

ROUNDTABLE

The Growth of Arabic Biographical Writing in South Asia from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century

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This essay surveys the Arabic biographical writing of select South Asian Muslim scholars from the late Mughal to the colonial period to argue that, for scholars participating in trans-regional networks of hadith scholarship, Arabic biographical writing served purposes distinct from Indo-Persianate biographical writing. South Asian scholars chose to write Arabic histories to access pasts and construct communities that centered the ‘ulama’ as a distinct class of Muslims who represented the continuity of Islamicate discursive traditions across time and space. Arabic biographical histories indicate a different sense of temporality and geography than Indo-Persianate histories by both marking the passage of time through the transmission of religious knowledge over generations and mapping transregional scholarly networks.¹ However, this did not necessarily entail a disavowal of Indo-Persianate histories that placed greater emphasis on saintly miracles, blessings, and shrines.² This productive tension between Indo-Arabic and Indo-Persianate writing is missed when only Indo-Persianate texts are examined.

In juxtaposing the tendency to memorialize figures as ‘ulama’ in Arabic biographical histories and sufis in Indo-Persianate histories, I am not claiming that the two historiographical traditions were necessarily opposed to one another. Indeed, Shahab Ahmed has asserted that balancing between the juristic tradition that defined ‘ulama’ and the mystical tradition that defined sufis represented a “prominent and permanent thread of the history of Muslims ... a balance, at different times and places in history, and in different social and discursive spaces in society, often weighted more to one side than to the other.”³ The notion of balance is

¹ For instance, see Michael Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mun* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Wadad al-Qadi, “Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholars’ Alternative History of the Muslim Community,” in *Organizing Knowledge: Encyclopaedic Activities in the Pre-Eighteenth Century Muslim World*, ed. Gerhard Endress (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 23–76; Jonathan E. Brockopp, *Muhammad’s Heirs: The Rise of Muslim Scholarly Communities, 622–950* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Jo van Steenberg, “History Writing, Adab, and Intertextuality in Late Medieval Egypt and Syria: Old and New Readings,” in *New Readings in Arabic Historiography from Late Medieval Egypt and Syria*, eds. Jo van Steenberg and Maya Termonia (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 1–29.

² For instance, see Marica K. Hermansen and Bruce B. Lawrence, “Indo-Persian Tazkiras as Memorative Communications,” in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, eds. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000), 149–75; Marica K. Hermansen, “Religious Literature and the Inscription of Identity: The Sufi Tazkira Tradition in Muslim South Asia,” *The Muslim World* 87, no. 3/4 (2007): 315–29; Nile Green, *Making Space: Sufis and Settlers in Early Modern India* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³ Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 24–25.

helpful insofar as it reminds us that the differences between Indo-Persianate biographies and their Arabic counterparts are not absolute.

The following pages build on previous scholarship on the role of hadith scholars in the construction of an early modern “Arabic cosmopolis.” From the fifteenth century, according to Ronit Ricci, an Arabic cosmopolis “defined by language, literature, and religion” produced a “translocal Islamic sphere” across the Indian Ocean.⁴ Jyoti Gulati Balachandran’s contribution to this roundtable reinforces the importance of broadening the study of Arabic historical works beyond their local contexts and situating them within an Arabic cosmopolis. Engseng Ho’s exploration of Indian Ocean communities built by Yemeni Sayyids, Joel Blecher’s examination of the emergence of hadith studies in Gujarat, and Christopher Bahl’s recent study of references to Indians in Egyptian and Hijazi Arabic biographical dictionaries and the increasing circulation of Arabic biographical works in India, all cumulatively demonstrate that hadith scholars had played a crucial role in writing Arabic histories connecting Muslims across the Indian Ocean since the sixteenth century.⁵

The above studies focused on historical works produced in either the Arab world or the coastal areas of Sindh, Gujarat, and Malabar. However, the writings of two eighteenth-century Indian hadith scholars further inland indicate some scholars believed that knowledge of Arabic historical works was still lacking among South Asian Muslims.

