Aziz Ahmad, "Epic and Court: Epic in Medieval India"

India's Islamic Traditions, 711-1750

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Eleanor Zelliot’s essay shifts the level of analysis from the macro to the most micro level possible—a contemporary, though hypothetical, dialogue between a single Hindu and a single Muslim over issues that are squarely religious in nature. Composed in the sixteenth century by the Marathi bhakti poet Ekhnath, the kind of text here translated and discussed by Zelliot is perhaps unique in the entire corpus of Indian literature. At once witty, profound, comic, and poignant, this short drama-poem, while having its own message and agenda, provides a rare glimpse into how unlettered villagers could have experienced religious alterity. Moreover, it is unlikely that Ekhnath could have imagined the dialogue, or that his village audience could have understood it, had not Indo-Muslim culture and society already attained a familiar presence in rural Maharashtra.

By the 1990s many scholars of pre-colonial India, seeking to move beyond normative visions of either Islamic or Hindu society as reflected in the mass of Arabo-Persian or Sanskrit textual materials, turned to sources that were less self-consciously prescriptive in nature, such as vernacular literature and architecture, numismatics, or epigraphy. Representing this tendency is Cynthia Talbot’s 1995 study of Telugu inscriptions produced in Andhra between the fourteenth and seventeenth century. Talbot concludes that non-Muslim representations of Muslims in this region were not only historically constructed, but constantly in flux. Thus, for example, when upstart Telugu warriors attempted to mobilize support for their fledgling kingdoms in times of political instability, they typically drew upon ancient tropes in order to demonize ‘Turks’ as barbarians. In times of political stability, on the other hand, non-Muslims of Andhra not only respected these same ‘Turks’ as legitimate and powerful rulers, but rhetorically assimilated them as a natural part of India’s cultural landscape.

1

Epic and Counter-Epic in Medieval India

Aziz Ahmad

Muslim impact and rule in India generated two literary growths: a Muslim epic of conquest, and a Hindu epic of resistance and of psychological rejection. The two literary growths were planted in two different cultures; in two different languages, Persian and Hindi; in two mutually exclusive religious, cultural and historical attitudes, each confronting the other in aggressive hostility. Each of these two literary growths developed in mutual ignorance of the other; and with the rare exception of eclectic intellectuals like Abu’l-fazl in the sixteenth century, or the seventeenth century Urdu poets of the southern courts of Bijapur and Golkonda, their readership hardly ever converged. The Muslim and the Hindu epics of medieval India can therefore hardly be described as ‘epic’ and ‘counter-epic’ in the context of a direct relationship of challenge and response. Yet one of them was rooted in the challenge asserting the glory of Muslim presence, and the other in the response repudiating it. In this sense one may perhaps use the term ‘counter-epic’ for the Hindi heroic poetry of medieval India as I have done. Also, the contrast between these two literary growths is not confined to what is classified in Western literatures as full-blown epic, but to the epic material in general.

MUSLIM EPIC OF CONQUEST

The Muslim epic of the conquest of India grew out of the qaṣīdas (panegyrics) written on the occasions of Indian campaigns by the Ghazanavid poets at Ghazna and Lahore, and later by the poets of

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the sultanate like Nāṣīr and Sangrīza in Delhi. Amir Khusrau’s Miftaḥ al-futūḥ1 is the first war-epic (raṣmīya) written in Muslim India. It celebrates four victories of Jalāl al-Dīn Khāljī (1250–6), two of them against Hindu rājas, one against the Mongols and one against a rebel Muslim governor.

The next historical narrative of Amir Khusrau, Khazā‘īn al-futūḥ,2 was written in prose, but the epic style and formulae were retained as well as the thematic emphasis on the glorification of the Turk against the Hindu. The concentration is on style in the tradition of Hasan Nizāmī’s Tāj al-ma‘āṣir rather than on history,3 and the stylist’s effort to make use of the enantiomy of prose composition Khusrau had recommended in his treatise on rhetoric, I‘jāz-i Khusrawi,4 is manifest throughout the work as a continuous rour de force, unfolding itself in extended images, parallelisms, stylistic deductions, conceits and analogies. For instance:

... the Rāi became hot at their words and thus disclosed the fire that burnt in his breast: ‘Our old and respectable fire-worshipers, the lamps of whose minds burn bright, have said clearly that never can the Hindu stay before the Turk, or fire before water.’

