

The curious case of Carnatic: The last nawab of Arcot (d. 1855) and Persian literary culture

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While the nineteenth century is a period that generally witnessed Persian's longue durée of decline in post-Mughal South Asia, it is also one in which Persian literary culture reconstituted itself in multiple ways that allowed participants to remain invested in its production. This article focuses on one such environment in the nineteenth century—the court of the last Nawab of Arcot (d. 1855). It highlights the development of Persian literary culture at Arcot, its promotion by the last Nawab through an exclusive Persian poetry society and the personal clashes and poetic rivalries that beset debates around Persian poetry. It demonstrates how Persian literary culture not only remained an important part of the Arcot court's cultural milieu but also how its poetic debates remained connected to larger issues vexing poets elsewhere in the Persianate world, in particular around the questions of 'who speaks for Persian' and 'what constitutes the Persian canon'.

Keywords: Indo-Persian, literary history, Arcot, south India, poetry

Introduction

When Nawab Muhammad Ghaws Khan, the last Nawab of Arcot, died without heir in 1855, the East India Company (EIC) took the opportunity to formally annex his dynasty's territorial possessions and conclusively end the reign of the Nawabs.¹

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¹ While the English and Persian sources of the time refer to this successor state as 'the Carnatic State' and those who ruled over it as the 'Nawabs of Carnatic', the region of Carnatic is significantly larger than that which the Nawabs actually controlled. Therefore, when referring to later Nawabs, such as Muhammad Ghaws Khan Bahâdur, I have opted for the 'Nawab of Arcot', as it more accurately reflects the scope of the Nawabs' domains during that time. Carnatic will be used when discussing trends in the larger region around the court and state. Persian and Arabic words are transliterated from their original following Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary*, absent any diacritical marks for consonants. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

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The Nawab's uncle and one-time regent, Azîm Jâh, attempted to attain the position of Nawab for himself, but was instead granted the title of Prince of Arcot. The House of Arcot continues until this day with privileges and titles.

The death of Muhammad Ghaws Khan ended an era promoting Persian literary activities encompassing his reign and that of his predecessors. The absence of a local court dedicated to the support of Persian literary activities, the consequent lack of available employment opportunities for individuals versed in Persian administrative technologies and the insistence of the British to shape the area's educational activities according to their own criteria all led to Persian literary culture in Carnatic losing much of its importance and lustre. The *Madrasah-yi A'zam*, which the Nawab started in 1851 to instruct students in both religious and secular sciences, was converted into an English high school in 1859. Many instructors appointed to teach Arabic, Persian and Islamic theology were dismissed.² So too the Company's own *madrasah* at Fort St. George College, Madras, was converted into a high school.³ Fate was no more kind to individuals whose livelihood depended on Persian retaining its cultural and official status at the court, whether they were poets and scholars receiving patronage or administrators. Those seeking to continue to capitalise on their skills and knowledge of Persian for employment turned to the princely state of Hyderabad.

But for a short while the Arcot state, especially during the brief reign of the last Nawab, served as a bustling environment of Persian literary activity and production. Both the Nawab's own personal investment in promoting Persian literary activities and the attractiveness of employment opportunities available at his court and nearby Madras for individuals skilled in Persian made the Arcot state, perhaps unexpectedly, a curious outpost of Persian in mid-nineteenth-century South Asia. After all, this period of Persian productivity at the Nawab's court and its environs followed Thomas Macaulay's famous 'Minute on Education' in 1835 that is presumed to have served as the immediate death knell for Persian in South Asia.⁴ Nonetheless, following 1835, poets, littérateurs, administrators, language teachers, tax collectors and others continued to invest themselves in producing works of Persian poetry and prose.

Much of the information detailing the cultural and literary environment of Persian at Arcot can be found in a series of *tazkirahs* (biographical anthology) of Persian poets, which help record the lives of individual authors and their verse. As Marcia Hermansen and Bruce Lawrence have noted, however, *tazkirahs* are 'not mere mnemonic repetitions' meant to simply record the lives and oeuvre of individual authors, but rather 'conscious remembrances' that may serve as 'both cultural

² Kokan, *Arabic and Persian in Carnatic*, p. 517.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 518.

⁴ Macaulay, 'Minute on Education', 2 February 1835.

artifacts and cultural reconstructions'.⁵ *Tazkirahs* 'both memorialize individuals and communicate their legacy to a new generation'.⁶

Recent scholarship has endeavoured into the world of *tazkirah* production to demonstrate the valuable ways in which these texts assist in exploring issues of poetic legacy, literary reception, community identity and conceptualisations of trans-regional space.⁷ It is a growing body of scholarly output that seeks to creatively use the shifting impulses of memorialisation in the *tazkirah* genre across space and time to reconstruct everything from daily life to national literary historiographies. Remarkably, *tazkirah* composition at Arcot in the early and mid-nineteenth century is one of the most fervent locales of this genre's production across the Persianate⁸ world during this time.

In the case of Arcot, the great preponderance of *tazkirahs* serve not just as testaments to individually recorded lives but also as snapshots of intellectual fervent, contrasting literary styles, and deep anxiety about one's place within a bustling yet contracting Persianate world. Indeed, it is competition over *tazkirah* production itself that excavates deep-rooted issues of literary-cultural identity vexing the many participants involved. Collectively, the voices accumulated in these texts help reify and demarcate what Hermansen and Lawrence refer to as *tazkirahs*' attention to formulating 'common identity and a convergent legacy' by raising questions and concerns about how a community of poets in mid-nineteenth-century South Asia should understand their position and literary output both within their own world and that of Persian literary history.⁹ From the vantage of mid-nineteenth-century Carnatic, what did it mean to produce acceptable Persian verse? Who maintains the right to 'speak' for Persian poetry? What are the potential ethnic and geographic fault lines defining literary debate?

As will be seen below, the accumulated voices found at the last Nawab's court in mid-nineteenth-century Arcot provide no definitive answers. Situated in an atmosphere beset by local rivalries, the poets and littérateurs of this courtly locale provide conflicting opinions and attitudes about what constitutes acceptable poetic style and how this relates to one's position in the Persianate world of contemporary times and that of the past. Some of Arcot's participants understand the rivalry over poetic style in literary terms, pitting a 'simple' style of poetry against a 'complicated' one; others view such literary rivalry more sceptically, recognising elements of competition between 'Indians' and 'Indo-Iranians' coursing through it.

⁵ Hermansen and Lawrence, 'Indo-Persian Tazkirahs', p. 150.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁷ For example, see Losensky, *Welcoming Fighānī*; Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire*; Schwartz, 'Bāzgasht-i Adabī'; Kia, 'Imagining Iran'; and Beers, 'The Biography of Vahshi Bāfīqī'.

⁸ My understanding of the term 'Persianate' follows the usage as articulated by Marshall Hodgson as referring to 'cultural traditions in Persian or reflecting Persian inspiration', in such fields as literature, administration, history-writing or the arts. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, p. 293.

⁹ Hermansen and Lawrence, 'Indo-Persian Tazkirahs', p. 152.

This article begins with a brief history of the Nawabs of Arcot and an examination of the personality and early education of Nawab Muhammad Ghaws Khan, the last Nawab of Arcot. The focus then turns to the literary activities of the Nawab's court and, in particular, his Persian poetic society. The article concludes with a discussion of poetic rivalry in mid-nineteenth-century Carnatic, through the competition of *tazkirah* production, and varying self-conceptions of what it meant to compose Persian poetry during this one particular moment in time and how that relates to one's grander understanding of Persianate poetic community.

Pivot of Persian: Nawab Muhammad Ghaws Khan 'A'zam'

It is the time of learning for the prince of our age, From his splendour the night of enjoyment like luminous morning rage. He is the elegance of the throne and the beauty of the Walahjahi¹⁰ crown, A shining candle has he become to this house of renown.¹¹

When Muhammad Ghaws Khan ascended the throne in 1825 under the care of a regent, the Nawabs of Arcot were no more than titular heads of state under the suzerainty of the British EIC. The relative political and economic autonomy once achieved by Mughal-appointed governors and later independent rulers of the territory during the period from 1698 to 1801 was now over.¹² In 1801, the British leveraged accusations of political malfeasance and financial mismanagement to force the Nawabs to sign a treaty declaring the British right to select the next ruler and exercise suzerainty over the state in exchange for a stipend.¹³ Nonetheless, as the political and financial fortunes of the state began to wane, the Walajahi court rose to new heights of princely splendour and lavishness, with a greater attention to 'the sacred and ceremonial functions of kingship and on rituals which exalted the status of the ruler and his kin'.¹⁴ The Arcot state was well positioned in this regard prior to the treaty in 1801, having become an attractive destination for poets, Sufis, scholars, administrators, artisans and military men as early as the reign of Sa'adatallah Khan, who was appointed *subahdar* in Carnatic in 1710. In the early eighteenth century and after, due to the disruption of patronage networks at other Muslim courts, Arcot witnessed an influx of individuals looking to serve

¹⁰ The ruling house of Arcot.

