Title	Understanding Hinduism Through the Eyes of Al-Beruni: An Analysis of His Observations and Critiques in "*Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind*"

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Abstract
Al-Beruni's "Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind" (commonly known as Al-Beruni's India) is a landmark text in cross-cultural studies, written in the early 11th century. The book offers an in-depth analysis of Indian society, particularly focusing on Hindu religious and philosophical thought. Al-Biruni's work is distinguished by its meticulous approach, as he learned Sanskrit, engaged with local scholars, and studied key Hindu texts like the Vedas and Upanishads. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Al-Biruni approached his subject with an unusual degree of objectivity and respect, aiming to bridge intellectual gaps between Islamic and Hindu civilizations. His analysis includes a detailed study of Hindu cosmology, theology, and metaphysics, particularly focusing on the concepts of Brahman (the ultimate reality) and Atman (the individual soul). Al-Biruni's most significant critique is directed at Hindu polytheism and idol worship, which he contrasts sharply with Islamic monotheism. Nevertheless, he acknowledges the monistic tendencies within Hindu philosophy, noting that many Hindu thinkers ultimately posit a singular divine essence. The English translation by Dr. Edward C. Sachau, published in 1888, further popularized the text, preserving its scholarly rigor while making it accessible to a wider audience. Sachau's translation, though praised for its accuracy and extensive commentary, has been critiqued for reflecting certain 19th-century Orientalist biases. This paper explores his treatment of Hinduism, analyzing his observations and critiques within the broader socio-cultural and religious context. Al-Biruni's work, coupled with Sachau's translation, continues to be a critical source for historians, theologians, and scholars of comparative religion, offering timeless insights into intercultural understanding and scholarly objectivity. Overall, "Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind" stands out for its empathetic scholarship, providing a rare medieval Islamic perspective on Hinduism that values comprehension over condemnation.
Keywords: Al-Biruni, Edward C. Sachau, Comparative Religion, Hinduism, Investigations, Impartiality

Introduction

Comparative study of religion is a vast field. Many books are written on religions, their individuality their rituals their cultural aspects and also there exist book that have a comparative analysis of religions. Be it non sematic religions like Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, or Confucianism and more. Or be it sematic religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam many books are written in this manner.

On Hinduism there are written many books but one stands above all in its linguistic structure, in its depth of knowledge about the Hindus culture and religious rituals and that is also considered as a primary book written on Hinduism in its authenticity. Al-Beruni's Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind is an astonishing work done by Al-Beruni on Hinduism paralleled by none.[1] His work Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind remains a masterpiece of cultural anthropology and cross-cultural scholarship. Completed around 1030 CE during his time in India, Al-Beruni's India stands out for its objectivity and the depth of its research, offering one of the most comprehensive studies of medieval Indian society, including the religion, philosophy, and social structure of Hinduism.[2]

Al-Beruni's Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind is a pioneering work in the field of comparative religion and anthropology. It offers one of the earliest and most detailed foreign accounts of Indian society and religion, written with a level of scholarly rigor that was unprecedented for its time. Al-Beruni's approach, his willingness to learn Sanskrit, engagement with local scholars, and documenting Hinduism as Hindus themselves understood it, sets his work apart from the polemical writings of other medieval authors.

The present paper seeks to outline Al-Beruni's approach, analyze his observations and criticisms of Hinduism, and recommend specific chapters that provide the best insights into his understanding and critique of Hindu doctrines and customs. The study also highlights Dr. Edward C. Sachau's English translation of this work and its impact on the wider academic appreciation of Al-Beruni's research.

Al-Beruni's Life

Abu Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Beruni (973–1048 CE), known as Al-Beruni, born in Khwarazm (modern-day Uzbekistan), was one of the most brilliant minds of his era.[3] He was a polymath, excelling in fields such as mathematics, astronomy, geography, anthropology and history. His scientific

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[1] Starr, S. Fredrick. The Genius of their Age. London : Oxford University Press, 2023. p. 113.

[2] Ahmed, S. Akbar, *Al-Beruni: The first Anthropologist.* Ireland : Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Brirtain, Rain No. 60 (Feb., 1984). pp. 9-10.

[3] Encyclopaedia of Islam. New Edition. Edited by H.A.R. Gibb, J.H. Kramers, E. Levi-Provençal, Leiden : Brill, 1986. Vol. 1, p. 1236.

curiosity took him to different regions, including India, where he accompanied Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni. During his stay in India, Al-Beruni learned Sanskrit and spent over a decade studying Indian literature, religious texts, and scientific treatises. His insatiable thirst for knowledge is evident in the way he approached his study of Hinduism, aiming to understand the beliefs and practices of the people rather than impose his own.

Al-Beruni is best known for his extensive travels and scholarly works. His time in India, during the campaigns of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, gave him access to Indian scholars and texts.[4] He was, for his time, an admirably impartial writer on the customs and creeds of various nations.

