

Stranger in the City: The Poetics of *Sabk-i Hindi*  
By Shamsur Rahman Faruqi

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*If there is a knower of tongues here, fetch him;  
There's a stranger in the city  
And he has many things to say.*

Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib<sup>1</sup> (1797-1869)

The phrase *sabk-i hindi* (Indian Style) has long had a faint air of rakish insubordination and unrespectability about it and it is only recently that it has started to evoke comparatively positive feelings.<sup>2</sup> However, this change is clearly symptomatic of a process of gentrification and seems to be powered as much by political considerations as by literary ones. Hence the proposal by some scholars to describe the style as “Safavid-Mughal”, or “Isfahani” or plain “Safavid” rather than “Indian.”<sup>3</sup> Wheeler Thackston even believes that “there is nothing particularly Indian about the ‘Indian-style’....The more accurate description is ‘High-Period’ style.”<sup>4</sup>

The term *sabk-i hindi* was coined perhaps by the Iranian poet, critic, and politician Maliku'sh Shu'ara Muhammad Taqi Bahar (1886-1951) in the first quarter of twentieth century. It signposted a poetry in the Persian language, especially ghazal, written mostly from the sixteenth century onward by Indian and Iranian poets, the latter term to include poets of Iranian origin who spent long periods of their creative life in India. “Iranian” here means a native of “greater” Iran, a cultural entity that was generally meant to comprise all of present day Iran and Azerbaijan in the North and West, Afghanistan in the South and East, and Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in the East. Similarly,

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<sup>1</sup> Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, *Kulliyat-e Ghalib*, Lucknow, Naval Kishor Press, 1872, p. 442. A very good modern edition (just ghazals and ruba'is) is *Divan-e Ghalib Dihlavi*, ed., Muhammad Hasan Haeri, Tehran, Ihya-e Kitab, 1998. The verse quoted here occurs on page 184 of that edition.

<sup>2</sup> “In the last two decades, the works of many unrecognized poets have been edited and published for the first time...material is now readily available to allow literary critics, scholars and historians to begin to study Safavid-Mughal poetry in all its variety and richness.”, Paul E. Losensky, *Welcoming Fighani, Imitation and Poetic Individuality in the Safavid-Mughal Ghazal*, Costa Mesa, Mazda Publishers, 1998, p.3.

<sup>3</sup> See Paul Losensky, *Welcoming Fighani*, pp. 4-5. Shams Langrudi believes the origin of the Indian Style to have been in Isfahan, but effects a compromise by always using a conjoint appellative: *sabk-i hindi (isfahani)*, see his *Sabk-i Hindi va Kalim-e Kashani: Gird Bad-e Shor-e Junun*, Tehran, Nashr Markaz, 1372 (=1993); also see Muhammad Riza Shafi'i Kadkani, *Sha'ir-i A'inaha: Bar-rasi-i Sabk-i Hindi va She'r-i Bedil*, Tehran, Agah, 1376 (=1998), p. 15. Amiri Firuz Kohi is firmly of the belief that the Indian Style should justly be named *sabk-i isfahani*. See his preface to *Kulliyat-e Sa'ib Tabrizi*, Tehran, Kitab Khana-e Khayyam, 1336 (=1957), pp. 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> Wheeler M. Thackston, chapter entitled “Literature” in Zeenut Ziad, ed., *The Magnificent Mughals*, Karachi, OUP, 2002, p. 94.

“India” stands not for just *Hindustan* (the part of the country that lies north of the river Narbada) but for the entire sub-continent.

Although almost always viewed with disfavour and disdain by the modern Iranian literati and their Indian followers (whose number has tended to increase since the nineteenth century), *sabk-i hindi* has loomed large enough in the historical consciousness of the Iranian as well as the Indo-Muslim literary community for several speculations to be made about its origin which has invariably been found to have been in a place or area other than India<sup>5</sup>. The case for Fughani Shirazi (d. 1519) being the originator of the style has been supported by many, including the great Shibli Nu'mani (1857-1914), and more recently by Paul Losensky.<sup>6</sup> A case has been made out even for as early a poet as Khaqani Sharvani<sup>7</sup> (1126-1198/99) who wrote very few ghazals and is recognized as a master of the qasida while *sabk-i hindi* is associated overwhelmingly with the ghazal.

The Iranians' disapproval of the Indian Style betrays a certain puzzled anxiety—for the poetry, though occasionally bristling with uncomfortably high imaginative flourishes and unusual images and unconventional constructs has yet a potency, vigour and éclat which mainline Iranian poetry would be hard put to match. One reason for the Iranian eagerness to find a non-Indian place of origin for the Indian Style could lie in the fact that some of the major Iranian poets of that style never went to India: the names of Shifa'i Mashhadi (d. 1613), Mirza Jalal Asir (d. 1630/31), Shaukat Bukhari (d. 1695/99) and Mir Tahir Vahid (d. 1708) come instantly to mind. If native, untravelled Iranians too wrote in the Indian Style, this was a matter for further anxiety unless a non-Indian, Iranian origin could be found for the style.

Amiri Firuz Kohi has a nice point when he says that new styles arise in a given age because of the intuitive urgings in the minds of speakers of a language to bring about such an event of freshness whether in every day linguistic usage or in the language of literature and poetry, and no one person can be credited with the invention of a given style. Interactions between peoples and civilizations are the true agents of change. Then he goes on to say that India under the Mughals attracted poets and scholars and artists from Iran and elsewhere because it was then a land of fortune and a centre for both commerce and the arts. Unfortunately if predictably, Firuz Kohi becomes entirely unhistorical at this point and goes on to say that the foundation of the new style was laid by Iranians and it reached its perfection in Isfahan because of the presence there of Sa'ib and his Iranian imitators. It was these poets, who according to Firuz Kohi found their imitators in the quintessential poets of the Indian Style, in Shaukat Bukhari, Mirza Bedil, Mulla Ghani Kashmiri, Nasir Ali Sarhindi, and others.<sup>8</sup>

Ghani Kashmiri (d.1666) and Sa'ib (1601-1669) were almost exact contemporaries and according to the tradition in Kashmir, Sa'ib went all the way to Kashmir to make Ghani's acquaintance. According to Shibli Nu'mani, Sa'ib mentions

<sup>5</sup> Khurasan or Herat (in modern day Afghanistan) have been proposed as the Indian Style's true place of origin. See Karl Jahn, ed., *History of Iranian Literature*, Dordrecht, D. Reidel, 1968, pp. 295-96 and 496-97.

<sup>6</sup> Shibli Nu'mani, *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. III, Azamgarh, Ma'arif Press, 1956 (5<sup>th</sup> reprint), p. 24, and *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. V, Azamgarh, Ma'arif Press, 1957 (4<sup>th</sup> reprint), p. 57. Paul Losensky describes Fughani as a “literary artist” who “manipulated the traditional themes and images of the *ghazal* to create a distinctive poetic voice that would serve as a model and inspiration for generations of poets to come” (Paul Losensky, p. 9).

<sup>7</sup> See Ali Dashti, *Khaqani, Sha'ir-i Der Ashna*, Tehran, 1977. Ali Dashti argues at length in favour of Khaqani as the paradigmatic “Indian Style” poet.

<sup>8</sup> *Kulliyat-e Sai'b*, preface, pp. 4-5.

Ghani admirably<sup>9</sup>, so the influence, if any, should have worked the other way round. Bedil lived from 1644 to 1720 and Shaukat Bukhari died in 1695/99. They are poets of the Indian Style but are too remote in time for Sa'ib or any direct imitator of his to have influenced either of them directly. There had been poets before Sa'ib, for example Urfi, (d. 1590/92), Faizi (d. 1595), and Naziri (d. 1612) who are now recognized among chief poets of *sabk-i hindi* and who were active in India well before Sa'ib matured as a poet. In fact, Sa'ib even said that he cannot hope to emulate Naziri because even Urfi could not approach Naziri in poetic excellence:

*Sai'b should become just as Naziri?  
What a foolish thought!  
Even Urfi did't push poetry  
To Naziri's level.*<sup>10</sup>

While Paul Losensky detects "a deep sense of artistic inadequacy"<sup>11</sup> in Sa'ib when confronting Naziri, Firuz kohl would have us believe that Sa'ib is the fountainhead of all *sabk-i hindi* poetry. Amiri Firuz kohl apparently clinches his argument in favour of Isfahan and Sa'ib by quoting a she'r from Sa'ib:

It was quite by chance that I found a *maqta'* [concluding verse] in the poems of Sa'ib that supports the idea that Isfahan at that time was the dearly loved one of the people of literature and was the lodestar of the circle of poetry. The she'r is:

*I swear by the new manner, Saib,  
The station of the Nightingale of Amul is vacant in Isfahan.*

It is clear that by the phrase "new manner" (*tarz-i taza*) Sa'ib means just the Isfahani style which he had brought to perfection.<sup>12</sup>

"The Nightingale of Amul" is Talib of Amul (d. 1626), poet-laureate to Jahangir, and one the greatest of Persian poets and not just of the Indian Style. By *tarz-i taza* Sa'ib certainly means Talib's manner (or style) which is the same as what we now describe as the Indian Style, but it is by no means the case that Sa'ib is here claiming to have brought the *sabk-i hindi* to perfection, far less that he is claiming Isfahan to be the Indian Style's place of origin. With the masterly ease in creating polysemic texts so typical of *sabk-i hindi*, Sa'ib is saying many things in this she'r, but not those which Amiri Firuz kohl seems keen to foist on it. More importantly, Firuz kohl has misremembered the text. Where Firuz kohl has "vacant" (*khali*), Saib's true text has *paida* which means "visible", "taken shape", "made an appearance", "apparent", "evident", and much more in the same mode. The end-rhyme word (*radif*) of the ghazal in Sa'ib's *Kulliyat* (and also Shibli) is *paidast*<sup>13</sup> (is visible, has taken shape, made appearance, etc). So there is no way that the she'r could have *khali* (vacant) as the penultimate word. Further, the true text has "Talib of Amul" and not "Nightingale of Amul" as quoted by Firuz kohl. Anyway, this

<sup>9</sup> Shibli quotes the following she'r from Sa'ib:

*Sai'b, this ghazal is in reply to the one from Ghani:  
"Oh the memory of those days when the cooking pot of my desire  
Had a covering on its top."*

See *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. III, p. 175. I couldn't find this she'r in Sa'ib's *Kulliyat*; nor could I locate the ghazal of Ghani's to which Sa'ib purportedly wrote this reply. It is possible that Shibli found the Sa'ib she'r in some manuscript, and the Ghani ghazal is now lost.

<sup>10</sup> Sa'ib, *Kulliyat*, Lucknow [?], Naval Kishor Press, 1875, p. 102.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Losensky, p. 304.

<sup>12</sup> Amiri Firuz kohl, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Kulliyat-e Sa'ib*, Naval Kishor Press, p. 143, and Shibli, *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. III, p. 175. Both these sources also have "Talib of Amul", and not "Nightingale of Amul."

doesn't alter the sense, but "vacant" instead of "has made appearance" etc., does. The main meaning now is that the spirit of Talib has moved from Amul and has made appearance at Isfahan [in the shape of Sa'ib].

It might be of some interest to mention here that neither the word *sabk* (Arabic *sabk*=mode or manner of formulation) nor the compound *sabk-i hindi* (or in fact *sabk-i* anything at all) occurs in standard classical Persian. It does not find a place in any of the older dictionaries of the language. The three major dictionaries of Persian produced in the nineteenth century also are unaware of these vocables.<sup>14</sup> It is only the great modern dictionaries that enter this word and define it as "style" (written *isteel*, with a soft "t" in Persian; the borrowing is obviously from French, rather than English)<sup>15</sup>.

This silence of the earlier dictionaries of classical Persian raises the suspicion that that the concept of differentiated "authorial styles" or "style" as exemplified by individual writers, or specific schools or circles of literary creation is foreign to the Indo-Persian literary culture, and our awareness of the problem of an "Indian" style of the Persian ghazal is more of a modern construct than a living reality of the tradition. Doubtless, words like *tarz*, *ravish*, and *shevah* were often present in the traditional discourse and we nowadays routinely translate them as "style". Yet it is quite likely that *tarz* meant "manner", *ravish* meant "mode, general deportment, behaviour", and *shevah* signified "practice". Amir Khusrau, in his seminal Preface (*Dibacha*) to his *Divan Ghurratu'l Kamal* (1294) has some very interesting things to say about *tarz*. (He too doesn't use *sabk*, or *uslub*, or any of the words now used in the sense of the English word "style.")

Of all the Indo-Persian poets, or perhaps all Persian poets ever, Khusrau revelled most in theorizing about poetry. He used his seminal, highly concentrated, and even occasionally elliptical prose in the *Dibacha* ("Preface") to his major *divan Ghurrat'ul Kamal* (1294) to say delightful things about the nature of poetry and the business of making poems. In the section on the concept of *ustad* ("Master) in poetry, Khusrau says that there are five "forms" or "faces" of poetry. Here, and throughout the discussion that follows, Khusrau uses words like *tarz* in the sense of "manner, form, face", so forth. He says:

Thus, it is a waste of words to use them in prose. The second form [of poetry] is temperate, and that is the manner [*tarz*] that is called "poetic".<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> They are: *Shamsu'l Lughat* compiled (1804-1805) by some scholars at the request of one Mr. Joseph Bretho Jenner and printed at Mumbai, Matba'-e Fathu'l Karim, 1891/1892; Ghiasu'ddin Rampuri's *Ghiasu'l Lughat* (1826), numerous printings in the nineteenth century, for example, Kanpur, Matba'-e Intizami, 1894; Muhammad Padshah Shad's *Farhang-e Anandraj*, completed in Banaras in 1888 and printed twice in India over the next ten years, an Iranian seven-volume edition is by Dabir Siyaqi, ed., *Kitab Faroshi-e Khayyam*, Tehran, 1363 (=1984).

<sup>15</sup> See Ali Akbar Dehkhoda (1881-1955), *Lughat Nama-e Dehkhoda* (1931/2-1981). I have before me the CDROM version, issued by the University of Tehran, email: [press@ut.ac.ir](mailto:press@ut.ac.ir); Dehkhoda says, "Writers of the recent times have meant it to mean very nearly the same as the European term "Style" [*isteel*]." Also see Dr. Muhammad Mo'in (d. 1971), *Farhang-e Mo'in*, Vol. II, Tehran, 1965. Mo'in doesn't use the word *isteel* but says substantially the same things as Dehkhoda. Neither authority suggests that the word *sabk* was ever used in classical Persian at all. I am grateful to Asif Naim Siddiqi of Muslim University, Aligarh, for enabling me to consult these two dictionaries.

<sup>16</sup> Amir Yaminuddin Khusrau, *Dibacha-e Ghurrat'ul Kamal* (1294), ed., Vazirul Hasan Abidi, Lahore, the National Book Foundation, 1975, p. 35.

Khusrau goes on to discuss the manifestation or evidence of “intellectual wisdom” [*dana’i*] in poetry and says that again it is seen in poetry in five “forms” or “faces”:

The fifth [kind of] wisdom is poetic, and it is such that each of the other manners [*tarz*] of wisdom attains to the highest in this manner [*tarz*].<sup>17</sup>

Now Khusrau comes to main exposition of his theme, he wants us to know which kinds of poets most express or make manifest the “poetic wisdom” and how:

The polo-player of the field of speech cannot but be of one of three states. A manner (*tarz*) becomes available to him on his own, that no one ever had before. For example, the manner (*tarz*) of Majd-e Majdud Sana’i, or Anvari, or Zahir Faryabi, or Nizami: a manner (*tarz*) special [to the poet who is], king of that domain, [and of] a splendid and refulgent mode (*ravish*). [His is the case] unlike that of Khaqani who is [an imitator] of Mujir [Bailqani], or Kamal Isma’il who is [an imitator] of Maulana Raziuddin Nishapuri, or Mu’izzi [Nishapuri] who is [an imitator] of Masud-e Sa’d. Or then, he [the poet] walks after the manner (*tarz*) of the Ancients and the Contemporaneous....And if no special method or way (*tariq*), or no mode (*ravish*) of specialization becomes apparent for the embroiderer of the pearl-strings of poetry (*nazm*), he takes his business forward by following behind his predecessors and pulling behind those who are the remnants,...I regard him too as “Master”, but only half a one. Thus a Master is one who owns a manner (*tarz*), and the follower in the footsteps of that Master is the Disciple<sup>18</sup>.

Toward the end of this part of his discussion Khusrau makes the startling declaration that he is not a Master because:

Whatever I have composed in situations of preaching and wise words, my case is that of a follower of the temperaments of Sana’i and Khaqani...and whatever I have let flow in Masnavi and Ghazal, is by virtue of my following the temperaments of Nizami and Sa’di...Thus, how could I be [suited for the title of] Master<sup>19</sup>?

It must be noted that I have been almost entirely unable to convey in English the delightful and subtle wordplay of Khusrau. But his meaning, I hope, is clear: it is not necessary for good or even great poets to have individual styles and *tarz*, *ravish*, *mode*, and words of this effect do not convey in Classical Persian the sense that the words *style sabk* have in Modern English and Modern Persian respectively. Khusrau’s categories, which were never challenged and were more or less unconsciously followed throughout in subsequent centuries, clearly establish the fact that having regard to the nature of poetry, words like *tarz*, *ravish*, *mode*, represented an ontological, and not an epistemological situation. Poems exist in certain modes, and each mode is a *tarz*, and each *tarz* can have any number of followers or imitators.

This is made clear by Ghalib, the last great Indo-Persian poet in the classical mode and a person of wide learning in the Persian poetry of all ages. In an Urdu letter to Chaudhri Abdul Ghafur Surur, Ghalib wrote (1863):

From Rudaki and Firdausi to Khaqani, and Sana’i, and Anvari, and some others, is one group. The poetry of these venerable ones is of one mould or make (*vaz’*)

<sup>17</sup> Khusrau, *Dibacha-e Ghurra’t ul Kamal*, p. 36.

<sup>18</sup> Khusrau, *Dibacha-e Ghurra’t ul Kamal*, pp. 38-41.

<sup>19</sup> Khusrau, *Dibacha-e Ghurra’t ul Kamal*, p. 40.

with small differences. Then the Venerable Sa'di invented a special manner (*tarz*)....Fughani became the inventor of yet another special practice (*shevah*). ...This practice (*shevah*) was perfected by Zahuri, and Naziri, and Urfi....Sa'ib, and Salim, and Qudsi, and Hakim Shifa'i are in this category....Thus there are now three manners (*tarzen*) determined and established: Khaqani, and those who are close to him; Zahuri, and those who are like him; Sa'ib, and those for whom Sa'ib provides the precept<sup>20</sup>.

Shibli uses the actual English word "style" as a synonym for *tarz*, though it is clear that by *tarz* he means the manner of using themes and not the manner of using words. He says, "Different *tarz* (styles) were established in Ghazal", and then speaks of the *tarz* of "*vaqu'a go'i* or *mu'amila bandi*" which he defines as "depiction of events and transactions that occur in the business of love and loving" and further says that the inventor of this *tarz* is Sa'di (1184-1291) and that Khusrau (1253-1325) "made substantive addition to it". Then Shibli goes on to list "the commingling of philosophy in the ghazal" as another *tarz* which he credits especially to Urfi Shirazi (1554-1590/2)<sup>21</sup>.

This is not to say that there is no such thing as an Indian sensibility that plays upon the Persian ghazal like an expert or inspired musician playing a musical instrument. There is, certainly, a non-Iranian air in the ghazals written in the *sabk-i hindi*, but it is not oppressive, while the word *sabk* (mode or manner of formulating something) gives the impression of artifice and strain and oppression.

Shibli Nu'mani does not use the phrase *sabk-i hindi* (his five volumes were written between 1909 and 1914, published 1909-1918<sup>22</sup>, and the work of Bahar came later). But he clearly credits Fughani with being the "founder" of the "new age" in poetry which is marked by "subtleties of thoughts and themes"<sup>23</sup> and he describes Fughani as the "grandpere Adam of this new age"<sup>24</sup> and "the inventor of the new style"<sup>25</sup>. Later, he twice mentions the influence of India on this new style:

The [literary and cultural] taste of this place [India] engendered yet more sumptuous colourfulness and delicate subtlety in the poetry of Urfi and Naziri.<sup>26</sup> Intermixing with India generated delicate subtlety of thought and imagination. The delicate subtlety of thought and imagination that one sees in the poetry of the Iranians who made India their domicile is not at all to be found in the [Iranian domiciled] Iranians."<sup>27</sup>

The words that I translate as "sumptuous colourfulness" and "delicate subtlety" are *rangini* and *latafat* in the Urdu original. Though they sound somewhat vague to the modern ear, they are keywords in the poetics of the eighteenth century Urdu ghazal, the direct inheritor of the Persian *sabk-i hindi*. Shibli wasn't much in love with *sabk-i hindi*

<sup>20</sup> Khaliq Anjum, ed., *Ghalib ke Khutut*, Vol. II, New Delhi, Ghalib Institute, 1985, pp. 613-614. The exact date of the letter is not known. It was written sometime in July, 1863.

