Like meaning in the word, \(^{28}\)
/The way for new themes
Is not closed;
Doors of poetry
Are open forever.

The beloved
Whose Name is Meaning reveals
Herself, bright, when the tongue
Removes the curtain from
The face of Poetry.

Poetry is
Unique in the world, there is
No answer to poetry. \(^{29}\)

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\(^{28}\) Vali, *Kulliyāt-e vali*, p. 203.

\(^{29}\) Vali, *Kulliyāt-e vali*, p. 177.
Chapter Seven:
The ‘New’ Literary Culture

It must be remembered that Hindī / Rekhthah literature did not begin in the North as the creative mode of the dominant language. It was very much a second fiddle to Persian. By the early eighteenth century, Indians—especially in the North, but also in the Aurangabad area—regarded themselves as having a native speaker’s competence in Persian. (I have given some details of the confident eighteenth-century Indian Persian literary culture in a recent article.1) Most of the earliest Rekhthah writers in Delhi were Persian poets who wrote in Rekhthah on the side. That this was the case until much later in Aurangabad too is evidenced by Shafiq Aurangābādī’s saying in his tazkirah called Chamanistān-e shu’ārā that he began writing poetry in Persian by the age of twelve (he was born in 1745), had no taste for Rekhthah, and in fact looked down upon it. When Rekhthah poetry became extremely popular among his friends, he too turned to it, but not without considerable mental conflict and anguish.2

The new wave of Rekhthah / Hindī writers who began to arrive on the scene in the early 1700’s, and whose poetry received a much needed fillip from the example of Vāli, wrote more Rekhthah than Persian. Yet Persian did not become the mere second string to the Delhi poet’s bow until much later. In the previous chapter we have seen Ḥātim (1699/1700-1783),

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1 I have given some details of the confident Indian Persian literary culture in the eighteenth century in my ‘Privilege Without Power: The Strange Case of Persian (and Urdu) in Nineteenth Century India’. This paper was actually part of my then ongoing work for the project that generated the papers which are now being printed in a separate volume, edited by Sheldon Pollock.

2 Shafiq Aurangābādī, Chamanistān-e shu’ārā, p. 9.
writing in the Preface to his selected poems (Dīvān zādah, 1755-56) say that in Persian, he was a follower of Šā'īb, and in Rekhtah, of Valī. He also has a shīr to this effect. In a ghazal composed in 1753/4, he says:

/In Rekhtah, Ḥūtim is the slave
Of India’s ṭāṭī; in Persian,
He is beholden
To the bulbul of Tabriz/.

There is a qiṣʿa by Saudā which has been cited by some as establishing the fact of Rekhtah/Hindi’s dominance in Delhi in the first half of the eighteenth century, in the sense that Indians are supposed to have realized by then that Persian was not their metier, and they were better off writing Rekhtah. In the poem, a learned person advises Saudā against taking up Persian. The poem has been titled, perhaps by the editor, ‘Satire against Mirzā Fākhir Makīn’. In the poem, Saudā goes to a Persian expert for correction of his Persian verse, saying that there is of course another expert, Mirzā Fākhir Makīn, as well, but he has no time for such things. After two days’ deliberation, the expert advises Saudā:

Should an Indian-language person
Desire to be a poet,
The Rule of Rekhtah would be best for him;
For, why should he
Become the butt of Persian-knowers
By composing falsely in Persian?

The penultimate shīr of the poem is:

Thus only Khusrau, and Faizī,
Faqīr, and Arzū
Are the ones whose poetry

3For this shīr see Ḥaṣrat Mohānī, Intikhāb-e suḥkan, vol. 1, p. 20. The word ṭāṭī is commonly translated as ‘parrot’, and bulbul as ‘nightingale’. Neither is satisfactory, and ‘parrot’ seems especially inappropriate for ṭāṭī in such contexts. While in Persian ṭāṭī does mean ‘parrot’, in Urdu it refers to a small songbird much fancied for the sweetness of its voice and the extent of its repertory.

The Mughal considers worthy
Of praise.4

The story of what passed between Saudā and Fākhir Makīn, I have recounted elsewhere in some detail. Suffice it to say here that Saudā had gotten the better of Makīn in a matter relating to Persian poetry. Makīn refused to acknowledge the Indian Persian writers and found fault with even the Iranians. Saudā was able to demonstrate the errors of Makīn’s ways. This led Makīn to instigate a physical attack on Saudā. The poem we are discussing here is clearly a satire against Makīn, who is represented as saying that only four Indians are worthy to draw praise from ‘the Mughal’, and no others can write Persian properly. Makīn’s people, it may be noted, came from Central Asia; so they were ‘Mughal’, and not Iranian. The poem has thus nothing to do with the Indians’ alleged newfound love for Rekhtah and their realization that Persian is not for them.

It has even been suggested that the Persian ‘expert’ whom Saudā (the speaker in the poem) consults, is Khān-e Arzū. Yet we see that Khān-e Arzū himself is mentioned in the poem as one of the four acceptable Indian Persianists. If Khān-e Arzū were the advice-giver, he would never have put down his own name among the acceptable four; and even if he had done so, Saudā would, out of prudence, not have reported it. Also, if the poem was written, as is apparently the case, after Saudā’s brush with Makīn, the ‘expert’ could certainly not be Khān-e Arzū, who died in 1756, two decades before the incident between Saudā and Makīn.

There was not much ‘high’ literary activity in Rekhtah before the impact of Valī was felt in Delhi. As we saw in Chapter Six, ‘ghazal’ meant only ‘Persian ghazal’ until quite late in Delhi’s literary culture. Young writers who were turning to Rekhtah at the turn of the century in Delhi were perhaps more comfortable in Persian than in Rekhtah. Thus, when poets


5In my ‘Privilege Without Power: The Strange Case of Persian (and Urdu) in Nineteenth Century India’. 
began composing in Rekhtah in large numbers, they needed guides or mentors to put them through their paces, whence was born the institution of ustād (master, mentor), and shāgird (pupil, disciple) which is unique to Urdu literary culture, and which did not exist in even Dakānī or Gujārī. Khan-e Arzū provided a signal service by becoming ustād—formal or informal—to a number of young Rekhtah poets. In fact he became so successful at this that many Persian poets also became his shāgirds or obtained the benefit of his advice.

Once established, the ustād-shāgird institution took root and spread fast. What had begun as a need soon became a fashion, and then a minor industry. Loyalties were generated and abrogated, desertions and rejoins took place, feuds began to occur between ustāds, or between shāgirds of the same ustād. Poetic genealogy became an important part of a poet’s literary status. Codes of conduct and protocols of behaviour were developed. For example, prospective shāgirds were expected to bring some present—usually sweets—when they first approached the ustād. Intercession by a senior intermediary, the father of the candidate, or a friend common between the ustād and the applicant’s family, was a good way of approaching an ustād. The ustād expected, and got (though he rarely asked for them), goods or money for services rendered. Until authorised to do so, and sometimes even in spite of such authority, the shāgird didn’t recite his work in open assembly without the ustād having vetted it. Prose was as much subject to the ustād’s discipline as poetry. It was expected that no shāgird would set up as an ustād, and take shāgirds himself, until the ustād permitted it.

These protocols are reminiscent of the codes of conduct prescribed for Sufi disciples, and also the pupils of professional musical families (gharānās). But there were no religious undertones anywhere except that a faint air of sanctity attached to the proceedings. Leaving an ustād and going to another was generally bad form, but one could have two ustāds, one for Urdu and the other for Persian.

Ustāds of great reputation and ability even used to have shāgirds older than themselves. They would sometimes refuse to accept a person as shāgird. Mir says that Raja Jugal Kishor, a nobleman of note, wished to be enrolled with him as a shāgird. “Not finding [his poetry] amenable to, or suitable for, correction, I drew a line across much of his work”. This happened in 1754/5; Mir was then about thirty-three years of age. He was quite hard up and could have done with a rich patron. In Ab-e hayat Muhammad Husain Azād narrates the case of Qamar ud-Dīn Minnat (1742/3–1792/3), who was of ancient lineage and a person of substance. He approached Mir, desiring to be taken as a shāgird in Rekhtah. When Mir heard that Minnat wasn’t from Delhi, and wrote mostly Persian, he supposedly said, “Sayyid Shāhib, Urdu-e mu’alla is the language of Delhi proper [and of nowhere else], please don’t you trouble yourself in it. Go and write in Persian, that itsy bitsy tongue of yours”.