Some of Al-Beruni's other works:

Apart from Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind, Al-Beruni authored over 100 books in various fields,[5] ranging from astronomy and mathematics to history and pharmacology. Here are some of his most famous works:

1. **The Remaining Signs of Past Centuries** (A :(الآثار الباقية عن القرون الخالية comparative study of calendars and historical events in different civilizations).[6]

2. **The Mas'udi Canon** (القانون المسعودي): (An encyclopedic work on astronomy and geography, dedicated to Mas'ud, the son of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni).[7]

3. **The Book of Instruction in the Elements of the Art of Astrology** (كتاب التفهيم لصناعة التنجيم): (A comprehensive guide to astrology and astronomy written in both Persian and Arabic).[8]

4. **The Book of Precious Stones** (كتاب الجواهر في معرفة الجواهر): (A treatise on gemstones and minerals).[9]

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[4] The Science of Al-Beruni. Sparavigna, Amelia. 12, s.l. : International Journal of Science, 2013, Vol. 2, pp. 52-60.

[5] Verdon, Noemie, and Michio Yano. "Al-Biruni's India, Chapter 14: An Account of Indian Astronomical, Mathematical and Other Literature." History of Science in South Asia (2020): 57–58.

[6] Al-Biruni, Abu Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad. Al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah 'an al-Qurūn al-Khāliyah (The Chronologies of ancient nations). London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1879.

[7] Al-Biruni, Abu Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad. Kitāb al-Qānūn al-Mas'ūdī (Canon Masudicus). Hyderabad: Matba'at Majlis Dāʾirat al-Ma'ārif al-Uthmānīyah, 1956.

[8] Al-Biruni, Abu Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad. Kitāb al-Tafhīm li-Ṣinā'at al-Tanjīm (The Book of Instruction in the Elements of the Art of Astrology). London: Luzac, 1934.

5. **The Book of Pharmacology** (كتاب الصيدنة في الطب): (A medical encyclopedia focusing on herbal medicine and pharmacology).[10]

6. **The Fixed Stars** (القران الثابت على الارض): (A detailed study on astronomy and the mapping of the stars).[11]

7. **The History of India** (التاريخ الهند): (This title is often confused with Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind, but it focuses more on the historical aspect

8. account of astronomical of Indian civilization)

9. **Treatise on the Use of Astronomy** (رسالة في الاستشهاد بالفلك): (A detailed instruments and their use in observing celestial phenomena).[12]

About the book "Al-Beruni's India"

Kitab al-Bīrūnī fī Taḥqīq mā li-al-Hind (A Critical Study of Indian Doctrines, Whether Rationally Acceptable or Rejected) (كتاب في تحقيق ما للهند من مقولة مقبولة في العقل أو مرذولة" commonly known as Al-Beruni's India, is one of the earliest and most comprehensive accounts of Indian society, culture, and religion.[13] Written during the 11th century, this monumental work offers a unique perspective on Hinduism and Indian life through the eyes of an outsider.[14] Al-Beruni's objective was not to convert or criticize but to document Hindu beliefs, social structures, and practices as they were, directly from their source. By studying Sanskrit and immersing himself in Indian culture, he achieved a deep understanding of Hindu philosophy and science. His impartial and thorough approach to documenting Hinduism has ensured that his work remains relevant to this day. His study of Indian cultural and religion was original as he found and examined the religious

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[9] Al-Biruni, Abu Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad. Kitāb al-Jawāhir fī Ma'rifat al-Jawāhir (The Book of Precious Stones), edited by Hakim Mohammad Said, Islamabad: Pakistan Hijra Council, 1989.

[10] Al-Biruni, Abu Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad. Kitāb al-Ṣaydana fī al-Ṭibb (The Book of Pharmacology). Karachi: Hijra Council, 1973.

[11] Al-Biruni, Abu Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad. Al-Qur'ān al-Thābit 'alā al-Arḍ (The Fixed Stars). Ed. Jan Hogendijk. Leiden: Brill, 2010.

[12] Al-Biruni, Abu Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad. Risālah fī al-Istishhād bil-Falk (Treatise on the Use of Astronomy). Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1900.

[13] Robinson, Catherine A. Interpretations of the Bhagavad-Gita and Images of the Hindu Tradition: The Song of the Lord. London: Routledge, 2014

[14] Ataman, Kemal, "Re-reading al-biruni's lIndia: case for intercultural understanding", lslam and Christian-Muslim Relations, 2005, Vol. 16, p. 143.

truths himself.[15] As an outsider investigating the religious and cultural systems of Hinduism, Al-Beruni approached his study with a unique commitment to fairness and neutrality. It remains a critical text for understanding the early interactions between the Islamic world and South Asia. This research paper analyzes the key elements of his observations, critiques, and the importance of his work, with reference to the content of the two volumes.

Purpose and Approach

The primary objective of Al-Beruni's study was to create an accurate and detailed account of Indian culture to bridge the intellectual and cultural gap between the Islamic and Indian civilizations. Al-Beruni's method was scholarly and comparative. He learned Sanskrit,[16] studied Indian texts like the Vedas and the Upanishads, and engaged in dialogue with Hindu scholars, striving for an authentic understanding of Indian thought. He was probably intrigued by the Arab scholars who were attracted to peculiar Hindu culture. [17] This commitment to comprehensiveness and scholarly rigor set his work apart from other contemporary accounts.

The English Translation by Dr. Edward C. Sachau

The English translation of Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind by Dr. Edward C Sachau[18] in 1910 remains one of the most important contributions to making Al-Beruni's work accessible to Western audiences.[19] Sachau's translation is known for its accuracy and fidelity to the original Arabic text. He also added extensive notes and a preface to contextualize Al-Beruni's observations for contemporary readers. However, some scholars argue that certain nuances of the original Arabic are lost in translation. Despite these challenges, Sachau's work has been instrumental in bringing Al-Beruni's India into the academic canon.

