BRILL

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
ISLAM IN ASIA 3 (2022) 128–153

brill.com/ijia

Alphabet Poems and other Urdu Religious Booklets

Francesca Orsini | ORCID: 0000-0003-3608-005X
Professor Emerita, SOAS, University of London, London, UK
fo@soas.ac.uk

Received 13 July 2022 | Accepted 25 July 2023 |
Published online 14 September 2023

Abstract

Religious booklets formed a substantial part of the boom in commercial publishing and print culture in nineteenth and early-twentieth north India, cheaply available and widely reprinted by multiple publishers. This essay considers two popular texts that allow us to trace some of the range and of the linguistic and emotional contours of this production. *Alif Be* alphabet poems gesture towards the earlier history of Muslim oral traditions in north India. Short *Wafātnāma* verse narratives on the death of the Prophet Muhammad, conversely, were most likely produced by authors connected to Sunni reform movements and sought to focus their devotion on the Prophet alone.

Keywords

popular Urdu – Muslim devotion – alphabet poems – death of the Prophet Muhammad

Religious booklets of all kinds formed a substantial part of the commercial publishing boom in the nineteenth-century, in northern India as elsewhere in the subcontinent (Green, 2011). The religious booklets discussed in this essay testify to the ability of commercial publishers to produce and market "oral-literate" genres that could be recited or read aloud in communal settings or read silently, or almost silently, alone, and market them around Sufi shrines or at fairs: "Since around the close of the nineteenth century," Kelly Pemberton notes, "the bazaars attached to Sufi shrines have been the repositories and disseminators of a type of demotic literature that was printed cheaply, marketed *en masse*, written in the vernacular languages" (2002: 55). In this, Islamic religious

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill NV | DOI:10.1163/25899996-20230015
© FRANCESCA ORSINI, 2023 | ISSN: 2589-9988 (print) 2589-9996 (online)
This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 license.

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

booklets were like the songbooks, songs of the twelve months (*bārahmāsas*), and short narratives or *qiṣṣas* that were the most widely printed genres in late nineteenth-century northern India (Orsini, 2009: especially 20–21).

Who were their authors? In most cases we do not know, because the texts were printed and reprinted without paratextual details about them. As a result, their names became titular attributes ("The alphabet poem of X, Y, or Z") rather than markers of personal authority honed by the specific seat or tradition to which the author belonged. Only rarely do texts reveal more than bare names: one edition of the oft-reprinted alphabet poem by Wajhan calls him Miyan Wajhan Shah Sandelvi and calls his poem and the one by Miyan Karim Shah the work of "perfect mystics" (*ʿārifān-i kāmil kī taṣnīf*) (Wajhan, 1878: 8). This indicates that they were Sufis, Wajhan from the *qaṣba* of Sandila in current Uttar Pradesh. But like the booklets of Sant poetry published by the Belvedere Press (Orsini, 2015), booklets unmoored the words of teachers and saints from their specific milieus and from specific bonds of affiliation or personal connection and reached out to a wider and anonymous community of believers.

The booklets themselves, ranging between 8 and 36 pages, consist of either single titles or collections (*majmūʿa*) of texts in the same or in different genres. Printed on flimsy paper in the standard octavo (roughly, 6 × 9 inches or 16 × 23 centimeters) or the smaller 16mo (10 × 17 cm or 4 × 6.8 inches) formats, they could cost as little as 1 anna or 6 paise – less than 1/10 of a Rupee. The same commercial publishers published booklets of Shiʿi and Sunni devotion, including songs and narrative poems about the martyrdom of Imam Husayn at Karbala (*nawḥa*, *mars̱iya*, and *jangnāma*), miracle tales (*muʿjiza*), narratives about the birth, ascent to heaven, and death of the Prophet Muhammad (*mawlid sharīf* or *mawlūdnāma*, *miʿrājnāma*, and *wafātnāma*), mnemonic alphabet poems (*alif be*, from the first two letters of the alphabet), verse prayers (*munājāt*), and religious tales (*qiṣṣas*) like the *Qiṣṣa shāh-e Yaman*, about the Prophet's miraculous conversion to Islam of the Shah of Yemen. According to the official records, the *Quarterly Lists of Publications* (1867–), some of these titles were among the ones most often reprinted by printers across the cities of northern India, suggesting a wider readership beyond the truly puny numbers of literates recorded for this period (see Orsini, 2009: 49 for literacy statistics).[1] The

1 The *Quarterly Lists of Publications* were published regularly after 1867 by colonial officers in the different provinces and record the details of all the publications submitted for official registration. They are not a complete record, since registration was voluntary, but they are by far our best source of information for book history in colonial India. Print editions rarely surpassed 1000 copies, so multiple editions are our best indicators that a title was popular, particularly if it was reprinted (copyright rules notwithstanding) by several publishers in the same and in different cities over the years.

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

British Library in London is fortunate to hold a substantial collection of these flimsy and highly perishable nineteenth-century print objects.

The genres of nineteenth-century commercial publishing can be divided between "genres introduced" through print, like theatre chapbooks and detective novels, and "genres reproduced" from earlier manuscript or oral traditions (Orsini, 2009: 229). Religious texts likely fall among the genres reproduced, and therefore already familiar. Some – like the *alif be* alphabet songs – can be traced back to the oral tradition and to a repertoire and language partly shared with the Sants, those saint-poets who sang their devotion and religious ideas and appealed to a broad spectrum of individuals and groups. Others, like the *Nūrnāma* booklets, offer simplified versions of texts already available in manuscript form in Persian and regional languages (d'Hubert, 2019).[2] But compared to the substantial *jangnāma* and *marṡiya* texts composed for Shiʿi gatherings, or to the elaborate Sufi romances composed in Avadhi, Bengali, and Punjabi since the fourteenth century, these are much simpler, shorter, and less literary texts.[3]

Other works, like the verse narratives or descriptions of the life, appearance, death, and miracles of the Prophet Muhammad, were likely produced by authors connected to the various Sunni reform movements that sought to pull ordinary Muslims *away* from the worship of Sufi saints and focus their devotion on the Prophet alone. These texts, Epsita Halder (2023) argues, re-channeled the intense devotion and fervor connected with the remembrance of the Karbala martyrs towards the Prophet.

Both *alif be* and *wafātnāma* booklets composed in simple language were available in the religious print market from the 1850s and highlight its heterogeneity. *Alif be* alphabet poems gesture towards the otherwise largely missing history of Muslim oral traditions in early modern North India. They also point to the limitations of looking for Urdu folklore and oral traditions within a narrowly defined linguistic code. Muhammad Husayn Khan's *Wafātnāma*, whose earliest print version appears to have been printed in Delhi in 1852, exemplifies the new devotional verse narratives inspired by reformist movements (Pearson, 2008; Metcalf, 2014 [1982]). Together, the *alif be* and *wafātnāma* texts show a more colloquial linguistic and aesthetic register to the one associated with Urdu poetry and prose in this period and take us into complementary aesthetic and affective realms.

2 The British Library has as many as 15 editions of the Urdu *Nūrnāma*, published between 1868 and 1879 in Delhi, Etah, Kanpur, Lahore, and Lucknow (Blumhardt, 1901: 131).

3 For example, Muhammad Fazil's *Jangnāma-e Karbalā*, printed over 172 pages and published at least three times between 1873 and 1878 (Bumhardt, 1901: 126). See also Bard (2002) and Knapczyk (2014: 283–285) for printed editions of Mir Anis' Urdu *marṡiyas*.

