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What is This?
'Through throats where many rivers meet': The ecology of Hindi in the world of Persian

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I

Like the curlews which moved Dylan Thomas on the shores of the Welsh estuary Mughal poets have also spoken 'through throats where many rivers meet'. Of the many rivers, the two which repeatedly find their confluence in Mughal literature—and often starkly in the same text—are Hindi and Persian. We are used to thinking of Urdu and Persian as the twin presences in Mughal literature, but the juxtaposition of Hindi and Persian strikes us as counter-intuitive, for in the course of the past century Hindi has come to be associated dominantly with the Hindu, and Persian with the Muslim community. This article is about precisely this juxtaposition, and about the three-way relationship implied by the co-presence of Hindi and Persian in Mughal literature—the relationship between literary and religious identity, and the varying emotional resonance of the two languages in the elite culture of Mughal India.

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Having raised the issue, let us visit a specific historical moment which captures the questions most vividly. In the spring of 1739, a small group of Mughal noblemen travelled to the outskirts of Delhi and set up camp for an extended stay at the bustling fairgrounds surrounding the tomb of the Sufi saint, Shāh Madār. The fair was set up around his tomb and the occasion was the anniversary of his death (‘urs). The Mughal friends were, therefore, more than just spectators at a fair—they were also pilgrims. And among these pilgrims to a Sufi’s tomb was a Hindu nobleman by the name of Ánand Rām.1 As was the custom among the Mughal literati, Ánand Rām composed poetry, not in his native Punjabi, but in Persian. And to signal his Persian poetic persona, he took the Persian pen-name (takhallus) of Mūkhliš, ‘the sincere’—sincere, that is, as a lover. On the occasion of his ‘pilgrimage’ to the saint’s tomb, Mūkhliš was in the company of several Persian-speaking Muslim noblemen, chief among whom was the great lexicographer and grammarian Sirājuddin Khān Ārzū. On his first night at the fair, Mūkhliš was troubled by insomnia, and so he asked his servant to lull him to sleep by telling him a story.

The servant’s lullaby was a very well-known tale. It had been written in 1542 in a dialect of Hindi by Muhammad Jayasi, a provincial Sufi belonging to the Chishti order, and it told of the tragic love affair between a north Indian prince and a Sri Lankan princess named Padmāvatī. What detains us in this sleepless night at the fairgrounds is not the content of the tale, which was called Padmāvat, but rather Mūkhliš’ reaction to its language. As the servant narrated the tale in the broad eastern dialect in which it had been composed by Jayasi, Mūkhliš was entranced. Here is how he remembered the event:

My servant told the colorful tale that Jayasi, the author of the Hindi Padmāvat, had written entirely in the eastern dialect—as though it were an eastern melody brimming over with pain (emphasis mine). Jayasi had based its wording on uncommon ideas and rare metaphors; however, since the work contains the bewitchments and marvels of love, it compels the heart to feel pain. And I said to myself: ‘if this Hindi beloved (ma’shuq) were to be displayed in the robes of a Persian writer then it is possible that this work of art might appear elegant and permissible in the estimation of those who possess taste (dar naẓar-i ahl-i zauq in fan mustahasan numāyad). Therefore, my pen laid the foundations of this literary project and, having completed it within the span of a week, called it Hangāmah-ye Ishq [The Clamour of Love].2

For his retelling, Mūkhliš chose a sartorial metaphor. Through a synecdochic association, he transformed Jayasi’s Hindi tale into its central character, Princess

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2 Ánand Rām Mūkhliš, Hangāmah-ye Ishq, Khudabakhsh Library, Patna, MS # 8918, folio 5.
Padmāvati. But the transformation raised a dilemma—how was this Hindi beloved-in-the-rough to be presented to men of literary refinement, such as Mukhlis’ friends? For her presentation to them—by implication her lovers—Mukhlis deemed the Hindi beloved in need of a change of clothes; and these he fashioned when he recast her coarse form in Persian finery. Here, Hindi is defined by opposition: if Persian robes refined the Hindi beloved, making her fit for the eyes of literate men, then Hindi by implication lacked polish, elegance and taste.

That, however, was not the end of the matter, for lurking in Mukhlis’ account we also sense a complimentary attitude towards Hindi, and especially towards its eastern dialect, which he highlights for comment. While on the one hand, Mukhlis felt the Hindi beloved to be in need of a change of clothes, on the other he found her to be especially effective in moving emotions. In his imprecise definition of ‘an eastern dialect’ Mukhlis is the distanced view of an urbane Panjabi peering eastward from the cosmopolis of Delhi. But imprecise though he was about the tale’s provenance, Mukhlis felt the unmistakable pull of its rhythm upon his sensibility—it moved him, he says, as does ‘an eastern melody brimming over with pain’ (sar tā sar chūn parda-ye pūrābī labrez-i dard). The eastern dialect of Hindi evidently evoked associations of musicality, rhythm and cadence. According to the exacting standards of a Mughal nobleman the Hindi Padmāvat may have lacked polish, but it was also especially effective in moving the heart to feel the ennobling emotion of pain, without which, in Sufi psychology, man remains merely a man.

This anecdote ushers in a host of questions which smudge the outlines of a conventional picture. Padmāvat, the story of which Mukhlis heard recited, is recognised as a central, foundational text of the Hindi literary canon. And yet, here we glimpse it at a threshold—as it is about to enter Persian. Nor was this the first time that such a transposition had been attempted. In 1739, when Mukhlis sat sleepless in Delhi, there already existed three major Persian retellings of the Hindi Padmāvat and one Bengali transposition, and in just a few decades there were to be countless retellings in Urdu.

This is an association still made today among Indian singers who prefer such eastern dialects as Bhojpuri, over the standard Hindi (Kharī boli) as also Urdu. The reason they give is that in Bhojpuri the large number of words ending in vowels lend themselves to vocal embellishments (such as gamaks), for it is the vowels that are typically drawn out in singing. Personal communication, Jyoti Pande, October 2000.

However, even if we confine our gaze to Jāyasi’s Hindi Padmāvat, its status as a property of the Hindi literary canon appears somewhat tenuous if we focus on the history of its readership. For example, the earliest surviving manuscript of Jāyasi’s Padmāvat, copied in the year 1674, was written with an inter-linear Persian translation. Its owner and scribe, a Sufi by the name of Muhammad Shākir, was clearly more comfortable in Persian—to the extent that he laboriously added diacritics on every Hindi word to show the short vowels without which he could not pronounce the Hindi he copied out in Arabic script. Muhammad Shākir, however, did something else which gives us a rare glimpse into the very essence of his literary imagination. As he copied the Hindi poem and scribbled its literal Persian translation in the lines between, it sparked in his memory couplets from the Persian ghazals of Ḥāfīz. And these Muhammad Shākir left inscribed on the margins. For example, at a turn in the narrative where Prince Ratnasena hears of the beauty of Princess Padmavati, and is instantly smitten by her, Muhammad Shākir inserts the famous opening couplet of Ḥāfīz’s divān in which the poet warns: ‘Love appeared at first a cinch, until the problems came’ (ki ishq āsān namūd avval, vale uftād mushkil-hā). Now King Ratnasena stands warned in the hallowed words of Ḥāfīz who, through the force of Shākir’s imagination, spoke to Jāyasi across the two centuries that yawned between them.

In Shākir’s imagination, Hindi and Persian were locked in so tight an embrace that it is only through a great insensitivity that we can pry them apart. A reader such as Muhammad Shākir presents us with a challenge: to train our own imagination to recognise those fleeting Persian resonances which animated what he copied in Hindi. To rise to this challenge is to train our ears to hear both Jāyasi and Ḥāfīz, as also Hindi and Persian, for it is in this simultaneous presence of two authors and two languages that we rediscover the delight which compelled Muhammad Shākir through the tedium of adding diacritics to every Hindi word in the 300-odd pages of the manuscript. Thus, if we venture beyond the pages of Hindi critical editions and define Padmāvat according to its literary life in the experience of Mughal readers, then the ecology of what is conventionally held to be a Hindi text turns out to imply Persian as well. Is it not telling, then, that in the considerable critical literature on Padmāvat there is no mention at all of Persian, even though almost everyone who has worked on Padmāvat has consulted this celebrated early manuscript?

