A Muslim *Bhagavadgītā*: 'Abd al-Rahman Chishti's Interpretative Translation and its Implications

Ilyse R. Morgenstein Fuerst
Assistant Professor of Religion
University of Vermont

ABSTRACT:
The *Bhagavadgītā*, as one book within the epic text of the *Mahābhārata*, has long held a place of importance in South Asian religious traditions, most notably in Hindu lineages, but also among some non-Hindus. This paper examines a Chishti-order Sufi's interpretation of the *Bhagavadgītā* as a text that could and should address his fellow Muslims. In his translation and commentary, entitled *Mir'āt al-ḥaqā'iq* (Mirror of Realities), 'Abd al-Rahman Chishti (d. 1683 CE) instructed his readers to see the presence of God in the *Bhagavadgītā*, while altering aspects of the text to fit Islamic conceptions of the divine, and drawing upon well-known Hindu philosophical traditions in his explication of the text. This paper argues that religious boundaries are both maintained and conflated within 'Abd al-Rahman Chishti's version of the *Bhagavadgītā* in ways that challenge understandings of his historical time period, which is shared with the early reign of Aurangzeb (d. 1707 CE). A text presumed to be Hindu was understood using both Hindu and Muslim sources, and was presented as a source of proper religious behavior for Muslims in an era usually characterized as one of Islamic orthodoxy; as such, this text exemplifies a fluid, regional articulation of a South Asian Muslim practice and historical evidence to counter prevailing conceptualizations of religion in this period.

KEYWORDS: Islam; Chishti; *Bhagavadgītā*; Sufi; South Asia; Aurangzeb

THE *BHAGAVADGĪTĀ* HAS long been a site of religious and scholarly interpretation, even before the gaze of Orientalists brought the South Asian epic into global light. Its influences are seen the world over, ranging from classical dance performances to the poetry of T. S. Eliot.[1] However, little attention has historically been paid to the ways in which it has been understood, rendered, and even translated by South Asian Muslims; moreover, scant attention has been given to the historical and political impact of these interpretive translations. As such, what follows treats the work of a particular Sufi, with an aim to complicating a well-rehearsed historical narrative; despite its regional, linguistic, and theological specificity, the ways in which 'Abd al-Rahman navigates his audiences' assumed expectations, his religious identity, and the identities of others speak to deeply important issues in and outside of precolonial Muslim South Asian contexts. Put differently, what follows addresses general issues of historical borders, and how we categorize, explain, and understand religious history. First, I explore how the Sufi 'Abd al-Rahman Chishti (d. 1683 CE) translated and commented upon the *Bhagavadgītā* with the express purpose of enlightening his peers as to the presence of divine wisdom in the text. Second, using 'Abd al-Rahman's text as a case study, this paper will show how malleable religious boundaries between Muslims and Hindus were negotiated and contested, Last, I argue that because 'Abd al-Rahman sees the *Bhagavadgītā* and his translation thereof as another textual model of religious behavior for Muslims, facile religious characterizations of this epoch merit nuance and rethinking.

'Abd al-Rahman Chishti (d. 1683 CE) belonged to the Chishti Sufi order (*tariqa*), as his eponym implies. The Chishtis have long held an important place in Indian and South Asian

[1] A number of scholars have commented on the relationship between Eliot and Indic, often Sanskritic, texts, especially the *Bhagavadgītā*; such allusions are especially noticeable in *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*. See, as examples: Cleo McNelly Kearns, *T. S. Eliot and Indic traditions: a Study in Poetry and Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); K. S. Narayana Rao, "T. S. Eliot and the Bhagavad-Gita," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Winter, 1963), pp. 572-578.

Islam. As the most influential and largest Sufi order in the region, they are often noted for their ties to local traditions: Chishti Sufis, including noted luminaries Mu'īn al-Dīn Chishti (d. 1230 CE), Farid ad-Din Ganj-i Shakar (often referred to as Baba Farid; d. 1265), and Nizam ad-Din Awliya (d. 1325 CE), wrote in ways that were clearly informed by their Hindu and often yogic counterparts. While in some ways a more obscure figure than his illustrious predecessors, 'Abd al-Rahman treats the subject of Hindu epic and theology in a typically Chishti manner, investigating it, thinking about it, and incorporating it into overlapping Muslim, Sufi, and Chishti worldviews.

In fact, 'Abd al-Rahman has no compunction about positioning Islam as *the* religion. He does not, for example, suggest that the *Bhagavadgītā* is as religiously accurate, pleasing to God, or fundamentally devoted to the Divine *as* Islamic sources. Instead, 'Abd al-Rahman Chishti, as we will see below, argues that the seemingly Hindu text, when read correctly, contains within it kernels of truth—that is to say, insofar as parts of it are correct, those parts are Islam. In so doing, he situates Islam within a South Asian milieu, theologically positioning it within even non-Islamic texts. Yet, it would be inaccurate to suggest his interpretative translation demonstrates a syncretism between Islam and Hinduism both because of the theoretical shallowness of such a claim,[2] as well

[2] Many scholars have problematized and even dismissed outright models of cultural interaction that rely on syncretism. Generally speaking, these critiques take issue with the idea that one, monolithic entity would encounter another similarly monolithic entity, and thus change or produce a third, notably "mixed" object. This oversimplifies what are, undoubtedly, complex, involved, and multifaceted processes between ever-shifting ideologies. See, as examples: Tony K. Stewart and Carl W. Ernst, "Syncretism," in Peter J. Claus and Margaret A. Mills eds., *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 2003); Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1-10; Sheldon Pollack, "The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300-1300: Transculturation, Vernacularization, and the Question of Ideology," in Jan E. M. Houben, ed., *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit: Contributions to the History of the Sanskrit Language* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 197-247.

as the fact that his work does not support such a reading. Rather than such a hybrid model, I suggest that ʻAbd al-Rahman's work demonstrates how South Asian Muslims discursively engaged local traditions with great sophistication and familiarity, while still simultaneously asserting the superiority of their own tradition.

Yet, before delving into ʻAbd al-Rahman's distinctive translation of the *Bhagavadgītā* (and thus his particular vantage point) as evidence to challenge broader historiographical claims, it is worth briefly exploring the extensive historical and contextual space from which his translation emerges. What were hallmarks of the Chishti order? Traditional hagiographies link it to its eponymous founder, Muʻīn al-Dīn Chishti (d. 1230 CE). As is typical in hagiographies, there are a number of explanations for how Muʻīn al-Dīn came to Hindustan, and how he proved his superior religious ability in such a way that a new Sufi order would be founded. In one such hagiographical reference Muʻīn al-Dīn is said to have wandered from Baghdad (where he had conducted his studies) through Persia, and on to Delhi in order to fulfill a dream in which the Prophet Muhammad came to him and instructed him to go to Ajmer, a small city in Rajasthan. He dutifully follows the instructions of the Prophet, but upon arriving in Ajmer, he encounters the Hindu feudal prince of the region who demanded that Muʻīn al-Dīn leave his land. The Sufi refused to leave, and instead issued a curse that stated that should the prince dispatch his army, the men will be able to move freely, but their cavalry of camels would not be able to leave the field until Muʻīn al-Dīn was allowed to remain. Of course, Muʻīn al-Dīn's words come true, and the prince is bewildered at his inability to move his forces; eventually, he grants the Sufi a piece of land, the very land upon which Muʻīn al-Dīn's shrine or *dargāh* is said to stand today. In many versions of this narrative, the story goes one step further: the Hindu prince not only concedes to Muʻīn al-Dīn's demands, but upon witnessing such miraculous feats, converts to Islam and becomes a disciple of the Sufi master as well.[3]

