

The City of Beauties in Indo-Persian Poetic Landscape

SUNIL SHARMA

Premodern Persian poetry was largely produced in an urban environment, and poets, whether associated with a royal court or of a mystical bent, had a special relationship with the city in which they practiced their craft. In prosperous times the city was the location of patronage networks and a cosmopolitan center of cultural life, as well as being a macrocosm of the narrower spaces that provided the context for the performance of Persianate poetry, i.e., the private *mahfil* (assembly) or the *majlis* (session) of courtiers or Sufis. The opinion of Gustave E. von Grunbaum concerning Arab poets can equally be applied to those of other Islamic traditions:

The poets have set reasons when they praise life in the city ... They take pride in the presence of a powerful prince, of men learned and pious, without exhibiting as a rule much interest in the glories of the city's past. They have an open eye for its scenic beauties, and like their less articulate fellows identify strongly with their place of residence yielding only too often to the impulse to turn on other cities and their inhabitants if some disappointment does not even provoke them into an attack on the place which they had praised to the sky only a short while before.¹

As a result, the large corpus of topographical literature in Persian is often the only documentation of places and people that have otherwise vanished without a trace from historical memory. In the Indo-Persian context, poets affiliated with patrons who had commissioned grand building projects, such as Amir Khusraw's (d. 1325) description of the architectural projects of the Delhi sultans and the poems of Mughal poets active at Shah Jahan's court, had a prescribed role in translating the vision of a new building or city into the discursive realm of poetry.² Along with the buildings and gardens of a city, a Persian poet's amorous gaze would often settle on the beautiful inhabitants of the place, who embodied a city's vigor and vitality. Working within a narrow system of poetics, but one that did not exclude the potential for innovation, poets described relationships between poet and patron or poet and city in the metaphorical language of love. Given the power-based and

often mercenary nature of such relationships, it is not surprising to find the dalliance of the lover and beloved set in the commercial world of a thriving city. In this paper, I would like to explore the rhetorical connections between love lyric, commerce, and the city at one level, and at another level, read Indo-Persian city poetry (and Urdu to the extent that it drew its inspiration from Persian, with which it had a paradoxically complementary yet competitive relationship) as a medium for the transmission of knowledge about various modes of cultural and social interaction in urban centers of power, described in a special poetic language embedded in tradition, but at the same time reflective of a new historical mode of thought. The chronological framework of this study is from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, which happens to correspond to a period of Persian literary innovation and experimentation known as the *sabk-i Hindi* (the Indian style). I shall take into account the works of selected Iranian émigré poets writing for Indian patrons, as well as Indian poets who wrote in Persian and Urdu.

A useful term that is often employed in the discussion of Persian poetry about cities is *shabrashub* or *shabrangiz* (city disturber), which is more often a topos than a literary genre.³ The *shabrashub* was originally an appellation for a beautiful beloved in a lyric poem, but also a short bawdy lyric addressed to a young boy who is engaged in a trade or craft and coquettishly offers his wares to the love-struck poet. One of the earliest instances of this kind of poetry is found in the *divan* of Mas'ud Sa'd Salman (d. 1121), whose *shabrashub* poems, although replete with useful information on the crafts and trades prevalent during his times, represent a metaphorical city and are not localized.⁴ Also included in his versifying of the multifarious fabric of a utopian metropolis are beloveds who are distinguished not only by a trade or craft but also by their membership in a religious community (Hindu, Christian, etc.) or by a distinctive physical characteristic (curly hair, a squint, etc.). With the rise of major urban centers of Persianate culture from the fifteenth century onwards, this kind of poem became a

unified work specifically written for a city and ruler who are named therein. By providing a catalogue of young boys who are cheerfully engaged in their sundry professions, the poet attempts to convey a sense of the dynamic and complex structure of the society in which everyone, including the poet himself, has an assigned role.

After Mas'ud Sa'd Salman, the earliest surviving long poems of this kind were written by the Timurid poet Sayfi of Bukhara (d. 1504) in the form of independent *ghazals* praising the beauty and skill of different youthful professionals, but like his predecessor he did not provide a social context or unifying device by linking them to any particular city.⁵ Beginning in the sixteenth century, a poem in this genre came to be written about every major urban center in the Iranian, Central Asian, and Ottoman regions, sometimes as a single narrative in the *masnavi* form or as short unconnected poems. The poems of Lisani (d. 1534) about Tabriz, Vahidi (d. 1700) about Isfahan, and Sayyida (d. 1707) about Bukhara describe the public spaces of their respective empires and are catalogues of craftsmen and professionals, often using the particular idiom connected with their metiers. In the Indo-Persian tradition, i.e., from the Mughal and Dakhani poets of Persian, there are no works of this genre in an independent form; rather, we come across hybrid texts where the *shabrashub* tends to be used as a topos in the context of a larger work. This may reflect the tastes of the Indo-Persian patrons or poets themselves and is an interesting example challenging the too-frequent monolithic view of Persianate poetry. With the end of the great empires, poets no longer privileged this genre, but again there were peculiar transformations to it in the Indo-Persian context, as will be seen below.

