Locating Race in Mughal India

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This article uses writings of the French traveler François Bernier (d. 1688) on race as an inroad into the question of locating race in Mughal India. I explore Mughal discourses of alterity through an examination of Persian writings from various genres composed during the long seventeenth century. In contrast to Bernier, these writings do not offer concepts equivalent to that of race. However, by invoking narratives of descent from Noah's son Ham, ideas of climatic and physiognomic humoralism, and the attribution of physical qualities or character traits to social groups, these works engage in practices of racialization while also at times undermining them.

INTRODUCTION

WHEN REFLECTING ON the problem of race in Mughal India, my mind first turned to an essay by François Bernier (d. 1688), the well-known French philosopher, physician, and traveler, who lived in the Mughal Empire for over a decade between 1658 and 1669.[1] I thought of this essay because Bernier, unlike the Mughal writers whose works I also examine here, offers a very explicit theory of race. He describes "four or five Types of Race among men whose distinctive traits are so obvious that they can justifiably serve as the basis of a new division of the Earth."[2] Bernier's essay exemplifies a broader

    [1] Bernier, 1684.
    [2] Bernier, 2001, 247 (translation); Bernier, 1684, 133–34 (original).

trend in European writings during this period, when, with the rise of colonialism, the terms *race* and *caste* acquired new connotations. Once signifying lineage and pedigree, these terms were now increasingly used to offer totalizing explanations for human diversity and as ways of ordering and classifying social collectives.[3]

Although Bernier's essay on race has received critical attention from historians of Europe, it has not garnered much notice from scholars of South Asia, who tend to focus on his writings that directly address his time in India. In this article I explore what we see when we juxtapose Bernier's views on race against elite Persianate discourses in seventeenth-century Mughal India. I use Bernier as a frame for this inquiry partly to illustrate the inescapability of referring to Europe when discussing early modern concepts of race, and partly to define and limit a horizon for investigation. Here, I seek to provincialize such notions of race circulating in Europe by comparing them to discourses of alterity prevalent in Mughal India.[4] The term *Mughal* in my analysis denotes the social and cultural formations associated with the state during the heyday of the Mughal dynasty through the late sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries. During this period, Persian was the administrative and court language of the Mughal Empire and the Deccan sultanates, used by elites and state functionaries as their primary literary language.[5]

There is relatively little scholarship on the subject of race in precolonial India.[6] By contrast, the topic of caste in South Asia has understandably garnered a great deal of critical attention. Indeed, the very question of whether non-European societies held notions of race is ripe for controversy. There are good reasons to be suspicious of the universalization of race as a subject of investigation. The array of modern European discourses that positioned race at the intersections of science, nation, and global capital do not find any ready analogue in precolonial India.[7]

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[3] For a discussion of the biological ideas about animal breeding and reproduction earlier attached to *race* and *caste*, see Nirenberg. For an examination of the role of Portuguese colonialism in making caste into a social category, see Xavier.

[4] I refer of course to Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*. On the simultaneous indispensability and inadequacy of European thought, as well as the "task" of "provincializing Europe," see Chakrabarty, 16–18. See also Loomba.

[5] For a pioneering assessment of the role of Persian in fostering an imperial culture in precolonial India, see Alam.

[6] A volume edited by Peter Robb is a notable exception, though it contains only three contributions on the precolonial subcontinent. See Robb.

[7] Anidjar suggests that the "historicization of race" is part of a "strange and ambivalent universalization" that erases the specificity of modernity. See Anidjar, 520–21.

Yet, in modern South Asia, there is no escaping race. The political climate in India today makes any study of race in the Mughal context particularly fraught. Hindu supremacist discourses regularly invoke the false claim that the Hindu population of South Asia was enslaved under Mughal rule. They also portray Indian Muslims in racialized terms as foreign interlopers. With a Hindu nationalist government ruling India since 2014, such narratives have become increasingly dominant both in India and in the Indian diaspora abroad. They are regularly disseminated through social media, with the aid of troll armies, and in schools, through revised textbooks. The state and its allies deploy these problematic historical narratives to justify the ongoing repression and marginalization of Muslims in India.[8]

Hindu nationalist ideologies of race and religion are engulfed in the long shadow of colonialism in South Asia. As Ilyse Morgenstein-Fuerst shows, after the Revolt of 1857, the colonial state relegated Muslims in India to the status of a racialized minority.[9] Colonial subjects, whether Hindu or Muslim, also internalized discourses of scientific racism and the association of race with blood.[10] For example, in 1873, the reformist Mahdī ʿAlī Khān gave a lecture in Urdu bemoaning the status of Indian Muslims: "When the Muslims arrived in India they were very robust, rosy complexioned [*surkh o safed*, lit. red and white], strong and healthy. Their natures [*ṭabīʿat*] were free as well. . . . But when they made India their homeland [*waṭan*] and joined [*mil gaye*] with those nations [*qaum*] that were inferior to them in strength, courage, freedom, knowledge and livelihood, [nations] in whose veins flowed restrictions, slavery to custom, and narrow-mindedness, then they, too, became so."[11] Khān's image of a "pure" race becoming degenerate through reproductive mixing with inferior races directly channels colonial conceptions of race and nation.

It would be anachronistic to transpose onto Mughal India modern notions of race shaped by colonial race science. However, as the case of Bernier shows, the term *race* itself was not an anachronism for seventeenth-century Europeans who traveled to India, though it undoubtedly held very different significations from the concept as it developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[12]

[8] Truschke, 2020; Gandhi, 2020b.

[9] Morgenstein-Fuerst, 5–8.

[10] Banerjee and Copeman.

[11] Translated in Devji, 3. I have kept Devji's translation, but have incorporated in brackets some of the Urdu terms from the original text in Khān, 33.

[12] For instance, as Jyoti Mohan points out, nineteenth-century French anthropologists viewed India as a microcosm of the world's races; this contrasts with Bernier's view discussed below. For an in-depth study of scientific racial discourse in nineteenth-century France, see Mohan, 1617, who examines how "India became an intrinsic part of nineteenth-century anthropology."

By examining the ways in which an array of Persian texts from Mughal India imagine physical embodiments of human difference as well as the ingrained traits of social groups, I explore here their affinities with, and divergences from, the ideas of race that Bernier articulates. After introducing Bernier's writings on race, the main part of this article turns to a range of Persian works from a variety of genres produced in Mughal India. These writings include doxographies, chronicles, and works of belles lettres from the long seventeenth century—texts that were often, but not always, produced in the orbit of the imperial court.

It may still seem ill-advised, given the brutality of colonial rule and the dominance of far-right revisionist histories today, for the scholar of early modern South Asia to examine the question of racialization in Mughal discourses, rather than just, say, focus on the positive contributions of the precolonial Mughal state. In this regard, it is pertinent to recall Shahid Amin's argument in favor of examining antagonistic interreligious interactions that took place in precolonial times. According to Amin, "our concentration on intercommunal goodwill and harmony, though necessary, leaves the field of sectarian strife as the special preserve of sectarian and 'communal' historians."[13] Such an argument would also apply to the related area of the complex discourses of power and alterity in precolonial India. Moreover, I would add, further investigations of early modern discourses of race and racialization between Europe and India would also serve to better illuminate the destabilizing transformations of colonialism that took place later.[14]

Additionally, a study of race in a South Asian context would be incomplete without reference to caste. In line with recent scholarship, I understand both race and caste to be social constructs that operate through and uphold structures of power.[15] Of late, there has been a revival of interest in twentieth-century scholarly comparisons of race and caste. The recent publication of Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* has reinvigorated earlier debates, in academia as well as the public sphere, on the soundness and utility of race-caste comparisons.[16] Although Wilkerson's use of caste to understand race may well be reductive, it is also the case, as Malini Ranganathan observes, that "caste is not race, but caste deploys racelike logics and can be mapped onto

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[13] Amin, 9.

[14] Ania Loomba also makes a similar point: see Loomba, 503.

[15] Baber, 242.

[16] See Wilkerson. For critiques of Wilkerson's book, see Burden-Stelly; Appadurai. Suraj Yengde provides a historical analysis of the caste-race debate and also underscores the importance of the caste-race comparison for anti-caste activism.

and articulate with racial formations."[17] Ranganathan's discussion also brings to the fore the profound affinities between caste and race, with respect to the various ways they were both imbricated in the control of property and labor that underpins the history of capitalism. Moreover, as scholarship on race shows, racialization involves far more than the notion of somatic difference—which is often understood to be associated more with race than with caste. In modern South Asia, colonial knowledge production tended to racialize caste groups by assigning them fixed and inherent traits, both somatic and intangible. Here, in this article, I also briefly assess how Mughal discourses translate, fix, and imagine caste, in addition to how they associate various social groups with essentialized or racialized characteristics.

My analysis here is informed by recent scholarship on race such as that of Geraldine Heng, who argues for an understanding of race as a "structural relationship" that organizes human difference, or Ania Loomba and Jonathan Burton, who have shown how race works through "tropes of difference" in early modern England.[18] Of particular resonance is Loomba's call for a "comparative critique of racial ideologies across temporal and spatial boundaries."[19] The problem of race in Mughal India thus also speaks to a growing body of scholarship treating related topics—whether in the context of South Asia, such as slavery in India, or in other connected regions, such as race in classical Arabic and Persian literature.[20] Throughout, I am cognizant of the epistemic challenges involved in attempting to locate these discourses in history; such interventions, while seeking to add nuance, can inevitably also reify the idea of race.[21]

BERNIER AND RACE IN MUGHAL INDIA

Bernier produced his writings on race a decade and a half after he left India. At this time, he was ensconced in the intellectual milieu of Paris, frequenting the famed salon hosted by the patron Marguerite de la Sabliére.[22] During this period, he wrote prolifically. His writings include his famous account of his time in India that was part travelogue, part historical chronicle, and also contained letters he wrote to French notables. He also wrote on the philosophy of his teacher Pierre Gassendi and published a handful of articles in the *Journal*

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[17] Ranganathan, 261. On the race-caste comparison see also Loomba, esp. 509–18.

[18] Heng, 19; Burton and Loomba, 3.

[19] Loomba, 501.

[20] For an important volume on slavery in the subcontinent, see Chatterjee and Eaton. For a nuanced examination of blackness in a medieval Arabic heroic cycle, see Schine.

[21] For different reflections on a similar problem, see Anidjar; Nirenberg.

