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## Manuscript Variations of Dabistān-i Mazāhib and Writing Histories of Religion in Mughal India

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## Manuscript Variations of Dabistān-i Mazāhib and Writing Histories of Religion in Mughal India

### Abstract

A text that has found renewed interest among scholars of early modern India is the Persian compendium of religion called Dabistān-i Mazāhib. Written between 1645 and 1658, the Dabistān presents a lively ethnographic and historical account of customs and habits of various major and minor religious communities in northern India during the heyday of the Mughal Empire (1526-1707). Written like a travelogue, it moves between various modes of description including mythical revelations, storytelling, ethnographic notes, and authorial commentary. The Dabistān-i Mazāhib is also valuable because it is the earliest work outside of the Sikh literary tradition that contains first-hand accounts of the growing Sikh socio-religious movement established in Punjab during the sixteenth century. Focusing on this section titled "The Nanak Panthis", this article explores what translators, commentators, and historians have variously understood as comprising the original text. Since the early twentieth century, scholars have relied on later manuscript and print editions in their English translations and use of this work without necessarily reflecting on how these choices have preconditioned interpretive possibilities. My analysis of a recently discovered and earliest known manuscript copy of the Dabistān-i Mazāhib from 1650 suggests that all of the later hand written and print editions, which have now become standardized through scholarly convention, omit certain details and even entire passages. This has major implications for how we have understood the genesis and transmission of the text, and perhaps more significantly, the social groups and historical moments depicted in this one-of-a-kind work.

### Keywords

South Asia, India, Persian manuscripts, Mughal India, manuscript variation, translation, Aligarh Muslim University, British Library, Iran Culture House, Dabistan-i Mazahib, religion, manuscript studies

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# Manuscript Variations of Dabistān-i Mazāhib and Writing Histories of Religion in Mughal India

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SUDEV SHETH  
*Harvard Business School*

**I**N THE INAUGURAL ISSUE of *Manuscript Studies*, Benjamin J. Fleming drew our attention to how “orality, memory, ritual, and aesthetics in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism helped to shape the development and formation of manuscript traditions in South Asia.”<sup>1</sup> In addition, certain works, such as the *Bhagavadgītā*, were carefully copied and circulated as beautiful sacred objects, their elaborate images and gold leafing suggesting further the visual impression that *texts as objects* sought to leave on viewers. Apart from being items of beauty, early manuscripts from the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions were also mnemonic aids, and Fleming rightly contrasts this unique function with developments in manuscript cultures of medieval Europe. By the second millennium of the Common Era, the growing influence of Islamic polities in South Asia meant that accompanying cultures of the pen chiefly in Arabic and Persian could develop indigenous roots and form an important corollary to the prolific Hindu, Buddhist,

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Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this essay are the author’s own.

1 Benjamin J. Fleming, “The Materiality of South Asian Manuscripts from the University of Pennsylvania MS Coll. 390 and the Rāmamālā Library in Bangladesh,” *Manuscript Studies* 1 (2017): 28–51.

and Jain traditions. It was during this period that paper was introduced to the subcontinent, and soon after, various paper manufacturing centers were established across the subcontinent. This not only facilitated the extensification of manuscript production in India, but also catalyzed the development of regional linguistic registers and associated scripts, the rise of scribal specialists, and the rapid circulation of the written word both within and beyond literary spheres. In an era of preprint, 1000 CE marks the beginning of the “vernacular millennium,” or the growth of regional literary cultures evidenced by the proliferation of manuscripts and other forms of the written word that were beginning to self-identify with specific regional territories, distinct geocultural spheres, and unique literary values.<sup>2</sup>

By the early-modern period (1500–1800), royal courts continued earlier practices of patronizing manuscript production, propagating translation bureaus, purchasing texts, and even setting up libraries. For example, at the death of the Mughal emperor Akbar in 1605, the holdings of the Mughal Imperial Library contained an astounding 24,000 volumes valued at some 6,463,731 rupees.<sup>3</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, much of this collection was lost to poor climate, plunder, and the consequences of a Mughal royal court no longer having the power, prestige, and resources to sustain a robust collecting program. It is important to note that most of the manuscripts that the Mughal emperors possessed were canonical texts such as the *Gulistān* of Sa‘di, *Shāhnāma*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, and *Yūsuf wa Zulaykhā* of Jami, and their monetary values were determined by the status of the calligrapher, the quality of illuminations, and other aspects of their materiality. Lesser known texts, especially those written by contemporary authors not associated directly with the royal Mughal court or its nobles, did not necessarily find their way into imperial holdings and likely circulated through parallel networks of reading, writing, and collecting.

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2 Sheldon Pollock, “India in the Vernacular Millennium: Literary Culture and Polity, 1000–1500,” *Daedalus* 127 (1998): 41–74.

3 John Seyller, “The Inspection and Valuation of Manuscripts in the Imperial Mughal Library,” *Artibus Asiae* 57 (1997): 243–349.

One such parallel text that has found renewed significance over the past quarter century among scholars of early modern India is the seventeenth-century Persian compendium on religion called the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* (School of Religious Doctrines). In line with the other articles in this special issue on manuscript variation in South Asia, this essay explores what translators, commentators, and historians have variously understood as constituting the original text. Since the early twentieth century, scholars have relied on later manuscript and print editions in their English translations and use of this work without necessarily reflecting on how these choices have preconditioned interpretive possibilities. My analysis of a recently discovered and the earliest known manuscript copy of the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* from 1650 suggests that all of the later handwritten and print editions, which have now become standardized through scholarly convention, omit certain details and even entire passages. This has major implications for how we have understood the genesis and transmission of the text, and perhaps more significantly, the social groups and historical moments depicted in this one-of-a-kind work. Since this article is as much a reflection on methodology as it is an empirical contribution, I shall outline my broader perspective and approach to manuscript variation ahead of introducing the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*.

