THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Fraught Intimacies: Persian and Hindu Publics in Colonial India

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In 1899, a Persian book rolled off a lithograph press in the town of Sialkot in northwest India, over half a century after Persian had ceased being the official language of British colonial rule. Modern readers might find its cover page puzzling and incongruous. The title, اهنسا پرکاش (*Ahinsā parkāsh*; *Light on Nonviolence*), though written in the Persian script, is not in Persian at all but in a Sanskritized Hindi. The subtitle, فوائد ترک مده و مانس (*Fawāʾid-i tark-i madh wa māns*; *Benefits of Abstaining from Alcohol and Meat*), mixes Persian and Hindi. So does an invocation to a divine described as eternal and infinite, whose name is the sacred syllable Om (Masrur). Today, most Persian readers reside outside the subcontinent, while across South Asia a conceptual chasm separates Persian (together with Urdu) from Sanskrit and Hindi. These languages are generally seen to represent entirely distinct domains—the Islamic and the Hindu, respectively. The power and persistence of colonial narratives conflating language with religious community and nation occlude the existence of Hindu works in Persian like this.

Composed as a Persian narrative poem (*masnawi*), *Light on Nonviolence* illuminates a period of transition, when modern linguistic and religious boundaries were being erected but had not yet fully set. It targeted a readership of Persian-literate Hindus, whose numbers, though dwindling, were still fairly substantial in certain regions. While India's British rulers initially used Persian as a language of governance, in 1835 they instituted English as the official medium of education and law courts. Moreover, with religious and linguistic polarization increasing across the subcontinent, the call for Hindus to embrace a Hindi stripped of Perso-Arabic features gained momentum in the mid–nineteenth century (King; Dalmia 146–221). But in the

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princely state of Kashmir, where the author of *Light on Nonviolence* hailed from, Persian had continued as the court language until 1889, only a decade before this poem was published (Weber 74).

As a lens through which to examine the concept of the Persianate, *Light on Nonviolence* might seem an odd choice. The Persianate is often associated with cosmopolitanism, pluralism, a culture of civility (*adab*), and the development of a common literary canon. But, unlike many Persian writings by Hindus of an earlier period, *Light on Nonviolence* does not seek to find common ground between Hindus and Muslims. It resists the frameworks of hybridity or harmonious coexistence that animate many modern understandings of such cultural phenomena. Indeed, like many other nineteenth-century Persian and Urdu writings by Hindus, *Light on Nonviolence* addresses a distinctly Hindu public. Published during a time of fierce religious polemics between Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and various Hindu groups, *Light on Nonviolence* advocates the moral reform of elite, upper-caste Hindus —Brahmins in particular—whom it envisions as a consolidated social and political community. Still, the poem cannot escape the conventions of its Persian literary form and the concomitant habits of thought essential to its crafting and to its legibility.

It is precisely through works like *Light on Nonviolence*, though, that we can glimpse intimacies that are today unthinkable—where the world of Persian letters and political Hinduism intersect. The writings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hindus who engaged with Persian learning, many of whom eventually drifted away from Persian, constitute an archive of such intimacies. There are numerous words for intimacy in the Persian language: *uns*, *suḥbat*, and *hamrāzī*, to name a few. The emotive registers that such categories evoke are also well plumbed in Persian literature. But I do not propose to use a single conception or category of intimacy as an analytical tool; rather, I am interested here in intimacy's multiple, often antagonistic valences and implications. Intimacy can connote both affection and friction, closeness as well as separation, belonging but also ambivalence. The notion of intimacy that I explore is thus not quite identical to that which has been theorized in contemporary scholarship, such as, for instance, Lauren Berlant's concept of intimate publics (Berlant and Greenwald 77–80), in which the public is a space with the imagined capacity to unify heterogeneous interests, or Michael Herzfeld's idea of cultural intimacy as a collective private space of the nation (3–4). But I share with these thinkers a conception of the sociality of intimacy, present even when it unfolds in the closest of human relations or in the interior work of the self and its cultivation.