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

1 Memorable Instruction

Alif aik būrangī sāiyan[4]
hara ghaṭa wā kī parchāiyān
jahān dekho tahāṉ rūpa nyāra
aisā hai būrangī pyārā

Alif one many-colored Lord,
reflected in each and every body.
Wherever you glance, there
is his wonderful form.
Such is the many-colored Lord.

Wajhan kahe to kyā kahe
kucha kahne kī nahīn bāta
samandara samāyo būnda men
acharaja baṛo dikhāta. [1] (Wajhan, 1849: 2)

What can Wajhan say?
There is nothing to be said.
A drop holds the whole sea –
what an astonishing wonder.

Alphabet songs – called *alif be* when following the Arabic-Urdu alphabet, and *kakhahara* the Nagari one – provide a simple structure for the repetition and memorization of knowledge. In this they resemble the grinding songs analyzed by Richard Eaton (1974 and 2010). Each line or verse begins with a letter of the alphabet and a corresponding word, often the key term elaborated in the verse. As the two most oft-printed examples – by Wajhan and Miyan Karim – show, such song-poems could develop a core set of ideas or else jump around and provide diverse notions in pill-like form. Though printed in Urdu and following the Arabic-Urdu alphabet, *alif be* songs employ a mixed Khari Boli – Brajbhasha koine and a colloquial register full of *tadbhava* words, that is, words that evolved organically from older Indo-Aryan strata, so much so that an early printer thought it necessary to insert glosses explaining them in Persianate

4 "*būrangī*", glossed as "*har rang*" ("of every colour") is likely a calque on *bū-qalamūn*, "of every colour", the term for chameleon (Platts 1997 [1884]: 173). Since the poems' language is closer to Brajbhasha, my transliteration follows McGregor (1993). Final nasalized vowels are spelt here and elsewhere (*nahīn, men, kahān*) with a full *nūn* instead of the *nūn ghunna*, and my transliteration reflects this.

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

terms.[5] So, while the letters specific to the Arabo-Persian alphabet (ث، خ، ع، غ، ق، ط، ظ, etc.) require the words to be, well, Arabic and Persian (*s̱ābit*, *żarūr*, *ʿālam*, *gharūr*, *fāẕil*, *qināyat*), in the rest of the text the vocabulary is largely devoid of Perso-Arabic vocabulary and includes technical vocabulary like *japnā*, *dhyāna*, *guru rūpa*, *hari* (Hari, for God), *joga* (yoga), *biraha*, and so on, a vocabulary dialogically shared with the Sants.

Comparing Wajhan's *Alif be* by with Karim's – which often came first in printed collections – reveals interesting differences. Wajhan's poem is all about Sufi meditation and guided absorption into the path of love. The esoteric knowledge it imparts, about the mystery of love and the unity of existence, is expressed in metaphors familiar from the long Chishti tradition: just as the sea exists in each droplet, the shadow of God exists in each and every body. Miyan Karim's *Alif be*, by contrast, combines more generic verses about Sufi practice with verses about proper comportment and ethical behavior, and includes basic quotes from the Qurʾan. Like Karim's "prescription" (*nuskha*) appended in some collections, his *Alif be* reads like a general guide for a novice. As Karim himself says at the end: "A lot or a little, do whatever worship you can" (*thoṛī bahuta sī bandagī kara jo kuchha bana pāʾe*) (Karim, 1915: 8).

Both poems begin, appropriately, with *alif* for ایک, *aik*, God as one. In Wajhan's *Alif be*, God is one and present in everything, according to the theology of the unity of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). The poem continues with *be* to say that without a guide (*binā guru*) no one ever cracked the mystery (*bheda na pāyā*), and one first needs to find and love a guide before donning (lit. "dyeing," *basan rangāʾe*) the robe of a dervish and setting foot on the "path of love" (*pahale pīta guru se kare, prema ḍagara meṅ paga taba dhare*). One's practice (*joga*) can only be successful when (*tab*, for the third letter, *t*/ت) the "devious dilemma" (*bairan dubadhā*), that is, the dualism of me and you (*main main* and *tain tain*), disappears from one's mind (Wajhan, 1849: 2). ث/*s̱* is for "*s̱ābit dhyana*," steadfast meditation, thanks to which error vanishes on its own and one's breath does not go wasted (*birthā sāns na jāʾe*): the term used is *ajapājāpa*, a technical term for the silent repetition of the name of God, paired here with the typical Sufi metaphor of polishing the mirror of one's heart until all impurities disappear and one can see God reflected in it (*ajapājāpa tū japa re bhāʾī chūṭa jāʾī darpana kī kāʾī*) (1849: 3). Other verses insist on the practice

5 E.g. "*acharaja baṛo dikhāta*" employs a Brajbhasha verb (*dikhāta*) and adjectival ending (*baṛo*), and the *tadbhava* term *acharaja* (< Skt *āścarya*). Glosses in the 1849 edition of *Alif be Wajhan* include *zamīn* for *dharatī* (earth), *āsmān* for *ākāsa* (sky), *qadam* for *paga* (step), *ustād* for *guru* (Wajhan, 1849: 2).

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

of sitting patiently (the letter ص/*ṣ* is for *ṣabr*, patience), and on repeating the name of the Prophet day and night (*nisa dina nā'ūn nabī kā lījiye*) as the only practice needed (ض/*ż* is for *żarūrat,* 1849: 5). The disciple errs by thinking only within the limits (ح/*ḥ* is for *ḥad: ḥe ḥad bhara yaha bhūla hai terī*) (1849: 3) of the intellect (*budhi*). Or he may lose his way in search of wealth (ز/*z* is for *zar*, gold: *ze zara dekha tū bhūlā rahiye*) (1849: 4), which is "false illusion" (*jhūṭhī māyā*). As in the earlier Hindavi Sufi romances, the spiritual path is called the path of love (*pema*, *prema*). And in terms strikingly similar to Kabir's, love is an arrow piercing the heart and setting the body on fire:

> ذ/ẕāl ẕawq jaba laga nahīṅ āvai
> kitnon cahe ko'ū mana bhaṭakāvai
> hiradai lage na prema kī gāsī
> kaise milen kaho abināsī
>
> Ẕāl, many may lead you astray,
> but until you taste the pleasure,
> till you feel love's arrow,
> how can you meet the imperishable?
>
> jaba laga tana nāhīṅ jarata
> aura mana nāhīṅ mara jāta
> taba lagā mūratī syāma kī
> wajhan kahān dikhāta. (Wajhan 1849: 7)
>
> Till the body burns, Wajhan says,
> and the mind expires,
> how will the image
> of the dark lord appear?

This is Kabir:

> The Satguru is the true Hero, who loosed up a single Arrow;
> The moment it struck, I fell to the ground and a wound opened in my breast.
>
> Within the heart, a forest-fire is burning yet no smoke is visible:
> He whom it consumes knows that flame and He who kindled it. (Vaudeville, 1993: 168, 170)

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Notice that the term Wajhan used for God here is one commonly used for Krishna, the "dark lord", in his embodied form, *mūratī*. Wajhan is here re-accenting the vocabulary of *bhakti* devotionalism, knowing that his listeners and disciples will understand.

Love is also juice (*rasa*) and intoxicating wine (*madhu*) leading to a higher state of correct understanding.