I cite this example to point out what seems to me a pervasive and largely unexamined assumption of monolingualism in the study of pre-modern Indian literature. By this I mean more than just the assumption that medieval authors and

5 Muhammad Shākir Amrohavī, Padmāvat, Rampur Raza Library, Rampur, MS # 1.
6 Ibid., folio 31b.
7 Vāsudeva Sarana Agravāla, for example, does mention that Shākir copied the manuscript in Arabic script, and included an inter-linear Persian translation, but remains silent about the many Persian prose and verse comments which he also included, and which make Shākir’s manuscript such a unique source of reader responses. Muhammad Jāyasi, (Vāsudeva Sarana Agravāla, ed.), Padmāvat: Malik Muhammad Jāyasi Kria Mahakavya, Mūla aura SanjivaniVyākhyā, Jhansi, 1955, p. 18.
readers functioned primarily in one language. One significant corollary of the monolingual assumption is the facile equation we draw between literary traditions and religious communities. Thus, *Padmāvat* comes to be situated exclusively and neatly within the confines of Hindi written in Nāgarī script. But such neat correspondences fail to explain the social world of such Mughals as Mukhlīs and Shākir. Where, for example, do we begin to fix the identity of Mukhlīs—a Punjabi Hindu making a pilgrimage to the tomb of a Sufi saint, enjoying a sophisticated narrative in eastern Hindi and retelling it in high Persian for the delectation of his Persian- and Urdu-speaking Muslim colleagues?

To do justice to such a complex and adamantly heteroglot literary community we must, I believe, redirect our gaze at the blurred peripheries of literary canons, for it is there that we glimpse the intricate inter-dependencies and rivalries—in a word the 'ecology'—of literary communities. To thus excavate the ecology of Mughal literary communities means to cease thinking exclusively in terms of this or that text, or in terms of Hindi or Urdu studies, and to think instead in terms of an entire literary area with its multiple literary voices and the manner in which these interacted with each other. This is, admittedly, an ambitious task, a task which South Asian scholars have scarcely begun to tackle, and scholars of Hindi have actively discouraged for political reasons.

The elite, urban Mughal community was overwhelmingly Persianate and Islamic in its tastes. It valued Persian as the primary language of literary and political discourse; and yet a number of elite and Persian-speaking Mughal authors like Muhammad Jāyāsi and Muhammad Shākir specifically chose to compose or read either exclusively in Hindi, or in a mixture of Persian and Hindi. How do we account for these multilingual choices? Can we penetrate the intellectual universe of elite Mughal authors to define that range of aesthetic considerations which sometimes made Hindi seem attractive to them, even though they simultaneously held it to be lacking in refinement? What shades of meaning and emotion were thrown into higher relief by such anomalous linguistic choices, and how did elite Mughals themselves comment on the choice to write in Hindi? I will attempt to address this cluster of questions through examples of a number of Mughal texts. The first and longest part of the discussion will centre around *Bikat Kahānī* (The Great Tale), a long narrative poem composed in 1636 by Muḥammad Afzal, a teacher and scholar of Persian in the town of Panipat. I have chosen *Bikat Kahānī* to explore these questions for a number of reasons, most important of which is that Afzal composed it in both Hindi and Persian, thus locating it deliberately at the periphery of both literary traditions. It is thus, a useful starting point for exploring how these two languages interacted with each other in the elite Mughal imagination.

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The Mughal authors who chose to write in Hindi were overwhelmingly Sufi in their religious affiliations. This has led contemporary scholars like 'Abd al-Haqq⁹ and Richard M. Eaton¹⁰ to speculate that Hindi Sufi literature was overwhelmingly a literature of conversion, written by elite, Persian-speaking Sufi authors to enable them to reach out to the rural Hindus. Being unschooled in Persian or Arabic, the rural Hindu masses could only be drawn into the Muslim community through the use of Indian vernaculars. In his study of the Sufis of Bijapur, Eaton notes that the Bijapur prose compositions, which mostly dealt with abstruse theological issues, were most likely aimed at the inner circle of disciples, and were necessarily in Persian since Sufi technical vocabulary is derived exclusively from either Persian or Arabic. By contrast, the Hindi compositions were simple lyrics through which, he speculates, elite Sufis could effectively communicate with illiterate Hindus. Viewed thus, Hindi poetry is an elite concession to the simple sensibility of rural, Hindi-speaking Hindus. It was a literature which—in Eaton and 'Abd al-Haqq’s explanations—was demotic in its orientation, and because of this it was an ideal medium for enhanced communication with, and the gradual conversion of, Hindus."¹¹

Do elite Muslim aspirations to create a demotic vernacular verse in service of conversion explain a text like Bikat Kahānī? To answer this, we must first recognise the contours of the literary niche into which Bikat Kahānī fits. Afzal’s poem belongs to a well-known genre of pre-modern north Indian poetry called the Bārahmāsā, or the ‘12-Month Cycle’.¹² The Bārahmāsā presents the sentiments of a lover separated from the beloved, and in this general sense is not very different from the Persian lyric, the ghazal. The unique texture of the Bārahmāsā derives, however, from two peculiarities. The suffering lover of the Bārahmāsā, called the nāyikā, is quite unambiguously a woman grieving for a male lover, sometimes even her husband. In her laments the nāyikā typically addresses her female companions, and

- Since the publication of The Sufis of Bijapur in 1978, Richard Eaton has revised his own explanation of Hindi as an instrument of conversion: Personal communication, October 1997. Readers personally familiar with Eaton will know this; however, since the revision has not been made publicly, the explanation remains firmly lodged as a paradigm for understanding the Sufi use of Hindi even while its author questions it. More importantly, however, no new explanations for the use of Hindi by the otherwise Persian-speaking Mughal literati have been put forward. It is thus that I am raising this issue again after a hiatus of some 30 years.
- On the generic tradition of the Bārahmāsā see Charlotte Vaudeville, Bārahmāsā in Indian Literatures: Songs of the Twelve Months in Indo-Aryan Literatures, Delhi, 1986.
sometimes even older female relatives. By contrast the Perso-Urdu ghazal is at pains to leave the gender of both the lover and the beloved unspecified. The world of the ghazal is, furthermore, adamantly non-domestic. Mothers, sisters and female friends never intrude upon the lamenting lover. Second, the Bārahmāśa unfolds the sentiments of the female lover against the detailed background of changing seasons; thus, the changes in the natural world—such as turning leaves, or the migrations of birds—evoke different memories and sorrows in the lover. Indeed, the Bārahmāśa has a sorrow for every season. That the emotions are governed by the changing seasons is stressed by the very structure of the Bārahmāśa which, with its 12 sections, corresponds neatly to the 12 months of the calendar. The Persian ghazal also made use of the seasons as a backdrop for the lover’s sentiment, but usually used only spring and autumn. A further difference is that the rhythm of the Bārahmāśa is modulated specifically to the Indian landscape, with much being made of the monsoons, the traditional season, when martial or mercantile Indians wound up the season to return home after a year of either raiding or trading, when the rains made the roads impassable. The Bārahmāśa derives its greatest pathos from the wayward man who defies this normal rhythm of the Indian year and stays away even during the rains. It is not accidental that in Bīkaṭ Kahāṇī, Afzal introduces us to the lover’s sorrows during the months of sāvan, or July–August when the monsoon is at its height, and thus the laments of the lonely nāyikā presumably at their shrillest.

In all of this Afzal conforms to the conventions of the Bārahmāśa. Where he differs quite markedly is in his use of language for Bīkaṭ Kahāṇī is not just in a dialect of Hindi. Afzal’s language ranges, instead, from pure Persian—such as when he quotes Persian verses from the poet Jāmī—to dialects of western Hindi with a predominance of tadbhava words derived and modified from Sanskrit.13 This range is already unusual for its two linguistic extremities, but it is the middle range of Afzal’s language that is the most surprising for here one sees the most agile turns of phrase. Take, for example, a sentence where the grieving nāyikā taunts those ‘warriors’ who have never known the pain of separation:

13 A tadbhava, literally ‘born from it’ is a word derived from Sanskrit, rather than from Persian which, in the course of its historical existence, has gone through sound changes in consonance with the modern South Asian language in which it is used. Thus, ‘bīkaṭ’ is a tadbhava word, being derived from the Sanskrit ‘vikāṭa’, meaning, ‘immense’ or ‘terrible.’ By analogy, Latinate words in English might be called tadbhava, and Italian words may be said to bear a strongly tadbhava relationship to Latin. Since there is no technical English term describing this process in South Asia (‘Latinate’ immediately takes us to the specific terrain of Europe and Latin), I will henceforth treat this as an English noun and also use the verb ‘tadbhavisation’ to refer to the process by which a particular register of speech or writing is ‘infused’ with an unmodified Sanskrit vocabulary. In the case of north Indian literary texts the opposite of ‘tadbhavisation’ would be ‘Persianisation’ or ‘Arabicisation’, and, more recently, ‘Anglicisation.’ For the cultural historian and literary critic the issue, then, is the aesthetic, emotional and social consequences of the tadbhavisation of a work which could otherwise have been expressed in another register, such as, for example, the Persian or Arabic.
Bavā'ī ki nahi jis shakhš ko pīr
cē dānād dārd-e digar rā, are bīr?

