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Remarks on *Ara'ish-e Mahfil* by Mir Sher 'Ali Afsos

IN the Fondo Borgia of the Vatican Library, under the listing Ind 13, there is a rather curious manuscript, not the less for being, as it so far appears, the only one in the Urdu language existing in this library. It has to do with a well-known work entitled *Ārā'ish-e Mahfil*, compiled by an author—equally familiar to those who study Urdu language and literature—Mīr Shēr 'Alī Afsōs. This manuscript, which bears the date 1839 (though the work had already been printed in Calcutta in 1808 by the plates of the Hindustani Press of Fort William College), is composed of two volumes (of 428 pages and 232 pages, respectively) measuring 20cm by 16cm. It was copied, as a note at the end of volume two says, by Henry O'Gorman, professor of Hindustani and Persian, and revised by the *vakīl* of the deposed *rājā* of *Satara* (Bombay), Maulvī Mīr Afzal 'Alī. The letter *sīn* at the beginning of each section shows that the manuscript underwent revision, and another note explains that O'Gorman (whose London address, dated 1854, is given) was a learned scholar of oriental languages, particularly of Hindustani.¹ After having been presented to Pius IX, the manuscript was given by him to the Museum of the British College in 1860, and the annotation “seen and at places corrected by Riyāzu 'l-Ḥasan

¹For a long time the term Hindustani referred to the language in which this manuscript was written—whether, as in this case, it was written with Perso-Arabic characters or with Devanagiri characters—before the difference in script and symbology (culled from the writing by the Muslim community and by the Hindu) combined with various politico-cultural motivations, established the bifurcation into Hindi and Urdu, by now separated languages, as we shall shortly have occasion to see further.

of Jaunpur (U.P.), Roma 27.1.1945” perhaps indicates the scant interest that this gift has generated if no one has bothered about it for nearly a century.

If it is perhaps proper to bring to light a manuscript which held a notable importance in the orientalist culture of the last century, a greater reason to talk about it lies in the interest in the content of the work.

The report of the presence in the Vatican Library of this manuscript—which consists of a general description of the area around Delhi, with a brief history of the Hindu rulers preceding the Muslim conquest, and whose compilation is based on a Persian work which it largely translates, entitled *Khulāṣatu ’t-Tavārikh* by Munshī Sujān Rā’ē of Patiala—provides the occasion to make certain remarks about *Ārā’ish-e Mahfil*.² We are in fact dealing with an example of Urdu historiography—although the book has the peculiarity of having been used for the most part not as an historical text but as a text for studying the Urdu language³—which gives us the opportunity to take up the discussion of this language, its various fortunes and its prospects—a topic that is particularly timely given the debate in progress, especially in Pakistan, over the suitability of using Urdu as a linguistic tool for history.⁴

First of all it seems worthwhile to recall that the author, Mīr Shēr ‘Alī Afsōs, a Saiyid, whose ancestors arrived in India from Iran, and whose father had served as an official with various *navābs*, was born in Delhi in 1732 and, following in his father’s footsteps, at 27 entered the court of a member of the reigning family of Lucknow; he then passed on to that of the eldest son of the emperor Shāh ‘Ālam, Mirzā Javān Bakht, who had moved to the capital of the Oudh. There the *nā’ib* of the Navāb Āṣafu ’d-Daula introduced him to the British Resident, upon whose recommenda-

²Three editions of it were printed in Calcutta, in 1808, 1848 and 1863, and Court’s translation into English was published twice (Allahabad, 1871; Calcutta, 1882). Two selections in English were drawn from Court: one, the more famous by J. Shakespeare in 1817–18, with the title *Muntakhabāt-e Hind*, and the other by N. L. Behmohel, published in Dublin in 1847. Other manuscript copies of this work are located in the British Library and the India Office Library—as a further demonstration of its diffusion and popularity.

³For a long time, in fact, it remained one of the texts for the High Proficiency exam in Urdu for the junior members of Her Majesty’s Indian Civil and Military Services—as one can read on the frontispiece of the printed edition edited by W. N. Lees (Calcutta, 1871).

⁴Cf. K.K. Aziz, *The Pakistani Historian* (Delhi, 1994), ch. 4.

tion he went to Calcutta in 1800 to be taken on as head *munshī* of the Hindustani Department of Fort William College. He, who had mixed with famous poets at the court of Lucknow—where Urdu literature had enjoyed a renewed splendor after the decline of Delhi—and who was already known as a poet (author of a *divān* which had had much success), became part of this institution from the moment of its foundation, which, despite the poor opinion expressed by noted authorities,⁵ had such a great part in the development of the Urdu language.

In 1800 the then-general of the East India Company, Lord Wellesley, founded Fort William College so that the officials of the Company, arriving in India, would receive the instruction necessary to carry out the tasks that awaited them, and particularly a knowledge of the Indian languages which was indispensable to their duties. Until then no particular knowledge was thought necessary to become an official of the Company in India; but Wellesley (who had mastered Urdu and knew Persian) had cultivated a notable interest in Indian culture, that translated itself into the foundation of the Madrasa of Calcutta in 1780, into the attempt—though fruitless—to have a chair of Persian established at Oxford, and into the move to create the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784. Nonetheless, the goal of the College he wanted was not to give a further boost to oriental studies, academically understood, but proposed, most pragmatically, to make the administration of the Indian possessions operate at its best by putting at the Company's disposal people trained specifically to work in India. According to Wellesley's plans such a goal would have been met by an education in which knowledge related to India would be integrated with Western knowledge of a scientific and literary sort, devising a curriculum which would then be used in schools for training officials of public administration.⁶ According to Wellesley the syllabus should include Law, History, Geography, Political Economy,

⁵Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 211.