> Prema bhaṭṭī kā madhu piyu cokhā
> miṭa ja'ihe saba mana kā dhokhā (Wajhan, 1849: 7)
>
> If you taste the beloved's wine in the distillery of love
> all mind's deceit will disappear.

Love is a stuffed betel leaf that marks the beginning of a challenging quest: "ع /*ʿain*, the betel leaf of love is one of its kind. There, no place for two" (*ʿain ʿishq kā bīṛā hai nyārā, vahān dūje kā nahīṅ guẕārā*) (1849: 6).[6] Finally, love is the mystery, a deep river where distinctions between the lover and beloved, and between the manifest and the hidden, disappear in non-duality (*prema kī nadī gaharī, jo kou ūtarai pāra, ʿāshiq aur māʿshūq meṅ rahavai kauna bichāra*) (1849: 6).

Wajhan's poem about the Sufi path brings in colloquial idioms (pride "has spoiled the whole game" *gharūra ne saba khela bigāṛā*), and multiplies metaphors to make the mystery of the Sufi path and experience visible and tangible (1849: 6). Disciples must learn further (ط/*ṭ* is for *ṭālib*) to find "God's village" inside their own body (*ghaṭa ke andara hari kā gānv*). The choice of a register marked by *tadbhava* words, colloquial expressions, and terms shared with the Sants is not at all unusual among Sufis, who listened to *bhakti* devotional as well as other songs but accented and interpreted them in their own terms. But if finding God in one's own body is a shared metaphor, here it is paired with the "*pīr*'s town" (*pīra nagara*) and the "Prophet's city" (*nabī nagara*) (1849: 6; see Stewart, 2001; Orsini, 2014).

If Wajhan's *Alif Be* is all about the Sufi path and practice, Miyan Karim's intersperses basic Sufi ideas with general instruction. If in Wajhan's poem the repetitive structure aids the deepening of meditation, in Karim's it seems to help novices internalize simple religious and ethical precepts.

6 A *bīṛā* is a folded and stuffed betel leaf, which a warrior picks up when accepting a challenge.

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

(ا) ایک ایسا رب پیارا
جن پھیلایا جگ سنسارا
کاف نون سی کیا ظھور
ایسا ھے صاحب بھرپور

Alif One such lord beloved,
who spread out the whole world,
made it manifest through *kāf nūn* [*kun* = be].
He is the lord of abundance. (Karim, 1915: 2)

The letters خ/*k* (for *khāliq*) and د/*d* (for *dīn*) reiterate the basic covenant between God and the believers ("Am I not your God?" "Yes, I am"). ث/*s̱* is for *s̱ābit*, steadfast living with pure intention (*nīyat pāk*) according to the sharīʿa (*s̱ābit sharīʿat par rahnā*) (Karim, 1915: 2). ح/*ḥ* is for *ḥalāl* in food and speech: "Only one who eats *ḥalāl* and speaks the truth meets the Lord" (1915: 3).

Several verses instruct on ethical living and warn against deceit, covetousness, or pride ("Pride is bad, just see ʿAzāzīl's destruction") (1915: 5). ج/*j* instructs the reader or listener to live in the world without deceit and to worship God with a true heart (*jīm jagat meṅ kapaṭ na kījiye, sachche dil se rabb bhaj lījiye*), for acting deceitfully takes you away from God (1915: 3). گ/*g* is for *gumān*, warning against thinking bad thoughts (*gumān bad*) and acting basely (*ochhī karnī*), and it is followed by ل/*l* for *liyāqat* (propriety, merit), which accrues only once one kills "the enemy *nafs*": "*nafs* the snake is a bad, black cobra, who has survived its bite?" (1915: 6).

Miyan Karim mentions internalized practice, but his emphasis is less on love and esoteric knowledge and more on proper guidance, and on the sharīʿa and the sunna as the measure and limit.

(ت) تسبیح تم من مین جپنا
سچ پوچھو یہ مال ھے پنا
یہ دنیا دھوکھے کی سپنا
لاکھون مر گے کرکر اپنا

T Turn the *tasbīḥ* in your mind,
truth be told, this is your wealth.
This world is a deceitful dream,
thousands died thinking it theirs.

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

کریم کھے تو کیا کھے
کچھ بھی کھا نہ جأی
نیکی اپنا مال ھے
جو حق سے لے بخشاے(1915: 2)

What can Karim say?
Nothing can be said.
Goodness is my wealth,
God gifted it to me.

س/*s* is for *sirr*, mystery, but it is a plain one:

S, let me tell you another secret (*sirr*),
through which people may find God.
Close your eyes, ears, and mouth,
sit in a corner – this is the message.

What can Karim say?
Nothing can be said.
It is a famous prescription,
try it if you will. (1915: 4)

Karim's poem includes fewer metaphors from Sufi discourse. Even Mansur al-Hallaj appears less as a heroic example and more as a warning.

F the *faqīrī* you do is one.
where no step is set outside the sharīʿa.
Mansur spoke one word,
the *sharʿ* disclosed its command.

What can Karim say?
Nothing can be said.
Within the *sharīʿa* is good
which your guide tells you. (Karim 1915: 6)

As already mentioned, at the end Miyan Karim hints familiarly at both readers and listeners for his poem (*jo koʾī paṛhe sune ise yār*) (1915: 8). Elsewhere, he tells "educated people [to] act and understand, illiterates [to] ask a learned

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

person" (*paṛhe hu'e kar ʿamal aur būjh, anpaṛh ho ʿālim se pūch*) (1915: 5). This *Alif be*, this line suggests, is literally a primer directed at novices, including illiterate people, to introduce them to the basic terms and principles of a *sharīʿa*-aligned Sufi path and to warn them about venturing on the path without proper guidance. Theology, religious duty, and moral norms are ground together into pills of wisdom for devotees to eat, in other words to memorize and make part of their body. And while the two poems were also printed separately, when printed together Karim's *Alif be* preceded Wajhan's, perhaps as a recognition that it works at a more basic level – though without paratexts this is only speculative.

Alphabet songs connect to other mnemonic genres like mnemonic dictionaries or multiplication tables (*pahāṛā*) that were a basic part of the educational experience in South Asia for centuries (Hakala, 2010). The fixed structure of the alphabet accommodated variation in content, and alphabet songs became a "dialogic genre" par excellence: in other words, even the same lexical signifiers could carry different meanings and accents at the hands of Sufi and Sant authors. For example, Yari Sahab (*c.*1670s–1710s?), a guru in the lineage of the Bavri community which moved from Delhi to near Ghazipur, east of Banaras, sometime in the early eighteenth century, wrote two alphabet songs (Yari Sahab, 2005: 2, 9–12). And so did Bhikha Sahab, three generations down the same line (Bhikha Sahab, 2013: 62–3; see also Lal, 1933: 89–91). Yari chooses several of the same words that we found in Wajhan and Karim (ا/*alif* is *ek*; ث/*s̱e* is *s̱ābit*; ج/*jīm* is *jagata*, like *jaga*, world; ح/*baṛī ḥe* is *ḥad*; خ/*khe* is *khāvind*; ط/*ṭoe* is *ṭamāʾ*; ض/*żvād* is *żarūr*; and so on).[7] But if the initial definition of the singular, ultimate, and all-pervading divine entity is similar in Sufi and Sant vocabulary, and Sufi alphabet poems also used *jāpa* to refer to the practice of repeating God's name and sacred formulas (*ẕikr*), Yari's poem focuses on bodily practices using yogic and Sant vocabulary:

अलिफ एक अबिनासी देव
अविगत अपरम्पार अभेव ।
ताहि धरो धरि ध्यान हजूर
सो सब ठौर रहा भर पूर।।

Alif, one God imperishable,
immortal, infinite, undivided.
Keep that presence in your mind,
which pervades fully everywhere.

