

RELIGION IN HISTORY

Manjhan's *Madhumalati*
and the Construction of Indo-Islam

By Nita Verma Prasad



Lovers shoot at a tiger in the jungle. Illustration to the Sufi text *Madhumalati*. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/wowlhdj>.

In today's geopolitical environment, teaching South Asia can be somewhat of a sticky wicket, particularly when it comes to religion and communalism. Each time I discuss Hindu-Muslim relations in an introductory course on South Asia or in a 100-level world history class, I run up against a whole host of preconceived notions on religion in the non-Western world. Worse yet, most students are unaware that our modern understanding of religion can't be projected backward. However, a properly contextualized discussion of Hindu-Muslim relations in South Asia not only gives students a deeper comprehension of the region, but also illustrates how, when viewed through the lens of history, seemingly timeless institutions like religion can take on meanings and forms that our twenty-first-century minds could never imagine.

I have found literature from the Mughal Era to be invaluable in imparting these lessons. While multiple translated texts are available, *Madhumalati* by Mir Sayyid Manjhan Rajgiri (trans. Aditya Behl and Simon Weightman) is readily accessible as an Oxford paperback.¹ Moreover, its sixteen-page prologue—a length easily digestible by early undergraduates and high school students alike—is packed with evidence of the syncretic blending of Hinduism and Islam, or Indo-Islam, that was underway during the Mughal period (1526–1707). The composite nature of religious practice in Mughal India is a well-established fact among most historians, but is nonetheless politically contested terrain, as Hindu nationalist scholars and politicians prefer to depict the Mughals as foreign invaders who oppressed Hindus and converted with the sword. While most students are blissfully ignorant of this controversy, instructors should recognize that texts like *Madhumalati*, which reflect the indigenization of Islam on the subcontinent, speak to this deeply politicized discourse. A careful reading of *Madhumalati's* prologue, followed by informed classroom discussion, highlights the religious syncretism prevalent in premodern India, and also provides a critical lens on the nature of governance in the Turco-Mongol empires.

The Text and Its Context

Madhumalati is an epic poem written in 1545, at a time when the Mughal Empire was still struggling to establish itself on the Indian subcontinent. The Mughals faced multiple threats from local dynasties and, in fact, ceded control of their kingdom for a short while (1540–1555) to Sher Shah Suri, an Afghan general. During this period, the Afghans continued to generously patronize local artists, as the two Mughal emperors, Babur and Humayun, had done before them. One of these artists was Manjhan, the Sufi poet who penned *Madhumalati* from the court of the Afghan ruler Islam Shah.

Sufis, as I tell my students, are a bit like the “hippies” of the Islamic world; they revel in music and poetry, dance until they’re dizzy (the Whirling Dervishes of Turkey are Sufis), and drink freely. Sufism is a mystical form of Islam that rejects the more rigid, orthodox, and legalistic elements of the religion in favor of a personal connection with God. It’s not a sect or denomination, like Sunni or Shia, but rather an approach, adopted by both Sunni and Shia alike. By Manjhan’s time, Sufism had become deeply rooted in the Indian landscape.

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Mughal Emperor Akbar shows deference to Sufi Saint Sheikh Salim Chishti. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/vs8qq9>.

This mystical strain of Islam had initially developed in the eighth century CE in the area that is now lower Iraq as a reaction to the extravagant wealth and opulence of the Abbasid caliphate (750–1258). The first Sufis shunned all worldly indulgences; they were true ascetics, taking their name from the coarse wool cloth they wore as they wandered, begging and spreading their teachings. Over the next several centuries, this asceticism was combined with a classical mystical bent. Seeking direct communion between God and man, these early mystics preached the ideal of divine love, or knowing God through love.²

Sufism remained a fairly loose and unstructured movement until the thirteenth century, when the movement underwent far-reaching changes. Different mystical orders began to form, each one under the guidance of a particular *shaykh* (master). Orders differentiated themselves from one another based on their prescribed method of attaining oneness with God; each had a distinct set of spiritual exercises designed to achieve this end, most of which involved ritualized interactions with music, dance, poetry, and ascetic practice.³ It was in this phase that Sufism made its way to India, when in the early 1200s, the Chisti order was established in Delhi. By the fifteenth century, the Shattari order, to which Manjhan belonged, had become codified in India as well.⁴ The Shattaris quickly forged ties with the Afghans after their rise to power, and Manjhan thus found himself in the court of Islam Shah as a spiritual instructor and poet. It was there, in the early 1540s, that he wrote *Madhumalati*.⁵