⁶When, in 1853, an act of Parliament established that the appointments to the Indian Civil Service had to be by examination and, in 1854, a Committee, headed by Lord Macauley, was nominated, which established the requirements for officials, the recommendations that were drawn up turned out to be perfectly in sympathy with Section II of the Statutes entitled Admission of the Superior Officers and Professors of Fort William College. Reported in S.K. Das, *Sabibs and Munshis* (Calcutta, 1978), pp. 7–8.

Chemistry, Botany, Philosophy, as well as Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian, French and various Indian languages. Law should include British as well as Hindu and Muslim law in addition to the laws enforced by the Governors General of the Company. And History should include both European and Indian history. Learning the languages in use in India was indispensable, but had to go side by side with knowledge of classical languages, both Western and Eastern. Although only Westerners could be named professors, they had to be supported by *munshīs*⁷ of various ranks. The professor and *munshī* of the Hindustani Department—respectively Gilchrist and Afsōs—were particularly important, for though Wellesley had foreseen six chairs of modern Indian languages, the difficulties of costs to the Directors of the Company made it possible to institute only one, namely that in Hindustani.

Gilchrist's role (which Afsōs defines, in the introduction to *Ārā'ish-e Mahfil*, as *ṣāḥab mudarris-e hindī*, demonstrating how interchangeable the terms for denoting the language still were at the time⁸) was very important to the development of Hindustani and, in particular, of prose, as he made a special effort to create a style which was informal without being rough, and elegant without being pompous. The fact that the group of writers at Fort William, supported by him to produce works of this sort, cannot be defined as a real literary movement does not mean that they did not have a decisive influence on the evolution of the language. For a stylistic change effectively took place immediately afterwards—not only in works destined for Europeans, but also in those for regional circulation—as is evident from the works of the movement of the so-called Wahhabi Indians and from the productions of the Old Dilli College.⁹ Gilchrist and his fourteen *munshīs*, headed by Afsōs, produced, in four years, sixty works in Hindustani, or relative to Hindustani—some in Devanagiri characters—which, by the fact of being printed, produced a

⁷In India this term, which means “writer”—both in the sense of author and of scribe—took to meaning (especially among Europeans) a language teacher, especially of Urdu or Persian, with the sense of an expert of the language.

⁸M. D. Ṣiddiqī, *Gilchrist aur us kā 'Ahd*, (New Delhi, 1979), p. 26.

⁹S. R. Kidwai, *Gilchrist and the 'Language of Hindoostan'* (New Delhi, 1972), p. viii.

small revolution in the world of Indian languages,¹⁰ as became evident some thirty years later with the birth of Urdu journalism. The demand of teaching Westerners a language in which they could communicate with (not necessarily educated) Indians in fact laid the ground work for a linguistic evolution of fundamental importance, even though the work immediately derived from it certainly cannot be considered “literature” in the strict sense. It is in fact true that no educated person has ever read Afsōs or Mīr Amman’s books,¹¹ and so one cannot say that a direct influence exists between this sort of text and the prose of Ghālīb or Saiyid Aḥmad Khān; but it is equally true that modern Urdu, as a linguistic means capable of expressing any concept, owes much to Fort William College.

A further remark is necessary about the work of Fort William College in the linguistic and cultural domain (whose implications it will be necessary to take up later on): namely that it is precisely to this institution that one can trace the Hindi-Urdu dichotomy which would become primarily a political issue. It was in fact the authorities of the College who encouraged, at the insistence of the East India Company, two parallel groups of writers from within the Hindustani Department: one which used the Perso-Arabic script for its own writings and maintained a style tied to Persian, as the educated language of the Muslim world; and the other which used the Devanagari characters derived from Sanskrit, and which tried to Indianize—meaning, Sanskritize—the language as much as possible.¹² The Hindi-Urdu controversy would affect the politico-cultural scene in India for more than a century, for the Indian Muslims saw in the birth of Hindi a further threat to their own identity and another attempt to expel the Muslim contribution from India, denying them the title of “indianness,” so to speak. In fact, it is quite true that Urdu, its birth, its development and history are tightly bound to the Muslim presence in India, but it is equally true that until the birth of Hindi the language was the expression of Indian culture without other implications, nor did its use have any religious connotations.

¹⁰Fort William College had its own press which, along with others that sprang up in the same period of time, contributed to a revival of Indian languages, in addition to the spread of English.

¹¹Kidwai, p. 28–9.

¹²Cf. Ali Jawad Zaidi, *A History of Urdu Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1993), p. 211.

Paradoxically, it was exactly in the period of Mughal decline that a great cultural turmoil caused Urdu to emerge, in the place of Persian, as an important form of expression as well as a means of “high” communication, promoting it from a vernacular to a literary language. Until then, with the exception of the Deccan where the Muslim sultans had adopted the Dakhni variants as the principal cultural vehicle,¹³ the imperial Mughal government had always accorded Persian the rank of official language. It was in fact Akbar himself who extended Persian all the way to the administration (even at the local level), demonstrating a profound respect for the Persian culture that tied him to the international Muslim community. The Mughals knowingly pursued a policy of cultural leadership in India, to which the favor accorded to Persian belonged. The Mughal ideas of leadership, along with the mysticism of their Central Asian lineage, involved ambitions outside India, especially beyond the north-western border, though these declined definitively in the period following the reign of Shah Jahan, after which the Mughal pretenses no longer found any justification at the international level.