7 I transliterate the letters of the Arabic alphabet as they are vocalized in the text in the Devanagari script.

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

बे बिन जिभ्या सुमिरन करै
उनमनि सों मन की धुनी धरै ।
पूरन ब्रह्म जहाँ तहँ आप
ताहि जाप को कीजै जाप ।।

Be, do remembrance without (*bina*) moving the tongue.
Keep your axis on the supra-conscious state (*unmani*).
Wherever the full *brahma* is,
repeat and repeat his name.

For Yari, *ẕawq* is not the taste for things spiritual that sets the novice on the Sufi path: it is the taste of the five senses which the adept must crush to avoid the dispersal of energy and attention.

ज़ाल ज़ौक़ पाँचों का भानु
बाहर जाते भीतर आनु।
मेलि दसो दिसि इक मन करै
सो साधू कहु कैसे मरै।। (Yari Sahab, 2005: 9; see also Lal, 1933: 6)

Zāl crush the taste of the five [senses].
Bring them in as they turn outward.
Collect the ten directions into one mind.
How can that sadhu, tell me, die?

Yari's other, shorter, *Alif be* veers towards more basic instruction:

अलिफ़ एक हरि नाम विचार
बे भजु बिश्नु तारन संसार
ते त्रिभुवन सब घट में राजा
से साबित में चिन्है साजा। (Yari Sahab, 2005: 9)

Alif alone is the name of Hari
Be worship Bishnu the savior of the world
Te He's the king of three worlds and of every body
S̱e strong and stable is his creation.

Yari and Bhikha scrupulously follow the Arabic-Persian alphabet, including the *hamza* (and Yari the negative *lām alif*). But whereas Yari knows which words correspond to all the Arabic-Persian letters, Bhikha sometimes chooses words that sound like them according to North Indian phonology (*gyāna* for *ghain*

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

ݗ; *khana*, moment, for *khe*/ خ, spelled ख) (Lal, 1933: 90). His, it seems, is an oral knowledge of the Arabic-Persian alphabet. To use Purushottam Agrawal's (2009) term, he is *bahushrut*, "well-listened", rather than well-read.

Sufis using a Hindavi-Brajbhasha koine, yogic vocabulary and the names of Hindu gods like Krishna, and Sants using the Arabic-Persian alphabet and some of its recurring terms: this suggests a religious language that was partly shared, though the communities, practices, and specific philosophies and practices differed. "The words of a language belong to nobody, but still we hear those words only in particular individual utterances", Mikhail Bakhtin argued (Bakhtin, 1986: 88). In the spirit of Bakhtin's philosophy of language and his emphasis on the social (and productive) nature of the utterance – shared, accented, and re-accented by each speaker in constant dialogue with real or imagined listeners and other speakers – I suggest that we read these alphabet poems as instances of "re-accenting" terms, phrases, and characters, or even "multi-accenting" them if they sought to address different audiences at once or be particularly clever (see Orsini, 2018 for one example).

This point has historiographical and archival implications as well. Whereas the alphabet song-poems of Sufi and other Muslim authors have yet to surface in manuscript archives, the fact that the same genre is found in the Sant archive suggests that such poems must have indeed been common before Wajhan's and Miyan Karim's appeared in print. In this case, it is refracted in the Sant archive that we can find early evidence of the vernacular oral forms used for basic Islamic religious instruction in northern India.

Other evidence comes from the colonial ethnographic archive. A mnemonic song counts one to three to remind Muslims of who is most important (God, the Prophet, and Fatima). The festive scene of the founding of Mecca, saluted by the whole of creation and graced by the Prophet and by the *apsaras* of Indra's heaven, segues into the *umma*'s request for instruction.

Pahilé nám lé Alláh Míyán ká
Dújé Nabi Rasúl.
Tíjé nám lé Fátimá ká,
Jeké mukh par barsai núr.
Míthá nám Alláh Míyán ká
Dújé Nabi Rasúl.
Tíjé míthá Sáwan Bhádon
Jo barsai so núr.
Jehi din newá parí Makké men
Jánat muluk Jahán,
Jitné ummat rahé Muhammad ké

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Sab jhuk, jhuk karat salám.
Bágh bajáwai bánsurí,
Bhálu bajáwae túr,
Náchat áwain Indar ké pariyán,
Dekhat awain pák Rasúl. […]
Jitné ummat rahé Muhammad ké
Sab kharé bhaé kar jor.
Háth jorké ummat bolen –
“Nabi jí bachan sun áo.
Tumrá kahá Míyán karbai,
Nabijí jo kucha hukm lagáo.” […]
“Khudá ká nám japá ka bándhé,
“Subah, sabere, sám,
“Yah japná teré kám áwengé
“Jehi din hoihai Qayám.”
Dahiné takht par baithé Alláh Miyán,
Baiyén baithé Rasúl.
Nekí badí ká lekhá chukáwen,
Míyán rahe taráju jhúl. […]
Kalimá parho to kal parai,
Bé kalimá kal náhín.
Jáke mukh men kalimá basat hai,
Wáké dojakh ko dar náhín.

First repeat the name of God,
Second that of the Prophet.
Third take Fatima’s,
on her face rains heavenly light.
Sweet is the name of God,
Second, sweet is that of the Prophet.
Third, Sáwan and Bhádhon are sweet,
they rain heavenly light.
On the day Mecca’s foundation was laid,
the world knows,
believers in Muhammad
bent their head in obeisance.
Tigers played the flutes,
bears played the trumpets.
Indra’s fairies came to dance,
the Holy Prophet came to watch. […]

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

All of Muhammad's *umma*
stood with folded hands.
With hands folded they said –
"Listen Nabi ji, the Lord
will listen to what you say,
Give us your command." […]
"Repeat the name of God,
at dawn, morning, and night.
This will come in useful,
on the final day of Qayam."
On the throne Allah Miyan sits
on the right, on left the Prophet.
They check accounts of good
and bad, Miyan swings the scales. […]
Say the *kalima* and feel at peace,
no *kalima*, no peace.
One in whose mouth the *kalima*
dwells, has no fear of death.

"A Religious Song of the Dhobis" (Tiwari, 1891: 145–6)

The language is the same Hindavi-Braj koine of Yari, Bhikha, and Wajhan's alphabet poems. But the term *japa* here seems to refer not to the practice of repeating a holy name or phrase but to the five obligatory prayers. Even more succinctly, the *kalima* is enough to pass the test on the day of the final judgment.

This song "was recited to me by an old dhobi at Chunár, and is a curious illustration of the adoption of Muhammadan ideas by low-caste Hindus", wrote the Persian and Hindi educated clerk Bhanu Pratap Tiwari, a regular contributor to *North Indian Notes & Queries*, the ethnographic journal edited by the colonial administrator William Crooke. Apart from Tiwari's ethno-religious assumption (dhobis must be all Hindus), what is striking is that the song was recorded at all. Muslim songs, customs, and performances were implicitly excluded from the first Hindi collections of folklore since folk literature (*loksāhitya*) pertained to the Volk – which Hindi intellectuals coded as Hindu. As for Urdu, its self-definition at the time was too tied to language register, so that Muslim orature in this koine and not in "chaste Urdu" was not taken into consideration. Excluded on the one side on religious-cultural grounds and on the other on linguistic grounds, Muslim orature became completely invisible.