My scholarly perspective emerges from two overlapping fields of inquiry, South Asia regional studies, with its strong emphasis on language acquisition for the detailed reading of texts, and history, with its fetish for empirical discovery and reconstructing social pasts as a kind of synthesis of economic, cultural, and religious conditions. While both work with a keen eye toward describing the spirit of a bygone era, and even how this might relate to our own times, their methodologies and initial points of entry into the world of premodern manuscripts are often at odds. The field of South Asia studies cannot completely shed its origins in critical philology, comparative linguistics, and textual criticism, and therefore cannot escape asking questions like: How many recensions of a given work are known? How should a critical edition of a text be created, and on what factors should a modern scholar's own interpolations be based? What is the earliest known version of a text, and can its provenance be verified? And what aspects of its formal features such as language, grammar, and content can be identified as

unique? The emphasis here is *practice*, especially the practice of constructing a literature with the aim of reproducing an “authentic” version suitable for analysis.

In the discipline of history, the study of manuscripts for information beyond strict documentary evidence is relatively recent. Beginning in the 1980s, the analysis of manuscripts shifted from description and data mining to probing how the material forms of texts revealed much more about their creation, use, function, and content. Drawing on critical insights put forward most clearly by D. F. McKenzie, this approach is often characterized as the history of material texts.<sup>4</sup> It assumes that all manuscripts, in their individual physical forms, are objective and self-containing. Both these approaches—that is, philologically inflected area studies and sociocultural history—are painstaking and produce great insight, but ultimately risk becoming obscure in their individual pursuit of method. Simply put, the detailed analysis of many manuscripts for the sole and elusive purpose of creating an “authentic” edition is time consuming and sidelines important questions about historical change that might have brought us to the text to begin with. Similarly, the idea that any given manuscript is self-containing and that a microscopic analysis of any one variant, including its content and physicality, is sufficient for historical analysis leaves questions about historical significance, transmission, and resurgence unturned. Traditions of manuscript reading, writing, copying, creating, and circulating split for various reasons, and ignoring these can lead to severe limitations in our understanding of how intellectual endeavors are established and evolve over the centuries.

While each of the expositions about manuscript variation in this special issue are based on materials from different regions, time periods, and languages of South Asia, the contributions are united by each author making a case for the big question—that is, on what grounds should the study of manuscript variation be based? In this article, I hope to demonstrate that one possible way of organizing critical perspectives on manuscript variation

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<sup>4</sup> D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

is focusing on how particular editions of a text become standardized, and how, as a result, certain groups, historical moments, and social relationships portrayed differently across various copy-versions of a given text get homogenized into a single “authentic” representation. And while these differences might be the outcome of scribal error or even the byproduct of multiple versions created during the initial articulation of the text itself, we must recognize that manuscript variation might be a window into correcting, or at least reflecting on, aspects of the written word that come to form the basis of “empirical truths” about the past.

### *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*

*Dabistān-i Mazāhib* (School of Religious Doctrines) is a text belonging to the tradition of Azar Kayvan.<sup>5</sup> It was written between 1645 and 1658 and is an account of various religious communities of north and northwestern India in the seventeenth century. The *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* is written like a travelogue. It moves between various modes of description, including historical ethnography, mythical revelations and storytelling, and more authorial commentary. The writer is unknown to us, and refers to himself only in the third person as “the author” (*nāma nigār*) or “writer of deeds” (*kardār guzār*). From autobiographical references scattered throughout the book, he was likely born in Patna around 1617 and came to Agra in 1624. In the 1630s, he traveled to various towns and cities in northern India, spending considerable time in Kashmir and Punjab. It is possible that he traveled to Kabul in 1643 and from there on to Mashhad.<sup>6</sup> In the late eighteenth century, the great orientalist scholar Sir William Jones (1746–1794) noticed the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*. Some of his thoughts are revealed in a letter to his friend John Shore (1751–1834). Shore served as Governor-General of India

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5 Azar Kayvan was born between 1529 and 1533 and died between 1609 and 1618. He was a Zoroastrian high priest from Fars province in southwest Iran. He emigrated to India in the sixteenth century and established the Zoroastrian Ishraqi sect, or the School of Divine Illumination. See H. Corbin, “Āzar Kayvān,” *Encyclopædia Iranica* 3 (1987): 183–87.

6 Fath-Allah Mojtabai, “Dābestān-e maḍāheb,” *Encyclopædia Iranica* 6 (1993): 532–34.

from 1793 to 1797, and succeeded Jones as president of the illustrious oriental research organization the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1794.

I have read your pundit's curious book twice in Sanscrit, and will have it elegantly copied; the *Dabistan* also I have read through twice with great attention; and both copies are ready to be returned, as you shall direct. Mr. R. Johnston thinks he has a young friend who will translate the *Dabistan*, and the greatest part of it would be very interesting to a curious reader, but some of it cannot be translated. It contains more recondite learning, more entertaining history, and more beautiful specimens of poetry, more ingenuity and wit, more indecency and blasphemy, than I ever saw collected in a single volume: the two last are not the author's, but are introduced in the chapters on the heretics and infidels of India. On the whole, it is the most amusing and instructive book I ever read in Persian.<sup>7</sup>

In his other writings, Jones proposed one Mohsen Fani Kashmiri (d. 1670) as the author of the text. British scholar-soldiers Vans Kennedy and William Erskine rejected this hypothesis in the early nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> In 1856, Keykosrow Kavus, an Indian Parsi, suggested that Azar Kayvan's son and spiritual successor Keykosrow Esfandiar was the writer. This view has also been adopted by Rahim Razazada Malik, editor of the most recent and standard reference edition of the Persian text of the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*.<sup>9</sup> Other historians and compilers of biographical anthologies (*tazkira*) from the eighteenth century onward suggest the author to be Mir Zulfiqar Ard-estani, known by his pen name Molla Mobad. Manuscript copies of the text at Ganj Bakhsh Library in Islamabad, the British Library in London, and

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7 Letter 461 to John Shore, Gardens near Calcutta, 24 June 1787, from *The Letters of Sir William Jones*, ed. Garland Cannon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 739.

