All poets, in all ages, have placed a premium on timely themes, verbal dexterity, and aesthetic innovation, but in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century India there was a heightened sense of newness in the air. By the end of Emperor Akbar’s long reign (1556–1605), the Mughal Empire was well established, and, as we discussed above in chapter 2, the ensuing years that coincided with Chandar Bhan’s life and career saw the consolidation of a number of composite cultural trends that had, in many cases, been centuries in the making but now received a more explicit political and administrative formulation than ever before. An atmosphere of religious tolerance, a respect for scholarly inquiry and the arts, the rationalization of bureaucratic and administrative policies, and a welcoming respect not only for the cultural diversity of the subcontinent itself but also for the intellectual and commercial capital brought by travelers from around the world were all hallmarks of the Mughal state ideology of “universal civility” (ṣulḥ-i kull).

The sense of being on the cusp of a new historical era permeated the atmosphere of the Mughal court. Meanwhile, as one of the world’s most wealthy, welcoming, and tolerant locales, early modern India had become a prime destination for an extraordinarily multicultural cast of global traders, artists, service professionals, and adventurers seeking commercial opportunity and artistic patronage—Turks, Afghans, Iranians, Armenians, Yemenis, Africans, Europeans, and many others besides. This multicultural influx didn’t just add to the existing diversity of the subcontinent; the very fact that such radical pluralism was even possible fed the widespread belief among many intellectuals at the Mughal court and in the wider Indo-Persian world that a new age of social and political potential had arrived. The remarkable commercial and intellectual mobility throughout Asia and
the Indian Ocean world during this period, both overland and by sea, produced ever-newer types of encounters that were transforming intellectuals’ worldviews, giving many a palpable sense that an epochal change was under way, not just in South Asia, but across Eurasia.

One important factor in this early modern sense of epochal change across many parts of Eurasia and the Indian Ocean world was the turning of the Islamic calendar’s new millennium in 1591–92 CE, which was itself only one calendrical signpost in what has been described as a much broader “millenarian conjuncture that operated over a good part of the Old World in the sixteenth century,” from the Iberian peninsula all the way to South Asia and beyond.¹ A giddy anticipation of new human possibilities accompanied this historical moment, in Mughal India no less than elsewhere, even as the excitement was accompanied in some quarters by an equally potent revival of messianic cults, visions of impending apocalypse, and omens of the end of days.² It has even been argued recently that a certain form of millenarianism, in which the king represented the earthly embodiment of divine astrological conjunctures, was the dominant mode of understanding sovereignty in the early Mughal world, and indeed in much of South, Central, and West Asia in the post-Timurid era.³

But the sense of temporal transition was not limited to the eschatological, as a number of South Asian knowledge systems were undergoing unprecedented internal changes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was around this same time, for instance, that Sanskrit intellectuals first began drawing sharp contrasts between the work of “new” (navya) thinkers and that of “antiquated” (jīrna) scholars of generations past, inaugurating a self-consciously “new historicality by which intellectuals began to organize their discourses.”⁴ The “New Grammar,” the “New Poetics,” the “New Logic,” and so on remained largely in conversation with the classical Sanskrit tradition, but the navya discourse nevertheless opened up a space for novel forms of poetic and scholarly self-expression, including robust new idioms of regionalized Sanskrit literature, or kāvya.⁵

Meanwhile, by the sixteenth century South Asia’s “vernacular millennium” was well under way, as poets and other literati increasingly began to use spoken, regional, and other demotic languages for their compositions instead of—or in some cases in addition to—the more “classical” cosmopolitan languages like Sanskrit and Persian.⁶ The two centuries before the Mughal consolidation of power thus witnessed the emergence of flourishing new genres and literary practices in northern India, from the writings of antiestablishment devotional (bhakti) saints like Kabir, Mirabai, Caitanya, Guru Nanak, and others, to Sufi romances in the Awadhi register of Hindi such as Maulana Da’ud’s Candāyan (1379), Shaikh Qut-ban Suhrawardi’s Mirigāvatī (1503), Malik Muhammad Jayasi’s Padmāvat (1540), and Mir Sayyid Manjhan’s Madhumālatī (1545), all of which drew on multiple linguistic and religio-cultural traditions to produce almost entirely new forms of
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literary expression. The famed Rāmcaritmānas (ca. 1574), an Awadhi version of the Sanskrit epic Rāmāyana by the celebrated poet Tulsidas (1532–1623), emerged out of this same mix of generic and linguistic dialogism, as did one of the first early modern autobiographies ever produced in South Asia, the Ardha-kathānaka (Half a tale; 1641) by Banarasidas, a Jain merchant from Jaunpur who was an almost exact contemporary of our own Chandar Bhan Brahman.

Banarasidas’s witty memoir was written in Brajbhasha, another regional idiom that underwent a significant transformation during this period. Braj had long been known as a medium for regional devotional poetry, especially Vaishnava songs in praise of the Hindu deity Krishna and his consort Radha. But in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Brajbhasha also began to emerge as the preeminent “courtly vernacular” of early modern North India. As Allison Busch has argued, Braj literati during this period such as Gang (d. ca. 1608), Keshavdas (ca. 1555–1617), and others engaged in a self-conscious and unprecedented effort to reinvent high classical Sanskrit tropes, poetics, and thematic topoi for their own compositions. The resulting rīti style also included elements of the classical Persian literary idiom and became the darling of various Mughal, Rajput, and regional courts—an efflorescence that continued right up to the late nineteenth century, when such ornamental literary elegance in Hindi fell out of favor, as also happened with many early modern Persian, Urdu, and Sanskrit literary traditions that came under a withering critique from postromantic colonial and nationalist critics who viewed them as too “artificial” and “decadent” to be suitable for a modern national literature.

Against this larger historical backdrop, it is perhaps not so surprising that Indo-Persian poets like Chandar Bhan, too, would begin giving voice to a powerful sense of epochal transition in their compositions. Sure enough, over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries many early modern Mughal and Safavid poets and other literati across the transregional Indo-Persian ecumene articulated an unprecedented break with their literary past, a temporal distantiation most often invoked through calls for ingenuity and “freshness” (tāzagī) in poetic expression. It was not a complete break, though, in that even the most inventive “speakers of the fresh” (tāza-gūyān)–Chandar Bhan included—never went so far as to completely renounce the Persianate literary tradition that they had inherited. Rather, they continued to see themselves in a dynamic relationship with their poetic forebears, a relationship in which they, as the “latest” generation (muta’akhkhīrin), took up the classical precedents of “the ancients” (mutaqaddimin) and brought them to new and transcendent levels through poetic ingenuity and imaginative effort (khayāl-bandī). Thus even though for the most part poets continued to adhere to the same basic set of norms that had been developing in Persophone literature for centuries—the Persian language itself, obviously, but also its rhymes, meters, prosody, and conventional poetic tropology—they did so in very
self-conscious and formally innovative new ways. The goal, as the celebrated Mughal poet Abu al-Faiz “Faizi” Fayyazi (1547–95) put it, was to use the same “old words” (lafz-i kuhan) to generate “new meanings” (ma‘nī-yi nau), and thereby to create an updated, “fresh” (tāza) sensibility for a new era in an increasingly inter-connected new world.\textsuperscript{13}

This nearly universal urge to “make it new” emerged some three full centuries before Ezra Pound would issue his own famous modernist dictum and would thus—or so one would think—be of considerable interest to scholars of literary modernity generally.\textsuperscript{14} Strangely, though, this has not really been the case. In fact, just as the various aspects of seventeenth-century political culture that we have been examining in previous chapters have received far too little scholarly attention, so too has the era’s entire literary culture been virtually banished from modern Indo-Persian literary historiography. Indeed, one of the strangest things about the tāza-gū‘ī movement and this era of Indo-Persian literary culture generally is that its history, for all intents and purposes, has yet to be written in any proper sense of the word. This may seem like a stunning claim, especially considering that we are talking about the period that arguably witnessed the most prolific overall production of Persian literature worldwide. And yet it really is hard to argue otherwise, particularly when it comes to English-language scholarship.

The reasons for this scholarly neglect are quite complex, and I have examined them in some detail elsewhere.\textsuperscript{15} Most famously—or rather infamously, depending on your point of view—modern critics have dismissed virtually the entire literary output of the sixteenth-eighteenth century Persianate world as suffering from some sort of flawed “Indian Style” (sabk-i hindī). Some have argued that this Indian influence on Persian literature diluted the “pure Persian” idiom of earlier classical eras, in some cases specifically citing the alleged ineptitude of Mughal-era Hindu munshīs like Chandar Bhan for this defect. Others have argued that the real problem with the Indian Style was not linguistic dilution per se but rather the “Indian mind,” which has often been essentialized in this scholarly literature as somehow more prone to abstract, recondite, and abstruse subject matter than that of other places. In this sense, sabk-i hindī simply refers to what modern scholars consider to have been an unwelcome excess of “artificial” complexity in the poetry of the period, for which they blame India alone. In other words, according to this line of thinking—which, incidentally, was not formulated until the twentieth century—just about any poets in the early modern Persianate world who showed any hint of novelty, eccentricity, or formal experimentation in their compositions were doing so under the spell of the “Indian style,” whether or not they themselves were Indian, and indeed whether or not they had any connection to India at all.

Of course, these two positions are somewhat at odds, for it is hard to see how the alleged ineptitude of Persophone literati in India could simultaneously produce a literature so complex as to be not only unappealing but unintelligible (as
more than one commentator has characterized the poetry of the so-called sabk-i hindī. Be that as it may, the real problem from the perspective of literary and cultural history is that the entire notion of a characteristically “Indian Style” is an anachronistic and purely modern invention, one that would have been completely foreign to Chandar Bhan and any other poet of his era. This is not just a quibble about nomenclature, moreover. By treating certain features of the era’s poetry as somehow essentially and timelessly “Indian,” modern scholarship has approached these cultural phenomena far too ahistorically and in the process has almost completely forgotten that what the fresh poets—be they from India, Iran, Central Asia, Turkey, or somewhere else in the Persianate world—were really expressing was an exuberant sense of the novelty of the historical moment, one that cries out for examination as part of a larger conjuncture of global early modern literary consciousness.

The problem with the entire sabk-i hindī paradigm, in other words, is not necessarily its essentialism and its implicit—and sometimes explicit—cultural chauvinism, though that too is unfortunate. The real problem, analytically, is that it distracts us from the actual social, cultural, and historical dynamics that animated the Indo-Persian literati of the early modern period, nearly all of whom were far more interested in questions of newness and literary ingenuity than in “Indian-ness” as such. To see what this meant in practice, let us return to the poets and poetry of the period and try to see how they might have been viewed by someone with Chandar Bhan’s sense of literary style.

THE POETICS OF LITERARY REFRESHMENT

Given how neglected this period of Indo-Persian literary culture has been in modern scholarship, it is difficult to know where to begin in terms of how to introduce readers to Chandar Bhan’s perspective on such matters. Let us recall that Chandar Bhan was born in late sixteenth-century Lahore and that he most likely died in the late 1660s, that is, about a decade into Aurangzeb ‘Alamgir’s reign. Throughout his upwardly mobile administrative career trajectory, Chandar Bhan also gained a reputation as a poet of some distinction, and like most poets of his day he collected his substantial body of Persian verse into a volume normally referred to simply as the Dīwān-i Brahman. His prose works, as we have seen in previous chapters, are also peppered with various ghazals (lyrics), rubā’īs (quatrains), and individual couplets, some of which correspond to verses in the Dīwān, while others appear to have been stand-alone compositions. His poetic style has generally been praised by his immediate contemporaries for both its fluid elegance and its searching mystical temperament. But Chandar Bhan was also highly conscious, like most poets of the era, that he was living in what many saw as a new age, and he sought to inject that exuberant sense of newness directly into his verse.
Where did this idiom of “speaking the fresh,” of reinvigorating the classical Persian canon, actually come from? As we have seen from the discussion in previous chapters, Chandar Bhan lived and worked at a time when Persian language and literature flourished all over India, both as a courtly medium of elite literary expression (as it had already done for upwards of half a millennium), and as the official language through which the administration of the Mughal imperium was conducted. State policy encouraged Persian-medium education throughout the Mughal territories, not just for the literary and courtly nobility, but across the social and religious spectrum. Chandar Bhan’s father, both brothers, and son Tej Bhan all appear to have been accomplished Persian writers, and the addressees of his letter collection, the Munsha’āt-i Brahman, are representative of a variety of demographics, as we have amply seen in earlier chapters.

