



Roots of Inter-Faith Dialogue: The Fusion of Sanskrit and Persianate World in Indian-Subcontinent

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ABSTRACT

The strategic location of the Indian subcontinent plays a vital role as a significant crossroads for trade and migration paths linking West Asia and East Asia. This important position at a key intersection has facilitated migrations, trade exchanges, and the sharing of knowledge systems and cultures, especially between the Sanskrit and Persianate worlds. The period spanning from the Turko-Afghan rule in the thirteenth century to the decline of the Mughal rule was significant in the process of amalgamation of West and South Asian intellectual and cultural traditions. Various rulers during this period promoted both Sanskrit and Persianate languages and cultures, contributing to the growth of a cosmopolitan society. The exchange between these two cultural spheres also led to the dissemination of ideas promoting interfaith harmony. The convergence of Perso-Arabic and Sanskrit concepts brought about substantial transformations in the socio-religious environment of the Indian subcontinent. This fusion initiated debates on religion, governance, and traditions, encouraging opportunities for cross-cultural discussions. The resultant fusion of knowledge systems, ideologies and customs contributed to the development of a unique pluralistic ethos termed as "Hindustani" culture, which manifested in diverse forms across regional languages and traditions. What do the Sanskrit and Persianate knowledge

systems and cultures imply? How did the amalgamation of these two contribute to the emergence of a unique regional culture? How might this collective cultural understanding promote interfaith discussions? The inquiries that I intend to investigate in this study are of a similar nature.

Introduction

The Indian subcontinent has always been part of the transcontinental network, integrated into the wider Geo-cultural world, which facilitated trade, the movement of people, and the exchange of cultures and knowledge systems with other regions throughout History. The geographical proximity of the Iranian plateau to the Indian subcontinent enabled this connectivity through land trade routes, specifically the northern plains. Moreover, the west-Asian proximity through the Gulf region, linked to the Iranian plateau via the Arabian Sea to the west and the Indian Ocean to the south, makes it a significant hub for the exchange of trade, architecture, and ideas and ultimately facilitating the exchange of knowledge systems over the period.

To comprehend the relations between West Asia and the Indian sub-continent, it is crucial to analyze the historical and cultural elements that linked them. Trade paths like the Silk Road facilitated the trading of goods, products, and information. The growth of empires like the Persian Achaemenid Empire, Mauryan Empire, and later Mughal Empire resulted in the acquisition and assimilation of various cultures and regions, promoting cultural connections and exchanges, with west Asian regions. Moreover, the intellectual and knowledge structures found in the Sanskrit and Persianate worldⁱ were influential in shaping their connection. The Sanskrit domain, known for its extensive literary and philosophical heritage, generated numerous texts covering various topics like religion, philosophy, science, and literature and profoundly influenced different regional cultures all over the subcontinent. On the other hand, the Persianate domain, also influenced many cultures, cultivating distinct intellectual customs in areas such as theology, poetry, and history around Iranian plateau.ⁱⁱ

The blending of various regional cultures with the already existing Sanskrit and Persian languages and their intellectual heritages resulted in the development of a distinct language which was more accommodating and inclusive than Sanskrit and Persian, named “Hindustani language”.ⁱⁱⁱ Hindustani, originating from the amalgamation of Sanskrit, Persian, and regional dialects, promoted by many royal

courts and patrons, served as a common *lingua franca* enabling communication and connectivity among individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This diverse pluralistic society, marked by its rich array of cultures, faiths, and languages, highlighted the lasting impact of the inter-connectedness between the realms of Sanskrit and Persian.

The coalescence of Sanskrit and Persian influences has greatly enriched the cultural heritage, emphasizing the importance of striving for an acceptance of a pluralistic and diverse society promoting peace and unity. The similarities in its linguistics traits, spread and adoption by royal courts and patrons ultimately culminated into the Hindustani/Urdu language with the inclusion of many regional languages further fostered peace between different regions of India and helped in improving inter-faith religious dialogue.