The north Indian polymath Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762) considered Arabic histories a crucial component of his project to establish hadith studies in Delhi. In a pedagogical treatise, he expressed that Indian Muslims spent too much time reading Persian histories, to the detriment of subjects such as Arabic historical works that could aid in the study of canonical hadith compilations.⁶ Shah Wali Allah also authored an Arabic history of the first four centuries of Islamic law to explain juristic disagreements. In *al-Insaf fi Bayan Sabab al-Ikhtilaf* (The Correct Explanation of the Cause of Juristic Disagreements), he argued that people’s ignorance of hadith literature and the biographies of early Islamic scholars led to forgetting the developmental history of Islamic juristic traditions. He averred that historical amnesia of Islamic law had contributed to a partisan bigotry (*ta’assub*) almost as bad as the first civil war (*fitna*), when Muslims fought and killed each other.⁷

Shah ‘Abd al-‘Aziz (d. 1824), Wali Allah’s elder son, compiled a biographical history of hadith scholars in Persian to help students learn the history of the discipline of hadith studies. In the introduction to *Bustan al-Muhaddithin* (The Garden of Hadith Scholars), he stated that the book was meant to help address Indians’ ignorance around the main hadith compilations and scholars.⁸ The Persian biographical history thus functioned as a steppingstone to access Arabic biographical histories, underscoring Persian’s dominance in South Asia’s historical discourse.

The biographical works of Ghulam ‘Ali “Azad” Bilgrami (d. 1786), a contemporary of Shah Wali Allah from southern India, reveal differing logics in classifying how Indo-Persianate and Arabic histories memorialized exemplary Muslims. Indo-Persianate biographical works tended to represent Muslim exemplars as sufis and downplay their role as transmitters of

⁴ Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 4.

⁵ Engseng Ho, “The Two Arms of Cambay: Diasporic Texts of Ecumenical Islam in the Indian Ocean,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 50, no. 2/3 (2007): 347–61; Joel Blecher, *Said the Prophet of God: Hadith Commentary across a Millennium* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 143–63; Christopher D. Bahl, “Reading Tarājim with Bourdieu: Prosopographical Traces of Historical Change in the South Asian Migration to the Late Medieval Hijaz,” *Der Islam* 94, no. 1 (2017): 234–75; Christopher D. Bahl, “Transoceanic Arabic Historiography: Sharing the Past of the Sixteenth-Century Western Indian Ocean,” *Journal of Global History* 15, no. 2 (2020): 203–23.

⁶ Shah Wali Allah, *Wasiyat Nama Mutarjam ma’a Risalat Danishmandi* (Aligarh: Matba’at Ahmadi, n.d.), 10, 14.

⁷ Shah Wali Allah, *al-Insaf fi Bayan Sabab al-Ikhtilaf*, ed. ‘Abd al-Fattah Abu Ghudda (Beirut: Dar al-Nafa’is, 1986), 95.

⁸ Shah ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, *Bustan al-Muhaddithin*, ed. Nur al-Hasan Rashdi Kandhlawi, trans. ‘Abd al-Sami’ Deobandi (Kandhla, India: Mufti Ilahi Bakhsh Akadimi, 2016), 1.

religious learning.⁹ Thus, Bilgrami gave preference to sufis in his *Ma'athir al-Kiram* (Virtues of the Noble), a Persian biographical work (*tadhkira*), dividing it into two sections: the first devoted to sufis and the second to 'ulama'. However, in his Arabic *Subhat al-Marjan fi Athar Hindustan* (The Coral Rosary of Indian Traditions), Bilgrami criticized Indian biographical works' focus on sufis, and went on to provide "a survey of Islamic learning in South Asia in the eighteenth century."¹⁰ In this book, Bilgrami asserted that South Asian Muslims were overly preoccupied with recording the states and statements of sufis while ignoring the history of Indian 'ulama'. Consequently, the authors of some famous books produced in South Asia remained obscure.¹¹ Bilgrami thus viewed the lack of information about intellectual genealogies connecting teachers, texts, and authors as a serious shortcoming of the Indo-Persianate biographical genre.