Meanwhile, the lavish patronage available to poets and other literati at the Mughal court, as well as the Persianized courts of the Deccan, attracted a steady flow of Persophone poets and other litterateurs from Central and West Asia to India, where they often found a congenial and lucrative haven in which to practice their craft. This was in stark contrast, often, to the political unrest in much of Central Asia during this period, which had made consistent patronage difficult to secure. Thus, as one poet of the times, ‘Abd al-Razzaq Fayyaz Lahiji, put it: “Great is India, the Mecca for all in need / particularly for those who seek safety.” Another “push” factor that made India an appealing destination for Persianate literati of this period was the Safavid Empire’s increasingly restrictive vision of a shī’a state, a development accompanied by a considerably more censorious atmosphere that was generally inhospitable to overly provocative and antinomian poetry. Ghazali of Mashhad (b. 1527), for instance, was a well-traveled and well-known Iranian literary figure long before he ever came to India. But in the sectarian political climate of Safavid Iran, Ghazali’s poetry gained a reputation for “immodest” (bī-i’tidāl) subject matter and an “uninhibited style” (shewa-i bī-qaidī)—so much so that a group of ‘ulamā actually issued a fatwā calling for his execution. It was fear that this fatwā would be carried out that led him to leave for India, where, no longer fearing for his life, he eventually thrived as the emperor Akbar’s first poet laureate (malik al-shu’arā).

Indeed, Mughal India came to be viewed all over the wider Persianate world as a haven for intellectual freedom and literary genius, a place of such bounteous opportunity that, according to a verse of Talib Amuli (d. 1626)—another Iranian expatriate in India, who at one time served as Jahangir’s poet laureate—any Iranian traveler who got homesick while sojourning there “should be ashamed of himself” (sharm bād-ash). For poets in particular, Mughal India developed a reputation as one of the few remaining places where sufficient patronage and institutional appreciation were available with which to perfect one’s craft—a sentiment neatly summed up by ‘Ali Quli Salim’s famous couplet:
The means of acquiring perfection do not exist in the land of Iran, [Just as] henna has no true color, until it comes to Hindustan.

[\textit{nīst dar īrān-zamīn sāmān-i tahsīl-i kamāl tā nayāmad sū-yi hindūstān ḥīnā rangīn nashud}]^{21}

As with henna, so too with poets, and thus there was a kind of double infusion of Persophone intellectual production into India under the Mughals: one homegrown and “grassroots,” made up of relatively new South Asian demographics (represented by intellectuals like Chandar Bhan and his family) who were mastering Persian and deploying that mastery within the ambit of Mughal imperial and subimperial administration, commerce, art, and culture; and the other transregional and cosmopolitan, made up of expatriates from across the Persophone world who came to India in search of asylum, patronage, commerce, employment, or plain old adventure. Some of these travelers wound up settling in the subcontinent permanently, while others, like the celebrated poet Sa’īb Tabrizi (ca. 1592–1676), stayed only for a relatively short time—in Sa’īb’s case, barely seven to eight years—before returning home or continuing their peripatetic careers elsewhere.\textsuperscript{22}

One crucial figure for the present discussion who did settle in India for good was Masih al-Din “Hakim” Abu al-Fath Gilani (d. 1589), whose intellectual circle appears to have been the first to actually begin using the expression \textit{tāza-gū’ī}. We can, in other words, actually trace the usage of the term \textit{tāza} as a marker of poetic value with relative historical precision, to about one or two generations before Chandar Bhan’s own professional heyday. Abu al-Fath’s father had been a local ecclesiastical authority in northern Iran but had fallen out of favor and had eventually died in prison after Shah Tahmasp I (r. 1524–76) conquered his home province of Gilan in 1566–67. Fearing similar treatment, Abu al-Fath, together with his brothers Hakim Hamam and Hakim Nur al-Din, sought refuge in India, where all three managed to gain appointments in Emperor Akbar’s service. Abu al-Fath never achieved an especially illustrious rank at the Mughal court, though the emperor was apparently quite fond of him, and he did distinguish himself in various governmental and military capacities before his death in 1589. But it would appear, in any case, that his most lasting influence was clearly in the realm of literary culture, and the timing here is not insignificant for our purposes—Abu al-Fath died right about the time that Chandar Bhan was born, meaning that our own \textit{munshi} would have received his education and literary training at exactly the time when the notion of \textit{tāza-gū’ī} was first becoming fashionable. Meanwhile, the earliest source to specifically credit Abu al-Fath Gilani with popularizing the concept of \textit{tāza-gū’ī} appears to be the \textit{Ma’āṣir-i Raḥīmī} (ca. 1616–17), a chronicle of the court of the celebrated Mughal grandee ‘Abd al-Rahim Khan-i Khanan (1556–1627) by the Iranian émigré ‘Abd al-Baqi
Nahawandi (1570–1637). ‘Abd al-Rahim’s court was renowned for its literary and artistic patronage, and almost the entirety of the third volume of *Ma’āṣir-i Rahimī* is taken up with biographies of the many notable poets, artists, mystics, and others who enjoyed his patronage at one time or another. It is there that Nahawandi notes that the first literati to use such “fresh” terminology were those in Abu al-Fath Gilani’s literary circle. “To the poets and literati of today,” Nahawandi explains, “it is well known that *tāza-gū’ī*—which has become the fashion among the elegant poets of this era, such as Shaikh Faizi, Maulana ‘Urfi Shirazi, etc., who all composed in this mode [rawish]—was introduced and promoted by [Abu al-Fath Gilani].”23

“Shaikh Faizi” refers, of course, to the renowned Indian poet and intellectual Abu al-Faiz “Faizi” Fayyazi (1547–95), who remains widely regarded as one of the greatest Indo-Persian literati of all time and was also the elder brother of Akbar’s even more famous minister Abu al-Fazl.24 “Maulana” Jamal al-Din Muhammad ‘Urfi Shirazi (1555–91), on the other hand, was an émigré from Iran who had gone to India in 1584, where he became a friend and sometime rival of Faizi, and is also usually lauded—or condemned, depending on the critic’s vantage point—as one of the most formidable poets of the era.25 Both Faizi and ‘Urfi are among the “moderns” (*muta’akkhirīn*) whose works Chandar Bhan advises his son Tej Bhan to study (*CC*, 177), while Nahawandi describes ‘Urfi, in particular, as the “inventor of the fresh style” (*mukhtarā-‘yi ūrāz-i tāza*). Significantly, Nahawandi also calls attention to ‘Urfi’s considerable success in the literary salons of Shiraz even before he came to India at age twenty-nine, adding that “he has won accolades for his poetic virtuosity [ash’ariyat], fresh speaking [*tāza-gū’ī*], and subtlety [*nādir-sanjī*] among the people of Iraq, Fars, Khurasan, Turkistan, Hindustan, and the far corners of the world.”26 Indeed, it was perhaps because he lived in an age of such unprecedented cosmopolitan mobility that, according to Nahawandi, ‘Urfi was able to achieve a level of fame that his “peers and equals, namely the master literati of the past such as Khaqani, Anwari, Sa’di, and Shaikh Nizami,” were unable to experience in their own lifetimes.27

Within the trio, then, Abu al-Fath Gilani seems clearly to have acted as more of a facilitator, patron, and intellectual inspiration than a prolific litterateur himself. Apart from a collection of letters, he has not left behind much of a literary oeuvre, although he was known as a talented physician (hence the epithet “Hakim”) and is credited with writing a handful of notable treatises, including a commentary on Ibn Sina, as well as a manual for physicians called *Mujarrabāt* (Proven remedies).28 (He is also popularly credited, incidentally, with introducing the hookah to India.) Abu al-Fath Gilani obviously had an eye for literary talent, though, and Nahawandi mentions that he was among the first in India to recognize ‘Urfi’s genius and secure patronage for him, while Faizi, for his part, exalts the Hakim in one letter as a “second Plato” (*aflāṭūn-i šānī*).29
Prior to this historical moment no one seems to have ever used the term tāza-gū’ī to designate a poetic movement or particular era, much less both at once. One can find poetic precursors who influenced the tāza poets, of course, like Baba Fighani of Shiraz (d. 1519), whose oeuvre and popularity among later early modern generations have been exhaustively analyzed by Paul Losensky.30 And many poets throughout the ages had obviously boasted of their own individual genius and originality, a gesture known as ta’allī (self-exaltation), or sometimes fakhr (pride, boasting)—but never before had there been such a collective expression of self-conscious literary newness across the Persophone world.

This does not mean, however, that literary periodization itself was new, as Indo-Persian literati had been distinguishing between the poetry of the “ancients” (mutaqaddimin) and the “later” (muta’ākhirin) or “contemporary” (mu’āṣirin) poets for quite some time. Differentiating among different poetic styles was also not new. For instance, in some cases earlier critics referred to regional “schools,” or dabistāns, within the larger Persophone world.32 These were not abstract, geographically deterministic categories along the lines of modern sabk-theory, however; rather, they usually referred to the work of specific poets or groups of poets at specific courts, or in certain cosmopolitan regional centers like Isfahan, Shiraz, Herat, Samarqand, and Delhi, at particular historical moments. Thus, for instance, the great North Indian Chishti Sufi Nizam al-Din Auliya (d. 1325) is reported to have advised Amir Khusrau to write “in the manner of the Isfahanis” (bar ūzarz-i isfahāniyān)—not because Isfahan had some special claim to the authoritative Persian dialect, but because there was a clique of particularly talented poets from Isfahan during that era who were worth emulating.

There were also several common terms that critics used to distinguish the styles of master poets. The modern Urdu literary critic Shamsur Rahman Faruqi has noted, for instance, that the traditional way of classifying Indo-Persian literary styles could comfortably allow for multiple styles and fashions to coexist in any given era. Drawing on Amir Khusrau’s literary critical essay prefacing his Diwān-i Ghurrat al-Kamāl (The new moon of perfection), Faruqi shows that words like ūzarz (“manner”), shewa (“practice”), and rawish (“mode”)—the term that Nahawandi uses above to denote the tāza-gū’ī movement—could all refer to subsets of conventional poetic style.34 These might emphasize different aspects of the versifier’s craft or be further calibrated to the influence of particular canonical poets. But, as in almost all literary criticism the world over, the gradations among the compositional postures denoted by such terms could be very subjective, with considerable overlap across categories. Thus a poet might see himself as a follower of one earlier master’s rawish in one genre and another’s shewa in another genre. Amir Khusrau is a case in point: though he is renowned for boastful Indophilia and is considered a quintessential forerunner to the supposedly eccentric and overly intellectualized “Indian Style” (sabk-i hindi), the poets that Khusrau himself
claims to have tried hardest to emulate were all paragons of the classical canon: he
considered himself a disciple of Sana’i Ghaznawi and Khaqani in certain didactic
genres but a follower of Nizami Ganjawi and Sa’di Shirazi in expressive forms like
maṣnawi and ghazal.\textsuperscript{35}

Much of this earlier critical vocabulary continued to be used even after tāza-
gū’ī came into vogue, and commentators continued to refer to the early modern li-
terati as “moderns” (muta’ākkhirin), or sometimes “contemporaries” (mu’āṣirin)
well into the nineteenth century. Even Chandar Bhan uses this terminology, for
instance to distinguish between the volumes of classical versus contemporary
poetry available in the book markets of Lahore.\textsuperscript{36} Later in Chahār Chaman,
he again uses the same terms to classify the various poets whose works he advises his
son Tej Bhan to study as either “ancients” (mutaqaddimin) like Firdausi, Rumi,
Sa’di, Hafiz, and Nizami, or “moderns” (muta’ākkhirin) like Faizi and ‘Urfi (CC,
176–77). Notably, in Chandar Bhan’s classificatory scheme Indian poets of earlier
times like Mas’ud Sa’d Salman, Amir Khusrau, and Hasan Dehlavi are not listed
separately as peculiarly “Indian” but rather fit comfortably alongside all the other
canonical ancients, just as Faizi (an Indian) and ‘Urfi (an Iranian) are classed to-
gether with the other moderns. Note too, moreover, that Chandar Bhan specifi-
cally cautions his son not to begin dabbling too much in more modern and con-
temporary works until after “you have completely finished your junior studies of
the books of the ancients [mutaqaddimin].” Thereafter, he explains, “Your natural
literary inclinations [tab‘-i sukhan-dost] will lead you to the poetry of the moderns
[muta’ākkhirin]” (CC, 177).

