

**Between qasbas and cities**  
**Language shifts and literary continuities in north India**  
**in the long eighteenth century<sup>1</sup>**

Francesca Orsini (SOAS, University of London)

Accepted for publication in *Comparative Studies of Asia, Africa and the Middle East* on 25 April 2018

**1. Introduction**

*Badshah jurm-e ma ra dar guzar  
gunahgar-im wa tu afrazgar  
ultha bhanupratap tivari krt doha:  
chakravarti dasaratha ke karahu mora nistara  
haum patitana ko patita maim  
prabhu hau patita udhara<sup>2</sup>*

“Emperor, forgive my offense  
I am guilty while you exalt.”

Translation by Bhanupratap Tiwari, couplet:

“Son of emperor Dasharatha, save me  
I am a sinner among sinners  
yet you, Lord, are a sinners’ saviour”

Born in 1850 and raised first by his grandfather while his father worked away in a colonial office, Bhanupratap Tiwari became the magistrate’s head clerk in

1



This article is an output of the Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies project which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. No. 670876.

I would like to thank Purnima Dhawan and the other, anonymous reviewer at CSSAAME for their careful and constructive suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> *Pandit bhanupratap tivari charanadi nivasi ka sanchhep jivancharit va satsang vilas*, Ms Hindi 11035, UP State Archive, Manuscript Library, Allahabad, 3.

the Cantonment of Chunar, south of Banaras. His short Hindi manuscript autobiography, written in 1890, is a catalogue of what he studied and read and with whom and gives us a sense of how multilingualism worked on the ground. First, between the age of three-and-a-half and five his grandfather made him learn by heart a large number of devotional couplets. Then, after his tonsure ceremony and the ritual worship of studying (*path puja*) at age five, his grandfather taught him Hindi and Sanskrit while a local notable read with him the modern prose version of Krishna's life written at Fort William College by Lallujilal, the *Premasagar* (see below), as well as the Avadhi and Brajbhasha works by the late-sixteenth century poet Tulsidas. When Bhanupratap turned eight, his father decided it was time for him to learn Persian at Chunar Mission School. After that, his father taught him privately for a year: "He taught me the *Gulistan* and *Bostan* himself and made me learn them by heart. Meanwhile, I attended the *satsang* [devotional-poetic gathering] of Babu Pandit Ramayani and Babu Balbhadra Singh Sahab. In 1863, when my wedding took place, my father sent me to Maulvi Hingan Khan of Mirzapur to study [Jami's *Yusuf*] *zulaikha*, *Bahar danish*, *Insha khalifa* and *Madhoran*."<sup>3</sup> At age fifteen Bhanupratap and his father were keen that he should learn English "but, bearing in mind my situation and the difficulty of English," this seemed an impossible goal until a local missionary helped him enrol in a local English school—"it was not a school, it was a fairyland (*paristan*)!"<sup>4</sup> There Bhanupratap spoke English all the time and learnt by heart *Carpenter's Scholar's Spelling Assistant*, but he had to leave the school after his father fell ill in 1868. After he found employment in a government office, Bhanupratap continued to read and write and attend devotional poetic sessions—his family were followers of the Daryapanth, part of the broader devotional Sant tradition. Endowed with a keen sense of authorship, in his autobiography Bhanupratap occasionally translated Persian verses into Brajbhasha verse in the margin, as we see above. The Allahabad archive also holds manuscripts of the couplets taught by his grandfather and his Hindi translation of Sa'di's *Gulistan*, and Bhanupratap tells us that he also authored a history of Chunar, probably in Urdu.

It may seem odd to begin an essay on the eighteenth century with the autobiography of an ordinarily multilingual man in colonial service from the late nineteenth, but Bhanuprat's short manuscript gives us a sense of how much—or how little—education, language skills, and literary tastes had

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 6.

changed after a century of East Company rule in the region, the impact of English and of print technologies, and the split between Hindi and Urdu that rocked north India in the 1870s and 1880s. While we notice some notable shifts—modern Hindi, English, and the colonial office—there are also many continuities: Brajbhasha and Avadhi devotional poetry and poetic circles, Persian. Bhanupratap’s education was basically geared towards acquiring and stacking up language skills, but language learning involved acquiring literary tastes. Literary taste began by acquiring a sense of metre by memorising a large number of verses in Hindi and Persian. Education was piecemeal and very little of it happened in schools. For all his keenness to learn English, Bhanupratap began with early modern Hindi (Brajbhasha and Avadhi), continued with modern Hindi (the *Premasagar*) and then, formally, with Persian. Bhanupratap acquired most of his poetic tastes through formal study, though Urdu poetry seems to have come as a by-product of learning Persian and he never mentions studying it with a master. All these tastes involved practices of reading, recitation and singing that he shared with different people, different “communities of taste,” which only partly overlapped.<sup>5</sup> With some Bhanupratap shared devotional singing, recitation and discourse (*satsang*), with others Persian poetry.<sup>6</sup> Though he occasionally set up equivalences and translated between different poetic idioms, as we saw, he largely practised them separately. It’s unclear whether Bhanupratap developed a taste for English literature or for literature in modern Hindi: though he was an exact contemporary of the “father of modern Hindi” Bhartendu Harishchandra in nearby Banaras, Bhanupratap never mentions reading him or reading newspapers—nor does he mention the Great Revolt of 1857 for that matter.

As Bhanupratap’s autobiography shows, multilingualism was structural to his society, particularly in terms of education and of poetic and religious cultivation and practice. But it was not uniformly spread, which means that one must avoid generalisations and pay attention to particular configurations. Diglossia—the hierarchy between a formally learnt High language and a colloquial “low” language—was definitely present but did not exhaust literary tastes and practices. Bhanupratap valued Persian and

---

<sup>5</sup> I take the term “community of taste” from Ramya Sreenivasan, who suggested it to me to foreground the social dimension of taste and literary *habitus*.

<sup>6</sup> See also Jagannath Prasad “Ratnakar” and Ayodhyasingh Upadhyay “Hariaudh” in Ritter “Networks, patrons, and genres.”

English, yet that did not make Hindi a “dominated” or subjugated language, nor were the languages all struggling for the same stake in a single literary field. Nor do formal institutions like the school or the literary canon tell the whole story, and we need to be wary of models that rely only on them to account for the dynamics and power relations in literary culture—whether it’s the court in the early modern period or the colonial education system in this period. None can alone claim to tell the whole story.

The eighteenth century in North India has long been seen as a period of great political turbulence and flux, and the time when Urdu literary culture came into its own, particularly in the cities of Delhi and Lucknow. But while historiography has come to a more gradual view of the colonial takeover and emphasises the dynamic role played by groups and individuals who took advantage of the political vacuum in competition and collaboration with the increasingly powerful East India Company (EIC), literary historiography still starkly narrates the turn from pre-colonial to colonial culture as a complete epistemic shift. This is exemplified by the prevailing model of “Western impact and Indian response” and by the contrast between two cities—“pre-colonial” Lucknow under the rule of the Nawabs of Awadh, and Calcutta as the cradle of “colonial modernity.” The later colonization of north India makes the eighteenth century appear to last longer there, a “delay” that Sisir Kumar Das called “meta-phany.”<sup>7</sup> In this paradigm, new ideas and literary models flowed upcountry from Calcutta and modern literature in Hindi (and to a lesser extent in Urdu) appears engaged in a game of “catching up” with Bengali under the overarching shadow of Englishness.

This essay takes a different approach. It asks what happens when we take a *multilingual* and *located* perspective and try to connect the different trajectories, stories and tastes, the shifts but also the continuities apparent in the material that *together* make up the long eighteenth century in North India? A multilingual perspective means, Bhanupratap shows, taking a circumstantial and historicised approach to multilingualism that rejects the opposite poles of claiming that mixing languages and tastes was the cultural norm (“composite culture”) and surprise at any instance of mixing of Perso-Urdu and Hindi demotic or Sanskritic traditions. It entails recognizing the importance of the high languages of employment opportunity and cultural distinction (Persian and, increasingly, English), but also of the other

---

<sup>7</sup> Das, *A history of Indian literature*, Vol. 2.

languages and tastes that combined to form the particular make-up of literate and illiterate subjects. A located perspective involves using space as a lens in the sense suggested by the late geographer Doreen Massey, as a “sphere of coexisting heterogeneity,” in which “different trajectories coexist.”<sup>8</sup> It entails acknowledging but also resisting the identification of a place with a single language or language community (Lucknow=Urdu; Banaras=Sanskrit and Hindi; Calcutta=English and Bengali) and actively looking for the stories and subjects that such identifications obscure.

So if for most people Awadh culture now means the culture of Nawabi Lucknow with its Urdu poetry and sophisticated repartee, courtesans, music, and Shi’a devotion and festivals, this essay asks: what other stories and languages does this prominence of Nawabi culture and the naturalisation of Urdu obscure? Why only one story?<sup>9</sup> Taking a located and multilingual perspective also means, and this is the broader argument of this essay, thinking of even drastic political and epistemic changes like that of colonialism in terms of reshuffles and reconfigurations rather than linear shifts.