¹¹ By the poet Rā'iq on the occasion of the Nawab commencing his studies. Cited in Kokan, *Arabic and Persian*, p. 277. All extended quotes cited in Kokan are translated by me from the original Persian or Arabic.

¹² For a general background on the emergence of the Arcot state in the late seventeenth century, see: Ramaswami, *Political History*. In understanding how the state's emergence is partially defined by early rulers' successes in gaining greater control over the flow of external commerce and local ports of entry, see Alam and Subrahmanyam, 'Trade and Politics'.

¹³ Ramaswami, *Political History*, p. 375.

¹⁴ Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses, and Kings*, p. 223.

the state in a variety of capacities leading to the appellation ‘Shahjahanabad [i.e. Delhi] the small’.¹⁵

Policies during the 46-year reign of Muhammad Ali Walajah (r. 1749–95) helped continue the trend of attracting government servants, soldiers, jurists, literary men and Sufis in search of employment and patronage, as he further developed administrative structures, absorbed subordinate vassals and imposed streamlined forms of revenue collection upon the populace.¹⁶ Many of them, like the Walajahi rulers themselves, were from among the north Indian urban gentry.¹⁷ In this respect, the Arcot state under the Walajahis helped harbour and grow an Urdu-speaking Muslim elite. The Nawabs also employed groups of non-Muslims to fit their needs as an ambitious state in southern India. Among them were the Niyogis, whose variegated linguistic skills allowed them to act as ‘social and economic intermediaries between the local world of the village and the cosmopolitan world of the court’.¹⁸ The Nawabs equally sought to incorporate and co-opt non-Islamic religious symbols, such as the patronage of Hindu places of worship, thereby practicing a statecraft that transcended communal and religious boundaries.¹⁹

Crucial to the Arcot state’s development as the centre of patronage for literary and scholarly activity was Muhammad Ali’s decision to move his court from Arcot to a lavish residence at Chepauk next to Fort St. George, Madras, in 1766. The move to Madras marks a symbolic turn in the development of the Arcot state and is indicative of the further enmeshing of the activities of the court with that of the EIC. The employees and attendees of the court now found themselves in closer proximity to EIC officers, offices and institutions potentially in need of their services. This proximity allowed such individuals to better serve both the Nawab’s court and the EIC, which many would do later in the century and beyond. Local Muslim poets and scholars found easy employment teaching Persian, Arabic and Hindustani at the Company Madrasah²⁰ or served the EIC in other capacities, such as private language tutors, interpreters and assistants.²¹ The move to Madras also led to the Arcot state becoming more embroiled in financial dealings with the EIC, its officers and private individuals.²²

It was into such a courtly atmosphere that Muhammad Ghaws Khan found himself when he ascended the throne in 1825. As he was just over a year of age at the time, he was placed under the regency of his uncle, Azîm Jâh. More than half

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 153–54.

¹⁶ Phillips, ‘A Successor to the Moguls’, p. 366.

¹⁷ Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses, and Kings*, p. 155.

¹⁸ Wagoner, ‘Precolonial Intellectuals’, p. 796.

¹⁹ Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses, and Kings*, p. 168.

²⁰ The Company Madrasah was replaced by Fort St. George College, which opened in 1812.

²¹ Vatuk, ‘Islamic Learning’, pp. 49–50.

²² This practice of borrowing large sums of money from outside sources proved detrimental to the long-term sovereignty of Arcot, eventually serving as one of the justifications for the 1801 treaty.

of Muhammad Ghaws Khan's life (he died at age 31) was spent under a regent's control and devoted to educational activities that included, among other subjects, the study of Persian literature. His early engagement with Persian poetry in particular proved crucial in defining the cultural parameters of his court, his later literary activities and overall poetic outlook. It informed and inspired his later rule as a Nawab invested in the promotion of Persian literary culture and as a participant in that culture as 'A'zam' ('the grandest', his pen name). During his reign as Nawab, Muhammad Ghaws Khan served as the promoter, protector and arbiter of Persian literary activity.

The young Nawab's early education followed established curricular norms and practices found throughout the Persianate world at that time. The curriculum was based on the study of Arabic, the Qur'an, the Islamic sciences (such as *hadith* and *fiqh*), Persian literary texts and the art of Persian composition. On the surface, his education was not altogether exceptional compared to previous princes or the contemporary poets later active in his court, but this formative education would have a lasting impact.

The Nawab's early association with the poet and scholar Sayyid Abû Tayyib Khan 'Vâlâ' (d. 1848) would affect the direction of literary developments and debates years later at his court. The young Nawab met Vâlâ around the age of 12 and appointed him his teacher in poetry in 1835.²³ Under Vâlâ's tutelage, he read a variety of Persian texts and was guided through the intricacies of poetic composition and stylistics. Vâlâ became influential in poetic activities and debates during the Nawab's reign not only because he was the Nawab's teacher but through his instruction of other poets.

The Nawab's early education was also influenced by his introduction to the poetry of Nâsir Ali Sirhindî (d. 1696), one of the great Indian-born poets of the late Mughal period. The Nawab's admiration for the poetry and style of Sirhindî left a deep impression. He sought to imitate Sirhindî's style and recognised him as his model (*muqtadâ*) in his later writing.²⁴ Sirhindî's poetry too would be a central part of the literary affairs that consumed the Nawab's court and would continue to shape his own poetry.

Even though the Nawab of Arcot had become no more than a titular position by the time of Muhammad Ghaws Khan's lifetime, the EIC nonetheless sought to influence his educational development. The Court at Madras, through its government agent at Chempauk, encouraged the Nawab to take his study of English and the 'branch[es] of Science' more seriously. The agent even attempted to coax the Nawab and his handlers into allowing him to spend the final years of his education at Calcutta, where the 'qualifications which were calculated to throw a lustre over

²³ Kokan, *Arabic and Persian*, p. 368.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 351. The poet Bînîsh observed that the foundation of the Nawab's poetry (*pâyah-yi sukhan*) was based upon that of Sirhindî's. Bînîsh, *Tazkirah-yi ishârât-i Bînîsh*, p. 44.

the throne of his ancestors would be most readily acquired'.²⁵ This suggestion, along with others, was met with resistance. Eventually, the British authorities in Madras were forced to abandon their overtures.

In the face of British suzerainty and increased management over military and political matters, the Nawab and his court sought to protect whatever was still in their control. In specific terms, this concerned the Nawab's upbringing and education as an heir to the throne; more generally, it involved the cultural direction and composition of court activities. He did this most prominently through his engagement with and promotion of literary activities. The Nawab collected books in Arabic and Persian on a wide array of topics and his royal library 'contained almost all of the eminent works in all the three languages [Arabic, Persian, Urdu] on the various branches of learning'.²⁶ He established several printing presses to publish classical works in Arabic and Persian.²⁷ He oversaw construction of a state library in 1850 to house books and manuscripts collected from across South Asia and abroad.²⁸

The realm of Persian literary-cultural activities firmly anchored the Nawab's court. He provided patronage, bestowed titles on poets and presided over a society devoted to the discussion of Persian verse. His literary society was not an informal gathering of poets but an officially sanctioned assembly that closely guarded its membership, sought to establish standards of Persian poetry and to delineate its proper composition. The Nawab took such deep pride in its establishment that he sent 31 copies of *Tazkirah-yi ishârât-i Bînish* (*Bînish's Notices*), a work devoted to recording the literary society's activities and participant members, to the Madras Court for distribution. It was the sole work sent by the Nawab to local British authorities.²⁹

Nawab Muhammad Ghaws Khan was not only a patron of Persian literary activities but also an active participant devoted to shaping their development. He composed his own verse in Persian and wrote two Persian *tazkirahs* (or had them commissioned in his name).³⁰ The dictionary *Bahr-i 'Ajam* (*Sea of 'Ajam*) by the

²⁵ Madras Letter to Court, Foreign Department, 14 February 1837, no. 3, National Archives of India (NAI), New Delhi, India.

²⁶ Kokan, *Arabic and Persian*, p. 359.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 359–60.

²⁹ Madras Letter from Court, Foreign Department, 18 October 1854, no. 3, NAI, New Delhi, India. Unfortunately, the Political Letter from the Madras Court to the Court of Directors (3 June 1854, no. 1) recording the receipt of the copies of *Tazkirah-yi ishârât-i Bînish* and their associated comments could not be located. All that is known from the transaction is a response of the Court of Directors to the Madras Court stating: 'We presume that this work, of which thirty one copies have been presented to your Government by the Nuwaub, has been compiled under the directions of His Highness. We approve your having thanked His Highness for those copies and having distributed them in accordance with his wishes.'

³⁰ The two *tazkirahs* were *Tazkirah-yi subh-i vatan* (completed in 1842–33) and *Tazkirah-yi gulzâr A'zam* (completed in 1852–53).

poet and scholar Maulavi Muhammad Husayn Qadirî 'Râqim' (d. 1888) exemplifies the attitude of recognising the Nawab as an esteemed Persian poet and critic.³¹ Râqim dedicates his work to the Nawab, not by celebrating his just rule, powers and beneficence, but by praising his poetic voice, critical discernment, command of language and comprehension of difficult topics.³² More than being commended as the Nawab of Arcot, he is admired as the poet A'zam.