The Dhobis' religious song shows the Prophet addressed familiarly as he descends on earth to enjoy the dance and festivities for the foundation of

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Mecca. A similar “vertical levity” (Raj and Dempsey, 2010), establishing intimacy between human beings, the Prophet, God, and his angels can be found in another popular text, a narrative *maṡnavī* of 563 verses in written a conversational Urdu full of colloquial expressions, that elaborates on the last death days and death of the Prophet Muhammad (Husayn Khan, 1852).

2 Shedding Tears for the Prophet

The topic of the Prophet Muhammad’s death had been dealt rather briefly in the traditional biographies, like the *sīra* of Ibn Ishaq (1955). As Tarif Khalidi (2009: 2) notes, early biographers seem to have decided to include “the names of every single man or woman whose life in some way or another touched upon or intersected the core narrative”, and the events of the Prophet’s illness and last words of instruction, his death, and burial are told in the voice of many characters. What stand out are the light banter between the Prophet and ʿA’isha about whose headache was worse and who would die first, his last wish – for a toothpick! – and the discussions about how to wash the Prophet’s body and where to bury it (Ishaq, 1955: 682, 688–689). Biographies in the “Sunni mood” emphasized the unity of the community as the most important ethical and social value. Those in a “Shiʿa mood” emphasized the personal integrity of the ruler and made the case that a member of the family of Muhammad was best suited to guide the community after his death; they also included a voice telling ʿAli that he and the members of the Prophet’s family would face severe trials (Khalidi, 2009: 62, 129–130).

Muhammad Husayn Khan’s *Wafātnāma* (1852) focuses on a smaller cast of characters and includes spirited dialogues between ʿA’isha, Fatima and the angels Jibril and Azra’il who come to summon the Prophet. Allah, Jibril, and Azra’il, the Prophet, ʿAli, and all the chief members of the Prophet’s entourage all appear in the same familiar way. For example, When the Prophet’s temperature soars, God sends Jibril to enquire after his health and say:

agar is marż se wo nākām ho
shifā dūn maiṅ usko ki ārām ho
wagarna hūn mushtāq-i dīdār kā
ki dīdār ho yār ko yār kā. (Khan, 1852, vv. 61–2).

If this medicine does not work
I’ll give him a cure that will set him at rest.
Though I long to meet with him
As a friend longs to see a friend.

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

In fact, the predominance of dialogue and colloquial expressions and the informal way in which the angels and the revered figures of the Prophet's entourage of the early days of Islam are presented produce proximity and emotional identification in the listeners/readers, who feel part of the scenes played out before them.

Muhammad Husayn Khan's text evokes the context of oral recitation and devotional effusion and purification that accompany the commemoration of the death of the Prophet in the first twelve days of the month of Rabiʿ al-Awwal. During this period, the French orientalist Garcin de Tassy observed in 1831–1832 drawing on contemporary sources, "the Qur'an is recited every morning and evening in mosques or in private houses and alms are distributed after the *fatiha* is recited and incense is burnt in the name of the Prophet. The story of the death of Muhammad (*wafātnāma*) is also recited in Hindustani" (Garcin de Tassy, 1995: 155). Indeed, like a good sermon, the text touches different chords, from Jibril's courteous visits to the scolding Azra'il, the *malak al-mawt*, gets from Fatima, and from Allah's solicitous offer of a cure to Muhammad's affectionate parting from his wives and daughter that seeks to lighten the atmosphere.[8] Muhammad Husayn Khan explicitly mentions of the purifying and salvific effect of tears shed listening to the story.

> ʿAzīzo suno tum yih az gūsh-i jān
> wafāt-i nabī kā karūṉ maiṅ bayān
> Muḥammad ke gham meṅ jo ānsū chalen
> Wo ānkheṅ na dozakh meṅ hargiz jalen
>
> Listen my dear ones with ears of the heart,
> let me tell you the story of the Prophet's passing.
> Eyes shedding tears mourning for Muhammad
> will never burn in the fire of hell. (Husayn Khan, 1852: 2)[9]

In his *Wafātnāma*, the women of the Prophet's family play a substantially larger role than in the Arabic *sīra* literature, suggesting that they were perhaps part of the intended audience. At the same time, themes hotly debated among

8 In Bengali narratives, by contrast, the presence of the Four Companions and future caliphs (Abu Bakr, ʿUmar, Uthman and ʿAli) and of the *ahl al-bayt* (the Prophet's daughter Fatima, her husband ʿAli, and their sons Hasan and Husayn) overshadows that of his wives (ʿA'isha, but also Hafsa); I thank Epsita Halder for the comment.

9 The text in Husayn (1915: 2) differs slightly, suggesting some instability in the transmission from either oral recitation to printed text, or from one printed edition to another: "*Azīzo zarā khol kar gūsh-i jān/ wafāt-i nabī kā suno tum bayān*" ("Open the ear of the heart, dear ones/Listen to the narrative of the Prophet's passing").

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

reformist groups at the time – such as awareness of *namāz* and the description of its stages; the moral codes for men and women; the Prophet Muhammad's affective connections, particularly with the future caliphs, his family, and the *umma*, and their affective bonding with him; the importance of Jibril in the Prophet's life; the notion of the hereafter, the Prophet's position in heaven, and the description of heaven and hell and of the Day of Judgment – all find place in the narrative. Together, these features suggest that Muhammad Husayn was part of the reformist debates of his time and wrote his text partly to reach out to women.

The narrative starts without any preamble.

> the aik roz baiṭhe wo shāh-i ʿarab
> jamaʾ the mahājir aur ʿanṣār sab
> ki Jibrīl ne ā sunāyā payām
> ki bhejā hai Haqq ne wurūd o salām.
>
> One day that king of Arabia was sitting
> with all the friends and attendants who had come from Medina
> when Jibril came and related this message:
> "God sends his best greetings." (Husayn Khan 1852, vv. 9–10)

Jibril then recites the whole Qurʾan to the Prophet. The Prophet is immediately delighted while Abu Bakr is pained at heart:

> ushī se huʾā uskā dil bāgh bāgh
> Abū Bakr kā dil huʾā dāgh dāgh (v. 13)

People wonder – why is the Prophet happy but Abu Bakr is crying? It must be a secret (*rāz*), ʿUmar thinks. The contentious question of succession to the caliphate underpins this scene but is left unspoken: Abu Bakr's tears attest to his eligibility as the first caliph, and Muhammad is happy to see Abu Bakr loyally grieving. At the same time, strolling in a garden on a Saturday – the word used is the colloquial *sanīchar* – Muhammad reveals to his cousin and son-in-law, ʿAli, that Jibril has been coming to him every year to recite the whole Qurʾan. This year, though, Jibril has come a second time – this is how Muhammad has realized that he is going to die (v. 40).[10]

10 Jibril, the bearer of revelation to the prophets, acts as an intermediary between Allah and Muhammad and appears at various crucial moments in Muhammad's life, bringing him information about the untimely deaths of Hasan and Husayn and then carrying

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

As in the Arabic *sīra*, when he falls ill the Prophet jokes with ʿA'isha that for her to die before her husband would indeed be a good thing, but in fact he will die before her. In this *wafātnāma*, ʿA'isha's first thought is about proper performance of ritual: who will read the *namāz* for the Prophet at his death, who will wash him and cover him with a shroud? Don't worry, Muhammad tells her, God will recite the first *namāz*, followed by Jibril, and then by the "family members," the *ahl al-bayt*. This sequence places the *ahl al-bayt* right up front, even before the close bond between ʿA'isha and Muhammad.[11] ʿA'isha holds an important position in Sunni piety as Muhammad's caregiver on his deathbed but remains absent from the scene of grieving after Muhammad's death.[12] To his daughter Fatima, who is also upset, the Prophet reveals that she will not live long after him (v. 74). That Fatima will die soon afterwards – a detail Muhammad does not share with ʿA'isha – shows the intensity of Fatima's pain over her separation from her father, a pain that will kill her soon after Muhammad's death.

