In the background of the study of literary texts in premodern India, there lies the pre-conceived notion that there were binaries present between Hindus and Muslims in medieval India just like the political binaries present today between India and Pakistan. This essay will contest the notion of Hindu-Muslim categories in premodern India by investigating why such a notion exists in the first place. Furthermore, it will explore some translations and embellished versions of Hindu epic stories such as the Padmavat and Nal-Daman to show that the actual experience between Hindus and Muslims in premodern India was quite the opposite.

Based upon the literature produced at that time, there were various terms used to categorize and identify people in the early texts that had very little to do with religion itself and more to do with ethnicity. The competition between the elites of the ‘Indic’ and ‘Islamicate’ ethnicities were on the “same economic and social resources.” That is why the elites of the two groups converged cultures in the interest of the resources to create a “common political and military culture”. This convergent space allowed easy exchange between cultures and a unique fluidity of identity to take place within it, as people could move back and forth without much trouble. While different “languages, religious practices and ideological systems” continued to exist, they were not the driving force upon which this shared culture had been formed. Therefore, it did not really matter what the elites’ religious affiliations were. So instead of being a conflict between two opposing forces, it became a social formation that was transcultural. This allowed a multiethnic and multilingual community to thrive and go on to produce shared material culture based upon common social interest.

Reconsidering the Hindu-Muslim ‘conflict’

The notion of Hinduism and Islam being two monolithic identities in premodern India still persists today because of a dated academic construct, rooted in colonialism, that articulated the meeting of these two religions as a ‘conflict’ and at times as an act of ‘syncretism’. And that is why both of these terms are highly problematic. When one sees the encounter of two religious traditions as a conflict, there is an implicit labelling of one tradition being superior over the other, since the meeting is automatically seen as a contest between two opposing powers. Similarly, a syncretic model of interaction reinforces the idea that two distinct entities are coming together “to form some new construction that share[s] parts of both but could be classified as neither.” The underlying impression of such an act is inherently negative which

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3 Ibid., 248.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 264.
8 Ibid., 270.
Tony K. Stewart expresses as being like a by-product that is faulty, impure, not viable etc. Syncretism forces one to believe that the only correct model is when the two identities are mutually exclusive and stand apart from each other. Such paradigms produce all kinds of hostile theories of interaction between Hindus and Muslims. Instead, I argue in premodern India, when Hinduism and Islam were present in the same space, a general search for equivalence between the people took place. The means for this type of search are many but I will focus on the literary means, especially in translations and retellings of Hindu epic tales. This is because the evidence present within these texts suggests an understanding that is against ideas of ‘conflict’ and ‘syncretism’.

Stewart states that equivalence is a “mode that suggests two conceptual worlds are seen to address similar problems in similar ways, without ever proposing that they are identical.” Therefore, equivalence-making allows religious encounters to become acts of cultural translations where two different worlds attempt to understand one another in their own terms. And the result of this accommodation is a “creative and improvisational act that enriches and strengthens both participants…[and in addition,] it augments the existing entities.” Thus, what we see here is a more positive tone towards the meeting of Hindus and Muslims in India. Unfortunately, such a view is often disregarded because of the many other conflicts that did take place between them. To give an idea, Shantanu Phukan summarizes:

The tales offered as ‘proofs’ of Islamic aggressions in India are numerous enough to form a genre in themselves: the looting of the Temple of Somnath by Mahmud of Ghazna in the 11th century, the alleged building of a mosque on the site of Ram’s birthplace by the Mughal Emperor Babar in the 16th, and the excesses of Emperor Aurangzeb beginning with the decapitation of his rival Dara Shikuh, popularly held to be a liberal sympathetic to Hindus.