Both the protection of the Persian language and their ambitions in foreign policy were important factors in maintaining the ties of the Mughal aristocracy with Islamic society and culture in general, but both of these lines failed. Persian scholars never took the Persian works of their Indian peers seriously, while India suffered invasions by Nādir Shāh and Aḥmad Shāh Abdālī (who sacked Delhi twice). So, even though the study of Persian continued to be part of the curriculum of Indian Muslim intellectuals, at the beginning of the eighteenth century the Muslims of northern India turned toward Urdu. In this, as in other senses, the long reign of Aurangzeb (1658–1707) constituted a watershed, for it saw a decisive decline in imperial patronage with regard to Persian scholars, and a consequent decline in migration from Iran. In this sense, Aurangzeb was rather more “Indian” than his predecessors, given that he focused his political attentions on the Subcontinent, neglecting ties with international Islam.

The most important fact, however, resides in the change, from then on, in the audience which literature addressed. Indian writers who adopt

¹³Cf. D. J. Matthews, “The Kulliyāt of Muhammad Qulī Qutb Shāh: problems and prospects” in *Urdu and Muslim South Asia*, ed. Christopher Shackle, (London: London University, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1989), pp. 39–48.

Urdu no longer address an international audience, but an Indian one. And they no longer have the emperor and his court for a privileged interlocutor, but a much larger public, though still aristocratic. This broadening is unequivocally attested to by the fact that they went so far indeed as to translate the Qur'an into Urdu, in order to make it accessible to Muslims who did not know the classical languages of Islamic culture.¹⁴ In such a way, the preference from this period onward of Indian Muslims of the North to regional-cultural identity, rather than to universal Islamic identity, becomes apparent. And in the same vein, according to some, should also be seen the Pakistani attempts to declare Urdu as the national language, in the search for its own cultural identity.¹⁵

One literary genre in particular showed itself free of clichés from the Persian models. And it is the *shahr āshōb*, the epic or narrative poem of current political themes, particularly rich in Indian images, terms and references, with which poets of the highest order tested themselves: viz., Saudā, Mīr Taqī Mīr, Nazīr Akbarābādī, and even the last tragic Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah II, who under the *nom de plume* of Zafar, wrote a poem of this type. This demonstrates the deep interest that current affairs held for intellectuals, acutely aware of the changes which were taking place in the society to which they belonged.¹⁶

The actual writing of history deserves a separate discussion. At the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries Urdu also emerged as a language capable of producing works of history, coinciding with the introduction of English historiography into India. Urdu historiography, therefore, developed in a tradition of the decline of Indo-Persian and the emergence of Western historiography; and it is the first indigenous language, in the modern era, to undertake the production of historical works.

As early as the period preceding the founding of Fort St. George College at Madras, of Fort William College at Calcutta, and of Dehli College, one finds a few works of an historical nature in Urdu, as, for

¹⁴Shāh Valīu 'l-Lāh (1703–1762) translated the Qur'an into Persian, and his sons Rafī'u 'd-Dīn: and 'Abdu 'l-Qādir made two translations of it into Urdu, one in 1780 and the other in 1790.

¹⁵M. G. S. Hodgson, "The Unity of Later Islamic History," *Cahiers d'histoire Mondiale* 4 (1960), 911 n.

¹⁶Fritz Lehman, "Urdu Literature and Mughal Decline," *Mahfil*, vol. VI (Spring 1970), pp. 125–31.

example, that of Saiyid Bijnaurī (from 1772) entitled *Qiṣṣa va Ahvāl-e Rōhila*. From this and other examples of Urdu historiography of this period—whether one is speaking of original works or translations or abridged translations of histories in Persian—one finds that this type of work was usually undertaken on commission, often from English officials, and that the topics dealt with were always related to India, understood both in its totality and in its regional particularities. The language variously called by their authors Hindi-Urdu, Urdu or Dakhni, is in general quite simple, but often interspersed with Persian or local languages. Only on rare occasions are sources mentioned, even when it comes to famous authors, such as Mun‘im Khān Aurāngābādī,¹⁷ who certainly had access even to state documents. Then, apart from this last historian, it does not seem as though the authors of historical works had a particular specialization in writing history, rather that they were simply concerned with gathering a certain amount of information requested by their clients (who, very often, having a rather vague notion of it, were not much concerned with historiography). According to some, therefore, these initial works do not have scientific merit but constitute a mere example of how a given genre may begin.¹⁸

One should not be surprised, therefore, that Afsōs began with a Persian translation, nor that his notion of history, in the final analysis, does not break with that of the mediaeval political chroniclers who wrote in Persian. In the preface to the *Ārā‘ish-e Mahfil* he in fact demonstrates that he is aware of having dealt only with the powerful when he maintains that the history of the Hindu kings “in reality hands down only the names of the most important people, of whom in our days nothing is left, not even the lineage, no sign of them in the world.” And as the only way to leave a lasting sign is to “protect the people, to keep the state in constant development, to wield justice firmly,” the purpose that moves Afsōs—though he works at the behest of the English—is, like that of his predecessors who expressed themselves in Persian, religious, moral, and above all didactic. As Nizami has well explained,¹⁹ mediaeval Indian historians considered history principally a search for truth, and above all

¹⁷Active during the reign of the Nizam of Hyderabad ‘Alī Khān Āṣaf Jāh.