The insistence of Muhammad Ghaws Khan and the Arcot court to promote and maintain an allegiance to Persian literary activity appears at first glance as antithetical to the narrative of Persian's decline in post-Mughal South Asia. There is no doubt that the Persian language found itself in a transitory role in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century South Asia, in particular on account of its replacement by Urdu in various official and popular settings. Such developments were rapidly unfolding long before Muhammad Ghaws Khan aspired to the throne.

At the Mughal court, beginning around the reign of Shah 'Âlam II (r. 1759–1806), *rekhta* (slowly coming to call itself 'Urdu') began to be used in the court of the Mughals. While Persian remained in place as the official language, the gentry in Delhi became less inclined to utilise it in their writings. They increasingly viewed Persian as a language most readily associated with the royal patronage practices of a strained imperial centre. Instead, as Fritz Lehmann notes, they began to turn their attention to writing in Urdu, pivoting more directly to a local, rather than royal, audience.³³

Similar shifts were occurring outside of the imperial centre as cultures of newly emergent successor states were taking shape. As Barbara Metcalf notes, while central authority in the eighteenth century waned, the rise of regional powers witnessed the emergence of 'new cultural and institutional forms', allowing for Urdu, like other regional languages, to be enriched by the 'vocabulary and literary forms of Persian'.³⁴ In Awadh, for example, rulers beginning with Shujâ' al-Dawlah (r. 1753–75) offered patronage opportunities for Urdu in addition to supporting the fine arts in general.³⁵ Sceptical and wary of the old Mughal elite, rulers such as Shujâ' al-Dawlah relied on local non-Persianised groups and imported others, such as Shaykhzâdahs, Telingana Rajputs and Gosain mercenaries, who were more inclined to offer patronage to Urdu poets rather than Persian.³⁶

Alongside the shift in political tides and patronage practices stemming from the break-up of the Mughal Empire, Urdu emerged as a more readily acceptable

³¹ Râqim, who will be met further below, also presided over the Nawab's literary society and for a short time served as headmaster of *Madrasah-yi A'zam*. See Kokan, *Arabic and Persian*, p. 411.

³² Muhammad Husayn Râqim, *Bahr-i 'Ajam*, College of Fort William Collection, no. 527, NAI, New Delhi, India, p. 2.

³³ Lehmann, 'Urdu Literature', p. 126.

³⁴ Metcalf, 'Urdu in India', p. 30.

³⁵ Qamber, *The Last Musha'irah of Delhi*, p. 15.

³⁶ Syed, 'How Could Urdu Be the Envy of Persian', p. 299.

medium of literary and poetic expression in competition with Persian. The community, popular appeal and networks amongst Urdu poets were growing stronger, reified in descriptions of lineages and *mushâ'irahs* (poetic assemblies) as told in *tazkirahs* of Urdu poets increasingly being written in Urdu.³⁷

The British also played an active part in promoting Urdu as evidenced by their educational activities at home and abroad. Persian instructors continued to be hired both in Calcutta and at colleges in the United Kingdom,³⁸ but the transition to Urdu was on its way. Starting in 1800, the EIC began hiring various writers at the College of Fort William to translate many popular Persian books into simple Urdu prose.³⁹ Persian still remained popular among students, but Urdu was more than keeping pace in regard to enrolment, course offerings and publications.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, Persian remained relevant for the Nawabs of Arcot well into the middle of the nineteenth century as it did for other locales. As Shamsur Rahman Faruqi notes, Persian still had a place in the gatherings devoted to the recitation of Urdu verse well into the twentieth century, where Persian poetry could be recited 'without the audience or the poet feeling any incongruity'.⁴¹ The analysis of Tariq Rahman is equally revealing for the post-Mughal (and even post-1835) lifespan of Persian in India, as it points to how both the British and members of society continued debating the role of Persian and its shifting position within various institutions.⁴² As Nile Green has recently demonstrated in his multidimensional *Bombay Islam*, Persian production in nineteenth-century Bombay had a sustained impact well beyond the city itself. It made inroads into Iran as well, influencing its religious economy and national history through the circulation of texts that reflected the politically liberal atmosphere of Bombay and its services in printing technologies.⁴³

In the case of Nawabs of Arcot, the continued adherence to Persian literary norms was a matter of both practicality and the assertion of cultural independence. The emergence and consolidation of the nascent state necessitated the development of bureaucratic models dependant on Persianate norms for which out-of-work cadres

³⁷ Such as that of Mîr Taqî Mîr's (d. 1810) *Niqât al-shu'arâ* and Sa'âdat Khân Nâsir's (d. ca. 1857–71) *Khush Ma'rakah Zibâ*. Perhaps indicative of the shifting tide in textual production, at least in regard to *tazkirahs* dedicated to recording this nascent literary climate, was the language of composition of each of the aforementioned texts: Taqî Mîr composed his in Persian, while Nâsir composed his *tazkirah* in Urdu. By the 1840s, the grip of Persian prose was broken: Over half the *tazkirahs* of Urdu poets produced in that decade were composed in a language other than Persian, a far cry from the first four decades of the century when the situation was entirely reversed. Pritchett, 'A Long History', p. 881.

³⁸ On the intriguing occurrence of Persian instructors being hired at colleges in the United Kingdom in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Fisher, 'Teaching Persian as an Imperial Language'.

³⁹ Naim, 'Mughal and English Patronage of Urdu Poetry', p. 270.

⁴⁰ For these statistics, see the comparative charts in Das, *Sahibs and Munshis*, pp. 46–47, 69, 71 and 75.

⁴¹ Faruqi, *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History*, p. 150.

⁴² Rahman, 'Decline of Persian in British India'.

⁴³ Green, *Bombay Islam*.

of litterateurs, courtiers and administrators from the North filled a ready need. Likewise, the proximity of the court to a seat of British power, which still relied on Persian-based bureaucratic norms to conduct business, granted the language a continued position of primacy as a medium of regal and official cultural power. For the Arcot court, which had little opportunity for political independence under British suzerainty, the promotion of Persian literary activity served as the most appropriate and recognisable linguistic and social medium to maintain its cultural bona fides, in terms of both past practices and in accordance with the ongoing attitudes of the British. In the cultural and political nexus defining the relationship between the Arcot court and Madras, these were roles Urdu was not yet equipped to fulfil.

The Poetic Society of Muhammad Ghaws Khan and the Persian Poets of Carnatic

Persian in Madras was like a body without a soul, Like the Messiah the sublime
A 'zam brought it to life.⁴⁴

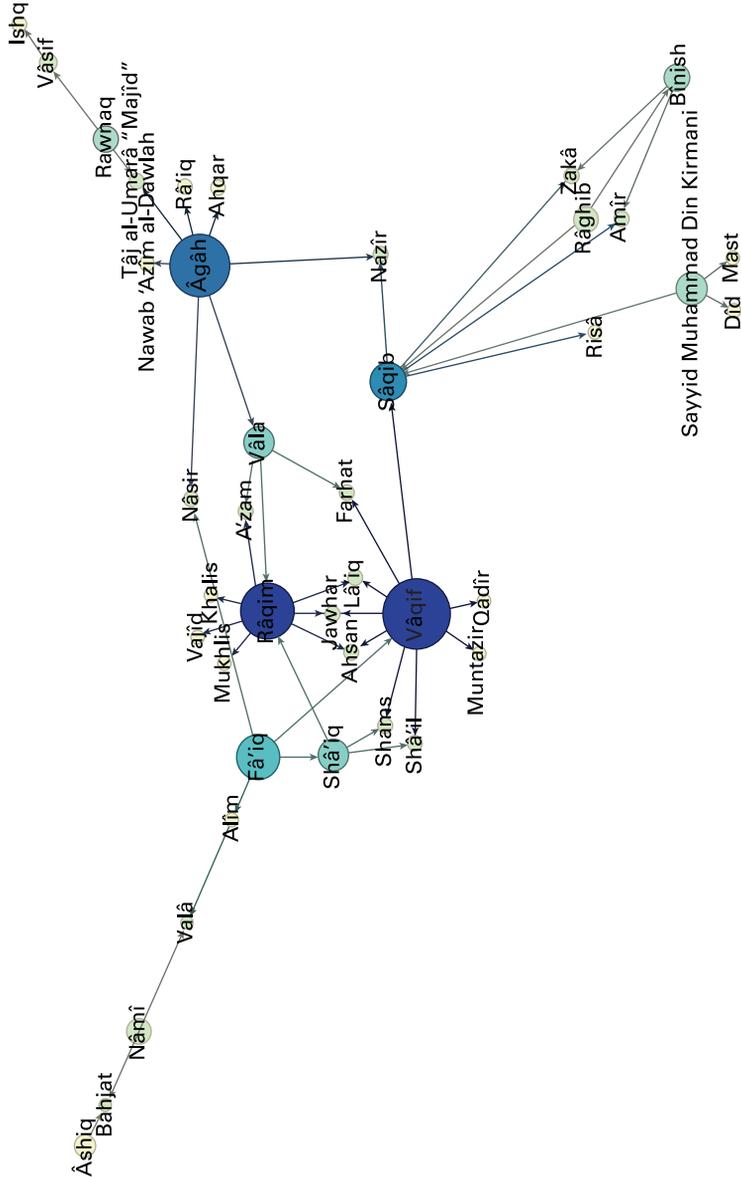
The details and nuances of such a vibrant Persian literary culture at Arcot, how it functioned, who participated in it and its place within the post-Mughal South Asian landscape and beyond are best seen by looking at the Nawab's literary society. This literary society was the fulcrum of Persian literary activity at his court.

