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The Mughal *Ramrajya*: Ideal State in the *Dastan-i Ram u Sita*

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Abstract

This paper explores the idea of the ideal state as articulated in *Dastan-i Ram u Sita*, the Persian adaptation of the *Ramayana* composed by the seventeenth-century scholar Mulla Masih Panipati during the reign of the Mughal emperor Jahangir. Focusing on Panipati's portrayal of *Ramrajya*, this study argues that the text presents a Mughal vision of ideal governance, one that resonates closely with Indo-Persian political thought, rather than with Hindu theological doctrine alone. In this Persian retelling, *Ramrajya* is not imagined as a mythical or purely divine realm, but as a site of ethico-moral order grounded in justice, restraint, and righteous kingship. This paper demonstrates that Panipati reinterprets the concept of *Ramrajya* through Islamic ethical values such as justice (*'adl*), trust (*amanat*), patience (*sabr*), and submission to divine will. Lord Rama is portrayed not only as an incarnation of Vishnu but also as a divinely guided ruler whose authority rests on moral conduct and responsibility toward his subjects. This vision of kingship closely parallels Mughal political ideals, in which the stability of the state depended upon the ruler's ethical discipline and commitment to justice. The ideal state described in the text thus resembles the Islamic conception of *Dar ul-Islam*, a realm characterised by peace, moral order, and just governance under a righteous sovereign. By analysing *Ramrajya* in Panipati's Persian *Ramayana*, this paper highlights how literary adaptation functions as a medium of political reflection in Mughal India. It suggests that *Dastan-i Ram u Sita* offers not only a reinterpretation of an ancient Indian epic but also a subtle articulation of Mughal ideals of statecraft, authority, and moral order.

Keywords: *Dar ul-Islam*, *Dastan-i Ram u Sita*, justice, kingship, Mughal political thought, Mulla Masih Panipati, Persian, *Ramayana*, *Ramrajya*

Introduction

The Persian adaptation of the *Ramayana* titled *Dastan-i Ram u Sita*, composed by the seventeenth-century scholar Mullā Masīḥ Pānīpatī during the reign of the Mughal emperor Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), represents a significant moment in the intellectual and political history of early modern South Asia (Truschke, *Culture of Encounters* 45). More than a literary translation, this work reflects a conscious Mughal engagement with India's pre-Islamic past. It demonstrates how imperial scholars sought to understand, reinterpret, and integrate Indic traditions within the broader framework of Indo-Persian political and ethical thought (Alam,

The Languages of Political Islam 67). The *Ramayana*, one of the foundational epics of the Indian subcontinent, provided Mughal intellectuals with a narrative through which to explore questions of kingship, justice, morality, and political legitimacy in culturally resonant yet conceptually adaptable ways.

Panipati's adaptation must be situated within the wider Mughal project of translation and cultural interpretation that began in earnest under Emperor Akbar and continued into the seventeenth century (Truschke 52). These translation efforts were not merely antiquarian exercises but were closely tied to imperial governance. By rendering Sanskrit epics into Persian, the administrative and literary language of the Mughal court, scholars enabled the ruling elite to access and interpret India's intellectual and ethical traditions (Alam 71). In doing so, they also reshaped these traditions through the conceptual vocabulary of Persianate political culture. This process created a shared moral and intellectual space in which diverse traditions could be understood within a common ethical framework.

Within this context, the concept of *Ramrajya* assumes particular importance. Traditionally understood as the ideal kingdom ruled by Rama, *Ramrajya* symbolised justice, moral order, and harmonious governance (Pollock 156). In Panipati's Persian retelling, however, *Ramrajya* is not presented solely as a sacred or mythological ideal. Instead, it emerges as a political model grounded in ethical sovereignty, just rule, and divinely sanctioned authority, principles that closely resonate with Mughal theories of kingship (Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign* 89). By examining how *Ramrajya* is articulated in *Dastan-i Ram u Sita*, this study seeks to demonstrate that Panipati's work reflects not only literary adaptation but also a sophisticated Mughal interpretation of ideal statecraft, integrating epic tradition with the ethical and political ideals of Indo-Persian imperial thought.

Historiography: Mughal Translation, Kingship, and Ethical Sovereignty

Scholarly discussions of Mughal engagement with Sanskrit texts have expanded significantly over the past two decades. Earlier historiography often treated Persian translations of Indic epics as either ornamental courtly projects or instruments of political accommodation (Truschke 23). More recent scholarship, however, has emphasised their intellectual depth and ideological significance.

A foundational intervention in this field has been made by Audrey Truschke, whose work on Mughal-Sanskrit interactions demonstrates that translation at the Mughal court was neither superficial nor merely symbolic. In *Culture of Encounters*, she argues that Persian renderings of Sanskrit texts involved processes of conceptual transformation rather than literal replication (Truschke 34). Mughal translators selectively reshaped Indic ideas to align with Indo-Persian intellectual frameworks. This insight provides an essential foundation for understanding *Dastan-i Ram u Sita* not as a faithful reproduction of the *Ramayana*, but as a deliberate reinterpretation shaped by Mughal ethical and political concerns.

