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Islamic, Persianate and Indigenous Traditions in Medieval India: An Institutional Translation and Negotiated Political Authority

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Abstract
The article revisits Muslim rule in India by moving beyond the conventional dichotomy of imperial domination and cultural synthesis. It is argued that political authority was sustained through 'institutional translation': the selective incorporation of local personnel, administrative practices, languages, religious networks and cultural expertise into emerging structures of sovereignty. In this respect, translation is more than a mere language transfer. It traces the transformations of political and religious claims, from the shrine to the town, the court, and the regional community. This article identifies and analyses four interrelated integration mechanisms: administrative brokering, religious mediation, linguistic and intellectual exchange, and cultural patronage. It draws on the writings of Sibte Hassan, Kazi Javed and Mubarak Ali, and scholarship on Arab Sindh, Ismaili Multan, the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal India. These mechanisms encouraged cooperation, not equality per se. Other groups were taxed, excluded or coerced but local elites could potentially be co-opted. Cultural exchange could occur within an unequal distribution of resources. The article therefore considers interaction as a practical and contested form of governance, rather than as an indication of harmony or domination. It concludes with a research agenda on regional comparison, intermediary actors and institutional interfaces.
Keywords: *Muslim rule in India; negotiated sovereignty; institutional translation; local intermediaries; religious networks; Persianate governance; Arab Sindh; Delhi Sultanate; Mughal India; political culture*

1. Introduction: From Civilisational Judgement to the Problem of Governance

The history of Muslim rule in India has often been framed by different civilisational narratives, focusing either on cultural exchange and assimilation, or on theorization of cultural imperialism. In colonial and orientalist narratives, the Muslim invasion was often described as the invasion of an external power into an apparently independent Indian

culture (Asif, 2016; Talbot, 1995). This view was challenged by Muslim nationalist historians, who highlighted the political successes, cultural inputs, and historical heritage of the Muslim people of the subcontinent (Ikram, 1997; Jaffar, 1950; Qureshi, 2003). Despite the differences in dynasties and religious groups, they can represent internally heterogeneous cultures. This raises the question: was Muslim power fundamentally the product of invasion, of cultural fusion, or of a unique political achievement? Nonetheless, this article is about the problem of how the Muslim-ruled kingdoms were able to take control of areas whose inhabitants, institutions, languages, and religious customs they had not created. Territory might be acquired by conquest, but long-term governance required money, administrative expertise, political cooperation, and connections with local religious communities. They were relied upon by officials, landed groups, interpreters, merchants, academics, religious experts and local elites. The issues are communication, negotiation, and the reproduction of authority.

This process is referred to as "institutional translation" and is more than the translation of words: it is the adaptation of political and religious authority as it travels between institutions and social settings (see Koskinen, 2014). A Persianate order could be instituted, negotiated with local elites, and read aloud in established religious settings by officials with local knowledge. Ultimately, a complex political structure was developed that depended on local knowledge and cooperation.

Three Pakistani historians have given opposing views on this question. Sibte Hassan emphasises the practical necessity of cooperation between local people and rulers, as well as the interaction between Muslim and Indian cultural traditions (Hassan, 1975, 1986). Kazi Javed is concerned with networks of commitment, intellectual exchange, and the tensions between orthodoxy and accommodation (Javed, 1977, 1983, 2010). Mubarak Ali emphasises centralisation of authority, hierarchy, political gains and conquest (Ali, 1992, 2005, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). In this study, their differences are used to define three different elements of governance—coercive power, mediation and adaptability—rather than viewing them as proponents of mutually incompatible views.

This study argues that Muslim rule cannot be explained by military superiority or cultural assimilation. The staying power of these arrangements depended on the selective linkages between political centers and local institutions. And some groups continued to be subjected to taxes, labour demands, exclusion or violence, while others were given office and privilege. Translation in the institutional context was therefore an unequal but negotiated connection across times and spaces.

