The issue central to this essay is defined by a three-way relationship—that between literary and religious identity, and the varying emotional resonances of languages and dialects in the élite culture of Mughal India.

Having raised the issue in the abstract let us visit a specific historical moment that captures the questions most vividly. In the spring of 1739 a small group of Mughal noblemen traveled to the outskirts of Delhi and set up camp for an extended stay at the bustling fairgrounds surrounding the tomb of a Saint. The fair was gathered around the tomb of a Sufi Saint whose death anniversary (‘urs) was being celebrated with great fanfare. The Mughal friends were, therefore, more than just spectators at a fair; they were, simultaneously, pilgrims. And one among these pilgrims to a Sufi’s tomb was a Hindu nobleman by the name of Anand Ram. ¹ As was the custom among Mughal literati Anand Ram composed poetry—not in his native Panjabi, but in Persian. And to signal his

Persian poetic persona Anand Ram had taken the Persian pen name (takhallus) of Mukhlis, “the sincere”—sincere, that is, as a lover. On this occasion Mukhlis was in the company of several Persian-speaking Muslim noblemen, chief among whom was the great lexicographer and grammarian Siraju 'd-Din Khān Ārzū. On his first night at the fair Mukhlis was troubled by insomnia, and so he asked his servant to tell him a story that he might be lulled to sleep.

The tale his servant told Mukhlis was very well known. It had been written in 1542 in a dialect of Hindi by Muhammed Jāyasi, a provincial Sufi belonging to the successful Chishti order, and it told of the tragic love affair between a North Indian prince and a Sri Lankan princess called Padmāvatī, or "She Who is Born of the Lotus." The narrative of Padmāvatī is one of the most celebrated romances in the canon of Hindi literature. What detains us in this sleepless night at the fairgrounds is not the content of Padmāvatī, but rather Mukhlis’s reaction to its language. As the servant narrated the tale in the broad Eastern dialect in which it had been composed by Jāyasi, Mukhlis was entranced. And here is what he said:

"My servant told the colorful tale that Jāyasi, author of the Hindi Padmāvatī, had written entirely in the Eastern dialect—as though it were an Eastern melody brimming over with pain. Jāyasi had based its wording on uncommon ideas and rare metaphors; however since the work contains the bewitchments and marvels of love, it compels the heart to feel pain. And I said to myself, “If this Hindi Beloved were to be displayed in the robes of a Persian writer (qalamkār-e Fārsī) then it is possible that this work of art might appear elegant and permissible in the estimation of the people of taste (dar naṣar-e ahl-e ṣaʿāq in fan mustahsan numāyūd). Therefore, my pen laid the foundations of this literary project and, having completed it within the span of a week, called it Haṅgāma-e 'Ishq (the clamor of love).”

For his retelling Mukhlis chose a sartorial metaphor. Through a synecdochic association, he transformed Jāyasi’s Hindi tale into its central character, Princess Padmāvatī. But the transformation raised a dilemma—how was this Hindi-beloved-in-the-rough to be presented to people of literary refinement—such as Mukhlis’s circle of companions? For her presentation to these refined friends—by implication her

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2Ānand Rām Mukhlis, Haṅgāma-e 'Ishq, compiled 1739 (Patna: Khudabakhsh Library, ms. #8918, folio 5).
lovers—the Hindi-beloved was deemed in need of a change of clothes, which were fashioned by Mukhliś when he recast in Persian finery the beloved he felt to be unpresentable in her coarse Hindi garb. Here Hindi is defined by opposition: if Persian robes refined the Hindi-beloved, making her fit for the eyes of the literati, then Hindi by implication lacked polish, elegance and taste.

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

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

3For a catalogue of the Persian versions of this narrative, see Saiyid Amir Hasan Abidi, “The Story of Padmavat in Indo-Persian Literature,” Indo-Iranica 15 (1962), pp. 1–11. Abidi mentions twelve different retellings, and it is entirely possible that manuscript searches will reveal others. None of these Persian versions is a literal translation, hence my use of the word “retelling.” For a Persian retelling of Jāyasi’s Hindi Padmāvat, see Bazmi’s Rat o Padam composed for Emperor Jahangir in 1619 C.E. See ‘Abdu ’sh-Shukūr Bazmī, Dastān-e Padmāvat.
But even if we confine our gaze to Jāyasi’s Hindi Padmāvat, its status as a property of the Hindi literary canon appears somewhat shakier if we begin to focus on the history of its readership. For example, the earliest surviving manuscript of Jāyasi’s Padmāvat, copied in the year 1674, was written with an interlinear Persian translation. Its owner and scribe, a Sufi by the name of Muhammad Shākir, was clearly more comfortable in Persian—to the extent that he laboriously added diacritics on every Hindi word to show the short vowels without which he could not pronounce the Hindi he wrote in Arabic script.

Muhammad Shākir, however, did something else which gives us a rare glimpse into the very stuff of his literary imagination. As he copied the Hindi poem and scribbled its literal Persian translation in the lines between, it sparked in his memory couplets from the Persian ghazals of Ḥāfiz. And these Muhammad Shākir left inscribed on the margins. For example, at a turn in the narrative where Prince Ratnasena hears of the beauty of Princess Padmāvat, and is instantly smitten by her, Muhammad Shākir inserts the famous opening couplet of Ḥāfiz’s divān in which the poet warns: “Love appeared at first a cinch, until the problems came” (ki ‘ishq āsān namād avval valē usfād mushkil-hā). King Ratnasena stands warned, therefore, in the hallowed words of Ḥāfiz. Through the learned medium of Shākir’s imagination Ḥāfiz spoke to Jāyasi, bridging the two centuries that separated them. In Shākir’s reading Hindi and Persian are locked in so tight an embrace that it is only through a great insensitivity that we can pry them apart. A reader such as Muhammad Shākir presents us with a challenge: to train our own imagination to recognize those fleeting Persian resonances which added depth to what he copied in Hindi. To rise to this challenge is to train our ears to hear both Jāyasi and Ḥāfiz, as also Hindi and Persian—for it is in this simultaneous presence of two authors and two languages that we may rediscover the delight which compelled Muhammad Shākir to persist in the tedium of adding diacritics.


4Muḥammad Shākir Amrōhāvī, Padmāvat (Rampur: Rampur Raza Library, ms. #1).

