

Mahabharata of the Mughals: Power, Translation and Sovereignty in Akbar's Razmnama¹

Dr. Rashmi Sharma

M.A., MPhil, NET-JRF, Ph.D

Assistant Professor-English

University Institute of Liberal Arts and Humanities- English

Chandigarh University

Mohali, Punjab, India.

rashmisharmapu@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper investigates the Persian translation of *Mahabharata*, titled *Razmnama*, to locate the text at the nexus of power, translation, and imperial sovereignty in the court of Akbar. The *Razmnama*, translated in the late sixteenth century, was more than a literary endeavor; it was a political gesture that transvalued the Sanskrit epic into the ideological discourse of the Mughal Empire. The translation, overseen by the intellectual patronage of Abu'l-Fazl and collectively translated by Brahmin scholars and Persian literati, is a paradigm of translation as a form of governance. Through the translation of *Mahabharata* into Persian, the language of imperial administration, Akbar translated epic power into a universalist manifesto of kingship based on the ideology of *sulh-i kul* (peace with all). The manuscript also embodied sovereignty through visual hybridity, fusing Persian miniature painting traditions with Indic narrative subject matter. The *Razmnama*, therefore, is a location where the process of textual transformation becomes an instrument of political integration, intercultural encounter, and

¹ The images reproduced in this research paper are included solely for purposes of scholarly criticism, analysis, commentary, and educational discussion. The images are employed only to support academic arguments and visual analysis, are not used for commercial purposes, and do not substitute for the original works. The images have been sourced from <https://digital.libraries.psu.edu/digital/collection/arhist2/search/searchterm/razmnama>

symbolic empire-building .Anything, be it beautiful or ugly, dignified or despicable, dreadful or of a pleasing appearance, deep or deformed, object or non-object, whatever it be, could be transformed into an aesthetic experience by the imagination and skill of an artist.

Keywords: Translation Politics; Imperial Ideology; *Mahabharata*; Sulh-I Kul; Manuscript Painting.

Translation is always a shift not between two languages but two cultures.

— Umberto Eco

If you seek your heart's satisfaction, submit to dissatisfaction, So that this very pain becomes a remedy for you.

- Abū al-Fazl, *Preface to the Razmnāmah*.

The *Razmnama* is more than a Persian translation of the *Mahabharata*; it is an illustrated manuscript where text and image combine to produce a powerful visual rhetoric. The Persian prose, Mughal miniatures, and Sanskrit epic narrative constitute a hybrid discourse that links different cultural worlds: the Persian-Islamic imperial ideology and the Hindu epic tradition. By means of visual recontextualization, epic characters are frequently shown in Mughal courtly environments, wearing contemporary clothes, thus integrating the moral world of the *Mahabharata* with Mughal rule. This hybridization is a paradigmatic example of how persuasion is the work of connection: linking imagination and articulation, words and images, and political power and moral philosophy. The manuscript is thus a visual hybrid that rhetorically mediates difference and unity, turning cultural diversity into imperial cosmopolitanism. This hybridity is what enables the transition from persuasion to identification. Through the visual restaging of the *Mahabharata* according to Mughal aesthetic norms i.e., clothing similar to that of Mughal aristocrats, and settings suggestive of imperial Mughal courts; the manuscript encourages the viewer to identify the moral world of the epic with the Mughal Empire.

The Mughal emperors, especially Akbar, were interested in the *Mahabharata* for political, intellectual, and cultural reasons, but not for religious conversion. As rulers of a predominantly Hindu population, Akbar was interested in bringing together various communities within a stable imperial structure. Through the translation of the *Mahabharata* in Persian, the *Razmnama* (approx. 1582), Akbar promoted a dialogue between Muslim rulers and Hindu subjects, thus increasing the legitimacy of the empire. The *Mahabharata*'s profound ideas about kingship, duty (dharma), justice, and moral dilemmas, particularly in the Shanti Parva, appealed to the Mughal vision of universal sovereignty.

In addition to the political, the sulh-i-kul (universal peace) policy of Akbar encouraged inter-religious discussions at his court in Fatehpur Sikri, and works such as the *Mahabharata* were part of larger endeavors of intellectual discourse. Later, scholars like Dara Shikoh continued such comparative studies of Indian religious thought. The heavily illustrated *Razmnama* also shows the appreciation for Mughal artistic sensibilities, as its dramatic stories and heroic elements were in line with the courtly tastes. Finally, the *Mahabharata* acted as a cultural conduit, adding to the cosmopolitan and inclusive nature of the Mughal court.

The notion of ingenium is also important in this regard². The translators, painters, and patrons used their imaginative synthesis, while the viewers were encouraged to imagine visually and emotionally the depictions of battle, counsel, and moral dilemmas. Thus, the *Razmnama* itself becomes a visual hybrid—a space where difference (religious, linguistic, visual) is not annulled but rather discursively synthesized into imperial cosmopolitanism. In

² The notion of ingenium refers to an innate creative and imaginative faculty that enables a person to invent, perceive connections, and produce original thought. The term originates in Roman rhetoric, particularly in the works of Cicero and Quintilian, who described ingenium as a natural intellectual gift essential for eloquence. While education and technique (ars) could refine ability, they argued that true excellence depended upon this inborn power of invention. During the Renaissance, ingenium came to signify a cultivated yet seemingly effortless creativity, blending natural talent with disciplined learning. In early modern philosophy, thinkers such as Giambattista Vico expanded the concept, defining ingenium as the capacity to perceive similarities between disparate things. For Vico, this imaginative synthesis formed the basis of metaphor, myth, and poetic language. By the Romantic period, the idea evolved into the modern concept of "genius." Immanuel Kant described genius as the innate mental disposition through which nature gives rules to art, emphasizing originality and spontaneity. Thus, ingenium represents the dynamic creative faculty that bridges intellect and imagination, allowing individuals to generate new meanings, artistic forms, and cultural expressions.

this regard, the *Razmnama* is a good example of how rhetoric, particularly visual rhetoric, is a constitutive act, not merely a communicative act of empire but also a construction of a shared cultural space within the empire.

I: Imperial Translation and Cultural Sovereignty: Akbar's Political Vision and the Making of the *Razmnama*

When the Mughal emperor Akbar ascended to the throne in 1556, only thirteen years old, the Turco-Mongol Mughal Empire had already conquered most of northern India and continued to expand greatly during his rule. Although the empire was an Islamic state, Muslims comprised only a small minority of the population as a whole. Akbar's rule was thus based on a very deliberate political strategy that sought to integrate the Hindu and other non-Muslim religious and political groups into the empire. Instead of ruling by exclusion, he adopted a policy of regional autonomy and sought to draw on the participation of various groups in the imperial administration.

Non-Muslims were given important roles within the court and administration. Hindus were not only given military and financial roles but also roles such as tax collectors, scribes, cooks, and artists within the royal court. In addition to opening up the administration to more people, Akbar also abolished the very unpopular *jizya*, or poll tax, that was payable by non-Muslim adult males according to Islamic law, as well as a pilgrimage tax payable by Hindus visiting holy sites. To further cement his alliances and build a sense of loyalty among the influential Hindu families within his empire, Akbar also contracted marriage alliances with the daughters of influential Hindu rulers across the empire. While these policies were clearly strategic, they created a climate of tolerance that would last for the next five decades, allowing non-Muslim art, science, and religious ideas to flourish under Mughal patronage.

Razmnama challenges us to read the manuscript not simply as a relic of the Akbar period but as a multifaceted aesthetic and intellectual entity that calls for intense critical

thinking. Just as James Joyce contends that comprehension is achieved only through active thinking, the *Razmnama* is more than a historical phenomenon that can be contextualized through explanation of its political significance, translation, and patronage. Its meaning is embedded in its visual, textual, and material complexities: the interplay of Persian prose and Sanskrit narrative, the dialogue between Hindu and Muslim intellectual traditions, and the synthesis of Mughal, Indic, and even European visual traditions. To comprehend its essence, one must engage intensely in critical thinking about how these components work together as a cohesive aesthetic entity.

The *Razmnama* challenges the conservative art historical approaches that are based only on contextualization and primary sources and do not engage in theoretical reflection. As a work of early modern South Asia, the *Razmnama* resists being contained within traditional approaches that distinguish Western theory from non-Western material. The *Razmnama* manuscript is a case study of aesthetic hybridity, cross-cultural transfer, and visual rhetoric—all of which can be productively approached through an interdisciplinary lens. Through the integration of philosophical, literary theoretical, translation studies, and visual theory approaches with archival research, it is possible to better understand how the *Razmnama* produces meaning. Therefore, thinking critically about the *Razmnama*, rather than simply placing it within a historical context, demonstrates that the manuscript is a complex site of cultural transfer, imperial ideology, and artistic innovation in the Mughal court.

The translation of the *Mahabharata* into the *Razmnama* was one of the most ambitious projects of the Mughal Translation Bureau during the reign of Akbar. As India's renowned national epic, the *Mahabharata* gets its name from the legendary emperor Bharata, who founded the Bhārata dynasty and ruled over the land of Bhāratavarṣa, which became the generic name for India itself from at least the sixth century CE onwards. Although the basic Bhārata story may have existed since the first century CE, each succeeding generation

contributed new tales and poetic texts, which by the fifth century CE had developed into the great epic, with “mahā” signifying “great.” In its present Sanskrit version, the epic is massive, filling nineteen printed volumes, and is second only to its sister epic, the Ramayana. Both epics have spawned numerous regional versions, commentaries, and adaptations throughout Asia, and have inspired a huge secondary literature in a variety of Indian and European languages.

Like other ancient, vast, and complex texts, the *Mahabharata* has long been a text that has been engaged with, interpreted, and translated. The most celebrated part of the *Mahabharata*, the Bhagavad Gita, had an autonomous existence as a text of philosophy and devotion, and it existed independently for centuries. Scholars like Richard H. Davis have located the composition, transmission, and evolving interpretations of the Gītā over the ages, showing how each generation reinterpreted it in response to new anxieties. Similarly, the *Mahabharata* as a whole, in which the Gītā was frequently embedded, is also a text that has been subject to such processes. Most importantly for the Mughal situation, the *Mahabharata* was not a dead text but a living and influential one in the sixteenth century. Its preeminence and intellectual ferment were sufficient to draw the attention of the Mughal court and to be translated into Persian, thus incorporating it into the cultural and imperial vision of the Akbarian Empire.