<sup>21</sup> *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. III, pp. 17-24. Throughout the discussion here Shibli uses the following words as interchangeable: *tarz* (manner), *rang* (hue, tint), *andaz* (manner, conduct), once he says *tarz* and glosses it in parentheses as "style", using the English word.

<sup>22</sup> Volume I was published in 1908, followed, in 1909 and 1910, by Volumes II and III respectively. Volume IV was published in 1912, the last and the fifth volume was published in December 1918. See Syed Sulaiman Nadvi's Introduction to Volume V, pp. 3-4.

<sup>23</sup> *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. III, p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. V, p. 57.

<sup>25</sup> *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. V, p. 58.

<sup>26</sup> *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. V, p. 61.

<sup>27</sup> *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. V, p. 70.

and was particularly disdainful of its Indian practitioners save Faizi Fayyazi (1547-1595) but he had excellent taste and unerring intuition about what he perceived as the main strengths of *sabk-i hindi*. His close acquaintance with the poetic theory and practice of the Delhi Urdu poets of the eighteenth century also gave him an advantage, which was not available to the Iranian students of the Indian Style. For example, he made a very perceptive remark about a (now) comparatively obscure Iranian poet Mirza Vali (d. 1590/91) that his poetry reminded him of the Urdu poet Mir (1722/23-1810).<sup>28</sup>

Shibli did not have a theoretical turn of mind, and his general dislike of cerebral, abstract thought in poetry further disabled him in his enterprise to provide an aetiology and diachronic morphology for the Indian Style ghazal. All the important points that he made about the “new style” were thrown out in a casual, almost off hand manner and were not backed by analysis or theory. With tantalizing vagueness and making a promise that he never found time to fulfil, he wrote:

This fact must be remembered from the life history of poetry that Persian poetry upon arrival in India acquired a particular kind of newness. I’ll narrate the details of this newness at some suitable time in the future.<sup>29</sup>

Enumerating the “new manners” (manner=*tarz*) that marked the poetry of the new age, Shibli Nu’mani identifies a *tarz*, which he names *misaliya* (=exemplifying). Better known as *tamsil* (exemplification), it is one of the two most prominent characteristics of the ghazal in the Indian Style. This is all that Shibli says about it:

[*Misaliya*, that is] to assert something and then state a poetic proof for it: The founders of this manner (=tarz) are Kalim [Kashani-Hamadani, d. 1651], Ali [*sic*, actually Muhammad] Quli Salim [d. 1657], Mirza [Muhammad Ali] Sa’ib [1601-1669], and [Muhammad Tahir] Ghani [Kashmiri, d. 1666]. This *tarz* became extremely popular, so that it continued [to be current] till the very end of [the new] poetry.<sup>30</sup>

Shibli offers no analysis, not even examples of how exemplification is effected. He doesn’t define his keyword “poetic proof” (*sha’irana dalil*). Perhaps he believed that his reader would have a fair notion of what a poetic proof was all about. Even so, he reckoned without the change in poetic taste and the idiom of literary theory that was overtaking the Urdu literary community in his own day, and he neglected, even in Volume V, to provide the theoretical underpinnings of this and other terms with the result that their import is not quite clear to most readers today.

It is true that since a “poetic proof” depends on metaphor mostly, or on statements which are regarded as axiomatic (*iddi’a-e sha’irana*= poetical assertion)<sup>31</sup> in the realm of poetry, it is not quite possible to enunciate or frame rules to define what constitutes a “poetic proof”. Echoing Coleridge, one might say that acceptance of poetic axioms or proofs “constitutes true poetic faith.” But seeing as how exemplification (*tamsil*) is one of the foundations on which the edifice of *sabk-i hindi* rests, taxonomies of different kinds

<sup>28</sup> *She’rul Ajam*, Vol. V, p. 64.

<sup>29</sup> *She’rul Ajam*, Vol. III, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> *She’rul Ajam*, Vol. III, pp. 18-19

<sup>31</sup> To be distinguished from the “poet’s assertion” (*idd-i’a-e sha’ir*) which is a statement made by the poet/speaker of the poem and thus it stands in need of “proof”, a poetical assertion contains a fact which is conventionally taken as true and no additional proof is needed for it. For the key role of convention in classical Urdu and Persian poetry, see Frances W. Pritchett, “Convention in the Classical Urdu Ghazal: The Case of Mir”, in *Journal of South Asian & Middle Eastern Literature*, 3, 1, Fall, 1979 and Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, “Conventions of Love, Love of Conventions: Urdu Love Poetry in the Eighteenth Century” in Zeenut Ziad, ed., *The Magnificent Mughals*.

of proofs and axiomatic statements should have been attempted. However, in a culture where appreciation and enjoyment of poetry were largely matters of intuition, and where theory almost always consisted of what had been handed down from the ancients, new matters were rarely theorized about. Valih Daghistani (1724-1756) devoted a large chapter of his tazkira *Riyazu' sh Shu'ara* (1749) to prosody and rhetoric. In it he gave just three lines to *tamsil* as follows:

It is [the way of] strengthening and emphasizing the [poetic] utterance by the means of another utterance [which asserts something] which is well known [accepted as fact]. And between the two utterances there should be similitude as regards content. And the simile is a kind of exemplification<sup>32</sup>.

Two she'rs, one from Sa'ib, and the other from Muhammad Jan Qudsi (d. 1646), and neither of them a particularly arresting example of *tamsil* follow this definition, and that's all that Valih is going to give us on this matter. Needless to say, the definition leaves much unsaid, and gives no indication of the importance of *tamsil* in the poetics of the Indian Style.

Shibli identified yet another, and more vital feature of the Indian Style when he said:

Many of the [poetic] themes of that time [that is, the time of the new style] are founded on words and on the device of punning. That is to say, the literal meaning of a word is treated as its actual meaning and the foundation of the [poetic] theme is established on it.<sup>33</sup>

This is a profoundly seminal statement but couched as it is in terse, somewhat inexact and nearly incomprehensible language, small wonder that no one realized its importance or followed it up. The solitary example with comments that Shibli appends here to his pronouncement hardly makes the matter clearer.

I'll return to Shibli's points presently. Let me first make it clear that although Shibli is perhaps the most percipient of all the critics who wrote about Indo-Persian poetry, he is not the most sympathetic (that distinction should perhaps go to Hasan Husaini). In fact, with his immense authority and his generally decisive manner, Shibli dealt a blow to the prestige of the *sabk-i hindi* in this country from which it has still not recovered. At least two immensely influential anthologies of Persian poetry appeared in this country during the past three or four decades. Both were put together by leading Persianists of their time who had held the chair of Persian literature at Aligarh Muslim University. Neither anthology allows adequate representation to the *sabk-i hindi* poets, especially those of Indian origin. The one edited by Professor Hadi Hasan<sup>34</sup> grudgingly allows a page and a half to Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil (1644-1720) and no space at all to Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797-1869) arguably the two greatest Indian-origin poets of the Indian Style. In addition to other major Indian Style poets of Indian origin like Munir Lahori (1609-1645), Nisabati Thanasari (d. 1688), Nasir Ali Sarhindi (d.1696/97), Muhammad Afzal Sarkhush (1640-1714), Nurul Ain Vaqif (d. 1781), Khvaja Mir Dard (1722-1785), all of whom he ignores, Hadi Hasan also doesn't recognize the earliest Indian poets, however distinguished, who wrote in Persian.

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<sup>32</sup> Valih Daghistani, *Riyazu' sh Shu'ara*, Ed. Sharif Husain Qasemi, Rampur, the Riza Library, 2001, p. 554.

<sup>33</sup> *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. III, p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> Hadi Hasan, ed., *A Golden Treasury of Persian Poetry*, originally published in 1966, 2<sup>nd</sup> and revised edition, New Delhi, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1972.

The other anthology, edited by Professor Zia Ahmad Badayuni<sup>35</sup> ignores Bedil altogether, but admits Ghalib to his assembly of the greats. With one exception—a token presence of Masud Sa'd Salman Lahori (1046-1121), quite like the token presence of Bedil in the earlier anthology—all the others mentioned by me above are missing from Professor Badayuni's opus as well. Needless to say, they are missing from Shibli's luminous pages too.

By way of contrast, we can look at two other anthologies of Persian poetry from the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Mirza Mazhar Jan-e Janan's renowned *Kharita-e Javahir* (apparently put together in 1756) is of medium length, and is more a celebration of *sabk-i hindi* than of Persian poetry as a whole. Mirza Mazhar Jan-e Janan (1699-1781), himself a notable Persian poet of his time, coolly allows more space individually to Jalauddin Siyadat Lahori (Indian, fl. 1690-1700), Nisbati Thanasari (Indian), and Mirza Razi Danish (Indo-Iranian, d. 1665) than he allows to Sa'di, Hafiz, or Rumi (the latter doesn't appear at all, but Bedil is also absent, and that's an omission that I can't account for, except by hazarding the guess that Mazhar Jan-e Janan, though a Sufi and intellectual of note, didn't somehow like the cerebral quality of Bedil's poetry). Navab Siddiq Hasan Khan's anthology *Almaghnamu'l Barid Li'l Varid wa's Sadir* contains only rubai's. The ruba'i is a genre where the Iranians are generally believed to have done better, and more, than the Indians. Siddiq Hasan Khan (1828-1895) chose more than 4000 ruba'is from far and wide in time and space and included even minor Indo-Iranian poets or poets of Indian origin, poets in whose company Shibli would not have even liked to be seen dead.<sup>36</sup>

The following summation from Shibli should give an idea of the sweep of his understanding, and also the harm that he could cause by his authoritarian judgement of the Indian Style:

Gradually, in the mode introduced by Fughani, there arose the tendency toward abstract themes [*khiyal bandi*], creation of [new] themes [*mazmun afirini*], preference for difficulty and complexity [*diqqat pasandi*]. These things began with Urfi. Zahuri [d.1616], Jalal Asir, Talib Amuli [d.1626], Kalim, and others promoted and advanced these tendencies even further, and this manner became popular and supervened over the whole realm of [Persian] poetry. And since intemperateness in this mode leads to extremely deleterious consequences, poetry's dominion came under the authority and sway of Nasir Ali [Sarhindi], Bedil, and others. And thus ended a mode and series of great magnificence.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Zia Ahmad Badayuni, ed., *Saman Zar, Intikhab-i She'r-i Farsi-i Iran va Hind*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademy, 1968. This anthology too was reissued recently.

<sup>36</sup> Mirza Mazhar Jan-e Janan [circa 1756?], *Kharita-e Javahir*, printed with the *Divan-e Mirza Mazhar Jan-e Janan*, Kanpur, Matba'-e Mujtaba'i, Ziq'a'dah, 1271 (=1855); Navab Siddiq Hasan Khan, *Almaghnamu'l Barid Li'l Varid wa's Sadir*, Bhopal, Matba'-e Shajahani, 1299 (=1881-1882). Yet another anthology of Persian (specifically, Indo-Persian) poetry came out from Aligarh, apparently with the view of righting the injustice done to *sabk-i hindi* in the two earlier anthologies: *Dreams Forgotten*, edited by Waris Kirmani, an admirer of *sabk-i hindi*. He performed a major service to the Indo-Persian tradition by bringing together many poets who were but names in the tradition. In fact, many weren't even names: they didn't exist in the literary community's consciousness. Waris Kirmani also wrote a (not very adequate, unfortunately) essay on *sabk-i hindi* by way of Introduction to his book in English. In spite of having tried to cast a wide net, Kirmani missed out on some significant names, like Shahidi Qumi (d. 1626), Hakim Husain Shuhrat Shirazi who spent a good part of his life in India and died here in 1736, Hakim Lahori (fl. 1770's) and quite a few others. See Waris Kirmani, ed., *Dreams Forgotten*, Aligarh, Dept of Persian, Muslim University, Aligarh, 1984.

<sup>37</sup> *She'rul Ajam*, Vol. V, p. 65.

One might almost say that given such friends, one doesn't need enemies, but Shibli's biases are beautifully and subtly modulated. One may not perceive all his biases at first reading, but insidiously, like a drop of oil on a smooth surface, the biases did spread and over time found lasting place in the literary consciousness of a wide variety of students of Persian (and of Urdu) literature in the sub-continent<sup>38</sup>. The hierarchies that Shibli's pronouncement maps out can be described as follows:

Fughani, *Grandpere, poet par excellence, d. 1519*

*Indefinite number of small successors*

Urfi d. 1592: *Inheritor and Improver by dint of personal excellence*

Zahuri, Jalal Asir, Talib Amuli, Kalim, [all Iranian,]: *Cousins, more or less distant, but recognizable as Fughani's progeny*

Nasir Ali Sarhindi d. 1696/97, Bedil d. 1720, *et al*, [interlopers, all Indians,]: *Extremely poor and villainous relations.*

The above still holds true in a large degree. It can't be denied that though Shibli's negative perceptions have parallels among the Iranians, they are actually powered by what Shibli believed to be the rightly guided and Western (read English) principles and beliefs about the nature of poetry. In the paragraph that follows the one that I just quoted above, Shibli tells us that "this revolution caused harm to Ghazal, for Ghazal in fact is the name [for depiction] of emotions pertaining to love..."<sup>39</sup> This is not a formulation that can be found in any Arabic or Persian treatise on literary theory, though it may not sound out of place in a similar work by an English or German Romantic critic.

## 2.

The first ninety pages of the fourth volume of *She'ru'l Ajam*<sup>40</sup> are easily some of the most delectable Urdu prose ever written. The abundance of examples, the swiftness of allusion, the breadth of range which encompasses Arabic, Persian, and Urdu with equal felicity, and serious and independent even if brief and flawed assessments of some Western views on the nature of poetry, the writer's obvious and infectious delight in the experience of reading poetry all go to make these pages a tour de force of literary criticism as well as creative prose. Much of the theory that can be extracted or inferred from this text is clearly derived from the practice of the *sabk-i hindi* poets. But Shibli's guardian angel remains a steadfast Victorian. Shibli regards with disfavour what he calls "the intemperateness of the imagination" and says that there is "no worse fate for poetry than improper use of the imagination."<sup>41</sup> Shibli then cites some verses in the *sabk-i hindi* as examples of such "improper use of the imagination."

Shibli then discusses hyperbole which is universally acknowledged as a form or function of metaphor. Shibli grants a limited value to hyperbole, yet his bias against the "new" (or, in our parlance, *sabk-i hindi*) poets whom he often calls *muta'akhhirin* (the later ones, in Shibli the word somehow has a faint sense of Johnny-come-lately), leads him into one of his illogicalities. He says:

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<sup>38</sup> I have examined some aspects of this matter in an essay, "Privilege without Power: The Strange Case of Persian (and Urdu) in Nineteenth Century India" printed in the *Annual of Urdu Studies*, no. 13, University of Wisconsin-Madison, ed. Muhammad Umar Memon.

<sup>39</sup> *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. V, p. 65.

<sup>40</sup> *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. IV, Azamgarh, Ma'arif Press, 1951.

<sup>41</sup> *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. IV, p. 40.

Examine the poets whose poetry is cited to prove the [inherent] goodness of hyperbole, and see to which era they belong. If they are among the later ones (*muta'akhhirin*), then know that it is a flaw in the culture which has affected the people's [good] taste too, so that they regard hyperbole with approval. Thus in that case neither the poet deserves to be admired, nor the taste of the people which approves such poets can be treated as reliable. Rather, one must believe that the civilization's decay has corrupted the taste of both the poet and his audience.<sup>42</sup>

Apart from the gross illogicality and circularity of this argument, what is worthy of note here is the fact that the argument flies in the face of all Arab-Persian literary theory and that it is clearly influenced by what Shibli considered to be "modern" and "western" notions about the nature of poetry which was supposed to require poetry to be "natural", not "artificial". In the very beginning of his disquisition, he offered the following definitions of poetry:

The function of feeling is not perception... its function is just to become affected when some affecting thing happens... This power, which can be designated *ihsas* [the power to feel], *infi'al* [to be affected], or *feeling*,<sup>43</sup> is another name for poetry. This is, this very *ihsas* becomes poetry when it puts on the clothing of words.<sup>44</sup>

Shibli goes on for many pages in this strain, giving alternative models of his definition, none of which can be found in Arab-Persian literary theory, though traces of Sanskrit literary thought can be occasionally glimpsed in his thesis. My point is that Shibli's discomfort with and the Iranians' dislike of *sabk-i hindi* should not be viewed merely as a function of ethnic-cultural arrogance. (All along, Shibli consciously identified himself with Iranian linguistic usage, literary taste and fashion.)

It is impossible for me here to resist the temptation to cite yet another powerful condemnation of *sabk-i hindi* delivered by Shibli. Writing about Sa'ib, whom he much admires, he notes that Sa'ib has praised Urfi, and proceeds to say:

Well, it was all right thus far, but what a pity, because of the common people's favourable faith, or influenced by their general reputation, Sa'ib praises even Zahuri and Jalal Asir...[he quotes from Sa'ib one verse each in praise of Zahuri and Jalal Asir]. This was the first step of wretched taste which ultimately resulted in the building of a whole highway and things have come to such a pass today that people swoon at the poems of Nasir Ali, Bedil, Shaukat Bukhari, and their likes. *The foundation of tyranny in the world was initially little. Everyone who came later, added to it.*<sup>45</sup>

The first major voice against *sabk-i hindi* on literary as opposed to personal or linguistic grounds was that of Lutf Ali Beg Azar (d. 1780) who in his *tazkira Atashkada* (1779) came out specifically against Talib Amuli and Sa'ib. Azar had no real literary theory though, and his hostility to the Indian Style could perhaps be read as assertion of the Iranian linguistic identity at a time when Persian language had shrunk from its immense loci in Central Asia to within the Safavid boundaries of late eighteenth century<sup>46</sup>. Riza Quli Khan Hidayat was no better (and was in fact almost abusive) in his

<sup>42</sup> *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. IV, p. 72.

<sup>43</sup> English in the original.

<sup>44</sup> *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. IV, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. III, Azamgarh, Ma'arif Press, 5<sup>th</sup> reprint, 1956, p. 177. Italics added. The sentence in italics is a direct Persian quote from the *Gulistan* of Sa'di. In my copy, printed at Kanpur, Matba'-e Majidi, 1909, the quote appears on p. 45.

*Majma'ul Fusaha* (1867/68).<sup>47</sup> The hostility of Azar and Hidayat has also been attributed to the Iranian literary “movement” of “Literary Return” (*Bazgasht-i Adabi*). Shams Langrudi, however disputes this and says that the decline of the Safavids caused poets to “turn their faces” from *sabk-i hindi* because the poetry of this style is that of “the intellect, power, and thought”, while the devastation, loss, and sorrow wrought by the fall of the Safavids at the hands of the Afghans needed a “poetry of the heart” which gradually established itself in place of *sabk-i hindi*<sup>48</sup>.

This interpretation is both fanciful and ahistorical, for *sabk-i hindi* was very much in evidence in Iran under Afghan rule and until even much later. Anyway, the main point is that the earliest opponents of Indian Persian like Ali Hazin and Valih Daghistani were themselves distinguished poets of the Indian Style and they were disdainful of the Indian register of Persian, and not of the Indian Style of Persian poetry. Hazin’s hostility seems to have been driven by pure malice. Valih Daghestani says with barely concealed sarcasm that Hazin’s “innate generosity and personal sense of justice” led him to write “cheap satires” on everybody, the King and his nobles included, in spite of the “highest degree of affection and consideration showered upon him by the King and the nobles”.<sup>49</sup>

As for Valih, his dislike of Indian-Persian poetry was clearly based on parochial grounds and was powered by the native speaker’s blind pride in his competence in the mother tongue. He quotes a reasonably good ruba’i by an Indian woman poet called Kamila Begam and says that it is also attributed to one Salima Begam, but:

This servant attributes it to neither, for it is more than a hundred years since the time of Faizi that the propagation of the Persian language has been expanding in India with the passage of time, yet I find that even the men here do not know or understand Persian, so what would their women know of the language?<sup>50</sup>

By the time of Shibli and Bahar, the world had changed for India and Iran in many ways and the impact of “modernizing” (read Western) influences in Shibli and in his Iranian contemporaries must not be underestimated. Shibli’s disapproval of abstraction, complex metaphoricity, ambiguity and high imaginativeness particularly recalls the prevalent Victorian literary bias against these things.