The poetic society of Nawab Muhammad Ghaws Khan, established in 1846 and lasting for roughly 10 years until the Nawab's death, was an officially sanctioned affair that met once a week at the royal residence. Here, professional poets, scholars and court administrators congregated to recite their own verses, critique the poetry of their peers and engage in discussion. Even though several poets in attendance were known to compose both Persian and Urdu verse, including the Nawab himself, the society restricted its work to the composition and discussion of Persian poetry alone. Most of the extant information relating to the Nawab's poetic society⁴⁵ comes from Sayyid Murtaẓā 'Bīnīsh' (d. 1849) and his *Tazkirah-yi ishārāt-i Bīnīsh* (completed 1848–49). The purpose of this work was to document the poetic society as well as the lives of other contemporary poets in the area of Carnatic. Bīnīsh died in 1849 and consequently was only able to witness the first years of the Nawab's poetic society; his *tazkirah* nonetheless provides a wealth of information. It includes information on the poetic, familial and employment backgrounds of the society's members as well as other poets in Carnatic. (Figure 1 presents one element of this interconnected literary network—genealogies of poetic instruction—that existed in Carnatic in the mid-nineteenth century and can be reconstructed from Bīnīsh's

⁴⁴ By the poet Ahmadī, cited in Kokan, *Arabic and Persian*, p. 417.

⁴⁵ The poetic society is variously referred to in contemporary sources as *mahfil-i A'zam* (A'zam's society), *mushā'irah-yi A'zam* (A'zam's poetic gathering) or simply *mushā'irah* (poetic gathering) or *mahfil* (society).

Figure 1
 Network Map of Instructional Poetic Connections at the Arcot Court and Greater Carnatic in the Nineteenth Century



Source: Reconstructed from information found in Bīnīsh, S.M. *Tazkirah-yi ishārât-i Bīnīsh*, ed., Dr. Sharīf Husayn Qāsīmī, Delhi, 1973. The text was originally composed in 1848–49.

text.) By situating the society in the larger literary context of Carnatic, *Tazkirah-yi ishârât-i Bînish* catalogues the various interrelationships among poets, administrators and elites composing Persian poetry during this time.

The location of the poetic society at the Nawab's court made it an exclusive affair. The attendees were rigorously vetted, only being accepted by the Nawab or one of the assembly's leading figures. As a result, it mostly consisted of well-known poets, scholars and administrators employed at the court, who were the key figures in the debates shaping the scope and direction of Persian literary activity during the Nawab's reign.

At the head of the poetic society was Maulavi Muhammad Husayn Qadirî 'Râqim' (d. 1888), the revered master of Persian poetry of Carnatic. He served as the instructor in poetry for many individuals during the time and received the title of *shîrîn sukhan* (mellifluous) from the Nawab. Râqim was the star pupil of the poet Vâlâ (introduced above), who was the Nawab's instructor in poetry. Vâlâ eventually appointed Râqim to read and correct the poetry of many of his students.⁴⁶ When Vâlâ died in 1848, Râqim also became the Nawab's instructor in poetry.⁴⁷ Râqim served as the headmaster of *Madrasah-yi A'zam*, appointed to that position in 1851–52.⁴⁸ At the poetic society, however, his role was largely ceremonial. The actual managing of the society's meetings was left to two judges (*hakamayn mushâ'irah*), the poets Mîrân Muhay al-Dîn 'Vâqif' (d. 1854) and Muhammad Qudratallah Khan Gûpâmavî 'Qudrat' (d. 1864).

Every poet present at the society had the ability to challenge the words of their peers by deeming them unacceptable and 'without proof from the words of the masters of language' (*bidûn-i istidlâl az kalâm-i asâtizah-yi ahl-i lisân*). These challenges could result in possible embarrassment, erode the poet's confidence in presenting verses again or cause the accused to stop attending the society's gatherings in the future.⁴⁹ According to Bînish, the two judges' mediation would end by sending the 'deficient one' on his way with 'his ignominy consigned by [their] resplendent thinking and sound reason'.⁵⁰ In actuality, the record of Vâqif and Qudrat's dismissals is less definitive.⁵¹

Among the society's members were attendants of the Nawab's court and several individuals whose fathers had attained positions of distinction at the Arcot court previously.⁵² Nearly all of those present were born and raised around Arcot, and many had studied poetry with teachers like Vâqif and/or Râqim (see Figure 1). The most notable exception to this local profile was the Baghdad-born poet Mirza 'Abd

⁴⁶ Kokan, *Arabic and Persian*, p. 411.

⁴⁷ Bînish, *Tazkirah-yi Bînish*, p. 85.

⁴⁸ Kokan, *Arabic and Persian*, p. 411.

⁴⁹ Bînish, *Tazkirah-yi Bînish*, p. 39.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁵¹ See, for example, *ibid.*, p. 108.

⁵² See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 51, 91 and 108.

al-Bâqî al-Sharîf al-Rizvî ‘Vafâ’ (d. 1856), whose travel and employment opportunities took him to Madras. Like many others, he participated in the society at the Nawab’s invitation. Due to his previous travel in Iran, the Nawab also requested that Vafâ ‘participate in the society and serve as arbiter of Persian discussions’ (*dar mahfil-i mushâ’irah sharik, dar guftgû-hâ-yi muhâvarât-i fârsiyah hakam bûd*).⁵³ Also present was Maulavi Muhammad Mahdî ‘Vâsif’, whose publication of a controversial *tazkirah* would initiate personal rivalries and poetic clashes at the Nawab’s court and set this author on a path to challenge the ethics and practices of the Nawab’s Persian literary activities.

Tazkirah Production: Competition and Rivalry

Having established the parameters and context for Persian literary activity in mid-nineteenth-century Carnatic, this article now turns to the poetic debates at the Nawab’s court. The poets of mid-nineteenth-century Carnatic comprised a fairly self-contained network, with the exclusive poetic society of the Nawab’s court at its centre. They were actively engaged, however, in poetic debates prevalent elsewhere in the Persianate world, including some beginning to appear in Qajar-era *tazkirahs*. Much like poets elsewhere in South Asia and Iran at this time, the Carnatic poets debated the merits, values and characteristics of the *tâzah-gû’î* (fresh-speak) style known for its inventive word choices, complicated literary acrobatics and overall juxtaposition with a ‘simpler’ style of poetry.⁵⁴

Evidence from *tazkirahs* dramatises the ways in which Carnatic deliberations were framed by local politics, a volatile mix of poetic tastes, personal rivalries and professional ties. Indeed, the debate over *tâzah-gû’î* during the Nawab’s time progressed along both poetic and personal lines. In mid-nineteenth-century Carnatic, not necessarily unlike other places, entry into disputations on poetics occurred through the writing of a *tazkirah*. Unique to the Carnatic experience, however, is that the mid-nineteenth century witnessed an outpouring of *tazkirahs* in a short time span. Moreover, the authors of these works were in direct conversation with previously written works of their contemporaries. They positioned their *tazkirah* as a response to the *tazkirahs* of their peers, making *tazkirah* composition the preferred method to enter one’s opinion into the ledger of current debates and respond to one’s contemporaries. Table 1 lists 11 *tazkirahs* as well as some other tracts that served as critical responses to recently produced *tazkirahs* of the time.

The Nawab himself entered the world of *tazkirah* production and poetic debate in 1842–43, about a year after he reached the age of maturity and attained the throne. *Tazkirah-yi subh-i vatan* appeared under his name, and features a discussion of local

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁵⁴ For more information on how these issues were being articulated in *tazkirahs* produced in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Zand and Qajar, Iran, see: Schwartz, ‘Bâzgasht-i Adabî’, pp. 1–8.

Table 1
Major *Tazkirahs* and Works Written in Response during the Reign of
Muhammad Ghaws Khan A'zam (d. 1855)

Title	Author	Year of Completion
<i>Guldastah-yi Karnâtik</i>	Râ'iq	Between 1828 and 1832–33
<i>Natâ'ij al-afkâr</i>	Qudrat	1842
<i>Tazkirah-yi subh-i vatan</i>	Nawab A'zam (?)	1842–43
<i>Ma'dan al-jawâhir</i>	Vâsif	1844
<i>Javâb-i i'tirâzât-i Vâsif</i>	Râqim	1845
<i>Tazkirah-yi ishârât-i Bînish</i>	Bînish	1848–49
<i>Tazkirah-yi gulzâr A'zam</i>	Nawab A'zam (?)	1852–53
<i>Tufah-i A'zamîyyah</i>	Irtizâ Ali Khan	1853 (?)
<i>Hadiqat al-marâm</i>	Vâsif	1853–54
<i>Sham'-i mahfil-i sukhan</i>	Sayyid 'Abd al-Latif	ca. 1862
<i>Husn-i khitâb va radd-i javâb</i>	Vâsif	1870

Source: Compiled by the author.