[22] Beasley.

des Sçavans, the first learned periodical published in Europe.[23] One of these articles, published in 1684, comprises Bernier's response to a conversation with de la Sabliére, in which she suggested that he use new discoveries to reconsider how people of the world had been classified.[24] Titled "A New Division of the Earth According to the Different Types or Races of Men Who Inhabit It" ("Nouvelle division de la terre par les differentes espèces ou races d'hommes qui l'habitent"), Bernier's essay offers a distinctive take on how to classify the peoples of the world.[25]

Bernier elevates the first of his four races as a normative benchmark against which the others are measured; its members comprise the inhabitants of most of Europe, parts of North Africa, and much of West, South, and Southeast Asia, including "the realms of the Great Mogul," and the Deccan kingdoms. Bernier justifies his inclusion of Indians and Egyptians though he acknowledges their darker skin; he attributes their complexions to sun exposure, rather than to an inherent quality.[26] By contrast, blackness, for Bernier, is an "essential trait" possessed by his second race, the inhabitants of Africa; it never vanishes, even if they settle elsewhere. The inhabitants of Central and East Asia constitute Bernier's third race. Finally, Bernier reserves a few derisive words for his fourth race, the "terrifying-looking" Lapps.[27] He then devotes the rest of his essay to sexualized descriptions of the women he encountered in India; here the gaze of a European male desire looms large.[28]

Bernier does not overtly rate the races he describes in terms of civilizational inferiority or superiority. Furthermore, as Joan-Pau Rubiés points out, Bernier assumes the existence of a universal human nature.[29] In this way, his schema is a far cry from the more fully developed racial theories of the nineteenth century. Yet, his classification rests on an implicit hierarchy, with the "first race" at the top. The races do not follow a uniform trajectory from light to dark; the fourth race is that of the Lapps, but Bernier does present an idea of blackness as inherent and distinct.

Some scholars today argue that Bernier's essay represents a distinctive turn in the theorizing of race in early modern Europe.[30] Bernier ignores, though does

[23] For his chronicle, see Bernier, 2008; for his work on Gassendi's philosophy, see Bernier, 1992.

[24] Beasley, 172.

[25] Bernier, 2001, 247 (translation); Bernier, 1684 (original).

[26] Bernier, 2001, 247–48.

[27] Bernier, 2001, 248.

[28] Bernier, 2001, 249–50.

[29] Rubiés.

[30] For example, Siep Stuurman credits Bernier with "probably the first attempt at a racial classification of the world's population": Stuurman, 1. Pierre Boulle views Bernier as emblematic of a "shift in thought" that anticipated the "emergence of a racial discourse" in the eighteenth century: Boulle, 20.

not reject, the biblical monogenetic theory of the origins of different peoples from the sons of Noah.[31] He also partially dispenses with classical climatic determinism—which held that the climes in which people lived shaped their physical traits—though he still invokes its ideas. Bernier, like his contemporary Leibniz, follows a new use of the term *race*—race, which used to denote lineage, now classified social groups on the basis of their physiognomies.[32] Most significantly, according to Justin Smith, for Bernier, "physical traits of human populations are now . . . the very criterion by which regions are to be mapped out."[33] Bernier did not confine his ideas about race to this article. His history-cum-travelogue depicts religious and regional difference in racial terms that are not fully consistent with the essay he would later write. For instance, after discussing the lineage of the Mughal dynasty in India, he describes the Mughals as a "race," hailing from Tartary, who, however, admit other "foreigners" ("étrangers") such as Persians and Turks to the ranks of rulers in India.[34] He adds, "To be considered a Mogol, it is enough if a foreigner have a white face [*blanc de visage*] and profess Mahometanism; in contradistinction to the Christians of Europe, who are called Franguis [*firangī*], and to the Indous [Hindu], whose complexion is brown, and who are Gentiles."[35]

Here, Bernier uses whiteness to draw a link between Europeans and Mughals, who, however, are distinguished by religious difference. He characterizes the "Indous," or natives of India, by both their brown skin and "Gentile" religion. Thus, although Bernier would later classify Mughals, Indians, and Europeans as all members of his first race, here he uses the term *race* to identify a more specific social group. He also articulates an idea of whiteness as a distinct category. Though Bernier's concept of whiteness and its relationship with race may seem inchoate and inconsistent, there had already been a sustained development of the idea of whiteness as a "defining characteristic" of the "European subject."[36]

One could take Bernier at his word and read him as merely reporting on the prevailing attitudes in Mughal society.[37] Nevertheless, the racialization of religious identities in his depiction raises questions: To what extent does Bernier

[31] Stuurman, 2.

[32] Smith, 147.

[33] Smith, 148.

[34] Bernier, 1916, 3 (translation); Bernier, 2008, 44 (original). I have added in brackets relevant terms from the French text as well as modern transcriptions of some of Bernier's terms.

[35] Bernier, 1916, 3 (translation); Bernier, 2008, 44 (original). By "Gentiles" Bernier is evoking the idea of Indians as idolators. For similar uses of the term by other early modern European travelers in India, see Subrahmanyam, 123–31.

[36] Heng, 182.

[37] As does Rubiés.

here impose his own racial typology on the people he encountered in India? How did discourses of alterity in Mughal India mark physical traits or other attributes as the fixed, inherent characteristics of particular groups of people, including religious groups?

Bernier's Mughal interlocutors offer an entry point. Bernier often recounts his conversations with his patron in India, an Iranian emigrant *mansabdar* (nobleman) named Mullā Shafiʿ Yazdī and known by his title Dānishmand Khān. The khan's favorite pursuits included, Bernier reports, astronomy, geography, and anatomy, fields of knowledge very much concerned with the constitution of human beings as well as human diversity. Moreover, Bernier recounts, the khan was fond of reading the works of Gassendi and Descartes, which Bernier had rendered into Persian for him.[38] Thus, we may ask how intelligible Bernier's notions of race would have been to Mughal intellectuals such as Dānishmand Khān.

There was no single Persian word or concept that corresponded to Bernier's notion of race. Yet, the Persian-literate elites of the subcontinent actively participated in established discourses of engaging human diversity, as well as enumerating and cataloging social groups. The idea that the peoples of different regions each had their own special qualities (*khawāṣṣ*) can be found in early Persian and Arabic works of natural history that later circulated widely in the subcontinent.[39] Moreover, the domain of Persian letters, through various discourses such as ethical theory (*akhlāq*) or mystical piety, articulated a universal anthropology of the human being, while also, as Zahra Ayubi observes, promoting a "hierarchical cosmology," in which people are naturally graded in a stratified order.[40] Furthermore, in the Mughal context, for instance, Persian served as a vehicle for sustained engagement with an array of Indic religious and aesthetic traditions.[41] However, as Prashant Keshavmurthy points out, this impetus to absorb was also mediated by a drive to define and maintain the boundaries of civility (*adab*).[42]

In what follows, I examine a selection from Mughal discourses pertinent to what one may identify as racialization. I do so by examining an array of texts dating from the late sixteenth through the seventeenth centuries. Through these formulations of difference and identity, I have sought to imagine the notions of alterity and explanations for human diversity with which a figure like

[38] Bernier, 1916, 353 (translation); Bernier, 2008, 369 (original).

[39] See, for instance, Qazwīnī, 171–88.

[40] Ayubi, 6.

[41] For recent scholarship on Mughal engagements with Indic thought, see Truschke, 2016; Nair; Gandhi, 2020a, 174–213.

[42] Keshavmurthy, 119–23.

Dānishmand Khān would have likely been familiar. While the topoi discussed here are in many ways very different in origin, they all existed side by side. Each also forms part of a broader repertoire in Persian for articulating a politics of place and belonging. The aim here is not to provide an exhaustive catalogue of Mughal tropes of racialization, but to identify starting points for discussion.

I begin by examining the biblical story of the curse of Noah's son Ham as it circulated in Persian texts of the Mughal era and its role in ideas of Adamic genealogies. Second, I explore the Persianate absorption of Greco-Arabic climatic determinism, which held that the clime in which one lived influenced one's physiognomy. Third, I briefly survey the idealized literary representations of the white Turk or Mughal juxtaposed against the black Hindu, a motif arising out of the Ghaznavid conquest of the northern subcontinent in the eleventh century. Finally, in the fourth section, I address the treatment of caste in Mughal discourses, including instances of the racialization of specific castes and other social groups, which emerge following the consolidation of the Mughal state in India. The arc of these areas of focus thus moves from the Mughal reception of narratives and concepts common to other Islamicate and even European societies, toward tropes and practices more particular to the subcontinent.

GENEALOGY

A significant part of the scholarly discussion of race in Islamic discourses has revolved around the so-called Curse of Ham, stemming from exegesis of a biblical story (Genesis 9:20–27) that ultimately led to accounts of the monogenetic origin of humans from Noah. This narrative has been viewed as foundational to the construction of race, and the linkage of race to slavery, in the European context.[43] Although not found in the Qur'an, different renditions of this story circulated widely in classical Arabic and Persian letters, and it was well known in the early modern period. Bernier and his Mughal interlocutors would have been familiar with this influential narrative of descent. While Bernier does not directly address this in his essay on race, his writings on Gassendi indicate that he at least did not contest the common Adamic origin of humans.[44] In this section, I examine how late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Persian encyclopedic and geographic works treat the story of Noah and his son Ham, in order to assess its centrality for the organizing of human difference in early modern Mughal India. At the outset, an argument recently put forth by Mana

[43] Goldenberg, 1–4; Braude, 103–05.
[44] Rubiés.

Kia is helpful; while emphasizing the importance of ideas of origin and lineage in the Persianate sphere, she delinks them from modern or eurocentric ideas of blood-based kinship and descent.[45] The narratives of descent from Noah in the Mughal context thus stand distinct from any association with notions of the purity of blood.

The lineage of Ham via Noah forms one strand of a broader discourse of genealogy that offered narratives accounting for the origin and ordering of social groups. The science of genealogy, or *ʿilm al-nasab*, entered Persian letters through Arabic. The Mughal courtier Muḥammad Ṣādiq Isfahānī (fl. 1638) has an entry on genealogy in his encyclopedia of knowledge and courtly etiquette entitled *Shāhid-i Ṣādiq* (The true witness / Ṣādiq's witness). He defines *ʿilm al-nasab* as "in general terms knowing the roots [*uṣūl*] and branches [*furūʿ*] of the inhabitants of the climes, and specifically, understanding [*taḥqīq*] the spread and proliferation of the *sayyids*."[46] His entry on *nasab* then dwells only on the specific denotation of *nasab* and proceeds to discuss *sayyids* or the descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad through his daughter Fāṭima and son-in-law and nephew, ʿAlī. The lineages associated with the Prophet Muḥammad were a main concern in early Muslim discourses on genealogy.[47] Moreover, as Ṣādiq was a Shia, that is, a member of the community supporting ʿAlī's claim to caliphal succession, this latter topic may have had a special resonance for him.