You, who've never known the pangs of sorrow
What, O warrior, d'you know of others' pains?\textsuperscript{14}

The English translation inevitably levels the macaronic texture of the couplet which alternates between such Hindi words as 'pīr' (‘pain’, from the Sanskrit ‘pūḍā’), and 'bīr' (‘warrior’, from the Sanskrit ‘vīra’). But in contrast to these \textit{tadbhava words} what is one to make of phrases like: ‘\textit{ce dānād dārd-i digar rā’} (What does he know of other pains)? The fragment is surprising in its use of not just Persian nouns, but also of Persian verbs and case markers. It is above all through the liberal use of such purely Persian phrases that Afzal creates a linguistic texture so markedly different from that of the early Urdu of poets like Saudā, who did use a highly Persianised vocabulary of nouns and adjectives, but never Persian verbs. The use of Persian verbs, case markers, and quotes from Jāmī is all the more unusual when juxtaposed against the special forms of address which Afzal uses from the stock vocabulary of a special female speech which Hindi-speaking men never use except to mimic women. For example, Afzal’s \textit{nāyikā}, frequently prefaces her laments with the vocative ‘rī’, used exclusively by women when addressing other women of roughly the same age and social status. Thus, for example, the \textit{nāyikā} says:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Khirad gum kardā, majnūn ho rahi rī}
\end{quote}

Losing my wits [this in pure Persian], I became a second Majnūn [this in Hindi].\textsuperscript{15}

This already stark contrast between Persian and the special domain of Hindi feminine speech is further complicated by variations in the kinds of Hindi Afzal chooses. His is not a uniform dialect of Hindi, but rather alternates between Braj and Khaṛī \textit{boli} (two dialects of western Hindi from the region around Delhi), with occasional words taken from the dialect of southern Hindi. Afzal seems interested in using the widest possible range of language, but not in order to create a middle range of language using some elements of both; his effort seems calculated, instead, to juxtapose the different languages in \textit{discrete} bits, much like the tesserae of a mosaic which retain their separate outlines despite their placement within a larger tableau.

If Afzal’s macaronic verse were the only example of its kind we might note it for its peculiarity and move on. However, far from being the only one of its kind \textit{Bikaṭ Kahāṇī} is part of a corpus of Perso-Hindi macaronic verse—a corpus which is mostly unpublished and seldom discussed, for neither Hindi nor Persian scholars from South Asia claim it as part of their literary canons, while Iranian and Western scholars of Persian generally consider it outside the pale of ‘proper’ Persian, ‘compromised’ as these texts are owing to liberal infusions of Hindi. Thus it is that the

\textsuperscript{14} Hāshmī and Khān, \textit{Bikaṭ Kahāṇī}, p. 33.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 44.
curlews which cried ‘through throats where many rivers meet’ are today heard by no one at all. This is what I mean by a disabling assumption of monolingualism in the study of South Asian literature.

Whether or not we feel comfortable in acknowledging their presence, or perhaps more pertinently whether or not we are up to the linguistic challenge posed by such texts, Perso-Hindi macaronic texts abound. And we do not have to look far, for in the textual tradition of *Padmāvat* itself we witness a confluence of Hindi and Persian. Soon after being composed in Hindi by Jāyasī, the tale of *Padmāvat* was retold by ‘Āqil Khān Rāzī, the governor of the city of Delhi and the deputy of Emperor Aurangzeb in the last years of his rule over the Mughal Empire. In his abridged version of the *Padmāvat*, Rāzī inserts couplets from such famous Hindi poets as Sūrdās within the otherwise Persian body of his verse. Again, as with Afzal, Rāzī’s effort is to juxtapose discrete bits of Hindi and Persian, rather than to blend their grammars and vocabularies in order to create a middle range like Urdu.

Now that we have noted the peculiarities of Mughal macaronic verse, the question remains as to why elite, Mughal authors should choose to write in Hindi when they clearly lived in a courtly sub-culture which valued Persian as the language of refined discourse, especially for the expression of lyric poetry. Eaton’s explanations offer us no signposts in our search, for they specifically address the motivations of missionary Sufis in writing Hindi, and *Bīkāt Kāhānī* is emphatically not a Sufi text. The Urdu critic Hāfīz Māhmūd Sherānī suggests a possible approach. By placing *Bīkāt Kāhānī* within a discussion of the development of Urdu in Punjab, Sherānī locates its bilingualism within a teleology of Urdu. Placed in a venerable genealogy consisting of the Hindavi writings of Amīr Khusro and Sharāfuddin Maneri, Afzal becomes a humble contributor to the long process of linguistic brewing which finally culminates in the ‘real’ Urdu of Saudā, Mir and, of course, Ġhālib. As such *Bīkāt Kāhānī* marks a stop on the long march of the north Indian vernacular towards the telos of the fully mature idiom of Delhi in the mid-eighteenth century.

The process of brewing by which Urdu allegedly formed itself is sketched by Sherānī through an analogy with code-switching in modern north Indian—and especially Punjabi—speech where, says Sherānī, ‘a speaker may begin with the intention of uttering a sentence in Urdu, stuffs an English snippet in the middle, only to end with a Punjabi verb’. Such a point is reached ‘without any special effort or artifice’ (ye sūrat baghair kisi khās koshish yā tāsannu ke paidā ho gayī hai). But in Sherānī’s estimation the peculiar macaronism of *Bīkāt Kāhānī* is no asset; and so, he continues: ‘In this poem Persian phrases and compounds have been crammed in at all odd points in such a way that the modern taste cannot find them

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acceptable.' Of course, since in Sherānī’s view this is incipient Urdu, such ungainliness is to be expected, especially when it comes from Punjab.¹⁷

For Sherānī the Hindi-Persian macaronism of Bikat Kahānī bears the same taint of grossness as did the mixed Latin-Italian verse for Italian humanists who first coined the term ‘macarronico’ to name a kind of burlesque pioneered in the 1490s. Here is Teofilo Folegno, a Renaissance humanist from Padova who wrote such verse for parody, defining his practice in a treatise on macaronism:

This poetic art is called ‘macaronic’ from macarones, which are a certain dough made up of flour, cheese and butter—thick, coarse and rustic. Thus, macaronic poems must have nothing but fat, coarseness and gross words in them.¹⁸

For the refined Latinate tastes of Teofilo, macaronic speech was just as low in the hierarchy of possible speeches as macaroni still is in our own culinary hierarchy of Italian pastas. And yet, gross as it was (or precisely because it was felt to be gross), this mixture of Italian and Latin was judged the more effective in making jabs. Sharper barbs could be fashioned of it than of the smooth Latin.

And it is here that we must begin with Bikat Kahānī—by asking what could be expressed more effectively in a mixture of Hindi and Persian than in pure Persian, the expected choice of language for a literatus like Afzal. And it is also here that we have to admit to a blindness, for we cannot sit in the presence of seventeenth-century readers of Bikat Kahānī to see whether or not a smile played upon their faces as they heard the nāyikā grieve in both Hindi and Persian. Impossible to tell for sure, but it does seem to me that unlike the burlesque of Teofilo, Afzal’s intent was not to make the grieving nāyikā the butt of satire or parody. The primary mood in Bikat Kahānī is the pathos of separation, or viraha. The reader is not asked to laugh at—but, rather, to cry with—the nāyikā.

I will address the issue of pathos, and particularly the kind of pathos that is enhanced by the use of Hindi, but for now, let me voice one important disagreement with Sherānī by pointing out that Bikat Kahānī does not use casual or spoken speech. It is, instead, a highly self-conscious literary undertaking. Its alternation of Hindi and Persian is, I would argue, a matter of far greater deliberation and aesthetic choice than the inter-linguistic slippages in modern or pre-modern street-speech. Its macaronism is precisely a result of tasannu or artifice, and mannerism. Its heteroglot nature has not just come about, but has been deliberately, even painstakingly, constructed. If one is attentive to the literariness of Bikat Kahānī, then one must ask how its macaronic texture was the result of aesthetic choices made by


a competent and sensitive author trying to enhance the pathos of separation by the use of Hindi.