The poet who composed *Light on Nonviolence* participated in the world of Persian literature as well as in the fractious public sphere of late-nineteenth-century north India. He is named as Bukka Kak, a magistrate (*faujdar*). His surname, Kak, signals that he belonged to the Brahmin community of Kashmiri Pandits. His unusual (and likely pseudonymous) first name recalls Bukka, the legendary Hindu commander in medieval India who reportedly fled the service of Muslim rulers to establish his own kingdom in Vijayanagar (Wagoner). Like other Persian poets, Kak had a pen name, Masrur, meaning "joyous." The book's cover advertises the support of Masrur's guru, a certain Baba Champa Nath, together with three Hindu leaders of the age who were active in social reform and education. *Light on Nonviolence* was thus positioned not only to showcase the author's erudition and poetic skill but also to make a social intervention.

By the turn of the twentieth century, when Masrur published his book, Hindus had been significantly involved in Persian learning for half a millennium. From as early as the reign of Sikandar Lodi (r. 1489–1517) there are reports of Hindus in government service (Alam 323). During Mughal rule in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, several Hindus sought employment in the expanded administration. Hindus worked for the state in a variety of roles, as scribes, record keepers, and tax collectors. Those who mastered the difficult composition of ornate prose and epistolography could find employment as munshis—secretaries or clerks for government officials (Alam and Subrahmanyam 62). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,

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many Hindus skilled in Persian also worked for the colonial administration (Bellenoit).

Hindus in Mughal government service generally viewed Persian as both a tongue of prestige and cosmopolitan learning and a cherished, embodied inheritance transmitted from father to son. For instance, the renowned munshi Chandarbhan (d. circa 1666), who wrote under the name Chandarbhan Brahman, composed several letters of advice to his son Tejbhan. One includes a detailed list of Persian prose and poetry titles that his son should read and counsels him to perfect or acquire calligraphy, accountancy, and scribal skills (Kinra, *Writing* 61). The writings of munshis often explicitly invoke the language of intimacy to refer to their relationship with the Persian language and related branches of learning. For example, Lal Bihari, another seventeenth-century munshi who served high-ranking nobles, describes himself as one of the هندی نژادان فارسی دوست ("lovers of Persian of Indian/Hindu descent"; Gandhi, "*Dharmaśāstra*" 39).[1] Bihari carefully taught the Persian alphabet to his six-year-old son, Nek Rai. And later, Lal Bihari found his son a series of suitable teachers so that he could study the classics of Persian ethical and belletristic literature. Nek Rai internalized this learning, and Persian came to shape his vision of place and belonging. A generation later, in his own autobiographical memoir, Rai describes the beloved landscapes of places he encountered during his childhood years by comparing their features to letters of the Persian alphabet and styles of Persian calligraphy (Alam and Subrahmanyam 67–68).

In addition to linguistic training, an education in Persian involved the cultivation of an ethical habitus and comportment, which comprised key elements of *adab*. Thus, Chandarbhan advises his son to be like him in his dealings with others and remain as discreet as an unopened flower bud (Kinra, *Writing* 63). Furthermore, Chandarbhan counsels that a munshi should not only hone his professional skills but also seek the company of mystics and renunciants and cultivate an attitude of detachment toward the material world (62–63). Such detachment could conceivably help munshis weather the vicissitudes of uncertain employment occasioned by political turbulence. Indeed, both Chandarbhan and Lal Bihari lived through the turmoil surrounding the mid-seventeenth-century war of succession and the Mughal prince Aurangzeb's rise to the throne.

The Persianate culture fostered by Indo-Muslim states also developed discourses of religious pluralism and universalistic humanism that permeated the writings of many Hindus in government service. For the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1555–1605), the slogan *ṣulḥ-i kull*, often translated as "universal peace," offered an ethical model for the conduct of both rulers and imperial servants (Kinra, "Revisiting" 146–60). The imperial project of Akbar, as well as other Mughal royals such as Jahangir (r. 1605–28) and Dara Shukoh (d. 1659), included sponsoring Persian translations of Sanskrit and Hindavi texts (Gandhi, *Emperor*). Many of these Persian works circulated among Hindus, who also produced their own renditions of Hindu writings. Thus, for example, Lal Bihari translated a Hindu legal work with its commentary (Gandhi, "*Dharmaśāstra*"), while another munshi, Amar Singh, translated the religious epic Ramayana. For Hindus steeped in multiple generations of Persian learning, these translations offered not only access to Sanskrit texts but also a way to define their religious tradition. While Bihari used the language of Islamic jurisprudence to frame his translation, many other Hindu translators of Sanskrit works presented these texts in universalistic terms drawn from Islamic mysticism.