Similarly, Muzaffar Alam, in *The Languages of Political Islam in India, 1200-1800*, has demonstrated that Mughal political discourse articulated sovereignty in universal ethical terms rather than narrowly sectarian categories (Alam 89). Concepts such as justice (*'adl*), moral responsibility, and the protection of subjects formed the backbone of Indo-Persian political thought. Alam's analysis suggests that Mughal kingship was imagined as a moral institution grounded in ethical discipline, a framework strikingly resonant with Panipati's portrayal of *Ramrajya*.

Azfar Moin has further illuminated the sacral dimension of Mughal sovereignty in *The Millennial Sovereign*. Moin argues that early modern Islamic kingship often combined saintly charisma with imperial authority (Moin 102). Although Panipati does not portray Rama through explicitly Islamic sacred idioms, his depiction of Rama as divinely guided and morally illuminated parallels broader Indo-Persian notions of sacred sovereignty.

From a literary perspective, Sunil Sharma, in *Mughal Arcadia*, has emphasised the creative agency of Persian poets in adapting Indic materials into established Persian genres (Sharma 67). Rather than passive

transmitters, Mughal authors actively reshaped narrative worlds to suit courtly aesthetics and political sensibilities. Panipati's framing of the epic as a dastan participates in this broader Persianate literary culture. However, despite this growing body of scholarship, the political implications of *Dastan-i Ram u Sita*, particularly its articulation of *Ramrajya* as an ideal state, have received comparatively limited sustained attention. While studies have examined Mughal translations of the *Mahabharata* and other Sanskrit works, Panipati's Persian *Ramayana* remains underexplored as a text of political thought.

This paper builds upon existing scholarship while advancing a distinct argument. It suggests that Panipati's portrayal of *Ramrajya* constitutes a Mughal reimagining of the ideal polity, one that resonates closely with Indo-Persian theories of ethical sovereignty and, in certain respects, parallels the Islamic conception of a morally ordered realm comparable to *Dar ul-Islam*. Rather than viewing the text solely as a literary adaptation, this study approaches it as a political reflection embedded within an epic narrative.

The Language of Ethics and Sovereignty in *Dastan-i Ram u Sita*

If *Ramrajya* in Panipati's rendering resembles an ideal state, this resemblance emerges not merely from narrative structure but from vocabulary. Political thought in the Persianate world operated through ethically charged terminology, 'adl (justice), amanat (trust), mulk (sovereignty), taqdir (divine decree), and farman (command) (Alam 112). The recurrence of such terms in *Dastan-i Ram u Sita* signals deliberate conceptual alignment with Indo-Persian political discourse.

In the coronation episode, Panipati describes Rama's accession in terms that foreground justice as the foundation of sovereignty:

ز عدلش جهان یافت امن و قرار
ستم گشت محو از دیار و حصار (Panipati, verse 112)

The verse links justice ('adl) with security (amn), a pairing deeply embedded in Islamic political theory, in which justice is understood as the precondition for social stability (Alam 115). Sovereignty here is not defined by conquest but by the elimination of oppression (zulm). This mirrors Indo-Persian mirrors-for-princes literature, in which kingship is justified through the ruler's capacity to remove injustice and ensure public welfare (Alam 118).

Panipati further emphasises the ruler's accountability. Rama is portrayed as entrusted with authority rather than possessing absolute dominion:

امانت به دوش شه دادگر
ز حق یافت فرمان و تاج و کمر (Panipati, verse 115)

The word amanat is crucial. In Islamic ethical vocabulary, governance is frequently conceptualised as a divine trust rather than a personal entitlement (Alam 121). By employing this terminology, Panipati reframes Rama's kingship within an ethical structure recognisable to Mughal political thought.

Such language resonates strongly with Muzaffar Alam's analysis, which argues that Mughal sovereignty was articulated through a moral lexicon that emphasised justice and responsibility over sectarian identity (Alam 124). In this context, *Ramrajya* becomes legible not as a purely Hindu theological construct but as an ethically structured polity compatible with Indo-Persian models of governance.

Ramrajya and Mughal Imperial Ideology

To appreciate the political implications of Panipati's work, it is helpful to consider Mughal imperial ideology more broadly. During the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir, sovereignty was increasingly articulated as a moral institution grounded in divine illumination and ethical discipline.

In the Akbarnama, Abu'l Fazl presents kingship as a radiance (*farr-i izadi*) bestowed by God and manifested through justice (Abu'l Fazl 45). The emperor's authority derives legitimacy from his capacity to maintain balance, suppress tyranny, and cultivate order. Similarly, in Panipati's text, Rama's sovereignty is depicted as luminous and morally transformative:

چو خورشید بر تخت بنشست شاه

ز نورش جهان یافت آیین و راه (Panipati, verse 118)

The solar metaphor recalls Persianate imperial symbolism in which the king embodies divine light (Moin 156). Although Panipati does not explicitly invoke Islamic prophetic categories, his language situates Rama within the symbolic universe of Indo-Persian sacred kingship.