A pronounced characteristic of *shabrashub* poems is a homoerotic tone, but the issue of gender in these poems has not been the focus of any serious study, perhaps because the subject has already been dealt with in the context of Persian lyric poetry as a whole.⁶ Rather, most scholars have emphasized the socio-historical value of the *shabrashub*. Such poems provide information on a multitude of professions and crafts in various cities and times in history, as evidenced by Mehdi Keyvani's statement, "For knowledge of the technical and social affairs of crafts and trades in the Timurid and Safavid periods, the *shabr-ashub* literature is a valuable source because it mentions tools and technical terms used in different crafts and the traditions and characteristic customs of particular guilds."⁷ However, this poetry was not composed to represent the commercial world realistically or as a technical treatise of any trade or guild. The vastness of the cultural region, which extended from Turkey to India, was obviously one reason different aspects of the genre were emphasized in such

poems, which were produced in response to local demands and tastes as well as the abilities of the poet. An increase in the participation of working-class people in producing poetry after the fifteenth century was a noticeable social phenomenon that has led modern Soviet scholars to describe these poetic efforts as "anti-feudal trends." In connection with Sayyida, the poet who wrote *shabrashub* poems about Bukhara in the late seventeenth century, it is stated that "the poetry of these authors is permeated with the ideology of the middle-urban classes, which determines such stylistic qualities as a trend towards a realistic reflection of the world in the themes and poetic images, abandonment of the rhetorical verse of the court poets, and simplicity of language."⁸ This does not apply wholesale to all poets and poems, since the ones dealt with in this paper were active in an elite courtly milieu, and in some cases were outsiders looking in wonder into a world that was at once exotic and paradisiacal.

The first Indo-Persian poet of note writing in this genre was the Iranian émigré Nuruddin Muhammad Zuhuri (d. 1616), who was active at the Nizam Shahi and Adil Shahi courts at Ahmadnagar and Bijapur. Zuhuri wrote an ambitious work called the *Saqinamab* (Book of the Cup Bearer), a genre that was in vogue for poets of the *sabk-i Hindi* style in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the entire Persianate world.⁹ At this time, almost every poet of any standing composed a *saqinamab*, which is not just an address to a *saqi* but a full-fledged narrative poem in *masnavi* form, often running to thousands of lines. Zuhuri took up a genre that dealt with issues of Iranian kingship and mysticism by way of addressing the *saqi* and *mutrib* (minstrel) and transformed it into a complex work of about 4,500 lines that deals with all aspects of courtly life, in a remarkable tour de force of poetic talent. The *shabrashub* and *saqinamab* are technically separate genres of Persian poetry, but Zuhuri's work innovatively combines images and topoi from both to produce a verbal panorama of the new city (*Nawshahr*) on the outskirts of Ahmadnagar. Like other *saqinamabs*, this work includes addresses to a wine server and minstrel and describes various accoutrements of a royal assembly, such as dancers, candles, wine, and *pan*, interspersed with panegyric utterances to the senior poet and mentor, Malik Qummi (d. 1616), and his patron, Sultan Burhan II (r. 1591–5).

Zuhuri's tour of the city begins with the private spaces of the assembly (*majlis*) and tavern (*maykhanah*), both places where wine drinking takes place, then moves out to public sites in the city such as the fort, baths, gardens, and bazaars. While passing through the bazaar, in a section comprising 135 lines, Zuhuri rapturously lapses into the *shabrashub* mode in order to describe the flourishing and active marketplace. He begins:

*chib guyam zi a'in-i bazarba
na bazarba tazah gulzarha...
siyah-chashm-i sabzan-i rangin nigah
bi-shur-i namak az shikar baj-khvab
khirad dar kham-i turrabha muhtila
dil az sa'id u saq bi dast u pa ...
bi-hizh-i dil u jan abl-i vafa
dil-i abani rashk-i aban-ruba¹⁰*

[What can I say of the ways of the bazaars?
They are not bazaars, but fresh rose gardens.
The dark-eyed beauties with flirtatious glances
Possess a cuteness/saltiness that seeks tribute from
sugar.
The intellect is afflicted with their curly tresses
The heart is paralyzed by their limbs ...
With heart and soul, they are faithful,
With a heart of iron, (they are) the envy of magnets.]

He goes on to boast that “the city is bejeweled by groups of skilled ones” (*zi il-i bunar shabr dar zivar ast*), whose mannerisms and actions can result in *savda* (both business transaction and the madness of love). Included in his catalogue are Hindu boys and professionals such as *kamangar* (archer), *bazzaz* (grocer), *sabbagh* (dyer), *attar* (druggist), *talagar* (goldsmith), *javahirfurush* (jeweler), and *sarraf* (money changer).

With the trades that are directly connected with gold and money, Zuhuri indulges in a poetic conceit by focusing on a single gold coin that represents the economic superiority of the Dakhan over other places. The imperial design underlying the composition of this work becomes clear during his excursus on this subject:

*chira sikkah az khandah bandad daban
shud az nam-i shah rushbinas-i jaban
chira din nabalad kib zad dar Dakan
zar-i butsbikan shah-i dushmanshikan
nayayad zar-i digaran dar hisab
nadarad suba partam-i aftab.¹¹*

[Why should the coin close its mouth from laughing?
The name of the king has made it familiar in the world.
Why should the religion (of Islam) not be proud that in the Dakhan,
The enemy-breaking king struck gold coins without images.
The gold of others is not worth anything,
A small star does not have the sun's radiance ...]