5Folio 31b.
to every Hindi word in the three-hundred odd pages of the manuscript. Thus, if we venture beyond the pages of Hindi critical editions and define Padmāvat according to its literary life in the experience of Mughal readers then the ecology of what is conventionally held to be a Hindi text turns out to imply Persian as well. Is it not telling, then, that in the considerable critical literature on Padmāvat there is no mention at all of Persian, even though almost everyone who has worked on Padmāvat has consulted this celebrated early manuscript?

I cite this example to point out what seems to me a pervasive and largely unexamined assumption of monolingualism in the study of premodern Indian literature. By this I mean more than just the assumption that medieval authors and readers functioned primarily in one language. One significant corollary of the monolingual assumption is the facile equation we draw between literary traditions and religious communities. Thus, Padmāvat comes to be situated exclusively and neatly within the confines of Hindi written in Nagari script. But such neat correspondences fail to explain the social world of such Mughals as Mukhlīs and Shākir. Where, for example, do we begin to locate the identity of Mukhlīs—a Panjabi Hindu making a pilgrimage to the tomb of a Sufi saint, enjoying a sophisticated narrative in Eastern Hindi and retelling it in high Persian for the delectation of his Persian- and Urdu-speaking Muslim colleagues?

To do justice to such a complex and adamantly heteroglot literary community one must, I believe, redirect one’s gaze at the blurred peripheries of literary canons, for it is there that we glimpse the intricate interdependencies and rivalries—in a word the ecology—of literary communities. To thus excavate the ecology of Mughal literary communities means to begin thinking in terms of not this or that text, nor yet in terms of Hindi or Urdu studies, but in terms of an entire literary area with its multiple literary voices and how these interact with each other. This is, admittedly, an ambitious task—one which South Asianists have scarcely begun to tackle, and scholars of Hindi have, for political reasons,

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Vasudeva Sarana Agrawala, for example, does mention that Shākir copied the manuscript in Arabic script, and included an interlinear Persian translation, but remains silent about the many Persian prose and verse comments which he also included, and which make Shākir’s manuscript such a unique source of reader- responses. See Vasudeva Sarana Agrawala, ed. Padmavat: Malik Muhammad Jayasi Kṛta Mahakavya, Mula aura Sanjivani Vyakhya (Jhansi: Sahitya Sadan, 1955), p. 18.
positively discouraged.

The élite, urban Mughal community was overwhelmingly Persianate and Islamicate in its tastes. It valued Persian as the primary language of literary and political discourse; and yet a number of élite and Persian-speaking Mughal authors like Muhammad Jāyasī and Muḥammad Shākir specifically chose to compose or read either exclusively in Hindi, or in a mixture of Persian and Hindi. How do we account for these multilingual choices? Can we penetrate the intellectual universe of élite Mughal authors to define that range of aesthetic considerations which sometimes made Hindi seem attractive to them, even though they simultaneously held it to be lacking in refinement? What shades of meaning and emotion were thrown into higher relief by such anomalous linguistic choices, and how did élite Mughals themselves comment on the choice to write in Hindi? I will attempt to address this cluster of questions with the specific example of a number of Mughal texts. The first and longest part of the discussion will center around Bīkāṭ Kāhānī (the great tale). Bīkāṭ Kāhānī was composed in 1636 by Muhammad Afzāl, a teacher and scholar of Persian in the North Indian town of Panipat. I have chosen Bīkāṭ Kāhānī to explore these questions for a number of reasons, the foremost of which is that Afzāl composed it in a hybrid of Hindi and Persian, and thus located it at the periphery of both literary traditions.

II

The élite Mughal authors who chose to write in Hindi were overwhelmingly Sufi in their religious affiliations, and this has led contemporary scholars like 'Abdu 'l-Ḥaq and Richard Eaton to speculate that Hindi

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Sufi literature was overwhelmingly a literature of conversion, written by élite, Persian-speaking Sufi authors for outreach to the rural Hindus. Being unschooled in Persian or Arabic, the rural Hindu masses could only be drawn into the Muslim community through the use of Indian vernaculars. In his study of the Sufis of Bijapur, Eaton notes that the Bijapur prose compositions, which mostly dealt with abstruse theological issues, were most likely aimed at the inner circle of disciples and were necessarily in Persian since the Sufi technical vocabulary is derived from either Persian or Arabic. The Hindi compositions were, by contrast, simple lyrics through which the élite Sufis could communicate with illiterate Hindus. Viewed thus, Hindi poetry is an élite concession to the simple sensibility of rural, Hindi-speaking Hindus. It was a literature which—in Eaton and ‘Abdu ‘l-Ḥaq’s explanations—was demotic in its orientation and because of this it was a perfect medium for the gradual conversions of Hindus.10

Do élite Muslim aspirations to create a demotic vernacular verse in service of conversion explain a text like Bikaṭ Kaḥānī? To answer this we must first recognize the contours of the literary niche into which Bikaṭ Kaḥānī fits. Afžal’s poem belongs to a well-known genre of pre-modern North Indian poetry called Bārahmāsa, or the “Twelve-month Cycle.”11 The Bārahmāsa presents the sentiment of a lover’s separation from the beloved, and in this general sense is not very different from the Persian lyric, the ghazal. The unique texture of the Bārahmāsa derives, however, from two peculiarities. The suffering lover of the Bārahmāsa, called the nāyika, is unambiguously a woman grieving for an unmistakably male lover—sometimes even her husband. In her laments the nāyika typically addresses her female companions, and sometimes even older female rela-

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10Since the publication of The Sufis of Bijapur in 1978 Eaton has revised his own explanation of Hindi-as-an-instrument-of-conversion (personal communication, October 1997). Readers personally familiar with Eaton will know this. However, the revision has not been made publicly or academically. Thus, the explanation remains firmly lodged as a paradigm for understanding the Sufi use of Hindi even while its author questions it. More importantly, however, no new explanations for the use of Hindi by the otherwise Persian-speaking Mughal literati have been put forward. It is thus that I am raising this issue again after a hiatus of some thirty years.