These protocols were mostly in place by the 1760’s, and soon spread to all Rekhtah/Hindi centres: Lucknow, Banaras, Allahabad, Murshidabad, Patna, Aurangabad, Hyderabad, Surat, Rampur, Madras, and so on. The later success and moral authority of the institution is difficult to explain except in terms of fashion, though there is the fact that it was a means of patronage too. In the beginning it certainly met a felt need: a literary community was giving up a foreign language in which it was comfortable, in favour of the local language whose

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6 Examples of this can be found occurring as recently as 1996. Ibrahim Ashk, a poet from Maharashtra, has published his poetic “family tree”, tracing, through some very obscure names, his “descent” from Saudā (d.1781) and Dard (d.1785); see Ibrahim Ashk, Agah, p. 4.

7 Mir, Zikr-e mir, ed. Maulvi ‘Abd ul-Haq, p. 75. An excellent English translation of this fascinating but difficult autobiography, with scholarly notes and appendices, has been made by C. M. Naim, directly from the Persian; see Mir, Zikr-i Mir, ed. C. M. Naim.

8 Āzād, Ab-e hayat, p. 263.
literary codes were seen as more or less independent, and therefore in need of being specially learnt.\footnote{The institution’s full literary and cultural dimensions have been examined by Frances Pritchett in *Nets of Awareness*, and also in her article in the forthcoming collaborative volume edited by Sheldon Pollock.}

The mushairah [musha′iraḥ] had been in existence in India since the sixteenth century, but had been confined to Persian recitation alone. The new literary community of the North, gaining confidence gradually, instituted mushairahs in Rekhtah as well. The fact that they were initially called marakhiṭah (an Arabicised Hindustani devised on the pattern of musha′iraḥ), suggests that poetry in Rekhtah was very much a second eleven to Persian’s first at that time. It was common until the nineteenth decades, if not even later, for Persian poetry to be recited at Urdu mushairahs without the audience or the poet feeling any incongruity. Until the nineteen fifties, individual Urdu poets’ collections often contained a bit of Persian poetry too.\footnote{I remember Jigar Murādabādī (1890-1960) reciting one of his rare Persian poems at a mushairah in Allahabad in 1954. The last time I recited a Persian composition of mine at an Urdu mushairah was at Nagpur in 1959. *Aṣmān nihārāb*, my recent collection of poems, has some Persian poems too.}

By the mid-eighteenth century the Hindus too, who had also been concentrating on Persian, began to adopt Rekhtah. The major ones in the beginning, like Sarb Sukh Divānā (1727/8-1788/9), were bilingual in Urdu and Persian. As I mentioned earlier, Divānā established a long and illustrious line of ṣāīgirds through his own šāīgirds, especially Ja′far `Ali Ḥasrat (d.1791/2). By the end of the century, Hindus were active participants in the Urdu creative scene, a situation that, happily, continues to obtain till this day, in spite of politically motivated efforts to alter it.

Urdu became nominally the language of power from 1772, when Shāh `Alam II took up residence at the Red Fort in Delhi. Since Shāh `Alam II himself had little political power, especially after his deposition and blinding by Ghulām Qādir (July-August 1788) and restoration by the Marathas (December 1788), Urdu cannot be said to have been a sharer in the power culture of those times. In the South and East, and in the Maratha administration too, Persian held sway for a long time. It was finally dislodged by the British in 1837. They introduced Bengali in Bengal, Oriya in Orissa, and ‘Hindustani’ in the Persian script over the extensive Northern Indian areas under their control.\footnote{For some details of Urdu literary life in Vellore, and the contribution to Urdu letters of writers like Abūl-Ḥasan Qurbi (1704/5-1768/9), see Rāhī Fidaī, *Dār al-`ulām lāffiyah velār kā adabī manzār nāmah*.} This amounted to a patronage and promotion of Urdu, of sorts, but the power elite continued to use Persian and English, and later English alone; manifestations of power and pelf were invariably couched in one or both of these languages. Jawahar Lal Nehru’s marriage invitation (Allahabad, 1916), was issued in both Persian and English.

Still, there was another, and quite real, sense in which Urdu had power. The story of Mir and Qamar ud-Din Minnat reflects, even if apocryphal, the self-image of Delhi-Urdu literary culture: Rekhtah / Hindi poets had self-confidence enough to sneer at non-Delhi Rekhtah speakers, and even at Persian. Qamar ud-Din Minnat, however ancient and substantial of lineage and means, couldn’t begin to compete with the Delhi Rekhtah speaker in finesse and elegance. A knowledge and practice of Urdu was a desirable quality from the 1750’s not only in Delhi, but also in Patna, Murshidabad, Lucknow, Farrukhabad, Hyderabad, Aurangabad, Vellore, and numerous other cities of the Empire which were now under the power of semi-independent, but mostly Delhi-appointed, satraps whose cultural base was Delhi.\footnote{Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*, pp. 175-77.} Rekhtah / Hindi in fact became a central reality of elite existence over much of the subcontinent before the eighteenth century was over. One indicator of this fact is the large number of taẓkiraḥs of Rekhtah / Hindi poets, and taẓkiraḥs of Persian poets many of whom wrote Rekhtah / Hindi, that were composed outside Delhi during the second half of the century.
At a rough count, at least fifteen such *taźkiraḥs* were written between 1752 and 1795, at places as remote from one another as Aurangabad / Hyderabad in the South and Patna in the Northeast. Poets mentioned in these *taźkiraḥs* are in places ranging from Ahmedabad and Surat in the West to Murshidabad and Calcutta in the East, and of course there are any number of poets from the South. The classes of society that the poets represent are equally diverse: Muslim and Hindu noblemen, other Hindus—Brahmans, Rajputs, Kayasthas, Khattris, Agarwals, so forth—professionals from barber to soldier, from teacher to preacher, Sufis, rakes, kings. Women also appear, as beloveds of poets, and occasionally as poets themselves.

One manifestation of the new Urdu culture was its almost morbid obsession with ‘correctness’ in language. Undue—and sometimes even almost mindless—emphasis on ‘correct’ or ‘standard, sanctioned’ speech in poetry and prose, and even in everyday converse, is one of the most interesting and least understood aspects of Urdu culture from the mid-eighteenth century onward. Persian’s immense prestige (‘Persian’ here includes Arabic) may account for a part of this emphasis. The idea seems to have been to make Reḵtah approximate to the Persian of a native Persian speaker. This was elitism of a sort, and may well have been meant to be exactly that.

Shāh Ḥātim is reputed to be the person with whom all this began. He did recommend using words in accordance with their original Arabic / Persian pronunciation—something which, as we have seen in Chapter Four, the Dakanī also recommended, but never practiced. Ḥātim also suggested removal of ‘Hindvi bhākhā’ words from the Reḵtah / Hindi poet’s active vocabulary. But the suspicion remains that all this may have been a defensive ploy for creating a distance between the language of Valī and that of Delhi. For Ḥātim also emphasised, in no uncertain terms, the primacy of established idiom over bookish idiom. Also, Ḥātim doesn’t seem to have been at all faithful to his own prescriptions. In the selection from his *divān* called *Divān zādah* (1755/6), which he made by ‘purging’ his older poetry of usages of which he now disapproved, one can find abundant examples of the very things that he was seeking to remove from the language of poetry.

As compared to the prescriptions, however self-contradictory, of Ḥātim, Valī’s approach was freer and more relaxed: both local and Arabic / Persian pronunciation had equal right in the language; words used by the common people need not be avoided. This was the credo in Reḵtah also, but Valī, because of his influence and popularity, was the great exemplar who was to be imitated, and also denied. This tension comes through clearly in Shāh Ḥātim’s Preface to the *Divān zādah*:

This servant [Shāh Ḥātim]...during the past ten or twelve years, has given up many words. He has favoured such Arabic and Persian words as are easy to understand, and are in common use, and has also favoured the idiom of Delhi which the Mirzās of [North] India and the non-religious standard speakers [rīnā] have in their use, and has stopped the using the language of all areas and sundry, and also the Hindvi that is called the bhākhā; [he] has adopted only such a register as is understood by the common people, and is liked by the elites.\(^\text{13}\)

One can see Ḥātim’s dilemma: he wants to hunt with the hounds and run with the hare. He doesn’t want to declare independence from Valī, but he does want to emphasise his Delhi-ness. He wants to use Arabic and Persian vocabulary, but only such as can be commonly understood. (Valī was quite fond of Arabic phrases.) He wants to use language that is sophisticated and secular, language used by the Mirzās (educated upper classes) and rīnds (more or less free-living, non-religious frequenters of wine houses and market places—the educated, carefree kind of people) of the North, but the language should also be such as can be understood by the common people of Delhi (not Aurangabad). He doesn’t want to use Brāj Bhāṣā, the language of sub-Delhi areas, whose domain lay to the south of Delhi (that is, toward Aurangabad), and from which both Dakanī and Reḵtah had derived a number of rātīsam words. Valī’s language abounds with them.