The problem of the early Iranian hostility to *sabk-i hindi* has thus many dimensions. Muzaffar Alam sums up very well:

The gap between the Iranian and Indian views of *sabk-i Hindi* cannot be explained simply in terms of the ethnic and geographical location of the critics. Differences in the nature of knowledge of poetry, the definition of poetry, the autonomy and innovativeness of the poet, and issues of communication (*iblagh*) as well as reception are also factors.<sup>51</sup>

There must also, however, be something in the Indian literary temperament that loves complexity and bold creativity in the themes and language of poetry. Muhammad Afzal Sarkhush in his *Kalimatu'sh Shu'ara* (1682) and Kishan Chand Ikhlas (d. 1748/54) in his *tazkira*

<sup>46</sup> See Muzaffar Alam, “The Culture and Politics of Persian in Precolonial Hindustan” in Sheldon Pollock, ed., *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions From South Asia*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2003, p. 178.

<sup>47</sup> Lutf Ali Beg Azar, *Atashkada*, 3 volumes, ed. Hasan Sadat Nasiri, Tehran, Amir-e Kabir, 1339-40 (=1960-61); Riza Quli Khan Hidayat, *Majma'ul Fusaha*, 4 volumes, ed. Mazahir Musaffa, Tehran, Amir-e Kabir, 1339 (=1960).

<sup>48</sup> Shams Langrudi, *Baz Gasht-i Adabi*, Tehran, Nashr Markaz, 1375 (=1996), pp. 43-44.

<sup>49</sup> *Riyazu'sh Shu'ara*, p. 202.

<sup>50</sup> *Riyazu'sh Shu'ara*, p. 602.

<sup>51</sup> Muzaffar Alam, p. 182.

*Hamesha Bahar* (1723)<sup>52</sup> cannot conceal their delight in poets who are *ma'ni yab* (seekers and finders of new themes) and *taza go* (composers of the fresh and new). Ikhlas in fact often lifts words and phrases from Sarkhush. This suggests that they used a critical vocabulary that had become standardized by early eighteenth century. Now let's just listen to Bedil from his very long masnavi *Irfan* (Gnosis, begun 1682, finished 1712) telling us about *sukhan* (= poetry, speech, utterance, discourse, word):

*If you tear asunder the veil on poetry's face  
You get to things that are beyond imagining,  
Ignorance becomes knowledge by the light of discourse.  
Knowledge is ignorance if word doesn't show itself,  
Word is what owns the high note as also the low  
Not just the weeping, it owns the silence too.  
When one speaks with the imagination  
One chooses a manner from poetry's manners,  
And if silence has its hints and gestures  
So has speech its own texts too.*<sup>53</sup>

In his long philosophical prose work *Chahar Unsur* ("The Four Elements") Bedil goes even further. "The word (*sukhan*)", he says, is

...The soul of the universe and the true principle of the reality of the existing things. When the word strives in the path of concealment of meaning-reality, it is like a whole world locking its breath in its breast. And when it boils over to reveal the text, it is a whole world growing up and rising upon it.<sup>54</sup>

These texts are at once a theory of language and a theory of poetry, and it is not perhaps accidental that they remind us of Bhartrihari. These matters are obviously a far cry from the hostile reader's fears of imagination or abstraction running riot and leaving the reader alone to tease out, or wrestle with the hidden meaning in the poetic utterance.

Iranian critics describe the poetry of *sabk-i hindi* as generally difficult to comprehend. Even Shams Langrudi who is a staunch admirer, particularly of Kalim Kashani, can barely contain his impatience at what he describes as the opaqueness of some of the poetry:

Although even before [the coming of the *sabk-i hindi*], brevity and punning have always had an acknowledged authority in poetry, the poets of this style used these elements so much and in such a way that sometimes their poetry became compact and concise to the extent of impenetrability<sup>55</sup>.

Similarly, Muhammad Riza Shafi'i Kadkani, whose admiration for Bedil perhaps exceeds that of Langrudi for Kalim Kashani says a little ruefully:

<sup>52</sup> Muhammad Afzal Sarkhush, *Kalimatu'sh Shu'ara*, ed., Mahvi Siddiqi Lakhnavi, Madras, University of Madras, 1951; Kishan Chand Ikhlas, *Hamesha Bahar*, ed. Vahid Quraishi, Karachi, Anjuman Taraqqi-e Urdu, 1973.

<sup>53</sup> Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil, *Irfan*, in *Kulliyat-e Bedil*, Vol. III, ed. Akbar Behdarvand and Parvez Abbasi Dakani, Tehran, Ilham, 1376(=1997), pp. 87-88. Bedil uses only the word *sukhan* throughout this extract. Determining what I hope would suit the context of the individual verse best, I translate it variously as poetry, word, and so on. A very good introduction to some Hindu-Sanskrit aspects of *Irfan* is Wagish Shukla, "Mirza Bedil's *Irfan* and *Yogavashitha*" presented at the Jamia Millia University, New Delhi, Conference on Bedil, 2003. The paper is yet unpublished, but will appear as a part of the proceedings of the Conference.

<sup>54</sup> Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil, *Chahar Unsur*, being part of Volume IV of *Kulliyat-i Bedil*, Kabul, Dapohini Vizarat va Dar'ut Talif-i Riyasat, 1342-43(=1963-64), p. 196.

<sup>55</sup> Shams Langrudi, *Sabk-i Hindi va Kalim Kashani*, p. 75.

Sad to say, all his far flying imaginings and thoughts of numerous hues and shades have remained so much hidden behind the veil of ambiguity and the darkness of faulty expression that even for comprehending his ordinary she'rs the reader needs inevitably to spend his time and mental effort.... Most of his verses are a kind of riddle for whose solution it is necessary to obtain help from the poet [himself].<sup>56</sup>

One feels that this is scarcely an improvement on Shibli, except that Kadkani clearly implies that Bedil repays many times over the effort one expends in figuring out his meaning. But the most important thing to note here is that Kadkani is apparently unmindful of the fact that to the Indian ear, Bedil is extremely mellifluous and to the Indian mind he is not more difficult than say, Urfi or Naziri. Indeed this is as true of the Afghan and the Tajik as it is true of the Indian.

### 3.

So what exactly did the *sabk-i hindi* poet do, or not do? Paul Losensky has a point when he says that people have mostly been defining *sabk-i hindi* in terms merely of “rhetorical and stylistic devices” and at best such descriptions provide only a “synchronic overview” and help orient the modern reader in a terrain which remains essentially unfamiliar to this day. Losensky however falls into an error common among western critics of Persian poetry when he complains that these conventional descriptions do not pay any regard to the “original context or chronology” of the poetry; “isolated, individual verses” are cited and this “loses sight of the poem, the fundamental unit of artistic organization and poetic performance.”<sup>57</sup> In fact, all poetry in the Indo-Persian literary culture is seen as synchronic, and in the world of ghazal there is no concept of a “poem”. The ghazal consists of a number of individual verses, most often unconnected with each other by theme or mood. Even in performance, the poet may not recite all the she'rs of his ghazal, or may change their order, or even add a few on the spur of the moment, or incorporate she'rs from another ghazal in the same rhyme and metre.<sup>58</sup>

It is quite proper therefore to attempt a critique of the poetry of *sabk-i hindi* by focusing on individual she'rs. One great advantage of this method is that it promotes the sense of intertextuality that permeates all pre-modern Persian and Urdu ghazal. Then, this method makes comparativism easier, because instead of presenting ten poems or ghazals from ten poets and losing sight of the forest for the trees, one can cite ten she'rs from ten poets and provide a view that is overarching and yet short. Conventional critics of *sabk-i hindi* have failed to give us anything much about the spirit of the poetry because they haven't attempted to go beyond and behind the lists of “metaphorical conceits, personification, proverbs, poetic aetiology, unusual imagery, colloquialisms, tangled syntax” that according to them characterizes *sabk-i hindi*. Further, as Losensky is quick to point out, most of the so-called distinctive “features of the fresh style can also be found in the poetry of other poets. By setting aside previous uses of these rhetorical

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<sup>56</sup> Kadkani, p. 19.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Losensky, pp. 3-4.

<sup>58</sup> The question of “unity” in the ghazal has been well discussed in Frances W. Pritchett, “Orient Pearls Unstrung: The Quest for Unity in the Ghazal”, in *Edebiyat*, Vol. NS 4, 1993. Pritchett shows to my mind quite conclusively, that here is in principle, no unity in the ghazal. Also see C. M. Naim, “Poet-Audience interaction at Urdu Musha'iras” in his *Urdu Texts and Contexts: The Selected Essays of C. M. Naim*, New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2003/4.

devices, Safavid-Mughal poetry is made to appear as a strange and unprecedented intrusion on the classical tradition.”<sup>59</sup>

What Muhammad Taqi Bahar has to say about *sabk-i hindi* bears out Losensky’s charge that Indian Style Persian poetry was described in such terms as to make it sound alien, if not entirely bizarre and outré. Bahar, with a blind arrogance that better suits a provincial administrator than a literary historian and critic, made up the following list of *sabk-i hindi*’s characteristics:

- (1) Little attention paid to eloquence of diction
- (2) Unusual and exotic words not used
- (3) Archaic expressions never employed
- (4) More attention given to new conceits than to anything else
- (5) Psychic states and internal excitement were not expressed by means of words but through conceits and metaphor
- (6) Lofty ideals and high thoughts expressive of noble life and extraordinary character are not found
- (7) The majority is *ghazal* in form, and the contents convey feelings of debilitation, humility, and vileness
- (8) Vocabulary drawn from the bazaar and low level of diction as compared with previous eras
- (9) Many new expressions that had not existed before
- (10) The greatest fault is that the personality of the poet cannot be known through his poetry; the poet does not invent conceits to suit his ‘message’, rather he first finds the conceit and then invents a message to suit his conceit
- (11) Monotonous.<sup>60</sup>

Apart from the fact that very nearly each of the above counts could be shown to be false, or wrong-headed, or meaningless, or untrue to the classical tradition (for example, numbers 6, 7, and 10 above are points a classical Persian poet would scarcely comprehend, much less grant their validity), the chief point to be made here is that the list betrays an anxiety, a haste to condemn, and a willingness to risk being described as incapable of understanding any poetry but that of one’s own tradition, that is truly remarkable.

If Bahar’s analysis is more of a denunciation than analysis perhaps because of nationalistic considerations, Ali Dashti has a vested interest in *sabk-i hindi* because his agenda aims at setting up setting up Khaqani as the originator of *sabk-i hindi*. So he finds the poetry of the Indian Style to be laden with “metaphor and metaphorical constructions” and sees the hallmarks of the style as:

Fine and rare thinking, going in search of new themes however unfamiliar, not resting content with the totality of a theme but taking aid from fine details, observations, habits, avoidance of clarity and simplicity in utterances, joining up with metaphors and symbols, using cognate or metaphorical constructions and having so much regard to wordplay and verbal homogeneity that the meaning is lost.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Paul Losensky, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> Bahar, *Sa’ib u shiva-i u*, in *Yaghma* 23, no. 5, as translated and quoted by Wheeler M. Thackston, in Zeenut Ziad, *The Magnificent Mughals*, p. 94.

<sup>61</sup> Ali Dashti, *Khaqani, Sha’ir-i Dir Ashna*, Tehran, 1977, p. 67. Also see Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, “Expression of the Indo-Muslim Mind in the Urdu Ghazal” in M. U. Memon, ed., *Studies in the Urdu Ghazal and Prose Fiction*, Madison, South Asia Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979, pp. 1-21. Also see the editor’s very stimulating Introduction, especially pp. xv-xviii, where he discusses Alessandro Bausani and others and makes the perceptive remark (p. xv) that the Urdu ghazal represents “

The generally sympathetic attitude of Ali Dashti notwithstanding, his analysis suffers from a methodological failure because he doesn't tell us how the "fine and rare thinking" works in the poem, or whether "avoidance of clarity and simplicity" is the same as failure to communicate or find (in the Coleridgian sense) the best words in the best order. Ali Dashti does not define his categories and thus leaves room for misunderstanding. For instance, in the eighteenth century when much of the poetics of *sabk-i hindi* came to be formulated if not entirely articulated, "metaphor" was understood somewhat differently than it is now. In *Hada'iqu'l Balaghat*<sup>62</sup> (1768) by Shamsuddin Faqir of Delhi (1703/4-1769/70) we have what is perhaps the best and most authoritative Persian treatise of the eighteenth century on prosody and rhetoric. In his theory of metaphor, Faqir is a close follower of the Arab theorist Abdul Qahir Jurjani (d. 1078) and in fact directly lifts some of Jurjani's examples in his discourse. Without going into the subtleties of the position of Jurjani and Faqir, suffice it to say that both grant the possibility of a metaphor being valid as metaphor only if the metaphor-word is interpreted in its literal sense. Faqir gives the name of *majaz-e aqli* (metaphor of intellect) to such metaphors and says that metaphors are different from false statements because metaphors are amenable to *ta'vil* (interpreting in a manner not according to the obvious meaning) and have *qarina* (general tenor, analogical context) for a certain meaning, and the metaphor maker makes it clear that he is not using the metaphor-word strictly for the object for which the word was originally designed, while false statements have no such *qarina* or amenability to *ta'vil*<sup>63</sup>.

While it is clear that such subtleties do not enter the consideration of *sabk-i hindi*'s critics and denigrators, the main point lies elsewhere: It is not just the excessiveness or even "excesses" of metaphor in *sabk-i hindi* which the critic needs to highlight. He needs to ask about the *use* that the metaphor was put to, the task that it was made to perform. In a literary tradition where modes (even new modes) of composing poetry are like territories to be worked by all-comers, the important thing to map is not the territory, but the manner of the working of it. This is a matter where even an extremely sympathetic and astute a critic like Salahuddin Saljuqi was led into deception. In his admirable *Naqd-i Bedil* Saljuqi wrote:

Thus the thing which the fashioners of styles (*sabks*) describe as *sabk-i hindi* (Indian Style) is largely sufistic ghazalness (*taghazzul-i tasavvufi*), and not *sabk-i hindi*. . . . The thing which has been named *sabk-i hindi* did not in itself originate in India, but has descended [in this world] from the firmament of Sufism. But India has been the land where the inspirations issuing forth from the firmament of Sufism have flown in a measure greater than in other lands, and Sufism has specially flourished and developed there. It is because of this that this style can be observed in every poet, to the extent of how deep he is in Sufism.<sup>64</sup>

Apart from the fact that this is a classic instance of "explain all, explain nothing", Saljuqi's main error is in not appreciating that the important thing is not "how deep" a

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the specific Muslim response to the age old tension between orthodox belief and individual freedom." My article can also be seen in Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, *The Secret Mirror: Essays on Urdu Poetry*, Delhi, Progressive Book Service/East West Books, 1981.

<sup>62</sup> Shamsuddin Faqir, *Hada'iqu'l Balaghat*, Calcutta, College of Fort William, 1813, see especially pp. 67-119.

<sup>63</sup> Faqir, pp. 72-73.

<sup>64</sup> Salahuddin Saljuqi, *Naqd-i Bedil*, Tehran, Kitab Khana-e Milli, 1380 (=1991), p. 88; originally published, Kabul, 1343 (=1964).

poet is in Sufism: what matters is what use the poet makes of Sufi material, what meanings he derives or acquires from it. Later in his book Saljuqi makes a feeble attempt to declare that Bedil is a true disciple of Rumi because the former embellished and made more colourful Rumi's "everlasting construct" of verbal inventiveness and originality".<sup>65</sup> But then all great poets excel in "verbal inventiveness and originality", and none more so than Hafiz whose model Saljuqi doesn't invoke. And in any case, Bedil's language was much more unorthodox than that of Rumi or Hafiz and in fact invited criticism even from his Indian contemporaries<sup>66</sup>.

All metaphor tends to do violence to the language and thus it commits a kind of unkindness, or aggression on the hearer or reader in testing his or her faculty of deciphering or figuring out the information content of the utterance directed to her. This violence is not the crude, anti-syntactical or turgid, ungrammatical speech that we encounter in degraded linguistic environments. The violence that metaphoric language perpetrates tends to destroy, or conflate, or change the nature of the categories that it deals with. Hafiz, for instance, is not generally given to the kind of metaphor that we are talking about here. But the nature of language, and of metaphor is such that both revel in stretching each other to the utterance. I translate literally:

*Without your sunface no light remains  
In my day, and as for my life,  
There's nothing left but the longest night of winter.*<sup>67</sup>

This apparently simple set of metaphors releases a number of reverberations: Quite easily and with sufficient justification the poet could have said *nur* (light) instead of *mehr* (sun), but *mehr* also means "love", so the phrase now has the additional suggestion of "love", that is, the loss of the sunface also involves loss of love, but *mihri-rukhat* can also mean love "the love of your face". So the loss of the sunface at one level suggests loss of love for the sunface. For some reason the protagonist has fallen into the horrible misfortune of not loving the face, that is the face of the woman whom he was to have been in love with. But what exactly is the sunface? Is it properly the sun? Perhaps so, because without it no light remains in the narrator's day. But if the absence of the sunface is just a intensifier-metaphor, then there is no reason to say no light now remains for (or in) the *roz* (day), for it is a tautology at best. But *roz* also means "life, days, age". So the sunface functions yet again as a metaphor: it is something whose absence darkens the speaker's life in a physical, and not just a figural sense. The second *misra'* (line) of this verse presents new problems. Is all that is left now of the speaker's life just one long winter night in the literal sense, or should we understand this to mean that the life that is now left for the narrator will be cold and lonely and long, like winter's longest night? But note that the poem does not quite say so. It equates the remainder of life to the longest cold night of the year. But does the equation work only on some inner, ontological level, and not physical, epistemological level? One would be entitled, I believe, to read the second line literally and then read metaphors into it.

This is precisely the kind of thing that that the Indian Style poets were doing. Except that they were more adventurous, or venturesome, than Hafiz and the rest of their great forebears. They knew that poems were made from, or on, a theme, (*mazmun*) and

<sup>65</sup> *Naqd-i Bedil*, p. 114.

<sup>66</sup> See for instance, Ghulam Ali Azad Bilgrami (1705-1786), *Khizana-i Amira*, Kanpur, Naval Kishor Press, 1871, p.153. Azad however acknowledges Bedil's right to improvise in the language and cites the great critic and linguist Khan-e Arzu (1689-1756) in his support.

<sup>67</sup> *Diwan-i Hafiz*, Ed., Muhammad Hasan Haeri, Tehran, Husain Khusravi, 1371(=1992), p.28.

each theme was a domain, a territory, and a *tarz*. They also knew that while there was no ideal or necessary reason to exclude a *mazmun* (theme domain, territory, ontological entity, *tarz*), there was something in the nature of things that precluded certain domains or ontological entities from becoming part of the notionally infinite fraternity of *mazmuns*. So the idea was to create new *mazmuns* (*mazmun afirini*), or to look at old *mazmuns* with new eyes. But the problem wasn't quite that simple. For what exactly is a *mazmun* in poetry? The first thing to remember here is that it is characterized by smallness, rather than largeness. The smaller and more specific the object, the better *mazmun* it can be for the purpose of poem-making, given of course a truly creative mind. Consider the following:

A favourite *mazmun* is of course Love. Love unrequited, or love frustrated and unsuccessful are okay *mazmuns* too. But the nature of the *mazmun* demands specificity. So, Love: Desire to see the beloved: Make Effort to do so: Get to see her: A glance: Get to speak to her: A kiss: Get to kiss her: She kisses: She kisses something: She speaks: She speaks to someone [to me, the lover, maybe]: A word by the lover to himself: A kiss by proxy... Such are some of the more obvious branches of invention where a *mazmun* may be found blooming feebly or in strong colours. The greater the metaphoric or unusual content in the *mazmun*, the better example of "mazmun-creation" it'll be. Yet Love, or Death, or Faith, or Fidelity are too great and too common *mazmuns* to be of real value in poetry. The finer you grind them, the better atomicity results. And still, the restless and the intrepid ones want always to go out and capture unlikely and intractable themes and forge them into poetic respectability. The "theme-creating" or "the theme-discovering" (*mazmun afirin*) poet is the most intrepid creature in the universe, and the Indian Style Persian poet was the epitome of all intrepidity. He sought to convert non-*mazmun* material of everyday life into *mazmun* by the means of plain poetic assertion, exemplification (*tamsil*), "poetic proof", and by pulling together the most unlikely things imaginable.