Ṣādiq treats the story narrating how Noah's son Ham was cursed with blackness in a related work entitled the *Ṣubḥ-i Ṣādiq* (The true dawn / Ṣādiq's dawn). Here, following a discussion of the tribes Gog and Magog, known from scripture, he provides an account very similar to that offered by earlier Arabic sources: "Some think Ḥām [Ham] son of Nūḥ [Noah], to be a divinely sent Messenger. The residents of India and Ethiopia are his descendants [*az aulād-i ū*]. They say that when Nūḥ sat in his ship, a divine command arrived, that he should have intercourse with his lawfully wedded wife in that ship. Ḥām came in on them. The next day, the color [of his skin] changed. His sons too came into existence black-colored [*siyāh fām*]."[48]

Ṣādiq Isfahānī then fuses this story with yet another version of Ham's curse. He continues:

They say that one day Nūḥ [Noah] was sleeping and his private parts [*aurāt*] were exposed. Ḥām [Ham] saw this and laughed and told Sām [Shem] and

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[45] See, for instance, Kia, 2020, 122–26.

[46] The translation is the author's, as are all subsequent translations unless otherwise noted. Sādiq, 2014, 267.

[47] Savant and De Felipe, 1.

[48] Bodleian Library, Persian MS Ouseley 292, Ṣādiq, *Ṣubḥ-i Ṣādiq*, fol. 13ᵃ.

Yāfaṣ [Japheth]. They castigated him [Ham] and covered him [their father] up. Nūḥ awoke and became aware of the situation. He prayed for blessings for Sām and Yāfaṣ and said about Ḥām that God the Most High would make his children the slaves [bandagān] and servants [khidmatgārān] of the children of Sām and Yāfaṣ. Then, whatever he said, happened. His children came into being black-colored. Ḥām, on his father's orders, went to the region [bilād] of Maghrib, which had been granted to him, and settled there. God the Most High blessed him with sons: Hind, Sind, Nūba, Zanj.[49]

Ṣādiq does not distinguish between these two slightly different tellings of the Ham story that he joins together, nor does he weigh one against the other. In both of these, Ham violates his parents' or father's privacy, and suffers the curse of blackness as a result. Ham then becomes the progenitor of certain peoples, who are also associated with blackness.

Even in works where Abrahamic origins are not the organizing principle for human diversity, the story of Ham still has a pervading presence. For example, it appears in Amīn Rāzī's late sixteenth-century *Haft Iqlīm* (Seven climes), a work that fuses geography with literary biography. The *Haft Iqlīm* maps the world according to the seven climes. For each clime, Rāzī gives accounts of its geography as well as, wherever possible, its literary notables in the field of Persian literature.

Here, the story of Ham appears in the context of Nubia. Rāzī first describes the geographic attributes of this region—its location by the Nile River, its breadth, its crops, and the religion of its people. Then, he relates the Ham anecdote. He mentions that the people of Nubia are descended from Ham's sons. Rāzī states that Ham was considered a prophet, but after the incident with his father, the line of prophethood was severed with his generation.[50] It is telling that rather than using the Ham story to provide an explanation for the origin of all peoples from Noah, Rāzī deploys it to offer an explanation for the existence of blackness.

But other writings also diminish the importance of the Ham story, and even subvert it somewhat. For instance, the *Āʾīn-i akbarī* (Institutes of Akbar) of Abū'l Faẓl (d. 1602) briefly relates the anecdote but omits Ham's error and subsequent curse. In a series of biographical entries, Abū'l Faẓl relates, "[Ham] was the son of Nūḥ [Noah]. After the deluge subsided, he came to Hindustan. Chroniclers [dāstān guẕārān] of other lands than this believe the Indians [Hindīyān] to be descended [nizhād] from him."[51] Abū'l Faẓl's wording

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[49] Bodleian Library, Persian MS Ouseley 292, Ṣādiq, *Subḥ-i Ṣādiq*, fol. 13ᵃ.
[50] Rāzī, 1:25–26.
[51] Abū'l Faẓl, 1872–77, 2:194.

suggests that the story of Ham is merely one among a range of theories purporting to explain the origin of various peoples. Indeed, he elsewhere cites it along with other theories. When Abū'l Fażl recounts the legend here, he preserves the part regarding the division of the earth but does not include the sting of the curse: "It is said that Nūḥ [Noah] divided the length of the habitable globe into three parts. The southern he gave to Ḥām [Ham], and this is the country of the blacks [*siyāhān*] and the Arabs [*tāziyān*]; the northern to Yāfaṣ [Japheth], where there are people of white and red countenance [*safed wa surkh chihragān*]; the middle portion was assigned to Sām [Shem] inhabited by the wheat-colored people [*gandum-gūnān*]." In the same passage, Abū'l Fażl cites ancient Persian, Greek, and Indian accounts of the division of the world.[52] Thus, in the *Āʾīn-i akbarī* the story of Ham is juxtaposed against several differing accounts; its presence here as one of many such stories to some extent undermines its normative charge.

In addition to citing the story of Ham, early modern writers in Persian extended the genealogy of Noah's descendants to include the progenitors of the subcontinent's various regions. A prominent instance of this occurs in the *Tārīkh-i Firishta* (The history of Firishta), a chronicle written at the Deccan court of Ibrahīm ʿĀdil Shāh in the early seventeenth century.[53] Here, the author Muḥammad Qāsim Astarābādī, known as Firishta (d. ca. 1623), describes and engages with Indic genealogies, which he attempts to supplant by fusing them with the lineage of Noah and his descendants. Firishta complains that the non-Muslims of India (he refers to them as infidels, or *kāfir*s) do not accept the story of Noah's deluge, and rather cite stories of the legendary prince Rāma. Instead, he avers, the origin of India's inhabitants can be traced to the descendants of Noah.[54] It is in this context that he refers to Ham when citing the dispersal of Noah's sons after the flood. However, Firishta eliminates any mention of shame or slavery associated with Ham. Moreover, he folds into this story a distinctively Indic lineage of rulers, giving a detailed exposition of Ham's descendants. He lists the four sons of Ham's son Hind—namely, Pūrab, Bang, Dakan, and Nahrwāl—who gave rise to the peoples of the subcontinent's four quarters. Thus, Dakan's sons were Marhath, Kathar, and Tilang; the three peoples (*qaum*) in the Deccan bearing their names are from their lineage (*nasl*).

[52] Abū'l Fażl, 1872–77, 2:49–50.

[53] Firishta's history is an exception to the other works discussed here, as it was not produced in proximity to the Mughal court, though it came to have a wide circulation in the early modern Indo-Persian sphere.

[54] Subrahmanyam, 82, mentions Firishta's anxieties regarding Indic genealogies, and his eagerness to supplant these with Noah.

Firishta continues this lineage, identifying subsequent generations of the descendants of Ham's four sons, who also included Krishna, the divine *avatāra* of Vishnu.[55]

Ṣādiq Isfahānī also incorporates this genealogy in the *Shāhid-i Ṣādiq*, a work which includes a detailed index of place names together with brief descriptions. Here, for instance, his entry on Bengal mentions that the place is named after Bang, son of Ham; the entry on Nahrwāla, a city in Gujarat, states that it was named after Nahrwāl, son of Ham.[56] Later, nineteenth-century works such as *Riyāẓ al-Salāṭīn* (The garden of sultans) tend to repeat Firishta's genealogy as received knowledge.[57] This expansion of the names of Noah's descendants to encompass local regions has precedents in contexts outside the subcontinent as well. For instance, in early Abbasid-era historiography, the Iranian regions of Fārs, Hamadān, and Khurāsān, were also said to be named after descendants of Noah.[58]

The examples discussed here illustrate the persistence in early modern Indo-Persian discourse of the story of Ham together with the lineages stemming from Noah. However, the narrations of the account were put to various ends, and were, in several—though not all—tellings, dissociated from any shame or wrongdoing linked to Ham's actions. Moreover, the story of Ham was by no means the sole or overarching paradigm for conceiving and organizing human difference. It must also be noted that the line of descent from Noah was not the only lineage invoked in Mughal discourses; the anxiety that Firishta articulates about Indic genealogies displacing the one from Noah is a case in point. As Mana Kia argues, the concept of lineage in Persianate societies encompassed relationships that were not based on biological kinship; these could also include scholarly and Sufi lineages.[59] Nevertheless, the association of Ham and his descendants with blackness persisted, and the account provided a malleable frame of reference for imagining certain territories, whether Nubia or Hindustan.

NATURE

While the story of Ham is an origin narrative of descent, it often sits alongside discourses of climatic determinism, which offer a very different explanation for human diversity. The two kinds of accounts sometimes feature in the same

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[55] Firishta, 1:15.
[56] Ṣādiq, 1998–99, 190.
[57] Ghulām Ḥusain, 19.
[58] Savant, 149.
[59] Kia, 2020, 122–45.

texts. Galenic and Ptolemaic theories of climate permeated early modern Persian writings, through the earlier reception of Greek natural philosophy in Arabic. Persian geographers adopted the Ptolemaic vision of the world as being divided into seven climes, or latitudinal zones running from south to north.[60] References to the climes and their influence abound in a wide range of genres and are not limited to works of geography or natural history.

The positions of the climes were thought to influence the bodies and physical characteristics of their inhabitants. Abū'l Faẓl lays out several theories elucidating the details of the various climes. Common to all is the idea that those living closer to the equator, and therefore in more direct contact with the sun, have darker skin. For instance, he describes one theory (which actually derives from Ptolemy) that maps each clime with the influence of a particular planet that was believed to have a bearing on the skin tone of the people living there. Here the *Āʾīn-i akbarī*'s description is steeped in empirical detail: it gives the exact latitudinal coordinates and length of daylight hours for each clime, and also includes the color of its inhabitants. The table below depicts Abū'l Faẓl's association of complexion with climes:[61]

First Clime	Black (*siyāh fām*)
Second Clime	In between black and wheat-hued (*miyān-i siyahī wa gandum-gūnī*)
Third Clime	White (*safed*)
Fourth Clime	Wheat-hued (*gandum gūn*)
Fifth Clime	In between wheat and white (*miyān-i gandum-gūnī wa safed*)
Sixth Clime	White leaning to yellowish (*safed māyil ba-zardī*)
Seventh Clime	In between ruddy and white (*miyān-i shuqra wa-bayāz*)

Normative assumptions permeate the empiricist description found above. The first and last climes represent the antipodes, and are the least desirable, while the intermediate climes are seen as the most hospitable. There is an implicit assumption that "wheat-colored" ("gandum-gūn") and "white," in the Persian "safed," meaning also "fair," are superior to darker or "yellow-hued" complexions. What we might categorize as pale whiteness, in the seventh clime is distinguished from the Persian "safed" with the Arabic word for white, "bayāz." Underlying this division is the notion that utter blackness and whiteness are extreme aberrations born of climate. Moreover, while most of these descriptions adopt a neutral tone, Abū'l Faẓl also slips in statements reflecting

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[60] Zadeh, 2011, 23–24; see also Zadeh's forthcoming *Wonders and Rarities: The Marvelous Book that Traveled the World and Mapped the Cosmos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023), 32–3, 163–64.