In the Khazā‘īn al-futūḥ, the glorification of the Khāljī conquest of the Deccan excites in irrepressible bravoado of iconoclast:

There were many capitals of the dervs (meaning Hindu gods or demons) where Sunnism had prospered from the earliest times, and where far from the pale of Islam, the Devil in the course of ages had hitched his eggs and made his worship compulsory on the followers of the idols; but now with a sincere motive the Emperor removed these symbols of infidelity ... to dispel the contamination of false belief from those places through the muezzin’s call and the establishment of prayers.6

Read as epic all this makes sense as a historical attitude rather than as history. Historically, as the English translator of the epic points out, the Deccan expeditions had no clear object—the acquisition of horses, elephants, jewels, gold, and silver .... Of course the name of God was solemnly pronounced. The invaders built mosques wherever they went .... This was their habit. Of anything like an idealistic, even a fanatical religious mission, the Deccan invasions were completely innocent.7

And yet as an unconscious rival of the Hammir epic, the Khazā‘īn al-futūḥ offers some interesting parallelisms. It boasts, perhaps as unhistorically as the Hammir cycle, of the massacre of thirty thousand Hindus at Chitor,8 and describes the self-destruction of Rajput warriors and self-immolation of Hindu women with a gesture of heroic contempt: ‘Everyone threw himself, with his wife and children, upon the flames and departed to hell.’9

Amir Khusrau’s next epic ʿAshīqa10 was courtly (bazzīya) in theme, relating the romantic story of the love of ʿAla’ al-Dīn Khāljī’s son Khizr Khan for the Hindu princess of Gujarāt, Dewal Rani, setting the pattern for a recognized type of Indian Muslim love story in which the hero is invariably a Muslim and the heroine a Hindu, asserting the conqueror’s right not only to love but to be loved, in an attitude of romantic bravado which was antithetical to the more hysterical sexual jealousy in the medieval Hindu legend. The atmosphere and sensuous reactions in this beautiful epic of Khusrau are indigenous, quite unlike the imagic atmosphere and sensuous appraisal in the Persian ghazal written in India; but the glorification of India is there as a consequence of the Muslim supremacy. ‘Happy Hindustan, the splendour of Religion, where the (Muslim holy) Law finds perfect honour and security ... The strong men of Hind have been trodden under foot and are ready to pay tribute. Islam is triumphant and idolatry is subdued’.11

Amir Khusrau’s Nub Siphr,12 combining stylistic variations and elements of the war epic and the court epic, was a command performance, written to celebrate the victories of Qutb al-Din Mubarak Khāljī and his general Khusrau Khan in the Deccan, before the latter murdered his master and turned apostate in 1320. The thematic emphasis is again on the Turk’s destiny as conqueror who is decreed to hold the Hindu in subjugation, though the commander of the Turkish army in this case was a convert from Hinduism.

Amir Khusrau’s last epic narrative, Tuğluq Nāma, had a real epic scope—the re-establishment of Muslim power in India by his hero Ghīyath al-Dīn Tuğluq, and the defeat he inflicted on the apostate Khusra Khan. But though the poem is full of religio-political fervour, it lacks in epic magnitude. Amir Khusrau, now old and failing in genius, concentrates on the historical narrative and the equation of incident with image, but the opportunities of heroic emphasis are missed.

ʿIsa‘ī’s Futiḥ al-salāṭīn is directly in the tradition of Amir Khusrau, though it claims inspiration from Nizāmī and Firdausī.13 Its heroic emphasis is traditional, glorifying the role of Mahmuḍ of Ghazna who made the Muslim conquest of India possible.14 It emphasizes throughout the epical superiority of the Turk over the Hindu.15 Essentially a historical narrative, told as a raṣmīya (war epic), it hardly ever misses a chance to weave in the bazzīya (court epic) elements of romance, such as the fanciful account of a Rajput princess’s representation to Muhammad bin Sam Ghuri,16 or the famous love story of Khizr Khan and Dewal Rani.17

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Versified history, with epic elements fading out, continued to be written in Muslim India until the middle of the seventeenth century, Azuri,
a poet who had earlier been connected with the court of Shah Rukh in Central Asia, took service under Ahmad Shah Bahmani (1422–36) and composed the Bahman Nama, a history of the Bahmanids in verse. The last considerable effort in this genre was Muhammad Jan Qudsí’s verse rendering of the Bâdshâh Nama of Lahori during the reign of Shah Jahan.

