



# BĪRŪNĪ, ABŪ RAYḤĀN VIII.

## INDOLOGY

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### BĪRŪNĪ, ABŪ RAYḤĀN

#### viii. Indology

Bīrūnī's fame as an Indologist rests primarily on two texts. One is a translation from Sanskrit into Arabic of the *yogasūtras* of Patañjali, entitled *Ketāb Bātanjal* (The book of Patañjali). The other, Bīrūnī's magnum opus, is *Ketāb taḥqīq mā le'l-Hend men maqūla maqbūla fi'l-'aql aw marḍūla* (The book confirming what pertains to India, whether rational or despicable). This is a wide-ranging examination of Sanskrit scientific sources, supplemented by conversations with Hindu pandits whom Bīrūnī met while accompanying his patron, Sultan Maḥmūd of Ḡazna, on military campaigns in northern India. In the West it is most often referred to as *India*, after E. C. Sachau's translation (*Alberuni's India*, 2 vols., London, 1888, 1910). There are also some references to Indian data in Bīrūnī's *al-Āṭār al-bāqīa*.

Of the two works, *Ketāb Bātanjal* is the earlier. In the *India*, Bīrūnī alludes to two texts of Hindu scripture which he had translated from Sanskrit into Arabic, "one about the origins and a description of all created beings, called *Sāmkhya* [Sāṃkhya], and another about the emancipation of the soul from the fetters of the body, called *Bātanjal* [Patañjali]" (*India*, p. 8). Both Sāṃkhya and Yoga, specifically the *Yogasūtras* of Patañjali, represent the epitome of Hindu



metaphysical speculation. The Sāṃkhya text has not survived; the Patañjali has, albeit in a unicum. First discovered by L. Massignon (1922) and later described by J. W. Hauer (1930), it was eventually published by H. Ritter (1956). It is divided into four parts, corresponding to the four divisions of the *yogasūtras* of Patañjali but also interpolating the views of an anonymous Hindu commentator into the Arabic rendition. A dialogic format, probably inspired by Socratic treatises with which Bīrūnī was well familiar, gives an ease of access to *Ketāb Bātanjal* not found in the Sanskrit original. Each part has a different focus: the questions and answers of part 1 focus on the complex interaction of the soul with the body and its own essence. Three methods of mind-control are described: 1. habituated action (Skt. *abhyāsa*, Ar. *ta'wīd*); 2. intellectual asceticism (Skt. *vairāgya*, Ar. *al-zohd al-fekrī*); and 3. devotion (Skt. *bhakti*, Ar. *'ebāda*). They correspond to the three stages of yoga elaborated in several Hindu treatises, including the *Bhagavadgītā*: *kriyā* or *karma-yoga*, *jñāna-yoga*, and *bhakti-yoga*. Their common goal is self-realization or liberation (Skt. *mokṣa*, Ar. *etteḥād*). Part 2 draws attention to the discipline required if self-realization is to be achieved. The adept must gradually disentangle himself from sense perceptions, following a seven-stage progression that includes four outer and three inner stages of preparation. Bodily withdrawal is now possible if one pursues the classical yoga system, often referred to as eight-limbed (*aṣṭāṅga*). Exposition of this system constitutes part 3 of *Ketāb Bātanjal*. In it Bīrūnī demonstrates his genius at lexical innovation. He is perhaps at his best in finding Arabic equivalents for the *prānas* (breaths, vital forces) and the *siddhis* (*'ajā'eb al-afāl*; extraordinary feats, both physical and mental), which together represent the pinnacle of yogic asceticism. In part 4 Bīrūnī further elaborates the five means by which the *siddhis* may be obtained, paralleling the Sanskrit original most closely in delineating *jñāna-* and *bhakti-yoga* as the fourth and fifth means respectively. He concludes his unprecedented translation with an addendum summarizing the primary purpose of Patañjali: to affirm the principles of metempsychosis and unicity (Ar. *tanāsok* and *etteḥād*) as well as the benefits of asceticism (Ar. *zohd*).

There are numerous contradictions between the Sanskrit text of Patañjali and the Arabic rendition of Bīrūnī. The five means of exercising mind control and attaining liberation, for instance, are reduced to three: the second means is roughly the equivalent of *jñāna-yoga*, while the method involving spells and cryptic formulae (Skt. *mantra*) is omitted altogether from *Ketāb Bātanjal* just as it is devalued as alchemy (*rasāyana*) in the *India*.