[61] Abū'l Faẓl, 1872–77, 2:27–28.

what we now recognize as antiblack racism, such as this statement regarding a larger class of black people (*sūdān*): "Those who live near the equator are called Zangīs [*zangiyān*]. They are absolutely black [*sakht siyah*] and their forms do not resemble human beings [*mardum*]."[62]

Here, in his comment on the people of the Zang, Abū'l Faẓl echoes earlier ideas from natural philosophy. For instance, the philosopher and statesman Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 1274), in his ethical treatise known as the *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī* (The Nasirean ethics), designates a category of humans, or rather, in this view, subhumans, who are actually at the highest order of animals. According to Ṭūsī, they include those "dwelling on the fringes of the inhabited world," such as the black people (*sūdān*) of North Africa (Maghrib). He adds, "the movements and actions of the likes of this type [*ṣinf*], correspond to the actions of animals."[63] Ṭūsī's highly influential treatise on virtue ethics circulated widely in South Asia. It is noteworthy that Abū'l Faẓl's patron, the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1555–1605), commissioned a grand illustrated manuscript copy of the *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī*.[64]

Other Mughal writers also articulate derogatory attitudes toward the inhabitants of the African continent. Amīn al-Dīn Khān Harawī, author of the early eighteenth-century natural history *Maʿlūmāt al-āfāq* (Knowledge of the horizons, 1711) describes the Ḥabshīs, an umbrella term which for him also includes the Zangīs (*zangiyān*) who live farther toward the south. He remarks on their physical characteristics, mentioning that "the darkness of their skin is due to the excessive heat of the land." According to him, the Zangīs have bulging eyes and large lips. Harawī also declares that their land was devoid of grace (*barakat*) and deprived of religion (*dīn*).[65]

Such remarks on blackness in general, and on the people of the Zang in particular, may be contextualized against a prevailing view that linked natural disposition with outward appearance, informed by the science of physiognomy (ʿ*ilm-i qiyāfa* or ʿ*ilm-i farāsat*). This branch of knowledge, which explained how physical characteristics reflected a person's inner nature, built on an early Arabic translation of a Greek treatise by Polemon of Laodicea (d. 144).[66] There were

[62] Abū'l Faẓl, 1872–77, 2:49.

[63] Ṭūsī, 2011, 46 (translation); Ṭūsī, 1992, 27 (original). I have retained the translation by G. M. Wickens but have added relevant Persian terms in brackets.

[64] This manuscript has survived in its entirety and is now in the collection of the Aga Khan Museum; see Ṭūsī, 1590.

[65] "Wa siyāhī-i laun-i īshān az ifrāṭ-i ḥarārat-i zamīn ast": Harawī, 45–46.

[66] On the Arabic tradition of physiognomy see Hoyland; Akasoy. For the Mughal context, see Joshi.

overlaps between physiognomy, medicine, the astral and occult sciences, and mysticism, all of which shared the goal of moving beyond external appearances to that which is hidden.[67]

One glimpse of the views on physiognomy that circulated at the Mughal court can be seen in a brief anonymous manuscript that the emperor Akbar had gifted Jahāngīr (r. 1605–28) when the latter was a prince. The manuscript has a note in Jahangir's hand mentioning this gift, and also has the seals of Shāh Jahān (r. 1628–58) and ʿĀlamgīr (r. 1658–1707), indicating that it long remained a valued possession in the imperial library. The work, entitled *Risāla dar ʿilm-i qiyāfa* (Treatise on the science of physiognomy) was calligraphed by Mīr ʿAlī in 1537 in Bukhārā.

The *Risāla* gives a list of skin colors and their attributes: "Fiery red color is a sign of excessive blood, rashness [*shitāb zadagī*], and madness [*dīwānagī*]. Yellow color is a sign of inner dross [*khubath-i bāṭin*]. Red and white color is a sign of balance in praiseworthy morals. Pure red color is a sign of modesty [*ḥayā*]. A dark [*sabz*], leaning to black color, or yellow, leaning to black color, is a sign of bad disposition [*khulq-i bad*]. An olive [*asmar*] complexion is a sign of intelligence [*faṭānat*]."[68] This brief classification reveals a distinct hierarchy of skin shades, derived from Greek thought. Some darker colors have a positive connotation, as, for instance, the color *asmar*, while "fiery red" skin is viewed negatively. Nevertheless, an admixture of black (*siyāh*) in the complexion is seen to indicate bad character. The Arabic translation of Polemon's influential treatise depicts the Greeks as possessing the ideal white and red balance in their complexion.[69] The *Risāla* also refracts this idea, and then strips it of its identification with the Greek people.

Recall, though, that Abūʾl Faẓl, in a nod to his Indian environment, identifies the people of the intermediate, and therefore most desirable, climes with the colors white and wheat-hued, instead of white and red. Physiognomic descriptions (*ḥilya*) of religious and political authorities, such as the Prophet Muḥammad, or emperors, served to adumbrate portraits of the ideal man.[70] The emperor Akbar, according to the *ḥilya* composed by his son and successor Jahāngīr, had wheat-colored skin.[71]

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[67] Akasoy, 126–39, discusses the links between physiognomy, medicine, and astrology in the context of medieval Arabic writings.

[68] Salar Jung Museum, MS ʿUlūm-i Sirrīya 100, *Risāla dar ʿilm-i qiyāfa*, 2a–2b.

[69] Polemon, 427.

[70] For an analysis of the *ḥilya* of Shāh Jahān (r. 1628–58), see Joshi.

[71] Jahāngīr, 25.

In the section of the *Risāla* quoted above, there is no mention of the "absolute blackness" that Abū'l Faẓl identifies with the people of the Zang. Though physical features were associated with moral qualities, or their lack, there is not always a strict association between physiognomic traits and the inherent qualities of specific peoples. Indeed, in physiognomic discourse, these traits, like the balance of bodily humors, were not necessarily stable and permanent. Illness, shame, or lovesickness, for instance, could lead to a preponderance of yellow in the complexion.

However, referring to early modern Europe, Jonathan Burton and Ania Loomba argue that treatises on physiognomy ought to be seen as participating in a discourse on race.[72] Certainly, both the *Risāla* and Abū'l Faẓl's remark reflect a more wide-ranging anxiety about and antipathy toward blackness prevalent in early modern Persianate writings. It is pertinent also to note, in the context of Islamicate writings on physiognomy, that Polemon derides those with black skin as cowards who lack ambition, and identifies them as the Ethiopians, people of the Zang, Egyptians, and those of surrounding areas.[73]

Despite the denigration of blackness, both overt and implicit, in Persianate discourses, one may ask if there was a difference between these and the attitudes toward blackness of many contemporaneous European travelers to India. European writers tended to use the term *race* along with *black* to denote a whole category of people, for instance the African slave-aristocrats of the Deccan, many of whom were Ethiopian. In this regard, Indrani Chatterjee mentions François Martin's (d. 1706) account of his meeting with Sīdī Darvesh, minister in the state of Jinjī in 1674, as an example of the use of *black* as a name for a people or a class of peoples, as opposed to regional identifiers such as *ḥabshī*.[74] In Martin's words, the minister was of "black kaffir race and frizzy hair" ("de race cafre noir et les cheveux crêpus").[75] Mughal writers often used *black* as an attribute and a descriptor for people who also bore other labels, though even these terms, like *ḥabshī*, could be metonyms for blackness. However, on occasion, whether in Ṭūsī's comments above or the climatic schema that Abū'l Faẓl laid out, terms such as "black" ("siyāh fām") or "black people" ("sūdān") were used as umbrella categories to denote peoples in themselves and even entire regions. For a fuller understanding of

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[72] Burton and Loomba, 25.

[73] Polemon, 427.

[74] Indrani Chatterjee, interview by Anna Reumert, *Borderlines*, October 31, 2019, https://www.borderlines-cssaame.org/posts/2019/10/31/theory-from-the-south-iii-on-slaves-and-freedmen-in-precolonial-south-asia-a-conversation-with-indrani-chatterjee.

[75] Martin, 1:574–75.

early modern Persianate attitudes toward people from the African continent, however, a deeper study of the Deccan context is warranted; this was a contact zone in which various groups, including military slaves from Africa, engaged with and encountered each other.[76]

Putting aside the purported influence on physical characteristics, the climes were conceived as cultural zones as much as they were geographic divisions of the earth. Indeed, their boundaries too were not set in stone. As Sunil Sharma points out, India's place within these climes shifted with its growing centrality to the world of Persian letters. The *Āʾīn-i akbarī* mentions that India was in the first, second, third, and fourth climes.[77] However, over five centuries earlier, the Ghaznavid polymath Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (d. ca. 1050), whose book on India is one of Abūʾl Faẓl's sources, had cited a theory that located the subcontinent in the first clime only.[78]

Amīn Aḥmad Rāzī's *Haft Iqlīm* vividly displays the variations in these cultural understandings of the climes. While Rāzī's description of the outlying climes is fairly sparse, he adds more detail in the regions where Persianate culture predominated. Here he lists the special characteristics and marvels of the places he described—the textiles of Bengal, for instance, or the idol of Somnāth, which still loomed large in the imagination centuries after Mahmūd of Ghazna destroyed it during a raid in 1026.[79] But, in contrast to Abūʾl Faẓl, his description has India almost entirely in the second and third climes.[80] Following a long-established tradition, Rāzī reserves the fourth clime, considered to be the most balanced and equable, almost solely for Iran. However, in the third, he includes some prominent cities in western and southern Iran, such as Kirman and Shiraz, as well as Indian centers of Persianate culture, such as Lahore, Delhi, and Agra. Here, the criteria for a place's inclusion and level of detail are its significance in a landscape of Persian letters and poetry; it is noteworthy that major urban centers of the subcontinent are seen to share a clime with some cities of Iran.[81]

Climate, geography, and civility were closely linked. If, according to climatic theory, geography and climate influenced one's bodily characteristics as well as one's temperament, then it stands to reason that favorable geography would

[76] For more on perceptions of Africans in the Deccan context, with a focus on the military slave Malik Ambar, see Eaton, 2005, 105–28. Mohit Manohar offers a nuanced examination of race in the Deccan using the case study of the architectural patronage of Parvez ibn Qaranfal, who, Manohar argues, was likely a military slave from Ethiopia.