Subsequently, I will attempt an answer to these questions, but for now let us begin by recognising the fact that whatever Afzal’s motivations in alternating between Persian and varieties of Hindi, the result was a text of such complexity that it could only be enjoyed by a highly-educated polyglot, well-versed in both Hindi and Persian. The enjoyment of such linguistic and literary complexity presupposes a degree of education and cosmopolitan experience not normally available to rural masses. Their liberal use of Hindi notwithstanding, Bikaṭ Kahanī and Rāzi’s Padmāvat are both texts written for the highly-educated Persianised elite of Mughal India—whether they were Hindu or Muslim. In other words, we have to imagine an author like Afzal or Rāzi inspired by something other than the virtuous ideal of communicating to the masses by writing in their vernacular. We have to imagine an ideal reader who was familiar with Persian and several dialects of Hindi, and furthermore, was adequately read in both literary traditions to appreciate the departures from the generic conventions of both the Bārahmāsa and the ghazal—departures which make Bikaṭ Kahanī a memorable text. Such a reader would not have acquired Hindi or Persian merely to cope with the demands of living in a multilingual society, but would have been interested in mining this dual heritage to extend the expressive reach of both languages.

III

One expressive world which opened more fully to Afzal through his use of Hindi was, I would argue, the world of ‘feminine’ emotions and life-experiences as defined in the context of Mughal culture. Both Hindi and Persian possessed an elaborate vocabulary for the expression of a lover’s grief at separation from the beloved; but in writing Bikaṭ Kahanī Afzal was tackling a genre which probed specifically feminine emotions, and which heightened the pathos of separation by positioning the confined woman within, gazing out at the expanse of ever-changing nature which was denied her, but which contained her lost or, worst yet, deceitful lover. The Bārahmāsa derived its emotional punch from the unequal status, positioning and movement of the wayward man and the sedentary woman. In this sense, it was a fairly perfect mirror of Mughal society.

The strongest voice in the tradition of Persian poetry was that of the ghazal, and this was an emphatically ungendered voice. The strict avoidance of gender specificity in the Persian ghazal was achieved all the more naturally for, unlike Hindi or Urdu, Persian lacks gendered verbs, nouns or adjectives. Of course, it is perfectly possible for the Persian narrator to assume a female persona by describing unam-

19 Feminine experiences and emotions as construed by a Mughal, and not a contemporary, audience. Thus, I do not want to suggest the existence of a stable set of emotions and experiences which are the essential and exclusive domain of women in all historical circumstances, but rather to sketch that range of sentiments which Mughal society deemed the natural domain of women.
biguously feminine scenarios, or parts of the female anatomy, but such directness was deemed crass by the society which produced the ghazal. It was not possible, however, to stress the gender of the speaker through the structure of Persian grammar itself. By using Hindi, and especially that sub-set of Hindi speech which is used only by Hindi-speaking women, Afzal grounds Bikat Kahani specifically and unambiguously within a female setting. Now the laments echo unmistakably in the privacy of the women’s quarters where the only immediate hearers are other women addressed by the näyikā in the intimate, feminine vocative ‘ri’. We the readers—especially the men—are eavesdroppers. Even for contemporary readers like myself this aesthetic of eavesdropping constitutes one of the central delights of a Bārahmāsā. Imagine, then, how much more intense the delight of eavesdropping must have been for an elite, Mughal reader living in a society far more radically segregated by gender than is ours. This is the physical world of the Bārahmāsā without inhabiting which we cannot inhabit the emotions of the grieving näyikā.

The convention of using Hindi for women’s speech was not peculiar to the Persian-writing Mughal literati, but continued into the eighteenth century, by when the same literati were writing increasingly in a heavily Persianised Urdu. A simultaneous consideration of Hindi in relation to a newly emerging Urdu of course invites the charge that in its new juxtaposition with Urdu, Hindi must necessarily have been valorised differently than in the previous century when Persian was the only expected choice for literary expression by the Mughal elite; to continue the biological metaphor, a changed habitat creates a different ecology. A honing of our understanding of the changing flavour of Hindi certainly demands reflection on how Hindi acquired a different set of cultural resonances as a result of the rise of Urdu in eighteenth-century Mughal India; however, to the extent that Urdu and Persian continued to be written by the very same authors a consideration of Urdu verse illumines yet another aspect of the ecology of Hindi in its Persianate environment.

The work of Muhammad Rafi Saudā (1713–80) is a good place to begin an examination of the continuing use of Hindi as a feminising agent in its Persianate environment for not only does Saudā stand at the very cusp of the era when the Mughal elite began using Urdu for literary purposes, but also the linguistic range of Saudā’s verse is somewhat greater than that of later Urdu poets like Ghālib who confined themselves almost exclusively to a Perso-Arabic lexicon. Saudā, by contrast, wrote not only in the idiom that we have come to know as ‘standard’ Urdu, but occasionally also ranged into pure Persian, as well as into the range of Sanskrit-derived vocabulary which today we call ‘Hindi’. Saudā’s work, therefore, is an ideal

place to begin asking questions about the ecology of languages in the elite literary culture of Mughal India.

Saudā was a prolific writer. His Kulliyāt (Collected Works) consists of two massive volumes arranged according to the various genres expected of an Urdu poet. One encounters, first, his biting satires (hijv) on which, above all, Saudā based his reputation, and thus his living. Next follow the Urdu ghazals, the masnavīs (long narrative poems), and maršiyās (elegies in honor of the martyrs of the battle of Karbalā). Saudā’s Persian ghazals constitute the smallest section, and finally bring the Kulliyāt to its close. The basic stock of Saudā’s lexicon is not radically different from that of classical Urdu poetry in its degree of Persianisation; however, in all of these genres (except the Persian poems) one notices a greater flexibility of linguistic range than in the work of nineteenth-century Urdu poets like Ghālib or Zauq. And this flexibility becomes especially apparent in Saudā’s maršiyās, where he ranges frequently into a Sanskrit-derived vocabulary of tadbhava words not as frequently encountered in his ghazals or satires. Some tadbhava words (like ‘sīs’ and ‘ran’: ‘head’ and ‘battle’ respectively) come to form the stock of conventionally used words in the evolving idiom of Urdu maršiyās, and the reader comes to expect them not only in the writing of Saudā, but also in that of later maršiyā writers like Mīr Anīṣ and Dabīr. Occasionally Saudā composes maršiyās in a register which even for his corpus of maršiyās is unusual in its density of tadbhava words; and in these maršiyās it is not just the vocabulary, but also the grammar, which is remarkable in its proximity to the grammar of regional Hindi dialects like Braj, Deccani, and, in one instance, even Punjabi.22

Saudā’s maršiyās provoke two questions about the aesthetic and emotional resonance of Hindi in its Persianate environment. First, why is it especially in the genre of the Urdu maršiyā that we see the greatest departures from a Persianised vocabulary, and second, why, within this field of relatively un-Persianised vocabulary, do certain maršiyās stand out even more in their use of tadbhava words?

One such maršiyā containing a combination of regional Hindi grammar with Sanskrit-derived words presents the laments of the women survivors of the house of Husain. The speakers in the elegy are: Fātimā, the mother of Husain; Zaināb, his sister; and Sakīnā, his young daughter. As they are all led in chains through the burning desert to the Caliph’s palace in Damascus, we encounter Fātimā, grieving for her dead son:

\[
\text{Kāse kahiye bāt kaun man sun ke būjhe} \\
\text{rovat hūn din rāt Ḥusainā ran men jūjhe}
\]

nainan barasata nirakhata, umagata hai chhâti
pyâse märe hai nabi ke aise nâti
gerû se kapde range, mukh par male bhabhüt,
pûcchen bibi fâtimâ ‘kit gaiyo mero pùt?'

Whom shall I tell, who will understand?
Weeping I spend my days and nights—my Husinanâ dead in battle
Eyes rain as I gaze, and my chest heaves
How they slayed with thirst the grandson of the prophet
Dyeing her clothes with saffron, rubbing her face with ashes
Sobbing, says Bibi Fâtimâ ‘Where’s my son gone?’

We may well shy away from the politically thorny issue of labelling Fâtimâ’s speech. Indeed, our choices are many, and bewildering: is it, for example, ‘Urdu’ or ‘proto-Urdu’, ‘Hindi’ or ‘Hindavi’? Or is it, instead, the classical literary dialect of ‘Braj’? The debate about the precise nomenclature and classification of Hindi versus Urdu has long exercised us, and it is, in my opinion, both arid and pointless, since answers to it are largely dependent on one’s ambitions in forging either long or short genealogies for contemporary speech. As such, it reveals far more about the politics of contemporary South Asian language communities than about Mughal social realities or aesthetic values. In fact, I would claim that the tussle over whether a literary text is in Hindi or Urdu is largely a distraction which detains us from the more pertinent issue of discussing the aesthetics and politics of the literary text in question, whatever its linguistic classification. In this case I simply follow Sauda’s lead, for he himself felt the need to name the particular register of speech when he labelled the marsiyâ clearly as being ‘dar zabân-i purabi âmez’—‘mixed with the eastern dialect’.