However, as Cynthia Talbot states, Muslims coming to India was most profitable in many ways. Since the Muslim empires created an environment for India that allowed the region to connect with international networks and transform itself into a multicultural, multilingual and pluralistic society; “In the long term… the cultural and social enrichment that resulted from this participation in the world’s most cosmopolitan civilization of the middle ages was to become an inextricable part of India’s greatness.” Therefore, we need to move on from the overly negative view of the encounter between Hindus and Muslims to be able to appreciate aspects of their meeting that were actually fruitful and provide one with a view that is not blinkered by colonial and post-divide sentiments. To give an example of such sentiments, Aziz Ahmad says:

Muslim impact and rule in India generated two literary growths: a Muslim epic of conquest, and a Hindu epic of resistance and of psychological rejection. The two literary growths were planted in two different cultures; in two different languages, Persian and Hindi; in two mutually exclusive religious, cultural and historical attitudes each

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 284.
11 Ibid., 277.
confronting the other in aggressive hostility. Each of these two literary growths developed in mutual ignorance of the other...[where] their readership hardly ever converged.\(^\text{14}\)

This is an extremely problematic saying because Ahmad reinforces a literary, linguistic, psychological and cultural divide between Hindus and Muslims in premodern India. Which is simply not true based on the evidence found in literary texts that indicate otherwise. Using examples rooted in two texts primarily, the *Padmavat* and *Nal-Daman*, I will explore the several, possible views that can be inferred from them about the involvement of Muslims with Hindus in premodern India.

**The embellished *Padmavat***

The *Padmavat* is a 16\(^{\text{th}}\) century embellished retelling of a Rajput narrative written by Malik Muhammad Jayasi in either eastern Hindavi or Avadhi.\(^\text{15}\) Jayasi did something quite different from what was expected of Muslim authors in his time. His translated quest narrative took inspiration from the *Ramayana*, Natha Yogic cosmology and Sufi martyrology.\(^\text{16}\) This was so problematic for Ahmad that he could find no other explanation for it except that the many non-Muslim influences on Jayasi’s writing were a result of his rustic eclecticism and Sufi liberalism.\(^\text{17}\) Which he stated were due to him being “away from [the] Muslim-oriented atmosphere of the cities where the Muslim elites were developing an insular anti-Hindu literature.”\(^\text{18}\)

A similar incident is seen with the 17\(^{\text{th}}\) century writer Aqil Khan Razi who wrote a much more embellished version of the Rajput narrative than Jayasi did. Razi was many things from a courtier under Aurangzeb’s rule, to a Deccani general, to a superintendent of royal baths, to the Red Fort governor and finally a court poet.\(^\text{19}\) His retelling of the *Padmavat* had such huge Persian influences that he completely changed the narrative’s name from *Padmavat* to a Persian name *Sham’ wa Parvanah*. Phukan comments that *Sham* had enough embellishments to be called a transcreation rather than being a retelling.\(^\text{20}\)

Hence, we see that in different contexts, authors were taking Indic stories of their own volition, regardless of whether they lived in the city or the countryside, and infusing them with a distinct Indo-Persian style that had influences coming from a variety of sources. What’s interesting about this literary movement is that even with such a range of allusions from different sources, the local readers were able to catch the underlying meaning behind both Hindu and Islamic literary motifs, plot devices, tropes, symbols etc. without any trouble.

To understand better how these embellished versions were received by the Indian audience, Phukan provides an analysis of a few notes and scribbles on the margins of translated manuscripts of the *Padmavat* by both Hindu and Muslims translators. This gives us an insight

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\(^{16}\) Phukan, “‘None Mad as a Hindu Woman’,” 42.

\(^{17}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{18}\) Ahmad, “Epic and Counter-Epic,” 475.

\(^{19}\) Phukan, “‘None Mad as a Hindu Woman’,” 47.

into “the range of meanings to which [this] narrative...[has] been susceptible” to over the years. In the margins of a 19th century manuscript, that is a Persian retelling of Padmavat titled Farah Bakhsh, a Hindu scribe named Lachhmi Ram notes down a couplet by the famous Persian poet Hafiz in a section of the text where the Rajput were defeated by Ala al-Din Khalji’s army in a battle at Chittaur. His scribble is so “ahistoric and apolitical” to the event that occurred between Muslims and Hindus in 14th century that it just does not ring true with the binary sentiment that Ahmad speaks of.  