11On the generic tradition of the Bārahmāsa, see Charlotte Vaudeville Barahmasa in Indian Literatures: Songs of the Twelve Months in Indo-Aryan Literatures (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1986).
vives. By contrast the Persian and Urdu ghazals at pains to leave the
gender of both the lover and the beloved unspecified. The world of the
ghazal is, furthermore, adamantly non-domestic. Mothers, sisters and
women friends don’t intrude upon the lamenting lover. Secondly, the
Bārahmāśa unfolds the sentiments of the female lover against the detailed
background of changing seasons; thus, the changes in the natural
world—such as changing foliage, or the migrations of birds—evoke
different memories and sorrows in the lover. The Bārahmāśa has a sorrow
for every season. That the emotions are governed by the changing seasons
is stressed by the very structure of the Bārahmāśa which, divided into
twelve sections, corresponds neatly to the twelve months of the Indian
calendar. The Persian ghazal also made use of the seasons as a backdrop
for the lover’s sentiment, but usually only the spring and autumn. A
further difference is that the rhythm of the Bārahmāśa is modulated
specifically to the Indian landscape, with much being made of the
monsoons—the traditional time when the rains made the roads
impassable and martial or mercantile Indians wound up the season to
return home from either raiding or trading. The Bārahmāśa derives its
greatest pathos from the wayward man who defies this normal rhythm of
the Indian year and stays away even during the rains. It is not accidental
that in Bīkāt Kāhāni Afzal introduces us to the lover’s sorrows during the
month of sāvan, or July, when the monsoon is at its height, and thus the
laments of the lonely nāyika presumably at their shrillest.

In all of this Afzal conforms to the conventions of the genre of
Bārahmāśa; where he differs quite markedly is in his use of language, for
Bīkāt Kāhāni is not just in a dialect of Hindi. Afzal’s language ranges,
instead, from pure Persian—such as when he quotes Persian verses from
the poet ‘Abdu ’r-Rāhmān Jāmī—to dialects of Western Hindi with a pre-
dominance of tadbhava words derived and modified from Sanskrit. 12 This

12A tadbhava (literally, “born from it”) is a Sanskrit-, rather than Arabic- or
Persian-derived, word which in the course of its historical existence has gone
through sound changes in consonance with the modern Indian language in
which it is used. Thus, “bikat” is a tadbhava word, being derived from the
Sanskrit “vikata,” meaning, “immense” or “terrible.” By analogy Latinate words
in English might be called tadbhava, and Italian may be said to bear a strongly
tadbhava relationship to Latin. Since there is no technical English term describ-
ing this process in South Asia (Latinate immediately takes us to the specific
terrain of Europe and Latin), I will henceforth treat this as an English noun and
also use the verb “tadbhavization” to refer to the process by which a particular
range is already unusual for its two linguistic extremities, but it is the middle range of Afzal’s language that is the most surprising for here one sees the most agile turns of phrase. Take, for example, a sentence where the grieving nayika taunts those “warriors” who have never known the pain of separation:

\[\begin{align*}
Bavā’i kī nahiṭ ā jis shakhs kō pir \\
Cē dānad dard-e digar-rā, ārē bir
\end{align*}\]
He who’s never known the pangs of madness
What does that warrior know of other pains?\(^{13}\)

The English translation inevitably levels the macaronic texture of the couplet which alternates between such Hindi words as “pir” (“pain,” derived from the Sanskrit “pida”), and “bir” (“warrior,” derived from the Sanskrit “vira”). But in contrast to these tadbhava words what is one to make of the phrase “cē dānad dard-e digar-rā (“what does he know of other pains”)? The fragment is surprising in its use of not just Persian nouns, but even Persian verbs and case markers? It is above all through his use of Persian verbs and prepositions that Afzal creates a linguistic texture so markedly different from that of the early Urdu of poets like Saudā, who did use a highly Persianized vocabulary of nouns and adjectives, but never Persian verbs. The use of Persian verbs, sentence fragments, and Persian quotes from Jāmi is all the more unusual when juxtaposed against the special forms of address which Afzal uses from the stock vocabulary of a special female speech which Hindi-speaking men never use except to mimic women. Afzal’s nayika, for example, frequently prefaces her laments with the vocative “rī” which is used exclusively by women when addressing other women of roughly the same age and social status. Thus, for example, the nayika says:

\[\begin{align*}
Khirad gum-karda, majnūn hō rahī rī \\
Losing my wits (thii in pure Persian), I became \\
a second Majnūn.\(^{14}\)
\end{align*}\]

\(^{13}\text{Bikaṭ Kabānī, p. 33.}\)
This already stark contrast between Persian and the special domain of Hindi feminine speech is further complicated by the variations in the kinds of Hindi Afzal chooses. His is not a uniform dialect of Hindi, but rather alternates between Braj and Khari Boli (two dialects of Western Hindi from the region around Delhi), with occasional words taken from the dialect of Southern Hindi. Afzal seems interested in using the widest possible range of language, not in order to create a middle range of language using some elements of both; his effort seems calculated, instead, to juxtapose the different languages in discrete bits, much like the tesserae of a mosaic which retain their separate outlines and identities despite their placement within a larger tableau.

If Afzal’s macaronic verse were the only example of its kind we might note it for its peculiarity and move on; however, far from being the only one of its kind Bikaţ Kabānti is part of a corpus of Hindi-Persian macaronic verse by élite Persianate Mughal authors. These texts are mostly unpublished and seldom discussed, for neither the Indian Hindi scholars nor the Indian Persian scholars claim them as the property of their literary canons. This is what I mean by the assumption of monolingualism. My current research on Padmāvat has revealed a number of such texts, the most well-known of which is a retelling of Jāyasi’s Padmāvat by Rāzi, the governor of the city of Delhi and the deputy of Emperor Aurangzeb in the last years of his rule over the Mughal Empire. In his abridged version of the Padmāvat Rāzi inserts couplets from such famous Hindi poets as Surdas within the otherwise Persian body of his verse. Again, as with Afzal, Rāzi’s effort is to juxtapose discrete bits of Hindi and Persian rather than to blend their grammars and vocabularies in order to create a middle range of language like the Rekhta-Urdu of the early eighteenth century.

Now that we have noted the peculiarities of Mughal macaronic verse, the question remains why did élite, Mughal authors choose to write in Hindi when they clearly lived in a courtly subculture which valued Persian as the language of refined discourse, especially for the expression of lyric poetry.