I'll begin by quoting two comparative low key examples from the Urdu poet Imam Bakhsh Nasikh (1776-1838) because it's easier in this case to "bare the device", or reveal "the verbal contraption." Nasikh's *mazmun* is... a blowpipe. Here's what he makes of it:

*Your blossom-colour mouth has made the blowpipe so fragrant  
The rose-saturated hookah pipe is shamed by it;*

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*Let the rival's ear be shot with jealousy's dart  
Speak to me today through your blowpipe.<sup>68</sup>*

The unlikely *mazmun* is yoked to the duty of love in a conventional way, but there are some interesting semantic and cultural nuances: the hookah-pipe is kissed and sucked by the beloved; it draws in, the blowpipe is also kissed, but it draws out, it throws its tongue out, as it were. Also, when the beloved blows through the blowpipe, her own sweet breath, excelling any sweetness and coolness of air from anywhere plays upon the blowpipe, as on a flute, making the pipe sweeter still. Even so intimate an engine as a hookah-pipe can't begin to compete with the love-action involved in the play with and upon the blowpipe.

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<sup>68</sup> Shaikh Imam Bakhsh Nasikh, *Kulliyat*, Lucknow, Matba'-e Maula'i, 1846, pp. 365-366. The modern text *Divan-e Nasikh*, Vol. I, edited by Yunus Javed, Lahore, Majlis Taraqqi-e Adab, 1987, p. 446, is not reliable here.

In the next she'r, we find the lover and (hopefully for him) his beloved reverting to childhood games. It was common in India for children to speak to each other in play or fun using a blowpipe or hollow reed. Here the beloved is being invited to reverse the actual lethal role of the pipe and give it a make-believe role which, if enacted, will immediately establish a friendly equation between the lover and the beloved, and will also make the Rival, the Competitor, so unhappy as if he'd been shot in the ear.

But there is a main meaning to *tufang*. Translated here quite properly as "blowpipe," the main meaning of *tufang* is "musket, heavy calibre gun." Now the tension generated by the jealousy of the Rival takes on a more sinister dimension. And if the beloved takes *tufang* in its main meaning, she may end up shooting the lover. In that case, the sound that will shoot through the Rival's ear will be the report of a gun, and it will make him jealous, for the protagonist would have had, through an error of communication, his heart's desire (because he was put to death by his beloved, but which is not what he wanted right then. Right then his main aim was to stun the Rival with jealousy) and the Rival would have got nothing but a big bang. So whose ear is going to be shot away? This is a question that makes us a trifle uneasy. The text seems to be going back upon itself.

We can see that there is not a plenitude of splendid meanings here, for "meaning-creation" was not always the business of the mazmun-creating poet. Yet it is clear that even this thin and barren theme (blowpipe) has yielded some enjoyable results. Indo-Persian poets invested a great deal of their creative energy on mazmun-creation. Let's take a brief walk through some of the most apparently barren or forbidding by lanes of their imagination:

Lenses for weak eyes had long been ground from suitable kinds of stone, and the power of sight was supposed to reside in the eye from where "rays of sight" emanated to illumine the environment. So Ghani combines the two images to make this striking yet strangely light-gossamer mazmun:

*It's not a pair of glasses that I have on my eyes  
Due to old age,  
My sight, in its ardent desire to look at you,  
Beats its head against stone*<sup>69</sup>.

The lover's ultimate fate is never in doubt: he will live and die unfulfilled, unrequited. But this gnosis needs to be expressed in newer, global, more dramatic ways, better still that it was expressed through a theme which one would normally not imagine suitable or proper for a poem. Muhammad Quli Salim says:

*The lover dies the moment he holds the object  
Of his desire in his arms;  
The blossom on the flower branch of the heart  
Is the bubo.*<sup>70</sup>

It needs to be said that the poem rests on the convention that in Indo-Muslim culture, the armpit also is described as the site of heart in the human body, and the bubo of course appears in the armpit, and the heart is often described as an "unopened bloom" or a "knot", or "a drop/clot of blood".

<sup>69</sup> Mulla Muhammad Tahir Ghani Kashmiri, *Divan-e Ghani*, eds., Ali Javad Zaidi and Muhammad Amin Darab Kashmiri, Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir Academy of Arts, Culture, and Languages, 1964, p.184.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted by Tek Chand Bahar in *Bahar-e Ajam*, Vol. II, Delhi, Matba'-e Siraji, 1865/66, p. 494.

The breeze is supposed to be free, but the its waves are assumed to be like links in a chain. Mad people are kept in chains, for obvious reasons. So if a person in chains is seen roaming about freely, there must be a reason for it. In the present instance, the poet-narrator finds the mazmun of the breeze's madness and liberation, banal in itself, but made new by the new character, the breeze:

*If the breeze didn't pass by the chains of  
The beloved's tresses, how come she lost  
Her mind and broke her chains?<sup>71</sup>*

The point is that the breeze should properly remain chained, and all of it should be pulled by natural forces together, and such indeed is the case, for the breeze comes and goes as one set or gust of waves. If it was in chains, it was sane, normal, as it should be. Broken chains flowing around her body, she moves everywhere like one deranged.

Flower-petals are everywhere in the garden, naturally. Some of them are blown over by the breeze into the stream or lifted up into the air. These trite enough themes are just the stuff on which the imagination of the *sabk-i hindi* poets feeds. The following examples are doubly helpful because they deal with the same theme. The following is from Mulla Baqar Hiravi:

*I see rose-petals floating on the morning breeze  
So now the garden too has found  
A messenger to send to her!<sup>72</sup>*

Abu Talib Kalim Kashani finds a gleefully callous, yet entirely appropriate mazmun here:

*Those are the pages of the Spring's beauty-list  
Washed away and discarded during your sovereign rule,  
Those aren't rose petals blown by the breeze  
Into the water-channel.<sup>73</sup>*

The beloved is by definition heartless and incapable of keeping faith. But what if someone wants to say different, and how does one go about collecting a proof for such an assertion? The cycle of seasons and the practice of measuring distance in terms of time provide the answer:

*The lovely ones too have the desire,  
And the fact that the rose comes back  
For the bulbul from a whole year's journey  
Should suffice as proof for love's practitioners.<sup>74</sup>*

Two of the most popular mazmuns, and in fact almost banal in their popularity, are colour, and lamentation, and their immediate associations: the rose itself (*gul* in Persian means "red rose"); the (rosy) colour of the beloved's visage; the (rosy/red colour of wine; the colour of the sky, the lament's feebleness, or effectiveness, or ceaselessness, or its beauty, so forth. I now give you two verses, and no comment except that in the face of such poems the superior, priggish and unfeeling comments of Muhammad Taqi Bahar and his followers ( the *sabk-i hindi* poems express feelings of debilitation,

<sup>71</sup> Ali Quli Maili, in Asif Naim Siddiqi, ed., *Ganjina-e Bazyafra-e Nau Daryafra*, Delhi, Anjuman-e Farsi, n.d., p. 229.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted by Mirza Mazhar Jan-e Janan, *Kharita-e Javahir*, p. 99.

<sup>73</sup> Kalim Kashani, in Shams Langrudi's selections from Kalim appended to *Gird Bad-i Shor-i Junun*, p. 150.

<sup>74</sup> Saidi Tehrani (d. 1658-9), in *Kharita-e Javahir*, p. 127.

humility, and vileness; the personality of the poet cannot be known through his poetry) seem like deliberate attempts at obfuscation. The first one is by Hakim Husain Shuhrat (d. 1736):

*My heart's portion was a blossom's breath  
One fell swoop and Rose took it away,  
I had a line of lament for my song  
One fell swoop and Bulbul took that away.*<sup>75</sup>

Now listen to Shaukat Bukhari (d. 1695/99):

*The wineglass struck a rare hue on your Frankish face  
Wine became rose-oil for the lamp that's your body*<sup>76</sup>

And finally Mirza Razi Danish (d. 1665) going off entirely elsewhere and pushing the mazmun, image, metaphor, whatever, to the utterance:

*Down there in the forest  
Clouds have laid the foundation for the red poppy's bedchamber;  
So what are you doing here, diverting yourself  
With painted walls and doors at home?*<sup>77</sup>

I must confess to have made the translation somewhat freer than is my wont. There are two reasons for this impertinence: the literal sense of what I have translated as *laid the foundation* is actually "poured out the colour(s)"; it's a delicate play on the idiom *rang rekhtan* (=to lay the foundation [of]). My second reason is intertextual: the literal meaning of Mirza Danish's second line is, "What for are you looking at the pictured decorations at home?" This is an echo, or in fact recuperation of a she'r from Sana'i Ghaznavi (1080/7-1131/41):

*Look, my entire counsel to you  
Is just this: You are a child  
And the house is full of colours*<sup>78</sup>

How many strands of text, world, and meaning has Danish pulled into his she'r I leave to the redoubtable Maliku'sh Shu'ra's progeny to figure out.

### 3.

The strategies of mazmun-creation are too numerous, in fact infinite, and what one really misses in the critics of *sabk-i hindi* is their general unwillingness to allow intertextuality as a legitimate literary device. This matter is too vast and complex to be dealt with here, suffice it to say that the whole poetics of mazmun *afirini* and *ma'ni afirini* (meaning-creation) is one of the functions of convention and intertextuality. Poems were made from other poems, or were founded upon other poems. Incessantly challenged, imitated, and improved upon, each poem became a notional paradigm. Wordplay became the most important weapon in meaning-creation because one could insert two or more possibilities in the poem for the price of one word. Exemplification often turned on wordplay and enlarged and enriched the utterance. Look at the following examples:

*The world never stays, however hard your grasp,  
However tightly one closes the fist,*

<sup>75</sup> *Kharita-i Javahir*, p. 123.

<sup>76</sup> *Kharita-i Javahir*, p. 123.

<sup>77</sup> *Ganjina*, p. 85.

<sup>78</sup> From the masnavi *Hadiqa*, quoted here from Muhammad Padshah Shad's dictionary, *Farhang-e Anandraj*, Vol. I, Tehran, Kitab Faroshi Khayyam, 1363 (=1984), p. 454.

*The colour of the henna cannot not fade away.*<sup>79</sup>

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*The heart without love  
Is far from God's grace,  
Dead bodies are washed ashore  
By the ocean.*<sup>80</sup>

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*Fighting is okay for the fool:  
For me, fighting is a flaw  
A ruby that has a vein in it is flawed;  
Likewise the wise man  
Who has a vein in his neck  
Has a flaw.*<sup>81</sup>

The point of the last verse is that in Persian, “to have a vein in the neck” means “to be conceited and stuck up.” Wordplay by itself provides a powerful incentive to meaning-creation but it must be remembered that it was the discovery of the distinction between “mazmun” (=what is the poem about), and “ma’ni” (=what does the poem mean?) that made such stupendous advances possible in enlarging the range and scope of *sabk-i hindi*. Ghani uses the mazmun *af-tab* (the sun) to say two different things:

*As far as possible  
Do not fall in love with a fickle one  
The sunflower is quite distracted and deranged  
By the sun.*<sup>82</sup>

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*Like the traveller who walks with the sun in his eye  
I journeyed toward my beloved  
But I didn't see her face.*<sup>83</sup>

Obliqueness of expression, or fashioning poems consisting of half-statements and half-suggestions is an art that one often associates *sabk-i hindi*. Direct evidence is lacking yet, but the influence of Sanskrit poetics can be discerned here in many ways. As I have had occasion to note elsewhere, classical Arab-Persian poetics used the single word *ma'ni* to indicate the theme, or the content of the poem. Persian did have two distinct words *ma'ni* and *mazmun* to indicate two different things. But the concept was never developed and gradually the term *mazmun* gave way entirely to *ma'ni* whose initial, actual sense of “meaning” was practically abandoned in literary theory. But how does one excavate, or generate, different meanings from a source which is ostensibly one and the same? The Arab theorist, holding that a poem meant what it contained, generally equated the “content” (*ma fih*) of the poem with its meaning and thus saw no need for a new category to describe something that could be got out of a poem though it was not necessarily intrinsic to the overt verbal structure of the poem.

<sup>79</sup> Shams Langrudi, *Sabk-ii Hindi va Kalim Kashani*, p. 162.

<sup>80</sup> Mirza Rafi Va'iz, in *Kharita-e Javahir*, p. 167.

<sup>81</sup> Muhammad Quli Salim, quoted in Navab Siddiq Hasan Khan, *Sham'-e Anjuman*, Bhopal, Matba'-e Shahjahani, 1876, p.201.

<sup>82</sup> Divan-e Ghani, p. 89.

<sup>83</sup> Divan-e Ghani, p. 91.

Ksamendra's idea of *auchitya* (appropriateness), very similar to the Arabic notion of *balagha* (full expressiveness)<sup>84</sup> seems to have joined somewhere in the Indo-Persian mind with the Sanskrit notion of *sahitya* (appropriateness of word to theme) and thus given rise in the seventeenth century to the revival of the term *mazmun* as a category distinct from *ma'ni*. Persian and Urdu poets from the seventeenth century seem to be using it not as two sides of the same coin, but as two entities that go to make a she'r. The Dakan Urdu poet Mulla Vajhi (d. 1669?/1671?) wrote in his masnavi *Qutb Mushtari* (1609/1610):

*In the art of poetry it is rather difficult  
To make both word and meaning coincide,  
Use only those words in your poem  
Which have found favour with the masters,  
If you have the ear for poetry's metre  
Choose words with care and write high themes.  
Even if there's but one powerful theme  
It enhances the pleasure of the speech.*<sup>85</sup>

Once it was recognized that a poem's *mazmun* (theme, subject, idea) need not be all the meaning that a poem may have, the foundation for ambiguity, obliqueness, metaphoricity, wordplay, verbal congruity (*munasibat*), and similar creative devices (very testing devices, most of them) was laid down forever.

In his masnavi *Gulshan-e Ishq* (1657), we find another great Dakani Urdu poet Nusrati Bijapuri (1600-1674?) making the assertion:

*Some beauties of Hindi poetry cannot  
Be transported to Persian properly;  
I drew the essence  
Of the two arts and made new poetry,  
Mixing the two.*<sup>86</sup>

Later, in his major work *Ali Nama* (1665), Nusrati says in prayer:

*Reveal, on the screen of my thought  
The virgin faces of all fresh mazmuns,*

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*Instil thus the nectar of meaning in my words  
That even the moon may lust to drink it*<sup>87</sup>;

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*The manner new, well woven, desired  
By all hearts; Colourful themes*

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<sup>84</sup> The main plank of Ksamendra's theory according to R. S. Tiwary is his emphasis on "placing together of things which are mutually agreeable or in harmony." Tiwary asserts that Ksamendra did not produce "any novel theory of poetry", see his *A Critical Approach to Classical Indian Poetics*, Varanasi, Chaukhamba Orientalia, 1984, pp. 269, 292. Yet Ksamendra's definition of *auchitya* if it reached Arab lands, would have struck a familiar chord in the imagination of his Arab contemporary Abdul Qahir Jurjani (d. 1078) who regarded the *nazm* (organization, construction) of the words in a text as the main source of excellence.

<sup>85</sup> Mulla Vajhi, *Qutb Mushtari*, ed., Tayyab Ansari, Gulbarga, Maktaba-e Rifah-e Am, 1991, p. 53.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted by Jamil Jalibi, *Tarikh-e Adab-e Urdu*, Vol. I, Delhi, Educational Publishing House, 1977, p. 335. *Hindi* of course here means "Dakani" or "Urdu", to give its modern name, (the language name "Urdu" was not in existence then).

<sup>87</sup> Nusrati Bijapuri, *Ali Nama*, ed. Abdul Majid Siddiqi, Hyderabad, Salar Jang Dakani Publications, 1959, p.9.

*Lofty meanings*<sup>88</sup>.

It is clear that significant things are happening here in Indian poetics. It is not Urdu that is being affected; it is clear that Persian is interacting with Urdu. We have just seen Nusrati claiming to have distilled the essence of the two traditions and created a new solution. Elsewhere in *Gulshan-e Ishq* he said:

*I fashioned the poetry of the Deccan to be like Persian*<sup>89</sup>

What is less clear, but can quite easily be inferred, is that these changes are occurring in Persian through direct or indirect transactions with Sanskrit. Urdu's first great poet Shaikh Khub Muhammad Chishti (d. 1614) wrote a treatise on metre where he discussed both *pingala* and Persian-Arabic prosody; both were much in use in Urdu at that time apparently. Shaikh Ahmad Gujrati (fl. 1580's) knew Sanskrit, and it is very probable that Nusrati knew both Sanskrit and Kannada. Amir Khusrau knew Sanskrit fairly well and it has always seemed to me that his designating the reader (and also the writer) as having the *tab'-e vaqqad* (a temperament that is knowing, intelligent, bright, and fiery) is influenced by Abhinavagupta's theory of the *sahridaya* reader. In Abhinavagupta's formulation, "a *sahridaya* has the competence analogous to that of the poet/composer to see, to hear, to feel, to participate, to experience."<sup>90</sup> Both Abhinavagupta and Khusrau emphasize the role of the reader's creativity in comprehending poetry. Similarly, Rajasekhara's *kavyapurusa*, the ideal being who partakes of the character both of the composer and reader, who stands for all compositions, and who therefore incorporates all possible poets and readers<sup>91</sup> reminds us of Khusrau's startling claim that all poetry is in a sense commentary on the Qur'an, or exemplification of its pronouncements.<sup>92</sup> Among the poets of the later centuries, major and influential poets like Faizi Fayyazi (1547-1595), Bedil (1644-1720), Bhupat Rai Begham Bairagi (d. 1720), Sirajuddin Ali Khan-e Arzu (1689-1756), and Ghulam Ali Azad Bilgrami (1704-1785) knew Sanskrit. Instances of such cross-lingual fertilization between two languages over the centuries should be hard to find in other premodern literary traditions in Asia.

All this brings us into the domain of hermeneutics, and poets of *sabk-i hindi* evince sharp awareness of the need for poetry to be interpreted. This again is something unique in the Arab-Persian tradition, but is a given in the Sanskrit. Before I go on to citing *sabk-i hindi* poets, I would like to follow Todorov's mapping, after Mammata, of the situations where there may be a gap between an utterance and its meaning. According to Todorov, Mammata says that interpretation comes into play when there is "an incompatibility between the primary meaning of the word and its context", and where there is also "a relation of association" between the primary and secondary meanings.<sup>93</sup>

Mammata, following Anandavardhan, identified seven differences between direct expression and indirect suggestion:

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<sup>88</sup> Nusrati Bijapuri, *Ali Nama*, p.425.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted by Jalibi, *Tarikh-e Adab-e Urdu*, Vol. I, p. 335.

<sup>90</sup> Kapil Kapoor, in collaboration with Nalini M. Ratnam, *Literary Theory, Indian Conceptual Framework*, New Delhi, Affiliated East-West Press Private Limited, 1998, p. 44.

<sup>91</sup> Kapoor, p. 53.

<sup>92</sup> Amir Khusrau, *Kulliyat*, Lucknow, Ram Kumar Book Depot, 1967, p. 39.

<sup>93</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Symbolism and Interpretation*, trs. Catherine Porter, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1982, p. 27.

1. Difference in the nature of the statement: the expressed meaning prohibits or denies, for example, while the suggested meaning commands or affirms.
2. Difference in time: the suggested meaning is grasped after the expressed meaning.
3. Difference in the linguistic material: the expressed meaning emanates from words; the suggested meaning may arise from a sound, a sentence, or an entire work.
4. Difference in the means of apprehension; the expressed meaning is understood by means of grammatical rules, whereas the suggested meaning requires a context as well: spatio-temporal circumstances, an interlocutor, and so on.
5. Difference in effect: the expressed meaning brings about a simple cognitive perception; the suggested meaning also produces them.
6. Difference in number: the expressed meaning is univocal, the suggested meaning may be plurivalent.
7. Difference in the person addressed: the expressed meaning may well be addressed to one character, the suggested meaning to another.<sup>94</sup>

Since all Arab literary theory originated from exegeses on the Qur'an, the Arab theoretical endeavour was toward developing tools that could help determine the ultimate, intended meaning of the text maker. Thus there was little there by way of investigation into the properties of language that lend themselves to ambiguity or polyvalence. Questions of interpretations did arise, but only to be settled one way or another. A good example is the criticism of Al Baqillani (d. 1013) on Imru' al Qais where he disagrees with the meaning of specific verses as generally understood, and then proceeds to disagree with his predecessor, offering what he regards as the true meaning of the verse in question.<sup>95</sup> Occasionally, Al Baqillani makes an observation which has the force of theory but he doesn't pursue it, as if the whole idea of *ma'ni* being separable from the words were distasteful to him<sup>96</sup>. Grammarians from Sibavaih (d. circa 798) to Abu Yaqub Sakkaki (d. 1228)<sup>97</sup> and many others have interesting things to say about the contextual properties of meaning (some of Sakkaki's comments here anticipate I. A. Richards) but deliberate ambiguity or plurivalence is not something which enters their ken as a literary device.

