

ROUNDTABLE

Afterword: Reassessing Arabic in South Asia

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In his learned and stimulating article that helps frame the contributions to this roundtable while also outlining directions for future work in this area, Nile Green notes the striking fact that it has been nearly a hundred years since the last substantial English survey of the field was attempted. That was M. G. Zubaid Ahmad's "Contribution of India to Arabic Literature," completed as a PhD dissertation under the supervision of the noted Orientalist Sir Thomas Arnold (d. 1930) at the School of Oriental Studies (as it was then known), University of London, in 1929. It was subsequently published with a preface by another distinguished Orientalist, Sir Hamilton Gibb (d. 1971), and retains some scholarly interest to this day.¹ That interest lies not only in the descriptions of the many Arabic-language works it lists—going well beyond Carl Brockelmann's classic *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur* in this respect—but also, in hindsight, in the assumptions that guide Ahmad's work. Ahmad believed there was little in the Arabic literature surveyed that showed any originality, partly because there was not much remaining to be said in fields like Qur'anic exegesis, the reported teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (hadith), or law by the time Indian scholars began engaging seriously with these subjects. It was also partly to do with an intellectual decline well underway by the time relevant areas of inquiry had reached India. The intellectual landscape remained unrelieved whether one looked at religious or secular literature, or even at writings in Persian for that matter: "... in spite of the abundance of Persian literature produced in India, nothing original is found in these contributions."²

Repeatedly, however, Zubaid Ahmad's assumptions run into the evidence he marshals himself. He appears, on occasion, to recognize this, although not enough to rethink his core assumptions. Speaking of the *Hujjat Allah al-Baligha* (The Conclusive Argument from God) of Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762), the influential sufi and hadith scholar of late Mughal Delhi, Ahmad observes, for instance: "if not entirely original, [it] contains a considerable amount of originality."³ Elsewhere, he notes that this work—an exposition of "the secrets of hadith"—is held in higher esteem in India than al-Ghazali's (d. 1111) famous *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (Revival of the Religious Sciences).⁴ Commenting on a work on the core Islamic rituals (*farā'id*) by the Sindhi scholar Muhammad Hashim b. 'Abd al-Ghafur (d. 1760), Ahmad states that it is "of a somewhat new type and is full of information."⁵ On the philosophical sciences,

¹ M. G. Zubaid Ahmad, *The Contribution of Indo-Pakistan to Arabic Literature: From Ancient Times to 1857* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1968; first published in 1946). For Gibb's foreword, see *Ibid.*, vii–viii.

² *Ibid.*, xxiii–xxiv; quotation at *Ibid.*, xxix.

³ *Ibid.*, xxvi. For the first edition of this work, see Shah Wali Allah, *Hujjat Allah al-Baligha*, ed. Muhammad Ahsan Siddiqi (Bareilly, India: Matba'-'i Siddiqi, 1869); for a partial English translation, see Marcia K. Hermansen, *The Conclusive Argument from God: Shah Wali Allah of Delhi's Hujjat Allah al-Baligha* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996).

⁴ Ahmad, *The Contribution of Indo-Pakistan to Arabic Literature*, 57–58.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 77–78. For this work, see Muhammad Hashim Tattawi al-Sindi, *Fara'id al-Islam*, ed. Ghulam Mustafa al-Qasimi al-Sindi (Hyderabad: Madinat al-'Ulum, 1978).

he observes: “the contribution of India ... is so considerable that a separate treatise might be written on this subject.”⁶ Caveats notwithstanding, such assumptions have had considerable longevity. In a wide-ranging work on Islamic education first published in 1982, Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), a professor of Islamic thought at the University of Chicago, echoes Ahmad: “[E]ducation in Indian Islam was generally not of a very high order,” because “when organized education got under way in India in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the formative and creative stages of various sciences in Islam had already essentially passed.”⁷

A reassessment of such views of Islamic intellectual history has long been overdue, and scholars have begun to do just that in recent years, especially in the context of the Arab Middle East and North Africa. If scholarship on this in the Indian context suffered from insufficiently examined assumptions about a sterile commentary culture afflicting intellectual life elsewhere, so, too, has revisionist work on these matters begun assisting with a better understanding of Indian intellectual history itself.⁸ Such scholarship, no longer hobbled by Orientalist assumptions, serves to remind us of, among other things, just how central Arabic has been to Muslim intellectual life in South Asia.