[3] This story is repeated many times, but see, as examples: Dalīl al-ʻArifin, *Malfuzat-i khavajah Muʻīn al-dīn Sajazi Chishti* (Delhi:

While many scholars have dealt with issues of hagiography and their varied roles on both praxis and historical memory,[4] these issues are not entirely prudent to the study at hand. What is important, however, is the way in which the primary foundation narrative of the *dargāh* at Ajmer is structured. Specifically, the Hindu prince is established as an inferior: his military power stands as no match to Mu'īn al-Dīn's religious might. I contend that this establishes a notable pattern for Chishti hagiographies insofar as the Hindu represents ignorance and disbelief—both in God and in the Chishti's unique relationship to that God. By locating the founder of the lineage over and above the Hindu prince, we see a narrative that derides both political authority (a source of contention elsewhere in Chishti histories) as well as the particular nature of Hindu authority. This will serve as an interesting backdrop to 'Abd al-Rahman's insistence upon a Hindu text's distinctive potential for Islamic learning. This also helps highlight the complexities of historical narrative—rooted, at once, in hagiography and legend as well as historical "fact"—at play within 'Abd al-Rahman's landscape. Further, the hagiographical tradition shows complex relationships between Muslims, Hindus, power, and representations of "correct" religion that contributes to a nuanced examination of translation—not only the translation of 'Abd-al Rahman, but also the ongoing, multidirectional translations of cultural and religious ideas.

The above short hagiographical anecdote thus demonstrates

Mujtaba'ī, 1883); P. M. Currie, *The Shrine and Cult of Mu'in al-din Chishti of Ajmer* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 69-72.

[4] The following examples are illustrative, but not exhaustive: Carl W. Ernst, *Eternal Garden* (Albany : State University of New York Press 1992); Richard M. Eaton, "The Political and Religious Authority of the Shrine of Bābā Farīd" and "Court of Man, Court of God: Local Perceptions of the Shrine of Bābā Farīd, Pakpattan, Punjab," in *Essays on Islam and Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 203-246; and Marcia K. Hermansen and Bruce B. Lawrence, "Indo-Persian *Tazkiras* as Memorative Communications," in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, eds. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000), 149-175.

three major points about both the Chishti order and its founder. First, the vital role of hagiography for historical examination is undeniable, and the manner through which each Sufi is linked to another or, more often, to a luminary exemplar, is just as important as concrete historical evidence. Second, the Chishti order remembers its founding as miraculous in nature: Muʿīn al-Dīn single-handedly and nonviolently thwarts an army, and in turn is rewarded with what remains the most important Chishti site in South Asia, Ajmer. Finally, this anecdote stands to demonstrate the Chishti order's perceived relationship and history with the local Hindu population. The relationship between Hindus (including *yogis* [or, in the Persian, *jogis*], *sannyasins* or renunciants, Brahmins, royalty of various stripes, and others) and Muslims (including Sufis, laity, and in some cases the supposedly more orthodox ulema) was a fixture of Chishti history, hagiography, and the development of ritual practice from its own self-conscious outset. This final point is central to the story of ʿAbd al-Rahman and his interpretative translation of the *Bhagavadgītā*.

The Chishti order is distinctly South Asian.[5] Chishti practice has long been tied to *dargāhs* or shrines, the sites of deceased Sufi *pirs*, which are above all places of *baraka* or blessing. Additionally, these locations served as physical homes for Sufi initiates and masters over the centuries, and continue to serve as pilgrimage sites, tourist destinations, and community centers across South Asia. The most famous and most visited shrines include Muʿīn al-Dīn's in Ajmer and Nizam ad-Dīn's in Delhi; both are sites of pilgrimage, religious education, and rituals that include *zikr* (lit., "remembrance" which usually includes chanting, meditation, and recitation), *sama'* (lit., "listening," which usually refers to music and in some cases dance), and *qawwali* (a South Asian style of singing that incorporates a variety of Muslim sacred sources like the Qur'an, hadith, and Sufi poetry). It is from this context that ʿAbd al-Rahman Chishti emerged. He belonged to the Sābirī branch of

[5] For a comprehensive investigation of the Chisthī order, see: Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

the Chishti order, and was named shaykh after his brother passed away, transferring the title to him in 1623 CE. His learning and writing reflected broad, intimate knowledge of Islamic as well as Hindu texts, a contextually normal—if not normative—biographical fact. Sābirī Chishtis specifically, and members of the Chishti order more generally, are usually depicted as open to Hindu forms of knowledge, including Hindu mysticism, mystical glosses of texts, Hindu philosophy, and other Hindu scholarship, like yogic disciplines.[6] ʻAbd al-Rahman demonstrates some of these characteristics by his apparent knowledge of Hindawi and Sanskrit, and by his interpretive translation itself.

ʻAbd al-Rahman lived apart from the major Sufi and political centers of the Mughal era: his base was in Dhanīthī, a small village nearer to Lucknow than any other major city, but still not particularly close to this major hub. Despite living geographically apart from the political center of the Mughal Empire in Delhi, it is worth noting that ʻAbd al-Rahman's life coincides with part of the reign of Muḥī al-Dīn Muḥammad, better known as Aurangzeb (d. 1707 CE; r. 1658-1707 CE). Aurangzeb has gained notoriety as a proponent of a more orthodox Islam than his predecessors; he is widely cited for having restrictive, even bigoted policies toward non-Muslims. It is often mentioned that during his reign, Hindu temples became targets for destruction. While Richard Eaton notes that some fifteen temples were destroyed during Aurangzeb's reign, he is careful to locate the destruction of religious edifices as, in many ways, a South Asian discourse of power, control, and

[6] Carl W. Ernst has written a number of articles on yoga as interpreted by South Asian Sufi Muslims. See the following examples: "Two Versions of a Persian Text on Yoga and Cosmology, Attributed to Shaykh Mu`in al-Din Chishti," *Elixir* 2 (2006), 69-76, 124-5. Revised edition ed. Scott Kugle, in *Sufi Meditation and Contemplation: Timeless Wisdom from Mughal India* (New Lebanon, NY: Suluk Press/Omega Publications, 2012), 167-9, 181-92; "Situating Sufism and Yoga," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 15:1 (2005), 15-43.

territorial gain.[7] Nevertheless, as Katherine Butler Brown notes:

> Aurangzeb is renowned in Indian history for his orthodox Islamic politico-religious ideology, which allegedly led to the widespread repression of many Indian religious and cultural expressions throughout his reign.[8]

Indeed, the infamy of Aurangzeb's orthodoxy is often juxtaposed with Akbar's famed (and perhaps overstated) pluralistic policies.[9] Yet, how such orthodoxy affected his courts and subjects remains a subject of debate. Brown has insightfully examined the question of Aurangzeb's supposed Islamic ban on music as an emblem of his *imagined* sovereignty; she concludes that the historical fascination with such a ban stands to reinforce political and historical narratives about the Mughal's reign, but does not fully represent the historical reality nor his relationship to music (and, for that matter, religion).[10]

For my purposes, it is important to note that 'Abd al-Rahman translated the *Bhagavadgītā* both from the Sanskrit into Persian as well as from a Hindu text into a Muslim one in the midst of an era that is often characterized by its orthodoxy, repression, and even zealous fanaticism.[11] In this context, one might question the impact and influence of Sufi orders: if Aurangzeb was intent on restoring relationships with the ulema, it may seem that, unlike previous Mughal eras, the Chishti Sufis would have necessarily experienced decreased

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[7] Richard Eaton, "Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States," in *Essays on Islam and Indian History*, Richard Eaton, ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 104-114.