This essay articulates this multilingual and located perspective by focusing on, and connecting, five stories: the “arrival” of Urdu (Rekhta) poetry in Awadh and the continued cultivation of Brajbhasha; the increased presence of Persian in Banaras; the eastward axial shift in the circulation of North Indian literati to and from Bengal; the continuities as well as shifts in the textual production and printing activities of Fort William College and the coevalness of Lucknow and Calcutta; and the parallel urban cultures of Lucknow and Banaras.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. The view from Awadh

---

<sup>8</sup> Massey, *For Space*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> I use Awadh as a geographical category even though I take it more in the sense of *Purab*, the Eastern region (as viewed from the Mughal centre of Agra and Delhi), in other words as incorporating also the region of Banaras, the equivalent of today’s Eastern UP.

<sup>10</sup> Persian writers called “Hindi” the vernacular (and occasionally Sanskrit), while others in North India called it simply “language,” *bhakha*. We call Brajbhasha the *koiné* of the *bhakha* of the area of Braj South of Delhi that became a literary and courtly vernacular all over North India and beyond. *Rekhta* (lit. poured, mixed) was the early name for another vernacular literary *koiné* following Persian poetic models that was later called Urdu.

Awadh, the Persian name for the city of Ayodhya and, by extension, for the region around it, much predated the eighteenth century Nawab state. Though located at the centre of North India and a region of early Islamic conquest in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the region of Awadh, crossed by great rivers (Ganges, Yamuna) and long-distance trade routes, had for centuries many small towns (*qasbas*) but no imperial capital. As a result, it is more difficult to identify its culture with that of the imperial court. *Qasbas* were garrisons and trade marts along routes that led from Bengal to Delhi and all the way to Afghanistan, or to Agra and south towards Gujarat, but also administrative centres where Muslim elites and, increasingly, Hindu petty service groups cultivated Persian as the language of elite culture and employment, while religious and non-religious songs and stories were told by all in the local vernacular, simply termed *hindavi* (Indian) in Persian sources, and *bhakha* (*bhasha*, i.e. “language”) in non-Persian ones.

The *qasbas* stood isolated in a countryside largely controlled by armed chieftains in mud forts—Hindu, Afghan, and Turkic—who provided military labour to a succession of rulers until the great Rebellion of 1857. Sufis who had been given land grants in order to populate, develop, and control the territory often found themselves at the receiving end of their raids. Power in Awadh remained contested until the Nawabs.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike the Rajputs of Rajasthan, the Rajputs of Awadh were not co-opted into the Mughal empire as military-administrative officials. And as far as I have been able to ascertain, they did *not* cultivate Persian but kept bards-cum-genealogists and occasional performers (story-tellers and singers). As part of the general increase of wealth in the Mughal seventeenth century, they set up small local courts, like Arwar near Pratapgarh, Amethi, Asothar, or Dhaundhiya Khera—we could call them “mud brick courts”—and began to cultivate and employ poets of courtly Hindi (Brajbhasha).<sup>12</sup> Sufis in the *qasbas* had already been composing and listening to Hindavi tales and songs; now some *qasba* elites also became interested in Brajbhasha courtly poetry and

---

<sup>11</sup> For a recent investigation, see Rahman, *Locale, everyday Islam*.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Himmat Singh “Mahipati” (r. 1709-1731) and his son Gurudatt Singh “Bhupati” of Amethi (their *nome de plume* means “king”), or Bhagvantray Khici of Dhaundiya Khera (d. 1735). Bhagvantray patronised the poet Sukhdev Misra, who may have returned from Delhi, as well as Kalidas Trivedi (*Vadhuvinoda*, 1692), his son Udaynath Tivari (*Rasachandrodaya*, 1747), and grandson Dulah (*Kavikulakanthabharana*); R. Sharma, *Ritikalini*. The most famous Brajbhasha poet-scholar of Awadh, Bhikharidas, lived all his life in the patronage of Hindupati Singh, brother of Prithvipathi of Arwar, near Pratapgarh (a seat established only in the 1680s); see below.

poetics and took pride in their connoisseurship of *both* Persian and Brajbhasha poetry and poetics, and in the case of some of the Bilgramis of connoisseurship in *three* languages—Persian, Arabic, and Brajbhasha.<sup>13</sup> For Bilgram Indo-Persian intellectuals, cultivating Brajbhasha poetry became a tradition and a mark of distinction among Persophone literati.

After the Iranian commander Burhan ul-Mulk Sa'dat Khan became the governor (*Naib/Nawab*) of Awadh and began to concentrate power onto himself in the 1720s, he clashed with both the rural Rajas and the *qasba* elites in receipt of hereditary grants that he sought to curtail.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the Nawab's army and administration provided jobs and new avenues of socio-economic mobility, and many *qasba* literati moved to Lucknow.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. Looking for Rekhta in rural and qasba Awadh

*lala churi tere ali lagi nipata malina*  
*hariyari kari deumgi haum to hukuma adhina*<sup>16</sup>  
 Your red bangle is so faded, my friend  
 Command me and I'll give you a green one.  
 Bhikhari das, The bangle-seller friend

*ladali bahu ka gavau naumasa*  
*nabi ali ka karama hua hai puji mana ki asa*<sup>17</sup>  
 Sing the bride's nine month song  
 Thanks to the Prophet and Ali  
 my hope has been fulfilled.  
 "Raslin"

Troubled by anxieties of origins (why is there no Urdu poetry in North India before 1700?), Urdu literary histories have rehearsed narratives of eastward migration of poets from Delhi ravaged by invasions to the safer and opulent haven of Awadh, while also claiming that Urdu was "already there" and that

<sup>13</sup> For the Bilgramis' cultivation of Brajbhasha, see Zaidi, *Bilgram ke musalman hindi kavi*. For Azad Bilgrami's multicultural poetics that included Arabic, Persian, and Brajbhasha, see S. Sharma, "Translating Gender," and Ernst, "Indian Lovers in Arabic and Persian Guise."

<sup>14</sup> See Alam, *Crisis of Empire*. Bhagvantray Khici of Dhaundiya Khera died in 1735 fighting Nawab Sa'adat Khan of Awadh; McGregor, *Hindi literature*, 196.

<sup>15</sup> See many entries in Hindi, *Safina*.

<sup>16</sup> *Rasasaramsha*, in Misra, *Bhikharidas*, Volume 1, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Pandey, *Raslin*, 335.

people in Lucknow were correct and legitimate speakers of the language, or “*ahl-e zaban*.” The Awadh capitals—first the new city of Faizabad and then the old town of Lucknow, which was entirely rebuilt, partly by European architects—attracted service groups, performers, poets, and craftsmen, creating a vibrant and thriving urban culture.<sup>18</sup> Poets moving to Faizabad and Lucknow included the first generation of Urdu/Rekhta poets from Delhi (Mir, Sauda, Mir Hasan, Jurr’at, etc.) as well as poets and reciters from Iran.<sup>19</sup>

But what about the bilingual Persian-Brajbhasha poets in the Awadh *qasbas* and Brajbhasha poets in the mud-brick forts? Did they take to the new poetry in Rekhta/Urdu? Did they switch to it and drop the older Hindavi and Brajbhasha tastes? In broader terms, do we read the rise of Urdu poetry as a phenomenon of *vernacularisation*—a switch from the older cosmopolitan language of Persian—or do we see it as a shift and a readjustment within a *continuing* multilingual literary culture? A single-language approach tends to see change in terms of substitution, whereas a multilingual approach tends to see new fashions as re-arranging rather than superseding older tastes.

Heidi Pauwels has recently documented, thanks to some wonderful detective work, how by the 1740s the Brajbhasha poet-prince Savant Singh “Nagaridas” of Kishangarh, who was directly related to the Mughal imperial family and had a mansion in Delhi, enthusiastically “responded” to the new Rekhta poetry of Vali which had recently reached Delhi from the Deccan in the 1720s and taken its poetic circles by storm. By comparison, Brajbhasha and Persian poets in Awadh took longer to discover Rekhta poetry.<sup>20</sup>

Let us take for example Bhikharidas, court poet in the small rural fort of Aror/Arwar near Pratapgarh and the most famous scholar of Brajbhasha

---

<sup>18</sup> Talwar Oldenburg notes that Lucknow was the fourth city in India after the colonial capitals, and “became the locus for the largest complex of luxury industries in northern India”; *Making of Colonial Lucknow*, 12. According to Cole, “Asafu’-d-Dawlah, Hasan Riza Khan, and Tikait Ray... initiated construction projects on an almost pharaonic scale as a means of absorbing the influx of laborers thrown off the land and of avoiding urban food riots. In 1785 several large works began, including a market, Tikaitganj; a huge gate, the Rumi Darvazah; and the Great Imambarah. [...] Most of Lucknow’s Shi’i grandees... built imambarahs in this period, as did many Sunnis and Hindus”; *Roots of North Indian Shi’ism*, 84, 96.