Whatever the linguistic label we choose to give Fâtimâ’s lament, one point is undeniable—it abounds in Sanskrit-derived words like ‘pût’, ‘nain’ and ‘mukh’, which are anomalous in Sauda’s largely Persianised register of speech. Both the narrator’s speech and that of the women in this elegy lack the Perso-Arabic vocabulary which Sauda uses extensively in his ghazals as well as other marsiyâs. Furthermore, in the use of forms like ‘gaiyo’ and ‘kit’ (instead ofgaya and kahän), Fâtimâ departs entirely from the standard Urdu-Khari boli grammar normally used by Sauda as well as most non-Deccani Urdu poets. The tone of Fâtimâ’s speech is certainly less polished because of her avoidance of Persian and her pointed use of a regional Hindi dialect. It is overwhelmingly as a result of this, I would argue, that her lament is laced with an informal, familial affection—a tone established immediately in the opening line by Fâtimâ’s transformation of ‘Husain’ into ‘Husainâ’

23 Ibid., pp. 524–27.
24 Deccani Urdu ghazal poets like Qult Qub Shâh are known for their liberal use of tadbhava words as well as the feminine voice; this, however, is a tradition that dies out in the Deccan by the early eighteenth century; it is, furthermore, a tradition that does not significantly influence either the north Indian Rekhta-Urdu poetic tradition, or the history of its criticism.
through the addition of the diminutive suffix ‘ā’. Fāṭimā thus claims the prerogative of a mother to address as a little child the son who was in fact in his fifties when he lay headless and parched in the sands of Karbala.

The loss which Saudā explores here is specifically a domestic and familial loss. It is, in other words, a loss unimaginable in the topography of the ghazal which, though also a poetry of loss, does not accommodate sorrow within the confines of the home. Widowhood and sonlessness are modalities of grief which appear risible, if not monstrous, when grafted on to the body of a ghazal. The grieving lover of the ghazal inhabits a far bleaker space. And he inhabits a more public space. The ghazal plays itself out in a series of conventionalised topographies: the kūcā (alley), the bāzār, the caman (garden), the dasht (wilderness) and the bazm (soirée).

Typically, the lover in a ghazal may hang about the beloved’s alley in the hope of catching a glimpse of him/her; he/she may try to intercept the beloved in the garden where the flowers remind him of the beloved’s face and the cypress of his graceful stature; he may finally glimpse the beloved in the soirée, only to be snubbed or pointedly ignored; disappointed in love, and oblivious to his appearance, he may appear in the most public of all places, the bāzār, where there is no dearth of advisers to counsel him at droning length, and where he may also be upbraided by the shaikh for his shameless behavior; exhausted, the lover may finally retreat to the wilderness which forms the antithesis to the city, the site of his public humiliation and private pain. But except for the soirée every one of these scenarios defines an open, publicly accessible space; and even the soirée, though held indoors, is only a marginally domestic space, being limited to the most public part of an elite house, the living room.

The ghazal maintains a scrupulous distance from the home and locates its sorrows in non-domestic spaces. And along with domestic spaces the ghazal avoids familial relations. As I stressed earlier, mothers, sisters or fathers do not intrude upon the lover’s sorrows, either to comfort or chide; nor do they comment upon the beloved’s wilful cruelty. In the emotional logic of the ghazal, the home and the family are not only a distraction, but also a dissonance.

The marsiyā, by contrast, is nothing if not a poem of domestic sorrows and concrete blood relations. Not only is its location domestic, but it is, furthermore, a specific domestic scene—the family of Imām Husain. And since the marsiyā locates itself unequivocally in the family, it also locates itself in the specifics of gender—women form almost half the cast of characters in the marsiyā. The laments of the male characters in a marsiyā often come from the battlefield; but the women grieve from the seclusion of the tents pitched outside the battlefield of Karbala. And the occasions on which we hear the women lament include such intensely

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25 Even when the home appears in the ghazal it is significant as a ‘negative space,’ that is, for its inaccessibility to the lover. For example, in Ghālib’s famous she’r: main vohān pahunā to un ki gāliyon kā kyā javāb? yād thin jīni duʾān ṣarīf-i darbān ho gayīn (Though at last I reached his [beloved’s] home what could I say to his stream of abuses? Every prayer I knew I’d used up to slip past the door-keeper).
domestic—and thus all the more macabre—occasions as the ‘wedding’ of Qāsim, held on the eve of the final battle, an occasion for which the groom’s body arrives riding on a bier. An exception to these ‘indoor laments’ are the laments we read of in this marşıyā by Saudā, for here the women grieve on their enforced march through the desert. True, for once the women are in the open desert and not in an enclosed domestic space, but that is precisely the pathos of the marşıyā—that those who should by rights be in seclusion and embossed by their families, are denied this and made to wander in public view. Thus, the marşıyā locates itself in the specificity of gender, family relationships, and domestic settings. The emotions it exploits are often quite unambiguously women’s emotions. And the speech which corresponds to an outpouring of such emotions is pointedly un-Persianised.26 The emotional texture and physical location of Saudā’s marşıyā is much closer to the Bārahmāsā where the laments also unfold within the walls of a home and in the company of other women. Thus, even though the verses of Bikat Kahānī and the marşıyās of Saudā are conventionally claimed as the literary ‘property’ of two different—and often mutually antagonistic—communities, I would argue that they are rooted in the soil of a very similar aesthetic logic. Is there a coincidence, then, between women’s speech, domestic settings and the use of Hindi in certain genres of Mughal poetry? If so, then what is the relation of this literary choice to the empirical reality of Mughal culture?

IV

The elite Mughal equation of Hindi with women’s speech was not, I would argue, merely a literary convention. It was, instead, a fairly faithful reflection of a social reality which inclined men and women to speak different registers of a common language, and sometimes entirely different languages altogether. We know very

26 The vernacularised nature of the marşıyā, at both the linguistic and thematic levels, has often been noted by Urdu critics. For example, C.M. Naim, ‘Urdu in the Pre-Modern Period: Synthesis or Particularism?’, New Quest, Vol. 6, 1978, p. 9. Naim writes, ‘The marşıya is the one genre of Urdu poetry which, as it developed, managed to maintain its original balance of local and foreign elements. In these elegies the emotions are Indian though the personae are Arabs; the landscape is conventional—sort of vintage ghazal—but the material culture, customs and rituals are Indo-Muslim.’ Naim suggests that this is so because the marşıya writer seeks, above all, to create a tear-jerker which will reduce the assembled Shia gathering to communal and cathartic weeping: ‘marşıyas are written to be read before an audience in a majlis, and to make the listeners cry. To succeed in its chief goal a marşıya has to be firmly rooted in the intimate and the local.’ Thus, Naim partly anticipates my own argument. Where I differ from him is in suggesting that in addition to aiming generally for a local physical setting, the marşıyā aims to evoke a set of ‘feminine’ sentiments and losses, and that this specifically gendered set of emotions are best expressed in an un-Persianised, and hence to the Mughals unpolished, speech. Such a speech was deemed appropriate for the evocation of ‘feminine’ sentiments largely because this is what the elite Mughal women, and especially domestic women, (not courtesans) spoke at home. I also differ from Naim in drawing connections between the genre of the marşıyā and other ‘feminine speech’ genres, like Bikat Kahānī by Muḥammad Afzal.
little of how or what elite Mughal women spoke, either among themselves or with men. And we know even less of what they wrote. We do know, however, that despite a constant trickle of immigration from Central Asia, Persian was not the language of greatest fluency for most women among the Mughal elite, since in the Indic environment it could only be acquired through an extended formal education with a maulavi. The most elite among Mughal women did manage to learn Persian, and some, like Emperor Aurangzeb’s daughter Zebunnisā, even became accomplished poets in it. But Zebunnisā quickly exhausts the list of prominent women poets who spring to mind. This was largely because formal education required the student to attend school outside the home, while elite married (and marriageable) women were expected to observe pardāh and remain at home.

Elite courtesans, however, were a different matter altogether. If we accept Muhammad Hādı Rusvā’s celebrated novel Umrāo Jān as a fairly accurate description of late Mughal education, we see that for urban, elite courtesans, a grounding in Persian, and especially Persian poetry, was considered de rigueur. For such courtesans, Persian-knowing maulavis were hired and retained by the ‘brothels’ (kothe), thereby bringing Persian into the house, rather than sending the women out to it. Indeed, elite urban courtesans like Umrāo Jān were probably the only group of Mughal women to be predictably and extensively educated in Persian. But the elite, urban courtesan was a very special type—she formed as miniscule a part of Mughal courtesan society as high-priced ‘escorts’ do in ours. More common, by far, were the numerous village courtesans whom Umrāo encountered.