The chronological frame starts with the Arab invasion of Sindh and ends with the fall of Mughal rule in 1857. The author stresses that the four chosen examples are not representative of all regions and dynasties during this long

period. These sites were chosen for comparative purposes because they illuminate many institutional issues, such as the incorporation of regional elites, the evolution of bureaucratic language, the consolidation of conquest, and the mediation of religious networks. Later political histories and previous descriptions of the introduction of Islam provide a broader historical context, but the study remains focused on the processes evident in the selected examples (Jalaluddin, 1993; Qureshi, 1971).

The methodology of the paper is the comparative reading of secondary historical interpretations. It does not treat a court chronicle, a religious recollection, an administrative account, and a contemporary historical study as interchangeable evidences. It distinguishes between a reported incident by a historian and the more general conclusion derived from it. This paper does not offer a methodological replication of Subaltern Studies (Guha, 1982), but this caveat is in keeping with the general critique of elite-centred history-writing ascribed to that school. It also recognises that Pakistani national histories were written with shifting ideological purposes and not a fixed narrative (Qasmi, 2019). The goal is not to settle every contentious case but to compare the institutional explanations that the existing research can support.

This is a historiographical study comparing Arab Sindh, Ismaili Multan, the Delhi Sultanate, and Mughal India, not an archival reconstruction. It takes into account the three historians in relation to studies of these periods, dealing judiciously with later chronicles and disputed testimonies. It poses questions about the role of language and patronage in integration, the impact of intermediaries on regional links, the shift from conquest to daily administration, and the ways in which scholarship might move the subject beyond civilisational dichotomies.

2. Negotiated Sovereignty and Institutional Translation

"Negotiated sovereignty" highlights the discrepancy between what a ruler claims and their capacity to rule. Besides military might, political legitimacy and decrees, authority depended on income, documentation, recruitment, transport, the management of cities and cooperation with organisations that possessed local knowledge. The four overlapping dimensions to be discussed in this study are: religious mediation through scholars, Sufi networks and local figures; linguistic exchange among Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, Hindi and Sindhi; administrative brokering through staff and current procedures; and cultural brokering through artistic, literary, architectural and ritual forms.

These procedures should not be lumped in a sweeping statement on "fusion." The idea distinguishes equality from inclusion. A dictatorship could employ local officials without offering all residents equal political standing, patronise a shrine while levying taxes on the local population, or adopt local customs while retaining status and office hierarchies. For

example, the appointment of Hindu officials is a political cooperation, but it does not mean that there is no economic exploitation or religious discrimination (Hassan, 1975; Javed, 1983). Similarly, Persian may allow communication in a vast political space, but require specific training to reach bureaucracy (Alam, 2004; Kumar, 2007).

Accommodations need not be just cynical, either. Institutional decisions are shaped by a variety of forces including political necessity, intellectual curiosity, spiritual commitment, personal relationships and economic incentive. The questions are what a practice did in a given context, who organised it, who supported it with their institutions, and who benefited. Flood's work on material culture shows how artefacts can be used to document cultural interactions, but also to reveal the unequal relationships that created and disseminated them (Flood, 2009). Similarly, Habib's work on agricultural systems illustrates why political history should remain linked to land, production, and income (Habib, 1999).

Scale matters: the court, the city, the temple, the market, the village, the family all understood power in different ways. "Relationships with elites have repercussions," Talbot says, "unlike farmers or craftspeople, and central policies may be applied unfairly." Precolonial religious identities should not be understood as fixed categories (Talbot, 1995).

In this framework, the three Pakistani historians are complementary analytical tools. Ali exposes the coercive conditions under which negotiation took place, Javed stresses mediation and religious contention, and Hassan helps to identify adaptability and cooperation. Their ideas are most useful in relation to particular institutions and geographical areas rather than reduced to generalisations about Muslim rule.

