation of the *Mahabharata*, but takes, as we might expect, a more skeptical attitude toward the project, particularly the chronology that would place parts of the story before Adam, and thus for Bada’uni, beyond any rational history based on sources he considered reliable.

¹² Chapter two, p. 19.

¹³ Chapter two, p. 20.

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 to copy it. And they keep it hid from Musalmans.¹⁴

Abu'l-Fazl is more enthusiastic, and appears to rebuff these criticisms by referring to his *Preface* as a sermon or *khutba*.¹⁵

Social Groups

One can understand whom Abu'l-Fazl believes would benefit most from reading the *Razmnama*, from his strong and sometimes direct criticism of a number of social groups. More broadly he criticizes those who have abandoned the written tradition entirely, common Muslim people who have not studied religious books and have not paid attention to the old history of past times. In this same category lies the merchant classes and pious Muslims. More specifically Abu'l-Fazl seems to refer to the *'ulama* who based their authority on an encyclopaedic command of scripture and jurisprudence without further study. He calls them deceivers on issues of *fatwas* and affairs of jurisprudence. Abu'l-Fazl considered these people mere masters of imitation and "symbols of ignorance and folly." The importance of this for Abu'l-Fazl seems to be that their misunderstanding or simple lack of understanding has caused learned men to withdraw, since their differing ideas were seen as a conspiracy that would ruin the order of the kingdom and the common people. During Akbar's reign there seemed to be an inclination away from

¹⁴ See *MT*, 2: 319-20.

¹⁵ Chapter two, p. 20.

Sanskrit toward local vernaculars¹⁶ and a *bhakti* devotional revival that was taking place and influencing some of Akbar's important subordinates. Abu'l-Fazl's comments, within the context of early Mughal India in the sixteenth century, seem to highlight his concern for those who appear to be 'imitators' of religious establishments and those that no longer stress the value of textual foundation. Truly learned men instead—in which category Abu'l-Fazl includes himself—have been pushed to the margins, even by the state authorities. But all this is about to change Abu'l-Fazl believes, as the whole "system of creation" will be renewed. The Translation Bureau could then be seen as a project instigated by Akbar that focused on 'classical' foundations, that would sweep away new religious ideas that were not based on textual sources, and the truth of the ancient Sanskrit texts were made available in Persian translation. By extension, the truth is also the wisdom of Akbar because he instigated the translation of the *Mahabharata* in the first place.

King and Patron

Due to his great wisdom and insight, Abu'l-Fazl says, the king asked for the *Mahabharata* to be translated in the best way possible. The hostility that divided the Muslims, Jews and Hindus became all too obvious to Akbar and for his own knowledge and understanding he decided to explore the reasons for their hostility and in turn derived a system that he believed could counter that. The establishment of Akbar's kingdom is based on his qualities of leadership and his traits as a great ruler, which Abu'l-Fazl describes as being deeply rooted coming from his descent from Timur and Genghis Khan.¹⁷ The question of good government is a central concern of Abu'l-Fazl, as he describes Akbar's "sword of conquest" as not one that is stained with blood, but marked by the ink of imperial decree: meaning that although Akbar used military power as king, he did not subject his people to brute force.

Drawing on a popular theme in the 'Mirror for Princes' literature, Abu'l-Fazl refers to the centralisation of power under Akbar without which Abu'l-Fazl says is a wonder

¹⁶ Patel, "Source, Exegesis, and Translation," 256-66.

¹⁷ See chapter two, p. 4.

how former kings of the country may have ruled.¹⁸ This brings to light Akbar's emergence as a powerful monarch in the vast chronological system of the world at the dawn of the millennium. Abu'l-Fazl describes Akbar as the animating force in everything. Without the presence of and wisdom of Akbar, craftsmen become as inert and silent as their own tools.¹⁹ This too refers to Akbar's decision to rectify the longstanding hostility between all classes of his Empire. Akbar issued the translation, due to his understanding, and the process of activity took place due to his command.

Therefore, all the difficulties connected with writing with which Abu'l-Fazl opens his *Preface* and the difficulties he faced in making a contribution—the smug fallacies of those believing in material things as manifestations of the divine, the slavish dependence on the written tradition, the foolishness of those who resort to mysticism, the inevitable obstructions thrown down before men of insight—are to be swept away by a new and powerful king, and the dawning of the new millennium. “His universal protection is eternal,” and encompasses all the people of his empire. The translation, therefore, was a vessel to propagate this transformative vision of the history of the Mughal Empire, and Abu'l-Fazl's *Preface* served as a tool that would help one understand that vision.

¹⁸ Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, 208.

¹⁹ See chapter two, p. 9.

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