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Includes index.


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PERSIAN AS A PASSE-PARTOUT: THE CASE OF MĪRZĀ ‘ABD AL-QĀDIR BĪDIL AND HIS HINDU DISCIPLES

Stefano Pellò

1. Framing a Hindu Textual Identity in Persian

If, how and to what extent the literary use of Persian by members of non-Muslim communities in South Asia—a phenomenon which is unparalleled in any other historical context in the Persianate world—contributed to the process of cultural circulation and renewal in late medieval and early modern India remains largely unasked. As a matter of fact, an essentializing identification of “Persian” with “Islamic” and a preconceived understanding of Persian literature in India as a somehow impermeable and elitist whole, have until recently tended to prevent this issue from being addressed. Without presuming to provide definitive answers when we are still looking for proper hermeneutical instruments in a field which is partially unexplored even at the basic level of the identification of the textual material, this paper tries to suggest some promising research paths by focusing on the Hindu participation in the circle of an important Persian poet in late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century India and on its portrayal in the contemporary and subsequent taḵkira literature. It can be seen as an exemplary case for studying transmission, change, and exchange at a literary level in premodern South Asia, involving a particular linguistic and poetic paradigm and the ways this is enlarged, re-shaped, and made to circulate through the encounter between a Muslim master and his non-Muslim disciples. More generally, this study might be of some utility in framing the (self-)understanding of the role of, and the values attributed to, the

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1 The work by Sayyid ‘Abd Allāh (1942) is still fundamental. Other more or less general contributions are Nadvi 1938 and 1939, Roy Choudhury 1943, Bukhari 1957, and Gorekar 1962. A brief, recent survey is Pellò 2008a. Among the most recent and specific studies which touch on some specific aspects of the problem are Alam and Subrahmanyan 1996 and 2004, Pellò 2006, and Kinra 2008.
identities of the Hindu (hindū) authors in the Persian written world from the late seventeenth century onwards.

While defending his own ustād, Mīr Ghulām ‘Alī Azād Bilgrāmī (d. 1200/1785), from the biting criticism of the Khatri Persian poet and lexicographer Siyālkoṭī Mal Wārasta (d. 1180/1766), ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Iftikhār (d. 1190/1776) writes as follows in his Taʿzkira-yi binażīr:

This poor slave has witnessed an astonishing fact: Books written by Hindus who imitate Muslims and get involved in the Islamic sciences have no light and are full of darkness, since their titles are devoid of the brilliant glare emanating from the eulogies of the Lord of the Prophets—may God pray for him and for his family and give them peace. ...Hindus, who should not overstep their bounds, have to commit themselves to writing books about their own sciences.3

Such judgments should, of course, be seen more as polemic pretexts than serious arguments about the boundaries of cultural territories: A few pages later in the same work, Iftikhār himself speaks in very positive terms of another Khatri intellectual, Kishan Chand “Ikhlāṣ”, the author of the important tazkira of Persian poets Hamīsha bahār, who is deemed a “skilful man (mard-i qābil).”4 After all, in this period, Persian was, as has been pointed out by Muzaﬀar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “also a South Asian language for all intents and purposes,”5 and it is not generally possible to distinguish a Persian ghazal written by a Muslim from another Persian ghazal written by a non-Muslim, as it is not generally easy to distinguish a Persian maṣnawi rendering of a Vaishnava narrative done by a Muslim from one accomplished by a non-Muslim. The expressive canon for writing Persian literature—with all its implications of thought and aesthetics—does not vary with a writer’s religious afﬁliation. As a matter of fact, in the context of Persianate India the relationship between

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2 In the Persian texts we deal with in this paper the term is used to indicate non-Muslim Indian followers of one of the Vaishnava (in the great majority of cases), Shaiva, or Shakta traditions; followers of the Sikh-panth are occasionally included among “Hindus”. The word hindū has a long history in the Persian poetic space, being commonly used from the Ghaznavid period onwards, originally indicating the “native of India”, by deﬁnition dark and an idolater (see de Bruijn 2004). The image of the hindū (as well as that, equally old, of the barahman) and related tropes are often used by non-Muslim writers of the later Mughal period as metaphors to describe themselves or their social groups, thus creating an interesting interplay between their supposed “real” and “literary” identities (see Pellò 2006: passim, especially 161–193, and also Pellò forthcoming). As far as the slippery category of “identity” is concerned, I draw here on Brubaker and Cooper 2000.

3 Iftikhār 1940: 5–6.


5 Alam and Subrahmanyam 1996: 132.
religious, linguistic and literary commonalities, identifications, and self-identifications is a multi-faceted one and it is not advisable, as Shantanu Phukan has warned, to draw any monologic correspondence between a literary or linguistic tradition, a confessional community, and an ethno-geographic origin. Suffice it to remind the reader here that the Hindu Siyālkoṭī Mal criticized by Iftikḥār because of his “interferences” was a firm advocate of “Iranian” linguistic purism as against the “Indianization” of Persian philologically defended by the Indian Muslim Sirāj al-Dīn ‘Ali Khān Ārzū. He also wrote a pamphlet against Ārzū with the very “Islamic” title—an allusion to a hajj ritual—of ṫajm al-shayāṭīn, “The Stoning of Devils”.

Nevertheless, and above all on account of the peculiarities of this polyphonic cultural milieu, Iftikḥār’s remarks do have a weight, as do, for example, munshi Rūp Narāyan’s words concerning the occasion of the composition of his highly refined Persian Shish jihat, “Six Directions” (1121/1709):

The compiler of these lines, Rūp Narāyan, the humblest of all creatures, does not actually deserve to speak, but he dares inform the reader that one day an impertinent person said that he had not seen any ingenious work of art written by the multitude of the Hindus, stating that these people are generally lacking in natural skills, and they can only try to make the most of the company of learned men. There is no hope, he said, to see any ornate literary invention from the Hindus. Such words have hurt this slave and have driven him to write a tale which includes many a rhetorical device.

What Iftikḥār and Rūp Narāyan present to us is mainly a problem of literary acculturation, which needs first of all a literary treatment—so to say, a “decontextualization to better contextualise.” An analysis starting from the literary personas of some Hindu poets who were the disciples of a great author such as Mirzā ‘Abd al-Qādir “Bīdīl” (1054/1644–1133/1720) will help us to highlight some elements useful for approaching the implied

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6 See Phukan 2000: 7–8. See also, to place the issue in a wider theoretical frame, Sheldon Pollock’s observations about the lack of crude correspondences between religious or regional affiliation and literary language (e.g. 1998: 7, and 2003: 24–5, 31).
9 I owe the oxymoron to Thomas de Bruijn’s critical acumen.
issues (overlapping and fluctuating) of linguistic choices, religious traditions, and literary interactions.