Carnatic poets. Its publication signals the beginning of a remarkably productive period of *tazkirah* writing by a series of authors who collectively sought to shape the memory of Persian poets and poetry at the court and beyond.

The author of *Tazkirah-yi subh-i vatan* expressly stated that he wished to position his *tazkirah* at least as an addendum to the recently composed *Guldastah-yi Karnâtik* (*Bouquet of Carnatic*, completed in 1828–33) by the poet Ghulam Ali Musa Riza 'Râ'iq' (d. ca. 1832–34). The author of *Subh-i vatan* justifies his work as a response to what he found lacking in the accounts of the poets presented in Râ'iq's *tazkirah*. He resolved to offer commemorations of some additional notable poets of his time. The result was modest.⁵⁵

A year later in 1844, the poet Vâsif (d. 1873) completed his *tazkirah* entitled *Ma'dan al-jawâhir* (*Mine of Jewels*), which more fully set in motion the debates at Arcot over poetics and larger questions of Persianate literary history. *Ma'dan al-jawâhir* is no longer extant and even the nature of its original distribution is in question. What is known of *Ma'dan al-jawâhir* comes from the reactions it elicited among Vâsif's opponents. Vâsif's opponents accused him of unduly criticising Maulana Bâqir Âgâh (d. 1805), the pre-eminent poetic instructor of Arcot during the time, and Nâsir Ali Sirhindî, whose poetry the Nawab sought to imitate in his own work, as noted in an earlier section. (To see the centrality of the role of Âgâh in the poetic genealogies of Carnatic at the time, see Figure 1.) The specifics of

⁵⁵ Râ'iq's work included the biographies of 70 poets from late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Carnatic. The author of *Subh-i vatan* enlarged the entries to include 20 others and expanded upon some of the poetic selections. Ivanow, *Concise Descriptive Catalogue of the Persian Manuscripts*, pp. 7–10.

Vâsif's 'insults' are not indicated.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, why all the animosity towards these two poets?

To grasp the grounds of Vâsif's criticisms, one must consider Vâsif's own poetic pedigree and personal relationships compared to his contemporaries. Unlike many of his contemporaries or even predecessors (see Figure 1), Vâsif cannot be connected to any of the major poetic networks prevalent at Arcot. Instead, he was a man apart: Neither his poetic lineage, family background nor his employment directly crossed paths with the Nawab and his inner circle. Vâsif's poetic instruction in Persian came primarily at the hands of his father 'Rawnaq', who according to Bînish favoured a 'simple' (*sâdah*) type of poetry.⁵⁷ The preference for such a style of poetry and its effect on Vâsif's poetic outlook, while not to be overemphasised, can be seen by the way Vâsif instructed his son, "Ishq". 'Ishq's poetry, like that of his grandfather Rawnaq, is described as being that of a simple style, hinting that Vâsif's family had a predilection for that style of poetry in the training of their offspring.⁵⁸ Vâsif's early exposure and commitment to such a simple style helps to explain his opposition to the poetry of Sirhindî and other like-minded poets being imitated during the time. While most poets active in Carnatic were instructed and influenced by each other, and were primarily focused on the more complicated fresh style of *tâzah-gû'î*, Vâsif and his family were in a realm apart.

Bînish further emphasises Vâsif's differences from his contemporaries by noting that he was 'more in the company with the eloquent ones of 'Ajam' (*û bîshar dar suhbat-i fusahâ-yi ahl-i 'Ajam bûd*) and 'acquainted with many of their conversations' (*aksar-i muhâvarât-i ânhâ-râ dar yâftah*).⁵⁹ The full meaning of Bînish's comment is not made clear, but the implication that Vâsif had a poetic outlook distinct from his colleagues, being 'more engaged' with the poets and conversations of 'Ajam, is suggestive. Though geographic fault lines had not yet fully cast a shadow over different styles of Persian poetry, equating *tâzah-gû'î* with Indian-born poets and a 'simpler' poetry with the poets from a circumscribed Iran-centric 'Ajam, as would be the case in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iran, Bînish's comment hints that such lines were beginning to form.

The most likely association Bînish was making between Vâsif and 'Ajam was one that meant to align the poet with native speakers of Persian, not the geographic locale of Iran or Iranian-born poets. One element of the debate about stylistics in the South Asian context centred on questions about one's poetic ability based

⁵⁶ According to Bînish, reporting in his *tazkirah*, Vâsif in *Ma'dan al-jawâhir* 'made shameless insults referring to Nâsir Ali Sirhindî and other masters and treated most of [their] poetry without decorum' (*nisbat bi-janâb Nâsir 'Alî Sirhindî va dîgar asâtizah shûkhî-hâ kardah va dar aksar ash 'âr bi adabî-hâ bih-kâr burdah*). Bînish, *Tazkirah-yi Bînish*, p. 124.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

on native language—whether a poet was a native speaker of Persian or not.⁶⁰ Questions about one’s ability to ‘speak for Persian poetry’, or perhaps more accurately ‘speak Persian poetry’, based on one’s native tongue are raised later by the author of *Gulzâr-i A‘zam* (*A‘zam’s Rosegarden*) when assessing Vâsif’s critique of the poet Bîdil (see below). Nonetheless, the possibility remains that the borders of what constituted ‘*Ajam*’ in the discourse of poetic debates were beginning to constrict for poets in South Asia, even though they remained at a distance from the Iran-centric notion of ‘*Ajam*’ emerging around the same time in Zand and Qajar *tazkirahs*.⁶¹

Vâsif’s aloofness from the networks and styles of other poets prevalent at Carnatic, his education and instruction of his own son in a ‘simple’ style of poetry and his greater familiarity with the poets and debates of ‘*Ajam*’ suggest a likely result: Vâsif increasingly was viewed as an opponent of the complicated *tâzah-gû’i* and its stylistics.⁶² When the dust of the personal animus that hovered over the debates between Vâsif and his opponents finally is cleared away, the difference in *poetic* opinions driving the debate becomes evident. But first the dust over Vâsif’s ‘insults’ would have to settle.

The response to Vâsif’s criticism of Âgâh, Sirhindî and others as outlined in *Ma‘dan al-jawâhir* was swift. A year later, Râqim penned his answer in a tract entitled *Jawâb-i i‘tirâzât-i Vâsif* (*An Answer to Vâsif’s Objections*). Râqim’s outright disdain for Vâsif and his recent work was made clear from the outset. His criticism firmly focused on what he perceived to be Vâsif’s breach of *adab*, chiding him for his ‘scoffing, cursing, and reproach of the eminent learned men and grand orators’ and ‘having stepped outside the path of decorum’.⁶³ Râqim goes on to note that he beseeched Vâqif to remove ‘baseless objections’ from his *tazkirah* but the latter refused.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ See Faruqi, ‘Unprivileged Power’.

⁶¹ For information on the shifting and increasingly shrinking geographic meaning of ‘*Ajam*’, see Sharma, ‘Redrawing the Boundaries of ‘*Ajam*’’. Sharma is particularly interested in the changing meaning of ‘*Ajam*’ as it pertains to the literary discourse of Iranian-born and Western historians.

⁶² It is worth noting that the opinions offered by Vâsif in *Ma‘dan al-jawâhir* may not have been made solely according to poetic tastes. His criticism, or ‘shameless insults’ as Bînish called them, may have had a personal element as well, particularly his comments concerning Âgâh. Âgâh and Vâsif’s father Rawnaq had worked together to correct the poetic verses of the one-time presumptive heir to the throne, Tâj al-Umarâ Ali Husayn Khan ‘Majîd’. When Majîd was passed over for the throne (on the recommendation of the British) in favour of Muhammad Ghaws Khan’s grandfather Nawab ‘Azîm al-Dawlah, Rawnaq’s star at the court may have fallen. Unlike Âgâh, Rawnaq had little relationship with the new Nawab. Rawnaq withdrew to the princely state of Hyderabad even as Âgâh continued to wield influence with the royal family through those poets trained by him.

⁶³ *Jawâb-i i‘tirâzât-i Vâsif* cited in Kokan, *Arabic and Persian*, p. 413.

⁶⁴ Râqim summed up his feelings in the following poem.