That many Indian scholars chose to write in Arabic might seem a surprising choice for a region where few people outside their own circles would have understood it. Such scholars, however, were not aiming to address a “popular” readership. Writing in Arabic allowed them to reach an actual or imagined trans-regional audience and engage with a scholarly tradition for which Arabic had long served as a major medium. It is not that Arabic somehow lent itself to more “religious” topics, with less religious ones relegated to Persian and other languages—a view deservedly debunked by several contributors to this roundtable. Rather, beyond the wider scholarly audience, the well-developed lexical and conceptual apparatus of Arabic made it a more obvious choice for particular disciplines, including Islamic law. Even when a scholar produced works in the same genre but in different languages, the choice was not arbitrary, although what dictated the decision is not always clear in every instance. For example, in the years following his return to India from the Hijaz, the hadith scholar and sufi ‘Abd al-Haqq of Delhi (d. 1642) wrote two commentaries—one in Persian and the other in Arabic—on the *Mishkat al-Masabih* (The Niche of Lanterns), a widely used collection of hadith. His associates had persuaded him that a commentary in Persian would be more beneficial to people, presumably due to the greater readership of that language in India. Upon starting, however, he found that Persian was not well-suited to articulating some of what he wanted to say, so he also embarked on a second commentary, this time in Arabic, which he completed first.⁹ In the years following his return from the Hijaz, the aforementioned Wali Allah also wrote two commentaries on the *Muwatta* (The Well-trodden Path) of Malik b. Anas (d. 795), a foundational work in Islamic law. In his case as well, the commentary in Arabic was completed well before the one in Persian, but it was the latter that turned out to be considerably more expansive in the range of ideas engaged. When, however, he wrote his *Hujjat Allah al-Baligha*—often considered his magnum opus—Wali Allah’s language of choice was again Arabic. While his Persian commentary on the *Muwatta* shows that he clearly did not think Persian was unequal to the task at hand,

⁶ Ahmad, *Contribution*, 129. Also see *Ibid.*, 167 (on medicine).

⁷ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 39.

⁸ For recent examples of such scholarship, see Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Ahmad Dallal, *Islam without Europe: Traditions of Reform in Eighteenth-Century Islamic Thought* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2018). On South Asia, see Asad Q. Ahmed, *Palimpsests of Themselves: Logic and Commentary in Postclassical Muslim South Asia* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022).

⁹ See ‘Abd al-Haqq al-Muhaddith al-Dihlawi, *Ashi‘at al-Lama‘at*, vol. 1 (Sukkur, Pakistan: Maktaba-yi Nuriyya Ridwiyya, 1976), 2. For the Arabic commentary, see al-Dihlawi, *Lama‘at al-Tanqih fi Sharh Mishkat al-Masabih*, ed. Muhammad ‘Ubayd Allah, 6 vols. (Lahore: Maktabat al-Ma‘arif al-‘Ilmiyya, 1970).

his adoption of Arabic in several other writings does suggest that Wali Allah wanted to be part of broader conversations than Persian might have allowed. Indeed, in hindsight it is difficult to see the *Hujjat Allah al-Baligha* having had the same impact on a readership beyond the eastern Islamic lands if its language had been Persian. For example, in the early twentieth century, *Hujjat Allah al-Baligha* was made part of the curriculum of the Gordon Memorial College of Khartoum, as an Indian publication proudly reported in 1907. The Egypt-based Syrian journalist and scholar Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1935) had also wanted the *Hujjat Allah al-Baligha*, among other works, to guide the writing of a textbook for Madrasat al-Da'wa wa-l-Irshad, a school he founded in Cairo in 1912.¹⁰