The motif of a war waged to protect or avenge the honour of Muslim women, similar to the motif ‘rape of Helen’ in Greek epic and historiography, originally an epic theme, lends itself again and again to Muslim historiography in India. The official casus belli in the case of Hajja bint Yusufl’s expedition against Sind (in 711 AD) reads in al-Baladhuri very much like the first few pages of Herodotus; the expedition was claimed to have been in response to the appeal of Muslim women captured by the pirates of Debal, and since their release could not be obtained by negotiation, it was accomplished by war and conquest. One of the expeditions of Sultan Bahadur of Gujarat (1526–37) against a Hindu chief was to avenge the dishonour of two hundred and fifty Muslim women whom he had captured. Sher Shah Suri’s expedition against Puran Mal, the Raja of Raisin, was undertaken on the complaint of some Muslim women: ‘he has slain our husbands, and our daughters he has enslaved and made dancing girls of them.’ Puran Mal was defeated and slain and his daughter was given away by Sher Shah to some wandering minstrels who might make her dance in the bazaars.

Outside the epic proper, the impressions of Central Asian Muslims freshly arrived in India and recorded by them in historical or autobiographical writing have something of that interesting raw material of antagonism, in which epic generally draws. Kamal al-Din ‘Abd al-Razzaq, the ambassador of Shah Rukh to the Hindu courts of the Deccan, regarded the Hindus at first sight as a curious tribe ‘neither men nor demon’, nightmareish in appearance, almost naked, incomprehensibly patriarchal and, of course, idolatrous. It was only after he had lived for some time in the highly cultured atmosphere of Vijayanagara that he discovered the beauty and the symmetry of Hindu civilization and paid it glowing tribute. More familiar is the damming tribute of Babur:

Hindustan is a country that has few pleasures to recommend it. The people are not handsome. They have no idea of the charms of friendly society, of friendly mixing together, or of familiar intercourse. They have no genius, no comprehension of mind, no politeness of manners, no kindness or fellow-feeling, no ingenuity or mechanical invention in planning or executing their handicraft works, no skill or knowledge in design or architecture; they have no horses, no good flesh, no grapes or

musk-melons, no good fruits, no ice or cold water, no good food or bread in their bazaars, no baths or colleges, no candies, no torches, not a candlestick.

HINDU EPIC OF RESISTANCE

The main intellectual resistance to the Muslim power did not come from the Brahmins. In the beginning they believed in Medhatith’s thesis: ‘Aryavarta was so called because the Aryans sprang up in it again and again. Even if it was over run by the mlechchas, they could never abide there for long.’ The faith in this thesis dwindled as the Muslim power came to be more and more firmly entrenched in the subcontinent. ‘With the Yaminis, the successors of Mahmud,’ continues K.M. Munshi, ‘firmly established in the Punjab, the Aryavarta-consciousness lost whatever significance it had. The belief that Chaturvarnya was a divinely appointed universal order, characteristic of the land, was shaken; for now a ruling race in the country not only stood outside it, but held it in contempt and sought its destruction.’ Hindu reformers passed over the question of Muslim domination in silence as the fruit of karma without making suggestions for its overthrow.

The literary reaction that echoed the psychology of Hindu resistance and reaction was popular rather than learned. It was mainly represented by the bardic tradition of Rajputana and in such works as Prithvi Raja Rasa, the epics of the Hamirra cycle, and the history of Bundelkhand composed by Lal in the seventeenth century. This bardic literature embodies tales of Rajput struggle against the Muslims as well as internece chivalric warfare among the Rajputs themselves, as specifically treated in the Aha Khand.

Of these the Prithvi Raja Rasa is attributed to the authorship of Chand Bardi, Prithvi Raj’s minister and poet-laureate, who is reported to have died fighting against the Muslim invaders in 1193. It might be assumed that the nucleus of the poem was composed soon after the events it narrates, but additions, interpolations, and polishing continued until well into the seventeenth century, as the epic has about ten per cent Persian vocabulary and mentions the use of artillery. As such this anti-Muslim epic-content goes far beyond the tragic situation of a single historical event, and weaves around it an accumulated arena of heroic resistance spreading over several centuries. It anachronistically telescopes within the time and space of Ghurid invasions the eponymous representatives of later ethnic groups of Muslim invaders, as the names of Muslim generals in the epic like Tatar Khan, Khan Mongol Lilar, Khan Khurasani Babbar,
a poet who had earlier been connected with the court of Shah Rukh in Central Asia, took service under Ahmad Shah Bahmani (1422–36) and composed the Bahman Nama, a history of the Bahamanids in verse. The last considerable effort in this genre was Muhammad Jan Qudsi’s verse rendering of the Badshah Nama of Lohuri during the reign of Shah Jahan.18

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Uzbek Khan and Khidai (Khalji? Ghilzai?) suggest. The poem abounds in
heroic similes of considerable emotion and sensitiveness:

The warriors in columns are like a line of devotees of the Yoga... Abandoning
error, illusion, passion, they run upon the gleaming edge (of the sword)
as to a place of pilgrimage.38

As the infidels with a rush greedily fall (upon the Hindus) they resemble
pigeons, which, turning a circuit settle down.29