Eaton’s explanations offer us no signposts in our search, for they specifically address the motivations of missionary Sufis in writing Hindi; and Bikaţ Kabānti is emphatically not a Sufi text. The Urdu critic Ḥāfiz

\[14\] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 44.
Maḥmūd Shērānī suggests a possible approach. By placing *Bikat Kāhānī* within a discussion of the development of Urdu in Panjab Shērānī locates its bilingualism within a teleology of Urdu. Placed in a venerable genealogy consisting of the Hindavi writings of Amīr Khusrō and Sharaftūd ‘d-Dīn Manārī, Afzāl becomes a humble contributor to the long process of linguistic brewing which finally culminates in the “real” Urdu of Saudā, Mir and, of course, Ghālib. As such *Bikat Kāhānī* marks a way-stop on the long march of the North Indian vernacular towards the telos of the fully mature idiom of Delhi in mid-eighteenth century. The process of brewing by which Urdu allegedly formed itself is sketched by Shērānī through analogy with code-switching in modern North Indian—and especially Panjabi—speech where, says Shērānī, “a speaker may begin with the intention of uttering a sentence in Urdu, stuffs an English snippet in the middle, only to end with a Panjabi verb. Such a point is reached without any special effort or artifice (ye śīrāt bağhār kisi khas koshish yā taśānnu ‘kē paidā hō ga’ti bāh).” But in Shērānī’s estimation the peculiar macaronism of *Bikat Kāhānī* is no asset; and so, he continues, “In this poem Persian phrases and compounds have been crammed in at all odd points in such a way that the modern taste cannot find them acceptable.” Of course, since in Shērānī’s view this is incipient Urdu such ungainliness is to be expected, especially when it comes from the Panjab.

For Shērānī the Hindi-Persian macaronism of *Bikat Kāhānī* bears the same taint of grossness as did the mixed Latin-Italian verse for Italian humanists who first coined the term “macarronico” to name a kind of burlesque pioneered in the 1490’s. Here is Teofilo da Folegno, one humanist who wrote such verse for parody, defining his practice in a treatise on macaronism:

This poetic art is called “macaronic” from macarones, which are a certain dough made up of flour, cheese and butter—thick, coarse and rustic. Thus, macaronic poems must have nothing but fat, coarseness and gross words in them.16

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

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

I will address the issue of pathos, and particularly the kind of pathos that is enhanced by the use of Hindi, but for now let me voice one important disagreement with Shērānī by pointing out that *Bikaṣ̡ Kahaṇṭi* is not casual or spoken speech. It is, instead, a highly self-conscious literary undertaking. Its alternation of Hindi and Persian is, I would argue, a matter of far greater deliberation and aesthetic choice than the interlinguistic slippages in modern or pre-modern street-speech. Its macaronism is precisely a result of *taΩannu’* or artifice, and mannerism. Its heteroglot nature hasn’t just come about, but has been constructed. If one is attentive to the literariness of *Bikaṣ̡ Kahaṇṭi*, then one must ask how its macaronic texture was the result of aesthetic choices made by a competent and sensitive author trying to enhance the pathos of separation by the use of Hindi.

In a moment I will attempt an answer to these questions, but for now let us begin by recognizing that whatever Āfžal’s motivations in alternating between Persian and varieties of Hindi, the result was a text of such complexity that it could only be enjoyed by a highly-educated polyglot,

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well-versed in both Hindi and Persian. The enjoyment of such linguistic and literary complexity presupposes a degree of education and cosmopolitan experience not available to rural masses. Their liberal use of Hindi notwithstanding Bikat Kahani and Razi’s Padmavat are both texts written for the highly educated Persianized élite of Mughal India—whether they were Hindu or Muslim. In other words, we have to imagine an author like Afzal or Razi inspired by something other than the virtuous ideal of communicating to the masses by writing in their vernacular. We have to imagine an ideal reader who was familiar with Persian and several dialects of Hindi, and furthermore, was well-enough read in both literary traditions to appreciate the departures from the generic conventions of both the Bārahamśa and the ghazal—departures which make Bikat Kahani a memorable text. Such a reader would not have acquired Hindi or Persian merely to cope with the demands of living in a multilingual society, but would have been interested in mining this dual heritage to extend the expressive reach of both languages.

III

One expressive world which opens more fully to Afzal through his use of Hindi is, I would argue, the world of feminine emotions. Both Hindi and Persian possessed an elaborate vocabulary for the expression of a lover’s grief at separation from the beloved; but in writing Bikat Kahani Afzal was tackling a genre which probed specifically feminine emotions, and which heightened the pathos of separation by positioning the confined woman within, gazing out at the expanse of changing nature which was denied her, but contained her lost, or worse yet, deceitful lover. The Bārahamśa derived its emotional punch from the unequal status, positioning and movement of the wayward man and the sedentary woman.

The strongest voice in the tradition of Persian poetry was that of the ghazal—and this was an emphatically ungendered voice. The strict avoidance of gender specificity in the Persian ghazal was achieved all the more naturally for, unlike Hindi or Urdu, Persian lacks gendered verbs, nouns or adjectives. Of course, it is perfectly possible for the Persian narrator to assume a female persona by describing unambiguously feminine scenarios, or parts of the female anatomy—but such directness was deemed crass by the society which produced the ghazal. It was not possible, however, to stress the gender of the speaker through the structure of Persian grammar itself. By using Hindi, and especially that subset of Hindi speech which is used only by Hindi-speaking women, Afzal grounds Bikat Kahani
specifically and unambiguously within a female setting. Now the laments echo unmistakably in the privacy of the women’s quarters where the only immediate hearers are other women addressed by the nayika in the intimate, feminine vocative “ṛ.” We the readers—and especially the men—are eavesdroppers. Even for contemporary readers like myself this aesthetic of eavesdropping constitutes one of the central delights of a Bārahmāṣa. Imagine, then, how much more intense the delight of eavesdropping for an élite, Mughal reader living in a society far more radically segregated by gender than is ours. This is the physical world of the Bārahmāṣa without inhabiting which we cannot inhabit the emotions of the grieving nayika.