When Vâsif wrote the *tazkirah*
in which he made his reproach clearly
Upon the words of the chosen poet

Râqim's account differs significantly from the way Vâsif later remembered the exchange. A full quarter century after Râqim offered his indictment, Vâsif addressed the matter in a work that appeared in 1870 entitled *Husn-i khitâb va radd-i javâb* (*The Beauty of Discourse and Rebuttal*). This work sought to address 37 allegations that Râqim had made against Vâsif.⁶⁵ His recollection could not be further from what Râqim penned 25 years earlier. According to Vâsif's version of events, not only did he willingly submit his earlier work to Râqim for inspection but he also was amenable to having the 'unsound and reprehensible' portions related to Sirhindî (about 'three to four pages') removed.⁶⁶ When Râqim 'opposed the settlement', having noted that 'you are older than me and your skills in the Persian language are apparent', Vâsif considered the matter closed.⁶⁷ Only it wasn't: Râqim penned his pamphlet (*Jawâb-i i'tirâzât-i Vâsif*) shortly thereafter, and a quarter century later Vâsif was still trying to set the record straight in his own *Husn-i khitâb va radd-i javâb*.

With the publication of *Tazkirah-yi gulzâr-i A'zam* in the Nawab's name in 1852–53, Vâsif's circumstances would change. No longer were his reputation, scholarship and opinions of poetry being questioned by a fellow poet, albeit by the Nawab's instructor and companion, but in a work bearing the Nawab's name. The publication of this work—not the tract by Râqim—would lead to Vâsif's later responses challenging Râqim's claims against him. Moreover, *Gulzâr-i A'zam* best encapsulates the debates vexing Carnatic poets about their place in the Persianate world and literary history.

The Local Nature of a Wider Literary Debate

The personal clashes, poetic rivalries and debates over poetics at the court of Nawab Muhammad Ghaws Khan reached their apogee with the publication of *Tazkirah-yi gulzâr-i A'zam* (*A'zam's Rosegarden*) in 1852–53. This work, more than any preceding or following it, laid bare the substance of conflicts among poets at the Arcot court. Here, one gains the fullest understanding of what exactly Vâsif wrote in his *Ma'dan al-jawâhir* that so upset his rivals (beyond the various 'insults') and warranted a head-on response.

The idea that *Tazkirah-yi gulzâr-i A'zam* was composed as a rejoinder to Vâsif's *Ma'dan al-jawâhir* is evident from the outset, reinforcing once again how

Sayyid Nâsir Ali Valî [Sirhindî]
 Also to disgrace the esteemed Âgâh
 he used impoliteness [stemming from] impurity of the heart
 Râqim found in this year in history
 the sigh of awareness from the Zulfiqâr of Ali.

From *Jawâb-i i'tirâzât-i Vâsif* cited in Kokan, *Arabic and Persian*, pp. 413–14.

⁶⁵ *Husn-i khitâb va radd-i javâb*. Cited in Kokan, *Arabic and Persian*. p. 406.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

authors used the genre to set the record straight on poetic matters, and how *tazkirah* production at the Nawab's court remained a competitive venture. 'I inspected the *tazkirah Ma'dan al-jawâhir* by Vâsif', the author writes in the introduction,

and I concluded clearly that the aforementioned work in many places did not penetrate the depths of poetic intricacies... the ocean of [my] temperament once again raged [and] the pearl of the sea of [my] contemplation boiled; the pure answers of which I encased in [this] *tazkirah*.⁶⁸

The bulk of the impressions and criticisms of Vâsif's work, however, are found in the entry on Vâsif himself, some 400 pages later (due to the alphabetical organisation of the *tazkirah*). The overwhelming attention given to challenging Vâsif's *tazkirah* is evident in the fact that his entry is some 20 pages, while the entries of others span no more than 2–3 pages.

The initial portion of the entry is positive in nature and follows the long-established template of *tazkirahs* by noting Vâsif's birth, education and employment: He was born in 1802–03, studied Persian poetry with his father, taught at an EIC school for 7 years and entered the Nawab's exclusive Persian poetic society in its inaugural year at the urging of one of its presiding heads. He even notes that among the attendees of the society, Vâsif's 'face shone with reverence' and reached a position of honour on account of his many scholarly works.⁶⁹ But when it comes to discussing *Ma'dan al-jawâhir*, the tone becomes more combative: 'It is not a secret', the author of *Gulzâr-i A'zam* writes, 'that in his own *tazkirah* Vâsif had offered rejection and objection in complete mockery and impudence regarding the words of poets'.⁷⁰

The author proceeds methodically to list the errors found in Vâsif's *tazkirah* on a variety of topics from his misunderstanding certain points of prosody ('*arûz*) to misstating the death dates of certain poets. On the surface, the quibbling is clearly an effort to present Vâsif's general scholarship as careless, inattentive to details and generally unworthy. A much larger purpose, however, becomes clear as the entry progresses: The author was trying to undermine Vâsif's trenchant criticism of the great Indian-born poet 'Abd al-Qâdir 'Bîdil' (d. 1721), whose work would later be considered the apogee of the complex *tâzah-gû'î* (fresh-speak) style in Persian literary history.

Significantly, it is Vâsif's discussion of Bîdil, rather than his criticism of Âgâh and Sirhindî (two personages close to the Nawab's heart and that of his coterie) that the author wishes to address most forcefully. This approach underscores that

⁶⁸ Muhammad Ghaws Khan Bahâdur 'A'zam'. *Tazkirah-yi gulzâr-i A'zam*, Aligarh Muslim University Oriental Manuscript Collection (AMU), Aligarh, India, yûnîversitî number 20 Fârsî tazkirah, dhu al-hijah 1270/1854, p. 6.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Vâsif's work was not viewed merely as a breach of proper conduct based on his personal 'insults' but also as one that opposed a certain type of poetry (*tâzah-gû'î*), exemplified by Bîdil. The status of *tâzah-gû'î* in general, if not Bîdil's poetry in particular, occupied several South Asian authors and poets, as will be seen below.⁷¹ Once again it is in a work written in response to Vâsif's *Ma'dan al-jawâhir* where one finds Vâsif's opinions themselves. The opening of Vâsif's opinion of Bîdil, as cited in *Gulzâr-i A'zam*, runs as follows:

Concerning Mîrzâ Bîdil he [Vâsif] wrote that the Mîrza, mercy upon him, in his God-given insight (*'ilm-i khudâ-dâd*) toward the creation of meanings, started to produce some foundations for fresh conversations (*khudish az khalq-i ma'ânî bi-sû-yi ihdâs-i mabânî chand muhâvarât-i tâzah pardâkht*), he gained an abode in the eyes of Indians, like a pupil in the eye. However, in the eyes of the eloquent ones of 'Ajam (*bulaghâ-yi 'Ajam*), his invented terms appeared [as] inverting the rules of poetry and excessive poetry, [which] seemed like a pain-causing mote in the eye's socket. Consequently, they started finding fault in his work. Maulavi Âzâd Bilgrâmî, who was a distinguished learned man of equitable temperament...says that the noble Qur'an, even though it is the wondrous words of God the almighty, descended suitable to the idioms of Arab men of correct speech so to be closer [i.e. easier] to comprehension. Thus, in the Persian language, when even a [poet of] unquestionable perfection like Bîdil invents words (*alfâz-tarâshî*), how could the people of ordinary speech accept him? For instance, in his elegy for his own son, he writes:

Whoever was gracefully planting two steps.
had a staff in their palm from my finger.⁷²
(*har-kih du qadam khirâm mî-kâsht*
az angushtam 'asâ bih-kaf dâsht)

Vâsif's insistence that supporters and opponents of Bîdil's poetry were divided along fault lines, with Indians in the former camp and the 'eloquent ones of 'Ajam' in the latter camp, is of primary importance here. It is this division that defines Vâsif's opinion and should be seen as strongly indicative of the manner in which the boundaries of 'Ajam were being reconfigured and understood. The 'eloquent ones of 'Ajam' in this context are not necessarily synonymous with 'eloquent ones of Iran' or 'Iranians' (a distinction bestowed upon them by later historians),

⁷¹ For some general information on the poetry of Bîdil and his impact, see: Becka, 'Bedil and Bedilism' and Shaff'î-Kadkanî, *Shâ'ir-i âyînâh-hâ*.

⁷² A'zam, *Gulzâr-i A'zam*, p. 402. Vâsif's recounting of Mir Âzâd Bilgrâmî's opinion does not exactly correspond to the impression of Bîdil's poetry in Mir Âzâd's original quote. Vâsif's rendition is actually more positive towards the great Indian poet, whereas Mir Âzâd's original quote strikes a more incredulous tone regarding Bîdil's 'invention contrary to language' (*ikhtirâ'î khilâf-i zabân*). Âzâd, *Khizânah-yi 'âmîrah*, p. 153.

but more likely corresponds to ‘eloquent ones whose native tongue was Persian’, leaving necessarily ambiguous the question of birthplace. Nonetheless, this does not detract from the fact that differences in poetic taste were being ascribed to different groups, whether one was a native or non-native speaker of Persian. Indeed, the boundaries of ‘*Ajam*’ were shrinking. The fact that it was an Indian poet and scholar in the nineteenth century, not an Iranian one of the nineteenth or twentieth century writing within an Iranian nationalist discourse, makes this distinction all the more interesting. Vâsif, it may be said, was a part of what Shamsur Rahman Faruqi sees as a tendency of nineteenth-century Indian poets to more definitively and uniformly disparage the Persian poetry of Indians at the expense of the ‘purity’ of poetry composed by native Persian speakers.⁷³

Vâsif was not alone in viewing Bîdil’s poetry as a lightning rod or even unique in choosing the particular expression ‘*khirâm kâshtan*’ (‘to gracefully plant’) to criticise the poetry of Bîdil and to judge his poetics. This expression became a favourite of many South Asian commentators in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The author of *Gulzâr-i A‘zam* references these commentators to provide support for his own opinion of Bîdil’s poetry. The inclusion of these earlier opinions underscores their accessibility in mid-nineteenth-century Carnatic, made possible by advanced techniques in printing and copying (some of which were adopted by the Nawab himself), and to increased book-centred learning and knowledge in late Mughal times.⁷⁴ Their presence in *Gulzâr-i A‘zam* is a testament to the vibrancy of the nineteenth-century South Asian book market and to the manner in which *tazkirahs* augmented the transmission and circulation of ideas and texts during this era.