Involvement in Persian learning could also foster social intimacies extending across caste and religious boundaries—for instance, between students and teachers, or different students of the same teacher. A notable case is that of the famous poet Mirza Abdulqadir Bedil (d. 1720) and his several Hindu disciples (Pellò). However, even as access to Persian afforded a measure of social mobility to some, it also solidified and reinscribed existing social hierarchies, including that of caste. Inheritable skills in South Asia were not merely about individual fathers and sons; they were enmeshed in the consolidation and reproduction of caste through the control of knowledge and, in

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this case, certain government posts. Caste thus produced its own intimacies, in the form of shared skills and familiarity with Persian. Certain caste communities came to dominate bureaucratic posts and the mastery of Persian. The scribal caste of Kayasths, to which Bihari belonged, had its own subcastes and was prominently represented in government service (Bellenoit 33–59). Other castes, such as Khatris, Amils, and several Brahmin subgroups including members of Masrur's own Kashmiri Pandit community, cultivated Persian knowledge and government employment. Members of these communities also served in the colonial administration and, by the twentieth century, made up a sizeable proportion of the burgeoning middle class.

By the time Masrur produced his poem in the late nineteenth century, many Hindus educated in Persian had become ambivalent about this intellectual inheritance. For example, Masrur's contemporary Shraddharam Phillauri (d. 1881), who, like Masrur, was a traditionalist Brahmin, excelled in his studies of Persian belles lettres during his youth and composed works in Urdu (Tulasideva 12). But he also started writing in a Sanskritized register of Hindi, and his Hindi literary and musical compositions formed his most enduring legacy. These works include the novel भाग्यवती (*Bhāgyavatī*), published in 1877 and considered to be one of the first Hindi novels, and the popular devotional song ॐ जय जगदीश हरे (*Om Jai Jagadīsh Hare*), still sung across north India today.

Nonetheless, Masrur's choice of Persian as the medium for his message reveals that it was still the primary literary language for some Hindus. Moreover, the fact that he published *Light on Nonviolence* in the Punjab, with the aid of prominent Hindus of the region, suggests that he was targeting an audience beyond his own Kashmiri Pandit community. It is likely that a work advocating vegetarianism would have had more support among Brahmins of the plains than among Kashmiri Pandits, who relied on a largely meat-based diet. For context, it is important to note that the Hindu print public at this point, especially in the Punjab, still operated in Urdu and Persian to a considerable degree. A number of public figures in north India published Persian books speaking for a Hindu community, some of which attacked Islam and Muslims (Ernst 193).

Yet, one may still wonder if, for Masrur, Persian served merely as the accustomed garment for his ideas, old as it was, to be worn a few more times before being discarded. How essential was the Persian language to *Light on Nonviolence*? The poem, laden as it is with Sanskrit vocabulary, would only have been partially intelligible to, say, an Iranian from Shiraz. Its header is a Sanskrit invocation saluting the elephant-headed deity Ganesha. In the introduction, Masrur outlines his goal to further the cause of دهرم ("dharma"), a multivalent word often used by Hindu traditionalists of the era to refer to true religion, though he supplements this term with the Persian معرفت ("gnosis"). Masrur beseeches the divine:

به آب معرفت تر کن خمیرم
به نور دهرم روشن کن ضمیرم (2)

Moisten my leaven with the water of gnosis
Brighten my conscience with the light of dharma.[2]

He introduces here the name and title of his guru—Sadashivrup Chambanath Swami—with a hybrid Persian and Hindi phrase as جوگیشر گرامی ("honored Lord of the yogis"; 2).

Through repeated recourse to Sanskrit scriptural authority, *Light on Nonviolence* conveys its main message—that Brahmins must avoid meat. The narrative frame of the poem features a charismatic youth in Kashmir, possessing a resplendent beauty, who delivers a religious discourse to the crowds thronging around him. Some of those present include Brahmins reluctant to accept the young man's spiritual leadership. Masrur bemoans that they rebelled against their own Hindu dharma (4). When the young guru exhorts them to give up fish and fowl, they remonstrate with him:

چرا ماس نمی خواهی خوردن
نگوید بید جای ترک کردن (7)

Why are you against eating meat?
The Vedas don't say anything about abstaining from it.