The choice of the school of Bidil among the many others in Delhi is due above all to the fundamental role played by this poet in shaping eighteenth and nineteenth-century Indo-Persian literature, which it is not even possible to approach without a knowledge of his work, both from a stylistic and a philosophical point of view. In South Asia, anything literarily significant written in Persian after his death has been written either following him or refuting him, up to Ghalib and Iqbāl. Bidil can therefore be considered the exemplary case to which one can compare all others. Moreover, his poetical circle in Delhi, along with that of Mīrzā Afzal “Sarkhwush” (d. 1127/1715), was among the first to systematically include non-Muslim pupils eager to learn how to write Persian poetry and artistic prose (given its peculiar socio-political features, I consider the well-known court of the Mughal prince Dārā Shukhū as a case apart). This is, in any case, the opinion of Laḥhmī Narāyān “Shafīq” (d. around 1222/1808), who, in his introduction to the second volume of his tazkira Gul-i raʿnā, which is declaredly devoted only to Hindu poets10 using Persian as a medium of expression (to put it in the words of the Vaishnava writer himself, “the sagacious authors of the idolaters”, nuktapardāzān-i āsnāmiyān), wrote:

In the days of Shāh ʿĀlam, Muḥammad Farrukhšiyyār and Muḥammad Shāh, thanks to the graceful company of Mīrzā Bidil—mercy be upon him—many individuals from the people of the Hindus acquired the talent of weighing poetic expressions. And so the Indian parrots tasted a new sugar, as will become clear from the reading of the subsequent pages.11

As a last introductory remark, it should not be forgotten that the tazkira, frequently rendered by the term “biographical writing”, although usually rich in information and anecdotes of various kinds, is first of all a literary genre governed by its own specific rules and recurrent topoi, and should be approached as a kind of collective and transforming Legenda

10 On the use of religious affiliation as a meaningful organizational principle and structural feature in another tazkira, the Anis al-aḥibbā by Mohan Lāl “Anis” (1804), see Pellò 2006: 144–153 and forthcoming.
11 Shafīq n.d.: 2. Consider the method by which Shafīq grafts the Hindu poets onto the tree of Persian literature by transforming them into textual figures of Persian literature itself: The last expression is a clear reference to Amīr Khusraw (the tūṭī-yi hind, “parrot of India”), as well as to a famous verse by Ḥāfīz: shakkarshikan shawand hama tūṭīyan-i hind / z-īn qand-i pārsi ki ba bangāla mīrawad [all the parrots of India become sugar-chewing / because of this Persian sugar-candy which goes to Bengal] (Ḥāfīz 1996: 452).
Aurea of Persian poetry posing many problems of historical reliability.\textsuperscript{12} Nevertheless, it is exactly this literary essence that draws our attention here, since it gives us the opportunity to observe the object of our investigation through the “internal” interpretative filters of several men of letters who often are in direct contact with the poetic milieu under investigation and enrich their own discussions with autobiographical notes. One of the literary topoi peculiar to the Persian taṣkira genre (be it devoted to poets or saints) is the ustād-shāgird (master-pupil) relationship: As a general rule, it is usually specified who was the master (or the masters) of the poet or saint whose biography is more or less schematically conveyed. When speaking of authors described as “Hindus”, whose literary output was usually—at least at the beginning—the result of a period of apprenticeship in literary circles led by renowned Muslim masters,\textsuperscript{13} this has an obvious relevance not only because it throws some light on the relations between the actors of the above mentioned interaction, but also because it allows access to the writer’s point of view on this relationship.

2. Dynamics of Interaction inside Bidil’s Circle

On the basis of the information found in twenty-two Indo-Persian taṣkiras compiled between 1136/1723 and 1300/1883,\textsuperscript{14} Bidil had, during his long stay in Delhi (between 1106/1685 and the year of his death),\textsuperscript{15} at least eight non-Muslim disciples, namely:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} On this topic see the clear observations by Losensky (1998: 18–9), who, in his study on the reception of the Persian poet Bābā Fīghānī (d. 925/1519) in the Safavid-Mughal literary world, has shown how his biography changed with the growth of his artistic fame (Losensky 1998: 17–55). See also the relevant comments in Hermansen-Lawrence 2000: passim.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Things will change especially in Lucknow, where I was able to isolate as many as six non-Muslim Persian poets playing the role of “masters” in the taṣkiras (namely, Sarab Sukh “Diwānā” who shifted from Urdu to Persian, Bhagwān Dās “Hindi”, Mohan Lāl “Anīs”, ‘Awāz Rāy “Masarrat”, Shītāb Rāy “Zār”, and Ratan Singh “Zakhmī”; see Pellò 2006: 131–138, 142–143). Some comments on the issue of the Muslim shāgirds of Hindu ustāds in the overlapping Urdu context can be found in Faruqi 2001: 51–2.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ikhlās (1973), Khwushgū (1959), Wālih Dāghistānī (2001), Ḥusaynī (1875), Ārzū (1992), Āzād Bīlgāmī (1871), Anonymous (ms.), Shafīq (n.d.), Qamar al-Dīn ‘Ālī (ms.), Muṣḥafī (1934), Khālīl (1978), Sandīlawī (1968–1994), Hindī (1958), Gopānmāvī (1957), Najm-i Tābātaḥbā’ī (ms.), Mirānjān Ajmāli (ms.), Nawāb (1875), Nūr al-Ḥasan Kāhān (1876), Salīm (1878), Sābā (1880), and Āftāb Rāy Lakhnawī (1976–1982). A list of Bidil’s disciples and friends (Muslim as well as Hindu) can also be found in Abdul Ghani 1960: 82–9, 96–8, 102–5. This section is partly based on Pellò 2006: 92–108.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Bidil’s biographical data are mainly gathered from Abdul Ghani 1960.
\end{itemize}
1. Lāla Amānat Rāy “Amānat” La’lpūrī (fl. 1740)
2. Lāla Sukhrāj “Sabqat” Lakhnawī (d. 1138/1725)
3. Lāla Shīv Rām Dās “Ḥayā” Akbarābādī (d. 1144/1732)
4. Śrī Gopāl “Ṭamīz” Dīhlawī (d. 1147/1736)
5. Rāy Ānand Rām “Mukhliṣ” Lāhorī (d. 1164/1751)
6. Bindrābān Dās “Ḵhwushgū” Dīhlawī (d. 1170/1756)
7. Lāla Ḥakīm (or Ḥukm) Chand “Nudrat” Thānesari (d. 1200?/1786?)
8. Gurbākhsh “Ḵuẓūrī” Multānī (d. unknown)

The Safīna-yi Ḵhwushgū is by far the most important for our purpose. Compiled between 1137/1724 (four years after the master’s death) and 1147/1734 (but with additions made up to 1162/1749)\(^{16}\) by one of the principal Vaishnava disciples of Bidil, Bindrābān Dās “Ḵhwushgū” (thus offering an “internal” point of view on the poetic school), it is the text in which the largest amount of information regarding Bidil’s Hindu pupils is found. Ḵhwushgū’s collection of biographical notices represents, as far as these poets are concerned, the main source for almost all the subsequent tāzkiras, which often directly quote whole passages from it.\(^{17}\) Therefore, our research is based mainly on the data obtained from the analysis of this text, and integrated, whenever possible, with the additional information offered by the other works.