In 1574, Akbar formalized his cultural and political program by founding a translation office, called the maktab khana, in his capital at Fatehpur Sikri. This office assembled the greatest scholars, scribes, and secretaries to translate significant Sanskrit texts into Persian. Some of the texts that were translated into Persian include the *Rajatarangini* (a history of the kings of Kashmir) and the Ramayana. The translation enterprise was not merely focused on Sanskrit texts but also included Arabic encyclopedias and historical texts, as well as the *Baburnama*, the memoir of Akbar’s grandfather Babur, who wrote it in Chagatai Turkish.

The activities of the translation bureau show that the intentions of Akbar were not merely to placate his Hindu subjects. This was a part of a larger and more long-term strategy to make Persian the official language of the Mughal Empire. Akbar had a vision of Persian not only as the language of the imperial court but also as the language of administration across the empire. Government officials, including clerks, scribes, and secretaries, were required to learn Persian, and a systematic multi-tiered education program was established to enable language learning. Many Hindus enrolled in madrasas with the intention of learning Persian, realizing that learning Persian would provide access to employment in the imperial administration. By this systematic Persianization, the Mughal Empire attempted to forge an imperial identity that would cut across religious and ethnic divisions, binding people together in a single administrative and cultural system.

In 1582, Akbar assigned the translation bureau the formidable task of translating the sacred Hindu epic the *Mahabharata* into Persian. Given that the epic comprises approximately 100,000 verses, the undertaking was immense. The resulting work was therefore an abridgment rather than a complete, literal translation. This Persian version was titled the *Razmnama*, meaning “Book of War.” The first, lavishly illustrated imperial manuscript was produced between 1584 and 1586. Today, this copy is housed in the City Palace Museum in Jaipur, India, although in recent decades it has remained largely inaccessible to scholars. A second illustrated manuscript of the *Razmnama*, dated between 1598 and 1599, is better known among scholars. The pages of this later manuscript were distributed over the years and are now to be found in various public and private collections throughout North America, Europe, and India. Compared to the earlier imperial manuscript, the 161 paintings from the 1598-1599 manuscript appear to be more condensed and less skillfully rendered. It was on this basis that scholars long ago concluded that the later manuscript was likely produced for a sub-imperial patron rather than at the highest level of

the Mughal court. But the paintings themselves contain the credits of artists who worked in the atelier of Akbar, and this constitutes strong evidence that the manuscript was indeed produced at the Mughal court, as a gift to a member of the royal family.

In addition, the modern sources also help to shed more light on the intentions of Akbar in the distribution of the *Razmnama*. According to the Mughal courtier Abd al-Qadir Bada'uni, after the completion and illustration of the imperial version of the *Razmnama*, the nobles were ordered to make copies with the blessings and favor of God. This order indicates that the intention of Akbar was for the Persian *Mahabharata* to be spread throughout the empire rather than for it to be restricted to the royal court. This objective is clearly stated in the preface to the *Razmnama*, which was penned by the court historian Abu'l Fazl. As Abu'l Fazl explained, the aim of Akbar was that the *Mahabharata*, which was full of deep religious and philosophical truths, should be translated so that the enmity between the communities might lessen and the truth might be easily discerned. By translating the holy books of both Hindus and Muslims into a common language, Akbar's intention was that the common man would have access to the true knowledge and would not be deceived by the so-called religious leaders. In this way, the translation project sought to emphasize commonalities between religious traditions, fostering mutual understanding and reducing sectarian conflict.

On the other hand, Akbar had to reconcile his inclusive policies with the sentiments of the conservative Muslim nobility. It is, therefore, significant that the most orthodox of Akbar's contemporaries, Bada'uni, who was notorious for his critical attitude towards some of Akbar's religious innovations, was chosen to supervise the translation work. His appointment may have been a deliberate move to placate the more conservative elements of the imperial court that the project was still on the right track. In this manner, the *Razmnama* project came to be more than a literary and artistic success i.e., it was a politicized tool designed to integrate a multicultural empire through language and intellectual pursuits.

A careful analysis of the production of the *Razmnama* shows the complex linguistic, artistic, and religious negotiations involved in the process. The production of the *Razmnama* was a complex process that involved the cooperation of Muslim courtiers and Brahman scholars, and this was not a simple or straightforward process. The three Mughal nobles chosen by Akbar to supervise the translation work were neither Sanskrit speakers, nor were they well-versed in the complex *Mahabharata* epic. This led to a complex process of translation. First, Hindu scholars were asked to write an explanatory text of the epic in order to explain its content. According to a contemporary source, this explanatory text was used by the Muslim theologian Naqib Khan to write a Persian framework that summarized the basic meaning. Later, the court poet Faizi was asked to improve this text, and he transformed it into a beautiful composition that used prose and poetry. The complexity of this process shows that the *Razmnama* was not simply the product of translation but of complex negotiations and transformations (see Figure 1).



Fig.1: The script translates into "The *Razmnama* stands as a testament to a time when power was used to build bridges between disparate faiths through the medium of ink and gold leaf."

In light of the importance of such interreligious collaboration, it is appropriate that the illustrated edition of 1598-1599 begins with a depiction of Hindu and Muslim scholars working on translation. In the preface to the manuscript, these individuals are characterized as learned and neutral authorities recruited from among both traditions. The painting strongly supports this interpretation of interreligious collaboration, while at the same time recognizing the differences between the two traditions. The painting is divided into two carefully organized sectors. Muslim scholars are depicted in the upper part of the painting, seated on a carpet with a floral arabesque design, while Hindu Brahmans are shown in the lower part of the painting on a floor decorated with a checkered design. Despite such compositional separation, there are many points of similarity between the two sectors. Most of the figures are clad in the Mughal *jama* or robe, and turbans, and their facial features are not substantially differentiated. The Muslim scholars can be distinguished through their beards and the codices that are placed around them, which are in the form of books in the conventional Islamic manuscript style. In contrast to the Muslim scholars, the Hindu scholars are distinguished through tilaks on their foreheads and a scroll with Devanagari script, which is the script used for Sanskrit and Hindi. While the painting is very careful in distinguishing sectarian differences, it also brings out the fact that the scholars are united in a common intellectual pursuit.

The illustration depicts the literal act of translation and exchange of ideas. The Muslim scholars (distinguished by their turbans and robes) and Brahmin pundits (commonly depicted with their traditional topknots or characteristic draped robes) are engaged in a discussion and consultation of various scrolls and codices. The composition is arranged in two registers. The top register is likely to depict the chief translators or supervisors, while the bottom register depicts the scribes and assistants engaged in cross-referencing the texts. The

Persian calligraphy at the top introduces the philosophical or narrative background of the epic, presented within the beautiful aesthetic framework of Mughal courtly art.

The style of art is a result of a sophisticated amalgamation of Persian miniature art, which is characterized by flat perspective, minute details, and rich coloring, with the developing aspects of Indian realism, which emphasizes a deeper sense of realism and expression. The collaborative nature of the project was extensive and included some of the greatest intellectuals of the time, such as Abu'l-Fazl, who wrote the foreword to the book, as well as some Brahmin scholars who translated the original text written in Sanskrit into a simpler form of Hindi before it was finally translated into Persian verse. Moreover, the presence of fly-whisk bearers (*chauri*) in the painting is also a significant element, as it symbolizes the status of the gathering being portrayed. This painting is more than "art." It is a statement of politics. Akbar's attempt to incorporate the history of India into the Mughal identity through the translation of the *Mahabharata* is evident. He was known to have instructed his nobles to read the *Razmnama* to understand the "true spirit" of the land they ruled over.

The other illustrations in the *Razmnama* of 1598-1599 show that a great deal of translation, adaptation, and creative invention was required for this project. The task of creating narrative illustrations for the *Mahabharata* was particularly daunting, since at this point in time; South Asia did not have a well-developed tradition of illustrating the *Mahabharata*. One would think that the earlier imperial version of 1584-1586 would have served as a source of illustrations for the later manuscript. Yet surprisingly, there is very little similarity between the two sets of illustrations, even for the same subjects. Artists who had worked on the earlier manuscript also worked on the later one, but it seems that they developed a completely new painting program. This might have been due to the preference of the court for originality and innovation. On the other hand, there may have been more

practical considerations at play, such as differences in time, budget, or audience that affected the shift in approach. The original *Razmnama* was a lavish imperial commission, intended for the emperor's personal enjoyment, while the subsequent manuscript, while perhaps intended for a member of the royal family, was far more modest. The illustrations in the 1598-1599 version are of a smaller scale, painted with a more limited palette, and featuring less complex detail, indicating that the artists were under pressure to complete the project more quickly.

Even within these constraints, the painters demonstrated notable creativity. For instance, the episode of the sarngaka birds i.e., a peripheral narrative within the epic lacked an established iconographic tradition. The artist Dhanu, to whom the painting is attributed, seems to have taken advantage of this absence to experiment boldly. His depiction of the flames threatening to engulf the birds employs an unusually dark and dramatic color scheme. The geometric emphasis in the composition diverges from typical Mughal painting conventions of the late sixteenth century. It is possible that Dhanu drew inspiration from European sources, particularly an engraving in the 1593 edition of *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines* by Jerome Nadal, which portrays Christ descending into Hell. A copy of this richly illustrated Jesuit text was presented to Akbar by the Jesuit Mission in 1595. The dramatic representation of fire in Dhanu's painting may echo the visual language of this European print (see Figure 2).



Fig.2: The Sarngaka Birds Survive the Burning of the Khandava Forest.



Fig.3: A folio from the *Akbarnama* depicts Akbar presiding over a theological discussion in the Ibadat Khana (House of Worship), reflecting his commitment to interfaith dialogue and intellectual exchange. The manuscript, written by his court historian Abu'l-Fazl and attributed to the court painter Narsingh, was created circa 1603–1605 during the late Mughal period.³

³ The *Akbarnama* is the official chronicle of the reign of Akbar, written by his court historian Abu'l-Fazl in the late sixteenth century. Composed in Persian, the work is divided into three volumes. The first traces Akbar's genealogy from Timur and Babur, establishing his dynastic legitimacy. The second volume narrates the events

In this Mughal court scene, two Jesuit priests, probably Rudolf Acquaviva and Francisco Henriques, who appeared at the court in 1580, are shown to the left in characteristic black European clerical attire, indicating the increasing interaction between the Mughal Empire and Europe and the intellectual curiosity of Akbar (see Figure 3). At the center, Akbar is shown seated on a raised dais under a red canopy, not in the formal imperial manner but in a position of listening and inquiry, underscoring his role as a seeker of knowledge. Various religious texts are laid out on the carpeted floor, indicating the emperor's vast library and his habit of having texts read aloud to him, including commissioned Persian translations of important Sanskrit texts such as the *Mahabharata*. The painting uses the typical 'stacked' perspective of Mughal painting, where the upper part of the composition stands for the intellectual world of the courtly discussion, and the lower part, filled with horses, courtiers, and commoners, points towards the larger world of the empire, suggesting the extensive reach of Akbar's empire. The painting is characterized by a colorful palette of luxurious gold, strong blues of lapis lazuli origin, and bold reds that give the painting both luxury and passion. Rather than depicting stiff and static figures, the painter has managed to capture dynamic interactions, with faces that are animated and expressive of the passion for debate that characterized the court. Above the painting, a beautiful panel of Persian calligraphy in Nasta'liq script provides a narrative or poetic accompaniment to the painting, in the classic Mughal style that combined text and image in a beautiful synthesis. One of the most fascinating historical facts about the painting is the role of the Jesuit missionaries, led by the likes of Rudolf Acquaviva, who were hoping to convert Akbar to Christianity. While Akbar received them with great deference and even allowed them to erect a church in the

of Akbar's reign in detail, including military campaigns, administrative reforms, court politics, and imperial expansion. The third volume, known as the *Ain-i-Akbari*, provides a systematic account of the empire's administration, revenue system, military organization, religious policies, and cultural life. Beyond a historical record, the *Akbarnama* serves as an ideological text that presents Akbar as a divinely guided, just, and universal sovereign. It constructs an image of kingship rooted in wisdom, tolerance, and rational governance, thereby legitimizing Mughal authority and articulating a vision of imperial unity.

court, he never converted to Christianity but instead continued to practice Islam, albeit in a heterodox and intellectually eclectic manner, much to the missionaries' eventual frustration.