He then moves on to a higher echelon of inhabitants of that city: the *abl-i ilm* (men of learning), *bakiman* (physicians), and *abl-i nujum* (astronomers), ending this portion with the high status of poets in that city. Zuhuri dwells much less on the amorous qualities of the professionals

and more on the commercial aspects of their activities, resulting in a more direct praise of his patron's achievements, which other poets allude to metaphorically.¹²

A couple of decades after Zuhuri wrote his influential work in the Dakhan, poets in the North were also busy versifying the accomplishments of their patrons, the Mughals, the Maecenas of them all being Shah Jahan. As part of a large corpus of Mughal poetry about buildings and gardens, Shah Jahan's poet laureate Abu Talib Kalim Kashani (d. 1650) composed a *masnavi* of 237 lines on Akbarabad (Agra) that includes some lines in the *shabrashub* mode. The work is a veritable panoramic tour of the city of Akbarabad in verse, with descriptions of the magnificent building complexes sponsored by the emperor Shah Jahan, the verbal equivalent of what painters of this time were doing in miniatures. The work ends with a description of the garden of Princess Jahanara and a dedication to the empress, Mumtaz Mahal. Kalim begins his poem by praising the land of Hindustan and the city of Akbarabad, in which all seven climes of the world have come together and people of every country reside. He then leads the reader through the bazaars of Akbarabad: the professional boys encountered are an *attar* (druggist), *bazzaz* (cloth seller), *sarraf* (money changer), *javahirfurush* (jeweler), *kbayyat* (tailor), *zargar* (goldsmith), *shaykhzadab* (sheikh's son), and *sipabzadab* (soldier boy). In addition, there are local and non-Iranian professionals such as *mahajan* (merchant), *tanboli* (pan seller), and *dobi* (washerman), as well as handsome Rajput and Pathan lads, who particularize the work to an Indian context. This context is described by the outsider Kalim, an Iranian émigré poet looking into the composition of an Indian metropolis. His report on this new and exciting world would have been read by an audience composed of both Indians and non-Indians from all parts of the Persianate world. Kalim's gaze directed at the beautiful boys engaged in their work is an important indicator of the economy of the city:

*khiyabanba-yi bazarash dilafroz
bi-kash-i 'aish, abl-i hirfab bar ruz
fitadab dar dukan-i yak mahajan
hame-yi sarmayab-yi darya vu ma'dan
burun ayad, agar bashad khariddar
zi yak dukkan-i u sad karvan bar.¹³*

[The streets of its bazaars are charming.
Every day the skilled ones (are occupied) in the procurement of pleasure.
The entire capital from the seas and mines
Is put in the shop of one merchant;
If there is a buyer, a hundred caravan-loads
Come out of one shop of his.]

Then he moves on to describe a money-changer, depicting him in the amorous language of the *ghazal* but cleverly bringing in images of money:

but-i sarraf ba sad 'ishvah u naq
bi-naqd-i qalb-i ma kay bingarad baz?
bi-pish-i ru-yi u az khirman-i zar
nayayad mushtari andar barabar
bi-in maghrur zar-i 'ashiq chib saqad?
bi-in pur fan kudamin bilab bazad?
bi-dastash naqd-i dil az barkib uftad
*durust az vay girift u kburdab pas dad.*¹⁴

[When will the money-changer idol, with a hundred coquetries,

Look again at the cash of our hearts.

Before his face, a customer's pile of gold

Cannot measure up.

What can a lover's gold do for this haughty one?

What trick can work on this skilled one?

Whoever's heart's cash fell into his hands, he grabbed it,

And returned the change.]

In the discourse of love, the dealings between lover and beloved are usually one-on-one, and characterized by any number of metaphors, the most usual being power-based relationships such as king–slave/Sufi, but rarely does a poet come across a whole city of beloveds. Before moving on to the other monuments of the empire that he is eulogizing, Kalim concludes that the excess of beauty in this city has robbed lovers of all their patience.

It was not solely in verse but also in the prose literature of this period that the felicitous celebration of public life, including the presence of lovers and beauties, the means of making merry, and an overall air of reckless abandon, became the established mode of glorifying a city. The Mughal ambassador to the Dakhan, an Iranian by the name of Asad Beg, while visiting the court of Ibrahim 'Adilshah at Bijapur in 1603–6, describes the bazaars of the city of Nauraspur in his unpublished text, *Vaqat-i Asad Beg*, as “filled with wine and beauty, dancers, perfumes, jewels of all sorts ... and viands. In one street were a thousand bands of people drinking, and dancers, lovers and pleasure-seekers assembled; none quarreled or disputed with another, and this state of things was perpetual. Perhaps no place in the wide world could present a more wonderful spectacle to the eye of the traveler.”¹⁵ Another text, the *Haft Iqlim* (Seven Climes), was completed in 1594 by the Iranian author Amin Ahmad Razi at the Mughal court of Akbar. This work celebrates the regions of the world in a combination of history–geography–literary biography, and the author introduces each major city with a description of its architectural beauties. In the case of

Delhi, which lies in the third clime, he mentions only its architectural monuments, but in the case of Ahmedabad in the second clime, he rhapsodizes over the beauties in its bazaars: “It is the capital of Gujarat ... Its bazaar, in contrast to those of other Indian cities, is extremely vast and neat, where perfectly decorated shops of two or three stories have been constructed, and all its inhabitants, both female and male, are so cute and lovely that they take the life of one who looks at them and bestow life when they speak.”¹⁶ This is followed by a short lyrical description of the beauties. The fact that Amin Ahmad Razi resorts to the *shabrashub* mode of describing a city suggests that this type of coded language is the normative discourse both in poetry and prose to convey positive characteristics of a place and paint a verbal picture in a style familiar to the audience.¹⁷