But unlike a term like muta’ākkhirin, which was for the most part strictly a
temporal designation for poets of recent vintage, whatever their stylistic orienta-
tion, the term tāza had a much more complicated dual sense, announcing both
an epochal transition and an unprecedented—albeit somewhat ambiguous—
aesthetic claim: that the new age demanded a new, “refreshed” poetic sensibil-
ity, one that was, moreover, not merely the product of any individual genius but
the product of a collective, “fresh” new worldview. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-
century commentators began increasingly to speak of the poetic now, and phrases
drawing self-conscious attention to “the [literary] manner of our present age”
(ṭarz-i zamān-i mā), or the “fresh mode of our era” (rawish-i tāza dar ‘ahd-i mā),
and so on, became ever more common across the Indo-Persian world.\textsuperscript{38}

This by itself represented a strikingly new way of talking about Indo-Persian
literary historicality. But it is equally clear that “making it new” in this context did
not mean completely exploding the existing formal and thematic conventions that
had made for good literature. Indeed, Nahawandi never suggests that tāza-gūyān
like Faizi and ‘Urfi invented an entirely new form of poetry. Both were steeped in
multiple classical traditions and continued using the established meters, drawing
from the existing array of Indo-Persian poetic tropes and themes such as the rose,
the nightingale, the wine of mystical and worldly intoxication, the poet-lover’s angst at the unattainability of the B/beloved, the unreasonableness of orthodox clerics, and so on.39 'Urfi was especially attuned to mystically speculative verse, a knack for expressing “gnostic yearning” (‘ārifāna-yi ‘āshiqāna) that, according to Ma’āṣir-i Rahimī, led “all the eloquent literati and poetic craftsmen to keep his Dīwān of ghazals and qaṣīdas with them day and night, attached to their bosoms as if it were a magic talisman.”40 Meanwhile, in his own verse ‘Urfi not only paid homage to the poetry of past masters like Kamal al-Din Isfahani and Khaqani but also was especially renowned for his innovative emulations of the panegyrics (qaṣīdas) of the twelfth-century master of the form, Auhad al-Din Anwari.41

Such emulation of past masters from the classical tradition, often in an explicit attempt to outdo them, was itself—perhaps paradoxically—a common driver of poetic innovation in Indo-Persian literary culture. In fact, in his analysis of Baba Fighani’s legacy Paul Losensky has amply demonstrated that it was common practice during this period for reputation-seeking poets to “greet” or “welcome” poets of earlier generations into their own oeuvre by writing “answers” (jawābs) to their predecessors’ greatest works.42 Poets had been writing such jawābs for centuries. For instance, Nizami Ganjawi’s collection of romantic epics (maṣnūnīs) was so widely admired and imitated across the Indo-Persian world that the mere mention of their number had the force of a proper name—“The Five” (khamsa).43 Amir Khusravī wrote five maṣnūnīs attempting to outdo them, and ‘Abd al-Rahman Jami (d. 1492), the great poet from Herat, had, in turn, tried to outdo Khusravī. Still later Faizi, ‘Urfi, and numerous other tāza-gūyān all tried their hand at refreshing the same set of master texts.

Usually such jawābs were expected to be in the same rhyme and metrical pattern as the original poem, imposing significant formal constraints on later poets. This also meant that for each succeeding generation “the dialectic between innovation and tradition, between poetic intention and literary convention” grew ever more acute, as it grew increasingly difficult to distinguish one’s self from the crowd of other imitators, past and present.44 Fellow connoisseurs, many of whom might be composing rival jawābs of their own, would be equally familiar with both the master text(s) and all the earlier attempts to answer them; and in such a competitive atmosphere clever manipulation of wordplay, tropes, and conventional themes came to be at an increasingly high premium. But all of this, it must be remembered, continued to take place within the formal and thematic parameters of classical meter, rhyme, and convention. The goal was not to renounce the canon but to “reevaluate, reform, and recreate the tradition in order to do it justice.”45

The era thus witnessed what the modern Urdu scholar Shamsur Rahman Faruqi has aptly described as a widespread literary “treasure hunt for new themes and meanings.”46 But it was one in which poets were expected to modulate, not
overthrow, the cosmopolitan traditions they had inherited. One could do this by taking an established classical theme or trope (mażmūn) and reformulating it in a “fresh” or creative new way or by mixing and matching images to create an entirely new literary topos—a gesture that came to be known as “theme invention” (mażmūn-āfirīnī). To the untrained eye, a verse with a novel theme might look just like any old verse from the Persian canon; but true connoisseurs prided themselves on not only composing but recognizing in the work of others verse that introduced new imagery to the stock of classical Persian tropes. A related concept that came to be known as “meaning creation” (ma’nī-āfirīnī) usually involved the remixing of common tropes and idioms, or the subtle variation of old thematic patterns, to produce entirely new meanings out of shopworn conventions.47

Merely “Indianizing” one’s verse in some obvious way was thus hardly enough to qualify one as a truly fresh poet. This is why most of the poets lauded in Maʿāshir-i Rahīmī as talented “fresh speakers” (tāza-gūyān) are noted not for tackling a particular subject matter, or for embodying a particular literary lineage, or for hailing from a particular place, but rather for contributing general traits and gestures of ingenuity that built on the classical canon. Naziri Nishapuri (ca. 1560–1614), for instance, is commended by Nahawandi for giving voice to “elusive meanings and complex themes” (maʿānī-yi gharība wa mażmīn-i mushkila), a talent that made him the “captain of eloquent poets and the commander of lovers of genuine expression.”48 Naziri had made his poetic reputation in Kashan long before setting out for India, where he initially became attached to the court of ‘Abd al-Rahim Khan-i Khānan and later emerged as one of Emperor Jahangir’s favorite court poets before retiring to Gujarat, where he died. He is also, like ‘Urfi and Faizi, included in Chandar Bhan’s list of “modern” poets worth studying (CC, 177). Despite his great success in India, though, and despite spending the bulk of his career during the peak era of tāza-gū’ī, Naziri is actually best known for having self-consciously patterned his qaṣīdas after those of the twelfth-century Khurasani master Anwari, as his great rival ‘Urfi Shirazi had also often done. In turn, Naziri’s lyrics have been compared favorably with those of both the modern Iranian poet Qa’anī (d. 1854) and the fourteenth-century master Hafiz Shirazi, whose ghazals he sometimes “welcomed” through emulation.49

Another Persian poet from the period who is often associated with India and sabk-i hindī was Nur al-Dīn “Zuhuri” Tarshizi (d. 1615).50 It is not entirely clear where he was born—possibly Tehran, but more likely a village called Khujand, in the Khurasani district of Tarshiz—but we do know a bit more about his travels later in life. After a basic education in topics like grammar, literature, prosody, and rational sciences, he had already gained quite a reputation as a poet while still a youth in Khurasan. This renown had clearly already spread to other localities, and when he traveled as a young man to Yazd his reputation preceded him—securing him both the hospitality of one Nawab Mir Ghiyas al-Dīn Mir Miran
and an almost immediate rivalry with the leading local poet, Wahshi (d. 1583) (who is, incidentally, also on Chandar Bhan’s list of outstanding modern poets). From Yazd, Zuhuri traveled to Shiraz, where one of the many regular poetic assemblies he participated in was held in the shop of a local baker known simply as Mirza Husain. He stayed in Shiraz for seven years, continuing his poetic training and mastering the art of calligraphy under the tutelage of one Maulana Darwish Husain. Eventually he became affiliated with the court of the Safavid ruler Shah ‘Abbas, but, feeling underappreciated and bereft of the necessary patronage, left for India. He first settled not at the Mughal court but at the court of Burhan Nizam Shah, the Sultan of Ahmadnagar, and thence made his way to the ‘Adil Shahi court at Bijapur. It was during this sojourn in the Deccan that he first met Faizi, who was himself on a diplomatic assignment in the south.

Given this itinerary, assessing either credit or blame to “India,” much less the Mughals, for Zuhuri’s poetic style seems like more than a stretch. Meanwhile, Nahawandi’s Ma’āśir-i Raḥīmī says of him that “by raining down excellence and grace, the clouds of his lofty nature gushed artistry and accomplishment, as he made the springtime of words and meaning and the garden of eloquence and subtlety lush and verdant.” Notably, however, Nahawandi adds that despite his ingenuity Zuhuri’s verse was widely respected for being “free of formal excess and ostentation” (bī-ghā’ila-yi takalluf wa šā’iba-yi taṣalluf).\(^5\)

In short, each of these so-called “Indian Style” Iranian poets already had clearly established reputations before ever arriving in India, and in some cases did not even begin their Indian careers at the Mughal court. This is not meant to support the argument, put forward by some recent Iranian scholars, that sabk-i hindī should be renamed the sabk-i isfahānī or some such—for that would simply replace one flawed metageography with another.\(^6\) The point, rather, is that such static geographies are fundamentally inadequate in the first place, particularly when we are talking about a literary world in which poets rarely remained in one city for too long, much less one country. They traveled in circuits from one intellectual center to another, attaching themselves to a succession of local literary salons and patrons, sometimes moving out of need, and sometimes simply in search of a change of scenery.

That is a major reason why, for the poets of this period, geographical location was far less important as a marker of literary taste than location in time, vis-à-vis the canon of past masters whose works they so admired and struggled so hard to surpass. Far from requiring a mere shift to a new civilizational climate, the path of renewal required poets to refresh the “simple” (sāda) poetics of a tradition grown “cold” and stale (afsūarda), an impulse reflected in this couplet by Jahangir’s one-time poet laureate, Talib Amuli (d. 1626):

I am ashamed of stale simple-speak, Talib;
My poetry and I require a metaphoricity all their own.
In other words, no matter where poets lived, the most important indicator of literary excellence was not Indianization but ingenuity—a fresh poetic voice that was “all their own.” Stale and bland images were to be spiced up and given new flavors, as Chandar Bhan suggests in this vivid culinary image:

Brahman, the savoriness of this fresh ghazal is something else;
As if the thought of her lips has been sprinkled over my barbecued heart.

But the emphasis, as it is here, was on imaginative reinvention, not rejection, of the classic Persianate canon and conventions.

Faizi’s oeuvre, which was perhaps even more wide-ranging than ‘Urfi’s and was similarly steeped in various classical traditions, is a case in point. Unfortunately, thanks to the sabk-i hindī paradigm, Faizi has often been viewed quite narrowly in a lot of modern scholarship simply as an “Indianizer” of Persian. At some level, this perhaps understandable, as even in his own time much of Faizi’s fame rested on his talent for adapting classical Indic texts into Persian, such as the Mahābhārata, the Bhagavad Gītā, Bhaskara’s twelfth-century mathematical treatise Līlāvatī, and the romantic legend of Nala and Damayanti. Faizi himself, however, was also one of the most accomplished Arabic savants of his day, something he tried to prove by penning an extensive commentary on the Qur’an. What made this routine exegesis “fresh,” though, was the fact that Faizi managed to compose the entire text using only undotted letters. Then, as if to prove that this extraordinary feat was no fluke, Faizi also wrote an entire treatise on ethics in which he did exactly the reverse, using only letters with dots. Meanwhile, in his more conventional Persian poetry, even when Faizi played with the concept of tāzagī, his ghazals were overwhelmingly imbued with classical Indo-Persian poetic conceits, particularly the anguish of mystical love, or ‘ishq, as in these two couplets.

My heart burns from a fresh scar;
Once again, the house has caught fire.

The fresh martyrs of the beloved’s wink gain new life;
For the sword of love reanimates the victims of sacrifice.

[zi sāda-gū’i-yi afsurda nādim-am Ṭālib
man-o-sukhān ba hamān ẓarz-i istī‘āra-i khwēsh]

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[barahman in ghazal-i tāza rā digar namaki-st
magar khayāl-i lab-ash bar dil-i kabāb guzasht]

(\textit{DB}, 81.7)

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My heart burns from a fresh scar;
Once again, the house has caught fire.

[\textit{dil-am az dāgh-i tāza misozam
bāz dar khāna ātish uftād ast}]

The fresh martyrs of the beloved’s wink gain new life;
For the sword of love reanimates the victims of sacrifice.

[jān yāftand tāza-shahīdān-i ghamza-‘sh
shamshīr-i ‘ishq zindāgī-afzā-yi bismil ast]
It’s a bit difficult to convey in English, but neither of these verses is eccentrically “Indianized” in any demonstrable way, nor does either contain any Hindi words that might make it difficult for an audience outside South Asia to understand. On the contrary, however clever the conceits of both might be, stylistically they are perfectly conventional.