On the contrary, poets of the *sabk-i hindi* revel and delight in making poems do more than, or different from what one expects them to do. They strain at the leash of language, demand attention and concentrated effort at comprehension. Possibly as a consequence of the separation of *ma'ni* and *mazmun*, they are extremely conscious of plagiarism. For as long as meaning (in

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<sup>94</sup> Todorov, pp. 12-13.

<sup>95</sup> See Al Baqillani, *Ijaz'ul Qur'an*, Sections on poetry, translated and annotated by Gustave von Grunebaum as *A Tenth Century Document of Arabic Literary Theory and Criticism*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1950, pp. 64-65, 70-71. I am obliged to C. M. Naim for making this text available to me.

<sup>96</sup> For instance, "For it often happens that a saying is well worded, but not sustained by any worth while meaning" (p. 64), and "The second verse is lacking in beautiful features and is devoid of any idea" (p. 65).

<sup>97</sup> For an overall view of the sciences of language in Arabic culture, see G. Bohas, J.-P. Guillaume, and D. E. Kouloughli, *The Arabic Linguistic Tradition*, London and New York, Routledge, 1990.

the sense of *mazmun*) was common property, there could be no real plagiarism. Using a subtle if somewhat tenuous argument, Abdul Qahir Jurjani practically denied plagiarism as a category.<sup>98</sup> However, once it was established that common themes can generate uncommon meanings, plagiarism became a hot subject. The question: who derived which meaning first from a given *mazmun* could become an occasion for heated investigations and even accusations. On one occasion, even the reclusive and generally uncaring Ghani Kashmiri had to defend himself in writing against a charge of plagiarism.<sup>99</sup> Ironically, it was Ghani who himself often complained of being plagiarized. In a laconic *she'r* whose point turns upon a delightful (and happily, translatable) pun, Ghani said:

*My peers took my verses  
Pity they didn't take my name.*<sup>100</sup>

Kalim Kashani, perhaps greatest of *mazmun afirin* (theme creating) poets, must also have at some time felt the pinch of the accuser's finger, for he said:

*How can I take the themes of another  
When in my creed  
Redepicting my own themes is thievery?*<sup>101</sup>

In the eighteenth century, the most visible controversy about plagiarism was caused in Delhi by the Iranian immigrant poet Shaikh Ali Hazin who disdained everything Indian in spite of the most generous patronage showered on him by the Emperor Muhammad Shah (r. 1719-1748), by Umdatul Mulk Amir Khan Anjam (d. 1746), and by everybody else everywhere. Anyway, a friend sent to him a *she'r* by Muhammad Afzal Sabit Ilahabadi, a leading Persian poet of the time and a protégé of Umdatul Mulk, Hazin's own patron. In the words of Valih Daghestani:

Mir Muhammad Azim Sabat, who is the true son and successor to Mir Muhammad Afzal Sabit has brought up five hundred *she'rs* from the *divan* of the Shaikh [Ali Hazin] where the *mazmuns* are precisely those of other [poets]. The reason for this matter was this: One of his relations had occasion to send to the Shaikh a verse from the *divan* of Muhammad Afzal Sabit. He [Shaikh Ali Hazin] wrote back to say that apart from the fact that the *mazmun* of this *she'r* is quite lowly, the *mazmun* itself is from such and such poet and Sabit has stolen it from him. Mir Muhammad Azim saw that note and his sense of honour was greatly aroused. Within a few days he trashed five hundred of the Shaikh's verses.<sup>102</sup>

Thus the separation of "theme" (*mazmun*) from "meaning" (*ma'ni*) had three far-reaching consequences for Indo-Persian poetics. First, poets began to look for new *mazmuns*, or new ways to tackle old *mazmuns*. This was given

<sup>98</sup> I am not familiar with any extended discussion in English of Jurjani's views on plagiarism. Paul Losensky cites Gustave von Grunebaum, "The Concept of Plagiarism in Arabic Theory" in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 3 (1944) and also discusses the subject briefly. See *Welcoming Fighani*, pp. 103-107. For a concise Persian source, see Abdul Husain Zarrinkub, *Naqd-i Adabi*, Vol. I, Tehran, Mu'assasa-i Intisharat-i Amir-i Kabir, 1361 (=1982), pp. 168-9.

<sup>99</sup> *Divan-e Ghani*, pp. 257-259.

<sup>100</sup> *Divan-e Ghani*, p. 165.

<sup>101</sup> Kalim Kashani, in Shams Langrudi's selections from Kalim appended to *Gird Bad-i Shor-i Junun*, p. 180.

<sup>102</sup> *Riyazu'sh Shu'ara*, p. 213. Valih goes on to reproduce over the next ten or twelve pages a chunk of Sabat's text.

many names: *mazmun afirini* (“theme creation”), *mazmun yabi* (“finding [new] themes”), *mazmun bandi* (“depicting [new] themes”), *khiyal afirini* (“creating [new] thoughts”), and in the extreme case, *khiyal bandi* (“depicting [abstract] themes and thoughts”). The obvious base for such activity was metaphor, but the chief achievement of the Indian Style poets was to *treat metaphor as fact* and go on to create further metaphors from that fact. Each such metaphor in turn became a fact and was used to generate another metaphor. Metaphor thus became a phenomenon of not merely substitution, but of contiguity. Metaphor, in other words, became syntagmatic rather than paradigmatic. This is perhaps the greatest single innovation in the realm of metaphor in any poetics, but it hasn’t been given the attention it deserves. As we saw above, perhaps Shibli Nu’mani is the only critic who appreciated this point<sup>103</sup>. Shibli had more to say on this point in his discussion of Kalim Kashani where he informs us somewhat disparagingly:

The thing that people describe as *mazmun afirini*, when analysed, turns out to be a new metaphor, or [new] simile, or some startling hyperbole, or some poetic assertion which is not really true, but the poet makes the claim [to its truth], and proves it by a poetic argument.<sup>104</sup>

Shibli here omits but implies the crucial point that the metaphor, or whatever figure is in use by the poet is treated by him as a fact. For example, *ab shudan* (to turn to water) means “to be ashamed”. Also, *ab* (“water”) means, “brightness, cutting edge”. Using these metaphors as facts permits the poet to generate new metaphors, thus:

*I am no sword, yet the ocean-hearted Time  
Flings me into the fire  
So as to give me a bit of water.*<sup>105</sup>

Note the double use of “fire”; more noteworthy is the image “ocean-hearted” (= “bountiful”) for it has “congruity” with “water”. Use of words which have, or seem to have “congruity” (*munasibat*) with each other is one of the glories of *sabk-i hindi*. Here’s another example of congruity and the *mazmun* of *ab* (“water”):

*You passed from my sight  
And I am living still,  
Shame didn’t turn me to water  
Dust be on my head.*<sup>106</sup>

The congruity is obvious, and the other interesting point is that “to have dust on the head” has a range of meanings from shame and humiliation and ignominy to death. Ghalib picked up this *mazmun* nearly a century later but chose to give up the water-dust congruity for something which shocks and startles:

*I managed to keep alive without you  
And didn’t kill myself for the shame of it,  
My life for you, do not come to me now*

<sup>103</sup> *She’rul Ajam*, Vol. III, p. 21.

<sup>104</sup> *She’rul Ajam*, Vol. III, p. 194.

<sup>105</sup> Kalim Kashani, in Shams Langrudi’s selections from Kalim appended to *Gird Bad-i Shor-i Junun*, p. 175.

<sup>106</sup> Anand Ram Mukhlis (1699-1751), quoted in Syed Abdullah, *Adabiyat-e Farsi men Hindu’on ka Hissa*, New Delhi, Anjuman Taraqqi-e Urdu (Hind), 1992, p. 156 [1943].

*I am disgraced before you*<sup>107</sup>.

Going back to the original mazmun of water-sword-thirst, we have Talib Amuli:

*I am so fond of my thirst  
That even if water from your sword-stream  
Was fetched for me, it would  
Not flow down my throat.*<sup>108</sup>

Here the water metaphor is taken to its next stage of contiguity: swords have water (are sharp); streams have water; so sword=stream. "Fondness for thirst" is however another [complicated] story and will not bear telling here.

*I had a mind to give tongue  
To my thirsty lips, but out of shame  
My tongue turned to water and  
Flowed into my throat.*<sup>109</sup>

The theme of wine as "Vine's daughter" was centuries old by the time Kalim Kashani came to it in early seventeenth century. It occurs extensively in the qasidas of Minuchihri (d. 1040) and has been studied in depth by William Hanaway<sup>110</sup>. Kalim gives a new keenness to the mazmun by using the metaphor "Vine's daughter" in the sense of a real woman:

*When I attend the beloved's assembly, I drink  
Aged wine. Vine's daughter grows old  
By the time it comes to me.*<sup>111</sup>

The beauty of the poem comes from two unexpected directions, both emanating from the literal use of the metaphor "Vine's daughter". Old wine is supposed to be good, so the narrator can have no complaint, but an old woman is not supposed to be good. So the same daughter is both good and bad, young and old. A few decades later, Rahib Isfahani almost duplicates Kalim's main image of young-old woman, but gives a global sense to the transaction:

*It has been a long time for me  
Yawning away in this wine house,  
By the time the toast passes to me  
Vine's daughter will have become an aged crone.*<sup>112</sup>

We now encounter Bedil who uses the same metaphor-fact but adds many new dimensions of meaning by extending the fact-level of the metaphor:

*By an excess of headstrongness  
Her temperament produces direnesses,  
Not having a husband, Vine's daughter*

<sup>107</sup> Ghalib, *Kulliyat*, p. 418.

<sup>108</sup> Talib Amuli, quoted in *Kharita-e Javahir*, p. 129.

<sup>109</sup> Talib Amuli, quoted in Mulla Qati'i Hiravi, *Majma'u'sh Shu'ara-i Jahangiri*, [circa 1615], (in the biographical notice of Talib Amuli), ed., Muhammad Salim Akhtar, Karachi, University of Karachi, 1989, p.138. Also included by Nabi Hadi in his selection from Talib Amuli in his *Mughalon ke Malikush Shu'ara*, Allahabad, Shabistan, 1978, p. 218.

<sup>110</sup> See W. L. Hanaway, "Blood and Wine: Sacrifice and Celebration in Manuchihri's Wine Poetry" in *Iran* XXVI, 1988.

<sup>111</sup> Kalim Kashani, in Shams Langrudi's selections from Kalim appended to *Gird Bad-i Shor-i Junun*, p. 154.

<sup>112</sup> Quoted in Naqsh Ali, *Bagh-e Ma'ani*, [circa 1783], (in the biographical notice of Rahib Isfahani), ed., Abid Riza Bedar, Patna, Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Library, n.d., p. 73

*Gives birth to mischiefs.*<sup>113</sup>

Apart from the metaphor-mazmun, the verse is a triumph of the art of congruity. Practically every word in the poem has more than one connection with each other. Then there's an untranslatable wordplay using *dast[gah]* ("hand") and *sar* "head". The humour is not a bonus here, it is the main objective. The affinities and the wordplay reinforce the humour. In the following she'r from Hulas Rai Rangin (d. 1776) we see the humour taken a degree further in hilarity, though the banter this time favours Vine's daughter:

*The Shaikh runs miles away  
From Vine's daughter, Look  
What a non-manly man he turned out to be.*<sup>114</sup>

Annemarie Schimmel gave to Amir Khusrau the honour of being the first poet of the Indian Style. She said:

With Amir Khusrau (d. 1325), the virtuoso in poetry and music and sweet-talking 'Parrot of India', the new style of Persian poetry opened its first buds: in his verses we find some of the complicated, even abstruse metaphors and extremely artistic technique which were later so common in the so called *sabk-i hindi*, the 'Indian Style' of Persian poetry.<sup>115</sup>

There is some truth in the general tenor of Annemarie Schimmel's observation, but it is not so much the "abstruseness" of metaphor as the metaphor-into-fact strategy that we find in Khusrau. A she'r like the following could easily have been written by Sa'ib, or Bedil:

*Your beauty, by the fire of youth  
Brings forth smoke from the lovers' hearts.*<sup>116</sup>

It is common enough to describe the lover's sigh as "smoke". It is also common enough to describe the beauty of the beloved, or the radiant face of the beloved, as "fire/fiery/flame", and so on. Khusrau uses both metaphors as belonging to the domain of fact, rather than that of the imagination. Ghalib takes the next step on that path:

*Whoever encounters her in the streets  
Says, "There goes the fire-worshippers' Lord and Master!"*<sup>117</sup>

Another example, similar in spirit though not in details, is the following she'r from Khusrau, intensely personal and almost tragic in its depth of feeling, it also has an ambiguity, all of which make it a fine instance of *sabk-i hindi* making itself felt ahead of its time:

*They say, Khusrau, what are you weeping at?  
I am the turtledove of my own spring.*<sup>118</sup>

The ambiguity is untranslatable, but it can be seen that the narrator-poet-turtledove's sorrow could be because they are alone and sui generis, or because it is the fate of the turtledove-poet to create his own world and celebrate his own spring by

<sup>113</sup> Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil, *Kulliyat*, Vol. II, ed. Akbar Behdarvand and Parvez Abbasi Dakani, Tehran, Ilham, 1376(=1997), p. 773.

<sup>114</sup> Quoted in Ali Ibrahim Khan, *Suhuf-e Ibrahim*, (in the biographical notice of Hulas Rai Rangin), ed., Abid Riza Bedar, Patna, Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Library, 1978, p. 76 [circa 1791].

<sup>115</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *A Dance of Sparks, Imagery of Fire in Ghalib's Poetry*, New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1979, p. 10.

<sup>116</sup> Amir Khusrau, *Kulliyat-e Ghazaliyat*, Vol. IV, ed., Iqbal Salahuddin, Lahore, Packages Limited, 1975, p. 230.

<sup>117</sup> Ghalib, *Kulliyat*, p. 439.

<sup>118</sup> Amir Khusrau, *Kulliyat-e Ghazaliyat*, Vol. III, p. 347.

weeping in it and for it. These cosmic considerations of man-poet's role in the universe, and questions of self-worth and the value of being are foreign to the non-Indian Style poets' temperament but fit very well with a poet like Bedil whose special predilection was for making abstract themes manifest by abstract images. But before we go to Bedil, let's hear Urfi nearly three centuries after Khusrau:

*Don't ask, In whose ear  
Do you pour your lament, Urfi?  
For I am the nightingale of the garden  
Of my own tastes and desires.<sup>119</sup>*

Khusrau's image had a degree of abstractness. Urfi has more abstraction, greater intellection, but perhaps the sense of pain and loneliness is greater in Khusrau. One achieves abstraction at some cost, though the cost seems to be worth paying. Listen now to Bedil:

*I have narrated to no one  
The story of my not speaking,  
I told it to my ear, yet speak  
I didn't.<sup>120</sup>*

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*Judge it from my instrument and don't ask me  
Of the song that I don't have; If you see  
You can hear the story that I don't have.<sup>121</sup>*

I have earlier commented upon the great value of wordplay in generating new mazmuns (*mazmun afirini*) and meanings (*ma'ni afirini*). That wordplay is also an essentially metaphorical device seems not to have been noted by critics and admirers alike of *sabk-i hindi*. Yet wordplay is a favourite device of all Persian poets. Even in the academia, for instance, Khusrau is recognized (even if somewhat grudgingly and with an air of embarrassment) as being fond of wordplay. It would therefore be interesting to study an example of wordplay from Khusrau alongside one from a poet of the *sabk-i hindi*.

As we have seen, living on without the beloved, and even eating and drinking, are distasteful and in fact undesirable activities for the lover. Yet life has to go on, and here Khusrau's protagonist justifies a drink of water:

*I never watered my heart with water  
That was to my desire,  
Each drop of water that I drank  
Without you was a sword.<sup>122</sup>*

We are familiar with the syntagmatism: water-river-sword. Now wordplay introduces a number of new things here: One sense of *ab* is "pure wine". Then, one sense of the original of my first two lines is, "I never found any satisfaction, any comfort (*ab-e khush khurdan*=to be happily content, to achieve satisfaction); and for the heart to drink water (*ab khurdan-e dil*) is for the heart gain strength and support. Khusrau says *jigar* ("liver") and not *dil* ("heart") but under the circumstances it does not matter.

Khusrau's subtleties are special to him in the sense that he is a very great poet, but *sabk-i hindi* poets had learnt from him, and from the new search for *ma'ni-e begana*

<sup>119</sup> *Divan-ii Ghazaliyat*, ed., Waliul Haq Ansari, Patna, Khuda Bakhsh Library, 2000, p. 457.

<sup>120</sup> Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil, *Kulliyat*, (Tehran edition), Vol. II, p. 431.

<sup>121</sup> Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil, *Kulliyat*, (Tehran edition), Vol. II, p. 433.

<sup>122</sup> Amir Khusrau, *Kulliyat-e Ghazaliyat*, Vol. III, p. 482.

(“theme that is alien and unfamiliar”), *ma’ni-e nazuk* (“subtle and delicate theme”) whose successful realization gave greater happiness to the poet than Id’s crescent moon. Listen to Sa’ib:

*The moment of luxury for us is to bring  
A fine and subtle theme within our grasp;  
For nothing else is the crescent moon  
That signals the Id for us  
Who think subtle and delicate thoughts.*<sup>123</sup>

Now listen to him again. Rarely will one find such serene delight and proud yet quiet celebration of creativity and invention in poetry:

*Sa’ib, one who gains the acquaintance  
Of strange and alien themes  
Withdraws himself entirely from  
Worldly acquaintances.*<sup>124</sup>

This brings us to Bindraban Khushgo (d. 1756/7) friend and disciple of Bedil:

*Without you I hold the wineglass  
In my hand; it’s like the sun  
Held in eclipse.*<sup>125</sup>

Here, *giriftan* is “to hold”, but its nominal form *girifta* is also used to describe the eclipse: *aftab-e girifta* is “the eclipsed sun”. Khushgo now adds two new metaphorical subtleties: a common metaphor for “wine” in Persian is *aftab* (“the sun”), and for a lover of wine the wineglass is like the sun anyway because it holds wine whose waves are often described as the rays of the sun. Thus it is metaphor-turned-literal-turned-metaphor that we see here.

I briefly mentioned exemplification (*tamsil*) as a potent means for creating new meanings. We also made brief mention of “poetic proof” and how Shibli believes it to be generally false, but the poet makes it come true by his assertive energy. But actually, it is the metaphoric or epistemological appropriateness (the latter based on some common observation on historical-social practice), or the invoking of some “poetically universal truth” that establishes the poem’s argument successfully. Wit and satire also play their role, especially if the “proof” is from the social world. Consider this delightful verse from Ashraf Mazhandarani, affectionately known as Sa’ida-e Ashraf (d. 1708):

*The pious ones’ hypocritical tears  
Were shed in God’s House,  
The slattern castes away bastard babies  
At the mosque.*<sup>126</sup>

From the broad and somewhat sexist satire of Saida-i Ashraf to Urfi’s dewdrop delicate gentle wooing is a whole world, but it is the same world, essentially:

*Do no stint your beauty’s radiant light  
From my heart. However much the mirror picks  
Beauty’s flowers, its harvest never diminishes.*<sup>127</sup>

<sup>123</sup> Mirza Muhammad Ali Sa’ib, *Kulliyat-i Sa’ib*, Lucknow (?), Naval Kishor Press, 1875, p. 510.

<sup>124</sup> Mirza Muhammad Ali Sa’ib, *Kulliyat-i Sa’ib*, p. 38.

<sup>125</sup> Quoted in Naqsh Ali, *Bagh-e Ma’ani*, (in the biographical notice of Bindraban Khushgo), ed., Abid Riza Bedar, Patna, Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Library, n.d., p. 60.

<sup>126</sup> Quoted in Sirajuddin Ali Khan-e Arzu, *Majma’un Nafa’is* [circa 1752], (in the biographical notice of Ashraf), mss in the Riza Library, Rampur.

Apart from the perfect exemplification, there is the subtlety of the heart-mirror congruity, because the heart is often described as a mirror. Then there is the word *khirman* (“harvest”) which suggests plenitude, ripeness, cornucopian perfection, and yet has just that hint of death and destruction which injects a slight pinch of the snake venom of irony into the wooing. (Harvests were traditionally exposed to risk by fire or flood.)