The choice of language could further other purposes, too. As Mohsin Ali argues in his contribution, the genre of biographical writing in pre-modern Indo-Persian pursued rather different goals than such works in Arabic. Whereas the former was well-suited to writings on Sufis, the latter was the preferred medium for works seeking to foreground the 'ulama' as participants in longstanding traditions of Islamic scholarship. As Ali observes, however, some wrote about the 'ulama', too, in both languages; a notable example was Siddiq Hasan Khan (d. 1890), a pivotal figure in the development of the Indian Ahl-i Hadith or salafi orientation.¹¹ Arabic had a significant role as well in fostering trans-regional networks, as Ali and Jyoti Balachandran show. It also served pedagogical purposes, a point Nile Green and Sohaib Baig usefully highlight in their contributions—purposes that went beyond the fact that the key texts studied as part of a madrasa education were, and continue to be, in Arabic. New texts arising from within the madrasa milieu in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, such as a teacher's discourse on canonical hadith work, were sometimes written in Arabic even if the teaching itself tended to be in Urdu.¹² Doing so could enable an enterprising member of the study circle to showcase his own Arabic skills, but could also facilitate the eventual publication of the teacher's commentary. As Michael O'Sullivan shows in his contribution, the use of "pure" Arabic also served to highlight claims to religious authority, as in the case of the leader—the *da'i mutlaq*—of the Isma'ili Bohra community; the *da'i's* early twentieth-century critics tended to write instead in Gujarati, Urdu, and English, in effect underscoring the symbolic significance of the Bohra leadership's own deployment of Arabic for official religious positions. Within scholarly circles, however, at least in pre-modern India and irrespective of any particular religious orientation, the mere choice of language may not have been a distinguishing enough marker, for there was no lack of those who wrote in both Arabic and Persian.

Some authors could even alternate between Arabic and Persian in a single work.¹³ Doing so was unusual, but there was no mistaking the fact that many South Asian languages were intertwined with one another, Arabic among them. That relationship was itself the subject of a sophisticated theorization by Siraj al-din Khan Arzu (d. 1756), a philologist, Persian and Urdu poet, and a major influence on the early development of Urdu. In a book titled *Muthmir* (The Fruitful), a sustained engagement with the famed Jalal al-din Suyuti's (d. 1505) philological work *al-Muzhir* (The Manifest), Arzu explicated the "correspondence" (*tawāfuq*) between Persian and Hindi, while also documenting the Arabicization of particular

¹⁰ *Al-Nadwa* (Lucknow) 4, no. 11 (December 1907), 40; "Nizam Madrasat al-Da'wa wa-l-Irshad," *al-Manar* (Cairo), 10, no. 14 (1911–12), 808.

¹¹ Though better known for his biographical writings in Arabic, he also wrote a large biographical work in Persian with a focus on the 'ulama' and their writings: *Ithaf al-Nubala al-Muttaqin* (Kanpur, India: Matba'-'i Nizami, 1871).

¹² See, for instance, Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, *al-Kawkab al-Durri 'ala Jami' al-Tirmidhi*, comp. Muhammad Yahya Kandhlawi, vol. 1 (Karachi: Idarat al-Qur'an wa-l-'Ulum al-Islamiyya, 1987), 16 (preface by the editor and glossator, Muhammad Zakariyya Kandhlawi). See also Muhammad Taqi 'Uthmani, *Dars-i Tirmidhi*, ed. Rashid Ahmad Sayfi, vol. 1 (Karachi: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1993), 12–13.

¹³ For an example of such a work, see Shah Wali Allah, *al-Tafhimat al-Ilahiyya*, ed. Ghulam Mustafa al-Qasimi, 2 vols. (Hyderabad, India: Shah Wali Allah Academy, 1967–70). For another example, see the work of his son, Shah Rafi' al-Din (d. 1818), *Damgh al-batil*, ed. 'Abd al-Hamid Sawati, 2 vols. (Gujranwala, India: Idara-yi Nashr wa Isha'at, Madrasat Nusrat al-'Ulum, 1976).