<sup>19</sup> See Cole, *Roots*, 97; also Knapczyk, “Crafting the Cosmopolitan Elegy.” For a list of Urdu poets in Lucknow, see Sharar, *The Last Phase*, and Trivedi, *Making of the Awadh Culture*. For Persian poets in Lucknow, see Pellò, *Tutiyan-i Hind*.

<sup>20</sup> The palace library in Kishangarh has a copy of Vali’s *divan*; Savant Singh’s anthology *Padamuktavali* includes a few of Vali’s *ghazals*, and he began to write Vali-like poems and Rekhta *dhrupad* and *khyal* songs; Pauwels, “Literary Moments” and *Cultural Exchange in Eighteenth-Century India*.



poetics of the period, and “Raslin” (1699-1750), a Sayyid military man who died fighting the Afghans in the service of the second Nawab of Awadh, Safdar Jang, and the most famous *qasba* Persian-and-Brajbhasha poet.<sup>21</sup> Their works date from the 1730s and 1740s and speak directly to one another.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, Bhikharidas is noted for his inclusive and judicious “praise of poets” that mentions a whole line of Muslim Brajbhasha poets, Raslin included, and for acknowledging Persian as part of the linguistic make-up of Brajbhasha poetry.<sup>23</sup> Yet in his own Brajbhasha works he did not use a Persianate register, nor, as far as I can see, did the other Brajbhasha poets active at rural Awadh courts like Kalidas Trivedi, Udaynath Tiwari, or Dulah.<sup>24</sup> They all included demotic subjects in their courtly poetry—for example, Bhikharidas listed lower caste women (the bangle-seller, the midwife, the barber’s wife, the carpenter’s wife, the dyer’s wife, the washerwoman) among the heroine’s friends—or inserted short narratives to frame verses illustrating points of poetics.<sup>25</sup> They also wrote many compositions in folk forms like seasonal songs (see epigraph), opening to popular registers and genres to a greater degree than earlier Brajbhasha

---

<sup>21</sup> Ghulam Nabi “Raslin” belonged to the famous Husaini Wasti [Wasiti] family of Sayyids of Bilgram and studied with the doyen of Bilgram teachers, Mir Tufail Muhammad; he seems to have travelled and/or lived for a time in Delhi and Allahabad, and according to Azad Bilgrami, “He went to Bengal in search of employment (*naukri*), and after he came back [unsuccessful?] he joined the retinue of Nawab Safdar Jang, and when the Nawab took the army for the second time against the Afghans and the Afghans took refuge at the feet of the Kuh Madariya [in the Sivaliks range], Mir Ghulam Nabi died during the battle of a cannon wound—what a pity”; “Azad” Bilgrami, *Sarw-i Azad*, 213; also 312-4 and 371-94. Azad does not say who Raslin studied Brajbhasha poetry and poetics with, though he tells us that he had 500 Brajbhasha books in his library—commentaries as well as poetry collections and poetics manuals—some with his own Brajbhasha marginalia; Zaidi, *Bilgram* (92-9) contains the most informed account of his life, library, and works.

<sup>22</sup> Raslin’s short work describing the beauty of the woman’s body, *Anga-darpana*, dates from 1737; his longer treatise on aesthetics and varieties of heroines, *Rasaprabodha* (1742), is very similar to Bhikharidas’s *Rasa-saramsha* (1734) and is exactly contemporary to Bhikharidas’s treatise on metre *Chhandarnava* (1742); Bhikharidas’s work describing the woman’s body (*Shringara-nirnaya*) dates from 1750, while his most celebrated work, *Kavya-nirnaya* (1746, mostly on figures of speech), expressly mentions Raslin among the best Brajbhasha poets; Chaturvedi, *Kavyanirnaya*, 7.

<sup>23</sup> See Busch, *Poetry of Kings*, 120.

<sup>24</sup> For extracts, see R. Sharma, *Ritikalini* and *Udaynath kavindra granthavali*. These themes were already present, though less prominently, in earlier poets like Keshavdas and Rahim; I thank the anonymous reviewer for this point.

<sup>25</sup> See e.g. the skit of Lalita entertaining Krishna while he waits for Radha to arrive that frames the short “heroines’ description” in Kalidas Trivedi’s *Varavadhuvinoda* (R. Sharma, *Ritikalini*, 30), or the little story of the servant and his miserly master that Bhikharidas tells to exemplify the *rasa* of comedy, Chaturvedi, *Kavyanirnaya*, ch. 4, 85-6.

courtly poets.<sup>26</sup> Yet none of them played with the Persianate register or attempted Rekhta poems. Was it because they and their non-Persianate rural Rajput patrons were too far from Delhi circles?

In the case of Raslin, in the words of a Hindi critic his works on poetics are written in “very pure Brajbhasha *though he was a Muslim*. There are no Persian words in them. There is no difference between his language and that of a Brahmin poet.”<sup>27</sup> Yet we do find a few traces of Rekhta in his occasional poems, which begin with several ones in praise of the Prophet, of ‘Ali and his family, and of various Chishti Sufis.<sup>28</sup> Though these poems do not follow Urdu metres, they do approximate the Urdu ghazal rhyme scheme of *radif* and *kafiya* (underlined and italicised below), a feature that became common with other late Brajbhasha poets, too.<sup>29</sup> See this description of the rainy season:

*samchi bata meri rasalina e na manati hain,*  
*ulata ke mohi samujhaya rahi **bhora tem***  
*dhura jala bhare pon bijuri ko sanga dhare,*  
*avata nahim lai gagana ghana **ghora tem***  
*avadhi ke bite hum na chhamri yaha deha yatem,*  
*gahi ke marora mere anana **kathora tem***  
*mano kara jora pancho tatva ek thora hvai,*  
*asa lena apne kon dhaye chahun **ora tem**.*<sup>30</sup>

My true words, Raslin, she does not trust,<sup>31</sup>  
 instead she’s been scolding me since dawn.

Heavy with dust and rain, the wind brings lightning  
 yet no rain comes, only rumbling clouds.

The appointed time has passed, yet I have not left my body

<sup>26</sup> Again, courtly Brajbhasha poets and painters had already “elevated” popular genres like *barahmasas*, but the language here is more demotic, see Raslin’s epigraph.

<sup>27</sup> Misra, *Mishra-bandhu-vinod*, 392, emphasis added. See also Busch, “Riti and Register.”

<sup>28</sup> Pandey, *Raslin*, 301-8; he also uses ‘Ali as exemplifying the “heroic mood” in impeccable Brajbhasha; see *Rasaprabodha*, *ibid.*, 202.

<sup>29</sup> The repeated word or words at the end of *ghazal* verses are called *radif*, while the varying rhyming word before them is called *kafiya*. We occasionally already find this rhyme scheme in the Brajbhasha poems (*kabittas*) by Tulsidas in early seventeenth-century Banaras, which suggests that imitation of the *ghazal* may not be the only origin of this phenomenon; but it certainly intensified in this period, see e.g. the poet Thakur ca. 1800 in Bangha, *Scorpion*, 32; I thank Imre Bangha for this point.

<sup>30</sup> *Phutkal kabitt* (loose poems) 73, Pandey, *Raslin*, 328.

<sup>31</sup> Or, “my words full of *rasa*.”

but twist my face with harshness.  
As if the five elements are come to take my life  
and stand ready all around me with folded hands.

And at the end his selection of Raslin’s Brajbhasha verses, Azad Bilgrami specifically quotes two “descriptions of the heroine *in the Rekhta language and the ruba’i metre*” (a Persianate quatrain with AABA rhyme, emphasis added). The first reads:

1. *sukiya/svakiya* [the heroine as wife]

*az bas ke haya-dost hai vo maya-e naz  
is tarah son hai is ke sukhan ka andaz  
khame ki zaban son jyon nikalte hain huruf  
par kan talak nahin pahunchti avaz.*<sup>32</sup>

She’s so chaste, that alluring one,  
This is how she speaks:  
Letters spring from the pen of her tongue,  
Yet no sound reaches one’s ears.

Here we find the kind of experimental accommodations that Heidi Pauwels found in Nagaridas: the grammar is largely Khari Boli, i.e. not Brajbhasha, with a few Persian compound forms and *izafat* linked constructions (*haya-dost, maya-e naz*); the vocabulary is much more Persianised than that of Raslin’s Brajbhasha poems; and the Persianate vocabulary is matched to the emotional and poetic language of Brajbhasha “catalogues of heroines” (*nayika bhed*)—here, the overly timid wife—rather than with the Persianised lover and beloved.

