



A FEW MEDIEVAL INDOLOGISTS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM: A HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDY

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Abstract:

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents a vast intellectual heritage of philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, linguistics, literature, culture, religion, political thought, and arts. During the medieval period, India attracted scholars, travellers, translators, and intellectuals from different cultural and geographical backgrounds. Their observations, translations, and scholarly investigations contributed significantly to the documentation, interpretation, and transmission of Indian knowledge. Among them, Al-Biruni, Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang), Ibn Battuta, Abul Fazl and Dara Shikoh occupy the most significant position. Although these scholars differ in their objectives, methods, and historical contexts, their works provide valuable insights and information into India's intellectual traditions, religious practices, educational systems and cultural interactions and social life.

This article examines the contributions of these selected medieval Indologists to the understanding and transmission of the Indian Knowledge System. It explores Al-Biruni's comparative study of Indian philosophy and sciences, Xuanzang's accounts of Buddhist learning and educational institutions, Ibn Battuta's observations of social and institutional life, Abul Fazl's systematic documentation of Mughal India, and Dara Shikoh's efforts to interpret Indian philosophical traditions through a comparative religious framework. The article argues that their works constitute important historical sources for reconstructing India's intellectual past and understanding the development of intercultural knowledge.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge System, Indology, Al-Biruni, Xuanzang, Ibn Battuta, Abul Fazl, Dara Shikoh, cross-cultural exchange, intellectual history.

Introduction:

The medieval period occupies an important position in the intellectual history of India. It witnessed the preservation, development, circulation, and reinterpretation of knowledge across different regions, languages, religions, and scholarly traditions. Indian intellectual life was not confined to religious philosophy alone; it included mathematics, astronomy, medicine, grammar, logic, architecture, literature, music, agriculture, statecraft, and systems of education. The expression Indian Knowledge System refers to the interconnected body of knowledge developed and transmitted through India's classical, regional, oral, textual, and practical traditions. Medieval Indologists played a significant role in documenting and interpreting this intellectual heritage. In this article, Indologist is used broadly to refer to scholars who systematically studied Indian languages, religions, philosophies, sciences, and cultural institutions. The term should not be understood as an exact description of every figure discussed here, since medieval scholars operated within different intellectual environments and did not necessarily identify themselves as Indologists.

To study the Indology and to prepare this paper Al-Biruni (973–1048), Xuanzang (c. 602–664), Ibn Battuta (1304–1368/69), Abul Fazl (1551–1602) and Dara Shikoh (1615–1659) are mostly significant. Their writings provide different perspectives on India's intellectual and cultural life. Some investigated religious doctrines and scientific knowledge; others recorded educational centres, social customs, political institutions, and philosophical encounters. Al-Biruni's "Kitab ul-Hind" for example, is an important source for understanding Indian religion, mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, and social organisation around the early eleventh century. Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang) and his major work is "Da Tang Xiyu Ji"



(Great Tang Records on the Western Regions) which provides information of Buddhist learning. Ibn Battuta and his major work “Rihla” (a travel account) is highly significant. Historian Abul Fazl and his major works “Akbarname and Ain-i-Akbari” is also mostly informative about Mughal Administration. Similarly, the translation projects associated with Dara Shikoh demonstrate how Indian philosophical texts became part of wider Persianate intellectual conversations. Therefore, the study of these Indologists explain the preservation and system of Indian Knowledge.

Objectives of the study: The significant objectives of this research article are-

1. To examine the contributions of selected medieval scholars to the documentation and interpretation of Indian knowledge.
2. To investigate their accounts of Indian philosophy, religion, science, education, culture and social institutions.
3. To analyse the role of translation and cross-cultural interaction in the transmission of knowledge.
4. To understand the relevance of medieval intellectual exchanges to contemporary interdisciplinary research.

Research questions: This study addresses the following research questions-

1. How did medieval scholars contribute to the documentation of India's intellectual traditions?
2. What aspects of Indian philosophy, science, religion, and education did they emphasise?
3. To what extent can their writings be used as reliable historical sources?
4. What is the significance of their contributions for the contemporary study of the Indian Knowledge System?