The Hindus, catching the mlechhas by their hands, whirl them round,
just as Bhima did to the elephants; (but) the comparison does not do justice
to the fight.30

Another epic of the Prithvi Raj cycle is Prithviraja Vijaya, probably
composed by the Kashmiri Jayanaka between 1178 and 1200.31 The poem
accuses Muslims of confiscating charity lands and oppressing Brahmins.
The Turushka (Turkish) women are condemned for bathing in the sacred
lake while in their menses.32 The epic seems to confuse Mahmud of
Ghazna's invasion of Gujarat with the Gurid invasion of Ajmer. The
victory of a Hindu hero, Anoraja, is celebrated—a hero who compelled
the defeated Turks to retreat, who in their plight in the desert had to
drink the blood of their horses to survive,33—obviously an exaggerated echo
of the plight of Mahmud's army in the desert of Sind after his sack of
Somnath. Equally confused in historical perspective is the joyful news of
the defeat of Ghuri at the hands of the 'Raja of Gujarat',34 while Prithvi
Raj was planning to destroy Ghuri and the mlechhas, 'the fiends in
the shape of men'.

The unhistorical epic legend35 of Raja Hammir Dev's (c. 1300) gallant
fight against 'Ala-Din Khalji, and his heroic death, was celebrated in
bardic literature of several Indian languages.36 Chief among these are
Hammir Rāy, and Hammir Kāvyā by Sarang Dhar, a bard of the mid-
fourteenth century.

In the middle of the fifteenth century, Nayachandra Suri rewrote this
legend in his Hammir Mahākaviya. Although a Jain, he invoked the
blessings of Hindu gods on this epic, because of its Hindu chivalric theme
and because of its anti-Muslim content.37 The epic weaves in the heroic
history of the Chauhans from Prithvi Raj to Hammira, and has a section of
Prithvi Raj's exploits. Rajput rajas gather in gloom round Prithvi Raj to tell
him of Ghuri, who is accused of burning Hindu cities and defiling Hindu
women, and who is said to have been sent to this earth 'for the extirpation
of warrior caste'.38 Then follows the legend of Prithvi Raj taking
Muhammad bin Sam Ghuri a prisoner in Multan, presumably after his
victory at Tara'in, and later setting him free. Unable to defeat Prithvi Raj
in open battle, the Ghuri invader has recourse to a ruse; he sends some
Muslim minstrels in disguise in the Rajput army, who enchant the Rajput
hero's horse Natyaramba with their music, and Prithvi Raj is himself so
enthralled with the dancing of his horse that he forgets to fight and is taken
prisoner by the Muslims.39

Another anti-Muslim hero in Nayachandra Suri's epic is Viranarayana,
who turns down Jalaal al-Din Khalji's offer of alliance—alliance with the
mlechhas would have been disgraceful betrayal of Rajput chivalry—as
also does Vaghbata, who seizes the throne of Malwa, and whose son Jaitra
Singh has a beautiful queen Hiru Devi, who is at times 'possessed with
a desire to bathe herself in the blood of Muslims' during her pregnancy,
'a desire which was often gratified by her husband'.40 The child she gave

birth to was the last great hero of the Rajput epic, Hammira.

The Hammira epic narrates the legendary story of 'Ala al-Din Khalji's
expeditions against Hammira, the Raja of Ranthambore, who had ceased
to pay tribute to the Muslim sultan. Bhoja, a formerly vanquished foe of
Hammira, takes refuge in 'Ala al-Din's court. The first Khalji expedition
led by the sultan's brother, Ulugh Khan, wins an inconclusive victory
because of the treachery of a Rajput noble. The second is defeated by the
Rajputs, who also capture some Muslim women who are forced 'to sell
buttermilk in every town they pass through'.41 Significantly, the Mongols
are in alliance with Hammira against the Khalji sultan, though Hindu
chiefs all over India ally themselves with him against Hammira.42 'Ala
al-Din offers three alternative terms of peace to Hammira: to resume
paying tribute, or to hand over the four Mongol chiefs who had taken
refuge with him, or to give his daughter to 'Ala al-Din in marriage. As
Hammira rejects all the three alternatives, 'Ala al-Din personally undertakes
the siege of Ranthambore. One of 'Ala al-Din's (Hindu) archers kills by
an arrow a Hindu courtesan, Radha Devi, who is defiantly dancing on
the wall of the fort, but Hammira gallantly forbids his archers to shoot at 'Ala
al-Din when they have a chance. Finally 'Ala al-Din wins over Hammira's
minister, Ratapala, by permitting him to seduce his younger sister—
humiliation of Muslim women being a recurring theme in the Hammira
cycle of epics. Ratapala as well as Hammira's wife urges bestowing the
hand of Hammira's daughter on 'Ala al-Din to put an end to the hostilities,
and the girl herself requests her father to 'cast her away like a piece of
broken glass,' but Hammira's regards giving his daughter away to an
unclean mlechcha 'as loathsome as prolonging existence by living on
his own flesh.' Hammira's womenfolk, including his daughter, throw
themselves into flames to escape dishonour at the hands of the Muslims,
and Hammira himself performing jāhar throws himself on the Muslim
army, but 'disdaining to fall with anything like life into the enemy's
Uzbek Khan and Khildai (Khaliqi? Ghilzai?) suggest. The poem abounds in heroic similes of considerable emotion and sensitiveness:

The warriors in columns are like a line of devotees of the Yoga... Abandoning error, illusion, passion, they run upon the gleaming edge (of the sword) as to a place of pilgrimage. 28

As the infidels with a rush greedily fall (upon the Hindus) they resemble pigeons, which, turning a circuit settle down. 29

The Hindus, catching the mlechchas by their havers, whirled them round, just as Bliima did to the elephants; but the comparison does not do justice (to the fight). 30

Another epic of the Prithvi Raj cycle is Prithviśrīla Vijaya, probably, composed by the Kashmiri Jayanaka between 1178 and 1200.31 The poem accuses Muslims of confiscating charity lands and oppressing Brahmans. The Turushka (Turkish) women are condemned for bathing in the sacred lake while in their menses.32 The epic seems to confuse Mahmud of Ghazna’s invasion of Gujarat with the Ghurid invasion of Ajmer. The victory of a Hindu hero, Anorāja, is celebrated—a hero who compelled the defeated Turks to retreat, who in their plight in the desert had to drink the blood of their horses to survive,—obviously an exaggerated echo of the plight of Mahmud’s army in the desert of Sind after his sack of Somnath. Equally confused in historical perspective is the joyful news of the defeat of Ghuri at the hands of the ‘Raja of Gujarat,’33 while Prithvi Raj was planning to destroy Ghuri and the mlechchas, ‘the fiends in the shape of men’.

The unhistorical epic legend35 of Raja Hammir Dev’s (c. 1300) gallant fight against ‘Ala al-Din Khalji, and his heroic death, was celebrated in bardic literature of several Indian languages.36 Chief among these are Hammir Rāya, and Hammir Kāvyā by Sarang Dhar, a bard of the mid-fourteenth century.

In the middle of the fifteenth century, Nayachandra Suri rewrote this legend in his Hammir Mahākāvīya. Although a Jain, he invoked the blessings of Hindu gods on this epic, because of its Hindu chivalric theme and because of its anti-Muslim content.37 The epic weaves in the heroic history of the Chauhans from Prithvi Raj to Hammir, and has a section of Prithvi Raj’s exploits. Rajput rajas gather in gloom round Prithvi Raj to tell him of Ghuri, who is accused of burning Hindu cities and defiling Hindu women, and who is said to have been sent to this earth ‘for the expirition of warrior caste.’38 Then follows the legend of Prithvi Raj taking Muhummad bin Sam Ghuri a prisoner in Multan, presumably after his victory at Tara’in, and later setting him free. Unable to defeat Prithvi Raj in open battle, the Ghuri invader has recourse to a ruse; he sends some Muslim minstrels in disguise in the Rajput army, who enchant the Rajput hero’s horse Natyarambhha with their music, and Prithvi Raj is himself so enthralled with the dancing of his horse that he forgets to fight and is taken prisoner by the Muslims.39

Another anti-Muslim hero in Nayachandra Suri’s epic is Viranārāyaṇa, who turns down Jalal al-Din Khalji’s offer of alliance—alliance with the mlechchas would have been disgraceful betrayal of Rajput chivalry—as also does Vagbhata, who seizes the throne of Malwa, and whose son Jittra Singh has a beautiful queen Hira Devi, who is at times ‘possessed with a desire to bathe herself in the blood of Muslims’ during her pregnancy, ‘a desire which was often gratified by her husband.’40 The child she gave birth to was the last great hero of the Rajput epic, Hammir.