Geographical Location

Geographically, the subcontinent has been divided into three major regions: the northern mountains, the Gangetic plains and the peninsula. The northern mountains have been described in the past as a barrier to communication that isolates northern India from Asia. But in effect they were rarely barriers and the north-west of the subcontinent was in continuous communication with peoples and places in western and central Asia. It was almost as if such communication made possible by the passes in the north-western mountains and intensified cross-cultural activities along with expansion of empires. The Pamirs in north, Hindu Kush in North West and Sulaiman ranges in West and Himalayas in Northeastern side were seen as geographical boundaries of the Indian subcontinent. The Indus valley is connected by Bolan and Khyber passes to West Asia and it's connected to Central Asia by Agil pass. Contrary to the idea of Himalayan as a barrier to Indian subcontinent, the passes and ranges provide the geographical interface between the Oxus and the Indus Valleys paving way towards Indo-Gangetic plains and to Bengal delta. When seen from this perspective it ceases to be the barrier cutting off access to West Asia and Central Asia which it was once thought to be. ^{iv}

The “Sanskritic Cosmopolis” ^v

Sanskrit language as literary composition played a major role in the introduction of variety of cultural changes. The compilation of Vedas and the two great Epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, in Sanskrit over the period had a major impact on the regional cultures of the sub-continent. The texts helped in the development of homogenizing cultural ideology also, with Sanskrit as a primary means of

knowledge and interaction. This influence and the development of homogenous ideas based on these texts can be termed as a Sanskritic Cosmopolis. Sheldon Pollock's concept of the "Sanskrit Cosmopolis"^{vi} describes a broad cultural network that encompassed large parts of South Asia and Southeast Asia before during ancient and early modern period. This cosmopolis, inhabited by large number of people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds was connected by the use of Sanskrit as a common language, enabling the flow of ideas, information, and artistic techniques among various cultures and communities. It also served as a platform where mutual literary customs, cultural principles, and beliefs nurtured a feeling of local identity, even in the absence of a central political power. This lasting impact of Sanskrit language and the culture it produced is evident in the varied cultural practices of South Asia and Southeast Asia.

Sanskrit literature produced such as Panini, the author of *Ashtadhyayi*, Kalidasa, known for *Abhinajakuntalam*, Banabhatta's *Harshacarita* and Vishakadatta, the writer of *Mudrakshasa*. All these texts played a prominent role in establishing the dominance of Sanskrit in Indian Subcontinent. The literature provided a common ground for the exchange and synthesis of regional cultural traditions also, likewise the adoption of *Ramayana* into many regional variants, leading to the production of versions of *Ramayana*'s which led development of new cultural forms and practices.^{vii} While Sanskrit served as a unifying force, it also allowed for regional variations within the broader cultural sphere. Different regions developed distinct cultural expressions based on their specific historical, geographical, and social contexts, resulting in the formation of a rich fabric of cultural diversity within the overall framework of the Sanskrit Cosmopolis.

The "Persian Cosmopolis"^{viii}

Just like the "Sanskrit Cosmopolis", the "Persian Cosmopolis" refers to a vast cultural sphere that extended across much of Western Asia, Central Asia, and South Asia during the pre-modern period. This region was characterized by the common language of Persian, facilitating the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and artistic practices across diverse cultures and societies.^{ix} It was a space where shared literary traditions, cultural values, and beliefs fostered a sense of regional identity, despite the absence of centralized political authority, similar to the case of Sanskrit.

The Persian Cosmopolis played a crucial role in shaping the history and development of the regions it encompassed. Its legacy continues to be evident in the rich and diverse cultural traditions of

the Middle East and Central Asia. The enduring influence of Persian language and culture can still be seen in the various aspects of life in these regions, from literature and art to philosophy and religion. The *Shahnama* of Firdausi, *Divan* of Hafez and Rumi and also the Persian translations. Later Akbar promoted the translations of *Mahabharat* and *Ramayana* also in Persian in Indian subcontinent.

The Fusion

The fusion of Sanskrit and Persian cultures led to a diverse and impactful cultural interchange that significantly influenced the Indian subcontinent and beyond. Despite maintaining their individual characteristics, these two traditions mutually influenced and enhanced each other. A notable result of this cultural exchange was the emergence of novel languages and literary works. The exchange between Sanskrit and Persian languages gave rise to the emergence of novel languages like Urdu, as well as innovative literary forms that incorporated elements from both traditions. This fusion of cultures led to the development of a varied and vibrant literary scene that mirrored the distinctiveness of the region. Beyond language and literature, the cultural interchange between Sanskrit and Persian also significantly influenced various aspects of life in the Indian subcontinent. The collaboration among academics from different backgrounds encouraged the sharing of ideas and the creation of new knowledge. This collaboration also played a role in shaping regional identities based on their common cultural heritage.