Ḥātim’s agenda was basically twofold: its negative part was his (un)conscious desire to move away from Valī; its positive

\(^{13}\)Shāh Ḥātim, *Divān zādah*, p. 40.
part was his wish to bring the language of poetry into line with that of the Mirzās, the rinds, and the common people of Delhi. Balancing all these elements was a task, but great poets like Mir performed it very well. Unfortunately, it was the least important and the least right-minded part of Shāh Hātim’s agenda—namely, downplaying the value of tatsam words—that caught the eye and fancy of many later historians. What was in fact an attempt to arrive at a secular, urbanised and urbane, modern-idiomatic, literate but not overburdened language was seen, and hailed, as exclusionism and ‘reformism’, as if the language were a criminal or a patient who needed reform or healing, and it was the duty of the poet to perform this task.

There is no doubt that the proportion of tatsam vocabulary declined in Rekhtah / Hindī over the second half of the eighteenth century. But was it because of Hātim, or other reasons not yet discovered? Was Hātim describing in the guise of prescription, and was the language at that time changing faster than we make allowance for? One would need more evidence than is available at present to ascribe the decline in the number of tatsam words in literary Urdu to the ‘exclusionism’ and ‘reforms’ inaugurated by Hātim.

In any case, Urdu literary culture from the late eighteenth century onwards does place an unfortunate stress, which is also entirely disproportionate to its value, on ‘purism’, ‘language reform’, ‘purging the language of undesirable usages’, and—worst of all—privileging all Persian-Arabic over all Urdu. Urdu is the only language whose writers have prided themselves on ‘deleting’ or ‘excising’ words and phrases from their active vocabulary. Instead of taking pride in the enlargement of vocabulary, they took joy in limiting the horizon of language, even going to the extent of banishing many words used by literate speakers, or even by their own ustāds.  

As a result of the process described above, the order of privilege that finally emerged in the Urdu literary-linguistic culture by the third quarter of the nineteenth century—one that remains more or less intact to this day—can be depicted as follows:

Top: Iranian Persian; that is, Persian written by Iranians who never came to India.
Upper Middle: Indo-Iranian Persian; that is, Persian written by Iranian-born writers who lived much of their creative life in India.
Middle: Indian Persian; that is, Persian written by Indians, or by descendants of Iranians settled in India.
Lower Middle: Urdu, provided its Arabic / Persian component conforms as far as possible to Arabic / Persian.
Bottom: Urdu with an Arabic / Persian content that does not conform to Arabic / Persian norms and format.

In the above order of things, ‘Persian’ means the Persian described in the top two categories above. ‘Arabic’ means, generally, Arabic absorbed into Persian. ‘Iran’ means Greater Iran, which includes much of what is known today as Central Asia. The term also subsumed Afghanistan until well into the eighteenth century.

Why this pecking order came into existence, and why Urdu writers themselves took an active part in establishing and perpetuating it, is a question that I have addressed, though not entirely solved, elsewhere.  

Of course, the power of langue is always greater than that of parole, and Urdu is no exception. Thousands of ‘incorrect’ or ‘questionable’ words and phrases entered even the literary language, despite the restrictions, and are entering even now. Yet many of the taboos that originated in the early nineteenth century are still in place. In theory, and also to a large extent in

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14One of the more blatant examples of this kind of literary gentrification is a divāṅ of Muḥṣafī (1750-1824)—actually a selection from four of his divāṅs—printed at Rampur in 1878. The selection was made by Muṣaffar ‘Ali Asr (1801-81), a shāgīrd of Muḥṣafī, and Amir Ṣufī (1828-1900), a shāgīrd of Ṣufī. They took numerous liberties with the dead master’s text in order to bring his language into line with what they regarded as the standard, proper idiom, worthy of a modern ustād (see Muḥṣafī, Divāṅ-e muṣafī, Khuda Bakhsh Library reprint edition).

15For detailed discussion, see ‘Privilege Without Power: The Strange Case of Persian (and Urdu) in Nineteenth Century India.’
practice, Urdu literary idiom remains the most restrictive kind imaginable. This linguistic restrictiveness contrasts most starkly with the steady expansion of literary theory that we see from Vâli (1665/7-1707) to Shâh Naṣîr (1755/-1838) and Shâlîk Nâsîkh (1776-1838).

The first major discovery in the field of literary theory was that a distinction could be made between mazmûn (theme) and ma'nt (meaning). Classical Arab and Iranian theorists use the term ma'nt to mean ‘theme, content.’ As late as 1752, we find Tek Chand Bahâr defining the word ma'nt as ‘synonym of mazmûn’. Barely fifty years later, Shâns ul-lughât, the next great Persian dictionary compiled in India, defines ma'nt as ‘that which is connote by the word’. The idea that a poem could be about something (mazmûn, theme), and could mean something different, or something more (ma'nt, meaning), may have come from the Sanskrit. One is reminded of Mammatâ’s classification, following Anandavardhana, of different kinds of meanings, and surpluses of meaning. This has been admirably summed up by Todorov as follows:

At some point during the twelfth century, the Sanskrit poetician Mammatâ (Kavyarâkasa) summarised as follows the prevailing ideas of his day--ideas engendered by the fundamental work of Anandavardhana, who perhaps was the greatest of all theorists of textual symbolism. Mammatâ identified seven differences between direct expression and indirect suggestion:

1. Difference in the nature of the statement: the expressed statement prohibits or denies, for example, while the suggested meaning commands or affirms.
2. Difference in time: the suggested meaning is grasped after the expressed meaning.
3. Difference in the linguistic material: the expressed meaning emanates from words; the suggested meaning may arise from a sound, a sentence, or an entire work.
4. Difference in the means of apprehension: the expressed meaning is understood by means of grammatical rules, whereas the suggested meaning requires a context as well: spatio-temporal circumstances, an interlocutor, and so on.
5. Difference in effect: the expressed meaning brings about a simple cognitive expression; the suggested meaning also expresses charm.
6. Difference in number: the expressed meaning is univocal; the suggested meaning may be plurivalent.
7. Difference in the person addressed: the expressed meaning may well be considered to one character, the suggested meaning to another.

While some of the distinctions made here by Mammatâ would apply to drama alone, the rest can easily be seen in action in the poetry of, for example, Mir (1722-1810), who is not only a master of thâm (item 2 above seems to put the effect of thâm in a nutshell), but also of plurality of meaning (item 6 above), use of plain words which, in the given context, have greater meaning or charm than would otherwise be the case (items 3, 4, and 5 above).

Discussing Piaget’s theory of the processes of ‘accommodation’ and ‘assimilation’ active during the course of a reader’s effort to arrive at the meaning of a given text, Todorov says that this position was first taken by Mammatâ, who said that (in Todorov’s words) ‘it is necessary, first, that an incompatibility between the primary meaning of the word and its context be manifest; second, that a relation of association exist between the primary and secondary meanings’. This clearly sets down the precondition not only for shiešha but also for the much more sophisticated thâm, and it is also apparent that such a theory could not have come into existence without converting the unity of the text into the duality of theme and meaning, or mazmûn and ma'nt.

In Urdu, Mullâ Nuṣratî Bijâpurî (1600-1674) seems to have been the first to use the term mazmûn in the sense of ‘theme, idea.’ Since he does so a number of times, and the context is

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16Bahâr, Bahâr-e ‘ajam, vol. 2, p. 614. Note, however, that Bahâr is familiar with the new term mazmûn.


19Todorov, Symbolism and Interpretation, p. 27.
one of poetic excellence, he is doubtless making a point in literary theory:

/Reveal, oh Lord, on the screen
Of my poetic thought
The freshness and virginity
Of all my themes/.\(^{20}\)

/Your manner is new,
And your speech
Appeals to the heart,
Your themes are lofty,
And colourful/.\(^{21}\)

/I spoke throughout
By means of new themes, and thus
Revealed the power
Of God’s inspiration/.\(^{22}\)

/New, fresh themes
Are my weapons
To cool and kill
My opponent’s breath/.\(^{23}\)

Nuṣṭātī, a man of great learning, may have known Sanskrit. Or he may have picked up a point or two from his Kannada- or Telugu-speaking literary friends, or from his own Kannada—he was originally from an area which is now in Karnataka, and so, for that matter, is Bijapur too at the present time. In any case, he would have been aware of the fact that such a distinction was being made, or assumed, by his Persian-writing colleagues. All of them wrote in the ‘Indian style’, and Nuṣṭātī himself said that he made Dakanī poetry resemble that of Persian. More importantly, he also said that there are many ‘Hindi’ [Indian] excellences that cannot be properly transported into Persian.

