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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/edl/710>

DOI: 10.4000/edl.710

ISSN: 2296-5084

Publisher

Université de Lausanne

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 September 2014

Number of pages: 199-226

ISBN: 978-2-940331-35-2

ISSN: 0014-2026

Electronic reference

Blain Auer, « Early Modern Persian, Urdu, and English Historiography and the Imagination of Islamic India under British Rule », *Études de lettres* [Online], 2-3 | 2014, Online since 15 September 2017, connection on 18 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/edl/710> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/edl.710>

EARLY MODERN PERSIAN, URDU, AND ENGLISH HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE IMAGINATION OF ISLAMIC INDIA UNDER BRITISH RULE

This paper analyses the early modern transformations of South Asian literary cultures through the production of historiography in Persian, English, and Urdu. In the 18th-19th centuries, South Asian communities experienced and participated in a major restructuring of the languages of the subcontinent. Urdu and English were institutionalized as governmental languages and utilized in new literary productions as Persian was gradually marginalized from the centre of literary and governmental politics. Three interrelated colonial policies reshaped the historical consciousness of South Asia and Britain: the production of new Persian histories commissioned under British patronage, the initiation of Urdu historiography through the translation of Persian and English histories, and the construction of the British history of India written in English. This article explores the historical and social dynamics of these events and situates the origins and evolution of the colonial historiographical project. Major works discussed are the *Tārīkh-i Bangālāh* of Salīm Allāh Munshī (fl. 1763), James Mill's (1773-1836) *The History of British India* first published in 1817, Mīr Sher 'Alī Afsos' the *Ārā'ish-i mahfil*, as well as the production of original Urdu histories such as Muḥammad Zakā'-Allāh's (1832-1910) the *Tārīkh-i Hindustān*.

The Persian language is rich, melodious, and elegant; it has been spoken for many ages by the greatest princes in the politest courts of Asia; and a number of admirable works have been written in it by historians, philosophers, and poets, who found it capable of expressing with equal advantage the most beautiful and the most elevated of sentiments.

It must seem strange, therefore, that the study of this language should be so little cultivated at a time when a taste for general and diffusive learning seems universally to prevail.

William JONES, *A Grammar of the Persian Language*, 1771, p. i.

His Lordship-in-Council is of the opinion that the great object of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India; and that all funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on English education alone.

Resolution by Lord Bentinck, March 7, 1835¹.

Introduction

Persian, as a language of influence in South Asia, developed in the medieval period and evolved into the early modern age². Up through the 17th century, the Persian language had a prevailing impact on the South Asian literary sphere through the Mughal courtly cultures³. However, by the 18th century things were to dramatically change for the Persian literary culture as it was gradually marginalized from the centre of literary and governmental polities. It was in this century that the East India Company, the mercantile arm of British interests in the subcontinent, transformed its activities into a complete imperial project. Robert

1. Bureau of Education, *Selections from Educational Records, Part I (1781-1839)*, p. 130. Also see K. A. Ballhatchet, "The Home Government and Bentinck's Educational Policy".

2. M. Alam, "The Culture and Politics of Persian in Precolonial Hindustan". For the process of Persianization of Bengali culture during the 17th and 18th centuries see K. Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India*, p. 215-238.

3. M. Alam, "The Pursuit of Persian".

Travers refers to this critical time in *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British in Bengal*, saying that “the Company began to reimagine itself as a vehicle not just of British national trade, but of the political reconstruction of a Mughal province”⁴. Alongside the efforts to define, categorize and conquer India for imperial aspirations, the British were in the process of shaping their own national consciousness. It was through the construction of India as a literary object that the British forged a new national identity⁵.

The political transformations of this time initiated a new period of Persian language usage. British colonialists entered into a massive and institutionalized study of the Persian literary heritage. British administrators, soldiers, engineers, scientists, linguists, and politicians sought to better understand the Indian subcontinent, through Persian, as best to rule it. History writing was one of the most dominant literary modes utilized in this endeavour. For instance, noting the case of British efforts to colonize south India, Rama Mantena writes, “British interest in the status of history and of historiographical narrative in India was very much at the heart of the formation and consolidation of the colonial state in India”⁶. It was in this period that a new generation of authors gave birth to the British colonial historiographical tradition of India that represented a distinctive turn in the writing of history in the Persian language. This project contributed to lasting changes in three critical and interrelated areas: 1) the conceptualization of “India” as a subject of history with an impetus to discover historical “origins”, 2) the translation and transmission of British colonial historical knowledge into the Urdu language, and 3) the social formation of a new working class of historians/language specialist known as the *munshī*.

4. R. Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India*, p. 67.

5. For three works focusing on the discourses of colonialism and British identity produced in English literature see P. K. Nayar, *English Writing and India, 1600-1920*; P. Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness*; G. Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*.

6. R. S. Mantena, *The Origins of Modern Historiography in India*, p. 9.

1. *Persian Historiography and Translating History*

Historians of colonial India have noted that the premodern British scholars' acquisition of knowledge in South Asia was never a naive or benevolent endeavour. Bernard Cohn demonstrated that the intensified production of colonial knowledge, in the late 18th century, had two primary goals, or at least effects: to transform "knowledge" itself, and in particular, "Indian scholars" into "instruments of colonial rule"⁷. The colonial encounter transformed South Asian forms of knowledge and revolutionized scientific discoveries in geography, botany, and linguistics⁸. In the second half of the 18th century, British scholars systematized their efforts to categorize and quantify the "Orient" through the study, translation, and production of Persian historical texts⁹. This led to a major shift in the core reading audience and purpose of the Persian historiographical tradition.