37 For her divān (anthology of poetry) see Zebunnisā Begam (Magan Lal and Jessie Duncan Westbrook, trs), The Diwan of Zeb-un-nisa: The First Fifty Ghazals, London, 1913.
38 We see how the dilemma between educating marriageable girls while still maintaining pardāh was solved in Nazir Ahmad’s novel Taubā an-Nasūh (The Repentance of Nasūh). In this nineteenth-century didactic novel, Ahmad solves the problem of women’s education by having the central female character in the novel, Fahmidah, open an all-girls’ school at her home, thereby bringing the students into a domestic space in the presence of a married woman, rather than sending them out into the relatively more public space of a school. Significantly, if we look at the curriculum prescribed by Ahmad (and taught by Fahmidah) we notice that Urdu is taught for practical reasons of being able to deal with life in north India, and so is some elementary Arabic (so the girls may correctly pronounce verses from the Qur’ān). Persian, however, is conspicuous by its absence, to say nothing, of course, of Persian poetry, which would have been regarded as superfluous, if not downright harmful, for girls headed for marriage. See C.M. Naim, ‘Prize Winning Adab: A Study of Five Urdu Books Written in Response to the Allahabad Government Gazette Notification’, in Barbara Metcalf, ed., Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam, Berkeley, 1984, pp. 309–12.
40 Having been published in 1899 Umrāo Jān is not, of course, a ‘Mughal’ novel, but it is, nevertheless, a good source for recreating the social and material contexts of late Mughal north India because the world it describes—navābi Lucknow—was such a self-conscious heir to Mughal traditions which, I would argue, continued well beyond the final dissolution of the Mughal royalty in 1858.
when she was kidnapped and taken out of Lucknow to serve at the court of a
provincial Hindu kingdom, or even the commoner type whom she described in her
later life as hanging about the fairgrounds of Lucknow. In the recollection of her
life-history Umrao is very quick to point out that these courtesans were skilled in
neither the musical nor the poetic arts. Nor, of course, were they adept in Persian, or
even in Persianised Urdu. They were, quite simply, sex-workers, from whom the
customers expected neither the pleasure of witty conversation nor the challenge of
poetic exchanges.

In Rusvā’s novel, we detect two distinct gradations of speech—elite, urban men
and courtesans display their virtuosity by speaking and writing Persian, or an
elaborately Persianised Urdu, while domestic women, like Umrao’s mother in
Faizābād, and later her lover’s wife in Lucknow, talk in a variety of unstandardised
vernacular dialects with a minimum of Persian. So, although a handful of Mughal
women from royal families or elite courtesan ‘families’ did write and compose in
Persian, it largely remained the domain of educated men. In fact, throughout Mughal
history, and well into the nineteenth-century, a command of Persian was the mark of
an educated man, whether Hindu or Muslim. Thus, by retelling the Hindi Padmāvat
in high Persian, Mukhlis was not just transporting the tale into a register acceptable
to his literary friends, he was also bolstering his own reputation as a man of letters,
and possibly competing with his friend, the great lexicographer Sirājuddīn Khān
Ārzū, who was also present that sleepless night at the fairgrounds.

By contrast, in Mughal culture the un-Persianised vernacular—often simply
called ‘bhākhā’, or ‘speech’31—was associated with women. And I would add that
its strongest association was not just with any women, but especially with married
and, thus, house-bound women. It is because this association was already widely
prevalent that numerous late nineteenth-century proponents of Hindi could glorify
the language by personifying it as a virtuous housewife, while vilifying Urdu as a
harlot in their attempts at promoting the one over the other as the national lan-
guage.32 The association of an un-Persianised vernacular with virtuous domestic-
ity is already implied in Mughal texts like Sauda’s maršiyā where Fātimā’s
domesticity is fully highlighted by her pointed avoidance of Perso-Arabic words.
Would her laments have had the same ring of helplessness or outrage if Saudā had
made her cry in the same polished, Persianised speech in which gender-less lovers
and beloveds lisped to each other in his ghazals? As with the association of Hindi

31 Which is in itself a tadbhavised form of the Sanskrit ‘Bhāṣā’ and thus hints at the tadbhava
nature of this vernacular. Thus, for example, early publications of Padmāvat are titled Padmāvat
Bhākhā (Padmāvat in the Vernacular). See Muhammad ‘Abdul Vāhid Ghafarallāh, tr., Padmāvat:
Bhākhā Mutarjim, Kanpur, 1905. For other earlier uses of this word to refer to an un-Persianised
32 And not just as the virtuous housewife, but also as ‘Queen Abode of Truth’, opposed to Urdu
as the ruthless rival for the throne. For glorious representations of Hindi (and negative ones of
Urdu) in late nineteenth-century literature see Christopher King, ‘Forging a New Linguistic
Identity: The Hindi Movement in Banaras, 1868–1914’, in Sandra Freitag, ed., Culture and
and musicality, this particular association with women has also had a long life, persisting well into the twentieth century. Many north Indians brought up in pre-partition South Asia still remember that until quite recently Hindi was called ‘auraton ki zabān’, or ‘the women’s language’, and that those who so called it thus intended a contrast with the vastly more Persianised Urdu.

The un-Persianised vernacular, or bhākhā, was not, however, a uniform thing. It, too, was graded, and one of its nuances was a very specialised idiom called the ‘Begamāti zabān’ or ‘lady’s jargon’. Begamāti zabān distinguished itself most conspicuously through its unique stock of curse words, diminutives and terms of endearment. A word such as ‘mūā’ (corpse) could be hurled at someone intensely disliked, and would immediately identify the speaker as using Begamāti zabān. As such, the Begamāti zabān extended the emotional reach of language, by making it possible to express greater extremes of both love and hatred, affection and annoyance. But it is significant that only women had the prerogative of using its unique vocabulary. A man using a word such as ‘mūā’ could count on being laughed at for being effeminate. Thus, if un-Persianised Hindi was women’s speech (auraton ki zabān), Begamāti zabān was the very heart of this speech—the inner core from which men were not just discouraged, but actively barred.

Predictably, Begamāti zabān was neither Persianised nor Arabicised. What little Persian or Arabic it did have was pronounced—or according to some ‘mispronounced’—with the Persian ‘zs’ changing to ‘j’s’ and the ‘khs’ to ‘khs’. It was this special sub-set of speech, and its many ‘mispronunciations’ of Perso-Arabic sounds, which a late nineteenth-century Muslim reformer like Maulānā Ashraf ‘Ali Thānavī sought to correct in his didactic book Bihishtī Zevar (Heavenly Ornaments). And it is precisely this change of pronunciation of Persian words that is also evident in those passages of Afzāl’s poem where the nāyīkā speaks in Hindi. But unlike the begams who spoke the Begamāti zabān, Afzāl’s nāyīkā surprises us by breaking out in chaste Persian and, in one instance, even Arabic. And when she does so we get the distinct impression that were she to walk out of the pages of the text her diction and pronunciation would meet with the approval of any Maulānā.

As a technical term, Begamāti zabān is usually reserved for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women’s speech. However, since the peculiar social conditions which produced a distinct ‘lady’s jargon’ were not unique to the nineteenth century, I would assert that a similar gender-based cleavage also existed in the two prior centuries of Mughal culture, with women speaking a medley of unstandardised, and usually unnamed, local dialects with a thin veneer of Persian, and an even thinner one of Arabic. In our contemporary jargon we tend to group such unstand-


ardised, un-Persianised dialects under the rubric of ‘Hindi’. This, however, is quite far from the official Hindi of post-independence India, which carries an increasingly crushing load of unmodified Sanskrit words.

In the eighteenth century, Saudâ called such un-Persianised women’s speech ‘the eastern dialect’, thereby hinting that the eastern reaches of the Gangetic plain—being furthest removed from Delhi and Lucknow, the two centres of Persianate culture—spoke a language less Persianised. For a Mughal intellectual like Saudâ, Afzâl’s incursion into an un-Persianised ‘Hindi’ might well have connoted ‘popular’ speech, but for him its efficacy would not have consisted in its orientation towards the rural Hindu masses, but, rather, in its vivid evocation of a rustic and unschooled women’s dialect which all Mughal elites heard at home, especially in the women’s quarter.