II. Visualizing Power and Sovereignty in the *Razmnama*: Mughal Aesthetics, Political Theology and Imperial Imagination

Another examination of this paper is to examine the ways in which the illustrated *Razmnama*, the Persian version of the *Mahabharata*, commissioned by Akbar, operates not only as a literary translation but also as a pictorial meditation on power, sovereignty, ethical statecraft, and imperial responsibility. Through the dynamic synthesis of Persian, Indian, and European artistic traditions, the manuscript reinterprets the epic moments of the Game of Dice, Draupadi's Disrobing, Krishna's Diplomacy, Tribute Scenes, and Cosmological Mythologies in a uniquely Mughal imperial context. The illustrations of the *Razmnama* translate episodes of moral dilemmas, administrative governance, war strategies, and renunciation into meditations on sovereign power, justice, and the delicate balance between dharma and imperial politics. Through the placement of epic heroes, advisors, and queens in Mughalized architectural settings and aesthetic traditions, the *Razmnama* reinterprets the *Mahabharata* as a trans-historical mirror of empire, where the sovereignty of rulers is challenged, the exercise of power is staged, and ethical statecraft becomes the primary concern of both narrative and imperial imagination.

Flemish engravings appear to have influenced in the 1598–1599 manuscript as well, demonstrating the selective and imaginative appropriation of non-indigenous artistic traditions by Mughal painters. In a composition by Salih Kashmiri, the cloud deity Kundadhara is represented as a human figure seated upon a cumulus cloud (see Figure 4).



Fig 4: The painting depicts a Brahmin performing devoted service to the deities in pursuit of a desired boon, and it bears the artist's signature at the center reading "Amal-e Salih Kashmiri" (the work of Salih Kashmiri).

Although the subject is entirely rooted in Indic mythology, the treatment suggests familiarity with contemporary Jesuit prints, which include several scenes of figures descending or resting upon clouds. The same European sources may have informed Sangha's depiction of the iron statue crushed by King Dhritarashtra in place of Bhima. The statue's foreshortened form reveals an awareness of European pictorial conventions. Faced with the

task of inventing fresh narrative images, Mughal artists appear to have drawn heavily upon European engravings, perhaps because their novelty granted a sense of creative freedom.



Fig.5: This folio depicts the powerful figure Bhima embracing the iron statue of himself that King Dhritarashtra intended to crush in a fit of grief and rage, and is attributed to the Mughal court artist Lutf Allah.

The painting represents the emotional reunion of the Pandavas and the blind king Dhritarashtra after the Kurukshetra War (see Figure 5). At the center-right, the old, white-bearded king Dhritarashtra is embracing a dark metallic figure, which is the iron statue of Bhima. As per the epic story, the grief-stricken king, in a rage over the death of his sons, had planned to kill Bhima in a crushing embrace, but Krishna, foreseeing this attack, had replaced

Bhima with an iron statue. The painting represents the moment when Dhritarashtra breaks the iron statue, thinking it to be his nephew. At the left side, Krishna holds up his hand in a gesture of control and restraint, standing alongside the Pandava brothers, including Yudhishtira, who is dressed in orange-pink attire, as they are dealing with this emotional situation that is about to change from violence to mourning. Other figures in the lower registers, perhaps Vidura and other members of the royal court, respond with evident concern, adding to the sense of grief and reconciliation. As part of the *Razmnama* initiative, this image embodies Akbar's wider cultural and political agenda: the translation project aimed to introduce Persian-speaking Muslim elites to Hindu culture and to further his policy of *sulh-i kul* (universal peace). In terms of artistic style, this folio combines Persian miniature painting techniques, with their emphasis on fine lines and deliberate spatial organization, with Indian elements, including the use of colorful dyes, dhoti-style clothing, and Hindu imagery. The block of Persian Nasta'liq script above the image tells the story, while the architectural background, including its green-tiled roof, balcony, and birds perched on the balcony railing, places the epic story in a Mughalized palace setting that integrates narrative, moral, and aesthetic concerns into a single visual whole.

However, not all the scenes in the manuscript demanded this level of innovation. The many battle scenes in the manuscript could be copied from existing examples in the Mughal royal library. The Timurid versions of the *Shahnama* and other Persian epics provided elaborate precedents for illustrating battle scenes. Likewise, illustrated versions of the *Akbarnama* and the *Baburnama*, histories of the reigns of Akbar and Babur, respectively, provided vivid illustrations of battle scenes. Battle scenes were a standard part of Mughal artistic training, and the artists were skilled at representing horses, armor, weapons, and dead soldiers. Thus, some of the battle scenes in the 1598-1599 *Razmnama* appear to be generalized to the point of near interchangeability. Only the Persian texts at the bottom of the

pages, which specified the particular scene and the main actors, differentiated one scene from another.

In certain instances, artists both referenced and modified earlier visual precedents. The image of gods and asuras churning the cosmic ocean draws upon a painting by Ramdas in the 1588 *Ramayana* prepared for Akbar. However, the painter Fattu adjusted the composition, repositioning Mount Mandara more centrally rather than adopting the oblique perspective of the earlier version. Such changes indicate that aesthetic considerations sometimes took precedence over efficiency.

In the *Razmnama* depiction of the Churning of the Ocean (Samudra Manthan), the artistic methods demonstrate the early “Akbar style” as characterized by art historians, with its emphasis on dynamic storytelling, crowded composition, and a colorful, eclectic palette (see Figure 6). The blue color of the gods and the dark, turbulent water is painted with lapis lazuli, a highly prized pigment imported from Afghanistan. During the Akbari period, this blue was conventionally used in strong, flat, saturated areas to create striking contrast with vermilion reds and gold. However, as Mughal painting developed during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan, artists began to “wash out” lapis lazuli to create a range of tonal values. While still used primarily as a symbol or iconographic color, blue was increasingly used to create a sense of depth, especially in softly rendered skies that reflected the influence of European oil painting methods.

The figures in the Akbari Samudra Manthan series share the same dynamic composition and crowdedness. The mountain Mandara, the serpent Vasuki, and the gods and asuras are packed tightly into the picture, creating a “stacked” composition that highlights the mythological turmoil and group activity. The crowded mythological composition gave way to elegant single-figure portraits and an emphasis on recessionary space during the later Mughal

period. Landscapes and hills, which had been stylized and symbolic in earlier art, became more naturalistic, with subtle gradations of depth and atmospheric perspective.

The process of production also marks a significant shift in artistic culture. During the reign of Akbar, the production of large imperial manuscripts, such as the *Razmnama*, was a collaborative effort of the atelier, where one artist would draw the preliminary sketch (*tarrah*), another would add the colors (*rang-amezi*), and a third artist would paint the faces (*chihra-kusha*). The dynamic brushwork and dynamic motion of the churning water in the painting indicate this collaborative and experimental process. During the reign of Jahangir and Shah Jahan, the imperial style shifted towards the celebration of individual master artists and attention to detail. Methods like *pardaz* (stippling), where numerous small dots were used to create smooth skin and textured fabrics, replaced the earlier dynamic brushwork. The shift from the Akbar style to the later Mughal style represents a shift from the use of bold color, active gesture, and idealized landscape to the use of subtle tonal modeling, individualized portraiture, and naturalism. The *Razmnama*, therefore, represents a critical juncture in Mughal art, where the ambitions of rulers, the desire for cross-cultural innovation, and the power of narrative set the stage for the refined elegance of the seventeenth century.



Fig 6. The image is a folio depicting the Samudra Manthan (Churning of the Ocean), where deities and demons use the serpent Vasuki and Mount Mandara to extract the nectar of immortality.

Because of the number of artists involved, the lack of an established iconographic tradition, and the variety of visual sources i.e., Persian, Mughal, and European; it is surprising that the 1598-1599 *Razmnama* is so stylistically consistent. Besides its literary and ideological value, some scholars propose that the Mughal interest in the *Mahabharata* had a more serious undertone. As historian Michael Willis has suggested, the epic is, in the end, not a story of

triumph but of tragedy i.e., of destruction, the fall of empires, and the loss and recovery of cultural memory. It is, in this sense, a story about India itself, about the rise and fall of empires, about the sovereignty that is undone by internal strife. Such a set of concerns may have run very deep with Akbar and his court. The theory is that while the epic served as a tool of imperial ideology, particularly through the Persian translation, that is, the *Razmnama*, it also served as a cautionary mirror.

The *Mahabharata* dramatizes enduring binaries i.e., passion and power, vendetta and virtue, devotion and deception within a world structured by ambition, intrigue, greed and moral ambiguity. In the context of the never-ending struggles for dominance, the *Mahabharata* provides a compelling paradigm for understanding the subsequent forms of politics in India, whether in the kingdoms of ancient India, the colonial state, or the modern democracy. The dynamics of power politics inscribed in the *Mahabharata* i.e., dynastic rivalry, moral compromise, alliances, and the conflict between dharma and politics seem to persist through the ages, and this suggests that the *Mahabharata* is not only literature but a cultural model through which the politics of the world have been imagined and interpreted. Through an examination of some of the characters in the *Mahabharata*, this paper will attempt to identify the uncanny similarities between the politics of the *Mahabharata* and the politics of the contemporary world.