The first step in reconstructing the relationships between members of Bidil’s circle is to find out what these texts tell us about the personal ties between the master and his non-Muslim pupils. Clear statements on the subject are quite scanty, and predictably, most of them are to be found in Ḵhwushgū’s Safīna. Usually, they consist in the simple indication of a master-pupil relationship, or, in a more general way, they briefly record the existence of an artistic fellowship, as in the entry on Ḵuẓūrī by Ḵhwushgū:

He used to frequent the great Mīrzā Bidil for many years, and so, through practice, he could improve the quality of his expression.\(^{18}\)

Now and then, nevertheless, we learn something more specific, as with the brief mention of the assignment of the takhallus, the nom de plume, to Ḥayā, a common topos for the ustād-shāgird dynamics in tāzkiras,

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\(^{17}\) The whole biography of Nudrat in the Gul-i ra’nā, for example, is a quotation from the Safīna-yi Ḵhwushgū (compare Ḵhwushgū 1959: 352–5 with Shafiq n.d.: 165–9).

\(^{18}\) Ḵhwushgū 1959: 348.
comparable to the entrusting of the personal Ẕikr by the murshid in the corresponding taẔkiras of saints. So writes Khwushgū:

He had the precious occasion to practice his poetry in the presence of Mīrzā Bidil, thus obtaining his takhallas from him. He now speaks with the poetic tongue of his master.

One of the most interesting and meaningful anecdotes is contained in the TaẔkira-yi Ḥusaynī and concerns Amānat’s biography, which is absent from Khwushgū’s work. Having characterized this poet as “one of those people who gained a great deal of advantage from Mīrzā ‘Abd al-Qādir Bidil,” Mīr Ḥusayndūst Ḥusaynī Sunbhulī goes on as follows:

He himself [Amānat] used to relate this incident: “One night, I was walking near some ruins, thinking about writing a diwān of verses, when suddenly, in the darkness, I saw a madman in high spirits dancing hand in hand, though respectfully, with my master. In the height of ecstasy, my master looked at me and said: Go, and a whole sea of pearls and rubies will for sure spurt from the spring of the particles of dust! And so I went, and I succeeded in completing my diwān in a very short time.”

This account, which in itself has a clear symbolic value as a literary initiation, gains a definitely Bidilian inflection if we consider that it contains some narrative motifs which remind the reader of some events, these too with similar symbolic meanings, related by Bidil himself in his autobiography, the Chahār ‘unṣūr (The Four Elements). As a matter of fact, Amānat’s strange and decisive meeting can be compared with the encounters between Bidil and his own quite enigmatic spiritual master, Shāh-i Kābulī, who suddenly appears and disappears three times in the mentioned text, also changing Bidil’s life-course as a poet. The image of the dancing madman, in particular, might be a reference to the narrative of the last of these encounters, when Bidil, riding his horse in a Delhi bazaar, realizes that a dancing madman is following him in a kind of ecstasy: The madman turns out to be Shāh-i Kābuli, who, that very night, will reveal to his disciple many important spiritual secrets.

As I have already noted, a relatively copious amount of (autobiographical) information concerning the relationship between Bindrāban Dās

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19 On the structural features shared by the two taẔkira typologies—often not so easily distinguishable—in Persianate South Asia, see the comments in Hermansen and Lawrence 2000: 149–56; a systematic study in this critical field is still lacking.

20 Khwushgū 1959: 183.

21 Ḥusaynī 1875: 49.

Khwushgū and his master can be found in the section of Khwushgū’s Safina devoted to Bidil’s life and poetry. In relating his master’s life, besides underlining his own participation in the literary assemblies and discussions held at Bidil’s home, Bindrāban Dās insists on the frequency of his encounters with the great poet, writing, for instance, that “the poor Khwushgū could gain the advantage of his company more than a thousand times in his life”; the settings of these intellectual exchanges are vividly described, thus suggesting a great familiarity with Bidil. For example, Khwushgū recounts the long nights spent listening to the master among chilams and water-pipes (qhalyān) and boasts of having recorded his utterances in a collection of malfūzāt. Sometimes, the author of the Safina goes beyond the intellectual aspects of his relationship with Bidil by relating as an eye-witness his own impressions of Bidil’s most private habits:

In his mature years, when I, the humble Khwushgū, went to visit him every day, I could see him eating two and a half or even three sūrs of food. When he was young, he used to indulge in drinking alcoholic beverages, but these were not agreeable to his noble health in old age. It is for the same reason that he completely abandoned every kind of intoxicant.

All in all, however, the interaction between Khwushgū and Bidil is described by Khwushgū himself as essentially literary; it is a fundamentally poetic

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23 Bidil’s biographical notice is by far the longest in the Safina: If we include the verse anthology, it covers almost 44 pages in the 1959 edition (Khwushgū 1959: 103–47), whereas the second longest notice, devoted to Siraj al-Dîn ‘Alî Khân “Arzū”, is not longer than 19 pages altogether (Khwushgū 1959: 312–31).

24 See, for instance, the first-hand reports of Bidil’s meeting with the satirist Ja’far Zaṭallî (during which Bindrāban Dās tries unsuccessfully to persuade his master, offended by Zaṭallî’s irreverence towards the Mughal poets ‘Urfi and Faţiżī, to let the poet complete the recitation of his poem: Khwushgū 1959: 113), and of Bidil’s successful debate with an unnamed author whose maṣnawî had been sharply criticized by the poet of Patna (Khwushgū 1959: 117).


26 Khwushgū 1959: 112. Unfortunately, the work has been lost (see the comments of Kâkî in Khwushgū 1959: 1).

27 Again, as in the above-mentioned case of Hayā’s biography in the Taṣkîra-yi Husayni, there is an echo here of a fact narrated by Bidil himself in his Chahâr ‘Unsur: In this text it is Bidil’s spiritual master, Shâh-i Kâbulî, who is described as able to eat enormous amounts of food (Bidil 1965–6: 158); it is interesting that in both cases Bidil as a master acquires the features of his own master, who is essentially a poetic character created by himself. There is no doubt about Khwushgū’s detailed knowledge of Bidil’s autobiography since it is directly mentioned and openly used as a source in the Safina (Khwushgū 1959: 106, 109).


29 As a further example I should add the importance given by Khwushgū to his own achievements in composing jawâbs, “replies”, to Bidil’s verses (Khwushgū 1959: 119–20).
relationship—in which spiritual and literary mastership are equated—which does not end with the master’s death:

Every year, on the day of his ‘urs, an assembly of poets is held. When all the creators of subtle images are together, someone reads a ghazal from Bidil’s dīwān and everyone, consequently, gives a demonstration of his own poetic nature. It is always a beautiful gathering, and I hope the eye of discord will always stay away from it.

To find other evidence regarding personal relationships between Bidil and his Hindu disciples it is necessary to turn to sources other than the tazkiras. It may be briefly mentioned, among these “external” remarks is a private note by Ānand Rām Mukhlīṣ, who claims to possess an autograph copy of Bidil’s dīwān with a portrait of the master on the last page. Similarly to Amānat’s story described above, the portrait motif may be closely related to an episode narrated by Bidil in his Chahār ‘unṣur.

Going back to the tazkiras, of course, many critical judgements are found which underline the resemblance of the formal features of our authors’ poetry to their master’s style, but they are external observations that do not tell us anything exceptional about the relationships inside the poetic circle, being usually limited to simple statements.