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

The work of Muḥammad Rafī’ Saudā (1713-80) is a good place to begin examining the continuing use of Hindi as a feminizing agent in its Persianate environment, for not only does Saudā stand at the very cusp of the era when the Mughal élite began using Urdu for literary purposes, but

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17 For the most recent research on the history of the naming of this new vernacular, see Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, “Unprivileged Power: The Strange Case of Persian (and Urdu) in Nineteenth-Century India,” in The Annual of Urdu Studies #13 (1998), pp. 10–11.

the linguistic range of Saudā’s verse is somewhat greater than that of later Urdu poets like Ghālib who confined themselves almost exclusively to a Perso-Arabic lexicon. Saudā, by contrast, wrote not only in the idiom that we have come to know as “standard” Urdu, but occasionally also ranged into pure Persian as well as into the range of Sanskrit-derived vocabulary which today we call Hindi. Saudā’s work, therefore, is an ideal place to begin asking questions about the ecology of languages in the élite literary culture of Mughal India.

Saudā was a prolific writer. His Kulliyat (collected works) consists of two massive volumes arranged according to the various genres expected of an Urdu poet. One encounters, first, his biting satires (hajvi) on which, above all, Saudā based his reputation; then follow the Urdu ghazals, the mañnavs (narrative lyric poems), and marjiyas, elegies in honor of the martyrs of the battle of Karbala. Saudā’s Persian ghazals constitute the smallest section, and finally bring the Kulliyat to its close. The basic stock of Saudā’s lexicon is not radically different from that of classical Urdu poetry in its degree of Persianization; however, in all of these genres (except the Persian poems) one notices a greater flexibility of linguistic range than in the work of especially nineteenth-century Urdu poets like Ghālib or Ţauq. And this flexibility becomes particularly apparent in Saudā’s marjiyas, where he ranges frequently into a Sanskrit-derived vocabulary of tadbhava words not as frequently encountered in his ghazals or satires. Some tadbhava words (like “sis” and “ran” “head” and “battle”) come to form the stock of conventionally-used words in the evolving idiom of Urdu marjiyas, and the reader comes to expect them in the writing of not only Saudā, but even later marşiya writers like Mir Anis and Dabir. But occasionally Saudā composes marjiyas in a register which even for his corpus of marjiyas is unusual in its density of tadbhava words; and in these marjiyas it is not just the vocabulary, but also the grammar, which is remarkable in its proximity to the grammar of regional Hindi dialects like Braj, Dakhani, and, in one instance, even Panjabi.\(^{19}\)

Saudā’s marjiyas provoke two questions about the aesthetic and emo-

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tional resonance of Hindi in its Persianate environment. First, why is it especially in the genre of the Urdu mar¡iya that we see the greatest departures from a Persianized vocabulary, and second, why, within this field of relatively un-Persianized vocabulary, do certain mar¡iyas stand out even more in their use of tadbhava words?

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

\[
\begin{align*}
Kāsē kahiye bāt kaun man sun kē bāiye \\
Rōvat hūn din rāt Ḥusainā ran mēn jāiye \\
Nainan barsat nirkat, umagat hai ēliai \\
Pūsē mārē hāe nabi kē aise nāti \\
Gērū sē kапрē ranēgē mukh par malē b'ubhāt \\
Pūrēn bībī Fāṭima “kī gaiyō mērō pūt?”
\end{align*}
\]

Whom shall I tell, who will understand?

Weeping I spend my days and nights—
my Husaina dead in battle
Eyes rain as I gaze, and my chest heaves
How they slayed with thirst the grandson of the Prophet
Dyeing her clothes with saffron, rubbing her face with ashes
Sobbing, says Bībī Fāṭima, “Where’s my son gone?”

We may well shy away from the politically thorny issue of labeling Fāṭima’s speech, for the choices are many, and bewildering: is it Urdu or proto-Urdu, Hindi or Hindavi? Or is it, instead, simply the dialect of Braj? The debate about the precise nomenclature and classification of Hindi, Urdu and the various types of Hindi has long exercised us. It is a debate which I deliberately want to avoid, since answers to it are dependent on one’s ambitions in forging either long or short genealogies for contemporary speech. It is a debate which ultimately tells us far more about the politics of contemporary South Asian language communities.

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than it does about pre-modern social realities. I would, in fact, go so far as to claim that the debate over Hindi or Urdu is largely a distraction which keeps us from the more pertinent issue of discussing the aesthetics and politics of pre-modern literary creations, whatever their linguistic classification. In this case I simply follow Saudā’s lead, for he himself felt the need to name the particular register of speech when he labeled the marṣiya clearly as being “zabān-e Purabī-āmēz” (“mixed with the Eastern dialect”).

Whatever the linguistic label we choose to give Fāţīma’s lament, one point is undeniable—it abounds in Sanskrit-derived words like “pān” “nain” and “mukh” which are anomalous in Saudā’s largely Persianized register of speech. Both the narrator’s speech and that of the women in this elegy lack the Perso-Arabic vocabulary which Saudā uses extensively in his ghazals as well as other marṣiyas. Furthermore, in his use of forms like “gaïyā” and “kit” (instead of gayā and kahānī) Fāţīma departs entirely from the standard Urdu-Khari Boli grammar normally used by Saudā as well as most non-Deccani Urdu poets. The tone of Fāţīma’s speech is certainly less polished because of her avoidance of Persian and her use of a regional Hindi dialect. It is overwhelmingly as a result of this, I would argue, that her lament is laced with an informal, familial affection—a tone established immediately in the opening line by Fāţīma’s transformation of “Husain” into “Huṣainā” through the addition of the diminutive suffix “a.” Fāţīma thus claims the prerogative of a mother to address as a little child the son who was in fact in his fifties when he lay headless and parched in the sands of Karbala.