[77] Sharma, 2017, 66.

[78] Bīrūnī, 102 (fig. 23).

[79] Rāzī, 1:77, 75.

[80] Rāzī, 1:50–81, 365–409.

[81] For a discussion of Rāzī's *Haft Iqlīm*, see Kia, 2019.

produce a positive impact on the inhabitants of a place. To be sure, as Mana Kia points out, "moral substance" was not completely reducible to climate and geography.[82] It is striking, though, that descriptions of climate as well as the natural attributes of various regions came to have a strong presence in the Indo-Persian literary imagination. Given the prevalent understanding that climate shaped physical bodies as well as character, these descriptions take on an added significance. Furthermore, as Sunil Sharma mentions, such topoi were also frequently linked to the conquest and absorption of new regions into the Mughal Empire.[83]

Although Babur, the first Mughal emperor (r. 1526–30), famously decried India's heat and dust, several later Mughal writers emphasized India's superior climate. Abū'l Faẓl begins the *Āʾīn-i akbarī* by situating and extolling Hindustan, which for him was not limited to the political boundaries of Akbar's empire. This land, as he sees it, is surrounded by the sea in the south, east, and west. In the north, it borders "an intermediate region" ("wāsiṭa") between Hindustan and China, which Abū'l Faẓl regards as akin to the sea (*bisān-i daryā*), perhaps implying that this region was unknowable and sparsely inhabited. He then pronounces that Hindustan was "unrivalled in its climate [lit. 'water and air'], its closely spaced harvests, and the balanced temperament [of its people]."[84]

Despite such praise of India's climate, Persian writers tended to portray certain parts of the subcontinent as being more salubrious and conducive to better temperaments, while depicting the climate of others as having a negative impact on its people. Kashmir's climate, flora, fauna, and landscapes were often extolled as the pinnacle of perfection, especially after its conquest and incorporation into the Mughal Empire in 1585.[85] However, one must note that poets and writers did not simply resort to praise and celebration when writing about climate and geography, as nature too had to be tamed and civilized; in the case of Kashmir, they also wrote of its bitter cold and forbidding terrain.[86]

Other regions did not fare as well. Bengal was one such area—Abū'l Faẓl described it as "a land where, owing to the climate's favoring the base [*hamwāra az hawā-yi sufla parwar*], the dust of dissension [*ghubār-i fitna*] is

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[82] Kia, 2020, 63.

[83] Sharma, 2017, 73.

[84] Abū'l Faẓl, 1872–77, 1:4.

[85] Maurya; Sharma, 2017, 125–55; Gandhi, 2020a, 93–94.

[86] For instance, the poem on winter by Ghanī Kashmīrī. See Ghanī Kashmīrī, 273–80. See also Gandhi, 2020a, 93.

always rising."[87] It is pertinent that Abū'l Fażl made this evaluation in the context of the recent Mughal conquest of Bengal from the Afghans who had ruled it. Several other Mughal accounts complain about the humid and enervating climate of Bengal affecting the ability of its people and those who visited.[88]

However, a few decades later, the poet and litterateur Abū'l Barakāt Munīr Lahaurī (d. 1644) tilts the balance toward praise of Bengal—its land, water, climate, as well as numerous fruits and flowers, in a *maṣnawī* (narrative poem) dedicated to the region. He does have a few complaints, often couched in a humorous vein. For instance, the mosquitoes, who are "masters" ("ustād") at bloodsucking, render unnecessary the services of phlebotomists (*faṣṣād*).[89] The weather is sometimes cool (*khunak*) and sometimes blazing (*shuʿla tāb*).[90] Yet, he lauds the particular delights of Bengal, to which he frequently refers using the vernacular Indic names for coconut (*nāriyal*), mango (*amba*), and jackfruit (*kathal*).

Similarly, though not at such length, the *Shāhid-i Ṣādiq*, whose author lived in Bengal, extols the monsoon (*barskāl*) of the region, in a section dedicated to indexing various geographical territories. Here Ṣādiq Iṣfahānī also cites verses appropriate to the regions listed. In his entry on Bengal, he quotes his own poetry comparing the land's lushness to a green parrot: "It turns the color of a parrot, from the blessing of the climate [lit. 'water and air']." He also adds, "Everyone who is old becomes young through this air," and compares the shimmering water to the illuminated *Arzhang*, the famed book of pictures associated with the Iranian prophet Mānī (fl. third century CE).[91]

Such verses celebrating Bengal's climate form merely a small portion of the numerous descriptions in Indo-Persian literature of the geography of Hindustan or of specific regions. To be sure, early modern Islamicate literatures took up as themes not only the natural attributes and climate of a region, but also gardens and cities; these were associated with imperial discourses as well as practices of refining the self.[92] However, the often-idealized portraits of nature, topography, and climate were still widespread. Viewed against the prevailing conceptions of

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[87] Quoted in Eaton, 1993, 167. I have added in brackets the relevant Persian terms from Abū'l Fażl, 1881, 290.

[88] Eaton, 1993, 167.

[89] Munīr Lahaurī, 158. A brief discussion of this *maṣnawī* is found in Sharma, 2017, 158.

[90] Munīr Lahaurī, 174.

[91] "Ba rang-i ṭūṭī gardad zi faiż-i āb o hawā; har ān kih pīr buwad zīn hawā jawān gardad": Ṣādiq, 1998–99, 58–59.

[92] On Mughal literary depictions of gardens in Persian, Braj Bhāṣa, and Urdu literatures, see Roth. On the city of Isfahan in Safavid literature, see Emami. For an overview of the *shahrāshob* genre on beloveds of the city in Indo-Persian literature, see Sharma, 2004.

the relationship between climes and their inhabitants, they also reflect on the people living in those regions.

Bernier's typology of races that are only partially molded by their climatic zones stands in contrast to the deep preoccupation with climate and the natural world in Mughal literature. While discussing female beauty, Bernier acquiesces to the role played by land and water in regions where the women were beautiful. He adds, however, that these factors were not sufficient, and that "the nature of semen" which would "vary with specific races" determined the preponderance or lack of beauty.[93]

MUGHAL AND HINDU

In Indo-Persian discourses as well, climate was not the sole explanation for human difference. Alongside the idea that the climate of a particular place shapes the bodies inhabiting it was an idea of difference more pervasive. Even if all people residing in Hindustan were thought to be affected by its climate, their bodies could also be seen as marked with the specific characteristics common to the larger social groups to which they belonged.

Bernier's aforementioned reference to the "white" Mughals and "brown" Hindus is relevant in this regard. Elsewhere he comments that by the third or fourth generation or so, the descendants of the foreign-born Mughals acquire a "brown complexion" ("le visage brun") and "languid manner" ("l'humeur lent") and are less esteemed than recent arrivals.[94] There is a suggestion here that with successive generations in India the humoral composition of these Mughals' bodies has changed, whether through the effects of the Indian climate or through intermarriage. However, Bernier's essay on race also mentions that the women of Kashmir, who were white-complexioned like European women, were much sought after by the Mughal nobility; the unstated implication is that the resultant offspring would be light-skinned.[95]

While Bernier may to some extent have been imposing his own interpretive framework on the Mughal social world he observed, his comments nonetheless spark questions regarding racialization and identity in Mughal India. Were *Mughal* and *Hindu* operative social categories? Were they indeed racialized in the manner he suggests? Did the Mughal ruling elites, in particular those who could trace their lineages to places beyond the subcontinent, such as Iran or Turan, identify with whiteness, and seek to preserve it? While Indo-Persian literary works, even across a range of genres, certainly do not reflect all social

[93] Bernier, 2001, 249.
[94] Bernier, 1916, 209 (translation); Bernier 2008, 204 (original).
[95] Bernier, 2001, 249.

attitudes and practices in Mughal India, they do offer some ways to delve deeper into the Mughal-Hindu binary that Bernier invokes.

Bernier was not alone in using *Mughal* as an umbrella term for demarcating a social group associated with the ruling class. For instance, a similar use of the word occurs in the *Tazkira-yi Pīr Ḥassū Telī* (Memoir of Pīr Ḥassū Telī). This work, comprised of some seven thousand verses, was composed in the 1640s by one Ṣūrat Singh, a minor government official from the Punjab, in praise of a Sufi saint known as Pīr Ḥassū Telī. The latter was of the relatively low-status caste of Muslim oilmen (*telī*), worked as a grain merchant, and amassed a community of followers and disciples—many of whom, like Ṣūrat Singh, were Hindu. In the course of detailing the saint's miracles, Ṣūrat Singh also illuminates social relations in the Punjab during the era. Here, the *Tazkira* recounts a story of a Hindu (it uses this very term) who had borrowed gold from a Mughal and was crushed by the burden of his debt, only to be ultimately rescued by the pir. In this tale, the Mughal rides a horse and is representative of the ruling establishment.[96]

The *Tazkira* uses the labels *Hindu* and *Mughal* as well as *Hindu* and *Muslim* oppositionally, to signal identity and alterity. As we shall see later, *Mughal* was only one of many identifiers used by and for certain elites associated with the Mughal state. But though the Mughal here is a Muslim (as he is contrasted here with a Hindu), not all Muslims are conflated with Mughals. It is notable that the author's spiritual guide Pīr Ḥassū Telī does not fall in this category. It is also worth noting that the *Tazkira*'s author, Ṣūrat Singh, was steeped in the norms of Persianate *adab*, in the sense of a high culture of civility and refinement, as was he very much part of the Mughal state and its cultural order.[97] His critical portrayal of the Mughal thus does not entail a rejection of Persianate culture.