In this period, the British Governors General, based in Calcutta, were in an intense political and military engagement with the Nawab-Nazims of Bengal for control of the region. As Peter Marshall noted in his study of Bengal, "the year 1765, when the East India Company became the Emperor's *Diwan*, has come to be seen as the dividing line between Mughal and British Bengal"¹⁰. In their expansion into South Asia, the British were in need of an accurate picture of the political terrain to effectively implement their own policies. Christopher Bayly notes that "without good political and military intelligence the British could never have established their rule in India or consolidate the dominant international position of the United Kingdom. During the years of conquest, British knowledge of the country was drawn largely from Indian sources and supplied by Indian agents"¹¹. Calcutta became the epicentre in the production of the new colonial historical knowledge. This was achieved, in large part, by the foundation of the "Asiatick Society" that was established in 1784 under the leadership of William Jones (1746-1794) and consolidated in the creation of Fort William College in 1800. Kapil

7. B. S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, p. 21.

8. K. Raj, *Relocating Modern Science*.

9. T. Rahman, "British Language Policies and Imperialism in India", p. 105.

10. P. J. Marshall, *Bengal*, p. 93.

11. See Ch. Bayly, *Empire and Information*, p. 10.

Raj regards Fort William College as “the first of a series of institutions in which these different knowledge traditions and their corresponding skills were brought together, standardized, and rendered teachable”¹². It was in this period that the study of the Persian language began to accelerate. William Jones produced *A Grammar of the Persian Language* that was printed in 1771. As early as 1767, Benjamin Kennicott (1718-1783), a noted Hebrew scholar, made a proposal to establish a professorship of the Persian language at the University of Oxford. Kennicott gives a simple reason for this need, it was because “the great and rich possessions of the East-India Company in that part of the world make it of the utmost consequence to them to have persons in their service well instructed in the Persian language”¹³.

On the whole, British administrators in India did not have direct access to the sources of knowledge of the subcontinent, lacking as they did in linguistic and cultural fluency. As a consequence, they generally relied on the established class of Persian educated literati immersed in the Mughal courtly ethos, individuals directly employed under the Mughal emperor or in one of the regional principalities. Now employed by the East India Company and in changing economic, political, and social circumstances, many members of the Persian literary community navigated two cultural worlds. They increasingly occupied the cultural borderlands that existed between the British colonial administration and the Persian language courts of South Asia. They facilitated the liaison of these often divergent, and at times collaborative cultural spheres, performing variously the role of interpreter, translator, and informant. In many cases they communicated the values of Persian language courts to their British patrons while translating those values to accommodate the cultural differences and political power represented by the British. In this position the “native informant” was both a “source” and an “author”.

In pre-colonial India, the historian writing in Persian frequently served in administrative posts as judges, advisors, ministers, and mid-level bureaucrats. The crafters of history were rarely, if ever, exclusively

12. K. Raj, “Colonial Encounters and the Forging of New Knowledge and National Identities”, p. 127.

13. B. Kennicott, *A Proposal for Establishing a Professorship of the Persian Language in the University of Oxford*, p. 12.

authors¹⁴. As such, Persian history writing was didactic in nature and closely wedded to the genre of advice literature. As the British acquired more knowledge and power and employed larger numbers of Persian literati within the colonial apparatus, a significant transformation took place in the social function of the Persian historian. During 17th century Mughal times, the title of *munshī* had been conferred upon court scribes responsible for official correspondence. Under British service this position increasingly and exclusively evolved into the “Moonshee”, “a native teacher of languages, especially of Arabic, Persian, and Urdū”¹⁵. The transformation of the *munshī* into a cross-cultural interlocutor can be seen “literally” in the most important Persian grammar of the period titled, *The Persian Moonshee*¹⁶. Major shifts in the administrative cadre from Mughal to British institutional governance appeared across bureaucratic offices such as was the case of the *akhbār navīs*¹⁷. Members of the new class of “native” colonial scholars produced, at the impetus of British colonial administrators and for the first time, a colonial Persian historiographical tradition.

One of the earliest authors of colonial historiography was Salīm Allāh Munshī (fl. 1763). Though little is known about the life of Salīm Allāh, he was one of a growing number of South Asian scholars acting as translators for British administrators, as the title of *munshī* indicates. He wrote the *Tārīkh-i Bangālah*, one of the most important histories of the second-half of the 18th century¹⁸. The history was commissioned by Henry Vansittart, the Governor of Fort William between 1760-1764, and it details contemporary events in Bengal between 1695-1756. High level British administrators like Henry Vansittart were frequently personally involved in the new historiographical project. He had partially translated the *Ma'āthir-i Ālamgīrī*, a history of the late period of Awrangzīb's reign, and had it published in 1785¹⁹.

14. For some historical background on social policy and court function of history writers see B. Auer, *Symbols of Authority in Medieval Islam*, p. 16-18.

15. H. Yule, *Hobson-Jobson*, p. 581.

16. Francis Gladwin first published this in Kolkata in 1795 and revised and edited it for numerous editions. See for instance F. Gladwin, *The Persian Moonshee*.