8 J. J. Modi, "A Parsee High Priest Dastur Azar Kaiwan, 1529–1614 A.D. with His Zoroastrian Disciples in Patna in the 16th and 17th century," *Journal of the K.R. Cama Oriental Institute* 20 (1932): 1–85 at 8.

9 Rahim Razazada Malik, ed., *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*, 2 vols. (Tehran: Kitābkhānah-i Tāhūrī, 1983).

the University Library at Aligarh Muslim University confirm Mir Zulfiqar Ardestani (Mobad) as the author.<sup>10</sup> An anthology of Mobad's poems comprising three thousand couplets is held by the public library in Patna in the Indian state of Bihar, and poetic fragments from it appear in the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*. Many of the proper personal and place names cited in Mobad's anthology are also found in the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*.<sup>11</sup> The text was composed during the reign of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (1628–57), a time when Lahore and Kashmir were important centers of imperial activity. Therefore, it is not surprising that Mobad spent the years between 1627 and 1643 meeting representatives of various sects, government officials, and other individuals in and around Kashmir and Lahore.

In an important article, Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi argues that modern Orientalism emerged from dialogical conditions in which Persianate scholars were crucial to the education of “pioneering” Orientalists.<sup>12</sup> He argues that histories of Indian and Iranian modernism have been suppressed by the twentieth-century nationalist historiographies of both countries. During the formative years of modern European discourses on the Orient, observers belonging to the Persian literary sphere were writing and commenting on both the occident and their own orient.<sup>13</sup> These traces of oriental agency and scholarship survive in genres such as the biographical dictionaries, commentaries, translations, and various original treatises.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, the indigenous scholars and texts that informed early orientalists like William

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10 Irfan Habib notes that the earliest manuscript copy of *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* at Aligarh Muslim University dates to 1792. He suggests that printed editions of the work, “which have so far been used by students of Sikh history, carry what appears to be a revised, somewhat abridged version.” See Irfan Habib, “Sikhism and the Sikhs, 1645–46 from Mobad, *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*,” in *Sikh History from Persian Sources*, ed. J. S. Grewal and Irfan Habib (New Delhi: Tulika, 2001).

11 Mojtabai, “Dābestān-e maḏāheb,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*.

12 Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, “Orientalism’s Genesis Amnesia,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 16 (1996): 1–14.

13 The main example Targhi cites are the *mehmāndārs* or guest keepers who accompanied distinguished foreign visitors to Iran and India.

14 For example, it is well known that Akbar’s court attracted scholars and illustrious figures like Father Jerome Xavier, who represented the third Jesuit Mission to his court in 1594. These men debated the issues of the day, wrote treatises, and partook in the imperial transla-

Jones have been erased from intellectual histories of colonialism and Western domination. In fact, “the breakthroughs in comparative religion and linguistics, which were the high marks of the Oriental Renaissance in Europe, were in reality built upon the intellectual achievements of Mughal India.”<sup>15</sup>

The Persian-Indian scholars and texts that informed Jones’s historical linguistics and commentaries remain obscure. In the case of *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*, all we know is that one Mir Muhammad Husayn Isfahani introduced the text to Jones. It is possible that Jones’s initial perspective on the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* as constituting evidence of India’s linguistic diversity and ethnic plurality was an appropriation of ideas held by his own indigenous intellectual interlocutors like Muhammad Isfahani. Targhi also observes that “Orientalism’s genesis amnesia” was made possible in part by late eighteenth-century European ideas about the author being the originator of the text and the primary mode by which a work’s authenticity, credibility, and content were to be judged. As a result, “European interlocutors constituted themselves as the repositories of originality and assigned non-European scholars the function of native-informants.”<sup>16</sup> It would not be unreasonable to suggest that post-Romantic Western ideas about single authorship continue as the epistemological foundation of the humanities, and therefore manuscript studies, in contemporary times. It comes as no surprise, then, that much of the limited scholarship on the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* focuses on making a case for who the author was and why he might have written such a book rather than analyzing the internal logic of the treatise, its contents, and even its manuscript variants.<sup>17</sup>

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tion projects. See H. Beveridge, “Father Jerome Xavier,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 57 (1889): 33–40.