Persian words and vice versa. He also showed that some of the words al-Suyuti adduced as examples of such Arabicization were in fact of Hindi and Sanskrit (“*Hindi-yi kitābī*” [book-based Hindi]) origin.¹⁴ His interventions went beyond an explication of the correspondence between languages in the Indian context, however, which he claimed to be the first to do.¹⁵ Contrary to a commonly held view, he argued as well that distinguished poets of recent, even contemporary, times and not just the authorities of a long-gone age could be adduced as proof of correct usage; further, that Indian Persian poetry was not necessarily inferior to that of native Persian speakers.¹⁶ Those writing in Arabic in India may well have said something similar. In both cases, it suggests a very different view of South Asian intellectual life than that pictured in Zubaid Ahmad’s aforementioned study.

How various Indian languages could come together in a single scholarly career is worth illustrating further with reference to ‘Abd al-Rahim Gorakhpuri, a remarkable if now largely forgotten early nineteenth-century scholar. Gorakhpuri had once studied with Shah ‘Abd al-‘Aziz (d. 1824), the distinguished hadith scholar of Delhi, and subsequently settled in Calcutta.¹⁷ He served there as a tutor to the grandsons of Tipu Sultan, the ruler of Mysore in south India, whom the forces of the British East India Company had defeated and killed in 1799. When Sayyid Ahmad of Raebareli (d. 1831)—who championed an understanding of Islam firmly anchored in the Qur’an and hadith, with a concomitant rejection of much of the customary devotional norms of Indian Islam—passed by Calcutta *en route* to the Hijaz, one of Tipu’s grandsons wanted to cut him down to size by debating with him *in Arabic* or, failing that, Persian. Sayyid Ahmad had politely declined this challenge, preferring to speak Hindi instead.¹⁸ Gorakhpuri, for his part, wrote in both Persian and Arabic, authoring works on: logic and astronomy; a mathematical treatise and a treatise on mechanics, both in Arabic; and a history of Tipu Sultan and his father, Haydar ‘Ali (d. 1782), in Persian. Gorakhpuri also wrote a treatise on the relative merits of Arabic and Persian, siding with Persian for good measure.¹⁹ English, too, was a language he came to know well. His history of Haydar ‘Ali and Tipu Sultan was based primarily on English sources and he translated John Clark Marshman’s *History of India from Remote Antiquity to the Accession of the Mogul Dynasty* into Persian. Published after Gorakhpuri’s death, the latter work was dedicated to Lord Canning, the governor-general and viceroy of India (1856–62), by a grandson of Tipu.²⁰ Gorakhpuri belonged to a milieu characterized by the confluence of Western and Indian scholarly traditions, evoked insightfully with reference to the early history of print in India in Sohaib Baig’s contribution.

¹⁴ See Arthur Dudley, *India in the Persian World of Letters: Khan-i Arzu among the Eighteenth Century Philologists* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022), 84–5, discussing Siraj al-Din Arzu, *Muthmir*, ed. Rayhana Khatun (Karachi: Institute of Central and West Asian Studies, 1991), 179–209, esp. 182, 186. For al-Suyuti’s work, see *al-Muzhir fi ‘Ulum al-Lughah wa Anwa’iha*, ed. Muhammad Ahmad Jad al-Mawla et al., 2 vols. (Cairo: Dar Ihya al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyya, 1971).

¹⁵ Arzu, *Muthmir*, 221; Dudley, *India in the Persian World of Letters*, 87.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 54–141, 278–82.

¹⁷ ‘Abd al-Hayy al-Hasani, *Nuzhat al-Khawatir wa bahjat al-masami’ wa’l-nawazir*, 8 vols. (Hyderabad, India: Majlis Da’irat al-ma’arif al-‘Uthmaniyya, 1947–70), 7: 259–60.

¹⁸ Muhammad Ja’far Thanessari, *Sawanih-i Ahmadi* (Delhi: Matba’-i Faruqi, 1891–92), 68. See also anon., *Waqai’ Sayyid Ahmad Shahid* (Lahore: Sayyid Ahmad Shahid Academy, 2007), 827–33 (though this work does not specifically mention the challenge by Tipu’s grandson).