31 Quoting one of the praise verses written by Khwushgū for his master might be useful in illustrating this point: bāyad-am shustan lab az mushk u gulāb / tā bigyāam nām-i ān qudsiyanāb // sāmī’-ā-rā waqt-i gulchini rasid / nātiqa-ra subh-i haqbiñī damid | I must wash my lips with musk and rose-water / before uttering the name of the one living in sainthood // The time to collect roses has come for the hearing / and for speech has appeared the dawn of the vision of truth] (Khwushgū 1959: 104).

32 It seems that this dīwān, with an annotation by Mukhlīṣ certifying that the authenticity of the book was attested by Bidil himself, is held by the Habib Ganj Library (I draw here on information given in the usually trustworthy biographical work on Bidil by Abdul Ghani 1960: 68).


34 Salim 1878: 37.

35 In the late tazkira Riyāż al-‘ārfīn by Āftāb Rāy Lakhnawi (written in 1883, when a neo-classical “Iranian” linguistic purism had long been the prevalent fashion in the languishing Indo-Persian literary realm), only one among Bidil’s non-Muslim disciples, Ānand Rām...
As can be seen from the few reported specimens, there is nothing specific in the notices regarding interpersonal relations with Bidil about any sort of “Hinduness” of the poets we are dealing with, whose connection with their master is, all in all, described in standard literary terms (the master-pupil relationship, the poetic initiation, the sharing of the same socio-textual spaces, the stylistic heritage) by the tazkiras. A meaningful exception does occur, however, in the biography of Sabqat from the Safina-yi Khwushgū, where we read:

He was one of the pupils at Mīrāz Bidil’s sacred court, and his master used to repeat very often these words: “Among my Hindu disciples Sabqat has no equal.”

The testimony, though isolated, is noteworthy because it shows the existence of a tendency, within Bidil’s exemplary circle, to judge the work by non-Muslim poets as a separate category. Its relevance in a wider literary perspective is incontrovertible considering that the election of the “best Hindu poet of Persian” is a recurrent topos in many Indo-Persian tazkiras. Limiting ourselves to two examples chosen from the texts concerning Bidil’s court poets, the late Tazkira-yi nigāristān-i sukhan (1292/1875) awards the honour to Khwushgū, while the earlier Riyāz al-shu’arā (1161/1748) bestows the title to Anand Rām Mukhlīṣ. Most interestingly from the point of view of the history of Indian Persian, he chooses Mukhlīṣ for his fluency in Persian (khwushmuḥāwirāgī), unique, in the Iranian writer’s opinion, among his co-religionists (dar jamāʿat-i hunūd).

The extent of the interaction between socio-religious and linguistic-literary spaces becomes evident if we look at the features of some works written by Bidil’s Hindu disciples and the relevant remarks by the tazkira-writers. As a matter of fact, many of them deal with traditional Vaishnava themes in their Persian works. Speaking of the devotee of Krishna Tamīz, Khwushgū, who was himself a Vaishnava born in the holy city of Mathura, writes:

\[\text{Mukhlīṣ, is mentioned, but he is deemed “a pupil of Sirāj al-Dīn ‘Ali Khān Ārzū” (Āftāb Rāy Lakhnawi 1976–82: II, 192); significantly, Bidil’s poetic diction is judged as follows in this text: “Although there are still some, among ignorant Indians, who consider him to be among the most sublime writers, he is absolutely worthless in the opinion of those who really know the Persian language. His Persian, like that of Nāṣir ‘Āli [Sirhindī (d. 1694)], is worse than Hindi” (Āftāb Rāy Lakhnawi 1976–82: I, 123).}\]

\[\text{Khwushgū 1959: 158.}\]

\[\text{Nūr al-Ḥasan Khān 1876: 27.}\]

\[\text{Wālīh Dāghistānī 2001: 706.}\]
He engaged in a thorough study of Indian books, and became a man of great learning in this field. He wrote a *maṣnawi* on the beauties of Mathura and the Braj Mandal, describing, profusely and in detail, the peculiarities of these places. He read it for me when I went to visit my birthplace.

Also noteworthy is Khwushgū’s mention of Nudrat’s partial Persian rendering of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, especially on account of the details he mentions and the comparative evaluations crossing the literary and the religious fields:

[Nudrat] translated into Persian the tenth *skandha* (*iskandh*), that is, the tenth chapter, of the *Bhāgavat*, a book which is highly venerated by the Indians and deals with the deeds and the adventures of Krishna, whom they consider the manifestation of His name. This work consists of 14,000 distichs written in the meter of *Shirīn u Khusraw*: The lines are well-constructed, flowery, and pleasant. While composing it he wanted me to listen to his progress almost every day. Once he presented me with this verse, about Krishna lifting a mountain with his forefinger, thus protecting himself for seven days from a violent, calamitous rain which is the symbol of the Last Day (*qiyaṃmat*). It is a very agreeable line: He easily lifted that heavy mountain / like the new moon lifts the sky with its finger [*sabuk bar dāšt ān kūh-i garān-rā / chu māh-i naw bar angusht āsmān-rā*].

When dealing with Ḥayā’s essay about the holy places of Krishnaite devotion, Khwushgū takes an analogous approach, using an assimilative/interpretative strategy to textualize the concept of the *avatāra* and at the same time to exploit the literary achievement of the Vaishnava poet to explain and illustrate the religious meaning of the Braj region:

He wrote a prose work on the pattern of the late Mīrzā Bīdīl’s *Chahār ‘unṣur*, naming it *Gulgasht-i bahār-i Iram*. It is devoted to the peculiarities of the

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39 This text is now probably lost.
40 Khwushgū 1959: 311.
41 As with Tamyiz’s work, this writing has also probably been lost.
42 The printed edition of Khwushgū’s *Safīna* carries the form *سکندر* instead of the expected *سکنره*. It is most probably a mistake by the copyist, since it is found also in other *tazkīras* which drew on this text, as, for example, the *Gul-i rānā* (Shafiq n.d.: 126). Therefore, I give the amended form in transcription.
43 Khwushgū 1959: 353. Especially noteworthy, besides the assimilative interpretation of Krishna as the manifestation of God’s name and the use of the image of the *qiyaṃmat*, is the certification of the literary identity of Nudrat’s poem by juxtaposing it with Niẓāmī’s normative *Shirīn u Khusraw*. Moreover, the association of the moon with the finger in the quoted verse might hint at the miracle of the splitting of the moon (*shaqq al-qamar*) with his index-finger by Prophet Muhammad, related by Islamic tradition and based on *Qurʾān* 54: 1–2; this would represent a further, though more subtle, textual hint towards the “poetic transculturation” of Krishna’s deeds.
44 I have not been able to trace this work in any catalogue or collection so far.
Braj region, that is, the area of Mathura and Vrindavan (Bindrāban): It describes the special qualities of a land which is, in the religion of the Hindus (mashrab-i hunūd), the birthplace and the home of Krishna the avatāra (krishn-i avatār), whom they consider the most perfect manifestation of the Infinite’s attributes (ṣifāt-i nāmutanāhī). I was delighted in reading it.45