¹⁸Javed Ali Khan, “Beginning of Historical Writings in Urdu,” *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, vol. XLII, Part I (Jan. 1994), pp. 23–35.

¹⁹K. A. Nizami, *On History and Historians of Medieval India* (New Delhi, 1983), pp. 43–5.

Baranī; they had a theory of history and a precise idea of the duties of the historian, among which are patience and the teaching of submission to the wishes of God, and the expurgation of false faiths which lead to wrong truths. And here again Afsōs shows himself to be perfectly in line with such a theory when he affirms (again in the preface) that he made an effort to “correct the errors,” and that in the translation he has favored the administration of the provinces. And with regard to the places he describes, where profound changes sometimes occurred, he declares that he was only interested in the tombs and holdings of the Sufi when speaking of places of worship; while with regard to the Hindu mystics and their holy places, he says candidly that he has not taken them into consideration as they are contrary to religion and faith, and “because this is the religion of the inferior.” He does not shy away from invoking ‘Alī as a guide and claiming that “the human being needs to know and to adore the Creator according to his own religion, and he should not know those that are false; and because with time the pagan cults become heresies it is necessary to stick to correct knowledge.” And he adds: “God save us from useless knowledge!” He continues, saying that, nevertheless, he has done all that is necessary to avoid spreading errors, for it is not appropriate to indulge in things of little worth: life is too serious to take them into consideration until the necessary and obligatory things have been obtained. “When dealing with sovereigns and rulers, as one learns of the good and evil of past kings, one must choose the good and pass over the evil so that their reigns not be a bad example and endanger the state.” And he concludes that in this way history is “guide and knowledge, because when the human being is aware of which and how many lords and powerful kings, despite their retinue and wealth, have died out, and of whom not even the traces of a tomb are left, he would not perhaps desire to have either followers or kingdoms.” And he continues: “The world and worldliness should be considered fleeting things, and the other world and that which is inherent to it should be considered immortal things. What has become of ambitious sovereigns? For them too the place of repose is the dust. Of those who were glorious and splendid princes nothing remains but tombs; the heads that bore golden crowns are nothing but skulls covered with dust—while on the page remains written the good and bad they did.”

Therefore the *Ārā'ish-e Mahfil* is without a doubt a dynastic history with moral and didactic intentions, and not without its own originality (though a translation) precisely because, by express declaration of the author, we are dealing with a willfully unfaithful translation. Perhaps it is

for this reason that Garcin de Tassy considers this work the chief one of Afsōs, and deems it particularly useful as it contains general knowledge about India and the customs of its inhabitants, topographical descriptions of the provinces, and the history of the rulers of Delhi from Yudshtir to Pritḥvī Rā'ē. Above all, says De Tassy, one may consider this work original both for the number of facts that have been taken from elsewhere and because often, instead of repeating the assertions of the Persian version, he has corrected those he considered errors.²⁰

Regardless of the esteem of Garcin de Tassy, who translates large pieces of the *Ārā'ish-e Mahfil*, this text, as we have already had occasion to mention, was used primarily for language apprehension, as reading, and as a stylistic model, without heeding too much its value as history, perhaps because Urdu historiography was born in a moment of transition and is, in a certain sense, squashed between that of Persian and that of English, unable to glean the best of either tradition. And this brings us to the use of the Urdu language as a means for writing history, a topic which closely touches Pakistani intellectuals in particular.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century—the period in which Afsōs's work is situated—and particularly as a consequence of the impact with Western culture and British works, there was an effort to be rid of old stereotypes and to renew the language, making it suitable for the exposition of any topic. And though this effort was carried on, so that eventually Urdu was able to respond positively to all the stages of national historical development, opinions are divided. There are those who hold that Urdu succeeded in stripping itself of courtly traditions, highfalutin words, artificial diction and stale images, and became a language able to reflect the psychological considerations, the emotional experiences, and even the whisperings of the populace. And in doing so, it made room for the foundation of new and vigorous schools born in response to Western-style education and modern lifestyles, such that one can speak of an Urdu revival, of which Āzād and Ḥālī were the precursors.²¹ But others are not of the same opinion. Despite a conspicuous number of authors of material definable as scientific and historical, considered models of clarity,

²⁰M. Garcin de Tassy, *Histoire de la Littérature Hindouie et Hindoustanie* (Paris, 1970), vol. I, p. 37.

²¹Khwaja Ahmad Faruqi, "Urdu Literature," in *Contemporary Indian Literature* (Delhi, 1959), pp. 264–81.

erudition, flexibility and research,²² K.K. Aziz, for example, puts forward serious and justifiable doubts that, as far as history is concerned, Urdu can be a suitable language.

This eminent Pakistani historian, without entering into the controversy about whether Urdu is or could be or should be the national language of his country,²³ poses the question of whether it is worthwhile today to choose Urdu as the language for writing history which is not merely regional history. According to him the choice is between English and Urdu, and it does not depend only upon the person, his command of the language, his education and cultural basis. After all, two historians of the caliber of I.H. Qureshi and Aziz Ahmad, both native speakers of Urdu, chose English when it came to writing historiography.