To be sure, elsewhere in his oeuvre Faizi sometimes engaged in the art of “self-exaltation” (تَالِی) vis-à-vis his cosmopolitan rivals, but even then he was apt to couch the boast in the language of a Sufi āshiq:

Do not seek the road to abstention from Faizi,
For the master of love [i.e. Faizi himself]
has shown the Persians the way to the tavern.

[tariq-i zuhd zi Faizi majū ki murshid-i ‘ishq
namūd rāh-i kharābāt parsīyān rā]58

However assertive such boasting may appear on the surface, there is nothing in this couplet that reflects the sort of radical literary or linguistic Indianization postulated by the sabk-i hindi paradigm. Faizi had a clear sense of pride in his Indian identity, no doubt; but he also saw himself and India as full participants in the Persophone ecumene and considered tāza-gū’ī to be a movement generated by a transregional avant-garde, not just by poets who had some connection to India. Hence his praise for Muhtasham Kashani (d. 1588), the Safavid “sun of poets” (shams al-shu’arā) who apparently never left his hometown in central Iran, and thus never met Faizi, but about whom Faizi nevertheless exclaims:

The silk-spinner of expression is that great man [muḥtasham] in Kashan,
Who embroiders his eloquence with a fresh technique.

[harīr-bāf-i sukhan muḥtasham ki dar kāshān
ba tārāz-i tāza tārāz-i sukhanwarī dārad]59

Given Faizi’s admiration for Kashani, it should come as no surprise that he too was included in Chandar Bhan’s own list of essential modern poets a couple of generations later (CC, 177). Meanwhile Faizi, for his part, drew confidently on the deep civilizational connection between India and ancient Persia to claim both traditions:

I might be Indian, but even so, through sheer talent,
I claim the championship
among those whose language is Pahlawi [i.e., ancient Persian].

[gar hindiyam wa lekin dāram ba zor-i qudrat
bā pahlawī-zabānān da’wā-yi pahlawānī]60

Even Faizi’s forays into explicitly Indic literary topoi were often framed in terms that a broad audience across the Persophone ecumene could make sense of. Thus in the epilogue to *Nal-Daman* he locates the tale as part of the universal
“story of Love” (hādīs-i ḥaṣq), invokes the legendary mystical prophet Khizr as his guide, describes himself as a modern Barbud—the medieval Persian musician proverbial for his lilting melodies—and claims that a hundred nightingales would croon that “an ‘Iraqi rose has blossomed in India.” The subject matter itself might be Indophilic, in other words, but the form is utterly classical, and the Indian elements are artfully transcreated for a transregional cosmopolitan audience. Indeed, Faizi insists in the same passage that his poetic character is drawn as much from Ganja as from Delhi, yet another clear indication that he, like Amir Khusrau and ‘Abd al-Rahman Jami before him, and many others besides, sought to measure himself against the classical standard set by Nizami Ganjawi.

In fact such Indophilia, while perhaps especially robust under the Mughals, was hardly new in Persianate literary and intellectual culture. As the research of Finbarr B. Flood and others has so well demonstrated, South, Central, and West Asia had been interconnected in a vast, transregional “mercantile cosmopolis” for centuries. People and ideas moved quite freely in this cosmopolitan world, unhindered by modern boundary and identity controls, and among the various classes of merchants, men of war, religious pilgrims, craftsmen, artisans, literati, and other men of the pen who made their way to and through the subcontinent the “wonders of India” (‘ajā‘īb al-hind) had always provided a fertile source of imaginative possibilities. It should not be surprising, then, that many early modern poets continued to use “exotic” aspects of Indian culture to expand their metaphorical repertoire, even when writing for Persianate audiences beyond the subcontinent. Moreover, by the literary standards of the age the mere act of incorporating Indic mythemes and cultural topoi into a Persian composition was not enough to make the work tāza. It might lend a measure of superficial novelty to a composition, but the poetry itself still had to convey an ill-defined—but no less necessary—blend of classical (Persian) allusiveness, verbal artistry, and inventive meaning.

Faizi’s Iranian contemporary Nau‘i Khabushani (d. 1609), for instance, explored the trope of Hindu widow immolation (sati) as a metaphor for the apotheosis of romantic love (‘ishq) in an epic called “Burning and Melting” (Soz-o-Gudāz). But even this “exotic” topos was hardly new, having served for some time as a common way for Sufis and other mystics to express wonder at what they considered to be an act of sublime devotion, the Hindu woman burning herself alive out of love for her husband. Besides, stylistically speaking Nau‘i’s text is composed in an extremely common Persian meter and is explicitly modeled not on anything “Hindi” but rather on a text of indisputable classical Persian credentials, Nizami’s epic “Khusrau and Shirin.” Such compositions always existed in multiple literary contexts, registers, and genealogies, in other words, and for many commentators in the Persian literary audience, specifically, the use of Indic literary topos, or the occasional Hindi word, barely elicited comment. In this case,
Nau'i is praised generally in Ma‘āṣir-i Rahīmī for the “colorful meanings [ma‘ānī-yi rangin] and heartfelt poems that sprang from his passionate nature,” traits that made him “distinguished and exceptional among the fresh speakers of the current age [tāza-gūyān-i in zamān].”

Perhaps it should come as no surprise, then, that Nau'i was also on Chandar Bhan’s syllabus of moderns worth studying (CC, 177). But both Chandar Bhan and Nahawandi are notably silent on the “Indianness” of Nau'i’s work. Chandar Bhan, in fact, doesn’t mention it at all, while Nahawandi says of Soz-o-Gudāz only that “[Nau'i] has embellished the fabric of a maṣnawī in the meter of [Nizami’s] Khusrau wa Shīrīn, called ‘Burning and Melting,’ with glittering ornaments, and done it extremely well.”\(^{65}\) For Nahawandi what was noteworthy about Soz-o-Gudāz, in other words, was not its ostensibly “exotic” Indian subject matter but rather its expert use of language and its location within the larger taxonomy of Persianate literary canonical precedents. Indeed, no matter which classical tradition one was attempting to rejuvenate, Faizi’s goal of stretching the “old words” (lafz-i kuhan) so as to produce “new meanings” (ma‘ānī-yi nau) applied equally whether one was drawing from Indic or Perso-Islamic traditions.

**CHANDAR BHAN’S FRESH POETRY**

In Chandar Bhan’s own verse, we see a blending of the fresh aesthetic with a deeply mystical sensibility similar to what we saw in Faizi’s and some of the other verses quoted above. The historian of Shah Jahan’s reign, Muhammad Salih Kam-buh, for instance, observed that Chandar Bhan used to get so overcome with the pain of mystical yearning that he often wept while reciting his verse. Perhaps our munshi himself had this personality quirk in mind when he composed this playful couplet:

>Pour forth such tears from your flowing eyes, O Brahman,  
That you can fetch fresh water for the priests.  

\[birekht ashk chunān barhaman zi dida-i tār  
ki āb-i tāza ba rūy-i barahmanān āward\]  
(\textit{DB}, 174.5)

There’s quite a bit going on in this clever bit of verse. The first line is plain enough, drawing on a common trope of the poet crying floods of tears in the anguish of separation from the Beloved. These are mystical, Sufi tears. But Chandar Bhan adds a nice twist in the second hemistich (\textit{misra‘}): cry so much, he tells himself, that you can collect enough “fresh water” (āb-i tāza) to fetch and present (ba rūy awarden) to the class of Brahmans generally, presumably to use in their ritual bathing. The implied contrast, one could say, is between
Chandar Bhan’s own mystical and esoteric awareness as a poet-lover-mystic and the empty, formulaic, exoteric rituals of other “mere” Brahmans. Meanwhile, there is also a nice wordplay in the second line. Āb-i rūy literally means “face water,” that is, perspiration, but idiomatically, presumably because of water’s reflective properties, the expression can also be used to suggest a face that is bright, shining, glistening, or otherwise radiant—hence its further connotations of honor, dignity, and so on. Thus the second line can also be read as “so that you can restore fresh luster/dignity to the Brahmans,” that is, by showing them a heightened degree of mystical awareness, the evidence for which is the very tears of existential yearning “poured forth” in the first line, and with which you can also—in yet a further connotation—quite literally wash, and thus brighten, their faces.

Such compact, inventive, and elegant wordplay was the essence of the fresh aesthetic. And in Chandar Bhan’s case, his identity as a Brahman allowed him plenty of opportunity to toy with other poetic topoi that were commonly associated with Hindus, but had nevertheless been a part of the Persianate poetic tradition for ages, such as the “time-honored” Sufi and Indo-Persian literary trope of the unattainable beloved as an idol (śanam or but) and the poet-lover-mystic as an idol worshipper (śanam- / but-parast), “leaving the Ka’ba and going to the idol temple”—a play of concepts, that, as Annemarie Schimmel once noted, “[has] been part and parcel of the Persian tradition for the last millennium.”66 It was surely this cluster of associations that led Salih to playfully describe Chandar Bhan as “the idol worshipper in the temple of poetic expression” (śanam-parast-i but-khāna-i sukhan). To Salih, in other words, Chandar Bhan was an idol worshipper not just as a member of the Hindu community, but also as a mystical poet always yearning for the perfect, unattainable, Reality that can only be imperfectly conceived through language. Thus one uses poetry as a substitute, a way to use linguistic form (ṣūrat) to at least try and approximate true Meaning (ma’ni), just as the religious devotee uses an idol as a kind of imperfect metaphor for the transcendent, immanent God. It is precisely in this vein that the Mughal emperor Jahangir once accepted the explanation of a group of pundits that the use of idols in Hindu worship was not, in fact, an affront to monotheism but rather a subtle means to it.67 And this seems clearly to be what Salih has in mind when he insists that “even though [Chandar Bhan] appears to be a sacred thread-wearer, his intellect transcends infidelity; even though he has the form [ṣūrat] of a Hindu, in essence [dar ma’ni] he [also] breathes Islam.”68

This reference to Chandar Bhan’s “sacred thread” (zunnār), too, was no coincidence. At the literal level, it obviously drew attention to Chandar Bhan’s identity as, in fact, a Brahman. But Salih was also simply invoking yet another long-standing trope in classical Persian literature wherein the trappings of non-Muslim ritual and devotion—be they Christian, Zoroastrian, or Hindu—were valorized as a rebuke to
what many Muslim poets, Sufis, and bon vivants saw as the superficial and hypocrical pieties of orthodox clerics. Thus it was extremely common in medieval and early modern Indo-Persian poetry to find the *zunnār*, specifically, “contrasted to the rosary of law-bound, pious people . . . [and] widely used as a metaphor for infidelity which was in reality a deeper faith.”69 Chandar Bhan himself was quite fond of toy ing with this exact trope for expressive effect, at times even “reverse-engineering” it, as it were, to send up the superficialities of Hindu ritualists themselves. For instance, in one verse he confides:

I have an especially intimate bond with my sacred thread
Which keeps on reminding me that I come from [a line of] Brahmans.

[ma rā ba rishta-i zunnār ufštā-yi ḵhāš̱ ast
ki āygār-i man az barhaman hamidāram]

(*DB*, 256.5)

Like the verse we examined briefly above, this one is not so straightforward as it may first appear. On the one hand, we could read it as meaning: “I have a special respect for my traditions, and thus the sacred thread is especially important to me.” But it could also mean: “I have so transcended superficial religious practices that the only thing that reminds me of my Brahmanical heritage is this slender thread.” One could even read it in a more general sense of existential angst and alienation: “I have become so confused by all my religious experimentation, with Sufism and such, that I need this thread to remind me who I really am.” There is also a clever play on the word *rishta*, which literally means “thread,” as in “sacred thread” (*rishta-i zunnār*), but can also mean a social connection, especially a familial bond, thereby resonating with the first line’s suggestion of a “special bond of endearment” (*ulfšt-yi ḵhāš̱*) as well as the second line’s genealogical premise of coming “from [a line of] Brahmans” (*az barhaman*).

The subtle—and sometimes not so subtle—critique of orthodoxy contained in such verses notwithstanding, it is precisely this interplay of potential readings and clusters of meanings that gives the verse the kind of semantic “density” (*rabt*) that would have delighted a contemporary audience.70 We should also not discount the role of worldly wit and humor in the appeal of such verses. No doubt the poetry of the *tāza* era was sometimes obscurantist and recherché, as modern critics have endlessly carped. But we forget that sometimes it was also just meant to be funny. Thus in another verse Chandar Bhan warns, tongue-in-cheek:

The wine of monotheism tests a man, O Brahman;
A novice like you will get drunk off of just one cup!