Research methodology:

The article adopts a qualitative, historical, and interpretative methodology. It draws upon the surviving writings of the selected scholars, published translations, and modern academic studies of medieval intellectual history. The primary materials include Al-Biruni's Kitab al-Hind, Xuanzang's travel account commonly known as Great Tang Records on the Western Regions or Da Tang Xiyu Ji, Ibn Battuta's Rihla, Abul Fazl's Ain-i-Akbari, and Dara Shikoh's Sirr-i-Akbar. These texts are examined thematically with attention to their descriptions of knowledge, educational institutions, religious traditions, social organisation, and intercultural exchange. The study also considers the historical circumstances in which the works were produced.

Al-Biruni (973–1048 CE):

Al-Biruni was a polymath from Khwarazm whose interests included mathematics, astronomy, geography, chronology, religion, and philosophy. His study of Indian intellectual traditions is one of the most important examples of comparative scholarship in the medieval Islamic world. Al-Biruni's principal contribution was methodological as well as descriptive. His attention to language, textual evidence, comparison, and rational inquiry made his work a valuable source for the history of Indian knowledge. Modern scholarship continues to examine both his intellectual achievements and the limitations of his perspective.

Indian philosophy and religion:

Al-Biruni's Kitab al-Hind, also known through Edward C. Sachau's English translation as Alberuni's India, provides a systematic account of Indian religious beliefs, philosophical ideas, literary traditions, social practices, and scientific knowledge. He examined Indian philosophical traditions through Sanskrit texts and discussions with learned Indian scholars. His engagement with Hindu thought included questions concerning the nature of ultimate reality, the soul, creation, religious duties, and the relationship between philosophical reasoning and spiritual practice. His work is particularly significant because he attempted to explain Indian beliefs to readers unfamiliar with their intellectual background. Rather



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than treating Indian traditions exclusively as objects of criticism, he sought to understand their internal reasoning and compare them with ideas familiar in the Islamic philosophical tradition.

Contribution to mathematics and astronomy:

Al-Biruni recognised the importance of Indian mathematics and astronomy. He discussed mathematical methods, astronomical calculations, calendars, planetary movements, and systems of chronology. His account reveals that Indian scientific traditions formed part of a wider network of intellectual exchange connecting South Asia with Central Asia and the Islamic world.

His work is useful not only for identifying scientific concepts but also for understanding how mathematical and astronomical ideas were interpreted across different linguistic and cultural environments.

Sanskrit learning and translation:

One of Al-Biruni's important achievements was his engagement with Sanskrit intellectual literature. His work on Indian texts included a rendering of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras into Arabic, known as the Kitab Batanjali. This project represents an early example of the translation of Indian philosophical thought into an Arabic scholarly environment.

Social structure and the caste system:

Al-Biruni discussed the Indian caste system, religious regulations, customs, and social distinctions. His observations are valuable for the historical study of social hierarchy and access to knowledge. However, his account should not be treated as a complete description of every Indian community. It was shaped by his sources, his encounters with learned groups, and the intellectual categories through which he interpreted Indian society.

Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang) (c. 602–664 CE):

Xuanzang was a Chinese Buddhist monk and scholar who travelled through Central and South Asia in search of Buddhist scriptures and advanced religious learning. His account provides important evidence about India's religious landscape, intellectual centres, and educational traditions in the seventh century.

Nalanda and higher learning:

One of Xuanzang's most significant contributions to the study of Indian knowledge is his description of Buddhist educational institutions, particularly Nalanda. His account is an important source for reconstructing the history of monastic education, scholarly debate, and advanced learning in early medieval India. Nalanda was associated with the study of Buddhist philosophy, logic, grammar, and other disciplines. It attracted students and teachers from different parts of Asia and illustrates how religious institutions could also serve as centres of intellectual activity. Xuanzang's writings provide evidence of an educational culture in which learning involved textual study, memorisation, interpretation, debate, and the training of advanced scholars.

Buddhist philosophy and Sanskrit texts:

Xuanzang travelled to India partly to obtain authoritative Buddhist texts and resolve questions concerning Buddhist doctrine. After returning to China, he participated in extensive translation work, helping to transmit Indian Buddhist literature into Chinese.



His translation activity demonstrates that the movement of knowledge between India and China depended on sustained scholarly cooperation, linguistic competence, religious networks, and the availability of manuscripts.