[8] Katherine Butler Brown, "Did Aurangzeb Ban Music? Questions for the Historiography of His Reign," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Jan., 2007), 79.

[9] Catherine Asher and Cynthia Talbot, *India Before Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 129-131.

[10] Ibid., 82, 118-120.

[11] John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 172.

imperial support, prestige, or authority. But while his policies demonstrate an obvious change from those of Akbar, they built on shifts made by the two emperors between them, Jahangir (d. 1627 CE; r. 1605-1627 CE) and Shah Jahan (d. 1666 CE; r. 1627-1658 CE). More importantly, however, we might be accustomed to modernist orthodoxies that aim to reform Sufism,[12] but this does not accurately depict Aurangzeb's relationship to Sufis. Indeed, Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence note that the Mughal tradition of Chishti *dargah* patronage continued under Aurangzeb.[13]

Chishti Sufis were not the only group that benefited from Aurangzeb's rule. Simon Digby references the political and religious authority of Sufis in his preface to his translation of the *Malfūzāt-i Naqshbandiyya*, pointing out the ways in which Chishti and Naqshbandi Sufis competed for Mughal attention and patronage across Aurangzeb's reign.[14] Digby further demonstrates the complicated and ongoing relationship of Sufis to the Mughal throne: while discussing the complicated milieu of Deccani Sufism during Aurangzeb's military campaigns, Digby mentions the fact that Sufis (specifically Naqshbandi *khwāja*s) were maintained "on handsome pensions by the emperor."[15] Using the *Malfūzāt-i Naqshbandiyya* as but one example, Nile Green notes that the southernmost reach of the Mughal Empire under Aurangzeb, in the city named for him, flourished in large part due to multiple Sufi groups.[16] Although some have pointed out that the Naqshbandi and Chishti orders

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[12] See: Charles Kurzman, "Introduction: The Modernist Islamic Movement," in *Modernist Islam 1840-1940*, Charles Kurzman, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 19-20.

[13] Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 101.

[14] Simon Digby, *Sufis and Soldiers in Awrangzeb's Deccan* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), x-xi.

[15] Ibid., 21.

[16] Nile Green, "Geography, Empire and Sainthood in the Eighteenth-Century Muslim Deccan," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (2004), 207-208.

varied and were sometimes at odds,[17] what is important here is the fact that Aurangzeb supported Sufi orders, and as such it is worthwhile to examine his reign as one in which pluralities of Islam (and Sufism, for that matter) continued to flourish.

While ʻAbd al-Rahman and his interpretative translation clearly complicate the received explanation of Aurangzeb's legacy, his work also demonstrates the sort of intellectual and religious discourse happening apart from political and religious centers of the Mughal Empire. In other words, in addition to offering nuance to Aurangzeb's reign, ʻAbd al-Rahman's text also seems to suggest that Aurangzeb's orthodox policies may not have had a great impact across the empire.

ʻAbd al-Rahman's Interpretive Text: *Mir'āt al-haqāiq*.

ʻAbd al-Rahman Chishti's translation and commentary of the *Bhagavadgītā* is entitled *Mir'āt al-h aq ā'iq* (or *Mirror of Realities*).[18] Though not his most celebrated work,[19] *Mir'āt al-*

[17] K. A. Nizami, *State and Culture in Medieval India* (New Delhi: Adam Publishers, 1985), 160.

[18] It is worth noting that as part of his dissertation, Roderic Vassie (from whose work I draw below) compiled an edited Persian edition of the *Mir'āt al-h aq ā'iq*.[18] This edited text is based upon two of the three manuscripts known to exist. The first manuscript is: ʻAbd al-Rahman Chishti, *Mir'āt al-h aq ā'iq*, (British Library, Persian Collection, OR 1883 IX); the second is ʻAbd al-Rahman Chishti, *Mir'āt al-h aq ā'iq* (NQ 57 in the *Descriptive catalogue of Arabic, Persian & Urdu rnss. in the Library of the University of Bombay* by ʻAbd al-Qãdir Sarfarã). Vassie is apparently one of three authors to spend significant time with ʻAbd al-Rahman Chishti (See Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, 211, 221. See also: Hameed ud-Din, "ʻAbd-Al-Rahman Cesti," Encyclopædia Iranica, I/2, p. 146). As such, I necessarily rely not only on his edited text, but also on his commentary, as one of my only available interlocutors; I realize, of course, the limitations of such a narrow conversation, but maintain that it is this type of narrow, historical evidence that helps further complicate and nuance historiographical inquiry—the objective of this essay.

[19] This is not, however, his most famous work, *Mir'āt al-asrār*, which is a hagiographical text that traces the Chishti lineage and other notable Sufi personages.

h aq āiq demonstrates the Chishti order's typical comfort with Hindu traditions. It expresses, moreover, a distinctive way of imagining many paths to God in which paths other than Islam are, more or less, deficient. This is to say that while 'Abd al-Rahman works from the *Bhagavadgītā*, and makes connections between Islam and Hindu theological conceptualizations, ultimately his interpretation rests on the idea that Islam is the one true, pure path to God ("the sublime goal," or *ūd-i bīrang*).

'Abd al-Rahman's text interprets the *Bhagavadgītā*, which is, itself, the book of the larger Hindu epic *Mahābhārata* in which Lord Krishna reveals himself as God—and, for many, Krishna reveals himself in a way akin to a monotheistic God—and then describes proper worship and action to Arjuna, who is typically regarded as the hero of the epic. 'Abd al-Rahman's comfort and familiarity with Hindu textual traditions is not merely interesting because it flies in the face of problematic, teleological assumptions that Hindu and Muslim traditions (and, by extension, people) are incompatible—thus justifying the modern nation-states of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.[20] 'Abd al-Rahman's fluency is not merely interesting because it gets at issues of a constructed, regional identity unique to South Asia that challenges preconceived notions of his location. His work *Mir'āt al-h aq ā'iq* articulates ways in which Muslims should read the *Bhagavadgītā* for their own personal religious gain. It does not, however, attempt to make the *Bhagavadgītā* acceptable by way of excusing it for its "problems," but rather 'Abd al-Rahman seems to envision the text as essential for Muslim and especially Chishti practice. In other words, 'Abd al-Rahman's interpretation of the *Bhagavadgītā* assumes its truth, and attempts to translate that truth to his peers. The consequence for this is twofold: first, an "Islamicized" *Bhagavadgītā* that is, as will be seen below, rather different from any mainline Hindu *Bhagavadgītā;* and second, this *Bhagavadgītā* is imagined to be part and parcel of Islamic praxis, which not only demonstrates a distinctive gloss, but also a

[20] Carl W. Ernst, ""Reconfiguring South Asian Islam: The 18th and 19th centuries." *Journal of Comparative Islamic Studies* 5/2 (2009), 248.

direct challenge to simplistic conceptualizations of the "orthodoxy" of his era.