A prose work that more closely bridges the gap between verse and prose *shabrashub* descriptions is the popular *Mina Bazar*, which was widely used as a reader for students of Persian in India. This Indo-Persian text, which bears no dedication or authorship, has been attributed both to Zuhuri and to Mirza Muhammad Iradat Khan Vazih (d. 1716).¹⁸ Set in an undisclosed city, the *Mina Bazar* includes thirteen short chapters in florid rhymed prose that begin with a description of the women's bazaar (*zananab bazar*) and nine beautiful young shopkeepers (jeweler, cloth seller, flower seller, sweet seller, druggist, fruit seller, tobacconist, *pan* seller), who are not distinguished by gender but are presumably female. On a stylistic and structural level, the text reveals an awareness of the verse *shabrashubs*, but its emphasis is less on the poetics of love, interplay between writer and beloved, and more on the physical description of the beautiful shopkeepers and their commerce. What is unique about it apart from its form is the use of the women's bazaar as an entry point into a self-contained and private world, unlike the exclusively male public spaces in the poems, and the absence of any attempt by the author to link his work to a larger project of eulogizing an empire.

The use of the catalogue device in the *shabrashubs*, both in poetry and prose, appears to be an indirect precursor to the ethnographic surveys of the colonial period that mapped out the complex fabric of Indian society into a detailed typology according to castes and communities. The *Tashrib al-Aqam* (Concise Account of Peoples) is such an illustrated work in Persian, written by the Eurasian Colonel James Skinner (1778–1841) and completed in Hansi in 1825 with a dedication to Sir John Malcolm.¹⁹ This work is a survey of the occupational groups and religious mendicants under the headings of four castes of the Hindus (the four original castes, mixed castes, castes derived from Vishvakarma, and miscellaneous castes), plus a section on Muslim

families and tribes including *qavvals* and *faqirs*. The headings are reminiscent of the more “pure” Safavid *shabrashubs* in the wide range of occupations covered and also in that many Persian words are used, such as *rismansaz* (rope maker), *kbishtpaṣ* (brick maker), and *zargar* (goldsmith), along with Indic ones such as *bhāngī* (sweeper), *kumbar* (potter), and *baid* (physician). The work opens with an account of the history of the house of Timur, from the conqueror down to the time of Akbar II (r. 1806–37); the section on Muslims with the kings of Awadh and the Afghans of the Panjab. Thus, like the other Persian poems of this genre, it sets a panorama of the commercial world against the backdrop of a ruling polity, here the late Mughals, in order to represent the complex fabric of that society. The difference is that here in its scientific objectivity the emphasis is on the origins of the groups described rather than on the poetics of the tradition, and a single metropolis is not the focus of the poet’s vision but a larger socio-geographic region. Actually, the *Tashrib al-Aqam* is more like the Ottoman Turkish version of this genre, which is a mapping of the cities and peoples of the empire.²⁰

Returning to the realm of poetry, Kalim’s emphasis on the diversity of the population of Akbarabad was echoed a few decades later in a remarkable poem about the important port city Surat, in Gujarat, written by the poet Vali (d. 1720). In the histories of Urdu literature, Vali’s name stands first in the canon of classical poetry. He is credited with bridging the gap between an older indigenous Dakhani Hindavi with the high Persianized *rekhtab* (early Urdu) poetry of the North, which resulted in the flowering of classical Urdu. Vali is claimed both as Dakhani and Gujarati but his register of Hindavi was the language of a cultural continuum that included both regions. He showed a partiality for Gujarat, which is the subject of a short *masnavi*. His forty-seven line poem on Surat celebrates the city’s beauties and its bustling commercial life in a new language, but is inspired by the Indo-Persian *shabrashub* tradition. His amorous sweep of the demography of the city results in a catalogue of beautiful and industrious beloveds among whom are Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, and also Europeans, each contributing to the city’s overall prosperity.²¹ Vali is effusive in his praise for the city:

Agar dekhe hain logan Sham o Tabrez

Na dekha ko’i aisa mulk-e zarkhez

Ke is bhitar ka’i aise hain tujjar

Ke Qarun kon nahin un ke nazik bar ...

Bhari hai sirat o surat se Surat

Har ik surat hai vaban anmol murat

Khatm hai amradan upar safa’i

*Vali hai bishtar husn-e nisa’i.*²²

[People may have seen Syria and Tabriz,
But no one has seen such a prosperous place.
For in it, there are such merchants
To whom Croesus could not measure up ...
Surat is filled with (fine) reputations and faces,
Every face there is a priceless idol.
Purity reaches its perfection in the beardless boys
(here),

But Vali, the beauty of the women is (even) greater!]

He goes on to boast that all Krishna’s legendary *gopis* are actually mere imitations of the beauties that exist here! Since both Urdu grammar and Vali’s Dakhani poetic background, unlike Persian, permit gender differentiation, he includes women in his catalogue of beauties, celebrating the demographic diversity of the city in an inclusive fashion. But this poem may not have found many fans in the fastidious literary circles in north India. According to the biographical traditions, Vali was deemed worthy to be read only after he brought his language in conformity with the dictates of the Delhi literati, such as Shah Gulshan and Khan-e Arzu, by purging it of vernacular Indic elements, including the presence of women, as in the Surat *masnavi*. But Vali had most certainly introduced something new into the Urdu poetic landscape, for, according to Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, his “most important contribution was to infuse among Rekhtah [Urdu] poets the sense of a new poetics—a poetics that owed as much to the Indian-style Persian poetry, and through it to Sanskrit too, as it did to his Dakani predecessors.”²³ The remarkable poem on Surat was composed at a charged moment in the history of Indo-Persian literary culture, when Urdu was primed to claim and eventually occupy the space left by the closing of the literary border between the Iranian lands and India, as the larger Persian world fragmented into separate cultural regions dominated by local traditions.