Gulzâr-i A‘zam continues with a pastiche of the opinions of Âgâh, Mir Âzâd Bilgrâmî (d. 1786), Khan-i Ârzû (d. 1756) and Mirza Muhammad Hasan ‘Qatîl’ (d. 1817) on the poetry of Bîdil and, more generally, the use of idioms in Persian poetry. Opinions range from an outright dismissal of Bîdil’s usage to the rejection of Bîdil’s critics. The latter three commentators addressed the usage of *khirâm kâshtan* directly in their respective works: Mir Âzâd in *Khizânah-yi ‘âmirah* (*The Royal Treasury*); Ârzû in *Majma‘ al-nafâ‘is* (*The Assembly of Delicacies*); and Mirza Qatîl in *Shajarat al-amânî* (*The Tree of Desires*).

The author of *Gulzâr-i A‘zam* presents the opinions of Âzâd, Ârzû and Qatîl, noting that all three have said that the words of Bîdil ‘went against the idiom of the Persians’ (*khilâf-i muhâvarah-yi Fârsîyân*). In this statement, we have an initial indication that the general dismissal of Bîdil’s poetry was one founded on linguistic, not geographic, affiliation. The author then notes that Mir Âzâd believed that Bîdil ‘had invented some strange things in the Persian language that people of everyday speech do not accept’ (*dar zabân-i fârsî chîz-hâ-yi gharîb ikhtirâ‘ nimûdah*

⁷³ See Faruqi, ‘Unprivileged Power’.

⁷⁴ Green, ‘The Uses of Books in a Late Mughal Takiyya’.

kih ahl-i muhâvarah qabûl na-dârând), a slight variation of the same quote by Mir Âzâd that Vâsif included in his *Ma'dan al-jawâhir*.⁷⁵

Summarising the opinion of Khan-i Ârzû, the author relates that he too recognised Bîdil as having instigated bold usages in Persian, which people across India accept.⁷⁶ This quote makes no precise reference to 'Persians' (*Fârsîyân*), but its very omission makes apparent the demarcation between their unstated opinion, on the one hand, and the people of India who accept Bîdil's poetry and its invented terms on the other. Although Ârzû criticises Bîdil for using idioms counter to accepted speech, his overall judgement of Bîdil in *Majma' al-nafâ'is* is overwhelmingly positive. He refers to the poet as his teacher and defends the poet generally against criticism.⁷⁷

The author of the *Gulzâr-i A'zam* concludes with the opinion of Qatîl, who more plainly than the first two commentators remarks how critiques of Bîdil's poetry are founded on extra-literary criteria, such as Bîdil's Indian identity. Qatîl is perhaps an ideal candidate for detecting such complexities and subtle shifts in the identity politics of literary discourse. Born a Bhandri Khatri and named Diwani Singh, he became an accomplished writer and a convert to Shi'î Islam.⁷⁸ Qatîl wrote of the following regarding Bîdil:

Such do they relate of Mirza Bîdil, mercy upon him, that in the elegy of his own son he created the idiom *khirâm kâshtan* and the reason is on account of the Mirza's Indianness (*Hindî būdan-i mîrzâ*). If he had been from the soil of Isfahan or another locale in Iran (*az khâk-i Isfahân yâ dîgar bilâd-i Îrân*), then no one would reproach him.⁷⁹

Qatîl's opinion, hinging on Bîdil's 'Indianness' as the source of his plight among critics, aligns best with that of the author of *Gulzâr-i A'zam*. The author of *Gulzâr-i A'zam* goes on to offer a justification for the use of *khirâm kâshtan* as an acceptable phrase given the stylistics of Bîdil's poetry. But it is Bîdil's homeland of India rather than that of Iran that preoccupies the author. It is the clearest indication yet amongst the opinions offered that geographic fault lines perhaps have a role to play in this debate. No matter that both the Indian-born Vâsif and Mir Âzâd Bilgrâmî viewed Bîdil's stylistics as problematic. It is the undue chastisement that the great Indian poet has endured for not being *born in Iran*, and presumably for not being a native speaker of Persian, that draws the author's ire. Building on Qatîl's example, the author of *Gulzâr-i A'zam* offers the following summation:

The source of the attack of the Iranians (*Îrânîyân*) relating to the curse and scorn of the exalted Mirza [Bîdil] is, one, the Indian origin (*Hindî nizhâd būdan*) of

⁷⁵ A'zam, *Gulzâr-i A'zam*, p. 406.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Kia, 'Contours of Persianate Community', p. 280.

⁷⁸ Alam and Subrahmanyam, 'Eighteenth-century Historiography', pp. 423–25.

⁷⁹ A'zam, *Gulzâr-i A'zam*, p. 407. For the original quote, see Qatîl, *Shajarat al-amânî*.

this esteemed master and, two, the Sunni religion of this man of excellence. But if this celebrated one had been from the locale of Iran (*Îrân diyâr*) then they would have elevated him to the ninth clime and would have brought his spell-shattering (*bâtil al-sihr*) poems to the status of inimitability (*i'jâz*). From the time of Abu al-Hasan Rûdakî Samarqandî Tûrânî, who is the point of reference (*marja'*) of all poets of Iran and Turan, until today not one of Iran's poets appears whose speech is immune to various types of offenses both by way of idiom as well as by way of prosody, rhyme, etc. What justice that they leave all [their poets] alone but only make trouble with the Mirza[?].⁸⁰

The author's scathing attack of Iranian critics who 'made trouble' with the poetry of Mirza Bîdil based on his 'Indianness' and 'Indian race' (not to mention his Sunni background) raises an intriguing question. Who were these attackers of Bîdil?

Scattered throughout the various citations on Bîdil in *Gulzâr-i A'zam* are references to Iranians, 'eloquent ones of *'Ajam*', *Fârsîyân*, and the soil of Isfahan. Persian literary history has often focused on how poets located in nineteenth-century Iran railed against the *tâzah-gû'î* style of poetry, of which Bîdil's poetry is considered the apogee, in initiating an exclusively Iranian literary movement seeking to 'return' (*bâzgasht*) Persian poetry to the styles of the classical masters. A natural conclusion to draw is the author of *Gulzâr-i A'zam* and his contemporaries were aware of the existence and critiques of this *bâzgasht* movement in Iran.

The citations in *Gulzâr-i A'zam* provide no indication that this was the case. Nor do *tazkirahs* composed in South Asia around the same time recognise any type of literary movement burgeoning in Iran that sought to 'return' Persian poetry to the styles of the classical masters. Consider, for example, *Natâ'ij al-afkâr* (*Consequences of Thoughts*), composed at the Nawab's court 19 years earlier in 1842 by Qudrat, an appointed judge of the Nawab's poetic society. This work covers Persian poets during and prior to the author's own time (in South Asia and elsewhere) and is well sourced.⁸¹ Among the *tazkirahs* Qudrat consulted was Âzar's *Âtishkadah* (*Firetemple*), one of the earliest critics of the complicated style of poetry that came to be associated in literary historiography with *tâzah-gû'î*. Yet, Qudrat shows no awareness of such critiques dominating literary circles in Iran in a way that constitutes a cohesive movement. His entries on several poets later considered among the founders of the 'return' movement fail to portray these poets as having initiated a major movement antithetical to the *tâzah-gû'î* style of poetry exemplified by Bîdil.⁸² Earlier *tazkirahs*, like *Tazkirah-yi Suhuf-i Ibrâhîm* (*Ibrahim's Pages*, composed in 1790–91), likewise provide no evidence that an Iranian programme of literary reform was received in South Asia. Even though such works contain

⁸⁰ A'zam, *Gulzâr-i A'zam*, p. 407.

⁸¹ Qudrat, *Tazkirah-yi natâ'ij al-afkâr*; Naqavî, *Tazkirah-navîsî*, pp. 553–55.

⁸² Qudrat, *Tazkirah-yi natâ'ij al-afkâr*, p. 664.

several entries on poets later considered crucial to the 'return' movement in Iran, there is little mention of such poets' stylistic affinities or distastes.