Leaving aside the advantages of English, it seems appropriate here to mention what this scholar states as far as Urdu is concerned. In the first place he maintains that no one outside Pakistan and a few Indian cities reads this language, so it is not adapted to explain historical questions to the world from an Indian Muslim point of view. If this point of view is to be spread and made acceptable—taking away the monopoly of historical interpretation of the Subcontinent from the Indians—the Pakistani historian will have to renounce Urdu, for this means guarantees him a very limited public. He would surely have readers, but in a society with a low level of literacy they would essentially be made up of those who, for various reasons (the most prevalent of which are ideological) have abandoned English or have never gained a good understanding of it. As its audience is limited to the lower classes and to younger students, historical works in Urdu occupy a rather weak position. Furthermore, Urdu characters are relatively few and it is very difficult to quote extensively in languages which have a different alphabet, for this implies a considerable effort of translation. An effort that has not yet been undertaken, given that no one has yet bothered to translate the articles of Saiyid Amir ‘Ali, the writings of Agha Khan, the discourses of Muhammad ‘Ali, the documents of the All India Muslim League, the proceedings of the Round Table Conference, to name only a few of the myriad documents preserved at the India Office and in the British Public Record Office (not to speak of those existing in private holdings and archives, newspapers, etc.).

As for its vocabulary, it would not be rich enough; moreover, its

²²*Ibid.*, p. 280.

²³Aziz, pp. 154–7.

phraseology would not be flexible enough to sustain the weight of a sophisticated scientific prose, due to the scarcity of prose works and the language's inability to develop its style according to the dictates of circumstances in continual change. From its beginnings Urdu has concentrated on poetry and in particular on the *ghazal*, and so regardless of the richness of its literature, it is difficult to use it for philosophical explanations, or to describe constitutional problems, or, even more so, to talk about law or the social sciences. And if one adds to the scarcity of words the difficulty in articulating a complete sentence with many subordinates—all while remaining comprehensible—one arrives at the conclusion that Urdu prose is not suited to express sophisticated arguments and intricate analyses, being intrinsically unable, in doing so, to preserve the fluidity of narration.

Its style, too, appears particularly unsuitable to our critic, as it is anchored in the legacy of the Perso-Arabic past, so that peculiarities, mannerisms, customs and idiosyncrasies persist, which the modern reader—especially if used to the soberness of Western languages—finds strange and difficult. In the first place he cites the habit of referring to people exclusively by their honorific title, which often even takes the place of their name. It is enough to take the example of Muhammad 'Ali Jinnah who by now is ever the Qaid-i Azam. However, not all people have been honored in this way, and so there is already an implicit judgment in the way of citing names. For example, Abul Kalam Azad is always Mawlana and Saiyid Amir 'Ali and Saiyid Aḥmad Khān are always cited by their name without the title. Moreover, only Muslims are dignified in this way, while other people appear deprived of any title whatsoever. Furthermore, as various ways exist in Urdu to refer to a person given the social rank he occupies and the level of respect he carries (e.g., one always refers to a person of high rank and/or to one who garners respect with the verb in the plural), the way in which a writer refers to someone already implies a judgement and an evaluation. Apart from this, there are also various ways to show admiration or contempt at the disposal of those who write in Urdu, according to the verbs and turns of phrase employed. To take a very simple example, the declarations of a Muslim leader are usually reported using the courteous verb *farmānā*, while for those of others one simply uses *kahnā*. Both verbs mean “to say,” but the value of what is said is much different according to the choice made. And one could take, as K. K. Aziz indeed does, many other examples.

Again according to this author, Urdu grammar was fixed by Mughal imperialism, and the prose style by Muslim history. The Pakistani histo-

rian who uses Urdu as a linguistic medium has at his disposal many verbs and pronouns to refer to Muslims and non-Muslims, compiled from centuries of practice in denigrating the *'ajami* and *kāfir*, and in glorifying the Arabs and Muslims. As the Muslims began not as historians but as biographers and genealogists, piety and deference were fundamental in their writing, so what comes out is not a critical evaluation but rather a tribute of respect, taken up next by chroniclers and historians: whence the plural of verbs and pronouns, the hesitation to criticize great men, the lack of regard with respect to those who find themselves outside Islam.

The nature of Oriental society reinforced the habit of writing history as if it were a matter of performing an act of homage—and this owing to three types of social pressure. In the first place, as one was dealing with a tribal society the head of the tribe or clan enjoyed a greater authority, stretching next to the head of the extended family, and finally to the family *tout court*. In the second place the Qur'an itself establishes certain values to regulate and guide family life, including respect for elders and absolute obedience to one's parents. In the third place, the spiritual and moral life of the community was guided by the elders and by the *muhtasib*, who had the responsibility of keeping it pure and proper, and who had the power to correct and punish subsequent transgressions. In general this type of society continued to exist in Islamic countries until about fifty years ago. Moreover the society was feudal and imperial, and so a code existed—unwritten but highly formalized and perfectly understood by all—which governed all social relations. It is no wonder then that the language of history reflected this type of society.

At this point it seems opportune to recall that the Islamic environment was not unique in these respects. In fact, the two societies with which the Indian Muslims came in closest contact, the Hindu and the British, were founded on the same broad principles. In Hindu society the head of the extended family exercised an even greater authority, and as for British society, until the end of the Victorian era it was organized according to a definite network of relationships which were deeply conservative and reverential, and which was based on the superiority of parents over children, and of the rich over the poor. It was the twentieth century, and especially the First World War, that upset the order of British society—with universal suffrage, political parties rooted in the various classes, the increase in authority of Parliament, the growth of the middle class, taxation of the rich, the spread of education, the weakening of the feudal class: all factors which produced an egalitarian society, less deferential and more independent. In the writing of history these changes

caused the development of a critical attitude toward the past. And so modern historiography was born.