Translation Quality and Scholarly Contribution

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[15] Senin, Nurhanisah, Fadila Grine, Wan Adli Wan Ramli, Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, and Siti Fairuz Ramlan. "Understanding the 'Other': The Case of Al-Biruni (973–1048 AD)." International Journal of Ethics and Systems 35, no. 3 (2019): 392–409. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOES-01-2018-0010

[16] Al-Birūnī, Abū al-Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad. Taḥqīq mā li-l-Hindi min maqūla maqbūla fī al-ʿaql aw marḍūla. Edited and published by Dāʾirat al-Thaqāfa wa-al-Sīyāḥa – Abū Dhabi, Centre for Arabic Language, Abu Dhabi, 2018, p:13.

[17] Tara Chand. Influence of Islam on Indian Culture. Ilahbad : Indian Press Ilahbad, 1922. p. 10.

[18] Kozah, Mario. *The Birth of Indology as an Islamic Science: Al-Beruni's Treatise on Yoga Psycology.* Leiden : Brill, 2015.

[19] Cotesta, Vittorio, and Catherine McCarthy. The Heavens and the Earth: Graeco-Roman, Ancient Chinese, and Mediaeval Islamic Images of the World. International Comparative Social Studies, vol. 52. Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2021.

Sachau's translation is noted for its accuracy and meticulousness. He preserved Al-Beruni's analytical tone and ensured that the complex philosophical ideas were rendered in clear and accessible language. His extensive footnotes and annotations added context, making the work useful not just as a translation but as an academic resource.

Al-Beruni's Impartiality

Rather than seeking to criticize or refute Hindu beliefs, he aimed to present them as they were understood by their practitioners. His goal was not to impose Islamic views or pass judgment on Hindu practices, but rather to offer a faithful and accurate representation of Indian civilization.[20] One of the clearest demonstrations of this neutrality can be found in the Introduction to his book, where Al-Beruni writes:

> "I shall not produce the arguments of our antagonists in order to refute such of them as I believe to be in the wrong. My book is nothing but a simple historic record of facts" [21]

Sachau's praise on Al-Beruni's objectivity

In his preface, Sachau emphasizes the importance of Al-Beruni's objectivity, noting that:

> "He [Al-Beruni] does not blindly accept the traditions of former ages; he wants to understand and to criticize them. He wants to sift the wheat from the chaff, and he will discard everything that militates against the laws of nature and of reason." [22]

This insight from Sachau highlights the extent to which Al-Beruni applied critical thinking to his work without sacrificing fairness. Sachau's translation has been instrumental in allowing modern scholars to access Al-Beruni's comprehensive and impartial study of Hinduism. [23]

The chapters of the book

Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind is divided into 80 chapters, covering a wide range of topics from cosmology and astrology to social customs and religious beliefs. Al-Beruni meticulously documents every aspect of Hindu life that he encounters,

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[20] Ataman, Kemel, Re-Reading Alberunis India. Islam and Cristian Muslim Relations, 16, April 2005, Vol. 2.

[21] Al-Biruni. Alberuni's India: An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws and Astrology of India about A.D. 1030. [Trans] Edward C. Sachau, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1910, Vol.1, p: 7.

[22] Sachau, Edward C. *ALBERUNI'S India, Preface.* London : Dryden House, 1910. Vol. 1, p:xxv.

[23] Verdon, Noémie. The Books Sāṅk and Pātanğal: A Socio-Cultural History of al-Bīrūnī's Interpretations of Sāṅkhya and Yoga. Perspectives on Islamicate South Asia, vol. 2. Leiden; Boston: Brill, January 17, 2024.

comparing them to the Greek and Islamic traditions. The detailed chapter-wise breakdown of Al-Beruni's Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind illustrates the depth of his investigation into Hinduism and Indian society. From religious beliefs and scientific advancements to rituals and daily customs, Al-Beruni's work provides one of the most complete and unbiased accounts of Indian culture from the perspective of an outsider. Each chapter reflects his thorough research, his respect for the subjects he studied, and his commitment to providing a factual account.

Chapter1: Introduction to "Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind"

The first chapter of Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind serves as an introduction, where Al-Beruni explains his motivation for writing the book. He emphasizes the importance of understanding different cultures on their own terms rather than through the lens of one's own beliefs. Al-Beruni is candid about the challenges he faced in documenting Indian society, such as language barriers and the reluctance of some Hindu scholars to share their knowledge with a foreigner.

In the introduction, Al-Beruni notes how mutual ignorance between different cultures leads to misconceptions and hostility. His goal is to reduce this ignorance by providing a detailed, factual account of Indian beliefs and practices. Importantly, he states that he will refrain from imposing his own religious views (Islam) and will present Hinduism as it is understood by its practitioners. Al-Biruni acknowledges that some Hindu beliefs may appear entirely heathen to followers of other faiths, but emphasizes that these doctrines genuinely represent the religious worldview of the Hindus.[24]

Chapters 2 to 11: Religious and Philosophical Beliefs of Hindus

In these chapters, Al-Beruni delves into the religious and philosophical aspects of Hinduism. His treatment of these topics is detailed and methodical, reflecting his deep respect for Hindu intellectual traditions. The key themes of these chapters include:

1. **Belief in God (Chapter 2)**

Al-Beruni explores the Hindu concept of God, noting the existence of a supreme, formless entity (Brahman) that is central to Hindu belief. He contrasts this with the multitude of gods worshiped by Hindus, explaining that these deities represent different aspects of the divine, much like angels or prophets in other religious traditions.