Faizi keeps Urfi’s *mazmun* even closer to the world, but omits the under text of irony. He loses one dimension of meaning, but the poem gains in intimacy of tone:

*Oh, what will your beauty lose?  
You, with a thousand different coquettish ways,  
Were you to give me a little leave to gaze.<sup>128</sup>*

Still keeping close to the human world, I’ll conclude this part with a she’r from Naziri Nishapuri (d. 1612):

*Beauty, for a little time  
Lets arrogance, impudence, and  
Waywardness have their head;  
When kings take a new domain  
They first leave it open for pillage.<sup>129</sup>*

Naziri is one the most difficult poets to translate, or even paraphrase concisely, because he has a unique ability to pack more narrative and more words in a two line she’r than seems ordinarily possible. Our Urdu poet Mir Muhammad Taqi Mir (1722-1810) shares this quality with him. In the present verse, the narrator has an apparently naïve faith that a conquest by a beloved is like a king’s conquest: kings first let their victorious soldiers sack a conquered city and then come back with doses of balm and balsam. The narrator believes that the same thing happens in the contest of love. The beloved first acts cruelly and waywardly and then settles down to the sweet business of romance. What is not articulated here is the major premise that beloveds are by definition wayward and the narrator should not have his hopes up. The *tamsil* (exemplification) is appropriate to more worlds than one.

I briefly touched upon the phenomenon of plagiarism in this literary culture, or not the actual occurrence of the phenomenon so much as its being a subject of conversation and disputation. Few people appreciate that plagiarism was never a hotly contended issue in the classical past of Arabic and Persian. It became important only when *mazmun* and *ma’ni* came to be seen separately. Some people have thought that issues of “originality”, “innovation”, “departure”, and hence in some sense “rejection” of the past were involved in the “movement” of *taza go’i* in the seventeenth century. Actually, there was no departure, far less rejection in the modern, western sense. The *istiqbal*<sup>130</sup> (going forward, welcoming) ghazals written in conscious imitation and improvement of the ghazals of earlier ustads only affirmed that poetry was a common territory made up of *mazmuns*, except that now *mazmuns* could be unfolded or unwrapped to show what inner works they could contain. Discussions or accusations of plagiarism in this culture do not affirm the western notion of originality: they reveal an

<sup>127</sup> Urfi Shirazi, *Divan-i Ghazaliyat*, ed., Waliul Haq Ansari, Patna, Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Library, 2000, p. 273.

<sup>128</sup> Faizi Fayyazi, *Divan-i Faizi Fayyazi*, Lahore, Maulvi Firozuddin and Sons, n. d., p. 89.

<sup>129</sup> Naziri Nishapuri, *Kulliyat*, Lucknow(?), Naval Kishor Press, n.d., p. 127.

<sup>130</sup> For a full discussion of *istiqbal* and what it might have entailed, see Paul E. Losensky, *Welcoming Fighani, Imitation and Poetic Individuality in the Safavid-Mughal Ghazal*, Costa Mesa, Mazda Publishers, 1998.

anxiety, an eagerness which both are functions of their search for the extended frontiers of poetry. Sa'ib said:

*Sa'ib, though fresh poetry doesn't  
Even go for dirt, all masters of poetry  
Steal themes from one another.*<sup>131</sup>

This is a piquant she'r, somewhat difficult to interpret unless one bears in mind the seventeenth century Persian literary background in India where searching for new themes and making plurivalent texts was the fashion, the need, and indeed the whole *raison d'être* for the poet. Everybody was sure that new mazmuns could be found, and everybody saw that mazmuns had a strong family resemblance. So there was always the possibility of the poet being charged for having failed in his search for a new theme or word (*talash-e mazmun-e taza; talash-e lafz-e taza*), or be even directly accused of stealing. It was not a search for originality in our sense, or of even individuality in any special sense that caused the anxiety. It was more like a treasure hunt, where even the slightest lapse from concentration or the tiniest aberration in finding the right word-clue could destroy the whole effort. Or it was like the hunt for a rare and elusive animal whose traces could be obliterated if the light of the imagination went off or even wavered for a nanosecond. Worse still, the hunter could lose the quarry even after running it down:

*All the time it tends  
To vault away from the nook of the mind,  
A new theme is a gazelle that needs  
Capturing.*<sup>132</sup>

Where I have “capturing” Ghani has *bastan* (“to bind, to tie, to confine”). But *bastan* in a literary context means “to depict, to use in a text”, and in other contexts it also means “to copulate, to cross-fertilize”, (*ghazal* or gazelle is a common metaphor for the beloved). Other congruities are perhaps obvious.

As I have suggested above, plagiarism/intertextuality was not unknown in classical Arabic literary thought. Jurjani's denial was not to the fact, but to the blame that was occasionally seen attaching to it. Later, Sa'duddin Taftazani (1322-1390) in his encyclopaedic *Mutavval* practically forbade the use of the word *saraqah* (“theft, plagiarism”) for a literary text unless the fact of borrowing or taking could be demonstrated to have taken place. Rather, the term *tavarud* (“occurring at the same time”) should be used. Commenting on this, Azad Bilgrami says :

Were one to look with the eye of diligence, there won't be found a poet who could be said to be free of *tavarud*. For the store of all information is particular to God's knowledge [of things], great are His tasks. The theme-depicter's pen shoots an arrow in the dark. What does the pen know if the prey [that its arrow shot] was already bound in wing and feather, or if it was flying free.<sup>133</sup>

But Azad Bilgrami was writing in 1752, a century and more after the poets were reeling with the intoxication of vast, newfound spaces. In fact, the more inventive the poet, the more was he suspected of skulduggery. Sialkoti Mal Varasta (1698/1703-1766) with cruel wit consigned Muhammad Quli Salim to perpetual perdition:

<sup>131</sup> Mirza Muhammad Ali Sa'ib, *Kalam-i Sa'ib*, Vol. I, eds., S. M. Yunus Jafari and Sahibzada Shaukat Ali Khan, Tonk, Arabic and Persian Research Institute, 1982, p. 226.

<sup>132</sup> Ghani Kashmiri, *Divan*, p. 132.

<sup>133</sup> Ghulam Ali Azad Bilgrami, *Sarv-i Azad, being the second fascicle of Ma'asir'ul Kiram* [1752], Hyderabad, Kutub Khana-e Asifiya, 1913, p. 69.

*The only text  
That you didn't break into  
Is the Qur'an; the only construct  
That you didn't take away is the Ka'ba.*<sup>134</sup>

The wordplays and the congruities are extremely telling in the original but untranslatable in English. I have given the bare membrane, but I hope some of the scorn and gleeful derision comes through. Ironically enough, Salim himself complained of being often plagiarized and even named the great Sa'ib as his chief culprit<sup>135</sup>.

#### 4.

When everybody is looking for new themes and is trying to generally increase the word-meaning ratio, poems will tend to feel unfamiliar, even difficult, inviting more than usual application of mind before they can be understood. Sa'ib said:

*Sa'ib, it's not easy  
To find a complex theme;  
On this turning and twisting road  
The navigator himself is of the turns and twists.*<sup>136</sup>

If the poet's own temperament both guides and sends astray, the locus of meaning has to be carefully searched out and scrutinized. Poems are not things to be trifled with. They require study and contemplation.

*A person who has no understanding,  
Were he to glue his eye to a book  
He wouldn't still see meaning's visage  
Even in his dreams. The brainless ones do not  
Reflect on poems: the bubble  
Has no capability to dive into the ocean.*<sup>137</sup>

The treasure hunt for new themes and meanings had some other consequences which were of greater moment than the poet's demand for his poems to be regarded as sites for reflection, and not just artefacts of pleasure. With the freedom of *mazmuns* came a celebration of ambiguity, of open-endedness in the composition. Poets wanted now to suggest more and say less. Yet a function of this surge of semantic exuberance and richness of subtext was also a sense of inadequacy of language, almost a failure of communication. And finally, a celebration of silence as the communication that is most pregnant with meaning. These developments are generally associated with Bedil, but can in fact be seen in both Faizi and Urfi, the first great poets of *sabk-i hindi*.

Needless to say, the last two phenomena are generally associated with Modernism and are in any case entirely foreign to Arabic-Persian and Sanskrit, the two literary traditions which went into the shaping of *sabk-i hindi*. Perhaps the Indian mind, which revels in abstraction, led our poets into temptation. They needed to explore the limits of language and perhaps they ultimately found its limits to be too narrow for their purposes. How can meaning be known when the maker of the meaning is unable to put himself into his painting, Sa'ib asked. For one can know only those whom we know, or can know on a conceptual level:

<sup>134</sup> Quoted in *Sarv-i Azad*, (in the critical and biographical notice of Muhammad Quli Salim), p. 67.

<sup>135</sup> *Sarv-i Azad*, pp. 67-8.

<sup>136</sup> *Kalam-i Sa'ib*, Vol. I, p. 247.

<sup>137</sup> Ghani Kashmiri, *Divan-e Ghani*, p. 227.

*The painting, in silent wonder  
Knows nothing of the painter's state  
Don't ask the figure painted on the cloth  
To reveal the meanings that are hidden.*<sup>138</sup>

\*\*\*

*If your imagination desires and dares to practice  
Freedom, then you must write open-ended themes  
Like the blossom's fragrance on the morning breeze.*<sup>139</sup>

The open-ended theme, stated with energy and power is to be contrasted against the themes and meanings that refuse to come out in the open. Bedil has three kinds of celebrations: he challenges his people to understand his meanings, for all the old meanings have now lost their resonance; then he says that you'll understand me only when you don't understand. And finally, he extols silence as the most perfect text:

*A whole people gained understanding of the manner  
Of Names and Attributes, apprehended whole assemblies  
Of Unity and Abundance. All those words are become  
Over-used and ancient.  
It's my meanings now that should be understood.*

\*\*\*

*An intellect that knew black from white,  
Don't believe that it knew God's mystery  
As it needed to be known. I spoke a word  
But only after I attained perfection:  
You will comprehend when you don't comprehend.*<sup>140</sup>

Zahuri Tarshizi (d. 1616/17) is nowhere as challengingly bold as Bedil, few poets could be, but even in his love-themes Zahuri found ways of introducing ideas about language that seem to anticipate Bedil:

*You do not weigh and consider coquetry  
In the true measure, and you are no connoisseur  
Of words. Were it so, you would know that indifference too  
Is glance, silence too is speech.*<sup>141</sup>

Nasir Ali Sarhindi creates a moralizing mazmun alongside the mazmun of silence:

*The 'anqa's reputation,  
By virtue of his tracelessness, creates for him  
Numerous camel-files of fame;  
Silence, when it goes beyond all bounds  
Has the clamour of caravan-bells.*<sup>142</sup>

<sup>138</sup> Sa'ib, *Kulliyat*, Naval Kishor, p. 510.

<sup>139</sup> Bedil, *Chahar Unsur*, p. 189.

<sup>140</sup> Bedil, *Ruba'iyat*, being part of Vol. II of *Kulliyat-i Bedil*, Kabul, Dapohini Vizarat va Dar'ut Talif-i Riyasat, 1342(=1963), pp. 177, 206.

<sup>141</sup> Quoted in *Sham'-e Anjman*, (critical and biographical notice of Zahuri), p. 285.

<sup>142</sup> Quoted in Azad Bilgrami, *Khizana-e 'Amira* [1757-8], (biographical and critical notice of Nasir Ali Sarhindi), Kanpur, Nawal Kishor Press, 1871, p. 332.

From Zahuri and Nasir Ali to the following ruba'i is a large step, but Bedil takes it cheerfully. It is to be doubted if any great poet of any tradition has celebrated silence so much and so well as Bedil, who was also a great conversationalist and raconteur:

*The nature of madness is not a static reality,  
The apparent may fly ever so high, but it can never be  
The Unapparent. Even if the two worlds talked away  
Until they turned to blood, the speech that attains  
The level of silence would be impossible.<sup>143</sup>*

There can be little doubt that Bedil's glorification of the enigmatic, his valorisation of silence over speech, and his demand that his meanings be heard to the exclusion of all others', all of these have some Sufistic, or even general, non-Islamic mystical dimension. But I am here concerned with the literary statement that such pronouncements make. Communication and comprehension are not the same; silence has a speech of its own, purer and closer to Truth, language often lets the poet down; the poet's speech is not everyday speech, it needs to be interpreted; the speech of philistines comes nowhere near the poet's speech. These propositions are an important part of the poetics of *sabk-i hindi*, and are some of the chief reasons why this poetry sounds so unfamiliar to an ordinary reader of Iranian-Persian poetry. Quite by chance, I once read Hafiz regularly for a number of days. Returning then to Ghalib to prepare for a conference paper, I felt disoriented, as if I was reading a different language.

The mention of Ghalib brings me to the point that while it is Bedil and Ghalib who most have borne the opprobrium of Iran-oriented critics, the flashes of literary theory that I just noted above can be discerned even as early as in Fiazi and Urfi, the first truly great poets of *sabk-i hindi*. It is remarkable that premodern literary culture everywhere stood on the assumption that poetic competence meant the capability to give words to any thought, any theme, however complex. Yet we have Indian poets of early sixteenth century anticipating and experiencing dilemmas of language and silence that we regard as the hallmark of twentieth century modernism.

*Faizi, none is able to get to the depth  
Of your word of love,  
Sealed and secret, your subtle points  
Are a riddle with a difference.*

\*\*\*

*Footsteps are strangers  
On the road that I walk,  
The breath is a stranger  
From where I speak.<sup>144</sup>*

<sup>143</sup> Bedil, *Chahar Unsur*, p. 246.

<sup>144</sup> Faizi Fayyazi, *Divan*, p. 25. The ghazal, of which this is the opening verse, also appears (with two she'rs missing and a few changes including of course the poet's name in the last she'r reading as "Urfi" instead of "Faizi") in Waliul Haq Ansari's Khuda Bakhsh Library edition of Urfi's ghazals (*Divan-e Ghazaliyat*, p. 257). This is obviously an incorrect attribution and is based, as the editor himself informs us, on just one mss of Urfi's ghazals. The ghazal doesn't appear in the Naval Kishor Press edition of Urfi's ghazals (*Divan-e Urfi Shirazi*, Kanpur, Naval Kishor Press, 1915). Nabi Hadi (p. 90) attributes the she'r to Faizi but gives no source. Misattributions were not uncommon in the culture. Another example of this is discussed below with reference to Khusrau.

\*\*\*

*How can pen and paper withstand  
The fire of my heart?  
I have hay and straw in my hands  
And the fire is a blaze.*<sup>145</sup>

Among the poets of *sabk-i hindi*, Urfi and Bedil have been mythologized most, though for different reasons. Urfi has been seen as the “superior other” of Faizi: consumptive, resolute and arrogant, dying young<sup>146</sup> in remote Akbarabad far away from his loved home in Shiraz, a spiritual and emotional exile who knew by dint of the native’s intuitive genius all those subtleties of Persian language and poetry that Faizi had laboured so hard but failed to acquire. Ghalib, like Shibli, an unashamed advocate of Iran against India, loved to posit Faizi against Urfi. Ghalib once famously said that as far as Persian language is concerned, none among the Indians except Amir Khusrau is authoritative, and “even Mian Faizi slips up on occasion.”<sup>147</sup> On the contrary, Urfi was for Ghalib “the obeyed one; we are his obeyers and followers.” Further, Urfi’s casual observations even had the force and authority of rules.<sup>148</sup> Yet reading Urfi’s poetry one hardly finds any disdain for India. What one is struck by is Urfi’s strong sense of the poet’s experience as the lonely, creating self. He is the only poet I know who speaks of the pain of being a poet:

*My ill repute took the whole world  
But I am happy; for the world  
Is a foreign country,  
No one here is from my people.*<sup>149</sup>

\*\*\*

*It is quite proper for Urfi to follow Hafiz  
For he lacerates his heart and knows  
The pain of being a poet.*

\*\*\*

*Well, what place can there be for Urfi’s pen  
When the pen of even Hafiz cannot draw  
Images like the ones made by  
My theme-portraying pen?*<sup>150</sup>

These two she’rs are quintessential *sabk-i hindi*, stating as they do the fundamental positions of poets of that style: the literary mode of a poet’s existence, the travails that creativity imposes upon the poet, the poet’s search for new themes, his role as painter-creator, and the paradoxes of his art: he is the creator, yet as often as not, his medium seems to fail him.

*There’s not one word that silence*

<sup>145</sup> Faizi Fayyazi, *Divan*, p. 29.

<sup>146</sup> Urfi died at the age of thirty-six. Most of us tend to forget that Faizi too didn’t live to see fifty. He died of asthma, aged forty-eight.

<sup>147</sup> See Ghalib’s letter dated May 14, 1865, to Har Gopal Tafta in Khaliq Anjum, ed., *Ghalib ke Khutut*, Vol. I, New Delhi, Ghalib Institute, 1984, p. 352. “Mian” means “master” among other things. Here Ghalib has used it derisively.

<sup>148</sup> Letter to Ahmad Ali Rampuri (undated) in *Ghalib ke Khutut*, Vol. IV, p. 1543.

<sup>149</sup> Urfi Shirazi, *Divan*, p. 242.

<sup>150</sup> Urfi Shirazi, *Divan*, pp. 306, 372.

*Does not excel, there's no knowledge  
That's not excelled by forgetting.*

\*\*\*

*My tongue left behind by my subtle thoughts,  
My secret meanings remain,  
The word's amplitude is exhausted  
And yet my word remains unsaid.*

\*\*\*

*Don't be in denial  
When you don't see any visible emblem,  
For the enigmatic ones put away  
The pen and tablet, and write.<sup>151</sup>*

I have commented on Bedil's mazmuns of silence, and failure of communication. When Bedil sees silence as the greatest form of communication, he seems to be both denying and affirming the word as man's supreme power and achievement. Yet poets of *sabk-i hindi* are conscious not only of the pain and anguish that creativity brings, they also declare and affirm the need for the reader to devise systems of interpretation which can look behind the words. Just as Ghani said that mere application of labour wasn't enough to fathom the depths of poetry (*the bubble has no capability to dive into the ocean*), so also Ghalib said that his meanings were not expressed in the words, his meanings needed to be mined like precious stones from a quarry:

*He doesn't have poetry that could be  
Inscribed on paper. Go away,  
This Master has gems that need to be mined.<sup>152</sup>*

It is perhaps not without significance that this she'r occurs just before the "stranger in the city" she'r which I have made the epigraph of this text. Just as Urfi and Faizi seem to be anticipating Bedil on the problem of silence and communication, Ghalib seems to be confirming them by citing his own experience:

*Writing is not acceptable to my poems  
They are full of lightness and grace;  
No dust arises as my charger  
Gallops on.<sup>153</sup>*

Now consider these she'rs from Bedil who seems to have reserved his greatest and profoundest creative moments for the worship of silence and failure:

*Oh, what a multitude of meanings  
Discouraged by unintimate, alien language  
Remained hidden, for all their bold beauty,  
Behind the secret veils of mystery<sup>154</sup>.*

\*\*\*

*A text, even if it is entirely full of meaning,  
Can be edited or added to: Silence*

<sup>151</sup> Urfi Shirazi, *Divan*, pp. 162, 214, 331.

<sup>152</sup> Ghalib, *Kulliyat*, p. 442.

<sup>153</sup> Ghalib, *Kulliyat*, p. 359.

<sup>154</sup> Bedil, *Chahar Unsur*, p. 34.

*Is a text from which one cannot pick and choose*<sup>155</sup>.

\*\*\*

*Were the silence-theme to blossom,  
The floret with unopened lips  
Could become the bulbul's teacher*<sup>156</sup>.

The mazmun of failure of communication often finds expression through the metaphor of travelling yet not arriving, and also through the metaphor-image of the unpolished mirror which has been employed in amazingly diverse and creative ways by all poets of *sabk-i hindi*.

*I travelled: by flying or by the labour  
Of stumbles and leaps,  
I travelled everywhere until I  
Arrived at non-arriving.*<sup>157</sup>

Ghalib was able to combine the two ideas to create an hourglass like effect where one theme reflects the other:

*What can I say about the length  
Of the journey of love's desire?  
On this road, sound fell off  
Like dust from my caravan-bell.*<sup>158</sup>

The felicities of congruity, wordplay and metaphor are all but untranslatable in these poems. You'll have to accept me at my word that they are there. That most conventional reading has not yielded the delight and meaningfulness that these verses so abundantly possess is only an indicator of our own inadequate theories of reading. For example, in the "silence-theme" she'r above, I translate *gul kardan* as "to blossom." The literal sense of this idiom is "to do or make [a] flower". Metaphorically, it means, "to become apparent." My translation doesn't fully catch any of the multiple meanings in "apparent", but makes a compromise in favour of congruity and wordplay by saying "blossom", thus suggesting the *gul* ("rose") in the original. Now the sprig or the bud is traditionally seen as silent, for its petals ("lips") are closed, while the bulbul is the lover of the rose(bud) and his chief quality is eloquent singing (which subsumes lamentation, complaint, weeping, so forth). So the traditionally silent one becomes the master of the vocal one here. But the rose is also traditionally seen as "deaf" (because it does not "hear" or respond to, or answer, the bulbul's lamentation and complaints). The rose's petals are supposed to resemble ears, so it has ears, but is deaf, and yet it will instruct the bulbul in the art of eloquence, perhaps because it is deaf, because the instruction actually is in the theme of silence, and for a deaf person the whole world is silence. Again, the original has *ta'lim-e bulbul kunad* which I translate as "become the bulbul's teacher", but there's no way for me to suggest that *ta'lim* ("education; imparting instruction") is also the term used by the dancing girls for formal music lessons. Then the words *gul* ("flower"), *lab* ("lip[s]"), *ghuncha* ("bud, sprig"), *ta'lim* ("musical instruction"), and *bulbul* ("bulbul, the nightingale") all have affinities with each other. None of the affinities, if reduced, would affect the basic mazmun, but they enhance the delight and

<sup>155</sup> Bedil, *Nikat-e Bedil*, being part of Vol. IV of *Kulliyat-i Bedil*, Kabul, Dapohini Vizarat va Dar'ut Talif-i Riyasat, 1342-1343(=1963-1964), p. 251.