17. See M. Fisher, “The Office of Akhbār Nawīs”.

18. M. Salīm Allāh, *Tārīkh-i Bangālah* (India Office Collection British Library) and *Tārīkh-i Bangālah*.

19. M. S. M. Khān, *The History of the First Ten Years of the Reign of Alemgeer*.

The process of translating the Persian historiographical tradition into colonial knowledge was complex. The *Tārīkh-i Bangālah* reveals one of the characteristic literary elements of the colonial historiographical tradition. While detailing dynastic succession from one ruling family member to another, Salīm Allāh Munshī clearly does so in a fashion to make this information useful to the British administrator. In Persian historiography produced for South Asian courts, dynastic succession was incidental to larger narrative goals that detailed the justice and injustice of Muslim rulers. For the British reader this information was primarily for the understanding of who had ruled and who succeeded to rule. The reorientation of information and the subservience of narrative intent to narrative fact is a characteristic of “modern” historiography. In this sense one can observe the first signs of modern Persian historiography in the late 18th century.

The production of Persian language histories under British patronage was just one important element in the colonial historiographical enterprise. It was accompanied by an intensive translation project into English. The *Tārīkh-i Bangālah* was translated into English by Francis Gladwin and published as *A Narrative of the Transactions in Bengal during the Soobahdaries of Azeem-us-Shan, Jaffar Khan, Shuja Khan, Sirafranz Khan and Alyvardy Khan* in 1788²⁰. Gladwin (1744/5-1812) was a prolific translator of Persian works and was appointed in 1801 as the first professor of Persian at the East India Company’s college at Fort William. His oeuvre includes major translations of important works such as the *Ā’in-i Akbarī*, *Bayān-i wāqī’*, *Ṭūṭināma*, poetry collections, and advice literature. These works were published at an official level and dedicated to the chief administrative officers of the British empire. For instance, Francis Gladwin dedicated *The History of Hindostan, during the Reigns of Jehāngīr, Shāhjahān, and Aurungzebe*, which was published in 1788, to the Governor-General of India, Charles Cornwallis²¹. This work was part translation and part historical reinvention based on earlier Persian historical works written in India. His translation of Abū al-Faḥr al-ʿĀ’in-i Akbarī, which saw the first volume completed in 1783, was dedicated

20. M. Salīm Allāh, *A Narrative of the Transactions in Bengal during the Soobahdaries of Azeem-us-Shan, Jaffar Khan, Shuja Khan, Sirafranz Khan and Alyvardy Khan*.

21. F. Gladwin, *The History of Hindostan, during the Reigns of Jehāngīr, Shāhjahān, and Aurungzebe*.

to Warren Hastings, Governor-General of Bengal from 1772-1785²². It was under the patronage of the Governor-General's office and the East India Trading Company that the translation was completed. The purposes of such translations were stated clearly in a letter from the Governor-General's office published along with the text, that is "to assist the judgment of the Court of Directors on many points of importance, to the first interests of the Company"²³.

2. *Shaping the Historical Consciousness of "British" India*

One of the major developments of the British historiographical project was that historians gradually began to conceptualize India as a singular historical subject. This was a new direction in the evolving historical consciousness of India and in contrast to the precolonial Persian historiographical tradition which generally followed a dynastic configuration. An illustration of this transformation can be seen in Alexander Dow's translation of Muḥammad Qāsim Hindū Shāh Astarābādī Firishta's *Gulshan-i Ibrahīmī* first published in 1768²⁴. Firishta wrote the *Gulshan-i Ibrahīmī* for Deccan courts and it was completed around 1609. It is an extensive history of the period of the dominance of South Asian Muslim courts, dating from the Ghaznavids to the 16th century. It is a classic example of the Persian dynastic history of Muslim rulers, as the title *Gulshan-i Ibrahīmī* or *The Abrahamic Flower Garden* indicates. Dow, however, transforms the conceptual orientation of the work retitling it, *The History of Hindostan*. This is an early example of a historical work that, in its title, conceived of the historical idea of "Hindustan" as an integrative whole, beyond the individual dynasties that ruled various regions, but never the entirety of what is now the modern nation-state of India. Dow implicitly states the reason for his change in the dedication of the work to King George III (r. 1760-1820). He says that the purpose of this translation is to show the British, "A striking contrast of their own condition; and, whilst they feel for human nature suffering under despotism, exult at the same time, in that happy liberty, which

22. Abū al-Faḍl, *Ayēen Akbery*, p. ix-xii.

23. *Ibid.*, p. ix sq.

24. M. Q. H. S. A. Firishta, *The History of Hindostan*.

they enjoy under the government of a Prince”²⁵. Dow’s translation fits the model of two enduring imperial ideologies: one that the legitimacy of British rule in India rested upon the concept of “Oriental despotism”, and two, a belief that India was “once ‘magnificent’ but now fallen”²⁶.

Naturally, most of the new works in Persian commissioned by British authorities dealt specifically with Bengal, the region where the British had established the greatest expanse of their administration. One of the next most influential Persian historians and representatives of the Persian literati employed by the British was Ghulām Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā’ī (b. 1140/1727 or 1728). Born in Delhi, he moved to ‘Aẓīmābād (Patna) where his father and uncles served in the court of ‘Alivardī Khān (1676-1756), the Nawab of Bengal between 1740-1756. Ghulām Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā’ī frequently acted officially in the role of emissary, particularly in establishing relations between the East India Company and the Rohilla leader, Ḥāfiẓ Raḥmat Khān (1120/1708-1188/1774)²⁷. During the rule of Mīr Qāsim, the Nawab of Bengal between 1760-1763, he was the principle envoy to the British delegation in Calcutta. In the 1760’s he passed into the service of the East India Company and in 1774 or 1775 it was Colonel Goddard who appointed him to the post of Revenue Collector of Chunagarh. He was the author of *Siyar al-muta’akhirin* (*History of modern times*), a work completed in 1781. It was around this time that Ṭabāṭabā’ī had an interview with Governor-General Warren Hastings and the work was subsequently dedicated to him²⁸. Ghulām Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā’ī was greatly influenced by Sujān Rā’ī Bhandārī’s late 17th century history, the *Khulāṣat al-tavārikh* (*The compendium of histories*), written in Persian and completed in 1696 as a landmark in the literary production of Awrangzīb’s period. Sujān Rā’ī Bhandārī, was a Hindu author who served in the function of *munshī*²⁹.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Th. R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, p. 15.