¹⁹ Al-Hasani, *Nuzhat al-Khawatir*, 7: 259–60; ‘Abd al-Razzaq Malihabadi, *Azad ki Kahani Khwud Unki Zabani* (Delhi: Maktaba-yi Isha’at al-Qur’an, 1965), 365–71.

²⁰ John Clarke Marshman, *Tarikh-i Hindustan*, trans. ‘Abd al-Rahim Gorakhpuri (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1859). For the dedication, see the unpaginated front matter. Marshman’s *History of India* was first published in 1836. For Gorakhpuri’s history of Haydar ‘Ali and Tipu Sultan, see *Karnama-yi Haydari* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1848). This book was dedicated by Ghulam Muhammad, a son of Tipu Sultan, to Sir Thomas Maddock, deputy governor of Bengal. Gorakhpuri is not identified as the author of this work, though a contemporary Urdu translation does identify him as such: see *Hamalat-i Haydari*, trans. Ahmad ‘Ali Gopamawi (Calcutta: Matba’-i Tibbi, 1849), 3–4. For his authorship of it, see also al-Hasani, *Nuzhat al-Khawatir*, 7: 259.

To the extent that Gorakhpuri has left a mark on posterity, it is largely negative. He is alleged to have venerated the sun, a charge that apparently had less to do with his heliocentric views and more with his opponents' intense hostility towards him. Foremost among these opponents were the followers of the aforementioned Sayyid Ahmad of Raebareli. Sayyid Ahmad and his associates figure prominently in 'Abd al-Hayy al-Hasani's (d. 1923) *Nuzhat al-Khawatir* as well, the largest biographical dictionary of Indian scholars ever produced in Arabic. Gorakhpuri receives a polite nod there, with the otherwise unexplained comment: "he was charged with godlessness and heresy" (*al-ilhād wa-l-zandaqa*).²¹ Even as al-Hasani acknowledges him as "one of the outstanding scholars of the philosophical sciences," the insinuation of godlessness and the pointed lack of substance in this biographical notice serve only to marginalize him. The exception to such representations is an account by Abu'l-Kalam Azad (d. 1958), a Qur'anic exegete and major figure in late colonial Indian politics, discussed by Roy Bar Sadeh in his contribution, who himself is an illustration of what it means to think of Arabic as a South Asian language. Azad, who went through a time of intense religious doubt, speaks of Gorakhpuri with much admiration and insight in his autobiography. He, too, notes that Gorakhpuri is well-known as a *dahrī*—an "atheist"—but says that he could find no indication of wayward beliefs in the writings available. Such characterizations tended, Azad says, to be applied to those who charted a new path for themselves. Azad goes on to note that, well before the time of Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), the pioneering modernist and founder of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh (not to be confused with Sayyid Ahmad of Raebareli), Gorakhpuri argued that Muslims ought to learn English and Western sciences. It would not suffice to simply translate particular Western works into their own languages, as their predecessors had once with Greek learning. A key difference between the two eras, Gorakhpuri argued, was the fact that the corpus of Greek sciences was a closed entity by the time Muslims encountered it; such was not the case with the ever-expanding modern Western sciences, which therefore needed to be accessed directly, in English.²²

Although Gorakhpuri was no doubt a reviled figure well before al-Hasani wrote about him, the latter's account in his Arabic-language biographical work contributes to signposting who mattered in the long story of Islam in India, and who did not.²³ But if the case of Gorakhpuri alerts us to the politics of knowledge, what of the politics of language itself? Several contributors have addressed this question insightfully in this forum. As Hinesh Shah observes, Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb was a keen reader of al-Ghazali's work, and our understanding of Aurangzeb's political thought remains inadequate if we ignore such sources of influence. If engagement with Arabic extends beyond scholars, as Shah suggests, it also goes beyond the intellectual heritage itself, as Ada Petiwala shows in an illuminating discussion of Hindi film and song in Arabic translation. Nor is this a one-way street, as she also notes; though seldom recognized for what they are, echoes of Arabic music can be heard in Hindi cinema itself. In recent decades, Arabic has also served as "the de facto screen language of Islamic terrorism," evoking the most sinister associations through the mere use of actual or supposed Arabic words. Against this backdrop, a scholar in contemporary India highlighting his ties with peers and patrons in the Arab Middle East can become a fraught matter.