Fatima in fact plays an active role in Muhammad Husayn Khan's text. When Azra'il, the Angel of Death, calls out loudly as he stands waiting at the door, ʿA'isha tells Fatima to go and look – their togetherness is a feature of the new Sunni reformist piety, which appropriates Fatima and pulls her from her Shiʿa intercessory role. Fatima scolds Azra'il in no uncertain terms:

> tujhe kyā muḥammad se darkār hai
> mĕrā bāp is waqt bīmār hai (v. 348)
>
> What business you have with Muhammad?
> My dad is ill right now

And when Azra'il calls out again, and the Prophet from his bed opens his eyes and asks what the noise (*shor-o ghul*) is, Fatima replies:

> kahā fāṭimā ne koʾī hai ʿarab
> khaṛā shor kartā hai yah bī-adab (v. 351)

---

the premonition of Muhammad's own death. In early modern Bangla texts on Karbala, Jibril also descends after Husayn's death in Karbala to cry with Muhammad, while in the later *dobhāṣī* Karbala narratives he reappears with the other archangels on the Day of Judgment. Epsita Halder, email communication, 18 May 2022.

11 As Epsita Halder notes, in reformist narratives ʿA'isha is not generally referred to as shedding tears after Muhammad's death, and in *dobhāṣī* Karbala narratives in Bengal this became the prerogative of the members of the future four Caliphs and of the *ahl al-bayt*; email communication, 18 May 2022.

12 I am again grateful to Epsita Halder for this comment; email, 18 May 2022.

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

"It's some Arab", said Fatima
"He's standing, the uncouth, making a racket!"

Fatima's imperious scolding would have likely made women listeners snicker. When Azra'il finally comes before Muhammad, he stands courteously (*adā se aṛā*) and asks him if he's ready to follow him.

Meanwhile, Jibril comes, too, with the happy news that everything is ready in heaven and that even hell is comparatively cool that day.

kahā āj dozakh kī hai āg sard
nahīn̠ dozakhī par hai kuchh ranj o dard
bihishton̠ men̠ kyā ūb bichhā hai farsh
murattab hu'ā āj kursī o ʿarsh
kiyā āj ḥūron̠ ne kyā kyā singār
khaṛe hainge ghilmān bāgh o bahār (1852: vv. 370–72)

He said, "Hell's fire is cool today,
it does not bother people there.
A beautiful carpet is spread out in the heavens!
A chair and throne are well arranged
Houris have come out in their best
and boys are happily standing at the ready."

In Sunni reformist Islam, the depiction of the hereafter became an all-engrossing topic. The Qur'anic paradigm introduced by Sunni reformers was based on the affirmation of an awe-inspiring Allah, whose wrath will befall individual Muslims who do not follow the path of duty, that is, performing the *farż*. If individuals adhere to the *farā'iż*, they will be allotted the pleasures of heaven on the Day of Judgement; if they stray, they will be tortured in hell. Within this framework of reward and punishment, Muhammad is hailed as the savior of the *umma* because he offered his sunna, his sayings and practices for Muslims to follow. In Bengali *wafātnāma*s (*ofatnāma*s), which by describing Muhammad's actions acted also as manuals of comportment, the theme of Muhammad being offered heaven was essential.[13] Muhammad Husayn Khan's *Wafātnāma* dwells on Muhammad's lingering before his final breath to bargain for the best possible deal for his *umma*.

Before Muhammad agrees to die (he, too, is keen to meet his lord), he hesitates, worried about his dear community. He wants to make sure that God will

13 Epsita Halder, email communication, 18 May 2022.

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

pardon sinners even if they repent at the very last minute. In another funny sequence – which, however, presses the idea of being committed to performing the *farā'iż*, here in the form of repentance for any moral deviation – Jibril rushes to and fro again and again between God and the Prophet, who keeps bargaining down the time needed for repentance to a single breath. When the Prophet finally dies, Jibril brings the bier (*tābūt*) down from God himself, while Azraʿil slowly draws out the life spirit (*jān*) of the *umma* from his chest. Color disappears from Muhammad's face and perfume spreads in the air while he cries "*yā ummatī*", affectionately apprehensive about the community even after his death (*magar donoṅ honṭh uske ḥarkat meṅ hain̠, sunā kān dharkar yahī kahtī hain̠. ṣadā uskī dil se uṭhtī thī yahī, ki yā ummatī ummatī ummatī*) (1852: vv. 522–3).

Already Ibn Ishaq's *sīra* contained some discussion regarding the proper performance of the Prophet's funeral rites – should he be washed naked or with his clothes on? "As they disputed, God cast a deep sleep upon them so that every man's chin was sunk on his chest. Then a voice came from the direction of the house, none knowing who it was: 'Wash the apostle with his clothes on'" (Ishaq, 1955: 688). In reformist tracts and narratives, Muhammad's choice of ʿAli to perform his last rites over the other three future caliphs was a recurrent theme: it secured ʿAli's position in the affective world view of Sunni Muslims, both as member of the *ahl al-bayt* and as an early caliph. At the same time, such appropriation of ʿAli overwrote Shiʿa devotion towards ʿAli and his family and their antagonism towards the Sunni caliphs by confirming, through ʿAli's dual position in the *ahl al-bayt* and the caliphal succession, the integral bonding between the *ahl al-bayt* and the caliphate (see for example the Dobhashi narratives discussed in Halder, 2023). In Muhammad Husayn Khan's *Wafātnāma*, it is the women themselves, instructed by ʿAli, who wash the body before covering it with a shroud; ʿAli drinks the leftover water and gets special knowledge. Some drama attends the proceedings here, too. Does the Prophet need to be washed, he who was so pure? While the women hesitate, a voice is heard:

> ki mat ghusal do kuchh nahīn̠ aḥtiyāj
> yih hai pāk ṭāhir muṭahhar mizāj. (1852: v. 487)
>
> Don't bathe him, there is no need.
> He's pure, clean, cleansed by nature.

Immediately, another voice – Khizr's – denounces the first one as that of Iblis (1852: vv. 506–7).

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Though excessive wailing is restrained, the prolonged and recurrent outbursts of weeping in the story – for example, when Bilal the muezzin returns to Medina and calls out the Prophet's name in the first *azan*, and everyone is once again moved to tears (1852: vv. 558–61) – create a Sunni counterpart to the collective mourning during Muharram. The story ends on a note of mourning before the concluding prayers (*munājāt*):

> nahī<u>n</u> kahne kī ṭāqat ab jī ko hai
> ke yih gham wo hai āh sab jī ko hai
> pas ab hai yahī ūb kam kar kalām
> aur us shāh par paṛh wurūd ū salām. (1852: vv. 562–63)
>
> I have no strength left to tell,
> the pain is a sigh that fills my heart.
> Better to now lay down my pen
> and recite my salute to that king.