27. I. Husain, “The Role of Ghulam Husain in the Formation of Anglo-Rohilla Relations between 1766-71”.

28. For more detailed biographical information of Ghulām Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā’ī and the history of the manuscript and print editions of *Siyar al-muta’akhkhirin* see C. A. Storey, *Persian Literature*. The following articles are largely summaries of Storey see M. A. Rahim, “Historian Ghulam Husain Tabatabai” and T. Ahmad, “Sayyid Ghulam Hussain Tabatabai”.

29. Sujān Rā’ī Bhandārī, *Khulāṣat al-tavārikh*. While setting new directions for Persian historiography in South Asia, Sujān Rā’ī was greatly influenced by Abū al-Faẓl. For a summary discussion of the *Khulāṣat al-tavārikh* along with references to Abū

The general introduction to the *Siyar al-muta'akhhirîn* displays another new pattern in historical consciousness that took shape in 18th century Persian historiography. In general, universal histories written in Persian begin with two mythic cosmogonies: Islamic and Persian. The first treats the life of Adam, the progenitor of human kind, and his subsequent descendants of prophets leading up to the time of Muhammad. A second myth of origins follows an ancient Persian model that begins with the life of Gayumarth and proceed through the history of Persian kings. In contrast to the established chronology of historic origins, Ghulām Ḥusayn Tabāṭabā'ī situates India in a singular linear narrative as a succession of dynasties who rule a single unified region, India, through time. Thus, the "Indian" portion begins with "Hindu" kings from Yudhiṣṭhira to Pṛthvīrāj Chauhān. These Hindu kings are superseded by Muslim rulers who are followed by the British. This is one of the first characteristics of colonial British historiography. The "ancient" history of India becomes a backdrop for the "modern history" that involves the immediate attention of colonial authorities. The bulk of the *Siyar al-muta'akhhirîn* details such events as the death of Awrangzīb and the succession to the Mughal throne. It treats in detail the political and military history of Bengal from the Nizamat of Murshidabad and the affairs of 'Alivardī Khān, the British victory at Plassey, Robert Clives' diplomacy with Shāh 'Ālam II (r. 1173-1202/1759-1788, 1203-1221/1788-1806), Shujā' al-Dawla's capitulation to the British in Awadh, the events of Muhammad Shāh's (r. 1131-1161/1719-1748) reign, the Maratha and Aḥmad Shāh Durrāni encounter, Ḥaydar 'Alī Khān of Mysore, the death of Nawāb Mīr Qāsim down to 1781. John Briggs wrote, in the preface to his 1832 revised edition, of the transition of power from Mughal to Maratha and then British rule:

No period of Indian history can be so interesting to Englishmen, as that which immediately preceded the establishment of our dominion, and no circumstances can be so instructive as those which hurled to the ground the most potent empire in the universe, and which elevated in its stead nearly at the same moment, that of a race of illiterate

al- Faẓl's influence see M. Alam, S. Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World*, p. 401-410.

and course barbarians, in one quarter; and led to the introduction of a highly civilized people in other parts³⁰.

As a consequence, Ghulām Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī's history received enormous attention from British soldiers and administrators. The *Siyar al-muta'akhhirīn* caught the notice of William Jones, around 1790, who engaged in translating extracts from the work to observe "the Administration of Government and Justice by the English in India"³¹. An English translation of the *Siyar al-muta'akhhirīn* quickly made its way into print. Significantly, it played a role in an international scandal involving Warren Hastings during his impeachment hearings for alleged fiscal improprieties committed in India heard before the British Parliament in London. Hājī Muṣṭafā, the translator, sent his translation of the *Siyar al-muta'akhhirīn* to England in the hopes of finding a publisher there so that the work would go "towards clearing the Governor's Character"³². In fact, the translator claims that this was his motivation for producing the work. However, when Hājī Muṣṭafā was unsuccessful bringing the book to publication in England he turned to a publishing house in Calcutta. This he felt would have the secondary benefit of "supplicating the British public in Bengal"³³.

3. The Role of Urdu Historiography and Translation

A major transition from the use of Persian to Urdu began at the very beginning of the 19th century. It was a significant period that initiated Urdu historiographical production under colonial auspices, a trend that was paralleled by other vernacular South Asian languages. For instance, Partha Chatterjee notes in his study of Bengali historiography of the period that "the first three books of narrative prose in

30. Ghulām Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *The Siyar-ul-Mutakherin: A History of the Mohamedan Power in India during the Last Century*, p. iii sq.

31. See title page of the W. Jones translation of Ghulām Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *The Siyar-ul-Mutakherin* (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library).

32. Ghulām Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *A Translation of the Sēir Mutaqharin*, p. 4. For some speculation and biographical information on the interesting figure of Hājī Muṣṭafā see M. J. Franklin, *Orientalist Jones*.

33. Ghulām Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *A Translation of the Sēir Mutaqharin*, p. 5.

Bengali commissioned by the Fort William College in Calcutta for use by young Company officials learning the local vernacular were books of history”³⁴. It was a period of intense reimagining global history in general and Islamic history in particular. While for the British, Persian was a language of necessity, Urdu was a language of convenience. The Urdu language was uniquely positioned to disseminate historical knowledge in South Asia. As Gail Minault notes in her study of the Delhi College, “Urdu (or Hindustani) filled the need for an Indian vernacular that was more generally understood than Persian, but that nevertheless had an association with government and incorporated administrative terms and concepts”³⁵.