3. Arab Sindh: From Conquest to Administrative Support

An early illustration of the distinction between military acquisition and long-term governance is Arab Sindh. Mubarak Ali refuses to understand the invasion solely in terms of local conditions, viewing it as part of a larger imperial expansion (Ali, 2012b, pp. 20–21). His focus gives the story back its strategic edge and political aspirations. However, subsequent narratives of conquest cannot be regarded as unambiguous representations of events that occurred in the seventh century. Asif's analysis of the Chachnama shows how later conceptions of Muslim beginnings in South Asia were influenced by a literature created and passed down in a different setting (Asif, 2016). Therefore, the construction and application of its tales affect the meaning of "conquering".

Hassan settles in Sindh and engages with the local culture. He names Debal, Mansura, Multan, and Uch as educational hubs associated with the Abbasid realm (Hassan, 1975, pp. 169, 175–179). He also talks about local involvement in government and the armed forces (Hassan, 1975, pp. 166, 201; Hassan, 1986, p. 138). Javed points out that local systems are still in

place, Hindu officials are appointed, and non-Muslims are acknowledged as protected subjects (Javed, 1983, pp. 35–36).

Force was insufficient for the dictatorship to rule. Conquerors were unable to swiftly replicate local authorities' understanding of land, income, customs, and community connections. Although their integration aided the transition from conquest to administration, continuity did not equate to equality, as established mediators might continue to hold power while entrenched hierarchies persisted. MacLean provides a framework for the analysis of religious groups and the social interactions that formed Islam (MacLean, 1989).

Hassan's account of Sindhi experts being sent as slaves to Iraq complicates the notion of trade further. He says that educated Sindhis were valued for their linguistic capabilities after being displaced (Hassan, 1975, pp. 166–167). Hence knowledge might travel by service, by migration, by patronage, by commerce or by force. Expertise was not always freely handed down, and those who possessed it did not always have control over its use.

Hassan further states that the local ruler, Mehrok bin Raik, desired the Islamic teachings to be translated into Sindhi (Hassan, 1975, pp. 167–168). This incident is not to be taken as independently verified evidence, but as a claim reported via the cited history. Its interpretative relevance is the possibility to localise religious ideas through the mediation of language. Furthermore, Hassan complicates a simple center-periphery model of information flow in his discussion of Sanskrit medical knowledge entering Arabic intellectual spaces (Hassan, 1975, pp. 175-176).

Thus, Arab Sindh serves as an example of both language and administrative translation. To achieve new political goals, the new government modified customs and relied on local knowledge. This was neither a total social revolution nor the absence of dominance. Which institutions were kept, who represented the local community inside them, and how the allocation of power altered are the main questions.

4 Ismaili Multan: Intermediary Religious Networks

Ismaili Multan draws attention to non-administrative modes of mediation. According to Hassan, Ismaili customs might be modified to fit local customs (Hassan, 1975, pp. 188–189).. Javed uses the relationship between the missionary Sadr-ud Din and the Hindu ascetic Machar Nath to illustrate how Islamic and Indian religious traditions interact (Javed, 1977, p. 70). According to these narratives, contact outside of the imperial court might lead to the development of religious authority.

Teachers, devotional activities, tales, symbols, interpersonal connections, and governmental statements are all ways that religious concepts spread. New concepts may be made accessible through familiar cultural forms, but adaptation does not guarantee widespread adoption; cultures may oppose, reinterpret, or selectively embrace them. The historians' readings of the

cited sources suggest interaction, not the full reach or reception of certain behaviours.

MacLean's study provides an institutional framework for the analysis of religious groups in Arab Sind and the neighbouring regions (MacLean, 1989). The history presented here does not allow us to reconstruct the financial resources or the internal organization of the Ismaili networks in Multan. Future research would have to investigate patronage, mobility, education, communal resources and relations with political authority. But the example also expands the notion of institutional translation, since non-state religious networks are able to connect people across boundaries of culture and politics, while simultaneously developing their own hierarchies and competing claims to authority.

5. The Sultanate of Delhi: Devotional Authority and Bureaucratic Language

The Delhi Sultanate enabled long term communication between religious networks, regional political interests and central government. Hassan stresses the importance of Persian in administration and the diversity of customs in Muslim political culture (Hassan, 1975, pp. 180–186). He also notes that the Lodis used Hindi as well as Persian, which he sees as a pragmatic reaction to the linguistic realities of power (Hassan, 1975, p. 307). 2. These results call into question the idea of a Sultanate with a uniform culture.