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

21Deccani Urdu ghazal-poets like Qulī Qutb Shāh are known for their liberal use of tadbhava words as well as the feminine voice; this, however, is a tradition that dies out in the Deccan by the early eighteenth century; and it is a tradition that does not significantly influence either the North Indian Rekhta-Urdu poetic tradition or the history of its criticism.
Typically the lover in the ghazal may hang about the beloved’s alley in hopes of catching a glimpse of him/her; he may try to intercept the beloved in the garden where the flowers remind him of the beloved’s face and the cypress of his graceful stature; he may finally glimpse the beloved in the soiree, only to be snubbed or pointedly ignored; disappointed in love, and oblivious to his appearance, he may appear in the most public of all places, the bazaar, where there is no dearth of advisers to counsel him at droning length, and where he may also be upbraided by the shaikh for his shameless behavior; exhausted, the lover may finally retreat to the wilderness which forms the antithesis to the city, the site of his public humiliation and private pain. But except for the soiree every one of these scenarios defines an open, publicly accessible space; and even the soiree, though held indoors, is only a marginally domestic space, being limited to the most public part of an élite house, the living room. The ghazal maintains a scrupulous distance from the home and locates its sorrows in non-domestic spaces. And along with domestic spaces the ghazal avoids familial relations. As I stressed earlier, mothers, sisters or fathers do not intrude upon the lover’s sorrows, either to comfort or chide; nor do they comment upon the beloved’s willful cruelty. In the emotional logic of the ghazal the home and the family are not only a distraction, they are a dissonance.

The marjiya, by contrast, is nothing if not a poem of domestic sorrows and concrete blood relations. Not only is its location domestic, but it is, furthermore, a specific domestic scene—the family of Imám Ḥusain. And since the marjiya locates itself unequivocally in the family it also locates itself in the specifics of gender—women form fully half the cast of characters in the marjiya. The laments of the male characters in a marjiya often come from the battlefield; but the women grieve from the seclusion of the tents pitched outside the battlefield of Karbala. And the occasions on which we hear the women lament include such intensely domestic—and thus all the more macabre—occasions as the “wedding” of Qāsim, held on the eve of the final battle—an occasion for which the

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22 Even when the home appears in the ghazal it is significant as a “negative space,” that is, for its inaccessibility for the lover. For example, in Ghālib’s famous she’r: Maiṁ vahāṁ pahūcqā ṭō un-kti gāliyōṁ kā kyā jāvāhb / Yād ṭiṁ jiṁī ḍu’ā’tō ṭarf-e darbān bō ga’tīn (Though at last I reached his [beloved’s] home what could I say to his stream of abuses? / Every prayer I knew I’d used up to slip past the doorkeeper).
groom’s body arrives riding on a bier. An exception to these “indoor laments” are the laments we read in this marjiya by Saudā, for here the women grieve on their enforced march through the desert. True, for once the women are in the open desert and not in an enclosed domestic space, but that is precisely the pathos of the marjiya—that those who should by rights be in seclusion and embosmed by their families, are denied this and made to wander in public view. Thus, the marjiya locates itself in the specificity of gender, family relationships, and domestic settings. The emotions it exploits are often quite unambiguously women’s emotions. And the speech which corresponds to an outpouring of such emotions is pointedly un-Persianized.23 The emotional texture and physical location of Saudā’s marjiya is much closer to the Barahmāsa where the laments also unfold within the walls of a home and in the company of other women. Thus, even though the verses of Bikaṭ Kahānī and the marjiyas of Saudā are conventionally claimed as the literary “property” of two different—and often mutually antagonistic—communities, I would argue that they are rooted in the soil of a very similar aesthetic logic. Is there a coincidence, then, between women’s speech, domestic settings and the use of Hindi in certain genres of Mughal poetry? If so, what is the relation of this literary

23The vernacularized nature of the marjiya, at both the linguistic and thematic levels, has been noted repeatedly by Urdu critics. For example, see C.M. Naim, “Urdu in the Pre-Modern Period: Synthesis or Particularism?” New Quest 6 (February 1978), p. 9. Naim writes, “The marjiya is the one genre of Urdu poetry which, as it developed, managed to maintain its original balance of local and foreign elements. In these elegies the emotions are Indian though the personae are Arabs; the landscape is conventional—sort of vintage ghazal—but the material culture, customs and rituals are Indo-Muslim.” Naim suggests that this is so because the marjiya-writer seeks, above all, to create a tearjerker which will reduce the assembled Shi’a majlis to communal and cathartic weeping: “[M]arjiyas are written to be read before an audience in a majlis, and to make the listeners cry. To succeed in its chief goal a marjiya has to be firmly rooted in the intimate and the local.” Thus, Naim partly anticipates my own argument; where I differ from him is in suggesting that instead of aiming generally for the local setting the marjiya aims quite specifically for a creation of feminine sentiments and losses and that this specifically gendered set of emotions is best expressed in an unschooled vernacular speech, largely because this is what the élite Mughal women (and especially domestic women, as opposed to tavā’ifi) would have spoken. I also differ from Naim in drawing connections between the genre of the marjiya and other “feminine-speech” genres, like Bikaṭ Kahānī by Muḥammad Aḥfāl.
choice to the empirical reality of Mughal culture?

IV

The élite Mughal equation of Hindi with women’s speech was not, I would argue, merely a literary convention. It was, instead a fairly faithful reflection of a social reality which inclined women and men to speak at different registers of a common language—and sometimes entirely different languages altogether. We know very little of what Mughal élite women spoke either with their men or among themselves; but we do know that despite a constant trickle of immigration from Central Asia, Persian was not a mother-tongue for the bulk of Mughal élites; it was acquired, instead, through formal education with an üstād (teacher, mentor). Formal education was largely the privilege of men, since it required the student to attend school outside the home, and élite women were expected to observe parda. It is easy, then, to imagine the gendered quality of élite Mughal speech—with educated men displaying their virtuosity by speaking, and especially writing, Persian—and later an elaborately Persianized Urdu—while women talked in a variety of unstandardized dialects with a minimum of Persian. The “Begamātī Zabān” or “Women’s Jargon” which late nineteenth-century Muslim reformers like Maulānā Ashraf ‘Ali Tāhānvi sought to chasten was overwhelmingly a colloquial speech lacking in flowery Persian or Arabic. What little Persian or Arabic the Begamātī Zabān did have was pronounced—or according to Tāhānvi “mispronounced”—with the Persian “zṣ” changing to “jṣ” and the “khṣ” to “kḥṣ.” It is precisely this change of pronunciation in Persian words that is also evident in those passages of Aftāl’s poem where the nāyika speaks in Hindi. But unlike the begams who spoke the Begamātī Zabān, Aftāl’s nāyika surprises us by breaking out in chaste Persian and, in one instance, even Arabic.