\(^{21}\)Nuṣṭātī Bijāpūrī, ‘Āli nāmah, p. 27. Here, he is praising the poet-king ‘Āli ʿAdil Shāh II.
\(^{22}\)Nuṣṭātī Bijāpūrī, ‘Āli nāmah, p. 425.

and he, Nuṣṭātī, having discovered the essence of both, had created a new kind of poetry by mixing the essence of one with the other.\(^{24}\)

The question whether the author intends, or in some way controls, the meanings derived from his text does not seem to have been discussed in classical Urdu literary theory. It is, however, clear that Mammāt’s formulations allow for, or perhaps even stipulate, the author’s control over the meaning(s) of his text. This position, though in general accord with the Perso-Arabic theories of meaning, does not clearly allow for the reader’s autonomy: the reader is at liberty to find meanings in a text so long as he can show that the meanings are there, and have not been superposed. This became necessary in order to defend allegorical-metaphoric-symbolistic interpretations of Sufi literary texts, especially the poetry of Ḥāfīz.

Maulānā Shāh Ashraf ‘Āli Thānāvī (1863/4-1941), perhaps the greatest Indian Sufi ideologue and conservative reformer of Sufi religious practices in the first half of this century, said in a waqī (religious discourse) delivered on February 19, 1922:

The poetry of Ḥāfīz abounds in subtle points relating to the [Sufi] path. And it’s not the case that we [Sufis] extract them from his poetry because of [blind] faith….The fact of the matter is that no one can bring out anything, unless it is there, inside [the poem].\(^{25}\)

It is obvious that Thānāvī is not propounding something here which he regards as original to himself alone: he is stating what he considers as a given in the traditional Indo-Islamic theory of literary interpretation. One consequence of the formulation ‘if a meaning is not in a text, it cannot be found there’ is a new twist given to the theory of authorial intent. If a meaning is contained in a poem, the author must have put it there in some sense, which might not necessarily be the strict intentionalist sense.

However, this theory of interpretation allowed Urdu poets of the eighteenth century to find intricacies in the poems of

\(^{24}\)Jālībī, Tārkīb-e adab-e urdū, vol. 1, p. 335. The passage is quoted from Nuṣṭātī’s Gulshan-e īshq (1657).
others—and thus make room for the same kind of discoveries in their own poems—and to talk of -main afirin (meaning-creation) as a major aspect of creative writing. In Chahar ‘unsur (Four Elements, 1704), a difficult and highly concentrated prose work containing his Sufic-intellectual thought, Bedil declared that the apparent (word) and the unapparent (meaning) are each other’s states, inseparable, and yet they have different identities:

At this locus, the apparent and the unapparent, like the light from the sun, are reflective of each other’s state: and word and meaning, like moisture and water, have a relationship no different than the relationship between the head and the foot. No word ever made up a cluster that a meaning then didn’t make an appearance. And no meaning ever unveiled itself that wasn’t a word. The ends of either thread, like those of the pearl’s bright water, don’t go ahead of one another, and the steps of either of them, like the two feet of a compass, don’t move ahead of the other.26

One advantage of such a theory was that it enabled the poet to place a positive value on new words—that is, words which hadn’t lost their meaning potential through over-use—and also on involved expressions, which needed attention and care to unravel. The poet could thereby justify trying to make the poem’s creation, and also its interpretation, an intellectual exercise. Thus Mīr:

/Each utterance
Has a multiplicity
Of sides, oh Mīr,
Oh what things do I say
With the tongue
Of my pen!/ 27

/Like the beloved’s tresses,
Each of his shī’irs is
Full of curls and twists
Truly, Mīr’s poetry is
Of a wondrous design./ 27

26Bedil, Chahar ‘unsur, p. 235.
27Mīr, Kulliyat, pp. 553, 615.

Another consequence of the theory that mazmūn and ma’nī are separate (and perhaps even separable) was a new stress on the idea of the unity and equality of word and meaning. We saw Vaj’hi expressing—or rather advocating—this notion in his poem Qutb mustart (1609/10). This may have been an unconscious (or even conscious) echo of the concept of sāhīya:

/The difficult part of the art of poetry
Is to make both word and meaning
Coincide/.28

Now Hātim puts this idea to dual use, making a point in literary theory, and also in the beloved’s praise. He says in a ghazal composed in 1752:

/Those of fine imagination
Describe you as a line of verse
Where word agrees with meaning;
Spontaneous, and heart-attracting
From head to foot/.29

The continuing popularity of the notion of the unity of word and meaning can be judged from the fact that Momin (1800-1852) used it nearly a hundred years later. Writing a praise poem-cum-chronogram in Urdu for Mustafā Khān Sheftah’s Persian taktirah, Gulshan-e be-khār (Thornless Garden, 1834), Momin said that here:

/Measuring sings the praises
Of word, and word
Adulates meaning/.30

We have, so far, examined some developments in classical Urdu literary theory which suggest that regardless of the variety of meanings that a text may contain, the author exercises a measure of control over the meaning of his text. However, once it was recognized that a text may have many meanings, it was

28Vaj’hi, Qutb mustart, pp. 53-54.
29Quoted in Hasrat Mohani, Intikhab-e sūkhān, vol. 1, p. 63.
30Sheftah, Gulshan-e be-khār, p. 363.
but a step to assume that the reader could generate his own meanings and that the ultimate control might indeed be his, not the author’s. Again, the lead toward this was provided by Sufic thought. In the malfāq (Conversations) of the great Indian Sufi Shaikh Sharaf ud-Dīn Yahyā Maneri (d. 1380/81), ‘Ain ul-Quzzāt Hamadānī reports the Shaikh as saying:

There is no fixed norm for [explicating] a poem’s meaning. The listener apprehends meaning in accordance with his own state, [and] with whatever meaning he already has in his heart. Example of this is cited from [the case of] the mirror: there is no stable or fixed way in which the image is reflected in a mirror, such that whoever may look into a mirror, may find one and the same image in it. Rather, whoever looks into the mirror will find there a reflection of only his own face. The same is [true] of poetry: whoever listens to it, listens according to his own manner. He derives meaning from the poem agreeably with the state that exists in his heart.31

This position, which is almost at the opposite pole from Ashraf ‘Ali Thānawi’s standpoint, does not seem to have been investigated, or enlarged, in terms of theory. Yet it must have had its effect on literary praxis, for it implies a greater possible distance between word and meaning than Mammāta or Thānawi would seem to allow, and this could permit the poet to take liberties with the language and indulge his taste for abstract images. These qualities became prominent in Urdu poetry with the advent of khyāl bandā.

The introduction of such far-reaching distinctions between theme (ma’amūn) and meaning (ma’nt) had made several more things possible. It was, for instance, recognized that while themes were theoretically infinite, very few of them were acceptable in poetry. Thus the search for new, acceptable themes, or for new ways to express old themes, became a noble occupation for the poet and was called ma’amūn ṣūfīn (creation of themes). This gave rise to a mode in which the theme’s novelty or far-fetchedness, became an objective for its own sake. Far-fetched or novel themes also had, however, to pass

the test of acceptability. This was called khyāl bandā (capturing imaginary, abstract, elusive themes) and the mode, though not the term, seems to have begun with the ‘Indian style’ Persian poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Poetry in this mode was cerebral rather than ‘emotional’, or ‘emotive’. In Urdu, the first traces of this manner can be found in Vāli, ‘Abd ul-Vāli ‘Uzlat and Mir. By the end of the eighteenth century, it was firmly in position as the ruling mode of the day.