Indian society, geography, and culture:

In addition to Buddhist institutions, Xuanzang recorded information about geographical regions, rulers, religious communities, customs, and social life. His account is particularly valuable for studying the relationship between religious institutions and the political and cultural environments in which they operated. However, Xuanzang's perspective was shaped by his principal interest in Buddhism. Therefore, his account should be read alongside other textual and archaeological evidence when reconstructing the broader Indian intellectual landscape.

Contribution to the Indian Knowledge System:

Xuanzang's contribution lies in documenting India's Buddhist intellectual heritage and preserving evidence of the international circulation of Indian texts. His journey demonstrates that Indian knowledge was not static or geographically isolated; it participated in transregional networks of education, translation, pilgrimage, and philosophical debate.

Ibn Battuta (1304–1368/69 CE):

Ibn Battuta was a Moroccan traveller who spent several years in the Delhi Sultanate during the fourteenth century. His account offers valuable information about political authority, legal institutions, commerce, urban society, and cultural practices.

Knowledge of law and administration:

Ibn Battuta was trained in Islamic jurisprudence and served as a qadi, or judge, at the court of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq. His experiences provide insights into the operation of legal institutions and the relationship between scholarly qualifications, religious law, and political authority. Although his account primarily reflects the Indo-Islamic institutional environment, it helps historians understand the wider social and intellectual context in which different traditions of learning operated.

Trade, cities, and occupational knowledge:

His Rihla contains descriptions of cities, markets, commercial activities, travel routes, and the occupations of various groups. Such material helps reconstruct the social and economic conditions that supported the circulation of people, books, goods, and ideas. Trade networks and urban centres formed an important part of the infrastructure through which knowledge travelled. Merchants, religious scholars, administrators, and travellers all contributed to these exchanges, even when their principal purposes were not scholarly.

Education and religious life:

Ibn Battuta's observations also illuminate religious institutions, learned individuals, and the role of scholarly networks in medieval India. His work is especially useful for examining the interconnectedness of legal learning, religious authority, political patronage, and urban life.

Limitations and historical value:

The Rihla is an important historical source, but it is also a literary travel narrative containing anecdotes, reported information, and accounts of extraordinary experiences. Modern historians therefore compare its descriptions with other



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contemporary evidence rather than accepting every detail as direct observation. Ibn Battuta's contribution to the study of the Indian Knowledge System is consequently indirect but significant: he helps explain the social, institutional, and economic conditions in which knowledge was produced, transmitted, and practised.

Abul Fazl (1551–1602 CE):

Abul Fazl was a historian, court intellectual, and principal chronicler of Emperor Akbar's reign. His writings provide extensive information about Mughal administration, revenue systems, social organisation, cultural practices, and the intellectual environment of the sixteenth century.

“Ain-i-Akbari” as an encyclopaedic source:

The Ain-i-Akbari, the administrative and descriptive portion of the Akbarnama, is among the most important sources for studying Mughal India. It records information about the imperial administration, provincial organisation, revenue arrangements, military institutions, prices, measurements, and various aspects of Indian society. Its significance for the Indian Knowledge System lies in its systematic collection of information about the functioning of a large political and economic system. It enables historians to examine the relationship between administrative knowledge, agricultural production, taxation, measurement, and governance. The work is particularly valuable for studying the theoretical structure of Akbar's revenue administration, although official descriptions cannot automatically be assumed to represent conditions in every village.

Indian traditions and intellectuality:

Abul Fazl's intellectual environment was shaped by Akbar's interest in religious discussion, historical inquiry, and the collection and translation of important works. The Mughal court became a meeting place for scholars representing different religious and philosophical traditions.

The broader translation movement under Akbar encouraged the rendering of Sanskrit texts into Persian, including works associated with the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Such projects brought Indian narratives and philosophical concepts into a Persian-language literary and political environment. Abul Fazl's own writings helped create a framework for understanding India's cultural diversity within the context of imperial governance and intellectual exchange.

Knowledge and society:

The Ain-i-Akbari also illustrates how rulers and administrators depended upon organised information. Agricultural yields, land measurements, revenue assessments, prices, and provincial statistics were essential to governing an extensive empire. These practices can be understood as forms of applied knowledge. They connected local agricultural experience and administrative record-keeping with wider systems of political decision-making.