Certainly, 'Abd al-Rahman was neither the first nor the most popularized Muslim translator of Hindu texts. There have been a number of Persian translations of the Sanskrit epic. Indeed, during his reign, Emperor Jalāl al-Dīn Muhammad Akbar (r. 1556-1605 CE) ordered a massive translation program of Hindu theological and philosophical texts, as well as Sanskrit plays and literature. This perhaps drew upon other, similar programs of translation—or at least stands in a lineage of translation—including that of King Zayn al-Abidin of Kashmir (d. 1470 CE).[21] Dara Shikoh, Akbar's grandson, and Fayzi, a courtly poet and author in Akbar's court, each penned comprehensive translations of the *Bhagavadgītā*, among other translations of equally vital Hindu religious and philosophical texts. Additionally, Abu'l Fazl, Akbar's courtly scribe and, as it happens, Fayzi's brother, also contributed to this literature.

Dara Shikoh was himself affiliated with Sufi orders, including the Qadiriyya, and he took an interest in Sanskrit, Hindu texts, and Hindu philosophy; he wrote a well-known translation of the *Upanis ads* often referred to as *Sirr-e Akbar* or *The Greatest Mystery*.[22] As such, not only were there precedents for 'Abd al-Rahman's *Mir'āt al-h aq ā'iq*, some scholars have even argued that his work stands in a direct lineage with those commissioned by Akbar.[23] However, these aforementioned translators focused on *translation* as such, before interpretation—in other words, their works were attempts to replicate the original Sanskrit in Persian as accurately as

[21] See, as examples: Mohibbul Hasan, *Kashmir Under the Sultans* (New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2005 [1956]), and Aziz Ahmad, "Trends in the Political Thought of Medieval Muslim India," *Studia Islamica*, No. 17 (1962), pp. 121-130.

[22] This is available in a printed form in two versions, one Persian and one Sanskrit. Dārā Shikūh, *Sirr-i akbar*, with an introduction in Persian and English by Tara Chand (Tehran: Taban, 1957); Dārā Shikūh, *Sirre Akbara*, with an introduction and translation of some exegetical materials in Hindi by Salamā Mahaphūza (New Delhi: Meharacanda Lachamanadasa Pablikes ansa, 1988).

[23] Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, 61.

possible, with minimal additional commentary or exegesis.[24] ʻAbd al-Rahman's translation is far more an interpretation of the Hindu epic than a strict translation. What is interesting is both the possible connection to previous translations as well as the seeming rarity of that connection during the reign of Aurangzeb.

It is worth pausing and briefly problematizing the role of Sanskrit, as well as my use of phrases or terms like "original." Sanskrit as the original language for the *Bhagavadgītā* does not imply that there was *one* Ur-text; moreover, as many scholars have shown, the multiplicity of Sanskrit texts as well as vernacular *Bhagavadgītā*s provides for a range of interpretations across South Asia's history and present.[25] The variety in textual sources itself does not come close to accounting for interpretive traditions that had and continue to have their own literary afterlives and effects upon the reading of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhagavadgītā*. All of which is to point out that scholars cannot and should not point to one primary text from which all other versions are derivations: there is no evidence for such an Ur-text, but even if there were, the ramifications of the vast proliferation of the epic surely affect its very reading, interpretation, and translation. All of this stated, I use terms like "original" here to indicate the unidentified version of the Sanskrit text from which ʻAbd al-Rahman works.

Despite links between his work on the epic and those that preceded him, Abd al-Rahman's translation does not stand so neatly within the tradition of courtly translations: he interprets not for the sake of interpretation, but rather with the express purpose of convincing other Muslims of the text's veracity. His audience is patently Muslim, and most likely members of his own Chishti Sufi order. Within the first lines of his commentary and translation, *Mir'āt al-h aq ā'iq*, ʻAbd al-Rahman's intended audience is made clear: by using technical terminology, well-

[24] Carl W. Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Persian and Arabic Translations from Sanskrit." *Iranian Studies* 36 (2003), 174, 185-187.

[25] See, as but one example, the discussion of textual variety in: J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Mahabharata, Volume 1: Book 1: The Book of the Beginning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), xxiii-xxv.

established Sufi concepts, and Qur'anic references, one can appreciate that he wrote for a Muslim, and likely Sufi, reader. For example in his introduction, he utilized the phrase "*asrar-i tawhid*," meaning "secrets of unification," a concept that will be discussed more fully below.

Significantly, in the introduction to the work, 'Abd al-Rahman states that he penned the *Mir'āt al-h aq ā'iq* to "do for the Bhagavadgita what Shaykh Sufi Qubjahānī had done for the *Yoga Vāsis t ha* in his *Kashf al-kunūz*."[26] The *Yoga Vāsis t ha* is a text traditionally attributed to Vālmīki, more famously known for the *Rāmāyana*. In it, the sage Vāsis t ha teaches Rāma about *advaita* or the principle of nonduality, a concept that stresses the illusory nature of the mundane world—and a concept that is, as we will see below, meaningful for 'Abd al-Rahman. 'Abd al- Rahman's text is similar to that of Qubjahānī insofar as both authors utilize Sufi, prophetic, and Qur'anic frameworks to locate Sanskritic or Hindu ideas within properly Islamic contexts. We see, then, that 'Abd al-Rahman located himself within a Indo-Persian intellectual lineage, one that purposefully set about interpreting Hindu texts and, by extension, theologies or philosophies for a Muslim Sufi audience. 'Abd al-Rahman's citation of Qubjahānī also indicates that this set of interpretations of Hindu texts bore import for Chishtis and held merit within this historical moment. This again lends some nuance to the work of his contemporaries and contemporary context.

Beyond this direct statement of purpose and intention, there are other indicators that 'Abd al-Rahman's text was written for an educated, well-versed Muslim audience. He used technical Sufi terms, popular Chishti and Sufi verses (often in Persian) to support his ideas, and technical abbreviations for Qur'anic verses, indicating his translation was intended for his peers, i.e., well-educated Muslim men, most likely inducted into Sufi orders. His reliance on Qur'anic verses and Sufi cosmologies

[26] Roderic Vassie, "'Abd al-Rahman Chishtī & the Bhagavadgita: 'Unity of Religion' Theory in Practice," in *The Legacy of Mediaeval Persian Sufism*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (London: Khaniqahi Nimatullahi Publications, 1992), 368.

further indicates that his version of the epic was specifically designed to demonstrate the *Bhagavadgītā*'s inherent, palpable, and beneficial philosophical and spiritual precepts to his Chishti contemporaries.

As but one example, 'Abd al-Rahman Chishti focuses on the oft-cited "People of the Book," or *ahl-e kitab*, a Qur'anic understanding of the groups of people, typically understood to include Jews, Christians and Sabians, who share in similar divine revelations. We in the Western academy today recognize this as a corollary to our contemporary concept of Abrahamic traditions, perhaps. In South Asia, in addition to Jews, Christians, and Sabians, some Muslim theologians, jurists, and Sufi commentators expanded the traditional "People of the Book" definitions to include Hindus, following their Persian contemporaries and predecessors for whom "People of the Book" often included Zoroastrians. Some have argued broadly including Hindus into a Muslim framework was a politicized strategy to fold majority Hindus into the minority Muslim rule and empire. Many Muslims including 'Abd al-Rahman make cogent arguments for understanding Hindus as a people with revealed scripture, however.