Every edifice you see is prone to breakage, except
For the edifice of love which is devoid of any cracks.

Based on this couplet, one can infer that Ram’s reading of this narrative was not about the battle between Muslims and Hindus at Chittaur, but rather on the “final triumph of the ethic of love...that love, unlike Chittaur, can never be sacked.”

In another incident, a translator named Muhammad Shakir, a Sufi Shaikh from 17th century, translated the Padmavat from Hindi to Arabic and then to Persian. In the preface to his translation, he inserted a biographic incident from the life of the 14th century Sufi Shaikh Nizam al-din Awliya. What is remarkable about his note is that Shakir doesn’t see the Padamavat as a literature of Muslim triumph over the Hindus, rather he saw the tension between the Rajput Ratnasena and Ala al-Din Khalji as similar to the classic Sufi-hagiographic literary trope of the tension between the emperor and the Sufi Saint. These minor occurrences on the side-lines of translated texts reveal to us that first and foremost, both Muslims and Hindus were reading, commenting and translating texts in a mutually inclusive manner, and not as epics of conquest or resistance of one over the other. Secondly, there does not seem to be any hostility in knowing more about the Hindu literary tales by the Muslims.

Such appearances in texts question the saliency of religion in premodern India. Phillip Wagoner states that in premodern India rather than religion, ethnic terms like Turuska, Parasika or Telugu were of more importance when labeling a people. Furthermore, “cultural code switching and boundary crossing” was so common that it was part of daily life for the people. Accordingly, when thinking about premodern India, one needs to completely eradicate modern identity-markers like ‘Hindu’ or ‘Muslim’ to better understand the dynamics of a past environment that was shared between communities of several cultures and faiths.

Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya notes that even after there was familiarity with Islamic terms and practices by 13th century in India, Muslims were still not identified by their religion, rather the focus continued to stay on generic terms for outsiders/foreigners such as Yavana, Mleccha and tribal/community-based terms. For example, the term Parasika was used to denote westerners of pre-Islamic Persia. But, over time this term gained a new connotation and was used

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21 Ibid., 43.
22 Phukan, “‘None Mad as a Hindu Woman’,” 44.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Wagoner, “‘Fortuitous Convergences,” 241.
28 Ibid., 242.
for Muslims in general. Later on, it became interchangeable with Yavana and Mleccha instead of being fixed for only Muslims or Persians. Thus, “the use as well as the non-use of particular words, in addition of course to ways they were used, may indeed be indicative of attitudes” of the people of premodern India towards one another.

The patronage of Nal-Daman

During the second half of the 16th century, Persian became the “language of power and culture” in India over other vernacular languages. With the rise of the Mughals and their much-loved patronage, stories in the vernacular were being translated to Persian and resulted in a “new form of Indo-Persian synthesis.” What the Mughal emperors like Akbar, Jahangir and Prince Dara Shikuh were essentially trying to do with these translation projects of retelling Hindu stories was to provide the Persian-speaking world with an opportunity to experience the ‘Indian flavor’ of things, while at the same time stay familiar to their Persian audiences. They would also try to encourage relations between Muslims and Hindus, so much so, that an Akbari motif of sulh-i kull; “universal peace…[and] social harmony mediated by royal power” came about for artists to praise their patrons, which was reminiscent of the promotional acts by these royal personages.

A good example of Mughal patronage is the Persian retelling of the classic story of Nal and Damayanti that Mughal poet-laureate Abu’l Faiz ibn Mubarak (better known as Faizi) wrote in the 16th century for Akbar. Nal and Damayanti were originally found in the Mahabharata in Sanskrit before being spread around India in many other vernacular languages. Faizi says in his verse-narrative that Emperor Akbar told him:

Tell the old tale anew,  
Of the love of Nal and the beauty of Daman.

Make a hundred songs of pain into poetry,  
Fill the fresh goblet with an old wine ...

See what love once was like in India.