15 Tavakoli-Targhi, “Orientalism’s Genesis Amnesia,” 3.

16 Tavakoli-Targhi, “Orientalism’s Genesis Amnesia,” 9.

17 Exceptions to this observation are Aditya Behl, “Pages from the Book of Religions: Comparing Self and Other in Mughal India,” in *Notes from a Mandala: Essays in the History of Indian Religions in Honor of Wendy Doniger*, ed. Laurie Patton and David Haberman (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2010), 113–49; Aditya Behl, “Pages from the Book of Religions: Encountering Difference in Mughal India,” in *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia: Explorations in the Intellectual History of India and Tibet, 1500–1800*, ed. Sheldon Pollock

Apart from the various early translations of the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*, which I discuss in the subsequent section, the earliest secondary reference to the text in a contemporary scholarly work is a long essay by the Indian Parsi scholar Jivanji Jamshedji Modi.<sup>18</sup> He uses the text to give an account of priests and laymen associated with Azar Kayvan, and draws attention to the social conditions that pushed large groups of Zoroastrians to migrate from Fars province in Iran to India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Modi says that Patna's long associations with Buddhism and Jainism may have attracted Azar Kayvan and his disciples to the city located on the banks of the Ganges River in northeast India. Modi devotes the bulk of his essay to a close reading of the chapter on the religion of the Parsis. For our purposes, his translation of Mobad's own words about his endeavor are relevant:

In this book, named Dabistan, there is given some account of the knowledge and work and manners of the ancients, and of the words and actions of the later ones (as described) by those who know what is known and see what is hidden (and by) the worshippers of outward forms and the choosers of inner meaning. (All this is given) without lessening or diminishing anything, without hatred or jealousy and without corroborating or refuting.<sup>19</sup>

Starting in the 1950s, Indian historians mined the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* like a medieval political chronicle to establish a social history of religion in Mughal India. For this group, the sections on Mughal emperor Akbar's composite religion called *Din-i Ilahi* and the passages on the Sikhs were especially relevant.<sup>20</sup> These chapters allowed these twentieth-century

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(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 210–39; Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, “Contested Memories: Narrative Structures and Allegorical Meanings of Iran's Pre-Islamic History,” *Iranian Studies* 29 (1996): 149–75.

18 Modi, “A Parsee High Priest.”

19 Modi, “A Parsee High Priest,” 10.

20 For example, see M. L. Roy Choudhury, *The Din-i Ilahi or the Religion of Akbar* (Calcutta: Das Gupta & Company, 1952); A. A. Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar's Reign* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1975); Irfan Habib, “Jatts of Punjab and

scholars to demonstrate how a powerful premodern emperor like Akbar could establish his own religious doctrine and, in the case of the Sikhs of Punjab, how peasants were manipulated through godmen into the revenue-harnessing designs of a fledgling sociopolitical movement emerging from the agrarian countryside. More recently, the aftermath of the Babri Masjid incident also sparked a renewed interest in precolonial histories of religious identity, sacred practices, and cross-community interactions across the subcontinent. In September 1990, the Indian politician L. K. Advani began a religious tour across northern India to mobilize support for his populist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party. Advani reached Babri Masjid, a sixteenth-century mosque built by the Mughal emperor Babur. He claimed that the mosque was made by demolishing an ancient temple, and symbolized years of destruction and pillage that Hindus had endured from violent Muslims who he said were invaders from Central Asia. In 1992, Babri Masjid came crashing down as young Advani sympathizers axed its symbolic domes and iconic pillars. The country erupted in terror, and ensuing riots between Hindus and Muslims claimed many lives.<sup>21</sup> Such public violence in the name of historical injustice reaffirmed the importance of writing secular histories to combat sectarian, and often misguided and unfounded, representations of the past. These writings have tried to persuade readers to not confuse the political rhetoric of dogmatic histories with factual accounts based on scholastic rigor. Historian Simon Digby led the way with an essay that pushed against the idea that Mughal rule, widely understood in India as constituting a dark period of “Muslim” domination, was despotic and that social life in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century India was restricted by the state. He paints an alternate picture of Mughal India as a landscape of multiple

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Sind,” in *Punjab Past and Present: Essays in Honour of Dr. Ganda Singh*, ed. Harbans Singh and N. Gerald Barrier (Patiala: Punjabi University Press, 1976).

21 The Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh was a sixteenth-century mosque commissioned by the first Mughal emperor, Babur, in 1528. In 1992, it was demolished by radical Hindus who justified their attack on historical grounds, claiming that the mosque was built by ruining an ancient temple dedicated to the Hindu Lord Rama. The controversy sparked major Hindu-Muslim communal violence across Indian cities and towns, the social and political remnants of which are still felt today.

mobility in which neither the authority of the Mughal emperor nor his provincial governors restricted movement.

[Mobad] was clearly a man who had the entree to the company of influential Mughal officials and literary men, while important religious figures—among them Guru Har Gobind, Chidrup Gosa'in and Sarmad—as well as an assortment of Catholic priests, Tibetan lamas, sanyasis, bairagis and Kashmiri and south Indian Brahmans were prepared to give time to his society and questioning. The places to which he travelled do not fit in easily with Mughal clerical employment, nor with any obviously profitable pattern of trade.<sup>22</sup>

The late M. Athar Ali of Aligarh Muslim University wrote his final essay on the author of *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*.<sup>23</sup> A devout secularist, Athar Ali also argued that such a composite text could have only been produced in the syncretic environment that was the Mughal Empire. “Among [the Mughal Empire’s] many vices, there were surely some virtues too in a civilization that could produce such a man (like Mobad) and such a book nearly three hundred and fifty years ago.”<sup>24</sup>

Literary scholar Aditya Behl was also working on this text before he passed away in 2009. Behl provides a sophisticated study of the work that balances specific content analysis with broader historical contexts.<sup>25</sup> He writes that *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* differs from the Muslim encyclopedic tradition because Mobad undertakes new interviews and rereads the scriptural texts. Mobad then reframes his ethnographic observations and understanding vis-à-vis his own Zoroastrian sect’s cosmology and practices. Behl argues that the text is comparative, and there is a “tension between the

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22 Simon Digby, “Some Asian Wanderers in Seventeenth Century India: An Examination of Sources in Persian,” *Studies in History* 9 (1993): 247–64 at 255.