One of the first authors in the budding Urdu historiographical tradition was Mīr Sher ‘Alī Afsos (1735-1809). Mīr Sher ‘Alī Afsos was a *munshī* within the British colonial institutional structure. He worked at Fort Williams College under Richard Wellesley (1760-1842) and John Gilchrist (1759-1841) as the head of the “Hindoostanee Department of the College”. Afsos became famous for the *Ārā’ish-i mahfil* (*Embellishment of the assembly*)³⁶. It was first published in Calcutta in 1808 and then in subsequent editions and forms in 1848, 1863, 1871, and 1882. A partial French translation was produced in 1844³⁷. It quickly became a standard for the Urdu language. John Shakespear utilized a selection of the text in 1817 for “Hindustani” language instruction³⁸. It was only a year earlier that he helped compile and select Arabic sources to reimagine the history of Islamic Spain³⁹. After Shakespear’s contribution the text was used for the High Proficiency exam in Urdu for British civil servants in India⁴⁰. The *Ārā’ish-i mahfil* became an important text in the “new curriculum for the training of administrators”⁴¹. However, its perceived value as a historical text dissipated with time. W. Nassau Lees notes in his preface to the fourth edition of 1871

34. P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, p. 77.

35. See G. Minault, “Delhi College and Urdu”, p. 121.

36. Mīr Sher ‘Alī Afsos, *Kitāb ārā’ish-i mahfil, ḥāṣil-i mazmūn-i Khulāṣah al-Hind*.

37. Mīr Sher ‘Alī Afsos, *Histoire des rois de l’Hindoustan après les Pandavas*.

38. J. Shakespear, *Muntakhabāt-i Hindī, or Selections in Hindustani*.

39. Th. H. Horne, J. Shakespear, *The History of the Mahometan Empire in Spain*.

40. D. Bredi, “Remarks on *Ārāish-e mahfil* by Mīr Sher ‘Alī Afsos”, p. 34 n. 3.

41. S. Sharma, “‘If There is a Paradise on Earth, It Is Here’”.

that he didn't believe it had any "intrinsic value", other than it being an example of "standard Oordoo"⁴².

The *Ārā'ish-i mahfil* was a "translation" of Sujān Rā'ī Bhandārī's late 17th century history, the *Khulāṣat al-tavārikh*, the work that had impacted Ghulām Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī. The *Khulāṣat al-tavārikh* was chosen as a project for translation because it stood as the standard of the late-Persian historiographical tradition in South Asia. As a literary piece it covered a range of three historiographical topics: the geography of India, the history of Hindu kings and kingdoms, and a history of Muslim rulers beginning with Nāṣir al-Dīn Sabuktigīn and continuing down to the time of Awrangzīb. The section on Hindu kings and kingdoms begins with the mythical king Yudhiṣṭhira of the Mahābhārata down to Pṛthvīrāj of the Chauhān rulers. Historically speaking it created a frame for Indian history segmented between Hindus and Muslims, though geographical bound. This represented a Brahminical literati historical viewpoint that is exemplified in other works of the period such as the prose Bengali historical work the *Rājābali* by Mṛtyuñjay Vidyālaṅkāra published in 1808. Here time is composed essentially of yugas, the current one being the Kālīyuga, which begins with the reign of Yudhiṣṭhira. Mṛtyuñjay's view of the history of Hindu kings, like that of Afsos, ends with Pṛthvīrāj Chauhān⁴³.

Alongside the production of Urdu language histories came transformations in education⁴⁴. The founding of the Delhi College in the 1820's led to the advancement of education in Urdu where it was the language of instruction for all subjects of study⁴⁵. The formation of the Delhi College, and its active press, the Maṭba' al-'Ulūm, played a major role producing historical works on India. Beginnings of a major Urdu translation project, initiated under the Principle of the Delhi College Felix Boutrous, in the 1840s came out of the Vernacular Translation Society which serialized a number of English historical works such as "a

42. See preface to Sher 'Alī Ja'farī Afsos, *Ārā'ish-i mahfil*, p. i.

43. For an overview of the Brahmin literati historical view in the *Rājābali* see P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, p. 77-84.

44. Major educational reforms were underway across colonial South Asia. This affected the transmission of Persian and Arabic language education. For the case of the Calcutta Madrasa see M. Q. Zaman, "Religious Education and the Rhetoric of Reform", p. 300.

45. See G. Minault, "Delhi College and Urdu", p. 123.

history of England [*Tārīkh-e Inglistān*] and Elphinstone's *The Kingdom of Caubul*, and original publications from the college press, such as *Tārīkh-e Yūsufī*, the travels of Yūsuf Khān Kambalposh to England”⁴⁶. Regional histories became a major focus such as the *Tārīkh-i Kashmīr*, an Urdu translation by the *munshī* Ashraf ‘Alī of the Persian work by Muḥammad A’ẓam, was printed at Matba’ al-Ulūm at Delhi College in 1846⁴⁷. Aloys Sprenger commissioned the work while serving as Principal of Delhi College.