<sup>156</sup> Bedil, *Kulliyat*, (Tehran edition), Vol. I, p. 805.

<sup>157</sup> Bedil, *Kulliyat*, (Tehran edition), Vol. II, p. 589.

<sup>158</sup> Ghalib, *Kulliyat*, p. 367.

the meaning by their presence. All this within the space of nine words and in a metre which is shorter than most popular Persian metres.

Similarly Ghalib, in his “caravan-bell” she’r asks in the original, “Oh, what do you ask of the length of the journey...?”. This kind of interrogative is one the great glories of Persian and Urdu but has no equal, not even a remote one, in English. But the point is clear: the narrator can’t really answer the question about the journey’s toils because the voice has fallen off even from the most vocal and continuously talking member of his caravan: the caravan-bell. If the bell is voiceless, the caravaner also is bound to be speechless or voiceless. But more importantly, the bell keeps tolling when the caravan is on the move. So if the bell is silent, the caravan must not be on the move. It must be asleep, or dead. Now the congruities: *tul* (“length”), *safar* (“journey”), *rah* (“road”), *gard* (“dust”), *firu rekht* (“fell off”), *jaras* (“caravan-bell”). All the words are from the domain of journeying.

I will conclude this discussion of themes of silence, communication, and failure to realize one’s full expressive potential by quoting first Naziri and then Bedil:

*My quality of sight and reflection  
Remained buried under a layer of rust,  
He who fashioned my mirror, alas  
Left it unburnished.*<sup>159</sup>

\*\*\*

*Oh, what a multitude of mirrors  
Tormented by the pain of beauty’s indifference  
Turned to ashes under the rust and did not  
Realize their essential luminance.*<sup>160</sup>

The translation is feeble, but the main drift is clear. The poem recalls and will bear comparison with the she’r about the alienness and unintimateness of language. I translate *jauhar*, a term in philosophy, physics and religion, as “essential luminance” because in the context of a (metallic) mirror it signifies the circular or wavy marks that can be seen on highly tempered and burnished steel. “Did not realize” is *paida na kard* which is something like “did not make apparent, did not acquire or become the possessor of, did not develop or generate, etc.” But the special tragic energy of the poem comes from the fact of beauty’s indifference to the mirror: Was beauty’s indifference a deliberate act of neglect, or was it just the way things were in the mirror’s universe, or was beauty not percipient enough to discern the mirror’s potential? And what is the role of “torment” (*dard*) in this play of desire and failure? What if the mirror were indifferent to beauty’s indifference? Could it then realize its potential still? And what do we learn about the creative self from this verse? Is the poet’s heart (the mirror) just the recipient of mazmuns (beauty looking at itself in the mirror) and does not have a will of its own? How are poems made, then? What implications do the bitter facts of failure of the imagination, being cheated by language, or being made to wait for inspiration that never comes have for the poet and for ordinary human beings?

There is no doubt that these questions have a strong lapsarian sense. Man has fallen away from a better state and language, man’s most potent tool in a hostile world, never tires of reminding him of this fall and its own resultant failure. Poets over three centuries from Faizi and Urfi to Ghalib do not seem to tire of telling us about man’s

<sup>159</sup> Naziri, *Kulliyat*, p. 204.

<sup>160</sup> Bedil, *Nikat*, p. 116.

unique and lonely station in the universe and the inadequacy of his language. Ironically enough, but quite properly too, they do so in some of the most hauntingly beautiful words that man ever put together. Note the bitter taste of irony in the following verses from Faizi:

*Don't seek from the heavens the mysteries  
Of beginningless eternity: the heavens are far,  
Day and night there  
Are but curtains strung by darkness and light.*

*Don't harbour the ambition of putting foot on the heights  
For that station is at a great altitude;  
Don't speak of coming close to him, for the Sovereign  
Is jealous of all others.<sup>161</sup>*

This is not the kind of poetry that can appeal to academics who want everything straight and uncomplicated, uncontaminated by metaphor or mystery. Hasan Husaini in his delightful little book on Bedil and the modern Iranian poet Sohrab Sipihrī, cites Ali Dashti on the following *she'r* of Kalim Kashani's to the effect that it is devoid of meaning:

*You came for a stroll in the garden, and the rose  
Put its hands to its face out of modesty and shame  
And became a floret again.*

Hasan Husaini quotes Ali Dashti as follows:

Although Kalim has the best taste among poets of *sabk-i hindi*, and is superior to most of them in regard to artistry in composition, even he occasionally becomes aberrant due to hyperbole and desire for novelty. For example, the above-quoted verse will be eternally meaningless because the rose having bloomed once can never go back to the state of being a bud.

Husaini tartly comments that Ali Dashti,

Does not know, or doesn't want to know that rules of poetry are different from rules of botany.... Surely this generation of literary people can never untie the knots for our younger generation of poets and would never lead this generation to new destinations.<sup>162</sup>

Husaini made a strong reply based on the general theory of poetry as metaphorical statement but didn't elaborate it. What Kalim is doing here is *husn-e ta'lil* ("excellence in attributing the cause") where the poet uses a metaphor as a true fact of the external world and employs the metaphor to explain another fact of the external world. The metaphor is thus a true fact on one level, and a fiction on another level.

Let me now conclude this discussion with Bedil:

*What was it that plucked at the strings of your heart  
That you came here to divert yourself among such as me, and us?  
You are the springtime of another world, how is it that you  
Are here, in this garden?*

*It wasn't anyone's lips that played upon a flute  
It wasn't anyone's caged breath knocking at the confining breast,*

<sup>161</sup> Faizi, *Divan*, p. 29.

<sup>162</sup> Hasan Husaini, *Bedil, Sipihrī, va Sabk-i hindi*, Tehran, Sarosh, 1368 (=1989), p. 86.

*Nullity hurled the mirror against stone, so you became able to speak.*

*What happened to your robe of skiey blue silk? Who ripped away  
That seraphic cloak so that you came to this transient grief house  
Of perdition looking for a yard or two of shroud?*<sup>163</sup>

It is impossible to determine one tone for these verses. The narrator seems to credit man with a will of his own—a will to self-destruct, or at least self-devalue. Or perhaps by apparently blaming man, the narrator only emphasizes that the real blame lies elsewhere. Alternatively, it is neither man nor fate that is to blame, it is just the way the dice are cast in a universe that is essentially inimical to man. A somewhat tragic-ironic voice also can be heard in the she’rs when they are read together (in the actual ghazal the she’rs are number 1, 6, and 8). Read individually, as they should, they evoke different responses. The opening verse, for instance, can be read as a love poem addressed to the beloved; the second verse seems more pertinent to a statement about language (all things are as if held captive in nullity (*‘adam*), which is like a mirror, because the figures in it are both real and unreal). When that mirror broke itself, speech was released. So man obtained the power of speech at great cost, he had to leave the security and duality of the mirror to become bound to speech, and thus to earth. The last she’r is both mocking and mournful. Loss and gain ultimately seem to have lost their commonplace meaning too, for it’s by wearing the shroud that the subject can perhaps go back to the state of wearing the skiey blue silk seraphic robe.

Place this last she’r of Bedil’s alongside the following from Urfi:

*He espied a garden, and pleasant air  
And went into flight toward it;  
The poor little pheasant didn’t know  
That there is a falcon there.*<sup>164</sup>

The mazmun is very similar, but Urfi’s tone is slightly ironical, if detached. My translation fails to bring out the laconic power of the last two words of the she’r, for the text just says, “there is a falcon” and doesn’t specify time or place. The falcon (*shahbaz*) exists timelessly, not tied to any locale. Bedil, on the contrary, is passionate, angry, sarcastic, mysterious.

## 5.

The Indian Style poets have a reputation for reckless, irresponsible use of language and for their inability to adhere to the standard Iranian register of Persian, the implication being that they were non-native (and therefore incompetent) speakers of the language and that even the native-speaker poets had their language “corrupted” by their consorting with non-native speakers. Bedil, whose imagery is often highly abstract and whose word-compounds often evince a creativity and unconventionality that is rare among other poets except maybe Nasir Ali Sarhindi (d. 1696) and Ghalib, has come in for special disapproval among both Iranians and Indians. In fact, it can be said that most of the criticism of the Indian Style poets’ use of Persian emanates from Bedil’s (dis)reputation as an undisciplined writer. Husain Ahi blames Bedil for having Persian only as his second language acquired in neither Iran nor Afghanistan. Ahi recognizes the Afghani register of Persian as legitimate and even occasionally superior to the Iranian

<sup>163</sup> Bedil, *Kulliyat*, (Tehran edition), Vol. II, p. 856.

<sup>164</sup> Urfi, *Divan*, p. 250.

one, but alleges that since Bedil was born and brought up in India and was never in Afghanistan, “basically, Bedil’s language is different from the one current in Afghanistan.” Further, since Bedil according to Ahi did not have access to the native speaker’s natural competence in the language, “part of Bedil’s vocabulary is inexpressive and unsuccessful.”<sup>165</sup>

Now whether there is a standard Iranian (or even Shirazi or Isfahani) register is a moot question. In the natural course of things, there can only be a notional rather than actual register against which all other uses are testable. But this is not the occasion for me to go into that debate. I’ll only notice in passing that according to Khusrau, the Persian spoken in India and Transoxiana was superior to all other registers. “God, the Opener of all doors, has opened the door of language and poetry upon us and our Persian is the [pristine] Dari Persian”, and the Persian of India is the same “throughout these four thousand and odd *farsangs* in the written as well as the spoken mode.”<sup>166</sup> Nearly five centuries later, Sirajuddin Ali Khan-e Arzu held that so far as Persian was concerned the Persian spoken in the *urdu* (“royal city”) was normative for all places. He also explained the term “Dari” (used by Khusrau) to mean the Persian language which is spoken in the royal city or the *urdu*. He doesn’t make his rule specific to Delhi, but he must have had Delhi in the back of his mind.<sup>167</sup> More importantly, Khan-e Arzu held that non-native speakers also could acquire the competence and authority to effect creative distortion in the standard register of a language.<sup>168</sup>

There is an anecdote about Faizi and Urfi to the effect that once Urfi boasted of his native speaker’s privileged position before Faizi and said, “I have learnt my Persian on the knees of my mother and grandmother.” Faizi replied, “Okay, but we have learnt our Persian from the pages of masters like Khaqani, Anvari, and others.” Urfi retorted, “But those venerables too learnt their Persian on the knees of *their* mothers and grandmothers.” Traditionally, this has been seen as a crushing reply, establishing forever the privilege of the native speaker over the non-native speaker.<sup>169</sup> Khan-e Arzu, on the contrary, makes here a fine point in regard to the literary against the spoken idiom of a language:

One of the learned men of India told one of the poets from Iran, “Learned Sir, you have learnt Persian from the old ladies of your house, but we learnt it from your masters of the standard lexicon like Khaqani and Anvari.” From this, the above said Indian meant these very compounds that occur [in a literary text] on different occasions through a multitude of paths and ways. The common people have no awareness of their mysteries. Thus those who are trained and educated by [the

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<sup>165</sup> See Introduction by Husain Ahi in *Divan-i Maulana Bedil Dihlavi*, ed., Khal Muhammad Khasta and Khalil Khalili, Tehran, Furoghi, 1371 (=1992), p. 14. Ahi goes on to say that it is absurd and ridiculous to compare Bedil with Sa’ib for the latter ranks so high in Persian literature and language that very few poets can be compared to him. It is noteworthy that Sa’ib himself is a major Indian Style poet and is in fact the only poet of that style who has lately received sympathetic attention from Iranian critics.

<sup>166</sup> Khusrau, *Dibacha-i Ghurra’t ul Kamal*, pp. 28-29. A *farsang* is roughly three miles.

<sup>167</sup> Sirajuddin Ali Khan-e Arzu, *Musmir* [1747-52], ed. Raihana Khatun, Karachi, University of Karachi Institute of Central and West Asian Studies, 1991, p. 13. I am grateful to C. M. Naim for making this text available to me.

<sup>168</sup> *Musmir*, pp. 34-39.

<sup>169</sup> Ghalib clearly believed this to be the case. See his undated letter (perhaps 1867) to Mirza Rahim Beg, in Khaliq Anjum, ed., *Ghalib ke Khutut*, Vol. IV, New Delhi, Ghalib Institute, 1993, p. 1476. (Ghalib claimed the native speaker’s privilege for himself too, on extremely tenuous grounds.)

intellectual] elites are better than those who are trained and educated by the common people.<sup>170</sup>

This says pretty much the most important thing that needs to be said in this context about the acquisition of literary language. Yet I know of no study which attempts to understand the theory and practice of language by poets of the Indian Style. For instance, Muhammad Taqi Bahar said that these poets did not use unusual and exotic words, never employed archaic expressions and yet they have an abundance of new expressions that had not existed before. Apart from the obvious contradictions, what must strike the reader here is these poets' avoidance of archaisms and their predilection for new words, maybe even neologisms. The phrase *lafz-e pakiza* ("the bright/sophisticated/beautiful word") and occasionally *ma'ni-e pakiza* frequently occur in the poetry of *sabk-i hindi* in contexts where the merit of words in poetry happens to be the question.

The term *lafz-e pakiza* seems to have the force of theory, but I have seen no discussion of it in contemporary texts, or even dictionaries. Muhammad Taqi Bahar doesn't apparently give any attention to the term. Yet it is clear that poets of the Indian Style placed some store by it. Sa'ib has used the phrase with his wonted elegance:

*Although subtle themes can fly without the aid of wings  
The lafz-e pakiza becomes wings and feathers for the theme.*<sup>171</sup>

That is to say, the *lafz-e pakiza* is an additional source of energy. Ghani Kashmiri's pupil Muslim Kashmiri makes a similar, or perhaps even more fundamental point in his Preface to Ghani's Divan. He has a ruba'i there of which the second she'r is:

*Themes are like orphans by your side,  
You need words to rear and bring up the themes.*<sup>172</sup>

As I said above, there is no discussion of the term, or phrase, *lafz-e pakiza* in the traditional texts, or even dictionaries. Tek Chand Bahar gives two glosses on *pakiza*; one of them is relevant to literary theory. According to Bahar, *pakiza* may have been formed by joining *pak* and *zah*, giving the sense of "a thing which is born of or produced by purity or chastity, without pollution or contamination." This sense would therefore suggest that a *pakiza* word should be grammatically correct, but without the taint of common usage. Thus it would be the opposite of *mubtazal* ("frequently used").<sup>173</sup> Ali Akbar Dehkhoda in his *Lughat Nama* gives quotes supporting the usages *sukhanha'i pakiza* and *she're* [a she'r, one she'r] *pakiza*. The definitions that Dehkhoda gives for *pakiza* include "sophisticated, free from defect, beautiful, pure, chaste" For the word *pak* Dehkhoda has also the definition *raushan* ("bright") which is at least marginally relevant for us, because we also see frequent mention of *ma'ni-e raushan* ("brilliant theme) in the poetry of *sabk-i hindi*. Here is Shaukat Bukhari using the phrase almost like a term in literary theory:

*It's not an easy task to depict a brilliant theme,  
My prose turns into poetry the same way  
As water turns into pearl.*<sup>174</sup>

The point is that it is only the raindrops that are precipitated in the month of Naisan, and of those too only some can become pearls if they are swallowed by the mother-of-pearl at the right moment. So for the poet's amorphous ideas, [that is, his

<sup>170</sup> *Musmir*, p. 33.

<sup>171</sup> Sa'ib, *Divan*, (Tonk edition), p. 279.

<sup>172</sup> Ghani, *Divan*, p. 54.

<sup>173</sup> Tek Chand Bahar, *Bahar-e Ajam*, Vol. I, p. 225.

<sup>174</sup> Quoted by Kishan Chand Ikhlas in *Hamesha Bahar*, p. 2.

prose], (=fluid, shapeless and of less value, like a drop of water) to become poetry (=hard, well-formed, bright and of much greater value) is a process that depends on many factors over which the poetic temperament can have no control. Ghani improves upon the image of pearl-water and in the process makes it clear that he is making a statement in literary theory:

*Ghani, a brilliant theme is water,  
When set well in the poem,  
It is a pearl.<sup>175</sup>*

Ghani again uses the verb *bastan* whose meaning in the context of mazmun and poem we have discussed elsewhere above. I translate *basta shavad* as “set well”, suggesting a different but quite relevant image. Of course the pearl’s brightness is also *ab* (“water”), and this aspect of the mazmun remains untranslated here, like much else. But the general flow of the meaning is, I hope, clear.

It is difficult to say if the *lafz-e pakiza* is something like Flaubert’s *mot juste*, but it’s not necessary to go into this matter at present except to say that the Indian Style poets’ constant concern with nuanced language gives the lie to their reputation for being verbal spendthrifts. If nothing else, the variety of epithets used by them and by the tazkira writers and critics about the quality of the words used in the poems should indicate to us that the use of words in poetry was indeed a serious matter for them. Another indicator of the value this literary culture placed upon words is the fact that beginning with *Mu’iyid’ul Fuzala* (1519) of Maulvi Muhammad Lad, and ending with Muhammad Padshah’s *Farhang-e Anandraj* (1888-9), some of Persian’s greatest and most authoritative dictionaries were composed during the heyday of the Indian Style poetry. A general, bird’s eye view of the poetry would suggest that the following qualities in words seem to have been valued above others:

1. New or unusual combinations and compounds (*tarakib*). These are the glory of the Indian Style but unfortunately quite impossible to represent in English. Appreciation of the newness or excellence of the compounds can only come from adequate exposure to the poetry anyway, so I’ll pass on to the next quality, particularly because it is generally a function of the first.
2. The compounds and combinations (*tarakib*) become more and more abstract (that is, based on abstract images or metaphors) with the passage of time. This seems to have annoyed Shibli and also the Iranians, but is in fact the high water mark of the Indian Style. Abstraction begins faintly with Urfi (d. 1590/92), becomes more discernible two or three decades later in Naziri (d. 1612) and Zahuri (d. 1616/7) who are almost exact contemporaries. It gains greater prominence in Jalal Asir (d. 1630) and with Sa’ib (d. 1669) it becomes the dominant mode. Nasir Ali Sarhindi (d. 1696), Shaukat Bukhari (d. 1695/99), Bedil (1644-1720), and finally Ghalib (1797-1869) provide the apogee (or the nadir, depending on who is reading them) of this manner. This list is by no means complete, I give only the most prominent names. It must also be noted that among the great names, Talib Amuli (d. 1626), Kalim Kashani (d. 1651), and Ghani Kashmiri (d. 1666) are the least inclined toward abstraction.
3. Archaic or arcane words are rarely used, if at all. But there is general predilection for (a) using polysemic words, and using them in such a way that all, or most meanings are germane, and (b) using familiar, commonplace words in their less

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<sup>175</sup> Ghani, *Divan*, p. 99.

- familiar sense. This last quality works particularly against Nasir Ali, Bedil, Ghalib, and others whose language use seems slipshod because the familiar sense of a word or expression used by them doesn't apply in the context, and the reader often misses out on the fact that there is a less familiar but apposite meaning to the word in question.
4. Although Ghazal is the genre where the Indian Style found its finest expression, it is by no means the case that this style is not apparent in other genres. The major genres of Qasida and Masnavi, and the minor but extremely popular genres of Ruba'i and personal Elegy all show the same effects, especially among the leading poets of the style. In other words, qualities and characteristics of language use are common through all the genres, given the internal and external structure differences that mark one genre from the other.

I'll cite a few translatable example of abstract imagery and hope that I can convey some of the thrill that the originals have. I won't analyse or explicate, because if the translation can't convey something of the original, the commentary will sound academic and pedagogical.