During the early decades of the eighteenth century, historical and political changes led poets to redefine the function of the city poem: the exuberant city poem of Persian with *shabrashub* elements became the *shabrashob* (the disturbed city), a lament for a declining city in classical Urdu poetry.²⁴ The correspondence of type of poem and language is not as neat as it might appear; there were a few Persian poets who wrote satirical poems on the decline of the times in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, such as Ni’mat Khan ‘Ali (d. 1710), but these poems did not attain the popularity that the Urdu ones did. Conversely, some Urdu poets like Mir ‘Aqī Mir (d. 1810) also wrote a few homoerotic verses in the older Persian style, as well as, astonishingly, poems on women engaged in various professions, as with Fa’iz Dihlavi (d. 1738), but these were isolated instances that did not develop into full-fledged genres.

Poets such as Mirza Muhammad Rafi Sauda (d. 1781), Qa'im Chandpuri (d. 1793), Mir Taqi Mir, Nazir Akbarabadi (d. 1830) and others wrote *shabrashobs* in a satirical mode, portraying a bleak picture of urban society and the collapse of commerce and social hierarchies.²⁵ The weakening of Mughal power and Nadir Shah's invasion of Delhi are considered to be the historical factors for this shift in a worldview that finds a voice in poetry of nostalgia and pessimism. Since the complex networks of patronage had broken down, these poems mock the professions that are in decline: the charming and competent professionals have turned into pathetic caricatures of their former selves who will stop at nothing to make a bit of money.

Most of the Urdu *shabrashobs* allude only in a general way to the political events of the time and do not explicitly mention the ruler, to whom Persian *shabrashobs* were usually dedicated. One exception is the poem (*mukhammas*) by Qa'im, which begins with a scathing denunciation of the *badshah*, in this case Shah 'Alam II after the battle of Sakartal in 1772, when the Rohilla chief Zabita Khan was defeated with the help of the Marathas:

Kaisa ye shah ke zulm par uski nigah hai
Hathon se uske ek jaban dadkhab hai
Luchcha ik ap sath luteri sipah hai
Namus-e khalq sa'e men uske tabah hai
*Shaitan ka ye zill hai na zill-e ilahi*²⁶
 [What kind of a king is this who is intent on injustice?
 An entire world is protesting against him.
 A lout himself, he has a brigand army,
 The honor of the people is defiled by his rule.
 He is the shadow of Satan, not the shadow of God.]

Qa'im also decries the pitiable condition of the empty markets and listless lovers and beloveds of Rohilkhand. In Agra, the poet Nazir lamented the depressed state of commerce there:

Mare hain bath, bath pe, sab yan ke dastkar
*Aur jitne peshavar hain, so rote hain zar zar*²⁷
 [All the artisans here twiddle their thumbs,
 All the professionals weep bitterly.]

While Sauda mourns the loveless state of Delhi:

Jabanabad tu kab is sitam ke qabil tha
Magar kabhu kisi 'ashiq ka ye nagar dil tha
*Ke yun utba dia goya ke naqsh-e batil tha*²⁸
 [Delhi, did you deserve all this?
 Perhaps at one time, this city was the heart of a lover,
 It was wiped out as if it had been an ephemeral
 drawing.]

The betrayal of the poet/lover by his beloved has thrown the entire social order out of balance. The focus

of these poems is not merely a reflection of the realities of the social life of a people who are floundering in an economic recession, but a deeper crisis concerning the language and practice of poetry as well as the poet's relation to the past. Carla Petievich writes,

Though the narrator is not the frustrated lover of the ghazal, the poet imbues him with the self-pity, emotionality, and tendency to exaggeration which characterizes not only the *'ashiq* of the ghazal, but also the narrator of other genres of Urdu poetry. The *shabrashob* poet has not abandoned the poetic tradition by any means, but he has been affected by his experiences profoundly enough to be moved to depart from the standard modes of poetic expression.²⁹

A subtext of these poems is nostalgia for a vanished Persian culture with links to the larger cosmopolitan world of Persian beyond India, as expressed in the city poems previously, which Urdu could never have. The literary battles over linguistic purity and canonization of Persian poetry that were waged during this time between Indian Persian writers such as Khan-i Arzu (d. 1756), who was also promoting a Persianized Urdu, and the last of the major Iranian émigré poets, Hazin (d. 1756), resulted in a persistent gloom in the works of the Indo-Persian/Urdu poet.

With the decreased status of Persian in the nineteenth century, the manifestation of the anxiety over the Persian literary past is most dramatically worked out in the writings of the poet Asadullah Khan Ghalib (d. 1869).³⁰ Ghalib is perhaps better known for his Urdu poetry, since in his time Persian had already attained the status of a classical language, but his writings and views constitute a historically critical crossroads of several linguistic and cultural traditions: Indo-Persian and Urdu, as well as classical and modern. Although through his Urdu poetry and prose, he was a pioneer in adapting the language for a modern world, at heart he had not let go of the Persian past. Eager to flaunt his Iranian Persian credentials, he valorized émigré poets like Naziri, Zuhuri, and Hazin over those of Indian origin such as Fayzi and Bedil. His Persian oeuvre is at least three times the size of his Urdu, but his choice of language and the nature of his bilingual oeuvre have not been systematically studied.