The lack of recognition in South Asian *tazkirahs* of a supposedly contemporaneous 'literary return' movement based in Iran, which sought to distance itself from a particular literary style, should not be surprising. The idea that the *bâzgasht* movement in Iran was a response to poetic stylistics is primarily the construction of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary historians looking to justify and rationalise an argument claiming that Iranian poets rescued Persian poetry from its decline in other locales, particularly in India. However, a closer examination of the poetry and attitudes of the early founders of the *bâzgasht* movement in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Isfahan makes clear that they were significantly more interested in seeking out patronage and reconstituting the role of the poet in society.⁸³

The critiques over Bîdil's 'Indianness' appear to have been contained within India itself. The 'Iranians' of *Gulzâr-i A'zam* were most likely Indo-Iranians (whose native tongue was Persian) based in India. In other words, criticisms of Bîdil's poetry at this time were not connected to the writings of any specific community of poets based in Iran, although later literary histories would try to make this association by portraying Bîdil's poetry as the apogee of *tâzah-gû'î* style, later denigrated as the 'Indian Style'.⁸⁴

The debate over Bîdil's poetry may appear at odds with *Gulzâr-i A'zam*'s immersion in the local literary politics and rivalries of mid-nineteenth-century Carnatic. In its introduction, *Gulzâr-i A'zam* was positioned as a rejoinder to *Ma'dan al-jawâhir*, in which that work's author, Vâsif, 'made shameless insults' about Âgâh and Sirhindî. By the end of the work, it widens its lens beyond the local rivalries and the specific errors of Vâsif's text to consider the broader issues of Persian poetic development and the place of Bîdil's poetry in it. It does not show any receptivity to ideas emanating from an embryonic literary movement in Iran concerned with stylistics.

Nonetheless, while the debate in Arcot was not in conversation with those emerging in Iran, they do exhibit similarities. Indeed, Isfahan-based poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth century clearly sought to hearken back to models of more 'simple' verse. They did so, however, not because of a stylistic preference for 'simple' verse over a more 'complicated' one. Rather they followed such a programme because the simplicity of previous classical masters, in particular in the *qasidah* (ode) form, provided the most fundamental model for re-establishing the role of the poet as an actor bestowing praise and receiving patronage in the aftermath of the downfall of the Safavids and destruction of Isfahan. As receiving

⁸³ Schwartz, 'Bâzgasht-i Adabî', pp. 30–74.

⁸⁴ For the important role of Bîdil in Persian literary historiography, see Schwartz, 'The Local Lives of a Transregional Poet'.

patronage was the primary aim of these Isfahan-based poets, the imitation of a more 'simplified' model of the *qasidah* was a more appropriate modelling device than the 'complicated' *ghazal* of the *tâzah-gû'î* style. It was not until later in the nineteenth century and the firm re-establishment of poetic patronage at the Qajar court in Tehran that debates over stylistics were awarded a position of primacy in an emergent *bâzgasht* movement. It was at this time that Iranian-based authors began to ascribe literary style with geographic location, namely, a 'simple' style for Iran and 'complicated' style for everywhere else.

In writing of debates over proper Persian stylistics in eighteenth-century north India, Arthur Dudley correctly points out that such discussions 'were framed primarily in terms of temporality, that is, old styles versus new styles. Geographical differences are a distant secondary concern in the critical literature.'⁸⁵ For example, while the well-documented debate between Khan-i Ârzû and Hazîn Lâhijî (d. 1766) is easy to slot as one pitting an Indian versus an Iranian (and all the associative proto-nationalist baggage that comes with it), it was by no means the prime mover of their rivalry. The major difference between the two interlocutors does not concern geographic or ethnic rivalry but rather differing opinions over the strict adherence to the discourse of the ancients: Hazîn believed in such an adherence, while Ârzû saw this opinion as one of unwarranted conservatism.⁸⁶

And yet as stylistic difference seemed to have out-trumped ethnic and geographic rivalry in eighteenth-century north India, the situation seems to have been reversed a century or so later in south India. A debate that began over the stylistic acceptability of Bîdil's idioms ended by associating differences of literary opinion with ethnic and geographic difference. By carefully assembling select passages of Bilgrâmî, Ârzû and Qatîl and reframing them with his own, the author of *Gulzâr-i A'zam* appears to have flipped the terms of the debate. Unlike a century earlier, the author of *Gulzâr-i A'zam* concludes that differences in stylistic opinions are indeed grounded in questions of ethnicity and birthplace.

The debate over Bîdil's poetry in Carnatic was *not* one that pitted Iranian-born poets against those born in India, but the dispute *was* being seen as shaped by fault lines marking distinctions between Indians and Indo-Iranians and increasing reference to the territoriality of Iran. Notably, the author of *Gulzâr-i A'zam* reserved his ire not for the Indian opponents of Bîdil, but for those 'Iranian' critics and poets who seemed more preoccupied with Bîdil's place of birth and native tongue than his poetry. While it was the critique of the Indian-born Vâsif that precipitated the need to defend Bîdil, it was the Indo-Iranian critics whom the author chastised most. It should be recalled here that opinions in this text include those by Indians who supported Bîdil's poetry and/or what it represented (e.g., Qatîl and the author of *Gulzâr-i A'zam*) and other Indians who viewed it more sceptically (e.g., Vâsif,

⁸⁵ Dudley, 'Sabk-e Hendi and the Crisis of Authority'.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Mir Âzâd). Put differently, the debate over Bîdil's poetry in nineteenth-century Carnatic was an Indian one, yet the culprits critiquing the great Indian poet's work were increasingly being seen as 'Iranians'. Unable, however, to relate these deliberations to any Iranian or Indo-Iranian interlocutors, or concomitant debates favouring ethno-geographic differences over stylistic ones, makes determining why discussions over Bîdil's poetry progressed as they did extremely difficult. It is perhaps the most curious element of Persian literary culture at Carnatic.

Coda

After the Nawab's reign, works in Persian continued to be produced by poets and scholars in Carnatic but with less frequency.⁸⁷ If *tazkirahs* may be taken as reflective of contemporary literary climates, then the last *tazkirah* dedicated to the poets of Carnatic during this time does little to belie the notion that the vibrancy of Persian literary culture declined precipitously. Sayyid 'Abd al-Latîf's *Sham'-i mahfil-i sukhân* (*The Candle of Poetry's Gathering*, ca. 1862) appears only as a shell of the many *tazkirahs* discussed above that featured detailed accounts of the individuals, activities and debates occurring around Persian in Carnatic in the mid-nineteenth century.⁸⁸ It is a stark contrast to the time of the Nawab's poetic society, their debates and the overall Persian literary climate outside of the court. Those days were in the past.

Closing the chapter on the Nawab's literary activities was left to Vâsif. After the Nawab's death, he attempted to restore his honour by levelling claims against the authenticity of Nawab's own writings. He addressed the issue of the authenticity of the two *tazkirahs* appearing in the Nawab's name in a work entitled *Hadiqat al-marâm* (*The Garden of Intention*), which dealt with the learned men of Madras and Hyderabad. The work was not printed until 1862–63, several years after the Nawab's death. Though published in Madras, Vâsif most likely wrote the work in Hyderabad, where he migrated in 1853–54 to take a position at the *Dâr al-ûlûm*.⁸⁹ In this work, Vâsif offers strong words about Vâlâ, one of the Nawab's instructors in poetry, noting that

He was among the people of knowledge but he made people dumb-witted and envious. He used to teach Nawab Ghaws Khan, after his studies, cunningly [hidden] from people. He used to address the Nawab as 'Khan Sahib' and thus, because of this, he used to claim for himself that he [was] the greatest of poets and the most eloquent of orators.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ For example, see Hadi, *Dictionary of Indo-Persian Literature*, pp. 736–56.

⁸⁸ 'Abd al-Latîf al-Husaynî al-Latf, *Sham'-i mahfil-i sukhân*.

⁸⁹ Incidentally, Vâsif's rival Râqim also migrated to Hyderabad following the death of the Nawab and his dismissal from *Madrasah-yi A'zam*, also attaining an appointment at the *Dâr al-ûlûm*.

⁹⁰ *Hadiqat al-marâm*, cited in Kokan, *Arabic and Persian*, p. 355.

Vâsif's persistence is a testament to the state of Persian literary culture as it existed in mid-nineteenth-century Carnatic, which resulted from a fortunate conjunction of factors. The vibrant poetic environment was the result of the Nawab's personal interest in Persian and his promotion of literary activities, the continued cultural currency of Persian and the plethora of employment opportunities available for individuals skilled in Persian, both at the Nawab's court and with the EIC in Madras. Listening to the voices accumulated in various *tazkirahs*, one experiences the vitality of literary activity, debate and rivalry that is the legacy of the last Nawab of Arcot and the poets of his court and environs. In the case of Carnatic, the tale of Persian literary culture in nineteenth-century South Asia was not one of outright decline, but a story of re-articulation and renewal, driven by the local politics, personalities and networks of an educated elite. Their tussles over the poetry of Bîdil and the manner in which it was framed by both local rivalries and regional opinions demonstrate that the court of the last Nawab of Arcot deserves to be accorded a place in the legacy of Persian in South Asia and the historiography of literary debates in the Persianate world.

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