Urdu history writing had an 18th century beginning. The *Qisṣah va aḥvāl Rohīlah* written around 1774-1775 by Sayyid Rustam ‘Alī Bijnorī is an early Urdu history⁴⁸. Bijnorī was employed by the Rohilla Afghans until their influence began to decline. After this he found a position working for a British officer. It was used in part by Charles Hamilton, an officer in the service of the India Company employed to work as Persian translator. He used this and other sources to produce *An historical relation of the origin, progress, and final dissolution of the government of the Rohilla Afgans in the northern provinces of Hindostan* compiled from a Persian manuscript and other original papers in 1787⁴⁹. Another early work is the *Tārīkh-i savānīḥ-yi dakkān* (*History of the events of the Deccan*) by Mu’nim Khān Awrangābādī al-Hamdani written in 1782. It is an abbreviated version of his earlier Persian work. There is also an Urdu translation of the *Tārīkh-i Fīrūz Shāhī* by Vāriṣ ‘Alī b. Shaykh Bahādur of Shajahanabad, commissioned by Sir Henry Captain Louis. Finally, *Tārīkh-i Seringapatam* is a work of Dakkani Urdu, and a translation of the Persian work *Tavārīkh-i Hydarī* by Munshī Muḥammad Qāsim by the officer Colonel Makhi in 1801⁵⁰.

The 1840s were transformative in the historiographical production of Urdu literature in terms of genre. Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (1817-1898) published the *Āsār al-ṣanādīd* (*Monuments of Kings*) in 1847. This

46. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

47. Muḥammad A’ẓam, *Tārīkh-i Kashmīr*.

48. Rustam ‘Alī Bijnorī, *Qisṣah va aḥvāl Rohīlah*.

49. Ch. Hamilton, *An Historical Relation of the Origin, Progress, and Final Dissolution of the Government of the Rohilla Afgans in the Northern Provinces of Hindostan*.

50. The above mentioned works are described in more detail in J. A. Khan, “Beginning of History Writing in Urdu”. See also histories catalogued in J. F. Blumhardt, *Catalogue of the Hindi, Panjabi, and Hindustani Manuscripts in the Library of the British Museum*, p. 3-5.

publication signalled the growth of a new reading audience for historical works produced in Urdu, beyond the “educational” value placed upon them by British colonial administrators. C. M. Naim postulates that there existed three markets for the publication of *Āsār al-ṣanādīd*: Indian Urdu readers, colonial officers, and sightseers in Delhi⁵¹. He notes several other Persian works, in a similar genre, that preceded the *Āsār al-ṣanādīd*: Zayn al-‘Ābidīn Shirwānī’s *Bustān al-siyāḥa* between 1833-1834, ‘Abd al-Qādir (1780-1849) and his *Vaqā’i-i ‘Abd al-Qādir Khānī* composed in 1831, and Mirzā Sangīn Beg’s *Sayr al-manāzil* completed sometime around 1821. Sunil Sharma argues that the topoi surrounding the “flourishing and multicultural city” in Persian literature produced in South Asia go back to the medieval period but “began appearing in the sixteenth century”⁵². Similarly there was an expansion of biographical literatures. Francis Pritchett notes in her study of *tazkira* literature that “Until about 1845 most tazkirahs of Urdu poetry were themselves written in Persian”⁵³.

Sharma notes that the successive revised editions of the *Āsār al-ṣanādīd* were made:

In an effort to present his history as a more objective work, with scholarly citations and devoid of traditional rhetorical flourishes and quotations from Persian poets, Sir Sayyid prepared a second edition in 1854, and subsequently a third edition⁵⁴.

This indicates Sir Sayyid eagerness to engage in reclaiming history from the British on a number of fronts. The clearest example of this is his swift response to the events of 1857 with the Urdu publication in 1858 of the *Asbāb-i baghāvat-i Hind*, his version of the causes of the infamous “Great Mutiny”⁵⁵. It was also the time of the instalment of the Naval

51. C. M. Naim, “Syed Ahmad and his Two Books Called ‘Asar-al-Sanadid’”, p. 680.

52. S. Sharma, “‘If There is a Paradise on Earth, It Is Here’”, p. 240.

53. F. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and its Critics*, p. 64. On the development of the *tazkira* literature see *Nets of Awareness*, p. 63-76. Also see F. Pritchett, “A Long History of Urdu Literary Culture, Part 2: Histories, Performances, and Masters”, p. 864-911.

54. S. Sharma, “‘If There is a Paradise on Earth, It Is Here’”, p. 240.

55. Biswamoy Pati notes in the introduction to a volume dedicated to understanding the contested histories of this event that “the early accounts and testimonies, including

Kishore Press in Lucknow⁵⁶. Sir Sayyid demonstrates his concern over the production of historical knowledge through his critical editions of the seminal Persian histories of South Asia: *Tārīkh-i Fīrūzshāhī*, *Tuzuk-i Jahāngīrī*, and the *Ā'in-i Akbarī*⁵⁷. Further evidence of the centrality of history and historical narratives to debates about social and political identity can be seen in the way Sir Sayyid contested the representations of Muslim rule in South Asia as depicted in Shiva Prasad's (1832-1890) *Itihās timir-nāshak* (*History as the dispeller of darkness*)⁵⁸.