In Hindu society, the period after Independence has also seen changes of great significance that have allowed it to observe and preserve the past with a critical spirit. The Indian archives, private collections of documents, libraries, centers of historical research, history departments at universities, the means and resources available for the study of history are much more advanced than those that exist in any other country of the Third World. Whence it follows that today the history of South Asia is effectively that which is written in India, and is accepted world-wide, even by Muslims. This interest, almost a passion, for history is the result of the process of democratization of Indian society, in contrast to what has happened in Pakistan. There they are still struggling to establish a functional political system, and politics and society continue to chafe at the bit of the feudal class—showing no signs of weakening—which is courted both by the armed forces and the political parties. Until the country recognizes a true democracy, the traditional and critical ways of looking at and recording the past will continue to have the upper hand; and it will not succeed in creating adequate technical instruments.²⁴

This discussion of the suitability of Urdu as a linguistic medium for the writing of history has taken us a little far from Afsōs, who found himself operating in a situation where this order of problems had not yet intruded. Prompted by the English, he strove to put right a language and works that would make possible these later developments—as happened for Hindi, born in the same context. And it is at this point that it seems worthwhile to make some remarks on the Hindi-Urdu dichotomy which has its very origins precisely in the Fort William College of Calcutta where the *Ārā'ish-e Mahfil* was written.

As we have previously seen, at that time the words Hindi, Urdu, and Hindustani were considered synonyms. To clarify this point we shall once again take up Grierson's remarks under "Hindustani."²⁵

As a dialect of Western Hindi, Hindostani presents itself under several forms. These may first of all be considered under two heads, *viz.* Vernacular Hindostani, and the Literary Hindostani founded thereon. Vernacular

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 169–75.

²⁵G. A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, vol. IX (Calcutta, 1916), pp. 42–3.

Hindustani is the language of the Upper Gangetic Doab and of Western Rohilkhand. Literary Hindostani is the polite speech of India generally, and may be taken as the vernacular of educated Musalmans throughout northern India, and of all Musalmans south of the Narbada. ... The word 'Hindustan' is Persian by origin, and means literally 'the country of the Hindos or Hindus.' By it writers connote the country between the Punjab on the west, Bengal on the east, the Himalayas on the north, and the Vindhya on the south. ... The word 'Hindustani' was coined under European influence, and means the language of Hindostan. It thus connotes much more than it literally signifies, for, besides Hindostani, three other languages, Bihari, Eastern Hindi, and Rajasthani, are spoken in Hindostan. ... The earliest writers on India (such as Terry and Fryer) called the current language of India 'Indostan'. In the early part of the eighteenth century writers alluded in Latin to the *Lingua Indostanica*, *Hindustanica*, or *Hindostanica*. The earliest English writers in India called the language 'Moors,' and it appears to be Gilchrist who about 1787 first coined the word 'Hindustani' or, as he spelt it, 'Hindoostanee.'

Literary Hindostani, as distinct from vernacular Hindostani, is current, in various forms, as the language of polite society, and as a *lingua franca* over the whole of India proper. It is also a language of literature, both poetical and prose. ...

It has several recognised varieties, amongst which may be mentioned Urdu, Rekhta, Dakni, and Hindi. Urdu is that form of Hindostani which is written in the Persian character, and which makes a free use of Persian (including Arabic) words in its vocabulary. The name is said to be derived from the *Urdu-e mu'alla* or royal military bazaar outside the Delhi palace. It is spoken chiefly in the towns of Western Hindostan, by Musalmans and by Hindus who have fallen under the influence of Persian culture. Persian vocables are, it is true, employed in every form of Hindostani. Such have been admitted to full citizenship even in the rustic dialects, or in the elegant Hindi of modern writers like Harishchandra of Benares. ... But in what is known as High Urdu the use of Persian words is carried to almost incredible extremes. In writings of this class we find whole sentences in which the only Indian thing is the grammar, and with nothing but Persian words from beginning to end.

Leaving aside the description of Rekhta and Dakhni, we now come to that of Hindi:

The word 'Hindi' is used in several different meanings. It is a Persian, not an Indian word, and properly signifies a native of India, as distinguished from a 'Hindu' or non-Musulman Indian. ... On the other hand, Europeans use the word in two mutually contradictory senses, *viz.* some-

times to indicate the Sanskritised, or at least the non-Persianised, form of Hindostani, which is employed as a literary form of speech by Hindus, and which is usually written in the Nagari character: and sometimes, loosely, to indicate all the rural dialects spoken between Bengal proper and the Panjab. In the present pages, I use it only in the former sense. This Hindi, therefore, or as it is sometimes called, 'High Hindi,' is the prose literary language of those Hindus of Upper India who do not employ Urdu. It is of modern origin, having been introduced under English influence at the commencement of the last century. Up till then, when a Hindu wrote prose and did not use Urdu, he wrote in his own local dialect. ... Lallu Lal, under the inspiration of Dr. Gilchrist, changed all this by writing the well-known Prem Sagar, a work which was, so far as the prose portions went, practically written in Urdu, with Indo-Aryan words substituted wherever a writer in that form of speech would use Persian ones. ... Since Lallu Lal's time Hindi has developed for itself certain rules of style which differentiate it from Urdu, the principal ones relating to the order of words, which is much less free than in that from of Hindostani.²⁶

Once the linguistic terms of the discussion are thus defined—keeping in mind once more the responsibility of Gilchrist and of Fort William College (which, as far as the Hindustani Department goes, is practically his creation)—we may go on to see the consequences of this initiative.