The question then arises as to the manners in which identifiers like *Mughal* and *Hindu* were racialized. Mughal elites sometimes laid claim to whiteness, at least the partial whiteness mixed with wheat color or red, outlined in the climatic and physiognomic schema above. However, this identification, as well as the concept of whiteness itself, took on a form different from Bernier's idea of whiteness, which could encompass Mughals as well. There was a distinction assumed between white skin and the extreme paleness that writers in Arabic and Persian viewed as an aberration found in the northern climatic extremities.[98]

Thus, Mughal writers did not necessarily see whiteness as a common denominator of Northern Europeans and elite Muslims in Hindustan. Some did not

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[96] Ṣūrat Singh, 33–34.
[97] Ali, 315.
[98] See Zadeh's forthcoming book, *Wonders and Rarities* (2023), 191–92.

even view whiteness as an attribute of the English. For instance, Harawī mentions in his *Maʿlūmāt al-āfāq* that the color of the inhabitants of the fifth clime was white (*safed*); this includes the lands of Turkistan, Transoxania (*Māwarā al-nahr*), north Khurasan, all the way down to Kirman, then up to Fars and Rayy, back up to Northern Iraq, Azerbaijan, and part of Armenia, then through Rum, Greece, and the regions bordering the Mediterranean. By contrast, he includes in the first clime, associated with blackness (*aswad al-laun*), parts of "Hind and Sind," Nubia, Barbary (*Barbar*), and various other lands including Britain (*Birṭāniya*).[99]

The association of Mughals with whiteness is further complicated by instances from the Sanskrit literary sphere. Audrey Truschke observes that, in Sanskrit works commissioned by Maratha rulers, Muslims or Mughals are referred to as "red" ("*tāmra*") or "red-faced" ("*tāmrānana*"). Unlike attributions of redness to Europeans in Sanskrit texts, these references are not necessarily negative in tone; they could be merely neutral, or even laudatory, such as when Paramānanda (fl. 1670s) uses this as an epithet for Jahāngīr in his *Śivabhārata*, an epic extolling the deeds of the Maratha ruler Shivaji (r. 1674–80). It is possible that this identification of Mughals with redness was linked to the influence of Persianate discourses of physiognomy and climatic humoralism.[100]

The instances discussed above reflect some of the prevailing notions of a Mughal social collective that possessed specific physiognomic characteristics, and also point to the different ideas about these bodily attributes. However, the physiognomic distinctions made between social groups did not necessarily fall along religious lines. For instance, the Hindu Kāyastha scribe Bhimsen (fl. 1690s) comments disparagingly on the people of the Deccan, where he had been posted in the service of ʿĀlamgīr (r. 1658–1707). Bhimsen remarks that they were "dark of complexion, ill-shaped, and ugly of form"; he adds that one would die of fright if one were to by chance see them at night.[101] Bhimsen sees the Deccanis through the lens of alterity based on physical appearance; that they are presumably also Hindu does not constitute a basis for identifying with them.

Nonetheless, some of the most vivid explorations of the white/black polarity come up in the domain of Persian belles lettres. A popular motif in Persian literature draws upon stylized depictions of the Turk and the Hindu. Here

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[99] Harawī, 42.

[100] Truschke, 2021, 182, speculates that this could be related to the Persian expression *surkh-rū*, lit. "red-faced," meaning "honorable." I am grateful to Audrey Truschke for sharing with me these examples prior to the publication of her book.

[101] Translation by Jadunath Sarkar, quoted in Truschke, 2017, 119. I thank Audrey Truschke for reminding me of this example.

the Turk is identified with whiteness and light while the Hindu, connoting both Indian and the Hindu religion, is identified with blackness and darkness. The Turk-Hindu motif predates Mughal rule in India; Annemarie Schimmel traces its prevalence to the era of Maḥmūd of Ghazna (d. 1030).[102]

In these poetic uses, blackness or darkness is not necessarily construed as a negative quality and indeed is often celebrated. Poets deployed the trope to engage in intricate wordplay that drew upon the polysemy of words such as *Hindu*, which metonymically connoted blackness, and *Hindustan*, which was depicted as a land of darkness. While a comprehensive study of the Turk-Hindu trope and its variations in Mughal-Safavid poetry is beyond the scope of this article, a few examples will serve to illustrate the complex ways in which it was invoked.

The trope of India's darkness crops up frequently in the poetry of Ashraf Māzandarānī (d. 1704), as Stephen Dale observes. Ashraf was an Iranian émigré poet who was tutor to the princess Zeb al-Nisāʾ (d. 1702), daughter of ʿĀlamgīr (r. 1658–1707). In one verse, Ashraf uses the metaphor of light and darkness while comparing the Indian beloved with Mughal "beloveds" (lit. "idols"): "Seeing the Indian idol, after the idols of the Mughals / Is like stepping into shade from the sun."[103] In the world of Persian poetry, the Indian (Hindī) connotes blackness, while Hindustan is also associated with oppressive heat. The poet playfully inverts this latter association when he evokes an image of the cool relief experienced when viewing the dark Indian beloved, while the white Mughal beloved's beauty is so resplendent that it sears the onlooker.

By contrast, a verse by Ghanī Kashmīrī (d. ca. 1668) celebrates opalescent Kashmiri beauty, implicitly making a slippage between the place and its people. As is common with Persian poetry of the era, the verse lends itself to multiple readings, several of which are captured in the translation by Mufti Mudasir Farooqi and Nusrat Bazaz: "Kashmir's beauty sparkles through its fairness / Black beauty here, if any, is as rare as a mole [*khāl khāl*]."[104] The metaphor used in the first hemistich literally states that Kashmir, from its fairness or loveliness, is the "burnisher of beauty" ("raushangar-i jamāl"); it conjures up an image of polishing and making shine. In the next hemistich, the expression *khāl khāl* can mean "rare," but also "speckled" or "spotted"; *khāl* means "mole," and is a metonym for the dark Hindu. The black beauty in

[102] Schimmel, 110–11.

[103] "Naẓāra-yi but-i Hindī pas az butān-i Mughal / ba sāyah dar shudan az āftāb rā mānad": cited in Dale, 204–05. I have slightly modified Dale's translation.

[104] "Kashmīr az ṣabāḥat raushangar-i jamāl ast / ḥusn-i siyah ānjā gar hast khāl khāl ast": Ghanī Kashmīrī, no. 89. For the translation, see Ghanī Kashmīrī, 189.

Kashmir, then, may be rare or hard to come by, or may be like the attractive mole adorning a beloved's face, or else even the speckles or spots that threaten to mar a burnished mirror. Here this verse alludes to the Turk-Hindu trope without directly using it.

At times, the Turk-Hindu motif was invoked to challenge rather than underscore the binaries apparent in the phenomenal world. In the following couplets from a *ghazal*, Ṣāʾib Tabrīzī (d. 1676), a renowned poet who served both Mughal and Safavid patrons, advances a vision of divine union against the world's multiplicity: "To my eyes, the world's night and day appear of one color / The battle of Turk and Hindū I do not know, I do not know // The spring-garden of Unity has no [two-colored] charming rose [*gul-i raʿnā*] / The Musalmān and Hindū I do not know, I do not know."[105] In these verses, Turk and Hindu, associated with day and night, respectively, and their counterparts, Musalmān and Hindū, represent the duality that melts away when viewed through the lens of oneness. The beautiful *gul-i raʿnā* is a rose with two colors, but it has no place in the garden of divine unity.

However, Ṣāʾib himself would refer mockingly to the "black" Indians, when, after returning to Iran, he wrote a *qaṣīda* (panegyric ode) celebrating the Safavid victory over the Mughals at Qandahar in 1653. The Indian side, upon their loss, he relates, "grew yellow-faced and ashamed." Then, he adds, "Even though no color is deeper than black / In their flight, yellow-facedness overcame those black people."[106] Ṣāʾib's mention of the Indians' yellow faces refers to their fear and shame as they fled the battlefield in disgrace, emotions so overpowering that they saturated their black complexions with yellow.[107] The reference to their blackness here thus also has a derogatory sense.

Persian poetry was often a self-referential discourse and cannot be seen as a transparent or comprehensive reflection of actual social attitudes. Other contemporaneous writings offer hints of social divides between elites perceived as Mughal and other sections of society, though these distinctions are not reducible to a simple Hindu-Muslim or foreign-indigenous binary, as Bernier would have it. The space of literary imagination allowed for explorations of the Turk-Hindu or Mughal-Hindu motif that could both subvert and affirm tropes of difference and oppositionality, or take them into another realm altogether.

[105] "Ba chashm-i mā shab o roz-i jahān yakrang mī āyad / nizāʿ-i Turk o Hindū namīdānam namīdānam // namībāshad gul-i raʿnā bahāristān-i waḥdat rā / Musalmān rā o Hindū rā namīdānam namīdānam": Ṣāʾib Tabrīzī, 2703.

[106] "Az siyāhī garcha bālatar nabāshad hech rang / zardrūyī ghālib āmad bar siyāhān dar farār": Ṣāʾib Tabrīzī, 1387. Also quoted in Gandhi, 2020a, 163.

[107] According to the Arabic translation of Polemon, an admixture of yellow, in the absence of illness, indicates "bad intent, fear, and cowardice": Polemon, 427.

The diverse ways in which poets took up this motif were no doubt entangled in complex aesthetic and political considerations. It is nevertheless telling that the trope and its variants proved to be pervasive and enduring through the early modern period.

CASTE AND CATEGORIES

While Hindu and Mughal or Hindu and Muslim were social categories as well as literary motifs, they coexisted with other complex and shifting identifiers and concepts that were also associated with the attributes inherent to particular groups. As mentioned earlier, in contrast to many contemporaneous European discourses, Mughal writings do not invoke an idea of race linked to blood and pedigree, and the categories most frequently used to refer to social groups do not have a strong association with bloodlines or, for that matter, even lineage. Neither are physical attributes, whether heritable or not, in themselves the primary basis for delineating human difference, the way they seem to be in Bernier's essay. However, both the documentary practices of the Mughal state, as well as the elite discourse of Persian letters, inscribe in implicit and explicit ways the association of various physical as well as intangible characteristics with different social groups.

As far as documentary practices are concerned, the records that survive of the workings of the Mughal state are fragmentary; the contrast is stark when one compares them with the mammoth archives of the Ottoman state. However, there are rich holdings in some areas: for instance, the enormous archive pertaining to Mughal rule and expansion in the Deccan, especially under ʿĀlamgīr in the latter half of the seventeenth century, or caches of court documents from different parts of India.[108] Certain types of extant documents point to a practice of recording on paper the physiognomy of the persons interacting with the state in different fashions, while at the same time listing their particular social identifiers.