[mard-āzmā-st bāda-i tauhīd barhaman
nā-āzmūda mast ba yak jām mishawī]

(*DB*, 335.5)
In another, he sounds a more defiant note, cleverly combining the idiom of Sufi antinomianism with a commitment to a different kind of devotion in order to produce a lovely poetic conceit:

I wash the robe of transgression with my tears, O Brahman;
But the mark on my forehead from prostration to the idol remains.

[dāman-i 'isyân ba āb-i dida shustam barhaman
lek naqsh-i sijda-yi but bar jabīn dāram hanūz]

(\textit{DB}, 231.5)

One could read this verse in a cheeky, humorous vein, as in: “I keep trying this monotheism business, and I’ve gotten to the mystical stage where, like the Sufis, my tears have washed away my earlier self; but, Lady Macbeth–like, I just can’t seem to get that mark of my old idol-worshipping self off my forehead.” Or one could read it almost as a defiant rebuke: “I may well dabble in Sufism, but don’t think that means I’ll abandon my traditions.” There may even be other possible readings. But the more important observation, for present purposes, is to note that while these verses are almost always open to multiple interpretations (and translations), in none of them is the grammar or vocabulary particularly difficult from a stylistic point of view—again, quite contrary to the oft-heard modern complaint that what distinguished “Indian Style” poetry was its inordinate rhetorical complexity.

Salih, in fact, goes on to say that “[Chandar Bhan’s character], like his poetry, is pure in its perfect lack of ostentation,” and, while the point may seem obvious to some readers, it is important to note that he did not mean this pejoratively. For it seems clear that an effect of poetic \textit{tāzagī} did not always have to involve complex, bombastic, and intricate formal experimentation; it could also, as was often the case with Chandar Bhan’s poetry, simply mean taking a conventional theme and expressing it in a particularly elegant, new, and refreshing way, or recombining the old conventions to invent a new theme altogether. It also did not—or at least did not \textit{necessarily}—require the poet to draw on exotic themes simply for the sake of being exotic. Thus even when Chandar Bhan exploits his interstitial subject position as a Brahman steeped in the Perso-Islamicate cultural world, or draws on “Indic” tropes, he almost always does so—much like Faizi—within the norms of existing poetic conventions, meters, vocabulary, and imagery, often in direct conversation with the work of other poets. Consider this verse, on the thirst for awareness being thwarted by the false water of the “mirage” of worldly existence—

What does one derive from the vivid shimmer of the world, Brahman?
He who dives into the mirage will remain thirsty.

[zi āb-o-rang-i jahān chī-st barhaman hāsîl
ba-mānd tishna-lab ān kas ki bar sarāb nishast]

(\textit{DB}, 55.5)
—which recalls ‘Urfi’s slightly different take on a similar theme (mazmūn):

Don’t be so proud of your intellect; know that it is simply a lack of thirst;
Your mind is deceived if you don’t [keep trying to] drink from the mirage.

[zī nāqṣ-i tishna-labī dān ba-‘aql-i khwēsh manāz
dil-at firīb gar az jilwa-i sarāb nakhwūrd]¹¹

Chandar Bhan has at least five verses in his Diwân that play specifically on this classic mystical theme alone. Even when he invokes a theme like religious infidelity (kufr), he often couches it specifically within a Sufi idiom, as for instance in these couplets from the same ghazal:

When the agony of love comes, the desire for a remedy is infidelity [kufr];
In such affairs, having an objective in sight is itself infidelity.

[chu dard-i ‘ishq rasad khwāhish-i dawā kufr ast
dar in maāmla izhār-i muddā‘ā kufr ast]

On this path do not exert anything but your tearful eyes;
To walk the journey to the Friend on earthly feet is itself infidelity.

[dar in tāriq ba-juz chashm-i tar makun taklīf
ki tā-yi marḥala-yi dostī ba-pā kufr ast]
(DB, 27.1, 27.4)

Again, these couplets, while certainly clever, are not “difficult” or opaque by any serious measure. Chandar Bhan has simply taken some relatively conventional images and redeployed them in a novel way to produce something unexpected and fun. But another thing that helped to make some couplets “fresh” was, quite simply, the claim to freshness itself. On some level, saying was doing, and the claim to be modern, the self-awareness of participating in the newness of the moment, was often just as important as the actual demonstration of one’s aesthetic virtuosity. Thus a poet might facetiously marvel at his own ability to create such “freshness,” as in this couplet by Chandar Bhan:

Surely the words must have alighted from skies above
For such a fresh lyric to have found my tongue today.

[sukhān zi ‘ālam-i bālā magar firod āmad
ki āmad in ghazal-i tāza bar zabān imroz]
(DB, 233.3)

Or he might make the unending quest for novelty a structural feature of the verse itself, as he does here:

O Brahman, plant a fresh theme in a fresh refrain;
A new shoot always looks prettier in new sod.
Besides the overt call to always be inventing new poetic themes (mazmūns), which is a clear sign of the times, the real delight of this couplet turns on a clever use of the word zamīn, which literally means “earth,” “ground,” or “land” (and which I have translated here as “sod”) but which also has a very specific technical meaning in the idiom of Persian poetry. Specifically, it refers to the prosodic “ground” that specifies a given ghazal’s meter, rhyme (qāfiya), and refrain (radīf). So zamīn works here not just on the literal level of the ground for planting new flowers, but also metaphorically in its reference to the formal structure into which the innovative mazmūn and radīf called for in the first line will be inserted.

Needless to say, this meta-awareness and sense of literary play would not have been lost on Chandar Bhan’s contemporary audience, and it is this aesthetic that allows him to boast repeatedly, and quite self-consciously, of his ability to produce an effect of freshness (tāzagī) in his literary expression (sukhan) throughout his poetic Dīwān. Indeed, by my rough count the words tāza and/or sukhan appear some eighty-five times in Farooqui’s 1967 edition of Chandar Bhan’s Dīwān. And it is this conscious effort to “make it fresh” that led so many of his contemporaries to express their appreciation for his verse, either by praising his literary abilities in their own works or by including his verses in their personal anthologies (bayāzes), as we have noted in earlier chapters.

Note too that the verse just quoted is in one of the most common traditional meters available to a Persian poet, and does not contain a single Hindi expression or neologism, though the entire logic of the sabk-i hindi paradigm in modern scholarship would certainly lead one to expect it. As Momin Mohiuddin, a modern Indian scholar who has written on the supposedly characteristic features of sabk-i hindi, explains: “Although to introduce Hindawi words into pure Persian was considered unpleasant, it was an unforced necessity with Khusrau, Barani, ‘Afif, and other writers [of the pre-Mughal Delhi Sultanate era], like the sufis. The ready access to Hindawi for homely expressions . . . was a natural process and more practicable than coining or neologism.” Mohiuddin goes on to explain that the conceptual correlate to this capitulation to the Indian environment on the part of medieval Indo-Muslim literati was the supposedly active intervention of Hindus—like, say, Chandar Bhan—whom he presumes to have been somehow more Indian than their Indian Muslim brethren, and thus, by implication, even less capable of writing “pure Persian.” Their effect on Persian language and literature was thus considered especially deleterious, according to Mohiuddin, who adds that the kind of Hindi expressions and neologisms he is talking about were
“equally peculiar to the munshis of the Moghul period, and reached their acme in the composition of the Hindu Munshis.”

This line of thinking directly implicates a writer like Chandar Bhan in all the alleged flaws of the so-called sabk-i hindī (with nary a mention, by the way, of tāzagū’ī). But again, note the argument’s essential contradiction. On the one hand, it is stipulated categorically that Hindu munshīs were, by definition, incapable of fully mastering Persian and thus had to resort to inserting Hindi words and expressions into their compositions. Yet this very same intellectually deficient species managed somehow to smuggle the hyperintellectual abstraction of the “Indian mind” into not only their own writings but the literature of the entire era—forcing even non-Indians like ‘Urfī, Naziri, Nau’ī, Sa’īb, and the like to “succumb” (a word that is often used in the scholarly literature on so-called sabk-i hindī) to the new fad for abstraction, experimentation, and excess. While Hindi words and expressions are indicted as the initial linguistic culprit, it is the entire civilization embodied by them that gets convicted. Thus Mohiuddin concludes: “Persian became more Indianised when the Hindus took to the study of Persian. . . . A great majority of Hindu Munshīs, all of whom flourished during the Moghul regime, enriched the Persian language with Indian vocabulary, homely metaphors and imageries drawn from the Hindu-Muslim beliefs. . . . This Indianisation was complete when Persian succumbed to the influence of Indian customs and creeds, legends and mythology, romance and folk-lore. It was not only a change of form but a change in spirit and mood . . . the essentially pantheistic mind of Medieval India.”

If Mohiuddin’s argument were valid, however, then we should expect Chandar Bhan, as one of the foremost Hindu munshīs of his era, to have used Hindi words and “homely expressions” routinely throughout his oeuvre. Yet apart from place names and certain physical objects that have no real Persian equivalent—the betel-leaf confection “pān,” for instance—we do not find much evidence of such “Hindi influence” on his word choice.

In fact, there is hardly a trace of crude “Indianization” anywhere to be found in most of the verses cited above, apart, perhaps, from Chandar Bhan’s use of the word Brahman. But this was of course the poet’s pen name, which had to be included in the verse because ghazal conventions demand that a poet use his nom de plume somewhere in the final couplet of a composition. And even with regard to his own pen name, Chandar Bhan routinely alters the usual pronunciation of the Indian term Brahman (two long syllables) to ba-rah-man (short-long-long), or bar-ha-man (long-short-long), in order to fit the relevant Persian meter. In other words, if anything what we are actually seeing is not some sort of crude, incompetent, or hapless Indianization of the Persian language but rather a highly literate and sophisticated Indian poet’s Persianizing of his very name in order to conform to the classical metrical conventions that remained the norm among the wider audience of the Persianate world.
Generally speaking, then, even poets like Faizi and Chandar Bhan who were proud of their Indian heritage and status as elite Mughal literati wanted to advertise their poetic wares—not to mention the charms of Mughal rule—across the Persianate world. And there is almost nothing in most of the verses discussed above that would have been the least bit unintelligible to a contemporary Persophone audience in faraway Shiraz, Herat, Isfahan, or even Bukhara or Istanbul for that matter. Good poets simply assumed that their works would reach a wide transregional audience, as Chandar Bhan’s occasional boasts to this effect suggest: for instance, his claim that “the books and writings of this supplicant have gained fame all over Iran and Turan, and have reached every corner of Hindustan, in every region and every district.”

Such boasting was not some sort of defensive effort on the part of Indian poets to “fit in” or to prove their literary credentials to a skeptical audience of “proper Persian” literati. It was a claim to literary and cultural superiority, to the ability to outdo their poetic rivals, wherever they might be in the wider Persophone world. Of course, as noted above, there was a long tradition in Indo-Persian literature of such boasting (fakhr), or “self-exaltation” (ta’alli). Perhaps the most famous example from an Indian Persian poet is the well-known boast of Amir Khusrau:

I don’t have Egyptian candy with which to answer an Arab;  
I am a Hindustani Turk, and so I reply in Hindawi.

\[
\text{shakkar-i misrī nadāram k-az 'arab gūyam jawāb  
turk-i hindūstāniyam dar hindawī gūyam jawāb} \]

Even here, though, despite Khusrau’s feisty protestations of “Hindawi” genius, in order to reach his desired cosmopolitan audience he had to play by cosmopolitan rules and pen his boast in Persian. The same is true of another famous bit of “Hindi” fakhr on Khusrau’s part:

Since I am a parrot of Hind, if you want to inquire correctly,  
Ask in hindawi, that I may reply correctly.

\[
\text{chu man ūtūt-ī hind-am a'r rāst pursī  
zī man hindawī purs tā rāst gūyam} \]

However much verses like this demonstrate Khusrau’s pride in “Indianness,” they are nonetheless intentionally couched in a cosmopolitan idiom that could be understood far beyond South Asia. And Khusrau was, in fact, read and generally respected all over the Persianate world, as was his contemporary Hasan Dehlavi (d. 1336–38), who was himself so renowned for his lyrical ghazals that he was sometimes referred to as the “Sa’di of Hindustan.” Thus not only did Indian poets look outward across the Persian cosmopolis for inspiration, both before and during the so-called sabk-i hindi period, but other intellectuals across the ecumene, far from viewing Indian poets as harbingers of literary degeneration,
tended to see them as equal and legitimate poetic interlocutors. Bear in mind, too, that by the fourteenth century, as one modern Indian scholar put it (with admittedly rather sweeping judgment): “The whole tract of land extending from the borders of Delhi to the centres of learning in Persia was one long connecting chain . . . from the man in the street to the king on the throne, the distinction between Ghazni and Lahore or Khurasan and the Punjab was never felt.”