As I said above, the term khyāl bandā does not seem to occur in Persian. The terms that Indo-Persian poets routinely employed for the kind of themes that a khyāl band poet might use, were ma’nt-e nazuk (delicate / subtle theme) and ma’nt-e begānah (unfamiliar, unusual, remote theme). Ṣā‘īb used both terms in shi’r’s that are typical shi’r’s of khyāl bandā:

/Whoever, oh Ṣā‘īb
Became acquainted with
Unfamiliar themes, drew away
From the acquaintance of
The common world./

/Exstasy, for me, is to capture
A fine and subtle theme,
Nothing else is the new moon
Of the ʿīd for those
Of subtle and delicate thought
Like me./32

In Urdu, the earliest use of the term khyāl bandā is, appropriately, by Naṣīkh, the quintessential khyāl band poet. Typically, it is also a statement of theory:

/The meaning of the khyāl band
Is right there in the poem itself,
It’s very near, that
Which people believe to be far.33

31Quoted in Vahīd Ashraff, Rūba’ī, Part III, pp. 3-4.
32Ṣā‘īb Tabrizi, Kulliyat, pp. 38, 510.
33Naṣīkh, Kulliyat, p. 317. This shi’r occurs in the first divān, compiled in 1816/17.
This is clearly the same position that we saw in the utterance of Maulānā Shāh Ashraf ‘Alī Thānawī above. But while Thānawī was making a general observation, Nāsikh is placing the question of the khīyāl band poet’s meaning in its proper context: he is, in effect, demanding a close reading of his text. The word bandī assumes importance here. Its literal sense is ‘tying, binding, setting’. So the khīyāl (abstract, remote, notion or theme, or an image or figure conceived mentally) was to be set in the poem just as a gemstone is set into a piece of metal. The poet might do violence to language, but he set down his captured thought as delicately and firmly as a jeweller setting a stone.

Praising the beloved’s beauty, for instance, was a major theme. Praising the beauty of her face was a major sub-theme. Praising the eyes, lips, cheeks, so forth, were major sub-sub-themes. Praising something for which there was no space in any of the conceivable categories presented several kinds of challenge: one had to find such a thing, then one needed to imagine, or find, some praiseworthy aspect of it, and then, hardest of all, one needed to invent terms of praise that conformed to the dictates of convention. This is how Mīr looks at the beloved’s pockmarked face:

/They weren’t so plentiful,
The pockmarks on your face—
Who then has been planting
His glances on your face?/34

This is brilliant, for it implies beauty both before and after disfigurement by smallpox. But the verse turns upon a wordplay: in Urdu, one of the ways to convey the act of looking intently at something is to say, ‘to bury / embed / plant the eyes or the glances in / on something’.

Now Jur’at (1748-1809) imagines a drier situation, but doesn’t quite achieve the image that could bring off the desired effect:

/The body of that rosy-Rose

34Mīr, Kulliyāt, p. 389.
Praising the beloved’s tresses, and his newly sprouted or neatly styled beard, was another favourite sub-theme. Yet another was that of the lover’s side or breast, ripped open by the beloved’s glance as it plundered away the heart. Shāh Naṣīr found one unique image to deal with all this:

/The wound in my side, because
Of the sutures, looks like
A millipede. Don’t tamper
With my heart—there lies a millipede

The darkening down on that face
Oh Naṣīr, is after the curled
Side-lock now. The millipede
Is out to drive the scorpion from his home/.38

It must be remembered that many shīrs of khyāl bandī sound faintly (or even strongly) bizarre in English translation today. One is tempted to believe that they would not sound entirely outlandish to ‘thinking poets’ (in Coleridge’s words) like John Donne, or to other metaphysical poets whose poetry is characterised by what Dr Johnson described as ‘forced thoughts, and rugged metre’. Dr Johnson went on to say:

From those sounds which we hear on small or on coarse occasions, we do not easily receive strong impressions or delightful images; and words to which we are nearly strangers, whenever they occur, draw that attention on themselves which they should transmit to things.

Those happy combinations of words which distinguish poetry from prose, had been rarely attempted; we had few elegancies or flowers of speech, the roses had not yet been plucked from the bramble, or different colours had not been judged to enliven one another.39

This passage could very well be rewritten, omitting the tone and tenor of disapproval, to read as an excellent and perceptive evaluation and appreciation of what the Urdu khyāl bandī poets

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40Nāṣīkh, Kulliyāt, p. 158.
41Nāṣīkh, Kulliyāt, p. 29.
Is all the lamplight there is. 42

These shi’rs of Ghalib also show the weaknesses of khyâl bandî: the image occasionally doesn’t quite fit the theme, creating the problem of insufficient ‘proof’. This may have been one of the reasons for khyâl bandî’s decline after the 1850’s. The main reason, however, seems to have been a radical change in ideas of literary excellence, and greater stress on ‘truth’, and ‘personally felt’ emotion in poetry.

Dr Johnson said that the Metaphysical poets ‘neither copied nature nor life; neither painted the forms of matter, nor represented the operations of the intellect’, and therefore would ‘without great wrong, lose their right to the name of poets’. 43 But it is precisely these things which endear the Metaphysical poets to the modern western mind: refusal to describe the world as it appears to the common eye; straining after difficult and not easily accessible effects; novelty of image and metaphor; and a bold and sweeping brush. These things should have endeared the khyâl bandî poet to the modern Urdu taste as well, had not that taste been corrupted by considerations of ‘realism’ and ‘natural poetry’ as propagated by Halî and others.

Consideration of khyâl bandî took me nearly half a century ahead in my narrative, for khyâl bandî came into its own toward the end of the eighteenth century. The main mode of early eighteenth-century poets was thâm. If khyâl bandî sought to push to the limit the poet’s innovativeness (and in fact also his luck), it was the frequent use of thâm (wordplay generated by the intent to deceive) that betokened the first major attempt to make poems yield more meaning than they seemed at first glance to possess. This attempt was called ma’ân âfîrîn (creation of meanings), as opposed to ma’dâr ma’ânî in (creation of themes). The book definition of thâm is that the poet uses a word that has two meanings, one of which is remoter, less used, than the other, and the remoter one is the intended meaning. The mind of the listener / reader naturally associates the word in question with the less remote, more immediate meaning, and is thus put into deception; or the listener doubts if he heard the verse correctly. Poets of the early eighteenth century, however, did much more than this.

In the hands of Vâli, and the Delhi poets, thâm came to mean many kinds of wordplay. They also created situations where the two meanings of the crucial word that was used to create thâm were equally strong, and it wasn’t possible to decide which was the poet’s intended meaning. Another way of using thâm with greater creativity than its book definition allowed for, was for the crucial word to have more than two meanings, such that all the meanings were more or less relevant to the poem’s discourse. 44

Let us now take a look at some instances of thâm. For obvious reasons, they don’t fare well in translation, and I’ll have to trade off excellence for translatability. The following examples are from Abrû:

/I hacked through life in every way,  
Dying, and having to live again  
Is Doomsday! 45

I’ll now supply, through brief commentary, the aspects of meaning that are lost in translation. The explications are arranged in the order of obvious to less obvious:

1. I hacked...in every way: (1) I tried all ways of living a life; (2) I suffered all kinds of hardship.

Dying...to live again: (1) To be resurrected; (2) To die by inches, again; (3) To become involved in the cycle of living and dying over and over again.

Doomsday: (1) The day of resurrection, when all the dead will be brought back to life; (2) A major calamity; (3) A great deed; (4) A cruelty.

42 Ghalib, Divân-e ghalib kâmîl, tarîkht tarîth se, p. 199. I would like to acknowledge the value of Gyan Chand’s commentary, Ta$fîr-e ghalib, in helping elucidate these highly complicated shi’rs.


44 For a comparatively extended examination of thâm and related matters, see my Urdu gharzal ke aham mor.

45 Abrû, Divân-e abrû, p. 270.
Here is another illustrative verse of thâm by Ābrū:

/I turned my heart to blood through grief,
And then the blood to water
And poured it forth through the eyes,
And was only then called ābrāf. 46

Ābrū here refers to: (1) The poet's name; (2) [The heart as] honour for the face; (3) [The heart as] brightness--adornment--of the face; (4) [The heart as] water flowing down the face; (5) Dignity [as name for the heart]. The latter four meanings turn on the literal-metaphorical sense of āb (brightness, water) and rā (face), the idea being that brightness of face betokens honour and dignity, just as blackness of face betokens the opposite. The original Urdu has a happy ambiguity about the subject of 'was called': it applies both to the speaker (Ābrū), and to his heart.