The major issue in *Ketāb Bātanjal* is not textual but theological: what sense does Bīrūnī make of the various paths to liberation that Patañjali proposes? That question can only be answered with reference to the *India*. There is a significant overlap of categories between *Ketāb Bātanjal* and the *India*. Composed around 421/1030, while Bīrūnī was at the height of his analytical powers, the *India* represents both a distillation and an extension of what had been broached in *Ketāb Bātanjal*: to classify and evaluate the major categories of Hindu philosophy and religion. Nearly two-thirds of the *India* (48 of 80 chapters) reviews the achievement of Indian science in several fields. Yet there is not a continuum of methodological perspective between *Ketāb Bātanjal* and the *India*. The former represents a bold effort to communicate the essentials of yogic asceticism to an Arabic readership. The *India* not only communicates but also evaluates the full range of Hindu thought and ritual. The initial twelve chapters provide a magisterial overview of Hindu notions of God, creation, metempsychosis, salvation, and idolatry. The Hindu approach to God, creation, and salvation is generously commended, bearing favorable comparison to reflections that emerged from ancient Greece and classical Islam. The same is not true for metempsychosis. While noting some parallels between it and the teachings of both Greek philosophers and Sufi masters, Bīrūnī stresses the disjuncture between such notions and normative Muslim belief. He himself has memorialized the disjuncture by his oft-quoted remark: *al-tanāsok 'elm al-neḥla al-hendawīya* (“metempsychosis is the password of Hindu belief,” tr. I, p. 50). Nor is Bīrūnī sympathetic to idol worship. He portrays it as class-specific, being the indulgence of uneducated, superstitious masses, rather than the preference of those literate Brahmins with whom he himself was in frequent contact.

It is in chapter seven of the *India* that we find Bīrūnī’s longest and best documented assessment of Hindu beliefs. He examines in detail the three paths to liberation and in so doing, signals his preference for the teachings of Patañjali over the directives of other Indian scriptures, including the *Bhagavadgītā*. The contest is framed by the discipline of devotion (*bhakti-yoga*) and the pursuit of knowledge (*jñāna-yoga*). On the one hand, Bīrūnī draws extensive attention to *bhakti-yoga*, especially in depicting ethical norms and drawing on parallel notions from the Sufi tradition. Many of the most extensive quotations illustrating the three-fold path to liberation derive from the *Bhagavadgītā*. On the other hand, however, the schematization of these paths and the topical sentences for each are directly quoted or paraphrased from *Ketāb Bātanjal*. It is to *jñāna-yoga* that Bīrūnī draws attention time and



again. Salvation in his view is inseparable from self-cognition; in its most direct form, “it is the return of the soul as a knowing being into its own nature” (*Ketāb Bātanjal*, par. 78), or as he states in the *India*, “the soul distinguishes between things by defining them and so grasps its own essence (*‘aḳalat dātahā*)” (tr. I, p. 68 [rev.]).

If Bīrūnī seems to be an inadvertent theologian in the early chapters of the *India*, in the later chapters he assumes the role of a pre-modern anthropologist. Ten of the last seventeen chapters in the *India* address ritual practices, principally initiation and funerary ceremonies but also obligatory sacrifices and dietary rules, together with fasting, pilgrimage, and festival observances. Textual evidence is constantly checked off against the declarations of personal informants, nowhere more tellingly than in chapter seventy-one. Bīrūnī begins by chronicling the mythical separation of scholars and riders. The innate merit of the former failed because most Hindus, like most people elsewhere, were not philosophers, and so philosophers could not rule. Warriors filled the power vacuum. Becoming kings, they proved to be perverse purveyors of power: they exempted Brahmins from the death penalty but exempted themselves from the penalty of being blinded for theft! Hindu prisoners of war suffered the worst fate, however. According to canonical law (the *dharmaśāstras*), such prisoners could only achieve expiation by an elaborate rite requiring them to ingest *pancagavya*, the five products linked to the cow. While that requirement in itself seems extreme, even it is not adequate according to Bīrūnī’s Brahmin informants. In their view, no expiation is possible for Hindu prisoners of war who return to India: they are never allowed to resume their former status (tr., II, p. 163).

Throughout the final chapters of the *India*, Bīrūnī continues to display his penchant for comparing and evaluating. While he tries to offer his readers a compendium of Hindu religious lore, as he read, heard about, and observed it, he also hopes to appropriate the “higher” truth of Indian philosophy, bracketing it with the Hellenistic corpus and integrating both into the worldview of educated Muslims. He cares little for the uneducated—whether Muslim or Hindu—and so the final chapters of the *India* that are devoted to Hindu rituals, appear as a kind of ethnographic afterthought. They lend an air of completeness to his massive tome without, however, aiding his primary goal: to pursue the Truth. In the final analysis, Bīrūnī is better classified as an anthropological philosopher than a philosophical anthropologist.

One would be justified in criticizing Bīrūnī’s presuppositions as elitist and his



methodology as overly reliant on literary data, despite his overtures to personal informants. Yet Bīrūnī stands at the apex of Islamic scholarship on non-Muslim religious traditions. After him no one followed his lead as a dispassionate enquirer into the subtleties of Hindu thought until the late medieval-early modern period of Indo-Muslim history. It remained for nineteenth-century European scholars to spark an interest in further study along the lines he had initiated, among both educated Muslims and also Western scholars of Islam.

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