2. **Creation and Cosmology (Chapter 3-5)**

In these chapters, Al-Beruni discusses Hindu views on creation and structure of universe. Hindus believe in multiple worlds and cosmic cycles of creation and

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[24] Al-Biruni, Alberuni's India, trans. Sachau, 1910, vol.1, pp.21

destruction. He compares these ideas with Islamic and Greek cosmologies, highlighting both similarities and differences.

3. Karma and Reincarnation (Chapter 6-7)

Al-Beruni explains the Hindu concepts of karma and reincarnation, which are central to their understanding of life, death, and moral responsibility. According to Hindu belief, actions in this life determine one's fate in future incarnations. Al-Beruni presents this doctrine without criticism, noting its parallels with certain Greek philosophies such as those of Pythagoras.

4. Liberation (Moksha) and the Soul (Chapter 8-10)

Hindus believe in the possibility of liberation (Moksha) from the cycle of birth and death. Al-Beruni carefully explains the philosophical debates within Hinduism regarding the nature of the soul (Atman) and the paths to achieve liberation. He compares Hindu ideas of salvation with Islamic concepts of the afterlife and salvation.

5. Caste and Social Structure (Chapter 11)

The caste system (Varna) is a major focus of this chapter. Al-Beruni describes the rigid social hierarchy of Hindu society, noting that people are born into one of four primary castes: "Brahmins" (priests), "Kshatriyas" (warriors), Vaishyas (traders), and "Shudras" (laborers). Al-Beruni provides a detailed analysis of the roles and responsibilities assigned to each caste, as well as the restrictions that govern social interactions between them. He compares the caste system to social structures in other cultures, including the Muslim world.

Chapters 12-17: Scientific and Literary Contributions

These chapters explore the intellectual and scientific contributions of Indian civilization. Al-Beruni dedicates considerable attention to Indian mathematics and astronomy, documenting the Indian numeral system, including the concept of zero, and the development of trigonometric functions such as sine. He also mentions key texts like the Siddhantas and works by Brahmagupta. In the Chapter 16, he delves into metrology, discussing Indian units of measure for time, length, and weight.

Chapters 18-31: Geography, Cosmology, and Hindu Sciences

Al-Beruni's chapters 18 to 31 provide a thorough analysis of Indian geography and cosmology. He describes India's rivers, such as the Ganges and the Indus, and its sacred mountains, such as Mount Meru. Al-Beruni attempts to reconcile these geographical features with the Puranic descriptions of the universe, showing his dedication to understanding the internal logic of Hindu cosmology.

In this section, Al-Beruni also critiques some aspects of Hindu astrology and the influence of the planets on human destiny, though he presents these views

objectively. He compares these Hindu beliefs with Islamic and Greek ideas of astronomy and cosmology.

Chapters 32-41: Indian Timekeeping and Calendars

One of the most remarkable parts of Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind is Al-Beruni's analysis of Indian timekeeping, including the Hindu calendar system. He compares the different kinds of days, months, and years as used in India, discussing lunar versus solar calendars. He explains the concept of Kalpas and Yugas, the vast units of time in Hindu cosmology and compares them to the timekeeping systems in other cultures, such as the Greek and Islamic calendars.

Chapters 42-50: Philosophy of Time and Space

In these chapters, Al-Beruni explores the "philosophical implications of time and space" in Indian thought. He explains how Hindus conceptualize time not just in terms of days and years, but in terms of cosmic cycles, leading to broader philosophical questions about the nature of reality and existence. Al-Beruni shows a deep respect for Indian metaphysical ideas, even though they differ significantly from the Islamic view of linear time.

Chapters 51-62: Sacred Traditions and Narayana

In these chapters, Al-Beruni returns to religious and mythological themes, exploring the stories of Narayana and Vasudeva from Hindu scriptures. He provides an objective account of the religious rituals and myths surrounding these deities, emphasizing how they are integral to Hindu cosmology and religious practice. He also describes Mahabharata, including the great war of Bharata and the role of divine beings in it.

Chapters 63-80: Rituals, Ethics, and Laws

In the final chapters Al-Beruni meticulously documents the rules governing daily life in Hinduism, including dietary restrictions, purification rites, and funeral ceremonies. He compares the ethical codes in the "Manu smriti" and other Hindu texts with those of Islamic law, finding both similarities and significant differences.

Al-Beruni's Investigation of Hinduism

His approach to understanding Hinduism was methodical, based on direct observation, study of Sanskrit texts, and interaction with Indian scholars. Rather than simply passing judgment, Al-Beruni focused on presenting the Hindu worldview as it was understood by its practitioners. He explored central Hindu beliefs such as the doctrine of karma, reincarnation, and the caste system, providing detailed descriptions of religious practices like idol worship and rituals.