“Begamātī Zabān” is a technical term usually reserved for nineteenth-century women’s Urdu with its unique stock of curse words, diminutives and terms of endearment; however, since the peculiar social conditions which produced a distinct women’s jargon were not unique to the nineteenth century, I would assert that a similar gender-based cleavage also

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existed in the two prior centuries of Mughal culture, with women speaking a medley of unstandardized, and usually unnamed, local dialects with the thinnest veneer of Persian. In our contemporary jargon we might group such dialects within the rubric of “Hindi”—though not the official Hindi of post-Independence India, which carries an increasingly crushing load of unmodified Sanskrit words. In the eighteenth century Saudā called such un-Persianized women’s speech “the Eastern dialect,” thereby hinting that the eastern reaches of the Gangetic plain—being furthest removed from Delhi and Lakhnau, the two centers of Persianate culture—spoke a language less Persianized. For a Mughal intellectual like Saudā, Afgal’s incursion into Hindi might well have connoted “popular” speech, but for him its demotic nature would not have consisted in its orientation towards the rural, non-Persianized, Hindu masses, but, rather, in its vivid evocation of a rustic and unschooled women’s dialect which all Mughal elites heard at home in the women’s quarter. While savoring the rusticity of un-Persianized speech in writing its highly-educated, Persianized, male readers would have been under no illusions regarding whom this literature was intended for. Neither Afgal, nor Rāzi, nor yet Saudā breathed the air of a liberal world which deemed outreach to the masses in their vernacular the burden of the noble intellectual. To imagine this Hindi literature as demotic in its intended audience is to foreclose the possibility of a sophisticated, Persianized male taking delight in reading a rustic and informal speech that he himself never wrote, and may not even have spoken in the public arena with his colleagues, fellow-poets and Sufi masters.

The conception of the vernacular as the voice of “the people” or in the service of “the people” is perhaps best viewed as a trope that captures the social ideals of the founders and members of the modern nation state. Throughout the nineteenth century and continuing up to the present the logic of national idealism seizes upon language—and especially the vernacular as opposed to the classical language—as an essential building block of a shared national identity; so much so, that Benedict Anderson’s description of a nation as a “vernacularly imagined community” seems particularly apt. And one characteristic of “vernacularly imagined communities” is their celebration and accommodation of the vernaculus, the

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native “volk.” “In modern narratives of nationalism,” writes Sumathi Ramaswamy, “the language of a nation assumes importance because it is the tongue of its citizens, the very essence of the people who speak it. Correspondingly, the power of the language appears to derive from the power exercised by the collective entity, ‘the people’ in the nation.” But in discussing the Mughals we are talking of a time before the advent of the nation, and of a time before egalitarian philosophies came to celebrate the “volk” of the nation. The Persianized urban élite of Mughal India did not conceive of themselves in vernacular terms—which is to say that their dominant values were far from being vernacular values; but, of course, this did not translate into an avoidance of the vernacular, or its strict separation from the classical language. Those who adamantly shared a courtly, élite sensibility could nevertheless use the vernacular, and did so to great effect. This means that in approaching Mughal literature we should keep open the possibilities of the infinite combinations and permutations of Persian and the vernacular, while at the same time explaining these combinations in a way that does not presume a vernacular sensibility.

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26By contrast, she writes: “Prior to the nation’s birth, Tamil was valorized not because it ensured communication between its speakers, enabled the schooling of its citizenry, or facilitated the governance of the populace. Instead, it was held in awe for its demonstrated ability to perform wondrous miracles and command the all powerful gods.” In “Language of the People in the World of Gods: Ideologies of Tamil Before The Nation,” Journal of Asian Studies 55.4 (1998), pp. 66–7.

27The anachronistic imposition of our own vernacular ideals to pre-modernity is a distortion which is alive and well in the study of South Asia, especially among politically liberal historians overly-eager to find in pre-modern India glimmers of modern liberal subversions of hierarchic structures. One particularly unfortunate example of such historiography is Sudipto Kaviraj’s attempts at outlining a logic of writing and speaking in pre-modern India. In writing of the rise of vernacular literatures he says: “They arise haltingly, always making reverential genuflexions in the direction of the high tradition and its texts, which they were eventually to undermine … their first and most impressive texts are attempts to stretch the riches of this high culture towards the lower, culturally deprived orders. Their implicit justification would have been that, if religiosity and aesthetics were significant and valuable for all human beings, those without the use of Sanskrit [or Persian?] should not be deprived of these values. As a result these literatures assume a consciously subaltern relation between themselves and the high classical texts,” in “Writing, Speaking, Being: Language and the Historical Formation of Identities in India,” in Nationalstat und Sprachkonflikte in Süd und
To fail to do this is to bury this literature and its users within the graveyard of our own ideals.

Let us emerge from this forest of details to reconsider the issue of literary identities in Mughal India. What I have just presented suggests, I hope, the barest outlines of a logic of language use—enough of an outline to allow me to propose that for elite Mughal intellectuals Hindi usage was, among other things, a matter of aesthetic considerations. The aesthetics of Hindi usage was often linked to its perceived rusticity, which, in turn connoted an unschooled, feminine voice. It was thus that both the rustic femininity of Hindi and the urbane masculinity of Persian were thrown into sharper relief when contained in the voice of the grieving nāyika of Bikaṭ Kuhānī. Thus the resulting narrative could appeal more fully to the sensibilities of an elite Persianized reader like Mukhlīṣ who on the one hand deemed Persian the language of refinement, and so strove in his public life to claim its profile and status, but who simultaneously succumbed to the rhythm of eastern dialects, as does the heart upon hearing a “melody brimming with pain.”

V

So far I have addressed explanations which view Persianate Hindi literature as populist in inspiration and use. The other half of such explanations is the assertion that the masses being addressed by such Hindi literature were not only un-Persianized, but also non-Muslim, so that this demotic literature was simultaneously conversionary in its effects. It will again be useful to examine a pre-modern reaction to Bikaṭ Kuhānī to see if for a Mughal reader “conversion” meant precisely the same thing as for Eaton and 'Abdu 'l-Haq in their discussions of Hindi Sufi literature.