Many tazkiras, and very clearly the Gul-i ra’nā by Lāchhmi Narāyan Shafīq and the Tazkira-yi Hindī by Bhagwān Dās Hindī, along with the Safīna-yi Khwushgū on which they are largely based, show a very similar attitude towards such cross-cultural works (or, perhaps better, cross-literary works, as we shall see), trying to negotiate a quite predictable acculturative explanation. But not every writer can boast the privileged vantage point of Khwushgū, a member of Bidīl’s court and a friend of the poets whose works he describes, nor the conscious perspective belonging to those who, like him, live on the threshold of multiple socio-textual territories, such as, his followers Shafīq and Hindī. A different point of view is represented, for example, by the anonymous author of the Taṣkirat al-shu’arā.46 Regarding Ḥayā, he writes:

We do not know the details of his biography, but judging from his poetry it is clear that he is an Indian and probably a Hindu, since he has celebrated the city of Mathura and other places of worship (ma’badhā). (Anonymous: f. 275a)

Not all of Bidīl’s Hindu disciples (nor, for that matter, all of the Hindu poets using Persian) have written literary works inspired by Indic religious themes (for instance, from among the poets of Bidīl’s court, not a single text which could fit this category has ever been ascribed to Sabqat or Mūkhlīṣ); on the other hand, it is a well-known fact that translations and renderings, both in prose and verse, of works like the Bhagavadgītā, the Rāmāyana, etc., done by Muslim men of letters are hardly lacking.47 Nevertheless, the terse remarks by the author of the Taṣkirat al-shu’arā are challenging and point toward the themes central to this paper. The widespread phenomenon of non-Muslim poets of Persian dealing, especially in the

46 In his work on the history of Persian tazkira-writing in the Indian subcontinent, Sayyid ‘Alī Rīzā Naqāwī suggests that this book was composed around 1170/1760 (Naqāwī 1964: 438).
47 Consider, for instance, the well-known Persian-verse Rāmāyana by Masīhā Pāṇipatī (d. after 1050/1640; see Jalīlī 2001). For further specimens, see specific lists such as those given in Habibullah 1938, Mujtabai 1978: 60–91, Shriram Sharma 1982, and Anusha 2001: 767–73; see also Ernst 2003: 174.
eighteenth century, with Indic devotional literature\textsuperscript{48} appears to be an attempt to enrich the Persian literary tradition from within by giving a canonical citizenship to Hindu (especially Vaishnava) images and themes. This seems to be done, as the remarks by the tazkira-writers we have quoted suggest, not by breaking up the structures of the literary palimpsests, but by making the new material pass through two complementary filters: the aesthetic-stylistic one, which is represented, in the case of Bidil’s disciples, especially by the expressive language of the so-called “Indian style”, and the relevant philosophical one. The latter can be broadly described as comprised of Sufi-Neoplatonic concepts and interpretative frameworks (by the late seventeenth century deeply influenced by the cosmopolitan speculation of the philosophers of the school of Isfahan) readable, if necessary, as Vedanta and/or bhakti-oriented. (For the related phenomenon of reading Vedanta and bhakti material as Sufi across confessional communities, see essays by Busch and Orsini in this volume.) In other words, if a (manifold) Hindu individuality exists in Indo-Persian literature, it seems already integrated, at the very moment of its birth, in the organism containing it, as a literary mode and a further expressive opportunity which \textit{enlarges} the reference system without \textit{transforming} it. On the contrary, it consists of the new images that, in order to be accepted, transform themselves into something familiar to the Persian literary environment. A meaningful example, though still to be thoroughly investigated, is represented by the main work of one of Bidil’s Hindu disciples, the \textit{jilwa-yi zāt}, “The Epiphany of the Essence”, by Amānat Rāy, a free rendering of the tenth \textit{skandha} of the \textit{Bhāgavatapurāṇa} into Persian verse as a long \textit{masnawi}: The Vaishnava material is remolded in a style which generally seems to follow that of the \textit{ustād} Bidil; the title itself, very interestingly, appears as a conscious attempt to closely link the poem to the conceptual universe of the mainstream tradition of Persian poetry.\textsuperscript{49} The poem opens with the following lines, whose meaning is self-evident from the point of view of the aesthetic-religious reference-system:

\textsuperscript{48} The relevance of this phenomenon had already been noted by Aziz Ahmad almost fifty years ago (Ahmad 1964: 235).

\textsuperscript{49} The expression \textit{jilwa-yi zāt} is employed in a famous \textit{ghazal} by Ḥāfiz: \textit{ba’d az īn rūy-i man u āyina-yi wasf-i jamāl / ki dar ānjā khābar az jilwa-yi zāt-am dādand} [From now on I shall turn to the beauty-describing mirror / because there they made me aware of the epiphany of the essence] (Ḥāfiz 1996: 372). The concept of \textit{tajallī-yi zāt} (\textit{tajallī} is a synonym of \textit{jilwa}), “the epiphany of the essence”, is central in the Neoplatonic conceptual universe of classical Persian Sufism, and is explained in the popular Sufi glossary by Sajjādī as the “supreme manifestation of the beloved’s beauty” (Sajjādī 1971: 118–20).
In the name of the Beloved of the world, who is hidden from the eyes of people.
The world is the mirror where His beauty appears, no place is devoid of His light.

The interpretation of the *avatarā*, as the title alone lets the reader suspect, draws clearly on post-Ibn ‘Arabī Sufi speculation and on the Persian poetic language, which had formally mastered it from the thirteenth century onwards; in our immediate context, this interpretation is closely related to the results of the already-mentioned philosophical reconciliation attempted by Dārā Shukih around a century before. The concept of the manifestation of Krishna in the world as in the *Bhāgavata* is introduced with the following distichs, again drawing, in the opening lines, on the popular image—in mystical Persian poetry—of the reflection of divine beauty in the “mirrors” of the world:

az ān pas ān sitāyish-rā sazāvār
numāyān gasht dar shīkl-i awatār
ki ḫusn-ash khalq-i zāhirbīn bibinad
gul-i nazzāra chūn āyīna chīnad

Then he, who is praiseworthy, appeared in the shape of an *avatarā*, to show his beauty to creatures, who see only appearances, and pick, like a mirror, the flower of the one who watches.

The poem is very frequently interspersed with *ghazals*, to give it a recognizable literary identity before a Persianate (but also perhaps Persian) audience. Naturally, such texts written at Bidil’s court do not spring up suddenly and in isolation: As a matter of fact, they find many illustrious forerunners in the literary experiments carried out at the Mughal court in the preceding century, but they seem also to be directly affected by the specific cultural atmosphere of the immediate environment in which they are born. It is Bidil himself who shows a deep interest, both philosophical and

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50 Amānat ms.: f. 1b.
51 Amānat ms.: f. 2b.
52 A typical specimen, comparable to the interpretative works produced at Bidil’s court, is represented by the *Omnāma* by Banwālī Dās “Wali” (d. 1085/1674; Wali ms).
aesthetic, in Indic literary and devotional traditions. From the Safīna-yi Khwushgū we learn, for instance, that

the noble Bidil was well-acquainted with theology (ilāhiyāt), the exact sciences (riyāziyyāt), and the natural sciences (ṭabīṣiyāt), and he had a deep understanding of medicine, astronomy, geomancy, amulet-making, history, and music. He knew by heart the whole story of the Mahābhārata, which is the most revered book among the Indians (tamām-i qisṣa-yi mahābhārāt ki dar hindiyān az ān mu‘tabartar kitāb-i nīst ba yād dāsht).  