As such, a second example of 'Abd al-Rahman's use of the Qur'an is his gloss on Surat Yunus 47: "Every people has its messenger." In fact, he spends a good deal of time at the start of his interpretive translation expounding upon Jan-i Janan's explication of this Qur'anic verse, which understands "every people" to be broadly applied beyond the known non-Muslims of the Qur'an (i.e. Jews, Christians, and Sabians).[27] Following the Qur'an and a commentary thereof, 'Abd al-Rahman understands Krishna as the messenger for Hindus.[28] Put

[27] Shah Ghulam 'Ali Dihlavi, *Maqamat-i Mazhari: Ahval wa Malfuzat wa Maktubat-i Hazrat Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan Shahid* (Lahore: Urdu Science Board, 2001). See also a recent English translation: SherAli Tareen, "The Perils and Possibilities of Inter-Religious Translation: Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan on the Hindus," *Sagar: A South Asia Research Journal*, University of Texas at Austin South Asia Institute, Volume 21, (May 2014), pp. 43-51.

[28] Roderic Vassie, "Persian interpretations of the *Bhagavadgita* in the Mughal Period, with special reference to 'Abd al-Rahman Chishti "

differently, ʻAbd al-Rahman applied the famous *sura* to demonstrate two distinct—though related—issues: first, he positions Krishna as a leader of and messenger to his people; and second, because Krishna is realized to be this messenger within the *Bhagavadgītā*, it is a revealed book. ʻAbd al-Rahman therefore squarely places the Hindu epic and its hero within a Qur'anic understanding of revelation and prophethood, and suggests that Hindu learning and texts are compatible with those of Islam, though ultimately subservient to it.

As I mentioned previously, there were other, more literal translations of the *Bhagavadgītā*—and these do not necessarily follow ʻAbd al-Rahman's assertions. However, ʻAbd al-Rahman Chishti did not merely translate the *Bhagavadgītā*, and litter his translation with references from Islamic textual traditions; his translation is not, as stated above, a strict translation; it also yields interesting and innovative commentary. In fact, unlike other, earlier Mughal-era translations of the epic, his version purposefully altered and ignored passages that did not fit his interpretation of the text as appropriate, proper, or a model for Muslims. In other words, his interpretative translation includes, in the main parts of the text, radical changes to the Sanskrit that are simply not present in those other Mughal-era works. Furthermore, because his interpretation argues that the *Bhagavadgītā* is compatible with Islam, and, in its most extreme reading, even aims to absorb the *Bhagavadgītā* into Chishti practices, ʻAbd al-Rahman makes the following claim: Islamic practice and even aspects of its textual tradition rely on this patently South Asian, Hindu source. While this claim is robust, it is not necessarily unlike that of Dara Shikoh, who insisted that in order to understand the Qur'an one must read the *Upanishads*.[29]

Given the way in which Aurangzeb ascended the throne—that is, by defeating elder brother Dara Shikoh—ʻAbd al-Rahman's interpretation seems to fly in the face of what we

(Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1988), 24, 48-50, 52.

[29] Irfan A Omar, "Where the Two Oceans Meet: an Attempt at Hindu-Muslim Rapprochement in the Thought of Dara Shikuh," *Journal Of Ecumenical Studies* 44, no. 2 (2009): 303-314. Cf.: Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism," 186.

might expect of his reign. If we were to accept the characterization of Aurangzeb's reign as one of zealotry, orthodoxy, and a reestablished, strong ulema, perhaps we would not expect 'Abd al-Rahman's text in its context. It is possible that 'Abd al-Rahman Chishti, as a matter of both time and location, simply ceased to be affected by these ideological shifts at the court: far from the political center, and overlapping with the beginning of Aurangzeb's reign, it is possible these changes did not reach him. In other words, it is possible 'Abd al-Rahman's networks remained more closely aligned with those of Akbar's court. However, to suggest that he was somehow not a product of his time is, itself, a troubling claim, and not one I intend to make. Rather, I maintain that his work, while distinctive and even "un-orthodox," expresses an intellectual, religious milieu far more multifaceted than has been typically portrayed.

The primary example of the radical changes 'Abd al-Rahman makes in order to articulate its compatibility and import to Muslims is found in the climax of the *Bhagavadgītā*. Here, 'Abd al- Rahman Chishti fundamentally changed the dialogue and its implications at this key juncture, in which Krishna reveals himself to be God to Arjuna. This is a particularly long exchange between Krishna and Arjuna, so I have excerpted the most important phrases from the Sanskrit version of the text:

> I am the father of this world, its mother, the Placer and Grandfather, the object of knowledge... the syllable OM... I am the goal, master, lord, witness, abode, refuge, friend, source, destruction and continuity... I am immortality and death, that which exists and that which does not.[30]

Given Krishna's revelation, most mainline Hindu interpreters—and some Muslim translators like Dara Shikoh—claim or support a claim that Krishna is either the monotheistic God, or one way of imagining an all-powerful divinity.

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[30] *Bhagavadgītā* 31.9.1.

'Abd al-Rahman glosses these verses in a manner that is distinctly Sufi: Krishna, he claims, has not revealed himself to be God, but instead merely realized there can be no duality— that is, there is no unique self, there is only the Divine; all things are one. In fact, in 'Abd al- Rahman's text, Krishna adds an important characteristic to his litany, as seen below. His interpretive translation of the same passage cited above reads:

> I am the master, lord, home, asylum, friend, majesty, destruction and continuity...I am life and death. I am the Truth.[31]

If the line "I am the Truth" is a notable addition to our eyes, it would have certainly stood out to 'Abd al-Rahman's contemporaries, as it mirrors a famous—or perhaps more aptly, infamous—outburst of an exemplary Sufi, Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922 CE). Al-Hallaj is remembered to have exclaimed: "*anā 'l-haqq*," or "I am the Truth."

These are, of course, the very words that 'Abd al-Rahman places in the mouth of Krishna. By making Krishna utter this phrase, 'Abd al-Rahman creates an avenue through which Krishna can be read not as God—a blasphemous, incorrect understanding from a Muslim vantage point—but instead as a part of the Sufi lineage. Krishna is like al-Hallaj, a revered, foundational Sufi figure, and as such has merely realized there can be no duality. Krishna, in other words, merely mirrors al-Hallaj's famous outburst.

Despite evidence that 'Abd al-Rahman is familiar with classic Hindu philosophy, he does not follow the evident and well-accepted Hindu gloss, often centered on the commentaries, interpretations, and exegesis of Ramanuja (d. 1137 CE) and his disciples,[32] which states that Krishna is in fact the highest form

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[31] 'Abd al-Rahman in Vassie, 148-149.