The Hammir epic narrates the legendary story of ‘Ala al-Din Khalji’s expeditions against Hammir, the Raja of Ranthambore, who had ceased to pay tribute to the Muslim sultan. Bhoja, a formerly vanished foe of Hammir, takes refuge in ‘Ala al-Din’s court. The first Khalji expedition led by the sultan’s brother, Ulugh Khan, wins an inconclusive victory because of the treachery of a Rajput noble. The second is defeated by the Rajputs, who also capture some Muslim women who are forced to sell buttermilk in every town they pass through.41 Significantly, the Mongols are in alliance with Hammir against the Khalji sultan, though Hindu chiefs all over India ally themselves with him against Hammir.42 Ala al-Din offers three alternative terms of peace to Hammir: to resume paying tribute, or to hand over the four Mongol chiefs who had taken refuge with him, or to give his daughter to ‘Ala al-Din in marriage. As Hammir rejects all the three alternatives, ‘Ala al-Din personally undertakes the siege of Ranthambore. One of ‘Ala al-Din’s (Hindu) archers kills by an arrow a Hindu courtier, Radha Devi, who is defiantly dancing on the wall of the fort, but Hammir gallantly forbids his archers to shoot at ‘Ala al-Din when they have a chance. Finally ‘Ala al-Din wins over Hammir’s minister, Ratipala, by permitting him to seduce his younger sister—humiliation of Muslim women being a recurring theme in the Hammir cycle of epics. Ratipala as well as Hammir’s wife urge bestowing the hand of Hammir’s daughter on ‘Ala al-Din to put an end to the hostilities, and the girl herself requests her father to ‘cast her away like a piece of broken glass,’ but Hammir’s regards giving his daughter away to an unclean mlechcha ‘as loathsome as prolonging existence by living on his own flesh.’ Hammir’s womenfolk, including his daughter, throw themselves into flames to escape dishonour at the hands of the Muslims, and Hammir himself performing jīhar throws himself on the Muslim army, but ‘disdaining to fall with anything like life into the enemy’s
hands, he severed, with one last effort, his head from his body with his own hands."43

Neither this,44 nor other legends about Hammira have any sound historical foundation. Another equally fantastic Rajput heroic legend describes Muhammad bin Tughluq’s defeat and imprisonment at the hands of Hammira.45

On the other hand, the Rajput epic of internecine chivalry is generally neutral to the Muslims. An outstanding instance of this genre is Alī Khand,46 which belongs to the other Prithvi Raj cycle of Qannuj and Mahoba, and celebrates in Bundeli Hindi the exploits of Alī and Uden, heroes of Mahoba. Muslim characters in this epic are merely decorative. Prithvi Raj is confused with the Badshah in Delhi. Though the central theme of the epic, the rivalry between Prithvi Raj and Jay Chand, is based on a twelfth-century legend, additions seem to have been made by the reciting bards until as late as the middle of the eighteenth century, for there is a reference to the incursions of (Ahmad Shah) Durrani.47 Towards Muslims the epic occasionally shows an attitude of reconciliation, which had its historical basis in the assimilation of Rajput chivalry in the composite machinery of the Mughal empire by Akbar.

The ninth century Khumān Raysa was recast in the sixteenth century, devoting a large section to ‘Ala-al-Dīn Khaljī’s sack of Chitor.48 This and the Hammira cycle are the closest parallels and probably relative sources of Mālik Muhammad Jāisī’s Padmāvat (1540). The case of Jaisi in the history of the anti-Muslim Hindu epic is a remarkable one. Himself a practising Muslim, saturated in the slightly heterodox rural version of the Chishti Sufi order as represented by his opium-eating preceptor Shah Mubarak Bodle, Jaisi seems to have had some familiarity with the Vedanta, though much less with the Puranas; shows strong influences of Kabir, and an interest, extraordinary even for a Muslim living among the Hindus in a village like Amethi, in Hindu lore.49 His patron Jagat Dev was a Hindu ally of Sher Shah Suri. Among his friends was a Hindu musician, Gandharv Raj, and he had studied Sanskrit grammar and rhetoric under Hindu pandits.50 Under all these influences and away from the Muslim-oriented atmosphere of cities, where the Muslim elite was developing an insular anti-Hindu literature, Jaisi accepted in all simplicity, at a non-sectarian level, the bardic legends of Rajput heroism against ‘Ala-al-Dīn at their face value, and moulded his Ratan Sen on Hammira.