That which was in Afsōs's time, for scholars, one language written with two different alphabets has with time separated so much as to give way to two true distinct languages,²⁷ but the debate has not yet ended. To understand the terms of the question we must see how it began and to whom one may assign responsibility.

If Urdu was not accepted as a language worthy of respect until the era of Shah Jahan, from then on it flourished and developed, occupying the highest position at the court of the last Mughals, and it found in the last emperor, Bahadur Shah II, not only a great patron but also an extremely gifted poet. The English also encouraged its development, particularly after the abolition of Persian as the official language; and Gilchrist is an example of the great interest nurtured by the new conquerors who considered it the *lingua franca* of northern India. However, effectively lacking

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 44–6.

²⁷ Ralph Russell, "Some Notes on Hindi and Urdu," *Annual of Urdu Studies* (no. 11, 1996), pp. 203–8.

a mass following, the British administrators quickly found themselves asking which was the language of northern India: Urdu, written with the Perso-Arabic alphabet, or Hindi, written in Devanagiri? The Hindus grew ever more insistent in maintaining that Urdu did not satisfy their needs and that it had to be replaced by Hindi. Already in 1870 they had formed numerous organizations to spread this opinion, while the pandits of Benares had begun a fervent campaign against Urdu. The Muslims, on the other hand, firmly opposed the introduction of Hindi into the courts and public offices, denying that Urdu was the language only of Muslims, and reclaiming its membership to both communities.

At first the English did not lend excessive attention to the controversy, but when Sir John Campbell became governor of Bengal things changed. Particularly impressed by the statements of certain officials—according to whom Urdu was not acceptable to the greater part of Hindus—in 1872 he introduced Devanagiri in place of the Urdu alphabet in certain administrative divisions, convinced that Urdu was too artificial and turgid a language. This measure encouraged the supporters of Hindi, with the consequent birth in many cities of the Hindi Prachar Sabha, which proposed to replace Urdu with Hindi wherever it was in use. The resentment this caused among Muslims led the measures regarding the language to be applied without excessive rigor under Campbell's successor, Sir Richard Temple. But once again the Hindus attacked—particularly in the United Provinces—with demonstrations in favor of the adoption of Hindi, to which the newspapers dedicated ample space. It was thus that under Sir Ashley Eden the government of Bengal issued an order, dated 13 April 1880, for the replacement of the Urdu alphabet with the Devanagiri in the courts and offices of Bihar so that the subjects of that province would have a means of communication which was not foreign to them. Despite the protests of the Muslims—who saw themselves deprived even of their positions because of the change of language—the measures were upheld with the enthusiasm of the greater part of the Hindus. From this a further tension arose between the two communities, aggravated by the attitude of many newspapers—so much so that at one point the president of the Hindi Prachar Sabha, Babu Sandial, wrote to Saiyid Aḥmad Khān in the hopes of reaching a compromise. The latter's response was polite and understanding, but their respective positions remained irreconcilable. Rather, Sir Saiyid publicly denounced the agitation in favor of Hindi stating that the adoption of Nagri letters and of the Hindi language would greatly hurt the Muslims educated both in public and private life, and that this attack was second

only to one against religion. Following which certain eminent Muslims of the Punjab founded an association to safeguard Urdu interests, the Anjuman-e Ĥimāyat-e Urdū. It was only thanks to their efforts that the North-West Provinces were spared the same linguistic fate as Bihar. And thanks to the counter-offensive of Saiyid Aḥmad Khān, who, in order to be heard by the English and to awaken opinion, formed a central committee for the protection of Urdu and assumed its presidency.

In the meantime, the nomination of the Education Commission in 1882 offered a new occasion for the Hindus to support the Hindi cause: this time they asked not only for its use in courts and public offices, but demanded that it be taught in all the schools, primary and secondary, of northern India. Petition after petition overwhelmed the Commission, signed by thousands of Hindus who maintained that it was intolerable that their children should be taught using Urdu, which they regarded as a mere carry-over from the ancient Muslim tyranny in India. Against all this the Muslims did rather little to support the Urdu cause and sent the Commission only one petition. Organization was a little more efficient only in the Punjab, thanks to the activity of Faḥl-e Ḥusain; but the controversy (rather strangely) was carried on by Muslims on non-communalist bases. To cite one of their petitions: "Urdu is not our religious or national tongue. Nor is it imported here from any foreign country. It is the product of India itself. It owes its origin to the joint action of both the Hindus and Muhammadans."²⁸ And they maintained that it was not a question regarding education, but regarding politics.

The Education Commission did not take the controversy too seriously and left the status quo practically unchanged; but the Hindus continued their activities in favor of Hindi. In 1885, however, the constitution of the Indian National Congress made sure that learned Hindus lost interest in the linguistic question, dedicating itself mostly to political problems, and—particularly in the period when its leaders supported unity between the two largest communities—avoided encouraging a movement that would inevitably have alienated Muslim sympathies. This course was held for many years, despite the fact that Saiyid Aḥmad Khān and the other prominent exponents of the Muslim community of northern India continued to have no faith in the Congress and to criticize its activities.