[32] Ramanuja is, of course, the philosophical counter to Śankara insofar as he truly was a *Vai ava* philosopher, taking Krishna's revelation as factual, and placing Vishnu at the head of the pantheon for worship. Śankara instead glosses Krishna within the *Bhagavadgītā* in a similar manner to 'Abd al-Rahman, as will be discussed just below. For Ramanuja's commentary, see for example, *Sri Ramanuja Gita Bhasya:*

of God and is to be worshipped.[33] Instead, immediately following Krishna's disclosure, 'Abd al-Rahman inserts the infamous verse from al-Hallaj thereby placing Krishna—and the *śloka*s (verses) in which he outwardly declares himself God—within a context of Sufism, and apparently values dissolving the boundaries between the individual and God.[34] Furthermore, 'Abd al-Rahman also inserts verses from Shaykh Nizam ad-Din Awliya and Ghaws al-'Azam, both of which point to the importance, value, and superiority of the type of union with God that extinguishes the self, and allows the individual at the highest level to proclaim his unity with God.[35] These well-known Sufis, and their respective places within a lineage of saints, effectively help 'Abd al-Rahman assert that Krishna can likewise be read—and accepted—as a saint within the same Sufi and/or Chishti framework as well as draw upon very specific understandings of *tawhid*.[36]

This is significant for a few reasons. Obviously, 'Abd al-Rahman changes the climax of the text, where Arjuna and, vitally, the reader/listener learn the true nature of Krishna. Compared to the Sanskrit original, instead of learning Krishna's divine *nature*, we come to know that Krishna has divine *realization*—that is, he realizes the unity of God. For Muslims,

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with text in Devanagari and English rendering, trans. Svami Adidevananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1991).

[33] J. A. B. van Buitenen, trans., *Bhagavadgītā*, *Bilingual Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 74 and 75, verse 11.55 [33.55]. The term here is "*madbhaktaḥ*" which is, literally, "devoted to me."

[34] Vassie, "Persian interpretations of the *Bhagavadgita* in the Mughal Period," 57.

[35] Nizam ad-Din in 'Abd al-Rahman, trans. Vassie: "Where our essence is you cannot see a thing./ If we say God [is] there we are unbelievers," 244. Ghaws al-'Azam in 'Abd al-Rahman, trans. Vassie: "I am God! I am God! I am God!," 244.

[36] An anonymous reviewer of this essay insightfully pointed out the uses and popularity of al-Hallaj amongst some Hindus; while tangential here, it is worth noting his influence across religious boundaries. See: Anshu Malhotra, "Panths and Piety in the Nineteenth Century: The Gulabdasis of Punjab" in *Punjab Reconsidered: History, Culture, and Practice*, eds. Anshu Malhotra and Farina Mir (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

and especially Muslims in Sufi orders like ʻAbd al-Rahman, the ability to have divine realization is especially salient, and alludes to the special religious knowledge of other celebrated Sufis. Al-Hallaj's famous instantaneous realization is but one example of a larger Sufi concept at play—a concept with which ʻAbd al-Rahman infused his interpretative translation: *tawhid*.

The idea of *tawhid*, the indivisibility or oneness of God, is arguably one of the most important theological, philosophical, and "mystical" concepts in all Islamic thought. Most understandings of Islam—the various orthodoxies and heterodoxies that have contended and contested since Islam's inception—have a central idea about *tawhid*. For Sufis, following the intellectual lineages of luminaries like al-Hallaj and Ibn ʻArabi (d. 1240), *tawhid* often comes very close to the concept of nondualism—the concept that there is no difference between God and the human.[37] More often than not, however, *tawhid* in a Sufi context is a more qualified nondualism: there is a unique God who is both separate and different from, and yet utterly united to and intertwined with, His human subjects. *Tawhid* is a guiding concept in Islam, and in Sufism, both in and outside South Asia; it is, therefore, no surprise that the concept pervades ʻAbd al- Rahman's text in both stated and inconspicuous ways.

References to al-Hallaj and other Sufis and the alteration of Krishna's revelation are not the only places we see our author using the concept of *tawhid*. In fact, within the *Mir'āt al-haqā'iq*, ʻAbd al-Rahman often directly refers to the concept. As mentioned above, he utilized the phrase "*asrar-i tawhid*," meaning "secrets of unification." In this passage, he claims that "unification" is the ultimate goal of the *Bhagavadgītā*; he supports this claim by further stating that the text's descriptions of proper practice structure a practitioner's path to

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[37] Many gloss *tawhid* and, as will be discussed below, its Sanskrit equivalent *advaita* not as nondualism but as monism, the idea that unity is the overarching quality of the universe. These terms are obviously related, and while it is not my purpose to get into their philosophical similarities or differences, it seems important to point out that despite the fact that I am more comfortable with the term "nondualism" than "monism," not all scholars would agree.

unification with the Divine. Throughout this introductory passage, 'Abd al-Rahman uses very direct Sufi terminology and philosophy to access what he sees as the true meaning of the text. At the same time, he also relies on traditional Islamic sources, like the Qur'an and *hadith* that amplify the significance of *tawhid*. As but one example of many, 'Abd al-Rahman writes:

> Krishna answered [Arjuna's question about the necessity of discipline]: "Arjuna, two things are necessary, unification and the path. If you wish to abandon the path, this is not wise for you still say, 'This is my brother and that [man] is my kinsman.' You have just such an outlook. For the person who has this sort of outlook, to withdraw from the path is not profitable. So do not leave the path. When unification becomes a certainty in your heart, the path will pass away from you." The prophet - may God bless him and give him peace - has said on this secret: 'Unification is the falling away of adjuncts.'[38]

In this selection, 'Abd al-Rahman's Krishna very clearly tells Arjuna that unification (*tawhid*) is indispensable; moreover, Krishna tailors his message for Arjuna specifically, telling him that he cannot pretend to move from the path, as he identifies with his brothers and kinsfolk. The language of brotherhood could represent both Muslims generally, as in the concept of *umma*, or it could refer to Sufi fraternal brothers; in either case, Krishna speaks to Arjuna as one who is already initiated into a recognizable Muslim community—and therefore one who cannot merely "withdraw" from the path. 'Abd al-Rahman further emphasizes the importance of unification as well as Arjuna's relationship to a Muslim community by concluding with what is presumably meant to be a *hadith* that also prioritizes the benefit of *tawhid*. Though, as Roderic Vassie similarly points out, this so-labeled *hadith* does not appear in any major compilation of *hadiths*, 'Abd al-Rahman's use of it is still important: it demonstrates the vital relationship between one's direct access to God (i.e. the removal of intermediaries, or

[38] 'Abd al-Rahman in Vassie, trans. Vassie, 209.

adjuncts) through unification—and places this "fact" in the voice of the Prophet, giving weight and authority to his own interpretation.[39]

Having *tawhid* as the primary lens through which 'Abd al-Rahman interpreted the *Bhagavadgītā* allowed him to shape his "translation" accordingly. Throughout the work, he skillfully reinterpreted or side-stepped any verses that interfered with the Islamic concept of divine unity. In addition to the examples above, 'Abd al-Rahman consistently changed passages that centered on attributes of Krishna as God. This could be as simple as leaving honorifics like Great God (*mahadeva*) or Supreme God (*vāsudeva*, *narayana*) untranslated or unaddressed. While it should be mentioned that many honorifics—especially, for example, Narayana—are understood as epithets for Krishna or Vishnu, 'Abd al-Rahman chooses to use the proper name only; this seems to indicate a discomfort with the elision between Krishna as holy man and Krishna as God.