Even against strong cultural and social currents, Persian history writing persisted. Another figure whose life signified the dramatic cultural changes underway is the noted poet Mirzā Asad-Allāh Ghālib (1797-1869). Writing in both Persian and in Urdu, Ghālib lived in the crosshairs of the social and political confrontations taking place in the middle of the 19th century. He was a courtier and court poet to the last Mughal ruler, Bahādūr-shāh Zafar (r. 1837-1857), whose political authority had been confined to Delhi. Following the events of the sepoy revolt in 1857, the British removed him from the throne and he was exiled. While Bahādūr-shāh Zafar still possessed the power of patronage, Ghālib was commissioned to write a universal history, in the Persian language, which he titled *Mīhr-i nimrūz* (*The midday sun*)⁵⁹. He was only able to complete the history down to the life of the Mughal ruler Humāyun, and did not proceed with the second volume as planned. The work was only partially finished in 1855, and the events of 1857 most likely hastened its termination. This is further evidenced by the fact that the next historical work Ghālib took up was the *Dastanbu* (*The fragrant*

contemporary accounts, saw the Great Rebellion from a typically colonial perspective". B. Pati, "Introduction: The Great Rebellion of 1857", p. 1.

56. For an overview of the impact of print culture in 19th century South Asia see U. Stark, *An Empire of Books*.

57. Abū al- Faẓl, *Ā'in-i Akbarī*; Zīyā' al-Dīn Baranī, *Tārīkh-i Fīrūz Shāhī*; Jahāngīr, *Tuzuk-i Jahāngīrī*.

58. For further discussion of this controversy see A. A. Powell, "History Textbooks and the Transmission of the Pre-colonial Past in North-Western India in the 1860's and 1870's", p. 108-129. For an analysis of Shiva Prasad's historical claims see M. Goswami, *Producing India*, p. 174-182. For a further discussion of Shiva Prasad's role in this period see U. Stark, "Knowledge in Context".

59. See Mirzā Asad-Allāh Ghālib, *Mīhr-i nimrūz*.

bouquet)⁶⁰. This memoir, written in Persian, was Ghālib's own personal account of the events of the 1857 revolt, which he witnessed as a resident of Delhi.

The publication of Muḥammad Zakā'-Allāh's (1832-1910) Urdu history, the *Tārīkh-i Hindustān* published in the 1870's, signified in many ways the end of the Persian historiographical tradition of the subcontinent⁶¹. Zakā'-Allāh "taught mathematics and wrote prodigiously during his long career as an educator. Among his works, in addition to a large number of mathematics textbooks, was a laudatory history in Urdu of Victoria's reign, the *Viktoriyā Nāma*. He is the subject of a respectful biography by C. F. Andrews [titled *Zaka Ullah of Delhi*]"⁶². Muḥammad Zakā'-Allāh's birth coincides with the recommendation of a parliamentary committee in 1832 to remove Persian in its role as a governmental language and replace it with regional languages such as Urdu⁶³. It was within one generation of that policy that the Persian historiographical heritage was replaced by English and Urdu. He followed the *Tārīkh-i Hindustān* with the *Tārīkh-i 'urūj-i salṭanat-i ingliṣiya-i Hind* (*The history of the rise of English rule in India*). It is through this historiographical production that the seeds were planted for the nationalist historiography that would emerge in the 1870's⁶⁴.

4. *English Historiography of India and the Translation of European Historiography*

The 18th century was a critical period in the identity formation of "Europe". It was during this century that "the prevailing notion of 'Europe' came into sharp focus"⁶⁵. The first half of the 18th century saw British scholars engaged in a comprehensive project to study and

60. See Mirzā Asad-Allāh Ghālib, *Dastanbū and Dastanbūy: A Diary of the Indian Revolt of 1857*.

61. Muḥammad Zakā'-Allāh, *Tārīkh-i Hindustān*. For a short discussion of the *Tārīkh-i Hindustān* see M. Hasan, "Sharif Culture and Colonial Rule", p. xli-xlv.

62. See G. Minault, "Delhi College and Urdu", p. 134.

63. T. Rahman, "Decline of Persian in British India", p. 50.

64. Partha Chatterjee situates the "threshold of nationalist history" in the 1870s. See P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, p. 91.

65. K. Chatterjee, C. Hawes, "Introduction", p. 4.

catalogue Persian historical sources in South Asia. Early histories produced in English were translations from single or multiple Persian manuscripts. This was the case with James Fraser's *The History of Nadir Shah*, published in London in 1742⁶⁶. Fraser (1713-1754) had studied Persian under a number of different Muslim and Parsi scholars while staying in Khambhat and other places on the West coast of India. It was during this time and over the course of his travels that he collected a number of Persian and Sanskrit manuscripts. He catalogued these in an appendix to his history, one of the earliest of its kind. Early English language histories of South Asia were generally dynastic in character.

In the 1830's the British had made the decision to replace Persian as an official language in favour of the regional languages and English. The Governor General-in-Council's recommendation of 1835 limited funds to the purpose of teaching English alone to the loss of the vernacular and classical languages of South Asia⁶⁷. Around the same time changes were made to language usage in the courts of the East India Trading Company. Persian was replaced as the sole legal language in favour of vernacular languages and English⁶⁸. The reasons for this were manifold: the British no longer viewed Persian as relevant to the colonial endeavour, English was now on the ascent, colonial administrators sought political advantage in appealing to the larger demographic of non-Persian speaking Indians, and colonial rulers had finally achieved enough power to effectively undermine the cultural cache of the Persianized elite⁶⁹.

Transformations in British language policy in South Asia reflect a new British historical understanding. Indian history was now British history. James Mill (1773-1836) famously wrote *The History of British India* first published in three volumes in 1817 and later expanded to six volumes.