In the context of the *Razmnama*, this argument takes on a further historical resonance. The Mughal translation of the *Mahabharata* was more than a literary exercise; it was a political gesture that re-inscribed the epic within an imperial context. Through the translation of the text into Persian and its illustration in the visual idiom of the Mughal court, the epic was re-inscribed as a mirror of sovereignty, politics, and ethics. The oppositions of power and morality inscribed within the epic could then be read as being instructive or cautionary for imperial politics itself. The *Razmnama* illustrates that the political grammar of the epic was

already being translated in the early modern period as a guide to politics. Thus, the continuities between the power structures of the epic and later politics are mediated not only through cultural memory but through acts of translation and imperial appropriation, and the *Mahabharata* becomes a trans-historical text of political reflection.

Incredibly gifted and breathtakingly beautiful, Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* is positioned at the ideological and political heart of the text. While she is often held culpable for the outbreak of the final war, Draupadi is less a cause of conflict than its most visible sufferer and agent. At her swayamvara, Draupadi is the object of the collective desire of the male characters, she is seen as a prize to be won and owned. Draupadi's boldness, especially in her choice of a husband, upsets the patriarchal applecart and earns her the ire of powerful men, including Karna. Her public degradation in the Kaurava court at Hastinapur, culminating in the attempted disrobing, is one of the most chilling moments in epic storytelling. Draupadi is declared "unfeminine," is deemed immoral for her polyandrous marriage to the five sons of Pandu, and is treated as a political commodity rather than as a human being in her own right. As critics have noted, her status as deviant enables the male assembly to rationalize violence against her, reducing her body to a site where patriarchal domination is asserted. In this respect, Draupadi moves beyond the boundaries of her literary function and becomes emblematic of the 'second sex', the Other, who is made to suffer humiliation that stands for both individual and collective shame. Rape or attempts to rape as feminist scholars such as Susan Brownmiller have shown, are not spontaneous expressions of sexual desire but strategic acts of domination, intended to intimidate and control. Draupadi's experience lays bare the complex interplay of gender, power, and public shame.

When this incident is considered in the context of the *Razmnama*, its significance broadens further. The Mughal translation and illustration of the epic re-contextualizes Draupadi's humiliation in an imperial discourse. In the illustrated manuscripts, the courtly

context of the disrobing incident often mirrors a Mughal *darbar*, synching the Kaurava assembly with the contemporary imperial context. This visual displacement of the disrobing incident heightens the political implications of the incident: the desecration of a woman in a royal court becomes a warning sign about the abuse of imperial power. Through the inclusion of Draupadi's suffering in a Persianized, courtly manuscript, the *Razmnama* converts Draupadi from a mythological heroine to a visual and discursive symbol of the failure of ethics in governance. Her body, which is contested and exposed, becomes a metaphor for the vulnerability of justice when rulers give in to hubris and revenge. In this Mughal context, Draupadi's humiliation thus becomes not merely a gendered tragedy but also a political warning; amplifying the epic's meditation on power, ethics, and the disastrous consequences of unregulated power.

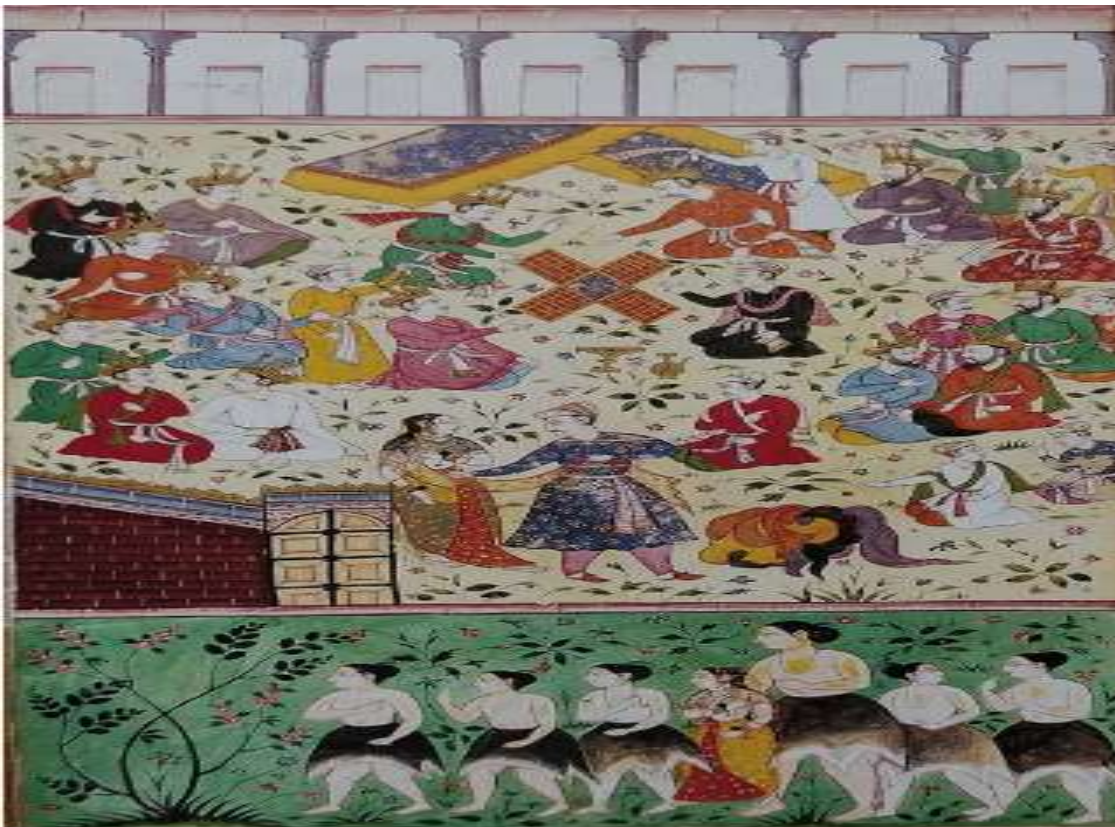


Fig.7: This vibrant folio depicts a courtly gathering centered around a game of chaupar (a cross-and-circle board game), reflecting the Mughal interest in depicting social and strategic elements of the epic alongside its divine themes.

The painting represents the pivotal Game of Dice (Dyuta Sabha) episode (see Figure 7). The red, X-shaped textile in the center symbolizes the chaupar board, the gambling game through which Yudhishtira loses his kingdom, his brothers, himself, and ultimately Draupadi. The geometry of the cloth visually anchors the composition, emphasizing the fatal turning point of the epic. The crowned and richly dressed figures surrounding the board represent the Kuru elders and princes Bhishma, Drona, Duryodhana, and others assembled in the court of Hastinapura. Their orderly arrangement and calm expressions contrast sharply with the moral chaos unfolding. In the lower middle section, Draupadi is being confronted or seized by Dushasana. This moment anticipates her attempted disrobing and public humiliation, the ethical nadir of the epic and the immediate catalyst for the Kurukshetra war. The visual emphasis on her body language often shown resisting or gesturing in protest conveys both vulnerability and moral authority.

The painting reflects the distinctive Akbari atelier style, which fused Persian manuscript conventions with Indian narrative dynamism. The composition of the miniature is structured in a carefully organized vertical hierarchy that enhances both its narrative clarity and symbolic depth. In the upper register, architectural arches and palace interiors evoke the grandeur of a Mughal courtly space, situating the epic episode within an imperial visual framework. The middle register contains the gambling scene itself—the narrative and moral center of the composition—where the decisive game of dice unfolds amid assembled royals. In contrast, the lower register shifts to a garden or exterior setting populated by female attendants, possibly Draupadi's companions, which may symbolically suggest her displacement and the impending exile of the Pandavas. This tiered arrangement enables multiple temporal and emotional moments to coexist within a single pictorial frame, a defining feature of Mughal narrative painting that merges storytelling with sophisticated spatial organization. The use of intense mineral pigments i.e., lapis lazuli blues, malachite

greens, vermilion reds, and gold demonstrates the luxury materials available to the imperial workshop. The brilliance of these colors enhances the dramatic gravity of the scene. The floral millefleur background, intricate textile patterns, and individualized facial features signal a departure from earlier Safavid flatness toward Mughal naturalism. The women in the lower panel, clad in shorter clothes and situated amidst dense foliage, could symbolize Draupadi's maids or foreshadow the Pandavas' exile in the forest. The contrast between the palatial architecture in the upper panel and the open natural setting in the lower panel might thus signify a shift from the secure world of the palace to one of exposure, from the indulgent world of the palace to one of dispossession. This contrast between the two panels adds to the thematic complexity of the painting, which contrasts the indulgent world of the Mughalized court with the morally bankrupt choices it makes. Artists such as Basawan and Daswanth were known for introducing expressive modeling and psychological depth into imperial manuscripts, qualities visible in emotionally charged scenes like this one. The painting thus re-contextualizes the dice game not simply as mythic bad luck but as a political allegory cautioning that the absence of checks on power, moral passivity, and the reduction of human dignity to a mere instrument will undermine the very basis of kingship. In the *Razmnama*, this image serves as an imperial mirror, encouraging reflection on justice, self-control, and the duties that accompany the exercise of sovereign power.

Krishna is the ethical and political pivot of the *Mahabharata*; a strategist, diplomat, and prophet who sought to maintain dharma by cunning rather than by miracle. Closely identified with the Pandavas and his paternal aunt Kunti, he stands by them in banishment and degradation, yet ever seeks to bring about reconciliation between the warring cousins. His greatness consists not only in his divine strength but also in his moderation: he rarely calls upon his divine powers, preferring persuasion, negotiation, and ethical argumentation. His universal appeal lies in his ability to prioritize the group's welfare over his own

advantage; an ideal that can be identified with liberal political ideology. Based on J. M. Keynes's definition of liberalism as rational generosity and civilized balance, Krishna represents a political liberalism that is founded on reason, moral responsibility, and civilized politics. In contrast to Bhishma, Drona, Vidura, or Kripacharya, who are tied down by their own loyalties or codes, Krishna shows flexibility in his actions, which are guided by his moral vision. His liberalism is not dogmatic but practical with the common aim of achieving justice. Sometimes his methods seem Machiavellian, like when he advises his followers to resort to morally dubious methods in war or when he tries to convince Karna to change sides from Duryodhana, but all these methods are explained away in the context of his overall mission of establishing balance. For Krishna, peace is always the best option, but when injustice leads to tyranny, it is necessary to take a firm stand. In the *Udyoga Parva*, his refusal to accept Sanjaya's argument for infinite forbearance shows his commitment to the balance of the cosmos; where aggression, if unchecked, has to be countered by equal force to maintain balance (see Figure 8).