The second chapter of *Subhat* is devoted to biographies of forty-five Indian Muslim 'ulama', showing the importance of Indians in Islamic intellectual history. The chapter is titled "What Has Been Mentioned about 'Ulama'."¹² Those Bilgrami categorized as sufis in the Persian work, such as his teacher from Medina, Muhammad Hayat al-Sindhi (d. 1750), were categorized in the Arabic work as 'ulama'.¹³ Bilgrami chose to memorialize exemplary South Asian Muslims as 'ulama' because Arabic biographical histories often centered them as transmitters of knowledge.

Bilgrami's concern about the lack of historical information on Indian 'ulama' and Shah Wali Allah's diagnosis of *ta'assub* as rooted in ignorance of early Islamic history were repeated in the nineteenth century by Nawwab Siddiq Hasan Khan al-Qanuji (d. 1890) in *Abjad al-'Ulum* (The Most Established of the Sciences), a three-volume Arabic encyclopedia of Islamicate scholarly disciplines.¹⁴ Here, al-Qanuji portrayed the history of Islam as a history of religious learning, stating that to remember the virtues of the illustrious 'ulama' will expose readers to God's blessings.¹⁵

Moreover, al-Qanuji's position as consort to Shah Jahan (r. 1868–1901), the ruler of Bhopal, helped him incorporate South Asia into wider Arabic discussions on hadith-centered reforms through his publications and correspondences.¹⁶ His *al-Taj al-Mukallal min Jawahir Ma'athir al-Tiraz al-Akhir wal-Awwal* (The Crown Bejeweled with Gems of the Virtues from the Latest and Earliest Exemplars), an Arabic biographical history, linked contemporary anti-*taqlid* (tradition/al) hadith scholars from Yemen, the Hijaz, Baghdad, Cairo, Istanbul, and India. He cast them as representing the latest chapter in a longer history of iconoclasm, which began with Ahmad b. Hanbal's (d. 855) stand against the Abbasids. Al-Qanuji explicitly eschewed a focus on political history, stating that he preferred to focus on religious knowledge. Through his selection of biographical material, he hoped Arabic readers would see that "despite the world being filled with injustice and darkness, and catastrophes and massacres, there still remain secrets in sufi lodges, knowledge of religion, love of piety, preference for truth over the world, abandonment of *taqlid*, and the strength of certainty."¹⁷

'Abd al-Hayy al-Laknawi (d. 1886), a younger contemporary of al-Qanuji from the prestigious Farangi Mahall family, felt that al-Qanuji and the generality of Indian 'ulama' were

⁹ Marcia K. Hermansen, "Religious Literature and the Inscription of Identity: The Sufi Tazkira Tradition in Muslim South Asia," *The Muslim World* 87, no. 3/4 (2007): 324.

¹⁰ Carl W. Ernst, "Reconfiguring South Asian Islam: From the 18th to the 19th Century," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 5, no. 2 (2009): 250.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹² *Ibid.*, 71.

¹³ Ghulam 'Ali Azad Bilgrami, *Ma'athir al-Kiram* (Agra: Matba' Mufid-i 'Am, 1910), 164; Ghulam 'Ali Azad Bilgrami, *Subhat al-Marjan*, 177.

¹⁴ Muhammad Siddiq Hasan Khan al-Qanuji, *Abjad al-'Ulum* (Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2002), 691, 715.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 565.

¹⁶ Seema Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 283.

¹⁷ Muhammad Siddiq Hasan Khan al-Qanuji, *al-Taj al-Mukallal min Jawahir Ma'athir al-Tiraz al-Akhir wa-l-Awwal* (Doha: Idarat al-Shu'un al-Islamiyya, 2007), 513.

ignorant of the Ḥanafī legal tradition's history. Al-Laknawi wrote *al-Fawa'id al-Bahiya fi Tarajim al-Hanafīyya* (Beautiful Lessons from Lives of Ḥanafīs), a biographical dictionary of Ḥanafī scholars in Arabic, to show the changes the legal school had undergone and how it encompassed diversity. Explaining his motivation, he wrote, "I have found past and present scholars in our land treating history as if it were strange and turning their backs to it. Consequently, it has become a forgotten and lost treasure."¹⁸ According to al-Laknawi, the Indians' ignorance of the multitude of Ḥanafī scholars rendered them unable to grasp the breadth of the legal tradition. He further clarified that he did not write about sufis because books on their lives were abundant and easily found in South Asia.¹⁹