66. J. Fraser, *The History of Nadir Shah, Formerly Called Thomas Kuli Khan, the Present Emperor of Persia*.

67. T. Rahman, "British Language Policies and Imperialism in India", p. 105.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

69. Shamsur Rahman Faruqi gives other reasons. He argues that it was the privileging of Iranian Persian over Indian Persian that sowed the seeds of decline in the 18th century. This he traces to Shaykh 'Alī Ḥazīn (1692-1766), an Iranian poet of noble birth. Faruqi writes, "First and foremost, it was the Indians themselves, and not the British, who knocked down Indian Persian and Urdu from the pedestal of cultural value, and they did not put English, but Iranian Persian, in the space vacated by Indian Persian and Urdu." See S. R. Faruqi, "Unprivileged Power", p. 16.

Mill infamously “never visited the Indian colony, relying solely on documentary material and archival records in compiling his work”⁷⁰. Other major examples of British historiography of India are G. R. Gleig’s *The History of the British Empire in India*, published in London in 1830, and *The History of India* by Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779-1859) first published in 1841. Significantly, English works of history of South Asia populated the realm of missions and educational institutions associated with schools. In 1836, John C. Marshman (1794-1877) published a schoolbook history titled *The History of India: From Remote Antiquity to the Accession of the Mughal Dynasty*⁷¹. It was published simultaneously in Serampore Mission and at the Church Mission Press in Calcutta⁷². *The History of India* saw a number of reprintings and it was updated and expanded in 1867⁷³.

It was during this period that the British historical consciousness was translated into Indian languages. By 1846, the *Bhāratavarshīya itihāsa*, a Hindi translation of *The History of India* produced for the Agra School-Book Society, had already reached its second printing⁷⁴. A Persian translation of the same work, titled *Tārīkh-i Hindūstān*, was commissioned by Bahrām Shāh, the grandson of Tipu Sultan, and dedicated to the Governor-General of India, John Viscount Canning⁷⁵. An abridged translation by Nūr Muḥammad of Marshman’s *History of India* was published under the title *Tārīkh-i Bangāl*⁷⁶. The work was printed at

70. J. S. Grewal, “Characteristics of Early British Historical Writing on Medieval India”.

71. J. C. Marshman, *The History of India*.

72. For a history of this Serampore Mission see E. Potts, *British Baptist Missionaries in India, 1793-1837*. Potts gives was one of the early demonstrations of the intensive role missionaries played in the colonial project as linguist, educators, and translators of South Asian languages. Although the colonial and missions enterprises were deeply intertwined they did not always share mutually beneficial goals. For some of the tensions between missions and the British government in the early 19th century see A. Porter, *Religion versus Empire?*, p. 68-75.

73. J. C. Marshman, *The History of India*.

74. J. C. Marshman, *Bhāratavarshīya itihāsa*.

75. J. C. Marshman, *Tārīkh-i Hindūstān*. Another slightly later work in this vein is the 1876 *Tārīkh-i Hind* and Urdu translation of Roper Lethbridge’s widely read *The History of India*, first published in London, Mumbai, and Kolkata in 1875.

76. Nūr Muḥammad, *Tārīkh-i Bangāl*. For a further description of these following works see J. A. Khan, “Historical Writings in Urdu Under the Auspices of Dihli College (1825-77)”, p. 381-394.

the Maṭba' al-'ulūm at Delhi College in 1846. Similarly, the *History of Afghanistan* written by Mountstuart Elphinstone was translated into Urdu as the *Tārīkh-i Afghānistān* by Ashraf 'Alī and published in 1845 in Mumbai⁷⁷. In 1835, around the same time that Marshman produced *The History of India* he also published a *Brief Survey of History* which bore the subtitle "from the birth of Christ to the age of Charlemagne compiled for the use of youths in India"⁷⁸. This was part of the project to translate the British understanding of world history to readers and students of vernacular languages in India. An Urdu edition of the *Survey of History* was produced in 1844⁷⁹. Other works in this vein are the *Tārīkh-i Inghlistān* and the *Tārīkh-i Rūm*, Urdu translations of Oliver Goldsmith's (1730-1774) *History of England* and *History of Rome* published 1844⁸⁰. It was more than a decade before this time that Alexander Fraser Tytler's (1747-1813) popular *Elements of General History, Ancient and Modern* was translated into Urdu as *Lubb al-tavārikh*⁸¹.

Conclusion

In conclusion, history writing in India and about India of the 18th and 19th centuries was a product of a complex crosscurrent of languages and ideas. In the 18th century, historiography of India was defined by Persian language histories written for the courts of Muslim, Sikh and Hindu rulers. British colonial administrators approached this literary heritage with an eye to translating and moulding that knowledge for their own uses. Persian histories and the Persian language were studied in an intensified effort to understand India's past. Through the acquisition of historical forms of knowledge and as a product of colonial politics, a new literary socio-cultural understanding was enabled through the efforts of the *munshī*. Individuals occupying this post crafted a "modern" colonial

77. Mīr Ashraf 'Alī, *Tārīkh-i Afghānistān*.

78. J. Marshman, *Brief Survey of History*.

79. J. Marshman, *Khulāṣat al-tavārikh*.

80. For a list of these and other works printed at Delhi College see J. A. Khan, "Historical Writings in Urdu under the Auspices of Dihli College (1825-77)", p. 392, n. 2. For another early translation of British history into Urdu see Major Sutherland, *Tārīkh-i bādshāhān-i Inghlistān*.

81. A. F. Tytler, *Lubb al-tavārikh*.

historical understanding of India. Through the creation of British colonial histories, first in translation, and later through “original” English language histories, colonial historiography was born. In many ways the historiography produced in South Asia came full circle. Once a matter of translating Persian historiography into English, now, English conceptual history was translated back into India. This dense engagement of language and politics produced a transcultural globalized sphere where a new literary product and a new historical understanding of India in the 19th century was born.

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