Here we see Akbar in Faizi’s narration telling him to emphasize Nal and Daman’s love for each other in a fresh manner that specifically caters to the local Indian audience. Fascinating conditions such as these by one’s patron led to the formation of a style that cultivated the best of both Persian and Indian literature in one space. Thus, Indo-Persian writers “produced a

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 208.
34 Ibid., 223
35 Ibid., 204-205.
36 Ibid., 207.
sophisticated Indian Islamic literary tradition, employing a set of desi (indigenous) literary and religious terms and a romantic narrative universe.”

**Indo-Persian literary style**

This brings one to the question of how did an Indo-Persian literary style successfully exist in premodern India? I would argue that such a literary phenomenon was possible because of the presence of two things: the theme of love in India and *iham* (deliberate ambiguity) that came from Persian literature. *Iham* was “theorized afresh in a radical manner by Amir Khusrav of Delhi” in 14th century and had continued to be taken up by writers in India following him. 38 His view on the ambiguity present within the text allowed “various possible meanings of a text... [to be] all equally legitimate, with none accorded true primacy.” Such an understanding provided considerable plasticity for Muslim writers where they could assign *majazi* (metaphorical) meaning to things that were not directly Islamic. *Magaz* could be seen on a literal level for worldly things that serve as metaphor or a link to *haqigat* (essence) that is on a higher plane and is much more difficult to grasp without any referents.

The theme that complimented this *majazi* element for Muslim writers the most was the excess of love found in India. For writers like Razi, *sati* (Hindu funeral custom) and *but parasti* (idol worship) were the “paradigmatic ideal” of a suffering lover and *suz*; an act where *ishq* “finds its fullest expression and extension.” Hindu acts like *sati* and *but parasti* were seen as *haqiqi* (spiritual love) counterparts for the *majazi* (metaphoric) elements of love. With such unique inversion of monotheism, Razi saw the idol worship in India as a form of devotion to the Beloved. Furthermore, *sati* could be explained as an extreme act of devotion akin to *fana* in Sufism. But Phukan is quick to point that this equivalence of *fana* to *sati* does not signify that Razi had accepted *sati*. On the contrary it shows that through use of *iham*, Razi was able to show *sati* as a paradox of *kufr* and *iman* simultaneously. And then afterwards he “collapses the dichotomies of *kufr* and *iman* in the same way as *fana* is held to render such dichotomies meaningless for the lover-mystic who experiences it through Sufi discipline”.

Hence, we see an open transference of acts and concepts of Hinduism being taken up by Muslim writers in order to write texts that were not anti-Hindu, rather they were Islamic texts that adopted a more Indic expression. Such texts very much disagree with the dual categorization that Ahmad supposed existed between Muslims and Hindus in premodern India.

To provide some further context, it needs to be mentioned that such an exchange of religious stories/thoughts was not uncommon or unheard of in premodern India. There is a great and extensively-studied field of devotional literature present in South Asia that consisted of Sufi and Bhakti poets openly influencing one another’s thought and poetry. For sure, such literature does not explain the history of the first encounter between Muslims and Hindus in premodern India. But, especially for scholars, it provides texts that can be analyzed to reveal how poets of

37 Behl, “The Soul’s Quest,” 63.
38 Alam and Subrahmanyam, “Faizi’s Nal-Daman,” 208.
39 Ibid.
40 Phukan, “‘None Mad as a Hindu Woman’,” 48.
41 Ibid.
42 Phukan, “‘None Mad as a Hindu Woman’,” 51.
other faiths dealt with one another and attempted to bridge the gap between themselves.\textsuperscript{43} Therefore, it is an exciting and dynamic part of South Asian literary history that opens up many doors of analysis and interpretation. Because of such exchange, genres such as Indo-Persian literature could be born where religious borrowing did not pose any threat to different belief systems.