Yet, as Bar Sadeh shows, there was a time when leaders of Muslim opinion in colonial India saw the inter-confessional appeal of Arabic in the modern Middle East as a model for an *Indian* language. That language was Hindustani, billed as a simplified form of Urdu and intelligible across India and beyond. Thanks to what it shared with Persian and

²¹ Al-Hasani, *Nuzhat al-Khawatir*, 7: 259. On his alleged veneration of the sun, see Thanasari, *Sawanih*, 73.

²² Malihabadi, *Azad ki Kahani*, 366–71. Azad's account of Gorakhpuri's views on modern Western sciences draws on the latter's Persian tract, 'Arz-dasht dar Bab-i Zarurat-i Tarwiji Zabani Angrezi wa 'Ulum-i Farang. I have not been able to locate this work.

²³ For a study of al-Hasani's biographical work, see Mohsin Ali, "Modern Islamic Historiography: A Global Perspective from South Asia" (PhD diss., UCLA, 2022), 205–93.

Arabic, as Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi (d. 1953) argued in 1933, Urdu was the only language that could help India maintain cultural ties with other Persian and Arabic-speaking regions—from Afghanistan to Baghdad in the case of Persian, and from the coasts of Arabia and Africa to Gibraltar for Arabic.²⁴ He proposed calling it Hindustani because doing so “would rid us of the history, concealed in the word ‘Urdu,’ of occupation by the Mughal encampment”—a reference to the putative origins of this language in the Mughal imperial camp (Turkish: *ordu*). “Hindustani” carried no such baggage, and concerted efforts to reintegrate into it Hindi words that had once been a familiar part of it would help make it a necessary complement to a shared Hindu-Muslim homeland.²⁵ Needless to say, that vision did not come to pass. Nadwi himself would emigrate to Pakistan to play a not insignificant role in debates on the new state’s Islamic identity.

The contributions to this roundtable offer exciting pointers to some of the directions in which fruitful work can and is being done to recover the history of Arabic as a South Asian language. The significance of such work lies in its potential to impart a fuller and more nuanced understanding of how various South Asia languages relate to one another.²⁶ It can also shed new light on major, but relatively neglected, areas of intellectual and social history in the South Asian context, including Islamic law and even, as Green observes, the history of the ‘ulama’ in precolonial India. Colonial and postcolonial-era ‘ulama’ have continued, in many cases, to write in Arabic, and lack of attention to this has tended to produce skewed views of their culture and politics. But this is true not only of the ‘ulama’. Altaf Husayn Hali (d. 1914), a noted associate and biographer of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, is best remembered as an Urdu litterateur but he also composed poetry in Arabic.²⁷ New work on Arabic in the South Asian context promises as well to explicate how intellectual, religious, cultural, and other trends in South Asia have informed and, in turn, been shaped by those in other Muslim societies, including but extending beyond Arabic-speaking ones. Such scholarship has begun not just to reveal hitherto unexplored facets of South Asia’s relationship with the wider world, but also to guide us to new ways of understanding South Asia itself.

²⁴ Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi, “Hindustan main Hindustani,” in idem, *Nuqush-i Sulaymani* (A’zamgarh, India: Ma’arif Press, 1939), 19–76, 66–67.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁶ It is only in the mid-twentieth century that Arzu’s *Muthmir*, the pioneering work in this area, would be rescued from a long obscurity. See Dudney, *India in the Persian World of Letters*, 93.

²⁷ See *Kulliyat-i Nazm-i Hali*, ed. Iftikhar Ahmad Siddiqi, vol. 2 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqi-yi Adab, 1968–70), 430–42.