²⁸Cited in N. S. Gorekar, *Glimpses of Urdu Literature* (Bombay, 1961), p. xxvi.

The question arose again in 1898 when a delegation led by several pandits of Benares went to the then-governor of the North-West Provinces, Anthony MacDonnell, who had previously shown himself very sensitive to the introduction of Devanagri in Bihar. Even though the response gained did not fulfill all of their requests, the sympathy shown them by MacDonnell encouraged them to continue their requests, and in less than two years, although Urdu characters were not abolished, Devanagri reached a level of equality in the courts and public offices and it was decreed that—English officials aside—it could not be considered suitable to fill a government position with someone who was not able to use both Urdu and Devanagri characters. Naturally the Muslims reacted; it was no longer a question only of Bihar: the North-West Provinces were their homeland. The blow was felt even more strongly as it came just after the demise of Sir Saiyid; and a demonstration followed. MacDonnell was labeled an “enemy of Islam” and a “filo-Hindu *satrap*,” and even the heads of Aligarh were forced to take a position. This time Moḥsinu ’l-Mulk convened a meeting on 13 May 1900 at Aligarh and talked of widespread alarm among Muslims (loyal subjects of the government) regarding a measure which wrought serious damage to their interests. Moḥsinu ’l-Mulk and his colleagues had never before believed in the utility of demonstrations, but now the matter was of a serious threat, as Theodore Morison, rector of the Muslim Anglo-Oriental College, agreed. An Association for the Defense of Urdu was founded, and under its auspices pamphlets were published and funds gathered. The landed proprietors of the United Provinces, as well as lawyers and Muslim merchants—believing themselves to be hard hit in their own interests—met at Lucknow in August of 1900, under the presidency of Moḥsinu ’l-Mulk, to confirm that although it was not their intention to interfere in British politics—according to the teachings of Saiyid Aḥmad Khān—nonetheless it was their express duty to keep their language alive using any constitutional means. Moreover it was decided to go as a delegation to the vice-governor to uphold their reasons and to form a permanent association for the defense and development of Urdu. But the Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū was founded only in 1903, with Thomas Arnold as president and Shiblī Nu‘mānī as secretary.

These moves, however, had the opposite effect, and during a visit to Aligarh MacDonnell made it clear that if Moḥsinu ’l-Mulk did not withdraw from this sort of agitation he would have to tender his resignation.

This put an end to the movement, but the question remained, estranging ever more Hindus from Muslims.²⁹ So much so that in 1937 M. Mujeeb clashed with the movement that at all costs wanted to make Urdu and Hindi separate languages, undermining the culture that their unity expressed.³⁰

These are the terms of the debate which has its origins in the initiatives of Gilchrist and the works of his *munshī*, among whom are Lallu Lal and Afsōs.

In the meantime, in Pakistan Urdu has become the language of communication between provinces, and that of the mass media, in short the language of all those who have a certain level of urban experience, and there have been notable efforts to develop it. In India, however, practically the opposite has happened: the rapid Sanskritization of learned Hindi has brought with it the disappearance of Hindustani as an educated language. Urdu is no longer the language of instruction, nor that of the administration, nor that of the means of communication, but has been relegated to the private sphere and to the very restricted one of eminently poetic literary works. And all of this despite the fact that Urdu really is not the language of only one community, as the works of numerous Hindus and Sikhs who have chosen to express themselves in it, demonstrate.³¹ The point is that if Urdu is not to stagnate and die it must be recognized as part of a larger cultural whole which has historically involved many regions and different communities of the Subcontinent. The quasi-universal identification of Urdu with the interests of the Muslims diminishes the language itself and the culture from which it was born.³²

These are the considerations which the rediscovery of Afsōs's manuscript in the Vatican Library brings to mind. It has not seemed

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. xvii–xxxiv.

³⁰ F. Coslovi, "Per una storia del dakhni," in D. Bredi and G. Scarcia, eds., *Ex libris Franco Coslovi* (Venice, 1996), p. 7.

³¹ It is not by chance that the first great archive of books printed in Urdu was put together by the publishing house of Pandit Nawal Kishore, that the first great novel in Urdu was written by Pandit Ratan Nath Sarshar, and that writers of the caliber of Krishan Chander and Rajinder Singh Bedi chose Urdu as a means of expression.

³² Aijaz Ahmad, "Some reflections on Urdu," *Literature and Society* (July 1989), pp. 23–9, *passim*.

appropriate to talk about the work itself, except to point it out, although one does not feel inclined to agree fully with the hard judgment of Lees³³ (who nevertheless appreciates the Persian work from which the *Ārā'ish-e Mahfil* is taken, if not literally translated) when he says that Afsōs is a “dishonest translator,” that he has made it a sort of “fairy tale,” and that its “only merit consists in the language in which it is written.” Did the person who gave this work to the pope guess at the interest it might have as a key to understanding the cultural developments in India in that period? Or did he simply ask for the endorsement of Lees’s operation? It is certain that, whatever the intent, there was no answer. Certainly an “Indian” interest existed in the pontifical university much before the era in which the said manuscript was donated, stretching back to the codes of Fra’Paolino da San Bartolomeo, among which there is a *Thesaurus linguae indianae*, which contains words in a language, “not Sanskrit, but national and gentilitial to that people, and descending from Samscadamica, and then corrupted and marred by many Persian and Arabic words.” □

—*Translated from Italian by Anis Memon*

³³Lees, pp. ii-iii.