Two Rekhta poems and a rhyming scheme are not a lot. Raslin, who was also trained and wrote poetry in Persian, seems to have solidly remained a Persian *and* Brajbhasha poet and have consciously kept the two poetic idioms separate, which is one of the possible choices for bi/multilingual poets. After all, he could use Brajbhasha to express Islamic devotion perfectly well (see epigraph). Moreover, probably Raslin died too early to be part of the expansion of Rekhta poetry beyond Delhi.

---

<sup>32</sup> Azad, *Sarw-i azad*, 391.

What we begin to see, then, is a bifurcation between Persian and Brajbhasha (and Hindavi) “communities of taste” in rural and *qasba* Awadh, and Perso-Urdu literary culture in Lucknow. But did poets and patrons in Lucknow under the Nawabs continue to cultivate Brajbhasha poetry?

### 3. Looking for Brajbhasha in Lucknow

Apart from the finance ministers Tikait Rai and Balkrishna Rai, Lucknow elites do not seem to have patronised Brajbhasha poetry, and I could find only the names of five poets and only a handful verses.<sup>33</sup> By comparison, Hindi texts on poetics were commissioned in imperial Delhi at least up to 1750, and historical surveys list four times as many Brajbhasha poets in Banaras at a slightly later period.<sup>34</sup> Partly, this is a problem of archives and sources. Even though the first Hindi historical surveys (*Shivsimh saroj* in 1878, *Mishra-bandhu-vinod* in 1909) are heavily biased towards the Awadh region, and late-nineteenth century Banaras Hindi publishers printed many Brajbhasha works, what they mention without substantial quotes is now largely irretrievable.<sup>35</sup>

Does this mean that Brajbhasha was absent from Lucknow, displaced by Rekhta? Yes... but not quite. Rather than the sophisticated courtly poetry of Bhikharidas and Raslin, it was other genres that kept Brajbhasha current in Lucknow: songs, particularly *khyal* and seasonal songs, and funnier, more

---

<sup>33</sup> “Sagar, *unchevale* Vajpeyi” (1786-1823), patronised by Tikait Rai, wrote a *Bama-manoranjan* (Women’s entertainment); Beni from Rai Bareilli district dedicated a *Tikaitray-prakasha* (1792) to Tikait Rai and a *Rasa-vilasa* to one Lachmandas—both titles suggest poetic manuals (*Mishra-bandhu-vinod*, 491, 535). Beni “Pravin,” author of a poetics manual much praised by the Misra brothers, was patronized by Navalkrishna “Lalanji,” son of Nawab Ghazi ud-Din Haider’s Kayastha diwan Raja Dayakrishna and brother of the famous Maharaja Balkrishna; the latter patronised one Jivannath Bhatt from Nawabganj in Unnao district (b. 1746) who composed a *Vasant-paccisi* (*ibid.*, 518-9, 471). Finally, Lalakdas, the poet who was the butt of Beni’s satire below, composed a story of Rama before his marriage; Misra, *Mishra-bandhu-vinod*, 533. Tikait Rai also patronised Persian, and probably Rekhta, poets; Hindi, *Safina*, 103-5.

<sup>34</sup> For Brajbhasha literary production patronised by emperor Muhammad Shah (r. 1719-1748) and his court, particularly related to music and *khyal* songs, see Pauwels, *Cultural Exchange*, 38-42.

<sup>35</sup> There is also a problem of nomenclature: does Hindi poetry in Persian sources of this period refer to Rekhta (which is a word that they use) or Brajbhasha? E.g. When Bhagwan Das Hindi writes about his own father, it’s clear he means Brajbhasha: “he was always immersed in thinking about the Lord of servants (*rabb al-‘ibad*) and wrote many Indian (*hindi*) poems in praise of the Creator *in the language of Braj*” (Hindi, *Safina*, 241, tr. Pellò, *Tutiyan*, 18). But when he says that Ja’far ‘Ali Hasrat was “inclined from the beginning towards Hindi poetry” and “several became his disciples for metrical verses in Hindi,” does he mean Rekhta or Brajbhasha? Hindi, *Safina*, 62.

popular poems like Beni's "pimp poems" or *bhamrauve*. These songs largely reproduced the typology of heroines and situations of Brajbhasha poetics, so even though Brajbhasha courtly poetry was not patronised and valorised per se, its aesthetics and poetic idiom continued to be current and understood. Only, now Brajbhasha existed within the multilingual repertoire of song-poems, all part of the same performance context, that included Persian and Rekhta *ghazals* and Punjabi *tappas*.<sup>36</sup>

What Beni is famous for is *bhamrauve*, a genre which seems to have been largely orally transmitted.<sup>37</sup> Here's a poem on mud in the streets of Lucknow, which appears in line with the kind of wordly, witty *rekhti* poetry that Ruth Vanita has written eloquently about in her book *Gender, Sex and the City*.

*gari jata baji aura gayanda gana ura jata,  
 sutura akari jata musakil gau ki  
 dabana uthay paem dhokhe ji dharat,  
 hota apa garakaba rahi jata pag mau ki  
 beni kavi kahai desi thara thara kampai gata,  
 rathana ke pathana bipati bardau ki [?]  
 bara bara kahata pukari kartara tosom,  
 mica tau kabula pai na kich lakhnau ki.*<sup>38</sup>

A cart goes by, horses and elephants fly,  
 a camel stops in its tracks, a cow struggles by.  
 Lifting one's hem, you misplace your step and  
 drown and lose your turban from Mau.  
 Says Beni, travellers tremble,  
 misfortune awaits in the carts' path [?],  
 I tell you Lord, again and again,  
 death is fine by me but not Lucknow's mud.

---

<sup>36</sup> Out of 200-odd long and short pieces in Richard Johnson's song album from ca. 1780 Lucknow held in the British Library, 90 are in Brajbhasha (mostly short *khyals*) and as many as 92 are *tappas* in Punjabi, 7 *Rekhtas*, 8 Persian, 2 in Marwari, 2 *Purbi* (Eastern language), and 1 *Bhakha* song; Ms IO Islamic 1906, British Library, London. For a discussion of this manuscript, see Schofield, "Words without songs."

<sup>37</sup> A collection of *bhamrauve* was published by Bharat Jivan Press in Banaras in the late nineteenth century, but I have unfortunately been unable to trace a copy.

<sup>38</sup> Cited in R. Pandey, *Hindi sahitya ka brijhad itihās*, vol. 6, 408.

Another poem by Beni makes fun the poet Lalak and a third lampoons a shopkeeper for selling him tiny mangoes.<sup>39</sup> Again, this evidence is perhaps too scanty to advance an argument about Brajbhasha poetic taste in Lucknow. But—and this is where a spatial approach that actively looks “laterally” for other stories comes in—if we read it not so much in the context of the tradition of Brajbhasha poetry but in parallel with Urdu, it acquires a new significance: it connects Brajbhasha poetic practice with the new Urdu urban poetic culture of Lucknow.

More broadly, these examples of Rekhta in Awadh qasbas and of Brajbhasha in Lucknow suggest that the establishment of the new polity, with its religious orientation towards Iran and influx of Persian and Rekhta poets, had important consequences for language use and literary practices: the older Persian-Brajbhasha/Hindavi bilingualism of the Awadh qasbas was replaced by Persian-Urdu bilingualism, while Brajbhasha remained current largely as a language of songs. Biographical dictionaries and anthologies do not mention Urdu poets writing in Brajbhasha, though Urdu poetic culture made space for demotic words and worlds within the dialogues of narrative poems (*masnavis*) and the emotional dirges on the battle of Karbala (*marsiyas*).<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Looking for Persian in Banaras

A different example of linguistic shift as a result of political reorientation occurred in nearby Banaras. Its commercial growth in the eighteenth century, together with neighbouring Mirzapur and Ghazipur, was intimately connected to the emergence of Awadh as an autonomous polity under the Nawabs and the growing influence of the East India Company. As Christopher Bayly has shown, the small local Bhumihar landholder Mansaram, the founder of the Banaras dynasty, was able to replace Mir Rustam ‘Ali as revenue-farmer for Nawab Safdar Jung by promising greater revenue thanks to the support of the local merchants.<sup>41</sup> And in Vasudha

---

<sup>39</sup> Singh and Pradhan, *Kavita ka shuklapaksha*, 208.

<sup>40</sup> Even the Mughal emperor Shah ‘Alam II (r. 1759-1806), author of the multilingual song collection *Nadirat-e shahi* and a Brajbhasha poet with the penname “Shah Alam,” is only remembered by his Persian and Urdu penname “Aftab” in Nawab Mustafa Shefta’s mid-nineteenth century *Tazkira gulshan-e bekhar*, 67-8. See the lively dialogues in the *masnavis* of Mir Hasan and Shauq Lakhnavi (*Masnaviyat-e mir hasan* and Khan, *Masnaviyat-e shauq*); for the language of *marsiyas*, see Oesterheld, “Looking Beyond Gul-o-bulbul,” and Knapczyk, “Crafting.”

<sup>41</sup> Bayly, *Rulers*, 178; Dalmia, *Nationalization*, 67.