The reaction to Afgāl is by the Persian poet Vāleh Dāghistānī (d. 1756), who in the 1730’s compiled a biographical sketch of Indian poets writing in Persian. In the section on Afgāl we see Vāleh grappling with the anomaly of a Persian-knowing elite Mughal poet choosing to write in Hindi. Vāleh explained Afgāl’s motivation by writing, we would say con-

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structured, a biography which portrays Afzal as a convert to Vaisnavism. Vâleh mentions that although a maulavi, in his old age Afzal fell madly in love with a young Hindu woman from the pilgrimage city of Mathura. So consumed was he by her that giving up both prayers and fasting he hung about her alley in hopes of catching glimpses of her. Spurned repeatedly by her, and ridiculed by the children in the neighborhood, he eventually shaved off his white maulavi’s beard, apprenticed himself to the Hindu priest of a local temple, and got busy learning the Indian sciences. Being intelligent he made marvelous progress in Hindi, and was even named the successor of the temple-priest. It was in his new capacity as the converted Brahmin priest that he finally managed to waylay the Hindu woman one day when she came to offer pujâ at the temple. When she saw the immense transformation in the ex-maulavi she was instantly ashamed of all she had put him through and immediately chose to convert to Islam and become his wife. Vâleh dates Afzal’s Hindi verses to the period of his obsession with the Hindu woman.

The question, of course, is how are we to navigate our way through this biography. Clearly, to read it as a factual account of Afzal’s life would be naïve; equally naïve, however, would be to dismiss it as merely a fanciful tale, for while it may tell us nothing of the actual circumstances of Afzal’s life it speaks quite eloquently of a Mughal intellectual’s grasp of the issue of writing in Hindi, and its relation to the issue of conversion. The paradigm of conversion which Vâleh followed in constructing his biography of Afzal is a trope in Sufi hagiographies and is encountered most conspicuously in Faridu ’d-Din ’Attâr’s thirteenth-century Persian masterpiece, the Manţîqu ’t-Tayr (conference of the birds).’ Attâr relates the story of a certain Shaikh Sanân who falls in love with a Christian woman, and in blind obedience to her becomes a swineherd, thereby forfeiting his status as a Muslim Shaikh. He plunges further into kufr (disbelief) by donning the cap and belt of the Christians. Eventually, however, he returns to the Muslim community.

In the inversionary logic of Sufi paradigms the lover’s path to true knowledge and union with the beloved lies through immersion in the darkness of disbelief and the resultant public censure, or malâmât. It is

through his patient endurance of this censure that the true lover proves his resolve. Thus, it is no accident that in the biography Vâleh shows Afgâl bursting out in couplets which praise infamy and destruction as a blessing on the suffering lover. From the Sufi point of view the courting of public censure as a result of abandoning Islam makes yet another significant point: it establishes a tension between conventional religious observances and the intuitive grasp of Truth which a Sufi attains after enduring hardships, and which often leads him to act in outlandish ways. Of course, for a Sufi the unveiling of Truth through union with the beloved takes precedence over conformity to the rules of correct religious behavior; it is this hierarchy of values that the Sufi-lover establishes through becoming an outcast to the Muslim community. But the foray into disbelief is only an intermediate step, for—partly in response to orthodox critiques—Sufis also recognized that the truly successful mystic should ultimately be capable of containing himself to the point of maintaining the external decorum required of all social beings. Thus, while the first flash of esoteric knowledge may indeed cause the Sufi to lose his wits, ultimately the ecstasy has to be contained. It is thus that Shaikh Sanân returns to the Muslim community.

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

Like Eaton, Vâleh also explained the choice of Hindi by an élite, Persian-knowing poet in terms of an interface between Hindus and Muslims—but with one twist. In Vâleh’s explanation the movement is reversed—it is not the Muslim poet who addresses the potential convert in his simple idiom; instead, the Muslim poet becomes a Hindu to speak in the Hindu’s idiom. May we, then, feel free to say that Vâleh talks of a conversion? Only, I believe, if we take care to note the difference between what he and we mean by “conversion.” By conversion Vâleh seems to have meant a good deal more than merely the shifting of allegiances from this community of believers to that. Conversion may indeed mean that, but for Vâleh the more interesting conversion was the initiation of the poet, and presumably also the reader, into the transformative possibilities of the path of love. Hindi and immersion in Hinduism were merely the external signs of such a “conversion.” In contrast to modern interpreters like Eaton or ‘Abdu’l-Haq Vâleh did not understand Afzal’s choice of Hindi exclusively within the binary framework of a Hindu-Muslim interaction. The conversion which Vâleh sketches presumes a rather different burden of commitment, and is oriented towards a very different debate than what we in the late twentieth century mean when we talk of “conversion.” For one, Vâleh’s conversion was not an apocalyptic event leading to an estrangement from an original confessional community; it was, instead, a liminal moment in the unfolding of a ritualized process of self-integration. As such it lacked the finality which for us is a defining characteristic of “religious conversion.” Secondly, in terms of its intellectual grounding Afzal’s conversion echoed an age-old debate within the Islamic tradition—the debate, that is, between a strictly legalist, literalist position and a Sufi mystical position on the persistent tension between public decorum and religious ecstasy. This debate had been rehearsed before and elsewhere in the Islamic world—such as by ‘Attar writing in thirteenth-century Iran of Shaikh Sanan’s conversion to Christianity and pig-farming. Thus, the rhetorical effect of Vâleh’s construction of Afzal’s persona as a Sufi heretic (kafir) was to root Bika’at Kahani within a venerable debate internal to the Muslim community. To be sure this ongoing Islamic debate in both its South Asian and Middle Eastern variants cast a sidelong glance at non-Muslims. In ‘Attar’s case the glance rests on Christians; in the bulk of Persian ghazal poetry it is the wine-drinking
Zoroastrians dwelling at the fringes of the city who express the liminal identity of the reprobate lover; and in Vāleh’s case the bearer of the liminal identity is the Hindu Vaisnava priest. Certainly all of these accounts tell us something about the relation between Muslims and the various non-Muslims, but they do infinitely more than just this. They also, and I would say primarily, voice tensions within the Muslim community. The thrust of such accounts is not to articulate a dialogue with or against Hindus or Christians, but, rather, to illumine yet another facet of a debate central to the self-understanding of medieval Muslims vis-à-vis Sufism.

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

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

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