While Persian played a significant role in shaping the cultural landscape of the subcontinent, it did not supplant the indigenous Sanskrit tradition. Instead, it engaged in a dynamic process of interaction and exchange with Sanskrit literature and philosophy. Sanskrit texts were translated into Persian, and Persian works were adapted and reinterpreted in Sanskrit. This cross-fertilization led to the emergence of new literary genres and philosophical concepts that blended elements from both traditions.

One notable example of this exchange is the development of the *Urdu* language, which emerged as a synthesis of Persian, Sanskrit, and local dialects. Urdu literature, particularly during the Mughal period, showcased a remarkable blending of Persian and Indian poetic traditions, resulting in a unique and distinctive style. ^x

Persian art and architecture also had a profound impact on the subcontinent. The intricate and ornate styles of Persian styles, exemplified on Taj Mahal, were adapted and incorporated into local building traditions by Mughals. Persian motifs, such as floral designs, calligraphy, and arabesque patterns, can be found in countless monuments and artifacts across the region. ^{xi} In the realm of

painting, Persian miniature painting, with its emphasis on detail and narrative, influenced the development of Indian miniature art. Indian artists adopted Persian techniques and subject matter, while also incorporating elements from traditional Indian painting styles.

The Persian language and culture had a major influence on early Urdu poets and writers, many of whom were Persian speakers. The literary traditions of Persian served as a guide for Urdu poets, shaping their writing style, themes, and techniques. Along with Persian, Sanskrit also played a part in the evolution of Urdu language and literature. The language of Urdu developed by incorporating Sanskrit words and grammatical features, resulting in a distinctive linguistic fusion. Additionally, the inclusion of local languages and dialects like Hindi, Punjabi, and Gujarati contributed to the enrichment of Urdu, showcasing the varied cultural milieu of the Indian subcontinent.

The Regional Variations: Localized expressions through Literature and Poetry

Amir Khusrau is often considered the pioneer of Urdu poetry, with his works laying the foundation for the development of this literary genre. Known for his exceptional poetry and literary works, he was honored with the title *Tuti-i-Hind* (Parrot of India) in the field of Persian literature. He is credited with creating the first verse in Urdu, as well as the initial instance of the unique Urdu meter known as the ghazal, in a composition that combines Persian and Urdu elements. The individual created numerous puzzles, poems, mysteries, and playful verses that are still widely enjoyed. In the Urdu language, his works continue to be well-received. The poet frequently incorporated Hindi words into his verses. In addition to his proficiency in poetry, he was also a skilled musician who created his own unique musical patterns. He is acknowledged for incorporating Persian, Arabic, and Turkish influences into Indian classical music and for pioneering the *khayal* and *tarana* genres of music. ^{xiii}

Ibrahim Adil Shah II, a ruler of the Adil Shahi dynasty in the Deccan region of India, was known for his military expertise and support for the arts. He authored a Hindi text on music, showcasing his appreciation for the cultural heritage of the area. His court poet, Maulana Zuhuri, composed a Persian preface for this work, considered a renowned example of Urdu prose literature. Zuhuri's introduction is distinguished by its sophisticated style, extensive vocabulary, and adept employment of rhetorical techniques. It highlights the Persian influence on Urdu prose, illustrating the assimilation of Persian literary customs into the developing Urdu language. Zuhuri's writings stand as evidence of the cultural interchange and amalgamation that occurred during the Adil Shahi era, and they are still esteemed for their literary merits. Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah, the ruler of Golconda and the creator of Hyderabad,

was also a supporter of Urdu literature. He is recognized for assembling a diwan, a compilation of Urdu ghazals. This collection reflects his passion for Urdu poetry and his role in advancing the Urdu literary heritage in the Deccan area. ^{xiii}

The Marathas, a prominent Hindu warrior caste, were instrumental in the promotion of both Sanskrit and Persian languages in the Indian subcontinent. Their main objective was to establish a Hindu state and resist foreign rule, but they also supported various cultural and intellectual activities. Sanskrit, being the ancient language of India, was adopted by the Marathas as a representation of their Hindu heritage. The Marathas set up educational institutions for Sanskrit and provided patronage to Sanskrit scholars and poets. They also funded the translation of religious and literary works into Sanskrit. Additionally, they acknowledged the significance of Persian for diplomatic and administrative purposes. The Marathas promoted the study of Persian literature and history, employed Persian-speaking scholars and diplomats, and utilized Persian as a means of communication with other rulers and states. ^{xiv}