23 M. Athar Ali, “Pursuing an Elusive Seeker of Universal Truth: The Identity and Environment of the Author of the *Dabistan-i Mazahib*,” *Mughal India: Studies in Polity, Ideas, Society, and Culture* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 216–28.

24 Athar Ali, “Pursuing an Elusive Seeker,” 226.

25 Behl, “Pages from the Book of Religions,” 210–39.

ultimate validity of his own group's esoteric beliefs and the pluralist account of religions that he constructs."<sup>26</sup> According to Behl, Mobad uses his own community's beliefs as outlined in the very first chapter as the standard by which subsequent materials are arranged and judged. This classificatory strategy constructs a larger narrative "arc from similarity to incommensurable difference" ending with a final "undecidability between competing truth claims."<sup>27</sup> While I remain unconvinced that the larger organizing principle of the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* is a teleology of incommensurable difference between religious traditions of Mughal India, Behl highlights the difficulties Mobad faced in representing the indigenous "Other," including translating their metaphysical concepts, belief systems, and customs. However, by privileging a purely formalist reading of the text as artifact, Behl downplays the chronology of Mobad's travels, the nature of his ethnographic descriptions, and the hesitant certainty with which he writes. As quoted earlier, Mobad says that he writes without "lessening or diminishing anything, without hatred or jealousy and without corroborating or refuting." A closer analysis of one section on the Sikhs of the Punjab may reveal the possibilities and limits of reading into and around *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*, and draws our attention back to how the study of manuscript variation might allow us to work with such premodern texts in more precise ways.

### *The Nanak Panthis, or the Sikhs of the Punjab*

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS AND PRINT EDITIONS

Sections from the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* were first rendered into English by the lexicographer and translator Francis Gladwin in 1789.<sup>28</sup> Gladwin limited

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26 Behl, "Pages from the Book of Religions," 215.

27 Behl, "Pages from the Book of Religions," 222.

28 Francis Gladwin, "The Dabistan, or School of Manners," *New Asiatic Miscellany* 1–2 (1789): 86–136. For more on Gladwin, see Parvin Loloï, "Francis Gladwin," *Encyclopædia Iranica* 11 (2001): 9.

his translations to the first chapter on the Zoroastrian Parsi community. A German rendition of the same section by F. von Dalberg followed in 1809.<sup>29</sup> The Scottish orientalist John Leyden translated passages related to the Roshaniyas sometime in the first decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup> David Shea, Professor of Oriental Languages at Haileybury College in London, began a full translation of the text but died before he could complete it. Anthony Troyer completed the translation and published a three-volume set in 1843.<sup>31</sup> The literary scholar Sardar Umrao Singh Majithia published a translation of the Nanak Panthi section in *Khalsa Review* in 1930. I have not been able to access this essay; however, Ganda Singh says his own independent translation of the same passage nearly a decade later comes “dangerously near” Majithia’s.<sup>32</sup> Irfan Habib has also translated and commented on the Nanak Panthi section in a recent edited volume of Persian primary sources for writing Sikh history.<sup>33</sup> An early Gujarati translation by Mobed Fardunji Murzbanji was printed in Bombay in 1815, and a second edition was issued in 1845.<sup>34</sup> The significance of these translations is that they all rely on a later version of the manuscript, as discussed in the subsequent subsection.

As far as copies of *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* in Persian, various manuscripts are scattered throughout South Asia. An early copy dating to the author’s time is held at Ganjbaksh Library in Islamabad, but I have not been able to

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29 F. von Dalberg, *Scheik Mohammed Fani’s Dabistan oder von der Religion der ältesten Parsen* (Aschaffenburg, 1809).

30 Roshaniyas followed the teachings of Pashtun warrior-poet Sufi Bayazid Ansari (1525–1581/85). Ansari’s book *Khair al-Bayān* presents his philosophical teachings, which center around how to practice religious austerity without adhering to ritual protocol. See John Leyden, “On the Rosheniah Sect, and Its Founder Bayezid Ansari,” *Asiatic Researches* 11 (1812): 363–428.

31 David Shea and Anthony Troyer, eds., *The Dabistan, or School of Manners*, 3 vols. (Paris: Oriental Translation Fund, 1843).

32 Ganda Singh, “Nanak Panthis or the Sikh and Sikhism of the 17th Century: Translated from Muhsin Fani’s *Dabistan-i Mazahib*,” *Journal of Indian History* 19 (1930): 195–219.

33 Irfan Habib, “Sikhism and the Sikhs, 1645–46 from Mobad, *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*,” in *Sikh History from Persian Sources*, ed. J. S. Grewal and Irfan Habib (New Delhi: Tulika, 2001).

34 Athar Ali, “Pursuing an Elusive Seeker.”

access this.<sup>35</sup> M. Athar Ali and Irfan Habib have relied on at least three different manuscripts kept at the Aligarh Muslim University Library in their study of the text.<sup>36</sup> Several copies also exist at the British Library in London, and a single copy is held by Oxford University.<sup>37</sup> As far as printed copies of the Persian text, the first was issued in 1809 by Nazer Ushruf in Calcutta, followed by lithographs from Bombay in 1875 and Lucknow in 1877.<sup>38</sup> Drawing on these printed editions, Rezazada Malik issued a newly typeset version of the complete text in 1983.<sup>39</sup> This is now the standard primary source reference text for contemporary scholars. This is significant because Malik's reprint does not distinguish between the two versions of the source text that I discuss below.