Historical contribution:

Abul Fazl's importance lies primarily in the documentation of institutional and administrative knowledge. Unlike Al-Biruni, who concentrated substantially on religious and scientific traditions, Abul Fazl wrote from within an imperial court and was concerned with describing and legitimising the Mughal state. His work must therefore be read critically, with attention to its courtly purpose and the possible differences between imperial ideals and actual social conditions.



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Dara Shikoh (1615–1659 CE):

Dara Shikoh, the eldest son of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, was a scholar and patron of comparative religious inquiry. His projects sought to explore philosophical connections between Islamic Sufism and Indian traditions, particularly Vedanta.

Sirr-i-Akbar and the Upanishads:

Dara Shikoh's most significant contribution to the transmission of Indian philosophical knowledge was *Sirr-i-Akbar*, a Persian translation of fifty-two Upanishads completed around 1657. The project involved collaboration with Indian Brahman scholars and Persian-speaking intellectuals. The Upanishads contain philosophical reflections on the self, ultimate reality, consciousness, liberation, and the relationship between the individual and the absolute. Their translation into Persian made these texts accessible to readers who did not know Sanskrit. This was an important moment in the history of intellectual exchange because it brought Indian philosophical literature into a language widely used in the scholarly and administrative cultures of the Mughal world.

Majma-ul-Bahrain: The mingling of two traditions:

In *Majma-ul-Bahrain*, commonly translated as *The Mingling of the Two Oceans*, Dara Shikoh explored perceived correspondences between Sufi thought and Indian philosophical traditions. His comparative approach sought to identify shared concepts and possible points of philosophical convergence. Rather than treating religious traditions as entirely disconnected, he attempted to develop a vocabulary through which scholars could discuss their similarities. However, his approach was interpretative. The equivalences he proposed between Sufi concepts and Vedantic ideas should not be understood as proof that the traditions were identical. Their differences in theology, metaphysics, terminology, and religious practice remain important.

Translation as a collaborative intellectual process:

Dara Shikoh's projects demonstrate that intellectual achievements often depend on collaboration rather than the efforts of a single individual. Indian pandits supplied Sanskrit learning and textual interpretation, while Persianate scholars contributed linguistic and interpretative resources. Although Dara Shikoh sponsored and shaped these projects, the precise extent of his personal participation in the Sanskrit-to-Persian translation process remains a matter of scholarly discussion. Therefore, the role of Indian scholars should be recognised as integral to the production of these translations.

Influence of Indian philosophy:

The Persian translation of the Upanishads later became the basis for a Latin translation by Anquetil-Duperron, published in the early nineteenth century. This helped introduce European readers to selected Upanishadic texts through an indirect translation route. The process illustrates how knowledge may travel through multiple languages and intellectual communities, with each stage shaping the interpretation of the original material. Thus, Dara Shikoh's contribution was both philosophical and historical. He helped to create a bridge between Sanskrit and Persian scholarship and demonstrated the potential of translation to facilitate intercultural understanding.

Comparative analysis of the selected scholars:

The above discussed selected five scholars significantly approached Indian knowledge from different intellectual positions and perspective and their works are harmonious rather than interchangeable.



Scholar/Indologist	Major Work	Contribution to understanding Indian knowledge
Al-Biruni	Kitab ul-Hind	Indian philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, religion, and society and culture
Xuanzang	Da Tang Xiyu Ji	Buddhist education, Nalanda, religious institutions and India–China intellectual exchange
Ibn Battuta	Rihla	Legal institutions, urban life, trade, social practices and political administration
Abul Fazl	Ain-i-Akbari	Imperial administration, revenue knowledge, agriculture and social organisation
Dara Shikoh	Sirr-i-Akbar and Majma-ul-Bahrain	Sanskrit–Persian translation and comparative religious philosophy

From the above comparison, we can understand the following dimensions of medieval intellectual society.

1. Knowledge was multidimensional. It included theoretical philosophy, religious learning, empirical observation, administrative practices, and social life.
2. Translation was a major instrument of intellectual exchange. Xuanzang's work helped transmit Indian Buddhist literature to China, while Dara Shikoh's project brought Sanskrit philosophical texts into Persian.
3. Institutions supported the production of knowledge. Monasteries, scholarly communities, royal courts, and urban system provided different environments for debate, teaching and translation.
4. The purposes of scholarship were varied. Al-Biruni pursued comparative understanding, Xuanzang sought Buddhist learning, Ibn Battuta recorded experiences of travel and public life, Abul Fazl documented imperial institutions and Dara Shikoh explored philosophical platform.