More decisive, however, is what Bidil himself writes in his Chahār ‘unṣur, where we find several descriptive and interpretative hints of the Vaishnava and especially Krishnaite religious sphere. Particularly relevant, in the context of the present study, are the passages where Bidil speaks about Mathura, a city much loved by him and where he lived for about three years. In one of these passages, he gives a detailed and sensitive literary description of his experience of Braj pilgrimage centers, also adding some celebratory lines, perfectly in keeping with his usual style and, above all, drawing a textual identification between bhakti for Krishna and the unending “love for the unattainable” represented by the Persian poetic figure of Majnūn:

In the country of Mathura, the market of passionate love (sawdākada), whose dark land has become a whitened, propitious mark since Krishna bade his farewell to the world, where the amorous air, like the sad loneliness of a sigh, has lost the color of rest and stillness, incessantly striving to reach that unattainable one, the tears of the gopīs (gōpiyān) are stormy waves still flowing in the waters of the Yamuna (jumna), and the voice of [Krishna’s] bānsuri is still heard in its flute-like alleys, a soul-stirring modulation which makes the dust dance.

dar zamīn-ī ki maḥabbat aṣar-ī kāshta-ast
gard-ī ū kharman-ī chandīn ṭapīsh anbāshta-ast
bar bahār-ī ki az-īn kūcha damūda-ast naśīm
jigar-ī chāk zi šubh-ash ‘alam afrāshta-ast
hama ṭan shawq shaw wa wādiy-ī majnūn dar yāb
mashhad-ī sukhtagān buy-ī dil-ī dāshta-ast

53 Khwushgū 1959: 118. Bidil’s knowledge of the Sanskrit itihāsas is actually a common topos in his reception: Significantly, as late as 1875, the Lucknow publisher Nawal Kishore still ascribed to Bidil a Persian poetic rendering of the Rāmāyana, the Nargisistān, which was actually written by another author poetically named Bidil, Chandar Man, who was alive in 1105/1693–4 (see Anusha 2001: 540).
54 See, for instance, the quite technical—in Vaishnava terms—dialogue on the problem of Time between Bidil and a Brahman who was travelling with him (Bidil 1965–6: 41–5; the episode is roughly summarized and briefly commented upon in Abdul Ghani 1960: 54–5).
55 I follow Abdul Ghani’s chronological estimate (1960: 56).
In a land where love has sown a trace
dust has gathered a rich crop of palpitations.
On that spring whose breeze has breathed from this alley,
the wounded heart, at dawn, has hoisted a flag.
Be passion, nothing else, and find the valley of Majnūn!
The grave of those burned by love has got the fragrance of a heart.

Without any choice but to follow the decree of passion, I resided there for a period, and by observing the kaleidoscopic colors of appearance, I polished a mirror of astonishment. The cheerful lament of the sacred bells still caused the tumult of pride to fly up in the sky, and the hard beliefs of the Brahmans still adorned the embroidery of the zunnārs\(^56\) with the stone-vein of haughty idols. The magic juggler of illusions delivered the sickle of a field of hopes to the talent of the nails of the sannyāsins (sanāsiyān), and the spellbound blinkers of faith worked hard to cut off the hair of the pilgrims (jātriyān); to harmony, a minstrel playing sweet melodies, was entrusted the embellishment of the nightingale nests through the heart of the wise ones (parāgiyān), and to nature, a hunter with his snare, was entrusted the nourishment of the turtle-doves in their cages through the interior strength of the yogīs (jogīyān).

\begin{verbatim}
ʿālam na bulandī dārad u na pastī
dil inhama makhmūrī u mastī dārad
az dayr u haram maqṣad-i dil ʿishq-i khudā-st
īn āyīna sakht khwudparastī dārad\(^57\)
\end{verbatim}

The world has no sublimity nor has it humility:
It is for the heart to be so drunk and intoxicated.
Temple and mosque, to the heart, mean love of God:
This mirror is indeed a self-worshipper!

Elsewhere in the same work, the spiritual powers of a renunciate whom Bīdil met on the outskirts of Mathura have a deep impact on his sensitivity.\(^58\) It should be borne in mind, moreover, that the Braj area is also the scene for one of the three revealing encounters between Bīdil and his travelling guide Shāh-i Kābulī.\(^59\)

The poem on Krishna’s deeds by Amānat that we have briefly introduced, and, in particular, the prose texts by Tamyīz and Ḥayā described in

\begin{footnotes}
\item[56] The word zunnār, originally indicating a kind of belt or girdle worn in the Byzantine world (ζωνάριον) and employed in the Persian poetic tradition as a symbol of “infidelity”, alludes here, as in other cases in the Indo-Persian context, to the yajñopavīta, the brahmānical sacred thread.
\item[57] Bīdil 1965–6: 148.
\item[58] Bīdil 1965–6: 279.
\item[59] Bīdil relates this event in his Chahār ʿunṣur (Bīdil 1965–6: 161–7).
\end{footnotes}
the *tażkiras* and consecrated to the holy Krishnaite places of Mathura and the Braj region, are likely to be ascribed to a precise interest in the master for that particular context of religious geography.

As a working hypothesis, then, we can say that Bīdīl’s Hindu disciples observe—while working as Persianate literati—Hindu traditions first of all through the interpretative lens of their *ustād*, who is in turn poetically fascinated, as in the above quoted autobiographical passage, by the Vaishnava devotion and religious milieu in Mathura. A telling sign is that the *tażkiras* agree in assessing the *Gulgasht-i bahār-i Iram* by Ḥayā as a work composed on the pattern of Bīdīl’s *Chahār ‘unṣūr* or, more generally, following Bīdīl’s stylistic trends.⁶⁰ The central concern, in other words, is not an alleged “Hinduness” of the poets, but the poetic circle, which is the locus for the mediation between various superimposed (self-)identifications: As we have seen, most *tażkiras*, which are the expression of an essentially literary memory, show it in quite clear terms. As an additional note confirming the canonicity of the products of the Hindu members of our poetic court, it should be underlined that the works dealing with geographical descriptions and celebrations, at least from the critical remarks by *tażkira*-writers, take their place within an already established literary genre in the Indo-Persian context,⁶¹ which is consequently only reinforced and subtly modified, keeping with the rules we have seen before.

3. **Beyond the Literary Circle: Widening a Cosmopolitan Culture by Localizing It**

“The cultivation of Persian poetry,” writes Christopher Shackle,

was always a central marker of the cultural identity of the elite, whose efforts to distance themselves from Indic cultural associations led to the formation of an elaborately self-contained symbolic system underlying the interlinked genres of *qasida*, *ghazal* and *mašnavī*. Such purism was not limited to Muslim elites; it also extended to the practice of Hindu poets from the Persianizing classes ... In other words, the wide-ranging and profoundly differentiated views of the premodern period are not associated with the Hindu-Muslim divide itself; they are marked more by class than by creedal separations.⁶²

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⁶⁰ In addition to the passage from the *Safīna-yi Khwushgāh* I quoted above, consider the following comments in the *Ṣuhūf-i Ibrāhīm*: “Ḥayā was one of Bīdīl’s disciples: By imitating his master’s style he wrote a prosework entitled *Gulgasht-i bahār-i Iram*, whose subject is the description of Mathura and Vrindavan” (Khalil 1978: 52).