This epic poem, like so much of the literature produced by Sufis, is a love story in which the hero, Prince Manohar, finds but then loses his true love, Madhumalati. After wandering for a year disguised as a Hindu yogi, Manohar finds Madhumalati, and the two are ultimately reunited. Their

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story embodies the familiar themes of desire, separation, and love that run through most Sufi romances, where the relationship between the lovers is meant to mimic the relationship between the Sufi devotee and God. Manohar thus represents the ideal Sufi, who suffers through a wandering life of asceticism on his quest to find true beauty and love (God).

The Text and Indo-Islam

Thankfully, students needn't get bogged down in the exploits of Manohar and his beloved. While the main text of *Madhumalati* highlights the cultural amalgam of the times, the prologue is a short yet intense read that does the same. Manjhan's prologue adheres to the literary conventions of the genre: in it, he thanks his spiritual guides and political sponsors, and praises God. As he goes about these tasks, Manjhan, like other Sufi poets, effortlessly folds Hindu concepts into an Islamic framework, thus underscoring the religious syncretism of the time.

At first glance, students encounter a narrative structure that emphasizes the Islamic roots of the author; this is apparent from the section subheadings in the prologue. The first section, for instance, is titled "In Praise of God," and it seems that for Manjhan, this god is singular: "He is one, there is no other."⁶ While Hindu scripture sometimes addresses its many gods similarly, numerous allusions to Qur'anic verse sprinkled throughout this section forcefully suggest Islamic monotheism at work here.⁷ The next section, titled "In Praise of Muhammad," continues to build on the Islamic framework. Here, students learn of the Prophet Muhammad's centrality to the religion. Muhammad is hailed as the "Lamp of Creation," which, as explained in the annotations, is a reference to the Islamic belief that Muhammad was bathed in divine light during the first revelation.⁸ The rest of the section carries on in this manner, praising the Prophet, founder of the Islamic religion: "Muhammad is the root, the whole world a branch."⁹

Likewise, the third section of the prologue, "In Praise of the Four Caliphs," celebrates the most important leaders of the *umma*, or early Islamic community:

*Now listen while I tell of [Muhammad's] four companions,
the givers of doctrine, truth, and justice.
The first was Abu Bakr, the Proof,
who accepted as truth the words of Muhammad.
The second was Umar, the king of justice:
he left father and son for the work of God.
The third, Usman, knew the secrets of scripture.
The fourth was the Lion Ali, the virtuous,
who conquered the world by the grace of his sword.
They held the original scripture as truth, accepting nothing else.¹⁰*

Students unfamiliar with Islamic history can rely on the exhaustive notes, which familiarize them with the iconic figures mentioned above: these early rulers assumed leadership of the *umma* after the death of the Prophet and thus occupy a special place in Islamic history, somewhat akin to how Americans view the Founding Fathers. Digging a bit deeper into these sections, students continue to find references to Muslim scripture and lore, such as the famous Qur'anic passage the *Surat-a-Nur*, or the *Verse of Light*, which establishes Allah as the source of all light.¹¹ Interestingly, I can always tell which students have just flipped through the prologue, reading only the various subheadings—those are the students who argue that *Madhumalati's* author is unequivocally Muslim.

However, students who read a bit more carefully are confronted with the undeniable presence of Hinduism in the text; it's not subtle to those paying attention. It shows us that Manjhan's Islam is a wholly Indian form of Islam; it has become indigenized, adopting various motifs, beliefs, and worldviews from Hindu Indian culture. Students encounter this in the opening lines of *Madhumalati*:

*God, giver of love, the treasure-house of joy
Creator of the two worlds in the one sound Om,
my mind has no light worthy of you,
with which to sing your praise, O Lord!
King of the three worlds and the four ages,
the world glorifies you from beginning to end.¹²*

Again, the annotations are critical to a thorough analysis: they explain that in the Islamic account of creation, God uttered a single sound and the universe came into being. Line 2 above alludes to this, but Manjhan changes the uttered word from the Arabic "*kun*," or "be," to the Hindi "*om*," thereby embedding a central Hindu concept into a Muslim narrative. *Om* is one of the most sacred symbols in

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Hinduism, which, when spoken correctly, incorporates three different sounds, representing the three stages of life; the three main Hindu gods; the past, present, and future—in short, the entire universe. Originally appearing in the Hindu *Upanishads* (c. 800–200 BCE), it litters all subsequent Hindu scripture and ritual.