Mughal muster rolls (*arz wa chihra*) recorded the identities of soldiers recruited in the armies, together with details of the horses they were assigned. According to Subah Dayal's close study of a cluster of such documents from the seventeenth-century Deccan, they typically noted the father and grandfather of the soldier, along with his caste or other social identifier. This latter label of social identification was often far more specific than the broader identifiers mentioned in Persian chronicles, perhaps reflecting the shifting dynamics of these identities as well as of the state as it expanded southward. The documents also described in varying detail the physical features of the soldier, including his

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[108] Regarding the latter collections, see Hasan, 855–57.

complexion, eyes, other facial features, hair, as well as moles and scars, if any. The reverse side of the muster rolls also included details of the horses assigned to the soldiers, their breeds (e.g., *turkī, tāzī*, etc.), and appearances.[109] Farhat Hasan discusses very similar physical descriptions (referred to in this context as *ḥilya*) of individuals taking part in property transactions, together with their caste identifications.[110]

There is no apparent move here to extrapolate from these descriptions of individuals broad generalizations about the physical attributes of castes or other social groups. The documents do not seem to explicitly connect the descriptors used for individual physiognomies to the characteristics of specific peoples. However, I would argue that the juxtaposition of these physiognomic descriptions alongside social identifiers is suggestive. The production and circulation of these documents held the potential for implicit linkages between certain types of bodies and the members of particular social groups. Moreover, although these documents seek to capture the minute particulars of an individual body, the broader rubrics they used in order to produce the descriptions may have helped foster a discourse on physiognomies and social identities spilling beyond the domain of Persian literacy.

The documentary regimes of the Mughal state generated very specific labels of social identification, including those signifying what we may call caste, ones that clearly shift and evolve over time, and, as Dayal points out, were produced through the process of interaction with scribes.[111] At times, these specific inscriptions of social identity do get refracted in court-sponsored writings. The most notable case is the *Āʾīn-i akbarī*, which offers a voluminous record of the castes, subcastes, and other communities holding the revenue collection rights (*zamīndārī*) of every district (*pargana*) in the empire, with certain areas featuring in greater detail. For example, the *zamīndār*s of the forty-eight subdivisions of Delhi include Ahīrs, Jāṭs, Shaikhzādas, Sayyids, and Zunnārdārs (lit. "sacred-thread wearers," here likely referring to Brahmans), as well as Chokar Rājpūts, Chauhāns, and Rājpūt Rānghar Jāṭs.[112] Although caste domination was a shifting and dynamic process, the effects of this distribution of caste dominance could persist for centuries. There are instances of colonial

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[109] Dayal also notes a correspondence between status of the army personnel involved and the detail of these descriptions; military laborers would get rough descriptions penned on lesser-quality paper. Dayal, 858–59.

[110] Hasan, 866.

[111] Dayal, 885–88.

[112] Abūʾl Faẓl, 1872–77, 1.2:518–19. My transliteration of the terms incorporates slight changes to the original Persian orthography to conform with common usage today.

accounts recording the same caste groups controlling land revenue in a particular region as were earlier mentioned in the *Āʾīn-i akbarī*.[113]

However, as in the case of race, Mughal writings also lack an overarching category such as caste to denote social groups. Unlike orientalist and later colonial discourses, Mughal writings do not present a reified notion of a caste system as the unique and overarching social institution in India.[114] They also do not create a solid interpretive distinction between the idea of a caste group and that of a community bound by religious doctrine and practice as well as what we today might call an ethnic group. Nonetheless, many Persian writings of the period assert the centrality of the four *varṇas* enshrined in Sanskrit texts. Moreover, they do attribute certain essentialized traits to particular social groups. In the rest of this section, I discuss examples from these Mughal discourses and reflect on their function.

Here it is apposite to touch upon the treatment of caste both in Bernier's writings as well as in Persian texts of the time. Bernier classifies the Gentiles into four tribes (*tribus*) that correspond to the four *varṇas* of Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. He states that the four Vedas enjoin this division, and that these tribes are endogamous.[115] *Tribe*, according to a late seventeenth-century French lexicon, signified a unit that does not stand alone, a part of a whole that is linked to the other parts through origin from a common stem or stalk (*tige*).[116] Thus, in Bernier's discussion, tribe serves as a closed unit branching back to a broader origin through tree-like hereditary descent. However, unlike some other European visitors to the subcontinent, Bernier does not significantly elaborate this classification. Yet, it is a striking coincidence that his concept of race and the *varṇa* system both rely on a four-fold categorization.

For writers of Persian, the most commonly used category to refer to the *varṇas* is *qaum*. While this term does not have precisely the same signification as Bernier's *tribe*, it was used when assigning to Hindus the fixed system of the four *varṇas*. Abū'l Faẓl preserves the term *barn* (*varṇa*, transcribed according to the vernacular rather than Sanskrit pronunciation), while describing the four groups; however, in other instances in the *Āʾīn-i akbarī*, he refers to them as *qaum*, such as "qaum-i Shūdar," (Shudra *qaum*), for instance.[117] Similarly, the *Shāhid-i Ṣādiq* states, "The Hunūd [Hindus] are divided into four

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[113] For instance, see Habib and Habib, 501.

[114] Nicholas Dirks highlights the colonial construction of caste as at once "pervasive" and "totalizing" as well as a "fundamentally religious social order." Dirks, 13.

[115] Bernier, 2008, 325; Bernier, 1916, 325.

[116] See *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, s.v. "tribu."

[117] Abū'l Faẓl, 1872–77, 2:191.

*qaum*s: Barahman [*brahman*], masters of religion; Chhatrī [*kṣatrīya*], masters of the sword; Bais [*vaiśya*], farmers and merchants; Sūdar [*śūdra*], servants."[118] Here the idea of *varṇa* as a broad-based division of a larger group (that is, the Hindus), echoes prevailing European ideas of a tribe, and the accounts of travelers such as Bernier. However, the use of *qaum* is not restricted to describing the Hindu *varṇa*s. Its use is so common and wide-ranging that, if one were to translate it, it would make sense to render it, as many do, simply as "people."

Moreover, there were several ways of invoking caste in Persian without using the term *qaum*. For instance, the mid-seventeenth-century survey of religions, *Dabistān-i maẕāhib*, sometimes speaks of the Brahmans, or Chattrīs (*kṣatriyas*), for instance, using just these terms, rather than appending the term *qaum*.[119] Sometimes, in the *Dabistān* as elsewhere, *qaum* and *ṭāʾifa* are used interchangeably to refer to a specific subcaste (*jāti*): "They say, after Nānak, Guru Angad of the Sarīn Khatrī *qaum*, took Nānak's seat on his [Nānak's] command, and after him, Guru Amardās, of the Bhilāī Khatrī *ṭāʾifa*, became his successor; after that, Guru Rāmdās, who was a Sodhī Khatrī succeeded."[120] Here, as far as the usage of terms such as *qaum* and the roughly synonymous *firqa*, *ṭāʾifa*, *zumurra*, and *giroh* are concerned, there is not a hard distinction posited between social groups bound by birth or geography and those bound by creed. There is thus a slippage between the concepts of a caste group and a religious collective with shared devotion toward a deity or leader. For instance, the *Dabistān* refers to the Baishnawān (*Vaiśnava*s) alternately as a *firqa* and a *ṭāʾifa* while describing the beliefs and practices of this *maẕhab* (religious collective).[121]

This is not to efface the subtle differences in valence that these terms can carry. *Firqa*, for instance, often connotes a division of a broader religious collective.[122] *Qaum* is often used to refer to a larger collective, such as the "qaum-i Hunūd."[123] Yet, a certain measure of fluidity persisted into the colonial era, when British census officials attempted to standardize the markers of social identification, and, in the case of late nineteenth-century Punjab, tried to make *qaum* stand for "caste or tribe" and *ẕāt* or *firqa* stand for "clan."[124] This fluidity of social categories, though, does not necessarily signal that the groups

[118] Ṣādiq, 1896, fol. 37.
[119] Fani, 127–28.
[120] Fani, 199.
[121] Fani, 175–76.
[122] Carl Ernst points out that the Ghaznavid heresiography *Bayān al-adyān* (1092), which is one of the earliest heresiographies composed in Persian, uses *firqa* or *giroh* to refer to the religious groups it discusses.
[123] For instance, see Ṣūrat Singh, 31.
[124] Maclagan, 576.

themselves were loosely constituted. There are indications, for instance, in the Mughal context, that property transactions and bonds of marriage tended to take place within the same caste group, unless they were subject to external pressure.[125] While Mughal texts do not rigidly demarcate different kinds of social categories, they regularly attributed to caste and ethnic groups certain fixed and inherent traits. Such gestures anticipate the colonial era racialization of castes. Certain groups featured more prominently than others in the Indo-Persian discursive sphere. The following examples are illustrative.

The Brahman had long been a trope in Arabic and Persian writings, including poetry. This figure, paradoxically associated with true faith through his embrace of idolatry and infidelity, came to have a prominent role in the Mughal imaginary. A verse from a ghazal by ʿUrfī Shīrāzī (d. 1591) points to this paradox: "I am of the Brahman religion; for my faithfulness taunted my companions / the arch of my idol-temple struck a hundred laughs at the prayer niche."[126] In Persian poetry, the Brahman's body also becomes associated with the *zunnār*, which was once a term for an infidel's girdle, and later came to denote also the Brahman's sacred thread. In both cases, the *zunnār* identifies a true believer. This poetic trope of an idealized Brahman crosses over into other genres as well, and features in the self-presentation of some Hindu writers of Persian who were Brahman by caste. For instance, it appears in the writings of Chandarbhān "Brahman" (d. ca. 1670), a prominent Persian litterateur at the court of Shāh Jahān, who in the mid-seventeenth century composed the *Chahār Chaman* (Four meadows), a memoir that also served as a celebration of the imperial court and empire. Chandarbhān also composed poetry and adopted Brahman as his own poetic pen name.[127] In the *Chahār Chaman*, Chandarbhān follows what by then was established convention to describe his own Brahman community as the "community of the people of the *zunnār*" ("zumurra-yi ahl-i zunnār").[128] Moreover, Chandarbhān repeatedly stresses the antiquity of Brahman customs and the piety and loyalty of Brahmans.[129] However, such representations could be contested even within the Persianate sphere. Interestingly, the aforementioned Ṣūrat Singh, who does not seem to have been a Brahman, cites the *zunnār* together with prayer

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[125] Hasan, 855.

[126] "Brahman kesh-am, kih ṣidq-am ṭaʿna bar aṣḥāb zad / ṭāq-i ātishkhāna-am ṣad khanda bar miḥrāb zad": ʿUrfī Shīrāzī, 1:560, no. 497.

[127] Rajeev Kinra points out that this choice of pen name entailed that Chandarbhān would have to include a couplet concluding each ghazal that meditated "playfully on the meaning and nature of Brahman-ness": Kinra, 23.

[128] Chandarbhān, 145.