While savouring the rusticity of un-Persianised speech in writing, its highly-educated, Persianised, male readers would have been under no illusions as to who this literature was intended for. Neither Afzâl, nor Râzi, not yet Saudâ breathed the air of a liberal world which deemed a reaching out to the masses in their vernacular the burden of the noble intellectual. To imagine this Hindi literature as demotic in its intended audience is to foreclose the possibility of a sophisticated, Persianised male taking delight in reading a rustic, unacademic speech that he himself seldom spoke publicly, and which he would certainly not have deigned to write to his intellectual equals, whether they were male colleagues or educated courtesans. Afzâl’s genius as a poet lay in his surprising juxtaposition of this vernacular (bhâkhâ) with a chaste Persian in the laments of a grieving woman. His text delighted Mughal readers because it defied their expectations, and not because they found its Hindi easier to understand, nor yet because they could use it as an effective means of communicating with the Hindu masses.

The conception of the vernacular as the ‘voice of the people’ or in service of ‘the people’ is best viewed as a trope in our own modern consciousness. I would also add that for the study of pre-modern literature it is a disabling trope, and one that needs to be historised and questioned. To do this, it helps to begin with the realisation that the glorification of the vernacular as ‘voice of the people’ is a conception that serves the social ideals of the founders and members of modern nation states. Throughout the nineteenth century and continuing up to the present, the logic of nationalism seizes upon language—and especially the vernacular as opposed to the classical language—as an essential building block of a shared national identity; so much so, that Benedict Anderson’s description of a nation as a ‘vernacularly imagined community’\(^3\) seems particularly apt. And one characteristic of ‘vernacularly imagined communities’ is their unfailing celebration of the vernaculus, the native-born. ‘In modern narratives of nationalism’, writes Sumathi Ramaswamy, ‘the language of a nation assumes importance because it is the tongue

of its citizens, the very essence of the people who speak it. Correspondingly, the power of the language appears to derive from the power exercised by the collective entity, "the people" in the nation.\(^{36}\)

With Mughal culture, however, we step into a radically different ethical and intellectual terrain. As we enter this landscape we have, above all, to bear in mind that we are visiting a culture before the advent of the nation, and a time before egalitarian national philosophies came to celebrate the 'folk' as the very marrow of the nation, and so to court them as the indispensable element of the emerging state. Whether Hindu or Muslim, the Persianised urban elite of Mughal India did not conceive of themselves in 'vernacular terms'—which is to say that they did not value their written or spoken language according to its proximity to the speech of the masses; nor did they view mass accessibility as a measure of literary success. But at the same time their overwhelmingly elite outlook did not translate simply and literally into an avoidance of the vernacular, or even its strict separation from high classical Persian. Those elites who enthusiastically participated in Persianised art forms, and maintained their exclusivity and social distance from the masses, nevertheless used an un-Persianised Hindi for special occasions, such as, for example, when they wanted to evoke a self-consciously rustic, domestic and feminised register of speech. Thus, in discussing Mughal literature we should be alert to the literary possibilities of the combinations of Persian and the vernacular, while at the same time explaining these combinations in a way that does not presume an egalitarian sensibility.\(^{37}\) To fail to do this is to bury this literature and its users within the graveyard of our own ideals.

\(^{36}\) By contrast, she writes: 'Prior to the nation's birth, Tamil was valorized not because it ensured communication between its speakers, enabled the schooling of its citizenry, or facilitated the governance of the populace. Instead, it was held in awe for its demonstrated ability to perform wondrous miracles and command the all-powerful gods.' In Sumathi Ramaswamy, 'Language of the People in the World of Gods: Ideologies of Tamil Before the Nation', Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 55(4), 1998, pp. 66-67.

\(^{37}\) The anachronistic imposition of our own vernacular ideals to pre-modernity is a distortion which is alive and well in the study of South Asia, especially among politically liberal historians overly-eager to find in pre-modern India glimmers of modern liberal subversions of hierarchic structures. One glaring example of such historiography is Sudipto Kaviraj's attempts at outlining a logic of writing and speaking in pre-modern India. In writing of the rise of vernacular literatures he says:

They [i.e. vernacular literatures] arise haltingly, always making reverential genuflexions in the direction of the high tradition and its texts, which they were eventually to undermine. Their first and most impressive texts are attempts to stretch the riches of this high culture towards the lower, culturally deprived orders. Their implicit justification would have been that, if religiosity and aesthetics were significant and valuable for all human beings, those without the use of Sanskrit [or Persian?] should not be deprived of these values. As a result these literatures assume a consciously subaltern relation between themselves and the high classical texts (emphasis added).

Let us emerge from this forest of details to reconsider the issue of literary identities in Mughal India. What I have just presented suggests, I hope, some framework of a logic of language use—enough of a framework to allow me to propose that for elite Mughal intellectuals Hindi usage was, among other things, a matter of aesthetic, and not just practical, considerations. The aesthetics of Hindi usage was often linked to its perceived rusticity, which, in turn, connoted to elite Mughal readers an unschooled, domestic, feminine voice. It was thus that both the rustic femininity of Hindi and the urbane masculinity of Persian were thrown into sharper relief when contained in the voice of the grieving nāyikā of Bikat Kahānī. Thus, the resulting narrative could appeal more fully to the sensibilities of an elite Persianised reader like Mukhlīś who on the one hand deemed Persian the language of refinement, and so strove in his public life to claim its profile and status, but who simultaneously succumbed to the rhythm of eastern dialects, as does the heart upon hearing a ‘melody brimming with pain’.

So far I have addressed explanations which view Persianate Hindi literature as populist in inspiration and use. Such explanations invariably isolate one prominent use for this allegedly populist Hindi literature: they claim that the masses addressed by this literature were not only un-Persianised, but also non-Muslim, so that this demotic literature was simultaneously conversionary in its effects. If, as I have tried to demonstrate, the issue of language use had much to do with the logic of aesthetic considerations, and not merely with the logic of ‘practical’ matters, then it behoves us to ask how an issue like ‘conversion’ functioned within this logic. Put another way, what were the associations of ‘conversion’ in the Mughal literary imagination? To arrive at these associations or meanings we have to approach conversion not just as a historical process, but also as a literary trope. To understand conversion literarily we again look at Bikat Kahānī or, rather, at a Mughal reaction to it.

The reaction to Afzāl’s poem is by the Persian poet Vāleh Dāghestānī (d. 1756), who in the 1730s compiled a biographical sketch of Indian poets writing in Persian. In the section on Afzāl, we see Vāleh grappling with the anomaly of a Persian-knowing elite Mughal poet choosing to write in Hindi. Vāleh explained Afzāl’s motivation by writing, we would say constructing, a biography which portrays Afzāl as a convert to Vaisnavism. Vāleh mentions that, although a maulavī, in his old age, Afzāl fell madly in love with a young Hindu woman from the pilgrimage city of Mathura. So consumed was he by her that giving up both prayers and fasting he hung about her alley in hopes of catching glimpses of her. Spurned repeatedly by her, and ridiculed by the children in the neighbourhood, he eventu-

ally shaved off his white maulavi's beard, apprenticed himself to the Hindu priest of a local temple, and got busy learning the Indian sciences. Being intelligent he made such marvellous progress in Hindi, that he was eventually appointed successor to the temple priest. It was in his new capacity as the converted Brahmin priest that Afzal finally managed to waylay his Hindu beloved one day when she came to offer pūjā at the temple. When she saw the immense transformation in the ex-maulāvi she was instantly ashamed of all she had put him through and immediately chose to convert to Islam and become his wife. Vāleh dates Afzal’s Hindi verses to the period of his obsession with the Hindu woman.

How are we to navigate our way through this biography? Clearly, to read it as a factual account of Afzal’s life would be naïve; equally naïve, however, would be to dismiss it as mere fancy, for, while it may tell us nothing of the actual circumstances of Afzal’s life, or of conversion as a historical process in pre-modern India, it speaks quite eloquently of a Mughal intellectual’s grasp of the issue of writing in Hindi, and its relation to the issue of conversion as a literary trope. The paradigm of conversion which Vāleh followed in constructing his biography of Afzal is a trope in Sufi hagiographies and is encountered most conspicuously in Fariduddin ‘Attār’s thirteenth-century Persian masterpiece, Mantiq al-Tair (Conference of the Birds).39 ‘Attār relates the story of a certain Shaikh Sanān who falls in love with a Christian woman, and in blind obedience to her becomes a swineherd, thereby forfeiting his status as a Muslim shaikh. He plunges further into kufr (disbelief) by donning the cap and belt of the Christians. Eventually, however, he returns to the Muslim community.