Major findings:

The major findings of the comparative study of these medieval scholars are highly significant and we can enlisted as follows

1. Preservation of intellectual heritage: The writings of these scholars preserve information about philosophical systems, religious texts, educational institutions, scientific practices, and social structures. Their accounts are particularly valuable where other contemporary records are limited or fragmentary.
2. Intercultural exchange and knowledge transmission: Medieval intellectual history demonstrates that knowledge travelled through pilgrimage, trade, translation, scholarly debate, and royal patronage. The circulation of Buddhist scriptures between India and China and the translation of Upanishads into Persian illustrate different forms of this process.
3. The relationship between knowledge and power: The activities of these scholars also reveal the relationship between intellectual life and political institutions. Royal courts could support translation, historical documentation, and scholarship, while religious institutions provided settings for teaching and philosophical debate.
4. Knowledge as a social practice: The Indian Knowledge System cannot be understood exclusively through philosophical treatises or scientific texts. It must also be examined through the institutions, social relationships, economic practices, and cultural environments that enabled knowledge to develop and circulate. Ibn Battuta's descriptions of urban and institutional life and Abul Fazl's records of administration demonstrate the importance of these wider contexts.

Relevance to the contemporary Indian Knowledge System:

The contributions of medieval scholars remain relevant to contemporary research and education in several ways. Firstly, their writings encourage interdisciplinary research connecting history, philosophy, literature, mathematics, religious studies,



linguistics and social sciences. Secondly, their translation projects demonstrate the importance of multilingual scholarship. Studying Indian intellectual traditions through Sanskrit, Pali, Persian, Arabic, Chinese and regional languages can reveal connections that remain less visible when research is limited to a single linguistic way. Thirdly, their works highlight the need to preserve manuscripts, critically edit historical texts, develop reliable translations, and make scholarly resources accessible to students and researchers. Finally, the historical evidence suggests that the Indian Knowledge System should be studied as a dynamic and diverse body of knowledge. It developed through continuity and progression.

Limitations of the study:

This article discusses five selected Indologists and cannot represent the full range of medieval scholarship associated with India. Other important subjects include the contributions of Sanskrit grammarians, mathematicians, astronomers, physicians, Jain scholars, Buddhist philosophers, regional intellectual communities, and Persianate historians. The selected major works of these Indologists also differ considerably in genre. A travel account, a philosophical translation, a religious study, and an imperial administrative record cannot be evaluated adopting same criteria and precisely.

Conclusion:

The contributions of Al-Biruni, Xuanzang, Ibn Battuta, Abul Fazl and Dara Shikoh provide different dimensions of India's medieval intellectual and cultural history. Their works preserve valuable evidence concerning Indian philosophy, scientific traditions, religious institutions, education, social organisation, political administration, and intercultural exchange and social life. Al-Biruni, the polymath stands for his systematic investigation of Indian religion and sciences. Xuanzang proves his expertise for his documentation of Buddhist learning and educational centres. Ibn Battuta's tallency remains for his descriptions of social institutions and everyday life. Abul Fazl is also notable for his comprehensive account of Mughal administration, agriculture and society and Dara Shikoh also remains as a bridge for his efforts to bring Indian philosophical texts into the Persian intellectual world. However, their writings require critical evaluation because every historical account reflects particular circumstances and perspectives and the study of medieval Indologists offers an opportunity to understand India's intellectual heritage and Indian Knowledge System within indigenous and international context.

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
ISSN:2277-7881(Print); IMPACT FACTOR :10.16(2026); IC VALUE:5.16; ISI VALUE:2.286
Peer-Peer Reviewed, Refereed & Open Access International Journal - As per UGC Norms
(Fulfilled Suggests Parameters of UGC by IJMER)
Volume:15, Issue:10(2), October 2026
Scopus Review ID: A2B96D3ACF3FEA2A
Article Received: Reviewed: Accepted
Publisher: Sucharitha Publication, India
Online Copy of Article Publication Available: www.ijmer.in

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