## MANUSCRIPT VARIATION AND PROBLEMS FOR SOCIAL HISTORY

Currently, no critical edition of *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* based on the collation and study of all available early manuscripts exists. This has also prevented any sustained discussion of what manuscript variations of this text might imply, and it has also led to a range of historical assumptions and perspectives about its authorship, sources and credibility of information, and context of its

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35 Mojtabai, "Dābestān-e maḏāheb." The Ganjbaksh Library has three manuscript copies of the text with the following common era dates: 1809, 1846, and undated. It is possible that the undated manuscript is the early version that Mojtabai refers to. See S. Arif Naushahi, *Catalogue of Litho-Print and Rare Persian Books in Ganj Bakhsh Library, Islamabad*, 2 vols. (Islamabad: Iran-Pakistan Institute of Persian Studies, 1986).

36 Irfan Habib, "A Fragmentary Exploration of an Indian Text on Religions and Sects: Notes on the Earlier Version of the Dabistan-i Mazahib," *Indian History Congress* 61:474–91.

37 For the copies held at the British Library, see Charles Rieu, *Persian Manuscripts of the British Museum*, 3 vols. and supplement (London: Longmans, 1879–95). From this collection, I have consulted five bound manuscript copies dated 1792, 1797, 1812, 1819, and unknown. For the single copy at the Bodleian Library at Oxford, see Eduard Sachau and Hermann Ethe, *Catalogue of the Persian, Turkish, Hindustani, and Pushtu Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), 1037 [MS Ouseley Add. 140].

38 Nazer Ushruf and W. Butterworth Bayley, eds., *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* (Calcutta: 1809); Ibrahim b. Nur Muhammad, ed., *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* (Bombay: Dar al-Ḥukūmat, 1875); *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* (Lucknow: Naval Kishore Press, 1877).

39 Malik, *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*.

production. Extant views of who authored or compiled the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* are based on ambiguous information couched in the body of the text itself, scattered notes and writings in the margins, or in some cases, what scribes wrote in colophons. But, which text are we talking about? Not only do various manuscripts say different things about who may have authored the text, but we cannot always confirm which manuscripts were used as the source text for the English translations and analysis by each of our early commentators. Some of these manuscripts may no longer exist, and even if we are able to locate early versions of the text, we have no way of confirming if they were indeed the same ones used by the early scholars who made initial forays into the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*.

After carrying out a detailed comparison of the five manuscripts held at the library of the Aligarh Muslim University in India, the earliest one from 1762, Irfan Habib suggests that there are two versions of the text.<sup>40</sup> My own study of a recently discovered manuscript held at the Iran Culture House in New Delhi confirms this observation. Dating to 1650, this manuscript is the earliest known version of the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* that we have on record.<sup>41</sup> It is contemporaneous with and verifies our author as Mir Zulfiqar Ardestani Mobad. The scribe is listed as one Mohammad Sharif, and the colophon says it was completed on Tuesday, 4 October 1650, after its contents were verified by the author Zulfiqar Ardestani Mobad himself.

Therefore, when speaking of the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*, later manuscripts, and certainly all of the printed editions of the work in Persian right from the nineteenth-century lithographs to Malik's most recent typeset facsimile, carry a revised, somewhat abridged version of this earlier text. Even more significantly, the sole complete English translation by Shea and Troyer is also based on this later modified version of an earlier text. We should, therefore, delineate between two versions of the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*, an earlier Version A and a revised Version B. For a list of manuscripts consulted for this essay, see Table 1.

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40 Habib, "A Fragmentary Exploration."

41 *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*, by Mirza Zulfiqar Azar Sasani Mobad. Library of Noor Microfilm Center, Iran Culture House, New Delhi MS No. 51/1, Microfilm No. 140; dated 1650. A facsimile of the manuscript has been recently published by Karim Najafi Barzegar, *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* (New Delhi: Iran Culture House, 2010).

TABLE 1. Manuscripts consulted.

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**Aligarh Muslim University***Version A:*

Ashen Collection Farsiya 200/1, [1763]  
 Muneer Alam Collection, Box 2/Item 2, [1792]  
 MAO College Collection, Farsiya, Akhbar 8, [1829]

*Version B:*

Sir Sulaiman Collection 612/1, [date unknown, nineteenth century]  
 Shift Collection, Farsiya 128/96, [1821]

**British Library***Version B:*

MS Add. 16670, [1792]; MS Add. 16671, [1797]; MS Add. 25849, [1812];  
 MS Add. 7613, [1819]; MS Add. 23537 [unknown, nineteenth century]

**Iran Culture House, New Delhi***Version A:*

Noor Microfilm No. 140, Iran Culture House, [1650]

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There are two major differences between the versions. First, Version A contains passages that have been omitted in the revised edition, and second, while both works are divided into twelve chapters, some of the titles and the organization of the subchapters, or *nazars*, are different in Version B. For example, in the second chapter on the religious systems of the Hindus, Version A has fourteen nazars, including discrete ones on renunciants (Sanyasis), mendicants (Bairagis), enlightened ones (Gyanis), and the Sikhs (Nanak Panthis). In Version B, there are only twelve subsections, achieved by deleting a chapter on Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, and adding new chapters on Buddha Mimansa, Vedanta, and dialectics. The lone standing chapters in Version A on Sanyasis, Bairagis (including a discussion of Kabir, the famous fifteenth-century saint-poet), Gyanis, and Nanak Panthis have been subsumed under other headings, namely those on Yoga, Vaishnavites, Vedantas, and “On the various religious systems professed by the people of India,”

TABLE 2. Major differences between Version A and Version B.