Dalmia's terse summary, at the Treaty of Allahabad in 1765 after the Awadh and Mughal defeat at the battle of Buxar in 1764, "the English commander Major Munro could present [Mansaram's son] Balwant Singh to the emperor as being quite openly under British protection."<sup>42</sup> The EIC then pressured the Nawab to cede Banaras and the other three districts to the Company, and between 1775 and 1795 the Company moved into directly administering taxation and justice, particularly under the astute and able Resident, Jonathan Duncan. While British presence in the city remained limited, the Maharaja's crown was thus quickly hollowed, though he retained considerable local authority and significant ritual and cultural roles.

But while the Maharaja, the EIC and merchant families all extended their patronage to Sanskrit learning in the city, Company rule also led to an influx of Persian-knowing service groups, turning Banaras into a node, if not a centre, in the Persophile geography of North India.<sup>43</sup> Apart from the celebrated Iranian poet Sheikh 'Ali Hazin, who famously moved to Banaras in 1748 and died there in 1766, and those who came as part of the entourage of the Mughal Prince Mirza Jawan Bakht, who lived there from 1786 and 1788, the members of the Persian "community of taste" in Benares mentioned in a 1814 Persian biographical dictionary (Zulfiqar 'Ali "Mast" *Riyaz al-wifaq*/The Meadow of Friendship), were all "newly-arrived" (*nau-vared*).<sup>44</sup>

Zulfiqar 'Ali himself seems to have himself been an administrator "newly arrived" in the city after living in Patna and Calcutta. In fact, apart from a couple of old families, *all* the individuals he mentions in connection with Persian poetry in Banaras had recently come to the city looking for employment as administrators, doctors, teachers, or merchants, or had retired

---

<sup>42</sup> Dalmia, *Nationalization*, 68ff.

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. the Persian texts on Indian ascetics commissioned in Banaras and analyzed by Ernst in *Refractions of Islam in India*.

<sup>44</sup> Four of the individuals Zulfiqar 'Ali mentions came with Mirza Jawan Bakht (for whom see Kasturi, "Lost and Small Histories"): Mirza Jan Tapish, who later made his way to Calcutta and who Zulfiqar 'Ali is very proud to have known and exchanged letters with; Mirza Bu 'Ali Khan; "one of the mirzas of the imperial court and a friend of the late emperor Shah 'Alam II"; and the nephew of Nawab 'Abdul Ahad Khan Bahram Jang, Muhammad Mahdi 'Ali Kan "Nairang," who was also connected to Shah Alam II, "still lives in Muhammadabad, Banaras" working for the Mughal prince Mirza Khurram Bakht, and was a very good friend of the writer; Zulfiqar 'Ali, *Riyaz al-wifaq*, 88, 105. Another Persian *tazkira* composed in Banaras, the *Suhuf-i ibrahim* by the EIC judge 'Ali Ibrahim Khan "Khalil," does not even bother with small fry Banaras poets.

here.<sup>45</sup> It was through the East India Company that experienced munshis came to Banaras. For example, Rai Sahib Ram was a Khatri from Delhi well trained in “the customary knowledge” and in poetry, who had enjoyed “the grace of the company of most of the poets of the age” and had worked and progressed in the imperial chancellery in Delhi before he was drawn “to the Eastern region” and came to Banaras thanks to the EIC Resident Jonathan Duncan.<sup>46</sup> Khwaja Yasin was also from the “holy ground” of Delhi, and his ancestors had scribed orders (*farmannawis*) for the emperors; at first “he worked (*naukri*) for most of the “hat-wearing” (*kulah-poshan*) foreigners—presumably in Calcutta—ending as chief servant (*mulazim*) of Mr James Stewart, who was appointed judge in Banaras between 1805 and 1808, so Khwaja Yasin travelled with him from Calcutta to Banaras.<sup>47</sup> A few members of the Maharaja’s family and sons of local rich merchants also sought training in Persian poetry as part of elite culture.<sup>48</sup>

So while we usually think of Persian as a Mughal legacy, in Banaras Persian appears to have *become* a significant literary language in the late eighteenth century as part of the upcountry expansion of the EIC. Ironically, Zulfiqar ‘Ali’s *tazkira* was written only twenty years before the EIC replaced Persian with English at the top and the Indian vernaculars at the bottom of the administration in 1835, and this world would fold up, for some very quickly, for others rather more slowly. As in the case of Nawabi Lucknow, it is striking how quickly the language-scape (to borrow Arjun Appadurai’s term) changed in this period, before it got crystallized and historicized into separate language identities in the nineteenth century.

## 5. The eastward loop

---

<sup>45</sup> His *tazkira* is of the kind “my friends and all the notable people I know” rather than including only professional or acknowledged poets.

<sup>46</sup> Zulfiqar ‘Ali, *Riyāz al-wifaq*, 31.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 12. Another munshi, Ramjas “Muhit” from a Khatri family originally from Lahore though born in Delhi, was drawn to Banaras by Mr Jones “Mumtaz ud-daula” and headed the Indian section of the customs house; *ibid.*, 92.

<sup>48</sup> Of the Maharaja’s family, Zulfiqar ‘Ali praised his middle brother Babu Dev Narayn Singh for writing in good *nasta’liq*, his “God-given talents,” and his affection for the writer. He also praised the Maharaja’s maternal uncle Babu Sawanjit [sic] Singh “Ashiq” as “*mirzamanish*” (i.e. a gentleman) and for being the cheerful light of assemblies. The only Persian poet the Maharaja seems to have directly patronized is the Kashmiri Muhammad Zakir; Zulfiqar ‘Ali, *Riyāz al-wifaq*, 34, 61, 36.



As already noted, in this *tazkira* Banaras emerges not as a centre but as a node in a network that stretched all over North India and beyond. Of the 90 individuals about whom Zulfiqar 'Ali tells us something about, one third lived, passed through or stopped in Banaras for a while; another third lived and worked in Bengal, where he had met them, twelve in Bihar, fifteen in Lucknow or Awadh *qasbas*, and a handful in Allahabad, Agra, Hyderabad, Rohilkhand and "the South." Delhi, Lahore, and Kashmir figure in his *tazkira* only as places individuals, or their ancestors, originated from before they moved East. One tenth of the people Zulfiqar 'Ali met as they passed through Banaras were on their way between Calcutta, Lucknow, Patna and Delhi.

Unlike the usual story of the eastward movement of poets and scholars from Delhi to Lucknow and Faizabad in Awadh, this is a story of an eastward movement from the *qasbas*, cities and villages of the Gangetic plain to Bengal, in some cases looping back to Patna, Lucknow and Banaras. Clearly, rather than Delhi, or even Lucknow (where probably other claimants cornered available positions), in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries it was colonial Bengal (or else Hyderabad) that could provide opportunities for Persian-educated youths. The terms used in the *tazkira* for colonial service (*naukri*)—"honour," "closeness" or "friendship" (*rifaqat*) with Indians in high positions in the Company administration or with the hat-wearing foreigners themselves—echo those of service to earlier Mughal rulers and administrators.

In fact, it was in Murshidabad and Calcutta that Zulfiqar 'Ali breathed a cosmopolitan air, meeting Mir Muhammad Husain who travelled as far as Egypt, the courtier and poet Mir Qamruddin "Minnat," and the Iranian ambassador Mirza Khalilullah Khan "Safir."<sup>49</sup> It is this eastward loop that Walt Hakala illuminates in his book about Urdu literati and lexicographers *Negotiating Languages* (2016), a loop that imbricates Persian-educated north Indians and other *émigrés* with the EIC and reveals the incessant traffic of people, books, and tastes across the temporal as well as geographical divide between Nawabi Awadh and colonial Bengal.

## 6. Fort William College and Hindustani revisited

Another link across this divide is provided by J.B. Gilchrist and the Indian language teachers (*munshis*) he employed at Fort William College. Fort

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 27, 90-91.

William College and Gilchrist (whose short tenure there as professor lasted only between 1800-1803) are usually remembered in Hindi and Urdu for two reasons, both marking epochal changes: Gilchrist's sponsorship of *prose* texts that heralded the beginnings of modern Hindi and Urdu literatures, and his momentous definition of language. Gilchrist called the modern language of North India Hindustani (Hindostanee), divided it into three levels, and distinguished the "Middle or Genuine Hindostanee Style" of Khari Boli in Persian script (what was later in the century called Urdu) from the rustic Hindi (*Hinduwee*, i.e. Khari Boli in Nagari script), the language of Hindus alone.<sup>50</sup> This definition is usually read as part and parcel of a colonial policy of *divide et impera* aimed at creating a split between Hindus and Muslims.<sup>51</sup> It was certainly part of an ethnographic vision that saw Hindus and Muslims as separate groups and that linked script, language, cultural tradition and religious community into a single cluster.