Ali Jawad Zaidi says that Urdu poets of the early eighteenth century adopted the art of maqmān dhîqât and complex craftsmanship as a conscious design, and the underlying theory 'was not different from what Bhāmaha had developed in the seventh century. The tradition that travelled from Sanskrit to Persian, and from thence to Urdu, may have kept changing its form and structure, but not its spirit'. 47

That there is considerable truth in what Zaidi says is borne out by the fact that Bhāmaha did place special emphasis on what he called atishayokti, a concept that he defined as follows: 'An utterance, transcending the common modes of speech, resorted to with some purpose, is regarded as the poetic figure, called atishayokti'. He goes on to say, 'Atishayokti alone is the entire vakrokti which creates the charm in meaning and for which the poet should make efforts'. 48 R. S. Tewary says that Kuntaka defined vakrokti as 'an utterance characterised by wit or ingenuity'. 49 When we read the above statements with Krishnamoorthy's statement that 'Bhāmaha and Daśīn held the view that the common denominator of all arthâlankâras was vakrokti or atishayokti', 50 we can begin to understand the true nature of the thâm practiced by the Hindi / Rekhthah poets of the eighteenth century, and its debt, direct or oblique, to Sanskrit literary thought.

The main point about thâm was it was an intended act, and had for its purpose the following objectives: to deceive, or surprise, the reader / listener; to create a happy effect of wit; and, ultimately, to explore new dimensions of meaning, and the limits of language. Even in its most elementary form, it was regarded as sanat-e ma'navi (a figure pertaining to meaning), an arthâlankâra, and was not just a frivolity, as modern Urdu critics seem unanimously to have held. It had greater complexity than the Sanskrit shlesha, for shlesha seems to recognise only two senses of a word to be in operation. In fact, Udbhata seems to have denied even two senses to a word, holding that in case of shlesha, 'the words should be regarded as different when they have different senses, even though their forms may be the same'. 51

The position of Mammâta was closer to the concept of thâm as defined in the books—'two different expressions, identical in sound, uttered simultaneously', 52 except that in the hands of the Urdu poet, an thâm-based utterance could convey many more than just two meanings. Also, one or more of the meanings of the thâm-bearing text in Urdu could be irrelevant or not fully relevant, and provide only the pleasure of piquancy or play. In all such cases, Mammâta's formulation to the effect that 'An expression can give only one sense at a time' 53 seems to break

46Ābrū, Divān-e ābrū, p. 103.
47Zaidi, Do adab i iskal, p. 41.
49Tewary, A Critical Approach to Classical Indian Poetics, p. 252.
50Krishnamoorthy, Indian Literary Theories, p. 168.
51Kunjunni Raja, Indian Theories of Meaning, p. 44.
52Kunjunni Raja, Indian Theories of Meaning, p. 45.
53Kunjunni Raja, Indian Theories of Meaning, p. 45.
down. Sanskrit theory recognizes that though the primary sense of a word, the abhidha, is fixed, other contextual factors like the speaker's character, the time, the place; and so forth can make the word 'suggest various other ideas'. But here we are in the realm of dhvani, rather than meaning proper, while both tham and shlesha are primarily matters of semantics.

The major difference between the Sanskrit shlesha and the tham as practically invented by Khusrav and perfected by the major Urdu poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, lies in the ideas of the Indo-Persians about the nature of language. While Sanskrit linguistic and literary theory strongly inclines toward the notion of language as the means of (honest) communication, the Indo-Persians seem to revel in the idea that deception is one of the legitimate functions of language, or at least of creatively employed language. Thus if a text has more than one discernible meaning by virtue of tham or even by virtue of the less comprehensive shlesha, the deception lies mainly in the fact that the listener / reader is obliged to grant that the text which by definition should convey a definite message, is seen here as conveying more than one message at the same time and is thus compromising the accuracy function of language.

Another insight pertaining to literary theory and practice was provided by recognition of the fact that there can be poems that make a strong appeal to the emotions, but the meaning of which may be, at least at first sight (and perhaps always), not very clear, or not very valuable. Reconsideration and close analysis may, in some cases, reveal the poem to be the site of possibilities or actual occurrence of significant meaning. But in all such poems, meaning, that is the analysable content, is not the most important part of the poem. The quality that made this possible was called kaifiyat, a state of subtle and delicious enjoyment—an enjoyment that could be of the nature of the pleasure that one derives from tragedy, or a sad piece of music. Also, kaifiyat does not permit sentimentality, 'sentimentality' here being held to mean an extravagance in words, words that are larger and louder than the emotion that the poem is trying to convey. Kaifiyat makes no overt appeal to the listener / reader's emotion. In many cases, the protagonist / speaker's own mood or state of mind may be difficult to fathom. Certainly, it is always complex enough to discourage a direct, linear interpretation.

The concept of kaifiyat reminds us of dhvani in some respects. Krishnamoorthy informs us of Anandavardhana's appreciation in a poem of 'the vital animation provided by the emotional content described in all its variety, including states of mind', in a poem. Anandavardhana cites an example provided by Bhatṭendurāja, in which the latter describes the physical and emotional response of the gopīs when they first look at Krishna in his full youth. Krishnamoorthy paraphrases Anandavardhana's comments on Bhatṭendurāja's muktaka as follows: 'For one who cannot respond to the intensity of love in this stanza, it cannot have any poetic value. There is no recognisable figure of speech beyond two common-place similes, nor any highly striking poetic gem embodying the rasa of srnāra or love'.

While dhvani is a more comprehensive term than kaifiyat, what Anandavardhana seems to be saying here is precisely what most often happens in a verse with kaifiyat. The absence of striking metaphors or images makes a shīr of kaifiyat even harder to translate than an tham-bearing shīr, yet I'll make an attempt, and try to convey some of the flavour of such shīrs. Here are a few from a ghazal by Muṣṣafā:

/I looked at her, and sighed a sigh
I looked at her with longing, once

When she wielded her sword on me
I put up my hands for protection

When someone behaved arrogantly
I wore my cap awry, rakish

54Kunjumni Raja, Indian Theories of Meaning, p. 311.

55Krishnamoorthy, Indian Literary Theories, 193-95.

56For a good discussion of kaifiyat, see Pritchett, Nets of Awareness, pp. 119-22.
Mute, patient, I gave up my life,
Oh Mushafi, and made her bashfulness
My witness./ 57

It can be said that the mood of a kaifyat-bearing shīr recalls that of an accomplished Elizabethan lyric, or song. This view would be somewhat reductionistic if applied always, and especially to a truly great poet like Mir, whose kaifyat poems are found very often to hold complex meanings too. It should, however, generally hold true for poems like the one quoted above. Consider Shakespeare, in Twelfth Night (Act II, Scene iv):

/ Come away, come away, death,
And in sad cypress let me be laid;
Fly away, fly away, breath;
I am slain by a fair cruel maid.
My shroud of white, stuck all with yew,
O prepare it!
My part of death, no one so true
Did share it./

Here are some further examples of kaifyat, from Valī to Mīr. The verses have again been chosen with a view to their amenability to translation:

/ How can my Love leave my heart
And go away?
The prey is wounded, how
To go away?

If my tears didn’t come to help,
How would the choking
That afflicts my heart
Go away?/ 58

This is Valī. Not much commentary is needed here, except that the original is much more subtle: The phrase ‘go away’ applies to both the hunter and the prey; the phrase that I translate as

'leave my heart' actually has only 'leave heart' in the original; and since in the original it can also mean 'to lose heart', one meaning of the shīr could be that the beloved should not lose heart at not having brought down the prey in one clean blow, and should stay to finish the job. In the second shīr, the original has the word ghubār, which means 'dust'; in the present idiomatic context, it means repressed unhappiness, rancour, or displeasure. For want of a better alternative, I was obliged to make an 'explanatory' translation, which does no good to the polysemy of ghubār; also, the wordplay between 'water / tears' and 'dust' is inevitably lost.

Let us now look at a sampling from Sirāj Aurangābādī (1714-1763):

/ Hear, oh hear the account
Of the amazement of love:
Nothing remained, neither madness
Nor the enchantress;
You didn’t remain you, I
Didn’t remain me. All that was left
Was senselessness.

What a breeze it was that blew
From the direction of
The unapparent. The garden of joy
Burnt down, but a bough
Of the Tree of Pain—one would
Call it the heart—
Remained green./ 59

Let me round off this discussion of kaifyat with examples from a ghazal by Mīr, in his third divān, compiled around 1785:

/ I wept away all the blood there was
In my heart; where is any drop left now?
Sorrow turned me to water
And my life flowed away,
What is there left of me now?

Lover and beloved, all of them

58Valī, Kulliyat, p. 247.
59Sirāj, Kulliyat, p. 667.
Became story and legend here;
This world is a place to weep at,
Where is Laila, and where is Majnun?

How full the wilderness felt
When Majnun was around—
He’s gone, and where is
That brightness, that grace
Left in the desert now?