*Just look, Urfi, what storms did my weeping raise!  
I washed off, from the eye of my fortune  
All its friendship with sleep.*<sup>176</sup>  
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*I remained deprived of comfort for the heart  
And sympathy  
From your black eyes,  
Your eyelashes erected a paling around your glance.*<sup>177</sup>  
\*\*\*

*Because of an abundance of the violet,  
The garden looks like the face of Joseph  
Turned blue due to harsh slaps from his brothers.*<sup>178</sup>  
\*\*\*

*Just one candle will suffice in the assembly for ages,  
If it continues to lose its progress  
And stand in wonder at your gait.*<sup>179</sup>  
\*\*\*

*Filled with the memory of someone's drunken eye  
I sank away deep into myself so that  
From my dust now arise the coquetries  
Of her eyelashes, modest and asleep.*<sup>180</sup>  
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*The sky stands in no risk from travellers in non-space,  
The wine-carafe is not harmed  
By the wine's colour striking out of it.*<sup>181</sup>  
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<sup>176</sup> Urfi, *Divan*, p. 509.

<sup>177</sup> Naziri, *Kulliyat*, p. 273.

<sup>178</sup> Sa'ib, *Kulliyat*, (Naval Kishor), p. 546.

<sup>179</sup> Nasir Ali Sarhindi, quoted in *Khizana-e 'Amira*, (in the critical and biographical notice of Nasir Ali Sarhindi), p. 331.

<sup>180</sup> Bedil, *Kulliyat*, (Tehran, Ilham edition), Vol. II, p. 770.

*My lamentation is busy working on me and I  
Am dying for it still. I am  
A moth circling around the lamp  
That is lit on my own grave.*

*The dust of my being has been kneaded  
With heart's blood. I am  
The colourfulness of the patterns  
Made by my own sword.<sup>182</sup>*

Let me now give a couple of illustrations of the use by these poets of a familiar word in an unfamiliar but perfectly legitimate sense. I'll cite verses from those which I have quoted earlier to illustrate other points. The following is a she'r by Nasir Ali Sarhindi:

*The 'anqa's reputation,  
By virtue of his tracelessness, creates for him  
Numerous camel-files of fame;  
Silence, when it goes beyond all bounds  
Has the clamour of caravan-bells.*

The word that I translate here as "tracelessness" is *gumnami* which generally signifies "the state of being unknown". It is obvious that this sense is out of the context here. Actually, *gumnami* also means "the state of being traceless". The word that I translate here as "creates" is *tarazad* (from the verb *tarazidan*) in the original. Its familiar meaning is "to decorate, to embroider, to beautify" and this meaning is obviously inapplicable here. A less familiar sense of *tarazidan*, however, is "to make, to organize, to lay on", and this meaning is perfectly in order here. Then, "camel-file" in the original is *karavan* which is commonly used in the sense of "caravan." It is clear that this doesn't make good sense in the context. Yet actually, the word (originally *karban*) properly means a long file of pack animals like camels or mules. Now it is clear that the word *karavan* is not only appropriate to the context, but is also extremely delightful because the poet is speaking of the 'anqa's invisibility creating for him immense "loads" of reputation. A less than fully knowledgeable reader would be justified to dismiss the use of *gumnami*, *tarazad*, and *karavan* here as just another example of slipshod writing. But the Indian Style poets expected their reader to be knowledgeable.

The following she'rs are by Bedil:

*It wasn't anyone's lips that played upon a flute  
It wasn't anyone's caged breath knocking at the confining breast,  
Nullity hurled the mirror against stone, so you became able to speak.*

What I translate as "mirror" is *abgina* in the original whose most familiar meaning is "glass" as in "glass-pane". This doesn't apply to the context at all, but another meaning for *abgina* is "mirror". Taken in this sense, the word not only makes sense but also creates a brilliant image.

*I travelled: by flying or by the labour  
Of stumbles and leaps,  
I travelled everywhere until I  
Arrived at not arriving.*

<sup>181</sup> Shaukat Bukhari, quoted in *Sarv-e Azad* (in the biographical and critical notice of Shaukat Bukhari), p. 121.

<sup>182</sup> Ghalib, *Kulliyat*, p. 360.

Here, I translate *tapidan* as “stumbles and leaps”, for the familiar meaning, “to be restless, to writhe and thrash about as in pain” makes nonsense of the poem. The less familiar meaning, “to leap, to move from one’s place, to make involuntary movement” immediately pulls the poem together.<sup>183</sup>

## 5.

I expect that my translations however weak do some justice to a poetry which was perhaps never meant by its makers to be dissected or translated into English, a language that shares almost nothing with the Indo-Persian literary and linguistic culture. But it is true that the poetry generally sounds difficult to Indian students as well. Some might frown in displeasure at a poetry that sends the reader back to dictionaries (funnily enough, I didn’t find any native-speaker of English making this complaint about Shakespeare, or even the lowly Gerard Manley Hopkins) and occasionally needs cogitation before meaning or beauty can be discerned in it. Such persons might put this poetry down as “elitist”. Yet in fact, “elitist” was not always a term of disapproval, and certainly not in the Indo-Muslim literary tradition, and certainly the poetry of *sabk-i hindi* is elitist, as almost all good poetry always is. Hasan Husaini admonishes:

*Hindi* poetry is the poetry of sharp intelligence, coloured by intellection, and one can’t use it for ecstatic dancing (*hal*). This poetry is not made use of in assemblies of Sufi singing and ecstatic dancing. It doesn’t set the soul atremble and does not sink its claws in the mysterious corners of the inner self. For it is the theme-thinking Intellect and not the security destroying, pyrotechnic Love that organizes its engagements.<sup>184</sup>

One may not agree with the assertion about the poetry of *sabk-i hindi* not being popular material for singing or sending its hearer into raptures, but the main point is well taken. This poetry thrives best under rigorous and vigorous reading for its driving force the intellectual, and not the emotional imagination. But we also have the testimony of Sadruddin ‘Aini that Bedil’s poetry was sung by unlettered peasants in Central Asia. Drawing upon the Memoirs of ‘Aini who reported that in the early part of the twentieth century he found “labourers and peasants singing Bedil’s ghazals while they worked”, Muhammad Riza Shafi’i Kadkani asks:

What understanding does the unlettered peasant in Transoxiana derive from the poems of Bedil when he recites them aloud, or sings them in his long nights? Or even now what do the common people in Afghanistan get from reciting Bedil aloud that we students [who live] in the other direction [West of Transoxiana and Afghanistan] are denied?<sup>185</sup>

One answer could lie, of course in the sheer music of Bedil’s poetry, and the historical-cultural construction of his reputation in Afghanistan and most of Central Asia. But there could be something more to it, something to do with the nature of poetry in general, and especially with the poetry of *sabk-i hindi*.<sup>186</sup> Amir Mina’i (1828-1900), the

<sup>183</sup> The definitions quoted here can all be found in *Lughat Nama-i Dehkhoda*.

<sup>184</sup> Hasan Husaini, pp. 90-91.

<sup>185</sup> Muhammad Riza Shafi’i Kadkani, *Sha’ir-i A’inaha, Bar Rasi-i Sabk-i Hindi va Sh’ir-i Bedil*, Tehran, Intisharat-i Agah, 1376(=1998), pp. 103, 105.

<sup>186</sup> For some subtle and informative discussion on the tradition of the *musha’ira* and popular reception of poetry and audience- and reader-participation in the making of poetic texts in the Indo-Persian literary culture, see Frances W. Pritchett, “A Long History of Urdu Literature, Part 2: Histories, Performances, and

well-known Urdu poet and lexicographer, is reported to have once remarked that Bedil's poetry had the quality of pleasing even when it couldn't be understood.<sup>187</sup> Muhammad Riza Shafi'i Kadkani says something quite similar<sup>188</sup>, and while Amir Mina'i's observation doesn't surprise me for he was an Urdu poet of distinction, I hold it to the great credit of Kadkani for him to have arrived at such a conclusion for he stands in the shadow of a two hundred-year old tradition of hostility to *sabk-i hindi*.

As regards the Indian critics' attitude to *sabk-i hindi*, I have had occasion to observe elsewhere in this essay that we have done almost as badly as the Iranians. In fact, Urdu poets have very nearly always venerated *sabk-i hindi*, and at least the Iranian-origin poets of the Indian Style have been held as normative as far as language use was concerned. But there has been no real critical acclaim of this poetry. In fact, Indian critics have generally been either hostile, or patronizing, or both toward *sabk-i hindi*. And this attitude extends even to Khusrau. While Ghalib was unwilling to grant any Indian but Khusrau the status of undisputed master of standard, literary Persian, Shibli Nu'mani, in spite of claiming to be Khusrau's true admirer managed to be snide about Khusrau's Persian. In the midst of his long and admiring and perspicacious chapter on Khusrau, Shibli suddenly says:

The Amir has used many idioms which are not found in the poetry of any native speaker...[here he give four or five examples]...This has encouraged the mistrustful to say that it is because of his being a resident of India that he lapses into Indian usages. Maybe such is the case. But since I don't have confidence in my own investigative and diligent searching, I cannot share this mistrust.<sup>189</sup>

As is well known, Khusrau composed (circa 1299-1301) probably at the request of Sultan Kaiqubad five long masnavis in reply to, or in imitation of, or on the pattern of the great twelfth century Persian poet Nizami (1140-1207) whose five masnavis are known collectively as *khamasa-i Nizami* ("The Five of Nizami"). In one of the masnavis called *Matla'-ul Anvar* (circa 1299) Khusrau targeted Nizami in a few she'rs of boasting, particularly in the following verse:

*The star of my sovereignty has risen  
And hurled an earthquake in Nizami's grave.*<sup>190</sup>

There is nothing bad or objectionable in such boasting which is quite in the tradition and is known as *ta'alli* ("to exalt oneself"). In another, earlier masnavi *Qiranu's Sa'dain* (1289) he was also properly humble toward Nizami and used a novel image to make his obeisance:

*It would be unripe of me to bake my raw obsession  
For all themes ripened and matured with Nizami.*<sup>191</sup>

Khusrau's close Iranian contemporary Ubaid Zakani (1300-1371) remembered today mostly as master of the pornographic satire was a ghazal poet of some note. His

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Masters" in Sheldon Pollock, ed., *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003.

<sup>187</sup> Ahsanullah Saqib, ed., *Makatib-i Amir Mina'i*, Lucknow, Matab'-e Adabia, 1924, p. 16. The conversation was between Amir Mina'i and the editor of the volume.

<sup>188</sup> *Sha'ir-i A'inaha, Bar Rasi-i Sabk-i Hindi va Sh'ir-i Bedil*, p. 21. The verse under discussion here is a particularly opaque sounding one from Bedil. Kadkani says that each part of this verse is delightful but the whole makes little sense. Interestingly enough, Hasan Husaini devotes considerable ingenuity and space to elucidating this very she'r, which he regards as coherent and full of meaning. See Husaini, pp. 116-129.

<sup>189</sup> *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. II, Azamgarh, Ma'arif Press, 1947, pp. 163-164.

<sup>190</sup> *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. II, p. 131.

<sup>191</sup> *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. II, p. 131.

reputation as a ghazal poet may have suffered because of Khusrau's popularity. According to Vahid Mirza at least one ghazal of Zakani found a place in manuscripts of Khusrau's ghazals.<sup>192</sup> Anyway, he picked up Khusrau's culinary image to make a sharp rebuttal of Khusrau's achievement in his *Khamsa*:

*Because of rawness, Khusrau fell into error:  
He cooked his broth in Nizami's pot.*<sup>193</sup>

Shibli has attributed Ubaid's displeasure to "chauvinistic prejudice"<sup>194</sup> but Vahid Mirza passes the matter over in silence, indicating that he is in general agreement. Then he says:

The truth of the matter is that if [Khusrau's] *Khamsa* is viewed as a whole, then it can be described as a very good imitation of Nizami's *Khamsa*. It is always difficult for the copy to excel the original, so the maximum possible praise of Khusrau, which wouldn't be too far from the truth either, could be to say that it is the best imitation possible of Nizami's *Khamsa*. And some extremely competent appraisers, like [Abdur Rahman] Jami [d. 1492] and [Ali Sher] Nava'i [1440-1500] also agree with this assessment. Now this is another matter that in some places Khusrau has managed to depict situations and subjects whose height and excellence Nizami was unable to attain.<sup>195</sup>

This from a very erudite, sympathetic scholar who spent a lifetime studying Khusrau. I need not point out the contradictions in the above pronouncement, nor the feeble literary theory that is expected to hold it up. In the beginning of his text, Vahid Mirza deplors the fact that European and Iranian critics alike hold a low opinion of Indian-Persian poetry.<sup>196</sup> But he lets himself off the hook of decision in the matter of Iranian against Indian by saying:

There can be no greater evidence of Khusrau's merit (*khubi*) than the fact that even Iranian critics have acknowledged his greatness....But if in spite of knowing all this [the alleged praise of Khusrau by Sa'di, and an even weaker inference

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<sup>192</sup> Muhammad Vahid Mirza, *Amir Khusrau*, Allahabad, Hindustani Academy, 1949, p. 199. Misattribution, especially from a less popular poet to a more popular one, was not unknown in premodern Arabo-Persian literary culture. We have seen one example above, involving Urfi and Faizi. Sana'i Ghaznavi, in his compilation of the divan of his senior contemporary Masud Sa'd Salman Lahori, included many poems which were not Masud's but were popularly believed to be his. Sana'i made necessary deletions when Masud pointed out, not without displeasure, the interpolations. See Franklin Lewis, *Reading, Writing, and Recitation: Sana'i and the Origins of the Persian Ghazal*, unpublished Ph. D dissertation, UMI Dissertation Services, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1996, pp. 133, 224. Also see Sunil Sharma, *Persian Poetry at the Indian Frontier: Mas'ud Sa'd Salman of Lahore*, New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2000, p. 137. Sometimes the author himself would attribute his work to a more popular or prestigious author. Lewis suggests that Sana'i may have included some of his own poetry in the compilation. While one can't be positive in Sana'i's case, deliberate authorial misattribution was not unknown and may in fact have played quite a busy role in premodern Arab literary culture. See Abdelfattah Kilito, *The Author and His Doubles*, Tr. Michael Cooperson, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2001.

<sup>193</sup> Muhammad Vahid Mirza, p. 269; *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. II, p. 128. Both these authorities cite Badauni's (d. 1595-6) famous history *Muntakhab 'ut Tavarikh* for this she'r.

<sup>194</sup> *She'ru'l Ajam*, Vol. II, p. 128.

<sup>195</sup> Muhammad Vahid Mirza, pp. 269-70. Muhammad Vahid Mirza was long-time Professor of Persian at the university of Lucknow. As a sort of coda to him, listen to Nabi Hadi, lately professor of Persian at Aligarh Muslim University, "If native-speaker Iranian critics feel a touch diffident with this poetry, their attitude in this is not arbitrary or without reason. Thousands of she'rs can be cited from Mughal poetry which are no more than exhibitions of strained contrivance and gratuitous extravagance." *Mughalon ke Malik'ush Shu'ara*, p. 14.

<sup>196</sup> Muhammad Vahid Mirza, pp. 10-11.

from a she'r of Hafiz], one looks down upon classical Indian-Persian poetry, it can be nothing but perverse obstinacy.<sup>197</sup>

I will leave without comment this sad evidence of several kinds of failure but must add that the “abounding grace” that Mirza has vouchsafed to Khusrau does not touch the poets of *sabk-i hindi* whose “merit” has not been acknowledged by any Iranian critic since the late eighteenth century. Sa’ib and Bedil are recent exceptions, and while their “merit” too has been acknowledged by just a few, there are “admirers” like Husain Ahi who indignantly deny even the possibility of a comparison between Sa’ib and Bedil.

## 6.

The Indian Style in Persian poetry is no longer a living reality of literature. Persian studies began to decline in India with the rise and establishment of the colonial power. The Indo-Persian literary culture continued to command respect until about the last decade of the nineteenth century but its decline continued steadily until the independence of the country and its partition in 1947 applied a decisive blow, and not only in India, but also in the newly created state of Pakistan. The creation of Bangladesh in 1971 only helped emphasize the redundancy of a culture of whose two principal languages Persian was very much a thing of the past, an arcane discipline found only in specialized university departments. Its other language, Urdu, underwent a dark phase in India, flourished though under state patronage in Pakistan and became practically outlawed in Bangladesh.

The loss of the Indo-Persian literary culture is a great loss for the sub-continent, and not in terms of literature alone. It was a political-cultural state of mind, an integrating power, and a big window to the past as well as the outside world. English can fulfil the latter role to a certain extent (for English windows do not open on Central Asia and the Middle East), but English can’t even begin to perform other roles which the Indo-Persian literary culture historically performed over three centuries. The only consolation for this culture in modern day South Asia is that Persian commands some respect and prestige in its academic-literary environments. But absent the continuity and sympathetic understanding of the nuances of the past, Persian studies now lack the dynamism that characterized them until the middle of the nineteenth century. Small wonder, then, that the entire Persian scholarly community in South Asia has been unable to provide a satisfactory, or comprehensive theoretical or historical account of *sabk-i hindi*.

In Iran, the decline of *sabk-i hindi* began with the so-called “literary return” *bazgasht-i adabi* in late eighteenth century. This “return” seems to me to have been more a political rather than literary matter. It was clearly a “rebellion” against *sabk-i hindi* though Shams Langrudi tries to link the “return” to a historical perspective by saying that the style that became current at that time was the answer to a need felt by the poets to go back to their ancient forebears. The decline of the Safavids resulted into a state of chaos and uncertainty was not suited to the cerebral, abstract manner of the Indian Style, hence the desire to go back to something more suited to the mood of the times.<sup>198</sup> I have already pointed out that Langrudi’s account is not consistent with the actual history of the poetry. There is no need for me here to examine this question further, except to say that

<sup>197</sup> Muhammad Vahid Mirza, p. 16.

<sup>198</sup> Shams Langrudi, *Bazgasht-i Adabi*, pp. 43-44, 48-49, 52.

like all efforts at trying to link literary events and trends to political-social history in a one-dimensional manner, Langrudi's effort too is simplistic and his argument circular. For our purposes, it is sufficient to say that by abandoning the Indian Style, Iran lost the creative energy that had informed her poetry for more than three centuries. The "return" poets so laboriously assembled by Langrudi in his book are insufferably uninteresting.

How would have *sabk-i hindi* answered or adjusted to the challenges of the twentieth century in South Asia? Could its practitioners have devised an effective defence against the Noah's flood of change that overtook everything in South Asia in a matter of just a few decades? It is an interesting but futile question. No one can turn the pages of history to start afresh from a given point. The Indian Style has so far clung to its flimsy but very real hold on the Indo-Muslim cultural consciousness. One can only hope that it continues to do so, and maybe even make it stronger over time.

*The rose cannot know  
To what far places its scent will travel;  
Don't expect the lovers to know the final end  
Of the frenzied heart.<sup>199</sup>*

Allahabad,  
October-November, 2003

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi

### ***Author's Note***

Originals of Persian and Urdu verses quoted are to be found in the Appendix.

All translations from Persian and Urdu are by me, except for the extract from Bahar's essay on Sa'ib which I have gratefully taken from Wheeler Thackston.

Following the convention of English literature, I have translated the poems depicting the beloved as female. Since Persian has no gender markers, most poems in which the beloved appears can be read as being about a female, or about God, or about just an idea of "belovedness". In some cases the gender is more or less clearly specified as male, though the poems translated by me here do not present any such situation. For a somewhat extended discussion of the problem of gender in identifying the beloved, see my chapter, "Urdu Literature" in Zeenut Ziad, ed., *The Magnificent Mughals*. Also see C. M. Naim, "Homosexual (pederastic) love in premodern Urdu poetry" in his *Urdu Texts and Contexts: The Selected Essays of C. M. Naim*, New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2003/4.

The meaning-independent two-line verse or poem that appears in all traditional genres of Arabic, Persian, and Urdu poetry in groups of two or more and is the basic unit in which the poetry is discussed by critic and reader alike, is called *bait* ("house") in Arabic, and extremely often so in Persian. In Urdu, The term is *she'r* ("something composed or versified") which is used also in Arabic in the sense of *bait*, though very rarely, and oftener in Persian. It has been

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<sup>199</sup> Sa'ib, *Kulliyat*, (Naval Kishor), p. 511.

generally translated as “couplet” which I feel gives quite the wrong impression. For one thing, very few *bait*s rhyme; they follow a given rhyme structure that is determined at the beginning of the poem (ghazal, qasida). So most *bait*s, except those occurring in a *masnavi*, have no rhyme scheme, and the two lines of the *bait* do not rhyme, except in very exceptional cases. So I have used *she’r*, *verse*, *poem* interchangeably for *bait*, unless the context requires otherwise.

Each of the two lines of a *bait*/*she’r* is called a *misra’* (“the leaf of a door”.) I have translated *misra’* invariably as “line”.

I am thankful to my friend Azizuddin Usmani, of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, for freely making available to me a large number of new and old Persian texts without which this study could not have been attempted.

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