But despite these two undisputed points, *in practice* Gilchrist and Fort William College did other things, too, which conversely point to significant continuities with the eighteenth-century literary culture of Lucknow and North India more generally. First, despite the language division and separation at the conceptual and practical level, several of the texts produced at the College were printed in both Urdu and Hindi scripts, implying that they were in fact mutually intelligible in terms of language and subject matter. We can visualise these texts, like Mirza Kazim 'Ali Javan's *Singhasan battisi* (1803) or Haider Bakhsh's *Tota kahani* (1804), as a common ground, with texts printed in only one script like Lallujilal's *Premasagar* and Mir Amman's *Bagh-o bahar* (both 1803) as outliers. Second, Gilchrist fought the modern language corner against those Orientalists who insisted on teaching EIC recruits Persian and Arabic, and we can also see him as an Orientalist making the case for Hindi and Urdu (to use the later denominations) as the modern language of Hindustan, and for recognizing and appreciating Persianate literature. By contrast, the professor of Bengali insisted that all students

---

<sup>50</sup> Hindustani was the "living intermediate prevalent speech of the present day," to be distinguished from Hindi, "lest this might be confounded with *Hinduwee*, *Hindoo'ee* which belong here exclusively to the Hindoos"; Gilchrist, Preface to *Dictionary English and Hindostanee*, xix. While Alison Safadi is right in pointing out that Gilchrist's construct of Hindustani was inclusive, "encompassing the entire *khari boli* continuum from a highly-Persianized style at one end, to one almost devoid of Persian at the other," the division of Hindus and Muslims into "two nations" underlies his view of language; Safadi, "Colonial construction of Hindustani," 10.

<sup>51</sup> See the sources quoted *Ibid.*, 171-2.

learning Bengali should study Sanskrit, appointed only Brahmin pandits as Bengali teachers, and would not accept anyone who knew some English because it had “corrupted” their language.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, the books printed by the College at its own and other presses in Calcutta included Urdu books of poetry that had been written only fifty years earlier, like Miskin’s *marsiya*s (1801, also in Nagari script), Mir Hasan’s *masnavi Sahr ul-bayan* (*The Magic of Eloquence*, 1802/3?, large quarto, 320 pp.), the *diwan* of Mir Soz (1810), select satirical *masnavis* by Sauda (1810), the complete works of Mir Taqi Mir (*Kooliyati Meer Tyqee*, 1811), and the even more voluminous *Dastan Amir Hamza* by Khalil Khan Ashk (1803, 500 pp. of large quarto).<sup>53</sup> In short, Fort William College sponsored the publishing of some of the best-known eighteenth century Urdu poets from Delhi and Lucknow, each of whom had done something *new* with language and with different Persianate genres and had become a modern classic.

To press the point about temporality, while we tend to think of late-Mughal Delhi and Nawabi Lucknow as “pre-modern” and colonial Calcutta as “modern”—i.e. we do not think of them as coeval—in fact Fort William College shows that they were part of a coeval, two-way traffic. Not only did Delhi and Lucknow literati work at the College, sometimes directly recommended by the Company Residents, but Fort William College prose texts also fed back into the literary culture of Lucknow. This is the case of Dayashankar Nasim’s famous *masnavi Gulzar-e nasim* (*The Garden of Nasim*, 1838), which directly adapted and acknowledged Nihalchand Lahori’s prose narrative *Gul-e bakawali* (*The Bakawali Flower*, 1804) sponsored by the College.

Against this undoubted continuity of repertoire of stories and motifs, what is usually foregrounded in texts produced at Fort William College is the novelty of prose, which becomes a metonym for the modern age: in Hindi literary histories the nineteenth century is often simply called “the age of prose.” But if again we look more closely, some of the prose works produced

---

<sup>52</sup> “Carey’s insistence on Sanskrit for the Bengali students and teachers did not produce happy results,” writes S.K. Das. “The Bengali writings of the British students show unhappy Sanskritism in their style. Unimaginative borrowings from Sanskrit, replacing the living and racy Bengali, made their style stilted and wooden. In the case of Urdu Gilchrist did not insist on the knowledge of Persian and Arabic so dogmatically and that was one of the reasons why the Urdu writing in the College of Fort William was more natural and simple”; Das, *Sahibs and Munshis*, 65-6.

<sup>53</sup> Details in Das, *Sahibs*, and on Frances Pritchett’s MEALAC website, “Select Publications of Fort William College.”

at the College are not that different from verse narratives. Mir Bahadur ‘Ali’s *Nasr-e benazir* (Incomparable Prose, 1803), for example, not only employs a language that draws *both* from the poetic idiom of Urdu *and* the colloquial and colourful language of Mir Hasan’s *masnavi*, but is literally half in verse or rhymed prose.<sup>54</sup>

If we, conversely, consider that some of the most popular verse genres in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Lucknow already contained colloquial and idiomatic dialogues and descriptions that could easily fit in a prose narrative, the distinction between verse and prose loses its epoch-changing quality and becomes more blurred.<sup>55</sup> For example, in Mir Hasan’s *masnavi Gulzar-e iram* (The Garden of Iram, 178?), the “noisy” verse description of the bazaar in Faizabad includes vendors’ cries that one can hear even today. The seller of precious stones cries: “*miyan sahab, jawahir ka kaho kam*” (“Tell me sir which gems you need”), the flower seller, “*mu ‘attar phul hain ji motiya ke*” (“Fragrant jasmines!”), the vendor of sugarcane juice shouts, “*misri ke ganne*” (“Sweet sugarcane!”), another hawker, “*kya namkin bane hain,*” “*mirchon ke chane hain... karare bhurbhure nimbu ke ras ke*” (“What great snacks I made. Chillied chickpeas... hot, crisp, with lemon juice!”).

Rather than a story of momentous literary and linguistic break with the past in the context of Calcutta’s “colonial modern,” then, Fort William College becomes a story of remarkable literary continuity with the literary culture of eighteenth century North India. It was for this reason that English translations of Fort William texts often carried the sobriquet of Oriental or Eastern novel.<sup>56</sup>

## 7. A tale of two cities: Lucknow and Banaras

*bina piya ghata nahin bhavai*  
*raha raha dila rundho avai*  
*bijari ki chamaka tarapavai daravai*  
*bina piya...*

Without my love I don’t enjoy the dark clouds  
 At every moment my heart tightens  
 The flashing lightning makes me tremble and start  
 Without my love...

<sup>54</sup> See Ali, *Nusr-i Benuzeer*.

<sup>55</sup> Mir Hasan, *Masnaviyat*, 191, 195, 196, 205.

<sup>56</sup> E.g. Major Henry Court’s translation of the *Nasr-i-Benazir* as *the Incomparable Prose of Mir Hasan* calls it “an excellent specimen of an Eastern novel,” n.p.

Lal Pari's song in *Amanat, Indarsabha* (1852-4)<sup>57</sup>

*piya bina barasata ayo pani*  
*chapala chamaki chamaki darapavata*  
*mohi akeli jani*  
*koyala kuka sunata jiya phatata*  
*yaha barakha dukhadani*  
*"harichanda" piya shyama sundara binu*  
*birahini bhai hai divani*

Without my love the rains have come

Lightning flashes and scares me,

it knows I am alone.

The *koyal* coos, the heart breaks,

wretched is this rainy season.

Harischandra, without her handsome dark love,

the woman left alone goes crazy.

Bhartendu Harishchandra, *Varsha vinoda*

(Delight of the Rain, song collection 1880)<sup>58</sup>

A located and multilingual approach to the long eighteenth century helps bring into relief the parallels between the urban cultures of Lucknow and Banaras, cities that usually stand juxtaposed to each other, central to the Urdu-Persian and Sanskrit-Hindi stories respectively. As a result of this dichotomy, we are endlessly surprised to find the emerging Urdu musical theatre in Lucknow employing so many songs in Brajbhasha and other regional dialects, and Hindi poets in and around Banaras writing Urdu verse, too.<sup>59</sup> Not only that, the temptation is to read these acts as individual choices motivated by "syncretic" tendencies or as a political reaction to colonialism.<sup>60</sup> We do better instead to read them in the light of practices of multilingual education like Bhanupratap's, if this is the case, or as part of the new fashions and practices arising in the urban culture of *both* Lucknow and Banaras.

---

<sup>57</sup> Taj, *Court of Indar*, 265, slightly changed.

<sup>58</sup> H. Sharma, *Bharatendu samagra*, 160.

<sup>59</sup> On Bhartendu's Urdu verse see e.g. Senguta, "Kṛṣṇa the Cruel Beloved."

<sup>60</sup> e.g. Afroz Taj's otherwise excellent edition of *Amanat* Lakhnavi's play *Indarsabha* states: "like any thinking person of his generation, *Amanat must have been* disturbed and depressed by the relative instability and political decay that was spreading around him... *Amanat must have* also watched the expansion of the British into north central India with some dismay," *Court of Indar*, 69, emphasis added.