Whatever Muhammad Husayn Khan's affiliation may have been, his simple and attractive narrative could circulate in cheap booklet form as an oral-literate genre in gatherings at home and in mosques. Amy Bard (2015) has described contemporary settings in which miracle stories or *muʿjizas* like the ones found in the British Library booklets and still printed in India and Pakistan are told in family and devotional gatherings. We may imagine the *Wafātnāma* being read out straight or used as a basis for more elaborate sermons that would intersperse, amplify, and delay the narrative with repetitions, tears, comments, direct appeals, descriptions, Arabic citations, and exhortations, with the speaker modulating their voice between surprised, pathetic, intimate, harsh, etc. (see Cummins and Stille, 2021).

3 Conclusion

I have long been intrigued by the gap where Muslim popular ritual and devotional genres in North Indian languages should be in the history of tellings and texts (Orsini and Butler Schofield, 2015). Urdu critics and scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were interested in popular Urdu or in popular Muslim devotion only for the sake of criticising them. For one thing, was the language of popular Muslim devotion even Urdu? As scholars like Catherine Servan-Schreiber (1999) or Shahid Amin (2015) have shown, North Indian Muslim performers like Madaris or Dafalis did not use "proper

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Urdu" but rather Bhojpuri and other local languages, and women sang songs to the Prophet or to Husayn and other members of the *ahl al-bayt* in Avadhi (Khan Mahmudabad, 2013) or Sindhi (Asani, 1995; tellingly, the Urdu poems he includes are written texts in a literary style). Meanwhile, when the first Indian collectors of Hindi folklore (like Tripathi, 1929) went around collecting songs, they did not include anything "Muslim." As a result, until quite recently it was as if "Muslim folklore" or popular culture (*lok adab*) did not exist – though we know that Sufis and ordinary Muslims sang, listened to, and composed seasonal and other songs, like *bārahmāsas*. The first book on Urdu popular culture dates from 1990 (Rais, 1990), the first academic conference on the topic from 2017 ("Exploring the Popular Culture of Urdu Language," Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 8–10 September). It is in the context of this gap that the booklets of *alif be* poems or of verse narratives of *wafātnāma*s, *mawlūdnāma*s, or the *qiṣṣa* of the Shah of Yemen appear so precious, whether they were texts "reproduced" or "introduced". When the pre-print archive is still largely missing, we must look elsewhere into other archives and for traces that make visible a practice or a tradition.

While scholars and historians of religion have tended to focus on religious debates, reform and polemics and their abundant textual production, the advantage of a book history approach is that it begins from the evidence of the market: which texts and genres were reprinted most often, and were therefore most popular among readers? Whether they represent specific religious positions is less interesting than their linguistic, aesthetic, and religious range and variety. Although what this essay offered was just a preliminary exploration, it seems clear that the religious print market was animated by a great number of different actors and impulses: older Sufi centers; "traditionalist" reformers translating the Qur'an and other key texts in Urdu (Farooqi, 2010); poets and possibly religious performers bringing out their devotional poems; reformist authors composing verse narratives in a simple diction and fast pace that closely approximates that of non-religious *qiṣṣa*s; and printer-publishers who maximized their offerings by reprinting all of these texts and genres. As with other popular Urdu print genres of the nineteenth century – songbooks, *qiṣṣa*s, theatre chapbooks, and so forth – the language of these religious-devotional genres represents a flexible koine stretching from colloquial Urdu to Brajbhasha. Muhammad Husayn Khan's *Wafātnāma* appears closer to non-religious *qiṣṣa*s, while Wajhan's and Miyan Karim's *alif be* poems to Sant orature. The former helps us extend the range of "popular Urdu" to oral-literate religious narratives. The latter provide evidence to the dialogue conducted through shared utterances, language, and genres between Sufis and Sants.

Much like the footpath stalls outside stations and shrines, the large collections of flimsy printed booklets from the late nineteenth and early twentieth

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

centuries now in the British Library reveal the important presence of popular registers of Urdu discourse, which too often get obscured by the preference for sophisticated poetry and high forms of textuality, a preference that is reflected in the biases and gaps of the manuscript archive. Let us abide to the injunction and listen to these texts, imagining ourselves to be in a group assembled to mourn the death of the Prophet or to celebrate his birth, or as having bought a booklet outside a Sufi shrine and trying to memorize its teachings letter by letter.

References

Printed Editions of wafātnāmas *in the British Library*

ʿAli, Nusrat. (1856). *Wafātnāma*. Kanpur, 1856, pp. 16. 14119.e.4 (12).

Khan, Muhammad Husayn. (1852). *Wafātnāma*. Delhi, pp. 32. VT 1060.

Khan, Muhammad Husayn. (1868). Kanpur, pp. 24. VT 469.

Khan, Muhammad Husayn. (1869). Delhi, pp. 16. VT 656.

Khan, Muhammad Husayn. (1870). Lahore, pp. 16. VT 484.

Khan, Muhammad Husayn. (1873). Delhi, pp. 16. VT 595.

Khan, Muhammad Husayn. (1875). Meerut, pp. 20. VT 742.

Khan, Muhammad Husayn. (1876). Kanpur, pp. 20. VT 742.

Khan, Muhammad Husayn. (1876). Delhi, pp. 16. VT 702.

Khan, Muhammad Husayn. (1877). Delhi, pp. 16. VT 758.

Khan, Muhammad Husayn. (1878). Delhi, pp. 16. VT 758.

Khan, Muhammad Husayn. (1869). *Wafātnāma*. With *Ḥulya-i-sharīf*, Ghulam Imam Shahid's *Qiṣṣa-i haẓrat Bilāl* and *Qiṣṣa-i haẓrat Ḥalīma*, Karamat ʿAli Khan's *Qaṣīda naʿtīya*, and Muhammad Hasan ʿIlmi's *Mautnāma*. Kanpur, pp. 24. VT 809.

Khan, Muhammad Husayn. (1876). Kanpur, pp. 24. 14119.e.20 (6).

Khan, Muhammad Husayn. (1875). Lucknow, pp. 24. VT 813.

Khan, Muhammad Husayn. (1878). Lucknow, pp. 24. VT 1220.

Khan, Muhammad Husayn. (1873). *Wafātnāma*. With *Sakarāt nāma*, *Miʿrāj nāma, Shādīnāma, Moʿjiza-i hirnī, Moʿjiza-i darakht*. Madras, pp. 16, Madras. VT 898.

Khan, Muhammad Husayn. (1915). *Wafātnāma*. In *Majmūʿa* [Selection], with *Fażāʾil nāma, Nūr nāma, Shamāʾil nāma, Afrīn nāma, Miʿrāj nāma*. Lucknow, pp. 2–6. VT 1060.

Printed Editions of Alif Be

Karim. (1875). *Alif Be Miyān Karīm*. With Wajhan's *Alif Be*, Bareilly, pp. 16. VT 721.

Karim. (1915). *Alif Be Miyān Karīm*. In *Majmūʿa-i-Alif Be Miyán Karim waghairah*, Lucknow, pp. 8. VT 3823(5).

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Karim. (1878). *Alif Be Miyān Karīm*. With Miyan Karim's *Nuskha* and *Munājāt*; and with Wajhan's *Alif Be*, Delhi: Matba' Rizvi, pp. 8. VT 807.