Even if this appraisal seems hyperbolic, the main point about the interconnectedness of medieval Persianate literary centers across vast swaths of territory, under numerous different political formations, cannot really be disputed. These different centers of poetic production might well have developed local fashions and even local superiority complexes. But it is precisely in these rivalries, in their constant imitations of and protestations of superiority over their poetic counterparts in far-off lands, that the Persophone intellectuals spread out across ‘Ajam actually prove the underlying cosmopolitanism of their literary world, rather than the reverse. For instance, as noted above, Khusrau himself looked to the celebrated Shaikh Sa’di Shirazi (ca. 1213–92 CE) as an inspiration and fellow traveler in the art of ghazal, as we can see by his boast:

As far as they speak Persian
In this age two have shone forth:
One of them is Sa’di, the other myself;
Each has brought the ghazal to its full potential.

[tā ba-jā’i ki ḥadd-i pārsiyān
andar īn ‘ahd do tan gasht ‘iyān
z-ān yakī sa’di-o-sāni-yash hamā-m
har do rā dar ghazal ā’in tamām]83

Thus, instead of seeing the poets’ rivalries and ubiquitous boasting as evidence of locally insular and parochial aesthetics, we could just as easily see them as trying to outdo one another in a vast transregional conversation. Chandar Bhan himself would echo Khusrau’s boasts, with similar paradoxical force, some three centuries later:

This Brahman serves up his subtleties with Hindi lips;
He does not know Persian, Turkish, or Arabic.

[barahman az lab-i hindī-nizhādān nukta misanjad
zabān-i pārṣī wa turkī wa tāzī namidānad]
(DB, 218.5)

Just like Amir Khusrau before him, Chandar Bhan may well be bragging about his “Hindi” identity, but the verse is clearly addressed to readers beyond India and is meant to be intelligible to them—what’s the point of a boast, after all, if no one in the intended audience can actually understand it?
In purely aesthetic terms, then, if an earlier poet like Khusrau is to be posited as a forerunner, and Hindus like Chandar Bhan as the completers, of an “Indian Style” characterized by incomprehensible mannerism, thematic complexity, and so on, then these verses would actually seem to bear witness to an utterly contrary poetics. Not only are they written in the cosmopolitan idiom of Persian, but they are grammatically straightforward, contain no difficult vocabulary—either Hindi or Arabic—and are written in three of the most common meters in the entire Perso-Arabic prosodic system. In what sense, then, other than the ex post facto attribution to them of pseudonationalistic content, can we slot these verses as harbingers of the formal decadence so often associated with sabk-i hindū?

In fact, Chandar Bhan himself gives no indication in his writings that he is using anything but pure, fluent Persian in the tradition of all the past masters. Thus, even as the Mughal-Safavid political rivalry was heating up during his lifetime, and even though he might claim that his own melodious voice was proof positive of India’s cultural superiority over Iran—

There’s no doubt that India enjoys nobility over the land of Iran
When the King of the Age [Shah Jahan] has a sweet-singing parrot like me

[sharaf bar khīṭa-i īrān-zamin hindūstān dārad
ki shāh-i ‘asr chūn man tūtī-yi shakkar-fishān dārad]
(DB, 220.12)

—the poetics of his ta’allī were, like nearly all of his verse, incontrovertibly classical. Likewise in this verse:

Carry this message from Hindustan to Iran, O Nightingale:
That if they require a sugar-scattering Brahman, I am the one.

[ba īrān mī-barad afsāna-yi hindūstān bulbul
barahman rā shakkar afshānī a’r bāshad hamīn bāshad]
(DB, 206.5)

The latter verse, in particular, plays on both Rumi’s classical tale of the parrot who sent a message to India with a trader and Hafiz’s famous verse boasting that all the “Indian parrots” would become “sugar-crunchers” as they echoed the “Persian candy” of his verse all the way to Bengal. On purely aesthetic grounds, then, not only are these verses thoroughly imbued with intertextual referents from the classical Persian canon, but also, even at the level of word choice, one would be hard pressed to see in them evidence of the type of linguistic degradation so often associated with sabk-i hindū, and with the Hindu munshīs in particular. Rather, it makes far more sense to see Chandar Bhan and his rival poets, whether in Mughal India, Safavid Iran, or elsewhere further afield, as competing players, yes—but
largely playing by the same cosmopolitan rules, with the same canonical literary equipment, on the same cultural playing field.

There is a striking parallel here with the dynamic described by the Sanskrit scholars Yigal Bronner and David Shulman, regarding what they call the “metapoetic awareness” of regional “Sanskrit of the place” in late medieval and early modern India: their description of the ways in which regional Sanskrit poets balanced their rootedness in particular localities with their commitment to participating in a much larger cosmopolitan ecumene. With few alterations, in fact, much of what Bronner and Shulman say of such regional Sanskrit literary cultures could apply equally to the Persophone ecumene in the same period:

We could postulate that as a rule, wherever we find a mature “Sanskrit of place,” we will also find a commensurate body of literary theory unique to that area or at least some salient expression of metapoetic awareness. Such localized poetic theories inevitably engage with classical or normative schemes and categories, and with canonical theoreticians. . . . This kind of intertextual conversation inevitably generates a certain intellectual or experiential depth. The same kind of complexity is an essential feature of what we are calling regional Sanskrit poetry. Local themes, conventions, genres, concepts, names and places are consistently plotted against the old, rich cosmopolitan set of images and patterns . . . [but] Sanskrit still allows a poet to transcend his or her parochial context and reach out to a space shaped by a wider, inherited discourse. At the same time, Sanskrit enables a skilled poet to condense into the space of a single work—even a single verse—an entire world of specific associations, contents and meaning.86

Bronner and Shulman’s recognition of the constant dialectic between the local and the cosmopolitan, and the “fundamental tension” that accompanies it, opens up a space for us to see that, as with Sanskrit, participation in the Persian literary cosmopolis, no matter how locally adamant—as in the case of Amir Khusrau’s boasts, or Chandar Bhan’s geopolitical *ta‘allī* quoted above—always meant “positioning oneself in relation to wider literary universes” and enabled “a unique connectedness of the various domains . . . all conveying a sense of worldwide potential [since even] a highly local milieu allows a skilled poet to dig deep, to tap into these underlying currents.”87

Chandar Bhan’s poetry provides an excellent example of this principle at work. Throughout most of his *dīwān*, one could argue that he was just as—if not more—likely to draw on the Perso-Arabic religious and folk traditions as the Indic. One would be hard-pressed, in fact, to find a single instance in all of Chandar Bhan’s *dīwān* in which he refers, for instance, to a Hindu god. By contrast, he regularly invokes the names of many stock characters from the Persianate literary and mystical idiom such as Farhad and Shirin, Yusuf and Zulaikha, and so on. Here he is, for instance, boasting of his ability as a tear-jerking narrator of epic romance:
Even the stones would begin to wail if I were to patiently recount Farhad’s bitter travails in pining for Shirin.

[zi talkhi-ha-yi Shirin an chi bar Farhad mi-ayad
agar ahista guyam sang dar faryad mi-ayad]
(DB, 107.1)

In legend, of course, Farhad was famously exiled by King Khusrau, his rival for Shirin’s affections, to work as a stonecutter on Mount Behistun—giving the conceit that “even the stones” would cry for the doomed lover if they heard Chandar Bhan’s version of the story an added allusive density. Meanwhile, Chandar Bhan also uses a clever word choice to heighten the poetic effect, referring to Farhad’s tribulations as talkhi-ha (lit. “bitternesses”) in playful contrast to the literal meaning of “Shirin” (“sweet”). Elsewhere Chandar Bhan liked to invoke the tortured lover Majnun, the quintessential “mad lover” of Persianate literary and mystical lore, for instance here:

It’s been ages since there’s been any trace of the ways of Majnun;
This ancient lifestyle shall be refreshed in my era.

['umri-st k-az tariga-i Majnun aShe namand
in rasm-i kuhna taaza shawad dar diyar-i man]
(DB, 318.2)

And again here:

I’ll give just one whiff of the tips of your tresses to [today’s] lunatics of love
And thus, through me, the ways of this lineage will be refreshed.

[bui zi sar-i zulf-i tu khwaham ba-junun dad
ta taaza shawad rasm dar in silsila az man]
(DB, 304.3)88

At one level, both of these couplets clearly echo canonical precedents such as, say, Jalal al-Din Rumi’s verse on a similar theme:

Get your hands off of me, Reason,
For today I am too busy with Majnun.

[bashawi ai ‘aql dast-i khwesh az man
ki dar majnun paiwastam man imroz]89

But the crucial point is that, without knowing beforehand that these four lines were Chandar Bhan’s, one might struggle in vain to decipher where (and by whom) they could have been written, because really they could have been written anywhere in the entire Indo-Persian cosmopolis. However, given the poet’s
insistence on producing an effect of tāzagī, there can be little doubt about when they were written. Thus here again, on the most basic level of literary historical analysis, the term sabk-i hindī simply fails to account for the most salient feature of the verse in question, namely Chandar Bhan’s claim to poetic renewal.

MODULATING AND CONTESTING THE FRESH STYLE

This buzz surrounding tāza-gū’ī continued throughout the seventeenth century and is reflected in many different types of sources. The historian Muhammad Salih Kambuh, for instance, lauds a number of his contemporaries for their fresh compositions in his chronicle of Shah Jahan’s reign, the ‘Amal-i Şâliḥ. A generation later, Muhammad Afzal Sarkhwush (d. 1714) also praises a great many poets as tāza-guyān in his biographical compendium Kalimāt al-Shu’arā, a work that begins with Sarkhwush’s own ode to “fresh” poetic expression (sukhān):

Sukhān is the soul, so listen, my dears, to the following discourse;
If you want a fresh soul [jān-i tāza] with every passing moment,
hear now of sukhan.

Meanwhile, in his study of Mughal-Safavid poetics, Paul Losensky has cited scores of examples, from various poets, of the continuing emphasis on tāza-gū’ī as the century went along. For instance these four couplets from Talib Amuli (d. ca. 1625–27), Sa’īb Tabrizi (d. 1676), and Kalim Kashani (d. 1651):

Like the garden of time,
I am an old rosebed, Talib.
My fresh spring [bahār-i tāza]
is my new meaning.

We are, Talib, the seeker
after the nightingale of melodious hymns.
The fresh manner [rawish-i tāza]
is our creation.

Whoever, like Sa’īb, is an old acquaintance
of the new style [tarz-i tāza]
speaks with the verve
of the nightingale of Amul [i.e., Talib Amuli]’s garden.

If the market for poetry’s wares
is depressed these days, Kalim,
make the style fresh [tāza kun tarz]
so it catches the buyer’s eye.

Among these three, Sa’īb is probably the best known today and is widely regarded as someone in whom “the ingenuity and cerebral juggling of sufistic and
pseudo-philosophical themes characteristic of the ‘Indian’ style reach their climax.”
But once again, a closer look reveals that Sa’ib’s career is actually a perfect illustration of what is wrong with the sabk-i hindī paradigm. For one thing, as we have just seen, Sa’ib himself did not refer to the elements of his poetic style that usually get flagged as signs of sabk-i hindī as peculiarly “Indian,” but rather as “fresh,” without any particular geographical qualification. Moreover, Sa’ib was already in his thirties when he arrived in Mughal India, via Kabul, and stayed in the subcontinent for only seven years (ca. 1625–32) before returning to Isfahan where he lived out the rest of his life, a period of approximately four decades.

It is quite a stretch, in other words, to give India either credit or blame for Sa’ib’s poetic style, unless one is willing to believe that this relatively brief sojourn in the subcontinent as an already-established adult poet was enough somehow to strip him of virtually all intellectual agency. He not only was born in Iran but also spent the vast majority of his life in Iran, yet this apparently had nothing whatsoever to do with his penchant for “cerebral juggling,” which is ascribed entirely and involuntarily to his encounter with India. It would be rather like arguing that Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald should be banished from the canon of American literature because they spent a few formative years in Paris, or that James Joyce should not be considered Irish, much less studied in respectable departments of English literature, because so much of Ulysses was actually written in Paris, Zurich, and Trieste. Such a scenario is almost inconceivable—yet this is precisely how the bulk of modern Persian literary scholarship has treated not just Sa’ib but the entire tāza era, using the slippery, invented category of sabk-i hindī as an excuse.