Persian provided a means of elite communication and management across regions, but it could also restrict bureaucratic access for those who were not schooled in its ways. Language is situated in the evolution of political institutions (Alam, 2004; Kumar, 2007). Persian was both a mark of professional distinction and a tool of authority.

In the Sultanate, there are tensions between those who support accommodation and those who maintain more rigid religious limits (Javed, 2010, pp. 16–23). His discussion of Balban, Kaiqubad and Alauddin Khalji suggests that the views of the religious officials did not always find their way into political policy. Such individuals should not be labelled with fixed terms like "liberal" or "orthodox" because their decisions were influenced by changing political influences and because the religious academics themselves were diverse (Javed, 2010, pp. 16–18). Javed instead sees Muslim intellectual and political life as marked by discord, rather than as a unified religious effort.

Another means of mediation was provided by Sufi networks. Javed mentions people connected to the Chishti tradition such as Amir Khusrau, Nasiruddin Chiragh-i Delhi and Nizamuddin Auliya, but also mentions religious communities that were less welcoming in some cases. Devotional institutions could create social spaces beyond the court's direct jurisdiction,

but their power depended on followers, sponsors, local conflicts, and institutional resources. This is not saying there is world peace.

The Sultanate is thus an example of the interaction between bureaucracy and religious translation. Social and religious ties were mediated by devotional networks, while the Persianate administration tied regional institutions into central power. These procedures may support or contradict one another. The result was a pluralist political environment in which power was transferred in a number of ways by a number of institutions, rather than a single cultural synthesis.

6. Mughal India: Knowledge Exchange and Imperial Integration

The Mughal era exemplifies a political center that attempted to bring a wide variety of regional elites and intellectual traditions into a vast imperial system. Hassan describes the Mughal aristocracy's adoption of Indian traditions in clothing, food, music, festivals and courtly etiquette (Hassan, 1975, p. 290). He additionally emphasises the role of Indian artists, administrators and counsellors in imperial service (Hassan, 1986, pp.143-144). Such cases often support the notion of a composite civilisation. They also reveal the real task of imperial integration: to extend its influence the court used cultural forms, aristocratic connections, and local expertise.

Incorporation was still hierarchical and selective but regional elites serving the empire could strengthen the state and gain new resources. Integration was not a sign of equality; instead, it was a negotiated achievement. Mukhia offers a more detailed framework for the workings of the empire (Mukhia, 2004).

Knowledge brokering was equally important. In his study of Sanskrit at the Mughal court, Truschke (2016) shows that Sanskrit intellectual traditions infused imperial contexts through scholars, translations and sponsorship. Kinra's analysis of Chandar Bhan Brahman demonstrates the role of a Hindu Persian-language secretary in the administrative and cultural world of the Indo-Persian kingdom (Kinra, 2015). These examples show that contact was more than the adoption of cuisine, clothing, or holidays, but also the exchange of texts, knowledge, and intellectual authority.

Cultural creation was tied to imperial resources through architecture, art, music, literature and handicrafts. Habib argues that Mughal power derived from land revenue and production (Habib, 1999); Asher's research is on courtly architecture (Asher, 1992). The distribution of patronage expenses and the hiring and pay of artisans remain important issues. Akbar's Sulh-i Kull policy is very important. It is frequently translated as "universal peace" or "peace with all," and it has been seen as an attempt to define an imperial system that would allow for religious diversity. Moin contends that rather than being merely an early example of contemporary secularism, sulh-i kull should be understood within Mughal political theology and the issue of sovereign peacemaking (Moin, 2022). The institutional argument is

supported by this view, which holds that pluralism was a political and intellectual strategy used by the monarch to manage a heterogeneous imperial area.