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*Version A*

- Contains additional passages omitted in Version B
- Twelve chapters
- Chapter II on religious system of Hindus is divided into fourteen nazars or subsections
- Separate sections on Sanyasis, Bairagis, Gyanis, and the Nanak Panthis
- Additional passages with details on Mughal officials, names of early Sikhs, information about Jats, and other episodes (for example, the passage on Pratap Mal Chhada reproduced below)
- Last date mentioned in the text is 1649

*Version B*

- Somewhat abridged of Version A
  - Twelve chapters
  - Chapter II on religious system of Hindus is divided into twelve nazars
  - Section on Yoga Sutra of Patanjali deleted
  - New sections on Buddha Mimansa, Vedanta, and Tark (dialectics)
  - Section on Sanyasis subsumed under Yoga
  - Section on Bairagis subsumed under Vaishnavites
  - Section on Gyanis subsumed under Vedantas
  - Section on the Nanak Panthis subsumed under “On various religious systems professed by the people of India”
  - Last date mentioned in the text is 1652
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respectively. It is important to note that the last date of the author’s travel mentioned in Version A is 1649, whereas in Version B it is 1652. Table 2 summarizes the major differences between the two versions.

It is certainly worth exploring what the author thought was insignificant enough to excise from his initial book, and what the logic of his reorganization was. For starters, Version A contains a potentially embarrassing episode of a named Mughal official, which has been revised in Version B. This is of Ahsan Ullah Zafar Khan, son of Khwaja Abu al-Hasan Tarbati, who served as governor of Kashmir during the reign of Shah Jahan from 1633 to 1638.<sup>42</sup> He was involved in providing one Gosain Tirlochan, a Shaivite tantric, with

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<sup>42</sup> Shah Nawaz Khan, *Ma’asir-ul Umara or Biography of Nobles (1780)*, 2 vols., trans. H. Beveridge and Baini Prashad (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1941): 1014–20.

young slave prostitutes and courtesans. In Version A, Zafar Khan's wife became a devotee of Gosain Tirlochan and presumably had sexual relations with him. Moreover, Zafar Khan also requested the Gosain to spiritually assist and empower him in his efforts to conquer Tibet on behalf of the Mughal emperor. While Version B has a similar passage, it has been shortened to obscure his association with slave prostitutes and diminish the adulterous relationship that his wife might have shared with the Gosain.

*Version A*

Buzurg Khanum, the Daughter of Saif Khan, the wife [*zan*] of Ahsan Ullah titled Zafar Khan, son of Khwaja Abu al-Hasan Tarbati, became much involved with [*maqad*, connoting a sexual union] with the Gosain. Finally, Zafar Khan became close to the Gosain, and supplicated that he assist in attaining victory over the Tibetans.<sup>43</sup>

*Version B*

Ahsan Ullah, titled Zafar Khan, son of Khwaja Abu al-Hasan Tirmizi [*sic*], Governor of Kashmir, became acquainted with him through the confidants of his wife [*haram*] who shared a good relationship with the Gosain. He made the request that he might obtain victory of the Tibetans.<sup>44</sup>

Second, by subsuming Version A's standalone chapters on the Sanyasi, Bairagi, Gyanis, and Nanak Panthis as subsections of a single chapter on the various belief systems related to the Hindu religion in Version B, the author demonstrates that his endeavor was ongoing and incomplete. The classifying, ordering, and presenting of groups according to how similar they might be to

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43 Version A, Noor Microfilm No. 140, [1650], fol. 118b; Version A, Muneer Alam Collection, Aligarh Muslim Library, Box 2/Item 2, [1792], fol. 117a.

44 Malik, *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*, 1:169–70. For a more detailed analysis of Zafar Khan in both versions of the text using the eighteenth-century copies of Version A, see Irfan Habib, "A Fragmentary Exploration of an Indian Text on Religions and Sects: Notes on the Earlier Version of the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 61(2001): 474–91.

each other was subject to change as he learned new information. Third, Version A has greater details of interest about specific persons like Bidhai Chand, the thief whom guru Arjun had instructed to abstain from stealing but continued to do so at the expense of locals. Finally, Version A also contains specific names and occupations of some of the early Sikhs, and details of the Jat caste groups who began joining the entourage of the Sikh gurus. Version B has omitted entire passages, such as the episode of Pratap Mal Chhadha, which finds mention in Version A included in the manuscript held by the Iran Culture House.

Pratap Mal Chhadha: Chadda is a sub-caste of Khatri. He is a *gyānī*, that is ‘*ārif* [lit. ‘one who knows,’ referring to the highest grade to which a mystic can attain). Sialkot is his native place. He has served ‘*ārifs* possessed of perfection. He does not recognize the ties of any religion or law. He regards all religions to be paths leading to the Creator. He recognizes in every physical form a manifestation of the Beloved. Once, owing to some need, he became a follower of a man named Dwara, who is the deputy of a representative of Hargobind Nanakpanthi, and made himself out to be a disciple of his. Dwara washed his feet, and thereafter, the persons of that faith present drank of that water, since whenever they admit anyone to their own religion, they do likewise. But, finally some argument broke out between Pratap Mal and Dwara. Dwara said to Pratap Mal, “Yesterday I washed your feet, that is, I made you my disciple, and today you fight with me.” Pratap Mal said, “O fool, my foot is always washed by Jats like you, I never let my hands touch my feet.” The Jats are a lowly people in India, and Dwara was a Jat.<sup>45</sup>

It is possible that this passage might have been offensive to members of the Jat-Sikh community, especially the Sikh guru Har Rai (1630–1661), who served as our author Mobad’s ethnographic interlocutor and key informant

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45 Version A, Noor Microfilm No. 140, [1650], fol. 167b.

regarding the early history of the Sikh movement. Therefore, it was excised in the revised Version B of the text.