The story of Jaisi’s Padmāvat falls in two parts. The first deals with the love-quest of Ratan Sen for Padmīni (Padmavati), the princess of Ceylon, inspired by the pandering wisdom of Hiranmin the parrot (allegorically the wise preceptor, the Hindu ‘gurū,’ the Sufi ‘pir’), and

with the adventures that befall the hero on his return journey to his capital, Chitor. This part of the story is straightforward romance, without any epic element; and the legend of the wise parrot was popular in the oral tradition of Avadī,51 as well as in Sanskrit anti-feminist literary history. This early part borrows elements from such earlier versions as Udayana’s Padmavatī and the Rāmāvata.52

The second part of Jaisi’s poem assumes the form of an epic with an allegorical clue. Raghu Chitan Pandit (the devil), a minister of the court of Ratan Sen (epically sublimated Hammira, allegorically the human mind or soul) disgraced by his master for sorcery, tempts ‘Ala-al-Dīn (epically counter-hero, allegorically māya, majūz, unreal of the Sufis, illusion) with jewelled bracelet (symbol) and description of the beauty of Padmavati (epically the Hindu heroine personifying honour, allegorically ‘intelligence’ or firāsat, regarded as a supreme merit for a monarch and his courtiers in Muslim political philosophy). ‘Ala-al-Dīn demands that Ratan Sen surrender Padmavati, and when the hero refuses indignantly, the counter-hero besieges the fort of Chitor (allegorically human body). Then, because of the Mongol pressure (an element also borrowed from the Hammira cycle), Ratan Sen (mind) negotiates for truce, and against the advice of his trusted generals Badal and Gora (heroic ‘twin’ as Alī and Uden in Alī Khand), he entreats ‘Ala-al-Dīn (illusion), who sees the reflection of Padmavati (intelligence) in a mirror, falls in love with her, and takes Ratan Sen prisoner by a treacherous ruse. Gora and Badal enter the imperial fort of Delhi by a counter-ruse (which is a parallel to the ‘Trojan horse’ motif) and rescue Ratan Sen (mind), who returns to Chitor and fights against Deopal (character and episode of unestablished allegorical significance, borrowed from the cycles of Rajput internecine chivalry), who had insulted Padmavati in his absence. Ratan Sen kills Deopal but himself receives a mortal wound. His (mind’s) two consorts, Padmavati (intelligence) and Nagmāti (world sphere), burn themselves to ashes on his funeral pyre. ‘Ala-al-Dīn (illusion) arrives and storms Chitor (body), only to find Padmavati (intelligence) reduced to ashes with Ratan Sen (the mind). This allegorical epic of Rajput chivalry, written by a Muslim, ends with an anti-Islamic finale: ‘and Chitor became Islam.’

As the author is a Muslim, the array and might of the Turks is not belittled, though his sympathy lies with the Rajputs. He makes an open reference to Hammira,53 sees in the Rajput struggle something of the epic grandeur of Mūhābhārata,54 and quotes without contradiction Gora and Badal’s version of the inherent treachery of the Turks.55 Much more remarkable is his complete self-identification with the sense of tragic intent in a Rajput epic-theme, and its view of his own culture and religion:
hands, he severed, with one last effort, his head from his body with his own hands.\(^4^3\) 

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for the outwardly simple phrase ‘Chitor became Islam’ signifies, in its allegorical equation, the unsubstantial victory of illusion.

Historically, the story of ‘Ala al-Din Khilji’s love and pursuit of Padmavati is not related by any Muslim historian before Abu’l-fazl, who has borrowed it from Jaiśī or from other cognate Rajput legends. None of the historians of the sultanate mentions it, not even Isami, who hardly ever misses a chance to introduce romantic material, or Khusraw, who might have found in the story a theme more interesting than that of Khizr Khan’s love for Dewali Rani.

An examination of the historical material of Jaiśī’s allegorical epic yields interesting results. Ratan Sen (1527–62), the Rana of Chitor, was a contemporary of ‘Ala al-Din Khilji, but of Jaiśī himself and of Sher Shah Suri. The ruse of warriors entering an enemy fort in women’s palanquins, though a motif paralleled in epic and romance, had also some historical basis as it was used by Sher Shah to capture the fort of Rohtas. In 1531, nine-years before the composition of Padmāvat, a case of mass satī by Rajput noblewomen had occurred in a Rajput fort sacked by Sultan Bahadur of Gujarat to avenge the disorganisation of two hundred and fifty Muslim women held captive in that fort. There might have been a conscious or unconscious confounding in Jaiśī’s mind of ‘Ala al-Din Khilji with Ghiyath al-Din Khilji of Malwa (1469–1500), who had a roving eye and is reported to have undertaken the quest of Padmānī, not a particular Rajput princess, but the ideal type of woman according to Hindu erotology. Ghiyath al-Din Khilji, according to a Hindu inscription in the Udaipur area, was defeated in battle in 1488 by a Rajput chief named Badal-Gora, multiplied by Jaiśī into twins. It therefore seems that Jaiśī, or possibly the transmitters through whom the changed version of the Hammira legend reached him, incorporated several near-contemporary historical or quasi-historical episodes in the original legend. Jaiśī himself confesses at the end: ‘I have made up the story and related it.’