⁶¹ The issue has been addressed by Sunil Sharma (2004).

⁶² Shackle 2000: 56.
As a gloss to Shackle’s statements, which are perhaps a little too rigid in reinforcing the idea of an Indo-Persian elite radically cut off from the other cultural worlds of premodern India, I would add that this “purism” is above all a formal one, pertaining more to how literature is written (the choice of the poetic register) than to what the man of letters writes (the choice of the poetic subjects). Especially for the maṣnawi, “Indic cultural associations” are acceptable and accepted by the Indo-Persian socio-textual community as long as they do not clash with the well-established—but by no means fixed and motionless—reference system of Persian literary expression, or, in other words, as long as they undergo a transcultural (but transaesthetic would probably be a more proper adjective, avoiding the risk of presuming fixed boundaries among cultures) restyling, as in the highlighted case of Amânat’s Jilwa-yi żāt. The aesthetic provincialization of Sufi concepts through the use of Indic poetic forms and of a Hindu religious vocabulary is well known from regional (vernacular) poetry by Muslim authors. Although less studied as such, a similar process occurs in the cosmopolitan Indo-Persian literary sphere, especially from the late seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century. And if, as Shackle states with regard to the Punjabi context, vernacular Muslim literature helps the spreading of “a diffuse conception of South Asian religious identity,”63 Indo-Persian literature, thanks to its Persianization of Indic elements, provides “local” religious themes with a cosmopolitan character and supports cultural circulation not only at the pan-Indian level, but also at the transregional one. We can consider, for instance, the role played by travelling Iranians such as ʿAlī Hazîn (d. 1766), and by the East India Company agents as well as the impact of the direct circulation of Indo-Persian texts and authors in Iran proper64—as a matter of fact, it would be somehow restrictive to look at circulation in the Indo-Persian textual milieu without taking into account its extensive connections with West and Central Asia. Such implications can be verified preliminarily by looking at the biographies of the disciples of Bîdîl in some of the tażkiras on which we based our discussion.

One of the missions of tażkira as a literary genre is to transmit a certain view of literature (and of its producers) and to preserve a specific perspec-

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63 Shackle 2000: 57.
64 Hazîn’s alleged comments on Bîdîl’s and Nâṣir ʿAlî [Sirhindî’s] “incomprehensible” prose, regarding which he writes that he cannot imagine “a better souvenir to make friends in Iran burst out laughing” (Āzâd 1992: 212), offer a stimulating hint in this direction. However, much more intriguing for the immediate context of this paper are the travels of Hindu Persian literati in Iran, such as Jagat Rây “Barahman” (fl. 1091/1680–1) who, according to Shâfiq Awrangabâdî, settled in Yazd as a merchant (Shâfiq n.d.: 29).
tive on cultural memory. Some elements in our texts seem to indicate that one of their aims was to cater to a wide audience and to spread these views and memories among them, while providing them with “Indic” annotations. The Safina-yi Khwushgū and the Gul-i ra’nā do this in a quite explicit manner: They exploit Persian, and at the same time, the opportunities given by the thematic openness of the tazkira-genre, using the presence of Hindu poets within eighteenth-century Indo-Persian literary circles to describe, explain, and interpret many aspects of Vaishnava culture and religious geography. As underlined by Alam and Subrahmanyam when dealing with the Safarnāma by Ānand Rām “Mukhlīṣ”, the description of the socio-religious peculiarities of the Indian landscape becomes a “discovery” of what is familiar. Typically, the Hindu authors of Persian tazkiras place themselves outside of the religious context they describe and to which they actually belong, speaking of Khatri, Kayasth, and Brahman writers as a category alien to themselves, tendentiously adopting the “international” perspective of a learned traveller to better communicate with a wide (and not exclusively Indian) audience.

The simplest and probably most widespread technique is represented by the specification of the social background of the non-Muslim authors; as a matter of fact, from the eighteenth century onwards, the indication of caste can be described as a topos of the tazkira genre in South Asia. As in the notice devoted to Śrī Gopāl “Tamyīz” in the Safina-yi Khwushgū, this often becomes the occasion to offer additional explanations bearing a socio-religious flavor:

He belongs to the sūraj brahman people (qawm); among the Brahmans of Hindustan, the sūraj people consider themselves as being the descendants of the sun.

In other cases, the indication of a specific social provenance provides a clue to supply the reader with precise explanations regarding non-Islamic Indian cultural traditions. This is, for instance, what Bhagwān Dās “Hindi” does while speaking of Bindrāban Dās Khwushgū in his Safina:

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65 See the discussion, mainly based on tazkiras of Urdu poets, in Hermansen and Lawrence 2000: 156–160.
66 A classic example is the Tazkira-yi haft iqāmān by Āmīn Ahmad Rāżī (1002/1594), which is both a collection of poetic biographies and a work on world geography and ethnography. As an immediate forerunner, I would indicate the late seventeenth century Mīr‘at al-khiyāl by Shīr Khān Lūdī, who deals with prāṇa-yoga—he calls it ‘ilm-i nafas, “the science of breath”—while speaking of Indo-Persian poets (Lūdī 1998: 107–11).
67 See Alam and Subrahmanyam 1996: 142.
68 Khwushgū 1959: 311.
Bindrāban Dās Khwushgū comes from the tribe (tāʾīfā) of the bais (bays), which is a subdivision (firqa) of the people (qawm) of the Rājpūts of Biwāra, a place in Awadh province. Their lineage goes back to Shalivāhana (sālibāhan), whose calendar is used in Indian texts just like that of King Vikramāditya (bikramādīt).

The pretexts for introducing such digressions in the tazkiras are manifold; what is essential, for the authors, is to harmonize the extra-canonical elements within the literary structure they employ. In one of the most interesting passages from the point of view of textual representations of Vaishnava cultural elements in the whole panorama of the Indo-Persian tazkiras, Lāchhmī Narāyan “Shafiq” expounds some aspects of Krishnaite devotion starting from an analysis of the name of Bindrāban Dās “Khwushgū”, always maintaining an essentially linguistic and poetic approach:

He is a Hindu from the people of the bais (bays) ... He was born and educated in Mathura ... which is a city not far from Akbarabad. His name is Bindrāban Dās. Bindrāban ... is the name of a place near Mathura; As for the word dās, in the Hindi language it means “servant” (ghulām). The meaning of the name is thus “servant of that incomparable place”, as in the case of Najaf Quli [“servant of Najaf”]. Mathura is the homeland of Krishna (kīshan), who has the largest following among the Hindus (muqṭadā-yi ‘umda-yi hunūd-ast). [Krishna] had one thousand six hundred wives. It must be known that in the religion of the Hindus (dar dīn-i hunūd) women can marry only one man and cannot marry twice: That is why Indians always describe love from the point of view of a woman. Krishna gave rise to such an uproar that Indian poets, in their love compositions (dar tagḥazzulāt-i khwud), always refer to the love of Krishna’s wives for Krishna and do not speak about other loves, differently from Persian and Arabic poets, who have no specific single couple of lovers and mention now Laylā and Majnūn, then Wāmiq and ‘Azrā, or Shīrīn and Farhād. In Hindi poetry the beloved is Krishna: Although, according to Abū’l-Fazl’s inquiry in the Akbarnāma, almost five thousand years have gone by since the times when he lived, his fame is still alive and from the earth of his homeland still rises the scent of love (az khāk-i wātān-i ā hanūz būy-i ‘ishq miyāyad). It is a wonderful flowering land which throws hearts into confusion. The noble Āzād—may his excellent shadow be extended—writes: From the desert plains of Majnūn still rises love:/ When I passed by, the heart palpitated down there [hanūz az dāman-i sahrā-yi majnūn ‘ishq mikhāzad/ ki hangām-i guzar uftādan-i mā dīl ṭapīd ānjā].