Another reference to Hindu belief appears in line 5, where Manjhan alludes to the *tribhuvana*, or three Hindu worlds, as well as the “four ages,” or the four Hindu periods of time: the *Krta*, *Dvapara*, *Treta*, and *Kali yugas*. Hindus believe the world is currently in the final stage, *Kali yuga*, a period of degeneracy which ends with Lord Shiva, the god of destruction, destroying the universe and starting the cycle anew. Manjhan describes himself as living in *Kali yuga* and constantly warns his readers of this “age of degeneration . . . black as a cobra.”¹³ He continues to showcase Hindu theology throughout the prologue: students come across Indra, the Hindu god of rain, and Hanuman, the monkey child of the Hindu god of wind and central character in the Hindu epic *The Ramayana*.¹⁴ *Madhumalati* is jam-packed with such references, each meticulously annotated for students unfamiliar with Hindu theology. While the narrative structure and many of the literary devices employed by Manjhan punctuate his Islamic roots, references to Hinduism are just as profuse.

It's worth emphasizing that references to Hinduism and Islam are not neatly separated from one another by verse, line, or section; the prologue doesn't merely juxtapose self-contained Hindu allusions with Islamic ones—it *combines* them. Hinduism and Islam exist in a mishmash within the prologue and are thus transformed into a wholly new Indo-Islamic tradition. For example, in the opening lines quoted earlier, Manjhan merges the Muslim creation myth with the Hindu concept of the universe. Similarly, he uses Hindu terminology to describe the Islamic God, the Prophet, and the four caliphs. Of Allah, Manjhan writes: “He is Om, the singular sound . . . alone in the three worlds and the four ages.”¹⁵ Here, the Islamic Allah is equated with the Hindu om. Moreover, Hinduism's three worlds and four ages, which should be populated with Hinduism's many gods, exist here with only one monotheistic deity. Manjhan, then, is not merely alternating his religious allusions or going back and forth between Hindu and Muslim lore—he is integrating the two, masterfully weaving distinct traditions into a unified whole, thus mirroring the construction of the blended religion Indo-Islam.

Students are generally bewildered as the reality of religious syncretism confronts them in every verse of the prologue; their initial reactions range from confusion to disbelief. Living in an age where religions are neatly pigeonholed in discrete compartments—not only separate, but sometimes hostile—they struggle to grasp the meaning behind Manjhan's writing. Most are confused as to why a Muslim so freely references Hindu theology, using Hindu characters and events as though they were



Akbar holds a religious assembly in the Ibadat Khana (House of Worship) in Fatehpur Sikri; the two men dressed in black are the Jesuit missionaries Rodolfo Acquaviva and Francisco Henriques. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/v49zexz>.

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his own. Others (rather cynically) chalk it up to political expediency and then falter when asked to explain why referencing Hinduism in the court of a Muslim ruler is expedient. Yet the composition of the narrative text—one in which Hindu precepts are readily assimilated into an overarching Islamic framework—precisely mirrors the religious syncretism that was at work in the Mughal Empire, where the construction of Indo-Islam was, by Manjhan's time, well underway.

The Text and Indian History

Manjhan's prologue provides a fantastic window into the sociocultural milieu of the time. Students gain insight into the religious context of the period, as well as get a feel for how Turco-Mongol empires governed. A thorough discussion of Indo-Islam encourages students to unpack and reexamine their ideas on religion in both past and present, East and West. It also highlights the many problematic assumptions on politics and empire in Eastern societies, and the importance of proper contextualization.

Any instructor of world history must contend with multiple misconceptions on religion in the East. Over the last decade or so, the media has provided us with enduring images of violence perpetrated in the name of religion in places like Syria, Iraq, India, and Somalia, to name but a few. Many of my students come to class with the idea that religious conflict is a timeless, immutable feature of "exotic" places like these. Others, of course, have no specific thoughts or ideas on Eastern religions whatsoever. All of them, however, nurture ahistorical views on religion and piety: they understand religion as it exists in the twenty-first century, full stop.