Religious and Philosophical Beliefs

Al-Beruni delves deeply into the metaphysical aspects of Hinduism. He discusses the Hindu belief in a single, supreme God, yet they revere multiple deities as

manifestations of that divine power, often attributing to them the roles and functions of the ultimate God, which he found clashing to monotheistic traditions like Islam.[25] However, he notes the complex layers of polytheism and idol worship,[26] which play a significant role in the popular Hindu practice. In the initial chapters he outlines Hindu philosophical concepts such as the nature of creation, the existence of multiple worlds, and the journey of the soul to gain knowledge. [27]

Caste and Social Inequality

Al-Beruni is critical of the hereditary nature of the caste system, which, in his view, conflicts with the Islamic ideal of social equality. The Hindus call these castes as Verna (colors).[28] His analysis goes beyond the surface, he goes in depth of their conditions[29] exploring how the caste system affects social mobility, marriage, and the distribution of power. He notes that this rigid system created social divisions that were difficult to bridge.

Untouchability

Al-Beruni discusses the status of outcasts and untouchables (those outside the caste system), or Antyajas, who were subject to extreme discrimination and exclusion. These individuals were relegated to performing the most menial and impure tasks and were often segregated from mainstream society.[30] He is particularly critical of the practice of untouchability, which he considers dehumanizing. Al-Beruni's critique is one of the earliest non-Hindu condemnations of the practice, highlighting its moral and social consequences.

Hindu Gods and Deities

The practice of creating images of deities has been deeply rooted in Hindu tradition since ancient times, [31] grounded in the belief that the divine manifests itself through various transient forms in the material world.[32] Al-Beruni offers a detailed account of the Hindu pantheon, describing the major gods such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, along with their roles in Hindu cosmology. He also

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[25] Al-Biruni, Alberuni's India, trans. Sachau, 1910, vol.1, pp.50

[26] Al-Biruni, Alberuni's India, trans. Sachau, 1910, vol.1, pp.111

[27] Ibid, pp.50

[28] Al-Biruni, Alberuni's India, trans. Sachau, 1910, vol.1, pp.100

[29] Ibid, pp.103

[30] Ibid, pp.101

[31] Anis, Ather. Concept of Tolerance Towards Hindu Religion and Idol Worship in Muslim India: A Legacy of New Theo-Political Thought Development in Indian Islam. PhD diss., Washington, DC: The George Washington University, 2024, pp.6.

[32] Wink, André. Al-Hind: The Slave Kings and the Islamic Conquest, 11th–13th Centuries. Vol. 2 in Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World. Boston / Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002. pp. 301–428.

compares the Hindu concept of the divine with the Greco-Roman and Islamic traditions, showing a remarkable depth of understanding. He notes that while Hinduism appears polytheistic on the surface, many Hindus believe in a single, overarching God, with other deities serving as manifestations of different aspects of the divine.[33]

Women in Hindu Society

Al-Beruni's observations about the role of women in Hindu society are nuanced. He notes the patriarchal structure, wherein women are generally subordinate to men. However, he also records instances of respect given to women, particularly in religious contexts. Al-Beruni discusses women's issues such as matrimony, the menstrual course, embryos and childbed.[34] He criticizes practices such as Sati, the custom of a widow immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre, for its cruelty, while acknowledging that women sacrifices were seen as a virtuous act in Hindu society.[35]

Cultural Practices and Festivals

Al-Beruni describes various Hindu festivals, rituals, and practices, noting their importance in maintaining social and religious order and the Hindu calendar, sacred pilgrimages, and the centrality of astrology in daily life. His account of the different forms of sacrifices and offerings, particularly in temple rituals, provides valuable insights into the spiritual life of ancient India. [36]

Hindu jurisprudence

Al-Beruni also addresses Hindu jurisprudence, explaining how civil and religious laws are intertwined in Indian society, and how legal decisions are made based on caste and religious texts. These final chapters offer a comprehensive view of the ethical and legal foundations of Hindu life, reflecting Al-Beruni's dedication to understanding every aspect of Indian civilization.

Hindu Practices and Rituals

In Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind, Al-Beruni provides a comprehensive and objective examination of Hindu rituals, practices, and religious customs. His investigation into Hinduism is not limited to abstract philosophy or cosmological beliefs; he delves deeply into the everyday practices that define Hindu religious life. Below is an exploration of key practices and rituals he documented:

    1. **Dietary Restrictions and Fasting:**

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[33] Al-Biruni, Alberuni's India, trans. Sachau, 1910, vol.1, pp.27

[34] Ahmed, S. Akbar, *Al-Beruni: The first Anthropologist.* Ireland : Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Brirtain, Rain No. 60 (Feb., 1984). pp. 9-10.

[35] Al-Biruni, Alberuni's India, trans. Sachau, 1910, vol.2, pp.154-157

[36] Al-Biruni, Alberuni's India, trans. Sachau, 1910, vol.2, pp.178-184

In his account of dietary laws, Al-Beruni notes the importance of vegetarianism among certain sects of Hindus, particularly the Brahmins. He explains how the concept of non-violence (Ahimsa) extends to food, with many devout Hindus abstaining from meat. He also discusses fasting practices, which are common during religious festivals and periods of penance.[37] Al-Beruni compares Hindu fasting traditions to Islamic fasting during Ramadan, noting the spiritual goals behind these acts of self-denial.