[129] For instance, Chandarbhān, 146, 150, 177, 188.

beads (*subḥa*) as "shackles" ("qaid"), implying that they were the apparatus of an exoteric religiosity, which could be transcended with the help of his Sufi preceptor Ḥassū Telī.[130]

Then we have representations of Hindu Rājpūts, who were an evolving and heterogenous group often closely embedded within the Mughal state. Tropes of Rājpūt fearlessness abound in Mughal writings, and the Rājpūt body is often associated with armor and weapons. While describing the emperor on a ride, Chandarbhān remarks that the Rājpūts, who were "famous for their courage and loyalty, were like a mountain of iron around and before the palace cavalry."[131] Elsewhere, Chandarbhān includes the "Rājpūts of valiant constitution" ("shahāmat-sirisht") in a list of the imperial servants for whom "valor is their religion" ("shujāʿat kesh").[132] In an account of the mid-seventeenth-century war of succession, the chronicler Muḥammad Maʿṣūm (fl. 1660s) valorizes the fearless Rājpūts fighting at Dharmat, whose "chests were stitched with the points of spears" and outshone even the Mahābhārata's legendary heroes Arjun and Bhīm.[133] On the other hand, some Rājpūt communities were reputed to be less cultured than others, and in need of refinement. Jahāngīr mentions in his memoirs the "savage disposition" of Karan Singh, while elsewhere remarking positively on the knowledge of Persian poetry held by another Rājpūt, Rāī Manohar.[134]

The tropes involving Brahmans and Rājpūts in courtly writings perpetuated essentializing stereotypes about these communities, while also offering a route to Persianization and incorporation into the domain of courtly civility. Such portrayals also bolstered a certain vision of imperial sovereignty. Here, as in Abū'l Faẓl's formulation, which draws upon the *akhlāq* tradition of practical moral philosophy, the emperor is seen as the supreme physician ministering to the health of the body politic (*paykar-i salṭanat*). Four types (*ṣinf*) of people make up this body politic—namely, warriors, merchants and artisans, intellectuals, and finally peasants and workers. They each correspond to one of the four elements.[135] Specific caste or ethnic groups are not included in Abū'l Faẓl's account. However, the flattened and idealized depictions of social groups in courtly writings, mentioned above, resonate with this humoral conception of the empire as comprising a mix of different elements which the sovereign maintains at a perfect equilibrium.

[130] Ṣūrat Singh, 123, 256. Ṣūrat Singh, 542, refers to his community as the Kanboj *firqa*.
[131] Chandarbhān, 117.
[132] Chandarbhān, 75.
[133] Maʿṣūm, 80, also cited in Gandhi, 2020a, 221.
[134] Jahāngīr, 47, 11.
[135] Abū'l Faẓl, 1872–77, 1:4.

Marginalized caste groups with a lower status did at times feature in Persian literature, frequently in eroticized or aestheticized representations. We have seen above that during the seventeenth century, Persian works of poetry, especially *maṣnawīs*, lavishly described the flora, fauna, and people of specific regions or of Hindustan writ large. This genre of poetry celebrating place sometimes also included idealizations of various peoples, including those belonging to caste groups that otherwise do not feature in court-sponsored writings.[136] For instance, the poet Munīr sings paeans to various beloveds in his *Maṣnawī-yi Bahār-i Jāwed* (Masnawi of the eternal spring), which focuses on Kashmir. Each beloved represents a profession, and thus, by extension, a caste; indeed, the names of their professions tend to correspond to caste appellations. Here these people are folded into idealized tropes of young male beloveds. They include the "Falconer Idol" ("nigār-i bāzdār"), whose hair was like a falcon's claws.[137] Also featured are the "Moon-faced Bowmaker" ("kamāngar-i māhrūy"), the "Carpenter-Idol" ("but-i najjār"), the "Merchant-Idol" ("but-i bazzāz"), and the "Water Carrier Idol" ("but-i saqqā"), among others. While in Persian these names (without the adjectives) merely denote professions, in the Indian context they carry clear associations with specific castes, often with the same appellation.[138] In Munīr's poetry, these men are depicted along with the tools of their labor in an eroticized manner. For instance, the description of the alluring merchant includes a play on a word that means both the planet Jupiter and the "customer": "His ruby lips have become the shop of heart-seizing / Hence the sun has become his Jupiter/customer."[139] The poet's description of the water carrier includes this verse: "From the well of that dimple he serves his water / He hauls from it the heart's bucket, full of water."[140] These sensualized accounts afford Munīr an opportunity to infuse fresh elements into the topoi of this poetry of place and to display his literary prowess, but they also turn his subjects into living embodiments of their caste professions.

At other times, essentialized descriptions of entire groups are woven into larger narratives. For instance, Ghanīmat Kunjāhī (d. 1695), in his poetic romance *Nairang-i ʿIshq* (The spell of love), features the *bhagat-bāzān*, also

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[136] According to Sunil Sharma this theme of celebrating various kinds of beloveds in a city was pioneered by Ẕuhūrī (d. 1616): Sharma, 2004, 74.

[137] Munīr Lahaurī, 205–06. For a colonial account of this caste group, also known as Bahelia, see Crooke, 1:105.

[138] Munīr Lahaurī, 201–11.

[139] "Lab-i laʿlash dūkān-i dilbarī shud / az ān rū mihr ū rā mushtarī shud": Munīr Lahaurī, 208.

[140] "Zi chāh-i ān zanakh ābash khurānad / pur ābī dalw-i dil az way barānad": Munīr Lahaurī, 201–11.

known as *bhāṇḍs*, who were a traveling group of performers and magicians. In his depiction, these sweet-tongued people had a fluid ability to slip into any character: "Each a master of his art / Now a man, then a woman, or a dwarf // Now *sanyāsī*s [Hindu ascetics], hair disheveled / Then Muslims, people of faith."[141] They are both alluring and dangerous: the town *muḥtasib*, an inspector of markets and morals, had to rein them in, while Shāhid, who is one of the *bhagat-bāz* protagonists of the poem, is literally sent to school (*maktab*) to undergo refinement.[142] In contrast, this *maṣnawī* describes a group of Afghan wandering highwaymen as incorrigible and ruthless ruffians. It likens their language to the rasp of a sickle cutting dry straw, to the wail of a cow being slaughtered, and to the cry of a camel stuck in mud.[143] These portrayals fit into a larger pattern in Mughal texts of representing certain non-sedentary communities as wayward and troublesome. In many ways, these depictions foreshadow similar colonial attitudes.[144]

The extant sources on the workings of the Mughal state, together with other writings such as doxographies and certain belles lettres compositions, differ widely with regard to genre; yet collectively they illustrate some of the various manners in which caste was operative throughout seventeenth-century India. Mughal writers, like their European counterparts, believed the four *varṇas* to be an essential form of Hindu social organization, though this concept could not fully account for the lived reality of caste. The idea coexisted with the state's documentary practices, which, in the course of regulating property ownership, employment, and revenue collection rights, reflected as well as helped consolidate the existence of numerous bounded social groups. There is scope for more research here into the specifics of how caste inflected the control of labor and property in this era.[145] The literary inscriptions of caste and other social groups with racialized characteristics are thus informed by underlying structures of power and domination in Mughal India as well as ideologies of imperial sovereignty.

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[141] "Ba fann-i khweshtan ustād har yak / gahī mard o gahī zan gāh mardak // mū pareshān gahī sanyāsān / gahī islāmiyān-i ahl-i īmān": Kunjāhī, 152.

[142] Kunjāhī, 152, 161.

[143] Kunjāhī, 152, 240.

[144] For some instances of Mughal attitudes toward non-sedentary groups, see Singh, 337–38.

[145] There exists important recent work in this regard, for instance, by Sumit Guha. However, the literary and documentary sources associated with the Mughal state, for instance, hold the potential for further work on caste. For further examination of this phenomenon, insights from studies of a later period may also prove relevant, such as Rupa Viswanath's work demonstrating, on the basis of colonial archives, how caste was a form of labor control. See Viswanath.

CONCLUSION

As with other arenas of writing and being, the Persian discourses in Mughal India on alterity and group identity were multilayered and complex. These epistemic formations could engage in, as well as push back against, practices that we would today readily identify with racialization. This discursive terrain was by no means confined to the genealogy of Noah, climatic and physiognomic humoralism, literary motifs of Turk and Hindu, or to the essentializations of religion or group. The broader multilingual environment of precolonial vernacular and Sanskrit writings on somatic difference and caste still remain a potential realm for further analysis.

Bernier's writings show that, even in the early modern era, India was an important site for the development of European theories of race. His Mughal interlocutors, like his patron, Dānishmand Khān, might well have found some of these ideas familiar, particularly in the way Bernier's division of people echoed theories of climatic determinism. In some respects, Mughal and European attitudes of antiblackness were similar. It is also true that Mughal and European intellectuals shared a background of Greek natural philosophy and biblical lore. Yet, in their own valorization of Hindustan and its regions, Mughal writers were much more interested in reshaping discourses of genealogy or climate to accommodate the subcontinent's places and peoples. Situating Bernier's ideas on race in the broader Mughal context not only shows their faint resonances with Persianate discourses but also exposes their significant divergences. There are crucial differences between Bernier's racial classification of humans and the racialized tropes invoked by the Mughal intellectuals he would have met.

But the significance of Bernier's theory lies in hindsight, for the lasting hold on the imagination that race would eventually take in the subcontinent and elsewhere. Though race in early modern Europe looked different from its nineteenth-century forms, in retrospect, it served to anticipate and buttress these later developments. As Walter Mignolo argues, "race as racism" emerges in the European Renaissance "as an intrinsic part of the consolidation of capitalism in the Atlantic economy and of Western expansion."[146] By contrast, for a host of historical reasons, the hierarchical discourses of difference and identity in Mughal India did not end in racial capitalism, colonialism, or the biopolitics of the nation-state.

Today race is at the core of Hindu nationalist visions of India as a so-called civilizational state, where religion too is thoroughly racialized. There is no direct conduit through which to trace back to precolonial India modern ideas of

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[146] Mignolo, 313–14.

nation, religion, and race. As mentioned above, colonialism had much more of an impact in this regard. Even so, with the swift ascendancy of the East India Company in the eighteenth century, precolonial naturalizations of group difference did not automatically die out. The early production of colonial knowledge relied greatly on repurposing earlier Persianate forms of knowledge and deploying these discursive structures for sundry forms of classification and division. An attention to the messy and complex genealogies of race further illuminates these colonial interventions, through which categories of race, religion, and nation would eventually subsume many preexisting modes of fathoming difference and hierarchy.

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