A landmark event in Ghalib's life, and one that is made much of by his biographers, was an extended journey he took from Delhi to Calcutta in 1828 in order to present an appeal to the British authorities over the matter of a pension that was due to him from his uncle's estate. On this trip, which lasted almost two years, he halted in Banaras for three months, during which time he wrote a poem in Persian about the city, called *Chiragh-i Dayr* (The Temple Lamp). The poem is a *mas-*

navi of 109 lines and tripartite in its structure. It opens with Ghalib feeling homesick for Delhi and missing his friends, whom he calls *bi-vafa*, the usual appellation for beloveds who are faithless by nature. The second part is a rhapsodic description of the city of Banaras/Kashi, which appears as a veritable paradise to the poet, and every Hindu object and act becomes material for a display of his rhetorical skills. There is a whole cluster of images connected with the Hindu and his world (the submissive Hindu slave, the Hindu adoration of his idol, the steadfastness of a Hindu lover as exemplified by a sati, etc.) that formed an integral part of the repertoire of the Persian poet, especially in the Indo-Persian context where this was a means to relate his poem to his social milieu. As we can expect, Ghalib praises the beauties of the city, exploiting the meanings of “idol” as beloved and the Hindu “idol-worshipper”:

Savadash paytakht-i butparastan

Sarapayash ziyaratgah-i mastan ...

Butanash ra biyula shu'lah-yi Tur

Sarapa nur-i izad, chashm-i bad dur

Miyanha nazuk u dilha tavana

*Zi nadami bi-kar-i kbvish dana.*³¹

[Its land is the capital of idol-worshippers,
From one end to the other, it is a pilgrimage site of
the intoxicated.

In essence, the beauties are ablaze like Mt. Sinai.

From head to toe, divine luminescence, “May the evil
eye be fat.”

(They have) narrow waists and strong hearts,

They are innocently skilled in their work.]

There is no attempt to present a typology of beloveds or their professions as in the earlier Persian *shab-rashubs* but the spirit of this part of the poem is the same. The poet seems to find a strange liberation in the city of Hindu beauties, all of whom are worthy objects of love, as the ones in Surat were for Vali. As a home of beauty and creative energy, Banaras bypasses Delhi and is actually closer to Iran; playing with the Hindu name of the city, Ghalib says it is but half a step from Kashi to Kashan in Iran! In the third part of the poem, he gloomily lapses back into ruminating over the depressed state of Delhi, using the imagery and mood of the Urdu *shab-rashob*. He describes the lamentable situation to an enlightened friend:

Kib bini niken'iba az jahan raft

Vafa u mibr u azarm az miyan raft

Zi imanba bi-juz nami namandab

Bi-ghayr az danab u dami namandab

Pidarba tishnab-i kbun-i pisarba

*Pisarba dushman-i jan-i pidarba.*³²

[See how goodness has gone from the world,

Fidelity, affection and modesty have all gone.

Faith exists only in name,

Nothing is left but baits and snares.

Fathers are thirsty for their sons' blood,

Sons are enemies of their fathers.]

He wonders why the day of resurrection does not appear and put an end to this inequity, to which his companion responds with a smile that its appearance would mean the end of the beautiful city of Banaras! Surveying the picturesque sites of Banaras exhilarates Ghalib and he pens only positive things about it, while a contemplation of his past and the state of Delhi fills him with gloom; however, at the same time there is a charged anticipation regarding a new city that lies ahead.

When Ghalib finally reached his destination, he communicated his views about the city of Calcutta in several letters to friends and poems in Persian and Urdu. In this short poem, written in the question-answer genre, the poet reports a conversation with an imaginary companion. The poet enquires about the three cities that form part of his poetic imagination: the friend says that Delhi is the soul and the world is the body, Banaras is a beautiful beloved, and as for Calcutta:

Hal-i Kalkattab baz justam, guft

“Bayad iqlim-i hasbtumash guft”

Guftam, “adam bi-bam rasad dar vay?”

Guft, “az har diyar u az har fan”

Guftam, “inja chib shughl sud dihad?”

Guft, “az har kib bast tarsidan”

Guftam, “inja chib kar bayad kard?”

Guft, “qat'-i nazar zi shi'r u sukhan”

Guftam, “in mahpaykaran chib kas and?”

Guft, “kbuban-i kishvar-i Landan.”

Guftam, “inan magar dili darand?”

*Guft, “darand, likan az aban.”*³³

[I asked about Calcutta. He said,

“It should be considered the eighth clime of the world.”

I asked, “What kinds of people does one encounter in it?”

He said, “From every land and of every vocation.”

I asked, “What profession is profitable here?”

He said, “To be afraid of everything there is.”

I asked, “What work should one do here?”

He said, “Everything except poetry and writing.”

I asked, “Who are these fair creatures?”

He said, “The beauties of the country of London.”

I asked, “Don't they have hearts?”

He said, “They do, but [made] of iron.”]

This poem has several elements that are familiar from the Indo-Persian poetic tradition of city poems, such as

his fixation on the beauties and occupations, but its form and treatment of the subject is entirely new and remarkably modern. Ghalib does not describe the city through his own eyes although he is physically present there, but mediates through a secondary voice. The beauties in Calcutta, though belonging to a new and foreign world are, in fact, in complete harmony with the past, for the beloved in the Persian (and Urdu) poetic world is always heartless and cold and never deigns to return the affections of the poet/lover. Ghalib came away from Calcutta with his worldview changed by his experience but his mission unaccomplished. He was so charmed by the capital of British India, especially its beautiful women and mangoes, that he declared in a Persian letter to a friend, "By God, had I not been a family man, with regard for the honour of my wife and children, I would have cut myself free and made my way there. There I would have lived till I died, in that heavenly city, free from all cares."³⁴ With him, we come full circle, and this new metropolis is the heir to the utopian Indo-Persian city that is peopled with beautiful beloveds.