2. Marriage and Family Life:

Al-Beruni provides insights into Hindu marriage customs, which he describes as elaborate and deeply rooted in religious tradition. He outlines the various stages of a Hindu wedding, including the selection of a spouse (which was traditionally arranged by families), the wedding ceremony itself, and the duties of a husband and wife. Al-Beruni contrasts these customs with Islamic marriage practices, highlighting the social and religious expectations placed on women in both cultures. He is particularly struck by the notion of lifelong devotion and purity expected from Hindu women. [38]

3. Ethics and Law in Hinduism:

Al-Beruni describes Hindu ethics as being closely tied to caste and religious duties. He explains the Manu smriti, the ancient law code, which outlines the responsibilities and duties of individuals based on their caste and stage of life. Al-Beruni provides a balanced analysis of Hindu law, noting that while the caste system is rigid, the ethical framework within Hinduism promotes moral behavior and adherence to religious duties. [39]

The distinctiveness of Hindus from other Nations

Al-Beruni's exploration of Hinduism in Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind reflects a meticulous examination of the religious, philosophical, and social aspects of Hindu culture. One of his key findings is the distinctiveness of Hinduism compared to other religious systems and civilizations, particularly Islam, Greek traditions, and other foreign influences. Al-Beruni approaches this with an anthropological lens, noting how Hindus maintain specific customs and worldviews that set them apart.

1. Hindu Self-Conceit and Isolation

Al-Beruni identifies self-conceit as a defining characteristic of Hindus. He argues that this sense of superiority stems from their long-standing tradition of insularity, which manifests as a depreciation of anything foreign. Hindus, according to Al-

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[37] Al-Biruni, Alberuni's India, trans. Sachau, 1910, vol.1, pp.69
[38] Al-Biruni, Alberuni's India, trans. Sachau, 1910, vol.2, pp.154
[39] Al-Biruni, Alberuni's India, trans. Sachau, 1910, vol1, pp.105-110

Beruni, view their own religious and social systems as inherently superior, making them dismissive of outside influences. This belief is, in part, a consequence of their geographic isolation and cultural segregation. Hindu scholars and intellectuals were particularly resistant to learning or adopting knowledge from other civilizations. Al-Beruni remarks on this isolation, stating:

> "The Hindus believe that there is no country but theirs, no nation like theirs, no kings like theirs, no religion like theirs, no science like theirs."[40]

They have no desire to know the beliefs or sciences of foreigners, whether Greeks or others. Al-Beruni himself, a scholar well-versed in both Greek and Islamic sciences, saw this refusal to engage with external ideas as a limiting factor for the intellectual growth of Hindu society.

2. Hindu Cosmology and Timekeeping

Another significant difference Al-Beruni highlights is the Hindu understanding of cosmology and time, which is deeply complex and distinct from other worldviews. Hindu cosmology is cyclical, with an emphasis on vast cosmic epochs known as Kalpas and Yugas and such vast spans of time that it is difficult to grasp in ordinary terms. This differs from the linear concept of time prevalent in Islamic and Christian thought. Al-Beruni describes the Hindu division of time, explaining how these massive time cycles contribute to a fundamentally different perspective on life, the universe, and existence itself. The Hindus measure time in a way that is incomprehensible to those who believe in a linear progression.[41]

3. The Caste System as a Barrier

One of the most striking social distinctions that Al-Beruni emphasizes is rigidity of the caste system in Hinduism. He contrasts the Hindu Varna system with the more flexible social structures found in Islamic societies, where status is not fixed by birth but can be influenced by merit, piety, or achievements. In Hindu society, however, individuals are born into a specific caste, which dictates their roles, responsibilities, and social interactions throughout their lives. Al-Beruni explains that the Hindus hold that people are born into a specific caste, and this determines their occupation and social status. They believe that Brahmins are born from the head of Brahma, Kshatriyas from his arms, Vaishyas from his thighs, and Shudras from his feet.[42]

Al-Beruni further elaborates that caste-based discrimination prevented meaningful interaction between different social classes, and this internal division contributed to the isolation of Hindus from other nations. He found the untouchability of

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[40] Al-Biruni, Alberuni's India, trans. Sachau, 1910, vol.1, pp.22
[41] Ibid, pp.368-371
[42] Ibid, pp.100-102

certain castes to be particularly harsh, noting that this strict hierarchy hindered the unity and cohesiveness of Indian society.

4. Resistance to Foreign Sciences and Cultures

Al-Beruni also observed a significant resistance among Hindus to foreign sciences and knowledge. He notes that despite the presence of highly advanced mathematical and astronomical knowledge in India, Hindu scholars were reluctant to share their knowledge with foreigners, particularly Muslims. This reluctance, Al-Beruni suggests, is tied to the sense of cultural superiority that pervades Hindu society.[43]

Al-Beruni himself, as a product of this tradition, valued the cross-cultural exchange of knowledge and found the Hindu reluctance to engage in such exchange to be one of the most significant barriers to understanding between Hindus and other nations.

5. Theological Differences

Al-Beruni's investigation into Hinduism also reveals theological differences that distinguish Hinduism from Islam, Christianity, and other monotheistic religions. While Hindus worship a pantheon of deities, they also believe in a single, overarching supreme entity, Brahman. Al-Beruni compares this to the concept of monotheism in Islam but notes the polytheistic practices that are prevalent among Hindus. The Hindus, though they speak of one God, worship many deities, each representing different aspects of the divine. They believe that the formless Brahman is too distant for ordinary worship, so they venerate idols as intermediaries.[44]

This blend of monotheism and polytheism set Hinduism apart from other religions that emphasize a singular, personal God. Al-Beruni was intrigued by the symbolic nature of idol worship in Hinduism, acknowledging that it was misunderstood by outsiders who viewed it as mere idol worship without recognizing the deeper theological context.