Javed ties Kabir and Guru Nanak's religious and devotional endeavours with Akbar's political openness (Javed, 1977, pp. 90–96; Javed, 2010, pp. 36–38). There was no single show made up of these actors. Intellectual interaction, religious movements, and imperial policy all sprang from distinct institutional settings and had distinct objectives. Although they might not be the same, their impacts might overlap.

The letter sent to Humayun and credited to Babur serves as an example of the necessity of separating safe facts from political goals. Hassan and Javed use the book to bolster the idea that Babur advocates for just and tolerant governance (Hassan, 1975, pp. 275–278; Javed, 2010, p. 30). Beveridge's examination of parental counsels ascribed to Babur calls into doubt the identity and provenance of the manuscript tradition (Beveridge, 1923, pp. 78–82). The passage is an example of how historians have constructed arguments regarding legitimacy using disputed documents; thus, it should not be interpreted as definitive proof of an established policy.

Hassan draws a comparison between precolonial conquest and settlement and British colonial control, contending that while British rule was linked to an external metropolitan framework, wealth acquired by previous governing elites frequently persisted inside the Indian political system (Hassan, 2012, pp. 384–386). This does not resolve the issue of exploitation, but it does identify a difference in the geography of imperial authority. It is still possible to take money from farmers and distribute it unfairly within an area. Habib's agrarian analysis is crucial for keeping rural producers' financial experiences in mind (Habib, 1999). Therefore, Mughal integration illustrates the article's main idea: cultural brokering might support a regime while living with significant disparities.

7. Comparative Results: Four Political Integration Mechanisms

The instances show four methods of authority negotiation used by Muslim-ruled polities. Although their relative significance differed, they all addressed the challenge of making key claims effective across a variety of geographical areas.

Initially, new powers were linked to preexisting local knowledge through administrative brokering. The administration in Sindh was able to control a society whose organization existed before invasion thanks to the retention of personnel and customs (Hassan, 1975; Javed, 1983; MacLean, 1989). Persianate administration offered a more comprehensive bureaucratic language under the Delhi Sultanate, but it was still reliant on local knowledge and political connections (Alam, 2004; Kumar, 2007). During the Mughal rule, the provincial elites were linked to imperial institutions through appointments and alliances (Kinra, 2015). Thus, administrative

continuity served as a tool for transforming political demands into practical governance.

Second, communication routes outside of governmental agencies were established through religious mediation. Religious experts may be able to communicate concepts through recognisable symbols, interpersonal connections, and regional customs, according to Javed's discussion of devotional networks and the Ismaili instances from Multan (Hassan, 1975; Javed, 1977). In conjunction with offering a place to stay, these networks may also reinforce internal hierarchies, borders, and rival claims to authority. Their role has to be examined in specific institutional contexts.

Third, the mediating role of language and intellect made knowledge transferable across political and cultural boundaries. The study of Sanskrit at the Mughal court, the Persianate administration of the Sultanate, and the Arabic and Sanskrit knowledge associated with Sindh suggests that translation was not just about the transfer of ideas across established civilisations, but entailed institutional reconfiguration and selection (Hassan, 1975; Alam, 2004; Truschke, 2016). Another differentiator was linguistic proficiency, and opportunities may be advantageous for bilingual and multilingual mediators.

Fourth, political power was made real and consequential through cultural patronage. Festivals, architecture, art, music and literature can be used to express alliances and forge common political-cultural repertoires (Asher, 1992; Hassan, 1975; Flood, 2009). Patronage, however, required money, personnel, supplies, and transportation. Concentrating resources in elite settings may offer opportunities for experts and artists. Therefore, both the conditions of production and symbolic interpretations must be addressed in cultural history.

These processes demonstrate the inadequacy of cultural synthesis and imperial dominance as mutually incompatible theories. A court may attract local elites while limiting access to high office; a religious network could promote communication while upholding hierarchy; a monarch could embrace local practices while collecting taxes. On the other hand, the agency of local intermediaries was not eliminated by political dominance or force. Finding out how relationships were structured and how their consequences varied across groups and geographic areas is the explanatory challenge.