Of course, this is not at all how early modern poets like Sa’ib (and Chandar Bhan, for that matter) thought about their place vis-à-vis the Indo-Persian literary canon. Indeed, one gets a far more realistic and concrete sense of the aesthetic commitments of someone like Sa’ib simply by looking at what he himself considered to be worthy poetry—as we are fortunately able to do, for he compiled a voluminous personal anthology (bayāz) of favorite poets and poetry that has survived in manuscript, though it has never been published. The first thing one notices while perusing the contents of Sa’ib’s bayāz, and obviously the most relevant here, is that the overwhelming majority of entries are the work of established canonical masters, to each of whom several, in some cases many, folios are devoted. By contrast, in a manuscript hundreds of pages long, there are barely a handful of folios at the end dedicated to Sa’ib’s own contemporaries, from each of whom only a few individual couplets are quoted.

Among the latter group, incidentally, is a verse by none other than our own Chandar Bhan Brahman—a slight variation on the same verse quoted above (p. 198)—under the heading “a Hindu invention” (ikhtirā’-yi Hindū):

From the first time I blinked my eyes
life was already at the beginning of the end;
We have tread this path without producing so much as the sound of a footfall.

[chashm tā bar-ham zadam anjām shud āghāz-i 'umr
ṭai shud īn rah ān-chunān k-āwāz-i pāy bar nakḥāst]96

But though Sa‘īb was obviously keeping tabs on what his poetic contemporaries were up to, and was occasionally noting down particularly interesting couplets in his notebook, the main purpose and focus of the bayāz was to anthologize the work of literary greats from previous eras, those whose poetry even the most committed tāza poets would have agreed needed to be mastered before one went about trying to innovate. As if to underscore this point, in the front matter of one of the two known manuscripts of Sa‘īb’s bayāz is a note, probably penciled in by a cataloguer, describing the manuscript simply as an “anthology of poems of the ancients” (muntakhab-i ash‘ār-i mutaqaddimīn). Far from rejecting the poetry of the classical tradition, in other words, even the most avant-garde poets of the tāza era saw it as the foundation upon which their fresh aesthetic was built.

This does not mean, however, that the aesthetic claims and commitments of the fresh movement went completely unchallenged, even at the height of tāza-gū’ī’s seventeenth-century vogue. Indeed, there is a notable hint of such contestation in a text called Tażkirat al-Safar wa Tuhfat al-Zarshal (A memoir of travel and a gift of victory), the memoir of an accomplished Hindu munshī of Aurangzeb’s reign named Nik Rai (b. 1670). Nik Rai explains at one point that he himself has closely studied the oeuvres of earlier generations of tāza poets like ‘Urфī, Sa‘īb, and Mirza Jalal Asir, and he includes some of his own verses that he says are in the mode of Sa‘īb. But he points out that there were vigorous debates (munāzirāt) between the tāza-gūyān and some of their critics.97 Indeed, one of the most overlooked aspects of this entire era is that the critical reception of tāza-gū’ī was far from uniform, even at the peak of its popularity.

For one thing, there were clearly multiple different styles within the parameters of tāza-gū’ī. Some commentators considered Sa‘īb, for instance, to have created a whole new brand of poetry. Meanwhile, beginning around midcentury, contemporary critics started taking note of yet another new poetic idiom that some referred to as the “imaginative style” (ṭarz-i khayāl). These developments were summed up neatly by the noted eighteenth-century philologist and critic Siraj al-Din ‘Ali Khan Arzu (1689-1756), in his biographical compendium Majma’ al-Nafā’is:

When Mirza Muhammad ‘Ali Sa‘īb appeared on the scene, literary expression entered a whole new world. . . Many of his contemporaries like Mirza Jalal Asir Shahristani and Mulla Qasim Mashhadi, better known as “Diwana,” took a new path, calling their style the “imaginative style” [ṭarz-i khayāl]. Because of the fanciful imaginative possibilities of the age, they produced many poems that are altogether meaningless [bī-mā‘nī].
When some of the Indian poets, such as Shah Nasir ‘Ali [Sirhindi], Mirza ‘Abd al-Qadir Bedil, and Iradat Khan Wazih, took a liking to Asir and Qasim, they added yet another hue [to this new style] and carved out many more fresh thoughts and expressions [khayālāt wa ‘ibārāt-i tāza tarāshīdand].

One of the poets who figures prominently here is Mirza ‘Abd al-Qadir Bedil, yet another poet routinely touted in modern scholarship as representing the pinnacle of “Indian Style” abstraction. Yet clearly at least some of Bedil’s contemporaries viewed him as part of a new movement, distinct from tāza-gū’ī, and distinct even from Sa‘ib’s neo-tāza style. Note, too, that whatever its eccentricities, the Indian poets were not even viewed as the progenitors of this new țarz-i khayāl, at least not according to Arzu. We might also detect an echo of this imaginative turn in other late seventeenth-century works, for instance in the title of an important compendium of literary biographies and other essays compiled in 1690–91 by an Indian Afghan named Sher Khan Lodi, the “Mirror of the Imagination” (Mir’at al-Khayağ) (1998), and possibly even in the name for the musical genre known as khayāl, which was emerging as a popular form at precisely this historical moment.

Contrary to what the sabk-i hindī model would lead us to expect, in other words, there were multiple ways of classifying literary newness and imagination among seventeenth-century Indo-Persian cognoscenti, most of which hinged on stylistic judgments above all else. It is clear too that many early modern commentators, as if anticipating the complaints of later critics, seem to have agreed that there were limits to how far one should go in terms of verbal ostentation, as the line between ingenious “meaning creation” (ma’ni-āfrīnī) and trafficking in “meaningless” (bi-ma’ni) nonsense could be a fine one. In fact, the aesthetics of tāza-gū’ī were being contested all along, as some poets pushed the limits of metaphorical and semantic possibility, while other poets and critics chided them for overdoing it.

Already in Ma’āshir-i Rahimī (1616), for instance, though the author admired the poet Husain Sana’i Khurasani’s intricate expressions, he also noted that many contemporaries were often unable to understand Sana’i’s strained verse, at times ridiculing his “inaccessible language” (nā-rasā’î-yi lafz). Of a certain Maulana Haidari, Nahawandi gripes: “He used to just imitate the manner and mode of his mentor Maulana Lisani’s expressions, and had no taste for the latest poetic fashion [rawish-i muta’ākhkhirin].” Kamal al-Din Jismi of Hamadan is said to have written too many “difficult and overly intricate verses” (ash’ār-i mushkila daqīqa bisyar) even for sophisticated contemporary audiences, and thus, though he liked Jismi personally, Nahawandi concedes that “his oeuvre must be excused for the immaturity, nonsensicality, and all the other flaws that the work of tāza-guyān in this day and age may be prone to.”
In short, as in any age of literary ingenuity, not everyone was enamored of tāzagū’ī, and even aficionados like Nahawandi—or Chandar Bhan, for that matter—did not simply indulge bad poetry just because it was experimental or provocative. They too sometimes puzzled over particularly abstruse verses, as suggested, for instance, by Chandar Bhan’s offhand observation that the entire court once spent an entire week discussing and pondering the meaning of a single couplet by a certain Hakim ‘Abd al-Khaliq (CC, 43). There was thus an ongoing negotiation, in the courts, the literary salons, and the bazaars, over what constituted the appropriate way(s) to deploy poetic originality. Nahawandi’s comment about Jismi shows, moreover, that astute commentators recognized that the aesthetic logic of tāzagī was itself part of the problem. Taken to extremes, it always carried the potential, especially in less talented poets, to cross over into nonsense and absurdity.

Consider, moreover, that one of tāzagū’ī’s harshest contemporary critics was, in fact, an Indian, namely Chandar Bhan’s good friend Abu al-Barakat Munir Lahori (1610–44). In a sharply worded essay called Kārnāma (Book of deeds), Munir takes aim squarely at four literary titans of the previous generation, ‘Urfi Shirazi (d. 1591), Talib Amuli (d. 1626), Mulla Zulali Khwansari (d. ca. 1615), and Nur al-Din Muhammad Zuhuri (d. 1616), all Iranian émigrés, three of whom we have already noted in our discussion thus far. Munir begins Kārnāma courteously enough, imagining a literary assembly in which he himself sits quietly in a corner, listening to the discussions, as the conversation turns to comparisons of the new poets with the literati of previous generations (sukhanwarān-i peshīn).

Some praise ‘Urfi for being the “master of the fresh style” (sāhib-i ūrāz-i tāza), while others praise Talib Amuli for “having given new life to those who express fresh meanings” (tāza-guftār-i ma’ni rā jān dāda), and so on. The attendees go on to proclaim that earlier poets like Mir Razi Danish Mashhadi, Kamal al-Din Isfahani, Amīr Khusrau, and Mas’ud Sa’d Salman—that is, two Iranians, two Indians—had they been alive in this era, would have been like mere students learning at the feet of these four modern masters.

This is too much for Munir, who, as the “wielder of the mirror of justice” (āyina-dār-i inṣāf), finally speaks up and appeals to people of fair conscience (inṣāf-ẓamīrān) to put a stop to such hubris. “Do not elevate these purveyors of the ‘fresh’ over the ancients,” he implores, begging his colleagues not to continue such prideful “infidelity [kufr] against the path of justice.” Then, his plea falling on deaf ears, Munir decides to argue the case in writing. He acknowledges that some might see his attacks as a violation of “the norms of universal civility” (shewa-i šulh-i kull), but he hopes that “those who understand literature in India and comprehend meaning in Iran” (sukhan-shināsān-i hind wa ma’ni-rasān-i īrān) will excuse his speaking the truth bluntly.

What follows is a meticulous critique of various couplets by the four authors in question, framed as a classicist corrective against the excesses of tāza-gū’ī. It is
not that Munir is opposed to poetic ingenuity as such, so much as critical of innovation for its own sake, particularly when it produces verses so outré that they are ineffective or simply don’t make sense. Thus he takes some to task for the same sin of “inaccessible language” (nārasā’ī-yi lafẓ) that Nahawandi also cautioned against, while others are lampooned for having invented conceits so far-fetched that they are shutur-gurba—like comparing “camels to cats.” In some cases Munir’s objections concern usage and grammar, for instance the discussion of what he considers to be ʿUrfi’s incorrect use of the word nuqṭānī. Elsewhere he quibbles about word choice, as when he suggests that the imagery of one of Zuhuri’s verses would have been more powerful if he had used the phrase “world of water” (ʿālam-i āb) instead of “torrent of wine” (sail-i sharāb). The approach, in other words, is detailed and scholarly, emphasizing the technical minutiae of the poet’s craft in a witty, occasionally even sarcastic tone.

It has been suggested that what these complaints actually reflect is a growing “ethnic-professional” rivalry between Indian and Iranian intellectuals at the Mughal court as an ever larger number of Iranian émigrés “sought to advance their lot by questioning the linguistic competence of the poets of Indian descent,” prompting a backlash among Indian poets and other literati. There is, undoubtedly, at least some truth to this assessment. In a short epilogue to Kārnāma, Munir complains openly of the way that, in his estimation, Mughal patrons fawned over Iranian émigrés at the expense of talented Indian poets like himself.