Wajhan. (1849). *Alif Be*, Kanpur, pp. 8. VT 104.

Wajhan. (1875). *Alif Be*, Lucknow, pp. 8. VT 617.

Wajhan. (1877). *Alif Be*, Lucknow, pp. 8. VT 725.

Wajhan. (1877). Alif Be. In Muhammad Zardar Khan, *Rahbar-e rāh-e ḥaqq*, Lucknow, 8vo, pp. 109–10. 14119.e.28.

Wajhan. (1877). *Alif Be*. In *Majmūʿa-i tawḥīd*, Lucknow, pp. 1–3. 14114.e.28.

Wajhan Shah Sandelvi. (1878). *Alif Be*. In *Majmūʿa alif be*. Delhi, pp. 2–8. VT 807.

Secondary Sources

Agrawal, P. (2009). *Akath Kahānī Prem kī: Kabīr kī kavitā aur unkā samay* [*The Untold story of love: Kabir's poetry and his time*]. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan.

Amin, S. (2015). *Conquest and Community: The Afterlife of Warrior Saint Ghazi Miyan*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.

Asani, A. (1995). In Praise of Muhammad: Sindhi and Urdu Texts. In D. Lopez Jr, ed., *Religions of India in Pratice*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 159–186.

Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Tr. Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Bard, A. C. (2002). *Desolate victory: Shīʿī Women and the Marṡiyah Texts of Lucknow*, PhD dissertation, Columbia University.

Bard, A. C. (2015). Hearing Moʿjizat in South Asian Shiʿism. In F. Orsini and K. Butler Schofield, eds., *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*, Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, pp. 137–168.

Bhikha Sahab. (2013). *Bhīkhā sāhab kī bānī*. Allahabad: Belvedere Press.

Blumhardt, J. F. (1900). *Catalogue of the Library of the India Office*, vol. II, pt. II (Hindustani books). London: Eyre and Spottiswoode.

Cummins, S. and Stille, M. (2021). Religious Emotions and Emotions in Religion: The Case of Sermons. *Journal of Religious History* 45 (1), pp. 3–24.

d'Hubert, T. (2019). Persian at the Court or in the Village? The Elusive Presence of Persian in Bengal. In: N. Green, ed., *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019, pp. 93–112.

Eaton, R. E. (1974). Sufi folk literature and the expansion of Indian Islam. *History of Religions* 14 (2), pp. 117–127.

Eaton, R. E. (2010). Women's Grinding and Spinning Songs of Devotion in the Late Medieval Deccan. In: B. D. Metcalf, ed., *Islam in South Asia in Practice*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 87–92.

Farooqi, M. A. (2010). Changing Literary Patterns in Eighteenth Century North India: Quranic translations and the development of Urdu Prose. In F. Orsini, ed., *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, pp. 222–248.

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Garcin de Tassy, F. (1955). *Muslim Festivals of India* Ed. and tr. from the French by M. Waseem. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Green, N. (2011). *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840–1915*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Hakala, W. (2010). *Diction and Dictionaries: Language, Lexicography, and Learning in Persianate South Asia*, PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

Halder, E. (2023). *Reclaiming Karbala: Nation, Islam and Literature of the Bengal Muslims*. New York: Routledge.

Husayn Khan, M. (1852). *Wafātnāma*. Delhi, Kashmiri Darwaza: Matbaʾ Sadiq al-Akhbar, H1260. British Library VT 1060.

Husayn Khan, M. (1915). *Wafātnāma*. In *Majmūʿa* [*Selection*], with *Fażāʾil nāma, Nūr nāma, Shamāʾil nāma, Afrīn nāma, Miʿrāj nāma*. Lucknow: Matbaʾ Mujtabai, pp. 2–6. British Library VT 1060.

Ishaq, A. I. (1955). *The life of Muhammad: a translation of Isḥāq's* Sīrat rasūl Allāh, with introduction and notes by A. Guillaume. London: Oxford University Press.

Khalidi, T. (2009). *Images of Muhammad: Narratives of the Prophet in Islam across the Centuries*. New York: Doubleday.

Khan Mahmudabad, A. (2013). Muharram: Reliving a sacrifice. In M. Ali, ed., *A Leaf Turns Yellow: the Sufis of Awadh*, New Delhi: Rumi Foundation, 2013, pp. 178–185.

Knapczyk, P. (2014). *Crafting the Cosmopolitan Elegy in North India: Poets, Patrons, and the Urdu Marṣiyah, 1707–1857*, PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin.

Lal, R. L. (1933). *Mahātmāoṁ kī bānī* [The Oeuvre of the Great Souls]. Bhurkura, Ghazipur: Ram Baran Das.

McGregor, R. S. (1993). *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Metcalf, B. D. (2014 [1982]). *Islamic Revival in British India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Orsini, F. (2009). *Print and Pleasure: Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.

Orsini, F. (2014). "Krishna is the Truth of Man": Mir ʿAbdul Wahid Bilgrami's *Haqāʾiq-i Hindī* (Indian Truths) and the Circulation of Dhrupad and Bishnupad. In: T. de Bruijn and A. Busch, eds., *Culture and Circulation: Literature in Motion in Early Modern India*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 222–246.

Orsini, F. (2015). Booklets and Sants: religious publics and literary history. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38 (3), pp. 435–449.

Orsini, F. (2018). *Na Turk, na Hindu*: Shared language, accents and located meanings. In R. Kothari, ed., *A Multilingual Nation*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 50–69.

Orsini, F. and Butler Schofield, K., eds. (2015). *Tellings and Texts: Music, story-telling and performance in north India*. Cambridge UK: Open Book Publishers.

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Platts, J. T. (1997 [1884]). *A Dictionary of Urdū, Classical Hindī and English*. Reprint New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.

Quarterly Lists of Publications Published and Registered under the Provisions of Act XXV of 1867. 1867 – For North-Western Provinces, Oudh, Punjab …

Pearson, H. O. (2008). *Islamic Reform and Revival in the 19th century India: Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah*. Reprint New Delhi: Yoda Press.

Pemberton, K. (2002). Islamic and Islamicizing Discourses: Ritual Performances, Didactic Texts, and the Reformist Challenge in the South Asian Sufi Milieu. *Annual of Urdu Studies* 17, pp. 55–83.

Rais, Q., ed. (1990). *Urdū me<u>n</u> lok adab* [Folklore in Urdu]. New Delhi: Simant Prakashan.

Raj, S. J. and Dempsey, C. G., eds. (2010). *Sacred Play: Ritual Levity and Humor in South Asian Religions*. New York: SUNY Press.

Servan-Schreiber, C. (1999). *Chanteurs itinérants en Inde du Nord: la tradition orale Bhojpuri*. Paris: Editions l'Harmattan.

Stewart, T. (2001). In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter Through Translation Theory. *History of Religions* 40 (3), pp. 260–287.

Tiwari, B. P. (1891). A Religious Song of the Dhobis. *North Indian Notes & Queries* (Dec.), pp. 145–146.

Tripathi, R. (1929). *Grām gīt* [Village Songs]. Allahabad: Hindi Mandir.

Vaudeville, C. (1993). *A Weaver Named Kabir*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Yari Sahab. (2005). *Yārī sāhab kī ratnāvalī* [Yari Sahab's Jewel Collection]. Allahabad: Belvedere Printing Press.

Downloaded from Brill.com 01/15/2024 05:30:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/