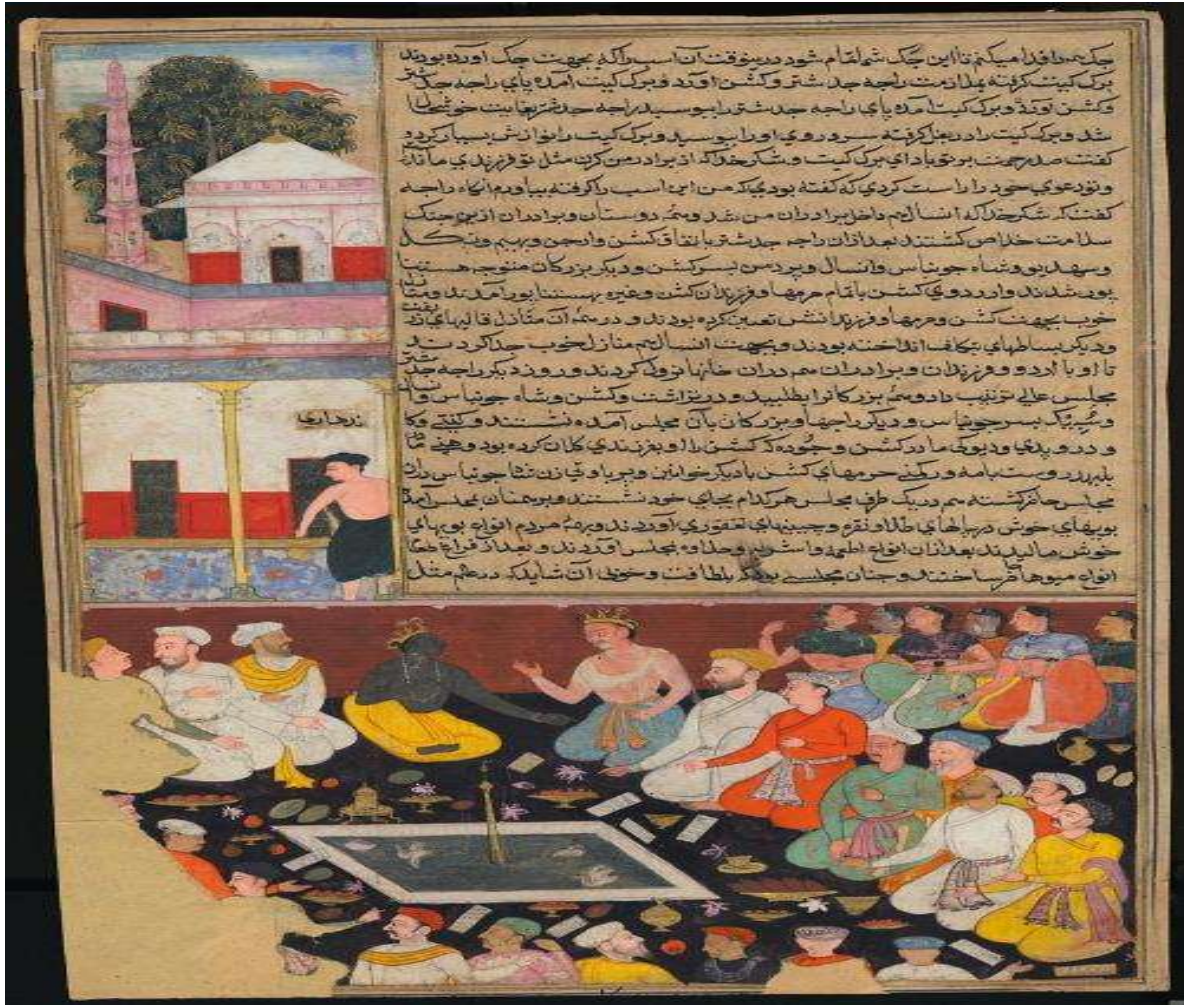


Fig 8: This folio depicts a vibrant courtly gathering of kings and noblemen, including a prominent blue-skinned figure (Krishna), assembled around a central garden pool.

When the highly politicized story of the *Mahabharata* is reinterpreted through the prism of the *Razmnama*, the image of Krishna takes on an unmistakably imperial undertone. The Mughal translation endeavor was not merely a process of translating Sanskrit to Persian but also one of reinterpreting the epic in terms of moral kingship and cosmopolitanism. The battlefield can often be likened to a Mughal imperial camp, and the royal courts mirror the aesthetics of Akbar’s *darbar*. The dark-skinned, crowned figure wearing a yellow pithambara is Krishna, placed as a moral exemplar and mediator. To his side is a majestic figure, likely Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandavas, engaged in deliberation. However, the epic past is consciously subverted through a Mughal perspective: the architectural style, water fountain,

and clothing of the secondary characters are all indicative of sixteenth-century imperial courtly culture. Through the placement of the ancient Indic heroes within a contemporary Mughal context, the artist makes the epic readily accessible to a Persianate audience of the early modern period. The vertical or “split-screen” format of the painting further emphasizes the layered approach to the narrative. The top register depicts the exterior of the palace, with pink architecture, a guard, and a controlled façade, while the bottom register swings open into an interior courtyard, where the central conversation takes place. This architectural device creates a sense of depth as well as a symbolic tension between external power and internal debate. Especially noteworthy are the figures in European clothing and hats at the far left, who represent Jesuit missionaries to Akbar’s court. Their presence in a Hindu epic story is a paradigmatic example of Mughal anachronism, which places the world of Akbar’s own cosmopolitan court within the narrative universe of the *Mahabharata*, thus encoding a reference to Akbar’s own interest in comparative religion.

In terms of artistic style, the folio is a prime example of the mature Imperial Mughal style. The representation of the square pool and fountain, which is reminiscent of the *charbagh* garden design, represents order, harmony, and refined rule. The scattered papers on the ground represent intellectual pursuits and the documentation of knowledge, which emphasizes the environment of debate and philosophical discussion. The vibrant colors, including lapis lazuli blues, vermilions, and gold leaf, indicate a lofty royal commission from the imperial workshop. In this way, the painting moves from illustration to a deliberate visual commentary on power, knowledge, and the cosmopolitan imagination of Mughal rule.

When considered in the context of the *Razmnama*, Krishna’s political character reveals further layers of meaning. The Mughal court’s reception of the epic was more than a literary phenomenon and involved the incorporation of Indic philosophy into an imperial system of governance. In the visual manuscripts produced in Akbar’s workshop, Krishna is

depicted in a way that resonates with Mughal courtly culture. The visual semiotics of the *Razmnama* frequently depict Krishna less as a remote god and more as an exemplary statesman, akin to a *pir*-like guide or sagacious vizier steering rulers toward moral action. His strategic manipulation can be read alongside Mughal political theory, particularly Akbar's principle of *sulh-i kul* (universal peace), which emphasized pragmatic tolerance and the maintenance of imperial stability over rigid orthodoxy. Krishna's willingness to transcend conventional codes for a higher moral objective parallels the Mughal conception of sovereign responsibility: the ruler must sometimes override formal rules to secure justice and social harmony. In placing Krishna in the context of the intercultural environment of Akbar's translation project, it becomes clear that his figure exceeds the epic form to become a representation of moral statecraft. The *Mahabharata*'s exploration of power and morality is thus transposed into the Mughal court's preoccupations with imperial politics, and Krishna is at the forefront of this exploration as a representative of statecraft. Krishna's powers of persuasive provocation as a consummate political strategist are most dramatically revealed on the eve of the Kurukshetra war in the *Mahabharata*. As Arjuna wavers at the sight of venerable seniors and kin on the opposing side, Krishna's reprimand, though firm, is tempered and guides him away from the paralysis of emotional indulgence to the rigor of moral rectitude. His exposition, distilled in the *Bhagavad Gita*, enunciates the tenet of karma-yoga: the performance of duty with detached discipline. Action, not abstinence, maintains the balance of the universe. Hence, Krishna's reinterpretation of war is not a matter of personal revenge but a necessary moral duty in a larger metaphysical scheme (see Figure 9).



Fig.9: This folio depicts the majestic Vishvarupa revelation, wherein the multi-armed deity Krishna manifests his supreme divine form to the warrior Arjuna, who stands in prayerful adoration before Krishna's chariot.

This picture is a very interesting example of cultural fusion and is probably an illustration from a Persian version of the *Mahabharata*, called *Razmnama*, created during the Mughal period in India. It portrays a very important moment from the *Bhagavad Gita*: when Lord Krishna shows his divine form to the prince Arjuna. He is shown with blue skin, a typical sign of his divinity in Hindu art. He has multiple arms, symbolizing his omnipotence and "Universal Form" (Vishvarupa). He is seated on a chariot, which he famously drove for Arjuna during the Kurukshetra War. The figure on the left, wearing the green robe and crown, is Arjuna. His hands are clasped in a *anjali mudra*, symbolizing his deep devotion and surrender after seeing Krishna's true form. Though the subject of the painting is derived from

the *Mahabharata*, namely the revelation scene of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the artistic style is purely Mughal, as evidenced by the visual language of the *Razmnama*. The Persian calligraphy at the top, the floral landscape in the style of Persian miniatures, and the ornate crowns and clothes worn by Arjuna all point to the Mughal atelier. The white horse pulling the chariot is rich in symbolism: in the philosophical framework of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the chariot is the human body, the horses are the senses, and Krishna, as the charioteer, is the soul or guiding intellect.

The Persian inscription, penned in beautiful Nasta'liq script, records the instant when the 'light of knowledge' arrives in Arjuna and the Lord displays his true, divine form. Important words like Surat (form/appearance) highlight the appearance of the divine vision, while *Khuda-vandi* (divinity/lordship) uses the Persian word *Khuda* to convey Krishna's ultimate power, which is a common theological lexicon across cultures. The name Arjuna occurs in the inscription as the addressee of this revelation. Created by the joint efforts of Persian scholars like Naqib Khan and Brahmin intellectuals, the language of the manuscript combines Islamic honorific vocabulary, including "Great is His Glory," with Hindu devotional ideas, depicting Krishna in a prophet-like or God-like capacity. Thus, the painting and the inscription together represent the broader project of the *Razmnama*. The combination of Persian script with Hindu imagery is characteristic of the *Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb* i.e., the syncretic culture of North India, where different religious and linguistic streams came together.

Krishna's political acumen extends beyond philosophical instruction to tactical orchestration His deliberate actions of inciting Arjuna against Bhishma, plotting the killing of Jayadratha through the illusion of sunset, counseling the strategic half-truth about Ashwatthama to weaken Dronacharya, and exhorting Arjuna to attack Karna during his moment of vulnerability; demonstrate a pragmatic code. Each of his opponents is defeated

not only by his cunning but also due to the antecedent moral failing: Jayadratha's brutality against Abhimanyu, Drona's inflexible intolerance, Karna's collusion in Draupadi's disrobing and Bhishma's passive endorsement of oppression. Krishna's rule-breaking, therefore, is transformed, within the epic framework, into a tool of restoring Dharma. Justice, in Krishna's estimation, sometimes requires flexibility when strict observance leads to oppression.