Furthermore, *Ramrajya*'s ethical order parallels the Islamic conception of a morally regulated realm often described in juridical and political literature as *Dar ul-Islam*, a territory characterised by peace, justice, and the protection of subjects under legitimate authority (Alam 135). While Panipati does not use the term directly, the structural resemblance is evident in his depiction of a kingdom free from oppression and governed by moral law.

The comparison should not be overstated; *Ramrajya* retains epic and Indic dimensions. However, the convergence of ethical vocabulary suggests that Panipati consciously framed the epic kingdom in terms resonant with Mughal political ideals.

Literary Adaptation as Political Thought: Translation and Mughal Ideology

The political significance of *Dastan-i Ram u Sita* lies not only in its depiction of *Ramrajya* but also in its ethical reframing of Rama's kingship. It also lies in the very act of adaptation. By rendering the *Ramayana* into Persian poetic form, Mulla Masih Panipati participates in a broader Mughal intellectual project: the translation of India's pre-Islamic past into the moral and political vocabulary of the Persianate court (Truschke 142).

Panipati's language consistently situates the epic within Indo-Persian literary aesthetics. For instance, Rama's sovereignty is described through metaphors common to Persian court poetry:

چو خورشید عدلش برآمد ز تخت

جهان را ز نورش بیاراست بخت (Panipati 248)

Justice rises like the sun from the throne, illuminating the world. The imagery of solar radiance is deeply embedded in Persianate theories of kingship, where the ruler's justice reflects divine light (Sharma 89). By employing such metaphors, Panipati renders Rama legible within Mughal imperial symbolism.

Similarly, the garden imagery surrounding *Ramrajya* echoes Persian literary conventions:

جهان گشت چون باغ از عدل شاه

وز او سبز شد هر درخت و گیاه (Panipati 249)

The garden metaphor, so central to Mughal imperial architecture and political imagination, transforms Ayodhya into a Persianate moral landscape (Sharma 94). As Sunil Sharma has argued, Persian literary production at the Mughal court frequently adapted Indic material through familiar aesthetic forms, thereby integrating it into imperial discourse (Sharma 97).

Translation here is not mechanical. It is interpretive. Concepts such as dharma are not transliterated but ethically reframed. Where the Sanskrit epic emphasises divine incarnation and cosmic duty, Panipati foregrounds justice, restraint, and moral responsibility, terms resonant with Islamic ethical thought (Truschke 148).

Audrey Truschke has shown that Mughal engagements with Sanskrit texts involved "conceptual translation," whereby ideas were reconfigured to fit Indo-Persian intellectual frameworks (Truschke 151). *Dastan-i Ram u Sita* exemplifies this process. *Ramrajya* becomes a moral polity analogous to Islamic political ideals; Rama becomes a divinely guided yet ethically accountable sovereign; epic warfare becomes an allegory of justice versus tyranny.

Moreover, Panipati's choice of genre, *dastan*, places the narrative within the Persian storytelling tradition. By calling it *Dastan-i Ram u Sita*, the poet positions the work among heroic-romantic epics rather than exclusively religious scripture (Sharma 102). This literary framing broadens its accessibility within the Mughal courtly milieu.

Importantly, the adaptation does not erase the narrative's Indic character. Instead, it creates a layered text in which Sanskritic themes coexist with Persianate political vocabulary. The result is neither simple Islamisation nor faithful preservation, but a dialogical synthesis.

This synthesis reflects Mughal imperial realities. Governing a diverse population required moral frameworks capable of transcending sectarian boundaries. As Muzaffar Alam notes, Mughal political thought often articulated sovereignty in universal ethical terms rather than narrow confessional categories (Alam 178). Panipati's *Ramrajya* embodies precisely such universality.

Thus, literary adaptation becomes political reflection. By translating the epic into Persian and reframing its central concepts, Panipati articulates a vision of the ideal state that resonates with Mughal ideological aspirations. The epic past becomes a mirror for contemporary governance.

Conclusion

The broader significance of this adaptation lies in its historical context. Seventeenth-century Mughal India was marked by ongoing negotiation between diverse religious and intellectual traditions. By translating the *Ramayana* into Persian and rearticulating its political ideals, Panipati participates in a larger imperial project of ethical synthesis. As scholars such as Muzaffar Alam and Audrey Truschke have demonstrated, Mughal engagements with Sanskrit texts were often motivated by the desire to construct universal models of sovereignty that transcended confessional boundaries (Alam 182; Truschke 167).

In this light, *Ramrajya* becomes a mirror of Mughal aspirations. The ideal state is neither exclusively Hindu nor exclusively Islamic; it is defined by moral governance. Justice radiates outward from the throne; the populace lives free from oppression; cosmic and social order align. Such a vision reflects the ethical vocabulary of Indo-Persian kingship literature while remaining rooted in epic narrative.

Ultimately, *Dastan-i Ram u Sita* demonstrates that literary adaptation functioned as political thought in Mughal India. By reshaping the epic past, Panipati articulates a subtle but powerful statement about the nature of legitimate authority. *Ramrajya*, in this Persian retelling, stands as an emblem of ethical statecraft, a Mughal vision of the ideal polity expressed through the language of epic memory.

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