The Muslim community built in al-Laknawi's Ḥanafī biographical history was different from al-Qanuji's community of anti-*taqlīd* scholars, and this competition to define transregional Muslim communities spilled over into historiographical polemics.²⁰ Indeed, in *Ibraz al-Ghayy fi Shifa' al-ʿAyy* (Highlighting Errors to Cure the Weak), al-Laknawi cataloged nearly two hundred of al-Qanuji's historical errors and critiqued him for not verifying (*taḥqīq*) information in the oldest historical sources available.²¹ In 1885, al-Laknawi sent a copy of *Ibraz al-Ghayy* to the salafi scholar Nuʿman al-Alusi (d. 1899), an admirer of al-Qanuji in Baghdad, evidencing that Arabic biographical writing produced in South Asia was addressed to—and did reach—a transregional audience.²²

ʿAbd al-Hayy al-Hasani (d. 1923), the rector of the Nadwat al-ʿUlama' seminary in Lucknow, expanded on the above critiques of Indo-Persianate histories in his monumental eight-volume Arabic biographical dictionary *Nuzhat al-Khawātir wa Bahjat al-Masami' wa-l-Nawazir* (Promenade of Thoughts and Delight of the Ears and Eyes). In 4,515 biographical entries, he divided notable Muslims associated with learning and scholarship in South Asia into fourteen generations, from the eighth century to the early twentieth century. Within each of the fourteen generations, the entries are organized alphabetically. Al-Hasani criticized Indo-Persianate histories for being so preoccupied with ornate writing about poetic verses and sufi miracles that they failed to provide crucial information about erudite Muslims, such as their birth and death dates, what subjects and books they studied, with whom they studied, and what they taught, wrote, or contributed intellectually.²³

Al-Hasani believed the Indo-Persianate historical tradition had led to two main problems: that the authorship of renowned books, such as *al-Fatawa al-Hindiyya*, remained unknown and that some contemporary Muslims doubted the historical existence of certain famous Muslims.²⁴ The latter problem, according to al-Hasani, arose because "the [Indo-Persianate] compiler's entire effort is spent in detailing the unveiling and miracles of the saint. And every attempt is made to present the saint as a superhuman being."²⁵ In al-Hasani's view, the lack of historical data necessary to tracing the continuity of knowledge from present to past generations posed a challenge to writing the intellectual history of Indian Muslims.²⁶

¹⁸ Muhammad ʿAbd al-Hayy al-Laknawi, *al-Fawa'id al-Bahiya fi Tarajim al-Hanafīyya*, ed. Muhammad Badr al-Din al-Naʿsani (Cairo: Matbaʿ Dar al-Saʿada, 1906), 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3, 4.

²⁰ Saeedullah, *The Life and Works of Muhammad Siddiq Hasan Khan, Nawab of Bhopal, 1248-1307 (1832-1890)* (Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf, 1973), 93–101.

²¹ Muhammad ʿAbd al-Hayy al-Laknawi, *Naqd Awham Siddiq Hasan Khan al-Musamma Ibraz al-Ghayy al-Waqi' fi Shifa' al-ʿAyy*, ed. Salah Muhammad Abu al-Haj (Amman: Dar al-Fath, 2000), 18, 26.

²² Itzchak Weismann, "Genealogies of Fundamentalism: Salafi Discourse in Nineteenth-Century Baghdad," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 2 (2009): 278; al-Laknawi, *Naqd Awham Siddiq Hasan Khan*, 8.

²³ ʿAbd al-Hayy al-Hasani, *Nuzhat al-Khawātir wa Bahjat al-Masami' wa-l-Nawazir* (Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 1999), vol. 1, 30.

²⁴ ʿAbd al-Hayy al-Hasani, *al-Thaqafa al-Islamiyya fi al-Hind* (Cairo: Muʿassisat al-Hindawi li-l-Taʿlim wa-l-Thaqafa, 2012), 13; Abu al-Hasan ʿAli al-Hasani Nadwi, *Hayat ʿAbd al-Hayy* (Raebareli, India: Sayyid Ahmad Shahid Academy, 2004), 283.