The imputation of deceit by Duryodhana against Krishna, in bringing about the death of Bhishma, Drona, Karna, and Jayadratha is but the echo of an ageless censure of political expediency. But Krishna's measured defense locates the blame for the tragedy in the moral lapses of his opponents. In the ideological context of the *Razmnama*, this dialogue highlights the most fundamental of questions in politics: can political cunning ever be condoned as a means to banish disorder and re-establish the cosmic and social order? The Mughal visual and textual context subtly tends towards an affirmative answer to this question. The reign of Akbar was marked not only by conquests but also by the deliberate policies of stabilizing a religiously and culturally diverse empire. The policies of Akbar, which included the establishment of alliances through Rajput marriages, the abatement of the *jizya* tax (albeit temporarily), the centralization of administration, and the establishment of *sulh-i kul* (universal peace), were not only idealistic but also pragmatic attempts at consolidating imperial power with a minimum of rebellion. In this sense, the political cunning of the reign of Akbar was more a function of flexibility in politics for the consolidation of imperial power than a mere device for personal ambition. As in the case of a ruler beset by competing loyalties and contradictions of faith, Akbar frequently operated beyond the strictures of orthodoxy in order to maintain social harmony. In this sense, pragmatic politics can be morally justifiable as a means of eliminating disorder, sectarian conflict, and maintaining justice, provided it is accountable to a larger notion of the common good than the imperial

ego. Thus, Krishna and Akbar emerge as philosopher, strategist, and political thinker simultaneously. Their digressions from traditional ethics are subsumed in his larger agenda of annihilating *adharma*. Both are representatives of enlightened politics—to reconcile the spiritual and temporal domains. The *Razmnama* thus lifts the theological play of the epic to a meditation on imperial politics, where Krishna's fusion of ethics and politics represents the delicate balance between justice, power, and action, which Akbar sought to achieve.

III. Imperial Translation and Cultural Synthesis: Mughal Political Theology or Artistic Innovation

The *Razmnama* was much more than a translation of the *Mahabharata*, as it was a full-fledged imperial cultural project under Akbar. The translation of a Hindu epic into Persian and painting it in the Mughal atelier style was a project that promoted cultural integration, as it combined the narrative traditions of India with the language of Persian and the artistic conventions of the Timurid-Safavid school. In terms of politics, it was a project that legitimized the Mughal Empire by associating the rule of Akbar with the moral order of dharma, which was embedded in the epic. In terms of art, it was a project that promoted innovation in composition, perspective, gesture, and individualized portraiture, which was an important milestone in the development of Mughal miniature painting. The larger ideological vision of *sulh-i kul* (universal peace) that Akbar had in mind was to integrate various religious and cultural traditions that existed within the empire. Through the visual representation of the moral failure of the Kuru dynasty, there is an implicit contrast between unjust kingship and the ideals of morality that a king should represent.

Whereas the Dice Game folio was centered on the political gamble of the Kuru court, this painting represents a moment of tribute and royal administration. In the *Mahabharata*, wealth was often calculated in terms of cattle, and this scene seems to represent a moment of kingship that is either one of tribute or charitable giving, perhaps in relation to a ritual

sacrifice of Ashvamedha. Yudhishtira is seated beneath a yellow canopy (shamiana), indicating a gesture towards servants who are bringing gifts of cows and bulls, naturalistically depicted. The presence of record-keepers or officials with bundles of goods indicates the formalized recording or distribution of wealth, underscoring the administrative aspect of kingship. The Persian Nasta'liq text indicates that the scene represents Yudhishtira's departure for the forest and his gift of livestock and goods to Brahmans, underscoring the ideals of royal generosity and renunciation in the visual and textual program of the *Razmnama*. This folio illustrates the Mughal synthesis of styles that thrived in Akbar's royal atelier (atashkhana). The miniature illustrates a number of characteristic qualities of early Mughal painting under Akbar. The presence of peacocks sitting on the rooftop indicates a royal or religious context, which is a traditional theme in Indian art, while the pink-colored architecture and distant cityscape indicate the increasing use of European perspective methods in the Mughal atelier. The composition of the miniature deviates from the formal and linear organization of earlier Persian miniatures, which instead depict figures in overlapping and dynamic clusters to achieve depth and a sense of lively courtly activity. Moreover, the detailed facial features, even of the minor attendants leading the cattle, indicate the Mughal concern with fine portraiture and naturalism, which reflects Akbar's intense interest in realism.

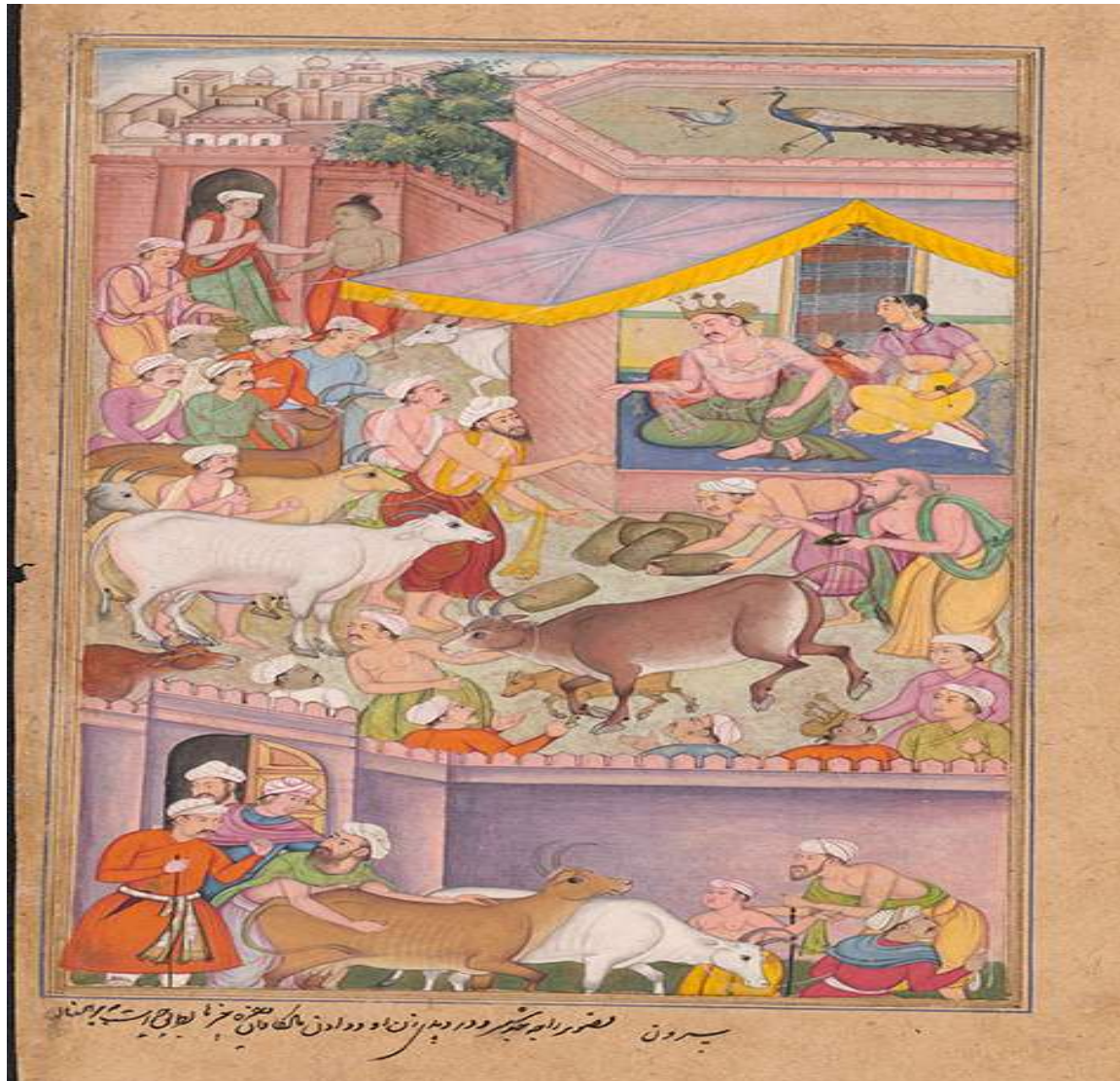


Fig 10: This depicts a bustling scene of the Pandavas distributing a vast herd of cattle to the people, featuring an architectural palace setting with peacocks on the roof and a Persian inscription identifying the work of the Mughal artist Behram.

Whereas the Dice Game folio from the *Razmnama* is imbued with psychological drama and the threat of disaster, focusing on the conflict drama surrounding the gaming board in a closed, courtly space, the Livestock Tribute folio offers a completely different ambience, which is procedural, ritualistic, and administrative. The attention is now on the symbols of prosperity and opulence, especially the cattle, which are featured prominently, placed in a larger courtyard with architectural and urban features. This contrast also underscores the versatility of the manuscript, which transitions from conflict to royal

responsibility and success. In terms of historical context, these illustrated manuscripts were actually very expensive imperial commissions, created through a team-based atelier system, where one artist would create the first drawing (tarrah), another would add color (rang-amezi), and a third might create personalized portraits (chehra-numai), which also speaks to the organized and sophisticated artistic culture that Akbar encouraged.

The *Razmnama*, does not explicitly articulate homosexuality in modern identity-based terms. However, certain narrative and visual elements may be read through a queer or homosocial lens. The *Mahabharata* also has instances of gender fluidity and non-normative embodiment, most famously the tale of Shikhandi, who was born as a female and later lived as a male, and the metamorphosis of Arjuna into Brihannala. These instances problematize the notion of fixed gender binarism and enable the discussion of performative identity and embodied transition. Secondly, the Mughal court culture, particularly under Akbar and his successors, celebrated passionate bonds of male homo-sociality, whether between warriors, friends, and courtiers. In the illustrated *Razmnama* manuscripts, the physical proximity, gazes, and emotional investments of the male characters occasionally resonate with the Persianate aesthetic traditions of beauty and devotion that transgress the fixed heteronormative norms. Persian literary traditions, particularly those influenced by Sufi poetry, frequently employ gender-neutral beloved characters. The translation work supervised by Abu'l-Fazl may have subtly encoded relationships *Mahabharata* in accordance with Persian rhetorical traditions that emphasize affective intimacy, admiration of male beauty, and spiritualized devotion.