In response, the youth delivers a discourse on ahimsa, understood here as abstention from taking

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life.[3] Although he does refer in passing to the ethical dimensions of vegetarianism, his main concern is to identify ahimsa as one of the special duties prescribed for Brahmins. He cites religious texts such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Vedas to support his argument:

چنین شری کرشن در گیتا به ارجن
بیان فرموده اند دهرم برهمن
اهمسا برهمنان را فرض دائم
اهمسا برهمنان را دهرم قائم
اهمسا را بود معنی به تکرار
نیازردن وجود هیچ جاندار
همی دان بید را از روی هدایت
اهمسا کرده بر برهمن روایت (7)

Thus did Lord Krishna to Arjun in the Gita,
Expound the dharma of Brahmins.
Ahimsa is the Brahmins' perpetual obligation,
Ahimsa is the Brahmins' eternal dharma.
To repeat, ahimsa has this meaning:
Not injuring any being with a soul.
Know too that the Veda, by way of divine guidance,
Authoritatively attested ahimsa for Brahmins.

The guru underscores the idea, implicit in these lines, that each caste has its own dharma, understood here as a path of religious duty attested to by a set of authoritative scriptures. For Brahmins, this duty is the practice of nonviolence. *Ahimsa*, then, in this understanding, is not a universal ideal for humankind but the means by which Brahmins maintain the purity and superiority of their own religious status. Elsewhere, however, Masrur suggests that only one who follows the precept of nonviolence can call himself a Brahmin:

همان برهمن بود که دهرم داند
نه برهمن خون جانداران فشاند (14)

He is a Brahmin who knows the dharma
A Brahmin doesn't spill the blood of those with a soul.

He assumes, however, that the Brahmins are a preformed social group; he does not argue that a person can rise to Brahmin status through deeds alone.

The Bhagavad Gita and the Vedas are not the only Hindu sacred texts mentioned here. The poem also cites injunctions against eating flesh from the *Manusmriti*, a work that under colonial rule was enshrined as the premier code of Hindu law (8). It turns to the teachings of Vasishtha, tutor to the legendary divine prince Rama and his brother Lakshmana (13), and draws on the words of Patanjali, author of the *Yogasutra* (18). Indeed, much of the work is devoted to an exhaustive listing of sacred authorities and their support for nonviolence. *Light on Nonviolence* also discusses ten injunctions in a legal code by the legendary Indian sage Parashar that applied specifically to the current epoch of humanity, known as Kaliyuga ("age of darkness"; 10–12). These injunctions include the consumption of meat and alcohol, which, though permitted earlier, are now forbidden.

The inclusion of these Hindu scriptures is no accident. Spokesmen for Hindu reform and revivalism in the nineteenth century often engaged with and helped construct the concept of a unified Hindu textual tradition. In large measure, they were heirs to the efforts of orientalists such as William Jones and Henry Thomas Colebrooke, who sought to unearth the authentic versions of Hindu sacred texts for use in the colonial administration. However, in its first stages, British orientalism relied heavily on the earlier tradition of Persian Indology (Tavakoli-Targhi). Indeed, some late-nineteenth-century Hindus educated in Persian persisted in using the Mughal-era translations of Sanskrit scriptures. Others, such as Phillauri, stressed the importance of accessing the original Sanskrit texts (*Dharam Kasoṭī*). Yet for his part, Masrur upholds the primacy of Sanskrit discourses and advances a canon of Sanskrit authority through Persian verse.