Yet, perhaps an even more fruitful example of omitted or reinterpreted verses are those that address *sams āra* or reincarnation, one of the primary Hindu theological ideologies that stems from the *Bhagavadgītā*. In the text, 'Abd al-Rahman completely eschews this vital scene. In fact, there is no mention of the textual appearance of *sams āra*. It is, rather, interpreted in such a way as to denote "born-again" upon death: rebirth, as I will show below, signifies being born-again in the realm of cosmic afterlife as opposed to being reborn in this worldly plane. Instead of translating the two pertinent Sanskrit lines in question literally, 'Abd al-Rahman divides the verse, and pieces it together with Qur'anic and hadith fragments so as to render the climactic moment compatible with Islam. The Sanskrit reads:

> You must understand that he is constantly born and constantly dead, and so you have no cause to grieve over him, O Strong-Armed One [Arjuna]; for, to those who are born, death is assured, and birth is

[39] Ibid., loc. cit. footnote 3.

> likewise assured to the dead.[40]

We see here that Krishna speaks directly to Arjuna, using his epithet "Strong Armed One;" Krishna also speaks directly to the action of the epic by referencing Arjuna's grief about the war and the past and future deaths his participation in that war has and will cause. The first line of the verse is a strong statement in the second person: "You must understand that he is constantly born and constantly dead." The second half of the verse explains this cycle: those who are born will die, and those who die will be born. The very next verse uses for the first time the term *sams āra* in describing the cycle of rebirth seen here.

In contrast, 'Abd al-Rahman's interpretative translation addresses the issue of birth and death, but imagines the cycle differently. Additionally, he includes lines that are foreign to the original Sanskrit, and yet would have been instantly recognizable to his Muslim contemporaries as references to the Qur'an and *hadith.* His translation reads as follows:

> Be certain of this, too, Arjuna, that whatever comes will die.
>
> *The word of God: Every soul tastes death.*
>
> Whatever dies, Arjuna, will come again to be.
>
> He—upon whom be peace—has said: And the resurrection after death. The word of God: He brings forth the living from the dead, and he brings forth the dead from the living.[41]

As a matter of visual clarity, I have left unmarked the lines that most reflect the Sanskrit original; I have marked Qur'anic insertions in italics; and I have underlined *hadith.* The first insertion reads, "The word of God: every soul tastes death," and is a direct reference to the Qur'anic verse *al-anbiyā*.[42] The second addition is a reference to a *hadith* or saying of the Prophet Muhammad. And the third is also a Qur'anic reference,

[40] *Bhagavadgītā*, 2.26-2.27.
[41] 'Abd al-Rahman in Vassie, 60.
[42] *Qur'an* 21:35.

in this case to the *sura al-an'ām.*[43] 'Abd al-Rahman, in both translating and inserting Islamic references, has effectively shifted the very meaning of rebirth in the *Bhagavadgītā* for his readers. Instead of being a literal rebirth into another body in this world, as most Hindu commentators and traditions insist, it becomes a reference to the afterlife. The Qur'anic verses about souls dying and about God's power over life, teamed with the hadith about resurrection paint a portrait of an Islamic understanding of what happens after death: namely, that one is reborn, but into the realm of God, not the mundane. The interpretive translation of these verses demonstrates 'Abd al-Rahman's conviction that the Hindu epic communicates a real and meaningful set of values to Muslims, a set of values simply misinterpreted by Hindus.

This positioning of Hindu glosses as a distortion mimics classical Islamic views that similarly understood divine messages prior to the Qur'an ultimately revealed the same message, but came to be misinterpreted (by non-Muslims). 'Abd al-Rahman's fluency within Hindu textual traditions, and yet a positioning of the *Bhagavadgītā* as *essentially* the Qur'an in another form may not be as paradoxical as it seems. In fact, this attitude stands to place him more squarely within a Chishti worldview. As David Damrel has demonstrated, Abd al-Quddūs Gangōhī similarly incorporated yoga practices into his conceptualizations of proper Muslim practice, while simultaneously maintaining that Hindus were *kafir*s, and should not have been allowed to hold official positions in the court.[44]

Conclusions: Implications of 'Abd al-Rahman's Interpretations.

It is clear that 'Abd al-Rahman makes assumptions about the nature of Krishna and his relationship to Arjuna through the very specific lens of Sufi thought and practice, and the wider scope of Islam: as discussed above, despite Krishna revealing

[43] *Qur'an* 6:95.

[44] David Damrel, "The 'Naqshbandī Reaction'Reconsidered," in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, ed. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 177-79, 184, 186.

himself as Narayana—the highest form of Vishnu and what many commentators translate as God—'Abd al-Rahman insists that Krishna is not God, but rather, merely points toward a nondualistic concept where creations are mere manifestations (*tajalli)* of the existence (*wujūd*) of the Creator.[45] Other examples of the way in which 'Abd al-Rahman eschews the Sanskrit original in order to support an Islamic appropriation of the text include details like alterations in grammatical structures. Throughout the *Bhagavadgītā*, Krishna speaks rather informally, referring to Arjuna in the second person ("you") and speaking of himself in the first person ("me"), instead of the more formal majestic plural, perhaps better known colloquially as the "royal we." In 'Abd al-Rahman's *Mir'āt al-haqā'iq*, however, Krishna's personal "me" is omitted entirely; this seems to be a manner by which 'Abd al-Rahman can avoid the confusion of Krishna as God and instead maintain his gloss of Krishna as a perfect devotee of God.

It is clear that 'Abd al-Rahman makes assumptions about the nature of Krishna through the very specific lens of Sufi thought and practice, and the wider scope of Islam: despite Krishna revealing himself as "God," 'Abd al-Rahman insists that Krishna is *not* God, but rather, merely points toward a monistic truth wherein *all* creations are necessarily also the Creator. Similarly, 'Abd al-Rahman stresses other aspects of the esoteric quality of the *Bhagavadgītā* beyond the concept of *tawhid*, highlighting the moments where Arjuna learns, from Krishna, how to devote oneself to knowledge, practice, and devotion, as well as realize that there is no difference between the individual and God. Many have argued that beyond learning that Krishna is God, the main instructional aspects of the *Bhagavadgītā* are those that stress *yoga* (discipline).[46] The Sanskrit text spends an incredible amount of time outlining the three primary yogas,

[45] 'Abd al-Rahman in Vassie, 58.

[46] These would include but are not limited to: J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahabharata: A Bilingual Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); John Stratton Hawley, "Yoga and Viyoga: Simple Religion in Hinduism," *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (Jan., 1981), 1-20; and Sri Krishna Prem, *The yoga of the Bhagavat gita*, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973.).

and explicitly depicts these types of disciplined action as pathways to God.