In this paper I have attempted to trace the intricate genealogy of the city poem in the Indo-Persian textual tradition by identifying the poetic imagery, tropes, and topoi employed, as an initial step in integrating poetic knowledge systems from parallel and overlapping geographic and linguistic regions that can be amplified with the discovery of other relevant texts. Although each poet's response to his environment is novel in its own way, being informed by choice of language and reception of the tradition, we need to better our understanding of the development of the aesthetic principles that lent a particular perspective to the Indo-Persian poet's vision. The existence of valuable historical data in *shab-rashub* poems is certainly a reason to pay attention to these poems, but one must not be unmindful of the complex ways in which the poets skillfully manipulated these facts to present their kaleidoscopic view of a social landscape that combined material and metaphorical vistas. Whereas early poets like Zuhuri and Kalim inserted *shab-rashub* elements into their poems, the structure and purpose of their works differed from that of the Safavid and Central Asian poems of this genre. What they share and pass on to Urdu poets like Vali and Ghalib is the exuberant tone and specialized register of the language of love lyric, an essential element of which is to view all the beautiful people of a city in continual dalliance with the poet-narrator. Other Urdu poets like Mir and Sauda chose to articulate their feelings about the city by lamenting or lampooning the state of cultural decline and an absence of commerce and love in a darker mode of expression, thus working within the same tradition by reversing it. With Ghalib, the situation becomes more complex, since he is the recipient of

both the *shab-rashub* and *shab-rashob* traditions, and negotiates his own position at the intersection of the two while perched at the

NOTES

¹Gustave E. von Grunebaum, "Aspects of Arabic Urban Literature Mostly in Ninth and Tenth Centuries," *Islamic Studies* 8 (1969), 282.

²The Iranian side of this phenomenon has been explored by Paul Losensky, "The Palace of Praise and the Melons of Time: Descriptive Patterns in 'Abdi Bayk Sirazi's *Garden of Eden*," *Eurasian Studies* 2 (2003): 1–29.

³For an overview, see J. T. P. de Bruijn, "Shahrangiz, 1. In Persian," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. A comparative perspective with European literature is provided by Michele Bernardini, "The *masnavi-shab-rashubs* as Town Panegyrics: An International Genre in Islamic Mashriq, in *Narrated Space in the Literature of the Islamic World*, ed. Roxane Haag-Higuchi and Christian Szyska (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001), 81–94.

⁴These poems are discussed in Sunil Sharma, *Persian Poetry at the Indian Frontier: Mas'ud Sa'd Salman of Lahore* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2000), 107–16.

⁵There is also a small collection of quatrains of this genre attributed to Amir Khusraw, some of which are marked by his characteristic puns in Persian and Hindavi, but they are not part of a unified poem and could date from any period. For Sayfi's poems, see Sunil Sharma, "Generic Innovation in Sayfi Bukhari's *Shab-rashub Ghazals*," in *Ghazal as a Genre of World Literature: The Ottoman Ghazal in Its Historical Context* (Beirut: Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft, forthcoming).

⁶This subject is treated by C. M. Naim in "The Theme of Homosexual (Pederastic) Love in Pre-Modern Urdu Poetry," in *Studies in the Urdu Ghazal and Prose Fiction*, ed. Muhammad Umar Memon (Madison: South Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin, 1979), 120–42.

⁷Mehdi Keyvani, *Artisans and Guild Life in the Later Safavid Period* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1982), 197.

⁸A. Mirzoev, quoted by Jan Rypka, *Iranian Literature* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1968), 508.

⁹For the origins of this genre, see Sunil Sharma, "Hafiz's *Saqinamab*: The Genesis and Transformation of a Classical Poetic Genre," *Persica* 18 (2002): 75–83.

¹⁰*Saqinamab-i Zuburi* (Kanpur: Naval Kishore, 1890), 121–2. All translations of poems are mine.

¹¹*Saqinamab-i Zuburi*, 125. In a comparative vein, the link between a new cash economy and the appearance of a new poetics is also found in Telugu poetry of the same period. See A. K. Ramanujan, Velcheru Narayana Rao, and David Shulman, ed. and trans., *When God Is a Customer: Telugu Courtesan Songs by Ksetrayya and Others* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 24. In recent times, Orhan Pamuk's work of historical fiction, *My Name Is Red* (in the English translation; the original is in Turkish), is set in Ottoman Istanbul in the year 1591, around the same time as Zuhuri's poem was written and in a similar cultural milieu. Each chapter of the novel is narrated by an individual or object central to the tale, one of

which is a coin.

¹²Zuhuri's *Saqinamab* circulated widely and inspired "imitations" by various poets. One such work is by Mulla Tughra (d. c. 1667) who wrote a *Saqinamab* for the Safavid Shah 'Abbas I (r. 1587–1629) before he immigrated to India. In his poem, there is a catalogue of the different professionals in the bazaar who are shown playfully interacting with the villainous figure of the market inspector (*muhtasib*). Ahmad Gulchin-Ma'ani, *Shabrashub dar shi'r-e Farsi*, 2nd ed. by Parviz Gulchin-Ma'ani (Tehran: Rivayat, 2001), 203–6.