Nonetheless, *Light on Nonviolence* is studded with Persian literary tropes. Masrur describes the young guru as a جوان چهار ابرو لاله رخسار ("tulip-cheeked youth with four eyebrows"), referring to the two sides of his downy upper lip as well as his brows (3). As the quintessential beloved of Persian poetry was an adolescent boy, these incipient sprouts of manhood were commonly extolled. From the youth's mouth emerged سخن لؤلؤی خوشاب ("speech like lustrous pearls"), another common Persian motif (3). When news of this youth's arrival

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spread, elites and commoners alike flocked for his *darshan*—a term used when Hindu devotees partake in the holy sighting of a guru or a deity's image. But here too, the poem invokes imagery commonly associated with the beloved in Persian poetry. The youth came strutting out from the Shalimar grounds, a picturesque Mughal-era garden in the city of Srinagar. From near and far, people gathered around him:

خلائق بهر درشن جمع گشتند
چو پروانه بگرد شمع گشتند (4)

People congregated for the sake of darshan
Like moths swarming around a flame.

The jaunty gait of a young male object of desire and the beloved likened to a flame that attracts and consumes lovers are stock Persian literary images.

Masrur's poem repeatedly reveals an intimacy with Muslim discourses of revelation and divine law. One example occurs in the denouement, where he describes an assembly of Brahmin religious scholars in Kashmir. This appears to have been an actual occasion, convened, as Masrur relates, by the prominent public figure Hargopal Kaul. The author of several Persian writings, including a chronicle of Kashmiri history, Kaul founded in 1893 the Sanatan Dharm Sabha (Eternal Dharma Society), an association that discouraged meat consumption (Rai 147–48). We read that during the assembly, some ignorant attendees raised questions, following which a lengthy debate ensued. At long last, the assembly came around to the understanding that Brahmins should not consume meat or alcohol. Masrur's wording in this section is striking:

بامر بید آخر وحی گردید
مد و ماس به برهمن نهی گردید
خبر شد عام در هر کوی و برزن
نشد واجب مد و ماس بر برهمن
ازین الهام هر کس گشته آگاه
بدلخواهی شده بر دهرم دلخواه (26)

Finally, it was divinely revealed in the command of the Veda
Alcohol and meat are forbidden for the Brahmin
The news became public in each alleyway and street
That alcohol and meat are not obligatory for Brahmins
Everyone became aware of this divine inspiration
With heart-desire, they became beloved of dharma

These verses exemplify paradoxical and antagonistic intimacies. Masrur's use of the terms وحی ("divine revelation"), نهی ("forbidden"), and واجب ("obligatory") evoke key ideas from Islamic law and deontology, which in turn are drawn from the Qurʾan. However, Masrur uses these terms to elucidate his notion of dharma. As a magistrate, Masrur would have been immersed in a Perso-Arabic legal discourse of bureaucratic authority. In an earlier era, many Hindus who had dealings with the Mughal state would have had a universalistic understanding of law that was shaped by such a Persianate discourse (Chatterjee 38–40). At the same time, Hindus like Bihari had also used similar terminology to carve out a separate legal domain within the general framework of Islamic law. Masrur's poem shows that, even as colonial rule entrenched separate legal and religious spheres for Hindus and Muslims, these earlier intimacies, born of education and profession, persisted in new forms. For Masrur, dharma is eternal and universal, but it is also explicitly the inheritance of Brahmins alone.

Masrur's poem illuminates the shifting contours of language politics in colonial India. As an inheritance, Persian was fraught and burdensome for many educated Hindus in north India but still too intimately familiar to totally discard. Masrur, the magistrate, is merely one among several Hindus who reshaped Persian discourses of legal and religious universalism as dharma. Writings like *Light on Nonviolence*, produced by Hindus for their own purposes, are thus inherently destabilizing to modern literary or intellectual canons of Persian writing. As a modern interpretive category, the Persianate, like the cultural formations it describes, is unstable, heterogeneous, and resistant to a fixed center (Gould). The Persian writings of Hindus in the colonial public sphere form part of the worlds that the Persianate as a capacious if unsettled category has sought to reach, even as today they

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have been abandoned as anathema or simply unthinkable.

Notes

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1. The term هندی (*hindī*) here literally means "Indian," but was also used, along with the Arabic broken plural هنود (*hunūd*), to denote Hindus as a religious community.

2. All translations are mine.

3. I use here the standard English transcription of the term *ahiṃsa*, which has now entered the English language. The *Ahinsā Parkāsh* is inconsistent in its Persian transcription of the term, which it sometimes writes *ahinsā* and other times *ahimsā*.

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