In the inversionary logic of Sufi paradigms, the lover’s path to true knowledge and union with the beloved lies through immersion in the darkness of disbelief and the resultant public censure, or malāmat. It is through his patient endurance of this censure that the true lover proves his resolve. Thus, it is no accident that in the biography Vāleh shows Afzal bursting out in couplets which praise infamy and destruction as a blessing on the suffering lover. From the Sufi point of view the courting of public censure as a result of abandoning Islam makes yet another significant point: it establishes a tension between conventional religious observances and the intuitive grasp of Truth which a Sufi attains after enduring hardships, and which often leads him to act in outlandish ways. Of course, for a Sufi the unveiling of Truth through union with the beloved takes precedence over conformity to the rules of correct religious behaviour; it is this hierarchy of values that the Sufi-lover establishes through becoming an outcaste in the Muslim community. But the foray into disbelief is only an intermediate step, for, partly in response to orthodox critiques, Sufis also recognised that the truly successful mystic should ultimately be capable of containing himself to the point of maintaining the external decorum required of all social beings. Thus, while the first flash of esoteric know-

ledge may indeed cause the Sufi to lose his wits, ultimately the ecstasy has to be contained. It is thus that Shaikh Sanān returns to the Muslim community.

When Vāleh constructs the biography of Afzal on the Sufi paradigm of the wayward but true lover, he hints that Afzal’s linguistic exclusion from the community of Persian-writing poets parallels the self-exclusion of the Sufi from the community of conventional Muslims. Thus the biographer casts the poet’s persona within the mould of an ideal Sufi. Like Shaikh Sanān, Afzal also emerges the better for this foray into kufr. In the logic of Vāleh’s imagination, the Hindi which Afzal chose to write was a product of the excess of love which blinded him temporarily to the path of both the conventional Muslim and the conventional Persian poet. But this temporary turning away from convention was not just progress on the path of errors; it was, instead, the necessary first step to gaining an intimate knowledge of the beloved. Thus, for Vāleh, whose biographic imagination was steered by Sufi paradigms, Afzal’s decision to write in Hindi was not a concession to the simple sensibility of rural non-educated Hindus, but rather the necessary outcome of a stage along the lover’s path, which the poet writing of love also treded. Vāleh must have been thoroughly aware that his inclusion of Afzal in a biography of Indian Persian poets was questionable, since Afzal’s only composition was a hybrid Hindi-Persian poem. Thus, by including Afzal in his biographical compendium, Vāleh was in some sense offering a defence of Afzal’s decision to write in Hindi. In the logic of this defence, Hindi was presented as proof of Afzal’s profoundly transforming experience of love—an experience which presumably rendered his love poetry all the more potent, for it was now no mere lisping about love, but proceeded, instead, from a solid core of experience.

Like Eaton, Vāleh also explained the choice of Hindi by an elite, Persian-knowing poet in terms of an interface between Hindus and Muslims, but with one twist. In Vāleh’s explanation the movement is reversed—it is not the Muslim poet who addresses the potential convert in his simple idiom; instead, the Muslim poet becomes a Hindu to speak in the Hindu’s idiom. May we, then, feel free to say that Vāleh talks of a conversion? Only, I believe, if we take care to note the difference between what he and we mean by ‘conversion’. By conversion Vāleh seems to have meant a good deal more than merely the shifting of allegiances from this community of believers to that. Conversion may indeed mean that, but for Vāleh the more interesting conversion was the initiation of the poet, and presumably also the reader, into the transformative possibilities of the path of love. Hindi and immersion in Hinduism were merely the external signs of such a ‘conversion’.

In contrast to modern historians like Eaton or ‘Abd al-Haqq, Vāleh did not understand conversion simply as a historical process; nor did he view Afzal’s choice of Hindi exclusively within the binary framework of a Hindu-Muslim interaction. The conversion which Vāleh sketches presumes a rather different burden of commitment, and is oriented towards a very different debate than what we in the late twentieth century mean when we talk of ‘conversion’. For one, Vāleh’s conversion was not an apocalyptic event leading to an estrangement from an original confessional community; it was, instead, a liminal moment in the unfolding of a ritualised
process of self-integration. As such, it lacked the finality which for us is a defining characteristic of 'religious conversion', especially when we understand conversion simply as a historical process.

Second, in terms of its intellectual grounding, Afzal’s conversion echoed an age-old debate within the Islamic tradition—the debate, that is, between a strictly legalist, literalist position and a Sufi mystical position on the persistent tension between public decorum and religious ecstasy. This debate had been rehearsed before, elsewhere in the Islamic world, for example, by Āṭṭār writing in thirteenth-century Iran of Shaikh Sanân’s conversion to Christianity and pig-farming. Thus, the rhetorical effect of Vâleh’s construction of Afzal’s persona as a Sufi heretic (kāfir) was to root Bikat Kahâni within a venerable debate internal to the Muslim community. To be sure, this ongoing Islamic debate in both its South Asian and Middle Eastern variants cast a sidelong glance at non-Muslims. In Āṭṭâr’s case, the glance rests on Christians; in the bulk of Persian ghazal poetry it is the wine-drinking Zoroastrians dwelling at the fringes of the city who express the liminal identity of the reprobate lover; and in Vâleh’s case the bearer of the liminal identity is the Hindu Vaisnava priest. Certainly, all of these accounts tell us something about the relation between Muslims and various non-Muslims, but they do infinitely more than just this. They also, and I would say primarily, voice tensions within the Muslim community. The thrust of such accounts is not to articulate a dialogue with or against Hindus or Christians, but, rather, to illumine yet another facet of a debate central to the self-understanding of medieval Muslims vis-à-vis Sufism.

I will conclude by restating a question with which I began: how do we do justice to the study of a community as intricate as that of Mughal India? There is a tendency among us to read the history of medieval India as the unfolding of an overwhelmingly agonistic dialogue between Hindus and Muslims. It is thus that we explain Persianate Hindi writing as the outcome of a Muslim desire to convert Hindus by speaking to them in their vernaculars. In so doing, we move within the narrow orbit of a question that has lately held the Indian national imagination in its thrall. The question involves the presence of Islam in India as a problem to be explained: how might we account for the spectacular success of Islam, and its ability to win so many converts in India despite its radically un-Indian texture, a late arrival in the subcontinent, and, above all, a linguistic dependence on Arabic and Persian? In the post-partition and post-Babari Masjid climate of South Asia, the question has come to acquire a breathless urgency, for it is fundamental to the self-perception of both Hindus and Muslims as people with divergent religious identities and commitments. In India, it clamours all the louder in the political imagination of an increasingly conservative Hindu majority trying to forge a national unity by presenting Islam as a historically persistent internal threat to the integrity of a Hindu nation.

The question of Islamic success has traditionally been answered in a number of ways. One conventional answer presents Islam as a religion of the sword, and so attributes Islamic success to a history of coercive conversions among Hindus.
Indian Muslims as well as secular liberals have reacted with alarm to this image of conversion by sword, for the last century of violence has amply proven the potential of such images in sustaining social violence. If in such a climate of growing antipathy to Muslims, the Islamic ‘success’ in India is explained by means other than coercion, then Islam appears in a generally more favourable light and Muslims as less problematic on the national stage. It is here, in the logic of a defensive Muslim and liberal response to the popular narrative of conversion by force, that the Sufi finds a useful niche as the peaceful disseminator of Islam. It is not an accident that in the historiography of such liberal Muslim authors as Maulavi ‘Abd al-Haqq, Sufi authors minister gently and even ‘democratically’ to the Hindu ‘avam, winning their hearts by talking to them in their own language. The role of the Sufi as a gentle preacher and disseminator of Islam is largely unquestioned and it is a handy counter-narrative to the long list of alleged Islamic conquerors (ghazi) who sit so heavily upon the modern Hindu imagination. Presented thus, Persianate authors who chose to write in Hindi become instruments of an essentially ruthless Islam as it marches juggernaut-like upon a passive Hindu majority. To do justice to the complexity of Mughal society, we might begin by asking if it is possible to place Hindi writing by Persianate authors within a broader range of aesthetic, theological and political concerns than is allowed by the logic of contemporary Hindu fears of a Muslim minority.

A proper acknowledgement of the complexity of Mughal culture will begin with the recognition that in addition to the dialogue between Hindus and Muslims, there sounded throughout Mughal history other dialogues, such as that, for example, between Muslims and Muslims; that Mughals like Valeh sometimes made sense of their world in reference to these debates, for they may not have felt as sharply the Hindu–Muslim polarity which is so blindingly a part of our mental ‘furniture’. The recognition of this difference between our imaginative world and that of Mughal times does not demand that we naively accept the cheerful historical narrative of Hindu–Muslim brotherhood that is officially prescribed by the Indian Government in its ceaseless attempt at promoting a national culture of tolerance. What it does require, however, is that we recognise a fuller range of intellectual and aesthetic concerns animating the Mughals as they went about creating a cultural fabric that still retains the power to move us with its intricacy and subtlety.