¹³*Divan-i Abu Talib Kalim Hamadani*, ed. Muhammad Qahraman (Mashhad: Astan-i Quds-i Razavi, 1990), 143.

¹⁴*Divan-i Abu Talib Kalim Hamadani*, 143.

¹⁵Quoted in Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Discovering the Familiar: Notes on the Travel-Account of Anand Ram Mukhlis, 1745," *South Asia Research* 16:2 (1996), 136.

¹⁶Amin Ahmad Razi, *Haft Iqlim*, ed. Javad Fazil (Tehran: 'Ali Akbar 'Ilmi, 1961), vol. 1, 80–1. Also see his description of Qustantaniyah (Istanbul) in the sixth clime, "From the palace to the city limits there are bazaars and shops, among which there are seven thousand coffeehouses. In every shop, a number of delicate and pretty youths are seated who have tresses and moles that are snares, and who act as magnets to attract hearts," v. 3, 499.

¹⁷This mode of writing, using the beauty/commerce/crafts matrix to write about a city, was also used conversely, as in Babur's negative description of Hindustan, "There is no beauty in its people, no graceful social intercourse, no poetic talent or understanding, no etiquette, nobility, or manliness. The art and crafts have no harmony or symmetry." He adds a few lines later, "The one nice aspect of Hindustan is that it is a large country with lots of money ... Another nice thing is the unlimited numbers of craftsmen and practitioners of every trade." *The Baburnama: Memories of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 350–1.

¹⁸Zuhuri had started a trend in the composition of rhymed prose with his rhetorical work *Sib Nair* (Three Prose Pieces) and *Mina Bazar* was most likely written in response to that by Vazih or another poet. The problem of the authorship of this work is discussed in the introduction to the edition by Muhammad Ahmad Siddiqi, ed., *Mina Bazar* (Allahabad: I. Karimi Press, 1954), 18–24.

¹⁹This work is discussed by Cedric Dover, "The Cultural Significance of Col. James Skinner," *Calcutta Review* 134:1 (1955): 17–23; also see Jeremiah P. Losty, *The Art of the Book in India* (London: British Library, 1982), 148, 152. I am grateful to Amanda Hamilton for drawing my attention to this material and providing copies of the unpublished manuscript. We plan to present this text in a joint project.

²⁰In Ottoman Turkish this genre is known as *sebrengiz* and the number of such poems is far greater than in Persian. For more information, see Talat Sait Halman, "Shahrangiz, 2. In Turkish," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.; also see J. Stewart-Robinson, "A Neglected Ottoman Poem: The Schrengiz," in *Studies in Near Eastern Culture and History: In Memory of Ernest*

T. Abdel-Massib, ed. James A. Bellamy (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Near Eastern and North African Studies, 1990), 201–11.

²¹Eric Beverley, "Representing Cosmopolitanism: Surat City in Three Early Modern Literary Texts," unpublished paper.

²²*Kulliyat-e Vali*, ed. Nur al-Hasan Hashmi (Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdu Academy, 1981), 378.

²³Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 141.

²⁴The semantic difference between *shabrashub* and *shabrashob* is of course only valid if examined from today's perspective, accounting for the differences in the Iranian and Indian pronunciation and interpretation of the Persian term. This also points to a larger problem of the academic and cultural distance that has been created between the Persian and classical Urdu literatures (the same can be said of Persian and Ottoman). The Urdu poets probably saw their poems as belonging to the same tradition as the happier ones, but with a large dose of irony in the new form. In retrospect, Persian scholars also use the term *shabrashub* for any satire on a city even if the poem lacks the agents of the disturbance.

²⁵See Munibur Rahman's statement, "One of the major conventions of the *shabr-ashob* is to name a series of professions and to describe the state of affairs governing the individuals associated with each of them. The *shabr-ashobs* are determined by the nature of their content, rather than by any separate form, and many of them appear in the works of the poets under titles other than *shabr-ashob*. They could be found in any of the traditional verse forms employed in Urdu poetry, though it is possible that some forms might have been favoured more than others during a particular period. Characteristic of the genre, at least during its pre-1857 phase, is the use of satire and ridicule as weapons of criticism, a feature that makes it difficult sometimes to draw a line between a *shabr-ashob* and a *badju* ("insult poem")," "Shahrangiz, 3. In Urdu," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.

²⁶*Kulliyat-e Qa'im*, vol. 2, ed. Iqtida Hasan (Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqi-e Adab, 1965), 56.

²⁷*Kulliyat-e Nazir Akbarabadi*, ed. Mawlana 'Abd al-Bari Sahib (Lucknow: Ram Kumar Press, 1951), 466.

²⁸*Kulliyat-e Sauda*, vol. 2 (Allahabad: Ram Narain Lal Beni Prasad, 1971), 266.

²⁹Carla Petievich, "Poetry of the Declining Mughals: The *Shabr Ashob*," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 25:1 (1990): 104.

³⁰Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, "Unprivileged Power: The Strange Case of Persian (and Urdu) in Nineteenth-Century India," *Annual of Urdu Studies* 13 (1998): 3–30.

³¹*Divan-i Ghalib Diblavi*, ed. Muhsin Kiyani (Tehran: Raw zanah, 1997), 317.

³²*Divan-i Ghalib Diblavi*, 317.

³³*Divan-i Ghalib Diblavi*, 389.

³⁴Quoted in Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, *Ghalib, Life and Letters* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 48.