Both Lucknow and Banaras in this period saw a combination of courtly and urban culture of musical and poetic *soirées* (*majlis*, *sabha*) at court or in the houses of landed and merchant elites (*rais*), with master-poets who held courtly positions but also had private pupils and created individual poetic circles.<sup>61</sup> We see the conscious creation of public pageants, festivals, and processions in which the Nawab or the Maharaja played an important ritual part, but that also saw the participation of urban elites and of the general population in a show of mutual legitimation and social cohesion.<sup>62</sup> One visited semi-public gardens, fairs, and other open spaces to see street performers, courtesans and other “beloveds” and to be seen in one’s finery, while time seems to have been regulated not by the modern clock but by the calendar of festivities and ritual events. In both Lucknow and Banaras courtesans were at the heart of musical life and elite entertainment, lived in the very centre of the city (the Chowk), and could also be glimpsed in the open spaces and public occasions already mentioned. In both cities the rich variety and opulence of gold- and silver- embroidered, woven and threaded textiles, of jewelry with precious and semi-precious stones, of perfumes and fine food and drink items, find expression in the elaborate descriptions of these items within poetic genres, from Mir Hasan’s *masnavis* to *rekhti* poems about clothes and ornaments, to the elaborate description of the *pari*-courtesans’ attire in Agha Hasan Amanat’s run-away success, the play *Indarsabha* (1852-4).

If there is one form that was equally important in Lucknow and Banaras—indeed everywhere in North India in the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century— and that underlines this commonality of tastes and practices was, it is the song (see above). While song collections predate this time, we see now a veritable explosion, with capacious repertoires including Urdu and Persian *ghazals*, Brajbhasha *khyal* and *thumri*, Brajbhasha-Purbi (Eastern) seasonal *hori* and *basant*, and Punjabi *thappas*, in manuscript and later in print.<sup>63</sup>

Songs about love, devotion, the season, and particular events, for example, constituted a very substantial part of the *oeuvre* and daily poetic practice of Bhartendu Harishchandra (1850-1885), heir to an important merchant family and the key Hindi intellectual of Banaras. Like other elite

---

<sup>61</sup> See Pellò, *Tutiyan*.

<sup>62</sup> See Cole, *Roots*, and Dalmia, *Nationalization*; also Freitag, *Culture and Power in Benares*.

<sup>63</sup> So the song repertoire of Richard Johnson’s album includes more *tappas* and *khyals*, that of Amanat’s *Indarsabha*’s more *ghazals*, and that of Bhartendu more seasonal songs, but all three largely overlap in terms of languages and song genres.

men of his time, Harishchandra was trained in music and singing by leading courtesans, and according to an early biographer he composed as many as 1500 songs; his collected works include more than ten printed song collections.<sup>64</sup> The same holds true for other literati of his day. Agha Hasan Amanat's *Indar sabha* was composed for the musical theatre (*jalsa rahas*) that seems to have been the rage in Lucknow at the time, and includes as many as 50 songs in all the genres mentioned above and including innovative hybrids like a *Basant ghazal* and a *Sawan ghazal* that mixed *ghazal* aesthetics with motifs and the emotional content of seasonal songs.<sup>65</sup> So while tradition ascribes the fashion for musical theatre to the eclectic taste of the last King of Oudh, Wajid 'Ali Shah, on the basis of Amanat's own description of an *Indarsabha* performance, complete with heavy curtains and fireworks exploding every time a dancer entered the stage, it seems that Wajid 'Ali Shah was following with his own *rahas* compositions the urban fashion of the day.

## 8. Conclusion: Political and epistemic shifts and aesthetic continuities

Reading the onset of colonial rule and its impact on linguistic and literary ideas and practices from the perspective of eighteenth-century North India instead of nineteenth-century Calcutta implies a shift of focus from the English-educated *bhadralok* intellectuals and writers to literati belonging to older princely, service and merchant elites. These also became part of the new colonial set up—Bhartendu studied English, read the new Orientalist publications, championed the Hindi movement, founded schools and associations, engaged intensely with print culture and photography, and was for a few years Honorary Magistrate in Banaras—but often retained a whole range of older tastes and practices.

Yet the culture of Brajbhasha and Urdu poetry, or of Persian education, was not just an elite culture, either, but an aspirational and everyday culture for non-elites, too. The autobiography of the ordinary clerk Bhanupratap Tiwari with which I began details his multilingual, piecemeal education and the poetic practices and “communities of taste” that it fostered, almost a century after Fort William College allegedly separated Hindi from Urdu and six decades after the EIC's shift from Persian to English as language of the

---

<sup>64</sup> See H. Sharma, *Bhartendu samagra*.

<sup>65</sup> Taj, *Court of Indar*, 133-4.

court and administration should have made Persian education and literary tastes impractical.

The prevalent story of eighteenth-century Awadh that identifies it with Urdu and Lucknow is not wrong, of course, but does obscure other stories, languages, trajectories, patterns, and parallels. I have highlighted some of them here—the persistence of Brajbhasha poetry in the Awadh countryside and of Brajbhasha songs in Lucknow; the role of the East India Company in the late and short-lived presence of Persian poetry in Banaras and the new eastward axis of North Indian Persophone intellectuals; the parallels between the urban cultures of Lucknow and Banaras; and the co-evalness of Lucknow and Calcutta. There are other stories one could add—of Paltudas, the most famous Sant poet of this period, for example, who moved from his village to Ayodhya, near Faizabad, or the Ramanandi poets and scholars active there, or the translations and texts commissioned by the British Residents in Banaras and Lucknow.<sup>66</sup> There are always other actors, other stories.

A multilingual approach shows that the emergence of Nawabi Faizabad and Lucknow prompted a move among the Persian-educated towards Rekhta/Urdu and away from the cultivation of Brajbhasha courtly poetry. Brajbhasha did not disappear completely from the urban culture of Nawabi Lucknow (certainly not from nearby Banaras or the “mud brick courts” of rural Awadh), but it came to occupy a more limited space, as the language of music and songs. Brajbhasha poetry itself seems to have become “less” Brajified and more topical, satirical, in line with the Urdu urban literary culture of Lucknow. Because beside the more rarified Urdu-Persian culture of ghazals and poetry meetings (*musha'iras*), this period also saw an upsurge of descriptive and narrative poems (*masnawis*) with a new emphasis on colloquial idioms and *realia* like food, fairs and festivals. This idiom very similar to that of the other eighteenth-century Urdu urban poet, Nazir Akbarabadi, who is often considered an outlier but appears in this context entirely in line with current urban fashions. The emphasis on luxury items in *masnawis* like Mir Hasan's turned set-pieces like the description of the heroine's body from head to toe (*sarapa*) into a description of the clothes and jewels she wore. The description of richly clad heroines in musical settings

---

<sup>66</sup> See *Paltu sahib ki bani*. For Ramanandi poets and scholars, see Pinch, “Reinventing Ramanand,” and Paramasivan, “Between Text and Sect.”



made the identification between poetic heroines and real-life courtesans palpable and inescapable.

One striking thing about these stories and trajectories is how quickly in this period literary fashions and language affiliations changed. This contrasts with the firm ideas and accounts produced in the new colonial-nationalist episteme that naturalised and historicised Hindi and Urdu as two separate and long-standing quasi-national literary cultures inherent to ethno-religious groups.

A located and multilingual perspective still shows the mounting political control of the EIC and a real shift in patronage to colonial officials and new Indian compradore elites, but not the tabula rasa or complete epistemic shift that narratives of “colonial impact and Indian response” tend to produce.<sup>67</sup> It is interesting, for example, to read Gilchrist and Fort William College not only as the agents of momentous linguistic and literary changes but also as the transmitters of North Indian (largely Urdu) literary culture into the world of print. Looking ahead, much the Urdu literary culture of eighteenth century Delhi and Lucknow became in effect modern Urdu print culture, whether at Fort William College in Calcutta or with later publishers in North India, picked up by attentive scholars like Garcin de Tassy in Paris.<sup>68</sup> Conversely, eighteenth-century Brajbhasha poetry and poetics texts found their way into print and into Hindi literary history.

Another pattern emerging from the comparison between the urban literary cultures of Lucknow and Banaras is what we can view as either a convergence between elite and popular cultures or as the attraction of urban elites towards popular song and theatre genres. This is confirmed by the later nineteenth-century story of commercial print culture in Hindi and Urdu, which shows the slow emergence of “modern genres” among a sea of song collections and theatre chapbooks.<sup>69</sup> Yet, though testimony to the continuing currency of a whole range of linguistic and aesthetic registers *in both scripts*, multilingual songbooks did not become part of *literary* history. There was no epistemological space left for them in the context of the new language ideologies of Hindi-Hindu-Indian and Urdu-Persian as Muslim and

---

<sup>67</sup> See most recently Mufti, *Forget English*.

<sup>68</sup> Whose *Histoire de la Littérature Hindoui et Hindoustani* draws almost entirely from existing *tazkiras*.