Finally, to illustrate how the two versions of the manuscript present slightly altered renditions of similar passages, I offer two examples below. The text from Version A has been sourced from the earliest manuscript from the Noor Microfilm Center of the Iran Culture House dated 1650, while the passages from Version B refer to Malik's 1983 Persian text.

Example 1:

*Version A*

And all that the Muslims ate, that was considered permissible and [he did not] prohibit it, except for the cow, and [just as Nānak] praised the Muslims, the *avatārs*, goddesses and gods of the astonishing Hindus were also venerated, but he regarded them all as cherished slaves of the omnipotent, and considered God to be incomparable [singular] and [he] denied the [possibility of] Descent [of God into human soul] or Union [between God and man]. They say, he held the Muslims' rosary in his hand and put sacred thread on his neck, and recited the formula of faith and offered *namāz* in the Muslim manner, and according to the faith of Hindus recited the *mantras* and *gayātrī* and offered ritualized *pūjā*.<sup>46</sup>

*Version B*

Just as Nanak praised the Muslims, he also praised the avatars, gods, and goddesses of the Hindus. However, he regarded all of them created, not the Creator nor [its] direct descendants nor in union with [the Creator]. They say he held the rosary of the Muslims and kept the thread around his neck.<sup>47</sup>

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46 Version A, Noor Microfilm No. 140, [1650], fol. 133b.

47 Malik, *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*, 1:198.

While the passages convey a similar message, Version A provides a more detailed representation of the first Sikh guru Nanak's manners and syncretic ways. It clearly states that he practiced ritual prayer in the Muslim manner (*namāz*) and offered recitations (*mantras* and *gayātrī*) and worship (*pūjā*) according to the habits of the Hindus. While both passages deploy Sufi technical terms for Descent (*ḥulūl*) and Union (*ittiḥād*), Version A is more precise in suggesting that those earthly reincarnations, goddesses, and gods are God's creation, and therefore, incomparable to God. Version B does not use the terms *namāz*, *mantras*, *gayātrī*, and *pūjā*, and is therefore less precise in conveying the ritual habits of Nanak. It is possible that the author wished to convey ambiguity and unorthodoxy in Nanak's ritualistic practice, and found it expedient to delete the reference to specific terms in Version B.

#### Example 2:

##### *Version A*

Thus some Sikhs of the *Gurū* pursue agriculture; some, the profession of merchants; and some, that of service. Everyone, each year, according to his own resources, puts together money and takes it, by way of his offering [*nazar*], to the *masnad*.<sup>48</sup> The *masnad* does not keep it for himself. But all else in that year they bring for the *masnad* [himself] [as offering] for his taking the offerings [*bhet*] to the *Gurū's* establishment [*sarkār*], the *masnad* keeps it for himself, in case he does not have any means of livelihood himself. But if he follows a business or profession, he never touches this offering also. He brings forth everything [collected by him] and takes it to the *Gurū*. In the month of Baisākh in the month February the *masnads* assemble at the court of the *Gurū*. At the time of departure, the *Gurū* confers a turban on each of the *masnads*.<sup>49</sup>

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48 *Masnad* literally means "seat" or "cushion," and refers to the position of the appointed Sikh leader who linked the local diocese with the larger resource harnessing apparatus of the Sikh Guru.

49 Version A, Noor Microfilm No. 140, [1650], fols. 142a, 142b.

*Version B*

Therefore, some of the Sikh Gurus pursue agriculture, some trade, and others service. Each of them brings every year according to his capacity money earned by them as a customary offering and sends it to the *masnad*. The *masnad* does not keep it for himself. Whatever else comes throughout the year for the *masnad* for the purposes of his sending [the offerings to the guru], this he keeps in his own possession only if the *masnad* does not have a livelihood. And if he has work or pursues a trade, by no means he touches these offerings. He takes forth everything to the Guru in the month of Baisakh when the great luminary [Sun] is in the sign of Taurus. The *masnads* gather at the door of the Guru and whomever wishes from the *Meli*, and is able to go along, comes to the Guru with the *masnad*. And at the time of taking leave the Guru honors each one of the *masnads* by bestowing a turban.<sup>50</sup>

In this passage, Version A confirms that the Sikh followers of the guru, and not the Sikh gurus themselves, pursue various professions like agriculture, trade, and service. This is significant because it clarifies how income to support the growing Sikh community was harnessed by the Sikh gurus. In relying on Version B of the manuscript, even Shea and Troyer perpetuate the idea that the Sikh gurus pursued various trades in their widely cited English translation of the text.

The fact that numerous copies of the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* survive attests to the validity of the author's endeavor, and its resonance with readers across the centuries. As such, manuscript variation is not simply about collecting, collating, and analyzing different versions of the same text, but by drawing our attention toward its diachronic production and consumption seriously, we can highlight aspects of how intellectual thought and historical data are critically transmitted and received. In the context of researching and writing social histories of specific communities, attention to manuscript variation might form one way to evaluate the particularities of past practice. One

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<sup>50</sup> Malik, *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*, 1:206.

of the major issues that comes up when trying to understand manuscript variation is how the practice of transcribing can itself alter meaning. What is precisely gained and lost when new renditions are assumed to be equivalent to the original? By beginning an initial foray into the two prominent versions of *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*, this article has suggested that multiple copies of a manuscript not only allow us to resolve questions of ambiguity, but also invite us to explore why certain passages have been added, omitted, or modified, and how this might precondition interpretive possibilities going forward.

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