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Shafiq organizes his digression as if he is addressing a non-Indian audience, giving careful instructions for reading the words bays, mathurā and bindrāban in the Perso-Arabic script (the passages, which follow the traditional Persian lexicographic approach, have not been translated here), in all likelihood well-known to the whole Indo-Persian intellectual community, but not necessarily so for an Iranian or a British “international” reader. The linguistic and literary point of view adopted by the author appears clearly immediately afterwards, thanks to the comparison between the epithets Bindrāban Dās and Najaf Quli: Whereas the name Bindrāban Dās needs to be spelled and commented upon, the reading and the meaning of Najaf Quli is taken for granted. Krishna, whose divine aspect is predictably never alluded to, not only is historicized following a well-attested Muslim intellectual attitude (the quoting of Abūl-Fażl’s Akbarnāma as the authoritative text on Krishna’s life by a Vaishnava writer is a self-sufficient explanation), but, most notably in our context, is described as an essentially literary character: The heart of Shafiq’s speech is represented by a comparison of the psychological attitude towards the beloved in the Indic and Arabic-Persian poetic traditions, always observed from the latter’s perspective (it is not by chance that the “Indian” love poems are defined as “their tağhazzulāt”). Krishna and the gopīs are accommodated into the poetic taḵkira through the key hermeneutics of poetry, and this allows the author to give technical information without producing any dissonance in the dominant biographical and literary critical tune. The last section, where Mathura is described in terms similar to those used by Khwushgū’s master Bidil in the passages from Chahār ‘unsur above, completes the normalization process by directly transferring Krishna (read as an amorous typology) into the Persian poetic riverbed: In Āzād’s verse the sacred land of Mathura is absent but felt to be symbolized by (and to be implied in) the desert plains scoured by the lover Majnūn.

As a last example, Ḥayā’s biography in the Safīna-yi Khwushgū by his friend and fellow pupil (at Bidil’s maktab) Bindrāban Dās allows us to observe how the account of specific events in the lives of single authors can promote the insertion into the textual texture of the taḵkira of “exotic” pearls without creating expressive frictions. After celebrating Ḥayā’s poetic

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71 Lachhmi Narāyan’s close links to the British, for whom he worked as a historian, are well-known; see, for instance, Naqawī 1964: 440–1, and Anusha 2001: 1518–9.

72 Compare the verse by Āzād—as understood by Shafiq—to the third one among those inserted by Bidil in the passage of the Chahār ‘unsur translated above: Following what I have observed in the section above, one could start speaking, albeit cautiously, of a specific topos in the hermeneutics of the poetic image of Majnūn, sanctioned by Bidil’s authority.
skills by mentioning that he was able, in a literary salon, to recognize a linguistic imperfection in a verse composed by Khwushgū himself—which allegedly had not been noticed even by the renowned expert Sirāj al-Dīn ʿAlī Khān “Ārzū”—Khwushgū writes:

After that episode, he promised that he would come to see the humble compiler of this page in his house. On the fixed day, he joined the mushāʿira assembly and recited very nice poems. At dinner time, he justified himself pronouncing these words: “I am a disciple (murīd) of Gokula people (gokūliyān), and I conform to their rules, so I don’t eat what has not been cooked by the disciples of my own spiritual tradition (silṣila), otherwise I cook for myself.” Then he gave his companions the permission to eat.73

Ḥayā declares his specific devotional affiliation and his strict loyalty to his religious community’s rules by describing a dietary prescription in the middle of a poetic gathering, the mushāʿira at Khwushgū’s home, which obviously perfectly matches the thematic framework of the taẓkira and Ḥayā’s being part of the Indo-Persian literary community. It is probably the larger narrative setting (the poets’ poetic discussions and gatherings) that offer here a valid aesthetic safe-conduct to such peculiar religious information; and the harmonization appears to be fostered by the choice of the usual assimilative lexicon, presenting the followers of Vallabhāchārya (the “Gokula people”) as a Sufi silṣila and Ḥayā as one of its murīds.

4. Conclusion

Regarding the Sanskrit “new” intellectuals of the seventeenth century, Sheldon Pollock writes that “at the level of literary expression ... the seventeenth century was a time of border-crossings we are just learning how to perceive.”74 This lucid statement is certainly valid also for the Indo-Persian milieu, and also for the eighteenth century, one of the most neglected periods in Persian literature but also one of the phases which seem to most clearly show the innovative results of the acclimatization of Persian in South Asia.75 The analysis of the specific case offered here can be seen as an attempt to begin understanding the modalities under which these circulation-induced innovations and border-crossings came into

73 Khwushgū 1959: 185.
being. Even within the narrow scope of this paper, of course, many issues remain obscure: For instance, we need to address not only the ideas that circulate in, among, and through the texts but also the conditions of the material circulation of the texts themselves, including more precise details of their audiences and reception. We also have to better understand whether we can actually speak of a Vaishnava devotional literature in Persian, whose possible role and diffusion is not clear at present. Notwithstanding these and several other open questions, however, the circulation within Bidil’s circle and its textual representation clearly underline how Persian—as a cosmopolitan literary culture—was able to widen its aesthetic reference-system from inside by adopting a kind of inclusivist poetic hermeneutics. This phenomenon, it should be emphasized, acquire a deeper significance if understood as part of a wider trend of textual circulation marking the late seventeenth and eighteenth-century Indo-Persian intellectual world: As a matter of fact, in this period we not only see Ārzū’s programmatic struggle towards a (ideologically crucial) recognition of a structural kinship between Persian and Indo-Aryan languages, but also conscious attempts to compare the Sanskrit-based poetics with, and to “translate” them into, the Arabic-Persian system (as in the Ghizlān al-hind written by Āzād Bīlgrāmī, d. 1200/1785). In this consciously cosmopolitan context—although conflicting with an ever-increasing, exclusivist “Iranian” purism—the “Hinduness” of the Hindu disciples of Bidil (who, we have seen, had already textualized his own view of Vaishnavism) seems to perform, in many taqkiras, essentially a textual function, an occasion for the inclusion and the diffusion, through the Persian passe-partout, of what I would call the familiar, pre-integrated aesthetic newness of a “Hindu” filtered experience.

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77 See Sharma 2009. It should be noted here that, according to Āzād himself, among the writer’s friends asking him for a Persian translation of the work is Lāchhmī Nārāyān “Shafiq”, the author of the here much-quoted taqkira Gul-i raʿnā (Āzād Bīlgrāmī 2003: 26).


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