Grieving for friends gone away
Away my life,
My heart longs for them so much
But how can I find them now?60

The interrogative has a rhetorical power in Urdu which English cannot match—and my translation is feeble enough. Yet if not the rhetorical power, some of the pensive, bitter-heavy mood perhaps does come through. Villon’s poem ‘Ballade des Dames du Temps jadis’ and especially its refrain, inevitably comes to mind—‘But where are the snows of yesteryear?’61

Villon’s tone is perhaps a little mocking. Mir too is quite capable of mocking, but in moments such as these the poet / protagonist’s voice comes through as the voice of one whos has seen all weariness, all departures, and all journeys. Yet like Shakespeare, Mir gives free rein to his instinct for wordplay even in such situations. I have not, for obvious reasons, chosen the wordplay shi’r s, or tried to bring out in my translation the faint nuances of wordplay that the present shi’r s do have.

I devote so much space to khyal bandi and kaifiyat because khyal bandi, if at all known to modern Urdu scholars, is one of the unmentionables of Urdu poetry; hardly any critic has had the courage to recognise that Ghâlîb—whom most people today regard as the greatest Urdu poet—was a khyal bandi to the core. As for kaifiyat, the term is unknown, and modern poets like Firdaq Goharhpuri (1896-1982), some of whose poetry evinces the quality of kaifiyat, have been praised for entirely the wrong reasons.

Another concept, not fully developed or realised, but clearly present in poets from Mir to Shâh Naşîr, and even Ghâlîb, was that of shorish, or shor angez. The phrase shor angez has been present in Persian since at least the sixteenth century. It seems to have become a technical term by the end of the seventeenth century. The literal sense of shor angez is ‘tumult-arousing’. That it was used in a technical sense is borne out by the presence of another term for the same effect: the term shorish, which simply means ‘tumult, disturbance’. So obviously it was a quality of the poem, and not merely its effect on an audience, that was in question here.

Apparently a poem was considered shor angez if it had the quality of passionate, yet impersonal, comment on the outside universe, or the external state of things.62 Mir has often claimed his poetry to be shor angez. Apart from the fact that this quality of Mir’s poetry seems to be obvious even to us today, it must have been so powerfully perceived in his own day that Sauda satirized it, with apparently Mir in mind. He has a whole ghazal, criticizing mediocre poets. In the last but one shi’r he makes a play upon the word shor, which means both ‘tumult’, and ‘salty, of pleasantly pungent taste’, and says:

/ The passion-arousing quality
of insipid poetry
is something like the alkaline salts
that grow on a piece of land
where people go and piss./63

Even if it is not a satire on Mir, or maybe in addition to being one, the ghazal is certainly a kind of statement in literary theory: Sauda regards ‘meaning-creation’, ‘search for colourful themes’, ‘acceptance by the people’, and ‘shor angez’, as important attributes for a good poet.

Then there were matters concerning the grammar of poetry, like rabt (connection between the two lines of a shi’r), and

60 Mir, Kulliyat, pp. 556-57.


62 For a good though brief discussion of shor angez see Pritchett, Nets of Awareness, pp. 113-16.

matters flowing from *thām*-like *rī́yāt* (consonance) and *munāsībāt* (affinity), both pertaining to the play of words in extending or strengthening the meaning in a poem—which came into prominent consideration by about 1750.

Thus a number of theoretical ideas, or refinements of existing ideas, about the nature and art of poetry, some dealing with fundamentals and some with details, were developed and promulgated in the century and a half that passed after Vāli came to Delhi in the year 1700. The process stopped when the great discontinuity of 1857 occurred. Old ideas were given up, or lost, in the new literary ethos that looked to what it thought was British (or European) culture for providing both model and ratification. After 1857, classical poetics in Urdu lost prestige so fast that it had all but disappeared by the time the new century arrived.\(^{64}\)

Urdu writers began to leave Delhi by about 1760. The exodus was not so great, nor life in Delhi so uniformly intolerable, as 'official' historians tend to describe. In fact, the century, for all its turmoil and upheavals, seems to have been a great one for writers who wanted to travel. Āzād Bilgrāmī (1704-1785) travelled to Thāṭha (Sind), Lahore, Delhi, Aurangābād, Arabia, and many other places. Qamar ud-Dīn Minnat (1733/4-1792/3) went to Lucknow, then Calcutta, then Murshidābād, then Hyderabad, and then again to Lucknow and Delhi. Ṣabd ul-Valī Uzlat (1692/3-1775) travelled from Surat to Delhi, then to the Deccan. Siyākkoṭī Mal Vārastah (d.1766) is reputed to have travelled to Iran to imbibe modern Persian idiom, and so on. Ṭek Chand Bahār too is reputed to have undertaken a similar journey. Ṣalī Ḥazīn came to Delhi from Iran, went to Lucknow, then settled in Banaras. Mīr Zīyā went to Lucknow from Delhi; then he went to Murshidābād. Even such a minor person as Abūl-ḥasan Amrūllāh Ilāhābādī travelled to Banaras, Patna, and Murshidābād to do research for his *tazkīrah*.

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\(^{64}\) This process of change, along with its implications for Urdu poetry, has been studied with sympathy and understanding by Frances Pritchett in *Nets of Awareness*.

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People did leave Delhi for other places, though, and many came to Delhi too, to stay for long periods or short. The most charismatic of Delhi's new writers, Khān-e Ārzū, came from Gwalīr at a fairly mature age. Inshā'ullāh Khān Inshā (1756-1817) came with his father from Murshidābād to Delhi; later, he went to live in Lucknow. Mīr came from Agra, travelled widely in modern Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, and spent the last twenty-two years or so of his life in Lucknow. Sādūš (1706-1781) travelled to Farrukhābād around 1760, then to Lucknow. Mūṣafī went from Bareilly to Delhi, then Lucknow, then Delhi, and finally to Lucknow. Saʿādat Yār Khān Rangīn (1756-1834/5) was brought by his people from Sārhind to Delhi when he was small. He travelled to Lucknow and elsewhere on business, but remained based in Delhi. Qā'im Chandpurī (1724-1795) came to Delhi from Bareilly. Rāṣīk Aẓīmābādī (1748-1822) came from Patna in the 1770's to Delhi, hoping to become a pupil of Mīr's. He spent quite some time in Delhi before going back to Patna. In fact, a reasonably exhaustive list of notable writers who travelled about in the eighteenth century might occupy many pages.

On the whole, more people left Delhi than came to it. The process continued until about the end of the century. Lucknow gained the most, but others like Murshidābād, Banaras, Patna, and Calcutta (at the turn of the century) also made important acquisitions. The eighteenth century was much more aware of itself than the previous one. There was greater contact among poets. Writers from the North generally knew about those from the South, though they may not always have acknowledged them. Writers from the South knew quite well the works of their Northern counterparts. Criticisms and appreciations were constantly offered in writing or orally.

Bāqār Āghā (1745-1808), the greatest Dākānī / Rekhtā literary personality of the eighteenth century, though himself unacknowledged by *tazkīrah* writers of the North, evinces familiarity with the works of all major northern poets of his time. He regards only Sādūš as worthy of his steel.\(^{65}\) In one

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\(^{65}\) Alīn Sabā Navūdī, *Maulānā bāqār āghā ke adabī navādir*. See Navūdī's introduction, his selection from Āghā's *dīvan*, and Āghā's Preface to *Gulzār-e 'ishq* (1794), pp. 41, 77, 82, 144-147. Also see
Shīr he praises Dard (1720-1785) by implication, saying that after Dard, there will be no one to value and admire the poetry of Bāqar Āghā. He says that Saudā’s admirers are everywhere from ‘Hind to Karnatak’, but that some people, while they place Saudā above even the Persian writers, do not acknowledge Nūṣrāt, just because ‘his language is not smooth’. Bāqar Āghā is reported to have tangled with the great Āzād Bilgrāmī when the latter found some faults in Āghā’s Persian matnāvī, Mirāt al-ul-husn.

The extent to which distantly placed poets kept abreast of each other’s work at the time can be judged from an incident involving Āzād. Though the matter relates to Persian, it can be taken as typical for both Rekhtah/Hindi and Persian poets. ‘Abd al-Vaḥīb Iftīkhār tells us in his Tazkīrah-e benaẓīr (1758/9) that Āzād Bilgrāmī compiled a tazkīrah called Yad-e baizā. While Āzād was in Lahore, Ḥākim Lāhorī, himself a prominent poet, obtained from Āzād a copy of Yad-e baizā. When Siyālkoṭi Mal Vārastah saw it, he observed that Āzād had misattributed a number of shīr. Word of this reached Āzād too. Checking up on the matter, Āzād realized that there was truth in what Vārastah said. He therefore withdrew his tazkīrah, and wrote that errors had occurred in it due to the unreliable nature of the texts that he worked from; should anyone find wrong attributions in the copies of the work already in circulation, they should refer the matter to the tazkīrah writer. Āzād was gracious, but the incident generated bad blood between Vārastah and Āzād’s pupils.