<sup>69</sup> See Orsini, *Print and Pleasure*.

“foreign,” so they became what Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi has called the “homeless texts of Persianate modernity.”<sup>70</sup>

Attending to the material evidence of the multilingual archive and reading for traces of multilingual practices like Bhanupratap’s autobiography adds complexity to narratives of colonial modernity. Without minimising the hold that new language and literary ideologies took over north Indian intellectuals, they point to the relative autonomy of cultural practices, whether in reproducing “communities of taste” or appropriating new technologies like print and commercial theatre and aggregating new publics.

11,100 words

## References

Alam, Muzaffar. *The crisis of empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707-48*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Ali, Mir ‘Bahadur. *The Nusr-i Be-Nuzeer, reprinted for the use of the Junior members of He Majesty’s Indian Civil and Military Service*. W. Nassau Lees, ed. Calcutta: College Press, 1870.

Bangha, Imre. *Scorpion in the Hand: Brajbhasha court poetry from central India around 1800*. New Delhi: Manohar, 2014.

Bayly, Christopher A. *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1770-1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Bilgrami, Ghulam ‘Ali “Azad.” *Sarw-i azad*. Hyderabad: Kutubkhana-i Asafiya, 1913.

Busch, Allison. “Riti and Register.” In *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture*, edited by Francesca Orsini. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010.

--. *Poetry of Kings: The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Chaturvedi, Jawaharlal. *Kavyanirnaya*. Varanasi: Kalyandas, 1962.

Cole, Juan R. *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722-1859*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

---

<sup>70</sup> Tavakoli-Targhi, “The homeless texts of Persianate modernity.”

Court, Major Henry, tr. *The Nasr-i-Benazir or the Incomparable Prose of Mir Hasan*. Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1889.

Dalmia, Vasudha. *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harishchandra and nineteenth-century Banaras*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Das, Sisir Kumar. *Sahibs and Munshis: an Account of the College of Fort William*. New Delhi: Orion Publications, 1978.

--. *A history of Indian literature. Vol. 2. 1800-1910: Western impact, Indian response*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008.

Ernst, Carl W. “‘Indian Lovers in Arabic and Persian Guise: Azad Bilgrami’s Depiction of Nayikas.’ *Journal of Hindu Studies* 6 (2013): 37-51.

--. *Refractions of Islam in India: Situating Sufism and Yoga*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 2016.

Freitag, Sandria, ed. *Culture and Power in Benares*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Garcin de Tassy, Honoré V.S. *Histoire de la Littérature Hindoui et Hindoustani*. Paris: Oriental Translation Committee of Great Britain and Ireland, 1839.

Gilchrist, John B. 1786. *A Dictionary English and Hindostanee*. Calcutta, Part 1. <https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.94187/2015.94187.Dictionaryenglish-And-Hindoostanee--Vol-1#page/n29/mode/2up>

Hindi, Bhagwan Das. *Safina-i hindi*. Patna: Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Arabic & Persian, 1958.

Kasturi, Malavika. “The Lost and Small Histories of the City of Patronage, Poor Mughal Pensioners in Colonial Banaras.” In *Banaras, Urban Forms and Cultural History*, edited by Michael Dodson. New Delhi: Routledge, 2012

“Khalil,” ‘Ali Ibrahim Khan. *Suhuf-i ibrahim: bakhsh-i mu’asir*. Teheran: Anjuman-i Asar va Mafakhir-i Farhangi, 2006.

Khan, Rashi Hasan, ed. *Masnaviyat-e shauq*. New Delhi, Anjuman-e Taraqqi-e Urdu, 1998.

Knapczyk, Peter A. “Crafting the Cosmopolitan Elegy in North India: Poets, Patrons, and the Urdu Marṣ iyah, 1707-1857.” PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2014.

Massey, Doreen. *For Space*. London: Sage, 2005.

McGregor, R.S. *Hindi literature from its beginnings to the nineteenth century*, Vol. 8. Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1984.

- Mir Hasan. *Masnaviyat-e mir hasan*. Lucknow: Matba' Tej Kumar, 1966.
- Misra, G.B. and S.B. Misra. *Mishra-bandhu-vinod*. Prayag: Hindi Grantha Prasarak Mandali, 1913 [1909].
- Misra, Vishwanathprasad, ed. *Bhikharidas granthavali*. 2 volumes. Varanasi: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 1956.
- Mufti, Aamir R. *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literature*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016.
- Oesterheld, Christina. "Looking Beyond Gul-o-bulbul: Observations on Marsiyas by Fazli and Sauda." In *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture*, edited by Francesca Orsini. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010.
- Orsini, Francesca. *Print and Pleasure: Popular literature and entertaining fictions in colonial north India*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009.
- Paltu sahib ki bani*. Allahabad: Belvedere Press, 2008.
- Pandey, Rajbali. ed. *Hindi sahitya ka brihad itihās*, vol. 6. Varanasi: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 1957?
- Pandey, Sudhakar, ed. *Raslin granthavali*. Varanasi: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 1969.
- Paramasiva, Vasudha. "Between Text and Sect: Early Nineteenth Century Shifts in the Theology of Ram." (2010) [escholarship.org](http://escholarship.org).
- Pauwels, Heidi. "Literary Moments of Exchange in the 18th Century: The New Urdu Vogue Meets Krishna Bhakti." *Indo-Muslim Cultures in Transition*, edited by Alka Patel and Karen Leonard. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- . *Cultural Exchange in Eighteenth-Century India*. Berlin: EB Verlag, 2015.
- Pellò, Stefano. *Tutiyān-i Hind: Specchi identitari e proiezioni cosmopolite indo-persiane (1680-1856)*. Firenze: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2012.
- Pinch, William. "Reinventing Ramanand: Caste and History in Gangetic India." *Modern Asian Studies* 30.3 (1996): 549-571.
- Pritchett, Frances. "Select Publications of Fort William College." <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00urdu/baghobahar/BBFORTWM.pdf>
- Rahman, Raisur. *Locale, everyday Islam, and modernity: Qasbah towns and Muslim life in colonial India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Ritter, Valerie. "Networks, patrons, and genres for late Brajbhasha poets." In *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture*, edited by Francesca Orsini. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010.

- Safadi, Alison. 2012. "The colonial construction of Hindustani 1800-1947." PhD dissertation, Goldsmiths, University of London.  
[https://research.gold.ac.uk/8026/1/History\\_thesis\\_Safadi.pdf](https://research.gold.ac.uk/8026/1/History_thesis_Safadi.pdf)
- Schofield, Katherine Butler. "Words without songs": the social history of Hindustani song collections in India's Muslim courts c.1770–1830". In *Theory and Practice in the Music of the Islamic World*, edited by Rachel Harris and Martin Stokes. London: Routledge, 2018.
- Sengupta, Sagaree. "Kṛṣṇa the Cruel Beloved: Harishcandra and Urdu." *The Annual of Urdu Studies* 9 (1994): 82-102.
- Sharar, 'Abdul Halim. *Lucknow: the last phase of an oriental culture*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Sharma, Hemant, ed. *Bharatendu samagra*. Varanasi: Hindi Pracharak Sansthan, 1989.
- Sharma, Ramanand. *Ritikalini kavi kalidas trivedi granthavali*. Ghaziabad, Pachauri Prakashan, 2003.
- . *Udaynath kavindra granthavali*. Delhi: Lokhit Prakashan, 2007/
- Sharma, Sunil. "Translating Gender: Azad Bilgrami on the Poetics of the Love Lyric and Cultural Synthesis." *The Translator*, 15.1 (2009): 87-103.
- Shefta, Nawab Mustafa Khan. *Tazkira gulshan-e bekhar*. New Delhi: Qaumi Kaunsil barae furogh-e urdu, 1998.
- Singh, Bacchan and Avadhesh Pradhan. *Kavita ka shuklapaksha*. New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2001.
- Taj, Afroz. *The Court of Indar and the Rebirth of North Indian Drama*. Delhi: Anjuman-e Taraqqi Urdu (Hind), 2007.
- Talwar Oldenburg, Veena. *The Making of Colonial Lucknow*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Tivari, Bhanupratap. *Pandit bhanupratap tivari charanadi nivasi ka sanchhep jivancharit va satsang vilas*. Ms Hindi 11035, UP State Archive, Manuscript Library, Allahabad.
- Trivedi, Madhu. *The making of the Awadh Culture*. New Delhi: Primus Books, 2010.
- Vanita, Ruth. *Gender, Sex and the City*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2012.
- Williams, Richard. *Hindustani Music between Awadh and Bengal, c.1758-1905*. PhD dissertation, Kings College London, 2015.

Zaidi, Shailesh. *Bilgram ke musalman hindi kavi* (Muslim Hindi poets of Bilgram). Banaras: Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 1969.

Zulfiqar 'Ali "Mast." *Riyaz al-wifaq*. Tabriz: Chap-i Azarbayijan, 1964.