This complaint was not, however, as nativist as it might first appear. For one thing, the bulk of Munir’s argument—which, let us remember, is explicitly addressed to the literati of both Iran and India—is framed not in ethnic terms but specifically in terms of defending classicalism against the excesses of tāza-gū’ī, a trend for which he blames the Iranian poets, not the Indians. Nowhere does he even hint that classical poetic norms and conventions should be “Indianized” in the way imagined by the sabk-i hindī thesis; on the contrary, his point is precisely that literary competence in a cosmopolitan language like Persian is not region specific, and he cites as evidence the popularity and gracious reception of Indian poets like Masʿud Saʿd Salman, Abu al-Faraj Runi, Amir Khusrau, Hasan Dehlavi, and Faizi in the wider Persianate world. The problem in his era, as Munir saw it, was that patrons were beginning to privilege Iranians as native speakers (ahl-i zabān) in a historically unprecedented way and were thereby undermining the traditional hospitality of ‘Ajam’s cosmopolitan literary culture. Pointing out the errors of Iranian poets like ʿUrfi was a way of illustrating that even Iranians were not infallible when it came to questions of grammar, usage, and aesthetic taste, while, concomitantly, erudite Indian poets and literati with classical training were perfectly competent to critique such errors. In short, while Munir’s literary argument was conservative, his cultural argument represented a plea for cosmopolitan egalitarianism over parochial favoritism.
In this light, while it is true that the growing rivalry between Indian and Iranian intellectuals during this period was a critical historical factor that still needs much more scholarly attention, it is equally clear that the larger contestation of the fresh style did not play out solely in those terms. Other, non-Indian literati also criticized tāza poets of various stripes for their “inaccessible language,” while conversely plenty of Indian-born intellectuals like Chandar Bhan continued to express admiration for the tāza aesthetic in general and for Iranian poets like ‘Urfi, Talib Amuli, Sa’ib, Kalim Kashani, and Muhammad Jan Qudsi in particular. Recall that Chandar Bhan’s own verse was included in Sa’ib’s bayāz and that our munshi was an epistolary correspondent of both Munir Lahori and the latter’s sometime poetic rival Muhammad Jan Qudsi, with whom Munir and another Indian-born poet named Mulla Shaida (d. 1669) had a noted public feud.

Munir’s complaints, therefore, though clearly significant, were hardly representative among all Indian-born intellectuals. Sure enough, Munir’s position in Kārnāma was openly rebuked a few decades later by another Indian intellectual, Siraj al-Din ‘Ali Khan Arzu (d. 1756), in an essay aptly titled Sirāj-i Munīr (A light on Munir). Arzu acknowledges that some of Munir’s criticisms of “the latest poets” (shu’arā-yi muta’ākkhāh) are valid, but he faults his predecessor’s repudiation of tāza-gū’ī as too sweeping and as a squeamish failure of imagination. The task of poets, after all, has always been to innovate and stretch the possibilities of linguistic meaning. Arzu makes a point, too, of scolding Munir’s sarcastic tone as an unproductive breach of scholarly decorum, noting at one point that “no progress can be achieved through glibness [charb-zabānī].” More important, as Arzu painstakingly demonstrates, is the fact that many of the “fresh” usages and conceits that Munir criticized as outrageous crimes against poetic language can actually be supported by examples from the classical canon. In a bravura display of literary critical philology—all the while insisting, notably, that his methodology is entirely objective and “free of bias” (khalī az ta’aṣsub)—Arzu provides exhaustive rejoinders to every one of Munir’s objections. Many of these run to several pages, as Arzu corroborates the contested tāza usages through authoritative attestations, or sanads, from past masters whose linguistic and aesthetic credentials were beyond dispute: Anwari, Rudaki, Kamal Isfahani, Khaqani, Nizami Ganjavi, Amir Khusrau, Sa’di, and Faizi, to name a few. Implicit in Arzu’s argument, in fact, is a telling verdict: it is precisely Munir’s imperfect mastery of the ancients that hinders his appreciation of the moderns.

Here, then, we have an Indian philologist wielding profound erudition to defend the modernist tendencies of Iranian tāza-guyān against a conservative attack lodged by another Indian who saw himself, ironically enough, as an avowed champion of the very same classical canon later employed to refute him. Given this tremendous deference to the earlier tradition, imagine the surprise of all concerned if they were somehow granted a glimpse into a future in which they...
were remembered simply as typical of an age characterized by mass “alienation of
the poets from the old established masters.” Imagine the look on Munir’s face,
or that of contemporary readers like his friend Chandar Bhan, if he were to read
in a modern reference work that his literary style and ‘Urﬁ’s were both of a piece,
merely reﬂecting “standard features of the Persian lyrical style known as sabk-e
hendī.” And imagine how oddly it would strike Arzu to hear another of his es-
says, Tanbih al-Ghāﬁlīn, described as “an essay in defense of Sabk-e Hendī”—a
term that wouldn’t even be coined for nearly another century and a half. The
fact that one has to conjure a different meaning of the term sabk-i hindī for each
of these statements even to make sense is proof, if any more were needed, that the
very category is inadequate for capturing the sophistication of these intellectuals’
literary world.

THE GLOBAL HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF TĀZA-GŪ’Ī

There is an uncanny synchronicity to the fact that ‘Abd al-Rahman Jami of Herat—
“universally regarded as the last eminent ﬁgure in the history of classical Persian
literature”—died in 1492, the year of Columbus’s discovery of the New World.
Several hundred years of vibrant, cosmopolitan Indo-Persian literary and intel-
lectual production were yet to follow, much of which not only participated in, but
also made potent contributions to, the “connected” intellectual histories of global
early modernity. Yet for nearly a century this rich archive has all too often been
walled off by a self-defeating scholarly embargo—not just in Iran, but also in Eu-
rope, in America, and even, surprisingly enough, in South Asia—under the ﬂimsy
pretext that it was all too “Indian,” too Hindi, or too Hindu to be anything more
than an embarrassment that should be repudiated when spoken of at all.

Chandar Bhan’s own oeuvre has been a clear victim of this neglect. But it has
also had devastating consequences not just for the study of Indian Persian liter-
ary culture, speciﬁcally, but also for the study of South, Central, and West Asian
cultural modernity generally. And so, if we are ever to bring the vast Persophone
literary tradition into the wider scholarly conversation about various “alternative
modernities,” then it is precisely such “homeless texts” from the age of tāza-gū’ī
that call out for further scrutiny. For that to happen, needless to say, an entirely
new critical vocabulary will be necessary, and, as I have tried to suggest, maybe
taking a fresh look at the actual aesthetic claims and commitments of the fresh
poets would be an ideal place to start.

Before bringing the discussion of Chandar Bhan’s poetic world to a close,
however, we should emphasize that there is a notable global and comparative
dimension to all this, too. We do not know nearly enough, for instance, about
the resonance of notions like tāza-gū’ī in places like the Ottoman cultural world,
although it is noteworthy that the latter has been characterized by at least one
eminent modern scholar as “remarkable for . . . innovation that is often extreme,”
coupled with a pronounced millenarian ethos that inspired literary imagery
“marked perhaps more by radical, even catastrophic, disjuncture with the past
than by smooth continuity.”125 We know, too, that at least some of the tâza poets
were very popular in the Ottoman world, such as Faizi, who has been described
as having been among “the chief foreign influences on the development of Ot-
toman Turkish poetry.”126 Meanwhile, Walter Andrews and Mehmet Kalpakh
have demonstrated the striking degree to which early modern Ottoman literary
and commercial cultures were integrated with those of Europe via the Mediter-
anean basin, particularly where philosophical ideas about romantic love were
concerned.127 We can thus rightfully chart a set of cultural dots in an arc that
connects the poetics of tâza-gû’î—either directly or indirectly—to exactly con-
temporary fashions in Europe like the so-called “mannerist” movement and the
“quarrel between ancients and moderns.”

The term mannerism began as an art-historical designation for the trend toward
stylized, self-conscious aesthetic formalism that became fashionable in sixteenth-
century Italy, roughly between the later Renaissance and the Baroque periods. It
so happens, moreover, that like sabk-i hindî the term mannerism is a twentieth-
century invention, and the mannerists themselves have also suffered greatly at the
hands of modern critics.128 Where critics of sabk-i hindî have been exasperated by
its “abstract ideas, farfetched similes, quaint metaphors, queer fancybuilding and
morbid imagery [that] had reduced the lyric to an absurdity,” European critics
have likewise seen in mannerism “a demand only to advance incomprehensible
and dazzling remarks.”129 Like the experimentalism and ingenuity of tâza-gû’î, in
other words, mannerism has been dismissed in much of modern scholarship and
criticism merely as vain anticlassicism, a fad for artificial and empty formalism
from which the arrival of the baroque’s emotional sincerity has been considered—
not unlike the so-called “cultural return” (bâzgasht-i adabi) movement in modern
nationalist Iran—a welcome relief.130 Mannerism was nothing but a “stylish style,”
as the art historian John Shearman called it, one that lacked authenticity because
its heightened artifice served as a barrier to the “overt passion, violent expression,
[and] real energy” of the raw human condition.131

This modern response to mannerist style was of course largely a product of
romanticism’s cult of the personal experience of the individual creative genius—a
stance that also, in the wake of British and French colonialism, deeply informed
Indo-Persian literary historiography’s modern critical idiom, especially the in-
tense hostility toward the early modern tâza-gû’î (aka sabk-i hindî) era. But just as
Western scholars have begun more recently to see the mannerists in a more favor-
able light, and to view their interest in formal innovation less as an empty gesture
and more as a dynamic response to the anxieties and exuberance of global early
modernity, we must try to do the same for the cultural world of tâza-gûyân like
Chandar Bhan and his contemporaries and to situate their ideas about cultural renewal in a larger global framework.

Indeed, on a purely literary theoretical level, it is hard not to notice the striking parallels between the two movements. Beyond the broad conceptual agreement between mannerist notions of “ingenuity” and the Indo-Persian idiom of “freshness,” there is an uncanny harmony even in some of their theoretical minutiae—for example, mannerist ideas about the “acuteness” (acutezza) of expression vis-à-vis tāza-gū’ī’s “tightness” or “connectedness” (rabt); the mannerists’ attention to metaphor as the staple of literary revivification vis-à-vis tāza-gū’ī’s similar ideas about stretching metaphor (isti’āra) in the service of “meaning creation” (ma’ni-āfrinī); or the mannerist sense that an artistic expression, as the seventeenth-century mannerist theoretician Matteo Peregrini insisted, “must be rare and remote from the normal way of using the words in question” compared with Indo-Persian literary theorists’ definitions of ihām, a kind of punning in which the poet intentionally thwarted readers’ expectations by intending a word’s “remote” meaning rather than the “near” one.132

To my knowledge, no sustained comparative analysis of these cultural phenomena has ever been attempted. One thing we do know, however, is that for the mannerists too there was general agreement that a historically informed, cosmopolitan “sensus communis [was] of utmost importance” as a precondition for true ingenuity.133 In other words, as in the Indo-Persian world, one had to respect and master the existing canon and conventions before one could successfully innovate. Meanwhile, the Indo-Persian trope of Truth (ḥaqq) as an immanent but veiled reality in a constant process of being disclosed anew by what Chandar Bhan himself once referred to as the “magical language” (jādū-bayānī) of poetry (DB, 43.5) finds a striking parallel in Peregrini’s assertion that “the intellect does not create, but only unveils and presents.”134 Or, as Chandar Bhan’s contemporary Mirza ‘Abd al-Qadir Bedil, perhaps the most celebrated metaphysical poet of the early modern Indo-Persian canon, put it:

If you tear asunder the veil on poetry’s face  
You get to things that are beyond imagining.  
[gar niqāb-i sukhan shikāfta’ī  
ān chi dar wahm nist yāfta’ī]135

Whether or not we can connect these European and Indo-Persian cultural movements directly, it would certainly appear that an uncannily similar response to the historical moment was percolating globally, in various ways from the salons of Europe to the salons of Delhi and beyond—perhaps not with total “symmetry,” but with undeniable “simultaneity.”136

...
I should note in closing that I have not spent so much time in this chapter on *tāzagūʾī* because it is the only or even necessarily the most dominant theme of Chandar Bhan’s literary oeuvre. Indeed, while such notions of cultural refreshment and renewal were undoubtedly a crucial factor in animating Chandar Bhan’s overall poetic sensibility, they were far from the only ones. But to have also offered a sustained analysis of the extraordinary range of mystical ideas, the often playful engagement with the preceding literary canon, and some of the other features of his poetry that are so fascinating on a purely literary level would have required—as Chandar Bhan himself was so often fond of saying—at least another chapter, and maybe even another whole book. Such analysis will thus unfortunately have to wait for another occasion.

But given the overwhelming, indeed suffocating, dominance of the so-called *sabk-i hindī* paradigm in virtually all modern Indo-Persian literary historiography, the most important thing to me as a student of Chandar Bhan’s poetry and cultural world seemed to be to try to recuperate some sense of the larger cultural context and idiom through which he and his contemporaries responded to the novelty of the age. Indeed, Jacques Barzun once observed that “cultural periods are united by their questions, not their answers.” Perhaps, then, going forward we can return to asking with Chandar Bhan and the other early modern *tāzagūyān*:

Brahman, you have recited this fresh *ghazal* in such a fresh voice; Where, and from whom, did you learn such a new style?

[gufti ba-tāzagī ghazal-i tāza barhaman in țarh-i tāza țarz-i kudām-o-kalām-i ki-st]

(*DB*, 69.5)