Conclusion

The fusion of Sanskrit and Persian cultures led to a diverse cultural exchange that greatly influenced the Indian subcontinent and beyond. While maintaining their individual identities, these two traditions influenced each other, giving rise to new languages, literature, and cultural expressions. This exchange highlights the potential of interfaith dialogue and collaboration in promoting peace and mutual understanding among communities. Through embracing the various aspects of their cultural heritage and participating in respectful communication, individuals from diverse backgrounds can benefit from each other's knowledge, foster mutual understanding, and contribute to the development of a more cohesive society.

This instance of cultural exchange demonstrates the positive impact of interfaith dialogue and cooperation in promoting peace and mutual understanding among communities. Embracing the rich diversity of cultural backgrounds and engaging in respectful conversations enable individuals from various origins to exchange knowledge, bridge gaps in understanding, and cultivate a more cohesive society. The amalgamation of Sanskrit and Persian further emphasizes the significance of acknowledging and valuing the diverse cultural influences that contribute to the evolution of a collective cultural legacy. Moreover, the interaction between Sanskrit and Persian was not restricted to a national scale but also reached out to local and regional populations. This local impact played a role in the

emergence of various cultural manifestations within the larger context of the Sanskrit-Persian cultural domain. By appreciating both the universal and local facets of their cultural legacy, individuals in India can promote a feeling of solidarity while also honoring their distinct identities.

Notes

ⁱ The term "Sanskrit world" pertains to the cultural impact of Sanskrit language, while the term "Persian world" refers to the predominance of Persian cultural influence, particularly the role played by language. Sanskrit was predominant in Indian sub-continent, while Persian was prevalent in the Iranian plateau, both of these languages influenced various cultures through language, and poetry.

ⁱⁱ Eaton, R.M. (2019). *India in the Persianate Age 1000–1765*, London: Penguin.p.13.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hindustani language means, the languages that is produced because of the blend of Sanskrit, Persian and regional languages and people from different ethnic backgrounds and cultures of Indian sub-continent share a commonality on the basis of language later it was known as Hindi or Urdu.

^{iv} Thapar, R. (2002). *The Penguin History of Early India from the Origins to AD. 1300*, New Delhi: Penguin.p. 39-40.

^v The concept of the Sanskrit Cosmopolis, as introduced by scholar Sheldon Pollock, refers to a widespread cultural domain that encompassed a significant portion of South Asia and Southeast Asia in ancient times. This cosmopolis was characterized by a collective cultural environment in which the Sanskrit language and literature held significant importance, despite not being a single political entity. In a similar fashion Persian cosmopolis also refers to culture in which Persian language and literature played importance. See Pollock, S., *Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

^{vi} Eaton, R.M. (2018). "The Persian Cosmopolis (900–1900) and the Sanskrit Cosmopolis (400–1400)" in *The Persianate World*. pp. 63–83. doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004387287_004.

^{vii} Ramanujan, A.K. (1991). 'Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation', in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. by Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press). pp. 22–48. ISBN 9780520075894. Available at <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft3j49n8h7/>.

^{viii} Similar to the Sanskrit Cosmopolis, the Persian Cosmopolis is the area under the influence of Persian language, the term is coined by Richard Eaton.

^{ix} _____. (2019). *India In the Persianate Age 1000–1765*, London: Penguin. pp.57-58

- ^x Zaidī, A.J. (1993). *A History of Urdu literature*, New Delhi: Sahitya Academy. pp.1-2.
- ^{xi} Koch, E. (2014). *An Outline of Its History and Development, 1526-1858*, Delhi: Primus Books. p. 14.
- ^{xii} Hossain, I.U. (2023). ‘Dynamic cultural patterns of medieval India: A Study of Persian Literature during the Early Eenturies of Delhi Sultanate’: in *International Journal of History*, Vol. 5, (1) pp. 114-120.
- ^{xiii} Khan, M.H., *Mohammad Quli Qutb Shah*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996, p.1-2.
- ^{xiv} Kulkarni, A.R. (2001). ‘Medieval Maharashtra: A Fusion of Cultures’in: *Indian historical Review*, Vol. 28, (1). pp. 31-49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/037698360102800203>.

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