Āzād Bilgrāmī, Bāqar Āghā, Siyālkoṭi Mal Vārastah—they were not atypical poets in the century. All of them were at home in more languages than one—Āzād and Āghā were excellent poets in Arabic too, and both knew Sanskrit. Āghā knew Telugu as well. That none of them was in Delhi is significant. As Muzaffār Alam has astutely observed, the history of the eighteenth century in India needs to be studied from a non-central, non-Delhi-oriented point of view as well. ‘It can be seen’, Muzaffār Alam says, ‘that local and regional social groups were emerging as powerful forces’ in eighteenth-century India. The result of a Delhi-centred approach, therefore, is that ‘one remains imprisoned within the narrow confines of Delhi to the exclusion of significant developments elsewhere’.

Though Delhi lost a number of prominent persons to Lucknow, it retained its hegemonic pretensions, at least in regard to Rekhtah/Hindi. Important literary centres had sprung up all over the country, and were vying for space, if not supremacy, on the literary-cultural map. Lucknow became Delhi’s chief rival for many reasons. Its ruling class mostly came from Delhi, and as the eighteenth century drew towards its close, Lucknow may have begun to look upon itself as replacing, rather than representing, Delhi. Sulaimān Shīkh, Shāh ‘Alam’s second son, had been managing the affairs of the state at Delhi during the period 1759-1772, when his father was elsewhere. Palace intrigues obliged him to leave Delhi for Lucknow in 1784. Thus Lucknow was well set to consider itself Delhi in miniature.

Somewhat naturally, Delhi claimed to be the pristine source of the language, and implied that the language spoken elsewhere could claim to be reliable only in so far as it conformed to the register of Delhi. Non-natives of Delhi, or even those whose forebears left Delhi long ago to settle elsewhere, could scarcely claim to be owners of standard speech. Writing in 1807, Inshā gave a certificate of correctness to the Urdu spoken by some people of Lucknow, but for political reasons: his patrons were the Nāvāb of Avadh, and

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Rāhī Fidāʾī, Dār al-‘ulām latfīyah velār kā adabī manqar nāmah, p. 98.

66 Alīm Šābā Nāvīdī, Maulānā bāqar āghā ke adabī navādīr, p. 114.

67 Alīm Šābā Nāvīdī, Maulānā bāqar āghā ke adabī navādīr, p. 115.

68 Iftīkhār, Tazkīrah-e benaẓīr, pp. 13-14.
Prince Sulaimān Shikoh. He gave short shrift to ordinary Lucknow residents:

Thus the people of Lucknow are those who pronounce ʿilm as ʿilm, or ʿilm; ʿaqil as ʿaqil; ʿālīb-e ʿilm as ʿālīb-e ʿilm; and when I say, ‘the residents of Lucknow’, I mean those who after the devastation of Delhi perhaps Abdāl’s invasion of 1761], took up residence in Lucknow. But the congregation of these people of Delhi is not proven before me in any city other than Lucknow. Residents of ʿĀẓmābād [Patna] and Murshidabad, in their own estimation, regard themselves as competent Urdu speakers, and regard their own city as the urdua...”.

Inshā’s cautious pronouncements in favour of Lucknow’s Delhi-originated elite, and his rejection of Lucknow’s locals, didn’t win him many adherents. For the natives of Lucknow who, according to Inshā, couldn’t pronounce simple Arabic words correctly, claimed authority and normativeness for their own usages, even if this entailed total or partial rejection of Delhi. Writing in 1825, Rajab ‘Alī Beg Surūr scoffed at the Urdu of Delhi. In the long, colourful, and somewhat strained prose panygeric of Lucknow that he put by way of Introduction to his prose romance Fasānah-e ‘ajāḥīb (1825)—generally called a dāstān, although its claim to this generic status is untenable and the author himself did not so describe it—Surūr went out of his way to criticize not only Delhi’s language, but also its status as a well-administered, populous city:

The speech that is current in Lucknow’s lanes and alleys—let anyone who heard it elsewhere, recite it, or if they saw it written, let them exhibit the text. From the time of Bābūr Shāh’s rule to the reign of Akbar II, [in Delhi] it was like the saying ‘the hearth fireless, and the pitcher waterless’. The city of Delhi was a wilderness, its people unhappy and dumbstruck. The [worth of the

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70This point was first noted by Maulī ʿAbd-ul-Ḥaq and also by Brij Mohan Dattāreyā Kaifi, early editor and translator respectively, of Inshā, Daryā-e lātafat (see Kaifi’s edition, p. 108). Yaktā, following or anticipating Inshā, made a similar point (Yaktā, Dastār ul-faṣāḥāt, p. 6.)


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Seven: The ‘New’ Literary Culture

spoken] idiom of all kings, the intonation, the standard speech of the Exalted Court, all this can be seen from the works composed by the poets of Delhi. The delicacy and subtlety of [the speech of Lucknow] was never there, nor is it there yet...

Mīr Amman Sāhib has given the name Bagh o bahār [Garden and Spring] to the story of the Four Dervishes, [he] has actually chewed the thorn of jealousy, has made a meaningless fuss, insisting that this language [Urdu] is of their [the people of Delhi’s] mouth alone, their allotted share from Destiny, but in comparison to ʿĀṭī Ḥusain Khān, the original author, has tripped in a hundred places.

An answer to Surūr was given by Fakhr ud-Dīn Ḥusain Suḵhān Dihlavī, in his prose romance called Sarosh-e suḵhān:

Since Mirzā Sāhib has, in his compilation, made fun of poor Mīr Amman Dihlavī, and has directed a few harsh barbs from his tongue toward that clear-speaking one, so I also now say: Surūr Lakhnāvi revised and corrected the Fasānah-e ‘ajāḥīb a hundred times, tightened and cleaned up phrases that were dull, but he still couldn’t spot [all] his errors... In many places he has used the feminine gender where masculine was called for, and masculine, where feminine was needed... The truth of the matter is that one who doesn’t know the language of the Exalted Court, doesn’t know masculine from feminine, has never lived in Shāhjahānābād, hasn’t seen the Royal Court—what face could such a person have to compose a dāstān?.

This was bandying words, and also defining battle lines. The dispute never became too hot, but its contours hardened, and also changed, in the nineteenth century. Ḥāfīz Ḥusain Ḥāfī declared that there were certain intrinsic differences between the poetry of Delhi and Lucknow, the former being less given to verbal excesses and conceits. More than what Ḥāfī actually said, it was what he didn’t say that defined his biases. In his momentous Muḡaddamah (Preface, 1893), he quoted numerous Delhi poets, often with approval, to illustrate his points, but...
rarely bothered to quote from the poets of Lucknow, except to express disapproval, or when—as in the case of Mir Anis (1802-1872)—he had no choice but to praise the poet. The air that pervades this most influential of books is that there are two kinds of poetry: Delhi poetry and Lucknow poetry. The former is generally superior. This led to the supposition that Delhi poetry is ‘spiritual’, ‘sufistic’, ‘simple’, ‘not given to physical-erotic themes’, and ‘free from verbal and other excesses’. Lucknow poetry is ‘shallow’, ‘given to wordplay’, ‘obsessed with physical-erotic themes’—in a word, ‘decadent’.

The theory of ‘two schools of Urdu poetry—Delhi and Lucknow’ thus came into existence. The most interesting thing to note in this more or less ongoing fiction is that appeal was rarely, if ever, made to classical canons and practices in defence or denigration. That is, no one ever stopped to inquire whether the categories of ‘truth’, ‘realism’, ‘genuineness of feeling’; ‘inwardness’ as opposed to ‘artificiality’ and ‘outwardness’; ‘Persianism’ as opposed to ‘limpidity and felicity of language’; and so on, were at all the categories through which the past literary culture of Delhi and Lucknow understood itself. By the time the major modernising texts of Urdu literature came out—Ab-e hayat by Mu‘ammad Husain Azad (1880), Mujaddamah-e shi‘r o shi‘tri by Aljaf Husain Haali (1893), Kashif ul haq‘iq by Imad Imam Asar (1894), and Yadgar-e ghali by Haali (1897)—both time and space had quite changed for Urdu literature, and our narrative must stop here.

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For an extensive discussion see Zaidi, Do adabt iskal, and Petievich, Assembly of Rivals.