Al-Beruni's Treatment of Hindu Theology

One of the central themes in Al-Beruni's India is his detailed exploration of Hindu theology and philosophy.[45] His study primarily draws on the Vedas and the Upanishads, providing a structured analysis of Hindu cosmology, the concept of Brahman, and the notion of Atman (soul) which is seen as eternal and undergoing cycles of rebirth. The Hindus speak of a god who is too exalted and too remote to

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[43] Al-Biruni, Alberuni's India, trans. Edward C. Sachau, 1910, Vol.1, pp.152

[44] Ibid, pp. 27-32

[45] Starr, S. Fredrick. The Genius of Their age: Ibn Sina, Beruni, and Lost Enlightenment. London: Oxford University Press, 2023, p:100-110

be concerned with the affairs of this world. Therefore, they worship various deities, each of whom represents some aspect of the divine nature. The idols, however, are merely representations and not to be confused with the gods themselves.[46]

Hindu Literature (Vedas and Other Texts) in Al-Beruni's Work

Al-Beruni dedicates significant portions of Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind to describing Hindu literature, particularly focusing on the Vedas, Puranas, and other sacred texts. His study of these texts is not superficial; he delves into their religious, philosophical, and scientific dimensions, highlighting their importance in shaping Hindu thought. He specifically learned Sanskrit to have First hand Knowledge of Hindus religious Literature.[47] For this al-beruni states:

> "I do not spare either trouble or money in collecting Sanskrit books from places where I supposed they were likely to be found, and in procuring for myself even from very remote places." [48]

The Vedas

Al-Beruni regarded the Vedas as the most sacred texts of Hinduism, revered for their antiquity and religious authority. He identifies four Vedas: Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda, each of which he describes as containing hymns, prayers, and rituals meant to guide religious practice. These texts were believed to be revealed and were passed down orally through generations of Brahmins, the priestly caste.

Al-Beruni's account of the Vedas emphasizes their role in establishing Hindu religious authority, noting that Brahmins rely on these texts to legitimize their rituals and societal position. He also compares the Vedic system of knowledge to Islamic scriptures, finding parallels in the way both religions regard their holy books as sources of eternal wisdom.[49]

Puranas and Epics

Al-Beruni is thought to be the first Muslim to have studies Puranas.[50] While discussing Puranas and epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, he views these as rich sources of mythology, cosmology, and history, detailing the deeds of gods, kings, and heroes. The Mahabharata, for instance, includes discussions on dharma

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[46] Al-Biruni, Alberuni's India, trans. Sachau, 1910, vol.1, pp.122-123
[47] Starr, S. Fredrick. *The Genius of Their age: Ibn Sina, Beruni, and Lost Enlightenment.* London : Oxford University Press, 2023.
[48] Al-Biruni, Alberuni's India, trans. Sachau, 1910, vol.1, pp.24
[49] Al-Biruni, Alberuni's India, trans. Sachau, 1910, vol.1, pp.125-126
[50] Ahmed, S. Akbar, *Al-Beruni: The first Anthropologist.* Ireland : Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Brirtain, Rain No. 60 (Feb., 1984). pp. 9-10.

(duty), war, and the nature of the soul, themes that Al-Beruni analyzes with admiration for their philosophical depth.

Al-Beruni notes that while the Puranas contain significant mythological content, they also serve as repositories of Hindu astronomical and geographical knowledge. He documents how Indian scholars used the Puranas to map out the cosmos and the earth, reflecting their integrated approach to science and religion. [51]

Al-Biruni's Survey of Hindu Scientific and Literary Traditions

Al-Biruni recorded a vast corpus of Hindu knowledge spanning astronomy, astrology, medicine, philosophy, and ethical literature. He listed texts like Karana-para-tilaka, Karana-pâta, Karana-cûdāmani, Rahunrakarana, Mānasa, Daśagītikā, Āryāshtaśata, and Lokananda all astronomical treatises. In astrology, he cited Samhitās by Mandavya, Garga, and Varāhamihira, Jātakas, Śrotavya, Sārāvalī, Gudhamana, and Praśna-Gudhamana. Medical science was represented by Caraka Samhita, while moral and literary thought appeared in the Pañcatantra. [52] These texts reflect India's classical knowledge systems, blending exact sciences, predictive disciplines, and ethical instruction. Al-Biruni respected their depth and complexity, even as he critiqued certain mythological or exclusivist elements in their transmission.

Hindu Cities Mentioned in Al-Beruni's Work

Al-Beruni further discusses significant Hindu cities such as Multan, Thanesar, and Varanasi, emphasizing their roles as centers of pilgrimage and learning. These cities were critical to maintaining Hindu religious and intellectual traditions. For example, Somnath was an important Shiva temple and Kanauj a major cultural hub. [53] His descriptions of these cities show the interconnection between geography, culture, and religion in medieval India. Through his meticulous documentation, Al-Beruni provides one of the most thorough and impartial studies of Indian civilization from an outsider's perspective.