In Jaiśī’s legend ‘Ala al-Din Khilji, the archrival, is not exactly the villain of the piece; his imperial title is acknowledged, and though his unchaste love for Padmavati is condemned, much of the Muslim tradition favourable to him has been woven in and he is complimented as a righteous and noble sultan. On the whole, the allegory is loose and the epic strain second-hand and subordinated to the didactic. Jaiśī’s real intention seems to be to tell a good story that would appeal to his fellow-villagers, the large majority of whom were Hindus.

Long before the composition of Padmāvat by a Muslim, the Hindu secondary epic occasionally adjusted itself to eclecticism, as in the case of Vidyapati Thakur’s Purusha Puriksha, which tells of Hindu rajas coming to the aid of Muhammad bin Tughluq against a fellow-Hindu raja and kafir. The idealization of Hindu women who preferred death to the embraces, conjugal or otherwise, of Muslims passed on from Rajput epic to popular song in other areas such as Bihār. Sexual hostility produced curious juxtapositions on the popular Hindu mind such as the one describing Akbar as the illegitimate son of the Hindu poet, Niharī Sahay, who was given, according to the legend, Choli Begum (The Lady Brassiere), a (non-existent) wife of Humayun, as a gift by Sher Shah. Anti-Muslim secondary epic burst into boiling fury in Maharashtra, after Aurangzeb’s reversal of Akbar’s tolerant policies, espeially in the Granthāvalī of Kavi Bhushan, whose idealization of Shivaji as a hero has little in common with the tragic heroism of Rajput epic and is much more intensely religious. It formulates the epic of revival, not resistance: ‘The Muslims have destroyed all our temples; they are hoisting ‘Ali’s (Allāh’s?) flag everywhere; rajas have fled; everywhere one sees (Muslim) pīrs (saints), and pīyāhāms (prophets), nowhere Hindu sants and sādhus; Kashi has lost its splendor and there are mosques in Mathura. If there were not Shivaji everyone would have been circumcised. According to Kavi Bhushan, Aurangzeb is the incarnation of Kumbhkaran (elder brother of Rāmāyana’s villain Ravana). Shivaji is his antithesis. He is the arch-hunter, who chases Mughal generals who are like storks, Mughal amirs who are like peacocks, Bangash Pathans who are like herons, Baluchis who are like ducks, whereas the horses of the Maratha hunter are like hawks. The epic continues with obvious self-satisfaction: ‘The goddess Kali has become fat eating the heads of the pigtaileless Muslims.’

NOTES
5. Eng. tr. and italics of Wahid Mirza, Life and Works, p. 224.
8. Khāzī ’in, p. 49.
11. Ibid., tr. H. Elliot, History of India as Told by its own Historians, Allahabad, 1964, III, p. 546.
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8. Khaz’i, p. 49.
11. Ibid., tr. Henry Elliot, History of India as Told by its own Historians, Allahabad, 1964, III, p. 546.
15. Ibid., pp. 220–26, and passim.
17. Ibid., pp. 322–33.
22. Ibid., ff. 208a–210b.
25. Ibid., p. xiii.
29. Ibid., p. 23.
30. Ibid., p. 63.
32. Ibid., p. 262.
33. Ibid., p. 273.
34. Ibid., pp. 279–80.
38. Ibid., p. 17.
41. Ibid., p. 34.
42. Ibid., pp. 35–6.
43. Ibid., pp. 29–47.
44. Mathur, ‘Chitor’.
15. Ibid., pp. 230–6, and passim.
17. Ibid., pp. 322–33.
20. 'Abdāl Khān Sarwānī, Tārikh-i Sher Shāhī, relevant section tr. in Elliot, IV, pp. 402–3.
22. Ibid., ff. 208a–210b.
25. Ibid., p. xii.
29. Ibid., p. 23.
30. Ibid., p. 63.
32. Ibid., p. 262.
33. Ibid., p. 273.
34. Ibid., pp. 279–80.
38. Ibid., p. 17.
41. Ibid., p. 34.
42. Ibid., pp. 35–6.
43. Ibid., pp. 29–47.
44. Mathur, ‘Chitor’.

47. Ibid., p. 159.
51. Kalb-i Mustafā, Jaisi, p. 100.
54. Ibid., p. 361.
55. Ibid., p. 350.
59. Ibid., pp. 112–3.
60. Ibid., p. 113.
61. Ibid., pp. 114–5.
63. Shirreff, Padmavati, pp. 270–1.
64. Maheswar Prasad, Purusā Parikshā of Vidyapati, pp. 20 et seq.
68. Ibid., pp. 310–11.
69. Ibid., pp. 313–4.
70. Ibid., p. 347.
71. Ibid., p. 344.