Fig .11. This folio depicts the blind King Dhritarashtra seated within a palace, listening as his advisor Sanjaya recounts the events of the Great War.

This particular painting shows the blind King Dhritarashtra and his charioteer/adviser, Sanjaya. Besides its obvious role as a representation of the story, this painting is also a very interesting case study of affective intimacy and spiritualized attachment as it occurs in a courtly, social setting. The intimacy that occurs between Dhritarashtra and Sanjaya in this particular instance of the story is not romantic in any modern way but is instead very affective, based in emotional closeness and shared interiority. The two men are placed in a contracted architectural space that emphasizes the privacy and exclusivity of their encounter; their knees almost touch, creating a sort of “bubble” of confidentiality that subtly excludes the presence of the other man in the background. The most moving aspect of this particular

painting, however, is the shared gaze—or rather, the substitution of the shared gaze with something else. Dhritarashtra, who is blind and has his eyes closed or averted, does not literally see; instead, he sees the Kurukshetra war as it is happening through Sanjaya’s verbal descriptions. Sanjaya’s serious face and meaningful hand gesture convey the ongoing transfer of vision, emotion, and meaning. The slight extension of their hands towards each other further emphasizes their tactile and psychic dependence, underlining the king’s dependence on his charioteer as both narrator and “divine eye.” In the larger context of the *Mahabharata*, this dynamic can be seen as a metaphor for mediated perception itself, where the act of seeing, knowing, and ruling is itself made possible through relationships of trust and communication.

The depiction of Dhritarashtra and Sanjaya also reflects the Persianate aesthetic ideal of refined male beauty that profoundly shaped Mughal visual culture. Both figures are rendered with delicate, almond-shaped eyes, finely arched brows, and carefully groomed mustaches—features associated not only with heroic masculinity but with courtly elegance. This “moon-faced” ideal blurred the boundaries between the lover, the warrior, and the sovereign, presenting beauty as an attribute of moral and political stature. Their richly patterned *patkas* (sashes), floral turban ornaments, and gracefully draped robes signify more than material wealth; they evoke *farrah* (divine radiance or kingly glory), suggesting that external adornment mirrors inner refinement and legitimacy. The attendant holding the *chauri* (fly-whisk) further heightens this aesthetic framing. His presence transforms the scene into a spectacle of composed authority, directing the viewer’s gaze toward the poised, almost statuesque forms of the central pair. In this way, admiration of male beauty becomes inseparable from the visual language of sovereignty, virtue, and cultivated grace within the Mughal-Persianate artistic tradition.

The bond between Dhritarashtra and Sanjaya may also be understood through the lens of *Sakhya-Rasa*, the devotional ‘nectar of friendship’ found in Indian aesthetic and spiritual traditions. Their relationship transcends hierarchy, moving beyond that of king and servant into a space of spiritualized attachment. Sanjaya functions not merely as a courtier but as an intermediary of vision and truth, a figure akin to a guru who provides moral and metaphysical context to the catastrophic events of the war. Through his narration, the blind king remains tethered to reality, history, and conscience. The intimacy of this exchange suggests a form of *seva* (selfless service): Sanjaya leans inward with attentiveness and devotion, embodying loyalty that is ethical rather than ornamental. His physical beauty, while present within the Mughal aesthetic framework, is secondary to his role as a vessel of knowledge and truth. The subdued palette and contemplative stillness of the composition further intensify the emotional tenor of the scene. A quiet melancholy pervades the image, as though both men share the weight of impending destruction i.e., the unraveling of their lineage and the moral cost of war, binding them in a fellowship forged through sorrow, duty, and spiritual responsibility.

The visual elements of the composition meticulously combine together to construct a layered symbolic narrative. The most striking feature is the contrast in gaze: Dhritarashtra’s closed or sightless eyes juxtaposed with Sanjaya’s focused, intent stare signify the movement from physical blindness to spiritual or mediated insight. Vision is transferred rather than possessed, suggesting that knowledge and perception are relational rather than individual. Their attire i.e., floral crowns, delicately patterned textiles, and translucent fabrics embodies the convergence of earthly sovereignty and aesthetic refinement. These garments do more than denote rank; they visually encode grace, cultivated authority, and an almost luminous dignity. Finally, their mirroring postures; seated closely and leaning slightly inward create a subtle symmetry that conveys mutual vulnerability. This inward inclination suggests the burden of shared knowledge and confidential truth, reinforcing the emotional gravity of their exchange.

Together, gaze, attire, and posture transform the scene into a meditation on insight, power, and the intimate weight of responsibility.



Fig.12. This folio depicts the patriarch Bhishma lying on a bed of arrows as he imparts final instructions to the Pandavas and Krishna before his death at the end of the Kurukshetra War.

This is the scene where the Kurukshetra war has been going on for the tenth day. Bhishma, the grand-uncle of both the Pandavas and Kauravas, was an invincible warrior who possessed the boon of death at his own will. After being hit by numerous arrows from Arjuna, Bhishma fell from his chariot. But instead of touching the ground, his body was sustained only by the arrows that were piercing his body, forming a "bed" for him. Since he had the choice of the time of his death, Bhishma lay on this bed of arrows for 58 nights, awaiting the arrival of Uttarayana (the winter solstice) to give up his life. During this period, Krishna and

the Pandavas visited him. This is the period when the Shanti Parva and Anushasana Parva of the epic take place, where Bhishma delivers lengthy lectures on politics, morals, and dharma. In this Mughal miniature from the Persian *Razmnama*, the episode of Bhishma's final discourse is rendered with remarkable symbolic and aesthetic precision. Bhishma lies horizontally beneath a spreading banyan tree, his body upheld by the bed of arrows that both wound and sanctify him; though defeated, he appears as an elderly, bearded patriarch in regal attire, preserving dignity in suffering. Closest to him sits Krishna, identifiable by his blue complexion and yellow garments, his raised hand poised in a gesture of blessing or philosophical discourse. Behind Krishna are the five Pandavas, attentively receiving their grandfather's final teachings, their vividly colored tunics and Mughal-style helmets reflecting the fusion of Indic epic narrative with sixteenth-century Persianate courtly aesthetics. The banyan tree, emblematic of longevity and eternal life, shelters this liminal moment between life and death, while white birds perched among its branches evoke celestial calm. In the foreground, a stream of water recalls the episode in which Arjuna, moved by compassion, pierced the earth with an arrow to summon the sacred Ganga, Bhishma's divine mother to quench his thirst, thus intertwining filial devotion, cosmic symbolism, and heroic agency within the composition.

This illustration points out the Mughalization of Hindu iconography. The armor, the types of shields, and the facial profiles are typical of the court of Akbar. The scene moves beyond the mythological storytelling and becomes a reflection on sovereignty, law, and ethical kingship. The Mughal imperial ideology attempted to synthesize the Persianate ideals of the 'Just King' with the Indic notions of dharma, and a paradigm of kingship emerged that was based not only on conquest but on moral authority. In this visual narrative, Bhishma embodies the transformative moment from the violence of war to the rule of governance. Even as he is struck by arrows, he is composed, authoritative, and didactic, turning the

battlefield into a classroom for ethics. The listening attitude of the Pandavas draws attention to the fact that proper sovereignty is based on ethical cultivation and refined behavior and not simply on violence. Sovereignty in this depiction is something that is learned, not seized through violence alone. Bhishma is also a symbol of institutional memory. As a dying patriarch who embodies immense knowledge of law, ethics, and statecraft, he occupies a space between a holy past and a political future. This corresponds to the self-fashioning of the Mughal ruler, who was conceptualized as the *Insan-i Kamil* (Perfect Man), a mediator between divine wisdom and worldly governance. Just as Bhishma imparts his accumulated knowledge of ethics before giving up his life, the Mughal ruler situated himself as the inheritor of complex traditions, ranging from Indian to Persian to Timurid, and integrated them into a new imperial discourse. The icon thus enunciates a theology of transition, whereby power must flow from wisdom and sovereignty must be consecrated by ethical discourse.

The presence of Krishna is critical to the ideological paradigm of the *Razmnama* and the Mughal ideology of *sulh-i kul* (universal peace) as expressed during the reign of Akbar. Krishna's proximity to the ruling dynasty symbolically reinforces divine approval, as the legitimacy of sovereignty is contingent upon its correspondence with the transcendent will of God. In the Mughal imperial ideology, the emperor was imagined to be the Zill-Allah (Shadow of God on Earth), a sovereign whose power was derived from the divine mandate and not simply from the sword. The painting's representation of Krishna as a witness to the transfer of sovereignty as counselor would thus indicate that political order is contingent upon the reconciliation of the temporal and the sacred.

Concurrently, the painting is also involved in another act of cultural translation. The *Mahabharata* is translated into specifically Mughal terms of Persianate landscape conventions, courtly textiles, physiognomies, and imperial composition. This 'Persianized'

Mahabharata is more than illustrative; it naturalizes the Sanskrit epic into a Mughal visual and intellectual lexicon. Through this aesthetic naturalization, the Mughals figuratively inscribed themselves into India's sacred past, claiming interpretive dominion over India's civilizational memory. The painting thus becomes at once theological and political: it situates the Mughal emperor as the inheritor of a divinely ordained line of righteous rulers, who could synthesize multiple traditions into one imperial whole.

The compositional structure of the scene reflects what may be described as the Mughal 'Circle of Justice', an enduring concern with hierarchy, balance, and moral order. In the *Razmnama* miniature, Bhishma occupies a visually elevated and central position, even in his wounded state, signaling the primacy of wisdom and seniority. Below and around him, the Pandavas are arranged in disciplined, tiered formation, their seated postures reflecting composure and attentiveness. This spatial choreography echoes the *dastur-ul-amal*; the codes of conduct and ranked decorum that structured the Mughal court under Akbar. Authority is not chaotic but ordered, not horizontal but carefully graduated. Notably, the figures are depicted not in combat but in contemplation. The battlefield has been transformed into a pedagogical arena. In Mughal political theology, heroism was increasingly redefined: the ideal ruler was not merely a conqueror but a listener; one who internalized counsel, exercised restraint, and administered justice with deliberation. The silent, attentive poses of the Pandavas visually articulate this shift from martial valor to ethical governance.