8. Towards New Directions of Historical Inquiry: Institutions, Networks, and Regional Comparison

Here are five research avenues. Instead of relying on ruler-centered narratives, academics should first examine institutional interfaces. Central authority was linked to local society through revenue offices, courts, military installations, shrines, marketplaces, and networks of patronage. It

would be possible to understand how authority functioned outside of the court by contrasting formal regulations with local execution.

Second, studies should contrast the intermediaries linking rural populations to political centers. Translators, scribes, merchants, religious instructors, landed groups, officials, and cultural experts did more than convey commands. They negotiated responsibilities, analysed data, and established the conditions under which authority functioned. The career of Chandar Bhan serves as an example of the importance of researching people who transitioned between the linguistic and institutional realms (Kinra, 2015). Comparable research on the Sultanate, Sindh, and Multan might show how these possibilities changed throughout time.

Third, we need to pay more attention to the institutional histories of religious networks. The resources, structure, and geographic reach of Ismaili and Sufi groups are called into question by the instances presented by Hassan and Javed. Patronage, movement, education, ritual, and relationships with governmental authority might all be studied. This would distinguish specific institutions and local settings rather than portraying "Sufism" or "Islamic influence" as homogeneous factors.

Fourth, knowledge and language should be examined as resources unequally distributed among institutions and social groupings. Literary languages in the region included not only Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, Hindi and Sindhi, but these languages also regulated access to academic interaction, administrative activity and patronage. We can trace who learned these languages, where the translations were done, what texts were used in courtly circles, and how information was adapted to different audiences. Alam, Truschke and Kinra's work provides a starting point (Alam 2004; Kinra 2015; Truschke 2016).

Fifth, the political economics of patronage needs to be linked to cultural production. Issues of labour, materials, payment, taxes and transportation could be combined with studies of architecture, art, textiles, music and manuscripts. While Habib's theory of agriculture locates imperial wealth within production and revenue mechanisms, Asher and Flood emphasise the importance of material culture in grasping historical encounters (Asher, 1992; Flood, 2009; Habib, 1999). This approach seeks to delineate the institutional and material conditions that made the production of culture possible, rather than reducing culture to economics.

It is important to compare regions and times. The Sultanate, Mughal India, Sindh and Multan were not interchangeable systems. Conquest and settlement, institutional establishment and consolidation, courtly ideals and local application should all be distinguished in research. Talbot's work on pre-colonial identities and Eaton's work on Bengal and temple sacrilege both emphasise the importance of context (Eaton, 1993, 2000; Talbot, 1995).

Conclusion

This article has argued that institutional translation, rather than a choice between cultural synthesis and imperial dominance, is a better way to understand Muslim authority and model of governance in India. By carefully integrating local individuals, knowledge, languages, religious networks, and cultural competence, political power became enduring. This hierarchical, negotiated procedure allowed for rule without eliminating inequity, force, or extraction. Different configurations of this technique are shown in the four scenarios. The Sultanate was shaped by linguistic and bureaucratic translation; the Mughal court integrated regional elites and intellectual traditions into an imperial framework; religious mediation is evident in the networks connected to Ismaili Multan and Sufi traditions; and administrative broking is evident in the retention of local personnel and practices in Sindh. In each case, intermediaries acted as a bridge between groups and organisations that shared no language, social structure or religious experience.

Hassan, Javed and Ali still remain useful, as they throw light on different aspects of these interactions. Ali argues that conquest, hierarchy and political benefit are still important; Javed stresses religious and intellectual mediation; and Hassan stresses adaptability and collaboration. Their interpretations are best used as tools in analysis instead of mutually exclusive conclusions. Their claims also need to be read against the limitations of the evidence, especially where later accounts or contested materials form the basis of sweeping conclusions.

The proposed study program asks how power was transferred between courts, offices, religious networks, markets, and communities, and how intermediaries changed this. How were the advantages and disadvantages of integration distributed? It connects institutions of power with social and material history. Thus, Muslim governance is a dynamic system of political structures agreed upon, shaped by networks, institutions and local communities.

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