²⁵ ʿAbd al-Hayy al-Hasani, *Yad-i Ayyam* (Lucknow: Majlis-i Tahqiqat wa Nashriyat-i Islam, 1983), 92.

²⁶ ʿAbd al-Hayy al-Hasani, *Hindustan ka Nisab-i Dars Awr uske Taghayyurat* (Lucknow: Shuʿba-i Taʿmir-o-Taraqqi Dar al-ʿUlum Nadwat al-ʿUlama', n.d.), 4.

Arabic biographical works continued to be relevant for Urdu histories of Islam in the twentieth century, especially works published by the Dar al-Musannifin academy in Azamgarh, which became part of the Republic of India in 1947.²⁷ Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi (d. 1953), its founder and one of the most important South Asian historians, mentioned that his interest in history was piqued by his engrossment in Arabic hadith studies and the associated biographical histories, such as Shah ‘Abd al-‘Aziz’s *Bustan al-Muhaddithin* and al-Dhahabi’s (d. 1348) *Tadhkirat al-Huffaz* (Biographies of the Memorizers).²⁸ The popular nine-volume *Siyar-i Sahaba* (Lives of the Companions) series on Muslims from the first three centuries of Islam published by the academy between the 1920s and 1950s represents an Urdu synthesis of information gleaned from hadith and Arabic biographical sources.²⁹ Thus, in line with Michael O’Sullivan’s essay in this roundtable, the histories published by Dar al-Musannifin show that the adoption of Urdu did not necessarily diminish the relevance of Arabic in constructing Muslim communities in South Asia.

Fully comprehending the production of Arabic and Urdu histories discussed above requires widening the historiographical perspective beyond the Indo-Persianate historical tradition and the disruptions generated by colonialism.³⁰ In this essay, I argued that South Asian hadith scholars had been involved in reading and writing Arabic histories since the eighteenth century, constructing communities across the Indian Ocean and maintaining a connection to the past through intellectual genealogies. This often entailed critiquing Indo-Persianate histories for their tendency to memorialize Muslims as sufis rather than ‘ulama’.

When combined with Indo-Persianate histories, Arabic historical works shed light on how Indian scholars negotiated their location in a Persian and Arabic cosmopolis. Moreover, increased interest in Arabic histories for constructing transregional Muslim communities in South Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries cannot be singularly explained as a modern search for cultural authenticity due to British colonialism’s marginalization of Indo-Persianate histories, nor as a product of anti-imperial ideologies.³¹ Greater study of South Asia’s Arabic historical traditions can therefore help contextualize the salience of ongoing intellectual exchanges between South Asia and the Middle East in the twenty-first century.

²⁷ Muhammad Ilyas al-A‘zami, *Dar al-Musannifin ki Tarikhi Khidmat* (Patna, India: Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, 2002).

²⁸ A.B.M. Habibullah, “Historical Writing in Urdu: A Survey of Tendencies,” in *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, ed. C.H. Philips (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1961), 492; Muhammad ‘Imran Khan Nadwi, ed., *Mashahir Ahl-i-‘Ilm ki Muhsin Kitaben* (Lucknow: Idara Ihya-i ‘Ilm-o-Dawat, 2013), 32.

²⁹ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, “A Venture in Critical Islamic Historiography and the Significance of Its Failure,” *Numen* 41, no. 1 (1994): 39–40; Shah Mu‘in al-Din Ahmad Nadwi, *Siyar al-Sahaba: Khulafa’-i Rashidin*, vol. 1 (Karachi: Dar al-Isha‘at, 2004), 10.

³⁰ Barbara D. Metcalf, “Nationalism, Modernity, and Muslim Identity in India before 1947,” in *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*, eds. Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 129–43; Manan Ahmed Asif, *The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 306.

³¹ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, “Arabic, the Arab Middle East, and the Definition of Muslim Identity in Twentieth Century India,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series 8, no. 1 (1998): 74–75; Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

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