A comparison of political ideals further clarifies this parallelism. Bhishma's authority in the epic derives from vow, lineage, and ascetic discipline; in the Mughal framework, imperial authority emanated from *farr-i izadi* (divine radiance), a celestial legitimacy believed to illuminate the sovereign. Law in the *Mahabharata* is grounded in *dharma*, the cosmic order sustaining the universe; in Mughal governance, this found resonance in the combination of *qanun* (imperial decree) and *sharia* (Islamic law), mediated through the

emperor's interpretive authority. Succession in Bhishma's discourse involves the transmission of wisdom to rightful heirs; similarly, the Mughal ruler styled himself as a paternal figure; the 'Just King' who functioned as spiritual father to his subjects. Thus, the painting becomes a visual allegory of ordered sovereignty, where hierarchy, justice, and divine sanction converge into a coherent political theology. Thus, in this reading, the collapse of previous regimes, including the Delhi Sultanate, could be retroactively applied to the narrative of the epic itself, where hubris, moral failure, and ultimately destruction are the results of autocracy, factionalism, and moral blindness. Thus, for the Mughals, the epic could have been more than a means to an end of cultural integration and political consolidation; it could have been a warning about the transience of power in the Indian subcontinent. The tragic element of the epic reminded the rulers of the impermanence of power and the need for moral vigilance in ruling:

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

In "Akbar's *Mahabharata*: An Indian Epic for the Mughal Emperor", Audrey Truschke also concedes that this translation was not simply a literary undertaking but a calculated political and cultural act that shaped conceptions of sovereignty and social identity in Mughal India. The *Razmnama* project involved systematic translation practices at Akbar's *Maktab Khana* and was deeply embedded in statecraft, serving to articulate Mughal claims to Indian kingship and foster ideological cohesion within a multi-religious empire. Truschke delves on how the translation influenced Persian literature, reconfigured epic narratives to

resonate with Mughal imperial values, and contributed to broader processes of intercultural engagement, ultimately serving as a tool for both governance and legitimization of Mughal rule. The emperor regarded the epic as one of the ‘greatest books of India’ (*mu‘azzam kutub-i Hind*), a vast compendium encompassing narrative (*qisas*), moral exhortation (*mawa‘iz*), political counsel (*masalih*), ethics (*akhlaq*), refined conduct (*adab*), and religious knowledge (*ma‘rifat, itiqadiyat, tariq-i ibadat*). In commissioning its translation i.e., *Razmnama*, Akbar sought not merely to recount the war between the Kurus and Pandavas but to transmit the epic’s encyclopedic body of knowledge to a Persian-reading audience. Although modern scholars often translate *Razmnama* as ‘Book of War’, the term captures only the narrative frame; the deeper intent was to convey the ethical, philosophical, and religious substance embedded within the martial context.

The translation was guided by a principle of literal fidelity. The translators were asked to translate literally, without domestication or theological interpretation, to the point of retaining the invocation to Lord Ganesha instead of substituting it with the more conventional Islamic *bismillah*. This move is significant in that it indicates a deliberate abandonment of religious hierarchies in favor of a commitment to textual integrity. The larger goal was epistemic democratization: to break the monopoly of the Brahmanical priesthood on sacred knowledge and make the text available both within and outside the Hindu community. However, the process was remarkably complex. It involved mediating between two complex cosmologies: Persianate Islam and Sanskritic Hinduism, through collaborative translation practices that negotiated differences in language, concepts, and theology. The text, therefore, is a milestone in intercultural communication, encapsulating the complexities and potentialities of intellectual communication in a plural imperial environment.

The *Razmnama*, in terms of grandeur and splendor, is a massive intellectual undertaking, creating manuscripts with exquisite calligraphy and illustrations, and making an

indelible impact on the Persianate literary tradition in India. It institutionalized intercultural scholarship at the highest imperial level and enabled a level of collaboration between Sanskrit scholars and Persian scholars that had never been seen before. However, paradoxically, the movement had very little social impact. The production of knowledge was strictly limited to the imperial court, which represented an elitist notion of knowledge that did not permeate the social levels. Consequently, the translation movement could not create any kind of intellectual following outside the Mughal imperial circle and eventually petered out after the death of Akbar.

Razmnama moves beyond the conflicts of dynasties to become a massive psychological and moral mirror of humanity in a Mughal imperial setting. Instead of pitting characters into simplistic binaries of good and evil, the *Razmnama* presents extremely complex characters i.e., Bhishma, Karna, Draupadi, Arjuna, and Duryodhana whose deeds are driven by conflicting duties, desires, loyalties, and moral dilemmas. By virtue of its text and illustrations, the *Razmnama* retains the realism of the epic: ambition, jealousy, honor, compassion, revenge, love, and doubt coexist as defining aspects of humanity. The Kurukshetra war is presented not just as a divine duel but as the inevitable result of pride, moral ambivalence, factional rivalries, and political myopia. The genius of the *Razmnama*, like the Sanskrit epic it translates, is in its refusal to provide simplistic moral dualisms. Dharma is revealed to be interpretive and context-dependent rather than strictly absolute, as it reflects the complexities implicit in governance and human agency. Thus, the *Razmnama* becomes a universal imperial epic that transcends linguistic, religious, and cultural differences. Through its translation of the text into Persian and its expression in Mughal idioms, it enhances the representation of humanity in all its complexity: noble and flawed, heroic and vulnerable, constantly caught up in the struggle between righteousness and desire.

A translation revival did take place during the reign of Dara Shikoh, but with entirely different intellectual and political agendas than those of Akbar. Akbar launched the imperial translation project of a grand scale, such as the *Razmnama*, translating key Sanskrit texts into Persian to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and consolidate Mughal rule over a religiously plural empire. His translation project was deeply embedded in statecraft: it aimed at comparative understanding, administrative integration, and the promotion of a useful cosmopolitanism. In contrast, the famous Upanishad translation in the *Sirr-i-Akbar* by Dara was clearly focused on theological integration. Dara claimed that Islam and Hinduism were merely converging on the same metaphysical truth and pointed out similarities between Sufi monism and Advaita Vedanta. While Akbar was interested in rational inquiry, organized debate, and imperial administration, Dara was more interested in mystical insight, spiritual equivalence, and esoteric oneness. These opposing orientations informed their respective political legacies. Akbar's politics consolidated Mughal power and remained relatively stable during his rule, promoting interreligious dialogue as a tool of imperial expedience and universalism. Dara's syncretic vision, on the other hand, was contentious among orthodox and royal circles; after his defeat in the war of succession to Aurangzeb, he was beheaded, and his theological agenda was relegated to the sidelines. In contrast to Akbar's relatively stable approach, which integrated religious engagement with rational politics, Dara's metaphysical universalism was not institutionally supported. Instead, the transient existence of the Mughal translation movement reveals the underlying challenge of establishing intercultural understanding within a political framework in which knowledge, patronage, and power remained the preserve of the elite. Akbar flourished, but Dara lost his head and his kingdom.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Copyright: © 2026 by Dr. Rashmi Sharma Author(s) retain the copyright of their original work while granting publication rights to the journal.

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, allowing others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon it, even for commercial purposes, with proper attribution. Author(s) are also permitted to post their work in institutional repositories, social media, or other platforms.

References

- Abu'l Fazl. (1873–1894). *The Ain-i-Akbari* (H. Blochmann & H. S. Jarrett, Trans.). Asiatic Society.
- Abu'l Fazl. (1907–1939). *The Akbarnama* (H. Beveridge, Trans.). Asiatic Society.
- Ahluwalia, R. (Ed.). (2021). *Reflections on Mughal art and culture*. Niyogi Books.
- Alam, M., & Subrahmanyam, S. (2012). *Writing the Mughal world: Studies on culture and politics*. Columbia University Press.
- Ali, M. A. (2006). *Mughal India: Studies in polity, ideas, society, and culture*. Oxford University Press.
- Beach, M. C. (1981). *The imperial image: Paintings for the Mughal court*. Freer Gallery of Art.
- Bhattacharjee, A., & Sarkar, D. (Eds.). (2024). *Contemporaneity of the Mahabharata narrative: Epic of the moment*. Routledge.
- Brownmiller, S. (1975). *Against our will: Men, women, and rape*. Simon & Schuster.
- Dara Shikoh. (2001). *Majma-ul-bahrain (The mingling of the two oceans)* (M. Mahfuz-ul-Haq, Trans.). Majlis-i Taraqqi-i Adab. (Original work published 1655)
- Das, A. K. (2005). *Paintings of the Razmnama: The book of war*. Mapin Publishing.
- Davis, R. H. (2015). *The Bhagavad Gita: A biography*. Princeton University Press.
- de Mora, J. M. (2005). The “Mahabharata”: A portrait of humanity. *Indian Literature*, 49(1), 137–145.
- Eccleshall, R., Geoghegan, V., Jay, R., & Wilford, R. (1984). *Political ideologies: An introduction*. Hutchinson.
- Eco, U. (2001). *Experiences in translation* (A. McEwen, Trans.). University of Toronto Press.
- Eco, U. (2003). *Mouse or rat? Translation as Negotiation*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

- Haider, N. (2011). Translating texts and straddling worlds: Intercultural communication in Mughal India. In S. Bhattacharya (Ed.), *The varied facets of history: Essays in honour of Aniruddha Ray* (pp. 115–124). Primus Books.
- Keynes, J. M. (1925). Am I a liberal? In *Essays in persuasion* (pp. 311–322). Macmillan.
- Koch, E. (2001). *Mughal art and imperial ideology: Collected essays*. Oxford University Press.
- Kovacs, H. (2022). The preface to the *Razmnama*. In M. Willis (Ed.), *Translation and state: The Mahābhārata at the Mughal court* (pp. 67–122). De Gruyter.
- Laurence, J. (2026). *Akbar's Mahabharata: An Indian epic for the Mughal emperor*. Harvard University Press.
- Shukla, J. C., & Jalali Na'ini, A. A. (Eds.). (1979). *Razmnamah (Mahabharata)* (Vols. 1–4). Tehran University Press.
- Truschke, A. (2016). *Culture of encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal court*. Columbia University Press.
- Truschke, A. (2026). Akbar's Mahabharata: An Indian epic for the Mughal emperor. In *Handbook on Religious Toleration in Comparative Perspective* (pp. xx–xx). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-93898-6_27
- Willis, M. (2012). *The Razmnama: The Persian Mahabharata and the Mughal court*. British Library.
- Willis, M. (Ed.). (2022). *Translation and state: The Mahābhārata at the Mughal court*. De Gruyter.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This research paper is an original work and has not been copied, duplicated, or derived from any previously published material in a manner constituting plagiarism. All external sources have been properly acknowledged and cited in accordance with academic and ethical standards. The manuscript has not been submitted elsewhere for publication and has been checked to ensure it is free from plagiarism, data fabrication, data falsification, or any other form of academic misconduct. Any unintentional errors, if identified, will be corrected promptly. The author also declares that no external funding, grants, or financial support were received for conducting this research or preparing this manuscript, and that the work was completed without any financial influence or sponsorship that could compromise its objectivity or integrity.