In contrast, the religious context that springs to life in the pages of *Madhumalati* is complex and nuanced. The Mughal Empire was self-consciously Muslim, ruling over a largely Hindu population, but relations between the two communities were varied, and conversion to Islam was never a prerequisite to wielding political power or participating in public life.¹⁶ Mughal rulers sought to knit India's many communities into a single system—one that was held together by common political allegiance rather than uniformity of religion. Akbar (r. 1556–1605), best-known among Mughal rulers for his flirtations with different faiths, opened his court, harem, and administration to Hindus, and adopted an even-handed approach to governance. His pluralistic policies led to an influx of non-Muslim nobility at court (both his chief adviser and principal wife were practicing Hindus) and an upswing in local artists and art forms, such as the ritualistic chanting of Hindu hymns. Even more important was Akbar's philosophical openness to other faiths. He studied them exhaustively and even tried to proffer a new syncretic religion, *Din-i-Ilahi*.¹⁷ While politically motivated discourse aimed at downplaying the composite nature of premodern India tends to cast Akbar's policies as exceptional, texts like *Madhumalati* underscore the fact that accommodation and inclusion were occurring long before the reign of Akbar, and indeed characterize the entire period. Although there were orthodox Muslim factions and *ulama* who resisted such syncretism, their voices were, for the most part, muffled. The accommodative policies laid down by Akbar and those before him endured even under more orthodox Mughal rulers like Aurangzeb.¹⁸ But let me not overstate the point: there was indeed an awareness of religious difference, sometimes reflected in differential tax demands and access to power, and religious strife did occasionally occur. Nonetheless, religious inclusivity was woven into the fabric of Mughal administration in a way that is lost to modern India.

Moreover, there is convincing evidence that religious syncretism was at work in the villages as well. Richard Eaton, in his landmark study *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, shows how Islam was indigenized among Bengali agrarian communities. By demonstrating that even in rural India, the Mughals fostered accommodation rather than forced conversion, Eaton challenges those who, for political reasons, would project communal hostility further back than it belongs. He details how Muslim religious figures—saints, angels, prophets, and even Allah—seeped into local cosmologies, partly because of prolonged cultural contact and partly because more deities and rituals meant more tools with which to solve life's everyday problems.¹⁹ This use of religion as technique, the efficacy of which is determined by the user, is totally foreign to my students; it's the point where their modern mindset limits a proper understanding of the past.²⁰ I often explain it to them by comparing it to our twenty-first-century approach to health care: today, people try all kinds of cures for illness—acupuncture, homeopathy, ayurveda, chiropractic—in addition to allopathic care. Like religions, many of these systems are theoretically incompatible and suspicious of one another, but a patient who is loyal to one may still avail of the others. We're free to use whatever works. This is the way religion functioned in many premodern Indian villages; it's how Indo-Islam was forged at a grassroots level.

Sufism—and Sufi literature in particular—was an important part of this process at both the court and village level. Sufism was ideally situated to absorb local religious traditions and then spread this

hybrid among the people. Philosophically, Sufis loosened many of the restrictions of orthodox Islam: their equation of God with love at times approached pantheism, and their ideal of direct communion with God provided a counterbalance to Islam's heavy emphasis on formal theology. Moreover, Sufi *shaykhs* readily adopted Hindu yogic asceticism and tantrism.²¹ Sufism, then, had an extraordinary capacity to absorb non-Islamic practice and belief, allowing Islam "to come to terms with a variety of mentalities, a multiplicity of local forms of faith."²² Sufis were not merely less orthodox Muslims, they assimilated local tradition and practice, making it easy for Hindus to regularly engage with and participate in Sufi ritual, right alongside Muslims. It was this kind of engagement that helped forge and perpetuate Indo-Islam.

Literature was one of the vehicles through which this change occurred. Poems like *Madhumalati* would have been read aloud at court and in local Sufi establishments, and ritually performed in Sufi shrines.²³ Much of the folk poetry of the period was composed by Sufis as well, written in vernacular languages and passed down orally.²⁴ Authors like Manjhan meant to entertain and also inform both the court and village about Sufism; he thus articulated spiritual ideology using local terms and concepts that could be readily understood and assimilated by his audience. Thus, "poets at these courts forged a distinctively Indian Islamic aesthetic culture."²⁵ *Madhumalati* and other such texts were at once reflections of, and stimuli for, the construction of Indo-Islam; Sufi poets like Manjhan were agents of historical change and also proof that such change was occurring. The vivid picture of acculturation they provide punctuates communalism's modernity; it reaffirms the fact that the history of communal violence on the subcontinent is a relatively short one. Instructors of 100-level survey courses can push this theme even further by discussing the text in conjunction with the construction of communalism during the British colonial period, as detailed by Gyanendra Pandey.²⁶ Pandey's study is a link between the reality of twentieth-century Hindu-Muslim strife and the religious syncretism of the past; it shows how and why the latter was supplanted by the former.