These pathways are the three types of yoga: *karmayoga* (discipline of action), *bhaktiyoga* (discipline of devotion), and *jñanayoga* (discipline of mind). As we might imagine, these disciplined courses of action appealed to an initiated Sufi, and ʻAbd al-Rahman Chishti commented on these types of proper discipline at some length. He paid special attention to the discipline of the mind, indicated that *jñanayoga* is something in which all Muslims should engage, and equated it to a mindfulness of God. This "discipline of mind" is even occasionally referenced as the concept of *zikr* or remembrance (of God), a prominent feature of Sufi practice and theology.[47] While these references are fleeting, they appear in contexts that indicate that the effect of a *zikr*—complete focus and concentration on God—is the effect of *jñanayoga* when performed appropriately. In this way, the two terms are compatible, and perhaps even emblematic of the compatibility of the epic with Sufi and Muslim value systems.[48] ʻAbd al- Rahman drew upon basic Hindu concepts of devotion and practice in a way that demonstrates his familiarity with Hindu understandings of the text; he also simultaneously utilized the very same text and concepts to guide Muslims to acceptable, textually sanctioned practices. In fact, ʻAbd al- Rahman glosses the Hindawī term "*jog*" (Sanskrit: *yoga*) as "*darvīshī*," dervishes (another term for Sufis) or ascetics, effectively linking Sufis and yogis within his interpretative translation—and appropriating Hindu terminologies for his own uses.[49]

But ʻAbd al-Rahman's use of *yoga*, arguably the chief messages about praxis to have been gleaned from the *Bhagavadgītā* for Hindus, should not be viewed as idiosyncratic. As mentioned above, treatments of yoga (and Hinduism broadly conceived) form a significant intellectual corpus for Chishti

[47] ʻAbd al-Rahman Chishti in Vassie, 143-144, 146.

[48] For a robust examination of compatibility, translation and equivalence, see Tony K. Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter through Translation Theory," *History of Religions*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Feb., 2001), pp. 260-287.

[49] ʻAbd al-Rahman Chishti in Vassie, as examples: 143, 147, 149.

Sufis; this was so much the case that in typical British Orientalist and colonist writings, Sufism was understood as a derivation of Hinduism, and not a historically rooted, valid aspect of Islam.[50] This view is not entirely past, as more recent scholarship replicated a similar idea: R. C. Zaenher echoed these sentiments, claiming, "Muslim mysticism is entirely derivative."[51] These arguments say nothing of modern Muslim debates about the legitimacy of Sufism, and its relationship to Hinduism (i.e., non-Islamic or un-Islamic ideas). Viewing 'Abd al-Rahman's interpretative translation within its context becomes clearer when Sufi engagement with yoga is taken seriously.

Ernst writes that

> it [is] abundantly clear that in certain Sufi circles there was an awareness and use of particular practices that can be considered yogic (although the question of defining yoga, and the perspective from which it may be identified, still needs to be clarified).[52]

While Ernst is careful not to oversimplify "yoga" itself, he makes evident the ways in which certain Sufi circles—'Abd al-Rahman's Chishti lineage, for example—made use of practices within that umbrella tradition. Similarly, Damrel suggests that in another Sufi order, the Naqshbandiyya, yogic practices were also engaged and appropriated to fit within an Islamic cosmology.[53] 'Abd al-Rahman's glosses on *jñanayoga* do not necessarily demonstrate a new source of information or praxis for a Sufi, nor do they signal that he was, in some way, unique

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[50] See, as pertinent examples: Sir William Jones, "On the Mystical Poetry of the Persians and Hindus," in *Works*, (London: 1807), 4, 220-221; and Colonel Sir John Malcolm, *The History of Persia, from the Most Early Period to the Present Time: Containing an Account of the Religion, Government, Usages, and Character of the Inhabitants of that Kingdom* (2 vols., London: John Murray, 1815), 2, 383-383, 402.

[51] R. C. Zaenher, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry into some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience* (New York, 1961), 160.

[52] Ernst, "Situating Sufism and Yoga," 21.

[53] Damrel, "The Naqshbandi Reaction," 180.

among his brotherhood; instead, that he located and linked *jñanayoga* to *zikr* firmly roots him within a South Asian Sufi milieu. What is interesting is not that this is the case, but rather that we see such an example within an era thought to dispense with this particular intellectual and theological engagement altogether.

Above, I have discussed the ways that ʻAbd al-Rahman Chishti stressed *tawhid* and its links to yogic paths and how the forms of *yoga*, especially *jñanayoga*, were in turn understood as related to proper Muslim practice. The presumed, rigid boundaries between Muslims and Hindus—at once relics of Orientalist scholarship as well as products of contemporary Indian and Pakistani nationalisms—are thus confirmed overstatements. Not only does this textual example demonstrate fluidity between and among presumably elite Hindus and Muslims, it also serves to highlight how Muslim scholars like ʻAbd al-Rahman saw himself in light of his Hindu neighbors: rather than proving the problematic, teleological assumption of communal discord, ʻAbd al-Rahman's work shows familiarity with classical, important, and complicated Hindu texts. While far from the problematic narrative of premodern South Asia as a pluralist utopia, ʻAbd al-Rahman's text does indicate more permeable religious boundaries—even in the arena of textual interpretation and translation—than is commonly assumed.

More pertinently, ʻAbd al-Rahman's *Mir'āt al-h aq ā'iq* stands as an example not merely of permeable boundaries or shared regional and religious commonalities, but it also demonstrates a critical lineage in which ʻAbd al-Rahman utilized preexisting norms—including the translation and commentaries on Hindu texts by Muslims—and, indeed, built upon those norms in distinctive ways. Most notably, while ʻAbd al-Rahman's interpretive translation positions Islam as *the* religion—the right pathway, the correct devotional tactic, the most perfect way to worship God—he does so by demonstrating the universality of its teachings; by interpreting the *Bhagavadgītā* as a religious text that, despite its Hindu origins, contains kernels of Islam, ʻAbd al-Rahman effectively locates Islam in South Asia, in non-Islamic literatures and cannons, and even in seemingly polytheistic epics. This

contribution makes plain the ways in which Muslims—and especially those, like ʻAbd al-Rahman, who were Sufis—engaged with and in some ways legitimized local traditions while at the same time asserted the supremacy and superiority of Islam.

ʻAbd al-Rahman Chishti drew upon Muslim Qur'anic and Sufi concepts alongside those of *advaitin* philosophy, and he envisioned a particular interpretation of the sacred Hindu epic text of the *Bhagavadgītā* to be sacred to Muslims. He argued, ultimately, that the *Bhagavadgītā* held within it kernels of absolute truth that were grounded within conceptual, theological, and philosophical ideas (i.e. the nature of God) as well as disciplined practice (i.e. proper worship). These kernels, when seen in the light of his learned interpretation, corrected common Hindu (mis)interpretations by reframing them within Muslim paradigms. This claim seems, at its face, distinctive to South Asian Islam: inflected and interpreted through regionally vital textual sources, which span multiple traditions. That it comes to exist at a moment historically imagined as a return to a "real" Islam—an Islam of orthodoxy and reliant upon law, as opposed to open, interpretative practices—has been of primary concern here. ʻAbd al-Rahman's *Mir'āt al-haqā'iq* does not have significant scholarly attention, and seems, as well, not to be of vital import to Chishti Sufis. It is, however, a wealth of evidence toward further nuancing, complicating, and discovering the range of religious expression and analysis during Aurangzeb's rule. ʻAbd al-Rahman's interpretative translation is, at once, representative of a Chishti intellectual history, fluency in Hindu normative textual traditions, and an emphasis on "proper" Islamic practice—but not one that heralds a changed era, marked by isolationism and zealotry. Instead, it signifies an ongoing set of discourses of substantive and substantial Islamic engagement with Hindu traditions that predated and outlived Aurangzeb's reign.