Evolving Accessibility of Hindu Religious Knowledge from Al-Biruni's India to the Global Present

In the 11th century, Al-Biruni's ethnographic observations revealed a deeply guarded structure of religious knowledge within Hindu society, particularly among the Brahmins, who restricted access to sacred texts and theological discourse. His efforts to engage with Hindu philosophy were met with resistance, as non-Hindus especially Muslims and foreigners were often denied entry into the

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[51] Al-Biruni, Alberuni's India, trans. Sachau, 1910, vol.1, pp.130
[52] Ibid, pp.157-159
[53] Ibid, pp.294-305

domain of scriptural learning. This exclusionary approach was not solely rooted in linguistic barriers, but reflected a broader commitment to preserving ritual purity and caste-based hierarchies. Al-Biruni noted that many Brahmins feared that the transmission of Vedic knowledge to outsiders could result in its distortion or contamination, thus threatening their spiritual and social authority, not only that but they also didn't take interest in other nation's achievements as he says in his book:

> "Their haughtiness is such that, if you tell them of any science or scholar in Khurasan and Persis, they will think you to be both an ignoramus and a liar. If they travelled and mixed with other nations, they would soon change their mind."[54]

In contrast to this historically exclusive model, the modern era has witnessed a gradual transformation in the dissemination of Hindu religious and philosophical teachings. Contemporary Hindu thinkers and spiritual leaders often frame their teachings in more inclusive and universal terms, spreading their messages beyond India[55] extending concepts such as yoga, meditation, and prajñā (intuitive wisdom) to a global audience. Hindu philosophical systems offer methodological insights that transcend empirical reasoning, advocating for a progressive refinement of consciousness through stages of perception, intellect, and ultimately, spiritual realization.[56] While orthodox circles may continue to guard traditional knowledge, many contemporary gurus navigate the balance between tradition and innovation, redefining religious authority in more globally accessible formats.[57] However, the epistemic asymmetries first encountered by Al-Biruni have not entirely disappeared; they persist in subtle forms through modern institutions of knowledge and representation.[58] The journey from restricted transmission to global dissemination thus reflects a complex, layered evolution rather than a linear or absolute shift.

Hallmarks of "Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind"

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[54] Al-Biruni, Alberuni's India, trans. Edward C. Sachau, 1910, Vol. 1. pp.23

[55] Aravamudan, Srinivas, Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language. Princeton: Princeton University, 2006.

[56] Wilfred, Felix. "Indian Theologies: Retrospect and Prospects: A Socio-Cultural Perspective." In Encounters with the World: Essays to Honour Aloysius Pieris, SJ, edited by Aloysius Pieris, Marshal Fernando, and Asanga Tilakaratne, Colombo: Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue, 2004, p:168.

[57] Lucia, Amanda. "Innovative Gurus: Tradition and Change in Contemporary Hinduism." International Journal of Hindu Studies 18, no. 2 (2014), p: 221–263.

[58] Giri, S. "The Challenge of Understanding India." Asian Ethnology 69, no. 1 (2010), p:3–32.

Al-Beruni's work is distinguished by its depth, objectivity, and scholarly rigor. Key hallmarks include:

1. Empathy and Objectivity

Al-Beruni's investigation is marked by impartiality and objectivity. He sought to understand and document Hindu beliefs and practices without attempting to criticize or refute them. His goal was to record Indian knowledge and culture in a way that made sense to outsiders, particularly the Islamic world. This scholarly detachment was unusual for the time and set his work apart.

2. Detailed Comparisons

Throughout the book, Al-Beruni draws comparisons between Hinduism, Islam, and Greek traditions, particularly in the fields of philosophy, theology, and science. This comparative method helps readers understand Hindu practices in relation to other global traditions, showing both the unique and universal aspects of Hindu culture.

3. Ethnographic Precision

Al-Beruni includes detailed descriptions of Indian cities, regions, and religious sites, such as Multan, Thanesar, and Somnath. His ethnographic detail is unmatched for the period. Al-Beruni provides precise descriptions of Indian customs, geography, and social norms.

4. Cultural Relativism

Al-Beruni presents Hindu customs and rituals in a way that respects their internal logic. For example, he explains idol worship by noting that idols are symbolic representations of divine power, not worshipped as gods themselves, a nuance often misunderstood by outsiders. This reflects his cultural sensitivity and relativist approach.

5. Linguistic Mastery

Al-Beruni learned Sanskrit to access Hindu scriptures, including the Vedas, Puranas, and other religious texts. This allowed him to provide first-hand descriptions of Hindu belief system without relying on translations or second-hand interpretations, greatly enhancing the accuracy of his work.

6. Scientific Observation

In addition to religious and philosophical matters, Al-Beruni documents Indian advances in mathematics and astronomy. He was deeply impressed by Hindu achievements, especially their numeral system, including the concept of zero, and their advanced astronomical calculations.

Conclusion

Al-Beruni's Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind remains an invaluable source and groundbreaking attempt for understanding medieval Indian culture and Hinduism

through outsider's lens. His balanced treatment, coupled with detailed critiques and comparisons, makes his work a unique scholarly contribution. The English translation by Dr. Sachau has further solidified its place in global academia, providing an accessible yet comprehensive introduction to Al-Beruni's scholarship. Through this work, Al-Beruni documented Hinduism, Indian mathematics, astronomy, and various social customs, making him a pioneer in cross-cultural studies and comparative religion.

Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind lay the foundation for Al-Beruni's exploration of Hinduism by covering the religious, philosophical, and social frameworks of Indian society. His objective approach and deep respect for Hindu intellectual traditions are evident throughout the chapters. By comparing Hindu beliefs with Islamic and Greek traditions, Al-Beruni demonstrates his commitment to cross-cultural understanding, making his work an invaluable contribution to comparative religion and history.