However, an important aspect of Indo-Persian literature that needs to be considered is what were the motivations for Muslim writers in retelling Hindu epic tales. Razi’s rendering of \textit{Padmavat} is a tale in which the reader is supposed to participate in the \textit{suz} with the translator himself:

\begin{quote}
O ogler in the house of metaphors  
O traveler on the royal road of need  
draw the mascara of \textit{‘ishq} upon your heart’s eyes  
and take an earnest step within this house  
that you may see in this wondrous enchantment  
the self-manifesting soul, and life unveiled by the body.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

Here, we see that Razi is expecting an internal transformation to occur within the readers when they read his translation. He states that to understand the essence (\textit{haqiqat}) of the tale, the reader must be able recognize \textit{‘ishq}. “What is recommended is not a simple aesthetic enjoyment of the tale but an active engagement of its ethical demands.”\textsuperscript{45}

In comparison, in Faizi’s \textit{Nal-Daman} we are straightforwardly told about his patron’s wishes of writing a romance literature that is particular to India. While doing so, Faizi took advantage of this opportunity to expound on kingly ethics and offer his patron sage advice. In \textit{Nal-Daman}, Faizi uses the theme of love (\textit{‘ishq}) and juxtaposes it with other themes like the intellect (\textit{‘aqil}), beauty (\textit{husn}), desire (\textit{shauq}) and frenzy (\textit{junun}) to conclude that the balance between the intellect and love is the key to good kingship and social harmony.\textsuperscript{46} This occurs towards the end of the \textit{Nal-Daman} epic where Nal is restored as the king when he awakens the “perfectly equilibrated form of kingship” within himself.\textsuperscript{47} Therefore, what we see here is that a specific political agenda was involved in this retelling of the story of Nal and Damayanti where Faizi was appropriating local forms of knowledge from the Hindu literary epic tradition. This is clearly observed by his usage of Indian metaphors of \textit{sati} and Hindu gods, which he cleverly uses without opposing monotheism in a similar fashion as what Razi did in his Persian rendering of \textit{Padamavat}.

Thus, what is understood through such projects of patronage by Indo-Persian writers like Razi and Faizi is that Muslims authors were using Hindu epics for extremely apolitical reasons, such as Sufi pedagogical devices for meditation on \textit{suz} or political and moral guidance to one’s

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\textsuperscript{44} Phukan, “None Mad as a Hindu Woman”, 49.  
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{46} Alam and Subrahmanyam, “Faizi’s \textit{Nal-Daman},” 213-217.  
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 239.
\end{flushright}
own patron. These reasons are extremely far from the epic and counter-epic notion that has been framed for premodern India.

Conclusion

Having explored the context, motivation and reception of the embellished retellings and translations of epics like the *Padamavat* and *Nal-Daman*, one can now reform the colonial understanding of there existing Hindu-Muslim categories in premodern India. It is important to note that in no way do literary texts accurately describe life in premodern India. Nevertheless, they allow one to analyze the attitudes and thoughts of the people living at the time through the poetic reflections and expressions that they most commonly used. As it can be seen through these texts, life was not as clear-cut as simply having Muslim epics of conquests and Hindu counter-epics. In fact, even epics that clearly centered around political conflicts between Muslims and Hindus were shown to have been read with a poetic and metaphorical lens rather than with historical accuracy later on in history. The notion of intolerance between religions in India was brought about by British colonialists who used religion as an identity-marker for themselves and for the people they colonized. The British imperialism’s shadow sparked post-colonial nationalisms and a heavy fundamentalist backlash within both Hindu and Muslim spheres that wished to separate into two nations.48

At the end, one notices that poetry in premodern India, more specifically the poetic devices, had a very interesting role to play in terms of dictating people’s attitudes towards one another. Especially when poetry was known to be such an important part of *desi* culture where the oral tradition transcended all sorts of boundaries and limits like literacy or class systems. I contest that the flexibility within poetry for subjectivity was one of the key factors that allowed people in premodern India to be able to find a common ground with one another regardless of their varied ethnic backgrounds. A great example of this was the exchange of dialogue between Bhakti and Sufi poets in devotional literature. It showed how famous religious figures were influenced by one another in a very inclusive and passionate manner. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the openness to interpretation within poetry provided Muslim writers, during the Mughal empire, with a platform. Here, they could borrow stories from Hindu epics and retell them in ways that did not conflict with their religious beliefs to a much wider audience than before.

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