Just as Manjhan's text brings students' preconceived notions on religion into sharp relief, it also casts a critical lens on commonly held ideas on politics and government in the Turco-Mongol empires. Scholars who study these empires—Mongol, Safavid, Mughal, Ottoman—sometimes place undue emphasis on military aspects of governance. Descriptions of these political formations as "military patronage states" or "gunpowder empires" abound.²⁷ *Madhumalati* is an important corrective to these ideas, allowing students to imagine a lively royal court where music and poetry could be heard in the evenings. Indeed, patronizing the arts was a critical element of rule in many of the Turco-Mongol empires; a great ruler was expected to provide artistic proof of his power. Thus, the production of music, paintings, public structures, and literature was intrinsic to a successful imperial formation, the evidence of which extends from the Blue Mosque in Istanbul to the Taj Mahal in Agra. *Madhumalati* speaks to this broad approach to governance, one that involved so much more than military policy.

When I use *Madhumalati* in my classes, it often sparks lively conversations on the nature of religious practice. Today, religions don't have fluid boundaries; the lines between them aren't porous and ever-shifting. Moreover, we generally don't use religion as a practical tool to cope with life's problems—we don't, in other words, do rain dances when faced with drought. If we did, then perhaps



Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh. Painting of Jahangir (Akbar's son) meeting with a Sufi Shaikh rather than the Ottoman Sultan and James I of England. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/ut4cgap>.

we'd be open to trying somebody else's rain dance if ours didn't work. The difference between now and then, in what religion meant and how it was used, is a conversation that starkly illustrates the importance of proper contextualization when studying history; I imagine it would be salient in a world religions class as well. Undergraduate and high school students are often unaware that meanings, associations, and significations can be specific to a particular era. In other words, they don't understand that the better part of history is not knowing when things happened, but knowing how those happenings were perceived and experienced in a different time and place. *Madhumalati* sharpens our understanding of communal relations in India, showing us why we can't look at the sixteenth century with a twenty-first-century lens.

This is a lesson that students can apply not just to Mughal India, but to all their further studies in history. ■

NOTES

1. Manjhan, *Madhumalati: An Indian Sufi Romance*, trans. Aditya Behl and Simon Weightman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). As a graduate student, I was fortunate to have studied with the late Aditya Behl; his passion for the genre was infectious.
2. Raaziuddin Aquil, ed., *Sufism and Society in Medieval India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).
3. J. S. Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 1.
4. Richard Eaton, *The Sufis of Bijapur, 1300–1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), xxix–xxx.
5. For more on the relationship between the Shattari order and the royal court, see Eva Orthmann, “Ideology and State-Building: Humayun's Search for Legitimacy in a Hindu-Muslim Environment,” in *Religious Interactions in Mughal India*, eds. Vasudha Dalmia and Munis Faruqui (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 19–22.
6. Manjhan, 5.
7. *Ibid.*, 5.
8. *Ibid.*, 5.
9. *Ibid.*, 5.
10. *Ibid.*, 6.
11. *Ibid.*, 3.
12. *Ibid.*, 3.
13. An entire section of *Madhumalati's* prologue, titled “A Warning,” is dedicated to imparting this message. Manjhan, 16–17.
14. *Ibid.*, 6.
15. *Ibid.*, 3–4.
16. Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 134, 159.
17. Audrey Truschke, *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 13–16; and Barbara Metcalf and Thomas Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 15–21. Religious tolerance was practiced in some of the other Turco–Mongol empires, most notably the Mongol Empire, but it was by no means a feature of all pre-modern Islamic empires. See David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).
18. Audrey Truschke, *Aurangzeb: The Life and Legacy of India's Most Controversial King* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).
19. Eaton, *Rise of Islam*, 302.
20. *Ibid.*, 274.
21. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*, 59.
22. Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 48.
23. Aditya Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379–1545*, ed. Wendy Doniger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1–2.
24. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*, 157.
25. Behl in Manjhan, “Introduction,” xiii.
26. Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 1–65.
27. See, for example, Marshal G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

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